

Features

October 2012 — Vol. 77, No. 4

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Sea Legs

Jake Heggie's opera *Moby-Dick*, which has its San Francisco Opera premiere this month, has been an audience and critical favorite wherever it has played since its 2010 world premiere. BARRY SINGER explores the secrets of its success.



Moby-Dick at State Opera of South Australia, 2011, with Jay Hunter Morris as Ahab

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Jay Hunter Morris in

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Jay Hunter Morris in

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"It is a great thing in a sailor to know how to sing well," Herman Melville wrote in his novel *Redburn*, with nary a thought about the world of opera. "Some sea-captains, before shipping a man, always ask him whether he can sing out at a rope."

Two years ago the world of opera asked of Melville's magnum opus, *Moby-Dick*, the same essential question — can you sing? The answer was a rather surprising and resounding yes. As composed by Jake Heggie, from a libretto by Gene Scheer, for Dallas Opera in a joint commission with San Francisco Opera, San Diego Opera, Calgary Opera and State Opera of South Australia, *Moby-Dick* sang damn well. Since its premiere at Dallas Opera's Winspear Opera House on April 30, 2010, to admiring reviews and enraptured audiences, it has been received as effusively as any recent new work, with virtually sold-out productions mounted at each of its commissioning institutions — up to, and soon to include, San Francisco Opera, where *Moby-Dick* opens on October 10.

San Francisco Opera is anticipating more than 90% capacity for its eight-performance run. At Dallas Opera, three of six *Moby-Dick* performances sold out, and total paid box office for the run was 94%. According to a spokesman for San Diego Opera, the company's budget for *Moby-Dick* was far lower than for a production of, say, *La Bohème* or *Carmen*, with a break-even point at roughly 79% of ticket-sale capacity. San Diego is a conservative operagoing city; still, *Moby-Dick* wound up drawing 84% of capacity, or 106% of San Diego Opera's anticipated target.

What has made Melville's exhaustingly epic tome such an audience magnet? Well, for one thing, you don't have to read it. "The mistake people make is to try and recreate the literary experience. You can't do that," Leonard Foglia, the director of *Moby-Dick*, has pointed out. "You have to create something new. Whenever we changed something slightly from the book, we would always come back to — 'It's the most famous novel no one's ever read. So don't worry about it.'"

The prime advocate for tackling *Moby-Dick* as an opera was playwright Terrence McNally, Heggie's

celebrated librettist on *Dead Man Walking*. “Dallas Opera wanted to commission something for the opening of its then-new Winspear Opera House,” Heggie has recalled. “Artistic director Jonathan Pell asked me what I might like to do. The next time I was in New York, I asked Terrence the same question. He answered, ‘Well, there’s only one opera that I want to do, and that’s *Moby-Dick*.’”

Heggie was understandably flabbergasted, but he was soon persuaded. McNally, however, was forced to withdraw for treatment of lung cancer. Heggie then brought in Scheer, his longtime associate, to complete the libretto.

Moby-Dick is that rare example of an opera collaboration where all hands have pulled as one. Scheer’s libretto slashes Melville’s sprawling, digressive fish-tale down to its riveting, character-driven, narrative essence. Heggie’s score propels this raw, stripped-down story with lush, liquefied melodies that float ominously over savagely irregular rhythms. Houston Grand Opera artistic and music director Patrick Summers, who has conducted the world premieres of all four of Heggie’s full-length operas and will lead the orchestra again in San Francisco, navigates this oceanic mélange commandingly. Foglia’s staging stirs together Robert Brill’s deconstructed set design, Jane Greenwood’s evocative period costumes and Don Holder’s spectral lighting, deploying projections and other complex contemporary technologies yet keeping them in taut service to the story, alternating the visual grandiosity that *Moby-Dick* demands with a theatrical intimacy that keeps the performers and their characterizations close to the audience’s heart.

“*Moby-Dick* continues to enjoy exceptionally strong critical and audience reaction,” acknowledges Keith Cerny, general director and CEO of Dallas Opera. “I believe this can be credited to four primary factors — a compelling libretto with multi-dimensional characters, excellent vocal and orchestral writing that builds to a powerful climax, a memorable subject based on a classic American novel, and innovative use of stage special effects seamlessly integrated into the production. Heggie and Scheer make an excellent case for reimagining a great work in order to provide fresh insights into important underlying truths.”



The world premiere of *Moby-Dick* at Dallas Opera, 2010, with Ben Heppner as Ahab
© Karen Almond/Dallas Opera 2012

It isn't that *Moby-Dick* as a musical enterprise is even especially new. Numerous symphonic and choral adaptations have preceded Heggie and Scheer's, along with at least one opera — a 1988 effort by Italian composer Armando Gentilucci. Before receiving a commission from Santa Fe Opera to musicalize Somerset Maugham's *The Letter* a few years ago, composer Paul Moravec and librettist Terry Teachout first proposed *Moby-Dick* to Santa Fe's general director Richard Gaddes, only to be told that Jake Heggie was already at it.

Along with Thomas Adès and John Adams, Heggie has earned a name for himself as an opera-maker with drawing power at the box office. Probably no work composed in the past decade can compare (or compete) with the international attention that *Dead Man Walking* has commanded. This enables Heggie to pretty much choose as he wishes among opera companies and opera subjects. Heggie operas get produced, even when they are *Moby-Dick*. That Heggie turned out a captivatingly accessible score for his *Moby-Dick* has made the opera a hit identified as much with its composer as with its legendary literary parent. "It's a listener-friendly score set to an excellent libretto of a familiar title," remarks San Francisco Opera general director David Gockley simply. "And it's all encased in a great visual production."

Watching videos of each production affirms the fact that *Moby-Dick* has also been cunningly well cast, starting in Dallas and right on through to San Francisco, where all of the principals are scheduled to reprise roles they originated. Certainly Melville would have appreciated Ben Heppner as Captain Ahab. Heppner's brawling, Wagnerian tenor perfectly captures Ahab's obsessive majesty. Making Pip a pants role was one of Heggie and Scheer's most inspired ideas, as was the choice of young Talise Trevigne to play the part; she lends the opera a fearless vitality. Baritone Morgan Smith, as Starbuck, and 2009 Richard Tucker Award-winning tenor Stephen Costello, as Greenhorn (Melville's Ishmael renamed), inhabit with clarity and insight the respective experience and inexperience of these two seafaring men. New Zealand-born bass-baritone Jonathan Lemalu conjures Queequeg's fierce exoticism hauntingly.

It is encouraging to have confirmed, even in this age of sustained economic downturn, that a new opera actually can succeed when it does everything right. Yes, *Moby-Dick* is yet one more entry in the seemingly inexhaustible classics-of-literature sweepstakes that has gripped the world of new opera commissions for years now. Yes, Jake Heggie's score is more inspired pastiche than earthshaking innovation. And yes, Leonard Foglia's staging is dense with standard-issue, of-the-moment, cinematic tropes. In all of these senses, *Moby-Dick* is a textbook example of current, cutting-edge, grand opera style. But so what? It works. □

BARRY SINGER's new book, *Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill*, has just been published.

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