

Political Consciousness and the American Composer

By Eric A. Gordon

It may seem odd to you that an American historian comes to Italy to speak with you about politics, class, race, and workers' issues in music. After all, America is supposed to be the country without social classes, a land of freedom, justice, liberty and equality for all without any birthright to privilege. When we fought our Revolution against colonial rule, we left all that behind in Old Europe.

Well, I am here to tell you what you surely already know...that this is the official mythology that we all learn in school, but it is most certainly not true. We do have social classes, we do have our own oligarchy, our ruling class, and we have a political system of only two legitimated parties, both of which are capitalist, both pro-war, both imperialist, both in the pockets of Corporate America. They differ only in style and degree. The class war is alive and well in America.

I am also here to tell you, again what you surely know, that there are now and there always have been Americans acutely aware of these deeper truths of our society, and they—we—have found innumerable if not always very effective ways of expressing ourselves, through political action both legal and extralegal, and through cultural and artistic endeavor. It has been said that music alone cannot make the Revolution, but there certainly has never been a revolutionary movement without music.

In our brief time together today, let's talk about composers of art and theatre music. For the purposes of this discussion, I leave aside strictly popular music—slave songs, gospel, minstrel, spirituals, blues, and jazz, all of which have strong components of resistance to the condition of slavery and oppression. I leave aside the long tradition of folk music, in which you can readily find strong strands of opposition to class pretense and a robust representation of the dignity of working people. And I leave aside popular music and rock, whose importance to the spirit of rebellion would merit many dissertations. I would also remind you that we will be talking unapologetically about music of the Left. For the Right Wing doesn't need to create its own music. The capitalist class already controls the means of production, the educational system, the media, the concert hall. That class already has the power to bend the dominant culture to its own purposes, and even, as we shall see shortly, to absorb and defang oppositional culture and call it its own. Still, I would say, the Left, because it seeks something apart from the status quo, has the best tunes!

I have in my home a book called "Songs of Freedom," original settings of poems "dedicated to the people of free spirit," poems by known writers such as Percy B. Shelley and Thomas Hood, and by other named and pseudonymous authors, such as "Man-Out-of-Work." The composer was one Platon Brounoff, and the book, decorated with the composer's photograph and a graceful art nouveau design, is dated New York, 1904. It is

surely one of the early attempts at writing art songs as part of a movement for serious social change.

In 1934, five years into the worldwide Depression, and just as Fascism had installed itself in parts of Europe, a number of American composers came together in New York in the Composers' Collective. It included such figures as Aaron Copland, Elie Siegmeister, Marc Blitzstein, Earl Robinson, and often received visitors such as Hanns Eisler. They all had conservatory backgrounds, many of them with Nadia Boulanger, and all felt the time had come to start applying their talents and training to the revolutionary movement.

There was still much open, widespread disagreement between Socialists and Communists, and disagreement between them and more conservative sectors of the labor movement, but in the Composers' Collective, most were drawn to the Communists. That influence would last at least another twenty years, up until the devastating McCarthyism of the 1950s.

Their aim was to elevate the musical level of the working class, to introduce, for example, 12-tone music to labor choruses, while at the same time, introducing social themes into the concert hall. Needless to say, workers did not respond en masse to 12-tone aesthetics. In the mid-1930s the Communist Party switched to its Popular Front strategy, trying to unite all Left and centrist forces interested in opposing fascism, and part of that campaign was to Americanize the Party, de-emphasizing the ethnic groups that had comprised much of the Communist movement until then.

As a product of this period I might mention a wonderfully concise and well-written pamphlet by Elie Siegmeister called "Music and Society," one of the finest introductions to the theory of Marxism as applied to music. It can be downloaded now from the Internet, but for years had been for all practical purposes suppressed (in part with the author's own collusion). From this period, too, date Aaron Copland's song "Into the Streets May First," and Marc Blitzstein's first experiments with radical themes that in a short time flowered in his powerful musical "The Cradle Will Rock."

