



PHOTOS BY WIQAN ANG FOR THE B

performers rehearse "The Bug Opera" at Indian Hill Music in Littleton. The show combines sophisticated music with a child-friendly storylin

By Sarah M. Taylor  
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**T**he plump green Caterpillar looks out and asks, "Why change?"  
A know-it-all Paper Wasp explains that after metamorphosis, Caterpillar will turn into a moth. Paper Wasp strolls around his library, looking for a picture of a Luna Moth to show him.

Caterpillar lets out a large burp; he ate the paper. After being shooed out, and after a lively twilight quartet with three other bugs, Caterpillar reaches a birch tree as night descends.

He whips out a telescope and sings, "There is still so much to see," while a chorus of insects makes clicking and swishing noises, eventually fading into the darkness.

This is the world of "The Bug Opera," a work by composer Geoffrey Hudson and librettist Alisa Pearson, where imagination flies free.

In the works for five years, and kid-tested and approved in workshops over the past year, the opera will debut Saturday at Indian Hill Music in Littleton. The

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# Ick! Eek! Encore!

Creators of 'Bug Opera' hope debut connects with children and parents



Composer Geoffrey Hudson and librettist Alisa Pearson wrote the basic story for "The Bug Opera" in 2001; the project picked up momentum when they partnered with Indian Hill



**PHOTO GALLERY**

See more images of "The Bug Opera" at [boston.com/globe/northwest](http://boston.com/globe/northwest).

# Working the bugs out, one

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authors hope the show will live on long after this weekend.

The opera is a triumph for the creators, who live in Cummington. ("It's nice and quiet," Pearson said, "and there are lots of bugs.") It is also a way for Indian Hill Music to connect with the community.

Hudson and Pearson met in 1987 when they were undergraduates at Oberlin College. While in college, Pearson taught at a nature camp in West Virginia that fueled her fascination with bugs. "That's where I started to get a sense of these beautiful life forms, where we all kind of cry, 'Eek!'" after observing luna moths and other creatures of the night, Pearson said.

Pearson — who received a degree in biology from Oberlin, and degrees in voice from Oberlin and the Eastman School of Music — spent eight years in Vienna performing in opera and films. The idea of merging bugs with children was triggered when she noticed the success of a program of operatic works commissioned for children at the Vienna State Opera.

Around 1998, she met up again with Hudson, who had also spent some time in Vienna. She told him how children's opera was performed in a tent on the roof of the famous state opera building. "When I told Geoff this, his eyes lit up," said Pearson, 38.

They wrote the basic story in

2001, and the project has accelerated since 2005 as the duo partnered with Indian Hill Music, a nonprofit regional center for music education and performance.

Hudson, 39, who holds degrees in composition from Oberlin College and the New England Conservatory, said that an opera geared toward a young audience is "a license to be playful."

"It's allowed me to have more sense of humor in my music, and the rhythms are probably more vivid than I do in other things," he said of the two-act piece.

The story follows good-natured Caterpillar, who is afraid of growing up. He is befriended by the buzzy, yet anemic Mosquito, reluctant to drink blood. Along their journey to find out what happens to caterpillars during metamorphosis, the two bugs meet the vain Paper

Wasp, happy-go-lucky Dung Beetle, menacing Spider, and an enchanting Luna Moth.

"People say it's a children's opera, and it is, because it's with bugs, and kind of easy concepts for kids to understand," said soprano Karen Vincent, who plays Mosquito. "But the music is really sophisticated. It's not silly."

Bruce Hangen, who is music director of the Orchestra at Indian Hill and will conduct 10 instrumentalists for the performances, agreed with Vincent.

"It's a blend of instruments and voices and drama for an audience that we hope will bridge the gap of

generation to generation," said Hangen, who is also conductor of youth and family concerts for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and principal guest conductor for the Boston Pops. "The idea is certainly fun enough and interesting for kids to get something out of, but it is also written at a level, musically speaking, that adults will get something from it, too."

Speaking of his composition, Hudson said: "One of the things I was really conscious about was making a different sound for each character."

