

## Catching up with Mark Adamo

By Kathleen Watt and Robert Wilder Blue

All *Lysistrata* photos by Brett Coomer courtesy of HGO.

A conversation with **Mark Adamo** is always a wonderful adventure. **Kathleen Watt** spoke with Mark recently after the successful premiere of his second opera, *Lysistrata*, at Houston Grand Opera. They spoke about life after *Little Women* and about the new opera and other matters musical.



**USOPERAWEB:** Would you say that composing “chose you,” even after you had set out to be a playwright?

**Mark Adamo:** It’s not either/or for me, or first/second. I’ve always interpreted things both by ear and by word: an utterance expresses as much to me by its rhythm or dynamic as by whatever words are being spoken. So, I’ve not felt I had to mute one side of my brain to favor the other. When dreaming an opera, I need only to find that dramatic gesture—the fulcrum—which words, as well as sound, can express, and then shape both music and words to embody that gesture. This was true even when, as a student playwright, I wanted a line of dialogue to rise and fall just so, or wanting it shorter, or more percussive, or somehow

“warmer.” Playwrights frequently describe the need to make their dialogue musical. My need was just more urgent and more literal.

*You refer to yourself as intrinsically a theater man (as did Puccini) and for years, you said, you were somewhat reticent to identify as a composer in the classical sense.*

All good music is theater music. What do the first four notes of the Beethoven Fifth *mean*? No one can tell you exactly, but many of the explanations are implicitly dramatic, from Fate knocking at the door to a simple clearing of the throat. No matter how abstract—think, in Beethoven again, of the last quartets; think of the Fifth—the music seems to embody a dramatic argument that persuades you even if you can’t identify its terms. (Remember that the orchestral history of the West begins with moonlighting opera players.)

I was indeed slow to think of myself as a “bona fide” composer, but that was a) because I’d had pen and paper since I was five and couldn’t afford a musical instrument till I was sixteen, and b) because I was interested in writing music for the theater in my own language for people living now—which I then thought meant writing for the ambitious musical theater of Gershwin, Sondheim and Bernstein, because the opera house seemed mostly a museum of the antique and the exotic, catering to an audience more interested in the performer as a circus-virtuoso than as an interpreter of new sung drama. Now we’re living in a healthier time.

**With the success of *Little Women*, you must feel more an initiate than a visitor from the dramatic theater. But, some artists feel that “outsider” status feeds their creative process. Do you?**

No. “Outsider/insider” is, to me, a largely meaningless distinction. It belongs to fashion, rather than content—it’s concerned with the ego of the artist, not the meaning of the art. If you want or need one, you can always find a big, bad “they” who don’t understand poor little “you.” Trim your eyelashes! It’s partly my impatience with that sort of thinking that forms the subject of **Lysistrata**.

**In your melodic language you employ dodecaphony as a foil for melody—or is it the other way around? You’ve described the foreground material in *Little Women* as “freely tonal and motivic.” in a non-tonal matrix of serial recitative. Does *Lysistrata*, so different from *Little Women*, lend itself to the same treatment?**

Each piece poses its own problems. When I began **Little Women**, I hadn’t written twelve-tone music since college. I enjoyed it, in a brain-teasing sort of way; dodecaphony is to composition what the acrostic is to literature. But the very consistency of that harmonic palate makes it monotonous to me—if everything’s dissonant, then nothing is. So, it’s difficult to make convincing aural shapes from harmonies so liquid and fugitive. But **Little Women** is a score in which the plot has very little to do with the events. The opera follows a girl learning to stop fighting change, but its episodes describe writing stories, marrying, or moving to New York. Much of the libretto fills in the details—who’s Laurie’s tutor; why is Beth fragile—but doesn’t support the theme. I needed melodies to rise from and vanish into a neutral background of recitative—but how do you make recitative interesting? That’s when I wondered if the very neutrality of the dodecaphonic palate, which made it so unsatisfying as the foreground of a piece, might perfectly support the non-thematic music of **Little Women**. In the past, when I’d listened to Schönberg or Webern, I’d always concentrate on the timbres or the gestures or the textures—anything but the harmony. So, I thought that painting the recitative from this palate would similarly highlight the words and the vocal lines, precisely because the harmony wasn’t leading you much.

**Lysistrata**, though, is a very different piece. There’s almost no exposition—character is action—so it didn’t need the same background **Little Women** did. **Lysistrata** starts from the observation that the bitterest conflicts between people don’t start in mere dislike. They begin with both combatants claiming, “I am the true type (the native, the believer) of which you are the false (the occupier, the heretic.)” It’s a thrilling premise for music, because you can write the score and the libretto in audible counterpoint to each other. The libretto may be describing what seem to be very different things—for example, a woman lighting the lamps for her lover while a battalion drills outside the walls. But the music asks you to consider whether both of these behaviors aren’t variations of the same impulse. So, you have very little non-thematic material in this score; it’s almost all melody, varying and refracting as you listen.



