

The Sacred in Opera

December 2010

In This Issue...

Ruth Dobson

Welcome to the December 2010 issue of the Sacred in Opera Newsletter. Over the past several years the SIO Newsletter has emphasized sacred drama from many perspectives, including encouraging performances of the many works already available, features on new sacred operas, interviews with stage directors and conductors about their productions, and features on performances presented by NOA members. Our goal is to promote the presentation of works new and old in the sacred genre. These performances bring spiritual and musical satisfaction to performers and audiences alike and lead to more work for composers, stage directors, conductors, singers, and orchestral musicians.

Some highlights from our past newsletters include a series of articles on the subject of staging oratorio from several contributors, including Carl Gerbrandt, G. William Bugg, Mozelle Clark Sherman, and conductor Keith Clark; an interview with Christopher Mattaliano, the General Director of Portland Opera about his recent production of Hugo Weisgall's *Esther* at New York City Opera; features on Christmas operas including *A Gift of Song* and *The Night of the Star* by Mary Elizabeth Caldwell, *The Greenfield Christmas Tree* by Douglas Moore, *A Christmas Rose* by Frank Bridge, *Only a Miracle* by Seymour Barab, and three operas by Richard Shephard—*Good King Wenceslas*, *St. Nicholas* and *The Shepherd's Play*. Kurt-Alexander Zeller has shared his experiences in putting together a sacred scenes program at Clayton State University called Women of the Bible. We have profiled two of our NOA members who have received the Sacred in Opera Lifetime Achievement Award from NOA, Carl Gerbrandt and Evelyn Swensson. NOA member and composer Philip Hagemann shared insights about his opera *Ruth* in a recent issue. All of our previous newsletters are available on the NOA website. Please visit the NOA website and click on the Initiative link, then on Sacred in Opera.

Our SIO convention presentations have been spectacular, with many fine performances, including Britten's *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac* at the convention in Los Angeles, and excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in a session about the staging of oratorio with Dr. Carl Gerbrandt, presented in Atlanta in 2010. We are grateful to so many fine performers from NOA and elsewhere who have contributed their time to perform in these sessions.

One of our first issues included an article from NOA members Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky about their opera *Eve's Odds* and a scholarly article by Rachel Magdalene entitled, "Retelling the Bible in Song: A Brief Story of the Libretto of *Eve's Odds*". Now we are anticipating the world premiere of another opera by Bruce and Jason, *St. Thomas the Carpenter*, which will be performed at the upcoming convention on Friday, January 7 at Travis Park United Methodist Church in downtown San Antonio. In this issue, we are featuring not only the upcoming performance of *St. Thomas the Carpenter*, but another new and highly successful opera, *The Prioress's Tale*, music by Delvyn Case and libretto by Christopher Hood, which was premiered in 2008.

An Interview With Bruce Trinkley And Jason Charnesky: *St. Thomas The Carpenter* Ruth Dobson

RD: Where did you get the idea to do an opera based on the Apostle Thomas? The story of the opera is based on his travel to India to spread the Gospel and the difficulties he encounters while there. How much of it is based in Scripture and how much is artistic license?

JASON: Ever since I was a teenager I have been interested in early Church history, and I vividly remember the day at Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh when I first came across a copy of the Acts of Saint Thomas. The Acts was probably written in Syria for a popular audience, so it tells the story of Saint Thomas like a spiritual adventure novel. Based on legends about the apostle that had been gathered through the first two centuries of Christian history, the Acts follows Thomas through his missionary journey to the east, into the kingdoms of India. The contents of the Acts is a pretty mixed bag. Some of its tales are about as believable as Kipling's *Such So Stories*. Other chapters contain prayers as profound as the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. The Acts was not written as a chronicle of history, but as an edifying tale that could show its readers how they should live a Christian life.

Scripture has nothing to say about Thomas after his confession of "My Lord and my God" when Jesus offered his wounds up to the investigation of that doubting apostle. But early Christian tradition consistently places Thomas' missionary activity East towards India. The Acts of Saint Thomas names one of these converted Indian rulers as King Gondophares, which was the actual name of a number of historical kings in what is present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is the story of this king's conversion as told in the Acts of Saint Thomas which became the plot of our church-opera.

