

MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN OPERA AND
THE RISE OF THE
UNCONVENTIONAL LEADING MEZZO-SOPRANO

BY

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Abstract

The lecture recital focuses on selections from leading mezzo-soprano roles from four mid-twentieth century American operas: *Regina* by Marc Blitzstein, *Trouble in Tahiti* by Leonard Bernstein, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* by Douglas Moore, and *The Crucible* by Robert Ward. I discuss how each of these operas features a leading mezzo-soprano lady and how those roles compare and contrast to mezzo-soprano leads from European opera of previous centuries. Specific arias from each role are highlighted in order to display why each character displays unconventional characteristics.

This paper provides an in-depth character analysis of these four roles and show that there are definite similarities in how they break away from standard mezzo-soprano tropes and also brings to light the connection between mezzo-soprano roles in operas by mid-twentieth-century American opera composers and contemporaneous transformation in the American society, most specifically the genesis of Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s. The hope is to draw a connection between these four operas in providing unconventional representations of strong female leads with the mezzo-soprano voice type and establish this feature as a predominant characteristic of mid-twentieth century American opera.

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Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, the United States underwent massive social and political change. The 1940s saw the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, the 50s brought the so-called Golden Age as well as the start of the civil rights movement, and the 60s were engulfed in the Vietnam War, hippies, and rock and roll.

The world of art music was not impervious to these changes. The first half of the century had seen a large shift in musical language and also a rise of the question of whether social consciousness had a place in music. In terms of opera, the United States was just beginning to establish its national identity. Although some composers had attempted to tackle the genre earlier in the century, the first notable American operas did not appear until the 1930s: Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1933) and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935). Following these works, a plethora of composers decided to try their hand at writing opera, thus paving the way for a series of characteristically American operas.

Four of these composers were Marc Blitzstein, Leonard Bernstein, Douglas Moore, and Robert Ward. From 1930 to 1970, these men wrote and premiered seventeen American operas, several of which are still regularly performed today. This paper takes an in-depth look at four of them: *Regina* (1949) by Blitzstein, *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952) by Bernstein, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956) by Moore, and *The Crucible* (1961) by Ward.

Written within twelve years of each other, these four works have significant similarities. Though set in different times periods, all four operas provide snapshots into iconic American moments. Based on Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, *Regina* is set at the turn of the century in a small town in Alabama and gives insight to the struggles of a family business, thus examining the relationship between capitalism and family values. Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* explores the

unhappy marriage of an American suburban couple in the 1950s and satirizes middle-class values and consumerism. *The Ballad of Baby Doe* is based on actual historic figures in the mining town of Leadville, Colorado in 1880. Lastly, Ward's *The Crucible* is based on Arthur Miller's play about the Salem Witch trials in the 1690s.

All four of these operas also feature a substantial lead role for a mezzo-soprano. Leading roles for mezzo-sopranos are not unprecedented in European opera; characters such as Carmen, Dalila, and Amneris paved the way for mezzo-sopranos to portray strong, important leading ladies. Twentieth-century American opera composers continued this trend while adjusting characterization to suite their own needs. While these characters are connected to their European predecessors through their powerful personalities, these four American women also break away from nineteenth-century European mezzo-soprano tropes by incorporating more sympathetic aspects to their characters and thus represent a specifically American element in the four operas. In particular, Regina Giddens, Elizabeth Proctor, Augusta Tabor, and Dinah are all married women, of a slightly older age than most leading ladies of standard European operas. All of them, furthermore, are unconventional for their respective time periods and find ways to break out of the stereotypical gender norms.

The choice of Blitzstein, Bernstein, Moore, and Ward to incorporate strong, unconventional mezzo-soprano characters aligns with the rise of the feminist movement. With the Second World War came the necessity for the working housewife. Rosie the Riveter became a cultural icon for American feminism. Women were working, and they liked it. A decade later, there was a push by conservative forces to return to pre-war notions of women's place in the home. The illusion of the perfect housewife pervaded advertising while modern

psychology tended to discourage any form of feminist ideology.¹ However, this could only last so long after housewives had a taste of autonomy. Feminism surged through the 1950s into the creation of Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s, coinciding largely with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963.

Regina, Dinah, Augusta, and Elizabeth, though set in different time periods, provided examples of strong, independent-minded women to mid-twentieth century audiences. The composers and librettists who wrote these operas did not shy away from the strength of these women but embraced it in order to fortify the overall message of their shows.

¹ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 53, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ku/detail.action?docID=625080> (accessed January 26, 2018).

I. Mark Blitzstein and *Regina*

The character of Regina Giddens in Marc Blitzstein's *Regina* is not a conventional female figure. As a Southern aristocrat at the turn of the twentieth century, she lives in an era where women's lives are largely dictated by the men around them. Yet Regina has found a way to create her own power. Within the confines of her own prison, she uses the only source of power she has—her womanly wiles and wit—to rise to a position above her brothers.

