

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: OPERA IN AMERICA:
MUSIC OF, BY, AND FOR THE PEOPLE—
A PERFORMANCE DISSERTATION

Carolyn Black-Sotir, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2012

Dissertation Directed By: Leon Major, Professor/Director
University of Maryland
School of Music

Opera in America: Music of, by, and for the people is a study of the relationship between American popular culture and opera in the United States. Four performance projects demonstrate the on-going exchange between the operatic community—including its composer, singers, and patrons—and the country's popular entertainment industry with its broad audience base. Numerous examples of artistic cross pollination between lowbrow and highbrow music will illustrate the artistic and social consequences created by this artistic amalgamation.

Program #1, *By George! By Ira! By Gershwin!*, is a retrospective of Gershwin's vocal music representing a blending of popular and serious music in both style and form. The concert includes selections from *Porgy and Bess*, a work considered by many musicologists as the first American opera.

Program #2, *Shadowboxer*, is a premiere performance of an opera by Frank Proto and John Chenault. For this newly commissioned work, I serve as Assistant Director to Leon Major. *Shadowboxer* provides a clear example of opera utilizing popular culture both musically and dramatically to tell the true story of American hero and legendary boxer, Joe Louis.

Program #3, *Just a Song at Twilight*, is an original theatrical music piece featuring music, letters, diaries, and journals of the Gilded Age, an era when opera was synonymous with popular entertainment. Special attention is focused on turn-of-the-century singers who performed in both opera and vaudeville.

Program #4 is a presentation of Dominick Argento's *Miss Manners on Music* and illustrates the strong relationship that can exist between opera and American popular entertainment. Originally conceived as a song cycle, I have staged the work as a one-act opera sung and acted by soprano Carmen Balthrop. This piece is based on the writings of pop icon and newspaper columnist Judith Martin, otherwise known as Miss Manners.

All four performances are recorded in audio and video formats.

OPERA IN AMERICA: MUSIC OF, BY, AND FOR THE PEOPLE:
A PERFORMANCE DISSERTATION

by

Carolyn Black-Sotir

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts
2012

Advisory Committee:

Professor Leon Major, Chair
Professor Carmen Balthrop
Professor Linda Mabbs
Professor Dominic Cossa
Professor Charles Rutherford

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PREFACE

Tenor Jon Vickers warned the opera world to beware of smearing “the line between art and entertainment” and declared that one “cannot bring art to the masses. . . [one] never will.”¹ For the past quarter century I have hoped to prove Mr. Vickers wrong. It has been an interesting endeavor filled with challenges, successes, and a few mishaps along the way. My dissertation evolved out of this ongoing venture and focuses on the influence of American popular music and culture on opera in the United States, as well as some of the artistic and social consequences of this artistic amalgamation.

From a very early age, my own musical tastes reflected my innate and overwhelming preference for “classical” music. Unlike most of my contemporaries, I listened to Bach, Mozart, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Mahler, to name a few. My generation’s music-of-choice was rock-n-roll, a genre I found uninspiring and often irritating because of what I perceived it to be—banal texts set to uninteresting melodic lines with unsophisticated harmonies.

In my late teens, I left home to study voice and viola at Eastman School of Music where I stumbled upon the Great American Songbook. I was intrigued and impressed with the works of such composers and writers as George and Ira Gershwin, Kurt Weill, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Mark Blitzstein, Leonard Bernstein, and Stephen Sondheim. While these composers’ works are steeped in Western European music tradition, they incorporate popular American musical idioms such as Negro spirituals, jazz, and folk music into their works, and their texts reflect the sensibility of the

¹ Jon Vickers, “Eminently Otello,” *Dial* (January 1987): quoted in Lawrence W. Levin, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 254-255.

American people. This repertoire, emanating from my own American heritage, connected me to my past and subsequently evoked a sense of belonging. I found the American Songbook possessed similar characteristics to that of the “classical” vocal repertoire I was studying in school. Like the songs of Brahms and Schubert, Gershwin and Rodgers songs, for example, featured beautiful melodic lines that I found singer-friendly. Like a Schumann *lied*, these American tunes were set to interesting and thoughtful texts expressing such universal themes as love, disappointment, and loneliness. I was particularly drawn to the songs’ American context and their uniquely American sensibilities.

After earning my Master’s degree, I embarked on a career as a professional singer and actress. Out of financial necessity, I took on an eclectic line-up of singing jobs: one Sunday afternoon as guest recitalist singing German *lied* and French *mélodie*, the next Saturday evening—an all-Broadway revue; one week, singing “Sesto” in a concert production of Mozart’s *La Clemenza di Tito* and the following month—playing the conniving “Laura” in the Broadway musical *City of Angels*. At the Mozart opera performance, it was hard not to notice and be disappointed by the sparsely attended concert (which I considered the richer presentation on numerous levels), while the Broadway show enjoyed a much larger turn out. Was there not a way to appeal to both audiences simultaneously, to entice these two separate audiences to a single presentation?

And so, I began presenting programs featuring music utilizing both serious and popular elements, hoping to expose lovers of popular music to the substantive and elevating aspects of classical music, while at the same time introducing classical music lovers to the charm and wonders of American musical theatre.

I continue to search for ways to take the best characteristics of popular and serious music and combine them into a single performance genre. I believe opera offers the possibility of creating that unique combination, despite its reputation as an elitist art form. This dissertation explores the question: could co-mingling of serious and popular dramatic elements and musical styles generate more broadly based, enthusiastic support for opera in America without sacrificing artistic integrity?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Carmen Balthrop and Leon Major for their support and encouragement. Their invaluable artistic and personal insights have made an indelible impression on my life and my music.

A special thanks to Professors Linda Mabbs, Dominic Cossa, and Charles Rutherford for dedicating their time and talents as members of my Dissertation Committee with an added note of appreciation to Professor Mabbs for her significant suggestions in the writing of this dissertation.

I would like to also recognize Delores Ziegler and Martha Randall who have taught me so much about singing through their pedagogy and their performing.

Thank you to Patrick Diamond for his talent, generosity and good humor.

I also want to express my gratitude to Virginia Wyant and Debbie Kuckuda for their guidance and patience as they helped steer me through the sometimes confusing requirements of the doctoral degree program.

I want to recognize my parents, Merle and Louise Black for instilling in me an ever-present curiosity and love of learning.

And finally, I acknowledge my husband, Michael Sotir, for his love, selflessness, and understanding throughout my doctoral studies.

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CHAPTER 1

The interplay between “popular” and “classical” in terms of music and culture has always fascinated me, including the give and take between American pop culture and opera in America. For the purpose of this dissertation, it is important to identify what is popular and what is classical since these terms and their definitions continue to evolve. Thus, I am defining classical music as described in Webster’s Dictionary: “of, relating to, or being music in the educated European tradition that includes such forms as art song, chamber music, opera, and symphony,” while using “popular” to describe ragtime, jazz, folk, and musical theatre music. “Highbrow,” a term often associated with classical music, is synonymous with high culture and the elite. “Lowbrow,” on the other hand, is used in connection to entertainment of an anti-intellectual nature whose appeal is geared to the masses.

