

The 2013 Young Composer Competition sponsored by Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra

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CONTACT: Mary A. Rogier 510-845-5305

What do you get when you combine an enthusiastic 240-singer chorus -- mostly middle-aged and older -- with three promising young composers -- all well under 30? Here in Berkeley, where the Berkeley Community Chorus and Orchestra will perform the work of the top three winners of their recent Young Composer Competition in early May, what you get is both an exciting (and free!) concert series and an unexpected opportunity for music-loving community members and young composers to connect and communicate across the generations through their common love of music.

Although BCCO has sponsored composition competitions in the past, this is the first time it has sponsored a nationwide competition focused on young composers, under the age of 40. According to BCCO Music Director Ming Luke, BCCO decided to sponsor the competition to “hear the compositional voices of the current generation,” and provide a forum for the performance of their work. The competition was launched in mid-2012 with a Nov. 1 deadline. The three finalists will have their scores performed in the upcoming concerts and receive a CD of the performance, a prize of \$500, and travel funds to participate in a rehearsal. The winning composer will receive an additional prize of \$500 and his composition will be featured again in the fall 2013 concerts.

Submission guidelines clearly reflected BCCO’s interest in accessible works, calling for previously unpublished works under 10 minutes for SATB chorus and orchestra that are “appropriate for a non-auditioned chorus to perform.”

- Works should be written for SATB chorus and chamber orchestra.
- Compositions should be appropriate for a non-auditioned chorus to perform.
- Works must be no more than ten (10) minutes in duration.
- Instruments may include the following: two flutes (piccolo), two clarinets (bass clarinet), two oboes (English horn), two bassoons, two French horns, two trumpets, single percussion, timpani, keyboard, violin, viola, cello, bass. The string performing count will be maximum 6/5/5/4/2.
- Acoustic works that utilize electronic/computer accompaniment are acceptable.
- All music must be unpublished.

Applicants were also asked to submit three bound copies of a full score, a recording on a CD, and a biography.

BCCO attracted an impressive judging panel, including composer John Adams as honorary chair; composer Gabriela Lena Frank; UC Berkeley professor Ken Ueno; BCCO member Christian Fritze; and BCCO Music Director Ming Luke. The judges each reviewed all 17 entries and selected their top five, which the chorus then previewed, singing each of them during what Luke calls a “stumble-through” in a January rehearsal. At the end of the meeting, chorus members voted to select the three finalists, which included: Costas Dafnis’ *Carmen Vocis*,

a poetic reflection on the unique expressiveness of the human voice; Michael Schachter's *Oseh Shalom Bimromav*, the text of which is a Hebrew prayer about granting peace to all people; and Keane Southard's *A Day of Sunshine*, which set a Longfellow poem to an exuberant song of thanks for "the gift of life in the beauty of the natural world."

One of the benefits for the finalists was a trip to Berkeley to rehearse with the BCCO. During the rehearsals, Luke led the chorus through the new piece, frequently consulting with each composer about his intent, rhythm, tempo and dynamics. Luke then turned the podium over to the composer for a lively question-and-answer session, giving the singers a better understanding of the composition and an interesting glimpse into the lives, dreams and aspirations of each composer. Chorus board president Karen Davison and soprano Nancy Sue Brink, professional videographers, videotaped all three sessions for potential use in the future.

For the chorus members, the visits from each finalist decidedly exceeded their expectations, and made the competition both so musically exciting and personally enjoyable. Because BCCO is a resolutely non-audition chorus, many BCCO singers start out with no or relatively little musical training or singing experience. The group normally takes on only one major piece for each concert series, and allots as much as three full months of weekly rehearsals in order to learn and shape the piece. Thus, some of the singers were wary of having to learn three completely unfamiliar works in addition to the May concert program's "main course," the Durufle Requiem.

