

theWholeNote

Canadian Premieres

by Christopher Hoile

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The last month of 2009 and the first of 2010 will witness premieres of two new Canadian operas. On December 3, Toronto Masque Theatre will present the world premiere of *The Mumpers' Masque* by Dean Burry, and on January 20 TrypTych will present the world premiere of Andrew Ager's *Frankenstein*. These are not the only events. The Music Gallery will present the "rockabilly techno opera" *The Ship of Fools* by renowned avant-gardists Daniella de Picciotto and Alexander Hacke on December 12, the Toronto Operetta Theatre will revive its production of Emmerich Kálmán's *Countess Maritza* December 26-January 3 and the COC will revive its production of Bizet's *Carmen* January 27-February 27.

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For Andrew Ager, Composer-in-Residence at St. James Cathedral in Toronto, will mark his first foray into opera. His previous works for choirs, soloists, orchestras and chamber ensembles have had numerous premieres in Europe. Next year he goes off to Santa Fe for performance of his *Winter: An Evocation* and then to Monte Carlo to make a recording of his organ music.

In a telephone conversation, Ager revealed that his interest in writing *Frankenstein* began about eight years ago when he was living in Halifax. He initially was drawn to the vampire novella *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu, but after conversations with William Whitla, a specialist in the Gothic novel at York University, he turned to the most famous Gothic novel of them all, with Whitla agreeing to serve as librettist. Ager admits he has a certain insider's knowledge of the subject matter having once worked in a morgue in Halifax. A meeting with Edward Franko, Artistic Director of TrypTych Concerts and Opera, ensured that the work would see the light of day. TrypTych held a staged workshops of the opera in 2003 and 2005 when the work was three hours long. He has now shortened it to 100 minutes on the model of Richard Strauss's *Salome*, feeling that an intermission would cause a deleterious break in tension.

From the very start, Ager and Whitla agreed that the opera must "at all costs avoid anything campy" particularly all the extraneous paraphernalia associated with the innumerable movie versions. Ager's interest is in "following the book as closely as possible with its focus on the personal and metaphysical relation of the creator and his creation."

Ager's inspiration for the music is Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) because of "its depiction of extreme psychological states." Ager, however, does not employ Berg's atonal technique but rather a mode he calls "extremely extended harmony." In the nine-member cast tenor Lenard Whiting sings Victor,

baritone Steven King sings the Monster and soprano Dawn Bailey sings Victor's beloved and wife, Elizabeth. The premiere will be fully staged, with Ager providing the accompaniment on grand piano. Two companies in Germany have already expressed interest in the opera, but Ager hopes that a DVD of the January performances will provoke even more responses.

Meanwhile, Ager is already at work on his second opera, *The Wings of the Dove*, based on the 1902 Henry James novel, which he plans to have ready for presentation, fittingly enough, in a palazzo during the next Venice Biennale. For more information see www.tryptych.org.

Christopher Hoile is a Toronto-based writer on opera.

He can be contacted at: opera@thewholenote.com.