

The Canticle of the Black Madonna

COMPOSER

Ethan Gans-Morse

LIBRETTO

Tiziana DellaRovere

Fast Facts

Professional Premiere: Newmark Theatre, Portland OR, September 5 & 6, 2014
Stage Director, Kristine McIntyre

Workshop Premiere: University of Oregon School of Music, February, 2013

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What is *The Canticle of the Black Madonna*?

The Canticle of the Black Madonna is a new opera based on an original story by librettist Tiziana DellaRovere. It follows a fictional American soldier returning home to his wife in coastal Louisiana in 2010 and the challenges of combat-related PTSD that afflict both characters while they simultaneously face a radically-changed economy and a loss of their traditional way of life in the aftermath of the Gulf Oil Spill. I was extremely fortunate to have a creative partner on the level of Tiziana, whose work offers everything a composer could ever dream of: psychologically rich, three-dimensional characters, a story of deep emotional redemption, and a kind of humanity and spirituality that make the piece appealing to a very wide audience.



Principal cast members of The Canticle of the Black Madonna

What makes this work so unique?

The Canticle of the Black Madonna is a stunning collision of two worlds. As a contemporary opera, it tells a story that is timely, relevant, and emotionally gripping, even for audiences that are not accustomed to attending classical opera. But it also integrates elements of sacred oratorio, healing ritual, and Jungian psychodrama through the introduction of the Black Madonna, two angels, and a Greek chorus as on-stage characters who inspire the protagonists without ever directly interacting with them. In this richly textured combination of artistic, psychological, and spiritual components, this work seeks to unlock the full potential that opera carries to be at once artistically entertaining, emotionally stirring, psychologically healing, and spiritually inspiring.

Who is the Black Madonna, and why does she appear in a story about an American soldier?

The title character of this opera is not intended to be a representation of the Virgin Mary or as any representation of the Catholic faith. Rather, the opera employs longstanding icons of faith and mysticism which have been firmly established in European musical tradition in order to dramatize the experience of a perfect mother-love that comes to us in our moments of greatest pain and despair, regardless of our religious convictions or lack thereof.

In fact the Black Madonna is the Christian expression of an ancient tradition of potent mother goddesses, such as Isis, Cybele, and Demeter. Not merely limited to their roles and depictions in religious scripture, these Black Madonnas are all incarnations of a single, powerful archetype. In this sense, the “Black Madonna” is the all-powerful, all-present divine love of the Universal Mother who gives us inner strength to persevere through our greatest hardships, nurtures us when we lose hope, and dries our tears when we are inconsolable.

While psychology has much to offer trauma survivors, it is the living experience of this love that enables them to feel whole again. And while many of us are spared the life-shattering traumas experienced by survivors of war, we all share a deep and often repressed craving for this Dark Mother to inhabit us in the midst of our pain and guilt in order to restore our sense of goodness and our sense of belonging to the larger, all-loving family of humanity.



The Black Madonna

Why did you choose a “high art” form such as opera to address such a real-world crisis like combat-related PTSD?

Tiziana and I consider the arts to be one of the most powerful ways to create vivid, human experiences and to bring about tangible, lasting healing. The arts circumvent our conscious, linear minds and speak directly to the collective archetypes that motivate us. When you watch a movie about a hero, whether it is a fictional character such as Luke Skywalker, a mythical figure such as Hercules, or a historical person such as Gandhi, the sense of excitement, inspiration, and power that such an experience evokes within you is more than entertainment: It is the activation of that warrior archetype within you, the call to act for the greater good of humanity, even at the greatest expenses of hardship, failure, pain, and overwhelming obstacles.



