

For the Eye and the Ear: American Operas from Novels

Robert Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry* is too new to have appeared on CD or DVD, but a number of other American operas based on American novels are available and are worth looking into. Here are notes on just a few.

George Gershwin

Porgy and Bess

DVD, EMI, Glyndebourne Festival, film based on the stage production, 1993

CD, MCA Classics, Excerpts with original cast, 1940

CD, Guild, American Touring Production, live performance, 1952

CD, Sony/Masterworks Heritage, Acomplete@ studio recording, 1951

CD, Decca, Cleveland Orchestra, complete studio recording, 1975

CD, RCA Red Seal, Houston Grand Opera, complete studio recording based on the stage production, 1976

CD, EMI, Glyndebourne Festival, studio recording based on the stage production, 1988

CD, Decca, Nashville Symphony Orchestra, studio recording based on the 1935 Broadway version, 2006

CD, RCA Red Seal, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Austrian concert performance of Harnoncourt edition, 2009

Unlike the sources of the other operas discussed in this article, DuBose Heyward's novel, *Porgy*, is remembered almost exclusively as the inspiration for George Gershwin's only full-length opera, *Porgy and Bess*.

As the above list shows, this American classic has a recording history unmatched by any other American Opera. In fact, it even shares a distinction with operas such as Verdi's *Don Carlos* and Bizet's *Carmen* of being presented in a variety of editions with controversy over which version is "what the composer intended."

More important than musicological considerations is the fact that a great American opera has gradually received the recognition it so richly deserves and is available in multiple performances of high quality. Even the longstanding question of "is this really an opera?" seems to have been settled by the basic fact that it is being performed by major opera companies here and abroad, including the Metropolitan Opera, England's Glyndebourne Festival, and, of course, Milwaukee's Florentine Opera.

As the complete performances of the published 1935 score by the Cleveland Orchestra, Houston Grand Opera, and the Glyndebourne Festival have made clear, Gershwin composed the work to be sung throughout—only the white characters speak rather than sing—with a dramatic line carried forward orchestrally accompanied recitative, arias, duets, ensembles and choruses. Hearing any of these fine versions, a listener can only marvel and the outpouring of beautiful, moving and imaginative music Gershwin created—almost an embarrassment of riches, since the uncut score runs to more than three hours of music!

All of the listed recordings are of interest and worth hearing. The 1940 excerpts feature the fine originators of the title roles, Anne Brown and Todd Duncan, who also sing some

numbers belonging to other characters. The excerpts are led by Alexander Smallens, conductor of the original 1935 production, the 1942 Broadway revival, and the 1952 touring production which launched the careers of Leontyne Price and William Warfield. This 1952 production has only recently become available in a recording of a live performance given while it was on tour in Berlin. The sound is decent for the time but balances were difficult to maintain with such a lively physical staging. Nevertheless, the sheer vitality and commitment of the production that bowled over audiences in Europe and South America as well as on Broadway come through vividly, and it is wonderful to hear Price and Warfield at the outset of their careers.

In 1951 Columbia Records released a pioneering studio recording headed by Camilla Williams and Lawrence Winters, which, although somewhat cut, offered listeners a chance to hear the opera in something like its originally intended form. It still registers as a compelling performance and also as a landmark in the early days of long-playing records in its successful use of sound effects to suggest the action of a live performance, an approach that has been followed by most subsequent recordings.

In 1975 Lorin Maazel and his Cleveland Orchestra made the first recording of the complete published score for Decca (then London) Records. The cast was billed as “young” at the time but certainly was a credit to the casting directors, since it included a number of artists who went on to major international careers, including Willard White (now Sir Willard), Leona Mitchell, Barbara Hendricks, and Florence Quivar. It is an exciting and beautiful performance and recorded in stunning sound. At almost the same time, Houston Grand Opera mounted a staging of the opera—also complete—which enjoyed a successful run on Broadway and toured widely. RCA made a studio recording of the production which featured Clamma Dale as Bess and Donnie Ray Albert as Porgy, conducted by John DeMain. Both of these recordings highly recommendable.

