

Margaret Brouwer's *Voice of the Lake* to be premiered at the Breen Center

by Mike Telin



Enjoying the natural beauty of Lake Erie has always been part of composer Margaret Brouwer's life — she grew up spending summers at her family's lake cottage in Huron. But when dangerous levels of algae blooms in the Lake's western basin caused a water crisis in Toledo in 2014, the ensuing national conversation about environmental pollution and the state of the country's drinking water became the source of inspiration for Brouwer's latest composition, *Voice of the Lake*.

The four-part oratorio will have its world premiere this Sunday, November 12 at 3:00 pm at the Breen Center for the Performing Arts. Conductor Domenico Boyagian will lead soloists Angela Mitchell, soprano, Merav Eldan, mezzo-soprano, Brian Skoog, tenor, and Bryant Bush, bass, with the Oberlin Musical Union (Gregory Ristow, director), the Cleveland Institute of Music Children's Choir (Jennifer Call, director), and an expanded Blue Streak Ensemble.

“What I do is write music,” Brouwer said during a recent telephone conversation. “In the beginning this was my way of protesting, but it became much more than that.” In a July 2017 [interview](#) with *ClevelandClassical.com*, Brouwer said that she began her research by reading newspaper articles, participating in public forums, and talking with government officials and leaders of nonprofit environmental organizations.

At the time of that interview, Brouwer had completed 3/4 of the work. Now that it is finished, has her vision of the piece changed over time? “I suppose it has,” she said. “When I started out I was really up in arms about the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers putting the dredged bottom of the Cuyahoga River into Lake Erie. That's been in the

news for several years because there were people in Congress, environmentalists, and citizens who didn't want that to happen.”

Although Brouwer first thought the struggle and the contrasts between the two groups would make a great opera, her thoughts moved in the direction of oratorio when the Oberlin Musical Union and the CIM Children's Choir became interested in the project.

“I also thought that I was going to make the piece completely negative, but for me the Lake is rejuvenating. It helps the spirit when you are near it — seeing the enormity and the power that it has. That, along with the fun of swimming, fishing, and boating, puts things in perspective, and I wanted that to be a big part of the piece too.”



Since July Brouwer has done even more research for a video that will be included in Part III where the soprano is having a dream about the things that are causing the pollution in the Lake, and wondering how to make the problem better.

Her fieldwork took her to the farm of Dale Daniels in northern Lorain County. “He gave me a tour and showed me all that he is doing to clean the water before it goes into the river and then into the Lake.”

The composer also spent time with Frank Greenland, Director of Watershed Programs at Northeast Ohio Sewer District. “The City is trying its best with all the storm runoff, but it's a big issue because it goes into our drinking water. This is all in the video. It shows the bad stuff but also shows the attempts that are being made to fix things — that's why

Part IV is hopeful. It's not saying that everything is great, but it is hopeful that things will get better."

Brouwer said that she thinks the Oratorio's ending works very well. "It's got some great choral stuff in it." Click [here](#) to read a synopsis of all four sections.

In addition to the music, Brouwer also wrote some of the Oratorio's libretto. "I asked David Adams if he would write some poetry about the Lake. I love his poetry, it's so beautiful, but some of the time I felt like I needed direct, simple words in order to lay out the information. I think the two work together well."



Still, with all of the progress that is being made in combating the Lake's pollution, Brouwer pointed out that the algae bloom problem had recently returned to national headlines. On October 3, *The New York Times* reported, "A potentially harmful algae bloom covered more than 700 square miles in the western basin of Lake Erie last week, turning the lake bright green and alarming residents and local officials... The algae blooms contain cyanobacteria, which, under certain conditions, can produce toxins that contaminate drinking water and cause harm to the local ecosystem."

Brouwer hopes *Voice of the Lake* will cause people to think about how important a healthy lake is to all of us. "It provides drinking water for eleven million people. Everyone who lives along the Lake and the rivers that flow into it needs to be thinking about all of this."

What began out of personal interest has led Margaret Brouwer to become a student of the issue. "I've learned a lot from everyone along the way — things I didn't know I was

going to learn and that's great. I feel like I've written a better piece because of it — it's not just my opinion.”

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