

L O S A N G E L E S

MASTER CHORALE

Van Nuys High School Students Write and Compose New Oratorio, *Naia: The Spirit of Hoyo Negro* (“Black Hole”), About the Discovery of 13,000-Year-Old Ice Age Skeleton



Oratorio will be released as a digital series, May 3 - 7, 2021

(Los Angeles, CA) April 8, 2021 – Los Angeles Master Chorale’s Voices Within Oratorio Project, now in its 10th year, culminates in the digital premiere of *Naia: The Spirit of Hoyo Negro*, an original oratorio written by approximately 80 Van Nuys High School students who



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participated in the 20-week program remotely and virtually during the 2020-21 academic school year.

Naia: The Spirit of Hoyo Negro will be premiered as a series of digital episodes, Monday - Thursday, May 3 - 6, 2021, culminating in the digital release of the complete work on Friday, May 7, 2021.

Every year the Los Angeles Master Chorale's Oratorio Project immerses a group of high school students in the creation of an original oratorio that explores a central theme. This year's Oratorio Project is about a prehistoric teenager affectionately called "Naia," whose 13,000-year-old skeleton was found deep within an underwater cave, Hoyo Negro, near Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. The subject for the oratorio was chosen because it is an epic, complex story – rich with mystery, science, and technological discoveries. Students were able to relate to Naia because she was their age and she travelled alone, navigating an isolated journey, perhaps similarly to how students have had to navigate the pandemic without being able to connect with their friends. Research about Naia provided the Oratorio Project students with many avenues to explore as they developed the story. Source material included evidence from archaeologists, anthropologists, genetics and DNA science, migration tracking to the New World, and many other clues to an ancient mystery.

“It was imperative that the Master Chorale continue its Oratorio Project during the pandemic, to give students the opportunity to create, stay connected and build community during a time of isolation,” said Lesili Beard, the Master Chorale’s Director of Education. “The students used this year’s theme to reflect on their own experiences living in the time of the pandemic, including social isolation, with little support for remote, digital learning. We are so grateful for our continued partnership with Van Nuys High School.”

Throughout the pandemic, students met weekly with Master Chorale teaching artists using video conferencing platforms to participate in classes designed to increase and improve



student music skills, and teach students how to write the words and melodies to a full-length original oratorio. Adapted for the virtual environment, each session fostered creativity and connectivity by building digital teams guided by Master Chorale teaching artists.

The Oratorio Project engaged four Master Chorale teaching artists, Alice Kirwan Murray, lead teaching artist and singer, Doug Cooney, lyricist, Saunder Choi, composer, and Kelci Hahn, singer to work with the students virtually, alongside Van Nuys High School choir teacher Brianne Arevalo, who leads the vocal program of 9th through 12th grade students. Students wrote the libretto and created melodies for each movement of the oratorio. They were mentored by the teaching artists on how to use musical techniques to capture the voice of the characters they create, propel the momentum of the plot, and paint the mood of a scene. After the oratorio was written, the students auditioned for featured roles and are coached vocally to prepare for the performances. The lead role of Naia will be sung by a talented 12th grade student, and Naia's spirit is depicted through movement from a student from the school's Dance Department.

This is not the first time that the Oratorio Project topic has mirrored current events: last year's oratorio, *Requiem: This Earth, Our Home*, was a requiem for climate change and the urgency to do something about it. The 2019 oratorio, *WALKOUT: Past, Present, Repeat*, recounted the East Los Angeles High School Walkouts of 1968, when over 20,000 Los Angeles students walked out of the classroom to protest discriminatory practices that undermined the academic ambitions of Latino students. In 2018, *Hear Our Voice: A Woman's Journey* focused on the history of women's rights in the midst of a rising #metoo movement, and was featured in the [Los Angeles Times](#); in 2017 the students created an oratorio called *In America* examining the topic of Japanese incarceration camps during World War II, written and performed at a time of heightened focus on immigration issues. *In America* received national press coverage in a [PBS NewsHour story](#).



Voices Within is an educational artists' residency program developed for the Los Angeles Master Chorale by Marnie Mosiman in collaboration with Bernardo Solano, Penka Kouneva, David O, and Doug Cooney.

Voices Within and the Oratorio Project are made possible by generous support from American Business Bank, William H. Hannon Foundation, Rose Hills Foundation, Thelma Pearl Howard Foundation, Lon V. Smith Foundation, John and Beverly Stauffer Foundation, Sidney Stern Memorial Trust. Walter J. and Holly O. Thomson Foundation

CALENDAR EDITORS:

WHAT:

Naia: The Spirit of Hoyo Negro

An original oratorio by Van Nuys High School students created for the Los Angeles Master Chorale's Oratorio Project. Performed by Van Nuys High School students.

WHEN & WHERE:

Mon. - Fri., May 3 - 7, 2021

Digital premieres at <https://lamasterchorale.org/> at 10 a.m. PST

May 3:

Episode One

May 4:

Episode Two

May 5:

Episode Three

May 6:

Episode Four

May 7:

Naia: The Spirit of Hoyo Negro
the complete work

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