



The Sacred in Opera **February 2008**

Evelyn Swensson Honored with the First NOA “Sacred in Opera Award”

NOA honored Evelyn Swensson for her long-time work in this field during the recent convention in Los Angeles. Evelyn’s work in this field was featured in the NOA Notes last spring in an interview with John Pfautz, the former Chairman of the SIO project. Her work spans 40 years, and includes productions of Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde*, Debussy’s *Prodigal Son*, Puccini’s *Suor Angelica* and many, many others. She was the Director of the Family Opera Theater for Opera Delaware in addition to years of work as a Minister of Music. She has been a presenter at the American Guild of Organists National Convention and is listed in “Who’s Who in America,” “Who’s Who in Music,” and “Who’s Who in Entertainment.”

Evelyn is a graduate of Hollins University in Virginia and Westchester University in Pennsylvania which honored her in 1993, naming her a distinguished alumna of the University. Her musicals, published by “Dramatic Publishing,” have been performed across the United States, as well as in Canada and New Zealand.



-Evelyn Swensson-
Picture Courtesy of
“Dramatic Publishing”

After the convention, Evelyn Swensson sent this note of thanks to the NOA:

Thank you for honoring me with NOA’s first “Sacred in Opera Award.” I almost wish I were just beginning, for 50 years ago Carl Gerbrandt had not published his Producer’s Guide and I had to make my own list. After producing major works on his list by Berlioz, Britten, Caldwell, Debussy, Hovhaness, Martinu, McCabe, Mendelssohn, Menotti, Owen, Pasatieri, Paulus, and Thompson, we staged parts of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio, The Other Wise Man - Paul Nordoff, A Day for Dancing - Lloyd Pfautsch, Laud to the Nativity - Ottorino Respighi, and The Last Supper from R. Thompson’s Passion According to St. Luke (Maunday Thursday).

Our two largest productions were King David by Honegger and Hodie by Ralph Vaughan Williams. For Dubois’ Seven Last Words, the choir, in black, became the crowd, singing and shouting from memory; Mother Mary sang the opening solo, and all solos by Jesus, tenor and baritone, were sung by one male in white. For Sister Angelica by Puccini, we invited real nuns from the Catholic Church next door to sing with us. For Christmas services we staged Luke 2:1-20 using different musical settings each year. As the minister read the scripture, soloists and choir sang to music by Beck, Bitgood, Lovelace, Kile Smith, and others.

Carry on! Dare to be different! Stage cantatas and oratorios if you can find the talent to do them well. People in the pews will thank you. Best wishes to all of you who believe in The Sacred in Opera.

-Evelyn Swensson-

Sacred in Opera Spotlight: *Eve's Odds*

For our first edition of the SIO newsletter, we are taking an in-depth look at the chamber opera *Eve's Odds*, with music by Bruce Trinkley and libretto by J. Jason Charnesky. Commissioned and premiered by Penn State University Opera Theater, *Eve's Odds* is based on the biblical story of the "first sin," or the serpent's temptation of Eve and Adam. The first performances in 1997 were in the Pavilion Theatre at Penn State. It was conducted by Gregory Woodbridge and staged by NOA member Susan Boardman, Director of PSU Opera Theatre. Additional performances have been directed by Nick Managano at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, Jason Hiester at Ohio Wesleyan University, JoElyn Wakefield-Wright at Syracuse, and John Pfautz at Augustana College. We hope that this in-depth look at *Eve's Odds* will encourage more performances of this work.

In our SIO newsletter we will feature many of the works currently being performed by our members. We encourage you all to look into the vast repertory available in this field, works which can be effectively presented in both theaters and in houses of worship. Please let us know about productions of sacred drama that you have been involved with, the challenges you encountered, the audience reception, the venues, etc.

We want to hear from all of you! Contact Ruth Dobson at dobsonr@pdx.edu.

