‘Dia de Los Muertos’

New Music Works pays tribute to the Mexican observance of the dead

By Wallace Baine
wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com
@wallacebaine on Twitter

Over the last decade or so, at least in California and other places with a strong Latino heritage, the annual bacchanalia we know as Halloween has slowly been moving toward something more meaningful – namely, the Mexican observance known as Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead.

In case you’re coming late to the Dia de los Muertos trend, the Santa Cruz-based ensemble New Music Works is presenting a concert that embraces the Mexican tradition while adding some new influences along the way.

The concert titled “Dia de Los Muertos” takes place Saturday – All Saints Day on the Catholic calendar, a day that defines both Halloween and Day of the Dead.

It will feature the NMW Ensemble and the Cabrillo Latin Music Ensemble in a collection of pieces that reflect on the occasion interwoven with traditional songs, rituals and dances from Mexico and Colombia.

“It brings out the spiritual flavor of the holiday,” said Philip Collins, NMW’s musical director who admitted that a show honoring the Day of the Dead can be tricky to pull off, at least in its tone. “We also want people to come away feeling they’ve enjoyed a festive night.”

In that spirit, the night will also include a costume contest and an altar in the tradition of the holiday.

The evening will open with a welcoming piece that Collins said will set the tone appropriately. Also featured will be a poetry reading and a song based on D.H. Lawrence’s “Song of a Man Who Has Come Through.”

The concert’s central program includes the work of Gabriela Ortiz, a well-known Mexico City composer and teacher. Presented will be three of four movements of her 1997 piece “Altar de Muertos.” Also included on the program will Peter Gar-