

Published November 24, 2010

WomenSing in Lamorinda

By Lou Fancher



From left, Kristan Torres (Moraga), Patti Sax (Lafayette), Amy Hiestand (Orinda); other Lamorinda singers not pictured are Barbara Beck, Teresa Caldwell, Jules Campbell, Kathy Eastman, Jane France, Diane Griffin, Midori Kang, Gloria Kubitschek, Jean Murray, Patty Murray, Nancy Schroth, and Mary Wallace. Photo provided by Robin Harper

If there's magic in numbers, then 45 is the lucky draw for WomenSing, the 45 member Lafayette-based chorus celebrating its 45th anniversary season this year.

In June, the choral ensemble received the 2010 national Chorus America/ASCAP Alice Parker Award for adventurous programming. The award is given to choruses that invigorate and educate audiences by presenting challenging, new music.

Patti Sax, a Lafayette resident, joined WomenSing in the fall of 1995. "My fourth child had just graduated from high school, and after spending many years as a spectator, I decided to become an active participant in something I love," she says. She recalls being nervous at the audition, which included vocalizing, sight reading and singing a prepared song. "Sight reading is always a bit scary for me because it's the one thing that is unpredictable," she says, adding that "our artistic director is very good at putting the singer at ease."

Martin Benvenuto has been the Artistic Director of WomenSing since 2002. With an extensive list of degrees, accomplishments as both a singer and a conductor, and work with prominent Bay area choirs and composers, Benvenuto could be a solo star. But his dedication to collaboration, and to the art of ensemble as a collective voice, makes him, instead, the perfect embodiment of WomenSing's community activism.

And "community" is much more than just Lamorinda and the Bay Area; a fact made plain by the group's Youth Inspiring Youth project. The program, started three years ago, pairs the young winners of Berkeley's River of Words poetry competition with young composers. "[The poetry] is written by children from all over the globe, who have learned about the importance of their local watersheds and about how to express respect and appreciation for it through this art form," Sax says. "Then WomenSing creates an opportunity for young composers to create new music for treble voices using this material. The composers have the honor of being mentored by Libby Larsen, and we get the excitement of learning and sharing these pieces with our audience."

Grammy-award winning Larsen, a bundle of enthusiasm and a gifted contemporary music composer, whose work is in the repertoire of groups across the country, leads the young composers in a process Kristan Torres, a five year member of the chorus, calls "magical." Torres discovered WomenSing the week she moved to Orinda. "I was looking in a community center brochure and there was an advertisement. I called for information and auditioned that evening," she writes. Like Sax, she's busy, but makes room for WomenSing because "it not only fulfills the need for having music in my life, but it has introduced me to a diverse, talented group of women, who all have the same interest. We are all in different stages in our lives, and dealing with a variety of challenges...and we check all of this at the door and come together to make music."

Amy Hiestand, of Orinda, was drawn to the group's camaraderie as well. With a living room full of instruments, amplifiers, music stands and a piano, she admits, "music is a really, really important part of life in our family."

Hiestand likes the mix of contemporary and traditional music the chorus performs. "It is more interesting for me as a singer to perform a variety of genres," she says. "I think it's more interesting for audiences too."

Challenging music is not just for audiences, all three women are quick to point out. "Last December we performed Britten's Ceremony of Carols," Hiestand says, "It's a lovely work for the holidays, but it was tricky to learn initially. The language is a bit different from our English today and there were difficult pieces within it - unusual chord progressions, and keeping tone and pitch up was sometimes hard." Torres remembers Wendigo, a song accompanied by a prerecorded soundtrack of music and sounds, as particularly difficult. Sax shares her fellow member's memory, saying, "Singing it was a bit like jumping on a moving train and hanging on for our lives!"

WomenSing rehearses in central Lafayette for two-and-a-half hours weekly, with an additional, optional rehearsal held one day each week in Orinda. In addition, Hiestand uses an on-line database, Musetta, spending an hour on her own to review and prepare for ensemble rehearsals. Sax says she puts in an average of 2 extra hours per week, and Torres, with young children and a packed schedule writes, "I do a lot of rehearsing in my car (if my kids can stand it) and listen to the music almost every day. I sit down to work on the music a few times a week. I often have a piece that I work on or hum throughout the day."

It's clear that all three women value the role music plays in their lives. Sax mentions having been born "with a song in my heart," and Torres is "honored to be a part of [the Youth Inspiring Youth] process." Singing with the chorus keeps Hiestand "motivated" and "artistic," even amidst her life's personal and professional demands.

With concerts in December and June, and a tour to Washington D.C. in 2011-including performances at the Library of Congress and the National Cathedral-they are proud of WomenSing's position in the national music community. Beyond that, they are grateful for the friendships with other women and eager for the musical opportunities ahead. Sax articulates the legacy of WomenSing's last 45 years in elegant fashion: "The traditional [music] provides an opportunity to learn about different classical styles and how they relate to the times in which they were written. It's a bit of a mini-history lesson. And the new [music] is so exciting because it explores new ways of putting sounds together to express emotions."

Upcoming performances:

Sunday, December 12,

4 pm

First Congregational Church Berkeley

2345 Channing Way

Berkeley

Reception to follow

Wednesday, December 15, 8 pm

St. Mary's Chapel

1928 Saint Mary's Road

Moraga

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