When The Fat Lady Sings

Opera History As It Ought To Be Taught

David W. Barber

Cartoons
Dave Donald

Preface
Maureen Forrester

Foreword
Anna Russell

INDENT PUBLISHING

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First published in Canada in 1990

Indent Publishing
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Toronto, ON, Canada M6H 1S8
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This edition first printing, October 2013

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Barber, David W. (David William), 1958-
When the fat lady sings: opera history as it ought to be taught

Rev. ed.
Includes biographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-9878492-7-4
1. Opera - Humour
I. Donald, Dave. II. Title

ML65.B238 2000 782.1'0207 C00-932642-1

Typeset in Plantin

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Author's Note and Acknowledgments

"The opera's not over until the fat lady sings," goes the saying (or, depending on the circles you travel in, "the opera *ain't* …"). And when the fat lady sings, there's sure to be a story or two to tell about that extraordinary pastime Samuel Johnson called "an exotick and irrational entertainment," the opera. (Spelling was not so exact a science in Johnson's day as in our own, that being before the days of spellcheckers and other computerized wizardry.)[1]

When the Fat Lady Sings: Opera History as It Ought to Be Taught is my third foray into the dangerous realm of musical humor, following on the heels of *A Musician's Dictionary* and *Bach, Beethoven and the Boys: Music History as It Ought to Be Taught* (which, if you don't already own, I would greatly appreciate if you ran out and purchased right away, available both in print and as an ebook).

As I have earlier done with *Bach, Beethoven*, I feel it important to stress that the historical information you're about to read — I hope you're about to read — is true (or at least has been perpetuated by some other historians before me). As the great Anna Russell is fond of saying, "I'm not making this up, you know!"

Those who've already read *Bach, Beethoven* (thank you) will notice the occasional similarity between that book and this one, for which I make no apologies. It is, after all, the same history. Besides, the history of opera, as you will discover, is filled with examples of self-plagiarism. If it was good enough for Handel and Mozart, it should surely be good enough for me.

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[1] Johnson was perhaps not the best judge of such matters. His biographer, James Boswell, tells us the great man "knew a drum from a trumpet, and a bagpipe from a guitar, which was about the extent of his knowledge of music."

Welcome to a brand-new Indent Publishing edition of *Fat Lady*, with some minor tweaks and additions taking into account the latest available scholarship and fun facts.

As usual, I owe a debt of gratitude to numerous librarians for their help in scrounging together the research material for this book. And of course I would have gotten nowhere without the help and talents of Dave Donald, whose illustrations add so much to the text. Special thanks also to Jacques Lauzon, my friend and business partner in Indent Publishing, for his help in bringing out this new print edition.

DWB
Toronto, 2013

Preface

My career as a singer didn't exactly have what you might call a typical beginning.

I like all kinds of music, everything from Wagner to pop songs. I remember, as a girl growing up in Montreal, that I spent lots of time with my friends sitting on the fire escape in the evenings singing songs from the radio. (Learning the melodies was easy, but memorizing the words was harder. In those days the publishers used to print all the words as a sort of comic book so you could sing along to Sinatra and everybody else. It's too bad they don't do that anymore.)

Even now I sing all the time, especially when I'm trying to get ready for a performance. Sometimes I hardly even know I'm doing it: People pass me on the street as I'm doing my grocery shopping or something and say under their breath, "There's that woman who hums to herself."

Still, I'm not entirely self-taught: I've had wonderful teachers, even though I've never been to music school.

But if I had gone to music school, this is how I would want to learn about all those composers, by reading David Barber's *When the Fat Lady Sings: Opera History as It Ought to Be Taught*. It's very, very clever, it's a fabulous read, and I wish children who are taught music in school were taught this way.

This is a very humorous book, but at the same time it tells it like it is, or was. David's not really fabricating anything, he just manages to give you the gist of the history while leaving out all the boring bits.

It's full of things you can pick up on and talk about at parties, and Dave Donald's drawings are so well done, too.