The opera follows the original form of the play and is divided into three acts, set in the house of the Regina and Horace Giddens in a small southern town in the spring of 1900. Regina and her brothers, Ben and Oscar Hubbard, are in the process of making a deal to buy a cotton mill. Regina's husband Horace has been staying in a clinic in Baltimore due to a heart condition, but because his money is needed to finish the deal, Regina manipulates her daughter Alexandra into bringing him home, thus putting his health in danger. Upon discovery that her husband has foiled her plans and her brothers have stolen Horace's money to make the deal without her, Regina hastens Horace's death of a heart attack by withholding his medicine when he needs it. In the end, Regina gets what she wanted all along, threatening to send her brothers to jail and gaining the majority of the profits from the cotton mill deal while also permanently destroying her relationship with Alexandra.

The Role of Regina

Blitzstein did effectively portray Regina as a ruthless, greedy manipulator, and his musical choices uphold these ideas. The role of Regina requires an extensive range that spans two-and-a-half octaves. The tessitura is demanding, often requiring extensive singing in the area of the voice that is often the upper *passagio* for women. The performers must sing five arias along with multiple demanding ensemble pieces in addition to constant dialogue between scenes.

Regina Giddens is a character that warrants much discussion. Blitzstein certainly noted the importance of the character, not only by making her the female lead of the show but also titling the opera after her. As both librettist and composer, he was able to characterize the role of Regina the way he wanted through both music and text.

Blitzstein had a very intimate understanding of the character before he began work on this opera. In 1946, he received a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation to compose an opera. Having just written incidental music for Lillian Hellman's play *Another Part of the Forest* earlier in the year, he chose the play's sequel, *The Little Foxes*, as the basis for his new opera.² *Another Part of the Forest* gives insight into Regina's upbringing. Marcus Hubbard, Regina's father, was a cruel and violent man who had alienated the local townspeople of Bowden, Alabama by profiteering from the Civil War. Regina's older brother Ben blackmailed his father into relinquishing the control of the family to him. With his newfound power, Ben prevented Regina from marrying her impoverished lover, John Bagtry, and instead forced her into marrying Horace Giddens to extend the family wealth.³

The back-story provides insight into Blitzstein's take on Regina, because it clarifies the motive for her attitude toward her brothers throughout the opera as well as the reason for the presence of one scene that does not appear in Hellman's original *The Little Foxes*. John Bagtry, Regina's love from her younger years, does not appear in *The Little Foxes*, but Blitzstein decided to insert the character into his opera. Bagtry enters in the middle of the party scene, much to Regina's delight. She sings an aria in the form of a beautiful waltz, illustrating the physical

² Anne Foradori, "Mark Blitzstein's 'Regina': A Pivotal Work in American Musical Theatre" (Doctoral diss., Ohio State University, 1994), 11.

³ Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 316.

beauty that Regina is complimented on multiple times throughout the opera. While her husband Horace watches, Regina begins by laying on the charm to her old beau. However, the mood quickly turns. While the music remains sweet, the text starts to reveal Regina's rotten thoughts. Soon she is insulting John Bagtry, calling him rude names and telling him that he could never light the passion within her that things like diamonds and money can. She ends the songs with the words, "I'm in love with things. You've a thousand rivals—things," and what began as a ploy to make her husband jealous turns into another selfish rant about her desire for material possessions.

The inclusion of John Bagtry and the subsequent scene accomplishes several important tasks in the character development of Regina. Bagtry represents Regina's youth and past, before she became hardened and materialistic. It shows the audience that she was once capable of love. However, as the text of the aria changes from affectionate conversation to rude insults, we see the transformation that Regina has undertaken over the years. By being denied the love that she yearned for in her youth, she has turned to the love of material things.

Regina's love of money and the things that money can buy is one of the main components of her character. In fact, it is one of the main themes from Hellman's play, who was trying to draw attention to the moral dangers of consumerism. By incorporating John Bagtry and giving the audience a look into the way greed has corrupted the once lovable character of Regina, Blitzstein is driving this main point home.

Perhaps the best-known aria of the whole show is Regina's "The Best Thing of All." At the end of a long first act, during which Regina has helped seal the cotton mill deal, strong-armed her brothers into giving her a higher share of the profits, and manipulated her daughter

into bringing Horace home from the hospital, Regina launches into her signature song. The opening verse reads:

You know, if you want something that's over the wall,
Don't wait and don't hope and don't beg and don't crawl.
Oh no, you must take what you want.
You must take it in your hand like a ball.
To want and to take is the best thing of all.

These lyrics can almost be seen as Regina's personal credo, a statement of the belief system that drives her in everything she does. Regina not only believes that she deserves everything she wants, most importantly material things, but also believes in taking them, no matter the cost, both literally and figuratively.

The musical setting shows Blitzstein's awareness of Regina's bold and unashamed attitude. The main theme is expansive and broad, mirroring the commanding pomp of Regina's nature and expresses her great adoration for "things." Written in the key of A major, the aria packs a punch and ends on a soaring high A. While the bulk of the aria does sit on the staff, the repetitive melodic motive continually rises, creating excitement but also drawing the tessitura of the piece slightly higher than Regina's other singing up to this point in the opera. This mimics the excitement that Regina feels as she talks about her love of wanting. The final verse mimics the opening material, only this time at a slightly slower tempo, marked *Poco maestoso*. This is Regina's final moment of Act 1, full of grandeur and glory.

