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Welcome to this latest edition of the Sacred in Opera Newsletter. This issue focuses our attention on the musical narratives of great women in history, who are believed to have made strong and powerful choices for the betterment of their communities and society at large. All but one of this newsletter’s featured works have also been written by women.

We first take time to celebrate the success of this year’s SIO plenary session production at this month’s NOA Conference in Salt Lake City, Marisa Michelson and Pulitzer Prize winning librettist Royce Vavrek’s dramatic oratorio, Naamah’s Ark. This re=imagining of the Genesis ark tale, not only gives voice and name to Noah’s wife, but invites Muslims, Christians, and people of all tongues into a celebration of new life after the storm.

Next, our feature story, looks back at the 1994 winner of the National Opera Association Chamber Opera Competition, Daniel Crozier’s With Blood, With Ink. This gripping story recounts the life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun and icon of women’s early writing and colonial New Spain. Subject to the authority of religious male leaders, Sor Juana who was socially marginalized, took pen to challenge and contest the gendered norms of the time. Since its premier, Crozier’s successful score has been produced by Fort Worth Opera and other noteworthy venues. The SIO has identified this work as a substantive piece of vocal writing that deserves continued dissemination and future productions. Readers will be interested in knowing that With Blood, With Ink provides opportunities for university opera programs who are seeking to produce works with plentiful casting opportunities for treble voices.

This issue also takes time to highlight two newer works. Sanctuary & Storm, an Opera America Discovery Grant recipient, written by Tawnie Olson (composer) and Roberta Barker (librettist), depicts a fictional debate between the two most powerful women in Medieval Europe: Hildegard of Bingen and Eleanor of Aquitaine — two women who have risen to great power and yet are still not respected in the same way as their male equivalents in their society. Lastly, Gayla Morgan’s, Mary — A Musical, presents a fiercely resilient Mary Magdalene, who experiences more power and peace, when choosing community over isolation. We applaud all featured artists in this edition, and congratulate our selected writers, Philip Seward, Nicole Leupp Hanig, and Susan H. Bingham.

I feel I must fight for [my music], because I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put out to sea.

- Ethyl Smythe, composer
This edition’s focus on “Great Women,” was inspired by exuberant presentations at this month’s NOA Conference in Salt Lake City that focused on bridging equality gaps and that featured exciting new works by women and for women. It is well known that the NOA never ceases to work hard to provide its members with tools and resources that greatly support their careers. But perhaps its greatest distinction, the thing that compels me to write this statement, rests in the renewing dose of genuine kindness and camaraderie found within this body of artists and scholars who engage in meaningful discussions and initiatives that serve to remind all of us why what it is that we do matters! The 2019 NOA Conference certainly reflected this organization’s commitment to pioneering the future of opera, which includes promoting scholarship that increases awareness of and discussion about diversity and gender parity in the field. The Sacred in Opera is proud to be part of that conversation. We certainly invite you to make plans to register for the 2020 NOA Conference in Cleveland (January 8-11, 2020). But before then, be sure to take advantage of NOA regional events happening throughout the year.

Lastly, please take a moment to read through notes from the SIO Editorial Board. 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 the best high-impact publications to showcase your ideas and work.

As always, take time to tell your colleagues and friends that we are here, sharing on the Sacred in Opera!

Wishing you continued inspiration and success in the new year,

Dr. Isai Jess Muñoz
The Sacred in Opera Initiative of the NOA Chair and Senior Editor
Celebrations: Marisa Michelson and Royce Vavrek’s “Naamah’s Ark” Headlines the 2019 NOA Conference in Salt Lake City

Every year, NOA’s Sacred in Opera Initiative receives a robust number of submissions from composers and directors interested in having us look further into their work. In summer 2017, New York’s adventurous company, Heart Beat Opera, introduced us to the composer of this year’s Sacred in Opera Plenary Session Production, Ms. Marisa Michelson.

Ms. Michelson has described her compositional process as an exploration of the performer as a presence-cultivator, truth-seeker, as a shaman, and the performance itself as an invitation to enter into an intimate, heightened, and revelatory relationship with the moment and each other. Her process engages in 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.