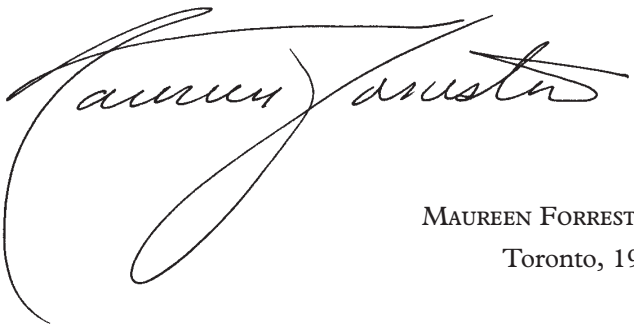
Don't be put off, by the way, by the title. I think it's darling. These days there are some wonderful and skinny opera singers. But there didn't used to be, especially if they sang Wagner. It comes from eating at too many receptions. (Musical receptions are the funniest things I've ever been to, but that's another story.)

So many lay people feel "music's not for me." But you don't have to study music to enjoy music, or even opera. I've never felt music is an elitist thing, and this book helps prove it.

It would be wonderful to find this book in the seat pockets of airplanes, so that when people arrive in Milan or Rome they'll say, "Let's go to the opera."

When The Fat Lady Sings is so clever that you don't need me to tell you it's clever. You can read it and find out for yourself.

One hopes that the great composers had as much of a sense of humor as David Barber has. I think they might have.



Maureen Forrester,
Toronto, 1990

Dedication

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, Johann Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms and all the other great composers who knew better than to write any operas.

Tutto nel mondo e burla;
l'hom e nato burlone.

(All the world's a joke;
all men are born fools.)

— GIUSEPPE VERDI, *Falstaff*

Foreword

WHY IS IT THAT PEOPLE who write about "classical" music usually tend to be either desperately dreary or insufferably pompous?

Goodness knows.*

That's why it was such a joy to come across *A Musician's Dictionary, Bach, Beethoven and the Boys* and *When the Fat Lady Sings* by David W. Barber. I read them all cover to cover, and it brightened up my weekend no end.

I could have easily wound up in that stuck-up lot myself, as a matter of fact, were it not for a most fortuitous accident.

When I was young I had a very good voice, so my father — who had started out as an infant prodigy on the piano and who later had to suffer accompanying my mother, who had a shattering vibrato and couldn't count — had me taught all the necessary adjunct to song, i.e. piano, ear training, harmony, theory, etc.

I was always convinced he was passionately wrapped up in my future as a diva.

At the age of 16, while attending one of those women's detention camps the English call boarding school, I was hit in the face with a hockey stick, which smashed my nose and completely ruined my acoustics.

Was Father upset? No fear! He said, "You can go to the Royal College of Music anyway and carry on with all the other stuff. It will keep you out of mischief until I can get you married." So he wasn't

*Most "classical" music starts out as "popular" music, but should a "popular" composer die before his music fades out, he immediately becomes "classical" and is taken over by the stuck-up lot. Like for instance George Gershwin.

passionately wrapped up in my future at all, he was a Male Chauvinist Pig (although a very nice one. After all, he was born in 1867, so what else could you expect?).

When I got to college I auditioned for the Opera School. I sang my aria, and the director said, "Can you play the piano?" He was gratified that I could. "With a voice like that, we couldn't expect to sing in an opera, could we?" he said, "but all our student coaches graduated last term, and we are looking for new blood."

So I did opera coaching and what was known as "Filling In," which could be anything from playing bass drum and triangle in the opera orchestra to singing tenor in vocal ensemble, as there weren't any tenors around at that time. In fact, you had to be ready to substitute for anyone who wasn't there, no matter what they did. You learn a lot that way, as well as make a big fool of yourself half the time.

So I was a general dogsbody for seven years, which is how long it took me to graduate in Musicology and Composition. I was said to have been the worst pupil that Dr. Vaughan Williams ever taught. I think he just kept me around for laughs.

I married a French horn player in the London Philharmonic Orchestra, which played at Covent Garden at the time. So I went to the opera every night, as orchestra wives got free seats in the gods. In those days, musicians didn't get paid much, so they rehearsed the Wagner tubas in the living room, which ruined the carpet.

