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

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From the Editorial Board
From Richard Owens

*Founder of the American Institute of Musical Studies (AIMS) in Graz, Austria*

Singers in a Strange Land

It is a privilege to share with you some of my thoughts in this issue of the Sacred in Opera Initiative Newsletter. Having been involved in opera since my teen years, I still search for the real meaning in what we opera lovers do. What moves us time and time again to invest our energy, money, effort, research and, yes, love, in this mysterious art form? Almost four hundred and fifty years ago, the small group of musical amateurs and professionals in Florence were certain they were creating something new, by re-creating an art form which was centuries old, and which was the center of Greek Culture and religion. Here we are today, still searching for the truest way to express our inner and/or sacred thoughts in a seemingly impossible task.

The title above is, of course, a variant of the passage from Exodus 22. But as we look at what we have accomplished in the years since the efforts of the Camerata, we see that in some way we are still attempting to find meaning and truth in an art form we love. Unfortunately, we often imitate Caccini in trying to get our version of the truth of the Euridice story (performed before Peri could present his Orfeo). But the importance of the Sacred in Opera Initiative is that it continually seeks to define and to redefine meaning in our human experience by expanding the definition of the word, “opera.”

Whether we prefer the challenging setting of the Haggadah by the late Elizabeth Swados, or the deconstruction of the story of the Magdalene in Mark Adamo’s controversial score, The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, we can rest assured the search for truth has not ceased. Furthermore, the addition of Taema by Richard St. Clair and Jody Nagel’s Fifty-Third Street, show that we are reaching far beyond the bonds of Judeo-Christian writings to examine ourselves in the light of other great religious traditions, including Islam and Hindu.

Today, all of our great humanist traditions are being questioned, and attempts are being made to discredit our democratic institutions. Our mission is to speak out, or rather sing out, in support of the humanitarian beliefs and practices which are so important to our
survival. As composers, librettists and performers, we are like the DACA Dreamers, working in a land where our very existence is questioned by politics and war. But we know in our own artistic hearts that we are the continuing creators in the unfolding human experiment. Let us continue to sing, no matter how strange the land!

About our contributor:

Richard Owens, baritone, has enjoyed a long career on the opera and concert stage, in arts administration and in teaching, in both Europe and the United States. He holds degrees from Trinity University (BM), Yale University (MM) and Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology (MSTh), and completed advanced training in Opera and Lied at the Akademie für darstellende Kunst in Vienna. Mr. Owens founded the American Institute of Musical Studies (AIMS) in Graz, Austria, and served as its Artistic Director from 1968 until 1984, when he moved to Orlando, Florida, to serve as General Director of the Orlando Opera Company, a position he held until 1990. The Orlando Opera experienced dramatic growth during his tenure, greatly increasing its attendance and subscriber base, as well as its community outreach, number of performances, and engagement of international stars. He founded the Musiktheater Bavaria program in 2000, and served as its General and Artistic Director for many years.

Mr. Owens currently is Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Voice at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, where he has taught since 1992, and previously also served on the voice faculties of Baylor University, Southern Methodist University, Texas A & I University, North Texas State University, and the University of Central Florida. He has published books titled Towards A Career in Europe (a handbook for singers auditioning for opera houses in the German-speaking countries) and The Professional Singer's Guide to New York. He has been mentor to hundreds of successful opera singers and musical theater performers, many who have sung at the Metropolitan Opera, and in major Broadway productions.
Composer Spotlight On: Marisa Michelson...
Cultivating Spiritual Movement in Music Drama

Dr. Isai Jess Muñoz

Composer Marisa Michelson may best be identified as an artist whose creative process addresses human conditioning and serves as a medium in which to heal her yearning for full integration of body, mind, and spirit—perhaps something that is increasingly difficult to find in the relentless speed of our world.

At the heart of Michelson’s compositional process is Constellation Chor, a process-oriented experimental voice ensemble founded by Michelson, whose mission it is to research and explore “performer as a presence-cultivator, truth-seeker, shaman, and the performance as an invitation to enter into an intimate, heightened, and revelatory relationship with the moment and each other.” Initiated in 2016, she has led this closely-knit ensemble through a series of methods and expressions which include meditation, inner-development, and deep listening as a means to generate new musical material from a place of mindful attention and spontaneity.

Michelson’s 2013 off-Broadway musical, Tamar of the River, was noted by New York Magazine as “One of the most extraordinary new scores in years.” Since that time, Michelson has tackled multiple projects, including Naamah’s Ark, a dramatic oratorio co-written with Pulitzer Prize winning librettist Royce Vavrek, which was commissioned by New York’s Master Voices (formerly known as the Collegiate Chorale). New York audiences will have the opportunity to experience this exciting retelling of the traditional ark story from the perspective of Noah’s wife, Naamah, which will feature Tony-Award winner Victoria Clark this coming June as part of Lower Manhattan’s “River to River Festival.” Michelson’s latest musical, One Thousand Nights and One Day, co-written with playwright Jason Grote, is a reimagining of Arabian Nights with a contemporary update set in NYC between a Jewish man and a Palestinian woman. Fans of her writing, can catch this new offering which will open off-Broadway Spring 2018.

