

CLASSICAL NOTES

# Musical setting of Dead Sea Scrolls to get premiere

By David Weininger | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 26, 2013

Eric Chasalow, a composer at Brandeis, writes a lot of music with texts. It's an intricate and fine-grained process, one that requires "living with the words — feeling the musicality of the words and how that connects to their meaning," he said recently. And it requires him to have a deep familiarity with a text's language before embarking on a musical setting.

So in April, when he saw a proposal from a fellow faculty member soliciting projects dealing with the Dead Sea Scrolls, he was torn. On the one hand, he was attracted to the idea of delving into these mysterious and often fragmented texts, illuminating them through music. On the other, he didn't know much about the scrolls, he knew no Aramaic, and he remembered only some of the Hebrew he'd learned growing up.



MIKE LOVETT

**"It suddenly felt like bar mitzvah lessons again," Eric Chasalow, Brandeis composer, on listening to spoken excerpts of Dead Sea Scrolls for "Where It Finds Nothing But the Wind."**

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The challenge won out, and Chasalow spent much of the summer composing “Where It Finds Nothing But the Wind,” a setting of excerpts from the Dead Sea Scrolls for soprano, flute, guitar, percussion, and electronics. The piece is due to be premiered Oct. 5 by the new-music group Dinosaur Annex, along with an older work of Chasalow’s and music by Kaija Saariaho and Jonathan Harvey.

In a way, the new work shows how a piece of music can emerge from the network of friendships and associations around a composer. For years, Chasalow had wanted to write a piece for Tony Arnold, an outstanding soprano and leading light among contemporary music singers. “I think she’s just fantastic — what she can do is really incredible.”

When he asked Arnold whether she’d be willing to learn a piece written in Hebrew, her response, Chasalow remembers, was “Oh, I had this synagogue gig in Chicago off and on for years. I’m a good Catholic girl, but I can coach with this great cantor.”

Brandeis itself provided a host of connections, starting with the Scrolls themselves. The school is the educational partner for the exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls that’s at the Museum of Science through Oct. 20. Marc Brettler, of Brandeis’s department of Near Eastern and Judaic studies, chairs the committee working with the museum, and he sent out the call for proposals that initially fired Chasalow’s imagination.

Brettler not only provided a written transliteration of the Hebrew texts Chasalow selected but recorded himself reading them as well. His colleague David Wright did the same with the Aramaic portions. With those aids, Chasalow felt he could create a persuasive, nuanced text setting.

### **Dinosaur Annex**

Slosberg Recital Hall, Brandeis University, Waltham 781-736-3400.

<http://www.dinosaurannex.org>

**Also performing:** Tony Arnold, soprano  
Music of Chasalow, Saariaho, and Harvey

**Date of concert:** Oct. 5, 8 p.m.

**Ticket price:** \$5-\$20

Still, the process brought back unexpected memories. “I’m sitting there listening to these sound files of them reading the thing, and it suddenly felt like bar mitzvah lessons again.”

The Scrolls, which were discovered between 1947 and 1956 in caves near the Dead Sea, contain a variety of biblical and other texts. Wading through them, Chasalow initially looked simply for “texts that I could set. And then I started putting them into an order, and it started to take a shape that made musical sense to me.”

“Where It Finds Nothing But the Wind” begins in a personal tone, with psalm selections, and moves into a broader voice with sections from the Scrolls’ wisdom literature, a genre dealing with ethical teachings. The strangest text comes from the non-biblical Book of Enoch — an overtly lurid scene in which the sons of God cavort with the daughters of men, who then give birth to giants who go on a rampage over the earth. This is followed by entries from the War Scroll, written by a community living near the Dead Sea who were preparing for a final battle between light and darkness. The piece ends with a pair of benedictions.

Chasalow often uses electronics in his works, as he does here, leading an interviewer to ask whether there was a tension between the modernity of the musical means and texts which live in the distant past. “In this particular piece, the electronics are very subtle,” he answered, with the exception of one movement which was all electronics. “The focus in most of this is on the instruments on stage.

“I actually think we’re at a moment where we’re used to hearing things and not even noticing whether they’re electronic or not,” he continued. “But I want to make the kind of music where it becomes irrelevant whether it’s electronic or the sound of a flute or the sound of a voice. Hopefully you’re focused on the text that’s being projected and the sound world of the piece.”

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