

The Story of the Annunciation Presented by David White

What do we know of the character of Mary in the Christmas story?

In the summer of 2000, I had a problem. My small theatre company was working with two other small theatre companies to run a theatre building in northwest Denver. As we were working collectively, and as all three of our companies wished to produce something for the Christmas season, we decided that we would work collaboratively on a single Christmas project and would put aside all proceeds to be used specifically for the expenses of the building itself.

This created a new problem for me. Ours was the only company of the three which was working to provide a living for artists. Simply put, I couldn't afford to give away the Christmas season. Thus, I needed to come up with an offering which could play off-nights and which would be supported by the northwest Denver community.

I didn't want to do another version of "A Christmas Carol" for two reasons. Firstly, the regional theatre company in town staged a big, splashy version of this story every year and, while I could offer a quality production for a much lower ticket price, I didn't wish to compete with the Denver Center directly in this way. Secondly, my company had toured a small production of this piece the year before and I didn't think there would be a lot of enthusiasm among my team for remounting it (OK, in reality, I didn't have a lot of enthusiasm for remounting it).

The collaboration show was a compilation of stories by Dr. Seuss, meaning that it would appeal to families with children. I thought that my company should offer something a bit more sophisticated- I didn't want to compete, both artistically and commercially, with my partners. At that time, the primary demographic of the section of town in which the theatre stood was heavily Catholic. Was there a story we could tell that might have a "draw" amongst those looking for a specifically Christmas-themed evening with some religious depth? And, would such a story be interesting enough for me to write a piece on it?

Three of my company members were available to commit to this project- all of them women.

So, there you have it, the challenge of repertory theatre- aesthetic vision within logistical and commercial reality. I needed a show that could go up with minimal sets (performing off-night means you have to either play on the main-stage show's set or be able to take your set down before Thursday night each week of your run), using three female singer/actors, and which would have a commercial draw for the geographic location of the theatre. Commercial draw requires that it be somewhat unique, so no "Christmas Carol." Not a kid's show. Hmmm.

How about the Virgin Mary? OK, this was an answer!

Or, sort of. I knew very little about the subject, and the last thing I wanted to do was to put something up that would be in any way offensive to the neighborhood at Christmas time. But I needed it to be interesting both for me and for my company members, as well as for those who might come because they were familiar with my work.

Not really knowing where to begin, I reached out to the Archdiocese of Denver for help. They responded right away that they really didn't know a whole lot about the Virgin Mary, but I should probably start with the Gospel of Luke. I researched the Virgin Mary in books and on the internet and kept running into suggestions to start with the Gospel of Luke. Finally, I took the hint and opened up the Gospel of Luke.

To write a good play, one needs three elements. Firstly, the story should follow an arc. Secondly, the characters need emotional depth and their journey through the story should follow the story's arc, giving it humanity and meaning. Thirdly, it needs a conflict of some kind, a challenge, if you will, that is resolved somewhere short of but near to the end of the piece.

My specialty was not in creating original stories but, rather, in adapting existing stories into a musical theatre format. What had always worked for me was to find a theme of some type, perhaps or perhaps not overtly stated in the story, that, nonetheless, gives the story depth and holds it all together. Once I found this, I could craft the arc of the story into a theatrical setting and create humanity in the characters.

Aesthetically, I was interested specifically in Mary as a person in her own right, rather than limiting her importance to that of being the mother of Jesus. Frankly, in my view, Mary's character becomes almost an afterthought in Luke's nativity story after the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55). There isn't a lot of action here, so the story needs to be about Mary specifically. The arc of the story, in this case, is within the character of Mary. So, what is the theme, the "hook" that I could use to put it together? Is there a conflict there to make a compelling narrative? In fact, there is.

In Luke's telling, the character of Mary goes through a profound development culminating in the Magnificat, and this seemed to make sense as a theme on which I could hang the narrative. To my view, it was the most human and, thus, the most interesting part of the story. So, I thought it made sense to set my piece as a one-act opera within the borders of the story from the Annunciation through the Magnificat.

As an artist, particularly one who writes derivative, interpretative works, I believe it is very important that I remain true to what I find within the original story itself. I also believe it is very important that whatever I have found as the theme remain the primary point of focus in the work. Bringing in other things, or creating controversies simply for the sake of doing so, creates a distraction and, in my view, dilutes the power of the work. Although it is not particularly important to the theology of Christianity, the Nativity back-story in the Christian tradition is extremely important to the culture of Christianity in our society- even non-Christians celebrate Christmas! Given that my interest was in reflecting on the character development of Mary, it

made no sense whatsoever to do anything with the story counter to the Christian traditions. Therefore, I believed it extremely important that I include nothing in the piece that couldn't be borne out in religious scholarship and/or tradition. My purpose was not to comment on the viability of the Christian nativity myth. The story is what it is, and it was my job to tell it.

The Christmas story is well begun in the Gospel of Luke in the Christian "New Testament" (Luke 1:26+) when Gabriel, an arch angel, appears to a young girl named Miriam (or, in English, Mary). Christian tradition has it that Jesus was born of a virgin. The text is overt here (Luke 1:27), and the idea of the girl being a virgin is supported in the Gospel of Matthew 1:18-23 which, in turn, refers to the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 (although the Isaiah passage does not specify "virgin"). The other Christian canonical Gospels, Mark and John, do not tell a nativity story.

Frankly, I didn't, and I don't, find the discussion of the miracle of virgin birth particularly interesting, except as this relates to the prophecies of Isaiah (more on this later). Virgin birth, as well as other miraculous birth, is prevalent in mythological lore and is not particularly germane to our topic today. (For those interested in miraculous birth, a good starting point is https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miraculous_births.)

In addition to my lack of interest, I felt that the question of virginity would be somewhat settled by audience members who might attend- either they believed in a virgin birth in this episode or they didn't. There really was neither anywhere to go with this topic nor any compelling reason to discuss it.

