

THE GREATEST OPERA EVER TOLD WAITS TO BE STAGED

Interview with Sleepy Hollow composer Bob Milne

BY JEAN BARTLETT



(Jean Bartlett photo)

Michigan native Bob Milne relaxes in his cousin's home in Pacifica, CA.

"My opera begins in the Old Dutch Church in the village of Sleepy Hollow," Bob Milne told his hushed audience. "It's late autumn and the year is 1790. Sleepy Hollow is, at this time, a Dutch farming community. It is located along the eastern shore of the Hudson River, in fact along the widest section of the Hudson which the Dutch call the Tappan Zee. The village is 30 miles north of New York City."

This demonstration by Bob Milne took place, not so long ago, in a private home in Pacifica, California. And as the composer played and explained his amazing score, and introduced his listeners to his opera's protagonists, not a pin dropped. We learned of the singing instructor Ichabod Crane. Crane is 35 years of age, riddled with self-importance and is the conductor of the Old Dutch Church choir. There is Katrina Van Tassle. She is 18, beautiful and a glowing soprano who sings lead in the choir. Katrina's father is Baltus Van Tassle. He is a farmer and a highly respected village elder of considerable wealth. Crane, as ignorant of the town as he was when he first arrived six months earlier, is certain Katrina's heart will soon be his. He is also certain there are no "Sacred Woods" or "Haunted Woods" as the locals believe.

"The woods are on the outskirts of town," Milne explained. "And they are inhabited by the spirits of the villagers' ancestors, making them a holy place. However, the villagers also know that a fearsome specter, a headless horseman, additionally dwells within the woods, making the woods a very unsafe place to be at night."



(Artist Linda Milne © 2011)

Bob Milne thunderously describes with music, what his wife (artist Linda Milne) so harrowingly defines in illustration – the ghostly monster that lurks within the dark, foreboding woods.

We learned the pompous Ichabod Crane listened only to the sound of his own voice. He dismissed the townspeople as superstitious. He ignored the fact that Katrina's heart belonged only to strongman Brom Bones, a member of the village guardsmen, The Rough Riders. We also learned Crane refused to listen to the lute player, a spirit sent to warn him of the danger of turning a deaf ear on the residents of Sleepy Hollow.

"It is Ichabod Crane's own arrogance that will lead him to a final confrontation with the forces of the night."

As Milne discussed his "Legend of Sleepy Hollow – The Opera," we heard beautiful, wild bedlam going on as the villagers danced. We heard the powerful baritone of Brom Bones professing his love for Katrina and the glorious, seemingly impossible 15 and 16-part harmony as the opera's leads were joined by the villagers as choir.

There were a number of reasons why Milne's listeners could hear all this. At times the composer and librettist became so enthused regarding the activity that will be going on, on the stage and in the orchestra pit when full funding arrives to

produce his opera, that he sang a "swaggering" Brom Bones song in D Minor, or, he turned up the volume to one of the music clips from his opera.

If you've got good speakers, go directly to a sample listen (a computer-generated audio file) to the Choir of the Old Church presenting Robert Milne's "Days of the Waning Sun" from his opera "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow:" https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=qtrY_oPhw4.

Milne wrote his opera in 2009. "I composed the opera in my head while driving halfway across the State of Montana."

This is no exaggeration. Milne was born with a phenomenal gift of being able to hear every note, as he composes, without using an instrument. He does, however, play piano. In fact, he has made his living playing piano, which includes serving at one point as a U.S. Department of State music ambassador. He is also a former French horn player. His own story is a page turner.

First off, it's important to note that Pacificans know this piano player. The Michigan native and lifelong resident has played every year in Pacifica for more than 15 years. He does the ragtime, boogie-woogie concerts at the Pacifica Moose Lodge, affectionately known as "Carnegie at the Moose." He donates his times for these performances, which are all benefits for the Pacifica Historical Society, www.pacificahistory.org. Bob's cousin, longtime Pacifican Bill Hall, is married to Kathleen Manning, a dedicated mover and shaker for the Pacifica Historical Society.

