# Striking the Right Note

By VIBHUTI PATEL

## Cleopatra appears in a sari stole in a revival of Samuel Barber's brilliant but disastrous 1966 opera *Antony and Cleopatra.*

New York's Metropolitan Opera stages over 200 performances each year, attended by more than 800,000 people, and experienced by millions more through live high-definition film, TV and radio broadcasts. Founded in 1883 by wealthy businessmen, it has been home to the most creative and talented artists. But while its original home boasted great acoustics, the opera house did not have adequate stage facilities until 1966, when it joined the newly formed Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and was fitted with state-of-the-art technical equipment.

To celebrate its opening, the Met commissioned American composer Samuel Barber to create a grand opera. Barber complied with *Antony and Cleopatra*, based on his favorite Shakespeare play. The opera was written specifically for the first black, professional, operatic soprano, Leontyne Price. The Met got Italian movie director Franco Zeffirelli to create the libretto to accompany Barber's music. It seemed like a terrific team and the star of the show would be the fabled new stage machinery, a masterpiece of technological innovation. Unfortunately, the opening night—September 16—was a total fiasco. As one critic put it, "everything that could go wrong did." Worse still, it was the kiss of death for *Antony and Cleopatra*, despite its gloriously lyrical music.

For 43 years now, musicologists have puzzled over what went wrong and their many explanations have all led back to that first production. The new stage machinery broke down during rehearsals, recalls Peter Davis, *The New York Times* music critic who was present that evening. Lighting cues were erratic, audible cries such as "Look out for the sphinx!" came from the backstage crew, Cleopatra was trapped inside a pyramid. The orchestra threatened to strike because it had no contract. A settlement was negotiated, literally at the last minute, just before the third-act curtain. As we now realize, Zeffirelli's vision as designer and director of the opera was totally at odds with that of Barber. Known for his over-the-top productions, Zeffirelli wanted to portray a clash of empires through Hollywood-like glamor and high-tech dazzle. "A pastiche of Elizabethan, Roman, Egyptian and modern—a baroque exuberance" is what he says he aimed for from his reading of Shakespeare's play, Davis wrote in *The New York Times*. Nothing could have been further from Barber's goals. For, although he too had been inspired by Shakespeare's powerful poetry, it was not the clash of civilizations that he wanted to portray but the intimate passions of mature lovers destroyed by the politics of their times. He lamented, "What I wrote and what I envisioned had nothing to do with what one saw on that stage."

Still, despite the garish production, that first audience responded favorably to the music. Unfortunately, the press panned *Antony and Cleopatra*. Many critics have conjectured that Barber's Neo-Romantic music, fluid and lyrical as it is, was out of step with the fashion of the day. The composers that held sway in the 1960s were modernists, writing music that was atonal and minimalist. Barber's was a conservative formal voice at the time. Despite the intelligence and ingenuity of his composition, its lush orchestration and deeply moving arias, reflecting some of the most emotive love poetry that Shakespeare ever wrote, he did not win over critics who were swayed by contemporary trends.

Barber went into a deep depression from which he never recovered. He attempted to save his opera by getting his friend, Italian composer Gian Carlo

Courtesy Metropolitan Opera Archives

*Left: Justino Diaz and Leontyne Price in the 1966 premiere of Samuel Barber's* Antony and Cleopatra *at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Right: Lauren Flanigan, draped in an antique gold-tissue sari, performs as Cleopatra in the 2009 revival of Barber's composition at the New York City Opera. Far right: The New York City Opera chorus playing the people of Rome and Egypt.*

Menotti, to revise the libretto from 16 to 14 scenes, and himself cut the score by an hour. In 1975, that version was performed at New York's Juilliard School of music. Then, in 1983, at Italy's Spoleto Music Festival and again, nearly a decade later, at Chicago's Lyric Opera. Sadly, none of those performances reestablished Barber's jinxed opera. A brilliant and cultivated man whose orchestral music won numerous awards, whose 1958 opera *Vanessa* had won a Pulitzer Prize, and whose career should have been crowned by the Met commission, never composed another opera. Barber died a broken man in 1981.

Now, the New York City Opera, another Lincoln Center company, younger than the Met and one that is committed to the development of American opera and the staging of innovative 20th century works, has revived *Antony and Cleopatra*. The company performed Barber's work in concert—no distracting scenery, costumes or staging, showcasing only the music, singing, orchestration and chorus—to sold out audiences at the vast Carnegie Hall earlier this year.

The verdict? A unanimous triumph for the huge cast, headed by soprano Lauren Flanigan and baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes in the title roles, lauded not just by cheering audiences but by *The New York Times*' critic, Anthony Tommasini, who offered a coveted imprimatur: "What a difference it makes to hear the piece performed by an opera conductor who palpably believes in it; skilled orchestra players and choristers; and a strong cast headed by two exciting artists…. The fervent and sensitive performance made the best case for this opera that I have encountered." His detailed appraisal of Barber concluded, "With this performance City Opera continues its tradition of championing overlooked works."

Barber's revised version—the only one sanctioned by his family—was the score used to great effect by the New York City Opera, whose pale, blonde Cleopatra wore an antique gold-tissue sari, draped like a stole over a simple black dress. "I found these saris at the bottom of a fabric bin in Pondicherry, a furniture store that's going out of business," Flanigan confessed. "It's a lot of material but I didn't pleat it like a sari, I just had it over me." As to why her Cleopatra chose to wear saris, she explained, "It was interesting to equate ancient cultures, I thought there would be historic resonances. I wanted a visual impact but I didn't want to spend too much." After the intermission, the "stole" changed to a brilliant blue Benares silk with gold *buttis* and red-and-gold border and *pallu* which, Flanigan said, "had to be lined and patched up because it was so old." That, however, was the extent of the evening's exotica. For the rest, it was magnificent singing—both by the principal singers and the huge chorus playing the people of Rome and Egypt.

And there was Shakespeare's immortal poetry: Cleopatra calls Antony "my man of men," he acknowledges her power by calling her "Egypt," identifying the woman with her empire. The Roman Enobarbus echoes Shakespeare's highly evocative description of Antony's first sight of Cleopatra on the Nile: "The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,/Burn'd on the water…" and, "...she did lie/In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold of tissue…" Finally, the lovers' suicides—Antony, the great Roman general who lost the most critical battle of his life because he was besotted with love, and Cleopatra, the queen known for driving Roman generals crazy, who killed herself to avoid the humiliation of defeat—are as majestic and moving in Barber's opera as in Shakespeare's great play.

Now that Barber's magnum opus has redeemed itself, perhaps it will return in the avatar that Barber had dreamed. Who knows? Maybe even on the prestigious stage of the Met which now boasts a new general manager, the immensely adventurous Peter Gelb, who stages modern operas, revives forgotten old ones, commissions new works, and brings in highly talented stage and film directors to give them the finest artistic productions imaginable. Above all, Gelb is a new-technology fiend so there should be no let-downs—Cleopatra would not have to appear on a dark stage because the lighting cues were garbled.

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