

All Quiet (*and tuneful*) on the Western Front

San Diego Opera, Bodhi Tree Concerts and Sacra/Profana collaborate for a very special holiday production.

by PAT LAUNER

DECEMBER 1914. Five months into World War I. Even peace requests were made—by the Pope and 101 British suffragettes—for a temporary hiatus from fighting for the celebration of Christmas, the warring countries refused. But on Christmas Eve, the soldiers in the trenches declared their own, unofficial Christmas cease-fire.

The event has become known as The Christmas Truce of 1914. Though it's often assumed to have occurred in only one area, the truth is that approximately 100,000 British and German troops along the Western Front took part.


The trenches were 50-250

yards apart, close enough for soldiers to shout to each other. The space between them was known as “No Man’s Land.”

That Christmas, men from both sides ventured into No Man’s Land to mingle, sing songs, drink, exchange gifts, play soccer—and bury their dead.

The unprecedented event has been memorialized in song (from “Snoopy’s Christmas” to Paul McCartney’s “Pipes of Peace”); film (1969’s *Oh! What a Lovely War* and the 2005 *Joyeux Noël* in French); and a 2011 opera, *Silent Night*, adapted from the French film.

In 2008, a radio musical drama, *All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914*, first



San Diego Opera presents
*All Is Calm:
The Christmas
Truce of 1914*
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Bodhi Tree Concerts' ensemble cast (foreground); Sacra/Profana performers (background).

heard a year earlier on Minnesota Public Radio, debuted onstage in Minneapolis. Created by Peter Rothstein, artistic director of Theater Latté Da, with musical arrangements by Erick Lichte and Timothy C. Takach, the piece offers firsthand accounts of the event, using soldiers' letters, autobiographies, poetry and graveyard inscriptions, complemented by patriotic tunes, trench songs and Christmas carols from England, Wales, France, Belgium and Germany.

Creator Rothstein has said, "I wanted to tell the story in their own words. For decades, the truce was considered a romantic fable, a fiction, and I wanted to give legitimate voice to this remarkable moment that had somehow been denied its rightful place in history."

The heartrending a capella drama highlights the stark beauty of the human voice, the ability to turn even the most horrible

situation into something extraordinary, and the universal desire for peace, unity and camaraderie.

For the past three years, *All Is Calm* has been presented in San Diego by Bodhi Tree Concerts, a 7-year-old nonprofit performance organization that donates 100 percent of its proceeds to charitable causes. They have teamed up with Sacra/Profana, a much-lauded local choral art group.

This year, the two companies are joining with the San Diego Opera for three performances at the Balboa Theatre (Dec. 7-9).

The collaboration is part of the Opera's Detour program, which features alternate performance spaces and productions, an idea initiated three years ago by SDO General Director David Bennett.

"I saw Bodhi Tree's production," says Bennett. "I love the piece. It's amazing, beautiful, profound and effective. For one night, these men took ownership over their history. Sadly, at the end, they had to go

back to the cacophony of war.

"It really is a choral opera," Bennett continues. "It's about the sound of the voice—choral and spoken. The expressive potency of the voice is the centerpiece of everything we do at the Opera. Though this piece has been seen in theaters around the country, and an off-Broadway run opened last month, we're the first opera company to present it. *All Is Calm* is a great way to showcase some wonderful local singers, and expand what opera can be.

"There's a good deal of overlap between the opera chorus and Sacra/Profana," says Bennett, "which is an incredible chorus. I sang a lot of choral music myself, and I'm very impressed with the level of music-making they produce. It's very refined."

There's a fourth collaborative element of this production. It will be directed by Alan Hicks, who recently assumed a shared position as /CONTINUED ON PAGE 76

