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Following the musical road less traveled: Da Camera Singers perform the music of "Dissident Voices"



Sheila Heffernon conducts the Da Camera Singers during a rehearsal at Amherst College. STAFF PHOTO/JERREY ROBERTS [» Buy this image](#)

Frank Couvares sings a solo during a rehearsal with the Da Camera Singers.



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For the Gazette

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The "Dissident Voices" referred to in the title of the Da Camera Singers' spring concert this weekend are wildly diverse, with an occasional note of dissonance.

Not to worry about the dissonance, though. In the end, it adds pungency to gorgeous varieties of harmonies and rhythms from multiple traditions and hybrids of traditions, in a concert that mixes poetry, theater and music in as broad a repertoire as the venerable choir — a choir that's long been focused on classical music — has ever tried.

Leonard Bernstein's signature exuberance gives excitement and charge to the Latin Mass in the centerpiece of the concert, his choruses from "The Lark," a play about Joan of Arc by Jean Anouilh, adapted by Lillian Hellman. A counter-tenor solo, to be sung by mezzo-soprano Justina Golden, weaves soulfully through the choral parts, which will alternate with excerpts of monologues from the text to be recited by Anika Nailah.

Nailah is a Pocasset Wampanoag African American poet, author, performer, anti-racism educator and "cultural liberationist," the founder of Books of Hope (encouraging, editing and publishing texts by youth) now residing in the Valley.

A workshop Nailah gave at the Northfield Mt. Hermon School, where Da Camera director, Sheila Hefferon, is chair of the performing arts department, became an impetus for the concept of the concert. Nailah acknowledges that it was a leap for her, as a not particularly religious woman of color, a skeptic of nationalism and an opponent of colonialism, to identify with Joan of Arc, a white Roman Catholic and the very quintessence of French patriotism.

"But the fire inside the girl Joan (the fire that ultimately and literally consumed her), even as frightened as she was at every step, that is something I can definitely relate to," said Nailah.

Another example of the program's musical fusion is the blending of Negro Spiritual motifs with ancient Philippine rhythms called Kulintang (said to be similar to African talking drums) in "How I Discovered America." It's a choral setting by Francesco Nunez (founder and director of the Young People's Chorus in New York City) of a poem, by Philippine-American writer Eric Gamalinda, that's densely packed with references to the Philippine immigrant experience.

The chorus chants "Batingting, Batingting" — an onomatopoeic Filipino word for gong — and "airen, sarang, mahal kita" (words meaning lover, love and I love you in Chinese, Korean and Filipino) as members clap the beat with their hands.



Then the mood and pace change with a slow and swelling refrain, "This is how I discovered America," stirring up a feeling of almost romantic patriotism — patriotism of the Statue of Liberty variety, not the nationalist kind.

In short, "Dissident Voices" is an innovative, challenging, and politically charged program that was designed by Hefferon to speak truth — and beauty — to power and ugliness at a fraught moment in our nation's politics and history.

Poets and suffragettes

Da Camera Singers' bread and butter over 45 years of music-making in the Valley has been Baroque and Renaissance classics, interspersed with contemporary derivations and offshoots of the classical tradition, including a series of new compositions by Valley-based composers, which the group has been commissioning since 2009.

"Dissident Voices" goes further afield to search out music by women composers rooted in powerful movements for social justice, such as Margaret Bonds, an African American composer and pianist from Chicago whose setting of Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to music is on the program.

Interpreting the plaintive beauty of Negro Spirituals in many places, the piece brings out the epic and spacious dimensions of Hughes' brief but evocative tribute to the spiritual roots and core of the African diaspora.

Bonds, one of the first Black students to attend Northwestern University, was a close friend and frequent collaborator with Hughes, and she eventually joined him in Harlem, where she contributed in many ways to the flowering of arts and culture later known as the Harlem Renaissance. Her piano rendition of "Troubled Waters," one of many Negro Spirituals she reinvented for that instrument, also will be performed by Da Camera soprano and concert pianist Nancy Babb.

Langston Hughes' spirit will be hovering over the concert in yet another way: through the artistry of Nailah. She acknowledges "Langston" as a revered creative ancestor, if not an immediate influence on her poetry (though his poem "Black Misery" was an inspiration for her most recent book, "Every Day in America: Thirty Black Moments"). At the concert, Nailah will recite her poem "Still Here," which calls out centuries of oppression of non-whites by whites.

Another time and place (England in the early 1900s), another struggle for social justice, another movement in the arts and another composer you might not have heard of: Dame Ethel Mary Smyth, a die-hard suffragist who struggled with her own family and with critics to earn respect as a classical composer. Even then she was she harshly criticized for writing music that was "too masculine."

Whatever its musical merits, Smyth's "March of the Women" became the anthem of the extraordinarily militant British suffrage movement, and the women of Da Camera will sing it heartily, likely knowing themselves the importance of marching for the cause.

Dame Smyth's muscular, powerful — okay, masculine — "Kyrie" from her acclaimed "Mass in D" is also on the program.

Going further back in time takes us to an excerpt from Sophocles' "Antigone," in which a young girl gives a tyrant her what for. Composer William Hugh Albright, of Gary, Indiana, has set the dialogue from the scene, in which Antigone appeals to a higher justice than the tyrant's "laws," within a shimmering dome of sound. With influences ranging from ragtime to "non-tonal classical music," Albright's music has been described both as "polystylistic" and "quaquaversal."

Quaquaversal? Whoever heard of that? It means "dipping from a center to all points of the compass," according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

An apt, unusual word to sum up "Dissident Voices."

The Da Camera Singers perform "Dissident Voices" Friday, May 31 at 8 p.m. at Helen Hills Hills Chapel in Northampton and Sunday, June 2, at 3 p.m. at the Church of Saints Andrew and St. James in Greenfield. A donation is appreciated.

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