The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

Mark Adamo, Composer and Librettist

On April 24, 2013, at the Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, baritone Thomas Hampson and the Jupiter String Quartet premiered Mark Adamo’s Aristotle, a chamber setting of a poem by former United States poet laureate Billy Collins.

Provost Ralph Hexter: Thank you, Chancellor and Mark. In a way, this academic year began with our convocation and the Chancellor chose “The Arts” as a theme. This is, in very many ways, a really fitting part of that series and, as you can tell, we have a wonderful temple to the arts here and elsewhere on campus. It’s a real honor to have you here premiering a work and then this ability to get an insight into some of your thoughts.
Mark Adamo: Thank you. It’s delightful to be here. We had a beautiful rehearsal right on this stage not hours ago, so it’s already a very happy place for me.

Hexter: As a lover of music, I’m just in awe of folks who create and compose. It’s completely beyond me. How did you come to composition? When did you discover your gift and your love and your desire to compose?

Adamo: The most empirical answer is when I got my first piano, when I was 16. I was in such awe of the music that I heard recorded or that I would hear other people perform, it never occurred to me I could make it myself until I was able to find an instrument that was small enough to fit in my living room and inexpensive enough for us to afford. Then I found myself obsessively drawn to it. As soon as I developed any facility on the piano at all, I started to write, although it didn’t feel at the time that I was writing, so much as I was finding melodies already in the keyboard. The ways in which the brain talks to itself!

But I had come to it so late, and I had been writing and performing in theater as a child. So I thought that the music would fold into what I was doing theatrically, that maybe the summit of what I could attain as a composer would be composing for the theater. No one was more surprised than I when, after college, I started getting commissions from musicians whom you would think would know better. I had such an imposter syndrome at that point that I felt that I was merely imitating a composer in my degree program. A composer was someone who had written his first piano sonata at the age of nine. That was not I.

But I kept writing pieces for the people who asked, and ever-so-gradually my ambition began to shift. I thought, while I will write for the theater, maybe I can also write my own orchestrations as certain distinguished theater composers have—Leonard Bernstein in West Side Story, principally—or maybe I can write other music concomitantly. So it was only after being commissioned by Eclipse Chamber Orchestra to make my first orchestral piece in Washington—a piece called “Late Victorians”—that I said to myself, (I’m being quite accurate here), “I, too, was at that performance; and something happened; and too many people believe in you for them all to be delusional.” It was the first moment that I thought maybe, as unlikely as it seems, the concert hall might be where I belong. Shortly thereafter, the commission for Little Women came in. At that point I gave up any resistance. I thought, okay, you’re a composer. Deal with it.

Hexter: Well, that is an unusual story. It strikes me because you came to the theater first, I have to then ask sort of a perennial question in opera, prima la musica, poi le parole: “first the music and then the words” or is it the other way around? There are whole operas written around that question.

Adamo: Tom Hampson and I shared a hearty and exasperated conversation about this very issue. Maybe I’m in a privileged position here as my own librettist, having been pretty thoroughly trained as a writer of language for the theater as well as a writer of music for it. I firmly believe that it’s neither one nor the other, that the center is this acted gesture towards which both the music and the language are aiming. It’s striking how on the one hand you’ll have very learned musicologists describe the works of Verdi as being works in which the music is preeminent. Then you read Verdi’s letter to his first Lady Macbeth in which he says, “I implore you, should you come to a point where you feel you must serve either composer or
the poet, please serve the poet, because that is what the composer has done.”

So even the composers we think of as the most symphonically driven, for whom one thinks the music comes first and the language bobs off the back of the speedboat like a bunch of balloons… well, Wagner, our major Romantic creator, crafted his own libretti. He had also no sooner built that enormous theater in Bayreuth for that orchestra than he covered it so that the voice, and the drama, would be clear.

“Read the correspondence of any major operatic author—Britten, Strauss, Verdi, Puccini. The stress is on making the drama work, which is not to say just getting the right words, but finding the fusion. That’s critical, and that’s how I’ve always felt.”

