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Co-commissioned by the Virginia Arts Festival, Virginia Opera, the Modlin Center for the Arts at the University of Richmond, and Texas Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.

This project supported in part by Virginia Tourism Corporation’s American Civil War Sesquicentennial Tourism Marketing Program.
RAPPANNOCK COUNTY
A new music theater piece about life during the Civil War.

Ricky Ian Gordon
Composer

Mark Campbell
Librettist

Kevin Newbury
Director

Rob Fisher
Music Director

This moving new music theater work was co-commissioned by the Virginia Arts Festival to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War. Its creators, renowned composer Ricky Ian Gordon (creator of the Obie Award-winning Orpheus & Euridice and the acclaimed opera The Grapes of Wrath) and Broadway librettist Mark Campbell were inspired by real diaries, letters, and personal accounts from the period.

Enter the lives of Virginians at war — black and white, rich and poor, soldiers, nurses, widows, survivors — through Gordon and Campbell’s haunting songs on a stage transformed by projections of Civil War photography, illustrations, and documents.

Performed by five singers playing more than 30 roles, the 23 songs that comprise Rappahannock County approach its subject from various perspectives to present the sociological, political, and personal impact the war had on the state of Virginia.

The story is told chronologically, from the forces that brought on Secession to the hope of reconciliation following the South’s surrender, and does not have a traditional narrative but follows the historical arc of the Civil War. Cohesion for the work is not enforced by contrived dramaturgical device, but rather emerges from the layers of details and themes presented in the songs.
Rappahannock County is a story told through many voices, a kind of mosaic or collage of human experience. Why might an artist choose this approach? What are some of the advantages of including multiple points of view? Are there any disadvantages?

These are some of the voices you will hear:

- A preacher calls for Secession — he believes the Bible supports slavery.
- A cartographer recounts his sadness at having to make maps that will lead to destruction.
- A trio of Southerners express their early optimism following the North’s defeat at the first Battle of Manassas.
- A young slave boy learns about the events of the war by eavesdropping on the master and his wife from the crawlspace of their house.
- A woman spy in an occupied town gathers information about the Yankees’ activities by selling pies in their camp.
- A man who has succumbed to disease in a hospital ward mocks the myth of “the good death.”
- A young slave woman in a contraband camp burying her infant daughter.
WHAT IS SECESSION?

A PREACHER CALLS FOR SECESSION — HE BELIEVES THE BIBLE SUPPORTS SLAVERY.

What is Secession?

Secession (derived from the Latin term secessio) is the act of withdrawing from an organization, union, or especially a political entity. Threatening to secede can be a tactic to gain power or influence over the group. On December 20, 1860 South Carolina seceded from the Union, followed within two months by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Ultimately, eleven Southern slave states declared their secession from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America, also known as “The Confederacy.” The Civil War (1861-1865) was the war between these two entities.

The preacher in the show reads the Bible and finds evidence that God supports slavery. Many people read the Bible and find that the opposite is true. How is this possible? How can one document mean such completely different things to different people? How do our experiences and expectations shape our interpretations of what we read?

Fredericksburg, Virginia. View on Princess Anne Street showing Baptist church and 6th Corps hospital.
A CARTOGRAPHER RECOUNTS HIS SADNESS AT HAVING TO MAKE MAPS THAT WILL LEAD TO DESTRUCTION.

Prior to the Civil War, few detailed topographic maps existed of the portions of the country that would eventually become battlefields. There was no real interest in buying them, so few were made. Once the War began, maps were in high demand. Mapmakers, or cartographers, were sought out and directed to quickly map the battle areas. Speed was much more important than accuracy and precision. Precision instruments were almost never used. Distances were measured by pacing, actually walking the distance, either by humans or by horses. Military leaders needed maps in a hurry and the terrain in question often changed quickly with the pace of the battle. The people who made these maps were known as topographic engineers, or “topogs,” as they were called by the soldiers on both sides. Some of them were trained as surveyors or engineers, and some were artists, but they all had the ability to work independently, to read landscape, and depict it correctly and as precisely as possible on paper. The features measured were the ones important to leaders of the armies — bridges and fords, gullies and ravines, roads, and sources of water and food (the latter for both animals and soldiers). The topogs set out in advance of the armies — measuring, taking notes, and drawing. Their field book pages show incredible skill and detail.

