There's an old story about a man and his child who were attending a military parade, prompting the child to ask, “What is war, father?” When the father replied with a detailed description of what war was all about, the child innocently asked, “Suppose they gave a war and nobody came?.”

This story could well apply to the First World War, which of all of the wars fought by Western nations seems to be the most senseless. In the opinion of many who have studied the conflict, there was no clear reason for fighting. Moreover, the lack of any real strategy amplified the number of deaths, as the nature of trench warfare made it certain that the advancing army would suffer major casualties in each assault. Soldiers involved in these offensives knew that they were heading for almost certain death.

It is the very nature of this conflict, where it was hard to tell the “good guys” from the “bad guys,” that makes the stories of fraternization with the enemy so compelling. It is no accident that the most famous American film about this war was All Quiet on the Western Front, which tells the story from the German side. (The lead actor, Lew Ayers, was so moved by his experience that he became a pacifist). Likewise, the most notable musical stage treatment of this war prior to Puts’s Silent Night was Kurt Weill and Arthur Green’s Johnny Johnson (1936), a story with a strong pacifist slant. One of the most effective scenes of this play is the one where the German and American priests recite identical prayers, each in his own language, before the battle. At the end, Johnny, after a post-war stay in a mental institution, tries to regain his childlike innocence by becoming a toy salesman, but in the final scene he loses a sale due to his refusal to carry toy soldiers. A bitter satiric 1962 review, Oh, What a Lovely War, grew in popularity as Americans became increasingly disenchanted with their nation’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict.

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The opera *Silent Night* is a remarkably faithful adaptation of the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noel*, which depicts the historically accurate Christmas Eve truce of 1914 through fictional characters. In the words of librettist Mark Campbell, the message of the opera is “War is not sustainable when you come to know your enemy as a person. When you see that the person you might be shooting has a child or a wife or has this life at home and they’re just not the enemy, then it becomes very difficult if not impossible to sustain war.” Yet in the end the story has a sadder message – no matter how well intentioned the soldiers may be, they are the victims of stronger forces which compel them to kill despite their humanity. In this sense the opera adheres to George Bernard Shaw’s definition of tragedy: “It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions, that really concern us.”
CAST, CHARACTERS AND ARTISTS

General character information is listed below. To view the actual cast and artists in the Lyric Opera 2014-15 season production of *Silent Night*, visit www.kcopera.org/productions/silent-night-15/artists.

GERMANS

**Nikolaus Sprink** – A German soldier and opera singer (Tenor)

**Anna Sorensen** – Nikolaus’ lover, also an opera singer (Soprano)

**Lieutenant Horstmayer** – (Baritone)

**Kronprinz** – Son of Kaiser Wilhelm II (Tenor)

SCOTTISH/BRITISH

**Jonathan Dale** – A soldier (Tenor)

**William Dale** – Jonathan’s brother (Baritone)

**Lieutenant Gordon** – (Baritone)

**The British Major** – (Bass-Baritone)

**Father Palmer** – (Baritone)

FRENCH

**Lieutenant Audebert** – (Baritone)

**Ponchel** – Lt. Audebert’s aide-de-camp (Baritone)

**The General** – (Bass)

**Madeline** – Lt. Audebert’s wife (Soprano)

Various German, Scottish, and French soldiers
Prologue: Late Summer, 1914

War is declared. At a Berlin opera house, the announcement disrupts the careers and personal lives of international opera singers Anna Sørensen and Nikolaus Sprink. In a small church in Scotland, it inspires dreams of heroism in William who demands that his younger brother Jonathan immediately enlist with him, as their priest, Father Palmer, looks helplessly on. In the Parisian apartment of the Audeberts, it angers Madeleine who excoriates her husband for leaving to fight while she is pregnant with their first child. With nationalistic songs in the background, the men prepare to leave for war.

Act I: In and around a battlefield in Belgium, near the French border, around Christmas

Scene 1: December 23, late afternoon – A horrific battle is fought between the Germans and the French and Scottish. An attempt by the French and Scottish soldiers to infiltrate the German bunker fails miserably; corpses begin to pile up in the no-man’s land between the three bunkers. When William is shot, Jonathan must leave his brother behind to die.

