

**Orchestra Nova's critically acclaimed
Masterpiece *Messiah***

Thursday, December 8, 7:30 p.m.

Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church

Friday, December 9, 7:30 p.m.

St. James-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, La Jolla

Saturday, December 10, 7:30 p.m.

Solana Beach Presbyterian Church

Jung-Ho Pak, conductor

Chorus

SACRA/PROFANA

Krishan Oberoi, artistic director

Guest artists

Megan Weston, soprano

Darryl Taylor, countertenor

Robert MacNeil, tenor

David Marshman, bass-baritone

Masterpiece What?

Each year, we get asked by those who haven't yet experienced it, what "Masterpiece" refers to in the title of Orchestra Nova's production of Handel's holiday favorite. Those who have experienced it and are "in the know" must wonder how it all started.

Jung-Ho had an idea

The idea came from Jung-Ho Pak, Nova's artistic director, four years ago. Jung-Ho had conducted countless *Messiah* performances from California to Cape Cod and was trying to find a fresh way to approach the work and give it a more Baroque-like style while, at the same time, offering something unexpected and even more enriching for the guests to enjoy. Jung-Ho knew he could not do this alone. He knew the music intimately, but what if he "married" this masterpiece of music with masterpieces of art. For that, he needed a collaborator with a strong background in art. He met with Dr. James Grebl, Manager of Library Services at the San Diego Museum of Art. They slowly began matching up text from the libretto and images of great works of art. Over the next several months, dozens of works were considered, removed – and finally nearly 30 images were selected.

It's all in the bow

With the images ready to go, Jung-Ho started working on the musical approach. He knew he wanted the Baroque style that required the musicians to play with a slightly different technique. Normally, a musician holds the bow toward the end, near the base. However, the Baroque style forces players to hold the bow much higher up on the stick – something they're not trained to do. Jung-Ho had to work with our (very patient) musicians on both holding the bow differently and getting a different sound out of the instrument. Through some practice, he had the sound he wanted: an 18th century sound.

Hallelujah!

Next was the chorus. A typical *Messiah* performance could include an orchestra of 100 and a chorus twice that size. However, with this simpler approach (going back to the Baroque era), Jung-Ho would work with just 20 musicians and 20 voices. With so few voices, just five people per vocal part, the diction had to be extremely clear and the dynamics needed to stay true to the score.

Masterpieces of art. ✓

New bow technique. ✓

Smaller, intimate chorus. ✓

Masterpiece *Messiah* was a reality.

Back to the beginning – 18th century Ireland

My, how times have changed! It was 1742 in Dublin and the premiere of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* was cancelled by, of all people, the Dean of St. Patrick's Church, Jonathan Swift. This was long after his *Gulliver's Travels* had been published and he had a bit of a curmudgeonly reputation. The reason for the cancellation: the performance included singers from his church and the performance was in (horrors of horrors!) a music hall! Wouldn't he be surprised to know that *Messiah* is performed throughout the world today – in music halls, in churches, even in arenas.

The premiere did finally take place in Neal's Music Hall that year but, at the insistence of Swift, under the title of *A Sacred Oratorio*. All proceeds were allocated to the Foundling Hospital, an organization for underprivileged children which still exists today as *The Thomas Coram Foundation*. That wasn't a problem for Handel because he had long given generously to the charity. The title for this oratorio, however, was a different story and he quickly changed it back to *Messiah*.

Three weeks and it's done

Handel's friend Charles Jennens wrote the libretto and asked him to write the music. Depressed and nearly broke after the bankruptcy of his opera hall in London, Handel recognized that opera wasn't a financially feasible option at that time so he sat down and wrote *Messiah* as an oratorio (an opera without staging) at breakneck speed in just three weeks.

It is divided into three sections:

Part I – the prophecy of the coming of a *Messiah* and Christ's Nativity

Part II – Christ's suffering and death

Part III – the affirmation of the Christian faith and glimpses of the revelation

Ironically, he intended it to be a thought-provoker for Lent and Easter and, in fact, the premiere was performed during Lent. Today, it is primarily considered as a Christmas tradition.

"I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God himself!" he is said to have told a servant during a break in writing, supposedly after he had completed the *Hallelujah* chorus.

Defining the countertenor

During our production of *Messiah*, guests will notice that the solos typically sung by an alto have been replaced with a countertenor. We did this to keep in the spirit of our 18th century approach. Occupying the highest male register, the countertenor's range is closer in sound quality to a soprano than a regular tenor. Countertenors were used extensively during the Renaissance and Baroque eras; thus, using a countertenor is in keeping with our 18th century approach.

Rock star status

Today, countertenors are in demand more than ever. These artists figure as prominently in a major opera company as any star soprano, tenor or bass. And in recital, audiences can hear works performed by Bach, Handel and contemporary composers. In fact, if you follow *Britain's Got Talent*, you would have seen a countertenor compete on stage in 2009 (sadly, he did not win).

