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The Maestro Of Foley Square

Judge Richard Owen

By Norris D. Wolff

Opera and law, arias and opinions, librettos and legal precedent all emanate from Judge Richard Owen. A noted composer and librettist, Judge Owen has had hundreds of performances of his eight beautifully crafted operas — ranging from brief one act works for chamber groups (the non-judicial kind) to full length dramas scored for soloists, chorus and full orchestras. By doing so, he has enriched us musically and, I believe, contributed to our jurisprudence and the administration of justice by demonstrating the jurist's insight, compassion and understanding to the most complex moral issues customarily facing judges in the Southern District. Indeed, the moral dilemmas and forces Judge Owen faces and adjudicates on a daily basis, while not the subject of his operas, have some parallel in the serious life dramas and subjects he has chosen for his operas. Four of the operas he has composed and written librettos for are illustrative of such challenging, moral issues tackled intellectually and musically by the Judge — e.g., *Rain*, *Mary Dyer*, *Abigail Adams* and *The Death of the Virgin*.

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Rain (from Somerset Maugham's "Rain"), is set in the 1920's and opens with Sadie, a sometime prostitute, trying to make it as a singer in a sleazy Honolulu night club. The club is raided but she escapes on a boat to Pago-Pago and encounters a zealous missionary and his wife. Between his efforts to "save her soul" and her reluctant, gradual acceptance of his teachings, there develops a story of elemental passion reaching a tragic end.

Mary Dyer, a Quaker, was hanged on Boston Common in 1660 under the colony's law of religious exclusivity aimed at active dissenters including Quakers. Her death marks the beginning of religious freedom in America. In the second aria, Mary is in jail and questions whether her return was truly God's will or folly. Many of the populace come to sympathize with her to accept a reprieve. She refuses unless the draconian laws are repealed, which is refused by Governor Endicott (who finds himself reluctantly compelled to enforce the law). After the hanging, the Governor is told, "She hangs there as a flag." He realizes that Mary, by her supreme sacrifice, has achieved her goal of religious freedom for all.

In a later work, *Abigail Adams*, the heroine, John Adams' wife, agitates for the colony's independence from England and demands rights for women (the libretto is taken from their letters). But the legal themes of women's rights and the basic freedoms on which this country was founded are secondary to the poignant, heartfelt and humanistic aspect of the opera — namely the extraordinary love between Abigail and John Adams.

In *The Death of The Virgin*, the painter Caravaggio destroys his lover's life and his own in the process of fighting for his own artistic integrity. Lena, Caravaggio's model and mistress, pleads with him to paint her in the style that his Cardinal patron and the Roman art world of the 1600's expects. Caravaggio, a violent, abusive man, resists, which eventually causes him to be imprisoned, and, possibly, her demise. After her suicide in the Tiber and her body is removed to the shore, he paints Lena as the Virgin Mary. The painting has hung in the Louvre since 1791.

Not all of Judge Owen's operas have been "heady" opera fare. In an operatic version of *Tom Sawyer*, the Judge wrote a children's opera in which his son, Richard, Jr., sang the lead.

Where did this all start? Where all great music starts — in the heart and the home.

Judge Owen's wife, soprano Lynn Owen, provides the inspiration for much of his music as he writes leading roles with her voice in mind (she has sung leading roles at the Metropolitan Opera). Two sons, David and Richard, Jr., share their parents' opera passion. David, now — good grief — practicing law full time, once sang such roles as Ynold in *Pelleas et Melisande* at the Metropolitan Opera. Richard, Jr. is a professional conductor (no worries about billings, only billboards, thank you). For several years, the Owens ran a small opera company in Maine, spending summers touring with road productions of *La Bohème* and *Die Fledermaus*. In fact, the Judge even sang the role of Parpignol — the toy seller who appears briefly in Act 2 of *La Bohème*.

The Opera

Judge Owen started going to the Metropolitan Opera with his father when he was about 4 years old (he remembers his first — *La Bohème*). At 5, he began to study piano and, after graduation from law school, started writing songs for the Bar Association shows. In 1956, Judge Owen met Lynn at the Tanglewood Music Festival. At the time she was a student at Julliard just beginning a career as a soprano. Through Lynn, the Judge turned his attention from popular songs and the Bar Association shows to serious music and opera, writing also the librettos for his operas. He began attending night classes in composition at the New York College of Music as well as studying privately with Maestro Vittorio Gianini as well as the Manhattan School of Music.

In his chambers are framed letters in the handwriting of Richard Wagner, Giacomo Puccini, Giuseppe Verdi and other opera memorabilia. They remind us, possibly putting the finishing touches on a pre-trial order or proposed jury charge, that there is more to life than “just” practicing law or administering it.

To hear the judge's opinions, go to the district court. To hear arias from the operas of Judge Owen, sung by his wife Lynn Owen, and conducted by his son, Richard, Jr., go to <http://www.lynnandrichardowen.com>.

Either way, your mind and heart will find excellence.

I recitative my case.