

The Met @ 50

By John Mauceri



Metropolitan Opera 1966-67

CELEBRATIONS EVOKING REMEMBRANCE SAY A LOT ABOUT US.

We tend to use the decimal system and its major divisions to encourage reassessment in terms of looking back and connecting it to today. The 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death seemed like a good excuse to perform his plays, though it is hard to imagine he really needed it. (I remember suggesting a concert honoring a major anniversary of Walt Disney's death when I was told by an official at the company, "We do not celebrate deaths—only births.")

Classical music anniversaries are also significant markers of what is considered important. New York and Los Angeles ignored the centenaries of Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Bernard Herrmann, two composers whose influence is bigger than most of their contemporaries, while the 90th birthday of Pierre Boulez was the subject of much discussion and unquestioned praise. The classical music world is gearing up for the 100th birthday of Leonard Bernstein in 2018, while the New York Philharmonic is currently celebrating its 125th anniversary around Antonin Dvorak and music about New York City.

Fiftieth anniversaries are the most interesting, because people who were there at inception will inevitably survive to report, represent, and make a case for status as a "classic" for the art that emerged—or that they created—during early adulthood. The fiftieth of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1963, and of *West Side Story* in 2007 are good examples.

This year we have the 50th anniversary of *Star Trek*. We also have a number of books that make use of oral history to take us back to the 1960s with the rise of the Black Panthers, the anti-war movement, the hippie-drug culture, the civil rights movement, and the beginnings of the women's and gay rights movements. And recently, a documentary by Ron Howard, *The Beatles—Eight Days a Week*—was released centered around the Fab Four's final concert appearance 50 years ago.

There is another important anniversary taking place at Lincoln Center that so far has gone mostly unnoticed. Fifty years ago, on September 16, 1966, 8:00 pm Eastern Daylight Savings Time, a brand new Metropolitan Opera House opened with the world premiere of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a 3-act epic opera by Samuel Barber, one of America's most honored and respected composers—and with a text by William Shakespeare (who was celebrating the 350th anniversary of *his* death). And I was there.

The opera house—the largest auditorium at the slowly evolving Lincoln Center—was bigger than the old Metropolitan Opera House on 39th street by some 500 seats. It was designed by one of New York's greatest architects: Wallace Harrison, the former director of planning for the United Nations and, as a young whippersnapper, part of the team that brought us Rockefeller Center in 1939. There could be no more admired architect for this job than Wallace Harrison.

I was twenty-one and had just moved into my senior year dormitory room in Branford College at Yale when I put on my tuxedo and boarded the New York-New Haven-and-Hartford train to New York City for the opening night. Once there, I met up with my Aunt Rose, who had first brought me to the opera when I was 16 years old. That I soon got to conduct all of its major singers—Leontyne Price, Jess Thomas, Justino Diaz, John Macurdy, and Rosalind Elias—makes remembering that night all the more important for me—and the general ignorance of the anniversary all the more telling. Every one of those singers, except Jess Thomas, is alive should anyone wish to reconstruct that history from the singers' point of view.

Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* was as gala an affair as could ever be imagined in those golden years of classical music in America. The composer had already won two Pulitzers, one of which was for another opera commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, *Vanessa*. Along with Aaron Copland, Barber simply *was* American classical music.

Urbane, complex, and retaining a musical language that was at once European and American, Barber was the perfect choice to open America's grandest of grand opera houses.

The Met's general director, Rudolph Bing, had spared no expense. He commissioned the world's most glamorous and effective stage director, Franco Zeffirelli, to direct and design the production—and serve as the man to fashion Shakespeare's words into a viable libretto. (Six years earlier, Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also only used Shakespeare's words for its libretto.) Zeffirelli created an epic vision of Rome and Egypt, all seen through moving aluminum pipes that acted like glistening venetian blinds through which we both saw and imagined. For the last four minutes of act one, for example, the libretto says, "Cleopatra, from a great distance, slowly appears on the barge, as in a vision." And indeed, adding to the full depth of the Metropolitan's enormous state-of-the-art stage was an equally immense stage *behind* it that opened before our eyes as we watched a fully built ship sail toward the audience in slow motion as the curtain fell.

