

A WORLD PREMIERE FOR DANCE OPERA ‘TEST PILOT’

by: Caroline Palmer, published by Star Tribune (Minneapolis/St. Paul) September 15, 2014

When the Wright Brothers first took flight in 1903 they couldn't have imagined how air travel would evolve from an inventor's dream into a tool of commerce complete with cramped seating. With the dance opera "Test Pilot," which had its world premiere Friday night at The O'Shaughnessy in St. Paul, choreographer Penelope Freeh and composer Jocelyn Hagen have put the romance back into flying, with a visually and aurally striking creation that both turns back time and contemplates the future.

The work focuses on the story of Orville and Wilbur Wright (portrayed by James Sewell Ballet members Nic Lincoln and Cory Goei) but their sister Katharine (soprano Carrie Henneman Shaw) is the spiritual guide as she observes her brothers building their aircraft. And yet "Test Pilot" is more than a historical exercise. Freeh and Hagen explore the ramifications of the Wrights' achievement — from the use of air power in battle to the advent of other flight pioneers like Amelia Earhart. Even a recent [Delta Air Lines](#) theme song makes its way into the libretto: "Ascending, we reflect on what was left behind and what is yet ahead."



Freeh's choreography is as sleek and streamlined as a jet body. When she and fellow dancer Stephanie Fellner crisscross the stage you imagine contrails billowing behind them. Lincoln and Goei's movement is more industrious at first as they pursue their important task, but toward the end they also bound with grace. Justin Schell's well-placed video projections show the original telegram announcing the Wright Brothers' achievement.

Hagen's composition comes to vivid life through the voices of singers Nathan Bird, Gary Ruschman, Scott Sandersfeld, Timothy C. Takach and David Walton, plus a stellar string quartet (James Garlick, Margaret Humphrey, Kirsten Whitson and Matthew Williams). Most intriguing is the recitation of the aviation alphabet ("Alpha, Bravo, Charlie ...") and flight terms ("pitch, roll") set to song, a theme that carries through the evening.

The crackling energy of "Test Pilot" dips at times, and sometimes returns to ideas that were clear enough the first time around, such as the repetition of a song set to Octave Chanute's 1894 essay "Progress in Flying Machines" which foretells the use of flight in war and global communication. But like all innovators, it's certain that Freeh and Hagen will continue to refine this project until it truly soars.

“Test Pilot” at The O’Shaughnessy: The untold story of the Wright brothers’ sister

by: Basil Considine, published by TC Daily Planet, September 18, 2014

St. Catherine University launched its 2014-2015 Women of Substance series on September 12 with *Test Pilot*, a striking new music and dance piece. The work, billed as a dance opera, delves into the early history of aviation from an unusual perspective: that of the Wright Brothers’ sister Katharine. The explorations of flight, its mechanics, and the build-up to the final flight are engagingly rendered in vocal and instrumental music and in modern dance.



The term “dance opera” is both evocative and somewhat ambiguous. “Scenic cantata,” the subtitle of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* (originally staged as a ballet, before its appropriation as a concert piece and element of popular culture) comes closer to describing how the different elements relate. Vocal music *does* play a prominent role in exposition and atmosphere, with some truly striking numbers such as the five-part pieces for men’s voices “The Art of War I” and “The Art of War II”, but it’s the backdrop of the scenario and its evocation through dance that weaves everything together.

Test Pilot was created by choreographer Penelope Freeh (who also appeared as one of the dancers) and composer Jocelyn Hagen. The texts that they set are an interesting bunch, picked from both historical documents and more contemporary poetry and song lyrics. Some of these texts give unexpected insights, such as a poem written by Amelia Earhart shortly before her disappearance while flying around the world. Although eclectic, these texts and the projections by Justin Schell add an important focus to the work as a whole.

Hagen’s score is engaging, drawing on a potpourri of musical styles including the operatic; a live string quartet, prerecorded tracks, and some interesting use of looping effects added to the variety. Freeh’s choreography was excellently rendered by the cast of dancers, with some of the airplane segments being especially memorable. As a whole, the individual numbers flow well from one to the other, although a planned intermission would be welcome.

The Wright Brothers repeated their test flight for the benefit of the press, before moving on to bigger and better things; *Test Pilot* similarly deserves another showing.

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