The New York Times has described Ms. Michelson’s compositions as “exquisite,” and her 2013 off-Broadway musical sensation, 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 commissions, including our 2019 NOA Conference Production, Naamah’s Ark, a staged community 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 founded by Robert Shaw). This celebratory work tells the story of Noah’s Ark from the perspective of Noah’s wife, Naamah-- a strong woman who must guide all the diverse species of animals in coming together as the Ark reaches dry land. Scripture does not provide a name for Noah’s wife, but according to Marisa, “She deserves a name, so we have her one!” From the birds to the hippos, each group has its own concerns. Can they learn to live together after the crisis has passed?
Presented in collaboration with Southern Utah University, a company of over 300 artists performed Michelson and Vavrek’s inspirational work in Salt Lake City’s Gothic Romanesque Cathedral of the Madeleine. The Cathedral of the Madeleine quickly rose as the ideal choice to host the NOA 2019 Conference production. Beyond the beauty, size, and wonderful acoustics of the sanctuary, the Cathedral is home to The Madeleine Choir School. Being one of only three Roman Catholic Choir Schools in all of North America, its mission is to inspire young people to become engaged scholars, effective communicators, dedicated liturgical musicians, and responsible world citizens who seek to build a civilization of justice, mercy and love.

This year’s NOA production, was made possible by generous support from Southern Utah University. Isai Jess Muñoz (SIO Chair), Carol Ann Modesitt and Krystal McCoy (both from Southern Utah University) produced the event. In line with the mission of the Sacred in Opera Initiative, this interfaith production was shared 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.

The Sacred in Opera Initiative wishes to thank the following individuals:

- Michael Crotty (Choreographer)
- Logan Allen and Oasis Stage Works (Lighting Design)
- Frank Stearns (Sound Design)
- Dr. Lynn Vartan (Director of the Southern Utah University Apex Series)
- Skip Daynes and Daynes Music (Piano Rentals)
- Participating Choirs: Fort Herriman Middle School, Jordan H. S., Paradigm H.S., Pleasant Grove H. S.
- The staff of Salt Lake City’s Cathedral of the Madeleine: Patricia Wesson (Director of Development); Gregory Glenn (Director of music and Liturgy) and Father Raymond Diaz.
- Senior Administrators of Southern Utah University: Lawrence Johnson (Music Department Chair); Shawna Mendini (Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences); Bradley Cook (University Provost); Marvin Dodge (SUU Vice President) and Scott Wyatt (University President).
- The National Opera Association Board of Trustees, with special thanks to NOA President Paul Houghtaling, NOA Executive Director Robert Hansen, and NOA Vice President of Conferences, Lisa F. Dawson
- Individual Supporters: Peter Pasternak, Diane Douglass, Ree Zaphiropoulos and Leland Modesitt.

Naamah’s Ark at the 2019 NOA Conference, Salt Lake City
The idea began with Krask’s proposal to Crozier that they write a short opera on his eighteen-page libretto. After Crozier agreed to what he expected to be about a twenty-minute opera, Krask made some revisions and returned with a fifty-two-page libretto. Though the task seemed more daunting, Crozier began composing, and after two years, completed the work which runs as a long one-act — ninety minutes.

The powerful story of Sor Juana is well-known in Mexico, if not in the United States. The opera introduces this formidable historical character to modern audiences. Educated to read, write and think, young Juana was known to debate the learned men at court — and win. When she refuses to marry, the men of the church decide the best life for her would be in a convent. Once she understands that she will be allowed to continue her studies and writings, she agrees to go. As life continues at the convent, Padre Antonio criticizes the young woman’s attention to her studies. When she tries to discuss her work with him, he becomes angry. A visiting Countess, Maria Luisa comes to tell her the court will be returning to Spain but promises to publish Sor Juana’s work in Europe. As Sor Juana writes an introduction for her volume, she wonders why she should be treated differently than men with regard to her writing. Later the Archbishop visits the convent and demands that

*With Blood, With Ink*, winner of the National Opera Association 1994 Chamber Opera Competition, weaves together disparate musical elements from Gregorian chant to early nineteenth-century Romantic music, to aspects of early twentieth-century atonal music, in service of the story of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a nun from seventeenth-century Mexico City under the rule of Spain. Composer Daniel Crozier, working with librettist Peter M. Krask, began composition of the opera during his graduate studies and, after twenty years, the two were pleased to see a production on stage at the Fort Worth Opera followed by the release of a recording on the Albany Records label in 2014.

**Feature: Daniel Crozier’s* With Blood, With Ink*, A Past NOA Chamber Opera Competition Winner**

Philip Seward
Sor Juana renounce her work. Given little choice, she eventually does. She cuts herself and signs in blood the agreement that she will no longer speak or write about her faith and her beliefs.

Composer Philip Seward recently took time to sit down with Daniel Crozier to explore his interests in composing opera and sacred music.

Sacred In Opera: Who are some of your Favorite Poets and writers who have inspired your work in the theatre and in music?

Dan Crozier: In poetry, my tastes vary widely. A few of my strong interests have been Wordsworth, Dickinson, Sitwell, Merton, Carlos Williams, Lorca, Machado, and Neruda, as well as Sor Juana herself. Musically, I would say my strongest influences are probably found in the early nineteenth century: Schubert through Chopin, extending to Mahler and Fauré, have been important for the study of controlling mood with its very subtle gradations, and for pacing, which is so important. There are a lot of others too, like Stravinsky, Ravel, Berg, and American composers of the twentieth century who have helped me in many other ways. Jack Beeson comes to mind as a wonderful composer of opera. Other operatic influences…I think Mozart, Verdi, Britten and Tippett most.

SIO: How would you describe yourself as a composer or more generally speaking, as an artist?

DC: I’m a slow, methodical composer, completing a little bit at a time. It’s a painstaking process, but if you work that way, you can build something large over time: one phrase, one line, one scene at a time…that sort of thing.

SIO: Would you say you have trouble with compositional unity over a large work then?

DC: No, but it’s a big challenge. I’m always concerned with it. I think that’s part of what makes my process take so long. I’m always thinking about the big picture while I’m working on small bits, trying to maintain a bird’s eye view all the time. I don’t necessarily work in order either. For this opera, I began by writing the big moments and later worked out the connecting material. I had a network of thematic ideas from the start that made their way through the whole piece. This opera uses a lot of Gregorian Chant. Two of the chant melodies in particular, which appear symbolically, in addition to a network of leitmotifs associated with characters and ideas, weave their way through the entire opera.

SIO: How would you describe the sound of your music?

DC: Well, in all my music, not just opera, I’m after two things, elegance and drama. They are the qualities most interesting to me. I guess those two values seesaw back and forth in terms of prominence…at different times in any given piece. Although my music is quite chromatic, I love tonality. Now there are moments that are frankly atonal in this opera, when the dramatic situation demanded that, but even then, my ear attempts to perceive through a tonal lens. I would say that the music of composers I mentioned earlier, those from the early nineteenth-century in particular, guide my aesthetic quite a bit, even though no one would mistake this opera for music of that period.
SIO: Are you speaking of traditional tonality or also pitch-centric music?

DC: Pitch-centered music, but I think traditional tonal relations govern a lot of emotional direction even when they are not explicit in a functional sense. I think tonal areas and the large-scale use of tonality can impact the audience’s perceptions. Mozart was the greatest master of this.

SIO: When is writing difficult for you?

DC: All the time…every day. You always think you can do better. You always try to make something the best it can be, and you always worry that maybe it can still be a little better than it is. What I find is that inspiration from the material itself often propels the process forward. Peter Krask’s libretto is very poetic. He managed to use the main character’s own words, since she was a brilliant writer. He weaved her writing into the libretto in ingenious ways. So, the text can drive me forward, but often it’s something about the musical materials themselves, and their potential, that energizes the compositional process. Ravel spoke of this.

SIO: What time of day do you generally write?

DC: Whenever I’m free is when I work. So, I do a lot late at night because there aren’t distractions then, but if I get breaks between classes, I’ll steal a few minutes for work during the daytime.

SIO: What are you working on right now?

DC: Right now I’m working on movements for a concerto for two clarinets and orchestra — a double concerto. Part of it was premiered last summer. I wrote a large movement and a smaller one. The players are going to present it again this summer, so I’m working on two additional short movements.

SIO: Was that a commission?

DC: Yes, that was a commission from a husband and wife team, William Hudgins (principal clarinet of the Boston Symphony) and his wife Catherine, also a fantastic player. They wanted more music that they could play together. There isn’t very much in the repertoire.
Who are the librettists you work with? Do you work with several or only Peter?

I have only worked with Peter, and our mutual teacher, Roger Brunyate. Roger was director of the opera department at the Peabody Conservatory, and he wrote the libretti for my first two operas, a short piece called Leaving Home, which represented my first operatic project, followed by a one-act, titled The Reunion. It was a wonderful libretto, and the project went very well.

A year or two later, Peter approached Roger, asking if he could suggest a composer for him to work with. Roger proposed that we collaborate. That’s how we got connected to work on this.

Is your recent work different from With Blood, With Ink?

It’s been some time… a lot of things are the same… things I’ve talked about in terms of elegance and drama are still my priorities. Perhaps the harmonic language and expressive range have broadened a bit.

Do you do your own orchestrations?

I do. Yes, I don’t want anyone else to touch it really. I don’t do my own typesetting, however.

Oh really, so you work with pen and ink?

I do. I have a couple of former students whom I trust to help me with getting scores and parts together.

Where are you from?

I’m from Pennsylvania originally. I grew up near Philadelphia. My father worked as an archaeologist at Temple University. I went to Westminster College and from there to Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore where I met Peter.

