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From finance to music

By Barbara Rose Shuler

When I first met John Koza, he wasn't a music man. The husband of a colleague of mine, it was my understanding he worked with balance sheets for a local corporation -- a bright and genial man of numbers.

Some years later, Koza said goodbye to the balance sheet job and, to my surprise, set about educating himself for a new career as a choral director. During this period, he displayed the passion, dedication and instinct for music that one expects from seasoned professional musicians.

He showed no small amount of courage in leaving the financial securities of business for a new career in the arts. My colleague helped by bestowing on his endeavors a gold standard of spousal support. A few years later, Koza emerged with a master's degree in choral conducting, tempered in the rigorous curriculum of Dr. Charlene Archibeque at San Jose University.

The trajectory of Koza's music career is impressive. Just as he was finishing his studies, Vahe Aslanian retired from Camerata Singers, which he had founded 25 years before, and handed Koza the baton. Koza has created fresh, exciting programs for Camerata, bringing the chorus to new levels of proficiency and community recognition. It was not long before the Carmel Bach Festival, for whom he sang as a member of chorus, noticed his talent and singled him out for assistance with the choral preparations.

Two years ago Koza was asked to create a youth chorus for the festival. He delivered a jaw-dropping, brilliant first concert cycle with a terrific group of young local singers. In addition to his work with the youth chorus, Koza has now been tapped to serve as the festival's assistant choral director. In 2007, he will be working side-by-side with one of the finest choral directors in the country, Andrew Megill, recently hired as the festival's new associate conductor.

This weekend Koza completes a circle with a work that neatly reflects the success he has experienced to this moment. For his thesis recital for Dr. Archibeque, he chose Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, a three-movement setting of six psalm texts all sung in Hebrew, which he presented at the Carmel Mission.

Koza loves the piece but felt that he wasn't able to achieve what he had wanted in the Mission performance. So, he has brought it back this year as the centerpiece of Camerata Singers March concert. He has hired countertenor Christopher Fritsche, formerly of Chanticleer, to sing the lovely "The Lord is my Shepherd" solo in the second movement. And he has engaged five percussionists plus tympani for the performance. This promises to be a signature performance for Koza and a treat for the audience.

"I know better how to rehearse it. We've drilled it and drilled and we are ready to go," he says.

He decided to balance the Psalms with Old American Songs by Aaron Copland, hence the title of the program: "A concert of Copland & Bernstein."

"Copland has captured such an American spirit in these songs," he says. "I have fallen in love with them."

The program concludes with "The Lord is My Shepherd" by American composer Randall Thompson, accompanied by harpist Karen Thielen.

It might be a good idea to buy tickets right away if you wish to attend the concerts.

Carmel Music Society|

The Janaki String Trio takes its name from a Sanskrit word which symbolizes self-realization. Striving for an artistic and spiritual ideal expressed in the unique relationship between the composer, musicians and listeners, Janaki has earned acclaim as a superb new ensemble.

The New York Times calls the trio "magnificently polished." The young artists of Janaki received national acclaim in 2006 as the first string trio ever to win the Concert Artists Guild International Competition. Founded at The Colburn School of Music in Los Angeles in early 2005, the group won the 59th Annual Coleman Chamber Music Competition in the same year. Janaki's violist Katie Kadarauch won the Carmel Music Society instrumental competition in 2005. She is joined by violinist Serena McKinney and cellist Arnold Choi.

These three electric young virtuosi prepare programs that combine standard classical works with rarely heard gems. The CMS program includes Beethoven's String Trio in G-Major, Op. 9, No.1, Sergei Taneyev's String Trio in E-flat Major, Schubert's String Trio no. 1 in B-flat Major and Jason Barabba's String Trio No.1.

Barabba has a local connection with parents who live in Capitola. His String Trio was commissioned by Janaki in 2006 and is dedicated to them.

"They were prominent in my thoughts during the entire compositional process. It is a thrill to work with them," he says.

Barabba, based in Los Angeles, creates "astounding work of the highest artistry." He has presented his works in university settings across America, including the University of Chicago, the University of California at Irvine and the University of California at Los Angeles.

The trio's 2006-07 season highlights include its New York recital debut on the CAG Series at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall along with appearances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and at the Honest Brook, Music Mountain, Mendocino, Martha's Vineyard and Great Lakes Chamber Music Festivals.

Their 2006 debut CD featuring works by Beethoven, Penderecki and Barabba. The trio has a strong commitment to arts education. Currently, the ensemble is partnering with the Da Camera Society in promoting music in elementary schools, hospitals, retirement communities and other community venues throughout the Los Angeles area.

IF YOU GO • What: The Camerata Singers present "A concert of Copland & Bernstein" • Where: St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 1071 Pajaro St., Salinas (Friday, March 2) and San Carlos Cathedral, 500 Church St., Monterey (Sunday, March 4) • When: 8 p.m. (Salinas) and 3 p.m. (Monterey) • Tickets: \$16 general, \$13 students. Call 642-2701 or at the following locations: Pilgrim's Way in Carmel; Bookmark and Bookworks in Pacific Grove; Gadsby's Music Co. in Salinas • Information: www.camerata-singers.org

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