I feel if I can find not only what that character is thinking, but also how he’d dance what he’s thinking—that is, how the body language is going to express what is meaningful to that person at that point—then I’d get a fragrance of what language and what music can marry and produce that living gesture on stage.

Hexter: Knowing how many dissertations and books are based on the correspondence between the composer and the librettist, you’ve just destroyed the possibility of generations of scholars, but this allows me, since I can’t talk to Wagner. So let’s talk about some of the text you’ve set. When you have text, do you begin already to hear the music that goes with that text?

Adamo: Well, by the time I set them, whatever their sources, they’re mine. Apologies and respect to, say, Aristophanes, but by the time I get to a libretto, I’ve done two outlines, one of which I will describe to you now.

The first I call the silent movie outline. I pretend: if the opera is already written and I am deaf, so I have no access to either language or sound—but it’s being staged in front of me, what does the design of the drama—that is, which characters come in, how do they come in, what actions do they perform—tell me about the story I wish to tell? In the case of Little Women, that outline will consist of lines like; “Jo enters, flings herself on the couch. She picks up her diary; she buries it in cushions. Laurie enters, reaches to touch her, draws his hand back before he does.” None of that is either text or song. But those actions give you an idea of who those characters are kinesthetically. They give you some sense of what is at stake in the narrative.

Then I send that to every smart person who will take my calls and say, “What story do you think I’m telling?” Based on their responses, I’ll try to rewrite that as effectively as possible. At the end of that process, I’ll have a sense of what ideas are more important than others, what ideas might come back either identically or in other forms, which if, as a musician, you are thinking at all motivically—that is, if you’re thinking of how the balance of variety and repetition throughout a long evening can build an experience—those things that repeat hint at what the important recurrent events of your drama might be.

Then you put that outline aside and you say, “Now I’m in the theater. Alas, now I am deaf,
and I do not understand the language. But, from that first outline, I have a sense of what is going on, and I am hearing voices and orchestra.” So if, say, a character is saying that everything is perfect and nothing needs to change, you ask yourself, what harmony says it’s not broken, we need not fix it? What vocal line or rhythm indicates we are happy where we are? Conversely, if you have a character that is extolling the need for change, well, how can she tell you that harmonically? What vocal texture might she choose? If, in the first everything’s-perfect example, that character’s phrases are quite regular, maybe the changing character, irregularly, sings a ten-beat line followed by an eight-beat line followed by two four-beat lines. This is just preliminary sketchwork, but it can yield valuable information.

And after you’ve put that outline through a number of drafts, by the time you get to the first draft of the script, it’s also the first draft of the score, because the language is already accommodating music that, of course, you haven’t composed, but the needs of which you’ve articulated.

**Hexter:** When I think of the operas that you’ve written and the one that’s about to premier, the texts arise out of very different backgrounds. One is based on a novel that many know. One is based on an already dramatic piece, although one very distant in culture, which requires translation at various levels. And then I’m not even sure how you would describe the text of Mary Magdalene, which we’ve dubbed *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*. I guess I’m asking about this sense that you created it out of many texts. How did each of those vary and how did you actually come to the final version of the text that you set? “Set” may be the wrong way of describing it.

**Adamo:** I’ve never done anything like this piece before. When I first wrote to David Gockley, the producer, I said, “This is what I would like to propose. All you really need to tell me is ‘not a chance’ or ‘maybe’ because I don’t know if it’s possible until I do the research.”

I should back up a little bit and say that *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is based on the Gnostic gospels, the canonical gospels, and the scholarship thereupon which fills in the historical context of those texts. It’s trying to imagine a human original of the story of Jesus of which all of the extant Gospels might be considered mythic variations.

So one premise is that everyone involved was a human being, that the reported miracles were fabulating embroideries of things that actually happened, but happened in the world in which we all live.

Another premise is that the female personae left out of the original should and could be restored and reimagined. By definition, this would involve adaption, dramatization, speculation. But I did want to write a libretto about which—while I could obviously not say “this is the way that it did happen”—no one, based on the texts that we all share, could say “this is not the way it could have happened.” So it was very important to me not to use any medieval sources, in which Mary Magdalene sails to Provence and founds the French royal family. All that comes much later and is based on folklore, not Scripture.

