University Chorus concludes season with American favorites, plus a premiere

By Jeff Hudson

June 01, 2013 | Leave Comment

Details

Who: University Chorus
When: 7 p.m. Friday
Where: Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, UC Davis
Tickets: $12 general, $6 students; www.mondaviarts.org, 530-754-2787

The University Chorus will wrap up this year’s season with a concert at 7 p.m. Friday in the Mondavi Center’s Jackson Hall. And the theme will be American music from several centuries, including a brand-new piece by local composer Garrett Shatzer, which will be getting its premiere.

“I’m always so happy to do a program of American music, because there are so many different areas it covers,” said conductor Jeffrey Thomas. “American music has more sub-styles than you find in other countries that have a longer musical tradition. That’s partly because of the way America was put together” — drawing immigrants from many lands, who brought diverse musical ideas with them. “You have the American tradition of spirituals, of Shaker tunes, and so many other things,” Thomas said.

Shatzer’s piece is titled “The Lesson”; Thomas said it was written for the University Chorus and is dedicated to the group.

“It has a text by the Italian poet Pietro Metestasio (1698-1782) that examines the feelings of lost love, when there is no longer hope that the heart stained with unfaithfulness will change its ways,” Thomas said. “The music is dark and moody and intriguing. There are lots of note clusters, pairs and groups of voices. … It is very clever, and a blast to rehearse.”

Shatzer said “the challenge in this piece was using the short text (eight extremely short lines) to create a compelling work that simultaneously unfolds musically and narratively. Rather than use simple repetition or lengthy melismas to pass the time, I decided to make the words rather unintelligible at the beginning via musical means (i.e., not by having the choir mumble or anything of the sort). So I incorporated thick, gnarly textures and dense harmonies early in the piece, and these give way to clearer voicings toward the end as the speaker of the poem comes to grips with his realization.”

Also on the program will be “Modern Musick,” composed in 1781 by the early American composer William Billings, which opens with the line, “We are met for a concert of modern invention, to tickle the ear is our present intention ...”
also will be an Aaron Copland adaptation of the Shaker tune “Simple Gifts,” and Samuel Barber’s “Sure On This Shining Night,” as well as “I Have Had Singing” by Steven Sametz, a recent piece that originally was written with the male choral group Chanticleer in mind.

There also will be a set of spirituals, including Moses Hogan arrangements of “The Battle of Jericho and “Elijah Rock,” the Gerre Hancock arrangement of “Deep River,” and an anonymous arrangement of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” (sheet music that was acquired some years ago by Thomas’ predecessor Albert McNeil, who led the University Chorus for 21 years).

Thomas also will conduct two different pieces titled “Alleluia.” One was composed by Randall Thompson in 1940, during the early years of World War II, as a commission for the dedication of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. The other setting was recently composed by Eric Whitacre, whose music is popular with choral groups nowadays.

“The two ‘Alleluias’ set up a kind of parallel,” Thomas said. “We will also sing a somewhat earlier Eric Whitacre piece called ‘Sleep.’ ”

Thomas said the idea of doing a program of American music actually originated with the singers in the University Chorus.

“They had worked so hard earlier this year, preparing the Beethoven Choral Fantasy and the Elgar oratorio ‘Dream of Gerontius,’ ” Thomas said. “So I asked them ‘What would you like to sing in the spring?’ And when several different American works from different eras were suggested, Thomas recognized that they would go together nicely as a program.

“It will be a relaxed program, more of a low-key evening” after the big presentation of the Elgar oratorio in March. “We will celebrate their hard work (earlier in the season) by focusing on some music that they like to sing.”

Tickets are $12 general, $6 for students, available at www.mondaviarts.org or 530-754-2787, or at the door.

— Reach Jeff Hudson at jhudson@davisenterprise.net or 530-747-8055.

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