Scene XIII: The New Opera (1994-2021)

Bengtson: The Maids (1994)

Swedish composer Peter Bengtson, born in 1961, is clearly a modern composer in the full sense of the word. He came of age at just about the same time that the events described in the previous *Interlude* were taking place: the deterioration of operatic singing as well as the edgy, often confused staging, later combined with Virtue Signaling and Social Justice.

For his chamber opera *The Maids,* however, he reached back in time to a 1947 play by Jean Genet, which in turn was based on a real-life story as bizarre as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho.* This involved two sisters, Christine and Léa Papin, who worked as maids for the well-to-do Lancelin family beginning in 1926. The lady of the house, Léonie Lancelin, became mentally ill and took out her mania on the Papin sisters, sometimes physically assaulting them. In February 1933, after returning from dinner out, Léonie and her daughter Geneviève discovered that the house was dark. The sisters explained that the iron they plugged in had a short and thus blew the power in the house. Blowing up in rage, Madame Lancelin began attacking the maids, but this time they fought back. Léa gouged her mistress' eyes out while Christine went to grab a knife and a hammer and returned to the scene of the fight. They used a heavy pewter pitcher to bash in the heads of both Léonie and Geneviève.

Genet elaborated on this drama in his play, making the sisters (now named Claire and Solange) incestuous lesbian lovers who construct elaborate sadomasochistic rituals with Madame. In Genet's scenario, there is no fight sparked by Madame's madness or the sisters' passion; on the contrary, according to Wikipedia, "Their deliberate pace and devotion to detail guarantees that they always fail to actualize their fantasies by ceremoniously 'killing' Madame at the ritual's dénouement."[1]

This might clearly have been an opera for our time, a story about lesbian sisters, but having them also be sadomasochistic and murderers clearly wasn't going to score points with the Politically Correct crowd. This is unfortunate. There are bad apples in *every* barrel, gay or straight, and the fact that they happened to be both lesbians and sadomasochists who took their fantasies too far was clearly an application of Freudian psychology taken to an ultimate extreme for dramatic purposes. When Cincinnati Opera director Nicholas Muni staged *The Maids*—on a double bill with Ullmann's *The Emperor of Atlantis*—it caused a sensation bordering on scandal, and was one of the reasons why Muni's contract was not extended.

And, alas, Muni was one of the very few stage directors who have had the courage to stage this opera, which otherwise only exists in the form of its one recording.

It is clearly not surprising that Bengtson's music is edgy, using modern harmonies. What is surprising is that he also interweaves melodic lines into it, thus defusing what could have been another *Lear* or *Die Soldaten.* Indeed, there's a certain quality about this music that puts one in mind of a *film noir* soundtrack from the 1940s, albeit a very high quality one on the level of a Bernard Hermann, George Antheil or Alan Shulman.

Which is not to say that the music does not have its edgy moments; indeed, the opening monologue, though including rapid trills for the soprano, walks a tightrope between Alban Berg and Hermann. One thing that strikes you is that, for a "chamber" opera, the orchestra is rather full-sounding; it is not at all light and airy, as you might expect, but dark and foreboding. (I immediately thought of Bernard Hermann's music for *Hangover Square,* a film about an insane concert pianist.) And the Hermann influence is not just in my imagination: when Madame sings about love, Bengtson uses a four-bar quote from Hermann's score for Hitchcock's *Vertigo.*

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Maids

But Bengtson is an excellent composer, thus the music for *The Maids* is ever-changing despite its Hermann references. The lines for the sisters are even more jagged and angular than those that Berg wrote for *Lulu.* By keeping the vocal line at such a fever pitch, only the orchestra provides a slight respite from the edginess of this score, and the music is in fact *so* dramatic that all the performers would have to do is rather minimal dramatic acting in order to make an impact. Being an hour-long, one-act work, the opera moves like greased lightning—a more psychotic version of *Elektra,* you might say. The only break comes when—the phone rings! Then, the orchestra stops and we get spoken rather than sung lines. When the singing resumes, however, it is surprisingly soft and lyrical, accompanied by equally soft, rumbling tympani and a few pizzicato low strings…the calm before the storm. In this section, Bengtson's vocal lines are more graceful and lyrical. When the orchestra resumes, it is with harp, flute, high winds and strings as the vocal line remains fairly lyrical but not conventional. There is another spoken scene, this one much more dramatic, beginning in undertones but building up to shouts. When the drama ramps up once again, the music stabs and cuts like a knife.

By means of these various devices, pushing the envelope and then pulling back, Bengtson managed to create a wonderfully diverse and creative score. He also managed to accomplish what Reimann could or would not do in *Lear,* which was to provide more contrast in the music and less of a monolithic, edgy "wall of sound." It's rather a shame that the plot of *The Maids* is still so offensive to people; the diversity of the music reflects the almost schizophrenic states of mind of the principal characters, reflecting their moment-to-moment changes of mood, mindset and motive. In the fourth scene of the opera, Bengtson tosses in some music reminiscent of, yet different from, the "drowning" music in *Wozzeck.* His pacing and alternations of mood and the psychological state of his characters is brilliant and unerring. Later in this scene, Bengtson combined a steady, almost stomping beat with harsh, edgy, metallic-sounding chords—then backed off just as quickly, resuming his soft, sustained but similarly edgy chords behind the semi-lyrical, semi-parlando vocal music, on which it fades out.. Not a note or scene in this piece is superfluous or uninteresting.

Fortunately, the sole recording of this opera, difficult to find as a hard copy but easy to locate for streaming or download, presents a first-class performance with soprano Anna Eklund-Tarantino as Claire, mezzo-soprano Eva Pilat as Solange, contralto Gunilla Söderström as Madame and conductor Niklas Willén.

Rautavaara: Aleksis Kivi (1996)

Einojuani Rautavaara (1928-2016) was a composer admired to the point of idolization in his native Finland, but taken with a grain of salt nearly everywhere else except in England. I never quite understood this although here in his finest opera, the subject matter, like that of Smetana's *Dalibor,* relates so much to his native culture that it is not always appreciated elsewhere.

The historical Aleksis Kivi (1834-1872), considered Finland's greatest writer and author, was a figure of such importance in his home country that he was ranked with Pushkin and Goethe, but outside Finland he is not as well known. Kivi wrote a collection of poems and a dozen plays, including *Seven Brothers,* which took him a decade to finish. A proponent of realism in literature, Kivi was out of step with the Romantic movement that was at its height during the bulk of his career. He survived vicious attacks from critics and fellow writers to establish himself, but his health failed and he died at the age of 38. His birthday is celebrated today as Finnish Literature Day.

As in the case of Reimann's *Lear,* the idea for this opera was given to Rautavaara by the principal singer in the cast, in this case baritone Jorma Hynninen. To summarize the plot as best I can, there is a prologue showing Kivi at the end of his life, visited by a Professor of literature,

August Ahlqvist, who berates him for his “disgraceful” literature. The first act then opens in a brighter mood and happier time in the author’s early years when his creativity was at full flower. Kivi, whose real last name was Sternvall, is visited by his patroness, Charlotta Lönnqvist, and her pupil-assistant Hilda, to whom Aleksis reads one of his recent poems. They are joined by a group of well-wishers—members of the artistically progressive Young Finns—who congratulate him on winning a prize for his play, but Aleksis criticizes one of them for his “cheap aesthetics.” Kivi’s view was that the common people should not be described in prosaic terms but given ideals that they should strive for.

In Act II the mature Kivi, embattled by the literary establishment and embittered by fate, begs Professor Ahlqvist to support the publication of his books, but after poring over them for a while Ahlqvist just silently walks out. Kivi then hides from the band of Young Finns, ashamed of his failures. After Kivi is given some money by a supporter and goes out for some liquid fortification, Ahlqvist monologizes that such “defilers” of the national language must simply not be supported but crushed.

Act III opens with Kivi going into an empty theater to drink and meditate until the mythical beings in his subconscious appear to him in frightening hallucinations. (He’s got the DT’s.) He then falls asleep, with half of the last act taking place in real life and the other half in his visions. Ahlqvist reappears, pushing a decrepit old poet who he idolizes but who opposes Kivi, along in a wheelchair. Characters from Kivi’s play, *The Cobblers on the Heath,* appear, possibly from the stage and possibly from the author’s imagination. Charlotta tries once again to rescue Kivi, but it’s too late. Ahlqvist now appears as a devil with horns. In the epilogue, set in the mental hospital, Kivi encounters his younger self and sings of an “Isle of Bliss.” The doctor, another manifestation of the evil Ahlqvist, ushers Charlotta in. The final song presents a vision of the Isle of Death which awaits him.

As one can judge from the above, the opera doesn’t so much lack for drama as it lacks for action. Kivi must be played by a baritone with an outstanding voice and far-above-average acting skills, and its success or failure onstage cannot be covered over with moronic and irrelevant “Regietheater” staging filled with naked nuns and/or insane people. And yet *Aleksis Kivi* is a universal topic, the struggle of the individual artist against society and the artistic establishment. One thinks of such tragic figures as Robert Burns or Franz Kafka, those tilters at literary windmills who were crushed in their lifetimes but glorified after their tragic early deaths.

Yet the opera deserves survival if for no other reason than that it contains some of Rautavaara’s most hauntingly beautiful and inspired music. Highly lyrical despite its modern harmonies, the music is absolutely transcendent; it shimmers and glows in one’s ears and mind like the remnants of a beautiful dream, even in its dour, fatalistic moments. It’s so good, in fact, that it grips you from the first notes and never lets go. It’s not so much that you *can’t* escape it so much as that you don’t *want* it to end. And oddly enough for a modern composer, Rautavaara wrote in a largely tonal style with occasional real arias, albeit modern ones, in which the soloists’ voices resound—particularly Hynninen, who is in fabulous voice from start to finish. Kivi and his buddies even get a pretty good drinking song in Act II. Atonality only comes into the opera during the Act III mad/hallucination scene. Thus, for me at least, it is the extraordinarily high quality of the score that places it on an exalted level.

The only times when one’s attention wavers during this opera is when Ahlqvist is onstage, because his is a speaking part and not a singing role. Apparently, Rautavaara wanted a first-class speaker in this role, and according to Wikipedia, Lasse Pöysti was one of Finland’s greatest dramatic actors, but of course in these moments all Rautavaara could do was create a sort of “holding pattern” in the music behind Pöysti while he pontificated to the struggling author. Yes, Rautavaara made up for this with absolutely sparkling music for Charlotta and Helen, and except for

the Ahlqvist moments the music never lacks for imagination or color, but this, too was a flaw that made for some dull moments within an otherwise lively and organic musical creation.

The music is thus a strange yet fascinating mixture of French impressionist orchestration, light, transparent and colorful, often leaning on the winds to create its effects, melodic but not entirely conventional lyric lines for the singers, and harmonies that utilize whole-tone scales and chromaticism. This heady blend makes it a sort of cross between Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* ballet, Szymanowski's *King Roger,* and the largely conversational style of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride.*

Although Rautavaara builds his drama carefully, one can sense from the shift in the music at the beginning of Act II that Kivi is starting to lose his grip on reality; the stresses of his battles with the literary establishment is starting to take its toll, though it is not yet at the breaking point. Kivi's "mad scene" walks a fine line between his strange visions and his struggle to keep a hold on reality. In addition, his final scene is deeply moving; the soft orchestral ending just fades away into nothingness.

