



San Francisco's Cabaret Opera Company

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**NEW OPERA THRIVES AT FRESH VOICES FESTIVAL**

This May, San Francisco's acclaimed small opera company, Goat Hall Productions, will present the sixth edition of **Fresh Voices**, its annual festival of new theater music. The only event of its kind on the local music scene, Fresh Voices showcases new works by Bay Area composers and librettists, complete or excerpted—not just readings but staged productions. The venue is Thick House on Potrero Hill, where Fresh Voices appears as part of Thick Description's 2006 Presenting Program.

**Fresh Voices VI** spans two weekends, each offering a different menu of operas: Program A runs May 18–20 and Program B runs May 25–27. In addition to the two opera programs, the 2006 festival includes an evening of “Songs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (May 21) and the return of The NOW Festival, in which composers from far and wide gather to perform their own works (May 28). Performance times are 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 5 p.m. Sundays.

“Our theme this year is *Pipers & Puppets*,” says GHP Artistic Director Harriet March Page.

“The idea originally came from Mark Alburger's new opera on the Pied Piper tale, but I realized that all these works deal in some way with power dynamics: Who's piping the tune, and who's dancing to it? Of course, it can be hard to tell which is which, and often the piper and puppet are embodied in one person. Two of the operas even feature real puppets!”

Composers whose works are presented take an active role in producing the event, often bringing in stage directors, scenic or costume designers, and instruments. Many of the operas are directed by March Page, and Fresh Voices Music Director Mark Alburger conducts. Program A presents these new operas:

***Leonardo's Notebooks***, music and libretto by Lisa Scola Prosek, directed by Jim Cave. Sung in Italian with supertitles, *I Quaderni di Leonardo* is based on excerpts from da Vinci's notebooks. The drama takes place in the court of the Duke of Milan, whose wife, Beatrice d'Este, has gathered the finest talents in Italy. Characters include Leonardo and his clever servant Salai; Beatrice and her sister Isabella, "first ladies" of the Renaissance; and Baldassare, a jealous court poet. Competition for recognition and patronage in this world was fierce; the writer's role grew out of disparaging remarks made about Leonardo by the real Baldassare Castiglione. The libretto comments on Leonardo's experiments in optics and perspective, and his struggle to carry on his real work amid his patrons' demands. In the final scenes, the court flees the chaos brought on by a French invasion, and Leonardo urges his "brothers" to seek truth and forsake the mundane world. Prosek, who studied composition with Milton Babbitt and Lukas Foss, incorporates comic styles from the bel canto era — such as *frottola* (a musical joke) and *cabaletta*, the rapid repeated syllabic forms used in *opera di buffa* — into her modern musical idiom.

***Amok Time***, music and words by Steven Clark, is an opera based on the classic *Star Trek* episode of the same name. A video of the episode — which depicts the intensely private, sometimes violent rituals of the Vulcan mating cycle — accompanies live singers and an electronic score inspired by (and sometimes incorporating) the original soundtrack. The drama that unfolds has a mythic quality that recalls grand romantic opera, while the score — with its driving rhythms, electric guitars, samples, and even jazzy sections — is decidedly 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Clark's concert music has been performed in the U.S. and Europe by orchestras and chamber ensembles including Earplay and the Arditti String Quartet. He also performs and produces pop music, as well as music for theater, television, cell phones, and video games. His film scores have been heard at the Sundance Film Festival.

***Dear Composer*** is a four-minute opera with music and words by John Beeman, who notes, "Many composers, like writers and visual artists, have received numerous 'not interested' responses before emerging as respected artists." His composition uses fragments from these rejection letters as its text. The excerpted words and phrases are multilayered in three spoken parts to create humor and irony. The bluesy instrumental accompaniment is provided by prerecorded electronic instruments and live piano and string bass.

***The Pied Piper of Hamelin***, music and libretto by Mark Alburger, after the poem by Robert Browning. GHP Music Director Alburger has guided Fresh Voices since its inception. This is his sixth opera to bow at the festival; others have included *Antigone*, *Animal Farm*, and *Camino Real*. Its libretto comes verbatim from the Robert Browning poem, but this *Pied Piper* is a

politically charged allegory: the Piper is George Bush, the Rats are terrorists, the Mayor is Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (among other contemporary politicians), and the Children spirited away by the Piper are soldier boys and girls being marched off to war. Musically it is a typically complex Alburger amalgam he describes as “postmedieval-minimalist-modernist,” the ingredients including Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*, “with infestations from Debussy’s *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, Berg’s *Wozzeck*, Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*, Ravel’s *Pavanne for a Dead Princess*, Puccini’s *Turandot*, Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and 12-bar blues.”

Program B of **Fresh Voices VI** features these works:

***Tales of the Cultural Revolution*** (or, *The Tuba and Madame Mao*) and ***The Fashion God: A heck of an opera***, both with music and words by Brian Holmes. Also returning to the festival is Holmes, whose *Fun with Dick and Jane* was performed during Fresh Voices V. *Tales of the Cultural Revolution* concerns the suppression of tuba playing in China during the Cultural Revolution. Says Holmes, “This dastardly deed was the brainchild of Chiang Ching, the wife of Chairman Mao and ringleader of the Gang of Four. Later, when the Gang was purged, tuba players were restored to their rightful place in the vanguard of the Revolution.” He adds, “*Tales* was written in 1978, after I mistakenly recruited two tuba players to perform *Tubby the Tuba*.” Performances will be accompanied by the projected drawings of Justin Novak.

