

£4.99 March 2010

# Opera



Martinu in Prague  
Samuel Barber  
Wagnerian blood  
Susan Bickley



# GIVING VOICE TO BEAUTY

Roger Pines salutes Samuel Barber's centenary

To leave, to break, to find, to keep, to stay, to wait, to hope, to dream, to weep and remember ...' Thus sing the principals in the climactic quintet of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*. Composed mainly in canon, the music exhibits a beauty and eloquence often compared with *Rosenkavalier*'s final trio. Aching melancholy, too, colours that episode, and it is in large part melancholy that one feels in marking Barber's centenary (1910-81). His operas number only three—saddening indeed, for few 20th-century composers had so much to offer the stage.

A Pennsylvania native and the nephew of the Met contralto Louise Homer, Barber was already composing songs in his youth. At ten he even attempted an opera (just the first act was written), for which his family's cook contributed the libretto! A decade of rigorous training at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute instilled a lifelong meticulousness in his creative process. The composer Lee Hoiby, Barber's house guest during his work on the final song of *Mélodies passagères* (early 1950s), offers this reminiscence:

One night he kept me up by slowly and monotonously repeating the same two bars, over and over, with only the slightest variation, it seemed forever. The next morning I asked him what on earth he had been doing. 'I was looking for the right notes,' he said. 'Just as in a Beethoven sonata, you have to play the notes on the page. Anything else is wrong.' It was the most important composition lesson I ever had—how much care needs to be poured into every tiny choice.

■ Samuel Barber at the time of the premiere of 'Vanessa'



Barber's potential when it came to writing for voice and orchestra emerged with *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1948), premiered by Eleanor Steber. The text was James Agee's nostalgic evocation of small-town life. 'I have family from the South,' says Christine Brewer, one of *Knoxville*'s finest interpreters today, 'and I think Barber captured so well the sound of the locusts, the sight of the fireflies, the hot Southern nights. Every moment is perfect, and very American.'

By the mid-1950s Barber was more than ready for opera. Providing a libretto was his life partner, Gian Carlo Menotti, who had already





■ The premiere of 'Vanessa' at the Met in 1958, with (l. to r.) Eleanor Steber in the title role, Nicolai Gedda as Anatol, Giorgio Tozzi as the Old Doctor, Regina Resnik as the Old Baroness, George Cehanovsky as the Major Domo and Rosalind Elias as Erika

composed nine operas, writing the texts himself. Isak Dinesen's mesmerizing *Seven Gothic Tales* inspired the atmosphere, but the synopsis and text of *Vanessa* were Menotti's own.

For 20 years, Vanessa awaits the return of her lover Anatol. Surrounding her are her niece Erika, her taciturn mother, and a kindly doctor. Anatol having died, his son—also named Anatol—arrives at Vanessa's mansion. He seduces inexperienced Erika, who falls for him, yet he chooses to pay court to Vanessa. Weeks later (and unbeknownst to all), Erika intentionally miscarries Anatol's child. Besotted with the shallow, opportunistic young man, Vanessa weds him and departs for Paris while Erika remains behind, declaring 'Now it is my turn to wait'.

Maria Callas declined the Metropolitan Opera's invitation to create Vanessa, and Sena Jurinac cancelled—reportedly due to illness—six weeks before the first night, after which Eleanor Steber rapidly learned the role. Joining Steber, Nicolai Gedda, Regina Resnik and Giorgio Tozzi was a young Rosalind Elias, whose Erika made her a star. The Met's premiere in January 1958 earned excellent reviews and Barber won a Pulitzer Prize, but a mixed reception (especially from the German critics) greeted the opera at the 1958 Salzburg Festival.

Unheard at the Met since the 1964-5 season, occasionally presented elsewhere in

*Rosalind Elias remembers Samuel Barber and 'Must the winter come so soon?'*

“After receiving the score of *Vanessa*, I went to Rudolf Bing's office and said, 'I'm so honoured to be doing *Erika*, I just love the role, I love the opera, but I'm the only one without an aria!' 'One moment, *Rosalind*,' he said, then dialled the phone: 'Sam, I've got *Rosalind Elias* here and she wants to talk to you.' I said, 'No, Mr Bing, no!' But then I got on the phone and said, 'Mr Barber, I'm so honoured to sing your piece, it's so beautiful, but I'm the only one who doesn't have an aria'. (Lee Hoiby was there when Sam got the call—he said, 'What nerve that girl has!') It was nice that Sam already knew me when he wrote *Erika*'s aria 'Must the winter come so soon?'.