We are again fortunate that the sole recording of this gem is excellently sung and acted by baritone Jorma Hynninen (Aleksis Kivi), speaker Lasse Pöysti (August Ahlqvist), mezzo-soprano Eeva-Liisa Saarinen (Charlotta), soprano Helena Juntunen (Hilda) and bass Jaakko Hietikko (Uncle Sakeri), conducted by Markus Lehtinen.

Eötvös: Tri sestry [Three Sisters] (1998)

Péter Eötvös (b. 1944) is the successor to György Ligeti among modern Hungarian composers. He writes in a similar style, yet has his own methods of constructing melodic lines and harmony. He has written, to date, 12 operas, the last being *Sleepless* in 2021, but the one I chose for inclusion here is *Tri sestry,* his first large-scale opera.

Commissioned by famed conductor Kent Nagano, it is based on Anton Chekhov's 1900 play concerning the lives of three sisters through various stages of a three-year period. It has one of the largest assemblage of characters of any Chekhov play though it centers around Olga, Masha and Irina Prozorov and their brother Andrei. These siblings, all very intelligent and highly educated in their birthplace of Moscow, are taken for granted in the provincial town to which their father moved the family. The sisters hate their current lives and dream of returning to Moscow. A year after the father's death, Olga is a lowly high school teacher bored by her job. Middle sister Masha married young to Kulygin, who is also a high school teacher. He dotes on her, but she has since found him dull and uninteresting. Baby sister Irina, only 20 when the play begins, dreams of devoting her life to meaningful work. As for Andrei, he wants to be a university professor but, lacking the opportunity, becomes a small-time town clerk. Depressed and disillusioned, he wastes away his life drinking and gambling (which are practically national hobbies for many Russians, even today). Of course, Chekhov embellished this story with side issues, such as the mutual love between Masha and Vershinen who are, sadly, trapped in unhappy marriages.

Tri sestry can thus be viewed as a feminist play written 65 years ahead of its time—yet I can't recall its ever being held up by feminists as a harbinger of their cause. Perhaps the fly in the ointment is that none of the three sisters are really very pleasant people; they are, to put it bluntly, not just intellectuals but snobs who pretty much hate everyone who isn't on their level of intelligence The strangest thing about Eötvös' opera is that all the female leads are sung by *countertenors.* I've yet to find an explanation for this, but I suspect that Eötvös just likes the countertenor voice and wanted to give them something to sing other than Baroque music. As for the opera itself, Eötvös viewed the plot as I do, a confused, tangled mess of personal relationships and inner power struggles, and thus broke down its four acts into three "sequences," in each of which he tells the same story with a different central character as its focus. In Eötvös' description of

how he changed the play, recorded and issued on the CD of the world premiere performance, he put it this way:

> In this way, the same scene is re-examined from different points of view. Chekhov's story has no real hero, but is a network of human encounters, all of them couched in a language of great sensitivity and dealing with relationships involving three people. As an example, we may single out the three romantic attachments.
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> Central to the first sequence is the character of Irina. She vacillates on a conscious and emotional level between her fiancée Tusenbach and his friend, the soldier Soljony. Irina's sense of duty ties her to Tusenbach, but her unconscious affection for Soljony finds expression both in silence and in outbursts of hysterical anger...
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> The second sequence is devoted to Andrei, who is the younger brother of the three sisters. He's a long-suffering character, unsuccessful in his profession and unsuccessful in his choice of partner. It is Natasha who finally marries him, but she's the black sheep of her family and of the bourgeois society in which they find themselves...her power over Andrei and his sisters is like a wreath that finally chokes all other emotions.
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> The third sequence belongs to Masha. Her husband, Kulygin, is the very embodiment of bourgeois self-confidence and tedium. Masha...would like to break free from this false and mendacious situation. Her hopes are pinned on Vershinin, the officer from Moscow. With him, she hopes to discover new work and find true love. In successive scenes, her husband and Vershinin sing of their love for her, but although Vershinin does so to the same music as Kulygin, Masha feels moved only by the officer's declaration of love.

Some of the music sounds like something from an insane asylum, evidently meant to convey their anger and confused states of mind. The orchestration is at times exceptionally light, even for a chamber orchestra, focusing on a few extremely high-lying violins, edgy winds and percussion, although there are many moments when the orchestra breaks through as if their emotions were exploding. There is also great sadness in some of this music, such as the Act I scene with Iruina, Tuzenbach, the Doctor and Soliony. Eötvös thus paces the opera in a less consistently edgy manner than Reimann's *Lear;* though it is not easy listening, the vocal lines do have a certain melodic structure which, again, could be taken out of the context of his score and often (but not always) set to more conventional, tonal harmonies. Occasionally, he uses "slithering" passages for the voices suggesting microtonality; in other moments, he requires extremely wide intervals, with leaps up or down over an octave or more. (Oddly enough, this technique was also used by Handel in one of his bass cantatas, *Nell'Africana Selve.*) Later in the first act, he actually includes a lyrical duet that almost sounds like something Tchaikovsky might have written (at least in the vocal line). With both the vocal lines and the orchestra constantly varying their sound and approach, he keeps listeners engaged, wondering what will occur next.

Both the world premiere performance with Oleg Riabets (Irina), Albert Schagidullin (Andrei), Alain Aubin (Olga) and Vyatcheslav Kagan-Paley (Masha), conducted by Nagano and Eötvös, and the 2019 live recording with Ray Chenez (Irina), Milolaj Trąbka (Andrei), Dmitri Egorov (Olga) and David DQ Lee (Masha) are well sung and conducted, but the latter not only has warmer, more realistic sound that is not as cold and clinical as the DG recording, but conductors Dennis Russell Davies and Nikolai Petersen give the music more forward momentum, thus coaxing even more highly dramatic performances from the various (and excellent) singers.

***Langgaard: Antikrist* [*Antichrist*]** (1923, rev. 1930, premiere 1999)

Here is yet another case of an opera premiering many decades after it was written, but unlike Viktor Ullmann, it wasn't because the composer had been sent to a Nazi death camp. Rued

Langgaard (1893-1952) was just plain weird as a composer. By profession he was an organist, which was a good thing because if he had depended on his composing activities for his income, he'd have starved to death. The booklet accompanying a recent CD of his chamber music—including a chamber group transcription of his *Music of the Abyss*—explains this pretty well:

> Rued Langgaard's inner division can be experienced at its extreme in the chamber music written between 1913 and 1924, in which the secure world of his youth is undercut by a dark musical undercurrent. This is most apparent in the work for piano, *Music of the Abyss,* which is presented here in a transcription for chamber ensemble by Allan Gravgaard Madsen (born 1984) of which this is the first recording. This meeting between Langgaard and Gravgaard brings to a climax the work's view of modern man's destructive strength in a crazy ride towards the abyss.[2]

To which we can add this comment from Wikipedia:

> His then-unconventional music was at odds with that of his Danish contemporaries but was recognized 16 years after his death...[he] composed in a late Romantic style, emphatically dramatic and endowed with colossal mood swings.[3]

Antikrist, to give the work its original title, is Langaard's only opera. It was originally written between 1921 and 1923, then submitted to the Royal Danish Theater, which rejected it then and several times later due problems with the censors. Langgaard then spent four years completely rewriting it, from 1926 to 1930. At that point, it was accepted by the Danish Broadcasting Company (DBC); they handed it over to conductor Launy Grøndahl, who worked with it for another decade before shelving it. The first audio-only premiere occurred on the DBC 28 years after Langgaard's death, in 1980, with the first recording made in 1988, but the stage premiere didn't occur until 1999. It is now considered Langgaard's greatest work—which does his corpse a whole lot of good. Leave it to musical academics to not recognize a masterpiece for more than half a century. Oh, by the way, in the 21st century there is now also an annual Langgaard Festival in Ribe, Denmark, which also helps his corpse pay its bills to keep his grave clean.

Even in its finished, revised state, *Antichrist* is a crazy, symbolic, non-linear work that was clearly a half-century ahead of its time. There is no plot in the conventional sense of the word. In the prologue, God agrees to let Lucifer send the Antichrist into the world for a certain period of time. In Scene 6, the Antichrist is cursed and dies; the rest of the opera involves, as Bengt Viinholt Nielsen puts it in the liner notes to the Danacord recording, "an ironic-sarcastic pillorying of the slogans and 'cure-alls' of modern civilization from an idealistic and religious point of view." Langgaard believed that society and churches has both failed us, and the only solution was man's personal relationship with God. Nielsen continues:

> The text is in a poetic, mystical, expressionistic, relatively inaccessible symbolic language where it appears to be the sound and "value" of the individual words that count rather than extended passages of coherent meaning.
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> In the libretto, Langgard has specified a number of "universal symbols" he wants to point up the scene: sphere, ram's horn, leafless tree, etc. He refers to Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) famous print Melancholia and to the Renaissance painter Luca Signorelli's (1441/50-1523) Antichrist frescoes in Orvieto Cathedral. These references help to make the opera "timeless," while the gas flames constantly mentioned in the stage directions were for Langgard

[2] Liner notes for Dacapo 8226152.
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rued_Langgaard

> the essential symbol of the period around 1900 – gaslights were the normal street lighting of the age, and for the composer their flickering was a symbol of Purgatory and the lost souls![4]

The musical language of *Antikrist* is in late-period advanced Romanticism, i.e., related to Richard Strauss, but 1:15 into it the music becomes strange: an organ sustaining a chord over pizzicato strings, indicating that something ominous is about to happen. When the opera proper begins around the seven-minute mark, the music bears some resemblance to early Zemlinsky and late Strauss, with constantly-moving, edgy harmonies beneath a resolutely tonal melodic top line. Being an essentially symbolist opera without a linear story line, the stage settings need only resemble somewhat a religious ceremony with a few moving figures. The music also bears some resemblance to the Venusberg scene in *Tannhäuser,* but skewed and turned on its ear. About 25 minutes into the opera, during one of the soprano arias, he references *Siegfried.* Yet at the half-hour mark, the music suddenly sheds its Wagnerian allusions and jumps feet first into Langgaard's much edgier style.

Since Langgaard was an organist himself, the organ is fairly prominent in *Antikrist,* which makes sense since the opera is a condemnation of organized religion and its empty promises to believers. As usual, Langgaard's music is constantly changing tempo, harmony and even meter: as Wikipedia put it, "colossal mood swings." In this respect of juxtaposing themes and musical ideas rather than continuing a musical flow *à la* Strauss or Zemlinsky, Langgaard was clearly ahead of his time. His chief failing, at least in the early 1920s when he wrote this work, is that he reached back in time to more Romantic forms more often than he reached forward, but we also have to remember that *Antikrist* was "substantially rewritten" in order to please the powers that be in the classical world in an effort to get it produced, thus he was probably trying to placate them by keeping it fairly conventional in places in addition to making it sound something like religious music. There are arias for the characters, although not conventional *da capo* form. Like the instrumental accompaniment, the vocal lines jump about and change tempo and meter within each piece—yet the primarily tonal setting of this opera does make it much more accessible to a reactionary audience than the edgier works we've been discussing.