Because I didn't find the virgin-birth thing very interesting, I decided I would not make a point of it. The way to do this when setting a theatrical piece is simply to say something is so and to leave it at that. Story telling is about suspension of disbelief, and this is particularly true in story telling through dramatic presentation, whether in live theatre or in some other media. If I tell the audience that some guy is Billy Ocean at the beginning of the story, then the guy is Billy Ocean. OK, we all know that, in reality, it's George Clooney pretending to be Billy Ocean. But, for the experience to be effective, we all agree that George is Billy for the next couple of hours. And, when you don't want to draw attention to a piece of a story when you're writing a play, you simply state it overtly, state it symbolically, or ignore it all together.

In this case, given that the myth of the virgin birth is innate to the tradition, I couldn't simply ignore it. And, in addition, I felt that Mary's virginity, as a concept, actually helps in this character study in that it strengthens the innocence factor of Mary at the beginning of the narrative. The way I decided to deal with Mary's virginity, then, was to set the beginning of the piece in a locked garden- symbolic of virginity. This took care of the virgin aspect without needing further comment and also gave me the ability to develop Mary's youth- in the first section she is praying and playing in the garden- and also to subtly give credence to those who would need to see that Mary's virginity is an important part of the story.

Thus, I had the simple outline of settings. We would begin with young Mary in a garden and establish her as an innocent and profoundly religious person (more on this later, as well). We would also need to establish Elisabeth, who is present at the Magnificat. Given that there is a journey- Mary travels *to* Elisabeth- we need to establish that Elisabeth is somewhere *other* than the garden. This also plays into our symbolic hand in that Mary, growing in sophistication, *leaves* the garden to travel *to* Elisabeth- who is not in the garden, not virginal. And, of course, I would need to establish both Elisabeth and Gabriel as characters as well, that they might exist in support of and in counterpoint to the arc of Mary's character development.

From this point forward, the reader might find it helpful to open the libretto and follow along.

I open with Mary in the garden, praying. When she is finished praying, she sings a playful song with Gabriel (set as a dramatic soprano- remember, I was writing specifically for women), seen by the audience but not by Mary, adding a counterpoint. Gabriel's words foreshadow the Annunciation subtly and also quote the Song of Solomon 2:10-11 (more on this below).

We leave Mary in the garden and crossfade to Elisabeth (page 3 in the libretto) who prays in echo of Mary in both the melodic and poetic lines. Then I take some poetic license. I felt I could do this because the story is about Mary, not Elisabeth. And, as Luke and Christian tradition give us even less about Elisabeth than they do about Mary, I needed to invent something to make her interesting. Luke does tell a story of a barren Elisabeth and her husband Zechariah praying for a child and this prayer being heard and answered. So, when we first meet Elisabeth in my piece, while her prayer echoes Mary's musically, the words are quite different. Mary was committing herself to her servitude of God in service to mankind, while Elisabeth is asking for a child. This much is scriptural as told in Luke as a prequel to the Gospel story.

The poetic license I take happens next. To establish the situation for the land of Judah in this time period, I have Elisabeth sing a small aria speaking mournfully about the contemporaneous plight of the land (*Judah, land of woe....*, page 3). In this, she speaks of the messianic hope of the people of the time, that of a political and/or military leader who would change their political situation. I bring Mary in (page 4), singing from the garden, and they sing a short duet further establishing Mary's innocence in contrast with Elisabeth's experience of political hardship.

This is a technique fairly common in musical theatre, a duet in which the characters are in different places and seemingly unaware of each other. I use it here to create a musical relationship between Mary and Elisabeth and to set up a poetic contrast between Mary's youth and Elisabeth's maturity. And, more practically, this technique allows me to "travel" back and forth between Mary and Elisabeth easily.

I leave Elisabeth, then, and have Mary sing a canticle. "Voice of My Beloved" is set poetically to continue to establish Mary in her relationship to her destiny (note the rather innocent allusions to the ideas in Song of Solomon, especially 2:8- set in a voice of romance as a young girl would- but also foreshadowing the profound and rather dark days ahead). Musically, this piece is quite

different from those that precede it in that it is up-tempo with a driving rhythmic accompaniment in contrast to long phrasing in the voice.

If you look carefully at the poetry throughout the libretto, you'll hear echoes of the poetry of the Song of Solomon from the "Old Testament" again and again. This is intentional. The Song of Solomon is a difficult yet deeply beautiful text included in the Bible as an allegory of the love between God and his creation set in a poem of a lover and his, or sometimes her, beloved. At times it is erotic, at other times pastoral, but always about romantic love (as opposed to the "agape" love concept applied in various theologies). This work set a foundation for me to understand and to express the complex relationship of Mary to God asked of Mary in the Annunciation. You may have noticed that the title of this work, "Arise My Love, a Reflection of the Virgin Mary" echoes a passage in the Song of Solomon (2:10). Gabriel's first words are directly from it. And this work appears throughout my text (I even included an allusion to it in the Magnificat- *Awaken now, O north wind, and come thou south to the garden*- Song of Solomon 4:16). Given the intimacy and the humanity of the implied relationship between God and Mary, resulting in the very compassionate and human figure of Jesus (particularly as presented in Luke, unlike the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels of Mark or John- a topic for another time), I worked the story from this position. This is a profound decision, for what it's worth. In so doing, I am making the Annunciation a *human* event- Mary, a humble human maiden, is the central figure. She is important in her own right as a vital entity, not simply as the vessel.

