

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Peppie Calvar:

Every group that performs in Holidays at Hendricks functions as a class within the College of Visual and Performing Arts. It's University Singers, the Hendricks Chapel Choir is a class within the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Crouse Chorale, Setnor Sonority, the University Orchestra, the Schiff band. All our organists are students studying in the Setnor School of Music. I think that's frankly what... One of the things that makes it so special is that the community gets a chance to see and hear what it is that our students are doing and how our faculty are interacting with our students to make them better musicians and prepare them to be musicians for a lifetime.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the podcast is José Peppie Calvar, the associate professor and assistant director of choral activities at the Setnor School of Music here at Syracuse University. Calvar directs the Hendricks Chapel Choir and serves as artistic director for Holidays at Hendricks. He is also chair of the Setnor School's Department of Applied Music and Performance. Calvar is joining us today to discuss the upcoming Holidays at Hendricks concert series, which this year features two concerts on Sunday, December 4th. Their performances by a bunch of talented student organizations on campus, who will entertain with holiday theme music. And Peppie was kind enough to join us here to preview Holidays at Hendricks and everything else about his career at Syracuse. Peppie, thanks for taking the time to join us.

Peppie Calvar:

My pleasure, John. Thanks for having me.

John Boccacino:

How are you holding up these days?

Peppie Calvar:

It's funny because Holidays at Hendricks is a sort of an all-consuming thing for me. The Holidays come and they never really go for me, they just kind of stay around. I'm always thinking ahead to the next big Holidays at Hendricks performance. It's a big operation and I'm really, really glad to help spearhead and get so many students in front of so many eyeballs.

John Boccacino:

When exactly do you and your student groups and organizations really start planning and preparing for holidays at Hendricks?

Peppie Calvar:

I'm on an 18-month track, so I am already thinking ahead to Holidays at Hendricks 2024, really. Holidays at Hendricks 2023, really, it's right around the corner.

John Boccacino:

In your humble opinion, what is it about Holidays at Hendricks that makes it such a special celebration? We have alumni that will come in from all over the country that want to take part in this. Why is it so special?

Peppie Calvar:

Every group that performs in Holidays at Hendricks functions as a class within the College of Visual and Performing Arts. It's University Singers, the Hendricks Chapel Choir is a class within the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Crouse Chorale, Setnor Sonority, the University Orchestra, the Schiff band. All our organists are students studying in the Setnor School of Music. I think that's frankly what... One of the things that makes it so special is that the community gets a chance to see and hear what it is that our students are doing and how our faculty are interacting with our students to make them better musicians and prepare them to be musicians for a lifetime.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned the groups, and I want to give them a shout out one more time. We have the Hendricks Chapel Choir. We have the Syracuse University Symphony Orchestra, Crouse Choral, Setnor Sonority, the University Singers. There was a new edition last year. Was it the Schiff Jazz Band? Am I getting that right?

Peppie Calvar:

Yeah, the Morton Schiff Jazz Ensemble directed by Dr. John Coggiola, they're fantastic. They're our flagship university big band, and I, as a lover of jazz, love to have them as part of the program as well, and I think that they add such a fantastic component to the show.

John Boccacino:

All told, how many students do you think will have a role in a performance for Holidays at Hendricks?

Peppie Calvar:

I am going to give a rough guess of about 230.

John Boccacino:

You've got these different organizations, but it's really, you're almost going to see a Broadway show with the set changes, the different groups that are coming out. It's a theatrical performance. It's not just an orchestral performance or a music performance. It's all-encompassing.

Peppie Calvar:

It is. We've done such a wonderful job. Thanks in large part to Brian Simons and Logan Simons from Sensational Events in providing some aesthetic improvements, all of the staff in Hendricks Chapel, frankly, have invested so much of their capacity and their bandwidth to seeing that the space is as inviting as possible and that the spaces is as reflective of what we want to communicate as Hendricks Chapel and as an institution to our community as we celebrate these moments together. We've worked really, really hard. We're super happy with particularly the lighting with what it looks like when all those lights come down and the candles come up, like the background that you're showing right now, which is so cool. It really is a tremendous investment of time and energy and thought, and we love that the community has loved us back so much.

