

Francesco Santelli's Opera "Tamar of Timna, from Misery to Glory" Debuts

September 25, 2013

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Santelli directed the Fall 2013 production of Mozart's "L' Oca del Cairo" at Caldwell College.

This is an edited front-page article from the October 2013 edition of Passaic County Arts News, which includes a Unificationist theological perspective on the inspiring work of one New Jersey-based Unificationist's interpretation of the story of Tamar through an opera that he wrote and produced based on the Biblical insights of Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

The Assisi Music Festival commissioned an opera by Francesco Santelli, the Composer in Residence of the Festival and the Founder and Artistic Director of the Garden State Opera, who wrote and produced an original opera titled "*Tamar of Timnah, from Misery to Glory*."

The world premiere performance of '*Tamar of Timnah, from Misery to Glory*' will be at Caldwell College in Caldwell, New Jersey on Sunday October 27, 2013 at 4 p.m. Plans are being made for a performance in Italy in 2014.



Francesco Santelli wrote and produced an original opera about Tamar da Timnah.

Santelli, a native of Rome, Italy who joined the Unification movement in 1973, and his wife, Luella, are both Unificationists who were Blessed in marriage by Reverend and Mrs. Moon in 1982 at the Madison Square Garden Blessing in New York City. They have two daughters and two sons and currently reside in New Jersey. Having taken much inspiration from the words of Rev. Moon throughout his personal life, Santelli explained that Moon's words were also the source of his artistic inspiration this time too. During one speech in particular many years ago, he heard Rev. Moon explain that, "If you can understand about Tamar, you can understand the whole [Divine] Principle." With this in mind, the composer wanted to create a work to inspire as many people as possible with her story. Keeping to the theme of a great woman in providential history, Santelli found it fitting to dedicate this work to the wife of the man who inspired this work, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon.

"This is a tremendously inspiring work of our brother, Francesco Santelli," wrote Dr. Ann I. She continued: "His creative genius in teaching the Divine Principle through the art form of opera could be a very inspiring story."

Santelli, librettist and composer of the work, has pointed out that the story of Tamar in the Bible (Genesis 38) is a brief but fascinating and intriguing one that attracted his attention years back. The figure of this woman, Tamar, has been criticized by many biblical scholars because of her peculiar behavior; in fact, in the story, she hid her identity among some temple prostitutes in the city of Enaim and enticed Judah into a sexual relationship there. "This has generated so much controversy about the nature and motivation of this woman," says Santelli. However, he added, "I was mainly inspired because she accepted the course and the lonely path without anger or resentment and was ready to risk her life and her dignity in order to become the mother of her future twins and the progenitor of the Messiah."



Family portrait of the Santelli family and sons and daughter-in-law and grandchild.

According to the composer, in the opera *'Tamar da Timna'*, audiences will be presented with a new view of Tamar. The dramatic interpretation of the libretto and the music will view Tamar's actions as "inspired from above." Judah and Tamar are immortalized in the Gospels for being the lead progenitors of a glorious genealogy that goes from King David to the Messiah himself, hence from the *miser*y of the Enaim's moment to the *glory* of Judah's justification of her, and finally her position in history. Jacob, Judah's father, had prophesized on his death bed that the 'lion of the tribe of Judah' will do great things, and such a prophecy could not have been fulfilled if Tamar hadn't done what she did. In the end Judah himself acknowledges Tamar's greatness with the famous words "She is more righteous than I am" (in Hebrew, *Tsadakah Meemeney!*)

The story of Tamar is inspirational, Santelli maintains, because of her faith in the will of heaven, which she espoused at the risk of her life. She understood through her life of prayer and through knowing the prophecy of Jacob on his deathbed that Judah's lineage had to continue.

"We cannot judge others. She was not a prostitute even though she had to dress as one to obtain her purpose," Santelli explained. "She endured the course and the lies and broken promises of Judah to advance God's plan."



The painting "Tamar and Judah" by Horace Vernet, 1840.

He pointed out that the sexual element in this story is interesting and peculiar in that, the relationship between the two was not simply a horizontal human act, but rather reinforced with a vertical or 'spiritual' purpose. When Tamar was on the verge of being executed for her adulterous affair, she cared little for her life, only that the lineage would continue and that the prophecy would be fulfilled. "Tamar stands as an inspirational figure and a role model if we understand her motivations for her actions."

The opera has other characters: Hirah, friend of Judah, a dubious influence on him, and Zemira, a character not present in the biblical story; Tamar's mother, who plays an important role in the opera as comforter of Tamar and who pleads with Judah for Tamar's life when she is about to be sent to death for the alleged sin of adultery. Shela, the third son of Judah and Batsheva, who was promised to Tamar, is part of the cast of characters and, of course, Judah -- conflicted yet destined for greatness (he will appear drunk at one point and solicits sex from temple prostitutes).

As for the music, the opera is tonal and melodic with dissonant sections throughout, according to the different emotions of the moments for the characters and what the libretto calls for. There are several Hebraic motifs and cadences used, and the staging is in biblical times.

There are three dances in the work, including the *Kadeishas* Dance (The Temple Prostitutes), Tamar's dance for Judah and a dance in Judah's household to celebrate the return of his son Shela, all performed by *The Kennedy Dancers* of Jersey City. The libretto is in Italian with English supertitles, and the production is staged with an orchestra.

Tax-deductible contributions are welcome (The Garden State Opera is a nonprofit 501 c 3 organization). For anyone interested in learning more about the opera, or to have a performance organized in your community please contact GSO at (973) 685- 9972 or email to gstopera@optonline.net, the GSO website is gardenstateopera.homestead.com.