

ACCESSIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN JULIA SMITH'S *CYNTHIA PARKER*

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In 1939, composer Julia Smith's first opera *Cynthia Parker* dramatized the story of a Texas legend. Smith manipulated music, text, and visual images to make the opera accessible for the audience in accordance with compositional and institutional practices in American opera of the 1930s. Transparent musical themes and common Native Americans stereotypes are used to define characters. Folk music is presented as diegetic, creating a sense of authenticity that places the audience into the opera's Western setting. The opera is codified for the audience using popular idioms, resulting in initial but not lasting success.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the Metropolitan Opera announced that Peter Gelb was succeeding Joseph Volpe as the company's general manager. A *New York Times* article detailing the change stated that Gelb plans to "reconceive the Met as an institution more open to popular influences and more attractive to a wider public."¹ This "reconception" would include the use of supertitles, an increase in new productions,² the elimination of gala concerts, and the broadcast of Met productions in movie theaters and over the Internet.³ This plan, if successful, would make opera a more everyday, mainstream part of American culture.

Only six months later, an article by Philip Kennicott appeared in the Metropolitan Opera Guild's magazine, *Opera News*. In it, Kennicott took a somewhat different view of opera's relevance in American society. He asked, "if American culture keeps going the way it's going, is the day approaching when we may ask, is opera still relevant?"⁴ Kennicott explored the idea of opera as marginal as opposed to mainstream. Opera, according to Kennicott, does not embrace the possibilities of its marginal position, but instead tries to blend in with other amusements and become part of the mainstream.

¹ Daniel J. Wakin, "As Opera Audience Shrinks, the Met Get Daring," *New York Times*, late edition, February 11, 2006.

² The Metropolitan Opera considers a "new" production to be different from a world or company premiere. Often, a production is defined as "new" because it is presented under new direction.

³ Wakin.

⁴ Philip Kennicott, "Is Opera Still Relevant?" *Opera News*, August 2006, 35.

Mr. Kennicott, concluded that "opera never was central to American society, and it never will be."⁵

Opera's place in American society is a curious one. The National Endowment for the Arts 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts reported that for the last twenty years, only three percent of the American population attended opera.⁶ While this number has not changed in the last twenty years opera attendance has at least kept pace with population growth. The survey also reported that opera patrons are older, wealthier, and extremely educated in comparison with audiences for jazz, "classical music," drama, and musical theater. According to the survey, the education level of opera attendees is so high that persons with graduate degrees are more likely to attend opera than those with just a college degree.

Opera audiences are not necessarily shrinking, but neither are they growing. Instead, the audience represents a very small and well-defined segment of American society. This "elite" group also provides the funds that keep opera alive in the United States. Financial statements from major American opera companies in the United States show that the two largest contributors to opera budgets are box office sales and private contributors. On average, box office receipts and private donations equal at least sixty percent of the budget, and perform at about the same percentage mark.⁷ In

⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁶ *2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts: Summary Report* (Washington, D.C: National Endowment for the Arts, 2004), 58-9.

⁷ The Metropolitan Opera, "The Metropolitan Opera Annual Report 2004-2005," <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/about/report.aspx> (accessed September 25, 2007).

comparison with Europe, where many artistic institutions receive substantial government subsidies, money plays a more necessary role in how an opera company relates to the public. In his search for a broader audience for the Met, Peter Gelb faces the challenge of simultaneously placating the expectations of long-time opera patrons while trying to introduce his innovative ideas for the company. The *Times* reported that Gelb's "strategy also carries the risk of alienating traditional opera lovers and serious-minded critics. It remains questionable how congenial iTunes opera downloads would be to the typical Met attendee, whom the house has identified as a 62-year-old college graduate earning about \$120,000."⁸

Given its current reputation as an elitist, somewhat esoteric artform removed from mainstream American culture, it is ironic that opera's early history in the United States was more of a popular entertainment that appealed to all segments of society. The earliest American productions were ballad operas imported or adapted from England. There was little refinement in the ballad operas, which often featured popular songs, lewd stories, and commonplace characters (e.g., *The Beggar's Opera*).⁹ A new type of audience emerged during the early nineteenth century with the importation of Italian opera. Karen Ahlquist describes how the arrival of Italian opera produced a unique dynamic between money, audience, and opera in nineteenth-century New York

The Lyric Opera of Chicago, "The Lyric Opera of Chicago Financial Statements, April 30 2005 and 2004," <http://www.lyricopera.org/about/financial.asp> (accessed September 25, 2007)

San Francisco Opera, "San Francisco Opera Association Report on Audit of Financial Statements for the year ended July 31, 2005," <http://www.sfopera.com/p/?mID=144> (accessed October 21, 2007)

⁸ Wakin.

⁹ Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: a History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 95-101.

City. Her study details the development of “opera as culture” that was promoted by wealthy financiers looking to patronize their own high art. Because of the expense involved in producing Italian opera, the wealthy were able to exert some control over its production, especially what was performed and who was singing.

Ahlquist notes how opera was an attractive investment for the “business-oriented patron.”¹⁰ When compared with theater, it was easy to make the case for opera being more “refined,” more genteel, and “elite.” Over time, box seats and season subscriptions made opera patrons out of the attendees who could afford to purchase their seats in advance. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine describes the same situation as a “sacralization of culture” in the United States. Levine states that “although opera was not, then or now, totally divorced from popular culture, by the end of the nineteenth century it was no longer part and parcel of the eclectic blend of culture that had characterized the United States.”¹¹ In other words, opera left the mainstream of culture. Starting with the Italian Opera House (1833), wealthy patrons created a “cultured” version of the American opera experience. Ahlquist concludes by stating, “If opera was inherently ‘rational and refined’ as its proponents asserted, then appreciating it on its own terms was a desirable form of self-improvement. If, on the other hand, it was not entitled to

¹⁰ Karen Ahlquist, “Opera, Theatre, and Audience in Antebellum New York” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1991), 148.

¹¹ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 102.

such respect, then in order to succeed it would have to be understood by, and meet the expectations of, an audience wide enough to support it."¹²

The public face of opera in the United States has, since the nineteenth century, vacillated between the opposing images of "high culture" and "mainstream entertainment." Perhaps this is why Richard Crawford has observed that "when performance and reception are brought into that history, opera looms as a significant genre in American music."¹³ He sees a similar dichotomy in American opera that has been propagated through concepts of "authenticity" and "accessibility." "Accessibility" is when opera is made to be both entertaining and participatory, and thereby appealing to a broader audience, like with the early ballad operas. "Authenticity" stands in contrast to accessibility because it meant divining the "certain original spirit" of a work dating from its creation. Wealthy patrons, like those who supported Italian Opera in New York, were necessary to finance "authentic" opera. Crawford wrote, "Authenticity can be an expensive proposition. Its serious pursuit requires financing that, though still connected to the marketplace, does not depend completely upon it. The combination of idealism and sacrifice that underlies authenticity helps to explain its appeal to certain kinds of performers and patrons. In high-mindedness and rigor, authenticity is somewhat akin to religion."¹⁴

¹² Ahlquist, 149.

¹³ Richard Crawford, *The American Musical Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

Institutions, performers, and composers have approached dichotomies of “accessibility” and “authenticity” or “high culture” and “mainstream entertainment” in a variety of ways. Knowing this, it should be no surprise that Gelb intends to try and make opera more accessible. He stated that he “told the board at the time of my choice that I wanted to take this great institution that had grown somewhat isolated artistically and reconnect it to the world.”¹⁵ Gelb recognizes that his audience is not diverse enough to support the Met long-term. His method is to pull away some of the barriers that make opera unattractive to a broader public. In bridging the gap between opera and a “broader audience,” opera companies, like the Met, are now trying to make people feel comfortable and welcome in the opera hall. Gelb believes that using more familiar or popular conventions will help audiences grow. “The idea is to really conceive of it as an event, because that's what's exciting about opera.”¹⁶

Peter Gelb and the Met are not alone in quest for “accessibility.” For example, the Websites for many major American opera companies include information to assist those who are “new to opera.” The Web pages reflect what companies “think” creates the gap between opera and a more “mainstream” audience. Recurring topics include the singing of opera in foreign languages, appropriate dress, and the cost of attendance. Companies seem to doubt the accessibility of opera in their tone and tactics, going so far as to ask whether or not the average person can even come to appreciate the opera.

¹⁵ Wakin.

¹⁶ Ibid.

It is therefore evident that opera companies, through such tactics, are trying to make people feel comfortable and welcome in the opera hall. Some sites aim to educate the audience on points of opera etiquette, or assimilate them into operatic culture. "Every baseball fan knows what to do during the seventh-inning stretch. Likewise, every opera fan knows to honor certain longstanding traditions," admonishes the Seattle Opera's Website.¹⁷ New York City Opera, a company known for presenting new and American works, tries "dispelling the myths of opera" on its Website. It refutes the notions that "Opera is expensive, boring, antiquated, for 'blue-hairs' only," and that "all opera singers are fat, screaming ladies in horned helmets."¹⁸ The San Francisco Opera lists twenty-one appearances of opera in popular movies, from *The Godfather* to *XXX*, showing that, like the movies, "there is something in opera for everyone."¹⁹

As American companies recognize the gap between opera and public, effective methods are needed to accomplish their goal. How might an opera company sell the idea of opera as mainstream entertainment to a broader audience? This goal is not new, and this is not the first time that such an idea has been implemented. The concept that opera can and should be accessible has preoccupied American opera companies and American composers of opera. This study focuses on one such composer, Julia Smith, and her first opera, *Cynthia Parker*. Smith began work on the

¹⁷ Seattle Opera, "First Timer's Guide," <http://www.seattleopera.org/discover/etiquette/> (accessed October 14, 2007).

¹⁸ New York City Opera, "New To Opera?" <http://www.nycopera.com/about/newtoopera/> (accessed October 14, 2007).

¹⁹ San Francisco Opera, "New To Opera," <http://www.sfopera.com/p/?mID=160> (accessed October 14, 2007).

opera while a composition fellow at the Juilliard School of Music in 1934. *Cynthia Parker* premiered on February 16 & 17, 1939 at North Texas State Teacher's College in Denton. It was not performed again until 1985.²⁰ Despite the work's obscurity, its construction and production are based strongly on the idea that "there is something in opera for everyone." Smith tries to build connections between the audience and the work, making *Cynthia Parker* an excellent example of the methodology used in creating opera that is more "accessible."

