From Blank Page to Final Bow: A Comprehensive Approach to the Creation of 21st Century American Opera

As a Vocal Performance Major, there are essentially two distinct academic areas of my education. There is the intellectual study of music, which includes topics like music theory, history, and analysis. Then there is the applied study of music, which focuses on musical technique and opera performance. Unfortunately, Performance Majors seldom have the opportunity to combine the two sides of our education in artistically relevant ways. This project will not only combine my academic and applied studies, but will also give me a deeper and more hands-on understanding of all aspects of my field of interest, opera performance and production.

As a University Scholar, I plan to compose, direct, produce, and perform in an original opera. In doing so, I will immerse myself in all aspects of opera as an art form. The composition of the score will allow me to apply my knowledge of music theory and form in a real-world artistic setting. Directing the production will give me experience in all aspects of opera production which are not usually taught to undergraduates, including stage direction, scenic design, costuming, lighting, and administrative production work. As a Performance Major, I will also originate one of the singing roles to further develop my performance skills. I hope to use this as a unique opportunity to feature the undergraduate students in the department, who usually perform in supporting or ensemble roles. Since the storyline I have developed is a piece of Holocaust historical fiction, my project will also involve historical and cultural research.

This will be the first time a student-written opera has been developed at UConn. Voice Performance Honors Theses usually consist of a recital or a paper; this project involves much more extensive and comprehensive work in all areas of opera. I aspire to be an opera performer and director when I finish my graduate studies, so the opportunity to oversee the entire production will provide me with invaluable experience in the field in which I hope to work.
Review of Literature

One of the most exciting aspects of my project is that it is fundamentally interdisciplinary within the realm of opera and the Performing Arts. As there are no scholarly works which concretely describe how to write and produce an original opera, my project will allow me to study a number of disciplines. These include stage direction, music composition, performance, costuming, stage design, the history of American opera, and the history of the Holocaust.

Alan Montgomery’s *Opera Coaching* looks at stage directing techniques as they specifically apply to opera. It explores topics such as how to plan musical coachings and stage rehearsals, how to successfully present one’s ideas in both music and spoken dialogue, and even discusses general opera rehearsal decorum. The first portion of Robert Skloot’s *Directing the Holocaust Play* explores how to respect the Holocaust historically while interpreting it artistically. I have stage directing experience, but sources such as these will help me understand how to successfully direct a piece of art while maintaining the historical integrity of the plotline.

Although music composition is a very personal artistic process, works like Margaret Wilkins’s *Creative Music Composition: The Young Composer’s Voice* will give me a focused direction as I edit the vocal score (which I have spent the last year developing). A large portion of Wilkins’s book is devoted to composition for voice. It examines the relationship of the voice to the accompaniment, how to successfully set text, and how to write the tessitura (vocal range) of a piece. Reginald Brindle’s *Musical Composition* also emphasizes vocal music writing. It explores musical forms for vocal music, as well as methods of text declamation and accentuation.

Stage design work is a hands-on discipline, and a number of sources will help guide my technique and execution in the creation of the costumes and the set (the scenery and furniture). Mary Kidd’s *Stage Costume* emphasizes the physical processes of costume construction and
fitting, and includes a number of stage garment patterns. The introduction to Leo Van Witsen’s *Costuming for Opera*, on the other hand, highlights how the costuming process changes when outfitting singers. It discusses methods of leaving sufficient breathing room in a garment, as well as how costumes affect movement. Richard Arnold’s *Scene Technology* is a resource for all aspects of stage design. It explores technical and artistic design drawing, building and painting techniques, methods of assembling a set, and how to maintain the set during the run of a show.

There are many different schools of thought on opera performance techniques. My personal performance and directing style has been developed through experience in numerous shows, and will be improved by sources like David Ostwald’s *Acting for Singers*. Ostwald covers every aspect of opera performance, including creating believable singing characters, developing successful interpretation, creating subtext, and identifying characters’ objectives.

In his introduction to *Opera in Context*, Mark A. Radice writes that in the relatively self-contained world of opera, it is important for artists to understand the cultural and musical contexts of their work. My opera is a piece of historical fiction which uses the Holocaust as a backdrop to explore themes of isolation, self identity, and unconditional love. I feel strongly, though, that it be framed with integrity from a historical perspective. Comprehensive historical sources such as Ronnie Landau’s *Studying the Holocaust* will be valuable in fact-checking the research I did before developing the plot. Additionally, Robert Skloot’s *The Darkness We Carry* examines the historical and cultural treatment of the Holocaust in different genres of stage drama. I will also reflect on my work in the context of American opera in general. Sources such as Elise Kirk’s *American Opera* cover the history of 20th and 21st century opera in America, and explore the musical and stylistic trends of its leading composers. This will help me to better understand from where I take inspiration as a composer and writer.
Methods

With the knowledge that this is a substantial artistic and scholarly undertaking that would be inconceivable in only three semesters, I began work on my project over a year ago. I spent a great deal of time during my Sophomore year and the following summer writing a complete draft of the music and dialogue. It includes 4 acts in 350 pages, and is written in English with piano accompaniment instead of a full orchestra. (Music and dialogue excerpts are available upon request.) Looking forward, the work on my project will be divided into four main segments.

