

'Little Prince' opera comes to Berkeley

by Steven Winn

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Rachel Portman was not an obvious choice to write an opera based on "The Little Prince." A noted film composer - her credits include "The Joy Luck Club," "The Cider House Rules," "Chocolat," "The Manchurian Candidate" and a 1997 Academy Award for "Emma" - she had exactly zero experience in opera.

Portman wasn't the first choice to create a new score for Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's cherished 1943 novella, either. Operatic veteran Philip Glass ("Satyagraha," "Akhnaten," "Appomattox") had already mulled the project but decided to pass. When Glass' publisher, Jim Keller, approached Portman and asked if she might be interested, the idea seemed both daunting and irresistible.

"My desire to write an opera that you could take a child to see and enjoy was so strong," Portman recalled by telephone from her home in London recently, "that I overcame my fear of entering into the classical world."

Her instincts have been affirmed by a stream of "Little Prince" productions since the work's Houston Grand Opera premiere in 2003. Mounted by New York City Opera in 2005, the piece has been done in Boston, Milwaukee and Tulsa, among other places, and broadcast on British television. "The Little Prince" lands in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Friday for a six-show run (through May 11) co-presented by Cal Performances and the San Francisco Opera.

Such a sustained journey from city to city is a rarity for a new opera. Among the few that manage to receive a fully staged premiere, fewer still enjoy subsequent productions elsewhere. The harsh economics of opera production and the box office pull of a tried-and-true repertoire too often create a once-and-done scenario for new work.

But in conception and execution, "The Little Prince" may have been charmed from the start. First, there's the intrinsic appeal of the source. In his fablelike tale, famously enhanced by his own illustrations, Saint-Exupéry spins out a philosophical dialogue between a pilot whose plane has crashed in the Sahara and a prince from another planet. In its light-fingered fusion of whimsy and existential meditation on innocence and experience, the book holds a magical allure for children and adults.

The author, an aviator who had once crash-landed in the desert himself, wrote "The Little Prince" during a sojourn on New York's Long Island. The book has been translated into many languages and sold more than 50 million copies worldwide. Previous adaptations include a 1964 opera by Lev Knipper, a 1974 musical film by Lerner and Loewe (their final collaboration) and a 1980s anime series for Japanese TV.

Portman, a 47-year-old mother of three daughters, had read the book as a child, "when I was far too young to fully grasp it," she said. "I had some vague memories of the drawings. I probably loved the book at the time, but also found it unsatisfying."

When she reread the story with the idea of adapting it in mind, Portman was freshly enchanted and apprehensive. The episodic nature of the story seemed the most immediate problem to solve. Once she accepted the challenge, she began to see connections between opera and film music.

"I'd spent most of my life writing music that tells stories, so there wasn't this huge distinction," Portman said. "Opera was a fairly natural place to go. Plus, I'd really missed being able to write for the voice, and I wanted to set text. That's not something you can really do in film, where singing can be incredibly distracting."

Glass, who remained a kind of father figure to the project, introduced Portman to director Francesca Zambello. The South African playwright Nicholas Wright, another operatic novice, joined the team. Maria Bjørnson (Broadway's "The Phantom of the Opera") signed on as designer in what would prove to be her last production (she died in December 2002). The plan was to premiere the work at the English National Opera.

Portman and Wright evolved some clear ideas about how to make Saint-Exupéry's story theatrically vital. She was convinced that the title role had to be sung by a child rather than a soprano in a juvenile trousers role.

Boy sings the part

"I was very keen to have a boy sing the part of the Little Prince," she said. "Children love it when they see a child onstage. They imagine themselves up there."

Portman knew she couldn't expect a young boy to carry the opera on his shoulders.

"He has only one aria," she said. "He sings the whole time, but his responses are short, just as they are in the book."

Two 12-year-olds, Tovi Wayne and Tyler Polen, will take turns portraying the Little Prince in Berkeley.

Portman also devised a children's chorus, whose members portray, among other things, stars and roses.