Leaving Mary, I return to Elisabeth (page 5 in the libretto). Gabriel appears to her and tells her she is pregnant. Time now for some more poetic license- in Luke, Gabriel actually appears to Elisabeth's husband, Zechariah. But, remember, the company available to me were three women. And, while taking this license, I took it a step further, having Elisabeth pick up some of Gabriel's prophecy about the child she is to bear and misunderstanding his destiny. Remember, also, I had her praying not only for a child but for one who would be a deliverer. In fact, John does, in time, become a deliverer, but is not the prophesied messiah (for those not familiar with Christian tradition, Elisabeth's son is John the Baptist- an important, if limited, character in the story of Jesus' ministry). Not a huge controversy, but a way to establish Elisabeth a little more fully. For the record, nobody ever challenged me on this- I suspect this is so because Elisabeth isn't a principal character in Christian traditions surrounding Christmas and, thus, isn't as well known as the others. Also, while I suggested this aspect of Elisabeth's character, I didn't spend a lot of time focused on it, making it possible, maybe even likely, that people didn't challenge this concept because they simply missed it.

I have established the characters of Mary, Elisabeth, and Gabriel. I have established settings for both Mary and Elisabeth and have also reminded careful listeners of the plight of Judah and of the hope for a Messiah. It's time to dig into Mary's development.

The text of Luke says that Gabriel was sent to a virgin *betrothed*... In the first century, a Jewish girl of Judah could be betrothed as early as 12 years old. Tradition tells us that Mary was about 14 at the time of the Annunciation, but she could have been younger. Gabriel is an archangel:

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel>. Out of nowhere, this young, innocent girl encounters an archangel. And, what he tells Mary is profound.

We're back to Mary now in the libretto (page 6). She sings that it is night in the garden. Luke doesn't say it's night, but I thought it would be interesting to set it at night to highlight the "ghostly" aspect of Gabriel's appearance. It also allows me to use a lighting cue to show the passage of time.

And this brings me to a "kind of interesting" thing for the layman with regard to live theatre. I was interested in highlighting the rather frightening aspect of the young girl facing an arch angel, but was quite limited in the special effects available to me. Some of this is the nature of live theatre, some of this was financial and logistical reality, but most of it was my aesthetic vision. I am not a big fan of "gee whiz" effects in live theatre. Live theatre, to me, is about live storytelling, not effects.

So, I bring in Gabriel using a darkened stage, allowing for shadows, and with musical and dramatic devices. The music and poetry at Gabriel's entrance bring her into physical reality for Mary- *Morning's music waits on thee, in my vision you are free. Child of heaven's promise thy God has favored thee.* We simply block Gabriel to appear behind Mary, who responds that she has heard the angel before she sees her. With tentative musical statements, Mary realizes something unusual is happening. Then, musically, I have Gabriel open up into full dramatic soprano voice- *Favored child, God is with thee in the moment,* and so on. Mary responds with growing understanding, moving into a short, lyrical aria "Angel Song," (page 7) wherein we see her character developing in acceptance that she is, in fact, talking to an angel and that she is ready to hear what the angel has to say:

*What is Thy will, what would Ye have of me?
Voice never still, allow Thy wisdom free.
Sing, I will respond.
Thy blessing lives within the frightened hour
Yet I am strengthened in the voice of God*

In the libretto, you'll notice that we're now coming upon some words that are not in italics. These are to be spoken by the actress. All the rest are sung. When you add spoken words to a piece otherwise sung, it makes the spoken words stand out, gives them a force in contrast with those sung. Given that Gabriel's words here are a direct message from God, I thought they should be highlighted.

Gabriel begins with "Fear not, Mary, chosen of Heaven and blessed in the sight of God." (page 7 of the libretto- adapted from Luke 1:28). Mary, understandably, is frightened and confused by this. Luke tells this overtly: "But she was much perplexed by his words, and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (Luke 1:29, NRSV). Gabriel senses this, as he responds "Fear not, Mary....."

Let's look at what Luke has given us here. He specifically tells us that the angel Gabriel is sent from God. He could have simply said "an angel" was sent, but he specifies it is Gabriel, who is an arch angel. Arch angels are important angels, Gabriel in particular (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel>). What does this mean? Getting inside the head of my character, I wondered what it would be like to encounter such a being- "much perplexed" indeed.

Gabriel continues, telling Mary what she is chosen for:

Ye shall conceive in your womb and bear a son
And Ye shall call His name Jesus.
He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High
And the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father, David
And He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever
And of His kingdom there shall be no end.

Now, remember, I was writing for live actors. I wanted to give them something to work with emotionally. Something in the text whispered to me that there was depth to be mined here in the character of Mary. At first, I couldn't find it. But it's there and, in time, it became apparent to me.

Luke didn't give me a whole lot to work with, but he did give me this bit of potential profundity- Mary's answer. Mary responds in a way we might not expect. She says to Gabriel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34 NRSV) Or, as I wrote it, *Child am I still, I have known not a man*. Given that this young girl is speaking with an archangel, seeking clarification in this way seems odd. Not petulant, but certainly not what we might expect to hear from an innocent young girl facing a representative apparition of God, and an arch angel at that.

After Gabriel explains how all this will work, Mary replies *Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word* (Luke 1:38, libretto page 8). It seems as if Mary is agreeing to this. Was it possible she might not have agreed to it? In his explanation, is Gabriel trying to sell Mary on the idea? Did she have the ability to say "no"?

The other aspect that seemed odd is what Gabriel says next. He doesn't tell Mary to return to her mother. He tells her to go to her distant cousin. Why wouldn't Mary go to her mother?

So, two questions came to my mind. Firstly, did Mary have the choice to say "no"? Secondly, is Mary's mother not available to her? I'll start with the second question first.

We know nothing about Mary from the Book of Luke, other than her being virginal and betrothed. I did further research and discovered that Catholic tradition speaks to Mary's life prior to the Annunciation, based on the apocryphal Gospel of James or Protoevangelium of James, written about 145 CE: www.asu.edu/courses/rel376/total-readings/james.pdf

This book helped me to understand why the archangel sent Mary to her cousin, rather than to her parents. According to this tradition, Mary's parents, Anna and Joachim, follow through on a pact by giving three-year-old Mary to the temple. Although apocryphal, this text is generally accepted by Catholic Church tradition as being in line with their understanding of the person of Mary.

