

Tobias Picker  
b.1958

# ARIAS

for Tenor and Piano

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ED 30135

PREVIEW  
Low Resolution

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## Foreword

When it comes to American opera, we are living in the middle of a Renaissance — a boom, if you will, since the intensity of creative activity devoted to composing and producing new operas has no real precedent in this country. Tobias Picker has been a major part of this Renaissance over the past two decades, from the moment he launched his career as an opera composer with *Emmeline* at Santa Fe Opera.

It's far from usual, with one's first attempt at this complex, interdependent, home run Mr. Picker achieved. Yet he had wisely taken his time before embarking on this prodigy, Mr. Picker spent the first decades of his career developing a distinctive style in chamber, and solo compositions — and honing compositional skills that have informed his writing for the stage.

It wasn't until he'd reached the age of 40 that creative urgency came in a circumstance that was a commission to set Judith Rossner's novel about Emmeline Mosher, a fictionalized amount of a real nineteenth-century woman and her grimly tragic fate. But since then Mr. Gurnea has received a number of five substantial operas — not to mention chamber versions of several of the same pieces, some by smaller companies and a major new revision of *An American Tragedy* for its revival at the 2013 Metastasis Festival.

Because so much of his subject matter centers on the emotional turmoil of ordinary people caught up in realistic, unforgiving situations, An Pick is often soon branded "American verismo." As far as such comparisons go, he says, "I don't know." Calling this a compliment, though it says nothing about his music itself — beyond the fact that most Americans are so culturally conditioned to allow for the heightened moments of revelation to which his music and lyrics so aptly resemble a well suited.

By collaborating with such gifted writers as J.D. McClatchy and Donald Scheer, Mr. Picker ensures that these numbers enhance and give shape to his characters — from David Griffiths consumed by blinding ambition to grab his share of the American dream to Thérèse Raquin, a guilt-haunted conscience after the murder of her husband Dolores Claiborne, who attempts to explain her choices to her hardened daughter. "The words of the other great American poets," Mr. Picker, who in his settings take detailed account of the natural rhythms of language, might suggest another comparison: that J.D. McClatchy has suggested: Janáček who similarly creates a sense of strong work in a claustrophobic society."

Despite the obvious and well-worn construction of each of these operas, they circle around recurrent shared themes: the struggle of repressive conditions, the situation of powerless but determined women, disillusion and religious isolation. Even the plot devices and settings of the literary sources on which he draws — from Greek Oedipus to Emile Zola to Stephen King — contain uncanny echoes in their climaxes, including or trial. *Mr. Fox*, based on the children's story by Roald Dahl, is an exception in this way — but here, too, the comedy has a dark, sardonic edge, and the singing still serves a clear social function: social commentary.

Yet for all the dramatic, even Gothic, situations of his narratives, Mr. Picker's musical characterizations provide more psychological portraits. Aria after aria in this collection shows him using the tools of his trade to harness the power of the human voice to reveal a character's inner life or sense of self in the face of dire situations. He might call for dramatic leaps in range to underscore Roberta Alden's desperation in the face of the high-lying vocal line of the murdered husband Camille come back as a ghost; or a sweet, lyrical melody to depict lovesickness in "Miss Hedgehog's Aria" from *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. "Opera is about the most difficult music," emphasizes Mr. Picker. That's true not only across the large canvas of an entire opera but within the limits of an aria as well. For this composer, arias become a narrative microcosm and a key to a character. As such, they call for skills both musical and dramatic from their interpreters, but the challenges posed by these pieces will give corresponding pleasure.

Thomas May  
Author of *Decoding Wagner*  
2014

## About the Operas

### **Emmeline**

(1996)

An opera in two acts

Libretto by J.D. McClatchy

Based on the novel by Judith Rossner

Commissioned by Santa Fe Opera

World Premiere: July 27, 1996: Santa Fe Opera

George Manahan, conductor

Francesca Zambello, director

#### **Premiere Cast:**

Emmeline Mosher: Patricia Racette (soprano)

Matthew Gurney: Curt Peterson (tenor)

Mr. Maguire: Victor Ledbetter (baritone)

Aunt Hannah Watkins: Anne-Marie Owens (dramatic contralto)

Henry Mosher: Kevin Langan (bass)

Sophie: Melanie Sarakatsannis (soprano)

Pastor Avery: Herbert Perry (bass)

Mrs. Bass: Josepha Geyer (mezzo-soprano)

