WHAT LIBRETTISTS DO

by **Terry Quinn**

As an opera librettist you will labor blissfully at the tip of an inverted pyramid. One that grows to its awesome height, width, depth and weight only well after you – and your composer – have finished working. The singable poetic plays that you contribute to this most collaborative of the lively arts will be as central, and remain as half-buried, as any building's foundation. If all goes well, your share of the work will attract little attention. But if flaws should appear in the more exposed layers of the structure, then a thorough hunt will begin. Professional and amateur critics alike will dig down below set, lighting and costume design; below singing, acting, stage direction, music-playing, conducting and the score itself. At that point your libretto will get plenty of scrutiny. To be an opera librettist you will have to accept, even thrive on, this strange combination of stealth and accountability.

Let's say that mix attracts you. What specific skills and personal attributes will you need to acquire and develop? Of course there's no prescribed list. The field is so off-to-the-side and its practitioners so idiosyncratic that it's not likely any two librettists go about their craft in the same way. But judging by my own experience working with seven different composers to date, here's what seems to me to be the right stuff.

In the making of an opera, the words come first, not the music. But before you put word one to paper or screen, you and the composer need to agree on a *subject*. That choice having been made, you are responsible for coming up with a *concept* for the work, developing a dramatic *premise*, then writing – in poetic form – a curious sort of play. One that not only allows but requires a musical setting if it is to be fully realized. What's wanted is a sturdy lyrical scenario that leaves as much room as possible for the composer, instrumentalists, singers and design team to bring the nascent story to vivid life.

As a case study here, I propose to analyze the development of *The Mark of Cain*, a chamber opera that is scheduled to receive its world premiere at New York City's Chelsea Opera this November. The libretto is mine, the music that of composer Matthew Harris.

Matthew and I consulted from the very beginning on the choice of subject. The possibility of a commission was our impetus. A six-member singing group called Western Wind, when seeking a foundation grant in the winter of 2010, invited Matthew to join their application as composer. He in turn asked Jim Schaeffer, director of the Center for Contemporary Opera, to recommend a librettist, which is when I joined the project.

In our first exploratory meeting, before we'd even determined whether or not we were compatible partners, Matthew asked me if I would consider a Biblical subject. By astonishing coincidence, I'd read the fourth chapter of Genesis the night before and so said, "How about Cain and Abel?" He loved the idea. Within a matter of minutes, we'd come very close to agreeing on our subject. (A set of significant refinements would later

result in Abel's being eliminated as a character in the opera.) But a subject is far indeed from a full-blown operatic concept.

Now it was time for me to do a considerable amount of work on my own. It's generally agreed that novels and plays cannot be written by committee; neither can librettos. I regard my first solo task as the development of a dramatic concept, following an extensive period of research. In this instance I read the relevant sections of the Old Testament and the Koran, many exegetical articles written by theologians and commentators of the Islamic, Jewish and Christian faiths, and numerous works of fiction and poetry. (Lord Byron's verse drama, Victor Hugo's poem and Jose Saramago's novel, all titled *Cain*, were particularly useful.)

In the process, I had the luck to be referred by a friend to a Hebraic scholar in Woodstock, New York, who led me to a trove of arcane sources. Thanks to her, I learned that in the Jewish Midrash and Mishnah traditions, Cain and Abel were each believed to have had a female twin, by whom the race was to be propagated. And that, by God's directive, each was to wed not his own but his brother's twin. The texts claim that Cain disobeyed, choosing to mate with his own twin sister, owing to her superior beauty.

If you are adapting another work of art – as librettist Lorenzo da Ponte did, for example, when he patterned the libretto for Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* on Pierre Beaumarchais' *La Folle Journée ou Le Mariage de Figaro* – your research needn't extend very far beyond the source play. But if your libretto is to be completely or virtually original, then wider research will be called for.

In *The Mark of Cain*, the account of the burial of Abel's corpse was inspired by two little-known verses in the Koran. In that account, Allah sends two birds from the skies, within the sight of the man who has just killed his brother. (The text of Chapter 5, Verses 31-32 makes no mention of the names Cain and Abel.) One bird slays the other then scratches out a grave in the earth. And so in my libretto, Cain says to his sister as the Serpent mimes his account:

CAIN: It was the Serpent ... It was the Serpent ...
"Watch," she whispered in my ear,
"I'll lure two ravens from the sky ... "
And lo, they swiftly flew to earth!
At once the larger pecked the smaller one
till it was dead,
Then clawed a hole and quick concealed its brother.
Thus, I learned, one lays to rest another.

