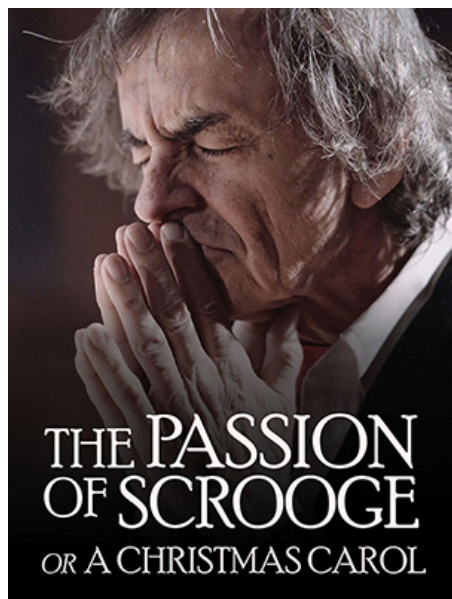


# OPERA NEWS

**Recordings** (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/recordings.aspx?date=12/1/2018>) > Opera and Oratorio

## DEAK: *The Passion of Scrooge*

**DVD** Sharp; 21st Century Consort, Kendall. Production: Moon. Zen Violence Films, 60 mins.



**T**HIS UNUSUAL HOLIDAY OFFERING, a retelling of *A Christmas Carol* as a contemporary chamber opera/musical monodrama by the well-regarded composer/bassist Jon Deak, is presented as a cinematic concert performance. Deak (b. 1943), who spent thirty-six years as associate principal bassist of the New York Philharmonic, composed the work in 1997 for the D.C.-based 21st Century Consort, the resident ensemble of the Smithsonian Institution. Successful performances of the piece became a holiday tradition, and a CD release followed in 2000. This thoroughly enjoyable film version, insightfully conceived and directed by H. Paul Moon, adds intriguing new dimensions to Deak's winning and bravura musicalization. The charismatic and characterful baritone William Sharp plays Scrooge, in a performance that is mostly sung, but partly spoken and partly intoned in speech-song. The performance is shot in a wide-open space inside a church, with the ten instrumentalists arrayed in a circle, led by conductor Christopher Kendall (also the producer), who leads a wonderfully spirited (so to speak) and finely detailed performance.

The musical prelude begins, and Sharp bounds smilingly into the midst of the group. "It's a ghost story," he gleefully informs us as the orchestra shimmers and swoops creepily. "And all you instruments are going to help me play the parts in the story!" This proves to be true—solo players stand in musically as various characters, *Peter and the Wolf*-style. The players also get involved by stomping their feet, murmuring and making shivering sounds. At one point they portray intrusive carolers, singing "God rest ye merry gentlemen" before getting waved away by Scrooge.

Sharp, enjoying himself mightily, transitions seamlessly among his roles as Narrator, Scrooge and several of the other characters (Marley, the Ghosts, Bob Cratchit). Deak has at his command an arsenal of musical styles, transitioning seamlessly from spiky modernism, with lots of creepy skittering and sliding, to pleasing madrigal-style harmonies, which instantly evoke nineteenth-century British yuletide cheer. It's first-rate and remarkably illustrative storytelling—now-humorous, now-ominous.

In Moon's framing, the piece actually begins with the composer. In a prologue, we see Deak on the balcony level of some grand library. His lightly underscored spoken voiceover (starting with the "All the world's a stage" monologue from *As You Like It*) gives the impression that he is searching for inspiration in order to write his Scrooge opera. More credence is given to the idea that the movie is Deak's story as much as Scrooge's when Deak supplants Kendall at the podium and conducts the final minutes of the opera. We also see Deak walking the streets and riding the subways of New York City during an interlude between acts. Some of the shots of the homeless are no doubt meant to evoke Dickensian London, reminding us that the same social ills are still with us. When Sharp intones the inevitable closing line "God bless us, every one!," its triumphant musical line almost seems to have flowered out of nowhere, but that's a small quibble for a score that is superbly well-crafted and integrates its contrasting styles in perfect service of its timeless story. Isaiah Sheffer, the late artistic director of New York's Symphony Space, wrote the imaginatively condensed libretto that plants us firmly inside Scrooge's psychodrama. —Joshua Rosenblum