

Capital Hearings Sing Simply for the Joy of It

Informal A Cappella Group's Gigs Include Birthday Parties, Marriage Proposals and Even Roller Derbies

By RACHAEL BADE

While several hundred lobbyists sat calmly listening to Members of Congress talk about the importance of federal arts funding last week, Dileep Srihari's heart raced. His only thought: "I hope they don't arrest me."

Without warning, the 32-year-old former Hill staffer leapt to his feet and began to sing "America the Beautiful."

Across the room, a man dressed like a waiter hoisting a tray of danishes joined in. Another man in a cowboy hat began to sing as well. By the time they reached "purple mountain majesties," more than a dozen had joined in.

Once again, the Capital Hearings had stolen the show. The Washington, D.C.-based a cappella group has a history of hijacking attention by singing in unconventional settings.

On Tuesday, the setting was Arts Advocacy Day. Srihari had talked with the event's organizers about the musical surprise ahead of time, but to keep it under wraps they had not notified the Capitol Police. Fortunately, they didn't mind.

It wasn't the first time Srihari's 13-member group had staged an unusual performance.

Compared with traditional 100-member choirs where singers don tuxedos and gowns, the Capital Hearings — or "Caps," as they call themselves — are a bit offbeat.

The group includes professional singers who have recorded CDs with the London Symphony Orchestra and performed at the National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony and the Capitol's July Fourth "A Capitol Fourth" concert.

But the Caps are nothing like Washington's more traditional symphonic choirs.

For one, their song selection sets them apart. Although they dabble in classical music for formal gigs such as cocktail parties, they branch out from Thomas Tallis-type hymns. Instead, they blend jazz and pop music, performing Billy Joel's "Lullaby," the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows" or the Beatles' "Yesterday."

Mike Rowan, who sings bass, joined the group for that very reason. He missed performing modern music, something he did often in his college glee club. And during his first rehearsal with the group last fall, the Caps started fiddling with an a cappella version of Michael Bublé's "Haven't Met You Yet."

"That hooked me — I sing that song in the shower," Rowan said.

Because of their diverse repertoire, the Caps' gigs tend to be less concert hall, more backyard barbecue. The group debuted at a cocktail party hosted by the deputy head of mission at the British Embassy last July. They serenaded beside the pool in 100-degree weather.

Their performances since then have been just as avant-garde. Flash mobs aside, they've performed at Eastern Market and birthday parties for middle school kids. They caroled for the nurses' holiday party, intensive-care patients and families in the surgery waiting rooms at Washington Hospital Center.

On May 14, they'll sing the national anthem at the DC Rollergirls championship bout, an idea suggested by tenor John Hazangeles, the group spokesman, performance booker and the one holding



Courtesy Edward Hoover

The Capital Hearings a cappella group performs almost anywhere they're needed, including Eastern Market (above) and at the Willard Hotel (right) for holiday carols. The singers gather every other week to practice their contemporary repertoire.

the danishes at Arts Advocacy Day.

Their most interesting gig is yet to come.

A few weeks ago, a Washingtonian eagerly sought the group's voices to accompany the upcoming proposal to his intended. The Caps will sing the couple's song when he pops the question this month.

"Some stuffy chorus groups would scoff at this sort of thing," said Hazangeles, a self-described "lounge lizard" and Frank Sinatra lover. "I mean, can you imagine a chorus with 150 members singing the national anthem at a roller derby bout?"

The group rehearses every other Wednesday at either music director Srihari's apartment near Cleveland Park or soprano Carolyn Wise's Capitol Hill row house on South Capitol Street — more recently the latter since Srihari's neighbors started complaining about the "noise."

Members push living-room sofas and coffee tables against the walls, sit in a horseshoe on the floor and sip red wine while practicing their latest tunes. Sometimes they order pizza or nibble cheese cubes to give their vocal cords a break.

Srihari, who oversaw constituent flag requests for then-Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and left the Hill to pursue a law degree, started the group in early 2010 with Hazangeles and Wise, a former staffer for Rep. Randy Forbes (R-Va.).

The trio struck up their friendships



Courtesy Nello DeBlasio

while performing with the Choral Arts Society of Washington.

"We've had the fortune of singing in some world-class music halls with some of our other groups, but it's important for us to do fun things," Hazangeles said.

"Not that Choral Arts isn't fun — it's just a different type of fun," Wise added.

Using word of mouth and even Craigslist, they attracted several singers from the District's symphonic groups, including Choral Arts, 18th Street Singers, Cantate Chamber Singers and Choralis.

Each auditioned in Srihari's apartment and came from what Hazangeles calls the "classical choral tradition": raised on Mozart and Bach, well-versed in eight-part singing and not intimidated by sight-reading and notes that skip around the staff.

For most Caps vocalists, singing is an extracurricular activity. They lead separate careers and work at the Congressional Youth Leadership Council, the Government Accountability Office and the Securities and Exchange Commission. Two teach music to children; one was lead tuba player in the National Symphony Orchestra.

Despite their different careers, however, they're all united in a love for music

and an unwillingness to see their most beloved hobby slide.

"For a while at rehearsals, we can just forget about our busy lives and do something completely different by singing," Srihari said.

Most Caps sing in at least one other symphonic choir. Matt Schwartz, an attorney, rehearses with the Choral Arts Society on Tuesday nights, the Caps on Wednesday nights and the choir at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on Thursday nights — discounting weekend performances.

But for each, the Capital Hearings brings another joy to song, something they don't find in their symphonic shows: Whether it's allowing a 5-year-old girl to conduct the group with a candy cane at Eastern Market or daring a Capitol Hill flash mob, the Caps, it seems, thrive on spontaneity that's well-received.

Almost every person in the Cannon House Office Building room, for example, stood and chimed in with "America the Beautiful" by the song's end. When the Caps walked off after finishing their song, Rep. Rush Holt (D-N.J.) expressed what everyone was wondering: "Who are you guys?"