The Sacred in Opera Initiative Newsletter
The Official Journal of the National Opera Association’s Sacred in Opera Initiative

The National Opera Association, P.O. Box 60869, Canyon, TX, 79016-0001

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THE SACRED IN OPERA NEWSLETTER is published twice a year online by the National Opera Association in cooperation with the University of Delaware. The publication schedule is June and December. The newsletter exists in PDF format from 2008 through 2018 and is a free publication. Copies of all back issues are available on the pages of the Sacred in Opera Initiative of the National Opera Association Website (www.noa.org).

JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS are welcome year round and should be sent electronically to the Editor-in-Chief, Isai Jess Muñoz (IJMunoz@udel.edu). Full submission guidelines may be found online (www.noa.org).

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Welcome to this latest edition of the Sacred in Opera Newsletter. This issue focuses our attention on the works and processes of three living American Composers. We first introduce you to Dr. David Wolfson and his Faith Operas — A formidable collection of four short pieces recently premiered at Hartford Opera. We also take time to highlight the work of three longtime NOA members, composer, Philip Seward and composer-librettist team Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky. Dr. Seward’s gripping operatic setting of the St. John Passion, pairs historical conventions with experimental music aimed to inform a seraphic soundscape. Trinkley and Charnesky, whose collaborative efforts span nearly three decades, take time to share on their creative process, particularly when working with stories colored by faith and ethics. We applaud these artists, and also congratulate our writers, Casey Robards, Andrea Chenoweth-Wells, and Susan Mcberry.

It’s been encouraging to receive messages and materials from so many colleagues around the nation interested in serving and engaging with the SIO community. We are always interested in hearing from potential contributors, and we have drawn up a few points on why and how our web-based format might just be one of the best high-impact publications to showcase your ideas and projects related to opera at interplay with the ideologies of world religions. Please take a moment to read through notes on our Editorial Board. The SIO Committee has refined our language on peer reviewed article submissions.

Looking to the future, we encourage you to visit the New Events Page on the NOA website where you will find information on our three upcoming regional conferences happening this Fall. There, you may also register for the 2019 NOA Annual Conference in Salt Lake City Utah (January 2-5, 2019). This year’s Sacred in Opera Plenary Session, alongside all other conference events focused on this year’s theme, Pioneering the Future of Opera, will feature outstanding artists and teachers with topics and perspectives aimed to strengthen your work in our field. As always, we hope that this newsletter serves to inspire and renew your faith in all that good ol’ opera can do in today’s world.
Composer Spotlight On:
David Wolfson and his Faith Operas

Dr. Casey Robards

Description of The Faith Operas (4 works)
by David Wolfson

*Maya’s Ark* (faith restored): A former drug addict (mezzo soprano) wants to build an ark in the parking lot of a church. The residing clergyman (baritone) opposes the crazy idea until he realizes the role of the ark/her dream is vital to her recovery and equates the work of building the ark and the spiritual work of faith. Running Time is 10 minutes. Forces include mezzo soprano, baritone, piano trio or 11-piece orchestration.

*Rapture* (faith shattered): An American woman (mezzo soprano) looks forward to being assumed bodily into Heaven in the Rapture. Her daughter (soprano), with her as the moment comes and goes, shares a range of differing emotions and the two realize that faith shattered is also a new beginning. Running time is 11 minutes. Forces include: soprano, mezzo soprano, piano trio. 6-piece, 11-piece, or 14-piece orchestration is also available.

*A Fine Invention* (faith tested): The 4-year old daughter of a Christian Scientist couple is very ill, resulting in a serious testing of faith. As their daughter’s outcome is unknown, how will Michael (tenor) choose between his beliefs and his wife Donna’s (soprano) desire to seek medical treatment? A crisis of faith represents a crisis of identity. “Who are we if we don’t believe?” Running time is 10 minutes. Forces include soprano, tenor, piano trio or 11-piece orchestration.