Adam and John

The renowned scholar Joseph Campbell established that in their healthiest forms, these archetypes motivate our greatest acts of human strength, creativity, and compassion; however, these archetypes can also become wounded, neglected, and distorted. When a culture outgrows its archetypes, fails to keep them modern, relevant, fresh, and vibrant, then the culture suffers an immense collective wound. In the case of modern warfare, we are enthralled with an ancient heroic archetype that can no longer be achieved through the mechanized, scorched-earth wars we suffer from today. Children grow up with toy guns, soldiers, and video games that give them a sense of strength, power, and importance. But the reality is that modern war—unlike the tribal or mythical wars of centuries long-gone—relies of high-tech weapons that are often operated over long distances and kill soldiers,

Why did you choose a “high art” form such as opera to address such a real-world crisis like combat-related PTSD? (continued)

civilians, and the local ecology with equal disinterest. Soldiers have long derived purpose and meaning from meeting and testing their skill against adversaries on the field of battle, but today’s battlefields are often highly impersonal and random. Someone pushes a button in Nevada and twenty people die in Afghanistan. A soldier guides a bomb that wipes a host of enemies and a week later he’s home on leave for the holidays, trying to act like nothing happened.

So, more than ever, we need the “high arts” to reconnect soldiers and civilians alike with the human condition, with the epic truths of life and death, and with the ways that their sacrifice intersects with society. Most essentially, we need the high arts to reconnect combat soldiers and the civilian community with the war that’s fought within, because that’s the war that keeps raging long after cease-fires and truces and lines in the sand have been drawn.



Adam and Mara

Would you consider *The Canticle of the Black Madonna* to be a “sacred opera?”

The opera does feature the Black Madonna and two angels, and these are spiritual entities who share the stage with yet remain invisible to the modern characters. But it is not the inclusion of spiritual characters nor their commentary on the protagonists’ actions that make *The Canticle* a sacred opera, but rather something far more subjective, and that is the effect that the piece is intended to have on the audience.

Opera can do more than merely narrate the spiritual transformation of a character. Indeed, opera can also activate such spiritual transformation within audience members, turning them from passive spectators into engaged participants in a powerful psychodrama. These engaged spectators both witness the emotional healing of the characters and actually undergo the same healing themselves. It is through this healing capacity, this identification and transformation of a wound in the collective experience of contemporary American society, that we define *The Canticle of the Black Madonna* as a sacred opera.

We were fortunate to receive a very profound and stirring letter from Vietnam combat veteran and Silver Star recipient Bill Ritch, who defined the sacred nature of this opera perfectly:

*I believe *The Canticle of the Black Madonna* reveals a path to inner peace through feminine love for all who have experienced trauma in their lives. This path is revealed through the power of music, a power, perhaps the only power, that can reach into the depths of one’s heart, the depths of one’s soul.*

*Here lies the true gift of *The Canticle*—sharing the healing experience of love through the beauty and power of music. It opened my heart and brought new healing to me, 44 years after I returned from Vietnam.*

Have other combat veterans seen the opera? What has been their response?

Their response has been enthusiastic beyond our expectations. They've been deeply touched. Here's how they've explained it to us: When soldiers return home from combat, their first instinct is to isolate themselves. Over time, they push away even their closest family and loved ones. There are a variety of reasons for this—some feel numb after leaving their “larger-than-life” combat experience that everyday civilian life can't compete with, some feel that they will always be misunderstood if they try to describe the complexities of combat, some feel responsible for the loss of soldiers who were closer than family, and some feel wrongly judged by civilians—but regardless of the individual reason, it's a common phenomenon, and a tragic phenomenon because isolation is often the first step in a path that leads to suicide. CNN recently reported that veterans may be killing themselves at a rate of more than 20 suicides per day, or approximately one suicide every 65 minutes.

When veterans are exposed to a piece of art like *The Canticle of the Black Madonna*, and they enter into the ceremonial world of the opera house and mix in with a civilian audience, they get to see their own story, their own lives, their own selves reflecting back from the stage, and the power of the music and the narrative sweeps them into a shared experience of grief and exaltation that makes them momentarily one with the civilian community. For at least that one moment, they're not alone; they have a shared bond with the human condition, and they have hope for a better life. That's what happens to the fictional soldier in the story, Adam. He faces his own demons and ultimately finds redemption in the love of his wife, Mara, who learns to embody the love of the Black Madonna. And when the soldiers and civilians go through that healing ritual with Adam and Mara, they feel that there has been a reconciliation and healing within their souls, and that they too deserve to be loved.

