

## NOTES ON THE ARIAS

### AM AHL AND THE NIGHT VISITORS

- music and libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti
- commissioned by NBC Television; first performed in a live broadcast on December 24, 1951

#### This is my box

in one act

*setting:* the Italian Hills at the time of the birth of Christ; a poor woman's home and yard

*character:* King Kaspar

This Christmas opera tells the story of a crippled boy who is miraculously healed when he offers his crutch as a gift to the newborn Christ. The three Magi have stopped for the night at the home of a poor widow. Her son, Amahl, wide-eyed, points to a jeweled box carried by King Kaspar and asks what it is.

### AMISTAD

- music by Anthony Davis
- libretto by Thulani Davis after the historical events of the 1839 *Amistad* revolt
- commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago in memory of Ardis Krainik; first performed there on November 29, 1997

#### The moonlight died

from Act II, scene 2

*setting:* an American courtroom, 1839; the slave who revolted and commandeered the *Amistad* is on trial for mutiny and murder

*character:* the Navigator

The case of the *Amistad* mutiny has become a historical symbol of the slave trade. In this aria the Navigator testifies about the events on the night the ship was taken over by its captured passengers.

### ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

- music by Samuel Barber
- libretto by Franco Zeffirelli, based on the play by William Shakespeare
- commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center, New York City; first performed there on September 16, 1966; a revised version was prepared by the composer in 1975, with textual revisions by Gian Carlo Menotti

#### The breaking of so great a thing

from Act III, scene 1

*setting:* Egypt, 41-31 BCE; Cleopatra's monument

*character:* Caesar (Octavius)

Shakespeare's play, based on history, is a tragic story of love, power and intrigue, telling of the Roman General Marc Antony and his sensual mistress, Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. Caesar, ruler of Rome, is furious that Marc Antony has crowned Cleopatra and himself as the rulers of the Roman Empire in the East. War begins between Antony and Caesar. Caesar has defeated the Egyptian army and found Antony dead in the arms of Cleopatra. Caesar and Cleopatra make their peace and then he turns, clearly saddened, to Antony's body. He picks up Antony's sword, kisses it and places it on the dead man's chest. The aria corresponds to Act V, scene 1 in the play. The opera concludes with Cleopatra's suicide, inflicted by a poisonous asp.

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It is exciting to have reached a point in history where a four-volume series of viable, attractive, musically diverse American arias is a practical possibility. It would have been unlikely, even far-fetched, to have imagined such a publication a few decades ago. The dramatic rise in the number of new operas created and a welcoming climate for them, as well as sustained interest in the best of the heritage of American operatic literature, makes it clear that the time has arrived for the *G. Schirmer American Aria Anthology*.

What is American opera? The easy answer is: operas created by American composers and librettists, or by composers and librettists working in America, most often (but certainly not exclusively) for American audiences. Those were the initial principal criteria for an aria to be considered for the *G. Schirmer American Aria Anthology*. Beyond that, the question becomes more difficult to answer, revealing an amalgam of aesthetics, common to most any slice of the continually emerging, dynamic American culture.

That basic question, "What is American opera?," leads to intriguing thoughts. Music written for the stage in the United States has sometimes straddled opera and musical theater in form and style, far more evidently than in Europe. The relationship of opera and Broadway is an ever evolving one. In the 1940s and '50s, a prevailing, publicly championed theory espoused Broadway as the true home for any relevant American opera movement, embraced in the work of Gian Carlo Menotti, Kurt Weill and Marc Blitzstein, among others. There are operatic influences in the theater work of Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Frank Loesser, to name just a couple of examples. At other times over the last century, the vocal and musical kinship between opera and Broadway has been more distant.

Hence the deliberate choice of the *G. Schirmer American Aria Anthology* as series title, allowing for the inclusion of some selections that are "arias" because of expansive vocalism in an operatic spirit, but which are not from works that could be clearly classified as operas. One may debate the definition of *Sweeney Todd* as opera or musical theater, but there is no doubt that it is firmly in the repertory of opera houses, and that is ample reason for including selected excerpts for operatic voices in these volumes. "What Good Would the Moon Be?" from *Street Scene*, or "What will it be for me?" from *Regina*, or the selections from *Lost in the Stars* may have strong musical theater elements, but they fairly represent an important aspect of opera written for Broadway. Nevertheless, while operatic singing is called for in musical theater, a line had to be drawn somewhere. We stopped short of including tempting material from pieces such as Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*, or Jerome Kern's *The Cat and the Fiddle*, or Harold Rome's *Fanny*, to cite a few possible examples. However, because of musical and cultural importance as landmark literature suitable for opera singers, we included "Ol' Man River" from *Show Boat* and "Soliloquy" from *Carousel* in the Baritone/Bass volume.