This brings up the discussion as to whether Regina should be considered a soprano or a mezzo-soprano role. Being the most well-known aria of the opera, "The Best Thing of All" is sometimes excerpted out for auditions—by sopranos. Similarly, scores will often label the role as soprano, but there is evidence to suggest otherwise. Originally, Blitzstein wrote the role to be sung by a mezzo-soprano. He later revised the role for Brenda Lewis, a soprano who premiered

the role of Birdie. This resulted in raising several of the lower parts to accommodate her voice.⁴ However, it is important to note that the role still largely sits in a comfortable mezzo-soprano range. Although the range is extensive, the majority of the role sits on the staff and saves the high notes for moments of high intensity and excitement. A soprano without a comfortable low range will struggle with this role, and audiences will also struggle to hear them over the orchestra for extended portions of the score. Similarly, any mezzo-soprano who wishes to have success must have a solid handle on their top range and not tire too quickly from utilizing it frequently.

In terms of what types of singers have sung the role in the past, the group is diverse. American Broadway singer Jane Pickens premiered the role and received great acclaim for it. Having made a name for herself in the early 1930s as one of the Pickens Sisters, Jane Pickens continued her musical studies at Curtis and Julliard and made connections through steady work on and off the stage, including contact with *Regina* producer, Cheryl Crawford.⁵ Pickens' proven musical talents along with her Southern upbringing made her a perfect, albeit unexpected choice, for the titular role. It is important to note that Pickens was considered a Broadway singer and did not carry the distinction of soprano or mezzo-soprano, thus continuing the vague categorization of the role.

Soprano Brenda Lewis, who played Birdie in the opening run of the opera, eventually made the move to sing Regina in later runs at City Opera. It was at this point that Blitzstein rewrote sections of the role to accommodate the slightly higher range of Lewis' voice. However, although clearly successful as an operatic soprano, Lewis was well known for singing mezzo-soprano roles, most notably the title roles in Bizet's *Carmen* and Jack Beeson's premier of *Lizzie*

⁴ Anne Foradori, "Examining a 'New' American Classic: Vocal Writing in Marc Blitzstein's 'Regina'," *Journal of Singing* 54, no. 1 (September 1997), 25.

⁵ Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 333.

Borden. This points to the fact that although Brenda Lewis was considered a soprano, she was also successful singing roles with lower range and tessitura.

In subsequent productions throughout the United States, the number of sopranos to mezzo-sopranos that sang the role is almost split straight down the middle.⁶ And in many cases, the sopranos who sang the role have a history of singing mezzo-soprano roles of a similar style. In general, the voice categorization is less important than having the endurance and range to sing such a demanding role. Therefore, the identification in the score as “soprano” is not accurate in terms of the range of voice types that feasibly sing the role.

Furthermore, the characterization of Regina Giddens actually relates more to the stereotypical mezzo-soprano leading roles of European opera. Regina could very easily be compared to Dalila. Both women are seductresses who use their physical beauty to allure men to meet their own needs. In fact, both of them have their own songs for seduction. While very different in style, Dalila’s “Printemps qui commence” and “Mon cœur s’ouvre à ta voix” function in the same way as Regina’s seduction tune, which shows up twice in the opera: first, when Regina is trying to woo Mr. Marshall into agreeing to the Hubbard’s plan and secondly, after Horace has returned from Baltimore and Regina is trying to convince him she has no hidden agenda in bringing him home. Although the lyrics to these two instances are completely different, the music is exactly the same, pointing to the idea that Regina is not being genuine in either interaction but employs this tune as a known manipulation tool, much like Dalila who is manipulating Samson in the name of her people.

While Regina does relate to previous mezzo-soprano leading ladies, like Saint-Saëns’ Dalila, there are certain aspects to her character that break away from mezzo-soprano

⁶ Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein*, 345.

stereotypes. Regina is certainly revolutionary as an early twentieth-century woman for her elevated status among powerful men. However, what makes her different than other leading mezzos is that by the end of the opera she has achieved that power through more than her sexual prowess. Carmen and Dalila are both strong female characters, mostly noted for their skills as seductresses. Regina, while certainly aware of her abilities in that realm, has transcended the need for seduction by the end of Blitzstein's opera. In fact, the final victory for Regina is not a conquest of a love interest but in gaining the upper hand to her brother Ben, who has controlled her for most of her life.

This correlates to the shift in attitudes about women during the time that Blitzstein was composing *Regina*. He began writing in 1946, a year after World War 2 ended. During the war, the women's workforce increased by 60% and three-quarters of that work force was comprised of married women.⁷ For the first time in American history, women were being recognized for their ability to work outside of the home and were given freedom from their feminine expectations.

Regina, though set in the early part of the century, is a representation of new expectations for women. Though Regina is certainly not a lovable character, audiences are more put off by her cut-throat demeanor than her ability to step outside the typical female gender roles. This may not have been the case had the opera premiered several decades earlier, but because the 1940s were the beginning of a long and drawn out women's movement, audiences were more prone to accept the revolutionary nature of Regina Giddens.

