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Turning Point Ensemble revives The Lake, 60 years on

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By Alexander Varty, November 7, 2012

A sense of history runs powerfully through a new production of Barbara Pentland's opera *The Lake*—beginning with the very surprising fact that this striking work is only now receiving its premiere, 60 years after its creation.



The Turning Point Ensemble is helping to give the 1952 Canadian opera *The Lake* its premiere as a way to mark composer Barbara Pentland's centenary.

Few Canadian operas were being mounted in 1952, and after being performed once for a CBC broadcast, *The Lake* was shelved until Astrolabe Musik Theatre's Heather Pawsey and the Turning Point Ensemble's Owen Underhill hatched plans to revive it as part of Pentland's centenary. For Underhill, it's a way of paying homage to an artist who played a significant role in his own creative development.

"I came to Vancouver in 1981, and I was, I guess, 27 years old then," the conductor, composer, and former Vancouver New Music artistic director explains, on the line from his Vancouver home. "And my first professional performance with Vancouver New Music ended up being conducting Barbara Pentland's *Disasters of the Sun*, with [mezzo-soprano] Phyllis Mailing. So I got to meet Barbara Pentland right away and worked with her on that piece. And you know, of her generation she's one of the three or four most important Canadian composers, so it was interesting, as a young person, to come and get to meet her. She had a reputation of being quite forbidding, but I found her to be actually quite generous and friendly, particularly when you were performing her work. She was always very scrupulous about how it should be done, but she was also very supportive of the performers."

The Lake, which features a libretto from poetic pioneer Dorothy Livesay, deals with figures both historic and mythic. The legendary Ogoopogo plays an important role, but the central story concerns the connection between Okanagan pioneers Susan and John Allison and the First Nations people who already inhabited the region.

"When we think that it was 1952, I would say that it's kind of countercultural," Underhill notes. "And the story is written a little bit more from the point of view of the women rather than the men, so in some ways it's kind of domestic—and a little bit

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countercultural, again.

“Sixty years later, we may look at that or at the representation of First Nations people, and of course it’s kind of a colonial representation,” he adds. “But it’s a fascinating one, and I think it’s important, historically, to see an opera like this.”

Also important is Pentland’s link to the American composer Aaron Copland. “She went to study with Copland in the summers of 1941 and 1942 at what was Tanglewood, in Massachusetts,” Underhill relates. “She said that he was very supportive, and told her she didn’t have to study anymore: she should just go out and compose and do her work. So I think he gave her confidence, and what she took from it stylistically, I suppose, was the clarity and simplicity of his music—and you can certainly hear that in this opera.”

To underscore that connection, Turning Point will also perform Copland’s *Sextet and Vitebsk* at its upcoming concerts, along with *Shadows of Stone*, a newly commissioned work from New York City–based trumpeter and Copland acolyte Dave Douglas. Two American classics, a lost Canadian treasure, and a premiere from a modern master? The shows should be historic in their own right.

The Turning Point Ensemble and Astrolabe Musik Theatre present *The Lake* at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts’ Telus Studio Theatre on Wednesday and Thursday (November 14 and 15).

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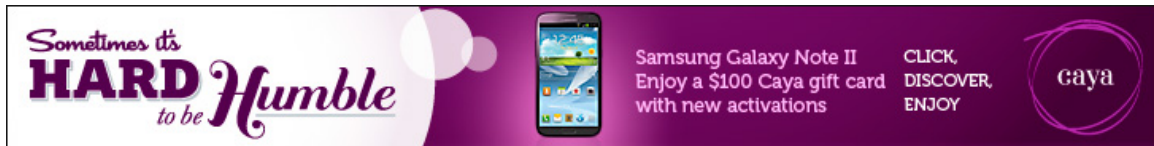
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