

Page to Stage: A New Opera *Howards End, America*

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Abstract: The author begins by describing her function as an opera librettist adapting a great work of literature, comparing it to that of a voltage transformer channeling and converting the energy of one dynamic, kinetic vehicle to that of another. She goes on to describe in detail her choice of scenes from Forster's *Howards End* and the development of her text for a full-length opera *Howards End, America*, set in the 1950s in Boston, with contemporary sensibilities tailored for an American audience. She accounts the process of working within the constraints of the operatic medium, creating original text for arias, duets and other ensembles, while seeking to maintain the tone and sensibilities of Forster's language. She pays particular attention to the choice she made to cast the characters of Leonard Bast and his wife as African-American, focusing on issues of race relations, rather than class barriers, as does Forster. Certain creative liberties were necessary in order to streamline the narrative and convey the most essential and compelling aspects of the book. The premiere of the opera will take place at Z Space (Theatre Artaud) in San Francisco late in February, 2019, a production of San Francisco's premiere new music ensemble, Earplay.

Keywords: *Howards End*, opera adaptation, libretto, music, Stevens, Shearer

As the librettist of seven operas over the past ten years (*Howards End, America* is my seventh), I have been pondering what it is that opera librettists do when they transform and condense a great literary work of the past into a text to be set to music and performed by singers. Fancifully, I conjured up all sorts of arcane occupations—decidedly Dickensian in their quirkiness—with which the librettist's job might be compared. These range from medieval alchemist, articulator of bones and cake decorator, to the carver and gilder who fashions in gold leaf the frame that will vivify a great painting. None of these comparisons seemed quite right.

Then I happened on the metaphor of the electrical adapter, basically just a plug that converts attributes of one electrical device or system to those of an otherwise incompatible device or system; or perhaps its humble relation, the voltage transformer, that so-necessary gadget in our hand baggage when travelling abroad, used to alter the voltage of a foreign power source to match that of one's hair dryer.

I find the metaphor of librettist as adapter or transformer of currents to be very apt. It acknowledges the dynamism of the original source, in this case E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, one of the early twentieth century's great literary achievements. And, it recognizes that the source, whatever its inherent power, cannot simply be transferred to the opera stage without channelling and converting its particular "voltage" to accommodate the dynamic, kinetic vehicle of opera and the concomitant sensibilities of opera audiences.

Let me begin with some background about my own career as musician, experimental performer, and writer, a trajectory that has led to, and culminated in, my recent work as a librettist, adapting great literary works, including *Middlemarch*, for the opera stage. From childhood a lover of great English novels, I trained as a classical pianist, singer, and musicologist, anticipating an academic career in music. When, in the late 1980s, I began to realize the constraints academia could impose on an artist's time and freedom to experiment, I embarked on a new career: devising interdisciplinary solo pieces for my own performance on stage.

As a "performance artist" I combined keyboard playing with speaking, singing and dramatic acting. The technical demands and possibilities were quite singular, so I found myself creating my own repertoire. This included text creation and, later on, music composition. I was also my own director, making such decisions as where speech should elide into singing and where movement away from the keyboard should happen. Short experimental works soon grew into full-length solo pieces—some fifteen over two decades. In a number of my pieces I portrayed multiple characters, using staging, costumes, hats, even noses, to switch from one to another. My experience and comfort level in writing for the stage evolved in this way. So, writing was something I came to do out of necessity in order to generate a singular, personal performance vehicle.

This process evolved quite naturally into conceiving operas and writing libretti for them. Constructing texts for other singers to perform is similar to creating them for oneself. Knowledge of vocal placement—what words

and phrases sing well—is important, as is readiness to cut or to augment the text if necessary. Choosing the subject or “story” is paramount. One must be able to visualize quite early in the process how the whole piece will work: whether singing will enhance the story and serve the drama, and vice versa. One must have characters in mind that can be created musically and dramatically. And, what is termed “relevance” —envisioning and forging connections to contemporary issues —can sharpen the experience of opera for an audience.

When, in 2007, I first collaborated as a librettist with the distinguished San Francisco-area composer Allen Shearer, I began a transition from my previous creative mode and professional activity that seemed effortless and had been consistently fulfilling. Shearer, also a trained singer, is a master of vocal as well as instrumental composition. His body of works includes many song cycles as well as an early full-length “grand opera,” *The Goddess*, based on a Satyajit Ray screenplay and supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. Shearer and I began to brainstorm about creating new works of chamber opera more modest in scale, to reflect the evolving, quite harsh economic realities besetting opera development and production.

Our first major opera, *The Dawn Makers*, a fanciful chamber opera based on a Greek myth, enjoyed critical and popular success, with a high-profile San Francisco production in 2009. This was followed by a brief comic opera based on a Kafka story, and a children’s opera. In 2015, our full-length *Middlemarch in Spring*, the work of five years from conception to production, enjoyed international recognition, cited by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*³ as one of the most noteworthy classical music events of 2015 on the world stage. This was followed by two comic operas, quite modest in scale, which had successful productions in the Bay Area. We were happy in bringing forward these lighter, smaller works, which were much enjoyed by audiences. But the challenge we had yet to embrace was that of creating what could be called a “tragic” opera.

