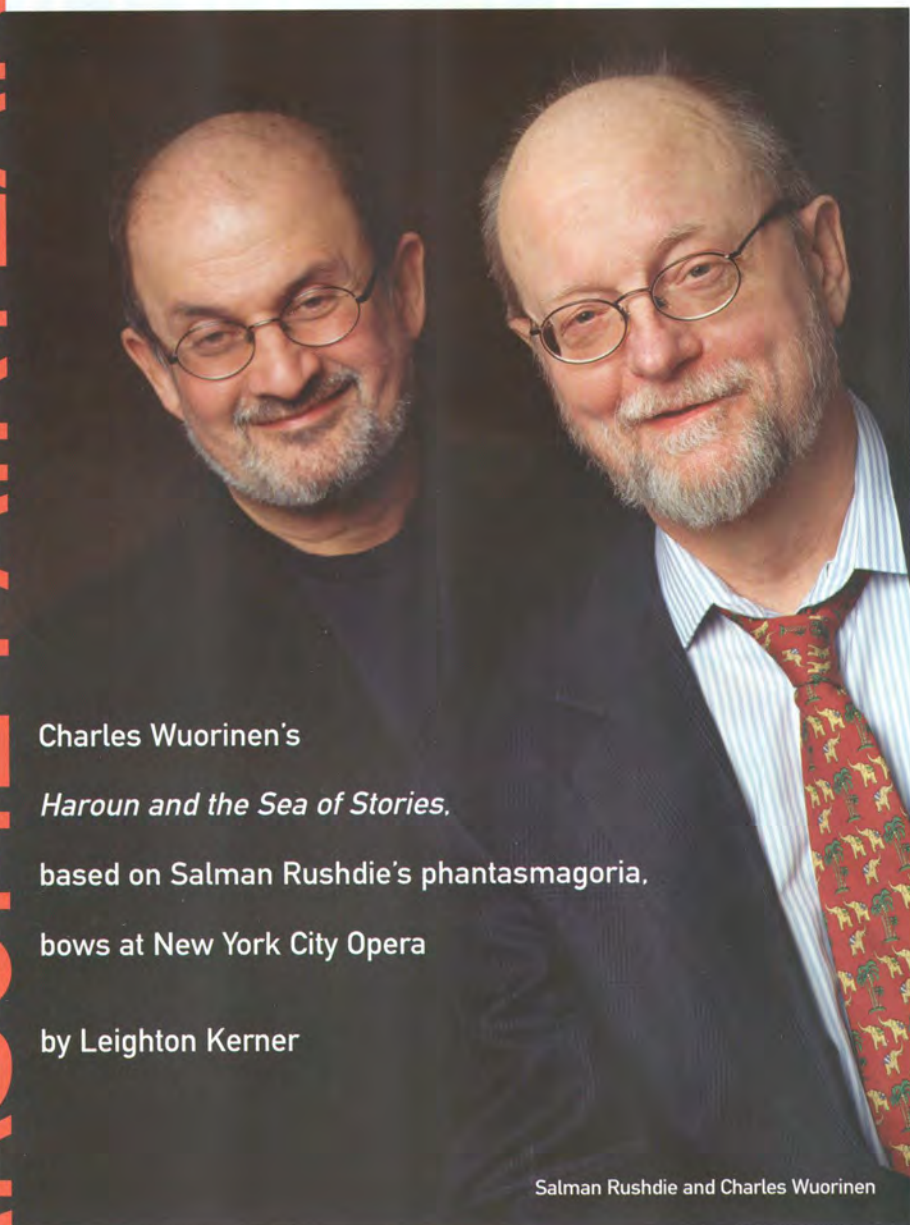


FEARSOME FAIRYLAND



Charles Wuorinen's

Haroun and the Sea of Stories,

based on Salman Rushdie's phantasmagoria,

bows at New York City Opera

by Leighton Kerner

Salman Rushdie and Charles Wuorinen

Fix your anticipating mind, if you will, on the idea of a new, sophisticated, adult fantasy-opera based on an equivalently sophisticated children's novel written by a man under a death sentence. Consider further that the novel and opera joyously and poetically relate a young boy's adventures in winning a war against extraterrestrial forces of ignorance and spiritual darkness (not quite like the earthly forces that condemned the book's author). Also, don't ignore — as if a listener could — the fact that the opera continually sends its twelve-tone musical language dancing in light-footed, infectious riffs, yet often calms down to sing soft little elegies. And what can one say about a libretto with such a characteristic stage direction as "Haroun takes a cup, dips into the sea, and drinks a story"?

The opera in question, as you may have guessed from that stage direction, is *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, based on Salman Rushdie's eponymous 1990 novel. The composer is New York's Charles Wuorinen, who continues to give academically aggressive modernism a lively name. The librettist is the English poet, politically fiery international journalist, and Rushdie friend and enthusiast James Fenton; the director of New York City Opera's world-premiere production, now in preparation for an October 31 opening, is Mark Lamos, a good man for keeping audiences awake at City Opera, the Met, Glimmerglass and points West.

The ceaselessly delightful novel was written somewhere near "the valley of the shadow of

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death." Rushdie, born in 1947 in Bombay (now Mumbai), was educated there and in England, at Rugby and Cambridge. After working in Pakistan, he returned to England, where he began to receive critical acclaim for his writing. His wild, fantastical fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), was deemed blasphemous by some Islamic groups, and Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, on Valentine's Day 1989, issued a *fatwa* (decree) calling for Rushdie's death. The author went into hiding under British government protection, although he did manage to appear unannounced and briefly at a few occasions important to him. His associates were not immune from the *fatwa*; his Japanese translator was murdered, and his Norwegian publisher and Italian translator were attacked. (A minor personal note: I myself at that time took a recently bought copy of *The Satanic Verses* into a midtown-Manhattan coffee shop, and a soft-spoken man came over and advised me to keep the book in my bag for safety's sake.)

