

## S.J. Chamber Orchestra, Choral Project bring gift of 'Light'

By Richard Scheinin

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Light, guarding against the darkness. That was the theme of the weekend's holiday program by the San Jose Chamber Orchestra and the Choral Project, and, boy, did light ever win out over the cold and the gloom of the season.

The two groups, each based in the South Bay, have been collaborating on holiday programs since 2004 and the product keeps getting better. This year's model was short and sweet, a seamless hour-long program without intermission, linking old and new, and East and West. Plus, Friday's venue - Holy Cross Church in Santa Cruz - put a perfect reverberant glaze on the proceedings; every tap of a tambourine or drum gained in ripeness and definition, thanks to the room's acoustic.



But that was only an added perk to the program, titled "Winter's Gifts: Light," which repeated Saturday at Mission Santa Clara and Sunday at St. Benedict's Church in Hollister. Mostly, this was a labor of love by both groups, whose directors, Barbara Day Turner (of the chamber orchestra) and Daniel Hughes (of the 45-voice chorus), took turns leading lively, nuanced performances and creating a sustained mood of beauty and reverence.

"Winters Gifts" ranged across religious and national traditions, from Christian to Jewish to Hindu and Sikh and Vietnamese. The basic theme was that communities across the globe celebrate light amid darkness around this time of year. The sense of shared custom and ritual was reflected in the program; there was a sense of flow between the pieces, which were sequenced to match mood and tonality.

The chorus, besides showing off its fine gloss and blend, visibly enjoyed the act of singing. The instrumental soloists were dynamite. And the variety of the programming was a steady surprise: traditional carols, Bach, Holst - and composer Anica Galindo, a 2003 graduate of Santa Clara University, whose "A Wintry Vale," commissioned by San Jose Chamber Orchestra, conjured fresh snow on a quiet morning.

Helping knit the program together were three exceptional instrumental pieces by Pleasanton-based composer Michael Touchi. Also commissioned by San Jose Chamber Orchestra, each brief work captured something essential in the tradition it addressed.

"Reflections on Diwali" - a meditation on the Festival of Light, celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs and Jains - set richly melodic, almost improvisatory, lines for oboe over the static drone of strings, with Touchi, at the piano, simulating, here and there, the glisses of a sitar's strings.

Oboe soloist Michael Adduci was extraordinary, and the piece, as a whole, flowed neatly out of what had preceded it: an Eastern-leaning setting, by John Rutter, the English composer and choral conductor, of "Three Kings of Orient."

Later, Touchi's "Reflection on Hanukkah," drawing melodic material from the Yiddish tune "Tif in Veldele (Deep in the Forest)," matched light (clarinetist Mark Brandenburg's super-virtuoso klezmer flights) against shadow (a chorale of strings, playing the Yiddish tune "in retrograde"; backward, in other words).

Still deeper into the program, Touchi's "Reflection on Tet," honoring the Vietnamese New Year, integrated lively folk-dance passages, slow pentatonic interludes of ritual calm, and flutter-breath flute cadenzas, performed by Isabelle Chapuis, a dazzling player.

As Larry David would say, the whole thing was "pret-ty good."

And as respectful in approach as it was, it didn't get mired in, say, blissed-out meditative-ness. There was always the determined religiosity of Bach ("Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern") and Mendelssohn ("Es wird ein Stern aus Jacob aufgehn," from "Christus"), conducted by Day Turner.

And, toward the end, with Hughes conducting, there was the delicate mystery language of Polish composer Andrejz Kozsewski, in which the chorus quietly whistled and droned and, essentially, muttered in tongues.

It would be great to hear this inventive program again next year. But by that time, the chamber orchestra and chorus will be on to something new.

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