*Heaven’s Gate* (faith distorted): A self-proclaimed messiah “Bo” asks those capable of achieving “Next Level Above Human” status (requirements include celibacy and disgruntlement with the current state of things) to prepare to be set free from the body and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Convinced that a sign in the form of a comet is announcing the moment, his followers decide to leave the world of personal shortcomings, corporate rule, war, hunger, strife, apathy, crime, fast food, bills and other evils and commit mass suicide. Running time is 45 minutes. Forces include soprano, mezzo soprano, tenor, baritone, and piano trio.

Praised by the New York Times for writing “theatrically forceful” and “musically inventive” works, David Wolfson’s latest dive into music-drama tackles compelling stories of faith, recently premiered by Hartford Opera.
A Conversation with Composer, David Wolfson

SIO: Where are you from?

David Wolfson: I was born in Cincinnati. I consider myself a New Yorker who was born in the Midwest. I went to the Cleveland Institute of Music and moved to New York after that.

SIO: Did you find yourself stepping into a life of a full-time composer?

DW: Oh Lord, no. I came to New York expecting to be a composer and work in musical theatre as a pianist and music director. To some extent I've had a quite varied freelance life. I have done both of those, have played in Broadway pits, done a lot of music prep – copying, orchestration, etc., played for cabaret acts, all the things that a musical theatre musician can do (and by and large we're all expected to do all of them). In between all of that I have composed. My wife was a choreographer and dancer and at that time; we ran dance companies in the 90s and I wrote a lot of music for them. My output dropped precipitously when my son was born, then picked back up again. It has been very much a freelance life, and only in the last 7 years when I went back to school have I given my writing life more direction.

SIO: How would you describe yourself as a composer, as an artist?

DW: I don’t describe myself as a composer very much! But I could in two different ways depending on whether I’m writing instrumental or vocal music. When I’m writing instrumental music, I feel much like a kid playing with Legos… I have a bunch of techniques and can put the things I’ve mastered together in a million different ways to make something cool. If necessary, I can raid other people’s Lego boxes or in great extremity come up with a new Lego of my own. When writing for singers, my impulses (using the same tools) are more in the service of illuminating some portion of our existence as human beings—our maddening, idiotic nobility and contradictory nature.

SIO: Your faith-oriented works present specific belief scenarios. They also deal with universal questions and themes on what makes us who we are, and how belief informs not only our own behavior, but also our relationship with others. I found myself empathizing with the mother in Rapture who in the beginning, appeared condescending in manner. But in just 10 minutes, you covered so much ground!

Did you conceive the Faith Operas as a complete series or did you write them one by one and then group them together?

DW: The answer is yes, both. I wrote Maya’s Ark in 2010. At the time, I was working with the Remarkable Theatre Brigade, who would produce programs of short operas. I had written musicals for several years but had never dabbled in opera. Maya’s Ark is based on the true story of Kea Tawana who in the 80s became a cause célèbre after building an ark in the parking lot of a church in Newark, New Jersey. I first attempted to write a musical about this woman but the concept ran aground because the villain in the piece was the city’s zoning board, and that element did not particularly excite me. Nevertheless, the story sat in my mind for 20 years. I finally chose to conceive a 10-minute opera with Kea’s pastor in the scene (who is never asked about in the news reports). The opera explores what a conversation between the two might be.

Shortly after the work was completed, Grethe Holby, who runs Ardea Arts and the Family Opera Initiative, arranged for a reading of it, and later produced a film version of the work.[1]

Soon after this, Harold Camping’s ministry was proclaiming that the Rapture was coming (May 21, 2011). I was at a street fair in Manhattan and there were several people walking on the curb carrying signs declaring that the Rapture was coming in May. I remember thinking, “Oh to be a fly on the wall as that moment comes and goes.” It’s then I said to myself, ‘That’s my next opera!’ Thus, the piece happens in real-time (the minutes just before and after the false prediction fails to occur).[2]

Having then written two operas on the subject of faith, I realized I had a theme going and decided it would be wonderful to make an evening of it. My wife Lynn was the first to conceive a third scenario that involves a Christian
Scientist couple with an ill child, which I then developed into A Fine Invention—currently the most recent addition to my list of micro faith operas. This piece is not specific to any biographical story per se, but rather it’s a kind of composite story.