I invented very little of this story. Just about everything that happens in the opera is related in the Acts: the drawing of lots by the Apostles to determine where each should carry the Gospel, the reluctance with which Thomas greeted his Indian assignment, the sale of Thomas by Jesus himself to the sea-merchant Abbanes, Thomas being hired as the king's architect, the "re-purposing" of the construction budget to feed the hungry and treat the sick, and the vision of the beautiful palace waiting in heaven for the king on account of these corporal acts of mercy – all of this is taken exactly as I found it in the Acts. I have added the children's chorus of sea creatures. And I have turned the brother of the king into his wife (accompanied by three handmaidens) so that the composer could have more women's voices at his

disposal. The tales as told in the Acts is so well plotted that I needed to take no more artistic license than that.

Scripturally, I believe the author of the Acts came to write this story as a meditation on the meaning of two scriptural sayings of Jesus: "In my Father's house there are many mansions." (John 14:2) and "Whatsoever you do to these, the least of my brethren, that also you do unto Me." (Matthew 25:40) Dwell on the meaning of those verses, then apply them to an exotic locale with Kings and Queens of India and you get the edifying little tale as we find it in the Acts of Thomas.

RD: Forgive me if I ask the age-old question of which came first – the words or the music? What is the collaborative process between you and the librettist, Jason Charnesky?

JASON: Generally, the idea comes first; in this case the idea came from NOA's The Sacred in Opera sessions. These sessions led me to really take a close listen to Britten's church operas. The opportunity of creating a work for church performance appealed to both of us. I suggested my long-beloved story of Saint Thomas in India and Bruce liked the idea. Then we talk together about the vocal combinations and forces that Bruce would like. How many major roles, whether there will be choruses and if so what sorts, and what sort of trios, duets or other combinations Bruce would like. We knew from our first discussions that we wanted the work to have three moments when the entire congregation joins in singing with the performers. Since everyone would have to know the words and the music (or would have to be able to pick up on them pretty quickly), we needed to choose familiar hymns for these congregational sings. We had great fun reviewing and playing each of our favorite hymns and arriving finally at *Crown Him With Many Crowns*, *Teach Me O Lord Thy Holy Way*, and *In Christ There Is No East Or West*, Then I go into seclusion and start writing. Bruce sees the first draft libretto, makes suggestions and I rewrite. Then Bruce takes the libretto (which he has already had a strong hand in shaping) and sits down to compose.

RD: You have written both secular and sacred chamber operas. How does the process differ?

JASON & BRUCE: I think first and foremost in all the works that we do we strive to create pieces that (1) work dramatically; (2) have vocal lines that are lyrical (*JASON*

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An Interview With Bruce Trinkley And Jason Charnesky

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(aside): I would say, though Bruce would be too modest to put forward this claim, music that is absolutely beautiful and ravishing, time and again); and (3) that entertain the audience, by whatever means: humor, drama, real human emotion. We strive to create pieces that an audience just wants to keep watching, that grabs their attention and rewards their time.

That part of our process remains the same whether the work we are writing is secular or sacred. With sacred pieces there is an additional dimension. The sacred (and we speak of the sacred in its broadest sense, neither sectarian nor confined to any particular religious tradition) engages people at their deepest level. It provides the foundation of their moral judgments, and it informs every aspect of their lives, imbuing actions with value. As such, a sacred work needs to be edifying. *(Jason: Yes, I know I keep bringing this word up.)* It needs to build up the audience, to give them something more strongly constructed after having participated in the performance than it was before. Edifying tales are not the same as soothing bible stories reassuring us that all is right. Edification challenges us to consider what we mean when we make a faith claim, and how we should live differently if we truly believe what we claim.

In *Saint Thomas The Carpenter* we, like the characters in the opera, are challenged to come away thinking more deeply about what it mean to serve. It challenges us with the simple question: If you claim that you want to serve God, how can you *not* devote yourself to the welfare of all your fellow human beings at their most basic level of need – where there is hunger giving to eat, where there is sickness bringing healing, where there is physical need giving all that we have of our wealth and our energy to meet that need. The cost and the rewards of such costly grace is the edifying theme of the opera.

RD: There are six solo roles, plus Adult Choir, a Children’s Chorus, Youth Chorus, and Congregational singing. The orchestra includes a string quintet, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, brass quintet, harp, piano, organ, hand bell choir, and percussion. Yet I think the score looks very accessible for sacred music programs of any size. Would you agree with that? Please elaborate.

