

The Height of the Opera



THE MOTHER OF US ALL
Chicago Opera Theater
at Athenaeum Theater
May 19, 1984

By Kyle Gann

Some people go to the opera because when they close their eyes it is a concert, and many, many people go to the opera because they like to hear singers sing high notes

very loud, and why oh why most people go to the opera I do not know. An opera is an opera is an opera and it is a pain, and it is not relevant no it is irrelevant and boring, unless perhaps it is a modern American opera and sung in American, in which case it is perhaps possible for an American to hear it. To hear meaning perhaps to assimilate and to draw connec-

tions to and from one's own experience. And if it can be heard then an opera is not an opera that is to say a stuffed dinosaur, but something beautiful.

Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson wrote two operas that can be heard by Americans, and they are beautiful and not operas. The first one you know is *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which is in four acts and about many, many saints and the second one you may not know is *The Mother of Us All* and the Chicago Opera Theater did it. Very well. *Four Saints* is about religious ecstasy and its libretto is opaque and hard to understand and seems like nonsense, but *The Mother* is not about ecstasy no it is about politics and it is not hard to understand, even though the characters tend to say what's on their minds without listening to each other, and there are many important ideas in it that mean things to people. Which does not happen in opera.

Susan B.: What is marriage, is marriage protection or religion, is marriage renunciation or abundance, is marriage a steppingstone or an end? What is marriage?

Susan B. Anthony is the mother of us all, and Daniel Webster and John Adams and Thaddeus Stevens and Lillian Russell and Ulysses S. Grant are all in the opera, as well as the narrators Virgil T. and Gertrude S. and other historical and fictitious characters. And some of the historical characters say things in the opera that they actually said in life, especially in the debate between Susan B. and Daniel Webster, in which they do not listen to each other.

Besides being a political opera *The Mother of Us All* is a feminist

opera, and it is about women not wanting to change their names when they marry, and about how the rich and powerful do not listen, and most of all it is about women's suffrage and why the word "male" was written into the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Susan B.: Negro man, would you vote if only you can and not she?

Negro Man: You bet.

Susan B.: I fought for you that you could vote, would you vote if they would not let me?

Negro Man: Holy Gee.

And the differences between men and women and the rich and the

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powerless are told very simply, that is not at all to say that they are not very profound.

Susan B.: What is man, what are men, what are they. I do not say that they haven't kind hearts, if I fall down in a faint they will rush to pick me up.... Men have kind hearts when they are not afraid but they are afraid afraid afraid. I say they are afraid but if I were to tell them so their kindness would turn to hate.

There is not a story, there are many stories. Indiana Elliot marries Jo the Loiterer and makes him change his name, and John Adams cannot kneel at the feet of Con-

stance Fletcher and kiss both her hands because he is an Adams, and Daniel Webster tells an old story about two brothers and a pit over and over again, and then falls in love with Angel More who says she is a mouse. And none of these stories has a beginning or an ending, they are all quite mixed up and contradictory and very much like life. More than operas are.

And *The Mother of Us All* is not an opera because it is hilariously funny, one really has to laugh and is not just being polite or showing off one's culture, and that does not happen in opera. But the laughs were not sudden ha-ha laughs. One person would chuckle and two seconds later another would giggle and then a man would crack up and by the time you had thought about it and were reduced to tears, the original joke was long gone.

Jo: Has everybody forgotten Isabel Wentworth?

Chris: Why shouldn't everybody forget Isabel Wentworth?

Jo: Well, that is just what I want to know. I just want to know if everybody had forgotten Isabel Wentworth. That is all I want to know I just want to know if everybody has forgotten Isabel Wentworth.

(Curtain)

Imagine it sung. Not until the epilogue do we find that everybody had indeed forgotten Isabel Wentworth.

All this comes across as warm and human and touching, despite the fact that Gertrude Stein's libretto is often disjunct and nonsensical on the surface, she puts ideas together without connections, ideas suddenly remind her of other ideas too quickly to write "and," and Thomson's music is quite the

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same way. It is full of waltzes and marches and nursery-rhyme tunes, although occasionally there are dissonances bitonality a dissonance and it is not really as simple as Thomson pretends. There are many, many beautiful melodies and not one of them is Italian. Between Stein and Thomson the opera works works works, and it is not tiresome, and one does not have to suspend one's belief in reality, even though one is not tied to that reality. Gertrude Stein invented a new kind of libretto that could be set to music intelligently, and Virgil Thomson invented a musical style to which the American language could be set naturally without distortion, not since Handel has English been treated so well. And it all works so well that why *Four Saints* and *The Mother* did not mark the beginning of a new American musical theater I do not know. Many American operas have been written, Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* and Robert Ward's *The Crucible* and Douglas Moore's *Carry Nation* are

all operas that is to say dinosaurs, and only Philip Glass learned enough from Stein/Thomson to write a *Saryagraha*.

I wish I could quote much more from the libretto, it is so funny and truthful and American. I can't.