Nico (Chad Shelton) seduces a blindfolded Lysia (Emily Pulley).

In *Lysistrata* there's a rather furious cabaletta up front. It's Lysia's second solo piece, when, to her great frustration, the Spartan and Athenian men go yet again to war, and there is not going to be peace after all:

Others order you, "Eat!" "Sleep!"  
Others say "Rabbit!"—watch you leap!  
Look like a ram, act like a sheep—Better to sleep alone...  
Go to hell, then!

**This text quite ferocious; is it even a little bit emasculating?**

Indeed; it's a vehement scene—Lysia's first—and Emily Pulley, our Lysia in Houston and New York, did wonder if it made her too tough a character to like in her opening moments. But that scene is preceded by the languid and (I hope) witty "Strategy is Everything", in which we first learn how alert and eager and enthusiastically in love this woman is—and even during this aria, the fury of the language is completed by the charisma of the vocal line, roiling with *fioritura* and propelling Lysia to a searing high C. The language gives us anger—but the music gives us the passion, the intelligence, and the longing that lies beneath.

**Why did you feel you had to make your adaptation so different from what Aristophanes originally wrote?**

I love *Lysistrata*'s strut and wit and nerve, and the Jungian dreamscape of its location—this magical temple at which a handful of men and women can reconcile the love of the battlefield with the battlefield of love. But the play itself is more a political pamphlet written as a sexual vaudeville than a study of characters in conflict. It posed the opposite problem of *Little Women*. If that novel was all character and no narrative drive—ten charming people in a stalled jalopy—then the play *Lysistrata* was an empty Porsche: speeding at 120 miles per hour, yes, but who's in it, and where are they going?

If I'd found something else I liked better, I'd have adapted it, but I didn't. What freed me was abandoning the word *adaptation*. My opera is less an adaptation of the extant play than a two-thirds-original piece that embeds the premise, the title, and three scenes in a scenario based on the play I think we remember, which is rather different from the one Aristophanes actually wrote.

It's so different because, while I love the utopian fantasy of the piece, I don't buy it. The ending's charming—the women's sanction works, the Athenians and Spartans drink and sing, we go home. Lovely. Can you, as an adult, believe it? If not, what do you believe? That's the question I wanted to answer.



Lysia (Emily Pulley) enlists the aid of her fellow Athenian women below (l-r) Kleonike (Myrna Paris), Myrrhine (Laquita Mitchell), Xanthe (Marjorie Owens), and Sappho (Jennifer Root).

**Is there a definitive moment somewhere in *Lysistrata* that locates its core, such that it defined your task as composer?**

The entire score grew outward from Lysia's aria, "I am not my own," in which she chooses her city over herself— by which choice no one is more surprised than she. It crystallizes the question of the opera, which—if the question of **Little Women** was "why must things change?"—is, in this piece, "Am I my sister's keeper?" Whose needs come first, yours or the world's?

**In *Little Women*, you describe a "love matrix" which Jo fights to keep from changing. Is that love matrix anything like what the women seek in *Lysistrata*?**

Both heroines in different ways struggle to reconcile their public with their private lives. Jo has no trouble at all with the world outside her window—but her delight in it presupposes that her private world doesn't have to change, which, of course, it does. As **Lysistrata** begins, Lysia is privileged enough to think that she can afford not to care about the world outside. The war is only her lover's job, and protesting it only her friend's hobby. Lysia flatters herself that her aesthetic distaste—what an ugly march the protestors sing—somehow elevates her indifference to a higher moral realm. Jo wants to keep her private world unchanged. Lysia wants to live only in the private world.

**Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is often pressed into service to protest war. You've spoken of your predilection for "consideration of internal human conflict," and of course, most of your work on *Lysistrata* preceded the American invasion of Iraq. But in the current sociopolitical climate your opera has an unintended political relevance. How does that sit with you? Have you been tempted to make any directorial accommodations for this?**

