

## ***Strawberry Fields***

Strawberry Fields is a contemporary opera written by librettist A.R Gurney and scored by Michael Torke. This is a one-act English-language opera that serves as the second part of a trilogy of operas in a series entitled Central Park. The Central Park series is comprised of The Festival of Regrets by librettist Wendy Wasserstein and score by Deborah Drattell as the first part, Strawberry Fields as the second, and The Food of Love by Terrance McNally and Robert Beaster as the final installment. All three works were commissioned by the Glimmerglass Opera, New York City Opera, and WNET's Great Performance Series for the 1999 Glimmerglass Festival.

These uniquely different operas are all drawn together by the common location of Central Park, and also by the writers. Each of these one-act operas is written by a team of a well-known playwright and a young composer. These stories and playwrights tell three distinct stories of people and their humanity. In The Festival of Regrets, a rabbi gathers for a Jewish festival in the park, and those partaking in the festival are forced to reckon with their regrets and find closure. Contrastingly, The Food of Love follows a homeless mother as she tries to leave her newborn with unsuspecting people in the park, and yet no one ever acknowledges her. The middle piece of this trilogy follows an old woman who believes her spot on a park bench is her seat at the opera and thus is the plot of Strawberry Fields.

Drawing on the extensive influence of John Lennon, Strawberry Fields is named as an ode to the singer and the section of the park that was also named Strawberry Fields in his honor following the murder of Lennon. Lennon was known to frequently take walks in Central Park as it was directly across from the Dakota where he resided. After his untimely passing, that part of the park was renamed Strawberry Fields. This name derives from Lennon's song with the Beatles "Strawberry Fields Forever" which was written about his childhood memories playing in the garden at a Salvation Army children's home in Liverpool that was yet also named Strawberry Fields.

As the title *Strawberry Fields* pays homage to all of these places, people, and feelings, it also reminisces upon the life of A.R Gurney, known for writing plays based upon his familial experiences. Gurney was born in 1930 in Buffalo, New York but did not get into playwriting until later. He spent most of his young and mid-adulthood as a Literature professor at MTI. He eventually began to write plays in his 50s and wrote nearly 50 full-length plays before passing. Most of his plays reached regional and Off-Broadway audiences. In an interview with *Playbill*, Gurney spoke about his work saying he often visited his family in upstate New York and "drew upon them and their sense of being lost in a changing America as source material" (*Playbill*). In his profound works about loneliness and the sonder of life, Gurney focused on writing authentic characters with real lives. While opera was a new medium, Gurney found a way to convey those ideas.

Paired with Michael Torke, Gurney created *Strawberry Fields* in the late 90s and it remains his only work of opera. Torke, however, has greater experience working in the operatic and classical music fields. A graduate of Eastman School of Music for undergrad and Yale with his master's in composition, Torke was originally born in Wisconsin in 1960. The age difference between Torke and Gurney provided great insight and depth into their piece and their collaboration. Torke focused deeply on post-minimalism music which has an elevator music feel and highly repetitive patterns in it. He composes a broad breadth of work including commercials, symphonies, and operas.

Together the two created the work *Strawberry Fields* in 1999 and celebrated its first performance on July 24, 1999, at the Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown, NY. Following the track intended by the commissioners, the show then traveled with the New York City Opera and premiered at the Lincoln Center on November 19, 1999. Finally, the show was telecast on January 19, 2000, on WNET's *Great Performances*, thus fulfilling the wishes of all the companies involved in commissioning the work. Since then, the show has earned little traction in performance. According to Torke's website, the chamber orchestration was made

newly available in Spring 2023. There is little evidence of performances between the 2000 premiere and the 2023 publicly available orchestrations. However, the show was also produced in a co-production by Oberlin College and Kendal at Oberlin, a retirement community near the college. The senior citizens and college students joined the team to perform the piece in 2021. Then in Spring 2022, the College of Southern Nevada presented the show in its West Coast premiere. With these performances, Oklahoma City University is one of the first places to present Strawberry Fields to regional audiences.

The show will hopefully be well-received by audiences as it is short and simple. The run time of the opera is around 38 minutes and it is entirely in English language. The one-act tells the charming story of an old lady and a student who form a bond through watching an imaginary opera. All characters in this show remain nameless and are identified by their role. Roles outside of the main old lady and student include the daughter, son, and nurse most notably but also a workman, boy, girl, panhandler, and additional chorus as needed or desired. The show begins with The Old Lady arriving in the park and finding a seat on a bench. Seated, the old lady believes that she is at the opera watching a show. A student joins her on the bench and begins to feed into the fantasy of the opera, much to the distaste of the old lady's son who finds her and tries to convince her to accompany him to the nursing home. The son finds little luck and calls his sister for backup. In the meantime, the old lady comes to believe the student beside her is her late husband. As they reminisce and enjoy the opera, the daughter and nurse arrive to assist the son. As they also try to encourage the old lady to head to the nursing home, they find she has passed peacefully away.

The show has central themes of finding and focusing on your joy, as well as living in the moment. With under forty minutes of music, the plot will unravel quickly presenting the challenge of how the audience will connect with the story and its characters. However, the basic nature of the show makes it easier for the audience to resonate with the simplicity and sweetness of it. The nods to John Lennon will also

hook audiences on the classic music. The overall nature of the show presents a wholesome storyline that serves to serenade and entertain audiences.

### ***Gianni Schicchi***

Following Strawberry Fields, the opera will continue in the second act with the opera of Gianni Schicchi. An hour-long Italian piece, Gianni Schicchi is a comic opera by Giacomo Puccini, a famous composer and lyricist. The show was derived from the 30th canto of Dante's Inferno a knight from Florence named Gianni Schicchi, a known fraud and imposter.