For sheer musical beauty along with plenty of dramatic power, the Glyndebourne Festival production is my personal favorite. Sir Willard White repeats his richly sung Porgy, this time partnered by silver-voiced Cynthia Haymon as Bess, with an exceptionally rich-voiced supporting cast and fine conducting by Sir Simon Rattle. Five years later almost all of the singers in this recording were reunited to make the one available video of the opera, a studio filming directed by its original stage director, Sir Trevor Nunn and using the original audio recording as its soundtrack. The lip-synching of the singers to their own voices inevitably robs the performance of a bit of the spontaneity of a live staging, but it is handled skillfully and the production is very beautiful. Given the tremendous theatricality of the opera, this DVD is my top choice for experiencing the opera at home.

In recent years, two recordings have appeared that offer variants on the complete versions offered by Maazel, DeMain and Rattle. The Nashville Symphony Orchestra version, conducted by John Mauceri, features two fine singers with extensive stage experience as Porgy and Bess, Alvy Powell and Marquita Lister. Mauceri presents the edition of the opera as presented in 1935 on Broadway, reflecting the cuts Gershwin sanctioned during the Boston tryouts. While I question his view that this version should be regarded as Gershwin’s definitive view of the score, I certainly find it interesting to hear the opera as its first New York audiences did, particularly since the performance here is a fine one.

The most recent recording of the opera is surprising, to say the least, a concert performance prepared and conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the noted specialist in early music and central European core repertory. As usual with Harnoncourt, his performance reflects strongly individual views of the music, which he clearly loves very much. In this case, however,

he seems to be out of his element, and is limited by a cast and chorus that lacks the complete identification with the idiom of the music found in earlier recordings. In a way the recording is more about the orchestration than about the singing or drama—the balance favors the orchestra, and Harnoncourt highlights fascinating details that normally blend into the totality of the music. His cast, headed by Jonathan Lemalu as Porgy and Isabelle Kabatu as Bess, is competent and committed, but the performance seems just a bit too “square”.

In all of these recordings, however, there is no doubt about the rich drama and melodic beauty of this exceptional operatic masterpiece.

Carlisle Floyd

***Willie Stark* (DVD, Newport Classic)(LSU Opera, 2007)**

***Of Mice and Men* (CD, Albany)(Houston Grand Opera, 2002)**

Carlisle Floyd is one of the small number of successful composers of opera to serve as his own librettist, and his strong theatrical instincts and writing skills have served him well. Several of his eleven operas have been based on American novels, including Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (*Willie Stark*) and John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. In both cases, his librettos have skillfully caught the dramatic essence of their sources as well providing Floyd the composer with singable texts and opportunities for dramatically effective arias and ensembles.

Steinbeck wrote *Of Mice and Men* as a “novel-play”, a work intended to be both readable as a novel and performable as a play, a form that lent itself readily to an operatic adaption. With its repeated verbal motifs, particularly George and Lennie’s dream of the farm they hope to buy, it even suggested recurring musical motifs. Floyd has added the character of a ballad singer as a kind of subtle commenting chorus but is otherwise very faithful to the structure and content of the original play. His musical narrative is clear and forceful and rises to eloquent climaxes, particularly in the moving final scene when Lennie dies happy believing he sees the longed-for farm.

The opera was first performed by Seattle Opera in 1970, but has had a growth in popularity since the turn of the century, including a production by Florentine Opera in 2003. The recording on the Albany label is from performances of a Houston Grand Opera production in 2002 and is a fine one, featuring tenor Anthony Dean Griffey as Lennie, a role he has made very much own in a number of productions, including that in Milwaukee. Gordon Hawkins is George and Elizabeth Futral is Curley’s wife, the single female character in the male world of the story. The spontaneity of the live performance comes through vividly on these discs and this fine opera is well worth hearing, though a DVD release of such a dramatic work would certainly be welcome.

Adapting Robert Penn Warren’s political novel, *All the King’s Men*, which was inspired by the career and assassination of Louisiana’s political boss, Huey Long, represented a much more complex challenge. The story is told in broad, epic terms, tracing the rise of Willie Stark to power and his political and personal relationships with those around him. Floyd manages to distill a coherent narrative from this rich material but the characterizations of the principal figures lack the depth that was possible in the more restricted world of *Of Mice and Men*. Despite some effective scenes, the opera doesn’t match the rich power of the original novel and it has enjoyed less success than some of Floyd’s other works since its premiere in Houston in 1981. That production, featuring a powerful performance by Timothy Nolen as Willie, was

televised on PBS but has never been released on tape or DVD.

