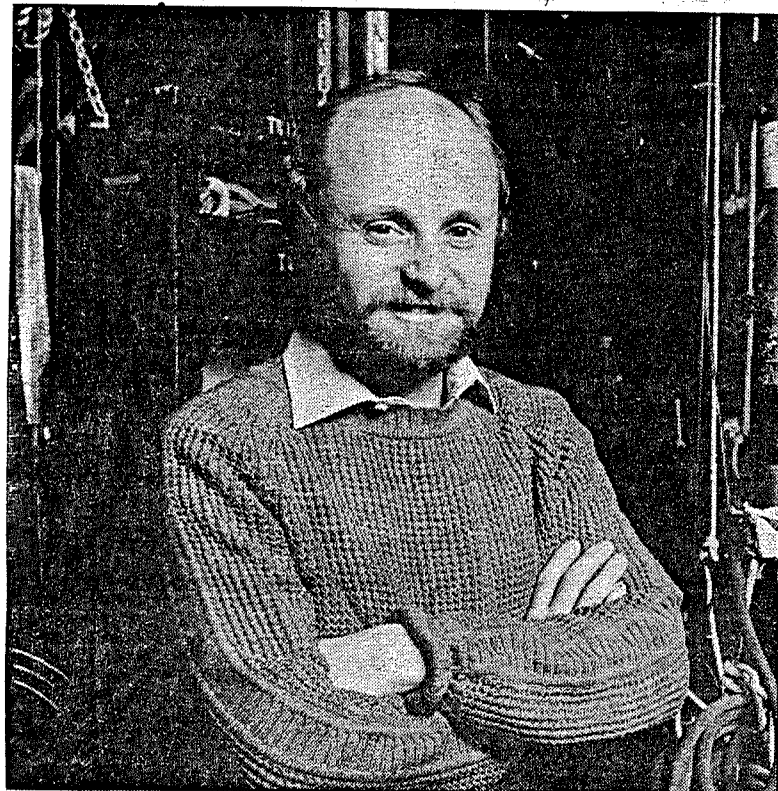


Lively Arts

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NEWS PHOTO / JOSEPH WIEDELMAN
Composer William Neil (left), a native of Pontiac, and a scene from his newly premiered opera, "The Guilt of Lillian Sloan."

New opera sparks new hope

By Nancy Malitz
News Staff Writer

CHICAGO — *The Guilt of Lillian Sloan*, an opera by the 30-year-old Pontiac native William Neil, opened here Friday with Mrs. Sloan on trial and the verdict in doubt.

The trial story was an apt metaphor for a number of issues surrounding this world premiere performance sponsored by the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Not only the success of Neil's music to a libretto by Chicago actor-director Frank Galati was in question, but also the tenuous future of opera itself, and the direction taken by the Lyric Opera to do something about it.

LYRIC OPERA in 1983 launched an aggressive composer-in-residence program to combat the erosion of new composition in this, the most complex of Western civilization's theatrical art forms. After a nationwide search lasting six months, Neil was chosen for a three-year fellowship (at \$15,000 a year) provided by Lyric's long-time visionary benefactors Lee and Brena Freeman. The grant provided Neil total immersion in the day-to-day workings of a major opera company, offering him all the contact with singers, conductors, stage

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directors, lighting engineers and designers he wanted.

Lyric hoped to provide Neil with a sense of "the scene" that his 19th century counterpart Giuseppe Verdi took for granted in the Italian opera heyday, or that Richard Rodgers enjoyed on Broadway in the 1950s — a scene that would stimulate creative response *realistically* grounded in theatrical craft.

THE COMPANY had good reason to fear the kind of opera written in relative isolation from the opera world: Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki was already an ace at orchestral writing when he accepted Lyric's commission for a 1976 opera *Paradise Lost*, based on Milton's poem. He had even written an opera before — *The Devils of Loudun*. But his magnum opus turned out to be unrealistic in the extreme. It arrived fully two years late, massively overscale in its physical requirements and theatrical values, and just plain unsuccessful musically. The opera precipi-

tated Lyric's own fall from grace when it crippled the company financially with \$2 million in total cost and enraged an audience which lost patience trying to follow a convoluted plot and unintelligible singing.

