

# CSUH Poet Pens Libretto for Contemporary Opera

Photo/Joanna E. Morrissey

Poet On Campus: Susan Gubernat at Peterborough, NH.



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By Jim Montgomery Staff Writer

First you're invited to become a poetry fellow at the prestigious MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H., and then your poetry is compared to the songs of Mahler by a leading American composer, and then ANOTHER composer invites you to write a libretto for an opera he's planning. Not a bad summer's adventure.

That's the summer Susan Gubernat had three years ago. The assistant professor of English at Cal State Hayward brought those lustrous credits to the hilltop campus two years ago and joined the creative writing program.

"I write about love and death," she modestly says, when asked to characterize her writing, vividly imagined poetry about the details of everyday life. Raised and educated on the East Coast, Gubernat has written poetry that has acquired a national following and received many awards, including the Washington Prize, a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, and fellowships at prestigious retreats like Yaddo, the Millay Colony and the MacDowell Colony.

In 1998 Gubernat was selected from among 900 other poets to receive the Marianne Moore poetry award. This award also allowed the publication of her first collection of poetry, called "Flesh."

While at the MacDowell Colony in 2000, the composer Richard Danielpour introduced her to a young American composer named Adam Silverman.

Danielpour said he saw echoes of Mahler's songs in her poetry. In turn, Silverman told her he had written a piece for soprano and piano based on one of her poems, "To Become an Islander." Silverman told Gubernat he planned to write an opera about Janusz Korczak, a holocaust martyr, and recruited her to write the libretto (the story line, dialog and lyrics). Never having written a libretto before, and curious about Korczak, Gubernat got to work.

She and Silverman talked extensively about Korczak, who turned away from a successful medical practice and promising writing career to become an advocate for children issues for the rest of his life. His many heroic deeds earned him the name "the good doctor" throughout Poland.

He visualized orphanages as communities, an integral part of life in Warsaw, and directed such progressive orphanages in the years before the start of World War II. He was also a Jew. He built an orphanage to shelter children left homeless by the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. With the 200 children he tended, he created a "Children's Republic," complete with flag.

When the Nazis finally came for him, he led the children in a "dignified processional out of the gates of the orphanage, past a stunned citizenry and muted cadre of SS officers," Gubernat says,

the children carrying “the flag of their ‘Children’s Republic’ into the waiting cattle cars.” The trip ended at the infamous Treblinka death camp, where Korczak and the children were executed.

Silverman and Gubernat developed the strategy for the opera, which was to consist of a prologue and three acts. The opera, called “Korczak’s Orphans,” would cover the events of the doctor’s life from 1919 to his death in the summer of 1942. Gubernat completed the libretto and Silverman set to work to develop a short score for piano and voices, as well as a full score.

Seeking to test the structure of the opera, Silverman arranged for a workshop performance of its second act, choosing Act II because it seemed best able to stand alone. The performance took place last May at the Lebanon Opera House, in Lebanon, N.H.

Real Time Opera, a champion of new music theater, is currently developing the opera. The full opera is currently in its composition and development phase, and Gubernat has returned to her teaching chores at CSUH. She shuttles between the Contra Costa and Hayward campuses and also contributes her talents as a member of the 2003-2004 Academic Senate.

Gubernat expects to continue working on the libretto as the opera evolves. Meanwhile she has another book in the works and wrestles with the problem of allowing herself to become “type cast” as a poet of “blue collar” themes - a characterization by her Marianne Moore Poetry Award judge, Robert Phillips - or whether she should write against type and produce poetry based on the travails of the ruling class.

Only time - and the contents of her next book - will tell how she will resolve her dilemma. Music remains a dominant theme in her life. Her father played cornet in a big band, and she sang in choir.

If she has another opportunity in another life, she says she might opt for a career in vocal music.