

Odin Backgrounder

Prepared by Donald Knaack (*The Junkman*™)

To date, there have been two operatic versions of the Odin saga by Donald Knaack. Both versions have the same themes: History repeats itself and no one seems to listen. Both operas follow the road to Ragnarok, the war to end all wars, yet all the main characters succumb to their own personal apocalypses long before the actual war occurs.

First Version: titled *Odin, the Opera*. Knaack became enamored with the Odin story and the idea of a theatre work in 2000. He knew this was an opportunity to create a new work with elements that presently did not exist in theatre and/or opera: 1. a cast of actors who utilized street singing, spoken word, and extended vocal techniques, and 2. an orchestra of ten percussionists performing exclusively on reused and recycled materials.

The overall theme of the opera was *"history repeats itself, but no one seems to listen"*. Knaack also pledged to adhere as closely as possible to the mythology. Knaack enlisted the assistance of Anna Dibble to review the ongoing development of his libretto and provide design of the logo as well as the costumes. He further enlisted Linnet Taylor to provide staging and logistic support as well as reviewing the ongoing development of the libretto.

By 2003, with the libretto, staging and costumes in place, it was time for Knaack to shop for a workshop venue. In 2004, Knaack approached the Steinhardt Music and Performing Arts Department at New York University. After numerous discussions, NYU decided to engage in workshoping *Odin, the Opera* culminating with four concert, semi-staged performances at the Frederick Lowe Theatre on the NYU campus from April 14-16, 2006. All performances were sold out and received standing ovations. There was also positive coverage from CBS Evening News, National Public Radio, and The New York Times stated *"The appeal of the whole thing lay mainly in its youthful energy and striking instrumentation."*

At <http://www.junkmusic.online/odin-the-opera>, you will find a video of the complete performance, as well as a 30 minute overview of the entire work. The overall duration of the work was 1 hour and thirty five minutes with an intermission and it was performed by six principal soloists and a chorus of 24 - many of whom doubled as other minor characters throughout the story.

Second Version: titled *Odin, then and now*. After years of involvement with other projects, including a five-year stay in the United Kingdom under the auspices of a Tier One Exceptional Talent Visa, Knaack dug deeper into his original Odin theme and discovered the ancients had also struggled with the same issues that plague the world today.

Odin, then and now is an opera about the Vikings, the most resourceful, innovative, creative, orderly, and yet violent societies of its time. The Vikings amassed great wealth, which in turn led to unbridled greed and lawlessness within the law. They ignored a crippling drought, rising sea levels, and a rapidly moving epidemic. Due to climate change, fifty percent of their population and coastal lands disappeared.

Their leader was Odin, who was, simultaneously, the God of War and the God of Knowledge. Odin was the world's most feared warrior, but as he had also discovered the Runes and poetry, he therefore understood that someday the pen would ultimately be mightier than the sword.

Odin was warned of his future, yet finds himself helpless to prevent his fate, thus bringing us to the main theme of the opera: "History repeats itself, yet no one seems to listen." The opera opens in the days prior to the Vikings' demise and is narrated by a modern-day tv weather presenter who offers commentary on the Viking history that will unfold upon the stage, provides a forecast about events to come, and draws parallels to events transpiring in the world today.

It is this focus on yesterday and today that makes *Odin, then and now* a transformational opera. This transformation from ancient and modern is further illustrated by the music. Musically, the vocal deliveries have morphed into street singing, spoken word, and extended vocal techniques, and the music has morphed from traditional orchestral instruments to eleven percussionists performing exclusively in reused and recycled materials - all amplified. Technically, it's an opera complete with arias, recitatives, duets, quartets and the like, yet it has transformed into a modern day musical theatrical experience in which, like many things today, the boundaries aren't as well defined and stiff as they once were.

PRODUCTION and TECHNICAL INFORMATION

GENERAL

The overall duration of the work will be 1 hour and thirty-five minutes, ideally without intermission, and performed by seven principal soloists and a chorus of 24 - many of whom will double as minor characters throughout the story. A minimum stage size of approximately 23 x 49 feet or 7.0104 x 14.9352 meters is required.

As *Odin, then and now* is a story about the Vikings, it is recommended that apart from Knaack, who is American, the remainder of all cast, musicians, crew, and support will be Swedish. Likewise, the reused and recycled materials that will become the music instruments of this production will originate from Sweden.

LIBRETTO AND MUSIC

At this stage, the libretto and music for *Odin, then and now* has been written by Knaack. What is recommended is a final revision of libretto and music by Knaack in

partnership with Dramaturgy, possibly coinciding with Script Readings followed by the World Premiere performances (suggested fall, 2025.)

THE CAST

Eight principal characters and a chorus of twenty-four persons - SATB. See CAST DETAILS below. Please note the character of Odin will be required to have two personas: one as the God of War, and another as the God of Knowledge. These personas will involve different vocal deliveries and timbres emanating from the same body. The characters of Loki the female and Loko the male, are played by one actor, using costume and different voices to convey to the audience which character is on stage.

THE ORCHESTRA

The orchestra consists eleven percussionists, each with its own separate & unique battery of percussion instruments made exclusively from found, reused, and recycled materials. Each separate percussionists' battery will have the appropriate amplification. The conductor could be Knaack or another individual.