I wanted everything I was going to invent to come from something real, but until I did the
reading, I didn’t know what was out there. What is out there, while quite rich, is fragmentary. None of it is primary; almost none of it is secondary; most of it is tertiary. As biblical scholar Rebecca Lyman said to me the last time I was in San Francisco, “To do this work is to realize very early on that you are working with six puzzle pieces out of 1,000, none of which fit together, all of which are blue.”

So before I undertook the processes that I just described to you, I had to turn myself into a reasonable simulacrum of a biblical scholar and read not only all of those texts, but also the who had unpacked certain mysteries were hiding in plain sight; even—often!—in the gospels that we hear every Sunday.

For example, in Mark, Luke, and Matthew, the elders say; “Isn’t this Jesus, Mary’s son? Aren’t James and Joseph his brothers?” That may seem like a perfectly innocuous phrase until you remember that a man was always identified patronymically, that is to say, as the son of his father. The consistent reference to Jesus as “son of Mary” throughout the canonical gospels indicates that he was seen as having no legitimate father. But that’s a clue that only scholars can reveal. It’s not really clear in the text.

Everywhere in the reading—particularly in the Gnostic gospels of Philip, *Pistis Sophia*, and the *Dialogue of the Savior*, there was so much more possible detail, not only about Jesus, but also about the position of Mary Magdalene as his companion. (The word *koinonos* in Greek means exactly what “companion” means in English; friend, or consort in all but name.)

The dynamics between Mary and Peter were particularly astounding. Mary says to the Savior, “I am afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and hates all my sex.” Or Peter says, “Make Mary leave us, for females are not worthy of this life,” in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Jesus responds, “I will make her male, like the rest of you males, and then she will be worthy to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” Now I’ve placed those lines in a context that I made up, and then I developed them dramatically, but in doing so I did try to stay within the textual frame of what we’ve found so far.

**Hexter:** Well, I’m certainly looking forward to seeing the opera when it opens in San Francisco and I wouldn’t be surprised if many of the people in the audience are and we shouldn’t talk all the time about the opera, but I have to ask you this: in the long history of opera, there’s actually been a bit of resistance, sometimes actually open resistance to putting biblical stories on stage, and the closer you get to the life of Christ, the greater the resistance. That’s one of the reasons you have oratorios and the passions. Probably the most common biblical operas are *Samson and Delilah* and *Salome*, so there you have put Jesus or, as I think you call him, Yeshua, on the stage. I just have to ask you, how did you feel about that, and were there tensions that you felt, resistances even yourself or dangers that you needed to avoid?

**Adamo:** It might interest you to know that Wagner attempted *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, abandoned it and turned to *Parsifal*.

Oh, yes, there was resistance, and not only to portraying Jesus onstage. We live in a religiously contentious time—although what time is not? But it seemed to me that it was time for someone to write this from neither an atheistic nor a believing stance. Whatever else the Christian story is, it belongs to all of us culturally whether or not we were brought up in it religiously. As Wagner did—not with the abandoned Jesus opera, but with *The Ring*—it seemed to me not only worthy,
A “myth” is not a lie. It’s a story that we tell ourselves in order to organize our moral imaginations.

Hexter: You were talking about the role of women. In the three operas I’m thinking of, you have women with agency. Certainly, that’s one of the things we love most about *Little Women*. Of course *Lysistrata*, the revolt of the women in that famous sex strike and now Mary Magdalene. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Adamo: What’s odd is that *Little Women*, which launched this women’s trilogy, was not my idea. But, while I had many issues with it—what is the piece about? what’s the dramatic shape?—it simply did not occur to me that I couldn’t write it because I happen to have a Y-chromosome. I don’t know if that’s generational or if it’s because I grew up in a family with three very different and very strong female presences: my mother and my two sisters. It was a

but urgent, to take this foundational myth of Western culture and revisit it in terms of the time and place in which we live.

