



Chelsea Opera: The Face on the Barroom Floor & Emperor Norton

An exhilarating double-bill of marvelously sung and beautifully presented one-act operas by contemporary American composer Henry Mollicone.

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Molly Mustonen and Benjamin Robinson in a scene from “The Face on the Barroom Floor” (Photo credit: Robert J. Saferstein)

On Friday, November 7, 2014, in the high, dark, night-time space of St. Peter’s Church in Chelsea, the eleventh season of Chelsea Opera was opened with two one-act operas by composer Henry Mollicone and librettist John S. Bowman. It was a marvelous evening.

Since its composition and premiere in 1978, *The Face on the Barroom Floor* has been a familiar piece in the repertoire of small American and European opera companies for good reason: it is an accessible, well-conceived and lovely work. *Emperor Norton*, written just four years later, is even stronger than *The Face*: it is more substantive musically, artistically and intellectually. This performance was *Emperor Norton*’s New York premiere.

For *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, Mollicone both played piano and conducted; for *Emperor Norton*, Mollicone played piano and conducted in collaboration with Chelsea’s assistant conductor, Noby Ishida. Librettist Bowman was in the appropriately enthusiastic audience and received his own share of happy applause at the end of the evening. The presence of the two operas’ creators – one playing and performing, and the other observing – was a treat and the intimate, vibrant feel of the chamber opera was happily powerful.

The Face is set in both modern and nineteenth century Central City, Colorado; the story unfolds at the famous Teller House – built in 1872, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places and still operating as a casino and restaurant – where there is a portrait of an ethereally beautiful woman painted on the main barroom floor. Various legends are attached to the portrait on the floor, but Bowman and Mollicone essentially created their own legend and put it into a three scene opera whose plot is straightforward, neat and sturdy. The first scene introduces a twentieth century love triangle: an aspiring opera singer finds herself caught between her present lover and the Teller House bartender, a former lover.

The second scene is a flashback to the nineteenth century love triangle that ended in the jealousy-driven murder of the lovely singer whose portrait was painted on the barroom floor. Finally, third and last, the awful modern replication of the nineteenth century tragedy takes place in the twentieth century Teller Bar. The face on the barroom floor tells the whole story. It maintains a past event in present memory and, from one hundred years ago, it foretells a future which is now.

Soprano Molly Mustonen played twentieth century Isabelle and nineteenth century Madeline. Mustonen has a strong and accurate voice, capable of considerable expressivity and fluent range. Mustonen has well-developed acting skills; her supple voice can shimmer in flirtatious affection, whisper throatily in supplication or fill the house with intense drama, while never losing the coherence of the melodic line. One example of the subtlety of her voice lies in the different styles of Isabelle's performance-singing and Madeline's performance-singing.

Twentieth century Isabelle sings opera: her brief sample *Traviata* aria excerpt is entirely credible as the sound of a classically trained singer reveling in Verdi. In contrast, nineteenth century saloon girl Madeline sings an old-time pioneer ballad of love and violence: the song transports us to the Wild West of our collective American imagination. That Mustonen can so easily carry these different styles and identities within a single performance is testament to her depth and maturity as an artist.

Tenor Benjamin Robinson as Larry/Matt and baritone John E. Callison as Tom/John were very fine, but because their characters are not as fully developed as Isabelle/Madeline, they had fewer opportunities to display real versatility in their acting. Musically, however, they were strong and effective. Solo arias from both men were confident. In addition, together with Mustonen, they were responsive, flexible and deft in the constantly changing patterns of duets and three-singer combinations called for by the libretto.

Emperor Norton is a more complex opera than *The Face*, both musically and dramatically; unlike *The Face*, it is not divided into distinct scenes but flows in a single sequence. Its setting is San Francisco, in both the mid-twentieth century and the mid-nineteenth. Joshua Norton (1819-1880) – the Emperor – is an actual historical figure. He was a charismatic opportunist, a fortune-seeking – and acquiring, and losing – idealist who was known across the continent for his self-proclamation as Emperor of the United States; he was a reformer who vowed to end his country's moral corruption, a fascinating, charming and impoverished bon vivant, a street-wanderer and cheap boarding house inhabitant who died penniless, mourned by thousands who loved him as the royal leader he claimed to be. His story has inspired plays, songs, fictionalizations ... and this opera.

