

The Sacred in Opera **June 2012**

In This Issue...
Ruth Dobson

In the June 2012 issue of the Sacred in Opera newsletter, we have three inspirational articles about the practical side of producing sacred drama from some of those who do it. The process of presenting these works has its own unique challenges. We have two articles from John Pfautz, who has been the primary driving force behind the institution of the Sacred in Opera Initiative of NOA. John is a recent past-president of NOA. His strong vision for promoting and producing sacred drama is reflected beautifully in the following two articles, one about his work in Nigeria and the other an overview of his many productions at Augustana College, where he is Professor of Music. Kurt-Alexander Zeller, who with John is a member of the SIO committee, tells us about his recent experience (in some hilarious detail) presenting Britten's *Noye's Fludde* at Clayton State University in Georgia. We hope these articles will inspire you to present one of the many wonderful works available in this field in your own communities.

We are looking forward to presenting a staged sacred opera (title TBA) during the upcoming convention on the evening of Friday, January 4, at the beautiful First Congregational Church in downtown Portland, just two blocks from the convention hotel. We know you will want to join us for this very special event. More details about the production will be included in the December Sacred in Opera Newsletter.



John Pfautz
Augustana College
Rock Island, IL



Kurt-Alexander Zeller
Clayton State University
Morrow, GA

A NIGERIAN SACRED IN OPERA EXPERIENCE

JOHN PFAUTZ

During the summer of 2004, while teaching a weeklong seminar on Sacred Music Drama at Southern Baptist Seminary, I met music missionary Dr. Paul Davidson, who was ending a year of furlough and preparing for his return to the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS) in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. Of the various scenes that we prepared from this exciting genre, Paul mentioned that they were appropriate for presentation by the students at NBTS. He and I discussed the possibility of me spending my sabbatical teaching/directing at NBTS the following Spring. Though Dr. Davidson and his family were unable to remain in Nigeria due to a family member's illness, I stepped into the role of visiting professor, teaching voice lessons, church music courses, repertoire courses, conducting ensembles, and directing scenes from sacred music drama. [For definitive information on this genre, including operas with sacred themes, and musical theatre pieces such as *Godspell*, both full-length and short scenes, I recommend Dr. Carl Gerbrandt's book: *Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide*.]

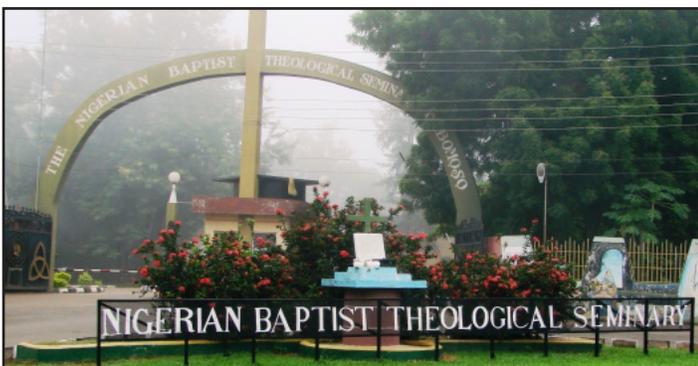
Being my first teaching experience outside of North America and desperate to provide a worthwhile learning experience for the students and faculty at the seminary, I barreled ahead with an agenda of bringing the same type of operatic experience that we had experienced at Southern Seminary in Kentucky. In spite of my lack of cultural sensitivities, the students

and faculty of the Faculty of Church Music at NBTS worked tirelessly on difficult repertoire that fully challenged the limits of the tonic sol-fa system on which many Africans rely.

Following a choral processional of a western arrangement of a South African tune and text, and a few choral selections, we began our presentation of scenes from Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Pilgrim's Progress*, Randall Thompson's *The Nativity According to St. Luke*, and Jeff Barker and Ron Melrose's *And God Said...* Additionally, we presented selections from *Hymn Readings for Christian Worship* by John and Audra Parker ("Amazing Grace," "Great is Thy Faithfulness," and "Were you there?")

As you may know, drama and music drama has a long history in West Africa both outside and in the church. The participants in the rehearsals were enthusiastic and fastidious about the preparations. A number of students wanted to head up the costuming, another set about building light boxes for the front of the stage. Rough, but appropriate props came from unlikely sources. As expected, the process became a community event. Each participant understood his/her "job," however large or small, to be integral to the successful presentation of the overall project.

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Allow me to share three of my fondest memories. Though the musical challenges of Melrose's score of the Abraham and Isaac scene of *And God Said...* are beyond the scope of all but the most advanced practitioner of tonic sol-fa, the students embraced the challenge and presented the dissonances of the score in admirable fashion. However, the most memorable musical experience for this scene, and the one that gives the best example of contextualization, was the drumming ensemble that accompanied the scene. The building cacophony as Abraham binds his son, lays him on the altar and reaches for the knife rose in full crescendo with the combination of rhythms from the split drum, gong, shakere, talking drum and others, producing a more effective dramatic context than perhaps what Barker and Melrose could have imagined.

