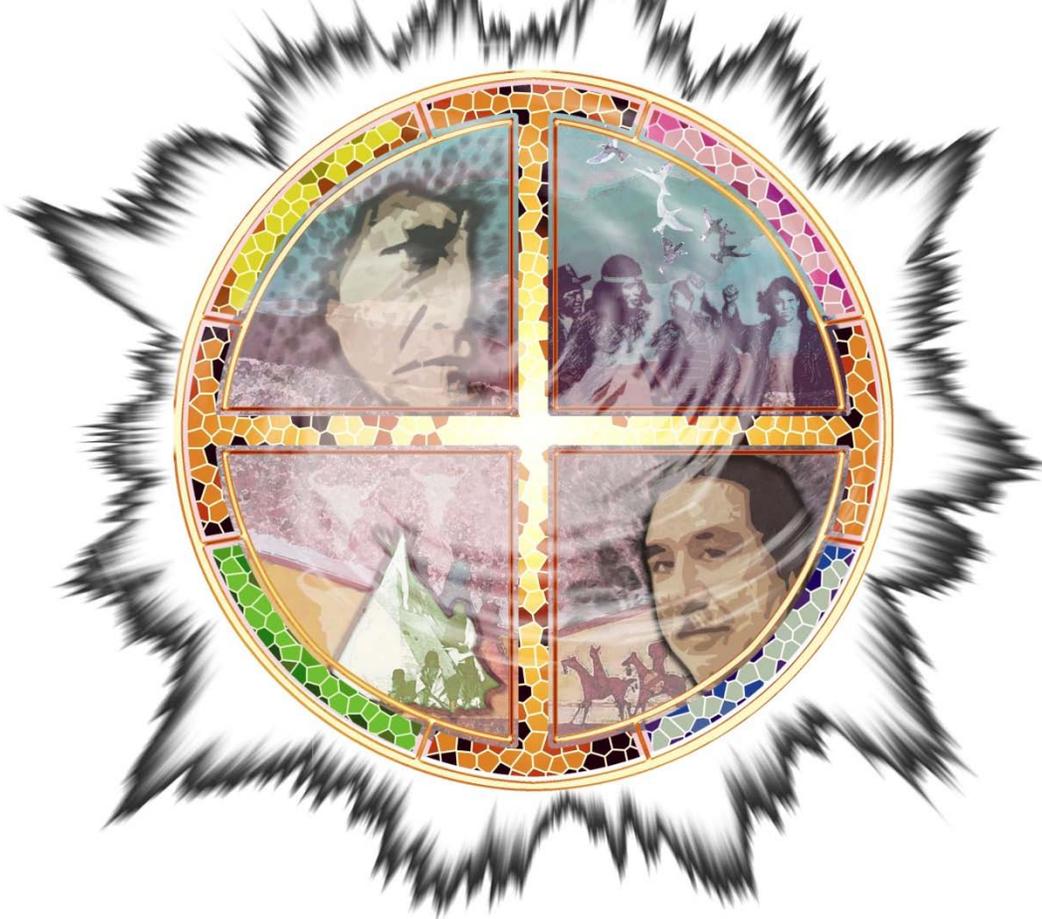


SUNDANCE



“You are about to perform an act which will close one more chapter in the history of the failure of the United States to do justice in the case of a Native American.”

Leonard Peltier – Sentencing Statement
April 18, 1977

SUN DANCE

An Original Opera about Native American Political Prisoner Leonard Peltier

Music by **Matthew J. Walton**
Libretto by **Leonard Walton**

Audio clips, video clips, full libretto, score excerpts, educational materials, and other information about the opera and its subject matter are available online at: www.sundanceopera.com

Project Description

Sun Dance is an original opera that tells the story of Leonard Peltier, a Native American political prisoner. The opera presents Leonard's story in the context of interactions that characterize the unequal and oppressive relationship between the United States government and Native Americans, events like the massacre at Wounded Knee and the occupation of Alcatraz. The historical scenes were designed so that they can be taken out and performed separately from the entire opera and the work can be accompanied by piano or by a small ensemble (flute, clarinet, violin, cello, keyboard, and piano). Several of the ensemble pieces are also arranged for a *capella* SATB choir.