It's ironic, really; when I completed the first draft of the piece in September 2000, I was happy with what I'd made of the play, but wondered if anyone would be interested in it. We were at peace, after all, and the play usually materializes either as the carrot of sex with which to lure students to the classics—or the megaphone of propaganda through which to protest the war *du jour*. Things change, indeed. If it were a choice between a) **Lysistrata's** topicality and b) peace here now, I would wholeheartedly choose 'b.' But I'm actually deeply grateful that we're presenting this piece now, because I think we need it more than we would have four years ago. That said, the opera may surprise the very people who are most familiar with the play, because it questions many of the play's assumptions. If you're looking to my **Lysistrata** to reinforce all the comfortable clichés of plucky peaceful women prevailing over clownish warmongering men, stay home. My observation is that virtue and vice, surrender and assault, beckon as seductively to women as to men, and the question "who's on top?" is not necessarily the same question as "who's in control?" Nor is the question simply war or peace? The question is: peace on whose terms? I think we need a new *Lysistrata*: but not if it's just another polemic. We have plenty of those and how much have they helped us? I'm hoping that hearing certain positions embodied in closely imagined characters might deepen our understanding of, and heighten our sympathy for, those with whom we disagree.

**What are the differences between adapting a novel and a play?**

Which kind of novel: which kind of play? If I were adapting *The Cherry Orchard*, it might feel like adapting *Little Women*—how do you make a naturalistic, domestic, prose melodrama into

something presentational that needs music to complete it? If I were adapting *Candide*, it might feel like adapting *Lysistrata*—it's ebullient, presentational, and socially perceptive, but are these characters or merely cartoons?

### Is there a turf war going on among postmodern composers, really, or is that something critics have whipped up?

There's a war only if you need one. Everywhere you look there's good new music made of a thousand different sounds. I only resist that traditional idea that new music is the composer's right but the listener's duty, or that to compose less intelligibly is in fact more intelligent. My experience has been that an audience listens much more actively to Britten than, say, to Babbitt because, however chewily polysyllabic Milton's program notes are, his process isn't clear to the ear the way Britten's is. If it's not clear, you listen the way you listen to wind chimes—passively. This is the lie of the libretto of [Schönberg's] *Moses und Aron*—that the sacred is only that which cannot be understood. Schönberg was spinning himself as Moses: I possess the divine truth, if only I could communicate it! Memo to Arnold: See Decalogue. "Thou shalt not kill." Any questions?

That mid-century hyper-complex ideal of new music was rejected not because it was too challenging, but because it wasn't challenging *enough*. Audiences *want* to be confronted, to have their assertions challenged. But, how can you *entertain* a challenge voiced to you in terms you cannot follow?



Athenian and Spartan women, led by Lysia, unite against their soldier husbands.

### Is there a sense in which art is tantamount to religion?

I freely admit that, as a former Catholic of Italian and German parentage, I do think that opera at its best can transform you the way religious services once did. But art shouldn't be a religion. For eschatology, it substitutes imagination; for morality, it substitutes

*frisson*. And the best artistic thinking (memo to Ratzinger!) assumes that one's critical intelligence, too, is a gift from God. No, I actually think the opposite: that religion should be evaluated on artistic grounds. The notion of inspiration is common to both paradigms, but art deals with it more healthily. The Bible as history, or lawbook, is risible; but the Bible as literature is inexhaustible.

### So, you would like to see American opera recover from “the failure of modernism?”

Oh, American opera is everywhere in bloom—we're all doing fine! But it's the twenty-first century, and we've all realized that modernism only represented the early twentieth century responding to the late nineteenth. Actually, modernism was a completely intelligible response to a specifically German cultural problem. It just wasn't a universal answer, for the very simple reason that Germany wasn't, and isn't, the whole world.



You have to remember how deeply nineteenth-century Germany identified itself by its arts in general and its music in particular: and how its Romanticism changed the idea of a composer from one who tries to channel divine truth into one who generates it—poor Mozart, mentally sketching his *Requiem*, sent to eat with the kitchen maids, while Wagner drinks with the Emperor and spins out *heilige Deutsche Kunst*. You'll give whatever weight you give to, say, Wagner's letters to Liszt describing *The Ring* as a coded threat to the Jews of Frankfurt and Leipzig. But there's little doubt that, in the early twentieth century, much German Romantic music imploded in much the same way, and for many of the same reasons, as German Romantic politics did—egomania, gigantism, obsession with the idea of superhuman potential as opposed to the polyglot imperfections of breathing human beings.

Schönberg's dilemma was to try to maintain the godlike superiority of the Germanic composer while avoiding the swamp of Romanticism. So his uttered pronouncements were as megalomaniacal as Wagner's, i.e., "Either what we do is music, or what the French do is music, but both *cannot* be music..." Thus becoming the Jimmy Swaggart of the treble clef. However, in his music, where Wagner went left, Schönberg went right. Brief, not long; transparent, not massive; analytic, not hyperemotional; encrypted, not clear.

