

nmc talks with **TOBIAS PICKER**



every year, for example. Moreover (and younger readers may not be aware of this), plays were written for TV and shown almost weekly. And those gave me another exposure to theater early on. Yes, and NBC used to commission operas for television, hard as that is to imagine today. I remember watching Menotti's *Labyrinth* on TV in 1963 and being very drawn into the whole experience. Even though he wrote it specifically for the medium of TV, its theatricality had a big impact on me at nine years old. It was not long after that that I was taken to see my first opera live, at the old Met, *Fanciulla*. The circumstances of my going to see *Fanciulla* are interesting from the point of view of what public school education used to offer. Every year at the elementary school I attended, the fourth grade class studied a great opera. We were paired off and spent weeks working together on a maquette showing our concept of how the set should look. We made these in large cardboard boxes with the front, top and one side cut out. Then there was a competition for best maquette and mine and my partner's won. Our maquette was put into a display case for the whole school to see and the entire class was taken to see a matinee performance of *Fanciulla*.

I did not begin my first opera, Emmeline until 1994, when I was forty. By this time I had composed pieces in just about every genre; four piano concerti, three symphonies, concerti for violin, viola, cello and oboe and a number of other orchestral and chamber

NMC: Your opera *Emmeline* premiered at Santa Fe Opera in 1996. It was your first opera. Three operas then followed in swift succession: *Fantastic Mr. Fox* two years later, *Therese Raquin* two years after that, then *An American Tragedy*, a Metropolitan Opera commission, in 2005. That's four operas in nine years! Had you always wanted to write opera, or did the experience of working on *Emmeline*, and its success, push you in a direction you would not have anticipated?

TP: *I wanted to (or knew I would eventually) write operas since I was a small child and watched them on TV. Amahl and the Night Visitors was broadcast*

pieces and vocal works. I had been composer in residence for the Houston Symphony for five years. I had honed my craft as an orchestrator and my voice as a composer. I knew I was finally ready to tackle the largest of all genres, opera, a genre for which I'd developed a great reverence.

*The earliest example of literature influencing my work was *The Encantadas* from 1983. It is a work for speaker (or actor) and orchestra and it is full of word painting inspired by the rich prose of Herman Melville's descriptions of the Galapagos Islands which he'd visited as a young man in the *Merchant Marines*. *The Encantadas* is a theatrical work – a melodrama – not a narrated travelogue. There is a drama between the speaker and the orchestra and a constant interplay that casts the speaker in different moods and characters throughout.*

*From the time I began composing as a child, I'd always hoped to be able to write opera. So much so that I wrote Gian Carlo Menotti a letter when I was eight telling him that I planned to write an opera about Schubert. (I abandoned the project in favor of learning to play the piano first). I was very excited when he wrote back to me. He said he'd done so because my childhood name, Toby, was the name of the central character of his opera, *The Medium*.*

Another early influence was my German Jewish grandfather's obsession with Wagner. From the time I can remember he made it very clear to me that Wagner was the greatest composer who ever lived and that Mozart was of no interest (he called it "deedle-deedle-dee-musik.") No composer besides Wagner was even worth mentioning. This attitude must have instilled in me a proper sense of awe about the entire world of

composition and made me all the more curious about other composers. And it forced me to confront Wagner at a very early age. This helped fuel an inward need to create drama with music, with and without words.

I'd written some songs as a student but nothing I'd ever let out. The first song I wrote was not until I was 30. It was written at the behest of Judith Bettina who had found a poem, Aussöhnung by Goethe especially moving (as did I when she showed it to me). She asked me repeatedly to set it for her. But, as I was busy with other projects I kept procrastinating. One day Judith was visiting us for Thanksgiving. Suddenly she said: "go into your study and don't come out until you've written that song." And that's exactly what I did. I set it in German in an hour and then asked her in and we read through it together. I wrote more songs for her over time and I credit Judy with teaching me how to write for the voice.

