

# The **New Music Connoisseur**

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**Jeffrey Lependorf: *American Lit. (The Hawthorne/Melville Correspondence)*. Libretto by Jeffrey Tillich. William Maxfield, conductor; Linda Lehr, stage director; Jeffrey Lependorf, pianist. Hell's Kitchen Opera. American Opera Projects, NYC, September 18, 1997.**

The Downtown Arts Festival's presentation of *American Lit.* was still a work-in-progress in September. With Mr. Lependorf at the piano, William Maxfield conducting, tenor David Zimmerman singing the role of Melville at all three performances (18th, 20th and 21st), and contralto Irene Ryan King thrice singing Footnote, the bottom line drawing card for this listener was not so much in the musical structure as in the basic concept.

What we mean is that the relationship of the tempestuous great sailor Melville to the restrained yet ever beguiling Hawthorne is a story this reviewer grew up with in the Berkshires, where it was born and briefly flourished in the 1850's while the two writers were neighbors. Portray this in non-fiction, fiction, drama, film, art -- I'm there. A musical interpretation? I'll go twice, which I did, enjoying myself both times.

Is this unfair to composer Lependorf? If so, why does he present his music in an offbeat manner? In the long run, does the musical language match the verbal cubistics of the letter fragments and professorial comments in the libretto? Yes, due to Mr. Lependorf's beautiful and often witty arias for Melville, Hawthorne, Footnote and Company and Chorus (four shaped note singers), the music swims upstream very deftly.

Mr. Zimmerman's passionate, florid Melville balances beautifully with Jeffrey Mandelbaum's Hawthorne. Through the musical rapport in their singing of three duets, thanks to composer and performers, one felt the intensity that prompted Melville, marooned in Western Massachusetts as a failed gentleman farmer (for a while), to dedicate *Moby Dick*, the fruit of the writers' friendship, to Hawthorne. There seemed to be less spiritual blending when Colin Duffy sang Hawthorne. Maybe it's just a question of taste.

Ms. King struck just the right Wildean notes as Footnote. Bass John Schenkel, who also served as Producer and sang Edward Duykinck to boot, struggled in his moments as the tragic Newton Arvin. I think this part needs to be rethought by the librettist, or recast. Also, the device of setting the writers' story in Arvin's Smith College classroom didn't seem to work in Part One. More work for the librettist?

The musical highpoint of Part One is a large-scale choral piece for the syllable-sound-bending "shaped singers," who were excellent. Here, the chorus becomes the Shakers, whose community Melville and Hawthorne visited during a key point in their friendship. Beautiful writing, beautiful singing, great diction. This section seems inspired.

Meet the Composer helped make these performances. We look forward to the performances of Part Two and the work in a fully-staged form. Mr. Lependorf gives every indication of a potential mastery of chamber opera. **Marlene Harding**

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