What were some of your influences growing up?

I started as a pianist. So I think my interest in the early nineteenth century comes from that repertoire I knew early and well. I played a lot of that music. I think a lot of our early influences remain strong — the things that attracted us to music at the start. I began writing piano music almost exclusively through my later teens. During my undergraduate years I started writing for other forces, and realized I was very interested in vocal music, and in the orchestra, too.

What are some of the hurdles you have had to face along the way?

The realities of the world of new music are quite a hurdle. I think we find our own ways to negotiate that, getting performances and so on. Opera is a favorite medium, but I haven’t written another since this piece, which was a long time ago now. I’ve found ways to use my operatic thinking in instrumental music. Truth be told, I think of all my music as operatic. I think of scenes and characters even in instrumental pieces. Opera is so
difficult to get performed, and so expensive. So, it’s hard to think of writing another opera without a commission. In the meantime, I’m content to write my own sort of operas without words.

**SIO:** What are some of your latest artistic obsessions — areas of interest for future works?

**DC:** I’m very excited about a piano concerto I’m planning based on paintings from the late Renaissance and early Baroque. It resonates with this opera actually in terms of subject matter. I have quite a few sketches completed. I hadn’t written any concerto pieces before this double clarinet concerto. About the same time I began that piece a pianist approached me about the possibility of a piano concerto. I also have a brass quintet to write, and I love text, so I’d like to do some more song settings. I’ve written a good many art songs, quite a few since the time of the opera. The most recent was an Emily Dickenson set, but I’d like to do more.

**SIO:** Would you say you were a born composer?

**DC:** Probably. It goes back a long way. I think there are two kinds of composers represented by the Mozart model and the Beethoven model. I’m definitely on the Beethoven side — meaning that the work comes, but with effort.

**SIO:** Are you a confessional composer?

**DC:** One of my favorite composers is Robert Schumann who might be the most confessional composer of all. I’ve been very attracted to his music. I think a lot more composers are confessional than meet the eye. I’ve used symbols in music a lot — opera allows one to do so easily, but I’ve done it elsewhere, too. I keep secrets — like Chopin did. I seldom reveal what it’s about. I have an orchestra piece titled, *A Tale After the Brothers Grimm*, and everybody always asks which fairytale. But I don’t say because I think it’s more fun to imagine. I am certainly a confessional composer, but a guarded one.

**SIO:** What is your music yearning to discover, to answer, to give us?

**DC:** I think we want music to provide an emotional discourse that can resonate with our own experience. I think that’s when music is most successful — when it can resonate with someone’s particular psychological journey.

**SIO:** Why focus on sacred music-drama as a form? What was your interest in this genre within the larger family of music drama?

**DC:** As far as the sacred subject matter… chant especially is really interesting to me. I love chorales, too. A lot of the music of the church is so beautiful. That was one of the attractive features of this particular piece. Though I wrote the opera before I ever taught anything, I now enjoy teaching sixteenth-century counterpoint very much. I enjoy spending time with students on that literature. It’s an inspiration.

**SIO:** Was there something that drew you to this
particular story?

DC: I think two things: one, the music of the church which we’ve mentioned. The other is the beautiful poetry of the heroine, Sor Juana. It is simply gorgeous writing. I’m always inspired by beautiful poetry.

SIO: What would you say are opportunities or insights you have found that can derive from this form of communication—the dramatization of sacred or transcendental stories and ideas?

DC: I think opportunities to create further works; spiritual growth for oneself; further investigation into how art relates to life- How art, meaning, and our existence come together.

SIO: Particularly thinking about sacred operas… so many are written to speak to the violence of the contemporary world. Do you think that these kinds of works are simply telling a story or do they reflect on ethical and moral issues?

DC: Oh, they definitely do. This story, old as it is, is still timely because human nature is the same in any period. There’s a lot in this piece that speaks to our conditions today.

SIO: Clearly in the twentieth-century Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughan-Williams and others — Americans as well— were drawn to sacred opera. Do you think besides the composers and librettists we’ve already talked about, there are reasons that might draw you to a sacred source going forward? Would the sacred aspect draw you to a project or would it really be about the story that may just happen to have a sacred aspect?

DC: The sacred aspect would interest me. I am a person of faith myself, and I like to reflect that where I can artistically. We have callings and I need to do what I am able. I agree with Stravinsky where this is concerned.

SIO: Do you think that the setting of sacred topics can breathe new life into those spiritual topics especially in our age of secularization and industrialization?

