



‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ coming to Orleans

By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

Posted Oct 22, 2017 at 3:01 AM

The massive production of the opera is being staged for two weekends at Rock Harbor’s Church of the Transfiguration by the orchestra and singers of Gloriam Dei Cantores, the actors of Elements Theatre Company, and multiple soloists.

“Ralph Vaughan Williams wanted everyone to relate to this man.”

Vaughan Williams himself certainly did.

The “man” that David Chalmers talks about is Pilgrim, the protagonist in Vaughan Williams’ operatic adaptation of “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” Chalmers directs the chorus in the massive production of the opera, being staged for two weekends at Rock Harbor’s Church of the Transfiguration by the orchestra and singers of Gloriam Dei Cantores, the actors of Elements Theatre Company, and multiple soloists.

Vaughan Williams’ obsession with John Bunyan’s allegorical novel lasted all of his adult life. He carried a copy of the work in his pocket, into the trenches during World War I. He prepared numerous sketches of the work during his long compositional life – a radio play, an early opera that was re-worked for the piece, many musical ideas. He even substantially re-worked the “final” product after its 1951 premiere, responding to criticism of the score and of the libretto.

It was a 45-year gestation that culminated in this “morality,” as Vaughan Williams chose to call it. The composer wrote his own libretto, with multiple borrowings from Scripture, and from the poetry of Ursula Wood.

Chalmers serves as chorus master, is also artist-in-residence at the Church of the Transfiguration, and has two singing roles in the performance – there are more than four-dozen individual roles. He was part of GDC’s 2005 presentation of the opera as well – “although the only thing that’s similar is that we’re doing the same opera,” he says.

It’s quite a production: a 40-person cast, a chorus of 60, a full orchestra – and almost 300 costumes. The Church of the Transfiguration will be transformed – “we’re turning it 90 degrees,” Chalmers says, with the stage running the length of the main aisle, the audience seated in risers. “This way we can use all the

dimensions of the church,” he says.

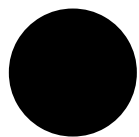
GDC artistic director Richard K. Pugsley sings the role of Pilgrim. Danielle Dwyer directs, and James Jordan conducts the orchestra. Projections that accompany the narrative were designed by Katy Tucker, and additional vocal soloists include bass-baritone Andrew Nolen, soprano Martha Guth and tenor Aaron Sheehan.

Stagings of “The Pilgrim’s Progress” are rare: GDC’s 2005 production was the New England premiere, and perhaps the last complete presentation of the work in the country. This performance is the featured artistic event in an international symposium commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation – and approximately the 500th anniversary of Bunyan’s allegorical novel.

“I think this work is relatable to any period in time,” Chalmers says, “but it’s not necessarily pertinent to this particular time. Vaughan Williams did want to create the story of Everyman. He spent 45 years toying with scenes, with the text, with how to portray different parts of the story.

“There’s actually five choruses in the piece, and they are very different. I would say we’ve been working on this close to a year and a half, between learning the music to a fare-thee-well, and starting to create characters.

“The chorus are very much characters in the story. We’ve spent lots of times making personal backstories for each of the scenes. I think you are seeing a vivid slice of life, a slice of reality.”



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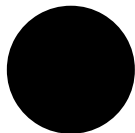
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