GO TO:
HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/COLLECTIONS/CIVIL-WAR-MAPS/ABOUT-THIS-COLLECTION/
Visit the Library of Congress website to view Civil War-era maps and learn more.
A TRIO OF SOUTHERNERS EXPRESS THEIR EARLY OPTIMISM FOLLOWING THE NORTH’S DEFEAT AT THE FIRST BATTLE OF MANASSAS.

The First Battle of Manassas, also known as the First Battle of Bull Run, was fought on July 21, 1861, near Manassas, Virginia. It was the first major land battle of the American Civil War.

Just months after the start of the war at Fort Sumter, the Northern public clamored for a march against the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, which could bring an early end to the war. Yielding to this political pressure, unseasoned Union Army troops under Brig. Gen. Irvin McDowell advanced across Bull Run against the equally unseasoned Confederate Army under Brig. Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard near Manassas Junction.

Confederate reinforcements under the command of Brig. Gen. Joseph E. Johnston arrived from the Shenandoah Valley by railroad and steered the course of the battle in the Confederate Army’s favor. A brigade of Virginians under a relatively unknown colonel from the Virginia Military Institute, Thomas J. Jackson, stood their ground and Jackson received his famous nickname, “Stonewall Jackson”. The Confederates launched a strong counterattack and as the Union troops began withdrawing under pressure, retreating to nearby Washington, D.C. Both sides were sobered by the violence and casualties of the battle, and they realized that the war could be much longer and bloodier than they had originally anticipated.
A YOUNG SLAVE BOY LEARNS ABOUT THE EVENTS OF THE WAR BY EAVESDROPPING ON THE MASTER AND HIS WIFE FROM THE CRAWL-SPACE OF THEIR HOUSE.

The slave boy has no other way of learning about what’s happening in the country. He can’t read a newspaper, there’s no radio or television, and certainly no internet. How do you learn about current events? How reliable are your sources? What are some research strategies you can use to ensure the integrity of your sources?

Historical sources such as documents, pictures, sound recordings, books, and common objects can shed light on the past. There are two main types of historical sources. A primary source is something that originates from the past. It existed at the time you are studying. The Declaration of Independence is a primary source. So is an ordinary bowl used in 1400. A secondary source is something that has been made more recently about the past — a history book, for instance, or a documentary film. What are some primary sources you could use to understand the Civil War era? How about secondary sources? Which kind of source is most reliable?

Culpeper, Va. “Contrabands.”

Richmond, Va. Barges with African Americans on the Canal; ruined buildings beyond.
Dysentery, diarrhea, typhoid, malaria. These diseases thinned the ranks of Civil War soldiers when they weren’t being killed in combat. Over a four-year period, disease claimed the lives of twenty percent of Confederate soldiers and ten percent of the Union forces. A Civil War soldier was ten times more likely to die of disease and eight times more likely to die from a battlefield wound than an American soldier in World War I.

Civil War-era medical care was, of course, insufficient to stem the rapid spread of diseases or to save many soldiers who had been wounded on the battlefield. It wasn’t just limited medical knowledge or resources that led to such widespread death, however. Relatively small numbers of hospital personnel also contributed to the shocking losses. In 1861, the U.S. Army had only 113 surgeons, 24 of whom resigned and went to the South, and there were no general military hospitals at the time. Four years later, more than 15,000 army surgeons served in the Union and Confederate efforts, and some 350 hospitals had been erected.
A woman spy in an occupied town gathers information about the Yankees’ activities by selling pies in their camp.