We rehearsed Thompson's Nativity scene for weeks, with Zechariah processing from the back of the chapel carrying a bundle of cloth that represented his son (John the Baptist.) Since I was conducting from the first pew, facing the stage area of the chapel, I could not understand the audience's unrest during Zechariah's entrance. The talented singer/actor playing Zechariah had managed to swap out the swaddled bundle of cloth for a friend's 3 month-old baby girl, complete with colorful hair ties. That was a definitive, living and breathing example of contextualization.

Since Ogbomoso, Nigeria, the city in which is the Baptist Seminary, was to be the location for the annual convention for the Nigerian Baptist Convention, Rev. Dele Ogunlade, a young music faculty member who was responsible for training the convention choir,

advocated for time for us at one of the services to present a short scene of sacred music drama. It took some convincing to gain the approval for not more than five minutes to present a sung dramatization based on "Amazing Grace." To the 14,000 in attendance, the familiar strains of this global favorite, with characters costumed as the blind man, Pharisees, and Jesus, the message of faith and redemption exceeded the boundaries of the multi-lingual congregation.

I look back with a bit of embarrassment on the cultural insensitivities that I took to my first visit. As I continue with annual short-term teaching assignments at the Nigerian Seminary, as well as teaching/traveling in Ghana and Senegal with American students, I find my cultural gaffs to be fewer. But, perhaps, as in the case of missionaries centuries ago, God was able to take my flawed efforts and bring lasting good. Last year, an NBTS student composed an opera in Yoruba on the story of Nahum, and it was performed at the seminary. Also, the young man who performed the role of Pilgrim in that first presentation in 2005, is completing his Ph.D. in music composition at the University of Minnesota, for which he is composing an opera based on the 7 churches of Revelation. I hope to present that opera with my American students in the Fall of 2013. The renowned Nigerian composer Akin Euba, in writing about his opera *Chaka*, referred to the give and take of African and Western sensibilities in his music as interculturalism. In that spirit, my experiences, in studying the music of Nigeria and Ghana, lead me to be less of a teacher to West Africans and more of a student.



SACRED IN OPERA -WHY?- JOHN PFAUTZ

In true academic tradition, it is time to reflect back over the 8 years since NOA adopted the Sacred in Opera as a major project and assess the activities and directions the project has taken. In both celebration of the successes of a near decade of effort along with a push towards the future, this article kicks off a series of short articles in an effort to affirm the effort, attract new (or renewed) interest, and to point to new horizons.

In 2004, I was invited to give a 5-day workshop on Sacred Music Drama at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Though not a Baptist, I was welcomed into an environment where sacred music drama was enjoying a long-standing tradition started by Dr. Carl Gerbrandt and continued by his successor, Dr. Mozelle Sherman-Clark. True to the mission of the Southern Baptist Convention the primary emphasis for sacred music drama (and for all efforts at that seminary) was to provide another method for ministry within the church and as an outreach tool. Though this genre works well in the evangelical realm, fine music and drama with a strong message based on religious theme(s) or a significant religious figure is appropriate in all situations where music drama is welcomed.

In a mid-western, selective, Liberal Arts institution – Augustana College (Rock Island, IL) I find myself in an environment that is an ideal venue for sacred music drama. I have departmental and administrative support to program whatever I choose, and a reliable, yet modest budget. The venue available to us for our Fall

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*Opera @ Augustana performs
"The Little Thieves of Bethlehem" by Paul O. Stuart*



John Pfautz

Dr. John Pfautz began Opera @ Augustana shortly after coming to Augustana in 1987. Performances have included *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *Die Fledermaus*, *The Elixir of Love*, *The Tender Land*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Sister Angelica*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *The Mikado*, *The Pirates of Penzance* and others. Additionally, Pfautz has worked together with the theatre department at Augustana in joint productions of musicals such as *The Secret Garden*, *Working*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, and the Spring 2012 production of *Batboy*.

In addition to directing the opera program at Augustana College (Rock Island, IL) John Pfautz supervises the Voice Area, teaches a church music course, as well as a course on the Music and Culture of West Africa.

John has served the NOA in many capacities including President (2008-2010) and was influential in providing the impetus for the Sacred in Opera project.

In 2005, Pfautz began teaching music and directing sacred music drama at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. His relationship with the Nigerian Seminary continues with short-term teaching experiences during breaks in the Augustana College academic schedule, including January of 2012. In addition, John has been teaching Augustana College students in Ghana while researching church music in West Africa.



Photographs from Augustana College's production of *A Truce of Carols*.