Perhaps Michelson’s most daring venture to date is her Desire/Divinity Project, an ongoing three piece work scored for fifteen singers, bansuri flute, melodica, cello and percussion. Michelson describes it as a work that lives in between a live music video, an oratorio, an opera, and a ritual. Michelson shares how Part 1 of this trilogy, “Song of Song of Songs,” explores the relationship between the sensual and the sacred, the body and the spirit, through an exegesis of the Western...
world’s oldest erotic poem, Song of Songs. Part II, “Sappho Fragments,” works with the fragments of Sappho’s poetry that still remain, and Part III, “The Farnearness,” draws from the lives of remarkable women of Christianity in the early part of the eleventh century such as Hildegard of Bingen. Under the expert direction and movement direction of Ethan Heard (Co-Artistic Director of Heartbeat Opera) and Emma Crane Jaster, Parts I and II will be experienced in just a few days, at New York’s Judson Memorial Church February 1-3, 2018.

SIO Chair, Isai Jess Muñoz, recently sat down with Ms. Michelson, who took time to share on her wholistic writing process, that is breaking the boundaries of formal convention, and encouraging audiences to reflect on the complexities of humanity’s relationship with otherworldly discussion.

Sacred in Opera: What does spirituality mean to you in relation to your work?

Marisa Michelson: It means I am an explorer; I am curious. When I am composing, I am communicating differently with Life, with myself, with the other humans in the room, or those who will sing and play the work. I am also committed to social justice, to equal rights, and making the world a better place—though I don’t often address this in my work directly (for many reasons), those things are somehow connected to my sense of spirituality.

SIO: Why have you chosen to utilize the genres of oratorio and sacred opera?

MM: Terms such as experimental musical, opera, oratorio—they exist on a cultural level. I see them as “fun containers” for a spiritual experience, but I am not attached to these forms. For example, I enjoy oratorio because it is a genre that calls upon the listener’s imagination. In my oratorio, Naahmah’s Ark, we tell this giant, fantastical story with limited staging and set pieces, which requires the audience to actively collaborate and fill in the blanks. It’s no place for the sedentary onlooker, and I just love that!

Some of my pieces may be considered operas, and I appreciate how that term communicates that my works are dramatic, and that music plays the central role. But regardless of the genre I choose to employ, there is always a search for transcendence. I do want to be clear that transcendence for me is not like flying high in the sky—it is deeply rooted, it is connected to reality, it is honoring the full spectrum of what it is to be human.

SIO: When did you begin composing?

MM: I started singing and studying piano at four years old, and at nine years old I was composing piano pieces—which was empowering! I want to acknowledge my virtuosic piano teacher, Eugenie Malek, for encouraging me to follow my musical bliss, even as she gave me a strong classical foundation. As funny as it may sound, I remember that in middle school I felt as though I was at some kind of musical emotional crossroads, and that’s when I began to
compose songs with voice and text. It was then that writing began to feel like a portal into an entirely new way of being in time and space. I wanted to be in that space all the time! That's when the discipline began to have real purpose for me.

Like many other young people in their teenage years, I was mesmerized by angsty songs focused on the pain of being alive. I felt a lot, and always intensely; I wrote about the Holocaust, and about not knowing how to trust, and even about nostalgia (funny for a 13 year old). Certainly being Jewish and learning about the Holocaust from an extremely young age was a huge part of my upbringing. My father, who is a poet, wrote about the Jewish experience. As a 13 year old, I met Holocaust survivors while traveling around singing in the children's opera, Brundibar, which had been written in the Terezin concentration camp. My Jewish heritage has been a formative part of my life.

When I was fifteen I attended the NYU Musical Theatre Writing summer program, and that's when I learned I could write songs for the theatre. I first wrote about a school shooting — Columbine had just happened and the pain of that was living inside me at the time. Shortly thereafter, I wrote my first full-length musical theatre piece about McCarthyism.

SIO: How would you describe yourself today as a composer?

MM: I am an artist who wants to get to know the world intimately. I want to enter each moment with openness and curiosity and be awake to the mystery of the relationship between the vastness of life and myself.

SIO: Other than Sacred elements, are there other connecting threads in the stories you've selected to set to music?

MM: I'm often writing about strong women who are at the center of their own stories making powerful choices. This has always been natural to me, though it wasn't conscious at first. I enjoy making women the

“Otherworldly.”
—Steven Suskin, Playbill
center of stories that revolve around one's relationship to spirit. Often when women are featured it’s in relation to men—and often within the paradigm of heteronormativity. In the Desire/Divinity Project, the women (and men) are sexually empowered humans—not pop-star sexually empowered, but humans whose sexuality is nuanced and multi-hued, and an extension of seeing the center and fullness of another person. I also play with gender fluidity and explore qualities we sometimes call masculine and feminine, as they live inside of everyone.

