Silent Night: A moving contemporary opera on the 1914 Christmas truce

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The performances at the Michigan Opera Theatre earlier this month of *Silent Night*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning opera dramatizing the 1914 Christmas Eve truce between German, Scottish and French soldiers during the First World War, is evidence that contemporary opera, if inspired by a serious theme, can have both wide appeal and artistic merit.

Silent Night, premiered by the Minnesota Opera five years ago, is based on *Joyeux Noel*, the 2005 French film dealing with the same important event. The composer is Kevin Puts, and the libretto is by Mark Campbell. The opera, after its 2011 premiere, won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for music.

A serious subject and good intentions are not enough in an artistic work, of course. In the case of *Silent Night*, however, its creators have come up with a work that is beautiful, gripping and cohesive as a dramatic statement on a universal and urgent theme. The opera has struck a chord among listeners who can see the glaring social and moral gulf, not only a century ago but today as well, between the workers and youth called upon to fight and die and the ruling elites who give the orders and profit from war.

The opera is in two acts, preceded by a brief prologue that sets the scene. The prologue, set just as war begins in August 1914, rapidly introduces the three story lines and some of the major characters who come together in the one-day truce.

First, we hear a snippet of a duet in a Berlin opera house. The singers, in a Mozartean style, are tenor Nikolaus Sprink and soprano Anna Sorensen. The two, who are also lovers, are interrupted by an official announcement from a representative of the German Kaiser that war has been declared. Sprink is conscripted without delay.

This is immediately followed by a scene in a small Scottish church in which two brothers, Jonathan and William Dale, get news of war and prepare to enlist for battle.

Finally, we see Lieutenant Audebert, the son of a French general, in the garden of his Paris apartment, preparing to leave for the front and assuring his pregnant wife, who bitterly and fearfully asks him to stay behind, that the war will soon be over.

The fate of these characters over the next few months is then traced in the opera's two acts. We are initially plunged into the horrors of trench warfare on the Belgian-French front. This is followed by the spontaneous Christmas Eve truce, only a few months after the beginning of the fighting.

The truce, closing Act I and extending into the first half of Act II, forms the central core of the opera. The various commanding officers, hearing of the cease-fire, erupt in outrage. Each of the armies is disciplined for its "betrayal." The killing resumes, with the audience aware of the grim fact that it was to continue for nearly another four years.

The arc of the story is a very simple one, from war to truce and then the resumption of war. Within this framework, the reality of war and the antiwar feelings that emerged rapidly after the first flush of enthusiasm are skillfully depicted.

One of the opera's ingenious dramatic techniques is the way in which most of the scenes shift quickly from one army to another. The set, in which a raised circular mound serves as the battlefield and no-man's land between the armies, allows for a rapid transition from one army bunker to another.

Composer Kevin Puts, now 44 years old, has already won wide acclaim. Writing in a tonal, expressive and musically accessible language, he makes use of folk-tinged material, impressive choral writing and a variety of styles. While perhaps more time is necessary to judge the distinctiveness of Puts' compositional voice, the music of *Silent Night* has integrity—it is moving and dramatically effective, while avoiding both sentimentality and blandness.

The expressive quality of Puts's music becomes clear in the opening minutes, as the Prologue displays the initial enthusiasm of the young Scotsman Jonathan Dale, followed by the concern of Frenchman Audebert, torn between war and his family. The Prologue closes with a brief tableau of the various soldiers anticipating battle, with Sprink, the German singer, under no illusions, singing, "This war is useless and insane. …"

Among other powerful scenes is one in the French bunker in which Audebert reads from a list of casualties in his unit, interrupting himself to sing a brief aria of devotion to his wife and unborn child. This is followed by a choral passage in which all of the armies, preparing for bed, express anguish and homesickness. *Silent Night* is sung in a mixture of five languages, including brief passages in Latin and Italian. In this scene, French, English and German voices intermingle in the solemn thought, "Sleep through the night…not wake, not stir till morning comes—this awful war will have ended."

The scene in which the truce emerges includes a folk-like ballad led by Father Palmer, the Anglican priest attached to the Scottish unit. This is followed by a German Christmas song delivered by Nikolaus, the operatic "tenor within the opera." A bagpipe, an unusual but completely appropriate orchestral instrument in this

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context, answers in friendship. Nikolaus, clearly the most politically conscious among the main characters, stands atop his bunker and makes the first move, followed by the three lieutenants waving white flags and the declaration of a cease-fire for Christmas Eve. This choral scene is a moving demonstration of human solidarity in the face of war's horror. In actual historical fact, the informal cease-fire on Christmas Eve 1914 involved approximately two-thirds of the troops along the 475-mile Western Front.

