



## David Hertzberg, *composer*

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### Is Opera Dying? No, But This One Is Staged Among the Dead

A new series, opening with David Hertzberg's "The Rose Elf," will produce classical performances in the narrow catacomb at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.



A rehearsal for David Hertzberg's "The Rose Elf" in the catacomb at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

**By Arthur Lubow**  
**Photographs by Vincent Tullo**

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For an opera whose heroine stores her murdered lover's head in a flowerpot, the setting felt creepily appropriate. Lining both sides of the long central passage of the catacomb at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn were family vaults that discreetly sheltered long-departed loved ones.

Overseeing the first rehearsal of David Hertzberg's "The Rose Elf," which opens on June 6 and starts a new programming series in the evocative space, Andrew Ousley cast an approving eye on the barrel-ceiling room. Illuminated by 14 circular skylights, the catacomb is 155 feet long but only 10 feet wide. The walls are stained, crumbling plaster.

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Teddy Poll, the production's conductor, rehearsing the piece.

It's a hallmark setting for Mr. Ousley, 35, who has established his own very particular niche presenting classical performances in places that were designed for grieving remembrance. For the last three years, he has supervised a series of concerts in the underground crypt of the Church of the Intercession in north Harlem. His website is cheekily called [deathofclassical.com](http://deathofclassical.com).

Having heard about the crypt concerts, Harry Weil, the manager of programs at Greenwood, contacted Mr. Ousley to see if he would be interested in the catacomb. Because the 478-acre cemetery is almost fully occupied, its management team is sussing out nontraditional revenue streams. Greenwood hosts more than 200 public programs a year in various parts of its picturesque grounds.

"When the cemetery was founded in 1838, it was a social space where people would come and picnic," Mr. Weil said. "This was before Central or Prospect Park."

But that moment can't be completely recaptured, largely because modern sensibilities are more uncomfortable in the presence of death. "We're an active burial site and have historic structures," Mr. Weil said. "It was necessary to find partners who are sensitive to that."

When he saw the catacomb last fall, Mr. Ousley immediately saw its potential. "I got the same feeling as when I first stepped into the crypt," he said.

The challenge was to find suitable programming. Meeting over coffee at Christmastime with Samantha Hankey, a young mezzo-soprano, he mentioned his quest. "I have an opera that's an hour long, and it's perfect," she told him. "It's about death and elves and dirt."

Ms. Hankey had just starred in a semi staged performance of "The Rose Elf" that had been developed by Opera Philadelphia. Based on a Hans Christian Andersen tale, the opera recounts the brutal killing of a woman's lover by her evil brother, as seen by an elf hidden within a rose. The music is voluptuous and passionate, in a French Impressionist vein.

“I tried to realize with the elf this meta-gender, gender-fluid erotic creature that witnesses this lurid tragedy with a detached voyeurism and is kind of transformed by it,” Mr. Hertzberg, 28, said.

When he learned of the proposal to stage his opera in the Green-Wood catacomb, he responded enthusiastically. “It felt so fated,” he said. “In so many ways, the catacomb will evoke the sexy, expressive danger and intense claustrophobia of the story.”

His director, R.B. Schlather, was more skeptical. Mr. Schlather, 32, had worked on “The Rose Elf” in Philadelphia, and last September there, he staged Mr. Hertzberg’s “The Wake World” at the Barnes Foundation;

it was recently honored as the best new opera of the year by the Music Critics Association of North America.

“I was initially resistant,” Mr. Schlather said. “But when I got here, I saw it made a lot of sense, because the piece has a lot to do with death.” Working with a bare-bones budget, he also realized that a cemetery provides an ample supply of the two chief items the story calls for: flowers and dirt.



Mr. Hertzberg with the mezzo-soprano Samantha Hankey, who plays the Elf.

Presenting operas in nontraditional settings is becoming a new tradition. The New York company On Site Opera has produced shows in such unexpected surroundings as Madame Tussauds wax museum and the Bronx Zoo. To close his inaugural season at Green-Wood, Mr. Ousley plans to bring in On Site’s production of three pieces by Gregg Kallor, including the world premiere of “Sketches from ‘Frankenstein.’”

“The Met and Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall put on what for a long time was an extraordinary experience,” said Mr. Ousley. “But what people of my generation expect out of a cultural experience has changed. They want a larger experience than just the performance, so we include time where they can eat something and have a drink and socialize with friends or meet new people. They want something unique and visually interesting as well as something sonically interesting: the Instagram effect. And they want something that moves them and makes them feel something.”

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Mr. Ousley wandered into the career of part-time impresario. The founder of Unison Media, a classical marketing and public relations company, he was looking to arrange showcase performances for a couple of clients when a friend told him about attending a private concert in the Harlem crypt. Mr. Ousley checked out the space.

“I thought it was acoustically suited to the music, and also more newsworthy than, say, Le Poisson Rouge,” he recalled, referring to the Greenwich Village basement club.

Although producing concerts wasn’t a moneymaking enterprising — profits went to the church, as they will go to Green-Wood — Mr. Ousley enjoyed it so much that he pressed on. With only 49 seats, the \$75 tickets for each crypt concert quickly sold out (as have the \$80 seats for the premiere of “The Rose Elf”).

For the crypt concerts, Mr. Ousley provided free grub and plonky wine before visitors descended for the hourlong performance. “If you have food, wine and a social component, you don’t need three hours of music,” he said. “I love ‘Tristan’ as much as the next person, but I don’t need to hear that all the time.”

At Green-Wood, he is upping his game, enlisting as sponsors several small distilleries, a craft beer brewery and a winery. Adopting the term that distillers use for the portion of their whiskey that evaporates as it ages in the barrel, Mr. Ousley calls the cemetery series The Angel’s Share. In fair weather (because the catacomb lacks heating, performances are scheduled only in the temperate months), the audience will congregate on a greensward with a commanding view to sip and sample before walking to the catacomb.

On a sunny, flowering spring afternoon, no one could argue with Mr. Weil, who said: “The main star of the show is always Green-Wood. People are blown away by how large and how beautiful it is.”

Within the catacomb, the creative team was discovering that the resonant acoustics were as opulent as the landscape. “I love how bloomy it is,” said Mr. Hertzberg. “It’s all smeared in a very languorous way.”

Some 140 spectators will be placed in long single rows along the sides of the central space, with a nine-piece orchestra at the far end and the singers moving up and down. “When Sam sings a high B, it will be right in somebody’s face,” Mr. Hertzberg said with a giggle.

The more time he spent at Green-Wood, the more he became sure that the opera would benefit from the setting. “We’ve been interested in exploring ways that the raw vitality and danger of a space can enlarge the experience of the music,” he said.

His black jacket splotted by white dust from the decomposing wall, Mr. Hertzberg said that for “The Rose Elf,” the catacomb felt uncannily like home.