By Greg Chmiander

Generations of Hope students have shared the Chapel Choir and Symphonette with audiences around the world through their participation in the Chapel Choir and Symphonette.

Chapel Choir and Symphonette are the college’s two touring ensembles, each with its own rich history and its own unique story of providing Hope students, music majors as well as those from other academic disciplines, opportunities to share their love of music – whether it’s part of the annual Christmas Vespers at Dimnent Memorial Chapel, or an overseas tour, such as one the Chapel Choir recently completed to South Africa.

The Chapel Choir tour, which ran May 9-19, provided the choir with an opportunity to sing in a variety of venues – ranging from performing at Sulzbach University in Johannesburg, one of South Africa’s top universities, to singing informally for children dealing with AIDS at a small clinic.

“It’s like no tour that any ensemble, or any group from Hope, has ever done,” said Dr. Brad Richmond, professor of music and director of choral activities at Hope, who has directed Chapel Choir for the past 13 years. “We have, of course, groups that have gone on mission trips ... but to integrate the kind of things we’re doing into a choir concert tour is really terrific.”

The South Africa tour marked the Chapel Choir’s first tour to Africa. The choir has toured Europe seven times, most recently in 2005, and has also toured extensively in the United States and Canada.

Richard Piippo, director of orchestral activities and associate professor of cellists’ chamber music at Hope, knows well the value of having students go on tours. He took the Symphonette on its last international tour in 2005, visiting Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic, and earlier this year took the group on a spring break tour, performing at venues in Illinois and Wisconsin.

“I’m always amazed at the audience response and the kind of audiences we get,” Professor Piippo said. “We don’t charge anything, and yet we have large crowds. To me, that is amazing.”

Professor Piippo, who joined the Hope faculty in 1999, recalled one story from the Symphonette’s 2007 tour that struck an emotional chord for him and members of the ensemble, when they performed at a rest home in Germany.

“We played for them, and I must tell you, there were tears in the audience, and it had a powerful impact on the students,” said Professor Piippo, who has been an adjunct cellist with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

“That’s a very important connection for me,” said Professor Piippo, who added: “You can come here and be a chemistry major and you can work in one of the finest science departments in the world – it’s right here,” Professor Piippo said. “Then if you wish to take choir or violin or viola or clarinet, you’re also able to do that.”

“It’s a wonderful place to be involved in the arts, because even if you’re not a musician or a music major, you can get involved.”

Chapel Choir is the oldest of Hope’s musical ensembles, having formed in 1929, long before the college had a major in music.

“There’s a long choral tradition here. I suspect if you go back 40-50 years, the vast majority of singers were not seeking a professional music degree,” Dr. Richmond said.

The choir began touring annually in 1953. Members must audition before being selected to join. Often, students who join Chapel Choir have started singing with one of the other college singing groups, such as the College Chorus, a non-audition ensemble, Dr. Richmond said.

The Symphonette, meanwhile, got its start in 1953. Members of the group are selected from the 80-member college symphony orchestra. Over the years, the 32-member Symphonette has toured across the United States from coast-to-coast, and has also performed in Canada, the British Isles, Australia and New Zealand.

In 2007, the Symphonette was one of only four orchestras from around the country selected to perform at the National Conference of the American String Teachers Association, selected from more than 100 orchestras that had applied.

Both Chapel Choir and Symphonette have made numerous television and radio appearances, including on the nationally-televise Hour of Power, from the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calif., which was founded by Hope graduate Dr. Robert Schuller ’47.

In addition to the performance aspect of the two ensembles, there are educational opportunities – both formal and informal – for students who participate. Ten of the Chapel Choir members selected their trip as the basis for their Senior Seminar, which involved extensive reading, guest speakers and a paper based on their experiences and how it has shaped their lives, Dr. Richmond said.

But even within learning pieces of music, there are opportunities for instruction.

“We can do way back and get involved, and even do a medieval studies course, in the middle of a French (song) from the 13th century...and we can move all the way to the present and do pieces that might have been set to poetry based on the Holocaust,” Dr. Richmond said.

“From a liberal arts perspective, we get to do it all.”

Both directors say they plan to continue to bolster the professionalism of both ensembles, and they hope to continue touring as well, “as a very positive experience,” Professor Piippo said.