

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Piedmont Choirs: navigating the new normal Even with COVID health restrictions celebrated children's choir doesn't miss a beat

By Allyson Aleksey

On March 16 choral programs everywhere were asked to cease operations. Six months later, the jury is still out on whether or not choir programs can begin reconvening in California. Amid the uncertainty, Chorus America and the American Choral Directors Association have advised choir groups to rehearse and perform online for the foreseeable future.

Piedmont East Bay Children's Choir, like many other choral groups, had to change both traditional instruction and performance to comply with shelter-in-place orders brought on by the current health crisis.

Under the leadership of Artistic Director Eric Tuan, the organization was quick to adapt. On June 6, rather than end its season with no final concert, the Piedmont Children's Choir showcased one of its best events – and did it entirely online. The “Spring Sing! Virtual Concert” celebrated the musical accomplishments of the choir's 200 singers after a full year of training and development.

Since then, Tuan has gone through lengthy efforts to make the choral experience as “normal” as possible in this era of the so-called “New Normal.”

A Stanford graduate, Tuan began his musical journey with Piedmont Choirs as a young chorister, and years later served on faculty as Ecco conductor and composer-in-residence before beginning his tenure as artistic director in July 2019. He is only the second artistic director in the choir's nearly four decade-long history.

As a seasoned chorister, Tuan understood the limitations of virtual instruction early on.



Piedmont East Bay Children's Choir Artistic Director Eric Tuan

“We're trying to offer something like a small, music conservatory”

—Choir Director Eric Tuan

“The great limitation of [video conferencing app] Zoom, of course, is that only one person can sing at a time. So choral singing as we know it is pretty much impossible at this point. I can lead a rehearsal by singing parts and teaching different parts, but we can't put our voice together,” he said.

But there is one advantage, he noted.

“It's almost like we're teaching every student individually at home, which has certainly made them more independent, stronger musicians,” he said.

The choir is spending more time in smaller groups or cohorts, so the Choir

is able to offer “pull-out lessons,” or specialized music instruction, to each student. This can prove to be an incredible advantage to singers and vocalists

who are beginning.

In the performing arts department, the choir is offering small elective classes: songwriting, musicology, musicianship, and other ways to explore creativity through an online medium.

“We're trying to offer something like a small, music conservatory. Traditionally, in a youth choir you sing together and much of the education happens through that experience of singing together and striving as a group towards this artistic goal. Now that that process has become much more difficult, we want to offer something that's more like a conservatory,” Tuan said.

Students are now getting a more well-rounded exposure to music, he confirmed.

It is not without its challenges; of course. The “new normal” requires hiring more staff, which in turn can pose some financial burden on the choir. Piedmont Choirs has hired additional vocal faculty, many who are alums or have other affiliations with the choir. Tuan said this means students can have more meaningful individual instruction over Zoom.

All the instructors are essentially working double-time, too. Tuan pointed out that digital instruction can require more preparation, in addition to the other classes he has taken on to teach.

Still, the choir currently has 200 students enrolled, which Tuan describes as a true testament of the community's involvement in the program and vice versa.

Part 2 in the series will explore the choral programs by age-group, starting with the kinder department.

SF MOMA: Museum from Home online screenings Rashaad Newsome's “Shade Compositions” September 23–30



Rashaad Newsome's “Shade Compositions” at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

By Allyson Aleksey

Though temporarily closed, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SF MOMA) is providing online content as patrons continue to shelter-in-place.

Throughout September, visitors can browse a rotating selection of video and performance commissions from the past

decade. Featured artwork changes every Wednesday at noon.

This week's screening is Rashaad Newsome's *Shade Compositions*, in which Newsome brings together an ensemble of local performers, using live video and sound mixing to synthesize their verbal and non-verbal expressions into improvised minimalist music.

Aurora Theatre features Brad Erickson in weekly series

By Allyson Aleksey

“Aurora Connects” is Aurora Theatre Company's weekly live broadcast, an “online salon and virtual happy hour.” A broadcast will go live every Friday at 4 p.m. on the company's YouTube channel.

In season two, Aurora directors Josh Costello and Dawn Monique Williams are joined by Theatre Bay Area's Executive Director Brad Erickson. Theatre Bay Area is one of the nation's largest performing arts service organizations, with more than 320 theatre and dance company members and 2,200 individual members.

For 13 years, Erickson has led the organization's efforts to support, promote, and advocate for the region's vibrant theatre and dance community.

Under Erickson's leadership, Theatre Bay Area has gained a national reputation for innovative programs and services. Its nationwide study on the intrinsic impact of the theatre experience on audiences is a leading example.

For six years Erickson served as president of Californians for the Arts (CFTA) and California Arts Advocates (CAA). He currently serves as Treasurer of both CFTA



Theatre Bay Area Executive Director Brad Erickson is the guest on this week's Aurora Connects

and CAA and as California State Captain for Americans for the Arts. He is the past Chair of the State Arts Action Network. Also a playwright, Erickson's plays have won several awards and have been produced in theaters from San Francisco to Indianapolis. He is a graduate of the Goodman School of Drama (now The Theatre School) at DePaul University with a degree in acting.

For more information, visit <https://www.auroratheatre.org/auroraconnects>.

Berkeley Rep presents a Sinclair Lewis masterpiece *It Can't Happen Here* to be shown October 13 on Youtube



Photo by Kevin Berne

Buzz Windrip, played by David Kelly, in Berkeley Rep's production of *It Can't Happen Here*, based on the 1935 Sinclair Lewis novel.

By Allyson Aleksey

The Berkeley Repertory Theatre's artistic director, Tony Taccone, reimagines the Sinclair Lewis novel *It Can't Happen Here*, written in 1935 during the rise of fascism in Europe.

Lewis' darkly satirical novel follows the ascent of a demagogue who becomes president of the United States by promising to return the country to greatness. The novel describes the rise of Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip, a president who foments fear and promises drastic economic and social reforms while promoting traditional values. After his election, Windrip takes complete control of the government and imposes totalitarian rule with the help of a ruthless paramilitary force in the manner of European fascists such as Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.

The novel's plot centers on journalist Doremus Jessup's opposition to the new regime and his subsequent struggle against it as part of a liberal rebellion.

In 2016, Berkeley Rep unveiled a new stage adaptation of Lewis' prescient novel. One week after that production ended, the presidential election roiled the nation. Now, the theatre company reprises that production with the same director, Lisa Peterson, but has readapted it as a radio play in four episodes.

This time, the radio adaptation will take place before the 2020 election.

“We're delighted to welcome back much of the original cast including David Kelly as the candidate Buzz Windrip, and to have Academy Award nominee David Strathairn join us as the liberal protagonist Doremus. See Berkeley Rep on [page 32](#)