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Berkeley Symphony starting season soon at Piedmont Center for the Arts

Sept. 24 'American Intersections' program selected for Chamber Series to explore ideas related to country's identity, music



photo courtesy of the Berkeley Symphony

At the Piedmont Center for the Arts, Berkeley Symphony Executive Director Kate Kammeyer addresses the audience March 19 at one of the symphony's Chamber Series performances last season. The symphony's 2023-24 season will start Sept. 24 in Piedmont with "American Intersections," a program influenced by jazz, blues, gospel, funk, folk and classical music selected to explore ideas related to American identity.

By **LOU FANCHER** | Correspondent

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Having entered the vestibule of the 52-year-old Berkeley Symphony as executive director in June 2022, Kate Kammeyer has made a home for herself now in the East Bay. Reflecting on what she has mainly learned about the Bay Area more than a year later, she says it is that each community has its own vibe.

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"In the East Bay, we have great food and art and people. You don't have to go to San Francisco or the South Bay — or you can, because each area is unique."

In Piedmont, where the symphony has established a robust following with its Chamber Series concerts at the Piedmont Center for the Arts, she says coming together to hear live music performed is communal and multigenerational.

"I'm privileged to program the chamber music series that complements the orchestral series (at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall and Berkeley's First Presbyterian Church) and solidifies the arc of the season," Kammeyer says. "The audience is greatly influenced by the art center and the schools being close together and by people going to the park, farmer's market or shops.

"They come in off the street and are comfortable. Our Berkeley Symphony diehards come, but also people from Oakland, Piedmont itself or nearby cities. I'm always surprised (that) it's all age groups and backgrounds."

The symphony's 2023-24 season (berkeleysymphony.org/series-overview) begins Sept. 24 with "American Intersections," a program selected to explore ideas related to American identity and music.

The repertoire includes Vijay Iyer's string quartet, "Dig the Say"; a short work for solo piano, "Credo," by Margaret Bonds; Molly Joyce's "Anatomy is Destiny," featuring violin and piano; Jessie Montgomery's string quartet, "Source Code;" followed by an intermission and Antonin Dvorak's "String Quartet No. 12 in F major."

"These are pieces or musicians that influenced each other, or present racial tensions or differing styles of music that are the broader concept of American music. People think of the Americana style as Copeland, Barber, Ives, but if you look at America, we're a bunch of immigrants. I was looking at musical influences throughout the world and asking, 'What does that encompass?'"

Kammeyer is a professional oboist who is also known to sit down behind a drum kit. With bachelor's and master's degrees in music and an artist diploma in oboe performance, she came to Berkeley Symphony from a prior post at the Rochester (New York) Philharmonic Orchestra as senior vice president and general manager.

Kammeyer has also worked with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra and the Longy School of Music of Bard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Addressing classical music, live performance and the role they play in American life in the current chaotic, swift-paced, Internet-driven and politically polarizing era, she speaks forcefully about the significance of stepping away from the digitized, automated realm and coming into a common space to experience the arts in community.

"In this time when what it means to be American is under fire, this is a healing spot to sit and consider who we are. When you hear all of this music on this program, everyone can feel a part of it. It's not just music from white, older men. We make room for other voices, which is something the symphony has been doing for 52 years."

Specific to the works in Piedmont's September concert that in combination with the symphony performance encompass the influences of jazz, blues, gospel, funk, folk and classical music, Kammeyer notes special highlights of each selection.

She says the rhythm, percussive sound and "James Brown kind of funk you feel in your body" are what she most admires in Iyer's "Dig the Say." The solo piano piece by Bonds is "short, sweet and connects to themes of a unified world where people have equal rights." Kammeyer says Joyce, with "Anatomy is Destiny," introduces embracing abilities.

"She's a composer with a disability and works with a toy piano as her signature thing," Kammeyer says of Joyce. "It's about her anatomy and breaking free from that. It's a lovely piece with a younger voice of a composer who's rising rapidly."

About Montgomery's "Source Code," Kammeyer says most notable are that it breaks the code of expectations for classical string quartets and also the thread of spirituals interwoven and uniting a work influenced by dance, poetry and jazz.

"It represents different voices, percussive then smooth, airy, atmospheric or active at other times. As we open up our palettes for classical music, we see the influences of jazz and other styles. Sometimes, we at Berkeley Symphony even think about throwing away the word "classical" when we talk about the music (we perform)."

Dvořák was a 19th century Czech composer whose "American Quartet" was written in 1893 and composed while he was working in New York and taking a summer vacation in Spillville, Iowa.

"He heard African American spirituals and Native American people singing songs akin to spirituals," Kammeyer says. "The quartet is infused with those voices and with his native folk songs. Even so, it sounds somewhat similar to what you hear in 'Source Code.'"

If the Intersections concert repertoire aims to break up preconceived notions of what string quartet repertoire sounds like and “fill in the pockets” of the full symphony’s “American Kaleidoscope” program, it also mirrors internal shifts within the organization during and while emerging from the pandemic years.

“A lot of people created new habits that have nothing to do with other people or attending something live,” Kammeyer says. “People went through changes mentally, physically and spiritually. To respond to that, we wanted to create a space like a sporting event; an entire experience.

“What will they feel from the beginning? What will happen during the program that isn’t academic but allows people to rest, reflect and have mindfulness for a moment? It needs to be not just entertainment but a place where they get excitement, find attachment to other people and energy to get through the week.”

To eliminate what she says are classical music’s past “us-and-them scenarios,” change is larger than not shushing people during concerts and made with an eye to retaining the special qualities of classical music. Ultimately, she believes solutions rest in establishing human connections.

“We couldn’t just rely on the fact that we had a diverse staff and repertoire. We had to ask ourselves if we were doing the things out in the community in the way we want.

“We went out and asked about the needs. Since then, we’ve partnered with the public library, and now I’m talking to the YWCA folks. They have programs giving opportunity to women, and at our concerts we can tell people about their efforts and show how we’re focusing on female composers. That’s connection.”