During this period, also, the folk revival began. Composers had been convinced that indigenous folk music traditions had all but died out in America under the onslaught of commercial music. But when researchers traveled out to Appalachia and Cowboy country and the Maine woods, they found enormous reservoirs of surviving ballads, hymns and lullabies, all kinds of music, that soon found its way into the American composers' tunebooks. Such figures as Earl Robinson, Aaron Copland, Elie Siegmeister, Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris, and many others, have trunkloads of folk-based symphonic pieces, film scores, and vocal arrangements as a result of this movement of Americanization of music in the 1930s. Certain historical figures, notably Abraham Lincoln, became frequent stand-ins for the policies of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies that would have been too partisan to celebrate openly in music. At the same time, composers, beginning with Blitzstein, started setting the words of our great democratic poet Walt Whitman, still a radical 40 or 50 years after his death, but also safely enough enshrined by time to allow composers of the Left to utter statements they would hardly dare to

make in the language of 1930s Communism. In Blitzstein's case, of course, he was in part interested in the homoeroticism of Whitman's voice that caused near-riots in the concert hall and in the press when he programmed his settings in concerts, featuring Black singers in his racy jazz rhythms.

This confluence of Americanism and Marxism, folklore and patriotism, led to such enduring works as Earl Robinson's cantata "Ballad for Americans," made famous by a coast-to-coast radio broadcast with Paul Robeson, and later his "The Lonesome Train," about Lincoln's funeral train, to Aaron Copland's "A Lincoln Portrait," "Rodeo," and a series of popular expressions of Americana. The movement led to Blitzstein's 1941 opera "No for an Answer," about labor organizing, and during World War II, his "Airborne Symphony," about man's desire to fly and the current air war against fascism. Earl Robinson's song "The House I Live In," made popular by Frank Sinatra (in the 1940s a well-known liberal), was written by two Communists—the lyricist was Lewis Allen, pen name for Abel Meeropol, who with his wife Anne adopted the two sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in the 1950s. Robinson's "Ballad for Americans" became so popular that in the same year, 1940, it was used for the Communist Party national convention and the Republican Party's national convention. Robinson was asked at the time if he had written the cantata for the Republicans. He answered, "No. I wrote it for all Americans, especially not only Republicans."

The argument has been made in the visual arts, that the promotion of Abstract Expressionism in the post-war era was a more or less conscious decision to marginalize narrative art, such as the art of the immediately preceding New Deal period, to depoliticize the arena of public discourse. I would argue that the same process took place in the musical arts as well—the academy and the critics held 12-tone music in the very highest regard, and all else, such as that represented by the likes of Virgil Thomson, Blitzstein, Robinson, Siegmeyer, Copland and the other New Dealers, was suddenly considered old-fashioned, "dated," uninteresting. Only in the 1960s and 1970s, once the bloom had fallen off the dodecaphonists, did such subjects as civil rights, with the stirring speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., start to re-emerge as legitimate themes for the American composer. Today, thankfully, we have finally adopted Mao Tse Dong's theory "Let a hundred flowers bloom." All styles are welcome, all themes are OK...except of course, censorship and public pressure still exert great power in the marketplace. We still need a vital movement of opposition to oppression, and composers will inevitably find their way to make their voices heard in that movement.

I'd like to dwell in a little more detail on that aspect of political consciousness where the American composer has made the strongest impact—the theatre and the operatic stage. And let me just say this, in case I have misled you: I am under no illusion that the American composer is a job category for revolutionary Marxists. Most are not. Most are simply law-abiding citizens like the next guy, but who feel their special position as public intellectuals gives them the responsibility to say something of importance, and that usually turns out to be something that advances democratic aspirations in a society under constant threat of the corporate Right. Composers, like other segments of the intelligentsia, are like the Russian intelligentsia of the late Tsarist era, or indeed the

intelligentsia of the Stalin era as well: They knew what was wrong with the system, tried to correct it in the ways society left open to them, but were ultimately powerless to effect change. Still, the theatre and the opera house represented one arena where voices for a greater and deeper humanity could be heard.

