Dreiser's classic An American Tragedy is brought to the New York opera stage

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The premiere of a new American opera is a relatively unusual occurrence. By one count, there have been about 200 such premieres in the past 15 years, but this compares with tens of thousands of performances of operatic classics during the same period by scores of opera companies, large and small, throughout the US. Moreover, of the 200 or so contemporary operas that have been produced, only a handful have been performed again since their original appearance. There is some hand-wringing, under these circumstances, over whether opera is a dying art form.

The Metropolitan Opera House in New York, known for its high musical standards but also for its musical and cultural conservatism, has seen only four new opera premieres in the past 30 years. *An American Tragedy*, a two-act opera by American composer Tobias Picker that premiered last month, was therefore awaited with great anticipation. Adding to the interest in the new work is the fact that it is based on Theodore Dreiser's classic novel of the same name, which was published 80 years ago.

Few works of fiction have so powerfully depicted the enormous social contradictions of American capitalism. *An American Tragedy* reveals the cultural and moral price of the frenzied drive for wealth and status which is officially encouraged as the realization of the "American Dream."

Dreiser based his novel on a notorious murder in 1906 in the Adirondack region of New York State. Chester Gillette was convicted and executed for the murder of Grace Brown, the girlfriend whose pregnancy threatened to wreck his plans for social and financial success. Gillette was not a monster, but rather a weak and vulnerable man whose actions, criminal and depraved as they were, were nevertheless primarily the product of definite social conditions. Dreiser was determined to portray his protagonist with understanding of the circumstances that produced him, and even a certain sympathy.

The story of *An American Tragedy* surely resonates in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The *World Socialist Web Site* has commented on the parallel between the 1906 New York murder case and the conviction of Scott Peterson in 2004 for the murder of his wife and unborn son. (See "The Scott Peterson case: a new American tragedy").

The composer of the new opera also makes reference to this case in a recent interview. Picker has clearly chosen Dreiser as his source because he feels the novel has something important to say to contemporary audiences.

The opera was commissioned more than eight years ago. It is the fourth opera for Picker, whose first, *Emmeline*, was premiered in 1996 to great acclaim, and went on to receive a wider audience on CD as well as public television.

Eight years between commission and premiere is not unheard of, but the lengthy period in this case does suggest the serious effort that went into this composition. The librettist, Gene Scheer, had the job of summing up a work of some 900 pages in an opera of less than three hours. In charge of the Met production was Francesca Zambello, an internationally renowned opera director whose new productions of opera classics as well as many of the most important operas of the twentieth century have usually been critical successes. The conductor was James Conlon, a musician known for his serious attitude toward contemporary music and music of the past century, and his efforts to understand that music within its historical context.

The cast for the Met production was a stellar one, bringing together some performers in the prime of their careers, such as mezzo-sopranos Susan Graham and Dolora Zajick, with younger singers who are have already achieved tremendous attention, such as soprano Patricia Racette and baritone Nathan Gunn.

Despite—or perhaps because of—all that this new opera seemed to have going for it, this listener found it disappointing musically and dramatically, at least on a first hearing. Precisely because of the expectations and especially the staid reputation of the Metropolitan, one got the impression that risks were generally avoided and the result was a certain blandness. This was a work that was designed to appeal to as wide a section of the current Metropolitan audience as possible, including of course the well-heeled patrons and board members whose financial support made it possible. This translated, first of all, into music that was accessible and accomplished—but also somewhat innocuous and generic.

This is not to say that there were no strengths in the production, and there were more than a few affecting moments. The use of a three-tiered set allowed for imaginative scene shifts and also for a kind of "split screen" effect, in which the different worlds of the characters were vividly depicted in dramatic ensembles.

In Act I, for instance, Clyde Griffiths (Nathan Gunn) and the young factory worker Roberta Alden (Patricia Racette)—Picker and Scheer have followed Dreiser's fictionalized account of the 1906 case fairly closely, and have used the same names the author used for Chester Gillette and his lover Grace Brown—come together while, in an effective use of the three-tiered set, the wealthy Sondra Finchley (Susan Graham) composes an invitation to Clyde to a birthday party. The voice of the "upstairs" Miss Finchley mingling with the "downstairs" characters of Clyde and Roberta makes for an effective trio. The class divisions are dramatically depicted, and the stage is set for what is to come, as Clyde's desperate desire for the status of the "upstairs" world leads to fatal consequences.

The closing scene of Act I, with Roberta anxiously informing Clyde that she is pregnant, is also effective, as is Picker's composition of an original hymn in the nineteenth century style for a scene in Act II in which Clyde sits with Sondra's family in church. And Dolora Zajick, as Clyde's mother, is especially strong in her Act II scene with her son after he has been charged with murder.

Despite all the skillful and often intriguing aspects, however, there was little of the overwhelming power of *An American Tragedy* present in this production. First, it must be said that Picker's music was not very memorable. It lacks a certain emotional power.

The composer was a pupil of Milton Babbitt and Charles Wuorinen

years ago, but has referred to himself, somewhat humorously, as a "collapsed serialist." He has long since left behind the atonal and 12-tone composition style, and this in itself should not be cause for criticism. Many others have likewise found that the rigidity and academicism of serialism in particular does not allow them to express themselves, and there are reasons why this music, especially prominent in the first several post-World War II decades, has not found an appreciable audience to this day.