John Boccacino:

What was it like for you the first time that you stood as the artistic director of how it is at Hendricks?
What kind of things hit you at that moment?

Peppie Calvar:

Oh my gosh. What am I getting myself into here? This is actually my 10th Holidays at Hendricks, and the amount the show has grown since my arrival here in 2013 is just... I mean, there have just been improvements from one end to the other. When we started out, it was just the Hendricks Chapel Choir. I invited the University Singers, because they're the university's flagship choral ensemble, and we collaborated with the Syracuse University Brass Ensemble directed by James Spencer, for a great many years. That was established for quite a while prior to my arrival. We've since shifted away from the Syracuse University Brass Ensemble to put more of a spotlight on our student instrumental organizations, namely, the Symphony Orchestra and the Schiff Jazz Ensemble.

Since then, we've incorporated all of our larger Setnor choirs and we've turned it into a major showcase from the Setnor School of Music, too, in which I'm faculty. We're showing institutionally what we do best musically, and we get to do it all at once in this one big moment. It's tremendously fulfilling for us and for our students, and we hope that our audience feel the same way.

John Boccacino:

Holidays conduct themselves so well towards musical performances. What do you think it is about our students that really set them up for success when it comes to showcasing their talents at Holidays at Hendricks?

Peppie Calvar:

Their dedication to their craft and their relationship with their faculty, our students, we have students from every unit of the university in our ensembles. Our University Singers are our flagship choral ensemble, and they have a few fewer non-majors in their ensembles than, say, the Hendricks Chapel Choir, which has a ton of non-majors, we're probably half non-majors. I would say that, in every case, what makes it special for them is their dedication. They're doing it because they want to be there and the faculty love, we as faculty just love to see their growth and their trajectory from the beginning of the semester to the end.

John Boccacino:

When we describe you as being the artistic director of Holidays at Hendricks, peel back the curtain a little bit for us. What role do you play in organizing, orchestrating, and getting all these talented student groups to come together for this special night?

Peppie Calvar:

It's quite a bit. Just very recently, I just finished composition of the last song, so it's an original song of mine, that combines our choirs with our University Jazz Ensemble. I also personally orchestrated the opening song, which combines all our university choirs with our Symphony Orchestra. I did it because I feel like I know what our ensembles are capable of. I can do a good job showing off our ability to do justice by diverse musics if I take it upon myself to score the pieces.

That's what I've been doing of late. We're working with our collaborators to make sure that they get to stand in front of the camera, because we have a massive online broadcast that happens a week after our

performance. We got to get all of our directors or special stakeholders in front of the camera so that we can introduce our pieces, because our online audiences won't see our paper program, so they want to hear from us. I think that over the course of these last three or four years, we've gotten that down pretty good, too. So, I coordinate that. I coordinate getting the synchronization rights for all the music that carries rights and working with university legal.

John Boccacino:

Hendricks has limited seating, so obviously tickets are a hot commodity when they're released for the two shows on the 4th of December. But the virtual performances will be streamed on the Hendricks Chapel YouTube channel. They'll be up on chapel.syracuse.edu. We'll make sure to promote that virtually wherever we can. What made this an endeavor that you wanted to get involved with, Peppie, when it comes to coming to Syracuse? How did you come to our campus community in the first place?

Peppie Calvar:

Before I came to Syracuse, I was the choir director and music theory teacher at an inner city middle and high school in Charlotte, North Carolina, where my family still resides. I had gotten my doctoral degree in choral conducting, and I think I was ready to take the next step in my career. I had visited Syracuse previously and I knew I liked the town, I knew I liked the university, I knew I liked the community and it was very easy, frankly, to fall in love with the Orange Family from the perspective of a faculty member, my colleagues, particularly John Warren and Elisa Dekaney, have treated me like family from the day I arrived. I've felt very welcome here from day one.

John Boccacino:

What is it about the venue at Hendricks Chapel that adds to the mystique, that adds to the sheer beauty of Holidays at Hendricks?

