

A sisterhood of song

Astoria Music Festival concludes with 'Little Women'

By **PATRICK WEBB**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

*'Who will we be tomorrow?
It's not in my control.*

*I know that for a moment, we were four sisters... one soul.
On to tomorrow, each to her separate goal.'*

— "Let Me Look At You," the finale to "Little Women" by
Mark Adamo

Can you control another person's destiny?

Perhaps it is better to ask: How long does it take for an adult to learn he or she cannot?

"Little Women," Louisa May Alcott's tale of sisters growing up in New England after the Civil War, asks both questions and comes to a distinct conclusion.

American composer Mark Adamo makes that the theme of the concluding quartet of his operatic version, which will be staged this weekend to complete the 2016 Astoria Music Festival.

The Friday evening show and Saturday matinee at the Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center will conclude three weeks of 13

classical concerts that have lured appreciative crowds to the North Coast for the 14th annual festival.

The four sisters will be played by the actresses who sang the roles in the Eugene Opera production in May. That show was directed by the opera company's general manager, Mark Beudert, and conducted by its musical director, Andrew Bisantz.

Both return to coordinate the Astoria production, with members of the Astoria Music Festival apprentice vocal artists program joining the cast. However, instead of an orchestra, which was used in Eugene, Adamo's music will be played by solo pianist Jeremy Reger.

Beudert, who is the director of the festival's

ASTORIA MUSIC FESTIVAL

'Little Women'

Opera sung in English, based on the book by Louisa May Alcott, music and libretto by Mark Adamo, directed by Mark Beudert and conducted by Andrew Bisantz, featuring pianist Jeremy Reger and a cast from Eugene Opera and the Astoria Music Festival apprentice artists.

7:30 p.m. Friday, July 1, and 2 p.m. Saturday, July 2, at the Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center, 16th Street and Franklin Avenue, in Astoria. Preview talk by Mark Beudert, one hour before each performance. For details, visit www.astoriamusicfestival.org

Apprentice Vocal Artist Program, will speak about the opera one hour before each performance.

The work, written in 1998, was the first opera by American composer Mark Adamo. It was commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera and has been performed around the United States and in Canada, Israel, Australia and Belgium.

The Boston Globe called it "The 'Cinderella' of recent American operas."

Critics have highlighted the manner in which Adamo uses recurring musical themes to contrast the lead

character Jo's stubbornness with her sisters' acceptance of change.

While he acknowledges that many readers see Alcott's classic as a story of a free-spirited writer torn between the love of the boy next door and a man of the world, Adamo once offered a more complex interpretation.

"Closer reading of Louisa May Alcott's novel revealed to me a deeper theme: that even those we love will, in all innocence, wound and abandon us until we learn that their destinies are not

ours to control," he said.

"So I shaped a libretto in which Jo's love for her sisters regained the power it wielded in the original novel — and imagined a finale in which Jo at last accepts that even sincerest love and strongest will cannot stave off change and loss."

The March sisters will be sung by mezzo sopranos Hannah Penn (Jo) and Alicia Piper Garcia (Meg), and sopranos Emily Way (Beth) and Jocelyn Thomas (Amy). Brett Sprague (Laurie), Tim McCoy (John Brooke) and Zachary Lennox (Friedrich Bhaer) play their suitors.

Bisantz, the conductor, is thrilled at the opportunity to reprise the show he and Beudert staged in Eugene. He has been involved with other productions with Glimmerglass Opera in upstate New York and Northwestern University in Illinois. It is a popular choice for college music programs, in part, because it offers four solid female leads. "These are the best contemporary roles for mezzo sopranos," he said.

Penn, who sings Jo, worked with Bisantz at Glimmerglass, in Florida and Eugene. "She is a crackerjack

musician," he said. "There's a depth to her performance as an actress that relates to her musical ability." Jo never leaves the stage. "It's an endurance test," Bisantz said.

The libretto draws on references to John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" as well as references to Goethe's writings sung by Jo's second suitor, the German Dr. Bhaer.

Bisantz predicts audiences will enjoy the witty first act, then share the emotion of Beth's death, the manner in which the sisters react to their suitors, and Jo's final

acknowledgment of the inevitability of change.

"It's a very American opera," he said, noting that Adamo earned a

degree in play writing before his musical credentials.

"Mark Adamo is a wonderful composer. The way he wrote this, using the language of the post-Civil War, is really why the piece is so effective. Mark wanted to tell the story, first and foremost, and add his musical ideas — but they all tell the story."

Bisantz describes the "gorgeous" quartet at the end, as "the most nostalgic piece in modern opera — sophisticated not simplistic."

**'THESE ARE
THE BEST
CONTEMPORARY
ROLES FOR
MEZZO
SOPRANOS.'**



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Eugene Opera General Manager Mark Beudert directs the festival's Apprentice Vocal Artist Program.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Mezzo soprano Hannah Penn will sing the part of Jo March in "Little Women."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Eugene Opera's musical director, Andrew Bisantz, will conduct "Little Women" at the Astoria Music Festival.

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