

# SOMETHING ABOUT LIBRETTOS

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There is a skit by William Saroyan called *Opera Opera*, a piece full of silliness and ridiculous repetitions. Many would agree that it is only a mild distortion of the real thing. Much as the American public likes opera, it has little respect for the libretto as a work of art or even as a theatrical piece. This is perhaps natural. Granted that there are a number of librettos of quality in the standard repertory, our audiences used to hear them either in a foreign language or in translation so inept as to destroy their effectiveness. The librettos written in English for the operas by American composers produced at the Metropolitan during the Gatti-Gasazza regime were, with one or two exceptions, pretentious and stuffy. At a time when the theater was in a fresh and lively state, they took as their models the dramatic ideas of nineteenth-century opera.

Edward Johnson once remarked that American composers and their librettists approached their work with imaginations paralyzed by the glamor of the past. It never seemed to occur to them that there should be any relation to the living theater. What was right for Rossini and Verdi would be right for them. They forgot that the nineteenth-century composers were writing for the contemporary theater.

Today the situation is much better. Skillful translators like the Martins, the Meads, Edward Dent, W.H. Auden and John Gutman have made a part of the standard repertory available in English. Although a large public seems to prefer opera in the original language, translated operas are making headway and audiences are discovering new satisfactions in the familiar repertory. This is particularly true of the Mozart operas, such as *Figaro* and *Così*, where the subtle relationships of the characters and the humor are lost when sung in an unfamiliar language.

The American composer also is showing better judgment in his selection of material to set. Menotti, who seems to have the theater in his bones, has shown that opera can be understandable and exciting to large audiences. Beyond the lyricism and singability of his operas, he has a fine sense of what will work on the stage and the ability to write in a literate and sometimes poetic style.

We now have operas, or operas in the making, with librettos based upon plays by Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Archibald MacLeish, William Saroyan, Pirandello and Brecht and new librettos by such men as Thornton Wilder, Stephen Vincent Benet and Paul Horgan. Until recently it has been difficult to persuade successful authors to collaborate or even to allow adaptations of their works. The fact that they will do so now is an indication of the increasing prestige of American opera. No one can say today that our composers are out of touch with the contemporary theater.

Choosing a libretto is a ticklish thing for a composer. Since an opera may take two years to write, and since he must live with his characters and continue to believe in them through the arduous months of planning, composing and scoring, the decision is painful. It is hard to generalize on what makes a good opera subject. We know from reading about the difficulties of Verdi and Puccini that good stories are hard to find. In the first place, the subject must lend itself to the inevitable distortion that comes from singing rather than speaking the lines; that rules out the matter-of-fact and the everyday. On the other hand, American audiences have shown little taste for fantasy. The heroic figure from history is hard to humanize, and opera stories (Wagner to the contrary) must above all be full of human feelings. When a composer finds a story, it often happens that some other composer has got there first. We all seem to be looking for the same qualities, and they are rare. Even if he does find the story he likes, the rights may be unobtainable.

I have been fortunate in my collaborators and in the choice of our material, but there were eleven years when I could not find a libretto that seemed to work. My first opera was an adaptation of Philip Barry's play *White Wings*. It was Barry's idea that it be turned into an opera, and he allowed me to cut and shape the dialogue myself. The play was a fantastic satire on ritual and tradition told in terms of a family of street cleaners. The prose style was beautifully cadenced, and in spite of all the surface horseplay the story had a real poignancy. One thing that Barry and I discovered to our surprise was that so much dialogue could be omitted without harm to the play. Music, although slowing up the pace, can provide many short cuts in characterization and description. A play adapted for an opera naturally does not offer many opportunities for set pieces or ensembles, but there are advantages in the uninterrupted dramatic flow that results.

My second opera, which came three years later, in 1938, was an adaptation of Stephen Vincent Benet's famous short story *The Devil and*

Daniel Webster. I had been urging Benet to write a libretto for me, and we did collaborate on a high-school operetta, *The Headless Horseman*. One day he asked me if I would like a libretto on the Webster story. He was worried because dramatic versions were beginning to appear and he wanted his own definitive one; he felt, however, that it should be done with music. We discussed the way the story might be treated so that there could be love interest, and so that everything could happen on a single evening. Then he went ahead with the libretto.

Benet was not an opera lover. He may have seen one or two, but when I showed him some libretto samples he said he preferred to proceed in his own way. The result was a tight dramatic story with fine characterization and some of his most beautiful poetry. It would have been impossible to put the whole thing to music without a great deal of change, and I thought it would be challenging to see what could be done with the text as it was. What came of our collaboration was a rather unusual combination of speech and song. There are set pieces in Webster, but long stretches of dialogue set it apart from traditional *Singspiel* or opera-comique. The most difficult problem was the treatment of Webster's great speech: I felt that it should be spoken, but it was the high point of the opera and needed a musical climax. This was provided by an orchestral background that mounted in intensity with the oratory and was supplemented at its conclusion by a choral outburst from the jury. Critics have sometimes pointed out that the music of the opera is too self-effacing, but I still think the values are right, and audiences are always moved by the work.

