

Musical Landscape

BILLY BUDD SAILOR GALA

Storytelling, across lives and generations, at core of 'Billy Budd' concert

Melville readings and arias from Britten opera to mark novella's 100th anniversary at gala fundraiser

By EVAN BERKOWITZ
The Berkshire Eagle

LENOX — When Leonard Bernstein, age 27, gave "Peter Grimes" its American premiere at Tanglewood, The Eagle wrote that he led Benjamin Britten's seaside opera with a "heroic and dependable beat" that was already his trademark. Nearly a half-century later, in the last concert before he died at 72, Bernstein returned to the opera's sea interludes racked by lung disease and channeling music that, wrote Andrew Pincus, "from the icy violins' premonitions ... to the savagery of the storm at the end, ... was slow and full of pain."

Leading Britten's music, commissioned by his mentor Serge Koussevitzky, on the grounds where he'd led his first outing on this side of the churning sea, "history seemed to sustain him," Pincus wrote.

Britten's ties to Berkshires are already deep — another of his operas, "Albert Herring," had its U.S. premiere at Tanglewood, too, as did his vocal concert work "War Requiem." Via his opera "Billy Budd," which took its action from a coastal town to the isolation of a naval frigate under sail, Britten is tied to its original author, one of the Berkshires' most celebrated: Herman Melville.

Berkshire Opera Festival, Berkshire County Historical Society and Tanglewood Learning Institute are coming together to explore those ties in Billy Budd, Sailor Gala, a fundraiser benefiting the Berkshire County Historical Society and Arrowhead at the Linde Center for Music and Learning. The evening of arias and readings from both Billy Budds will toast the novella's 100th anniversary. The gala, 7 p.m. Sept. 20, will be followed by cocktails and desserts by Gourmet Caterers. Tickets are \$100 and can be purchased online at berkshirehistory.org.

It's the sparkling core of a yearlong celebration that, across lives and generations, explores storytelling — whether fresh and heroic or tempered by pain and time.

The historical society had long wanted to involve Britten's opera in its celebrations, and for BOF, it's the second collaboration this year with a guardian of the county's literary heritage.

"[With] Melville and [Edith] Wharton, being able to connect with them in the same year is really exciting," said BOF spokesman Tyson Traynor, referencing the opera festival's workshop performance of "The Reef," a new opera based on Wharton's novel. "These opportunities are rare. ... We want to seize them when they happen."

For a work like "Billy Budd," which, owing to its place in the repertoire and its large, all-male cast, would make an unlikely BOF mainstage production, a concert "seemed like a no-brainer," Traynor said.

FROM BREADBOX TO BRITTEN
To borrow Mr. Pincus'



PHOTOS VIA BERKSHIRE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Baritone Markel Reed, top left, and tenor Colin Aikins, top right, will sing arias of Billy and Captain Vere, respectively, during a gala concert of selections from "Billy Budd," accompanied by Noah Palmer, bottom left, on piano. Up-and-coming conductor Luca Antonucci, bottom center, will host the event, which will also feature readings from the novella by actor Ryan Winkles, bottom right.

words, there was certainly a lot of history sustaining Melville, too.

"Billy Budd" was written in the last five years of Melville's life, "drawing upon something that had been a part of his younger years, being at sea, and something that had been successful for him as a writer in the past," said Lesley Herzberg, executive director of the Berkshire County Historical Society, during an interview at Arrowhead, Melville's Pittsfield home. "Revisiting those in his later years, it was nostalgia."

The resulting story is rather bleaker than his early South Seas adventures, and as for comparison with his hit "Moby-Dick," "Billy Budd" was very nearly read by no one.

It was his granddaughter, Eleanor Melville Metcalf, who discovered the manuscript stashed in a breadbox and shepherded it to publication in 1924.

"Eleanor, she knew her grandfather, and he was famous for telling her stories, and so they shared this wonderful relationship," Herzberg said.

The historical society will channel that spirit with oral history events at Arrowhead, Nov. 16, and at the Berkshire Athenaeum, Dec. 7, letting families preserve multigenerational stories that might otherwise get forgotten in life's breadbox. (You can see the actual breadbox in an Athenaeum exhibit, by the way.)

Earlier, there was a marathon reading and a new I.P.A.

from Hot Plate Brewing Co. called "Handsome Sailor," and BCHS will screen Peter Ustinov's film version at the Beacon Cinema on Nov. 13. A new audiobook of "Billy Budd" read by Oscar-nominated actor Paul Giamatti is recorded and coming soon.

Berkshire Cider Project will debut a limited-release cider at the gala, pressed from Arrowhead's apples. Actor Ryan Winkles will narrate the readings, with emcee Luca Antonucci and Noah Palmer on piano.

FROM THE MET TO MELVILLE

Details on weaving the narratives together are still being worked out — the opera's framing device, with a libretto by Eric Crozier and author E.M. Forster, doesn't quite match the novella's slow-burn worldbuilding. But the focus is on a cohesive story "in music and words," Herzberg said.

"People really respond to Melville and the themes that they find there," she said, "whether that be spiritual, the themes of the natural world, themes of humanity

[or] themes of a multicultural world that Melville created very early on."

For Markel Reed, the Metropolitan Opera and Berkshire Opera Festival alumnus who will sing two of Billy's arias at the event, it's an opportunity to add his own story to this wave-tossed tale.

"Even with stories that have been told over and over again, there is still something that a specific individual can bring," Reed told The Eagle by phone from New York. "As a Black man telling the story, I inherently am going to bring a different kind of nuance to being wrongfully accused and convicted ... and then put to death and finding some way of resolving it for myself before my end."

That's the driving plot of "Billy Budd": Press-ganged into Royal Navy service, the naive, stuttering adonis finds an immediate antagonist in master-at-arms Claggart, who falsely alleges Budd to be a mutineer. Angry and unable to find the words to defend himself, Billy inadvertently strikes Claggart dead.

As Captain Vere (sung by tenor Colin Aikins) convenes a court martial, he must choose between condemning a popular crewmate on a specious charge or risking the breakdown of order should an exception be made.

"I think it actually makes it a bit realer and closer to the times that we're in," said Reed, who sang in "The Reef" and made his Tanglewood debut this year. "As a storyteller in this body, in this mind, and of course with my voice, I get that unique opportunity of showing this audience something that they've probably not seen much of, with the same words that were written by and for someone that didn't look like me."

Evan Berkowitz is The Eagle's page one design editor, and also covers opera. Reach him at eberkowitz@berkshireeagle.com.

If You Go

Billy Budd, Sailor Gala

What: A benefit for Berkshire County Historical Society and Herman Melville's Arrowhead, featuring selections from the opera "Billy Budd, Sailor," with paired readings from the classic novella. Desserts and cocktails by Gourmet Caterers follow the performance

With: Markel Reed, Colin Aikins, Ryan Winkles, Luca Antonucci and Noah Palmer

When: 7 p.m. Sept. 20

Where: Linde Center for Music and Learning, Tanglewood, 3 West Hawthorne Road, Lenox

Tickets: \$100

Information and reservations: berkshirehistory.org

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