Class 8: Melville's Great Whale

A. Decisions, decisions!

1. Class title 1: Melville's Great Whale

Roman Fever was only a short story; *The Turn of the Screw* was a novella of only a hundred or so pages. But this class and the next will be about making an opera about one of the most massive American novels in existence: **Herman Melville's** (1819–91) masterpiece *Moby-Dick, or the Whale.*

2. A Melville timeline

Melville was born in New York City 1819. His family fell on hard times, leaving him to make his own way as a young man (though he might have done so anyway). He volunteered as a sailor, and made three voyages between 1839 and 1844. The middle one was on the whaler *Acushnet*, but he left the ship in the South Pacific, and lived for a while on a South Sea island, before signing on with another ship and returning home. His successful first novel *Typee* (1846) and its successor *Omoo* (1847) were based on these adventures. So too would his masterpiece *Moby-Dick* be, although that far transcended the others in concept and range.

3. Melville and Hawthorne
4. — the same, with houses

In 1850, while he was pretty much finished with his still-untitled whaling novel, he reviewed a collection of fiction by **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804–64), which was a revelation to him. He left New York and moved to the Berkshires to be near to his new idol. Melville's house, *Arrowhead*, is still standing, but Hawthorne's house shown here is a modern reconstruction. Despite what the portraits suggest, Hawthorne was 15 years older than Melville, and restrained while the other was exuberant. Nevertheless, they became friends. Rightly or wrongly, Melville saw a deep darkness behind Hawthorne's placid façade, and realized that this darkness was precisely what his virtually-completed whaling novel currently lacked; it did not yet contain the character of Ahab, for example. So in a fever of creativity, he spent the next year essentially rewriting it. In the process, he added to the old material rather than removing it, which is partly why it is so compendious, and so full of duplications.

5. The voyage of the *Pequod*

In short, the novel describes the multi-year voyage of the ***Pequod*** out of Nantucket, south round the Cape of Good Hope, across the Indian Ocean, to her final encounter with the great white whale **Moby Dick** in the South Pacific. Normally, a whaler such as this would kill many whales along the way and refine their blubber for the precious commodity of oil. But **Captain Ahab**, the master of the *Pequod*, is obsessed with battling this one whale, Moby Dick, who took off one of his legs some years before. Using his undoubted charisma to bring the crew under this spell, he forgoes many of these smaller harvests in

pursuit of his own objective. Only the First Mate **Starbuck**, a rational and highly moral man, recognizes this for what it is, an obsession verging on insanity, but he is also a man of order, and obeys his captain's commands. All this is narrated by a young man who signs on for the voyage much as Melville himself had done years before. We do not know his real name, but he opens the novel with the famous line, "Call me **Ishmael**."

6. The Narrative of Melville's *Moby-Dick*
7. Characters in the Novel

I am showing you two slides that attempt to summarize the main events of the 135-chapter novel, and also its characters and settings. I'll switch between them as we discuss how you might approach the task of boiling all this down to an opera of little more than two hours. Feel free to join in if you have recently read the book, or at least have some general sense of its scope. But please refrain if you happen to know what Jake Heggie actually did in his opera.

8. Jake Heggie, Terrence McNally, and Gene Scheer

In 2005, the Dallas Opera commissioned composer **Jake Heggie** (b.1961) for an opera to open their new perfomance space in 2010. Heggie had achieved worldwide acclaim for his 2000 opera *Dead Man Walking*, its libretto and adaptation of on **Sister Helen Prejean's** autobiographical book by the playwright **Terrence McNally** (1938–2020). Heggie asked McNally to suggest a new subject, and he offered *Moby-Dick*, largely because its scope and language was already so operatic in feel. After he had recovered his balance, Heggie agreed and the two of them started working. But McNally had to withdraw for personal reasons, so Heggie turned to another friend who had collaborated with him on several smaller projects, the poet and songwriter **Gene Scheer** (b.1958). I'll let him take it on from here, in two extracts from a video interview with **Ian Cambell**, the director of the San Diego Opera, one of the companies that joined in the initial commission.

9. Jake Heggie on initial decisions

Later in the interview, Heggie goes on to enlarge on what he sees as the main interpersonal themes. This is important in opera, as in any kind of drama, as it all comes down to the relationship between the people. Heggie and Scheer saw it, as you will hear, as two dualities: Ahab/Starbuck and Ishmael/ Queequeg, with the cabin-boy Pip standing to one side and the Whale (whatever it is) on the other.

10. Jake Heggie on themes
11. Casting decisions by the adapters
12. Characters in the Opera

This slide summarizes and expands on what Heggie just said. So the list of characters and settings becomes the one shown on screen now, with all the land episodes removed, and all characters other than the five just listed reduced to clear secondary roles or cut entirely.

13. Narrative decisions by the adapters
14. The Narrative of the Opera

Similarly, the long list of scenes I showed you earlier has beec pruned considerably. Of course, if I had listed all 135 chapters separately, you would probably find that Scheer drew material from less than a quarter of them. The dozen or so non-narrative chapters are gone; the 21 chapters set on land are gone except for a few fragments; the nine chapters describing the "gams," or encounters with other ships, are gone; a lot of duplication has been removed; and most of the rest has been compressed a lot.

