



Features

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Composer's Medium

BARRY SINGER talks to Broadway hit-maker Stephen Schwartz, whose opera, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, arrives at New York City Opera this month.



Lauren Flanigan as the medium Myra Foster in *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* at Opera Santa Barbara in 2009

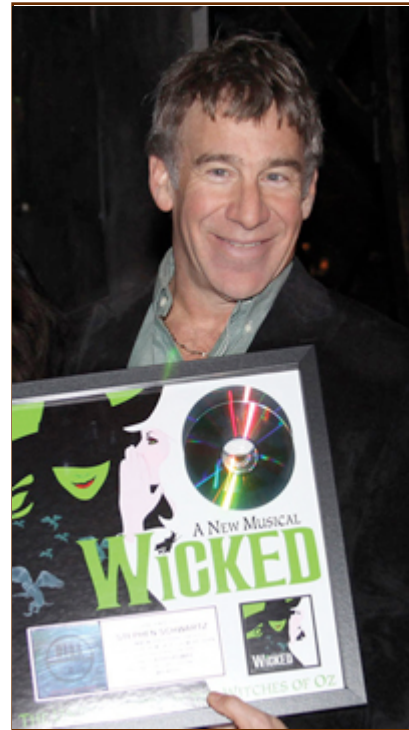
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Séance on a Wet Afternoon, which opens on April 19 at New York City Opera, is being billed as Stephen Schwartz's first opera, but the composer knows better. "My senior year at Carnegie Mellon, I wrote a very bad one-act opera that I called *Voltaire and the Witches*," he recalls, "all about the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian — very collegiate. But somewhere in the back of my mind I know I thought that I would one day try to write a good opera, a *real* opera. Then, of course, other career things intervened."

The trajectory of Schwartz's career is by now a part of Broadway history. Invited in 1971 to add new music and lyrics to what had been a fellow Carnegie Mellon alum's master's thesis project, a musical called *Godspell*, that was moving to a theater Off-Broadway, Schwartz produced songs that turned *Godspell* into a massive cult-hit. He was then invited to collaborate with Leonard Bernstein on the English texts for Bernstein's *Mass*, which opened the Kennedy Center that same year. The very next year Bob Fosse directed and choreographed Schwartz's first Broadway hit, *Pippin* (a show Schwartz had himself first conceived at Carnegie Mellon). Less than two years later, his new musical, *The Magic Show*, opened on Broadway, where it would run for just under 2,000 performances.

Schwartz then endured a long stretch of lean years, contributing intriguing music and/or lyrics for a number of legendary flops, including *The Baker's Wife* in 1976, *Working* in 1978 and *Rags* in 1986. Decamping to Hollywood, he collaborated with composer Alan Menken on scores for two Disney animated features — *Pocahontas* in 1995, which brought him two Academy Awards, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1996. Finally, in 2003, he returned to Broadway with *Wicked*, which has become the most successful musical of this century, an astonishing phenomenon among adolescent girls and currently the seventeenth longest-running show in Broadway history, with more than 3,000 performances and counting.

"After *Wicked* opened, I found myself thinking that from now on I would only like to do things that I hadn't done before," Schwartz says. "Writing an opera came right back into my head. I mentioned to friends that it was something I was now interested in doing, and one of them, Michael Jackowitz, who lived in Santa Barbara at the time, had an association with Opera Santa



Schwartz is presented with a plaque in November 2010 commemorating the double platinum certification of the original cast album for *Wicked*
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 Schwartz is presented with a plaque in November 2010 commemorating the double platinum certification of the original cast album for *Wicked*
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Barbara. I soon heard from them — they contacted me and asked if I would consider writing an opera for the company. I said yes immediately. Then I thought, 'Well, I guess I'm writing an opera.'"

The choice of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* — an eerie 1964 British film derived from a novel by Mark McShane about a deranged psychic who hatches a plot to publicize her powers by kidnapping a child and then helping the police to find him — was a notion that arrived indirectly, over lunch. "An agent named Peter Franklin took me out to talk over ideas for new musicals that he thought might interest me, and one of the things he pitched was *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*," remembers Schwartz. "As soon as he mentioned it I remembered it. I had seen the movie when I was a kid. But on the instant I didn't think it was appropriate for musical theater — it was too dark — and I wasn't particularly looking to *do* musical theater at that point anyway. So the idea, I guess, receded into my unconscious. As soon as Opera Santa Barbara called, though — maybe nine months or a year later — I thought of *Séance*."

Schwartz at first tried to tackle his new task exactly as he would have tackled a new musical. "Usually I sketch out a lot of music and possible ideas for songs early on, in no particular order. I tried to approach *Séance* that way, but I found it wasn't working for me. I couldn't put an opera together in my usual musical-theater mosaic or collage way, where the totality emerges from the separate pieces. Ultimately, I had to write the libretto first, from beginning to end, and then set it from beginning to end. With *Séance*, only a couple of major motifs literally came on their own. Everything else came sequentially from the libretto.

