A young man with brown, wavy hair is shown from the chest up, looking down at a piano keyboard. He is wearing a dark grey suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a blue tie with a white musical staff pattern. The background is a textured, brownish-grey wall. The lighting is soft, highlighting his face and the texture of his clothing.

STORY BY
PATRICK WILLIAMS
Photos by Donna Barry '06 MFA

Entering USU at 16, Shane Mickelsen wrote his own opera, saw it produced, conducted the orchestra opening night—and then went on to graduate.

“If you write it ...”

Bask in ovations for your own opera,
then collect your diploma.

IT WAS A *FIELD OF DREAMS* MOMENT for Shane Brian Mickelsen, a Utah State University vocal performance major, when he was faced with a variation of that oft misquoted line “*if you build it, he will come.*”

Easy enough...

if you're Shane Mickelsen

In Mickelsen's case, he heard “*if you write it, we will perform.*”

Write what?

An opera.

What kind of performance?

A fully-staged production in a two-night run.

But that's jumping ahead. Let's back up a bit and work through the process.

At first glance, Mickelsen is a typical college student. Probe a little and the “typical” doesn't apply. Yes, he's youthful looking, but his confident demeanor and outgoing personality obscure the truth. He's a bit younger than his classmates.

OK, he's young. He's talented, and he's focused — perhaps a bit more than his peers. And, he has a sense of confidence.

Confidence? Sure. He entered USU in 2007 at the age of 16. He auditioned for, and received, a vocal performance scholarship, so he decided to forgo his senior year of high school and move on to the university experience. After all, he'd already skipped a grade in school. Not graduating from high school didn't bother him, especially since he was focused on earning a college degree.

Cindy Dewey, head of USU's vocal performance program in the Department of Music, conducted the audition.

“Shane's audition was remarkable,” Dewey said. “He exhibited a musical maturity well past his chronological age. His language skills and sense of musical style were very highly developed for one so young. He also had a most pleasing vocal quality with an easy flow and warmth to his sound.”

So with his 17-year-old cousin, Jerry Westberg, it was off to Logan to enroll at USU and move into an off-campus apartment.

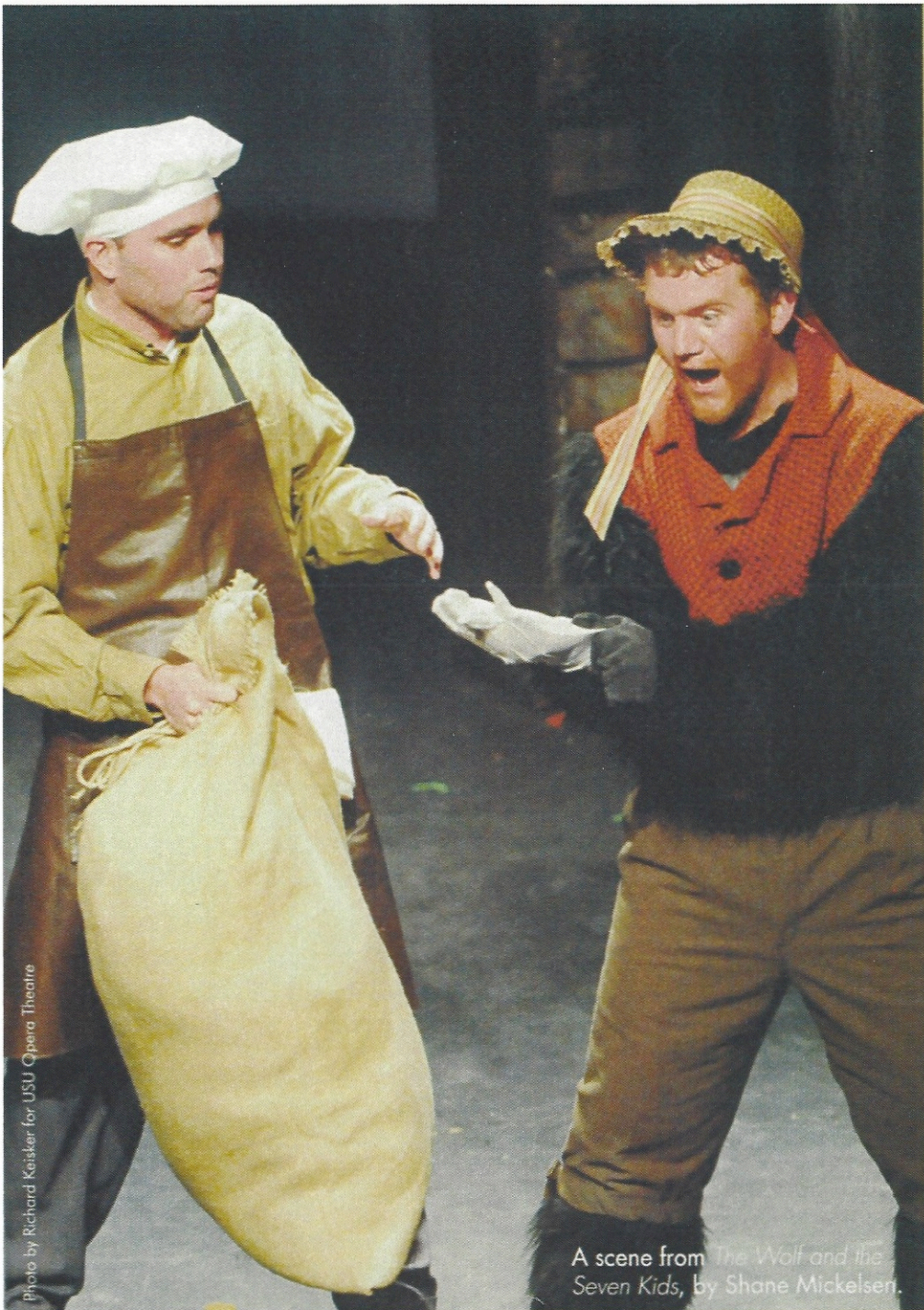
“It was my choice to skip graduating from high school,” Mickelsen said. “I adjusted to life at USU and fit right in.”

