

7 QUESTIONS FOR ...

Bongani Ndodana-Breen, music composer of *Credo*

FM: What drew you to the musical potential of the poem "Credo"?

Ndodana-Breen: The Freedom Charter is a complex document, but Brent Meersman's poem distils it into a unifying vision.

FM: Does the Freedom Charter need to be reinvented?

Ndodana-Breen: It's a living document. We wouldn't have a democratic SA without it.

FM: How has *Credo* changed since your first inspiration?

Ndodana-Breen: It has evolved in a wonderful way, primarily through the multimedia work of Andrew Black.

FM: You have composed diverse works. Is it fair to describe you as a musical chronicler of SA history?

Ndodana-Breen: That's a fair statement. I'm a Xhosa guy, I'm of this soil.

FM: Tell us about your company, Pina Ya Thari.

Ndodana-Breen: I started it with Brenda Sisane, who has worked tirelessly on *Credo*. We wanted to provide a certain voice that was missing in SA classical music.

FM: How is the fusion of classical music with SA musical idioms manifested in *Credo*?

Ndodana-Breen: There are some recognisable southern African tunes: protest songs and traditional Shona music.

FM: What's your next project?

Ndodana-Breen: It's a huge opera based on a famous SA novel, set hundreds of years ago. **Chris Thurman**

which also repeated itself, line after line, until Alber was satisfied.

They were joined for a few bars by Sibongile Khumalo, one of SA's foremost singers. As her voice soared and then faded with the ebb and flow of the rehearsal, I imagined Matthews hovering somewhere up in the flies. No doubt he would have been pleased by the symmetry of it all.

ZK Matthews is famous for his role as co-drafter, with Rusty Bernstein and Alan Lipman, of the Freedom Charter; he was also one of those accused and acquitted at the Treason Trial. But Matthews was, first and foremost, an academic — solid grounds for naming the main concert hall at Unisa's Muckleneuk campus, which doubles as the university's graduation venue, after him.

Unisa is celebrating its 140th anniversary this year. The University of SA has been an institute of distance learning for about seven decades. Yet it started life as the University of the Cape of Good Hope on June 26 1873 — which means that, technically, it shares a birthday with the Freedom Charter.

The historic Congress of the People met in Kliptown on June 25 1955, the culmination of Matthews' call two years earlier for a "convention at which all groups might be represented to consider our national problems on an all-inclusive basis". It took another day, however, to ratify the Freedom Charter that he had envisioned.

Nelson Mandela, under a banning order, was prohibited from attending the congress — but he snuck in and was there to witness the signing. We all know what followed: the treason trial; Sharpeville; Umkhonto we Sizwe; the Rivonia Trial; Robben Island; and then unbanning, release, negotiations, the first democratic elections, Madiba magic.

We know the Mandela story so well that we take for granted the numbers it entails: 95 years on earth, 27 years in prison, 67



Sibongile Khumalo Giving voice to principles of freedom

years of public service. We know that July 18 is Nelson Mandela International Day, and we know that we are supposed to do something valuable for 67 minutes in recognition of his achievements.

This Mandela Day, in the ZK Matthews Hall at Unisa, brings the world premiere of *Credo*, a 67-minute musical tribute to the Freedom Charter. How did this serendipitous aligning of names and dates and places occur?

It starts, as many good stories do, with a poem.

Aside from his work as a theatre and restaurant critic, Brent Meersman has established himself as a "political" writer.

His first novel, *Primary Coloured*, is a roman à clef based on his experiences working for Patricia de Lille's Independent Democrats; in *Reports Before Daybreak* and the recently released *Five Lives at Noon*, he chronicles SA's transition from the states of emergency in the 1980s to the 1994 election.

His poetry is likewise concerned with the legacies of apartheid and the challenges facing the post-apartheid state.

In the poem *Credo*, Meersman set out to capture the essence of the Freedom Charter in a simple, lucid fashion. "I wanted to get

away from the noise that has accumulated around the language of the charter," he tells me. "The language is somewhat outdated and problematic; it talks about 'brotherhood' and 'national groups', for example. I wanted to strip it down to its egalitarian core."

The Freedom Charter has, in recent years, been invoked by critics of what is termed the "neoliberal compromise" of the 1990s. Advocates of nationalisation or expropriation find in the charter evidence of the ANC having "sold out" by allowing private ownership to be protected by the constitution — the 1955 document stipulates that "the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people" and propose that "all the land" is "redivided among those who work it".

More conventionally, however, the charter is viewed as the basis of the constitution, the bill of rights in particular. For Meersman, though "nationalisation was probably uppermost in the minds of those who wrote the charter", it is important to remember that "it is not scripture — it's an historical document. It's not a blueprint for governance, and anyway, the world has changed so much since then. I wanted to concentrate on the values it expresses, which unite us, and get away from the policy-making, which divides us."

Meersman's poem is not merely celebratory. It closes with the conditional tense: a series of declarations beginning with "We would . . ." That "we" represents both the generation that created the Freedom Charter and the poet's contemporaries, who are disillusioned with our current leaders. "Would" is usefully ambiguous: it suggests "we want to" but also implicitly asks: "What would the charter signatories do today?"

The poem answers in terms of HIV/Aids, the arms deal, xenophobia and inconsistent foreign policy: "We would prevent, before / we had to cure, / with medicines / not armaments . . . Our beliefs would not stop at borders / diplomacy not become expediency."

Meersman reminds me that the charter is "not a parochial document", but situates SA within a global context. His poem does the same.

How, then, did a poem become a multimedia oratorio? Enter Bongani



Images, music, words Art presenting history

Ndodana-Breen, composer extraordinaire, who read Meersman's *Credo* as a libretto waiting for a score.

I first encountered Ndodana-Breen's work in *Winnie: The Opera* (2011), an ambitious undertaking that rightly identified the operatic quality of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's life story. In that production, Ndodana-Breen's music matched the twists and turns — moral, political, legal and otherwise — of Madikizela-Mandela's career, but also somehow transcended them.

While Mfundu Vundla and Warren Wilensky's libretto offered a balanced (albeit sympathetic) biographical account, at the level of plot and character it could not escape the tainted historical personage — especially not, as I wrote in these pages at the time, when Madikizela-Mandela herself appeared onstage

Brent Meersman Libretto based on poem



on opening night. The operatic mode nonetheless facilitated the conversion of a partly triumphant but often sad and occasionally sordid biographical narrative into something almost archetypal.

Winnie forms part of an intriguing subgenre in SA that might be labelled "historical-political opera". Opera Africa's *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* is another interesting example. After it was first performed in 2002, *Princess Magogo* travelled around SA and the globe, arguably promoting a particular brand of Zulu nationalism as it went (its subject, after all, was the late mother of Mangosuthu Buthelezi).

Credo is different from these two operas in both form and content. As an oratorio, it is a concert piece rather than a theatrical staging; there is no narrative perspective to interpret or comment directly on the Freedom Charter and what it means to us today. In this sense, as Meersman notes, it differs from his poem: "As a musical work, it sticks to the spirit of the charter. Its 'applicability' is left up to the audience."

Andrew Black's multimedia projections do, however, prod the audience into certain associations or comparisons — between then and now, struggle and submission, individuals and collectives, urban and rural landscapes.

Credo is, as Ndodana-Breen notes, a contribution to "the growing body of 21st-century artistic work based on the struggles, triumphs and victories of the country's turbulent history". Yet the music, text and images out of which it is constructed promise to make it distinct within this category. ■