Garth Baxter's "Lily"

Finding Forgiveness in Opera, Part I

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*TW: This post references sexual violence as-realized in operatic productions.

Classical opera plots pivot and wobble around women. Female characters are often beset by society, cursed by fate, disinherited, morally besmirched, or simply "unfortunate." I have always wondered why audiences are so captivated by these tragic protagonists: all receive pity, very few redemption, and none the righteous outrage we might feel for a friend.

Take, for example, Puccini's *La Bohème*. Based on Henri Merger's 1851 novel *Scènes de la vie Bohème*, *La Bohème* is the operatic and plot source material for the perennial Broadway favorite, *Rent.* TL/DR: In both *La Bohème* and *Rent*, a group of impoverished friends sing about pretending not to be in love with each other until the female protagonist dies and they all snap out of their nonsense too late, and learn to appreciate life and each other.

Traditional opera fans insist that there is no higher achievement in musical art than *La Bohème* or its famous duet "O soave fanciulla/Oh lovely girl" when the main characters (Rodolfo and Mimi) find themselves in love… only for Rodolfo to choose an ex-girlfriend over Mimi. This breakup is only the beginning of Mimi's trials: over the course of the opera she falls fatally ill, her sugar daddy abandons her, and she mourns what might have been in the final duet which doubles as her swan song, "Sono andati?/Have they gone?" At the end of the

duet, Rodolfo is left clutching her dead body and sobbing inconsolably to close out the opera.

Mimi is only one character in what Catherine Clèment calls "a parade of dying women," in the operatic canon (1979). There are dozens more: Carmen is stabbed, Tosca throws herself off some castle ramparts, Aïda suffocates in a tomb, Suor Angelica poisons herself, Lady MacBeth dies in feverish madness, and on and on. These mistreated women might simply be labeled as victims of the nineteenth century. After all, drama at the expense of female characters was standard artistic practice in both opera and literature. Yet most operas produced by major companies remain a parade of dying women. Maybe audiences go on excusing it because beautiful music conveniently glosses over violence. Maybe nobody in the audience cares at all.

Then again, maybe not. The opera world is changing slowly, and new voices are telling stories by women, rather than about them. Composers, librettists, and performers living and working in the 21st century are creating operas that look and feel more reparative than moralizing. Even those creators following the template of the grand romantic opera are re-imagining the lushness of the form with less lasciviousness. This summer, I had the great privilege of playing oboe in the orchestra for just such an opera: Garth Baxter's *Lily*. This review is the first of several posts about how opera might speak to contemporary audiences in new ways.

Loosely based on Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, *Lily* is Baxter's magnum opus and the product of a 13-year-long collaboration with author and librettist Lisa VanAuken. Garth self-describes his composition style as "modern traditionalist," and uses bold harmonies, perfect intervals and distinct sonorities in traditional musical templates with listenable melodies. Baxter's music, while obviously contemporary, nevertheless recalls the orchestral lushness of the romantic era as it ebbs and flows dramatically. We (orchestral musicians) are reared on this kind of symphonic writing and–similar to the violences and silences inherent in opera–are quick to forgive the shortcomings of nineteenth century symphonists and their world. Perhaps this

call-back to romanticism is why I find Garth Baxter's *Lily* so compelling: it takes a long-broken template and retains its beauty while rewriting the operatic female lead.

Baxter puts the brilliance of the source material for *Lily* to good dramatic use. Wharton's novel calls out the challenges faced by women in the nineteenth century, but Baxter and VanAuken make it clear that women navigating a patriarchal society face tough odds, no matter the era. While the original novel is a powerful indictment of the capitalist patriarchy, it is still a tragedy: Lily Bart is judged more harshly than her male counterparts for her attempts to better herself, and is the victim of sexual harassment with no real recourse. In the first draft of the libretto, VanAuken followed the novel fairly closely to capture this particular injustice. According to Baxter, bringing the full shock and awe of the romantic opera to a more idealistic text proved challenging for both composer and librettist.

Among several changes that VanAuken made to give Lily more agency within the drama is the way she narrates her thoughts, both throughout the opera and in the final scene (spoiler alert!). Lily speaks directly to her male counterparts in the opera's entirety and tells them exactly the double standards (especially in terms of her sexuality and morality) she is subject to. While opera arias always confuse the boundaries between a character's internal dialogue and their external conversations, Lily is uniquely frank with her main romantic interest. In the first scene of the opera, she lists all the people in society a poor woman is "beholden to" for her would-be suitor, Seldon, and at the very end makes allowance for a woman being concerned only with herself on rare occasions. Here, fragments of the melody are shared between soprano and winds: it is never fully realized in any one instrument or voice, and, like a woman's obligations, could spin on indefinitely without conclusion. It is a bittersweet moment: Lily's confidence in Seldon is beautiful but unrealistic.

When I inquired about Lisa VanAuken's adjustments to character interactions in the libretto, the composer wrote: "[*Lily*] was her story, her taking the Wharton premise and making it work in a theatrical setting by giving more depth to the

characters. … She brought some lightness and even a bit of humor that helped to make the tragedy more powerful by letting us see the characters as complicated human beings." Because of the relatable imperfections VanAuken contemporized, Lily becomes an increasingly frustrating character to follow to the end of the opera. The audience sees her humanity in her hopes and dreams, but can't fault her for the pragmatic way she navigates her circumstances.

At the opening of the final scene, Lily sings an ode to laudanum (an opiate) before taking a dose and begging the hallucinogenic drug to help her through the performative niceties of her own engagement party. Lily becomes delusional, and the audience's attention is held by her loosening grip on reality. As the story devolves over the course of the last scene, it departs more and more from Wharton's novel. When Wharton's Lily Bart dies of an overdose at the end of the book, the reader spends time with Seldon and her few friends, mourning her beauty even in death. It is a mausoleum of women casualties, a vigil kept by men and audiences removed from their humanity.

In VanAuken's libretto, the roles are reversed and Lily keeps the vigil: Seldon leaves her engagement party hastily and is killed in an accident as he drunkenly crosses the street. The orchestra plays a cacophonous interlude of simultaneous melodic themes from earlier in the opera as Seldon's body is retrieved from outside. The final aria, "Is this the cost?" is nothing if not an ideal realization of the operatic form and the virtuosic soprano voice. Sonically, the orchestral dust of the collision subsides and Lily shares her emotional turmoil as she experiences it. Her loneliness is accompanied by solitary wind and violin solos as she sings "...is this a holy punishment/for a woman who would choose to grasp/what few but certain joys life deigns to offer…" Unable to face the rest of her life without Seldon–without real interpersonal connection–Lily takes an additional sip of laudanum and collapses, leaving the audience to keep the final vigil. This final vigil is not for the sake of victimized women: it is for the sake of the universal pain visited on humanity by any injustice, gendered or otherwise.

As a reviewer, I agree with Garth Baxter's friend and fellow composer Hollis Thoms: Baxter has created an unvarnished view of the challenges found in marriage and love, personal and interpersonal development, and the external forces of society. Baxter's musical vision of Lily Bart has enough agency for the character to survive, rather than succumb to her circumstances. It is a nod to how far we've come in writing women, but it is also a harrowing reminder of the precarity brought about by gender inequity.