

Elise Witt celebrates a lifetime of song

By Bo Emerson, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Photos by Jessica Lily

Musicians honor Atlanta songstress for her contributions.



Elise Witt, one of the godmothers of vocalism in Atlanta, has coached and counseled singers all over the world.

Hundreds have subscribed to her classes in town and thousands have heard her perform, as a bandleader, a soloist and choral director.

At a benefit concert Saturday, Witt, 66, will celebrate a four-decade career in music and the publication of her first songbook. Through her classes and with her Small Family Orchestra and her vocal trio called Natural Rhythms and other ensembles, Witt has brought song into the lives of many.

The many now seem determined to repay the favor. On Saturday, it might seem like every member of that host of musical followers is on stage at once, during the show at the Chosewood Ballroom.

More than two dozen musicians will bring her tunes to life, including string band virtuosos Jeff and Johnny Mosier, Atlanta songster Caroline Aiken and roots musicologist and performer John McCutcheon.

On top of that, another dozen or so voices from the Global Village Chorus will help open the show.



While Witt will conduct the chorus, a group she has been working with since the Global Village Project began 11 years ago, most of the time, she said, she will just be listening and “basking.” It’s a bit of well-deserved sunshine she’ll be enjoying.

The Global Village Project is a private middle school for female refugees, created with the goal of teaching English (and regular middle school skills) to non-English speaking refugees, many of whom have arrived in this country after years in refugee camps.

“I use singing to teach English,” said Witt recently, as she waited in the San Francisco airport for a flight home.

She also uses singing to help the young women open up to each other, to create a community within the school and provide the artistic and musical rewards of choral training.

“I haven’t seen anyone do the type of work she does at our school,” said Kimberli Render, arts coordinator at the school. “It’s incredible.” Render said the school emphasizes “social and emotional learning, and the singing is a huge part of that: singing in a circle, singing in a community. I call her the heartbeat of GVP.”

Saturday’s show, which [benefits the Global Village Project](#), will draw its repertoire from “All Singing: The Elise Witt Songbook,” which includes 58 songs, from the poignant “My Journey Yours” to the piquant “My Salsa Garden.”

One of those songs is called “Singen Macht Alles Gut.” It’s a poem Witt’s pharmacologist father gave her for Christmas year, which she set to music for him. The song, styled after a German “Lied” will be performed Saturday by Render who is trained as an operatic soprano. (She is part of the chorus in the Metropolitan Opera’s new production of “Porgy and Bess.”) The title translates roughly to “singing heals everything,” a philosophy to which Render subscribes.

Witt is a topical writer in the Pete Seeger mold, and has always combined her music with a thirst for social justice, especially justice for those on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. One of her new songs, “My Journey Yours,” demonstrates that concern.

The song was part of a multi-disciplinary art project with Refugee Family Services in Clarkston, a DeKalb County town that has welcomed refugees from around the world. The staff members, who are also immigrants and refugees, taught Witt words from their home languages that mean “my journey yours.” Each language — Kurdish, Arabic, Mano, Amharic, Bosnian, Vietnamese, Somali — had its own rhythm. Witt then asked each staff member to recall a song from their childhoods — a lullaby, a musical game, a folk song — and she retrieved a melody fragment from each, to pair with the words. During the performance, the sounds of the different languages are stacked up to make a polyrhythmic web of words, accented with body percussion.

“I tell my singers [that] singers are athletes,” she said. “We use our whole bodies. Singing is a very physical thing; it vibrates your body, and singing with other people is combining our waves together.”



Born in Switzerland, Witt grew up speaking German, and came to the U.S. at age 4, learning English as her second language. (She has since learned several more.)

She came to Atlanta in the late 1970s to help found the Theatrical Outfit, and her first teaching job was helping members of that company learn how to use their voices.

In the 2000s, she began studying with vocalist Rhiannon, and with [Rhiannon’s teacher, Bobby McFerrin](#), performing onstage at Symphony Hall with McFerrin last year. McFerrin’s impact has been to expand her interest in spontaneous composition and to give her the confidence to improvise. “I like to think of that circle (of singers) as a trampoline, an elastic, supportive foundation for a soloist to take the jump, fly in the air and create something new.”

The original Theatrical Outfit (from top): Celeste Miller, Glenn Hilke, Bob Raposo, David Head, Elise Witt, Marianne Fraulo, Martin Swinger, Jeff Franklin, Del Hamilton (photo: Susan Orpin)



An Impromptu Glorious Chorus™ vocal workshop / community sing (photo by Jessica Lily)

Added Witt: “I also believe that singing in a community is a political act. I feel like it’s important for people to have a voice and for people to join their voices. I teach people who have been told they can’t sing, they aren’t musical, they’re tone-deaf. When they come to my classes within an hour they are part of this amazing sound.”

EVENT PREVIEW

Elise Witt and friends, featuring Caroline Aiken; CubanaSong; David Marcus; Britt Dean; DeDe Vogt; Deidre McCalla, Diane Durrett & Melissa Junebug; Eugene Wolf; Gayanne Geurin; Jessica Lily; John McCutcheon; Joyce & Jacque; Ken Gregory; Kenneth Johnson; Kimberli Render; Junk DNA; Mick & Evan Kinney; The Mosiers; Rosin Sisters; Sara Moylan; Tony Godwin; Travis McAfee; Veronika Jackson; and the Global Village Chorus

6 p.m VIP book signing: \$125 / 7 p.m. Concert \$15-\$75

Proceeds benefit the Global Village Project

@ Chosewood Arts Complex, 420 McDonough Blvd. SE, Atlanta. bit.ly/EliseWittAllSinging