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## An eye-opening show

### CHORAL PROJECT'S WILLINGNESS TO TAKE CHANCES PAYS OFF IN CONCERT

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One mission of the 45-singer Choral Project is to engage audiences, as the South Bay group proved again Friday with its season opener at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in San Jose.

Those who like compelling performances of unfamiliar music could only commend the 18-piece program, which was repeated Saturday. Many of the devoted followers of the group Daniel Hughes founded in 1996 are singers who wish they had the time or talent to be in a group this good.

Surely the others weren't bored. Those who wished "Shenandoah" hadn't been the only familiar work were engaged in other ways, starting with the printed lyrics and translations, which Hughes enhanced with introductions for nearly every song. It pays to stay alert. If you buried your head in the program too long, say just before intermission, the singers surprised you as they headed down the aisle, whistling out the door.

The whistling was part of Leonard Bernstein's "Soldier Song." That was one of two the group performed from Bernstein's music for "The Lark," a Lillian Hellman play. The other, the program-opening "Spring Song," featured clapping that tempted the audience to participate, and a tuneful countertenor solo by Ryan Nakagawa.

A most subtle non-vocal technique was the look of love on the faces of several female singers that put us in the mood for the spiritual love of Z. Randall Stroope's "Amor de Mi Alma."

There's nothing subtle about why this is one of the best-sounding choirs you'll ever hear. Like a lot of groups, the women elicit most of the praise. But I have to give the tenors some credit. The heroic blend of their nine voices was a major reason the crowd gave a long ovation to the final movement of Srul Irving Glick's "A Choral Symphony." The men's strengths are what really set the Choral Project's sound apart, along with Hughes' ability to maximize the talent.

Hughes' programming tastes are also an asset. The most eagerly awaited work Friday was clearly Imogen Heap's "Hide and Seek," an electro-pop-inspired song with heavy bass and lots of tone clusters, which you may have heard on TV's "So You Think You Can Dance." The song after that was a world premiere of Paul Rardin's gospel-infused "My Spirit Is Uncaged," jubilant music for Walt Whitman's poetry.

Hughes also is a first-rate arranger: The anthemic "Into the West" makes you want to see the movie that features it, "Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King."

Women's standouts: the alto section's legato quality in Felix Mendelssohn's "Richte mich, Gott"; soprano songbird Louise Lovelle's solo in a Nigerian lullaby; and alto soloist Juanita Harris' rendition of "Amazing Grace" in the finale - Paul Halley's "Freedom Trilogy," which combined the famous song with an eighth-century Kyrie and a rollicking South African hymn.

The volume of world music alone provides something for everybody to love - or not. A piece by Ted Allen, which Hughes described as "distinctively California," combined a compelling American Indian chant with an icky "O Susanita" modification of the iconic southern folk song. "Ungheresca," by Lajos Bárdos, is an infectiously percussive Hungarian song - sung in Italian.

The monotonous, but slightly hypnotic, Basque folk song "Phartzize trixte huntan" has a tie-in to this year's California International Choral Competition contest in San Luis Obispo, where the Choral Project placed first, second and third in key categories. The Choral Project fell in with the Basque contestants, and in the spirit of its mission of engagement, the groups later traded songs.

The Choral Project's philosophy pays in many ways.