

East Carolina University. *School of Music*

ECU Opera Theater
and
North Carolina NewMusic Initiative
present

*Four Saints
in Three Acts*

an opera by
Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson

James Franklin, Conductor
John Kramar, Stage Director
Eric Stellrecht, Musical Preparation/Chorus Master
Matthew Scully, Set Design
Jeffery Phipps, Costume Design
Erica Bolick, Choreography

October 23, 24, 25, 2016
7:30 p.m.
Fletcher Recital Hall

The Cast

Compère, bass	Christopher Short
Commère, mezzo-soprano	Caroline Miller
St. Ignatius, baritone	Skylar McKee
St. Teresa I, soprano	Grace Ashley
	Amanda Whitmore*
St. Teresa II, mezzo-soprano	Alexandra Fee
St. Chavez, tenor	Johnathon Spell
	James Taylor*
St. Settlement, soprano	Gina Marie Falk
St. Sara, mezzo-soprano	Chloe Agostino
St. Stephen, tenor	Elijah Cole
St. Plan, baritone	William Edwards
St. Cecilia, soprano	Baajah Mohammed
St. Bernadine, soprano	Elizabeth Stovall
St. Genevieve, soprano	Mikaela Schifter
St. Celestine, mezzo-soprano	Samantha Kunz
St. Giuseppe, alto	Darian Benton
St. Absolom, tenor	Adam Gross
St. Answers, tenor	Cory Whaley
St. Lawrence, tenor	Davis Martin
St. Vincent, baritone	Nolawi Araya
St. Jan, baritone	Joseph Morris
St. Phillip, baritone	Zachary Leach
St. Placide, bass	Nelson Pardo

* Performs Monday, October 24.

Scenario

(This production uses a scenario by John Kramar, respectfully influenced by Maurice Grosser, Virgil Thomson, and Gertrude Stein.)

Prologue – The opening scene establishes a festival atmosphere. Commère and Compère (Godmother and Godfather, respectively, who serve as narrators throughout the opera) introduce various saints to the audience. St. Settlement, St. Sara, St. Stephen, and St. Plan join together to form a solo vocal quartet to assist Commère and Compère in their duties. All enjoy food and drink.

Act I – The first act introduces St. Teresa of Avila. This remarkable woman is portrayed by two singers who share common beliefs. They often finish each other's thoughts. Sometimes they sing in unison. St. Ignatius appears. He is drawn to the noble work and ideals of St. Teresa. St. Bernadine, St. Celestine, St. Absolom, and St. Phillip serve as a solo vocal quartet to support the company's admiration for the gracious and gentle lyricism of St. Teresa's philosophy.

Act II – Moved by St. Ignatius, the saints decide to work together to create a noble gift for the world. It is decided that a house will be built for people in need. All contribute individually and collectively toward the creation of the home. St. Chavez completes the project.

Act III – St. Teresa and St. Ignatius share some friendly moments while the gentlemen saints work together to mend fishing nets. Once the lady saints leave the scene, Ignatius shares a moving and mystical vision with his friends. The ladies suddenly reappear, making the vision complete and profound. St. Cecilia and several of her friends dance a short ballet to celebrate St. Ignatius' vision. The saints join together to celebrate their community and its spirit of noble generosity. St. Settlement and St. Stephen sing a romantic duet.

Act IV – Following a brief prologue where Commère and Compère argue about the number of acts in the opera, the two reconcile tenderly. The opera's final act summarizes the saints' revelations about leading an artistic life. St. Teresa comments on the majesty and wonder of life, and how all is better when all work together towards an honorable goal. In the end, all agree that noble work is truly beautiful.

The opera will be performed without intermission.
It lasts for approximately 100 minutes.

Place and Time:

A gathering of young artists: Paris, 1927

or

A gathering of young artists: New York or Kansas City, 1934

or

A gathering of young artists: Greenville, 2016

“One should not try to interpret too literally the words of this opera, nor should one fall into the opposite error of thinking that they mean nothing at all. On the contrary, they mean many things at once.”

