



The N.E.O. Voice Festival presents

EXPLORATORIO: THE ORIGINS OF CREATIVITY

Shatto Chapel, First Congregational Church of Los Angeles
540 S. Commonwealth Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90020
Aug. 10, 2019 @ 8 PM

PROGRAM

<i>To the Muses</i> (2019)	Abraham Ross, organ	Robbie LaBanca
<i>You told</i> (2019)	David Saldaña, soloist; Abraham Ross, organ	Molly Pease
<i>Tentative Arrangements</i> (2019) Amanda Achen-Keenan, soprano solo; James Hayden, bass solo; Abraham Ross, organ		Michael Standard
<i>Balloon Interludes</i> (2019) I.		Lauren Spavelko
<i>He Took the Shape of a Shaper</i> (2019) Benjamin Hanson, soloist; Abraham Ross, organ		Claudia Hinsdale
<i>Variations on a Spectral Theme</i> (2019)		David Saldaña
<i>Balloon Interludes</i> (2019) II.		Lauren Spavelko
<i>You are tired,</i> (2019)		Leah Ofman
<i>Palimpsest III // on language and singularities</i> (2019) Sarah Grace Graves, alto solo; Benjamin Hanson, tenor solo; Trevor Villwock, electronics; Abraham Ross, organ		Trevor Villwock
<i>The Breath of Life</i> (2019)	Lorna Moore, conductor	Justin Witwick
<i>Nothing New Under the Sun</i> (2019)		Ashi Day

A NOTE FROM DAVID HARRIS, ENSEMBLE DIRECTOR

This week, 35 creative artists joined to explore the voice: their voice, what it means, how it works, what they can do with it, and how they can guide others into new ways of voicing. As a part of that experience, they created the New Explorative Oratorio, "The Origins Of Creativity". The work explores the creative life, reflecting both on the long term experience of living artistically, and on the short term experience of fulfilling inspiration by making something new. The piece begins with a frustrated question through the words of William Blake: "why do things promised feel so empty?" Treble voices, as if distant angelic hosts, pass that question to the basses and tenors whose private idea, a response to the question, surfaces only to be mocked and derided in "You Told". The ensemble then screams in frustration before responding with what seems like nonsense in "Tentative Arrangements", but what is, in reality, so highly structured as to obfuscate the underlying emotional conflicts, and then, we play. "Balloon Interludes" function throughout the work as a reminder that we "play" music, we don't "work" music. The release of exploration serves as ongoing inspiration. Claudia's "he took the shape of a shaper" references a Finnish folktale in which a god creates music by building an instrument from the bones of a fish. From death comes potential, we have to release parts of our selves to find others, and the ensemble hears the story as if around a mythological campfire. "Variations On A Spectral Theme" opens with a conviction "I have decided to go". The rest of the piece is based on a fractured version of this melody, broken into its spectral elements, a ray of hope that there is so much more around us there than we are aware of. "You are tired," is a reminder that ups come with downs, yet, a recognition that creativity thrives on connection. This newfound voice is followed, in "palimpsest III", by the fear that it may not be enough, that someone else, or something else like artificial intelligence might displace what we have found. "The Breath Of Life" is a setting of the Hebrew creation myth as told by an African American poet James Weldon Johnson. It draws the close connection between creative inspiration and divinity through the life-giving essence of breath. After one last balloon exaltation, we realize that creating doesn't mean coming up with something from nothing, but that new ideas build on old ones, which releases us into the very joyful human understanding that "it's all been done before." Now, we are ready. Ready to greet newness, emotion, connection, and play, as we end with "Introduction."

"The Origins Of Creativity" speaks with a single voice, even though it was created by so many different people who didn't know one another before this week. This clarity of message invites the idea that creative living is a universal experience, but opens a more intimate view into artistry as well. What we have discovered over and over again this week is that the act of bringing newness to life originates in relationship between self and other and self to self. Today we officially bring this new creation to life, completing its gift promise by mingling it with your creative presence. You are invited to join us at the end when prompted by hand holding, an act that will help fulfill the piece's ultimate power to connect.

PROGRAM NOTES

To the Muses by Robbie LaBanca

As an artist or even just a human being, we can all relate to having inspiration strike and then seemingly without warning or reason disappear. When writing this movement I decided to dive into that creative experience. The concept of the fickle nature of creativity is succinctly embodied in William Blake's poem "To the Muses" which serves as the text. These mythological entities would both grant and deny inspiration to artists seemingly only based on their whims. At the beginning and end of the piece I quote a Bach chorale whose original text speaks to the fleeting nature of human existence. In the final statement in which Blake says "The sound is forced, the notes are few" I have allowed a slow unwinding of the musical form until only the sound of the organ exists perhaps with the smallest glimmer of hope that the original inspiration might someday return.