I often work with biblical figures that I see as archetypes, because in this way I can get in touch with my own ancestors, and draw from the depths of the past to access something that is beyond myself. Indeed I find that historical narratives broaden my sense of self, so that my perspective widens and I may create material that feels beyond me.

SIO: In the context of art as a reflection of the times, are your works in any way intending to leave very personal, ethical, and moral questions to be answered by the listener?

MM: Perhaps they encourage questions, I don’t know. I am interested in providing an expanded sense of ourselves as humans, and an expanded sense of what we imagine is possible in our future. I am interested in Kairos (as opposed to Chronos), a sense of time that is less linear. A sense of time which feels at once the ancestors of the past and our ancestors of the future. Who will we become as humans? What does our future feel like? That experience of connection can be become present in listening to music, even if it can’t be articulated or fully understood with words.

SIO: What are some of the things you consider when writing for the human voice?

MM: First there is my own personal process of singing—in addition to composing, I’m also a vocalist, and singing is a central part of my writing practice. I’ve been most influenced by the approach of the Libero Canto School of Singing - It’s a set of guiding principles created by Lajos Szamosi in Budapest, before the Second World War.[1] The thing that fascinates me most about Szamosi’s methodology, is that it asks the engagement of the whole human being: the singer cannot be separated from the person’s emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual life. As someone who chooses to engage with singing in this way as a singer, writer and teacher, I’m looking for what is alive inside of the sound created. When the soul comes out through the singing… that is the most exciting thing. I want to write music that invites the singer’s soul!

SIO: Tell us more on how physical movement influences your compositional process.

MM: Absolutely! I work differently now than I used to. I need to be moving when I’m writing. I’ve also developed a strong need to be portable as a composer. I have a need to interact with the elements of nature. Sitting for hours on a piano bench began to feel too removed from the act of creation itself. I am now calling what I do “composing from the body.” I will often begin by drawing shapes on large pieces of paper and meditating on an idea, a concept, or some sensory stimuli. I try to invite the quality...
of that essence to imprint itself on my body and mind and I want to know that essence intimately. I then allow that imprint to fuel a vocal gesture. The length of this process varies, but it’s really not about time as much as attention, and about creating an internal space where I’m open to receiving ideas fully. If I’m present, it may only take 30 minutes before ideas come. But the longer I can play in that space, the better. The impulses that often come to me take on greater vitality when I’m moving my body to explore them. That’s why I founded the laboratory vocal ensemble, Constellation Chor.

Little children intuitively understand that there are many ways to communicate, explore, and be in the world — beyond verbal, beyond touch. I am learning to trust my inner child much more again, and I am beginning to understand that all the technical skills I’ve developed over the years are tools, but not the thing itself.

**SIO:** What are some of the ways you’ve played with notational process that we may be unfamiliar with?

**MM:** Hmm.. perhaps one example, is a way I’ve scored breathing. I’ve used a symbol that looks like a little dove. I also experiment with scoring “intention.” For example, in one of my scores I wanted the listener to understand that the performers were improvising to create the sound of twinkling starts. Not only did I indicate the pitches, but I drew the music pictorially, so that the image on the page looks like a cluster of stars. I’ve also written about how the intention is just as important as pitches on the page. I have another piece that focuses around a rhythmic “heartbeat” pattern: I drew hearts over the staff and explained to performers that executing pitches accurately but without a feeling of energetic centering in the heart is not the music I wrote.

Notation is a map to get to the thing, but it is not the thing itself. (The map is not the territory.) It’s so easy to remain a pedant and be stuck in the regulations of the score, but to me, it is about so much more than simply what’s on the score. At the same time, I understand how important the score is — it’s where the information lies!

**SIO:** Are there fears that the future of the work you create may not have a life beyond your interpretations of it?

**MM:** I have thought about that a lot, and no, I don’t have that fear. I’m constantly asking myself what makes my work worthwhile. Is the work only worthwhile if seen by many people? How many? How long must “buzz” surrounding you and your work last in order for your output to be deemed valuable? I don’t feel like the more one’s work is sung, the more it matters. Who we are and what we do plants a seed. I don’t know how or if my works will live on or blossom into the future. What I know now is that something magical happens when I’m collaborating with people who understand what it is I am trying to say, and help me say it, and that to me is meaningful and important.

**SIO:** What have you discovered that audiences gain from works like yours that consciously usher in a wholistic practice of body mind, and spirit?

