Vox Program Notes

Fall 2025

My Voice Be Brave

*“There will never be a new world order until women are a part of it.”*

*Alice Paul*

For twenty-eight years, VOX Femina Los Angeles has been giving women voice through the performance of music. Today, we launch our season two days before an historic election, with a concert that celebrates the courageous work of those who have dedicated their lives to equity and justice. The act of making music is one way of telling history - expressing the thoughts, words, and feelings of a community both past and present – in a way that keeps those memories alive and vital. *My Voice Be Brave* reflects upon American struggles for civil rights, and especially the right to vote – considering the struggles, the failures, the victories – and reminds us that we can both learn from the past and take strength from those who came before us, as we continue to march for the benefit of all.

The dedication on the front page of the sheet music for our first piece, “What Happens When a Woman?” by Alexandra Olsavsky and the Artemisia Trio, reads: “A song for the strong women of our world who seek to empower themselves by asking important questions.” As the piece begins, a slow stomp develops into a rhythmic march, and a single voice starts raising these questions. More voices join her in unison, and then blossom into harmony and echo – different voices coming together to provide support and adding urgency to the call until the questions are answered in unity, marching together: “We rise above, we lead with love.”

In “When Thunder Comes”, composer Mari Esabel Valverde sets the words of Children’s Poet Laureate J. Patrick Lewis, his 2012 poem that celebrates the work of American civil rights activists Sylvia Mendez, Harvey Milk, and Helen Zia. Valverde writes: “Calling attention to our history’s systemic erasure of the stories of marginalized human beings in the United States, Lewis’s sonnet presents a powerful model for patriotism. The drums, a figurative representation of a grass roots revolution, provide thunder, and the singing relays the message that, once unified, our individual voices can come together and ‘drown out fear.’”

In order to sustain a long-term fight for social justice, our bodies and hearts require times of respite. “My Heart Be Brave” by Marques L.A. Garrett is a piece that provides that breath of peace and rest, even as it is unshakably determined and full of hope. Starting with a quiet encouragement to the heart, the piece builds in intensity as the words of James Weldon Johnson turn to the assurances of nature – that the future will be bright as surely as night will turn to day.

Poet Barbara Saxton wrote “Hands Upon the Plow” in 2019 after researching the life and work of suffragist Alice Paul. Paul organized protests and parades and spent 7 months in jail for picketing peacefully outside of the White House. Some of the lyrics are inspired by Paul’s own words: “I always feel the movement is a sort of mosaic. Each of us puts in a little stone, and then you get a great mosaic at the end.” Composer Jocelyn Hagen sets these words with this idea of building in strength over time. She builds a mosaic-like character into the jazzy bass line of the piano – starting with a handful or smattering of notes, the line becomes more fluid and connected as the piece goes on.

“Keep Marching” is the finale of the musical *Suffs* by Shaina Taub,which premiered off-Broadway in 2022 and opened on Broadway in 2024. It brings the struggles of American suffragists Alice Paul and Lucy Burns to life, and highlights the struggles and differences in approaching the movement, and the ways in which the inclusion of Black women was curtailed.“Keep Marching” acknowledges that their victories are incomplete, and though it may take years, or generations, we must keep on marching.

The second half of our concert features a live performance of Andrea Ramsey’s “Suffrage Cantata,” which was commissioned by VOX Femina Los Angeles and a consortium of choirs in 2020. In this multi-movement piece, Andrea Ramsey adapts texts from Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, Jovita Idár and many other voices of powerful women in the Suffrage movement to tell the story of the fight women undertook to win the right to vote in America. The first movement, “One Day, It Is Coming” begins a narrative arc that leads to the 1848 convention on women’s rights at Seneca Falls. “Failure Is Impossible” is a musical representation of the arrest and trial of Susan B. Anthony for the crime of casting a vote in the election of 1872. The voice of Ida B. Wells-Barnett is highlighted in the third movement “When a Woman Knows Her Place”, confronting the limitations of white feminism in the suffrage movement. “Shall Not Be Denied” reminds us of the violent brutality that women were subjected to in the fight for suffrage as we are led into the final movement, “Forward Into Light” – much work *has* been done, and much work *remains* to be done as we continue in the ongoing fight for the rights of all people.