Yet the music becomes increasingly odder from the half-hour mark onward, more *Elektra*-like in its harmonies and edgy, fragmented melodic lines, which suits the growing tension of the story (such as it is). Towards the end of the performance, after the Antichrist is killed, the music returns to a tonal, religious style with which Langgaard rides out the opera. It's clearly a kaleidoscope of musical styles and forms, but it works in context because the music is continuous and presents the drama primarily via the music rather than the words as such.

The video performance uploaded on YouTube, with bass Sten Byiel (Lucifer/Hate), soprano Anne Margarethe Dahl (Spirit of Mystery/Despondency), tenor Poul Elming and soprano Helene Gjerris, conducted by Thomas Dausgaard, is a good, solid, well-sung one with decent (if cheap-looking) staging, but the audio-only recording with Joachim Sipp (Lucifer/Hate), Kathryn Jane Carpenter (Spirit of Mystery/Despondency), Heinrich Wolf (Mouth That Speaks) and Marie-Claude Chapuis (Mystical Voice) is conducted in a much more exciting fashion by Niels Muus, who also draws a much more dramatic reading out of his singers.

Rautavaara: Rasputin (2003)

Having written a brilliant opera on the life of Aleksis Kivi, Einojuani Rautavaara later turned his attention to one of the most unquestionably dramatic and, many would say, demonic

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[4] From the liner notes to Danacord DACOCD 517.

characters of the 20th century, the “mad monk” Grigory Rasputin. Since the opera only exists as a DVD and not as a CD release, and no libretto is available online, one must rely on the English captions on the former and other critics’ descriptions online to get a sense of how he constructed his libretto. Gary Hoffman, reviewing the video on *Opera Today* in 2005, put it this way:

> The opera only covers Rasputin’s life from the time he entered the life of Russian royal family as they desperately sought relief for their hemophiliac son. He is seen as a dangerous influence by the established order, represented in the opera by two men seeking to marry the Czar’s daughter Irina ó Dimitri and Felix, whose rivalry is muted by the fact of their own homosexual relationship. As Rasputin’s influence grows, desperation sets in, and finally the Monk’s enemies can find no other option than to poison, stab, and shoot him to death. The conflagration to come reveals itself in a dream of the czar’s, as flames fill the stage.
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> Rautavaara’s opera, therefore, takes its place in the Faustian tradition as an innovative portrait of a malevolent but charismatic figure and the havoc he wreaks in a society of false piety. And like Mephistopheles, Rasputin makes for a great role for a deep, resonant voice.[5]

There are, however, some very interesting facets to the libretto, written by Rautavaara himself, particularly the fact that he has us see Rasputin through his own image of himself as a calmer of distressed souls, healer of the sick and protector of those who take him into their families and treat him as an equal. By doing so, Rautavaara makes him a somewhat sympathetic figure rather than the completely deranged character he was in reality. In one sense this is a diversion for those in the audience who know Rasputin’s real history and somewhat misleading for those who do not: the latter will then surely see his killing as a heinous crime rather than an attempt to rid the royal family of a demon in their midst, no matter how good he makes the young Czarevitch feel. But the one thing he does leave in the story is Rasputin’s bizarre belief that one can attain salvation only by giving in to drunken orgies and unrestricted sex: at one point, he sings, “wonderful sin, wonderful suffering,” and joins the orgies himself to prove it.

As Robert Levine put it in his review of the DVD on *Classics Today:*

> Rautavaara’s take on the historic figure of Rasputin is that it doesn’t quite condemn him. It presents him as Rasputin sees himself—certainly complex, but on a mission of some worth, and as a genuinely disturbed and maniacally pious man. If he is a major manipulator, we get no hint that he’s aware of it; he wants power because he thinks he knows what is right...He’s almost sympathetic, almost saintly, and some observers might find this a weakness–it seems the opera needs a true villain. Rautavaara’s Rasputin manages to combine being revolting with being magnetic–a daringly strange but compelling creation.[6]

Rautavaara’s music for *Rasputin* is considerably darker and more harmonically complex than that for *Aleksis Kivi.* There’s a certain quality in the orchestral prelude that reminded me of Bernard Hermann’s music for *Psycho*—not the musical style, but the overall vibe—which is, of course, wholly appropriate. The video production uses a fairly bare stage set, which is perfectly all right with me. Some of the costumes are stylized, sort of reminding one of early 20th-century Russia but plainer, while others are exact for the period (particularly Rasputin and the women). In some scenes, you see (quite appropriately) Russian icon pictures framed and hanging on the wall. Unlike *Kivi,* in which the vocal lines were often grateful and tonally melodic, the vocal lines in the opening scene of *Rasputin,* though not really atonal, constantly skirt tonality by be-

[5] https://operatoday.com/2005/12/rautavaara_rasputin/
[6] https://www.classicstoday.com/review/review-11823/

ing, one might say, multi-tonal: they jump in and out of neighboring keys with impunity. I wish that some modern composers, particularly Kaija Saariaho, whose operas are sonically flashy but not well-constructed musically, would take note of how well-structured Rautavaara's music was. This is something my friends who mostly listen to old operas can't understand: how can I admire both Verdi and Rautavaara? Because each in his own style was an excellent composer, that's why. They knew what they were doing and created well-made musical structures, something the Bel Canto and some of the Verismo operas did not do. I also found it interesting that he made the young Czarevitch a speaking rather than a singing role; this made the character believable without forcing us to hear some kid whining in a high-pitched voice.

Salminen, for whom the role of Rasputin was created, clearly has a "black" bass voice. I point this out because, as I've noted elsewhere, when you have recordings of new operas sung by the artists for whom they were written, they provide a "sound model" for others to emulate. Rasputin would not sound nearly as interesting or malevolent if sung by a light *basso cantate.* In his entrance music, Rasputin's lines, though not conventionally melodic, are not as harmonically schizophrenic as the others. My view is that Rautavaara was trying to establish him, at least at the outset, as a character who on the surface seemed benevolent and not yet utterly controlling or malevolent. And, as in *Aleksis Kivi,* the musical continuity of the opera is stunning and holds one's attention. When he first meets Nicholas, Rasputin gives him an icon of St. Simon the thaumaturge to protect him and his family. This was a saint who purportedly had the supernatural ability to perform miracles. Nicholas reveals that he and the Czarina live like prisoners trapped in their quarters because his son's hemophilia is a "state secret." Alexandra tells Rasputin about the "sick" behavior at court, with Felix being spotted in women's clothes. Rasputin condemns wealthy nobles but exalts the poor, who he considers Russia's greatest strength. His philosophy is that "God and Nature are as one; where the sun rises over the field, and you meet a dream on the meadow beneath the sky: your own dream beneath the eternal heavens, a life which did not exist." The chorus then sings offstage, to the accompaniment of very light strings, sounding much like Russian Orthodox Church music. Every little touch, musical and dramatic, in *Rasputin* makes sense and contributes to the ongoing drama."The Empire is collapsing," Rasputin sings over the chorus, "falling into Godlessness. There must be new Christs, besides every minister when decisions are being made." The music increases in both volume and tempo, rising to an ecstatic climax.

Rautavaara was also smart to being in some of the underlying problems in Nicholas and Alexandra's society: a large segment of poor people who received absolutely no relief from their suffering, but who the Czar was convinced would support him against insurgents (dream on), and the battle between "our Balkan brothers and the Turks," in which fight the Russians, of course, threw in with the Balkans, a waste of lives, time and resources. "We must attack Constantinople!" the crowd chants, to which Rasputin replies that there "must be no war; I see a terrible storm cloud over Russia: an ocean of tears, destruction and grief, tears and blood. Those who want war do not realize that it is a wish for death." Rasputin was clearly insane, but he also saw some things very clearly, and was right in this and other important issues. But this, of course, conflicted with the aims of the Nobles, and so the plot was hatched to kill him. The Church hierarchy joins in on the plot when they realize that he had become a libertine, seducing the royal women at court and holding drunken orgies. Eventually, one of the women he raped also volunteers to be an assassin. Visually, the production also includes some actual footage of people marching through the street with Orthodox icons, some soldiers, and some footage of the movie that the Russians made on Rasputin.

And, despite Rautavaara's portraying Rasputin "as he saw himself," his character flaws are clearly evident, particularly in his proselytizing for unrestricted sex on the one hand and religious

obedience on the other, not to mention his open condemnation of Felix's homosexual affair. He was clearly a complex and contradictory character…in short, a perfect subject for an opera. *Rasputin* is a brilliantly constructed and laid-out music drama, a *Boris Godunov* about a mad monk, part devil and part genius.

Happily, the one and only recording of this work, the DVD performance with the original cast headed by Salminen's brilliant Rasputin, Jorma Hynninen as Nicholas and mezzo-soprano Lille Paasikivi as Alexandra, conducted by Mikko Franck, is brilliant and riveting in addition to being well sung from top to bottom of the large cast.

Van de Vate: All Quiet on the Western Front (1999, premiere 2003)

No composer of high worth is as consistently neglected, marginalized and seldom performed as Nancy Van de Vate (1930-2023), for reasons unclear to me. A native of Plainfield, New Jersey, she studied piano at the Eastman School of Music and theory at Wellesley College, completing her studies in composition at the University of Mississippi and Florida State University. She later studied electronic music at Dartmouth and the University of New Hampshire. Van de Vate taught at Memphis State University, the University of Tennessee and various other colleges through 1980, as well as founding the League of Women Composers. She moved permanently to Vienna in the 1980s and, finding roads closed to her by American record labels, founded her own company, Vienna Modern Masters, for which she recorded not only most of her own music but the music of many other neglected composers such as Tsippi Fleischer. Perhaps she is still ignored by all the other record labels, including Naxos which has an extensive catalog of American composers but not a note of her music, simply because she had her own, but this is, in my view, unconscionable. She was clearly one of the most significant composers of her time, writing in a number of modern styles and including in her catalog works in virtually every genre except the symphony.

Van de Vate's operas tended to be intimate affairs, with small casts and delicate orchestration. They also tend towards a tonal bias rather than the edgy bitonality or atonality of her orchestral works. I think this is not just because she wanted them to be audience-friendly, although that was probably a consideration, but because she viewed the words in a musical way, and the spoken English of plays tends to have a lilt to it. Since an opera is sung drama, then, it follows that the music is to be sung with some semblance of grace. One also notes that, in addition to its transparency of sound, her orchestral accompaniments to her operas often reflected sounds in the natural world: waves if it's about the sea, winds over a meadow or, as in this case, simulated sounds of war.