Once the three micro faith operas were completed, I felt that a longer piece (a true one-act) could serve to anchor a full evening performance. Because all the micro operas had been written for two people (each running between and were about 10-12 minutes in length), the idea would be for this new one-act, Heaven’s Gate, to use all the singers in those pieces and run at 45 minutes long to complete the evening’s second half. The running time for all four operas performed is 90 minutes.

Hartford Opera had premiered the short pieces between 2014-2016 on their “New in November” series. Liz Miller, artistic director of Hartford Opera Theatre agreed to produce an evening of all Four Faith Operas in 2017. The four pieces can be described as “faith restored, faith shattered, faith tested and faith distorted.” I would love to do a theme of “faith born” or “faith beginning,” but for now these four works fit very nicely into one evening.

SIO: Is there any reason why you choose to write your own texts? Have you worked with other librettists or existing texts?

I started writing my own texts for song cycles in the 90s when I had a deadline to write something for a singer and had waited too long to get permission for some poems. Then the answer was “no” [from the poet], so there was no time to do anything else. So, I wrote my own text, and discovered, ‘Hey, I like writing my own Libretto! I’ve also written musicals off and on for 30 years, working with other lyricists and book writers. At times I’ve been just the composer, other times I’ve also been the lyricist but never the book writer. Writing the libretto for Maya’s Ark was a huge leap for me—to create a dramatic structure for the first time. Once I discovered that I could do that, I gained greater confidence. One of the things I try to do is to illuminate the human condition through the story-telling. We all have our own personal perspectives on aspects of the human experience. So…if you can think of writing your own libretto, why not take a chance and give it a shot?

SIO: What do you find to be the greatest differences when writing operas versus musicals?

DW: This is a subject of perennial discussion… The short answer for me is that operas are written for opera singers and musicals are written for musical theatre actors. It’s two cultures, two sets of practices and expectations about how the rehearsals, the staging and the music will be involved. I love them both… In opera, you have these astonishing voices for which you can write music that is more much more complex. I find that you also have the ability for the music to contribute to the drama in a way that is generally not always possible in musicals. Some musical theatre people feel challenged when told that the music is going to be doing the acting here… But in opera, this principal makes sense. So, in short, that is one of the things I enjoy about writing opera. There’s one project I’m mulling over right now, and I’m not yet sure whether it will surface as a musical or an opera. Another major difference between the cultures of opera and musical theatre is that no one expects opera to make money (chuckling).

SIO: Do you have a sense of audience feedback about these works?

DW: One audience member said after the Boston performance [of Rapture], “Wow, I’m a little verklempt” and then paused and said “actually, MORE than a little!” During the initial reading of Maya’s Ark there were people relating that it was a very moving experience.

SIO: Do you have any other faith-themed works?

DW: Adventures of the Mind Monkey for piano and percussion is about unsuccessful attempts to meditate.

My mother belongs to a Unitarian fellowship in Michigan. She talked her congregation into commissioning a set of songs for their congregational choir based on the Seven Principles of Unitarianism. So, after the first one came out well, the second piece was requested. They then decided to go ahead with all seven (chuckle). Their instructions were to keep it easy, as it’s a small group that doesn’t rehearse often. The first six are relatively easy and the seventh is a little more challenging and a little longer (about 4 minutes). Over the course of 3 years, they learned the pieces then performed the complete cycle last year. It was interesting to write something directly FOR worship, which was something I had not done before.

SIO: Do you have any other faith-themed works?

