

BROOKLYN COURIER-LIFE

Opera Company of Brooklyn adopts *Korczak's Orphans*

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By Meredith Deliso

Since forming eight years ago, the Opera Company of Brooklyn has grown, from performances in the borough to gigs all over the city.

Previously bringing works to such non-traditional venues as the garage at Williamsburg's Northside Piers and Plymouth Church, as well as St. Ann's Warehouse, the company's next performance is May 3 at Manhattan's Stephen Wise Free Synagogue of the opera work-in-progress, *Korczak's Orphans*.

The inspiration to develop the opera, about the Polish doctor and children's author, Janusz Korczak, came more than a decade ago, when composer Adam Silverman visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. There he saw a statue of Korczak, a martyr figure in Polish history who ran a children's orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II and through his books advocated for respect of children.



Korczak's Orphans composer
Adam Silverman

"While struggling in the worst situation of the twentieth century, he created an orphanage that was revolutionary in his approach to how to teach children," said Silverman. Joining forces with poet Susan Gubernat, the librettist of the opera, the two have been collaborating for the past eight years. The New York City Opera first performed the second act in 2004, and the OCB picked up the piece and for the past two years has been holding workshops of the piece as it was developed. Now, the three acts, including the voices and piano, have been written, and on May 3, the company premieres the performance of all three acts.

"There have been a lot of stages to this," said Silverman, who is now working on the orchestration of the opera. "This is hopefully the step before the step before the full production as a complete work."

Dealing with such serious issues as the Holocaust and genocide against the Jews during World War II, the opera is predictably heavy and dark. The first act takes place in the Warsaw orphanage, just as "the ghetto is closing in," said Silverman. The second act goes outside and into the ghetto, where Korczak, played by Tracy Wise, faces the brutal reality of what is happening in the ghetto, where children are playing around the body of a dead child. The third act returns to the orphanage, where the children learn about their own mortality through a staging of a play. It ends with the Nazis coming to take the children and Korczak to the concentration camps.

"It's a story that is very close to the history of Korczak," said Silverman, as the librettist referred to biographies on the figure as well as his own diaries for inspiration. When Jay

Meetze, conductor of the OCB, first heard of the opera, he was immediately taken by Korczak's story.

“When I first heard that this man, who has written books as widely read in Poland as *Alice in Wonderland* is here, started this orphanage and he stayed with them all the way to the end, all the way to walking to the trains to go to the camps, that right there did it for me,” said Meetze. “That's quite amazing for a person to have this much courage.” The music of the opera is eclectic, with rich and memorable melodies.

“People who aren't coming for the history of it can certainly attend, enjoy the music, and be affected by what's going to be a beautiful performance of a touching story,” said Silverman.

Much like in their earlier venue choices at places like the Brooklyn Museum of Art and Brooklyn Public Library, as well as people's homes and even a lighthouse on Long Island, holding the opera performance at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue is a chance for the company to bring opera to the public.

“We like to take opera to the people, to people who don't ordinarily go to the opera to make it accessible,” said Meetze, who hopes to do more performances and collaborations in Brooklyn.

For Silverman, he hopes someday to bring the opera abroad to Poland and Israel, “where Korczak is most celebrated. I hope sometime that will come true,” said the composer. *Korczak's Orphans* will be performed on May 3 at 7:00 p.m. at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue (30 West 68th Street). Tickets are \$25 and can be purchased at www.operabrooklyn.com. For more information, call 212-567-3283.