Elie Siegmeister: *LADY OF THE LAKE*

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Lady of the Lake is one of two one-act operas written by Elie Siegmeister that were based on short stories by Bernard Malamud, one of the most important figures in American Jewish literature. In fact, his short stories have inspired a number of other composers to address them operatically.

Elie Siegmeister (1909–1991), whose name is familiar in classical music circles, is one of many composers whose music enjoyed a respectable amount of attention within a particular time frame, but somehow, by the late twentieth century, had faded from awareness. Nonetheless, he will always be best remembered for his lifelong mission to forge a distinctive American compositional idiom consistent with his unwavering social and political commitments—an embracive, pliant idiom that was heavily reliant on American folk music and Americana, but which, especially in his mature period, could be expressed within the framework of conventional concert and theatrical forms. Perhaps even more so than many of his circle—who during the 1930s and early 1940s gravitated with nearly blind faith to varying degrees of the far left in America but later distanced themselves as "establishment" composers—Siegmeister remained throughout his life an emblem of artistic social consciousness and an advocate of art and serious concert music for the common folk.

For many years he was an active member and participant in far left music associations and vehicles, in some cases even outright communist as well as communist-supported from Moscow. He never disavowed those associations, remaining a CPUSA (Communist Party USA) member.

Although eventually he stretched his canvas beyond the confines of folk tune expressions or content, most of his later music, in its exposition of memorable melodies and programmatic parameters, continued to reflect his populist predilection. His orchestral textures, too, tended to bow to the melody. And as he embraced more traditional forms in the postwar period, he further developed and refined his American idiom into what critics have called a "heightened Americanism." Whatever form or genre he addressed, he retained his fundamental concern for direct communication with audiences, and for music that spoke to them on its own merits—without necessary recourse to theoretical justification. Nonetheless, by the 1960s, some of his music was betraying a noticeably greater sophistication than his earlier, more transparent folk reflections, evoking from the critic Edward Rothstein the observation that he had "sublimated Americana into the substance of his work, with a language that is generally explained as tonal and provocative." In that sense, Seigmeister explained that the greatest art came from an artist who "responds to his own environment, people and tradition." Hence his new interest in musical expression of Jewish peoplehood, which is one of the things that attracted him to Malamud's stories for the last two of his operas.

In a 1988 retrospective examination of the socially and politically conscious underpinnings of Seigmeister's American idiom, Carol J. Oja observed that, whereas the so-called new Romanticism had become a recent fashion, Siegmeister had been "Romantic all along, letting electronics, dodecaphony, and aleatoric (chance) music go their way." Indeed, in an earlier essay of his own, Siegmeister rejoiced that he had lived to see the day when what he

called the "orthodoxy of the avant-garde" had capitulated to the new generation of composers. Both *Lady of the Lake* and his other Malamud-based opera, *Angel Levine*, exude transparent encapsulations of that sentiment. His special brand of Neo-Romanticism in both operas is nonetheless inseparable from his desiderata of inter-audience communication, as well as his focus on melodic substance.

Composed to a libretto by Edward Mabley based on the story "The Lady of the Lake," from Bernard Malamud's collection *The Magic Barrel*, the opera is an exploration of Jewish identity, and of the inner tension between acknowledgment and concealment of that identity for social gain and romantic pursuit. In this case, denial of Jewish heritage, even by an assimilated Jew upon whom religion appears to have no hold, leads to an ironic, unnecessarily tragic outcome. When he is finally able to come to terms with his evasion and redeem himself by revealing his Jewishness and accepting his lineage—though only for the purpose of winning back his love—it is too late.

A secondary, more general issue here is the inherent danger of mendacious misrepresentation, which becomes a tangled web from which the perpetrator cannot extricate himself, even with the truth.

In the Malamud story, Henry Blumberg, a floorwalker at Macy's department store in New York (an employee who directs customers to the appropriate departments of sales personnel), has received a modest inheritance and decides to leave his job and travel in Europe. (Why he is renamed Levin in the opera, when Blumberg is an equally perceived "Jewish name" in America, is not clear. It may be that Siegmeister and Mabley wanted to avoid confusion with one of the central characters in *Angel Levine*, as the two operas were conceived to be paired as a double bill.)

In Europe, Blumberg begins identifying himself as Henry R. Freeman, apparently assuming that this name seemed more neutral (even though, by the 1960s, when this story occurs, it too was a common Jewish name in America). In the opening paragraph of the unadapted story, Malamud explains that in Paris, for no reason of which he was sure, he was tired of the past—and the limitations it had imposed upon him. Although he had signed the hotel register with his correct name, Levin took to calling himself Henry R. Freeman.