Opera has sat on both sides of the cultural fence. This paper explores opera’s unique and ever-changing status in American culture. Through my research, I have discovered opera in the most unexpected places, such as a Three Stooges skit, “Squareheads of the Round Table,” where the three comedians serenade movie actress Christine McIntyre with their own rendition of the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Donizetti’s *Lucia Sextet* was one of the turn-of-the-century’s favorite musical works. According to the Library of Congress’s “Music for the Nation” Database, there are more than sixty transcriptions from *Lucia* for piano, harp, guitar and organ, along with sheet

music arrangements for voice and piano rewritten in English, often bearing no resemblance to the original text.¹

During the late nineteenth century, opera was the mainstay of American popular entertainment. Arias by Donizetti, Rossini, and Verdi were reconfigured as ballads in English and sold as sheet music. These operatic solo renditions were performed in domestic music parlors all across the country. Touring companies performed one-act versions of European operas in English. John Philip Sousa played a key role in introducing the general public to European operatic repertoire in the form of band music with his elaborate arrangements of Verdi and Wagner operatic excerpts. The vaudeville circuit featured opera by presenting entire scenes and arias performed by European singers on tour. *Black Patti Troubadours*, an ensemble of African-American touring revues often ended their performances with “Operatic Kaleidoscope” consisting of selected scenes and arias.²

When looking at pop culture’s relationship to opera, it is interesting to examine opera’s influence on American pop culture and its development of such iconic figures as Enrico Caruso. With the invention of the phonograph, Caruso could be heard in almost every home across America, and thus Caruso became a household name. His popularity spawned a plethora of operatic novelty songs, such as “Mister Pagliatch,” “My Irish Caruso,” with the most famous being “My Cousin Caruso.” This Tin Pan Alley tune offers musical references to *Pagliacci*, *Anvil Chorus*, *Toreador Song*, and the opening quartet from Act III of *Rigoletto*. The song is written in an operatic style complete with classical markings such as *con espressione* and *appassionato*, atypical for a popular tune.

¹ Larry Hamberlin, *Tin Pan Opera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 216.

² John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 384-385.

The Caruso tune also reflects a growing national resentment towards the Italian immigrant community. The song portrays class and racist attitudes: the text is set in dialect: words ending in a consonant are followed by “a” and “the” is written as “da”—a similar Tin Pan Alley practice of using Negro dialect in popular tunes.

America’s *fin-de-siecle* obsession with Salome was triggered by the scandal surrounding the Met’s production of Richard Strauss’s opera of that same name. *Salome*’s provocative staging and more specifically the sexual nature of the story as portrayed during the opera’s “Dance of the Seven Veils” resulted in closing down the production after opening night. The Met’s decision to stop production garnered national attention and from that an American fascination with Salome: the story of Salome became one of the hottest acts in vaudeville, dozens of Tin Pan Alley songs were written about her; in order to attract a larger audience, Oscar Hammerstein included the Salome dance in his production of *Götterdämmerung*. And in 1909, capitalizing on what the *New York Times* described as “Salomania,” the Manhattan Opera Company presented Strauss’s *Salome* starring one of the era’s most popular divas, Mary Garden.

Another operatic character to evolve into an American icon was “Cho-Cho San” from Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. The opera was first performed here in this country (1906) as a touring production in English and later presented by the Met in 1907 starring Geraldine Farrar and Enrico Caruso. The composer and his *verismo* operas appealed to the American public because they told stories about real-life people expressing real-life emotions. More than any opera preceding it, *Madame Butterfly* was embraced by U.S. audiences as uniquely American: its lead tenor and baritone roles portrayed contemporary American characters dealing with a topical issue very much on

the minds of many Americans—diplomatic relations between Japan and the United States. The opera also reflected our country’s ambivalent feelings about its evolving identity as an imperialistic world power. The opera inspired dozens of Butterfly songs from Tin Pan Alley such as “My Lulu San,” “Hurry back to my Bamboo Shack,” and “My *Yiddisha* Butterfly.” “Poor Butterfly,” written by Raymond Hubbell and John Golden is the most famous. Originally intended to be performed in *The Big Show* at New York City’s famed Hippodrome Theatre, the song was written for Tamaki Miura, the first Japanese soprano to portray Butterfly in the United States. According to the Library of Congress, there are 326 jazz versions recorded by such artists as Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughn, Tony Bennett, and Louis Armstrong.³

Numerous Tin Pan Alley tunes imitate Puccini’s melodies as well as evoke his harmonic style. In the case of “Avalon,” a popular song introduced by Broadway star Al Jolson, Puccini and publishing house G. Ricordi sued Jolson and company for lifting Puccini’s “*E lucevan le stella*” melody from *Tosca*. They were awarded \$25,000 in damages and entitlement to all the pop tune’s future royalties.

Richard Wagner’s operas enjoyed a tremendous following in the U.S., particularly among women of the Gilded Age who felt restricted by oppressive societal expectations. His operas displayed passion and emotion, and the public envied the freedom of expression characterized in Wagner’s music. For many American women, the opera divas represented power, freedom, and independence not available to the average American woman. Writer Willa Cather, author of *Song of the Lark* told Wagnerian soprano Lillian Nordica: “American prima donnas of the future will look back on your

³ Hamberlin, 159.

memory with pride and gratitude. You seem to embody all that is best in womanhood.”⁴

Female vaudevillian stars like May Irwin enjoyed the same kind of adulation.

While opera singers and their music were held in high esteem by the general public, there was a widening chasm developing within the populous in regards to opera. Opera was evolving into a sacralized art form—geared to the tastes and pocketbooks of a wealthy and privileged society. The American middle class who had enthusiastically embraced opera was now beginning to reject it, perceiving it as an elitist art form. As the United States worked to develop its own American identity—a character separate from its European ancestors, opera was regarded as a product of the old guard, an irrelevant and backward looking art form. Tin Pan Alley’s output began to reflect that cultural and artistic chasm with tunes like Irving Berlin’s “Simple Melody” that parodied opera and its patrons.

At the turn of the twentieth century, operetta provided an entertainment option for middle-class Americans who had become disillusioned with the elitist patronage of the Metropolitan Opera and its highbrow sensibility. Composers like Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml, and Franz Lehar, all steeped in the European operetta tradition, as well as England’s operetta team of Gilbert and Sullivan, provided what could be described as a “middlebrow” operatic experience; operetta, or “light opera,” featured operatic singers performing arias, large chorus numbers, elaborate sets and costumes, and sizable orchestras. Unlike opera, operetta transformed the sung recitative to spoken dialogue. In comparison to Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner operas, operetta’s plot lines were typically

⁴ “Song of the Lark: Opera in America”
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/lark/opera.html> (accessed May 4, 2012)

lighter in nature. During the twentieth century's first two decades, operetta was the most popular American musical theater entertainment.⁵

Still, there were composers committed to breaking down the cultural and racial barriers created by the sacralization. Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* represents one such attempt. It is a work based on the European opera tradition of arias, recitatives, and ensemble numbers but incorporates American popular musical idioms, most notably ragtime. With the help of composers like George Gershwin, American opera began to find its own unique voice. Throughout the 20th-century to the present time, composers like Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Gian Carlo Menotti, Samuel Barber, Phillip Glass, Dominick Argento, John Adams, John Corigliano, John Musto, and Kevin Puts have developed an American opera tradition: in comparison to its European predecessor, American opera orchestras are often smaller in size; the music is less harmony-driven, while rhythm plays a more significant role (as reflected in Scott Joplin's ragtime opera, *Treemonisha*). Libretti are in the language of the audience—English—thanks to the efforts by such organizations as *Opera in Our Language Foundation*, founded in the 1940s by singer, arts advocate, and composer Eleanor Freer.

In today's opera productions, whether it be a traditional European opera or a more recent American operatic work, iconic American figures abound. One of opera's most successful directors, Peter Sellars, has infused Mozart operas with contemporary American icons: For *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the setting is a Manhattan penthouse apartment, and "Count Almaviva" is portrayed as Donald Trump. *Così fan tutte* takes place in a

⁵ Lawrence Maslon. "Operetta." <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/hello/operetta.html#> (accessed May 12, 2012)

Cape Cod diner, and *Don Giovanni* is set in Spanish Harlem. Operas like John Adams's *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic* feature iconic political and historical figures.

