

Illustration of young Ernest Hemingway by Lui Rodrigues

Ernest Hemingway's

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

A New Opera in Two Acts

MUSIC Brian Wilbur Grundstrom
LIBRETTO David M. Dorsen

The fight for love and freedom never dies

International Brazilian Opera Company
World Premiere 2026 Brasília



Hemingway was a larger-than-life personality. In his popular novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, we can see some of the author in the character of Robert Jordan, an idealistic young American in 1930's Spain, who accepts a doomed mission to

blow up a bridge.

Through his lyrical melody-driven music, Brian Wilbur Grundstrom brings out the emotional depths of the characters and new insight to this Hemingway classic. Using the full versatility of opera, David Dorsen's libretto and Grundstrom's music

explore Hemingway's themes of trust, loyalty, honor, love, betrayal, fear, pain, loss, and sacrifice, while adding modern insight, as Robert Jordan's notions of honor clash with the reality of civil war.



Development Workshop Concert Performance

Music Director

Jeffrey Sean Dokken

Leads

Alan Naylor
(Robert Jordan)

Eliza Bonet
(Pilar)

Kelly Curtin
(Maria)

Sean Pflueger
(Pablo)



Comprimario

Danielle Bendjy
Suzanne S. Chadwick
Cosmo Clemens
Aurelio Dominguez
Santiago Alfonzo Meza
Derrick Miller
Jose Sacín
Lori Şen
Daniel Sherwood
Antony Zwerdling

Church of the Epiphany, Washington DC - November 20, 2022

Funded in part by a grant from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities

Soprano Indra Thomas Premiere of aria *Will He Love Me?*



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scores: brianwilbur.com/fwtbt



with Maestro Jeffrey Dokken and the Rome Symphony Orchestra
(from left: Dokken, Grundstrom, Thomas, Barbara Beninato)

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

Story

For Whom the Bell Tolls is set in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, a struggle between those in power (the Republicans or Loyalists) and those trying to depose the government, the Fascists. The Republicans are supported by the Soviet Union, and the Fascists, which are winning the war, are supported by Nazi Germany. It is an era where there was considerable support for the Soviet experiment; thousands of idealistic Americans went to Spain and fought with the Republicans.

Robert Jordan, an American fighting on the side of the Republicans, has been assigned to blow up a mountain bridge in the north of Spain to cut off Fascist reinforcements in preparation for the launch of a much awaited Republican offensive. Under the guidance of Anselmo, Robert Jordan connects with a band of guerrillas that he has been told will help him in his mission. Instead he discovers that they are lead by the drunken Pablo who opposes Robert Jordan's mission for fear the Fascists who know where they are will hunt them down, forcing the small band to abandon the safety of their cave.

Supporting Robert Jordan is Pilar who asserts her leadership of the restless guerrillas who support her over Pablo's shiftless refusal to take action. Robert tries to avoid becoming enmeshed in their internal struggles, aware he has become disillusioned in the potential for success of their cause – and in his mission. Still he is almost immediately taken by the engaging, though guileless Maria, who for all of her traumatized past, finds herself equally drawn to him, recognizing they are both looking for something or someone to believe in and live for.

The logistics for blowing up the bridge start falling into place when El Sordo, leader of a nearby band of guerrillas, agrees to steal the horses they need to make their escape afterwards. Nevertheless Robert Jordan learns that word has gotten out about the planned Republican offensive, compromising their success.

At the start of Act Two, matters take a turn for the worse when Fascist militia follow El Sordo's tracks in the newly fallen snow back to his hiding place and wipe out his band of guerrillas. That night, Pablo out of self-preservation steals the detonators Jordan needs for his explosives, and disappears. Robert Jordan realizes that although he can use grenades to trigger the dynamite for blowing up the bridge later that morning, it has become a suicide mission without sufficient men to attack the heavily guarded bridge and still escape safely. His greatest regret is that Maria, with whom he has fallen in love, may lose her life in the fighting.

In the dawn, as they prepare to leave, Robert Jordan, Pilar and the rest of the band are joined by the mercurial Pablo who has not only recruited more men but secured the needed horses. He confesses in a moment

of cowardice that he threw the detonators away but has also realized that the job can be done with grenades, though it makes the job riskier.

As everyone waits for the bombardment to begin signaling the start of the Republican offensive, Jordan assures a worried Maria that they will be together in America before too long. As she leaves to help guard the horses, Jordan and Anselmo prepare their assault on the bridge as Pablo and Pilar lead separate groups of men in attacking the guardhouses positioned at each end of the bridge.

