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For a Bronx composer, opera rises out of identity struggle

by Maya Rajamani

Readers of *The New York Times* were moved by a 2008 piece following a New Jersey man whose wife and children supported his decision to become a woman. Denise Brunner and her wife planned to stay together, but their fate as a married couple was up in the air as the gay marriage debate played out in New Jersey.

Their cause inspired composer Laura Kaminsky to write an opera.

“It immediately made me think, wow, what is a person willing to sacrifice to be their true self?” said Ms. Kaminsky, a 2014 Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) winner for music composition. “It struck me as being incredibly operatic: alienation, true identity, how relationships change, how society imposes on that... I said, ‘I think I have to write this opera.’”



BRIO winner Laura Kaminsky rehearses for the opera, 'As One,' at the BAM Fisher Theater in Brooklyn on Monday.

Photo: Masao Katagami

The culmination of her idea, her first opera, is *As One*, which will premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Thursday, Sept. 4. It is a collaboration between Ms. Kaminsky, who wrote the music for string quartet and developed the concept, and Kimberly Reed and Mark Campbell, who wrote the libretto, or text of the opera.

The piece focuses on transgender protagonist Hannah as she struggles with issues of gender identity and internal discord. The score calls for two singers — one male and one female — to play the role in order to convey Hannah’s struggle.

Producing the project took Ms. Kaminsky and Ms. Reed to Norway, where the main character’s journey culminates. While Ms. Reed gathered footage, Ms. Kaminsky wrote, inspired by the Norwegian seascapes and skyscapes. The footage went into a film to be projected behind the stage in lieu of a physical set. Ms. Reed chose string quartet as her medium due to its range, from the cello’s lowest notes to the violin’s highest.

“It’s symbolic of [the] fluidity and full range of a human being and their gender and identity,” she explained. “It’s a very intimate piece in a way, but out of that intimacy comes a lot of power because you’re right inside that person’s journey.”

Her own journey, which has focused on music and activism, began in New York City. Her father, a Bronx native, met her mother, who hails from London, in France.

Ms. Kaminsky began writing music early in life, going on to attend the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan, which has since merged with another school. At Oberlin College, she majored in psychology but studied composition, which she continued during her graduate studies at the City University of New York, completing them in 1980.

She has traveled far and wide thanks to her work as a composer, living briefly in Africa, eastern Europe and Seattle. Now, she resides in Spuyten Duyvil with her wife, Rebecca Allen, another Bronx artist.

“We call our apartment ‘Two Rivers,’” said Ms. Kaminsky. “My studio looks out over the Hudson, and Rebecca’s looks out over the Harlem River.

Social and political issues, she says, have inspired much of her work. In January, *The New York Times* wrote about her journey across the country, touring for a collaboration with her wife called The Crossroads Project. She composed the music, her wife provided visual art and a physicist spoke about issues important to the environmental movement.

Ms. Kaminsky has also found inspiration close to home. A three-movement piece for violin and piano called “Wave Hill,” which she wrote six years ago, was inspired by the landscapes of Wave Hill, the Hudson River and the Palisades.

Now, however, she is focused on preparing her opera for its debut.

“It’s just fantastically exciting, the visual aspect, the linguistics, the narrative,” she said. “I’m loving being a part of that.”