

# 'Sundance' shines

## Activist opera by SU alum heralds a new approach to the old form

By RUSS TARBY

"Sundance" shone brightly in its world premiere this summer at the Cazenovia College Theatre.

The father-and-son collaboration based on the 1977 murder trials of a prominent Native American was presented July 7 and 8 as part of the Syracuse-based Society for New Music's annual "Cazenovia Counterpoint" summer series.

### SU debut Sept. 27

The society presents the opera's Salt City debut at Syracuse University next week. "Sundance" rises at 8 p.m. Tuesday Sept. 27, at Crouse College's Setnor Auditorium. Admission costs \$15, or \$12 for seniors and students; 468-0246.

"Sundance" was composed by award-winning Syracuse University alumnus Matthew Walton, while his dad, Leonard Walton of Lancaster County, Pa., wrote the libretto based on the trials and incarceration of American Indian activist Leonard Peltier.

"Really I am more an editor," Leonard Walton told the audience of nearly 200 who attended the July 7 premiere. "These are the actual words that were spoken."

### Historical context

All he did, the elder Walton said, was arrange statements culled from trial testimony and written records to fit the opera format.

Peltier was active in the Ameri-



Alex deMontigny of the Lakota and Nez Perce tribes, narrates and plays the part of Leonard Peltier in "Sundance," a new opera by Matthew and Leonard Walton based on the 1977 murder trials of prominent Native American activist Leonard Peltier. The opera makes its Syracuse debut at 8 p.m. Tuesday Sept. 27, at Crouse College's Setnor Auditorium, on the Syracuse University campus

can Indian Movement in 1975 when an armed standoff took place in South Dakota between the FBI and Pine Ridge Reservation residents supported by AIM personnel.

In 1973, two FBI agents were shot to death during a confrontation with Indians, and Peltier was eventually convicted of the murders, though "Sundance" suggests his conviction was based on highly questionable evidence.

Three decades after the FBI killings, Peltier - now 58 - remains in federal prison at Lewisburg, Pa.

### Powerful story

The Waltons recognize Peltier's as

a story substantial enough to merit a serious presentation in a highbrow musical genre not exactly famous for its commitment to social consciousness. For taking that leap, for bravely pushing the boundaries of opera, the Waltons deserve a standing ovation.

Though it has a few flaws, "Sundance" announces the arrival of a new voice in modern music, one not afraid to speak hard truths about politics and social issues. There's no telling how big a role Matthew Walton may play in this movement, but "Sundance" is certainly a good start.

With his marvelous music, natural theatricality and populist passion, Walton has positioned himself

to achieve his goal to "revitalize contemporary music by combining it with political activism."

Let's hope "Sundance" is a harbinger of things to come.

### Solid septet

Matt Walton's music - and especially the way he arranged it for his small orchestra - demonstrated meticulous attention to detail, tone and variation.

The composer conducted the septet as it perfectly complemented the singers at every turn, never overpowering the cast while delivering dynamics sometimes lacking onstage.

Jim Krehbel's edgy violin lines and Stephen Heyman's precise piano parts were especially invigorating. Cellist Florent Renard-Payen provided a pleasant underpinning for his colleagues while clarinetist David Abrams and flutist Linda Green occasionally shone in the spotlight.

Electronic keyboardist Phil de Chateaubieux fingered some tantalizing vibraphone lines, an unusual yet welcome embellishment.

The vocalized dialogue often fell flat, however, even in English, even with surtitles projected on either side of the stage. Too often, the rhythm settled in and the dialogue went nowhere as the music seemed lack a certain sense of propulsion. The effect can be absolutely lulling. The composer could've done more with the indi-

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# 'Sundance' shines on Syracuse University's Setnor stage

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vidually performed vocal charts.

Occasionally, however, the dramatic situation - trial dialogue, for instance - benefited from Walton's bare-bones approach. So repetitive are the judge's denials of Peltier's motions, it's like a gavel repeatedly slamming against your head, which seems to be the point.

## Strong chorales

Walton's forte appears to be chorale pieces, in which he deftly complements the lyrics with oddly-voiced, but wholly satisfying, harmonies.

The chorales that conclude each act resounded with passion, defiance and confidence, eliciting enthusiastic audience response.

So did Act One's depiction of a blue-uniformed, armed quartet which marched priggishly across the stage praising the murderous 9th Calvary in a song based on old Irish drinking ditties.

That allusion to the calvary's Celtic roots worked amazingly well, making one wonder why "Sundance" makes so few references to Lakota music.

Native-American chanting can be a thrilling experience for listeners (simply sample Joanne

Shenandoah's award-winning disc, "Matriarch").

Such allusions to Lakota culture would've underscored the opera's unifying themes over more than 100 years of history.

That's right, rather than start Peltier's story in the 1970s, Leonard Walton's libretto wisely flashes back to the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, placing the opera's story in historical context while simultaneously staging an action-packed 19th-century battle scene.

Subsequent scenes are set at Alcatraz 1970; a return to Wounded Knee 1890 complete with projected photos of the carnage; Pine Ridge Reservation 1973-75; and Peltier's trials 1977.

## Ensemble achievement

"Perhaps embracing this opportunity to be part of something new and different, the entire cast of "Sundance" rose to the world-premiere occasion in July as the singing remained strong throughout. It was an ensemble achievement for the well-balanced cast of ten vocalists, a narrator and eight supporting characters.

The backstage ensemble also excelled.

Director Victoria Harder King had her hands full with action scenes and constant block-



Some of the musicians featured in 'Sundance' are, from left to right, George Macero, Linda Greene, Jim Krehbiel, Selma Moore, standing, David Abrams and Kevin Moore.

ing of more than a dozen players moving across Jarrod Bray's functional "rock formation" set. Harder's handling of movement culminated early in Act Two as the performers pace back in forth in a frenetic rhythm, reflecting the confusion over legal machinations at Peltier's 1977 trials.

Lakota sundancer Alex de Montigny, the opera's narrator, shouted Peltier's response to his eventual conviction: "White, racist America is the guilty one!"

## Impressive vocals

While the entire "Sundance" cast and crew deserve praise, sopranos Gina Manziello and Amanda Newhouse Carnie made indelible impressions, as did bass singer Eric Johnson.

During a particularly desperate scene at Pine Ridge, Manziello's Indian woman cries out, "Where are our defenders? Where are our men?" And she sang it in a voice that demands attention, displaying an amazingly well-rounded soprano with a ringing tone.

One of Central New York's most active and entertaining baritones, William Black, came across convincingly whether playing a victimized Indian chief or an Establishment bad guy. Black's straightforward, declarative style of singing paints the perfect picture every time.

Mezzo soprano Carol Ansell Spradling is another accomplished vocalist who can also act. Her unwavering voice and perpetual poise are a potent combination on any stage.

In "Sundance," Spradling was called upon to render some of the opera's most powerful lyrics, such as, "Let us forgive the worst of us ... Let us forgive so that all of us may be free."

The overall flow of the 90-minute opera, with plenty of action pushed along by Harder, along with the themes of racism and injustice unifying the whole, made for a memorable night of theater.

And although the Walton's primary theme of injustice is as real as the high stone walls which now surround Peltier, the libretto also hints at more cosmic themes:

"We are you yourself crying unheard within you," the ensemble sings in the opera's opening scene. "We are the voice of the Earth, of the future, of mystery."