

EAST BAY TIMES

Snapp Shots: Catch Oakland's yearly Chapel of the Chimes concert



Lloyd Paul/Chapel of the Chimes

The annual summer solstice concert at the Chapel of the Chimes, above, will be next Thursday.

By [MARTIN SNAPP](#) | Columnist | June 14, 2018

A columbarium is a building for the ashes of the dead's repose.

Sounds creepy, huh? But only if it's seen through the eyes of our modern era, which is in neurotic denial about death. Back in the 19th century, when death was a constant companion, people had fewer hang-ups about it. They routinely came with picnic lunches to hang out with their dearly departed.

One of the last of those great columbariums is the Chapel of the Chimes in North Oakland, built in 1909. It was the brainchild of its first director, Lawrence F. Moore, known throughout the funeral industry as "Mr. Cremation."

He wanted it to be a place that would convey "not an aura of death, but a haven of peace and tranquility for those who would be its visitors." So he hired the most brilliant architect of the era, Julia Morgan.

She created a veritable Gothic cathedral of gardens, cloisters, alcoves, fountains and chapels, with names like Garden of Serenity, Chapel of Repose and Sanctuary of Contentment. And she filled the walls and ceilings with stained glass windows that suffused each room with a dazzling ballet of light.

A lot of local notables are there. You can visit Al Davis and John Lee Hooker in the Garden of Ages and Giants shortstop Dick Bartell (aka “Rowdy Richard”) in the Garden of the Cross. One day, concert pianist Sarah Cahill, a prominent exponent of New Music, happened to visit the chapel. She took one look and thought, “Wouldn’t this be a great place to have a concert?”

So in 1996 the first Garden of Memory concert was held, with more than 30 musicians and musical acts, one in each alcove, chapel or garden. They ranged from the whimsical (a professional whistler whistling Mozart arias and Schibert lieder) to the experimental (would you believe a singing plant?).

Cahill herself played a piano piece by composer Henry Cowell — not with her fingers but with her forearms! Cowell wrote it to be played that way. Who would have guessed there’s a musical notation for that? And here’s the genius part: They decided to hold the concert on the summer solstice, June 21, the longest day of the year, to take maximum advantage of the light coming through the stained glass.

It was a huge success, and they’ve been doing it every year since. The only changes I’ve noticed is that the number of acts has grown from 30 to about 45, and the performers get more diverse every year.

You never know what you’re going to get. Some of the musicians will be holdovers from previous years; some will be newbies. If any of the performances isn’t to your taste, no problem: Just walk over to the next room, where there will be something completely different.

If you have kids, bring them. This is a very family-friendly event, and a lot of the wacky, one-of-a-kind instruments have been purposely designed for audience participation. Prices are reasonable too: \$15 for general admission, \$10 for students and seniors, \$5 for kids younger than 12 and free for kids younger than 5.

This year, June 21 will be next Thursday. The fun starts at 5 p.m. and will last until the sun goes down at 9. Trust me: This concert is definitely one for your, ahem, bucket list.

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