This year Milne's concert at the Moose was not his standard piano glide through the compositions of the masters of ragtime and boogie-woogie – though of course his performance was quite typically, breathtaking. This year he was the piano player for three silent films: the 1917 Fatty Arbuckle film "The Butcher Boy," featuring Buster Keaton; the 1921 Buster Keaton film "One Week;" and the 1915 Chester Conklin, Mack Swain film "Love, Speed and Thrills." Naturally, like always, he didn't rehearse in advance and didn't bring sheet music. He played what occurred to him at the moment.

"I was playing melodrama," Milne said. "I probably made up 95 percent of it while I was watching it. I have sight-read many silent movies and have seen enough of them so you can sort of anticipate what is going to happen next."

This leads the pianist to an interesting fact. Historic facts are something he often delivers to audiences, quite jovially, while his hands fly in two directions at once – finding every note and giving every tune the full measure of its composer.

"During the day of silent movies," he noted, "films would sometimes arrive with a piano score. But what if the piano player couldn't read the music? Well, then he just made it up."

"The thing is," the pianist continued, "I don't rehearse. I've never practiced. It is fun for me to play these things and that is why I never practice. Practice is no fun. In fact, I wouldn't know how to practice."

While Milne enjoys playing ragtime and boogie-woogie, he rarely listens to it. In fact, he rarely listens to anything whether it is ragtime or classical, though he absolutely loves classical. He grew up on classical and played in orchestras for 15 years, beginning when he was in 3rd grade. Those first four years were on violin and the next eleven were on horn. At home he will turn on an opera, but admits he is not a fan of modern opera. German composer Richard Wagner, 1813-1883, would be about the latest composer that holds his interest.

Milne started playing piano when he was four.

"My mother would play something on the piano. I listened from another room and when she was done, I would go to the piano and play it. I couldn't play it as fast as her, of course, but I knew what notes she'd played. But I was too little back then and didn't have the coordination."

At age 5, he would listen to Mozart on the family's hand crank record player.

"I understood Mozart's music was perfectly balanced and I could anticipate what he was going to do in the next passage, even though I didn't know the piece."

Funny, Milne never thought of himself as a pianist when he was growing up. He was a horn player. He began playing horn in 8th grade, and by the 10th grade he was playing French horn professionally in the Pontiac Symphony. He became 1st

horn at Interlochen, Michigan's internationally renowned center for the arts. After high school, Bob went to the prestigious Eastman School of Music.

Nevertheless, he got his first piano job in 8th grade. A dance instructor was teaching his fellow classmates to dance to various songs, including "St. Louis Blues." When her piano player quit, she asked Bob to take over. Those were \$5 gigs. Five bucks was a lot of money. In high school, everyone wanted him to play piano in a Dixieland band and he didn't know what they were talking about.

"I told them, 'I don't play piano,'" he laughed. "And they said, 'Yes you do.'"

So here he is, a professional musician on French horn in 10th grade, and he's heading with his parents in the car from Rochester, Michigan, down to the Detroit Train Station, an hour's ride, to pick up a friend of his parents.

"I heard this big E-Flat Concerto coming out of the radio and the station mentions it's Beethoven's 'Emperor Concerto.' I thought it was stunningly beautiful."

All the way back he thought of this piece and when he got home, he discovered his parents had a record of it and so he had a listen. Then he sat down at the piano and played it.

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In 1959, Milne attended his first year at the Eastman School of Music and was named 1st horn. His buddy Warren Ottey – whose own career as a music director and conductor has scaled the heights of his profession – said this about his Eastman classmate.

"Bob was the best horn player in Eastman the first day he walked into the school. For proof of this, listen to the horn solo during the overture to his opera. Bob said it's based on his 'warm-up' routines."