Now, granted, the writing of the Gospel of Luke likely predates the writing of the Gospel of James. However, the story of Joachim and Anna had to come from somewhere. And, Luke has Mary's mother not available to her. Either Luke was working from oral or written sources which were also available to the author of James, or, perhaps, the author of James is explaining the same confusion I had. Either way, it worked for my purposes.

In this Gospel of James, we hear nothing more of Mary's parents after they give her to the temple. This hints at why Mary's mother is not available to her. I saw in this a place to start with my question about Mary's mother. In fact, in my telling, I chose to have Anna be deceased. In soliloquy, Mary speaks to her mother as if she had died (*Mother from your heaven, can you hear your daughter's cry? Mother please respond in kind- page 8*).

But what about Mary's possible choice to say no? Why might she say no?

To understand the profound depth of what Gabriel has said to Mary, and why the question of a choice matters, it is important to know something of the Messianic prophecy in Christian tradition. And, to understand this, it is important to know something of the presentation of the meaning of this prophecy in the beginnings of the Christian tradition.

I Corinthians ("First Corinthians"), found in the Christian canonical scriptures, includes a section which is extremely important to the Christian Credo of the meaning of the death of the man Jesus, whom Christians see as the Christ. Saint Paul, writing sometime in the mid 50's CE to the church he had earlier established in Corinth, says:

"Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you- unless you have come to believe in vain. For I hand on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures...." (I Corinthians 15:1-3, NRSV).

The important part here for my purposes is "in accordance with the scriptures," by which he is referring to the suffering servant prophecy (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12) found in Deutero-Isaiah, written by an anonymous 6th century BCE author writing in exile. (Note: remember that Paul is writing decades before the canonical Gospels were written- thus, the scriptures to which he is referring are the Jewish scriptures, now thought of as the "Old Testament.") I make the assertion that Paul is referring to this because a passage therein, Isaiah 53:10, is echoed in Paul's statement: Isaiah 53:10- "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. **When you make his life an offering for sin...**"

The Gospel of Luke was written sometime in the 80's, CE, with revisions well into the second century. Thus, we should keep in mind that the fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, that Christ's death had something to do with the remission of mankind's sin, was well established, at least in the writings of Paul, decades before the book of Luke was written. Given that Luke is telling the story as happening to a virginal young girl, and given that the idea of the messiah being born of a virgin is prophesied in Proto-Isaiah, I felt confident that the author of Luke is aware of the suffering servant aspect of Deutero-Isaiah. I wondered if he might think that Mary, too, would be aware of this prophecy.

Returning to the Gospel of James, I knew that Mary had been given over to the temple. I assumed that, once there, she would be instructed in the traditions of the Jewish faith, and this would include the messianic prophecies. Mary would know about the suffering servant. She would know that life would be difficult and short for this person. OK, I don't really know that Mary would be so instructed. And, of course, Luke doesn't speak to this (neither does James in any overt way). But, given that, once she travels to Elisabeth, she recites the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), with its strong allusions to the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and Psalm 113, Luke seems to be hinting that she is familiar with Jewish scripture.

So, we return to Mary, standing alone in front of an arch angel, understanding that if she accepts this commission, she will be mother to a child doomed to suffer terribly and die with the entirety of the sins of mankind on his soul. She is alone in facing this. Her mother is not available to her. And she is somewhere between the ages of 12 and 14.

Oh, and lest we forget, in the canonical scriptures of the Judeo-Christian tradition, when God asks help of a human being, it rarely goes well for the human. Noah, after facing the terror of the cataclysm, is castrated by his son. Abraham's journeys are fraught with disaster and horrible choices. Moses dies before arriving in the promised land. David is the cause of Absalom's death. Daniel and other prophets face terrible challenges. And, interestingly enough, the only time throughout scripture that God asks the help of a human in an act of creation, he asks it of a young girl. This is a first in Jewish tradition, and it's all before Mary in this instance while she ponders what she has agreed to.

My text on this is as follows (page 8 in the libretto):

*Mother, from your Heaven, can you hear your daughter's cry?
Mother, please respond in kind.
Yet in God's persuasion, frightened dreams now enter my mind.
In the Child's soliloquy angry visions call to me
He shall not live to veil me in days of old
Moments shall be unkind to His word.
And a mother's plea will fall on angered thoughts, all unheard
And in death He will know, His mission in life forgotten there
Destiny's promise always within unseen.*

I have Gabriel respond, alluding to Psalms 89, which hints at the Messiah, and then encouraging Mary to travel to Elisabeth. Luke doesn't say so directly, but I interpret Mary's "journey" to Elisabeth as an allegory. She is leaving the garden, the locked garden of her virginity, to travel to Elisabeth who has conceived "in her old age." In transition, I have Elisabeth sing a setting of Psalms 118, ending with *Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord* (page 9).

Mary enters in a reverie, growing in her understanding. Elisabeth's words on page 9 are addressed to Mary, who isn't really aware of where she is, physically. Her "journey," in my setting, is more spiritual than physical. In her final words of this section, she is transformed into the Blessed Mother:

*Heaven's will in my heart, the music of God's tomorrow calls
Mother's love holding, always enfolding life.*

Elisabeth recognizes Mary's transition, as she sings in duet with Mary:

*Heaven's light embraceth thee
Thou are in a state of grace, of rapture
Chosen thou of wisdom, chosen thou of His word.*

At the end of the duet (page 10), Elisabeth speaks directly to Mary for the first time:

*Blessed art thou among women
And blessed be the Fruit of thy womb
And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord
Should come to me?*

I then use a musical device to indicate the entirety of Mary's transition, hearkening back to the playful musical motif of the beginning, but now with maturity in the poetry:

*Into the garden comes the light of God
It is blessed and my soul's caressed with
God's eternal promise, bringing hope, breathing free
And from innocence His wisdom awakes in me.*

"And from innocence His wisdom awakes in me." This is my stating that Mary's journey of understanding is complete, setting up the Magnificat. To explain what I mean here, it would be necessary for us to discuss the prologue to the Gospel of John, and I think this takes us a bit far afield for today's discussion. Suffice it to say I'm taking a bit of a theological stance here that went unchecked in this piece's performance days- probably because my statement here is subtle. Suffice it to say that this opera, as a character study, has brought Mary to the central moment of her destiny. And, in my telling, this is not the birth of Christ, but the understanding of her individual destiny. A hint of it lies in this line:

*Now the garden fills the night with song and with hope
And the music is the voice of His promised word*

And then we're into the Magnificat, the climax of the piece. In this, Mary is established in her heroic role which will remain for all time, in all of its challenge, heartbreak, and glory.

