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Music Students' Talents Showcased in One-Act Operas

April 3, 2015

To celebrate the 150th anniversary of Illinois Wesleyan's School of Music, faculty members wanted to invite students to share their talents in special and unique ways. One of those brainstorming sessions ultimately resulted in three one-act operas penned by students Tim McDunn '16 (Elmhurst, Ill.), Luke McLoughlin '15 (Chicago) and Sam Mullooly '16 (Wauwatosa, Wis.).



Composers Tim McDunn '16 (far left), Luke McLoughlin '15 and Sam Mullooly '16 in front of the set for McDunn's opera *Ex Libris*.

Short, one-acts are not common in the operatic repertoire, but there is some tradition of such works, ranging from Mozart's *Bastien und Bastienne* to Menotti's *The Telephone*. IWU's Director of Opera Theatre Robert Mangialardi believed student composers could manage one-act contemporary operas without becoming completely overwhelmed.

"Staging these three contemporary operas was a great way to tie all the pieces of our curriculum together," said Mangialardi, who is also visiting assistant professor of music. Opera students took on directing duties in addition to the singing roles; student musicians performed in the chamber orchestra.

A music composition and Greek and Roman Studies double major, McDunn wrote *Ex Libris*, taking the title from the Latin phrase meaning "from the books" commonly seen on the inside of a book to represent the owner or library. The opera's two characters, Oswald and Athena, are teenage foster children living in a used bookstore. *Ex Libris* portrays their struggles to understand both each other and to reconcile their fantastic world of books with the real world outside the store.

"To portray this, I have written both the music and the words in an accessible, Surrealist style that passes freely between imagination and reality," said McDunn. "Writing this opera has proven to be an exciting opportunity for me to combine some of my interests into one garish and grandiloquent gabfest—which I hope the audience will find some way of enjoying."

McLoughlin said his work, *Together for Warmth*, is more musical theatre than opera. "I admire the work of Stephen Sondheim, since he has brought musical theatre to new levels of complexity, nuance, and thus overall expressive capability," said McLoughlin, a music composition and English-writing double major. "It is a goal of mine as a composer to attempt to continue this development."

The majority of the piece follows two pairs of people during the aftermath of a sinking ship. McLoughlin said he attempted to show isolation, connection between human beings, and the relationship between these. "I wanted to show that, while we have the power to terrify and to anger one another, we also have the power to give—and to find—such peace, such euphoria, such hope within each other's arms," he said.

Mullooly's *The Hunters* is a comic opera that tells the story of the hunting trip of four females. While on a mission to dismantle the patriarchy, the hunters' penchant to play practical jokes on each other goes awry.

"Working under the motto of 'anything goes,' we made the staging and costuming as hilarious as possible," said Mullooly, a music composition major. "As a young composer, I feel as though it's always important to try writing in new genres when presented with the opportunity."

Mangialardi noted the difficulty of staging an opera, even a one-act, with the student composers involved in everything from composing the score to choosing a director to influencing set design and costumes. "It's exponentially more difficult to do a staged work than to do a musical performance with piano or voice," he explained. "This has been a great experience the students wouldn't otherwise get."

By Danielle Kamp '15