B. Creating the Shipboard World

Ian Cambell then goes on to ask Heggie about the music. I'll play this section because he is rather charming when speaking from the piano, and his performance of the Prelude will segue directly into the opening of the DVD of the opera, which I will play you in sections from here on out. I'll stop, though, after the first scene. As you watch, I'd like you to ask yourselves: what do you learn from it?

15. Jake Heggie on the opening music
16. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act I Prelude and Scene 1
17. — still from the above (Queequeg and Greenhorn)

So what does that scene do? It establishes the situation, obviously. It sets up one of the two key relationships. It begins to delve into Greenhorn's character: a rather disturbed young man, but a poet too, who can speak of "the dark November in my soul." Most of the memorable phrases come directly from Melville, actually, and his prose is often what others would write as poetry. This phrase comes from the very first paragraph, in a sentence that begins: "*Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet*…". And equally importantly, it shows Greenhorn as an agnostic, a critic of religion. It doesn't matter if he has no time for "Lents and Ramadans" or if he in face respects them; religion plays a large part in this story, and now at least the topic is on the table.

18. Elements in Act I scene 2

With that intimate scene behind them, Scheer and Heggie now show us the entire complement of the ship. The stage floods with people, the full male chorus. The three mates, **Starbuck**, **Stubb**, and **Flask**, fill us in with all the necessary information, most especially about Ahab. One of them has the line, "*I'd rather sail with a moody good captain than a laughing bad one*"—Melville's of course, but taken from an earlier part of the book. **Ahab** appears, 13 minutes into the opera; in the novel, he is kept out of sight until Chapter 28, over a fifth of the way into the book. Scheer gives him a stirring opening line: "*Infinity! We will harvest infinity!*" I assumed this was Melville also, but apparently not; anyway, it is as good an opening line as Verdi gives Otello. Ahab then produces the doubloon—note the music here—which he nails to the mast as a challenge to the crew. We see him as a master of rhetoric, using the sure-fire tricks of ritual and repetition. But note especially his Biblical language, for instance the number of lines beginning with "*Whosoever of ye*." Melville does this too; indeed, all his language for Ahab is on an elevated plane—Shakespeare or the King James Bible; it is a point I will come back to after the break.

The religious overtones continue with the ceremony of the three Harpooneers; I don't think I am imagining things to see this as a parody of the Mass.

19. Ben Heppner as Ahab and Morgan Smith as Starbuck

The stage clears, and we are left for the first of several confrontations between Ahab and his First Mate, Starbuck. [The photo shows the original Ahab, **Ben Heppner**, not the equally excellent but different **Jay Hunter Morris**, whom we see on the DVD.] Throughout the book, Starbuck is the voice of reason, and his reason is firmly rooted in traditional Christian morality. So he questions Ahab on two fronts: how much profit will his vengeance bring for the ship's crew and her owners, and is he not afraid of blasphemy? Ahab brushes him aside, saying that *he*, in effect, is God on the *Pequod*.

20. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act I Scene 2
21. Class title 2 (illustration by Rockwell Kent)

C. On with the Hunt

22. Act I scene 3, summary

Act I scene 3 of the opera is mainly practical exposition. **Starbuck** appoints **Greehorn** to his boat and tells him about whales and the procedure for hunting them. In the middle, he asks Greenhorn about his home life; when Greenhorn says he doesn't have any, this leads Starbuck to muse on his own. So in effect, he is singing a traditional **two-part aria**, the contrast between practical and personal standing in for the usual *cavatina* and *cabaletta*. Starbuck leaves, and **Queequeg** takes over the instruction. When he comes to the description of the Nantucket sleigh ride—being towed through the water by the harpooned whale—the projections and orchestra take over for the first time since the prelude. But suddenly it is time to put the instruction to the test. There is a call of "There she blows!" and the stage suddenly fills with crew, preparing the lower the whaleboats. But all is put to a stop by **Ahab**, who doesn't want to take the time away from his personal hunt for Moby Dick.

23. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act I Scene 3
24. Ahab's aria (illustration by Rockwell Kent)
25. Melville: *Moby-Dick*, start of Chapter XXXVII, Sunset

I mentioned that Scene 3 includes an aria for Starbuck that is quite similar to the traditional *scena*. **Act I scene 4** moves even closer to tradition by building to an operatic **quartet**. It begins with the aria for Ahab shown here. Heggie says in that same video interview that, although he generally likes to compose an opera from the beginning, he could make no progress until he had jumped ahead and composed this aria. It's a pretty terrific piece of writing, just as an aria text: compact, poetic, and evocative. But in fact all the words come from Chapter 37 in the novel, called *Sunset*; Melville's writing for Ahab is already so poetic that all Gene Scheer had to do was to extract a few sentences intact. Note, incidentally, that Melville structures this as a Shakespeare play, complete with stage directions. Just as he gives Ahab Biblical language elsewhere, this use of Shakespeare established him as a tragic hero like Lear.