The first act places the events of the opera in their historical context by revisiting two of the most significant events in Native Americans' long history of struggle versus the US government: the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee and the 1969-71 occupation of Alcatraz Island. It continues with a portrayal of the sense of fear and violence that permeated the Pine Ridge reservation in the 1970s and concludes with the shooting at Pine Ridge and the initial escape of the participants.

The second act brings the story from the 1970s into the present through the interactions and memories of three women at a rally to support Leonard Peltier. Two of them were participants in the activism of the 70s and all of them have some connection to Peltier. They reflect on current issues facing Native communities, while flashing back to excerpts from Leonard's trial. Their struggles with coming to terms with their anger over continued injustices against Native Americans reflect Leonard's own struggles and his transformation since his trial and imprisonment in 1977.

The opera was premiered by the Syracuse Society for New Music at the Cazenovia Counterpoint Music Festival on July 7th and 8th, 2005, directed by Victoria Harder King! and produced by Neva Pilgrim. One of those performances was webcast live to a global audience. Prior to that, the cast gave workshop performances of scenes at Nottingham High School and Syracuse University. The opera was performed again at Syracuse University on February 10, 2006. After those performances, the composer and librettist made a number of revisions to the opera to bring it to its present form.

Sun Dance presents Leonard Peltier's story in a way that appeals to a broad base of individuals who may not otherwise be aware of Peltier's imprisonment. It avoids the technical aspects of the trial, and speaks to the issue of finding a way to forgiveness while remembering and honoring those who have been and continue to be oppressed.

We see *Sun Dance* as a piece of art, an educational tool, and a vehicle for activism. *Sun Dance* is a contemporary opera, written for small production companies, to be performed either in its entirety or as isolated historical scenes. As part of its premiere, it was paired with educational programs for high school and college audiences, which we believe are an important complement to performances. And finally, it serves to remind audiences that neither Leonard Peltier's story nor the story of Native Americans in this county have been resolved. As Leonard recently wrote to his supporters, and as several characters in the opera remind us, "Don't forget, not ever."

Praise for *Sun Dance*

“Sundance” shone brightly in its world premiere this summer...The Waltons recognize Peltier’s as a story substantial enough to merit a serious presentation in a highbrow musical genre not exactly famous for its commitment to social consciousness. For taking that leap, for bravely pushing the boundaries of opera, the Waltons deserve a standing ovation...“Sundance” announces the arrival of a new voice in modern music, one not afraid to speak hard truths about politics and social issues...Matt Walton’s music—and especially the way he arranged it for his small orchestra—demonstrated meticulous attention to detail, tone and variation...Walton’s forte appears to be chorale pieces, in which he deftly complements the lyrics with oddly-voiced, but wholly satisfying, harmonies. The chorales that conclude each act resounded with passion, defiance and confidence, eliciting enthusiastic audience response.

-Russ Tarby, *Syracuse City Eagle*, September 22 to 28, 2005

The triumph of *Sundance*, a new and distinctively American opera with music by Matthew J. Walton and libretto by Leonard Walton, is that the expertise in other areas of its composer, an honors graduate in Music Composition who also holds an MA in Political Science from Syracuse University, has created something relatively new, educational, incredibly moving, and emotionally powerful - all within a familiar and traditional format. The music integrated very well with the performers, and the words of the libretto, which are words that were actually spoken or written at one point in history and raised to art by Leonard Walton, brought enunciation and clarity to the music's occasional instrumental complexity.

-Jude Nagurney Camwell, *blogcritics.org*, July 12, 2005

The opera’s plot traces the sufferings of Peltier and the Pine Ridge Indians, while the music displays Walton’s talent as a vocal composer. In a performance heard last summer, his chorales were skillfully voiced, making the conflict and dissonances embedded in the music sound harmonious.