⁷ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring*, 47.

II. Bernstein and *Trouble in Tahiti*

Marc Blitzstein and Leonard Bernstein were not only colleagues but also good friends. The two came from remarkably similar backgrounds and admired and encouraged each other's works. In many ways, Blitzstein was a mentor for the younger Bernstein, and when Blitzstein's opera *Regina* premiered in 1949 on Broadway, Bernstein wrote an article in the *New York Times* about the future of American opera.⁸ Bernstein was inspired by what Blitzstein had done with *Regina* and certainly had it in mind as he started work on his first opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*.

Happening simultaneously was Bernstein's impending marriage to Chilean actress Felicia Montealegre Cohn. The couple had endured a tumultuous relationship since 1946 but renewed their engagement in August 1951. Less than a month later, the two married and quickly went on an extended honeymoon to Mexico. While he had begun work on *Trouble in Tahiti* prior to their marriage, a bulk of the writing for this opera took place on the honeymoon.⁹

Bernstein's choice of subject material is quite unusual and has led many scholars to question his motivations. While Bernstein's satire on postwar consumerism and bourgeois marriage may not seem revolutionary to us now, it was certainly edgy in the 1950s. In a time that the League of Women Voters was denounced as a "communist front organization" by the House of Un-American Activities Committee, it was dangerous for any artist to be upfront about their leftist views.¹⁰ As a Jewish composer with ties to many people who had already been investigated by the HUAC, Bernstein was taking a risk by writing a piece that criticized "American" ideals.

⁸ Helen Smith, *There's a Place For Us: The Musical Theatre Works of Leonard Bernstein* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 45.

⁹ Smith, *There's a Place For Us*, 46.

¹⁰ Keathley, "Postwar Modernity," 221.

Bernstein's views on marriage are hard to decipher. In a letter to long-time mentor Aaron Copland, Bernstein says, "It is the most interesting thing I have ever done, though there are times when one's interest must be that of a person in an audience, or one would go mad. It is full of compensations—and rewards and reveals more to me about myself than anything else ever has, including a spotty array of analysts."¹¹ While Bernstein seemed devoted to presenting a happy marriage to the outside world, Felicia wrote to Helen Coates: "... in spite of the more than expected off moments, we stand a good chance of having a wonderful marriage. It takes patience and love, and I seem to have plenty of both. It is difficult for Lenny of course to have given up the mad, hectic, and glamorous life and gotten married to boot. Marriage is bound to take the blame for much that he must be missing . . . however it's all possible to cope with."¹²

It seems that while the two wanted the marriage to be successful, it was not without its struggles for both of them, much like the two main characters of *Trouble in Tahiti*, Dinah and Sam.

The Role of Dinah

Trouble in Tahiti is a one-act opera, lasting approximately 45 minutes, and follows a day in life of a young suburban married couple, Dinah and Sam. Sam is a successful businessman, and Dinah is a stay-at-home mom to their son Junior, who is mentioned in the opera but does not appear. These are the only two characters, but the show also requires a trio of singers, 1 female and 2 men. The jazz trio comments on the situation at hand, often employing sarcasm and humor, and functions as a modern day Greek chorus. Their music resembles that of a dance-band. Following in the footsteps of Blitzstein, Bernstein worked hard to employ popular music styles in his opera to make it more "American."

¹¹ Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 214-215.

¹² Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 214-215.

The prelude features the trio, painting the picture of a perfect suburban home. The illusion of perfection is soon shattered as the curtain opens on Sam and Dinah, having an argument over the kitchen table. The two cannot seem to find much to be happy about and argue about Sam not being able to make it to Junior's play later in the day. They leave to begin their day frustrated with each other.

The next series of scenes alternates between showing Sam at his office and Dinah at her psychiatrist's office. Here we witness Dinah telling her psychiatrist about her dreams. In the A section of her aria, "There is a Garden," Dinah complains about her overgrown garden, which she imagines is suffocating and trapping her. As she describes the garden in greater detail, the music shifts between triple and duple meter as well as major and minor modes. The mood shifts from fits of panic to moments of serenity, mimicking the inner strife Dinah is feeling. In the B section, Dinah imagines finding resolution and peace within the garden. She sings, "There love will teach us harmony and grace. Then love will lead us to a quiet place." It seems that Dinah is searching for these things and believes she will find them through the resolution of her failing relationship.