DW: something not meant to be a dramatic piece…
DW: Yes, exactly. The texts [of the Seven Principles] themselves are not exactly singable. My first impression was “Oh Lord, what have I gotten myself into…. How to get this to sing?” But it all worked, the congregation was very happy, and we’re working on getting the whole set published and widely available to the Unitarian community.

SIO: Do you have any desire to put any kind of personal faith journey into music?

DW: There’s nothing in my own journey that is remotely dramatic, for which I’m grateful! A large part of my personal or spiritual journey is my marriage (in its 32nd year), which has found its way into my musical writing, including a song cycle. One of the songs, When First I Loved You, will be included in a new music anthology for tenor that comes out soon.

SIO: What else are you working on now?

DW: Last year I had three new musical theatre/opera works premiered. I also finished my dissertation, a lot in one year! Now I’m working on a 30-minute monodrama for soprano, Sara Paar, for whom I’ve written many works. I’m recasting the legend of Daphne and Apollo for 2018… a current day mythology.

SIO: Tell us more about your dissertation work, “The Intelligibility of Classical Singers.”

DW: My dissertation focuses on what composers can do to maximize the chance of being understood by an audience. This is something that I’ve brought over from a lifetime in musical theater – the expectation that the words will be intelligible and can be used to tell the story. So hopefully future projects will even highlight this more. The Faith Operas were all written before the dissertation was complete (chuckle).

SIO: Where can people access your music or learn more about you?

DW: Email me at david@davidwolfsonmusic.net or visit my website: www.davidwolfsonmusic.net

If anyone is interested in performing the work with a different instrumentation, I’m open to adapting the orchestrations for the Faith Operas.

About our Contributor:

Dr. Casey Robards is a Pianist and Vocal Coach known for her artistry, versatility and sensitive musicality. She has given recitals with singers and instrumentalists throughout the United States, Europe, Central and South America and Asia. Her repertoire includes art song, opera, musical theatre, gospel, jazz, string, brass and wind. Dr. Robards is Head of the Collaborative Piano program at the Bay View Music Festival. Previous faculty appointments include positions with Indiana University, Oberlin Conservatory (postdoctoral) and Central Michigan University. Casey is interested in the intersection of music and social justice and has led benefit recitals for Musicambia, a non-profit that creates music conservatories in prisons. Casey attended the Tanglewood Music Festival (04, 05) and has degrees in Piano Performance, Piano Pedagogy and Vocal Coaching and Accompanying from the University of Illinois. Her dissertation was on the life and music of John Daniels Carter. www.caseyrobards.com

Notes:

1. Video of this production is viewable on Mr. Wolfson’s personal website: davidwolfsonmusic.net.

2. Rapture has also been performed in New Orleans (Newfangled Opera), Boston (Boston Opera Collaborative and the Boston New Music Initiative) and by Four Corners Ensemble in Ann Arbor, MI.
Composer-Bibrettist Team
Bruce Trinkley and Jason Charnesky

Dr. Andrea Chenoweth Wells

Composer Bruce Trinkley and librettist Jason Charnesky are no strangers to the Sacred in Opera Initiative. Two of their operas, *Eve’s Odds* and *St. Thomas the Carpenter*, were featured at The National Opera Association Conventions in Cincinnati (2000) and San Antonio (2011). In recent years the collaborative duo has expanded their list of works that engage with religious themes which at times, they choose to pair with current social climate inquiry. Both men recently sat down with SIO to shed light on their interests, their process, and the inner-workings of their ongoing writing for collegiate-level voices. Their long tenure at Penn State University has given them years of experiences, helping them better understand young performers. Their musical settings aim to foster the growth of young musicians and to celebrate the strengths that voices still in training have.