The mission is a success but not without losses including Anselmo who is killed. As they all gather once more after the bridge has been blown up, Pablo turns his submachine gun on the men he has recruited, so his people will have enough horses for their escape.

As they make their dash to safety in a hail of enemy gunfire, Jordan is wounded. He realizes he cannot go on without threatening everyone else's ability to get away. He takes Maria aside and assures her that he will be with her always and that wherever she goes, he will be with her. Once the rest have left, Jordan takes up his position with a machine gun to fight off the Fascists to the very last, while the others – including Maria – escape capture.

✎

Cast

Robert Jordan (Tenor), American, early 30's. A former Spanish instructor at a college in the mid-west, Robert Jordan came to Spain to support the Republicans and fight the Fascists. A skilled dynamiter, he has become disillusioned with the war, seeking meaning in performing his responsibilities to the best of his ability. To the world, he is handsome, virile, and in command, with a seemingly impenetrable stoical exterior. But these attributes mask an untapped emotional depth. Robert Jordan is consumed with self-doubt and a rolling loss of purpose. He is going through the motions without conviction. He realizes that he could die on this mission, but is unsure how he feels about that. Robert Jordan finds himself drawn to Maria both physically and emotionally. He feels protective of her but also aware that he cares for her in ways he has never cared for anyone before. Robert Jordan starts to imagine sharing a life with Maria, which gives him someone to live – and die – for. Tall, sinewy muscles, light complexion and hair.

Maria, 18 (lyric soprano) Traumatized first by witnessing her parents being executed, then gang-raped by the Fascists, she was saved by the guerrillas led by Pablo, when they blew up the train taking her south to a prison camp. Not part of the guerrilla band herself, she has found a place among them preparing food under Pilar's watchful eye which has given her a sense of belonging



*Abraham Lincoln Brigade
from the United States fighting in
Spanish Civil War, 1937, Aragón*

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

and helped heal her shattered sense of self. She is trusting by nature but still feels displaced and lost due to the emotional upheavals she has experienced. She is in search of something or someone to believe in and live for, even if she is not aware of it herself. Senses that beneath his resolute exterior Robert is a kindred – and equally lost – spirit. This awakens her dormant heart and prompts her to want to be with him and to have a relationship that is both emotionally rewarding and lasting and opens her up to imagining a better life with him elsewhere. Dark hair, attractive features, melancholy air beneath a very natural warmth.

Pilar, late 40's (dramatic mezzo) A born leader and a true believer in the Republic, placing all of her energies and passion in its service, even though she recognizes the ruthless brutality that exists on both sides. Never beautiful and insisting she is ugly, she still sparks with the fire – the Gypsy blood in her, she would say – that incited the passion of matadors when she was younger. Although she still describes herself as “Pablo's woman” she is disgusted that he's become a drunk, shirking his responsibilities to the others. Protective of Maria, she sees Robert as a way to get Maria to safety and senses that Robert may need Maria as much as Maria needs Robert. Gritty, commanding, keeps her own counsel, but with a sense of humor.

Pablo, late 40's (bass) Once a ruthless leader that both attracted and repelled Pilar, he is now tired of the conflict and has sought safety in hiding out in the mountains, drinking his nights away. He has alienated the other guerrillas who have already turned to Pilar for direction, even if he pretends not to know. He is invested in his own self-preservation at all costs, even if it means undermining Robert's mission. He can be crafty, selfish, duplicitous, and cowardly. But he is also smart and a survivor. Not to be trusted but the others do, even when they know better. Barrel-chested with shifting eyes that are always on guard.

Pablo's Band

Anselmo, 60's (baritone) Dedicated, reliable, committed to the Republican cause, though his conscience is still troubled by the human cost and moral consequences. Can see clearly what he must do if their side is to defeat the Fascists. Wears his age on his face, a man of few words, but uses them wisely.

Rafael, early 40's (tenor) Easy-going, self-identified Gypsy, always happy to have another meal; wily, willing to take orders but not always perfect at execution, expects to survive the war regardless of who wins.

Agustín, 30's (baritone) A hot-headed, foul-mouthed man who seems younger than his years for all of his hard-bitten commitment to the Republican cause.

Fernando, early 30s. (tenor) Engaged in the cause but on his own terms. Will stick it out but will be glad when it's over, so life can go back to what it was. Can miss the forest for the trees. Personable.

Amalia, 30's (alto) Sister of Fernando, plain & tom boyish.