²⁰ Jane Weiner LePage, *Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the Twentieth Century*, vol. ii, (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1983), 302.

CHAPTER 2

JULIA SMITH AND *CYNTHIA PARKER*

Julia Smith (1905-1989)

Cynthia Parker has a lengthy history that spanned the lifetime of its composer.

Julia Smith was born and raised in Denton, Texas where her father was a professor at North Texas State Teacher's College (NTSTC). Smith was a pianist and after getting a Bachelor's degree in English at NTSTC in 1930, she attended the Juilliard School of Music for a performer's certificate. After completing her course of study in 1933, she went on to receive a degree in music education.²¹

Smith's piano teacher Carl Friedberg encouraged her to pursue a degree in composition, claiming that there were more than enough pianists but too few composers.²² Over the next five years, Smith studied with Juilliard composition faculty Rubin Goldmark and Frederick Jacobi. While a student, she composed some short orchestral pieces that were performed by a small women's orchestra (the Orchestrette Classique) and also wrote a series of children's textbooks called *Music for Youth*.²³ From the beginning of her compositional studies, Smith wanted to write an opera based on a Texas story. She hoped to that the work would be included as part of the Texas Centennial celebrations, but she was unable to complete the work by 1936, the year of

²¹ Questionnaire, American Women Composers in the Twentieth Century: A Study of Selected Works, 197-?, Box 4, Folder 4, Julia Smith Collection.

²² LePage, 275.

²³ The textbooks were not published, but it is likely that arrangements from the series were included in the Ginn and Company text, *Worlds of Music*. Correspondence exists between Smith and the series editor, and Smith refers to the texts being published, in some form, by Ginn.

the centennial. *Cynthia Parker* was her first large-scale work following her graduation from Juilliard. It was the kind of musical accomplishment that she hoped would launch her career.

Smith became an accomplished composer, writing music for voice, chorus, orchestra, band, and chamber ensembles. Opera, however, was an important genre throughout her life. After *Cynthia Parker* came the folk opera *The Stranger of Manzano* (1946). The next three operas were composed for performance by children: *The Gooseherd and the Goblin* (1947), *Cockcrow* (1954), and *The Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep* (1966).²⁴

After a decade of writing opera and teaching, Smith returned to New York University for a doctorate. Her dissertation became the basis for the book *Aaron Copland: his Work and Contribution to American Music* (1954). The book was the second autobiography of Aaron Copland (it was preceded by *Aaron Copland* by Arthur Berger). Not only did it chronicle Copland's career to date, it contains many of Smith's personal views on American music and composition. Following publication of her book, Smith became active in promoting Copland's compositions through performing concerts of his piano works.

Over the next two decades, Smith dedicated herself to the promotion of works by women composers, including the publication of a *Directory of American Women Composers* (1970). In 1971, Smith was commissioned by The Opera Guild of Greater Miami to write an opera based on the life of Girl Scouts of America founder Juliette

²⁴ LePage, 302.

Gordon Low. *Daisy* premiered in 1973, and highlights from the opera were later recorded through a grant from the Ford Foundation.

In 1983, Smith began looking for a company to perform a full three-act version of *Cynthia Parker* to coincide with the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Texas Independence. The University of Texas (Austin) Opera Theater performed the work in 1985, numbering the performances of Smith's longest labor at two. Smith died in 1989 on her way to a performance of *Daisy* in Lubbock, Texas.²⁵

Cynthia Parker: Plot Synopsis

For her first opera, Smith chose the story of Cynthia Parker because of its high dramatic quality and its Texan roots.²⁶ Cynthia Ann Parker was abducted at age nine from her family during an Indian raid on Fort Parker (Texas) in 1836. She was raised among the Comanches, married a warrior named Peta Nocona, and had three children (two boys and a girl). The Texas Rangers captured Cynthia and her infant daughter during a raid on a Comanche camp in 1860. Legend states that she was captured and not killed because her blue eyes betrayed her origins. She was brought to her brother Silas, and spent the rest of her life in various homes of her Parker relatives. Her young daughter Topsannah (or Prairie Flower) died shortly after their capture, and Cynthia never saw her husband or sons again. Although it is believed that Cynthia lived until 1870, she never reacclimated to life in white society. Her son Quanah later became a

²⁵ Jane Bledsoe Flaherty, "Julia Smith, Thea Musgrave, and Joann Feldman: Biographies, Selected Operatic Works and Interviews" (M.M.E. thesis, Southeast Missouri State University, 1995), 32.

²⁶ Ann McCutchan, "Texas Legend Revived in Opera," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 5, 1985.

well-known and respected Comanche warrior and chief.²⁷ Smith and librettist Jan Fortune took historical facts and used them to create an adaptation of Cynthia's story, making changes to fit the dramatic needs of the opera. Smith defended her changes to the story, stating that the original facts did not provide a satisfactory climax and resolution. The opera not only reframes the timeline of Cynthia's life, but also keeps Topsannah (or Prairie Flower) alive and reunites Quannah Parker with his mother.²⁸

The opera opens with Cynthia as an adult in the custody of the Texas Rangers, following her recapture after twenty-four years with the Comanches. The Texas Rangers sing "The Trail to Mexico" around the campfire and go to sleep. Cynthia tries to sneak out of their camp, but is unable to free her daughter, Prairie Flower (here portrayed as a young girl, not an infant) before being discovered. Her family, represented by her brother Ed and his wife Mary, identify and claim Cynthia. The year is 1850 – ten years before Cynthia was actually captured by the Texas Rangers.²⁹

The next act is ten years later, sometime during the Civil War. Ed and Mary Parker are hosting a party, and the scene opens with a pioneer dance. After the dance, Mary urges the Texas Rangers to recount their tales of glory from the Indian wars. They respond by singing "Out of the Night on the Highway." One of the Rangers mentions that they are about to go after a band of Comanches who are led by Quannah Parker, Cynthia's son. Cynthia eventually enters the scene and laments her captivity

²⁷ The Handbook of Texas Online, "Parker, Cynthia Ann," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpa18.html> (accessed June 29, 2007)

²⁸ McCutchan.

²⁹ Margaret Schmidt Hacker, *Cynthia Ann Parker: the Life and the Legend* (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1990), ii.

and the loss of her sons. Ross, Mary, and Cynthia exchange words, and the Rangers exit. Prairie Flower enters and is upset because the guests have insulted her parentage and said she is not an Indian princess. The situation comes to head when Ed loses his temper and almost strikes Prairie Flower. He sings a duet with Cynthia about the lack of resolution between them since her return to the Parker clan.

After Mary and Ed exit, Cynthia shows Prairie Flower markings in the garden that signal Quanah is coming to rescue. They reminisce about their former life among the tribe as Cynthia spins at the spinning wheel. This scene carries into the "American Indian Dances."

The last act opens with an Indian assault on the homestead. The Comanches distract Ed and the others so Quanah can find Cynthia and Prairie Flower. Cynthia is accidentally shot with an arrow in the exchange. She is thrilled to see her son, and urges him to flee with Prairie Flower as death closes upon her. The opera ends as Cynthia dies and is carried from the homestead by the Comanches in a "Ritual Death Dance and Procession."

Cynthia Parker: Compositional and Production History

Cynthia Parker can be difficult to discuss because it exists in three forms: a one-act opera with prologue (1939), a two-act opera (1945-1966), and a three-act opera (1978-1984). Smith engaged Texas journalist Jan Fortune to write the libretto, and together, they chose Cynthia's story. Fortune wrote radio dramas for the centennial celebrations that featured stories of other Texas legends and historical figures. The 1939 version contains lengthy sections of dialogue, and exists in one act because Smith

was unable to complete more in time for the premiere performance in 1939. Much of the plot covered in the prologue is set to music in the subsequent versions of the opera. The prologue and two “scenes” of the 1939 version evolved into three full acts over the next forty years.

The work was expanded during the 1940s and 1950s because Fortune and Smith considered marketing the work in two other locations, Broadway and Hollywood. Smith insisted that the story maintain its tragic ending, but others felt that the story needed an uplifting conclusion in which Cynthia was successfully rescued or fell in love.³⁰ Fortune and Smith ended their association, so Smith made all future revisions to the libretto. The second version was never produced or fully orchestrated.

Smith prepared the third and final version in anticipation of the Sesquicentennial Celebration of Texas independence. The 1978 version trims away the lengthy scenes of dialogue and converts most of it to recitative. An expanded pioneer dance and duet are added to the musical numbers. The third version was also the basis for a reduction of the opera presented as a piano duo in 1988.

There have been two full-length productions of *Cynthia Parker*. The premiere was at North Texas State Teacher’s College on February 16 and 17, 1939. Dr. Wilfrid C. Bain, dean of the Department of Music, directed the performance. Smith engaged former Metropolitan Opera soprano and Texas native Leonora Corona to sing the title role of Cynthia. Students sang in the chorus, played in the orchestra, built the sets, and made the costumes.

³⁰ LePage, 280-1.

There is ample evidence that Smith tried to have the work performed in New York and other universities of the Southwest following the Denton premiere. No other performances actually materialized, despite mentions of New York performances in newspaper notices and in Smith's correspondence. Smith stated in a 1983 letter to Jan Fortune that a New York production never happened. She listed the production history of her operas in another letter to the National Opera Institute, noting, "I have been saving it [*Cynthia Parker*] for the Texas celebration I missed in 1936, but it can be ready for the 150th Anniversary of Texas Independence which occurs in 1986. In the meantime I have written five other operas (and at work on a new one); all have been produced, 2 are published [*Shepherdess and the Chimneysweep* and *Daisy*], 1 recorded [Highlights from *Daisy*], and at least 3 have enjoyed numerous performance [the three children's operas and *Daisy* are most often performed]."³¹ Almost fifty years later (1985), University of Texas (Austin) performed the three-act version of *Cynthia Parker* in honor of the Texas Sesquicentennial under the direction of Robert de Simone.

Studying *Cynthia Parker*

There have been two previous studies of Julia Smith and *Cynthia Parker*. In 1995, Jane Bledsoe Flaherty surveyed the work of three American women composers of opera. She spent time examining the Julia Smith Collection at the University of North Texas, and held an interview with Julia's brother, Emory Smith. Her study gives a brief overview of *Cynthia Parker* and *Daisy* and a transcription of the interview.

