

The Sacred in Opera **December 2009**

In This Issue

In this newsletter, the SIO continues with the topic of staged oratorio, with interesting contributions about the staging of the St. John and St. Matthew Passions from Dr. Mozelle Clark Sherman and from conductor Dr. Keith Clark. We are also pleased to mention the performances of three sacred dramas recently presented in the US, *Esther*, by Hugo Weisgall, at New York City Opera, *Ruth*, by Philip Hagemann, also presented in New York City, and *Unfinished Sermons* by Maurice Saylor, premiered in Arlington, Virginia.

Our previous newsletters can be accessed on the NOA website under the Sacred in Opera initiative. Recent contributors to the newsletter are Allen Henderson, G. William Bugg, Carl Gerbrandt, Bruce Trinkley, and Susan Boardman. Topics have included discussions about performances and production requirements of several operas, including *Eve's Odds* (Bruce Trinkley and J. Jason Charnesky), *Only a Miracle* (Seymour Barab), *The Shepherd's Play*, *St. Nicholas*, and *Good King Wenceslas* (Richard James Shepherd), *A Gift of Song* and *The Night of the Star* (Mary Elizabeth Caldwell), *The Greenfield Christmas Tree* (Douglas Moore), *The Christmas Rose* (Frank Bridge), and in the last issue, the staging of oratorio, with special emphasis on Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

We are pleased to announce that Dr. Carl Gerbrandt will receive the lifetime achievement award in the area of sacred drama award in this area at the convention in Atlanta. The NOA presented the first award for lifetime achievement in this area to Evelyn Swensson in 2008.

The SIO welcomes contributions from any NOA members who have had experience producing, presenting, performing, composing, or conducting sacred drama. Plans for the future include setting up an SIO blog. Please send your articles and ideas directly to Ruth Dobson, Chair of the Sacred in Opera project, at dobsonr@pdx.edu.

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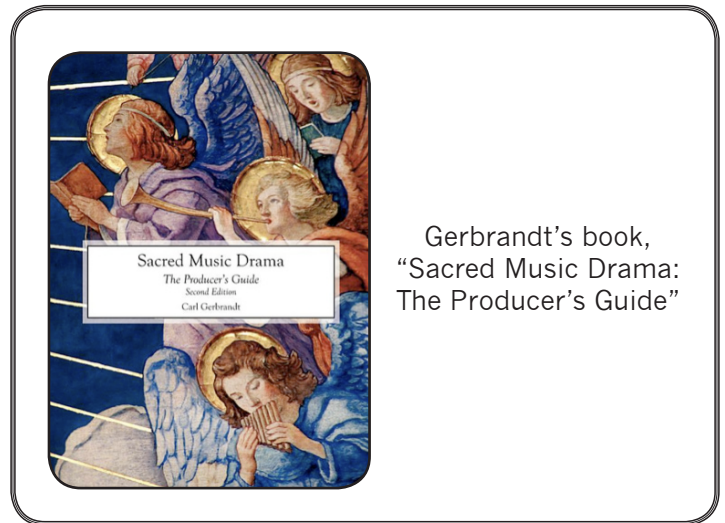
The SIO Lifetime Achievement Award

The Sacred in Opera project of the National Opera Association will honor Dr. Carl Gerbrandt for his lifetime achievement in the area of sacred music drama at the upcoming convention in Atlanta. In addition, Dr. Gerbrandt will be presenting the Sacred in Opera session at the convention on Saturday, January 9. This session will address the staging of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and will be entitled "Mendelssohn's *Elijah* - An Interactive Session". The session will feature baritone Gregory Gerbrandt as Elijah, Kathleen Roland Silverstein as the Widow, Christopher Meerdink as Obadiah, and Nancy Maria Balach as Jezebel. The audience will participate as the chorus. Dr. Gerbrandt will serve as narrator/stage director.

