

## Composer's Statement

We live in complicated times. At the point when some Caucasians are just beginning to engage issues of how their privilege expresses itself politically and culturally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is impossible not to be aware that, as the composer-librettist of this opera, I am a white man telling a story about brown-skinned people. Simply put, in one sense, "it is not my story to tell."

Yet the subject of the story I am telling is the very beginning of the deep racial divisions in America, a division caused by the belief that racial superiority was determined by skin colour and religion - by the very idea that racial superiority is even possible. This division was created by people who look like me. In the 1500 and 1600s - when this story is set - it was the Spanish. In the 1700s and 1800s it was the English and other northern Europeans, ultimately developing the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which in turn led to the breaking of one-sided "treaties" that were, in reality, merely a fig leaf for what would now be called ethnic cleansing. It is a division that is, in many ways, both still current and yet invisible to too many people. The story of Po'pay is about the havoc that was wreaked upon the indigenous population, the results of which are so interwoven in the fabric of modern American life - whether it be the running of pipelines through sacred lands or insensitive sports mascots - that many don't even see them. In that sense, this story and the history behind it is everyone's: it is as American a story as George Washington, or Martin Luther King - and as complicated.

Having said all that, **Po'pay** is not a *mea culpa*, or a political opera. The characters in it - both historical and fictional - are shaped, as we all are, by historical context, by the events surrounding them, and inevitably also, and perhaps most importantly, simply by the way they are wired as human beings. As in all good drama, it is a potent and combustible mix, well suited to the opera stage - a main hero struggling with internal demons; a naïve, idealistic younger sister; a freshly-minted priest whose eyes - and heart - are opened, not closed, by intolerance and racism; a cynical Governor aided and abetted by both army and the church.

On many levels, then, the story of Po'pay is a wonderful story, and one that is sadly virtually unknown to anyone outside New Mexico, where, in the words of Professor Enrique Lamadrid, Po'pay is

"our 'national hero' . . . who taught all of us the well fought lessons of cultural resistance. . . For almost a century and a half. . . poets, historians, journalists, and politicians have considered (him) as a cultural and political hero for all New Mexicans. His defiance of the Spanish colonial invaders from the south became an inspiration to later generations, both Hispano and Pueblo, for their resistance of the second wave of colonialism coming in from the east, from the United States."

While a little is taught in schools about 19<sup>th</sup> century Native American leaders - though even then only through the lens of the conflict resulting from white expansion - the colonialism of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries is too often represented as Europeans "discovering" a virtually empty continent. We should know our history.

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Throughout the creation of the opera I was very aware that Pueblo religious practices are secret, and that the right to that secrecy is paramount. **It is therefore very important that the listener understand that any religious sentiments expressed by the Pueblo characters in the opera are the words I have written for them, and only that.** Whilst traditional Tewa religious figures and ideas are occasionally referenced - in the same way that Jesus and God are referred to by the Spanish characters - the words my characters utter are not an attempt to represent or reproduce in any way beliefs of the Pueblos. I do use, in the chorus “Weave for us a garment” that the women sing in Act One and Three, my free adaptation of a prayer that is sometimes identified as Tewa. I have no idea whether that attribution is accurate, but I took the risk of including it because the prayer’s language is so similar in both content and intent to prayers from many earth-based spiritualities from Celtic to African animism that it seems to me to be a trans-cultural expression of faith. I chose it (like the quotations from Meister Eckhart and Psalm 139) because its slight familiarity and sense of being from outside the immediate world of the story lends it a depth greater than anything I could have written myself. It is also a much needed counterpoint to the rigid type of “weaponised” Christianity evidenced by the Spanish colonists.

Similarly, the Great Mother that Ku-tsa-yi reveres is purely and only a mash-up of my own imagination, a ‘generic’ combination of different traditions that I hope will offend none. Some phrases were culled from translations of Hopi songs by those too rare examples among the early ethnographers in the 1920s and 1930s who were there to record, not judge. She is a construct, a personification of the religious impulse found across cultures that calls us to be our best selves. In my opera she inspires in Ku-tsa-yi a faith that is to be envied, and one that is a key component of the unfolding drama.

Ultimately, to write a story that ignored the fact that the Pueblos had a belief system that was such an integral part of daily life would have been to reduce them to two-dimensional beings, not fully realised characters. For Po’pay it would have been as disfiguring as amputating an arm or a leg.

In the year where the indigenous main character of the film **Roma** (whose writer-director was *not* indigenous) was nominated not as a supporting actor but for the leading role, I can only hope that the time is ripe for Po’pay to step into the spotlight he so richly deserves, whatever the ethnicity of the writer holding the pencil.