

A Forgotten Heritage: Arias and Scenes from Earlier American Operas

Commentary by Aaron Ziegel, PhD

Performers: Towson University's "Music for the Stage"

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Harold J. Kaplan Concert Hall and *Recital Hall

Introduction

"American operas of the past have generally been preserved in a silent limbo called 'print,' located in tombs of learning called 'libraries.' There, in stacks seldom disturbed by a curious hand, are the heroes and villains, the happy or tragic lovers, the adventurers and plotters, the leaders and the followers that inhabit the alluring land of opera."¹ With these words, the great historian of American music Gilbert Chase summed up the fate that has befallen nearly every American opera written prior to *Porgy and Bess* (1935). Even avid opera fans might be forgiven for assuming that the genre's history in the United States begins with that seminal work, so little known are its predecessors. Second-hand opinions and inherited assumptions—or worse, simple ignorance—guide our thinking about the American scores that predate Gershwin's contribution to the genre.² The arias and scenes presented here aim to bring to light some of the operatic secrets that Chase's tomb-like libraries hold, giving voice to the otherwise silent limbo of dusty scores. Opera—or at least sung music within theatrical contexts—entertained American audiences even before the Revolutionary War, so it should come as no surprise that American composers sought to tackle the genre. Initial homegrown efforts were at first sporadic in frequency, admittedly derivative in style, and of merely localized importance. The arias by Arthur Clifton and George F. Bristow illustrate representative 19th-century trends.

By the early decades of the 20th century, however, American opera had become a more regular cultural occurrence. A greater number of trained composers, municipally supported opera

¹ Gilbert Chase, *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, rev. 3rd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 545.

² One admirable exception to this is Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

companies, and a burgeoning audience desire to witness stage premieres led to a confluence of conditions necessary for the emergence of a distinctively American style of operatic composition. During the 1910s, for the first time in the nation's history, numerous new scores were being composed, published, produced, critiqued by the press, staged in multiple cities, and sometimes even heard in excerpts on recordings. Operatic productivity had at last achieved a high enough frequency that stylistic trends could begin to coalesce into a recognizably nationalist identity. The U.S. was now engaged in the making of operatic history, rather than simply receiving it second-hand from Europe. The selections by Frederick S. Converse, Mary Carr Moore, Henry Hadley, and Charles Cadman present some of the decade's operatic highlights.³

Edith Borroff, as familiar with the breadth and scope of the American operatic repertory as anyone, once complained "that European music gets all the adjectives and verbs, while American music is limited to nouns. In other words, European operas are dealt with in lively discussions, while American operas are given only as titles and composers' names on supplementary lists."⁴ The excerpts presented here give listeners the opportunity to discover some appropriate adjectives for themselves.

These recordings are drawn from a program of arias and scenes researched and selected by the present writer and performed by Towson University's "Music for the Stage" ensemble as part of a scholarly symposium entitled "Composing American Opera" held in February 2015. All of the singers were Towson University students at the time; accompanying duties were shared between John Wilson and myself. The following pages provide performer details, a brief historical commentary, and the sung text for each selection.

³ For extensive studies of all of these operas, see Aaron Ziegel, "Making America Operatic: Six Composers' Attempts at an American Opera, 1910–1918" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 2011).

⁴ Edith Borroff, "American Opera: An Early Suggestion of Context," in *Opera and the Golden West: The Past, Present, and Future of Opera in the U.S.A.*, ed. John L. DiGaetani and Josef P. Sirefman (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1994), 22.

About the Music

[#1]

Composer: Arthur Clifton [born P. Antony Corri] (1784–1832)

Librettist: “Col. W. H. Hamilton” [pseudonym of an unidentified writer]

Opera: *The Enterprise; or, Love and Pleasure*

Selection: “Awake the Note of War” (Pauline’s Aria)

Premiere: 1822, Baltimore

Performers: Zoe Kanter, soprano; Aaron Ziegel, piano; Ross McCool, offstage trumpet

