Paul Moravec makes America’s past sing

The composer and University Professor Paul Moravec, D.M.A., has devoted his life to music, but he has another passion as well: history. Throughout his career, he’s found a way to bring the two disciplines together, frequently composing works based on events or texts from America’s past. His latest, Sanctuary Road, commissioned by the Overtone Society of New York, premiered this spring on May 7 at Carnegie Hall.

“It’s a historical oratorio based on the memoir of William Still, a conductor on the Underground Railroad,” he said. “Mark Campbell, a librettist I work with, suggested it as a source. We wrote a splendid libretto based on the historical record.”

Still’s memoir, The Underground Railroad, was published in 1872, and it is filled with testimony from fugitive slaves he helped deliver to freedom. Five soloists bring to life the stories of Still and several of the Fugitives, backed by an orchestra and a chorus that comments on the stories and occasionally serves as dramatic participants.

“I have long considered the Underground Railroad an especially inspiring and fascinating subject for music-dramatic treatment,” Dr. Moravec wrote for the Carnegie Hall program. “The epic nature of this historical saga brings to mind the Old Testament oratorios of Handel and the passions of Bach. Along these lines, when William Still narrates the death struggles of slaves in their efforts of freedom, his role is similar to that of Bach’s Evangelists.”

Dr. Moravec considers William Still a fascinating subject. “One, that, surprisingly, has yet to be explored in a copiously informative, full-length biography. Still’s father was a slave who had bought his freedom; his mother had escaped slavery only after a failed attempt, and he had siblings who remained—and died—in servitude. A staunch abolitionist, he was a prominent leader of Philadelphia’s African American community.

“Mr. Still has an amazing life story, so someone will eventually write his biography.” Dr. Moravec said. “I hope Sanctuary Road might in some small way help make this happen by bringing his name to wider attention.”

Dr. Moravec is now putting the final touches on another history-based work, a song cycle inspired by the poet Ted Koosre’s eponymous book, dramatizes the great blizzard of 1888 that killed thousands on the Great Plains; it premiered at Omaha Opera in 2008. Six years earlier, he wrote the cantata Spirit to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight, which originated at Roosevelt Field on Long Island. When the students of Garden City High School, it was based on the pilot’s memoir. Dr. Moravec’s songs of love and war, a cantata that sets to music letters written to and from soldiers fighting in the Civil War, both World Wars and Vietnam, was first performed in 1997.

American history and writers are his only muses, though. His best-known work, Tempest Fantasy, was inspired by the Shakespeare play. Premiered at the Morgan Library in New York City in a performance by Adele’s ensemble, it won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2004.

The Pulitzer Prize is one of many honors Dr. Moravec has received. He has won a Rome Prize Fellowship from the American Academy in Rome, a Guggenheim Fellowship, three awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation. He has served as artist-in-residence at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and he was elected to membership in the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in 2010.

In many ways, history is a wholly natural inspiration and subject for a composer. As Dr. Moravec explained, music and history share an inseparable bond. “Time is the medium of music and memory is the mediator,” he wrote in the Sanctuary Road program. “In its sublime, mysterious way, music remembers.”

“Composing the music for this oratorio,” he continued, “I was guided by my own experiences, the spirit and events of this extraordinary chapter in American history. As William Still sings about the slaves he aided on their road to freedom, their testimony will never be forgotten.”

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