Left: Allied troops

Right: German troops

Below: Allied and German troops come together to celebrate Christmas

production is an old library reading room turned into recital hall, making for great acoustics for singers, yet too live for more than only a few accompanying instruments. This college is affiliated with the Lutheran Church (ELCA to be exact) though there are more Catholic students than Lutheran and the faculty come from all faith traditions, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhism, as well as atheism. Though nearly all the sacred music drama repertoire that Opera @ Augustana has presented is Christian, but the messages of hope, peace and love are universal. Recently, the first opera performance weekend that fits into our music department's schedule of events falls just before a long series of holiday themed events – mid-November. By choosing holiday themed operas and identifying with the series of holiday concerts we benefit by being included in the advertising and marketing for those events. Additionally, it works well to present a couple of one-acts, with at least one of them including a chorus, so that we can cast the number of first year students who audition. Being able to use a number of students, not just the "stars," helps grow and strengthen the program. Catching them in their first term of college before they get over-committed in other areas is a good strategy.

We cannot present *Amahl and the Night Visitors* every year. Though I'm sure we would have an audience for it at that frequency, pedagogically it does not make sense to perform that piece more frequently than every 3 or 4 years. Like many of you, I asked "what is there besides Amahl?" It became clear to me that NOA could be a terrific resource for me when trying to locate repertoire that would work well for our situations. I began



asking around and found quite a number of members of NOA have asked the same question and found answers for their situation by doing some digging and asking the right people. This discussion among a number of NOA members led to the start of SACRED IN OPERA – a major project adopted by the NOA board of directors. With the endorsement of the board, a committee was established, convention sessions were planned, a mailing list was compiled and this newsletter was started. SIO has awarded two lifetime achievement awards to outstanding individuals who have made a major contribution to the genre of sacred music drama. Evelyn Swensson was our first recipient. Evelyn's history with the genre encompassed her whole professional life, producing performances of sacred repertoire without knowing anyone else was emphasizing the same themes. She was a trailblazer throughout the Northeast USA, never afraid to follow through with ideas that she considered "G-mail" (ideas from God.) With that confidence she was able to contact and work with the best composers and performers of the day in producing these works.



Evelyn Swensson,
First Recipient of the SIO's
Lifetime Achievement Award

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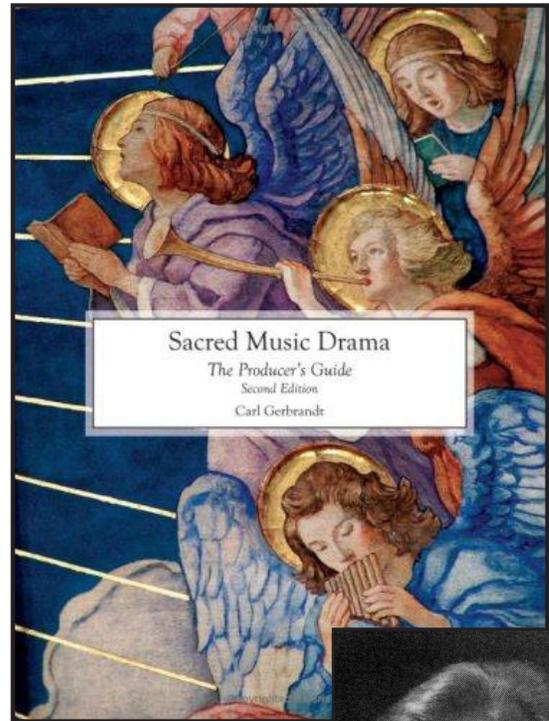
The other of SIO's lifetime achievement awards was presented to Dr. Carl Gerbrandt for his assistance in bringing the sacred music drama genre into the academic arena when he moved from his teaching position at Peabody Conservatory to direct the Sacred Music Drama program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Carl's exemplary musical skill as well as his rigorous academic standards is a model for us all. You should already be familiar with Dr. Gerbrandt's book. "Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide" is a terrific resource for all programmers of sacred music drama. I highly recommend you make use of its comprehensive scope of information and useful suggestions.

(Gerbrandt, Paul. Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide. second edition. Author House, Bloomington, IN. 2006.)

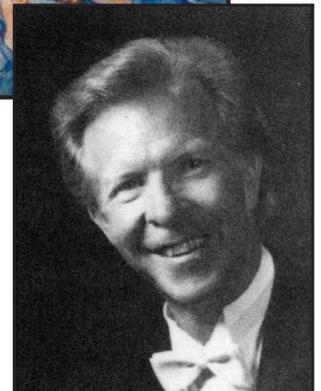
Having these two outstanding leaders in this field as active members to NOA has been enlightening and motivating to our membership. A second resource provided by NOA is the number of composers and librettists who are members. Hosting composers and/or librettists on campus for a final rehearsal, meeting with the cast, and a performance is an excellent pedagogical experience for our students and the broader community. Jeff Barker, the playwright for "And God Said...", (Ron Melrose, composer) was the first on-campus composer or librettist visitor, followed by Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky's visit to our production of "Eve's Odds." "The Little Thieves of Bethlehem" by Paul O. Stuart and Sally Gall saw composer Stuart on campus (photo below), followed the next year by Michael Taylor's visit for our production of his "Truce of Carols." Though Conrad Susa was unable to attend our presentation of "The Wise Women" it was helpful to correspond with him through the process of preparation. Likewise, Richard Shephard was unavailable to visit during our production of "Good King Wenceslas," "St. Nicholas," and "A Shepherd's Tale," but he was very helpful in providing the downloadable music files, as was Michael Taylor for "Truce of Carols."