In a scene with Spider, for example, there's a somewhat ominous musical sequence that sounds like a tap-shoe-wearing spider dancing on the piano keys, sometimes clonking the wrong chords, before leading into one of the opera's happy themes.

Other performers include baritone Nikolas Nackley as Caterpillar, tenor Matthew DiBattista as Paper Wasp, soprano Janna Baty as Spider, bass-baritone Aaron Theno as Dung Beetle, and soprano Pearson as Luna Moth. The soloists have performed at such venues as the Boston Lyric Opera, the Festival of Contemporary Music at Tanglewood Music Center, Glimmerglass Opera in Coopers-town, N.Y., the Michigan Opera Theatre in Detroit, and the Burgtheater in Vienna.

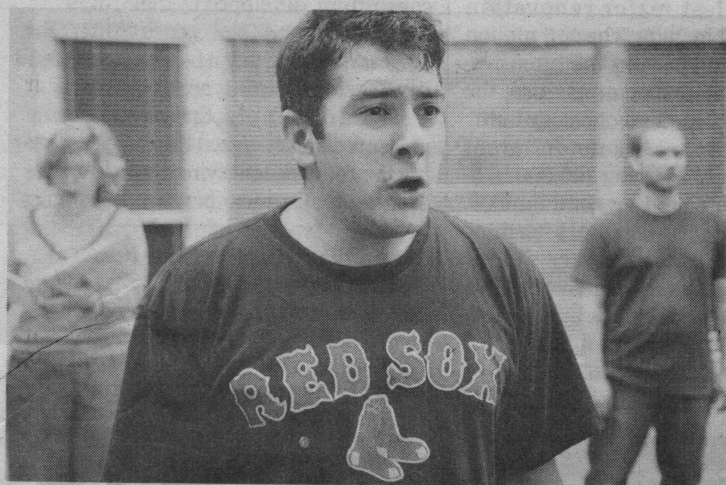
Indian Hill received funding for the project from the International Music and Art Foundation, with additional money from a variety of sources outside of Littleton.

"We all thought, 'This is very good music; this has a real educational value,'" said Susan Randazzo, executive director of Indian Hill Music. "It's an incredible collaboration and really perfect for this organization."

According to Randazzo, Indian Hill is one of a few organizations nationwide that combine a professional orchestra with a community music school. With that mission in mind, "The Bug Opera" has extended its feelers into the Indian Hill School's curriculum. Jo-Ann Wanh, director of education, helped develop musical terms and scientific concepts that could be taught in fourth and fifth grades. "Our aim in this whole process was to get it planted in the community," Pearson said. "We thought, 'You know, it's better to do it in your own backyard with your friends.'"