I started off full of sour grapes, with a chip on my shoulder. But that didn't last, because what went on around me was so hilarious there was never a dull moment. When I finally got around to putting it all together, it turned into a very satisfactory career. Since I cooked it up myself, I had no responsibilities to the Great Masters, and since my lamentable voice was past praying for, I was under no stress, and so I had a jolly good time.

But I must say I still adore opera. I know it is just as silly as Mr. Barber says it is, but I love it. Particularly *The Ring Cycle*, which I

have on tape. I often put it on at breakfast and let it burble along in the background all day. Why not? In the old days, the audiences made opera a background for eating, drinking, gambling and making love in the boxes of the theatre, and I must say I find it vastly preferable to we get on the radio nowadays, the likes the Stones or the Bones, the Who or the Poo — whoever that fellow is with the huge mouth and all those scruffy maniacs who jump up and down yelling and screaming. I think they're awful.

I sometimes put the *Brandenburg Concerti* on as background music, too, but the trouble with Bach is he always makes you feel you shouldn't be lounging around, but should be doing something worthwhile.

Anyway, I wish Mr. Barber the greatest success with his book. I know everyone is going to love it.

Anna Russell,
Toronto, 1990

Starting A Trend

Have cloud machine, will travel

Monteverdi and Crowd

If you're looking for someone to blame for this whole opera business, look no further than Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), a musician at the court of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua.

Others may want to place the blame elsewhere (and there's some pretty strong evidence against Vincenzo Galilei and his Florentine Camerata gang), but if you ask me, Monteverdi is the one who should be left holding the bag. He could have been content to be remembered as one of the finest composers of madrigals in 17th-century Italy — but no, that wasn't good enough. He had to go messing around with a whole new art form. Some composers never learn.

Claudio Zuan Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi was born in the Italian town of Cremona. His father, Baldasar, like that of Handel after him, was a barber-surgeon. Cremona was later to become famous as the home town of the renowned makers of Stradivarius and Guarnerius violins. This probably explains why Monteverdi grew up with such a strong need to fiddle around with the development of musical forms.[1]

We know nothing about Monteverdi's early musical training, but he must have picked it up somewhere, because he'd written his first book of motets by the time he was 15. When he hit 20, he'd written five books of motets and madrigals, and there was no stopping him.

[1] Maybe there's a connection here: The reason fewer composers write opera nowadays is that fewer of them have fathers who are barber-surgeons. Just a thought. If you were looking for a PhD thesis topic, you might consider it.

He got a job as court composer for Duke Vincenzo, who kept him busy writing all sorts of music to keep the duke and his friends entertained. (Vincenzo considered himself the life of the party, and since he was richer than most of his guests, they went on letting him think so.)

We don't know very much about Monteverdi the person. He was occasionally hot tempered and got into arguments with the duke's treasurer about his pay. (Who wouldn't?) He was once robbed by a highwayman, who took all his money but not his cloak, because it was too long. This proves either that Monteverdi was very tall or the highwayman was not. In 1595, Monteverdi married a court singer named Claudia Cattaneo (Claudio and Claudia — how cute!) and they had three children.

In 1600, a music theorist named Giovanni Maria Artusi caused a stir by publishing a treatise attacking modern music. He said there were too many wrong notes and it all sounded like so much noise. (Sound familiar?) Artusi didn't name any names specifically, but since he cited several examples from the music of Monteverdi, it didn't take a genius to figure out whom he meant.

Monteverdi did the grownup thing and ignored the insult. He just went ahead and wrote more madrigals. But four years later, Artusi wrote another attack, and this time he wasn't pulling any punches: He came right out and mentioned Monteverdi by name.

That did it: Now Monteverdi was really mad. He decided to compose an entirely new form of musical work, one that paid closer attention to the dramatic representation of the words (and one with simpler melodies, so Artusi could follow what was going on). He called it a *favola in musica*, or "story in music," and chose as his story the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. He called his creation *Orfeo* and it was the first real opera.

A group of musicians led by Vincenzo Galilei (father of the astronomer Galileo Galilei), who called themselves the Florentine Camerata — or Florentine Gang — had been advocating this form

of simplified music drama, the *stile rapprasentativo*, or "representative style," for several years. They thought it was important to get back to the musical ideals established by the ancient Greeks.[2]

This new style of singing was called monody. Don't get that confused with monotony, which is what some of us think opera is really all about.