26. Diagram of Act I Quartet

Ahab leaves for a moment. We then get a duet for **Queequeg** and **Greenhorn**, one above the other on the mainmast. At the climax of this, **Ahab** returns on one side of the stage, singing more words from the *Sunset* chapter I sent you. Simultaneously, **Starbuck** enters at the other side, musing on Ahab's madness. Each character is on a different place and level, and the language has different levels also: high poetry for Ahab, more normal poetry for Starbuck, prose for Greenhorn, and Tahitian or something similar for Queequeg. It is a magnificent piece of musical writing, and a wonderful summary of the moral dimensions of Melville's story.

27. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act I Scene 4
28. Summary of scenes 5 and 6

I'll play the rest without a break. Here's what to expect. First an orchestral interlude showing the passing of three months. Then one of those lighter scenes that Heggie said were so necessary, mainly involving Stubb and Pip. This turns into a dance, and the dance turns nasty. In this production, the nastiness seems to have a racial element, but I don't think this come from Melville, whose crew may contain conflicts of personality but not of race. Then whales are sighted once again. Ahab is inclined to refuse once more, but Starbuck uses the fight to persuade him that the crew needs to do what they signed on for. Now the projections come into their own, and we see the three whaleboats in the open sea. Queequeg harpoons a whale, but in the resultant "sleigh ride" Pip falls overboard, and is feared lost. The next scene, which begins with all the markings of a **traditional act-finale**, shows the processing of the dead whale in the try-works, together with a lament for Pip, a haunting choral *barcarolle*, "Rocked in the arms of the sea." Pip will be found, however. Verdi would have used the lament and subsequent relief as the slow and fast sections of a huge number, but Heggie pulls back; he has other plans for the Act I curtain, as we shall discover next week.

29. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act I Scenes 5 and 6 (first part)
30. Class title 3

Class 9: I'd Strike the Sun!

30. Class title 1: Melville's Great Whale

My title comes from a scene we played last week, Ahab's response to Starbuck: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." He continues in his mad but tremendous quest, and the tragedy moves unstoppingly to its conclusion. Last week, I talked a lot and played a little. This week, I am going to give you the rest of the opera, with a couple of comments on the end of Act One, but nothing at all for Act Two. I do want to leave at least ten minutes for discussion at the end.

31. Talise Trevigne as Pip

As you recall, we ended last week with the threnody for the loss of the cabin-boy, **Pip**. The scene has all the makings of a grand finale, but Heggie instead has Starbuck pursue Ahab to his cabin, for yet another of their confrontations, this time ending with the Captain pulling a gun on the Mate. Just then, however, news comes that Pip has been found alive. You might expect a big ensemble here, but it soon becomes apparent that Pip has gone mad—Melville makes him the **Fool** to Ahab's **King Lear**—and Heggie treats the scene instead as chamber music, a beautiful repeat of the *barcarolle* music of the lament. There is another aria for Greenhorn, in which he rejects Christianity for good. Then Starbuck goes back to have it out with Ahab in his cabin, only to find him asleep. This is an event that comes much later in the novel, but Scheer and Heggie bring it forward to give them a quiet ending to the act. Heggie, like Verdi, realizes the importance of two-character scenes like this and the one before it—but unlike Verdi, he is prepared to sacrfice the excitement of a big finale in favor of something more intimate, especially when it deals with existential issues as Melville does.

32. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act I ending
33. — still from the above

I am not going to give you a scene-by-scene account of Act Two, but will simply play it, taking our break in the middle of the interlude that Heggie once more writes to indicate the passage of time. I would point out two things to look for in the section we are about to hear. First, the beautiful chamber-music for **Greenhorn** and **Pip** when **Queequeg** tells them he is going to die. Second, the high drama of the scene with the lightning—although I must say I find the words of Ahab's opening lines, "*Light, thou leapest out of darkness; I am darkness leaping out of light*," are more powerful than any effects they can create onstage.

34. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act II opening
35. The *Pequod* and Moby Dick (moving still picture)

In the closing sections, I would call your attention to three things and ask one question. The first point to note is the episode of **Captain Gardiner**, who asks Ahab's help to find his missing son; Ahab refuses. Heggie and Scheer, as we know, have cut out all other *gams*, or encounters with other ships; but this is

important, so they handle it by having Gardiner's voice offstage. For me, whether in the novel or the opera, Ahab loses whatever sympathy I might have had for him by his refusal—but he almost regains it in the last scene that he and Starbuck have together, which both Melville and the libretto call *The Symphony*; it is a lovely scene, showing them finally coming together as lonely human beings, far from home. Then of course the chase for Moby Dick himself—and my question: do you think that the opera manages to make this truly climactic, whether in (a) the staging, or (b) the music?

36. Heggie: *Moby-Dick*, Act II ending
37. Class title 2 (the *Rachel*)

One reason, of course, why Scheer and Heggie had to include Captain Gardiner is that it is his ship, the *Rachel*, that rescues Ishmael at the end. And that marvelous closing sentence: "*It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan.*"

Anyway, let's discuss. What did you think about the climax, whether musically or in the staging? And feel free to mention anything else that struck you.