**MM:** I feel that the act of music making, whether through opera, oratorio, musical theatre… is a sort of ritual, much like praying or intention setting. It’s a way of ritualizing life. Ritual, storytelling, music-making, it’s all essential to how we make sense of our time here being alive. It’s also how we embody the
experience of togetherness. This is tricky for me to talk about because language is limiting and it pigeonholes. That’s why I choose to talk about it through music, because music can be less limiting. It’s an invitation; no matter what you believe about ritual or spirit, I hope people can connect with my music in a way that I would describe as, yes, spiritual.

SIO: What would be some compositional or production suggestions that you would offer as guidelines for writing and consequently staging in sacred spaces and other specific spaces?

MM: It’s tricky, especially when text is involved because these spaces are often so ambient. Sometimes I think it would be better to use microphones, but then I miss the unamplified, unadorned human voice. I haven’t figured this aspect out yet, but what I do know, is I’m interested in where we place the audience in the space. How might we situate the audience in a way where they can hear competing polyphonic lines most most clearly? Part of what Ethan, Emma, the Chor and I have been exploring with the Desire/Divinity Project is how to provide audiences with that same experience that performers have of hearing the other singers right up close.

SIO: Is the Desire/Divinity Project the first piece where you’ve played with the traveling audience concept?

MM: It’s been something I’ve wanted to do for a very long time, and we’ve played with this notion in previous iterations. With Constellation Chor, I’ve been interested in inviting the audience to lie down, to sit or walk around, almost as if our concert were an installation where they can experience the sound from different spaces.

SIO: Where do you see your music going from here?

MM: I have plenty of projects on the horizon that I’m excited about. I’m continuing to work on the Desire/Divinity Project. Constellation Chor meets every week, and we continue to experiment with togetherness, listening, and form. I also have a new project, a kind of opera that I’m going to begin. I have not yet written a thing, but it’s a concept that I’m developing with choreographer Chase Brock and playwright Jillian Walker. In it, I wish to explore questions that are super relevant to our time about how we treat each other whose Truth is different from our Truth. I don’t want to say too much, but a major portion of the opera will deal with a faith-based community who must grapple with their convictions.

To learn more about Marisa Michelson’s exciting work visit:

www.marisamichelson.com
www.constellationchor.com

About our Contributor:

Dr. Isai Jess Muñoz, tenor, serves as Chair and Senior Editor of the Sacred in Opera Initiative and Newsletter of the National Opera Association. As an active performer, he has appeared with The New York City Opera, The New York Philharmonic, The American Symphony Orchestra, Alvin Ailey Dance on Broadway, The Israel Philharmonic, The Verbier Festival and more. Dr. Muñoz is the recipient of numerous awards including the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts Career Grant for contributions to the dissemination of Iberian and Latin American Art Song. He holds degrees from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, The Manhattan School of Music and from SUNY Stony Brook where he studied with W. Stephen Smith. Dr. Muñoz currently serves as Assistant Professor of Voice and Opera at the University of Delaware. He has formerly served on the teaching faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University, The Manhattan School of Music Pre-College Division, and Musiktheater Bavaria. Visit: www.JessMunoz.com

[1] visit www.liberocanto.com
Katie Luther: A One-Woman Monodrama by Glenn Winters

Dr. Michelle Louer

With words and music by Glenn Winters, Katie Luther the opera, is a one-woman monodrama for soprano and piano in three scenes. Inspired by The Morning Star and the Nightingale, a play by Paul Schreiber, the opera was originally conceived and commissioned by Soprano Lori Lewis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

October 31, 2017 marked the 500th anniversary celebration of the Reformation of the Protestant Church, and throughout the world, the name of Martin Luther resounded. It was on October 31, 1517, that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses (articles of disputation concerning the nature of repentance, the penalty of purgatory, and the power and efficacy of indulgences) to the door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenburg, Germany.

This initial impulse of the Reformation was aimed at reforming the church within the established structure. However, Luther’s revolutionary ideals had impact far beyond the community of the faithful, transforming the whole of society and culture. Luther’s insistence on salvation sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide – by scripture alone, by grace alone, by faith alone – encouraged individual autonomy and the ability to reason and interpret for oneself. Through education and Gutenberg’s printing press, literacy increased and the first social media campaign made words, images and ideals more accessible to a broader cross-section of people, including his future wife, Katharina von Bora. Inspired by the writings of the Protestant reformers and their concept of theological and personal freedom, she rebelled against the strict monastic life she began at age six.

On Good Friday, 1523, Katharina joined a small group of nuns in escaping Marienhron, the Cistercian convent of Nimbschen where she had taken her vows eight years earlier. With Martin Luther’s assistance, the nuns were smuggled out of the convent by Leonhard Köppe, a
merchant from Torgau, in a wagon carrying barrels of herring. They arrived in Wittenberg and were taken in by wealthy citizens who assisted in their new life by arranging marriages for the young nuns.

Katharina was eventually settled with Luther's friend, the artist Lucas Cranach the Elder and his family. It seems she had her heart set on marrying Luther, refusing the marriage proposal of Wittenberg professor Kaspar Glatz. Katharina's determination was rewarded when Luther proposed and the couple married on June 13, 1525.

