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Gold Coast Celebrates Black History

By Lou Fancher



The Gold Coast Chamber Players are using their first performances of 2011 to prove they've got both talent and a desire to celebrate Black History Month.

The ensemble's performances, held in the Community Hall at the Lafayette Library, will feature Lawrence Beamen, a top finalist from television's America's Got Talent, and works by Antonin Dvorak and William Grant Still.

Pamela Freund-Striplen, the Gold Coast Chamber Players' (GCCP) artistic director, described the evolution of this year's special event.

"My son went through the school system here and I noticed they always did activities around Black History month. I saw he was participating through the schools, but there were no public events to celebrate the month."

She began to form a plan for a concert, and heard some surprising responses:

"Someone asked me recently, 'Why are you doing this: you're not black!' It never occurred to me that it didn't have something to do

Photo provided by Pamela Freund-Striplen

with all of us. And then, after it started developing, I thought how cool it would be to have related events. I thought it would enrich the whole concert to have a variety of things around Black History month."

Her idea had a snowball effect on library staff. Kathy Merchant, Executive Director of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation, reported that the Consortium Partners are gearing up for related activities, and Mayor Carl Anduri is brushing up a proclamation for the City Council's consideration.

"Our children's librarian, Donna Lenhardt, is pulling together a program with a woman who appears as Harriet Tubman, asking the children to follow her much like Harriet did for escaping slaves. The Chabot Space and Science Discovery Center is doing a program for ages 3-8 on the great African American inventor Washington Carver. The children will play a game that matches the name of the invention to a picture of the invention, will plant a peanut seedling, and will make their own peanut butter, then have it as a snack," she said.

Freund-Striplen, pleased with the expansion, was also thrilled with the contributions Beamen made to the project.

"My original idea was to pair Dvorak's American String Quartet and some spirituals. But once Lawrence became involved, it became a larger project. He has a lot of ideas about Black History Month. I think that's what drew him to say yes. The ideas behind it were more than just hiring him to do some singing," she said.

Not that the singing wouldn't be enough. Beamen knew he wanted to be a singer from his early days growing up in Mississippi. Hear him sing just one line of Old of Man River and there's little doubt he was born to deliver rich, vibrant renditions of the historically significant American songs.

"A good voice is a given in my world, but what I look at is how can they show me a new universe with what they sing," Freund-Striplen said. "The spirituals require an understanding of the text. I wanted a singer that could communicate the optimism and suffering that I hear in the African American spirituals."

Freund-Striplen said she has heard some of the best voices in the world through her work with the San Francisco Opera, but Beamen's deep, resonant sound told a story beyond the meaning of the lyrics.

"The songs are from Africa, there are folk songs, and songs from Israel. It's useful that he is African American in understanding where this music comes from: he grew up in Mississippi, he learned these songs from his grandfather, there's a history there that brings a richer experience than someone who learned it as an adult," she explained.

The ensemble's concerts often feature a slide show with information about the music and the composers. This time, Beamen will give contextual information about the spirituals and their connection to Dvorak's work.

Dvorak came to America in 1892 to identify the "American musical voice." History shows that he so loved the actual voice of young Harry Burleigh, a singer he discovered, that he asked the boy to sing to him almost daily. The composer came to believe African

American spirituals were at the heart of American music.

William Grant Still, whose Panamanian Dances Freund-Stripen described as "lively, with percussive things we do on the instruments," was the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra.

Freund-Stripen hopes the concerts are not a one-time event. The performances will be broadcast on KQED four times in February and the group has an education program that takes them to the schools throughout the year.

"We play all over the Bay area," Freund-Stripen said, "but I always want to have a community base for the Gold Coast Concert Players. We're hopeful that we will do this-or something similar-every year for Black History month."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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