The use of popular elements can have mixed results, as reflected in Vancouver Opera's decision, among others, to portray "Escamillo" in *Carmen* as Elvis Presley:

Much of the audience at the 2600-seat Queen Elizabeth Theatre reportedly went wild, and not with pleasure. Malcontent traditionalists booed and hissed. They cried foul. They cried sacrilege. They threw programs. They demanded McMaster's head. At the fifth and last performance, Monday night, the response was wildly enthusiastic. Yesterday's scandal is today's hot ticket.⁶

⁶ Martin Bernheimer. "Expo 8: Riotus, Avant-garde 'Carmen' in Vancouver." http://articles.latimes.com/1986-05-14/entertainment/ca-5578_1_vancouver-opera (accessed April 20, 2012).

Lecture Recital
By George! By Ira! By Gershwin!

Carolyn Black-Sotir, *soprano, viola*
R. Timothy McReynolds, *piano, tenor*
Thomas Williams, *bass, flugelhorn*

Gildenhorn Recital Hall,
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
September 24, 2009
5:30 pm

PROGRAM

Rhapsody In Blue (1924)

There's More to a Kiss than the XXX *from La La Lucille* (1919)

By Strauss *from The Show Is On* (1936)

Lullaby (1919)

Blue Monday Blues *from Blue Monday Blues* (1922)

Prelude II/Summertime (1926/1935)

He Loves and She Loves *from Funny Face* (1927)

The Babbitt and The Bromide *from Funny Face*

INTERMISSION

Fascinatin' Rhythm

They Can't Take That Away From Me *from Shall We Dance* (1937)

Just Another Rhumba *from A Damsel in Distress* (1937)

Soon *from Strike Up the Band* (1930)

It Ain't Necessarily So *from Porgy and Bess* (1935)

My Man's Gone Now *from Porgy and Bess*

Love Is Here To Stay (1938)

BY GEORGE! BY IRA! BY GERSHWIN!
PERFORMANCE NOTES

Lecture recital *By George! By Ira! By Gershwin!* explores the musical and theatrical struggle between high culture and mass popularity as revealed in the music of George Gershwin. The repertoire represents a blending of popular and serious musical elements in both style and form. Incorporating dramatic narrative, visual images, audio clips, and musical excerpts from his Broadway, opera, and instrumental works, this Gershwin retrospective lends context specifically to the composer's operatic works and their historic significance.

As one of the first American composers to incorporate folk, jazz, and Negro spiritual elements into "classical music," Gershwin is credited by many musicologists with writing the first American opera, *Porgy and Bess*. This folk opera illustrates the dilemma that can be created when a composer and his music are regarded as "cross-over," inviting numerous questions such as—"Is his work meant for the opera house or the Broadway theater?" Gershwin clearly states his operatic intentions, characterizing *Porgy and Bess* as a "combination of the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Die Meistersinger*."⁷ When reviewing *Porgy and Bess* in *Modern Music*, Virgil Thomson criticizes Gershwin's blending of disparate musical and theatrical styles into a single operatic work, claiming that "Gershwin doesn't even know what an opera is."⁸ Thomson's assessment of *Porgy and Bess* is based partially on his own inability to place

⁷ Charles Osborne, *The Opera Lover's Companion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), 133.

⁸ Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," *Modern Music* (November 1935): 16-17, quoted in Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 162.

the work in a specific traditional category: “I don’t mind his being a light composer and I don’t mind his trying to be a serious one. But I do mind his falling between the stools.”⁹

Although *Porgy and Bess* was not initially the success Gershwin had anticipated, the opera had its supporters who marveled at Gershwin’s ability to maintain the improvisatory style of African-American music within the confines of conventional European-based notated music. As in *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin’s one-act opera, *Blue Monday Blues*, utilizes “blue notes,” which can be either the flatted third or the seventh of the scale. The blue note is a distinctive characteristic of Jewish liturgical music and African-American blues where singers “bend” notes to create pitches between those of the major scale, helping to create an improvisatory feel in the melodic line. Gershwin, combining his own musical heritage with his love of such works as W.C. Handy’s *St. Louis Blues*, introduces blue notes to the Broadway musical and eventually incorporates this stylistic element into the operatic repertoire.

In putting together my lecture recital, I paid homage to George Gershwin’s populist philosophy by taking a more entertaining approach to the typical lecture recital: as opposed to the twenty-minute lecture followed by forty minutes of sung music, I chose to incorporate a theatrical but informative narrative throughout the entire program to create a dramatic arc to the performance. In order to appeal to a twenty-first century audience, I utilized visual images and audio clips to tell the story of George Gershwin, his life and his music. In this case, I found the audience to be attentive and invested in the program.

⁹ Virgil Thomson, “George Gershwin,” *Modern Music* (November 1935): 16-17, quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow /Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 233.

It was my goal to feature music that reflected the breath of Gershwin's work and the variety of styles—both popular and classical—he utilized in his music. I chose to present some of his songs in their original arrangements (as they would have been performed during the composer's lifetime). Some of the selections, however, reflected a more contemporary interpretation, illustrating Gershwin's relevancy to today's musical tastes. I utilized underscoring during all the spoken portions of the recital for two reasons: one, to lend a more theatrical context to the concert, and secondly, to feature Gershwin's piano and voice works not highlighted in the program.

George Gershwin's music defines an important era in U. S. history—America in the Twenties. It was a transformative time for our country as it evolved from a people living in scattered rural communities to an urban-centered population. The “war to end all wars” was over. America was coming into its own as a world power, and it was the most exciting place to be in the world. For many Americans, the future had no limits. George Gershwin and his music reflects that American innovation and confidence.

Most of the songs were presented in chronological order to give the audience a sense of Gershwin's evolving musical style. The program concludes with “Our Love is Here to Stay,” the last song Gershwin wrote before his untimely death at the age of 38.

DISSERTATION PERFORMANCE

Shadowboxer: An Opera Based on the Life of Joe Louis
World Premiere

Music by Frank Proto
Libretto by John Chenault

Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
Kay Theatre

April 17 – 25, 2010

Timothy Long	Conductor
Leon Major	Director
Erhard Rom	Scenic Designer
David O. Roberts	Costume Designer
Nancy Schertler	Lighting Designer
Projection Designers	Kirby Malone, Gail Scott White
Choreographer, Movement Coach	Alcine Wiltz
Chorusmasters	Gisele Becker, Kelly Butler
Wig and Make-up Designer	Jeanne DiBattista Croke
Assistant/On-Stage Conductor	Michale Ingram
Principal Coach	Justina Lee
Assistant Director	Carolyn Black-Sotir
Rehearsal Pianist	Sun-Ha-Yoon, Sooyoung Jung
Associate Set Designer	Jeremy Foil
Production Stage Manager	Maggie Vellegas
Audio Designer	Peter Park
Projection Research Assistant	Carolyn Black-Sotir
Pre-performance Lecturer	Carolyn Black-Sotir
Moderator, Pre-performance Panel	Carolyn Black-Sotir

SHADOWBOXER PERFORMANCE NOTES

Shadowboxer by Frank Proto and John Chenault was a new opera commissioned by the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center and performed by the Maryland Opera Studio for which I served as Assistant Director to Leon Major. *Shadowboxer* provides a strong example of opera utilizing popular culture both musically and dramatically. This operatic work is inspired by the life of pop icon Joe Louis, an American boxing legend also known as “The Brown Bomber.” Pop culture references abound throughout John Chenault’s libretto, offering a unique perspective into early twentieth-century American life; the audience not only witnesses the glory days of the boxing ring but also the racial struggles of a society plagued by prejudice and bigotry. Composer Frank Proto, like George Gershwin, integrates various popular musical elements including jazz and musical theater into the opera score as evidenced in Max Schmeling’s Act I operatic aria accompanied by an eight-piece jazz band. The composer’s ability and artistic courage to access numerous musical styles allow for a wide breadth of expression: “The musical language of *Shadowboxer* is not confined to one arena ... Joe (*Louis*) was a complex character who experienced the world in many disparate ways. Paraphrasing his life in a musical setting worked best for me by going in more than one musical direction.”¹⁰ This work also brings to light the possible consequences and vocal challenges when opera and popular music co-exist; the actors portraying Beauty #1, #2, and #3 sing in both operatic and jazz styles, which presents numerous vocal challenges.