Scene 2: December 23, evening – In the Scottish bunker, Lieutenant Gordon assesses the casualties after the battle. Father Palmer attempts to offer solace to Jonathan in prayer.

In the French bunker, Lieutenant Audebert discovers the French General waiting in his makeshift office who reprimands him for surrendering and threatens him with a transfer. The General leaves and Audebert laments the loss of his wife’s photograph to his aide de camp, Ponchel. When he is alone Audebert tallies the casualties in the last battle, while missing Madeleine and their child who he has not yet seen. He sings of needing sleep, a sentiment - continued -
echoed by all of the soldiers. As it starts to snow, covering the corpses in no-man’s land, the soldiers slowly begin to sleep. Alone in the German bunker, Nikolaus, reveals to an imagined Anna his despair about war.

**Scene 3: December 24, morning** – In the German bunker, crates have arrived – and little Christmas trees from the Kronprinz. Lieutenant Horstmayer criticizes the Kronprinz for not sending them more useful presents, like ammunition and reinforcements. He receives a directive from headquarters that Nikolaus has been ordered to sing at the nearby chalet of the Kronprinz, along with one Anna Sørensen. Nikolaus departs for the chalet, excited that he will be reunited with Anna again after many months apart.

The French soldiers have received crates of wine, sausages and chocolates from the quartermaster and open them jubilantly. Ponchel, a barber by trade, brings coffee to Audebert and sits him down for a haircut. He is reminded of having coffee with his mother every morning, who lives only an hour away on foot. The alarm clock he carries next to his heart at all times (which shielded him from a bullet in the last battle) rings at ten o’clock every morning to remind him of their daily meeting.

In the Scottish bunker, crates of whiskey have arrived from home. Jonathan writes a letter to his mother, not mentioning his brother’s death.

**Scene 4: December 24, early evening** – At the chalet of the Kronprinz, Anna and Nikolaus perform a duet. Following the performance, they steal a few moments on a terrace outside. Anna notices the cruel effect war has had on her lover’s spirit. She has arranged for Nikolaus to spend the night with her

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and is angry when he says he must return to his fellow soldiers. She vows to accompany him back to the battlefield.

**Scene 5: December 24, night** – In the French bunker, Gueusselin volunteers to infiltrate the German bunker, and with several grenades, sidles onto no-man’s land. The Scottish soldiers drink whiskey and play a bagpipe that another unit has sent them, as Father Palmer sings a sentimental ballad about home. The men in the other bunkers hear the song and react to it with sadness, caution and annoyance. Nikolaus arrives; his fellow soldiers greet him with cheers and applause and gasp in amazement at seeing Anna with him. When the song in the Scottish bunker is finished, Nikolaus sings a rousing Christmas song loudly in response and midway through, the bagpiper begins to accompany. Emboldened, Nikolaus stands atop the bunker raising a Christmas tree as a gesture of friendship. Against the protestations of their superiors, the soldiers from all bunkers stand. Nikolaus bravely moves to the center of no-man’s land. Gueusselin abandons his plan to grenade the German bunker.

Eventually, the three lieutenants, waving a white flag of truce, agree to a cease-fire... but only on Christmas Eve. The soldiers slowly and cautiously move toward each other. They share their provisions, their photos and their names. Anna appears and all of the soldiers are awed by the sight of a woman. Father Palmer has set up a makeshift church and celebrates mass with the men, while Jonathan finds his brother’s body and vows revenge. Father Palmer finishes the mass and urges the men to “go in peace” as bombs explode menacingly in the distance.
Act II

Scene 1: December 25, dawn – The following morning, Jonathan tries to bury his brother. Because the truce is officially over, two German sentries are prepared to shoot him, although Father Palmer and Lieutenant Gordon intervene. Looking on, Horstmayer proposes that it may indeed be time to bury all of the dead. The three lieutenants meet and decide that coffee that the truce will be extended until after the dead in no-man’s land are buried.

Scene 2: December 25, late morning, early afternoon – The soldiers pile up the corpses, Father Palmer delivers last rites and the soldiers form a processional bearing the wagon of bodies away. Anna looks on with Nikolaus and promises that he will not suffer the same fate.

Scene 3: December 25, all day – In the meantime, news about the cease-fire has reached headquarters, and the British Major, the Kronprinz and the French General all react in anger and disbelief. They declare that they will punish the soldiers for their betrayal.

