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Creating an opera

Workshop process allows public input on new work based on Hamlet

Posted By **Bonnie Richardson, For The Beacon Herald**

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Joseph Schnurr sings during rehearsals Thursday for the opera based on Hamlet, which will be presented at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church Saturday at 2 p.m. as part of Stratford Summer Music. SCOTT WISHART/The Beacon Herald

Local residents will have a rare opportunity tomorrow to experience an operatic workshop and to be part of the creative process. Stratford Summer Music is presenting a free "concert reading" of a full-length opera based on Shakespeare's Hamlet at 2 p.m. at St. Andrew's Church. Toronto-born composer Mark Richards wrote the ambitious project in five summers from 2004-08. It is being presented by a "stellar group of young musicians."

"Their work this week, together with Saturday's performance, will allow the composer to hear his work performed. T his is an important step along the road to the final product," said John Miller, artistic producer of Stratford Summer Music.

The company has been rehearsing at Stratford Central Secondary School all week. Each component, the chorus, the orchestra and the soloists, has been working independently in their own space since Monday. Thursday afternoon was the "sitz probe," the first time all three groups worked together.

Musical director Wesley Ferreira, a professor at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., said he has enjoyed working with this company.

"It has been a productive week. Everyone seems to be on the same page musically and the atmosphere has been very collegial. We all share a commitment to showcase the quality and integrity of this piece. "

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Joseph Schnurr, a graduate of Wilfrid Laurier University who currently lives in Germany plays the role of Hamlet. "It is wonderful to be part of creating something new. Our comments and suggestions can be communicated directly to the composer and integrated into the final version."

"One evening this week, Mark, Wesley, an accompanist and myself gathered at the home where I am billeted, working with four slightly different presentations for Hamlet's line 'And now I'll do it.' In the end we all agreed that we should use the fourth one."

Mr. Richards has described his musical style as "tonal with a bite."

"I use the traditional material that would have been familiar to the 19th-century listener and apply my own techniques to reinvent it for the 21st century."

"I was warned not to practise music in the bedroom," said Mr. Ferreira, "or it would end up in my dreams. Mark's music is so beautiful that I seem to always have his melodies in my mind."

"He has even been spotted in his room at night," added Joseph Schnurr, "waving his arms at the wall, still conducting the long-departed orchestra."

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Mr. Richards adapted the libretto using as much of Shakespeare's text as possible. He also found, or created, several opportunities for ensemble pieces to give variety to the work.

The ensemble work is performed in part by a chorus of singers from the Stratford area. Mary Lou Kingham welcomed the challenge of being part of this production.

"The workshop process is intense, with a lot to learn in a short time."

Holding down the bass section will be the Riedstras, father and son. Performing alongside professional singers has been "a fun and interesting experience" for Lutzen Jr.

"This is an opportunity to concentrate for a short period of time on something that is new to all of us," added his father. "Everyone is focused on doing a good job and interested to see how all of the pieces will work together."

The unique opportunity to influence a work before it has its world premiere will be shared with the members of the public who attend the workshop performance tomorrow. At the conclusion of the performance the audience will be invited to participate in a discussion led by the composer and other members of the company.

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