

Choral Junkies

Summer Sings

Are churches like shower stalls? Stephen Sturk says yes, in part. Singers, no matter what their abilities, do sound better in each of those places because of the acoustics. But something else is at work in church. "You can come in here," he says of St. Paul's Cathedral, where he is composer-in-residence, "especially on an early-summer evening, and there's a beautiful sunlight on the stained glass windows, and it can be an awesome experience singing in that kind of a sacred space."

Sturk runs the Pacific Academy of Ecclesiastical Music and began its

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"summer sings" last year. These are informal, join-the-choir-for-one-night events. He

transported the idea from back East, where, he says, "It's a long-standing tradition for large choral societies to sponsor summer sings." Prior to coming to California, Sturk spent 17 years as a conductor, composer, and tenor in New York. "In New York, you can go to three or four sings in the course of a week. The whole idea is to provide a fun time for singers to work with a conductor that they don't know or haven't worked with. It may also give someone who's shopping around for a chorus the opportunity to experience a particular director. So that was the premise of starting them here."

This year's sings began with Mozart's Requiem, conducted by David Chase of the La Jolla Symphony. "It was a hugely popular combination — the Mozart and Chase, who has a big following in town. So we had 177 singers, and believe it or not, it sounded pretty good." The other sings have been almost equally popular, says Sturk, who counted 150 people singing Vivaldi's "Gloria," conducted by Stanley Wicks of the First United Methodist Church.



Robert Plimpton conducts "Summer Sings"

Who regularly shows up to sing? "Most people tend to be experienced choral singers. I would almost call them 'choral junkies.' Some are regular singers in groups around town — members of the San Diego Master Chorale, for example; others just sing in their church choirs."

How does Sturk divide the voices? "It's a matter of faith. We've been lucky, in that we tend to have a fairly balanced group. We always have more women than men, but it doesn't seem to matter. The men always have enough power to balance the women. But it really is a matter of faith to say, 'Boy! I hope we don't get 120 sopranos!'"

It sounds as if beginners won't feel comfortable walking right in. "I think you're right. But at the start of each sing, I ask, 'Who has performed any of these pieces before?' 'Who considers himself or herself a good reader or good musician?' Then I suggest that people who are newer or unsure sit by one of those people, who'll help carry them along."

Does it seem like a rehearsal or genuine performance? "A little of both. Depending on the piece, conductors may choose to rehearse some spots before running through the whole, with soloists and everything else."

This Friday's bill of fare is English cathedral anthems, conducted by Martin Green, music director of St. Paul's. "One of the anthems is by Sir Hubert Parry. It's called 'I Was Glad' and is exactly 100 years old. It was first performed at the coronation of Edward VII, Queen Victoria's son, in 1902, and has been performed at every coronation since."

Why the past tense? Why not 'I Am Glad'?

"The text is from the psalm that says, 'I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the House of the Lord.'"

A second anthem on the schedule is by Handel. Called "Zadok the Priest," it was composed for the coronation of another British king — George II — in 1727, and it, too, has been sung at every coronation since its premiere.

On the fourth Friday in August, Sturk himself will conduct the final sing, featuring a contemporary Requiem by British composer John Rutter (b. 1945).

What is it about singing with other people that is so clearly uplifting? Maybe it's like running a marathon, where you get energy from the pack?

The question reminds Sturk of something Robert Shaw once said. The San Diego Symphony's conductor from 1953 to 1958, Shaw went on to become what many consider to be America's greatest conductor of choral music. Sturk hunts for a clipping several years old in which Shaw, who died in 1999, is quoted on the relationship of the choral experience to "the human enterprise" — i.e., life.

When he finds it, he reads, with added emphases: "You're forced to conclude that you can do something finer together than you can do by yourself. It's almost inevitably, ineluctably, a prod to at least an acceptance of your fellow man, if not respect for him." And it's true! Choral singing truly is a group experience. It can't be replicated by a solitary experience! You can't do this in the shower!"

— Jeanne Schinto

PACEM "Summer Sings"
Fridays, August 9 and 23
7:00-9:30 p.m.
St. Paul's Cathedral
2728 Sixth Avenue
(at Fifth and Nutmeg)
Singers, \$10; listeners, free.
(Enter the cathedral through
the Sixth Avenue entrance,
across from Balboa Park)
Info: 619-298-7261

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