Enter the World of Gabriel von Wayditch

By Frank J. Oteri

Perhaps the most distinguishing trait of being a human being is our ability to imagine things and to share the products of our imagination with others. For centuries, the most elaborate artistic manifestation of the human imagination has been opera—plotlines as intricate as novels; dialogue as rich as theatre; monologues as beautiful as poetry; set designs that combine the skills of painting, sculpture, and architecture; dance; and of course music, frequently employing the full resources of a chorus and an orchestra. The only art form that rivals opera in its scope is the cinema, but since opera is designed to be a live experience it somehow is more miraculous. Even after decades of innovations beyond the advent of motion pictures-television, video installations, the internet, virtual reality, and beyond—opera remains the most magical artistic endeavor we engage in as a species.

And opera has been magical as well as elaborate soon after its very beginnings with the Italian Camerata at the end of the 16th century. At first an attempt to recapture the essence of the classical drama of Ancient Greece and Rome, it quickly evolved into a total art form even in the first operas that are still performed to this day—the operas of Claudio Monteverdi. And there have been many great opera creators since then, to name just a few—in Italy: Cavalli, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini; in France: Lully, Rameau, Berlioz, Bizet, Gounod, Massenet; in England: Purcell, Handel, Benjamin Britten, and even Gilbert and Sullivan; in Russia: Glinka, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Tschaikovsky; in the Czech Republic: Smetana, Dvorak, Janacek, and Hába; in the German speaking countries: Mozart, Weber, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, Alban Berg, Kurt Weill, Stockhausen, Hans Werner Henze; and here in the United States the list of composers who've created important operas includes Victor Herbert, Deems Taylor, George Gershwin, Virgil Thomson, William Grant Still, Douglas Moore, Gian-Carlo Menotti, Jack Beeson, Carlisle Floyd, Hugo Weisgall, John Eaton, Dominick Argento, Thea Musgrave, Tobias Picker, William Bolcom, Daron Hagen, Philip Glass, Robert Ashley, Meredith Monk, and John Adams, among many, many others.

America also has its own tradition of the Broadway musical. And there are also a variety of traditions analogous to opera in East Asia—Peking Opera, Cantonese Opera, Japanese Kabuki, Indonesian *gender wayang*. It is truly a world-wide phenomenon, and yet it is always somehow otherworldly. From those first operas of Monteverdi which were inspired by Greek mythology or Ancient history, opera has frequently been about taking audiences to another place, another time, another level of consciousness. And even recent operas that deal with the here and now such as John Adams's *Nixon in China*, whose characters are known to all of us from newspaper headlines, or Jack Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, whose plot is familiar to anyone who has seen the movie, create a totally new world that is significantly different from the one we live in. Think about it, when's the last time everybody you interacted with sang to you?

In 2009 we have an opera repertoire of hundreds of years to choose from and operas seem to have been based on literally every subject imaginable-romance, war, more romance, mystery, deceit, murder, yet more romance, even science fiction. In fact, it would seem that every possible thing that could be done in an opera should have already been tried and every great opera from the past should have been performed and become part of the repertoire. But tonight we are here to introduce to you a completely unknown yet extraordinary composer who devoted his entire lifetime to writing operas, operas which are arguably the most elaborate ever to be conceived; in fact one of them lasts over eight hours and has been acknowledged by the *Guinness Book of World Records* to be the longest opera ever written. We are hoping that after you hear the fascinating story of this composer and listen to some short excerpts of his mesmerizing music that you're appetites will be whetted to hear more. Enter the world of Hungarian American composer Gabriel von Wayditch.

Wayditch was certainly very much part of the world of all the composers I have listed here, but somehow he stands apart from them at the same time. While all of them created music for audiences in their lifetimes, Wayditch heard almost none of his music in his lifetime, creating his operas in solitude. It's interesting to note that while there have been a handful of important operas to come out of Hungary—*Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók, *Hary Janos* by Zoltan Kodaly, and the many operas of Ferenc Erkel, who was something of a Hungarian Donizetti and whose works remain popular in Hungary but not really anywhere else—Wayditch, whose music has so rarely been heard, is arguably the most significant composer of Hungarian opera and yet all of his operas were composed in the United States, in the Bronx in fact!

