

**{NOW} Festival to present Dawn Sonntag's
Verlorene Heimat ("Lost Homeland")**

by Mike Telin



Although composer Dawn Sonntag was well-versed in writing art song, vocal chamber music, and works for chorus, there was one thing missing from her catalogue of works for the voice — an opera. “I wanted to compose one but I had not found a libretto that I connected with,” the Associate Professor of Music and Chair of the Music Department at Hiram College said during a telephone conversation.

Then one night during dinner with her mother-in-law, that changed. “I knew she had been born and spent part of her childhood in East Prussia, but I didn’t know why she had left. So I asked her and she told me the whole story. And when I was listening to it I thought, this is it!”

On Saturday, January 27 at 7:30 pm at the Maltz Center for the Performing Arts, Cleveland Opera Theater will present the Cleveland premiere of Dawn Sonntag’s *Verlorene Heimat* (“Lost Homeland”) as part of the company’s {NOW} Festival. Presented in collaboration with the Cleveland Composers’ Guild, the opera is based on the true story of the East Prussian refugee family of Christa Neuber Kuske (1937 – 2012) and the Jewish-Ukrainian girl they sheltered.

When the opera opens, August Neuber (a farmer and mayor of the village of Schoenberg) and his wife Elise have come to understand Hitler to be a dangerous and dishonest fraud. They have isolated themselves and their children from Nazi social

activities, and Christa, their daughter, cannot understand why her parents will not allow her to play with the other girls in the village. Click [here](#) to read a synopsis. Watch a short video of Sonntag describing the piece [here](#).

“The daughter Christa is my mother-in-law,” Sonntag said. “When she told me this story I had been living in Germany, so I knew from conversations that in the beginning many people thought that Hitler was this great leader who was going to bring economic prosperity to Germany. He was also going to reunite East Prussia, which had been separated from the rest of the country after World War I, with the rest of Germany.”

Sonntag said that it was when Christa’s father, August, was sent to Ukraine to survey land that his feelings about the Nazi party began to change. “He realized it was land that had been taken away from the people who lived there, and that the Nazis were planning to uproot the poor farmers from Schoenberg and send them there to farm it. He also realized that many Jews were disappearing from the area. August, like so many people, was a member of the Nazi party and had supported it. But when he saw what was going on, he said no and became a resister, first by refusing to wear his uniform to a local Nazi rally. And then his wife Elise allowed Hedwig, the young Jewish-Ukrainian girl, to sleep in the house and eat with the family.”



Sonntag's interest in the subject also stems from personal experience: growing up in Milwaukee as a German-American, she was taught about the Holocaust at a young age. "It was important for us to know that it was the *bad* Germans who were the Nazis," Sonntag said. "My father was the principal at the Lutheran School I attended, and he showed films about the Holocaust to my eighth grade — nothing was hidden from us."

Immigration is another interest of the composer. She grew up hearing stories about her family — one side came to the U.S. in the 1850s and the other in the early 1900s. Sonntag also lived in Germany for nine years while pursuing a freelance career in Frankfurt and studying philosophy and German (University of Heidelberg) and music (Hochschule für Kirchenmusik, Heidelberg). When she returned to the States she said she had to "re-integrate" herself, and see her own country through the eyes of an immigrant.

When Sonntag began creating the libretto for *Verlorene Heimat*, she benefited greatly from her mother-in-law's large library, including biographies and autobiographies about refugees from Eastern Europe and Holocaust survivors, and books about the history of East Prussia. "I had a lot to read, and over the next two years I'd call her and ask if she remembered how this or that happened."

Sadly, Christa Neuber Kuske was never able to see her life story presented on the stage. "I had hoped to have it finished so she could, but in April of 2012 she was diagnosed with lung cancer, although she never smoked. I visited her in August in Germany, and she spent every ounce of her energy going through letters and old newspaper articles with me because she wanted to help. She actually died two weeks later, and right after that I started composing the opera."

Presented on [International Holocaust Remembrance Day](#), the fully-staged production is directed by Justin John Moniz, and conductor Domenico Boyagian will lead the orchestra. The cast includes Rebecca Freshwater, Brian Johnson, Donna Warren, Timothy Culver, and Jason Budd. A second performance will be presented on Sunday at 3:00 pm. Free tickets are available [online](#).

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