

## ***Séance on a Wet Afternoon* Opera**

*Séance on a Wet Afternoon* is Stephen Schwartz's opera adaptation of the movie and novel by the same name.

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### **Why Opera?**

Question:

What was it that made you want to try your hand at opera, have you done it before? and are you more a musical fan or opera fan at heart?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I've always been interested in trying my hand at writing an opera, and in fact wrote a one-act opera my senior year at Carnegie Mellon -- it was entitled "Voltaire and the Witches" (don't ask about the plot!) and was part of a double-bill called "Twice Upon a Time", the other half being a charming musical by David Spangler called "Shakespeare in London." I am a fan of both media (musical theatre and opera) and am excited that there seems to be developing a new kind of opera/musical theatre that's kind of a cross between both.

### **Opera vs Musicals**

Question:

If you don't mind me asking, how is your opera coming along? What differences, if any, are you finding between writing for operas and musicals? Thanks from all of us for your time. Jack [probably from 2007]

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Jack: I am making progress. I have about a quarter or more of the first act written now, at least in first draft form. I have been able to hear a bit of it sung, and that has been encouraging to me. I am planning to have a complete first draft of the first act completed by the beginning of summer. Aside from the obvious differences in vocal range, two big differences are becoming apparent to me. Perhaps the most significant is that opera is unamplified, and therefore the music has to be written in such a way that the voices (and lyrics) can be heard over it. This sounds elementary of course, but if you think about pop music and Broadway music, almost always there is a constant riff or rhythm set up in the accompaniment, and then miking helps the voice of the singer or singers be heard above it. And this is with a smaller orchestra (albeit often with electronic instruments, which are harder to be heard over.) The give and take between voice and orchestra in opera needs to be worked out with much more care, and it does change the way one writes. The other big difference is that classically trained voices have a built-in "break" (or "passagio") that needs to be taken into consideration when devising melodic lines. Whereas with theatre and pop voices, one basically just writes to the top of the range, opera voices have stronger places below AND above the passagio, and sitting in the break for too long can be wearying. So that does influence the composing as well. This may be more technical information than you wanted, but I am finding it very interesting, and I'm sure there are more differences that I will learn about as I continue to write and work with the singers. Thanks for asking, Stephen Schwartz

## **Opera vs Musical**

Question:

Stephen, would you agree that another difference between an opera and a musical is that in, certainly a traditional, opera - the music is the most important factor - and then the lyrics and story. Not knowing many operas myself (apart from Jerry Springer - but we've talked about that) I can't really say much more - but it's always seemed to me that the strong musical virtuosity always shines through in an opera. But, I guess, in this "postmodern" era - the definition of opera has changed. Good luck with it!  
Nick Hutson

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

To some extent I agree, certainly in more traditional operas (let's face it, who can really follow the story of THE MAGIC FLUTE?) But I don't think that holds true in contemporary opera. Just as in musical theatre, I actually think it's the "book" that is key to the success or failure of the piece. Of course, good music is vital, but I have seen contemporary operas with excellent music totally founder because their story-telling is a mess. I think the strength of their libretti is a primary reason Jake Heggie's DEAD MAN WALKING and Mark Adamo's two recent operas of LITTLE WOMEN and LYSISTRATA have proven so successful (not that I'm at all impugning the music, but my point is that I believe the well-structured "books" are a large reason those operas have received so many productions.) In any event, I am hoping to bring my theatrical story-telling experience to my opera and that it will help the piece to work for audiences. Thanks, Stephen Schwartz

## **SEANCE: Writing for Lauren Flanigan, Style of Music, etc.**

Question:

Happy New Year, Stephen! Best Wishes for a prosperous and successful endeavor with Seance On a Wet Afternoon, your first opera. I read that veteran opera diva Lauren Flannigan will be featured as Myra during the First Chance Development Workshop at the American Opera Projects this month. We know from your posts that at some point in the development of Wicked you were writing the role of Glinda for Kristin Chenoweth who has an operatic background. Similarly, is there a collaboration with Ms. Finnigan that might facilitate the development of musical style and character that would lend a sense of depth into your operatic foray? What are your musical influences for Seance; classical opera (Verdi, Mozart), a more contemporary musical element, neither or both? As a composer, how long did you study/analyze the theoretical structure of opera in order to feel comfortable with this challenge? Many thanks, Mike Smith

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mike: Thanks for your message and your interest in my opera of "Seance on a Wet Afternoon". We are rehearsing feverishly for the reading of the first act this coming weekend, and meanwhile I am trying to use whatever available time I have to continue working on the second act.