My adaptation of *Middlemarch* was cited by critics as particularly successful, and the opera’s musical values and dramatic realization drew high praise. Preparations for the production of *Middlemarch in Spring* by other companies followed in the wake of its premiere. These developments emboldened

³ <http://www.britannica.com/art/performing-art-Year-in-Review-2015>

us to take on a project similar in scope and perhaps of greater challenge, a two-hour chamber opera in three acts based on *Howards End*.

The libretto's title page offers this description:

Howards End, America

Opera in three acts by Allen Shearer on a libretto by Claudia Stevens
after the novel by E. M. Forster

Cast

Helen Schlegel, attractive woman in her 20s, usually carries camera, shooting still shots or movies, soprano

Leonard Bast, African-American man, aspiring poet in his early 20s, suffers from asthma, tenor

Margaret Schlegel, Helen's older sister, attractive woman in her mid-to-late 30's, lyric soprano

Ruth Wilcox, wife of Henry Wilcox, in her early 50s, owner of Howards End, dies at end of Act I, mezzo-soprano

Henry Wilcox, wealthy, overbearing man in his mid-50s, bass-baritone

Charles Wilcox, son of Henry and Ruth, in his late 20s, formerly Helen's boyfriend, baritone

Jacky Bast, flamboyantly dressed African-American woman, once a nightclub singer, married to Leonard and older than he, mezzo-soprano.

Four-or-more singer/actors: SATB 'choir' of bank clerks, party guests, policemen, Mrs. Avery and nurse/midwife in small roles, spoken and/or sung

Orchestra

Flute

Clarinet in B-flat/bass clarinet in B-flat/alto saxophone in E-flat

Bassoon

Trumpet in B-flat

Trombone

Percussion

Piano

Violins 1 and 2

Viola

Cello

Double bass

The setting is mid-1950s Boston. Staging calls for indoor and outdoor settings. Helen's "artistic" still photographs and/or movies, which might be projected, provide scenic backdrops, action footage. (She may also pan the audience occasionally, provocatively bringing them into focus as part of the action.) The Schlegel sisters are philanthropists—prosperous, but not wealthy, lovers of art and literature, progressive supporters of social justice. In the post-WWII climate, they are suspected of communist leanings and, ironically, of being "too German." The Wilcoxes are wealthy industrialists. The Basts are poor.

The reader may ask, "Why the change of title? Why not simply name the opera *Howards End*?" First, we needed to acknowledge the existence of other adaptations of the book: a major, Oscar-winning *Howards End* feature film released in the early 1990s and redistributed to "select theatres" in 2016; and the high-profile *Howards End* BBC television series broadcast in 2017. Perhaps such "spin-offs" did affect our naming of the opera. (We briefly considered *Howards End*, 1955.) So did the more pertinent fact that our opera, any opera, cannot just be "the book." Certainly our opera *Middlemarch in Spring* could not have embraced or embodied the complexity and sprawl of the novel *Middlemarch*, with its many interlocking characters and plots.

But other factors weighed into the novel's renaming. The reader will notice various changes over the book, including, but not limited to, updating the opera to the 1950s. These are quite specific in their intent, implemented in accordance with my conviction that it is the librettist's responsibility, when adapting great literature for the opera stage, to convert one "power source" to accommodate the dynamic requirements of another. Her task is not only to facilitate and help to structure the composer's musical creation. She also must envision the opera's dramatic pacing and trajectory on the stage. And, she must devise the means to connect emotionally with an audience and further its enjoyment.

To that end, I felt that aspects of the novel had to undergo alteration. Rather than setting the work in England, the action is placed in America within a particular social, economic and political climate, that of the McCarthy era, with which an American audience might identify. I realized that the Edwardian lower-middle-class status of Leonard Bast and his wife Jacky would not resonate with our audience (although it still might in England). Therefore I decided that Leonard and Jacky would be African-American; that they would be subject to the racial politics and attitudes of that day (indeed, possibly

of the present day). How much easier it becomes, then, to “get” the meddling and the bungling of the well-meaning Schlegel sisters (recalling the Herritons in *Where Angels Fear to Tread*) in their attempt to “raise” the Basts and improve their lot! How much more convincing for an audience is the “forbidden love” between Helen and Bast, the indifference of the Wilcoxes to the plight of Leonard and Jacky, and their refusal to take responsibility for it. The new setting and the reassignment of roles along racial lines, then, were practical decisions, as well as creative ones, enabling a modern audience to respond to the opera’s story and characters, not as a “costume drama,” but as a work of potency and relevance for the present day. And so, the opera inevitably became a somewhat different animal than *Howards End*, the novel. It became *Howards End, America*.

These transformations notwithstanding—and despite the fact that *Howards End, America* omits several characters and conflates the roles of Charles and Paul—the opera does preserve the most significant characters and dramatic incidents of the novel. It juxtaposes the three socially disparate “groups” of Schlegels, Wilcoxes, and Basts. Its expressions of outrage against hypocrisy and the denial of feeling mirror, and are inspired by, those of the novel. I found myself referencing some of the novel’s language in constructing the (mostly original) texts of the solo arias and duets, which occur at major stress points in the narrative and carry the emotional weight of the opera. Forster can be quite reticent in describing the actual feelings or motivations of his characters, rather disclosing these through the character’s action (or failure to act) and speech (or insufficient speech). In opera, feelings cannot be played close to the vest. Expressive arias are often the means to expose a character’s emotions and explain his motivations at an important moment. This is what words set to music and performed vocally uniquely are able to do, and indeed must do. In addition to arias I assigned certain textual material to be set as a duet or a larger ensemble to propel and intensify the action by enabling several characters simultaneously to express disparate emotions, whether argument, discord or agreement.