THE INSTRUMENTS OF THE ORCHESTRA

It is highly recommended that Knaack collect and assemble the some 250 individual pieces in Sweden. This would require a work space close to the dimensions of the stage (approximately 23 x 49 feet or 7.0104 x 14.9352 meters) and a contact person (in a part-time capacity) who has a working knowledge of the local resources for the reused and recycled materials. Knaack will identify any and all the needed materials and the contact person would then identify and secure the materials and transport them to the work space (which ideally have easy load in and load out access).

CAST DETAILS

Principal Characters

THE WEATHER PRESENTER - In their 20s and with a good comedic sense, he/she is the conscience throughout the entire production. He/she periodically appears on a television screen and interprets the actions we're about to experience onstage, offers forecasts about events that are about transpire, and gives insight as to how those events relate to events happening in today's society.

ODIN has two distinct personalities: The God of War and the God of Knowledge, each requiring its own vocal delivery style & characteristics as well as physical mannerisms. In general, ODIN is an agile man who has been around for centuries. He sports a grey beard, a hooded shirt as blue as the sky, a grey cape, and a broad-rimmed hat. He has one shifty eye and a patch over the other. He is very aloof, totally fixated on his thoughts. He and wife, Frigg, have a son, Baldar. He also has a deceiving mistress, Loki. His quest for knowledge has led him to sacrifice one of his eyes and voluntarily hang from the Tree of Life for nine days & nights in order to gain knowledge (the Birth

of Civility). When the opera begins, Odin has completed those tasks and has returned to life as a new man. As both the God of War and the God of Knowledge, his deepening intelligence and the coming of civility begin humanizing him and simultaneously depleting his strength as a warrior. He knows that he can't stop war and he can't stop knowledge, so he becomes trapped and defeated in his own duality long before Ragnarok, the war to end all wars.

LOKI/LOKO - Loko is a cunning trickster who has the ability to change/shapeshift his body into other people or animals. He also has the ability to change/shift his sex. In this production, Loko is the male leader of the Giants and Odin's arch enemy. Loko can also shape shift into Loki, Odin's female lover. Loki sings in a higher register, but has the ability to sing low and harsh in the character of the male counterpart, Loko. Loko is the stronger, dominating character who controls the dual life. As the leader of the Giants, Logo has a final goal of defeating Odin at Ragnarok. Loko sex-shifts into the female LOKI in order to seduce Odin and get him to commit the unclaimed souls (souls not predestined for heaven or hell) to her care. Then Loko will take over the souls and train them to fight on the side of the Giants at Ragnarok (against Odin). In the midst of all the deception, sex changes and lies, Loki/Loko has a personal apocalypse in which nothing makes sense, there is complete identity confusion and they break down in the form of an aria.

FRIGG - wife of Odin, mother of Baldar. In her 40s or 50s, she is attractive, shares a deep knowledge of the destinies but is constantly obsessing over Baldar's safety. As a result, she has made pacts with all the evils, poisons, and forces of death (except one) to guarantee Baldar's life eternal. She is devastated by Baldar's death and by the fact she couldn't see it coming.

BALDAR - Young (late teens or early 20s). He is the monolithic good guy. It is only Baldar and The Ravens who have a grip on reality, the coming of civility and understand balance and control in life. Baldar is killed early in the opera, but his spirit returns throughout to offer Odin comfort and counselling.

THOR the famous great warrior is a red-headed, middle aged man of enormous strength - a staunch enemy of the Giants, yet a true friend of humanity. He was killed at Ragnarok and transported to Valhalla where he lives eternally with his musical robot. Throughout the opera, we visit Thor and his robot via TeleVirtual Reality and explore the vulnerable side of this strong individual.

RAVENS - Two male Ravens are Odin's link to world information. Each morning, they fly around the world, make observations, and report back to Odin. They, as Baldar does, see the world from a balanced perspective and are very frustrated that others don't see it the same way.

Characters from the Chorus

GIANTS are said to be the first creatures to inhabit the earth. They are simple, primitive, against change or progress, and thrive upon creating chaos. They are the arch enemies of Odin and his army, who represent change. Their leader, Loko and his scheming & chaotic nature leads to confusion within the ranks and ultimately causes the Giants to fragment and weaken.

BESERKS - Odin's army. A group of crazy, mad, yet effective warriors so over the edge their name has been immortalized. They could not function in any way other than being the most mean, gruesome and effective warriors that world has ever known. They would kill instantly on Odin's command without giving it any thought. They simultaneously represent the two opposing forces of repulsion and attraction. Legend says that in battle, they would howl like wolves and growl like bears, become so enraged they would bite off the ends of their shields, and foam at the mouth. Berserks possessed enormous strength and were invulnerable to the effects of fire and iron. As trained killers who must act immediately on instinct, the acquisition of knowledge & civility has a devastating affect upon their combat capabilities.

VALKYRIES – Nine beautiful young women who work for Odin who decide the fate of warriors in battle and carry the dead to Odin's Valhalla, a place in the sky for his warriors to live, eat, and drink for eternity.

GLYTHIA - A priestess who always carries a hammer. She presides over the funeral of Baldar.

DWARF – a midget who periodically wanders about the stage but never speaks

FROMIN – Odin's second-in-command. He makes several appearances in the opera but rarely speaks.

OLD WOMAN is Loki disguised as an Old Woman (in Act I Scene 10), who meets Frigg and gets her to divulge the one poison that will kill her son, Baldar.