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Cultivating New Works:

BY JOANIE BRITTINGHAM

Singers have Young Artist Programs to help them make the leap from student to professional. But what about up-and-coming composers? How do they get the training needed to successfully write operas? A New York City-based organization is providing just such training.

New operatic works are on the rise, thanks in part to a relatively new organization in New York City, the American Lyric Theater (ALT). Under the leadership of its founder, president, and producing artistic director Lawrence Edelson, ALT leads composers and librettists through the process of creating new works from ideas to performance, generating a new repertory of American opera.

Rather than using the submission-based process typical with theater festivals, ALT develops its projects through its Composer Librettist Development Program (CLDP), the only full-time mentorship initiative for emerging operatic writers in the United States. The program, which ALT launched in 2007, seeks to “identify, mentor, and champion artists and their work,” according to Edelson.

ALT selects four composers and four librettists every three years to participate in the program. Those chosen participate in more than 60 classes and workshops—over 200 hours of training—during the first year. Edelson and his staff then seek to identify composers and librettists “who have that creative spark that we believe has the potential to develop into a longer lasting partnership. We are looking for writing teams who we feel have potential to meaningfully contribute to the national canon of operatic works.”

Once these teams have been identified, ALT extends formal commissions to the most promising CLDP alumni. In 2009, ALT commissioned three teams to participate in *The Poe Project*. Each team wrote one-act operatic thrillers inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe. From this project, *Buried Alive* (by Jeff Myers and Quincy Long) and *Embedded* (by

Audrey Babcock and Audrey Luna in American Lyric Theater's workshop concert of *La Reina*, 2013



Composer Justine F. Chen giving notes in a rehearsal for *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing*, 2013



photo by Steven Meyer

photo by Steven Meyer

American Lyric Theater

Patrick Soluri and Deborah Brevoort) will premiere at Fargo-Moorhead Opera this month. "We are particularly excited by this partnership because we are helping to facilitate the first world premiere in Fargo's history," Edelson says.

In 2012, ALT commissioned three new teams: Jorge Sosa and Laura Sosa Pedroza for *La Reina*, Justine F. Chen and David Simpatico for *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing*, and Jeremy Howard Beck and Stephanie Fleischmann for *The Long Walk*. In June of 2013, ALT presented InsightALT, a festival featuring workshop performances of the three

operas in progress. The three works are continuing their development through the CLDP. "Though it is too early to make any formal announcements, multiple companies have expressed interest in producing them," says Edelson.

Librettist Stephanie Fleischmann says that sharing "creative conundrums in a supportive, workshop-like setting" created a basis for effective collaboration with composer Jeremy Howard Beck on *The Long Walk*. "That process wasn't always easy," Fleischmann admits, "but through it we established a shared language; our own way of having a back-and-forth; a melding of music, text, and

dramaturgy; and a trust in each other as artists."

David Simpatico, librettist for *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing* (called *The Turing Project* in its June workshop), describes himself as "a complete outsider from the world of opera" before joining the CLDP. As a performance artist and playwright, he learned the differences between writing for a musical and writing a libretto.

"In a musical, the lyrics are an extension of the story, amplifying the tale in moments when words alone were inadequate to the emotional and dramaturgical needs of the story," Simpatico explains. "In an opera,

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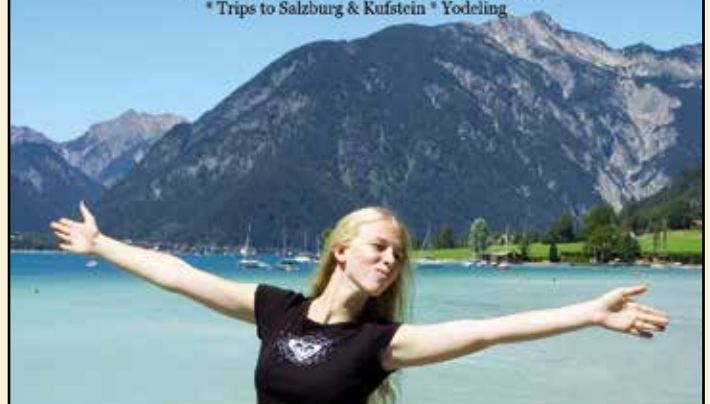
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however, the libretto *is* the story; the text informs the structure and unbroken emotional arc as articulated through the composer's vision. As in musical theatre, the words coupled with the composer's vision—but I quickly found the opera composer's vision was best served with far fewer words than in a musical, since the story is told from start to finish via the conduit of music.

