

The Student from Salamanca

THREE AMERICAN COMPOSERS -- THREE NEW OPERAS

Peter G. Davis, Music Critic, The New York Times, October 5, 1980

The New York City Opera has made numerous attempts over the years to cultivate American opera, a fragile hot-house bloom to judge from the spotty results so far. On Thursday night the company hopes to fertilize the rocky soil once again with the world premieres of three newly written one-act operas gathered under the heading of "An American Trilogy." Perhaps this time around the City Opera plans to woo its audience through the unpredictable smorgasbord nature of a diverse triple bill, proceeding along the theory that if one work fails to please, another one might succeed. At any rate, the three composers -- Thomas Pasatieri, Jan Bach and Stanley Silverman -- could not be more different in background, stylistic orientation or esthetic attitudes as to what constitutes a viable contemporary opera.

In marked contrast to the volatile New York-born Mr. Pasatieri, Jan Bach is a quiet, low-keyed personality from a small town in Illinois where he was born 42 years ago. Like so many composers nowadays, he divides his time between creative work and teaching, currently as a full professor of music at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. His comic opera, "The Student from Salamanca," won the City Opera's competition for a one-act American opera last May, and he received a \$10,000 prize as well as a production.

Mr. Bach, who claims no relation to Johann Sebastian's large family, wrote his own libretto, as he did for his only previous foray into opera, also a one-act comedy, called "The System." That work won the Mannes College competition in 1974 and was produced there by the school's opera workshop. "I'm not really an opera composer," he confides modestly. "I write for a wide variety of media because I like the challenge of doing something different in every piece. Once you've been bitten by the opera bug, though, it's hard to resist coming back. Now I'd like to try my hand at a full-length piece that is more balanced between the serious and comic I've already written two farces and I'd rather not become known as the Neil Simon of opera." "The Student of Salamanca" was drawn from a Cervantes tale that contains several typical commedia dell'arte characters - the old man with a pretty young wife, the handsome student who pays court to the girl behind her husband's back, the wife's scheming maid and the student's two clownish friends. "As you can see," Mr. Bach says, "I have absolutely no message to convey - the opera is meant to be strictly light entertainment. At the end of the action, the student has convinced the old man that he is a wonderful magician who will prove an invaluable addition to the household. What happens afterwards between the wife and the student - well, that's left to the imagination.

"I've bent over backwards here to write tunes. There was a lot of Benjamin Britten influence in my first opera, but this one tries to be in the spirit of Donizetti, Mozart or even Gilbert and Sullivan - some of the music is really unbelievably sentimental. I am, I admit, a very conservative composer. I've seen some of my other composer colleagues write such advanced, difficult music that even they couldn't tell if the performances were good or bad. I have to be able to hear exactly in my ear everything I write.

"Growing up in Illinois, I was not exposed to opera as much as a composer in a large city - even now, with so much teaching to do plus raising a family, there isn't that much opportunity. My wife is a singer, though, and that certainly is a big help in composing for the voice. Besides, the more opera I can see, the more the form fascinates me. We always have a jigsaw puzzle in progress around my house, and writing an opera to me is like assembling a huge jigsaw - the staging concerns, the travel music, the programmatic illustrations, the moments for lyrical repose, the building to dramatic climaxes. It is the most challenging medium for any composer."