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Song of Himself

ADAM WASSERMAN visits poet J. D. McClatchy, one of contemporary opera's busiest librettists.



Photographed at home in New York by Gregory Downer

When poet J. D. McClatchy got an unexpected call from American composer William Schuman in April 1987, asking if he might consider writing a libretto based on a short story by Roald Dahl, his answer came as a reflex: he said yes

on the spot. "I did love opera," says McClatchy. "And the chance suddenly to give something back to the art that had shaped my own life was a wonderful one." The fruit of his collaboration with Schuman, titled *A Question of Taste*, had its premiere at Glimmerglass during the summer of 1989 and marked the start of something of a second career for the poet.

More than twenty years later, McClatchy - who goes by the nickname "Sandy" - has done more than his fair share of giving back to the art that shaped his life, having emerged as arguably the most important librettist on the current American opera scene. Since that first effort for Schuman, he has gone on to create the texts for a remarkable number of high-profile works, traversing a variety of compositional and dramatic styles, including Bruce Saylor's 1994 Lyric Opera of Chicago premiere, *Orpheus Descending*; Tobias Picker's *Emmeline* (1996); Lorin Maazel's *1984*, which McClatchy cowrote with Thomas Meehan; Lowell Liebermann's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (2006); Ned Rorem's *Our Town* (2006); Elliot Goldenthal's *Grendel* (2006), written with director Julie Taymor; and the Met's abbreviated family-friendly English-language *Magic Flute*. Meeting McClatchy, it's easy to understand why he's found the opera world so amenable to his particular poetic gifts: he gives the impression of a genial if patrician figure - someone who seems capable of providing a certain academic rigor to his collaborations with occasionally mercurial opera composers.

The author of several well-received books of poetry, including *Hazmat* (2002) - which garnered him a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize - and editor of more than a dozen volumes of poetry, McClatchy divides his time between New York and Stonington, Connecticut. A professor of English at Yale (where he received his Ph.D. in 1974), he teaches in the spring and edits the prestigious *Yale Review*, which is published quarterly. Though his credentials as a poet are above reproach, McClatchy still finds himself confronting the attitude that fashioning a libretto is a thankless, handmaiden art. "I think people wonder why a poet would be interested in opera, when you can sit all day by yourself at a typewriter and have nobody contradict you. The collaborative process of an opera, where everybody is eager to tell you what you've done wrong and how to fix it, is just a different world altogether," McClatchy told me when we met in early May in his book-lined Little Italy apartment, a few days after his return from the La Scala premiere of Maazel's *1984*. "I think some people would even find it demeaning, [or] a drain of some sort on their creative juices. 'Wouldn't you rather write a beautiful lyric poem than write a libretto, whose literary quality is compromised by its tasks?' To me, that was never a question that made much sense. Because they are entirely different tasks, and each has a set of challenges and opportunities that intrigued me."

However dissimilar the exercises of creating poetry and operatic drama, McClatchy admits, with the deferential frankness of someone with nothing to prove, the invaluable concision that his first vocation has afforded the other. "I



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Simon Keenlyside in 1984, McClatchy's collaboration with Lorin Maazel, at Covent Garden in 2005

(http://www.operanews.org/_uploaded/image/article/1984lg8108.jpg)

Simon Keenlyside in 1984, McClatchy's collaboration with Lorin Maazel, at Covent Garden in 2005

think, in a way, my having written poems all my life was a pretty good preparation for writing librettos, simply because the task of the poet is to distill an emotion, an image, to the best possible word - not in the sort of prolix fashion of a novelist, absorbing vast swaths of society and psychology," he said. "That distillation is exactly what's needed in a libretto. One of the most important things for a librettist to do is to know when to get out of the way of the music - when music can do something much more powerfully and effectively than language can." At the same time, McClatchy credits his love of classical music - fostered by a grandmother who would pull him out of school each Friday to attend concerts given by the Philadelphia Orchestra - with improving his verse. "I have learned as much about writing a poem ... from listening closely to certain pieces of music as from reading other poems," McClatchy told *Contemporary Authors* in 2003. "This song by Fauré, that étude by Schumann, those vacant heaves of Mahler, the sweet-and-sour fantasias of Purcell, the slippery stones of a Bach courante, the dramatic build of a Verdi aria - these have taught me what I know about rhythm, enjambments and emotional transitions, the signifying strengths of the line and of pure sound, and how 'meaning' forms and reforms itself in subsequent readings of the poem. If a poem does not sound, if it cannot 'carry' itself on modulating, harmonic strophes, then it risks the dry pleasures of merely rational discourse, or the plain dull whimsies of the unconscious."