BRUCE: Before making final determinations for the orchestration of *Saint Thomas*, I was waiting until an actual production was in place so that I could tailor the requirements of the work to the resources of that production. My first step, as always, was to write the initial piano score to be as complete and autonomous as possible. My typical procedure in orchestrating is to compose the piano score such that it comprises as much as possible a full musical reduction of the total orchestral sound I have in mind. From that piano reduction, I then expand to meet the musical forces available to me in any particular production.

As it turns out, the performance area in Travis Park United Methodist Church is quite large and can accommodate a chamber orchestra, and they are accustomed to using additional musician in their services and performances. They also have a lovely harpsichord in the performance area so I have expanded the instrumentation so that the organist can also slide over to the harpsichord bench. We are taking advantage of the wonderful musical resources available in San Antonio. but I want to stress that the vocal writing is very accessible to amateur singers such as you would find in an average church music program.

One of my goals in composing the music from the very beginning was that this would be a church opera that can really be performed by almost any congregation. The performance in San Antonio will be quite grand. But the work was written such that it can be performed with just a piano and the singers. And if a couple of wind instruments or a string quartet is available, so much the better. For the youth choir, it would be helpful to have 12 singers since they do play the apostles in the first scene, but the children’s choir could be only a trio or quartet of singers.

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An Interview With Bruce Trinkley And Jason Charnesky

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RD: Please tell us about the upcoming production in San Antonio. I know that it will be at Travis Park United Methodist Church in downtown San Antonio on the Friday night of the convention, January 7.

BRUCE: The San Antonio performance will be in the beautiful sanctuary of the church which has a large performance area in the front of the church. Sam Mungo, who directs the opera program at Texas State University in nearby San Marcos, will stage the performance. Gary Mabry, who is the music director at TPUMC, is on the faculty at the University of Texas San Antonio and is also the chorus master for the San Antonio Opera. The original plan was to use students from UTSA, but because the performance, scheduled to coincide with the NOA convention, comes at a break in the academic calendar and just after the incredibly exhausting weeks of the Holy Season, it was decided to use young professionals from the area.

JASON: I think this will be a splendid performance. We could not have been luckier to have these fine musicians all coming together for the first performance of our church opera. And having the members of NOA in the audience singing along with the congregation will make this a “hymn sing” of exceptional beauty and power.

BIOGRAPHY

Bruce Trinkley, Composer, is Professor Emeritus of Music at Penn State University where he taught composition, orchestration and opera literature and conducted the Penn State Glee Club for thirty-five years. He received degrees in composition from Columbia University where he studied with Otto Luening, Jack Beeson and Charles Wuorinen. His concert works include *Santa Rosalia*, a cantata inspired by paintings of the Colombian artist Fernando Botero and filmed for PBS; *Mountain Laurels*, a choral symphony written for the centenary of State College, Pennsylvania with texts by central Pennsylvania poets; and *Cold Mountain*, a piano trio commissioned by the Castalia Trio for their concert tour of China. *Eve's Odds*, a comic chamber opera based on Genesis, won the National Opera Association's 1999 Chamber Opera Competition. *Cleo*, a chamber opera about making of the epic film *Cleopatra*, won the Competition in 2001. *York: the Voice of Freedom*, a full-length opera about the life of the only African American on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was premiered by the Penn State Opera Theatre in 2002 and was filmed by WPSX for broadcast on PBS stations. He and his writing collaborator, Jason Charnesky, have also written two operas for young people, *The Prairie Dog That Met the President* and *Chicken Little*. Their most recent operas are *Baby Shower* and *Buzz & Bud*.

Jason Charnesky, Librettist, is an instructor of English composition and rhetoric at Penn State. As a student Charnesky studied with the novelist Paul West, the poet Bruce Weigl, the writer Charlotte Holmes, and the science-fiction novelist James Morrow. Charnesky has written the lyrics and librettos for many works by composer Bruce Trinkley, including a trilogy of one-act comic operas: *Eve's Odds*, *Golden Apple* and *Cleo*. *Eve's Odds* won the National Opera Association's 1999 Chamber Opera Competition. *Golden Apple* was a 2001 finalist for the NOA Opera Competition. *Cleo* won the NOA 2001 Competition. A NATS workshop presented all three operas in the summer of 2001. A full-length opera, *York: The Voice of Freedom* was the centerpiece of a multi-disciplinary international conference at Penn State focusing on the history and the consequences of the Lewis and Clark expedition. York was filmed by PBS station WPSX. *Santa Rosalia*, a cantata based on a painting by Fernando Botero was performed in Bogotá, Colombia in 2007. Summer of 2010 saw the premiere of an outdoor tourist heritage drama set in the wilderness frontiers of Pennsylvania during the American Revolutionary War performed right where the action of the story takes place, at Fort Roberdeau, Pennsylvania.

