

Composer Learns From The

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CHICAGO

WILLIAM NEIL says he was equipped mostly with theories when he began his duties as composer-in-residence at the Lyric Opera of Chicago in February of 1984.

That's not to say he felt unqualified for the job. Although he was only 29 when the news of his appointment came, Neil had already garnered enough awards — from BMI, ASCAP, the Academy-institute of Arts and Letters — to be the envy of most of his contemporaries. After finishing his master's degree at the Cleveland Institute of Music he spent the 1978-79 season as a Fulbright scholar in West Germany. In the fall of 1983, when he first learned of the Lyric Opera's program, he was living in Italy, the beneficiary of a Prix de Rome. The University of Michigan doctoral candidate had quite a bit of music in his portfolio, and several of his more recent pieces involved the human voice. Until the offer from Chicago actually came, however, he'd never seriously considered writing an opera.

"But inside I was dying to try it," Neil said last weekend. "I'm glad I got my chance."

HE WAS STILL basking in the glow of the June 6 premiere of "The Guilt of Lillian Sloan," the two-act music drama that represents the culmination of his involvement with the Lyric Opera. Officially the one-night-only performance at Northwestern University's 1,200-seat Cahn Auditorium was a private affair, a production meticulously rehearsed and lavishly staged yet intended only for the eyes and ears of the Lyric's friends. But invitations were extended to anyone who called the phone number published in the Chicago papers, and the out-of-town press corps was as large as any that gathers to comment on additions to the American opera repertoire. The place was filled to capac-

ity; not surprisingly, the prevailing mood at the reception was of the sort one associates with a smashing success.

"LILLIAN SLOAN" is a boldly adventurous score, an opera on a grand scale spiced with dissonant intervals and disjunct rhythms, a new work not at all like the easily accessible pieces Opera Theatre of St. Louis has presented in the last several years.

But its pacing is too weak for it to be viable.

The intensity of the prelude continues unabated for the entire 48-minute first act; for all the deftness with which Neil varies his germinal materials, the tempo and volume levels have the effect of being constant, so much so that after a short while what is supposed to be a compelling murder trial takes on the tedious tone of a screaming match. Act II begins with a relatively gentle scene during which the opera's title character is visited in her prison cell and comforted by her mother; the respite is hardly enough to offset the predictable hysteria that pours from the stage when the action returns to the courtroom. For a listener who during the previous two hours has tried hard to find something in the music that offers clues to the characters' emotional make-up, it comes only as a relief when Mrs. Sloan and her lover are finally led to the gallows.

No matter how one measures the artistic worth of Neil's opera, though, the circumstances under which it came about deserve high praise.

When Ardis Krainik succeeded Carol Fox as general manager six years ago, she decided she needed to do something that would in part make up for the company's neglect of contemporary American music. With funds secured mostly from Chicago arts patrons Brena and Lee Freeman, early in 1983 Krainik announced the composer-in-residence program. It was — and still is — the only program of its kind in

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Wings, Gets A Passing Grade

this country

SIMPLY PUT, the Lyric wanted to find a promising young composer and install him in its facility.

The stipend would be small — just \$15,000 per year — but the composer would have complete access to all the company had to offer. Attendance at rehearsals and performances would be unrestricted, and visiting conductors, designers and stage directors would be available for consultation. Far more significant, certain singers connected with the company — not the big international stars, of course, but rather the dozen or so younger performers who make up the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists — would be more or less at the composer's service throughout his tenure. It was expected that the composer address himself to writing a work performable by the Lyric's American Artists ensemble. But there was no requirement that the opera actually be completed during the three-year residency. And there were no guarantees that a completed work would actually be produced.

"**FD ALWAYS BEEN** interested in the theater and the cinema," Neil said, "and I think that most of the music I've written has been based largely on 'dramatic' gestures. But I had never really given much thought to how operas are constructed. There was a great deal to learn from just standing in the dark and watching performances of Verdi and Puccini night after night."

There was also a great deal to learn — some of it in the form of painful lessons — from plunging headlong into the creative process.

Neil started working on an opera — a setting of the Anne Frank story — almost as soon as he arrived in Chicago; two weeks later he abandoned it when he learned that another composer had laid claim to the same literary source.

His second choice was "The Devil's Stocking," the novel by Nelson Algren based on the murder trial of prize-fighter Ruben "Hurricane" Carter; it was only after two scenes of the opera had been orchestrated and performed before a private audience in June of 1984 that the executor of the Algren estate decided to raise the fee for rights to the novel beyond what the Lyric Opera was willing to pay.

UNDAUNTED, Neil hunted up the transcript of a 1920s English murder trial he remembered reading about. Northwestern University theater professor Frank Galati liked the idea and agreed to fashion the libretto and take charge of the stage direction. Thus, a little less than two years ago, "The Guilt of Lillian Sloan" was conceived.

"For me, the real learning started when I began to collaborate with Galati and when I began to apply to my own work the insights I was gaining by studying the operas that made up the Lyric's regular season," Neil said.

"**I LEARNED**, for example, that a successful opera is based on a quick exchange of visual, sonic and dramatic elements, a kaleidoscopic arrangement that makes the attention constantly shift from one element to another. I learned that in successful operas action is contained within the opera itself, not created by the stage director. I learned that a successful opera composer uses his control over the listeners' emotions to get at their minds.

"By the time I entered the third year of the residency most of my theoretical ideas about intervallic structuring and 'symmetrical' harmonies had taken a back seat to the needs of musical theater. No matter how valid they may have been from a purely intellectual point of view, their stock value seemed to go down the more I concentrated on making the score dramatically effective. That's the main thing."

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