



Features

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First Person Singular

BARRY SINGER talks with New York City Opera general manager and artistic director George Steel about *Monodramas*, the company's new triple bill.



Left to right: Arnold Schoenberg, Morton Feldman and John Zorn
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George Steel can see a future, and it is singular. He has fended off, but barely, the errors of the past and deftly carved out some semblance of a present for New York City Opera in just his

second full season as general manager and artistic director. Now, Steel can make out a future tense for his company, commencing, he believes, with a trio of one-person one-act operas opening on March 25 at City Opera's David H. Koch Theater for six performances under the title *Monodramas*.

"*Monodramas* is our future," Steel declares, beaming across a conference table in the bunker-like bowels of the City Opera offices beneath Lincoln Center. "It reinvents the administrative way that operas are put together, it reinvents the artistic vision behind them, it reinvents what kinds of artists collaborate on operas — it reinvents the whole thing."

Beside him at the table, Steel's handpicked director for *Monodramas*, Michael Counts, grins and nods. At the end opposite, two members of City Opera's press office observe silently, a small digital recorder switched on between them on the otherwise empty tabletop. They are recording this interview — for posterity perhaps? Clearly, it is very important that everything come out right.

La Machine de l'Être, by John Zorn; *Erwartung*, by Arnold Schoenberg; and *Neither*, by Morton Feldman, are the three one-acts that comprise *Monodramas*, starring, respectively, sopranos Anu Komsu, Kara Shay Thomson and Cyndia Sieden, with video projections by Jennifer Steinkamp. None of these operas lingers beyond an hour. "All three," as Steel eagerly explains, "feature one solitary woman character — but radically different women, as well as radically different voice types. All three are projections of internal psychic states. And all three are virtually plotless. In fact, one — the Zorn — has no words at all."

An avant-garde assemblage of single-act works for solo female voice and full orchestra seems a dicey choice for an opera company still trying to regain its financial footing after well-publicized difficulties in the wake of general and artistic director Paul Kellogg's departure in 2007. But not to George Steel.

"I think it would be foolish *not* to take risks under these conditions," he insists. "New York City Opera must be the world's leader in doing this kind of work. That's when we thrive and survive. To sort of just *do* more operas is not going to bring in new audiences and new excitement. It's our job to move opera back to the center of the culture. We're not saying, 'If you like opera, you'll like this.' We're saying, 'If you like music and art and performance and theater and dance — all of those things, together — come see this show.' *Monodramas* has become a kind of spearhead here for a new model of producing opera — to bring artists together from different disciplines and make something fresh, working with new repertoire by new composers — music that demands a high level of virtuosity from the orchestra and the singers. Of all the opera companies in the world, New York City Opera is the one that should be doing exactly *this*."

Of course, *Monodramas* was Steel's idea, inspired by an operatic tradition going back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's one-person *Pygmalion* in 1762 and continuing on through, perhaps most familiarly, Francis Poulenc and Jean Cocteau's 1959 *La Voix Humaine* for lone female, with telephone. To wrangle his singular futurist vision, Steel has opted for a singular stage director in Michael Counts, a visual artist and theatrical innovator who (by his own bio's description) has "focused on creating large-scale immersive installations and theatrical productions, often in

unconventional spaces, for the last seventeen years." In 1995, Counts cofounded *GAle GAtes et al.*, a visual and performance-art-driven theater company, which moved two years later to a 40,000-square-foot warehouse in the Brooklyn neighborhood DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). Counts filled this vast space with environmental installations that he designed and directed, drawing international attention, particularly for a much-lauded adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* entitled *So Long Ago I Can't Remember*.

"I went to DUMBO roughly ten years ago to see something of his, and I was totally blown away by it," remembers Steel, though the piece's precise title eludes him now. "The audience moved through Michael's warehouse, following a sequence of tableaux — at least twelve, as I recall — and they were gorgeous. They were so sharply drawn, so visually exciting, so theatrically fresh, so cheeky! Some avant-garde theater pushes you away. Michael's reaches out to an audience, building bridges, connecting, no matter how abstruse the concepts. There was a sense of invitation to his work that night, but also a sense of mystery about the whole show. And I thought right away, wow, this guy should do an opera."

Steel, at the time, was running Columbia University's Miller Theatre with a venturesome adroitness as a programmer of both early and contemporary music and as an audience-builder — a very rare combination. "I waited until I finally was doing an opera at the Miller Theatre," Steel recalls. "That's when I called Michael and we actually met. For a while, we pursued a specific project that I think we're now going to do *here*, but I don't feel like talking about it, because — well, I can't just yet. When *Monodramas* came up, though, it struck me right away that Michael was the guy."

