

## Oratorio draws inspiration from Navajo traditions

By [Edward Reichel](#)

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The Salt Lake Choral Artists, joined by the Salt Lake Choral Artists Orchestra, will close out their season Saturday with the local premiere of Mark Grey's "Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio."

"It's quite an amazing piece," SLCA director Brady Allred told the Deseret News. "The score is really beautiful, and choir members have said they've been very moved by it."

The work was premiered in February 2008 by Michael Christie and the Phoenix Symphony. Allred, who also directs the choral program at the University of Utah, became aware of it through a former member of the U. Singers. "He went to Arizona for his master's and joined the Phoenix Symphony Chorus, where he was involved with the premiere," Allred said.

The former student contacted him and told him to consider programming the work. "I found the subject matter appropriate and decided to do it."

"Enemy Slayer" is a modern retelling of the Navajo story of creation, revolving around the cleansing ceremony which rids warriors of all the events they had been through in their lives.

In the oratorio, the Seeker (sung by baritone Gary Sorenson) comes home to his people from the war in Iraq. "He comes from the desert of chaos to the desert of peace," Grey said in an interview with the Deseret News. "He enlisted with his brother, who was killed in the war."

Once home, the images of war start to haunt the Seeker. "He's suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder," Grey said. "And the way the Navajos deal with it is to go through this cleansing ceremony."

The work is divided into the four cardinal points, which are sacred to the Navajos: east (birth), south (youth), west (adulthood) and north (death). "The Seeker starts in the east and goes towards darkness and gloom and death, but breaks through and ends in the east again, where he is ultimately cleansed," Grey said.

"The 'enemy' are the demons inside of us," Allred said. "And by the end of the work, everything is resolved, and the Seeker returns to peace and harmony."

The choir acts as a Greek chorus and adds commentary to the story, Grey said. "They are the ancestral voice, the voice of the community, the voice of the gods." "They encourage and give the Seeker hope," Allred said.

The music Grey wrote mirrors the conflict and final resolution of the story vividly. "Harmonically, it is essentially bitonal," he said. "There are two contrasting harmonic movements going on at the same time, which shift modally. There is some tonality in it, but it's not really tonal. The music is more dissonant — especially when the demons come back." But when the turmoil and inner strife are over, the music changes dimensions and turns to A major.

One thing Grey did not want was to have the score sound clichéd, like the kind of music one finds in Westerns. "That is something I specifically avoided." There are some Native American elements in the music, but they're only hinted at rhythmically and harmonically. "I infused that into the music, but it doesn't sound Native American."

When Grey, who was the Phoenix Symphony's composer-in-residence at the time, was commissioned by Christie to write a work commemorating the orchestra's 60th anniversary, he wanted to create something that would reflect on the American Southwest. "I was thinking, 'What would embody the Southwest, and Arizona in particular?'"

The answer, of course, lay in Native American tradition. "I re-familiarized myself with the Navajo creation story and pitched the idea of writing a piece based on that to Michael, who was very excited about it," Grey said.

He contacted Navajo poet and author Laura Tohe and asked if she would be interested in writing the libretto. "When I found her, we threw some ideas around on how to treat the subject, because everything is an oral tradition with Native Americans." And while the majority of the libretto is in English, there are also some sections in Navajo — about 7 percent of the text according to Grey.

The composer is thrilled that "Enemy Slayer" will be performed in Utah, since the story has some of its roots in the southern part of the state.

"It's very exciting that it's being done in Utah, since it's such an integral part of the Navajo people. There are places that are now off the reservation that are part of the creation story," he said, referring to the area outside Mexican Hat. "The Seeker goes back into the Valley of the Gods, and many of the monsters in the creation story lived there. That's why it's important that it's being done in Utah — to reflect on this magical, metaphysical world."

If you go

What: "Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio," Salt Lake Choral Artists and Orchestra, Brady Allred, conductor

Where: Libby Gardner Concert Hall, University of Utah

When: 7:30 p.m., May 2

How much: \$18.75 general admission, \$12.75 senior citizens and students

Phone: 801-581-7100

Web: [saltlakechoralartists.org](http://saltlakechoralartists.org)

Also: Pre-concert lecture by Mark Grey, Room 270, David Gardner Hall, 6:30 p.m., May 2, free

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