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Navajo ritual sparks unusual oratorio

Utah premiere » Utah concert will convey the healing power of the Enemy Way ceremony.

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Navajo soldiers brought up according to tradition often ask that a Blessing Way ceremony be performed before they head to the Middle East for military service. But when a Navajo soldier returns from battle traumatized, stronger medicine is required. For him, the Enemy Way is sung -- a ceremony for healing broken spirits and restoring balance to shattered psyches.

The story of such a man is at the heart of composer Mark Grey's "Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio," commissioned for a 2007 performance of the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. "Enemy Slayer" will receive its Utah premiere Saturday when Brady Allred conducts the Salt Lake Choral Artists in a Libby Gardner Hall performance. The composer and librettist will be present to discuss their unusual work.

Navajo religious rites are an unexpected subject for oratorio -- a classical music form similar to opera, but performed without costumes and scenery. Storylines usually come from the Bible, or classical mythology.

"Enemy Slayer" bends those expectations in surprising ways. Grey means his oratorio to be a musical work of contemporary relevance, taking inspiration from a Native American creation stories and ceremonies without trivializing them.

Before Grey began composing, he convened a group of Navajo elders tasked with teaching him -- a *belagana*, or white man -- how to convey aspects of Navajo ceremonies in an art work without violating their sacredness. With their blessing, he enlisted Navajo poet Laura Tohe to write a libretto that captures the spirit -- though not the actuality -- of the Enemy Way ceremony.

"It would be wrong and inappropriate for me or anyone else to take the Enemy Way out of its ceremonial context literally," said Tohe, an English professor at Arizona State University.

Instead of translating the ceremony directly, Tohe wove threads of its philosophy into a story of the negative impact war's violence has upon veterans and their families, and her culture's traditional way of healing such ills.

The central figure of the story is Seeker, a disillusioned soldier returning to the Southwest after seeing his cousin killed in a Middle Eastern battle. The two soldiers correspond to The Twins of the Navajo creation legend, who must be restored to spiritual health after killing the monsters that threaten their world. The solo role is written for a baritone, and will be sung by Gary Sorenson in SLCA's production.

The SLCA choir, 200-strong, operates in the manner of a Greek chorus during the oratorio, Grey said -- providing commentary on the action of the story as a representation of Seeker's community.

In the work's depiction of the ceremony, "the baritone -- the patient -- is being healed through prayer and songs, and the coming together of the whole extended family," Tohe said. "The chorus is the family and community that are there for the patient. The oratorio works on that ceremonial healing level, too."

Grey found an intriguing duality in the Seeker's splintered psyche, and represented it through musical means. "He has been praying as a warrior to go overseas and fight wars," Grey said, "but when he comes back, he has to deal with his own inner demons."

In that battle, the chorus embodies the essence of Navajo culture -- family, community and the Holy People of Navajo tradition. "They give the Seeker the tools to slay his own inner monsters," Grey said. "Eventually, he does, and is able to cleanse himself."

Grey avoided direct quotations of Native American music in his composition, and took pains not to pen a Hollywood-style version of "Indian" music. "I believe the music of indigenous people is created for a reason, and that is ceremony," Grey said. "Quoting something out of that is taking away from what that is."

Instead, he evokes his subject in subtler ways, such as occasional use of bells, shakers and drums, and certain rhythmic and harmonic aspects of traditional Navajo music.

Allred said Grey's music is beautiful and colorful, but difficult to sing and play. Seeker's off-kilter mental state early in the oratorio is depicted by pitting orchestra and chorus against each other through use of bi-tonality: the choir sings in one key, the orchestra plays in another. "As Seeker finds his way back, and finds peace, the music becomes more and more tonal," Allred said. "It's a very effective use of harmonic language to bring out the drama in the piece."

The dramatic tension in "Enemy Slayer" resolves as chorus and soloist unite in a single tonality when Seeker's troubled soul is healed. He is left in a state of profound peace that is meant to spill over to the oratorio's audience.

Such is the purpose of the Enemy Way ceremony, Tohe said -- to restore the patient to a state of hozho -- a Navajo word that has no exact synonym in the English language. "It's to arrive at a state of beauty," Tohe said. "That state of beauty that has to do with peace, harmony, balance and restoration."

"May there be hozho all around us

May there be beauty all around

May there be peace all around

on earth,

on earth

Let peace prevail"

Laura Tohe