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Sampling four centuries of chamber music with a purpose

By *Sophie Braccini*



St. Lawrence String Quartet Photo provided

Four Bay Area chamber music organizations are pooling their inspiration thanks to the initiative of Pamela Freund-Striplen, the leader of the Lafayette-based Gold Coast Chamber Players. The new entity, called the Bay Area Music Consortium, not only creates an economy of scale by inviting quality musicians, but unites their sensibilities by formulating unique, inspired programming. The first BAMC production will open the series in Lafayette on Feb. 9 with a highly spiritual concert interweaving four pieces from four different centuries performed by the renowned St. Lawrence String Quartet.

Freund-Striplen recalls how it all started a year and a half ago, during one of her solitary brainstorming sessions, when she realized that other local chamber groups she knew had different audiences, but similar personalities - and that it would be beneficial to band together to nurture, rather than compete.

Freund-Striplen approached Tiffany Loewenberg, director of the San Francisco-based Noe Valley Chamber Orchestra, and she was immediately on board and excited. Subsequently, they invited two other directors, Berkeley Chamber Performances' Joanne De Phillips and Mill Valley Chamber Music Society's Bill Horne to reflect on the different paths this alliance could take.

The four directors agreed to offer annual concerts with programming that would present their shared unique artistic vision. Gold Coast Players director says that her mission was to convince the other three that together they could create something unique. She sees BAMC as a metaphor of chamber music itself, where the whole is more than the sum of its individual parts.

The Feb. 9 concert will feature "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind" by contemporary Argentinian composer Osvaldo Golijov. Freund-Striplen explains that the music is a very impactful piece, a rich exploration of Jewish history. Isaac The Blind, who eight centuries ago was the great kabbalist rabbi of Provence (France), was the Golijov's inspiration behind the music for clarinet and the string quartet. Golijov wrote that the movements of (his) work sound as if written in three of the different languages spoken by the Jewish people throughout history, the prelude and the first movement, the most ancient, in Aramaic; the second movement is in Yiddish, the rich and fragile language of a long exile; the third movement and postlude are in sacred Hebrew. It is considered by some to be one of the greatest pieces in the clarinet repertoire in this century.

It seemed logical for Freund-Striplen to invite the St. Lawrence String Quartet to play this piece as it has had a long association with the composer. She adds that if it was not for the creation of the BAMC, Gold Coast would not have had the means to work with such a renowned quartet.

Freund-Striplen met with the quartet's cellist, Chris Costenza, and they brainstormed win-win ideas to compose the entire program. The quartet has recorded all of Haydn string quartets (see Tex Talk by the quartet about "The Humor of Haydn" www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVaQBTWu_u0). Together the two musicians thought of a crescendo of spiritual music, starting with Tango alla Zingarese (2016) by Bay Area composer Jonathan Berger (who will be at the concert), followed by Franz Joseph Haydn's String Quartet in D, Op. 20, No. 4 (1772), and to end the first part of the concert, the third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132 (1825), which bears the title Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an der Gottheit (Holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the Deity).

Freund-Striplen, who says that she will come to all of the four concerts as a spectator and not a musician this time around, adds that this unique concert will sample four centuries of chamber music in a meaningful way.

Gold Coast Chamber concerts at the Lafayette Library Community Hall often sell out, so tickets should be bought in advance. The Feb. 9 concert will start at 7:30 p.m. with a pre-talk by Kai Christensen at 7 p.m.

Info: <http://gcplayers.org>

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[back](#)

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