

Samantha Dennis

Off-Campus Review

Academy of the Arts Choral/Vocal - Senior Year, Semester One

“Virtual Voices” of the USC Thornton School of Music

Under the direction of Robert Cutietta, the Dean of the USC Thornton School of Music, the University of Southern California produced their Fall Festival 2020 with video contributions from the classical guitar department, chamber music, and the Virtual Voices showcase. In this concert, students demonstrated their creativity through collaboration between composers, singers, instrumentalists, directors, and producers. Included were performances of performer-composer original pieces, as well as excerpts from a variety of operas. Students also included violin, trombone, piano, and other instruments in addition to voice effects and video editing to enhance their performances. All of the songs were incredibly unique with each piece bringing a different mood and perspective to the audience.

One of my favorite performances was “Ave Maria” from the opera *Costas* composed by William Grant Still with the libretto by Verna Avery. The piece was excellently performed by Corey Estelle and Lorenzo Zapata who fully committed to their roles. From just the first few notes, it became clear that their voices were rich and full of energy. This piece clearly showed off their vocal ranges. They executed the entire piece beautifully and I was pulled into the song for the entire duration. Their connection to the piece and to each other was clear despite filming separately from home, with their harmonies sounding effortless. The two performers became more excited and fulfilled as the piece progressed and they were able to drink water and praise God for keeping them alive, showing not only their commitment to acting the piece but truly placing themselves into the lives of the characters they portrayed. Overall, this piece was full of raw emotion and provided a peaceful yet heartwarming end to the concert.

Although I greatly enjoyed “Ave Maria” the concert as a whole was unconventional compared to the typical choral concerts I have attended in the past. All of the pieces were very artsy and creative with the intention of making the audience uncomfortable using minor, diminished, and augmented chords and utilizing the dissonance and clashing notes or melodic phrases that result from these chord progressions. I typically prefer music in major keys with comfortable chord resolutions that leave the audience feeling satisfied; however, I loved experiencing something different and out of my comfort zone.