

Musicians give voice to marginalized people

By Caitlin Fowlkes for the Tidings | Dec 10, 2019 01:26 PM



Photo by Chava Florendo courtesy of Anima Mundi Productions. Anima Mundi Productions cofounder Ethan Gans-Morse plays one of the "Pianos for Peace" painted by Anima Mundi Productions cofounder Tiziana DellaRovere

You might know them as the painted piano people.

In October, Anima Mundi Productions presented what it called a Heart of Humanity concert. It brought in a trio of musicians featuring Malek Jandali and partnered with Pianos for Peace to place community-painted pianos in two locations in Ashland for the public to play.

Jandali is a pianist and composer who is working to turn Syrian writing

and history into music.

Within the week the pianos were painted, Jandali gave a couple of presentations about how music can preserve culture through the face of war, and then Anima Mundi launched the first in a series of three concerts.

“We sold about 250 tickets to the show, but way more than 250 people walked by that piano near the entrance to Lithia Park,” said Ethan Gans-Morse.

The mission of the organization, which Gans-Morse co-founded with his wife Tiziana DellaRovere, is to create original works of music and produce works from other composers, with a common thread that everything produced addresses social issues.

The second Heart of Humanity show is scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 12, at the SOU Music Recital Hall.

The show, titled “With Malice Toward None, With Charity For All,” will feature Japanese-American baritone Christòpheren Nomura with pianist Daniel Lockert and local musician Jodi French.

Gans-Morse described the performance as an “unforgettable recital of classical and popular works that explore the pressing topic of healing the wounds of war and restoring compassion.”

The third concert in the series, titled “Dreams Have No Borders,” is scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday, April 26, at the SOU Music Recital Hall.

The concert will include an original piece created by the co-founders based on interviews with several Latinas in Ashland who emigrated to the Rogue Valley.

“Everything that happens in the story really happened to someone we interviewed right here in Oregon,” Gans-Morse said.

The concert will feature Grammy-winning soprano Estelí Gomez, mezzo-soprano Cecilia Duarte, tenor Rafael Moras and the Delgani String Quartet.

He described the performance as a concert opera.

“People associate a lot with operas,” Gans-Morse said. “They usually think it’s not in English and they have powdered wigs and take place in 18th century Austria, but it’s really a dramatic narrative story told in song.”

Nomura, who will be featured in the January show, was part of the original Broadway cast of “Allegiance,” which was about the Japanese-American internment during World War II.

Gans-Morse said the musical caused a lot of people who had been silent about their own experiences to come forward and share their stories.

“This is exactly the type of experience we’re trying to cultivate — taking interdisciplinary art and using it to tell stories that need to be told,” Gans-Morse said.

The show includes a combination of classical music, using some songs from Nomura’s Broadway performance, plus an original from the co-founders of Anima Mundi and an original from Jodi French that uses a poem from a past Japanese-American poet laureate of Oregon.

“The show creates a journey from war to reconciliation and healing,” Gans-Morse said. “We try to have all of our performances end with hope.”

The Heart of Humanity series will become an annual event, Gans-Morse said, with three concerts each year, one in fall, winter and spring, on a Sunday at the Southern Oregon University Music Recital Hall. He said next year’s theme will be environmental impacts.

Gans-Morse said he and his wife have been commissioned to create other musical performances addressing social issues, beginning in 2010.

The first, an opera the couple wrote together, “The Canticle of the Black Madonna,” premiered in Portland and focused on a soldier of the Afghanistan war who suffered PTSD and returned during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The couple were also commissioned to create an opera, “Tango of the White Gardenia,” for a younger audience about bullying in Eugene.

The couple were also commissioned by the Rogue Valley Symphony to create a piece for its 50-year anniversary. They wrote “How Can You Own The Sky?” which described Southern Oregon Native American history, with collaboration by SOU professor and performer Brent Florendo and Dancing Spirit drummers.

“Over the course of these three projects, we found this powerful multilevel effect that happens,” Gans-Morse said. “These minorities say they don’t feel as invisible anymore.”

Anima Mundi means “The Soul of the World” in Latin, Gans-Morse said, and “it refers to our conviction that the soul of humanity and the fate of the planet are intertwined.”

The goal of the organization is to “seek to heal the soul of the world through the arts by providing experiences that bring people into their hearts and imagination, demonstrate the power of beauty and heal societal wounds through the shared experience of live music.”

For more information and to purchase tickets, see animamundiproductions.com.

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