Carl Gerbrandt is Professor Emeritus of Voice and Director of Opera Theatre at the University of Northern Colorado. While he made his mark in the field of operatic performance, Dr. Gerbrandt has also presented many recitals nationwide, masterclasses, and choral workshops. Of his over seventy opera and oratorio roles, four have been American premieres. He has appeared as bass soloist in two professional filmings of Handel's *Messiah*. Dr. Gerbrandt made his professional directing debut at Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center in Mozart's *The Abduction From the Seraglio*. Additionally, his staged production of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* was filmed by PBS-TV with subsequent broadcasts. He has staged over 40 operas, has served on a distinguished panel of international artists, and has given a presentation on the "Opera/Music Theatre Cross-over Singer" before a national audience.

Prior to his work at UNC, Dr. Gerbrandt was opera director for Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, Southern Baptist Seminary where he began their Sacred Music Drama Program, and Tabor College. In 1990, Dr. Gerbrandt held a Visiting Scholar position at Cambridge University, England, where he completed his book, *Sacred Music Drama: the Producer's Guide*. The second edition has recently been published by AuthorHouse. He has also edited *The Songs of Louis Cheslock*, a collection of the complete songs

of the late American composer. In 2004, he was again invited to Cambridge University, this time as a Visiting Fellow researching Zarzuela.



Conductor of the heralded Greeley Chorale from 1987-present, Dr. Gerbrandt directed the auditioned 90-voice choir on five International concert tours and presented 10 world premieres. In Summer, 1996, he became the first guest conductor of the Oxford Academy Orchestra in Oxford, England, leading the orchestra and the Chorale in Mozart's Requiem to a near capacity audience in the world renowned Sheldonian Theatre. In 2005, he took the Chorale to Italy. Most noteworthy was a performance before the Pope in Rome, a High Mass in St. Peter's, and a performance of Mozart's Requiem with the Mozart Sinfonietta of Rome before a standing room only audience in the Pope's church, Chiesa di St. Ignazio.

Recently, Dr. Gerbrandt has lectured before the National Opera Association convention in New York City, served as opera stage director and voice teacher for the Vocal Arts Symposium in Colorado Springs, and is involved as guest stage director and conductor. He holds conducting and performance degrees from Tabor College and Wichita State University, and a doctoral degree in Voice Performance from Peabody Conservatory of Music of Johns Hopkins University. Post-doctoral studies in voice and opera were taken at Nord-westdeutsche Musikakademie in Detmold, Germany.

Staging Oratorio: Should Bach's Passions Be Staged Today?

Mozelle Clark Sherman, PhD

Founding Director Emeritus: Church Music Drama Theatre
Southern Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

In London, 2005, Robert Hugill speculated on the role of dramatic presentation in recent ENO's productions of Handel's *Semele* and *Jephtha*. Asking what the composer would have thought about his works being staged, Hugill stressed the importance of this consideration when discussing if any oratorio should be staged today.

Anthony Tommasini mused in the *Critic's Notebook*, New York Times, April 11, 2006: How different music history might have been had Bach been interested in opera. Bach wrote a promise to the Leipzig town electors that he would write church music, which would not last too long, and should be of a nature that would not make an operatic impression. Yet, in his *Passions* Bach composed stunning musical dramas while steering clear of opera per se. His scores abound with such visceral operatic sweep that stage directors periodically do stage them; e.g., *St. Matthew Passion*, directed by Jonathan Miller at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1997 and 2001.

In a performance of the *St. John Passion* at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, April, 1984, the singers in the roles of Jesus, Peter and Pilate wore robes and acted out their parts on a stage, while the choir of men, women and children was divided with 32 members on each side of the stage. A highly-acclaimed staging, directed by Deborah Warner for the ENO at the London Coliseum, April 12, 2000, presented a compelling, convincing and moving alternative to the standard concert format of the *St. John*. Seen as a milestone in opposition to the usual constraints of British liturgical music, her production in English simulated a form of popular worship that enlisted theatricality and musical spectacle to deepen audience responses.

In deference to the aforementioned examples, may I tell of two, different, staged Passion performances that I directed?

