

The Opera

Drama thrives on conflict, and the story of Po'pay's Rebellion is ripe with it: this fact alone calls out for a musical setting. And if the sheer drama of the events themselves weren't sufficient reason for an operatic treatment, the main elements that lead to the Rebellion - colonialism, cultural imperialism, racism and religious intolerance - are still such thorny issues that sometimes the story feels eerily contemporary. Or perhaps more accurately, they are issues that are (finally!) beginning to be re-examined in our own times.

However, following the long line of stage works that are critical, by means of analogy and implication, of the times in which they were written, my opera is not a sermon, rather an invitation to the audience, if they so choose, to make comparisons and draw their own conclusions. I wanted to tell a purely human story, not a mythological one or a polemic.

Because the story is rooted in historical events which have more than one interpretation, my first decision was how to portray Po'pay: is he a King Arthur figure or a Robespierre? The realisation that he could be both was, in many ways, the key to unlocking the drama of the story. Rather than deciding between the opposing beliefs about his role in the Rebellion (religious leader or warrior), I made this dichotomy his internal dilemma, summed up by the question his sister asks: "which rules your heart: the kiva or the lash?" Which is his primary motivator: cultural and political independence (*kiva*) or revenge for the cruelties he and his people had suffered at the hands of the Spanish? (*the lash*). That is Po'pay's dramatic arc, and one of which he himself may have been unaware. Having been shunned by his sister, his last words are: "This heart, this broken drum, whose once proud rhythms stutter and fail, must make now a new music. I have forgone a sister's love for this: Tomorrow we will take feathers and corn pollen and in freedom offer them to the Gods." His rebellion has been successful, but the personal price has been very high. Nevertheless, one is left with the impression that, given the opportunity, he would not do anything differently a second time.

While the main historical events of the Rebellion shape the large scale form of the opera, characters have been invented to illustrate, investigate and ultimately propel Po'pay's internal dialogue:

- a younger sister, Ku-tsa-yi, who questions his motives as she sees the Pueblos turning towards violent uprising. She represents an idyllic past and tries to pull Po'pay back towards reverence for the Great Mother and away from military confrontation
- Pedro, a newly ordained Priest (and former courtier), who comes to Santa Fe "for the spiritual care of the natives", but is instead transformed by the cruelty he observes the Puebloans suffering at the hands of his fellow Spaniards. He becomes friendly with Ku-tsa-yi and a nascent, innocent romance is implied. This relationship enrages Po'pay who sees it as a personal, political and spiritual betrayal. It is a possible tipping point in his internal debate
- the various Pueblo leaders in the opera are historical figures who played a part in the Rebellion, but their words are mine. Their function in the drama is to nudge Po'pay towards direct action
- on the Spanish side there are two Franciscan Brothers who articulate the cruelty and religious intolerance under which the Pueblos suffer (with a secondary plot line of conflict with Pedro) and the Captain of the garrison who calls the Puebloans "simple, child-like creatures", and articulates how they are forced to serve their masters

- Governor Otermin, the actual governor of Santa Fe in 1680. Whilst he left an extensive - if self-serving - account of the Rebellion, the words he uses in the opera are purely fictional. He mediates the (well documented) political infighting between the secular administration and the church, but ultimately carries the authority of the King. His heartless and unthinking pragmatism (best illustrated in his comment to the Franciscan Brothers “Get the church finished and convert them afterwards. Then you can whip them as much as God demands.”) is a cause of much suffering for the Puebloans
- women of the Pueblo, who function a little like a Greek chorus