NERON KAISAR
A POETIC OPERA IN TEN SCENES
By John Peel with Libretto by M. D. Usher after Ancient Sources

THURSDAY
SEPTEMBER 18, 2014
4:30 P.M.

Jacqueline du Pré Music Building
St. Hilda’s College
NERON KAISAR
By John Peel with Libretto by M. D. Usher after Ancient Sources

PROGRAM

Neron Kaisar is a major work for chamber orchestra, chorus, two harps, small brass ensemble, and five voices. This evening’s performance is of the first scene from this work-in-progress, with piano and harp accompaniment. The dramatis personae for the larger piece are as follows:

Nero, Emperor of Rome ........................................... Tenor
Seneca, Stoic philosopher and Nero’s Advisor .................. Bass-Baritone
Tigellinus, Chief of the Praetorian Guard ....................... Bass-Baritone
Epaphroditus/Phaon/Sporus (Various Slaves, Courtiers, and Freedmen) . Contralto
The Sibyl, An Ecstatic Prophetess ................................. Soprano
Poppaea, Nero’s Mistress, and Second Wife ..................... Soprano
Octavia, Nero’s First Wife, the Former Emperor Claudius’ Daughter ... Mezzo-soprano
Agrippina, Nero’s Mother .................................. Mezzo-soprano
Chorus (Representing variously: Senate, Muses, plebs, Nero’s musical competitors, Jews and Christians)

SCENE 1, “incipit”

Nero is acclaimed Emperor by the Senate; receives poetic calling from the Muses; attended by his mother, Agrippina, and Seneca, his tutor and advisor; the Sibyl proclaims auguries for his reign ...

PERFORMERS

Chris Watson, Nero
Kate Symonds Joy, Agrippina
Giles Underwood, Seneca
Eloise Irving, The Sibyl
Peter McMullin, Piano
Anneke Hodnett, Harp
Oxford Voices, Chorus, Senate and Muses
Gulliver Ralston, Conductor

LIBRETTIST’S NOTE

Neron Kaisar is unique to the operatic literature, in both its premise and in our treatment of it. While the events recounted are faithfully historical, our artistic focus is on the emperor Nero’s sub-career and psychological orientation as a singer and kitharode. Much of the text is drawn verbatim from famous passages of ancient poetry, mostly Greek, but some Latin too, with interstitial dialogue in English and Latin prose. The English translations of all text included in this program are themselves poetic: They are not meant to be perfectly literal renderings (as if such a thing were even possible), but they are informed by a close familiarity with the original Greek and Latin sources.

The music makes use of traditional operatic forms that are cast in both classical and more modern musical languages. Just as the libretto moves from Latin to Greek, and from prose to poetry, the music responds: There are, for example, prose-like passages of recitative for sung dialogues and interchanges among characters, while the poetic set-pieces are composed using vocally-extended forms like classic aria to convey the heightened emotions. When characters quote ancient Greek poetry, the musical style deliberately steps back in time to a less ornate musical surface and to a more direct harmonic language. The music for Nero himself is always self-consciously “overwrought,” as it were, as befits a character who approached life as a work of art—indeed, as if it were an opera.

In Nero’s day, poems by Hesiod, Sappho, Anacreon, Alcaeus, Archilochus, and others were already established “classics,” and Nero’s ambition—which extended far beyond any ambitions he may have had as emperor—was to be an accomplished performer of this repertoire. The scoring for two harps in this piece provides a musical corollary to the lyre or kithara that would have been Nero’s primary instrument. The idea of musical competition (an activity on which both Greeks and Romans were very keen) is expressed throughout the work in the arguments/diologue exchanged between characters. One scene consists of an actual musical competition between Nero and various soloists who emerge from the Chorus to vie with him. Indeed, the glories and pitfalls of poetic and musical ambition are among this opera’s overarching themes, the purpose of which is to intentionally evoke (and innovate on)
a long-established trope from the musical canon (e.g., Bach's Der Streit zwischen Phoebus und Pan; Wagner's Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg; Strauss' Capriccio). An important secondary purpose in this work's thematic focus is to provide oblique, ironic commentary on our own culture's obsession with pop celebrity, as seen, for example, in the proliferation of "American Idol"-type television programs.

