

A first in North America!

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Mississaugans win international prize

By NANCY ENRIGHT
Canada is in the process of developing its own opera literatures and much of the credit goes to Beverly and Raymond Pannell of Mississauga.

The Pannells — he, an opera composer and former concert pianist, she a poet and

photographer — recently won the Salzberg Television Opera Prize, an international award that's never been captured before by a North American.

The Salzberg competition is held every three years. The Pannells beat 10 other countries for

the top broadcasting award for opera, including East Germany, Germany, Austria, Poland, England, the Netherlands and Hungary.

The opera is called "Aberfan". It tells the moving story of the tragedy that befell the

Scottish village in 1966 when a 700-foot-high coal tip slid down a mountain and buried a school for junior and infant children, killing 116.

The Pannells went to Aberfan in 1974 for the opening of a community centre built in memory of those children who died.

"The opera is based on what the grief-stricken parents told us," says Raymond.

"It was virtually a mountain resting on top of a mountain," he explains.

"The coal tip or slag was the waste of about 100 years and weighed thousands and thousands

of tons.

"Then came torrential rains. The townspeople knew how dangerous the slag was but the government denied it.

"The opera is about indifference and its consequences. It has worldwide applications," says Pannell.

The international jury of 10 in Salzberg obviously agreed.

Pannell composed the music to the opera, while he and his wife co-authored the libretto, or words to the opera.

John Thomson produced and directed the opera. The principle singers are Mary Morrison, Gary Relyea and Glynn Evans. The orchestra is made up of Toronto musicians and the Toronto Boys Choir sings in the opera as well.

The opera, commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Commission, was videotaped on location in a gravel pit about 15 miles north of Toronto.

It took the jurors only one ballot to choose "Aberfan" over the other entries.

Pannell traveled to Salzberg to view the competition.

"I wanted to see what other countries were doing in the medium."

As artistic director of the two-year-old Co-Opera Theatre, Pannell hopes to establish Canadian opera literatures.

"With this award, it's a good start," he says.

Beginning in December, the Co-Opera Theatre will present three new Canadian operas at the Toronto Free Theatre.

The operas are by artists already well established in alternative forms of theatre. The first is composed by Norm Symonds, libretto by Hrant Aliniak; composer of the second opera is Harry Somers, libretto by Martin Kinch and the third is composed by Harry Friedman, libretto by Tom Hendry.

The Pannell's award-winning "Aberfan" will be televised worldwide on CBC on Oct. 26. Plans are to synchronize the opera on FM stereo well.

Oct. 26 will be almost 11 years to the day that tragedy struck the tiny coal-mining community of Aberfan.