During the remainder of my Junior year, I plan to finish the writing and composition components of the opera. In the Fall semester, I will work with the Voice Area faculty to hold auditions for the singing roles, and select students to serve as the stage crews. During the Spring semester, I will edit and revise all of the voice and piano music with the guidance of Kenneth Clark, UConn lecturer and Connecticut Repertory Theatre Music Director. He will serve as an unofficial fourth faculty advisor on my project. I will work with him one-on-one to finalize the piano accompaniment and tailor the voice parts to fit the original cast. Dr. Constance Rock, head of the Voice Area and the chair of my Faculty Advisory Committee, will assist in advising my work on the vocal parts and spoken dialogue. Professor Karen Ryker of the Theater Department will serve unofficially as a fifth advisor, and has agreed to build on my stage directing experience and teach me about the essentials of opera direction and dramaturgy. Finally, I will meet on a regular basis with Dr. Charles Lansing of the History Department. An expert on 20th century Germany and the Holocaust, Dr. Lansing, who is part of my Faculty Committee, will advise me on the historical and cultural framing of my opera as a work of historical fiction.

The summer of 2012 will encompass the majority of the visual and design work for the opera. I have established relationships with, and received costume and property donations from,
a number of local theatrical companies. I will utilize these resources, as well as my own artistic background as a tailor and artisan, to design and create the costumes. A local Artistic Director/scenic designer, with whom I have worked in various productions, has agreed to use his extensive experience in the field to assist me in the design and construction of the set. To fund the costume and set construction, I plan on using the donated and borrowed materials from the local theater companies, as well as funds acquired through grants and private donations from individual benefactors. During the summer, I also hope to meet individually with each of the singers in order to coach them on their music and fit them for their costumes.

The production will occur in the Fall of 2012. Leading up to the production I will be studying opera direction with Dr. Jeffry McEvoy, as well as the administrative and production aspects of opera staging with Dr. Constance Rock. At this point, a regular rehearsal schedule of two to three rehearsals per week will be established based on the availability of the cast, with dress rehearsals every night of the two weeks leading up to the performances. This is also when the student pianist(s), production managers, and stage crews will be brought in. The opportunity to work behind-the-scenes will enhance their understanding of opera as an interdisciplinary art form. The production will be in late October or early November, based on the availability of Von der Mehden Recital Hall. I hope to stage two performances in a single weekend.

The Spring of 2013 will be spent reflecting on my work and giving the piece more exposure. I will present reflections on my project and musical selections from the opera at my Senior Recital. This will allow me to explore how my work functions in a concert setting. I will also work with Dr. Robert Miller and the Music Department recording staff to create an original cast audio recording. The audio recording, a video recording of the original stage production, and the printed score will serve as a testament to my work as a University Scholar.
Plan of Study

One of the most important aspects of my University Scholar project is that it directly provides me with a real-world application of the musical concepts and techniques I have learned over the past 3 years. Music theory, ear training and musicianship, and form and analysis classes directly affect my compositional style and the development of my music. Also, my work in voice lessons, opera studio, movement, and acting classes (as well as performance in many theatrical productions) has developed my technique and abilities as a performer and director.

In Spring 2012, Form and Analysis II will help to improve my compositional style. The more I study and analyze the music of significant composers, the more well-rounded I will be in the development of my own music. Vocal Literature, voice lessons, and Opera Studio and Theater will continue to make me a more well-rounded performer and director. Choral Conducting and Vocal Pedagogy will serve as invaluable experiences as I prepare to teach entirely new music to students during the summer and following semester.

My Independent Studies in the Fall of 2012 will allow me to study the aspects of opera which undergraduate students usually observe but are rarely taught. I will work with Dr. Jeffrey McEvoy, the stage director for Opera Theatre, to learn and explore directing techniques and rehearsal structuring. Dr. McEvoy will also advise me as I direct my production. With Dr. Constance Rock, I will more concretely study production aspects including staging, production logistics, scheduling, advertising, and community outreach. As my voice teacher, Dr. Rock will also directly oversee the development of my singing role in the production.

In Spring 2013, I hope to take Music of the Theater and Music in World Cultures in order to view my own work in the context of stage music in general. I also plan to take a practicum class in acoustics or recording. Class offerings on those topics differ each semester.
References

Works Cited


Significant Work in the Field (in addition to works cited)

Directing
David Diamond and Terry Berliner- Stage Director’s Handbook
John E. Dietrich and Ralph W. Duckwall- Play Directing
Charles Grippo- The Stage Producer’s Business and Legal Guide
Francis Hodge- Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style
Raymond Warren- Opera Workshop: Studies in Understanding and Interpretation

Music Composition
Gordon Jacob- The Composer and his Art
Charles Villers Stanford- Musical Composition: A Short Treatise for Students

Costuming
Joy Spanable Emery- Stage Costume Techniques
Richard La Motte- Costume Design 101

Stage Design
Frank A. Beach- Preparation and Presentation of the Operetta
William Faricy Condee- Theatrical Space: A Guide for Directors and Designers

Performance
Hardie Albright- Acting: The Creative Process
Robert Benedetti- The Actor in You: Understanding the Art of Acting
David Craig- On Singing Onstage
Shirlee Emmons and Alma Thomas- Power Performance for Singers
Samuel H. Nelson and Elizabeth Blades-Zeller- Singing with Your Whole Self

Holocaust History and Interpretation
Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck- The Holocaust and History
Ruth Franklin- A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction
Aaron Kerner- Film and the Holocaust: New Perspectives on Dramas
Daniel Levy and Nathan Snaider- The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age
Donald L. Niewyck- The Holocaust
Dan Stone- Histories of the Holocaust

Opera History and Context
Gerald Bordman- American Operetta
Herbert Lindenberger- Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception
Rosanne Martorella- The Sociology of Opera
William Schoell- The Opera of the Twentieth Century: A Passionate Art in Transition