Like Strawberry Fields, Gianni Schicchi is part of an operatic trilogy. This is the final installment in an otherwise darker trilogy. It begins with Il Tabarro (The Cloak) which is a dark tragedy followed by Suor Angelica, a sweeter tragedy. Both of these tragedies deal with death and dark themes so to contrast it, Gianni Schicchi is a farce full of humor and hilarious plot twists.

The story follows the family of Buoso Donati after his passing as they try to reap the assets of his will. The large cast of this opera is comprised primarily of family members including nephews cousins and wives. When Donati died, the family rushed to display the most grief to warrant their deservingness of the inheritance. Betto, Brother-in-law shares rumors begin to spread that the will leaves all funds to a monastery prompting the frantic search for the will. Finally, Rinuccio, Zita's nephew finds the will. He uses it as a bargaining tool to ask permission to marry Lauretta, daughter of Gianni Schicchi. Zita, eager to see the will, concedes and Rinuccio sends Gheradrino to bring Lauretta and Gianni Schicchi to them.

While they wait for their arrival, Zita and Simone, Donati's cousin, open the will to discover the rumors to be true - Donati snubbed his entire family leaving all his earthly possessions and wealth to the monks. In their frustration, the family begins to wonder if they can overcome this. Rinuccio suggests they enlist the help of Gianni Schicchi, notorious for his sneaky and sly ways, much to the disgruntlement of his aunt. When Schicchi arrives, he offers his condolences to the family but remarks in

their secured comfort because of the intended inheritance. Rita, forced to admit the situation, reveals the state of the will and quickly calls off the wedding and asks the Schicchi's to leave. Rinuccio and Lauretta protest until finally Lauretta threatens to throw herself into the Arno River. Unable to refuse his daughter under these dire and dramatic stakes, Schicchi begins to scheme a solution to the family's dilemma.

Schicchi ensures that no one outside of the family has heard of the death and requires the removal of the body. When the doctor arrives, he is tricked under dim lighting into believing the body in the bed is a Donati who has risen from the dead. The doctor feeling proud of his medical prowess leaves while the family summons a notary. While waiting for a notary, the family divided all of Donati's possessions evenly among themselves. Yet, there is the problem of what to do with his most valuable property as it would make one family member richer than the rest. The family decided to let Schicchi decide who to give it to. Schicchi promises to make the decision and then reminds the family that anyone involved with the forgery of a will is subject to exile and having a hand cut off. The family, fearful, sticks to the plan.

When the notary arrives, Schicchi is in bed acting as a dying Donati. He revokes all prior wills and begins to draft a new version. Schicchi follows through with his promises, giving each family member their requested assets yet when it comes to deciding who to honor with the final bit of wealth, Schicchi instead leaves those assets to himself. The family is outraged but fearing the punishment of the forgery being found out, is forced to remain silent. As the notary leaves, the family loots Schicchi's new home as he chases them out. Lauretta and Rinuccio, however, remain behind in the home as they vow their love to each other. When Schicchi returns to see the lovers, he justifies his actions through their union and comically ends the show.

Like in the canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Schicchi is deceitful at his core. In Dante's work, all the people in this ring of hell are being punished for sins of deceit. These range from disguise, counterfeiting, false accusation, and fighting, to prove their worth or better oneself. Despite hell and sinning being a heavy topic, Gianni Schicchi

remains a comic opera, a style known for its light-hearted plots and jokes. While his show was Puccini's first farce, it seems to be audiences' favorites.

To this day, Gianni Schicchi is commonly performed throughout the world. It first premiered at the New York City Metropolitan Opera on Dec 14, 1918. It was performed in tandem with the other shows that complete the trilogy. In modern times, this piece often stands alone or is combined with other pieces, not specifically those it premiered with. Since its premiere, Gianni Schicchi has been performed across the globe by notable companies including the Dutch National Opera, National Theatre Mannheim, Opera National de Paris, Calgary Opera, New National Theatre Tokyo, National Concert Hall in Dublin Ireland, the Finger Lakes Opera in Rochester New York and by countless college and universities.

Puccini intended his opera to be performed all over, just like it was. He was a revered composer of his time and still holds importance in classical music today. Born December 22, 1858, in Tuscany Italy, Puccini first fell in love with opera after seeing Aida in 1876. Following this revelation, Puccini studied at the Milan Conservatory under Antonio Bazzini, a violinist and composer of chamber music, and Amilcare Pinchielli, an opera composer. Under their wing, Puccini began to write operas which took off thanks to Giulio Ricordi who acquired the copyright to Puccini's first publicly premiered work and invested in commissioning Puccini's second. The two become lifelong partners, working together frequently. Puccini continued to work throughout the chaos of his personal life including when he fled from his home in Lucca with married women he intended to marry to escape the scandal. Later, this woman, now his wife, involved them in a greater scheme after she lost a fight to her jealousy and threatened a young servant girl. The girl killed herself in response and when the girl's parents had her body inspected, the doctor found no evidence of the accusations the wife claimed. Through this Puccini learned that people can be close but not always trusted – a theme often revealed in his works, including Gianni Schicchi.

This opera centers around the idea that a bit of fun never hurts anyone and plays with greed and jealousy in a humorous and highly enjoyable way. The show

demands a quick tempo for jokes to land and the pace to stay on track with the short runtime. The show maintains an upbeat mood despite the somber nature of the subject matter involving death. Poking fun at the people in this show, Puccini creates a work of art with heart and humor.