Duration: 5:30

Arthur Clifton was one of Baltimore’s leading composers in the early decades of the 19th century. He was born Philip Antony Corri, a member of a then well-known Italian-English family of musicians. (His father, Domenico Corri, composed operas and ran a publishing business in London.) Like most American stage works of the period, *The Enterprise* would not be considered true opera by today’s definitions. It is closer in style to English ballad opera—alternating scenes of spoken dialogue with simple, tuneful songs. The dialogue portion of the work no longer survives, but fortunately the music was published in its entirety in piano-vocal arrangements in 1823. The complete score includes an overture in imitation of Rossini, a so-called “entrée march,” an instrumental ballet, eleven solo numbers, and four ensembles. Only one of the score’s solos displays a truly operatic ambition. “Awake the Note of War” is in fact identified as a “recitative and bravura” in the score, thereby designating both the multi-sectioned nature of the aria and the coloratura challenges it poses for the singer. The music is remarkable for its ever-changing moods, contrasting tempi, and martial culmination. While the music is undeniably derivative in nature—an underdeveloped mix of ideas half-remembered from Handel, Mozart, and Rossini—it nevertheless satisfies the requirements of national opera, especially from the point of view of an 1820s-era audience. The text, with its repeated invocations of that most American of virtues, “freedom,” appeals specifically to a U.S. audience, while the musical style incorporates a distinctively American-sounding march idiom.

Awake the note of war,
Let freedom sound the shell,
To drive the foeman far,
His phalanx to repel,
To fight in honor’s cause,
Assemble valour’s band,
To win the worlds’ applause,
We’ll free our native land.

And while the trump of war blows strong,
While freedom’s swell floats on the air,
And measures pealing loud and long,
Inspire our men to nobly dare,
Then shall the maiden’s pray’r ascend,
And terror’s tear affection prove,
Imploring Heav’n its aid to lend,
And grant the laurel to her love.

Hark, hark the warlike cry,
The burnish’d arms they rattle,
Resolv’d to win or die,
Our heroes rush to battle.

[#2]*

Composer: George Frederick Bristow (1825–1898)
Librettist: Jonathan Howard Wainwright
Opera: *Rip Van Winkle*
Selection: “Nay, Do Not Weep” (Edward’s Aria)
Premiere: 1855, New York
Performers: Ben Hawker, tenor; Aaron Ziegel, piano
Duration: 5:41

The 1882 revised version of Bristow’s score, published nearly three decades after the work’s 1855 premiere, identifies *Rip Van Winkle* as a “grand romantic opera.” The term explicitly acknowledges the inspiration that Bristow drew from the genre of German Romantic opera, particularly the works of Carl Maria von Weber. *Rip Van Winkle* is again a number opera with scenes of spoken dialogue. (Recitative is reserved for a few intensely dramatic moments in the plot.) Much as *Der Freischütz* draws from German folk legends, Bristow and Wainwright turned to a distinctively American source for their plot. The middle of the work’s three acts introduces newly invented material that fills in the action during the decades that Rip remained asleep in Washington Irving’s original story. It is from this portion of the work that the selected aria is taken. Edward, the fiancé of Rip’s daughter Alice, is about to depart to serve his country as a Patriot fighting in the Revolutionary War, and he sings to help assuage her grief. The aria’s memorable, Italianate melody contrasts vividly with alternating martial strains. Once again, opera finds an occasion for a heartfelt appeal to American freedom and patriotic duty.

My country calls . . .
Dry love those tears.
Thy bitter grief almost unmans me.

Nay do not weep my Alice dear,
That I must leave thee now,
Love chase away that falling tear
And smooth that saddened brow.

My country calls then wherefore seek,
Thy Edward to delay,
One kiss upon thy paling cheek,
And then I must away.

One fond embrace, one parting sigh,
And I must to the field,
Where many a gallant heart beats high,
With patriot ardor steeled.

Nay bid me not remain with you,
Columbia cheers me on,
Then love farewell a last adieu,
Till freedom’s cause is won

[#3]

Composer: Frederick S. Converse (1871–1940)

Librettist: Frederick S. Converse

Opera: *The Sacrifice*

Selection: “Almighty Father” (Chonita’s Prayer)

Premiere: 1911, Boston

Performers: Grace Kane, soprano; John Wilson, piano

Duration: 2:39

The “sacrifice” of the opera’s title occurs when the male lead, Burton, an American military officer, throws himself before the approaching enemy, thereby securing a safe escape for his beloved Chonita, a Mexican maiden. This is an unusually non-patriotic ending for an American opera. Indeed, racial politics are the plot’s chief complicating factors. Set against the backdrop of the 1840s Mexican-American War, Burton is a rival for Chonita’s love and is in competition with her countryman, Bernal, who is fighting against the Americans. Emotionally torn between Burton’s entreaties and her fear that Bernal could be killed in battle, she ultimately seeks comfort in prayer. This “prayer aria” is presented here. Such numbers are of course common operatic ingredients for sopranos in distress, thus Converse’s example would resonate with an audience already familiar with similar instances in works of the standard repertory. The compositional goal here seems less to achieve a distinctively American idiom but rather to participate successfully alongside a European tradition.