This opera was based on Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel of the same name, which is primarily viewed as anti-war, and is, but which also explores, in Van de Vate's words, "the profound humanity of individual soldiers who were bravely but hopelessly involved in the war."[7]

The story centers around a young German soldier, Paul Bäumer. He and several of his high school friends, encouraged by their teacher Kantorek, enlist to help "save" Germany. but their idealistic dreams are dashed by the brutal treatment they receive from Corporal Himmelstoss on the one hand and the unimaginable brutality of life on the front. They eventually become focused on mere survival; visiting a dying friend in the hospital, Müller, one of Paul's friends, asks if he can have his boots since he won't be needing them anymore. They do, however, have various adventures, such as meeting up with some French women who give them sex in return for some bread. On a rare leave from the army, Paul returns home to visit his mother, but upon leaving is told by his sisters that she has had a relapse of her cancer. During one skirmish, Paul's friend Kat

[7] From the liner notes to Vienna Modern Masters 4004.

is shot on the way to their hut. Paul doggedly carries him on his back to the field hospital to have the wound taken care of. When he arrives, he feels relieved, thinking that Kat has been saved, but it turns out that he was hit in the back of his head by a small, stray bit of shrapnel, and is dead. After wandering back to the trench, Paul is also hit by a stray bullet and dies alone, lying on the ground as if sleeping. But, it turns out, he was the only casualty that day; there was so little battle fire that the army report consists of only those six words: "All quiet on the Western Front."

The opera uses a slightly larger-than-normal orchestra for her; most of her operas, focused on the text and the rhythm of the words, use a chamber orchestra, sometimes without brass, but in *All Quiet* the orchestral prelude features not only prominent trumpet parts but also pounding tympani, to emphasize the bleak atmosphere in which the soldiers find themselves. It is also harmonically denser and less grounded in tonality than her other operas, which move around their harmonic base but never quite go into atonality as much as here. The latter half of the orchestral prelude also uses multi-layered rhythms, another rarity in her theatre works.

The lines for the singers are not particularly tied to one key or another, but they are not atonal in the sense that Berg and Reimann were. They have a wonderful ability to follow the rhythm of the sung words simply and clearly without making a big issue of it. In this respect, her work is similar to that of Copland. Military band music is heard, muffled, in the background as we hear the voice of their teacher, Kantorow, trying to inspire his students to join the army and defend the Fatherland. As in the case of Monk's *Atlas,* however, one feels the absence of the visual element. This is a work that, also like *Death in Venice,* is tied very much to the visual. As explained earlier, this was much more frequently the case not only with modern opera but particularly with operas written during the television age.

Yet the music clearly stands on its own. Van de Vate wrote very varied music for the different scenes, and in this longer-than-usual opera for her, orchestral Intermezzi and little instrumental interludes abound. She was also very clever to make the events in Paul's Army life sound as close to "normal" as possible, only introducing more menacing elements when they occur. Except when a real battle was underway, much of the time the soldiers in World War I either marched, slept, or just kept watch, manning machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons that were only occasionally put into use. The trio of French women, ironically enough, sing as a trio, sounding something like the Andrews Sisters. "How can we be enemies," sings Paul, "when we all sit here together, like friends?" – the eternal question of war which, of course, changes allies and enemies as humankind marches blindly on from war to war.

Van de Vate strikes the right mood for every scene, yet despite its being an opera about war, it maintains a somewhat low-key approach because it is specifically an opera about Paul and his personal experiences. The scene in which he visits his mother while on leave is one of the most touching moments in it. Paul can no longer feel himself connected to the familiar sights of his home; his consciousness is too full of the images of war and his comrades. The music then becomes both eerier and more menacing as Paul returns to the front…we sense that something bad is about to happen.

The only weakness in the vocal writing here is that much of it falls into the same pattern: a few notes in the upper midrange of the singer, then a few notes a fourth or a fifth down. Other than that, everything is effective, producing an ominous yet strangely low-key drama.

The lone recording of this excellent work is quite good, with tenor Michael Polscer as Paul Bäumer, bass Marek Olbrzymek as Kemmerich, the Doctor and Leer, baritone Steven Scheschareg as Müller, Mittelstaedt and Kat, soprano Linda Healy-Steck as the unnamed French brunette and Paul's sister Erna, and tenor Dominic Natoli as Kantorek and the Major, conducted by Toshiyuki Shimada.

Debussy-Orledge: La Chute de la Maison Usher (1917-2004)

In Debussy's last two years, he worked feverishly to complete two one-act operas based on one of his favorite writers, Edgar Allan Poe, whose stories were very familiar in France through the translations by Charles Baudelaire. Ad in fact, he had started writing *The Fall of the House of Usher* as far back as 1908. In actuality, he first started on a rare comic story by Poe, *The Devil in the Belfry,* but by 1911 or 1912 he stopped, leaving less than a quarter of it completed. He then spent several years on *La Chute,* leaving it half-finished at the time of his death in 1918. Something might yet have come of it but his widow Emma, struggling to make ends meet, sold off pages of both manuscripts to collectors over the next decade (she also made gifts of some of them to friends). Interestingly, he wanted the opera to premiere at the Metropolitan, not because Poe was an American writer—Debussy never considered the opera being sung in any language but French—but because he admired their general director, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, as a real "wheeler dealer" with whom he might make a lucrative deal behind his publisher's back.[8]

In the early 21st century British musicologist Robert Orledge, a lifelong student and admirer of Debussy, began putting the pieces of the *Usher* puzzle together and eventually came up with a finished version that sounded remarkably and consistently like Debussy. Here is how he explained it to me:

> First of all, I studied the half of the opera that Debussy composed in great detail, noting how particular musical ideas were associated with dramatic moments or psychological states of mind – like the "Usher chord" (C major plus a high violin F sharp) that appears at strategic moments in Scene 2, often to arrest the dramatic movement suddenly and leave it suspended in space. I then started filling up the gaps from Debussy's final libretto, using his own ideas wherever possible, sometimes changing their harmonies or transforming them melodically and rhythmically, as Debussy does with Mélisande's theme in *Pelléas*. Joining Debussy to Debussy/Orledge required special care, but I have yet to find anyone who could identify the joins precisely without recourse to my markings in the vocal score of *Usher*. For I have nothing to hide and I explain the Debussian origins of each musical section as well. Occasionally in Roderick's rather repetitive monologue in Scene 2, I cut a few short passages that might interfere with the musical flow, and I had to write a "nightmare scherzo" (for the passage where Roderick tells his friend about another sleepless and horror-filled night in his crumbling ancestral home), as Debussy left no fast music for *Usher*, apart from the final bars.[9]

Orledge's reconstruction was not the first—Carolyn Abbate made one in 1975 which was premiered at Yale University in 1977, and Juan Allende-Blin made one in 1977 which was staged that year—but these were considered partial failures. Orledge's version was staged at the Bregenz Festival in 2006 and, happily, it has been performed several times since, such as at Austin, Texas (2006), and most recently by the San Francisco Opera in 2015.

It has been said that the main reason why Debussy kept abandoning work on *Usher* was that he wanted to get away from the style of *Pelléas et Mélisande,* yet every time he resumed writing he stayed somewhat in this style because it suited the mysterious character of the plot. But there are clear differences between the two operas, the first being *Usher's* brevity (it is less than an hour long) and the second being the frequent breaks in the musical line and increased tension created by faster tempi and sharp rhythmic attacks to point up the drama in the text.

In this respect it is closer in style to his symphony *La Mer* than to *Pelléas,* and indeed even

[8] As told to me by Robert Orledge in an interview I conducted with him in June of 2016.
[9] https://artmusiclounge.wordpress.com/2016/06/06/orledges-debussy-operas-on-cd-at-last/

such late Debussy works as *Jeux* still have traces of his earlier music in them. It was his signature style of writing. Because of this, Orledge respected Debussy's penchant for writing for only one singer at a time. Even when there are two characters in a scene, they never "duet" in the conventional sense. Despite this being a one-hour work, Debussy paced his sung lines relatively slowly though not as slow as in *Pelléas.* Listening carefully to Orledge's reconstruction, one notes his ability to cross both the earlier and later styles of Debussy into a seamless whole.

The opera begins with soft viola tremolos on a pedal B introduce a forlorn cor anglais, then a trumpet, briefly resolving into C. After unusual tone clusters and passing tones which color the music and push it towards the diminished—a typical Debussy device—we suddenly arrive at the major towards the end, with C-sharp dominating the beginning of the first scene, the only one in which we hear Lady Madeline sing. Again, her music is more angular rhythmically than Mélisande's *Mes longs cheveux*, and uses high-range *vocalise* (a new effect for Debussy) though clearly inhabiting the same sound-world, now in F sharp major. Muted horns and an eerie bass clarinet (along with bassoon) offset the regular beat laid down by the low strings. This is followed by a scene between The Friend and the doctor, discussing Roderick's strange condition which does not allow him to be exposed to daylight.

At Roderick's entrance, the higher instruments recede in volume (only a soft flute and violin are heard, followed by muted strings) as the protagonist greets his friend warmly but warns him that he and his sister are gravely ill. What I find particularly fascinating about the opera, as opposed to the story itself, is the way Debussy seemed able to combine in music the stated elements of physical illness and emotional anxiety with the implied elements of hypochondria and mental illness brought about in part by self-fulfillment. Roderick and Madeleine are deathly ill because they *expect* to be deathly ill. I ascribe this to the fact that, by Debussy's time, Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis were well known throughout Europe. It was thus easier for Debussy to "see" the Ushers' problems more clearly than Poe had, though the writer suggested that the house was "alive" and therefore able to respond to the illness and death of its inhabitants with its own collapse. I sensed that Debussy helped evoke the strange mental and emotional tensions in the story by this increased rhythmic element I alluded to earlier. Were this music to float along aimlessly like *Pelléas,* for instance, there would be no moments of high tension, like Roderick's outburst in A major, "Des flambeaux" (track 12), followed by a sudden increase to double tempo for the exchange between Roderick and his friend…a moment that would have been unthinkable in the context of *Pelléas*. In fact, I found that Debussy's tighter, more compact structure—a common feature of his late music—heightened the drama better than just a straight dramatic play based on the story could have done. Roderick's "nightmare scherzo" in the middle of scene 2, however, with its rapid tempo and interesting use of tympani (Orledge, who composed it, wrote and told me it was "a sort of short tympani concerto"), is a bit anomalous, but it ties in neatly with the feel of the drama Orledge, composing the finale of this opera, is also able to evoke strongly the tension of the Ushers as they near death and the demise of their house with stunning effect—almost a savagery that reminds one of Debussy's late piano and orchestral pieces.

This opera should clearly be part of the standard repertoire. It is musically interesting, dramatically taut and highly effective, and happily the recording featuring baritones William Dazeley (Roderick) and Eugene Villanueva (his friend), soprano Lin Lin Fan (Madeleine) and tenor Virgil Hartinger (Doctor), conducted by Christoph-Matthias Mueller, is highly effective.

Danielpour: Margaret Garner (2005)

Few modern operas, American or otherwise, premiered under such a ballyhoo of promotional hype as *Margaret Garner.* Written by white composer Richard Danielpour (b. 1956) and African-American librettist Toni Morrison, who had previously used the story of the historic

Margaret Garner for her novel, *Beloved,* it was initially a co-production of the Detroit, Cincinnati and Philadelphia Opera companies. These three organizations pooled their resources,, amassed a total of $2 million, and decided that the cast would contain noted operatic stars in several key roles rather than having each company mount it separately with whatever talent they could afford. This was especially beneficial to Cincinnati, the least affluent of the three companies, but the other two gladly agreed to include it because it was right over the river from the original site of the action (Kentucky) and also because the newly-opened Underground Railroad Freedom Center had its headquarters in the Queen City and could also promote it.

