

San Francisco Sinfonietta making a splash

By: Janos Gereben
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There are a handful of “big,” well-known music organizations in The City. But when it comes to participation, small and midsize choruses and orchestras have far larger numbers.

For example, the San Francisco Symphony’s 103 orchestra members, 30 paid choristers and 120 volunteers are vastly outmatched by up to 1,000 instrumentalists and an estimated 30,000 singers in the area performing regularly. Most are unpaid amateurs, but they put their all into the music.

One of those important grassroots music organizations is Urs Leonhardt Steiner’s fairly sizeable, paid and volunteer San Francisco Sinfonietta. It’s preparing for a May 31 concert.

The highlight: Carl Orff’s big, difficult and popular orchestral-choral “Carmina Burana” (performed by the S.F. Symphony, the San Jose Ballet and the Peninsula Symphony in recent days; scheduled Sunday for Chora Nova).

Loretta Taylor, concertmaster since the creation of the orchestra in 1994, says working with music director Steiner and all the musicians is “a real joy ... presenting to the public such varied programming.”

She says the mix includes standard classical repertoire, and “the unusual, the interesting, the out-of-the-ordinary musical genres.”

The first half of the May 31 concert will offer the U.S. premiere of “Aman” by Chicago-based rock composer Brendan Byrnes; “Selon L’Une” (“According to One”) by Sinfonietta musician (and accelerator operator at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory) Jan Pusina; and “Krankitup!” by Steiner and Larnie Fox, founder-director of the Crank Ensemble.

Fox, a visual artist who has been singing with the Sinfonietta, came up with “hand-cranked instruments made from recycled materials, producing sounds such as a bird-feather spine plucking rubber bands or the bristles of a broom brushing against wires cut from a coat hanger.”

In “Krankitup!” the musicians will improvise “over and around Beethoven’s ‘Symphony No. 2,’ providing surprise ‘quotes’ from well-known classical pieces, unusual sounds, sonic landscapes and textures.”

Of Steiner, the musicians say he is “very charismatic and funny in rehearsals, a master at using people of any ability, from rank amateur to seasoned professional, to make great music.”

Fox adds, “We need tenors currently — and donations! This is a hard time for community-based nonprofits.”



Big sound: The San Francisco Sinfonietta (pictured at the Sing it Yourself Messiah), led by Urs Leonhardt Steiner, is set to perform May 31 in The City. (Courtesy photo)

Michael Kimbell, principal clarinetist and resident composer, comes from the Community Music Center Orchestra, another organization headed by Steiner that is now merged with Sinfonietta.

He says participating in these two groups has been “immensely rewarding for me as a player and composer” (eight of his works were introduced here).

Immediately following the May 31 concert, Kimbell is flying to Germany, where his “Poem for Violin and Harp” will premiere at the music festival in Ottobeuren. The town happens to be home to the Benedictine abbey, established in 764, where the 13th-century texts for “Carmina Burana” were found.

IF YOU GO

San Francisco Sinfonietta Orchestra and Chorus

Where: Calvary Presbyterian Church, 2515 Fillmore St. (at Jackson Street), S.F.

When: 4 p.m. May 31

Tickets: \$20 to \$30

Contact: (415) 401-9229, www.sfsinfonietta.org