I first heard the music of Gabriel von Wayditch more than 25 years ago. At the time, I was an undergraduate at Columbia University and was running the classical music department at Columbia's radio station WKCR-FM. My big summer project was to clean up and organize WKCR's classical LP collection which was vast but was pretty much a mess. I had my own radio program once a week, but in the summer we lost a lot of our crew due to students heading back home to their families. So I had several radio programs I needed to take care of. But there was no way that I would be able to sort through that record collection if I was stuck behind a microphone in the control room the whole time, so I had to think up a plan. This was right before CDs took over how most people listen to music, not to mention all the other digitally programmable means of disseminating music nowadays. At the station we had two LP turntables and a couple of cassette and reel-to-reel decks at our disposal. But there was no way to program them sequentially. We could have each of them cued up, but when something ended, you had to be there to press play on the next machine or you'd be stuck with dead air. Luckily classical music, unlike most other kinds of music, tends to be on the long side. So we don't have to worry about changing songs every couple of minutes. And some classical pieces are really long, over a half hour, sometimes a couple of hours.

So I initiated a program that would feature a really long work—at least 90 minutes, ideally two hours—to fill up the time. All I'd have to do was select one piece, cue all the

sides, and make sure I was in the room when a side ended to cue the other machine or flip the record. I had a speaker near the record closet so in case a side ended I would immediately know and sprint down the hall to make sure the music was flowing before anyone complained. It was actually a great way to learn about the music I had found in that record closet, most of which I hadn't heard before, and it worked like a charm for about a month.

Until I put on the music you just listened to, which is the opening of an early 20th century Hungarian opera I'd never heard of called *The Caliph's Magician* by someone named Gabriel von Wayditch. At first it sounded to me completely like a product of its time, the final gasp of late romanticism—a gigantic orchestra of about 110 musicians; long, seemingly endless melodies; wandering harmonies that never quite resolve except for occasional bombastic climaxes. This was music that was totally over the top like Mahler, Richard Strauss, or even early pre-atonal Arnold Schoenberg. And yet somehow this music was even more over the top, even more phantasmagorical. It was so intoxicating that I couldn't stop listening to it. So much for organizing those records… I voraciously read through the libretto and the LP's booklet notes to discover that in this opera not only were the harmonies constantly wandering, so was the action on stage. There were scene changes every minute or so for the entire duration of the opera-ninety minutes, and that these scenes were often elaborate orgies. I then learned that this was one of Wayditch's shortest operas. Most of them lasted well over 4 hours. And there were 14 of them! And, even weirder, though the opera was in Hungarian, it was actually written here in New York City! There was contact information with the records on how to contact an entity called The Gabriel von Wayditch Music Foundation with an address and a phone number, so of course I called.

And that is how I got pulled into the weird and wonderful world of Gabriel von Wayditch. The Foundation, it turned out, was based at the office of a tax accountant, Gabriel's son Walter, who devoted every moment of his life he was not trying to get someone a refund from the IRS to trying to interest someone, anyone, in the music of his father who had died 15 years before, which is now forty years ago, in 1969. And Walter literally wrote letters or tried to call everyone-not just conductors and artistic administrators from opera houses around the world, but politicians running for office, sitting heads of states from around the world including the Soviet Union (who actually briefly expressed some interest) as well as Donald Trump (who didn't). But here was someone who seemed totally fascinated with this music—me. I didn't have access to an orchestra or an opera house, but I did have a radio program and I wanted to broadcast everything the man ever wrote.

One small catch, aside from *The Caliph's Magician*, only one other Wayditch opera—*Jesus Before Herod*—had ever been recorded. And, according to Walter, Gabriel von Wayditch only wrote these 14 big opera which needed an orchestra of 110 musicians and usually lasted over four hours; plus don't forget the one that lasts over 8 hours, way longer than anything on my long works radio show. Several Wayditch operas required scene changes every minute or so. And it turns out that even though they were written in America, all of them were in Hungarian. Plus, several of them involve major figures from

the world's most powerful religions in plot lines that also contain frequent sex orgies. Not the easiest thing to get someone to present.

In fact, it's almost as if Gabriel von Wayditch sabotaged any chance of anyone ever performing his music by making it too big, too long, too difficult, too obscure, and too controversial—all at once. He was also not the most diplomatic person—there's a story of him once meeting Aaron Copland seated at a piano during a meeting of the League of Composers and telling him that he didn't think much of what he was playing in front of everyone there. Well, Wayditch had very strong ideas about musical aesthetics.

