

**The Sacred in Opera** **June 2010**

In this Issue...  
Ruth Dobson

For our June issue of the Sacred in Opera Newsletter we are addressing two very interesting new topics, Jewish sacred drama and staged scenes from sacred operas. We have an interview with Christopher Mattaliano, the General Director of Portland Opera, about the recent production of Hugo Wesigall’s *Esther*, which he directed at New York City Opera in the fall of 2009. This production was a sensational success for NYCO and we wanted to ask Mr. Mattaliano about his experiences directing it. He directed the first production of *Esther* at NYCO in 1993 and also this recent revival. We are grateful to him for taking the time for this interview, given while he was busy directing Portland Opera’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

One of our new NOA members, Dr. Kurt Alexander-Zeller, who directs the opera program at Clayton State University in Atlanta, shares with us his experiences directing a program of scenes from sacred drama, called “Women of the Bible”. It made me think that this would an interesting concept for many venues if presenting a full opera is not possible. His insights into the production process are interesting on many levels and I know you will find them lively and interesting reading. We have included the program from that performance, hoping that the format he uses might be a useful tool for some of our members in their planning for future programs.

Ruth Dobson  
Chair, The Sacred in Opera

An Interview with Christopher Mattaliano:  
Hugo Weisgall's *Esther* at New York City Opera

## *Esther* (1993)

Presented by New York City Opera  
November 7-19, 2009  
David H. Koch Theater  
(formerly New York State Theater)

Composer, Hugo Weisgall  
Librettist, Charles Kondek  
Christopher Mattaliano, Stage Director  
Set Design, Jerome Sirlin  
Costume Design, Joseph Citarella  
Choreography, Jennifer Muller  
Conductor, George Manahan

**RD:** You directed both the world premiere of *Esther* at NYCO in 1993 and the recent revival in the fall of 2009. How did you prepare for directing this opera? Did you read the Book of Esther in the Old Testament in your preparation?

**CM:** That's the first thing I did when Christopher Keene, the former Music Director at New York City Opera, called me. He had this crazy idea, a visionary idea, that he wanted to do three world premieres in one week to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NYCO in 1993, and *Esther* was one of them. The other two were *Griffelkin*, based on a children's tale, by Lukas Foss and *Marilyn* by Ezra Laderman, a work about Marilyn Monroe. I knew a little bit about Weisgall's operas, *The Stronger*, and one called *The Tenor*. I had come across *The Tenor* because Richard Cross had sung in it. I was in Washington, D. C., on the road when Christopher called, so went out to Barnes and Noble to buy a Bible to read the story of Esther. I grew up in a very heavy Italian, Jewish neighborhood, but I was a little mixed up about which holiday was around

Esther. Then I remembered the holiday was Purim. Great characters in the story of Esther.

**RD:** Is the story in Charles Kondek's libretto the same as the Biblical text or has there been adaptation of the Biblical story? (Change of characters, modern touches, or other "artistic license"?)

**CM:** Charlie did a masterful job adapting the Biblical text. He had to create dialogue and conversation, as that is not in most Bible stories. He had to create dialogue between Esther and Mordecai, Esther and Xerxes. He follows the story fairly closely, and he made my job very easy by doing it in a way that was very well-defined and well-paced. There are 32 scenes in the opera, so it is very cinematic. Some scenes are only a minute long. There is always an overlapping of scenes, so as one scene ends, the next one is beginning. A couple will be finishing their scene down stage right and as they finish the chorus is entering. The reviews picked that up, saying it was a very tight, well-defined show. The biggest theatrical device is this overlapping

## Interview (continued)

of scenes, and because of that there was an in-built sense of rhythm to the show. Not many operas are written that way, but certainly many plays use that technique. *Dialogues of the Carmelites* and *Rake's Progress* use some of it. In *Carmelites*, the dialogue keeps unfolding, lots of short little scenes and conversations, so it is a similar construction.

**RD:** What musical language does Weisgall use in his opera? Does he use conventional tonal harmony?

**CM:** Weisgall is very much out of the school of Berg and Schönberg. He is very proud and uncompromising about that. Frankly, that's something I found very refreshing about the piece. He died in 1997, but Charlie is still with us and came to the revival this past fall. Hugo was very unapologetic about his musical language. I feel like today that so many composers use an eclectic language, a little bit of jazz, a little dissonance, a little bit of Americana, a little bit of arioso, and are so eager to try to please everyone. Weisgall says "this is my language". It comes directly out of the school of Berg and Schönberg. It's achromatic, dense, lacks a tonal center. But it's very expressive, close in nature to *Wozzeck* and *Moses and Aaron*. It's challenging, complex music, very powerful. And Hugo was a fabulous orchestrator. Epic drama, it really enhances the story of *Esther*.

**RD:** Is there a recording of *Esther*?

**CM:** There are some excerpts on a Naxos recording called Jewish Operas and they do excerpts from several Jewish operas, including *Esther* and David Schiff's *Gimpel the Fool*. Two numbers from *Esther* are on this CD, Jewish Operas, 2. (with the Seattle Symphony, Gerard Schwartz, conductor, featuring Juliana Gondek as *Esther*).

**RD:** Are their conventional arias, ensembles, trios, duets, etc?

**CM:** Yes, within the context of that style of this kind of music. *Esther* has a stand-alone aria, there's the equivalent of a love duet on the balcony after the Jews have been saved, all of the characters have a main aria, extended scenes, Mordecai has a big aria that opens Act III.

**RD:** Are they excerptable? Will we hear them in auditions?

**CM:** Yes. I was involved in a number of fundraising activities associated with the production, kids from the young art's program who were covering roles and yes, *Esther's* aria and Mordecai's aria were both performed.

