

PROGRAM NOTES

Carmen

Georges Bizet (1838–75)

Bizet entered the Paris Conservatory at age 9, winning its prestigious *Prix de Rome* in 1857; it provided for a 2-year residence at a Roman villa, where he had a very good time. Returning to Paris, he worked hard at composing, with mixed success: with the exception of incidental music written for a production of Alphonse Daudet's *L'Arlésienne*, most of Bizet's works—his great opera *Carmen* (1874) included—became popular only after his untimely death.

This opera is based on Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* (1845), a gripping tale of passion and violence set in Andalusia, revised by Bizet's librettist in a not-entirely-successful attempt to avoid scandalizing the Opéra-Comique audience. The gypsy girl Carmen, who works in a cigarette factory, is arrested for fighting with another worker (in Mérimée, she slashes an "S" across the other girl's face; in Bizet, she merely pulls hair). The brigadier Don José (in Bizet, a good if naive country boy; in Mérimée, a hot-headed Basque on the run) charged with taking her to prison is bewitched and allows her to escape. He is disciplined but cannot free himself from her spell: he deserts his unit to join Carmen, now working with a band of smugglers. She tires of him and takes up with a bullfighter. Don José can't handle rejection, confronts her at the bull ring (Carmen: "C'est toi!"), and kills her.

Selections Richard Rodgers (1902–79) & Oscar Hammerstein (1895–1960)

Born on Long Island, Rodgers probably imbibed a love of popular music with his mother's milk: his father enjoyed singing Broadway tunes to his wife's piano accompaniment. Self-taught on the piano, he began composing songs in his teens. In 1918 Rodgers met lyricist Lorenz Hart (1895–1943) with whom he collaborated on musicals and films until Hart succumbed to alcoholism, whereupon he began a new long-term collaboration with lyricist Oscar Hammerstein, which produced such hits as *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *The Sound of Music*.

Carousel (1945) is based on Ferenc Molnár's play *Liliom, the life and death of a vagrant* (1909), relocated from rural Hungary to New England and ending more happily. Instead of a conventional overture, the musical opens with *The Carousel Waltz*, setting the opening scene, a country fair: a n'er-do-well barker falls in love with a maid of the mills, but they have a rough time making ends meet; he resorts to theft, is killed during an attempted heist but is allowed to return from the dead years later to speak with the daughter he's never met, an unhappy encounter from which she somehow manages to take hope and inspiration.

Oklahoma (1943) is based on Lynn Riggs' play *Green grow the lilacs* (1931). Synopsis: girl, sweet on boy but too proud to show it, ends up at box social with villain instead; boy outbids villain for girl's picnic hamper; boy proposes, girl accepts; villain displeased, picks fight with boy, ends up dead; small-town western justice is OK with that.

The King and I (1951) derives from the 1946 film version of Magaret Landon's *Anna & the King of Siam* (1943), a re-working of Anna Leonowens' account of her experience as governess for the King of Siam (1862–67): despite their very different value-systems, a warm (but proper) relationship develops between them. Book, film, and musical are banned in present-day Thailand.

West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein (1918–90)

Conductor, composer, pianist, educator—Bernstein was a commanding presence in American music during the last 45 years of his life. A child of Russian immigrants (like Rodgers), he became interested in music at the relatively advanced age of ten, when the family acquired a piano. He learned fast, but took a somewhat unconventional path to a musical career, entering the Curtis Institute only after getting a B.A. from Harvard.

West Side Story (1957) is Shakespeare's tale of doomed love, *Romeo and Juliet*, freely transposed from renaissance Verona to 1950s New York City, rival West-Side street gangs (Jets and Sharks) standing in for feuding Veronese families (Montagues and Capulets). Here the lovers are Tony, an ex-Jet, and Maria, sister of the Sharks' leader, Bernardo. When Bernardo slays the Jets' leader in a rumble, Tony loses it and kills Bernardo. Filled with remorse, he begs Maria to forgive him and together they plan an escape from the mean streets. But Tony is killed in turn before they can pull it off, leaving Maria (in a departure from Shakespeare) among the living but bereft, an emblem of all whose hopes are dashed by cruelty and violence.

Phantom of the Opera and *Cats*

Andrew Lloyd-Webber (b. 1948)

Lloyd-Webber's father wrote music in the romantic tradition of Rachmaninov and Franck until he concluded that it was hopelessly out of fashion and gave up composition for teaching and administration. Son Andrew, perhaps instructed by his example, was drawn to more popular music. A musical entertainment commissioned by an English school developed into *Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968). It was followed by *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, *Evita*, *Cats*, and *Phantom of the Opera*, all of which enjoyed phenomenal success.

The Phantom of the Opera (1986) is based on Gaston Leroux's novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1910). Christine, a member of the Opera Populaire's chorus, receives inspiration and vocal coaching from what she takes to be her guardian 'angel of music' but is in fact a disfigured genius who resides in the bowels of the opera house—the Phantom of the Opera. Having fallen for her in a big way, he frightens the management into giving her leading roles and producing an opera he has written as a vehicle for her talent. Unfortunately for him, she prefers Raoul, a young aristocrat. The Phantom spirits her off to his lair, but ultimately rejects possession and steps aside in favor of his rival.

Cats (1981), which ran for 17 years on Broadway, is constructed from unlikely material for musical theatre—T. S. Eliot's whimsical and plotless *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939). Grizabella, the faded glamor cat who sings "Memory", does not make an appearance in the book, but Trevor Nunn's lyrics supposedly incorporate unpublished fragments of Eliot's poetry.

Soprano **Linda Tracy** has appeared in the pit or on stage for numerous musicals presented by the Windham Theatre Guild. She sings with the *a capella* ensemble *Take Note!* of which she is founder and director, and for Flamingo, an all-female swing band. Her day job is choral director at Tolland High School. A graduate of the Pomfret School, tenor **Christopher Lucier** is pursuing a career in opera. He has studied at BU's College of Fine Arts and with Marlena Malas at the Manhattan School of Music and, for the past 3 summers, performed at the Chautauqua Voice Festival.

Notes by S. K. Lehmann