

## A “Jubilant” Voice

by Diane Petersen  
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For lack of a better term, baritone **Jubilant Sykes** is often labeled a crossover artist.

The classically-trained singer, in demand as an opera and orchestral soloist all over the world, feels equally at home singing jazz and gospel music, Top 40 hits and Broadway tunes.

“The term crossover, I get it,” he said in a phone interview from his home in Venice Beach. “But for me, I’m just a singer ... If I had to label myself, I’m a folk singer, and I sing what I like.”

The baritone will sing two beloved spirituals this weekend when he joins the Santa Rosa Symphony for a set of holiday vocal concerts. During the first half of the program, Sykes will warm up his deep, resonant voice with the classic spirituals, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” and “Were You There?” During the second half, he will join forces with soprano Karen Clift and the Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir for a performance of Johannes Brahms’ uplifting *German Requiem*.

“The unifying factor is that these are sacred works, and it’s singing to the divine, of the divine,” Sykes said of the concert program. “Stylistically, they are excruciatingly different, and that’s probably the challenge.”

### **First appearance a success**

Sykes first appeared with the Santa Rosa Symphony in 1998, when he sang the bass solo in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, along with three spirituals.

That concert was such a success that he was asked to return the next year, opening the symphony’s 1999-2000 season with Copland’s “Old American Songs,” a Mahler song and two Mozart arias.

Sykes’ discography is equally eclectic. He released his first CD, a collection of spirituals and hymns called “Jubilant,” in 1998 with jazz trumpeter Terence Blanchard.

“Wait For Me,” released in 2001, features contemporary pop songs by everyone from Bruce Springsteen to Bob Dylan.

“That’s the wine-and-cheese CD,” he said. “It’s all mellow stuff, and very different.”

A long-time collaboration with classical guitarist Christopher Parkening led to his 2007 CD *Jubilation*, a collection of American and Brazilian music. Sykes’ 2009 recording of *Leonard Bernstein: Mass* with Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, earned him a 2010 Grammy nomination for Best Classical Record.

This weekend, Sykes hopes to be able to greet his fans, and sign copies of his CDs, during the concert intermissions. But if he’s too exhausted and his voice is not strong, he may have to take a rain check.

“I try to get lots of rest,” he said. “I stay in my hotel room until curtain time ... It’s a very hermitic life.”

### **Keep it simple**

Sykes plans to approach the spirituals, which will be accompanied by the orchestra, with a certain amount of simplicity.

“With the spirituals, you don’t want to get heavy-handed,” he said.

“Were You There?” is featured on Sykes’ most recent recording, *Jubilant Sykes Sings Copland and Spirituals*, reissued by Arioso Classics. The album was recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra and conductor Andrew Litton at Abbey Road Studios in London.

“These spirituals are beautifully orchestrated, very romantic and lush,” Sykes said of the recording. “The Copland songs were arranged for baritone and orchestra, and the spirituals were arranged for me.”

To prepare himself for his solos in the somber third and the stormy sixth movements of the German Requiem, Sykes said he will zero in on the lyrics.

“When you listen to the text, and you hear the choruses before, it really gets you in the mood,” he said. “The lyrics are straight out of the Bible, so it’s not sad to me. It’s just life.”

### **Consolation to the living**

Unlike most requiems, which are written in Latin, Brahms decided to write his in German. And rather than dwell on the fate of the dead, the composer chose lyrics offering consolation to the living.

“This is the people’s requiem, because he did it in his own language,” Sykes said. “There’s a sober, earthy approach to it. It’s more human.”

When he first started work on the German Requiem, Brahms was still mourning the loss of his friend, composer Robert Schumann, who died in 1857. After writing the original six movements, he inserted a tender fifth movement as a response to the death of his own mother in 1865. A rhapsodic setting for solo soprano and chorus, the fifth movement ends with the words “I will see you again” and “I will comfort you.”

Sykes lost his own mother just three months ago, and his father passed away two years ago. So he’s looking at the holidays, and his upcoming performance in Santa Rosa, in a different light.

“Because of what I’ve been through, there’s a bittersweetness to it,” he said.

“There’s a line that the chorus sings — ‘Death, where is your sting?’ Even though it’s painful, the sting is not there for me, because of my faith.”