**RD:** Is there a chorus? How did you stage them?

**CM:** It's a massive chorus opera, some of the most beautiful music is for the chorus. Big, long chorus numbers. He really envisioned this piece as a modern epic. The opera was commissioned by San Francisco Opera by Terry McEwen, who then retired. When Lotfi Mansouri came to the company, the project got dropped and NYCO picked it up. Christopher picked it up because he was a fan of Hugo Weisgall.

**RD:** How many in the cast?

**CM:** 118 people, one of the largest casts in opera. Fifteen soloists, a chorus of 60 people, children's chorus, ballet dancing in Act III at some of the palace scenes. We had about 25 supers, so over 100 on the stage. He wanted to write a grand epic opera in the style of *Don Carlo*, or *Boris Godunov*, a grand opera for the 20<sup>th</sup> C.

Interview (continued)

**RD:** What was your staging concept?

**CM:** Jerry Sirlin who designed it, he also designed the other two operas that premiered that week. He had to create a very flexible set design that worked for all three operas. He was an innovator in using projected images, nothing but platforms and screens. All the scenery images are projected on screens, like the Coronation, the harem when Esther is summoned to be in Xerxes' harem for a year, and Vashti in jail. In *Esther*, you'll have a chorus, then back to a palace, then to the street, then a page of music later you're back to the bedroom of Xerxes. With Jerry's design you could change scenes in a matter of seconds, which suited the need to change quickly for the 32 scenes. Visually it was very stunning and actually quite simple. He was the perfect designer for this opera. He would film a tombstone and colorize it on the computer. It was a production that used a lot of modern technology. The costumes were traditional and Biblical within a very modern kind of setting.

I was influenced by the films of Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese director whose movies I like. His most famous movie is *Seven Samurai*. I remember using his movies as a visual reference point for how I staged the opera, huge battle scenes, massive number of people coming over a mountain top and then just stop, hold that frame, and then dissolve into something else.

**RD:** The story of Esther seems inherently dramatic. Does staging a sacred opera lend itself to a different directorial style than a secular opera?

**CM:** I've done *Amahl*, and operas like *Cavalleria Rusticana* that have a huge sacred element to them. But really, the process is always the same. There is a reason those stories are used

over and over again. They are very powerful and very moving. Interestingly, there is a new book out, R. J. Crumb, *Mr. Natural*. You would recognize his comics immediately. One of his main characters was Mr. Natural. Crumb just published the *Book of Genesis*, literally every word. Very, very gripping. It's the entire book of Genesis, not a parody, very serious treatment of it. Entire story of Joseph, Abraham and Isaac, Noah and the Ark. Every word of the book of Genesis is illustrated. The Art Museum is doing an exhibit of his illustrations here in the future. I happened to read about it and I was reminded what great stories they are.

**RD:** I'm sure you worked very closely with Hugo Weisgall and Charles Kondek on the original production in 1993. Can you give us an idea of what it's like to work with the composer on a world-premiere production?

**CM:** I had been warned about Hugo Weisgall because he had the reputation of being a total curmudgeon. I got the libretto and I got a tape of just a workshop of two or three scenes done with piano from San Francisco. I read the story many, many times and read the libretto and made notes in the margin because I was going to be meeting with Charles and Hugo. I assumed that I might be able to suggest some things, adjusting this or that, expanding or cutting this or that. Hugo was in his 80's and had been teaching for years, he'd written several operas by this time, *Nine Rivers to Jordan*, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* which had its premiere at NYCO. I remember saying to him "this scene with two stories going simultaneously, between Haman and Zeresh, and Esther and Xerxes, it seems to me like an ideal opportunity to write a quartet, maybe something like Act III *La Bohème* with its two couples. Is that something you might consider?" I remember very precisely what he said—"Young man, I want you to know, any advice I've ever taken

## Interview (continued)

from a stage director has always been wrong.” I thought, “Oh, this is going to be a great year of my life!” But that said, we became very close. Trust is something you build. Once he saw I was taking the project very seriously, everything was fine. He started coming to rehearsals and saw the work we were doing; he was very supportive. He was a great man of the theater--he said that we could always discuss cuts, but he'd finished with the composing.

**RD:** He knew who he was

**CM:** Yes

**RD:** I understand the production was very well attended at NYCO this past fall. Do you know if it attracted a different kind of audience than other productions at NYCO or were they basically the same patrons?

**CM:** George Steele, the General Director, chose *Esther* to open the season this past fall. He came in after an awful time at NYCO, lots of turmoil and change and a huge remodel of the theater. But NYCO's history was always about world premieres and American works, and that was counterpart as to what was happening across the Plaza at the Met. *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Susannah* were all programmed at NYCO. George wanted to open the season with a modern American work. *Esther* had only been done for two performances in 1993 and was a huge success. There were attempts to bring it back in the interim by Paul Kellogg, but when they looked at the score and saw how big it was and just the cost factor, it got shelved. That was frustrating for me. So when George called I was thrilled. So they opened after the renovation with something very grand and something very closely identified with the company for many years. It's such a grand piece, a grand story. It was all

very exciting. They simultaneously opened the season and finished the renovation. A very special time--special, but exhausting! George did things like a Jewish single's night, on the grand foyer of the New York State Theater which is now the David Koch theater. The production was promoted by Rabbi's and throughout the Jewish community. It was a very successful production, well-attended, great reviews.

**RD:** How difficult is it to produce this opera? Is it accessible for a small or mid-size opera company or only for larger companies? Do you think that *Esther* will enter the opera repertory?

**CM:** No, probably not. it's just too big for most companies to produce. Maybe for special celebrations or events, the opening of a theater, as it was performed at NYCO.