The way Bernstein portrays the psychoanalytic treatment Dinah undergoes is different from the way it was portrayed in films and other media at the time. While many women sought help from psychiatrists in the 1950s, psychoanalysis was often looked down upon as a marker of hysteria and irrationality. This, in addition to the fact that most psychiatrists were men who believed that women belonged at home with children, made psychoanalysis less than effective in helping women. However, Bernstein does not include any of the negative viewpoints in the scene with Dinah and the psychiatrist. Because Dinah's psychiatrist is imaginary, there is no actual male authority figure to correct her behavior or diminish her frustration. Instead, the

therapy session is used as a means for Dinah to actually express her emotions. Furthermore, Dinah suggests in the opening scene that Sam should visit the psychiatrist as well. As Elizabeth Keathley points out, this is subtle but sends a clear message—that seeking therapy is not a gender specific activity.¹³

Keathley goes on to suggest that *Tahiti* was less biographical and more a critique of gender politics in the postwar United States. She even suggests that if Bernstein was identifying with either character, it was probably Dinah, the devalued “other” in a culture built on rigid expectations valuing capitalism, consumerism, and heterosexual marriage.¹⁴ This makes sense, considering that Bernstein admitted to seeing psycho-analysts from time to time. Although Dinah represents the stereotypical suburban housewife of the 1950s, she is actually given a voice to communicate her unhappiness, a privilege very few alienated people were given during the time period.

The way Bernstein portrays Dinah is extremely unconventional. While women-oriented advertising set out to empower women during World War II, it shifted back after the war to encourage women to return home and create perfect nuclear families.¹⁵ This was the kind of female role model that pervaded all forms of popular culture and created pressure for women to uphold. In writing Dinah, Bernstein gave a voice to what he saw as the reality of this shift—that woman felt trapped by these strict gender roles.

While women of the twenty-first century might consider Dinah submissive, she dares to step outside of expected gender norms. She is not afraid to express her frustrations with her husband, something that was not encouraged. The societal belief was that women like Dinah,

¹³ Keathley, “Postwar Modernity,” 244.

¹⁴ Keathley, “Postwar Modernity,” 245.

¹⁵ Andi Zeisler, *Feminism & Pop Culture* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008): 27-28.

married to a successful husband with the means to buy things, had no reason to be unhappy. But Bernstein understood that this was not reality for many women and used Dinah to give them a voice and bring attention to the falsities of the American Dream.

Although this aria of Dinah's is not as well-known as her later aria, "Trouble in Tahiti," it is more telling of Bernstein's own views on marriage and the failed promise of the American suburban dream. While less exciting and dramatic, it gives an inside look at the ethos of so many unhappy housewives from the 1950s and is therefore essential to the understanding of both the opera and its leading lady, Dinah.

Furthermore, Dinah continues the trend of American opera composers using a mezzo-soprano lead differently from European composers of the previous centuries. Dinah is not only the lead of *Trouble in Tahiti* but also the only named female in the show, a previously unaccomplished feat in standard operatic repertoire. Dinah also breaks the mold by giving a voice to the unhappy housewife. While operatic female characters that are unhappy in their marriage are many, it is usually a mere characteristic, not the entire plot. By centering the entire opera around Dinah's unhappiness, Bernstein is drawing attention to a social issue that was pertinent to his own social climate, making Dinah a figurehead for reflection and hopefully, change.

III. Douglas Moore and *The Ballad of Baby Doe*

Although titled *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Douglas Moore's opera is equally the story of three characters: Horace, Augusta, and Baby Doe. Moore began work on the opera while teaching at Columbia University with the help of John LaTouche, the librettist. Accounts from colleagues and students who witnessed the genesis of this opera often commented on the dramatically opposing nature these two men displayed. While Moore was disciplined and hard-working, LaTouche was considered erratic and worked productively in bursts.¹⁶

This is not the only way the two contrasted. Douglas Moore had been drawn to Baby Doe from the start, but John LaTouche seems to have had more admiration for Augusta Tabor. Soprano Leyna Gabriele, a voice student at Columbia who was the first to learn the role of Baby Doe and who witnessed the initial stages of the opera's inception, believed that LaTouche was "enamored" with Augusta and therefore "he really wrote very strongly for her."¹⁷ While Baby Doe is the typical soprano ingénue, LaTouche incorporated multiple sides to Augusta's character, making her character human and easy to relate to. Thus began the portrayal of two paradoxically portrayed females—both of whom displayed unusual power, strength, and independence in the Victorian era.

The Role of Augusta

The first true look at Augusta Tabor happens in Act 1 Scene 3. She is tidying up Horace's office with her maid Samantha. While cleaning, Augusta finds a check made out to Jake Sands, the owner of the Matchless Mine. Augusta believes that it is a horrible idea to buy another mine and resolves to talk to Horace about it later. Then she finds a set of beautiful lacey

¹⁶ John Moriarty and Duane A. Smith, *I Shall Walk Beside My Love* (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 95.

¹⁷ Moriarty and Smith, *I Shall Walk Beside My Love*, 95.

gloves, believing them to be for her. Quickly Augusta transitions from busily cleaning to fancifully admiring the gift from her husband, feeling special and loved. She finds the accompanying note and reads it. To a beautiful, legato melody Augusta reads the love letter, for one moment revealing her softer side.

The moment is short lived as she discovers at the end of the note that it was not meant for her, but for someone else—Baby Doe. After a brief fit of anger, the music dies down, and Augusta asks her maid if she has seen this Baby Doe. With no more than a positive nod from her maid, Augusta embarks on a melancholy and powerful soliloquy. She imagines the small, slender hands that would fit into those lacey gloves and the kind of woman that would have them. It must be a woman completely unlike herself. She looks at her own hands and is taken back to all the hardships she and Horace have endured together.