In his second year, the horn player headed over with fellow students to a local spot, the Treadway Inn, where on Friday and Saturday nights they would wheel out the old piano and do sing-along. The place was always packed for these events. Bob had never really listened to anything but classical music and there he was, chiming in with the rest of the gang on old standards like, "Cruising Down the River on a Sunday Afternoon." He didn't go there that often. When he did, he really enjoyed it.

In his third year at Eastman, 1961, he went over to the Inn with his buddies and the piano player wasn't there. Everybody was singing along without piano accompaniment, and Bob thought, "Well, I can play this stuff."

Hired on the spot, he was now getting \$10 bucks a night, Friday and Saturday nights, to play at the Treadway. "So, I've got some income." (Also at this time, on Thursday nights, at all of 19, he was assistant principal French horn in New York's Rochester Philharmonic.)

"Years later I met that guy who was supposed to play at the Treadway, and it turns out he wasn't there that night because he got drunk and landed in jail."

In the beginning when Milne played the Treadway, he played for five hours straight, no break. But the customers told him, "Bob, you get a break." However, the guy who owned the place, Mikhail, didn't want him to take a break. So the customers hatched a plot. Everyone huddled around the old upright. Like always, the pianist had taken off the top and the bottom boards to let the sound out. The crowd was singing "Baby Face," or something like it, when one of the listeners purposefully tossed his beer across the hammers.

"So now the piano won't work, of course," Milne laughed. "It's going to take at least half an hour for the hammers to dry out and stop sticking to the strings. Even old Mikhail could see the sense in this. So I finally got a break."

By 1963, Milne was playing horn with the Baltimore Symphony – assistant principal – while also going to the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Along came his next piano job.

"There was this place, the Peabody Bookshop and Beer Stube."

Now this is 30 years past the end of Prohibition, but this "Bookshop" was originally opened in 1922 by a couple of enterprising brothers, immigrants from Austria. And just like back in the day, in 1963 the right word would part the bookcases to reveal a speakeasy. Bob got a job playing piano there in 1963 and 1964, though he still played with the Baltimore Symphony. The Bookshop was wildly popular. Many of his fellow students from the Peabody Conservatory would come over to hear him play. This included fellow Peabody student Ernie Ragogini, now a decades-long friend of Milne's.

"Ernie is a tremendous piano player and educator. He is very well known. Back then he was playing all the Mozart concertos. He was playing Beethoven's 'Emperor Concerto.' I was so intimidated when I saw him sitting next to me at the Bookshop."

But Ragogini was there because he couldn't believe what Milne could do on piano. He told him so. The thing about Milne was, he genuinely did not think of himself as a piano player. "I was just fooling around."

In the summer of 1964, Milne quit the Baltimore Symphony. He hated all the politics of the symphony and he didn't like playing modern music and the orchestra people wanted him to play modern music. (There's some time in these early years that he also played professional pool on the side – he even defeated a world champion at one point. But that's a story in itself.) Suffice it to say he returned to Detroit, and we're still in 1964, and headed one night with his cousins, including Bill Hall, to Detroit's legendary Dakota Inn Rathskeller. The piano player took a break and Milne's cousins pushed him up on stage. The other piano player was dismissed, a fact Milne doesn't like to talk about, and Bob was hired on the spot. And just like that he transformed from a symphony horn player to a full-time pianist. He wasn't playing ragtime yet, but it opened the door to ragtime. As far as having a job playing piano in Detroit, he played seven nights a week for 25 years, five to eight hours a night. "Then I went out to see the world!"

In 1974, he went to his first ragtime festival.

"It was a major, famous festival in Toronto. There were people with big names playing there and I thought, well, I should find out what they think of me since I'm here."

To his surprise, they liked him. In fact, he was told he was the best pianist there. He didn't believe it. But he ventured back in 1975.

