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Review

The Scarlet Ibis

by Stefan Weisman and David Cote

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Who is the author of an opera: the librettist, the composer, the production designer, the performers, or all of them together? What are the consequences of using music to tell a story? Is a story even necessary? These are some of the questions that have generated controversy over the entire course of operatic history.

Wagner and Kerman¹ both assert that opera is primarily a form of drama; but it has also been observed that it is a form of mythology as well. The dramatic element may be de-emphasized while the musical element obviates any literal realism, even if some modern *verismo* operas strive to portray real circumstances in ordinary people's lives.² In 20th-century American opera, *verismo* assumed a characteristic form in works such as Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land*, Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*, Mark Blitzstein's *Regina*, William Grant Still's *A Bayou Legend*, and others. These works are set in a rural America of the recent past, and either incorporate a folk-music idiom or evoke it. A recent addition to this tradition is *The Scarlet Ibis* by Stefan Weisman, to a libretto by David Cote, based on a short story of the same name from 1960 by James Hurst.³

*The Scarlet Ibis*⁴ takes place in northeastern North Carolina between 1912 and 1918. It is a chamber opera with a cast confined to the five members of the Armstrong family and one locale (their house and its environment). There is no chorus or orchestra; the voices are accompanied by a nine-piece chamber ensemble. Within these compact forces, a powerful drama unfolds, one with complex mythic resonances. It is in one act of thirteen scenes charting the short life of the younger brother. Its title derives from a mysterious bird who appears toward the end of the opera, and whose fate reflects that of the younger brother.

Mythic resonance is apparent in the generic names of the characters: Father (baritone), Mother (mezzo-soprano), Auntie (alto), and Brother (mezzo-soprano). Only the younger brother (countertenor) is named: his parents christen him William Henry Armstrong but it is Brother who gives him his actual name, "Doodle." The first scene establishes six-year-old Brother as

the first protagonist; he is playing “Civil War battle” with toy soldiers while his mother is in labor, establishing the thematic opposition of war (death) and birth (life). Auntie (Father’s older sister) is acting as midwife. The baby is born tiny and encased in a caul, so weak that he seems barely alive. Father, a woodworker of stoic temperament, decides to build a miniature coffin. In subsequent scenes we see that the baby survives, and eventually Brother, an “all-American” boy, takes upon himself the task of “making a man of him.” He renames him Doodle because the underdeveloped baby can only crawl backwards, “like a Doodle bug.” He becomes the second protagonist.

To the conflicting forces of life and death (a neighbor’s son is reported killed in France) are added other mythic oppositions: the stereotyped gender contrasts between Brother’s (and Father’s) “masculine” drive to overcome weakness and pursue a life of action, and Doodle’s more “feminine” traits of dreaminess, bookishness, imagination, attunement with nature, and spirituality. A Christian subtext is also present: when Doodle demonstrates that he can walk Auntie thinks of the Resurrection; Brother refers to Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life; Doodle sings a hymn “Heal me;” and the ibis and Doodle seem finally to serve as a mirrored Christ symbol, leaving the question of redemption unresolved. Doodle’s ultimate death owing to Brother’s misplaced pragmatism seems to foreshadow the loss of myth, magic, and idealism that will be replaced by post-war American practicality and materialism.

These complex dynamics are presented in everyday prose, set to music that is appropriately modest and unassuming—apparently adhering to Monteverdi’s dictum at the birth of opera that the words should be the master of the music. But this is deceptive. The music exerts subtle but firm control over the way in which these dramatic forces and mythic subtexts are animated and arrive at their denouement.

A critical concern for an opera composer is establishing, maintaining, and modifying momentum, the forward-moving energy of narrative and music. Because traditional opera broke down into discrete “numbers” (arias, duets, ensembles, choruses, dances, etc.), momentum had to be continually reestablished. Wagner disrupted this with a continuous musical flow in which the dramatic forces were symbolized and sublimated in the instrumental music to bridge the actions of the characters. Post-Wagnerian composers have found many different solutions to the issue of continuity. Weisman’s seems deceptively simple: the music of this opera is built on a basic pulse, that is, a repeating note or chord that expresses the energy of the moment, supporting the vocal utterances, and morphing with the vicissitudes of the story and actions of the characters. This technique may have been inspired by the work of contemporary American minimalists, who have produced an impressive body of operatic work.⁵ But Weisman has managed to merge a subtle use of minimalist pulse-based continuity with the tone and framework of the American folkloric operatic tradition, without overt references to either. The only clear musical reference is the hymn “Heal me” that Doodle sings in scene 6, an excellent

counterfeit of an old-time Protestant hymn. Otherwise we only hear Brother singing “Reveille” as part of his Civil War games; I do not detect any allusions to fiddle tunes, square dances, etc. Weisman scrupulously observes Monteverdi’s dictum: the vocal lines mirror American vernacular speech and individualize the personalities of the singers, and the musical diction is impeccable. Brother and Father make the most emphatic use of pulses: Brother as he urges Doodle to greater physical exertions, Father as he saws and hammers first the coffin, and then the wagon. Mother and Doodle both sing in a more supple way, their lines assuming lyrical shapes evincing their more perceptible emotional lives. Auntie’s incantations offer spiritual authority, one permeated by folk-myths and superstition.

There are moments that correspond to traditional numbers, but they emerge out of and return seamlessly back into the flow of music and dialogue. Aside from the hymn, there are ensembles such as the two layers of the birthing scene, with Mother and Auntie juxtaposed to Brother’s soldier game. Mother’s lullaby to the newborn son in scene two emerges as a subtle three-note scrap of melody that eventually expands to reveal itself as an expression of maternal love that sounds completely spontaneous. There is no self-conscious sense of this as a “big moment” for the singer; remarkably, the only such moment is Doodle’s “lying song” of scene eleven. The hymn of scene six is preceded by Doodle’s “patter song” in which he introduces himself to the family as part of a home entertainment organized by Brother. Doodle is the artistic member of the family, and his songs in this scene are the closest we get to diegetic music. Doodle performs his “lying song”: “I have wings...” in scene eleven, a real aria that asserts his unfettered imagination: a sun-drenched and quasi-erotic dream vision of a magic boy and his peacock, foreshadowing the appearance of the ibis in the following scene. There Doodle sings a simple song to the dead bird, imagining what it had seen, as if Doodle himself had acquired the power of flight and was briefly able to view his narrow life from the outside.

While Doodle gradually emerges as the “star,” the character of Brother also develops, although less dramatically. His love-hate relationship with Doodle seems to tilt toward love mingled with pride in his own achievement as Doodle’s “coach.” At the final moment, despite Brother’s veneer of bluster and bullying, he, and we along with him, realize the presence of that love, never explicitly expressed. That it took Doodle’s death to produce this belated awareness may be the link to the larger mythic-dramatic significance of this tragic story and its powerful musical expression in this opera.

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NOTES

- 1 Two of the most influential writings about opera are Richard Wagner's *Opera and Drama* (1850) and Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama* (1952).
- 2 The best-known early examples are *Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) and *Cavalliera Rusticana* (Mascagni).
- 3 Hurst (1922-2013) was a professional opera singer in the early part of his career. "The Scarlet Ibis" is his best-known story.
- 4 Premiered in 2015 at the Prototype Festival, later produced in 2019 by the Boston Opera Collaborative and the Chicago Opera Theater.
- 5 Operas by Philip Glass include *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Ikhnotan*; those by John Adams include *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*. These and others have been produced at the Metropolitan Opera. Glass's operas are clearly mythological, while Adams's lean more toward *verismo*.