And yet, despite the difficulties that these operas pose and the difficulties of Wayditch's own personality, he did manage to secure a performance of one of his operas. The 1931 opera *Horus*, which was inspired by the story of one of the Ancient Egyptian deities, got performed a mere eight years after in was written. That's a shorter amount of time than some of the most famous composers have had to wait to hear some of their music. And it was a prestigious performance, too. It was conducted by no less a figure than the cousin of Gustav Mahler, Fritz Mahler, and presented by the prestigious Philadelphia La Scala Company at the Philadelphia Academy of Music, one of the world's greatest music venues, on January 5, 1939. But that's where Wayditch's luck ended. They were under-rehearsed and were unable to afford the 110 players that Gabriel demanded; he wound up with an orchestra of only 65 and claimed it was impossible to clearly hear what he wrote with this smaller group. Two newspaper critics showed up that night and both skewered it-the critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer was none other than infamous Henry Pleasants who had a reputation for never saying anything good about a new piece of music; in fact, Pleasants even wrote a book called *The Agony of Modern Music* in which he basically argues that the era of great music ended in the 19th century. There was supposed to be a second performance of Horus, which might have gone better (they usually do) but it was cancelled. It was the last time Wayditch ever heard anyone perform his music for the rest of his life. And yet he kept on writing opera after opera. It's the only thing he was truly passionate about. And it's the only thing he had been doing, at that point, for over twenty years.

(Ironically, he did not put his name on that production of *Horus*. Years later he explained that he feared his real name sounded too German for 1939, a time of growing indignation at the atrocities of the Nazi regime in the United States, and so he called himself Camille de Senez. But you have to wonder, considering how he wrote music that so eluded public performance, that perhaps he also used a pseudonym to somehow avoid this one public exposure of his music.)

Gabriel von Wayditch (or Wayditch Gabor as he was known in Hungary) was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1888 (on December 28 to be exact). The son of Dr. Aloysious von Wayditch von Verbovac, a nobleman who taught physics at the University of Pecs and who was something of a mad inventor, and Helena von Dönhoff, a Prussian baroness who claimed lineage back to the Teutonic knights. Young Gabriel could have anything he wanted and what he wanted was music. So he studied composition at the Royal Academy of Music, alongside Béla Bartók and Zoltan Kodaly, with Hans Koessler. And he also

studied piano with Emil Sauer who was a student of none other than Franz Liszt. By his teens, Gabriel von Wayditch has become the conductor of the Royal Orpheum Theatre. In fact, he began work on the first of his operas, Opium Dreams and the then director of the Budapest Opera House expressed interest in producing it there once Gabriel completed it. But a series of bad investments made by his father totally wiped out the family fortune and his parents split up. Aloysious Wayditch decided to come to America and his son Gabriel joined him and took the first two acts of his opera *Opium Dreams* with him. And the production of *Opium Dreams* at the Budapest Opera House never happened. But one of the only times in his life that Gabriel von Wayditch wrote something besides opera was at this time when he composed a short solo piano piece based on the music of this opera called, *Reminiscences from Opium Dreams*. Surprisingly considering Wayditch's own abilities as a pianist, he never performed this music in a public recital. In fact, it had never been performed in public until here pianist Lloyd Arriola performed it as part of the Extreme Hungary presentation at the Brooklyn Museum on October 3, 2009. Imagine the scene of the opera: A Chinese opium den in which an opium smoker experiences a variety of hallucinations and outer body experiences but ultimately overdoses.

Anyway, Aloysious and Gabriel arrived in New York Harbor in 1911. Two years later, Aloysious obtained a U.S. patent for a 3-D motion picture film camera and projector. No one at the time thought the idea had any practical value (3D movies didn't take off until the 1950s long after Wayditch's patent expired) and although Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of the U.S. Navy during the First World War, Josephus Daniels, enthusiastically accepted another one of Aloysious's inventions, a deep sea thermometer, Aloysious died penniless a decade later in Los Angeles in 1924. In the meanwhile, his son remained in New York City. For a time he played piano on ocean-liners and conducted small groups of musicians for various theatrical productions. But he kept his own composition somehow separate from his new homeland—he completed *Opium Dreams* in 1914 and after a couple of years proceeded to compose an additional three operas at an almost frantic pace, but all were in Hungarian, all for extremely large orchestras, and all required elaborate stage mechanics that would have even proved to be a challenge for the world's top opera companies at that time.

