

A School President Fired, An Opera Remembers

A Scholar Under Siege: Reliving Georgia's Wartime Racial Politics

In the summer of 1941, Georgia's colleges and universities collided with Eugene Talmadge, the state's powerful populist governor, in an episode that profoundly affected the course of Georgia higher education. Talmadge's firing of Georgia Teachers College (GTC) President Marvin Pittman and The University of Georgia's Education Dean Walter Cocking resulted in a loss of academic accreditation and a subsequent reorganization of the Board of Regents, drastically reducing gubernatorial control from the body. While somewhat overshadowed by America's entrance into World War II, Talmadge's assault on higher education policy became national news. Today, the incident is no less relevant, given the current friction between many state governments and higher education governing boards. As GTC developed into the present-day Georgia Southern University, the story of Marvin Pittman's removal and return has remained central to the lore and traditions of the institution. Therefore, as the school celebrates its Centennial, a special opportunity exists to revisit this controversial and significant piece of history, in the form of ' new two-act opera *A Scholar Under Siege*.

Musically and dramatically, the characters and events of *A Scholar Under Siege* provide an intriguing opportunity to explore the motivation of two opposing individuals through a work that derives dramatic energy from their conflicting views of power. In the opera, Eugene Talmadge views power by "the numbers": how many unit votes he can accrue through populist and segregationist rhetoric. In contrast, Marvin Pittman—intellectually and emotionally wedded to his institution—defines power as residing "in the mind and heart." These two leaders are supported by a colorful cast including *Atlanta Constitution* editor Ralph McGill, himself a significant figure in Georgia's civil rights movement and the speaker for GTC's 1943 commencement exercises, at which Pittman's return was celebrated.

Surprisingly, the opera does not begin in Georgia, but in 1947 Bavaria, where Marvin Pittman is serving as a member of a denazification commission reestablishing teacher education programs in postwar Germany. As he runs into local resistance to his work, Pittman is asked, "What can you know of us...our traditions, our history? Have Americans ever had a dictator?" Through the story of his firing, the American "resident expert" seeks to establish common ground with the officials, but, in so doing, rouses the ire of a recently deceased (and operatically reincarnated) Talmadge, who—surveying the audience—seeks to ingratiate himself by complaining, "Ain't this a pretty picture? All dressed up fancy for the opera, while I've gotta come back from the dead to tell you what's true and what ain't!" This sets the stage for the Georgia-based flashbacks that actually tell the story.

Allowing a personal note: The creation of this, my most important work, is a labor of love that owes a great debt to my university and music colleagues. As a composer, librettist, and educator, I seek to impress upon my students the interrelationship of knowledge within varying disciplines. As the work premieres and subsequently matures, I hope that it will find its own voice in society's ongoing discussions of education, politics, race, and—most importantly—personal sources of strength.