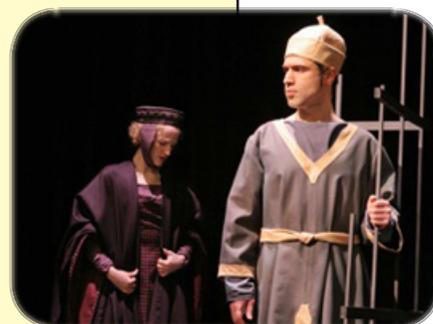
THE PRIORESS'S TALE

The Prioress's Tale is a new opera by the American composer Delvyn Case and librettist Christopher Hood. A Jewish man, a Christian woman, and a medieval priest are brought together by the tragic murder of a little boy—but his miraculous song proves the ultimate power of forgiveness to heal the wounds of religious intolerance. The opera radically transforms Geoffrey Chaucer's infamous tale of religious violence into a parable about how bigotry can be overcome by the realization of the common human experiences that unite us all. A complex, powerful, and dramatic work,

The Prioress's Tale is a moving musical testament to the possibility of reconciliation between all those whose differences seem insurmountable.

The opera was premiered in January 2008 at Eastern Nazarene College in Quincy, Massachusetts, directed by Andrew Ryker. Additional performances have included Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University, and Andover-Newton Theological School in Newton, Massachusetts. The 75-minute,

one-act work is scored for four singers (treble, soprano, and two bass-baritones), piano, and electronic sound. The premiere performances were followed by panel discussions about the issues raised in the piece featuring Jewish and Christian clergy and scholars, the composer, and the librettist.



photos by LK Case

Punk Opera As Spiritual Vocation Delvyn Case

Among the many things that Verdi and I have in common - just for starters, we are both men and the composer of at least one opera - I know that there is one thing that makes us different: he didn't personally drive the sets to *Aida* (let alone the elephants) around in a rental truck. No - as a successful opera composer, he probably had somebody else do that for him. He probably also didn't create his own YouTube channel to promote *Rigoletto*, or hang up his own posters at the supermarket for the premiere of *Traviata*. He probably had a manager to do that for him, so he could just swoop in on a performance in his limo, sit back, and enjoy watching hundreds of people he hardly knew perform his music in front thousands of other people he didn't know at all. Yes, that's what a successful opera composer does, right?

Of course it is - if you're a sell-out. If you've bought into a corrupt society's view of success. Simply put: if you're not a punk, like me.

Now - I don't have spiky green hair, the worst drug I've ever done is Starbucks, and the last time I punched someone in the nose I cried more than the other kid. But I am a punk opera composer, because I do all the things that Verdi didn't do - and I do them not just because no one else will do them for me, but because I actually want to. They are as fundamental to my life as an opera composer as is the writing of the music itself.

Those things are what have allowed me to conceive of my own sacred opera project as more than just a composition, but also as a spiritual "vocation". By this I mean something close to what Martin Luther meant. A vocation is something you do in service to a greater idea. For Luther, it was service to God. For that

theological rabble-rouser, it didn't matter if you were a priest, a plumber, or even - I imagine - a punk: if you consecrated your time by doing your job as a means of service to God, you could consider your job a "vocation". For my green-haired comrades, being a punk is a vocation because everything they do - from writing songs to promoting their own shows to designing their own t-shirts - is informed by a clearly-defined worldview: a worldview that was developed in service to a set of important ideas and ideals. First of all, punks espouse a radical commitment to the purity of musical and artistic expression, even to the extent of eschewing traditional notions of success. Though every punk wants her music to be heard, there is always a Faustian fear of success - of "selling out" - lest the music became corrupted by evil corporate America. At the same time, a punk worldview is founded on a commitment to the local community: the music is created from within a certain locally-based subculture, and is designed specifically to serve that small community. Elements of punk shows, like its material culture, fashion items, and - of course, the music itself - cannot be understood outside of the context created by the totality of that culture. Musical decisions grow out of practical needs - and vice versa - resulting in an integrated conception of art and society. For an authentic punk, this worldview is not just the result wishful thinking, but is manifested on a daily basis by the degree to which the music fuses with the subculture.