And this is as far as I took it with my little opera. I finish with a trio mirroring the opening piece of the work with Mary now established the primary character. Then I segue into a duet setting of the “Hail Mary” sung by Elisabeth and Gabriel, and finish with a canticle, sung by all three as a finale to the work. You might notice that the lyrics of Mary in the finale are of an entirely different character type than those of Mary in the opening. This is now the fully mature “Blessed Mother,” which sets a strong finale to the piece- the opera really stops at the end of the Ave Maria sung by Gabriel and Elisabeth. The finale transitions us to current day, as it were.

And, for the purposes of our discussion, I’ll end it here.

For Our Purposes in This Discussion

Virgin Birth

1. The Gospel of Luke describes Mary as a virgin, betrothed (Luke 1:27). The idea of the messiah being born to a virgin is hinted at in the prophecy in Proto-Isaiah.
2. Virgin birth is a common element in stories of heroes in a variety of cultures.

Mary is Quite Young at the Annunciation

1. She is betrothed.
2. She is a virgin.

Mary is a Solitary Figure

1. Luke does not mention anyone else in place at the Annunciation. Thus, Mary is alone with the arch angel.
2. Gabriel tells Mary to retire to her cousin Elisabeth’s. He says nothing of Mary’s mother.

Mary’s Understanding of the Suffering Servant Prophecy

1. The Magnificat echoes I Samuel and Psalm 113.

Mary’s Dilemma

1. Does she have the right/ability to say no?
2. God, through Gabriel, is speaking to a very different relationship to Mary than that which Mary sings about in the opening.
3. What does it mean to become the mother of the prophesied Messiah, particularly that of the suffering servant?

Applications

1. Are there hints in the text that Luke feels that this section of the story is important?

2. Why is Mary's journey through this experience not a bigger part of the Christian catechism?
3. Why is it important that the Christ be born of a human woman? What does this say about Christian tradition?
4. What are the catechetical challenges that could be made to my setting?

Some Insider Stories

Mystery Man

As we prepared to premiere this piece in the months leading up to December of 2000, I reached out to the archdiocese again to ask their help in promoting our performance run. They responded that, while they were pleased that we were doing a piece on "The Blessed Mother," they were reluctant to promote it because artists had used this topic to be disparaging of both Mary and of the Church. I responded by sending them a copy of the libretto. I heard nothing further.

On opening night, a well-dressed man purchased a single ticket and went upstairs to the balcony. Because we were in a 500-seat auditorium, and because we didn't expect an audience of more than 30 or so, we didn't really want people in the balcony. The house manager followed the man up to ask him to relocate downstairs but hesitated when he saw the man writing. He thought the man could be a critic we didn't recognize and chose to leave him alone. At the end of the performance, the man thanked the house manager and left. He returned the next night.

The following week, we had groups of parishioners come to the play, led by priests and nuns. It occurred to us that the mysterious man of the first week was likely a spy sent by the archdiocese!

An Award from an Unlikely Source

"Arise My Love" was very well received by the critics. This didn't help all that much as we were doing an off-night and terribly limited run. I think we did a total of 6 performances, although it might have been 9. Anyway, much later, in the early autumn of 2001, "Out Front Magazine," Denver's premiere LGBTQ publication (known then as the premiere gay magazine) came out with its "Best of Denver" edition. Their resident drama critic named "Arise My Love" "Best New Opera in Denver." Now, there weren't a lot of new operas being mounted in Denver then, probably aren't now. But the critic invented this award category to recognize the piece. Of the communities we tended to mine for ticket sales, frankly, the gay audience wasn't one we had thought of for a rather religious portrayal of the Virgin Mary. However, when we remounted the piece for the Christmas season of 2001, we did have some support from the gay community- likely thanks to Out Front Magazine!

Something Probably Too Religious to Discuss

As you've read, I set this story mostly as a character study of Mary and the particular time in her life when her character, her very being, was transformed forever. Although I borrowed a little bit from the traditions from the Gospel of James for my own purposes, I didn't bring the Immaculate Conception or any of the other Christian traditions from this apocryphal book into the opera overtly. But what I did "report on" here is something I think is not taught in Christian religious education, and maybe should be.

The story of Mary, from the Annunciation through the Magnificat, symbolically reflects a fundamental tenet of Christian theology. The child she bears, Jesus, is claimed in Christian tradition to be "the Christ," the anointed of God. In the years following the beginnings of the Christian church, and for several centuries thereafter, as Christian doctrine and dogma was being codified, the actual meaning of "the Christ" was disputed, often heatedly, by those charged with leading the movement.

What the Church finally decided upon is, in my opinion, beautifully described in Volume II of Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology (with apologies to Dr. Jim Gibson). In this book, Tillich speaks at some length of what "Christ" actually means and why this matters. Christ, in his telling, is the revelation of the "new being." Although Tillich's idea is far too complex to represent well in this setting, I will do my best to explain briefly. The concept speaks to ideas of Tillich's represented in his works The Dynamics of Faith and The Courage to Be. Tillich asks us to ponder the meaning of our existence relative to the potential of non-being, the reality of the revelation of being-itself across the abyss of existential nihilism, and how faith, defined as ultimate concern, is fundamental to our choice "to be." Jesus, the "new being," the "Christ," introduces us to a new potentiality in this conflict. As such, his being is transformative in our understanding of our lives, of our very existence.