#### **Synopsis of *Emmeline***

by J.D. McClatchy

In mid-century rural Maine, 15-year-old Emmeline, the eldest child of a poor farming family, is sent to work at a textile mill. She is soon seduced by a married supervisor, becomes pregnant, and is dismissed from her job. Her aunt arranges for her to live with the family of a wealthy neighbor, where Emmeline is adopted. Twenty years later, back at home to care for her ailing father, Emmeline falls in love with and marries a mysterious young stranger, Matthew Gurney. When he comes to visit, it is revealed that Matthew is, in fact, her stolen child. Unable to accept the thought of a husband and son, Emmeline begs Matthew to stay, but he abandons her. Distraught, Emmeline is ostracized by the townspeople, but she bravely refuses to yield to despair and resolves to survive, triumphing in her very survival.

Based on the novel by Judith Rossner, *Emmeline* is a powerful, an original framework from Jocasta's point of view—*Emmeline* makes a heroine of a woman who imagines events so that her inner life is given a moral dimension. She is a woman who seeks to free herself from the oppressive circumstances of the society of the time. Denied women their share of passion and power, and demanded that religion control their lives, the world, precisely orchestrated score proceeds deftly, never letting a scene outlast its welcome. The result of international acclaim, *Emmeline* is recognized as one of America's most important operas of the second half of the twentieth century.

**Fantastic Mr. Fox**  
(1998)

An opera in three acts

Libretto by Donald Sturrock

Based on the book by Roald Dahl

Originally commissioned to benefit the Roald Dahl Foundation (now Roald Dahl Children's Charity) with funding from Felicity Dahl.

World Premiere:

December 9, 1998; Los Angeles Opera

Peter Ash, conductor

Donald Sturrock, director

Premiere Cast:

Mr. Fox: Gerald Finley (baritone)

Mrs. Fox: Suzanna Guzmán (mezzo-soprano)

Farmer Boggis: Louis Lebherz (bass)

Farmer Bunce: Doug Jones (tenor)

Farmer Bean: Jamie Offenbach (bass-baritone)

Mavis the Tractor: Lesley Leighton (soprano)

Agnes the Digger: Jill Grove (mezzo-soprano)

Miss Hedgehog: Sari Gruber (soprano)

Badger the Miner: Malcolm Mackenzie (baritone)

Burrowing Mole: Jorge Garza (tenor)

Rita the Rat: Josepha Geyer (mezzo-soprano)

Porcupine: Charles Castro (tenor)

Synopsis of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*  
by Donald Sturrock

Mr. Fox is the owner of the Foxglove forest. He is clever, debonair and never at a loss for schemes to feed both family and friends. In the Foxglove country, at any time he may have met his match. A sinister trio of grovelling farmers, led by the miser Farmer Bean, will stop at nothing in their plans to destroy him and his family. The only way for Mr. Fox and their friends survive the farmers and their mechanical allies, Mavis the Tractor and Agnes the Digger, is a stirring song. Yet it is one that is also filled with unexpected humour and wit.

Based on one of the most popular stories by the celebrated children's author, Roald Dahl, *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is a tale of a fox whose music box turns funny, sad and frightening. Although Dahl's story is for children, the opera operates at multiple levels of meaning, also serving as a modern fable about oppression and the struggles between good and evil and between mankind and nature. Since its premiere it has inspired many new productions in the UK and USA, enchanting audiences of adults and children alike with its wit, energy and zany humor. Encompassing a variety of playful, catchy musical elements, including a waltz between a hedgehog and a porcupine as well as an unconventional fox-trot for the Foxes, the opera is guaranteed to appeal to anyone still youthful at heart.

## **Thérèse Raquin**

(2001)

An opera in two acts

Libretto by Gene Scheer

Based on the novel by Émile Zola

Commissioned by The Dallas Opera, L'Opéra de Montréal and The San Diego Opera

World Premiere:

November 30, 2001; Dallas Opera

Graeme Jenkins, conductor

Francesca Zambello, director

Premiere Cast:

Madame Lisette Raquin: Diana Soviero (soprano)

Thérèse Raquin: Sara Fulgoni (mezzo-soprano)

Camille Raquin: Gordon Gietz (tenor)

Laurent: Richard Bernstein (baritone)

Suzanne Michaud: Sheryl Woods (soprano)

Olivier Michaud: Gábor Andrásy (bass)

Monsieur Grivet: Peter Kazaras (tenor)

### **Synopsis of *Thérèse Raquin***

by Gene Scheer

Married Parisian couple Thérèse and Camille are reunited with an old friend, Laurent. It soon becomes clear that Thérèse and Laurent are more than old friends: their intense passion stands in strong contrast to the loveless marriage Camille and Thérèse have been enduring. Desperate to find a way of being together, Thérèse and Laurent decide to drown Camille in the Seine. After the crime is committed the guilty couple begins a tormented life. They are tormented by their own consciences and the ghost of Camille.