The renewed interest in what has been called neoromanticism, however, has also not produced any immediate solutions to the problem of finding an authentic and original contemporary voice for opera and other forms of classical music. Much of what Picker writes sounds derivative and simply does not move the listener. It says something that operas composed between the decades of the 1920s and 1960s—the works of Janacek, Prokofiev, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and the operas of Benjamin Britten, for instance—are both accessible and challenging in a positive sense, more provocative and stimulating than the neoromanticism of many contemporary composers. Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, a notoriously "difficult" work that dates from more than 80 years ago and has found a place in the operatic repertory, also comes to mind.

The development of new directions in classical music, it might be added, is a complex question beyond the scope of the present review. It is bound up with the intellectual and cultural climate over the second half of the twentieth century, the climate in which future composers studied and matured. The first half of the century saw many conflicting aesthetic views, including a healthy controversy between tonality, increasing dissonance and atonality, with the same composers writing in different styles at different times.

The situation became quite different after the Second World War. Atonality and serialism were turned by some critics into a dogma that was imposed on the actual development of music, with generally sterile results. It must also be said that the critical climate was bound up with a political disorientation and demoralization, an atmosphere in which the idea of writing "serious" music for a broad audience was increasingly rejected because of the alleged worthlessness of this audience.

The new opera's libretto is also something of a disappointment. Librettist Gene Scheer, in a note in the Met program, writes of Dreiser's angry reaction to the first movie version of the book, which appeared only six years after the novel. Soviet film genius Sergei Eisenstein was originally engaged to write a script for and direct a silent film version. Dreiser was very enthusiastic about this, Scheer writes, but the job was taken away from Eisenstein and given to Josef von Sternberg. The novelist hated the final version, writing in a letter to Paramount Studios that the novel had been "botched" by the director and screenwriter. "Their greatest fault has been in the characterization. They have made Clyde an unsympathetic, smart aleck who cares for only one thing, a girl, any kind of girl ... Clyde is a creature of circumstances, not a scheming, sex starved drug store cowboy."

Dreiser insisted on emphasizing the social forces manifested in these tragic lives. Scheer explains his own view: "For me, the most moving aspect of Dreiser's novel is the powerlessness which Clyde, principally, but to some extent all of the characters feel when trying to resist the larger social forces that are acting upon them ... Clyde is morally responsible for Roberta's death. But at the same time, he did not make the decision in a vacuum to allow Roberta to drown. That decision was born out of a lifetime of experiences and dreams that fed like tributaries into Clyde's life and ultimately dictated his tragic choice."

These are perceptive words, but unfortunately they do not find effective expression in the final version of the new opera. The job of compressing the novel into an opera was admittedly a difficult one. The cumulative weight of Dreiser's detailed characterizations, along with his narrative voice, produces a picture of what life was like in a period when wealth was equated with success and Social Darwinism held sway. Dreiser contrasts this with the extreme religiosity of Clyde's upbringing, not in order to exalt the role of religion, but to demonstrate the connection between the apparent opposites of religious fundamentalism and the extreme individualism and money-worship that is presented as the American Dream.

This is not to suggest that Dreiser's novel is simply a political tract. Dreiser's naturalism, while it has its limitations, does not suffer from didacticism. The facts of life speak for themselves, but they speak very powerfully. In the opera, however, little of this emerges. The social forces that Scheer correctly refers to are not clearly portrayed. His intentions are good, but good intentions alone, especially together with music characterized by the limitations discussed above, produce a final product that leaves much to be desired.

The Scott Peterson case was treated in the mass media as an occasion for empty and reactionary disquisitions on "evil." The composer and librettist of *An American Tragedy* may have tried to do something different with the opera, but one gets the impression that, whatever their intentions, they found themselves downplaying social and historical considerations in favor of purely psychological ones.

The composer himself says the following in the program notes in summing up his vision of the work: "In this land of hope and boundless promise, how do we as Americans find the balance between the God 'we trust' and our quest for wealth and the perfect love? ... What is our moral duty versus our need to realize The American Dream, especially when confronted with powerful passions in a fundamentally religious society and a materialist culture?"

Picker misses the essential theme of Dreiser's work. For the author, America was not just "this land of hope and boundless promise," but a very different place, a contradictory and often brutal society. Thomas P. Riggio, the editor of the Library of America edition of the book, describes *An American Tragedy* as "a stunning jeremiad against the delusions and inequities of American society." The choice was not between wealth and God, but rather the search for something beyond both religious hypocrisy and social inequality. This, however, is far from what most of the wealthy benefactors of the Metropolitan Opera would like to see examined on their stage.

The appearance of *An American Tragedy* at the Metropolitan is nevertheless not without some significance and redeeming interest. Opera is not dead or dying, as some critics suggest, although it definitely faces aesthetic problems involving both the form and content of contemporary efforts.

At the present time, there are opera houses other than the Metropolitan, and also other smaller venues, where important work is taking place. In this connection, one might point, as only one example, to John Adams' recent opera, *Doctor Atomic*, on the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer and the use of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which was premiered in San Francisco last year. The work of William Bolcom, Philip Glass, Osvaldo Golijov and others also merits attention. Musical development is severely distorted by commercial considerations and the corrosive effects of social polarization and inequality, but there is also something new that is struggling to be born.