In Bowman-Mollicone's *Emperor Norton*, a playwright, Marla is writing a drama about Emperor Norton, but is having trouble with certain scenes. An actress, Diana, and an actor, Michael, arrive at her studio believing they've been called for an audition; Marla doesn't know who's called them, but decides their presence might help her writing process. Entirely mysteriously, a figure calling himself Norton materializes; the three theater people wonder who he is, but the audience swiftly recognizes him as a quintessence of ghost, suggestion, specter and imagination made somehow tangible.

Norton starts as a narrator of the emperor's true story, correcting mistakes in Marla's script, and gradually becomes the real Norton himself who directs the actor, the actress and the playwright in the accurate version of his life. Diana, Michael and Marla enact various scenes in Norton's nineteenth century life; Marla falls in love with Norton, this man who will enable her to write a play that is both an accomplished work of art and an accurate piece of history. At the opera's end, Marla leaves her studio with Norton: they walk off the stage into San Francisco's fog, into imagination and possibility, into the powerful and compelling past, leaving the actor and actress behind in the studio as they wonder to each other just exactly what's transpired over the last half hour. The opera closes with Norton's voice proclaiming from backstage, "Tryouts are over!" • His tone is entirely modern: he is harried and hurried, jaded and cynical.



Vira Slywotzky, David Gordon and Justin Ryan in a scene from “Emperor Norton” (Photo credit: Robert J. Saferstein)

The singers in *Norton* – soprano Rosa Betancourt as Diana, tenor David Gordon as Michael, baritone Justin Ryan as The Intruder/Norton and soprano Vira Slywotzky as Marla – were splendid. Betancourt’s lovely voice, her acting talents and her completely credible identity as both Diana the person and Diana the actress playing many parts was handsomely matched by Gordon’s strong singing and delightful chivalry as both Michael the man and a fellow player caught in the surprise of improvised scenes, rendered first from Marla’s script-in-progress and then from the yellowed pages of the autobiographical manuscript Norton has brought with him.

As Norton, Ryan was a commanding presence; his large, deep voice conveyed a wealth of human experience as both singer and character. Slywotzky’s Marla was fabulous; her rich, full voice – alternately earthy and elegant, commanding and delicate – revealed the full complexity of her character.

The musicians – Mollicone at the piano in both *The Face* and *Norton*, cellist Emily Brausa in both, flutist Kevin Willois in *The Face* and violinist Stanichka Dimitrova in *Norton* – played beautifully together, able to make their individual and joined instruments sound as quiet as a single hushed voice and as huge as an orchestra. In addition, as the music required, the singers and the chamber ensemble were each other’s best and most supportive partners.

The evening would have been successful just because of the music. But the overall integrity of the production of the paired operas was significantly enhanced by Lynne Hayden-Findlay’s first-rate stage direction, making the best possible use of the singers’ physical energy and skills in fighting, falling and dancing, and by the inspired set.

On a raised stage in front of the St. Peter’s main altar and between the choir stalls, two screens provided first the backdrop of the late nineteenth century oak and stained glass of the Teller Room bar and then the idea boards in Marla’s twentieth century writing studio. Dark wood tables and mismatched open back wooden chairs from the turn of the last century did double duty in the two operas. The set was so well designed that the dark Carpenter Gothic oak of St. Peter’s ecclesiastical furnishings seemed to have been created to support the operas: it was a rare aesthetic coherence of a stage set and an adapted church space.

The set and stage design provided quiet and satisfying links between the two operas. On Marla’s two costume and clothes-props racks were all the costumes from *The Face*. One of the Teller Room screens remained as an inspirational prompt for the playwright: Victorian Wild West urban architecture is consistent from Colorado to California, and the style of the sets reinforced the motif of time traveling in both operas.