The costumes were a mixture of Elizabethan-meets-Cinecittà. A mere five years earlier, 20th Century Fox practically went bankrupt with its Elizabeth Taylor-Richard Burton *Cleopatra*. Filmed outside of Rome in the movie city created by Mussolini, *Cleopatra* just about ended the era of Hollywood epic blockbusters, as Sam Barber's new opera would do to American opera in the 50 years since the Met first opened its doors.

Thomas Schippers conducted. No American opera conductor had achieved the international fame of Schippers. That he was the trusted interpreter of Barber and Barber's life-partner, Gian Carlo Menotti, made him the authoritative maestro for the occasion. The libretto by Zeffirelli called for dances and ballets in the style of the Paris Opera's requirements for Verdi's *Aïda*. The choreography was by Alvin Ailey, making his Met debut. He worked with the Met's ballet mistress, Alicia Markova, who had begun her dancing career under the tutelage of Serge Diaghilev and was a

founding principal dancer of London's Royal Ballet as well as American Ballet Theatre. And then there was the cast.

I had seen Leontyne Price make her Met debut on January 27, 1961. It was a revival of the house's old production of *il Trovatore* and it was a normal Friday night subscription performance. It proved to be hardly normal. Both Price and Italian tenor Franco Corelli debuted together and Irene Dalis and Robert Merrill (in astounding voice) completed the quartet of soloists. (When I had the opportunity to conduct Merrill in two arias at the end of his career and mentioned that night, he said with anger in his surprisingly inflected "New Yawk" accent, "We had casts in those days. We had **casts!**") When Price returned to the Met to sing Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, I made sure I was there, too. She had gone from her debut bows that were genuine and moving to something very grand indeed by the time she sang the Mozart—I was part of her standing ovation in the orchestra section of the old opera house when Madame Price did a royal, and slightly disdainful, curtsy and the woman next to me uttered, "Well! Isn't THAT *quelque chose!*" Sam Barber and Leontyne Price were good friends and the composer, respecting the 19th century practice, had composed the role specifically for her magnificent voice.

With the African-American Price—born in Laurel, Mississippi—as Cleopatra, Rudolf Bing gave us an entirely American and multi-ethnic cast: Justino Diaz (from San Juan, Puerto Rico) was Antony, and Heldentenor Jess Thomas—from South Dakota—was Caesar. The first time I heard any of the music to Antony and Cleopatra it was at Bayreuth a month earlier, where Jess Thomas was singing *Tannhäuser*. I was being given a backstage tour by Wagner's granddaughter, Friedelind, when we passed by a rehearsal room where Thomas was being coached. I stood outside the room and listened as long as I could to get a preview of a brand new opera by a great living composer writing for the opening of my country's soon-to-be grand opera house. It was thrilling.

For those of us whose first experiences with grand opera had been the Metropolitan Opera House on 39th Street, the new house generated both excitement and dread. I first attended an opera in my freshman year in high school. The student matinee that spring was *Don Giovanni*, with Kim Borg in the title role and Toscanini's favorite soprano, Herva Nelli, as an alarmingly corseted Donna Anna. I was fifteen years old. That Christmas I received two tickets for *Madama Butterfly* at which Renata Tebaldi sang the title role. The combination of the Met's chandelier and Tebaldi's high B-flat at the end of "*un bel di*" sealed the deal. Broadway had entered my life when I was 10 and now opera made growing up in New York a dream for a kid who liked that sort of thing.

And so, for some six formative years I attended opera at the old house—usually with Aunt Rose. (After successfully navigating *Butterfly*, Rose called our house one night and said, "Johnny, I am really tired of Uncle Jim falling asleep during act two of every opera I go to. Would you like to come with me instead?" Rose had a subscription on alternating Friday nights in the dress circle. Uncle Jim, a fun-loving dentist who was more interested in golf than Gounod, found the mid-winter heating system of the old house perfect for a nap. The other Friday nights were held by another Italian-American family whose daughter was my age and, well, it didn't take long for me to be going just about every Friday night.

New Yorkers have a way with making things happen. "Street smart" is a phrase for it and it applies to anything we put our minds to. For me, it meant getting tickets to the opera and to Broadway shows. The latter was harder because each show was at a different theater with a different box office with a recurring ritual involving a check and a self-addressed stamped envelope from a stranger (me) asking for "best available." When it came to *My Fair Lady*, for example, the wait was six months and my mother and I sat in the last row of the orchestra (which made me quite grumpy). When it came to *Gypsy*, my older brother and I sat on the aisle in the Broadway Theatre as Ethel Merman brushed by me to make her surprise entrance from the house shouting, "Sing out Louise!"—and I

couldn't have been happier. Sometimes I got lucky.