It bears saying that a significant percentage of serious American musical theatre works debuted not in the opera house but on the Broadway stage, at university music schools, or on radio or television. The best-known expressions of American musical culture share such plebian origins. Why?

The United States was born without a ruling aristocracy, which in Europe sponsored the arts. Even after the bourgeois revolution in Europe, the State assumed the role of arts supporter. Strong left-wing parties and movements in Europe demanded from government a level of social investment in culture as a human and civil right. Almost every small city has its state-subsidized theatre or opera house.

In America, with minimal exception, culture (the great museums and opera houses) was a byproduct of philanthropy at best, but more usually a function of the market. Conservative opera companies (until recently the US had but a half dozen of any true significance) would rarely chance offending an audience by championing a new American work or composer. So American composers took their talents to the popular stage and over time discovered what would sell. Thus the American “musical,” in essence not so different from the commercial world of European operetta, but America left little room “at the top” for high culture. Only in the last few years have important houses vied for the prestige of presenting new American operas.

Those of you who are familiar with the career of the now 95-year-old Italian-born Gian Carlo Menotti will see that it recapitulates this emerging respect for operatic form. Almost all of his early works, beginning in 1937, debuted outside the opera house. Only beginning with *The Last Savage* (Opéra Comique, Paris, 1963, and the Met, 1964) do we truly see operatic companies committing to work by Menotti not previously audience-tested. Unfortunately, his later operas failed to convince. They show signs of Menotti’s overproductivity and shallowness in both his music and his libretti. Still, his great early works continue to sustain his reputation. *The Medium* and *The Consul* remain timeless and tragic stories for a modern world of deception, refugees, borders, exile, and loss.

Menotti cannot be considered America’s most socially conscious composer, however. That landscape was carved out by others, such as Marc Blitzstein, a Marxist humanist who made it his lifelong project to illuminate American problems of class, gender and race, and intermittently by Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Kurt Weill, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Richard Rodgers, Frederick Loewe, Carlisle Floyd, Stephen Sondheim, William Finn, Philip Glass, John Adams, and others.

Political musical theatre of the 1930s through the 1950s cannot be discussed without acknowledging the primacy of Marc Blitzstein. His Singspiel *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) is a savagely funny cartoon attacking Big Capital and an appeal to the middle

class to ally for its own self-preservation with the proletariat. It is probably the most-revived musical theatre piece from the 1930s, popular among college audiences, who can see from it that not much has truly changed in seventy years. *No for an Answer* (1941), again deriving motifs from popular musical styles and the tradition of workers' choruses, is more of an opera than *Cradle*, with fully developed characters, also on a labor theme. *Regina*, Blitzstein's 1949 Broadway adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play "The Little Foxes," is the composer's masterwork, now a frequently produced opera. Alongside his retelling of this sordid Southern Gothic tale of greed, Blitzstein provides a three-act running commentary on the origins of American music, from hymns to gospel to jazz, to dance, salon, and art music, and popular song. It was Blitzstein whose English translation of *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1954) repopularized that work after the war, and exposed new audiences to arguably the greatest political musical theatre work of the 20th century.

Blitzstein's later works for the stage, *Reuben Reuben* (1955) and *Juno* (1959) were unsuccessful commercially but contain a wealth of important music and ideas. At the time of his death in 1964 he had been working on an opera, commissioned by the Met, on the theme of Sacco and Vanzetti, the two Italian immigrant anarchists who were framed for murder and executed in 1927, a theme that Anton Coppola addressed in an opera produced in Tampa, Florida, in 2001.

About Class

Following on the heels of *The Cradle Will Rock*, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union staged *Pins and Needles* (1937), a revue of labor-oriented songs composed in the main by Harold Rome, starring talented amateurs. Unexpectedly, the show became a hit and would be revived and revised over a period of several years. Taking in a broad swath of types in a working-class New York neighborhood, Kurt Weill wrote possibly America's greatest opera, *Street Scene*, which premiered on Broadway in 1947. Lightened by a number of comedic and dance numbers, it is essentially the tragedy of unrealized dreams contained within a single tenement building. Earl Robinson, composer of "Ballad for Americans," "Joe Hill," and "The House I Live In," wrote a full-length stage work, *Sandhog* (1954), whose principal characters are the Irish-American workers who built the subway tunnels under New York harbor.

