

The Daily News 01/29/2014, Page B06

Bringingtherealworld, in 3-part harmony

True LifeTrio to perform in house concert on Thursday in Mountain View

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For The Daily News

They bring the world. Via gorgeous harmonies, the East Bay's True Life Trio travels through a wide spectrum of styles and traditions.

Their debut recording, "Home," a seven-song EP, is a wondrous introduction to the trio's multicultural musical expedition.

Trio member Juliana Graffagna says, "We wanted to get something out to the world that reflected the diversity of what we do. We're proud of it.

It was a huge accomplishment to get it out there. But you're always on to the next project.

We're already planning our next CD right now." Graffagna, Leslie Bonnett and Briget Boyle all sing and play percussion. Bonnett adds fiddle; Boyle guitar; and Graffagna bass. They met as performers in the Kitka Women's Vocal Ensemble.

"Our backgrounds, all of us, from singing in a larger chorus," Graffagna says, "is Eastern European and Baltic music.

That's sort of the mainstay. But we definitely branch out. We incorporate different Americana styles, Cajun music, specifically. Leslie Bonnett has a strong background in Cajun music. So it's been really fun to explore that and add three-part vocal harmonies, not often heard with that genre.

"So we're going from Eastern Europe down to Louisiana.

We do a little bit of Appalachian music, as well. And Eastern Europe, in and of itself, is quite broad, so we do the music from from the Balkans, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece, then we go up into more northern Europe, into the Ukraine and some Polish music. So it's a pretty wide range of stuff that we're exploring. Also we do a fair bit of Georgian music, as well, which is really wonderful. The traditional music is set up for three-part harmony."

They've also touched upon the musical traditions of Mexico, South Africa, Italy and other regions. Though each musical tradition has its own personality, there are common threads.

“For one thing, most of the music is folk music, so, just in terms of the subject matter, there are so many rich songs about real stuff, about love and conflict and war. There are a lot of songs about separating from your family. And that crosses all genres. Then, in terms of doing traditional music in general, there’s a vocal quality that you can use, that we take advantage of in all these different styles, a sort of more folk voice, using a chest voicing, which is a powerful, strident sort of tone to use.

The commonality is that it’s all folk music that sprang up from rural areas everywhere, having to do with the land and the basic stuff of life.”

The trio also performs original material, such as Graffagna’s lovely “Butterfly Dream.”

Originally from Chicago, Graffagna has been singing and teaching European music for 25 years. She has traveled extensively and worked with countless musicians.

“I feel that I am steeped enough in the music that it has colored the way that I hear music and see music. So it’s natural for me to then spin off and write my own things. It’s fun taking elements from these different traditions and incorporating them into my compositions, but then making it modern and singing in English.

It’s a challenge, but it’s a labor of love, for sure, for all of us.”

“Butterfly Dream” is one of the soaring a cappella numbers on the “Home” EP.

“Some of the music, you don’t want any instruments in it, because the harmonies are so rich, in and of themselves. It’s just perfect without. And some of it, frankly, sounds strange or too modern somehow, with instruments. It’s about being respectful of the traditions. But it’s also about making the most beautiful sound that we can make.”

Other tunes, especially the lively Cajun numbers, cry out for instruments to augment the vocals.

“It seems like there are endless amounts of tools in our little tool chest to pull out to vary the texture of the sound.”

The group creates unique arrangements of traditional numbers. Sometimes, it’s a matter of taking music originally designed for larger choirs and extracting the essential harmonies, so they can capture the majesty with three voices.

“We’re trying to find ourselves in all this music, since we’re not Macedonian or Ukrainian or Appalachian, for that matter. Without trying, you’re imprinting yourself, no matter what you’re doing. That’s a natural extension, putting our own personalities into it.”

Graffagna, already a singer, studied Russian language in college, and then tuned in to

Slavic folk music. “That’s what piqued my interest originally. And then I fell in love with the Bulgarian Women’s Chorus and wanted to sing like that.

“Leslie grew up in the Bay Area, doing international folk dance. That’s how she came to it. Briget got hooked up with Eastern European music at the College of Santa Fe. We all met here in the Bay Area and we chose each other out of this bigger group to branch out and do this thing, because we get along so well, personality wise.

And though our voices are so different, we think it’s a really good blend with the three of us. We all trust each other tremendously and our abilities to make something that sounds profoundly beautiful to us. So it’s a lot of joy.

“And it’s ever-changing.

We’ve only been together a few years, but we’ve already done a lot of different kinds of projects. We did a Jewish music program and a Polish music program and the annual Christmas revels pageant at the Scottish Rite theater in Oakland.”

On Thursday, the Trio plays a house concert in Mountain View.

“We do the house concerts more and more. It’s definitely the trend, certainly in the Bay Area and, I think, all over the place. For people who really want to hear music without glasses and plates being jostled, it’s a nice, quiet, home setting.

And for musicians, it’s terrific, because it’s so personal. You often don’t have to be amplified. So it’s a really pure, natural sound. And you’re three feet from the person in the front row, which can be intimidating in some ways, but mostly it’s just very nice. It feels very honest and a nice way for everybody to share music.

“The people that come, they’re really interested in hearing what you have to share with them. You get to hang out with people after the shows. A lot of these places have their own little established audience and then you bring your own audience in addition. So it’s a pretty good mix.”

The trio is in the planning stages for a recording/performance project about memory that will incorporate poetry, spoken word and dance, as well as traditional and original music.

Whenever they raise their voices in song, True Life Trio uplifts the listener, regardless of the song’s subject matter or language. “We want to transport you,” Graffagna says. “We want to bring people along on this journey. We just feel lucky that we get to be the vessel, we get to actually do the singing, because it is such a pleasant feeling to emit these sounds and blend in that way and breathe together. We get all that and then it’s a huge benefit that it’s something that other people want to experience, as well.”

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