Sometimes subject matter of operas created in the United States is purely American and rooted in history or traditional stories, illustrated in *Amistad*, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, *Down in the Valley*, *John Brown*, *The Mother of Us All*, and *X*. Other operas are based on more modern, urban American original stories: *Gallantry*, *A Hand of Bridge*, *The Hero*, *The Old Maid and the Thief*, *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, *Street Scene*, *The Telephone*. As might be expected, there are adaptations of American fiction and plays, such as *The Emperor Jones*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Little Women*, *McTeague*, *The Mighty Casey*, *Regina*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *A View from the Bridge*. As the United States clearly emerged as the international center for music after World War II, opera composers and librettists turned to topics with an outlook not confined by borders. Some are historical: *Madame Mao*, *Goya*, *Marco Polo*, and *Simón Bolívar*. Others are original stories with either specific or vague national definition, as in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *The Consul*, *Florencia en el Amazonas*, *The Medium*, and *Sweeney Todd*. As has been true for centuries, plays and novels from classic, international literature continue to be the basis for operas: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Ghosts of Versailles*, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, *Lost in the Stars*, *Tartuffe*, *The Tempest*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *Winter's Tale*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

Trends emerge when studying the chronology of works represented in these volumes, from *Show Boat* (1927) to *Madame Mao* (2003). Until the 1920s, any attempts at establishing American opera (or operetta, or musical theater) fell in the deep shadow of European models. In the 1930s to '50s, American composers took the stage in pioneering a national operatic identity: George Gershwin, Virgil Thomson, Gian Carlo Menotti, Kurt Weill, Marc Blitzstein, Douglas Moore, Samuel Barber. In the 1960s and '70s, quality regional opera companies became established parts of communities across the country, and audiences for opera grew, spurred also by regularly televised performances. Supertitles at last put to rest the long-standing American complaint by some of the non-comprehension of opera. As compositional styles that had been prevalent in the mid-century became less austere, the ground was fertile for the boom of new opera in the last two decades of the 20th century, with momentum especially building in the 1990s. American audiences are decidedly more welcoming now than ever before of contemporary experiences in the opera house. A significant number of American operas have successfully found international appeal in frequent productions abroad.

The anthologies aim to be a manifold survey of the literature, principally formed by the central role that G. Schirmer has played as the leading publisher of American opera. Musical styles represented are diverse, and will appeal to a variety of tastes and vocal needs. Some arias are among the most famous of American operatic excerpts. Others are published for the first time in this series and await discovery. Many other arias, never published outside the complete vocal scores, have been adapted as solo aria editions, giving them new life as active repertory alternatives. A large number of the 153 selections in these four volumes are conducive to general opera auditions, allowing a singer to show voice, musicianship and acting ability with fresh material. Others will be useful for a specific kind of audition for contemporary opera. Still other arias, which might be less appropriate for auditions because of complexity or length, are compelling for study, or for recital. To reach their full potential as communicative performing artists, it is crucial for American singers to explore music in their own language, with which they can culturally identify.

On the cover of these anthologies we present a distinguished American image by Charles Garabedian, a peaceful, juxtaposed congruity of architectural styles, not unlike the co-existence of musical styles between the covers of these collections. Unfortunately, this 1982 painting was destroyed by fire. In its published appearance here we preserve its beauty and extend its life, bringing it to new audiences, just as we hope to do with the music contained within.

No one creates a four-volume series by himself. My thanks to Stephen Sondheim for his kind participation, to other composers who gave valuable input to these aria editions, to Charles Garabedian and the L.A. Louver Gallery, to several publishers who cooperated in granting use of their music, and to the dutiful editors who worked with me, applying themselves with such sustained interest.

Richard Walters  
Editor  
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