

Douglas J. Cuomo

Arjuna's Dilemma

a chamber opera in one act
libretto (English, Sanskrit and Hindi) by the composer from
Bhagavad Gita and poetry of Kabir

Commissioned, developed and produced
by Music-Theatre Group

World Premiere: August 22-24, 2008
PepsiCo Theater, Purchase, NY
NYC Premiere: November 5, 7, 8 2008
BAM Next Wave Festival, Harvey Theater

Roles:

Indian vocalist, tenor, 4 female voices

World Premiere Creative Team:

Alan Johnson, conductor
Robin Guarino, director
Donald Eastman, set designer
Robert Wierzel, lighting designer
William Cusick, projection designer
Gabriel Berry, costume designer

Instrumentation:

1(pic, afl).0.1(bcl).0.tsax-0.0.0.0-2perc.tablas-pno-2vn.va.vc.db

Duration:

70'



From the Composer:

Based on the towering Hindu epic, the Bhagavad Gita, *Arjuna's Dilemma* utilizes North Indian performance styles, melodic structures, odd time signatures and rhythmic patterns alongside western instrumentation, harmonies and forms. North Indian vocals co-mingle with a Western tenor and fourpart choral writing, with references to both modern vocal styles and Byzantine and Gregorian chant. Improvisation is common to both musical worlds, with the Indian singer, tabla player and jazz saxophonist each using their respective improvisatory traditions to reach for the ecstatic, the sublime and the terror that make up the emotional world of this work

Douglas J. Cuomo composes for concert and theatrical stages, television, and film. Recent works include the operas *Doubt* (Minnesota Opera) and *Arjuna's Dilemma* (produced by Music-Theatre Group, premiere at Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival); *Black Diamond Express Train to Hell*, (American Composers Orchestra with Maya Beiser); *Only Breath*, (Maya Beiser); *Slowly She Turns* (Shem Guibbory); *Kyrie* (Chanticleer); and *Fortune* (The Young Peoples Chorus of New York City). For television and film: themes for "Sex & The City", "NOW with Bill Moyers", music for "Homicide: Life On The Street", and many others. His compositions are published by Schott Music.

Synopsis:

At the battlefield on the eve of the first conflict of a massive civil war, the noble Prince Arjuna finds himself in a state of almost paralyzing confusion. He must lead his army against an enemy that includes family, friends, and teachers. Unable to justify such violence against his own people, he turns for guidance to his advisor and charioteer Krishna. In the ensuing dialogue, Krishna reveals himself to be an avatar of Vishnu, the most powerful god in the Hindu pantheon. At Arjuna's urging he transforms himself into a vision of the true nature of the universe, in all its splendor and its horror. At first entranced and then horrified, Arjuna begs Krishna to stop the vision and return to his normal form. His horizons newly expanded, Arjuna understands that he must not fear death, nor shirk his duty, which is not only the literal battle in front of him but, more importantly, the fight for self-knowledge on the battlefield of the mind.

Praise for *Arjuna's Dilemma*:

[A]n opera with an **appealing** and **unabashedly eclectic** score ... The score boldly blends those Indian sources with diverse contemporary music idioms and hints of jazz ... I liked the score best when Mr. Cuomo pushed the complexity to extremes, piling up Arjuna's solos, choral counterpoint and instrumental textures to create **haunting, astringent, multilayered music**, with cluster chords in the electric keyboard and spiraling flights in the strings and winds.

—*The New York Times* (Anthony Tommasini)



A **genuinely original work** ... [Cuomo] clearly understands how music and dramatic action are coordinated ... Cuomo handles the juxtaposition and sometimes superimposition of the various types of music with such skill that **the opera has a sense of unity and purposefulness**... The musical development has a feeling of inevitability that keeps the listener fully engaged, but it's **full of astonishing turns** and is **never predictable**. Cuomo is also a natural vocal composer and his writing for the voice is **simply gorgeous** ... *Arjuna's Dilemma* is **an opera that should be explored by anyone with an interest in fresh new directions in music-theater. Highly recommended.**

—*AllMusic.com* (Stephen Eddins)

Cuomo [is] a **composer of serious intentions**, as his **haunting** chamber opera *Arjuna's Dilemma* makes clear ... The score is a **mesmerizing** blend of vocal and instrumental possibilities.

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Donald Rosenberg)

Arjuna's Dilemma has been created by a composer who trusts sound, a few fine voices and a few fine virtuoso instrumentalists, to reveal his message in the same way that the great opera composers trust the sounds will bring to us ... *Arjuna's Dilemma* is a modern opera.

—*OperaToday.com* (John Yohalem)

It struck me that *Arjuna's Dilemma* **has something a lot of new operas don't: appeal** ... Opera, to work, has to have a certain understanding of what drama is, and how it functions. But it also has to have an audience, and *Arjuna's Dilemma*...has a pretty good chance of attracting one.

—*The Washington Post* (Anne Midgette)