Scene 4: December 25, evening – When the truce is over, Nikolaus ridicules Horstmayer for his allegiance to the Fatherland; Horstmayer arrests him for insubordination. Anna takes Nikokaus’ hand and leads him across no-man’s land as Horstmayer orders his men to shoot, but no one moves. Reaching the French bunker unharmed, Nikolaus demands asylum for Anna and himself.

Scene 5: December 26, late morning – The British Major admonishes the Scottish soldiers for participating in the Christmas truce. They are to be

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transferred to the front lines. When a German soldier is seen crossing the battlefield, the Major orders him killed. Jonathan complies and dispassionately shoots the man.

Lieutenant Audebert returns to his small office and discovers the French General there. The General tells Audebert that he will be transferred to Verdun as punishment for consorting with the enemy and that his unit will be disbanded. Audebert informs the French General – his father – that he has learned he has an infant son named Henri. They vow to survive the war for the child’s sake.

The Kronprinz angrily announces that the German soldiers are to be deployed in Pomerania as punishment. The soldiers are taken off in a boxcar. The battlefield is now completely empty. Snow begins to fall again.

Synopsis courtesy of Minnesota Opera
Except for some brief scenes which comprise the prologue and one scene at a French chalet commandeered by the Germans to serve as a military headquarters, the entire action takes place December 23 through 26, 1914 on a battlefield in France. A rotating stage allows for seamless transitions among the trenches of the three military units, with the center of the stage serving as “no man’s land” between the trenches of the opposing armies.

As in the film, characters in the opera speak/sing in the language they would have used in real life. The composer, who has been described as a “polystylist,” faced the challenge of composing in five languages, each with a different stress system.

**Prologue and Act I:**

The opening scene of the prologue takes place at the Berlin Opera House, where Anna and Nikolaus are appearing in an Italian opera designated as being in the style of Mozart or Gluck. (The music is not borrowed from other composers; it is all original for this opera). In a foreshadowing of the events to follow, the opera is about a woman waiting for her husband’s return from the war. The choice of this topic for the opera within an opera was that of the librettist, because, in his opinion, “Sometimes, opera ennobles war. I wanted to skewer that notion in the opera.” The couple’s on-stage reunion is interrupted by the entrance of a military officer who announces that Germany has been attacked and that war has been declared. To achieve maximum contrast between the world of the opera and the real world, the officer’s words are spoken, not sung. In the background a male chorus sings a battle cry.
The scene shifts to a church in Scotland. Jonathan and Father Palmer are discussing the statues decorating the church, as William bursts in excitedly, announcing that war has been declared and repeatedly singing of military glory. He intimidates Jonathan into enlisting. As in the previous scene, a chorus of soldiers (British this time) sing of the glory of war.

Another scene shift takes us to a garden in France, where Madeline is expressing her anger at Audebert’s leaving her for the war shortly before she is due to give birth to their first child. He assures her that the war will be a short one and that he will return soon. A chorus of French soldiers is heard in the background. (In fact, at the outset of the war, few people envisioned a prolonged conflict).

The various soldiers now appear together on stage, singing in a cacophony of sound about the impending battles. Father Palmer has enlisted as a chaplain. A bloody battle ensues, accompanied by discordant music from the orchestra, and most of the onstage soldiers fall dead. Nikolaus, who is in many ways the moral center of the opera, expresses his disgust with the carnage. As the scene ends, William falls wounded, and Jonathan runs to his side, but he is forced to run for safety, leaving his brother to die alone.

In the Scottish bunker, Lieutenant Gordon assesses the damage. Jonathan tells Father Palmer that he feels guilty about abandoning his brother, and he swears to avenge his death. In the French bunker, the general reprimands Lt. Audebert for retreating in battle. The general tells Audebert that he will be transferred to artillery after Christmas. He leaves. Ponchel enters. Audebert tells him that he is lamenting the loss of his wallet, since it contained
a photograph of his wife. Ponchel, who is a somewhat comic character, tells Audebert that his life was saved when a bullet struck the alarm clock he always carries in his pocket; the reason he carries the clock is to remind himself every morning of the time he would visit his mother for breakfast. He leaves, and in one of the opera's few extended arias, Audebert sings a soliloquy addressed to his wife as he writes the names of the dead and wounded in a journal. (The idea for this juxtaposition was suggested by the director – one small indication of how contemporary opera is truly a team effort).

