



## Princeton Composer's Opera Premiered In Philadelphia's Kimmel Center

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Bringing a new opera from concept to production is a very complicated process, and one which opera companies undertake with great trepidation because of the expense. New York's Metropolitan Opera has taken on a huge challenge with Philip Glass's *Satyagraha*, which opened last week, but commissioning new operatic works is not just for the big boys. Regional companies are making a concerted effort to add to the operatic repertory with lesser-known but equally deserving composers.

Princeton composer Peter Westergaard is no stranger to the operatic genre; his adaptations of *The Tempest* and *Moby Dick* were brought to the stage by Princeton companies. Dr. Westergaard was faced with a new challenge in the fall of 2007, when Philadelphia's Center City Opera commissioned an adaptation of *The Always Present Present*, a collection of letters and poems by Princeton residents and literature mavens Theodore and Renée Weiss. Unlike his other operas, in which he was able to finish the score and then sought a performance venue, Dr. Westergaard was given a deadline for the completion of the score for this production. As described last week in this paper, the operatic treatment of *The Always Present Present* sprang from a longtime friendship between Ms. Weiss (who provided the libretto) and Dr. Westergaard. Sunday afternoon's workshop/ performance in the Innovation Studio of Philadelphia's Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts showed a one-act operatic work-in-progress, but one which has made its way through the compositional process with care and an eye toward creating a musical product which works.

The Kimmel Center's Innovation Studio was designed as a small space for experimental productions and the 75 or so seats in the room quickly filled with friends of both composer and librettist. The room was also designed as a chorus rehearsal hall, and soprano Shira Lissek and baritone Jason Switzer, singing the roles of R and T (representing the Weisses) had no trouble conveying text and music.

The *Always Present Present* was conceived in its operatic form for two singers, two instrumentalists, and two dancers, with each pair conveying a level of communication between the couple in the style of a memory play. Ms. Lissek and Mr. Switzer took their places dressed in clothes replicating their collegiate lives in the late 1930s and sat at simple desks and chairs, reliving one-and-a-half years of their lives condensed into a 50-minute opera. The two instrumentalists, violinists Yuri Segawa and cellist Anamarie Achitei, along with pianist Jody Schum, created a musical atmosphere to match each of the letters and each crisis which the young couple faced. There were no dancers for Sunday's performance, but when added, the dancers will also reflect each character's image of the other.

With only three instruments and two singers to worry about, Dr. Westergaard composed music which was intricate but easy to listen to. Both singers seemed to sing their parts with ease, with Mr. Switzer especially resonant in the space. Ms. Lissek presented a light-hearted character, giving the impression that she was a lot of fun, and Mr. Switzer conveyed devotion to his character wife. Both characters mixed spoken and



sung text well, and all three instrumentalists added effective musical touches to the scenes.

Even after decades of composing in all genres, Dr. Westergaard claimed this opera taught him new tricks. Music replicating 1930s New York City jazz permeated one scene and the final wedding scene was marked by klezmer effects from the violin and cello, both styles which Dr. Westergaard said were relatively new to him. For the final wedding scene, the composer was apparently inspired in part by the music of Abe Schwartz, an early twentieth-century violinist dubbed the “Klezmer King.”

Renée and Theodore Weiss’ life and love were from another era, reminiscent of a time when people took creative artists under their wing, presenting them in soirées and through publication. The Weisses introduced many writers to the public, and the operatic interpretation of *The Always Present Present* effectively offered a slice of what was behind the literature. This opera is apparently bound for full stage production next fall by Center City Opera, certainly a major coup for one of Princeton’s most esteemed composers.