

I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

June 2015

Opera

Vireo



Set of Vireo at Yost Theater - Photo by
Remsen Allard

At the historic Yost Theater in Santa Ana, California, a dedicated crew of artists and technicians is attempting a grand experiment in televised broadcast. The day is February 23 2015, and the opera *Vireo: The Spiritual Biography of a Witch's Accuser* by composer Lisa Bielawa and librettist Erik Ehn is having one of two taping sessions which are open to the public. Everyone present is hurried-in at specific intervals and are told they must maintain a rigorous silence, as any noise will interfere with the taping. Inside the theater, which was built in 1912 and is the oldest theater of its kind in Orange County, is something that resembles a film set. Much of the main floor seating and the stage area have been completely transformed into an environment, literally — trees

and earth and furniture and fencing are so plentiful that they form a dense barrier between audience and performers. The separation is understood as an implicit condition for today's look behind scenes of the production itself, and we are left peering through foliage and obstacles to catch but a glimpse of the action taking place that will in some weeks' time be disseminated over the airwaves and the internet.

An early scene from the opera is taped repeatedly in succession, as director Charles Otte, huddled in a makeshift control room at the back of the theater, stands by, observing output from the single Steadicam that is being used up on the set. Complex maneuvers require that two operators glide the camera around the protagonist Vireo, played with unassailable confidence by 16-year-old soprano Rowen Sabala, as well as around members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus and Bielawa herself, who conducts the Kronos Quartet from several different positions depending on the camera's fluid placement. There is an excitement to the bustle between takes (which are long and elegantly choreographed)

and an intensity to the endeavor, as was further elaborated to me by Juan Devis, Senior Vice President of Content Development & Production at KCETLink: the production schedule is dramatically shorter than what they are used to, and so the completion of all the needed post-production work will require clever solutions in order to meet their deadline.

KCETLink, who has partnered with Grand Central Art Center and Cal State Fullerton, will present the Pilot Episode on their broadcast of March 31st, 2015. Intrigued by the consort of moving parts and the integration of multiple disciplines in the production as well as the tireless dedication of its core members, I followed up with composer Lisa Bielawa to find out more about this highly anticipated project.

Are there any productions of opera on film that you have gravitated towards or have drawn inspiration from? (I couldn't help but think of the 1970 Hamburg State Opera production of *Wozzeck* while on the *Vireo* stage).

I must admit that this project wasn't actually inspired by things that are most like it - i.e.

by other operas, or by opera or music on film. I know that some great epic films like "Becket" (one of my favorites) certainly gave me my sense of what kind of grandeur and intimacy are possible at once, when epic stories are told with cameras. But no - in general when I see opera I actually go to the opera!

What was the casting process like for the lead role of *Vireo*? What sorts of difficult decisions were there to make regarding this role?

The callbacks were intense, almost two hours long. The girls (five of them) sang a two-minute section of the first episode that they had all learned from memory (something I wasn't expecting!), and I worked with them on musical and expressive things to get a sense for how we would work together. I conducted, so that I could get a sense for how well they could communicate with a conductor while also focusing on independent 'ownership' of musical lines. Charlie brought two cameras, so it was also a kind of screen test. He worked with each of the girls in various exercises, many based on concepts from commedia dell'arte. We also asked that parents be present, so that we could spend some time talking about the demands of the role, and discuss the scope of the project, answer questions. But in the end there were no

difficult decisions to make regarding the role. There are no compromises in the role of *Vireo* - it is not musically, dramatically or vocally easier than the other roles, she does not sing less. I wrote the role as I heard it, and hoped and believed that there was a young singer out there who could sing it - and we found her!



Lisa Bielawa and Rowen Sabala - Photo

I am reminded of the works of Susanne Kord in regards to witches (Murderesses in German Writing, 1720-1860), Kathy Stuart's work on Melancholy Murderers (Defiled Trades & Social Outcasts). What, if any, primary source materials inspired your desire to tackle the nature of so-called

"fanatic" women in history, especially those during the European Medieval Era ?

The list of primary source materials for this piece is quite long, since the research for it was part of my Senior Thesis paper at Yale. Trial documents from Salem; collaborative writings of the Surrealists and Dadaists; treatises by the neurologist Charcot and his coterie in turn-of-the-century Paris; micro-histories from the Venetian Inquisition; medieval medical treatises from England - the list goes on. The focus was not, however, on witches and criminal women, but on young women who had had some kind of visionary experience. How these teenage girls were viewed, prodded, encouraged, discouraged, separated, coaxed, punished and analyzed throughout history, most often by groups of men clustered together in the pursuit of the development of some kind of discourse - medical, intellectual, artistic, religious. This scenario and its tensions were the engine that drove all of the research.

Is *Vireo* written for the Kronos Quartet? Or will new installments feature new ensembles and instrument choices?

The first and second episodes were absolutely written for Kronos - their particular gifts and musical camaraderie. Future episodes will bring in other ensembles and instrumentations with a similarly personalized touch. This is one of my greatest pleasures - collaborating with musicians in ways that celebrate their particular musicality.



Kronos Quartet and Lisa Bielawa -
Photo by Remsen Allard

Who is responsible for the video backdrop that is used behind the instrumentalists/singers on-stage?

Director Charlie Otte is responsible for bringing together the whole team of superb designers whose work you will see. Stephanie Busing is the projection designer, production design is by Richard Hoover and Meghan Rogers; director of photography is Greg Cotton; sound consultant is Dan Dryden; costume design is by Christina Wright.

What are some of the unique challenges in realizing *Vireo* for broadcast? Furthermore, what are some of the pleasures of this process?

Vireo is created expressly for broadcast, which means that much of the thinking behind it plays smoothly into the medium. The level of transparency we have chosen, for example - with Kronos fully viewable, and myself too as conductor, whenever the action comes close to us. There is no pit, no separation of the various areas, and in fact no place for an audience: invited audience for our shoots were seated around the filming area, but

none of the shots were staged to be seen from any particular angle - only by the steadicam that captured each long shot. In these and many other ways, this process was different from producing an opera. There was no performance - only tech! And it is also different from a TV show in that the sound - singers and instrumentalists alike - was captured live, as the cameras were shooting. Viewers will not be seeing lip-syncing or bow-syncing. They will be seeing actual performances - but they are actual performances for camera, captured in the manner of a high-production film shoot. It is a genuine hybrid - and both the challenges and the pleasures of this encounter between forms was evident in our production process. Production teams from the different areas - costumes, camera teams, audio capture teams, post-production teams, artists - all came together joyfully with the expectation that nothing would unfold the way they are used to. Charlie made an effort, for example, to find a Director of Photography who had been a child performer in the opera. We needed to find people who were expert in their field, but willing to go outside their comfort zone to make something new. Singers who

have trained to fill an opera house with their voices, but who are comfortable working with a camera one foot from their faces! Charlie and I changed strategies as we went, on a very tight schedule with many systems in play. It was thrilling! Post-production is no less so (that's what I'm involved in now). It is true that I've never worked with a TV post-production crew before, and I came into this stage of the process feeling pretty naive, but it turns out that the process we need for Vireo is new to everyone - and everyone at KCET is up for it! Efficient? Maybe not always - not yet, we are learning. But joyful, yes. ■



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