



JAMIE PHAM Los Angeles Master Chorale

THE LOS ANGELES Master Chorale hosted thousands at Disney Hall and at satellite sites around the state on Saturday.

All together now

By Margaret Ecker

LAST SATURDAY, two old church-choir friends and I joined 9,000 fellow Californians to sing. Some of the music was easy, but a good deal of it was challenging, which was to our liking. Much of it was locally sourced, even more appealing. We sang for a full 90 minutes, 2,000 of us in Disney Hall alone, including a hundred Los Angeles Master Chorale singers, and many more singers at hubs around the state — San Diego, Sacramento, Berkeley, Fresno, Riverside. To say the Big Sing was awesome would be an understatement.

The bass note of anxiety in the larger world was palpable, of course, and we felt it inside the concert hall too. The manager of the Silver Lake Trader Joe's would die while we sang. Jonathan Gold, just hours later. Paul Manafort sat in jail awaiting trial for "conspiracy against the United States." His former boss, the president, would shortly tweet a threat to nuke Iran. Forest fires threatened homes on the west side of Yosemite National Park, fueled by the unmitigated heat and low humidity that climate change provokes.

Still, we sang. Not oblivious to the awfulness, but the time had been set aside, and we were gathered.

The Big Sing revealed the human urge to just get along.

We sang with our "outside voices," as conductor-composer Moira Smiley requested we do. We sang more quietly for Morten Lauridsen's "Dirait-on," in French, guided by Master Chorale artistic director Grant Gershon.

We did the finger-snap sound effects for Eric Whitacre's Spanish language "Cloudburst." We shouted out that we would not let anybody turn us around — no! no! no! — urged on by composer-arranger Rollo Dilworth and his arrangement of the beloved civil rights anthem.

We hit the ephemeral close harmonies of Whitacre's composition "Sleep." Smiley offered us the key of G, for Guthrie, so we could sing Woody's "This Land Is Your Land" to honor all those voices who can't sing it for themselves. For the finale, we rocked out on "Hey Jude": Nah nah nah, nah-nah-nah-nah. Nah-nah-nah-nah, hey Jude.

It was supposed to have been live-streamed, and for a lucky few, it was. But for

a gazillion others, the site crashed. People were surely dazzled by the sheer numbers, by the diversity of the program, by the technology that brought so many people together for a shared experience. (Watch the video, online at the Master Chorale website through Aug. 2.)

But what exactly comprised the awesomeness? I couldn't stop thinking about it, trying to figure it out. To say that deep breathing calmed our frayed nerves doesn't go far enough. Nor does it do justice to say that singing together is better than shouting at each other, though it surely is. Nor that beauty nurtures our better angels.

After days of pondering, this is what has come to me: Harmonizing with thousands of strangers was a deeply felt, primitive refresher course in community. We experienced the fundamental urge to just get along. We were reminded of our human obligation to ensure a safe space for singing, metaphorically and literally, all together.

I know about registering voters and marching, about speaking out and showing up, even on the days where despair overwhelms. But that's all about what to do. This was about why.

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