"Once I actually *could* start writing," he adds, "it went relatively quickly — maybe two years all told, not counting the orchestration, which took another year on its own. This was the first time for me, orchestrating. It's absolutely been a crash course, working very closely with Bill Brohn, with whom I worked on *Wicked*. I literally went over every note with him. There's no way I could have done this without Bill's assistance.



Flanigan with Kim Josephson (as Myra's husband, Bill)
 © David Bazemore for Opera Santa Barbara 2011

"*Séance* was developed very much like a piece of musical theater, with a series of readings and revisions," Schwartz continues. "Mark Adamo, who is a good friend of mine, told me about this place up in the Adirondacks called the Seagle Music Colony. I think they had done *Little Women* up there. It's like opera camp for young, recent college graduates or kids who are still in college, training to be opera singers. Mark introduced me to Darren Woods, from Fort Worth Opera, who is the artistic director there, and Darren made it possible for me to come up and have them perform my first act. That was the first time I got to hear the piece. It was basically a staged reading in tandem with Menotti's *The Medium*. That was incredibly useful. I learned about what was working, what was not working, what was difficult to sing, what was clumsy, where it was too long, where the story was being told inadequately. After that I cut and rewrote a lot of stuff. Thanks again to Mark Adamo, I was next put in touch with Charles Jarden at American Opera Projects, and they agreed to help me develop the piece. We did readings there a couple of times."

Almost from the outset, the star of *Séance* has been the extraordinary Lauren Flanigan, who, with this City Opera premiere, returns to the scene of many of her greatest triumphs. "I had seen Lauren do a production of *Regina* at Bard College," Schwartz recalls, "and I thought she would be a very good fit for the lead role of Myra, so I contacted her myself. I know I was thinking about Lauren for *Séance* before I went up to Seagle — I was hoping she would say yes. Once Lauren

did say yes, we began working very closely together. Lauren would sing through sections and give me her thoughts about everything. She taught me how opera singers use their voices and how knowledgeable they are about their own instruments. There's a duet fairly early in the first act with a line in which the word 'so' is held and rather stretched out on one note. I told Lauren that I wanted that note to feel incredibly warm. And she said, 'Well, you have me on a high A there, and that's not a very warm note for me, that's a more brilliant note for me. With a G-sharp, I can give you a lot of warmth.' So I rewrote the section and dropped that note down a half step. Lauren was also very helpful in shaping her role, in shaping the drama itself from a psychological point of view — what is my character thinking here? She has been indispensable."

Schwartz grew up on Long Island. He heard his first opera while attending the Juilliard Preparatory Division. "Basically I went to the Met and City Opera going back to the Beverly Sills days. I don't believe I ever fantasized about putting something of mine on either of those stages, though. The idea of singers at City Opera singing my music was never a dream of mine. It was *so* outside any kind of possibility. Whereas I did have aspirations for putting a show of mine on Broadway."

Apart from the two leads, Flanigan and Kim Josephson, the City Opera production features a largely different cast from the one that opened in Santa Barbara. Schwartz has done some revisions, musically and structurally, based on what he learned in Santa Barbara. The essential production, again directed by Scott Schwartz, the composer's son, is unchanged.

Obviously, if even a fraction of Schwartz's *Wicked* audience comes out to see his new opera, City Opera will have it made. Did that audience show up when *Séance* was in Santa Barbara?

"Yes!" Schwartz replies, with delight. "A lot of young people came. They responded more from a story point of view. When there were startling moments, they screamed — they reacted in places as if they were at a horror movie. Some of them wrote letters that were very gratifying, telling me, 'You know I've never been to an opera, I had no interest in going to an opera, but I had such a great time, and I didn't expect to.'"

Of course, Schwartz's early collaborator, Leonard Bernstein, comes immediately to mind when thinking about bridging the Broadway–opera divide — specifically Bernstein's works *Trouble in Tahiti* and *A Quiet Place*, which just enjoyed a much lauded City Opera revival. "Lenny was more of a classical composer to begin with," points out Schwartz. "If anything, he crossed over to Broadway from classical music, not the other way around." Schwartz pauses. "Opera is undergoing a resurgence just now that I think Lenny would like. Composers from other realms, like Rufus Wainwright, are writing operas. Rufus has an opera, *Prima Donna*, that I know City Opera is interested in doing. [The company has announced that it will mount the opera in spring 2012.] Musical-theater composers like Michael John LaChiusa and Ricky Ian Gordon straddle both worlds. Do I think this is a good thing? I do. The idea of opera as a museum piece is not a particularly good situation. There was a time when opera could only be either a museum piece or 'contemporary' and obtuse. If it was simply accessible to an audience, then it was viewed as cheap or not worthy — it needed to be difficult, and the audience had to struggle with it, to be good. I don't think that's particularly helpful either. But that fact is changing."

Is Schwartz thinking of writing another opera?

He laughs. "No. No, no. I'm just trying to survive *this*." □

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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