

The Musical and Personal Legacy of William Byron Webster

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William Webster as seen by others

HIS EMPLOYER ... Dream come true.

Stanford University (his then employer) Newsletter



DREAM COME TRUE

William Byron Webster, '64, MA '68, PhD '72, never imagined when he composed a chamber opera of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl* nearly 40 years ago that he would see it performed—much less have its world premiere in the City of Light. The work was performed June 20 as part of a four-day festival in Paris's Montparnasse on the Left Bank. An administrative associate in Stanford's department of aeronautics and astronautics, and a tireless advocate for fair housing in East Palo Alto, Webster's first love was music. He hopes to stage additional performances of the opera to benefit nonprofit organizations raising funds for worthy social causes.



THE MEDIA ... Match girl in the city of light.

Arts & Entertainment Section, Palo Alto Weekly

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace

Match girl in the city of light

Local composer William Webster has a surprise premiere of his fairytale opera, in Paris
by Rebecca Wallace

William Byron Webster is used to talking to newspapers. He's been a community activist in his city of East Palo Alto for 25 years. Toss him a question about parcel taxes or affordable housing, and he's on it. So it might surprise a local reporter to hear Webster speaking just as authoritatively about ariosi and "Der Rosenkavalier." As it happens, Webster has been writing operas for decades. And here's what surprises him: His chamber-opera version of the fairy tale "The Little Match Girl" is about to have its world premiere, in Paris.

Talking to the Weekly last week, Webster was about to leave for France, and he still couldn't fathom that his 40-year-old opera was about to be performed for the first time—in Europe, no less. "When June 20 passes and the event takes place, it will become a candidate for 'Ripley's Believe It Or Not,'" he said, beaming.

On June 20, his version of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale will be performed in the grand Town Hall of the seventh arrondissement. The work, which he describes as melodic, "traditional" and "accessible," will be sung in English by two French artists: soprano Anne-Chantal Carrière as the Little Match Girl and mezzo-soprano Véronique Bauer as the Grandmother. Gilles Nicolas will accompany them on piano. This is a rare premiere by an American composer in the City of Light, and the first trip to France for Webster. The writer is clearly gratified and thrilled.

The event grew out of Webster's longtime friendship with Roger Dickinson-Brown, an American poet and writer who now lives near Paris. Dickinson-Brown has versions of the opera on cassettes and CDs, and is a great admirer of the work. His son Adrian Harrington Brown is producing the June 20 production, and found the musicians and arranged the hall.

"This chamber opera, requiring as few as two musicians, starts out striking and beautiful and then grows on you. It is a little masterpiece," Dickinson-Brown wrote in an email to the Weekly. "The final duet is some of the most moving music I've heard from our times."

That's apropos for a tragic fairy tale that depicts a desperately poor girl selling matches in the street on a freezing New Year's Eve. When she sees a vision of her grandmother, Webster's opera has her singing: "You will vanish like the warm fire, the goose, and the great, glorious Christmas tree. But I'll never, ever let you go!" Grandmother responds, "There no cold, no hunger nor care is found, We'll ascend to the Kingdom of Love's reign, We shall be with God."

Webster met Dickinson-Brown at Stanford, in the days when Dickinson-Brown was studying with the late poet Yvor Winters. Webster's own roots also run deep in this area. He grew up in Palo Alto and holds three Stanford degrees: a bachelor's in music, a master's in German studies and a doctorate in German studies. Today he's an administrator in the department of aeronautics and astronautics.

In East Palo Alto, where he's lived for 40 years, Webster has been on the city's Rent Stabilization Board for two decades. His other volunteer efforts include serving on the Measure C parcel-tax committee and being a co-founder of the affordable-housing nonprofit EPA CAN DO.

In an interview, Webster is gregarious, articulate and precise, often remembering specific dates seemingly without effort. One stands out: Dec. 22, 1973. That's the day he started writing "The Little Match Girl."

At the time, Webster was teaching modern and classical languages at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. He was sitting in his office writing an article on Thomas Mann and Arthur Schopenhauer when his department head knocked at the door. The news was bad. Due to a shortage of freshmen, the university was cutting back, and the head informed Webster that his contract was not being renewed.

"I thought maybe I'd take the opportunity to do something different," Webster said.

An opera buff since his early years, Webster decided to write his own, "addressing one of the great problems of opera": the high cost of putting up a quality production.

He had a background in literature and a love for folklore, and "The Little Match Girl" was a natural fit. It all takes place on one bleak corner, making scenery easy. As for the costumes, they could be made from raggedy castoffs. "You don't even need to rent a hall. You could do it on a street," he said. "In a way, it's the perfect opera."

Webster wrote from Dec. 22, 1973, to Dec. 22, 1975, creating an opera that could be performed as one act or divided into two. But then he never took it to the stage. "Looking back, I think I could have produced it over the years for a few hundred dollars. But I suffered delusions of grandeur."

As Webster waited for the right situation to stage "The Little Match Girl," his life evolved. Back in California, he became involved in East Palo Alto issues. He wrote another opera, a version of "Cyrano de Bergerac." He spent time in Grass Valley working on still another opera, which would have been about the life of notorious 19th-century dancer and actress Lola Montez, who had owned a home in the foothills town.

Lola didn't pan out, but the little match girl did. Webster had a studio recording made of his fairytale opera and sent it to Roger Dickinson-Brown. The rest is history. And when the fairytale takes the stage in Paris later this month, the little match girl will take a treasured place in Webster's own history. ■

Info: For more about William Webster, his operas and the June 20 premiere, go to the little-matchgirlopera.com.

A FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE ... Cinderella Man

Posted by Spinoza, a friend in Uncategorized with tags community organizing, opera, William Byron Webster on June 9, 2013

After getting a PhD in German language and literature and writing both the words and music for operas about George Washington and the Little Match Girl, my friend William found himself working as an administrative assistant in the firm I joined in 1981 as a software engineer. He and some of my engineer coworkers were interested in art and San Francisco, so we'd go into "The City" to attend art openings and go to dinner...all on low salaries since we weren't "superstars", just good at what we did.

In the expensive rental and housing market of the Valley of the 1980s, just as crazy as Hong Kong's market today, I was able to find a rental on a crumbly street in Mountain View, but one that had its own charm; its name, for example, was "Easy Street". My lawyer laughed his ass off when I gave him my California address.

William lived in East Palo Alto, a hell hole since it was a dumping ground for service people (janitors, maids, computer operators and so on), especially people of color, who were exploited by criminals and landlords in a ghetto, adjacent to a wealthy suburb. Rich Palo Alto white people would go to EPA to get drugs but EPA represented what James Baldwin said terrorized American whites: "night, death and the devil".

William therefore organized his community to fight the root cause of East Palo Alto's problems: greedy landlords, and he continues the fight today.

But suddenly his opera, "The Little Match Girl" has been recognized as a work of art and given a Paris premiere. I do rather hope that any number of his wealthy enemies who like he love the opera are completely green with envy as this pesky community organizer and gadfly jets off to blasted Paris for the premiere of his opera! Take that, you ne kulterni scum!