

For immediate release

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## **\*\* New Opera at Princeton Reexamines One of the Most Notorious Rulers in History \*\***

Princeton University students have collaborated with a professional director in the creation of a historically accurate and dramaturgically pungent opera about the notorious Roman Emperor Nero. "Nero Artifex" will be performed at 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, March 24-25, in Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall on the Princeton University. The performances are free and open to the public with tickets provided at the Frist Center box office and at the door.

Nero Augustus is one of the most blackened names in history: a madman rumored to have killed his mother and pregnant wife, castrated and married a slave boy and set fire to Rome so that the city's flames might inspire his rooftop singing. Only recently have historians, in particular Princeton's Edward Champlin, attempted to disentangle the mythological accounts and post-mortem propaganda and to reconstruct a more unbiased account of Nero's reign.

It is these interpretations that three Princeton students have pursued in the opera *Nero Artifex*. Senior Theo Popov (composer), senior Veronica Shi (translator and historian) and class of 2010 graduate Mariah Min (librettist) have created a musical drama presenting the emperor as a well-meaning but incapable ruler whose artistic nature, combined with the selfish agendas of those around him, leads to a series of assassinations and eventually to the collapse of the imperial dynasty.

Director David Kellett vision blends the historical and the surreal, establishing Nero (Matthew Walsh) and his wife Poppaea (Lieve Hendren) as victims of the political machinations of their courtiers, from the Stoic Seneca (Kevin Zhu) and the sophisticated Petronius (Stephen Daniel) to the brutal Praetorian Prefect Tigellinus (Saumitra Sahi), the rebel Epicharis (Katie Dubbs) and the haunting spirit of Nero's mother Agrippina (Erin Winker).

The first opera composed in Classical Latin<sup>1</sup> since Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex, Nero Artifex" also pioneers the incorporation of ancient folklore into a Classical music framework.

"Many musicologists will tell you that in Rome music was a disregarded art form," says Popov, "but after months of research in sites around Europe I realized how vibrant and cosmopolitan the art of sound was in the Latin Empire." His score presents direct quotes of Greek and Roman hymns as well as indirect allusions to the instrumental and modal traditions of Classical antiquity.

"When Theo first approached me with the idea of directing his first opera, we spent many hours discussing the implications of his "Nero as victim" perspective and how to effectively present contradictions to an audience that may have preconceived notions of his life and times" says stage-director David Kellett. "Nero's pursuit of musical and dramatic recognition from the Roman public during his lifetime allows us to use elements of Greek and Roman theatre in telling significant parts of his story including such devices as theatrical masks, Greek choruses and pantomime. Working on a premiere with a living composer gives us the opportunity and flexibility to make changes where necessary in the rehearsal process bringing clarity in both music and drama!"

The creators of *Nero Artifex* are deeply grateful to Princeton faculty Edward Champlin, Steven Mackey, Paul Muldoon, and Peter Westergaard for the unwavering creative support.

For more information visit [NeroOpera.NET](http://NeroOpera.NET).

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<sup>1</sup> English supertitles will be projected.