Another aspect of Nero's career that we naturally aim to capture is the tragic consequences of the emperor's life choices, which are recounted in detail by Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio—i.e., the poisoning of his step-brother and potential rival to the throne, Britannicus; the spectacular murder of, and incestuous relationship with, his mother, Agrippina; the divorce, banishment and execution of his first wife, Octavia; his infatuation with Poppaea Sabina, who became his second wife, then his kicking of her to death while she was pregnant; the sorry fate of Nero's castrated boy-lover, Sporus, whom Nero later "married" because he reminded him of Poppaea; the scapegoating of Christians after the Great Fire at Rome; the military campaigns in Judaea and Nero's manipulation of messianic expectations there; the forced suicide of Seneca, his tutor and adviser; Nero's own desperate last moments and inglorious suicide, and, finally, the apocalyptic legend of his return from the dead.

Ultimately, however, this work paints Nero as a flamboyant Liberace-like character: someone not perfectly aware of his surroundings or of appropriate boundaries, not quite in control of his desires and fantasies, wanting more than anything to be a celebrated entertainer and performer, and, while fairly accomplished in that vein, not possessing the true talent of an original poet; someone whose libidinous self-indulgence harms those who inhabit the world around him. There is also a strong element in the piece of Oscar Wilde's dictum that life imitates art. That the characters often sing contextually appropriate "classics" to one another is one expression of this idea. But in a very real way, too, as far as the historical Nero is concerned, life and art did in fact become tragically intertwined. For example, the larger opera has scenes where Nero plays two of his favorite stage roles that correspond to events in his own life and reign—the incestuous Oedipus, and the matricide Orestes. Even Nero's last words are a bathetic farrago of snippets from the poetic canon, distant echoes of lost Greek tragedies: When, for example, unable to muster the courage to commit suicide and finding no one in his entourage who was willing to dispatch him, Nero exclaimed, "What, have I neither friend nor foe?" And then, in Greek, speaking to himself, "This is not becoming to Nero," and "Come now, rouse thyself!" One of Nero's most famous last quips, Qualis artifex pereo! ("What an artist dies in me!"), is perhaps most revealing of the emperor's own self-perception. But they were not in fact his last words: As the Pretorian Guard approached the villa where he was hiding—barefoot, abandoned, disguised in a dingy cloak and hat—Nero raised his courage, sang a line from the Iliad—"Hark to the sound I hear! It is hooves of galloping horses!"—and stabbed himself in the throat. And thus the curtain fell.
Claudia Octavia
National Museum of Rome
Octavia’s image on an ancient Roman coin

Palatine Nero
National Museum of Rome

Roman coin featuring an image of young Nero and his mother, Agrippina

Poppaea Sabina
National Museum of Rome
Scene 1: “Incipit”

Nero, aged 17, is carried in a litter with his mother, Agrippina, into a busy, opulent scene for his coronation, borne by slaves. The relationship between mother and son, as Suetonius reports, was thought to be incestuous. Agrippina had poisoned the outgoing emperor Claudius, her second husband, with mushrooms, having connived previously to get him to name Nero, her son by a previous marriage, as successor. Both mother and son are “expectant” for Nero’s imminent coronation.

Agrippina, stroking Nero’s face, fussing with his clothes and crown, sings Vergil, Eclogue 4.60, 62-63:

Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem.
Incipe, parve puer, qui non risere parenti,
Nec deus hunc mensa, dea nec dignata cubili est.

My darling boy, with a smile, begin!
Look at me, your mother! If you won’t spread
Your lips in joy for me, offer your chin,
No god shares his feast, no goddess her bed.

Nero smiles, kissing Agrippina on the cheek, neck, and bosom, boyishly, and a bit too over-fondly:

Mother!

Agrippina lets the bodice of her dress fall loose and sings Aeschylus, Choephoroe 896-898:

μητίσχε—ὦ παῖ—τόνδε δ᾿ αἴδεσαι, τέκνον,
μάστον, πρός υἱόν πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἁμα
οὐλοισιν ἐξήμελξας εὔτραφὲς γάλα.

Honor, my child, my son,
This breast at which you nursed.
Do not go; be not done!
Slumbering there a spell,
Squeeze out of me with pursed
Lips milk to make you well.

Nero buries his face in Agrippina’s bosom:

Mother, I do; and I will!

Nero steps out of the litter, arm-in-arm with Agrippina, and takes his seat on the dais. The Senate hails him as Imperator. Seneca is at his left offering advice; Agrippina on the right to assert her place. The Chorus, split between male and female voices, represents the interests of the Senate and the Muses.