Images from the New York City Opera production of *Esther*



## BIOGRAPHY

**Christopher Mattaliano** was named Portland Opera's fifth General Director in July 2003. In this capacity, he is responsible for all artistic, financial, and administrative aspects of the company. Previous to this appointment, Mr. Mattaliano was the Artistic Director of the Pine Mountain Music Festival, in addition to his very successful career as a stage director. He brings to the company an intense artistic vision honed from his extensive stage directing experience. Prior to taking the helm at Portland Opera, Mr. Mattaliano achieved considerable regional success, directing



five acclaimed Portland Opera productions—*Manon* (1991), *Eugene Onegin* (1992), *Pagliacci/Carmina Burana* (1997), *Candide* (2002), and *Il Trovatore* (2002). In 2004, his direction of Rossini's *The Journey to Reims* opened his first artistic season in Portland to both popular and critical acclaim. Since then he has directed *The Rape of Lucretia* (2005), Verdi's *Macbeth* (2006), *The Magic Flute* (2007), *Cinderella* (2007), *Albert Herring* (2008) *Rigoletto* (2009), and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (2010).

Mr. Mattaliano has directed North American productions for the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, San Francisco Opera, Washington Opera, the Canadian Opera Company, L'Opera de Montreal, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Minnesota Opera, Dallas Opera, Central City Opera, among many others. His work has also been enjoyed internationally at L'Opera de Nice and the Norwegian National Opera. He has directed world premieres of Hugo Weisgall's *Esther* for the New York City Opera, jazz composer Fred Ho's *Journey Beyond the West* for the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Peter Westergaard's *The Tempest* for the Opera Festival of New Jersey, and the American premiere of Fleischman's *Rothschild's Violin* at the Juilliard Opera Center. His passion for stage direction has extended well beyond the stages of those many companies. He has taught at the Juilliard School, the Metropolitan Opera Young Artist Development Program, Manhattan School of Music, Yale University, Mannes College of Music, and the New National Theater of Japan. In 1996 his essay on auditioning ("*The Dreaded Audition*") was published by OPERA America. Mr. Mattaliano received his BA in Theater Arts from Montclair State University with additional training at the Trent Park School of Performing Arts in London, England. In 1998 he received the L. Howard Fox Visiting Alumni Award from his alma mater as well as a National Opera Institute Stage Direction Grant.

Since joining the company, his presence is in considerable demand on the national level, leading the keynote panel at the 2004 OPERA America conference in Pittsburgh and being named to the National Endowment for the Arts' opera review panel. He was recently elected to serve on OPERA America's Board of Directors.

## Opera and Women of the Bible: A Production Reflection Kurt Alexander Zeller

Clayton State University, where I teach, is a public comprehensive university located in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. It has been recognized repeatedly in national college rankings as the campus with the most diverse student body in the Southeast. I almost always have in my opera classes students who are far older than traditional undergraduates, students of several different races, students from immigrant families, and students from many faith traditions. One thing this means is that “non-traditional casting” is neither an issue nor a choice—it is simply a reality. But another thing it often means is that students’ differing views of Sabbath observance must be accommodated.

For my production in the spring semester of 2010, my challenge was that the most outstanding singer in the course was a mid-twentyish dramatic mezzo, required by her degree curriculum to be in the opera class, who was also a very observant Seventh-Day Adventist. As our department does not control the calendar of Spivey Hall, our principal performance venue, I was stuck with the performance dates I had—which were Friday and Saturday evening, a direct conflict with the student’s Sabbath. She was between the proverbial rock and hard place; she needed the course to graduate, but her church told her she couldn’t sing a secular story on the required performance dates. I was similarly stuck—I couldn’t move the performance dates, I was expected to provide “reasonable accommodation” for the student’s faith observance, and I had no other student who would have been even remotely appropriate to double-cast with her.

The solution was to do a production on a sacred subject. The perfect choice for the student in question would have been *Samson et Dalila*—but I had no one suitable for a single one of the *other* roles, no giant grand-opera chorus, and a beautiful concert hall stage that, however, is only 12 feet deep with the orchestra pit down—destroying the Temple of Dagon effectively was going to be somewhat beyond our technical capabilities.

So, instead, I decided that we would produce an anthology show of short works and scenes from longer works, all built around the common element of female characters from the Bible. Feminist theologians often point out that women do not get much time in the patriarchal pages of the Bible, but even back as a child in my United Methodist Sunday School classes, I had already noticed that whenever women *did* show up in a

Bible story things suddenly got *much* more interesting. There’s hardly any such thing as a “peripheral” female character anywhere in the Bible—the women who are there, from Eve to Paul’s benefactress Lydia, through Rebecca and Rahab and Ruth and Deborah and Bathsheba and Esther and several Marys (and yes, even Delilah), are always game-changers. They get things done. In short, they act—and one of the primary purposes of my course is to help our students develop their acting skills.

It wasn’t hard to decide where to begin—as Rodgers and Hammerstein remind us, the beginning is a very good place to start. And the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden is essentially a story of how a woman took a decisive action that made all the difference. The action is clear—but the motivation is murky; theologians *and* dramatists have been asking “Why?” for millennia. One attempt to answer the question is quite familiar to NOA: *Eve’s Odds*, a one-act “musical midrash” by composer Bruce Trinkley and librettist Jason Charnesky that was a Chamber Opera Competition winner in 1999. *Eve’s Odds* manages to provoke both belly laughs and serious theological reflection, it’s written in a very accessible musical style, and I had students to cast all the principals well. It would, I was sure, be a good first half of the show.

