

Music

Wuorinen's Rushdie Work Finally Ready For Fall Debut

Children's stories have long been an operatic staple, from Rossini's "La Cenerentola" and Massenet's "Cendrillon" to Humperdink's "Hansel and Gretel."

But a different kind of fairy tale is making its way to the stage,

courtesy of lauded New York-based composer **Charles Wuorinen** and British poet/ librettist **James Fenton**: **Salman Rushdie's** "Haroun and the Sea of Stories." The tale was penned shortly after Iran's **Ayatollah Khomeini** issued his infamous *fatwa* after the publication of Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses."

"Haroun," by contrast, is a children's book that is a moving tribute to free thought and a meditation upon the bond between fathers and sons.

Wuorinen and Fenton have worked "Haroun" into two separate pieces. "The Haroun Songbook," scored for four singers and piano, was released on disc in May by **Albany Records**. "The 'Songbook' is intended as an autonomous piece," Wuorinen says. "About 75% of the opera doesn't appear in the 'Songbook.'"

Even so, it offers a preview of sorts of the complete opera (titled after the book) that will have its world premiere Oct. 31-Nov. 11 at New York City Opera.

The opera's bow has been a long time in coming. "Third time's the

charm," says Wuorinen, who observes that "Haroun" has already been delayed twice at NYCO because of financial constraints.

Wuorinen started work on the opera in 1997. He says the material now has resonances that were unimaginable when he began writing.

"When we were first working on adapting the book," the composer recalls, "Salman included a clause in his contract stipulating that he would be allowed to attend the performances. This was not long after the fatwa was issued, don't forget, and so he had cause to be concerned that for security reasons he would be left out. Now, of course, the whole world has undergone tremendous changes."

One might wonder at first if Wuorinen and Rushdie's aesthetic approaches might clash. Rushdie's writing exhibits an

ardent love of words, looping around on top of itself and featuring puns and deft asides. By contrast, Wuorinen writes spiky, brash music that's somewhat more plain-spoken. But the pair-

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ing is charming: "The Haroun Songbook" is playful, exuberant, witty and full of bright colors.

Wuorinen says that the "Haroun" text holds up well 14 years after it was originally published. "In a nonheavy-handed way, it stands firm against those who would shackle the imagination," the composer says.