

Utahn dreams of S.L. being choir capital

By Lee Benson

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SALT LAKE CITY — Brady Allred, artistic director and conductor of Salt Lake Choral Artists, has a dream.

It is his belief that Salt Lake City has the potential to be the capital of the world.

The Choir Capital.

He envisions the day when singing groups from far and wide look to Salt Lake as the mecca of music, the bastion of beat, the center of a cappella.

Sometimes, a place has to recognize its possibilities.

What do we have all around us? he notes. People who sing, that's what, and not just people who sing, people who sing in groups. Stop a person on the street and chances are he or she is in a choir at present, has been in a choir or is being asked to join a choir.

It's our culture. Why not capitalize on it?

"Singing is a normal activity here," says Allred. "Other places, it's being dropped from schools, even some churches are scaling back on choirs. But for us it is a way of life. We are rich in music."

Evidence of that is the resounding success of the Salt Lake Choral Artists, an amalgamation of choirs Allred has been in charge of since 2004. The organization has a 170-voice concert choir as well as four other specialized choirs, including a women's choir, a children's choir, a chamber choir and a 40-voice premier choir that is the elite of the elite.

The premier choir, performing as Salt Lake Vocal Artists, just returned from an international festival in Italy, where it came away with no less than five first prizes in competition against some of the best choirs in the world.

"In Europe, they know who we are," beams Allred, who has conducted the Salt Lake choir at competitions in concert halls all over the world.

But he longs to have a home game for a change.

"My goal is to have an international choral festival here," he says, "and we're working to make that happen."

If funding and other details fall into place, the first-ever Salt Lake International Choral Festival will be held in July 2013.

"People saw the magic of this place when we held the Olympics," he says. "We have so much to draw from, so many people who speak other languages, so many who are willing to volunteer, and a genuine desire to welcome the world."

And then there's the big local ace in the hole: the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The Tabernacle Choir wouldn't enter the competition — it doesn't do that sort of thing and besides, its repertoire is mostly hymns — but if it isn't the most famous choir in the world, it's close to it, and Allred has already received an indication that it would be very supportive of the festival, and might be available to perform in exhibition as well, in addition to its regular Sunday morning broadcasts.

"The Mormon Tabernacle Choir is on board with us," he says, imagining the impact of having members of visiting choirs rub shoulders with members of the MTC.

It would be a festival draw like no other.

In the meantime, Allred is focusing on the 2011-12 Salt Lake Choral Artists season-opener this weekend. Performances at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. are scheduled for Saturday at Libby Gardner Hall on the University of Utah campus. (For tickets, go to www.saltlakechoralartists.org.)

The featured piece will be "The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace" by British composer Karl Jenkins. Allred sees it as a prime example of the power of music to crusade for goodness.

"We can build bridges of peace and understanding through choral singing," he says. "Music lifts people, it enlightens them, it helps effect change for the better."

Today Utah, tomorrow the world.

Lee Benson's About Utah column runs Monday and Friday. Email: benson@desnews.com

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