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TV

An Opera for the Netflix Generation, Filmed on Alcatraz



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Alcatraz has been the setting of many Hollywood blockbusters from *Escape from Alcatraz* to *The Rock*. But a serialized, made-for-video opera? Now that's surely a first.

On a recent evening in June, the former federal penitentiary was the site of a film shoot for *Vireo: The Spiritual Biography of a Witch's Accuser* — a 12-episode opera created by Bay Area native composer and musician Lisa Bielawa in collaboration with playwright Erik Ehn and director Charles Otte. On set for Episode 9, a chorus of vocalists sang out a dirge-like lament accompanied by hurdy gurdy from one of the cell blocks. Down the corridor, in the decrepit prison

hospital, a string quartet played along with the sound of bells. Meanwhile, in a third room, a straightjacketed teen girl with a skull scepter confronted her doppelgänger.



Rowen Sabala as the title character in Lisa Bielawa's new serialized, made-for-video opera 'Vireo'. The latest episode was shot on Alcatraz *(Photo: David Soderlund)*

The unusual project is being filmed in 10-to-12 minute episodes — perfect for the ever shortening attention spans of a new generation. Shot in Southern California, New York, and San Francisco, the series will be broadcast next year on public television and online, and seeks to bring opera to a broader audience by using a digital streaming model a la Netflix and Amazon.

Vireo follows the convoluted adventures of the titular character, a teenage girl played by 18-year old soprano Rowen Sabala. The young woman hears and sees things, and is ultimately accused of being a witch. She exists simultaneously in contemporary Sweden, 16th century France, and the Vienna of 1893, and is, apparently, possessed by a witch, played by the blind mezzo-soprano Laurie Rubin.

Recasting stories of female hysteria

Bielawa is best known as the long-time vocalist for the world-renowned Philip Glass Ensemble and, locally, as artistic director of the precocious San Francisco Girls Chorus. She grew up in the Bay Area and has also undertaken ambitious projects locally, such as a work she composed for massive musical forces at Crissy Field.



The origin story of *Vireo* goes back to the composer's time as an undergraduate in literature at Yale, where she wrote a senior thesis about studies by men of female hysteria. The topic haunted Bielawa, and she collaborated with Ehn on a traditional three act opera in 1994. "I sent him stacks and stacks of photocopies of primary source material from several centuries," says Bielawa. "He wove it all into a libretto with the name *Vireo*." (Vireo is a type of songbird.)

Bielawa shopped the piece around to opera companies throughout the country, but came up short. The project was shelved for 20 years. Bielawa eventually resurrected *Vireo* as part of her residency at Cal State Fullerton's Grand Central Art Center (GCAC) in Orange County in 2012.

Opera for the Netflix generation

The idea to write an opera in episodes as one might approach a sitcom or telenovela came from Netflix. Specifically, the TV series *Arrested Development*, which Bielawa loves for its lampooning of life in Orange County's Newport Beach with absurdist wordplay and dark wit.

In the summer of 2012, when Bielawa and GCAC director and chief curator John Spiak were casting around together locally for a new project, the pair realized they were both fans of *Arrested Development*, and Spiak reminded Bielawa that the series takes place in the Orange County area.

"I looked around me and realized that one way to make innovative work that engaged with the community was to recognize that many of the smartest and most creative people around were involved in this evolving new form," Bielawa says. "The way to make an opera that was native to SoCal was to embrace its flagship format, the episodic series."

Taking TV opera in a fresh direction

Opera on television is nothing new. Gian Carlo Menotti's beloved *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was specifically composed for NBC in 1951 as a Christmas special,

and Benjamin Britten's less well-known *Owen Wingrave* was composed for television broadcast on the BBC some 20 years later.



Members of the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) in the hospital of Alcatraz. *(Photo: David Soderlund)*

Running at almost three hours — if you were to watch all 12 episodes back-to-back, that is — *Vireo* is just about the same length as the average opera. (Or it will be, once the project is finished, which is expected to happen before the end of next year.) But unlike the other two televised operas mentioned above, which are still occasionally performed on stage, *Vireo* doesn't fit into a traditional live opera setting. The episodic piece takes place in multiple time periods simultaneously. This time-bending is quite tricky to represent in a live performance. Also, *Vireo* features a dizzying number of collaborators like the Kronos Quartet, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME), the Bay Area choral group Cappella SF, and even a marching band from a high school in Indio.

What the episodic, web-based format of *Vireo* does provide for fans of opera is choice: the viewer can decide to snack on a single episode, take in a few at once, or binge-watch the whole thing in one go. "Each episode stands alone as a work of art, and yet also presents itself as part of a larger narrative," says Otte, who worked on the globe-trotting remount of Philip Glass' seminal opera *Einstein on the Beach*. (The production made a stop at Cal Performances in Berkeley in Oct. 2012.)

Success not a given

As with all operas, there are a lot of moving parts and production costs are often high. The budget for *Vireo* is $600,000. Although the project receives funding from a few foundations and grant programs (most prominently the community television organization KCET and Grand Central Art Center), Bielawa and her

team still need at least $260,000 to make it through to the end of the series. And success is certainly not a given. According to a 2015 study conducted by the opera industry organization Opera America, of the nearly 600 new operas premiered over the past two decades, only 11 percent have received a second production.

As a web-based work released in serial format, *Vireo* faces its own specific set of challenges. For one thing, the technical and artistic hurdles of producing a serialized opera with tons of collaborators in unusual locations like Alcatraz are immense. Then there's the esoteric, highly brainy subject matter: the (mis)treatment of female hysteria is hardly the stuff of an evening's light entertainment. It remains to be seen if the characters manage to connect with the video audience, many of whom may be viewing the episodes on the shrunken screens of laptops, tablets and even smartphones.

But Bielawa is fearless and clearly has talent. *Vireo* has already won a major prize from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers Foundation (ASCAP), a professional membership organization of songwriters, composers and music publishers, for its curious hybrid structure.

But *Vireo* isn't just a point of innovation for an art form that has long struggled to stay relevant. Bielawa is one of very few successful female opera composers in a field dominated by men. As such, she is aware that her work is also unusual in content; her heroine is not simply an exotic Carmen or Madame Butterfly. "I'm working with these very young women who are playing these important and complex lead roles," Bielawa says. "One of my motivations is to insist on roles for women in opera that have depth and breadth of character."

Watch the first two episodes of *Vireo*:

