Victoria for *Mrs. President*!

Modern Women at the Opera

This fall I had the opportunity to participate in the world premiere of composer Victoria Bond’s masterful opera *Mrs. President*. The premiere took place in my hometown of Anchorage, Alaska. I happened to be in town and was asked by the chorus master if I might help bolster the tenor section. I was intrigued by the novelty of being involved in the creation of a work and thus committed to participate. I am happy that I did, as it was to be an experience that renewed my faith in American opera and proved that the genre is alive, well, and relevant.

For weeks as a chorus we worked out our parts, and luckily Victoria Bond was in residence to give needed direction and facilitate any changes necessitated by the rehearsal processes. As a chorus member, I did not have a chance to hear the score in its entirety until the sitzprobe. There, all the disparate pieces that we had worked out in isolation coalesced into a stunning whole. The beauty of the work impressed me, as did the appropriateness of the score and the libretto for the operatic stage, more so than almost any other American opera that I had sung or seen. The chorus in this semi-staged production was set on risers at the back of the stage; thus I had ample time to digest the work as night after night I watched and heard the drama unfold from my unique vantage point. As I did so, my appreciation for the multiple facets of the work, from musical to philosophical, deepened. I knew that I wanted to spend more time with this work, and with Ms. Bond’s encouragement, I began exploring some of the ideas this opera inspired in me. Of course, the opera provides ample opportunities for personal interpretation, and its transcendental nature is one of its great strengths. However, for the sake of space, what follows is a discussion of the opera’s timely aspects, from its fidelity to operatic traditions in contrast to modern conventions, aspects of ritual and corporeality, and our current societal climate vis-à-vis personal choice and the advocacy of freedom.

The opera presents the story of Victoria Woodhull, an early feminist and proponent of free love[[1]](#footnote-1), and the first woman to run for president in 1872. While based on actual events, librettist Hilary Bell had to condense what Bond referred to as a messy history to form a succinct portrait of Woodhull’s run for presidency and create, as Bond put it, “a taut storyline that had one focus.” The cast includes Victoria Woodhull (soprano), Isabella Beecher (soprano), Elizabeth Tilton (soprano), Woodhull’s mother Roxie (mezzosoprano), Henry Ward Beecher (tenor), Joseph Treat (tenor), and James Blood (baritone). The characters are based on historical figures, but Bell found it necessary to form composite characters: e.g., the character of Joseph Treat is fabricated from many different men, and Isabella was conceived as a combination of Isabella Beecher and Woodhull’s sister Tennessee Claflin. Bond is very clear that “this is an opera – it’s not history, it’s not a biopic.”

Part of the strength of the opera rests in the ironic subversion of our expectations of a modern American opera by being unapologetically tonal and respectful of operatic traditions. A feeling of reverence permeates the score, yet it never succumbs to pastiche or operatic taxidermy. There are moments that evoke *La Traviata* or *Der Rosenkavalier*, for example, but in an organic way born out of the exigencies of the drama.

This debt to operatic convention is also evident in the organization of the opera. The action progresses in seven scenes over two acts, after the fashion of a number opera. Bond claims *Wozzeck* as an influence in this regard – a mosaic of vignettes that tells us about each of the characters. Each scene is a self-contained unit, but the incursion of intricately interwoven themes and motifs unifies them and provides a dramatic thrust that is often lacking in the traditional number opera style, creating what Bond calls “vivid pictures of moments – moments that move and are not static.”

Bond, like the successful opera composers of the past, understands the archetypal and ritualistic nature of opera. “If we want realism we go to film,” Bond points out. “Opera started out in the church and the stylized nature of the church service – I think retaining that quality, even though we take it in different directions, is still very important.” Bond claims the influence of and artistic fealty with Harry Partch in this approach. Bond, an accomplished singer in her own right, performed the role of the Old Goat Woman on the world premiere recording of Partch’s *Delusion of the Fury*, and this performance had a tremendous impact on her development and views on theatrical work.

These elements led me to examine the seven scenes of the opera as a series of self-contained rituals. The notion of ritual befits an opera about a woman running for president, Bond told me, as the office of president is filled with rituals, from campaigning and speeches to ceremonies and the inauguration, which we as a nation recently witnessed. The first scene, in which Woodhull is exploited as a child clairvoyant in traveling circuses, acts as an invocation, and consecrates her as a visionary and prophetess. The music of the trio of the male characters in the scene foreshadows their role in the rise and fall of Woodhull’s attempted presidency. The second scene, set during a service presided over by Henry Ward Beecher, begins with an ecstatic presentation of a hymn followed by an auction in which the congregation “purchases” a slave girl in order to grant her freedom. This scene functions as a pseudo-sacrament and features incantations of Christian spirituality. The third scene, a séance followed by Woodhull’s announcement of the publication of *Woodhull’s Weekly*,on the other hand, features incantations of a new order of spirituality, not only that of Woodhull’s clairvoyance, but also of her feminist doctrine of free love. The accompanying female chorus evolves from psychic mysticism to political activism in a kind of primordial chant hovering beneath the surface. The fourth scene, and final of the first act, presents the rite of confession and absolution for Henry Ward Beecher, who admits his true nature and devotes himself to free love. He is initiated into Woodhull’s order.

The second act opens with the scene in Steinway Hall where Woodhull publicly announces her run for president. It quickly turns into a sacrifice as Woodhull is decried as a false prophetess and symbolically stoned by her denouncers. The sacrifice is not only that of Woodhull’s dreams of presidency, but also that of Beecher’s support of Woodhull, the latter is cast in relief by the orchestra playing the slave auction music from the second scene – he has sold his integrity. The sixth scene, which Bond calls the quartet of disappointment, is an attempted exorcism by Blood and Beecher of Woodhull’s and Isabella’s drive to continue their mission. The last scene, referred to by Bond as Woodhull’s “sane scene,” culminates in the benediction and sanctification of Woodhull’s vision for the future.

Although strong ritualistic aspects permeate the work, Bond succeeds, like Partch, in grounding the abstract in the corporeal. This is accomplished in several ways, one being how Bond sets the libretto. Bond preserves a naturalistic declamation and speech rhythm that clearly communicates the text. Every word is understood – a rare feat in operatic achievement. This is achieved not only rhythmically but melodically as well in the way Bond writes for the voice. Roxie’s aria “Wise as Solomon” from Act I (see example 1) is a prime example of Bond’s excellent vocal writing. The rhythms of the vocal line mirror those that would be used in speech, and thus the audience is able to catch every word. The syncopations add a visceral quality portraying the moxie of Woodhull’s mother. The vocal line is inflected in a way that is indicative of someone gathering a crowd at a carnival.

As a singer, I am often perplexed at the unidiomatic treatment of the voice by modern composers. Singers are often required to break rules of “bel canto” in order to realize the music: wide and angular leaps, articulating in difficult registers, uncomfortable tessituras, etc. Bond, however, avoids this, in part due to her aforementioned success as a singer in her early career. As such, she has a first-hand understanding of how to write for the voice, as everything she wrote as a young composer was for her to sing herself. Bond also collaborated with acclaimed soprano Ellen Shade in creating the final version of *Mrs. President*. This collaboration benefited the score, the well-crafted vocal lines in particular. These elements are evident in the expert treatment of the voice. For example, Bond does not force the singer to over-articulate in high registers and makes sure what is sung is done so in a way that can be understood. “One of my icons there is Mozart,” Bond relates. “Mozart always set texts so that you can really understand them. When there are important things said, they are done so in a register that you can understand. If it was in a higher register– and as tenors and sopranos know, you can’t be understood above the staff– [it was] repeated so you can get the emotional content and the beauty of the voice, but you already know what they are singing about, you don’t have to catch a word on a high A.”

Another way the opera is saved from heady abstraction is in the characterizations. By fixing the focus on the emotional lives of the characters, these rituals contain a visceral quality that is the principle impact, where the ritual itself provides the framework. For the sake of space I shall examine how this is realized in the characterization of Victoria Woodhull.

Bond endeavored to create in Woodhull a character who transcends the historical figure and is one with whom any woman can identify. Bond says, “As a creator, what I want to do is make a role flexible enough so that the person singing it can put their own autobiography in it – where they can find that element in that character that they have lived, that they know personally. That’s what I want to create: something that has enough universality that whoever sings it, and hopefully it will be sung differently with each person, will be able to identify something in his or her own life that resonates with that character. Because I think all great operatic characters have that universality about them, they’re not just historic figures.”

Woodhull emerges from the fecund musical mind of Bond as dream role for any soprano and an operatic heroine on par with any Elvira, Tosca, Brunhilde, or Carmen. As Bond said on many occasions, Carmen was in fact a major inspiration. Her unabashed sensuality at once seduces and threatens the men around her and is her liberation and undoing. However, I also found elements of the sublime woman in her. But unlike tragediennes such as Anna Bolena or Lucia, Woodhull is the master of her fate.

This is an opera about a woman who finds her strength on her own terms, not by adapting a sense of masculinity, but in discovering her own authenticity. Woodhull was truly a Modern Woman, and as Jung tells us in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, those who live such a life “run counter to the forces of the past, and though [she] might thus be fulfilling [her] destiny, would none the less be misjudged, derided, tortured and crucified.” In operatic terms, Modern Woman is usually portrayed as Mad Woman. In her book *Feminine Endings*,musicologist Susan McClary showed that in the traditional operatic treatment of Mad Women there is a need to prevent the spread of the "contagion" that is the diva's madness - thus the mad woman's music must be contained or "framed."  In *Mrs. President* Woodhull unleashes this contagion onto future generations, such as when she sings, "from my ashes a thousand more will rise," (see example 2). Woodhull’s triumphant music, consisting of continually ascending lines shows not a woman whose "sexual excesses" have brought about a madness in need of containment, but a truth that must infect others with the germ of equality.

In the hands of a more traditional male composer, Woodhull's character may have demanded a traditional mad scene; after all, the drama is ripe for it, and the audience has been conditioned to expect it.  She is imprisoned, abandoned by her friends and lovers, her reputation destroyed, and all chance of attaining her goals seems smashed.  But true to her spirit as a Modern Woman, she faces these trials as the ineluctable outcome of her truth.  She does not descend into madness, but transcends her surroundings with a final prophecy of a future where women will rise up from the ashes of the auto-da-fé of her anachronistic visions, the embers of which would ignite the torch of suffrage. In the staging of the Anchorage Opera production, prominent women from the Anchorage community were brought onto the stage to show the fulfillment of that prophesy in our day. It was a stirring moment.

*Mrs. President*’stimeliness and applicability to our time was also striking as the premiere coincided with the final stages of the presidential election. As I listened to the opera night after night from my place in the chorus, I was unfortunately not surprised that the same issues dogging American politics in the time of Vitoria Woodhull are with us today. Over a century later our government is still concerned with who is allowed to love whom, and what rights women have over their bodies. Free love as understood in Woodhull’s time, through to the present concerning the right to love whomever we choose and be allowed to form and dissolve legitimate, recognized relationships, is an issue that continues to dominate the political landscape. The actors might have changed, but the crux of the argument remains the same. We have an insatiable appetite for discrimination, and no matter how many boundaries we break down, that drive is redirected. The truth is that we are still in need of Victoria Woodhulls. We need someone who will stand up for the disenfranchised and oppressed and expose the hypocrisy of the policy makers who would hold a nation hostage on the bases of their biases. This opera reminds us of that.

The prescription advocated by Woodhull herself, proposed in the September 23, 1871 publication of *Woodhull’s Weekly,* remains apropos today. On the question of whether there is a remedy for the ills of society, she stated that there is “none, I solemnly believe; none, by means of repression and law. I believe there is no other remedy possible but freedom in the social sphere. I know that it looks as though this were going in the direction of more vice. Conservatives always think that freedom must conduce to licentiousness; and yet freedom has a way of working out the evils begotten by the previous slavery, and its own evils also. Freedom is a great panacea. It will be when women are thrown on their own resources, when they mingle on more equal terms with men, when they are aroused to enterprise and developed in their intellects; when, in a word, a new sort of life is devised through freedom, that we can recover the lost ground of true virtue, coupled with the advantages of the most advanced age.”

