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Michigan Opera Theatre's Historic Opera Makes a Timely Debut

By Jenn McKee

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An opera about wartime enemies briefly laying down their weapons to share common ground and re-connect as humans?

Huh. You'd think **Michigan Opera Theatre** (<http://www.michiganopera.org/>) quite deliberately chose to open a production of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize-winning show *Silent Night*—inspired by the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noel*, about a temporary peace between different factions of World War I soldiers on Christmas Eve—during the week of the most divisive Presidential election cycle in our country's history.

"We had an orchestra dress rehearsal last night, and I found myself—and my leading lady did, too—we cried all the way through," said Muskegon native Chad Johnson, who plays a professional German opera singer who quickly finds himself on a battlefield. "It speaks to exactly what's going on right now in our country, and about finding and focusing on the important things in life."



Chad Johnson in 'Silent Night,' courtesy of Michigan Opera Theatre.

In addition, the show opens on the heels of Veterans Day and Remembrance Day, making *Silent Night's* timing all the more meaningful.

Created by librettist Mark Campbell and composer Kevin Puts, *Silent Night* takes place on a crowded WWI battlefield, but the show begins via three separate storylines: a French soldier who must leave his pregnant wife to fight in the war; two Scottish brothers who enlist and head into battle; and a professional opera-singing couple in Germany who are soon separated by world events.

“My character, Nikolaus Sprink, is a German opera singer, and his girlfriend, Anna Sorensen, is an opera singer from Denmark, ... and they’re this world-famous couple,” said Johnson. “But Nikolaus gets conscripted into the war. He’s an artist, and the first thing that happens is, he has to murder two people on the battlefield, and this just breaks him, emotionally. It’s the hardest scene to play, and it comes in the first act. He basically has a nervous breakdown. ... His girlfriend ends up having to pull him from the brink of post-traumatic stress disorder, so it’s a beautiful story of love enduring in the face of devastation.”

Johnson has played Sprink—who facilitates the Christmas Eve truce by stepping out from the Germans’ bunker and singing a German Christmas carol while the Scots play their pipes—in two previous productions of *Silent Night*.

“Because he’s an opera singer, I completely relate to what he’s going through,” said Johnson. “And the music is just so lush and beautiful. It’s a true American romantic opera.”

Though Johnson has been performing professionally for a while now, *Silent Night* nonetheless marks his professional debut in his home state of Michigan, and his family couldn’t be happier. “They’re thrilled,” said Johnson. “I have a lot of family coming from the Muskegon area, and my mother will be coming from Pontiac.”

A product of Muskegon’s Mona Shoals High School (and its powerhouse choral music program), Johnson earned a scholarship to Western Michigan University, and another opera performer from Muskegon, Gwenneth Bean, served as his longtime mentor.

These days, Johnson’s pretty excited to be part of an accessible, cinematic opera that’s been earning raves wherever it’s mounted.

“The flow of the opera is so perfect,” said Johnson. “There really are no lull moments. It’s not Wagner, where you wait two hours to hear your favorite part. ... Because I get to perform it time and time again, I see more in it each time. ... And every production I’ve done, it just blows people away.”

Silent Night is presented by Michigan Opera Theatre and runs from November 12th through 20th. For tickets, click [here](http://www.michiganopera.org/opera/silent-night/) (<http://www.michiganopera.org/opera/silent-night/>).

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