Shadowboxer is an example of a down-to-its-core American opera: it is a work based on one of our country’s greatest iconic figures, an opera created by three

¹⁰ Frank Proto, “Composer’s Notes,” *Shadowboxer* (April 2010) [Program Booklet].

Americans, librettist John Chenault, composer Frank Proto, and director Leon Major. Its music evokes all types of American popular music—all in the context of a single opera.

It was an exciting opportunity to be involved in the development and eventual presentation of a new opera. My work began under the title of Assistant Director, learning the ins and outs of putting on an opera, but I also enjoyed the added dimension and challenges created by working on new opera. My first days were spent doing research—looking through old newspaper and magazine articles in the archival rooms of numerous institutions including the *Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper*. In the *Baltimore News American* Photograph Collection housed in Hornbake Library at the University of Maryland, I uncovered fascinating images of Joe Louis, some which were used in the opera's series of dramatic projections. I spent a lot of time researching on the internet, attempting to discover videos and radio programs featuring Joe Louis and his boxing career. I attended the creative team meetings with Leon, Frank and John. There were many discussions, sometimes rather heated, about editing the libretto or cutting sections of the score. Numerous production meetings with the technical team, as well as the set and costume designers were held throughout the rehearsal process. I spent many hours with the opera's stage manager to make certain we were both very clear as to what our director wanted in terms of staging, lighting and sound.

In my responsibilities as Assistant Director, I attended every rehearsal and took director's notes, often giving these notes to the actors. Through my extensive research and the opera's rehearsal process, I came to know Joe Louis and the opera quite well. Based on this work, I was asked to present introductory lectures before each opera performance. In addition, at a special event held prior to the opera's opening night

performance, I moderated a panel featuring the opera's composer Frank Proto, its librettist, John Chenault and boxing expert and author, Bert Sugar. I asked Frank and John about the challenges and rewards of creating an opera. I asked Bert numerous questions about Joe Louis's career and his impact on boxing and the nation. The exchange among the three gentlemen was quite enlightening.

When the opera was over, there was still more work to be done. As Assistant Director I met with Leon, John and Frank for post-performance evaluations. Many issues were discussed: what worked and what didn't work, suggestions on how to improve the opera, and where and how the piece could be presented again. It was a tremendously valuable experience to work directly with a living composer and librettist.

PRE-PERFORMANCE LECTURE NOTES
An Introduction to *Shadowboxer*

Welcome to *Shadowboxer*, an opera in two acts based on the life of legendary boxer Joe Louis. I'm Carolyn Black-Sotir, Assistant Director for *Shadowboxer*, and with me on stage is Michael Ingram, the opera's Assistant Music Director. I am going to take the next few minutes to tell you a little about Joe Louis and his place in history.

Born Joe Louis Barrow in 1914, Joe is the seventh child of an Alabama sharecropping family but at the age of twelve, he and his family move to Detroit. While attending vocational school, he takes violin lessons. He also starts spending time at the local recreational center where he becomes enamored with boxing. Legend has it that, unbeknownst to his mother, Louis would skip his music lessons and instead head down to the gym—with his boxing gloves tucked inside his violin case.

Joe makes his amateur boxing debut at the age of 17. By the end of his amateur career, at the age of just 19, Louis's record scores 50 wins against 4 losses, with 43 knockouts. Louis's impressive amateur credentials grab the attention of professional promoters. But instead of signing with an established white manager, Joe chooses John Roxborough, a Black lawyer and part-time Detroit bookie, who teams up with Julian Black, a Chicago boxing promoter to work on Joe's behalf. Baritone Ben Moore sings the role of Roxborough and tenor Robert King plays Julian Black. To round out Louis's team, Roxborough and Black hire "Chappie" Jack Blackburn as Louis's trainer. Vashawn McIlwain will be portraying Blackburn. Blackburn is one of the best in the business, and initially refuses the offer to work with Joe because Joe -- is black.

Surprised? Well to understand Blackburn's reluctance, you need to know about Jack Johnson, the first Black Heavy Weight Boxing Champion of the World and an extremely controversial figure. Johnson ignores conventional views relating to the social and economic status of Blacks in American white society. He is outspoken, aggressive, and arrogant, bragging about his victories in the ring and publicly boasting about his prowess -- in the bedroom --with white women. White America is not happy with Jack Johnson, and ultimately not happy with boxing. And, so, for the next 22 years, the world of boxing and more specifically, the Heavy Weight Championship Boxing World title shut its doors to African Americans.

Joe Louis -- opens those doors. In contrast to Jack Johnson's controversial image, Joe's public persona is that of an honest, modest, hard-working athlete, a sort of gentle giant—but his talent in the ring leaves one awe-struck. After finishing his first professional boxing year with an undefeated record: 12 wins—ten which were knockouts, New York promoter Mike Jacobs, played by Aaron Ingersoll, joins Roxborough and Black in managing the “Brown Bomber,” one of many names coined by the press to describe Louis. Joe has hit the big time—Yankee Stadium, Madison Square Garden--defeating such champion boxers as Primo Carnera, Max Baer, Cinderella Man--James Braddock, only to be unexpectedly knocked out in the 12th round by Max Schmeling from Germany, portrayed by tenor Peter Burroughs.

Joe takes the loss with grace and class but remains determined to defeat his German opponent. In a rematch at Yankee Stadium, 70,000 fans watch and millions of Americans and people all round the world listen on their radios as Joe KO's Schmeling

within the first round. It is the punch felt round the world—symbolizing for many during those turbulent pre-WWII years, a victory for democracy over the Nazi regime. Joe Louis becomes the first African American embraced as a national hero by all Americans and a symbol for democracy at home and abroad.

The story of Joe Louis doesn't end there—and when watching the opera you'll learn not only about his professional life but his personal life as well.

Mezzo soprano Adrienne Webster sings the role of Marva, Louis's first of three wives. Soprano and faculty member Carmen Balthrop plays the role of Joe's beloved mother, Lillie. The characters named "The Three Beauties" represent Joe's numerous relationships with women, the Three Reporters—the press who chronicles Joe's professional as well as personal triumphs and failures. The rest of the ensemble, when not commenting on the opera's action in the style of a Greek chorus, play various roles: boxing fans, Ring Announcer, Referee, IRS agents, Vegas vacationers.

The Joe Louis character is played by three different actors—there is Young Joe sung by tenor Duane Moody, Old Joe by bass/baritone Jarrod Lee and Boxer Joe portrayed by dancer and combat artist Nicholas Vaughn.

Although I have spent the last five minutes giving you an abbreviated rundown of Joe Louis's boxing career and his impact on the sport, on race relations, and on our national psyche, our director Leon Major is quick to point out: "The opera is not intended to be an opera about boxing but about a man whose job was boxing and whose life is seen through boxing."

To give you an idea of what to expect from *Shadowboxer*, I'd like to quote the opera's librettist John Chenault: "The opera begins at the end—during the final moments

of Louis' life—as he confronts and is confronted by his past in the phantasmagoric (which means bizarre or fantastic collection-like) mental landscape of the boxer's faltering consciousness. There, as fragmentary memories, the highlights and lowlights of Louis' extraordinary boxing career, as well as his troubled personal and professional life outside the ring and after retirement, are recalled and relived, comprising the dreamlike images that flood Louis' mind and memory—thus *Shadowboxer*.”