While Luther’s motivations for the union are not known, his later references to her as “My rib” (a declaration of intimate spiritual connection referring to the Biblical story of Eve's creation from Adam’s rib), and “My Lord and Master Katie” reveal a unique partnership, especially for the time. The respect and esteem in which he held Katharina is further demonstrated by the unusual stipulations in his will. Upon a husband’s death, law dictated that a guardian be appointed to be responsible for the property and care of the widow and any children. However, Luther named Katharina as his sole beneficiary and as guardian of their children. She had certainly proven herself more than capable running their large estate, the ‘Black Monastery’, with its successful farm, brewery and fish-breeding business.

Unfortunately for Katie and her six children, the will was overturned. The resulting poverty, accompanied by war and plague forced the family to flee Wittenberg in 1552. Sadly, on route to Torgau, their carriage overturned, causing grave injury, and consequently soon after, Katie’s premature death.

In the words of soprano Lori Lewis, who originated the role of Katie Luther,

In “Katie Luther: The Opera” you will meet the woman behind the man who reshaped the course of history forever. This is the true story of the Reformation from a seldom-seen perspective. Through Katie’s eyes we see Martin Luther the family man, the husband and father… Marrying Christianity, the history of the Lutheranism, and the Arts, this is a personal tale told from inside the story.[1]

Scene 1 opens with eighteen-year-old Katharina von Bora in her room at Marienthronen Convent, near Wittenberg, Germany. It is the evening of Easter Vigil, 1523. She is portrayed as a young woman of ardent faith, who nonetheless longs for a life of freedom beyond the confines of the cloistered life:

When did this sanctuary become my prison? When did I first begin to dream of forbidden things? Of life in the outside world? Of escaping—this trap? God forgive me, God forgive me! I want… I want some meaning to my life! I want to breathe, to travel, to love! I want the love of a wonderful man! I want a child of my own! My heart aches to cradle a child in my arms! Enough of penance, enough of bondage, enough of these four walls! I can't breathe!

She discloses the plans to escape as well as her admiration for Luther, while also affirming a deep devotion to God. The conflicting emotions allow for a broad expressive range in the voice that is supported by the piano accompaniment.

Scene 2 depicts Katharina a few years after her marriage. Luther’s most well-known hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” forms a superbly integrated textual and musical counterpoint to Katharina’s anxieties and self-doubt. The earthly and the divine are interwoven in turns humorous and profound.

The final scene occurs in a small room at a Lodge near Torgau in December, 1552. Suffering from immense physical pain and exhaustion, Katie sings poignantly of her love for her children, the struggle of poverty, her despair over Luther’s death, and the powerful legacy

Glenn Winters’ opera Katie Luther, sets these three major phases of Katie’s life – young nun, married wife and mother, dying widow – in a compelling, 60-minute monodrama.
of his teaching. Psalm 31 returns as a touchpoint and foundation for this testimony of a strong woman on a personal and spiritual journey of reformation: “In Thee, O Lord, do I seek refuge: let me never be put to shame: in Thy righteousness deliver me! Yea, Thou art my rock and my fortress,” With a final reference to EIN FESTE’ BURG, the exigencies of life are laid to rest.

This through-composed opera which successfully employs melodic and harmonic reference to subject and emotional content, offers a satisfying comprehensive and logical structure. The vocal writing demonstrates a thorough understanding of the voice and bel canto technique, and there is ample opportunity for a broad range of vocal color.

Winters’ writing is highly expressive, making use of common twentieth-century compositional techniques of extended harmonies, quartal chord construction and bi-tonal combinations within tonal centers. The piano accompaniment does require advanced ability. The immediacy and accessibility in Winter’s score will provide both new audiences as well as opera connoisseurs with much to savor and appreciate.

**ABOUT THE COMPOSER**

Glenn Winters is a multi-faceted musician who has received acclaim as solo and collaborative pianist, operatic baritone, author, lecturer, blogger, librettist and composer. He has been the Community Outreach Music Director for Virginia Opera since 2004. He also teaches opera classes for several colleges and universities and hosts broadcasts on two public radio stations.

His book The Opera Zoo: Singers, Composers and Other Primates was published in 2013 by Kendall Hunt Publishing. His blog “Operation Opera” was awarded third place in a national competition of arts blogs sponsored by Carnegie Hall’s 2012 “Spring for Music” festival. Essays posted on the blog have been singled out by the National Association of Teachers of Singing and Operagasm.com as notable essays of the year. Dr. Winters’ operas have been performed throughout the United States.

In addition to Katie Luther, he has composed numerous operas upon commission by the Virginia Opera’s Department of Education, including Deep River: Marian Anderson’s Journey (2015), The Princess and the Pea (2014), The Empress and the Nightingale (2014), and Tales From the Brothers Grimm (2007) which has been staged by opera companies in Oklahoma (Cimarron Opera Company) and North Caroline (Piedmont Opera Company).

