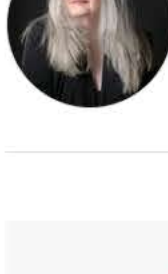
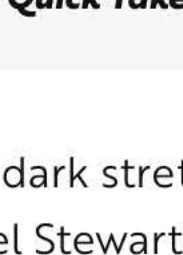


# A world premiere 'Amadeus': Daniel Stewart unites Santa Cruz arts in bold new concert adaptation



BY JANA MARCUS

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The Santa Cruz Symphony presents the world premiere of conductor Daniel Stewart's original concert adaptation of "Amadeus" on March 28 and 29, bringing together actors from Santa Cruz Shakespeare and more than 90 singers from the Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus.

On a dark stretch of Highway 1 heading north toward San Francisco, maestro Daniel Stewart had an epiphany – a lightning bolt of inspiration that would eventually bring together three of Santa Cruz's beloved arts institutions.

Last year, the [Santa Cruz Symphony](#) presented "Symphonic Shakespeare" – Shakespeare-inspired orchestral works paired with live performance by [Santa Cruz Shakespeare](#). The evening crackled with energy; the artists clicked, the audience responded and Stewart left energized.

For a conductor whose mind rarely stops, the black ribbon of Highway 1 and the Pacific Ocean crashing below the cliffs offered the kind of moment where ideas find you.

Somewhere along that drive, the answer arrived.

"Amadeus."

For those unfamiliar, "Amadeus" is the Tony Award-winning stage play by Peter Shaffer, later adapted into the Academy Award-winning film directed by Miloš Forman. The drama imagines the rivalry between the brilliant composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the court composer Antonio Salieri, exploring themes of genius, jealousy, faith and artistic obsession.

But Stewart wasn't interested in staging the play in the usual way. Instead, he imagined a concert built around Mozart's music, with moments of Shaffer's text woven through to frame the story.

Stewart began combing through the play and screenplay, studying every scene and line to see how the drama might interact with the orchestra.

What has emerged is something audiences have never seen before. On March 28 and 29, the Santa Cruz Symphony will present Stewart's original concert adaptation of "Amadeus."

The scale is striking: a 65-piece orchestra, more than 90 singers from the [Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus](#), and actors from [Santa Cruz Shakespeare](#) sharing the stage in a performance that blends theatre and symphonic music.

For Stewart, the project reflects a broader belief about what symphonic music can be.

"When different artistic disciplines come together, there is incredible synergy that enriches the human experience," he said. "You learn things about yourselves and about each other that don't happen when everyone is working in isolation."

Stewart often points to his experience at the New York Metropolitan Opera as formative.

"You have music, acting, singing, stagecraft, costume design, lighting – all the people behind the scenes," he said. "It's almost miraculous that those things come together at all. But when they do, it can be transcendent."

That sense of creative convergence sits at the heart of "Amadeus."

With over 150 performers sharing the stage, the scale of the collaboration raises an obvious question: How do three artistic institutions maintain their voices while shaping one cohesive performance?

Stewart, who developed the script and musical framework for the adaptation, doesn't see the challenge as a problem. He sees it as a privilege.

"When you have great collaborators, it becomes a delight," he said. "What they bring to the table is their expertise in their own areas. When there's artistic trust, anything is possible."

For Charles Pasternak, artistic director of Santa Cruz Shakespeare, this year's collaboration represents a natural evolution of last year's partnership.

"What makes this year different is that Daniel is looking at the whole evening as a full collaboration around Shaffer's play," Pasternak said. "With this adaptation the music leads and selected passages from the script provide the dramatic framework."



From left, Carlin Truong, artistic director of the Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus, Daniel Stewart, artistic director of the Santa Cruz Symphony, and Charles Pasternak, artistic director of Santa Cruz Shakespeare. Credit: Jana Marcus

But the project is not a co-production between the organizations. Pasternak points out that the evening remains firmly rooted in the symphony's artistic vision.

"This is really Daniel's creative endeavor," Pasternak continued. "He reached out and created a bridge between our two organizations, and I'm honored to be in the service of his vision."

That bridge began taking shape with last year's "Symphonic Shakespeare" and "Amadeus" pushes the concept further.

What the Shakespeare team brings, Pasternak explained, is their expertise in shaping the theatrical moments that unfold inside the music.



Pasternak himself will appear as the scheming Salieri, joined by actors Will Block as Mozart, Anjoli Aguilar as Constanze and Shaun Carroll as Emperor Joseph II.