I would like to proceed now to discuss the way in which my original text, particularly in arias and duets, interfaces with, and draws nourishment from, Forster’s language, while at the same time seeking to develop, and possibly even enhance, the novel’s emotional palette. The opera begins with Leonard Bast and Helen meeting on the street in the rain. She mistakenly has taken his umbrella, as she does in the novel. But rather than having the two emerging

from a lecture about Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, I thought to have them attending, and reacting to, a concert of Beethoven's Ninth. Bast is full of enthusiasm over its choral finale, a passionate plea for universal brotherhood:

Leonard:

(Arioso)

Oh, Miss Schlegel, that is my dream.

But this was more, this was something else!

Everything sounding together, despair and joy,

The melodies combining and intertwining.

Helen: Counterpoint.

Leonard: Is that the word? But what an idea!

While the women were singing

the brotherhood tune, at the exact same time

the men were singing about millions kissing!

Helen (*singing countersubject*): Seid umschlungen, Millionen.

In this way we are introduced to Bast as an idealist, a "diamond in the rough." Expressing his yearning for a better, more just, world he also reveals ignorance of high art and is "shown up" by clever Helen, with her knowledge of German and musical terminology. However, it is Bast who reveals the deeper, more intuitive understanding of Beethoven's remarkable combining of strains of poetry from Schiller's text. Helen and Bast proceed to sing joyfully in the street, attempting to recreate a contrapuntal episode from the symphony. It is easy, then, to understand the immediate attraction between the two: they have sung together in the street in the rain.

I have called the opera's first scene "Counterpoint" because the musical procedure of combining several voices is applied also to the scene's structure. It juxtaposes and overlaps two social milieus: the repressive and mean-spirited domestic realm of the Wilcox family at Howards End and the more embracing Schlegel household, where Leonard Bast is welcomed and given tea and encouragement.

At the outset I wished to present Henry Wilcox as opinionated and insensitive, his wife Ruth as increasingly alienated from the family, and their son Charles (substituted for Paul as Helen's former boyfriend) as a shallow, coarse fraternity boy, threatened and put off by Helen's intelligence and passion.

A brief exchange between Henry and Charles, discussing both Schlegel sisters, serves this end:

Henry: Margaret—that would be the sister of that bizarre girl Helen you were dating. Good you broke it off. Whatever did you see in her!

Charles: She came on to *me*, Dad!

(*Arioso*)

A girl like that doesn't hold anything back.

I like 'em easy, if you get what I mean.

She's pretty enough, she does have money.

But she got on my nerves, she would never shut up.

She flipped her lid when I cut her loose.

Man, oh man! She just went through the roof.

Helen's not normal, she's funny in the head.

This episode plants the seeds for Helen to be perceived, not just as unconventional, but as reckless and emotionally volatile, important to an understanding of her precipitous love affair with Leonard Bast, a black man. For a woman of high social rank, an interracial union, even in liberal Boston, would have been unthinkable in the 1950s.

But at this early stage it is the character of the ailing Ruth, misunderstood by her husband and son, that draws particular inspiration from Forster's prose. In her one aria in the opera (she dies at the end of Act I), Ruth conveys a yearning spirituality and awareness of her impending death as she bids farewell to her surroundings:

Henry: It's very damp, think of your condition . . .

Ruth: I am thinking . . . just let me see the sunset . . . and the house in it . . . as the light fades.

(*Aria, Henry and Charles overhearing*)

I have always belonged to the house, more than it to me,

This wych elm, this wondrous overshadowing tree.

My house, my home and what it means,

only Margaret could know, only she could see.

Belongings, pretty things . . . they're like a handful of straw.

But a house, this house in the setting sun,

in the pitiless air . . . and I am tired,
 so very tired. This house, the past,
 the climbing vine, the tawny chrysanthemums,
 Let them take me away . . .
 Let me go home again, home for the night . . .

In this way Ruth signals an affection for Margaret that will culminate in the willing of her home, *Howards End*, to her friend, rather than to the family. The aria's references to nature—the elm tree, the climbing vine—and its lyrical imagery of “a handful of straw,” “tawny chrysanthemums” and the “pitiless air” are drawn from Forster's language. They inspired composer Shearer to create, in this signature aria for mezzo soprano, a wistful song replete with vocal and instrumental beauties, including text painting. The aria also presents an instrumental motif that will reappear: the musical depiction of *Howards End*, the house, as a symbol of respite and refuge amid turbulence.

Henry belittles Ruth's feelings, as he will belittle everyone's:

Henry: My poor Ruth, she's like a child lately. Such odd ideas!
 She seems not to care about us any more, Charles, only the house.
 And that Margaret woman.

