



*Soldier Songs* production photos from The Atlanta Opera, San Diego Opera, and Beth Morrison Projects

## Tough Questions and Tough Stories

**David T. Little** (1978– ) has so far composed 8 operas/oratorios, 15 instrumental pieces for orchestra and large ensemble, 21 works for small ensemble, 7 choral and vocal works, and 11 solo compositions. Peruse titles on his website—*Dog Days*, *JFK*, *A Nest of Shadows*, *Haunted Topography*, *Conspiracy Theory*—and it is clear that he tackles thorny subject matter, asks tough questions, and tells tough stories. *The New Yorker* describes Little as “one of the most imaginative young composers” on the scene and *The New York Times* stated that he has “a knack for overturning musical conventions.”

For *Soldier Songs*, Little gathered tough stories, added elements of theater, opera, rock-infused-concert music, and animation, and then delivered an evening-length event meant to be a vehicle for reflection, engagement, and emotional connection.

If the purpose of the arts is not to produce products, but rather to produce thinking, then the very toughness of *Soldier Songs* is “high art.” The work provokes introspection and contemplation, while helping “to dispel the numbness felt by those of us lucky enough to only experience war through the comfort of our living rooms.”

### Select works by David T. Little:

***Soldier Songs*** A 60-minute multimedia work for baritone and amplified septet that explores the perceptions versus the realities of a soldier, the exploration of loss and exploitation of innocence, and the difficulty of expressing the truth of war.

***Am I Born*** An oratorio for soprano, children’s chorus, and orchestra that explores lost histories, altered places, and the spiritual bleed at the intersection of modernity and antiquity.

***Vinkensport, or The Finch Opera***  
A one-act operatic comedy about the Flemish folk-sport of finch-sitting.

***Dog Days*** A three-act opera collaboration with librettist Royce Vavrek that follows an American family in the near future who slowly starve as war rages. One day, a man in a dog suit arrives on their property howling for scraps.

***JFK*** A grand opera sequel to *Dog Days* with librettist Royce Vavrek that focuses on the night before John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963.

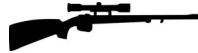
# *Soldier Songs* Synopsis

Chamber Opera in one act.  
Sung by one baritone.  
Running time about one hour.

Originally commissioned by the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, which premiered the work in 2006, *Soldier Songs* received its workshop premiere in New York in 2008 by Beth Morrison Projects, and directed by Yuval Sharon. The full world premiere production took place in 2011 at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas in New Haven, CT.



*Soldier Songs* photo from the Staged Production by Jill Steinberg, Beth Morrison Projects



## Summary by David T. Little

*Soldier Songs* contrasts the perceptions and realities of a soldier from the age of six through sixty-six. Based on interviews with veterans, and the culmination of nine years of work by composer David T. Little, *Soldier Songs* is constructed in three sections: Child, Warrior, and Elder, yet the movements flow seamlessly from start to finish.

### CHILD

A boy first encounters war through toys and games, playing with action figures available with an arsenal of accessories. As he grows, video games replace these dolls. These games offer an immersive, combat-like experience in which the player kills countless "enemies" and where the only consequence of the player's death is a brief wait while the game reloads. As the boy becomes a young adult, the game becomes more real. He registers for the draft at age eighteen. Reflecting on the highly-randomized selective service process from the Vietnam War, he counts each day with a passing dread at the thought of combat. Once deployed, he counts the days again, but differently: down from 365, hoping he makes it to one.

### WARRIOR

The boy is now a modern-day soldier. As technology has changed the tools and language of war, it has also changed the experience of combat. The soldier creates his own soundtrack: piping heavy metal into ear buds, he recreates the feeling of the video game, shooting abstract enemies that appear as pixels on a screen. But the game becomes too real, and the brutality of war sets in. Images of death, destruction, and killing that may have been exciting in action movies back home, now play out with horror before his eyes. He seeks refuge from incoming ordnance, an unbearable experience that he knows will stay with him for the rest of his life.

### ELDER

The stories diverge. Veterans reflect on their experiences in combat, or discuss the challenges of reintegration into civilian life. One man reflects on the futility of an endless war. Another confronts the bereavement team sent to notify him of his son's death in combat. The opera concludes with recorded interviews—the composer's family and friends: the soldiers who inspired this work—as our soldier opens his mouth to tell his story.

For more information, visit: [davidtlittle.com](http://davidtlittle.com)

"Music is a weapon of war. Rhythm organizes a soldier's training; song defines an army's morale and camaraderie; Metallica can prepare a soldier for battle. After the war, commemoration never happens without a band. Music is easily co-opted and made to serve a political or ideological message. But music is just as easily a vehicle for reflection, engagement, and emotional connection, and this is certainly what is achieved in *Soldier Songs*."