Composer Paul O. Stuart addresses the Augustana College cast of "The Little Thieves of Bethlehem" prior to a final dress rehearsal.



Carl Gerbrandt,
Second Recipient of the SIO's
Lifetime Achievement Award



Performing works by living composers adds a timeliness to a production schedule. Last year's production missed the opportunity to invite the composer by a generation or so, since we presented Paul Hindemith's "The Long Christmas Dinner," based on a play of the same name by Thornton Wilder. Though for obvious reasons we had no contact with Hindemith or Wilder, the Thornton Wilder society was very interested in archiving our efforts.

If you haven't recently programmed from the sacred music drama repertory, I encourage you to consider the strengths and benefits of doing so. If you have programmed any repertoire that falls into this category please tell us about it.

Contact me at johnpfautz@augustana.edu

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S NOYE'S FLUDDE

A PRODUCTION REFLECTION

KURT-ALEXANDER ZELLER

Although it isn't likely ever to dethrone the perennial *Amahl and the Night Visitors* as the opera most frequently performed by churches in the United States, most productions of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* do, like the 1958 premiere, take place in church sanctuaries. This is exactly as the composer intended. He wanted his opera, like the medieval mystery play upon which it is based, to be a communal experience in which both professional leaders and amateurs of all levels could take part. He wanted the parish to participate actively in the singing of three hymns during the show, and he made pipe organ (not always available in the average opera house) an integral part of the score. Also, church music establishments are much more likely to include the large number of child performers necessary to mount *Noye's Fludde* than are the academic programs where most NOA members work. Nevertheless, there are many good reasons for university programs to produce the work as well, as I hope sharing this summary of our experience with *Noye's Fludde* at Clayton State University in 2009 will demonstrate.

In 2008, the K-12 public schools of Clayton County, in the southern suburbs of Atlanta, lost their accreditation. (It has since been restored.) The ongoing saga was one of the biggest news stories in Georgia for much of that year, but to make a long story short, the issue was largely one of school board management and dysfunction; the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools was not making a statement

about what did or did not go on in the actual classrooms of Clayton County. Yet of course all the negative media coverage had a profoundly demoralizing effect upon the community and especially upon the teachers in the public schools, many of whom, particularly the music specialists, I knew quite well. It was distressing to see such accomplished educators feel so embattled, and I kept thinking about the negative effect it must be having on my friends' and neighbors' children to be hearing constantly, every single time the radio or TV was turned on, a lot of talk that, even in a half-understood way, clearly seemed to be saying that there was something wrong or bad about their schools and that some-

thing drastic (though nobody seemed to know just what) was about to happen. So I started wondering what we at the state university right in the middle of Clayton County could do to help our colleagues in the K-12 schools—and I came up with the idea that always worked to fix every problem in the 1930s-era Andy Hardy movies: "Hey, kids, let's put on a show!" The idea was that it would give the teachers and the students something to look forward to and take pride in during the 2008-2009 school year after losing accreditation that summer.

Noye's Fludde seemed like a perfect vehicle. It calls for children both onstage and in the pit, providing many opportunities for young people to be involved, and the story of Noah and the ark is familiar to virtually all children in



this part of Georgia, so they (and their parents) knew, and felt comfortable with, what they were getting into in a way that might not necessarily have been true of, say, the children's choruses in *Carmen*. I first contacted Joanne Maples, the lead music specialist for Clayton County Schools who was the music teacher at J. W. Arnold Elementary School, and enlisted her advanced chorus as the animals on the ark. Meanwhile, the Lovejoy High School Ladies' Ensemble became the chorus of Mrs. Noye's gossips.

Dr. Richard Bell (who had founded the strings program in the Clayton County schools and recently had moved to the neighboring Henry County Schools to do the same thing) agreed to conduct the orchestra and worked with colleagues to recruit student players from Rex Middle School and Union Grove High School to form the *ripieno* orchestra of student players to play alongside the string quartet of professional players the score calls for, and the AP Music Theory class at Union Grove High School made up the handbell ensemble for the climactic scene when the rainbow appears. Our percussion professor and her students provided the extensive battery of traditional and homemade percussion. (We all had great fun experimenting with what kinds of coffee mugs provide the best sound for the "slung mugs" rain effect.)

