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Humorous Essay
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**GREAT OPERAS
of the Lesser Composers**

by Andrew Kass

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Opera as we know it is approaching a crisis. The vast majority of operas currently performed by major companies are the same old warhorses composed in the 18th and 19th centuries. If this trend continues, our children will sleep through the same body of music as we and our parents before us.

Little relief is seen from the modern composers. Serial compositions tend to sound like a music store invaded by beavers. Charles Wuorinen reportedly once allowed four consecutive bars of melody to slip into an early draft of *Isla del Gilligan*, whereupon he promptly burned it. Such dour pieces lurch along in an atonal wilderness unvisited by all but the hardest of souls.

Of necessity, then, a great deal of recent musicological research has gone into unearthing the works of obscure composers. Many have been forgotten, others actively banished from memory. A sampling is presented here for consideration by the City Opera for its upcoming season, so that this generation may laugh, cry, and forget them anew.

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"Das Sheissmonger" ("The Tale-Teller") (1911)
by Anton Graumpf-Niblung (1883-1951)

Bright, splashy overture builds to a rising cadenza that flits from the basses through the trumpets to the flutes until ushers seize it and dump it in the alley. Curtain rises on a pastoral setting, a dairy farm in Bavaria sometime between the Thirty Years War and the First Reich. An old farmer, Der Alter Cocker, sits smoking a pipe atop a pile of cow manure. He sings in a surprisingly robust baritone about the size of the flop heaps he and his brothers could rake in their prime, soaring to a breathless arpeggio recounting improvements in animal husbandry. Out of breath, he faints. Unfortunately it is summer, so the children are too far away to hear him, making this opera something of a tour-de-force.

A man of many accomplishments, Graumpf-Niblung was a child prodigy on the piano. At the age of two, he won the Farshimmelt Scholarship for his contrapuntal *Chopstick Variations* for double clavier. He was a quarter-finalist at age 10 in the Tchaikovsky Competition, but lacked a finishing kick. This was remedied three years later when he won not only the Tchaikovsky but also a gold medal in the 1500 meters at Athens.

Graumpf-Niblung the art critic disliked Cubism, saying "none of my friends look like that," though his reclusive wife, Klima, was rumored to be rhomboid. His philosophical text on art criticism, *Fun with Crayons*, was thought to be the seminal German work in the field, though not fully understood until ten years after his death when his son Rudi removed all references to Play-Doh.

Das Sheissmonger enjoyed a vogue in the first week of the Third Reich, until Von Ribbentrop told Hitler what flatulence meant. After that, the opera disappeared until Camus mentioned it in his posthumous essay, *"Mais Serieusement,"* as a rare justification of murder short of nihilism.

***"La Sabot Malheureuse"* ("The Sad Wooden Shoe") (1789)**
by Antoine Migraïne de Boulaboillard (1763-1792)

This is a representative opera of the Neo-Postclassical period, which began as a musical expression of the French Revolution and ended the following Thursday when Robespierre started wearing dark glasses and listening to bop.

La Sabot is an allegorical tale set in Bretagne. A wooden shoe, representing tradition, falls overboard when Maurice, a fisherman, lands an enormous codfish (the Revolution). Maurice, overjoyed, sings an aria upon returning to the harbor which brings all the townswomen to the waterfront despite the smell. Just as he prepares to throw his line ashore, the codfish wakes up and bats him overboard. In one of the more ingenious passages in opera history, Anna the fishwife performs obbligato mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Maurice. Maurice awakes, suddenly obsessed with the cheese secreted in his lost shoe. The townswomen think this weird and leave, except for Anna the fishwife, who slaps him with the codfish.

The codfish and Maurice are both stunned and swap identities, singing a nearly incomprehensible duet about durable fabrics.

Meanwhile the shoe, forgotten, is alone and sad.

Migraïne de Boulaboillard was a close buddy of Louis de Saint-Just, a revolutionary consultant and fashion plate. Their circle was noted for its asceticism, save for its fondness for velvet underwear and Lip Quencher. Migraïne de Boulaboillard, originally a student of theology, was the son of a noblewoman and France's first jet pilot, Jean-Jacques Phillipe de Boulaboillard, whose place in history was denied him because jets were not then invented.