Well before the arrival of the first visitor, Keane Southard, Luke sent an email to choristers exhorting them to "be as prepared as possible for the session. Work on your rhythms! Read the poem beforehand! Punch out the notes!" Similar efforts were made for the other finalists' visits, as the chorus worked to master Schachter's haunting melodies and Dafnis' compelling anthem. In all, the chorus has spent a substantial amount of each three hour weekly rehearsal in February and March on learning and understanding these new works. This has been challenging, and earlier in the season, some singers were anxious about spending too much time on the competition pieces and not enough on the Durufle.

Anxiety notwithstanding, the choristers have greatly appreciated BCCO's decision to bring each finalist to Berkeley to introduce his composition and work with the chorus in rehearsal. As Christian Fritze, who represented his fellow singers on the judging panels, "While I enjoyed the experience of being a judge, to me, what really brought the competition to life was the time we chorus members were able to spend with each composer. The visits were musically fascinating and gave the chorus an impression of the human being behind the composition. And especially in light of their youth, each composer was able to speak eloquently about his approach, and each had a gentle way of making people aware of how to think about evaluating a new piece."

Making his first trip to the Bay Area, Southard was warmly welcomed by longtime Board member and alto Liz Raymer, who hosted him in their home in the Elmwood neighborhood. BCCO board member and soprano Ama Torrance hosted finalist Michael Schachter, and board member and alto Li-Hsia Wang hosted Costas Dafnis. Other Board members took the finalists on tours of the Berkeley campus, to the scenic Berkeley hills, and into San Francisco, and the full board held informal potluck dinners.

During their visits, the composers also were able to connect with other young musicians, spending time with the extraordinary team that Music Director Luke has assembled for BCCO. Assistant Conductor Derek Tam, accompanist Heather Pinkham, and Mia Tsui, Apprentice Conductor, all in their early 20s, shared their musical experiences over dinner with each finalist during their visits. Tam commented that “It's exciting to see the young composers finding their individual voice. I was impressed by the breadth of their musical influences. And it's very exciting to bring a composition to life when the composer is still alive, let alone sitting in rehearsal with you!”

For Costas Dafnis, at 23 the youngest finalist, this competition is unique in what it offered the three finalists: a trip to Berkeley for a weekend including lodging, sightseeing and the chance to participate in a rehearsal of their works plus a return visit in May to hear their work. The other two finalists were quick to agree, noting how unexpected and unusual it was for them to be personally welcomed and asked to work with the chorus so intensively.

Chorus members, too, appreciated the opportunity to connect with the young composers. Linda Morris, one of the BCCO board members who coordinated the competition, commented that “We were delighted to spend informal time together with each of these talented young men. Each of them was generous with his time, friendly, extraordinarily poised and articulate, and each was truly appreciative of the hospitality of our singers.”

As this article is being written, BCCO is entering the final stage of the competition, and interest in all three compositions and the final outcome continues to grow. During the first concert of the series, on Friday May 3rd, Music Director Luke will conduct BCCO's 220 singers and 50-member orchestra in the California premier performances of the work of three outstanding young composers. While Southard cannot attend, as he is now in Brazil on a Fulbright scholarship, two of these young men will be sitting in the audience along with their families, enjoying the thrilling experience of hearing -- and sharing -- their musical voice with a very welcoming Berkeley community. At the same time, BCCO's singers will be equally excited, enjoying the experience of what Luke calls “hearing the compositional voices of the current generation” just as much as the composers themselves.

When asked whether BCCO will sponsor a similar competition in the future, Luke is emphatic: “BCCO should definitely do this project again. Learning and performing new works should be integral to the mission of any ensemble. And exploring who may be the next Mozarts and Beethovens of the current day is an exciting process.” How can anyone resist an opportunity like that? Come to the concert on May 3, help choose the winning composition, and perhaps meet the next Mozart!

The BCCO concerts will be held at St. Joseph the Worker Church, 1640 Addison St., Berkeley, on Friday, May 3, at 8 p.m.; Sunday, May 5, at 4:30 p.m.; and Sunday, May 12, at 4:30 p.m. For more information, call BCCO at 510-433-9599, or see <http://www.bcco.org>.