The opera shifts rapidly to the Schlegel drawing room, where Leonard, in his first major aria, reveals his desire to know all of literature. But his ambition gives way to frustration over the nearly impossible task of self-education:

Leonard (*enthusiastic*):
 I'm reading all the major writers from A to Z.
 Just read Cummings, the poet – E. E.
 Now I'm at “D” for Dickens – *Great Expectations*.
 I could do the same with the composer greats!
 There aren't many “A's” but there's the three B's!

Helen (*flippantly*): That is a project for at least twenty years.

Leonard (*passion turning to anger*): But you all got a head start, didn't you!

(Aria)

A man like me,
 I thought, if I could only know what others know,
 if I filled my ears with other sounds,
 filled my mind with others' words,
 took them apart, put them back together
 and made them mine
 then I might catch the world!

Catch the world, a man like me!
 A man like me have time to think!
 A man like me make sense of things!
 With no peace at home, half an hour at lunch!
 No way I'll get there, no way I'll catch up.

A man like me! Grabbing at poetry like something I could own!
 With a brain full of words I'll never connect,
 a brain full of names that flutter away,
 fluttering birds I never can capture, never will hold.

Margaret: You must not despair, Mr. Bast. Such striving is admirable.

Leonard's aria references the novel's naïve Bast who hopes to "catch the world" by reading every important book, from A to Z. I inserted into the aria a reference to E. E. Cummings, whose famous line "How do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mr. Death?" (Cummings 1991, 90) will appear later. (As an emerging "beat poet," drawing inspiration from Langston Hughes and other jazz poets of the day, Bast could well be reading Cummings.) I chose as a refrain, "A man like me," to convey the bitterness, self-awareness and irony experienced by a black Leonard Bast, still regarded as a "boy" by much of the world. The aria also conveys, as does Forster's Bast, that words are elusive, like fluttering birds; and that "catching the world" might be too great a hope. Margaret's response is one of kindness, basic decency and moderation, attributes of her character evidenced throughout the opera. After Bast has departed, the sisters argue over what might be done for him:

(Duet)

Margaret: He's a grown man and married, he has his pride.

Helen: But he is unhappy, I can see it in his eyes.

Margaret: Why interfere? He aspires, so he will achieve.

Helen: Margaret, are you blind? Are you completely naïve?

Margaret: We give to all the charities, surely that is enough . . .

Helen: No, not enough! He's black, he's in need, it is up to *us*.

Margaret: Oh, let's not meddle, there must be other ways.

Helen (*not listening*): We can be his patrons, he'll be our protégé!

Margaret: We'll make a mess! We'll be out of our depth!

Helen: Out of our depth? Then we've been too shallow!

For once let's act. Talk is cheap, enough has been said!

In this interchange between Helen and Margaret I present diametrically conflicting attitudes of the day about racial equality and opportunity, while contrasting the sisters. Margaret is the more cautious and sensible (while possibly more “clueless” than Helen). Her focus is on empathy, shared humanity and good intentions, while the more sophisticated and radical Helen, darkly aware of the ugly face of discrimination, urges action. In this way, the intention of the sisters to become Bast's “patrons” (Forster's term), with its disastrous outcome, takes shape and can be seen to evolve directly from his first despairing aria.

And well might he despair. In Act II we are given a window into Leonard Bast's domestic life. Through orchestration and the occasional jazz riff Allen Shearer creates a distinctive, edgier musical environment for the Basts. As in the novel, Jacky is older than Leonard, desperate to hang on to him, and suspicious of his new friendship with the Schlegels. A fading jazz singer who, we are led to surmise, became “hooked” on alcohol or drugs, she laments her fading beauty and loss of stardom in her first aria, which interpolates a musical excerpt from a song by Fats Waller:

Jacky (*dancing while singing snippet of 'Ain't Misbehavin'*):

Remember this one, baby? Oh, Lenny that was quite some time!

When I headlined at the club, when I was in my prime . . .

(Aria)

That was me, my name in lights, at Wally's Paradise Café.

My name in lights when you were still in seventh grade!

I was sweet and smooth and sang the blues
 and everyone knew my name.
 'Ain't Misbehavin,' except I *was*, Len, you know how it was,
 I just couldn't not misbehave . . . (*laughs*)

That was me, my name in lights, gonna be makin' the big time!
 Gonna be just like Ella, "A Tisket, A Tasket," remember that one?
 Gonna sing at the Savoy, gonna have joy,
 people gonna know my name.
 Never gonna lose, never gonna get used,
 Never gonna be old, never gonna fade away . . . (*collapsing
 in despair, lighting a cigarette*)

Leonard responds to his wife as he does in Forster's novel, reassuring her and cloaking his own misery and frustration. But their ensuing duet, an argument over his preference for "their" culture, shows that the relationship is precarious, based on lies and deception.

The second act also brings together Henry Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel. Earlier Henry had destroyed a note written by Ruth on her deathbed, asking that Howards End be given to Margaret. Feeling guilty at having denied his wife's dying wish, he visits Margaret to present her with a small gift, then invites her to view his palatial, newly acquired house on Beacon Hill. Their mutual attraction develops subtly, each drawn to the other while they express divergent opinions about "the rich and poor." Sensing Henry's physical desire (his flirtatious line about despising worldly goods drawn from the novel), Margaret primly espouses altruism and high-mindedness:

Henry: I'm glad you don't despise the goods of this world.
 (*He leans as if to kiss her*)

Margaret (*moving away*): Despise! Why would I? But yes, Henry,
 I am conflicted.

