

DAY★STAR 27

C/W ALLERLEI 16

Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Agreed to write an opera:
It started in the key of C
And ended with a whoppera.
The thunder roared, the lightning flashed,
Stagehands and stage were shaken,
And from the wings a tenor dashed
A lot more ham than bacon.
And oh to be soprano
Now that Verdi's here;
Her mild serene piano
Was cryin' on her bier.
It grew from soft to forte,
Addio alla morte,
Expiring loud and snorty--
The critics yawned, I fear.

But Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Must now forego their battle;
The twist, the frug and watusi
Have sounded their death-rattle.

--MZB

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A few weeks or months ago (Time goes fast around here) Walter and I were speculating about Puccini's first opera, Le Villi. (The Witch Dancers.) As most operatic literati know, Le Villi was submitted to the perennial, or was it annual?, Sonzogno Competition for a one-act opera, and did not even win an honorable mention. Nobody now remembers the opera which took first place that year--in fact, the only reasonably permanent opera to come out of the years and years of the Sonzogno was Cavalleria Rusticana. Some operatic writers and critics have found it amusing to throw brickbats at the people running the Sonzogno competition, for not recognizing a Great New Talent. They tend to forget that Le Villi is fairly obscure today, too, and without the LP record industry it might have gone on mouldering away unrevived for perhaps another hundred years. And one can have a feeling for the judges at the Sonzogno. After all, Puccini's handwriting was notoriously ghastly--Ricordi later employed a special Puccini copyist--and this work, completed in haste, and posted at the last possible minute, may well have turned up long after the judges had read most of the acceptable entries and made at least tentative decisions. One can imagine a judge, handed the messy manuscript at the last minute, groaning, scowling, trying vainly to puzzle out the first few pages of the score, and finally--with a tolerant "Povero ragazzo!"--tossing the ms. into the slushpile of those to be returned without comment.

From here we got to speculating about the possible also-rans in that contest. I read somewhere that in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris one can sit down (if he has the patience, determination, and a strong enough rump) and go through the scores of over 30,000 (yes, thirty thousand) operas, all of which have been publicly performed at least once. Considering that there are at most 200 or so in the circulating "permanent repertory" and, maybe, a couple of hundred more which see an occasional revival, and that only two or three new operas or new revivals yearly have any chance of a second or third season (where are The King's Henchman, Mona, Natoma, Shanewis, Merry Mount or The Seal Woman these days?), the list of rejected operas must reach fearsome proportions.

And then we began wondering what might turn up at a modern (1978) competition for a one-act opera in English...and how the hypothetical judges would react to their task of reading this monstrous operatic slushpile. So you may imagine the Menzogno Opera Competition, 1978, and the four judges, one week after deadline date, gathering together at the chairman's cleared-off diningroom table, and asking....

WHAT HAVE YOU AT YOUR

B: Well, we might as well face the music--literally as well as figuratively. [groans; A (Chairman) bangs gavel.] How many entries did you tabulate altogether?

A: There were 127 entries--

C: That's not too many!

- B: You a glutton for punishment or something? [laughter.]
- A: [bangs gavel] Gentlemen, please! After the ones too obviously by illiterates, children, or crackpots, were weeded out--they're in this pile here, I didn't give you any of them--
- D: Are you sure about that?
- A: That still left eighty-~~seven~~.
- C: "Fourscore and seven scores ago..."
- A: Last year it was worse. You've each, I trust, read all of them through, or at least enough of each one to decide whether it merits further consideration here. This meeting is for weeding out all those that don't, and reconsidering the few that might have a chance. You know the rules: three prizes, ten honorable mentions; those qualifying must be one-act operas in English, previously unpublished and unperformed.
- B: That's still a hell of a lot of music-paper. Think of the 74 also-rans.
- C: What do you think we've been doing all week?
- D: The trouble is, only about half of these entrants, at most, have the least concept of what an opera is. Pet theories aside, it has to be music, and people have to play it, stage it, and sing it. And even meritorious music won't save an opera from oblivion if it has an impossible libretto. Nor will even a good combination of music and libretto get by if it is unstageable. Schubert and Tchaikovsky were only two of many who wasted fine music--I've heard some of the arias--on impossible libretti. And at the other end there is Schönberg's Moses und Aaron, which if staged today would get the impresario jailed for obscenity.
- A: Here endeth the first chapter of the Gospel According to Saint Giulio. When I was weeding them over I found it simplest to divide them into three categories--Possibles, Impossible and Incredibles. You probably noticed my bluepencil markings on the corner--asterisk for Possible, minus sign for Impossible, X for Incredible.
- C: With, of course, the Incredibles predominating.
- A: Naturally.
- B: Why did you distinguish between Impossible and Incredibles?

END OF THE TABLE, BROTHER?

by MZBB &
W. Breen

- A: I figured that the Incredibles would, if you all agreed with me, receive routine rejection slips, and that the Impossibles--the real also-rans, not merely also-walkeds, if you know what I mean, Pooh--might receive polite letters. Maybe even encouraging ones. You never can tell. Think of the history of the Prix de Rome: people never even getting honorable mentions there often became composers of first rank. The Prix de Rome competition became a laughingstock. So did the Sonzogno. And ours?

- B: From my own overlook--I mean looking-over--it looks to me as though there won't be that much difficulty in choosing prize-winners. I mean, really--we're judging operas, not impossible concoctions which nobody in his right mind would try to sing and no audience could remember a tune from five minutes after the last curtain call. I'm no reactionary, God knows; Britten based his Turn of the Screw on a twelve-tone row, yet little Miles's "Malo, Malo", Quint's call and one of the Governess's monologues still haunt me, and have ever since I saw the premiere over twenty years ago.
- D: Which reminds me: the operas submitted to these competitions seem to run in cycles. Last year there were eighteen or nineteen on supernatural themes!
- C: Cashing in, they hope, on the popularity of Turn of the Screw and The Medium.
- D: Yes, both were revived several times in the last couple of years.
- B: Now if any of the candidates could write like Menotti I wouldn't care!
- D: No, that was the trouble. Many of the worst ones plagiarized him. But this year it seems to be civil rights. Out of our 87 I remember at least eight on that theme, and seven of those would have gone into your "Incredible" pile. There was only one good one.
- A: I know the one you mean. Here it is, with the Possibles all right. The Lynching, by that chap from Chicago, Wayne Darcy. Libretto, he says, based on a short story "Daniel White for the Greater Good", by someone called Harlan Ellison.
- C: Harlan Ellison? Good God, isn't that the TV scriptwriter who used to do science-fiction and stories about juvenile delinquent gangs?
- B: Yes, it's in his Gentleman Junkie. I read it in paperback long ago. They're still reprinting collections of his stories.
- D: I read that one too. Brrrrrrr.
- A: You've got to admit the music is good, though.
- B: Pure Grand Guignol. Makes Il Tabarro read like Punch & Judy.
- C: I must admit he uses his Negro spiritual motives subtly enough and without the slightest bit of corn--or homily grits.
- D: Beautifully ironic. Recall the bit where the mob is yelling for White to be taken out and lynched, and the melodic line quotes note for note from the St. Matthew Passion--the chorus's howl of "Crucify Him!" And the jazz drummers at the finale---you think of the ending of L'Histoire du Soldat, of course, but it's the right thing in the right place here.
- B: You do have a point.
- A: Want this to be put aside for a second reading, or shall we put it with the prizewinners?
- C: Oh, it'll win something. I just hope it doesn't start something.
- D: In the prize pile, by all means.
- B: I'll reread it after we've decided which prize to give it.