But the Met was different because it was the same box office each time I sent in a ticket request—always calculated to arrive on the day tickets went on sale—and at some point a very great and good person got to "know" me. "I am sixteen years old and would like two tickets for the non-subscription Ring cycle. Thank you very much. Sincerely, John Mauceri" was both true and really effective. I got to see everything: Joan Sutherland's debut, Nilsson's first *Aïda*, the Bernstein-Zeffirelli *Falstaff*, and yes, Maria Callas' return as *Tosca* (with Corelli and Tito Gobbi).



Maria Callas

Most amazing of all (now that I think of it) was the farewell gala at the old house, on April 16, 1966. Leopold Stokowski started things off with "The Entrance of the Guests" from *Tannhäuser*, which kept on repeating until the stage was filled with retired singers from the great early years of the last century. One after another entered to rapturous applause. (Lily Pons was the only unhappy one. "They didn't ask me to sing. I can still

sing!” she was reported to have said.) When all the guests had entered and seated onstage, Stokowski did the unthinkable. He turned and spoke to us from the pit. “Please save this house with its EXCELLENT ACOUSTICS!” This did not go down well with Rudolph Bing who waited for revenge, which he nicely exacted in his book *5000 Nights at the Opera*.

The old Met did not get landmark status due to the influence of New York’s most powerful business men in conjunction with those who did not want a competitive opera house in Manhattan. That had been the case once before with Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House and the Met had won. The Met was not about to compete with itself in 1966. And after much handwringing, the great auditorium was demolished in 1967. RCA bought the gold curtain and cut it into little squares that were sold in a box set of long playing records, called “Opening Nights at the Met.” Parts of the proscenium were prize objects for collectors. I once had cocktails at the president of New York’s Wagner

Society and was horrified to see that the glass-topped coffee table on which I rested my chardonnay was a section of the old arch that had Wagner’s name on it and that had once proudly stood above the great stage from 1883 until the wrecking ball turned it into, as I said, a coffee table.

And so, with all that history, how were we supposed to greet this new opera house on that early fall evening in 1966? I was not present for the opening of Philharmonic Hall in 1962, but I did attend performances during its first season. (The Met performed there, it should be said, with the American premiere of Manuel De Falla’s *Atlàntida*, and even more significantly, on the second night of concerts in the hall, Erich Leinsdorf, the Boston Symphony, and pianist John Browning performed the world premiere of a new piano concerto by none other than Samuel Barber.)

There was a Bach B-minor Mass and a concert of John Cage’s music in which I remember seeing Merce Cunningham in colorful tights and shoeless, riding a bicycle onstage. I also remember how much I loved Philharmonic Hall. The walls and ceiling were a deep midnight blue, and the seats and the acoustical “clouds” were various shades of gold. Yes, perhaps it sounded like a really good car radio, but rarely have I felt so comfortable and uplifted in an architectural-musical space as I did in its earliest iteration. And although the acoustics took a hit from some of the critics, within a day or so, they had been altered (by adjusting the “clouds”) and John Chapman of *The Daily News* pointed out how “there is no doubt in my mind that the hall itself will be a great musical instrument.” The negative assessment, however, has stuck, and, as of this writing, the Philharmonic is hoping to raise a half a billion dollars to fix the hall.

After all the excitement of the opening of Philharmonic Hall, all of us in 1966 wondered what the new Met experience would be—both musically and aesthetically. Every ticket holder had already received an elegant program page designed by Julian Tomchin, extravagantly printed in Japan on pure silk bridal satin, and backed with Sea Island cotton.



Metropolitan Opera playbill cover 1965-66 season

Entering the building was unquestionably thrilling. The old house had no plaza in front of it. It had no lobby per se. What it had was a sense of history—Mahler, Puccini, Caruso, Toscanini. When you entered the old building, all you had were the ticket booths on the right and a wall of “8 by 10 glossies”—the phrase every artist knew: the official head shots in black and white. The Met would display these photos, one next to the other, in alphabetical order on that wall. If you were in the family circle you did not enter here, but had a separate entrance with an elevator to the top. The class distinction was ingrained in the old house, and it was classy inside. Up top, you had a magnificent view of that chandelier and down below there was Sherry’s restaurant and crush bar with its bright red cut-velvet wallpaper.