This scene is series of monologues, each displaying a different aspect of Augusta. The first section, as Augusta is tidying up, is one of the few moments that she is truly in a good mood. She is happy and content to be doing simple cleaning. As she discovers Horace's plan to buy the Matchless Mine, we witness Augusta's knowledge of Horace's business and her own business savvy. Then after finding the gloves, the audience sees the softer side to Augusta Tabor. Although previous scenes show Horace calling Augusta names, she waxes poetic about the romantic charms of her husband until she finds that the card is meant for Baby Doe.

Here Augusta transitions quickly from anger to sadness as she recalls previous hardships. We learn that Augusta has been battling the town gossip about her marriage troubles. We also learn that Augusta has a long, hard history of conflict with her husband. Augusta came from a well-off family in Maine but followed Horace to the unexplored and uncultivated western side of the country. She worked to put Horace through college, cooked meals for miners, managed his

affairs, and stood by him through all the tough times before he made his fortune. By allowing the audience to see all these different sides of Augusta, Moore and LaTouche create a complex and relatable character from the start. This scene is essential in developing the both the character of Augusta as well as the audience's loyalty to her.

Every soprano wants to sing the role of Baby Doe, but every woman in the audience goes home on the side of Augusta Tabor. That is due largely in part to the way she is portrayed by the librettist, John LaTouche. That is not to say that Moore had the intention of making Augusta the villain. His primary intention was to create a character that strongly contrasted Baby Doe. This is part of the reason that Moore wrote Augusta as a mezzo-soprano. Originally, he had conceived of the role as a dramatic soprano. However, he eventually switched the role to be sung by a heavier mezzo-soprano, both to have more contrast with the high range of Baby Doe but also to achieve a darker timbre for Augusta.¹⁸ Although he changed the type of voice he would like to sing the role, Moore did not rewrite the part. Frances Bible, who sang the role at Central City in 1956 said:

Originally, the part of Augusta was written for dramatic soprano, and then the composer decided that he wanted a little heavier voice than that in the part, but he didn't rewrite the part. So it is quite taxing. It gets up on top quite a lot, you know, and he didn't rewrite any of the high notes to fit the lower voice.¹⁹

As Bible suggests, the role does have an uncomfortably high tessitura for larger-voiced mezzo-sopranos. This inherent paradox reads to listeners and automatically puts them on edge, adding extra tension to the character.

This aspect seems to connect Augusta Tabor with her European mezzo-soprano ancestors, specifically those in Verdi's operas. Verdi mezzos like Amneris and Eboli both

¹⁸ Moriarty and Smith, *I Shall Walk Beside My Love*, 98.

¹⁹ Moriarty and Smith, *I Shall Walk Beside My Love*, 98.

require a heavier mezzo-soprano voice as well as a solid upper extension. They, too, are strong women who stand firmly in comparison to their soprano counterparts. In this way, Augusta carries on the European standard for strong mezzo-soprano leading ladies.

Augusta's next substantial scene takes place a year later in her parlor with four of her friends, all noisily asking, "What do you intend to do Augusta?" again and again. Augusta firmly replies that she will do nothing at all. The gossip ensues at an intense rate while Augusta remains stoic, until the mention of divorce. After being told that Horace plans to divorce her so that he can marry Baby Doe, Augusta becomes enraged. This, it seems, is the greatest shame Horace could put on her, much worse than cheating on her. The tension builds, as the ladies support her with cries of "Shout it from the housetops. Decent women everywhere will rally by your side." Augusta ends the scene with the chilling line, "If he every tries to divorce, I'll make him rue the that day that he was ever born." Marked *Maestoso*, this line is especially impactful. The accompaniment mimics the beating of the vocal line with accented chords, and on the word 'rue' Augusta sings a held out high A-flat. The line quickly descends to a middle C to end, moving from the height of a mezzo's powerful range to the chesty bottom.

Years later, after Horace has lost his fortune, Augusta has made a fine life for herself and is very well off. Baby's mother, Mama McCourt, comes to Augusta, begging for her to help Horace and Baby Doe, a very undignified plea. Augusta refuses to help, quoting the awful things Horace said to her at their last meeting, but after Mama McCourt leaves, Augusta begins to question her decisions. In Augusta's aria, "Augusta! How Can you Turn Away?," she urges herself to forget her own pride and help the man she promised her life to. She mourns the loss of the life she had with him and works herself into a frenzy, imagining him calling to her for help. But at the last moment, she holds her resolve and ends with the words "But I cannot go."

The music is not beautiful like Baby Doe's, but it is beyond powerful. Here is Augusta, a woman who is constantly admonished for coldness, baring every aspect of her inner feelings. She recognizes her faults, relives her pain, dares to let herself hope, and then makes her final decision because it is the only way she will be able to continue moving on with her life.

