

## Healing Words

### Musical statement on the human cost of war fuses Indigenous themes with classical forms

*Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio* premiered in Phoenix, February 7 and 9, 2008. Conducted by Michael Christie, with a score by Mark Grey, the Phoenix Symphony performed a brilliant alliance of Indigenous oral tradition and Western classical and choral music. The performance highlighted the fusion of Diné oral tradition with English language in a libretto by ASU Associate Professor Laura Tohe—whose native cultural heritage is Diné (the cultural name preferred by the Navajo tribe of Arizona).

The oratorio's evocation of Diné cultural sense of presence so impressed me that I asked Professor Tohe how she came to write the libretto. According to Tohe, composer Grey had in mind a concert composition with an Indigenous theme. He had "researched Navajo poets and my work in New York City library holdings." She further explained how "in the summer of 2006, he [Grey] contacted me...with the prospect of writing a Navajo creation story and asked if I would be interested in writing the libretto for the oratorio.... I was challenged [by] the idea...."

*Enemy Slayer* is based loosely on Monster Slayer, a mythic figure in Diné oral tradition; it is quite a leap in cultural understanding to have Diné mythic knowledge conveyed and understood in a culture and language ostensibly different from the original. Because composer Grey imagined *Enemy Slayer* as an attempt to demonstrate events that happen in different worlds as the same, Tohe offered her creative skill to accomplish just that. "A

success-

ful collaboration includes faith," she says, "I had complete faith that whatever Mark created would come from his integrity and honesty. I was writing what I knew about Navajo oral tradition and writing poetry, while he composed from his training, experience, and artistic sense."

What makes *Enemy Slayer* remarkable is its present-day topical relevance to the American public's concern about the Iraq War and the impact and toll of that war on the American psyche. Seeker, the hero and principal voice, sung by baritone



From L to R: Michael Christie, conductor; Scott Hendricks, baritone; Laura Tohe, librettist; Mark Grey, composer. Photo: Deborah O'Grady.

Scott Hendricks, is an Indigenous combat veteran returning home to the Navajo Nation. Traumatized by war, he suffers Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms like many Iraq War veterans. Tohe says, "Growing up around storytellers, I learned [that] stories of the past—mythic or historic—are still relevant to our lives today. To make the mythic story relevant to today's audience, it had to be filtered through a contemporary lens. Hence, a veteran who returns home must overcome the monsters he brings back from the

war." She adds, "The fusion...creates a powerful statement about the aftermath of war. It creates a bridge between two worlds using orchestra, voice, story, and imagery. It also affirms Diné language, oral literature, and the power of music to bring everything together artistically."

In conclusion, Tohe observed, "On one level, *Enemy Slayer* expresses the torment of the veteran protagonist and his need to heal, while on another level, it expresses how war touches our lives personally, communally, and nationally. If there is a resolution to be made—and I hope there is—it is that this country needs to acknowledge the terrible toll that war takes on returning veterans and on us as a nation. While Seeker is restored through Diné ceremony, there must be other ways for returning soldiers to heal."

Judging by the standing ovation *Enemy Slayer* received at its premier, the impact of the oratorio vision was very positive. This vision was expressed wonderfully by the 150 member chorus—representing Seeker's home and national community—in its lyrical recitation of a Diné prayer toward the end:

*By means of corn pollen  
May there be hózhó before you  
May there be hózhó below you  
May there be hózhó above you  
May there be hózhó all around you.*

—SIMON ORTIZ