

Good-Time Charlie

Charles Wuorinen's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* is a modernist twelve-tone opera that's easy to love.
By **Peter G. Davis**

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(Photo: Carol Rosegg/Courtesy of the New York City Opera)

A sleazy politician named Snooty Buttoo. A person or persons unknown who rudely pass wind onstage. Two plentimaw fish who not only dance but sing close harmony ("Call me Bagha, this is Goopy"). A little boy who takes a cup, dips it into the sea, and drinks a story. It's all quite delightful, but who would have thought Charles Wuorinen would produce a piece of music theater as lighthearted as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, now having its premiere performances at the City Opera? After all, this industrious 66-year-old composer, with more than 200 scores to his credit, has long been an unrepentant representative of uptown academicism, a self-proclaimed "maximalist" who wears his elitist badge with pride.

Well, perhaps Salman Rushdie's 1990 novel—an effervescent mix of fantasy, adventure, and allegory written after the author went underground to escape the famous fatwa that put him under a death sentence for blasphemy—was actually just waiting for a composer like Wuorinen. Not everyone will take to his idiom, an uncompromising application of twelve-tone modernism that develops an event-filled musical world that makes no concessions to populist tastes. But the score for *Haroun* will dazzle any receptive ear with its incredibly broad palate of finely tuned sounds and its irrepressible vitality—a singularly apt musical response to a sophisticated children's novel that has very adult things to say about a free imagination trapped in a world of oppressive thought control.

← BACKSTORY

Salman Rushdie wrote the short novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* for his then-11-year-old son, Zafar (whose middle name is Haroun). Published in 1990, it was Rushdie's first work after **radical Islamists issued the fatwa calling for his death**, sending him into hiding for a decade. The book took less than a year to write, and Rushdie says today that it amuses him that it's taken "ten times that" for the opera adaptation to come together. Moreover, "it's ironic that the book written at the most miserable moment of my life is **probably the happiest book that I ever wrote**," says Rushdie. "Its manner is very light and playful even when it's dealing with dark materials."

This happy operatic adaptation begins with a libretto that most composers only dream about: a dramatization that plays out on the stage with a scintillating theatricality that never makes a false move, coupled with witty wordplays that evolve from and expand upon the antic spirit and verbal elasticity of the original novel. The English poet and journalist James Fenton has passed the unlikely miracle of writing an opera libretto that makes for good reading all on its own. Some parts of the book had to be left out for practical necessity, but the essence is here: the tale of the storyteller Rashid, the "Shah of Blah" who has lost his gift for gab after the double shock of his wife's desertion and overhearing his ebullient son Haroun, in an uncharacteristic moment of despondency, wonder "what's the use of stories that aren't even true." The breathless adventures that follow, the battles between light and darkness as Rashid and Haroun reinvent themselves, restore peace, and regain their productive energy, are ceaselessly entertaining. We can practically see it all pouring from an invisible tap of invention installed by Iff the water genie, who makes wonders occur through his ingenious "P2C2E"—a Process Too Complicated To Explain.

Those who have not kept up with Wuorinen's output over the years and continue to pigeonhole him as a rigorous academic may be surprised at how laid-back *Haroun* actually sounds. His muse has been mellowing for some time, and without any loss of the structural complexity or physical vigor that have always marked his creative personality. The layout and formal organization of the opera is flawless, each section seamlessly connected by the composer's sure sense of proportion, rhythmic pacing, and instrumental color. More unexpected perhaps are the fluent and wittily inflected vocal lines and the levels of expressive depth that gather as the opera proceeds to its happy conclusion: "Ev'rything rhymes, ev'rything chimes . . . Yes, time is on the move again," sings Haroun contentedly at the end, as moving and satisfying a finale for a new opera that I have ever heard. Rushdie's response to a harsh dilemma was to reaffirm, through the eyes of a child, his right to be a free spirit; Wuorinen, equally principled and confident, captures that feeling to perfection.

Considering the sparse performance directions in the score, both Fenton and Wuorinen clearly wished to give future production teams plenty of room to devise their own approaches to Haroun and the fantastic world he inhabits. The City Opera staging, directed with brisk precision, a sharp edge, and loads of wicked wit by Mark Lamos, is consistently effective. The exotic headgear and floridly layered costumes by Candice Donnelly provide ample color, a basic motif of Islamic arabesques etched out in a lightbulb frame dominates Riccardo Hernandez's flavorsome sets, and Peter Nigrini's fanciful projections suggest everything from the depressing smoke that rises from dingy "sadness factories" to the aqueous wonders of an ocean filled with countless wonderful stories. Soprano Heather Buck combines just the right amounts of waiflike appeal, boyish spunk, and vocal virtuosity to make Haroun the real hero of his own tale, while Peter Strummer as the sinkable Rashid and an eager cast perform marvels under conductor George Manahan's firm musical direction.