There was only one problem. *Eve’s Odds* has an angelic chorus scored for SSA. Now, I always hear from my colleagues in NOA about the problems of producing opera with too many women and not enough men, but my program at Clayton State has *never* been like that. Real basses are rarer than hen’s teeth, it’s true, but I’m always up to my ears in baritones and tenors. Once I had cast the mezzo roles of Lilith and the Bad Angel, I was fresh out of any women but high, light soprani. There would be no alto line in that chorus. And what was I to do with the extra tenors and baritones I had just standing around? But there are advantages to doing works by living composers; after I explained my predicament to Bruce Trinkley, he obligingly re-voiced his angelic choruses for STB voices—and got me the parts in plenty of time! Problem solved.

Since the production was the weekend of Passion Sunday, I planned to end the evening with the *Planctus Mariae*, an anonymous 14<sup>th</sup>-century chant drama that depicts the lament of Mary the Mother of Christ at the foot of the Cross, with some ancillary contributions from Mary Cleopas, Mary Magdalene, and St. John. Some

## Opera and Women of the Bible (continued)

might think a 15-minute chant drama an odd choice for an opera program, but the *Planctus Mariae* is another sort of beginning—it is one of the oldest surviving pieces of music drama in Western culture. And nothing is as pure a challenge to the singing actor as something that has nothing but a vocal line. And its role of Mary the Mother is about as great and wrenchingly emotional a vehicle for a mezzo voice as there is in any work, anywhere.

In between, I planned to fill the program in with several scenes from works about Old Testament women. First, the opening of Act II of *Samson et Dalila*—the solo scena “Amour! viens aider ma faiblesse.” (If you’ve got a perfect Dalila but nobody else, I figured, there’s still got to be some way to let her sing at least little of the role with an orchestra while you have one on the premises.) Then, scenes from each of two Handel oratorios, *Athalia* and *Esther*. NOA can take some of the credit for that part of the program. I had already decided that these two were scenes that would work well “put on their feet” in a staging, but still I was vacillating about the advisability of staging pieces of an oratorio and wondering what my audience might think about seeing “concert works” acted out. And then, at the NOA Convention in Atlanta, there was Carl Gerbrandt’s session on staging *Elijah*, at which he mentioned that he also thought all of Handel’s oratorios but two (“yeah, *Messiah* and probably that snoozer *Susanna*,” I thought to myself) could be effectively staged—those two being *Messiah* and *Susanna*. (“OK,” I continued to think to myself, “I think I know a sign when I see one. No burning bush required.”) Thus, I had a program that ran under 2 hours (including intermission), that started at the beginning of the Old Testament and progressed in chronological order to the end of the Gospels and which began with a modern music drama and progressed in reverse chronological order to the beginning of Western music drama.

Doing an anthology show exacerbated one of the perennial problems for my opera productions—scene changes. My “theatre” is an acoustically superb concert hall with a modern but unsophisticated lighting plot, no fly loft or rigging, no stage machinery other than the orchestra pit lift, no wing space at all offstage left and very little offstage right, and three stories of an elaborate Fratelli Ruffatti organ case upstage center. The distance between the organ case and the edge of the stage when the pit is down is barely twelve feet. The stage decking is a very expensive wood specially chosen for its acoustic properties across which nothing may be rolled or dragged. Usually I have to make do with a

## BIOGRAPHY



Tenor Kurt-Alexander Zeller, Director of Opera and Vocal Studies in the Music Department of Clayton State University, has appeared in opera, music theatre, early music and concert throughout North America and Europe. Particularly acclaimed for his performances as a singing actor, Dr. Zeller has toured Austria in a revue of the music of Kurt Weill, appeared on German television, performed weekly “operatic soap operas” on the streets of Portland, Oregon, under a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and spent two seasons in the performance company of the Tony® Award-winning Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Dr. Zeller is a certified Andover Educator and conducts “What Every Singer Needs to Know about the Body” workshops from coast to coast. His book *What Every Singer Needs to Know about the Body*, co-authored with Melissa Malde and MaryJean Allen, was released by Plural Publications in 2008.

## Opera and Women of the Bible (continued)

unit set that can suggest all the various spaces of the production's world through small changes in lighting and set dressing—but this show had *five* worlds.

Still, a unit set of some kind was likely to be all that was logistically (and financially) viable. Working with my usual scenic team from MMI (a local firm I discovered when the owner's wife came back to school to complete a degree and signed up for the opera course just for fun), we filled the stage left corner alongside the organ case with a raised platform, in the center of which was a large, intricate artificial tree. A wide ramp curved around the front of the platform and ended at floor level center left, while there was just enough room for entrances and exits at floor level between the ramp and the pit. The whole thing created a variety of playing levels and places to sit, lean, or hide stage left.

The analogous corner stage right was filled with a rear-projection screen spanning two columns, and the organ case up center was masked up to 12 feet with simple pipe-and-drape, supporting curtains of inexpensive unbleached muslin. All this formed the unit set, with different projections on the screen for each work or scene. To dress the set for *Eve's Odds*, a small crop of realistic artificial apples were wired onto the tree with florist's wire, a large faux-rock "sofa" for Adam and Eve (mostly wood and papier-maché) went upstage just off center and several smaller boulders (recycled from Styrofoam pieces of last year's set) were scattered about, often hiding the bases of every large ficus, palm or Norfolk pine (real or fake) that we could beg, borrow, or steal. In front of the screen stage right sat our version of the wardrobe unit the action of *Eve's Odds* requires. And fortunately, the show occurred at high spring in Atlanta, so the gardens of relatives, neighbors, and obliging church ladies were raided so that the Garden of Eden was a riot of real flowers to harmonize with those on the screen.