This aria comes from a very lonely person: she probably just goes to her room, sits alone and daydreams, never revealing her feelings to anyone. She's living in that mansion with a self-centred aunt and a grandmother who doesn't talk to anyone—what kind of life is that for a young girl? The aria should be sung simply, with Sam's beautiful legato. It doesn't give you any introduction, so you have to give yourself time with it, letting the audience look into your soul.

Sam was so helpful and thoughtful—I don't know of another composer who would have been so kind to a singer. He attended every rehearsal and wasn't strict with his own music. Never! He kept asking me, 'Do you want me to change anything?' I said, 'Please don't. I want to sing your music the way you wrote it!' He was open to everything and was so positive, but in many ways I also felt such a sadness in him—an unfulfilment. ”

America but rarely internationally, *Vanessa* reached Britain only in 1999, at the Lyric Hammersmith. The 2003 BBCSO performance divided opinion: in OPERA, Patrick O'Connor and the Editor both applauded the work, but others found it 'mawkish and sentimental' (Anthony Holden, *The Guardian*) or beset by 'crashing obviousness' (Rupert Christiansen, *The Daily Telegraph*). Christine Brewer, the BBCSO's *Vanessa*, defends the opera: 'People consider the libretto a little melodramatic, but what about some of Puccini's operas? I love that the characters are so complicated. The quintet, one of the most beautiful things in the repertoire, always pulls on my heart. Another reason the opera's music so attracted me was that I felt the kind of sweep that you hear in Richard Strauss.'

If *Vanessa*'s predominantly post-Romantic idiom and 'grand manner' may alienate some contemporary-opera devotees, other listeners will find much to value. This is a genuinely well-crafted work: skilled recitative/arioso style enhances plot and characterization; Barber's orchestra superbly supports the principals' splendid set pieces (above all, *Vanessa*'s glorious 'Do not utter a word'); the final moments of all five scenes prove invariably gripping. Were *Vanessa* and Anatol less off-putting personalities, perhaps the opera would arouse greater affection.

In 1959, the Spoleto Festival introduced Barber's *A Hand of Bridge* (text by Menotti). In this nine-minute, piano-accompanied work, four card-players are presented with notable flair. To the American stage director Michael Ehrman, these are 'two suburban couples, completely repressed. Geraldine, whose aria—the opera's lyrical high point—is also a cry of pain, wants something human in relationships, whereas her husband David wants money and power. Sally is





■ Rosalind Elias (r.) as Erika in the premiere of 'Vanessa' in 1958, with Eleanor Steber in the title role

just frivolous, and *her* husband Bill is about lust. Like *Vanessa*, there's mystery and unanswered questions.' Today *A Hand of Bridge* remains essential for chamber groups and university opera workshops.

Barber anticipated his final opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, with 'Andromache's Farewell' (1963). Using text from Euripides's *The Trojan Women*, the music ennobles the final words of Hector's widow to her young son. Barber required incisiveness, tonal sumptuousness, and remarkable expressive grandeur, memorably supplied by the original performers, Martina Arroyo and the New York Philharmonic under Thomas Schippers.

In 1959 Barber agreed to create an opera for the Met's first season at Lincoln Center, but took his time considering possible dramatic sources. Only when pressed in 1964 by Schippers and the Met's Rudolf Bing did he consent to having his opera *open* the 'new Met'. After Barber settled on his favourite Shakespeare play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Bing enlisted Franco Zeffirelli as director-designer. Reliable sources write of Barber's actually learning *via the newspaper* that Bing had also asked Zeffirelli to prepare the libretto!

During three weeks with Barber in Tuscany, Zeffirelli cut locales and characters, reducing Shakespeare's five acts to three (and 42 scenes to 16), while leaving the language essentially unaltered. When listening to Barber's score, Zeffirelli, surprisingly, found it excessively small-scale. By the time the composer sensed their cross-purposes, presumably Zeffirelli's conception for the Met's vast stage was unalterable.

Some brilliant effects notwithstanding, *Antony and Cleopatra* was greatly overproduced when it opened on 16 September 1966. Schippers conducted the vocally effulgent principals authoritatively: Justino Diaz and Leontyne Price (the latter magnificently demonstrating the 'impassioned lyricism' Barber cherished in her voice) portrayed the lovers, supported by Jess Thomas, Ezio Flagello and Rosalind Elias. Massive media attention concentrated on Zeffirelli's production and the house itself, with Barber's opera generally treated apathetically when not panned outright.