Rosa, 30's (soprano)

Isabella, 30's (mezzo)

Lorenzo, 30's (bass)

Primitivo, 20's (bass) Youngest member of the band.

El Sordo's Band

El Sordo, 40's (baritone) An intuitive and fearless leader, if somewhat impulsive. Still can listen, evaluate, and understand orders are orders. Cares about his men and they care about him. Personable, engaging, gracious even in difficult circumstances, knows what to take seriously and what not.

Joaquin, 20's (tenor) Member of El Sordo's band



Orchestration

Small: Cl, V1, V2, Va, Vc, Cb, Piano

Large: 2222, 4331, Perc, Harp, Strings

Medium: 1111 4001 Perc, Harp, Strings

Running time: approximately 2:37 without intermission



Opera Development Milestones

Piano Vocal Reading with Ruth Bader Ginsberg

Composer's residence, Washington DC



(left to right) Music Director Erik Ochsner, Tenor Jesús Daniel Hernández, Soprano Kelly Curtin, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Composer Brian Wilbur Grundstrom, Librettist David Dorsen, Mezzo Suzanne S. Chadwick, Baritone Jose Sacín, Pianist Richard Seaton not pictured - July 22, 2015

Orchestral Recording - from Act 1 scene 4

PARMA Recordings

Omega Recording Studios, Rockville MD



Maestro Erik Ochsner & Mezzo Suzanne S. Chadwick - July 24, 2015

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

Libretto Reading

Robert Barnett, Director and Dramaturg
National Opera Center, New York City

Actors were hired for a reading of the libretto, which included a post-performance discussion with opera professionals in attendance. The reading gave the creative team an opportunity to test out the theatrical viability of the story as live drama, and make adjustments in the storytelling to strengthen the core conflict between Robert Jordan and Pablo and take a closer look at the romantic relationship between Robert Jordan and Maria.



Left to right: Mateo Gómez, Eliseo Roman, Grant Tambellini, Alexis Ortiz, Alma Cuervo, Ricardo Birnbaum, Antonio Rubio, Ionesco Cabrera - photography/video by Andrew E. Wagner - Mar 15, 2018

Maria Meets Robert Jordan - from Act 1



Soprano Kelly Curtin and Tenor Alan Naylor - 2020

Robert Jordan Doesn't Teach English - from Act 1

Orchestral Recording and Video

Orquestra Sinfônica do Teatro Nacional Claudio Santoro
 (National Theatre Symphony Orchestra - Brasília, Brazil)

This project was supported by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, Sister Cities Grant Program.



Maestro Titular Cláudio Cohen with orchestra in an international collaboration with American singers - July 20, 2021

Interview with creatives by Christina Scheppelmann, General Director of Seattle Opera



Top left to right: Christina Scheppelmann, Alan Naylor, David Dorsen, Brian Wilbur Grundstrom, Jeffrey Sean Dokken, Eliza Bonet
 Bottom left to right: Concertmaster Lilian Raiol, Maestro Cláudio Cohen, Malte Roesner - July 20, 2021

London Symphony Orchestra Overture

Maestro Miran Vauptić

PARMA Recordings released a collection of living composers by the LSO on the Navona label Fall 2022. Recorded Feb 26, 2022.



SCOR

Composer Brian Wilbur Grundstrom is equally accustomed to writing for orchestra, opera, film, theater, chorus, piano and chamber ensembles. His voice includes a strong affinity for long melodic lines, distinctive tonal harmonic vocabulary, engaging rhythms, skillfully executed counterpoint, and dramatic imagery.

Audiences take to his compositions immediately, finding in his melodies traces of Copland and Puccini.

Classically trained in piano from Gettysburg College, he continued studies with John David Earnest. His awards include Outstanding Emerging Artist in the 2013 DC Mayor's Arts Awards, eight artist fellowships from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and a Gold Peer Award for *Children of Zeus* – a 46-minute work for chorus and orchestra.



Librettist David Dorsen is an attorney and author. He is an opera lover and created the concept for the opera based on the novel by Ernest Hemingway. He is the author of the prize-winning biography, "Judge Henry Friendly, Greatest Judge of His Era," published by Harvard University Press, and "The Unexpected Scalia: A Conservative Justice's Liberal Opinions," published by Cambridge University Press. Dorsen served as Assistant Chief Counsel of the Senate Watergate Committee. His recent novel is entitled "Moses v. Trump". He has a forthcoming book analyzing the Watergate Scandal. Dorsen has taught at Duke, Georgetown, and George Washington Universities.