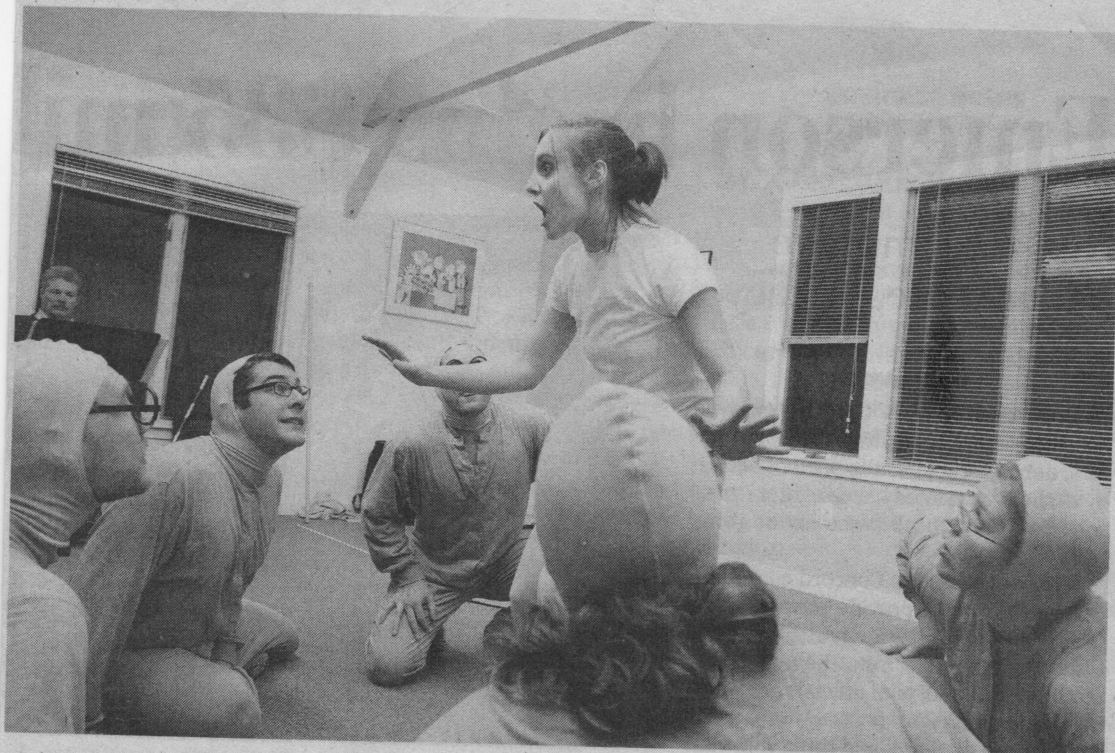
**'One of the things I was really conscious about was making a different sound for each character.'**

Geoffrey Hudson  
*Composer*



Nikolas Nackley, a baritone, plays Caterpillar. The opera will travel to Amherst and Providence for shows this month.

# performance at a time



PHOTOS BY WIQAN ANG FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Karen Vincent (center) plays Mosquito in "The Bug Opera." She said the concepts are easy enough for children to grasp, but also pointed out that the music is "really sophisticated."**

Last fall, the coauthors began a series of workshops to test scenes from their kid-friendly material. "It's been a real treat to be able to try out a piece as you're working on it," Hudson said.

Four of six workshops were held at Indian Hill. Two were held at Greenwood Music Camp in Cummington, where Hudson is a faculty member. At a workshop there last summer, some of his students participated in the performance and helped make a musical soundscape of insects on a summer night.

Overall, the workshops provided the coauthors an exciting way to connect with their audience before debuting the work, and partake in what Pearson called "collective imaging. . . . I was really struck by how many kids said they loved that moment of inviting them to imagine."

Among the changes were re-vamping a caterpillar costume that made the singer inaudible and speeding up the pace. "The songs that we have now are much more integrated into the story," Hudson said.

The authors were also advised by some friends at the Vienna State Opera to make the originally 10-person show more compact.

After this weekend's performances, "The Bug Opera" will be whisked off to the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Am-



**Janna Baty, a soprano who plays Spider, during rehearsals at Indian Hill Music in Littleton.**

herst and Columbus Theatre in Providence for shows this month.

"With new music, the hard thing is to find a repeat performance of something," said Pearson, who dreams of videotaping the opera and translating it into German. "We're very aware that the story has many levels. But we're also hoping it's a piece that you can return to, hear the beauty of music, richness of textures."

"Audience members don't need to see it perfectly literally," she said. "They'll give you a lot as long as you're believing what you do and you keep the magic."

As twilight falls in the first act, Caterpillar, Mosquito, Paper Wasp, and Dung Beetle sing a

quartet. Caterpillar starts with, "I am a fat caterpillar, and I like that," joined by Mosquito's "Into the Night" and Paper Wasp singing "Get Out!" while outside, Dung Beetle belts out "Round and Round."

And, as they conclude, the soundscape of bugs, clacking and shh-ing, fades out.

*"The Bug Opera" will be performed at 7 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at Indian Hill Music at 36 King St. Sunday's performance is sold out. Tickets are \$8 for children and \$12 for adults. Information may be obtained at 978-486-0540 or [indianhillmusic.org](http://indianhillmusic.org).*