

L O S   A N G E L E S

# MASTER CHORALE

## STUDENT COMPOSERS AND VOICES TAKE CENTER STAGE IN EMOTIONAL PREMIERE OF *AMERICAN DREAM*

On the Nation's 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, a Bold New Student-Created Oratorio  
Confronts Division, Identity, and Hope



**Los Angeles, CA, Monday, March 2, 2026** — In the face of ICE raids and protests throughout the country, more than 90 high school students from the Ramón C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts will be joined by eight singers from the GRAMMY® Award-winning Los Angeles Master Chorale for the free, MUST-SEE premiere of *American Dream*, a fascinating original nine-movement oratorio written and composed by the students themselves. The 40-minute performance will take place on **Wednesday, March 25, at 7:00 PM**, at the Cortines Concert Hall.

*American Dream* is the latest Oratorio Project spearheaded by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, now entering its 16<sup>th</sup> year. The Oratorio Project was born out of the Master Chorale's Voices Within program for 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students. It immerses high school students in a collaborative process to write a large, complex work similar to an opera with arias, duets, and a chorus. Students delve into historical and culturally rich subjects to find a meaningful story that they connect with and then tell the story through music. The curriculum combines elements of music composition, literacy skills, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning, such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

Throughout the 20-week residency, students work in small groups to write the libretto (the story) and create the melodies for each movement of the oratorio. As groups develop their individual movements, they are mentored by the artistic team to incorporate techniques that capture the voice of the character, propel the momentum of the plot, and paint the mood of the scene. After the oratorio is complete, students audition for featured roles and are coached vocally to prepare for the culmination performance.

The completed oratorio is premiered by the participating choir classes to a school-wide assembly and repeated for a community audience that evening. The performance features the choirs, soloists, and instrumentalists (both high school and professional) who are joined by eight members of the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

### **THE 2026 ORATORIO PROJECT – A RARE WORK OF URGENCY AND REFLECTION**

This year's oratorio, *American Dream*, is the culmination of the collaboration between Ramón C. Cortines students and the Master Chorale's Singer-Lead Teaching Artist Alice Kirwan Murray, Lyricist Teaching Artist Brett Paesel, and Composer Teaching Artist Saunder Choi. It is conducted by Cortines Choir Director Drew Lewis, a 2024 California Teacher of the Year honoree.

Opening with the insurrection of January 6, 2021, this oratorio confronts a defining moment of national fracture before traveling across eras of American history — from the Gilded Age to the Great Depression, from post-war prosperity to the consumer-driven 1980s and into today's "new normal." The students' libretto interrogates the distance between promise and reality, daring to ask audiences to consider: Who have we become? And what does the American Dream mean now? "The Oratorio takes the hopeful name 'American Dream' off its pedestal," said student writer Valerie Tellez. "It shows how simple some of our dreams can be and makes us question why it feels hard to achieve."

### **LIVED EXPERIENCE AS CREATIVE SOURCE**

Unlike traditional educational performances, *American Dream* is shaped directly by students' lived experiences. Workshop sessions became forums for candid dialogue about opportunity, inequity, belonging, and civic responsibility. Many participating students come from immigrant families and communities impacted by intensified immigration enforcement — realities that formed the work's emotional core. Co-writer Arielle Escareno says, "It's about what the American Dream is for many versus what many feel is their reality."

What emerges on stage is more than a performance. It is an eye-opening snapshot of young people thinking critically, collaborating across differences, and articulating their vision of America. Senior Margeaux Zagado summed it up simply: "America is complicated."

Lyricist Brett Paesel, in her fifth year with the Master Chorale's Oratorio Project, said she was surprised to learn that students did not strive to become wealthy or social media influencers. "They want the ability to go to college, have a better life than their parents did... Just an equal shot."

The oratorio's final hopeful movement imagines a future defined not by division, but by unity, dignity, and the pursuit of simple, human aspirations.

## MOVEMENTS

1. Insurrection – Facing a deep political divide, students question: Who have we become?
2. Hope – Students explore: Where did we come from? Why did we come here? What were our hopes and dreams? They begin to explore the promise of America.
3. The Dream – Immigrants' longing for the opportunity to work hard and reap the rewards is explored: the chance to create a better, more secure life for their children.
4. Born Lucky – Students look at those who are excluded from traditional ways to achieve success, positing that the easiest path to the dream is to “pray you were born lucky.”
5. Gilded Reality – A reflection of the nation's past begins with The Gilded Age. Students ask if achieving the dream has less to do with hard work and more with access to education and resources.
6. New Deal – Students move to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. The pain for citizens runs deep, but the New Deal's socialized programs try to even the playing field.
7. Give Me More – The relative prosperity that came with WWII and the social safety erodes again in the 80s. The American Dream transforms from modesty to riches as deregulation and consumer culture take over.
8. New Normal – Students define the “new normal” as including guns, unaffordable healthcare, withheld SNAP benefits, ICE raids. The American Dream is fading further for many people who feel unheard and unseen.
9. Un Solo Corazón (One Heart) – Students imagine their America: a country with one heart, where they have a family, a job, and a home. The oratorio ends on a note of deep yearning for simple things.

## EVENT DETAILS

Premiere: *American Dream*

Date: Wednesday, March 25, 2026

Time: 7:00 PM

Admission: Free – Register at [www.lamasterchorale.org/oratorio-project](http://www.lamasterchorale.org/oratorio-project)

Venue:

Ramón C. Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts — 927-seat Concert Hall  
450 N Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012

## MEDIA CONTACT

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**\*Media are invited to attend select rehearsals beginning March 19, 2026, with prior approval.**

## SPONSORSHIP CONTACT

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*American Dream* is the Master Chorale's 16<sup>th</sup> Oratorio Project. More than 1300 students have participated since its inception in 2010, thanks to the generous support from the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, the Edward A. & Ai O. Shay Family Foundation, Walter and Holly Thomson Foundation, Bank of America, N.A., Co-Trustee, The Kenneth T. & Eileen L. Norris Foundation, Lon V. Smith Foundation, John & Beverly Stauffer Foundation, Employees Community Fund of Boeing California, William H. Hannon Foundation, and Sidney Stern Memorial Trust.

## ABOUT THE LOS ANGELES MASTER CHORALE

For more than 60 years, the GRAMMY® Award-winning and revered [Master Chorale](#) has been a standard-bearer for choruses across America. Hailed for its powerful performances, technical precision, and artistic daring, the Master Chorale reaches more than 175,000 people a year through its concert series at the iconic Walt Disney Concert Hall, its international touring of innovative works, and its performances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and others. The choir is the nation's largest professional chorus led by Artistic Director [Grant Gershon](#). Its singers performed at the 97<sup>th</sup> Oscars® and are desired by legendary composers for their movie soundtracks. Their voices are currently heard in numerous films, including "Avatar: Fire and Ash," "Superman," "Wicked," and "Wicked: For Good." Its innovative and extraordinary learning programs include the renowned [High School Choir Festival](#), the [Oratorio Project](#), [Voices Within](#), and [Youth Chorus LA](#), all of which prepare future generations of choral singers and uplift communities through the transformative power of choral music. The Master Chorale is registered as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

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