The Pilot (to be played here by baritone Eugene Brancoveanu) does much of the musical heavy lifting.

"I think it's a very difficult role to play because he has to form a relationship with a child," Portman said. "Otherwise, the piece won't work dramatically. It's also vocally demanding - probably rather high for a baritone. I feel rather guilty about that."

Wright, whose plays include "Vincent in Brixton" and "Mrs. Klein," created a libretto of rhymed couplets.

"That just seemed a perfectly natural way to tell the story," Portman said. "Nick's a very musical writer."

Portman's own inclinations to write music emerged early. Born in the English town of Haslemere, she studied the piano, organ and violin.

"Around 13, I just started writing these little pieces," she said. "It was in my later teen years, when I discovered Ravel, Debussy and Satie, that I got more serious about it."

As a composition student at Oxford, Portman veered away from the prevailing academic doctrine. The more her professors pushed 12-tone serialism, the more she preferred the kind of playfulness that Stravinsky exhibited in "Pulcinella" - "where he was having fun with Baroque music." Her interest in tonal and narrative music took hold. By the early 1980s, she was writing for film and television.

Recognizing that opera was new terrain, Portman took unusual steps to get herself going on "The Little Prince." The first thing she did was take a trip to Morocco with a friend, away from the phone, other people and the demands of her daughters, now ages 8, 10 and 12.

"I wanted to be in the desert," she said, "to hear the sound of the air and the wind, to see the stars hanging in the sky."

Portman said she even did some composing while riding a camel, by singing into a Dictaphone.

"I was slightly embarrassed about it," she said, "but some of that actually made it into the opera."

Portman described her process as "incredibly untechnical and all about intuition." She wanted to capture certain elemental feelings in the book - "simplicity, sadness, friendship" - and do it in a way that would appeal to both adults and children. A recording of the Houston production reveals a work that is at once lush and delicate. The vocal lines for the Little Prince and the children's chorus features tender, yearning intervals. The Pilot's music is darker and more chromatically involved. Woodwinds rise from caressing waves of string sound. The orchestration calls for a typewriter and a kazoo.

Production postponed

Plans for the opera's first production were scuttled after Nicholas Payne, general director of the English National Opera, resigned in 2002. When that company's new administration decided against presenting the piece, Houston Grand Opera stepped up its participation to commission and premiere "The Little Prince." David Gockley, the San Francisco Opera's

general director, who ran the Houston company at the time, warmed to Portman's "cohesive, organic" score.

"I found that what she did was vivid, but not in a way that calls attention to itself," he said. "Its lack of pretension is just what makes the book as charming and appealing as it is."

The opera opened in an 1,100-seat house at Houston's Wortham Center in May 2003, where it was a critical and commercial success. For Gockley, who is keen on broadening opera's appeal to families, reviving "The Little Prince" in the Bay Area was a natural. The partnership with Cal Performances provided a suitable house, in Zellerbach Hall, and sufficient time on the calendar to accommodate a 10-day run.

Portman, who is now at work on a musical based on "Little House on the Prairie" for Minneapolis' Guthrie Theater, may not make it to Berkeley for the opening.

"I almost cannot bear thinking about it going on without me being there," she said. "The biggest thrill of doing an opera is seeing it put on and seeing it come together. What the singers, and especially the children, bring to it carries so much hope. That's what Saint-Exupéry's message is really all about."

The Little Prince: Fri.-May 11. \$40-\$60 (half price for ages 16 and younger). Zellerbach Hall, Bancroft Way at Telegraph Ave., UC Berkeley. (510) 642-9988, (415) 864-3330. www.calperformances.org, www.sfopera.com.

To hear excerpts from the Houston Grand Opera's 2003 premiere of "The Little Prince," go to links.sfgate.com/ZDAT, click on the video clip on the right and click on "The Little Prince."

E-mail Steven Winn at swinn@sfchronicle.com.

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Rachel Portman's family-friendly opera "The Little Prince" will get its West Coast premiere as a San Francisco Opera-Cal Performances production. Photo courtesy of Cal Performances



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