

Lee Students Bring Silent Classic to Life

More than 100 years after “The Phantom of the Opera” first appeared on the silver screen, the silent classic is getting a new voice at Lee College.



This October, Lee College students and faculty will bring the 1925 film to life through an unusual collaboration of film, original composition and live performance at the Lee College Performing Arts Center.

For the Lee College Visual and Performing Arts program, the project is a first. Rather than simply performing music as it was written, students will create and perform music that follows the action, emotion and drama unfolding on screen, responding to the film as the story develops.

At the center of the project is Dr. John Weinell, Lee College voice instructor and a professional opera singer who performs with the Houston Grand Opera Chorus. Weinell initially considered accompanying the entire 89-minute film himself on piano. Instead, he began developing a musical framework that would bring together student musicians, a small choir and an opera singer, giving students an opportunity to experience a form of performance they had never attempted before.

“Part of what makes this experience fun and exciting is that it’s my first time doing something like this,” Weinell said.

That sense of discovery extends to the students.

Rather than simply learning music and performing it as written, they have to watch the film, understand what is happening in each scene and learn how their musical parts help tell the story.

The result will be a performance that changes with the action on screen.

In one of the film’s most dramatic moments, live musicians will build the music around the famous chandelier crash. In another, an opera singer will perform live with prerecorded orchestral accompaniment. Other moments will leave room for the musicians to respond in real time.

“Some of it will be free and, like, crossing our fingers that works,” Weinell said with a laugh.

That element of uncertainty is part of what makes the project different from a traditional concert. The students must listen closely, collaborate and adapt to what is happening on screen, putting their musical training to work in a new way.

For Weinell, it is also a way to bring a piece of musical history into the classroom.

He has been part of the Lee College community for about 22 years, first teaching private voice as an adjunct while completing his doctorate at the University of Houston and later spending 17 years as a full-time faculty member. He teaches music theory, sight singing and ear training, choir, private voice and American music.

His professional experience in opera helped inspire the project. Weinell has long been fascinated by the tradition of live accompaniment for silent films, when theaters might use anything from a single pianist to a full orchestra to provide music for the action on screen.

Now, he is bringing that tradition to Lee College and giving students the opportunity to experience it firsthand.

The musicians will perform from within the theater rather than from the traditional stage, allowing them to watch the film as they perform. For the audience, that means the music becomes part of the visual experience rather than simply accompanying it from a distance.

“One of the things I hope people notice is our students,” Weinell said. “They’re incredibly capable, and this gives them a chance to do something they’ve never done before and to see what they can create. I think there’s something really special about watching students take what they’ve learned and turn it into an experience for an audience. I’m excited for people to see what they can do.”

Chris Coats, director of marketing for Lee College, said the performance also reflects what the Performing Arts Center brings to the community: opportunities to experience unique performances closer to home and at an accessible price.

“Experiences like this often mean driving into Houston’s Theater District or paying a pretty high ticket price,” Coats said. “We’re excited to offer this performance free and open to the public. For the audience, it’s a chance to experience ‘The Phantom of the Opera’ in a way they may never have experienced it before, with live music performed by talented student musicians and faculty alongside the film. That’s what makes this a performance you really have to experience live.”

Don't miss your chance to see this one-of-a-kind performance at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 22, at the Lee College Performing Arts Center. Admission is free. For more information, visit www.lee.edu/pac.