With the new opera house, however, there was grandeur from the moment you approached the house and entered the lobby. As a sometime-college-architecture student, I knew the lobby had been compromised and was meant to be a lot larger. Its curves and the red carpet gave the Met something it never had before—uplift. The two murals by Marc Chagall, each measuring 30 x 35 feet, brought accessible contemporary art into the foyer, with the tree of life floating above the Hudson River. The plaza was buzzing that night with famous people dressed magnificently and mingling with those of us who managed to get in—and those outside staring at all of us. America’s First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson, purred to the press in her broad Texas accent that grated on New York’s ears when she spoke of “all the gold and glittuh.” The English actress Hermione Gingold, who was as famous for her baritone voice with its lisping consonants as she was for pithy remarks, said of the auditorium, “It looks like it was decorated by a madam.”

Indeed, the auditorium itself was another matter. The walls were highly polished rosewood. The proscenium was painted in pure and dazzling gold. Above it was a sculpture by Mary Callery that reminded many of a deconstructed garbage can. I read about it in the program and said to Aunt Rose, “It was designed by a woman,” to which Rose said, “That’s no surprise.” I

was twenty-one, after all, and understood that Rose thought all those pipes were phallic. Ornamentation was a serious challenge for architects in that era and I was interested in this solution, a sculpture that replaced those composers’ name that had announced themselves from the equivalent perch in the old house. However, as I stared at the texture that had been applied to the area around the proscenium, I knew it looked somehow familiar but could not place it. After about an hour of thought I realized it was the pattern on Marcal paper dinner napkins.

The ceiling was a cream color and the lighting on the boxes looked like Cheshire cat smiles. The Swarovski crystal satellite chandeliers—a gift from the Vienna State Opera in thanks for the United States’ assistance in rebuilding their opera house after we had bombed it in March of 1945—seemed too small, or perhaps there weren’t enough of them for the space they were meant to inhabit. Sitting in the dress circle, I could view the performance either by looking at the stage or by watching its reflection in the walls—the proscenium was brighter than anything onstage. A blank cream ceiling ellipse surrounded by dazzling gold that continued down and around the proscenium, bright red carpets and seats, polished brownish-red wood walls, and little sparkling crystal chandeliers that went up and down seemed to compete with each other disproportionately.

Of course, knowing everything can be a burden—especially for a twenty-one-year-old. Over the years, the Met has muted all its colors and cut off the “smiles” so that the crystal lights on the boxes are rectangles now. The proscenium’s paint job is now a matte and darkened golden color. The walls do not reflect. The saloon red is now more of an understated burgundy. All of it has been made to look old, even as it has actually aged—and as it has become an iconic midcentury hall, its design floating somewhere between the 19th century excesses of the Paris *Opéra’s Salle Garnier*, Covent Garden’s glorious royal living room of an auditorium, Milan’s *Teatro alla Scala*, and with the 1967 brutalist *Teatro Regio* in Turin, which looks like the set for *Star Trek*. Harrison and his team found a middle road, one that sings of *Camelot*—both the Broadway show that

was designed by Oliver Smith and the Kennedy Era.

Sensory overload had a new meaning for me that night in 1966, even before I heard a note of the new opera. Just the sounds of the orchestra—beginning as it always had with lone harpist tuning before the racket of her colleagues obliterated her ability to hear—entering and playing their scales and excerpts of what was to come—was overwhelming. One could not escape the fact that the auditorium was a great space: huge, in comparison to the old house, and with vastly improved sightlines (no weight-bearing pillars!) The relationship between the stage and us in the audience was both inviting and epic.

When maestro Thomas Schippers entered the pit, there was an enormous ovation. A photo of all of us was taken from the stage. The first piece we heard was the “Star Spangled Banner.” It was hard to know what the acoustics were like because we were all

standing and singing. Once we settled back down and the lights in the auditorium went to black, there were speeches, and finally, it was time for an opera: new music played in a new hall and we—the lucky 4,000—were there. How would it sound?

Many of us knew that the Met was taking no chances and had diverted a student matinee on April 16, 1966 to the new house to try it out, five months before its official opening. That performance did begin with a bang: cannon shots were fired from the stage to test acoustical reverberation and decay rates. What followed was an opera the Met had commissioned in 1910, Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West*. Those kids and their teachers were the first ones, but, on September 16, at about 8:15 pm, we all got very quiet indeed, to hear. Yes, finally, to hear.