"I realized that I had to create a living libretto that was complete, but not finished," he continues. "I had to give the composer material that was grounded in expression, action, and behavior, but that did not paint the composer into a corner. It had to stay loose enough to allow for what the composer heard, as well as to what I heard."

Part of the success for these artists and their supportive learning environment comes from the CLDP artistic faculty. The mentorship team includes composer/librettist Mark

Adamo; composers Robert Beaser, Paul Moravec, and Anthony Davis; librettists Michael Korie and Mark Campbell; and dramaturg Cori Ellison. "These are artists who I admire greatly," Edelson says, "and who not only provide artist mentorship, but who help me strengthen the CLDP from year to year."

Once ALT commissions artists to write an opera, they discuss subject matter. Edelson sometimes proposes an idea that might suit a particular team, while some teams generate their own ideas. There are then six stages of the development process: the idea, the outline, the libretto, the piano vocal score, the orchestral score, and the production.

Simpatico found that the most helpful stage for him was the outline. "When I create a script or libretto, I find the more time I spend up front on the blueprint or the emotional road map, the clearer becomes the actual writing later on," he says.

Justine F. Chen, composer of *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing*, agrees. "A work can seem to morph significantly from one to the next," she says, "but I've found that it is best for me to keep all the stages in mind while in one stage. As it turns out, the most durable/unchanging part of our stages has been the outline."

When the outline is complete, writers begin their libretto. ALT holds a weeklong libretto workshop where actors work through the libretto while the writers experiment and discuss developments in their works. "The workshop culminates in a public reading at the National Opera Center (The Living Libretto Series), after which I moderate a Critical Response Session with the audience," Edelson says. "After the libretto workshop, the writers continue to refine the libretto until we all feel it is at a point where the writing of music can begin."



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Advice to Singers Who Wish to Audition for New Operas

“One thing I should stress for any singer wanting to audition for ALT, is that you must have at least one aria in English, post World-War 2, and ideally, something on your list should demonstrate your ability with more complex music. If you’re a tenor and you sing ‘Maria’ from *West Side Story* or ‘Lonely House’ from *Street Scene* as your English aria, I may enjoy hearing it, but it simply doesn’t give me enough information to consider casting you for the type of work we do. Show us you can sing challenging music with a beautiful voice, sound vocal production, musicality, and with real dramatic involvement—and you will grab our attention.”

—Artistic Director Lawrence Edelson, American Lyric Theater

Composers then begin to draft a score. When a preliminary draft of at least one act is complete, ALT puts together a piano vocal workshop to explore the work-in-progress, complete with professional singers, a conductor, and pianists. Again, this workshop culminates in a public concert reading followed by a critical response session with the audience. Subsequent steps and a timeline are determined based on the needs of each piece.

The process of auditioning and hiring singers was new to many of the composer/librettist teams. Part of their education at ALT is to learn about voices and voice types. “This was the first time I was in a room with opera singers all day!” says Simpatico. “I felt like I was being presented with tiny, back-to-back private concerts and thrilled to the talent and power of the singers. As Justine and I wanted several singers to double and triple on characters, we had to judge the singers in a more complicated way, since our decisions needed to be playable rather than merely theoretical. It was a great learning experience, one based as much in vocal talent as it was with stage presence.”

Much of Chen’s music was conceptual at the time of the auditions. “I had never selected singers before creating the music, though I have written with singers in mind before,” says Chen. “It’s different, though, because the singers I have in mind are usually my friends. It sounds so obvious, but it did change

my sensitivity to the characters in the opera, in that they were suddenly actual people for whom I would write.”

For the artists, the workshops are, in the words of Fleischmann, a revelation. “We *heard* what we were making,” she says. In particular, working with conductor Steven Osgood was instrumental to Fleischmann and Beck. “His questions allowed us to make almost invisible changes that made all the difference,” says Fleischmann.