Chorus (Senate) sings Vergil, Eclogue 4.4-7:

Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;
magnus ab integro saeculum nascitur ordo.
iam reductet et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna,
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.

The last age of the Sibyl’s song has come,
The great order of ages born anigh,
Virgin Justice returns to earth; some
New race, and Saturn’s reign, falls from on high!

Agrippina, to Nero:

You will rule the world! The ages will rejoice in you—my love!

Chorus (Senate):

Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus! Imperator! Divus Augustus! Nobilissimus! Sebastos!
Dominus noster! Pius et felix! Invictissimus!

Seneca, solemnly, sings to Nero from his De Clementia 1.7:

The risk the Roman people faced was great, while it was unknown what course your noble gifts would take. But as it stands, you can count on prayers from the State: I see no risk that some sudden self-amnesia will seize and hold you in its sway.

Too much prosperity makes men want more; and desires are never so restrained that they disappear once attained. Ascent always grows from great to greater, . . . and men embrace the wildest hopes once they obtain what they never, ever dreamt.

Today all your subjects feel inspired to say they are fortunate, and that nothing further could be added to these blessings—except they endure . . .
Chorus:

Laudamus . . . divinitatem tuam, maiestatem
tuam, clementiam tuam, serenitatem tuam,
facilitatem tuam!

We acclaim your divinity, majesty, mercy,
serenity—your happiness!

Agrippina, ecstatically:

Hail, Caesar!

As the acclamation subsides, Nero, accompanied by the harp, announces his platform as emperor (Archilochus fragments 1 and 2):

I am the servant of the Muse and Mars:
We wield the spear, yet the Muses’ gift is also ours.

Nero, holding a sceptre/mace:

From this sceptre comes our bread, from this sceptre wine—
I drink it down, as on this sceptre I recline.

Nero takes a symbolic sip from a chalice and tosses it away.

Agrippina, beside herself:

Drink it down to the lees, my son!

Seneca:

But not too much: wine is the window of the soul . . .

Nero continues his platform, picking up Vergil, Eclogue 4.55-59:

Linus and Orpheus of Thrace
Will not out-sing me in an air,
Though his mother, Calliope,
Inspire the one with her embrace,
And Linus Apollo, the fair.
Even Pan, if he vied with me,
With Arcady to judge the case;
Yea, Pan, with Arcady to bear
Judgement, would surrender to me.

Nero:

Non me carminibus vincat nec Thracius Orpheus
nec Linus, huic mater quamvis atque huic pater adsit,
Orphei Calliopea, Lino formosus Apollo.
Pan etiam, Arcadia mecum si iudice certet,
Pan etiam Arcadia dicat se iudice victum.

We lead men in song astray.
With lies like truth we taunt
Your kind; yet we also play
The truth, if and when we want.

Nero, archly:

What is truth?
Chorus, now Senate, oblivious to the Muses’ apparition, continues to sing its interests (= Heraclitus fragment 53 Diels-Kranz):

The father and the ruler
Of our humankind is War,
Who makes slaves free, free men slaves—
Some gods!—others men, no more.

Seneca continues with advice from De Clementia (1.26.3; 1.26.5; 1.5.1):

Good gods! What woe is this—to kill, to rage, to take pleasure in the clink of chains and in severing the heads of countrymen!

True happiness lies in saving lives, in summoning the many back to life from the brink of death by acts of mercy. No ornament is more fitting for a prince on high—not trophies stripped from a fallen foe, nor chariots stained with savage blood, nor spoils gained in war. To save life on a universal scale shows ... the power of a god; to kill en masse and without distinction is the force of firebrands and ruin.

You are the soul of the State; the State is your body. You see, I am sure, the need for mercy: When you spare another, you save yourself.

Nero, coyly:

Caesar, then, to that degree, is merciful indeed.

Agrippina waves Seneca off disdainfully, sings in reply, from Handel’s Agrippina:

Nerone, amato figlio; è questo il tempo, in cui la tua fortuna prender potrai per’ il crine, ed arrestarla. Oggi proprio fato la corona de’ Cesari ti porge. Svelo a te ciò che a tutti è ignoto ancor.

She offers Nero a large book.

Prendi, leggi! . . .

Chorus:

The Sibylline Books!

Tolle! lege!

Agrippina:

. . . e vedrai e ciò che la mia mente dispone
da tuo favor poscia saprai!

And you shall see
And know what my mind
Contrives for your future good!

