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## UPDATE

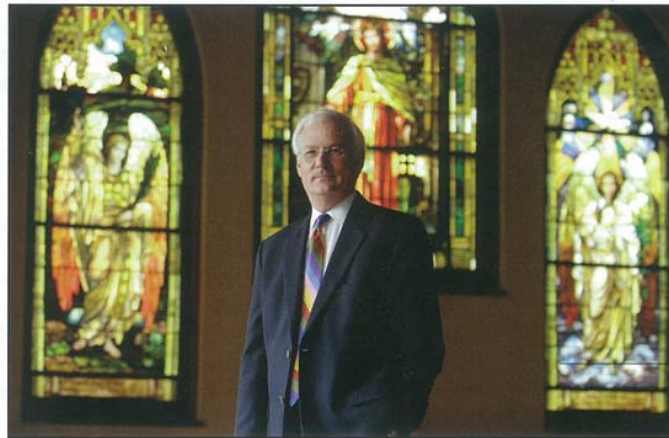
*The newsletter for University of Memphis faculty and staff*Baur writes opera inspired by *Da Vinci Code*

BY SARA HOOVER

Dr. John Baur, like millions of others, picked up a copy of Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*, and was fascinated enough with the ideas presented to do his own research.

"It was intriguing because I had never, in my wildest dreams, considered the fact that Jesus might have had a wife because that, obviously, is not part of your upbringing in the Christian church. It was a very interesting idea. That's what really hit me," said Baur, professor of music in the Rudi E. Scheidt School of Music.

Baur decided to write *Magdala*, an opera inspired by



Dr. Baur's opera, *Magdala*, draws from *The Da Vinci Code*. (Photo by Lissau)

fourth century Gnostic sources — even older than the 13th century sources Dan Brown used.

The opera tells the story of the conflict between Mary Magdalene and Peter after the

crucifixion of Christ over who should lead the church.

"Some people say that it's a radical notion that she was the wife of Jesus. To me, the radicalness is — not that she was the wife — that she was the heir apparent. She was disciple number one. She understood what Jesus was talking about much better than any of the other guys. They just didn't get it. Peter especially didn't quite understand what (Jesus) was after, so he misinterpreted all kinds of things and essentially, in my interpretation, led the church in the wrong direction."

Baur, who is on sabbatical to finish the opera, was not

See **Opera**, page 8

## Opera

from page 1

interested in Mary Magdalene before reading *The Da Vinci Code*.

"Actually we had so much misinformation about her that I probably wouldn't have been interested. But once I sorted out a lot of that, all of a sudden, it became very intriguing."

*Magdala*, Baur's second full-length opera, is planned for two acts and will run a total of two hours. His first full-length opera, *The Promise*, which chronicles the life and death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was quite different to create since plenty of sources were available on King — much in his own words. The opposite is true of sources for Mary Magdalene.

"We have so little historical information, whereas with King there's volumes and volumes, even in King's verbiage there are 15 books. (Mary Magdalene) is a little different. The slight amount of information that is in the Gospels is very, very small. If you only read the references that specifically say Mary Magdalene, there is very little that is in the *Bible* and it doesn't tell you who she is. The problem I have here is whenever I have Mary Magdalene saying something, it's all invented. I have to figure out what she might have said under the circumstances and then do it."

To give context to the conflict, Baur expanded the opera beyond Mary Magdalene and Peter in the first century to include the reverberations this fallout had during the third through the 13th centuries. Baur pulled in commentary from church fathers, cardinals, bishops, popes and saints, who provided their thoughts on women within the church.

"I bring things from a variety of sources to bolster the argument because the church went in this direction, they lost all of the female influence. That's a very unhealthy kind of thing to only have the male dominance. In the section where I bring in various church fathers and their views on women, Mary Magdalene at one point says, 'A womanless church will create monstrosity.' Their comments about women — especially the so-called heretics who allow women to preach, prophesize — they have some very harsh comments about that along with Mary (Magdalene)."

With the content based on religious texts, it is no surprise Baur is considering performing the opera in churches. To accomplish that, Baur is writing the opera for a smaller instrumental group, so the opera or parts of it can be performed in churches and then written for a full orchestra so *Magdala* can be performed in the traditional operatic setting as well.

"I may write it initially for 15 instruments," said Baur. "The reason for that is if you have a small version like that, a chamber version, you could perform the entire thing or parts of it in a church setting. So I'm not there yet, but I think that's probably where I'm going. I'll have the original version for 15 instruments plus all the voices, and then I will produce after that a larger version for a standard orchestra so that it could be done in an operatic setting or a church setting and it would be possible to do either one."

Baur started the research two and a half years ago and expects to finish the writing and composing by this summer. The opera is anticipated for the stage in either summer 2010 or summer 2011 at the Chautauqua Opera.

"Essentially this was a struggle between a patriarchal concept of the Christian church and a completely

inclusive concept which is what Mary (Magdalene) had but, more to the point, that's what Jesus had. Who knows how much we've lost both in terms of economic and creative power. To a certain extent that's the overriding story that I'm telling: It wasn't supposed to be that way and we blew it right at the beginning."