Augusta also does her own part in breaking the mold. While she loses Horace to Baby Doe, she does end the opera in a position of favor. Financially, she has found a way to support her lifestyle while also maintaining her elevated social status without a man at her side. Considering the opera is set in the 1880s, this not only makes Augusta unconventional but revolutionary, especially to female audience members from the 1950s who were struggling with oppressive gender ideas linked to marriage.

Women in modern audiences are apt to sympathize with Augusta as well. Beverly Sills, who is historically known for her outstanding portrayal of Baby Doe, knew that her biggest challenge with the role was not singing it but having to get audiences to respond to Baby Doe the way they naturally sympathized with Augusta.²⁰

Similarly, mezzo-sopranos who have performed the role recognize the strength of Augusta Tabor. Joyce Castle, who performed the role in eight productions across the United States including the fiftieth anniversary at Central City Opera, says:

In my estimation the role of Augusta is a jewel. The vocal writing is melded with the libretto in such a perfect way as to show a fully developed woman/character. She is a woman of great strength and vulnerability. She is a proud woman who has been dealt a blow. Her world seems shattered, yet she survives. A gift of a role!

The character development that Augusta experiences throughout the opera is astounding. As a "cold" wife who is unappreciated by her husband, she becomes a formidable opponent to her

²⁰ Moriarty and Smith, *I Shall Walk Beside My Love*, 105.

nemesis, Baby Doe. Then, after losing her husband, she attempts to help the man who has caused her so much pain only to be insulted again, and after his financial ruin, she proves herself to be an independent and savvy business woman. Yet through all of this, she is able to admit her own faults and express her own doubts at her actions. The combination of these things makes her genuine, real, and easy to relate to as well as an unconventional mezzo-soprano leading lady.

IV. Robert Ward and *The Crucible*

Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* opened at the Martin Beck Theatre on January 22, 1953 at the height of the McCarthy hearings. Miller's choice to create a work based on the Salem Witch trials stemmed from his long fascination with the historical event and also his belief that the repressive system and ethical absolutism of seventeenth-century Puritanism in Salem was being mirrored in the ideals of McCarthyism in the United States.²¹ He sought to delve deeper into the dangers that were involved in passing judgment based on strict moral obligations and succeeded in eliciting a strong response from audiences by creating a drama that obviously correlated with current events.²²

Robert Ward was a dedicated socialist, and when he and librettist Bernard Stambler saw an off-Broadway revival of Miller's play in 1959, the two were convinced that they had found the source material for their second opera. Ward, like Blitzstein and Bernstein before him, believed that the arts had the power to create social change. He said:

I feel strongly that the arts have a responsibility to be the social conscience of the society. They can entertain, too, but they have to be able to sensitize people to social values and needs. They have to be revolutionary sometimes, because they have to reflect the social undercurrents. And very often, they can do it more forcefully than anything else.²³

Miller's intent to create parallels between the Salem Witch Trials and the McCarthy hearings rang strongly with Ward and Stambler, who quickly sought the rights to the work.

The Role of Elizabeth

The first act sets the scene for the infamous witch trials, and the setting of the second act changes to the home of John and Elizabeth Proctor. Here Elizabeth is presented as a good and

²¹ Shannon Benson, "The Twentieth Century Operas of Robert Ward," (Doctoral diss., University of Western Ontario, 2010), 29.

²² Benson, "The Twentieth Century Opera of Robert Ward," 30.

²³ Benson, "The Twentieth Century Opera of Robert Ward," 31.

submissive wife. However, by the end of the act, she has grown to a strong-willed and complex character. It has been eight days since the beginning of the witch trials, and Elizabeth is uneasy. It is revealed that John Proctor had a relationship with young Abigail, and that is why Elizabeth dismissed her from the house. John and Elizabeth's relationship is tense and fragile. Elizabeth urges John to reveal Abigail's fraud to town, but John refuses, revealing that what he learned bears no proof because he was alone with Abigail when he learned it. Elizabeth is immediately suspicious, and John becomes fed up with always being judged. He reiterates that he has moved on from Abigail and implores Elizabeth to learn charity. He cannot reveal Abigail as a liar because she will retaliate by revealing him as a lecher.

Elizabeth responds with her aria, "I do not judge you, John." She denies judging John but sings mournfully of their ruined relationship. She goes on to tell John that Abigail will not damn him as a lecher, for it would incriminate herself. She urges John to step forward to not only save the people on trial but also to prove that he has eternally left his love for Abigail behind so that Elizabeth and him can recover their marriage.

This aria is essential in establishing Elizabeth as the moral voice for the entire opera. She starts with the lines, "I do not judge you, John. The court that judges you sits in your own heart. I never thought you but a good man, a good man though perhaps, a little bewildered. That's all." The text rings simple and true and shows that though Elizabeth has every reason to be upset by her husband's extramarital relationship, she is doing what she believes is right by staying above judgment. The vocal range of this section sits low, allowing Elizabeth to stay calm, controlled, and unthreatening.

