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Rowen Sabala stars as the titular Vireo. Photo by Bernie Wire

The World's First Streamable, Binge-Watchable Opera Is Being Made in L.A.

CATHERINE WOMACK | MAY 24, 2016 | 6:32AM

Mansplaining. The term may have been coined in the 21st century, but the practice is as old as, well, men.

As a graduate student at Yale in the 1990s, Lisa Bielawa became fascinated by stories of young women across history who experienced hysterical fits and the men who consistently spoke on their behalf. The stories are eerily consistent: A young woman in the 14th, 16th, 18th or 20th century has a transcendent, visionary experience and powerful men around her — usually priests or doctors — try to explain what is happening.

"I encountered this rash of young girls caught up in these stories involving various men and communities of men who were fascinated by their visionary experiences," Bielawa explains. "It was so weird to find this phenomenon rearticulated over and over again throughout history."

Bielawa, a singer and classical composer, thought that somewhere buried in her graduate school research on this topic, there might be the makings of a good opera. She passed her notes along to librettist Erik Ehn and the two began to work on an opera about a clairvoyant young woman named Vireo. Ehn outlined the story and Bielawa sketched out the musical framework, but the work remained in draft form for the next two decades.

“It’s a project that’s been waiting to find the right soil to flower in for a long time,” Bielawa explains. That soil turned out to be in Santa Ana, where Bielawa is the artist in residence at Grand Central Art Center. With the right timing, funding and organizational circumstances, Vireo’s story is finally coming into its own as an opera.

That form, like the story itself, is unusual and innovative. Bielawa and GCAC are working with KCETLink to release *Vireo* in a series of 12 operatic mini episodes. The first two episodes are available to stream for free online now. The rest will be released in the spring of 2017. It will be the world’s first streamable, serial, binge-watchable opera.

That is, if *Vireo* is an opera at all. There are certainly elements that are highly operatic — the singing, the orchestration, the libretto. But opera, by definition, is performed live. *Vireo* is performed “live” in front of cameras, but the audience will consume it at home on their laptops with headphones or through their television screens.



Composer Lisa Bielawa conducts David Johnson on chromelodeon. **Photo by Bernie Wire**

Bielawa herself isn’t sure exactly what *Vireo* is or how it will be consumed. “Is it an opera?” she asks. “It’s hard to say. Opera is undergoing a huge redefinition right now. And *Vireo* is certainly a big part of that. I guess it is the thing I’ve done that adheres most closely to what could be called a traditional opera.

“I’m interested in how people will consume it,” she continues. “Each [10- to 13-minute] episode is so rich. In a way, watching the entire thing is like eating 12 pieces of chocolate torte cake. I’m not sure if binge-watching is the best way to experience it. But I love the fact that it is in this format that allows people to decide how they want to see it.”

Bielawa, Ehn and director Charles Otte were in Los Angeles last weekend to film episode seven of *Vireo*. They're about halfway through the project and they're still in the process of creating it: Bielawa is writing music for upcoming episodes. Plot lines and characters are being fleshed out. There are aspects of *Vireo*’s production that would be

very familiar to anyone involved in making episodic television. And then there are the operatic bits, which are nothing like television.

Inside a hot, foggy Boyle Heights warehouse on a recent Sunday, the mashup of the film production world and the musical theater world was fascinating. Otte and Bielawa decided that the most convincing way to portray the musical performance was to shoot the entire episode in three complete takes. “Frankly, it’s quite virtuosic for all of us,” Bielawa explains.



Rowen Sabala, Emma MacKenzie and Maria Lazarova in rehearsals. **Photo by Bernie Wire**

After a day of intense rehearsals, all of these moving parts came together in an intricately choreographed dance. The cameraman maneuvered his way around the bizarre, psychedelic set, weaving among instruments, musicians and singers. Bielawa conducted from memory as she moved in and out of the way of the cameraman. This particular episode featured a saxophone quartet and an ensemble of large, other-worldly microtonal instruments. All the trappings of a TV set and all the inner workings of a live operatic performance convened for 13 intense minutes.

At the center of all of this was 17-year-old Rowen Sabala, a student at the Orange County School of the Arts, who was cast in the role of Vireo after an intense audition process. In episode seven, she sings with a twin of herself that she hatched in a previous episode. During the scene, the two girls flailed and thrashed and fell and danced, all while singing complex microtonal melodies. Another character, a man dressed at times in a lab coat and at times in priest’s garb, watched sternly from the sidelines.

Unlike the looming male figure, Bielawa isn’t trying to explain what’s happening to Vireo. She is simply giving her a voice. Is Vireo hallucinating? Is she crazy? Is she faking it? Is this thing even an opera?

No need to mansplain. Just choose your own adventure through this wild operatic art and take it in anyway you please.