

Features

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A Leap of Faith

Minnesota Opera took a chance on composer Kevin Puts, whose first opera, *Silent Night*, has its world premiere in St. Paul this month. MICHAEL SLADE reports.



Composer Kevin Puts based his new opera on the Christmas truce, depicted above, that momentarily brought together Allied and German soldiers in 1914

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Christmas Eve, 1914. The Western Front, World War I. Frozen, unburied bodies of fallen soldiers litter the battlefield. In the German trenches, a soldier begins singing a carol. From their trenches, across No Man's Land, the French and Scottish troops, moved by the song, his voice and memories of Christmases back home, cheer him. A Scottish soldier picks up his bagpipe and begins another carol.

The German singer grabs a tabletop Christmas tree the generals in Berlin sent their troops. Armed only with the evergreen, its candles burning, he climbs from his trench, singing, and walks to the middle of No Man's Land to serenade all the soldiers. The bagpiper continues playing. Slowly, soldiers from both sides climb out of their trenches. Awkwardly at first, they greet the enemy. Their three lieutenants agree to a Christmas Eve truce. The soldiers share photos of their wives and families. They sing. They drink. They

eat Christmas dinner. A Scottish priest leads a mass.

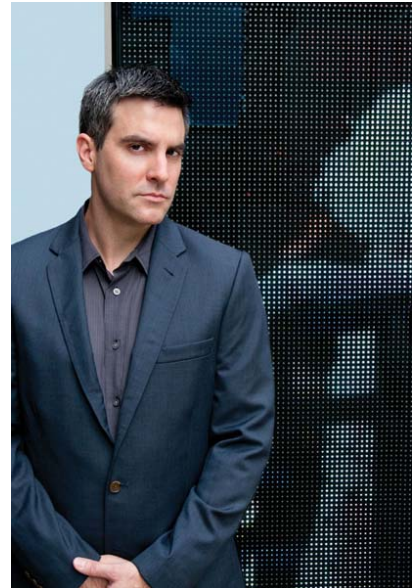
The next morning, the lieutenants extend the truce to allow each side to gather their dead and give them proper burials. Afterwards, the men play soccer. When the powers-that-be learn what is happening, they demand an end to the fraternization. But how can you continue the business of war once you know your enemy?

When Dale Johnson, artistic director of Minnesota Opera, saw *Joyeux Noël*, Christian Carion's 2005 film inspired by this true story, he immediately sensed in it the makings of a powerful opera. "I was so moved by it. The singing of 'Silent Night,' the image of Sprink carrying the Christmas tree, the three lieutenants' struggle with the orders from their commanders [to resume fighting], their struggle with themselves as human beings.... Here are these young guys stuck in this horrible situation. How are they going to deal with it?" *Joyeux Noël* focuses on the lieutenants, the priest and the German singer and his love interest, all of whose lives are irrevocably changed by the unofficial truce. "It felt like a very classical opera plot. They're all trying to live their lives, and there's this huge story going on around them that they can't control, and that they're being buffeted by."

The film has many potent visual images, and Johnson felt music could be used to create equivalent effects. So he knew he wanted a composer who was "a really strong orchestral writer." Johnson wanted a fresh voice and contacted music publisher Bill Holab to ask, "Who's interesting? Who's got a real point of view?" And Bill sent me Kevin Puts, plus several other extraordinary young people. I was listening to Kevin's Second Symphony, and I started crying — it was so beautiful. The next day I told [Minnesota Opera's then President and CEO] Kevin Smith, 'I think I have the guy for *Joyeux Noël*.' He listened and agreed."

However, though Puts (*Puts* as in "Johnson puts his money where his mouth is") had written a great deal of extraordinary orchestral work, including four symphonies and numerous concertos, he had never written an opera. In fact, the composer, who is thirty-nine, had written only one piece of vocal music — *Einstein on Mercer Street*, a work for baritone and chamber ensemble. Still, Johnson believed in him. "I knew he had it in him. I knew he knew how to create tension and develop a piece of music — really develop it to a climax and finish it — and that's a rare commodity." So, like that German singer on the battlefield, Johnson took a leap of faith and offered Puts the commission.

Puts was thrilled. "It's something I always wanted to do. There's been a strong narrative element to everything I write. I mean, even in the concertos there's always a sense of storytelling." Johnson decided to team Puts with veteran librettist Mark Campbell (*Volpone*, *Later the Same Evening*, *Rappahannock County*). "We wanted to give Kevin dramaturgical support," Johnson explained. "And Mark Campbell understands dramatic structure so well." In addition, Johnson brought on Eric Simonson to direct. "Eric's not only a wonderful



Kevin Puts

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Kevin Puts

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director, he's an accomplished writer himself. So we put him and Mark in the mix to really make sure this young composer had the kind of support he needed to create the piece."

Puts describes the moment he first read Campbell's libretto for the opera they decided to title *Silent Night*: "I don't think I've ever felt as excited creatively — as excited about a project or the process of composing — as when I got the libretto and put it on the piano. I just loved it." Which is not to say Campbell's libretto didn't present challenges. To begin with, it's written in five languages — English, French and German for the three armies, Latin for the mass, and Italian for an opera within the opera. (As in the movie, Sprink, the soldier who shares the Christmas carol, is a singer, who is seen performing with his love interest before war is declared.) Campbell worked carefully with translators to ensure accuracy. But then Puts had to set all those languages, with their different stresses and rhythms. "The German was the worst. I don't know German at all," Puts admits. But he received invaluable help from Mary Dibbern, head of music at Minnesota Opera. "She'd put marks on the libretto where the stresses are. Then I would read it to myself over and over. I really had to get it into my head, so it would just flow musically."

An extremely important role is played by the bagpipe. "That scene between the Scots and the Germans, before they all come together at the end of Act I — it's a lot easier for an instrument to help you do that than words," says Campbell. "The audience will accept a bagpipe making a statement and a singer answering it more readily than people saying, 'Let's be friends.' 'Okay.'" Conductor Michael Christie is also fond of the bagpipe. "It adds such a different color," he says. "I've always thought that the palette of an opera orchestra is in some ways underutilized. With the bagpipe, there's another sound, and it's appropriate. I keep pushing Kevin about it."

"The bagpipe was... a challenge," Puts says with a huge laugh. "It's very... limiting. And it's loud. Basically they have a B-flat scale with a lowered seventh. And it drones on a B-flat. That's it. They don't transpose. So I had to build several scenes around these tonal limitations." Then there was the prologue. Campbell has it build to cacophony as the principals (entering one by one) sing over three different war songs (one for each army, each in a different key) that have also been introduced one by one. "That prologue was really tough," Puts reminisces. "But I knew once I got past those first nine minutes...." He smiles. "I only had to worry about the bagpipes and the rest of the opera."

Campbell created room for grand orchestral moments. As Johnson points out, "The libretto is rich and powerful, but it's also concise. It lets the voice of the composer shine through. The sequence when the men bury the dead feels like a melancholy pavane that begins with a solo flute and increases in intensity as more of the orchestra is added. And the battle scene — I haven't heard anything like it. It's hair-raising. There's also a very simple aria for the French lieutenant in Act I. He's writing a letter home to his wife, but at the same time he's tallying the dead and wounded. It's an extraordinary moment, and really ballsy writing." Campbell credits director Simonson with the inspiration to include the tallying of casualties. "Eric said, 'It's a beautiful aria, but it needs an action.' And he was right." Johnson also savors the soprano's Act II aria. "It takes its time as it develops, and then all of a sudden it whips into a frenzy. Thrilling!"

"I've always believed in the maximum breadth of expression," Puts says of his musical choices. "I want to be able to draw from any sound worlds that are possible to me. If it's in my head and I find it powerful... You've got to use whatever's going to be right for the moment." That includes music that is atonal, strictly tonal, minimalist and unashamedly emotional. "I think it's possible to make it all work under the umbrella of one piece as long as the seams are convincing. Plus, there are ways to unify the vocabulary through elements like a theme or a motif, so it doesn't feel foreign to the listener. And I hope that at the end of the day, a language of my own emerges." Puts doesn't shy away from sentiment, as long as it's earned and honest. "You can't do what I'm trying to do in this piece without risking being labeled sentimental. But I'm just responding to the moments in music I love. And why water it down? It's not enough to have

music that's just sort of there in an innocuous sort of way — that won't upset anybody, that won't be too much this or too much that. Because, yes, it will be music, but it won't be an opera. You should strive for maximum potency!"

Puts and Campbell cannot speak highly enough of the support they've received from Minnesota Opera, including the three workshops the piece was given, two with singers and piano, the third with full orchestra. "This process has been ideal," says Puts. "I've never had anything like it. With orchestral commissions there's never any time to try things out. It's basically, deliver the piece, and the week of the premiere everybody starts playing it, and what can you really do at that point? Nothing substantial. But at Minnesota...!" Campbell concurs. "Those workshops allowed us all to make changes. Good changes. The right changes."

Johnson senses that his leap of faith has paid off. "I have a wonderful feeling about *Silent Night*. An exciting new voice is coming on the scene." □

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