- A: We'll save time by throwing out the incredibles and the impossibles first. There really aren't that many outstandingly good ones.
- C: Should we start with the other wrongs done in the name of civil wights by uncivil wights?
- D: Well, how about that wretched thing called We Shall Overcome?
- A: Which one? There are three here by that name, and a couple of others in the pile I didn't show you.
- D: The one by Cletus something.--Here it is, Cletus V. Washington. --That couldn't possibly be his name, could it?
- B: You'd be surprised. Is that the one based entirely on chain-gang songs?
- A: I'm afraid so. He seems to have picked up most of them from ancient Folkways recordings and Library of Congress tapes, so they're authentic enough.
- B: We're judging operas here, not anthropological fieldwork, I hope.
- A: At least he can write music; he can do something with his themes, and he can orchestrate. But the words...Propaganda, of course--
- C: With that title, what else?
- A: Yes, and sort of pathetic. I suppose he thought its crudity lent it ethnic value.
- D: I thought the fad for "ethnic" stuff went out years ago?
- A: He must not, though. Now if he'd only had a halfway decent libretto--
- C: That's just the trouble. It was halfway decent. Exactly half.
- A: The other two We Shall Overcomes are worse. One of them; believe it or not, has only guitar chords for instrumentation.
- B: You've got to be putting me on. I must not have read past the first few bars.
- D: It didn't improve beyond them, I fear.
- C: Honest Injun. Or honest idjit.
- B: I don't know whether to be mad or sorry for people like that.
- D: Be mad. If you start being sorry for them you'll get so you can't sleep nights. I learned that lesson four years ago when I began sitting in on these judging panels.
- B: Where are the other civil-rights things? We may as well hear of the worst now and dispose of 'em.
- A: Good God, you think they're the worst? I was letting you down easy, I thought. Well, here's one called The Riot, or Murder in the Classroom. This one, I should say, gets a personal rejection letter. The composer is a 14-year-old girl, she wrote her own libretto, and it is at least legible--and singable, I think--and she shows some ability at composition. Of course it reads a little like Schubert juvenilia.
- D: I remember it and it does. But then, so did Schubert's operas.
- A: The music is a little too naïve even for those, let alone for modern production. Pre-Debussy harmonies don't quite fit its climactic episode, where the kook throws the bomb through the --

- window. And how can you expect a bunch of little girls to sing on pitch after that, for the final chorus, over Wagnerian brass?
- B: She should have studied Turandot. Or at least Salome.
- C: At least I have to admit the kid can write. I didn't realize she was any younger than the rest. A shocker but good theatre.
- A: She's a scholarship student at Curtis Institute and has been at Interlochen and--get this--two successive Tanglewood seminars. Voice major, composition minor.
- B: That probably describes her musical career as a whole.
- A: I still think we should give her a nice encouraging letter.
- B: Not too nice, or we'll get another one next year.
- A: So we'll read it. Why not? Maybe someday we'll be seeing it performed, too, as Opus One of--what was her last name?--Hilda Bannister.
- D: And, perhaps, comparing her with Peggy Glanville-Hicks and Lili Boulanger. I'll draw up the note.
- C: Back to the Chamber of Horrors, friends--what's the next one?
- B: --No more twelve-year-olds, please--
- A: Oh, we've just started, and I weeded out the real kid stuff before, as I told you. Here's another We Shall Overcome. This one by someone calling himself Abdullah X.
- C: Take it gently between thumb and forefinger...
- D: Not even Prokofiev could make musical propaganda palatable, though God knows he tried hard enough. And this one, as I recall, was no Prokofiev.
- B: That was another one I couldn't get past page two in. Is there anything good in it later on?
- A: I'd play you a few bars of the finale, but I don't have a wind machine, banjo, ocarina or Aida trumpet handy.
- D: I wonder if his wrong notes were intentional, or if he just didn't care? Charles Ives was careless enough that way, but at least he had a thorough background in instrumentation, and I seem to remember at least two places where Mr. X wrote passages outside the ranges of the instruments.
- C: He may buy this John Cage line, but we can't. Not when people have to sing it rather than canaries. Impossible?
- A: No, Incredibles. Need you ask? That reminds me, here is an even more incredible one, in theme if not in quality. Black Christ.
- C: Translated from the original Ethnic?
- A: No, it's subtitled The Martyrdom of Malcolm X.
- D: The libretto wasn't too bad at that--special pleading aside--but the music sounded like Bob Dylan mixed with early Verdi.
- C: Simultaneously or consecutively?--No, don't tell me.
- A: Well, it's scored for jazz combo and a folkrock chorus. "Inspired" (it says here)--
- C: I think we could dispute the use of that term for this operanting

- A: --"Inspired", as I was saying, "by lectures given by the illustrious (spelled with one L) Dr. Richard Thorne, at the Free University of Berkeley." Whoever and whatever those might be.
- D: There was some kind of newspaper yammering about them, about ten years ago. In one ear and out the other. The Free University seems to have been some kind of adult education setup without any prerequisites or academic requirements, frequented by people who either couldn't qualify for the University of California or who refused in protest or something.
- C: Ah, yes. First there was the nonuniversity for nonstudents, then we had the fad of nonbooks for nonreaders--you know, in comicstrip format. And now it's nonmusic for nonlisteners, from John Cage to Abdullah X.
- B: Or at least nonopera.--And by the way, why do the Incredibles, to give 'em your word, always come in with these lo-o-ong letters of explanation? None of the dozen or so I would have given a second reading had anything with 'em except at most "Gentlemen: Herewith my entry. Juilliard '71, song cycle From Spoon River published by Schirmer '73, performed at Town Hall by Vishnevskaya fall '74, etc. Yours truly, Heathcliff Heimerdinger." They let their entries speak for themselves. Even your little Hilda Bannister, come to think of it, did that. Did someone tell her?
- D: It's the difference between the professional attitude and the amateur, I suppose. A work of art stands on its own merits without extraneous commentary at the time, or not at all. Much the same thing in other media. I used to be first reader for one of the literary magazines--slushpile and agented materials both--and 99 times out of 100, if a manuscript came with a long explanatory letter, it proved unusable from paragraph one. The professionals usually sent nothing at all with their manuscripts except their names, pen-names if any, and addresses or agents' addresses. In fairness I couldn't pass on or reject solely on that basis, but the rule did hold up almost without exception.
- A: Then I suppose this one here needs no more than a moment's review. The Great Wall, by Ignacio Ramirez. It's about Berlin, not China, according to the four-page covering letter.
- B: Not that you could ever have told from the music.
- D: And an accompaniment of gunfire yet. Didn't the poor goof realize that the voices would have to be heard over the--um--instrumentation? Scarpia had enough difficulties in the Te Deum...
- C: Toss it over.--No, not here, I meant over the wall!
- A: If your cycle theory holds up, we may be in for another year or so of political entries. Besides that last miscarriage of musical justice, as my punning friend here might call it, and the civil rights things, there were the three on the death of John F. Kennedy. Two were obviously too amateurish even to pass on to you. Last year there were four--none in the funning.
- B: And the other one--isn't that the thing whose composer had the chutzpah to suggest casting Maria Callas as Jacqueline Kennedy?
- C: I suppose we'll be seeing one on the Martyrdom of Lee Harvey Oswald any day now. Maybe we should give a special prize for the goofiest librettø?
- A: If I were running this competition instead of merely being the

chairman of the judging committee, I would make it a standing rule that no opera on the subject of Father Divine, Enoch Arden, or current or recent political disputes would be considered.