Internationally famous mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves gladly accepted the promoters' invitation to sing the title role, with the equally famous American baritone Rod Gilfry as her owner and nemesis, Edward Gaines. Another famous baritone, Gregg Baker, who had created a sensation at the Metropolitan Opera in *Porgy and Bess,* was signed to sing the role of Robert Garner, Margaret's husband. To round out this quartet of luminous stars, soprano Jessye Norman was contracted to sing the role of Cilla, Robert's mother, but sometime during the first rehearsals in Detroit she suddenly quit. In her place, the coalition signed soprano Angela M. Brown, who at the time had created a sensation at the Met in *Aïda,* to replace her. The remaining cast members would be filled out by each company's standard roster of artists.

The fifth cast member who was to have sung in every performance was tenor John Mac Master as the overseer Casey, but in Cincinnati he became very ill and his place was taken by a member of the company's young artists program, Mark T. Panuccio. Panuccio's bright, clarion voice with its healthy ring on the top notes and his obviously superior acting skills kept him in the role throughout the Cincinnati run. He later lost a lot of weight, changed his name to Marco Panuccio, and became the most popular operatic tenor in Cincinnati until his tragic early death at age 48. He also sang Casey in the Opera Carolina production.

One of the reasons why the promoters were so sure of the opera's success was that Danielpour wrote in a modern but very accessible style. His music was not bland, but rather combined a very skillful manipulation of themes and their development with tonality and, at times, something of a bias towards real jazz rhythms. He was also a very enthusiastic partner in the creation of this opera, which he had planned to write even before meeting Toni Morrison, thus he was inspired to compose some of his best music.

The pre-publicity in Cincinnati alone was the most intense I had ever seen in my 28 years of living here. There were no less that 11 related articles in the *Cincinnati Enquirer,* including four front-page stories; a half-hour-commercial-free TV program on WCPO on July 12, 2005, featuring interviews with Danielpour, Morrison, and the quartet of star singers; and a billboard campaign advertizing this opera independently of the rest of the season (a real rarity in Cincinnati). Every performance was packed. In fact, the demand for tickets was so high that an extra performance had to be hastily scheduled. I was indeed lucky to get two tickets to one of them.

Yet after the opera moved on to Philadelphia in February 2006, interest in it completely died off despite not only packed audiences but also very positive reviews. It never did move on to the Metropolitan Opera, but was given at Opera Carolina in 2006 and, finally, New York City Opera in 2007 before disappearing from the face of the earth. Danielpour has never pushed it since and there is no commercial recording or DVD.

So what happened?

For one thing, neither composer nor librettist pretended that the libretto was based on the real events in the life of Margaret Garner. The only three things that were factual were that the Garners were slaves of Edward Gaines in Kentucky, that they ran away and fled to Cincinnati where Harriet Tubman was running the "underground railroad," and that Margaret, upon being captured, was found to have killed her young son because she didn't want him to grow up in sla-

very as she had. Other things were changed for dramatic purposes, conflating the stories of other slaves on other plantations with the Gaines estate, among them the story—possibly false, never proven—that Edward Gaines forced himself on Margaret for sexual gratification. The opera also showed Robert killing the overseer Casey and being sentenced to death by hanging for it. But the descendants of the Gaines family were absolutely *furious* over the opera because it showed their family in an even more negative light than what really happened. Not that owning slaves and treating them as property was a good thing, mind you, but Morrison and Danielpour would have done well to change the family name. Unfortunately, Margaret Garner's real name was being used anyway, thus anyone who looked up the story could find out that Edward Gaines was her owner. To their credit, Morrison and Danielpour depicted him as a conflicted character, not inherently evil but determined to keep his "property" which included the Garners. One thing you learn is not to mess with these old Southern families descended from slave-owners. They all think of themselves as nice people who treated their slaves like family.

Since the opera was unceremoniously dropped after the Charlotte, North Carolina performance and nothing has ever appeared in the press or online, I can't say whether or not the Gaines family brought suit against Danielpour and/or Morrison, but as I say, they were clearly not happy campers when the opera hit Cincinnati.

Although the reviewers had generally good things to say about the opera, some complained of "dead" spots in it that needed to be tightened and shortened, as well as the "cliché-ridden" trial scene. The first act, with its many pop music references and Broadway-show like dance sequence for the black chorus, was for me the most problematic, but oddly enough I liked it better while watching the production than just listening to it later on the radio when it was broadcast. I also felt that, in a way, Danielpour did this deliberately to attract audience members who were not sophisticated in the ways of opera production. An opera that had, at least, some signifiers of popular music would certainly attract paying customers more than some more modern, edgy music. Halfway through the first act, the music clearly became more sophisticated although retaining strong elements of tonality, but also without cheapening the score. In a sense, *Margaret Garner* was Richard Danielpour's *The Consul,* and whether the descendants of Edward Gaines like it or not, it is a great opera.

One might argue that making the Gaines' and their overseer so vicious and controlling that the libretto was making up the audiences' minds for them by explaining the motives and the course of action. I would argue that slavery is slavery; it's the ownership of human lives by people who have no right to claim those lives as property except for the fact that they paid the slave-gatherers who carted those people to America against their will. And of course, there is still slavery going on in the world today, including sex slaves right here in the United States which millions of people turn a blind eye to because it doesn't "concern" them. But this is all part of the larger question not only of actual slavery but also the question of "indentured servants" who are not that far removed from slaves…and this still exists, too.

Thus I view *Margaret Garner* in the larger picture as an analogy for every person who feels physically and even legally trapped in a life they detest that was not of their own choosing. In addition to other changes in the story. Margaret only killed one child in reality, not two; she was not hung for her crime but resold to another plantation, and we also hear Margaret, Robert and Cilla discuss the slavery of the young versus the middle-aged who escaped, a dilemma that indeed kept several slaves on the "freed" plantation even after the Civil War, to work as sharecroppers. In the opera, we also hear Edward Gaines' daughter Caroline and her husband George Hancock, who symbolize the progressive white view of the era, ask Margaret for her opinion of love because they *respect* her opinions. Caroline and George also fight for her dignity and a human being and a fair trial when she is arrested…not for murder, but for "destruction of property."

We even hear Edward Gaines question his own inner feelings and motives when Margaret is sentenced to be hanged. These are not cardboard characters of a melodrama; Danielpour and Morrison invested them with hearts and minds and consciences. The cumulative result is staggering, lifting the drama of Garner's escape and murder of her child into the realm of true art.

After the murder scene, the curtain dropped suddenly and there was an orchestral interlude before the trial. I wondered at first about the need for this interlude, but looking around me I realized that Danielpour meant it to provide a few moments of reflection. I could hear the sobs and sniffles of many people in the theater: many women took that scene to heart.

In relistening to the opera now, with more critical ears than I had in 2005, I note a great many little details that I appreciate, such as the way Danielpour was able to constantly shift harmonies and rhythms behind the singers yet somehow make it sound smooth and organic. not disjointed or confusing. At times the orchestral music runs at a more angular rhythm than the sung lines, which adds edginess to the music without doing too much in the way of unusual tonality. More importantly, every single cast member did his or her best to produce crystal-clear diction. It isn't always perfect, but it's pretty darn close.

There were two funny moments, one intentional, one not. The intentional one came during the wedding scene, where Caroline explains to the guests why she asked the opinion of a slave about words of love. The guests sing in unison: "This is too subtle for us—time to say goodnight!" And they got up and left, boom, right away. The unintentional one came during the final, tragic scene. As Margaret's "lifeless" body was unhooked from the scaffold and then held aloft, one could see Graves trying *desperately* to look lifeless as the extras moved her around like a rag doll…but not quite succeeding. It almost spoiled a deeply dramatic moment.

Although there are no commercial recording of this opera, the radio broadcast of the Charlotte performance is online although the cast is less starry than the original. Both baritones were replaced, Gilfry by Michael Mayes and Baker by Eric Greene, and neither were as good as the originals. Angela M. Brown is also replaced by Angela Renee Simpson, but their voices are very similar. Stefan Lano conducts. Act I is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Bu3go4TGY4 and Act II at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0Jh0nx8600

Cipullo: Glory Denied (2007)

Some readers may feel that I'm being somewhat jingoistic by including so many American operas in this chapter, but the fact of the matter is that these specific American operas were not only all quite good but, in different ways, approaches to drama in music that had not been attempted by anyone else before them. Such is the case here with *Glory Denied,* written by Tom Cipullo (b. 1956), a New York-born composer whose father was a jazz bassist who used the professional name Ray Carle.

Glory Denied is not only an outstanding opera, but it seems to me the most outstanding work than Cipullo has written. It is also, as Cipullo himself states in the liner notes to the CD recording, "the first opera adapted from an oral history." It tells the sad but true story of Col. Floyd "Jim" Thompson, America's longest-held prisoner of war from the Vietnam era. Viewing himself as a young man, he recalls incidents from his nine-year ordeal, including attempts to escape, solitary confinement, torture, and being forced to sign a propaganda document. Yet somehow, he found the inner strength to survive it all and to do so with a minimum of mental and emotional deterioration.

The irony of all this, however, is that his wife, Alyce, was never told that he was still alive. Hearing that his plane was shot down, never receiving word of him thereafter and fearing the worst, she began dating another man and told her children that their father was dead. She refused to have his name inscribed on a POW bracelet, and in fact began legal proceedings to have him

legally declared deceased. After the POWs are released and come home, another man is mistakenly declared the longest-held prisoner, depriving Thompson of that honor.

Understandably, Alyce is shocked and upset by Jim's reappearance. She admits what she has done and offers to leave if that is what he wants, but Jim is willing to try a reconciliation. Having been away so long, however, he becomes more and more alarmed by the things that have changed in society since he left, shocked by the new permissiveness, what he sees as his wife's "immorality" and the disdain shown to Vietnam veterans. There is also a change in Alyce; she is no longer the docile housewife he left, but an assertive woman who refuses to be completely docile and obedient.

Jim goes to the church where they were married and asks to speak to the congregation. In the guises of both his younger and older self, he explains that his belief in God and the "love of a good woman" were what helped keep him alive. He tells Alyce that he has forgiven her, but she is offended by this, stating that she did nothing that requires forgiveness. The young Alyce is heard reading a touching letter to Jim. In the final scene, Jim is alone in his study. Now separated permanently from Alyce, illness having ended his military career, he is uncertain what to do with his life, finally consoling himself by repeating the phrase "One day at a time" as he did when he was a prisoner. He tries to stay positive and confident, but is still upset by it all—particularly by not having been given a bracelet.

The plot of this opera, then, goes far beyond the specific story of Jim Thompson. It is a reflection on the deep societal changes which to this day still separate Americans and cause both social and political friction, and in some instances these same societal changes are causing friction in other countries as well. It was a brilliant idea of Cipullo's to put these issues into an opera that I feel is one of the most significant ever written. Happily, it is still revived and performed, at least up until the point that these words are being written in 2022, but being essentially a chamber opera of short duration and small forces, it is clearly not a work for the big operatic barns of Europe and America. It was also very smart to present Thompson not as the "cultural dinosaur: he became, but rather as a sympathetic figure to be pitied and understood.