And BANG! – a glorious fanfare for the brass. *Tah-tah-tah-TAH-duh. Tah-tah-tah-TAH-duh. Tah-tah-tah-TAH-DAH!* An amazingly fast curtain parted to reveal a first image—nothing less than what Zeffirelli called “The Empire”—with the Met chorus singing “From Alexandria this is the news.” The libretto indicates that this enormous double chorus represents “Romans, Greeks, Jews, Persian, Africans, [and] Soldiers” and that is what was on that stage.

Few words were comprehensible, with the exception of “Antony fishes,” or was it “Antony wishes?” Counterpoint is the enemy of textural comprehensibility, and even if Barber had determined the audience needed to understand his libretto, Shakespeare would have tripped him up with, “Leave thy lascivious wassails!”

Barber had broken a century of convention by making the hero, Antony, a baritone. Ever since Mozart told us the truth about the two sets of lovers in *Così fan tutte*—a soprano with a tenor, and a mezzo-soprano with a baritone (even as they swap around for two acts)—opera has been about sopranos and tenors as lovers. The baritone is inevitably the villain or the sadly unrequited. The mezzo gets an aria, but doesn’t get the man. Mess with that and you are messing with your audience. But Barber had something else in mind: the warm colors of Leontyne Price’s voice and the way it would blend with a glorious and youthful baritone of Justino Diaz.

A short second scene in Cleopatra’s palace in Alexandria gave us the first solo sounds to bounce off the new stage. Antony sang, “These strong Egyptian fetters I must break or lose myself in dotage” and we understood the opera was actually in English—difficult English, but English nonetheless. An offstage chorus sang, “Cleopatra!” four times and Miss Price was brought on inside a moving pyramid that opened up to reveal her. (The pyramid had famously broken down at the dress rehearsal and stage hands had to rescue her by making an unexpected entrance in contemporary dress.)

Price was trapped in another way: a costume that made it all but impossible for her to move. Never a

great actor, she could not even make use of her arms without bumping into her exploding quasi-Elizabethan dresses, or knocking off the exaggerated Egyptian wig that was more than twice the size of her head. At this point, we all began to have that creepy feeling one gets that things would not get better. We remained cautiously hopeful.



Indeed, there were still wonders to be heard and visions to be seen. (The intermissions were the other opera that was going on that night. And just before Act Three, general manager Rudolph Bing came to the stage to inform us that the orchestra had agreed to a new contract and that the season would continue. In a way, that news added a jolt of optimism to the proceedings that affixed itself to the opera.)

Barber had surprised us with unusual music—an entire scene accompanied by timpani to end Act Two; a scene in which five characters “improvise their own recitatives, without conductor or orchestra,” while a “stick dance” takes place behind them that had been choreographed by Ailey—and Barber gave Miss Price an unforgettable aria before her suicide, “Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have Immortal longings in me,” which began with a leitmotif that had been introduced earlier, making it feel like an old friend and yet completely new.

A rousing final chorus, with trumpets onstage, ended the evening with the word, “Rome.” And when it was all over, we all had ... opinions! I rushed off to

get the train back to New Haven and the next morning I ran into the avuncular master of Jonathan Edwards College, Beekman Cox Cannon, who had been my 20th century music history teacher and a very grand seigneur. “Well, what did you think,” he said gleefully, having listened to the radio broadcast. I said that I thought the music was awful and then I used an image of an overripe peach that had fallen from a tree and had begun to rot. “And the costumes,” I said, knowing this would really get his goat. “You mean you were *there*? Why you son-of-a-bitch, tell me all about it!”

That’s what it was like—and perhaps still is: a delicious, venomous trashing of a serious and magnificent achievement that was not perfect by any means but was also profoundly memorable—so much so that just hearing a recording of that opening fanfare 50 years later brings it all back to me. (Leontyne Price attended the revised version of the score at Juilliard ten years after the premiere, and famously said when she heard those first notes, “Honey, I broke out in a cold sweat.”)

