

# Elizabeth R. Austin Turns 75

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To mark her 75th year, Elizabeth R. Austin (b.1938), American composer, pianist, teacher, and longtime member of the IAWM, has completed a big new work—an opera with the intriguing title *I'm one and double too*. The libretto, in German and English, is by her husband, Gerhard Austin. The story is based on the 1808 German novella *The Marquise of O-* by Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811). Austin also uses as a point of reference one of her favorite poems, *Ginkgo Biloba* (“Bilobed Ginkgo”), written in 1815 by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; the opera’s title is in fact the last line of that poem. For Goethe, just as the ginkgo leaf begins as two separate lobes or two parts and becomes a singular entity as the tree matures, so also do two separate people choose each other and become one. Austin’s musical setting of the poem functions as a leitmotif in the opera, and the ginkgo leaf appears as a visual symbol.

## The story

The Marquise of O- in Kleist’s story is the widowed mother of two children and the daughter of a colonel in Napoleon’s army. She discovers that she is pregnant, though she cannot explain how that happened. In the opera’s Prologue, as at the beginning of Kleist’s novella, the Marquise (Julietta) has placed an announcement in the local newspaper asking the man who is responsible to come forward. Her father, convinced that she knows the identity of the man, banishes her from his house for bringing shame upon the family; in his wrath he commands her to leave the children behind, but she refuses and takes them away with her. We learn that during an attack on an Italian outpost where her father was in charge of the defense, the Russian Count F- (Pjotr in the opera) had rescued her from a group of his soldiers who intended to rape her. The Count led her to a quiet part of the castle, where she lapsed into unconsciousness and he forced himself upon her. After the family moves back to their home in town, the Count visits her repeatedly. He asks for her hand in marriage, but she hesitates, then refuses him—all the more strongly when he identifies himself as the man responsible for her pregnancy. Nevertheless, her father has him sign a marriage contract, stipulating that he is to forego his conjugal rights. He lives

separately from Julietta and his newborn son, but he is invited to family gatherings. The final scene, which addresses how a reconciliation can come about, culminates in the Marquise’s forgiveness. Another wedding ceremony takes place, a happy occasion, and more Russian babies follow.

Kleist’s novella, in particular the rape, shocked readers in 1808, and Austin realizes that her opera may shock as well. By no means does she condone rape; the rapist is beyond contempt. Like Kleist, she is less interested in the rape as such than in its consequences. Austin’s message is “reconciliation, the counterweight to violence—a non-violent outcome to a tragic misdeed.” Some critics have



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noted that the extreme emotional states of Kleist’s characters reflect the havoc in Europe in an era of revolution and war; people are thrown into situations they do not understand or control. Austin sees the characters and plot line as “quite relevant to our time: the tangled and tragic encounter between a lovely woman and a man, caught up in the violence of war.”

Austin’s concern is with individuals. “The aggressions induced in wartime may be attributed to group behavior; yet the personal loss of inhibition usually held in check by one’s subconscious is individual,” she explains. “I am almost haunted by what drives a person to commit violent acts or to come up with shallow rationalizations for his/her actions.” Kleist’s story addresses the consequences of uninhibited action, when love and recklessness merge to cause a pregnancy that leads to shame and painful disorientation for the woman, and shame and remorse for the man. “Is there any way a catastrophic ending can be ameliorated

or avoided?” Composer and librettist agree that “it is essential that Julietta and Pjotr agree that forgetting the dark past would not lead to true and lasting reconciliation.” Evil must be confronted, not ignored. “We can rise above evil if we allow ourselves to consider another course,” not killing or dying, but living.

## From novella to opera

Constructed as a prologue and twelve scenes with an intermission after scene six, *I'm one and double too* combines Kleist’s story and Goethe’s ginkgo poem in a number of ways. In the opera’s first scene, the Marquise’s young twins sing Goethe’s poem as an innocent folk song, as their mother reminisces. The aria, which acts as a unifying factor, is sung by the main characters in various ensemble settings as the opera progresses. Each character reinterprets its message (“one and double”) to fit her or his inner state. The Count experiences the poem as representing the duality of character lurking within himself. He has watched the execution of his five soldiers for attempted rape, knowing that he himself was caught up in the violence of war and took advantage of the Marquise but remains unpunished. The Marquise views him as both a rescuing “angel” and an aggressive “devil.”

Austin is most interested in the transformation of Julietta, the widowed mother of two children, living in security and comfort, who finds herself inexplicably pregnant and thus banished from family and respectable society. For Austin, the defining moment, the peripeteia (turning point), is when Julietta defies her wrathful father, ignores public disgrace, and “rises out of time and place to take her children away with her. For a woman to effect a transformation of this intensity, she must reach into the essence of womanhood,” Austin writes.

Elizabeth and Gerhard Austin felt that the sudden resolution at the end of Kleist’s novella was weak and unconvincing. So they enhanced the period of time between the first, pro forma marriage of Julietta and Pjotr and the second, true marriage. The couple needed time, not to forget their tragic common past, but to rise above it in forgiveness and reconciliation. The opera’s final scene, then, covers about a year, as

indicated by the changing colors of the ginkgo tree in the background. “In a setting removed from outer reality,” the composer writes, “Julietta and Pjotr explore their feelings about the past and about each other. They pose the serious questions that need to be answered before any kind of a new life together can come about.” In scene twelve Austin sets Goethe’s poem as a duet for Julietta and Pjotr, as shown in Example 1. At the end of the opera, the ginkgo leaf appears visually as a universal symbol of two people living in a loving relationship.

The composer

Austin’s new opera, five years in the making, brings together many general features of her oeuvre. Michael Slayton in “Elizabeth R. Austin,” chapter 1 of *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music* (2011), offers detailed information about her development as a distinctive musical voice, of which the following is a summary. Born Elizabeth Rhudy in Baltimore, Maryland, she displayed remarkable musical abilities from an early age and enjoyed solid musical training. She studied piano at the Peabody Preparatory Institute in Baltimore, and spent summers at the Junior Conservatory Camp in Vermont. At age sixteen she won a composition competition. After high school, she entered Goucher College in Baltimore. In 1958, Mlle Nadia Boulanger, on a visit to the USA, heard one of her compositions and offered her a scholarship to study at the Conservatoire Americaine in Fontainebleau. Elizabeth graduated with a BA degree from Goucher in 1960.

She married the next year, becoming Elizabeth Scheidel. She and her husband moved to a suburb of Hartford, Connecticut, where she raised three children and taught music and composition at various music preparatory schools. In 1979, wanting to ensure that she could support her family, she enrolled in a master’s degree program in music composition at the Hartt School of Music (University

of Hartford), and when she finished she immediately began work on a PhD. She enjoyed the freedom of being a student and her teachers were encouraging. Her “epiphany,” when she reaffirmed her true calling as a composer, did not happen until she was about forty years old—the timing is perhaps more typical of women than men. In 1980, she completed her “breakthrough” work, the monumental *Zodiac Suite* for piano. Her attention became less focused on her family, and her marriage eventually ended. For her, succumbing to the “lure of the arts” was not as romantic as it might sound; “that fearsome lure, which Thomas Mann describes, is actually unpleasant and

painful for surrounding and unsuspecting family” (quoted in Slayton, p. 4).

In 1987 she completed her doctoral work, the *Wilderness Symphony* (Symphony no. 1), a nineteen-minute work for two reciters and orchestra based on the poem *Wilderness* by Carl Sandburg (1878–1967). The poem begins, “There is a wolf in me,” and Austin describes the symphony as “six character variations that evolve out of the introductory landscape, as each animal emerges from our psychological ‘zoo.’” Here, as in her new opera, completed some twenty-five years later, Austin confronts the dark and violent forces of the subconscious “wilderness.” In 1989, two years after

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 23-26) features Julietta and Pjotr (Count) with lyrics: "In re-ply to all these quest-ions, I have found the mean-ing true,—" and "In re-ply to quest-ions, I have found the mean-ing true,—" respectively. The piano accompaniment is marked *mf*. The second system (measures 27-30) features Julietta and Pjotr (Count) with lyrics: "Don't you feel in all my sing-ing, in all my sing-ing, that" and "Don't you feel in all my sing-ing, in all my sing-ing, that" respectively. The piano accompaniment is marked *cresc. poco a poco*. The third system (measures 30-33) features Julietta and Pjotr (Count) with lyrics: "I'm one and dou-ble too?" and "I'm one and dou-ble too?" respectively. The piano accompaniment is marked *ppp*. A stage direction is included: "They walk slowly, hand in hand, up the middle of the leaf (its seam) towards stage rear."

Example 1. *I'm one and double too*, scene 12, mm. 23-33

Example 2. *I'm one and double too*, scene 1

completing the doctorate, she married Gerhard Austin, a professor of German at the University of Connecticut, where he is now professor emeritus. Some of her compositions bear the name Elizabeth Scheidel-Austin.

Since her epiphany thirty-five years ago, she has produced an impressive amount of music, including piano works and works for other instruments, both solo and ensemble, two symphonies, about a dozen choral works, many songs and song cycles, and two electroacoustic pieces for instrumentalist and tape. She is often inspired by visual designs and literary works. Goethe's *Ginkgo Biloba*, which has great significance in the new opera, is the inspiration for the earlier trio *Ginkgo Nova* (2002), for English horn, cello, and piano; the score includes a floor diagram to guide the three performers as they move around the stage, outlining the shape of the ginkgo leaf. Austin often draws upon German writers, especially Romantics like Goethe, Kleist, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Adelbert von Chamisso. Her wide-ranging taste also includes Rainer Maria Rilke, Bertolt Brecht, Rose Ausländer, Ingeborg Bachmann, William Butler

Yeats, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Americans such as e.e. cummings and William Carlos Williams.

Quoting from musical masterworks of the Western tradition and weaving them into a "contemporary fabric" is fundamental to Austin's compositional technique. Such quotes "inevitably carry with them nostalgia, tinged with pathos or irony," she writes. She treats the old material as a thematic "jumping-off point" or she makes it a "form-defining element" of the new piece. Her aim is for the contemporary non-tonal or pan-tonal fabric to sound familiar and "right" to the listener and the tonal quote to sound oddly out of place. Musical passages are sometimes disguised, as in the six *Puzzle Preludes* (1994/2009), where she deconstructs and reworks passages by Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. (In his chapter, Slayton reveals the solution to some of the puzzles.) She is especially fond of the German repertoire, particularly German Romantic and late-Romantic composers—Schubert, Robert Schumann, Brahms—but she has also used material by Johann Stamitz, Igor Stravinsky, Olivier Messiaen, and others.

Example 3. *I'm one and double too*, scene 5

In *I'm one and double too* Austin continues her practice of musical quotation. She quotes the piano part of Schumann's *Mondnacht* (Eichendorff) in a moonlit scene (Example 2). She quotes a theme from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* ballet (Example 3), when the Count likens Julietta to the white swan of his childhood, which he dirtied in one incident. She quotes Wagner's famous Tristan phrase for its association with star-crossed lovers. Musical quotation takes a "twist" in the opera: in many of the arias she quotes her own music, as "a kind of retrospective,"

she explains. Quotations are mainly from her art songs—the *Drei Rilke Lieder*, *Five Sonnets from the Portuguese* (Barrett Browning), *Prayer for a Christian Burial* (Jarrett), *An die Nachgeborene* (Brecht), and *Frauenliebe und -leben* (Chamisso).

In her 75th year, Elizabeth R. Austin celebrates another notable achievement. Congratulations, Elizabeth!

#### Sources

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