(*Aria*)

I enjoy your pleasure in this palatial house.
 But then I think about others, others not so lucky,
 others who are suffering, while we live in luxury,
 others who live such different lives,
 in poverty and squalor, in ignorance and want!

It's simple, Henry: only connect!
 It's because we have too much that they have not enough!
 I'm like everyone, Henry, I live my life in fragments.
 I give to charities, all clean and neat and impersonal,
 when to help, to really help a single human being,
 Oh, that could be messy . . . but how much better it would be!

In this aria Margaret gives the opera's first utterance of the novel's famous line, and its epigraph, "Only connect." With childish simplicity she advances the notion that the poor have too little because the rich have too much. Perhaps Henry finds endearing such an oversimplification of economics. In his subsequent grandiose aria, revealing something of his gruff character, he obviously enjoys putting Margaret in her place, albeit gently, as a man who knows the world. Here I draw from, and paraphrase, the coarse and smug pronouncements Henry delivers to Helen elsewhere in the novel:

Henry:
(Aria)
 Give to your charities, by all means.
 Just don't get carried away, don't be naïve.
 You can take it from me,
 I know what goes on behind the scenes.
 We'll always have the rich and poor,
 that's how it has been, how it always will be.
(In a new tone) Show me a time when people were ever equal!
 You can't! You can't, you see.
(Firmly) Great forces shape our civilization.
 Impersonal, yes, great impersonal forces!
 There are the passive and the doers, the winners and the losers.
 Civilization is like a business managed well,
 where improvement happens all by itself.

Howards End, America somehow must provide Henry with a convincing reason to propose marriage to Margaret, and her to accept. Their coming together is sudden, abrupt, and rather inexplicable, both in the novel and in the opera—which will benefit here from effective performances

and stage direction. But Henry's enjoyment of vanquishing Margaret, a person of moral and cultural superiority to himself, a woman Ruth had loved better than he, may well provide him with sufficient motivation to fall in love, propose marriage, and look forward to dominating her further. Margaret's halting, headlong acceptance of his proposal, which I duplicate in the opera, is somewhat more difficult to believe. And so, I have fashioned for Margaret an initial response to Henry's manifesto, in which she first disagrees with him: "Improvement happens when people do good things for other people!" She follows this by proposing a kind of "deal," offering Henry an opportunity to display the necessary altruism to win her affections. She requests that he employ Bast (whom she does not reveal to be black) at his bank. And Henry accepts her *quid pro quo*.

Helen, however, is dumbfounded by her sister's acceptance of such a husband. In her first major aria, toward the end of Act II, she expresses her dismay and confusion in an outpouring of existential angst:

Helen:

(Aria)

Who is anybody, who am I?

I say the wrong things, people think I'm nuts,

"Shutter bug Helen, Helen and her whims!

She can never hold back, she can never fit in."

Who is Margaret? I don't know any more.

That she could fall for such a man, that Henry Wilcox

with his phony fancy bank, his portfolio of stocks!

People like that! Cardboard cut-outs, nothing but fakers,

with their golf clubs, yachts and cocktail shakers!

And who is Leonard? Is a job at a bank what he really wants?

Or what we want him to want because we're white.

Would he really have more time to write?

We're all pretending! Strip away the façade

and what's in back? Nothing but emptiness,

emptiness and panic.

Stop it now, Helen, you can help Leonard Bast.

Seize the day, take the chance!

In its dark tone and cynicism this aria draws directly from Helen's lines in the novel where she inveighs against the hypocrisy, pretentiousness and cowardice of the upper class, who hide behind a flimsily constructed "wall" of social niceties, witty speech and the accoutrements of status. The words "emptiness and panic," uttered by Helen in the novel to describe what lies behind that wall, also will feature in Helen's large Act III aria and Margaret's final duet with Henry. The notion of "panic" harks to other Forster novels and stories whose characters are in a muddle, frightened and out of touch with real feeling: Adela Quested in *A Passage to India*; Lucy in *A Room with a View*; friends having a picnic in "The Story of a Panic."

The aria also presents Helen as increasingly self-aware. She does not spare herself from scrutiny, turning the lens of her ubiquitous camera on herself and questioning her own motives in seeking to "raise" Leonard Bast. I thought it important also to have Helen realize, however fleetingly, that she may not truly know what Bast wants, only what her limited experience, within a world of white privilege, suggests to her is "good" for him.

Before the mortifying last scene of Act II, in which Bast is ejected from the Wilcox bank, he sings a brief arioso, describing himself to Helen, not as a stereotypical black man of few advantages, but as middle class, having gained admission to Boston University and forced to cut short his education. But in response, Helen appears not to take in the social difference between poor and middle class African Americans he conveys—or what might befall him if he does not get the bank job. At this point, increasingly smitten with him, she chooses to focus on the "poetry," rather than the reality, of his experience.

Leonard:

(*Arietta*)

My name is Leonard, I come from West Medford.

An ordinary place not far from the Mystic River.

A nice name for a river, but it's not very mystic,
where the Mystic River flows.

I was good at school, I got into B. U.,

then Jacky came along and the rest you know.

Helen: Where the Mystic River flows! But that is poetic, Leonard!
 “Where Alf, the sacred river, ran.” It’s a poem by Coleridge,
 do you know it?