Two of the Florentine bunch, Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, had even created a little music drama demonstrating their ideas. They composed their *Euridice* in 1601, six years before Monteverdi's version of the same story in 1607. You could argue the earlier work was the first opera if you want, but it was really just a dry run for the main event. It took a bigshot composer like Monteverdi to really go to town with the new style.[3]

In the original Greek legend, Orpheus travels to the underworld to rescue his beloved Eurydice from death. The god of the underworld tells him Eurydice will follow him back to the land of the living, but he can't look behind him to check on her. Being the suspicious type, he does anyway, and she dies again — this time for good.

Such a dismal finale would never do for Monteverdi, so he convinced the librettist, Alessandro Striggio, to write him a happy ending. In Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, the god Apollo descends from a marvelous cloud machine, restores Eurydice to life and reunites the happy lovers. (Monteverdi must have liked cloud machines: He used one again in his final opera, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. In his opera *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*, the god Neptune arrives in the amphibious version, an elaborate sea machine. "The Florentines," historian Carl Engel remarks tartly in his essay *The Beginnings Of Opera*, "had more scenery, machinery, and fireworks than was altogether good for them." So there.)

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[2] There was no way they could have known what Greek music sounded like, so they were talking through their hats. But that didn't stop them.

[3] You don't have to take my word for it: Monteverdi, none too modestly, takes the credit for himself.

In this, as elsewhere, we can see Monteverdi was the true pioneer of the operatic art. He established the form, and laid down the principles for many of its lasting conventions. From the very first, Monteverdi's example proved that no matter how ridiculous it made the story, the opera has to have a happy ending.

About the Author

DAVID W. BARBER is a journalist and musician and the author of more than a dozen books of music (including *Accidentals on Purpose: A Musician's Dictionary*, *Bach, Beethoven and the Boys*, *When the Fat Lady Sings* and *Getting a Handel on Messiah*) and literature (including *Quotable Sherlock* and *Quotable Twain*). Formerly entertainment editor of the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and editor of *Broadcast Week* magazine at the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, he's now assistant arts & life editor for Postmedia Network and a freelance writer, editor and composer. As a composer, his works include two symphonies, a jazz mass based on the music of Dave Brubeck, a Requiem, several short choral and chamber works and various vocal-jazz songs and arrangements. He sings with the Toronto Chamber Choir and Cantores Fabularum and a variety of other choirs on occasion. In a varied career, among his more interesting jobs have been short stints as a roadie for Pope John Paul II, a publicist for Prince Rainier of Monaco and a backup singer for Avril Lavigne.

Find him on the Web at bachbeethoven.com
or indentpublishing.com

About the Cartoonist

DAVE DONALD can't remember when he didn't scrawl his little marks on most surfaces, so it doesn't come as much of a surprise that he now makes a living doing just that. He is currently balancing a freelance career in publication design with his more abstruse artistic pursuits. This book represents one of his many illustrative collaborations with David Barber.

Books by David W. Barber
with illustrations
by Dave Donald

Bach, Beethoven and the Boys:
Music History as It Ought to Be Taught
(1986, republished 2009 by Indent Publishing,
also available as an Indent ebook, 2011)

When the Fat Lady Sings:
Opera History as It Ought to Be Taught
(1990, 2013, also available as an Indent Publishing ebook, 2012)

If It Ain't Baroque:
More Music History as It Ought to Be Taught
(1992, also available as an Indent Publishing ebook, 2012)

Getting a Handel on Messiah
(1995, also available as an Indent Publishing ebook, 2011)

Tenors, Tantrums and Trills:
An Opera Dictionary
(1996)

Tutus, Tights and Tiptoes:
Ballet History as It Ought to Be Taught
(2000, also available as an Indent Publishing ebook, 2012)

Accidentals on Purpose:
A Musician's Dictionary
(Indent Publishing 2011,
also available as an Indent ebook, 2012)

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Better Than it Sounds:
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The Last Laugh:
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Indent Publishing ebook, 2011)

Quotable Alice
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(2002, also available as an Indent Publishing ebook, 2012)

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(2003)

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Thanks again for reading the first chapters and we hope to hear from you!