

The New York Times

If Operas Can Make it Here ...

June 6, 2004

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI, The New York Times, June 6, 2004

(excerpted)

Even apart from its desire to build a new opera house, preferably at ground zero, the New York City Opera faces many pressing needs. So it could undoubtedly find lots of practical uses for \$300,000. Yet over the last year its hard-pressed development staff raised more than that to sustain an ambitious, important and impressively selfless program, "Showcasing American Composers." This annual free event, which was begun in 1999 and has in recent years also been called Vox, presents City Opera singers and players in full-orchestra readings of excerpts from works in progress: operas still being written or, if completed, awaiting first productions. Companies looking for new works to present have been following the showcase since its inception.

The 2004 edition took place over two days late last month at Symphony Space on upper Broadway. Substantial excerpts from eight works were performed with remarkable assurance, given the limited rehearsal time available for these brand-new scores. A major goal of the program is to provide the creators of a new opera with something like what was once standard practice with a Broadway musical: an out-of-town tryout to pave the way for a New York opening.

In the glory days of the musical, shows ran for weeks in Boston, Philadelphia, New Haven or wherever, so producers and creators could see what was working and fix what was not. The changes might range from tinkering with a tepid joke to overhauling the book, throwing out whole songs in favor of new ones.

A similar process used to be common in opera as well. Composers from Mozart to Richard Strauss learned early on that if they wanted to keep having works commissioned and produced, they had to give and take with singers, directors and impresarios. Mozart, a savvy man of the theater, and Stephen Sondheim, who has been through trial runs of "Bounce," his latest musical, in Chicago and Washington, would have a lot to talk about.

The score for "Korczak's Orphans" by Adam Silverman, a New York composer who has written concert works and operas as well as rock-infused music with electronics, raised different issues. The opera, to a libretto by Susan Gubernat, tells a true story. In 1942, a Jewish doctor, army officer, teacher and director of an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto was forced by the Nazis to take children under his care on a train bound for Treblinka.

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But even though the operagoing public today seems more open to new works than it has in decades, the repertory in most houses remains overwhelmingly traditional. Major commissions are rare. So even composers with no prior experience are under pressure to come up with an effective work right off the bat.

The City Opera's showcase provides composers and librettists with an invaluable chance to assess how a work might come across. Is the orchestration too thick? Are the words clear in their musical setting? Does a scene meant to be ruminative and mysterious actually sound inert and clunky? Or are the various elements clicking just as conceived?

The creators get plenty of feedback from audiences during these showcases. This year, as in the past, the event attracted administrators, artist managers, conductors, singers, composers and the operatically curious.

In a departure, the City Opera joined in a consortium with four smaller New York organizations also involved in developing new operas: American Opera Projects, the Encompass New Opera Theater, the Center for Contemporary Opera and the Music-Theater Group. Audience members who had the stamina after a full afternoon of hearing the excerpts performed by the City Opera forces could attend evening presentations by the affiliated groups. From the Center for Contemporary Opera, for example, there was the genre-smashing "A More Perfect Union": an allegorical look at the 1787 Philadelphia Constitutional Convention with music by Victoria Bond, libretto by Isaiah Sheffer (who runs Symphony Space) and concept and choreography by Ruth Priscilla Kirstein.

The success of the City Opera showcase is attested to by the number of works that have been (or will be) produced by major companies. In some cases, the commissions and productions were already in place before the tryouts, as with Bright Sheng's ambitious "Madame Mao," which had its premiere at the Santa Fe Opera last summer. But a reading in 2002 enabled Mr. Sheng to fine-tune the score, make crucial adjustments and generate interest. When preliminary scenes from Charles Wuorinen's "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" were presented in 2000, Mr. Wuorinen had a commission in hand through the support organization Works and Process but no commitment for a production. Paul Kellogg, the general and artistic director of the City Opera, heard the reading and adopted the work. It will have its much-anticipated premiere at City Opera in October.

Yet in several cases it was a City Opera reading that helped secure a commission. Scenes from Scott Wheeler's "Democracy," with a libretto by Romulus Linney, were presented in 2000. Edgar Vincent, a longtime, respected New York-based artist manager and publicist, who was in the audience, reported on the unfinished opera to his prime client, the tenor Plácido Domingo, who also runs the Washington National Opera. The company offered Mr. Wheeler a commission, and the opera, based on novels of Henry Adams, will have its premiere in Washington in January.

Naturally, some works that seemed problematic in their City Opera showcases remained so in their full productions. Deborah Drattell's "Nicholas and Alexandra," which was showcased in 2000, fared badly with critics and audiences last fall at the Los Angeles Opera. On the other hand, Mark Adamo's "Little Women," showcased in 1999, went on to popular runs at the Houston Grand Opera and the Glimmerglass Opera. Whatever one's take on Mr. Adamo's work (I had mixed reactions), its success reflects well on City

Opera's venture. Mr. Adamo, as the City Opera's composer in residence for the last three years, has played a major part in selecting works for the readings.

So how were the latest choices greeted? Tryouts of incomplete works shouldn't be subjected to full formal reviews, but the audience - professionals and civilians alike - had much to say.

Richard Danielpour's "Margaret Garner" - the first opera by this widely performed composer, with a libretto by Toni Morrison - is likely to divide audiences when it is produced, starting next year, in Detroit, Cincinnati and Philadelphia. Ms. Morrison's libretto, with its affectingly simple yet elegiac language, recounts a crime of a fugitive slave that shocked the country: Margaret Garner, when captured, chose to kill her child rather than subject it to a lifetime of slavery.

To judge from the excerpts performed here, Mr. Danielpour, true to his neo-Romantic penchant, has set the words with unabashedly lush and melodramatic music. In the scene in which Margaret and her husband, who is abruptly removed to another plantation, exchange last-minute avowals of love, Ms. Morrison surely intended the couple to be distraught and anguished. Mr. Danielpour enshrouds their words with ponderously sentimental music.

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Of the other works performed (I heard six of the eight), I was also struck by "Glory Denied," with music and libretto by Tom Cipullo. Mr. Cipullo adapted the text from a book about Jim Thompson, the longest-held American prisoner of war in Vietnam, by the journalist Tom Philpott.

As presented here, Act I of the opera proved intriguing and unconventional. It is conceived for a thick-textured orchestra and just two characters, Thompson and his wife, though each is portrayed by two singers: one representing the younger person living through the events, the other portraying the older person recalling them. Though the dramaturgy has unwieldy aspects, the excerpts performed, written in a teeming, hard-edged neo-Romantic language, had an impact.

In general, neo-Romantic musical styles ruled the day. A couple of works struck me as faceless and mediocre.

What I missed was something like Act II of Lewis Spratlan's challenging "Life Is a Dream," so gripping when presented in the 2002 showcase. Mr. Spratlan composed the opera, based on a Spanish play by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, in the late 1970's for a production that fell through. The music's gritty atonal style has put off potential producers ever since.