I was delighted to have the opportunity to be able to give Spivey Hall's giant Fratelli Ruffatti organ (whose three-story organ case so frequently has been a staging obstacle in mounting my opera productions) a starring role for a change and tucked Daniel Pyle, our adjunct professor of organ and music history, and the console into the back corner of the stage behind the ark (Daniel now claims to have been the only non-Noah Family human to have survived the Flood). Conveniently, Daniel's wife, Catherine Bull, is a professional recorderist with the Atlanta Baroque Orchestra and other ensembles, so I had the perfect player for the professional-level recorder part in the score. To my surprise, the one element of the orchestra I could not come up with out of the schools was the amateur recorder ensemble. I had been sure that there would be recorders in the schools—but apparently not, although one elementary music teacher did agree to play herself. Fortunately, Catherine came to my rescue; she regularly coached an amateur recorder ensemble of retirees and recruited them as the rest of the orchestra, which proved to be absolutely delightful. Thus, our pit included players ages eleven to eighty and was truly an expression of the whole community—professional performers, music educators, music students, and music lovers of all ages.

My Opera Production class performed most of the principal roles. Class enrollment that year was

comparatively small, and my most outstanding singers were a mezzo and a bass-baritone, perfect for Noye and Mrs. Noye. I had three other boys, two tenors and a high baritone, who would be excellent as Noye's sons (this was cheating a bit, as Britten really explicitly authorized casting only Jaffet as a tenor, expecting that Ham and Sem would be trebles), and two soprani, who could sing two of the wives. The third wife, Mrs. Ham, actually was played by a soprano from Luella High School who was taking voice lessons with one of my faculty colleagues through our Preparatory Division. (Thanks to that experience, this student came to Clayton State and is now finishing her junior year as a music major, so there are certainly recruiting advantages to a project like this as well!) God, who only speaks and does not sing, would be a Clayton State student who was a Theatre major.

Once all the performing forces were in place, rehearsing and building the show began. (There was one casting change midstream, when the student I had planned to use as Noye dropped out and was replaced with another Preparatory Division voice student of mine, this one a professional music educator recently transplanted from Illinois.) Because it is increasingly challenging for public schools to arrange for school buses or other transportation, most of the rehearsal with the elementary children had to happen at their school. They rehearsed their choruses with their teacher (and in fact they were the first cast members to know their parts cold, far outstripping my college students in speed and accuracy in preparing their music), and then on Friday afternoons my students, our staff accompanist Alex Benford, and I drove the five miles to Arnold Elementary and practiced the animal chorus scenes with the children for an hour. Mrs. Maples helped me divide the children up into the seven groups specified in the score, making sure that each group had a good balance of stronger-voiced leaders as well as less-confident followers.

Britten very obligingly has provided each of the groups of animals with a leader from Noye's family, so each of my students was introduced to the group of children he or she would lead and became responsible for making sure that all of them knew their music and their staging—and ultimately, once we had them, that all the children in his or her group had all their costume pieces. The elementary school students seemed absolutely fascinated with my undergraduate students, who clearly interested them much more (and probably were way cooler to the 11-year-old mind) than either their own teacher or that professor guy from the university, and it was especially interesting to me how much more seriously my students took all their responsibilities once they had eight fifth-graders to shepherd. Several of the Opera Production students were Music Education majors having their first experience in an actual elementary

school classroom. They all found it an eye-opener, but several actually created a great rapport with the children and excelled at working with them.

Because the school included many students from low-income households, I didn't want participation in the opera to be a financial burden on the children's families; however, my own budget also was much too small for full animal costumes for 40+ children. Consequently, we sent home a note with all the children, asking them to bring to the next rehearsal a set of plain long pants and a long-sleeved shirt; both garments were to be in the same solid color, preferably either black, brown, tan, white, or grey—but whatever the child already owned. All the children were able to do this with some color or another, and we assigned each child an animal appropriate to that color. (A few children who had only colors that aren't generally "fur colors" ended up being birds or reptiles. Of course the children who played the special roles of the Raven and the Dove had to have black and white clothing, respectively.) Then I constructed fabric hoods with head-dresses on top to suggest the heads of the appropriate animal: wolf, dog, camel, monkey, lion, hare, mouse, etc. Clayton County Public Schools art teachers also created a number of the head-dresses; many of these were quite amazing—particularly the ram with elaborate papier-maché horns and the towering heron. During several of our visits to Arnold Elementary, we showed the children PowerPoint presentations with pictures and film clips of the various animals and had a great time learning about their habits and feeding and movement patterns, which we practiced. (The Opera students enjoyed this as much as the fifth-graders!) Of course, there were a few instances in which the children were disappointed at first in the animal they had been assigned, but they usually came around. One boy was annoyed that his friend, who had tawny-colored clothing, got to be the lion, while he, with white pants and shirt, was designated the ram—disappointed, that is, until he discovered he got to butt Sem halfway across the stage! One of the biggest children (who looked several years older than most of her classmates) was not pleased to be a camel—until I showed her a slide that said that camels have amazingly long eyelashes. Sure enough, I made sure her head-dress featured the most voluptuous eyelashes ever seen this side of Vegas showgirls, and she was delighted.