DC: Oh sure, it can. I think that it is naturally challenging for people of our time to relate to abstract concepts and distant eras. However, an opera can make remote events seem very present and relevant indeed, provided the characters’ experiences resonate with those of an audience. Peter has drawn the characters so well in this piece that audiences are always engaged.

SIO: Do you have any compositional or production suggestions that you would offer as guidelines for writing and then consequently staging in a church or sacred space? Things that you might be concerned about because of the space?

DC: You mean in terms of dealing with institutions or just in terms of practicality of performance?

SIO: Both, I guess. You were produced by Fort Worth Opera House.

DC: Yes, we were. It wasn’t in a sacred space, though their set design was spectacular. The piece has been performed in sacred spaces too, however.

SIO: So are there issues related to staging in a sacred space that might be important to think about in terms of composition or production?

DC: Rollins College, where I teach in Winter Park, Florida, produced the piece in their chapel, as did Bucknell University. The late Richard Owens (founder of both AIMS and Musiktheater Bavaria in Germany) produced it at Rollins. There were issues because of the space such as where to put the orchestra — practical things. We built a platform. But it was incredible, because the chapel in which it was performed provided a backdrop of ready-made scenery. It made it far less expensive.

SIO: Aside from those points already mentioned, are there other aspects not yet mentioned that could help church music directors, composers, and producers build a case for the support of Sacred Opera from congregants, clergy, and leaders within sacred spaces?

DC: I would say that those types of pieces can provide new ways of communicating to their congregants as well as drawing interest from the wider community. They can
certainly function as a kind of ministry.

**SIO:** Where will your work go from here? For those who are interested, where may we acquire the score and materials?

**DC:** The work is self-published, so I provide the orchestral score, vocal score, and instrument parts as needed. This past semester, Christine Brandes produced scenes from the piece at San Francisco State University. Last year, Third Eye Ensemble in Chicago produced it.

**SIO:** Before we go, is there anything I haven’t asked that you’d like to say?

**DC:** You didn’t broach the subject, but people often ask, “Did you intend this opera to be an indictment of the Catholic church?” Most certainly not. That wasn’t Peter’s nor my intent. It’s a commentary on the times for sure, but I think it’s important to remember that Sor Juana, notwithstanding her extraordinary vision, and her very real differences with her clerical superiors, remained steadfast in her faith despite everything.

**About the Contributor:**

Philip Seward has worked internationally as a composer, conductor, pianist, tenor and teacher. In 2017, his sängspiel *High Fidelity* was produced at the Royal George in Chicago; in 2013, his chamber opera *How To Date A Coloratura*, was named one of three finalists at the National Opera Association Chamber Opera Competition. The world renowned Lyric Opera of Chicago commissioned works that include, *Stone Soup, A Noteworthy Tale, and African Stories*. These operas were produced in Chicago, Toledo Opera, Memphis Opera, and Pensacola Opera among others. The Lira Ensemble of Chicago also commissioned works including *Blessing*, on the 25th anniversary of the papacy of John Paul II, which premiered live on WFMT radio. Another piece for chorus and orchestra, *Sonnet*, was performed at the Chicago’s Symphony Center.

Upcoming recording releases include *How To Date A Coloratura* and *The Rose Prologues* both with soprano Patrice Boyd and conductor Gregory Buchalter. His other albums include *The Piano Album: Songs from Atonality, The Holiday Album: Songs from Atonality, Juan Peron’s Hand, Home, Hans Brinker*, and *Les Dames à trios...et piano*.

Philip Seward received the Excellence in Teaching Award during his work at Columbia College Chicago. He also serves as Music Director at Epiphany United Church of Christ in Chicago. Seward holds degrees from Wabash College, Northwestern University, and the University of Salford.

Mr. Seward’s publisher for choral music is Porfiri & Horvath. Other music is available through his website at: www.philipseward.com
Works in Progress: Tawnie Olson and Roberta Barker’s *Sanctuary and Storm*, an Opera America Awardee

Nicole Leupp Hanig

Collaboration and conversation between strong women is the connecting thread between both the creation and subject matter of *Sanctuary and Storm*. This new chamber opera weaves together a fictional debate between the two most powerful women in Medieval Europe: Hildegard of Bingen, the Sibyl of the Rhein and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duchess of Aquitaine, Queen of the Normans.

