

In the Thrall of Opera

COMPOSITION STUDENT RENE ORTH TAKES ON TWO OPERA ASSIGNMENTS—AND TRIUMPHS.

BY DAVE ALLEN

As closely as the great opera composers may have worked with their performers or their librettists, none of them ever communicated with the clarity and immediacy of a text message.

Simple, direct, and perhaps the easiest way to get in touch with a busy, overscheduled Curtis student, texting has been an indispensable collaborative method for composition student Rene Orth, particularly during the fall semester as she wrote a new chamber opera, *Emptying the House*. “I texted Sean”—that’s baritone Sean Michael Plumb—asking, “‘where do you sound most tender?’” Rene recalls. She consulted via text with mezzo-soprano Lauren Eberwein about where in her range words might sound clearest. That spirit, of important questions asked informally, typifies much of Curtis’ fertile creative environment, one where a composer like Rene can find the resources—talented singers and dedicated mentors, all within close reach—to fulfill some lofty operatic ambitions.

A former college athlete and audio engineer, Rene majored in music as an undergraduate at Rhodes College but came to composing late, and later still to opera. “I used to hate having to go to operas,” she says. “I can say I love it now.” Modern works, Tan Dun’s *Marco Polo* in particular, spurred her initial interest in the form. After a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* at Kentucky Opera while working on her master’s degree in composition from the University of Louisville, she found herself in the thrall of opera.

Rene’s immersion in works from the late 20th and 21st centuries has deepened further with the help of Mikael Eliassen, artistic director of the Curtis Opera Theatre and Hirsig Family Head-of-Department Chair in Vocal Studies. “I’m very excited about Rene because she’s identified that she wants to write opera,” he says, praising her as “curious and interested.” He has acted as an advisor, preparing her for the real-life experience of a composer offering her music in the world of contemporary opera.

Mr. Eliassen notes that modern operas take shape through a collaborative, give-and-take spirit among composers, librettists, directors, conductors, and singers—much as the great operas of the 18th and 19th centuries were developed. In bringing *Emptying the House* to the stage, he charged Rene with functioning as a producer. “She had to get the singers, get the orchestra together, find a conductor,” he says. “She really understood the whole process.”

Rene handled all of this while also working on another one-act opera, *An American Man*, as part of the Washington National Opera’s American Opera Initiative. After workshops in September and consultation with professional mentors, the 20-minute chamber opera received its premiere in November at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts alongside two other new works by young American composers.

INTIMATE INTENSITY

Both of Rene’s operas are intimate dramas set in the American South with social issues percolating underneath: hidden sexuality and political scandal in *An American Man*; AIDS and physical abuse in *Emptying the House*. Though they are chamber operas, with only a few roles and a reduced orchestra, the emotions and gestures seem all the more intense for being compressed into an intimate scale.

An early coup in the creation of *Emptying the House* was making a connection with in-demand librettist Mark Campbell, who collaborated with composer Kevin Puts on his 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *Silent Night*. An alumnus of the American Opera Initiative put Rene in touch with Mr. Campbell, who had served as a mentor in the program. Rene put forth the idea of a story about forgiveness between an abusive mother and her daughter. The librettist, she says, proved to be both creative and flexible. “I wanted a male voice in the piece, because it would be better for balance, so he came up with Paul”—Sean Plumb’s character—“and his whole story.”



Rene Orth holds the Edwin B. Garrigues Annual Fellowship at Curtis.

Emptying the House Goes to School

Rene Orth is enrolled in the Community Artist Program (CAP), which empowers students to design and implement performance projects that engage community audiences in innovative ways. For her project, Rene is bringing excerpts of *Emptying the House* to Taggart Elementary School in Philadelphia this spring with the help of her CAP mentor, Curtis alumna Alexandra von der Embse, who is a teaching artist at the school. “We’ll use the opportunity to talk with the kids about opera and about the themes of the piece that are relevant to them—especially forgiveness,” says Rene.

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In *Emptying the House*, all of the action takes place within the titular home, and the claustrophobic feeling of this confined space heightens the dramatic tension among the three characters. In one of Rene’s favorite moments of the work, a single word—“sorry,” set in a duet for Sean and soprano Heather Stebbins as his mother—takes on brilliant, shattering force. “I just wanted a beautiful, powerful duet, so I looked at Puccini’s *La bohème*,” says Rene—specifically, a quartet scene with simple vocal lines written at the tops of the singers’ ranges.

Rene’s drive to write opera has been fostered by her composition teachers at Curtis: Richard Danielpour during her first year; and this year, Jennifer Higdon, Milton L. Rock Chair in Composition Studies, who’s been working on an opera of her own (her *Cold Mountain* will premiere at Santa Fe Opera in August). “Rene comes to lessons with lots of questions,” says Dr. Higdon. “It shows that she’s thinking constantly about improving the music and handling all situations optimally.”

As Rene crafted a two-scene preview for a composition department recital in December, she and her teacher discussed ways of building tension; Dr. Higdon suggested operas by Britten and Peter Maxwell Davies as examples. Minute but practical details—like when and how to include vocal cues in instrumental parts, for example, or allowing for the time it takes an actor to walk across the stage—have been important during their lessons too, since Dr. Higdon has been addressing them herself as the premiere of her own opera draws near.

In the two scenes previewed in December, these lessons bore striking fruit. Teeming instrumental passages unfolded against steady electronic thumps beneath a simmering, agitated mezzo-soprano aria for the abused daughter; warm yet wrenching chords gave way to the climactic scene of forgiveness.

The premiere of the full work takes place on March 28, and though it’ll be different from the all-hands-on-deck feeling of other Curtis Opera Theatre productions, everything is in place for this tight-knit group of musicians, with Rene at the center, to deliver precision and artistic excellence.

But first, in light of the successful preview: a few edits, says Rene. “I want to make everything as intelligible as possible.” ♦

Dave Allen is publications and social media manager at Settlement Music School in Philadelphia. His writings on music have appeared in Chamber Music, Overtones, Symphony, and the Courier-Post.

Emptying the House in rehearsal: Composer Rene Orth with Mikael Eliassen, mezzo-soprano Lauren Eberwein, and conductor Edward Poll, and (below right) the small instrumental ensemble that accompanies the opera PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

