

Michael Braz: Composing History

Michael Braz vividly remembers the day he visited the Dachau concentration camp in the early 1970s. “A young German couple was in the museum with their son. The little boy pointed to a model of the camp and asked his parents, ‘What is this?’ It was a very powerful moment watching the parents’ hesitation,” said Braz, a composer and retired Georgia Southern music professor. “They were struggling with how to explain the horrors of Dachau to their son,” he explained.

This significant experience inspired Braz’s creativity, taking his music career from professor, composer and conductor to another level. “Memoirs from the Holocaust” details the story of a young Jewish boy who eventually discovers that his best friend is partially responsible for his father’s death.

Composing an opera is a lengthy, tedious process. Braz fully immersed himself in research, reading more than 20 biographical and historical books on the Holocaust and the people connected to it. “I really needed to discover what would motivate someone to become a Nazi,” he said.

“I like to work with words,” explained Braz about his meticulous attention to research, “and I like to write my own scripts. I wrote the libretto alone, and then I began composing. The mood and attitude of the character determines the mood and tone of the music, and it’s a long process. You have to think dramatically about how the characters interact and take this into consideration when writing,” he explained.

Three years later, in 1975, “Memoirs” opened with several performances at Barry University in Miami, where he was teaching at the time.

In 2004, Braz once again had the opportunity to create a musical masterpiece, while also leaving an unforgettable contribution to Georgia Southern. He wrote “A Scholar Under Siege,” which details the racial politics surrounding president Marvin Pittman’s controversial firing by Georgia Gov. Eugene Talmadge.

Braz used the same successful research methods as his first opera, reading an extensive amount of historical books about the two main characters to provide an accurate portrayal of the time period.

While “Memoirs” was written with just an accompanying pianist, “Scholar” was significantly more complex, featuring a 24-piece orchestra. After completing the libretto — a six-month-long process — Braz spent the next year composing the opera, finally taking six months to write the orchestration. “All of the ideas began in my head, with assistance from the piano,” he said.

Subsequently, he began by sketching rhythm and melodies in his notebook while traveling through Europe — whether it was on a bus trip through Italy or while touring Germany. Both “Memoirs” and “Scholar” have told compelling stories in very different settings, and Braz revealed the strength and impact of these experiences. “Writing these two operas has enlarged the scope of my career by requiring me to tell a story through the effective use of various musical and dramatic components characteristic of this 400-year-old art form,” he said.