During the intermission after *Eve's Odds*, the wardrobe unit and rocks were cleared, along with all the flowers except those on the platform around the tree (which also lost its apples), and two more columns were brought in to define a large cubical space stage right. This became where the indoor palace scenes in the Handel oratorio excerpts would be played, with changes of projection and lighting and the quick addition of a copy of a Mesopotamian throne for the *Esther* scene. The stage left playing area around the tree would serve as Dalila's garden—and, later, Mordecai's. The *Samson et Dalila* and *Athalie* scenes each would use only half

the stage, while *Esther*, mirroring the essential action of its heroine, would move across the stage from the space of the Jewish outsiders to the inner sanctum of the Persian palace. In this way, the three shorter scenes could proceed without any interruption between them.

There was a pause before the *Planctus* so that most of the orchestra could leave the pit (and save me a lot of money by keeping the total call for the union musicians at 90 minutes). Those five minutes were sufficient to strip the stage, like stripping the church for Good Friday, of the columns, the throne, and all the remaining flowers, and to perform a last bit of stage magic that turned what was once the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil into the Cross. Four music stands also were placed around the stage.

The first question absolutely every person I ever told we were doing this program, from my department chair to my barber, immediately asked me was, "What are Adam and Eve going to wear?" so I suppose at this point a word about costuming is in order. In my opinion, Bruce and Jason's "musical midrash" is a fantastical bit of whimsy with a serious intent, just like many of the real midrashes of the Jewish faith tradition, where magical details that are essentially factually anachronistic but somehow emotionally plausible abound—like Adam building a wardrobe for Eve. (This Adam totally is the guy whose descendants someday would think, in all seriousness, that the latest gee-whiz kitchen gadget would be the *perfect* romantic Valentine's Day gift.) Certainly one could put Adam and Eve in body stockings, try to create a realistically slithering Snake, etc.—but why? The Garden of Eden is what the world might have been, not what it is, though everything that happens there is somehow familiar to our world. Throughout the libretto, the youth and newness of Adam and Eve are emphasized, and after they take those first steps toward asserting individual agency by eating the apple, the angels sing "Childhood ends for God's newest babes..." These characters are a man and a woman as archetypal as John Gray's Mars and Venus, but with the egocentric life experience and wonder-filled world view of toddlers. So, I put my Eve and Adam in adult-sized versions of that archetype of toddler fashion: petal pink and baby blue footie pajamas.

The other characters are also archetypes in their way, so I put the Snake in a zoot suit that would be right at home on Sportin' Life—if Sportin' Life had a taste for python-skin print satin, that is. The Good Angel was a cross between a Botticelli painting and Norma Zimmer,

## Opera and Women of the Bible (continued)

the chiffon-gowned soprano who warbled “inspirational” numbers on the Lawrence Welk Show. The Bad Angel’s sexy backless number (black satin, with a red lining that flashed well through the side slit during her cha-cha) I made from a McCall’s pattern for a prom dress—if one that none of the mothers of any of *my* prom dates ever would have allowed anywhere near their daughters, but apparently times change.

When the show actually was performed, I got audience feedback that suggested that each work in the evening was the favorite of some segment of the audience. However, the students in the class were unanimous about their favorite piece on the program: *Eve’s Odds*, hands down. It was accessible; it was fun and funny (they were still cracking themselves up with it even after weeks of rehearsals); they *got* it. In fact, until they got into the theatre and were confronted with the challenge of being heard over the orchestra, most of them thought it was a much easier work than the other pieces in the show. And certainly each student, without exception, learned and memorized his or her music in the 45 minutes of *Eve’s Odds* far more quickly than his or her part in, say, 12 minutes of Handel. They enjoyed the characters, and, interestingly enough, found constructing the logical moment-to-moment inner monologue of the beings in this fantasy much easier to do, much less of a “character stretch,” than they found playing the characters in the “standard repertoire” Saint-Saëns or the Handel.

Audience reaction to *Eve’s Odds* was more mixed. Thankfully, I heard (either directly or second-hand) absolutely none of the reactions I had feared I might get in the Southern Bible Belt—that the work played fast and loose with the Scriptural account and was therefore offensive or invalid. A number of people actually appreciated (as do I) the theology of the piece. Some liked it precisely because they found it the most vernacular in musical style; others preferred other parts of the evening that conformed more closely to their stylistic expectations concerning opera. Not many in the audience found it as funny as the cast themselves did—largely, it must be admitted, because in two orchestra rehearsals (all we could afford) not all the students solved the problem we’d been working on for months: how to be heard and understood over the orchestra. (This was especially difficult for Eve, who has many middle-voice lines over significant orchestration, and for our Adam, for whom English is a second language—it took nearly a dozen rehearsals before I could get him to appreciate that, in his little naming-the-animals aria, “rhinoceros”

is a rhyme with “hiss”!) The laughs that were largely textual didn’t always land; while the sight gags never failed to produce the desired giggles.

In the second half of the program, there were different challenges. Staging the Saint-Saëns aria would be quite straight-forward, I thought. The thoughts are clear and powerful, and certainly the student (who had already learned the aria as a concert piece) knew it inside out. Well, yes and no. It turned out that it was actually rather difficult to get the student to feel comfortable moving about the stage while singing something she had already experienced in a different paradigm—the concert platform. The invisible 3’x3’ “recital box” cage kept re-appearing. She even, in flat sandals, began to walk as if she were in concert heels (which made negotiating the ramp very problematic)! I learned that even though the student had always been able to translate every word of the aria when she had sung the aria previously, she really had had no answers to any of the fundamental acting questions: “Who am I?” “What do I want?” and “How am I going to get it?” Exploring how Dalila moves was the key to discovering how she thinks—not that surprising, since all movement arises in the brain. It was instructive to see the enormous difference having sung the aria onstage made in her concert performance a month later on her senior recital—even though she re-enacted none of the actual staging—so keep telling your students to stage their recital and audition arias as part of their preparation process!