Finding their voices

Today, **Soprano Megan Weston** is recognized as "an interpreter of great quality" (*Sud-Oest*, France), a "gorgeous, light lyric soprano" (*Opera*) and as a singer of "remarkable virtuosity and charm" (*Financial Times*). She attended her first opera *Pagliacci* when she was a teenager and completely fell in love with the art form. She says, "I knew that I wanted to sing music like that; however, I had no idea how one would go about becoming a professional opera singer. Then, in college, I performed *Musetta* in *La Bohème*, and that experience prompted me to seriously pursue a career in classical music."

Megan excels in the standard repertoire of Mozart, Donizetti and Verdi, but she is equally successful in the modern works of Britten, Barber, Bernstein, and Berg. She has starred in musicals and has sung with opera companies and orchestras throughout the country.

However, Handel's *Messiah* has a special place in her heart and she says, "I remember hearing the *Hallelujah* chorus when I was a child on Christmas Eve at Midnight Mass. I had my first experience actually singing it as a freshman in my high school choir. It has always struck me as one of the most triumphant and magnificent pieces of music ever written! I loved singing it then and I still do!"

Countertenor Darryl Taylor has appeared with orchestras in the U.S. and in Europe, including 19 tours of Spain where he sang to enthusiastic, capacity audiences. Although he is renowned for his performances of art song, opera and oratorio, he is recognized as an authority on American song, especially music by African Americans.

However, he says that he might not have become a singer had it not been for his sister. "My sister was a singer well before me," he says, "and anything she could do, I had to try and do better. Typical sibling rivalry. I owe her my career."

Citing his love for Handel's *Messiah*, he remembers a particularly impactful experience in Tel Aviv where he was performing with a group at a music festival. He recalls, "We were in the back of the theater, waiting for the audience to clear out so that we could exit (it was a very old facility), and someone began singing the *Hallelujah* chorus. We all chimed in, sans conductor, and raised our voices to heaven in the *Promised Land*. It was a moving display."

Tenor Robert MacNeil has been praised by the *Los Angeles Times* for possessing a voice that is "clarion and clear." That statement is even more poignant when you consider where he "found his voice." Here's the story in his words:

"I never sang in my youth, growing up in a small town in the central valley of California. I was a history major in college (Chapman University) and had to take a required fine arts class. I signed up for a class on George Gershwin and at the end of the semester, each student had to sing one song. I sang my song and the university's choir director happened to be at the presentation. He offered me a scholarship on

the spot – he actually matched and surpassed the history department award. The next year, faculty members suggested that I change majors to voice. Little did I know what would happen.

“From there, I went to USC and then to the National Finals of the Metropolitan Opera, to Carnegie Hall, San Francisco Opera and the Los Angeles Opera.”

MacNeil has performed as a soloist with orchestras and opera companies in Asia, Australia and Europe in addition to this country.

Bass-baritone David Marshman knew singing would play a major part in his life during high school. He says, *“My inspiration to pursue singing came from my high school choral director who had a special talent for building a remarkably mature choral sound with young voices. With her encouragement, I sang one of the bass solos from Messiah for the first time in a school choral concert, which I still have on a recording I've kept all these years. I knew I was hooked.”*

Since 1998, David has been performing regularly with the San Diego Opera, both in the chorus and in several roles on the main stage. He has made several operatic, concert and recital appearances throughout the United States, including performances with the Los Angeles Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Lake George Opera Festival, and Capital Artists Opera in Albany, New York. He was recently appointed Interim Director of Traditional Music at the Village Presbyterian Church in Rancho Santa Fe and operates a private vocal studio in Carmel Valley.

Reinventing the choir

Since its debut in February 2009, **SACRA/PROFANA** has rapidly been gaining a reputation as an exciting new voice in American choral music. The 24-voice ensemble specializes in a unique blend of classic and contemporary styles, with a repertoire including everything from Schoenberg and The Smashing Pumpkins to Leonard Cohen and Ligeti. Under the direction of Yale-educated conductor Krishan Oberoi, SACRA/PROFANA is committed to providing a rewarding, entertaining concert-going experience by boldly championing the music of living composers, while breathing new life into timeless masterpieces.

It's all in the name

Artistic director and conductor Krishan Oberoi describes why he selected the name SACRA/PROFANA for his chorus, *“the word ‘profane’ can act merely as a synonym for ‘secular’, describing that which is unconsecrated, or non-sacred. In this sense, there is a nice symmetry to the name SACRA/PROFANA, in that it balances two important elements which are at the core of the ensemble's mission: the sense of belonging to the secular world, and being relevant in it, while at the same time striving to transport the listener to a higher spiritual plane.”*

A Yalie makes waves in San Diego

A native of New York, **Krishan Oberoi** studied at the New England Conservatory of Music and went on to receive his Master's degree from the Yale School of Music. He moved to southern California in 2007 where he joined the Grammy-nominated Los Angeles Master Chorale, then founded the 22-voice professional vocal ensemble SACRA/PROFANA, specializing in modern choral repertoire, in 2009. Last year, he co-founded the Modern Glee Club of San Diego, a volunteer community singing group.

As a performer, he has appeared at the Hollywood Bowl, Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, the Akropolis in Athens, Greece and numerous other venues around the world. He is currently a lecturer at San Diego State University, and also serves as organist at The Immaculata Church at the University of San Diego.