It was after Webster that the eleven years went by. Not until I talked with Arnold Sundgaard, who suggested an adaptation of Rolvaag's novel *Giants in the Earth*, could I find something that I really wanted to do. The story is a beautiful and stirring episode in the lives of the Norwegian pioneers in Minnesota. The two principal characters are a strong man, a natural land-settler, and his wife, a sensitive, unhappy woman destroyed by the rigors of the life.

This was my first experience with a novel as the basis of an opera. Sundgaard and I found that there was almost too much material for our own good; a short story is concentrated—you can get it all in the action—but in a novel you run the danger of omitting things that properly explain the dramatic sequence. In this adaptation, however, we were able to provide strong dramatic action and opportunities for short lyric solos. How successful we were cannot be decided until there is another and better production than the one at Columbia University in 1951. The critics did not like it, but the audiences did.

The Ballad of Baby Doe was my first experience with history. The story is hard to think of as history, however, because it all happened so recently. In 1935 I read in the morning paper of the death of an old woman who was found frozen in a miner's shack outside Leadville, Colorado. It appears that she was the widow of one of Colorado's richest mine owners, Horace Tabor, sometime U.S. senator, and that she had been fabulously beautiful. This certainly seemed like opera material, and the further I got into the story the more fascinating it was. The woman had been thirty years Tabor's junior; there was a great scandal when, in order to marry her, he had divorced his first wife, Augusta, whose indomitable courage had kept him going through many lean years. A decade after the marriage his fortunes took a bad turn, leaving him penniless. His young wife, who had been suspected of being only a gold-digger, turned out to be his main reliance, and after his death she took up her long vigil of thirty-six years beside his abandoned mine in Leadville.

For some reason this opera never got written in 1935, but I was overjoyed when in 1953 the Central City Opera invited me to write it for them to produce. Baby Doe, before her marriage to Tabor, had actually lived in Central City, so there was great local interest in her story. I asked John Latouche, who had suggested some sort of collaboration, if he would be interested in doing a libretto, and soon he was as involved as I with those three fascinating characters. Here again there was almost too much material. Three operas could be written about this story: one on the early years, one (the one we wrote) about the romance of Baby and Tabor and one about the tragic end of their daughter, Silver Dollar, who was found scalded to death in a Chicago rooming house. We did get a great deal of it in the opera, and in the last scene, which had elements of memory and looking ahead, were able to suggest some of the rest of it.

This time I hoped we could have some extended arias without slowing up the action; thanks to Latouche's remarkable theater sense, this was achieved. Baby Doe has five real arias, Augusta two, Tabor two. We also managed to bring the flavorsome William Jennings Bryan into the action with a speech which, in contrast to Webster's, the great man sang. The words, however, are not Bryan's. His speeches may have been good oratory, but they were prosy and cumbersome. Bryan's speech is partly Whitman, partly the Bible and the rest vintage Latouche.

One question about writing a libretto: shall it be prose or verse? In Baby Doe I asked Latouche, who was skillful at rhyming, to stick to cadenced prose. Being unmetrical, prose is more interesting for a composer. It

leaves him freer with his rhythms, and rhymes themselves can be very distracting when you hear them coming out regularly.

The Baby Doe story has many assets. It is full of the color of the vivid mining days in Colorado, it has four scenes where a chorus may be employed naturally, and the tug and pull between the three central characters gives it emotional depth and dramatic interest. Although there are eleven scenes and it is difficult to avoid short pauses between them, there seems to be no loss of momentum as the story develops.

One year after the Central City production of *Baby Doe* a wonderful idea came to me from a friend. Why not write a real soap opera? The television soap opera is so much a part of American civilization that a real one, complete with commercials and corn, might hold great appeal for audiences. I asked Arnold Sundgaard again to collaborate with me, and the whole venture was a delight to us both. In selecting a typically sentimental and absurd episode in which a surgeon who has been making unsuccessful advances to a pretty nurse finds himself about to operate on her fiance, we found situations which, in the fervent style of television, lent themselves admirably to operatic singing. For the concluding commercial we were able to concoct a real quartet in which the announcer joined with the principals in extolling the virtues of the advertised product—naturally enough, soap. This kind of fooling cannot be sustained very long, but *Gallantry*, which is what we called our opera, does well in its half hour.

