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Article Last Updated: Thursday, May 20, 2004 - 3:57:49 AM PST

Choral performance a real ode to joy

By Keith Kreitman, CONTRIBUTOR

ONE special joy of reviewing a performance is when you expect one thing, but end up experiencing **something** extraordinarily new and exciting.

That happened to me in 1953 when I attended a performance by the newly formed Chicago Civic Opera. I was stunned by a young performer imported from Italy for the lead in the opera "Norma." Her name was Maria Callas.

It happened again Monday at the San Mateo Performing Arts Center when I reviewed the Peninsula's Baroque Choral Guild and the California Symphony performing Beethoven's monumental Symphony No. 9 in D minor, Op. 125. It's better known as the "Choral Symphony," and its famous "Ode to Joy" in the last movement.

But what I'll remember best about the concert is another performance: "Songs from the Discovery" for chorus and orchestra, by a huge talent, Kevin Beavers. Beavers is the Young American Composer-in-Residence with the California Symphony.

Remember that name. The music world will be hearing much from this modest 33-year-old.

He based the two movements on poems named "Acrobat" and "Discovery" by the 1996 Nobel Prize-winning Polish poet, Wislawa Szymborska.

From the opening measures, I could tell it would be a unique experience. In the best of the new modern works I've heard in years, Beavers successfully has woven American vernacular music, from folk through jazz to rock, into traditional Western musical forms and come up with a trailblazing synthesis.

Having earned a doctorate from the University of Michigan, Beavers is a creative master of rich, complex orchestrations that most composers would need more years to develop. His harmonic structures are a feast for the ears, his special effects distinctly original, and his variations in dynamics leave the audience excitedly waiting for what's next.

In addition to the choral support, two vocal soloists, tenor Kevin Gibbs in "The Acrobat" and baritone Anton Belov in "Discovery," were outstanding.

What's in the future for Beavers? His **Symphony No. 1**, which will be premiered by the California Symphony next year. I'll be there.

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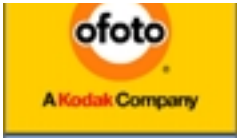
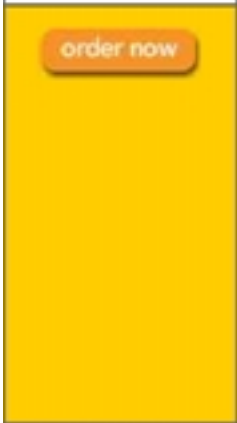
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Op-Ed

The 25-year-old Baroque Choral Guild, currently under the direction of Sanford Dole, is another **outstanding chorus on the Peninsula.** (I say we have the most **fine choruses per square mile** than any other place in the country.) **I don't think that its support in Beaver's composition and the Beethoven Ninth could be done better by anyone, anywhere.**

Directed by founder Barry Jekowsky, **the 17-year-old California Symphony, based in Walnut Creek, made its its first foray out of Contra Costa County with this program, and is looking forward to doing it again.**

Although the concert's opening work, **Mozart's "Overture to the Magic Flute,"** struck me as uninspired and listless, **the orchestra redeemed itself in the Beavers work and in the Beethoven Ninth, in which Jekowsky coaxed his performers to breathtaking heights.**

Gibbs and Belov were joined by mezzo-soprano **Wendy Hillhouse** and soprano **Courtenay Budd** in spectacular soaring **leads in the immortal choral final movement, "Ode to Joy."**

Which pretty much sums it all up. It was a joy.

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