³¹ Julia Smith, to John M. Ludwig, Executive Director, The National Opera Institute, July 11, 1983, Julia Smith Collection.

In 2005, Karen Jury wrote a thesis titled, "Julia Smith's *Cynthia Parker*: Historical and Musical Expressions in an American Opera." This study focuses both on the history of the work itself, but also its historical perspective as seen through its Native American elements, especially the appropriation of songs from *The Indians' Book* by Natalie Curtis. Jury, like Flaherty, spends time discussing Smith's role as an American woman composer, using many of the same sources, including materials from the Julia Smith Collection. This collection includes correspondence, manuscripts, programs, photographs, and other memorabilia from Smith's work as a composer, performer, and advocate. *Cynthia Parker* figures prominently in the collection, but almost as important are the materials in the collection that provide context for the work and its subsequent revisions.

For example, Smith's approach to writing *Cynthia Parker* in the 1930s is expressed in her work on a contemporary project, the textbook series *Music for Youth*.³² In the textbooks, Smith introduces opera to students following a specific pattern. The operas presented in both books are examples of European folk opera.³³ For example, in the Grade Four text, Smith talks about Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*. Smith starts with a composer biography and then proceeds to present the opera in segments that alternate between plot summaries and song arrangements. The songs presented are a hymn, dance, hunting song, and an aria. It is important to note that all of the above, with the exception of the aria, are types of functional music, or music useful in everyday life. The plot is interspersed between the songs, and at the

³² The Julia Smith Collection contains the books for grades four and six.

³³ *Der Freischütz* is presented in the Grade Four text, and *Guillaume Tell* in Grade Six.

end of the unit, students are encouraged to write their own dialogue and perform the opera. The structure of *Cynthia Parker* follows this pattern, using sections of dialogue to explain the story (since very little plot advancement occurs until the rescue scene) that alternate with a wide variety of song forms, including a hymn, dances, and cowboy songs.

This pattern does not disassociate the construction of *Cynthia Parker* from that of other operas. The work uses an overture, arias, recitative, dance sets, and other forms that are common to the genre. Upon a closer examination, what becomes apparent is an imbalance of the opera's disparate components. Part of the problem stems from the story and its diversity of character. Smith had to find ways to communicate a story that included gun-toting Texas Rangers, homespun pioneer folk, Native Americans, and a woman trapped between such vastly different cultures. Smith composed a work with cowboy songs alongside arias and Native American dances that range from lullaby to mescal rite, and then used the genre of opera as a container. This approach essentially turns the opera's construction on its head, emphasizing its parts at the cost of the whole.

In the following chapter, musical themes, cowboy songs, Native American music and referencing used in *Cynthia Parker* are interpreted as working on two levels. First, they are examined as simple, recognizable references, or are heard as source music that makes grand opera accessible by integrating the music with the plot. The audience is not constantly asked to disassociate performance from reality in *Cynthia*

Parker, but instead is given simple tools that aid in understanding a difficult plot. Simplification and familiarity allow access to the story and music.

Second, music and visual elements are used to authenticate Smith's version of the Cynthia Parker story. The audience is asked, on multiple levels, to accept the opera as an historical account of their American past. Smith used popular Western images to authenticate the opera's presentation of cowboys and Indians. By choosing common, well-known types and stereotypes in the opera, Smith aimed to attract a mainstream American audience.

Smith's rationale for this approach is supported by her definition of opera and her ambitions in the genre. Smith states in the preface to *Music for Youth* that "opera is the most democratic form of music, due to its integration of music, language, theatre, stage design and dance. For this reason it will capture the imagination of youth. The experience of participation in these carefully chosen operas [namely, European folk operas such as *Der Freischütz*], which are adapted to the level of the youth's understanding, will give him a medium for self-expression both creative and interpretive."³⁴ What *Music for Youth* reveals is the value Smith placed on opera as a genre that could relate to its audience and its performers, while blending many different styles and forms together. It was responsibility of the composer to provide elements that would inspire participation, imagination, interpretation, and creativity.

Smith's belief in opera's powerful hold over an audience coincided with her dream of an American opera tradition complete with works inspired by national stories

³⁴ Julia Smith, Ruth Shafer, and Dorothy Pease, *Music for Youth: Book Four*, 1936: 4, Julia Smith Collection.

and music. In discussing Weber in the text, Smith writes, "a few American composers have written operas based on American folk tunes and legends, but as yet, there has been no outstanding one such as Carl Maria von Weber. We know that when this composer does appear, he will do as much for American opera as Carl Maria von Weber did for German opera." This coincides with her conclusion to the preface, which states, "America must absorb the best in music, fill their souls with it and then create in terms of American feeling, experience and vision. Why cannot America express its characteristic qualities in music and thus develop a national feeling which, through music, will inspire and encourage the world?"³⁵

Smith's view of opera in America is best expressed in her composition of *Cynthia Parker*.

Smith targeted her opera for an American audience that she hoped would embrace its music and story on a personal level. Smith's ideas about composition and American music reappear in the text of her biography of Aaron Copland, written fifteen years after the premiere of *Cynthia Parker*. She divides Copland's compositions into three style periods. The last style is "*Gebrauchsmusik: American Style*" and includes the Americana, theater, radio, ballet, and film music composed during the 1930s and 1940s. In this section, Smith notes the "functional nature" of this music, and its appropriation of American folksong as source material. Smith defines her use of the term *Gebrauchsmusik* as "music for use" that "has taken two directions."

She continues:

³⁵ Ibid., 5.

The first has been 'developing music for amateurs to perform: operettas and cantatas for school children; instrumental pieces for school and college orchestras; and works in which the audience participates by singing some of the choruses and songs.' The second, music 'for performance by professionals, but intended for a wider audience,' includes incidental music for plays and films; for radio; light operas having a popular appeal; and music which has 'political and social significance in a changing world.'³⁶

Both of Copland's operas, *The Second Hurricane* and *The Tender Land*, fall into Smith's *Gebrauchsmusik* definition. *Cynthia Parker* is a prime example of Smith's *Gebrauchsmusik*, but straddles both definitions, intending to be both functional, yet for a wider audience. This only affirms that she continued her pursuit of composing works that were accessible, yet authentic in content that not only reflect American values and history with the goal of finding a mainstream, American audience.

³⁶ Julia Smith, *Aaron Copland: His Work and Contribution to American Music* (New York: E.P. Dutton), 162.

CHAPTER 3

ACCESSIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN *CYNTHIA PARKER*

This chapter is divided into two major sections that address issues of accessibility and authenticity in *Cynthia Parker*. The first section outlines the use of themes and musical gestures or references called “Indianisms” as examples of accessibility. The second section discusses the use of cowboy songs and Native American music and costuming in creating an authentic Western opera.

Musical Characterization of Cynthia Ann Parker

Smith uses simple musical references that emphasize character traits. Some of these references are presented as themes that are easy to hear and identify. First, musical themes are used to define Cynthia and her conflict of character as both a Parker and a Comanche. In an analysis written for the *Dallas Morning News* in 1939, Smith explained how the opera’s music represents “the classic situation in which Cynthia, torn between two great civilizations, finds herself.”³⁷ It is therefore not surprising how two themes relate this dichotomy of Cynthia Parker’s character through music. The first of these themes is heard in the 1939 version during Cynthia’s first aria, “Oh, My Brother.” The theme is a half note that ties to a descending line, for a total duration of two measures. This same gesture reappears as the theme for the “Ritual Death Dance,” initially played by the bassoon.

³⁷ John Rosenfield, “As Teachers College Prepares Premiere of Texas Opera,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 10, 1939.

The placement of the theme within the opera and its lamenting tone characterize Cynthia Parker as an "indomitable, heroic and tragic" figure.³⁸ When the theme becomes the melody of the "Ritual Death Dance," it would seem that the music was meant to foreshadow her doom from the start. Because the theme echoes Cynthia's desire to return to the Indian lodges, I refer to it as the "Preloch theme" (Preloch is Cynthia's Comanche name).

The Preloch theme plays a more integral role in the 1978 version, appearing four more times. The six times that the theme appears are all definitive moments for Cynthia's character. Cynthia first appears in the opera while the English horn plays the theme. The choice of instrument and the minor, downward progression of the music give the theme a sad and mournful character.

Example 1.1: Preloch Theme, Act I, Scene I



Horns and trumpets repeat the Preloch theme in Act II during the party. Ed Parker reacts to this presentation of the Preloch theme when it occurs just before Cynthia enters the stage. He hears the musical cue and reacts by telling his party guests, "Shh! Cynthia's coming!"³⁹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Julia Smith, *Cynthia Parker: an Opera in Three Acts*, 1978, 13, Julia Smith Collection.

Example 1.2: Preloch Theme, Act II, Scene I

26

Horn in F

Trumpet in C

Ed

ff *ff* *fp* *pp*

3 3

Shh.. Cynthia's com-ing _____
Cynthia enters quickly
from door of house (SR)

The six occurrences of the Preloch theme can be split into three types of presentation: first, instrumental solos (Examples 1 and 2); as melody for Cynthia to sing (the aria "Oh, My Brother"); and full orchestral presentations (when Cynthia remembers her past - what Smith terms the "climactic recognition," and as the thematic core of the "Ritual Death Dance"). Cynthia's first aria is the only instance when the theme is sung, and this is significant. The aria, "Oh, My Brother," resonates with Cynthia's sorrow about her captivity, expressed in the text, "Could I walk the paths of the foothills in the land of the Anadarkos! Could I smell the smoke of the campfire before the Great Chief's lodges, and hear the voice of my lost sons. Ai-ee!"⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Example 1.3: Preloch Theme, Act I, Scene I

This musical score is for the Preloch Theme, Act I, Scene I. It is written for a full orchestra and begins at measure 45. The score is in 3/8 time and features a key signature of three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The instrumentation includes Piccolo, Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in B-flat, Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn in F 1, Horn in F 2, Trumpet in C, Trombone, Tuba, Timpani, Snare Drum, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is marked with a forte (*ff*) dynamic throughout. The Piccolo, Flute, and Violin I/II parts feature melodic lines with triplets and slurs. The woodwinds and strings provide harmonic support with rhythmic patterns, including triplets in the Snare Drum and Cello parts. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system ending at measure 60 and the second system continuing from measure 61.

