

COLIN BROWNE / Tom Cone and The Opera Project

My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, that meaning will take care of itself. And the Stein texts, for prosodizing in this way were manna . . . You could make a setting for sound and syntax only, then add, if needed, an accompaniment equally functional. I had no sooner put to music after this recipe one short Stein text than I knew I had opened a door. I had never had any doubts about Stein's poetry; from then on I had none about my ability to handle it in music.

—Virgil Thomson, *American Music Since 1910* (1971)

Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) famously said that as a girl she'd loved the opera because she could not understand the words. It meant that she could absorb each moment's vibrancy without the irritable distractions associated with ploughing the semantic turf in search of meaning. The operas she attended would have been sung in French, Italian and German, masterpieces of plotting and double-entendre presented by travelling stock companies selling European chestnuts to the "uncultured" and the striving nouveaux-riches of America looking to burnish their credentials. For Stein, these performances opened the door to her practice as a writer absorbed by new theories about the nature of consciousness and a listener attentive to rhythm, sound, repetition and the semantics of the American language as it was spoken. It took a while, but by 1913, her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan could write in the journal *Arts and Decoration* that she'd begun to understand Stein's strategies by "listening to Gertrude Stein's words and forgetting to try to understand what they mean. . . ."

Tom Cone held Stein in high regard, but he also had enduring faith in the ability of urgent, precisely-targeted language to pierce the mighty and to speak truth to power, corruption, and fear. As a playwright and librettist, he worked to find linguistic disruption, disjunction and interruption wherever he could find it. He never stood still; when one linguistic strategy began to show wear and tear he shifted in the direction of its contrary, never wanting to bore himself and always wanting to be a step ahead. He was happy to be excessive, to challenge and to irritate, and, at the

same time, to touch the heart in ways one could never have imagined. His characters, tangled up in language, were never easy.

Tom was enthusiastic about contemporary opera. It was his conviction that it should be regularly overhauled in order to stay relevant and persuasive. This meant that if there were words they would have to be comprehensible; they'd have to mean something. For this to happen, in his city and in his adopted nation, they'd have to be sung in English and clearly articulated. Writers would have to turn their minds to lyrics, syllables, vowels, and consonants that incited and complemented the musical score. With Stein, he believed that "The business of Art . . . is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present" ("Plays" in *Lectures in America*). He was infuriated by the insistence of contemporary opera companies in Canada and the United States on producing more or less the same repertoire that Gertrude Stein would have heard as a child. He was dismayed by the stuffy, old-fashioned culture of grand opera, and excited by every attempt to create and produce opera with new young singers, musicians, writers, and composers. He knew that audiences would come to new operas if they had vitality and urgency, and he knew that companies could create international reputations by taking risks. He was vocal about this, and yet budgets and traditions and long-term planning by opera companies seemed to preclude new forms, new words, new music, and new advances in the art.

Tom and his wife Karen Matthews had once before addressed the timidity of Vancouver's musical institutions by creating, in 2004, with their colleague David Pay, a successful series in their living room that featured the commissioning of new songs. Called Song Room, it brought together Vancouver composers, writers and musicians twice a year to experiment with exciting and often risky collaborations. It brought new audiences to new music, and undertook to further develop these audiences by casting an ever-wider net. The "Collaborations" issue of *The Capilano Review* (Winter 2008) featured eleven Song Room collaborations. In the fall of 2010, Tom and Karen took the step of creating a new series called The Opera Project for the purpose of creating ten-minute operas. They commissioned four composers and four writers (Tom being among them, for which we can be grateful), and in May of 2011, they unveiled the new works in their home, including Tom's *Love Thy Neighbour*

with music composed by Edward Top, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's composer-in-residence.

The rules for The Opera Project commission are simple. The work may be no longer than ten minutes, there's not much room for acting, costumes or props, each project may feature up to four singers and four instrumentalists, and, as with all Cone & Matthews events, the money collected at the door goes directly to the performers. Tom insisted that the words had to be audible and comprehensible, and was firm in his conviction that the writer's libretto is equal in value to the composer's score, a surprisingly radical proposition in opera circles.

With the commission in hand, creators were free to explore and to redefine the very idea of what an opera might be, and this was true for the second set of five Opera Project commissions presented on the evening of September 22nd, 2012. The evening was dedicated to Tom, who died on April 5th, 2012. It was the last group to have Tom's imprimatur, if this is the right word, the last to have been chosen by him, to have received his particular blessing, the last to feel the warmth and the attention that came with being a part of this musical/textual experiment. When he asked one to participate, it was never just to fill in a hole on the program. There was a silent contract, or perhaps not so silent sometimes, as he was often free with his advice. He liked to take artistic, emotional, intellectual risks, and he wanted the participants to join him in taking those risks, to outdo him even! This is what mattered; he wanted to be transported somewhere he'd never been before. It was his challenge to anyone involved. He searched restlessly for artists who were breaking new ground. As genres became comfortable and predictable, he set off to look for whoever was launching a fresh assault on the present. I loved that restlessness. All of us who knew him will miss his urgency. He brought joy to all involved: joy in giving and joy in receiving.

Karen Matthews has said that she will continue with The Opera Project and with Song Room, which is Tom's wish. Audiences and artists alike will rejoice, knowing that there is still a place for experimentation and collaboration that they've had a share in creating and sustaining. We're grateful for Karen's generosity, and to David Pay and Carol Yapple, co-producers, who have contributed so much to the successes of both series.

—COLIN BROWNE, 23 September, 2012