Cipullo's music follows in the traditions of other modern American operas, including Hoiby, Monk and Van de Vate. The sung lines are lyrical but not conventionally melodic, the very light orchestral accompaniment using some modern harmonies but not in so harsh a way as to alienate the average listener. As in Nancy Van de Vate's operas, the sung lines follow rather than "lead" the rhythm of the sung text; Cipullo frequently punctuates his music with fragmented rhythms and percussion accents. Alyce has the most lyrical and grateful music; Jim's is more fragmented, reflecting his state of mind. In the first scene, Cipullo very intelligently sets up conflicting moods and words between young Jim and older Jim, along with the younger Alyce, as a way of setting up the drama to come when the changes occur. The frequent harmonic and tempo shifts in this scene are sometimes extreme, clashing with one another to set up the drama to come. In a few places, I felt that the percussion effects were a bit overdone, but not too much to unduly unbalance the composition of the opera. And, naturally, the more atonal moments are reserved for the most tense moments. In the scene where Jim addresses the congregation, the music becomes calmer and more consonant, reminding one of Copland. Interestingly, the music stays calm, but has some uncomfortable harmonies, when Alyce sings, "I don't give a shit whether you forgive me or not."

This is not an opera for passive listening. One is immediately caught up in the dichotomy of Jim Thompson's situation, the various implications of all these things in his psyche and his highly emotional reaction to them, exacerbated by the tension of his nine years in captivity. And once again, as Jon Vickers put it, great art "asks questions but does not provide answers." Each person in a society needs to adapt to changing times; the refusal to do so can only lead to two

things, neither of them good: an internal struggle that never ends or, worse yet, forming unholy alliances with others far crazier and more violent who can, and possibly will, physically attack those they disagree with.

In the sole recording of the opera, all of the singers have decent to excellent voices although clarity of diction is again an issue for some of them. Baritone Michael Mayes is older Thompson, tenor David Blalock younger Thompson, soprano Caroline Worra older Alyce, Sydney Mancasola younger Alyce, and Tyson Deaton the conductor.

Birtwistle: The Minotaur (2005-07, premiere 2008)

Although 90% of the modern, edgy style of classical music, particularly British music, stems from the rise to prominence of composer Thomas Adès in the late 1980s and early '90s, he did have predecessors, of which the two most famous were Harrison Birtwistle (1934-2022) and Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016). Although co-founders of the avant-garde British performance group The Fires of London in the late 1960s, they went their separate ways in the early 1970s. Maxwell Davies modified his composing style in the 1980s, becoming more tonal and less edgy than in his younger years, but Birtwistle remained true to that style until the very end.

Of Birtwistle's ten completed operas, the one that made the greatest impact and caused the most controversy was *The Minotaur,* a retelling of the ancient Greek myth by librettist David Harsent. The Minotaur was a legendary half-man, half-bull who purportedly lived on the island of Crete. Although he is extremely dangerous, living on human blood, he is fortunately imprisoned in a labyrinth from which he cannot escape. He does not understand his dual nature; in his waking hours, he is primarily an animal running on instinct. His human side only comes out in sleep (and, ultimately, death). Ariadne, deported to Crete, does not live in imprisonment but she cannot escape the island, which constantly reminds her of her tragic personal history in which her father King Minos's decision to keep a white bull instead of sacrificing it to Poseidon caused her mother to mate with the bull and thus produce the Minotaur, her half-brother. Ariadne falls in love with the hero Theseus and helps him escape the labyrinth after he kills the Minotaur with the aid of a string of glittering jewels. In his retelling of this legend, librettist David Harsent takes a new tack, considering the inner world of the Minotaur himself and suggesting a dark, compelling reason for Ariadne's intense love of Theseus: that she hopes that, by saving him, he will take her back to Athens—to which end she is willing to sacrifice her own younger brother in addition to feeding the "innocents" to the Minotaur. Thus, both of them view the Minotaur as a lever to deliver them both in slightly different ways. In this web of deceit, cruelty, loss and betrayal, no one is really innocent except, ironically, the Minotaur himself, who in his waking hours has no self-consciousness and thus no control over anything in his life. In a sense, then, the Minotaur symbolizes an Everyman controlled by forces beyond his control. In this opera, too, the Snake Woman is sung by a countertenor. Anne Orozio, writing on MusicWeb International,[10] suggested that Harsent and Birtwistle thus intended the Snake Woman to be a counterpart to the Minotaur: the former is half-man and half-woman while the latter is half man, half-beast. But Birtwistle also includes two more countertenors among the "Innocents." Let's just cut to the chase: the British have an absolute fetish for the countertenor voice. They are the ones who constantly shove them into Handel operas in roles originally written for castrati when, as I pointed out many chapters ago, Handel and every other Baroque composer who wrote such roles specifically stipulated that if a castrato soprano or mezzo was not available, those roles should be sung by WOMEN. But the Brits simply don't care. It's a countertenor culture, and they'll have their countertenors one way or another.

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[10] http://www.musicweb-international.com/sandh/2008/jan-jun08/minotaur1504.htm

As in the case of *Death in Venice* and *Lear,* the title role of *The Minotaur* was constructed for a specific singer, in this case British bass John Tomlinson. Tomlinson's voice had deteriorated somewhat by the time he performed this opera, but Birtwistle played to his strengths, writing in the one register of his voice that was still intact and thus could make a great effect by his relying on his histrionic instincts. He thus was able to bring a sympathetic quality to the character that worked supremely well despite the edgy music, so rhythmically complex and so technically difficult that, like Eötvös' *Tri sestry,* it required two conductors. The score sample which follows on the next page[11] gives one an idea of the music's extreme complexity.

Yet although the music is indeed edgy, one can immediately sense a great difference between Birtwistle and Adès. The latter is all edginess and sharp angles, whereas the former often phrases his music in a legato fashion, which, oddly enough, marks a similarity between Birtwistle and Britten. This also marks a similar difference between Birtwistle and Reimann, who was all about loud, fast, edgy music that was purposely designed to sound disjoined and incoherent, reflecting the tense, angular trajectory of *Lear.* Ariadne mimes in slow, elegant movements during the opera's orchestral prelude. Happily, the video recording of this opera includes English subtitles on the screen, otherwise you wouldn't be able to make out a single syllable that mezzo-soprano Christine Rice sings. Yes, she is a British mezzo singing in English, but without the subtitles you wouldn't know this. Not a single syllable she sings is intelligible as a word. ("My father's year-in, year-out revenge," for instance, emerges as "Muh fuh-thers yairin, yairout ruh-vuhnge.") As I've mentioned over and over, this is a major detriment among most star singers nowadays, and for whatever reason, neither composers, conductors nor audience members seem to care. Why? You'd have to ask them. I don't have a clue. And it's nut just because they're singing in British English. The cast of *Death in Venice,* reviewed earlier, was perfectly clear in every single syllable without the need of captions on the screen. Birtwistle's vocal lines are consistently angular, moving around the atonal landscape like jagged crags, yet there is always a legato line at work. Although the orchestral score is just as atonal as *Die Soldaten,* it is much lighter in texture, providing "holes" in the score for the singers to be heard more clearly. The stage set is primarily bare and mostly dark; except for the individual characters, the chorus moves in slow, measured paces, sometimes with simple but stylized dance movements, which adds to the strange and ominous ambience of the drama.

Interestingly, the title character, about whom this opera is all about, doesn't make his appearance until 45 minutes in. As expected, he enters with roaring sounds, not words, as percussion bangs ominously around him. The chorus shouts, "This is a road with no end! Go back the way you came!" and "This is a lock with no key! Go back or else you die!" The first words the Minotaur sings, a scene or two later (including a slow, soft orchestral interlude behind projected images of the ocean), are, "Daedelus made this my road without end, my lock without a key…I know all of it except the path that leads to the world outside." A disembodied voice answers: "The world outside is lost to you…When you dream, you dream only of the labyrinth." "The piece has a line that goes through it, a never-ending line, yet it changes," Birtwistle said of this opera, "For instance, the saxophone only plays when Ariadne is singing, but not all the time… and that sort of happened."[12]

The greatest weakness of *The Minotaur* is its over-wordy, pretentious libretto. Harsent apparently thought himself a successor to Shakespeare, thus the monologues are full of purple prose and overdone metaphors that would never occur to anyone to say or sing. In the opening scene, for instance, Ariadne sings on and on about "walking the shoreline like *a* flightless bird

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[11] https://www.nkoda.com/instrument?ref=e3004c3f-198d-41c2-8bd1-3678045b46c1

[12] From spoken interview on the YouTube video of the production.

Eight: a proposition

Bass Cl 3
Bass Cl 4
take Chase Cl
Solo
libero
Bsn 2
take Cbn
small Bass Drum
very large Bass Drum
Perc
Tam-tam
Nipple Gongs
Hp 1.2
Cimb
Db

Bsn 1
con sord
Tbns
con sord
près de la table
Hp 1.2
ARIADNE
Then break it. forget you are The - se -
THESEUS
I will go in - to him! I made a pro - mise

…The moon's a goddess though her name is secret… Gull-cry their death song, The wind is a tangle of voices, drawn to a whisper… The stones on this shore have smooth faces and tiny, hard hearts. They want to be flawless, they want to feel the beat of the sea. They want to be washed clean, scoured by salt. I know what they want." Shakespeare never tried to give motives or needs to inanimate objects in such a mundane manner.

Aside from the diction problems, the video recording issued of this work is a good one, with John Tomlinson as the Minotaur. baritone Johan Reuter as Theseus, mezzo-soprano Christine Rice as Ariadne, countertenor Andrew Watts as the Snake Priestess and tenor Philip Langridge as Hiereus, conducted by Antonio Pappano and Renato Balsadonna.

Tafreshipour: The Doll Behind the Curtain (2015)

Amir Mahta Tafreshipour (b. 1974) is an Iranian composer who studied in both his native country and England before moving to Denmark. Among his many works, he is perhaps best known for his harp concerto *Persian Echoes,* premiered in 2005 on the BBC. *The Doll Behind the Curtain* premiered in 2015, also in Great Britain, at the Tête a Tête Opera Festival in London.

A chamber opera running less than 70 minutes, *The Doll Behind the Curtain* touches on the topic of societal alienation as well as the universal subject of the *idée fixe.* Based on a short story from the 1930s by Iranian writer Sadegh Hedayat, who cited as his influences Poe, Chekhov and especially Franz Kafka, it tells of Mehrdad, a shy, introverted Iranian studying at Le Havre in France. He discovers a beautiful female mannequin in a junk shop, and buys it shortly before returning to Iran. Mehrdad believes he has found a beauty that is flawless and unchanging—as the booklet for the recording put it, "a passive object of adoration with which to share his secret life." Yet by the second act, Mehrdad finds himself isolated from both his parents and his adoring fiancé, Bita. She is his cousin, the engagement pre-arranged by his father who tries to nudge Mahrdad into marrying her. By this time, however, the mannequin has morphed from a passive object of adoration into "a demanding mistress." Sneaking into Mehrdad's room while he is gone, Bita confronts the mannequin. Mehrdad returns, now afraid of the power the mannequin has over him, and decides to "kill" it. But just as he takes out a pistol and moves to shoot the mannequin, a "figure" identical to it with its green dress and blond wig appears. Mehrdad goes to shoot the mannequin and pulls the trigger, as it turns out, on an empty chamber in the pistol. The figure shrieks and runs towards Mehrdad with its arms outstretched. Frightened, Mehrdad shoots at the moving figure; both fall to the floor. The figure's blond wig falls off, and underneath it is the image of Bita—who also suddenly goes limp. After Mehrdad manages to stand up again, he goes into the alcove where both he and the mannequin give out despairing cries. Curtain.