On Good Friday, April 20, 1984, with the Morningside Presbyterian Church and Orchestra, Phoenix, AZ, we mounted a *St. Matthew Passion* in similar form to the Cathedral of St. John's *St. John*. With a traditional raked and robed chorus in a semi-circle around a central orchestra and conductor, the biblically-costumed soloists performed as singing actors in a "stage" space between the conductor and the church congregation. To be free to act, the soloists performed this long and complex work from memory, a feat in itself. Their scenes were realistic in intent, but became a frozen 3-dimensional painting at the moments when the choir would come alive to invade the scene with their comments or musings. Lighting added to the color and focus desired within the stage area. Extra costs of this production were zero: the orchestra was already a part of the church program; the church choir wore their robes, yet reacted physically when appropriate; the costumes were made by members of the church from donated materials and time; the soloists were church members who believed in the program and supported it with their time and talents. The lighting was installed in the auditorium, and was enhanced by a memorial donation for the purchase of four ellipsoidals that would be used again in the future.

Similarity with the later Warner production can be found in our larger dramatic presentation of the *St. John's Passion* in the Alumni Memorial Chapel, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, on May 7, 1987. Peopled with a Greek-like chorus of 200, an orchestra of 78, and 12 soloists within four stage spaces, the direction of this plan was determined by the following considerations:

1. What was the spiritual purpose of doing it? What 20th-century needs could be met by blending the Scripture, the music, and contemporary theatrical staging possibilities?



2. What were the historical and musical limitations for such a staging? What did Bach's music already say; what did the church of his day say?
3. What "truths" were to be found that could enhance the glory of Bach's music without disturbing his integrity or the audience's sensibility?
4. What were the four main divisions of Bach's drama? Could we use them to present a compendium of time from the biblical story, through the 18th-century German liturgy, to current day images?
5. Could we expect all of the participants to memorize the entire work? What authentic drama could enable the chorus to be on book, and yet be a part of the scene(s)?
6. How much would such an undertaking cost in time, energy, manpower, and money?

Since the Church Music Drama Theatre was the only such program on any Seminary campus, it was necessary to be clear in the answer to these questions. The issue of validity was mute, as much of the text of *St. John* is pure Scripture, but with a budget of \$5000 for the entire year that encompassed two main stage productions, it was necessary to plan the feasibility of going forward carefully. Carl Gerbrandt had staged the *Elijah* previously with success, and the overall mood was in favor for staging a *Passion*. No recruitment was needed, as the Seminary maintained a full orchestra and oratorio chorus dedicated to an opera performance. Student and community soloists volunteered for work with our theatre on a regular basis. The set itself and additional lighting would be the main cost, as technical personnel were already on staff with the Theatre, and our biblical costume wardrobe could be enlarged as needed.

Dramatically, the Passion was divided into four obvious parts:

One:

The Evangelist—the storyteller—the 18th-century German pastor, who stood at an authentic (borrowed from the SBTS museum) pulpit in upstage center, only to sit in his matching pulpit chair when not singing. Since the SBTS Chapel has a four-manual organ in dead center of the tiered choir loft, the "Bach" organist was also dressed in 18th-century attire, and was housed directly under the pulpit.

Two:

The biblical story—the costumed actors of the Crucifixion dialogue, who filled the entire stage right in three tiers around a large cross; sometimes they acted in pantomime, sometimes (Jesus and Pilate) sang as their bodies displayed the plot. All would freeze as the lighting changed to reveal . . .

Three:

The commentators—contemporary-dressed soloists (nurse, farmer, politician, teacher, firefighter, mother, businessman, actress)—who came from various points of focus within the audience to express their response to the scene. Walking through the frozen biblical characters, each singer only sang one solo to end his/her path on one of the three levels of stage left that spread downward from a large, black/white abstract church window, balancing the cross of Jesus standing on stage right. These set pieces created a triangle with the Evangelist's pulpit. Since much of Bach's music is "busy," it was important to keep these characters simple and clear. They moved slowly through the wax-like prop pieces, past the organist, and into their church—today's reality displayed through their arias.

