



Los Angeles
Master Chorale
artist-in-residence
Reena Esmail

CULTURAL CONDUIT

Composer Reena Esmail's Western and Indian classical music creates connections among cultures, performers and audiences. / BY LIBBY SLATE /

When composer Reena

Esmail received a commission from the Los Angeles Master Chorale as its Swan Family Artist-In-Residence, she considered potential subject matter. After ruling out Covid-19 and women's issues, she hit upon a topic that people living in drought-affected Los Angeles could relate to: a requiem for water. The work—about 30 minutes in length, untitled at press time—has its world premiere at the ensemble's March 26 concert at the Walt Disney Concert Hall downtown; it's paired with Gabriel Fauré's 19th-century Requiem in D minor.

"We're here in Southern California, and all of us are deeply affected by the fact that water is becoming scarcer and scarcer," says Esmail, who grew up in L.A. after moving from her native Chicago at age three. She earned a bachelor's degree in composition from Juilliard and a master's and doctorate from Yale.

"I thought, what better way to really talk about this issue than to bring love

and care, and the mourning of the loss of that water, to a piece of music."

Esmail's inspiration came while attending a poetry reading by William O'Daly, known for his English translations of works by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; O'Daly has written poems about water loss and is the lead writer for the California Department of Water Resources' Water Plan. She reached out to O'Daly. "The requiem is a combination of Latin requiem [mass for the dead] texts, [O'Daly's] English texts and a few Indian texts as well."

The Indian texts will be sung by Esmail's longtime collaborator, Salli Oak; the chorale orchestra is joined by Indian musician Abhimanyu Kaushal on the tabla, two drums played by hand. Unlike Western classical music, Indian music has little notation and is primarily improvised. The result, Esmail says, is more complex melody and rhythm than can be accomplished in a printed score.

Combining Western counterpoint and harmony with the improvised