As the voice of Woodhull remains surprisingly germane today, Bond’s opera proves that the genre is as well. This is not an elitist museum piece, but a theatrical work that is as viable in our day and in our cultural climate as opera was in earlier times. *Mrs. President* works on both the micro and macro levels as a personal and socio-political statement. It succeeds both in the realm of idealism, and from a purely musical standpoint. Two short reasons, of the many worthy of exploration: the orchestration wonderfully celebrates the contribution of each member of the orchestra to the drama unfolding in the inner life of the characters. The construction of themes and their deployment provide boundless possibilities for interpretation that evolves with each new listen. In short, this is an opera with the capacity to reach any audience member, and should unreservedly claim a space in the standard operatic repertoire.

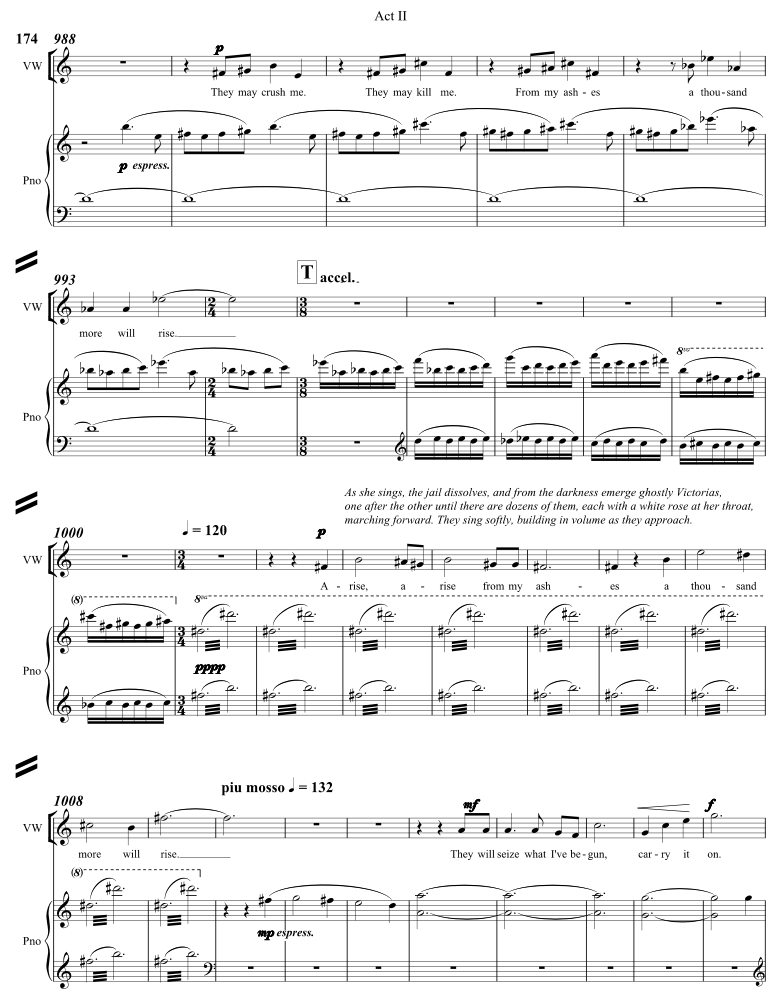
A quote by Isabella Beecher from the *Cincinnati Commercial* of June 1, 1872 after hearing Victoria Woodhull speak at a convention vividly presages my own experience with the opera *Mrs. President*: “I heard the voice of Mrs. Woodhull resounding through the hall … and declaiming in the most impassioned style, before a crowded audience of men and women who had been wrought up to a very high state of excitement. The scene was really dramatic, and to those who were in sympathy with it, it was, doubtless thrilling, glorious, sublime.”

Zachary Milliman received his M.M. from the University of Utah after completing his B.M. from Brigham Young University. His writing has been featured in a conference for the American Musicological Society as well as the Confutati Symposium. He currently resides in Alaska.

Example 1



Example 2



1. I would like to thank Ms. Bond for her input in this article and talking with me about the opera. Quotes from our conversation can be found throughout the article. For a synopsis and other information about the opera go to mrspresidenttheopera.com.

   This term in modern parlance references the sexual revolution of the 1960s, but in Woodhull’s time it referred to women’s rights, specifically in marriage and property. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)