

Of Mice and Men

by Kathleen Watt

IN THE SPRING OF 1964, Composer Carlisle Floyd was in San Francisco to stage a new production of his opera *Susannah*, the work that had secured his reputation. At that time, Kurt Herbert Adler, artistic director of the San Francisco Opera, offered Floyd a Ford Foundation commission to produce a new piece based on a work by John Steinbeck, and had already begun independently to germinate the seed of his own libretto after Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Originally conceived as a play in novella form, Steinbeck's work had already been adapted by the author himself, at the behest of Broadway's George S. Kauffman, in 1937.

Floyd went to work immediately on his operatic project, but *Of Mice and Men* would not reach the stage so easily. In 1958, Floyd's *Susannah*, along with Leonard Bernstein's *Wonderful Town* and Richard Rodgers' *Carousel*, had been chosen to exemplify American musical theater at the Brussels World Fair. But the 1960's, years of social foment and momentous change in every aspect of American culture, would shift musical tastes away from such accessible works. The influence of the dominant serialist composers of the 1960's, melody remained obstinately out of fashion. By 1968, Floyd's opera, with its Pucciniesque characters and lyrical vocal lines, would be likely to further provoke a prickly music community against the San Francisco Opera. So Adler surrendered primary rights to *Of Mice and Men*, without a performance.

Meanwhile, across the country, New York City Opera was in the throes of the opposite dilemma. By 1968, Julius Rudel was in search of a new piece to reassure opera-goers who had disliked Hugo Weisgall's searingly dodecaphonic *Nine Rivers From Jordan* the previous season. City Opera had premiered all three of Floyd's previous full-length operas, and now *Of Mice and Men* would be a comfortable fit.

Problems persisted, however, with the reworking and fine tuning inevitable in premiere works, and the opera was summarily dropped from City Opera's 1968 season. (The company did, however, present the New York premier of the work in 1983.)

Seattle Opera had been watching all this, and now seized its opportunity. *Of Mice and Men* was folded eagerly into its own 1970 season. Floyd continued to rework the opera, retooling the role of George for baritone Julian Patrick, and cutting entirely and extravagant extended ensemble scene set in a Wild West bordello. Of the role of Lennie, created by Robert Moulson,

Floyd said, “I wanted to de-emphasize the empty-eyed, slack-jawed conception of Lennie...[Instead], approaching Lennie as a child permits a much greater emotional range for the actor (and especially the composer) to exploit.” Of Curley’s wife, Floyd explained, “The coloratura element [is] used to heighten the excessively coy, false aspects of the character. When she is being emotionally honest, as in her confrontation with George in the second act, or in the third act duet with Lennie, her vocal line would be entirely without decoration.”

Of Mice and Men finally reached the stage in January 1970, again supported by a Ford Foundation grant. It was a popular triumph, and ironically, it only exacerbated Floyd’s then-unfashionable reputation as a composer prized by audiences but coolly received by the critics.

In this way, Floyd met in Steinbeck his perfect literary match. The distinguished American novelist was often dismissed as a sentimental social realist. Literary critic Donald W. Heiney claimed that “John Steinbeck is a model example of the modern American nostalgia for the primitive . . . [*Of Mice and Men*] is mere allegory or folklore, devoid of any social content.” But Heiney also admitted that “[Steinbeck’s] rural heroes, illiterate and often weak-minded, are nevertheless essentially noble. They are poeticized rustics...In *Of Mice and Men*, he consciously recreates the classic tragedy; the calamity of George and Lennie proceeds inevitably out of their characters in the same manner of the tragedy of Agamemnon. The figures are drawn on a smaller scale, it is true, but it is precisely Steinbeck’s point that humble and illiterate people may have their tragedies too.”

Steinbeck’s answer to his implacable critics came in the form of the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. Similarly, Floyd’s vindication rests in the durability and ever-growing popularity of his works, which have been more frequently performed on American stages than those of any living composer except Menotti. Thus, *New York Times* critic Robert Commanday was right on the mark in his review of the opera’s 1970 premiere: “Good, sure theater is always welcome, whether innovative or not, and *Of Mice and Men* promises to be around, pleasing audiences for some time to come.”