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Novel ideas

Outspoken composer Charles Wuorinen adapts a Salman Rushdie fable for the New York City Opera By **Steve Smith** Photograph by **Nina Roberts**

It amuses me that music produced for aristocratic courts, narrow-minded religious communities or an aspiring 19th-century bourgeois is regarded as a touchstone for measuring audience appeal," composer Charles Wuorinen says of the standard repertoire that presently constitutes most programming for major orchestras and concert halls. "When defensive composers from the pop avant-garde today talk about how Mozart used the so-called vernacular in his works, they forget that there *wasn't* any vernacular: There were peasants humming happy tunes as they labored in the fields, and fiddlers playing to drunken brawls in the taverns. There wasn't any pop music; that didn't come until broadcasting and recording developed. These are crashingly obvious points."

An unrepentant champion of musical modernism, Wuorinen, 66, is nearly as well known for such fiery polemics against creeping populism and trendy crossover efforts as for his compositions, which extend a European-derived tradition spawned by the advances of Arnold Schoenberg. Combined with the often craggy contours of his music, Wuorinen's seemingly barbed demeanor doesn't suggest an artist likely to embrace *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Salman Rushdie's whimsical fantasy novel for young readers, let alone spin it into one of the fall's most highly anticipated operas. But that's exactly what he's done. "The surface of the thing, the fantasy aspect, is a delight," Wuorinen says. "And then beneath that is sort of a message—it's a work against those who want to suppress the imagination."

Rushdie wrote *Haroun* for his then-11-year-old son, Zafar, in 1990, shortly after Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini had issued the fatwa that called for the writer's execution in response to his previous book, *The Satanic Verses*. The novel tells the story of plucky young Haroun, who sets out on a quest to restore the lost gift of gab to his father, Rashid, a renowned professional storyteller. The parallel to Rushdie's own perilous straits could not be clearer. "What I admired is that it was Rushdie's response to this awful thing that was done to him," Wuorinen says, "and yet there's no bitterness, self-pity or sentimentality."

Once he secured operatic rights to the novel, Wuorinen set about raising the money to finance the project—a point he makes no attempt to downplay: "Let's be clear about one thing: City Opera has put not one penny into my creating the work," he says. "While they are paying for most of the production, we also brought them a grant of a quarter of a million dollars from a foundation we have some connection with."

With both private and NEA funds in hand, Wuorinen set about assembling his creative team. "We decided that the way to start was to find a director, so that nothing would happen either verbally or music-

ally that would be too problematic for the stage," he says. Associates at Lincoln Center touted Mark Lamos, whose work has enlivened the stages of City Opera, the Met and Glimmerglass, among others. Lamos, in turn, recommended as librettist British poet James Fenton, a friend of Rushdie's who had contributed to the musical-theater smash *Les Misérables*.

Beginning their work in 1997, Wuorinen and Fenton completed *Haroun* in 2001; its premiere, however, was subsequently postponed twice due to post-September 11 financial shortfalls. Fortunately, both Lamos and music director George Manahan stuck with the production. A promising cast includes the highly regarded soprano Heather Buck in the title role, with Peter Strummer, an accomplished comedian who triumphed in City Opera's *Don Pasquale* last season, as Rashid, the "Shah of Blah." If Wuorinen's music is characteristically spiky, it also dances in gleeful step to the fanciful patter of Fenton's giddy, rhythmic verse.

So far, no further performances of *Haroun* have been scheduled beyond its initial run—most likely a sign of the cautious conservatism endemic to the musical arts. Still, Wuorinen has more than one reason to celebrate this year. In recent months, the Albany label has released both old and new recordings of Wuorinen's music on three discs, part of an ongoing series; John Zorn's Tzadik label will also issue a second Wuorinen title in January. In the spring, James Levine will conduct soloist Peter Serkin and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in a newly commissioned Fourth Piano Concerto, including a Carnegie Hall date. Levine, one of Wuorinen's foremost supporters, will also lead two other major performances of the composer's music at Carnegie Hall, and has commissioned additional large-scale pieces.

Ultimately, the devotion and advocacy of cherished colleagues such as Zorn, Levine and Serkin help Wuorinen remain unfazed by the populist whims and cyclical tastes of the music industry. "One of the things that drives me crazy when people talk about the public—the public wants this, the public doesn't want that—is that the public is an amorphous, passive throng; if you don't ask anything of it, it won't make an effort," he says. "To patronize the public by saying they can never be expected to put a little bit of effort into something that will repay them a hundredfold—I think that's a terrible insult to ordinary people. But the crucial thing to remember is that it isn't audiences or institutions that make music live or die: It's musicians. If they want something, it lives; if they don't, it's gone."

***Haroun and the Sea of Stories* opens at New York State Theater October 31.**