Real Life Civil War Spies:
Belle Boyd & Pauline Cushman

Belle Boyd’s espionage career began in 1861 when a band of Union army soldiers tore down the Confederate flag outside her home, replacing it with a Union flag. When one of them cursed at her mother, Belle pulled out a pistol and shot the man. A board of inquiry exonerated her. Union sentries were posted around her house to keep an eye on her, and she went to work charming them. Captain Daniel Keily revealed military secrets to her, and she shared those secrets with Confederate officers. Later, Belle hid in a hotel closet, listening in on a meeting of a Union general and his staff. Learning of secret troop movements, she rode through Union lines, using false papers to bluff her way past the sentries, and reported the news to the Confederates. For her contributions, she was awarded the Southern Cross of Honor. Stonewall Jackson also gave her honorary captain and aide-de-camp positions. Arrested on July 29, 1862, Boyd was held for a month before being released on August 29, 1862, when she was exchanged at Fort Monroe. She was later arrested and imprisoned a third time, but again was set free. In 1864, she went to England where she met and married a Union naval officer who she had converted to the Confederate cause.

An actress on tour with a theatrical troupe in Union-controlled Louisville, Kentucky, Pauline Cushman ingratiated herself with the rebels by making a toast to Confederate President Jefferson Davis following a performance, while secretly offering her services to the Union as a spy. By fraternizing with the rebel military commanders, she managed to smuggle battle plans and drawings in her shoes, but was caught, tried by a Confederate military court, and sentenced to death. Saved just three days before her scheduled execution by an invasion of Union troops, some reports state that she returned to the South in her role as a spy dressed in a male uniform, was given an honorary commission as a major by President Abraham Lincoln, and became known as Miss Major Cushman. By the end of the war in 1865, she was touring the country giving lectures on her exploits as a spy.
WHAT IS CONTRABAND?

A YOUNG SLAVE WOMAN IN A CONTRABAND CAMP BURYING HER INFANT DAUGHTER.

What is contraband? Contraband was a term commonly used during the Civil War to describe a new status for certain escaped slaves or those who came into the possession of Union forces. Its history as a term has a connection to Hampton Roads.

On May 27, 1861, three slaves, Frank Baker, James Townsend, and Sheppard Mallory, escaped at night and rowed a skiff to Old Point Comfort, where they sought asylum at the adjacent Fort Monroe.

Major General Benjamin Butler refused to return them to their masters, who were supporting the Confederacy. Prior to the War, slave owners were legally entitled to request their return as property. But Virginia had just seceded, declaring that it no longer considered itself part of the United States. If Virginia considered itself a foreign power to the U.S., then Butler felt he was under no obligation to return the three men, but could hold them as “contraband of war.”

The word spread quickly among southeastern Virginia’s slave communities. While becoming “contraband” did not mean full freedom, it was apparently seen by many slaves as at least a step in that direction. The day after Butler’s decision, many more escaped slaves also found their way to Fort Monroe appealing to become contraband. As the number of former slaves grew too large to be housed inside the Fort, the contrabands erected housing outside the crowded base. They called their new settlement Grand Contraband Camp. By the end of the war, less than 4 years later, an estimated 10,000 had applied to gain “contraband” status.

Escaped slaves left behind narratives of their lives that you can read today. Often used to promote abolition, they are vital primary sources that record the horrors of slavery and the terror of escape.

GO TO:
Read more here.
Rappahannock County presented stories about life during the Civil War set to music, but what about the real music of the Civil War?

The Music of War
During the American Civil War, music played a prominent role on both sides of the conflict: Union and Confederate. On the American Civil War battlefield, different instruments including bugles, drums, and fifes were played to issue marching orders or sometimes simply to boost the morale of one’s fellow soldiers. Singing was also a popular recreational activity that provided a release from the inevitable tensions that come with fighting in a war. In the camps, music was a diversion away from the bloodshed, helping the soldiers deal with homesickness and boredom. Soldiers on both sides often engaged in recreation with musical instruments, and when the opposing armies were near each other, sometimes the bands from both sides of the conflict played against each other on the night before a battle.

