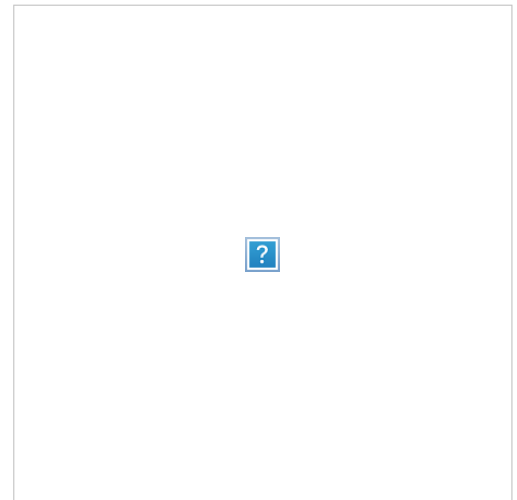


Tragic legend returns to public TV, retold this time as an opera

By | July 22, 1996

A local tale from Fayette, Maine, that came to public TV seven years ago in an *American Experience* documentary will return next year as an opera on *Great Performances*. The musical retelling will be taped later this week during the world premiere of Tobias Picker's new opera, *Emmeline*, at the Santa Fe Opera.

[The premiere received more than its share of [rave reviews](#), using words like "sensational" and "a triumph." *Great Performances*' version aired April 2, 1997 on many stations.]



Not yet in costume, Curt Peterson and Patricia Racette rehearse for *Emmeline*.

"I'm very happy that it's coming full circle," says Picker. "It shows that public television is so important, because it's capable of generating art."

A recognized symphonic composer, Picker had been looking for the story for an opera for eight years when he came across a rerun of the *American Experience* documentary "Sins of Our Mothers" in August 1990.

"I was channel-surfing and just happened upon it," he says. "Emmeline and I fell in love. Nothing like that had happened before *Emmeline*. I had to write *Emmeline* —I had no choice. It spoke to me directly on every conceivable level."

This is the story: Emmeline Mosher, a poor farm girl, comes to the weaving mills in Lowell, Mass., before the Civil War. She is seduced, becomes pregnant, and flees in shame. Back in Fayette, she gives up the child for

adoption and lives alone for years.

In what became Picker's Act II, Emmeline's life, already sad, assumes elements of classic tragedy from the myth of Oedipus: a younger man named Matthew Gurney comes to town, they fall in love and marry —only to find out afterwards that he is her son. He quits the scene, and Emmeline lives on in profound disgrace, shunned and alone.

As Picker watched the documentary, he told himself: "This is an opera. My god, I hope nobody else has done this story first!" It was the Oedipus story, but told from the viewpoint of the wife and mother, Jocasta.

"There are many Oedipus operas, but not a Jocasta opera," Picker exults. "This is not about Oedipus. This is about the mother."

"Emmeline has been victimized all her life and is just completely ground up in a machine beyond her control," says the composer. "But in the end she is alive, defiant and somewhat mad, perhaps. It is something that could happen in America."

Picker noted that Judith Rossner, interviewed in the documentary, had based her novel *Emmeline* on the Maine legend. He got her phone number through a mutual friend and began arranging to write the opera.

Three years later, the Santa Fe Opera signed Picker to compose *Emmeline*. J.D. McClatchey, a prize-winning poet and the editor of *The Yale Review*, agreed to write the libretto.

They based the opera on Rossner's novel, which put Emmeline's wedding in her young adulthood, instead of the documentary, which found that she married in her early 60s. But it was the TV history that first captivated Picker's interest and implanted in his mind the images of Maine women who told the story.

Last summer, public TV came back into the Emmeline story. Picker recalls

that he had just finished conducting part of the opera for a workshop at Santa Fe, and was still soaking wet from the exertion, when Jac Venza, executive producer of *Great Performances*, approached and gave him his card.

A year later, a crew working for Venza is in Santa Fe, preparing to tape the July 27 and 31 performances in digital video.

Laboratory about legend and history

There's another public TV connection to the Emmeline story, though an indirect one: the tale first reached the audience as the result of an ambitious Mobil Oil advertising initiative commissioned 21 years ago by Herb Schmertz, the oil company's imagemaker and founding patron of *Masterpiece Theatre*.

Schmertz wanted a series of three-minute commercials celebrating the greatness of ordinary Americans, for broadcast around the nation's bicentennial, and one of the dozen salt-of-the-earth folks chosen to be profiled for the series was a small-town Maine newspaperwoman, Nettie Mitchell.

David Hoffman, who headed the crew filming the Mobil ads, says that Mitchell, then 89 years old, was insistent that the filmmakers hear out a favorite story from childhood. Hoffman left, but told his crew to roll some more film.

Nettie Mitchell's story led directly to Judith Rossner's novel —Hoffman took the story to the novelist —and after Mitchell's death her filmed interview became vital material for Hoffman's "Sins of Our Mothers," which aired during the first season of *American Experience*, 1988-89.