Four:

The Chorales—arguably the most important musical aspect of Bach's music. Here, the chorus became more than commentators; they now became ardent Christians and deeply devout Bachians. The choir was divided evenly on either side of the orchestra seated on the main floor front across the auditorium. Chorus and orchestra were dressed in black with maroon collars. Muted stand lights and individual pin lights (a gift from a town business) provided acceptable lighting when stage and house lights were dimmed. As a Finale, the entire soloist/actor cast, save that of Jesus, stepped out of their roles to join as their living selves with the chorus and orchestra in final praise to the Almighty God. By this time, a stone representing each scene had been added to a funeral pyre, hiding the central

organ, on which the lifeless body of Christ was laid.

In search for a companion to “hearing” the Chorales, we determined that the major impetus of this music was spiritual beauty. What drama contained spiritual beauty without interfering with personal devotion? The answer was clear. Fine Christian Art. Six months of research yielded over 300 Fine Art renditions of the Crucifixion—from Renaissance masters to American Indian, Eskimo and Island characters. These massive slide images were thrown, not on screens, but on the walls surrounding the dimly-lighted stage of actors. It seemed as if they came from heaven itself.

Were these undertakings successful? Yes. Were there any who bemoaned a degradation of the composer’s vision? A few. Would I do it again? Yes, under the right circumstances and conditions. *The Seven Last Words of Christ: A Sacred Cantata* by Theodore Dubois is one of the easiest smaller works to stage and meets invariably with success. The length of a complete oratorio compels resources and time. As with the Bible itself, a stage director must also consider personal love and commitment that musicians feel for pure musical forms. Can you imagine invading a Wagnerian audience with “theatrical advances” in the rendition of *Das Rheingold*? It would be emotionally difficult to find an acceptable staging of the *Messiah* for this reason. Audiences feel that they own *Messiah*. Portions, such as the soprano recitatives sung by an angel, can easily be incorporated into a worship service, but Bach and Mendelssohn may be the better answer for a full-fledged mounting of an oratorio, for no other reason than fewer people in your prospective audience will previously know their Passions and oratorios.

Biography

Mozelle (Clark) Sherman, Founding Director Emeritus, Church Music Drama Theatre, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, is an award-winning stage director, lyricist, actress, author, and voice teacher with distinguished experience in civic, university and regional theatre of the United States and abroad. Dr. Sherman’s 60-year career and work are acknowledged as being dedicated to the building of a dynamic relationship between native lyric theatre, its artists, and its community. Her academic degrees are: University of Wisconsin-Madison: Ph.D. in Communications (highest honors) (Theatre and Drama) (1971); Indiana University: M.M. in Voice Performance (1955); Bethany College (Kansas): B.M. (summa cum laude) in Voice Performance (1953) University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point: Post-Doctoral Studies in Theatre Tech (1976, 1977); Grand Canyon University: Post-Doctoral Studies in Arts Administration and Computer Technology (1981, 1983); Baylor University: Post-Doctoral Studies in Robert Browning’s Musical Style (1991). She has taught on university faculties in Texas, Arizona, Wisconsin, Brazil, Panama, Kentucky and Kansas. She is a member of the Kentucky Opera roster and is its resident Dialogue Coach. She has directed regional opera and pageantry throughout North and South America. Also, in the Americas and Europe, Dr. Sherman is noted for her one-woman Women of the Bible dramatic presentations of over 80 biblical and contemporary woman leaders, and for workshops and seminars in the history and usage of the religious arts in worship: drama, music, the fine arts, and a combination of all three. She is co-owner and CEO with her husband, Dr. Louis L. Sherman, of the S & S Agency, and its subsidiary, Script & Score Publications, Louisville, Kentucky.

