

#### AMERICAN OPERA

In the years since 1945, opera in English has slowly entered the standard repertory. Many of these works were by Britten, yet a good deal more were by composers in the United States. While English will probably never challenge the Italian-German-French linguistic hegemony, it has gained a secure place in the second tier of operatic languages alongside Russian and Czech.

A significant factor in the evolution of American opera, as in every aspect of American life, was immigration. As a nation that has received shiploads of new citizens from throughout the world for centuries, the United States is distinctive in that its national operatic style is a blend of the many foreign elements that arrived on American shores and the uniquely American values that are a product of the nation's landscape, political philosophy, and particular energy.

The earliest opera performance on the American continent is thought to have been *Flora* by the English composer John Hippeley, first seen in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1735. English and French operas (the latter usually in translation) were seen in the colonies on a regular basis. Not surprisingly, New Orleans was the hub of French-language opera in the New World. New York was America's leading city of theater and music then as it is now, and many opera performances were given there during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Operas by native composers appeared as early as 1767. *Darby's Return* by William Dunlap (1766–1839) had its premiere in New York on November 24, 1789, in the presence of the newly elected President, George Washington. Many early American operas were based on patriotic themes, while others recounted the stories of Native Americans, especially Pocahontas.

Throughout the nineteenth century, immigrants from Italy, France, and Germany brought their national art form with them to the New World. These European styles dominated American stages, inhibiting development of an American operatic idiom. Italian opera was the first great style to sweep America in the nineteenth century. In 1805 Lorenzo da Ponte, the librettist of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*, moved to New York, where he became the first professor of Italian at Columbia University and helped introduce the city to Italian culture, including opera. Italian-language operas by Mozart, Rossini, and others were first given in New York in 1825, and their success led to the establishment of a series of opera companies that vied for audiences by bringing the newest operas and the greatest singers from Europe. Operas by American composers appeared throughout the nineteenth century, although most of them were influenced by the German style. With political unrest in Germany bubbling over, the 1850s and 1860s saw massive waves of German arrivals.

Many opera companies existed in New York before the Metropolitan Opera was created in 1883. The Academy of Music, on Fourteenth Street at Irving Place, was built in 1854 specifically for the presentation of opera. It had only eighteen boxes in its loge, the section where the bluebloods of New York society chose to sit. The Metropolitan was created by members of New York's upper crust who had trouble gaining admittance to the choice boxes in rival theaters. An architect was engaged to build the Metropolitan Opera House, on Broadway at Thirty-ninth Street, with the express mandate of designing an auditorium with many more boxes (there were 122 of them) to accommodate New York's burgeoning population of nouveau millionaires. Because social prominence was more important at the time than what was presented onstage, the design of the stage itself was shortchanged: there was not enough room in the

wings, so scenery had to be placed on Thirty-ninth Street, no matter the weather.

Very quickly, the Metropolitan, the Academy of Music, and other theaters had to compete for audiences, and the way to accomplish this was to outdo one another in the grandeur of the productions and the quality of the singers engaged. New York audiences became more discerning, fueled by the competition and by the ever-increasing waves of immigrants, who often compared what they saw in New York with what they knew in Europe. It became clear that the Metropolitan needed a new theater to stage worthy productions, although, because of years of wars and economic depressions, the new Met did not open until 1966. But the board members of the Metropolitan Opera Association had deep pockets, so the world's finest singers were engaged, and the Met came to be known as a "singers' house." This meant that, because of scenic limitations, the focus of Met productions was more on talented vocalists who would stand and sing. This may not sound like a bad state of affairs, but the consequence was that American audiences essentially came to believe that opera was voice and only voice, instead of being a combination of forces that together produce a work of art. Don't misunderstand: you can't do an opera if you don't have talented, intelligent singers with beautiful voices, but opera is musical *theater*, and for the event to be complete, the orchestral, choral, and scenic elements must count too.

New York musical audiences had other venues for hearing operatic music as well. The New York Philharmonic was born in 1842, a few months after the founding of the Vienna Philharmonic. New York's orchestra regularly programmed orchestral and vocal segments from the newest European operas, which meant that this music was introduced to New York audiences soon after being heard in Europe. This happened in part because newly arrived immigrant musicians brought sheet music with them of the newest works. In addition, composers such as Tchaikovsky and Dvořák came to the United States to compose and perform. The opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891 featured the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Tchaikovsky.