I have seen many operas, and each one had a blemish in its production, and most had many blemishes, but this production had no blemish at all. The Chicago Opera Theater's *Bartered Bride* was almost Czech, but its *The Mother of Us All* is completely American, and if you think that is an easy feat you don't know how opera singers are trained in America. The cast is by gosh an ENSEMBLE and not a pack of bellowing prima donnas trying to upstage each other. And except for one or two they sing beautifully and simply and not like opera singers, and they sing American as if they actually spoke the language and not like opera singers. I wonder where they came from. I did not know that there were 20-odd opera singers left in America that had not been overtrained past redemption. *The Mother* is not *La bohème* and it is not *Oklahoma* and it is not even something in between, and that they do not confuse it is a

minor perhaps but happy miracle. And they act excellently especially Debra Malt as Constance Fletcher and William Eichorn as John Adams in their touching duets, yes they all act very well. Perhaps it is easier for Americans to act well when the gestures are American gestures and the musical pacing is natural American pacing and not Wagner or Verdi.

To say that one person sang well would be to insult the rest they all sang so simply and beautifully, one can only line them up and thank them all. But certain images implanted themselves in the memory. I do not know where COT dug up Lee Strawn, he is the spitting image of the young Virgil T. whom he played, and I will never hear the music again without picturing him and his bemused, unflappable game-show-host style and smile as he presided over the opera's opening. Carmen Pelton as Susan B. was the star of the show, yes the central figure, and though she sang beautifully and acted well she did not sing or act as if she were the only person onstage, she blended into the cast with an unassumingness that was pretty to watch. And not like an opera singer. The part

is so simple and spare that few singers would have the intelligence to know how to read it, but Ms. Pelton brought to it warmth and a touching humility. Dalia Bach was awkward and housewifely and a very funny Indiana Elliot. Lesley Goodman was very funny too, she was Daniel Webster's girl friend Angel More, and wafted on a chair carried back and forth by two soldiers, singing her pretty-harp-accompanied aria with a lovely voice. Lovely too was the voice of Debra Mall, who was so perfectly and prettily 19th century that she was not a real person but an old daguerreotype come to life. Jon Gruett was entirely natural and humorous and pathetic as Jo the Loiterer, and Patrick Wroblewski's Chris the Citizen was much the same, and they were very comical together. And on and on.

This production did not have gorgeous sets designed by Robert Indiana like the famous 1976 Santa Fe production, it had almost nothing, a rather pretty orange-lighted nothing, but if one can judge from recordings, COT's *The Mother* was much better musically than Santa Fe's. Largely because conductor Steven Larsen was wise enough and

American enough to pace the work smoothly and intelligently. Europeans cannot, cannot conduct Thomson, they think he is at best Satie, at worst a gauche kind of Faure, they make him sound silly. Larsen made him sound noble and not slick, Thomson is a Protestant, he is never slick. The orchestra was a very bad size for Puccini but a very good size for Thomson, his pretty orchestration sounded sturdy, not too heavy or light. And the set did have pictures of the historical characters in the opera that came down from the ceiling, and excerpts from the score flew occasionally from wing to wing. And these were quite proper for Stein's self-referential text, and a joy to watch.

One goes to the opera to impress one's enemies, but one can go to *The Mother of Us All* to have a good time, and the Chicago Opera Theater's production did not have a single moment in it that was not a good time. And if you didn't go to *The Mother of Us All*, you may know perfectly well what an opera is, but you may not know at all what an opera could be. I went twice, which I never do.

Which is a fact.

Letters

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surfaced in Britain after the repeal of the antiwitchcraft acts in the 1950s.

(3) Witches do not deal with evil forces and are prohibited to do so when declaring their faith. Witches follow the Law of Three which states: "Anything that you do unto

others will return to you threefold." Witches also follow the law "An it harm none, do what ye wilt," paraphrased by Saint Augustine as: "Love God and do what ye wilt."

(4) Satan has no place in Wicca. Belief in Satan stems from the ancient Persian doctrine of two cosmic forces, one good and one evil, locked in eternal conflict. This was postulated by Zoroaster, and filtered through the Jewish mind and into Christian doctrine.

Satan as a power of evil is not

encountered in the Old Testament. He was merely a tester, a court prosecutor for the other side. His workings can best be seen in the Book of Job. He is a tester of faith, and in that capacity can be seen in the New Testament, appearing to Jesus after Jesus's 40 days in the desert. Satan, in medieval Jewish thought, was an allegorical figure for sin.

He took a different form in the Christian church, and was adopted as a horrible and fearsome figure,

designed to terrify the peasants into submitting to the New Religion. His physical form was never described in the Old or New Testaments, but the Christian church made him over in the image of the God of the Hunt.

(5) Sorcery is not a religion. It is a system of gaining power or wealth or something of this nature, by invoking Christian and Hebrew God-Names, drawing protective pentacles around oneself, and calling up "demons" for selfish or

whatever purposes.

(6) I respect anyone's right to practice their religion without negative reactions or ignorant comments from other people. I would appreciate it if other people would respect my rights.

I hope that you see fit to print this letter, and that it has cleared up some of your misconceptions of a religion that is nothing as it has been portrayed.

Lady Cerridwen
Evanston

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