

NOVEL VOZ from Havana Cuba will participate as guest artists in residence at the Coastal Sound Youth Choir Festival June 30 through July 04. Seventeen choirs from 5 countries will attend and learn about Cuban music from this acclaimed Cuban vocal ensemble.

Tickets are still available for their showcase public concert:

Tuesday, July 3

St. Andrew's Wesley Church, Vancouver, with the Children's Choir of the Royal Danish Academy of Music, Sing NSW and Novel Voz

For tickets, [info@coastalsoundfestival.com](mailto:info@coastalsoundfestival.com)

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## Cuban group grooves way to choral fest



MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

**Members of the Novel Voz choral group, from Cuba, groove to their own latin beat at the Playground of the Gods on Burnaby Mountain on Tuesday. They'll be performing at the Coastal Sound International Choral Festival, June 29-July 4, at Simon Fraser University.**

By Wanda ChowNewsLeader

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Novel Vos may be performing at a choral festival, but the term "choir" hardly does them justice.

The Cuban group, among the guest performers at the Coastal Sound International Choral Festival June 29 to July 4, is more of a "vocal ensemble" or a "vocal orchestra," said Jonathan Watts, president of the Canada Cuba Sports and Cultural Festivals, which is co-sponsoring the septet's visit to B.C. this month.

"They're a Cuban dance band but a capella," said Watts, a Canadian currently living in Cuba who is accompanying them during their stay here. "They don't really fall into any category. They really sound like a salsa band when they sing."

Novel Vos, which means "new voice" in Spanish, is reciprocating a cultural exchange that started a few years ago with Lower Mainland students and schools, and Coastal Sound Music Academy choirs visiting Havana, Cuba. There they participated in music workshops with Novel Vos and learned about the Cuban culture, Watts said.

The Cubans-to-Canada part of such exchanges is not common mainly because it is so expensive for Cubans to travel here. So Novel Vos is one of the first groups of Cubans to reciprocate the exchange, Watts said.

Throughout the month of June while they're here, the group has been holding performances and workshops with the schools and students they'd met previously at home, travelling across the Lower Mainland, to the Sunshine Coast and Vancouver Island.

During the festival they'll be joining conductors, choirs and other guest performers from around the world in a non-competitive event primarily focused on children's and youth choirs.

Back home, Novel Vos is well-known, having won a Cubadisco, the Cuban equivalent of the Juno award in 2005 for best vocal ensemble. The seven members – Isabel Zamora Alfonso, Eduardo Julián Jiménez Bravo, Susana Orta López, Roberto Carlos Cruz Rodríguez, Fernando Alexander Yero Ramos, Jorge Luis Molina Perez, Maribel Nodarse Valdés – have varied educational backgrounds, with four teachers, a lawyer, an engineer and a composer/arranger among them.

In addition to regular vocals and arrangements, the group sets itself apart with its blend of Cuban rhythms and jazz by also imitating instruments with their voices. Five voices sing harmony, providing imitations of brass instruments along with vocals, while two voices provide bass and percussion, supplying the sounds of an upright bass and Afro-Cuban percussion instruments such as bongos and congos. They are also choreographed and dance so as to look like they're playing the instruments, Watts said.

The group hasn't had too many surprises during their stay so far, as they became familiar with the Canadian music education system during their previous encounters in Cuba with local students and teachers, said Isabel Zamora Alfonso, through Watts, who served as interpreter.

"Even though we heard Canada is a cold country, we disagree," she said. "We think Canada is a very warm country because of its people."

"We've felt right at home," added Eduardo Jiménez through the interpreter. "Some schools have done projects on Cuba, made Cuban flags, learned how to say welcoming phrases in Spanish." Finding out that students were learning about Cuba before the group arrived "makes us very proud."

As for cultural differences, Susana Orta Lopéz noted any comparison has to take into account the differences in climate. "Cubans as a culture is happy, extroverted, people interact with people easily in the street, we're very spontaneous, we're extroverts," she said through the interpreter. "Canadians are not as extroverted, they're more reserved than we are."

Isabel Zamora Alfonso added, "It's a difference in climate because in our climate we live with doors and windows open and live out in the street."

Their music is laced with African, Spanish and Asian influences. "The African influence really impacts the rhythms of our music and the need to dance," said Orta Lopéz.

"In order to sing our music, you have to dance. When you listen to us, you have to dance."

Novel Vos will be performing at the free opening ceremonies for the choral festival, on June 29 at 7:30 p.m. at Simon Fraser University's Convocation Mall. They'll also perform at two ticketed events, July 3 at 7:30 p.m. at St. Andrews Wesley Church in Vancouver, and July 4 at 7:30 p.m., at the festival's closing gala at the Chandos Pattison Auditorium in Surrey.

Free and ticketed festival performances take place around the Lower Mainland, including Burnaby, New Westminster, Vancouver, Maple Ridge, Port Moody and Surrey.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit [www.coastalsoundfestival.com](http://www.coastalsoundfestival.com), e-mail [info@coastalsoundfestival.com](mailto:info@coastalsoundfestival.com) or call 604.916.5973.

- Volunteers are still needed for the Coastal Sound International Choral Festival which runs June 29 to July 4. Along with help at the office and concert venues, event organizers need "guardian angels" who will escort visiting performing groups throughout the festival, ensuring they stay on schedule. For more information visit <http://www.coastalsoundfestival.com/volunteers.html>,