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Faculty News

Sharon Wayne, editor

Tell es-Sakan: An interview with Composer Davide Verotta

On March 15, 2025, Davide Verotta's new work was premiered at the CMC Concert Hall, San Francisco, California, by The Friction Quartet, Otis Harriel and Kevin Rogers, violins; Mitso Floor, viola; and Doug Machiz, cello; and Haruka Fujii and Anne Szabla, percussion.

Let's start with the title, Tell es-Sakan. What is a tell? Is it a specific sort of geologic formation?

No, it's just a hill, really. The translation from Arabic is "hill of ash". It is a small archaeological site where in 1994 the Palestinian authority found traces of this very, very old (@3,500 BCE) settlement. And then about seven years ago, Hamas started to build housing over it, but eventually stopped. And now it has been further damaged by the war.

And this one specific site, are there others like it in the region? I think that there are others, but this is the oldest one in Gaza.

Was the piece inspired by Tell es-Sakan?

This piece is mostly about the current situation in Gaza and the war between the Jewish state and the Palestinians. I was trying to find a title, and for some reason the thing that spoke to me was this idea that there have been people there for thousands of years, and they have often been quarreling with each other, to put it mildly. So it was basically just this sense of this long history of conflict that does not afflict only this area, it pretty much afflicts the planet.

You originally conceived of this as a ballet?

I wanted to write a piece that occupied a whole concert evening, just one big chunk. And one way of doing that composition-wise is to think about literally a plot, like if it was a book or a movie. And then midway through, I was like, well, this can be designed as a ballet, right? With different scenes that follow each other.

At the beginning, the percussion and strings seem to have very distinct roles, but then they become more integrated as the piece develops.

Yes, it is very simple there for a little while: you have only percussion in the beginning, a short omen: war is coming although it's far away." And then you get a piece for strings only, which is the couple that meets, then another omen, string and percussion...little by little, the two stories get



For the full concert, click on the photo above, or [here](#)

intertwined because war is actually coming in and disrupting the couple. The last movement before tragedy strikes, is called "Small Quarrels". I wasn't really thinking in terms of making a small-scale version of the war conflict, but still, it's the idea. Having these pieces for the whole ensemble (representing war), versus only strings (representing the couple), was a way of trying to deliver a narrative in a piece that does not have a text. If it was a short opera or an oratorio, or a narrated piece, then you could literally tell people what is happening. One of the difficulties with this piece was to deliver a story without using words.

I thought the short titles that you gave to each movement made it pretty clear.

Some people in the audience, maybe they were trying to be too literal, they thought that at a certain point they weren't really capable of following the action. I think it is unavoidable, given that eventually the two story lines (the couple and war) mingle and then the last fifteen minutes is just a big lament and then a long period of war that takes over and dominates the scene.

And then ending with a little optimistic note at the end? Yes, a teeny optimistic note, a glimmer of light. I mean, these are choices that you make when you start to write these pieces, because you can write – you know, there is the famous piece *Threnody for Hiroshima* (by Krzysztof Penderecki). It is a great piece, but it hammers at you beginning to end. My piece is almost 55 minutes long, so to begin with, I didn't want to hammer everybody's head for 55 minutes, it's just too much! **So was that the reason you put the lover characters into the story?**

Yes, one of the main reasons was basically to say there is good, there is good on this planet. People do love each other, people meet and fall in love; and then there is this other side, sometimes it's overwhelming, but the other is still there. It might just be me, but I need a little bit of hope, you know? I just don't want to find myself in a fetal position in bed.

You've said the piece was a response to what's happening right now, but since you're referencing this ancient site, is there any part of it conceptually, that you're seeing 5,000 years ago, 3500 years ago, or as something that's timeless?

Oh, that's a good question. I mean, it's not that things like these are new: people enter a city and they enslave the women and kill the men and so... that is not too pleasant! But no, it was that for many months I was (and I am) so distressed about the Gaza war, and this was one of the ways I was coping. I would say that is my teeny, irrelevant contribution, and with this I was just saying "I protest."

At some level I regret not having put in words. My main problem when I write text for my music, is that it takes ten times as long as writing the music, because I'm not a writer. And in particular, this theme is so tricky. I think there are lines, and I'm definitely on the line that I think that what is happening there is just wrong. But how to say it in a way that respects nuance and people's feelings, a lot of components that require a lot of time or a better writer of words than I am. And I wanted to do this fast. I started in May, and it took me about four months to write.

So then what are you working on now?

I just finished a short opera on a witch from Scotland in the 16th century. And then I might go back to trying to attack a longer opera on war, giving it more time and with original text. Because again, it's absurd what we are doing to each other.

I've played your music and have found it has a lot of rhythmic interest, and is often quite atonal.

I try to strike a balance and I think that more tonal, consonant music has a space, a big space, and it makes a lot of sense when you are describing things like falling in love and getting married, and more atonal dissonant sonorities have a space too, but they are really appropriate when you're describing drama and tragedy and things that are not pleasure.

I thought I heard, in the lament, some brief modal moments.

It might have sneaked in a little bit at some point, even the more tonal parts can be chromatic, which is sort of typical of the south Mediterranean music, but I tried to stay away from using, for example, local folk tradition or modes.

How was the experience putting the piece together with this incredible group of musicians?

The group is great and these people, they're very amazing. They put it together with three rehearsals and it is kind of staggering how quickly they put together this amount of music. There was a touching moment: I was surprised how much the players, on the last moment of the piece, just a note on the vibraphone and the gong, they held that moment for at least 15 seconds. They were almost completely still. And that for me was very touching. Everybody in the audience was just suspending their breath. And we didn't plan it, it was just the first violin, Otis, he just decided to hold that moment for the longest time, and that was very touching.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. For the full interview, contact Davide and invite him for coffee.