Tawnie Olson, composer, and Dr. Roberta Barker, librettist, created music and text in Collaboration with Debi Wong and Arianne Abela. Ms. Wong and Ms. Abela are founding members of re:Naissance Opera who will perform and produce the work, that is co-commissioned by the Hartford Women Composers Festival and the Canada Council for the Arts. An OPERA America Discovery Grant has subsidized workshops of the new opera, and plans for its world premiere in May 2020 are currently under way. “In all my compositions, I really like working collaboratively. I know it makes the piece stronger. I have ideas about how things should go but others can enrich those ideas. Opera is the most collaborative art form and I’m really happy to be working in it.” Olson spoke at length with SIO about the continued evolution of this project—the way the it fits into her rapidly growing body of work—as well as her own development and process as a composer.

**Origins of this new work: Sanctuary and Storm**

Although *Sanctuary and Storm* is the first operatic project for both Olson and Barker, the subject matter was well suited to their base of knowledge and creative aspirations. The composer and librettist had been discussing a plan for a fully orchestrated, three-act, sacred opera for over ten years when the request for a chamber opera about Saint Hildegard of Bingen came from re:Naissance Opera. When Wong and Abela approached Olson about the project, they had yet to choose a librettist. Olson recommended her longtime friend Barker, who serves in a cross appointment and The University of King’s College and Dalhousie University as Associate Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies and Theatre Studies. The proposed topic of Hildegard of Bingen seemed ideal, particularly for Olson who explained that she and Hildegard, “go way back.” During her time of graduate studies at Yale University’s Institute of Sacred Music (ISM), Olson took a class on Hildegard with Professor Margot Fassler, one of the leading experts on the German writer and artist-theologian. During some early research Olson stumbled onto Hildegard’s letters, one of which was written to Eleanor of Aquitaine and another to Eleanor’s second husband, Henry II of England. As soon as she and Barker realized that Hildegard and Eleanor knew each other, it was clear that the opera had to be about them. “My librettist and I are huge fans of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Roberta’s mother is this great, second-wave feminist, so she grew up surrounded with books discussing Eleanor of Aquitaine and other exceptional
women from previous centuries — times where women were really not supposed to be doing anything except obeying and being quiet and sitting in the corner, and maybe having children if you’re Eleanor, and being a good nun if you’re Hildegard.” Soon the work began to take on the form of an operatic dialectic between Hildegard and Eleanor, focused on their own oppression and goals, with interspersed commentary from the Angel of History, a devised unworldly character whose vision extends outside temporal boundaries.

**Olson’s Thoughts on Casting and Writing for the Voice**

Olson’s commitment to fostering a collaborative environment is grounded in the way she views and approaches those performers for whom she is — individuals who as she mentions, “bring their own strengths to the process.” Olson’s history with re:Naissance Opera’s conductor Arianne Abela, goes back to their student days, singing together in the Yale Camerata. Olson wrote the part of Hildegard for the rich mezzo voice of re:Naissance Opera’s Debi Wong. Debi suggested the elegant soprano of Mireille Asselin for Eleanor, who received her Master’s Degree in the opera program at Yale. Olson had already written much for Dashon Burton’s powerful bass-baritone. She knew immediately that she wanted him for the Angel of History. “I was pinching myself. This is my first opera and these are the people I get to work with?” Before Olson began writing, she sent the singers a list of questions in relation to their singing so that she could tailor the vocal line to their voices. In rehearsal this practice continued. “During the second workshop, Mimi [Mireille] mentioned that she wished one section could sit higher in her range as it would make it more climactic and I thought, “Why didn’t I think of that?” Similar care was taken in choosing viola, cello, percussion and piano for the instrumentation. “I wanted lower strings to balance the higher voices and I wanted percussion, because you have such a huge palette of colors and dynamic range.” Workshop sessions of the prologue and first scene revealed the need to expand the instrumentation to include seven players: a doubling bass clarinet, percussion, piano, violin, viola, cello, and bass. “There is more heft now to match Mimi and Dashon’s sizeable voices.”

Barker’s libretto, utilizes Hildegard’s belief that prophetic visions, writings, and accomplishments, were utilized as a vessel for God to speak, at the center of the dialogue between the two women. From a historical perspective, Hildegard and Eleanor seem to have so much in common as disrupters of the status quo for women of the time. Olson explained:

*Eleanor went on the crusades, convinced the church to annul her first marriage, and then fought against her second husband with their children. Hildegard, was composing music, writing books on theology, and professing plans to establish her own community. She would suffer from*
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sudden ‘mystical’ paralyzing illnesses, where she would not move until the monks would agree to give her what she wanted. She would then quite suddenly and miraculously recuperate…Eleanor sees commonality in the strength and accomplishments of herself and Hildegard, but Hildegard disagrees. Eleanor explains that Hildegard is writing books and doing things women don’t do, and Hildegard replies that all of it is from God, not her. Eleanor challenges by saying: ‘Are you sure it’s God’s voice? Because right now it sounds like your voice that I’m hearing.’ It gets really fierce and I have to say, it’s fun writing angry woman music. I’ve never had an occasion to do it but it’s getting something out of my system that I didn’t even know was there.

