

BY EDWARD SECKERSON



Music with Heart

American opera
is alive and well
in the imagination
of Jake Heggie

In the multifaceted world of music theater, opera has always occupied the higher ground. It's almost as if the very word has served to elevate the form and willfully set it apart from that branch of the genre where characters are wont to speak as well as sing: the musical. But where does that leave Bizet's *Carmen* or Mozart's *Magic Flute*? And why is it so hard to accept that music theater comes in a great many forms and styles and that through-sung or not, there are stories to be told in words and music and more than one way to tell them? Will there ever be an end to the tedious debate as to whether Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* or Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* are musicals or operas? Both scores are inherently "operatic" for sure, but does performing them in an opera house as opposed to a Broadway theater make them any more or less important?

To some, it clearly does. When Andrew Lloyd Webber created a "rock opera" with *Jesus Christ Superstar*, he was surely mindful of how the juxtaposition of "rock" and "opera" might give his fledgling stage work a loftier street cred. When Leonard Bernstein was in the throes of writing arguably the greatest of all musicals—*West Side Story*—we know now from the exchange of letters to and from his collaborators, Arthur Laurents and Jerome Robbins, how vehemently they resisted his desire to "operatize" the piece, to maximize the effect of the sung music, for instance, to have Maria

true only to himself and that his unapologetic fondness for and love of the American stage at its most lyric would dictate how he would write, in the only way he knew how: tonally, gratefully, generously, from the heart.

Dissenting voices have accused him of not pushing the envelope, of rejoicing in the past and not the future, of veering too close to Broadway (as if that were a bad thing) and courting popular appeal. But where Bernstein, it could be argued, spent too much precious time quietly seeking the approval of his cutting-edge contemporaries (with even a work like *A Quiet Place* betraying a certain determination to toughen up his act), Heggie has written only the music he wanted—needed—to write. He is often asked if and when he might one day write a musical and his response is: "What do you think I've been writing for the last two decades?" Case made. Case rested.

Heggie's musical roots were sunk unfathomably deep when during his time at UCLA, he studied with Johana Harris, widow of that flinty American icon Roy Harris and one of the finest pianists of her generation. She was by his reckoning a hugely inspirational teacher and her husband's breadth of vision clearly rubbed off on both of them. A personal relationship ensued. Other names leap out from those UCLA years: movie music dynamo David Raksin (remember *The Bad and the Beautiful*?) and Henry Mancini in

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sing her final speech over the body of Tony. That was the "aria" that never was. And rightly so.

But when you consider how marginalized Bernstein felt by his peers (and having interviewed him the year before he died, I know this to be true), and how his remarkable Broadway work was seen as a handicap to his acceptance by the contemporary music establishment of the day, you begin to understand why he was so receptive to the idea that *West Side Story* was more of an opera than a musical and that by entrusting it to the leading soprano and tenor of the day (in that misguided and now discredited 1984 Deutsche Grammophon recording) would somehow enshrine it for the ages. It was a wrong-headed betrayal of its Broadway origins. And calling it an opera did not make it any more of a masterpiece.

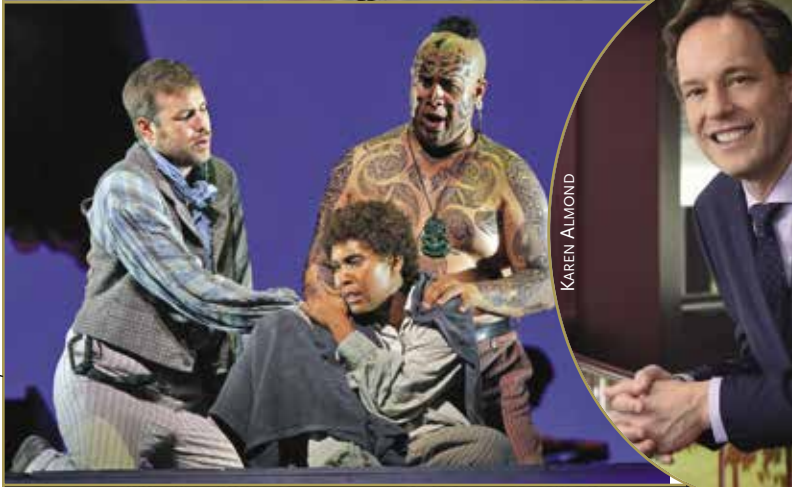
Yet Bernstein could see even then how the legacy of the American musical could and would evolve. I remember him saying on the day that we met that he fervently hoped that through the creative endeavors of figures like Stephen Sondheim, there would slowly but surely emerge a particular kind of American opera.

In that, he would surely have found kinship with Jake Heggie. They did meet, it seems, but not before Heggie's operas—led, of course, by the astonishing San Francisco Opera commission *Dead Man Walking*—had found unprecedented international success. Bernstein would perhaps have seen a bittersweet irony in the fact that Heggie, from the very start of his creative journey, had been

whose name an award was created. (Heggie was the recipient in 1987.) Add to that the unexpected twist of a career-changing appointment as San Francisco Opera's Public Relations Associate and a self-confessed passion for Barbra Streisand and you clearly have a man for whom the theater would always be home.

But in the beginning, there was Song. Heggie's many songs (to date, nearly 300 of them) were the embryos from which his big stage pieces would grow. They were self-contained dramas, always very specific, always telling a story. He has spoken of making a journey of any poem—sometimes a physical journey, always an emotional one. And that emotional connection has informed all his work with words. His great gift is in finding the natural music of those words and if a song suggests a foray into jazz or blues or even pop culture, his instincts are as sound as they are illuminating. In his dramatic song cycle *Into the Fire*—written for his muse-in-waiting, mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato—he traverses the tragic life of the sculptor Rodin's mistress and kindred spirit, Camille Claudel. Heggie's music is in perfect harmony with the way in which Claudel's sculptures move—or rather, dance.

Above all, his vocal lines—so naturally leavened in rhythm and rhyme, ebb and flow—are so grateful to sing. He is that rare thing: a born melodist. Small wonder that during his time at San Francisco Opera, the music he shared with luminaries such as Frederica von Stade quickly found favor. Without wishing to make



Three musical faces of composer Jake Heggie, from top to bottom: 2015's *Great Scott*, featuring (left to right) Kevin Burdette, Rodell Rosel, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Joyce DiDonato, Michael Mayes, Ailyn Pérez, and Frederica von Stade; the San Francisco Opera co-commission and co-production *Moby-Dick* with Stephen Costello (*Greenhorn*), Talise Trevigne (*Pip*), and Jonathan Lemalu (*Queequeg*) in the Company's 2012 staging; the Angola Prison scene from the 2000 San Francisco Opera world premiere of *Dead Man Walking*.

too sweeping a generalization, the musical language of contemporary opera can so often be at odds with the subject matter, by which I mean the particular color and cast of the setting, the specifics of time, place, mood, and situation. The musical syntax we've come to know all too well can sound much the same from piece to piece: vocal chord-stretching pyrotechnics that make little or no concession to individual characters, or indeed, operas. Heggie doesn't hide behind the fanciful or the tricky or the unsingably "cutting-edge" but rather serves and illuminates his texts through the honesty and elegance of his vocal writing.

Before I ever heard and was knocked sideways by *Dead Man Walking*, I came across Heggie's setting of the final monologue from Terrence McNally's emotive study of Maria Callas, *Master Class*. It was also written for Joyce

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DiDonato and it achieved what might have seemed impossible for anyone who has seen and ultimately thrilled to the play. It musicalized the text in such a way as to make it inconceivable that the music hadn't been there all along. It was later adapted for Kiri Te Kanawa. You see, singers know when they happen upon vocal gold.

Happening upon the appropriate musical color for his pieces is again key to their success. Though his musical voice is always apparent, the accent shifts. So we have the gospel elements in *Dead Man Walking*; the male chorus-driven, sea-shanty tang of *Moby-Dick*; the Italianate bel canto spoofing (so skilled in its affection and execution that it sounds like the real thing) in *Great Scott* (another vehicle, and then some, for DiDonato); or the homespun hue of *It's a Wonderful Life* with its magical celestial waltz so redolent of another of the American lyric stage's most glorious creations, Richard Rodgers' *Carousel*.

When a work is through-sung, the onus is on the composer to find ways of sustaining dramatic tension and pointing up all the emotional climacterics. Ask Andrew Lloyd Webber why he chooses the through-sung rather than the Sondheim-preferred book-song format (some would say a far more exacting skill), and he'll tell you that it's important to him that the music drives the narrative. In his case, underscoring and reprise carry forward the emotional memory; with Heggie, it's a more subliminal network of leitmotifs that trigger our emotional responses.

It's also the way in which speech becomes song and

It's a Wonderful Life received its world premiere at Houston Grand Opera on December 2, 2016.

From San Francisco Opera's 2008 production of *Three Decembers*, Frederica von Stade as Madeline Mitchell.



KAREN ALMOND

KRISTEN LOKEN

the way song takes us to the next level of intensity. Of course, it helps when you work with two of the best and most composer-friendly librettists imaginable: Terrence McNally (linking back to the Great White Way where he gave us one of the finest books ever written for a Broadway musical, *Ragtime*) and Gene Scheer whose ear for poetry lends a very particular dynamic. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, one might single out his collusion with Heggie in the Stephen Foster-like fireside song intimated in Mary Hatch's farewell to Bedford High or George and Mary's rapturous duet at the close of Act I where we are truly in thrall to Frank Capra's warm embrace. These lyric "blossomings," be they in the voice or orchestra, are an enduring characteristic of Heggie's musical language. Sometimes they are fleeting in nature, filling a phrase or even just a word. But they stay with you. You may not be immediately aware that they do, but you'll know them when they creep up on you again.

Opera is also about "elaborations." It's one of the reasons Stephen Sondheim gives for not liking it. He repeatedly says that he is interested in serving only the moment, not elaborating on it. I once jokingly suggested that his *Liebestod* (Isolde's transfiguration at the climax of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*) wouldn't be much fun, that it would all be over in 30 seconds. That amused him.

Heggie rises to those elaborations. Anyone who has ever seen and been floored by *Dead Man Walking* will remember above all the scene in the appellate court where the victims and perpetra-

tor's families are gathered. From the line "You don't know what it's like," Heggie fashions a searing sextet where everyone's pain is voiced. All are victims. And only in opera can they be heard at once. It's as powerful a piece of writing as I know in 21st-century opera and Heggie's detractors should be directed straight to it.

But there is more. In *Great Scott*, Heggie writes comic opera with heart. Wagner, Verdi, and Britten might come back to tell you how hard that is. In *Great Scott*, it is the fictional Italian master Vittorio Bazzetti whose ghost appears to opera superstar Arden Scott (DiDonato), spurring her on to shine in his long-lost opera *Rosa Dolorosa, Figlia di Pompei*. But the 11 o'clock number (to use Broadway parlance) of Heggie's opera turns comedy to aspiration, celebrating the craft in all its glory in a quartet which might well become known as Heggie's *Rosenkavalier* moment.

"It's always the song, not the singer," reads McNally's text and as that sentiment gains traction, my thoughts turn to the ghost of Bazzetti and his withering dismissal: "American Opera—I didn't think there was such a thing." There sure is, and it's alive and well in the imagination of Jake Heggie. 🌟

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