**EVE'S ODDS**

A Musical Midrash

_SIO:_ Trinkley and Charnesky’s partnership began in 1990 with the devising of a multi-movement cantata entitled *Santa Rosalia*. Written to commemorate the installation of a painting by the same name at Penn State’s famed Palmer Museum of Art, the work features four voices, woodwind quartet, and harpsichord.[1] When reflecting on this work and the beginning of his partnership with Charnesky, Trinkley explained:

**Trinkley:** I had planned to cobble together a text myself, using a printed interview featuring Fernando Botero [the visual artist commissioned to paint the installation Sant Rosalia]. One of the questions they asked him was, “Why do you paint fat figures?” and he responded: “I don’t paint fat figures, They look rather slender to me.” I knew this had to be in the text, along with some of the legends surrounding the historic figure of Rosalia, the patron saint of Palermo, Sicily. To this day, a procession of her remains is conveyed through the city to commemorate the cessation of the bubonic plague in the 16th Century which was attributed to her. I wanted a finale/prayer to Santa Rosalia. and I quickly realized that I needed help with the text. I asked Jason to join me in the project, and to this day, I believe composers should refrain from writing their own texts. They have enough of a challenge just to write the music.

_SIO:_ Thematically, Santa Rosalia both examines the historical figure of Saint Rosalia and also explores the philosophies of the artist, Francesco Botero. In this duality...
of purpose, Trinkley and Charnesky pinpoint some of the difficulties and the rewards of the creative arts which attempt to evoke the sacred. When questioned about spirituality and the creative process, Charnesky replied:

**Charnesky:** There is a way of orienting yourself towards the world, towards experience, towards all the fellow living travelers on this globe, which puts you in relation to the sacred… it’s a kind of attentiveness, a learned habit of open helpfulness and love, which results in a deep, wordless congruence between your own-most self and the unspeakable ground of Being. My librettos don’t contain the sacred; they don’t explain the sacred. But in the best of moments a story is told which captures the imagination. And the story is told in music which takes one away from oneself with its beauty, its rightness, its… Words fail. But we are taken to a place, a space, a moment (all of these words are wrong, you understand) when we are touched by the unimaginable immensity and intimacy of existence. For a moment we are no longer in the audience, we are raptured by Being.

**SIO:** Charnesky beautifully expresses one of the particular advantages to staging religious themes, namely that it is in embodying these ideas, telling a captivating story that theirse larger messages can be conveyed in a more visceral manner. And, the importance of collaboration of librettist and composer cannot be overstated. Trinkley explained, “When Jason writes lyrics for me to set, he knows what I am apt to respond with. Likewise, when I request lyrics from him, I am sure that he will produce words that are settable and that convey good sense, intelligence, and beauty.” Both Charnesky and Trinkley comment on their ideology with great practicality. Charnesky clarifies his process as follows:

**Charnesky:** Because Bruce is much more expert in knowing what notes best fit what words so as to be best able to be understood when sung, the libretto generally comes first in our collaboration. After talking about a potential project for however long it takes to seize my imagination and get me writing, I go off and produce a libretto, or more often the first half of a libretto. Bruce then sets the new text to music. Taking up from the cues of that music, I can usually finish the libretto in a short bit of time. Bruce sets the entire work, and works over the entire piece again and again, until every note and chord is precisely what he wants. What he wants is invariably music which can be sung such that the words can be easily understood. We don’t wallow in the luxury of pointless vocal exercises. We are showcasing a story told through song, not a performer’s tessitura.

**SIO:** Based on the success of Santa Rosalia, Trinkley & Charnesky continued collaborating with their one-act opera, *Eve’s Odds*, which features the story of Adam (baritone) and Eve (soprano), the Snake (tenor), and Lilith, Adam’s first wife. [2] After winning the National Opera Association Chamber Opera competition in 1999, *Eve’s Odds* later became the first act in a full-length work, *Ever Since Eden*. *Eve’s Odds* opens with a sibilant snake tempting Eve with the apple, while the chorus (Eve’s “conscience”), cautions her against her own trusting nature. The story is familiar, but Trinkley and Charnesky give these Biblical figures a humanity that allows the audience to experience their inner conflicts in a new way.