Peppie Calvar:

In my very biased opinion, Hendricks Chapel is the finest acoustic in a six county area. It is an absolutely beautiful place to make choral music, particularly, to make acoustic music. It is a beautiful building from the moment you walk in and you take that first breath in there and you look up at the columns and you look up at the ornate fixtures in the ceiling, and you just take that breath and you hold it for a second while you look around and you realize how spectacular the room is and the care that's been invested in making it that way. So, I really can't speak highly enough of the Hendricks Chapel staff and the philosophy here that's been kept of making sure that Hendricks Chapel was, is and ever shall be beautiful.

John Boccacino:

I know you mentioned you're working on some original scores for this year's performance, I'm not going to ask you to give away the secrets for the program on December 4th, but what else might be different about this year's performance, say, than last year's, when we got people back together in person for the first time since before the pandemic struck?

Peppie Calvar:

We continue to pride ourselves on the diversity that's exhibited in our programming. I'll speak for the Hendricks Chapel Choir just by itself. We're doing four featured pieces on our own, three of which are

either compositions or arrangements by female composers, and the other one of which is by an African American male. We would like to think that we are talking the talk and walking the walk when it comes to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

John Boccacino:

I can only imagine the challenge that it was during the pandemic to do, especially the virtual, Holidays at Hendricks. Take us inside that process. How big of a challenge and a project was it to still maintain and put on this performance knowing that we couldn't gather in person?

Peppie Calvar:

Holidays at Hendricks 2020 I think was a miracle. It was a small miracle. So many people did so much work that was a marriage of things that are within and things that are outside their expertise. We all became video and audio editors very quickly. We had the blessing of having Brian Simons and a relationship with him that sort of helped us to coalesce all our materials into something that was really, really spectacular. That let us reach out to our community in a time when they really needed to feel a sense of community because of all the isolation.

That relationship that started that year with Brian Simons, has continued to flourish and allows us now not only to have a great broadcast, but has also really helped us to improve the aesthetics of the chapel as well when it comes to the up lighting, the snowflakes, the dynamic lighting that you may or may not see during this year's show. We're just so thrilled, because the necessity is the mother of invention and the necessity of needing to reach out to our community during the pandemic has actually invented a much better and more accessible Holidays at Hendricks, particularly to those families of our students who live across the world and can't make it here to see their children do what they do so well.

John Boccacino:

I don't want to assume anything about this year's performance, but from a personal objective perspective, whenever I've gone to Holidays at Hendricks, I find it's just chilling when Silent Night is performed, it's so beautifully done. What is it, do you think, about that song and that performance in particular that just perfectly encapsulates Holidays at Hendricks?

Peppie Calvar:

I think that the way that it becomes an all-encompassing thing. That's a moment that we've carried on as a tradition from before my time, and we've continued to progressively improve it. Silent Night and the Lutkin, The Lord Bless You and Keep You, are a hallmark of what it is to be in the audience for Holidays at Hendricks. The lights come down, the light gets passed, everybody has a candle in their hands, a whole bunch of people are singing. By the way, everybody's going to be invited to sing Silent Night with us again this year. Thank you. I'm so excited. It's about us being the light together. We speak of the light so metaphorically, I think that it's an opportunity for our students to be the light for our audience, and I think it's an opportunity for our audience to realize the light that they have within them, because of the light that they have outside them in that moment, and then they can carry that light out into the world and be light to others.

John Boccacino:

It's powerful. It really is such a powerful message. You talked about community and needing community during COVID, that need for community has not subsided in the two-plus years that we've been dealing

with this pandemic. If anything, it's intensified, because we need to really be there for each other. I love the idea of spreading the light, taking it from Hendricks Chapel, going out into the world and just spreading this positive message. Where did your light from music come from? Who ignited that passion for you?

Peppie Calvar:

Oh my goodness. What a wonderful question. Well, I have to credit my dear mommy. She was a performer at Holidays at Hendricks 2014, I want to say. She comes from Charlotte, North Carolina with my dad every year. They sit in the audience for both shows, and they're a very happy mommy and daddy, as I hope many of our other mommies and daddies are. I have to credit a bunch of my teachers, particularly my high school chorus teacher, the teachers that I've had along the way, my instrumental teachers, my composition teacher, my piano teacher, there's so many people who have had such a profound impact on my life, and I am happy to pass their light on through me to my students.