The tragically short-lived composer Robert Kurka produced a masterpiece in his version of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, the tale of a tragicomic Wozzeck-like working-class conscript into a senseless army. Lerner and Loewe's adaptation of Shaw's "Pygmalion," *My Fair Lady*, places the issue of class front and center, perhaps representing the apotheosis of the American musical form.

Tobias Picker's latest opera, premiered at the Met in December 2005, is based on Theodore Dreiser's century-old *An American Tragedy*. Earlier operas include *Emmeline* (1996), the story of a woman who unwittingly marries her son, and *Thérèse Raquin* (2001), based on the Zola novel, all three powerful exercises in metarealism that question the very principle of free will in class society.

Leonard Bernstein was heavily influenced by Blitzstein: As a graduating senior from Harvard University he performed *The Cradle Will Rock*, and the two remained close friends until Blitzstein's death. *Trouble in Tahiti*, dedicated to Blitzstein, tells of a married couple's desperate alienation while they put on a "happy face" to the world. The well known Hat Shop Scene for the mezzo-soprano lead is a vocal tour de force that is as trenchant a critique of American interventionism as it is a hilarious recapitulation of a vicarious fantasy film with an exotic South Sea Island setting. *Candide*, after Voltaire, extends Bernstein's anti-establishment sentiment, taking on the philosophy of empty optimism and the contemporary American Inquisition in its McCarthyite incarnation. (Robert Ward's 1961 operatic treatment of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* also comments forcefully on McCarthyism, although set in colonial Massachusetts.) With *West Side Story* (1957) Bernstein achieved his height as a composer. Accused in some circles of "slumming," i.e., exploiting the urban ghetto for its picturesqueness, Bernstein had to be asking how it was possible for such violence, hate, and hopelessness to flourish in the greatest city of the richest country in the world.

Kurt Weill's American works are replete with social content, from the early anti-war *Johnny Johnson*, his pageant of Jewish history in *The Eternal Road*, through *Lady in the Dark*, an examination of psychoanalysis, *Love Life*, a dark résumé of American history through the evolving insecurity of the marriage institution, and finally *Lost in the Stars*, a poignant look at racism and apartheid in South Africa. Kander and Ebb, in *Cabaret*, about the rise of Hitler fascism, and in *Chicago*, about the criminality in American society that fame and money are allowed to disguise, indeed to celebrate, owe their courage to precursors such as Blitzstein and Weill.

About Race

Entrenched racism is the great curse on America. Whereas Broadway was able to incorporate Black artists, the first Black singer to break the color line at the Met (as Ulrica) was Marian Anderson, then past her prime, as late as 1955, when opera houses throughout the South were still segregated by race. For women singers of color the avenue opened to career success, somewhat less for men (or more precisely for tenors as love objects for white women). For new generations of Americans the appearance of artists such as Leontyne Price as Aïda, or debuting Samuel Barber's Cleopatra, not to mention as Leonora or Cio-Cio San, offered hope otherwise so persistently denied in schools, in housing, and in employment.

Ragtime composer Scott Joplin's three-act opera *Treemonisha* (1911) occupies a unique place in American musical history. An affecting melodrama involving a cast of freed slaves and conjurers appealing to superstition, it was not fully staged until the 1970s, winning a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for Joplin. Ragtime never before or since sounded so grand and regal.

