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This is taken from the August 14, 2002 edition of the Freeman South Dakota Courier, p. 1

WORLD PREMIER

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WORLD PREMIER

This Sunday, Will Ortman will lead 78 local voices and two accompanists through his original oratorio, "Jesus the Man, the Christ"

And it's got him nervous--and thrilled

Story by Jeremy Waltner

This is a story about a man and his desire to challenge himself musically. A man who set out to tell the story of Jesus as documented in the Scriptures through an oratorio, of all things--an opera, essentially, without the acting.

Yes, this is a story about Will Ortman, a young East Freeman farmer who, this Sunday, Aug. 18 at 7:30 P.M. in the Salem-Zion (North) Mennonite Church sanctuary, will lead 78 singers, a pianist and an organist through his 70-minute, four movement orator, "Jesus the Man, the Christ", which he has been working on the past 21 months. The actual music will begin at 8 P.M.; Ortman will use the first half an hour to speak about the process of writing "Jesus the Man, the Christ".

This, this is a story that has many elements, beginning with a grand idea from an aspiring young composer several years ago and concluding with a nervous, yet laid-back man who, not only is making his composing debut this weekend, but--aside from directing a song at the North Church Christmas Concert last winter--his conducting debut, as well.

"I'm opening myself up for either praise or criticism, I realize that, " says Ortman, who graduated from Freeman Academy in 1995 and Bethel college in 1999.

But in the same breath, Ortman says he feels no pressure because he's got nothing to lose.

"People are going to come to this thing without knowing what to expect," he says. "It could be a kazoo choir, for all they know. Expectations are very low because I'm a no-namer."

The story starts in Newton, As. in 1999, when Ortman was finishing his college career as a composition major. Through his curriculum, he had composed various short pieces--from a

prelude to instrumental contest pieces for high school students. While those were challenging and absolutely essential to the young writers' career, Ortman says he wanted to embark on a journey of a much grander scale and really challenge himself musically.

He decided to write an oratorio, a sacred form of musical theater with roots back to the 1600s and made popular by Frederick Handel, who composed what Ortman calls the most famous oratorio ever written, "Messiah".

Anywhere from an hour to four hours, oratorios are works which tell a particular sacred story through text, choral movements, soloists and instrumentation. "It's essentially an unstaged opera," Ortman says.

Other familiar oratorios include Felix Mendelssohn's "Elijah" and Joseph Hayden's "Creation".

"(The oratorio is) an uncommon musical form in our present time," Ortman says, "which is part of the reason trying to write one appealed to me. It's kind of novel."

Ortman says inspiration for his oratorio, which became known as "Jesus the Man, the Christ", came to him while studying the book of Mark in college. "I found Mark fascinating," he says. And with that, the stage was set for the concept of "Jesus the Man, the Christ".

Much like the "Messiah", Ortman chose to document the story of Christ from his birth to death to resurrection. But unlike "Messiah", it would feature the more "human" aspect of Jesus.

"Messiah" doesn't really examine his life much," Ortman says. "It looks at his birth and death, but I was more interested in the everyday side of him--the stories he told and the way he interacted with his disciples."

With the plan for the piece in place, it was just a matter of executing it. And Ortman admits he wasn't sure how it would go. It was November of 2000.

He decided to start small--write one song and see how it went. The song was "Temptation," which appears in the second movement of the oratorio.

"I thought I would write that and see whether or not I was interested in pursuing anything further," he said.

Upon its completion--it took around a week to write--Ortman had his answer. "I finished it," he said, "and thought it had potential. So I decided to launch into it."

For the next 16 months--minus a summer off in 2001--Ortman documented the life of Christ as told through the parables in no particular order and with no time frame in mind. "I wrote what I was interested in," he says. "In fact, some of the stuff at the end is the first thing I did".

Ortman wrote at random. Inspiration for the way his piece would sound came to him at various times. On a tractor or while singing in a choir or while trying to go to sleep. The melodies would

come and he would sit down at a piano to hear them live and help him conceptualize the sound and chord structures.

The process of hearing the melody in his head and then getting it down on paper had to be a quick, one-two punch. If too much time passed, he says, the moment would get lost.

"It's not like I could hear something in my head and store it there and three months later recall it," he said. "Mozart may have been able to do that. I can't."

Words mattered little at this point. He worked his way through the songs one measure at a time. He drafted them either by longhand or on a computer thorough composition software. Sometimes he listened to what he had written one measure at a time, sometimes he composed stanza and stanza before going back to hear it.

Sometimes the music didn't work. Most of the time it did.

It was a tedious process, Ortman says. Not only did he have to compose the melody but the accompaniment and dynamics, note by note, measure by measure.

"One of the challenges of composing is it takes a constant evaluation of how good it is," says Ortman.. "To write something that means anything a composer has to look at it as objectively as possible and decide what's worth keeping and needs to be changed. There were a couple of songs where I started completely over. You know, I would get 30 measures in and say, 'OK, this isn't going to work'"

But Ortman say he found much more success than failure while working his way through "Jesus the Man, the Christ", and the musical composition aspect of it all went rather quickly.

It was the addition of text that took the time.

"Stories are not singable, " he says. "You can't just open up Time magazine and sing one of the articles. Same with the gospels."

So Ortman had to work his way through the text of the parables and reconstruct the stories in a fashion that jibed with the music. He had to pay close attention to meter, rhythm and rhyme while keeping the meaning of the story intact.

"The challenge for me was to come up with a text that's singable and still true to the story," he says, but admits that some embellishment was absolutely necessary to fit with the melodies.

"I had to recall the text, interpret it and fill in the blanks. The literalist and more conservative people may have a problem with that, but's really the only way it can be done."

An example: The text from Luke is used for "Lost Son", a song in the oratorio's second movement. It reads: "But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get a fatted calf and kill it,

and let us eat and celebrate."

"Jesus the Man, the Christ" documents the story this way. All is true to the Scripture except the ending.

"Bring a robe and fatted calf and sandals and a ring. For my dear son who once was lost we now must dance and sing. This son of mine who once was dead is now alive today, so come and let us celebrate and give the Lord our praise."

The Scripture passage doesn't include "give the Lord our praise," Ortman says. "The literalist will say, 'that's not in there'"

But Ortman says that's artistic license he feels he can take and feels good about how the words work with the music.

"The text is very important to me," he says, noting it's difficult text to sing. "I would like people to walk out saying 'I have never thought about that parable that way before,' or 'that really opened my eyes.'" Hearing both the music and words put together by a live choir has now given Ortman the chance to evaluate how he did in the composition process. And he admits there's little he would change.

"It's really a moving experience, actually," he says. "It's really great hearing it all come together I've been close to tears a number of times."

"A lot of the time it sounds better than I anticipated it would," he continues. "And there are some places where I say, 'I could have done better'."

"Jesus the Man, the Christ" is also giving Ortman the chance to work on his directing skills, a trade as new to him as composing was two years ago.

"I struggle with it," he says of directing. "I've never directed in my life but I'm getting better. Everybody has been really patient with me."

As for the sound of "Jesus the Man, the Christ", it's a blend of soaring melodies laced with dissident harmonies. That said, even Ortman struggles to define its style.

"It would be fair to say," Ortman says, "that there's a lot of different styles and quite a bit of variation in the sounds."

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