In contrast to the dissonant music heard in the previous ensemble, the mood turns elegiac as the soldiers in the various trenches sing together in their various languages, welcoming the temporary peace that sleep brings. Nikolaus, however, laments that having witnessed the horrors of war he can never go back to life as he knew it.

A brief fugue (reminiscent of Bach) in the orchestra accompanies the delivery of Christmas trees to the German bunker. Lt. Horstmayer says that he would have preferred a delivery of weapons or additional troops. He informs Nikolaus that he has been summoned to sing at a Christmas party hosted by the Kronprinz (the Kaiser's son) at a chalet behind the lines, where Anna (with whom Nikolaus is romantically linked) will also be singing. Horstmayer is not upset to see him leave, as he does not believe that artists make good soldiers anyway.

At the French bunker, the soldiers celebrate the gift of alcoholic beverages from back home. Ponchel, a barber in civilian life, gives Audebert a haircut while reminiscing about his home, which is nearby but behind enemy
lines. In the Scottish bunker, Jonathan writes a letter to his mother, but fails to mention William’s death.

The scene shifts to the French chalet, where Anna and Nikolaus are singing the final phrases of an Italian duet. The Kronprinz thanks Nikolaus for volunteering for the army, but the latter reminds him that he was drafted. Asked for an encore, the two singers begin a song of Spring. Nikolaus finds it hard to continue, but he regains his composure and the two sing a sweet German song, perhaps reminiscent of Schubert. As they conclude, the orchestra strikes up a festive melody, but then suddenly shifts to more discordant music as the focus changes to Nikolaus and Anna’s private conversation. In contrast to the classical style of their formal duet, here their conversation may remind one more of the music of Richard Strauss, giving it a distinct Germanic flavor. They speak fondly of their first meeting, but when Anna hints that the two could spend the night together, Nikolaus replies that he must return to the front, and Anna surprises him when she announces that she has obtained permission to go with him. The party music returns briefly in the orchestra.

Back on the front, a Scottish soldier has acquired a bagpipe, and Palmer, followed by Gordon, sings a Scottish folksong accompanied by that instrument. The bunkers are so close in proximity that their singing is heard by the members of the other armies. Nikolaus and Anna arrive at the German bunker, and Nikolaus sings a German Christmas carol. (In the film, as in real life, the carol was “Silent Night,” but Puts substitutes an original carol of his own). Hearing him, the bagpipe player picks up the accompaniment. Over Horstmayer’s repeated objection, Nikolaus enters no man’s land carrying a Christmas tree and plants it between the opposing trenches. “Good evening
to the English,” he shouts, and the Scottish soldiers reply that they are not English but Scottish. After some friendly banter, the three lieutenants enter no man’s land and agree to a one-night truce. Spontaneously, the soldiers pour out of the trenches and strike up conversations with the opposing side. A crescendo in the orchestra echoes the soldiers’ ad hoc friendship.

Father Palmer conducts a service in Latin (the fifth language to come into play). When one of the soldiers comments that this may be Lt. Horstmayer’s most memorable Christmas, he replies that it is the only Christmas he has ever observed – he is Jewish. Only Jonathan is not in a conciliatory mood. Brooding over his brother’s body, he swears he will kill every last German. Father Palmer invites Anna to sing “Dona nobis pacem,” and he concludes the service with the words (in Latin) “Go in peace,” but as the soldiers sit silently, the sound of munitions can be heard in the distance.

**Act II:**

It is Christmas morning. Though the cease-fire has officially ended, hostilities have not yet resumed. Jonathan enters no-man’s land to bury his brother. Some German soldiers fear he is planting land mines, but Gordon waves a white flag and the Germans hold fire. The lieutenants meet and agree to extend the cease-fire until three that afternoon to allow for the burial of the dead. Horstmayer returns Audebert’s wallet.

An extended solemn instrumental passage, ending appropriately with a dirge on the bagpipe, accompanies the mass burial. Anna sings a lament about the women back home who will be receiving news of their loved-ones’ death, and she tells Nikolaus that someday she will hear of his death the same way. She repeats several times, “ Unless we do something about it.”
The opera then cuts away to the various military headquarters, where the three leaders sing simultaneously of their shock at what they have just learned transpired at the front. All three resolve to take punitive action.