Other American cities received large groups of German and Ital-

ian immigrants and saw the development of orchestras and opera companies that performed the classics and newer works. Cincinnati, with its large German population, was an early leader in classical music, and it has a fine orchestral, choral, and operatic tradition as well as an excellent conservatory of music. Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland, Chicago, and Milwaukee were other American capitals of classical music and opera. Singers such as Enrico Caruso arrived just as phonograph recordings and later radio helped spread their sound and their fame.

Arturo Toscanini conducted at the Metropolitan from 1908 to 1915. In 1928 he became music director of the New York Philharmonic. He spent most of his career, until his death in 1957, leading American orchestras and was a pioneer in broadcasting classical music on television.

While "serious" opera in America was based on the European model, Gilbert and Sullivan-style "light" opera and operetta soon developed a distinctly American flavor. From the end of the Civil War until the end of World War I, music-hall entertainments, tent shows, minstrel shows, Negro spirituals, the humor of vaudeville and the Yiddish theater of Jewish immigrants, and the uniquely American musical elements of ragtime and jazz all contributed to an emerging style known as the American musical theater. Because so many of these shows were first seen in the theaters of New York's Times Square, which is bisected by that great thoroughfare Broadway, the form came to be called the Broadway musical.

Early composers of the Broadway musical included George M. Cohan, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin. Kern and Gershwin were especially taken with American stories and native musical styles, and they produced musicals that could really be called folk operas, as American in flavor as *The Bartered Bride* was Czech. In Europe, Kern's *Show Boat* (1927) and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935) are usually performed in opera houses and are accorded the respect that works by the great European composers receive. (I once spent a weekend in Budapest hearing *Così fan tutte* on Saturday and *Porgy and Bess* on Sunday—both in Hungarian!) In recent years, American opera companies, especially the New York City Opera and the Houston Grand Opera, have begun to give clas-

sic American musicals the credit and the productions they deserve, and leading record companies have begun to record musicals by Kern, Berlin, Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Leonard Bernstein, and others, using opera singers in the roles formerly sung by Broadway stars such as Mary Martin, Gertrude Lawrence, and Barbara Cook.

(It is unfortunate that young audiences today think of the Broadway musical as an art form in which singers are amplified. This recent development is the product of poor vocal training for young performers and the tastes of audiences who have become used to loud rock and roll. In fact, until the early 1970s, Broadway musical comedy stars sang without microphones, and the orchestras that accompanied them were not amplified, either. The new operagoer at the end of the twentieth century is often startled to discover that opera does not use microphones. This sound, strangely enough, is jarring to some listeners because it is *not* artificially loud and distorted.)

Although Toscanini, Mahler, and others had been in New York earlier, a new phase in American operatic life began toward the end of World War I. The war and subsequent privation in Europe meant that many composers and performers could have more work and income in the United States. Their influence and contact with the old tradition elevated the quality of performances in American theaters.

As Nazism rose in the 1930s, many more artists and composers came to America, including Igor Stravinsky, Kurt Weill, Arnold Schoenberg, Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957), Béla Bartók (1881–1945), and Benjamin Britten, who drafted *Peter Grimes* in the United States before returning to England in 1942. Korngold was a talented Austrian whose best-known opera, *Die Tote Stadt*, was written when he was only twenty-three years old. In America he became one of the finest composers of film scores and guided a whole generation of Hollywood composers. Bartók was a Hungarian whose opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) has been a popular vehicle recently for Samuel Ramey, Eva Marton, and Jessye Norman. He was the greatest Hungarian composer, with a marvelous feeling for the potential in an orchestra to express mood, color and emo-

tion. He also brought Hungarian folk melody into his music and played a key role in developing musical education in his country. His life ended sadly and without much recognition in New York, where he lived close to Carnegie Hall. Bartók spent his last years anonymously, teaching music at Columbia University.