**PERFORMANCE HISTORY OF KATIE LUTHER: THE OPERA**

Oct. 23, 2013  World premiere at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO - Janet Hopkins, mezzo-soprano

Oct. 25, 2013  University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM- Melissa Carter and Lori Lewis, sopranos

Oct. 27, 2013  St. Marks Lutheran Church, Baltimore, MD- Elizabeth Madeiros Hogue, soprano

Oct. 26, 2014  Reformation Lutheran Church, Newport News, VA- Elizabeth Madeiros Hogue, soprano

Oct. 2015  Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN- Jennifer Haugen, soprano

July 2015  European premiere at the COSA15 Festival, Copenhagen, Denmark- Randi Røssak, soprano
RESOURCES

Composer Glenn Winters: https://www.glennwintersonpositions.com

Glenn Winter’s discusses the opera: http://dropera.blogspot.com/2013/07/who-was-katie-luther-and-why-write.html

Radio Interview with the Composer: https://kfuo.org/2013/10/09/his-time-katie-luther-the-opera/

About our Contributor:

Dr. Michelle Louer serves as the Director of Music and Fine Arts at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, where she conducts the 70-voice Sanctuary Choir, the 16-voice all professional ensemble Beecher Singers, and the Festival Orchestra and Brass Ensemble.

Dr. Louer earned a Doctorate of Music in Choral Conducting from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. She graduated summa cum laude from Yale University with a Master of Divinity and a Master of Music in Choral Conducting under Marguerite Brooks. Dr. Louer has formerly served on the faculty of Butler University, the University of Evansville, and Oklahoma City University.

[1] You may visit this link to hear an excerpt from Winter’s Katie Luther: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkJnw3SNAoU
**LUTHER: An Opera by Kari Tikka**

Dr. John Pfautz

NOA Past President and the Sacred in Opera Initiative’s founder John Pfautz, took time to this past December to converse with Kari Tikka, Finnish composer, conductor, teacher at the famed Sibelius Academy, performer, Lutheran, family man, and composer of the opera *Luther*.

It was at the National Opera Association’s 2006 convention, early on in the days of NOA’s Sacred in Opera Project, that I met Kari Tikka and his wife Eeva. They were in New York City for appointments with several musical and ecclesiastical people trying to arrange performances of Mr. Tikka’s new opera *Luther*. Like any self-respecting composer, Kari carried with him a case that included videotapes and flyers meant to give a thorough introduction of this full-length opera. I was fortunate to be handed the promotional materials.[1]

At the time, I was immersed in gathering as many titles and as much information possible on any operas that deal with sacred themes, events, or important religious figures. In addition to serving my own interests, I was assisting Carl Gerbrandt expand his annotated bibliography *Sacred Music Drama, the Producer’s Guide*, for which Carl was preparing a second edition.[2]

I was impressed and intrigued by meeting Kari for at least 3 reasons:

1. Kari is a warm, genuinely gracious and generous soul. I have been blessed to meet a number of these people as NOA has more than its share of “old souls.” I imagine that, like me, you remember well those special people.

2. Yes, yes, yes, I am interested in sacred music drama of all sorts, always hoping to produce new works or to encourage others to consider producing them.

3. I was then directing the opera program at Augustana College, an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America affiliated institution. I had been producing Christmas-themed operas on campus for a number of years and our ecumenical audiences responded well to the sacred themes previously presented. I am still wondering if now is the time to mount a production of *Luther* in the Quad Cities.

Readers of the *Sacred in Opera Newsletter* will not be surprised to read that there are people who find spiritual connections with many operas that may or may not normally be labeled as sacred music drama. The SIO Newsletter editors have tried to avoid publishing articles that might be interpreted as narrowly exclusive, or offensively...
aggressive in its presentation of religious material. There is the danger, on the other hand, in an effort to find language and themes that are universally acceptable and non-offensive that we may miss out on coming to understand the real value of an operatic work or the core values on which the composer and librettist sought to comment. For this reason, I choose to take this opportunity to write about Kari Tikka and his opera *Luther*. This should not surprise you considering that 2017 is known as the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing the 95 Theses on the church door at Wittenberg, Germany, which is generally considered the start of a series of events leading to the Protestant Reformation. Additionally, 2017 is the 100th anniversary of Finland’s independence from Russia.

Sacred in Opera Initiative: The Lutheran Church of Finland is very strong with about 4 million members, making up about 72% of the population. (In comparison, approximately 7 million people identify as Lutheran in the US, which is about 2% of the population.) It seems that choosing Martin Luther as the story and theme for an opera in Finland would not be a particularly surprising idea. Are there other reasons for your choice of this subject?