Back at the front, the three lieutenants, realizing that the truce is coming to an end, bid friendly farewells. Audebert compliments Horstmayer’s French, and the latter reveals that he has a French wife.

Returning to the German bunker, Horstmayer is confronted by Nikolaus, who asks how he can go on killing now that he has befriended the enemy. Horstmayer says he is serving the Fatherland. Nikolaus retorts that the Germans don’t even consider Horstmayer to be a real German, an unstated reference to his Jewishness. (Though Horstmayer’s Jewish identity is also referred to in the film, this comment was added by the librettist). He goes on to denounce the industrialists who are responsible for the war. Horstmayer calls him a traitor and places him under arrest. Anna comes forward and announces they will be prisoners, but not to the Germans. She leads Nikolaus across no-man’s land to the French side. Horstmayer threatens to shoot, but does not have the heart to kill them and fires a warning shot instead. Anna and Nikolaus approach Audebert and demand to be taken as prisoners of war, and Audebert complies.

In the Scottish bunker the major has arrived and loudly criticizes the fraternization. He tells the men that they are being transferred to a different front, and that Father Palmer has been recalled to Scotland. A German soldier is seen approaching, and the major gives the order to shoot. Most of the soldiers are reluctant to fire the first post-truce shot, but Jonathan complies.
The soldier falls, and the sound of the alarm clock is heard. Audebert waves a white flag and approaches the fallen soldier. It is Ponchel, who borrowed a German uniform so he could visit his mother. With his dying breath he tells Audebert that Madeline has given birth to a son. Palmer sings a hymn to peace.

The French general, who is now revealed to be Audebert’s father, enters, telling the lieutenant that he is being transferred to an out-of-the-way place called Verdun (which with our hindsight we know to have been the locale for one of the war’s bloodiest battles). The two men resolve to stay alive for the child’s sake.

The Kronprinz arrives to tell the German soldiers that they are being transferred to the Russian front. One of the soldiers plays a mournful tune on the harmonica as the soldiers slowly march off. From offstage, we hear one soldier from each army reminisce about the cease-fire, as we hear the sound of the trains transporting the soldiers to their new battle stations.
Online Resources

Our favorite *Silent Night* video clips from fellow opera companies:

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLs0evScqLO_tv9e9dRsgrROwFqBjvQe84

Photos and renderings previewing the production:

www.flickr.com/photos/kcoperasets/72157642166855085/

*Silent Night* musical highlights:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzzkuZ7nMmk
Kevin Puts, the composer of *Silent Night*, was born in St. Louis, MO on January 3, 1972, but spent most of his early life in Alma, MI. He studied composition at Yale University and the Eastman School of Music, as well as the Tanglewood Music Festival. His best-known teacher, and one of the most influential, was William Bolcom, whom he admires “because he is so adept at so many different styles and techniques” – a trait which is prominent in *Silent Night*. He subsequently was composer in residence at the Fort Worth Symphony and taught for several years at the University of Texas before moving on to the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University in 2005.

Whereas throughout much of operatic history composers chose their own subjects and put together their own artistic teams, in today’s music world composers are commissioned by opera companies for specific projects. The inspiration for *Silent Night* came from Dale Johnson, artistic director of Minnesota Opera, who viewed the film *Joyeux Noel* and immediately saw it as the subject for an opera. “I was so moved by it. The singing of ‘Silent Night,’ the image of Sprink carrying the Christmas tree, the three lieutenants’ struggle with the orders from their commanders, their struggle with themselves as human beings…It felt like a very classical opera plot. They’re all trying to live their lives, and there’s this huge story going on around them that they can’t control.” He realized that the story would call for a strong orchestral writer, and after listening to one of Puts’s symphonies, he determined that he would be the appropriate choice, despite the fact that the composer had never written an opera and had, in fact, composed little for the voice.
Given Puts's lack of experience with opera, Johnson decided to team him with veteran librettist Mark Campbell, who was cited in Opera News as “one of twenty-five artists poised to become major forces in opera in the coming decade.” Among the well-known composers with whom he has collaborated are Mark Adamo, William Bolcom, Ricky Ian Gordon, and Jake Heggie. He has won numerous awards, including a Grammy nomination, a Drama Desk nomination, and the Richard Rodgers Award (twice). At present he is working on four other projects for Minnesota Opera, including an adaptation of Stephen King’s The Shining. The addition of veteran director Eric Simonson completed the creative team for the original Silent Night production.

