

Tobias Picker

Emmeline

an opera in two acts

libretto (En) by J.D. McClatchy

based on the novel by Judith Rossner

Commissioned by Santa Fe Opera

World Premiere: July 26, 1996, Santa Fe Opera

Conductor: George Manahan

Director: Francesca Zambello

Emmeline Mosher · soprano - Matthew Gurney · tenor - Mr. Maquire · baritone - Aunt Hannah Watkins · dramatic contralto - Henry Mosher · bass - Sophie · soprano - Pastor Avery · bass - Mrs. Bass · mezzo-soprano

2.2(ca).2(bcl).2(cbsn)-4.2.2(btbn).0-timp-pno.hp-str
full evening

Chamber Orchestration

arranged by Samuel Bill

World Premiere: September 10, 2011, Dicapo Opera Theatre, New York, NY

Conductor: Samuel Bill

Director: Robert Alföldi

1(pic).1(ca).1(bcl).1-2.1.1.0-timp-hp.pno-str



Synopsis:

The setting is rural America in the mid-19th century. The eldest child of a poor farming family, Emmeline Mosher, is sent to work at a textile mill at the age of 13, is seduced by her married supervisor and becomes pregnant. Her child is taken for adoption before she sees it. Twenty years later, while caring for her elderly parents back at home, she falls in love with and marries a mysterious young stranger, Matthew Gurney. Inevitably he proves to be her son. Unable to bear the thought of losing both a husband and a son, Emmeline begs Matthew to stay. Disgusted, he abandons her and Emmeline is roundly condemned by all. Nevertheless, she steadfastly refuses to leave her home town, even though alone and ostracized.

Program Note:

Characters in tragic opera have lives of their own. That is to say, a life peculiar to the opera stage. The musical air they breathe, the heightened drama of their circumstances, everything is urged towards the extravagant, the extreme. However sprawling and complicated the source material, in opera the story is concentrated towards a few characters at the intersection of large primal forces, unspeakable choices, and overpowering emotions. The music, even as it charges the surface of things with a menacing grandeur, lays bare the tumultuous mysteries at the heart of the protagonist's struggle.

Whatever the known facts of the historical Emmeline Mosher's life were, in Judith Rossner's novel they were reimagined so that the woman's inner life was given a moral shape. Now that she is the heroine of an opera, the form's own traditions have further changed her. The shape of her life will seem more fated, the force of her character more poignant. What gives a new edge to Emmeline is the stage tradition she joins. She doesn't sing until, in the opera's second scene, someone takes an interest in her. It is love that draws out her song, and her singing imagines a life. Like operatic heroines from Norma to Butterfly, she looks to love for redemption and conjures it with her voice until, in the end, it betrays her.



Emmeline is crisscrossed with different kinds of love. There are the intimacies of friendship and the sometimes suffocating loyalties of family love. There is religious fervor and erotic desire. There is married love. Above all, there is the love between parent and child—the original, unquestioned, unbreakable bond. The opera opens with Emmeline's parents burying their newborn, and when Emmeline herself is then taken away from her family and sent to work in the textile mills, it is a wrenching separation. It is no accident that she is quickly drawn to figures of authority.

Throughout the opera, women are portrayed as subordinate but strong-willed, and men as seductive but weak. Emmeline's mother—overcome with grief in Act I and paralyzed in Act II—is entirely a victim of circumstance. Emmeline's Aunt Hannah has steeled herself against travail and hardened her heart. In her own way, while obeying them, Emmeline rejects both women as models. In love as in work, she seeks to free herself from the oppressive circumstances of the society she is part of. That society denied women their share of passion and power, and demanded that religion control their actions.

The two acts of Emmeline mirror one another. In both she falls in love with the wrong man, the first time through weakness and the second time through need. The repetition turns her decisions into a terrible, unrelenting curse. But at the end of the opera, Emmeline defies both her society and her fate. She would prefer to live in "sin," and ignores the judgment passed on her. Bravely, she refuses to yield to others and triumphs in her very survival. Ironically, the moment she is a free woman at last is also her undoing.

- J.D. McClatchy

Praise for Emmeline:

Ever since [its premiere in 1996], it has been a measure by which I assess the theatrical impact of other new operas. With its poetic, streamlined libretto by J.D. McClatchy and Mr. Picker's vivid score, this two-hour opera is continuously gripping, without a wasted note or word... Much of the theatricality of Mr. Picker's tonal score lies in how he gives each scene a distinct rhythmic and melodic character, and never lets one go on too long. Exposition, character development and emotional intensity are experienced simultaneously through well-constructed vocal writing and precise orchestration. In the final 10 minutes, Mr. Picker brings back themes from the rest of the opera, skillfully weaving them into a flashback reverie that cements our understanding of the heroine's determination.

- Heidi Waleson, *The Wall Street Journal*

The story is timeless in its Oedipal implications, yet relatable in scale, and Mr. Picker effectively expresses character nuances and plot twists with powerfully direct vocal lines. His potent orchestral writing evokes atmosphere, underlines conflict and conveys emotional tone with an emphatic directness. Mr. Picker's musical vocabulary is unapologetically conservative but never merely decorative, trivial or dull.

- Steve Smith, *The New York Times*

Tobias Picker has written a sensational, satisfying first opera based upon dramatic material of a distinctly Grimesian mold. *Emmeline*, in its world premiere at the Santa Fe Opera, is one of the most successful American operas in years. Picker's palette vibrates with wit, pathos and power, ranging from a berserk solo cello to represent doomed erotic tension, to powerful, unapologetic dissonance at the catastrophe.

- Jamie James, *The Times* (London)

Emmeline more than deserves the enthusiasm of opera-goers and performers, and should receive a permanent place in the repertoire. Catch it while you can.

- Jeff Kaliss, *San Francisco Classical Voice*

An important work that should put composer Tobias Picker at the forefront of the contemporary scene.

- David Patrick Stearns, *USA Today*

Don't miss [*Emmeline*] — it's one of the most powerful American operas to have appeared in this half-century.

- Leighton Kerner, *The Village Voice*