Perhaps here's a good point to digress and talk a little bit about these earlier operas. You heard a snippet from the second one, *The Caliph's Magician* from 1917, which takes place in a middle-eastern harem where a magician conjures various scenes for the caliph which are displayed on stage one right after another. Nowadays this could probably be accomplished with film projections and clever lighting, but back when Wayditch wrote it I'm sure it baffled everyone he showed it to. They probably were also a bit scandalized by all the pretty intense sex scenes in the opera, which would have landed Wayditch an X, or a XXX rating if there were such ratings for operas.

But if I can digress again, it's a minor miracle that this music was ever recorded and released. In the summer of 1975, six years after Gabriel von Wayditch's death, his son Walter raised funds to have it recorded by the then State-run Budapest National Opera. But when the Communist regime in Hungary learned that Wayditch was an expatriate living in America, they refused to release it on the Hungarian state-run record label

Qualiton. Luckily, Walter retrieved the master tapes from the recording sessions and eventually convinced the New Jersey-based mail-order classical record label Musical Heritage Society to issue it on 2 LPs—it's one of Wayditch's short operas—which, you'll remember, is the way I discovered it at Columbia University's radio station.

Anyway, Wayditch's next opera, which he wrote the following year, 1918, has the rather daunting title *Jesus Before Herod*. It is actually even shorter, and is the shortest opera in his entire output, a mere 40 minutes, but what a 40 minutes it is. With the recording of *The Caliph's Magician* as a demo, Walter convinced Peter Eros, then the music director of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra to perform J*esus Before Herod* in concert and subsequently record it in an English translation he created especially for them after he learned they couldn't learn the Hungarian. And he then managed to get Musical Heritage Society to record it on LP as well. So the problems these opera pose are not always insurmountable. In the opera, Jesus, about to be crucified, is brought before Herod. And there is a very moving chorus sung at the crucifixion. It sounds like the kind of music you would imagine choruses singing everywhere at Easter time. Perhaps opera companies all over the world would consider staging this every Easter? Here's the catch. The scene at Herod's palace is, you guessed it, a huge series of orgies.

So no one has every dared to stage *Jesus Before Herod*. But luckily about 10 years ago, I convinced an historic opera recording re-issue label, VAI, to re-release the audio recordings of *The Caliph's Magician* and *Jesus Before Herod* on a 2 CD set which is still available and can be ordered on line and even bought in the few record shops left in this world. But sadly, as far as these operas are concerned, that's all there is so far, even though Wayditch wrote an additional 11 operas. I'm going to try to give you an idea of each of these operas, but you're going to really have to use your imagination.

In 1920, perhaps to make up for the short time of *The Caliph's Magician* and *Jesus Before Herod*, Wayditch composed a massive seven-and-a-half-hour-long opera called *Sahara - Land of Death* which he envisioned being performed in two parts on consecutive evenings. The main character is a young woman who has been sold into slavery and is driven across the desert by an Arabian caravan. Five years later, in 1925, he completed the 5 hour *Maria Testver* (*Sister Maria*) which takes place in a 16th century cloister on Margit Sziget (Rabbit's Isle) in Budapest and concerns the story of a nun who is seduced in a convent, becomes pregnant, and ultimately murders her child. When the play Agnes of God became a huge hit on Broadway in the late 1970s and was later made into a movie, Walter von Wayditch tried to sue for plagiarism, but did not succeed. Back to 1925. Later that same year, Wayditch composed another 4 ½ hour long opera, *Venus Dwellers*, in which two lovers during an ecstatic embrace are transported to, you guessed it, the planet Venus. Then in 1931, Wayditch wrote the one opera he heard in his lifetime, *Horus*, an account of a visit to Earth by the Egyptian deity Horus, which lasts only a couple of hours. Many years later, Nicolas Slonimsky, who compiled a chronology of major events in music since the year 1900 (called *Music Since 1900*) included the premiere of *Horus*. For its historic value alone, *Horus* is truly deserving of a revival and a recording.

