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1996-04-01

Two One-Act Operas, April 1, 1996

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Boston University School for the Arts

presents

TWO ONE-ACT OPERAS

Featuring Members of the Opera Department

Will Graham and S. Mark Aliapoulios, *Stage Directors*
Alison Voth and Miles Goldberg, *Pianists*

April 1, 1996
Monday, 4:00 PM

855 Commonwealth Avenue
Concert Hall

The Telephone
Text: Gian Carlo Menotti

Gian Carlo Menotti
(b. 1911)

Lucy: Stephanie Davis Ben: Albert Jensen-Moulton
Stage Director: Will Graham
Pianist: Alison Voth

Time: The Present

Place: The U. S. A.

Riders to the Sea
Text: Based on the play by J. M. Synge

Ralph Vaughan Williams
(1872-1958)

Maurya (an old woman): Heather Petruzelli
Bartley (her son): Dan Gurvich
Cathleen (her daughter): Meredith Hanson
Nora (her younger daughter): Stephanie Davis
A Village Woman: Karen Johnson
Men from the Village: Patrick Gagnon, Morgan Moody, Brad Peloquin
Women's Chorus: Lauren Dooley, Erin Freeman, Amy LaMothe, Stephanie Sabin
Stage Director: S. Mark Aliapoulios
Pianist: Miles Goldberg

Time: Early 20th Century

Place: A cottage on an island off the west coast
of Ireland

As the opera begins we see two sisters mourning the loss of their brother, Michael, who has been missing at sea for a week and is presumed drowned. He is the sixth man in the family to die at sea, including the father and four other brothers. Only one brother remains, Bartley, the youngest. Their mother Maurya has been combing the seashore for days looking for a clue to Michael's fate.

The Telephone

In the late 1940's and early 1950's, a movement began in the United States to make culture more accessible to the public. The operas of Gian Carlo Menotti served as a perfect entry into operatic works for the average American. In 1947, Menotti composed *The Telephone*, subtitled *L'Amour à trois*. This frivolous (yet wise) one-act buffo served as a contrasting piece to share a bill with Menotti's mysterious *The Medium*. The operas opened together at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York to extraordinary reviews. Never before or since were the worlds of opera and Broadway so closely linked.

Menotti begins with a brief overture written in a classical style. During the course of the opera, Ben's attempts to declare his love to Lucy are thwarted by the constant ringing of the phone. Lucy's subsequent conversations, one a full scale aria, the next simply a wrong number, lead Ben to ultimately despise the phone and attempt to extinguish its "hundreds of lives" with a pair of scissors. In an ironic twist, Ben finally reaches Lucy through the phone itself, hence the subtitle employed by Menotti. The playful dialogues and familiar subject matter obviously appealed to an entertainment-hungry post-World War II public, and aided in the movement to make opera "easier to swallow" for the average theatre-goer.

Riders to the Sea

Edmund John Millington Synge was born in 1871 in Dublin, Ireland. The grandson of an Anglican minister and nephew of a Protestant missionary to the Aran Islands (scene of *Riders to the Sea*), he renounced formal religion in his teens. Synge made five trips to the rocky, storm-beaten Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland during the summers of 1898 through 1902. His total time spent on the Arans was more than four months. John Synge may well be considered Ireland's first pure dramatist as contrasted with its poets-turned-dramatists such as Yeats.

There is a quality of impartial and inexorable judgment in the style and technique of *Riders to the Sea* as a play. Despite Synge's rejection of religion, there are several powerful Biblical illusions from the book of Revelation (or the Apocalypse). One of the uncomfortable oddities of the life pictured in the play is that many of the objects which relate to the dead are brand new, while the living must remain content with old things.

"...for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said 'Behold, I make all things new.'"
- Revelation XXI: 4-5

The red mare and the grey pony seem to echo the description of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. The grey pony in itself is of particular significance.

"...And I looked, and behold, a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death."
- Revelation VI: 8

Lastly, the names of three of the characters have inherent meaning of great importance. Maurya is Irish for "Mary of the seven times wounded heart". Bartley is an ordinary name, that of a mortal, the living son. Michael, who's presence overshadows everyone and everything in the play is the name of the archangel who calls men's souls away from earth and brings them to judgment.

Vaughan Williams, with minor exceptions, has been faithful to the text of the play. There are a few lines omitted in the latter half of the story which, although effecting the momentary meaning, do not substantially detract from the intent of the action. The music is symbolic of the world outside the four walls of our story and only comes in sync with the vocal writing toward the end of the piece, when Maurya has suffered her final tragedy and looks up from the depths of despair. The story may seem, on the surface, to be about passive suffering. In truth, the overriding action of each of the four main characters is the attempt to protect and nurture the family against insurmountable odds and in the face of constant and ultimate defeat.

Acknowledgements

A special thank-you to Alison Voth for stepping in at the last minute to play for *The Telephone*. A welcome back to Albert Jensen-Moulton who graduated from SFA in 1995 and was a member of the opera program for three years.

Thank you's to Brad Peloquin for painting flats and arranging for lights,
to Keith Elder and the stage crew for all their help
to Stephanie Sabin for helping round props and organizing the women's chorus.
to Ed Cesaitis for the loan of properties from the Theatre Division.
to Will Graham for his words of wisdom about the characters in *Riders*.