



The Making Of An Opera
A Personal Recollection
and Reflection on Victoria Woodhull
„Mrs. Satan“

by Victoria Bond

Composer/Conductor Victoria Bond has written three operas, numerous orchestral, ballet and chamber works. Profiled in The Wall Street Journal, NBC Today Show, People Magazine and The New York Times, scenes from her second opera Mrs. Satan were performed by The New York City Opera. She has conducted in Europe, China and South America as well as throughout the United States and has served as Music Director and Conductor of several orchestras and opera companies.

Das Leben historischer Ausnahmefiguren eignet sich auf Grund seiner natürlichen Dramatik besonders für die Überführung in das Operngenre. Daher ist es kein Wunder, dass sich die Komponistin Victoria Bond in ihrer Oper Mrs. Satan dem Schicksal der amerikanischen Politikerin und Visionärin Victoria Woodhull angenommen hat. Im Folgenden berichtet die Komponistin über Entstehungsgeschichte und Umsetzung des historischen Stoffes.

Victoria Woodhull's name was introduced to me by my mother over 20 years ago. She was intrigued with this bold and fearless woman, because she represented the same philosophy of fierce dependence that my mother adhered to and which she passed on to me. It is inspiring to study Woodhull's struggles and to feel the encouragement to never give up the good fight no matter what the obstacles. I personally need to be in contact with such individuals, living or historical, and working to bring her character and her story to life is a passionate commitment.

The challenge was to find her musical "voice" as well as the musical expression for Henry Ward Beecher, her nemesis, Col. James Blood, her husband and Isabella Beecher, her closest friend. These people's lives intersect with tragic consequences and each goes through a significant metamorphosis during the course of the opera.

The Story

Victoria Woodhull was born in 1838 in Homer, Ohio to a poor family, and, gifted with clairvoyant visions, she was exploited from an early age by her parents who carted her from town to town reading fortunes, telling the future and performing as a child medium in a carnival-type atmosphere. She married early to a doctor, Canning Woodhull, who promised to rescue her from her desperate circumstances. However he proved to be an alcoholic and a womanizer. Feeling trapped in a miserable relationship, she returned to her work as a spiritualist, providing help and advice to women who, like herself, seemed doomed to the slavery of unhappy marriages. Because of these experiences, she determined to make her goal women's emancipation.

Her spirit voices advised her to go to New York City where, together with her younger sister Tennessee Claflin, she met Cornelius Vanderbilt who frequently consulted spiritualists on personal as well as financial matters. Vanderbilt was enchanted with the “bewitching sisters” and set them up as the first female stock-brokers on Wall Street. Although this was originally meant as a publicity stunt, the women were wildly successful and amassed a fortune. Because of this, Victoria was able to pursue her real passion, women’s freedom. She surrounded herself with the brightest minds of her time, including Col. James Blood, who was to become her second husband. Because Dr. Woodhull was the father of her two children and because he was incapable of looking after himself, she allowed him to live with her entire family in their palatial home in New York City. This, together with other unusual aspects of her family life, were to cause her no end of grief and to become lightning rods for every sort of criticism leveled at her and her unorthodox theories.

As Victoria rose in prominence, so did the controversy surrounding her. At first she was embraced by the suffrage movement because she was able to gain access to the powerful men in Washington. She pleaded forcefully for a woman’s right to vote, arguing that as a citizen, the Constitution already gave her that right. However, the conservative Congress denied suffrage, making it a state by state decision. Her vision, however, went far beyond a woman’s right to vote, her goal being nothing less than the complete equality of the sexes. This was too controversial a position for most women, including the suffragists, and they abandoned her as too radical for their purposes. In 1872, she announced herself as a candidate for President of the United States on the Equal Rights Party ticket with Frederick Douglass as her Vice-Presidential running-mate. She sought out the influential preacher, Henry Ward Beecher to endorse her campaign, both because he had many powerful men in his congregation, and because she knew about some embarrassing details concerning his private life.