NMC: Yes, but as you say, writing an opera isn't just writing for the voice, it's creating drama with music. You mention that in the 25 years leading up to *Emmeline* you had written a number of pieces for orchestra and a lot of chamber music. Several pieces come to mind: your piano concerto *The Keys to the City*, commissioned by the City of New York for the Brooklyn Bridge Centennial, *The Encantadas*, a melodrama which Sir John Gielgud later recorded, and *Old and Lost Rivers* for the Houston Symphony; the Octet for Parnassus, your first String Quartet for the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, *Invisible Lilacs* for Emmanuel Ax and Young Uck Kim. Were these pieces simply keeping you too busy to turn your attention to opera, or do you regard them in some way as preparation for the larger scale of *Emmeline*?

TP: *The latter. Large scale form is essential for every composer to reckon with. Having a lot of experience with form and structure before attempting to write an opera was a necessary thing, at least it was for me. Becoming a proficient orchestrator and developing my voice was for me, mandatory before even thinking about opera. Everything I wrote before *Emmeline* prepared me to write opera. How*

could an artist decide to paint an enormous fresco without first learning how to draw and mix paint?

NMC: Sure, and a fresco is a good analogy because of the need to "get it right" the first time. With so few opportunities for premieres, much less second or third performances, the better prepared a composer is the better the chances are that the opera will work as he or she imagined it. But there are at least numerous venues for readings and workshops of an opera as it develops – these, however, almost never involve an orchestra, and concentrate more on the purely theatrical aspects of an opera: the efficacy of the libretto, and how the music – and especially the voice -- enhances narrative and character development. These elements aren't a normal part of a composer's formal education. How did you learn what makes good theater?

TP: *I believe that one is either born to the theater or not. That said, just like learning to write for an orchestra, learning how to make better theater takes practice. I learn from all kinds of theater that I see, including opera. But, I think the most important learning comes from studying one's own work and learning to identify one's own mistakes and strengths. I have been very lucky to have had the opportunity of seeing my operas performed many times in multiple productions. I often think of the French painter, Pierre Bonnard because he simply could never leave a painting alone. He'd attend exhibitions of his work wearing a long coat with loops hidden on the inside that held paints and brushes. When nobody was looking, he'd dab a little more color here, or change something there. It is very hard for me not to make some improvement or other every time I see one of my operas. I've even persuaded conductors to leave notes on the orchestra player's music stands after the final dress. One can't do that with singers. They need much more time than a violinist to institute a change.*

NMC: You mentioned that you are now working on a Piano Quintet, and that it has been a long time since you haven't been working on a large opera commission. I imagine this could feel both very liberating and

limiting at the same time – liberating because after a Met commission any other piece is, almost by definition, on a smaller scale. And limiting for the very same reason. Could you please comment on that?

TP: *I am now finishing a Piano Quintet for Sarah Rothenberg and The Brentano Quartet for Da Camera in Houston. I'm very excited about the feeling I have that I've solved (almost) to my satisfaction the enormous problems that come with combining a string quartet and the king of instruments, the piano – two things that don't really need each other. And, I'm enormously excited about the music that this has brought out of me. It has been one of the most challenging projects of my career. I now understand why Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak, Shostakovich and others wrote only one piano quintet. It is also interesting to note that Beethoven never wrote one.*

NMC: And what do you have planned after the Quintet?

TP: *When the Quintet is finished, I'll compose an opera, with a libretto by J.D. McClatchy based on the book, Dolores Claiborne (by Stephen King - which was also made into a film with Kathy Bates). This will be my 5th opera and the first opera I write since writing An American Tragedy for the Metropolitan Opera.*

I'm very happy to be returning to opera after a six-year hiatus. I feel especially blessed to have another opportunity to write an opera after the Met. There have been only five operas commissioned and premiered by the Met in the past forty-four years, mine being the fourth. For whatever reason, of the five, only Phillip [Glass] has gone on to write more operas. Corigliano, Harbison and Tan Dun have not (yet) returned to opera (that I know of.) Of course working for and at the Met is a tremendously exciting and indescribably wonderful experience. But, I'm relieved to find that there really is life after the Met. (I did wonder whether there would be or not.) And while there is no company in America as big as the Met, there are certainly other great opera companies in the world to write for. ■