You told by Molly Pease

You told is the story of an idea's journey – how it forms, and then what happens when it spreads and is interpreted, manipulated and distorted. It's also an illustration of the creator's internal struggle with any given idea – how that idea begins in an intimate, private place in their mind, and then how hard it is to let go of their original idea when it begins to change because of outside influences. The piece wrestles with the question of whether artists should create for the sake of some higher purpose (i.e. "serving the music" or a divine entity), or if they should create for the sake of enjoyment/human fulfillment (either their own, or that of others).

Tentative Arrangements by Michael Standard

Tentative Arrangements is the movement that I wrote for the 2019 ExplOratorio at the inaugural N.E.O. Voice Festival. The theme of the festival is The Origins of Creativity. For me, the origins of creativity are tightly linked to problem-solving processes, so this piece is a codification of solution-finding. *Tentative Arrangements* is divided into 3 parts. The first part consists of phrases that are associated with frustration and wonder: expressions when seeing chaos. Over the course of the second section, the aforementioned phrases are deconstructed by the letter. The pitches and rhythms in this section are derived from the letters in each of the phrases in the first section. The final section consists of text and pitch sequences which is an innocuous anagram of the phrases in the first section. It doesn't mean much, but it sounds nice.

Balloon Interludes by Lauren Spavelko

Balloon Interludes is a silly, theatrical exploration of creativity. Balloons have the same appeal to me as play dough or finger painting—even more serious personalities will smile and play when someone tosses a balloon their way. The three interludes are designed to fit in-between other works on a concert and run like a ribbon in the background. In each, more categories of sound (and more balloons!) are introduced for play. The interludes balance structure and simplicity with flexibility and choice to invite everyone from the meek to the bold to confidently create together. At times, performers create a definitive focal point; at others, many. The audience can focus on and enjoy any interaction that fascinates them. They may even find themselves part of a spontaneous moment with a performer! Invite your inner child to come explore and prepare for fun! (And expect surprises!)

He Took the Shape of a Shaper by Claudia Hinsdale

This piece is a loose retelling of a Finnish folktale, in which demigod Väinämöinen builds an instrument called a kantele using pike bones, creating musical tradition. Many people try to play the instrument to no avail. Someone threatens to throw it into the water, but the instrument begins to speak and protests this. Väinämöinen then plays the kantele, and it sounds beautiful. It eventually falls in the water, and the god cries. A scaup retrieves his tears from the sea, and to everyone's astonishment, they have grown and changed into gilded, beautiful objects. We mold ourselves into different shapes that makes sense for each experience we take on, each moment we inhabit. In these shapes we make things that develop voices of their own. Creating can be uncomfortable and even crushing, but discomfort can undergo unexpected metamorphoses, blooming anew.

Variations on a Spectral Theme by David Saldaña

Variations on a Spectral Theme originates from a spectral analysis of an original melody on the first stanza of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Heaven-Haven." The deconstruction of the sound of sung poetry, and its reconstruction is an abstract form reflects a meditative chant on the mysteries present within our everyday speech.

You are tired, by Leah Ofman

When I began to write this piece considering the theme, "origins of creativity," I thought about why we as a species are driven to create. Are there any universal feelings that provide an impetus to make something? I landed on the feeling of heartbreak, as near a universal experience as possible. So many songs, poems, paintings, plays - you name it! - have stemmed from the creator's drive to express their sadness. The poem "You are tired," by e.e. cummings spoke to me about this feeling, and in setting it to music I hope to speak to you.

*Palimpsest III // on language and singularities by
Trevor Villwock*

My contribution to the N.E.O. ExplOratorio developed out of my recent fascination with artificial intelligence and the way it has already started to reshape human life, including our relationship with art and creativity itself. Musically, I found inspiration in the extremes of human-created language, from pre-speech phonetic sounds to complex formal languages like those used in computer programming. The piece draws inspiration in part from the idea of an "AI singularity," a point likely within the next century (and possibly much sooner) at which general AI will reach parity with humans and then rapidly surpass us in all domains, including scientific discovery, human psychology, technological innovation, and the creation of art. The score utilizes graphic and aleatoric notation heavily to allow the organist and vocalists a large amount of freedom in interacting with the electronic elements.

