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'Amelia': Seattle Opera embraces challenge on a grand scale

By Marc Ramirez
Seattle Times staff reporter

The set, loosely visualized in a basketball-gym-sized rehearsal space, evokes a 1980s-era North Vietnamese village. Onstage, through an interpreter, a man and wife tell a young American woman — the title character of Seattle Opera's production of "Amelia" — what happened to her father years earlier.

Nearly every line of dialogue is delivered in operatic song as they recall the memory, acted out in flashback onstage as the mood and music intensify. What makes the dialogue notable is that most of it is delivered in Vietnamese.

"Amelia," which plays through May 22 at McCaw Hall, is believed to be the first major U.S. opera production to feature the Southeast Asian language.

"As far as I know, the Vietnamese language has never been set to music by an opera composer anywhere," composer Daron Aric Hagen said.

For Hagen, that presented a puzzle: Aligning the work's melodies with the lyrics of a tonal language in which *how* a word is spoken can define its meaning. A flat syllable can mean one thing, while a rising or falling one can mean another.

This also presented difficulties when it came to the roles of Vietnamese villagers and soldiers, as none of the actors knew the language beforehand.

"It's a challenge," said Filipino actor Karl Marx Reyes, who plays the role of a truculent village official. "I had no idea how precise and expressive the Vietnamese



The Seattle Opera's production of "Amelia" features singing in Vietnamese — a prospect that presented many challenges for its composer and actors. Here, Luretta Bybee (who portrays Amanda, Amelia's mother) kneels during a flashback scene set in Vietnam.



JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Language coach Cay Bach, right, offers advice to Gary del Rosario, who portrays a North Vietnamese soldier.



JIM BATES / THE SEATTLE TIMES
In "Amelia," a young woman grapples with the loss of her father, a Navy pilot who disappeared in Vietnam. From left:

language is. In Italian, you're taught to sing the vowels purely â€" but with Vietnamese, there are nuances."

To help them negotiate that challenge, the Seattle Opera recruited dialect coach Cay Bach, a trained musician who interprets in Vietnamese and French for the state's Department of Social and Health Services.

The small but intense Bach provided a sage and significant presence throughout production preparations, compiling Vietnamese-language CDs early on for actors who would be singing in an unfamiliar tongue and then working with them daily at rehearsals to keep them on pitch. Even as they'd exit rehearsed scenes, he'd pull them aside to correct mistakes or offer advice.

"He's relentless," Reyes said.

Opera singers, of course, are used to singing in foreign languages, with most productions conducted in European tongues, mostly Italian. The Seattle Opera has done works in Czech, Hungarian, even Russian. "This is just business as usual," Hagen said. "Just a little weirder."

Not so easy

Six years ago, when Seattle Opera general director Speight Jenkins approached him about the prospect of penning a new production for the opera, Hagen pitched several ideas. Jenkins bit on "Amelia," which offered flight as a metaphor for the human condition.

To write the libretto, Hagen volunteered poet and longtime friend Gardner McFall, whose father, a Navy pilot, had disappeared during the Vietnam War. With the help of director Stephen Wadsworth, Hagen and McFall collaborated on a work that roughly mirrors McFall's story, which is the tale of a young woman, a mother to be, coming to grips with the loss of her father.

For authenticity's sake, they chose to incorporate Vietnamese into the scene in which Amelia and her mother visit the village in search of details behind her father's disappearance.

"It's the cultural, respectful and honorable thing to do, if one is going to have foreign characters," Hagen said.

It was easier conceived than done.

Hagen enlisted the help of a concert pianist he knew who spoke Vietnamese, and the pair sat at the piano and made sure Hagen's melodies matched the tonal shifts of the lyrics. "It was the hardest technical challenge I've ever faced as a composer," he said.

The result is a grueling depiction of wartime drama: The wounded American pilot, pursued by Vietnamese soldiers, finds brief refuge in a young couple's hut. Villagers scurry in panic as men armed with rifles rush the scene. *Where is the American? Who's aiding the enemy?*

He's rooted out of hiding, beaten and interrogated at gunpoint by an official. A villager is threatened with death unless he cooperates.

Karen Vuong (Trang), Loretta Bybee (Amanda) and Kate Lindsey (Amelia).

'Amelia'

Through May 22
By composer Daron Aric Hagen and librettist Gardner McFall. Story by director Stephen Wadsworth.

Where: At Seattle's McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer St.

Tickets: \$25-\$168, at 206-389-7676 or www.seattleopera.org

"It's really quite harrowing," Hagen said, particularly for those too young to remember the conflict. Director Wadsworth had to help the scene's child actors wrap their minds around it.

It's also a well-populated scene, featuring nine principal actors and 20 extras. Although Amelia, her mother and the interpreter sing in English, most singing parts are in the other language.

"Anybody with a gun has to sing in Vietnamese," noted Jonathan Dean, Seattle Opera's director of public programs and media.

For actors accustomed to emoting in English and European languages, that wasn't easy.

"We're out there as soldiers, trying to be all tough," said Japanese-American actor Monty Carter. But he and others were thrown off by Vietnamese pronunciation that called for the last word of a sentence to be said in, for instance, a rising tone, when their expressions of intimidation or anger in English would be delivered in a forcefully downward tone — or, at the very least, flatly.

"That's hard, in the heat of the moment, to pick that up," Carter said.

Keep calm

Bach had them practice delivering lyrics in a calmer voice. "When they're stressed, they keep making mistakes," he said.

Each practiced in his own way. Korean-born Masaop Kim took his lines to a Vietnamese restaurant and asked the chef to say them for him, while Karen Vuong, who plays the female half of the village couple, practiced with her Vietnam-born parents, who are ethnically Chinese.

Vuong's involvement in the production has tickled her parents to no end. "Every time I was on the phone," she said, "my mom would say, 'OK, sing me your lines!'"

They also helped with pronunciation. "It's important to get the diction correct," she said, noting one example in which a word said a certain way — with two syllables that are vowels at the end — means "daughter," but drop the last syllable and it translates as "chicken."

The goal, she said, is to find a balance between Western singing and Eastern language. One day, it just clicks. "You have to drill and drill," she said. "... Once you figure it out, Vietnamese ends up being a very musical language."

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We will tweet the Amelia libretto on this account, the first week of May.

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