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# Meet the Composer and Librettist

An Interview with composer Dave Ragland Jr. and librettist Mary McCallum.

It isn't everyday that an opera-goer gets to experience an opera by a living composer and librettist and hear from them directly! Take a minute to get to know the creators of *Beatrice!*

PO: *Dave, what brought you to composing? What or who were your early influences?*

DR: Growing up, I knew that there was something there. When I was a young kid, I would make up songs on the school playground. In fifth grade, I had an assignment to find a song that matched the book I was reading for book report presentations. I couldn't find a song that matched, so I went to the piano and wrote one.

As a clarinetist, high school band director Jim Ransom motivated me to step up, push harder and take my musical studies seriously. The Director of the TSU Showstoppers, Mrs. Diana Poe, opened up my mind to a world of musical possibility. I probably wouldn't be doing what I do today, if it wasn't for her.

PO: *Mary, what about you, what brought you to libretto and playwrighting?*

MM: Being an actress and starting a theater company brought me to writing. After working in theater for a few years, I had a core group of actors that I worked with a lot and I really wanted to write something with this group in mind that we could all be in. So, I tried my hand at writing my first play, which turned out to be a success, and I have been writing since then.

PO: *This isn't your first collaboration—how did you two begin your creative partnership?*



Dave Ragland Jr.

MM: Dave approached me a couple of years about writing the libretto for a project with Nashville Opera, *One Vote Won*. That's where it all started and we are working on our third project together now.

DR: That's right! Before the pandemic, Nashville Opera reached out to me about creating an opera to commemorate the centennial of Women's Suffrage. I reached out to Mary about creating the libretto. From her previous works around town, I knew her to be a great actress, director, and playwright - particularly in historical dramas.



Mary McCallum

PO: *What makes opera creating unique and different in each of your worlds?*

MM: I think the opportunity to create opera that is relatable and also, for the couple of projects that I have worked on, that have an educational component has been exciting. Getting to tell stories about amazing women (such as Beatrice) through this artform has been a great experience.

DR: I love the creation of synergy - creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Opera composition is just that. Striking a balance between melody, text, orchestration, and dramatic arc is an interesting challenge.

PO: *What, if any, accommodations do you make when writing for young audiences?*

DR: Accessibility is key. With works like *Beatrice* (and *One Vote Won*), I make it a point to write for the young person in the back of the eighth-grade history class who might not have gotten enough sleep last night. When everyone understands, everyone can contribute to the conversation.

PO: *Dave, what is your greatest challenge as a composer?*

DR: My greatest challenge is grabbing and keeping the listeners' attention and telling the story, while operating in the parameters of the human voice, instrumental range, and stagecraft.

PO: *Mary, what do you find challenging about writing a libretto?*

- MM: For the pieces I have written, which have been about real-life people and events, I always want to make sure I stay true to their history and portray them as accurately as possible. At the same time, there has to be some level of creative license taken to flush out the story. Just making sure that I find a good balance with that.
- PO: *How does your collaboration work?*
- MM: We will usually talk about the concept together, the constraints in terms of number of cast members, gender, setting, etc. Then I go away and do my thing, bouncing things off of Dave as needed. Then I complete the libretto and hand it off to Dave.
- DR: Once we both agree on the libretto, I will create the score. Then I'll send a draft of the score to Mary for her to peruse and approve.
- PO: *Dave, where do you usually start when you begin composing? What motivates the music and how does it proceed?*
- DR: I start with the text. First, the text will inform me of how a character speaks. For example, Beatrice Morrow Cannady speaks differently than Gloria in *One Vote Won*. It's about finding the character's voice and transposing that into music. Once that is determined, that helps me to form an idea of the overall pacing of the show. Then, I can honor the characters and keep things moving dramatically.
- PO: *Had either of you ever heard of Beatrice Morrow Cannady before you were approached for this project?*
- MM: No, I had not heard of her prior to this project but I am so glad to know her now.
- DR: I had not heard of either Beatrice or Edward Cannady before this project either. Working on this opera pushed me to learn more about African American life and history in the Northwest. I am grateful that Portland Opera chose to present this story.
- PO: *What about Beatrice really fired up your imagination or influenced the way that you wanted to portray the characters?*
- DR: Beatrice Morrow Cannady reminds me so much of my grandmother - the late Grace Moon Lay. Like my grandmother, Beatrice was a renaissance woman: an activist, educated, artistic, and dignified. I drew some inspiration for how to approach Beatrice from her, Grace Moon Lay.
- MM: I think the fact that she was such a pioneer and so brave and bold really captured my imagination. I love the fact that she didn't let people, circumstances, or the time she lived in to limit her. I really wanted to make sure that people saw how amazing she was and that she would not let a "no" stop her. At the same time, I also wanted to show her

as human with many different sides to her. And the fact that she didn't let having experience at something, for example running a paper, deter her from trying. I love her confidence.

PO: *Dave, how do you use music to illuminate the action of an opera?*

DR: In opera, music has to be a jack-of-all-trades. It must establish character, set up a scene, allow for "moments", pace the show, and entertain. In *Beatrice*, there are a lot of recurring thematic elements present to help the listener. Every time a character addresses someone formally, a particular theme is used. Every time Beatrice has a meaningful thought another theme is used.

PO: *Mary, how does knowing that your words will be set to music influence how you go about writing the libretto?*

MM: I really try to picture it set to music as I'm writing. Of course, the music in head is nothing like the music that Dave ultimately brings, but it helps me to try to picture how it will ultimately end up. At the end of the day, it's just to tell a great story.

PO: *In looking at opera, how would you like to see the genre evolve and grow into the future?*

MM: I think continuing to find ways to make opera more accessible as an art form and open it up to wider audiences.


DR: With *Beatrice* and *One Vote Won*, history (in particular, Black history) was not only presented but was made accessible and comprehensible with a relevant message. Hopefully, this type of discourse will encourage more members of our local communities - with a broad range of ages and ethnicities - to latch on. I would like to see more organic growth in our audiences, where the people make opera a part of their everyday listening and enjoyment.

PO: *Why do you think Beatrice is an important figure for people to know about?*

MM: She was such a smart, brave, and bold woman and really ahead of her time in so many ways. She never stopped fighting for what was right. She always rose to the challenge of fighting discrimination and taking a stand against hatred. Her example is something we should all look up to.

DR: Beatrice Morrow Cannady is someone who I wish everyone knew about! The things that she accomplished in Oregon - in that time period - were revolutionary.

PO: *What do you want students/audiences to take away from this opera?*



DR: First, opera is for everyone! Secondly, I want students to feel free to discover more about Beatrice and Black history in Oregon. Finally, I think every viewer can keep with them the message of determination and that one person actually CAN make a difference.

MM: I agree! One person really can make a difference and [that we should] be fearless in the pursuit of trying to make this world a better place.

PO: *If you could write an opera about absolutely ANYTHING, what would you like to write?*

MM: I have a play called *SingleVille*, which is a comedy about dating. I would love to turn it into an opera.

DR: It's TOO many things to list!! Oftentimes, I wonder if I can devise a plan to take a month off and complete drafts of as many things as I can - binge composing, I guess.

Please visit the composer and the librettist at:

Dave Ragland can be found

<https://daveragland.com/>

Mary McCallum can be found

<https://m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100054256026944>