The idea of catching a talented composer when he or she is still young and malleable belongs to Ardis Krainik, Lyric's general manager. A composer-in-residence program has been, as she puts it, "a pet project" for some time. With the Freemans' help, she put the plan in place to honor the Lyric's 30th anniversary and also the 10th anniversary of the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists, the training wing. The opera center produced *The Guilt of Lillian Sloan* before an invited audience at Cahn Auditorium on the Northwestern University campus. Lee Schaenen conducted; librettist Galati served double duty as stage director.

NEIL'S CREDITS at 30 already are impressive: A doctoral student of composer Leslie Bassett at the University of

Michigan, Neil already has won the Prix de Rome, three awards from the ASCAP and BMI composers' licensing societies, the Charles Ives Award, a National Endowment for the Arts award and a Fulbright grant.

Yet he readily admits he had a lot to learn, describing the response from seasoned pros at the trial run of his opera's Act 1 a year ago as "a humbling experience," especially the lecture soprano Barbara Martin delivered on what she called awkward vocal writing. Today, with his full-fledged, heavily revised and often very singable opera an accomplished fact, he knows that such lectures can be constructive.

The Guilt of Lillian Sloan is a British courtroom drama based on the celebrated Bywater-Thompson 1922 murder case — a woman is assigned the death penalty for her husband's murder because of letters suggesting she had committed adultery. Adultery and conspiracy to commit murder are two separate crimes, but in the Victorian court such issues had a tendency to become confused.

Neil has a juicy part for Lillian, a soprano, and secondary but substantial roles for her lover Owen, a tenor; the

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husband, a bass; the solicitor general, a baritone; Lillian's mother, a soprano, and the jury-chorus.

The opera begins with the jury delivering its verdict of guilty to some of the most rhythmically aggressive and generally exciting music in the entire show. The rest of the story is told in 10 scenes that move back and forward in time to sketch out Lillian's motivations and predicaments.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Neil's and Galati's debt to the 20th century operatic masters Benjamin Britten and Alban Berg was forcefully acknowledged. The judgmental chatter of the initial jury scene, played out against the tragic and otherworldly remarks of the out-cast Lillian, recall the unforgettable opening scene of Britten's *Peter Grimes*. And the sequence of psychological landscapes revealing the victim's increasing torment suggests the structural technique of Berg's *Woz-*

zeck, a link which Galati, as stage director, reinforced with highly charged and expressionistic stage movements on Diane Williams' black skeletal set.

AFTER THE jury's initial "Guilty!" utterance, the opera's most successful scenes came in the 2nd Act, when carefully distilled theatrical points were made by both Galati and Neil, clearing up the multi-layered confusion characterizing too much of the 1st Act.

Act 2 is an extended showpiece for the guilt-ridden Lillian, played sympathetically by soprano Joan Gibbons. Lillian, alone in her prison cell, is tormented by imaginary voices (whispered by the chorus); then is joined by her mother in an affecting duet and mother's lullaby. After such scenes, her hallucinations in court and confused behavior during the opera's denouement make sense in a way that is not possible during much of Act 1.

FOR A first-time listener, too much comes too quickly in Act 1. Galati's introduction of the carousel as a metaphor for the unhappy trap of Lillian's life is a good one, but it's almost lost in the general information glut — instead of appearing confused, Lillian is merely confusing. The texture of Neil's own music during these Act 1 scenes is also quite thick and homogeneous. One would appreciate a few moments of simple lyric abandon like those he so readily provides in Act 2; or, failing that, some other vividly contrasting device to better pace the story.

Yet it is impossible to deny the essentially attractive musical personality of Neil and the sharp theatrical instincts and poetic ear of Galati. And from their efforts, enthusiasm for the composer-in-residence program has grown: composers Dominick Argento,

Stephen Paulus and Hugo Weisgall were brought in to witness Friday's performance and offer suggestions for "possibly the next" project, now that Neil's done. "Possibly the next" is a phrase everyone here utters with a sidelong look at Lee Freeman. It was taken as a good sign that the benefactor looked proud of Neil's effort.