To prepare himself for staging *Monodramas*, Counts practically camped out in the Koch Theater. "I've always used what I've been given, in terms of a performance space," he says. "I spent many hours this summer in the theater, treating it as another site-specific space for my work, trying to find what the essence of that space is. I couldn't stage a piece without being in the room that it's going to occur in. I spent time in there with the music playing, and eventually I just started to draw, sketching what I heard and saw."

The results will be physically present, extending *Monodramas* well beyond the proscenium. "My approach is that the opera begins not when the curtain goes up and the music starts but rather when you enter the building," says Counts. "There will be these six sculptural pieces under glass that you'll see as you come into the Koch Theater that are sort of a decoder ring for the Feldman, but they also tie all three operas together. I always try to create a world."

Arnold Schoenberg composed *Erwartung* (which literally translates as "Expectation") in 1909, to a libretto by Marie Pappenheim, though the work did not have its premiere until 1924, in Prague, conducted by Alexander Zemlinsky with Marie Gutheil-Schoder as the soprano. "In *Erwartung*," Schoenberg wrote, "the aim is to represent in slow motion everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to half an hour." Gwyneth Jones, Evelyn Lear, Eva Marton, Jessye Norman, Renata Scottò and Anja Silja are just a few of the sopranos who have played Schoenberg's protagonist, a woman waiting for her lover in the darkness of an ominous forest, who at first mistakes a tree-trunk for his dead body, only to discover his body in fact later on and bemoan his death.

"*Erwartung* I adore," exclaims Steel. "It is not, by the way, a twelve-tone piece, it's an atonal piece. According to boring, boilerplate twentieth-century music history, Schoenberg's so-called 'atonal period' was one during which he could not sustain large forms as a composer, and so he had to invent the twelve-tone system — which is baloney! The music for *Erwartung* is entirely the loam of the psyche. Everything is gestural and evocative and crazy and wonderful. I totally love it.

"To program it," Steel continues, "I looked at a lot of different potential partner pieces, including *La Voix Humaine*, of course, which people tend to pair *Erwartung* with, but only because of their matching cast size. It otherwise has nothing to do with *Erwartung*. Feldman's *Neither*, however, is an excellent, true match, and it's so seldom done. It never has been staged fully in the U.S." (Its first U.S. performance was a concert in 1978 — the year after it was written — with Charles Wuorinen conducting at the Manhattan School of Music.)

John Zorn, a downtown new-music darling with an extraordinarily eclectic range, had meanwhile written an opera that NYCO read in 2007 as part of its Vox Contemporary Opera Lab — an opera for one woman and a huge orchestra. "John is a star in eight or ten different kinds of music," laughs Steel. "People don't think of him as a concert-music composer, but in fact he is an astounding concert-music composer. He'd actually given me a CD of *Machine de l'Être* a while ago. Suddenly it was the perfect third piece for this puzzle."

Machine de l'Être is a wordless ten-minute work inspired by drawings of Antonin Artaud. *Neither* has the grand distinction of a libretto by Samuel Beckett — the only opera libretto that Beckett is known to have written. "They actually met," notes Steel, "and Beckett said to Feldman, 'I will write you a libretto.' This is not the setting of a Beckett poem, this is an original opera libretto, about fourteen lines long, wittily ambiguous and yet transcendental, about internalists and externalists, inwardness and expression. Totally ravishing. The piece sits between the top line F of the treble clef and goes up to the D above it for the entire hour, never dipping below F, moving slowly, chromatically, with relatively even dynamics. It's not a shriekfest — it's kind of floaty.

"Look at this," crows Steel, suddenly pulling out the score. "Winds in threes, four percussion, two harps, piano, big strings. It's a beauty. Look at this texture — three bassoons and contra-bassoon, clusters in the horns, incredibly beautiful colors. I think this may be Feldman's most beautiful score. Constantly shifting rhythms. It is really a virtuosic test for the conductor, for the singer and for the band.

"The Zorn is too," Steel adds, flipping open his Zorn scorebook. "Winds in threes, huge percussion kit, a mere one harp, but look — here's the opening riff for the soprano. Yikes! And wait, that's only bar one. She's just wailing, throughout. But I shouldn't geek out on the music."

Will *Monodramas* cost less or more than a traditional grand opera?

Steel winces just a bit. "Doing *Monodramas* is not a budget move," he replies. "What an opera costs is an enormously elastic number, but this is not a cheapie. It's a real show. You think, 'Okay, one person onstage, this is going to be pretty austere,' but in fact, these pieces are the opposite of austere. There are total Technicolor worlds inside these women, and Michael has found ways to

project those worlds out into the house with great intensity. The whole thing is kind of an ecstatic experience. It's very exciting." □

BARRY SINGER *is writing a new book, to be published next year, entitled Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill.*

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