

South Surrey composer inspired to share powerful story at Vancouver Opera Festival

Homelessness issue rises with relevant requiem

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Staff reporter

There's a lingering tendency to think of opera as a recreation for social elites, concerned mainly with reviving classics of the past.

"People think of it as this separate, lofty closed world," said South Surrey's Marcel Bergmann.

But that was not the case historically, he pointed out – while chamber music was often funded by the titled and wealthy, operas (think Mozart's *Magic Flute*) and oratorios (think Handel's *Messiah*) were very much the province of a mass audience.

As popular entertainments, they also reflected the concerns and realities of the general public – and in a very real way represented a form of community engagement.

Over the last two decades, returning that sense of relevance has been an imperative among those concerned with ensuring the survival and future growth of the idiom, and it's certainly a component of the current Vancouver Opera Festival, running until this weekend in various downtown Vancouver venues.

For virtuoso pianist, arranger and composer Bergmann (frequently teamed with wife Elizabeth in the extraordinary versatile Bergmann Duo, and co-artistic director with her of the White Rock Concerts series), the current festival has provided the opportunity for a new production of his composition *Requiem For A Lost Girl*.

Described as 'a chamber musical about homelessness' ("although it's actually more



File photo

South Surrey composer Marcel Bergmann.

like an oratorio," Bergmann said), the powerful work plays tonight (Friday) at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. in the Fei and Milton Wong Experimental Theatre at SFU's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, 149 W. Hastings St.

Co-created with librettist Onalea Gilbertson, it's being co-presented by The Kettle Society – which works with those who are experiencing homelessness or have experienced it in the past – and SFU Woodward's Cultural Programs, and the current production incorporates writing and additional music by members of the society's choir and writers guild.

Structured as 'a memorial service for a young woman lost to the street', *Requiem* explores such raw and sensitive themes as

poverty, mental illness, addiction and the plight of missing and murdered women.

With titles of pieces that include *Addiction Song* and *I Hit Him 'Cause He Hit Me* it's not a work that can be accused of pulling any punches, and Bergmann compares it to such gritty Brecht-Weill pieces as *The Threepenny Opera* which he, Elizabeth and Gilbertson celebrated in a recent cabaret-style coffee concert at Surrey Arts Centre.

Originally commissioned in 2010 by the Land's End Chamber Ensemble in Calgary, it was also produced in 2012 at the New York Musical Theatre Festival.

"The original idea of a funeral for a young woman became a personal story for Onalea, because a girl she was at school with vanished on Highway 22," Bergmann said.

"It became the catalyst for *Onalea*. Originally, she was part of the cast and now she's directing it."

The production brings together members of the Yulanda M. Faris Young Artists Program and the Vancouver Opera Orchestra and chorus, as well as the Kettle Choir.

"We have over 20 members of the choir, with other singers, plus violin, viola, cello, clarinet and saxophone, percussion and piano – it's such a complex piece, combining professional musicians and community members," Bergmann noted. "The framework – a 14-song structure – is always the same but the choral part changes wherever it's done – it's always like a new piece."

The Kettle Choir brings a sense of authenticity to the piece that can't be dupli-

cated, Bergmann added, noting that the production has eagerly tapped into their own musical creativity.

"It's a wonderful group that has been together for two years. Working with them builds a sense of community. As one of the members said, 'I almost died – and now I'm singing opera.'"

In keeping with the themes, Bergmann's music draws on his multiple influences and eclecticism as a composer.

"My music is quite edgy," he said. "It's not like abstract music, but has dissonance and clashes. There is a very dark tango in there, and some jazz and some musical theatre."

The Bergmanns will also contribute in a more traditional mode to the current Vancouver Opera Festival's over-arching theme of Russian culture (which includes a production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and a new operatic adaptation of Gogol's *The Overcoat*) with a chamber music concert of Russian piano music Saturday (May 5) at 6 p.m. at CBC Studio 700 (700 Hamilton St.).

Among the pieces at that concert will be one that exhibits another side of Bergmann's compositional and arranging talents, the homage *Echoes of Tchaikovsky*.

While Bergmann said he's unsure whether the current atmosphere of experimentation and community engagement will carry over to future Vancouver Opera seasons, he's happy that it's happening now.

"It doesn't mean you should stop doing the wonderful pieces of the past," he said. "But we'll try to push the envelope as much as we can."