The performance on the recent DVD release from Newport Classic is a 2007 production by Louisiana State University Opera featuring a largely student cast augmented by professional artists in key roles. It is clearly a labor of love and baritone Dennis James sings and acts extremely well in the title role. While the vocal level of the student singers is high and they have been well prepared, no amount of makeup can hide the fact that most of them are years and decades younger than the characters they are playing. Production values—sets, costumes, staging—are only adequate. Enough of the musical strength of the opera comes through to provide some sense of the quality of the opera but this material really calls for a performance by mature professionals to have its full impact.

Mark Adamo

***Little Women* (CD, Ondine)(Houston Grand Opera, 2000)**

In a short time, Mark Adamo's *Little Women* has become one of the most widely produced American operas, with more than 65 productions worldwide since its 1998 premiere in Houston, including a very lovely staging in Milwaukee by the Skylight Opera Theatre.

In contrast with the other operas I have discussed here, Adamo's operatic adaption of Louisa May Alcott's novel is a relatively intimate, domestic work which calls for eleven soloists, no chorus, and modest orchestral forces. In writing his own libretto, Adamo has concentrated on what he considers the central theme of the work, the resistance to, and acceptance of, change. The events of the action are presented in flashbacks, framed by a visit by the adult Jo to the attic playroom of her childhood, as she tries to come to terms with the loss of that "perfect" fellowship of her youth. The closing scene of the opera returns to the attic where she is reunited with the childhood spirits of her sisters and her friend, Laurie and comes to terms with living in the present rather than the past.

Adamo's libretto is skillfully constructed and his free-flowing score vividly brings it to life with quickly developing action interspersed with occasional lyric passages of introspection. It is a richly expressive work, light-hearted at times and also very moving in its presentation of the challenges of growing up and accepting the fact that "things change."

The compelling performance, released on CD by the Swedish Ondine label, was recorded live at the time the Houston production was videotaped for showing on PBS. Many of the cast members are young artists at the beginning of their careers, including one of today's "superstars", Joyce DiDonato. All are fresh-voiced and totally in tune with their characters. My only regret is that the beautiful video version, which I remember vividly from its PBS showing, has never been released on DVD or tape—an opera of this quality deserves to be seen!

Ricky Ian Gordon

The Grapes of Wrath (CD, PS Classics)(Minnesota Opera, 2007)

Few composers have so successfully straddled the worlds of Broadway and the concert hall as Ricky Ian Gordon, and it is not surprising that this recording of his large-scale opera, *The Grapes of Wrath*, has appeared on a label devoted to “Celebrating the heritage of Broadway and American popular song.” The list in Wikipedia of singers who have performed his many songs includes artists from opera, Broadway and popular music and his works have been produced off-Broadway, at Lincoln Center and in major music festivals.

The Grapes of Wrath, with a libretto by Michael Korie based on John Steinbeck’s novel, was premiered by Minnesota Opera in 2007 and it is this production which has been released on CD. The opera has had several subsequent productions by regional opera companies and a 50-minute concert “suite” has been performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale. Given the scale of the opera—three hours of music, three acts (thirty-three scenes), thirteen principal singers plus chorus and full orchestra—it speaks to the quality of the work that other theatres have taken up the challenge of producing it.

It is certainly a remarkable and powerful work. Korie’s libretto is extremely effective in encompassing the sweep and the humanity of Steinbeck’s dust bowl era epic, and Gordon’s score makes effective use of musical styles derived from a variety of forms of American popular music which are woven into a convincing musical and dramatic whole. The moving story of the Joad family and its perilous trek from Oklahoma to a promised land that doesn’t fulfill its promise is told with compassion, with full justice done to its tragedy, triumph, and even occasional humor. The Minnesota Opera production was a fine piece of theatre, but even without the visual element, the opera makes for a richly rewarding listening experience.

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