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Music Comes to Life

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by Alexis Burling, Children's Bookshelf -- *Publishers Weekly*, 12/14/2006

On December 16, an extraordinary event will be taking place in Arezzo, Italy, an ancient Etruscan city located in the Tuscan countryside. At approximately 9:00 in the evening, Susan L. Roth's picture book, *Do Re Mi: If You Can Read Music, Thank Guido d'Arezzo*, will be performed live in Arezzo's historic Cattedrale di Arezzo. The story—and performance—are based on the story of Guido d'Arezzo, the Benedictine monk who is widely regarded as the inventor of modern musical staff notation.

American composer and conductor Victoria Bond has set the picture book to music, orchestrating it for a children's choir, with baritone and soprano soloists, percussion (played by members of the choir), and an organ. The music, based on the original Gregorian chant composed by Guido d'Arezzo, will be conducted by Maestro Angelo Mafucci, the artistic director of the Amici del Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele di Arezzo, and Roth's collaborator on *Do Re Mi* (Mafucci wrote the foreword).

Selected pieces of Roth's textured, collage-like original art will be hung on the cathedral walls (alongside art by Piero della Francesca), and electronic images from the book will be projected above the choir throughout the performance, visually telling the story of Guido d'Arezzo's life in time with the music.

If the collaborators on this project seem to be oddly connected, it's because they are. It turns out that Roth, Mafucci and Bond all knew (or knew of) each other even before the idea for this event sprouted.

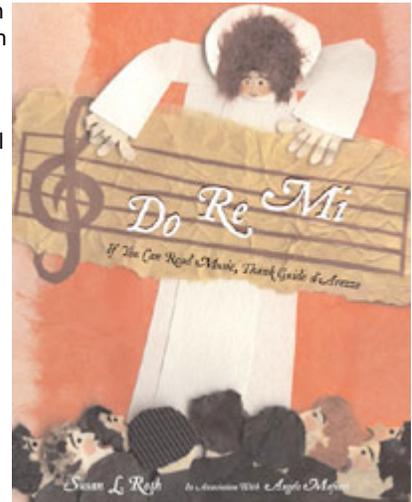
The seeds for this project (and the book) were planted years ago, when Roth was traveling in Italy and stumbled upon Guido d'Arezzo's name in a local guidebook. Upon digging further, she found a brochure at the hotel where she was staying (the Hotel Continentale—the same hotel where she and Bond will be staying on the 16th) about a local historical find of great international importance: a disintegrating scrap of parchment from the 10th century containing Guido's signature and a section of his Gregorian chant.

It was then that Roth knew she was hooked. She buried herself in research, and traveled to Arezzo many times over the coming years in order to learn more about Guido d'Arezzo's life and music. She met Silvia Martinelli (one of the soprano soloists in the December 16 performance), who put her in touch with Mafucci, who proved an invaluable source of knowledge and support. "Angelo worked hand-in-hand with me, helping me with all the research," Roth says. "He was always available and extremely scholarly."

Meanwhile, when she was in the States, Roth was introduced to Bond while at a dinner party for a mutual friend. Roth had brought along a copy of her latest picture book as a present for the hostess: a rendering of Walt Whitman's poem "Miracles" from *Leaves of Grass* called *Nothing but Miracles*. "Her artwork blew me away immediately," Bond says. "I was really quite impressed."

So impressed that she called Roth the next day to discuss an idea: combining her music with Roth's text in the form of a concert. Roth found a librarian at a school in Baltimore who was interested in hosting the performance, and their first collaboration was off and running.

Before long, Roth had what she calls an epiphany. Not only did she enjoy working with Bond on *Nothing But Miracles*, but she also knew that she wanted to work with her again in the same capacity on her Guido d'Arezzo



The poster advertising the concert in Arezzo.

project. When approached with the idea, Bond agreed in a heartbeat. "When you have a collaborator that you trust implicitly, you are even more able to access the outermost reaches of your imagination," she says. She loved the idea of working with Roth again, especially on a body of work so intimately connected to music and the origins of staff notation.

While Roth worked on finishing the book, Bond concentrated on composing the score. Guido's Gregorian chant would serve as the through line for both Roth and Bond's creations, from which point everything else—the narrative, the music, the art—jumped off. "I wanted to bring it up to date, to create a mosaic impression by using the whole Gregorian chant in its entirety as a baseline while capturing the enthusiasm and youthful energy of Guido's vision," Bond says.

Throughout all of it, conductor Angelo Mafucci was readily available as a knowledgeable music/Guido d'Arezzo scholar (the same scholar who discovered d'Arezzo's signature, mentioned in Roth's guidebook), an active collaborator in the writing of Roth's book, and as a trusted host. Although he and Bond have yet to meet in person (their first meeting will be at the performance on the 16th), they have spoken over the phone (in Italian—Mafucci doesn't speak English). Once while at Roth's office, Bond and Roth played a version of Bond's composition for him. "We were all so excited," Roth says. "Angelo, of course, caught the musical reference in Victoria's composition to Guido's own music right away."

Now that the book's release and the December 16 event are drawing near, Roth and Bond seem both indebted to and appreciative of each other. "It has been a joy and a privilege to collaborate with great friends on a project that all of us believe in and all of us love," Roth says.

Bond shares a similar sentiment. "Susan Roth has conveyed Guido d'Arezzo's dogged determination to discover a way to notate music despite the resistance of his elders. In addition to teaching children about this specific topic, [*Do Re Mi*] can inspire them to stick with their ideas no matter what others may think."

As Guido d'Arezzo knew 1,000 years ago, miracles can happen when you stand by your ideas. Clearly, Roth, Bond and Mafucci are carrying his torch.

A second performance of Do Re Mi will take place next April during the Texas Library Association conference in San Antonio.



The author, Susan Roth.

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