Making the decision to attend USU was an easy one for Mickelsen.

“It was the only place I looked,” he said. “I'm happy being an Aggie.”

And why not? Both his parents are USU graduates. His mother, Christine Mickelsen, both mentor and supporter of his creative work, holds a music degree in choral education from USU. She is a pianist who studied with Gary Amano, head of USU's piano program.

She provided an early foundation for Shane's music endeavors, teaching him music theory beginning at age 12, he said.



A scene from *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, by Shane Mickelsen.

“WITH THE LIBRETTO SET, MICKELSEN DROVE TO LOGAN, LOCKED HIMSELF IN A ROOM IN THE CHASE FINE ARTS CENTER AND SPENT 12 HOURS A DAY WRITING.”

“That helped prepare me to come to a university, at age 16, and excel in a music program.”

Shane’s father, Brian, is also an Aggie. He graduated from USU in 1990 with a degree in business and now owns a travel company.

Following the initial scholarship audition, Shane was offered a vocal performance scholarship, a well-earned distinction.

A baritone, he’d begun voice lessons in 2005 with Gary Sorenson at Weber State University, and he was earning awards at various competitions, including first place at the regional NATS — National Association of Teachers of Singing — competition in 2006. He took second place at that competition in 2007 and placed third at the Utah State Fair Competition in 2006 and 2007. As a performer on stage, he participated in plenty of musical theater, including *The Music Man* and *Les Misérables*.

At USU, it was in the winter of 2009 that Mickelsen said he was “writing hungry.” He’d been interested in music theory (thanks, Mom) and composition, and earlier, he’d attempted to write a musical, again teaming with his cousin.

“It’s difficult and we tried many times, but nothing really worked out,” Mickelsen said.

Those early attempts — and failures — led to Mickelsen’s eventual success, but it wasn’t a direct route. He’d taken several manuscripts to Lynn Jemison-Keisker with the message “I want to write an opera.”

It was then that Jemison-Keisker, head of USU’s Opera Theatre Program, said those words ... “Write it and we will perform.”

Problem was, the opera that was eventually performed was not the opera Mickelsen originally set pen to paper to complete. He began work in the spring of 2008 on a version of *Three Billy Goats Gruff* but by July 2009, Mickelsen threw his hands in the air and said, “I can’t write this!”

But then his mother told him about a fairy tale that provided the inspiration for the one-act opera he eventually completed. His mother was not only a mentor, providing the idea for the new opera, but she sat down with her son and helped assemble the libretto (dialogue) for *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*. It was a story she had read to Shane many times as a child.

With the libretto set, Mickelsen drove to Logan on July 7 — he's very specific with dates — and locked himself in a room in the Chase Fine Arts Center and spent 12 hours a day writing. After three days, the foundation of the score was complete.

"It was refreshing to have a new story, a new idea," Mickelsen said. "I was excited. Having a completed libretto really helped, and I was able to make incredible progress."

Several weeks later he recounted his creative process at a Utah State University Elderhostel Week program. Invited by Jemison-Keisker, he shared his experience — from a composer's perspective — about choosing material and writing a new opera. Those attending the one-hour presentation listened to examples from the new work, reviewed the libretto and asked the young composer myriad questions.