The second act begins with an extension of the truce agreed by the three lieutenants to allow for the burying of the dead in the no-man's land between the armies. This burial scene is yet another affecting choral section, beginning with an orchestral interlude in which flutes and harp lead the way and are followed gradually by passages for the entire orchestra.

The composer has not confined himself to tragic and somber moods. One of the most effective scenes is the trio of the three commanding officers, the German Kronprinz (son of Kaiser Wilhelm), the British major and the French general, voicing outrage over the actions of their subordinates, including the three lieutenants who have given voice to and sympathized with the instinctive pacifism of their working class conscripts. Here the music and lyrics ("Despicable! Unthinkable! Immoral! Dangerous! Traitorous!") perfectly capture the class hatred, rigidity and militarism behind imperialist barbarism. The lieutenants, in contrast to the military establishment's outlook, follow the trio of the officers with a brief leave-taking in which they wish their "enemies" the best of luck.

While music is traditionally dominant in opera, the libretto in *Silent Night* has a nearly co-equal role. Special note must be taken of the flashes of humor, briefly relieving the toll of the war and reminding the listener that even in the grimmest circumstances sometimes the rhythm of life continues.

To cite just a few examples: "We are not English, we are Scottish," the soldiers declare at one point, offering a correction that in the context actually serves to make light of national differences. The German Lieutenant Horstmayer, when he is asked if he has ever experienced a more unusual Christmas, surprises the questioner by explaining, "It is the only Christmas in my life—I'm Jewish." And later, when the lieutenants meet as described above, Audebert tell Horstmayer (whose wife is French): "Don't feel you have to invade my city to share a drink with me."

Even more important are the numerous expressions of antiwar sentiment, ideas that come naturally out of the mouths of these characters. When Sprink, performing with his beloved Anna at the chalet of the Kronprinz, is complimented on his volunteering for the front, he replies acidly, "I did not enlist. I was conscripted like everyone else."

Later, Nikolaus goes further, in a heated exchange with Horstmayer, the patriotic German Jew, in Act II. "You're an utter fool if you think you're serving your dear 'Fatherland.'… You're serving power and money. The Hindenburgs and the Krupps of this world. That's who you are serving."

The cast in the Detroit performances was uniformly at a high level. Among the major roles, Anna was sung by soprano Erin Wall, Nikolaus by Chad Johnson, Father Palmer by Daniel Belcher, Lt. Audebert by Philip Addis and Lt. Horstmayer by Kristopher Irmiter. The conductor was David Charles Abell, and the director was Eric Simonson.

The timeliness of this work could not be clearer. While *Joyeux Noel* was released in the midst of the bloodiest days of the imperialist occupation of Iraq, *Silent Night* has appeared amid signs that a twenty-first century world war is not only possible, but is an ominously growing danger.

It is not simply a matter of the results of the 2016 election in the US, as unprecedented as they are. In fact, however, both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton competed for the most militaristic posture. This is only part of a worldwide rise in nationalism and war scares that more and more resemble the years leading up to the first imperialist world war more than a century ago, and that underscore above all the urgent need to build a mass socialist movement against war.

It is indeed significant that an opera such as *Silent Night* has emerged today, and that it is finding audiences. The opera has been produced and performed at Opera Philadelphia, Cincinnati Opera, the Wexford Opera Festival, Calgary Opera, Opera de Montreal, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Fort Worth Opera. It has productions scheduled at Atlanta Opera and Opera San Jose. Such a reception for a new opera is virtually unprecedented in recent decades.

There was only one really discordant note at the performance by the Michigan Opera Theatre on November 12. Perhaps the opera administration, mindful of the strong antiwar message of *Silent Night*, tried to immunize itself against criticism by advertising its own patriotism. A 10-minute introduction in observance of Veterans Day (November 11) preceded the opera, with speakers from the Ford Veterans Network and others. The theme of the opera was undermined in the name of "supporting our troops." The giant Ford Motor Company was allowed to parade its patriotism—the same kind of nationalism and chauvinism consciously being built up in preparation for new wars.

The opera gave its own eloquent answer to this cheap nationalism. The original production of *Silent Night* by the Minnesota Opera is available for viewing on the Public Broadcasting System until December 12, 2016. It is highly recommended.

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