The opera had its premiere in November 2012 to great popular and critical acclaim, and it went on to win the Pulitzer Prize. In the near future Minnesota Opera will present Puts’ second opera, The Manchurian Candidate, also with a libretto by Campbell.

The success of a world premiere is often measured by the number of subsequent performances and productions. In this sense, Silent Night has been remarkably successful. The original production was followed by productions in Philadelphia, Fort Worth, Cincinnati, and Calgary. A Montreal production will follow soon after the opera’s appearance at the Lyric Opera of Kansas City. A second production, different from the original, premiered at the Wexford Festival in October 2014.

Puts describes his relationship to music as religious: “I’m not a religious person, so for me the music is the evidence that there may be a something greater than myself.” As a composer, he does not identify himself
with any particular style or movement: “I feel interested in a lot of subjects for opera. The interesting thing for me is to approach each of those projects in a different way, and to do whatever I need to do, musically to fit the story.”

While *Silent Night* is a lush, romantic, and tuneful opera, Puts does not believe in using melody for its own sake. He is primarily concerned with telling the story: “You know, it is very hard to do that and be convincing, especially when you are in the middle of theater and drama, making the opera feel like a story, to suddenly stop and have something which is a melody in the traditional sense and is formally designed like a song....it is difficult to do that and to remain convincing as a story-teller.”

On the personal level, Puts describes himself as an ordinary family man, one who has many interests besides music. His wife is a professional violinist, and they have a young son. For recreation, he enjoys music and sports. He does not attend many concerts, preferring to listen to music when he is alone.
While the specific incidents and characters in *Silent Night* (and the film upon which it was based) are fictional, the historical background is an accurate reflection of actual events. As documented in Stanley Weintraub’s *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce*, the informal truce and fraternization was actually a widespread phenomenon, not confined to a single locale. In most cases the Germans were the ones who initiated the truce. As in the film and opera, music was often the initial force which brought the two sides together, as many of the Christmas carols sung by the Germans were also part of the French and British traditions, albeit in different languages.

Several events depicted in the film and opera reflect actual occurrences. An opera singer named Walter Kirchoff was sent to the front lines by the Kronprinz (though unlike his fictional counterpart, he was not a soldier), and it was his rendition of *Silent Night* which inspired a reaction from the opposing side (though the bagpipe accompaniment seems to be an example of poetic license). The extension of the truce for the burial of the dead is also factual. The friendly taunts (such as the Germans’ offer to get together after they conquered France) was real, as was the Scots’ taking offense at being called Englishmen. Both sides took part in the improvised soccer games. And there was an angry reaction from the military commanders on both sides when they heard about the fraternization. Among the critics of the fraternization, ominously, was a young soldier named Adolf Hitler.

After the film was made, the director received a letter from a young woman who called herself a “grandchild of the fraternization.” Her grandfather was a German soldier who survived the war and afterwards traveled to France to visit a French soldier he had met during the truce. While there, he met and fell in love with a young Frenchwoman, whom he eventually married.

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The decision to identify the German lieutenant as Jewish was justified by history. Prior to the rise of the Nazi party, German Jews considered themselves fully German and served in the military as well as partaking in all other aspects of German culture. For example, when Jewish immigrants to the U.S. early in the twentieth century were asked about their national identity, Eastern European Jews said “Jewish” and German Jews said “German.” There is a story – perhaps apocryphal – about a Jewish soldier killing another soldier in hand-to-hand combat and being emotionally shaken when he heard his victim recite the “Sh’ma” – the traditional Jewish declaration of faith.

