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One voice

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It might seem strange to some to, in effect, anthropomorphize a musical instrument.

But, an oboe, for instance, can be a voice when a composer and the purveyor of a song combine efforts in text and music. Additionally, a choral composer might choose to blend choral work with centuries-old poetry.

This is the subject of Arcata Choral Artists' third annual concert, this one titled "A Way With Words," featuring contemporary choral compositions. The show will be held Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Eureka's Arkley Center for the Performing Arts.

As has been the case previously, singers, many of whom have never sung together, met during an intensive workshop — "A Choral Workshop Experience" — which took place this past week and which is under the artistic direction of Jonathan Souza.

"A short-term rehearsal process works for people," Souza said before the group's fourth rehearsal at Eureka's First Congregational Church.

There will have been a total of eight rehearsals before Friday's show.

"My mentor in graduate school taught me rehearsal will fill the space available to it," Souza said. "I really believe it to my core. ...

"We know it works because we've done it like this two years in a row. There's a comfort level with that history now."

"From the first year almost everybody that did it came back the second year," Kevin Sharkey said.

He, along with pianist Nancy Correll and Souza's wife, Christina Souza, are the principal coordinators of Arcata Choral Artists.

The group comprises close to 55 singers this year.

Jonathan Souza refers to this group's unique approach as that of conveying the experience of "choral art."

Jonathan Souza picks the choral music with consultation by Sharkey and Christina.

"Jon also makes the choices of how to get us there, how to get us from a group of singers who have never sung together to a polished group," Sharkey said.

This year, the angle is how literature/poetry interacts with choral compositions.

One example is the choral work composed by Eric Whitacre into which he puts "A Boy and A Girl," a poem by Octavio Paz.

Paz was Mexican (1914-18) and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in literature in 1990, Correll said.

She said the connection between poet and composer is about give-and-take.

"It's really the response of a creative artist to the work of another creative artist," she said.

When a composer incorporates a poem written apart from this composition there is an "overlay of meaning," Correll said.

“Many contemporary composers (use) words that were written hundreds (of years) ago,” Sharkey said. “That’s where contemporary composers today draw their inspiration.”

Friday’s concert will offer a range from sacred to secular to folk to classical songs.

Some will be sung a capella. Correll will accompany several.

The addition of the musical instrument might seem to some almost as a third layer added to the choral works and poetry.

Another accompanist in the show will be Ronite Gluck on French horn. Paul Basler’s “Alleluia” from music cycle “Songs of Faith” also features piano, congas and tambourine.

Virginia Ryder will accompany four songs on her oboe. “Four Pastorales” are poems by Thomas Hornsby Ferril set to music by Cecil Effinger.

“With our focus on words, to me these poems are almost a dialog between the voices and the oboe going back and forth,” Christina Souza said.

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