

*boating accident on  
the river styx*

thursday and friday,  
december 2 and 3, 1999  
7:30pm  
greenwall

# boating accident on the river styx

a chamber opera by dan mohr\*  
libretto by john hollander,  
from "on the calendar"  
additional text by the composer

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Dan Mohr — The Protagonist  
Kaiti Carpenter, Celia Twomey, Emily Wells — The Chorus

Bruce Williamson — Alto Saxophone, Bass and Alto Clarinets, Flute  
Ben Abarbanel-Wolff — Tenor and Baritone Saxophones  
Jason Stein — Bass Clarinet  
Chris Faris — Contrabass  
Jesse Olsen — Drum Kit

Christian Bucknum — Sound Engineer, Sampler  
Amy Williams — Piano, Conducting

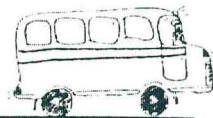
doT — Celia Twomey

musical quotations from  
"Je T'aime...Moi Non Plus" by Serge Gainsbourg  
"Der Tod und das Mädchen" by Franz Schubert,  
text by Claudius

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## scenario

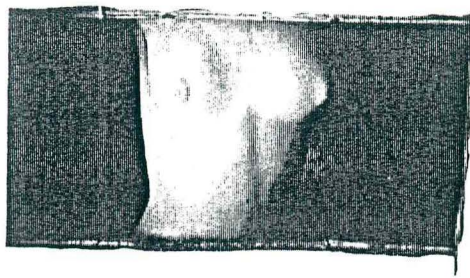
opening scene  
church scene  
sex scene  
death scene  
bus scene  
park scene  
party scene  
recital scene



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lighting design by Jason Eksuzian  
stage assistance by Sarah Reynolds  
recording engineered by Lang Crawford  
poster and program design by Dan Mohr

\*recipient of the 1998-1999 John Hendrick Memorial Commission



ma fin est ma commencement.  
—guillaume de machaut

go. ... go littel myn tragedye.  
—geoffrey chaucer

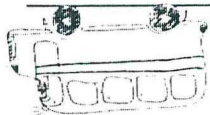
I began work on *Boating Accident on the River Styx* in late February of this year. It is largely a setting of John Hollander's poem "On the Calendar." The poem is a set of predictions for every day in a month, during which the narrator—the Protagonist in *Boating Accident*—almost always dies. Nearly all of the text included in the piece is taken from the poem, but I have significantly cut and reordered it to produce the narrative that is presented in the piece's present form. This narrative is not endemic to the text, even as it stands now; rather, it is a product of the interaction of the text with the music.

Through this interaction, I hope to have produced an aural theatricality prominent enough to refer to the piece as an opera. Its characters are not only the Chorus and the Protagonist—the musicians you see on stage—but also various themes and motives that arise from the text, and the atmosphere in which I have placed it. Take, for instance, the amplified-breathing that evolves from the Church Scene to the Death Scene. It develops itself, starting with calm and slow aspiration by the Chorus in the Church Scene, later to be inflamed into a state of sexual fervor; after which state's climax, it becomes the final, enfeebled gasps of a death swoon. This dramatic arch parallels, but does not denote or represent the textual progression presented by the Protagonist. The breathing is a character defined by every member of the ensemble, rather than by a single singing actor or instrumentalist. I have considered melodic lines, chord progressions, and rhythmic cells in a similar manner.

After the Bus Scene (what I imagine to be the vexation of the Protagonist's passage to the afterlife—the title's 'boating accident'), a considerable element of appropriation comes into play in the music. The quotation of Serge Gainsbourg and (especially) Schubert, as well as the appropriation of style (i.e., the improvisational structure of the Party Scene), converge here to define one final 'character' in the piece. This character is an exaggeration of the stylistic references in the Church, Sex, and Death Scenes. She has thus been around throughout the entire piece, and finally manifests herself physically on stage, in the form of a girl named doT...

This piece sees the culmination of my studies of vocal composition at Bennington. I thank all you who have turned out to hear it, and would appreciate hearing your feedback and reactions after the performance.

—dan mohr



Thank you to (in no particular order) Amy Williams, Tom Bogdan, Sarah Reynolds, Christian Bucknum, Lang Crawford, Michael Giannitti, Sarah Kermensky, Jason Eksuzian, Ann Resch, Sue Jones, ballroom dancers and basketball players, the music faculty, Lynn Book, my continued though tenuous sanity, Charity Dove and Matt Follette, Sarah Gancher and the Rats, and, ultimately, the dedicated and talented musicians without whom this performance would not have been possible, and to whom I am deeply indebted.

# libretto

## OPENING SCENE

I will start with an ancient trumpeting in my ears, an awakening in my eyes, as if the morning of a new month were a whole new year; but as my heart cries out under the burden of these surges of hope, the great call of the trumpet, the last call of all, will crack it. As if the end of the old were the end of the whole.

I will start a second time, awake again to an old alarm, move inevitably among the echoes of the previous day; in my family these things are always celebrated twice, and so I shall die once again of aggravated commencement.

