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OUT IN DC

Remembering through music

The Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington and D.C. Different Drummers collaborate on a special musical piece they will perform on World AIDS Day

By [KIM KRISBERG](#)
Friday, November 21, 2003

IT'S THE SIZE of 47 football fields and when last displayed in its entirety, it covered the National Mall. Such are the physical dimensions of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, a colossal monument to those affected by HIV/AIDS.

The sheer emotional and symbolic nature of the world's largest community art project is almost incomprehensible. After experiencing the quilt in such magnitude, how does a community hit hard by AIDS pass on the project's importance, its place in history — or, do you just have to be there?

The question poses an inevitable creative problem, according to Rob Maggio, the Pennsylvania-based composer and music professor who recently completed "Quilt Panels (for my love, for my grief, for my letting go)" for the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington, D.C., and the D.C. Different Drummers.

The two gay musical organizations, along with the All Souls Jubilee Singers and other community singers, will be performing the 40-minute piece Maggio composed on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1. It is known as the December 1st Project.

IT TOOK MAGGIO two years to complete the composition — one year researching and one composing and writing. And he said, at first, it felt reductive trying to compose a piece about a quilt with 45,000 panels.

But after the composing began, it didn't feel reductive at all. He says he just thought of the work as an individual panel, reflective of where he is now and what he's been through.

"Music can create a space for us to map our own emotion in — it's a bit like a landscape," Maggio says. "You can put 50 different people in a forest and they'll have 50 different reactions to what they feel in that space, and I think the same is true for music."

Scott Barker, artistic director for D.C. Different Drummers, said he had wanted to commission an original piece with the Lesbian & Gay Chorus of Washington since he became director in 1998, but wasn't able to think of a subject. One night two years ago, Barker was talking with a staff member of the D.C. chapter of the NAMES Project, which was responsible for the quilt and has since folded, about the quilt as a cultural artifact of the gay community and how it should be accessible to the public.

Barker said that as he left the NAMES Project office that night, he saw a 12-by-12 quilt panel on the floor and realized that the quilt itself had a story to tell — a story that could be told through music.

"There are so many diverse elements that make up this one big quilt," Barker says. "I wanted to convey the magnitude of the quilt in terms of the sense of loss and the number of people who made the quilt."

TO COMMISSION A composition about the quilt, members of LGCW and DCDD created the December



Visitors look at an AIDS Memorial Quilt panel when the project was on display at the National Mall in 1996. (Photo by Clint Steib)

MORE INFO

December 1st Project

Monday, Dec. 1, at 8 p.m.
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
University of Maryland at College Park
202-269-4868
www.december1stproject.org
Tickets: \$24-\$30


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1st Project and sent out a call for a composer through various music networks. Barker said Maggio stood out from the pack, in part, because his approach was very community-oriented.

To begin his work, Maggio spent a little less than a year talking with chorus and band members about what the quilt means to them and what they'd like to see in the composition.

Jill Strachan, LGCW's general manager, said the December 1st Project organizers conducted focus groups with the Women's Collective, an organization based in Washington that serves women living with HIV/AIDS, Us Helping Us: People Into Living, a D.C.-based non-profit group that primarily serves African-American gay and bisexual men living with HIV/AIDS, and youths and young adults at Youth Pride Day.

Many of the youths reported never having seen the quilt or having any real sense of what it means, which Strachan said confirms, "that the quilt was sort of disappearing in a monumental way."

One of the most powerful aspects of "Quilt Panels" is that Maggio wove names submitted by chorus and band members of those lost to HIV/AIDS into the composition, Strachan said.

In addition, the December 1st Project paid homage to those from LGCW and DCDD who have died from AIDS-related complications by creating a 12-by-12 quilt panel that will be displayed over the stage during the upcoming world premiere of "Quilt Panels."

"I tried to make music direct and bold — that didn't apologize for itself," Maggio says. "But I also wanted music that had a sense of hope ... I didn't want it all to be about grief and pain and loss."

Commissioning "Quilt Panels" not only took time and creativity, but money. It will cost the December 1st Project more than \$40,000 . The project already has raised a substantial portion of the total with help from groups such as the Gay & Lesbian Association of Choruses and the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, but it is still seeking donations.

Barker and Strachan hope "Quilt Panels" is a piece other bands and choruses will perform and, along the way, remind audiences that AIDS is still here.

"A bell should ring every time someone is diagnosed with HIV/AIDS," said one focus group participant from the Women's Collective. "Then, maybe people will notice."

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