"It's Friday night, open piano night, and the stage is empty. I go up there and I am feeling a little bit nervous. This is only the second time I've been to a ragtime festival and there are still all these big names. I didn't have a plan here. I just started playing this particular tune by Eubie Blake."

James Hubert "Eubie" Blake, 1887-1983, ragtime, jazz and pop pianist, is considered one of the greatest American composers of the 20th century. From a piano roll, Milne had taught himself one of Blake's early numbers and out of 100 players at the Toronto Festival, Milne was the only one who knew it. The song was, "If You've Never Been Vamped by a Brown Skin Girl, then You've Never Been Vamped at All."

"All of a sudden, I started hearing someone singing all the words. I thought, 'Who the heck?' So I turn around and who is standing right in back of me singing into a microphone but Eubie Blake! So I said, 'Mumble, mumble!' I was just horrified because here was this phenomenal pianist, whose name was right in there with all the legends like James P. Johnson, Scott Joplin and Fats Waller, and I am playing his composition. This guy used to accompany Bessie Smith and all the greats. I'm thinking, 'I don't belong here on this stage.'

"Finally, when we got done with this tune, there is this thunderous applause for him and I am just sitting there cowering. I was actually hoping that no one noticed me, but of course they did. So then I said to myself, 'He is going to leave the stage and what I just did was probably the worst he ever heard.' So I just sat there. I didn't even look at him. So he started to leave the stage, but then he turned around and said, 'Not bad, kid!' I just thought, 'Thank you, Jesus!' To hear those words from Eubie Blake – this just made my life."

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Businesses, Events and Profiles | Feature: Interview with "Legend of Sleepy Hollow - The Opera" composer Bob Milne | A6
www.bartlettbiographies.com | the week of 8-13-18-8-19-18 | story by Jean Bartlett



Milne plays Detroit's Rathskeller in 1964.



Several decades after his last Rathskeller gig, Milne returned to wow the crowds in 2018.

Milne is considered to be the best ragtime/boogie-woogie pianist in the world. In 2004, over a period of three days, he was filmed and interviewed by the U.S. Library of Congress and subsequently declared a "National Treasure." Those interviews, along with his extraordinary body of diverse compositions have been archived by the Library.

He has over a dozen commercial recordings. His compositions include: a piano concerto, a trumpet concerto, numerous art songs, a flute suite, about 40 piano rags, music for the stage play "Orvie," music for the stage play "The Christmas Chimes," and uncountable smaller pieces. He's also written five books, both fiction and nonfiction. One of the books is a collection of poems. One of the fiction works, "Turtle Lake," has long been contemplated for the big screen. The book came to Milne while he was playing piano in a bar. He realized that influential people with secrets were spilling those secrets over cocktails. It was a breeding ground for extortion and/or a work of fiction by Milne. Milne's wife Linda did the book's illustrations.

"The best decision of my life was marrying Linda in 1978," Milne stated.

All of this is an abridged story on a guy who has never practiced piano, who often plays 200 piano concerts a year, and who served for six years, on piano, as the U.S. Department of State music ambassador. His concerts have taken him all over the States and throughout the world, and his concert attendees have included: Former President George H. W. Bush, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Swiss Parliament in Berne. Then there are his "unplanned" concerts. One of those happened at an estate in Vermont where he played a number of songs he composed based on the poetry of Robert Frost. After he played, his hosts informed him the estate was the poet's former home.

"I played a concert for several years in a row on the west side of the Tappan Zee, in the town of New Paltz, New York. After one of those concerts, there was this guy in the lobby who started chatting with Linda and me about the way I played."

"This guy" turned out to be conductor Samuel Cristler who made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City on March 11, 1992 conducting Verdi's "Don Carlo." The three new friends went out to dinner and visited the next day at Cristler's summer house in Gardner. The conductor invited Milne to play on his Steinway and Milne played one of his own classical compositions. When the piece ended, Cristler asked Milne to write him an opera. As it turns out, Milne had always

wanted to do this; but on what topic? Coincidentally, just across the river from Cristler's summer home is the village of Sleepy Hollow. And so "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow – The Opera" began.