B: How many Enoch Ardens were there? I didn't recall but the one.

A: You didn't see the three others in the Amateurs pile. There must have been at least seven in last year's competition and over twenty since I've been on the judging panel.

D: They weren't the first. Someone named Rudolf Raimann, I believe, actually had his Enoch Arden performed in Leipzig, around 1905. I've seen reviews of the thing--pretty awful, the consensus went--but not even an aria survives of it today. I really wouldn't have expected the subject to interest twenty listeners, let alone twenty composers.

C: Tennyson's ghost must have gotten tired of merely rotating in the grave and decided to come out and haunt the music schools. To such a pass doth High Camp lead us.

A: Are we at least agreed on the merits of this year's Enoch Arden?

C: Yes. Tell the composer it deserves a performance--by the West Windwhistle, Arizona, Opera Society.

B: Why ridicule the thing for its subject matter? It's the music that counts. Who would have thought Carry Nation had any possibilities?

A: The one sent here didn't. I suppose you mean Douglas Moore's, the one they revived last year in San Francisco after it had some seventy performances by the touring Met company and lord only knows how many others in the late '60's.

B: Yes. Given good enough music and a passable libretto, any subject can make a good opera. So I hope they don't put in your exclusion clause after all.

D: That theory, my friend, gave the 19th century such inanities as La Sonnambula, La Gioconda and Il Castello di Kenilworth. Not to mention the more recent inanities such as The Secret of Suzanne.

C: Yes, and your beloved Puccini's Girl of the Golden West, complete with Indians and miners yelling Andiamo! and All right! and Ugh! Ugh! all at once.

B: No, you've just proved my point with that one, not refuted it.

A: Well, for goofiest libretto this time here is one of the prime nominees. Pinocchio, by Gennaro Benedetti. Done in Commedia dell'Arte style, yet.

B: Didn't the composer ever hear of Pagliacci?

B: Not only heard of it, but heard it, and far too often. I remember an aria for the puppet, "Just a boy of wood and paint," which could be Vesti la giubba without the sobs.

C: For tenor, of course? Or need I ask?

A: Let's be serious, at least. Remember, the poor fellow spent a year or so writing and orchestrating it.

B: He might better have spent that year listening to good operas and learning how to compose without copying them. The way Mozart and Puccini and Menotti did. I have no patience with these kooks.

A: Have no fear, it isn't a candidate for a second reading by me

either. How about you?

C, D: No, no.

A: But here, by God, is strong competition for it. Batman.

D: That wasn't in the pile you gave us.

B: You've got to be kidding!

D: I don't believe it.

C: I wouldn't believe it if I attended the premiere.

A: Look for yourselves.

B: I still don't believe it.

A: And he wants a boy soprano to play the part of Robin. I didn't dare look at the second scene--it's marked "In the bedroom."

C: Is it in purple ink?

A: No, but it ought to be, if the vocal lines assigned to Batman and Robin in the first scene are any criterion. Sprachstimme lines alternating with, for Batman, coloratura tenor --preferably in falsetto--and a low register that might be more suitable to a basso cantante. [groans]

C: [giggling] The falsetto when he's with Robin? [laughter]

A: No, it seems he's a tenor when he's in costume, and a man when in ordinary clothes. Musical disguise so that the city fathers wouldn't recognize him by his voice. At least that's what the covering letter said. Want to try it out? [passes the ms. on]

B: Sorry, not my type. [groans and howls of laughter]

D: Is this someone's idea of a practical joke?

A: I don't think so. The Batman fad has been with us off and on for about 12 or 13 years now.

B: Longer than that, surely. I remember reading Batman comicbooks when I was nine years old. [blushes]

C: [receives the ms., riffles through it, howls with laughter, puts his head down on his arms and goes into hysterics.]

D: Can I get you a tranquilizer or something?

B: [takes the ms. from before C, collapses in giggles.]

A: Gentlemen, gentlemen, please! [bangs gavel. C recovers.]

B: [recovering] By Herman W. Schmidt. --This doesn't tell us much. --Graduated with honors, he says, from Hardin-Simmons University Music Department, '77.

A: Where's that?

B: Somewhere in Texas.

A, C: Oh.

D: No, it has quite a good reputation; its traveling choir has performed all over the country as well as in Canada and Latin America, to good reviews. I heard the group do a fiendishly difficult program three years ago, in Philadelphia: a couple of Palestrina motets, the Bach Wachet auf cantata, Hovhaness's Magnificat, and some Benjamin Britten choral piece, among others. If this Schmidt person comes from there, he is well trained.

B: [spluttering] You couldn't tell it by this--!

D: [receives the ms., turns purple, then explodes in laughter.]

A: [bangs the gavel again] Can I get you a tranquilizer?

D: But what on earth could the poor fellow have been up to? He couldn't have been serious. Listen to this: [broken by giggles, he strikes a pose, hrrumphs, pulls C up to a standing position, points to the ms., and arm in arm they declaim unison in falsetto:]

C,D: "The Sign of Justice flames again
In Gothaaam's Mid-niiiiight Skyyyyyyy!"

[All four collapse in laughter.]

D: You can imagine what follows that. Roll of drums, clash of cymbals, the Bat sign searchlighted onto a back curtain, and the two heroes, still arm in arm, grab a dangling rope and are hoisted up offstage. Shades of the Rhine Maidens.

B: Maybe the poor kook is just naïve. Texas, you know. I hate to ridicule a sincere effort, but there are limits.

A: [dryly] I take it we are unanimous on rejecting this without comment.

C: I protest. We should at least send him a letter saying that we are sorry but Mme. Schumann-Heink is too old for tights.

A: Gentleman, please, please! [bangs gavel, almost unheard] We don't want to take all night. Let's get the other horrors out of the way quickly. The next one shouldn't take more than a minute or so. The Siamese Twins.

C: Surely, you mean get the horrors back into the chamber. That's the one laid in the freak show?

A: Yes, you remember--one of the pair is hopelessly in love with the fat lady, finds life too much for him, and commits suicide, the other twin necessarily dying shortly afterwards because they share a common liver or something--

C: Even if not a common lover. Is there a doctor in the cast?