One element of the film not included in the opera’s libretto is the documentation of the racism that was being promoted on both sides prior and during the war. The film opens with chilling scenes in which children of various nationalities address their school classes with speeches condemning the British and Germans as subhuman creatures, gleaned from actual historical records. Campbell felt that while this was an effective opening for the film, on the operatic stage it might be too “hokey and obvious” – not to mention the casting challenge this would pose. The film also includes a sermon given by the clergyman who replaces Father Palmer on the sacred duty to annihilate the German race – a speech taken word for word from an actual sermon preached to the troops in 1915.
Many casual music fans are not aware that there is such an entity as American opera. In fact, Americans have been creating some form of operatic entertainment since Colonial times. Unfortunately, it is also true that few people living today have ever seen an American opera written prior to 1911. Of course, the same could be said of other forms of American music. Few Americans could name two important composers who lived prior to the twentieth century. Only Stephen Collins Foster, whose oeuvre was confined almost entirely to the song repertoire, stands out from that period.

During the 1700’s American writers composed a number of “ballad operas,” often incorporating music from various sources with new lyrics. It was not until 1794, with the premiere of *Tammany, or The Indian Chief* (music by James Hewitt, libretto by Ann Julia Hatton) that a true American opera, with original music by a single composer, appeared. These writers, like many who followed them, achieved a distinctly American flavor by writing about Native Americans. Early in the twentieth century Charles Wakefield Cadman incorporated the rhythms of Native American music in his compositions. Significantly, contrary to the way in which Hollywood generally portrayed Native Americans, opera librettists generally showed these subjects in a positive light.

Some American composers adopted a practice which was to become commonplace later by adapting American literary classics for the operatic stage. Among these were George Frederick Bristow’s *Rip Van Winkle* and Caryl Florio’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The American productions of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance* inspired many American composers and librettists

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to write for the stage, but most Americans exhibited a taste for Viennese style operettas (many written by immigrants) in preference to true operas. Over the years, the operetta evolved into the Broadway musical, though beginning with the 1950's and continuing into more recent times, the line between the Broadway musical and opera becomes blurred, as in *West Side Story* (Leonard Bernstein), *Most Happy Fella* (Frank Loesser), or *Sweeney Todd* and *Passion* (Stephen Sondheim).

The earliest opera (by date of composition) that can be said to have even a toehold in the standard repertoire is Scott Joplin’s *Treemonishia*, composed in 1911 but not given a full production until many years later. This opera contains much beautiful music, but it is hampered by a didactic libretto (lauding education as a means of battling superstition) lacking in real dramatic tension. Between 1915 and 1935, under the directorship of Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the New York Metropolitan Opera produced several new works, but despite their popularity at the time, few of these are performed today. The first truly great American opera, George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, first appeared in 1935, though it took some time before it was accepted as a true opera rather than a Broadway musical. This is one of a small handful of operas composed prior to World War II that still holds the stage.

The 1950’s are often stereotyped in the media as a bland, conformist era, but it was actually one of the most creative periods in American cultural history. Not only was this decade part of what is often called the “Golden Age” of the American musical, it was also the period in which many of the most beloved American operas were written. Among the most popular operas of the decade were *The Consul* and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (Giancarlo Menotti),
The Ballad of Baby Doe (Douglas Moore), The Tender Land (Aaron Copland), Susannah (Carlisle Floyd), Vanessa (Samuel Barber), and Candide and Trouble in Tahiti (Leonard Bernstein). Amahl, which due in part to its connection to the Christmas season is probably the most popular American opera, was remarkable in that it was commissioned by NBC and had its premiere not in an opera house but in a television studio. Already in 1939 Menotti had begun experimenting with the media when he composed The Old Maid and the Thief for radio.

The twenty-first century has been a remarkably productive era in the creation of new American operas. During the past twenty years we have seen a surge in the creation of new American operas. Some have been based on recent history (Harvey Milk by Stewart Wallace) or by popular films (Dead Man Walking by Jake Heggie). More commonly, composers have turned to popular novels and plays such as A Streetcar Named Desire (Andre Previn), The Little Prince (Rachel Portman), Little Women (Mark Adamo), A View from the Bridge (William Bolcom), The Great Gatsby (John Harrison), and Moby Dick (Heggie). With the production of Silent Night and Ricky Ian Gordon’s The Grapes of Wrath, along with the aforementioned upcoming premiere of Kevin Puts’s newest opera, Minnesota Opera has shown a determination to be a major player in the creation of American opera. In short, we could be in the middle of a new “Golden Age” of American opera.
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