-Anna Reguero, *Goldring Arts Journal*, September 18, 2005

Lenny adds strong emotional elements to the libretto by using the actual words from events and trial manuscripts, complementing them with projections of photos from Wounded Knee and the 1969-1971 Alcatraz occupation. The singers' voices, the opera's scenery and lighting, and Matt's direction of the chamber ensemble created a powerful performance that works effectively to tell the story to audiences new to this part of history. Follow-up panel discussions are an integral part of the educational nature of the work.

-Donna Muhs McCarten, *Syracuse Peace Newsletter*, September 2005

Cast of Characters

There are 11 primary roles in *Sun Dance*. The first is a male speaking role, who plays the role of Leonard Peltier and narrates the opera. The other ten are sung roles. In most cases, singers play generic, archetypal characters that remain consistent within scenes, but switch between scenes, as the time period changes. Occasionally, characters remain consistent through multiple scenes. All of the singing roles play Native American characters at some point, and several also play white characters. The ages listed are relative and most of the generic Native American characters can be any age.

Narrator (spoken): Leonard Peltier

Part 1 (Soprano): Native American and white roles (younger)

Part 2 (Soprano): Native American and white roles (older)

Part 3 (Mezzo-Soprano): Native American roles (older)

Part 4 (Mezzo-Soprano): Native American roles (unspecified age)

Part 5 (Tenor): Native American roles (younger)

Part 6 (Tenor): Native American and white roles (older)

Part 7 (Baritone): Native American and white roles (older)

Part 8 (Baritone): Native American roles (unspecified age)

Part 9 (Bass): Native American roles (unspecified age)

Part 10 (Bass): Native American and white roles (older)

Synopsis

Act 1, Scene 1: Opening

The opera begins with a sweat ceremony, led by Leonard Peltier. We soon realize that he is conducting the ceremony in prison. A soprano then sings one of Leonard's poems as 'everyman,' every time, humanity, every oppressed people. We shift back to Peltier, who introduces us to the oppressive conditions of his life in prison. The first chorus is another Peltier poem calling in the Great Spirit and evoking it in the listeners.

Act 1, Scene 2: Wounded Knee

Peltier's thoughts draw us back to Wounded Knee. In the beginning we see the Indians doing their work, living their lives, and discussing their hopes and concerns about the growing Ghost Dance movement. The soldiers arrive, singing a song with a refrain that mocks the Ghost Dance shirt, "They claimed the shirt Messiah gave, no bullet could go through". We see the lead-up to the first shots of the encounter, as the soldiers surround the Indians. What follows on stage is the massacre, the confusion, the fury, and the fright of the battle as well as the mourning & grief of the Indians and of some sympathetic white characters. The words of Kicking Bear at the end of the scene reflect his hope for the return of the Messiah.

Act 1, Scene 3: Alcatraz

This scene is set on Alcatraz Island. It begins with the first occupiers, sitting around the fires at night, discussing the events and their plans for Alcatraz. It moves through the history of the occupation, tracing the initial excitement, challenges faced by the occupants, gradually waning interest among people on the mainland, and coming to a close when the last Indians have left the island.

Act 1, Scene 4: Pine Ridge

The scene begins with Pine Ridge residents discussing the increasing violence on the reservation and debating whether or not to ask AIM, the American Indian Movement, to come and offer protection. Soon after, the AIM members arrive at Pine Ridge and move into the compound of the Jumping Bull family. Through their conversations, we see the many different opinions and perspectives of AIM members. The scene ends with Peltier's summary of the fighting, their escape, and the subsequent capture of Peltier, Bob Robideau, and Dino Butler. The act closes with a reprise of the first chorus, which references the eagle that the Pine Ridge combatants believed led them to safety.

Act 2, Scene 1: The Trials

In the second act, the audience is introduced to three Native American women. Two of them have been with the Indian movement for many years and lived through the time of Pine Ridge and the trial. The third is young, and has more recently become involved with Leonard's cause. They get to know one another through the older women's reflections and flashbacks to scenes from the trials, and the younger woman's often critical responses. We see excerpts from the trial where Robideau and Butler were acquitted, and several different portions of Leonard's trial, including testimony from witnesses that was later proved to have been coerced.