Victoria endorsed free love, a term even more inflammatory in her day than it is today. However, by this she meant things that we would take for granted. In her day, once a woman was married, she gave up her most basic rights, including her freedom to own property, to keep her children if she divorced her husband and to keep her dignity and her place in society as a divorcee or a single woman. Victoria considered marriage, in this light, as nothing more than legalized prostitution. She believed in love and she did believe in loving relationships, but she also believed that when love was no longer a part of the relationship, no legal document could sanction it.

Henry Ward Beecher preached a conventional doctrine of holy matrimony, however he practiced a very different kind of free love, conducting numerous affairs with his married female parishioners. Victoria knew this and threatened to expose him if he did not endorse her bid for the Presidency. At first he wavered, but then confronted with the scandal that this would unleash, he withdrew his endorsement.

True to her word, Victoria ran a detailed article about Beecher in her newspaper, “Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly”. The storm that erupted as a result became the scandal of the century, on the front pages of every newspaper for months and the most celebrated trial of its time. As a result, Victoria was jailed. Her political hopes were dashed as was her financial empire. In the end, Beecher was exonerated and Victoria was vilified as “Mrs. Satan”



**Victoria Woodhull as “Mrs. Satan” — Thomas Nast
Harper’s Weekly, February 17, 1872**

Librettist Hilary Bell writes for stage, radio, screen and music theatre. Her plays have been produced in Australia, the UK, Europe and the United States. Hilary is a recipient of the Philip Parsons Young Playwrights' Award, Jill Blewitt Playwrights' Award, Bug'n'Bub Award, Aurealis Award for fiction, the Eric Kocher Playwrights' Award and an Australian Writers Guild AWGIE for music theatre.

Creating A Libretto

The first challenge in making Woodhull's life into an opera was condensing the enormous scope of her activities and focusing them into a single, significant event. As opera is first and foremost theater, a good story must have clarity, a sense of direction, and a plot that can be easily grasped on first viewing. Hilary Bell, librettist, had the challenge of combining a large number of individuals who played an important part in this drama into the seven principal characters in the cast. The chorus members participate as individuals as well as being part of a large group.

She skillfully wove Victoria's sister Tennessee Claflin into the role of her closest friend and supporter Isabella Beecher, and she created a fictitious character, Joseph Treat, who combines the qualities of many of Woodhull's adversaries and spurned lovers. We both agreed that the action should take place during the election year, 1872, and that the drama should center around the relationship between Woodhull and Beecher. This gave the plot a universal context: it was not only about a woman's struggle for equality, not only about a woman's battle against the conservative establishment, but it was also about a woman's personal ambiguity towards a seductive and powerful man who tries to control her. This is a story as alive and meaningful today as it was over a hundred years ago. The vote has not brought with it the goal of women's dreams, and there are still many battles to be fought. The headlines are full of the continuing abuse of women throughout the world as well as in our own country. Victoria Woodhull represents a potent example of the fierce determination of one individual who refused to be bullied.

The life of this woman haunted me until I could resist no longer. The music for her needed a wild and primal passion, which I longed to be able to represent. Henry Ward Beecher

also represented a fascinating portrait of one whose nature embraced those same qualities of passion and wildness, but who had been brought up to lead and to preach a life of bourgeois respectability. His married life was without love or passion, so he sought both in the many illicit affairs he conducted with his female parishioners. Although he was tortured by the knowledge that his life was a lie, he was too weak to do anything about it. When confronted with the possibility of "coming out of the closet" and embracing his true nature, he was at first drunk with the intoxication of revealing himself at last. However, on sober reflection, he realized that the life he had built for himself, with its prestige, power and respect, would collapse if he told the truth about himself. He could not face the condemnation of society. In the end, a coward, he turned on Woodhull and unleashed the forces that would bring about her doom.

Isabella Beecher was a character caught in the middle of a life-and-death tug-of-war. Her older brother, Henry Ward Beecher, was her idol, and she believed him to be the saint that society said he was.