However, it is not long before her anguish takes over. She continues, "But, oh, the dreams I had for our proud young love, a love that would never turn or falter. But now, it's

shattered, lost and gone. And an icy hand closes round my heart.” The intensity increases as does the general tessitura, until she is exclaiming, “How could it be you turned from me to one like Abigail? How could it be, John? How could it be?” It seems that although Abigail wants to move on from John’s indiscretion, the amount of pain she feels is too much to control.

Then Elizabeth switches moods again, imploring John to do what is right for all the innocent people who are in jail. She says John must officially break free from the hold that Abigail has on him, to save the innocent people Abigail is accusing as well as their own marriage. She has come full circle now and arrived back to the path of righteousness. John must do the right thing to correct the wrongs he has done. Only now, she is firm and strong. Her vocal line incorporates large, dramatic leaps while the range extends to a high A as she proclaims, “You will tear yourself free of her.” Elizabeth has grown from a submissive wife to a strong-willed moral compass in a matter of pages through the use of this epic aria.

A large amount of consideration by Ward and Stambler went into Elizabeth Proctor’s character for the opera. Throughout the opera, each character, including Elizabeth, faces a moral dilemma of having to choose between self-interest versus what is best for society. For Ward, Elizabeth represents Ward’s religious philosophy of “goodness and Godly behavior.”²⁴ While Elizabeth does not begin as the perfect character, she experiences a strong amount of character development. She comes to realize the truth behind her strained relationship with her husband and seems to be the voice of goodness throughout the opera. Her ultimate redemption comes at the end when she selflessly accepts her husband’s personal need to uphold his own morals instead of saving his own life by lying.

²⁴ Kolt, *Robert Ward’s ‘The Crucible’*,” 52.

Mezzo-soprano Frances Bible was the original Elizabeth Proctor at the premiere in 1961. Having already established herself as a powerhouse in American opera by portraying Augusta Tabor, she was a perfect match for the role of Elizabeth Proctor. Ward said, “Frances Bible as Elizabeth was the absolute embodiment of what I saw in that role. She gave it a sort of haunted quality with a rigidity and at the same time uncertainty with tremendous honesty.”²⁵

The choice of Ward to make Elizabeth Proctor a mezzo-soprano is a bit of a surprise. As one of the main protagonists, she represents the positivity that Ward was trying to promote, and her emotional journey is one to look up to. This is a significant variation from typical mezzo-soprano leads. Amneris, Eboli, and Dalila, though strong women, are far from moral icons. In fact, they could be considered villains. This is not the case with Elizabeth Proctor, whose biggest flaw is refusing to speak ill of her husband in court. Furthermore, Elizabeth survives—a fate very few mezzo-soprano leads can claim. Even Bizet’s *Carmen* must die at the end, but Elizabeth lives on. While the original intent of both Miller and Ward was to draw parallels between the Salem Witch trials and the McCarthy trials of the 1950s, the decision to create such a strong female character and let her live as the exemplary icon of the show sends a new message to audiences—that women can be successful in speaking up for what is right. This is an ideal that certainly coincides with the inception of second wave feminism in the early 1960s.

The strength and warmth of a larger mezzo-soprano voice mimics Elizabeth character perfectly. Warm and vulnerable in the lower range while powerful near the top, Elizabeth has a strong voice. It is her strength that is not always understood by the other characters in *The Crucible* and that makes her an unconventional woman. Her understanding and lack of hysteria as her husband is led to his death is criticized by those around her. They are frustrated with her

²⁵ Charles Wollver, “Robert Ward’s ‘The Crucible’: A Critical Commentary” (Doctoral diss., University of Cincinnati, 1986), 14.

lack of action and sees it as a failure to her wifely duties. What he does not understand is exactly what Ward and Miller wanted to convey—that Elizabeth has transcended to a greater realization than the other characters are capable of. She is the light at the end of a dark event.

Conclusion

As shown through an in-depth look at these operas, Regina Giddens, Dinah, Augusta Tabor, and Elizabeth Proctor are four unconventionally strong women. The men who included these women in their operas were well known for incorporating their political views into their work. Written in a period when political tensions were high in the United States, the desire to create socially conscious art was intense. In fact, writing with a social consciousness could be considered a prevailing characteristic of the budding identity of American opera of the time. While their intent was not to necessarily to promote women's rights, the specificities in how the four composers approached these women's characterization points to underlying social changes, particularly when the four mezzo-soprano roles are compared to those in earlier opera.

Like the need for social consciousness, the inclusion of lead roles for larger mezzo-soprano voices is another characteristic of many American operas from the mid-twentieth century. The roles included in this paper are the most well-known and regularly performed, but there are certainly many more in the operas from the 1940s to 1960s. This period of operatic production set a precedent for the specific features that continue to appear in American opera until the present day, including in the works by Jake Heggie and Mark Adamo. It could be said that American opera is more of an equal opportunity genre in terms of soprano versus mezzo-soprano leads in comparison to the trends of European opera of past centuries.

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: firstly, to provide an in-depth character analysis of these four roles and show that there are definite similarities in the way that they break the mold, and secondly, to bring to light the connection between mezzo-soprano roles in operas by mid-twentieth-century American opera composers and contemporaneous transformation in the American society.

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