His travels take him to the beautiful town of Stresa, on Lago Maggiore in Northern Italy, where he stays in a pensione in a villa. Disenchanted with the commercial tourist atmosphere of the Boromean Islands in Lago Maggiore, which are routinely visited by foreigners, he is urged by the *padrona* of his pensione to visit the little-frequented, privately owned island known as Isola del Dongo—which, she tells him, has a historic palazzo, with tombs and statues of famous regional figures, where Napoleon once slept. After resisting the suggestion initially, he hires a rowboat and rows to the island himself. There, he meets the beautiful Isabella, who tells him that she is a princess, the daughter and heiress of the aristocratic del Dongo family, owner of the island. They are instantly attracted to each other, but on the assumption that his identity would dampen her enthusiasm for romance, Blumberg keeps to his new pseudonym, Henry Freeman. Their love takes root, only to complicate the web of misrepresentations, of which she is part as well.

By the fifth scene, Isabella is waiting for "Henry" to arrive, and when he does, he declares his undying love for her. Intent on finding out whether he is a Jew, but reticent to ask him directly, she points to the mountains onshore and asks him if the seven snowcapped peaks remind him of a *m'nora*—the seven-branched candelabra used in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and a ubiquitous visual symbol of Judaism and the Jewish people (not to be confused with the special Hanukka *m'nora*, or *hanukki'ya*, which provides for nine candles or lights).When his response is withheld by "A what?" she asks him if it reminds him of the Virgin Mary's crown. He replies evasively that perhaps it does, depending on how one looks at it. Isabella doesn't press the issue, assuming that he is not Jewish, and the two engage in a love duet, swearing that they have found permanent love that cannot be denied.

After their avowals of love, Isabella confesses that she has lied—she is not a princess or an heiress, but the poor daughter of Ernesto, the caretaker, who looks after the property while the del Dongo family is away. Angry at having been deceived, Henry—maintaining his own deception—accuses her of trying to get to America through such a pose, in which he suggests that she was in league with her father. Denying that there was any such scheme, in a veiled comment she alludes to her suspicion that he is hiding something from her. Henry insists that he is hiding nothing, and Isabella's father takes him back to Stresa.

The next scene is Henry's sung soliloquy, in which he reminds himself that though he still thinks Isabella's lie was part of a calculated scheme, he has deceived her as well. His conflict centers around the realization that he pretended "to be what [he is] not." He determines that her status or origins make no difference, that his love is undiminished, and he orders a boat to return to the island.

In the final scene, Henry tells Isabella that he has come to ask her to marry him, but she says they must part forever. When he remonstrates, she tries one last time to learn his true identity. "Are you a Jew?" And once again his reply is a blunt, annoyed evasion: "How many no's never? Why do you persist with such foolish questions?" Replying sadly that she had hoped he was indeed Jewish, Isabella slowly unbuttons her bodice to reveal concentration camp numbers tattooed on her breast. She'd been interred at Buchenwald as a little girl. That, she explains, is why she cannot marry him. She and her father are Jews, and since their last meeting, she has realized the importance of her heritage, for which she and her family suffered. As she is about to go off, Henry finally confesses that he is a Jew, pleading for her to listen. Now, put off by a Jew who can so easily deny his Jewishness for the sake of acceptance by an aristocratic family, she disappears behind one of the statues. He gropes for her in the mist that has arisen from the lake, only to find himself embracing a moonlit statue. She is gone, and his fantasy has evaporated in the night.

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Writing about *Lady of the Lake* (as well as about *Angel Levine*), Siegmeister questioned whether "opera" was the appropriate generic designation. What he tried to do in his stage works, he said, was to find a new American form of musical theatre that would be "as honest and direct as any spoken theatre." Thus, as in his other operas, he shunned what he called "the outworn artifices of old European opera." What he sought instead was a form that would elicit the kind of direct audience response to singing actors as might attend speaking actors in a typical Broadway or off-Broadway play, or a film. "Singing theatre" is how he proposed to characterize these works. They are, however, whatever his hesitations, operas in every sense of the term.

Neither the action nor the continuously flowing recitative lines halt for conventional arias or other self-contained numbers, and even the love duet is not separate. It flows from, and back to, the sung dialogue—in some ways part of it more than a duet per se. The vocal lines are punctuated by a variety of orchestral effects, timbres, and gestures, but the orchestration is always sublimated within the vocal lines, so that even at its most dissonant or strident—for dramatic reinforcement—it never submerges the singing. The relative ranges of the voices and the orchestra make for a clarity that permits the words always to be heard easily, with little need to follow a libretto. If there are no developed melodies with their own arches that will remain in the audience's memory, there is nonetheless an overall melodic character to the opera, and the vocal lines—which often flow with lyricism despite mildly disjunctive intervallic leaps—are infused with melodic bits and fragments.

Lady of the Lake received its premiere in October 1985, on a double bill with Siegmeister's *Angel Levine* at the 92nd Street Y in New York, whose innovative but lamentably short-lived "Jewish Opera at the Y" program commissioned both works.