The Breath Of Life by Justin Witwick

When I first got this assignment, I immediately thought of the creation of man. I thought this would be a wonderful text to really bring the idea of creation to light. All throughout this piece, there is a sense of unity as well as a sense of awe in the idea of creation. There is also a bit of play between the parts, which is a bit of creation in itself, i.e. the piece creating itself as it goes on. Everything from the opening envelops the idea of starting from one thing and expanding it until it is what we desire. The opening comes back many times throughout the piece and it conveys the idea that we have a sort of style we revert back to when creating. I am so thankful to have this opportunity through the N.E.O voice festival and can't wait to apply everything to my future career!

Nothing New Under the Sun by Ashi Day

Nothing New Under the Sun takes playful aim at the idea of creativity as a personal trait, and instead frames creativity as communal and environmental. We live with the notion of the "lone genius," icons who changed the world with their breakthroughs. But nearly always, these breakthroughs come from building on the work of others, exchanges of ideas with colleagues, and discussions with partners, collaborators, and friends. This piece reflects a theory of creativity as an environment that can be curated through opportunities for risk taking and collaboration. Furthermore, the Einsteins and Beethovens in our history cast imposing shadows that can stifle our own creativity with unhelpful comparison, or emphasizing innovation over other values. It has been extremely freeing for me as an artist to let go of the notion that my work must be never-before-imagined, and to instead focus on finding what is true to the ideas driving me. This piece represents these concepts by building something communally out of very simple elements that are not particularly interesting or exciting on their own. The phrase "nothing new under the sun" is broken down into individual phonemes that are each given a single note. Once introduced, the sounds are public property, free to be combined, eventually forming motifs, ostinati, and melodies as well as syllables, words, and finally the full phrase. The piece aims to take the pressure of "newness" off of creation, and instead to joyfully embrace the wild possibilities in what we already have. (ashi-day.com)

Introduction by Jasper Sussman

Being asked to write a piece for the N.E.O. Voice Festival felt like being permitted to turn stone into water. At last, the common barriers were dissolved and I could let my imagination release its rigidity and wander free. I decided to focus on that phenomenon of the human voice that both allows us each to be perceived as individuals and then also as one uniform aural object. Moreover, I wanted to allow the performers of the work to practice awareness in both aural spaces, first engaging with their individual emotional energy, and then turning their awareness to aural sensations throughout the room. The result is a playful set of images and instructions that provide a foundation for self and communal exploration, celebrating the beauty that is each and every one of us and the magic that arises when we deeply commune.

ABOUT THE N.E.O. VOICE FESTIVAL:

Founded in 2019, the N.E.O. Voice Festival is a week-long exploration of the voice and its many capabilities within vocal performance and music composition. For festival participants, the Festival includes daily, interactive workshops; expert mentoring, evening rehearsals, and concerts featuring the best of LA's new music vocal scene. The festival culminates with the ExplOratorio: an oratorio composed and performed by N.E.O. Voice Festival composers, singers, and faculty that is centered around a theme. This year's theme is "the Origins of Creativity:" where does creativity come from, what constitutes creativity, and what stumbling blocks do artists face when trying to create. For more information about the Festival, please visit www.neovoicefestival.com.

N.E.O. MUSIC FESTIVAL 2019 PARTICIPANTS:

Amanda Achen-Keenan (N.E.O. Fellow), Ariana Stultz, Ashi Day, Benjamin Hanson, Brennan Meier, Catie Chapman, Claudia Hinsdale, Cloe Gentile, Daniel Castellanos, David Saldaña, Glenn Carlos, James Hayden (N.E.O. Fellow), Jasper Sussman (N.E.O. Fellow), Justin Witwick, Kirk Averitt, Kristjan Vrtič (N.E.O. Fellow), Lauren Spavelko (N.E.O. Fellow), Leah Ofman, Lorna Moore (Conductor Fellow), Michael Standard, Molly Pease (N.E.O. Fellow), Nyokabi Kariuki, Robbie LaBanca, Ryan Cox, S.A. Shell, Salime Caran, Sarah Grace Graves, Serena Standley, Sophie Leung-Wolff, Trevor Villwock

N.E.O. MUSIC FESTIVAL 2019 FACULTY & STAFF:

Abraham Ross / Organ Specialist
David Harris / Ensemble Director
David Saldaña / Administrative Intern
Fahad Siadat / Composition Director
Laurel Irene / Voice Director
TJ Sclafani / Program Administrator

OUT OF THE BOX CHAMBER VOCAL MUSIC SAT. AUG 3	CUTTING EDGE VOCAL ENSEMBLES WED. AUG 7	 a week of concerts FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, L.A. 540 S. COMMONWEALTH AVE.
GREAT WORKS GREAT ORGANS THURS. AUG 8	N.E.O. ORATORIO PREMIERE SAT. AUG 10	

Brought to you by VoiceScienceWorks, See-A-Dot Music Publishing, Inc., and the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles