

Six Characters In Search Of An Author
Opera in Three Acts
Music by Hugo Weisgall
Libretto by Denis Johnston
From the play by Luigi Pirandello

New World Records 80454

Weisgall's Marvelous *Six Characters*

*Please do not be surprised when a reality is born, formed and invoked by the magic of the stage itself--Do you not believe in the creative power of your own profession?--The Father, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author**

A momentous event in American opera--and the vibrant performance enshrined on these discs--took place in Chicago at the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists (the junior company of the Lyric Opera of Chicago) in 1990. This event went almost unheralded; it was only noticed locally, and (save for an enthusiastic review by *The New Yorker's* Andrew Porter) it was ignored afterward by a national press interested on the one hand in star singers and on the other in the latest "cutting-edge" atrocities. Nevertheless, Hugo Weisgall's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1956), with a libretto by the Irish playwright Denis Johnston, showed itself, in the National Public Radio broadcast several months later of the Chicago performances, to be a masterpiece of American opera. It is now plain that *Six Characters* deserves to be placed on the level of such vastly important works as Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928), Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956), and Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966) (available on New World Records 80322).

It cannot be said that *Six Characters* was absolutely unknown prior to its Chicago performance. Commissioned in the mid-1950s by the Ditson Fund at Columbia University and produced at the New York City Opera in the 1958-59 and 1959-60 seasons with funding from the Ford Foundation, the opera was a great success on its premiere, and won admirers notable both for their sophistication and for their enthusiasm. But these days success among the cultivated does not a place in the operatic repertory make, and *Six Characters* did not receive a professional production in all the years from the beginning of the 1960s until its rescue three decades later by the good taste and high courage of Ardis Krainik, the Lyric Opera's General Director.

Before we can understand why this miscarriage of artistic justice should have taken place, it is necessary to examine the nature of *Six Characters* as a work of art. This examination must begin with the remarkable 1921 play by the Italian author Luigi Pirandello on which the opera is based. The play immediately established itself as one of the monuments of the modern European theater, a reputation which it has not lost to this day; it has been available since the 1920s in various English translations.

As a whole, Pirandello's plays--including the recently much-done *Henry IV*--were founded upon a rejection, at once principled and emotional, of so-called ordinary reality, and its supersession by the created reality Pirandello attempted to put on the stage. *Six Characters* presents simultaneously a group of actors and the characters (in real life, so to speak) they hope to portray. The characters are not content to be at the mercy of the actors, and wish to find an author to tell their own, as yet unwritten, story. What Pirandello means to accomplish is thus first to destroy the illusionism of the stage and its practitioners, and then, by artistic sleight-of-hand, to claim that the creations of art can replace life.

Weisgall and his librettist had the brilliant idea of turning the Pirandello play-within-a-play into an opera-within-an-opera. Thus Pirandello's actors now become opera singers, and his stage characters operatic characters. The intermediary between professionals and the uncooperative personages they hope to portray remains the Director, transformed from genius theatrical to genius operatic. The six characters turn out to be six members of a troubled family--the very voluble Father, Mother, Son, and Stepdaughter, a silent young boy, and an equally silent young girl whose unrelated and unmotivated drowning provides the denouement of the story; the Stepdaughter and the two children are the illegitimate offspring of the Mother by another man, now dead. There is one additional character, at once peripheral and central: Madame Pace, a dressmaker doubling as the keeper of a brothel. The main body of the plot recounts the Father's attempt in Madame Pace's brothel to seduce the Stepdaughter, whom he fails to recognize.

The characters attempt to persuade the singers and the Director to let them play themselves. Led by the Director, the professional singers at first resist, claiming that only they have that one necessity for performing opera: union cards. But as *Six Characters* goes on, the superior reality of the characters pushes their would-be representatives into the background. At the end, as both characters and singers abandon the stage, it is clear that it is the characters who have won the day, for they will be remembered, while the singers--and the Director too--will never be more than faceless performers.

It goes without saying that the recriminations, guilt, and hatreds that suffuse the opera are the very stuff of twentieth-century angst; not surprisingly, they are the very stuff of opera itself. It is by no means the smallest achievement of *Six Characters* as a work for the lyric stage that it manages so completely to link the historical preoccupations of opera with the abiding psychological atmosphere of contemporary life and culture. On the philosophical level, the opera takes over, and deepens, Pirandello's lifelong concern with the inescapably nihilistic questioning of the metaphysical nature of reality.

It is true that for *Six Characters* to have succeeded as it has, it was necessary that its creators, and in particular its composer, be fully aware of the civilized culture that has gone into the making of the art of our century. Of all twentieth-century composers, Weisgall is one of the most intellectually and musically sophisticated. The son of a well-known Jewish cantor, he was born in 1912 in Czechoslovakia, and came to the United States in 1920. He has a Ph.D. in German literature from Johns Hopkins, and thereafter graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music. He served in World War II as assistant military attaché to governments-in-exile in London, and after the war was a cultural attaché in Prague. He has taught at Juilliard and at Queens College, and for many years has been on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In a fitting recognition of the respect in which he is held in our intellectual life, he is the immediate past president of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

One must not overlook for a moment that it is music, and only music, that has made *Six Characters* the artistic miracle that it undoubtedly is. First and foremost, Hugo Weisgall is an extraordinary musician, with an easy command of all the literature and materials of music. He is known primarily for his operas, a long string of which constitute the largest single contribution in the history of American opera. His works before *Six Characters* include *The Tenor*, written in 1949-50 to a libretto based on Wedekind, and *The Stronger*, written in 1952 to a libretto based on Strindberg. His later works include *Purgatory* (1958, after Yeats), *Athaliah* (1963, after Racine), *Nine Rivers from Jordan* (1968,

with Denis Johnston), *Jenny, or The Hundred Nights* (1976, John Hollander, after Mishima), and *Gardens of Adonis* (1959-81, John Olon-Scrymgeour, after Andre Obey and Shakespeare).

More recently, Weisgall composed *Esther*, based on the biblical story. This opera was originally commissioned by the San Francisco Opera and its then general director, Terence McEwen. *Esther's* production in San Francisco was canceled by the new general director, Lotfi Mansouri, on the grounds that the work was too ambitious for San Francisco's resources. What was too difficult for San Francisco was duck soup for the New York City Opera; in October of 1993, this plucky company performed *Esther* to audience and critical acclaim.

While the initial rejection of *Esther* was publicly explained in terms of its casting requirements, there can be little doubt that the real cause of the San Francisco withdrawal was the *musical* demands Weisgall makes on performers and audience alike. He has always written--and *Six Characters* is certainly no exception--in a difficult style, harmonically knotty, even though always clearly scored. His writing has often seemed post-Bergian, with its combination of a high level of chromaticism and what might be called the avoidance of the avoidance of tonality. What is so remarkable about Weisgall as an operatic composer is his ability to write music that impresses solely as music and at the same time mirrors the stage in a consistently uncanny way.

It is this combination of musical independence and dramatic relevance that so distinguishes *Six Characters*. In composing the opera, Weisgall drew on many sources: updated Gregorian chant, the nineteenth-century German synagogue service, early twentieth-century Italian *verismo*, and Schoenbergian expressionism. Like Pirandello himself, whose original play has its roots in the life of the playwright's native Sicily, Weisgall draws on his entire artistic and human background to create his work.

The stature of the musical outcome of *Six Characters* is proved by one simple fact: Unlike most American operas, and unlike almost all operas written since World War II, *Six Characters* contains vocal material--notably the arias for the Coloratura and the Stepdaughter in Act I--that can be excerpted from the opera, and performed independently in concert. What gives these arias their precious attribute of autonomous existence is sheer songfulness, extended, ripe, and memorable. Much the same can be said, too, about the immense power of the opera's end, with its gathering intensity of melody. Indeed, it is the profusion of melody, pleasurable to sing, play, and hear, that marks the entire score of *Six Characters*, and gives it its distinguished place among American operas.

For some years we have been hearing a great deal about "music-theater," a supposedly new fusion of song, word, and stage action that will replace opera as a creative force. The candidates for the successful achievement of this fusion have run the gamut from the 1976 Philip Glass/Robert Wilson *Einstein on the Beach* through the 1987 John Adams/Peter Sellars *Nixon in China*; hardier souls have even modeled their expectations--if not receiving any realizations from--on David Byrne and his Talking Heads.

Critical opinions vary, but to this listener, for all the provocations, genteel and often otherwise, that these supposed achievements have offered, their slim musical value has doomed them to be no more than *pieces d'occasion*, works of debatable artistic value devised to exploit a particular moment in the chaotic history of the avant-garde and its life styles. For a real achievement in true music theater, we must look to Weisgall's *Six Characters*, which manages to be a masterpiece both in its independently existing music and in its unity of sound and stage.

If Weisgall's work, by virtue of its excellence, does not belong to the present idea of music-theater, where, then, does it belong? The answer is simple: it belongs to the history of opera in general, and to the history of Italian opera in particular. I have mentioned Weisgall's use of *verismo*--the unfettered musical and dramatic expression of the most bloody happenings of daily life--a kind of opera associated with, among others, Puccini, Leoncavallo, and Mascagni. Weisgall is also to be seen, surprisingly enough, in the tradition of Gian Carlo Menotti, whose *Amelia Goes to the Ball* (1937) was written when both Menotti and Weisgall were at Curtis. In his later *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), *The Medium* (1946), *The Telephone* (1947), and *The Consul* (1950), Menotti attempted the linking of music and theater that has so inspired Weisgall; indeed, it is not too much to say that Weisgall, in his direct communication with the audience through musico-dramatic means, is the thinking man's Menotti. Above all, Weisgall, like Menotti, represents a hopeful development within the tradition beyond the operatic cul-de-sac symbolized by the vacant lushness of Puccini's *Turandot* (completed by Alfano after Puccini's death in 1924 and first produced in 1926), and by the huge scale of Berg's *Lulu* (1937). -- *Samuel Lipman*

Samuel Lipman is a pianist and critic, the cofounder (with Hilton Kramer) and the publisher of *The New Criterion*. He was a student of Mr. Weisgall at the Juilliard School in 1959-60. His notes are reprinted, in altered form, from the November 1990 issue of *The New Criterion*.

SYNOPSIS

The opera takes place on the bare stage of a provincial opera house, where a new work is being rehearsed. This rehearsal is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Six Characters, a Father, Mother, Son, a Stepdaughter and two smaller children--a Boy and a Little Girl. They claim to belong to an unfinished opera and have come here in search of an author who can complete and give life to their drama. Since neither the Opera Singers nor the Director are too pleased with the newfangled work they are rehearsing, the Characters do not have too much difficulty in persuading the Director that their own play should be substituted for the work in progress. As the Characters begin to develop the story line it immediately becomes clear that these Six Characters are not a happy, unified family, but that everyone really hates everyone else. The most serious rift isolates the sullen elder Son, who despises both his parents, and the Stepdaughter, who is not the Father's daughter but the illegitimate child of the Mother by another man, now dead. The two younger children are also illegitimate children. The Mother and the three illegitimate children are dressed in deep mourning. The situation, complex though it is, fascinates the opera company, and they all agree that after a ten-minute break, during which the Characters can work on the story line with the Director, the Characters will be permitted to demonstrate their own opera.

The second act shows the setting of the scene for the Characters' opera. When the casting begins and certain problems arise, the Father suggests that they, the Characters, be permitted to play themselves. A violent dispute ensues between the members of the company and the Characters, and the Director makes it clear that this is a union house where only bona fide members of the singers' union are permitted to perform on the stage. The Characters, anxious to proceed, invoke Madame Pace, the owner of the dress shop in which the first act of their drama is to take place, and dress up the bare stage with a few pieces of scenery, some furniture and a few hand props. They call for Madame Pace who suddenly appears from behind a door. The company is stunned by her sudden appearance, seemingly out of nowhere, and they are chided by the Father for having so little faith in the realities of the theater. The play gets under way and the company is greatly amused by the fact

that Madame Pace sings in a peculiar combination of English and Italian. Madame Pace does not like being laughed at and disappears as suddenly as she entered. The Father and Stepdaughter continue their action without her. The Stepdaughter has been forced to become a prostitute in this brothel which masquerades as a dress shop and the Father, not knowing who she is, is about to become her first client. No sooner have they sung a few lines when the Director interrupts and insists that the same scene is to be done again by his two leading singers, the Coloratura and the Tenore Buffo. The Characters cannot bear the way their drama is being parodied by the professional singers, and continually interrupt their performance. It is brought even closer to ruin when the Stepdaughter says that she must be permitted to take her dress off on the stage as part of the action. The Director warns her that such things cannot be permitted in his theater, and the Stepdaughter agrees to do the scene with only one arm bare and calls on her mother to scream and interrupt the action. The dramatic tension mounts; everyone on the stage senses the climax of the scene and the Stage Manager, who thinks that the Director has called for the curtain, suddenly brings it down. The Director is left in front of the footlights, fighting furiously to get through the curtain, violently protesting that he had only been talking to the Prompter.

When the third act opens we see the Chorus rehearsing with the Accompanist, the leading singers lounging around the stage waiting for the rehearsal to proceed. The Director wants to start but the Stepdaughter and Son begin to argue about the proper location. The Stepdaughter wants the scene to be in the Father's house between the Mother and Son. The Son, who throughout the opera does not want this drama to be portrayed at all, refuses, and insists on a garden scene. The Director announces that there cannot be too many sets and orders the Characters to make up their minds. They finally agree on a garden scene. During an aria (with chorus) by the Stepdaughter a cut-cloth descends, the lighting changes, and we see trees and a fountain. The Stepdaughter urges the Son to begin his scene with the Mother, and she is joined in her plea by both the Mother and the Father. The Son, still sullen, suddenly loses his temper and slaps his mother in the face, screaming that she has ruined his life. The singers are stunned by the Son's brutality, and for a moment the opera threatens once again to disintegrate. But now the Son is determined to finish the unpleasant business. The two younger children have gone to play near the fountain, and it now becomes apparent that the Little Girl is missing. The Son rushes over to the fountain and pulls out the Little Girl, who has been drowned by the other child. Some of the singers grow hysterical and rush off the stage with the Stepdaughter carrying the body of the dead child. We now discover the Boy behind some trees brandishing a pistol which he had stolen in the previous act from the Stage Manager's box. Everyone urges him to put down the gun, and as the Son advances menacingly towards the Boy, the Boy shoots himself. As the gun goes off there is a blackout. When the lights go up again, the Stage Manager comes on and explains that a fuse had blown. The Director and the singers notice that the Characters have all disappeared, and one by one the singers suggest that the Characters have been present only in the Director's imagination. He is angered by this suggestion and summarily dismisses the entire company, telling them the rehearsal is over. They file off the stage singing a chorus from the opera they were originally rehearsing. The Director is alone on stage, still puzzled by the day's events. Suddenly the Stage Manager turns out all the lights and as the Chorus in the background sings a few lines of the *Dies Irae*, eerie green lights rise on the stage and we see a funeral procession, the Father, Mother and Son disappearing up a ramp. They are followed at some distance by the Stepdaughter. As they reach a point half way up the ramp, the Stepdaughter laughs raucously, throws her arms in the air, and runs away in the opposite direction, leaving the other three to continue walking up the ramp and out of sight. The Director, now alone on the stage, has not seen this but has only heard the Stepdaughter's laugh. Frightened, he turns around and shouts "Who is there?" There is no answer. He shakes his head and walks out, as the Chorus sings a

final *Amen*. The green lights fade out as the Director walks slowly off the stage leaving it dark, bare and empty as at the opening of the opera. There is no curtain.

CAST

(In order of vocal appearance, by group)

THE COMPANY:

The Accompanist	Andrew Schroeder
The Stage Manager	Philip Zawisza
The Mezzo	Joslyn King
The Tenore Buffo	Bruce Fowler
The Prompter	Susan Foster
The Basso Cantante	Michael Wadsworth
The Director	Kevin Anderson
The Wardrobe Mistress	Dianne Pritchett
The Coloratura	Elizabeth Futral

THE CHORUS - The Deadly Sins:

Pride	Beverly Thiele
Envy	Carol Chickering
Sloth	Bryan Miller Rix
Lust	Tracy Mould Watson
Anger	Paul Jacobsen
Avarice	Bruce Wallace
Gluttony	Jeff Taylor
Unnamed Sin	Brad Cresswell
Chorus Mistress	Jayne Siemens
Wardrobe Assistant	Deborah Fair
Wardrobe Assistant	Melissa Lentz
Carpenter	Lawrence Montgomery
Carpenter	Tom Sillitti
Prop Man	Robert Prindle
Prop Man	Robert Miles

THE CHARACTERS:

The Father	Robert Orth
The Stepdaughter	Elizabeth Byrne
The Mother	Nancy Maultsby
The Son	Gary Lehman
The Boy	Victor Rooney
The Child	Jenna Heffernan
Madame Pace	Paula LoVerne

Conductor and Musical Director	Lee Schaenen
Stage Director	Matthew Lata
Scenic Designer	Jeff Bauer
Lighting Designer	Todd Hensley
Costume Designer	Jessica Hahn

Wig and Makeup Designer
Chorus Master

Alicja Klosek
Donna Brunnsma

KEVIN ANDERSON (tenor) began singing with the Moline Boys Choir under the direction of Dr. Frederick Swanson. He made his debut with the San Francisco Opera in 1985-86 in Aribert Reimann's *Lear*. As guest soloist, he has sung with the San Francisco Symphony, the Midsummer Mozart Festival, the Colorado Symphony, and at the Kennedy Center. Mr. Anderson made his New York City Opera debut in 1990 as the poet in *L'Heure Espagnole*, and also appeared as Sam in *Street Scene* and Frederic in *A Little Night Music*.

ELIZABETH BYRNE (soprano) began her musical studies in her native England. She then studied at the International Opera Studio in Zurich. Her professional debut was as Alice Ford in *Falstaff* with the Glyndebourne Touring Opera. She made her debut with English National Opera in the title role of *Madama Butterfly*, and has also performed with the Welsh National Opera and the Scottish Opera.

SUSAN FOSTER (soprano) holds a Bachelor of Music degree in vocal performance from Ohio State University. She was featured in Lyric Opera of Chicago's productions of *The Gambler*, *Carmen*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*, among others. Ms. Foster has appeared in concert with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in *Parsifal*, and with the Grant Park Symphony Orchestra.

BRUCE FOWLER (tenor) came to the Opera Center after participating in the apprentice programs of Santa Fe Opera, Opera Banff, and Tulsa Young Artists. His operatic roles include the title role in *Albert Herring*, Don Ramiro in *La Cenerentola* and Ferrando in *Così fan tutte*. A finalist in the Metropolitan Opera Regional Auditions, Mr. Fowler's credits also include concert performances with the Houston Grand Opera.

ELIZABETH FUTRAL (soprano) earned her Master of Music degree in voice at Indiana University. She graduated from the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists in 1991. She won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions in 1991 and was named "1992 Debut Artist of the Year" at the New York City Opera for her performances of Gilda in *Rigoletto* and Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte*. Ms. Futral has also sung leading roles with the Dublin Grand Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Edmonton Opera and the Greater Miami Opera. She has recorded duets with Thomas Hampson for EMI, and has also recorded for RCA/BMG and Elektra/Nonesuch.

JOSLYN KING (mezzo-soprano) earned her Master of Music degree in voice at Indiana University, where she studied with Margaret Harshaw. She has performed with the Washington Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Sacramento Opera among others. She appeared at the Lyric Opera of Chicago during the 1992-93 season in *Elektra* under the baton of Leonard Slatkin and in *Die Walküre* with Zubin Mehta conducting during their 1993-94 season.

GARY LEHMAN (baritone) attended Indiana University's graduate program in voice, where he sang the role of Dr. Malatesta in *Don Pasquale* and the title role in *Eugene Onegin*. He has won several music honors, including finalist in the Metropolitan Opera Regional Awards. Mr. Lehman's Lyric Opera mainstage appearances have been as Sciarrone in *Tosca*, Horatio in *Hamlet*, and the Deputy in *Don Carlo*.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

End of Summer. Charles Bressler, tenor; New York Chamber Soloists. CRI-343.

Fancies and Inventions. Julian Patrick, baritone; Aeolian Chamber Players, Hugo Weisgall, conductor. CRI-273.

The Golden Peacock. Judith Raskin, soprano; Morey Ritt, piano. CRI-417.

Overture in F. Czech Radio Orchestra, Hugo Weisgall, conductor. Supraphon H-18131.

The Stronger. Adelaide Bishop, soprano; Columbia Chamber Orchestra, Alfredo Antoninni, conductor. Columbia ML-5106.

The Tenor. Richard Cassilly, tenor; Richard Cross, bass baritone; Dorothy Coulter, soprano; Doris Young, soprano; Chester Ludgin, baritone; John Kuhn, tenor; Vienna State Opera Orchestra, Herbert Grossman, conductor. Westminster OPW-1206/WST-208.
Translations. Judith Raskin, soprano; Morey Ritt, piano. CRI-417.

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HUGO WEISGALL (b. 1912)

DISC 1

- 1 ACT I (48:28)
- 2 ACT II, Part 1 (16:48)

DISC 2

- 1 ACT II, Part 2 (29:55)
- 2 ACT III (41:11)

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