Ned Rorem's *Our Town* at Juilliard, 2008

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McClatchy says he first attended a live opera at the age of fifteen, when, for reasons he can't quite remember, he found himself alone in Venice. Having purchased a ticket to a performance of *La Traviata* at the Fenice, he recalls asking a man sitting in the seat next to him about the title and being baffled by the meaning of "the fallen woman." "Then suddenly the curtain opened, and it was Anna Moffo," he remembers. "She couldn't have been more beautiful, and there were gowns and champagne and bloody handkerchiefs and coins being thrown. I was just absolutely enthralled. I thought, 'Here is the inner life, dramatized in ways in which everything that was the stuff of dreams and fantasies - adultery, betrayal, lust and whatnot - was suddenly in front of me, with ravishingly beautiful music. I was just totally hooked, because I thought, here is the life that I live in my deepest self, all on the stage.'" After the performance, McClatchy found his way backstage and introduced himself to Moffo, who he knew had been brought up in Wayne, Pennsylvania, close to his home in Bryn Mawr. The fifteen-year-old McClatchy ended up sharing a post-curtain pizza with Moffo and her husband. "I went off, and I thought, I guess you just do that all the time. You just go out and get pizza with the star after the opera."

The experience stuck with him. When he is crafting a libretto by himself in his study at home, McClatchy says, the music going through his head invariably remains Italianate - Verdi, Puccini, Rossini, Donizetti. "I wish I were writing librettos for Puccini or Verdi," he says. "But contemporary music can be very theatrical, if it isn't always as beautiful, or as convention has it."

Music also seems to retain something of a central place in McClatchy's highly readable poetry, which features a notable attention to structure and form while also frequently conjuring the corporeal, sometimes ungainly, subjects embraced by the Confessionalist school. (For the record, McClatchy says that "only about half [of my poetry] when I am writing ostensibly about myself" is true.) The poems often seem to call for, if less frequently evoke, a musical setting. Take, for example, an astute description of the sound of late-career Callas, from the poem "My Old Idols" in his book *Ten Commandments* ("Her voice: steeped in a rancid syrupy phlegm"); the first stanza of the poem "Fado," which opens *Hazmat* ("Suppose my heart had broken/ Out of its cage of bone./ Its heaving grille of rumors -/ My metronome); or "Pantoum," also from *Ten Commandments* ("To explain why the world doesn't love her,/ Pamina's handed a dagger by her mother/ Whose happiness is veiled like a widow's./ Cutthroat stars disguised as tears.").

"Robert Lowell's poetry was always very important to me, and I knew him slightly," recalls McClatchy, who also cites the likes of Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane and James Merrill as significant to his own development; he refers to Auden as his "beacon." "I did my Ph.D. dissertation on Confessional poetry. From the beginning, when I began to take poetry seriously as a graduate student, I was fascinated by the way in which people made a self out of words, a self that other people believed was the very self that was in front of them. So, to that extent, I was always interested in how to make a dramatic character - whether out of myself or out of whole cloth, or somebody else. I feel, really, when you are in the middle of writing a libretto, you want to feel each character from inside."

Because of the empathy that he requires for the characters he fashions for the opera stage, McClatchy's ideas of what comprises a successful libretto sometimes place him at odds with the canon. "For all that Auden is my hero, I think the libretto for *Rake's Progress* is perhaps too literary," he says. "As is the libretto for *Peter Grimes*, where suddenly this outcast fisherman is singing these poems about the Great Bear and Pleiades. The language is very florid and not convincing as something that character would say. It's a beautiful opera, but there are those parts where you would try to keep a dramatic and psychological cohesion to the piece. On the other hand, I think *Billy Budd* is a fabulous libretto, the best thing he ever had. That owes everything to E. M. Forster's shaping and the way in which the language is suited to the characters so well."

More often than not, McClatchy says, the ideas for subjects to adapt will come from the composer, "because the composers have to live with this material longer than I do." And however protean his skills in fitting literature and drama to the opera stage, he remains discriminating when it comes to the proposals he'll accept: he says he turns down a project if he doesn't like a composer's music, or if the subject does not strike him as operatic. "I just think I can tell, at this point, what would work in music and on a stage, and some things just don't. I just back away and say, 'Fine, let somebody else try this. It's not for me.' I've been surprised talking with opera composers how often it is the case that they don't know much about opera. That they have never seen *Bohème*. I've thought, 'You're going to write an opera, and you've never seen *Bohème*?! How is that possible?' It doesn't mean that they don't know music, but I think it takes a good deal of experience to know how to write operatic music well. And I think some contemporary composers don't have as much [experience] as they need."