Shane Mickelsen began learning music theory from his mother at 12, exhibiting "a musical maturity well past his chronological age."

“SHANE IS A
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— LYNN JEMISON-KEISKER,
HEAD OF USU'S OPERA THEATRE
PROGRAM

By Sept. 25, 2009, the opera was complete — give or take minor revisions and editing. By Jan. 17, 2010, (those specific dates again!) final touches were done, including an overture to open the opera. Rehearsals began Jan. 23 and after a short, intense rehearsal period, *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, a one-act opera by Shane Brian Mickelsen, had its world premiere at the Caine Lyric Theatre in Logan, Utah.

On opening night, Mickelsen, the composer, dressed in formal attire, took the podium to conduct the orchestra. His opera played to sold-out houses during its two performances and garnered a standing ovation both nights.

“Shane is a remarkably talented, intelligent and self-motivated student with a wide variety of interests,” Jemison-Keisker said. “It is unusual to have an undergraduate student with his talents.”

Leading up to opening night, Mickelsen worked putting the final touches on the opera with a number of faculty members in the Music Department, including Sergio Bernal, director of the department's string program and conductor of the USU Symphony Orchestra.

“*The Wolf and the Seven Kids* is a remarkable opera, very cleverly crafted,” Bernal said. “It is highly amusing while keeping a solid artistic integrity. Its compositional worth goes far beyond being a mere ‘student effort.’ Shane is an extremely talented composer. I look forward to hearing future works by him.”

Dewey, Mickelsen's USU voice teacher was equally impressed and also called the work “remarkable.”

“*The Wolf and the Seven Kids* is remarkable for its tunefulness,” Dewey said. “It is replete with catchy melodies that stick with you long after the performance is over.”

Jemison-Keisker said the project provided mentorship opportunities for many through the collaborative effort that included students, faculty and community children. The combined

efforts were inspiring thanks to Shane's educational opera, she said.

And while Mickelsen's comic one-act opera received its premiere performances at the Caine Lyric Theatre, it didn't stop there.

The Marie Eccles Caine Foundation-Russell Family sponsors an opera outreach program each year at Utah State University. The program includes a quartet that travels to local elementary schools for performances. In spring 2010, the quartet presented a scaled version of the opera. Mickelsen was joined by his mother at the piano in a specially arranged duet version of the musical score.

“Students at the schools had the unique opportunity to see an opera written by one not so much older than themselves,” said Dewey. “They also got a chance to ask Shane about the process of writing an opera.”

This is the second time the Marie Eccles Caine Opera Quartet has had the opportunity to premiere a children's opera written by a USU student, Dewey said.

Although the Music Department does not have a degree in music composition, students who are interested are encouraged to compose for the ensembles and individual performers in the department. And, Mickelsen's efforts didn't go unrewarded. He created a related independent study course, “Readings and Conferences” with Jemison-Keisker's mentoring and received academic credit for his creative effort.

Writing a successful one-act opera isn't a bad way to cap your senior year. But, true to form, Mickelsen wasn't quite done. First, he had to fulfill the requirements for his senior vocal recital and then he was ready to join the Utah State University class of 2010.

So, on May 6, 2010, two days before commencement, Mickelsen presented a program that included works by Handel, Schubert, Holst, Chabrier and Scheer. He sang in English, German and French.

One more check off the to-do list for the young student composer.



Mickelsen's *The Wolf and the Seven Kids* has been called "a remarkable opera, very cleverly crafted and highly amusing..."

"Finishing a music degree in four years is quite an accomplishment, considering the number of required courses," Dewey said of the student to whom she had awarded a scholarship at the beginning of his college career. "There are no elective credits in a music degree because the required courses total more than 140 credits. To finish in three years is extraordinary. To finish in less than three years is nearly impossible. To find the time to compose an entire opera while finishing a very rigorous and time-consuming degree program is nothing short of superhuman."

And while Mickelsen has completed his degree at Utah State University, he is still growing, both personally and

intellectually. Reversing the normal trend, he graduated *first*, then stepped into the dark suit and practical shoes of a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And where is he serving? Rome, Italy, of course!

Learning the Italian language is another skill that might come in handy. After all, isn't Italy home to one of the greatest opera centers in the world?

"It's always most gratifying to follow the successes of our Utah State University graduates, and Shane Mickelsen will be no exception," Jemison-Keisker said.

What's next for Mickelsen? La Scala? Who can say.

Following his mission, he does have his sights set on graduate school —

perhaps in composition or music theory. As for another opera, that's a possibility.

"There's another idea back there," the young composer concluded.