

Music

URI professor teams with Pulitzer-nominated poet in opera

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By Channing Gray, Journal Arts Writer



It was about 20 years ago that Westerly composer Eliane Aberdam stumbled across an inviting book of verse in a secondhand book shop in Israel. The author was a Pulitzer Prize-nominated poet from California named Maurya Simon.

Aberdam set three of the poems to music, and eventually struck up a friendship with Simon when Aberdam had to get permission to perform the pieces. Now composer and poet are pairing up again, this time for a chamber opera about the daughter of Biblical King David. Tamar premieres in a concert version at the University of Rhode Island next Sunday. There will be just one performance, featuring local singers and faculty members from the URI music department.

Aberdam, who teaches composition at URI, was given the libretto six or seven years ago. She wrote a final chorus, but sat on the text until last year, when she got a small stipend from the university.

Before that there had been no incentive, which is to say money, to set the entire story to music. Although next weekend's concert version saves a lot by not using sets and costumes, the composer at least wanted to be able to pay the musicians.

The \$2,000 grant from the university made that possible, even though the project is still in the red.

The budget also limited to some extent the size and scope of the opera, which is scored for just

seven instrumentalists — including piano and percussion — and eight singers. There wasn't even enough in the kitty to get poor King David his signature harp.

Simon, who is expected to fly in for next weekend's performance, obviously had something grander in mind. Her libretto calls for a cast of 40 warriors, 40 dancers and various attendants. But a version that elaborate will have to wait, said Aberdam, a French native who got her doctorate at the University of California at Berkeley.

Incest, fratricide and war

Simon's libretto is taken from the Book of Samuel and deals with incest, fratricide and war — all the makings of a juicy opera. It is the story of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon. Her father, King David, turns a blind eye, but her brother Absalom takes revenge and slays Amnon.

Absalom is banished, but later forgiven. But on his return, he brings with him an army bent on overthrowing his father. He fails and is killed by one of the king's generals.

In a non-Biblical twist, the spirit of Tamar comes to haunt David as an old man. Perhaps, said Aberdam, it is the king's conscience.

While the story sounds downright Wagnerian, the opera actually runs just over an hour that has been divided into nine short scenes.

Simon and Aberdam met while Aberdam's mathematician husband was teaching at Dartmouth and Simon, the author of seven volumes of poetry, was spending time at the MacDowell Colony in nearby Peterborough, New Hampshire.

Simon told Aberdam she had written the libretto for Tamar for her own composer father, who refused to set it to music — he found the odd phrase lengths awkward.

But Aberdam, whose works have been premiered in Hungary, France, Israel and throughout the United States, was up for the challenge. Besides, she said, no one had ever offered her a libretto before, and she wasn't about to turn Simon down.

"The [phrase] length wasn't a problem for me," said Aberdam, who has written for just about every instrumental combination. Maybe that is because she

is not a native English speaker.

What was a problem, though, was getting the stresses on the right syllables.

“English for me is not a very operatic language,” she said. “I had to constantly look in the dictionary to see whether the accent was at the beginning, end or middle of the word.”

Harmonically complex

As for the music itself, Aberdam characterized it as “tonal with modal elements, and a few atonal elements,” which is to say modern, but tuneful.

That is a big change from her earlier work, which was avant-garde and highly complex.

Pieces of that ilk date from her student days, when she studied electronic music in Paris at the famed IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique-musique). She left her doctoral studies for a year to work at IRCAM and said the experience opened her eyes to “so many possibilities.”

“I was always thinking my teachers wanted me to be more complex, to change meter every measure,” said Aberdam, who is the mother of two small children. Her husband now teaches math at Central Connecticut State College in New Britain.

“Now I tend to be much milder, although my music is still harmonically complex.”

Next Sunday’s premiere features well known local baritone Rene de la Garza as King David, and soprano Norma Caiazza as Tamar. Caiazza’s husband, tenor Mark Conley, sings the role of Absalom. Nathan Zullinger will conduct.

Faculty members Sue Thomas, flute; John Dempsey, violin; and Elizabeth Gates, horn, are among the orchestra members, along with Ronald Stabile, percussion, and pianist Eric Mazonson.

The performance takes place next Sunday at 7:30 p.m. in the Fine Arts Center concert hall on Upper College Road. Tickets are \$8, \$2 for students on a first-come basis. Call (401) 874-2431.