Moreover, the Jewish Midrash account of Cain, Abel and their twin sisters, referred to earlier, inspired the opera's concept as much as Genesis did. I would define that concept this way:

The Mark of Cain combines, reshapes and extends several ancient creation myths to show how sexual jealousy and resentment might have caused the world's first murder to lead to a second such act. Long after Abel has been slain, his twin sister, Zellah, at last tracks Cain to the Land of Nod and wreaks her revenge.

Once you choose a subject, complete your research and develop a basic concept for the opera, you need to formulate what Lajos Egri called, in his seminal book *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, a premise. This is an armature for your narrative structure, a kind of conceptual through-line that will guide your story arc, inform every scene of the action, and in some way imply the nature of your ending.

In *Le Nozze di Figaro* the premise might be defined in this way: *The sincerity and perseverance of true lovers will vanquish the deceit of a powerful oppressor.* (This proves so not just for Figaro and Suzanna in their dealings with Count Almaviva, but for the Countess as well.) And in *Don Giovanni*, the premise *"The heedless pursuit of bodily pleasure will lead to death"* unifies the entire opera, from the attempted rape of Donna Anna and the slaying of her father in scene one to the don's eventual demise in the course of his Act Two encounter with the Commendatore's ghost.

The premise of *The Mark of Cain* can be stated simply: *"Murder breeds murder."* It's the premise of the Electra tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, as well as of the opera of the same name by Richard Strauss. And just as Egisthus and Clytemnestra's butchering of Agamemnon led to their own death at the hands of Orestes, so Cain's slaughtering of his innocent brother will fester as an unhealed wound until he is in turn is killed by his own sister.

That premise is clearly embedded in Zellah's words at the very start of the opera:

ZELLAH: This day, I vow, a lawless man shall die!
And by my hand – though he be my brother.

And at the end, as Zellah cradles Cain's corpse, she is confronted by God, who has sworn to punish whoever murders Cain: "Daughter," He sings, "what have you done?" She answers: "Vengeance am I promised, sevenfold, for daring to defy the Mark of Cain. Yet would I not commit this sin again? What I came to do I have done." A workable scheme, then, is to announce the premise early, in dramatic and lyrical fashion, to support it throughout your libretto by way of a series of increasingly momentous climaxes, and to justify it above all at the conclusion.

Da Ponte and Mozart did not end their masterpiece with Don Giovanni valiantly refusing to ditch his 'principles,' instead accepting a descent into the fires of hell. They ended it with the ensemble of six victim/survivors, Leporello included, encapsulating the work's premise in a gleefully sung taunt:

ALL: May this scoundrel dwell forever in the depths
that Pluto rules
While we, good people, sing that ancient anthem:
Here you see the dismal fate of those who practice evil.
As they lived, so they die!

That stanza serves nicely as an ironic crystallization of the opera's premise.

Once you have come up with a *subject* that you believe will intrigue an audience, a *concept* that promises lively narrative momentum, and a *premise* that will bind your characters' actions into an integral and cohesive whole, you can follow one of two courses: outline your plot arc in whole or in part, then begin drafting; or simply start writing the story itself at whatever point attracts you, and let the conflicts, reversals, epiphanies and crises reveal themselves organically. My own method is always to avoid a strict outline and instead begin creating singable dialogue as soon as I have (a) settled upon a specific place and general time frame for the action, and (b) heard in my mind's ear what each of the opera's main characters most yearns to express.

In the case of *The Mark of Cain*, I decided to follow Aristotelian precepts and have the story take place in one setting – an open space surrounded by humble desert dwellings – and within the span of a single day. At the crux of the tragic drama would stand two noble, larger-than-life characters in conflict, each with a hidden yet fatal moral failing. My beginning point – or what Egri would call 'the point of attack' – would be Zellah's arrival in the city Cain built following his banishment by God. She appears to Cain and his subjects to be a shepherd who has trekked from the highlands west of the Garden of Eden. But we learn in time that she is the slain Abel's – and in Cain's eyes, the ghost of the brother he killed. Before Zellah appears to him, she and the chorus sing:

CHORUS: Cain! Noble Cain! Child of Adam!
Builder of the World's one city – Enoch,
in the Land of Nod, far east of the Garden.
Enoch, named for the son that Onah bore him.
ZELLAH: Onah, fair sister ... long dead ...
And Abel, gentle brother ...
murdered in his youth.
Here Cain enjoys a placid life.
I'll lure him back to days of strife
and trap a haunted soul – at last!

In her fury, Zellah declares her intentions. She will force Cain to "unearth a buried sin" and reveal where her brother's bones lie, then face the justice she feels he has so far escaped. In the process, however, less elevated motivations will surface and complicate her mission.