Of course I was excited by the project simply because no one had done this. But I was also aware that this was a piece for a large stage: for the War Memorial Opera House. It can accommodate an orchestra of 80, a chorus of 48, a cast of 17. And for a grand opera in 2013, I thought, you need an idea that does not simply welcome the opulent; you need an idea that will fill, and serve, a theater that is the closest equivalent we now have to the amphitheater of Epidaurus, a place where a large segment of the culture comes to talk about itself. A safe place to talk about dangerous things.

I thought we needed to look at this particular myth because we are living by it, and there are consequences that come from the interpretations of our religious myths. For example, one interpretation of Islam leads to 9/11. Within our own culture, certain major institutional interpretations of the Gospels lead to certain attitudes towards women, which I think we can all agree are fraught. These are really attitudes about sexuality in general for which female personae are made to carry the heaviest burden, but they affect all of us in one way or another. I really thought that it was time to engage them.

I’ve lived a lot of the conflicts I am reexamining here through these characters. I have lived, in my own life, the conflict between what conventional religion wants me to be and who I feel I am meant to be. I don’t think I’m alone. That’s what made it urgent to bring Jesus on stage, having Mary Magdalene ask him the questions that we would all like to ask him were we there. As it turns out, the texts support her doing so.
Hexter: Let me ask you a very different question. It has to do with music and so-called classical music. Do you think that classical music is different from other kinds of music? How do you think about the whole universe of music that is both being created and listened to? What's classical music?

Adamo: The role constantly changes. This music began as an attempt to recreate what Greek drama might have sounded like. It became an aristocratic entertainment and then a bourgeois entertainment and now it’s anyone’s guess. Not even the composers know. Caroline Shaw, a violinist and a singer, wrote this mad, fabulous piece called *Partita* for this chamber choir called Roomful of Teeth; it’s all *vocalises* and Tuvan throat singing, clicks, speech and so on. She won the Pulitzer for it. When she did, she said, “I haven’t really been thinking of myself as a composer exactly. I’ve thought of myself as a musician.”

In two aspects, one historical and one acoustic, I think it can act, at least for us in the United States of 2013, as kind of a— I don’t want to say *countercultural* because I think that’s too truculent an adjective— but as an historically-informed stance from which to look at the world in which we live. That’s the world of big data, which means the world of the eternal now: the Twitter feed, the updated blog, the 24, 48 or however many news channels we listen to. And this acoustic, century-spanning form, in a wired world, can link even the contemporary subjects we treat with a tradition that preexists us: on the shoulders of whose giants we all stand.

I've written this piece for Tom [Hampson] and the Jupiters [String Quartet]. It's very contemporary in its diction and its subject matter, which I love because I haven't done that as often as I would like. But it's also not the first time that I, or anyone, has set a poem for an acoustically organized voice and for a string quartet. The poem was written maybe 4 years ago and the piece was written this year. But simply the fact of the forces, the facts of this auditorium, this stage and these artists we're using, place us in dialogue with the past. That's great: and it's not
Classical music may no longer perch on the pinnacle of cultural aspiration as it did in Germany in the 19th century, but I’m not entirely sure that’s a bad thing.

Another way of answering your question, which Collins has just done for me, is—what’s that great quote? “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t really past.” One thing I experience when seeing the Greek classics staged is not how much, but how little, we’ve changed. Whether we’re talking about the Sicilian Expedition (in Lysistrata) or where Iphigenia has gotten herself in trouble this time, our issues are Aeschylus’s. What surprised me most in my research for Lysistrata is that there was really no such thing as classicism, ever: there was only neoclassicism, that mask of the past placed over contemporary events to allow a contemporary audience to see themselves in them without being distracted by a too-journalistic perspective.

To its first audience, the events of the Oresteia were 100 years in the past. But, in most ways, the piece was about contemporary Athens. I didn’t do this in Little Women, but both the second opera and third opera share the same time-description on their title pages. In Lysistrata: “The time is now. The place is ancient Greece.” In this new piece: “The time is now, the place is first century Galilee.” I think that’s really the stance of art.