What I have always especially admired about *Noye's Fludde* is how well Britten was able to write music that is perfectly appropriate to the capabilities of less-accomplished performers (children and amateurs) and yet is unmistakably "Britten"—the third-level strings or the animal chorus or the handbell ensemble are still doing things that one also can see in *Billy Budd* or *Abraham and Isaac* or *Albert Herring*, but these musical and

dramatic devices are employed at an appropriate level of technical difficulty for the forces involved. (And I discovered that my students actually learned a lot from watching—and actively helping—the children work with easier versions of the same challenges that they have to face in more challenging repertoire.) The only musical weakness in the final product was the congregational hymns that mark the opening, midpoint, and closing of the story. During my brief welcome before the show, our audience seemed enthusiastic about having an opportunity to sing along and participate actively in the story, but in practice, they mostly just stared at the student deputized to conduct and cue the audience. Although I certainly had learned "Lord Jesus, Think on Me," "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," and "The Spacious Firmament on High" to the tunes SOUTHWELL, MELITA, and TALLIS CANON, respectively, long before graduating from the kiddie choir in a decidedly middle-brow United Methodist Church in the Pacific Northwest, during post-show discussions, I discovered that virtually everyone of every age in our audience in Baptist-dominant Georgia claimed never to have heard the first and the last. (Probably because of its association with the Navy, a number of veterans did seem to know MELITA. But only if they were "of a certain age.") I think now that it might have been wise to use the welcome-and-please-turn-off-your-cell-phones speech as an opportunity for a little impromptu audience rehearsal.

Once past the underwhelming performance of SOUTHWELL, the show picked up energy right away. The Theatre major playing God did indeed, as my colleague the Theatre Division Coordinator had promised, have a cavernously booming voice; there was no need for amplification. However, he also had severe visual disabilities, so he could not see the conductor. Nor, as it unfortunately turned out, did he have a very strong sense of rhythm, so it was a challenge to get him to speak the lines which had to be in strict rhythm as they were intended to sound. We solved the problem by having him wear an earpiece, and our other voice faculty member placed herself backstage and, through the miracle of modern wireless technology "rapped" his part along with him right into his ear—and he stayed on the beat! (For weeks my colleague's children had a good time teasing her about being "God's Prompter.") Nobody could see the earpiece—for one thing, God appeared, like Ezekiel's wheel, "way up in the middle of the air." I had procured special permission from Spivey Hall's director to place God in a little booth of "clouds" we built on top of the acoustical shelf that rings the second story of the concert hall, so we had a nice equivalent of the three-level "pageant wagon" of the medieval mystery plays.

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Kurt-Alexander Zeller

Kurt-Alexander Zeller began performing in opera, musical theatre, and oratorio in his native Pacific Northwest at age eight. Since then, he has performed throughout the United States, Spain, and Austria, and has appeared on German television, winning acclaim for his memorable characterizations as a singing actor. Among his favorite roles are Don Anchise il Podestà in *La finta giardiniera* and Monostatos in *The Magic Flute* by Mozart, Eumete in Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, Filippo in Haydn's *L'infedeltà delusa*, The Minstrel in *Once Upon a Mattress*, Tschang-Ling in the American premiere of Alexander Zemlinsky's opera *Der Kreidekreis* in Cincinnati, and many roles in the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, Johann Strauss, and Franz Lehár. His other performance activities have included a tour of Austria in a revue of the music of Kurt Weill, performing weekly "operatic soap operas" on the streets of Portland, Oregon, under an National Endowment for the Arts grant, and two seasons in the company of the Tony® Award-winning Oregon Shakespeare Festival. He also has served as stage director of Rogue Opera's productions of *La Cenerentola*, *The Barber of Seville*, and *Don Pasquale*. Dr. Zeller is in demand as an oratorio soloist and recitalist and has appeared as a concert soloist for the Atlanta Baroque Orchestra, New Trinity Baroque, the Terra Nova Consort, the Portland and Salem (OR) Chamber Orchestras, the Southern Crescent Symphony, and many other symphonies and concert series.

Dr. Zeller is Director of Opera and Vocal Studies and Coordinator of the Division of Music at Clayton State University in Morrow, Georgia, and is active throughout the country as a vocal adjudicator and clinician. He has given presentations and workshops for the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the International Congress of Voice Teachers, the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, and Early Music America. His book *What Every Singer Needs to Know about the Body*, written with Dr. Melissa Malde and MaryJean Allen, was released by Plural Publishing in 2009.