A: Well guessed. There is, and he gets on scene just too late to save the pair. He even talks like a doctor.

B: Ugh! This is carrying verismo too far.

D: It isn't unprecedented. The Medium had a deafmute, as did La Muette de Portici unless I misremember; there was a bearded lady in The Rake's Progress--

C: Played by a beatnik in drag?

D: --and not less than nine operas based on The Hunchback of Notre Dame.

B: Maybe so, but not in the last seventy years.

A: Haven't you seen any of the good ones? Let's get something here with promise. For instance: consider Jon Cartieri's The Death of Dracula.

D: It reads like a condensation of a four-acter.

B: The libretto could use some work. But I have to admit that the

music is singable and the orchestration quite ingenious.

C: Two huge sets, Petit Guignol and Grand Guignol.

A: Even granting that only the first prize winner gets a performance as part of the award, still I think this one deserves at least honorable mention and maybe a third or even a second. Shall I put it with The Lynching?

B, C, D: Yes, OK, go ahead.

A: And then there's this nice lyrical thing in three scenes, Ramona and Alessandro.

B: Sentimental twaddle.

C: You're hard to please. If it's gruesome you say ugh, and if it's sentimental you say ugh too. Trying out for a role as one of the Indians in Fanciulla del West?

B: Well, I just ask you; Helen Hunt Jackson? Fine for the movies, maybe, but an opera?

D: The music is well put together but it does seem a little too reminiscent of Charles Wakefield Cadman for my old ears.

C: Then at least it won't hurt the audience's ears.

A: And most of them won't have heard of Cadman anyway.

C: Or else they'll confuse him with the oldtimer for whom Caedmon Records were named.

B: But is that what we're looking for? Broadway, maybe, or even off-Broadway, but we have certain standards--

A: Gentlemen, gentleman! Obviously by the way you're arguing you don't consider it impossible. Let me put the thing with The Lynching and Dracula for a second reading, and go on weeding out the rest.

C: Until Tonstant Weeder frowns up... [A glares at him.]
A: I'm going to read off a few titles that look to me to be hopeless. If any of you disagree, stop me at once. We've got to save time somehow. Earth Abides? [silence] The Death of Socrates?

C: The composer of that one should have followed Socrates's example.

A: Well, at least he had the good sense to use Mary Renault's book as the basis for his libretto rather than the Jowett translation of the Platonic dialogues. Does it get a second reading, though?

B, C, D: No, no.

A: The Elephant's Child?

D: The poor simpleton must have just come back from a performance of Charles Koechlin's Les Bandar-Log.

C: But who would play the crocodile?

B: Maybe it was intended for performance by marionettes, with the voices backstage. I didn't look beyond the first page.

A: You're right about the stage direction. But I wish you would give some of these candidates more than a cursory glance. They might turn out to be better after their authors had finished clearing their throats.

D: It doesn't usually work out that way. An opera, like a play or a piece of fiction of any length, has to have a narrative hook;

professionals know it, amateurs usually don't. I know what my friend meant; I could normally tell after the first few bars of the overture, or at worst after the first couple of lines of dialogue, whether the thing had any merit. There are occasional exceptions--Madama Butterfly begins prosaically enough, more's the pity--but once the little geisha is onstage the interest picks up and doesn't let down for a moment.

B: Well, when a glance or two at later sections doesn't hold interest either, that seems confirmatory enough.

A: Anyway, let's go on. Cagliostro?

D: Weren't Johann Strauss's and Adolphe Adam's flops enough lessons to the composer of that one?

C: Y'know, next thing we'll be hearing about will be an opera based on Aleister Crowley and his wild haggis hunt.

A: You weren't doing your homework. There is an opera here about Crowley, but it's called The Great Beast. Set in his Abbey of Thelema, at Cefalù, dealing with his two--um--concubines. Winds up with a Black Mass at which the Devil appears.

B: The music was utterly impossible. I kept thinking of Boito's Mefistofele and how much better he would have handled the same dramatic situations--as composer or as librettist.

D: It isn't even historically accurate. The man must have drawn his information from the more sensational paperbacks. There must have been at least fifteen different ones published, not counting reprints, in the last dozen or so years, all purporting to explain Crowley. Titles ranged from "The Wickedest Man in the World" to "The Beast" to "Servant of Satan"--you know the type; when the sex novel craze faded out, this sort of sensationalism followed.

A: Rejected, I take it? [nods of assent] Let's go on: The Birth of the Holy Child, by Maude and Jeffery Finch-Andrews?

C: Let's hear the covering letter with that one.

A: I'll skip the personal stuff in it: "Performed"--no, let's begin a bit earlier: "Humbly submitted for consideration as a Traditional Christmas Pageant, suitable for churches, schools, and clubs. Performed twelve times by the North Wokington Falls Presbyterian Church Choir."

D: You asked for it.

B: Is it based entirely on Christmas carols?

A: I'm afraid so.

D: Didn't we reject this one two years ago?

A: I'm not sure, but I'd bet on it.

C: I suggest, in Christian charity to the good people of the North Wokington Falls Presbyterian Church, that we lose the manuscript, or they might have to listen to the thing a 13th time.

A: Oh, well...The Courtship of Miles Standish?

B: Oh, God.

A: By Miss (and yes, she underlined it) Prudence Cabot Lowell. And based on guess what.

- D: It's easy to ridicule librettos. How about the music? I seem to recall that it had a certain bleak strength.
- B: It was just about what one would expect from the title--based on New England hymn tunes. She must have gone through every hymnal published north of New York City from the Bay Psalm Book to William Billings. All in blank verse, and pretty awful.
- D: I think I'd like to try it at the piano. Some of Ives's earlier works had a similar feeling to them.
- A: Take it. I doubt it'll be worth your time, but if you really think it's worth a second reading, we can put it on that stack. --Better still, let's put it there anyway, for the moment, and you can play through it after we've finished. I have here something called Romola of the Redwoods.
- D: The libretto was ghastly and the music awfully folksongy though not even in a class with Weill's Down in the Valley, or any of the Blitzstein propaganda pieces.
- C: Strictly for admirers of Gene Stratton Porter.
- A: Rejected, I take it?
- C: "Woodman, spare that redwood tree..."
- B: Just about. I thought it sounded like a one act parody of Fanciulla del West.
- C: And you didn't say Ugh?
- A: Oh, dear. Speaking of good music and a ghastly libretto, here's The Little Mermaid. Straight from Hans Christian Andersen, of course.
- D: Well, it isn't the first time. Henriques's opera of that name was premiered--in Copenhagen, of course--about 1910. A flop.
- C: You and your elephantine memory.
- B: But this one, telescoped into one act? I suggest we give this guy a really good letter. The libretto is impossibly clumsy, but the composer--what's his name?--
- A: ~~Nils~~ Lindgaard. No librettist named.
- B: --has written some beautiful music, especially for the transformation scene. I don't care if there is too much scenery, fifteen characters, and those clumsy sentences--maybe he doesn't speak English well. But the man has a terrific lyric gift.
- D: I'd think it might even rate an honorable mention. Lyric gift is all too rare in these days when sentiment is still something embarrassing despite the example of Puccini, Menotti, Barber.
- A: A second reading it gets, then.
- B: It's nice to be reading a serious effort again.
- A: Speaking of serious efforts, here's one that would really have been in the running if someone had had sense enough to read the rules more carefully. The Tempest.
- D: A splendid thing though impossibly difficult to produce.
- A: It's in three acts, which automatically rules it out. Ten scenes. A consort of Elizabethan instruments, and an impossibly demanding hosen--well, tights--role for Ariel.