The Handel scenes were a trial, there’s no other way to put it. We started them last, because I mistakenly thought they would be the easiest to learn—they were relatively brief, it was perfect repertoire for the voices cast in the roles, and when it seems that every high school soprano sings “Va godendo” or “Bel piacere” for her Georgia Governor’s Honors Program and college entrance auditions, surely Handel is known territory. Apparently not. The students reacted as if they had been asked to learn *Lulu*. (In fact, I think some of them would have learned *Lulu* more easily.) They were interested in the characters. They were fascinated by score-study rehearsals in which we analyzed harmonic rhythms and melodic gestures and explored how these could generate not only character thoughts but very specific actor movements (the revelation: “You mean, they didn’t have, like, directors back in Handel’s time? The singers had to figure out all this stuff to do *themselves*? Crazy”). They actually came to enjoy the music and appreciate its drama. But what they never really managed to do, in three months, was learn the music accurately. Try

## Opera and Women of the Bible (continued)

as they would, in musical rehearsals, in voice lessons, in coachings with the staff coach-accompanist, in the hours of practice they all swore they were putting in on their own, by production week they still couldn't remember which of six phrases with the same text was which or how this melisma ended differently from the previous one.

I found this particularly frustrating, because in the course of working on the piece, I fell totally in love with *Athalia*. It's crammed full of beautiful vocalism, it's a psychological thriller, and it has to be on any top-three list of Handel's scores for most inventive orchestral writing. There are only two reasons I can think of that it isn't Handel's most-frequently performed non-*Messiah* oratorio: 1) There isn't a clearly definitive version (Handel wrote three versions, and I selected elements from each of them to create the scene we did). But that hardly stops us from mounting, say, *Tales of Hoffmann* in ever-changing arrangements. Or, more likely, 2) the Biblical story (in 2 Chronicles 21-23 and 2 Kings 11) is both so obscure and so unattractive. Although every student in my class had at least some basic idea of the stories of Eve, Delilah, Esther, and the Marys, not a single one of them ever had heard of Queen Athaliah of Judah. Small wonder. A story about the Queen Mother of Judah who seizes the throne by killing her own grandchildren and who eventually is deposed and executed is not exactly the kind of story the grandmotherly Sunday School teacher relishes telling to second graders.

But in writing both *Athalia* and *Esther*, Handel was as indebted to the plays of those titles by the French neo-classical playwright, Jean Racine (1639-1699), as to the Bible. Racine greatly expanded the psychology and motivations of the characters from the perfunctory treatments they receive in the Biblical narratives. Racine elevated Athalia to the status of a grand tragic heroine, complete with heroic stature, noble intentions, and fatal tragic flaw. Her concern for the state of Judah is genuine, if unappreciated by her subjects, and her relationship with the high priest of Baal, Mathan, merely a name mentioned in the Biblical story, is a deep and tender personal relationship.

Handel's response gives a singing actor everything he or she could want—the *accompagnati* in which Athalia relates her nightmare vision of the death of her mother, Queen Jezebel of Israel, are as dramatic (and gory) as anything in Handel's secular operas; Mathan's attempt to calm her with "Gentle airs, melodious strains," with its theorbo accompaniment and solo cello obbligato, is

probably the most sweetly seductive thing Handel ever wrote for a tenor (and yes, I chose the obvious reason for why the high priest of Baal should be so immediately handy when the Queen is awakened by a nightmare—this is Jezebel's daughter, after all), and Athalia's reply, "Softest sounds no more can ease me," is a brilliant mad scene in which her unraveling mental state is depicted by an extremely long passage (32 bars) with no bass line or continuo—only "rootless" treble instruments—and a jumpy flute obbligato.

Maybe it was that lack of a bass line that made it so difficult for the soprano to memorize the aria, but the *Athalia* scene truly didn't come together until dress rehearsals. *Esther* fared even worse. I ultimately had to excise the "garden scene" between Mordecai and Esther, as well as Haman's exit aria, from the production entirely; the music just wasn't anywhere close to audience-ready. The palace scene that remained, however, was quite a hit with the audience; Haman's "Turn not, O Queen, thy face away" became a genuine acting breakthrough for that student, and Esther's "Flattering tongue, no more I hear thee" demonstrated that Baroque music is perfectly capable of being just as violent as anything from the nineteenth century.

If learning the Handel was difficult for the students in those scenes, that was nothing compared to the difficulty the students in the *Planctus* had memorizing their music. None of them ever had sung chant before, and at first they were completely befuddled by music that lacked the familiar landmarks of harmony, consonance and dissonance in relationship to a bass line, or musical meter. That problem I *had* expected, so we began with several rehearsals in which we practiced chant style and explored how to "chunk" the melodies by looking for units of patterns, rather than viewing them as an interminable series of random intervals. The students felt that they learned a great deal from these rehearsals—one even said they had changed how she learned *all* music, not just the *Planctus*. We delved into the scholarship on the performance practice of medieval chant and decided that certain passages in particularly rigid poetic meters might have been performed metrically rather than in the current Solesmes style. Brief interludes (originally improvised) on organ and medieval harp were added between some speeches to help keep the pitch center stable.

The method did work—but it was very slow. It was slowed further by the only edition we were able to find to purchase, in which the editor had put the entire

## Opera and Women of the Bible (continued)

piece into metrical arrangements. It turned out that looking at one arrangement of rhythm and singing another—even if “another” was a rhythmically free one of the student’s improvised choosing—was too much visual distraction. I finally did what I should have done at first, which was write out the entire work in modern chant notation (but on a 5-line staff) with our English adaptation (I had decided back in September that 15 minutes of Latin chant would be too much for our audience). This took four solid days, but it was worth it—two days after receiving it, Mary Magdalene, who had been utterly lost before, could sing her part with complete fluency. Crucial lesson learned—the state of the score matters!