Although composed within only four years of each other, *Norton* represents a leap in compositional maturity from *The Face*. *The Face* has a musical patchwork-and-pastiche quality to it, only partially attributable to the stylistic shifts from the twentieth century time period to the nineteenth and back to the twentieth. By *Norton*, however, in 1981, Mollicone's music developed into a distinctive, individual and recognizable style. It is fluent, melodic, and not undaring; it is gracious and inviting, pleasing in its ability to change mood, pace and allusion without jarring the listener. Whereas influences as varied as Verdi, Puccini, Bernstein, burlesque honky-tonk and ragtime are clearly audible in *The Face*, each distinct in and of itself, in *Norton*, Mollicone's composition has evolved in such a way that the early influences are fluidly blended together and interconnected, recognizable now as a series of traditions, a musical genealogy in which Mollicone has successfully placed himself.

Similarly, Bowman's success as writer and librettist matured from *The Face*, already a tightly structured dramatic piece and a competent mastery of the tricky one-act opera genre, to *Norton*, a genuinely compelling and imaginative work of theater.

The carefully thought-out but predictable plot of *The Face on the Barroom*

Floor begins a tentative exploration of themes about the power of art – of portrait painting and legend narratives – but the transcendent power of both stories and the telling of them is, in some sense, the main subject of *Emperor Norton*. Story telling is examined as a vehicle for finding identity.

Diana the actress and Michael the actor move from playing parts to actually becoming people of the past, then transforming, once again, into young theater folk going to an audition, or a read-through. The progress of these two from the present to the past and back echoes the time shifts of *The Face on the Barroom Floor*, but in *Norton*, movements in and across time are achieved more subtly and fluently. At the end of the opera, though they are confused by the mysteriousness of Marla and Norton, they know more about how human beings live their lives.

The Norton figure requires the greatest leap of faith on the audience's part, but Bowman's writing makes him increasingly strong: by the end of the opera, the writing makes him exciting; by the end of the opera, Bowman has made him magnificent, equally great and imagined, completely plausible as the man with whom Marla the playwright falls deeply in love.

And Marla is a gorgeous and original character. She is confident and smart, but when we first meet her, she is impatient about her play, frustrated by those stop-and-go features of creativity that no artist can control. She is imperious about what she thinks is right, anxious when she gets things wrong, and humble in the face of both artistic and historical truths when she finds them. Initially, she is fidgety, sassy, sexy beyond her own recognition of the fact, and quick-witted.

As Marla's story unfolds – one made possible by the convergence of her creative imagination, historical fact, legend and folklore, the fantastical Norton's truth-flashes, and the power of his increasing reality – Marla becomes, in some senses, complete: she is both a woman in full and rich commitment to a complex, demanding love and an artist of mature creative achievement and insight. Furthermore, it is her art – her creation of characters who tell true stories – that nurtures her more fully realized and empathetic humanity and her actors' and the audience's.

One-act operas are like short stories: brevity and its constraints can make the the shorter works seem less substantial than ones in which length provides more time and space for heft. *The Face on the Barroom Floor* is very fine, but *Emperor Norton* is a more significant work. This double-bill was splendid: it moved from strength to strength. All seven singers, each accomplished artists on their own, displayed at every moment a palpable and dynamic collaboration. The artistic coherence and integrity of members of the Chelsea Opera, both on stage and behind the scenes, together with the energy of the all the musicians' engagement with their audience, were impressive and exhilarating.

Chelsea Opera: *The Face on the Barroom Floor & Emperor Norton* (November 7, 2014)

St. Peter's Church, 346 West 20th Street, in Manhattan

Chelsea Opera: 212-260-1796 or <http://www.chelseaopera.org>

Running time: *The Face on the Barroom Floor* – 35 minutes; *Emperor Norton* – 55 minutes