The audience, in retrospect, really enjoyed the opera. The critics, however, hated it. Everyone and everything was sent into the trash in a collective expression of mid-century revulsion and umbrage. How dare anyone write music that extended tradition, rather than

something completely new and avant-garde? Poor Aaron Copland had tried the completely new route a few years earlier at the opening of Philharmonic Hall with his *Connotations for Orchestra*, which the audience positively hated, even if the critics were equally loath to give him points for his musical *volte face* into serialism. (First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was famously heard greeting him afterward and at a loss for words, saying only, “Oh Mr. Copland! Oh Mr. Copland!”) Aaron had tried to be “with the boys” by writing a 12-tone piece, whereas Sam had more or less stuck to his artistic guns and wrote a grand opera for the 20th century. Both works have been unceremoniously dumped. Barber became so depressed that his output shriveled, as did Copland’s. Antony and Cleopatra was

deemed to be a “giant fiasco,” in the words of New York Times’ Peter G. Davis, “one of the great operatic disasters of all time.” It should also be pointed out that other operatic disasters include the world premieres of *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, and *Madama Butterfly*.

Sam Barber was so profoundly hurt that it inspired his former domestic partner, Gian Carlo Menotti, to come to his rescue. Sam and Gian Carlo never stopped loving each other even as they stopped being each other’s lovers. When I first met Barber, Menotti introduced us at Spoleto in 1974 where I was conducting the European premiere of Menotti’s one-act

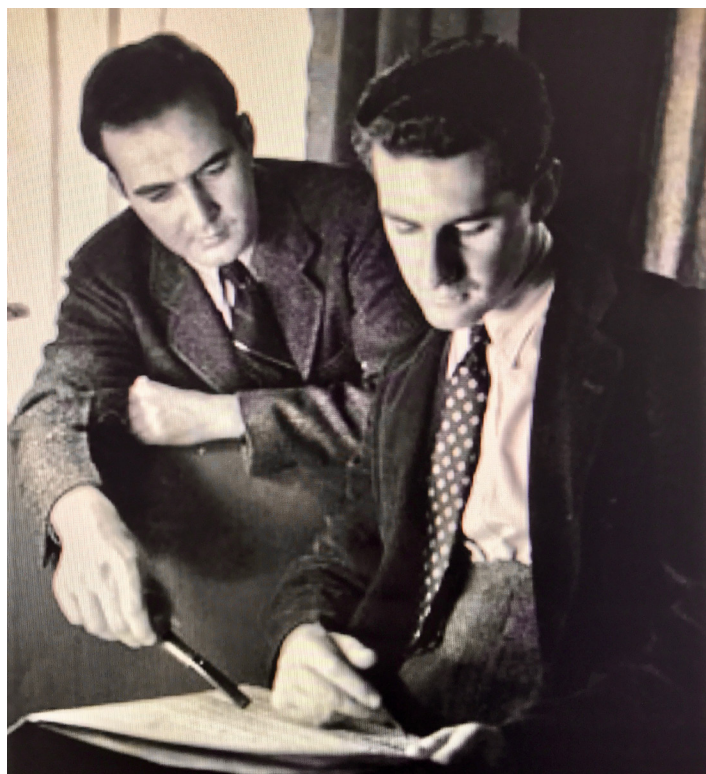


anti-war opera, *Tamu-Tamu*, and their mutual warmth and comfort were palpable and radiant. Schippers was conducting Luchino Visconti's magnificent production of *Manon Lescaut*, and Roman Polanski was directing an ill-conceived production of Alban Berg's *Lulu* in Italian. Jerome Robbins was there too, as was a young designer-writer whom Gian Carlo had discovered called "Bawbweelsohn" (Robert Wilson!). Sam was visiting Spoleto and we spent a bit of time together. Gian Carlo was always trawling for some bit of juicy gossip. "How are you getting on with the other conductors?" he asked me with a raised eyebrow.

It made a certain sense that Menotti, the composer of sixteen operas (as of that date), and the librettist for Sam's other Metropolitan Opera commission, *Vanessa*, would take over the score of *Antony and Cleopatra* and reshape it with his beloved Sam for performances in New York at the Juilliard School in 1976, and subsequently at the American Spoleto in Charleston. This time, Gian Carlo would also direct the proceedings.

