

WALKOUT: PAST, PRESENT, REPEAT Explores 1968 East L.A. Student Protests

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WALKOUT: Past, Present, Repeat, a timely new oratorio written by Van Nuys High School students for the Los Angeles Master Chorale's Voices Within Oratorio Project, will be premiered by students and members of the Master Chorale on Friday, March 1st and Saturday, March 2nd in the school's auditorium. The Friday performance will be for fellow students. The Saturday performance at 1 PM is presented as a free community concert and is open to the public.



WALKOUT: Past, Present, Repeat recounts the East Los Angeles High School Walkouts of 1968 when over 20,000 Los Angeles students walked out of the classroom to protest discriminatory practices that undermined the academic ambitions of Latino students to the point of channeling them into menial labor and prohibiting the Spanish language on campuses. These events are widely credited with awakening student activism and signaling the dawn of the Chicano civil rights movement in Los Angeles. The students' protests grew to include parents, families, and the general public, making national headlines. The 1968 Walkouts are attributed as having a significant impact on the dramatic rise in college enrollment among California's Latino students, a stronger sense of inclusiveness within the school system, and ultimately the elevation of Latinos to positions of power throughout the city.

Through its 10 movements, WALKOUT: Past, Present, Repeat details the grievances of the students and highlights the role of teacher Sal Castro who, with a group of activists who called themselves "The Brown Berets", created a plan to stage a school-wide walkout in order to publicize their objections with the Los Angeles School District. The oratorio also examines how the walkouts became an essential part of the La Raza movement embraced by the Chicano civil rights causes of the 1960s. The oratorio concludes with a look at the student activists of today, examining how the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in February 2018 has seen a new generation of high school students take to the streets to protest gun violence.

The Van Nuys High School students had first-hand experience of strike action while preparing the oratorio when their teachers went on strike in January. It is not the first time that the Oratorio Project topic has mirrored current events: last year's oratorio *Hear Our Voice: A Woman's Journey* focused on the history of women's rights in the midst of a rising #metoo movement detailed in a Los Angeles Times feature story; in 2017 the students created an oratorio called *In America* examining the topic of Japanese incarceration camps during World War II, written and performed at a time of heightened focus on immigration issues. *In America* received national press coverage in a PBS NewsHour story.

The performances of the 45-minute *WALKOUT: Past, Present, Repeat* are the culmination of the Los Angeles Master Chorale's 20-week Oratorio Project program. The program engaged three teaching artists, performer Alice Kirwan Murray, lyricist Doug Cooney, and composer Sander Choi, to work with the students, alongside Van Nuys High School choir teacher Brianne Arevalo, who leads the vocal program of 9th through 12th grade students. Students write the libretto and create melodies for each movement of the oratorio. They are mentored by the teaching artists on how to use musical techniques to capture the voice of the characters they create, propel the momentum of the plot, and paint the mood of the scene. After the oratorio has been written, the students audition for solo roles and are coached vocally to prepare for the performances. Eight Los Angeles Master Chorale singers perform the oratorio with the students, providing additional professional guidance.

Voices Within is an educational artists' residency program developed for the Los Angeles Master Chorale by Marnie Mosiman in collaboration with Bernardo Solano, Penka Kouneva, [David O.](#), and Doug Cooney.

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Photo of students in 1968 from the La Raza Photograph Collection at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Devra Weber / La Raza

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