For the libretto to Pickers' score, we have his sister, Ida Picker, to thank: she introduced Emile Zola's 1867 novel *Thérèse Raquin* to me after an old copy of the book fell off her bookshelf while dusting. The result is an opera with remarkable intensity, heightening the drama with its suspenseful and rhythmic score. The libretto explores the relationship between passion and complex atonality, with the latter taking on a more prominent role in the act, as Thérèse and Laurent come to grips with their crime. Picker masterfully creates a brilliant counterpoint with robust vocal lines.

## **An American Tragedy**

(2005)

Opera in Two Acts

Libretto by Gene Scheer

Based on the novel by Theodore Dreiser

Commissioned by The Metropolitan Opera

### **World Premiere:**

December 2, 2005; The Metropolitan Opera

James Conlon, conductor

Francesca Zambello, director

### **Premiere Cast:**

Roberta Alden: Patricia Racette (soprano)

Sondra Finchley: Susan Graham (mezzo-soprano)

Clyde Griffiths: Nathan Gunn (baritone)

Elvira Griffiths: Dolora Zajick (mezzo-soprano)

Elizabeth Griffiths: Jennifer Larmore (mezzo-soprano)

Samuel Griffiths: Kim Begley (tenor)

Gilbert Griffiths: William Burden (tenor)

Orville Mason: Richard Bernstein (baritone)

Hortense: Anna Christy (soprano)

### **Synopsis of *An American Tragedy* by Gene Scheer**

Clyde Griffiths, a poor, downstate Wisconsin 17-year-old working a job in his affluent uncle's factory in upstate New York. Clyde is warned of a no fraternization policy between management and workers. In warning, Clyde meets a factory worker named Roberta Alden. As this relationship is developing, Clyde is introduced to the socialite world of his uncle's children. After spending a night with Roberta, Clyde begins a romantic relationship with Sondra Finchley, the beautiful daughter of one of the town's wealthy couples. When Sondra plans to break off the relationship with Roberta to pursue her new romance, Clyde learns that Roberta is pregnant. Clyde schemes to rid himself of his unwanted child.

Theodore Dreiser's novel by the same name, *An American Tragedy* is a progressive drama of ambition, resentment, and faith that offers a common dilemma at the heart of the American experience: how do we find the balance between our moral duties and our dreams? These questions live in the space between every note of Picker's powerful music, and while searching for their answers, he has spun them into melodies that capture the passion and frailty of Clyde Griffiths' "Everyman."

## **Dolores Claiborne**

(2013)

An opera in two acts

Libretto by J.D. McClatchy

Based on the novel by Stephen King

Commissioned by San Francisco Opera

World Premiere:

September 18, 2013; San Francisco, CA

George Manahan, conductor

James Robinson, director

Premiere Cast:

Dolores Claiborne: Patricia Racette (soprano) / Catherine Cook (mezzo-soprano)

Vera Donovan: Elizabeth Futral (soprano)

Joe St. George: Wayne Tigges (bass-baritone)

Selena St. George: Susannah Biller (soprano)

Detective Thibodeau: Greg Fedderly (tenor)

### *Synopsis of Dolores Claiborne*

by J.D. McClatchy

The opera opens with an interrogation by police officers asking Dolores Claiborne of murdering the rich and imperious Vera Donovan, who is her maid and companion for forty years. As Dolores answers the officers' questions, we learn that her marriage ended in the murder of her depraved husband, who had been sexually molesting her teenage daughter. It is then revealed that Vera and Dolores were close friends, and that Vera's death was due to Dolores' intervention after learning of her innocence in Vera's death. Dolores's mother, who cannot forgive her mother—and even though Dolores has done everything a mother could do to keep three lives together, ultimately she is left alone.

Based on the bestselling novel by Stephen King, *Dolores Claiborne* is one of the most compelling characters to emerge from the author's imagination. Isolated, desperate, trapped, the feisty Maine housekeeper has no one to turn to except her daughter who despises her. Dolores is a natural fit for opera—specifically for Puccini. *Dolores Claiborne* is Puccini's fifth opera, a musical and dramatic triumph.