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Mason Bates, *composer*

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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Chanticleer masterfully presents three commissions

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic
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Although a composer at 30 is still considered young, a 30-year track record qualifies an arts organization as an institution. So there's an alluring piquancy in Chanticleer's new commissioning project, "Composers Our Age."

To celebrate its 30th anniversary, the estimable men's chorus called on three composers - born around the same time the group was founded - to contribute pieces on subjects of their own choosing. The resulting program, introduced in Berkeley's First Congregational Church on Tuesday night, was enlivened not only by a wide stylistic range but by the combination of youthful energy and technical mastery on display.

Of the three pieces, the most ambitious and satisfying was "Sirens," an expansive study of musical seduction by Berkeley composer Mason Bates. This collection of six diverse movements approaches the Greek legend of the Sirens from a variety of angles, rendering all of them with beauty and vivacity.

The two framing movements set the stage with excerpts from the "Odyssey" (with the ancient Homeric Greek, bizarrely, pronounced as though it were modern Greek). In between come settings of Heine's "Die Lorelei" - give Bates credit for facing down Schubert - as well as a 15th century Italian sonnet, a poem in Quechua and an excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew.

I don't begin to understand the relevance of that last one (Jesus was a Siren, luring Simon Peter to destruction?), but the music Bates writes for it is as lush and inviting as the rest. What's most striking about the piece, in fact, is how unabashedly the composer embraces both tonal sensuousness and rhythmic patterning.

Those are the time-honored tools of musical entrapment, of course, but they're also a potential pitfall for composers drawn into the snare of crafting merely pretty sounds. Bates dodges that peril by combining irresistible beauty with structural rigor and careful attention to the text.

The Homer movements are bold and muscular - these Sirens are just the sort to appeal to a Greek warrior's sense of pride - while the Heine setting unfolds in a Romantic mist of cushiony harmonies. The Italian sonnet by Pietro Aretino settles into a 6/8 rhythmic groove that interacts tellingly with the rhythms of the text, while the Quechua poem is a rough-hewn adventure yarn, punctuated by maracas and explosive whispers. The chorus sang every movement of the piece with the relevant stylistic fervor.

Composer Shawn Crouch offered a similar textual counterpoint in "The Garden of Paradise," a delectable five-movement motet based on poems by the Iraq War veteran Brian Turner and the 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi.

Like Bates, Crouch opts for sumptuous tonal harmonies when it serves his purpose - particularly in the gorgeous, unadorned "Lullaby" movement - but he also finds room for dense post-Romantic tangles. Those contrast revealingly with the more clear-cut textures of the Rumi sections, in which an open-toned drone accompanies fleet, delicate settings of the text in translation.

The program opened with "No Matter," composer Tarik O'Regan's arctically spare setting of excerpts from Samuel Beckett's "Worstward Ho."