***"Batman"* (1894)**
by Tadeuz Ryzmcyzhychyn (1859-1810)

Little of known of the mysterious Bard of Bialystock beyond the dates on his gravestone, presumably either an error or an end-of-century bargain. This student of the brilliant but misguided Dworkin (the first and last of the Pre-Cambrians, a movement devoted to the ancient

sound of breath through gills) enjoyed a vogue in the early 1880s with his *Concerto for the Right Hand*, since it was a cheap date. Legend has it that his insistence on the simple pronunciation of his surname as “Cohen” derived from his desire to simplify all things, even to the spending of his final years as a recluse in a forest hut, studying and learning from his friends the woodland creatures. From the owl, it is said, he learned patience. From the fox he learned stealth. And like the termite, he ate wood.

His last and arguably greatest opera sprang directly from these lessons. The tale of a young boy, lost in the deep woods, who is rescued and suckled by bats speaks even to this day as a cry to something deep within our souls, something that can only be expressed in a high, squeaky voice while hanging upside-down.

For *Batman* finally gave Ryzmcyzhychyn the libretto to turn his greatest liability into a strength. Following a youthful pipe-organ accident, Ryzmcyzhychyn could not bear the bass clef. Thus, his orchestrations go no lower than cor anglais and the rare viola, while his vocal palette was composed almost entirely of coloratura and counter-tenor, which accounts for why his operas are rarely performed today. Despite the critical chastisement of his early *Beowulf* as “a burly bunch of bawling banshees” and “opera for dogs -- and they can keep it,” Ryzmcyzhychyn persisted in extending the use of the upper registers. He achieved mild notoriety with his setting of Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, though predominantly because his cast was dressed only in feathers. Tchaikowsky, upon seeing his cantata *Damon and Pythias*, would only say cryptically, “I will go home now,” which Ryzmcyzhychyn took as encouragement.

For the next ten years, his life was devoted to *Batman*.

In *Andreas*, the boy raised by bats, he finally found his most perfect expression. The boy’s soprano passage “*Mein Grossen Kopf*” is a yearning cry of the outcast, which meets the answering chorus of consolation from the Mother Bats (“*Ach! Meine Kleine Schwanzler*”). The athletic requirements of hanging upside down while singing work best in Act One, where the cast is younger and more nimble.

The second act is more demanding, as an older counter-tenor Andreas attempts to craft wings for himself. The Mother Bats continue their encouragement while plucking him from the guano, but the stern Master Bat admonishes Andreas against defying nature in an ironic reprise of his own theme (“*Zei Dum Kopf*”). In response to Andreas’s despondent aria “*Ne Hock ma nicht Ka-Chynik*”, wood nymphs weave him a silken black cape and cowl while he sleeps. Upon awakening, Andreas is overjoyed. He spreads his wings and soars while singing “*Yippity Doo-Dah*” as the Mother Bats join in the swelling chorus. At the height of the celebration, he is snatched by an eagle and carried off.

Many great tenors of his time transposed the part of the mature Andreas down an octave to be able to sing the part and still talk the next day. An interesting and more artistically honest approach was taken by Slim Whitman in the 1962 Las Vegas revival, where he yodeled the part.

As far as is known, Ryzmcyzhychyn never wrote again, though dogs disappeared for hours at a time to the woods of his retirement.

“Moby Dick” (1912)
by Pomeroy Moulting-Cabbage (1871-1916)

Pomeroy Moulting-Cabbage, scion of the Maidenhead Cabbages, claimed to have had a vision at age 10 of Herman Melville gesturing to a rack of Classic Comics while humming Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*. Ten years later, Melville was dead; young Pomeroy swore to immortalize his greatest work in song. *Moby Dick* is the product of this obsession.

Moulting-Cabbage’s ambition was constrained by two factors: he had never read the book, and could neither read nor write musical notation. In overcoming the latter problem, he devised a new musical tablature which consisted entirely of phonetic instrumentation (e.g., “Trumpet: BA-BA-BA BRAAAP : BA-bup-bup-BUM : . . .”).