Mary's fundamental being is transformed in this journey, from innocent child to the Blessed Mother, from the Annunciation to the Magnificat. We can hear it in the words she uses. In hearing and accepting the revelation of God, spoken through Gabriel, Mary realigns her faith, her ultimate concern, entirely and, in so doing, is transformed. In latter-day vernacular, she is "reborn" in a profound way.

I find it interesting, and more than a little telling, that this story isn't more important in Christian catechism. Perhaps it is simply overlooked. I suspect, though, that a more likely explanation is that the meaning of Jesus as "the Christ" is simply too complex and, thus, difficult to wrestle with by catechumens and those charged with their instruction. Instead, they are

taught simply that Jesus “died for our sins” and “rose from the dead temporarily,” and that these are good things. Echoes of Orwell’s slogan in Animal Farm come to mind- explaining complex revolutionary philosophy to the masses with the simplistic “Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad.” And, as such, the story of Mary in this instance is simply missed altogether.

A pity, rather. It is truly an amazing story!

One of my very favorite Christmas-time pieces, appropriate to this topic, sung by the incomparable Chanticleer.

Ave Maria- Franz Biebl

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVyCJIPiHFg&app>

Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae
et concepit de Spiritu sancto.
Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus, Jesus.
Maria dixit: Ecce ancilla Domini.
Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.
Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus, Jesus.
Et Verbum caro factum est
et habitavit in nobis.

Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum.
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus, Jesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.
Amen. Amen. Amen.

The angel of God visited Maria
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

Hail Mary, Full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus, Jesus.

Maria said: See the servant of the Lord.
May it happen to me according to your word.

Hail Mary, Full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus, Jesus.

And the Word became flesh
And lived among us.

Hail Mary, Full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
Holy Mary, pray for us now and in the hour of our death.
Amen. Amen. Amen.

**Mary is in a
garden, praying**

Mary

*Yaweh Elohim, Master of the Universe, God of Abraham,
Blessed by Thy secret name.*

*List' and pay heed that Ye may know me, Thy servant.
Wherein lies the quietude of grace in the absence of misgiving,
In the silence of hope.*

*I have known the wickedness of man in the terror of the night,
Hearing cries of the forlorn in the anguish of loss and I weep.*

*While in the Spirit have I listened of the promise,
Have I whispered the longings of these, Your children,
And have I known Your reply.*

Seek me in the frightened hours of the morning.

Guide me in the warmth of the night.

*And keep me forever in Your love that I may know Thee,
That I may serve Thee,*

That I may live forever in Thy peace.

Amen

**Gabriel appears,
unseen by Mary**

Gabriel

*Arise my love, my fair one
And come away.*

Mary

*The garden knows me
I am unafraid in starlight.*

Gabriel

For lo, the winter is past

Mary

In gentle music I play, I love.

Gabriel

*The rain is over and gone.
Arise.*

Mary

*Come to the garden in the light of love
Come and play, it's a sunny day
Of laughter and of singing and of joy in my heart
And I welcome you to join in the start of life*

Gabriel

*Dance and sing, dance and play
Know of the warmth in the light of day
Chosen child, you shall know
God's tranquility shall ever flow in you*

Mary

*Come to the garden in the light of Grace
Come and play in the promised day
Of beauty and tranquility when love comes to me
And the blessing of His word sets me free in joy!*

Gabriel

*Child of hope, child of peace
Light of His love now in you released
Word of Grace now at hand
Given elegance toward understanding God.*

Mary

Music plays and I'm in a dream.

Gabriel

Innocent, elegant, blessed be the name of the Lord.

Mary

Childhood's vision clear and serene

Gabriel

Innocent, elegant, blessed be the name of our God.

Mary

Now I'm falling, laughing, calling your name.

Gabriel

*Chosen wonder, chosen one.
Blessed in your spirit, blessed in your heart
Blessed in the promised chosen start of
Prophecy's light come to life in the rapture
Holy Spirit in life*

Mary

*Come to the garden, come and play
Come to the joy with me
Come and sing the music
God's will is free.*

Gabriel

*Child of the garden are you here at play?
I must go, that your heart will know
The wisdom of God's promise in the light of your heart
As He welcomes you to join in the start of life.*

Gabriel exits

Mary

*Dance and sing, dance and play
Hear the music in the warmth of day.
Come with me, come and play
Kept in the silence may the music stay in me.*

*Master of the Universe
My soul attends Thee
Hear Your servant's prayer.*

**Crossfade to
Elisabeth, not
in the garden**

Elisabeth

*Yaweh Elohim, Master of the Universe
God of Abraham, blessed be Thy sacred name.
Long have I sought Thee that I might know life
Thus in the silence, seeking Your reply.
May You grant me a child, may You grant me a son
That his legacy be blessed in Your glory.
Thus in life, Thy goodness be reflected
Hear my prayer, O Blessed One.*

**Elisabeth is calling
for a deliverer**

*Judah, land of woe, land of enslavement
Hidden, lost to iniquity
Know God's promise of hope, hear the word of the Lord
Calling in strength
Darkness at hand seeking salvation
Seeking release in grace, in peace.
Isaiah's dream come
Prophecy's life enter in truth
Liken the world to Paradise, liken God's will to our eternal grace
Waken now and see, waken now and know
Into the light of a salvation, morning to night is lost, is released
Seek me, hear me,
Grant me peace.*

**Mary and Elisabeth in duet,
not aware of each other**

Mary

*Lighten the world in the garden of Abraham
Join me in play in the morrow
Join in the laughter of song
Join me in Heaven's redemption.*

Elisabeth

*Hear my call in the wilderness
From my infirmity, cause the release of Thy people
Now in the smile of Your blessing, give peace to us
In the redemption of hope.*

Voice of my Beloved

Mary

*Voice of my beloved now behold, He comes
Calling to me in a joyous voice of eternal love
Seeking the night He understands the frightened start
Seeking the day He whispers joy within my heart*

