

Longfellow's 'Song of Hiawatha' coming to life on CD

The producer hopes the project stimulates interest in the art of story telling.

By CLARKE CANFIELD
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Longfellow's epic poem, "The Song of Hiawatha," was written 152 years ago, but Michael Maglaras thinks the story can be as appealing to modern-day audiences as "Superman" or "Star Wars."

Like Clark Kent and Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Indian hero Hiawatha has human traits and superpowers, while battling evil and doing good. Maglaras, the owner of a record company, is now producing a six-CD audio recording of the poem due for completion in late summer.

It's fitting that the CDs are being recorded in a studio in Portland, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's hometown, in the year of the 200th anniversary of his birth. Maglaras hopes the project will stimulate interest in both Longfellow and the art of storytelling.

Hiawatha, Maglaras said, is a saga with enough incredible stories -- involving giants, magicians, talking animals, Indian gods, fierce battles and a giant sturgeon that swallows Hiawatha whole -- to captivate today's audiences.

"We're convinced this story was intended to come alive," Maglaras said during a break in a recording session last month.

The production should appeal to people who want to be entertained in a "literate, intelligent, sensitive way," he said. "There is a silent majority out there of people who are hungering after entertainment of a different form."

Maglaras, 57, is a former opera singer who founded Two17 Records in Stamford, Conn. He has produced recordings of alternative rock and jazz music as well as poetry.

He began working on the Hiawatha project last year after reading the poem in its entirety and coming away impressed. The work, 22 chapters in all, is based on stories and legends of various North American Indian tribes.

When Longfellow published Hiawatha in 1855, it was an immediate success. Some 50,000 copies were sold, and it was translated into French, Italian, German and other languages.

In time it became one of the best-known American poems. Who doesn't know these lines: "On the shores of Gitche Gumee, Of the shining Big-Sea-Water."

Inside a small recording studio last month, Maglaras recorded -- performed is a more apt description -- the final eight chapters of the poem. As he recited Hiawatha's eight-syllable lines, his hands gestured left and right and above while his voice changed pace, pitch and volume as he transformed from character to character.

Maglaras' opera training has come in handy in acting out more than 45 voices, ranging from the narrator to Hiawatha to seven varieties of birds, gods, old men and women, animals, monsters and magicians. Sound effects -- with Indian drums, flutes and shaker instruments -- will be added later.

"He brings a drama to the poem," said Michael McInnis, who is recording the production at his studio. "Older works are easily dismissed because they fall into the realm of slightly archaic language. He's bringing a drama to it that has brought the story and the beauty of the poem alive."

Although "The Song of Hiawatha" was a commercial success, it was criticized for being overly sentimental and parodied for its monotonous meter.

Among Indians, it has been criticized for perpetuating Indian stereotypes but also praised for showing Indian culture -- even a romanticized version -- to whites at a time when wars with Indians were still being fought.

"There is evidence certainly that a good many Indians accepted the poem," said Alan Trachtenberg, a retired Yale University professor and the author of "Shades of Hiawatha."

Maglaras maintains that the poem is a "great national epic" worthy of a dramatic performance -- not just a reading.

"Hiawatha in its entirety has not been recited aloud in over 120 years anywhere we can find," he said. "And certainly never with sound effects and Native American music and all the things we're doing."

Steve Bromage, assistant director of the Maine Historical Society, said he thinks there's a market for a CD set of the poem. More than 15,000 people each year visit the Wadsworth-Longfellow House, the home where Longfellow spent his youth that is now owned by the society.

"You'd be amazed at the people who come through here and feel a connection to Longfellow," Bromage said.

Maglaras plans an initial run of 5,000 or so boxed CD sets with a cover photo of Longfellow in his older years, a bushy beard and flowing white hair and a cape about his shoulders. The CD sets will sell in the \$30 range.

He is also planning a live performance in December where he will read "The Song of Hiawatha" from cover to cover in an auditorium in Portland. The performance is expected to take up to five hours with four intermissions.

Maglaras finds inspiration in the city where Longfellow grew up and is now the home to Longfellow Square, Longfellow Statue, Longfellow Books and the Wadsworth-Longfellow House. Not far from the recording studio is a brewery that makes Longfellow Ale.

"We're delighted to be recording this in Portland," he said, "because this is Longfellow country."