Let me tell you a story about a fictitious punk band from Orange County, circa 1980. The guys all worked at the greasy pizza joint after school so that they could buy instruments from the local music shop. They practiced in the garage when the lead singer's parents were

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BIOGRAPHY

Delvyn Case is Assistant Professor of Music at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, where he conducts the Great Woods Chamber Orchestra. He holds degrees from Yale (B. A. *summa cum laude*) and the University of Pennsylvania where he completed the Ph. D. in Composition at the age of 26. He is active as a composer, conductor, scholar, performer and educator. Before coming to Wheaton in 2010, he served as Visiting Faculty in the Department of Composition and Theory at the Longy School of Music. He is a past faculty member at Boston College, Northeastern University, and Eastern Nazarene College (Quincy, Mass.) His music has been performed by over twenty orchestras from Alaska to Florida, including the Louisville Orchestra. Other performers of his music have included the Grammy-winning quintet Chestnut Brass Company; mezzo-soprano D'Anna Fortunato; Grammy-nominated pianist Charles Abramovic; The New York Virtuoso Singers; Rome's Freon Ensemble; and Ibis Camerata. Recent commissions include a children's piece for the Portland (Maine) Symphony Orchestra's educational outreach ensemble and a new work for the Cambridge-based ensemble Dance Currents, Inc.



As a composer, he has received honors and fellowships from numerous organizations, including BMI, The Society of Composers, The MacDowell Colony, The New York Virtuoso Singers, The Atlantic Center for the Arts, The Composers Conference at Wellesley, the Orvis Foundation, The Chicago Ensemble, Audio Inversions, Sounds New, the National Association on Composers, and The College Music Society, among others. He is a former member of Boston's infamous composers' collective Composers in Red Sneakers. Delvyn Case is the composer of *The Prioress's Tale*, a 75-minute chamber opera inspired by Chaucer, whose January 2008 premiere garnered feature articles in the *Boston Globe* and the *South Shore Patriot Ledger*. A parable about the power of forgiveness to heal the wounds of religious intolerance, the production tours throughout New England each winter, supported by institutions wishing to explore issues of interfaith dialogue and peace-making in a unique way. Delvyn Case studied conducting with David Hayes at the Curtis Institute of Music, LanFranco Marcelletti at the Yale School of Music, and with John Finney of the Handel & Haydn Society.

He is the founder of the Quincy Bay Chamber Orchestra, a professional ensemble that exclusively presents educational and outreach concerts in the Quincy, Massachusetts. He is also currently Music Director of the Eastern Nazarene College Choral Union, a 75-voice college-community choir that under his baton has presented performances of the Requiems of Brahms and Mozart, Haydn's *Creation*, Handel's *Messiah*, and Honegger's *King David*. He is also the former director of the 80-member Eastern Nazarene College Gospel Choir, which under his direction performed in front of thousands at major professional events at Boston's Bank of America Pavilion and Hynes Convention Center. Delvyn Case is the co-founder and pianist for the avant-garde improvisation ensemble the meltdown incentive, which explores the complex relationships between text, music, and sound in edgy, thought-provoking, and often humorous new ways. Dr. Case also maintains an active career as a scholar, with primary interests in popular music and the relationship between music and religion. He has co-authored several articles for the interdisciplinary journal *Books & Culture*, and has given presentations at national conferences of The College Music Society and the American Academy of Religion. In 2004 he presented his research on the rhythmic structure of hip-hop as a fellow at the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research at Texas A&M University. He has also presented numerous papers at the regional conferences of the College Music Society dealing with a wide range of topics, from the ethics of music education to the pedagogy of songwriting. He has also spoken at events sponsored by Harvard Divinity School, Andover-Newton Theological School, The Association of Independent Schools-New England, and Project: Think Different. *The Prioress's Tale* will continue to tour in the New England area in February 2011. Visit www.delvyncase.com for more information.

