

Composer's Notes

When I first read the fabulous *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar, a novel which inspired at least three generations of gay men, I was instantly struck with the idea of transforming this historical subject into operatic form.

Both its intimate nature and wild grandeur seemed perfectly suited for what opera does best: creating a hyper-illustration of the dark inner lives of people up against formidable outer circumstances, while at the same time musically careening through the surreal dimensions of what lies in between. In my opinion, no other theatrical form truly refracts life into myriad vibrantly bright colors as much as opera does, and the tale of the Roman emperor Hadrian is a diamond perfectly cut for such a task.

In this new piece, I continue to follow my sincere love of long melodic lines mixed with rich orchestral textures, a pattern begun in my first opera, *Prima Donna*. But whereas the rainbow refraction is occurring, it's through a much darker and harsher lens.

This story unfolds amidst the upper echelons of a brutal militaristic state and involves historical facts wrapped up in total speculation and surrounded by the supernatural. My *Hadrian* is a surreal romp through time and space, mixing true occurrences with complete fabrication in order to illustrate a vivid "creative snap shot" of the Classical era.

The opera focuses on the emperor's true but problematic love of the beautiful male youth, Antinous. All the while, the dark specter of monotheism rises in the distance, heralded by the Jews and early Christians, which would ultimately destroy the lovers' ancient pagan belief system. Historical research shows how huge tracts of Hadrian's life and legacy were purposefully destroyed by vicious detractors — a tremendous tragedy, since judging by surviving accounts, he was a productive and just ruler. This, of course, is heavily complicated by his massacre of Jews, which cannot be forgotten, and is a major focal point of the opera, the results of which we are still confronting today.

His stabilizing of the Empire; his focus on philosophy, arts and architecture; his emphasis on diplomacy instead of brute force; and eventually his successful transfer of power. These achievements, as well as the dark stain of the massacre, would be better known and more deeply understood had it not been for Hadrian's overt homosexuality. Almost immediately after Hadrian's death, the patriarchal dictates of mankind took over the narrative, leaving the pathetic ancient observation that he "wept like a woman" when Antinous drowned to overshadow all his accomplishments.

I continue to explore the fascinating ideas which swirl around the subject of my second opera. But I am a composer, and therefore my armchair intellectual reach should be superseded by the music — music that I hope you enjoy.

~ **Rufus Wainwright**