Information from *Sacred Music Drama: The Producer's Guide, Second Edition*, by Carl Gerbrandt, AuthorHouse, p. 321-323

Music: Bruce Trinkley

Libretto: J. Jason Charnesky

One Act: The setting is the Garden of Eden, early in the morning of the second week.

Duration: 45 minutes

Can be presented in either a theatre or a house of worship. The production requirements are quite simple as are the musical and dramatic issues. This is a wonderfully funny and effective work.

Characters:

Eve, Soprano

The Snake, Baritone

Adam, High Baritone or Tenor

Lilith, Mezzo-Soprano

Guardian Angel, Coloratura Soprano (minor role)

Bad Angel, Mezzo-Soprano (minor role)

Chorus - SSA

The chorus should always be visible but never directly part of the action on stage.

Orchestration: Chamber Orchestra

Music materials are available from either the composer Bruce Trinkley (wbt1@psu.edu) or librettist, Jason Charnesky (jjc10@psu.edu).

Plot Synopsis:

A chorus of angelic voices sings a stately Alleluia. As they sing, they become more spirited and raucous, swaying in a wholly un-Anglican manner. Suddenly realizing their lack of dignity, they regroup and end the number in the best of High Church tradition! Eve appears, singing of the joys of this beautiful morning.

She is suddenly joined by her friend, the Snake who has a sibilant problem with his esses! He sings a ballad about free will and assures Eve that the forbidden apple is not dangerous but will give her the very characteristics of God. Adam interrupts the conversation with his "naming song," explaining that he has had a very busy day naming everything he sees and feels, including the new word "danger." He doesn't know what it means, but he is certain that he and Eve will soon be in it. The Snake suggests that perhaps "danger" is the name of the new wardrobe that Adam has just built for Eve. The three play games by getting into and out of "danger" (the wardrobe)!

Unexpectedly, Lilith, Adam's first wife enters, singing a habañera about her affair with Adam. Eve knew nothing about Lilith until now, and she flies into a rage and decides to eat the apple. Interrupting her, Adam exclaims that "he was waiting for the right moment" to tell her about Lilith. He then sings a love song and the couple is reconciled, ending the scene happily, but, the Bad Angel appears, tempting Eve further with her seductive "cha-cha-cha." The Guardian Angel appears just in time entreating (with her coloratura cavatina and cabaletta) Adam and Eve to strive for higher things. Pandemonium lets loose on stage until finally Eve shuts everybody up with her final decision to eat the apple. She does so! The chorus sings a blues of fate. Adam follows his heart, saying he will side with Eve, and he too eats the apple. Adam and Eve's eyes are opening and they name some new things: "nakedness," "eternity," and "maternity." They also go about inventing the middle class. As God is heard walking in the garden, the couple goes to face the unknown future. The chorus concludes with the statement: "God only knows."

Note from the Composer of *Eve's Odds* Bruce Trinkley

Jason and I were drawn to the creation story for several reasons. The first one was practical - we were looking to write a piece that had a number of roles for female voices and fewer for men's voices, because at the tender age of most singers in college, the women are vocally relatively mature, whereas the men are mostly in the baritone or "second tenor" category with relatively few deep basses or tenors with dependable higher notes. Secondly, the biblical stories are generally well-known. And as such, the characters are both a challenge to depict and very rewarding if successfully brought to life on stage. And it was also great fun to re-imagine these characters from the perspective we have now, with several thousand years of history intervening. We had great fun creating the three principals: Eve, the Snake, and Adam, and great empathy in depicting Eve's mounting dilemma. But we also enjoyed the challenge of creating the secondary characters on either side of her deliberations: Lilith, the Bad Angel, and the Guardian Angel.



And we hope in the end, that the piece informs and illuminates the challenges that we all face in life.

We have been thrilled and pleased, and frequently delightfully surprised by the many different approaches that directors, set and costume designers, and casts have brought to the production. We are humbled and honored that *Eve's Odds* has been given such attention, care and imagination.