Menotti hated the dance music ("Very camp") and removed it. He also felt that the score needed a love duet, even though Shakespeare did not provide anything like that in his play. Thus, in Scene 4 of Act Two, just before the Battle of Actium, there is a short duet of approximately fifty bars of music that makes use of words by the English dramatists Beaumont and Fletcher ("Oh take! Take those lips away"). The chorus is omnipresent in the revised version, but remains unstaged and upstage, focusing the drama down front—and eliminating a lot of rehearsal time. Melodramatic bursts occasionally replaced Barber's more controlled drama, as when *Cleopatra* screams at the sight of Antony's body being hoisted into the monument where she will soon join him in death, and "kisses him wildly" in seven new bars of orchestral passion. Caesar's part has been diminished, and with the removal of the part of the court eunuch, Mardian, Menotti also scratched one of the clearly-perceived phrases from the 1966 opening night that made us laugh inappropriately: hearing Miss Price's *Cleopatra* ask character tenor Andrea Velis, in perfectly enunciated Mississippi-English, "Dost thou have desires?"

The cuts and emendations of the revised 1976 edition are interesting and authentic, of course, but also remove much of the grandness and internal balance of what was clearly a grand opera. It is the only version that is currently available for performance, and Menotti, who died in 2007 at the age of ninety-five, steadfastly defended it in terms that made it clear that he was protecting Sam. It was Sam Barber, after all, who had protected him in 1928 when, as a frightened teenager enrolling at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, he could not speak a word of English. "I heard a kind voice behind me say, 'Vous êtes Italien?'" and it was Sam," Gian Carlo had told me. "He took care of me."



Sam and Gian Carlo

The last time Sam and Gian Carlo visited the Met—shortly before Barber's death in 1981—the two tried to go backstage after the performance, but did not have a pass, nor did they have their names on any official list. They were not granted entry, even though Gian Carlo tried to explain to the guard that his companion had composed the opera that opened the house. Menotti recounted this story with great bitterness when we last saw each other in 1999.

Antony and Cleopatra is Shakespeare's celebration of history's most famous love affair. Historically, it marked the end of an era. Cleopatra was the last pharaoh after all, and with the death of Antony in 31 B.C., Octavius Caesar became Rome's first emperor. Sam Barber's original opera was meant to represent, as New York Times critic Peter G. Davis said, "the sunset tragedy of two mature lovers trapped and destroyed by international politics." It may also have signaled the end of another era: America's classical foothold in world music. The World War II School from Europe, led by Pierre Boulez, had told us we had no real composers ("not even a Henze") and our leaders accepted that judgment. The American sound that Copland, Barber, Blitzstein, Bernstein, Hanson, and others had created was passé and only a few composers continued to write operas in that hugely successful American voice (Floyd, Ward, Beeson, Argento)—but we have turned our backs on all of them. Its post-mortem is the 1976 revised *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is also something of a final love letter from one man to another, Sam and Gian Carlo, both of whom had seen their reputations all but disappear during their lifetimes.

Barber did not make his text easy to sing. His musical evocation of Roman and Egyptian music, however, is great and persuasive. Unlike Alex North's masterpiece for the 1961 epic film that tells the same story in its second part, Barber makes a different case for how we can imagine a past whose music we do not and cannot actually recreate.

Verdi made up Egyptian music for *Aïda* by using exotic scales, flutes and harps (as seen in ancient Egyptian painting), and historically inaccurate brass instruments to represent the repressive power of the Egyptian Empire. North, who, in addition to being thoroughly trained at Curtis Institute, Juilliard, and the Moscow Conservatory, was also a jazz musician and a student of what we used to call "ethnomusicology." Thus, his Egyptian music (like Verdi's a century before) uses flutes and harp-like instruments, but expands the palette to include bass flutes, tuned gongs and the clattering harpsichord, frequently built over jazz grooves and riffs to indicate the African nature of Egypt. Barber finds his own way by remaining true

to the complex idiom of mid-century counterpoint, complex and dense harmonies and declamations, and the occasional big tune—the very thing that turned the serious music critics of the time into serious haters of his music—even as they accepted the phantasmagorical *Hochkutsch* of Messiaen, Boulez's teacher. Ironically, much of today's "modern music" owes far more to Samuel Barber than to Anton Webern (1883-1945) who in 1966 was the godfather of all contemporary music—American and European.