Olson’s works thus far represent a fairly even mix between vocal and instrumental achievements. Olson discussed how her compositional process is dependent on the existence or absence of text.

When a composer is setting text to music, their task is to interpret the text. I have to be passionate about the text…I won’t accept a commission with a mandated text. I just find it difficult to work with words that aren’t deeply meaningful to me. I’m excited about using the music to comment on the text…the text provides the structure for the piece. I’m also a sucker for word painting. Instrumental writing is excites me in a different way. When you’re writing a piece of instrumental music and you come up with a musical idea, you use it and run with it but if the musical idea doesn’t suit the text, you have to dump it. Instrumental music is freeing in that way but both have their own challenges and rewards.

Olson’s Thoughts on Notation

A commitment to serving the unique needs of different performers’ is evident beyond tailoring to specific voices. “Orchestral musicians and singers are different kinds of musicians and consequently, need distinctively different kinds of indications.” Her scores are explicit in their markings. She aims to minimize the number of questions asked of the conductor in a large orchestral rehearsal. “Singers are often accustomed to shaping phrases intuitively.” When she requires a forte dynamic, she puts it in the strongest range for the singer whereas pianissimo is often paired with lower part of the range, although she confesses, “I do love a floated high note!” In an attempt to allow room for more personal ownership of the music, in chamber-like passages, Olson utilizes fewer markings than in the more dense orchestral sections. She adds, “My music is pretty clear emotionally so I don’t need to say more. Between the music, dynamics and the text, you figure it out pretty quickly.” Olson’s use of thematic material found in Sanctuary and Storm, provides a window into her ability to relate textual meaning through instrumental lines. In this way, she creates a double layer of subtext beneath the words being sung.

In Sanctuary and Storm the music takes as its foundational material “In principio,” the final chant of Ordo Virtutum and Can vei la lauzeta by Bernardt de Ventadorn, who had Eleanor of Aquitaine as his patroness. The text of Can vei la lauzeta is quoted in scene three, the heart of the opera, and the music is used throughout as a symbol of human longing. In its prime form it symbolizes human longing as a force for good, and in inversion it symbolizes human desires as a force for evil. The first mention of Henry II, Eleanor’s second husband and an infamous tyrant, is accompanied by the inverted form of the song in the strings. “In principio” is quite a long chant, so I mainly use the opening, which sets the words, In principio omnes creature viruerunt, in medio flores floruerunt; postea viriditas descendit, a text about the greenness of Paradise and its subsequent fall. It is used in prime form as a symbol of the Divine, and in inversion to evoke the fall of humanity, the world, and the human condition in general. Later in the opera, Hildegard sings, “The trumpet simply makes the sounds…” to the prime form, then, as she sings, “I suffer from a heart of little courage,” she sings the inversion.
Olson’s Interest in the Sacred and more…

Olson was open about her devout Christianity and what inspires her as an artist, including her views and aims regarding sacred music. “When I write it is coming from a deep place. Housed in that deep place that is me, is a very strong religious belief. I’m very happy and comfortable to engage with it but not every piece I write is overtly sacred.” A few years ago she composed a piece about winter in response to the feelings of a Jewish friend of hers who felt uncomfortable in choirs due to the volume of Christian music.

Sacred topics are dear to my heart but it is just one thread… I am deeply enamored with the poetry of Lorri Neilsen Glenn and have set it several times. I love [composer] David Lang, and at times he can be too much of an influence on me. He has very compelling ideas and I have to be careful. I believe Kaija Saariaho might be the greatest living composer but I don’t think one can hear much of her in my writing.

Future Plans

The immediate future is bright for both Olson and Sanctuary and Storm. A workshop of the full opera is planned for May 2019 in Vancouver, BC, which will also include the first major production meeting with the design and directorial team. re:Naissance Opera hopes to premier the opera in their 2019-2020 season. Additional performances will include one for the Women Composers Festival of Hartford, where Olson is Composer in Residence, and a possible performance in Toronto. In addition to her continued work on Sanctuary and Storm, commissions in 2019 include two choral works, a piece for saxophone and electronics, and then a woodwind quintet. Olson was chosen as the winner of the 2018 Barlow Prize from 356 submissions from 36 countries and as a result will complete a consortium commission for choral groups The Crossing, Seraphic Fire and the BU Singers. Olson’s compositions can be found through the Canadian Music Center and through her publishers E.C. Schirmer and Hal Leonard. Compositions not available through those sources are available on request. Tawnie Olson serves on the composition faculty of the Hartt School of Music.

