

THE FAT LADY SINGS

Closing the Curtain
on Traditional Opera

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STORY BY NICHOLAS COX

GUERRILLA OPERA MAY SOUND LIKE A PARADOX.

What about the subversive spirit of guerilla tactics could be compatible with the snobbish art of opera? What about the antiquated world of classical vocal performance could be new and experimental?

Let Rudolf Rojahn and Mike Williams—the duo behind Boston-based Guerilla Opera—prove that this semantic pairing is anything but incongruous. The non-profit music collective touts its own unique style of performance art that endeavors to revolutionize the operatic world.

The two have created a show that is both riotously intense and wonderfully intimate. Performers belt their melodies at a discomfotingly close distance; the music is angular and unsettling, enthralling in spite of, or rather because of, its tones, which are at times caustic; the alto saxophone that makes up one quarter of the ensemble, already an unorthodox operatic instrument, blows wildly creating spastic overtones. The piece clocks in at less than an hour, but it leaves you stunned nonetheless, your emotions exposed like nerve endings to the outside world.



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Columbia University in New York, agrees.

He explains that it is common for composers to try to circumvent the typical environment of operatic performances.

"The cultural institution of the opera house is a huge, expensive operation," he explains. "Many composers seek to explore [alternatives]; very few can have their works performed by large companies."

These alternatives became the basis for Guerilla Opera's philosophies of performing in black box theaters with a small chamber orchestra and using limited sets and costumes. Armed with this solution, the collective was faced with the quandary of making opera seem less elitist, less stale, and more available.

"Opera as we know it is staid in many ways," comments Noel

Koran, director of opera at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. "So many mainstays of the operatic repertoire are 18th century pieces. There's a lot of relevance for today's societies, but at the same time, there is a museum value to these pieces because they are actually historical works."

This perception of opera as a museum piece, Frisch attests, is the reason for the constant exploration in the medium today. Composers have always looked at opera as offering the opportunity for testing new ideas

and have often experimented with "different kinds of plots, different ways of singing, screaming, or declaiming," he says.

"In the 19th century, there's not a single operatic mainstream," Frisch continues. "Even in the early 20th century, people like [Russian composer Igor] Stravinski and [German atonal master Arnold] Schoenberg were blurring the boundary between opera and musical theatre. So I think [what companies like Guerilla Opera are doing] is pretty healthy because some of these boundaries are artificial."

So, how would Rojahn and Williams continue to push down these walls? How could they do it in a way that would be exciting rather than off-putting? And how would listeners arrive at Guerilla Opera in their quest to explore new kinds of music?

"Instead of condescending to people and assuming that they don't know anything about art or music," Rojahn answers, "[we] assume that people are savvy listeners who are willing to hear new things."

The team works on the assumption that the intellectually curious, once exposed to new art

forms, will continually explore and seek out related mediums. For example, a lover of John Coltrane could easily be turned onto something a bit more avant-garde such as Philip Glass. And from that point, Rojahn suggests, the jump to new opera is presumably quite small.

This potentially far-reaching appeal of Guerilla Opera puts it in a unique position to be a kind of vanguard in a new music movement. And, indeed, the collective is headstrong in its efforts to popularize modern opera.

Later this year, the group will be performing an adaptation of French philosopher and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit." The work was adapted by composer Andy Vores—incidentally Rojahn's former composition teacher at the Conservatory.

"I think the future of classical music is the educated, curious listeners who branch out," Rojahn predicts. Further, he admits, it won't be old traditions that bring this new opera into the next century. "The most interesting art music that's happening is being written and performed by young people," he says. "And I think if the art form ever gets revitalized, it's going to be that age group that does it." **FM**

"What we're really interested in is to get people back in to see dramatic vocal performances," Rojahn says. The key is accessibility, which in the last century has become the shortfall of mainstream opera.

But it's not for lack of trying. Currently, national professional companies are doing everything they can to bring opera to a wider audience.

The San Francisco Opera, for example, is at the forefront of that movement, according to Karen Ames, its director of communications. Their efforts include live simulcasts from the opera house to baseball parks and movie theaters. "At San Francisco Opera," Ames says, "we believe that opera is an art form that everyone can enjoy and we are actively working to make certain the broadest possible audience is part of [it]."

The Guerillas, however, resort to still more extreme measures, such as affordable pricing (\$10 or less a ticket); exhilaratingly short performances (so the

audience leaves "feeling fresh and excited instead of exhausted," Rojahn says); and an overall concert experience that is ultimately enjoyable for even the most inexperienced opera listener.

It all began at the prestigious Boston Conservatory of Music where Rojahn, a percussionist turned composer, met Williams, a classmate and aspiring "new music" percussionist. As they reached the end of their studies, both became active in the new music scene—Williams via performance and Rojahn via composition.

Rojahn was working on an opera entitled "Heart of a Dog," based on a novel of the same name by 20th century Soviet writer Mikhail Bulgakov, and enlisted Williams' help in putting together an ensemble. The pair had hopes of future performances of Rojahn's opera, envisioning together the exciting possibilities of premiering the works of up-and-coming composers.

The musicians were immediately faced with two large challenges: the difficulty of producing a large-scale art project and the popular perception of opera as an elitist art form.

"I was interested in writing vocal music and had been wanting to write an opera," Rojahn says. "But it's difficult because operas are so logistically complicated and expensive to put on that it's impossible, essentially, to get an opera produced if you write one."

Walter Frisch, Gumm/Von Tilzer Professor of Music



Guerilla Opera (from left): Leslie Leytham, Mike Williams, Rudolf Rojahn, Peter Weathers, Aliana de la Guardia, and Kent O' Doherty.