

## **'Songbird' oratorio filled with power**

By Richard Scheinin

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Did you hear the one about the soap actor -- the guy who used to be on "General Hospital" and "Another World" -- who's starring in a Buddhist oratorio about an eagle and a songbird that save the world?

Sounds like a joke, right?

It's not. The actor is Jordan Charney and the oratorio (sort of) is "The Songbird and the Eagle," which turns out to be a charming and beautifully scored new work by composer Kim D. Sherman and librettist Rick Davis. It had its world premiere performances over the weekend, courtesy of the San Jose Chamber Orchestra and the Choral Project, and I wish I could see it again.

"Songbird" is a success because it doesn't overreach. It has a simple set of messages: Follow your heart; do what's right; stay the course. The music glows; it's deft sound painting, satisfied to tell a story. Sunday's performance at St. Benedict's Church in Hollister was both heartfelt and expert -- and, in case you were wondering, free of political correctness.

Commissioned by the San Jose Chamber Orchestra, "Songbird," which featured a lustrous performance by soprano Allison Charney (daughter of the soap actor) as the Eagle, doesn't quite fit into a category.

It stands between opera and musical theater. With its vocal solos, chorus and orchestral accompaniment, it has the *feel* of an oratorio. And, like an oratorio, it hasn't any sets or staging. But when was the last time you heard an oratorio based on a Buddhist fable? It's a long way from "The Messiah."

Even so, it made an ideal centerpiece for the third annual "Winter's Gifts" collaboration between the chamber orchestra and the excellent 45-member chorus, based in San Jose.

The program also included an eloquent performance of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Dona nobis pacem," the famous plea for peace, featuring baritone Joseph Wright and soprano Sandra Rubalcava. Rounded out by the Christmas music of Gustav Holst ("Christmas Day") and Franz Xaver Gruber ("Silent Night"), the 2006 version of "Winter's Gifts" (which also was performed Friday at Mission Santa Clara and Saturday in Santa Cruz) was exceptional.

Of course, a collaborative performance gets complicated. How to divvy it all up?

In the program's first half, Barbara Day Turner, the chamber orchestra's music director, conducted "Songbird" and Holst. She sat down for the second half, as Daniel Hughes, the chorus's artistic director, took over the podium for Vaughan Williams and Gruber.

Each conductor drew a full-bodied sound from instrumentalists and singers -- and each was helped out by a healthy dose of reverb in the church, which put a bloom on the acoustic bouquet.

"The Songbird and the Eagle" tells the tale of the young, innocent Songbird (sung by Katrina Swift, a 13-year-old soprano) who tries to save the world from storm and fire. The arrogant Eagle dismisses the effort as impossible, but, ultimately, spurns the other eagles in its aerie to join the Songbird -- and puts out the fire with its tears.

The fable is effectively narrated by Jordan Charney, whose words cut in and out of the musical storytelling. The chorus comments on the tale with "oohs" and "ahs" and by imitating natural sounds -- crackling flames, cries of terrified forest creatures.

Swift, as the Songbird, is pure-voiced and earnest; perfect. Allison Charney sings as a dramatic soprano should, red-blooded in her transformation from high-flying overlord to world savior.

Story and music are underscored by judicious piano figurations (Michael Touchi was the keyboardist), punctuated by steady birdcalls of silvery flute (beautifully played by Isabelle Chapuis) and intensified through applications of timpani and bells (Galen Lemmon).

Concertmaster Cynthia Baehr performed lyrically in long-lined cameos. But all this only hints at the overall sound of Sherman's musical language, which draws upon the golden-landscape imagery of Copland and the pure-hearted melody of musical theater (think "The Fantasticks" as well as Sherman's own "O Pioneers!" and "Heartland").

With its craggy, leap-about lines for the Eagle, it also pays homage to contemporary American opera; interpreted by Allison Charney, those lines are never far from song.

Occasionally fed by jazz (and I think I even heard a hit of Beach Boys), the music is stocked with harmonies that embody the story's emotional life. Let's hope Sherman and Davis will find new venues and audiences, of all ages, for their work.

Vaughan Williams' "Dona nobis pacem" is a much more "adult" composition, a classic commentary on the horrors of war, written on the cusp of World War II by a man who served as an ambulance driver in World War I. It sets biblical texts and poetry of Walt Whitman, whose "Beat! beat! drums!" and "Dirge for Two Veterans" are scathing indictments of militarism.

Wright and Rubalcava, well-known for their long residencies with Opera San Jose, sang with power and grace. The chorus was exceptionally responsive to Hughes; all you had to do was look at the expressions on the singers' faces to understand how much the music meant to each of them.

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