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In development: An opera about bugs kids can dig

By Sally Heaney
Globe Correspondent

Emily Castner, 9, of Lancaster thinks it's funny when a contented Caterpillar pats his full belly and sings about not wanting to become a moth.

"I'm a fat caterpillar, I don't care what you say," he sings. "I'm a fat caterpillar and there's no need to change."

The singing caterpillar that delights Castner isn't an animated character in a television cartoon or a new Disney film. It's baritone Nikolas Nackley on stage in "The Bug Opera" at Indian Hill Music, a nonprofit music education and performance center in Littleton.

Creators of the opera are staging workshops to get input from audiences and a sense of what changes they might make in the work. In a very real sense, adults and children who showed up at Sunday's workshop were helping to fine-tune the opera.

On that day, Nackley wore a splotchy green and white jumper, a green baseball cap on backward, and green glasses with attached feelers while performing in the second act of the new opera for ages 8 and older, which is now in development. An audience of 140 children and adults attended the free workshop performance.

Caterpillar wasn't the only insect onstage.

He was accompanied by a hungry, fearful female mosquito who doesn't want to drink blood; a bookish, arrogant paper wasp; and a dung beetle who relishes his sanitation engineering job and doesn't mind being on the social bottom rung. Dung Beetle pushed around a big, brown, cloth-covered ball signifying -- this is a kids' opera -- poop.

"Round and 'round, the world goes round," Dung Beetle, played by Graham Wright, sang in his deep, bass-baritone voice. "Round and 'round I roll." Dung Beetle is a philosopher. "What makes the world so rich?" he sang. "We each have a *niche* ... so many jobs to do."

So far, the first two of four scenes have been performed for workshop audiences at Indian Hill to give composer Geoffrey Hudson, 39, and librettist Alisa Pearson, 37, an opportunity for evaluation and feedback. The coauthors live and work together in Cummington.

Workshop performances of the last two scenes are scheduled for May and October at Indian Hill, and full performances of the complete 90-minute opera Nov. 17 through 19.

Hudson said the opportunity to try out the opera on live audiences as it is being written is "incredibly valuable."

"Frequently, when you write a new piece,

you only get that one chance, the initial performance, and then that's it," he said. "It's like a novelist writing the first draft and then being stuck with it."

The feedback last fall from two workshop performances of the first scene led to changes in costumes, according to Pearson. Audience members said they couldn't understand Caterpillar's words when he sang through his mask, so his costume was modified to eliminate the mask.

On Sunday, in addition to praising the quality of the singing and beauty of the music, several audience members said the "Crepuscular Quartet" at the end of the scene was overwhelming. (Crepuscular is "sort of the science word for twilight," Pearson explained.) They thought too much was going on simultaneously, which would overload children's capacity to take it all in.

In the quartet, all the characters sing their separate songs simultaneously. Caterpillar sings about being a fat cat while Dung Beetle does his rolling-ball number, Mosquito reflects about being beckoned into the night, and Paper Wasp repeats an imperious "Get Out," occasioned by Caterpillar absent-mindedly eating his valued scrolls.

Hudson told the audience what he intended each character's song to convey and then had the group sing the quartet again. This time, audience members liked it better, and one man said he "was really moved by it."

Afterward, Hudson was noncommittal about what if any changes he will make. "I understand the point they were making," he said. But he added that "the density of the texture was a conscious decision."

"At that moment of the opera, there really isn't any new information coming across in the text," Hudson said. "No one is saying anything different. At that point, it becomes a more abstract musical experience ... Music takes precedence over words."

And Hudson and Pearson are very serious

about music, despite the subject matter of their opera. They say that lowly bugs are perfectly appropriate characters for such a high art, as well as creatures that intrigue children.

Insects "are fascinating," Hudson said, "like these little alien life forms all around us leading these incredibly exotic lives." Their lives are "very dramatic" and full of operatic themes like love, death, and betrayal. "They lead very complex and colorful lives, and it seemed like a really happy marriage with opera."

Pearson, who will play the role of Luna Moth in "The Bug Opera," has long had a scientist's interest in bugs. She studied both voice and biology as an undergraduate at Oberlin College, where she met Hudson in 1987. His majors were composition and history. Later Pearson received a master's degree in voice from Eastman and Hudson received a master's in composition from the New England Conservatory.

The inspiration to write an opera for children began with Pearson's experience seeing new works for children at the Vienna State Opera in Austria, where she lived for eight years as an adult. Pearson also lived for a time in Vienna as a child and went to the opera house and theater. "I grew up just thinking that was normal," she said.

Hudson said he grew up listening to opera on the radio because his father had it tuned in. "I hated it," Hudson said. "I thought they were just making stuff up and bellowing."

But then he spent time in Vienna, where, "for the price of a cup of coffee," he could attend great opera. "I was hooked," he said.

Pearson and Hudson do not have children, but have taught children in settings such as the Greenwood Music Camp in Cummington.

"For kids, everything is new," Pearson said. "They encounter it and decide whether it's good or bad. We want kids to love opera the way we do and to go away with the same appreciation we have."

Pearson said that Indian Hill has received grants for the opera from the International Mu-

sic and Art Foundation. She said fundraising to match one of the grants was now underway.

Jo-Ann Wagh, the director of education and community partnerships at Indian Hill Music, said one of the missions of the center is to work with composers. While she is glad for the opportunity to help create a work for children, she said, “The adults are going to love this as much as the kids.”

She said that Indian Hill offers the opera creators a space for rehearsals, nonprofit status for obtaining grants, and a professional symphony. A subset of the symphony, the Indian Hill Chamber Orchestra conducted by Bruce Hagen, will provide the instrumental music during the full performance of “The Bug Opera” in November.

Indian Hill also provided last Sunday’s workshop performance with bug sounds. Musical theater students, including Emily Castner, sat around the edges of the room and, on cue, made hissing, clicking, insect noises, beckoning Mosquito.

“Night comes, it’s calling me,” she sings. “I must fly away.”

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The Dung Beetle (right) told the Caterpillar (right) and the Mosquito about how he makes balls of dung at a workshop last Sunday in Littleton.



Photos by Greg M. Cooper for the Boston Globe Paper Wasp, played by Matt DiBattista, and Mosquito, played by Jennifer Ashe, at Sunday’s workshop performance.



Geoffrey Hudson, composer of the show, directed the performers at Indian Hill Music in Littleton.

Ed Colley's View



Creators of an opera about bugs at the Indian Hill Music center in Littleton are soliciting public comments to help them fine tune the production.