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GROUNDSTONE FESTIVAL

At PS21's new GROUNDSTONE Festival, a choir of off-key singers comes together for a one-of-a-kind performance

By Matt Martinez, The Berkshire Eagle
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Participants in a choir assembled by Lithuanian artist Lina Lapelyte perform "Study of Slope," a piece meant to center and platform singers who identify as off-key or tone-deaf.

MARC DOMAGE

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CHATHAM, N.Y. — You’ve never heard a harmony like this before.

That’s the goal, at least, for composer and artist Lina Lapelyte and her choir of undervalued vocalists. As part of the performance art piece “Study of Slope,” Lapelyte platforms singers who might not get the chance to perform otherwise — a process that begins with intentionally recruiting locals who sing off-key and “consider themselves tone-deaf,” she said.

If You Go

What: GROUNDTONE Music Festival

Where: PS21 Center for Contemporary Performance, 2980 Route 66, Chatham, N.Y.

When: July 18-21

Tickets: \$75, four-day pass; \$30, one-day pass

Reservations: 518-392-6121, ps21chatham.org

“Do you struggle to sing in tune — or know somebody who does?” an open call on the [PS21 Center of Contemporary Performance website](https://ps21centerofcontemporaryperformance.org) reads. “Then this unique opportunity might be for you! ... No musical experience required — in fact, we’re specifically looking for participants who find it difficult to sing in tune.”

Over the course of a series of rehearsals in the weeks leading up to the performance, Lapelyte will work with the recently formed ensemble to make their voices resonate together and produce something pleasant for the audience. At the same time, the polyphony will be paired with improvisational instrumentation — Lapelyte will play the violin, along with three other improvisers for accompaniment.

There’s an element of randomness at play — each moment providing a chance for the unexpected to surface.

“It’s like losing the control and being open to what they have to propose, rather than having to kind of be fixed to my own ideas of sounding and harmonies,” Lapelyte said.

Lapelyte and the choir will present two performances, and an open dress rehearsal, of “Study of Slope” at the inaugural GROUNDSTONE Festival, a weekend of jazz, contemporary and avant-garde music on the PS21 campus that promises to place concerts “in nontraditional, immersive settings all around our grounds.”

She joins a lineup featuring saxophonist/jazz multi-instrumentalist Josh Johnson performing selections from the groove-driven, far out 2024 album “Unusual Object,” the mind-bending looped cello play of Julia Kent and an ensemble performance led by composer and conductor Matthew Aucoin, among others.

The festival runs July 18-21 (as part of the larger Upstate Art Weekend), concluding with a Monday evening performance of harp, cello and double bass by Lavinia Meijer, Clarice Jensen and Caimin Gilmore respectively. Performances of “Study of Slope” will occur 6 p.m. July 19 and July 20.

Lapelyte first arranged the piece in 2022, after it was commissioned by the Paris gallery Lafayette Anticipations, using excerpts from sculptor and artist Sean Ashton’s book “Living in a Land” for adapted lyrics. The 2017 novel is a study in opposites and negatives, as its narrator fills its pages discussing things that they have not done and will never do.

Starting initially, Lapelyte was unsure how the “Study of Slope” concept — and its intention to challenge expectations and standards in music, especially in the Western tradition — would be received.

“When I was doing it for the very first time, I was like ‘wow, this is really a mad proposal,’ and I wondered if anyone would relate to that,” Lapelyte laughed. “So I think the first surprise was that people actually did respond.”

By nature of not seeking out experienced performers, she found she was able to recruit a more diverse group — a vital piece of the project’s mission to platform voices that had been silenced. For some, Lapelyte said, it was a

chance to finally share their voice without fear of being judged or laughed at — all the while, contributing to something “beautiful and appealing.”

“Usually, I would hear stories of how someone would be told to be quiet in the school choir because the teacher was not happy with someone singing and destroying the ‘beautiful harmony,’” Lapelyte said with a smile. “So for me, this project is really about presence, and who’s allowed to be present and who’s not allowed to be present.”

Beyond its musical qualities, the project is also a community builder — its participants develop deep bonds over their time, and it proposes new ways to bring people together, she said.

It gives people experiencing it — both choir and audience members — new ways to communicate with one another at a time when it’s easy to be pulled apart, she said.

“I find it really hard to make work when the world is collapsing,” Lapelyte said, “and I think it’s been important to find a way of how and why to do it, and I find that what is important today is to practice being together and to practice speaking to each other.”

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