

# Classical Music: As American as mom's apple pie

Puritanical, Oedipal and eminently singable, 'Emmeline' is a whole-grain slice of Americana. Edward Seckerson applauds the opening night in Santa Fe

[Edward Seckerson](#) Thursday 08 August 1996 23:02

A brand-new all-American opera, Emmeline, was christened at Santa Fe, New Mexico, a little over a week ago. Judith Rossner (she of Looking for Mr Goodbar) wrote the novel, JD McClatchy the libretto, Tobias Picker the score. Picker has described Emmeline as "a tragedy of sweeping proportions". Big words. Big country. Americans know all there is to know about "sweeping proportions". It's in the blood, it's in the constitution. It's in the words of Oscar Hammerstein II, for heaven's sake: "You know you belong to the land, and the land you belong to is grand." To deny that is to deny the national character. Picker and his collaborators do not, and maybe, just maybe, that's what makes Emmeline an international event.

Rossner's novel is a weighty one. The setting is rural America in the mid-19th century. The Mosher family have fallen upon hard times. Henry, a farmer, and his wife Sarah are burying yet another of their children. Aunt Hannah urges them to send 13-year-old Emmeline, their eldest, to work in a New England textile mill. Once there, she is seduced by the owner's philandering son. A child is born but hurriedly offered for adoption before Emmeline even sees it. Twenty years later, she falls in love with, and marries, a mysterious stranger. In a twist of Oedipal inevitability - yes, you've guessed it - husband turns out to be son, and Emmeline is abandoned, rejected by all. Weighty, as I say. Historically, socially, Rossner chews on some pretty contentious issues here.

But this is opera, where the dramatic - or rather melodramatic - narrative holds sway, where the emotional stakes are pitched so high that characters assume a tragic gravity far removed from life as we know it. Though, having said that, the moralistic high-ground currently occupied by America's extreme right-wing is such as to make Picker and McClatchy's brand of rhetoric seem positively low-key. They have not, could not have, conveyed the full import of Rossner's ambitious novel, but the spirit, the wholeheartedness of it does come through. And strongly.

Picker's score is proudly, unashamedly, tonally, free-range Americana. You can trace its lines of succession through most of the great and good of America's musical past and present. Which is not to say that it feels second-hand. Not at all. There's a voice here, an impassioned one. But you know where it's coming from. There are phrases so immediate, so strangely familiar, that we may not at once appreciate how original they are. The aching lamentoso of the opening page is a case in point. It serves notice of a symphonist's feeling for narrative and development. And of a way with vocal lines that resonates all the way back to, and beyond, Porgy and Bess. At best, Picker is eminently singable. And that's no idle compliment.

Sometimes the inspiration comes over as more corn-fed than free-range. A somewhat iffy "point number" for the mill girls and their landlady Mrs Bass (Josepha Gayer) is Broadway to its painted fingertips. Then again, a "letter scene" for Emmeline - Appalachian flute and harp in attendance - is none the worse for its affectionate tugging towards Copland. These are fleeting nods of recognition (perhaps even conscious homages) on Picker's part: they would seem to reflect his own experiences as surely as those of his characters. A simple harmonica tune is elevated to an expression of regret for lost innocence, the chanting of Emmeline's name becomes a chilling leitmotif repeatedly baying out on horns in her moment of direst need and, most striking of all, the long-awaited love duet, when it comes, is at once impatient for, and fearful of the future, trumpet and fractured piano (the orchestra's leading protagonist - a busy, unsettling, weaving voice) engaged

in a nervy ragtime.

And, with that, the Santa Fe stage opens to the night sky. There is no permanent back wall to this stage: just nature's very own cyclorama. Designer Robert Israel has devised his own swinging wall-cum-door, a huge black cross precariously embedded atop it, as if God, in his displeasure, has hurled it down as a warning to sinners. On this particular night, some timely streaks of lightning (yes, the real stuff) arrived as if on cue. Perhaps producer Francesca Zambello has a hot line to the Almighty. She has just about everything else sewn up. Her stage pictures were, as ever, simply but strongly composed.

And none more unforgettable than Patricia Racette's moving Emmeline, deserted and alone, miming the action of the loom as if to spin her life away in the closing moments of the piece. The metaphor has come full circle. As has the piece. In an inspiring final scene (which really does take the opera on to an altogether more serious level), Picker and McClatchy return to where things began. All the figures in Emmeline's past come together in a powerful ensemble (and this excellent company, under conductor George Manahan's direction, really behaves like an ensemble), only to leave, one by one. So past and present, reminiscence and reality, guilty secrets and the price of them, are all one. Emmeline's final monologue is wrought in the best traditions of tragic opera and Racette is unstinting. She's a young singer to watch, and watch her we will. Vocally and emotionally (and how often they seem like separate concerns), her Emmeline goes the extra distance and that's what makes the difference. Jocasta chose death. Emmeline chooses life. Or rather, endurance. Puritan America lives on.