The first draft of a libretto will usually take McClatchy two to three months of work, prior to the two years, on average, that a composer will spend writing and orchestrating an opera. Still, he points out how fundamentally important it is that, as librettist, he give ample thought to the potential musical consequences of his writing. "For one thing, librettos have a large hand in creating the music, since they are prior to the music. They prompt the music and, to an important extent, shape it - not just syllables and sounds of words but the combination of voices and characters will give a certain shape to the music, from the solo aria to the concertante type of conclusion to Act I. Puccini, they say, is all a matter of entrances and exits - you have to think about things like that. I think that librettos cannot be as complicated or subtle as other kinds of writing, because they have to be sung, and because just the sheer physical nature of the theater, with the huge orchestra, big theaters and voice types that get so high that you can't understand the words that are being sung. There are a lot of handicaps in opera. Beyond that, you try to do the best you can to write language that individuates the characters. You try to give every character his own sound in the language and at the same time to have some kind of beauty or intelligence."

Creating believable characters in opera proves to be a particularly fraught process when adapting a familiar work with a built-in horizon of expectation. *Our Town* came about after McClatchy - who served as the first chairman of the board of the Thornton Wilder Society - convinced Wilder's nephew Tappan that the great American Expressionist play might be suited to the medium of opera. The opera had its premiere at Indiana University at Bloomington in 2006 and played in a new production at the Juilliard Opera Center in late April of this year. At those performances, the work struck me as a particularly accomplished feat of condensation, having retained many of the moments that one is likely

to find affecting in the stage drama, but further thrown into relief by Rorem's melodic evocations of nostalgia. McClatchy was forced to cut more than half of Wilder's play before producing a libretto with which Rorem was satisfied. In fact, he took Wilder's lead when pruning the stark, quotidian drama. "In these adaptations, I look to see what the original authors had in mind - if they had any thoughts about reductions. In this case, in the old days, plays were broadcast on the radio soon after they opened. And the play that was two and a half hours in the theater had to be an hour on the radio. So Wilder himself supervised various adaptations," he says. "It was done many times. So I looked in Yale's Beinecke Library at the Wilder Collection and saw what it was that he himself had allowed to be cut, what it was that he thought was most important."



The Met's "family-friendly" take on Julie Taymor's *Magic Flute* production, 2006
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Likewise, McClatchy counts the Met's *Magic Flute* reduction as one of the more difficult projects he's worked on. "With the music already in place, moving very rapidly and brilliantly, it's hard to keep up with Mozart sometimes. Also, we wanted to keep it from sounding as if it were in libretto-ese, writing that sounds like - as good as they were in the day - the Ruth and Thomas Martin translation, which sounds pretty creaky now, that 'To the palace we must go' sort of thing. [Taymor and I] wanted to give it a natural and a witty sound, but still do it on Mozart's terms."

When asked about upcoming projects, McClatchy rattles off a list of intriguing prospects, including an opera with composer Bernard Rands about the life of Van Gogh; a children's opera based on the comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which was originally announced as a commission for Ned Rorem, who has since withdrawn from the project; an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* with Michael Dellaira; and an operatic version of *On the Waterfront*, composed by David Carlson. He will also write the libretto for the operatic adaptation of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which is slated to play at La Scala in 2011. But what's most discernable when speaking with McClatchy about his future work is his good-natured but palpable reticence about a couple of projects that he "would really love to do. And if I mentioned them, somebody else might steal them."

McClatchy clearly remains deeply embedded in the world of literature and poetry, despite the myriad ways libretto writing commandeers his time. (He has two librettos that have to be written this summer, he says, because the composers have deadlines that must be met.) In addition to a new collection of his own poetry due out in January, he has edited *The Whole Difference: The Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal* - who counts as another of McClatchy's heroes - to be published in the fall by Princeton University Press. Despite the degree of his involvement with the worlds of poetry and academia, though, it seems more clear that the process of writing librettos, if not the larger world of opera, occupies a principal position in McClatchy's artistic heart.

"When a character in an opera sings of loneliness, she does it with dozens of people around her making music," McClatchy says. "Nowadays, when I read a poem of mine - say it's about loneliness - it seems so quiet, so isolated, so ... lonely." □

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