

Angel Musicians

Maybe it's the season. Angels seem to be everywhere.

Celeste Oram's new work begins with three teen angels in the wings. The middle movement of Schumann's violin concerto shares a melody with his *Ghost Variations* which the composer claimed was dictated by angels, though the voices likely arose in his own fracturing mind.

Angels have guided Ruben Valenzuela's work as well, but his angels are silent and his mind sound. Our new choral director has spent some time in Mexico City considering what angel musicians portrayed in the cathedral there might reveal about how sacred music was performed long ago.

Building of the cathedral began in the 16th century and continued for hundreds of years. Ruben focused on a chapel constructed in the late 17th to mid 18th century, "an interesting time when sacred music in Mexico transitioned from traditional Spanish forms to a much more Italian aesthetic," he said.

Contemporaneous art might reveal key aspects of musical performance such as which instruments were used and how they were held. But the art must be interpreted "with a cautious eye," Ruben said. Accurate documentation of cultural practices can be difficult to distinguish from allegorical symbolism. The lute, for example, has stood for music across cultures. "You can't conclude much solely from iconography," Ruben said. "You have to combine it with other clues inherent in the music itself." continued on page 2.

Young Artists

Jeanne Saier, with the help of many others, has led our young artist competition for decades. She shares her thoughts on providing opportunities for young musicians on page 3.

Dates for this season's competition are on page 4.



Christ in Glory (1684), a painting by Cristóbal de Villalpando that hangs in the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, shows angel musicians playing the Spanish double harp, lutes, bass viol, organ and cornetto.

Messiah Sing

Sing the Christmas portion of Handel's *Messiah* with us.

Sunday, December 14 at 4:00 pm
Saint Elizabeth
Seton Catholic
Church in Carlsbad.

Buy tickets:
<https://tinyurl.com/ljsc-messiah>



Ruben focused on basso continuo, the improvisatory undercurrent for most Baroque compositions. “It’s the very essence of the music, the bass line,” he said. He looked for angels playing bass instruments such as the bajon, a wooden reed instrument that was a precursor to the bassoon. Sometimes called a dulcian, the instrument has a soft sweet sound that melds well with the human voice.

Basso continuo notation usually designates only the bass notes with numerical indications of harmonic structure—a figured bass. Musicians realize the full accompaniment in real time during the performance.

Ruben’s focus on basso continuo arose from an interest in the improvisatory structure of jazz, in which musicians respond to one another on the fly. “You’re reacting to them, to the acoustics, the setting,” Ruben said. “The interaction will be different from one day to the next. Saturday evening’s performance won’t be the same as Sunday morning’s.”

The jazz-to-Baroque path characterizes Ruben’s eclectic musical interests. He’s played in garage bands. He’s taken on a new role as our choral director for an ensemble known for performing new music. Some of the musical ideas in John Adams’s *Harmonium*, on this concert, are like a different language, he said, sounding intriguing.

Ruben sees parallels between the early music movement that revived old forms and new music that arose in the 20th century. Both are a reaction against 19th century Romanticism, he said, “it’s the same spirit, charting new territory.”

And he’s drawn to the intertwining of old and new found in Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, in which poems by Wilfred Owen, written as a response to World War I are interspersed with the traditional texts of the Latin Mass. “He’s taken an ancient form, the requiem Mass, and inserted 20th century war poetry,” Ruben said. “It was a genius thing to take something new and embed it in something much older.”

Ruben resists categorizing music. “I hate to put genres and titles on things,” he said. Instead he seeks “in all kinds of art, just honesty. If it’s music that’s organic and honest, I’m there.”

—Susan Brown

The bajon was known by several names including dulcian and curtal. Listen to a demonstration of the instrument by Keith McGowan of His Majesty’s Sagbutts and Cornetts, a U.K. group that performs historically informed Renaissance and Baroque music. <https://tinyurl.com/softandlow>

Providing Opportunities for Young Musicians for more than 30 years

As soon as you walk through Jeanne Saier's front door you can tell that you're in a musical household. Two pianos nestled together occupy much of the front room.

Jeanne shares the house with her husband, a cellist and biochemistry professor at UC San Diego. They met in elementary school have performed together in many ensembles over the years.

Jeanne has played violin in the La Jolla Symphony since 1974. Three years after she joined, music director Tom Nee asked her to take over our competition for young artists. "I had no idea what I was taking on," Jeanne said. Tom told her it was a modest competition. But it was not so modest, Jeanne recalls. "There were several categories: vocal strings, brass... and age divisions. It was like a three ring circus."

The form of the competition has changed often over the years, and grown. Elimination of age categories drew complaints from teachers concerned that the younger students would be shut out. But Jeanne points out that teenagers have been winning.

