

# Oratorio is a study in healing

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The cry of the shofar, or ram's horn, opens and closes the hourlong Holocaust oratorio "To Be Certain of the Dawn." In between, themes of renewal, remembrance and hope unfold in a manner that composer Stephen Paulus likens to peeling away the layers of an onion.

At its core: The message that today's children are the key to preventing atrocities like the Holocaust, or "Shoah" in Hebrew.

The oratorio, commissioned by a Catholic priest from Minneapolis as a gift of healing to the Jewish community, will have its college-campus premiere Friday at St. Cloud State University. It will be performed by a rare collaboration of the choirs and orchestras of St. Cloud State, St. John's University and College of St. Benedict. Joining them will be the children of the St. John's Boys' Choir and Cantabile Girls' Choir.

The Rev. Michael O'Connell, rector of the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis, commissioned the oratorio to convey the message that Christians must take ownership for what happened during the Shoah and teach children about it so it never happens again.

Paulus teamed with Minneapolis poet Michael Dennis Browne, who wrote the libretto, or the text, of the oratorio. The result is a triptych that first questions why no one helped when Nazis slaughtered millions of innocent Jews. It then personifies the victims of the Holocaust before reinforcing the message: "You should love your neighbor as yourself."

## The message

Paulus and Browne want audiences to be moved and changed by their work. But they are cautious about telling audiences what they should take away from the performance, which will be followed by a Saturday presentation at St. John's Abbey Church.

"When you encounter a work of art that affects you, you become what (author) Charlotte Joko Beck has called a bigger container," Browne said. "It enlarges you. It stirs up possibilities of going through life. It adds dimensions, adds rooms. You become a bigger container, you become more compassionate. You listen better or you take someone else's life more seriously."

Their work, which debuted in November 2005 at the Basilica of St. Mary and was recorded in February by the Minnesota Orchestra, is about the importance of working for healing rather than creating divisiveness.

"Some person is going to be moved to tears and another person is going to say 'I thought it was interesting.' In between, I hope the majority of the people take away an understanding of the problem, but also some empathy for it," Paulus said. "I hope they are somehow moved and think 'I shouldn't be as mean as people have been. There's a way to be a better person in many respects.'"

## Part 1: Renewal

The oratorio begins with pre-Holocaust blessings spoken by Jewish children against a backdrop of growing gloom. Its Kingdom of Night chorus addresses Christians' failure to support Jews in the 1930s and relays the outrage and panic at what was allowed to happen.

The chorus laments the lack of a response, the lack of the inner light within Christians being shined on the growing campaign against the Jews. That chorus recounts how no one helped, even though God was calling out through the mouths of the children to bring light to the problem.

"This is the task: in the darkest night to be certain of the dawn, certain of the power to turn a curse into a blessing, agony into song."

-Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, theologian, educator, philosopher, author.

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Michael Dennis Browne (left) and Stephen Paulus listen to the choir practice during a rehearsal session April 14 at Ritsche Auditorium. (Paul Middlestaedt, [pmiddlestaedt@stcloudtimes.com](mailto:pmiddlestaedt@stcloudtimes.com))

## ABOUT BROWNE AND PAULUS

### Librettist Michael Dennis Browne

Browne is an accomplished poet who has collaborated with Stephen Paulus on many works since 1977. He has taught at the University of Minnesota for the past 37 years and is a distinguished professor of English. He has twice won Minnesota Book Awards for his poetry; a collection of his essays, "What the Poem Wants," will be published next year. This year, Browne was the first Kilian McDonnell writer-in-residence at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's University. He lives in Minneapolis.

### Composer Stephen Paulus

Paulus has written more than 300 works, including more than 150 choral works and 10 operas. He became one of the Minnesota Orchestra's first composers-in-residence in the 1980s. His work has been commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Dallas Symphony and St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. He lives in St. Paul.

"There are elements of the Jewish terror," Browne said. " 'Out of the mouths of children you kept calling and calling and calling.' The desperate nights and the desperate boxcar travels. It is kind of woven together."

The initial section, which lasts about 15 minutes, asks for a clean slate, an emptying of the soul so that renewal can occur. It also "heaps on the guilt," Paulus said. "You have to acknowledge that, except for isolated occurrences, responsible behavior that said 'This can't happen' was not going on," Paulus said.

## **Part 2: Remembrance**

This 30-minute section contains what Browne calls four "meditations upon the faces," based on photographs of Jews taken by Roman Vishniac in 1930s Eastern Europe. The faces in those photographs haunted Browne after he first saw them in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., he said.

The section begins with a soprano and mezzo soprano singing "Two Little Girls in the Street," filled with words that Browne imagined would come from the girls depicted in one of the pictures, an image that will be displayed for the audience to see. The innocence of their words is tempered by the realization that they likely ended up as victims of the Nazi crematoria. "They're making innocent statements, but (the words) pack a wallop," Paulus said.

Browne originally wrote the section in third person, but Paulus was so moved by the power of the words that he suggested Browne put them in first person so the girls were speaking directly to the audience. "It was a brilliant idea," Browne said with a laugh. "Not mine."

Said Paulus: "The goal of that section is to get people to think, 'Yeah, these were real people, and they were killed. And they didn't do anything except practice their religion and exist.' That is a tragedy." The section ends with "Hymn to the Eternal Flame," based on the children's memorial at Yad Vashem, the Jewish people's memorial in Jerusalem to the millions murdered during the Holocaust.

Browne again crafted the lyrics around what he imagined was happening to those who died and what they were thinking and experiencing in the endless nights at the death camps. The fire, which consumed the Jews in the crematoria, also can be a transforming symbol of hope, and the hymn encompasses the dual meaning of the flame.

## **Part 3: Visions**

There must be hope, Browne said in describing the transition to the oratorio's final section, which lasts about 15 minutes. And to punctuate the message, he was moved to "give the children the Scriptures."

The powerful words, taken directly from the Hebrew Scriptures, offer the hope of repair and forgiveness. Soloists then sing excerpts from the interviews Browne did with Holocaust survivors and descendants. "I have lived in a world with no children," the final survivor story begins. "I would never live in a world of no children again." Paulus said it speaks to the idea that Jews and Christians want to walk hand-in-hand.

"We want to be past these problems. We want to somehow not forget, because Jews continually take ownership of that theme – never to forget, hopefully so we don't make these mistakes in the future, after 1944. But lo and behold, they're being made in 2008. So we did forget."

The onion Paulus describes is never more layered than in the final section, where a mix of soloists, a cantor, choruses and the orchestra "spins and spins," he said. "And then it ends quietly," Paulus said. Again the message, this time in Hebrew, is emphasized that you should love your neighbor as yourself.

The shofar sounds, this time from the back of the auditorium, symbolizing movement, a call to the possibilities of change and heading in a new and different direction. "What we were hoping (the audience) should take away is an increased understanding of the history and the problem," Paulus said.

"Father Michael's intent was that we take ownership of (the Holocaust), even people who weren't there, who weren't born ... to understand the nature, the scope, the magnitude, the absolute abhorrent nature of the whole thing."

If the audience doesn't open its heart to the unknown lives that are being imagined in the work, Browne said, then the oratorio hasn't achieved the effect he and Paulus had hoped. "I call a poem an opportunity for the reader to imagine," Browne said. "And so this work is an opportunity for the listener to imagine the worlds that are being suggested." And to be changed, he said.

"If you have to say it, art's about transformation. It's about change. You shouldn't be the same at the end as you are at the beginning."