She has teamed with composers Ted Nichols and Phillip Landgrave to write the book, lyrics and production for large sacred lyrical stage works: with Landgrave—*The Light!* (2006); with Nichols—*Esther, the Queen* (1987); *Seventh Trumpet* (2004); *Word of Honor* (2005); *Rendezvous with Destiny* (2007-9). She is the author of privately-published books; e.g., *Dictionary of the Christian Arts*, *The Great Teachers of Singing*; *An Annotated Encyclopedia of the Christian Musical in the English Speaking Church*; *They Still Speak: Interviews with Great Artists of the 20th-Century Lyric Stage*, *173 Dramatic Scripts for 21st-Century Worship*, *133 Monologs for 21st-Century Worship*, as well as collections of over a thousand dramatic scripts and numerous journal/magazine articles. She translated three operas into English from their original languages, realized for piano the orchestration of another, and was designer of the production for *Two From Galilee* (Word, Inc.). She has been named to Who’s Who in America since 2000, and was named Outstanding Teacher of America in 1978. Other awards include the Orpheus award (Sinfonia), Gold Award (S.A.I.), E.B. Fred Fellowship (U.W.), State of Texas grants (two) for theatre excellence, and the Armstrong/Browning Grant for writing. Dr. Sherman is married, has two grown children, four grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. Her hobbies are historical research, pets, antiques, and playing percussion in Southern’s Symphony Orchestra.

Staging Oratorio Keith Clark

The fast-moving drama of the *St. John Passion* made it by far the best suited for “operatic” presentation. I’ve staged it twice. The first was a modernist production with John portrayed as a television reporter (accompanied by a cameraman) and the Evangelist as newscaster. We used live and pre-recorded video as part of the television “News.” Pilate was a powerful government man, the turba choruses portrayed soldiers, cops, street people, etc. It was effective in bringing the Gospel into confrontation with realities of the turbulent social events in the late 1960s.

These may sound like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell* or Bernstein’s *Mass* which were all composed around the same time, but they were more serious and powerful - certainly due to the difference between J.S. Bach and Andrew Lloyd Weber. (Although I consider *Jesus Christ Superstar* a serious piece, and one of the most influential religious works of its time. Without it, there would have been no Bernstein *Mass* or other use of Rock and Pop music to express serious religious themes. The original album is a classic. The show has been wrecked by too many bad high school productions and all the commercial religious schlock that followed, but it occupies an important place in music history.)

My other St. John production was a series of Tableaux vivants - as a cross between formal Japanese Noh drama and Greek tragedy. Since the author of *The Fourth Gospel* was so influenced by the Greek dramas that were familiar to all educated 1st Century Jews in the Roman Empire, we tried to pattern it after a Sophocles drama. Very static and intense, but none of the on-stage violence which marked our first production. This was more sophisticated my first attempt - I’d like to do it again sometime.

I’ll admit that I copied a terrific San Francisco production of the *Matthew Passion* - also as tableaux in flowing white Greek-inspired costumes and the set entirely made of billowing parachute material. Was very beautiful, but not as theatrical as the St. John productions. My recollection is that this was more of an “enhanced” concert performance during Holy Week.

While a UCLA student, I directed one of Los Angeles’s most active church music programs, which provided opportunity and budget to experiment with such things, and being assistant conductor of the Roger Wagner Chorale, I had access to fine singers. Our “Alternative Worship Committee” included the dancer Marge Champion, Steve Allen, and several writers who came up with great ideas, and we had access to many creative people. We produced a series using theater, dance and music in religious settings. We staged shorter Bach cantatas, *Messiah*, etc. with dance, etc. I also did the 12th Century *Maastricht Sepulcher Play* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (first performance in 800 years) and *The Play Of Daniel* back in the late 1960s; both are Medieval music dramas that Britten used as the pattern for his church operas. I’ve done the three Britten church operas, too - excellent pieces that deftly combine amateur and children with professional musicians and don’t need sets. I would highly recommend them.

I’d be very interested in seeing a staged production of *Elijah*. I’ve never considered it a convincing music theater piece - it moves slowly and the dramatic narrative is a bit literal and Victorian for my personal theatric taste. I don’t find it Mendelssohn at his best, but I’d be interested in seeing a production.