It seems that PTSD is a very important subject for you. Have you been touched by it personally?

Tiziana's father was a career officer in the Italian Air Force and a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, and he retired as a General. He was a courageous man with a loving, caring nature, but because of his war traumas, he subjected his family to the kinds of inexplicable outbursts of violent rage that only today are properly understood and diagnosed as PTSD. Tiziana spent decades healing and coming to terms with her own symptoms of secondary PTSD; because she has traveled that path herself, she feels very deeply and personally touched by today's epidemic of PTSD and post-combat suicides. In particular, she suffered because there was no knowledge or treatment of PTSD in her father's generation; she wrote this libretto not only for the veterans in memory of her father, but also because she wanted civilians to understand and identify the symptoms so they could offer to veterans and their families the support that she and her family never received. In fact, the veterans have been the first to recognize the significance that we—as civilians—were creating a bold, new work of art with the goal of reaching out to veterans, bridging the gap, and bringing them into the healing experience of the arts.

It cannot be overemphasized that the successful treatment of PTSD depends not only on the treatment and willpower of each afflicted veteran, but also on the response of the local community and on the attitudes of the entire nation toward its wounded soldiers. Histories and folklore of nearly all cultures around the globe, particularly the warrior cultures of the Native Americans, Celts, and West Africans, emphasize the importance of The Return, that pivotal moment when a warrior comes home from battle and is received by family, tribe, and nation. Historically, The Return was marked by greatly-anticipated rituals, in which the warrior's story was told in epic verse, song, dance, and theater, and the warrior's community gathered to shower the warrior with appreciation and honor. This relationship between the combatant and his or her community, which was invariably grateful for the sacrifices and protection afforded by its warriors, enabled the entire tribe or nation to assume the burden of war, to collectively shoulder the pain of its many traumas, to validate the sacrifices of its soldiers, and to give the warrior a new identity as a guardian and protector during peace times.

The Canticle of the Black Madonna develops the theme of The Return in a way that is very healing for both veteran and civilian audiences.

What can civilians do to help veterans?

We believe that we, as a nation, have failed in our duties to our soldiers, and that this failure has wrought devastating consequences on our vets and on our country as a whole. By failing to provide our soldiers with an honorable forum in which to gather and be welcomed back into their larger family, we have denied them the completion of their transformation into honored warriors and guardians. We have left them alone to deal with the collective guilt and shame that we refuse take collective responsibility for in our public discourse. As a result, vets often feel like social pariahs because they become living reminders of the bitter realities of war that our larger society is unable to cope with.

The Canticle of the Black Madonna is our effort, as artists, to create a forum for both military and civilian audiences to come together and experience the healing of the warrior archetype through the sacredness of music and poetry that express the love of the Universal Mother, who welcomes her son home by restoring within him his shattered sense of his own goodness.

We realized this effort was working when we presented a workshop version of *The Canticle* at the University of Oregon in February, 2013. In order to make the opera as realistic and respectful as possible, we had worked with soldiers from an arts organization run by and for combat veterans called A Rock or Something Productions.

I'll never forget the emails I received from these soldiers after our February workshop production. One, a career Army Infantryman wrote,

*As a man who has spent his life suppressing tears it is very much a release for me to cry now, even though I still hide it from people as best I can. Your voices and words are very powerful things. I hope you all realize and understand the TRUE nature of the power you carry with this performance of *The Canticle of the Black Madonna*. You are bringing something to the public, in an unfamiliar medium, that Hollywood can't show in its true light: the true heart and soul of a family and a man shattered by war.*

Another wrote,

You honor me, and my brothers and sisters in arms, with this opera. Please know that as a combat veteran I am truly and deeply touched that you have undertaken such an elusive and misunderstood issue as combat-related PTSD in America today. I am thankful to you all for what you do, and I know my fallen friends would be as well.