Another of Trinkley’s operas, *St. Thomas the Carpenter*, was written specifically for presentation at NOA’s 2011 Convention in San Antonio. [3] In his creation of *St. Thomas the Carpenter*, Trinkley manifests some of the devices he has found most effective in engaging audiences in sacred works. Trinkley explains:

**Trinkley:** We included hymns for the audience/congregation - after the manner of Britten in his church Works. Since the premiere of the work was for the NOA Convention, we had the greatest “singing” congregation any composer could wish for! Hymn tunes have never been sung more joyously, enthusiastically and beautifully than that performance in San Antonio. I should also add, that these hymns are known to all congregations and all congregations would enjoy participating in the church opera by joining in the singing of the hymns.

**SIO:** When it comes to presenting sacred works, Trinkley advises, “Know the space (acoustics and instruments available - organ, piano), know the performing forces available (adult choir, youth choir, soloists), and consider how the space can be used for the story being told.” Upon examination of the YouTube video of St. Thomas, one can see how every part of the church’s sanctuary space was used in the direction of the work. With minimal set and simple costumes, the director was able to create a convincing scenario for the action of the story to take place.
Other works on spiritual themes include Confess/Confuse, Christmas for King Midas, and One Life: The Rachel Carson Project — a cantata on the life and writings of ecologist Rachel Carson. Though One Life focuses more on social issues, Charnesky places it firmly in the category of “spiritual, but not religious.”

Trinkley and Charnesky have created a wonderful body of work together that makes sacred themes accessible to performers and audience alike. When asked about future projects, Trinkley responded, “the current immigration crisis, not only in the United States, but throughout the world has started us thinking about the plight of the Holy Family and the reasons for the flight into Egypt. It is a great story and people of all faiths need to be reminded.”

In Trinkley’s music, one can hear and see a refined and sophisticated balance of classical forms with references to American popular music, marches, jazz idioms, gospel and other genres of relevance to the treated subject. There are opportunities for singers of varying levels of study to be challenged and to shine. Charnesky’s libretti thoughtfully carry powerful intelligible statements that whenever appropriate, are tastefully sprinkled with moments of comedic flair. The performing forces needed in most of Trinkley and Charnesky’s works are reflective of trends in college enrollment, providing plenty of female characters to be cast. Orchestrations range from piano, to small chamber group, to larger chamber orchestra. For perusal scores or recordings of these or any other works in the Trinkley/Charnesky compendium, you are encouraged to reach out to Bruce Trinkley directly at wbt1@psu.edu

Notes:

1. Watch Santa Rosalia here: https://youtu.be/KM8sbF86KE
2. Watch Eve’s Odds here: https://youtu.be/3qCZvLAmSQ
3. Watch St. Thomas the Carpenter here: https://youtu.be/ib1qwWd0LtK

About our Contributor:

Andrea Chenoweth Wells, DMA, soprano, has appeared with orchestras and opera companies throughout the US, including regular appearances with the Cleveland Orchestra, the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, Cleveland Opera, Dayton Opera. Career highlights include her Carnegie Hall debut singing Verdi’s Requiem. Dr. Wells is a frequent soloist at Boston’s The Shakespeare Concerts, and is featured on several recordings of works with text by Shakespeare on the Parma label. A proponent of new music, Wells has worked with many living composers including Libby Larsen, Joseph Summer, Jack Perla, Jonathon Sheffer, and Monica Houghton. Wells earned her Doctorate in Music at the University of Cincinnati’s College-Conservatory of Music and her Masters of Music degree in Voice from The Cleveland Institute of Music. Dr. Wells is an Artist-in-Residence at the University of Dayton, where she teaches voice, aural skills, opera, and a course of her own design: Music and Faith on Stage.
When addressing how the Passion text should be set to music, Martin Luther insisted that the use of elaborate polyphony would distract from the importance of the narrative’s message. Nevertheless, before and since Luther’s time, countless composers have utilized a variety of polyphonic means by which to depict the Passion story. Dr. Philip Seward is now among those composers who have set the Passion in ways that interplay with operatic theatrical expression.

