

## THEATER

## Chamber Singers' 'Considering Matthew Shepard' still waiting

**"Sophie's Choice,"  
"Roots," Netflix'  
"Age of Samurai."**

These and many other performance pieces are so capable of disturbing me that my neck tightens even to think of them. Another is "The Laramie Project," a play I saw years ago about Matthew Shepard.

He was the young gay man in Laramie, Wyoming, who in 1998 was roped to

a fence and beaten, then left to die alone over the next few days. First responders transported him to a hospital, where he died of head wounds six days later. His torturers/



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murderers acted out their fear of homosexuality by snuffing him. Recently, while listening to the podcast "This American President," I heard about the frontiersmen who, for fun, back in Abraham Lincoln's day tortured the wild animals they had snared for food (Lincoln did not participate in such cruelty; in fact, just the opposite).

It seems cruelty is injected into our human DNA. The arts try valiantly to overcome our dark side and can be effective at showing us who we are and how we might recognize it and maybe change it.

Bloomington Chamber Singers are working hard to show us Matthew Shepard's story through their upcoming concert of Craig Hella Johnson's "Considering Matthew Shepard."

Shepard's murder affected such a range of people, from his family and friends, to readers of newspapers, to anyone who walks alone on an empty street, to those who have experienced a bully's sneer, to gay people over the world. The singers hope to give a live performance this fall at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater.

The composer presents Shepard's attack then attempts to process it as the U.S. and the world floated through denial,



Bloomington Chamber Singers. (Courtesy photo)

anger, lament and finally some form of acceptance.

I guess to accept Shepard's tale, we have to imagine that hope exists, or we would crack.

Although no piece of art could process these types of crimes for me, Johnson does strive to help us understand ourselves.

"Considering Matthew Shepard", which has been performed frequently around the world, is called a fusion oratorio, because it combines musical styles, including chant, soul, gospel, chorales, African drumming and Baroque polyphony.

Johnson uses the fusion to depict our emotions as we began to hear about Shepard's slaying. Setting his tone, Johnson explodes the drama into a primal lament, with fury, in the form of drumming and chanting. He splits the chorus into five groups, each with a mantra; each group layers its drumming and chanting over the previous group's.

Words become shouts; rhythms and drum timbres combine and overwhelm. The shouting stops as Johnson attempts to lead his audience, and singers, to a feeling of recovery. Can we recover?

Unnecessary violence has been our ubiquitous companion since humankind emerged.

(After Shepard died, members of the Tectonic Theater Project in New York City visited Laramie, Wyoming. They asked residents about their reactions to Shepard's death, and these conversations became the play "The Laramie Project," one of America's most performed plays. The Matthew Shepard Foundation helps fund productions of "The Laramie Project" and its epilogue, "The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later" each year throughout the country.)

Bloomington Chamber Singers, led by conductor Gerry Sousa, had planned to give their concert last year. It remains postponed until a later date.

"For over 30 years," Sousa said, "nearly every Tuesday evening of our September-to-May concert season, I have looked forward to walking into rehearsal and sharing the evening with a group of bright, caring and talented people who come



**SOUSA**

### More information

Find Bloomington Chamber Singers at <https://www.chambersingers.info>

Learn how to audition for Sousa at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ld3teirJfY&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ld3teirJfY&feature=emb_logo)

from astonishingly diverse ages, backgrounds and life pursuits."

The group tackles many of the Western choral tradition's most demanding works, such as Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," Beethoven's "Missa solemnis" and Mendelssohn's "Elijah."

"For many of us, it has been a core experience in our lives," he said.

"And then!" Most of the 40 singers have hung on, meeting every other Tuesday night on Zoom through the fall, as they presented programs such as voice master classes, group discussions and a presentation of multi-cultural music. They also produced two virtual-choir projects, a recording of Elaine Hagenberg's "O Love" and a set of virtual holiday cards.

For those who have enjoyed the singers, and who hope

to, fear not. Sousa said he is brewing plans for upcoming performances and ongoing rehearsals. In fact, another good sign, the choir has added two new staff members, Claire Tafoya as assistant to the conductor and Karen Kiegle, the choir's first development director. Sousa stressed his appreciation to the board, its president this year being Lisa Kurz.

"It is under (Lisa's) wisdom and guidance that the group continues to stay cohesive and strong," he said. "Without the leadership and dedication of these people, we would not have grown into the group we are today."

As we reinvent ourselves, the arts are doing what the arts do — creating. Sousa said his group may try the popular virtual-choir format, although that mode strikes him as antithetical to the choral experience. "Impressive and fun, but to me they lack the essential interaction that happened in our March 10 drumming rehearsal," he said. "We'll find ways back to that"

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## James Levine, who ruled over Met Opera, dead at age 77

By **Ronald Blum**  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Conductor James Levine, who ruled over the Metropolitan Opera for more than four decades before being eased aside when his health declined and then was fired for sexual improprieties, has died. He was 77.

Levine died March 9 in Palm Springs, California,



sex acts over a 25-year period. The Met said it found evidence of conduct that included discussion of pornography, groping, kissing and mutual masturbation.

In one instance, the Met accused Levine of inappropriately touching a musician starting in 1979 and six more times until 1991. In another 1985 incident, Levine was accused of groping and kissing an

the Metropolitan Opera and the Ravinia Festival, his artistry will long be remembered by those who experienced it live, through recordings, on television or video," Chicago Symphony Orchestra music director Riccardo Muti and Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association president Jeff Alexander said in a joint statement.

Born June 23, 1943, in

and became music director with the 1976-77 season. By the 1986-87 season, he was promoted to artistic director — in near-total control of the repertoire and casting — and drew criticism as other major conductors stayed away.

He led upward of 110 performances in a season in the 1980s, including tours. Levine was downgraded to music director