

# An Opera That Flies

Nearly 30 years after its premiere, Thomas Pasatieri's *Seagull* remains a confident adaptation of Chekhov; Tan Dun's *Water Passion* is just so much monotonous hokum.

**F**OR FIVE CHARMED YEARS BACK IN the early seventies, Thomas Pasatieri, not yet 30, was America's operatic wunderkind, turning out new scores even faster than Donizetti and enjoying prominent productions across the country. The regional opera scene was just beginning to gather steam, companies needed accessible new works to attract prestige, press, and donors without alienating audiences, and Pasatieri provided exactly the right stuff. His operas were melodic, lushly scored, highly theatrical, and based on such classy literary sources as Molière, Yeats, James, Chekhov, and Unamuno. Between 1971 and 1976, there were high-profile Pasatieri premieres from Seattle to Baltimore, but soon it was all over. The commissions stopped, the composer disappeared into Hollywood to begin a new career as a film scorer, and his operas vanished from sight.

Has the time come for a second act? The Manhattan School recently resurrected

**The Seagull**, first performed in Houston in 1974, and made that look like a distinct possibility. Having seen or heard most of Pasatieri's seventeen operas, I would say that *The Seagull* was his finest moment.

Back in the seventies, when new operas were an even tougher sell than they are today, it was no small feat for a 28-year-old composer to show such an easy command of the traditional operatic virtues, basic techniques that few American composers have ever mastered: a feeling for correct dramatic pacing, when to clinch a key emotional moment through lyrical expansion, a sure ear for natural vocal declamation, the ability to establish atmosphere without clogging the action. All this *The Seagull* manages seamlessly.

The Chekhov play was cleverly reduced and adapted for operatic purposes by Kenward Elmslie, the best librettist in the business at the time, one who also worked to good effect with Ned Rorem and Jack Bee-

son. The key conversations have been preserved, the tangled relationships clearly delineated, the lyrical moments flawlessly set up. Whether one responds to Pasatieri's conservative idiom or not is something else.

For my taste, his lush postromantic music can get rather sweaty for Chekhov's fragile, bittersweet characters, the harmonic textures sometimes seem too thick and clotted, and there is a fair amount of note spinning. Even at that, the composer has created many effective operatic moments for the major characters,

who are all given opportunities to show off their voices. No wonder so many talented American singers, both established stars and youngsters on the verge of major careers, were eager to sing in Pasatieri's operas 30 years ago. As directed by Frank Corsaro, *The Seagull* had an especially starry lineup for its premiere in Houston: Frederica von Stade, Evelyn Lear, Patricia Wells, John Reardon, and Richard Stilwell, with Catherine Malfitano in the second cast.

No apologies need be made for the Manhattan School production, fluidly directed by Mark Harrison, handsomely designed by Dipu Gupta, and under the firm musical direction of David Gilbert. Amy Shoremount as the abandoned Nina, Amy Gough as the self-centered actress Arkadina, and Keri Behan as the embittered Masha sang with vocal authority, and if Raymond Ayers (Constantine) and Matthew Worth (Trigorin) seemed a bit pallid in comparison, such is the nature of these vacillating characters.

While revising *The Seagull's* original three acts into two for this production, the composer apparently felt the opera bug bite him once again and began to think seriously about the possibility of writing opera No. 18. Who knows? The scene today is far more hospitable to new American operas than it was in the seventies, and Pasatieri could easily become a contender once again.



**ON THE VERGE:** *The Seagull's* fragile women, from left, Amy Shoremount (Nina), Keri Behan (Masha), and Amy Gough (Arkadina).

#### The Seagull

Revival of the opera by Thomas Pasatieri, based on the Chekhov play.

#### Water Passion After St. Matthew

Oratorio by Tan Dun.

PERHAPS THE MOST CONSERVATIVE COMPOSER of genius who ever lived, Bach would sure-