I can recommend some newer operas with serious religious themes:

1. Erling Wold’s *A Little Girl Dreams Of Taking The Veil*, which I’ve wanted to do for some time.

Very manageable forces: 3 singers, 2 actors, and 7-piece orchestra.

Based on Max Ernst novel translated from French. Excellent recording by the Paul Drescher Ensemble:
<http://www.dresherensemble.org/recordings/ensemblerecording.html>

Erling Wold is an interesting Bay Area composer who has written several other religious pieces, including the opera *Sub Pontio Pilato*. You can read about his operas at: <http://www.erlingwold.com/index.html>

2. James MacMillian, probably the most important living Roman Catholic composer, premiered his opera *The Sacrifice* at Welsh National Opera last year. I have not heard it yet, but I understand that it was a big hit. He is a fine composer of very beautiful sacred music.
3. Certainly the most prominent dead Roman Catholic composer of our time was Olivier Messiaen, whose *St. Francis* won't be done by many churches or opera workshops. Five hours long and requiring huge forces, it's the most important religious opera since Schoenberg's *Moses und Aaron*, the greatest religious opera of the 20th Century, and probably the greatest since *Parsifal*.
4. Regarding "big operas" with religious themes, don't forget Penderecki's operatic masterpiece *The Devils of Loudon* - very theatric and doable by big universities with lots of theater equipment and percussion instruments. IU opera did it years ago, and I've always wanted to do it in a big academic setting. Very powerful, and its themes of superstition, intolerance, and religious "terrorism" are very timely. Each incarnation of this story are important: Aldous Huxley's nonfiction book, Ken Russell's classic film with Vanessa Redgrave and music by Peter Maxwell Davies (another composer of much fine sacred music), and Penderecki's opera.
5. If somebody wants to make history, I doubt that Anton Rubenstein's *Sacred Opera In 1 Act: "The Tower of Babel"* has been done in the USA. The vocal score is available at the Harvard Library and can be downloaded free.
6. I wish I had seen the recent production of Handel's *Samson* in Victoria B.C., which set the drama in 1946 Palestine. It presented Samson as a 20th Century Zionist suicide bomber who destroyed the British headquarters at the King David Hotel, just as the Hebrew hero Samson killed himself and thousands of Philistines when he pulled down the temple in the Old Testament. Casting the Biblical hero as a modern Zionist terrorist was probably controversial, but it was also historically accurate and a very creative use of old music to illuminate the burning issues of our time. (He's a hero to us, but I'm sure the Philistines considered Samson the Osama bin Laden of their times.)

Biography

KEITH CLARK is Founding Music Director & Conductor of the Astoria Music Festival, which recently completed its seventh season of presenting opera, orchestra, and chamber music at the historic Liberty Theater in Astoria, Oregon. He is Principal Guest Conductor of the Siberian Chamber Orchestra in Omsk, Russia, Conductor of the Amadeus Opera Ensemble in Salzburg, and Founding Conductor Laureate of the Pacific Symphony in Southern California. Recently, he directed the U.S. State Department's American Music Festival in Chisinau, Moldova, conducted *The Marriage of Figaro* in Salzburg and *La Traviata*, Lucia di Lammermoor, and *Rigoletto* for Portland SummerFest; and in the fall of 2007 led a highly-acclaimed first Russian production of *West Side Story* at the famed Globus Theater in Novosibirsk. He is featured on over thirty recordings with the London Philharmonic, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Slovak State Philharmonic, Les Concerts du Monde Baroque Orchestra, Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra, Korean Symphony Orchestra, and the Pacific Symphony Orchestra. His CD's have received Grammy nominations, "Record of the Year" and "Classical Hall of Fame" awards, and Billboard Bestseller listings. A resident of Vienna and London for a decade, he appeared in Vienna's Musikverein and Konzerthaus, Salzburg's Mozarteum, Royal Philharmonic Hall and other historic sites and concertized with leading soloists, among them violinists Menuhin, Szeryng, Milstein and Ricci, pianists Arrau, Gutierrez, and Brown, cellists Starter, Rose and Harrell, and singers Thomas Hampson, Anna Moffo, Roberta Peters, Dorothy Kirsten, and Hans Hotter. He founded Southern California's Pacific Symphony Orchestra and built it into the nation's fastest growing professional orchestra, bringing it to international attention through recordings, broadcasts, and appearances on BBC and American television. He holds a Ph. D. in Music Theory from UCLA.