It is a long way from *Baby Doe* and *Gallantry* to Henry James, and audiences who have liked them may be surprised at my new opera, based upon one of his greatest novels, *The Wings of the Dove*. There are good reasons why this subject should not be chosen. There have been several stage versions, one by James himself, and they have all been failures. The plot itself—a triangle in which a young woman, desperately in love with a poor man whom she is not allowed to marry, involves him in a relationship with an heiress who is about to die—is strong theatrically, but much of the quality of the novel comes from James' literary style. This style is definitely not of the theater. It is opaque and involved: points are suggested rather than stated. The reader is kept on pins and needles wondering what has really happened or is going to happen. Things seldom happen in the present. Apart from this cryptic quality of the storytelling, a great deal of the fascination lies in the Jamesian vocabulary and phrase, both of which are impressive and much admired.

James Thurber, in an article in *The New York*, referred to *The Wings of the Dove* as a sort of Lorelei rock for dramatists who think they can make

it work on the stage. He did admit, perhaps jocosely, that the solution might lie in a soap opera or in a grand opera. At any rate, the story lends itself to such effective scenes, the characters are so strong, particularly the two women, that it seemed well worth trying. It is also the kind of story, with its psychological subtleties, that interests audiences today. If we could slant it toward rather than away from its audiences without sacrificing its quality, Ethan Ayer, my collaborator, thought it might work.

Just as in *Giants in the Earth*, the initial difficulty was to explain the story fully enough to be understood by those who have not read the novel. After we decided how to handle the exposition the details of retelling the plot were not hard, because the scenes are all understandable and exciting. Before the libretto was in its final shape we tried it out with people unfamiliar with the novel to make sure that nothing essential was being left out.

One thing we had to do was to change the name of the impecunious young man from Merton Densher to Miles Dunster. The name Densher could not be enunciated today without a ribald response, and while it will undoubtedly offend the faithful it had to be done. In other respects we have tried to adhere to the characters and events as James presented them.

The question of the language and its suitability for singing is another matter. In my opinion, Mr. Ayer has been singularly successful in reproducing the flavor of the James dialogue without mystifying the listener. He underlined every speech recorded in the novel, and when we came to the pertinent situation he would use as much of the original as seemed possible. Here is an example of what he has done. It deals with the first meeting between Kate and Dunster. Kate is the scheming young woman. This is James:

She had observed a ladder against a garden wall, and had trusted herself to climb it as to be able to see over into the probable garden on the other side. On reaching the top she had found herself face to face with a gentleman engaged in a like calculation at the same moment, and the two inquirers had remained confronted on their ladders. The great point was that for the rest of that evening they had been perched—they had not climbed down....And without a happy hazard six months later the incident would have closed in that account of it....Kate had one afternoon found herself opposite [Merton Densher] on the underground railway. She had entered the train at Sloane Square. Densher was already in it, on the other bench, and at the farthest angle....Kate was in fact sure

that the very next station was the young man's true goal—which made it clear that he was going on only from the wish to speak to her. He had to go on, for this purpose, to High Street, Kensington, as it was not till then that the exit of a passenger gave him his chance...

This passage was the basis for a love duet in the first scene in the opera, as follows:

MILES: Do you remember meeting face to face with me at somebody's party.

Across a garden wall?  
We climbed a ladder, each  
From opposite sides.

KATE: And the garden you were in was mine.

MILES: And mine was yours.

KATE: Do you remember meeting on the underground  
And on the other bench  
You sat and at my stop  
You still were there?

MILES: And at my stop

BOTH: And at your stop from High Street, Kensington  
To Lancaster Gate  
You still were there?

Milly (the heiress) in her attitude toward her illness is described by James as follows:

The beauty of the bloom had gone from the old sense of safety—that was distinct: she had left it behind her forever. But the beauty of the idea of a great adventure, a big dim experiment or struggle in which she might, more responsibly than ever before, take a hand, had been offered her instead. It was as if she had to pluck off her breast, to throw away, some friendly ornament, a familiar flower, a little old jewel that was part of her daily dress; to take up and shoulder as a substitute some queer defensive weapon, a musket, a spear, a battle axe—conducive possibly in a high degree to a striking appearance, but demanding all the effort of the military posture.

This passage is the basis for Milly's final song in the opera:

The beauty of the bloom  
Has gone from safety,  
But the beauty of struggle  
And experiment  
Has been offered me instead

I must throw away the friendly flower  
And take up the spear!

Devotees of the novel will be interested to know what happens to the famous last sentence, after Kate asks (Densher) if he loves her. He says he will marry her. “As we were?” asks Kate, and he says “Yes,” only to have her turn to the door, “and her head shake was now the end” as she says, “We shall never again be as we were!”

This, with apologies to the master, has been changed. When Kate demands that he tell her he still loves her, and he hedges, she says:

We're always honest with each other.

Do you love me now?

Now

The way things are

Miles, goaded beyond endurance, says “No” and goes out.

As Ethan Ayer wrote me in a letter that included some of the material quoted above, “First, Henry James’ story must be told, then it must be told dramatically, then it must be told musically.” We can only hope that what we have done is in some small measure worthy of this great story.