Jerome Kern's *Show Boat* (1927), his best work and one of the most influential American musicals, effectively raises the theme of interracial love. Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones* premiered at the Met in 1933 with Lawrence Tibbett, and is still regarded as the first truly important American opera. It tells of a Black American who makes himself

Emperor of a West Indian island, with tragic results. (Singer and actor Paul Robeson, who played the part in the original play by Eugene O'Neill, was never invited to perform an operatic role.) Virgil Thomson's dadaistic *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), to Gertrude Stein's libretto, does not deal with race per se, but because the composer cast it daringly for an all-Black company, it inevitably raised important, timely concerns as to the validity of Black voices on the operatic stage.

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is one of America's best known musical products. Its setting among poor South Carolina coastal Blacks kept in ignorance and economic slavery marks it as a major statement about race in America. Black composer William Grant Still wrote *Troubled Island* about the 1806 overthrow of Haitian Emperor Jean Jacques Dessalines; it was the first opera by a Black composer premiered by a major company, the City Center Opera Company (later the New York City Opera), and that company's first world premiere, in 1949. Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, a love story set among American servicemen and women during World War II, treats the theme of race-mixing, then so controversial in America. Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's *Ragtime*, based on the novel by E. L. Doctorow, reveals how Jews and other immigrant groups were able over time to assimilate upwards into American society, while Coalhouse Walker, going through all the motions of respectability, remained terminally Black. Broadway's recent *Caroline, or Change*, with a libretto by Tony Kushner and score by Jeanine Tesori, is a moving examination of the Civil Rights Era in the South, bringing into sharp relief both the brashness of a new Black generation and the limits of "liberal" sympathy. *Margaret Garner* (2005), by first-time opera composer Richard Danielpour, libretto by Toni Morrison, deals with a 19th-century Black woman, a kind of American Medea, who kills her child rather than see her returned to slavery.

About the Land

An important component of the American ideology is our sense of "exceptionalism," our conviction that America is different and better, unencumbered by Old Europe's stifling social structures imposed by kings and popes. Here, opportunity and success await any who will work hard and dare to dream. (The Native Americans of course have to get out of the way first.) We are free to exercise our individualism, sometimes for creative advance, and sometimes just to be perverse.

The American nationalist Douglas Moore wrote a series of operas based on indigenous material, such as *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *Carry Nation*, and *Giants in the Earth*, based on a story about Scandinavian immigrants in the rural Dakotas. But it is his *The Ballad of Baby Doe* that remains his most effective work. It takes place in 19th-century Colorado, and centers around the fortunes derived from silver mining. Aaron Copland never achieved success in the operatic genre: His early *Lehrstück*, *The Second Hurricane*, was written in 1936 for student performers, and celebrates New Deal values such as banding together and sacrifice for the common good. His later full-length opera, *The Tender Land*, incorporating traditional American folk songs, both celebrates the values of family and progress and calls them into question with profound ambiguity. Copland seems to suggest that there is a place in America, too, for the misfits and nonconformists.

Susan B. Anthony, a pioneering leader of the nationwide movement to gain the vote for women, is the subject of Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All*, again to Gertrude Stein's text. In *Susannah*, Carlisle Floyd transferred the Biblical story of Susannah and the Elders to a Tennessee setting, making it a pointed plea against conformism, and against the hypocrisy of religious fundamentalism. It also can be heard as a protest against McCarthyism. Nonconformism gets a hearty celebration in Galt MacDermot, James Rado, and Gerome Ragni's Broadway musical *Hair*, an ode to hippies and free love, and in Jerry Herman's *La Cage aux Folles*, which, revolutionary for its day, honors the lifelong commitment and love of two gay men despite all odds. Its theme song "I Am What I Am" became an unofficial anthem of the gay liberation movement. The same composer's *Mame* honors a liberated society woman who unexpectedly acquires a nephew to raise, creating a new kind of family with freethinking élan. In a series of brilliant musicals, such as *March of the Falsettos*, William Finn opens up the lives of urban gay men in the age of AIDS