With his recital partner, Dr. Michiko Otaki, Director of Keyboard Studies at Clayton State University, he has appeared in concerts across North America, including a performance at the International Congress of Voice Teachers in Vancouver, B.C., appearances as guest artists with the Degas String Quartet for a series of performances of *On Wenlock Edge* by Ralph Vaughan Williams throughout the Southeast, and many recitals in Atlanta's renowned Spivey Hall. WABE-FM also broadcast their program of British song by composers active in the 1920s and 1930s: "Everyone Sang: British Song between the Wars."

Dr. Zeller trained at the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where he became the first undergraduate in that institution's history to earn concurrent degrees in Theatre and in Music. His graduate studies were at the College-Conservatory of Music of the University of Cincinnati, where he was awarded the MM in Voice Performance and a DMA in Voice Performance with cognate studies in Opera Directing and Musicology. He has done further study at the Early Music Institute of Indiana University, the 1995 National Association of Teachers of Singing Internship Program at Florida State University, and the Seattle Academy of Baroque Opera.

One of the principal challenges of any production of *Noye's Fludde* is building the "ark" right in sight of the audience, and doing so in the 100 rather quick measures between the time Noye says he is beginning the ark and when he says it is complete. Our design and construction team from MMI, Don McCampbell and Bill Harrison, solved the problem by creating the equivalent of one of those puzzles where the picture is hidden in plain sight in the midst of another picture that distracts the eye. At the opening of the show, the audience saw a Sunday-School-Bible-story-picture that looked something like a small house up on a hill above painted vineyards and fields, a couple of trees, and a low stone wall and a small hillock in the foreground. As Noah and his sons and daughters-in-law labored, they chopped the branches off a tree—which then was revealed as a mast. They turned the "stone wall" over—it was Styrofoam, and the other side was painted as wooden gunwales. They took down the painted drops—which left the "little house" as the central tower of the ark above two levels of benches for the children's animal chorus—and removed the covering on the "hillock," which turned out to be the ark's forecastle. With a tug on some cords, Mrs. Noye's bleaching sheets were hoisted as a sail, and the ark was ready to receive its menagerie, all in less than three minutes.

A church generally offers many different routes for the different groups of animals to process (through nave, transept, loft, and chancel) to the ark—but so does the average concert hall, so academic producers can achieve the same effect. Our animals came from the rear and sides of the auditorium and through the house, from the small box seating areas that connect directly to the stage on either side of the orchestra pit, and from the stage wings. When each group has a distance to travel and comes from a different point, the simple antiphonal effects Britten built into the score just come alive. Because we'd practiced so thoroughly at their elementary school and the children already understood their relationship to the stage and approximately how far they would be traveling (I had measured the distances and translated them to the music room at Arnold Elementary—the trip from the back house entrance up onto the stage was X number of times around the perimeter of their classroom, while the distance from the box entrance to the stage was Y times) and my Opera student "shepherds" leading each procession had already practiced thoroughly in the theatre, it took us only a single rehearsal with the children in the theatre for them to be perfect in their timing, even moving in character as their respective animals.

I'm not enough of a cultural anthropologist to propose any theories about why, but the high school girls playing Mrs. Noye's gossips certainly had *no* trouble playing, well, gossips. Whenever I looked over at the

box stage left/house right (I don't suppose many people noticed or cared, but I amused myself trying to adhere consistently in my staging to the ancient convention of the mystery plays' era that the more virtuous character would be stage right of and above the less virtuous character, who would be to his left—or "sinister." Thus God was up on the acoustic shelf at far stage right, while Mrs. Noye's gossips did their drinking off the left side of the stage in the box seating area), the gossips were always doing something interesting—whispering, aping Noye, or mocking the dutiful daughters-in-law. I hardly had to direct them at all (though a few times I had to tell them to tone it down a little). What I did have trouble with (unlike the 5th graders, who basically had to do what their teacher and parents told them and be where they brought them, or my students, who were getting a grade) was getting the high school girls all to show up consistently for rehearsal.

One of my favorite parts of *Noye's Fludde* is when Noye sends his sons (he seems to be too hen-pecked to risk going himself) to "fetch in" their mother before the flood arrives. At this point in the story, the waters are already rising, which I depicted in this production by billowing lengths of (synthetic) silk creeping down the auditorium aisles, manipulated by student *koken*. The boys bellow, "Mother! We praye you all together, For we are heare, youer ownë childer, Come into the shippe for feare of the weither, For his love that you boughte!" and they do so, for the only time in the entire piece, in triads. Most of the ensembles of the work are contrapuntal (most often canons), but for this one line, the sons sing in parallel first-inversion triads—in other words, in the texture of 15th-century fauxbourdon. Now, the average church audience for *Noye's Fludde* is *not* going to pick up on Britten's little joke here, but once I pointed out to my music-major students (who also have to put up with me in Music History courses) that these young men are basically flexing their figurative and literal muscles using the same "English invasion" (*contenance angloise*) new-fangled noise that their parents (and the more crotchety medieval theorists) would have been yelling at them to turn down in the days of the original mystery play, it was quite surprising (and rather amusing) how thoroughly that brought new energy and intent to their delivery and to Mrs. Noye's negative reaction. (And nobody in that cast ever missed the fauxbourdon question in Music History I, either!)

