

## **Program Notes for *Pocahontas* by Joan Vail Thorne, Librettist**

The opera *Pocahontas*, is about the miracle and the mystery surrounding the life of the title character. There is nothing in the opera that contradicts the known "facts" of her story, but there is much of her story that is not known. Therefore, in a nonlinear sequence of "real" and imagined events that bridge time and place, this remarkable young woman is viewed as a prodigy of her Algonquin culture and the admired respected emissary of her father, Powhatan, the Great Chief of numerous Algonquin tribes. She is also seen as the equal in strength and courage of the redoubtable English Captain John Smith and the wife of the English colonist, John Rolfe, the mother of his child and the very first American "woman of two worlds."

This opera is the work of the imagination that celebrates a life. It does not attempt to explain or to analyze it, it simply marvels at the magnitude and significance of nineteen short years. We have long celebrated our "founding fathers"; we have even struck a coin in honor of another amazing Native American woman; but much of what has been done in art and entertainment about Pocahontas has been grossly inaccurate and ultimately demeaning to her heritage. Despite her origins in a culture that allowed women positions of influence and power, she has more often than not been seen as the besotted love object of white males. To the contrary, as ambassador of her great father, she was a savior of the Jamestown colony in a time of terrible drought. Later in her life, again as an ambassador in a triumphant visit to England with her colonist husband, John Rolfe, she became the toast of London, enjoyed the aristocracy's extravagant admiration, and was received at the court of King James I.

Ironically, it was in the midst of this triumph that she met her untimely end. Even her death was prophetic. Although no one can definitely cite the cause, it probably came from the microbes of a world that would eventually claim not only her life, but the honorable, vigorous civilization of her people. Andre Malraux has said, "Art is a revolt against fate." This opera would defy death and bring Pocahontas back to life as an example of the intelligence and courage that young people deserve in a role model. Ingmar Bergman has said, "Music is the only art that bypasses the intellect and goes straight to the soul." This opera would hope to paint Pocahontas deep in the soul of a people who owe their existence in part to her having been born. This opera is a celebration. As the words of the libretto attest:

This is a story  
This is not a history  
This is a story  
This is a mystery

## **Program Notes for *Pocahontas* by Linda Tutas Haugen, Composer**

Pocahontas is one of the most famous women of the last millennium, yet very little is known about her beyond the historic events of her life. The Powhatan Indians did not have a written language. So Pocahontas lives on only through the writings, both real and invented, of the English who knew or claimed to have known her. As a composer trying to imagine the life of Pocahontas, I was convinced of the need to understand Native American culture and spirituality. As historians have now recognized, these cultural truths can tell us a great deal about what probably did and did not happen in her short life.

According to anthropologists, the Native American tribes along the East Coast likely would have known of the Mayan Indians. The opera begins with a Mayan text that reflects a spiritual perspective of traditional American cultures.

It is not true that we come here only to live  
We come only in passing  
We do not own all that is given to us.  
On the journey we eat, sleep, and dream  
And whenever you are ready, O Maker of Life,  
I'll come home to you.

Throughout the performance, hand crafted Native American reed flutes, hand drums, and shakers, made specifically for this opera, are used. I included traditional Native American songs and drumming to portray the beauty and power of a culture that has survived 400 years. This music speaks directly to our sense of what happened long ago, and to the presence and significance of the many Native American tribes and cultures in America today.

Native singers perform the three traditional Native American songs in the opera. The first is a Celebration Song, used in Scene Two for the celebration of the harvest. The second song, is a Friendship Song, heard at the end of Scene Four, speaks of bringing people together who think differently, to live in harmony. The third traditional Native American song is an Honor Song, first sung softly under the litany of atrocities in Scene Six, and then strongly from center stage, the song is "sent to the skies." This honors all those who have faced adversity and died, and who have set a standard for our lives today.

I also incorporated a tune in Scene Two that has an astonishing history. This tune (heard in the alleluias and hosannas following Uttamatomakin's creation story) was known to the tribes bordering on the Atlantic coast. The Narragansett Indians had a tradition that the tune was heard "in the air" by them and other tribes *before* the arrival of the white man, as a prophesy of his coming. At the Narragansett's first visit to the Plymouth Colony's church, this same hymn tune was played, and much to their surprise, it was known to both the Narragansetts and the colonists! The tune was preserved by the Narragansett Tribe and written down by Native music historian, Thomas Commuck, in his book *Indian Melodies*, 1845.

While doing the historical research for *Pocahontas*, I recognized the potential for authentic music from the era to evoke English culture and sensibilities. As a result, there are several brief quotations of early 17th Century European music in the opera. Scene Three (Jamestown, 1608) and Scene Five (London, 1616) include music by English composer William Byrd, *Sellinger's Round*, (*The Beginning of the World*), a highly popular song in England at the turn of the 17th century and undoubtedly known by the Jamestown settlers.

Following Pocahontas' aria in Scene Five a brief Giovanni Gabrielli fanfare announces the entrance of the King. During her visit to England Pocahontas attended a performance of a musical and costumed production called a "masque" in the Court of King James. Nicolas Lanier's original music for that masque, Ben Johnson's *The Vision of Delight*, has not survived; in its place in this opera is one of Lanier's best-known masque compositions, *Mark How the Blushful Morn*.

In Scene Seven (Potomac River, 1612), melodies from two traditional hornpipes, *The Boys of Ballycastle*, which is taken from a madrigal by late-renaissance composer Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594), and *Cobbler's Hornpipe*, a traditional melody from Playford, circa before 1650, are heard.