The central mechanism in the action's development is Zellah's ability to shock and cajole her brother into a series of guilt-driven hallucinations. Cain thought he'd put his murderous past far behind him. Yet when this seeming stranger from the West confronts him with the walking staff she carries, he sees that it is the very blood-stained crook he used to murder Abel. Now Zellah's physical appearance – breasts tightly bound, hair tied back, body draped in shepherd's garb – stuns Cain out of his decades-long complacency:

CAIN: Abel! ... Years older but surely Abel ...
or his conjured image! ...
Lord of the Heavens, hear my cry!
Shall Cain the Vagabond never be free?
...
Lord, has not the rift between us been repaired?
What evil have I done these many years
That, once more, you should mock the gifts I make?
...
Release me from my brother's stare!
I knew not that the dead could see –
Dispel this ghost, for mercy's sake!

All librettists, in giving poetic voice to their characters, need to decide whether and where to use meter, rhyme and stanza structure. (This is of course a particular concern in the case of crucial speeches that the composer may choose to set as arias.) Other key matters include: how to pace the drama by way of short versus longer dialogue exchanges ... when to lighten the tone with humor or low-style speech, or heighten it with language rendered in the loftiest registers ... when to indicate the need for critical lighting effects, gestures and movements, in the form of bracketed stage directions. Cain, for example, must lunge at Zellah in rage. Zellah must deal him a body blow with the crook. Several lighting changes must signal a psychic shift for Cain whenever Zellah compels him to travel back in time to revisit the murder and burial of their brother, and again face God and the Serpent.

In drafting my libretto, I chose to create two 'peasant' characters not only to advance the action (Zellah, the stranger from afar needs to be escorted to the mighty Cain by two of his subjects), but also to elaborate the exposition and allow for an animating mix of tones, diction levels and poetic styles. The speech of this pair, a farmer and a townsman, is unrhymed, unmetered, comedic in tone and set in a low-style register:

MORADESH: Caleb, which of us shall tell Cain of the stranger in the square?
CALEB: Haven't you heard? We're not to call him that.
MORADESH: What's wrong with 'stranger'?
CALEB: Cain, I mean *Cain!* … 'Master' is now his title.
MORADESH: Who knew this?

When Cain later addresses Moradesh, his rhymed iambic pentameters contrast conspicuously, at once dramatizing the difference in the two men's social rank:

CAIN: What have you come to ask of me? Don't tarry!
My judgment of some trivial dispute?
A blessing on your daughter, soon to marry?
Speak up, for naught shall come to him
who's bashful as the hare – and stands as mute.

Even when Cain's speech dispenses with the strictures of prosody, it remains on an elevated level, taking on the lyricism and rhythmic pulse of free verse – as here, where he protests to God:

CAIN: I too have made an offering, oh Lord.
Grapes in nodding clusters, golden dates,
Pomegranates blushing in their ripeness.
And sheaves of wheat and barley –
the choicest bounty of my fields!

Zellah, too, speaks in the high style, though her singing lines are longer and more sinuous than Cain's. Also, as can be seen here, she is as likely to deal in spondees and loping dactyls as in iambs:

ZELLAH: You killed an innocent that you might bed his promised wife,
Then sought to hide your shame in this bleak land.
Cain, know that I've hunted you for half my blighted life –
And you shall die now, at your sister's hand!

There is a gradation, then, among the speech patterns of the four human characters. Yet God's pronouncements are pitched at the very highest level of solemnity:

GOD: Let no one fail to fear the Mark of Cain!
Whosoever slays my servant,
Vengeance shall be taken on him – sevenfold!

And the Serpent's pleas and exhortations, though similarly exalted, have a distinctly rhetorical feel:

THE SERPENT: Cain, you've not the meek soul of your brother,
Who always would obey and never dared
to touch life's fire.
You share instead the bold heart of your mother –
So take unto your marriage bed the sister you desire!
Take – as Eve would take – *what you desire!*

In addition to varying your individual speech modes, it is important to contrast the swiftly-paced, colloquial diction of a segment like this ...

CAIN: I'll hide the corpse! Hide it! Hide it!
THE SERPENT: Yes! If you would guard your worthiness,
your freedom – *then defy Him!*
GOD: CAIN! WHERE IS MY SERVANT, ABEL?
CAIN: I know not, Lord.
GOD: *ANSWER, CAIN! ... ANSWER!*
THE SERPENT: Say it. Only say it.
CAIN: Am I ...
THE SERPENT: *Defy!*
CAIN: Am I ...

THE SERPENT: *Defy!*
CAIN: Am I my brother's keeper? Tell me, Lord, ah tell me!
Am I? *Am* I? Am I my brother's keeper?

... with the deliberate, sustained feel of a solo outpouring of emotion:

ZELLAH: Ah Cain, my life was cursed an age ago –
The hateful day you chose to lie with Onah, and refuse me.
Because of you my womb has borne no fruit.
Because of you no man has touched my breast
or kissed me with desire.
I have no one beside me when I sleep.
I have no child of my own to love.
Your son will honor and remember you.
Who will remember me? Who will mourn for Zellah when she dies?