- C: Boy soprano? Benjamin Britten, what hast thou wrought?
- A: He doesn't say. There was no covering letter. I suppose a coloratura soprano could sing it offstage through a speaking tube and have the part mimed by a ballet dancer.
- D: I played through that one. I'm going to speak to a friend of mine about it; it deserves to be produced somewhere, but we've got to disqualify it here. I can't imagine how a serious composer--I saw his first opera done last year in Denver--came to submit this one here.
- B: Maybe his wife submitted it for him without reading the rules. I liked the thing too, but three acts?
- A: That's always the way. You get a good one and then have to rule it out on technicalities. Going from the sublime to--well, this one isn't really ridiculous, at that. The Death of Messalina. It's by the same kook who sent us one on Caligula year before last, and it makes Salome look like Elsie Dinsmore. But the music has merit.
- B: A lot of late Puccini influence, even to gongs and weird percussion, but it would make damned effective theatre.
- C: Now there is one Callas might well star in.
- D: So give the composer a merit badge. I think the music is hideous, myself--fitting its subjectmatter. I didn't like Salome, either.
- B: It's one of the few really singable ones, leaving aside The Tempest and The Little Mermaid. One scene, one soprano, two baritones and a tenor, with a small chorus. Easy to produce, and as near as I can tell not too difficult for the orchestra.
- A: Oh, it demands consideration, but if we were to give it a prize we'd be the laughingstock of the country. Honorable mention, and let some other group try it out. Speaking of laughingstocks--oh, lord, I'd forgotten this one. The Road to Tipperary: A Romantic Opera About World War One."
- C: Isn't this carrying High Camp a little bit too far?
- D: With music based on World War I soldiers' songs--some of them now being put on records as folksongs, yet. And a plot based on the same one that gave us at least fifty movies: the tired old "Soldier Left His Heart at the Red Cross Canteen," going back to war with the canteen girl's picture in his memory and whistling the song they sang there.
- C: Did someone talk about laughingstocks?
- A: Well, believe it or not, it was performed by his college's opera workshop.
- D: Doesn't that automatically disqualify it? Original operas, with no prior performances.
- B: Where's your elephantine memory? There have been dozens of operas based on folksongs, and the line between popular song and folksong has always been thin. Besides, this one has two very fine singing roles, and it isn't at all banal in its use of its materials. I'd vote it an honorable mention anyway.
- C: Oh, you're an incurable romantic. Also, you're inconsistent. Weren't you the one making like a stage Indian over Ramona and

Romola? I still say it's utter tosh.

- A: I don't think it's good enough to worry about. It looks as though three of us say No and a fourth says Honorable Mention. That is a clear majority. Into the reject pile, with a letter. We'll be here all night if we don't get on with it. Here's a more serious contender, now: The Trojan Women.
- B: God, yes. Heart-rending. Very strange instrumentation, almost Mahlerish tone-colors. I'd bet the composer either sings professionally or has something to do with vocal training. Maybe he's a chormaster or conductor.
- A: No data here; there was no covering letter. Morgan Stannard, San Francisco.
- D: I don't particularly like the balance. Only two men's voices against half a dozen women. Suor Angelica was quietly dropped from the repertory for that reason among several others--too little variety in voices.
- C: That doesn't apply here. The women's voices are set off, are contrasted far better than in Suor Angelica. Cassandra's role is one of the wildest I've ever seen for coloratura. The composer might have made a conventional mad scene--the plot is made to order for it--but instead he has made her into a figure at once pitiful and awesome. Helen of Troy as a dark mezzo who has to be able to act; Hecuba, a contralto, as fiery as any gipsy, as persuasive as Cicero. I think this is prize material. Good theatre, one set without any complicated props, no tenors, virtuoso writing for every voice, even in the choruses.
- B: And did you look through Hecuba's aria and lament for the child? And the chorale as the women go up toward the ships? I couldn't read through it without being shaken up. It was all I could do to keep from crying at the end. They don't write operas like that every year. I'd vote it first prize myself.
- D: I still think it's horrifying subjectmatter, though well done.
- A: And I myself prefer to see the first prize go to a comic opera if possible. This time there is a good candidate. The Buffoons' War, a real oddball item about the antics of the last Italian castrati in France.
- B: Would it get past the censors? I thought it a lovely spoof job myself but a bit risqué in subjectmatter.
- E: Surely you mean High Camp...
- A: No censor trouble outside the Deep South, maybe. There's not an off-color line in it. It's full of hilarious takeoffs on Handel, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart--
- D: But they all came long after the castrati and the Italian orchestras were banished from France!
- A: Have you no sense of humor? The anachronisms are part of the fun. A period piece complete with padded calves, yard-high wigs, florid and buffo parts with occasional hints of Rossini--and of Puccini. A sort of operatic counterpart of Prokofiev's Classical Symphony.
- B: It's a tour de force, all right--
- C: Tour de farce, I'd say.

- B: But it sounds too imitative. The music sometimes sounds so Handelian that the audience might have trouble telling if it was a spoof or a mere pastiche. Points like that get through to musicians, maybe, but not to audiences. That's my main objection to giving it a first prize against The Trojan Women--or The Lynching, for that matter.
- D: A good point. And it would be pure hell to cast. Four tenors, two countertenors, ~~three~~ comic trouser contraltos--where would you get them?
- A: You might try importing them from Berkeley. The University there has had some extraordinary resources in that line in recent years. They did Coronation of Poppea and the recording is still considered definitive. And that opera created more casting headaches than this one.
- D: You're right enough about that, anyway. What was the composer's name? Some Frenchman, I think.
- A: Philippe Lalande. Two chamber operas and a symphony in print.
- D: Lalande? A good man. I conducted his first opera, a thing called Chopin and George Sand. That was in Dallas.
- B: I heard a tape of it. It wasn't at all bad; another period piece, not a bit like this one in style.
- C: If he was good enough to get that subject matter through in Texas without being jailed, he must be pretty good. Gallic gall..
- B: I'd like to see it performed, anyway. Second prize, okay?
- A: It deserves better than that. But I pity the conductor who has to keep all those tenors in line, and the impresario who has to find three good contraltos. Costumery would be a problem, too. It would be an expensive piece but worth it.
- C,D: Give it a prize.
- A: Let's see--I don't think this needs serious attention: The Happy Prince. Hey, it's a cantata, not an opera: how did it get in here?
- B: Once again, somebody didn't mind the rules.
- A: And nobody in his right mind would consider an opera on the subject of Tarzan, even if the music were any good, which it isn't.
- C: Hoo hah! Is there a duet for Tarzan and Jane swinging through the trees? Or picking fleas off each other?
- A: Well, almost. They sing a canonic sequence "Me Tarzan--You Jane" for over a hundred bars, complete with references to Papageno and Papagena.
- B: Oh, God!
- D: I thought you were serious!
- A: I was and so is the composer. That's the hell of it.
- C: [turns his thumb down]
- A: Does it even deserve a letter of rejection?
- B, D, C: Are you kidding?
- A: Then there's the other extreme. Dorian Grey, in four scenes.