Hoffman and his writer/director on the documentary, Matthew "Rocky" Collins, were not convinced that historical records would bear out the story

told by Nettie Mitchell, and later by Rossner, so they set up their film as a detective story, confirming and denying the story with historical sources, piece by piece.

Though there were discrepancies in the ages of the characters and in spelling—it was really Emeline, not Emmeline—there also was enough agreement and circumstantial evidence to impress the filmmakers.

“I think her life was indeed a tragedy—there’s no doubt in my mind about that,” says Collins, who is now directing feature films in Manhattan. “Enough people believed she had married her son that, for her life, it was almost irrelevant whether she had. Whether she really did may be unknowable.”

The memories handed down by Nettie Mitchell and other elders of the town, and all the ensuing media versions of the story, have become elements in a laboratory about legend and history.

Even when Collins was shooting the documentary, the people of Fayette were remembering facts of Emeline’s life that were actually fictional embellishments from Rossner’s novel, the filmmaker says.

“I’m sure as soon as the movie was done, they were remembering things from my movie,” Collins says. And sometime next year, after the opera is broadcast, the memories of Emmeline may become entwined with the drama and music contributed by Tobias Picker.

A sampling of reviews

Chris Shull, *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*:

The debut performance was a triumph. ... From the opening funeral scene to a final heart-wrenching aria, soprano Patricia Racette was stunning in the title role, wrapping every note in pathos. ... Picker’s music is American modernism at its best, and *Emmeline* elicits an emotional pull that is inescapable. ... Without borrowing, Picker’s music recalls Stravinsky, Bartok,

Copland, even Philip Glass, stepping through and beyond their work. Picker's strong distinctive voice as heard in *Emmeline* will surely secure his place alongside these masters.

The Times, London:

...American composer Tobias Picker has written a sensational, satisfying first opera ... one of the most successful American operas in years. ... Inevitably, the score will be labelled "Neo-Romantic," the term now used for any music that makes concessions to melody and the limitations of the human voice. ... The libretto by American poet J.D. McClatchy bristles with clichés ... but at least has the virtue of being clear and singable.

John von Rhein, Chicago Tribune:

Picker's unabashedly romantic score floats singable vocal lines over broad fields of tonal harmony ... Besides being blessed with music that unerringly illuminates character and situation, *Emmeline* has a strong libretto by J.D. McClatchy. ... That this archetypal American tragedy never descends to melodrama owes much to director Francesca Zambello's artfully stylized production. ...

Marc Shulgold, Rocky Mountain News:

...*Emmeline* was saddled with a poorly thought-out stage design, quirky stage direction and an inconsistent score. ... Picker never found his own compositional voice, dabbling in folksiness here (complete with harmonica blowing) and studied atonality there. ... Too bad, because the singing was first-rate....

Mark Mobley, USA Today:

The tale has found its rightful telling at the Santa Fe Opera, which premiered *Emmeline* ... Instead of the sensational spectacle Hollywood might have made, this *Emmeline* —slated for a future PBS telecast —is an affecting, alternately grave and lyrical retelling of the Oedipus legend. ... [McClatchy's] words are clear as water, and when you read them, you can hear music. [Picker's] use of the orchestra is brilliant and transparent.

Heidi Waleson, *Wall Street Journal*:

This summer [the Santa Fe Opera] struck gold with the world premiere of Tobias Picker's *Emmeline*. ... The collaborators arrived at an emotional truth about the nature of love, particularly the love between mother and child, and created a *tour-de-force* role for soprano along the way.

Hugh Canning, *The Sunday Times*, London

The unquestionable hit of the festival...was Picker's *Emmeline*. Picker's music may not travel as well as Puccini's —its language draws on American forebears such as Copland, Stravinsky-as-heard-by-Bernstein, and the fashionable American minimalism —but it is accessible, exquisitely crafted and it always serves the drama as both accompaniment and commentary. ... I doubt if Zambello's production could be bettered. ... A hugely enjoyable occasion that I would gladly relive.

Olin Chism, *Dallas Morning News*:

This summer [the Santa Fe Opera] is adding an eighth world premiere that has a real chance of getting produced by companies around the world. ... Mr. Picker's music is for the most part highly effective. ... As drama, the opera works brilliantly.

Allan Kozinn, *New York Times*:

[*Emmeline*] is not without flaws, but its conservative, eclectic style puts the story across in a clear, unabrasive way likely to have broad appeal. ... Mr. McClatchey's singable, smoothly flowing text had a musicality many contemporary librettos lack. Mr. Picker has wrapped the text in music with a comfortably familiar ring...

Kenneth LaFave, *Arizona Republic*:

Listening to *Emmeline* is a little like observing a musical tennis match between Copland and middle-period Stravinsky in which Copland eventually wins. There are moments in the first act, especially, when Picker must have spent a lot of time with Copland's *The Tender Land*. ... The title role is a killer, an expressive *tour de force* into which Picker has poured his finest and most

intense music. The woman who sings Emmeline must have it all: high notes, facility, power, the ability to characterize vocally. Soprano Patricia Racette, singing July 31, had all those things in abundance....