*Innocence brings the joy of rapture
Eloquence sings the world hereafter
Calling me in a voice within my dreams
Singing free of a gracious tomorrow
Destiny in a world of hope
In a world of peaceful beauty and love*

*Now the promised future lives within the past
Hidden to man, yet the mortal prophecy seeks release
Calling to life in blessed morning comes the dawn
Calling in strength to the world in Heaven's song.*

*Innocence brings the joy of rapture
Eloquence sings the world hereafter
Calling me in a voice within my dreams
Singing free of a gracious tomorrow
Destiny in a world of hope
In a world of peaceful beauty and love*

*Now in soliloquy I envision days of sorrow released
Captured within a lifetime's mission born of man
And of the promised light I can see Heaven's redemption
In a child of the prophecy, child of Heaven's song.*

Mary exits
Scene crossfades to Elisabeth and Gabriel

Gabriel

*Woman, God has heard you in the prayer within your mind's voice
Seeking His response to hear your plea for man's respite
Blessed is He who knows you, for blessed will ye be in life
Within a child enfold you, the world may know of light.*

**Gabriel tells
Elisabeth she
will bear a
child**

*World of the morrow, lost now in sorrow
Listen, hear His word
Lost insurrection seeking reflection
The moment is in His blessing at hand, within you
Hear now the voice of Epiphany
Claim now the strength of His grace
Now in life the word of His love*

Elisabeth

*God can you hear me?
Ever be near me.*

Gabriel

Know the word, enlightened one, your virtue is blessed in God.

Elisabeth

I seek the truths of the world that these may guide me near to Thee.

Gabriel

*Within the prophecy your child calls Heaven's wisdom reconciled
To man's lost integrity, forgiven industry, now at hand*

Elisabeth

*Heaven's will hold me, touch me, enfold me
As of Rachel, God's word hath thus released the reproach of mercy
Bring forth of His will in the children,
The calling of life in Heaven's song
Now in prophecy's ecstasy, Isaiah's legacy born.*

*And in Thy blessing, Thy justice expressing
For embraced in my heart there lies the knowledge of Heaven's power
And in the response of Thy justice the power of hope shall light our way
Let the strength of eternity vanquish infirmity now.*

*Child of my life eternal glory lies in you
Child of my heart, immortal legacy responds in your name
Thus in the hope of your people the miracle lives in your name
The message of God in delivery unto His land*

**Elisabeth
thinks the
child is to be
the deliverer**

*Child of the life, eternal glory lies in you
Child of the heart, immortal legacy responds in your name
Thus in the hope of your people the miracle lives in your name
The message of God in delivery unto His love.*

**Elisabeth exits. Crossfade to Mary
in the garden, night**

Mary

*Come to the garden in the night of peace
I am loved, and my soul's released
To Heaven in God's blessing with a song in my heart
I'm alive in the moment of the start of a life of joy*

*Come to the garden, we shall sing and play
In the dark we will find our way
And God will set His blessing on the virtue of night
In the time, in the wondrous sight of live.*

Gabriel

*Morning's music waits on thee
In my vision you are free
Child of Heaven's promise, thy God has favored thee.*

Mary

Of the wind, I can hear you whispering my name.

Gabriel

*Fear not, thy God hast favored thee
His blessing now in grace on thee*

Mary

*Frightened child, reconciled.
God is with my heart.*

Gabriel

*Fear not in rapture, Heaven's hereafter
Yet is renowned in thee.*

*Favored child, God is with thee in the moment
Favored child, Heaven's bounty lives in you
Thus chosen, thus embraced, thus embellished in thy grace
With the music of Heaven ye shall sing.*

Mary

*Voice of the night, your vision frightens me
Yet with their sight, thy words enlighten me
I am bound to thee.
Chosen of Heaven, rapture calls to me
While of my promise music sings of thee.*

Aria: Angel Song

*In angel song call me to
Angel song set me free
As a light above now embraced in Heaven's love
Of my life I will have given that Thy love for man be revealed
That the myst'ry of death be forsaken, thus forgiven sin concealed.*

*Angel song, Heaven blessed
Angel song, now confessed
Colored soft and mild in this rapture reconciled
Yet refined of Heaven's virtue with Thy word my soul thus increased
Now the voice of God's inspiration, given mortal thought, be released.*

*What is Thy will, what would Ye have of me?
Voice never still, allow Thy wisdom free.
Sing, I will respond.
Thy blessing lives within the frightened hour
Yet I am strengthened in the voice of God*

**Luke 1:28-38
The Annunciation**

Gabriel

*Fear not, Mary, chosen of Heaven and blessed in the sight of God.
Ye shall conceive in your womb and bear a son
And Ye shall call His name Jesus.
He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High
And the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father, David
And He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever
And of His kingdom there shall be no end.*

Mary

*Child am I still
I have known not a man.*

Gabriel

*The holy Ghost shall come upon thee
And the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee
Therefore also that Holy One which shall be born of thee
Shall be called the Son of God.*

Mary

*Behold the handmaid of the Lord
Be it unto me according to Thy word*

*Mother, can you hear me?
Mother, can you comfort me?
In the moment I am afraid.*

*In the blessing granted, I am not understanding this future
Angel song in eloquence, frightens me to reticence
And moments beckon into the sight of God.*

*Mystery thoughts of loss fill my mind
While in angel's promise I may leave the past far behind.
Now at hand in the light the future of man is clear to me
Singing in God's magnificence to the world.*

*Mother, from your Heaven, can you hear your daughter's cry?
Mother, please respond in kind.
Yet in God's persuasion, frightened dreams now enter my mind.
In the Child's soliloquy angry visions call to me
He shall not live to veil me in days of old
Moments shall be unkind to His word.
And a mother's plea will fall on angered thoughts, all unheard
And in death He will know, His mission in life forgotten there
Destiny's promise always within unseen.*