Another theme stands in opposition to the Preloch theme, so it seems proper to call it the “Cynthia” theme. This theme occurs when Cynthia is reminded of her childhood or her identity as a Parker. Sul Ross sings the theme when it is first presented (two measures after rehearsal 13), accompanying the text “Can’t you understand we are only trying to bring you back to your people?”⁴¹

Example 2: Cynthia Theme, Act I, Scene I

13 Ross
Can't you un-der - stand we are on-ly try-ing to bring you back to your peo-ple

The theme is repeated several times throughout the same scene, and reappears when Ed arrives at the camp and first encounters Cynthia (rehearsal 32). It then conflicts with the Preloch theme during the first act during the debate over Cynthia’s true identity. The debate is settled when Cynthia reunites with her brother Ed and the Preloch theme, in a full orchestral presentation, is played instead of the Cynthia theme. The Cynthia theme does not appear in Acts II and III, reinforcing Cynthia’s refusal to accept life apart from her husband and sons. A review of the opera in the *Texas Music Educator* noted Cynthia’s conflict, stating that “most of the music, which is built around Indian themes, deals with the inner struggle of Cynthia Ann in her wish to return to the Indians.”⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., 2.

⁴² “Cynthia Parker – An All-Texas Opera,” *Texas Music Educator*, March 1939, 8.

The most important feature of the themes is their presentation as melody. The themes are therefore easy to hear, and their associations to Cynthia's character very direct. In writing about the use of themes in *The Heiress*, Smith states, "Thus this often 'foreground' music assists materially and psychologically in the dramatic conflicts that ensue."⁴³ The same is true for the Preloch and Cynthia themes in *Cynthia Parker*. The themes assist the audience in their understanding of Cynthia's predicament and its dramatic conclusion.

"Indianisms"

Smith uses another kind of referencing that appears in the music, libretto, and staging of *Cynthia Parker*. Such references were intended to deal with the most difficult and distancing element in the opera: Native Americans. There are three major Comanche characters (Cynthia, Prairie Flower, and Quanah) and numerous mentions of "Injuns" in the opera that are treated musically and textually.⁴⁴ Earlier in the century, many American composers had begun to incorporate music materials drawn from Native American sources into their own works, as part of their desire to create a distinctly "American" school of composition. This movement resulted in a number of "Indianist" works by such composers as Arthur Farwell, Charles Wakefield Cadman, and Victor Herbert, the latter two of whom wrote stage works based on Native American subject matter. Most of the "Indianist" movement had largely passed by the mid-1930s when Smith began composing *Cynthia Parker*, but the musical references (or

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Julia Smith, *Cynthia Parker*, 1939, 3, Julia Smith Collection.

“Indianisms”) that the movement created perpetuated in other media, primarily in film.⁴⁵

When the opera was composed, cowboy westerns were a stock film genre.⁴⁶ As in the “Indianist” operas, Native Americans were stereotypically portrayed in such films as one of two stereotypes: either as barbarians or “noble savages.”⁴⁷ During the early decades of the twentieth century, Hollywood propagated such stereotypes for Native Americans to a greater degree, largely because of their ability to match description with image, sound, and mass circulation.⁴⁸ *Cynthia Parker* uses Native American “Indianisms” for its Comanche characters in its score and libretto, not to mention the costuming. Beth Levy explains two “Indianist” approaches to writing that invoked the idea of Native Americans:

In instrumental works, these composers ignored the creative agency of Native Americans by altering borrowed melodies or disregarding their original contexts. In texted music, emphasis on Indian identification with the land enacted a metaphorical collapsing of the human, Native American presence into the colorful Western landscape.⁴⁹

Textually, the libretto of *Cynthia Parker* contains many references to nature, starting with Cynthia’s first interaction with her white captors: “May the Great White Spirit strike you down, may the God of Rain send lightning to blight you,” and her first aria

⁴⁵ Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 139-142.

⁴⁶ Michael Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Film* (Landham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 64.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

⁴⁸ Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 87.

⁴⁹ Beth Levy, “Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West, 1895-1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), 20.

recalls "the paths of the foothills in the land of Anadarko . . . the smoke of the campfire before the Great Chief's lodges." The rescue scene (which features all three Comanche characters) contains even more nature imagery, such as "swiftly galloping ponies," "star-shine, through the moonglow, through the blackened willows," and "sun-scorched grasses." The idea of the noble "savage" is clear in Cynthia's proclamation that "there is another journey before me, before me up to the Great White Spirit," or later when she declares, "my heart is light as an eagle's wing and strong as eagle's tendons; my feet are young and brave and free and eager to be running."⁵⁰

Musically, Smith inundates the score with "Indianisms" that grew out of Indianist compositions. W. Anthony Sheppard lists many Native American musical stereotypes used in Hollywood during the 1930s and 1940s, including "marcato pentatonic brass tunes," and "whoops and war chants," that served as aural signals to the audience that they were hearing Indians.⁵¹ He also points out that such symbols were meant to be "arbitrary" because the audience was less likely to connect with realistic Native American representations. Therefore, audiences came to understand such symbols as authentic, identifying tom-tom rhythms and modal melodies as realistic representations of Native American cultures. Michael Pisani discusses oft-used musical "Indianisms" in his article "I'm an Indian Too'," including tom-tom eighth note rhythms, modal, pentatonic, and minor inflections, diminished seven chords, and whooping or shrieks

⁵⁰ Julia Smith, *Cynthia Parker*, 1978, 23-28.

⁵¹ W. Anthony Sheppard, "An Exotic Enemy: Anti-Japanese Musical Propaganda in World War II Hollywood," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54 (Summer 2001): 327-8.

that receive orchestral treatment.⁵² Many of the musical signifiers described by Pisani and Sheppard are heard in *Cynthia Parker*.

Cynthia Parker starts with “the pulse of the tom-toms” in the bass instruments, and continues the thumping for twenty measures.⁵³ The rhythm returns at the close of Act I, immediately following the hymn of thanks for Cynthia’s safe return, lasting another twenty-five measures. The rhythm is first performed by percussion and later augmented by other instruments.

Example 3.1: Tom-Tom rhythm, Act I, Scene I (measure 3)

The musical score for Example 3.1 is presented in three staves. The top staff is for Timpani, the middle for Tom Toms, and the bottom for Harp. All three parts are in 2/4 time and feature a steady eighth-note pulse. The Timpani part is written in a bass clef with a key signature of one flat. The Tom Toms part is written in a percussion clef. The Harp part is written in a grand staff with a key signature of one flat. The score shows the first three measures of the piece, with the eighth-note pulse continuing throughout.

⁵² Michael V. Pisani, “I’m and Indian Too’: Creating Native American Identities in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Music,” in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 219-220.

⁵³ Mary Crutcher, “Tonight’s the Night – Texan’s to See First Own Opera,” *Fort Worth Press*, February 16, 1939.

Example 3.2: Tom-Tom rhythm, Act I, Scene I

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is Violin I, followed by Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The time signature is 2/4 and the key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes, with some measures containing chords. A box with the number 49 is above the first measure of the Violin I staff.

In addition to the tom-toms, there are several examples of Indian “whoops and shrieks” in the opera. Cynthia, on more than one occasion, sings a cry that appears in the libretto as “Ai-ee, Ai-ee.”⁵⁴ This happens in the opening scene when she curses the Rangers (five measures after rehearsal 10), later during the hymn of thanksgiving (five measures after rehearsal 46), and again as she laments the loss of her sons in the arioso, “It is true I was born of the white race,” at rehearsal 31.

⁵⁴ Julia Smith, *Cynthia Parker*, 1978, 65.

Example 4: "Ai-ee" excerpt, Act II, Scene I

The musical score for the "Ai-ee" excerpt, Act II, Scene I, is presented in a standard orchestral format. It includes parts for Timpani, Cynthia (voice), Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/2. The music is marked *pp* (pianissimo) and *morendo* (diminuendo). The vocal line shows the lyrics "Ai - ee" with a long note that spans across the measures. The instrumental parts feature sustained notes with a downward motion, mirroring the vocal line.

The motion of the Cynthia's cry (when sung) is always scored in a downward motion, another "Indianism" mentioned by Pisani that is most often chromatic. There are numerous places where chromatic lines descend in octaves. One of the earliest examples happens when Cynthia tries to escape from the Rangers in Act I.

Example 5.1: Descending Octaves, Act I, Scene I (one measure before rehearsal 10)

He springs toward Indian Woman
and pins her arms to her side,
aided by Tom

The octaves recur in the low brass only six measures later in the low brass, following Cynthia’s singing of “Ai-ee” after being restrained from leaving the cowboy camp.

Example 5.2: Descending Octaves, Act I, Scene I (six measures after rehearsal 10)

All of the “Indianisms” present in *Cynthia Parker* function like the themes discussed in the section above. They are identifiers that characterize, on a very basic level, the object of their association. Many of the references sound ominous and threatening, such as the descending octaves and tom-toms. Cynthia’s shrieks not only identify her as a Comanche, but also make her appear less civilized or human, as she cannot express her grief but through unintelligible syllables. The “Indianisms” stand in stark

contrast to the cowboy songs used in the opera, which are discussed in the following section.

Seeing the Authentic Past

History and operatic grandeur clash in the photographs from the 1939 production of *Cynthia Parker*. Leonora Corona's dress for the final two acts is obviously more about dressing the prima donna than evoking the pioneer days of Texas. The Native American costuming shows yet again how stereotypes were used to represent Comanche culture. "The popular image of the Indian as a man on horseback, wearing a flowing feather bonnet, breechclout and moccasins, holding an upraised tomahawk in one hand, seems to persist. His wife is envisioned as wearing a beaded browband with an upright feather at the back, a long, beaded buckskin dress and moccasins," writes John C. Ewers in an essay about "Static Images" used for Native Americans.⁵⁵

In viewing production and promotion stills from the 1939 *Cynthia Parker*, many of the features listed by Ewers are evident. *Cynthia Parker* benefits from telling a story that includes Plains Indians, since many such stereotypes grew from representing tribes like the Sioux, Apache, Comanche, etc. The costuming shows how popular image triumphed, yet again, over any attempt at accuracy. Cynthia's first costume, or at least part of it, is the sole exception to this rule. Her headdress recalls historical photos of Cynthia Parker, pictured below. This, at least, is some gesture toward the historical past based on some form of primary artifact. In using themes and musical "Indianisms," Julia Smith constructed simple definitions for characters and their roles in the opera.