- By someone signing himself Woodbine T. Meadowlark. Add yes, it is in purple ink.
- B: I seem to have heard that name somewhere before...
- A: And--get this, will you?--a lo-o-ong narrative introduction. By a Narrator.
- C: The ghost of Oscar Wilde, maybe?
- D: No, he's too busy rotating in his grave. I'm surprised not to see more Shakespeare, incidentally. I only recall two--The Tempest, which we disqualified, and something on Hamlet.
- A: Opelia. Here it is. By someone called Jacqueline Ericson.
- B: How many operas does that make on the Hamlet theme?
- D: Heaven only knows. I lost count years ago. Ambroise Thomas's version is dead, and the others were stillborn.
- A: This one seems to be based mainly on old British--British!?--folksongs. With a setting in ancient Denmark she used British tunes? And she calls for a consort of viols yet.
- C: Maybe that should be spelled v-i-l-e-s. I remember the thing; it has a florid mad scene. Joan Sutherland has induced too many sopranos to go mad on stage--and too many listeners offstage.
- B: And I didn't care much for Bellini the first time around, let alone Neo-Bellini. Let's not even give it a letter.
- A: Well, what about neo-Wagner? Here's something called Dolorous Gard, about Lancelot, Guinevere, King Arthur and company. Odd mixture of modern and archaic sound.
- B: I played the thing through on the piano. It sounds like dimly remembered Vaughan Williams, Holst and Hovhaness. Singable enough, but it has libretto trouble too.
- C: Yes--Wagner wrote it a hundred years earlier and called it Tristan.
- D: At least this one is only in one act.
- C: It's still impossible. Ods bodikins, but this auncient medieval movement hath gone an ell or two too far, methinks. Forsooth, let not the prize go to this concoction.
- A: Next we have The Princess, on a libretto based on Tennyson.
- B: Tennyson? I thought nobody read him these days. Let's see it.
- D: I thought Gilbert and Sullivan had killed that one off with Princess Ida, for good. Yet this one is dead serious.
- A: Neo-Puccini.
- B: But such beautiful neo-Puccini!
- D: The pile's thinning out, thank God.
- A: Oh, no! I missed tossing this one out before, somehow. The Titanic.
- C: You didn't miss much. Final duet by young lovers, complete with reference to the Flying Dutchman, and the stage band playing hymn tunes as the ship sinks--and the opera with it. Poop.
- A: Oh, well. Another science-fiction opera, and the weirdest one

yet. One roll of tape. Based on something called "The Cold Equations", it says on the box. The music is supposed to be 100% electronic--"as befits our age." No singers listed. Did any of you play it? [they shake heads in negative.] Well, do we want to put it on the tape recorder here?

B: God forbid!

D: Aniara was hard enough to take.

C: Well, anyway, it would be cheap to produce.

A: Mary Magdalen in three scenes. Some of this was pretty, but lightweight.

D: Its best future might be in cantata performance in churches. I don't remember that there was enough action outside the dialogue to preclude that style of presentation.

B: When anyone calls an opera "pretty" it's the kiss of death. It wasn't really that bad, as I remember. Give it a second reading--it might get an honorable mention anyway. There really haven't been that many good possibilities.

A: Something you couldn't say for this one. How did it get into this pile, anyway? I thought I'd sent it back or left it with the initial rejects.

B: Let's see it. Fata Morgana--what's wrong with it?

A: Just lift it. About 500 manuscript pages, and I couldn't read one of them. Does he think this is a cryptography contest?

B: I don't know how you're even going to get it back to its composer. There's no name on it!

A: I knew there must be some reason. Look--let's wind this up. Was there anything else we all ought to look at?

D: As it happens, yes. Pull out The Dan-Nan-Ron. Libretto based --thank you--on Fiona MacLeod, music drawn from Gaelic folk themes, and a marvelous bass monologue at the end. I'd say this one would rate honorable mention at least.

B: Rather grisly ending, but very singable. I'd go along.

A: Not another folksong opera?

D: Do I guess you are prejudiced against them?

A: Not exactly. But most of them are so terrible. In the pile I didn't pass on to you was a wretched thing called Viva Delano, all about the grape strikers in California in the late 60's, and sounding as if it had been written by one of them. An all-male cast, with tenors for the strikers, and basses and baritone as the big heavy villainous oppressors. It ended with a Freedom March, as you might expect...

B: And what's this one? The envelope isn't even opened. Did it even come in before the deadline? I never saw it before.

A: Toss it.--Speaking of last-minute entries, here's a real Incredible. The Ascension of Aimee Semple MacPherson.

C: Not serious, I trust?

A: Oh, very. To be done in a replica of her Los Angeles temple.

B: Shudder!

A: That just about does it, if we leave out the one on Nostradamus

- B: Another one I didn't get past page two on. How does it end?
- A: The French court sent for him, ordering him to prophesy good fortune for the king. Instead, he appears in astrologer's robes and declaims his quatrains in falsetto to a grim pavane. As the courtiers recognize their nicknames and their secret ambitions, they flee in terror.
- D: Sounds as bad as Cagliostro. Were there any others with the least merit?
- A: [riffles through the pile] Lazarus?--I thought not. Judgment of Paris?
- D: Gluck sewed up that theme for all time.
- A: Oh, the hell with it. If even you can't remember any others, it's a safe bet they wouldn't rate honorable mentions. We're pretty well agreed on the three prizewinners, and the main problem will be to decide which one gets which prize. Also [counts] there are only seven possible honorable mentions. Do we let it go at that or do we have to reread the impossibles?
- C: Fate worse than death. The rules didn't say there have to be as many as 10, only not more than 10 hon. men. And how are we going to decide which opera gets which prize? Each of you three has a different candidate for Number One, and it'll be like electing a Pope to get agreement among you.
- B: Will we end up tossing a coin? Or choosing compromise candidates?
- D: God, you're as bad as the composers. What do you think you're doing anyway?
- C: . . . Better you should ask what do the composers think they are doing.
- B: Writing operas.
- A: Somebody said a few years ago in the Saturday Review that opera was a living anachronism.
- D: Well, judging by what we've been reading here, it's living, all right. You can't have a good artform without a few dozen hearty would-be practitioners on the fringes.
- C: Each one ought to be singing "I would if I could but I can't."
- B: And so much for the state of the art.
- D: I wonder if any of these will last more than one season? Even the ones we award the prizes to?
- A: I suggest we adjourn, take the three prize candidates and the seven also-rans home and look over them again, then meet here next Monday to decide.