In answer to your questions: Lauren Flanigan has been extremely gracious in learning the material and singing sections of it for me during the development process, so while we are not working together as frequently as I did with Kristin as WICKED was being developed, I have definitely been keeping Lauren's voice in mind. For instance, in one aria, I wanted a very warm and emotional sound on one particular line, and Lauren told me that for her voice, the top note would be better on a high G# than the A on which I originally set it, so I was able to re-set a section so that the note came on a G#. These are the kinds of things I normally don't consider when writing for musical theatre (as songs are simply transposed to suit whoever is in the original cast). As we work on the reading, Lauren has also made very helpful suggestions about the phrasing of certain lines, etc.

I would say that the music is definitely in the modern opera tradition, but I have been trying to stay true to my own musical style and taste, so that it doesn't sound as if I'm imitating other composers. It has been challenging to me, with a real learning curve, to keep in mind that everything is acoustic and unmiked, so that the singers have to be able to be heard above the orchestra without amplification, and that does definitely affect how one writes. Plus of course the music can be more harmonically complex and more motivically driven than in musical theatre. I didn't really analyze the structure of other operas in writing "Séance", as I am relying on my own dramaturgical instincts and preferences, but I have always been an opera buff and thus am familiar with most of the classic and modern operas, and of course I did listen to many of them (and continue to do so) as I am working. But as I said, I'm really trying to stay true enough to myself to bring something different to the opera while remaining within the tradition. Thanks again for your interest, and I hope you will like "Séance..." when you hear it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

### **Schwartz on the Process of Writing Seance on a Wet Afternoon [from Nov 2009]**

Question:

What has the rehearsal process been like for "Seance"?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have been very fortunate in getting to do several readings of the opera over the last couple of years as I have worked on the piece. The "opera community" has been enormously supportive, so the development process has been more like that for a new Broadway show than what I have been told is customary for a new opera. This has allowed me to do rewrites and make improvements both dramaturgically and musically, so that we go into rehearsal in Santa Barbara with a piece that is in much more of its final version than would otherwise have been possible. I also have been lucky enough to hear, during three sessions with three different orchestras, pretty much the entire opera played through, so again I have been able to make many orchestrational adjustments and revisions in advance.

Question:

How does it feel to hear your music realized by singers & full orchestra for the first time? Has that feeling changed over the years?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There is something about having a sound in your head and then hearing it "in the air" with your own ears that is an amazing feeling. Because I am new to the world of opera, it has been particularly thrilling with this project, especially to hear the full orchestra, because Broadway orchestras have to be so small these days out of economic necessity.

### **Quotes from Stephen Schwartz on Séance Orchestrations:**

AT A WORKSHOP

Stephen Schwartz, just before the first American Opera Projects workshop:

"Immediately after tonight I will be doing my cuts and revisions!"

THE PROCESS OF ORCHESTRATION

Stephen Schwartz, on his preparations to orchestrate a section:

"I wouldn't begin to approach orchestrating a new scene or aria without going through it absolutely bar-by-bar with Bill."

Stephen Schwartz, on the orchestra's role:

"There is no question in my mind that the orchestra's telling the story." While a character offers an explanation, "... the orchestra is telling you the emotional truth."

Stephen Schwartz, on the final score and its orchestration:

"... in the end it all sounds of a piece because we (Bill Brohn and I) basically did it all together."

Stephen Schwartz, on his goal with the opera's text:

"I'm really striving to make sure that every word can be heard and understood without having to read supertitles."

Stephen Schwartz on collaboration:

"I'm completely non-proprietary... All I want is for the piece on every level to be as good as it possibly can be. I'm a huge believer in Gestalt theory, artistically. I don't care about who gets credit for what. If the piece succeeds, there's lots of credit to go around. If the piece fails, it's that whole famous thing about failure being an orphan."

#### COLLABORATING WITH SINGERS ON THEIR ROLES:

Stephen Schwartz, on learning to write for operatic voices:

"From the point of view of vocal writing, it has felt much more like terra incognita than I anticipated. ... It's much more technical ... . The voices make very different demands from musical theatre and I really had to learn about that. There's the issue of the passagio and the tessitura is completely different—I don't ever think about that working in musical theater. I never think about, where is this basically lying in the singer's voice or are they going to be able to be heard over the accompaniment? I know if you need to hear the singer over the orchestra, you can usually just boost the mike."

Stephen Schwartz, on writing a new aria for Lauren Flanigan before the New York City Opera, noted:

"I made adjustments to make it easier for her to sing, and she had some good suggestions about structure and specific notes and passages, as she would. We almost wrote the aria in tandem, in a way."

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Official site

[www.seancetheopera.com/](http://www.seancetheopera.com/)

Fan site with photos and updates

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/schwartz-opera.htm>

The movie and novel versions of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*