Act 2, Scene 2: The Verdict

This scene begins with the judge announcing the guilty verdict against Leonard, who responds with an angry speech to the judge and jury at his sentencing. As the women come to terms with the challenges of maintaining a struggle over generations while not becoming consumed by hatred and the desire for revenge, their shared experience from different situations and times brings them to realize that the struggle is not just for Peltier, but for all who face oppression.

Finally, the opera returns to the everyman feeling from the beginning. "Silence is the Voice of Complicity" is the last call to the audience to accept responsibility to take action. The young Native American woman from the previous scene sings Peltier's words in closing before Peltier repeats them himself, showing his understanding that his cause cannot just be his release from prison. His incarceration represents more in the struggle, and it is ultimately this that makes this a universal message. By speaking "Mitakuye Oyasin" ("We are all related") we understand that "my people" includes not just all of humanity, but everything in the universe.

Don't forget, not ever. The last words of the opera, spoken by Peltier, are a powerful reminder that this story does not have a happy ending. Leonard Peltier remains in prison. Governments throughout the world, including our own, continue to use oppression and imprisonment as tools of control. Each of us, in our own way, must remember this, and do what we can to implement change.

Creative Team

Matthew J. Walton (Composer)

Matt Walton received a B.Mus. in Music Composition with Honors from Syracuse University. While at Syracuse he was also awarded the Brian Israel prize in music composition and was recognized as a University Scholar, the highest honor bestowed on an undergraduate. His first opera, *Prodigal Lust*, was the first student-written opera performed at Syracuse and was premiered by the Syracuse University opera workshop. His most recent opera, *Sun Dance*, is based on the trial and incarceration of Native American political prisoner Leonard Peltier and was premiered by the Syracuse Society for New Music in July of 2005. He has studied composition with Joseph Downing, Daniel Godfrey and Samuel Adler and his music has been performed in London, Boston, San Francisco, and New York City.

In 2007-08, he was an artist-in-residence at *Gitameit* music school in Rangoon, Burma. While there, he taught classes in voice performance and music composition, conducted the choral ensemble, Gitameit Voices, and composed a piece for the choir entitled "Burmese Blessings." Gitameit Voices has performed this piece in Burma and Japan, and at several concerts in the US, including the May 2009 "Songs of Survival" Concert in San Francisco with Joan Baez.

Matt also holds M.A. degrees in Political Science from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and the University of Washington. He is currently a PhD candidate in the department of Political Science at the University of Washington. His research focuses on Buddhism in Southeast Asia, particularly the social implications of Buddhist meditation practices. Matt is also on the editorial board of "Green Theory and Praxis: A Journal of Ecological Politics" and has published book chapters on radical environmental politics and Buddhist theories of animal rights.

Leonard Walton (Librettist)

While Leonard Walton is an engineer by education, he has previously written for a series of fiction books encouraging young girls to pursue careers in science and technology. This is his first opera libretto. This is Mr. Walton's first significant involvement with Native American issues but he has a long history of involvement with social issues and is currently the Deputy Director of Street to Home for Common Ground, responsible for outreach and housing for chronically homeless individuals in New York City.

Victoria Harder King! (Director/Adviser)

Victoria holds an MFA from the Actors Studio Drama School where she studied directing with Arthur Storch and voice with Dr. Christopher Arneson. Undergraduate studies include studies in Theatre & Music at Loughborough University in England. Her New York City directing credits include *Sex Myths* (Wollman Theatre), Asst. Musical Director for *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Bleecker Street Theatre), and *Dinner With Friends*, *Waiting For Godot*, *The Seagull*, *Hello Out There*, and *Keely and Du* (Actors Studio). She has over 50 regional directing and acting credits. She composed two children's musicals, and co-authored a play with her high school students, which won the Indiana- Purdue Play Writing Competition, and was a finalist in the Kennedy Center Play Writing Competition. Victoria is also an accomplished set and light designer. She taught acting at SUNY Potsdam, voice at the Actors Studio Drama School, and theatre at Oswego High School. Victoria is a Trustee for the NY State Theatre Education Association. She is currently working with Full Cast Audio and teaching voice, acting, and Alexander Technique in Syracuse.