## CHURCH SCENE

*(ave regina salve sancta maria amen e u o u a e)*

I will enter a tabernacle in the wilderness of the city; the tabernacle, poorly built and tended, will collapse;

*(misereris omnium Domine et nihil odisti eorum quae fecisti dissimulans peccata hominum propter penitentium et parcens illis quia tu es Dominus Deus noster miserere mei Deus miserere mei quoniam in te confidit anima mea Gloria Patri e u o u a e)*

ripe apples will drop upon my head, grapes will express themselves from bunches, falling like drops to the confused floor; a huge gray squash will crush my skull like a head.

## SEX SCENE

I will enter a phase of erotic debauchery, searching among twisted regions of the Appalling for a hidden gateway into some sort of garden. And one calm evening of respite, I will pass into a pleasant glade of the more familiar sort of thing I had been fleeing in my explorations. Enjoying an elegantly turned-out and expensive one-legged daughter of joy, her stump tucked under my left arm for convenience in fucking, I shall succumb to a terminal transport which, given the relative absence of the uncanny, one could hardly have expected to be so strong.

## DEATH SCENE

I will take cold, finally.

I will awaken from a recurrent dream—of an unpleasant sort, but so familiar as to seem almost homely—to find myself in a low, narrow tunnel, along which I have been crawling, sharp rocks stabbing my knees and scraping my back, unable at last to move ahead or backward.

I will issue forth, screaming, into my mother's tomb.

I will receive from the new teller at the bank, a dim and inattentive person, a pair of strange coins made to fit perfectly over my closed eyelids; proving this by experiment, I will be hit by a large truck.

## BUS SCENE

I will join the other passengers in a slow bus as, after an eagle has flown at the windshield, causing the driver to lose control, the bus goes crashing down the lower slope of Mt. Parnassus, while other eagles wheel overhead.

*(the bodies of three blond boys will be recovered from the wreckage autopsies will reveal bruises and third-degree burns on wrists caused by accidental falls from bicycles into hot asphalt the smell of raspberry jam cooking in the hot afternoon the sound of construction conflating with the hum of locusts while other eagles wheel overhead)*

*(the broken beak of an eagle will be found today in the wreckage of a school bus fractures radiating out from the ostensible point of impact also will be found the corpse of the eagle once possessed of this beak autopsies will reveal a note on a scroll lodged inside the animal this note will read 'relax' while other eagles wheel overhead)*

## PARK SCENE

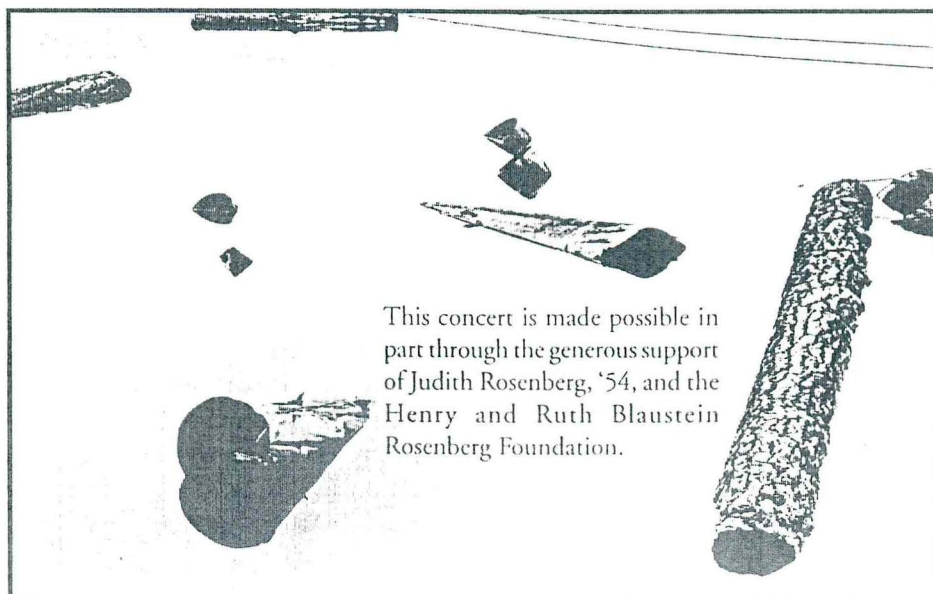
I will wander into a secluded part of the Central Park where three fourteen-year-olds, doubtless mistaking me for their true victim, Someone Else, will murder me for five dollars.

## PARTY SCENE

I will attend a small party in my honor at which there will be three short girls of about seventeen, too shy to talk to me. One of them, very fat and with an almost deformedly large ass, will have so sweet and clear-skinned a face, such soft and bravely arranged hair, that my heart will break as I think of her and her isolation in and from her body. I will be found next morning in the deep snow.

## RECITAL SCENE

I will pause before a shop window, long enough to see reflected in it a girl named Dot, with her name painted on her T-shirt, standing behind me awaiting recognition.



This concert is made possible in part through the generous support of Judith Rosenberg, '54, and the Henry and Ruth Blaustein Rosenberg Foundation.