

# Music Notes: The Crucible, a rare American opera



The myth is that, of all the art forms perfected by Europe, America has made major contributions to all but one: opera. The unacknowledged truth is that there **is** an American operatic theater, and if no native Wagner has yet arisen from our soil, many of its productions still compare quite favorably with some of the Italian and German war-horses whose exhaustingly regular appearances crowd newer works out of the opera house. Though rarely rejecting European operatic idioms per se (Virgil Thomson and Philip Glass are exceptions), American composers have tended to infuse the genre with highly American subject matter; which, one would think, would make the opera house a more comfortable, familiar place for American audiences who can never but feel distant from the likes of **Der Rosenkavalier**. **Porgy and Bess**, the most famous American opera by far, concerns drugs and murder among blacks in a Charleston ghetto. Thomson's **The Mother of Us All** is about Susan B. Anthony and American politics. Douglas Moore's **Carry Nation** is the life of the fanatical prohibition leader, Aaron Copland's **The Tender Land** is a Steinbeckian story of a Kansas farm girl and two hoboes, and even Carlisle Floyd's **Susannah** transfers the apocryphal story to a Tennessee valley full of hillbillies. Nevertheless, American opera houses, more concerned with signing up Domingo and Te Kanawa for next season than with any more noble artistic goals, have largely given American composers the brush-off, as if they were so many unwanted stepchildren.

"I think things are going to change," Robert Ward encouraged. "Generally, there are some very healthy elements developing. A lot of companies are getting involved in workshops that give composers a chance to get practical theater experience before they're faced with all the glare, the critics, the public... and they get a chance to meet writers, too. Some of these companies are forgetting that an American repertoire already exists, but I think they'll eventually come back around."

At 67, Robert Ward knows that repertoire: he's made six contributions to it, including one of the darkest and yet most American of American operas, **The Crucible**. During rehearsals of Ward's first opera, **He Who Gets Slapped** (after Andreiev), one of the singers drew his attention to Arthur Miller's 1953 play **The Crucible**, which was currently in an off-Broadway run. Ward was overwhelmed by the play's repellent but, well-constructed

tale of lust and revenge in the volatile atmosphere of the Salem witch-hunts, and decided immediately that it would be the subject of his next opera. Ward called Miller and asked if he would rework the play into an opera libretto.

"He was involved in a film at the time, and said if I knew a librettist I felt comfortable with, I should use him, but that he would like to work with us. We met with him six times, and once he was reassured we were treating the play in the proper spirit, he quit. We didn't see him again until opening night."

The librettist was Bernard Stambler, who was teaching English at Juilliard when Ward had taught music there, and who had written the libretto for his first opera. Stambler "had good credentials as a librettist. He was a viola player, and actually had older opera credentials than I did. I found out that when he was young, he had been part of a clique at the Metropolitan Opera House." With Miller's blessing, Stambler dropped a third of the play's dialogue, increasing the play's concision if not always its singability. Retained in spite of cuts, though, was the play's taut, compelling dramatic structure. Had **The Crucible** no other merits, it could at least boast one of the best and most cohesive stories in the entire operatic literature.

Other merits are present, however. The play's dramatic, highly psychological action is well served by a format that is basically Wagnerian (if sans leitmotifs), characterized by endless melody, long buildups to epiphanic climaxes, and even a demonically delivered stage curse in the first scene of act three. Characterizations are strong: the action revolves around the vengeful, hypocritical Abigail Williams, who invents accusations of witchcraft to ensnare her married lover, the noble but fallen John Proctor. Against the objections of the Reverend Hale, who realizes the nature of the tragic farce being played out, fanatical Judge Danforth presides over a demon-infested courtroom scene with enough lies, counterlies, accusations, and recantations to eclipse even the recent Webb-Dotson hearings. The sorcerer songs of the slave Tituba are set with subtle suggestions of jazz, and the evocations of American hymnody include a quite fetching and memorable first-act hymn in 7/4 meter.

Operas in English of a reasonable length (two hours) are difficult to find, and subsequent to the first performance (and the opera's receipt of

the Pulitzer Prize), Ward received many requests for a version with a more modest orchestration, to make the work viable for student companies and small theaters. Not until he was approached by the Chicago Opera Theater did Ward finally decide to rescore the work. The Chicago Opera Theater, of course, has a considerable reputation for American opera: its 1980 production of Lee Hoiby's **Summer and Smoke** was televised on PBS; last year it achieved a brilliant production of **The Mother of Us All**, and Floyd's **Susannah** is in the plans for next year. The Athenaeum Theatre, though, does not have an extensive orchestra pit, so Ward reduced the number of percussionists needed from three to one, and reworked the wind parts in tutti sections to allow for fewer players. His comment: "No one unfamiliar with the work will miss anything."

Chicago Opera Theater's production of **The Crucible**, the work's Chicago premiere, begins tomorrow (Saturday) night at the Athenaeum, 2936 N. Southport, and will be repeated on May 26, 29, 31, and June 1 and 2. Curtain times are Wednesday at 7:30 PM, Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 PM, and Sundays at 3:00 PM. Ticket prices range from \$7 to \$27.50. For reservations or further information, call 663-0048. The work's central villainess, Abigail, will be played by Gloria Capone, who did a fetchingly vivacious job as Marenka in **The Bartered Bride** last April. It will be interesting to see what she brings to an extremely different kind of role. The long-suffering Elizabeth Proctor will be sung by Cynthia Munzer, who has sung over 20 roles with the Metropolitan Opera.

Ward's most recent opera, **Minutes to Midnight**, concerns the possibility of nuclear annihilation, so it was only natural to ask if **The Crucible** had been written (in 1961) in response to the then-recent witch-hunts of the McCarthy era. "Actually, there was no influence in any direct way," Ward replied. "Bernard Stambler and I were of course staunch anti-McCarthyites during that era, but by 1961 that was really a matter of the past. The play is so powerfully universal that it could almost have been written about any time and place: about Poland today, or Russia, or even, I'm sorry to say, certain aspects of this country." As the voice of religious fanaticism grows even louder across the land and around the world, **The Crucible** only becomes more relevant — almost an odd quality in an opera.

— Kyle Gann