Punk Opera As Spiritual Vocation

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gone driving his sister to dance class. When they knew enough songs, the singer asked the priest who gave him his First Communion if the band could play in the church basement (as long as he promised to start showing up for CCD more often.) As the date of the show approached, they leveraged all of their local connections to promote the concert, including convincing the bass player's mom (the middle-school secretary) to let them use the mimeograph machine to copy their posters. A buddy of the drummer bought a bunch of cheap t-shirts at Woolworth's and hand-painted the band's logo using paint on "loan" from his uncle's hardware store. Since his girlfriend worked at the local library, she was able to get a bunch of free blank cassettes, onto which the band spent a couple of days recording some demos using the high school choral director's 8-track. They even convinced their dad's boss's brother to give them a few minutes on local radio to play a song. Friday night the show was packed, and everyone in town knew about it. And you know who came? A bunch of snotty middle-schoolers. The clerk at Woolworth who sold them the white T-shirts. Some weirdos that hang around the public library and saw the poster in the atrium. Music geeks from school (some say they even saw the choir director show up near the end.) And a couple of people that work at the local radio station. Not to mention the warden from the church and his two boys.

Nobody made any money, and no record exec showed up to give them a fat contract. But the show was a success. The time and energy and effort that the band put in was directly repaid by people who enjoyed the show and were glad they knew about it. And someone in the audience told the guitarist that his brother works at the local Y, and it would be totally awesome, if, like, they could play a show

there.

This is the way that I am a punk, and how my own sacred opera project is an example of punk opera. It's opera not viewed merely as a piece of music or as a dramatic production, but instead as holistic series of actions that brings satisfaction both to the artists and the many people who collaborate to make the event a success. I conceptualized my piece – *The Prioress's Tale* – not just as a composition, but as a project that was intended to grow out of the specific community I lived in – in my case, the city of Quincy, Massachusetts, just south of Boston. Every step of the process of creating the project – from writing the music to raising the money to promoting the premiere – grew out of my connections to those in my city. Because so many individuals and organizations in my city played a role in the development of the project, when it was finally premiered in 2008, the fact that the audience was comprised of hundreds of people I knew personally proved that the opera was considered an important and valuable opportunity. No reviewer came, and no important producer swooped in and offered to commission my next opera. But it was a success, because the time and energy I put into creating it was repaid by the support of those in my community.

Let me provide some background information. From 2006-2008 I composed *The Prioress's Tale*, a 75-minute chamber opera for four singers and piano that I created with librettist Christopher Hood. Though based upon a story of inter-religious violence from the Middle Ages, the message of the opera is that peace and reconciliation are indeed possible between people from different religious and cultural groups. After self-producing the staged premiere of the show outside of Boston in 2008, for the

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past three seasons I have taken the production on tour throughout New England, where it has been presented under the auspices of numerous (non-musical) organizations. Usually it is followed by some sort of interfaith panel discussion that explores the issues raised in the opera. I hustle to find funding sources in to allow the performance to live on, and every year it successfully touches the hearts of all sorts of people in the Boston area – kids, teens, academics, clergy, and many others.

The original story from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is quite problematic from a modern perspective. It is an ironic lesson in medieval piety presented as a parable about a young Christian boy slaughtered by a mob of angry Jews. Though I was attracted to the drama of the story and to its theological complexities, it would have been very difficult to convince anyone to support the production of an opera based on this tale. Of course, if I was going to devote several years of my life to composing and producing my first opera, I wanted to be sure that it was an opera that I could stand behind completely. So, my librettist and I conceived of this opera project as an opportunity to respond artistically to the original story, and to use it as a jumping-off point for a piece of art that communicated something that we cared deeply about. Thus was born the idea of turning this story on its head. We crafted a version of the story that still features many elements of the original, but which communicates our view of what "could have been", transforming Chaucer's tale into a parable about the possibility of forgiveness, reconciliation, and – believe it or not - religious tolerance. (Please see www.delvyncase.com for extensive information about the story and the libretto, as well as for audio and video excerpts.)

It's not hard to see how composing a piece of music with this message could be

considered a spiritual act. It's an example of using my skills and energies to spread a message of love and peace – hardly a revolutionary act. But it was actually all of the other activities surrounding the development and eventual performance of the piece that, for me, made it most gratifying – and made this project not just an exercise in public piety, but an intensely meaningful spiritual vocation for me.

To bring the performance to life for the first time, I raised almost \$10,000 from individuals and organizations in Quincy, Massachusetts, and beyond. I met with dozens of local clergy-members, from evangelical and mainline Protestants to Catholics to all different kinds of rabbis. I pitched the idea of the show to them. Some of them contributed money to support the production, but many of them simply agreed to promote the show. One particular local rabbi became a kind of mentor for me, guiding me through the potential mine-fields of working on this kind of project. I also sought out the collaboration members of the city government, from my local city council representative to the local cultural council members (who provided a small grant) to the members of the city Human Rights Commission. I even reached out to the large number of senior citizens complexes in town, and in addition to getting more people to come to the performance.