Bruce Trinkley, Picture Courtesy of Yelton Rhodes Music

Below: Augustana College's 2007 production of *Eve's Odds*



The First Production of *Eve's Odds* Susan Boardman, Director

Our production was not a religious statement. If anything, it was a political statement, about Eve's decision to be a whole person, to have many experiences in life, and to not be safe. I saw it as a feminist opera. We had the distinct advantage of working closely with Jason, the librettist, who also, I believe, saw this as a clear decision on Eve's part, to immerse herself in life. The other two operas in the tryptich - *Dido Decides* (now, *The Golden Apple*), and *Cleo* - were all on this same note. All involved strong women making strong life decisions. In that way, *Eve's Odds* was not religious, unless one has a much broader definition of that term than usual.

Our production was rather childlike, and at the same time, sensual. We had a wardrobe and boxes painted like children's blocks all over the playing area, which had a number of levels and was in a thrust theatre. The tree was simply apples hung on green fishing hooks suspended from the ceiling. The choir of angels stood up at the audience level on risers, dressed in white robes with golden halos. And all other characters wore body suits, so as to look almost nude. Adam and Eve had flesh-colored suits, twined with greenery. The snake's suit was green, the bad angel's was black, the good angel's was white with a policeman's hat, and Lilith's was brown, like the desert. All were barefoot. There was choreography and much movement. Lilith was incredibly sexy, the snake was insinuating and sensual, and Adam and Eve were innocent in their nakedness - it all worked.

Several years later, we did scenes from *Eve's Odds* for a NATS summer workshop on American art song and opera held at Penn State. Penn State faculty members and graduate students played the roles. This time Adam and Eve were dressed in pink shorts and T-shirts, and the snake in green sweat pants and T shirt. Lilith was also in brown, but in a skirt and shirt. It also worked.



Retelling the Bible in Song: A Brief Study of the Libretto of *Eve's Odds* F. Rachel Magdalene

Biblical stories have been told and retold for millennia. Because writing was difficult in the ancient world and many biblical texts began in oral form, the biblical stories often leave significant gaps in terms of plot line, setting, characterization, and so forth. Consequently, the biblical reader typically supplies some material in order to make sense of the piece. For example, in Genesis 22, where Abraham intends to sacrifice Sarah's beloved Isaac, we learn nothing about her knowledge and response. In reading the story, the reader is invited to ponder Sarah's role in the story. Such speculation is an act of interpretation which the story calls forth. Not only must the reader fill in obvious gaps in the story, but often he or she must supply characters' motives and tease out the theological and ethical message. In so doing, the reader may supplement the original text with other biblical texts, insights from their religious tradition, and/or his or her own imagination. Such interpretation brings the biblical reader into relationship and engagement with the text, the people, and God of ancient Israel. Therein lies the religious power of the Bible. Those who retell biblical stories in new form also interpret the biblical story in much the same way. Through such retellings, they pass on our biblical heritage so that it continues to edify, educate, inspire, and entertain us. Importantly, such interpreters often weave in contemporary cultural or sociological elements in their interpretations to make the stories fresh and relevant in the present day. This has helped keep the Bible alive for religious communities for thousands of years.

Biblical retellings, therefore, are an essential aspect of the power of the Bible. In fact, the Bible's long history of retellings began within the Old Testament, itself. Later parts of the Old Testament interpreted earlier parts. Between the two biblical periods and into the New Testament period, Jews and Christians continued to rewrite Old Testament stories for contemporary audiences. Moreover, the New Testament reads the Old Testament in light of Jesus' life and work. This tradition has lived on into the present day. The importance of the Bible to western culture has promoted its retelling in various media, not only in written form as discussed above, but also in the visual arts, drama, dance, and music. In a learning community at Augustana College, "The Bible in Story and Song," our students are studying how several stories of the Old Testament have been retold through the genre of sacred musical drama, from 18th century opera to Broadway musicals from the 1980s. We examine the elements that the composer, librettist, and director (where we have a video) all bring to the interpretation of the biblical story.



