

Rachel Portman and *The Little Prince*

In a new opera by composer Rachel Portman, with a libretto by Nicholas Wright, the Little Prince of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's treasured novella has a new incarnation on the operatic stage. Premiered at Houston Grand Opera in 2003, "The Little Prince" now comes to New York City Opera, in the production designed by Maria Bjørnson and directed by Francesca Zambello.



Composer Rachel Portman has been Hollywood A-list ever since becoming the first female composer to win the Academy Award (Best Original Score, for *Emma*, in 1997). But her fans have been devoted for much longer—and why not? British-born (Haslemere, England, 1960) and Oxford University-educated (Music, 1988), she's been composing since her early teens; she learned her craft at the BBC; her list of collaborators is a film-industry *Who's Who*; her many accolades include a British Academy of Film and Television Arts Award, a Chicago Film Critics Association Award, and the Flanders International Film Festival Award.

Portman's sound signature is an opulent, melodic romanticism and lush orchestration now on offer in her score for *Oliver*, the new Roman Polanski film, and such other titles as *Cider House Rules* (Oscar and Grammy nominations), *Chocolat* (Oscar and Golden Globe nominations), *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Legend of Bagge Vance*, *Hart's War*, *Only You*, *The Truth About Charlie*, *Marvin's Room*, *Addicted to Love*, *Home Fries*, *Beloved*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Used People*, and *Benny and Joon*, as well as *Ethan Frome*, *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, and *The Falklands War*, on BBC television.

Portman and her husband, motion picture producer Uberto Pasolini, are the parents of three daughters, wherein may lie the seed of Portman's first-ever foray into opera, *The Little Prince*, premiered by Houston Grand Opera in 2003.

Discovering a dearth of meaningful live theater for children, Portman determined to help remedy that herself. She settled upon *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's universally cherished story about a guileless boy who falls from space into the middle of the Sahara Desert. To orient herself to her task in the new medium, Portman turned not to the vast library of operatic literature (comparisons to Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* and Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* have been suggested)—but to the Moroccan desert, "to hear the sound of the sand."



The tiny caravan traveled atop camels Portman now calls, "Very lovely....Actually *most* uncomfortable, and *endless*....Wretched, really." After trekking for three chokingly hot



Composer Rachel Portman snapped this photograph in the Moroccan Desert, and kept it in a frame on her piano as she created the music for "The Little Prince".

days through a dry riverbed, until, "quite ill from heat sickness, and when I thought I could bear it no longer," they emerged into a sensation of "space, and silence—around your head, around your ears; the sound of light hanging about you; the sound of air, the slight breeze at night, when nothing else was moving;" the vast night sky salted with stars, "which is *all* about the Little Prince," says Portman. "We came across a stone well, exactly like there is in the book, just in the middle of nowhere. I saw how these wells are revered as sacred places. Even when it was just a hole in the ground, our guide made a religious gesture toward it in

acknowledgement." Later, "when we stopped and got off our camels, there was immediately a sandstorm. It was right out of the book," says Portman, adding, "I needed to know."

Back home in London, Portman says she composed at the keyboard, with the novella open at her elbow, Nick Wright's libretto on the stand, and a photograph on the piano of the stately dunes that had become her touchstone to "The Little Prince".

Scored for a small orchestra of twenty-six players, the opera's texture is conscientiously transparent, evoking the story's mirage-like luminosity. "What's so beautiful about St. Exupéry's thin little book," says Portman, "is its simplicity—which I was careful to preserve."

The opera's vocal forces are rather larger, with a chorus of some thirty-eight children and ten principals—a departure for Portman. "I've used voices before in film, [but] even a wordless voice is very hard to mix with dialogue—it attracts the ear too much—so there's not been much opportunity." Moreover, film music is, by definition, accompaniment, moreso than in opera—which is, by definition, singing. The music is the main event.

In these fundamental creative shifts, Portman was supported by a deft adaptation of the novella by first-time librettist, playwright Nicholas Wright. Portman commends "the ease with which Nick converted a very episodic work," into a cohesive system of arias and recitatives, that satisfied even the exacting heirs of St. Exupéry. Many lines of recitative, especially between the Pilot and the Prince, are direct quotations from St. Exupéry's text, usually non-melodic and sometimes unaccompanied. Arias, ensembles,



and choruses required original poetry from Wright, which Portman illuminates in an essentially through-composed musical score.

For a top-tier film composer, Portman is refreshingly unjaded about "the absolutely electric moment when it all comes together," and the "liberating" release from the frame-by-frame strictures of film scoring. But Portman has been liberating her film music in subtle ways for a long time. Not surprisingly, Portman is less technology-bound than many composers in film, where sound engineering uses evermore sophisticated automation. She eschews the "streamers" and metronomic "click-tracks" fed to players through individual headsets, which keep instrumentalists on the beat but isolated from each other, limiting the intra-orchestral communication so crucial to rich music-making. Portman prefers conductors like veterans David Snell and J. A. C. Redford, who keep the orchestra together by sheer force of...well...conducting. "I want the musicians to be able to take the cans off, so they can listen to each other." The result is an organic sound which the conductor can then ease in to fit the cinematic drama unfolding on a screen before him. "Exactly the same, actually," says Portman, as the opera conductor's coordination between pit and stage.