The other problem yielded some interesting results. Liberties were taken with the text: Ahab here is the shady proprietor of a South Seas travel service catering to attractive young men. A bold ensemble aboard the *Pequod* raises the first act curtain, which falls again before the bon

voyage champagne brunch. The second act takes place during a heated game of shuffleboard, where Ahab is suspected of having a fix on for Mr. Stubbs, the second mate, as First Mate Starbuck tries to arrange a lifeboat drill. Lights dim, and Ishmael sings *a capella* at the apron about the evils of diarrhea and sea-sickness, and why it is bad to have both at once.

The third act finds Ahab at the rail, feeding the fish. A white whale comes along and eats the fish. Ahab screams at the whale, calling it names and impugning its family. The whale, angered, turns and kills everyone except Ishmael. The whale, a *basso profundo*, sings a concluding aria to him about the meaninglessness of life and death.

Moulting-Cabbage never lived to see this work performed. At the outbreak of the First World War he joined the British Expeditionary Force as a lorry, and was lost when his mates asked him to "borrow sugar from the blokes across the field" as a joke.

The work was adapted ten years later by the Russian Ivan Hotzetodshky as a diversion from crossword puzzles whose answers were all "Stalin". By some accounts, *Moby Dicksky* (1926) is the most demanding opera ever written. The complete score requires three years to perform and, indeed, was finished six months after Hotzetodshky's death.

"Carmen II: The Sibling" (1926)
by Joao Ibrahim Lovejoy de la Puta (1900-1937) & Sam Bizet (1892-1967)

Georges Bizet's son, Sam, sought to cash in on the continuing popularity of his father's opera *Carmen*, but was stymied for years by his inability to compose on the spoons.

This problem was solved when he met Joao Ibrahim Lovejoy de la Puta, a Cadiz street musician who danced flamenco at weddings and bar mitzvahs. He had previously been commissioned by the Lisbon State Opera to write *Is Cold, No?*, an opera based on the Frobisher Arctic expedition, but the resident prima donna, Maria Egomania y Tsuris, refused to sing in mukluks. Bizet's business proposition was therefore attractive.

They set out to continue the story of Carmen, the fiery gypsy girl who steals the hearts of men, through the tale of her little sister, Carmencita, who, enraged by jokes like "Carmencita my lap," grabs other male parts in revenge. Most of the male roles thus end up in the higher tenor registers. Though not as soaring musically as the original, *Carmen II* offers a lot more jiggle.

De la Puta and Bizet immediately ran into trouble with opera purists, who noted that the pivotal character of Don Gregorio Pecco, a free-lance dance critic, need not become a soprano after the climactic game of mumbledy-peg which ends Act Two. In addition, audiences used to the original Carmen, written in French, were not prepared for a *bossa nova* Carmencita.

These quarrels may have been resolved by the research of musicologist Arnold Tweedle, who discovered that many crucial passages were being played upside down. Tweedle asserts that this was caused by de la Puta's odd habit of composing while standing on his head as Bizet shouted lyrics. He also found forty measures cut from the second act to make room for commercials, including Carmencita's lovely aria "*Oy Romania*".

"Leaping Lizards" (1949)
by Li Dog Ma (1912-1968)

Whenever classic operas of the Chinese Revolution are discussed, Li Dog Ma's *Leaping Lizards* is alluded to obliquely. Certainly the most demanding piece in the revolutionary canon, *Leaping Lizards* has for many years been misinterpreted and misunderstood, both officially and critically.

Throughout the 1930s, China was locked in a fierce civil war. During this period, Li Dog Ma lived as a penurious Parisian poet, musician and podiatrist, literally in the Left Bank of the Seine, in a small cave dug out of the quay. There he would rise at dawn, meditate, and sleep till noon, when he would emerge to annoy passers-by. It is said that he would play the bamboo flute for people sitting on benches until they paid him to go away. In this way, he financed his most ambitious project, a call to revolution in China completed two years after the revolution ended.

Although versed in traditional Chinese instrumentation and phrasing, Li scored the opera entirely for ocarina and alto sax. As the curtain opens, a heavy man in silk robes and a Charlie Chan moustache, Yo Ma Ma, steps forward and yawns, declaring in Mandarin that he is bushed from a long day of oppressing peasants. In a blue diminuendo from the sax, he sashays to his bed and turns in.

