

theBluenote

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THE RUDI E. SCHEIDT SCHOOL OF MUSIC NEWSLETTER

New Opera Inspired by *The Da Vinci Code*

Dr. John Baur was so fascinated with the process of writing his first opera, *The Promise* (based on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), he wanted to write another. While casting about for a topic to inspire him, he bought and read one of the 70 million copies of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. The fictional novel draws heavily upon the writings of the Gnostics, a segment of the early Christian community, whose theology has long been rejected by the Catholic Church. Although he had no background in Gnosticism, Baur was so intrigued he spent the next year and a half researching the subject. His readings included the Gnostic Gospels and *Pistis Sophia* which recounts the 11 years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Many of the writings Dr. Baur studied portray Mary Magdalene as Jesus' favorite disciple and the one who would logically become the leader of the Church. "In fact," he says, "they depict her as the only one of the disciples who really understood what Jesus taught." Another assertion of the documents is that Mary and the disciple Peter were at odds with each other in the early years of the Church. Mary was part of the Johannine community which may have included Gnostics. The community was open and diverse in its membership and advocated the total equality of women. Peter was part of a community in Jerusalem that was more conservative, exclusive in its membership and male dominated. Thus, the two opposed each other on what the new Church should be and who should lead it.

Using this scenario as his setting, Baur has entitled the opera *Magdala* and is basing it on the clash between Mary and Peter. The opera casts two characters as Mary Magdalene: a soprano in the role of the younger woman and a mezzo as Mary in her final years. The storyline is presented by the younger Mary and is set in the time immediately following the crucifixion. Intermingled throughout

the opera there are sub-scenes in which the older Mary is dictating her thoughts to a scribe.

The recurring themes of inclusion and exclusion provide the substance of the work. "Basically the idea of the opera is that in the conflict, Peter won and the world lost," he says. Noting similarities between this concept and the theme of *The Promise*, Baur observes, "What always bothered me about racial segregation was that it marginalized an entire group of people. In doing so, we have lost what they might have contributed to the world. It is the same with women. With women as equals, we would live in a totally different society today. Men and women approach things in completely different ways and we have lost centuries of what that might have given us."

Musically, Baur established a tonal style and sound in *The Promise* and does not plan to radically diverge from it in *Magdala*. However, he says there are some scenes that might lend themselves to other styles such as chanting. He has already completed a libretto but is currently revising it to add scenes and further develop the personalities of Mary and Peter. He hopes to finish sketching the music by the end of December and to complete the orchestral score in the summer of next year.

As for controversy, Baur is not terribly worried. "We don't really know what happened in the first century," he says, "but even in the Gospels, Mary Magdalene is the only person at the crucifixion, burial and resurrection." The opera will not address the red-hot topic raised in *The Da Vinci Code*—whether or not Mary was in fact Jesus' wife. "This story is about the conflict over the inclusion of women. To me, that was an even more radical idea."

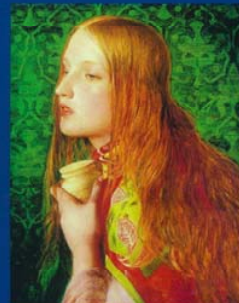
The Many Faces of Mary Magdalene



In the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great mistakenly proclaimed Mary Magdalene to be the unnamed sinful woman with an alabaster jar in the Gospel. Because of this she is perceived by many as a repentant sinner, possibly even a repentant prostitute. (Peter Paul Rubens, Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee, c. 1618-1620.)



A character in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* speculates about the person sitting to Jesus' right in "The Last Supper", who is usually assumed to be John, the beloved disciple. The character contends that this is not John, but a feminine figure – Mary Magdalene.



In both ancient and modern accounts, Mary Magdalene emerges as an enigmatic figure, with evidence that only leads to more questions about her role in the early Christian Church. Today many view her as having been minimized by an all-male religious establishment. (Anthony Frederick Sandys, Magdalene, c. 1860.)