While in hiding, Rushdie began his little novel about young Haroun and his father, Rashid, a professional storyteller who loses his "gift of gab" due to shock over his wife's sudden desertion with a neighbor. (The father's and son's names derived from the often-written-about eighth-century Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, a little joke from the author.) Father and, more prominently, son get embroiled in this war between light and darkness, ensure the victory of light, and return to their once miserable and now happy home — happy because the wife has remorsefully returned. And yes, the prodigal gab is back with Rashid.

Obviously responding to his own self-exile, Rushdie dedicated the tale to his eleven-year-old son, Zafar (whose middle name is Haroun), by way of an acrostic:

Zembla: Zenda, Xanadu:
All our dream-worlds may come true.
Fairy lands are fearsome too.
As I wander far from view
Read, and bring me home to you

James Fenton movingly works this into his libretto as a song for Haroun's frustrated mother at the beginning of the opera and as a hymn sung by the peaceful family at the close.

The idea of a *Haroun* opera came from Wuorinen's manager and longtime partner Howard Stokar. The two consulted with Lincoln Center Theater about choosing a director who would help nurse their project right from the start. The choice fell to Mark Lamos, who in turn suggested Fenton as librettist. Wuorinen told me, "Poets make better librettists than do playwrights, who are used to people talking and not singing." The composer also said that Rushdie had made only one demand about the projected opera — that he be allowed to attend a performance. He was then still under the *fatwa*, which has since been lifted.

Having set to work, Wuorinen and Fenton realized that this relatively short novel — less than 200 pages — was nevertheless so crammed with incidents and sparkling words that drastic cuts were required. I share their regret at omitting the brave and delightful girl, Blabbermouth, who might have been a future mate for Haroun, and the fearsome, helpful warrior, Mudra. But we still have Haroun's sometimes suffering family, their nice and far-from-nice neighbors and their town where factory chimneys once spewed clouds of sadness everywhere. Also remaining from the book are friendly creatures such as the water-genie, Iff; the talking bird, Butt; and the floating, talking bunch of flowers and

foliage named Mali. And don't forget two multi-mouthed fishes called Goopy and Bagha after, Rushdie tells us in the glossary, "goofy heroes of a movie by Satyajit Ray. The movie characters are not fishes, but they are pretty fishy."

We also encounter such villains as the ayatollah of darkness and silence, Khattam-Shud, a name Rushdie says means "completely finished," and the gangster-politician Snooty Buttoo. And there's the non-villainous Princess Batcheat (her name means "chit-chat"), whose abduction is one cause of the war, and who, aside from a single royal lover, lacks mass popularity because of a singing voice bad enough to launch a thousand ships in the opposite direction.

How will the alto who sings Batcheat be handled, seeing that her vocal line in the score looks quite proper? Wuorinen explains, "She'll be encouraged to sing off-pitch, shriek a bit, be rhythmically unsteady." But she has a triple role, and at least she can sing correctly as Oneeta, the good neighbor, and another princess, object of Haroun's aborted tower-rescue after he drinks that story from the polluted sea. Polluted? Look to Khattam-Shud.

And look to Rashid himself — the once and future story-telling virtuoso and restorer of imagination, whom the besieged author dubbed "The Shah of Blah" — as a stand-in for Rushdie. Look and listen, because Wuorinen's score is the antithesis of Blah. Yes, its hectic, twelve-tone sprints and zooms and flights of vocal and orchestral lines might make the first-time listener call for some traffic-control. But their density and energy leave no wreckage. It's as if perfectly diatonic phrases had been elbowing one another convivially within twelve-tone surroundings. Then, too, there are various kinds of decompression, even within Wuorinen's strict non-tonal boundaries. An ethereal female sextet represents birds in flight, mainly as prelude to a thumpingly parodic "War! War! War!" chorus. There are clever variations on the water-genie's non-explanation to Haroun about how he does his job: "P2C2E" ("A Process too Complicated to Explain"). There's Batcheat's smoky torch-song (if she'd only sing it nicely). And, of course, we have the final, gentle "bring me home" song.

A couple of hundred New Yorkers have already sampled a bit of *Haroun* when some of it was sung at Cooper Union in 2000, where City Opera held the first of its annual stretches of public workshops for operas-in-progress. Since then, the opera's production was postponed twice for financial reasons, and that caused some recasting. But City Opera's music director, George Manahan, is still conducting. Soprano Heather Buck sings Haroun, and baritone Peter Strummer is Rashid. Lamos has stuck by the project all the way and will stage it. Speaking to OPERA NEWS in June, he said he intends to use lots of projections for the sudden, fantastic changes of place and mood.

For those seeking to prepare for a new opera of widely diverse dramatic character and complex music, there are Rushdie's novel in a Penguin paperback, Fenton's clever libretto as the centerpiece of a Faber & Faber paperback titled *The Love Bomb* after one of his other music-theater texts, and an Albany CD, *The Haroun Songbook*, which contains thirty-four short numbers from the opera with a piano accompaniment composed by Wuorinen especially for the recording. Call the CD a tasting menu for a delicious and nourishing entertainment that's not too complicated to explain. □

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