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Two Aspects of *Troubled Island*

The first performance of *Troubled Island* was given on 31 March 1949 by the New York City Opera Company. It was the first time that company, now so thoroughly associated with American Opera, had done an American work. The fate of their production of *Troubled Island* has been much discussed in the literature on William Grant Still, often in the light of a suspected “conspiracy” against the success of the opera. I would like to examine two statements regularly made in these discussions. I will not challenge the truth of these statements: nothing I will say will either prove or disprove the charges of a conspiracy against *Troubled Island*. But in discussions of the first production I’m often bothered by what seems to me to be a lack of understanding of the implications of the two statements, and I thought this symposium would be a good place to say what I think previous commentators have missed.

The statements are as follows: (1) *Troubled Island* was performed only three times; and (2) László Halász, head of the New York City Opera and conductor of *Troubled Island*, and Olin Downes, principal music critic of the *New York Times*, tried to get Still to cut the duet that ends act II, scene 1, a duet which proved to be the most successful number of the opera.

Troubled Island was performed three times by the New York City Opera in the spring of 1949. This statement is often rendered as “only three times,” as though this signified failure. The classic statement of this view is Verna Arvey’s in *In One Lifetime*. “After three performances, *Troubled Island* was scrapped.”¹

A run of three performances could certainly be seen as failure if *Troubled Island* had tried for a Broadway run, like such earlier operas as: *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934, 48 performances), *Porgy and Bess* (1935, 124 performances), *The Medium* (1947, 212 performances) or the later *The Consul* (1950, 269 performances).

But *Troubled Island* was not produced on Broadway. It took the route of most new American operas: it was produced as part of a repertory season by a standard opera company. This is the classic portal by which a twentieth-century opera makes its initial way into the repertory—the route taken by *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Turandot*, *Wozzeck*, *The Rake’s Progress*, *Susannah*, *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, *Vanessa*, *Antony*

and *Cleopatra*. Such an opportunity puts at the disposal of the composer the experience of a major opera company—soloists, chorus, orchestra, conductor, scene designer, director, choreographer, performing venue, theater staff. In exchange, the show ends when the season ends.

Troubled Island was important to the New York City Opera: it was their first attempt at producing a new American opera. The first mention of their spring 1949 season in the *New York Times* came on February 17. It concentrated entirely on their planned presentation of *Troubled Island*, and, indeed, mentioned none of the other operas they had planned for the six-week season. The article ended: “*Troubled Island* will highlight the opera company’s forthcoming season, which will consist of thirty-four performances of fourteen works.”²

One opera, *Aida*, did get four performances (you hire the elephant, you use the elephant). Most of the others received three performances: four (counting *Cav* and *Pag* as a single unit) got two. In this context it is foolish to speak of *Troubled Island* as getting “only” three performances. As to its being “scrapped”: it was the final performance of the season.

Let me be fair. We are now used to schedules announced a year in advance, going on the notion that you can get the current New York City Opera schedule three years out. In 1949 things were not sealed in so early, the New York City Opera did not formally announce the schedule of their first two weeks until March 11. At the time of the first performance of *Troubled Island* they had not yet formally announced their full schedule to even the *New York Times*. Admittedly, it would have been possible to squeeze in an extra performance of *Troubled Island* on a day when the theater was dark. In fact, two years later, in a highly unusual move, the New York City Opera did add two extra performances of a new work, David Tamkin’s *The Dybbuk*, to their schedule in response to a demand for tickets.

For the problem of the second act duet let me quote Verna Arvey’s *In One Lifetime*.