⁵⁵ John C. Ewers, "The Static Images," in *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, ed. Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L.P. Silet (Ames, IA: The Iowa State University Press, 1980), 16.

The Cynthia and Preloch themes are easy to hear and assigned clear, undisputable meanings that foreshadow Cynthia's fate from the very first act. The "Indianisms" work in similar fashion, providing the most widely accepted, popularly understood musical, textual, and visual cues to represent the Comanches.

Illustration 1: Leonora Corona as Preloch



Illustration 2: Cynthia, Prairie Flower, and Quanah, Rescue Scene



Illustration 3: Photograph of Cynthia Parker



Illustration 4: Prologue, 1939 production



Illustration 5: Braves Dances, "American Indian Dances"



Illustration 6: "Ritual Death Dance and Processional"



Cynthia Parker and Authenticity

The use of Native American stereotypes gives the impression that Julia Smith was not concerned with presenting an accurate account of Cynthia Ann Parker's story. Even though the facts are ripe for artistic appropriation, Smith and Fortune felt the need to concoct the rescue scene, in order to heighten the drama of an already dramatic tale. Smith did not, however, aim to abandon the reality of Cynthia's story. Smith took a special pride in presenting Cynthia Ann to her fellow Texans in an opera that designed to be a picture of Western American life.

A 1939 *Time* magazine wrote that the audience of *Cynthia Parker* "heard not musical history in the making but local history in the remaking; and they loved it." The article recounted Cynthia's tale in detail, calling it "a story from the 1830s which many of the audience had heard on their grandfathers' knees." The writer assumes that the opera was factual, identifying the major plot points, including the fictional rescue Fortune and Smith concocted for the final scene. The article concludes with a similar account of a white settler, Bianca Babb Bell, who was abducted by Indians: "one day some redskins swooped down on her home, shot her mother dead with arrows right before her eyes, carried her and her small brother off and held them captive for two years."⁵⁶ The article accepts the opera as true to fact, emphasizing its attention to history in describing the opera's premiere. This shows how the opera, with its boast of being based on a true story, valued its own definition of authenticity in depicting the story of Cynthia Parker.

⁵⁶ "Opera in Texas," *Time*, February 27, 1939, 47.

History, accurate or not, was another way that Smith planned to connect opera and audience. It led Karen Jury to conclude that the opera is best described as “historical.” Jury focuses on the Native American references and music as a reflection of changing views concerning Native Americans in the United States that arose during the 1930s and 1940s. She analyzes Smith’s use of source music taken from Natalie Curtis’s *The Indians Book* for the “American Indian Dances” to substantiate her claim. Jury writes:

Two of the major underlying themes of the opera are the disbelief on the part of the Texans that Cynthia could possibly prefer living with the Indians and the continuing hostilities between the Indians and the Rangers, who were determined to rid the land of the Indian threat. These were very real issues facing the frontier settlers around the time in which *Cynthia Parker* is set. Fortune, with her knowledge of Texas history, accurately portrayed this in her libretto. During the 1830s-60s, Comanches were still roaming across Texas and Oklahoma with relative freedom, and raids by them and other Indian tribes were common occurrences. The general belief during Cynthia’s lifetime was that Indians should either be assimilated into American culture or removed if they refused and/or resisted.⁵⁷

There are several problems with Jury’s proposal. First, the opera is an unlikely representative of changing views toward Native Americans as it uses common stereotypes (musical, textual, and visual) to portray Cynthia and her children. The relationship between the Comanches, and in particular, the Texas government, was not as static or as clear as either Jury’s description or the opera maintains. The attack on Fort Parker, for example, is often described as an unusual occurrence. Second, Jury admits that there exists no evidence of Smith’s own views towards Native Americans beyond their appearance in *Cynthia Parker*. Even the use of music from the Curtis book

⁵⁷ Karen Jury, “Julia Smith’s *Cynthia Parker*: Historical and Musical Expressions in an American Opera” (M.M. thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2005), 34.

is misappropriated. Smith uses music from multiple tribes and recasts their meaning for her own purpose.⁵⁸ Not only are the characters stereotyped, all supposed marks of musical authenticity are questionable at best.

What Jury's thesis does show is how Julia Smith prized the idea of *Cynthia Parker* as historical. In fact, the idea of historical authenticity is apparent throughout the opera. Smith did include a disclaimer in the 1939 program that "no effort has been made to obtain historical accuracy. Modifications for opera and dramatic purposes have been made."⁵⁹ The fabricated rescue scene and other deviations from the original story mean that the opera is not historically accurate. However, almost every newspaper article about *Cynthia Parker* mentions its factual basis or its Texas roots or the authentic American music in the score. Smith did not need historical accuracy to use authenticity as a tool of accessibility. Instead, she was able to fluctuate between artistic license and historical references that would attract interest from the media and audience alike.

Using authenticity, Smith entices her audience to invest their attention. This happens musically, textually, and was especially important in promoting the work. In many different ways, Smith tries to create the feeling of being a witness to the actual events, or as providing an "authentic" Western experience for her American audience. It may be that she wanted to replicate her own experience of seeing the West brought to life through music. "I shall never forget," Smith recounted, "the effect that one of the first New York performances of the ballet [*Billy the Kid*] had upon me, for I – hailing from the Southwest where the cowboy songs Copland employed sprang into being –

⁵⁹ Program, *Cynthia Parker* performance, February 16 & 17, 1939, Julia Smith Collection.

was completely touched by the sincerity and authentically expressive emotional content projected by the happy union of music and choreography. 'This is real American art,' I thought, 'the genuine article!'"⁶⁰ *Billy the Kid* premiered the year prior to *Cynthia Parker*. Interestingly enough, the works share the use of cowboy tunes to evoke the experience of the "wild West."

The West is a common setting that blurs the lines of historical accuracy and authenticity. Janet Walker describes a perception of Westerns as historically authentic that permeates film depictions of the frontier. Walker writes, "through the lens of history, we come to realize that westerns incorporate, elide, embellish, mythologize, allegorize, erase, duplicate, and rethink past events that are themselves – as history – fragmented, fuzzy, and striated with fantasy constructions."⁶¹ *Cynthia Parker* is an example of a Western story that tries to duplicate and embellish the past. Smith and Fortune's libretto rewrites history and there is little about the opera that is actually accurate, but Smith uses mainstream Western images and music to create a sense of the authentic. Reviewer C.E. Shuford wrote, "Aside from the vivid and original use she has made of her native material, the beautiful melody she has introduced for the common man in her audience . . . Julia Smith has driven home a lesson for both herself and other composers interested in the future of American music. On the plains and hills of the Great West she has staked her claim."⁶² This depiction of the Great West includes the folk and cowboy songs and a Native American dance suite.

⁶⁰ Julia Smith, *Aaron Copland: his Work and Contribution to American Music*, 9-10.

⁶¹ Janet Walker, ed., *Westerns: Films through History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 13.

The image of the cowboy stands in contrast to that of the Native Americans in the opera. Whereas Comanches are heard and seen using largely negative stereotypes, cowboys are shown using a different set of stereotypes, again, largely drawn from film, but also radio. Cowboy songs were another powerful reference to Western life, but their associations were more positive, lovable, and heroic. Actors such as Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and later Roy Rogers are examples of the "singing cowboy" icon Hollywood created in the 1930s. By the middle of the decade, the music of the singing cowboy was already popular on the radio, and was easily transferred to the big screen.⁶³

This image, while not accurate, was common and accepted by moviegoers, making it a convenient tool Smith could use to authenticate her Western opera. The music functions to influence audience perception of the characters and the opera's setting. First, it placed musical artifacts of American culture to make direct connections from the American cultural past to the present. Second, Smith worked the songs into the story as naturally occurring. Folk music, including two cowboy songs, is not incorporated into the music as melodic and harmonic source material, but as part of the action. In film, such music is termed diegetic music.

One cowboy song appears in the 1939 version, two in the 1978 version. The first cowboy song, "The Trail to Mexico," was appropriated, and the second, "Out of the Night on the Highway," was originally composed. Smith does not cite her source for "The Trail to Mexico," but the lyrics appear in John and Alan Lomax's *Cowboy Songs*

⁶² C.E. Shuford, "Second Performance of Opera 'Cynthia Parker' Moves Smoothly Before Big Audience at T.C.," *Denton Record Chronicle*, February 18, 1939.

⁶³ Stanfield, 87.

and Other Frontier Ballads.⁶⁴ Peter Standfield notes how the Lomax collection built a base for the later popularization of cowboy music, and Smith talks about their work in *Music for Youth*.⁶⁵

In the 1978 version, the Texas Rangers sing the “The Trail to Mexico” immediately following the overture. Their leader, Sul Ross, first outlines the tune (one measure after rehearsal 3) and then the men join in, some singing harmonies on the syllable “Hmm” (rehearsal 4). They are sitting around the campfire after a successful raid on the Comanche camp, singing a cowboy tune at the end of a long day.

Example 6: “The Trail to Mexico” – Act I, Scene I

The musical score is set in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). A box containing the number '4' is positioned above the first measure of the Tenor part. The Tenor part begins with a whole note rest, followed by a half note G4, and then a series of quarter notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The Bass 1 part starts with a whole note G3, followed by a half note A3, and then a series of quarter notes: B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4. The Bass 2 part begins with a whole note G2, followed by a half note A2, and then a series of quarter notes: B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G3. The lyrics for Bass 1 are: "Oh, it-was a long ___ and lonesome road ___ as our herd rolled ___ on to Mex-i - co ___". The Tenor and Bass 2 parts have "Hmm" harmonies written below their respective staves.

The orchestral accompaniment is spare, with the occasional ring of tambourine in the background. Smith meant the song to be a natural occurrence in the opera, writing that “The Rangers sing a cowboy song, hoping that its strains will soothe the frightened

⁶⁴ John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 132-135.

⁶⁵ Stanfield, 47.

captives and induce them to sleep."⁶⁶ Smith creates a scene that leads the audience to believe what they see on stage as an authentic imitation of life. As the first musical number after the overture, this scene helps set the tone for the opera as a whole.