In some ways, this story shares a theme similar to that of Montemezzi's *L'Incantesimo,* where the main character is shocked to discover a deer in the woods that has the face of his wife, Giselda. That story was written by Sem Benelli, also in the 1930s. Apparently, there were writers back then who used symbolism to define, each in his or her own way, the essence of women who were loved but apparently misunderstood in terms of their essential being. One is also reminded of E.T.A. Hoffmann's famous story, later used in Offenbach's opera, of a man's infatuation with a mechanical doll which he not only believes to be human but falls in love with based purely on her "perfect" good looks. Only the destruction of the doll before his own eyes brings him to his senses. The introduction of the Doppelgänger by Hedayat created a fantasy figure which combines the qualities of both the artificial object of beauty (the doll) and the real-life woman.

In this opera Tafreshipour created light, transparent orchestral textures, modal harmonies and often slow-moving melodic lines. The goal of such music is to create, as much as possible, an hypnotic spell on the listener, enveloping him or her in a sound-world quite different from even that of advanced European harmonies—this despite the fact that the very opening music of

this opera is loud and dissonant, with what sounds like a wordless choral interjection—yet since there is no chorus, this passage is actually sung by the septet of soloists. The music, you might say, hovers around B major—at least, B natural is the prominent tonality around which Tafreshipour assembles his tonal dissonances, at one point in the orchestral opening actually sounding a B major chord—and in fact, the music constantly suggests tonality more often than not. Mehrdad's opening monologue does indeed have a melody line (it is not really strophic) although it is not conventionally tuneful. "What is it she wants to tell me?" he asks himself as he gazes at the mannequin in the window. "I could believe those eyes, opaque, made of alabaster, see into my soul and she knows me as I am." And already at this early stage, the mannequin "sings" wordless tones, much like Roxana in Szymanowski's equally exotic *King Roger,* and set to a similar modal melisma. Here, at the very outset of the opera, Tafreshipour is already pulling the listener into Hedayat's shadowy fantasy world.

Within its brief duration, Tafreshipour sometimes makes quick scene changes. After addressing the doll, there is a blackout. When the lights go up again, he is in the Lycée where the Maître addresses him, telling him that he is sorry to see him go back to Iran because he has seen "your mind and conscience grow." British librettist Dominic Power should also be given a great deal of credit for not only compressing Hedayat's story into a libretto but also for his good sense in not making the text over-wordy, always a temptation for many English writers who somehow think of themselves as being equivalent to Shakespeare.

Power's decision was a wise one, using the device of having figures written to or talked about appear and sing onstage. Thus as Mehrdad writes to his family back home, his mother and Bita appear onstage and sing. Interestingly, the proprietor of the shop from which Mehrdad buys the mannequin is named Tombeau, the French word for "tomb." Also of note are his words to Mehrdad after he buys the doll: "With such a model, so *compliant* and so *subtle* [italics mine], you would create the ideal woman…Hide her from covetous eyes." This, too, recalls Coppelius' words to Spalanzani when he sells him the lifelike eyes to plant in the doll Olympia's face. And for some reason not explained, Tombeau's granddaughter Giselle also follows Mehrdad back to Iran, and in fact has a (sung) conversation with his parents and later with Bita. I'm not sure what that means, but it's certainly interesting.

Back home, Mehrdad has applied lipstick to the doll's mouth to make it look more realistic, but is already packing a gun in the opening scene of the second act, long before the final denouement. Part of the dialogue between Bita, Giselle and the mother is indeed surreal. Out of nowhere, Bita sings, "Now it is winter, snow covers our city, and you are here," to which Giselle sings one word—"Different"—and the mother also sings just one—"Indifferent," to which Bita responds, "Cold as snow." Immediately after, Mehrdad, pistol in hand, sings one line, "May God forgive me," then sinks to his knees in front of the mannequin, puts the gun to his temple and pulls the trigger…but the chamber is empty. Yet even with the three women present, not one makes a comment or tries to stop him from what is clearly a suicide attempt. Strange indeed! Although Bita sings on two occasions that she is devoted to Mehrdad, when moments of crisis like this arrive she doesn't lift a finger to help him. One begins to think that the reason he's so attached to the doll is that she is no more emotionally responsive or giving than his fiancé.

There are also hints, not too subtle but underplayed, of Hedayat's criticism of the harshness of Iranian and Musim culture. Before leaving France, the Maître offers Mehrdad a glass of wine, which he turns down. He then offers him a dinner with his fellow-students, which he also turns down. After Maître leaves, Mehrdad sings, "'Enjoyment and duty co-exist in the harmonious soul.' How facile is the conversation of pompous petit-maître." Somewhere deep in the recesses of his subconscious, we come to think, the doll represents not only a love-ideal to Mehrdad but also a touch of freedom that he is not allowed to pursue.

Listening to Tafreshipour's orchestral score is a treat in itself. The delicacy of the chamber orchestra is made all the more effective by his pointillistic writing with its alternation of counterpoint and the little spot solos given to various instruments (oboe and bassoon in addition to various string instruments. As soon as Mehrmad buys the mannequin, the music becomes edgy and confused, reflecting his mixed-up state of mind. A strange disquiet also underlines the music behind Bita and Mehrdad's parents upon his return home. "Outwardly dutiful, respectful, quietm but a stranger," the Father sings. "Cold as the snow that shrouds Tehran." As Mehrdad, ignoring them, sings to the mannequin "I cannot leave you, and you will not free me," Bita and his mother sing a strange chord, A above an Eb, underlining his alienation from reality. Middle Eastern melismas constantly underline the music in this scene. The music sounds almost comical in a dark way, like a drunken song sung in a bar, when Mehrdad asks then, "What do you see when you see me? A drunkard? A fool?" Little touches like this continue throughout the opera. Much of the music passes by the listener's ear as if emerging from a dream…sometimes a pleasant dream, but just as often an edgy, uncomfortable one, particularly in the scene where Bita confronts the doll, singing, "If I could, I would destroy you, kill you, to bring him back."

And there is a surprise. Immediately after Bita starts to take the blond wig from the mannequin's head, there is a blackout, and in the very next scene both Giselle, Tombeau and the Maître suddenly reappear out of nowhere, repeating lines that they used in Act I as Mehrdad is sprawled on the couch in a drunken stupor…evidently an alcohol-induced hallucination.

It's difficult for me to say, given my limited exposure to Tafreshiour's music, whether or not the "voice" he uses in this score is his usual or normal style of writing, but every scene of *The Doll Behind the Curtain* works in context as well as in relation to each other scene. It may not be a masterpiece, but it's a highly effective psychological, almost hallucinatory opera. My sole complaint is that the music ends abruptly, not sounding like an ending at all.

As for the singing, it is somewhat uneven. Tenor Jonathan von Schwanenflügel (Mehrdad) has a pleasant tone and somewhat good diction, but his voice is somewhat nasal and every sustained note flutters unevenly. Baritone Thomas Storm (Maître) and mezzo-soprano Eleanor Widman (Mother) have consistently fluttery voices (and Widman's also has a whiny quality about it that grated on my ears), but both sopranos, Maria Dreisig (Giselle) and Signe Sneh Durholm (Bita) have good ones (though some of Durholm's high notes sound a bit shrill), as does bass Per Bach Nissen as Tombeau. The singers' diction varies, but the men are generally intelligible though singing in British English, which has its own sound, while the sopranos lose their consonants in notes above the staff. They generally make do, however, and all act their parts with their voices fairly well, but a more consistently good cast would clearly have enhanced the quality of the performance.

Blanchard: Fire Shut Up in My Bones (2019)

Although several well-known composers have been fascinated and influenced by jazz, it is difficult to think of another composer who is also an actual performing jazz musician, let alone one who started out playing with Lionel Hampton's orchestra, but that is the case with Terence Blanchard (b. 1962). Following his stint in the Hampton band, Blanchard then became a member of drummer Art Blakey's famous Jazz Messengers, for which he was that band's director until 1986. In the 1990s, he began his composing career with film scores for director Spike Lee, including the hit films *Do the Right Thing, Mo' Better Blues* and *Malcolm X.* In 2000, he was named artistic director of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz in California, but despite all this and other film and Broadway scores, he didn't produce a serious classical score until 2013 when his opera *Champion* was premiered by the Opera Theatre of St. Louis. Six years later he produced this, his second opera, which eventually became the first such work by an African-

American composer to premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, on opening night 2021. A performance of it was aired nationally on the Met's Saturday afternoon broadcast series on January 8, 2022. Its surprise success was such that the Met agreed to perform *Champion* the following season (2022-23).

The libretto was based on the real-life memoir of journalist Charles Blow, who at a young age was sexually molested by his cousin Chester. He was too ashamed to tell his mother, who was having enough problems getting rid of her good-for-nothing husband (Charles' father) by threatening to shoot him if he bothered her one more time. Out of this poverty-stricken background, Blow earned a fully paid scholarship to Grambling State University; in this fictionalized account of his college days, he goes through some rigorous hazing by his fraternity (something that never happened in real life because the fraternity didn't haze their pledges) but withstands all the pain and indignity without a complaint because he is hurting so much inside. He tells Greta, a woman he has fallen in love with and is having an affair with, about his sexual abuse as a child, hoping to exorcise some of his demons, but learns that she is seeing someone else and doesn't love him enough to cut off that relationship. Calling home to talk to his mother, he learns that cousin Clarence has come to visit; this prods him to grab his gun, jump in his car and head back home to kill the man who molested him, but the spirit of his childhood self, Char'es Baby, stops him and tells him to let it go and just continue to live his life.

Onto this dark and troublesome story, Blanchard lavished some of the most strikingly original and thoroughly American operatic music I've heard in ages. Not every section is brilliant; there are a few moments when the opera drags just a bit, and in some of the sung recitative passages Blanchard tended to run out of ideas, but these can easily be corrected with a little editing. Most of it is outstanding, and he created a seamless cross-pollination of jazz and classical themes without making either sound forced or precious.

As a true and often seamless fusion of jazz and classical music, Blanchard wrote rhythms that jazz musicians can play in their sleep but classical musicians struggle with even after several rehearsals. Much of the problem was his use of jazz drums, whose rhythms that the classical musicians have trouble playing. The fact that he found a way to reconcile these two disparate styles and make them work as a unified whole is a credit to Blanchard as a composer. Listening to the music, I'd also add that some of the difficulty came from the changes of tempo that Blanchard introduced even within the jazz rhythms, shifting between a straight 4/4 and 6/8, 5/4 and 7/8. Fortunately, the Met orchestra also included jazz musicians who had no problem at all coping with this.

