

Tobias Picker
b.1954

ARIAS

for Baritone/Bass and Piano

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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, and often thankless art form a home run Mr. Picker achieved. Yet he had wisely taken his time before embarking on this creative prodigy, Mr. Picker spent the first decades of his career developing a distinctive voice in chamber, chamber, and solo compositions — and honing compositional skills that later informed his writing for the stage.

It wasn't until he'd reached the age of 40 that creative urgency and circumstance led to his commission to set Judith Rossner's novel about Emmeline Mosher, a fictionalized account of a nineteenth-century woman and her grimly tragic fate. But since then Mr. Picker has produced a catalogue of five substantial operas — not to mention chamber versions of several of them that have been performed by smaller companies and a major new revision of *An American Tragedy* for its revival at the 2015 Santa Fe Music Festival.

Because so much of his subject matter centers on the personal and social turmoil of ordinary people caught up in realistic, unforgiving situations, Mr. Picker's operas have soon been branded "American verismo." As far as such comparisons go, he says, "It doesn't do anything to say this is a comparison, though it says nothing about his music itself — beyond the fact that verismo opera is steamier and structured to allow for the heightened moments of revelation to which it is and verismo operas are so well suited.

By collaborating with such gifted writers as the novelists J.D. McClatchy and Gene Scheer, Mr. Picker ensures that these numbers enhance and give depth to their characters — from the young Griffiths consumed by blinding ambition to grab his share of the American West and Thérèse, who is left with a guilt-haunted conscience after the murder of her husband Dolores Claiborne, who is trying to explain her choices to her hardened daughter. "The words are another layer," says Mr. Picker, who in his settings take detailed account of the natural rhythms of language and the specific situations of each character. Another opera on that J.D. McClatchy has suggested: Janáček who similarly crafts his operas of strong women in a claustrophobic society."

Despite their varied settings and characters, each of these operas, they circle around recurrent shared themes: the struggle of women in a repressive society, the situation of powerless but determined women, the illusion of love, and the power of the human voice to reveal a character's inner life or sense of self in the face of adversity. Even the plot devices and settings of the literary sources on which he draws — from Emile Zola to Stephen King — contain uncanny echoes in their dramatic structure and themes. *Mr. Fox*, based on the children's story by Roald Dahl, is a comedy, but the comedy has a dark, sardonic edge, and the singing has a social commentary.

Yet in all the dramatic, even Gothic situations of his narratives, Mr. Picker's musical characterizations are so precise and psychologically portraits. Aria after aria in this collection shows him using the tools of his trade to reveal a character's inner life or sense of self in the face of adversity. He might call for dramatic leaps in range to underscore Roberta Alden's desperation in 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 drama in 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

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 Moie: 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 finest hole in the forest. He is clever, debonair and never at a loss for schemes to feed both his family and his friends. In the meantime, he may have met his match. A sinister trio of grotesque farmers led by the sinister Bean, will stop at nothing in their plans to destroy him and his family. The only way for Mr. Fox and his friends to survive the farmers and their mechanical allies, Mavis the Tractor and Agnes the Digger, is a stirring song. It is a stirring song, yet it is one that is also filled with unexpected humour.

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, by 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 the love 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: Gagor Andrasz (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 that Camille and Thérèse have been enduring. Desperate to find a way of being together, Thérèse and Laurent conspire to drown Camille in the Seine. After the crime is committed the guilty couple begins a life of hell as they are tormented by their own consciences and the ghost of Camille.

For the libretto to Pickers' story, we have his sister, Lida Picker, to thank: she introduced Emile Zola's 1867 novel *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 music. The libretto weaves between tonality and complex atonality, with the latter taking on a more prominent role in the second act, as Thérèse and Laurent come to grips with their crime. Picker masterfully creates a number of counterpoint 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 kid, gets a job in his affluent uncle's factory in upstate New York. Clyde is attracted to the factory because he's warned of a no fraternization policy between management and workers. After a warning, Clyde befriends a factory worker named Roberta Alden. As this relationship is blossoming, 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's father insists that she break off the relationship with Roberta to pursue her new fiancé, Clyde realizes that Roberta is pregnant. Clyde schemes to rid himself of his unwanted child.

Theater's adaptation of 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 boundless promise, how do we find the balance between our moral duties and our quest for the American dream? 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 grandeur 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, accusing Dolores Claiborne of murdering the rich and imperious Vera Donovan, who employed her as a maid and confidante 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 their 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 husband brought her to her mother—and even though Dolores has done everything a mother-in-law can do to keep three women 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. Trapped, desperate, and alone, the feisty Maine housekeeper has no one to turn to but her daughter who despises her. Dolores is a natural fit for opera—specifically for Pickett LePage's *Dolores Claiborne* is Pickett's fifth opera, a musical and dramatic triumph.