The opera also includes a newly composed cowboy song, "Out of the Night on the Highway," Smith wrote for the Rangers to sing at the pioneer dance. The song, a ballad, tells of the Rangers and their battles with various Indian tribes. The tune is a rollicking mixture of eighth- and quarter- note rhythms that chromatically climb and fall, only to rise again. Smith's melody is not easily singable, especially without its accompaniment, nor is it very "cowboy-like." The chromatic melody does not lend itself to smooth or very effective harmonization.

The stanza, "Out of the night on the highway to the beat of a thunderous tune, the rangers are riding, riding, under a yellow moon," emphasizes the diegetic quality imposed on the song, creating the picture of the cowboys singing a song of triumph after their victory. The song is, in essence, a ballad that recounts the Rangers' successful raid of the Comanche camp mentioned earlier in the opera. In 1985, Smith labeled the song as "Texas Rangers' Song." Again, she attaches meaning to the song, trying to communicate to the audience its purpose in the work.

⁶⁶ Julia Smith, "Synopsis of the Story and Themes from the Opera," December 1985, 1, Julia Smith Collection.

Example 7: "Out of the Night on the Highway," Act II, Scene I

The musical score is for a piece in 6/8 time, marked *mf* Allegro (in two). It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Out of the night on the high-way To the beat of a thun-der-ous tune The ran-gers are ri-ding, ri-ding Un-der a yel-low moon; Far on the star-dust sky-line You can see them pass Ran-gers are ri-ding, ri-ding, ri-ding, ri-ding, ri-ding, Un-der a yel-low moon!" The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *p*, *cresc. ed accel.*, and *f*.

Far on the star-dust skyline
Cherokee war cries sound,
Silver spurs on sweating flanks,
Sparked hoofs o'er the ground.

Scream of a high-spent arrow,
Whoop of a savage yell!
The Rangers are riding, riding, riding,
Into a living hell!

Sabers flash in the moonlight,
Sabers splattered with blood;
And down in the dust a dead man
Where a painted warrior stood.

Clatter of clash and thunder
Of savage, sword and men,
Shriek of a dying soldier
A bugle call, And then -

Weary and work and bloody
The rangers circle and pass
Silver spurs on the highway,
Spent arrows deep in the grass

Far on the star-dust skyline
You can see them pass...
Rangers are riding, riding, riding, riding,
riding, riding, riding under a yellow moon.

In film, diegetic music is considered more difficult for audiences to accept than non-diegetic (or background) music. The listener can absorb non-diegetic music because it often occurs without conscious notice. Diegetic music, on the other hand, reminds the viewer that the film is a fabrication and the music must be processed as part of the illusion.⁶⁷ Cowboy songs in an opera could provoke this response, but are just as likely to do the opposite. For a regular opera attendee, cowboy songs might feel horribly out of place amidst recitatives and arias, but a person unfamiliar with opera could have the opposite reaction. However, in comparison with the "American Indian Dances" (discussed below) the cowboy songs were an easy, familiar form for opera-going Americans to understand and accept. The cowboy songs, therefore, served both as a tool of authenticity, but also accessibility.

The Authentic Indian

Smith also used diegetic music to portray the Comanches in the "American Indian Dances" that conclude the second act. The Dances consist of four different pieces: "Lullaby," "Braves Dance," "Medicine Man's Dance," and "Mescal Rite." Smith used Natalie Curtis's *The Indians' Book* as the source for the Native American music incorporated into the opera. Curtis's book does not include songs transcribed from the Comanches, so Smith used melodies that suited her purposes, often patching melodies from different tribes and used for different purposes together under her own titles and functions. Karen Jury delineates the use of tunes from Curtis's book in her thesis.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 22-25.

⁶⁸ Jury, 103-104.

The Dances occur at the conclusion of the second act. Cynthia and Prairie Flower have just concluded "The Spinning Song," in which they reminisce about their home. Smith describes the scene in a synopsis of the opera written for the 1985 Austin production:

As Preloch and Prairie Flower sit in the garden in the growing dusk, they recall happy memories of the Comanche seasonal tribal rites—the springtime vigor of the youthful braves, the Corn Song, the exotic mysteries of the Medicine Man and, most exciting of all, the Mescal Rite in which they all joined. As these various scenes in memory pass before their eyes, the two women are also intensely alert, waiting for the sound of galloping ponies' hoofs that would bear them away to the foothills of Anadarko and freedom!⁶⁹

The scene is crafted to elucidate a specific response from the characters that in turn transfers to the audience. The characters are transported back to their former life through music and dance. The experience is so real that Cynthia and Prairie Flower become "intensely alert, waiting for the sound of galloping ponies' hoofs," because they anticipate returning to the Comanche camp.

There are, of course, several problems with this scene. Smith used any number of misappropriated melodies to create the Dances. For example, the Mescal Rite uses two melodies from the Curtis book. The first melody is labeled as a ghost dance, and the second is a begging song. "The Medicine Man's Dance," "Corn Song," and "Lullaby" come from the songs of other tribes, including the Penobscot, Dakotas, Pueblo, and Cheyenne. Jury notes that there is one "Comanche" song in the anthology, attributed to the Arapaho Indians, but the attribution does not derive from the tribe, but the

⁶⁹ Julia Smith, "Synopsis of the Story and Themes from the Opera," 7.

translation of the word "Comanche" as enemy.⁷⁰ The most authentically "Comanche" part of the Dances is the Mescal Rite, an integral part of their culture that was later adapted by other tribes.⁷¹

The Dances were, however, a powerfully affective part of the opera. Almost every review from the 1939 production makes mention of the "American Indian Dances." "The dances are truly a big part of what is destined to be a big opera," applauded the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reviewer E. Clyde Whitlock after the dress rehearsal. "The composer's brilliant work in her Indian melodies and her use of native material 'which scorns Venetian fountains and gondolas and strikes sharply into fundamental Americanism' were equally praised." Both the Dallas and Fort Worth papers carried some version of Smith's musical analysis of the "American Indian Dances." Whitlock continued, noting that "the savage, yet unforced vigor of the Indian dances, the integrity of internal development and inspirational quality of some of the themes at the moment of greatest need were not lost on the hearer."⁷² There is no doubt that the "American Indian Dances" resulted in one of the more memorable scenes in the entire opera.

The cowboy songs and Indian dances present two kinds of authenticity to the audience. First, the cowboy songs serve to affirm the expectations of the audience that this is a "Western" work, similar to other "Westerns" of their acquaintance. In some

⁷⁰ The Handbook of Texas Online, "Comanche Indians," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpa18.html> (accessed September 25, 2007)

⁷¹ Natalie Curtis, ed., *The Indians' Book* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1907), 162-3.

⁷² E. Clyde Whitlock, "Musical History Is Made at Denton as Texas Opera 'Cynthia Parker' Is Given First Time," *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, February 17, 1939.

fashion, the “Indianisms” discussed above also serve this function, because they fulfill the audience’s expectations for music that signals the presence of Native American characters. However, the “American Indian Dances” gave Smith the opportunity to tout her pursuit of the “authentic” that differed from “Indianisms” elsewhere in the opera. She believed that by using *The Indians’ Book* that she was creating a sequence that was truer to Native American life. From an audience perspective, it would be instructional to read Smith’s statement in the program notes, “The Indian Dances, representing the second scene in the opera proper, are based on authentic Indian melodies whose source is Natalie Curtis’ *The Indians’ Book*, considered to be the best collection of Indian lore. The dances make their own scenario.”⁷³

Smith placed a high value on the diegetic presentation of music in *Cynthia Parker*. With the exception of the rescue scene, most of the music that carries from the 1939 version to the 1978 version includes the cowboy songs and the dances. In many ways, Smith’s approach meant that the audience was not asked to suspend their belief. An American audience could accept the idea of cowboys singing because they were familiar it. They were meant to be awed while watching the “authentic” ritual of the “American Indian Dances” that was based on real Indian music. They could hear the Comanches as Indians because they had tom-toms and chromatically descending lines. The audience was given all the tools to access the production as authentic, based on their prior knowledge and experience.

⁷³ Program, *Cynthia Parker* performance, February 16 & 17, 1939, Julia Smith Collection.

CHAPTER 4

SEEKING AN AMERICAN AUDIENCE AND PROBLEMS OF ACCESSIBILITY IN

CYNTHIA PARKER

I still have faith that *Cynthia Parker* will prove the best of the lot if properly presented to the public. I also believe if it can have as splendid a reception as the 1939 smaller work, it will have a place in 20th Century American Opera.⁷⁴

Julia Smith, letter to John Ludwig, 1983

The American Audience and Opera in the 1930s

Cynthia Parker is designed to be an accessible opera that emulates an authentic experience of the past. Smith's desire for creating an opera that would be popular with a broad spectrum of the American public was not arbitrary or even unusual for her time. The decade of the 1930s saw many changes in American music, as American composers began to look inward and focus more on distinctly American idioms, employing elements drawn from jazz, the blues, Broadway musicals, and other vernacular sources. These trends no doubt influenced Smith's own ideas about composing, especially as they are articulated in *Cynthia Parker*. Her methods for accomplishing her goals, although sincere and thoughtfully laid out, present fundamental problems that demonstrate the difficulties composers (and opera companies) face in making opera more accessible. While the desire to find an authentically "American" voice manifested itself differently in many composers, Arthur Berger noted:

Since about the mid-twenties they [American composers] had been advocating that it was time for American music to 'come of age' one of the first

⁷⁴ Julia Smith to John Ludwig, July 11, 1983, Box 21, Folder 2, Julia Smith Collection.

achievements necessary to reach that goal was to establish an identity so that the music would be recognizable as American in the way that French music was recognizable as French and German music as German.⁷⁵

Some composers simply wanted acknowledgement and performances for American works, but others were trying to create a national music of the kind described by Berger.⁷⁶ Recorded sound and radio broadcasts meant a broader audience was able to access music; composers only needed to supply them with new compositions. Aaron Copland described his interpretation of the situation in his book *Our New Music*:

During these years I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer. The old 'special' public of the modern music concerts had fallen away, and the conventional concert public continued apathetic or indifferent to anything but the established classics. It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. Moreover, an entirely new public for music had grown up around the radio and phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them and to continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.⁷⁷

However, even if American composers wrote music with the public in mind, finding a performance venue for new American works remained difficult. Few American composers were able to breach the canon of compositions broadcast by institutions like the Met or the NBC Symphony. Toscanini conducted a few works by Ferde Grofé, Aaron Copland, and Don Gillis (Toscanini's radio producer), but such pieces were the exception to a very European standard. The Metropolitan Opera has never been considered friendly to American operas, with the exception of a few productions in the

⁷⁵ Arthur Berger, *Reflections of an American Composer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 21.