Music is invisible and there is no way to reassess it without performing it. We are constantly coming to new conclusions about art whenever a museum collects and presents that art, but we cannot hang an opera on a wall. We have to perform it for you to hear it. Those of us fortunate enough to have been at the opening of the Met and the premiere of *Antony and Cleopatra* have lived to tell of it and would encourage the rest of the world who still care about opera to share in that reassessment. There were eight performances of it at the new Met in 1966. Thirty thousand people attended *Antony and Cleopatra*—and it was as successful as any new opera ever presented at there. Its critical drubbing in mid-twentieth century America did what could not be done in the 19th century to *Carmen* and *La Traviata*: it stopped it and its composer. Much the same thing happened to Menotti, who went from Pulitzers to pulverized, and retreated to Scotland "where I did not have to read *The New York Times* every morning"—though he continued to write operas.

But really, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a good opera—maybe a great one. If we cannot find room for a major work by a major, internationally celebrated composer, how can we expect opera to survive? Feeding the repertory is the only way forward and surely it is not merely a question of commissioning new works. There must be room for Barber and Menotti on our stages because we owe it to our composers and to ourselves. Fifty years is the crucial point for a musical work. It has already gone from new to old and now awaits reassessment. Will it be rediscovered? Will it be a classic? Will we simply ignore it and await some champion who might use another anniversary, divisible by ten, to justify dusting it off and presenting it "for

your consideration” as the Motion Picture Academy likes to put it at Oscar time?

Classical music continues to present its core repertory—presenting it in new and frequently controversial productions—and then suddenly jump over fifty years or more to commission and present new works, skipping the mid-century. Broadway, Hollywood, pop music—and of course art and design—have room for this complex and diverse period and are a lot healthier for it.

On September 16, 2016, I sat in the darkened Metropolitan Opera House. I watched an army of brilliant technicians, stage managers and stagehands, custodial staff and carpenters hard at work during an all-day stage-and-orchestra rehearsal of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. Sir Simon Rattle was (understandably) totally unaware that he was leading this rehearsal on the 50th anniversary of the opening of the house. Nothing was said to the orchestra or the artists. It was just another rehearsal.

I listened as Simon coaxed the first two notes of the prelude to Act One out of the cello section. Perhaps he repeated this passage ten times. I felt the multiple geniuses on display that day: Wagner, of course, and Wallace Harrison and his fellow architects and designers who had created the magic proportions of an auditorium that lets music and singing envelope us; Simon, who knew just what he wanted and demanded it with charm and insistence; the orchestra and the cast—who were moving about and singing as the set was being adjusted and the lighting was still being tried.

An assistant conductor sat behind Rattle in the first row. It reminded me of when I sat behind Leonard Bernstein, taking notes and following along as he rehearsed *Carmen* with Marilyn Horne in 1972, and I thought about the eleven *Fidelio* performances I had conducted there in 1976. Harrison made the relationship between the conductor and the stage so completely natural that one never has any idea just how gigantic the space behind us is. (Covent Garden and Scala are both a thousand seats smaller.) It is just the conductor, the orchestra, and a stage that seems

close and intimate. In other words, the Met is a miracle of design.

As I sat in the darkened theater, a familiar face came up to me. It was Ken Howard, a photographer I have known since Santa Fe in 1973 when he photographed, and I conducted, a new production of *Così fan tutte* there. He is now the principal photographer for the Met. When the lights came up during a break he offered to take a photo of me, fifty years after Aunt Rose and I sat upstairs to experience *Antony and Cleopatra* and the new Met for the first time.

The new house is no longer the new house. It is the Metropolitan Opera House and the old house is simply a glorious memory of my youth. And while we can rejoice in the achievement of the fifty-year-old house—because it is there to be experienced—we can also wonder at what music awaits rediscovery. On May 7, 2017, the Met will hold a gala with arias and ensembles from many operas and, for the first time in fifty years, it will perform “excerpts from *Antony and Cleopatra*.” Maybe you will be there and, having heard those excerpts in the hall that first brought it to life, you will want more of it. Perhaps, as Gustav Mahler once said of his own music, its time has come.



JOHN MAUCERI

American conductor, educator and producer. For seven years (2007-2013) he served as Chancellor of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts (Winston-Salem) and is the Founding Director of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra. The former music director of the Teatro Regio (Turin, Italy), Scottish Opera (Glasgow), Washington (National) Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, the American Symphony Orchestra (Carnegie Hall), he has conducted most of the world's leading orchestras and opera companies and has appeared on the stages of Broadway and Hollywood, as well as the most prestigious halls of academia . Among his many awards, Mr. Mauceri is the recipient of a Tony, a Grammy, an Olivier, two Emmys and Yale University's Alumni Achievement Award.

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