

# An African Trinity

By Kyle Gann

## The Mother of Three Sons

Celebrity collaborations staged by Big Cultural Institutions are generally more impressive as marketing strategies than as art. Europe has better taste in such matters, so I should have been clued in by the fact that the Aachen Opera and Munich Biennale brought together composer Leroy Jenkins, dancer Bill T. Jones, and poet Ann T. Greene. Still, I was prepared to be condescended to by their dance opera *The Mother of Three Sons*, in its October 19 American premiere at New York City Opera. I had little faith that even an improviser as good as Jenkins could write an opera when an orchestra expert like John Adams had so recently failed. Then the piece, a third of the way through, swept me up and made me wish it wouldn't end. When this review appears, you will still have a chance to see the opera, November 2 at 2. You won't experience anything more joyous and colorful, nor much that's more moving, this season.

For that first third of the opera, I was impressed, but suspected that the proscenium stage was not the optimum venue for a piece so intimate. Never has a work so

non-European in ethos been coaxed into such a European format. Greene's libretto, drawn from Yoruban myth, about a woman who demands sons and is then enraged when each one arrives with some crippling flaw, is too archetypal to treat literally, though its text is far more singable than *The Death of Klinghoffer*, a vocal monstrosity. (The Klinghoffer is my new unit of operatic value, a convenient one because it can be calculated in large, round figures, like yen. *The Mother of Three Sons* is worth around 1500 Klinghoffers.) Jenkins's music began, as you'd expect from an AACM new-jazzier, soloistically, with a thin, chamberlike orchestration: flute over rattles, horn moans over sharp marimba dissonances. It made me want to hear the piece in a closer, less formal setting, perhaps with the musicians in view, surrounding the dancers.

What became apparent was that Jenkins and Jones were husbanding their resources, for as the Mother's desire to control her sons leads her into the larger world, the opera grows with firm pacing into symphonic, epic proportions. Nothing in Jenkins's tightest improvs and chamber concerts had suggested the sure theatrical instincts he shows here.

Far better than most recent classical opera mongers, he knows when to rely on simple but asymmetric patterns (during the film sequence, for instance), when to drop down to repetitive percussion (during the wilder dances), and when the music can transcend its accompaniment function to state its own points. *The Mother* is driven by dance, and when you're working with a choreographic imagination as boundless as Jones's, you've got to write music that is porous, airy, and flexible. Jenkins did.

Classical critics might characterize that music as being in the nouveau Schoenberg/Stravinsky idiom that improvisers turn to when they notate, full of dissonant ostinatos and complexly angular contours. That said, Jenkins never turns a cliché, but evokes one potent sonic image after another, down to the last, tragic whole-step alternation. The best is the scene in which the Mother gives birth to three sons. The strings play slow, Coplandy lines, introverted but impersonal, not suggesting sadness. At each birth, Jones's dancers stamp out a rhythm at a tempo unrelated to the orchestra's, then lift the Mother as a new son rolls out from under her. That tempo contrast's a simple trick, but it draws a profound picture from two perspectives, one within the energetic human sphere, the other from the larger, karmic overview. Had Jenkins mickey-moused the dance rhythm like your average conservatory product, the effect would have been pedestrian. As done, it was visually and aurally unforgettable.

The score seems to spill out of the pit in violent bursts, and its



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Leroy Jenkins coaxes a non-European ethos into an extraordinarily European format.

use of improvisation demands amazing feats of conductor William Henry Curry. Most of the vocal performances are splendid. Ruby Hinds (the Mother) turns in an affecting performance in a clear voice powerful enough to dominate the stage, and Rhodessa Jones's wonderfully articulate, black-accented narration surrounds the piece with the authority of ancient wisdom. The production isn't problem-free. Having a vocal quartet sing the lines from stage right while the dancers lip-synch feels makeshift, and Jenkins occasionally suffers from the American inability to set English lyrically. Even so, in such a transparent context the super-titles (indispensable in *Klinghoffer*) are irritatingly redundant; they give your eyes a shortcut when your ears should be drawn in by doing the work. But being African American in aesthetic, *The Mother* is delightfully chaotic around the edges; unlike slicker

European operas, its unity isn't so fragile that a miscalculation here or there affects the whole.

Then there's the dancing, and the brilliant costumes, and the vibrant sets, and the buildings that roll onstage oppressively during the frenetic urban dance. I make a sour opera fan because productions so rarely live up to the operas of my imagination, but in this case the myth seems to fall into the visual and aural space by itself, intact. Without venturing into a vocabulary outside my expertise, I found it beautiful the way Jones picked up the adult dancers who played the sons and examined them as if they were babies; gravity seemed to exert no influence. And every now and then, Jenkins's unmistakably rough-hewn violin playing comes soaring out of the orchestra pit like the gruff voice of an old friend, reminding you that one of our downtown regulars is making the magic work. ■

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