



Review: "The Tender Land"



Chad Kranak and Joanie Brittingham in a scene from "The Tender Land"
Robert J. Saferstein

By Eric Grunin - June 24, 2014

The Tender Land (1954), Copland's one full-length opera, was commissioned in 1952 by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, with the aim of a [television production](#). (NBC had just had a great success in December 1951 with Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.) The libretto by Horace Everett (pen name of Eric Johns) is a quiet story of a farm girl's decision that it's time to leave her mother's house.

Unfortunately for Copland and Johns, the NBC Opera Workshop turned down the finished product, and the premiere was given in 1954 by the New York City Opera at City Center. This change of venue was doubly unfortunate. The intimate story might have been well suited to the living room, but it had little chance at a nearly 3000-seat venue. Reviews were poor.

Johns urged Copland not to give up, and they made revisions for that [summer's](#) Tanglewood Festival and a [final version](#) mounted the next year at [Oberlin College](#). Although Copland felt it was well received, the work never caught on, so Copland extracted a concert suite and put the whole thing behind him. Nor did he ever again consider the genre, frequently referring to opera as *la form fatale*.

The Tender Land remained generally obscure until 1987, when composer Murry Sidlin prepared a reduced orchestration, shrinking the instrumental requirement from a full orchestra down to thirteen players, not coincidentally the same thirteen used by *Appalachian Spring*. This brought the opera within the range of possibility for opera companies of modest means, and it is this version that has been presented to us by Chelsea Opera, breathing life into what was for most of us a mere footnote.

The music of Aaron Copland tells a tale of two stylistic poles. At one we find the accessible 'public' music of his [greatest hits](#), the ballets *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). At the other is the thorny 'private' music of his chamber music, such as the *Vitebsk* trio (1929), the *Piano Sonata* (1941), and *Piano Quartet* (1950).

The public style followed the example of Virgil Thomson, who showed that you could take naive source material, such as Protestant hymns or cowboy ballads, and use it to create an appealing, optimistic surface. To this Copland added sufficient developmental variation to reward repeated listening.

It was a winning formula, but it was best suited to ballets and movie scores, where the mood and material could change frequently. For longer spans it worked less well: the *Third Symphony* (1946) has thrilling moments but also awkward transitions, and when the last movement brings in his *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), it is somehow both catharsis and [concession](#) at once.

The Tender Land is squarely in the public style and at just two hours in length shows the aforementioned issues. The libretto adds to the problem: it's insufficiently concerned with the characters as particular individuals, instead stressing that they are archetypes. As Copland himself said in a 1980 radio interview (with NPR broadcaster Fred Calland):

"I don't think the libretto that I used was that fascinating from a theatrical standpoint. The fellow who wrote it was a friend of mine. I thought it would be easy to work with him, I could ask him to change things and he wouldn't be upset, that kind of thing. But he wasn't

a real pro."

In Act 1 we meet the Moss family on their Kansas farm, most importantly Ma Moss (Leonarda Priore) and Laurie (Joanie Brittingham), her elder daughter. It's the day before Laurie graduates from high school, the first in her family to do so. Ma is worried about what the future holds for her daughter. Laurie is drawn to the wider world, but only vaguely: "*What makes me think I'd like to try / to go down all those roads beyond that line / above the earth and 'neath the sky?*" The music is pretty, but it's slow, and these wisps of plot take what becomes a very long twenty minutes.

There's one bit of exposition that's tucked into Ma's scene, where postman Mr. Splinters (David Kellett) warns Ma Moss about what happened to the neighbor's girl last night: "*Seems she met with a feller in the fields / a strange feller here abouts they say / Poor girl's shook up for a spell / She got an awful fright.* And in case there's any doubt what he means: "*There's s'posed to be two of 'em travelin' together / Wouldn't be surprised if they turned out to be the one / That set on Jessie Kane two month ago [...] Poor kid. Gonna have a young 'un they say.*"

So it's not a surprise that two itinerant workers show up, Martin (Chad Kranak) and Top (Peter Kendall Clark), or that Laurie takes a shine to Martin, or that Grandpa Moss (Steven Fredericks) offers them shelter. It's not a surprise that Grandpa invites them to Laurie's graduation-eve party before Ma can explain why maybe it's not such a good idea. What is a surprise is that this increase in dramatic tension is still fairly dull music. The melodies in *Appalachian Spring*, or his *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, though diatonic, typically generate excitement through wide leaps and dissonant harmonizations; perhaps Copland was here too constrained, having *a priori* decided to employ "*a natural language that would not be too complex for young singers at opera workshops throughout the country.*"

Then out of nowhere, Copland delivers the Act 1 finale "The Promise of Living," an absolutely gorgeous quintet, the main characters just standing and singing, so beautiful that choruses do it on its own. Finally able to thicken the vocal texture a bit, unrestrained by the need to have dialogue understood, Copland is here in his element and reminds us why we came.

Act 2 starts with the party scene, with "Stomp Your Foot," a lively and fun chorus, and this generates enough energy to get us through to where actual drama appears - Grandpa catches Laurie and Martin stealing a kiss and, and Grandpa gets furious, mostly at Laurie. He keeps this up even after we hear that the bad guys mentioned in Act 1 have been caught and locked up. (Copland was blacklisted in 1950 after having been listed in *Red Channels*, so this paranoia and xenophobia is plausibly allegorical.) Ultimately Grandpa reproaches Laurie: "*If this happens again, I'll curse the day that you were born.*"

That's too much for her, and that night, Laurie sneaks out to meet Martin in the moonlight, where they proclaim their love and agree she'll leave with them. She goes off to sleep, and meanwhile Top very reasonably talks Martin out of it ("*...sleepin' in a railroad crate. / Is that how you see Laurie?*"), and they leave before she wakes. When she finds out, she's devastated, but decides she has to leave anyway. So she takes leave of her mother, who sings a lamenting farewell as Laurie walks out into the world. Curtain.

But...how does this make sense? This degree of love-at-first-sight is a bit much even for opera, isn't it? Where is Laurie going? How is she going to live? Why won't she stay at least until the afternoon, when she'll receive her diploma? And why is Grandpa so *angry*? Ah well, we gave it a fair hearing and can now move on.

Strongest in the cast were Ms. Brittingham as Laurie and Mr. Fredericks as Grandpa. Some of the other singers were defeated by the church acoustics, and director Lynne Hayden-Findlay did what she could with the impossibly tiny playing area. Conductor Samuel McCoy kept everything running smoothly and the ensemble sounded well.

The librettist has said that he was out to make a timeless story about the great cycle of life, and one can imagine a production that put that static quality front and center, instead of the naturalistic approach we saw here. Even so, there are just too many stretches, particularly in Act 1, that are never going to be very interesting.

The Tender Land (June 13 - 14, 2014) - Chelsea Opera at St Peter's Church, 346 West 20th Street, in Manhattan. Running time: two hours and 30 minutes including one intermission

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