Recent Performances Of Sacred Drama In The Us : *Ruth*

Philip Hagemann

You might like to know that my one-act chamber opera, *Ruth*, was given a concert performance this past Sunday evening (11/8) at a lovely church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan by the Metro Chamber Orchestra (which presented my adaptation of Debussy's *The Prodigal Son (L'enfant Prodigue)* last season. The orchestra is conducted by its founder, Philip Nuzzo, and is made up largely of substitute players from the Met, Philharmonic and ballet orchestras. They're really quite good. The performance was quite fine and was recorded. I haven't heard the recording yet but my fingers are crossed that it will turn out well. When the idea of an opera on the story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz first occurred to me and I began researching the story, I learned from several friends who were ministers or students of theology that the Book of Ruth is an anomaly in the Old Testament. Unlike most other books, women play important roles. (One of the most unusual aspects is that the women of the village name the son of Ruth and Boaz--elsewhere always a male privilege.) Usually they are chattel or appendages to the male characters. But here they have wills of their own--though of course they are always aware of their need for male protection. Scholars say the book was almost excluded from the Bible; what may have earned its inclusion was that it demonstrated that God's love extended to all peoples--women, foreigners, everyone--and that it provided the genealogy of David.

The Women's Chorus in the opera has a double aspect. Sometimes it acts as a "Greek Chorus", narrating the story directly to the audience, and other times portrays in a more conventional way the women of the village. The Stage Director will have to ensure that this double duty is clear. Since the Women's Chorus is always in three parts (SSA), its size should be in multiples of three--probably six or nine or twelve singers. Having said that, however, the most recent production a few weeks ago in a church in Manhattan used, to great effect, only a trio of singers.

The Men's Chorus, on the other hand, makes a brief appearance at the end and always portrays men of the village. Its size should be complementary to the size of the Women's Chorus.

The scenes are very fluid--cinematic, one could say. Therefore, there should be an absolute minimum of scenery, probably just a backdrop suggesting first a barren landscape and then a field of grain. Buildings and furniture seem unnecessary. Lighting, however, can

add immeasurably to the changes of scene and mood. (From the composer, Philip Hagemann)

(The following performance information about the opera *Ruth* comes from *Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide, Second Edition*, by Carl Gerbrandt, published by AuthorHouse)

Music by Philip Hagemann (b. 1942).

A one-act chamber opera with libretto in English by the composer, based on events from the Old Testament book of Ruth and other Biblical passages.

First performance (concert version) was held in December 2001, by the Rockland County Choral Society, Suffern, NY: Other early performances include New York Singing Teachers Association, Composers Showcase, Rose Building, Lincoln Center (one scene) in May 2002. The staged premiere was given on October 17, 2003 at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL; November 2003 at Trinity Church, Mt. Vernon, IN, and Epiphany Lutheran Church, Carbondale, IL.

Considerable chromaticism and straying tonalities are found during times of chaos and sadness while more traditional harmonies are used to paint those texts which are positive and express happiness or hope. Vocal lines are mostly lyric and vocally conceived though chromatic and only occasionally disjunct. Accompaniments frequently doubles the vocal line. A few arias and set numbers exist along with some accompanied recitatives; continuous music throughout. Female chorus sections are very dissonant and difficult--could be done with a small ensemble. Three short orchestral interludes separate the scenes.

One act with several connected scenes. Set in the lands of Moab and Judah in Biblical times. Duration: ca. 45 minutes

Major Roles: Naomi (mezzo-soprano---top A4), a woman of Judah; Ruth (soprano---top B4), Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi; Boaz (baritone---top F#3, opt. G#3), a prominent landowner of Judah.

Minor Roles: Orpah (soprano), Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi; A servant of Boaz (tenor---top C4), short role with high tessitura; Amnon (tenor), another land owner of Judah.