Anne Chase introduced the vocal division and led that part of the competition for 30 years. "As our emphasis shifted to contemporary music, Anne introduced the requirement for a 20th century work," Jeanne said. "Now contestants must perform a piece composed after 1950."

This year Elena Yárritu, a flutist with the symphony, will co-direct the competition with Jeanne. "Elena has some really good ideas," Jeanne said. Among them is an award honoring the best performance of a contemporary work, for which they hope to find funding. In addition to the first place winner, who will receive \$2,000 this year, several other categories such as most promising have smaller awards, all contributed by sponsors.

And of course the first place winners have the opportunity to perform an entire work with the ensemble, usually the following season. It's an important opportunity, Jeanne said, "So many wonderful players never get a chance to play with an orchestra."

Jeanne recruits judges from outside of San Diego so that they will be unfamiliar with the competitors and free from even unconscious bias. She feels that bringing wonderful judges from out of town has enhanced the reputation of the ensemble and San Diego's rich musical community.

"Young artists are so exciting — to see them grow," Jeanne says. She follows the contestant's careers and notes that even some who didn't win went on to study at conservatories. Alumni have pursued professional careers with the Calder Quartet, San Diego Opera, Pacific Symphony and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, to name a few. Keir GoGwilt, winner in 2016 who played the fiendishly difficult Concentric Paths by Thomas Adès with us two years ago, returns this weekend for the challenging Schumann concerto.

"The level has risen," Jeanne said. "Sometimes it's extremely hard to choose a winner."

—Susan Brown

Jeanne grew up in Palo Alto as part of a musical family. "Our father's favorite thing to do was to take us over to Stanford for free music programs," she said. All four of her siblings played music, and she remembers her older sister rousing them all at 5:30 in the morning to practice before school.

Her grandfather established the Peninsula Symphony, a community orchestra in San Mateo, and her parents founded the California Youth Symphony. At one point she played in the Peninsula Symphony with her father and grandfather. Jeanne earned a teaching diploma from the Royal College of Music in London and completed a bachelor's degree in music from the San Francisco Conservatory.



Jeanne as a young artist

Jeanne plays piano as well as violin. For 22 years, she accompanied the youth choruses of the North County Singers, whose advanced ensembles sang Carmina Burana with us in 2018 and on many other occasions.

For the past four years, Jeanne has accompanied the Tremble Clefs, a chorus for people with Parkinson's disease for whom singing can be therapeutic.

2020 Young Artists Competition

Not a solo endeavor!

Many people have contributed to the success of the Young Artists Competition.

Ann Chase introduced the vocal division and led it for more than thirty years.

Vanya Russell has prepared lovely lunches for the judges, committee and guests for more than 30 years.

Michael and Nancy Kaehr for many years have hosted the fundraising recital at their home.

June Allen has overseen the reception for the recital.

Carol Plantamura took over the vocal division when Ann Chase retired.

Laurinda Nikkel and **Fiona Chatwin** now oversee the vocal division.

Elena Yárritu has stepped into the instrumental role.

Diane Salisbury and her invaluable and supportive team have provided logistical and office help for the past 12 years.

Dates

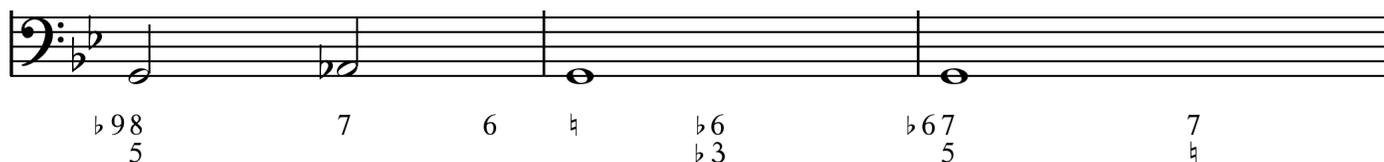
December 13: Deadline to enter. Information on the ensemble's web site <https://lajollasympphony.com/2020-yac>

January 25: Competition, open to the public.
9 am to 4 pm, Conrad Prebys Music Center.

February 23: Winners' recital and reception. Reserve your ticket by calling 858-534-4637.

Newsletter contributions

If you have news to share with the ensemble or know of a member you think we should feature, get in touch. If you would be willing to take over this newsletter, let me know. The best way to reach me is email: susandbrown@gmail.com



Otherworldly voices, missing music

This must be the season of lost violin concertos. Like Florence Price's works, Robert Schumann's violin concerto vanished for a long time. Schumann wrote the piece for Joseph Joachim who played it once. Nearly 80 years later, Joachim's great-niece, the violinist Jelly d'Aranyi, claimed that spirits speaking through a Ouija board begged her to find the work, which had been hidden away in a Prussian library. An interesting version of the story in the U.K. Independent: <https://tinyurl.com/violin-ghosts>