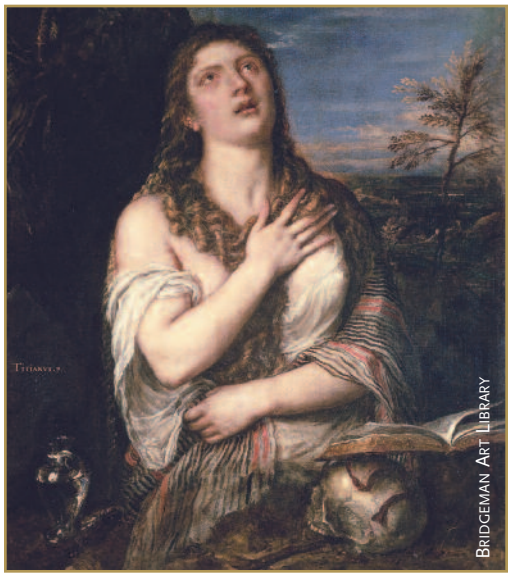
By David Gockley

San Francisco Opera presents the premiere of Mark Adamo's *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* in June 2013. This fall, we present a series of articles both in print and online that shed light on the opera and the complex issues it deals with. Visit sfopera.com/magdalene for more information.

AN OPERA ABOUT MARY MAGDALENE

Since announcing the world premiere of Mark Adamo's *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* for the Spring/Summer of 2013, many subscribers have asked me why we chose to do an opera on this subject. My response is that this is one of the world's great stories in a new and exciting version, written and performed by some of the most extraordinary artists in opera today. Some, though, have expressed bewilderment. "Mary Magdalene, sure: but a Gospel of Mary? My Bible includes only the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!"

But there is a Gospel of Mary: and this opera is based not only on that text, but also on other versions of the New Testament story that only came to light seventy-five years ago. In 1945, in the Egyptian desert, archaeologists discovered a treasure trove of these alternate versions: the Gospels of Mary, of Thomas, and of Philip; the Dialogue of the Savior; Pistis Sophia (Faith-Wisdom, in the Greek) to name a few. All these versions—while echoing the sayings and character of Jesus as described in the traditional Gospels—shed brilliant new light on Jesus, his teachings, and his relationships: especially his relationship with a woman known as Mary from the Galilean city of Magdala, known more commonly as Mary Magdalene.



Detail from Mary Magdalene in Penitence *(c. 1560) by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio c.1488-1576).*

Mary Magdalene appears in every traditional Gospel, but never as the center of a story, and never in the same way each time. No Gospel though claims she was a prostitute. She came to be remembered as one because a sixth-century Pope, in one influential sermon, combined several female characters—some sensual, some sinning, some both—into one character: and called that character by the Magdalene's name. All the Gospels agree that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. But Luke 7:11 also mentions another, unnamed female "sinner," two days before Jesus's crucifixion, who burst in to a dinner held in Jesus's honor and, weeping, anointed his feet and dried them with her hair. And the Gospels remember two other Marys (aside from Jesus's mother): a reformed prostitute named Mary of Egypt, and Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus and Martha. In 594 CE, Pope Gregory declared all these women were one woman: Mary Magdalene. The first woman—the first person—to whom the risen Christ appeared, became (in Roman Catholicism, at least: the Orthodox Church never agreed) a whore!

As such, she was a tremendous success. Countless churches, particularly in France, were erected in her honor. Generations of poets, musicians, and sculptors depicted her; and, over the course of innumerable paintings, she acquired her own iconography: red hair, glamorous gowns, an ointment jar. She became even more extravagantly fictionalized during the Middle Ages: sailing to Provence and ending her days as a kind of female John the Baptist in some tales, marrying Jesus and establishing the French royal family in another. (There's no Scriptural support for either of these tales: but that didn't stop Dan Brown from using them as a colorful backdrop for his thriller *The Da Vinci Code*.) Mary, the Mother of Jesus, virginal and untroubled, remained what women were supposed to be. But the emotionally and erotically alive Magdalene—human, flawed, but ultimately redeemed—was closer to what women—to what people—actually were and...are.

But then these Gnostic texts, which had been forgotten—or suppressed?—for nearly two millennia came to light: and they describe a very different Magdalene. This Mary is not only a member of Jesus's inner circle of followers, but one Jesus describes as "the blessed one...she whose heart is more directed to the Kingdom of Heaven than all your brothers." Was she his spouse? Mary is described with a word that can mean either his "companion" or "consort," and Jesus is described as "constantly kissing her on the mouth." Many of these texts assert that Peter, the father of the Western Church, resented Mary's influence on Jesus and vied with her for Jesus's favor. And the *Gospel of Mary* concludes with a breathtaking account of how Mary, after seeing Jesus in the tomb, returns to the terrified disciples and encourages them to take heart and preach the gospel far and wide.

So, neither a virgin nor a whore but a human woman—alive both erotically and spiritually—who may have been as (or more!) important than any of the male disciples in founding, at Jesus' side. How can this not be an opera? Of course it's a fascinating historical project: taking a story we thought we knew and daring us to wonder if it might have happened differently, before the institutional Christianity of long ago decided on an official version. But it's also a richly dramatic project. The texts unearthed in 1945 hint at intense and fascinating conflicts among Mary, Peter, Jesus, even his mother Mary; and ambivalence about women not just from Peter, but within Jesus himself. The drama, in becoming more human, gains, not loses, richness. And, fortunately, we have the composer-librettist who can bring this to life. Mark Adamo was fired by this subject five years ago, and the opera he's created—meticulously researched, vividly scored, touching and true—will be unlike anything you've seen or heard before.