

Verb Ballets to repeat Geoffrey Peterson's *Edmund Fitzgerald* at John Knox Church

by Mike Telin



On Friday, April 24 at 7:00 pm, the John Knox Performance Series will present Verb Ballets in a production of Geoffrey Peterson's *Edmund Fitzgerald*, a concerto for piano and strings, choreographed by Richard Dickinson. The performance will be held in Trinity Hall at John Knox Presbyterian Church in North Olmsted. Seating reservations required: see our [concert listings page](#) for details.

Dickinson's choreography of Peterson's concerto was premiered during the 2014 NEOSonicFest. Prior to the premiere, ClevelandClassical.com spoke to Richard Dickinson and Geoffrey Peterson about the work. The following preview was originally published on March 26, 2014.

Geoffrey Peterson's concerto chronicles the tragic shipwreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald in Lake Superior in November, 1975. Its four movements are entitled "Embarkment," "The Gales," "Six-Fathom Shoal" ("We're holding our own") and "Entombment-Dirge." The concerto makes use of several musical quotes. One is *Spanish Ladies*, an English sea chantey, which appears in both the first and third movements. Another is the funeral march theme from the second movement of Beethoven's third symphony, which is heard in the fourth movement of the concerto. In addition, a chime is rung 29 times during the final bars of the piece to memorialize the men who lost their lives.

Richard Dickinson, who also serves as Verb Ballets' associate director, said in a recent telephone conversation that being from California, he was not aware of the folkloric status the story has acquired locally. "Everyone I've talked to who's from the area seems to have a fascination with the story." He also thinks it's a tale that mirrors the great classical ballets.

“Being a dancer and having danced ballets like *Swan Lake* and *Giselle*, there’s always a tragedy and a transformation, and I did feel this story has both. We all understand the tragedy, but I see the transformation during the final scene when a townsman stands up and looks toward the future as if to say, this isn’t the end, this is just part of our lives. Sometimes these things happen and we move forward. So in the end, I approached the choreography as if it were a two-hour ballet, even though it lasts only fourteen minutes.”

As a choreographer, Dickinson says that he tries to get inside the heads of composers in order to better understand the meaning of the music. “I’ll listen to pieces over and over again to try to figure it out. Geoffrey was very helpful: when he found out I was going to choreograph the concerto, he sent me all of his research.”



Composer Geoffrey Peterson, who grew up in the Cleveland area and studied both at the Oberlin Conservatory and the Cleveland Institute of Music, said during a telephone conversation that writing a piece commemorating the wreck of The Edmund Fitzgerald was something he felt compelled to do. “I couldn’t get the idea out of my head.”

Peterson said that the inspiration for his concerto for piano and strings came to him when he was living in Philadelphia and had just seen the movie, *Titanic*. “As an artist, sometimes you get an idea in your head and you simply can’t get rid of it. You either try to ignore it, which is very hard to do, or if it’s something you really should do, it’s going

to be like the proverbial monkey on your back. That's what this piece was to me. I felt compelled to do it."

Peterson also thought it would be interesting to write a classical companion piece to Gordon Lightfoot's famous 1976 ballad. "If you're not from the Great Lakes, it's because of that song that you know about the wreck. He immortalized it. I love the ballad — it's very haunting — but I wanted to write something for the concert hall."

The concerto was completed in 2002. Afterwards, Peterson connected with the head of development at the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. "I told him about the piece and said that I'd love to premiere it as close as possible to where the ship went down." After corresponding for several years, the concerto was finally premiered in 2005 by the Sault Symphony Orchestra in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, in commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the shipwreck. "It was really great because the concert took place only about 50 miles from the actual shipwreck site."

Writing the concerto also provided Peterson the opportunity to pursue his passion for research. "One of the things I love about being a composer is that you get the privilege of being able to learn about all kinds of new things," Peterson said, adding that he delves into reading as much as possible about a subject.

Peterson went on to cite many Ohio connections to the sinking of the vessel, which was operated by the Oglebay Norton Company of Cleveland. "Of the 29 men who died, fourteen were from Ohio, including four from the Cleveland suburbs of North Olmsted, Lakewood, Richmond Heights, and Bay Village. The rest were mostly from the Toledo area as well as from a few small towns. And the captain, Ernest McSorley, was going to be retiring at the end of the year. For many people in Cleveland and around the Great Lakes, this is not only a regional but also very personal story."

Peterson describes his concerto as a memorial to the men who lost their lives. "In the most simple terms, that's what it is. The third movement, "Six-Fathom Shoal" ('We're holding our own.) represents the last communication between The Edmund Fitzgerald and another ship in the area, The Arthur M. Anderson. The last radio transmission between Captain McSorley and the Captain of the Anderson was, 'We're holding our own,' then they vanished from radar."

How does Peterson feel about having the concerto choreographed? "I went to a rehearsal and I think what Richard Dickinson has done is extraordinary. I never in a million years thought this piece would be choreographed, but what Richard and the dancers have done is phenomenal."

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