

Kent fall opera scenes include premiere of *The Story of an Hour*

by Daniel Hathaway



Kent State music education major Scott Little's new opera, *The Story of an Hour*, has inspired KSU opera director Marla Berg to take her annual fall opera scenes program to a new level this year.

“Although I didn't hear the portion of Scott's piece that was workshopped during Cleveland Opera Theatre's {NOW} Festival, Tim Culver thought it was really good. Then I heard a reading of some of the work at Kent. But what really spurred me on is that Scott wrote a short piece for the Kent orchestra and choral concert last spring, and I really liked it. He came in to talk with me about what it would be like to

produce an opera and I thought, you know what? It's a 40-minute piece. Wouldn't it be an extraordinary experience for everybody involved if we did it.”

Berg's decision to mount the premiere ramped up the usually modest fall opera scenes program considerably. “I normally do a montage of eight to ten small scenes, and I thought, I'll just match Scott's piece up with two bigger scenes,” Berg said. Although she's always promising to make things easier on herself the next time around, the director ended up choosing Act III of *The Marriage of Figaro* and scenes from Berlioz' *Beatrice and Benedict* with spoken dialogue from Shakespeare, all of which share the theme of marriage. “It's going to be a really



wonderful program, although Act III of *Figaro* has just about put me in the nuthouse,” she said.

In addition to the added excitement of a premiere, Berg’s ambitious plans rode on the wave of an abundance of vocal talent at Kent this fall. “We have 147 students registered for voice instruction this semester, including more graduate students than ever before,” she said.

Another happy coincidence was the availability of an existing stage set. “I went down to the Wright-Curtis Theater to ask if we could re-use the backdrop from their fall production, and they said, why don’t we just leave the whole set up?”



Now a senior at Kent, Scott Little started composing when he was in the eighth grade. But the idea of writing an opera hadn’t occurred to him until his friend Tim Tibbits approached him nearly two years ago. “When an opportunity comes my way, I say ‘yes’ and then I figure out how to do it,” Little said in a telephone conversation.

“Tim loved opera but wasn’t musically trained. I thought it was cool that he was so passionate about the idea of writing one. But he wasn’t just pipe-dreaming — he really had a plan.”

That plan arose from a short story by [Kate Chopin](#) published in *Vogue* on December 6, 1894, under the title *The Dream of an Hour*, later changed to *The Story of an Hour*. “It’s extremely short and accessible, but so much happens inside that span of time,” Little said. “Tim worked on the libretto, and we gathered friends and opera-trained people for a reading that summer. Then I started writing the music.”

In the fall of 2017, Little recruited four Kent students and pianists and did a test run of the piece, followed by a professional performance of part of the work by Kent voice professor Tim Culver at the 2018 {NOW} Festival at the Maltz Performing Arts Center in Cleveland. “I felt we had workshopped it enough to take it to Professor Berg,” Little said. “She took a leap of faith and decided to program it in some fashion. I finished writing it over the summer, and here we are.”

Berg was impressed. Although she has staged only one opera premiere before, Steven Mark Kohn’s *Mary Chesnut* at Cleveland Public Theater, she took up the challenge bravely. “Scott gave me some ideas, but I’ve taken everything else from the libretto. I’ve tried to make it like real life — not operatic. Just characters living their day.”

Although the rest of this weekend’s program will use piano, Little’s opera is scored for string quartet with oboe and English horn. “I love the sound, and I know how to write for that combination,” he said. He admits that as an oboist himself, he hasn’t been particularly easy on the double reed player.

When we talked, Scott Little had just heard the piece all the way through for the first time. “I was very pleased,” he said, “but I’ve learned that as more and more people are involved in a production, the composer has to step back.”

And after a long gestation period, Little said of his work that “the honeymoon phase is over. The music has to re-impress me. I can no longer like it just because I wrote it.” And for a young composer with an evolving voice, two years is a long time. “There’s music in the production that’s about a year old, and other music I wrote just toward the end. Continuity of style is a challenge. Some moments are more mature and some are more youthful.”

Marla Berg noted that Little’s music is rhythmically challenging, but the score leaves a strong impact. “Don’t give it away, but the ending is the strongest part of the piece and left us all in tears after the first run-through.”

Saturday, November 17 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, November 18 at 3:00 pm: Kent State Fall Opera Scenes, Marla Berg, director, Jay White, music director, Karen Ní Bhroin and Tori Petrak, conducting, Vicky Tong, piano, and Jahna Stanton, Giuseppe Tejeiro, Virginia Ashley, Viviana Pinzon, and Ian Daugherty, oboe quintet. "Marriage — Inside, Out." Act III of Mozart's Marriage of Figaro, a montage of scenes from Act II of Berlioz' Beatrice and Benedict, and Scott Little's one-act opera, The Story of an Hour (libretto by Tim Tibbitts). Wright-Curtis Theatre, Center for the Performing Arts, 1325 Theatre Dr., Kent. Tickets are available [online](#).

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 13, 2018.
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