

Pacifica Quartet and Colorado Children’s Chorale Premiere “Pitch In” in Denver

Friends of Chamber Music launches its season with a program that spotlights hunger awareness and the world premiere of James Lee III’s new work.

By Toni Tresca

Chamber music is often imagined as something preserved in amber, a pastime for powdered wigs and musty concert halls. But in the right hands, it becomes something far from dusty: alive, unpredictable, even urgent.

“You can certainly sit at home and listen to music on Spotify or watch a video on YouTube, but it’s not the same as feeling the air vibrate with hundreds of people in an audience together,” said Pacifica Quartet violist Mark Holloway. “There’s something special about live chamber music in particular, so we try to bring that to an audience and transmit this great music the best we can, straight to them without interference.”

That energy will be on display Sunday, September 7, when Friends of Chamber Music opens its season at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts. The Pacifica Quartet, a multi-time GRAMMY winner and longtime Denver favorite, will share the stage with the Colorado Children’s Chorale for a program that moves from Samuel Barber to Ludwig van Beethoven, with the world premiere of James Lee III’s “Pitch In” at its center.

September also marks Hunger Awareness Month, and the concert will spotlight Food for Thought Denver, the grassroots volunteer group that fills “PowerSacks” of weekend meals for students across 75 local schools.

“Anything that can bring more attention to food insecurity is wonderful,” Holloway said. “I’m really grateful that we will be spotlighting Food for Thought Denver this month to help draw attention to the issue of food insecurity.”

The Pacifica Quartet is no stranger to Denver. “We love the audiences in Denver,” Holloway said. “It’s a savvy, smart, educated, open-minded, generous audience, so we love playing there. It’s a beautiful hall at the university, and we make regular appearances there throughout the years, always with great pleasure.”

That familiarity allows the ensemble to bring programs that don’t pander but challenge. The evening begins with Barber’s “String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11.” Written by the young Pennsylvania composer in the 1930s, the work is concise but potent.

“It's a very sort of distilled work,” Holloway said. “Every note counts. It's not as long as many quartets are, but the heart of the piece is the incredibly famous, and rightfully so, the ‘Adagio for Strings.’ That piece really helped to cement his legacy.”

The mournful piece that has accompanied presidential funerals, including FDR and JFK, echoed through movie soundtracks such as “Platoon” and seared itself into the American ear. In quartet form, however, it's less monumental and more personal.

“Originally, it's for a string quartet, so while it does have this emotional sweep of grandeur when it's played by an orchestra version, the quartet is a more intimate endeavor,” Holloway said. “It's tricky trying to keep everything lined up and keep the phrasing going. It's a very special piece of music. There's really nothing like it, and it really contrasts well with the outer movements.”

From there, the program leaps into the new. “Pitch In,” by James Lee III, marries string quartet with children's choir and poetry by Sylvia Dianne Beverly (“Lady Di”). The text is a plea to confront hunger and to care for one another, and the music is equally direct.

“He has a real, honest and imaginative, and beautiful sort of palette of colors,” Holloway said of Lee's writing. “It's compelling music, and it has a straight-to-your-heart kind of feeling to it.”

Pacifica had worked with Lee twice before and commissioned him to create this new work for the concert. When the idea of a children's choir emerged, the match seemed inevitable: young voices carrying an urgent message about hunger, lifted by strings. Lee himself will miss the Denver premiere after being called away to London for a Proms performance of one of his orchestral works at Royal Albert Hall, but his music will speak for him.

“Right from the opening, it's compelling music, and it's not written too densely, so there's a purity and simplicity to it,” Holloway said. “But he didn't write down for children. It's a very pure message, and his music really suits that nicely.”

Anchoring the program is Beethoven's “String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130”, complete with its original finale, the infamous “Grosse Fuge.” At its premiere, audiences found the fugue impenetrable, even grotesque, and Beethoven's publisher begged him to swap it out for something more palatable. The composer obliged, but Pacifica is playing the quartet as first conceived: sprawling, extreme, and, in Holloway's words, “one of the greatest movements of all time, of anything, anywhere.”

“It's extremely modern and at the limits of what a string quartet tonality could do and what romantic music can be,” he said. “As with Beethoven, he's always going for extremes. Extremely

loud to extremely soft, very, very fast. The range of human emotions and characters is there. It's one of the great pieces of our repertoire.”

Taken together, the program is both a survey of the past and a statement about the present. Barber’s music distills anguish into something hauntingly intimate. Lee’s “Pitch In” pleads for attention to the hungers of today. Beethoven’s piece rips open the boundaries of form, as wild now as it was two hundred years ago. And in the middle of it all, the Pacifica Quartet and the Colorado Children’s Chorale will bring it to life, one bow stroke and breath at a time.

“The great joy in being a musician is that we have to get our hands in it, we have to create, we have to bring it to life, otherwise it's just on the page there,” Holloway said. “Coming to a concert means hearing that music created in the moment—four people in conversation, finishing each other’s sentences, building something together. It’s fresh every single time, and it only exists because the audience is there to hear it.”