Milne spent time researching the legend of "Sleepy Hollow." This included visiting Sleepy Hollow and meeting with the town's historian Henry Steiner. It also included studying Old Dutch customs, looking into bizarre creatures of Germanic folklore and investigating the observations of writer/historian Washington Irving, 1783-1859, regarding the real-life, 1790 Sleepy Hollow incident which inspired Irving's classic American short story.

Milne and his wife Linda set off for the West Coast where the pianist had a lineup of ragtime concerts.

"As I was driving, I could hear one of the arias in my head. I could picture the whole thing, the details of the stage, almost as if I was sitting in the mezzanine. I could see everyone on stage and listen to the whole orchestra, and I could hear 20 to 30 percent of the words that were being sung. I also knew what the other lyrics were supposed to be, I just didn't have the rhyming patterns yet. The next day (using the music notation and sound set software Sibelius), I would sit down and have coffee and write out the melodies, lyrics, orchestrations and stage plot that I thought up the day before in the car."



(Linda Milne photo)

2009. Writing out the melodies, lyrics, orchestrations and stage plots at a Walmart in Montana.

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow – The Opera" is 2 and 3/4 hours in length. It has seven scenes.

Milne's gift of seeing and hearing music performed in his head has been the subject of studies by eminent neurologists Dr. Jim Toole and Dr. Kerstin Bettermann, using functional brain MRI and advance MRI imaging technology. The researchers and their teams were able to demonstrate that Milne can accurately process multiple pieces of music, up to four symphonic pieces at one time, simultaneously in his mind. His skillful musical multi-tasking abilities are unprecedented.

Milne's opera has been heralded by opera insiders as "one of the greatest operas ever written." Barnaby Palmer, orchestral and operatic conductor, calls Milne "One of the truly great American composers" and has been involved in supporting the opera's stage debut since he first heard it.

Peter Benecke, former Düsseldorf Opera tenor, calls the music of Milne's opera, "Ingeniously complex, sometimes containing three separate meters simultaneously, expressing intimate affection in a stunningly beautiful duet. People don't even realize what it is to which they're reacting while being deeply touched and moved." Benecke sang through the role of Milne's Ichabod Crane and noted he fell in love with the music. "The style and language of Sleepy Hollow is both stirring and accessible. It speaks to the very heart and soul of the listener."

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Warren Ottey pored over Milne's opera score. He listened to it for three days and after those three days he had this to say. "I am absolutely enthralled. I believe that its premiere will be sensational as performed by a major opera company. Furthermore, I believe its subsequent performances will attract a great company of devotees, serious opera lovers and novice listeners alike."

As for the instigator, conductor Samuel Cristler listened to the Milne opera and summed his thoughts up in one resounding word: "Bravo!"

What does this opera need to be staged? Money! Opera is an expensive art form. It always has been. Yet this American has written an opera that will not only thrill opera buffs, but it has music and a story that will appeal to everyone: a headless horseman that haunts the woods; a beautiful young woman who has to fend off the unwanted attention of an out-of-towner who has become the village choir director; a heroic villager who is willing to put his life on the line, daily, for the safety of his village and the safety of his true love – and all of it set to thrilling, beautiful music.

In the time of Mozart, his music only made it to the masses because it was supplemented by Emperor Joseph II. In the case of Wagner, King Ludwig II of Bavaria was a great fan and he opened his pocket book. Who can support this Bob Milne opera? Who should support this opera? Maybe all of us.

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Visit <https://sites.google.com/site/sleepyhollowopera/home> to learn more about this exciting American opera and listen to music clips. Contact Bob Milne by email: rmilne@tir.com. Contact him by U.S. mail: P.O. Box 586, Lapeer, MI 48446.



A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.