Then, in the first of several visitations which constitute the *leitmotif* of the piece, a chorus of creeping sheep cast a curse upon him, the pentatonic rag “*You should grow like a potato, with your head in the ground and your feet in the air*”.

(It should be noted that Li’s bestiary is based entirely on hearsay. His only direct contact with the animal kingdom up to and including his Paris years was an embittered wharf rat, Marcel, acknowledged in Li’s memoirs as a great teacher, but generally considered a limiting influence. Two generations later, Marcel provided the inspiration for the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.)

Yo’s next visitation is a trio of racing tortoises (“*Beware the flying shells of destiny*”), which he subverts by flipping a table in their path, causing them to ricochet into the wings.

Finally, to the sound of gongs and percussive flatulence, seven lizards leap onto the stage. The type of lizard is not specified; given the meager stage directions (“They are green and they leap”), scholars have generally agreed on Kalfuss’s Green Skink, though a lobby has arisen for the Jade Chalk Monitor. The lizards initially try to lull Yo (“*We represent the Lullaby League*”), but when he invites them to play Parcheesi, they declaim the great rondeau “*Je suis fou pour l’amour*”, converge upon Yo’s bed, and eat him.

At the piece’s world premiere at the Beijing Opera, Mao himself commented “Huh?”, and presented Li with a crusty sock, a symbol of the Long March. In his long honorary tenure as latrine inspector and state composer for Hebei Province, Li experimented with existential themes within the socialist context, searching for the *huang chung* (dynastic perfect pitch) of the Revolution. In *Ding-Wa (That Which We Leave)*, a latrine inspector plays mah jongg with Death so that the peasants can finish the sorghum harvest. With the arrival of the Cultural Revolution,

his persistent use of western instrumentation exposed Li to the wrath of the Red Guards; he was sent south as a farm laborer, and drowned in Guanxi Province while napping in a rice paddy.

"Sink the Bismarck!" (1943)
by Trevor Gryffwyd-Ffwyng (1916-1988)

This curio of British patriotic propaganda was commissioned by Winston Churchill to celebrate the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck*. The first of many curiosities is that the piece was commissioned in January of 1939, before the *Bismarck* was even launched.

The selection of Welsh composer and rugby commentator Gryffwyd-Ffwyng for this commission was another oddity. A furtive student of Maestro Carl Stalling, Gryffwyd-Ffwyng posed as a sound effects board to observe his mentor at work. Following treatment for massive trauma, he became a featured slide whistle soloist with the Warner Brothers Orchestra, working his way up to concert master and first kazoo.

These experiences gave Gryffwyd-Ffwyng a broad vision of the possibilities of physical opera. And *Sink the Bismarck!* is nothing if not physical. This epic, fully as long as the Ring Cycle, is the only opera to incorporate fog, torpedo biplanes and high explosives, leaving aside the requirement that it be staged on the high seas. It also marks the introduction of the klaxon as a concert instrument.

The plot is simplicity in itself. Act One opens with Der Admiral, a diminutive figure with bright red beard and brows, singing "*Great Horny Toads (A Warring Seaman's Ode)*", where he vows to "sink *Britisher Schwein* until der seas are *Mein!*" The British Home Fleet puts to sea immediately, but when a 16-ton weight falls on the *Hood*, the fleet withdraws.

In Act Two, the British cruiser squadron led by *Repulse* approaches, with the crew following the Captain in the distinctly Wagnerian "*It is time to sink da Bismawk*". They sail into a fog and wander aimlessly for the remainder of the act, their music frequently crossing the German theme "*Olly olly oxenfree*" in Ivesian counterpoint.

In Act Three, the *Ark Royal* appears and launches torpedo bombers as everyone looks for everyone else over a snatch of "*Die Elkind*", until the fog clears on the *Bismarck*, which is promptly blown to smithereens.

Termed pastiche by some, who note the frequent quotes from Wagner, Rimsky-Korsakoff and Spike Jones, *Sink the Bismarck!* nonetheless retains the power of a piece that demands its audience wear helmets and flak jackets.

"The Bruce" (1827)
by Gavin MacGavin (1780-1844)

In 1807, Gavin MacGavin, an Edinburgh chemist, undertook to write an opera about Scotland's greatest national hero, 14th century King Robert the Bruce. Lacking a formal musical education, indeed lacking any musical training at all beyond Bagpipes 1.01 at the University, MacGavin strove to let his inner voice and a few primitive anaesthetic compounds create an opera worthy of The Bruce.