As you know *Shadowboxer* is a new work—the brain child of Director Leon Major. On the advice of Carmen Balthrop, Leon approached the creative team of librettist John Chenault and composer Frank Proto to write the story of Joe Louis through words, music, and theater. Leon spent many hours talking with Frank and John about the opera's concept. Once a basic idea of the opera was formulated, John began researching Joe Louis and writing the text. Then came the music.

DISSERTATION PERFORMANCE

Just a Song at Twilight

Carolyn Black-Sotir, *soprano*

Michael Carl, *pianist*

December 12, 2011

5:30 pm

Ulrich Hall, University of Maryland

PROGRAM

Love's Old Sweet Song	J. L. Molloy
Will You Love Me In December As You Do In May?	Ernest Ball
When You Were Sweet Sixteen	James Thornton
Those Wedding Bells Shall Not Ring Out	Monroe H. Rosenfeld
Where The River Shannon Flows	James I. Russell
On The Banks Of The Wabash Far Away	Paul Dresser
Shenandoah	Folk Song
Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay!	Henry J. Sayers
A Bird In A Gilded Cage	Arthur J. Lamb
I Don't Care	Harry O. Sutton
Danny Boy	Fred E. Weatherly
Roamin' In The Gloamin'	Harry Lauder
Nobody	Bert Williams
Come Down Ma' Evenin' Star	John Stromberg
Poor John!	Henry E. Pether
The Band Played On	Charles B. Ward
Oh, You Beautiful Doll	Nat D. Ayer

Under The Bamboo Tree	Bob Cole
Goodbye, My Lady Love	Joseph E. Howard
When Johnny Comes Marchin' Home (1863)	Patrick Gilmore
Where Do We Go From Here?	Percy Wenrich
It's A Long Way To Tipperary	Harry H. Williams
How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down On The Farm	Sam M. Lewis
Over There	George M. Cohan
After the Ball	Charles K. Harris

PROGRAM NOTES

Just a Song at Twilight

Tonight's program features music from late-Victorian America and the role this repertoire played in our social, economic, and cultural histories. To better appreciate this musical genre and its significance, a brief overview of the era may prove insightful.

America's Gilded Age, spanning approximately 35 years from 1880-1915, the era of abundance and paradox, marked a major shift in the country's economic, social, and cultural orientation. Beginning the period as a nation of small farmers and craftsmen, the United States developed into one of the world's most productive countries by the year 1915, boasting an industrial output equaling that of England, France and Germany combined.

An explosion of innovation and invention helped fuel this productivity. From 1860-1890, the government issued 440,000 patents in comparison to just 36,700 patents during the previous 70 years. For the manufacturer, such innovations as the Bessemer blast furnace, the Siemens Open hearth process, and the electric power plant radically increased the factory's productivity to what seemed like lightning speed. For the businessman, such innovations as the telephone, two-way telegraph, typewriters, electricity, and skyscrapers increased the pace and variety of services offered. For the farmer, technological advancements drastically altered their industry: the steam tractors, mechanical reapers and harvesters reduced the time required to plant and harvest wheat crops by almost 75%.

As the period progressed, manufacturing began to outpace the agricultural industry, not only causing a shift in the country's economic foundation, but in the nation's social orientation as well. The expansion of railway lines--35,000 miles of track in 1865 to 242,000 in 1900--provided accessible transport between farm communities and cities across the country. Thus, rural dwellers moved to urban areas to work factory jobs and enjoy the cities' modern conveniences. That trend, along with the influx of 16 million European immigrants to the nation's urban centers, transformed the country's rural orientation to that of a modern urbanized society.

The Gilded Age was a time of abundance. The country's total wealth increased from 16 billion in 1860 to 88 billion in 1890. Such prosperity gave society the time and the means to pursue culture, another defining aspect of the age. Expositions, world fairs, department stores, parks, museums, and music halls functioned as houses of culture, where the middle class could experience wonders from around the world. The museums, many of which were established during the 1880s and 90s, displayed fine art and relics from distant times and places. The proliferation of newspapers and new journals such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Munsey's* disseminated information which extended beyond a parochial purview, transforming its readers into cosmopolites.

This sense of abundance and leisure also contributed to the era's characterization as "the golden age of the diary." According to writer and historian Jane Hunter, journals "became almost obligatory companions to a class endowed with a modicum of leisure."¹¹ Many young Victorian women were avid writers, "spending long hours at writing desks producing pages of letters, composing poetry, copying passages from literature, keeping

¹¹ Jane Hunter, *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 40.

all manners of diaries and journals.”¹² For parents of proper young ladies, a daughter’s record keeping was “character building, time-filling, and refining.” Diary writing provided young female writers the opportunity to “organize their daydreams or structure their self-scrutiny, to experiment with a voice they could call their own,”¹³ and thus helped lay the groundwork for the New Women of the Progressive era. In addition, the music hall gave voice to the women’s movement as female performers like Vesta Tilly and Helen Mora dressed, sang, and expressed themselves as men.

The sheet music industry, which flourished during the Gilded Age, brought all these industrial, financial and social elements “home” to the Victorian parlor—the setting for tonight’s program. During the turn of the century, the music salon’s purpose was to display one’s cosmopolitan experience and cultural abundance—and so the room was typically decorated with an eclectic mix of exotica, rarities, collectibles, and most importantly, the piano--that sign of affluence and aspiration to social status. The domestic musicales were as eclectic as their domestic architecture and as heterogeneous as the bric-a-brac and the what-nots that adorned the room’s interior. Serious music lived in comfortable harmony with more popular pieces. The popular songs were often topical, which makes them rich historical artifacts. This music addressed such issues as urbanization, industrialization, women’s changing roles, the impending war, immigration, and the country’s growing racial diversity.

The Gilded Age was a paradox comprised of two contrasting themes—abundance and loss. The incredible wealth of robber barons Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Vanderbilt existed alongside (and actually was built upon the backs) of poor factory workers who

¹² Ibid., 42.

¹³ Ibid., 43.

lived in city slums. With the rise of skyscrapers came the fall of the country farm. With young men seeking new exciting opportunities in “far-off” lands came sons leaving behind forever their families and homelands. As described by Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

I begin and end tonight’s program with “Just a Song at Twilight” because twilight is paradoxical in nature--a unique moment that teeters between light and dark, day and night. The Gilded Age was a twilight era in American history, signaling the end of one century and the beginning of the next where Americans let go of the past to embrace the future. It is that dilemma that we all face at one time or another often accompanied by the desire to re-live times gone by. It is this premise on which tonight’s program is crafted, a sentiment poignantly expressed by the man who originally coined the phrase “Gilded Age,” Mark Twain:

Her thoughts wandered back over her old life again and her tears flowed unrestrained . . . She saw herself in the budding grace of her twelve years, decked in her dainty pride of ribbons, consorting with the bees and the butterflies, believing in fairies, holding confidential verse with flowers, busying herself all day long with busying trifles, that were as weighty to her as affairs that tax the brains of diplomats and emperors. She was without sin, then, and unacquainted with grief, the world was full of sunshine and her heart was full of music . . . If only I could go back and be as I was then for one hour, hold my father’s hand in mine again, and see all the household about me, as in that old innocent time.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: a tale of today*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1904), 550-551.

JUST A SONG AT TWILIGHT

Song Notes

In developing tonight's program, collections of turn-of-the-century journals, diaries, photographs and original sheet music were carefully reviewed. In addition, numerous nineteenth-century theatrical and music reviews, as well as written accounts describing the performances practices of the period were studied and used as references in presenting Just A Song At Twilight.