John Boccacino:

What was your seminal moment that really sparked you down this path of being a composer, being a conductor? How did you get this passion?

Peppie Calvar:

I've been a composer since I was in middle school. I've always enjoyed being behind the keyboard and seeing what it was that I could record and do and overdub and that's been fun. I didn't realize that I needed for this to be my career until a really profound moment that I had in church as a freshman in college. I was actually at North Carolina State University as an engineering student, realizing to myself as time went on and as I continued to fail calculus tests, that engineering was really not for me. I had been going home and ministering in my church, in the music ministry with my mom and some friends. I was doing it monthly, and that October, I had an experience that I felt like I had been hit over the head. From that moment on, I knew what I had to do. And destiny has unfolded from there for me. I have been very, very blessed.

John Boccacino:

Inquiring minds want to know, what was that hammer-over-the-head-moment if you're able to share?

Peppie Calvar:

I was singing a piece called the Cares Chorus. I had never sung it before. I was singing it in unaccompanied three-part harmony with two friends. And it goes like this.

(singing).

It was in that moment, when the silence came that I was like, "What the heck am I doing with my life?" At that moment, what I had been doing, what I needed to happen, happened, what I had been doing up to that point started not to make any sense. What I needed to do from that point forward seemed to make a whole bunch more sense.

John Boccacino:

It really seems like you found your passion, you found your calling, and to get to spread that to our amazing and talented students here at Syracuse University is a blessing for the campus community. What can you describe the feeling of just working with our students? How does that satisfy you?

Peppie Calvar:

Oh my gosh, man, it is a daily blessing. It is a daily blessing. It always comes with its set of challenges, but it also comes with small, daily victories. A light goes off in somebody's head every single day around here. I've said it from the day I got here, I feel like being at the right place at the right time is really, really important for people. This place has such a wonderful tendency to create the right time for people.

John Boccacino:

You don't just limit your talents to the students who are here in Central New York. I want to give our audience some background. You love to travel and you have a residency in Mexico, you have a residency in Costa Rica, you travel across the continents giving these clinics and masterclasses. What fuels that part of your passion?

Peppie Calvar:

My goodness, just that ongoing drive to spread the light and to spread the message of choral music across the world. I think that's part of my job as a faculty member at this institution is to bring choral music and great choral music, particularly great American choral music, across the world. That's what audiences across the world want to hear anyway. I leave for Brazil on Tuesday, today's Friday, I will be there for two weeks doing a choral festival down there with... I will be hearing four choirs a day, no, 10 choirs a day, doing four pieces each and giving them comments and feedback. I can't wait. I'm so excited. At the same time, I'll be doing a clinic on music literacy, which I find to be so incredibly important, because the world wants to sing and the world will sing a whole heck of a lot better if it knows how to read music. They'll sing a whole heck of a lot more if they know how to read music.

I'll be doing a presentation on choral arranging because I love doing it. At the same time... That's Brazil, in my time there. Later this spring, the Hendricks Chapel Choir is going to collaborate with the Syracuse University Wind Ensemble and travel to the UK, specifically to Lockerbie to be there to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Pan Am Flight 103, in which 35 Syracuse University students perished. We are so excited and honored to be a part of that commemoration.

We're commissioning a piece from a UK-based fabulous composer, Cecilia McDowall. She's actually composing a piece with a text by Nicholas Vrenios, who was one of the victims of Pan Am Flight 103. We just couldn't be any more excited about the international impact that the Hendricks Chapel Choir is having. I'm just honored to be in the right place at the right time, even if that right place happens to be 5,000 miles from here. My attachment to here is what makes it great.

John Boccacino:

No, there's a lot to be said for the right time, right place mentality. Again, we're so fortunate to get to have your services here at Syracuse University. You do so much musically. Do you have a preference of being a composer or being a conductor? Which one maybe stands out to you as maybe being your favorite? Or does it depend on the day and the performance?