Almighty Father, look down on me, and grant me Thy protection.
Comfort my sorrow.
Teach me Thy mercy, and show Thine infinite compassion and love,
the peace which Thou didst promise through our Lord
Thy Son and our Redeemer.
Saviour hear me.
Break the power of them that compass me round.
For all who trust in Thy defence shall fear no enemy.
Lord Thou art my shield and my salvation.

[#4]

Composer: Mary Carr Moore (1873–1957)

Librettist: Sarah Pratt Carr

Opera: *Narcissa; or, The Cost of Empire*

Selection: “Another Weary Day” (Narcissa’s Act III Scene and Lullaby)

Premiere: 1912, Seattle

Performers: LaShelle Bray, soprano; John Wilson, piano

Duration: 5:26

The opera *Narcissa* provided several significant American firsts: it is the earliest true opera composed by a woman to receive a fully staged production under the baton of the composer herself. Its plot is based upon the life and death of an historical figure, Narcissa Whitman, a missionary to the Oregon Territory who was ultimately killed by members of the indigenous Cayuse tribe. The libretto, authored by the composer’s mother, presents Narcissa as a tragic heroine who gave her life in service to the nation. She, like Chonita from Converse’s *The Sacrifice*, is a character who turns to prayer in times of adversity. Her sense of patriotic duty to the expanding United States, her motherly care for the children orphaned by the hardships of pioneer life, and her abiding faithfulness as a missionary to the frontier West are all drawn together in this scene and lullaby, which opens the opera’s third act.

Ah! Another weary day,
That but repeats the weary yesterdays;
Knows God how hard the toil to win these children of the plains.
Eyes! Eyes! ev’rywhere they are!
No hour of day or night
May we escape them,
Save in darkness, sleep.
And yet no fear must daunt me,
That is doubting God,
And hind’ring Marcus too.

Oh God above, we thank Thee,
For the night’s sweet rest,
The dawn so fair,
For safety, food, and home.
Oh prosper us in work, in work for Thee.
Bless us, nerve our hearts, our hands, in thine employ.
The Lord my Shepherd is, I shall not want.

Sleep on, sleep on, poor little one sleep,
Thy mother’s not here,
Sleep, long sleep, unbroken and deep,
Is hers on prairies drear.

Sleep on, sleep on, dear little one sleep,
Sleep, my childless arms shall guard,
My lost one’s love thou shalt reap,
Nor know ’tis hard.

[#5]

Composer: Henry Hadley (1871–1937)

Librettist: David Stevens

Opera: *Azora, the Daughter of Montezuma*

Selection: “I Dreamed that Death” (Papantzin’s Dream Narrative)

Premiere: 1917, Chicago

Performers: Meghan McGinty, alto; Aaron Ziegel, piano

Duration: 5:01

If Moore’s opera depicts Narcissa as an American role model, then Henry Hadley’s *Azora* implies a possible extension of the concept to historical figures pre-dating the existence of the United States. The opera enacts a markedly fictionalized version of the downfall of Montezuma’s Aztec empire. Whereas a postmodern point of view might focus upon the destructiveness of Hernán Cortés’ colonialist conquest, the opera instead presents a reading in which the conquistador (a non-singing role, who only appears onstage during the opera’s tableau-like finale) functions as the bringer of Christianity to the New World. Early in the opera, Montezuma’s sister, Papantzin, receives a vision of the Christian salvation that will soon be brought to their land. In the scene given here, she recounts her vision to her brother and his priests and generals. Their uncomprehending and antagonistic response motivates much of the opera’s subsequent action. The music is through-composed: its opening *siciliano* rhythm gives way to heroic fanfares, sustained “celestial” harmonies, and declamatory pronouncements as the scene proceeds. Papantzin thereby becomes a sort of proto-American—the seed of later American virtues.

