

## World Premiere of Margi Griebeling-Haigh's *The Higglers*:

### A conversation with director Marla Berg



by Mike Telin

The first time that composer Margi Griebeling-Haigh read A.E. Coppard's *The Higglers*, she knew the short story about life's missed opportunities was fodder for an opera.

On Saturday, June 7 at 7:30 pm at Disciples Christian Church, Griebeling-Haigh's tragi-comic chamber opera *The Higglers* will receive its world premiere, directed by Marla Berg and conducted by Steven Smith.

The cast includes tenor Brian Skoog in the title role, soprano Gabrielle Haigh as Mary Sadgrove, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Frey as Mrs. Sadgrove, mezzo soprano Denise Milner Howell as Mrs. Witlow, and soprano Lisl Wangerman as Sophy Dawes. The production will be repeated on Sunday, June 8 at 3:30 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with director Marla Berg by Zoom and began by asking her how she developed the concept for the new work.

Marla Berg: I always first go to the drama and sort out what the story is — who are the main characters, and what are their conflicts. I've also been working through the score and sorting out the staging. I take note of how each character develops, and how the conflict in the story develops.

Then there are the challenges of scene changes and props, and figuring out how the singers enter and exit the stage. It's like putting a puzzle together.

Of course there is the singing, the music, and the score, which are equal partners. So it's all about gaining an understanding of how the music compels the story and the drama forward.

*Mike Telin: How does Margi's music drive the drama?*



MB: I find her music to be very complementary to the text. I make the comparison to Hugo Wolf because his song repertoire is not unmelodic, but it is so attentive to text.

*MT: How did you go about getting to know the characters?*

MB: The opera is based on a Coppard short story. Although he's sort of gone out of fashion, at the time he was writing, he was one of the preeminent authors of short stories. So the first thing I did was read it, and then read a little bit about the author. So I got a sense of where the story is taking place.

There is no recording, but Margi provided MP3s of the orchestra and vocal parts, and that has been extremely helpful.

But it's really about going through it page by page, and listening to what the characters are saying. Listening to the music, and sorting out what's actually happening in their minds, which is the most fun part for me. Margi also wrote the libretto, and I want to be true to what she imagined.

The title character is Harvey, who is a Higgler (a dealer who buys poultry and dairy products from farms and supplies them with small items from the shops in town). He has recently returned from World War I and is trying to figure out how to make a living in a rural village in England.

So I look at that character, and I think, okay, he's resourceful. He's smart. He takes his responsibility seriously. And I think he wants to grow his business. I respect him, but he's a bit unsure of himself. That shows as the story unfolds, because he ends up having to choose between two very different women. And essentially the story is about that decision that he has to make.

Still, every day I read it I learn new things about each of the characters.

*MT: Did Margi provide any stage directions in the score?*

MB: She gives great descriptions before each scene — what season it is, and what the set looks like, and describes what she imagines will be happening onstage. And when it comes to staging it, I try very hard to follow those descriptions.

She does indicate that this is a rural village, and for me, that means I need to figure out how to show that on the stage. We are going to use projections, which will help set the scene. There are simple sets but the projections will help define that for the audience.

Sometimes I wonder how to interpret the music because there are musical comments in the orchestra that I'm sure she had intentions about. But I can also have my opinions — she hired me to help tell the story.

*MT: What are the staging challenges?*

MB: One is that there are eight scenes in the first act, and six in the second so I have to figure out how to get from one scene to the other. Gabrielle, Brian, and Elizabeth will also add their own personality to their characters and that's an interesting thing that happens during rehearsals.

*MT: You're on a very tight schedule.*

MB: We are, so the singers will come in with the music learned and memorized but that presents an interesting challenge, because all of a sudden the director starts imposing a character on you. So they do need to have their own ideas. And I think that's the joy of the creative process,

*MT: You have worked with the conductor before.*

Yes, I was able to work with Steven Smith during that Opera Scene's project with The Cleveland Composers Guild and Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and my experience was that he is an amazing conductor and collaborator. It was a true joy to work with him. There are conductors who are wonderful symphony conductors and then there are the conductors who get opera — and he gets it. He's supportive of the director, and the singers. I feel fortunate that I have a great group of people to create this with.

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