Helen is delighted that he knows the poem by Coleridge (1999, 73). She cannot, however, save him from the humiliation of being dragged out of the Wilcox bank, and the first half of the opera ends with Helen left to rage against Henry, exclaiming uselessly, “The bastard! The lying bastard!”

Act III, following intermission, creates a single dramatic and musical arc towards catastrophe. Mounting friction between Henry and Margaret drives the action. While their earlier disagreements were gentle, philosophical and unspecific, the third act will see them veritably at each others’ throats. Urged on by Charles or by Helen, their verbal combat, usually in the form of duets, builds to a shattering climax. Forster’s prose has a tendency to be coy, eschewing overt theatricality and delivering the punch through British “understatement.” But opera is a dramatic vehicle and the librettist cannot be coy. I perceived as my overriding task in the final act to channel the novel’s subliminal current of hysteria and cruelty (a lurking goblin?), the energy of its covert, smouldering evil, and to transform and convert that electricity mercilessly into inevitable and tragic apotheosis.

In the first scene the lawn of Howards End serves as the setting for a garden party to raise money for one of Margaret’s charities. In attendance are Henry’s “good old boy” friends, represented by a chorus in four parts singing Harvard glee club favourites. As in the novel, Charles drives Margaret to the party, displaying a callousness and meanness we have come to expect from him, first when running over a cat, later in suggesting to his father that Margaret is a gold-digger intent on owning Howards End. Amid the festivities, Henry announces his engagement to Margaret. But things are not going well between the two and they quarrel over Leonard Bast. In the first of several abrasive duets Margaret turns on Henry and each accuses the other, referencing similar language to the novel:

Margaret: Leonard left his job at Bay State Containers after you said it was about to collapse.

Henry (*nonchalant*): Did I? Oh. Well, as it happened, Bay State restructured, they’re on the way to full recovery. Showed a good profit last quarter in fact. Too bad this Bast acted in haste.

(Duet)

Margaret: But now they won't take him back . . .

Henry: I'm sorry for your clerk . . .

Margaret: He's unemployed and it's all our fault!

Henry: . . .but it's all in a day's work . . .

Margaret: No. A man who had little now has less . . .

Henry: It's the battle of life, no more, no less . . .

Margaret: But it's owing to us! We are to blame.

Henry: Come, come. No one's to blame . . .

Margaret: Is no one to blame for anything? You promised a job . . .

Henry: Well, if you put it that way,
you were not truthful about Mr. Bast.

Margaret: I? Everything I told you about him was true.

Henry: Except for what you failed to tell me about him.

Margaret: Why should that have mattered?

Henry: That was precisely what mattered!

Helen, emerging by the final act as the opera's heroine, also has not forgotten the Basts' plight or her own role in causing it. Camera always in hand, shining a light on injustice and hypocrisy, she has become the social conscience of her insulated community—as well as our own. (In my proposed design for the opera I suggest that her still shots and movie footage might be projected, using live camera feed, and that she occasionally turn her camera on the audience, projecting it as well.) In the opera, then, I have sharpened the character of Forster's Helen from one of an eccentric, outspoken, and rather mixed up young girl of privilege to that of a woman of conscience and a budding political activist. Meanwhile, Leonard has reached the end of his rope. Struggling with homelessness, marital woes, and debilitating asthma, he cannot reconcile his dream of a life in art, fostered by the Schlegel sisters, with the realities of poverty and discrimination.

As in the novel, Helen brings the Basts to the party (but in her car, not by train) in order to shock and shame Henry into taking responsibility for them. She enters, brazenly exclaiming for all to hear, "They're starving! I found them starving! We have ruined them!" In the ensuing ensemble (the opera's only trio) Helen, Margaret, and Bast generate a cacophony of discordant, careening emotions, as they express simultaneously their dismay, fury and embarrassment:

Helen: Henry should apologize to them. Why is he hiding, why are you covering for him?

Margaret: I am going to be his wife, I can't see him insulted! And what you are doing is wrong, it's reckless, it's impulsive.

(Trio)

Helen: We insist on talking to him!

Margaret: If you intend to confront Mr. Wilcox . . .

Leonard: Please, Miss Schlegel, this wasn't my idea . . .

Margaret *(continuing)* . . . and call him to account . . .

Helen: That's just what we intend to do . . .

Leonard: . . . we don't want any trouble . . .

Margaret: You make a great mistake!

Leonard: I hate all this. We didn't want to intrude . . .

Margaret: You take away their dignity . . .

Leonard: Oh, God, Jacky, let's get out of here . . .

Margaret: You make them into hangers-on.

Leonard: . . . finish eating so we can go . . .

Helen: Take back those words, "hangers-on!"

Leonard: Let's go, there's nothing left to do . . .

Margaret: Mr. Bast, I am sure Mr. Wilcox will shake hands with you.

In my stage direction, Henry then turns toward Leonard awkwardly, trying to shield himself from Jacky's view, as departing, embarrassed guests cast curious glances and Helen captures the scene on camera. It is then, of course, that Jacky will recognize Henry and "out" him in front of his guests as a man who, while married to Ruth, had also been her lover:

Jacky *(rising suddenly)*:

(Arietta)

Henny! If it isn't my old friend Hen!