Peppie Calvar:

I feel like it's a real privilege to be able to wear all the hats. My high school band director, God rest him, he said that I was a jack of all trades and a master of none. I'd like to think I've made it far enough down the road that I can wear the hats and wear them well enough to be able to educate our students from multitude of perspectives, how it is that their performance is going to be received? What it is that they

need to do to put on their best performance? What it is that they need to do as composers so that performers can put on their best performance? It's a thrill ride. I love the rollercoaster.

John Boccacino:

I do want to shift gears briefly before we close off here. There have to be some passions of yours that are outside of the musical realm. What are some hobbies you've got that you like to do in your free time?

Peppie Calvar:

I love being outdoors, particularly in Central New York, particularly in the summer and fall time. I have a nine year old son who's going to be 10 in just a few weeks. We love to play golf together. We love being outside. We love to fish together. We just think that this is a very, very special place to be a lover of the outdoors. Our four seasons are just spectacular. By the time Holidays at Hendricks comes, there may or may not be snow on the ground. It might be 15 degrees that night. It might be 60 degrees that night. You just don't know. But one way or another, the outdoors finds a way to be beautiful here.

John Boccacino:

Yeah. We really do get to enjoy all four seasons as much as we are speeding towards winter and fall is flying by us. It's great to have all four of the seasons here and in Central New York. How about what's the best piece of advice you ever received that really sticks with you today?

Peppie Calvar:

Aha. My dad, who is very much not a musician, very much a practical person and a businessman, advised me once to see my path, see my destination, and create a path to that destination. Because after I left North Carolina state and started being a music major, I kind of went through all the majors and was lost as to what I wanted to do. Music education became, I actually didn't really feel like I wanted to teach, and music education became the only thing that was left that I hadn't already done. He said, "You know what? Get the music education degree, because if you get that degree, you'll be able to teach. And if you don't want to teach, you'll still have the degree and the credentials to do so." So, he said, "Just walk that path. It's the easiest path to get to a career you're actually going to want."

From that point on, the road has become much more clear. It has also become very clear, because we get students in here all the time who don't know what it is that they're going to do as their next step. So, they're sort of wandering when it comes to what it is that they're doing now, so that they can create a life for themselves beyond now. I think that's so important for our students. What is it that you want to actually do with your life? How is it that you want to spend your time? And how is it that you want to build a career for yourself? See the path. You can change, as a college student, particularly an undergraduate student, you can change your mind a bunch of times, that's fine. But see the destination and start building the path towards that destination, so that that way you always feel like there's purpose to what it is that you're doing.

John Boccacino:

Another powerful piece of advice and really have a plan, map out where you want to go. There's nothing wrong with not knowing what you want to do. This is the time to formulate that plan and figure out where you want to head with your passions. Again, you've clearly found your passion here at Syracuse

University and Hendricks Chapel. My last question for you is one I've been dying to ask, but I wanted to save this towards the end. What's the story behind your nickname of Peppie?

Peppie Calvar:

Peppie is a nickname. I'm José Calvar III. My grandmother, my dad's mom, insisted that my name be José, so that's my name. But my mom did not want me to be named José. So, every José, well, the nickname for José is Pepe. She didn't want me to be Pepe either. So, she put Peppie, P-E-P-I-E, pretty much on me at birth without putting it on my birth certificate. I've been called Peppie by everybody ever since. Except for the DMV and the bank. Honestly, I think that José in Italian is, Signore Boccacino, is Giuseppe. So, Giuseppe short is Peppe, [inaudible 00:29:40].

John Boccacino:

See, we try to educate our audience and share some insights into our guests that go beyond just their title. I love the candor you've given us during this conversation. It's been a fantastic time chatting with Peppie Calvar, the artistic director of Holidays at Hendricks. He does so much more for us as an associate professor and assistant director of the choral activities. Make sure you follow along the Hendricks Chapel website for information on getting your tickets for Holidays at Hendricks on Sunday, December 4th. Guaranteed to be a thrill and a crowd pleaser inside of Hendricks Chapel. Peppie, thank you for the time and best of luck with your travels and we can't wait to see in a couple weeks for the performances.

Peppie Calvar:

[Italian 00:30:21], Signore Boccacino.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for The 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.