Kari Tikka: All my youth I had struggled seriously how to be in a good relationship with God. I thought that I have to please God or at least make a decision to take Jesus in my life. That kind of religion did not give peace. And when my life collapsed in divorce and with many disappointments in my professional life, I got as a gift from heaven, St. Paul's words: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” I don't have to succeed, God's grace is enough!

The line from St. Paul to Saint Augustine, to Martin Luther seems to be my way. I started to read Luther and what was written of him. As I have worked all my life in opera, gradually I started to think of an opera on Martin Luther. I made the libretto with some help from my friend the director Jussi Tapola. My effort in this opera was to be historical, but still more to focus on Luther's main theme: Freedom! And, I wanted to represent Martin as a normal human being – not as a statue, like the one that appears in the end of the opera. I wanted to ask – where do we have Luthers today?

SIO: One of the many interesting facts about Luther's life that is brought out in numerous biographies, is how Martin struggles with the devil. You presented that struggle prominently in the opera. Can you explain further?

KT: According to Luther, mankind has five strong enemies in its eternal Dance of Death: Devil, Death, Sin, Law, and Hell. We can't win them, but Jesus Christ has won them on the cross and He gives us victory. I wrote the other major role to the Devil, also the other four are personified in my opera[3]

SIO: What can you tell us about the location of the first performances of *Luther*?

KT: The premiere was in the Rock Church (Temppeliaukion kirkko) in the center of Helsinki. This church has been our church all the years from 1969 when it was built. My wife Eeva worked there as a pastor. The church is also a very good place for music and theatre.[4]

SIO: The inclusion of singing by the audience/congregation within the opera performances must have been particularly moving in the strikingly beautiful environment and acoustics of the Rock Church.

KT: Finland is very Lutheran, but of course the knowledge of Martin Luther and what he has done is quite poor nowadays. That was one reason to compose...
this opera and to have it performed in Finland. Fortunately, *Luther* has been performed about 40 times now, in four towns in Finland, in Wittenberg, Berlin, and Wangen Germany, and at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

**SIO:** Martin Luther has had a significant impact on your personal and professional life, now almost 500 years after his death. How would you describe Kari Tikka’s spiritual journey?

**KT:** Here are the basic pillars in my life: the Word of God, prayer, the Holy Eucharist, the local congregation at the Rock Church, and of course, my family and music. This all in Lutheran Finland, now 100 years independent!

**SIO:** Fascinating! What’s next?

**KT:** I am currently seeking funding for the first performances of my new opera *Love is Strong as Death*. It is an allegoric work that goes through The Salvation History. The main characters are Adam and Eve. In the second act New-Adam, Eve is the bride - congregation. The main themes are hope, God’s omnipotence and love, even when He gives hardships and seems to forget us. The libretto is mine. There are two acts, 9 soloists, choir, children’s choir, with full orchestra. I am trying to get performances in the Old Opera House of Helsinki in 1-2 years from now.

**SIO:** Thank you for your faithfulness to your vocation. Your compositions and words inspire us. May these works inspire many for generations to come.[5]


[3] For the cast and orchestra requirements as well as the libretto in English, visit this link: http://www.karitikka.com/luther-libretto-in-english.html

[4] You may visit this link for an introduction to the Rock Church: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temppeliaukio_Church

[5] Visit the following link for “Grace Song” a song composed earlier, also incorporated into *Luther*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qd9tJ660_Q

**About our Contributor:**

Dr. John Pfautz serves as Chair of the Division of Fine and Performing Arts at Augustana College in Illinois. Additionally, in 2005, Pfautz began teaching church music courses and directing sacred music drama at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. John Pfautz actively teaches and researches church music in Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania and Kenya. He has recently created a 3-year certificate program - Church Musicians’ Training – for local church musicians in Kenya who cannot attend university, Bible College or seminary, to study music and worship to better serve their congregations. Pfautz is a past president of the National Opera Association.
The Sacred in Opera Initiative recently hosted a celebratory plenary session at this year’s NOA Conference in New Orleans, honoring the life and work of composer Susan Hulsman Bingham— who the National Opera Association proudly honored this year with the Sacred in Opera Lifetime Achievement Award. Highlights from six of Bingham’s many operas were performed by students from the University of Delaware. The event was moderated by Dr. Michelle Louer, and directed by Dr. Isai Jess Muñoz (SIO Chair), Dr. Samuel Mungo (Peabody Conservatory), and Dr. Blake Smith (University of Delaware). The NOA Sacred in Opera Award serves to honor and shed light on those individuals whose work has been instrumental in shaping a clearer definition of what defines “sacred” in opera. In line with the mission of the Sacred in Opera Initiative, the nomination and review of candidates for the award were conducted by members of the SIO Committee with a positive awareness of religious diversity and the intentional practice of engaging people of different faiths for the betterment of our organization and society as a whole.

