



Toni Morrison and Richard Danielpour

Notes on Margaret Garner

From Richard Danielpour, Composer

I began to seriously entertain the idea of composing an opera as early as 1994, when I was at work on completing my first cello concerto for Yo-Yo Ma and the San Francisco Symphony. I had started to see that so many of my concert works were akin to “secret operas”—instrumental or vocal works with a hidden dramatic scenario. Realizing that I had been, in effect, an opera composer in disguise, I began to ask myself what the criteria would be for an opera that I would actually write. I settled on three requirements. One, not only did I need a strong story, but in addition a narrative involving great tension, a great dilemma and ultimately a commensurate and compelling catharsis. Secondly, I wanted a text that would make music a natural and viable part of the drama. I’ve dreaded going to performances in which it was apparent that the opera in question could just as easily have been a play or film. I knew that I would hate to have an audience ask, “...why are these people singing?” Lastly, I knew that with a great story, the actual language in the libretto would have to exist somewhere between prose and poetry. This would ensure that the words coming out of the mouths of the singers/characters would not allow them to sound or look awkward on stage.

When Toni Morrison and I met for lunch in New York City in early July 1996, we each had an idea to propose to the other; little did we know that we were not only each proposing an opera, but an opera based on the same

story about Margaret Garner! I knew soon enough that although Toni Morrison had never written a libretto, she would be the ideal person for this opera. She possessed a deep identification with the story, having used the historical account as material for one of her greatest novels, and intuitively understood from the start my prerequisites for the opera as if they were her own as well. It bears mentioning here that in addition to her already extraordinary gifts, Toni Morrison was able to assimilate so much of what was needed to create a libretto—her first libretto—in what amounted to a relatively small span of time. That she was able to do this with such grace and steadiness was astounding. Her coolness under pressure and her unwavering confidence in our working relationship were a constant inspiration to me.

We began working on a treatment for *Margaret Garner* as early as January 1998. As we exchanged ideas, I quickly started to feel that, apart from the inherent potential of the story for the stage, an inner urgency about writing the work began to take hold of me. Composers write some works because they want to and others because they need to do so. Toni began to give me a crash course in the unofficial history of America since the Civil War, through a different perspective—one that would never be found in most high school or college textbooks. What I understood was that the story that we were choosing was an archetype of perhaps the single greatest unhealed wound in our country's history, and that class and economics played just as great a role in this "wounding" as did the idea of race. Indeed, it occurred to me that perhaps the only true way to begin to heal such a wound would be by going directly into it—and I believe that we attempted to do so in the creation of this opera.

It wasn't, however, until late 1999 that our idea became a reality when the consortium of the three opera companies in Detroit, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia was formed. By the fall of 2000 a commission was in place for us to write the opera. I saw the first five scenes of the libretto in rough draft by spring 2001, but it wasn't until February 2002 that I began in earnest to compose the work. Nearly three years later, in early December 2004, the work was finally completed. Within that time I had written the work on two continents (North America and Europe), had been involved in two workshops (August 2003 and August 2004), and had made literally thousands of alterations and rewrites, both large and small to the opera which finally will be heard this year.

From Toni Morrison, Librettist

Before the enthusiasm I brought to the initial meeting between Richard Danielpour and me, to discuss working together on a project, there was a long period when the very last thing I wanted to do was re-imagine the language for and narrative of Margaret Garner's ordeal. For more than five years I had been in thrall to the material, trying to do justice to the historical characters involved while exercising the license I needed to interrogate the dilemma Margaret both presented and represented. The arc of conventional slave narratives—bondage, escape, freedom—has limitations that can easily defeat the meaning of the events by concentrating on their drama, and in so doing sacrificing the complicated, profound inner life of those who had experienced them.

It often seemed beyond my grasp. I took comfort and courage from two convictions: 1. Narratives of nineteenth-century African American enslavement are inexhaustible—there can never be (should never be) a final one; 2. No human experience—however brutalizing—was beyond art. If it were, then the brutalizers will have triumphed.

Some ten years later, free of the exhaustion following the publication of *Beloved* I realized that there were genres other than novels that could expand and deepen the story. The topic, the people, the narrative theme, passion and universality made it more than worthy of opera; it begged for it.

Enter Richard Danielpour. Having worked with him on other projects at Princeton, I knew his passion equaled his intelligence and that his talent was overwhelming. Joining him in creating an opera was no small undertaking, but whatever reservations I had about this, my maiden voyage into writing a libretto, were quickly overcome by my long time disappointment with the treatment of language ascribed to African Americans. This powerfully evocative metaphorical language, so dominated by inflection, nuance and rhythm leant itself almost seamlessly to music. The challenge and sheer excitement of providing a composer of stature with the words from which the music could soar were irresistible.

To the people who made this production possible: the brilliant cast, the flawless direction, the opera companies and the "management" of all, I owe my sincerest thanks. Richard Danielpour, as the engine of this enterprise knows "thanks" is too small an acknowledgement of his place in this project. I will have to invent another word. Finally, to the real people who lived this tale, I trust we have done them, their heirs, and their spirits justice.