Chen also felt the workshops gave direction to her work. “It was very educational to see what made sense, what was confusing, and how the different singers looked upon their roles—their own priorities in learning the part or understanding their characters,” says Chen.

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L to R: Daniel Belcher, Heather Johnson, Benjamin P. Wenzelberg, Mercer Patterson, and Hayden Wall in ALT's workshop concert of *The Long Walk*, 2013



photo by Steven Meyer

The critical response session with the audience provided additional feedback. “[It allowed me to experience] firsthand not only how the material was landing, but also in what was not landing,” says Simpatico. “The *Turing* piece combines sensuality

with mathematics, and it was crucial to hear where the blend worked and where it needed bolstering. I was thrilled at the level of feedback from the audience, much of which found its way into the next step of revising the existing text and music.”

“Workshops are an opportunity to hear the work come off the page,” says Edelson. “It is time to experiment, to play, to digest, to explore. I always emphasize process over ‘end product.’ Of course, the goal is to write a fantastic piece, but it is incredibly important that the writers know they have time to figure things out.”

Edelson keeps sessions with the audience from becoming counterproductive by using Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Method. “It is a highly structured methodology that facilitates useful conversations between artists and audiences, but does so in a way that keeps the control in the hands of the artists,” he explains. “One thing we really stress is that feedback is not ever meant to ‘solve problems’ or to tell the writers what they need to do; rather, it is to help show the writers where their intent might not be coming across as clearly as they want it to.”

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Creating these new works takes time. “This process—from idea to outline to libretto to piano vocal score—usually takes about two years,” says Edelson. “Orchestration does not begin until subsequent piano vocal workshops are held, the number of which is determined based on the needs of each piece. Orchestral workshops are scheduled only once each piece is really ready to benefit from that process.”

Production planning begins when ALT partners with a coproducer. ALT has partnered with diverse companies, including Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Fort Worth Opera, and Fargo-Moorhead Opera. OPERA America also supports ALT. “[This] has been invaluable in helping to provide opportunities to forge these partnerships,” says Edelson.

ALT does not involve any staging in the workshop phases of the operas. “I firmly believe that writers need to be able to focus on what is on the page,” says Edelson. “A great director can solve a lot of issues in a problematic piece, and too often I have seen really good directors mask the issues in new works as they are developing through their stage craft. Being an excellent director is not the same as being an effective dramaturg. The piece itself has to stand on its own—or, as I’ve been known to say, great operas can survive really bad directors!”

“We want to develop operas that can survive the most misguided directorial hand—and I say this as someone who is a

director—so this is not meant to insult the art of directing,” he continues. “Secondly, because we partner with other companies for the production of works developed at ALT, those companies understandably want input into the production team. We feel that the assembly of those teams should be a collaboration.”

ALT’s model was designed to complement the efforts of larger producing companies. Because ALT absorbs the development costs of new works, other companies can evaluate potential pieces at a stage beyond a concept and are often more willing to produce the work. “While companies tend to embrace new works by composers who have already proven themselves in the opera house,” Edelson says, “they tend to be less willing to take a risk on emerging artists—especially those who do not have the support of an organization that is promoting and showcasing their work. ALT acts as that support system.”

Young Artist Programs provide young singers with opportunities to develop their skills, but there are few similar opportunities for writers. “Young Artist Programs for singers provide highly skilled talent at a relatively low cost for chorus, small roles, covers, and educational outreach,” says Edelson. “Mentoring writers doesn’t provide a similar immediate return on investment for opera companies. Of course, the long-term return can be huge—but that is not the business model under which most

companies operate. This is why what ALT does is so important.”

Since the CLDP was founded in 2007, other companies have followed suit. Washington National Opera and Opera Philadelphia in partnership with Gotham Chamber Opera and Music-Theatre Group have launched important initiatives to mentor writers and produce more American opera. “While ALT remains the only full-time program on a national scale to mentor both composers and librettists, I’m thrilled to see so much energy going into supporting the next generation of operatic writers and the production of their work,” says Edelman.

“I believe every opera company in the country has an obligation to champion the work of living composers and librettists,” he adds. “Whether they do that independently or in collaboration with ALT, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that we are all making a concerted effort to build the size and quality of the national canon. Knowing that ALT is playing a vital role in the future of American opera gives me great satisfaction—and great pride.”

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