Still, a month before the performances it was obvious to me and to all the cast that they were not going to have the piece memorized. I could have pulled the piece out of the show entirely, but my colleague Alan Xie, a multimedia artist who heads our Art program, had already put a lot of work into designing a video (with inspirations as various as the 1515 Isenheim Altarpiece of Matthias Grünewald and the recent multimedia work of Bill Viola) that would be projected on the stage right screen as the action of the original medieval stage directions unfolded around the cross stage left. We had had some stimulating discussions with the entire Art area faculty about the function of images (altarpieces, frescoes, etc.) in transmitting Biblical stories in the era of the *Planctus*, when most of the population couldn’t read the Bible for itself, and about how the internet age may be turning communications back to a post-literate, image-dominated paradigm. Alan’s intent was to create a 21st-century experience that might be analogous to hearing a chant drama in a cathedral surrounded by carvings, frescoes, and stained-glass windows. After all his work, I wasn’t about to just announce to Alan that I was going to pull the plug on the show—and his video.

So instead, I decided to make the video the visual focus of the piece and remove from the singers the responsibility to memorize most of the music. I re-staged the show. After a choral conductus (sung by the rest of the students in the pit), the lights came up on the Cross, surrounded by a tableau of the actors in the exact poses of the three Marys and St. John in the Isenheim Altarpiece, the image that also opened Alan’s video. As it happens, the first four speeches in the *Planctus* introduce each of the characters in turn. At her or his first speech, each actor broke the Isenheim pose, sang to the audience, and then moved to a pre-set music stand around the perimeter of the stage for the rest of

the work. Each of these stations was lighted with one tightly focused instrument. There also were specials of white and red light on the Cross. Otherwise, the video was the only light onstage until Mary the Mother’s violent final commination, indicting the corruption of the whole world for the death of her child, when lights directed at the audience flooded on. As the video returned to the Isenheim Altarpiece, and the pit choir began to chant the “Stabat Mater” (this I kept in Latin), the lights faded down to only the specials on the Cross and the spot on Mary the Mother’s face. After several phrases, these faded out and the piece ended in black and silence.

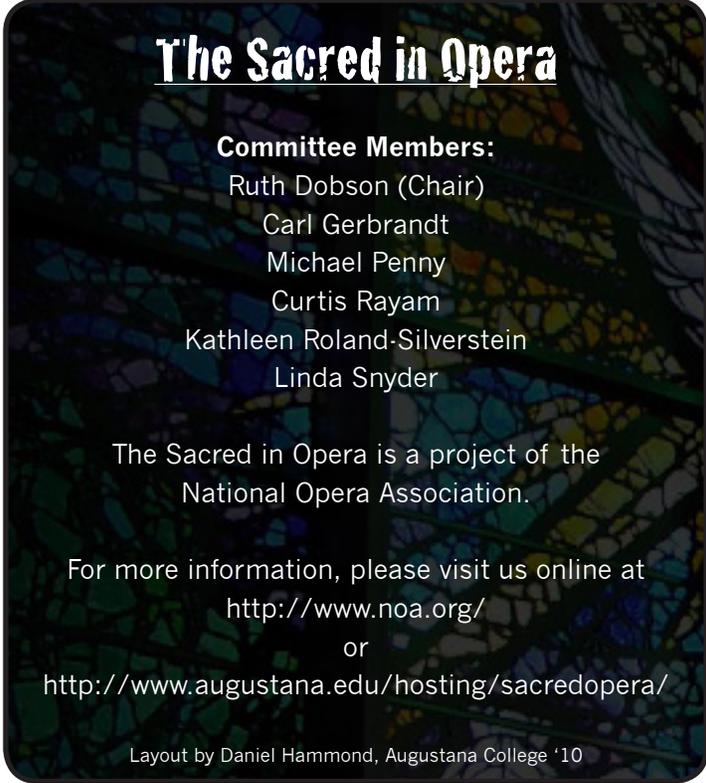
The cast remained skeptical right up to opening night. They didn’t like the video. They didn’t believe anyone would care about a piece in which there was almost no stage action. (And I realized how visual this generation truly is when I suggested it would be no different from listening to a radio drama, like the Met broadcasts, or from buying and playing an audio CD of a stage work. It turned out that they had never done either.) They didn’t notice (as I had) that once the pressure of absolutely having to memorize the work was off and they stopped panicking and started just working instead, they had mostly memorized it anyway and hardly looked at the music in front of them. They were sure the whole thing was going to be a disaster. I airily assured them everything was going to be fine—but I was wondering myself how it would be received. Fortunately, during the show I couldn’t obsess about it—I had to play the medieval harp in the pit.

When the last couplet of the “Stabat Mater” died away in blackness, there was silence. And more silence. And still more silence. The pit was too far down for me to see any of the audience. The lighting board operator and the stage manager had been told to wait for applause to bring up the lights for bows—and they certainly did as they’d been told. The dark silence seemed so interminable, I actually began to wonder if the piece had flopped so badly that the audience all had left. The organist to my left looked at me quizzically, with his eyebrows raised all the way into his hairline. One of the chorus tenors whispered in my ear, “Maybe we should start clapping?” And then it began, a roar of applause—and, after the lights came up, hollering and whistling. It was the longest ovation I’ve ever experienced for an academic production—just as it once seemed it would never start, it then seemed difficult to stop. The cast was thunderstruck; weeks later they still were talking about how astonished they were that so many of their friends and relatives and neighbors and

## Opera and Women of the Bible (continued)

church members had liked best, of all things that evening, the chant drama. “But now I get it, what you meant about ‘radio drama,’ Dr. Zeller,” said one of them, “You have to put everything you’re saying into your voice; it’s just voice and text—you can’t just make some ideal tone and then hope the audience will figure out what it’s supposed to mean by what they see.” And then the capper: “I guess I should be trying to do that with everything I sing, huh?” Bingo—lesson learned.