From the 1970s Forward

You are certainly familiar with the world-renowned Stephen Sondheim. Virtually every major Sondheim work, hovering on the borderline between musical theatre and opéra comique, is inspired by original aperçus of sharply observed social commentary. *Anyone Can Whistle* questions who is mad and who is sane in an over-regimented world. *Pacific Overtures* treats the 19th-century Western imperialist penetration of Japan as a kind of prologue to *Madama Butterfly*, ending in reverse with Japanese industry invading the modern-day consumerist society of the West. *Company* is in essence a frontal attack on the institution of marriage, an update on *Trouble in Tahiti*. The event that propels *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* into motion is the merciless sentence to prison and exile of an innocent man, who then takes his revenge in Brechtian fashion by setting up an ingeniously competitive capitalist enterprise that mocks bourgeois law and morality. As *Merrily We Roll Along* unfolds, we witness how at each turn in the careers of a generation of idealistic, ambitious young graduates, cynical and hurtful choices unavoidably produce disillusionment and pain.

The work of John Adams occupies a unique place in the evolution of American opera. *Nixon in China* placed recent historical events and still living characters onto the stage in so riveting a manner as to make the musical representation more memorable than the massive TV and print media coverage. In *The Death of Klinghoffer* Adams again took recent news events, the piracy by Palestinian terrorists of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro*, and gave voice, if not legitimacy, to the multiple passions of historical agency. His latest, *Dr. Atomic*, investigates the horrific but inevitable science that produced the world-altering atomic bomb in New Mexico, focusing on J. Robert Oppenheimer and his moral conflicts.

The controversial, hypnotic minimalist Philip Glass has written a number of spectacularly large-scale works taking on great cosmic ideas in the human experience, for example, the mathematical and philosophical insights in *Einstein on the Beach*, Mahatma Gandhi's pacifist liberation politics in *Satyagraha*, and the emerging idea of monotheism in

Akhnaten. The Voyage, written for the Met in 1992, to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's first excursion to the Americas, is less a biography than a treatise on the concept of exploration and discovery.

A majority of the best-received works to hit both Broadway and the now burgeoning regional opera scene in recent years have addressed important social issues. *Rent* by Jonathan Larson has played for more than 4,000 performances on Broadway for ten years and is now a major motion picture. It is a *La Boheme* updated to New York's Lower East Side, where almost everyone has AIDS in a feverish explosion of love, liberty, and life. *The Wild Party*, by Michael John LaChiusa, is a brilliant through-composed Broadway opera about the Prohibition-era Roaring Twenties, featuring a hard-drinking cast of wouldbes and wannabes, each of whom is living a great lie that resonates deeply with today's audiences.

In 2005, as a Texas oilman's war continued to rage, Houston Grand Opera premiered Mark Adamo's *Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess*, a gentle-hearted but clear plea for settling differences some other way. In the same year Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov, settled in the United States, premiered *Ainadamar*, a searing dissection of the fascist mentality in Spain, leading to the execution of Federico García Lorca. References to contemporary U.S. policies abroad were unmistakable. Runaway Broadway hits *The Producers*, by Mel Brooks, and *Hairspray*, by Marc Shaiman, tackle soulless commercialism and race, among other forms of prejudice.

The subject of the mentally disabled has come up before—in Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* and in Sondheim's *Assassins*, about the fame seekers who have killed or have tried to kill American presidents—and recently finds new expression in Adam Guettel's *The Light in the Piazza*, about Margaret, on tour in Italy with her not noticeably brain-damaged daughter Clara. The mother's conflict revolves around how much to tell the boy who has fallen in love with Clara. Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* treats a horrible, senseless murder and more centrally the long American agon of the death penalty and its ultimate futility.

America is represented abroad by only a handful of composers, and its music theatre even less, excepting a few commercially successful musicals. I wonder how many of the composers and works I have mentioned are more to you than just names and titles. But a closer familiarity with America's rich, colorful operatic and Broadway traditions can only be healthy, for the theatre manifests a face of America not often reflected in the headlines. We have our share of composers who create art for art's sake, but those with a healthy social conscience are not in the mood to merely entertain. Rather, they are inspired to uplift, educate, and challenge their country to become better. That is the America I hope I have given you a little opportunity to know better.