The Gospel of John was Seward’s scriptural inspiration for the underpinnings of his new opera girded by a co-written libretto with theatre director, Joan Mazzonelli. Seward, a long-time member of the NOA, has amassed an impressive portfolio of repertoire for the voice which includes opera, musical theatre, art song, chamber music, and choral works. He is a Professor of Instruction at Columbia College Chicago and , heads the Music Lab at writingmusicaltheatre.com which works in conjunction with the Academy for New Music Theatre in Los Angeles. He has served sacred spaces in a variety of capacities, and currently holds the esteemed position of as music director at Epiphany United Church of Christ in Chicago.

Much of Seward’s compositions have come to fruition through commissions, but *The Passion of John* is a work he chose to embark upon for his own artistic and spiritual exploration. Seward first drafted a shortercversion of *The Passion* that focused solely on the last days of Jesus’ life. Shortly after a workshop of the opera’s initial permutation, he began the monumental task of expanding the work, which now presents St. John’s complete narrative on the adult ministry of Jesus. Seward’s latest version of *The Passion of John* is hot off the presses and now waiting to been produced.

It is important to note, that in addition to his authority as one of today’s leading American composers, Seward is an accomplished singer and collaborative pianist whose years of experience inform the way he appropriately addresses the challenges and pitfalls found in voice classifications. Seward also looks after maintaining the text’s intelligibility, setting words in the necessary vocal ranges needed to ensure clarity of diction.

Although it has some rhythmic and tonal areas of the work will challenge even the most highly skilled vocalists, alongside those more accessible sections plentifully found throughout the piece, these complex areas serve to provide an exciting look at the life of Christ through a new set of lenses. In order to compliment the ancient Passion text, Seward thought it fitting for some of the musical ideas, to derive from more ancient conventions.

His use of rhythm, texture and harmonic treatment are somewhat reminiscent of Arvo Pärt and Henryk Góreckiz, composers who Seward acknowledges as highly influential to his output. The release of sound and the wash of it coming back is part of the musical framework, as is the use of language for creating rhythmic sound. Extended vocal techniques are used such as whispering of text, the blowing of air from the mouth for wind effects, and ad lib layering of tone clusters to underscore spoken narration. The instruments

*The Passion of Christ should not be acted out in words and pretense, but in real life.*

~Martin Luther

Susan McBerrry
are largely independent from the singers, functioning with their own voice. However, when helpful, Seward has them double the vocal lines with pitch references. The sounds he has created using mediated (electronically enhanced) instruments help bring this drama even further into a contemporary soundscape.

When casting, directors may feel tempted to engage a choral ensemble. However, choral singers may offer a distinctly different sound than that of quality solo singers in a grouping. It is the more sonorous quality of the latter that Seward has expressed he wishes to see assembled for performance.

The theatrical scope of Mazonelli and Seward’s libretto also merits our strong consideration. Seward’s love for pairing words with melody shines through his setting of the Passion language to seraphic music. The composer/librettist team hopes that their setting of the St. John narrative offers a fresh perspective of the Passion text for the twenty-first century. They wish to emphasize that the work should not be classified or treated as an oratorio. Seward categorizes *The Passion of John* as a full-length ensemble work intended to be staged. There are stage direction suggestions imbedded in the score as well as clear indications for movement and lighting. Seward has envisioned that this work may best be experienced in large cathedrals or other sacred spaces with contemplative acoustical beauty.

Interestingly, given the opera’s well-organized framework, the work could also be produced in smaller sections that are self-contained to good effect or as a complete new work. In other words, scenes could be extracted for worship services or opera workshop scenes programs.

