

[Opera meets text messaging](#)

By Gail McCarthy Staff Writer

A Gloucester composer has woven a message on Internet safety and the implications of text messaging into a centuries-old art form.

He's set to present his project at several free public events on Cape Ann and at two North Shore colleges over the next few days.

Robert Bradshaw and his crew of chamber opera musicians will present the program featuring the premiere of his latest creation — "QWERTY," a 30-minute comic chamber opera — which involves texting, its impact on communication and much more.

QWERTY — the name is drawn from the first five letters on the traditional keyboard — is the story of a question, and whether or not it will ever be asked. Two characters, Joe and Ella, are unable to put down their phones and speak directly to each other, opting to communicate through the abbreviated world of text messaging.

But the answer to the question between the two of them may be blocked because of the pervasive use of personal communication technology.

Bradshaw, a father of two schoolchildren, is eager to use an operatic format to bring attention to this phenomenon to the North Shore. All performances are free to the public.

"I don't want people to shy away because it is opera. This is really accessible music. The message is serious but the package is light-hearted and fun," he said. "I want to encourage people to attend — especially if you have never listened to opera.."

Bradshaw, who has written community-based music for the Cape Ann Symphony and ensembles around the world, continues to be concerned about the impact of this constant connectivity and its negative impact on human interaction, with many opting to use technology to communicate instead of face-to-face interaction with the spoken word.

Gone are the days when physicians were about the only ones who carried personal communication devices. Now it is common to have 6-year-olds carrying cell phones.

In recent years, Bradshaw has been exploring chamber opera as a vehicle to reach audiences and to start discussions about these 21st-century issues facing modern society. His one-act opera "Gabriel" — with the ubiquitous Internet dot in the title — had its world premiere in Sydney, Australia, in 2010 by members of Opera Australia and the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra. That work deals with how society's infatuation with the Internet and social networking has become a dehumanizing influence in the world.

Lynn Shane, a soprano and visiting lecturer at Salem State University, said she is delighted to be a part of this program and to work again with Bradshaw.

"His music can be challenging to learn, but it is so expertly written that the end result always sounds beautiful and effortless," she said. "This piece is very fun to sing. Rob includes a lot of 'scene painting' in the instrumental music, which helps bring the libretto to life such as 'texting' sound effects, laughter, time ticking, agitation, etc.

"The prominence of the marimba in the orchestration is interesting and gives the piece a lot of fun energy," she added. "The message is important for both adults and kids. We all need to slow down and have more face-to-face conversations in our lives."

Bradshaw said the programs are possible because of a unique New England nonprofit organization founded by Ernie Boch Jr. called Music Drives Us, which provides grants for programs using music as a tool to benefit society.

There are seven events altogether, four at schools during school hours and three evening performances.

The four during school, to which the public is invited as long as they sign in at the front offices, are today at Chelsea High, and tomorrow at Gloucester's Veterans Memorial School and the Gloucester Community Arts Charter School; there was a Wednesday program at West Parish grammar school.

The musicians will demonstrate classical music, talk about their experiences as professional musicians, perform excerpts from "QWERTY" and talk about Internet safety. The team of musicians at the daytime schools events are Antanas Meilus, tenor; Allan Hawryluk, violinist and concertmaster of the Cape Ann Symphony, Janet Harrison, principal horn of Cape Ann Symphony, and Kristjón Ólafsson (marimba).

Meilus will make a point to tell the children that he is going to turn off his cell phone before singing of an aria from the new chamber opera. This is followed by a slide show about the need for safety when interacting online in chat rooms, blogging, using email and texting.

"Each one has a safety statement," said Bradshaw. "For example, a blogger can put anything up, sometimes without any research at all, and if you put up something hurtful to yourself and others, you should really consider that before you do it.

"These kinds of interaction can be turned into a musical expression where we can all comfortably discuss these issues without upsetting anyone but make that point that we are all responsible for our actions, even when it occurs with the use of technology," Bradshaw added. "We also want to raise awareness and engage the audience with music and opera."

The following link has information about these performances:

www.rjblc.com/QWERTYPoster.jpg.

Gail McCarthy can be reached at 978-283-7000, x3445, or at gmccarthy@gloucestertimes.com. if you go

What: Free public performances led by Gloucester composer Robert Bradshaw, focusing on the premiere of "QWERTY" — a 30-minute comic chamber opera. There also will be performance demonstrations and a different discussion each night about technology and how it inspired the creation of this new opera.

Featured performers: Lynn Shane (soprano), Gary Wood (baritone), Nathan Cohen (violin), Monica Duncan (clarinet), Kristjón Ólafsson (marimba) and Beverly Soll (piano).

Performances:

Saturday, at Endicott College's Center for the Arts Rose Performance Hall in Beverly at 7:30 p.m. This Lecture Recital about reaching young audiences through opera takes place at 7:30 p.m. For information, call 978-232-2397 or visit www.endicott.edu/centerforthearts.

Sunday, at Gloucester Community Arts Charter School at 4:30 p.m. This family concert titled "Whose reading your email?" is a community event focusing on Internet safety and connecting through the arts. For information, call 978-283-0832.

Monday, Salem State University, at 7:30 p.m. at Recital Hall (central campus). There is a pre-concert lecture titled "Why Opera?" by Composer Robert J. Bradshaw. For information, call 978-542-6296.