Love's Old Sweet Song (1884) *music by J.L. Molloy, lyrics by G. Clifton Bingham*

This was Irish composer J.L. Molloy's biggest American hit and is often referred to as "Just a Song At Twilight." It was first sung by Antoinette Sterling who enjoyed substantial royalties from her performance, but the song is most closely associated with 6'2" English contralto Clara Butt. Ms. Butt took a rather populist approach to music, performing at London's Alhambra Music Hall, as well as the Opera House at Covent Garden. If the song's first two measures sound familiar, you are not alone in that sentiment: music critics accused Sir Arthur Sullivan of lifting Molloy's melody in the initial theme of "When a merry maiden marries" from *The Gondoliers*. This song also found its way into James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Will You Love Me In December As You Do In May? (1905)

music and lyrics by J. J. Walker

Ernest Ball was a classically trained musician and has often been described as the American Tosti. Although he wrote in various musical styles, he is best known for his Irish songs with such classics as "Mother Machree" and "When Irish Eyes Are Smilin." The lyrics were written by future New York City mayor J.J. Walker.

When You Were Sweet Sixteen (1898) *music and lyrics by James Thornton*

James Thornton left England to make his mark on the American vaudevillian stage. This song was inspired and sung by his singing partner and wife--Bonnie Thornton. It is his most successful tune and went on to be recorded by Al Jolson in the Hollywood movie *The Al Jolson Story* (1946) and by Perry Como in 1947.

Those Wedding Bells Shall Not Ring Out (1896)

music and lyrics by Monroe H. Rosenfeld

Despite the fact that Monroe Rosenfeld was a womanizer and gambler, he never wrote a song without a moral! He was better known as a journalist than a composer or lyricist and is credited for coining the phrase "Tin Pan Alley." In the February 1897 edition of *Metropolitan Magazine*, Rosenfeld wrote about the artist who first introduced this song: "Easily in the front rank of stars in vaudeville is Miss Helene Mora, an attractive young woman of English parentage, who is known by the title of Female Baritone. Her voice is of great depth and sonorousness. These qualities along with her most remarkable dramatic power, have placed her in a position where she earns at least three hundred dollars per week. A United States Congressman only receives one hundred dollars a week, and sometimes he doesn't even deserve that; whereas the applause from the pit and the gallery attests nearly every night that this vaudeville singer fairly earns her large income."

Where The River Shannon Flows (1906) *music and lyrics by James I. Russell*

On The Banks Of The Wabash Far Away (1897) *music and lyrics by Paul Dresser*

Shenandoah *Folk Song*

These three selections fall within the category of popular songs known as "river songs." This genre often expressed a longing for home, a popular sentiment of Gilded Age songs.

Paul Dresser was the brother of American novelist Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*). “On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away” was named Indiana’s state song.

Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay! (1891) *music and lyrics by Henry J. Sayers*

This American song, written in Missouri by Sayers, was first introduced in London by music hall star Lottie Collins. It was vaudeville’s May Irwin, however, who gained the most notoriety with this flirtatiously rebellious number. During a command performance for President Woodrow Wilson and his cabinet, she suggested he appoint her “Secretary of Laughter.” May Irwin also holds the distinction of participating the first ever cinematic kiss in Thomas Edison’s 1886 film *The Kiss*. Although the smooch lasted only a few seconds, it is referred to as the “50-foot kiss” for the amount of film used.

A Bird In A Gilded Cage (1900) *music by Harry von Tilzer, lyrics by Arthur J. Lamb*

Harry von Tilzer’s life reads like a classic novel: born with the humdrum name of Harry Gumm, von Tilzer ran away from home at age 14 to join the circus, at which time he decided to change Gumm to his mother’s more glamorous maiden name “Tilzer” and then added “von” for dramatic effect—oh, so Victorian. “A Bird in a Gilded Cage” falls within the genre of Gilded Age melancholy songs, often described as “the tear-jerker.” As one of the era’s most popular tunes, it sold more than two million copies in sheet music. This song serves as an interesting contrast to “Ta-Ra-Ra Boomdeay” as both songs address what late-Victorians described as “the woman question.”

I Don’t Care (1905) *music by Harry O. Sutton, lyrics by Jean Lenox*

This is a song that reflects the emerging female voice during the Gilded Age. While challenging the basic Victorian female ideal of earnestness, its rebellious, non-compliant, and independent philosophy portends the emerging 20th century woman. “I Don’t Care”

was vaudevillian star Eva Tanguay's signature song and earned her the nickname: "The I Don't Care Girl."

Danny Boy (1913) *music based on Londonderry Air, lyrics by Fred E. Weatherly*

Weatherly was a prolific songwriter, gifted poet, and author of numerous children's books. *Danny Boy* remains his best-known work and is one of more than one hundred songs composed to the folk tune "Londonderry Air." Regarded as the greatest Irish ballad ever written, Weatherly's rendition represents the many sad farewells so common among families during the Gilded Age as sons left home for the cities or foreign lands.

Roamin' In The Gloamin' (1911) *music and lyrics by Harry Lauder*

Sir Harry Lauder was a "triple-threat" in the music hall business as lyricist, composer, and performer. He had a distinctive style, often laughing and singing at the same time and providing interludes of humorous patter between song verses. "Roamin' in the Gloamin'" was a favorite with American audiences. Sir Lauder had a long and successful career and was knighted by the Crown in recognition of his efforts on behalf of England during WWI.

Nobody (1905) *music and lyrics by Bert Williams*

Bert William was a prominent figure in breaking down the racial barriers in the theatre and beyond. Not only was he the first black performer to earn star status on the vaudeville circuit, he was the first African-American to star in a Broadway show. His best-known hit, "Nobody," comes from a song genre described with the disturbing term "coon songs." Originating in mid-19th century American minstrel shows, these songs were extremely popular during the Gilded Age. While the song humorously portrays a stereotypical down-on-his-luck shuffling black man, one will note the underlying

edginess and commentary on racial injustice. Tonight's performance is presented in the style of May Irwin, vaudeville's top "coon shouter." "Coon shouters," white female singers who imitated the male minstrel vocal style, were popular on the vaudevillian circuit.

Come Down Ma' Evenin' Star (1902)

music by John Stromberg, lyrics by Robert B. Smith

John Stromberg wrote this beautiful song specifically for Lillian Russell, one of the most popular and successful singers of the Gilded Age. She was known for her stunning vocal and physical beauty. Her life reflected the era's opulence and extravagances: she was married four times as well as maintained a forty year-relationship with Diamond Jim Brady. As was the case with many music hall singers, she performed both in opera and vaudeville. Despite Robert Smith's setting of the song's text in dialect--a practice which was common at the time, she chose to sing it without dialect. I have decided to follow her example.

Poor John! (1905) *music by Henry E. Pether, lyrics by Fred W. Leigh*

"Poor John: was one of Vesta Victoria's signature songs. Miss Victoria gained stardom as a child in the English music hall. Comic songs like "Poor John" were her forte. When on stage, she took on a cockney persona which proved extremely popular here in the States. She toured extensively on the vaudevillian circuit, making her one of vaudeville's highest paid performers.

The Band Played On (1895) *music by Charles B. Ward, lyrics John F. Palmer*

This song was premiered at Hammerstein's Harlem Opera House during the composer's own vaudeville act. This piece holds the distinction as the first popular song to go

beyond the song pluggers' sales promotion by also utilizing newspaper advertisements as a means of increasing sheet music sales.

Oh, You Beautiful Doll (1911) *music by Nat D. Ayer, lyrics by A. Seymour Brown*

This selection is characterized as a ragtime love song and remained a popular tune throughout WWI.

Under The Bamboo Tree (1902) *music by Bob Cole, lyrics by J. Rosamund Johnson*

Composer Bob Cole was a pioneer: he created and produced "A Trip To Coon Town," the first all-black musical written and owned by black showmen. He also formed a successful partnership with the Johnson brothers, which resulted in the publishing of more than 200 songs. Many of Cole and Johnson's songs deviated from the traditional "coon" style to encompass sophisticated lyrics and humor, as well as refined musical features. Legend has it that Cole based "Under the Bamboo Tree" on the Negro spiritual "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See." Despite Johnson's objections to using a religious song in a pop tune, Cole assured the writer he would create a new tune by merely inverting the original. Thus, "Under the Bamboo Tree" was written and became one of Cole's most popular songs.