### So, Schönberg's mistake, in your view, was to insist on the superiority of the unintelligible?

The *aurally* unintelligible—exactly. If you think about it, the Second Viennese School made sense—as a parochially German response to a particular and *unrepeatable* set of historical circumstances. Alas, for good or ill, German taste had defined concert music for very many for very long. So American composers allowed themselves to be bullied into trying to carry on Germany's musical dialogue with herself, as opposed to creating our own. That was a huge mistake; and it cost us decades of potential operatic composition, because opera is public address, and this ideology scorned public address.

Developing from this came all the familiar pseudo-oppositions that made talk about new music such migraine-inducing tedium for fifty years. You know: "either music advances public taste, or it addresses the audience—it cannot do both." Oh, *please*. I would argue that you *cannot* advance public taste *unless* you successfully engage the audience. *Madama Butterfly* did infinitely more for Impressionist composition than *Pelléas [et Mélisande]* did, because more people heard it—and the reason more people heard it is because it's a better, more dramatically intelligent, more precisely expressive composition.



The Athenian and Spartan women honor Lysia.

### How much importance do you attach to cognitive meaning in a melody that returns?

Melody, not ideology, stimulates the musical mind. Melody is nothing more nor less than a line you can recognize that builds a structure you can hear. It takes intelligence both to make and to hear such a structure. The audience at **Lysistrata**'s premiere were so attentive to the melodic writing that, forty minutes into Act One, they laughed at a theme's ironic return. Why? Because they were paying attention; and they were paying attention not because I bullied them into it ideologically but because I'd convinced them, with the clarity of the writing, that my musical process would reward their attention. I gave them the best of my intelligence, and they responded with the best of their attention. *This* is how music thrives.

### Will you always write your own libretti or are you open to collaboration?

I'll probably always do my own libretti, only because I always take my calls and, if need be, I take myself out to dinner, ply myself with alcohol, and finally persuade myself to make those damn six cuts in Act Two. But, [John Corigliano](#) and I are indeed plotting a collaboration—my words, his music. Stay tuned.

### What's next for *Lysistrata*, and you?

**Lysistrata** is a co-production of Opera Columbus and New York City Opera, so it is scheduled for New York in March 2006, with Opera Columbus dates yet to be determined. **Little Women** bows in Tokyo in May, and the new production of that piece I'm stage-directing at Skylight Opera Theatre in September moves first to Columbus and, thereafter, perhaps, to two very exciting international venues. In October, I make an all-Adamo CD with Eclipse Chamber Orchestra for release on Naxos. My harp concerto is one movement away from completion. And I continue leading the VOX program at NYCO indefinitely, as composer-in-residence.

### David Gockley, who takes over as general director of San Francisco Opera in 2006, has commissioned your third opera for the company. Can you tell us about it?

A grand-scaled free variation on *Dracula*: certainly for San Francisco, possibly with up to three co-producers. I believe (he said cautiously) I've located its fulcrum, but there are still a thousand questions to answer. The renown of the character is both a blessing and a curse—there are as many opinions as to what the myth is about as there are people who know it, so I have a great deal of thinking to do (I'll also have to steer between the Scylla of grandiosity and the Charybdis of kitsch.).

### Will you reference Bram Stoker's *Dracula* of 1897—the high Gothic template of this tale?

Stoker, Angela Carter, *Orpheus*, *Faust*, *Prometheus*, and Milton's Lucifer all may hover over this piece. It may begin in the nineteenth century and end up in the twenty-third; there may be some electronic musical content. I don't know. It needs size, though. There's really no point in creating a chamber *Dracula*: the subject wants distance, height, grandeur, and a slightly less vernacular texture than either *Little Women*'s or *Lysistrata*'s. Inasmuch as *Dracula* must be stylized to some degree, it'll challenge me more as a librettist than as a composer: one artist's stylization can be another's pomposity (See Scylla, etc.).

But the important work, as ever, is less on tone than on character. That's what slowed my starting *Lysistrata*, until I realized that I didn't have to be limited to Aristophanes' not-quite-characterizations. Lysia starts out as the comic heroine of Aristophanes, but in my opera, she blunders into becoming [Sophocles' tragic heroine] *Antigone*. She sacrifices the personal to something larger: the needs of her people. So, too, with the new piece. What's at stake? What are the big questions that bring us back to *Dracula*? I think they may be "Must we die? And, if we didn't have to die, would we still be good?" But I'm only just beginning.

### **Do you anticipate ever writing an opera on a specifically gay theme?**

Maybe. Writing a piece is like falling in love. You can't plan it, but you know when it happens. It's not as if I were looking for a "straight" piece with *Lysistrata*. And some gay stories have recently yet been sung—Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*, Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's [Harvey Milk](#) and Paula Kimper's *Patience and Sarah*. There's already a growing list.

