Narrator:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson:

On Easter weekend, 1906, a terrible injustice occurred on the square in Springfield, Missouri. An angry mob lynched three innocent black men. I’m Nicki Donnelson. Today I have Dr. Cameron LaBarr, director of choral studies at Missouri State University, to talk about a recently released album from the MSU Chorale entitled *Easter 1906*. These horrific events left a lasting impression. LaBarr tells us more about the incident that scarred the city for generations.

Dr. Cameron LaBarr:

*Easter 1906* was recorded by the MSU Chorale in May of 2021 in Lincoln, Nebraska while on tour. We commissioned this work by composer Will Averitt and lyricist Robert Bode. We premiered the work in February of 2020, and then we had to take a 15 month hiatus before we were able to record it. So, as difficult as it was to recount the story, we found a great sense of peace. We felt a certain way to talk about this that brought our students together, that brought discussion in the community that we wouldn’t have otherwise been able to have. Sometimes having an artistic experience around a difficult topic is the best and the only way to really find human connection.

Nicki Donnelson:

As a collective, they created an album that memorializes the victims and raises awareness about the tragedy. For the students, many who were learning about this incident for the first time, it was a vulnerable and powerful experience with a multitude of emotions. LaBarr tells us more.

Dr. Cameron LaBarr:

I find that it’s valuable to come at difficult issues head on. Many of the students in our program didn’t know about this story. It's not something that’s talked about on a regular basis, and they didn’t fully understand the weight of what we were going to do and just how much correlation this story has to everything that’s still going on in our lives, unfortunately. We’re still more or less at war with each other in some form or fashion and communicating these difficult stories is one way where we can really emerge, and we can really listen, and we can really talk to each other. This has impacted our students’ social and personal awareness and they have an incredibly heightened sensitivity to the world around them but more so, more importantly, the souls around them. I feel like the students are more accepting of others than they ever have been, they’ve learned about themselves. Everyone has grown through this piece and taken on an understanding of other peoples’ condition, and they understand that they can’t understand and that’s an important thing too.

Nicki Donnelson:

While preparing this album, the students researched the names of the men and women who were hanged in the name of racism across Missouri. LaBarr elaborates.

Dr. Cameron LaBarr:

Yes, movement twelve is called “A Litany”, and it starts out with a narrator, Alyssa Lang-Taylor saying there were eighty lynching's in Missouri between 1889 and 1925. And then, there’s instrumental music underneath while the choristers read the names, and some of the names are names like Henry Thomas, Alfred Gizzard, Benjamin Smith, John Davis, and so on. And some of the names, unfortunately, are “unknown black man”, “unknown white man”, “unknown black man”, and so on. It's a terribly jarring and moving experience.

Nicki Donnelson:

In a previous interview, many of LaBarr’s students spoke of the emotional toll of this project. Here we hear from two of these students, Cory and Richard.

Cory:

When *Easter 1906* was first introduced to the class I would have to say I felt very uncomfortable, and I was researching what this piece was about and what it pertained, and I thought, “I am surrounded by a lot of people that I don’t know and a lot of people that don’t look like me”. And we’re talking about three African American men that were lynched in Springfield and I thought, “Oh my goodness this is huge, and I don’t know how this is going to go.”

Richard:

One of the things that really stood out to me and touched me was at the very end of the work when it says that the only thing to remember this a simple bronze plaque. And then, as we did our-- looked at the various people in the song where we read the names of all the people who’ve been lynched in the state of Missouri, I remember doing the research for my particular person, Mundi Chowage, and I scoured everywhere and there was nothing about him except his name on a list of someone who had been lynched. And there’s so many of these people’s stories that have not been told and it’s such an important part of our history and such an important part of the fabric of, yes, the pain, but also what we need to re-bring up to experience healing in the long-run. But I think it’s with this and putting it to music that we finally get to heal as people, as a nation, as a society to bring these stories to light so that we can eventually, then, move forward.

Nicki Donnelson:

*Easter 1906* is available anywhere audio is streaming. Thank you for listening. I’m Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri State Journal.

Narrator:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.