I’m not sharing this story in order to pat myself on the back—in fact, as I’ve already related, I made a lot of mistakes and miscalculations and had a learning curve almost as steep as the students’ in putting on this show. What I hope to do in telling my story about our experience with the “sacred in opera” is to encourage others to explore the literature, also—for any of a number of reasons that may be good ones for you, too. You also may have students who want to, or who must for religious reasons, sing opera on sacred subjects. You also may work in an area where there is keen interest in sacred subjects and not so much in “opera”—it’s still a scary word for many. You also may have students you want to introduce to the musical style and dramatic conventions of Baroque opera in their native tongue without the added complication of Italian texts. You also may want to teach students the lesson of acting with only sung tone, as my students were surprised to learn to do with the plainchant of the *Planctus*. If so, I hope sharing the successes in our experience may inspire you to try something similar—and that sharing the pitfalls may achieve another of my principal pedagogical aims, which, as I constantly tell my voice students, is “to help you all avoid making the same stupid and time-consuming mistakes I once did!”



**The Sacred in Opera**

**Committee Members:**  
Ruth Dobson (Chair)  
Carl Gerbrandt  
Michael Penny  
Curtis Rayam  
Kathleen Roland-Silverstein  
Linda Snyder

The Sacred in Opera is a project of the  
National Opera Association.

For more information, please visit us online at  
<http://www.noa.org/>  
or  
<http://www.augustana.edu/hosting/sacredopera/>

Layout by Daniel Hammond, Augustana College '10

# PROGRAM

*Eve and Her Daughters: Opera and Women of the Bible*

An anthology of music-drama works featuring women from the Bible:

Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky: *Eve's Odds*

Camille Saint-Saëns: *Samson et Dalila* (excerpt)

George Frederick Handel: *Athalia* (excerpt)

George Frederick Handel: *Esther* (excerpt)

Anonymous (14<sup>th</sup> century): *Planctus Mariae*

Clayton State Opera, 26 and 27 March 2010

Produced and Directed by Kurt-Alexander Zeller

Video Art: Alan Xie

Costume Design: Kurt-Alexander Zeller

Lighting Design: Christa Chandler, MMI

Scenery Design and Construction: Bill Harrison and Christa Chandler, MMI

Technical Director: Don McCampbell, MMI

Musical Preparation: Alexander Benford and Kurt-Alexander Zeller

Rehearsal Pianist and Coach: Alexander Benford

*Eve and Her Daughters: Opera and Women of the Bible*

CAST

*Eve's Odds* (1997), by Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky

Eve	Melissa Callender
Adam	José Caballero
Snake	Salvatore LoCascio
Lilith	Lianna Williams
Bad Angel	Kelly Jarrard
Good Angel	Lindsey Martin

Angels : Amanda Pillatzki, Nicole Wilder, Naybu Fullman, Afolabi Giwa, Kyle Thomas

INTERMISSION (15 minutes)

Act II, scene 1, from *Samson et Dalila*, by Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Dalila	Lianna Williams
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Act I, scene 3, from *Athalia*, by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759)

Athalia, Queen of Judah	Lindsey Martin
Mathan, High Priest of Baal	José Caballero

Scenes 5 and 6 from *Esther*, by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759)

Friday, 26 March

Saturday, 27 March

Esther	Nicole Wilder	Melissa Callender
King Assuerus	José Caballero	José Caballero
Haman	Afolabi Giwa	Afolabi Giwa

INTERMISSION (15 minutes)

*The Lament of Mary (Planctus Mariae)*, 14<sup>th</sup>-century anonymous liturgical drama

Video installation for this production of *Planctus Mariae* created by Alan Xie

Friday, 26 March

Saturday, 27 March

Mary, the mother of Jesus	Lianna Williams	Lianna Williams
Mary Magdalene	Kelly Jarrard	Kelly Jarrard
Mary Jacobi	Amanda Pillatzki	Lindsey Martin
St. John	Salvatore LoCascio	Salvatore LoCascio

**ORCHESTRA**

**Alexander Benford, conductor**

<b>Flute:</b>	Lisa Bartholow	<b>Violin I:</b>	Allison James
<b>Oboe:</b>	Barbara Cook	<b>Violin II:</b>	Holly Bryan
<b>Clarinet:</b>	Kathy White	<b>Viola:</b>	Allyson Fleck
<b>Bassoon:</b>	Dan Worley	<b>Cello:</b>	Cynthia Sulko
<b>Trumpet:</b>	Yvonne Toll	<b>Bass:</b>	Bob Goin
<b>Horn I:</b>	Kathy Wood	<b>Theorbo:</b>	William Hearn
<b>Horn II:</b>	Amy Black	<b>Percussion:</b>	Kristin Lyman
<b>Trombone:</b>	Ed Nicholson	<b>Medieval harp:</b>	Kurt-Alexander Zeller

**Keyboard:** Alexander Benford and Susan Tusing

**PRODUCTION PERSONNEL**

**Stage Manager:** Christina Patterson  
**Scenery Construction:** Bill Harrison and Christa Chandler, MMI  
**Costume Construction:** Kurt-Alexander Zeller, Shaun Amos, Christina Howell, Celia Stanley, Opera Production class  
**Lighting Operator:** Christa Chandler, MMI  
**Opera Assistant:** Amanda Pillatzki

**SPECIAL THANKS TO**

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Dr. Susan Tusing (Head) and Ms. Delores Toothaker (Administrative Assistant), Clayton State University Department of Visual and Performing Arts

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