*The Fashion God* is about Michael D. Brown, who led FEMA while Katrina destroyed New Orleans. The libretto is based on email messages to and from Brown, who wrote: “When you look at my lovely FEMA attire, you’ll simply vomit. I am a fashion god.” Other characters include Carol S. Brown’s somewhat loyal assistant, and a Reporter. Victims of Katrina appear as a chorus of sock puppets. President George Bush sings praise to the chief: “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.” Despite this accolade, Brown becomes another of Katrina’s victims. Holmes composes mostly for chorus and voice, with works commissioned and performed by leading Bay Area groups. A professor of physics at San Jose State University, he specializes in the physics of musical instruments.

***Eye Eye Sailor***, with music and words by Steven Clark and Michael Wertz, is, says the composer, “a deeply serious and allegorical opera about the captain of a sailing ship, his vile nemesis (a ravenous shark), and his true love — performed by sock puppets.” Clark and Wertz comprise the Bay Area experimental poptronic band Svelte. Wertz is also a professional illustrator whose artwork has appeared in *The New Yorker* and many galleries.

*The Music Department*, music and words by Allan Crossman, dramatizes a day in the life and loves of conservatory students and teachers. “Song scenes” depict a student who resists modernizing his compositions and appeals to Mozart, his patron saint; a musical banquet celebrating time in all its glory and commenting on how its vastness has been commercialized; a teacher giving a lovelorn student a lesson in romance; and an intergalactic Ed Sullivan Show featuring a song-and-dance act from “a strange but all-too-familiar planet.”

*Cats, Dogs & Divas*, music by Mark Alburger, words by Harriet March Page. March Page describes this as one-fourth of a “Verdian Ring”: four monodramas set to music by Verdi, as “troped” by Alburger. This one derives from *Il Trovatore*, though other musical references (and not just Verdi) abound. “In this version,” notes March Page, “the mono has expanded to a sextet of young women, singing the provocative text in several voices, with expanded harmonies that span the full range of female expression, for better or worse!”

*Joan of Arc: Fear of the Fire* (scene from Act III). Music and libretto by John Partridge, directed by Bill Sevald. From this new music drama on Joan’s trial and execution, we present “The Exhortation” scene, in which she is shown the instruments of torture and given one last chance to confess. Writing for a larger ensemble than in the past, the composer has eight principals on stage in this scene, plus a chorus of townspeople. “I am a big fan of medieval music, and I tried to give the music some of the feel of the period,” he says. “The libretto is based on the written record of Joan’s trial. Joan at various times has been depicted as a pious shepherdess, a populist military leader, and a proto-feminist. I purposely avoided other portrayals of her (for example, Mark Twain’s and George Bernard Shaw’s) so I could form my own idea.”

*Brigid, Fiery Arrow*, with music and libretto by Connie Tyler. Tyler’s narrative uses the story of Brigid, the ancient Irish goddess of the hearth, to talk about war and peace, fear and grief, and the strength that comes from love and forgiveness. Musically it centers around a lilting melody that becomes distorted and loses its rhythmic pattern when the characters are unbalanced and disconnected. Intertwined with the vocal parts, a violin comments on and adds to the story. By legend Brigid was the first person to kee in Ireland, and in the climax she releases her fiery powers in keening over the death of her young son. Like fire, the music erupts in flaming counterpoint, reuniting the warring peoples and providing healing for all.

On the first Sunday of the festival, many of these same composers will debut their songs and song cycles in *Songs for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Says GHP Artistic Director Harriet March Page, “We’ve reluctantly turned down wonderful submissions in the past because they didn’t fit into the ‘opera’ category, so we’re glad to find a place for the song form in this year’s festival.”

Composer/librettists for this program also include Dawn Chambers, Gary Friedman, Elizabeth Lim, and D. C. Meckler.

And on the final Sunday, May 28, Mark Alburger and more than a dozen fellow composers from the Bay Area and far beyond will perform their own works in *The NOW Festival*. Alburger has been producing this unique event for several years, originally at Dominican University, more recently at Goat Hall, GHP's home venue.

Casting **Fresh Voices VI** was the fruit of a successful experiment, notes March Page. In January, the composers and several dozen invited singers met at Goat Hall for a kind of musical marketplace. Each composer offered samples of his or her musical wares, the singers performed or sight-read from the new works, and many matches were consummated in this musical dating game. "Singers are used to the stress and risk of having no say in casting, but here they got to turn the tables and audition the composers," says March Page. "A board member who was there suggested we should do it again and sell tickets!"

Page hails the intrepid ensemble cast of Fresh Voices, many of whom have performed in past festivals and will appear in more than one of the operas. "We have an amazing group of 30-plus singers willing to submit themselves to the adventure of an unknown musical/theatrical experience, which is the festival's hallmark. We provide a supportive environment in which each can work and grow, and they provide us with energy and enthusiasm and remarkable musicianship — new works are usually far from easy!"

Critics have praised the festival. Jeff Kaliss wrote of Fresh Voices IV, "Goat Hall has come to embrace an ensemble of impressively fine singers who are also good actors. . . . And it's providing this ensemble with gifted directors . . . inspiring uncompromised attention from serious opera-goers." William Susman (on FV II): "Living up to its name, Fresh Voices presented a truly amazing selection of new works. . . ." Sandy Staggs, in the *San Francisco Observer*: "Nowhere else, at least in San Francisco, can one see such an edgy collection of new and daring works."

Works introduced at previous festivals have gone on to enjoy complete productions at GHP, including *Henry Miller in Brooklyn*, with music by Mark Alburger and book by Mel Clay; and Sarah Michael's *Arachne*.

For complete schedule information on FRESH VOICES, and to download press photo, visit [www.goathall.org](http://www.goathall.org). For advance reservations and group sales, contact the Thick House box office, (415) 401-8081. Tickets go on sale at the door 30 minutes before each performance. Thick House is located at 1695 18th St. near Arkansas St., San Francisco.