Yuval Sharon, September 2012, Notes from © 2013 BMI CD Recording

# Words from composer David T. Little



*I wrote Soldier Songs to try to figure things out. In 2004 I was invited by my former high school to speak with students about my life as a composer. Following my talk was my old friend, Justen Bennett, who was asked to talk about being a soldier. Justen had just returned from Iraq where, among other things, he had been a field medic, and had been*

*among those who stormed Saddam Hussein's palace. I felt a little silly.*

*Exiting the auditorium I saw a display case, which I remembered as having been used to celebrate student achievements: a victory for the football team, or the marching band, or photos from the musical that had happened the previous week. Now it was full of photos of alumni currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, driving tanks and carrying machine guns. Here, in the same case where the prom pictures used to go.*

*I remembered back to my days with them in class arguing about the ethics of Vietnam, or even Operation Desert Storm. I remembered my attitude at the time: that war was always wrong, and that those who signed up to fight it were always fools. And yet, here were my friends—smart kids all—now in the desert defusing land mines.*

*I then thought of my own family. Although we are not an intensely military family today, my generation is the first in nearly a century to not have a member in the service. My uncles were in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and my grandfathers were in World War II, in Europe. Cracks began to form in my absolutist position, and questions began to arise.*

*To find my own answers, I called every veteran I knew and asked them to speak with me about their experience. Everyone I asked said yes. It was from their stories that this piece began to emerge. What struck me most was that for almost all of them, this was the first time they had ever talked about their experience, even though for some they'd left active duty nearly 40 years ago. This became central to the piece—what, for me, this piece is about: the impossibility of the telling.*

*I never meant for this piece to prove a point, or even to have any kind of "message" to deliver. Rather, it is material presented for contemplation. I have selected and edited these interviews more as a way of sharing than as a way of convincing. By conducting these interviews, and writing this piece, I gained an awareness of the complexity and difficulty of the soldier's situation, and gained empathy and compassion for the men and women who have experienced the "one-way door" of combat; where once you pass through, you may never fully come back.*

David T. Little, November 2012, Notes from © 2013 BMI CD Recording  
See also: [www.boosey.com/cr/music/David-T-Little-Soldier-Songs/101880](http://www.boosey.com/cr/music/David-T-Little-Soldier-Songs/101880)

## How many wars has America fought?

From the American Revolution to the Iraq War, the United States has fought in **12** major wars.

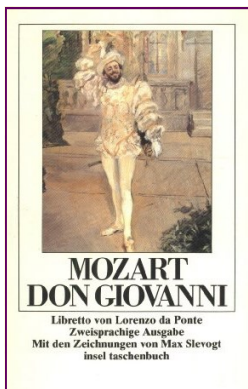
- American Revolution (1775–1783)
- War of 1812 (1812–1815)
- Indian Wars (approx. 1817–1898)
- Mexican War (1846–1848)
- Civil War (1861–1865)
- Spanish-American War (1898–1902)
- World War I (1917–1918)
- World War II (1941–1945)
- Korean War (1950–1953)
- Vietnam War (1964–1975)
- Desert Shield/Desert Storm (1990–1991)
- Global War on Terror (Oct 2001– )

**America's Wars  
Total U.S.  
Military Service  
during Wartime:  
41,892,128**



## Is it unusual for composers to write their own libretti?

A **libretto**, from the Italian word that means *little book*, is the text that is sung in opera. When supertitles are projected during an opera performance, the words have been chosen or translated from the opera's libretto. Most composers work with **librettists** to write the words that are set to music. Sometimes a librettist writes an original story, but often the stories are based on a book or play. One prominent example is *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*), composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, using a libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, who based the story on a stage comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais titled *La folle journée* (*The Mad Day*). Other renowned librettists include Metastasio, Scribe, Boito, and von Hoffmannsthal.



A less common practice is when composers write their own libretti. Wagner wrote both the music and the libretti for all of his stage works, including his 13 completed operas—among them were *The Flying Dutchman*, *The Ring Cycle*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*. British composer Michael Tippett wrote both the music and libretto for his best-known opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*, which he based on Mozart's *The Magic Flute*.

David T. Little wrote both the music and libretto (song texts) for *Soldier Songs*, based on recorded interviews with veterans of five wars. Not only is the source material inventive and unusual, but also the solo work on both music and text by one creative artist is atypical for opera.

### **Soldier Songs: Libretto Table of Contents**

#### **Part One: Child**

- I. Real American Heroes (Age 6-12)
- II. Boom! Bang! Dead! (Rated "T" for Teen) (Age 13-17)
- III. Counting the Days (Age 18-21)

#### **Part Two: Warrior**

- IV. Still Life with Tank and iPod (Age 22-24)
- V. Old Friends with Large Weapons (Age 25-27)
- VI. Hollywood Ending (Age 28-29)
- VII. Steel Rain (Age 30-31)

#### **Part Three: Elder**

- VIII. Hunting Emmanuel Goldstein (Age 32-43)
- IX. Every Town Has a Wall (Age 44-52)
- X. Two Marines (Age 53-57)
- XI. War After War (Age 58-66)

#### **Coda: The Closed Mouth Speaks**

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*There's no honorable way to kill, no gentle way to destroy. There is nothing good in war. Except its ending.*

Abraham Lincoln

*Only the dead have seen the end of war.*

Plato

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