She knew nothing of his secret affairs. She saw how adored he was and she took his teachings and his guidance to heart. However, when she met Victoria Woodhull, she saw a woman who was unlike her family. She was captivated by Woodhull's charisma and drawn to her as a life-affirming alternative to the pious and constricting laws that governed her own family. This put her squarely in the middle of the opposing forces of her brother and her friend. After meeting Woodhull, she wanted to devote herself to women's freedom, but her brother, infuriated at her activities, successfully intimidated her by insinuating that her passion for Victoria had homosexual overtones. Horrified by his accusations and by the implied disgrace that such a liaison would mean to her entire family, she backed down and abandoned Woodhull and her cause, returning, reluctantly to the fold of her all-powerful family.

Victoria's husband, James Blood, married her with the clear understanding that theirs was to be an unconventional relationship. He believed in open marriage, in which both husband and wife were free to explore other sexual partners. At first, this arrangement seemed to work, and he encouraged Victoria to indulge her many passionate affairs, however, he did not anticipate the emotional devastation that such unbridled freedom would wreck on his own emotional life. In the end, disappointed and disillusioned, he became the victim of his own unrealistic philosophy, abandoning it and his marriage vows. Victoria was left, at the end of the opera, alone and abandoned by everyone.



180

piu mosso $\text{♩}=112$

389 *f* *ff*

VW — is the man!"

Pno. *ff*

She regains her composure
meno mosso $\text{♩}=96$

394 *f* *mf* *p*

VW As long as wo - men can - not vote We are ig - nored. Fear

Pno. *mf dolce*

398 *accel* *piu mosso* $\text{♩}=120$ *ff*

VW not, I don't want an - ar - chy. I want e - qual - i - ty, Jus - tice.....

Pno. *p*

Suddenly, she takes on an unearthly quality, as in her trance, as if seeing a vision.

403 *Presto* $\text{♩}=76$ *ff* *dim*

Pno.

Ausschnitt aus der Arie „I'm Told I'm a Citizen“, in der Victoria Woodhull die bürgerlichen Rechte von Frauen formuliert.

This story is certainly operatic in its tragic scope. In studying Victoria's history, I was struck by those qualities that define the great among us. Although she never achieved her goal, she left us with a remarkable testimony to her courage, her vision and her indomitable spirit. I hope to illuminate those qualities in my opera "Mrs. Satan". She has been an inspiration to me all through this process.

208

683 *p*

VW A world where all are free Not just

Piano *mp*

690 *mf* *mf* *p*

VW one house, Not just one place, Not just one

Piano *mf* *mf* *p*

697 *poco piu mosso* $\text{♩} = 120$

VW col - or or class. Not just one land. *p*

JB You're ill; You can

Piano *p espr.*

Aus der 3. Szene des
2. Akts: Victoria Woodhull
hat die Vision von einer
besseren Welt.

Compositional Techniques

I have had three principal composition teachers: Ingolf Dahl, during my undergraduate studies at the University of Southern California, Paul Glass with whom I studied privately after I graduated and Roger Sessions who taught me at the Juilliard School where I earned my doctorate. Each one gave me a unique perspective and set of skills and these have formed my compositional technique.

I learned both traditional harmony, counterpoint and form as well as the twelve-tone technique, and all are integral components of my language. My harmonic palette is primarily tonal, as it affords me the maximum contrast between consonance and dissonance, but I have retained the contrapuntal aspect of the twelve-tone technique, as it taught me how to apply Baroque principals to the contemporary aesthetic.

Opera fascinated me early on, and I made up stories accompanied by music as a child. My father sang with the New York City Opera and I was in their children's chorus, singing in productions of *Carmen*, *La Boheme* and even such rarities as Carl Orff's *The Moon*. Although my first instrument was the piano, I later studied singing and sang in numerous opera produc-

tions at school, including Harry Partch's iconoclastic *Delusion of the Fury* which was recorded by Columbia Masterworks. I wrote many vocal works for myself to sing, and several short operatic scenes, before embarking on my first opera, *Travels*. Based on a contemporary re-telling of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, this was produced by Opera Roanoke in 1995.