--Maurice Grosser

The opera was first performed on Wednesday, February 8, 1934, in the auditorium of the Avery Memorial, Hartford, Connecticut, under the auspices of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music, A. Everett Austin, president.

The Orchestra

James Frankin, conductor

Eric Stellrecht*, piano
Brandon Banks, harmonium
Christopher Ellis, violin
Sarah Laird, flute
Cassandra Kossmann, clarinet
Bo Newsome*, oboe
Cameron Stephenson, bassoon
Patricia Tyler, trumpet
Caleb Harris, horn
Taylor Babson, trombone
Dan Crisp, percussion
Mark Klaich, percussion
Eli Helms, percussion

*ECU School of Music Faculty Member

Production Team

Music – Virgil Thomson
Libretto – Gertrude Stein
Stage Director/Producer – John Kramar
Conductor – James Franklin
Musical Direction/Chorus Master – Eric Stellrecht
Set Design – Matthew Scully
Costume Design – Jeffery Phipps
Choreography/Costume Assistant – Erica Bolick
Production Assistants – Jenna Kuchar, Tasha Johnson
Lighting – Sammie Kunz, Adam Neal
Financial Coordinators – Dawn Phillips, Dawn Harrison
Publicity – Harley Dartt

A Note from the Director

Four Saints in Three Acts, a uniquely important opera, has fascinated me for over 30 years. It was created out of a friendship between two American artists who lived in Paris during the years between the two World Wars. Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson were both on the outer fringe of notoriety when they decided to write an opera as equal partners. They agreed that the work should pay tribute to "the artistic life" – the type of life that was embraced by their circle of friends. (Said circle included the likes of Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Paul Bowles, and Aaron Copland.) Finding an appropriate way to represent artists in a fashion that was appropriate for the lyric theater proved to be challenging. Both Stein and Thomson knew that a contemporary version of Puccini's *La Bohème* would hardly be suitable to their sensibilities. At one point Stein suggested an option to use America's founding fathers as noble artists. Thomson was opposed to seeing performers in white wigs, so they kept discussing alternatives. Eventually, both creators agreed to use saints to portray human beings attempting to live artistic lives. Stein wrote the libretto without delineating characters, setting, or any traditionally operatic conventions. She instructed Thomson to do with it as he wished – as opera composers had been doing for centuries. With the help of his partner Maurice Grosser, Thomson came up with a scenario, and created characters to deliver Stein's uniquely non-narrative text. Thomson invented the two narrators – Commère and Compère – as a way to tie the seemingly disparate ideas in the libretto into a cohesive entity. After handing over the libretto to Thomson, Stein's fame increased considerably due to the success of her book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. This sudden fame left the task of getting the opera produced to Thomson. He worked tirelessly for over five years before finding the appropriate venue in an art museum in Connecticut that happened to be run by one of his old friends from his student days at Harvard. The opening night changed operatic history. Such was the success of the opera that it immediately moved to Broadway. It was the longest running opera ever to play on Broadway until it was eclipsed by Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. The original production team is now legendary. John Houseman directed, while Frederick Ashton led the choreography. New York artist Florine Stettheimer designed the sets and costumes. The original cast was comprised entirely of African American singers and dancers, including many members of the renowned Eva Jessye choir. Ms. Jessye's choir would go on to be the core of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Thomson loved the voices and elocution of his cast members. He felt that having a cast made up of non-traditional performers helped to show that his "Saints" were indeed unique individuals -- individuals who could rise above all obstacles of worldly life to create beauty. Our own production somewhat mirrors the original. Here are our own young artists working on seemingly impossible music and text, facing the challenges of a debilitating hurricane, and a volatile political climate -- locally, nationally, and globally. My soul has been touched by their profound work, and it is my hope that you will be touched as well. I wish to thank Chris Uiffers, Eric Stellrecht, Jeff Phipps, Matt Scully, and the cast members for their help and support.

– John Kramar

Acknowledgements

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Jenna Kuchar, Tasha Johnson, Graduate Assistants

Mr. Harley Dartt, Assistant Director for Marketing and Publicity, ECU School of Music

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ECU SNATS Chapter Members

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