This inundation of great talent meant that American music schools and performing arts institutions benefited from the knowledge that the artists from the Old World could impart. In addition to composers, conductors, singers, dancers, and instrumentalists, many of Europe's top stage directors and scenic designers arrived and gradually began to shape twentieth-century American operatic production. This mass artistic immigration was different from previous waves of immigration, in which people arrived who wanted to preserve art as they had known it in Europe. By contrast, the 1930s and '40s saw the arrival of artists who intended to create art for audiences in the United States. These artists helped launch a distinctly American style of classical music and opera that has continued unabated ever since.

One of the most successful émigré composers was Gian Carlo Menotti (b. 1911). Born in Varese, Italy, he began his studies in Milan and continued them at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Although an Italian by birth, he deeply felt American style and idiom. His early operas were highly successful. They included *Amelia Goes to the Ball* (1937), *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), *The Medium* (1946), and *The Telephone* (1947). Later works, including *The Consul* (1950), *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951, a beloved children's opera, written for television), and *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954), all added to his reputation. Menotti is a complete man of the theater who directs and conducts performances of his and other composers' works. Among his greatest achievements was the creation of one of the world's foremost arts events, the Festival of the Two Worlds, held in Spoleto, Italy, since 1958. In recent years an American edition of the festival has taken place each May in Charleston, South Carolina, site of the first known opera production in the New World more than 250 years ago.

Since the 1930s, many American composers have written brilliant works, often with American settings and themes and tailored

to the talents of specific American singers. These composers and their operas include: Leonard Bernstein (1918–90), *Trouble in Tahiti* and *A Quiet Place*; Douglas Moore, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956) and *Carrie Nation* (1966); Jack Beeson, *Lizzie Borden* (1965); Aaron Copland (1900–90), *The Tender Land*; Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah* (1955) and *Of Mice and Men* (1970); Marc Blitzstein (1905–64), *Regina* (1949); Virgil Thomson, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), to librettos by Gertrude Stein; Stephen Paulus, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1982); William Bolcom, *McTeague* (1992); John Adams, *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991); and Samuel Barber (1910–81), whose *Vanessa* (1958) is one of the most popular and enduring American operas. Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), commissioned for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, has only recently begun to be given the credit it is due.

Stephen Sondheim, who wrote the lyrics for Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957), is now one of the greatest composers for the American musical theater. While some of his works are superb examples of the Broadway musical, two Sondheim works from the 1970s, *A Little Night Music* and *Sweeney Todd*, are more like operettas or even operas and have received numerous performances in opera houses.

Other American composers whose work has covered a wide range of musical styles include: Roger Sessions (1896–1985), Hugo Weisgall (1912– ), John Corigliano, and Philip Glass. Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*, which had its world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1991, was one of the most wildly successful new operas in many years. Corigliano and his librettist, William Hoffman, used characters from Beaumarchais's *Le Barbier de Seville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro* to create something new. *The Ghosts of Versailles* draws both from the plays and from the operas they inspired in Rossini and Mozart, but we look back at them with modern, weary eyes. The opera is brilliant and sentimental in music and atmosphere, and it proved yet again that engaging and meaningful new operas can still be created and still attract audiences.

The contemporary American opera composer who is probably

best known around the world is Philip Glass (1937– ). His musical style, which is characterized by repetition and by the rhythms and cadences of the music of India, has divided audiences and critics. Just as Satie and Stravinsky worked with talented collaborators from all of the arts to produce their music dramas, Glass has sought the leading contemporary writers, directors, and designers. His works may be difficult to comprehend for the opera newcomer, but they should be approached with an open mind and revisited as one's knowledge of opera grows. His leading works include *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, *Akhmaten*, and *The Voyage*, which was commissioned for its world premiere in 1992 at the Metropolitan Opera to observe the five hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to America. The opera is a sophisticated meditation on the way travel changes our sense of ourselves, of others and our world. Columbus is but one protagonist in this challenging opera that uses music to encourage audiences in self-discovery.

Although my intention in this chapter was to give an overview of the growth of opera, many fine composers were given little or no coverage and many operas were not mentioned. The important thing is to understand how opera has evolved due to the political, psychological, social, and artistic forces that have shaped four hundred years of Western history. Opera existed long before Mozart and did not die with Puccini. Importantly, the art form is still vibrant and growing and if opera composition in the United States and Britain continues to evolve, English may well be the future great language of opera.