⁷⁶ Charles C. Alexander, *Nationalism in American Thought, 1930-1945* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 83-4.

⁷⁷ Aaron Copland, *Our New Music* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1941), 229.

early twentieth century. To illustrate this, when Julia Smith was unable to procure a New York engagement for *Cynthia Parker*, she turned to her alma mater to premiere the opera. Even without the support of these powerhouses of radio, American composers were adamant that their time had come, and that the people were now ready and able to listen. It was in a 1937 interview that Copland, when asked if there was a “discernable and definite trend and aim in today’s music,” replied, “The trend is to get closer to the audience.”⁷⁸

This trend had a remarkable influence on Julia Smith. *Music for Youth* and Smith’s biography of Copland both express her desire for an American music. Her sentiments were echoed by soprano Leonora Corona, who stated, “Until we have American operas written in English, we will never have an opera-loving public. We must have our own means of expression. Our operas must be born in this country, readily understandable in tunes, themes, and structure to win an American public. And that is what we have done in *Cynthia Parker*.”⁷⁹

While Smith’s method in composing *Cynthia Parker* reflects her philosophies about opera, there was another reason for choosing the genre during the 1930s. Ironically, the Metropolitan Opera made opera a household entertainment during the Great Depression. Radio broadcasts were, once again, an impetus for change. The Met began broadcasting live in 1931 on Christmas Day with Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Hänsel*

⁷⁸ Post Concert Discussion, February 25, 1937, WPA Theater of Music, in *Aaron Copland and His World*, Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 406.

⁷⁹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Hoping to Make a Hit With ‘Cynthia,’” 1939. [This article was written after the Denton premiere.]

und Gretel. Two years later in the depth of the Depression, the company was forced to shorten its season due to financial hardship. Rona Wilk explains how the Met found a way to survive against such overwhelming odds: "In the radio audience, the Met had one trump card that other companies did not: the untapped, untried resource of the expanding radio audience who had been tuning into the Met's live broadcasts every Saturday afternoon for the preceding two years."⁸⁰

Met officials mounted two "Save the Met" campaigns (1933 and 1940) asking radio listeners for financial support, while other supporters formed the Metropolitan Opera Guild (1935). Wilk compares the methods of the Met to New Deal operations, as it not only provided the money needed for the company to survive, but also changed the dynamic between an institution and the American people.⁸¹ The 1940 campaign provided the funds for the Metropolitan Opera Association to purchase the building deed, with the largest percentage of donations coming from radio listeners.⁸²

In a 2007 article in *Opera News*, the magazine of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, Barry Singer described the need for and place of the expanded 1930s audience: "Accessibility was suddenly a paramount concern within these famous elitist institutions – accessibility in the populist sense of new social equality for potential ticket-buyers, but also in the hardcore marketing sense."⁸³ Rona Wilk points to how such odd

⁸⁰ Rona M. Wilk, "Vox Populi': Popularization and Americanization of Opera in America, 1931-1966" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2006), 29.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸² Irving Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1966), 36-38.

⁸³ Barry Singer, "Changing Fortunes," *Opera News*, July 2007, 47.

circumstances forced the Metropolitan Opera to mix with the people and changed audiences from passive patrons to active participants:

The participatory culture engendered by the Great Depression. . .in which individuals desired to be a part of something larger than themselves, provided a language of inclusion into which the Met could tap for its own purposes. The Met's leaders began to realize that they needed to cultivate a broader audience if the organization was to survive.⁸⁴

Problems of Accessibility in *Cynthia Parker*

The Met found a way that not only made opera accessible, but also built ties of loyalty and appreciation for the genre. Given the Met's endeavors in bringing opera to the public, it should be no surprise that we see more attempts in the 1930s by composers to create operas in a more popular idiom. *Cynthia Parker* was created in this mindset, and despite initial success, has been produced only twice since its composition. The 1945 version, intended for two popular venues, Hollywood and Broadway, was never even orchestrated, let alone produced. What about *Cynthia Parker* failed to capture the imagination of its American audience?

As mentioned above, the 1939 premiere received much attention and acclaim. Reviews of the work appeared in New York newspapers and music magazines under such headlines as, "Texan's Opera Performed in Dallas" (*Musical America*), "Texas Girls to Give Own Opera----On A Texas Heroine" (*New York Sun*), "Native American Opera of Indian Days to Make Debut in Texas" (*Hollywood Citizen*), and "Western Girl Puts Old West Into Opera for Native Texas" (*New York World Telegram*). All of the headlines mention Texas or Texans, and three make some reference to the historical nature of

⁸⁴ Wilk, 30.

the work. Within Texas, journalists John Rosenfeld of the *Dallas Morning News*, John William Rogers of the *Dallas Times Herald*, and E. Clyde Whitlock of the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* all wrote more than one article about *Cynthia Parker*, covering the rehearsals, the arrival of Leonora Corona, the premiere, and other newsworthy items about the opera's production. North Texas professor C.E. Shuford provided coverage for the local paper, the *Denton Record Chronicle*. *Cynthia Parker* overran the campus newspaper, *Campus Chat* for over a week with articles, photographs, and interviews.

The premiere itself received good reviews on most counts. Smith's views mold the promotion and reviews somewhat, as she spent most of her time talking about the works Texan roots, the future of opera in United States, and the pomp and circumstance surrounding the premiere. The *Hollywood Citizen* wrote:

Virtually all the rest of the cast consists of amateurs – students of North Texas State Teachers' College, which is sponsoring the production. The author said of her opera: "We are engaged in an experiment and I think that we are going to prove that this kind of opera can be produced – Texas will show American that it can be. If America is ever to have its native opera, that opera will come from the American people."⁸⁵

The music of the opera received some mention, especially the use of folk music. E. Clyde Whitlock, whose coverage of the opera was picked up by *The Musical Courier*, wrote, "The composer's brilliant work in her Indian melodies and her use of native material 'which scorns Venetian fountains and gondolas and strikes sharply into

⁸⁵ *The Hollywood Citizen*, "Native American Opera of Indian Days to Make Debut in Texas," February 16, 1939.

fundamental Americanism' were equally praised.⁸⁶ Numerous reviews praise Smith's orchestration.⁸⁷

Despite some attention to Smith's music, the reviews primarily report more about the opera as an event than as a musical work. The *New York Sun* commented on the production:

Three departments of the college are co-operating in the production of the opera under the direction of Dr. Wilfrid Bain, head of the music department. The men's glee club and the girls' glee club will help in the chorus singing; the sets are being built by the students in the speech department and students in the department of physical education will put on the dances. Dr. Bain hopes to demonstrate that American colleges should be able to stage operas successfully. Denton has already spent \$1,200 getting ready.⁸⁸

John William Rogers listed the important audience members and their relation to the opera's historical roots:

[P]resent for the occasion were a number of descendants and relatives of the celebrated Indian captive, Cynthia Ann – and other figures – on the same row with us, for instance sat the Rev. White Parker, grandson of Cynthia and son of the famous Chief Quanah. Picturesquely wearing her full Indian costume, so that now and then with the music of the score was mingled the music of her shells and beads, was Quanah Parker's last wife, Princess Tokay. On the other side of us sat a lady, now 82 years old, who had been captured by the Indians as a child in Oklahoma, who had lived among them two years and had known Quanah Parker when he was a boy. These and other interesting Texas and Oklahoma personalities associated with the Parker clan [were] introduced during an intermission to the fascinated audience of 2,500 who packed the theater.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Whitlock.

⁸⁷ *Dispatch-Journal*, "Cynthia Parker' Rehearsal Shows Opera is Authentic," February 16, 1939.

⁸⁸ Anabel Parker McCann, "Texas Girls to Give Own Opera---On A Texas Heroine," *The New York Sun*, February 2, 1939.

⁸⁹ John William Rogers, "Corona Helps Texas Opera in Premiere," *Dallas Times Herald*, February 17, 1939.

Leonora Corona, the Met soprano who premiered the role of Cynthia, figured largely in the publicity. "Miss Corona, a former leading soprano of the Metropolitan Opera Company, was the Indian Princess Preloch and from all accounts the large and distinguished audience enthused no end over her voice, her singing and her acting," stated Pierre V.R. Key in *Musical Digest*. Reviews focus on her Metropolitan and La Scala performances and her hometown association to Dallas.

Despite all the publicity, Smith was unable to procure subsequent performances of *Cynthia Parker*. She tried to have the work performed by professional companies in Dallas and New York, but amateur productions gave opportunity for the composer to exercise a strong measure of control over the production, and were cheaper to procurer.⁹⁰ Smith's plan for the opera then was two-fold: professional productions would bolster the opera's credibility, leading to productions in colleges and universities in the form of a tour. There are seven letters written to various colleges and universities of comparable or larger size in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas trying to secure performances of *Cynthia Parker*. All of the letters date from June 1939, four months after the premiere at NTSTC. The letters are variations on a form letter, and all but one are signed by Smith's husband, Oscar Vielehr, acting as her business manager. All seven letters refer to a New York production, after which the opera would go on tour. The cost to produce the work is listed at \$2,500⁹¹ for one performance, but in the

⁹⁰ This is clear in a letter from Julia Smith to Mr. Ernest Hutcheson, October 18, 1938, and in the faceplate for a 1939 *Cynthia Parker* score, both items are available in the Julia Smith Collection.

⁹¹ This estimate is twice the amount spent on the premiere.

case of a second performance, the price would decrease.⁹² Neither the New York performance nor the tour ever materialized. The premiere passed with the news cycle.

More than forty years lapsed between productions of *Cynthia Parker*. Opera in the United States changed dramatically. By the 1980s, most major cities boasted a professional opera house. There were prestigious opera programs at conservatories and universities, and a canon of American operas, though small and infrequently performed. Probably one of the greatest changes was in production value. American opera houses turned opera into a multimedia experience, using electronics, lighting, and sound equipment as another operatic tool.

The 1985 Austin production received vastly different reviews from the earlier production. This time, there were only two local reviews, one by Mike Greenberg of the *Express News* and the other by Jerry Young of the *American-Statesman*. Greenberg and Young spent more time discussing the actual opera.