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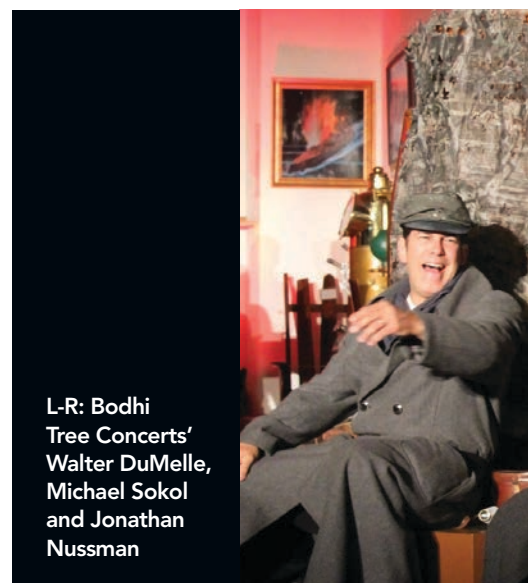
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L-R: Bodhi Tree Concerts' Walter DuMelle, Michael Sokol and Jonathan Nussman

SAN DIEGO OPERA / CONT'D. FROM PAGE 18
assistant director for the San Diego Opera and director of the opera program at San Diego State University.

"We're doing this a little differently than Bodhi did," Bennett explains. "We're having all 16 performers divide the dialogue. There's a variety of accents—upper class and working class, Cockney, German and French, which will be managed by our dialect coach, Vanessa Dinning. It's a good fit for us. I'm very excited about it."

Blame it all on Chad Frisque. The local tenor first brought *All Is Calm* to Bodhi Tree, after his friend participated in the original Minneapolis production. Frisque was a core chorister in the first Bodhi Tree production. He also brought the idea to the San Diego Opera, and he'll be performing in this year's presentation.

"Our productions were decidedly different," says Walter DuMelle, who along with his

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wife, Diana DuMelle, founded Bodhi Tree Concerts. “We had six principals and behind them, an ensemble of 12 men from Sacra/Profana. Now, the 16 singers will be more a brotherhood of equals.”

The connection to the Opera isn’t new. Walter DuMelle, a potent operatic bass, has sung with the Opera chorus a number of times, and Diana worked with David Bennett at Gotham Chamber Opera in New York, before they both came West. From the outset, the Opera provided Bodhi Tree with costumes, props and set pieces for their *All Is Calm* productions.

“Then Juan Acosta came on board,” DuMelle says of the artistic director of choral music for Sacra/Profana. “His touch and heart were perfect for this sentimental and touching piece. It was a great coming together. Besides being a seasoned choral director at many different venues, he brings sensitivity to the meaning of this piece. We’re

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Bodhi Tree Concerts' Jonathan Nussman and Timmy Simpson

at a time when sentiment is so important.

"Juan makes a group of singers sound so good," DuMelle continues. "He has a great ear for crafting a homogeneous sound that feels so organic and true. It goes right to the audience's heart."

Acosta, a native San Diegoan, has performed with the San Diego Opera in nearly a dozen productions, and made his solo debut as a tenor in *La Bohème* in 2005. He joined Sacra/Profana in 2015, and has arranged collaborative performances with Art of Élan and the San Diego Symphony. He is recognized nationally for his programming and his attention to contemporary composers.

This will be his third time conducting *All Is Calm*.

I'm really excited about the collaboration with the Opera," Acosta says. "We're really bringing in the big guns, pardon the pun. But the resources they make available are amazing."

The intricate musical arrangements contain, at times, 10-part

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harmony. “These are contemporary arrangements, completely accessible,” Acosta explains. One of his favorite musical moments is “Silent Night.”

“It’s sung by three singers, from three different countries, in three different languages—in three different keys. Then the whole group comes together and sings in one language (English), and in one key. It’s symbolic of these disparate cultures and countries coming together.

“I think, historically,” Acosta continues, “the fact that the truce happened in more than one place makes it more powerful. We also know that many of the people involved had to be reassigned from the front, because they lost their taste for battle. If anybody doubts for a moment the power of music, it literally pulled people out of the trenches. If guys who didn’t know each other and were shooting each other could come together and sing, what a great message that is for our time. If it can be done there, the potential is there for all of us.”

“This piece makes people weep,” says Bodhi Tree’s DuMelle. “There’s a palpable synergy in the room, an emotional connection. Folks leave feeling better having been there together.”

All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914 will play at the Balboa Theatre Dec. 7 and 8 at 7 p.m., and Dec. 9 at 2 p.m. The Dec. 8 performance will air live on KPBS-TV at 7 p.m. *For tickets and info: sdopera.org* 



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