Wenzel Peter's depiction of "Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden"

Our first studied work was Bruce Trinkley's *Eve's Odds*. We read carefully the Adam and Eve story (Gen. 2-3) in English translation (The New Revised Standard Version), and then examined how J. Jason Charnesky's libretto retold the story. We investigated which aspects of the original story Charnesky deleted or modified significantly. We also observed his additions and expansions of the biblical story. Once we made note of these changes, we asked what the changes amount to in terms of plot development and character development. These things have not only literary significance but theological, ideological, and ethical significance. For example, in expressing God offstage, musically, and without words, Trinkley and Charnesky understand God as far more transcendent and otherworldly than does the biblical author who anthropomorphizes God in Gen. 2-3. The basic theology of the two versions shifts in this manner. How humans are cast by the librettist also informs what religious scholars call theological anthropology, or what it means to be human. Charnesky depicts repeatedly both Adam and Eve as entirely free agents, exercising highly informed choices. While this idea is in the original text, it is not nearly as pronounced as in Charnesky's libretto. This dynamic is especially important in Charnesky's characterization of Eve. She has much more information than does the Eve of Genesis. She also has mixed, complicated motivations. In the end, she rejects the actions and motivations of all the other characters, which she identifies in great detail, to follow her own heart.

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Retelling the Bible in Song: A Brief Study of the Libretto of *Eve's Odds* *continued from page 4*

This is consistent with Charnesky's stated intention of casting Eve as a stronger, more powerful, and more determined figure than the original Eve. There are, however, significant ideological implications embedded in this choice, that is, the ideology of modern feminism or post-feminism. Thus, Eve is translated from the ancient story's cultural situation to the modern. Charnesky updates her so that more of us can relate to her today. Finally, the librettist's choices may have ethical implications in that they may when taken together alter the fundamental moral of the story or the supported ethical standards. In Charnesky's redrawing of Adam as one who eats the apple to be forever bound to Eve in love, we see a different ethical standard, a more modern one, based on love rather than on obedience and the maintenance of hierarchical social structures, as is more common to ancient Israel. The story in this way is far more approachable and appealing to a contemporary American audience.

Although further study would reveal still more significant biblical interpretation by Charnesky, our space is limited. My purpose in writing this essay can be, then, merely to whet the appetite. I argue that the careful study of biblical interpretation through various musical genres is just in its infancy; yet, understanding how sacred music drama interprets and translates the ancient biblical stories for audiences throughout history could yield abundant fruit not only for Biblicists and musicologists, but for all those involved in the staging, performance, and appreciation of the sacred musical drama. I, therefore, want to encourage many more voices to sing and be heard on this important topic.



F. Rachel Magdalene, Assistant Professor of Religion,
Augustana College

SACRED IN OPERA SESSION: NOA Los Angeles Convention

The SIO session during the convention presented Benjamin Britten's *Canticle of Abraham and Isaac*, introduced by NOA's John Pfautz and performed at the Friday session of the convention by NOA member Kathleen Roland-Silverstein, mezzo-soprano, and guest artist Jonathan Mack, tenor. In addition Kathleen and Cantor Evan Kent from Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles performed excerpts from Kurt Weill's *The Eternal Road*, with commentary by Cantor Kent. This beautiful presentation was a highlight of the convention.

The Sacred in Opera: April Issue

All submissions must be e-mailed to Ruth Dobson (dobsonr@pdx.edu) no later than April 1st!

In the issue, we will focus on the following topics:

1. Another AMAHL - any fresh ideas?
2. Can you really successfully stage a dramatic oratorio?
3. We will begin an ongoing column in the next issue:

WHAT'S NEW IN SACRED MUSIC DRAMA?

This will be for you to submit new works that you have composed, produced, or run across.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Also, feel free to include digital photographs with your submission!

The Sacred in Opera

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Layout by Daniel Hammond, Augustana College '10