As a librettist, you will be counted on to help singers give fullest and purest expression to their skills. This you do through euphony and the management of elegant rhythms that are seldom used anywhere but in the areas of poetry and song. And at the syllable level, you will work in league with the composer to provide soloists and chorus members alike with singing lines that feature *vowels*. Especially vowels unchoked by consonant barriers. (To illustrate, the phrase "What Librettists Do" would fail miserably as a song lyric, thanks to the "s-t-s-d" roadblock at its center. A combination permissible in prose, anathema in song.)

It would be foolish to ignore the expressive power of the well-placed consonant: the energy of plosives, dentals and fricatives ("Blood of my blood, yet twice a traitor to me!" ... "Tell me, Lord, tell me!" ... "Avenger, come from afar"); the soothing quality of liquids and sibilants (" Yes, my long-lost brother." ... "Like Eve – do as you must! Like Eve – do as you will!" ... "Yet I see the selfsame glimmer in the eye, the slender nose, that smoothness of the cheek."). But many consonants are unvoiced and designed to *stop* vocal sound for semantic, non-lyrical purposes. Vowels, on the other hand, are the key conveyors of sound and, especially in the realm of song, offer a far more effective way to express *emotion*, the essence of opera. They are the great friends of singers and composers and work best when they are set free at the end of sung lines: ("shall die" "could see" "what is true" "from me" "in the dew").

Meter, rhyme, euphony, pacing, the management of contrasting dialogue styles – all important technical considerations. And at the more abstract end of the spectrum, the determination of subject, concept and premise, as earlier discussed, are fundamental tasks any librettist must take on. However, the soul of your poetic drama will not reside in the surface qualities of the language you create, nor in overarching elements of structure and plot. It will reside in *the strength of your characters*. The nature of their goals and desires ... the credibility of their dialogue and behaviors – and, by implication, their thoughts and attitudes ...the way they succeed or fail at displaying their essence when drawn into conflict. To quote theorist Lajos Egri once more, "Character *is* action."

Each of your principal characters should be a power keg of desire, a potentially destructive emotional force, either already in a state of turmoil at the start of the story or at least capable of combusting under the right dramatic pressures. The audience must see clearly what it is that each character wants. Or not just wants but *has to have* if he or she is to be happy, to be fulfilled in life, or *in extremis*, to survive.

There are six characters in *The Mark of Cain*, apart from the chorus. Two of them, Moradesh and Caleb, are minor and their motives are not salient. Two, God and the Serpent, have principal if secondary roles, and their desires carry great importance. What God wants is to effect Cain's obedience; what the Serpent wants is to procure Cain's defiance of his Maker. The two remaining principals, the protagonist and antagonist of the work, are Cain and Zellah. What Cain wants is at long last to be redeemed; what Zellah wants is to avenge Abel's murder. And as the opera's climax approaches, plot developments will surface a hidden motive: Zellah's lust for the brother who long ago jilted her as a mate. Furthermore, Cain's intention to survive his sister's homicidal mission will determine his final speeches and actions. Such opposing desires as these (defiance vs. obedience; lust and vengeance vs. survival and redemption) can generally be counted on to enliven a libretto and to serve as key dramatic elements the composer will look for when the time comes to create the opera's score.

If passionate desires in a conflictual context are not there, along with the characters' strength of will to pursue those desires to the end, then your libretto will fail. And no flights of linguistic lyricism, no profusion of beautiful arias, no wonders of vocal artistry, acting or stagecraft are likely to save you. Nor the composer. Nor the cast, the designers, the entire theatrical enterprise.

To avoid contributing to this sorry fate, you, as a librettist, have due diligence issues to attend to. You must go to as many operas, both old and new, as possible. You must take a serious attitude toward learning the craft from mentors, teachers, books, scores and the published librettos of your predecessors and contemporaries. You must seek out commissions, grants, conferences, workshops, contests and residencies. You must woo composers, stage directors, producers who might take on or advance your projects. You must be humble enough to make well-considered changes that composers or singers require, plus proud and self-confident enough to stand behind those textual choices that you know are right.

Above all, you must *live*. Mozart's da Ponte is again the model here. He was a Jew and a fervent Christian, a seminarian and a serial seducer, a hard worker and a spendthrift, a New York City shop owner, a literature professor at Columbia University, a scoundrel more than once wanted for fraud. Naturally he could write the librettos for *Don Giovanni*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Cosi Fan Tutte* and so many other operas. He knew sanctuaries, bedrooms, royal courts, classrooms, the road. He lived.