

John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid

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John Brown: The Opera *Composer-librettist's Statement*

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Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/john-brown/mechem-abstract.pdf>

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Abstract

"...It takes a national and religious birthpang to produce a John Brown; the story of him is an immortal legend — perhaps the only one in our history." — Boyer: The Legend of John Brown

Immortal legend, moral crisis, struggle for freedom — these have always been the stuff of opera. For most of my life I have believed John Brown to be the ideal, larger-than-life figure needed for opera, and believed that opera is the ideally extravagant medium to present the action and passion of the national struggle over slavery. I have never agreed with those who, like Dr. Johnson, think that opera is simply an exotic and irrational entertainment, or a plaything for the rich. I would rather take as my models Verdi and Wagner, for whom the glory of opera was not only its musical power to stir the passions, but also the power to dramatize great ideas and events.

If this means "grand opera," then so be it. This epic subject demands grandeur. As in *Boris Godunov*, another opera about a nation in crisis, the chorus plays an important role. I have composed music that often uses of the flavor of American hymns, spirituals and folk songs of

the period. A large orchestra is required to balance the chorus and to support the heroic type of voices that I envision for John Brown, Frederick Douglass and Jeb Stuart. I very much hope that *John Brown* will bring many people into the opera house for the first time, particularly African-Americans for whom Brown and Douglass are great heroes. I have always believed that opera should communicate directly and powerfully with anyone who is musical and loves the theater.

I do not intend *John Brown* to be just a history lesson. There is a great love story at the heart of the action. One of Brown's sons was engaged to a girl from a pacifist family; she wants him to leave Kansas — which had become a battleground for the struggle against slavery — and I expect that many in the audience will see the story through her eyes. She is then devastated by her brother's murder by pro-slavery invaders, our national dilemma mirrored in her personal torment. Partly through her love and partly from what she learns about slavery from Frederick Douglass (the great black leader and Brown's friend), she casts her lot with the Browns.

John Brown is still a highly controversial figure. Ever since Harpers Ferry people have taken sides violently for or against him. There is a warped legend that he was insane; he has been vilified in some quarters as nothing but a fanatic, a murderer and thief. But Emerson and Thoreau knew him well and thought him a great man. My libretto neither deifies nor vilifies Brown. I have tried to be historically accurate in the essential points. It is absolutely necessary to see Brown in the context of his time in order to understand the man, and to understand the Civil War. I grew up in Kansas (my father was the state historian) and the truth of this story is important to me. I spent a year doing research, consulting with the foremost authority on Brown at that time, the prize-winning historian Stephen B. Oates, before, during and after writing the libretto. I find it very encouraging that in the last few years, five new objective biographies of Brown have been published and a major film is being planned.

In sum, I have tried to use the power of music and drama to bring to life our country's greatest conflict. Through the lives of these very real people I hope that others will see and feel this tragedy as I have come to — as a warning. Its message is as true now as then: peace will never come before justice.