

A ROOSTER FOR ASCLEPIUS
by Peter McMurray

Michael Sakir, conductor

Phaedo/Artemis: Amanda Keil, mezzo-soprano
Crito/Apollo: Brooke Larimer, mezzo-soprano
Socrates/Asclepius: Alan Bailey, baritone
Chiron/Guard: Taylor Horner, bass
Phaedo: Cameron VanderWerf
Interlocutor: Matthew Peebles

Alex Conway, flute
Jacob Wise, clarinet
Alexa Schmitz, violin
Brandon Brooks, violoncello
Chris Wilson, percussion

J. Jacob Krause, stage director & designer
Heather L. Ash, stage manager
Iris Harrington-Woodard, crew
Alice Yi & Shannon Rosa, artists

Synopsis:

A Rooster for Asclepius is a timbral operatic depiction of the final three days of Socrates' life as he awaits execution in Athens. Imprisoned for some time, he has begun having strange dreams, which he shares with his friends who visit him. As he finally takes the poison that will kill him, he has a hemlock-induced dream of the mythical healer Asclepius, who was first saved by the gods as a baby from his mother's funeral pyre, then raised and trained as a healer by the centaur Chiron, only to be killed later by Zeus because he raised Hippolytus from the dead. At the conclusion of the dream, Socrates dies and his friends sing praises to Asclepius for releasing him from this mortal existence.

"Crito, we owe a rooster to Asclepius: make this offering to him and do not forget".

The Trial and Death of Socrates – Plato

Composer's Note:

While not considered tragedy—the usual stuff of an opera libretto—the writings of Plato about the trial, prison stint, and death of Socrates carry a certain tragic undertone as they reflect on the unnecessary, untimely death of the great philosopher and social critic. The libretto of this opera comes primarily from those texts by Plato, augmented with other ancient Greek writings (e.g., Pindar, Homeric Hymns) that recount the life of Asclepius, a mythological healer mentioned by Socrates on his deathbed as he tells his acolytes to make a sacrificial offering of a rooster to Asclepius. Presumably this request was intended to ensure that Socrates would be well cared for as he sojourned onward from this life.

In this opera, however, I view this moment as part of an ongoing series of dreams that have appeared to Socrates in the days before his death: first, a vision that his life would be prolonged several days while waiting for the arrival of a sacred ship from Delos (at which point a temporary ban on executions would be lifted); and second, a divine mandate that he should set the fables of Aesop to verse. His dream of Asclepius—my own interpolation—comes after he has taken the hemlock and appears to have fallen asleep, but then comes to and makes his seemingly out-of-nowhere request about offering up a

rooster. If Plato's accounts dwell more heavily on the philosophical chit-chat going on in the prison, I instead highlight these dreams as the centerpiece of Socrates' last days alive.

Another significant factor in Socrates' demise is his daemon, or voice inside his head. Whether divinely inspired or perhaps a bit off his rocker, Socrates continually blurs the line between piety and heresy, much to the chagrin of the polis powers-that-be. In this opera, that line between human and the divine is likewise blurred, as each mortal character doubles as an immortal. So that's the opera in a nutshell: poultry, daemonic dreams, and deathrow philosophers. And the music grows out of those themes.

-Peter McMurray

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BIOGRAPHIES

PETER MCMURRAY, composer

Peter McMurray is pursuing graduate work at Brandeis University in Music Composition and Theory, where he has studied composition with Davy Rakowski and Yu-Hui Chang, and electronic music with Eric Chasalow. His research on Pauline Oliveros is part of Chasalow's ongoing oral history archive of interviews with pioneers of electronic music. Other interests include saxophone performance (jazz and other improvisational forms) and research on oral literature and performance. In addition to his studies, he currently works as the associate curator of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard.