



Features

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Encountering Previn

In his eightieth-birthday year, André Previn looks back on an eclectic career that has taken him from Hollywood to the world's elite orchestras - and forward to his new opera, *Brief Encounter*, which opens at Houston Grand Opera next month. By BARRY SINGER



Librettist Caird and composer Previn

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André Previn remembers the first opera he ever saw. "I was six or seven. We were still living in Berlin, where I was born, and my father, who adored music and was extremely German, thought, 'Well, now the kid has seen symphonic concerts, he's seen recitals, the time has come for him to see an opera.' Still, he worried, maybe operas are too long for one so young. My father looked in the newspaper and found a performance of Strauss's *Salome*, which he saw was short, a one-act. So the first opera I ever saw was *Salome*, but on a double bill with the ballet *Coppélia*, if you can believe it! Apparently the presenter figured a one-act was not worth real money, so they paired *Salome* with *Coppélia*. I adored *Salome*, but it was quite a while before I realized that Herod did not work in a toyshop."

It is no secret that Previn, who turns eighty this year, wound up taking his time before revisiting the opera house as a composer - more than sixty years, in fact. The premiere next month of *Brief Encounter* at Houston Grand Opera constitutes only the second original opera contribution of Previn's incomparably eclectic career as a composer, conductor, pianist, jazz musician and film scorer, following his warmly received debut musicalizing Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* for San Francisco Opera in 1998. With a libretto by John Caird, *Brief Encounter* is derived from the beloved 1945 David Lean film, as originally adapted by Noël Coward from his own play, *Still Life*. It stars Elizabeth Futral and Nathan Gunn as Coward's star-crossed adulterers, with Caird also handling directing duties and Patrick Summers conducting.

"It's not that I didn't grow to love opera," Previn insists on the phone from his New York apartment. "But I was much more taken as a teenager with the orchestral repertoire. I went to the opera quite a bit, but I concentrated on the orchestra."

Previn has worked with many distinguished opera singers over the years in front of symphony orchestras and on solo recordings. He has, however, hardly been a regular in opera-house pits. His appearances at the Met have been limited: a short run in the summer of 1979 conducting a Kennedy Center presentation of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, his theatrical collaboration "for actors and orchestra" with the playwright Tom Stoppard; and a New Year's Eve 1998 guest appearance onstage in a gala performance of *Die Fledermaus*, as piano accompanist to Susan Graham on a Gershwin interpolation, "Someone to Watch Over Me."

"I enjoy conducting opera," Previn maintains. "I enjoyed the two Ravel operas, *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* and *L'Heure Espagnole*. I enjoyed *Figaro* and *Fidelio*. And I've always desperately wanted to conduct *Pelléas*, because I think it's one of the all-time greats, but it's not something that intendants today are crazy to put on. *Pelléas* was offered to me once with an ultra-modernist director attached. He wanted to set it in Vietnam. I said, 'Are you serious?!' He said, yes, very, the French were there. And I said, 'Thanks very much. I'll see you around.' *Pelléas* is the most deeply French of virtually any opera. It's impossible to put it anywhere else."

Previn's maiden venture into opera as a composer was the hotly publicized *Streetcar*, which he also conducted at its San Francisco Opera premiere. "I had been offered a couple of commissions before that," he recalls. "One was from a very good opera house in Europe, but it was a story in which everybody onstage spent the entire length of the opera in togas. The subject was old

Greece. I forget who the author of the novel was that it was based on. I said to them, look, I can't do that. I don't know how people in togas think. And don't talk to me about *Idomeneo*, because I'm not Mozart.

"Then Lotfi Mansouri from San Francisco Opera called me and asked, 'What about *A Streetcar Named Desire*?' 'Lotfi,' I said, 'hang up, because I've just said yes.' It was as simple as that. Lotfi then asked, 'Do you have any wild ideas for *Blanche*?' And I said, 'Yes, Renée Fleming.' Who hadn't really done very much of anything yet. I'd worked with Renée in concerts, and I'd listened to her on records. I thought she was absolutely wonderful. She was the most human Desdemona I'd ever heard. I mean, I used to love the way Kiri sang it, but she was never as vulnerable as Renée. Anyhow, Lotfi called Renée, and she said yes without hearing even a note of music. San Francisco then came up with Philip Littell as librettist. I didn't know him at all."

Previn selected his *Brief Encounter* librettist himself. "This time around I picked John Caird, who was a recommendation from Tom Stoppard, who is a good friend of mine. Why didn't I just use Stoppard?" Previn laughs. "I tried, naturally. I said to him, 'Look, I'll let you pick the subject matter, if you like.' But Tom said to me, 'No thanks. The idea of writing a whole lot of words, the way I write words, and having each syllable sung, just makes me extremely nervous.'"

The choice of *Brief Encounter* - like that of *Streetcar*, another classic film adapted from a classic play - triggers an inescapable question: given Previn's extensive resumé as a composer of Hollywood film scores, is it possible that he feels more comfortable turning old movies into operas?

"Oh, my God," Previn practically shouts into the phone, "no! Writing an opera has nothing to do with writing a film score. A film score is an accompaniment to an already existing series of images. An opera is a musical extension of the word. I think in the old days, in the '30s, Korngold probably *wanted* to write operas with his film scores, and Korngold came pretty close. But with the best will in the world, you can't compare the two."



HGO *Brief Encounter* set design by Bunny Christie
Set design by Bunny Christie/photo by Andrew Cloud

Brief Encounter is about thwarted passion, the forbidden attraction between Laura, a respectable housewife portrayed in the film by Celia Johnson, and Alec, an upstanding, married doctor played by Trevor Howard, as they first fatefully meet and then continue to rendezvous in a suburban railway station.

It was Previn's fifth wife (since divorced), the violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, who suggested *Brief Encounter* to her husband for an opera. "Anne-Sophie was very touched by the movie, she loved it, and she said to me, 'Whatever you do, try and set this to music.' And I said okay," Previn recalls. "It was a good idea. I saw the film and was very moved by it. I thought it could make a wonderful opera - it's a wonderfully sentimental and sad story and therefore very operatic. I called John and told him to look at the movie, which he did. He called me back to say he hadn't yet stopped crying. We then contacted the Coward estate about making an opera out of it, and they said yes, absolutely."

What about Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, which Lean deployed in the film as a recurring motif to such powerful effect that the music practically functions as another character? Does Previn in any way touch on it?

"You know, I haven't talked to anybody who hasn't brought that up, and I don't blame them," Previn sighs. "It was brilliant use of the piece, I must say. Obviously we have no desire to do that again. I don't reference it at all. And I can already foresee with dread that every person who goes to see this and every reviewer that reviews it is going to ask, 'Where's the Rachmaninoff?' But that's the way it goes."

Is it also true that the illicit affair at the heart of *BriefEncounter*, which was never consummated on the screen, actually will be consummated in this opera?

Previn pauses. "For the moment," he begins slowly, "we've decided, yes, it will. But that is still very much up for discussion during rehearsals. John feels that if they don't, then what's all the fuss about? A rather *modern* statement, I think. To my mind, it's much more English if they don't. So we'll see."

It is staggering to contemplate the trajectory of André Previn's journey in music. From the Berlin Hochschule für Musik at age six to Paris and then Los Angeles in flight from the Nazis; from Beverly Hills High to the soundstages of MGM and more than sixty film scores, including four Academy Awards - for *Gigi*, *My Fair Lady*, *Irma la Douce* and *Porgy and Bess*; best-selling jazz recordings, both as a piano soloist and as accompanist for the likes of Dinah Shore; best-selling recordings with Renée Fleming, Barbara Bonney, Kiri Te Kanawa, Frederica von Stade and Sylvia McNair; plus all the conducting posts - leading the Houston Symphony (1967-69), the London Symphony (1969-79), the Pittsburgh Symphony (1976-84), the Royal Philharmonic (music director 1985-87; principal conductor 1987-91), the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1985-89) and the Oslo Philharmonic (2002-06); his knighthood in 1996 and, finally, a Kennedy Center Honor in 1998. How could opera possibly be anything but an afterthought for Previn?

"Am I an opera devotee these days?" he asks rhetorically. "When there's a new opera out there, I tend to be very interested. But I don't automatically go just because it's new. I went to see John Harbison's *Gatsby*, I went to see Bill Bolcom's *A View from the Bridge*."

And?

"I admired them both, though I thought they were a little long. Certainly both were worth writing. Those are two very good composers. I thought they did a very good job."

Is there anyone in opera today that Previn would like to write for?

"I would love to work with Plácido Domingo," he replies without hesitation. "I think he is absolutely remarkable. I saw an interview with him where he said he would now like to sing a role that is down a little closer to the baritone range. So that has given John and me some food for thought. I also love Angelika Kirchschrager. John and I have a couple of ideas but nothing to announce just yet."

Like what?

"Well, we fooled around for a while with *The Heiress*," he somewhat grudgingly reveals - "the film of Henry James's *Washington Square*. But it had too much talk and very little real dialogue, so John and I decided against it. I still think it's a good idea," Previn insists almost combatively. He pauses, and his tone brightens. "But not as good as *BriefEncounter*." □

BARRY SINGER won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book, *Alive at the*

Village Vanguard.

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