The boys pick up Mrs. Noye bodily and carry her into the ark. (This required a surprising amount of rehearsal for three strapping young guys to accomplish, mostly because they kept thinking they could come up with a way to do it that was easier than the director's. But eventually they admitted they couldn't and just did it exactly as they'd been told, much to the relief of the mezzo, who really was remarkably good-humored about

their experimentation.) As they do so, the floodwaters sweep away the gossips, which was easily accomplished with a few hefty billows of the three shades of blue silk while the gossips ducked out the box door behind them. The *koken* rushed up the stage steps with their silks, and the ark began to “move,” thanks to the reactions of the cast on the quite stationary boat and the increasing agitation of the silken “water” and the orchestra (the storm is particularly fun for the percussionists and recorderists).

The sending of the Raven and Dove requires children who are capable of moving evocatively and of remembering not exactly choreography but at least a reasonably involved “flight plan,” but the group of elementary-school children did include several such, including one with the almost impossibly fortuitous actual name of Raven Goforth. (I was several times accused of having made that up, but that *was* the little girl’s name.) These children were the only ones who had more than one rehearsal in the theatre before opening night—they had two. And they all performed with nearly perfect timing.

As the floodwaters recede (the *koken* with their silks returning whence they came), God appears again and, with him, the rainbow. Britten accomplishes this very clearly but simply in the music just by sliding up from a tonal center of D to one of E-flat and adding the glittering brilliance of the handbells to the musical texture. We made a lovely Vacation-Bible-School, primary-color-crayon-box rainbow transparency and projected it across the silver pipes of the Ruffatti organ case as God turned around one of his clouds to bring out the sun. The opera ends as the audience joins in TALLIS’ CANON with the cast, and each of Noye’s family leads a group of animals out of the ark—we took each group through the theatre and out a different exit—leaving Noye alone onstage for a last benediction from God before he also exits.

I was pleased with how our production turned out artistically, and the reaction of the public also was very positive. There were pedagogical and recruitment benefits to our program, too. Our students gained some valuable experience working with children (experience that was valuable not only for the Music Education majors; I reminded several of the Music Performance majors that, if they were fortunate, the 9:00 a.m. “school outreach performance” in an opera company’s apprentice program would be a part of their futures). We already have had students audition for our music major because of their experience onstage or in the orchestra—and perhaps there will be more, as most of the schoolchildren who worked on the piece in 2009 are still a few years too young for college. And, at least compared to what I have been accustomed to, it was a media bonanza for

us—there were splashy articles (complete with photographs of adorable children) in local newspapers and Opera America even broadcast word of our show and its partnership with Clayton County Public Schools across the country in one of their Education Talk e-newsletters, much to the delight of my dean.

But the most rewarding thing about the production was seeing the success of what I had at first set out to do—to help put a feeling of purpose and pride back into the work of music teachers and their students in the local schools and to give them a sense of possibility rather than defeat. Music teachers were able to invite their principals to see the work of their own students in the same hall the community more commonly associates with the likes of Robert Shaw, Angela Hewitt, and Susan Graham. Parents still angry about the state government’s very belated response to the political problems with their school board were almost touchingly grateful that somebody, *anybody*, who worked for the state had taken an interest in their children. And, of course, it was very heartening to see so many young people having fun making opera and learning by experience that the word is nothing to be afraid of.

But more than that, it was gratifying to watch all these kids who had been hearing for a solid year how hopeless their educational futures were come on to a college campus and feel that they could indeed be part of what happened there, that it wasn’t a closed, alien world they would never penetrate. During a break at the dress rehearsal, when I already had compiled a list of costume repairs as long as my arm that somehow needed to be done (by me!) before the next evening, when a careless middle schooler in the pit had just destroyed an orchestra chair (the reason for the break) and consequently the director of Spivey Hall had just read me the riot act, and when we were having “technical difficulties” with the rainbow and I was feeling about at the end of my rope, I noticed one of the fifth grade boys, who played one of the dogs, plop himself down next to one of my students, who was the “shepherd” of his group and who it had been clear for weeks he thought had to be just the coolest guy on the face of the planet. His music teacher had already told me this particular boy was constantly in trouble at the elementary school and performed poorly in all his classes—except hers, where she’d always found him a model student. The little boy beamed up at my student (not exactly an academic paragon himself) and announced brightly, “Know what? I’m gonna work hard now in math and my other classes so then I can go to college like you.” The rainbow and its message of grace and promise had never seemed quite so brilliant.

The Sacred in Opera

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The Sacred in Opera is a project of the
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Layout by Daniel S. Hammond