Working on a symphonic performance dramatically changes the actors' rehearsal process. A Shakespeare production might rehearse for five or six weeks. A symphony concert comes together in just a handful of rehearsals.

"We really have to show up fully prepared," Pasternak said. "Most of our creative work happens before we ever get into the room with the orchestra."

That compressed schedule requires careful choreography between the conductor and the actors.

Pasternak remembers a moment during last year's collaboration that revealed just how precise that partnership can be.

He was standing just offstage waiting for his entrance.

Onstage, Stewart conducted the orchestra through the swelling music. Conductors are always slightly ahead of the music, anticipating what the orchestra will do next.

Then, all at once, Stewart glanced over to Pasternak and made the smallest gesture with his hand.

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"It was the most magical, open invitation to enter," Pasternak recalled. "He's managing dozens of things at once, and still he turns and gives that cue exactly when the moment needs to happen."

Moments like that reveal the quiet artistry behind collaboration. They also reveal something about the Santa Cruz arts community. "We believe a rising tide lifts all boats," adds Pasternak.

If the theatrical collaboration adds one layer to the production, adding the chorus expands the scale even further.

More than 90 singers from the Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus will join the orchestra and actors onstage, creating a sonic presence that transforms the concert hall into something closer to a dramatic tableau.

Leading that ensemble is Carlin Truong, who became artistic director of the Cabrillo Symphonic Chorus in 2025 after joining the Cabrillo College faculty. He prepared the chorus earlier this season for the symphony's performance of Holst's "The Planets."

For Truong, the collaboration marks an exciting early chapter in his tenure with the chorus.

"It's been fabulous," he said of working with Stewart. "I love his creative ideas and his innovative programming."

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Truong describes his role as preparing the singers in rehearsal before they join the orchestra under Stewart's baton. By the time the performance begins, his work is done.

But for Truong, the most meaningful moments of the project happen long before the audience arrives.

In rehearsal rooms at Cabrillo College, singers connect with one another as they discover the emotional core of the music.

"We laugh, we cry about the music," Truong said. "That's where the music really comes alive."

In "Amadeus," the chorus becomes part of both the storytelling and the soundscape. Rather than just providing musical texture, the singers respond to the drama unfolding around them, guiding the audience's emotional focus.

"We're there to tell the story and react to it," Truong said.

Underlying his approach is a belief in the power of collective voice, much like Stewart's. "We come together to create what is not possible alone," Truong said.

He takes that idea seriously. "I truly believe that if everyone in the world sang, we would create a better world."

If the artists see the collaboration as a chance to expand the creative possibilities of the concert hall, the symphony's leadership sees it as a chance to expand the audience as well.

Deborah Bronstein, president of the symphony's board, feels the project reflects a broader effort to welcome new listeners into the hall as live arts continue rebuilding after the pandemic.

"We know there are many patrons who support both the Santa Cruz Symphony and Santa Cruz Shakespeare," Bronstein said. "I hope Shakespeare audiences who don't normally attend the symphony will be intrigued to come hear this unique collaboration."

She also believes the production may reach beyond the traditional audience for either organization. Film lovers familiar with "Amadeus" may be curious to see how the story unfolds live. Families might see it as a chance to introduce younger generations to symphonic music.

And for those who have never attended a symphony concert, Bronstein believes the production offers an ideal entry point.

"This is the perfect way to be introduced to the concert hall," she said. "There's a story to follow, incredible music that deepens the emotional experience, and so much happening onstage."

For Bronstein, the deeper value lies in something that TV screens and streaming cannot replicate: experiencing live music and theatre in a room full of people creates a shared emotional space, one that communities need now more than ever.

For Daniel Stewart, that emotional connection lies at the heart of Mozart's music.

He often reflects on a moment in the film "The Shawshank Redemption," when Mozart's music suddenly fills a prison yard. Morgan Freeman's character describes it as something so beautiful it cannot be explained.

"That captures something essential about Mozart," Stewart said. "He wanted music to be approachable, something so beautiful anyone could respond to, even without knowing anything about it. Yet beneath that beauty lies extraordinary depth."

What began as a quiet idea on a dark highway has grown into something much larger – musicians, actors and singers sharing one stage in pursuit of a single artistic moment. The result is more than a concert. It is a glimpse of what can happen when Santa Cruz's arts community chooses to create together.

Audiences can experience what Mozart himself believed music could do best: speak directly to the heart, no explanation required.