As soon as Billy arrived in New York for rehearsals, he learned László Halász, the conductor, lived in the same apartment house as Olin Downes, whose opinions Halász eagerly sought. Downes had seen the opera score and had made up his mind that the end of the first scene in the second act would have to be rewritten. “The audience won’t take it,” Halász told Billy, as he insisted that he would have to compose a new ending for the scene in the three weeks before the opening. Billy invoked the “no changes without the composer’s consent” clause in his contract and refused. The audience loved it as it had been written. In the light of that happened later, we couldn’t help but wonder whether Downes had anticipated the success of that crucial spot, and tried to block it.³

Let’s look at the end of act II, scene 1. The two wholly despicable characters in *Troubled Island* are the principal tenor, Vuval, who scoffs at the

ambitions of the Haitian people, and who falsifies Dessalines's letters to his generals in order to incite them to revolt, and the principal soprano, Dessalines's empress Claire, who hates Haiti, despises Dessalines, and encourages Vuval in his deceptions. Vuval and Claire represent the mulatto strain in Haitian society, which Hughes sees as being a principal cause of the fall of Dessalines. Claire has been brought from Paris to serve as Dessalines's empress: she dreams of returning to Paris with Vuval.

The end of act II, scene 1 is a seven-minute scene for Claire and Vuval, ending with a four-minute out-and-out love duet in which the two look forward to their new life in Paris. The early part of the scene performs a function in the plot of *Troubled Island*, because it is here we learn that the plot to depose Dessalines is already in progress. "Already in the south Stenio's soldiers all the forts have seized / and generals everywhere are ready to revolt." Without these lines, we would not be able to understand the happenings of the rest of the opera.

But even before the spot just quoted Vuval addresses Claire passionately. His words evoke all the light-is-good, black-is-bad images we—and Still, and Hughes—hoped to replace:

From this great brute land you emerge
In all your pale loveliness;
You speak, and with the tone
This land is clothed
In a new dress.

Still sets these lines as an absolutely unironic declaration of love. The scene drives past the expository material—Stenio and those forts—to a straight-out love duet—again entirely unironic—in which Vuval and Claire plan to escape from the court and fly to Claire's beloved Paris. After which "the sunset flames to rose and gold as they embrace," and there is a swift curtain.

Here is a major love duet for two very unlikable people, and people in fact who are going to get everything they want and nothing they deserve. *It is Vuval, in the event, who will kill Dessalines*. Why would Downes and Halász feel that "the audience won't take it"?

But, finally, Still was right. There are two great examples in earlier opera of the bad guys getting the act-ending all-stops-out love duet. One would have been known to neither Downes nor Still: the final duet between Nero and Poppea in Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*. Opera fans know it now. Nero has forced his advisor Seneca to commit suicide and has banished his empress Ottavia and Poppea's lover, Otho. With all obstacles removed, Nero and Poppea advance stage center and sing opera's first immortal love duet. "Pur ti miro."

But Downes and Halasz would certainly have known the other great example, and perhaps Still would also: the end of the "Polish Act" of *Boris Godunov*. The false Dimitri, an impostor claiming to be the rightful em-

peror of Russia, and Marina, a Polish noblewoman conspiring to deliver Dimitri up to the Jesuits, take the stage apart with a love duet that reconciles those who want opera to be all tunes to the declamatory stretches in the rest of *Boris*, while those of us who think of *Boris* as one of the greatest of operas also wait for that extra jolt of melody. In fact the Claire/Vuval duet performs much the same service for *Troubled Island* as the Dimitri/Marina duet does in *Boris*. It is a sort of seventh-inning stretch in an opera otherwise full of politics, thoughtfulness, and ambiguity. It is entirely logical that Downes and Halász, examining the score, would have seen the duet as false and foreign to the opera. Indeed if we use their reaction in talking about a "conspiracy" against the opera, we must, I think, at least admit that the duet is between two non-admirable characters. But in fact, it works. Claire and Vuval, mounted by their love (how they would be revolted by that phrase!) become more than Claire and Vuval. For a moment we see the world of *Troubled Island* through other eyes. Lord knows the two of them are sincere. So, I suppose, is Lieutenant Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton at the end of act 1 of *Madama Butterfly*. He's still a rat. So are Claire and Vuval. But the force driving them is a Universal Force.

Notes

1. Verna Arvey, *In One Lifetime* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1984). 143.
2. *New York Times*, 17 February 1949.
3. Verna Arvey, *In One Lifetime*, 142.