Goodbye, My Lady Love (1904) *music and lyrics by Joseph E. Howard*

Composer Joe Howard first gained recognition as a cake-walk champion and like Sir Harry Lauder, wrote and performed much of his own music. Keeping it "all in the family," he asked his wife, vaudevillian performer Ida Emerson to debut his popular "Goodbye My Lady Love."

When Johnny Comes Marchin' Home (1863) *music and lyrics by Patrick Gilmore*

Originally written during the Civil War, this song remained a frequently performed selection in the music parlors of late-Victorian America. Gilmore's song remained relevant throughout the era with the country's involvement in both the Spanish American War and WWI.

Where Do We Go From Here? (1917)

music by Percy Wenrich and lyrics by Howard Johnson

Nicknamed the "Joplin Kid" composer Percy Wenrich was best known for his piano rags. Ironically, "Where Do We Go From Here," one of his many war-related songs is not a rag but does rank as one of his most popular works.

It's A Long Way To Tipperary (1912)

music by Harry H. Williams, lyrics by Jack Judge

Another popular WWI song, this piece was originally written as a British music hall and marching song.

How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down On The Farm (1919)

music by Sam M. Lewis and Walter Donaldson, lyrics by Joe Young

Over There (1917) *music and lyrics by George M. Cohan*

Vaudevillian performer Nora Bayes introduced two of WWI's popular war songs: "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down On The Farm," and "Over There." The former addresses the dilemma created by the country's population shift from rural to urban. Young men were leaving home in support of the nation's war effort, and thus Americans were becoming citizens of the world. George M. Cohan chose Nora Bayes to introduce "Over There," perhaps the war's most famous song for which he received special congressional recognition.

After The Ball (1892) *music and lyrics by Charles K. Harris*

Selling more than 10 million copies in its first twenty years of publication, “After The Ball” ranks as the most popular ballad of its time. The song brought in \$25,000 per week for composer/lyricist Charles Harris. The public’s overwhelming reception illustrated to the business world the commercial potential of the popular song industry. It was the ultimate tear-jerker--a “must-have” for the music parlor. In its full rendition, the song tells of lost love and regret, two sentiments felt deeply during America’s Gilded Age era.

PERFORMANCE NOTES
Just a Song at Twilight

Just a Song at Twilight, is an original music theatre piece that recreates America's Gilded Age, an era when opera was synonymous with popular entertainment:

Opera, and the musical style of the genre, soon permeated everyday life in America. Not only did it shape much popular music, but popular songs adapted from these operas soon found their way into almost every heart and home. These songs formed a major part of the repertory in America: operatic songs were sung in the parlor, parlor songs were inserted into operas, any and all could appear on a concert.¹⁵

The first song on the program, "Love's Old Sweet Song," although first introduced by vaudevillian singer Antoinette Sterling, became the signature song of English contralto Clara Butt. Like many opera singers of the period, Miss Butt adopts a populist approach to music, performing parlor songs and popular ballads at London's Alhambra Music Hall, as well as singing the lead role in Gluck's *Orfeo and Euridice* at the Opera House at Covent Garden. She is just one of many opera singers who cross back and forth between vaudeville and opera. Opera legend Rosa Ponselle is actually discovered when performing with her sister Carmelita at *The Riverside*, one of New York City's biggest vaudeville houses. As one of the "Ponzilla Sisters," Rosa catches the attention of audience member Enrico Caruso, and the rest is history. Opera and vaudeville performers "gave voice to the passionate, emotional, and volatile American character. . . in an era that censured the expression of personal feelings."¹⁶

Opera is a mainstay not only on the vaudeville stage; it has a presence in entertainment of all kinds: town band concerts feature arrangements of Verdi and

¹⁵ John Ogasapian and N. Lee Orr, *Music of the Gilded Age* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 32.

¹⁶Ibid., 36.

Wagner's greatest operatic hits, domestic music-making includes piano transcriptions of popular operatic themes and arias, selections from Verdi's *Rigoletto* are performed at the Presidential Inauguration. Italy, France, and England respond to the American demand for more opera as numerous European opera companies travel to the States to present full-scale productions. European opera composers find new inspiration in American culture as illustrated in Giacomo Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* (*Girl of the Golden West*), an opera about the California Gold Rush.

The repertoire featured in *Just a Song at Twilight* provides unique insight into the sensibilities and events of late-nineteenth century America, a time when "serious" music lives in comfortable harmony with popular music. The songs are mostly topical, addressing such issues as urbanization, industrialization, women's changing roles, the impending war, immigration, and the country's growing racial diversity.

To develop *Just a Song at Twilight*, I reviewed numerous turn-of-the-century journals, diaries, photographs, and original sheet music. In addition, numerous nineteenth-century theatrical and musical reviews and written accounts describing the performance practices of the period were studied and used as references in creating this "living history musicale." More than ninety images, gathered from the Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, the Maryland Historical Society, the Enoch Pratt Library, and the Towson University Archives, are projected onstage during the program to pay homage to another popular turn-of-the-century entertainment—the magic lantern show. Presented in the manner of the time, in the costume of the period, and in the context of the age, *Just a Song at Twilight* traces the life of the turn-of-the-century American woman as reflected in the music of the era.

DISSERATION PERFORMANCE

Pre-performance Event
A Birthday Surprise for Miss Manners

Carolyn Black-Sotir, *Moderator*
Panelists: Judith Martin, Robert Martin, Dominick Argento

April 23, 2012
6:30 pm
Leah H. Smith Lecture Hall

Miss Manners on Music

Carmen Balthrop, *soprano*
Alcine Wiltz, *Postman, Dancer, Phantom*

Aeolus Quartet
Cassidy Morgan, *bass*
Michel Langlois, *celeste*
Lee Hinkle, *percussion*
R. Timothy McReynolds, *conductor*

Staged by Carolyn Black-Sotir

April 23, 2012
8 pm
Dekelboum Concert Hall
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center

Prologue
Manners at a Concert
Manners at the Ballet
Manners for Contemporary Music
Manners at a Church Recital
Manners at the Opera
Envoi

My final dissertation performance was a staging and presentation of Dominick Argento's *Miss Manners on Music*. Argento, one of our country's most important living operatic composers, based this work on the writings of pop icon and newspaper columnist Judith Martin, otherwise known as Miss Manners. The work's subject matter—Miss Manners's advice on proper etiquette when attending the opera and other musical performances—deals with the larger matter of American civility, an issue that has inspired numerous books on the subject and graced the covers of such popular news magazines like *Newsweek* and *Time Magazine*. The cycle's combination of iconic American figures with iconic classical music references allows for an entertaining performance. In the first song, "Prologue," Argento inserts a few measures of Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik*. The cycle's second song, "Manners at a Concert" begins with the theme from Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, and in Song #6, "Manners at the Opera," Argento gives a big musical nod to Wagner.

Originally conceived as a song cycle, I staged this work as a one-act opera performed by soprano Carmen Balthrop. I was excited about this opportunity for a number of reasons: I would be directing Carmen Balthrop, a dynamic and accomplished singer/actress; we would be presenting for the first time a new arrangement of the piece. Originally, it was scored for voice and piano, but in honor of the festival, Argento scored it for a small ensemble consisting of string quartet, bass, percussion, and celeste. I was very excited about directing a never-before-performed arrangement of the work. Because *Miss Manners on Music* was one of the offerings presented during the ten-day *Art of Argento* Celebration at University of Maryland, Dominick Argento would be attending the performance, as well as pre-performance rehearsals; Dr. Martin who initially

commissioned the work, would be in attendance, as would his wife Judith Martin—Miss Manners, on whose words much of the work’s text is set. As one can imagine, I was excited about the opportunities to discuss the cycle with these three individuals. In addition to interviewing them for an upcoming Argento documentary which I am producing for the University of Maryland, I also acted as moderator for the pre-concert discussion with the composer and the Martins, thus providing an insightful back story.