The more classical passages of this opera are very much descendants of Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein's jazz-influenced scores, although the vocal lines are less conventionally melodic. This is because Blanchard has them "follow" the orchestral writing, which even in the first sung scene vacillates between classical and jazz feeling, but when I use that term I do not mean to indicate that the music is improvised in any way. It is not, but the underlying rhythms are clearly jazz rhythms; the fact that Blanchard has combined them much more skillfully than anyone else before him can mislead the listener somewhat. The set pieces, which do at times coalesce into "arias," one might describe as post-graduate Gershwin: they have a jazzy feel about them but are not as memorably melodic. The music is also more continuous and less episodic than in any other "jazz opera" I've heard, the lines continuing to progress in development sections, the sort of thing that composers seldom use in an opera. Interestingly, this style is particularly apropos to the story since Charles Blow was born and raised in Louisiana, one of the "cradles" of jazz.

Despite the few weaknesses noted above, most of the music is well written and fascinating, and having a cast of black (African-American, Caribbean and others) artists to sing it gives the

words as much as the music an authentic feel. In addition, because the libretto was written by a black man, the use of "ebonics" in the sung text has a much less artificial or "precious" quality than in other operatic texts using black characters. The bottom line is that, whenever Blanchard inserts an "aria" with a jazz beat to it, it actually sounds like something a black man or woman might sing, which ties the music closer to reality.

Through most of its duration, the music of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* ambles and struts. Putting the very different dramatic situations aside, it is a black counterpart to Copland's *The Tender Land,* a musical drama about one person's coming of age in very specific and quite different cultural backgrounds. In these two different environments, the principal character's proclivities come through. Laurie, in *The Tender Land,* enjoys her time alone with herself in her white culture; Charles, on the other hand, lives in, as his mother sings at one point, "a house full of noise," which she, at least, likes because one can't be "lonely" in such an environment. It all depends on what one desires in one's life. In the slower, more serious moments, one is so caught up in the situation and the words that the music almost seems like a very good "background" which one can feel and gain vibes from without having the need to analyze it. Thus the various segments of this opera manage to flow one into the other, but not in a manner analogous to any purely classical opera. It simply has a flow all its own.

Blanchard is continually sensitive to the characters' changes of mood, and although the scene in which Charles is sexually molested by his cousin Chester seems a bit long, the tension this scene creates in the theater, which is what really counts, produces a truly dramatic effect. By contrast, the later scene in which the older Charles is told by his mother that his cousin Chester has dropped in, and Charles tells him he's going to come over to settle the score between them, is compressed—a brilliant stroke that brings the drama to a sudden and forceful conclusion. By these strongly musical means, Blanchard thus takes Charles' personal shame and makes the audience understand it as the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, regardless of race or social circumstance. It is, then, the best kind of opera, one that takes a personal story and makes it good drama with a message that transcends the specific tragic moment.

The DVD performance released by the Metropolitan Opera features a generally excellent cast from top to bottom—good voices, dramatic interpretation, *and* excellent diction: baritones Will Liverman (Charles), Ryan Speedo Green (Uncle Paul), Norman Garrett (Foreman/Adult James) and Chris Kenney (cousin Chester), sopranos Latonia Moore (Billie) and Denisha Ballew (Verna), tenors Terence Chin-Loy (Chicken Plucker) and Chauncey Packer (Spinner), conducted by Yannick Nézet-Seguin.

Summer: Hamlet (2021)

Joseph Summer (b. 1956) is an American composer who primarily writes vocal works set to the poems and plays of Shakespeare. He has, in fact, been doing so for decades but is not nearly as well known as other composers who have put the Bard's words to music. Although he studied composition with Karel Husa as well as with Arnold Schoenberg's amanuensis Richard Hoffmann, Summer's music tends more towards resolving thorny harmony than breaking it apart. In 2021 he finished work on a complete operatic treatment of *Hamlet,* which was then premiered and recorded, the CDs being issued in April 2022.

As for the contemporary operatic treatment of *Hamlet* by British composer Brett Dean, it could not be more unlike Summer's. Dean wrote consistently thorny, atonal music, pushing the voices about through their registers in a bizarre and often unmusical manner; he also broke up Shakespeare's play, taking scenes and monologues out of sequence, often just repeating certain lines like "To be or not to be" as if they were mantras. The end result was musical and theatrical chaos, but although this is what the well-educated scribes who write in the arts sections of major

newspapers and journals prefer, I clearly do not. There is nothing organic or even coherent about Dean's *Hamlet.* To use a quote from Shakespeare (*Macbeth,* Act V, Scene 5), " it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Summer's *Hamlet,* on the other hand, is a solidly-written, highly imaginative opera. Yes, much of the music is loud and some of it, particularly the most dramatic scenes, use modern harmonies and somewhat congested instrumental voicing, but the vocal lines are relatively grateful to the singers and the overall effect more dramatic because it is much closer to the original play. Claudius' opening monologue is stately and regal, as it should be, and Summer's orchestra combines music of some ceremony with its unusual rhythmic and harmonic shifts. I was very pleased to hear the way Summer wove the songs/arias from Hamlet I had heard on his other CDs into the finished opera; everything is seamless, bespeaking a composer of great skill. They sound just as you would imagine they would in an ideal world, and despite the occasional use of dissonance, he somehow managed to create music that has a British sound bias.

On balance, the important thing is that Summer keeps things moving and finds ways to continually morph and shift the music to sustain interest while setting the words to music that always sounds not merely appropriate but perfect. I have no idea how much of this was written in white-hot inspiration and how much in long hours of meditation, but it almost sounds as if each act was created in a continuous burst of creative energy, and that's how it should be. The shift into the scene where Ophelia tells Polonius that she is frightened features a solo violin; the orchestra quiets down to project her interior state of mind. Her music is much more angular than the other characters, encompassing large leaps up and down in her range, probably to indicate her confused state and fears.

The music leading into the exchange between Hamlet and the ghost is also extremely well done, suggesting the supernatural without sounding, yet, entirely ominous. Interestingly, the ghost is sung by a mixed chorus, an interesting touch, and they have some of the most dissonant music in the entire opera, which again makes good dramatic sense. The slightly eerie music of the ghost scene then shifts, seamlessly, into stately court music for the scene with Polonius, Gertrude and Claudius. One is continually amazed at how well Summer dovetailed the rhythmic flow of Shakespeare's words into his music without making it sound too forced or contrived, yet there are a few moments (such as Polonius' monologue beginning "Good madam, stay awhile") where I wished that he had increased the tempo a bit in order to move things along. But these are not frequent moments, and the music chosen in lieu of faster-paced themes was clearly not uninteresting or inferior. The polyphony used in the final scene of Act I is not only skillful but quite interesting, showing everyone's words and thoughts crossing each other.

Act II, again, completely omits the opening scene, here involving Polonius, Reynaldo and Ophelia; I, for one, did miss her monologue, "He took me by the wrist and held me hard." It also omits the second scene with Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but this is not a crucial scene; it's also quite long. Rather, it picks up two-thirds of the way through Hamlet's monologue once the last two-named have exited, starting with "I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play," and it does include the re-entry of Gertrude with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The music here is rather more lyrical than in the first act, which is a welcome relief; there were a few moments in CD 1 where I felt the orchestration was a little too thick and edgy. In the second act, too, Summer creates more concerted scenes with the singers, which are also quite good. The orchestration, though less dense, is no less interesting, at one point combining French horns with chimes and using a solo trumpet behind Hamlet in one of his scenes and using a solo bass to introduce Hamlet's most famous monologue, "To be or not to be." This is a superb setting of these famous lines, bringing out the drama in them without overdoing it too much. And with voices this good, the Ophelia-Hamlet duet is both dramatic and quite beautiful, although I thought the

(Score sample from Hamlet, *provided by the composer.)*

famous line, "Get thee to a nunnery" should have been more strophic; it would have given the line more bite; but he cleverly introduced a 6/8 rhythm, which switches back and forth between that meter and a straight 4, for the ensuing exchange between Ophelia, Hamlet and Polonius. The score page which follows, showing a bit of his setting of the famous "To be or not to be" monologue, is an excellent indication of Summer's working methods.

Summer also cleverly uses a piano trio to play the music for the play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap,* and includes the sound of them tuning up. I'm not so sure, however, that Summer should have had the Player King and Queen of the dumbshow sing; it takes up valuable time in the opera and holds up the drama, even though the music is quite interesting. The scene which culminates with Hamlet singing "What a piece of work is man" is also quite extraordinary, using lower instruments in the orchestra to give weight to the drama. The Gertrude-Hamlet duet is also very well written, again with the ghost represented in the background by the chorus.

As you listen and read the libretto simultaneously, you notice occasional lines and even whole scenes left off the recording. Apparently, there were some sections cut for the recording sessions; considering how good the music is, this is a shame, particularly for the first recording of an entirely new opera of such high quality. Act III opens with the Gertrude-Ophelia scene, introduced by rumbling basses and the piano trio. The latter's arioso, "Pray you, let's have no words of this," is excellent, and knitted into the fabric of the scene. Ophelia's mad scene is excellent music, and rather different from the one with piano accompaniment on the album *Enterprises of Great Pitch.* There is a good instrumental interlude leading to the Player Queen's singing of "There is a willow grows aslant a brook." One small weak moment comes when Laertes reacts to Ophelia's death; I just didn't think the music had much empathy in it. Summer also uses a great deal of counterpoint in the scene, "Give me your pardon, sir."

Overall, I felt that Summer did an excellent job setting the often long and not very "musical" lines of Shakespeare in this opera. It could not have been an easy task, and must have cost him countless hours to come up with just the right notes—and moods. Bottom line: this setting of *Hamlet* is, as I stated earlier on, a masterpiece. Sadly, too many opera lovers only love the older, tuneful works of the past. They will not move up to works in which the music is inherently dramatic and not inherently tuneful, and that is a pity. Those readers who feel as I do about opera as drama, however, should not hesitate to obtain this set. The recording as such is a excellent and the singers all fit their roles exceptionally well, particularly tenor Omar Najmi as Hamlet, sopranos Brianna Robinson as Ophelia and Michelle Trainor as Gertrude, baritone Evan Bravos as Claudius, mezzo-soprano Katherine Pracht as Horatio and conductor Leo Hussain.

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And that, as they say, is that. I could, of course, go on writing this book until the day I die, adding new operas and commentary to the continuing operatic scene, but as you will read in the ensuing Epilogue, we seem to be caught in a vicious cycle of moronic stage productions by emotional cripples whose use older classics to promote their latest take on Social Justice, and new operas based on popular movies which, though slightly dramatic, have the disadvantages of being either too silly to be taken seriously on the opera stage as drama or too specifically focused on an isolated personal issue that is blown out of proportion, and this in itself is not only harming but destroying opera as an art form. Composers and directors should always consider that an audience is not monolithic in their views or necessarily focused on a specific social issue that in itself is perhaps *tragic* but not a *tragedy.*