

Taking note of figures from history

The Boston Globe



Composer Andy Vores (above, next to statue of Leif Erikson) has written a "micro-opera" about the explorer. Also on Boston Musica Viva's "Living Statues" program is a work inspired by William Lloyd Garrison (below). (Justine Hunt/Globe Staff (above))

By David Weininger

Globe Correspondent / October 3, 2008

[Email](#) | [Print](#) | [Single Page](#) | [Yahoo! Buzz](#) | [ShareThis](#)

Text size [-](#) [+](#)

Andy Vores didn't quite know what to make of the commission at first - it was probably the oddest one he'd ever gotten. Boston Musica Viva, the new-music ensemble with whom he has a long history, was asking the composer to write a five-minute-long chamber opera about a well-known Boston statue.

 **Discuss**
COMMENTS (0)

"Yeah, that was a little peculiar," Vores says with a laugh when asked about it. He recalls that after scratching his head a bit, though, he began to see possibilities. "Great ideas can come out when you're forced to put them into an odd container."

Tonight,
Handel and Haydn Society
opens with its new
artistic director designate
Harry Christophers
conducting in Symphony Hall . . .
Celebrity Series opens with an
80
th
birthday tribute
to
Leon Fleisher
in Jordan Hall . . .
Boston Musica Viva

What he and librettist Fred Choi came up with was the eight-minute "Leif," their take on the statue of Leif Erikson that stands on Commonwealth Avenue near the Charlesgate East. It's one of three "micro-operas" that Musica Viva commissioned for its 40th-anniversary season, which opens tonight. Also on the "Living Statues" program is the seven-minute "The Liberator" by Dutch composer Theo Loevendie, inspired by the statue of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, also on Commonwealth Avenue. Each is written for a small instrumental ensemble, soprano, and baritone.

Boston Musica Viva

presents

two mini-operas

with links to local statues at the Tsai Performance Center. . . and Tufts kicks off a weekend

festival honoring composer T.J.

Anderson

. . . Tomorrow,

Andre Previn

leads the

Boston Symphony Orchestra

. . .

Chameleon Arts Ensemble

performs at the Goethe-Institut Boston .

. . and the

Lydian Quartet

plays Beethoven and Ives at Brandeis. .

. Sunday, composer

William Bolcom

participates in a live taping of

"From the Top"

at Jordan Hall . . . and a New England

Conservatory

memorial program

pays tribute to the late pianist

Patricia Zander

.

A third work - by Brian Robison on Quaker Mary Dyer - wasn't finished in time for the concert, which also includes music by Steven Stucky, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, and Aaron Copland.

Richard Pittman, Musica Viva's founder and music director, says that the idea of short operas on Boston themes arose during discussions of how to mark the group's anniversary and emphasize its connections to the city. Stage director Nicholas Deutsch suggested focusing on statues, which offer crucial, if largely unseen, clues to a city's past.

"This sounded wacky enough to be interesting," Pittman says by phone, laughing.

"When I think about it, there are a lot of statues I walk past and don't notice," says Vores. But Erikson had always grabbed his attention, the Viking seeming lost and a bit out of place in the middle of Commonwealth Avenue. "He's gazing off into the distance in this pithy pose with his hands up, shading his eyes. It kind of looks like he's looking for his friends and they haven't arrived."

He and Choi began researching the monument's backstory. Created by sculptor Anne Whitney in 1887, it was commissioned by Eben Horsford, a Harvard professor and inventor of Rumford Baking Powder. "He became convinced that Erikson had in fact landed at Gerry's Landing in Cambridge," Vores explains, adding that the idea seems to have few adherents today.

They eventually came up with five quick-changing scenes, each singer assuming multiple roles. "Leif" begins with two tourists puzzling over the statue and moves to Horsford and his daughter discussing their research on Erikson's landing. The statue even gets its own scene, in which it laments that no one ever notices it, standing amid the bustle of a busy street. The opera ends with a kind of redemption, a Boston Marathon runner telling the statue that she always looks out for Erikson when she's finishing the race. [Continued...](#)

Page 2 of 2 -- In a way, Vores says, the opera's absurd brevity liberated his creative instincts. "We found that these were little vignettes, so we could afford to be kind of cartoonish, inasmuch as there wasn't time for character development." Yet hidden in the piece is a sort of thumbnail history of Boston, as well as a serious idea about public art: As Vores puts it, "Cities, not sculptors, make statues."



Discuss

COMMENTS (0)

Tonight,
Handel and Haydn Society
opens with its new
artistic director designate
Harry Christophers
conducting in Symphony Hall . . .
Celebrity Series opens with an
80
th
birthday tribute
to
Leon Fleisher
in Jordan Hall . . .
Boston Musica Viva
presents
two mini-operas
with links to local statues at the Tsai
Performance Center. . . and Tufts kicks
off a weekend
festival honoring composer **T.J.
Anderson**
. . . Tomorrow,
Andre Previn
leads the

While "Leif" borders on surrealism, Loevendie approached his task more straightforwardly. "The Liberator," for which Deutsch wrote the libretto, offers a brief resume of Garrison's career, with the baritone taking his role and the soprano mostly narrating important events in his life.

For Loevendie, the main point of interest was in Garrison's uncompromising character. "It's basically a dramatic opera about a colorful and just man in a very dramatic period in American history," the composer wrote in an e-mail message.

Though different in approach, the two "Living Statues" operas are a testament to the continuing vitality of Boston Musica Viva, which manages both to cast a wide stylistic net and to remain dialed in to the community of Boston composers.

Asked what he thought the program said about his ensemble at its 40th birthday, Pittman responds, "It says that we're encouraging talented composers, that we're always trying to take a fresh look at the creation of new music. That in reaching out to audiences, we're interested in doing something a little different - not just for the sake of being different, but out of the real creative urges of these composers."