My staging decisions, however, were made weeks before I had the benefit of talking with the Martins or Argento. Had I discussed the piece with the composer early on in the staging process, I may have made different directorial choices. For example, during my research, I read Argento’s memoir and sensed from his writings that he typically prefers his works be presented in their original context. I was concerned: by staging a piece not meant to be staged, was I doomed to fail in the composer’s eyes?

Staging a work based on a real live person who actually attends the performance presented an additional challenge. My research indicated that Judith Martin, whose husband originally commissioned the piece as a surprise 60th birthday gift, adored the work’s premiere performance, presented by one of Miss Martin’s favorite singers, mezzo-soprano Phyllis Pancella. The review of Pancella’s presentation describes her use of minimal staging and minimal props: a small tea set and white gloves, and depicts Pancella as a very proper Miss Manners. I, on the other hand, after studying the text and music, interpreted this character quite differently, and decided, despite the risk of disappointing Miss Martin, to take the character in a very different direction, viewing her as a hip, acerbically witty pragmatist.

In contrast to Pancella's presentation, my staging was much more complex. Since I was asked to stage the cycle as a monodrama/mini-opera, I felt compelled to create a line of continuity between songs and accomplished that by adding new characters—"The Postman" and "The Dancer"—played by dancer/actor Alcine Wiltz. Additional props were added to support Carmen Balthrop's attempts to communicate the text to the audience. Although Carmen did a stellar job at pronouncing the words, and in spite of Argento's genius at setting text, like many American operas, many words were difficult to understand. Unlike the Argento operas presented during the festival, *Miss Manners on Music* did not enjoy the benefit of surtitles. Props provided visual support in communicating the text.

So, many of my directorial decisions emanated from a desire to illuminate the text for the audience. For example, in song #6, "Manners at the Opera", the prominent and recurring operatic musical reference justified the addition of an iconic operatic figure—"The Phantom," portrayed by Alcine Wiltz. Although of European origin, thanks to Claude Rains, Lon Chaney, and Andrew Lloyd Webber, "The Phantom" is recognizable to most Americans. "The Phantom" helped make the piece more accessible to the audience-at-large. And from the audience's reaction, I believe it did.

One of the highlights of my experience with Argento and his music were the hours I spent talking with the composer about *Miss Manners on Music*, his great American operas—*Miss Havisham's Fire* and *Postcard from Morocco*, and his vocal music. Based on these discussions, I inferred that in regards to *Miss Manners*, Argento prefers a more conventional approach to its performance. He did recognize, however, the work's reception-- a standing ovation and perhaps an example of what can happen when

popular and classical elements co-mingle. Heidi Waleson of the *Wall Street Journal* portends that “Argento’s pieces are built with wit and passion, and always with the dramatic shape and color that make them theater. They speak to the heart.”¹⁷ Almost a century earlier, American writer Theodore Dreiser characterizes popular songs with a similar sentiment: “[Popular songs] reach far out. . . touching the hearts of the nation. . . . expressing a brief melody, snatched from the unknown by some process of the heart.”¹⁸

¹⁷ <http://www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu/2010/c/engage09/dominick-argento/about> (accessed February 29, 2012).

¹⁸ Howard Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter: a Chicago composer* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 20.

CONCLUSION

Each of the four performances illustrates how popular culture and music contribute to the development of opera in the United States. *Just a Song at Twilight* presents an era when opera and popular entertainment were closely intertwined. After 1920, however, the lines between highbrow and lowbrow art and culture were clearly drawn, and the subsequent sacralization of opera drove a chasm between opera and the general public. The Gershwin program begins where *Just a Song At Twilight* ends with Gershwin's attempts to take what had become an elitist art form—opera for the few—and return it to the masses through the use of popular music elements. *Shadowboxer* and *Miss Manners on Music* serve as examples of how popular culture and its music influence contemporary opera and/or its composers in the United States. Throughout this dissertation as well as in my own professional work, I have found the co-habitation of popular and serious to have mixed results.

Just a Song at Twilight illustrates the fascinating juxtaposition of opera and vaudeville. As the program's only singer, I faced the challenge of singing in both operatic and popular vocal styles within the context of one program, a challenge that today's professional opera singers may face as well. Operatically trained singers are typically aware of the importance of singing with a solid breath connection, an open throat, and a released tongue. When singing popular repertoire such as jazz and musical theatre, singers ideally should retain these same vocal basics while making adjustments in melodic phrasing, enunciation, and resonance of tone. This can be a challenging task: singing a straight jazz tone or phrase without vibrato, remaining on pitch, and

maintaining a well-supported open tone require a sophisticated understanding and command of vocal technique.

As American opera composers continue to incorporate popular American musical idioms into their works, it is important that singers possess the flexibility and knowledge to meet increasingly diverse stylistic demands. Such was the case with *Shadowboxer*. On many occasions, composer Frank Proto asked the singers to substitute their so-called operatic voices for their “jazz voices.” This request proved difficult for many of the singers: some couldn’t grasp the concept, others complained of vocal fatigue when singing in a pop vocal style, and the majority of the singers simply continued singing with a “classical sound.” As a result, some of the opera’s dramatic nuance was lost by the singers’ inability to produce the intended vocal effect. What should have been a new and positive experience for the singers became a potential source of anxiety and vocal discomfort.

In operatic works like *Shadowboxer*, the use of iconic American figures can help capture the attention of the non-opera going public and perhaps broaden the opera’s appeal. As moderator for *Shadowboxer*’s pre-performance talk featuring legendary sports writer Bert Sugar, I found it rather delightful that this tough-talking, cigar-smoking fellow was about to attend “the opera.”

Miss Manners on Music, based on Judith Martin’s syndicated column, was originally conceived as a song cycle. In his memoirs, Dominick Argento characterized the cycle as a sort of mini-opera.¹⁹ Thus, I staged *Miss Manners on Music* in that spirit. Immediately following the program’s conclusion, I spoke with a few women who attended the concert and asked them why they were there. They explained they were

¹⁹ Dominick Argento. *Catalogue Raisonné As Memoir*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), 102.

Miss Manners fans and were hoping to meet her at the performance. It was American icon Miss Manners who indirectly enticed these ladies to attend a classical music concert.

Some of our country's greatest works have evolved from composers and singers who cross back and forth over the artistic cultural divide: Leonard Bernstein, one of the most influential Americans of the twentieth century, was conducting Mahler's *Symphony Number 1* while composing the Broadway musical, *West Side Story*. Dominick Argento incorporates numerous popular music idioms in his opera *Postcard from Morocco*. That tradition continues with such composers as John Musto, in his opera *Volpone*, which "employs everything from Broadway to *bel canto* in a ferociously clever musical adaptation of Ben Jonson's play. Like Bernstein, Mr. Musto is not afraid to entertain."²⁰

For many years, as a singer, director and arts advocate, I had minimal interest in new American operatic works. Instead, I was drawn to the traditional operatic canon—works by Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner. This dissertation project, however, forced me to take a closer look at contemporary American operas, such as *Shadowboxer* and witness the positive role American popular music and culture can play in operatic works.

As I regrettably watch regional opera companies go out of business, most specifically in my home town of Baltimore, I now believe the future of opera in America relies partially on the genre's return to an art form by, of, and for the people. From this point forward, I plan to encourage and support new innovative American works that strive to expand opera's current musical and cultural boundaries.

²⁰ Charles Michener. "John Musto." *New York Observer*, quoted in <http://www.peermusicclassical.com/composer/composerdetail.cfm?detail=musto>. (accessed April 24, 2012).

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