But that's only half the story. In 1934, Wayditch returned to the New Testament with his own unique spin on the story of *Mary Magdalene*. Next year, 1935, he wrote the 4-hour-long *Buddha* which takes place in a cave in the Far East and is the story of a wayward girl who comes into contact with an ascetic who has taken on the name Buddha. Five years later, in 1940, fresh from the performance of *Horus*, Wayditch composed the mythological opera *Nereida*, also 4 hours, in which a mortal falls in love with a sea spirit. As the Second World War was raging in 1942, Wayditch sat in his studio in the Bronx and composed the 4 ½ hour *Anthony of Padua* which takes us away from the horrors of war-torn Europe back to Europe in Medieval times where a novice at a monastery falls in love with a peasant girl upon whom his superior also has designs, with tragic results. Then in 1945, as World War II drew to a close, Wayditch completed *The Catacombs*, also 4 ½ hours, which recounts another taboo romance, this time between a Roman pagan centurion and a Christian girl in Ancient Roman times. In 1948, Wayditch completed one more, *Fisherman's Dreams*, another 4 hour opera which is set in the middle of Lake Balaton in Hungary where a deliquent fisherman drinks wine and dreams of a beautiful woman instead of fishing.

By this point, Wayditch had composed a larger body of music than any composer on American soil, well over 48 hours of music. But no one seemed to care. It must have been extraordinarily discouraging. He gave piano lessons to children in the neighborhood and performed standard classical repertoire on the piano in a trio with a violinist and cellist which frequently performed on the recently created WNYC-FM. Yet throughout the 1950s, he never once considered composing anything original for his piano trio or for any other ensemble for that matter. Although he wrote plays and philosophical treatises in Hungarian from time to time, developed his own alphabet, and even painted-landscapes of non-existent places. And, strangely, he wrote a song with lyrics in English, "Hudson River," the only time he ever created a piece of music that acknowledged his adopted homeland. It's a touching, sentimental song which years after his death was named the official New York state song for the American bi-centennial—a nice honor, but one that did not lead to any significant performances of Wayditch's music. And every now and then there'd be a glimmer of interest in one of the operas—Leopold Stokowski expressed interest in conducting an orchestral suite from Opium Dream, when he visited New York Dmitri Shostakovich said he would try to garner enthusiasm for Wayditch back home in the Soviet Union, James Levine considered presenting *Horus* at Ravinia—but nothing ultimately materialized.

And all that really concerned Gabriel von Wayditch for the rest of his life was a massive eight-hour long opera called *The Heretics* which involves the brother of a crusader in the 12th century on the road to Jerusalem who is rescued by a group of heretics and falls in love with one of them. Wayditch toiled on *The Heretics* for 20 years, completing the piano reduction only shortly before his death and collapsing in the middle of the 2,870th page of manuscript of the full orchestral score.

As I mentioned earlier, Wayditch died in 1969, forty years ago this year. His son Walter spent the rest of his own life trying to get people interested in his father's music, but to little avail aside from the two operas he managed to get recorded and finding a few music

journalists who were interested plus one zealous Columbia University undergraduate composer who would eventually become very active as a music journalist.

Walter died in February 2005 a few years after his wife Renate died. Their son and Gabriel's grandson, Ivan, who grew up in a home that was surrounded and haunted by his grandfather's ghost—manuscripts everywhere, talk of few other topics—is still alive. But no one is sure where he is at this point. Luckily before he vanished into thin air, Ivan showed up at my door late one Sunday night (on April 20, 2008) and deposited all the manuscripts of the 14 Gabriel von Wayditch operas. It was probably a cathartic release. But so much more needs to be done. I have tried in whatever way I have been able to make people aware of this music. I got the two operas that were recorded re-issued on CD and I wrote an article about Wayditch for the *Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. And the Hungarian Cultural Center has become interested in championing this music which is a huge leap forward for the cause of this music. But now we need to find a conductor and an opera company who is really willing to take a chance of some of the most unusual artistic accomplishments of the 20th century. George Steel, who is now the Artistic Director of New York City Opera has known about these operas for a long time and has been trying to find an appropriate venue to mount one of them. Perhaps he has that venue now. It often seemed as though Gabriel von Wayditch did not belong in the 20th century, but perhaps his music belongs in the 21st century!

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