In his article, "Opera misses true tragedy in 'Cynthia Parker'," Greenberg wrote:

While this situation has dramatic potential, this simple, chatty libretto has too little meat on it. The characters are blandly drawn and psychologically static. Conflicts of cultures and loyalties are asserted – at great length and redundancy – without being shown. What is missing is a seasoned dramatist who could have turned a merely sad end into a genuine tragedy. To a degree, the libretto's weaknesses are an artifact of its period, and much the same can be said of Smith's music. Often quite pretty, facile, singable and tuneful, the score also betrays a great many roots.⁹³

⁹² Oscar Vielehr to Oklahoma A&M, Austin College, Texas A & M, John Tarleton Agricultural College, Kansas State Teachers' College, and Southwest Texas State Teachers' College, and Julia Smith the Stephen F. Austin State Teachers' College, June, 1939, Box 21, Folder 2, Julia Smith Collection.

⁹³ Mike Greenberg, "Opera Misses True Tragedy in 'Cynthia Parker'," *Express-News*, December 9, 1985, San Antonio, TX.

The libretto is undoubtedly the weakest part of *Cynthia Parker*. Its problem is not only the archaic language style, but also the events Smith and Fortune chose to depict. Their version of the story begins so late in Cynthia's history that for an audience unfamiliar with the story, much of its drama is lost. In 1985, the use of Native American songs from *The Indians' Book* was nothing spectacular or historically affirming, and musical "Indianisms" would be heard as stereotyping. Young reiterates some of Greenberg's criticisms:

With the exception of *Porgy and Bess*, which dates from 1935, no American opera of the period has survived, and *Cynthia Parker* reminds us of the problems that have beset American composers who have approached the medium. Musically, the work is eclectic, with friendly bits of Victor Herbert-style music theater cast among some fairly convincing impressionistic scoring. The music is well crafted and effective in parts, but never seems to find its own voice.⁹⁴

The Austin reviews note a consistent problem with the opera. In the midst of using the historical story, the folk and Native American music, and following the musical styles of its day, *Cynthia Parker* fails to communicate an identity of its own.

From the opening thump of the tom-tom, *Cynthia Parker* moves from device to gesture to reference. The inclusion of such references is meant to represent a foreign culture through simple, accepted signals. The 1939 production might be able to take this position, but by the 1985 production, such gestures are heard as stereotypical and serve to distance the audience from the music. David Burnand and Benedict Sarnaker explain that "the simplistic application of an authentic style adds little to a scene and courts the danger of jolting the audience into a consciousness of its ignorance and the

⁹⁴ Jerry Young, "Cynthia Parker' Makes History, Seeks Voice," *American-Statesman*, December 7, 1985.

strangeness of the music" in their discussion of national identities expressed in film music.⁹⁵ Claudia Gorbman uses Richard Crawford's "dialectical tension between authenticity and accessibility" to point out how "something is always lost in even the most faithful transporting of music from one culture into another, in each stage of presenting original music to a mass audience."⁹⁶ The task of depicting a person trapped between two cultures was daunting to begin with. Trying to make it easily accessible and understandable for a broad audience meant resorting to simple and inadequate representations of both cultures that, over time, could only be read as stereotypes.

Smith's methods parallel many of the ideas Peter Gelb has for the Metropolitan Opera. A problem Gelb faces is the established opera patron. "What will he do with the core audience while he's courting this new audience?" asks music critic Martin Bernheimer.⁹⁷ With *Cynthia Parker*, Julia Smith had to create an opera with broader appeal while keeping intact operatic conventions traditional audiences would expect. This accounts for the number arias and ariosos in the second and third acts. Cynthia's character needed vehicles not only to express her depth of sorrow, but also so the soprano could delight the audience. In *Cynthia Parker*, vastly different musical styles are placed side by side, making it difficult to establish any progression toward the climax and conclusion. However if Smith ever hoped to market the work successfully in

⁹⁵ David Burnand and Benedict Sarnaker, "Film Music and National Identity," *National Identities* 1 (March 1999): 13.

⁹⁶ Claudia Gorbman, "Scoring the Indian: Music in the Liberal Western," in *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 238.

⁹⁷ Wakin.

New York, she would need the image of the prima donna just as much as she needed the cowboy in rural Texas.

Smith's use of popular images and references is, in many ways, similar to Gelb's bringing in pop music writers to collaborate on future Met productions. The 1985 demonstrates the difficulties composers face when they attempt to incorporate strictly popular idioms into their works; such references, no matter what their original function, often sound dated upon later hearings – i.e., they do not always wear well over time. This fact is reflected in such critical statements regarding the 1985 production as this one by Austin critic Jerry Young: "Texas composer Julia Smith's *Cynthia Parker* is like an artifact removed from a time capsule. The work speaks of, and perhaps to, another time."⁹⁸ This is not to say that popular elements cannot be effective within an opera. Smith's final opera, *Daisy*, uses a liberal amount of mainstream music and styles. While the opera suffers from other disjunctive problems, the popular references serve the subject and overall conception of the work more effectively than in *Cynthia Parker*.

Smith's 1939 production shares Gelb's vision of opera as an event. Smith pooled every resource that she could to make the premiere of *Cynthia Parker* spectacular. She engaged a Texas prima donna, she invited persons who were historically linked to the opera's story, and she even capitalized on the efforts of the university in staging the work. The media response was appreciative of this fact, but then the opera disappeared. The novelty of the story and its staging in Texas made for good print the first time around, but subsequent performances relied on the work's intrinsic merits.

⁹⁸ Young.

This is one reason Smith constantly revised *Cynthia Parker*, because she was unable to market the opera in its original form. New characters, songs, dances, and spectacle were needed both to fix problems with the 1939 version and to take it in a new direction. For example, the 1945 version begins before the Ranger raid on the Comanche camp and includes the death of Cynthia's husband, Peta Nocona. This addition added a highly dramatic death scene and an engaging new character. Smith dropped this scene for the 1978 version and instead focused on the Texas Rangers – a popular Texas icon spread through a wide variety of media.⁹⁹

Gelb's endeavor is not doomed to failure because it mirrors characteristics and methods used for *Cynthia Parker*. For one thing, he manages the premiere opera company in the United States with a budget in the millions of dollars. *Cynthia Parker* does show the difficulties of reaching a broader audience for opera in the United States. It shows that even if one provides the audience with the familiar, the popular, or with a spectacular event, audiences may look at first, but may not be so inclined to stay.

⁹⁹ Mike Cox, *Texas Ranger Tales: Stories that Need Telling* (Plano, TX: Republic of Texas Press, 1997), 238.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Cynthia Parker is an example an opera that attempts to bridge the gap between opera and audience. Julia Smith crafted her first opera during a time when composers and institutions were exploring ways of communicating with the audience, such as through the use of popular idioms. The 1939 premiere was an immense success, drawing the attention of national newspapers and magazines that recognized the opera for its folk music, its historical basis, the headliner soprano, and production by the college. The initial success of *Cynthia Parker* was not enough to procure further performances in New York or other universities as Smith had hoped, and despite further revisions, the work was not performed again until 1985.

Reviewers of the Austin production found *Cynthia Parker* to be dated and out of touch in both the historical facts and in its musical styles. Popular idioms that made the work so accessible in 1939 changed over time, as did the audience, critical reception, and American opera scene. It was difficult, if not impossible, to replicate the momentous occasion of the 1939 premiere that capitalized on the opera's novelty. Julia Smith hoped that *Cynthia Parker* would continue to be performed, but this proved to be more difficult than she anticipated. Despite its fundamental problems and weaknesses, if we look at the totality of the 1939 event, Smith did succeed in her original conception in making an opera with something for everyone, or "an opera of the people, by the people, and for the people."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ *Denton Record Chronicle*, "Opera Like Lincoln's Idea of Government to Make Debut Tonight in Denton; Many Visitors Coming," February 16, 1939.

APPENDIX

LIST OF MUSICAL NUMBERS IN THE 1939 AND 1978 VERSIONS OF *CYNTHIA PARKER*

1939 VERSION

"A short orchestral prelude of an Indian character, ominous mood is heard."

Prologue

SCENE I

Pioneer Dances

Chorus

Male Chorus

"Out of the night on the highway"

Arioso

Cynthia

"It is true I was born of the white race"

Aria

Cynthia

"Oh my brother"

Duet

Cynthia &
Prairie Flower

"Spinning song"

American Indian Dances

Wolf's Cry

Quanah

Recitative

Prairie Flower

"Greetings to the son of my father"

Aria

Cynthia

"My son, my son"

Aria

Quanah

"On Swiftly Galloping Ponies"

Recitative

Cynthia

"My son, the hand of death is upon me"

Aria

Prairie Flower

"Dew stars the hills of freedom"

Recitative

Quanah

"Mother, a fever is upon you"

Recitative

Cynthia

"No, my limbs are cool"

Trio

Prairie Flower,
Cynthia, &
Quanah

Funeral March and Ritual Death Dance

"They commence the ritual death dance which completes the glorification of Cynthia"

1978 VERSION

ACT I

Prelude

Chorus

“The Trail to Mexico” *

Male Chorus

Song

“May the Gods of all the Noconas” *

Cynthia

Song

“Can’t you understand” *

Sul Ross

Song

“Many years ago” *

Ed

Choral Prayer

“Thank God for our sister’s rescue” *

Ensemble

ACT II

Square Dance

“The Monkey’s Wedding”

Chorus

“Out of the night on the highway”

Male Chorus

Arioso

“It is true I was born of the white race”

Cynthia

Aria

“Oh, my brother”

Cynthia

Duet

“The years are long” *

Cynthia & Ed

Duet

“Spinning song”

Cynthia &
Prairie Flower

American Indian Dances

Lullaby

Braves Dance

Corn Song

Medicine Man’s Dance

Mescal Rite

ACT III

Wolf's Song

Aria

"My son, my son"

Quanah

Cynthia

Recitative

"Greetings to the son of my father"

Aria

"Dew stars the hills of freedom"

Aria

"Mother, the lodges of Anadarko"

"On swiftly galloping ponies"

Prairie Flower

Prairie Flower

Quanah

Duet and Trio

Prairie Flower,

Cynthia, &

Quanah

Ritual Death Dance and Processional

*indicates not part of the 1939 version

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