You remember me, don't you Hen?

All the way from way back when?

Oh, we had a lot of laughs in those days,

didn't we, Honey! Henny, honey!

Back in the old days, back in '48,

back at Wally's Paradise Café!

You were a bit younger then, but weren't we all!

Didn't we have fun, the two of us!

Didn't we get stinking drunk,
wasn't it sweet when we got high!

You remember me, Hen, the apple of your eye?

Henry (*mortified*): Congratulations on your protégé, Margaret!

She is quite drunk.

My representation of Henry's affair with Jacky, that of a restless middle-aged man frequenting the local black nightclub for drugs and sex, may well be more convincing than the novel's where, in the sort of coincidence one associates with Dickens or George Eliot, Henry had met and seduced Jacky on Cyprus. But Henry's mortified response is identical to that in the novel, turning the blame on Margaret.

The opera, as it progresses, becomes increasingly intent upon addressing the problem of forgiveness. We will not actually witness Margaret forgiving Henry for having "set up" Leonard Bast to become unemployed, or for his affair with Jacky. But we must assume that she did both; in the scene to follow she has married him. We are compelled to ask, "How could she do this?" It is a problem that plagues the novel also. With the opera's presentation of the Basts as African-American, however, Margaret need not go through mental perambulations about the virtue of forgiveness (which seem somewhat forced in the book); she need only dismiss her past patronage of Bast as having been ill founded. She need only regard Henry's behaviour within the context of prevailing attitudes and assumptions, including her own, about race: "a man" like Henry easily might have had relations and "gotten high" with an available black nightclub singer. Further, how many American banking establishments actually would have hired a "negro" in 1956?

But Helen vents her vexation, outrage and pity by seducing and making love to Leonard in her car.

The affair between Helen and Leonard as depicted in the opera, occasioning its one love duet, is rendered more credible than the novel's, I think, by the fact that Bast's artistic gifts, as well as his "beauty" (which she captures early on with her camera) had registered immediately with Helen. By contrast, in the novel the relationship between the two seems somewhat ambivalent; Helen appears almost matter-of-fact in remarking to Margaret after his death, "I tempted him and I killed him." Near the end of the opera Helen, holding

her baby and looking out at his dead body on the gravel, will scream those words in anguish.

Helen's pregnancy as a result of the affair is fully developed in the opera. She sings the second of her major arias as a prelude to the final scene of Act III. With Forster's line, "I will pass out of their lives" as its refrain, the earlier "panic and emptiness" resurfaces as Helen, pregnant and single, weighs her options, wavering between bravado and terror:

Helen:

(Aria)

I will pass out of their lives.

It will be easy, I won't be missed.

Things have happened that can't be fixed.

(Agitated) Can't tell Margaret, don't want to be judged,

Can't tell Margaret, gotta hide, gotta run.

Atta girl, Helen, you can do it!

just a few more months until it comes.

It will be easy, I'll pass out of their lives.

Where will I go? Greenwich Village, Santa Fe?

Look, it's me on the road!

San Francisco, here I come! City Lights Books!

When I use up my trust fund, I'll get work as a cook!

But oh! Loneliness and the night

when I pass out of their lives. . .

and then after that?

Panic and emptiness, emptiness and panic.

What's the difference between Jacky and me?

She'll pick herself up, she'll land on her feet.

What am I made of, can I go it alone?

Help me Meg, help me go home.

It was important to me that Helen, in her predicament, should give voice to a longing for her sister. In the novel the estrangement and emotional

distance between the sisters is not entirely convincing (other than, perhaps, as a symptom of typical British evasiveness and coldness). I also found rather inexplicable and forced Helen's desire to "connect" with *Howards End* before departing to give birth in Germany. I decided, for musical and dramatic reasons, that Helen would actually bear her child at *Howards End*, and this has occasioned possibly the first "real time" depiction of labour and delivery in opera. Allen Shearer uses the orchestra brilliantly to embody the peaks and valleys of Helen's labour pains, the reverential stillness of the baby's delivery and the newfound intimacy between the sisters. Margaret helps to deliver the child, after which she promises significantly, "No one will ever hurt you again. No one will ever hurt him [the child]. I give you my word."

The text of Bast's most expressive aria, his last as he struggles with illness, trying to reach *Howards End* and see his child, is a surreal jumble of half-remembered poetry and snatches of song. Shearer employs a screaming saxophone and jazz percussion to vivify Bast's fragmenting world, his bitterness, grotesque musings and physical collapse:

Leonard:

Aria (delirious, disjointed, singing to keep himself going)

Going home, going home,
we are going home, home again to Mr. Death.
Things to take care of?
A man like me? No: *boy!*
How do you like your *boy* now, Mr. Death?

Soon it will be finished, everything ends . . .
Why can't I connect? Try again, Leonard, try to make sense.
The journey's over, the end feels near,
an end to shame, an end to fear.
Come, my love, my pretty sweeting,
Journeys end in lovers meeting.

