

## Choral glory

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Basking in choral glories last weekend in San Francisco, Monterey and Carmel, I've been reflecting on the vastly expressive nature and importance of human voices raised together in song.

As poet Langston Hughes writes: "Song is a strong thing."

Song is not only a strong thing, it is an essential part of our humanness. We shape our lives and our world through song.

We lift ourselves up and sometimes cast ourselves down through song. We enter the amazing continuum of human emotions, aspirations and self-reflection through song.

We love in song. We declare in song. We grieve in song. We move through life's great passages in song. We even laugh in song. We are a singing species.

Hughes' words were sung by The Camerata Singers, directed by John Koza, in their delightful and uplifting May program "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies."

I also attended Chanticleer's compelling presentation of the West Coast premiere of their new commission "And on Earth, Peace" at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco — featuring movements by five contemporary composers of different ethnicities and creeds — designed in the structure of a traditional Latin mass.

Sunday afternoon at Sunset Center, the choral splendor of the Monterey Symphony's season finale of Brahms' "German Requiem" conducted by Max Bragado Darman proved a transporting experience.

Curiously, for it surprises me, the work that has most provoked my thoughts from that wonderful three-day choral immersion is "America, the Beautiful." It's a gorgeous song, especially in the Buryl Red arrangement offered as the conclusion of the Camerata concert.

You know the words:

"O beautiful for spacious skies,

For amber waves of grain,

For purple mountain majesties

Above the fruited plain!

America! America!

God shed his grace on thee

And crown thy good with brotherhood

From sea to shining sea!"

Song is a strong thing and the choice of words and music to represent a great nation is a strong thing.

With respect for Francis Scott Key — the 35-year old lawyer who wrote the words to "The Star Spangled Banner" after witnessing the American victory over the British at Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 — "America, the Beautiful" seems a much worthier candidate for our national anthem.

The battle honored in "The Star Spangled Banner" is over, as are many defining moments in our history. Yet we relive it constantly in this song, with its "bombs bursting in air," as our national anthem.

Saving the "land of the free and the home of the brave" against the warships of the British is a noble outcome, to be sure.

But for an anthem, would it not be better, wiser and more true to our shared aspirations as Americans to be stirred by "O beautiful for spacious skies...?"

There is beauty and peace in "America, the Beautiful," both musically and poetically. And, it is definitely easier to sing, which

should be a prerequisite for any nation's song.

Over the decades, efforts have been made to change our national anthem to "America the Beautiful." I don't know why these attempts have failed. Perhaps inertia.

Whatever the reasons, it is hard to imagine that any American would genuinely prefer to listen to "The Star Spangled Banner" — set to the tune of an old British drinking song, of all things — over the setting of "America, the Beautiful" that concluded Camerata's concert last week. The song is strong.

Heat, passion and surprise!

The Santa Cruz Chamber Orchestra concludes its first season Saturday at Holy Cross Church this Saturday at 8 p.m.

The ensemble will perform an evening of contemporary Latin American classical music, including works by Piazzolla, Bragato and Villa Lobos.

Guitarist Mesut Ozgen, bandoneon player Seth Asarnow and cellist Kelley Maulbetch join the orchestra as soloists in Piazzolla's "Double Concerto for Guitar and Bandoneon," solo guitar pieces by Villa-Lobos, Graciela Y Buenos Aires for cello and string orchestra by Jose Luis Bragato and more.

Asarnow, a native of the Bay Area, has been a featured soloist at Davies Symphony Hall with the San Francisco Symphony.

He has performed Piazzolla's "Four Seasons" with Donald Runnicles and members of the San Francisco Opera, and he has toured Japan with his own trio.

He is also the bandoneonist and musical director of "Nora's Tango Week," an international conference for the instruction and celebration of tango, now in its 10th year in the Bay Area.

Asarnow will be playing a series of tango sensations by Piazzolla as part of this program.

The bandoneon is a concertino-like instrument particularly popular in Argentina. It plays an essential role in the orquesta tipica, the tango orchestra.

Maulbetsch is a member of the Santa Cruz, Monterey, Napa, Fresno, Modesto and Marin symphonies.

She has participated in music festivals such as Tanglewood, the National Repertory Orchestra, and AIMS in Graz, Austria. She received her bachelor's degree in cello performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music.

Ozgen has performed and taught master classes throughout the United States, Spain, and Turkey.

He has been a guitar faculty member at the University of California-Santa Cruz since 1998.

In addition to his own compositions, which are mainly based on or influenced by traditional Turkish music, Ozgen has long been a strong advocate of new music.

Tickets are \$10, \$15 and \$20 at the door and are available in advance at Streetlight Records in Santa Cruz. For more information, call (800) 838-3006.

Bach Festival reminder|

An amazing one-time-only Carmel Bach Festival event takes place on July 7 on stage at Sunset Center.

As a fundraiser, popular festival musicians will be performing repertoire never before heard at the festival, including Broadway hits, Irish folk music and more!

Ticketholders will attend an elegant catered pre-concert strolling supper in the foyer. There will also be a live auction.

This black tie optional event begins at 6:30 p.m. Call the Bach Festival for more information at 624-2046.GO!

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