The work was not completed until 1827. It received its first performance by the Edinburgh Light Opera in November of that year at Steuaert's Pub, Heathside. Though the performance was marred by vigorous audience participation in the second act battle scenes, critics emerged extolling this vibrant contribution to Scottish culture. The piece was performed to similar acclaim (with similar results) throughout Scotland until in 1854 Lord Cardigan banned it as "a load of caterwauling rubbish that is a threat to our national health." To prove it, he had everyone at a matinee in Aberdeen shot.

The Bruce is novel in structure and performance. The tale is told by a narrator, Sir John of Mayall, who at curtain's rise plays a harmonica solo in the style of the original Sonny Boy Williamson, then sings "This i' the tale o' Rroberrrt the Brruce. You want t' make somethin' of it, ya limey git?"

The action then proceeds in episodes, starting with Robert's exile to the Isle of Rathlin after sending prank mail to the King's Governor in the form of English knights soldered into their

armor. He sings a plangent lament, "*Ma Lassie Na-barr, Na-barr*", or, "*My Love Is Like a Red, Red Herring*", for his beloved Alison, a trout dresser from Greenock. The famous episode of Robert learning courage and perseverance from a spider is portrayed in the aria "*Ach, Wee Beastie, Spin Your Web*", which grows into a duet with the spider. Sir John explains that Robert is very lonely at this point.

In Act II, The Bruce and the spider make off to Loudon Hill, where during a rousing ensemble of "*Born to Run*" they win a victory which gets the Scots into the playoffs against Edward II's feisty Arsenal team. During a quiet moment in the siege of Stirling, Robert and Alison are reunited and swap off-color limericks while the spider, suffering from compound dyslexia, traps itself in a pint of bitters and drowns. After a suitable dirge comes the audience participation part of the opera, the Battle of Bannockburn.

The outnumbered Scots win a smashing victory; the nation is saved, the people rejoice, and Robert sings "*Tis Great To Be A God.*"

"The Interpretation of Dreams" (1887)
by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Few people are aware that Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychoanalysis, started out as a composer. "Siggy Boy Freud," as he styled himself back then, was the best cigar-chomping stride piano player in Vienna. His work with Dr. Josef Breuer inspired great white boogie tunes like "*Goin' Crazy Rag*" and "*I Dig My Mama*", which in turn led to his later theories of hysteria and sexuality. As he developed his theories of analysis, however, he grew morbidly fearful of piano keys, which reminded him of his mother's mah jongg tiles.

The opera (to be produced in Cleveland this fall by Robert Wilson) begins with the heroine, Johanna K., dreaming of a mighty tower screwing itself out of a beach with her late father waving from the top. Then she is on a train which enters a dark tunnel. Her analyst spans her.

Johanna goes home and sings herself to sleep (the famous aria "*One Thousand Bottles of Beer on the Wall*"). She dreams of yeast, and being in a rising loaf of rye bread without seeds on a plain of matzohs. Suddenly she is attacked by a brisket wielded by her brother. She wakes up and runs off to tell her new analyst, Karl Rogers, who is sleeping with his eyes open.

In Act II we are totally immersed in Johanna's dream world. She is bathing in milk, singing "*There Once Was A Milkmaid From Muenster*". She becomes cross when the dream changes before the punch line, especially since she is now in a sauna where the milk doesn't smell so great. She runs out of the sauna to a snow field and dives into a cold lake, singing the unforgettable ten minute appogiatura "*AAAIYEEEE!*" She thinks this will wake her, but instead she falls asleep in the tower of an ice castle with her late father and dreams of a tower screwing itself out of the ground

This opera, properly done, can go on for years.

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CONTENTS and DISCONTENTS

Introduction (168 words) 1
Das Sheissmonger (313 words) 2
La Sabot Malheureuse (257 words) 3
Batman (606 words) 3
Moby Dick (381 words) 5
Carmen II: The Sibling (312 words) 6
Leaping Lizards (572 words) 7
Sink the Bismarck! (364 words) 9
The Bruce (433 words) 10
The Interpretation of Dreams (341 words) 11