About our Honoree

For over 40 years, Susan Bingham has committed her talent, passion, and creative energies into telling the stories that shape and reflect our common humanity. She has breathed vibrant life and invited audiences into full engagement with ancient manuscripts of the Talmud and the Hebrew Bible, centuries-old folktales and fables, and venerable liturgical rites. In this way, Bingham extends the trajectory of Handel, Britten and other composers in employing sacred story for dramatic musical inspiration.

With degrees in music from Sarah Lawrence College and the Boston University School of Fine and Applied Arts, and advanced studies at Yale University, Susan was well on her way as a concert pianist. But her career path took an unexpected and welcomed turn. An invitation from a friend to set his favorite Psalm text to sing at church revealed Susan’s innate compositional talent, and led to what would become her life’s work.

Susan soon began composing choral anthems, mass movements, psalm settings, and children’s and liturgical opera. The operas were conceived to be

Susan Hulsman Bingham and SIO Chair, Isai Jess Muñoz
used in place of a sermon during worship services in churches and synagogues. Lasting approximately 20 minutes each, the Sacred in Opera Lifetime Celebration featured scenes from six of Bingham’s “chancel operas.”

By 1984, Bingham’s vocal works had gained regional renown and popularity. The informal Trinity Players in New Haven who performed many of these early operas, became the Chancel Opera Company of Connecticut. Drawing on local talent, the Opera Company toured extensively. In 2005, after a move to Pennsylvania, Bingham adopted the current name of The Children’s and Liturgical Opera Company to reflect the now extensive and diverse catalogue of her compositions which include 18 chancel operas, 10 chamber operas, 3 full-length operas, in addition to other significant pieces.

Four of Bingham’s operas have been broadcast on NBC TV. She has been invited on 3 separate occasions to appear at Lincoln Center New York City under the auspices of Meet the Composer, and has received numerous grants for her work, including The Connecticut Commission on the Arts, The New Haven Fund for Arts in Education, and Meet the Composer: New Music for Schools.

Her dedication to community outreach and education through her work with children is notable. Rather than making a cameo appearance as part of a larger “adult” opera, or writing operas to be performed for grade-school audiences, Bingham integrates children not only as performers, but as co-creators. Her work for 20+ years at Worthington Hooker Elementary School and the Foote School in New Haven allowed Bingham to unleash the creativity in children. She welcome children to collaborate together in writing libretti (Anniversary Tales, a collection of short folktale operas from around the world) and in devising compositional structure (the Plains Indian tale The Legend of the Bluebonnet).

We see that Bingham’s work exemplifies both what it is to honor tradition and the historical evolution of the church’s liturgy in interplay with opera, all while composing new liturgical operas that serve to revisit and revive historical practices for post-modern audiences. Her service in our field has included years of outreach that took time to address the needs of some of our most innocent and fragile citizens, inner-city children and youth. Through a variety of commissions her work also made it a point to lead conversation in Interfaith and LGBTQA equality. She has done this work not in spite of her religious beliefs but because of them. Bingham has most unapologetically presented ideas that aimed to help people make better sense of their worlds and their responsibility within them. It is for these reasons, that unquestionably, Bingham’s life-work has exemplified what it means to be one of the National Opera Association’s Sacred in Opera Lifetime Achievement Honorees.

Guides for Producers Interested in Bingham’s Operas

To inquire about Susan Bingham’s full library of works, you may visit:  www.ChancelOpera.com

Contact information for attaining materials and rights: chancelopera@chancelopera.com

Comments on Susan Bingham’s Work

Susan Bingham’s music . . . enhances the scriptural stories she wishes to bring to life. . . The (Children’s and Liturgical Opera) Company is a first-rate troupe. Because of the nature of their work, their performances belong
most effectively in a worship setting. Lively, compelling and faithful portrayals of Biblical characters and stories greatly enliven any devotional service.

The late Joseph Papp
New York Shakespeare Festival Theater (Public Theater)
New York City

The music (for the chancel opera PIECE TOGETHER) was splendid, the drama moving. The work is an extraordinarily effective interpretation of Mark 5:21-43 . . . Your attentiveness to the socio-historical setting, the literary context, and the dramatic structure of the passage . . . made the text come alive in a compelling way . . . Your opera embodies precisely the sort of retrospective narration out of which the gospel traditions grew . . . In short, the opera was an exemplary piece of exegesis . .

Richard B. Hays
Professor of New Testament
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

I had the delightful surprise and privilege of hearing Susan Bingham’s A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MARY AND THE ANGEL GABRIEL (at St. Peter’s Church, Citicorp Center, New York). It is a beautiful piece of music . . . The congregation burst into prolonged applause at the conclusion . . (and this is) highly unusual and was much merited.

Philip A. Johnson
President, Council on Religion and International Affairs
New York, New York

I cannot tell you how moved I was by your presentation of ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS. Everything about it was superb in its feeling and beauty. I found myself welling up with inexplicable tears as I sat so close to the supper table at Emmaus.

The late Bradford Hastings
Bishop Suffragan of Connecticut
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.