The Sibyl—blind, dishevelled in appearance, wild hair, sumptuous, ecstatic—pushes her way through the crowd, grabs the book from Agrippina (it is open, but the Sibyl is not looking at it) and confronts Nero. She sings a concatenation of Oracula Sibyllina 2.4-5, 3.815-818, an oracle from Dio Cassius (62.18.3-4), OracSib 5.29-31 and 5.377-380:

πᾶν δέμας ἐκπληχθεῖσα τάδ᾿ ἔσπομαι· οὐδὲ γὰρ οἶδα ὅττι λέγω, κέλεται δὲ θεὸς τὰ ἐκαστ᾿ ἀγορεύειν. . . οἳ δέ με Κίρκης μητρὸς κἀγνώστοι πατρὸς φήσουσι Σίβυλλαν μαινομένην ψεύστειραν· ἐπὴν δὲ γένηται ἅπαντα, τηνίκα μου μνήμην ποιήσετε κοὐκέτι μ᾿ οὐδείς μαινομένην φήσειε, θεοῦ μεγάλοι προφῆτιν. . .

What I will sing I do not know.
Yet what I speak doth God require.
They say I am a raving liar,
Myself to ecstasy I throw.
Circe’s child, I am Sibyl, sire
Unknown. But all will thus transpire.
Thought mad no more, God’s truth I show.
This performance of “Incipit” from Neron Kaisar is made possible by the Irene Gerlinger Swindells Endowment at Willamette University. Thanks also to Fiona Macintosh and Justine McConnell of the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama. Mike Wright of Willamette University Communications created the program. Cheryl Cramer prepared the music score. Transliteration of Greek into the International Phonetic Alphabet was done by Frances Merrill.

Exhausted from delivering the prophecy, the Sibyl concludes with an anonymous poetic line transmitted in Suetonius Nero 38:

“When I am dead, may fire consume the earth.”

Nero, smartly, wildly, with wanton disregard of the Sibyl’s warnings:

Nay, Sibyl, your song is false! your line should read: “When I am alive!”

**ARTISTS’ BIOS**

**John Peel**

John Peel’s previous opera compositions include a monodrama for soprano and chamber orchestra, *The Pythia*, based on Paul Valéry’s La Pythie, commissioned by the ensemble Collage in Boston, Mass; and an opera seria, Voces Vergilianae, in collaboration with librettist M. D. Usher, commissioned by Willamette University in Salem, Ore. for the opening of the Rogers Music Center in 1999. Major orchestral works include the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, commissioned by Riverside Symphony in New York and premiered in 2000 with violinist Joseph Lin; and Sinfonia Romanza, commissioned by conductor James DePreist for the Oregon Symphony and premiered in 2005. Peel’s chamber music includes Scena ed Aria for violin and piano, premiered by Rolf Schulte and Alan Feinberg; and Como un Arco de Viola, settings of poems by García Lorca, for soprano and string quartet, premiered by Cuarteto Latinoamericano with soprano Janice Johnson. Peel holds the position of Composer-in-Residence, Irene Gerlinger Swindells Professor of Music at Willamette University, where he teaches composition and produces New Music at Willamette, a series of concerts, residencies and lectures devoted to art music of our time.

**M. D. Usher**

Mark Usher is professor and chair of classics at the University of Vermont. In addition to scholarly books and articles in the field of classics, he has published three books for children, original poetry and translations, and one other opera libretto, Voces Vergilianae, in Latin with music by John Peel. Usher lives in Shoreham, Vermont, where he and his wife built and operate Works & Days Farm, a small, diversified farmstead that produces lamb, pork, honey and eggs.
ABOUT WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY

Willamette — a nationally renowned, private liberal arts university in Salem, Oregon — is a place where teaching and learning, strengthened by scholarship and service, flourish in a vibrant campus community.

Founded in 1842, Willamette is the first university established in the western U.S. Willamette’s beautiful, historic 60-acre campus — located across the street from the Oregon State Capitol and in the heart of the Willamette Valley — features a residential undergraduate College of Liberal Arts and two professional graduate schools: the College of Law and the Atkinson Graduate School of Management.

A Willamette education prepares graduates to transform knowledge into action and lead lives of achievement, contribution and meaning. Willamette’s 24,000 alumni around the world include a Nobel Prize-winning economist, corporate presidents and CEOs, nationally recognized artists, 15 Oregon Supreme Court justices and numerous Fulbright Grant-winners.