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From OPERA NEWS, Oct. 24, 1998

Anna Madakirian, Hungarian-born soprano, stars this week in a revival of The Road to Tipperary, a romantic, lyrical period piece of great and tender charm. This opera, first performed in 1979, was originally submitted to the Menzogna Competition, failing even to win an honorable mention.....

POPPEA CROWNED IN HIGH RENAISSANCE SPLENDOR

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) has long been a name to conjure with, both among music lovers and people given to musical one-upmanship. Among the former, he has attracted an increasing following due to a dozen or twenty discs mostly devoted to collections of his madrigals, some of them (like Gesualdo's) eerily modern in sound and of Wagnerian intensity on their small scale. Excerpts from his Orfeo (1607) have been available on several labels, and what appears to be a complete or nearly complete version came out a few years back on Archive. But only with the present version of his L'Incoronazione di Poppea has the musical world been given a performance of Monteverdi's finest work which might sound at all like what its Venetian audiences of 1642 applauded. Not only is this performance authentic in almost every detail, it is also musicianly in the highest degree, full of gorgeous arias and ensemble numbers, and with dramatic interest unwavering through some 32 scenes occupying almost three full hours.

Poppea received a drastically cut performance and recording by the Glyndebourne Festival group in 1962, further marred by an orchestra large enough to obscure some of the contrapuntal lines, and a chorus of Seneca's intimate friends ample enough for Lohengrin; and there have been three or four other revivals in recent years. Part of this interest in Monteverdi's masterpiece might be attributable to soloists' seeking a suitable setting for gems like Seneca's Solitudine amata (how many coloratura bass roles can be found in the standard repertoire?) or Arnalta's lullaby Adagiati, Poppea...Oblivion soave (and why hasn't this shown up on discs of aria collections by the likes of Berganza or Simionato?). But surely much of it is due to the opera's intrinsic merits. Musically it is unequalled--to my ears anyway--by any Italian opera on records prior to, perhaps, Handel's Semele, or possibly even some of Mozart's earlier efforts. We do not find long dull passages of recitative setting off an occasional display aria; instead, many numbers--as with Puccini--are dramatic set-pieces where it is difficult and really unimportant to tell where recitative ends and aria begins. Dramatically it is static in manner but powerful in effect. A single day in Rome of 65 A.D. becomes a microcosm of intrigue-ridden, turbulent, violent Venice of the 1640's--each a world of passionate extremes. The prologue, omitted in previous recordings, spells it out: the capricious god of Love vanquishes Virtue and even Fortune. "Dirà che'l mondo a cenni miei si muta!"--"You both shall admit that the world changes at my whim!" Amoral if not immoral in theme, savage in tone, the librettist Busenello has goddesses berating each other in fishwife language, each act with at least one passionate love duet between Nero and Poppea, brutally sharp contrasts between each scene and the next, pitiless characterizations in which nobody shows up as better than he ought to be with the possible exception of a flirtatious page-boy, from whom nothing much could have been expected. Empress Octavia, much wronged and potentially a tragic heroine, descends to a Borgi-esque level by forcing her irresolute paramour Otho to put on female garments and attempt to murder her rival Poppea--only to let him bungle the act and receive a sardonic pardon by Nero as a tribute to love, while Octavia is exiled. Nero's sometime tutor and official moralist/philosopher Seneca, though meeting his death warrant nobly,

shows up as a petulant windbag. Then as now, Busenello seems to say, is anything what it claims or appears to be? where are the virtues of yesteryear? The cynicism of Gianni Schicchi here appears in a context of social criticism which might apply as well to today as to 17th century Venice.

The recording was made from one of a series of live performances at the University of California, Berkeley; its sponsors went to the trouble of collating all extant mss. including the previously unpublished Treviso version of 1640--with the result that the scenes come in an unfamiliar and far more convincing order, many lines acquire dramatic point they had previously seemed to lack, and some numbers appear that had never before been heard. Monteverdi's orchestra contained but 14 instruments, and that is what we hear in this performance--throwing all emphasis on the vocal presentation. Two of the instruments, a split-key harpsichord (giving separate keys for D-sharp and E-flat, G-sharp and A-flat, and tuned in meantone as were all the instruments of Monteverdi's day) and a chitarrone or archlute, were specially built for this presentation. The attempt to achieve authenticity did run up against a few limitations. Modern trumpets had to be used in high registers rather than the ancient valveless trumpets in which accurate pitch was usually a lucky accident; a baritone (possibly the one undistinguished voice in the group) sang Nero instead of the contralto or presumably unavailable castrato who would have done so in 1642; the capricious Amore and the incredibly naive page should have been done by boys rather than by low contralto and baritone. (On stage, the sight of the page-boy trying to sound about 13 years old while wearing a black beard brought many audience giggles.)

Despite these flyspecks, this version of Poppea has assembled probably the finest group of soloists to be heard on stage in years. Special honors must go to John Thomas, a countertenor with the range, agility and vocal strength to warrant reviving the impossibly difficult castrato operas as a vehicle for him. Miriam Abramowitsch uses her fine contralto to excellent effect as the Goddess Fortuna and one of Seneca's three friends. Carole Bogard's Poppea exploits a heavy but smooth and clear low register; a fine dramatic soprano. Louise Parker's Arnalta is on the rough, almost hollow side, but the role is deeply felt and well projected. Herbert Beattie, as Seneca, exploits a coloratura bass, somewhat harsh but superbly controlled. Each of the 25 roles is well realized, well rehearsed and in general well sung, with excellent diction. The ornamentation in use in Monteverdi's day is far more difficult than that in later opera, and yet these singers manage to make much of it sound not only fluent but easy. One could have wished, perhaps, for more imaginative realization of the continuo lines by the harpsichordist, as in fact was heard in the Glyndebourne version; but here too perhaps Alan Curtis (who also edited the libretto) wanted to subordinate everything to the vocalists.

Recorded sound is excellent, partly because of Hertz Hall's impeccable acoustics; placement of instruments and voices was calculated to achieve maximum clarity. A labor of love, deserving an audience far wider than a tiny circle of connoisseurs of Renaissance vocal gymnastics. ---Walter Breen

⑤ ① MONTEVERDI: L'Incoronazione di Poppea. Miriam Abramowitsch, John Thomas, James Fankhauser, Edward Jameson, Carole Bogard, Herbert Beattie, others; chamber orchestra, Alan Curtis cond. from keyboard. CAMBRIDGE 0000 (3 discs).

[For real. Above review sent as sample to several hifi mags, receiving personal letter explaining review OK but no staff openings.]

A D A L G I S A

And when even ten slow summers had swollen and fallen,
she would wake sobbing in the night, remembering
(while the world slept around her aging heart)
Nights stolen beneath a drowned and sleeping moon
Gold on black branches, grey on the ominous trees
old long before the Romans raped her land.

The face of one half feared and then half loved
and then all loved; the mystery new-formed
when all the world within a span of days
had changed its face, for her, for ever.