At the same time, other aspects become more exacting in the theater, where no studio engineers stand by to "fix" errant orchestral balances, or to bump up the volume, for example, of an unfortunately situated marimba. Instead, such adjustments send the opera composer back to the score, to "fix" things for good. Portman acknowledges finding "new things" in her own music with each new combination of performers, as the opera has traveled from Houston to Boston and Milwaukee, and onto now film via BBC studios. "Live theater is new every time—especially in opera, where the conductor's interpretation can make such a huge difference."

Speaking about the genesis of this first foray into opera, the composer gives generous credit to distinguished colleagues. Once settled upon the Little Prince story, Portman first consulted the music of American composer Phillip Glass, whose body of work has effectively dissolved traditional boundaries between concert hall and cinema soundtrack. Soon after, when the Saint-Exupéry property was offered to Glass himself, he passed it on to Portman without hesitation, along with his own publisher, Jim Keller, who then continued to develop the project with Portman. Keller connected the composer with acclaimed opera director Francesca Zambello, whom Portman calls a "driving spirit" behind the opera. In addition to fielding logistical difficulties, including the minutiae of securing international rights to the property, Zambello introduced Portman to playwright Nicholas Wright, and brought the whole project to David Gockley at Houston Grand Opera. The rest is now, as they say, history. On the heels of its success in the U. S. and the U. K., rights to perform the work throughout the world have now been secured, although France is still in the offing. "I suppose we really will have to do it in French," says Portman, though whether the text will be Saint Exupéry's or a translation of Wright's libretto is a matter yet to be determined.

Of her music for the opera, Portman says, "I am not writing in some modern musical language that might be difficult to understand. I really want people to understand it. I want to communicate the same, simple message that was communicated in the story by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry."



Portman paints musical portraits children will recognize and adults appreciate. In the Pilot's baritone resonates the earnest nobility of the human condition. The composer uses the bassoon to King-ly advantage, suggesting a benevolent pomposity, and an ermine-draped, corpulent good nature. Flutes loft a flock of Cranes, in children's voices, like wind beneath their wings. A Drunkard swoops and slurs, and the Prince's line, in its treble-y innocence, seems to follow the weaving Drunkard away. The Businessman is all tickity-tickity typing and adding machine. Timpani, rim shots, whip cracks, calling horns and voices announce the Hunters, with low strings bounding in a-hunting-we-will-go gallop.

In key roles, the Snake is an unctuous tenor under the celesta's rarefied insinuation, and a slithery sinew of sustained strings. The melody of the Prince's Rose, first heard in the Pilot's voice, describes her pouting hauteur, more naive ingénue than truculent diva, in a disarmingly lovely duet with the Prince. Portman deploys clarinet and oboe for the Fox, furry paws stepping watchfully, expertly. In the Taming, his ginger tune is heard in friendlier flutes, and gradually shared by the Prince's own delicately sonorous strings.

"But in our early meetings," recalled Portman, "there was concern that a child couldn't carry a whole opera. 'Can't we have a soprano do the lead?' I said, 'Absolutely not. If you do that no child will be interested in this.'

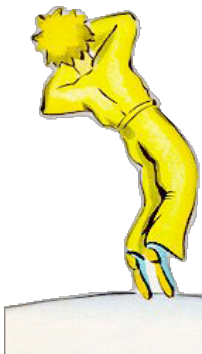


"Having a small boy on the stage is, for children, a special fascination. And I was careful that the Prince not have to hold the stage on his own for too long at a time. [Librettist] Nick was quite clever at getting the Pilot to 'tell the story', taking pressure off the Prince. He has quite quick little replies, staying right in the middle of his range." And under Francesca Zambello's nurturing direction, says Portman, the arc of the two actors' relationship "tends to utterly mirror the relationship between the boy and the pilot in the story." She adds, "It's very touching to see."

Portman organizes the scenes into two acts. One is expository, introduced by the Pilot. A shorter act follows in which, as his relationship with the Pilot deepens, the Prince learns his necessary lessons; and he learns—and then pursues—his own destiny.



"Even adults disagree about where the Little Prince is going at the end," says Portman. "But in that [ambiguity] is the overwhelming desire of the Prince to get back to his Rose, who needs him, back to his own planet—which is his heaven," she says. "It's what he wants."



With its ingenuous Prince, its flock of singing children, and the colorful characters who surround them, this opera is sure to entertain. But its fabulist lyricism delivers much more. It is a way into shared mysteries of our being, as humans, and a way out of confusion and suffering, for children of all ages.

Portman's future projects include more works for voice, large and small, more works for children, and happily, more opera—for grown up grown-ups. ■