Because of the community buy-in of the project, and not just its message of inclusion, a columnist from the Boston Globe wrote a feature article about the production. That was terrific, but in typical punk fashion, I knew I had to take charge of promoting the project. So, after the premiere I created an extensive website for the opera project, featuring dozens

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of photos and background information, as well as a YouTube channel with an extensive set of videos. Thanks to a lot of hustling on my part, for the past three seasons I have brought the touring version of the show to various venues in New England, where it has been performed as part of various initiatives meant to stimulate conversation about inter-religious dialogue and anti-Semitism featuring Jewish and Christian clergy. Performances and discussions have been sponsored by the Massachusetts Council of Churches, the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, and several of the largest and most culturally visible churches in the Boston area. The piece has never in fact been performed at a performing arts center or theater – only at churches, a library, and schools. But I consider that a positive aspect, because the audience has been made up of people who are drawn to the project because of its message, not because they love opera. At one performance, a Jewish teenage youth group from a local synagogue arrived in full force with their rabbi. At the same performance, the adult Bible study class had been studying the libretto for several weeks and came prepared with questions.

Narrowly considered as a piece of musical drama, *The Prioress's Tale* is a “sacred” opera in that it explores the decisions – right and wrong – that people of faith make according to their religion and culture. In this sense it is a parable: a sermon dramatized by a story. But considered more broadly, it is a sacred opera because the project has become for me a spiritual vocation: it is a way I have devoted my time and energy in service to a greater idea. But the “idea” that I am committed to should not be mistaken for the message of the opera itself – that we should seek forgiveness and reconciliation with those who are different from us. Rather, the idea that birthed my vocation is that a piece of art, when created

intentionally within and for a specific community, can become a reification of that message. Because I approached my sacred opera like a punk approaches his own music, I was able to integrate my life as a creative artist with my life as a member of my community. The result was not just that my opera came to life, but that I developed a vastly expanded view of the role opera can play in the “real world.” Personally, I experienced the rich sense of gratification that comes from feeling that what I love to do is also something that is valuable to others, and, in turn, that that is a service to something greater than myself. Since that “something greater” is, for me, God, then *The Prioress's Tale* is not just something that gives me satisfaction, but actually a spiritual vocation.

But there is more. Interestingly, it is the fact that *The Prioress's Tale* is a sacred opera that has allowed this to happen. Its sacred nature has allowed me to partner with all sorts of communities in my city and region – organizations that are built on a commitment to social justice and peace-making, not necessarily music. Paradoxically, it is not despite but because of its religious topic that the project has brought so many different people together in both its genesis and in its birth – Jews, Christians, and even opera lovers! *The Prioress's Tale* hasn't been reviewed yet. I haven't made one cent off of it. An opera company has not produced it, it hasn't been recorded or broadcast, and I haven't even been able to orchestrate it yet. But those aren't the standards that make it gratifying for me. Of course, I'd love it if Glimmerglass or the Santa Fe Opera picked it up, and I am confident that it's a strong enough show to be worth their time. But if I had written it for them, I wouldn't have been the person driving the truck from show to show. I wouldn't

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Punk Opera As Spiritual Vocation

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have gotten to know my local clergy and community members, or the gentleman who runs the camera for the public access TV station, or the local librarian, or the guy who runs the Ryder truck franchise when he's not selling coal and ice out the back of his pickup. These are people whose lives have become a part of mine, and whom I would not have met had I not made it a personal mission to intentionally inscribe the project in my local community and in my own spiritual life.

This is punk. This is living your life as an artist within a specific community. This is writing the music you want without compromising its style or your message. It is also about making your own opportunities – not just because no one else will make them for you, but because the opportunities that bring you the most satisfaction are not the kind that others can make for you. It is devoting your time and your energy and your skills to the service of those around you. It is a spiritual vocation.

I may not have enough hair for a Mohawk, but I write the music, I find the gigs, I promote the shows, and I hang up the posters. And you know what? I wouldn't have it any other way. But if you know someone at the Met, please put in a good word for me....

The Sacred in Opera

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