The Met scrapped a revival, but Barber didn't give the work up. With Menotti's help, large cuts were made to the libretto. Looking through the piano score, one finds more than 50 pages that Barber eliminated. He composed brief sections of new music, including a much-needed love duet. Following Juilliard's 1975 premiere, Version II has

■ Barber (l.) with the cast of the premiere of *'Antony and Cleopatra'*







■ *Inaugurating the new Met: Franco Zeffirelli's production for the premiere of 'Antony and Cleopatra', 1966*

been heard at Spoleto USA, London's Abbey Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and most recently in a New York City Opera/Carnegie Hall concert performance. Critical response has become rather kinder: for example, Justin Davidson, writing in *New York* magazine in 2009, cited 'clearly etched characters and music that ranges from solid to sublime. It's just too good a work to be left to moulder between one-offs.'

Version II presents essential dramatic elements—the protagonists' love affair, Antony's marriage to Octavia, the catastrophic battle of Actium, the defeated Antony's death (believing Cleopatra dead, he falls on his own sword, but is then taken to the Queen and dies in her arms), Cleopatra's suicide. There is tighter focus on the title characters by shortening Octavius Caesar's role, turning Octavia into a silent figure, and cutting the silly and distracting Mardian, Cleopatra's eunuch. In the Roman galley scene ending Act 1, an elaborate dance episode is cut.

Lee Hoiby hears in *Antony and Cleopatra* 'more than its share of moments of ravishing opulence', while finding that the work lacks heart and that Barber never 'really loved his characters or the story. There is too much effort to be grand.' Despite musical and dramatic streamlining in Version II, Lord Harewood's comments regarding Version I (*OPERA*, November 1966) still apply. I agree with him in finding the choice of this particular Shakespeare play perplexing. Few lines beg for musical treatment—could *any* composer have felicitously set Cleopatra's 'Celerity is never more admired than by the negligent'? Harewood rightly found Shakespeare's words 'too complicated to keep afloat on a singing line'. Both versions fail to produce riveting drama until the second-act final scene, where the flute-and-timpani accompaniment unnervingly colours Antony's suicide.

During the first two acts, Barber frequently handles Cleopatra's more petulant and aggressive sides awkwardly. In Act 3, however (as she prepares to apply asp to breast), the music achieves stunning expressive power through broadly arched phrases Barber had tailored especially for Price. Here the characterization projects a conviction seldom encountered in the other *dramatis personae*. Earlier in Act 3 is a trio for Cleopatra and her two maidservants (mezzo and contralto); at the time of the Met premiere, Price hailed that episode as the most beautiful music Barber had ever written. Harewood and seemingly every other critic discussing *Antony and Cleopatra* have cited Act 3 as the portion of the work where Barber's score found its true voice.

Only a few notable works marked Barber's last years. He was debilitated by the sale of his beloved home, plus depression, alcoholism, finally cancer. Even had he been alive to witness the more positive reception greeting Version II in Chicago (1991) and New York (2009), one cannot imagine this inspiring him, Verdi-like, to produce a new opera in his twilight years.

Clearly the scarring debacle of the Met's *Antony and Cleopatra* discouraged Barber from opera—from composition in general. That is tragic, for Barber's music genuinely enriched voices. Had he found a librettist to offer him a bolder, more immediately appealing drama than *Vanessa* (perhaps exploiting an essentially American, *Knoxville*-like expressive directness), would his debut opera be more eagerly embraced than *Vanessa* is today? If Barber and Zeffirelli had been in true creative 'sync', and if *Antony and Cleopatra* had premiered under less pressure, would it have triumphed? Tantalizing questions, never to be answered. Today, in listening to *Cleopatra*, *Vanessa*, and *Erika*, we can only weep in imagining the Barber operas that might have been.

*The Curtis Opera Theatre, Philadelphia, stages 'Antony and Cleopatra' in a new production by Chas Rader-Shieber, on March 17, 19 and 21.*

## Newsdesk

### Private sponsorship down

According to figures released by Arts & Business, the total figure for private sector investment in culture in the UK fell in 2008-9 from its record high in 2007-8 to £654.9 million, a drop of seven per cent. Business investment fell by six per cent, while the giving from trusts, foundations and individuals dropped by seven per cent, confirming an anticipated—though not disastrous—fall in arts philanthropy. Broken down by art form and region, the figures reflect many different trends, and the most dramatic changes include a decrease to museums

of 37 per cent and an increase to visual arts organizations of 15 per cent. Opera suffered a drop of 12 per cent, which means that in 2008-9 it received £27 million from private sources, or £2,979,419 less than in the previous year.

### Vilar begs for mercy

Alberto Vilar, the disgraced former financier and opera benefactor who faces 22 years in jail after his conviction for \$40-million fraud, has written to the judge due to pass sentence on February 5 asking for leniency. In a letter to Judge Richard Sullivan, filed at the Manhattan