My second opera, *Mrs. Satan*, received a concert reading of four scenes by the New York City Opera in 2001. In writing this opera, I was able to utilize both tonal and twelve-tone techniques, the former in the overall melodic lyricism of the arias, and the latter in the layered counterpoint of the ensembles. I wanted to have maximum contrast between the abstract rituals of theater which formed the framework, and the emotional realism of the characters who inhabit a personal space, overlapping with others and developing during the course of the action. They each have a signature melodic, harmonic and rhythmic profile, and like an instrumental theme, these undergo a process of development. As characters interact, their themes likewise interact and "bleed" into one another, modifying and transforming each other.

Thus in the final scene in Act I between Victoria Woodhull and Henry Ward Beecher, the two characters begin at opposite ends of the spectrum, their individual themes being unlike each other in every way. Her theme is cool, ironic and self-assured. Her tempo is relaxed and her harmonies consonant, with a pulsing rhythmic figure, calmly waiting and watching him. His initial tempo is fast and irregular, his harmonies dissonant and his melodic line jagged and disjunct, with short outbursts of fury and venom. She does not react to his musical onslaught, remaining unmoved. However, as she begins to influence him, both through implied threats and seductive charm, his music reacts to her. At first he is violent, but then, realizing the impotence of his bluster, he begins to absorb her musical motives, until at the end of the duet, their individual strands are fused into one single line.

This technique applies to the Quartet in Act II between the four principal characters: Woodhull and her husband, Colonel Blood and Beecher and his sister Isabella. It begins as a double duet. Blood, tenderly cradling the defeated Victoria in his arms, sings a folk-like song of longing for a simpler life with her in their country home. But Victoria, not listening to him and still caught up in her ambitious dream, softly mumbles phrases from her theme, formerly full of opulent harmonies and vigorous rhythms, but now subdued and sparse, drained of its life.

Beecher, having regained his bluster, now directs it towards his younger sister who he is still able to control. His music recapitulates the angry bully of Act I, and his character, not having learned anything from his experiences, is reflected in his music, which has also not developed, but which reiterates its old formula. His sister, Isabella, on the other hand, has thoroughly absorbed the music and philosophy of Victoria Woodhull. In Act I, her youthful, malleable character was shaped by the adoration she felt for her older brother, and thus her theme was a variation of his. But during the course of Act II, she realizes his flaws, and despising him, she turns her affection and her music to Victoria. In the Quartet, when she confronts her brother, her frustration motive is based on a moment in Act I when she suddenly realizes his duplicitous nature.

These four distinct characters are unified by one thread, which gradually draws their music from the outer limits of contrast, closer and closer together. Each one questions whether or not the other loves him, and the quartet ends with this unifying theme, set as a question, both verbally and musically, as the cadence does not resolve.

I hope by this brief analysis of two significant scenes from *Mrs. Satan*, to make clear that my musical decisions were based on the interaction and the development of each character. The choice of key, harmonic progression, rhythmic motives and formal outline were all shaped by the drama created by this interplay. After setting the story in motion, there was an inevitability to each musical decision, though finding this often took much trial and error. I did not want to be bound by an external system which would impose an artificial unity, but rather to discover, through the unfolding events, what each character and situation demanded.

Im Jahr 2001 wurden vier Szenen aus Victoria Bonds Oper *Mrs. Satan* an der New York City Opera in der Reihe „VOX: Showcasing American Composers“ aufgeführt. Ein Jahr später folgte eine konzertante Aufführung in der Guild Hall in East Hampton. Im Dezember des letzten Jahres stieß die Oper auch in Europa auf Interesse: Im Barocksaal des Alten Rathauses in Wien interpretierte die Sängerin Patricia Johnson die Arie „I'm Told I'm A Citizen“. Eine konzertante Aufführung der gesamten Oper ist dort für das Jahr 2007/08 geplant.