I dreamed that Death had claimed this mortal frame,
And forth, along a dim, mysterious road, my spirit fared;
In time a spacious valley met my sight, which no beginning had, nor end,
With hills on ev’ry side.
And through this fair and verdant space, a mighty river ran athwart my path!
And still I knew no fear, but ere I plunged into the flood,
I closed my eyes to gather strength, and when I opened them again,
Behold! there stood upon the brink
A glorious Youth in garments white,
Whose visage like the heavens shone,
His lustrous wings repeating all the splendent hues
The sun has e’re evoked from all the precious gems of earth!
And on his gracious brow there stood the figure of a Cross.
And as I gazed, he spake:
“Not yet! It is not time,” he cried;
“For thou hast yet to learn the love of God,
Ere thou shalt cross the River!”
And speaking thus, he turned me toward the east;
And there upon the waters I beheld
Great ships that bore a host of men.
Aloft they held bright banners,
And lo! on ev’ry ensign shone the figure of a Cross!
Then spake the Youth: “Behold! the Warriors of God are they,
The One Great God of All! And bring His Word unto thy race.
Therefore, return! Relate what thou hast heard;
And behold, this is the message thou shalt bear:
All gods but One forsake,
And cease thy rites unhallowed;
There is no other God save Him on High,
And Christ the only Sacrifice!”

[#6]

Composer: Charles Wakefield Cadman (1881–1946)

Librettist: Nelle Richmond Eberhart

Opera: *Shanewis, the Robin Woman*

Selection: “Love Stole Out of the Sea at Star-Break” (Shanewis and Lionel’s Love Duet)

Premiere: 1918, New York

Performers: Allison Nichols, mezzo-soprano; Andrew McGowan, tenor; John Wilson, piano

Duration: 4:46

Cadman’s *Shanewis* was the first American work to be presented in two consecutive seasons at New York’s Metropolitan Opera, and it continued to be revived throughout the country well into the 1920s. The opera’s one-act form, in two-scenes with a connecting orchestral intermezzo, pays obvious tribute to the familiar *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* pairing, while the score’s consistently fresh and memorable melodic inspiration demonstrates that Cadman was a keen observer of the key to Puccini’s popularity. The title character, Shanewis, is an American Indian woman who has trained as an operatic soprano. At the start of the work, she has returned to the home of her patroness to present an impromptu recital, whereupon the Lionel promptly falls madly in love with her (despite the fact that he is already engaged to Shanewis’s childhood best friend Amy). As one might guess, given yet another operatic romance that crosses established racial barriers, Lionel will pay the price for his transgressions with his life—such is the stuff of which *verismo* operas are made. The excerpt presented here, however, offers the love duet that Shanewis and Lionel share soon after their first meeting. Removed from its admittedly problematic plot context, the unquestionably beautiful lyricism that Cadman achieves here provides a compelling window into a repertory that rewards the efforts of intrepid scholars and performers alike.

LIONEL Love stole out of the sea at star-break;
 Was it the magic of the moon that drew him,
 Or was it your eyes so brown and tender,
 Or was it my ardent heart
 Longing, longing,
 Not knowing what it longed for
 Till it found you?

SHANEWIS Love rose up from the great white water,
 Stole upon us dreaming unaware,
 Bound our alien hearts together.
 Ah, what call’d him from his far-off places?
 Was it the Moon of blood-red lilies?
 Was it my heart like a warm red flow’r,
 Glowing, glowing with its desire?

LIONEL Shanewis! Shanewis!
 Ah! why do you fear to welcome Love?
 Take him to your breast!

BOTH Love stole out of the sea at star-break;
 Was it the magic of the moon that drew him,
 Or was it your eyes so brown and tender,
 Or was it my ardent heart
 Longing, longing,
 Not knowing what it longed for
 Till it found you?

PIANO-VOCAL SCORES

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“Music for the Stage” at Towson University

Music for the Stage is a faculty led student ensemble within the Department of Music at Towson University. It was created in 1998 as a training ground for voice performance, vocal music education majors, and others to experience a wide variety of vocal music suitable for stage performance, including opera, musicals, art songs, cabaret, and other genres. The ensemble has performed workshop scenes and fully staged productions, including *Die Zauberflöte*, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Solomon and Balkis*, *A Hand of Bridge*, *The Medium*, *The Old Maid and the Thief*, among others. Music for the Stage regularly collaborates with faculty members from the Department of Music as well as others across the College of Fine Arts and Communications and the larger University and professional community. Towson’s Music for the Stage was awarded second prize in the National Opera Association’s collegiate opera scenes competition in 2009, with several students selected to perform in two new operas presented at the 2009 National Opera Association convention in Washington, D.C.