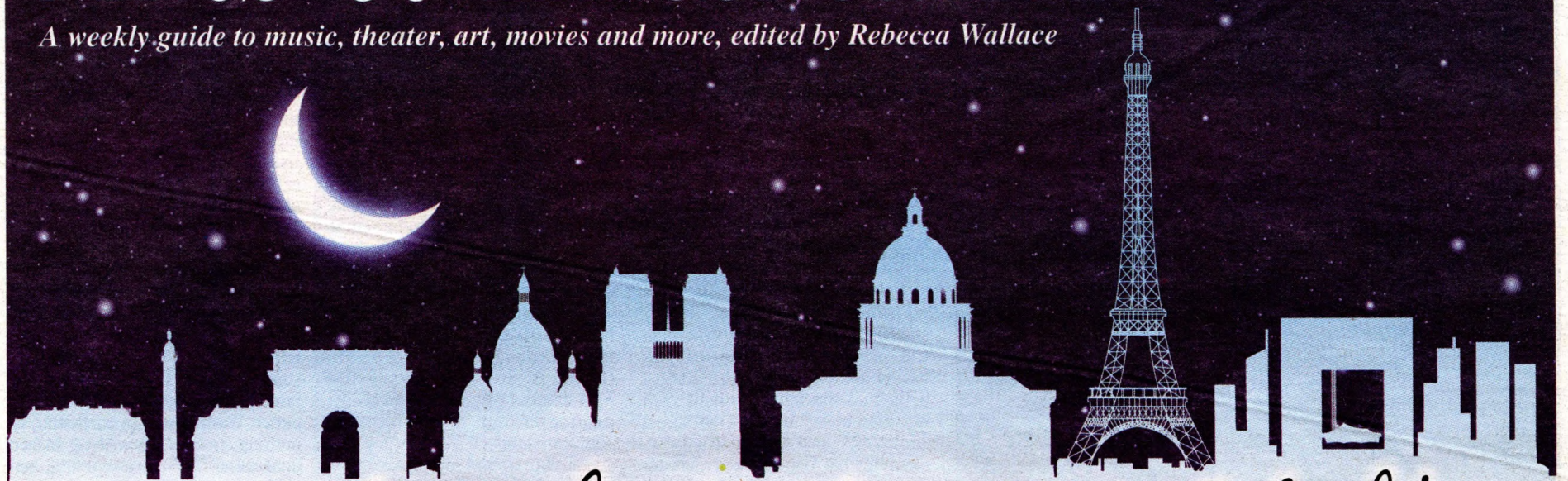


Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



Match girl in the city of light

Local composer William Webster has a surprise premiere of his fairytale opera, in Paris

by Rebecca Wallace

William Byron Webster is used to talking to newspapers. He's been a community activist in his city of East Palo Alto for 25 years. Toss him a question about parcel taxes or affordable housing, and he's on it.

So it might surprise a local reporter to hear Webster speaking just as authoritatively about arioso and "Der Rosenkavalier." As it happens, Webster has been writing operas for decades. And here's what surprises him: His chamber-opera version of the fairy tale "The Little Match Girl" is about to have its world premiere, in Paris.

Talking to the Weekly last week, Webster was about to leave for France, and he still couldn't fathom that his 40-year-old opera was about to be performed for the first time — in Europe, no less. "When June 20 passes and the event takes place, it will become a candidate for 'Ripley's Believe It Or Not,'" he said, beaming.

On June 20, his version of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale will be performed in the grand Town Hall of the seventh arrondissement. The work, which he describes as melodic, "traditional" and "accessible," will be sung in English by two French artists: soprano Anne-Chantal Carrière as the Little Match Girl and mezzo-soprano Véronique Bauer as the Grandmother. Gilles Nicolas will accompany them on piano. This is a rare premiere by an American composer in the City of Light, and the first trip to France for Webster. The writer is clearly gratified and thrilled.

The event grew out of Webster's longtime friendship with Roger Dickinson-Brown, an American poet and writer who now lives near Paris. Dickinson-Brown has versions of the opera on cassettes and CDs, and is a great admirer of the work. His son Adrian Harrington Brown is producing the June 20 production, and found the musicians and arranged the hall.

"This chamber opera, requiring as few as two musicians, starts out striking and beautiful and then grows on you. It is a little masterpiece," Dickinson-Brown wrote in an

email to the Weekly. "The final duet is some of the most moving music I've heard from our times."

That's apropos for a tragic fairy tale that depicts a desperately poor girl selling matches in the street on a freezing New Year's Eve. When she sees a vision of her grandmother, Webster's opera has her singing: "You will vanish like the warm fire, the goose, and the great, glorious Christmas tree. But I'll never, ever let you go!" Grandmother responds, "There no cold, no hunger nor care is found, We'll ascend to the Kingdom of Love's reign, We shall be with God."

Webster met Dickinson-Brown at Stanford, in the days when Dickinson-Brown was studying with the late poet Yvor Winters. Webster's own roots also run deep in this area. He grew up in Palo Alto and holds three Stanford degrees: a bachelor's in music, a master's in German studies and a doctorate in German studies. Today he's an administrator in the department of aeronautics and astronautics.

In East Palo Alto, where he's lived for 40 years, Webster has been on the city's Rent Stabilization Board for two decades. His other volunteer efforts include serving on the Measure C parcel-tax committee and being a co-founder of the affordable-housing nonprofit EPA CAN DO.

In an interview, Webster is gregarious, articulate and precise, often remembering specific dates seemingly without effort. One stands out: Dec. 22, 1973. That's the day he started writing "The Little Match Girl."

At the time, Webster was teaching modern and classical languages at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. He was sitting in his office writing an article on Thomas Mann and Arthur Schopenhauer when his department head knocked at the door. The news was bad. Due to a shortage of freshmen, the university was cutting back, and the head informed Webster that his contract was not being renewed.

"I thought maybe I'd take the opportunity to do something different," Webster said.

An opera buff since his early years, Webster decided to write his own, "addressing one of the great problems of opera": the high cost of putting up a quality production.

He had a background in literature and a love for folklore, and "The Little Match Girl" was a natural fit. It all takes place on one bleak corner, making scenery easy. As for the costumes, they could be made from raggedy castoffs. "You don't even need to rent a hall. You could do it on a street," he said. "In a way, it's the perfect opera."

Webster wrote from Dec. 22, 1973, to Dec. 22, 1975, creating an opera that could be performed as one act or divided into two. But then he never took it to the stage. "Looking back, I think I could have produced it over the years for a few hundred dollars. But I suffered delusions of grandeur."

As Webster waited for the right situation to stage "The Little Match Girl," his

life evolved. Back in California, he became involved in East Palo Alto issues. He wrote another opera, a version of "Cyrano de Bergerac." He spent time in Grass Valley working on still another opera, which would have been about the life of notorious 19th-century dancer and actress Lola Montez, who had owned a home in the foothills town.

Lola didn't pan out, but the little match girl did. Webster had a studio recording made of his fairytale opera and sent it to Roger Dickinson-Brown. The rest is history. And when the fairytale takes the stage in Paris later this month, the little match girl will take a treasured place in Webster's own history. ■

Info: For more about William Webster, his operas and the June 20 premiere, go to thelittle-matchgirlopera.com.



William Webster started writing his chamber opera "The Little Match Girl" 40 years ago. Now he's in Paris for the world premiere.

Veronica Weber