Chorus: Women's Chorus of SSA—sometimes acts as a narrator of "Greek Chorus." And at times women of Judah. Men's Chorus of TB portray villagers.

Orchestration: ob, bsn, hrn, hp, timp, perc, strings

Synopsis: Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, have lost their husbands. In her sorrow, Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah that she must return to Judah, her homeland, and instructs them to return to their Moabite families. Ruth in a show of deep love and loyalty to Naomi insists on accompanying Naomi to Judah with the well-known words of her aria "Whither thou goest, I will go." Arriving in Judah and in need of sustenance, Ruth works faithfully and relentlessly in the fields of Boaz, gleaning leftover grain. The unmarried Boaz is so impressed by the humble and remarkably loyal Ruth, that he pursues and takes her as his wife.

Materials, from the Composer:

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Notes: Best performed in a house of worship. The composer suggests that scenery be kept to a minimum using perhaps only a backdrop which suggests first the barren landscape and then a field of grain. Buildings are unnecessary with the use of minimal furniture. Lighting could greatly enhance the changes of mood and scenes. Musical interludes between scenes are brief and continuous, allowing for minimal scenery changes. This is a challenging score requiring well-trained singers in the lead roles.

Esther

by Hugo Weisgall

NEW YORK CITY OPERA recently presented Hugo Weisgall's *Esther* at the David H. Koch Theater. Here are excerpts from the November 9 New York Times music review by Anthony Tommasini, classical music critic for the NY Times.

"With the New York City Opera's production of Hugo Weisgall's "*Esther*", this essential company, teetering on the brink of extinction not long ago, announced it was back. Not just up and running, but exuding purpose and confidence. Based on the biblical story of the Persian empire's Jewish queen, "*Esther*" was given its premiere by the City Opera in 1993. This serious, complex and flinty work was an unlikely triumph with audiences and critics. The opera's authenticity and sheer theatricality broke down resistance to its gritty atonal language. When Weisgall appeared for a curtain call, he received a frenzied ovation. "*Esther*", his 10th opera, would be his final one. He died four years later at 84.

After those two performances in 1993, "*Esther*", with a libretto by Charles Kondek, disappeared. Enter George Steel, City Opera's new general manager and artistic director. In devising a limited comeback season for this company with a history of championing new works, Mr. Steel has said that beginning with "*Esther*" could not be more fitting. Doubters in the opera world derided his decision. Yet ticket demand has been so great that another performance has been added. Christopher Mattaliano, the director of the premiere production, has refurbished that staging, which used filmed images projected on scrims and screens. This revival uses richly detailed video and other innovations. The orchestra and chorus, conducted by the company's music director, George Manahan, sounded completely comfortable with Weisgall's uncompromising score". (Anthony Tomassini, New York Times)

Unfinished Sermons

by Maurice Saylor

A new one-act opera, *Unfinished Sermons* – a parable for church performance, music by Maurice Saylor and libretto by Phillip Grace, premiered on Friday, November 13, 2009, at 7PM with a repeat performance Saturday, November 14, 2009, at 7PM at Walker Chapel United Methodist Church in Arlington, VA.

This opera represents a narrative that is being worked out in countless congregations across the country. It is the story of two people - one grounded in tradition, the other excited by new conceptions of faith. There is also a third voice, the chorus. On the simplest, human level, it represents the spirit and wisdom of the everyday faithful, who are often caught between the contentions of these two polarities - yet through their steadfast and simple devotion hold possible clues to a resolution.

On another level, the chorus also represents the ageless voice of wisdom, reminding us that there is a greater ground of faith which holds us all together in this grand tension -- (perhaps intentionally?) -- while affirming timeless truths. In support of the work's theme, the score blends new musical ideas with traditional sounds. The tension of this parable - like the real tension felt by many today - is over who truly holds the legitimate interpretation of the faith.

The argument is the struggle to find the truth. The argument itself is a sign of life. (Description by Maurice Saylor).

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.

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