I asked Philip to share a little on his concept for a performance venue and he states:

The ideal environment would be to have the opening text [“In the Beginning”] metaphorically emerge from a darkened stage. Sound is very important—the specific percussion sounds, the mediated instruments, and then the voices should all emerge out of the dark. The Passion has a near a cappella sound overall...The human voice stretches back in time to the origins of the text and is central to the soundscape. I can also imagine a production where sound comes from multiple places, in a mix of light and dark, on a nearly bare stage. The overall mood varies, from the bright, hopeful conclusion of the first scene, to the dark sound of scene three.

My hope is that soon Philip Seward will have the opportunity to witness the premier of *The Passion of John* in a suitable space filled with capable musicians and an appreciative audience. The Sacred in Opera Initiative congratulates Dr. Seward on so successfully contributing to the canon of sacred music-drama.

Below is additional information provided by our composer that provides further information for producers addressing further logistical considerations.

From the Score’s Forward:

*The Passion of John* is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Gospel of John. The work plays out in seven scenes and is set for fifteen solo singers: three sopranos, three mezzos, three altos, three tenors, and three bass-baritones, a speaker with resonant low timbre and dramatic ability, plus flute, guitar, cello, chimes, and percussion...” (orchestra chimes, wind chimes[mark tree], timpani, and cymbal)...Each of the instruments should be amplified to balance the sound of the voices. With individual amplification a delay patch may be employed of two to four seconds (depending on the performance space) for each of the instruments. The use of such a delay is indicated within the score.

The synopsis includes:

- Prologue in three sections
- Seven Signs and Wonders
- Threat (from the Pharisees)
- Testimonials
- The Last Supper
- Trial and Crucifixion
- Resurrection
The sections of this work are self-contained in about ten-minute scenes that could be performed independently from the whole. The exception is the second, which is longer and includes six signs and wonders that Jesus performed during his ministry. The section on Testimonials is for nine trebles, sometimes each singing an independent line that could easily be excerpted. Role reversal occurs with some of the male characters refreshingly sung by women. The characters are assigned as follows:

John the Baptist: Alto

Jesus: Tenor

Mary, Mother of Jesus: Soprano

Mary, Mezzo; Martha, Soprano

Lazarus: Baritone

Pilate: Alto

Thomas: Mezzo

Seward’s setting of the Passion includes: Unison singing of all 15 singers, solo movements with melodic passages underpinned by repeated phrases from other voices (sometimes in tone clusters as well as more consonant sections which are quite lyrical). A non-singing actor also serves as a narrator.

Appendix:

Rhythmic layering from “Trial and Crucifixion,” p. 163

From “Signs and Wonders,” p. 38

Contrapuntal layering from Prologue, p. 25

About the Contributor:

Soprano Susan McBerry, lyric soprano and teacher of voice and coach/accompanist, has been the coordinator of vocal studies at Lewis and Clark College since 1987. She teaches Art and Science of the Voice and Vocal Literature in addition to private voice lessons. She also directs the Opera Workshop and Musical Theater Workshop. As a vocal coach and conductor, McBerry has provided vocal and music direction for plays and musicals at Lewis and Clark, student compositions, operas and opera scenes. In her tenure at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Portland where she is now Director of Music Emerita, she produced and directed sacred opera and oratorio for twenty years. In addition to being on the Sacred in Opera committee of NOA, Susan has been a member of NATS as Cascade Chapter president, Oregon’s district governor and NW Regional Governor.
From the Editorial Board

Article Submission and the Peer Review Process

Although traditional print journal and monograph publishing is still alive and well, non-traditional forms of publishing such as the Sacred in Opera Web and Blog based format can serve as wonderful supplements or alternatives to traditional scholarship. Web based publications such as ours can enable the broadest possible readership of your research outputs and become an important way to maximize the dissemination and impact of your findings. It is also important to note that the publishing process serves as a networking vehicle. In order to better serve our community members, the SIO committee continues working diligently to refine its formalized peer review process for the vetting of article submissions and materials to our newsletter. We welcome you to visit our updated submission criteria found in the SIO pages of the NOA website. We are always interested in supporting the good work you are doing in the field of Sacred in Opera. Let us hear from you.