

Pandemic stories set to music to premiere online Aug. 29

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The LA-based HEX Ensemble was expanded to 12 singers for the Rogue Valley-produced "Six Feet Apart." The core group, from left, are Molly Pease, David Conley, Laurel Irene, James Hayden, director Fahad Siadat, and Saunder Choi. Irene and Siadat are originally from Ashland.



Rogue Valley production 18 months in the making

A massive multimedia choral oratorio by Rogue Valley-based nonprofit Anima Mundi Productions will premiere online Sunday, Aug. 29, at 5:30 p.m., with a Q&A to follow.

“Six Feet Apart: Stories of Resilience and Transformation” harnesses

the power of music, poetry and visual art to present a diverse collection of Oregon pandemic stories.

AMP is the same organization that launched a festival of painted pianos in 2019, “Pianos for Peace Oregon,” in partnership with Atlanta-based Pianos for Peace.

The music and poetry for “Six Feet Apart” were created by Ethan Gans-Morse and Tiziana DellaRovere. They are founders of AMP, artistic collaborators, and a married couple residing in Phoenix.

“We wanted to amplify diverse voices and foster collective healing in Oregon and beyond during the pandemic,” Gans-Morse said.

The Almeda fire added to the suffering already created by COVID-19, and the stories reflect how people have coped with both.

“Much to my surprise,” DellaRovere said, “when I was interviewing for these stories, people thanked me for listening and said they felt unburdened just by talking to me about their trauma.”

The project was a large undertaking.

AMP spent a year collecting stories and conducting interviews. Out of those interviews, DellaRovere wrote a libretto comprising seven poems. Those poems and two guest submissions from Oregon poets laureate Anis Mojgani and Kim Stafford were set to music by Gans-Morse for choir and piano trio.

Fifteen professional musicians recorded the music remotely, each independently from home.

“They recorded themselves on video as well as audio,” Gans-Morse

said, “so we see onscreen that the singers are themselves in quarantine, singing about people in quarantine.”

A Los Angeles audio team mixed and mastered the audio. Filmmaker Camilla Tassi produced the film/music video of the multimedia performance that will premiere Aug. 29. It includes images of the people whose stories are shared, the musicians, videos of the fire, and specially created artwork.

Performing the work are the HEX Ensemble and the Brightwork New Music Ensemble, both LA-based groups.

HEX Ensemble normally is composed of six singers but was expanded to 12 for this project. It has performed with the LA Opera, LA Philharmonic, LA Master Chorale, The Industry, and other prominent organizations. The LA Times reviewed HEX soprano Laurel Irene as “downright superhuman” and “simply astounding.” Irene and another member, Fahad Siadat, are originally from Ashland.

Brightwork, a Grammy-nominated classical new music sextet, provided a piano trio for the production, consisting of Aron Kallay on piano; Shalini Vijayan, violin; and Maggie Parkins, cello.

Betty LaDuke, a noted artist and writer who lives in Ashland, provided artwork for “Six Feet Apart.”

Poetry forms the libretto. After multiple interviews, DellaRovere wrote two poems as bookends — a prologue and an epilogue — which frame the work. Inside the oratorio are five more original poems by her and two poems from the poets laureate, all based on the stories collected.

One of the poems is based on submissions by middle-schoolers from

Portland.

The stories are as varied as the people of Oregon. Following are some examples:

Choral works are not new to AMP. Gans-Morse and DellaRovere launched the nonprofit about 10 years ago with an opera, “The Canticle of the Black Madonna,” which the Oregonian called “a huge achievement” and “generous, carefully crafted and supremely compassionate.”

Since then, they’ve created three additional operas, a program symphony in collaboration with the Rogue Valley Symphony, and their Heart of Humanity series of which “Six Feet Apart” is a part.

Collaborators on “Six Feet Apart” included Kim Lesley of the Southern Oregon Historical Society, Mara Liechty at HB Lee Middle School in Portland, and The Southern Oregon Coalition for Racial Equity.

“We reached out to numerous Oregon nonprofits to help us with story collection in their communities,” Gans-Morse said.

Tickets for the world premiere are “pay what you will,” starting at \$12, available online at humanitytickets.com. Performances thereafter on their website are free.

“We use YouTube as the streaming platform,” Gans-Morse said. “So, nobody needs fear any technical challenges. If you can watch a YouTube video, you can watch our concerts. But we embed them on our website so we can include program notes and other contextual materials.”

Other AMP concerts can also be viewed on the website. Normally, AMP concerts are performed at the SOU Music Recital Hall, but because of the pandemic, the 2020-21 season is being released online.

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