

History of the Work's Development

It is heartening to see that opera is experiencing new growth in some locales. Perhaps one reason for this growth is the rise of visual projection – eye candy to whet our appetites for more thrilling productions. While it may be remarkable to see traditional, frequently performed operas re-staged with visually arresting backdrops, I find myself asking: Instead of remaking classics, why not explore the vastness beyond? If contemplating new works, one might further ask: Instead of making a lot out of a little, why not make a lot out of a lot? Visual projection makes it seem as though you could do almost anything!

I am a long-time reader of science fiction and fantasy, and the stories tend to be epic. “Space Opera” is a label often applied to the best examples, where a universe is so vividly imagined, and where events are shaped by characters so memorable that you can’t help but care about them. These stories often reveal humanity in ways that are both surprising and compelling. Could such works really become staged operas? As with anything else, choose the right dramatic story with inspiring, relatable characters and match its unique spirit with engaging music, and I am certain that it could. Throw in some next-level visual projection, and the prospect is too tempting to ignore!

My opera is based on Greg Bear’s epic fantasy work *Songs of Earth & Power*, a volume that combines revised versions of two earlier works, *The Infinity Concerto* and *The Serpent Mage*. The intricately layered storytelling of his work is beyond the range of a single opera (as I would see it told). The scope of Song of Sidhedark, therefore, takes us to the middle of Chapter 28 of *The Infinity Concerto*.

Creating a libretto adaptation of *The Infinity Concerto* began in 2013. I contacted Greg Bear late in 2014 to float my idea for the opera cycle based upon his books. He was enthusiastic about having me continue this work, and with a written agreement in hand I was able to move forward.

One request from Greg was that the libretto be written in screenplay format – an understandable request. In retrospect, this proved to be very helpful in developing highly detailed stage directions for an opera presentation by forcing me to keep the stage presentation foremost in my mind. Stage directing became a prerequisite to grasping the tone of every moment of every scene, and this would come to pay real dividends in dramatizing the singing voices of the characters.

Once he approved the completed libretto adaptation I was able to proceed with composing the opera. As the work progressed, I periodically sent printed scores and MIDI sound files to Greg. I am happy to say that he heard the majority of the work. Unfortunately, he did pass away before hearing the opera’s conclusion. I am grateful to Astrid Bear, Greg’s widow, for her continued support of this project. It is my sincere hope that Greg’s imaginative story will one day reach the live opera stage, and in so doing honor his memory and amazing legacy.

Artistic Goals of the Creative Team

As both librettist and composer, my operatic goals are to convey a relatable intimacy of the characters within this fantastical realm, and to clothe them with approachable music that also reflects the epic scale of the story. One also hopes to deliver a memorable tunefulness with the potential to leave the listener humming a part they have heard after only a few repetitions. To keep audiences engaged the staging should have a lot of movement and the storytelling should have a brisk pace that contrasts dramatically with the tender, quieter moments.

Composing the Music

Musically, my artistic goals are to be found in the chosen harmonies, voices, and instrumental scoring. Here are some highlights:

Breed Waltz

Story-wise, there is no such thing as a Breed Waltz, but the ironic nickname stuck. My elegiac, “La Folia”-like chord progression underpins a significant part of the harmony of the opera. Some widely varied examples of its rendering include:

- Act 1 Scene 07 (Michael Meets the Crane Women)
- Act 1 Scene 08 (Alyons Comes in the Night)
- Act 1 Scene 11 (The Kaeli)
- Act 3 Scene 10 (Eleuth Battles the Guardian)
- Act 3 Scene 11 (Euterpe in Ruins, Alyons Pays The Price)

Contralto Voice

Contralto voice appears to be somewhat rare in opera, but not so rare in real life. Often associated with an adjective like “sultry”, low female voices seem loaded with dramatic charisma, much like their basso profundo male voice counterparts do, I suspect. In my opera there are two contralto-voiced characters, Lamia and Spart. While their personas couldn’t be more different, they do share this one characteristic.

Chorus

The most notable uses of chorus are:

- Act 1 Scene 11 (The Kaeli), “Breed” chorus
- Act 3 Scene 10 (Eleuth Battles the Guardian), “Past Victims of the Guardian” male chorus
- Act 3 Scene 12 (Onward, Alone), “Spirits of the Blasted Plain” chorus

Piano

The piano is a character in its own right. Lamia, a captive in Clarkham’s former mansion, keeps a demolished piano as one of her companions, a reminder of what was lost. Helena, we learn, was a concert pianist back on Earth, and it was during a moment of musical ecstasy while performing Prokofiev that she crossed over to Sidhedark, a place that – tragically for her – forbids pianos. Helena becomes the heart of the human resistance, and one of their most defiant acts is to build a piano. Michael, upon learning of the subversive

plan to build a piano finds renewed hope for the captive humans. Later he is devastated to discover that his heart's greatest desire, Helena, is secretly Savarin's lover, and in his despair he wanders the snow-drifted streets of Halftown – a moment that called for the bare-boned dirge of a piano.

Vibraphone

A vibraphone provides an interesting alternative to the more typical harp. Vibraphone is used extensively throughout Song of Sidhedark, representing part of the larger voice of magic in the story. For example, the opera opens with a solo bowed vibraphone singing of "Clarkham's Wine." It is both a warning of the dangers Clarkham's character represents and a reference to (spoiler alert!) his eventual undoing in *The Serpent Mage*. The vibraphone is also used in Act 1 Scene 08 (Alyons Comes in the Night) when Alyons' mount splashes across the stream running by the Cranes' mound, reminding us that Riverines (Sidhe water spirits) are abundant in these waters. The voice of a woman with Sidhe heritage is said to be disarmingly beautiful, perhaps expressive of the magical talent within. The vibraphone is liberally employed to give Eleuth's voice a nuanced, ringing timbre. During her aria "Halftown has donned its mask of white, and I mine" [Act 3 Scene 10 (Eleuth Battles the Guardian)] her voice and her magic-infused timbre diverge, playing off each other.

Tuba

The blustery, swirling, wind-driven snow associated with the dynamic weather of Sidhedark became a character for me, and the tuba is a surprisingly agile instrument that seems to lend itself well to this mood. Its use is especially notable at the end of Act 3 Scene 08 (Stealing the Sani).

Flugelhorn

Arno Waltiri, the real mastermind behind the events of *The Infinity Concerto*, is in his true form the last of a race of birds known as the Cledar. Personally speaking, some of my strongest improvisational memories are of the sound of a flugelhorn "in flight." This instrument seemed to give our "bird" the gravitas he needed.

Musical Influences

There are too many musical influences to list here, but a few operas worth mentioning are: Bluebeard's Castle (Bartok), Kovanshchina (Mussorgsky), Tannhauser (Wagner), Nixon in China (Adams), Boris Godunov (Mussorgsky), Norma (Bellini), and Die Frau Ohne Schatten (Strauss).

Final Thoughts

I dare to hope that I have brought these unique characters to life in a way that makes the performance roles irresistible for both singers and audiences alike. In the great opera tradition of telling epic stories with live orchestra, stunning voices, and brilliant stagecraft, I offer up Song of Sidhedark as a fresh journey into a new and thrilling realm.

David Tyree