Hurry, hurry you're almost there.
Stay and hear, your true love's coming!
In delay there is no plenty, do you hear, no plenty!
Merrily we roll along on this road to no plenty . . .
Crown thy good with brotherhood . . . (*he falls*)

Crawl, boy! Crawl to Mr. Death . . . (*light fading on Bast*)

Howards End, the house, now will emerge, paradoxically, as a different kind of “sacred” refuge than Ruth’s: one that is not to be violated by a scandalous woman or breached by a black man. With the words drawn from the novel as a refrain, after an enraged Henry has ordered Helen and the child from the house, Margaret pleads in her longest and most dramatic aria, “Today she asks to spend the night.” Henry’s refusal is particularly horrible, considering that Helen has just given birth:

Henry: That pickaninny and its mother will be gone from the house. Gone within the hour! Charles, take them to the hospital. They may not stay the night. And you, Margaret, how could you abuse my house, betray my trust . . .

Margaret (*impassioned*):

(*Aria*)

Today she asks to stay the night in your empty house!

A house you do not care about.

A house that has been empty for over a year.

Today she asks to stay the night.

May she stay with her newborn child?

I ask, I beg.

Today she asks to stay the night.

May she be forgiven, as you hoped to be forgiven,
as you *were* forgiven!

From fruitless pleading, Margaret proceeds to her finest moment in the opera, as in the novel, the denunciation of Henry we all have been waiting for:

Margaret: Henry! You’re speaking of the wife you betrayed!

You had a mistress, I forgave you.

Helen had a lover, you drive her from this house!

Stupid, hypocritical, cruel!

What man betrays his wife when she’s alive,

hides behind her when she’s dead!

What man gives advice that ruins another man

and shrugs it off, Oh, how could he be responsible!
 You are that man! You were responsible! (*grabbing him*)
 You'll see the connection if it kills you!
 You betrayed Ruth. Can't you say 'what Helen has done, I have done!'
 Oh, dearest, only connect! Why can't you connect!

But Henry cannot "connect." Nor can Charles contain his resentment as he snatches a golf club and rushes out of the house to strike the arriving Bast, causing his death. In my libretto Bast will not be allowed to enter the sanctum of *Howards End*; the house now has come to represent the bastion of white privilege where cowards, including even the Schlegels, take refuge from harsh realities.

But Margaret will not forgive Henry without a struggle. As in the novel, she returns the key of the house to him and declares her intention to leave him. Charles is arrested and Henry begs for Margaret's forgiveness. I constructed their final duet as a meditation on the problem of unconditional forgiveness. It asks whether to forgive again, and yet again, constitutes weakness or strength. Then, by its deliberate repetition of "again," the question is somehow resolved: although the goodness of *Howards End* has been lost it may yet be regained.

(*Duet*)

Henry (*weeping*): It is over, I am finished. Charles will go to prison, I don't know what I'm about any more . . .

Margaret (*looking away*): What can we salvage?

Henry: Do what you will with me Margaret,

Margaret: What is left of this marriage . . .

Henry: I'm empty without your love.

Margaret: . . . but emptiness and panic?

Henry: Can't you see I'm suffering,
 I'm broken, I'm ended.

You forgave me once,

Margaret: Was it weakness or strength . . .

Henry: Forgive me again!

Margaret: . . . to forgive again, and yet again?

Henry: Oh, comfort me, Meg!

Margaret: If I'm to forgive, and to forgive again,

Henry: Let us stay together,

Margaret: then, only then, and all of us together . . .

Both: Let us all remain here at Howards End.

And so, Margaret's acquiescence again is conditional, this time upon Henry's acceptance of Helen and her racially mixed child into the family. By agreeing to hunker down at Howards End both Margaret and Henry are acknowledging the stigma that will attend Helen and her little boy. What can be their future in the "real world?"

To attempt an answer, I constructed a short epilogue to take place on the beach a year later. As in the novel, Henry discloses that Ruth had willed the house to Margaret and that he had flouted her wish. He asks, as he does in the novel, "I didn't do wrong, did I?" But this time Margaret will not answer; she is numb. The music of the opera's ending now will reference the rain and storm of its beginning. The tide has come in and the wind is rising. Helen asks Margaret, who seems to have assumed leadership of the family, what they should do. Margaret replies, "The wind is too strong, we have to go in."

The force of the music and clarity of the stage action will establish the opera's final impression, what the audience will "take away." The directions I provide at this point call for Henry and Margaret to begin to exit. Helen chooses not to follow right away, remaining outside in the wind. Then Margaret, who now carries the camera, turns and deliberately takes a picture of Helen with her child. Helen proudly holds the child up as the wind howls around them. With these stage directions I hope to convey, somewhat in the fashion of Forster, a veiled symbolism that hints at, rather than proclaims, the way forward for Margaret, Henry, Helen and her child. Perhaps it is the plea for "courage and love" of George Emerson in *A Room with a View*. It also suggests broader implications for this story of a house called Howards End, invoking the question mark George sculpted from his food: "Can we retreat from the world?" "What lies in store?" and "What shall we do?"

The leading San Francisco-based new music ensemble, Earplay,⁴ recently announced that it would produce the premiere of *Howards End, America* at San Francisco's Z Space (formerly Theatre Artaud) on March 1-3, 2019. There are to be three performances with preview on February 28. The producers also have announced the casting of international vocal artists Nikki Einfeld in the role of Margaret Schlegel, Phillip Skinner as Henry Wilcox and Sara Duchovnay as Helen Schlegel.

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⁴ <http://www.earplay.org/www/homepage.php>