*Mother, I am anxious.
Mother, I am frightened, hold me.
In my confusion know me in thy heart
And hear me in my prayer, and respond to me in sunlight
Stay beside me in peace and in love.*

Gabriel

*Beloved child, the Lord is with thee
In His grace seek ye wisdom born of Heaven
Comfort ye, and fear not the days yet to be
For He hath said mercy shall be built up forever
Thy faithfulness shalt thou establish in the very Heavens
I have made a covenant with My chosen
I have sworn unto David, My servant, thy seed will I establish forever
And build up thy throne to all generations
Behold Mary, chosen child of righteousness
Thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son, in her old age
And this is the sixth month with her.
Arise my love, my fair one, and come away.*

Psalm 89

Luke 1:36

**Crossfade to Elisabeth-
Psalm 118**

Elisabeth

*O give thanks unto the Lord
For He is good, and His mercy endureth forever
I called upon Him in distress, He answered me, setting my free
He hath taken my part with them that help me
He hath taken my part with them that hate me
I will bring praise, for Thou hast heard me
And Thou art become my salvation
This is the day the Lord hath made
We will rejoice and sing gladly
Blessed by he who comes in the name of the Lord.*

Mary

Mary enters

*Mother, thou art near me, in this time thy daughter's night
Lightens to the future's dream.
Of a chosen respite I am in your thoughts serenely
Hidden in a memory, thoughts of comfort sing to me
Quietly calling in the voice of your love.*

Elisabeth

*Chosen child of beauty, blessed be thy song
Seek me.*

Mary

*Wakening silence, I know Thy mind
Visions of tomorrow telling of Thy mercy refined.*

Elisabeth

*Heaven's light embraceth thee
Thou are in a state of grace, of rapture
Chosen thou of wisdom, chosen thou of His word.*

Mary

*Heaven's will in my heart, the music of God's tomorrow calls
Mother's love holding, always enfolding life.*

Elisabeth

Mary, child, sing of life

Gabriel

Sing life

Elisabeth

*Blessed art thou among women
And blessed be the Fruit of thy womb
And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord
Should come to me?*

Gabriel

Thus unto the Lord.

Mary

*Into the garden comes the light of God
It is blessed and my soul's caressed with
God's eternal promise, bringing hope, breathing free
And from innocence His wisdom awakes in me.*

Elisabeth

*Mary mild, mercy's child
Brought forth in sanctity
Heaven's promise lives in thee.*

Mary

*Now the garden fills the night with song and with hope
And the music is the voice of His promised word*

Gabriel

Blessed are ye woman who believes of the prophet's industry.

Elisabeth

*Blessed is this chosen sight of God
And the Child within.*

The Magnificat

Mary

*My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my savior
For although thus regard in low estate
Thus is given the wealth of His grace*

*Awaken now, O north wind
And come thou south to the garden*

*Henceforth all Thy generations call me blessed
For He that is mighty hath done to me great things
And Holy is His name
And His mercy is on them that fear Him throughout generation
He hath shewed them strength with His arm
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts*

*He hath put down the might from their seats
And exalted them of low degree
He hath filled the hungry with good things
And the rich he hath sent empty away
He has holpen His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy
As He spake to our fathers, Abraham, and to his seed forever.*

*Now to the garden comes the light of God
In His love we will come to know
The blessing of His righteousness, the voice of His word
And the music of our faith will be heard in joy*

Elisabeth
*Child of hope, child of peace
Light of His love now in you released
Word of grace now at hand
Given elegance toward understanding God.*

Gabriel
*Into the garden, light of the world
Singing in praise forever more.*

Mary
*Join me in innocence, hear me in eloquence
God hast blessed me with the rapture of His word.*

Gabriel
Within the garden ye shall live in His love

Elisabeth
In our peace

Mary
Heaven's joy released and we will live forever in the grace of His love

Elisabeth
Heaven's song

Gabriel
From above

Mary
In the music of our joy

Elisabeth

*Dance and sing, dance and play
From the night comes the day
Chosen child you shall know
Loving wisdom grows with strength in you*

Gabriel

*Dance and sing, dance and play
Know of the warmth in the light of day
Chosen child, you shall know
God's tranquility shall ever flow in you.*

Mary

Music plays and I'm in a dream.

Gabriel and Elisabeth

Innocent, elegant, blessed be the name of the Lord

Mary

Knowing vision clear and serene

Gabriel and Elisabeth

Innocent, elegant

Gabriel

*In His wisdom God has chosen
Praise His Name*

Elisabeth

*Blessed Child is Heaven sent
In His vision luminant
Of immortal blessing praise His name.*

Mary

Come, praise His name

Ave Maria

Gabriel and Elisabeth

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee

Elisabeth

Blessed art thou among women.

Gabriel

Blessed be the fruit of thy womb, Jesu

Gabriel and Elisabeth

*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for our sinners now
And at the hour of our death
Amen.*

Finale

Mary

*O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Thy name
In all the earth who hast set Thy glory above the Heaven's!
Out from the voice of the Child hast Thou ordained the strength to endure
While born to us now is the Child enthumbed that we may live in Thy love!*

*Thus to the world the Son of Man is received
In Holy love He endures the sorrow's iniquity
Now in release of our sin we prosper
Singing God's glory in hope
We offer our praise in tomorrow's promise
Singing the message of peace.*

*Gloria sing to the Lord, sing the hope of your heart in rapture
Gloria into the word, come
And forever we will know His wisdom, virtue and strength, His mercy
Singing the light of the world forever
Gloria Patri
Amen.*

*Join me now in the song, in Heaven's love we belong
In righteousness we will know the glory of the Lord
Thus in God's blessing we live forever singing the praise of the Child
And joy will respond in the word of rapture
Gloria Alleluia!*

*Gloria to the Lord.
Love!*

Gabriel and Elisabeth

*Gloria, Gloria in excelsis
Gloria Patri
Et in Terra pax hominibus
Amen*

Gloria, sing to the Lord!