

Programme Notes

I can think of no better précis for Ben Jonson's 1606 satire *Volpone* than his own acrostic, which prefaced the play:

V olpone, childless, rich, feigns sick, despairs,
O ffers his state to hopes of several heirs,
L ies languishing; his parasite receives
P resents of all, assures, deludes; then weaves
O ther cross-plots, which ope' themselves, are told.
N ew tricks for safety are sought; they thrive; when, bold,
E ach tempts th'other again, and all are sold.

Caveat for Ben Jonson scholars: librettist Mark Campbell was careful to append to the title "An opera in two acts unfaithfully based on Ben Jonson's comedy." It is a longstanding tradition for opera librettists to take the adaptive liberties necessary to translate a stage play into this particular art form, and this libretto is as much Mark's creation as Ben Jonson's. The main plot has been re-imagined, subplots and characters jettisoned, one character created, one even transgendered for the sake of having another female voice in the ensemble: music and theater follow different rules. Yet the libretto does adhere to Jonson's original promise to present "deeds, and language, such as men do use." Though utilizing a tightly controlled rhyme scheme, the characters speak to us in an utterly natural and colloquial way. The structure is a model of concision: a composer couldn't ask for a better libretto.

Volpone is a story about greed, lust, betrayal, sanctimony, subterfuge, (all of which are as much with us now as in 1606) but above all, about obsession – and when competing obsessions collide (and no one dies) we have comedy.

When Kim Witman approached me in 2001, to write an opera for *Wolf Trap*, I immediately thought of composing a comedy – to my knowledge, no one was writing them. It seemed that while high-flown tragedies and iconic heroes were the currency in opera houses, comedy had been relegated to the Broadway stage. My own operatic exposure was heavily tilted toward the comedies – *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Falstaff* in particular, since my wife was engaged frequently to appear in those works. It was the rehearsal process that intrigued me – the relish the cast took in experimenting, pushing things to the limit, looking for maximum humor, yet always exercising the discipline of never going too far. The old sayings are quite true: comedy is hard, and timing is everything. And writing comedy is like assembling a ship in a bottle: the law of set-up and punch line, like the law of gravity, cannot be ignored. In the end, an audience can give a warm round of applause at the close of a tragedy, and the composer and librettist can go home satisfied. With a comedy, if the audience isn't laughing throughout, you haven't written a comedy. And that's not to say it's only about laughter – the best comedies can be deadly serious.

All that said, first and foremost in our minds, was to furnish the audience with an engaging evening in the theater. We offer *Volpone* in the hope we accomplished that.

- John Musto

Although it's the text in a comic opera that usually gets the laughs (a few musical jokes aside), an audience won't even snicker politely at the best line if the composer sets it awkwardly, or overwrites it, or—and this happens—imposes his or her own musical dogma on a story. John Musto does none of those things. He remains true to his musical voice, tells the story, delineates characters, and creates melodies of such force and wit and with such economy, I feel that every laugh we earn is shared. Further his music sparkles with ingenuity; every time I hear the score—and it has been often—I hear something new.

A word about the adaptation: Ben Jonson wrote some of the most beautiful language that ever graced the stage in his *Volpone*. You won't hear that in ours. If Ben Jonson's play were set word for word by a composer, the opera would be at least 6 hours long. We're more humane than that. In preparing the libretto, I de-poeticized the language, reduced five acts to two, excised a subplot, changed the gender of a few characters (we needed more female voices) and added a new character, Erminella, to humanize the story a bit. That's why I refer to it as an "unfaithfully fashioned" adaptation.

In closing, many thanks to McGill University for giving *Volpone* its Canadian premiere.

- Mark Campbell, December 2012