Can you give an example of one of the veterans whose lives were changed by the arts?

Sean Davis is a perfect example. His army career spanned nearly 20 years and he became a Sergeant First Class in the Army Infantry before he was very nearly killed by an ambush in Iraq. He survived miraculously and was awarded the Purple Heart, but his life changed very quickly when he was forced back into civilian life. A month before, he had been leading soldiers into battle; now here he was waiting tables and trying to relate to customers who complained that their soup was too hot or their shrimp wasn't cooked right. The transition was so hard that he decided to stay continuously drunk until one day, he hoped not to wake up ever again.

Sean has told us time and time again that the arts saved his life. He is now not only a professional painter but also a professional author with a novel coming out soon. That's why he's such a passionate supporter of *The Canticle of the Black Madonna*. He is constantly telling us that this opera will save lives, just like the arts saved his life.

Can you give an example of one of the veterans whose lives were changed by the arts? (continued)

And that's why he and other soldiers have fully endorsed this project and we have created an alliance between the arts, the veteran community, and our region's social service providers.



Masks used in the *Canticle of the Black Madonna*, created by Tiziana DellaRovere

How has this experience evolved your understanding of the sacred in opera?

Art is much more than entertainment. It reconnects us with ourselves, restores our wounded self-image, and reaffirms our passion and our sense of belonging. The arts are the ideal vehicle for social change and the healing of the wounds of the world because they speak directly to the human unconscious through symbolism, ritual, and shared communal experience.

In this way, the sacred in opera is that which can speak directly to and from the wounded collective archetypes of our modern world in a way that realigns us as one family, connected both in victory and tragedy, interdependent upon each other and our natural world, and deserving of honor for the contributions each one of us offers.

We are very proud that our next production of *The Canticle of the Black Madonna* will have even more direct input from combat veterans, and that in addition to the opera itself we will be offering the veteran community a series of direct service and awareness-raising events such as art therapy, panel discussions, distinguished lectures, and psychological workshops.

All audio and images appearing in this interview are from Eugene, Oregon in February, 2013 under the musical direction of Vincent Centeno

Biographies



Composer, Ethan Gans-Morse is an award-winning composer and the Executive Director of Anima Mundi Productions. His works have been performed by numerous ensembles, including the Portland Vocal Consort (winner of the 2010 Composer Competition), the American Creators Ensemble, the Quartetto Indaco, the Fireworks Ensemble, and the Eugene Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, and his music has been presented and premiered at numerous concert series, including the Music Today Festival, the Vanguard Concert Series, the Oregon Composers Forum, the highSCORE Festival (Pavia, Italy), the Oregon Bach Festival Composers Symposium (Eugene, Oregon), the Instrumenta Oaxaca Festival (Oaxaca, Mexico), and the Ashland Winter Fine Arts Festival (Ashland, Oregon). His compositions brings together his love of Renaissance and Baroque music with his passion for new, socially relevant works of art that inspire a sense of human connection. Ethan holds a Master's degree in music composition from the University of Oregon and a Bachelor's degree in music and linguistics from Macalester College.

Librettist, Tiziana DellaRovere is an author, artist, mystical poet, and counselor who has dedicated more than three decades to the exploration of the deep psyche and the understanding of the human soul. A specialist in healing rituals, Tiziana has served as a catalyst of transformation for thousands of people through her workshops, trainings, and private practice. Born in Milan, Italy, Tiziana studied at the University of Milan (Law), the California College of Arts and Crafts (Painting and Sculpture), San Francisco State University (Clinical Psychology), and seminary at the Liberal Church of Antioch, where she was among the first women ordained as a priest. She is the author of *Adorata: The Path of Enlovement*, *The Adorata Codes of Love*, *Sacred Fire: Rites of Passage and Rituals of Worship*, and the upcoming book, *The Sacred Lovers Within*, a groundbreaking new work that harmonizes the masculine and feminine elements in the deep psyche.

The Sacred in Opera

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