

OCEANIC VERSES

A Folk Opera. Commissioned by Carnegie Hall, Official Selection New York City Opera VOX 2010, excerpts performed on 21c Liederabend 2011 at the Kitchen with the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. Oceanic Verses is currently being expanded from a 35' oratorio to an evening length production to premiere at the Kennedy Center and River to River summer 2012 and the Barbican Centre with the BBC orchestra.

Film by Ali Hossaini. Libretto by Donna Di Novelli.

OCEANIC VERSES follows four separate arcs as a Sailor (folksinger Claudio Prima) casts his net for lost songs; a Scholar (improviser Helga Davis) investigating immigration loses a suitcase filled with research; a Peasant (soprano Hila Plitmann) seeks a better life for her future children; and a Soldier (Chris Burchett) crawls over land to bury what he loves. All four characters are joined by their yearning to uncover a fading past in Southern Italy.

Oceanic Verses musically paints a picture of Italy as it once was, a cross section of cultures expressed through song. By examining and researching the Salento region which maintains many ancient traditions and still speaks Griko, a much forgotten language, Prestini creates a work that illuminates the complex ethnic mosaic that has shaped her cultural heritage. The story is derived from the texts of the songs chosen and intermittent poems from a variety of Italian poets through time coloring the work with the various influences of Salento region.

Oceanic Verses combines fragments of folk traditions and music that date as far back as 3000 BC, field samples from research in the Salento region, and Prestini's original music, resulting in a work where the ocean surrounds and binds the main character's tales. It serves as metaphor for the expanse that can both separate cultures while simultaneously connecting them. In this way, the ocean becomes a sonic and visual narrator, guiding listeners through a personal journey into a culture Prestini left at a young age.

VIDEO

Hossaini's visual world is an immersive video environment that recreates the atmosphere of the

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Mediterranean while offering a canvas where we can tap the expressive potential of the performers as actors. Using a technique of undulating video, Hossaini creates a visual music that presents the inner lives of the characters on an ultrawide screen that curves around the stage. Players and audience are immersed in the folkloric landscape that inspired Oceanic Verses. Rather than tell a story in the manner of cinema, Hossaini directs the performers to act in short abstract sequences that he juxtaposes as poetic counterpoint to the musical stagecraft. This video environment amplifies the presence of the main characters while giving Oceanic Verses a sense of place that is impossible with a traditional set.

LIBRETTO

Oceanic Verses is sung in various dialects including Griko, Genoese, and Sardinian, coloring the work with various ethnic influences. Di Novelli is expanding the current text by thirty-fourty minutes to create circa a seventy five minute work, and we are working together closely to develop the stories, music and visual elements as an organic whole. Di Novelli sees the piece as part archeology, part oceanography. The opera simultaneously sifts through the sediments of centuries and journeys on the top of mediterranean currents that bring immigrants, and conquerors to each others' shores. The opera juxtaposes death and life in every utterance, reminding us through its characters of the fragility of all life, including our common globe.

Appropriately, Oceanic Verses has developed through successive layers of collaboration. Starting with initial sparks of inspiration—the songs, poems and motifs I discovered in Italy—the work has been absorbed, interpreted and expanded by talented collaborators in a range of disciplines.

Oceanic Verses stretches across boundaries, combining locale and time into a constant present. Where ocean, land and sky meet, the edges of the Mediterranean provide landscapes and peoples teeming with conflict, yearning and the aching realization of their own finitude.

“While all the pieces on VOX 2011 were excellent in their own particular ways, I have to say that Oceanic Verses was the one that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up for the sheer visceral pleasure of the musical language.” Ed Yim, Director of Artistic Planning, New York City Opera

“Paola Prestini’s music is wrenching and tender and luminous and pure and exuberant: always vivid and always generous. Her compositional voice sings of today, but also of an ancient, primordial time, a time of revelations and prophecies.” Osvaldo Golijov, composer

PAOLA PRESTINI

Paola Prestini è direttrice della collettiva interdisciplinare non profit VisionIntoArt, che ha commissionato lavori a numerosi artisti emergenti ed ha realizzato performances in tutto il mondo dal 1999.

Le sue composizioni sono state commissionate dalla Carnegie Hall, dal Concert Artist Guild, da WNYC e dai Kronos Quartet e rappresentate alla Carnegie Zankel Hall, al Whitney live, al The Stone e al Joe’s Pub di New York ed in festival tra quali Etnafest n Italia e al BEMUS in Serbia. Ha ricevuto numerosi premi e riconoscimenti da organizzazioni quali ASCAP, AMC e NYSCA. Ha realizzato importanti programmi educativi per la New York Philharmonic ed è Direttore Associato (of Making Score) alla New York Youth Symphony. La sua musica è prodotta dalla Tzadik Records e le sue composizioni sono pubblicate da Arcana, Zorn’s Musicians on Music Books. E’ una PD Soros fellow e laureata alla Julliard.