Information about Sanctuary and Storm can be found at: https://www.reopera.com/sanctuary-storm.

About the Contributor

Soprano, Nicole Leupp Hanig has appeared as a soloist with the Jussi Björling Festival in Sweden, the Maggio Musicale Festival in Italy, the Pacific Music Festival in Japan and Atelier Lyrique in France. She has performed a solo recital at St. Martin’s in the Field in London, Berg’s Sieben Frühe Lieder at Durham Cathedral in Durham, England and was a soloist in Opera Galas for Amnesty International at St. James’ Picadilly in London and for the Cairo Opera in Egypt, which was recorded for Egyptian television. Opera roles include Die Feldmarschallin in Der Rosenkavalier. The Countess in Le Nozze di Figaro, Rosalinde in Die Fledermaus, Miss Jessel in The Turn of the Screw, and the role of Sian in development workshops of James McMillan’s opera The Sacrifice which was commissioned for Welsh National Opera. Upcoming projects include a recording of the art songs of Charles Widor for Albany Records. Dr. Hanig holds degrees from The University of Colorado, and The University of Illinois as well as a Post Graduate Diploma from The Royal Academy of Music in London where she was awarded the Diploma of the Royal Academy for distinction in performance. She is an Associate Professor of Music and Director of Vocal Studies at University of Portland and an Artist/Teacher with Music in the Marche, an opera training program and festival in Mondavio, Italy.
The Lighter Side: Gayla D. Morgan’s *Mary – A Musical*
Susan Hulsman Bingham

MARY — A MUSICAL is a lively “midrash” dealing with the deepest of universal human issues — acceptance of ourselves, the risks of vulnerability, the rewards of community — as presented through the prism of the life of Mary Magdalene and her relationship to Peter, Jesus, and Jesus’s other close disciples.

MARY is, therefore, not meant solely for Christian audiences, though Christians will surely love seeing the major events of Jesus’s life fleshed out as seamlessly as they are in this musical.

Gayla Morgan (book, lyrics, music) and Jean Mornard (book) have credibly characterized Mary Magdalene as a delightfully honest, bright, strong-willed, angry, opinionated, loving, vulnerable and brave woman, and they have done an equally effective job of portraying Peter, the antagonist in this musical, as a loud, expressive, honest and stubborn man. “They represent two sides of the same coin,” says Morgan. “Both lack filters.”

Jesus, whom the authors admit is a somewhat lesser character in this piece, is refreshingly angular — even rough-hewn — and is also vulnerable and open about his fears and doubts. At one pivotal point, for instance, he admits his attraction to Mary Magdalene, and though her attraction to him is also obvious, she redirects him to the heart of his divine nature and mission and signs on as his disciple and helper. By bringing out this physical aspect of Jesus and Magdalene’s relationship, the authors have acknowledged and honored human nature and love while maintaining focus on the enormity of Jesus’s assignment and mission. They offer their audience both a model of a strong, God-centered personal celibate relationship and a model for how we might live and work lovingly and effectively in Community.
Though the composer’s classical training as a violinist and singer are apparent in her writing, this musical also contains Jewish tonalities, folk, jazz and even a touch of Gregorian chant within an envelope of, as she calls it, “musical theater/pop”. Fresh and striking melodies arc over accompaniments that are sensitively transparent, allowing the voices to be showcased without competition.

As for drama: humor and depth follow quickly upon one-another. As for pace: there are no points where energy falters or the story loses intensity.

Most of us who were reared in the Christian tradition were taught that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Scholars have since acknowledged that nowhere in the four Gospels was Magdalene called a prostitute. Neither was she to be confused with the woman who anointed Jesus’s feet with her tears, nor the woman who was caught in adultery.

Co-author the Rev. Jean Mornard is an Episcopal priest, and Ms. Morgan has been active in Christian churches her entire life. It is to their credit that they mindfully and intentionally chose the early “popular” version of Mary Magdalene’s life rather than base their story on the issue of her having been possessed by seven demons. Why? you might ask. “A musical about demon possession would portray Magdalene as a victim, not as someone actively choosing to change. It provides a much less dramatic story line,” says Morgan.

MARY — THE MUSICAL fills two functions: it is a compelling musical theater piece for all audiences, and it suggests that Mary Magdalene might be the torchbearer for Christianity’s most important message — that of universal, nonjudging love and radical inclusion as the only route to true inner strength and peace.

Morgan is looking for opportunities to workshop MARY in 2019 and can be contacted at maryamusical@gmail.com or through the website, MaryAMusical.com.”
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.