The Druid chaplet

about her dedicated curls, once cherished
proudly the symbol of a consecration
whereby she held herself apart--now she held hateful
symbol and sign and promise. She a child
had sworn her soul away. She had not known.

She woke, and wept
after ten sullen seasons, with an aching
too vast to be defined. In troubled hightmares
out of that past, the garden in cool summer,
scent of fresh leaves and flowers and the garden
before the hidden house.

The priestess waiting.

A woman young in years, yet old in power,
ancient, serene, in wisdom and in beauty,
adored yet feared, adorable yet fearful,
divine in her austerity, visible power,
the Gods' own signet shining between her brows.
The open symbols trembling in the light.
Who were the fools who said it was a mark
seared in her flesh with fire?

After ten years she could not call to mind
one word of all her incoherent pleas
kneeling to risk all on a hope of mercy,
for her own words were swallowed up in wonder,
wondering at her pity, at the white sorrow
touching the face no longer stern;

why tenderness
could touch the chosen of the hidden Gods?
Why laughter, tears or weeping
might show the priestess but a woman, laughing
to touch her face with secret smiles, and promise
freedom from hated vows.

Ten frozen winters after she woke screaming,
seeing in nightmare always, that face changing
into a blazing majesty of fury,
seeing behind them, in the secret chamber
(as if he knew the way too well) the Roman,
...he was forgotten now, except in nightmares
such as these guilty dreams, that waked her screaming

or when his voice, remembered, called at twilight
when her heart dreamed along the past, a whisper
of her brief joy strewed terror in her sleep.
After ten years...
Only in sleep could she recall his name.

His face too, quickly muted into fury
when she had hoped he too had come to plead
for her, for them, until his raging eyes
showed that her face was not the one he sought.
Rage from them both. But not for her. She kneeling
as a bent bush before the gales of winter
stripped bare of early spring.
So quick the change from tenderness to lashings,
whips of barbed scorn. Rage striking
and all too clear the tale....

...that now they whispered
after ten years had burned away the scandal,
burned away tragedy, except for her, made gossip
for crones: to whisper, nights, before the fire
where maidens clustered close like winter sparrows
their innocent-wise eyes shining with scandal
and fascinated shame:

"There was a priestess...
a very holy priestess...of this temple.
They say, they say she even loved a Roman,
they say she bore him children; and they burned her,
loving, upon the altar, with her lover...
They say this. But it may be but a tale,
only a scandal on the lying lips.
Surely the Gods would chasten such a one!
Surely the Gods would strike...."

Only a tale for scandal's tongues to whisper
after ten years had burned away the heartbreak;
Not guessing at the thoughts of one who sheltered
silent among them, seeming not to listen
or whisper at the tale. Burned too impassive.
Not guessing at her thoughts....

"I walked unseeing
in too great hurt to listen or defend her
or would have dared to speak. After ten years
still too afraid to speak. After ten winters
full of the still room, night within the rock
the dagger fallen nerveless to the floor, torn veiling
flung to the winds within the hidden room,
the golden softness of the children's heads
under a woman's hands, in her last gesture.
(For even then she was in love with death
and touched the children with relinquished love
shorn then, at last, of shame.)

"Strange to recall it here: within this silence,
these solitary deaths where women sleep
more still than I, fast in my wakefulness,
recalling; Norma spoke then of her children,
which I dared not. Even daring
(for even then she was in love with death)
to speak of mine to come. Brothers to these

sleeping beneath her hands, and not to know=
how close three deaths had come. And mine, and mine...
Strange that she dared to speak of this to me
and I dared not, dared not...and her eyes shining
As if she saw death, welcoming its kiss.

This in my hands. All this. But for the moment
of fierce cold justice rising up within me
but for the moment
in which I willed to match her sacrifice
knowing I could not match her love
or will to match it. And I glowed gladness
myself more fierce in right, more cruel in daring
myself more loving than her pitying heart.
Strange that I never knew a moment's sorrow
then, when I drew her back reluctant, held her
(for even then she was in love with death)
with my two hands from death. I more unwilling
than she to face a future left without her,
and knowing, as her new-glad arms released me,
her sister-kiss. just fading on my cheek,
I must regret it. Knowing all this,
would I have wished to change what I had done?

"I do not know.

"After ten years, at every dawn and evening
seeing her face still glowing in the sun
that shone around her loosened hair, made flame
of the flame-mark laid in between her brows.

"And yet for a brief time, I think I knew it.
I think I knew the answer for a moment
just before dawn, in that bleak hour, the forest
silent with menace of old sacrifice
old long before one Roman made the land
hide from the steel of swords. He wore no steel,
his a steel face, still cruel yet still ardent,
still scornful of her name, and still insistent
I should forget her too. Yet facing him
I knew his shamed eyes saw--just what I saw:
the hands of Norma on his children's heads,
the flame around her eyes. I knew it then;
she could have lived without him, could endure
her life-gift taken. She had offered truly
life then for him and me. He was the victim.
He could not long endure, in his most secret
soul; shorn of her, he knew that; knowing
sought to un-know it with new desperate ardor
so that I fled in fear, knowing, half hoping
he would pursue.

"Even to know he could not long forget her,
he made me his excuse to dare their Temple
in their most cloistered part. And yet contagion
out of her caught him; I do not think he struggled
then, when the priests took him.

"And even then, I think I knew the end.

"It all came true;
their deaths spread ruin in a peaceful land
where she had held the Gaulish wolves on leash,
he the tight yoke upon the Roman steel.
Now war-dogs coupled crudely on their tomb,
whelping small wars, throughout the length of Gaul.

"I saw it all. I know. I knew it even
in the last trials, when before the Priesthood
she flung (still threatening) the cruel challenge:
'A priestess living, false to vows and homeland
and to the sacred Gods...'

and then her silence
fell, till the echoing space rang with the name
she had not spoken. And their eyes like death,
like swords, like steel, like flame, filling the archways
with silence, question, death. And still her silence.

"(I trembling, held too dumb, too sick with terror
to speak the word that might have saved them both,
yes, and me too; a silence that has lasted
now for ten frozen years, as if that silence
lodged in my frozen heart, and buried
flame there with flame at heart, the glowing
of the flame-mark between her glowing eyes.)

"Then flung a name a lance, into the target
of their raw shuddering eyes. The name?

Her own.

Her voice not raised, yet shouting down the years
to speak the name of death. The name?

Her own.

"She had been kinder
to drag me forth from where I crouched, expectant
knowing she spoke my name, not yet half conscious
that I was not to die. She had been kinder
(I for a little while in love with death;
and still too numb to know I would not die)
or I had died with them... too late, too late.
Rather both deaths than that, to see her smiling
and the white joyfulness beneath her veil
after they stripped her ornaments away
and burned her sacred flowers. No fading thought
of me, to dim their courage. Life like death
and death for them that for the face of life
and of their love. And I to wake for years
knowing life sweet, and knowing it beyond
an inner voice that did not care, and said
with cold exactitude: You too are dead.
Which of us died that day I am not sure:
her face is still around me in the fire.
Her punishment was ended in a day
and mine had just begun."

Marion Z Bradley