In May 1861, the United States War Department officially approved that every regiment of infantry and artillery could have a brass band with 24 members and a cavalry regiment could have a band of 16 members. This was followed by a Union army regulation of July 1861 requiring every infantry, artillery, or cavalry company to have two musicians and for there to be a 24-man band for every regiment. The July 1861 requirement was ignored as the war dragged on, as riflemen were more needed than musicians. In July 1862, the brass bands of the Union were disassembled, although many of those soldiers still played music for their companies in a less official capacity. A survey in October 1861 found that 75% of Union regiments had a band. By December 1861, the Union army had 28,000 musicians in 618 bands; a ratio of one soldier out of 41 who served the army was a musician. The Confederate army was believed to have a similar ratio.

“I DON’T THINK WE COULD HAVE AN ARMY WITHOUT MUSIC.” — Robert E. Lee
The Spiritual

Spirituals are an African-American musical tradition rooted in slave folk songs expressing suffering, sorrow, hope, and affirmation. Where congregations could not read, a leader intoned the Biblical psalm one line at a time, alternating with the congregation’s singing of each line to a familiar melody. Hymns were also set to borrowed melodies, often secular folk tunes. Themes included going home to the Promised Land and overcoming sin. Many of the songs, such as “Steal Away” and “Roll, Jordan Roll,” were thought to have double meanings, referring to biblical passages while also commenting on the slaves’ immediate situation. Marked by strong rhythms, singers swayed, clapped hands, and tapped their feet along with the beat. African-American spirituals developed in part from white rural folk hymns but differ greatly in voice quality, vocal effects, rhythm, and type of rhythmic accompaniment. They were sung not only in worship but also as work songs.

Go Down, Moses is just one of hundreds of spirituals that tell the story of a people. With the refrain — Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s Land, tell ol’ Pharoah, let my people go — it connects the experience of the Jewish people in Egypt with that of the Africans in America.

GO TO:
HTTP://WWW.NEGROSPIRITUALS.COM/NEWS-SONG/INDEX.HTM
index of spirituals lyrics, choose a song and analyze what it might have meant to the people who sang it.
Discussion Questions for Students:

— Rappahannock County is a story told through many voices, a kind of mosaic or collage of human experience. Why might an artist choose this approach? What are some of the advantages of including multiple points of view? Are there any disadvantages?

— Read and clip an article from a newspaper or printed from the internet regarding Secession. Without re-reading, write down five important details you remember from your reading. Share your article with a classmate, who will do the same: read the article once and list five remembered details. What were the differences in your lists? How might your experiences and expectations have shaped what you retained from your reading?

— Create a witness: Rappahannock County is a story told through witnesses who lived during the era. Create a witness of your own – man, woman, child, farmer, soldier, slave, whatever you like – and create a primary source from that witness. A letter, a diary entry, or a medical report, perhaps. Have it contain enough information to be valuable to a historian. What might a historian look for in a primary source?

Discussion Questions for Adult Book Clubs or Discussion Groups:

— Rappahannock County is a story told through many voices, a kind of mosaic or collage of human experience. Why might an artist choose this approach? What are some of the advantages of including multiple points of view? Are there any disadvantages?

— Think about what each new voice adds to the picture that the performance is creating. What are some of the issues you hadn’t thought of that the songs explore? Are you surprised by some of the choices the artists made in including such diverse characters?

— Think about the wars the United States has been involved with during your lifetime. What characters do you think would be most compelling if you were to create a music theater piece about another war?

— How effective was the mosaic approach of many voices in telling the story of the era? Which of the songs did you think was the best at evoking the character and his or her point of view?

Images on this page:
Culpeper, Va. Surgeons of the 2d Division, 3d Corps.
Slaves - Cumberland Landing, Va. Group of “contrabands” at Foller’s house, Gibson, James F., b. 1828, photographer.
Richmond, Va. Wagon train of Military Telegraph Corps.
Group of civilians.