

ITALIAN INTRIGUE

Nico de Villiers explores the Oscar-winning composer
Richard Hageman's only opera

Those who know of the Dutch-born American composer and conductor Richard Hageman may have come to him through his songs: his setting of Rabindranath Tagore's poem 'Do Not Go, My Love' has, since its publication in 1917, become a standard in the American art song canon, recorded by artists including Lauritz Melchior, Maggie Teyte, Kiri Te Kanawa, Thomas Hampson and Roberta Alexander. Or alternatively, film enthusiasts with a particular interest in the director John Ford's Westerns might recognize Hageman's name from the credits of such classics as *Stagecoach* (1939, for which he shared an Oscar), *Fort Apache* (1948), *3 Godfathers* (1948) and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). During the late 1930s film studios sought out musicians with prominent careers in the classical music world, a focus that established the distinct symphonic sound in film music that is still prevalent today. Hageman was the first conductor of the Metropolitan Opera to be employed by Hollywood. In Westerns such as Ford's, the musical scores added to the narrative—in fact, they often steered it, which led to these films regularly being dubbed 'operas for the silver screen'. When Hageman began his Hollywood career in 1938 he already had extensive experience on the Dutch operatic scene as both a répétiteur and a conductor, had worked as a conductor and coach at the Metropolitan Opera for nearly 20 seasons, and had conducted the Chicago and Los Angeles companies. Some references to operas found their way into his scores: Puccini's *Turandot* influenced Hageman's score for *The*

■ Hageman's 'Caponsacchi' (Act 2, scene 3) at the Metropolitan Opera in 1937





■ Richard Hageman in c. 1937

Shanghai Gesture (1941), and the *Méditation* from Massenet's *Thaïs* and the children's duet from Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* are prominent examples in *3 Godfathers* seven years later.

Hageman (1881-1966) had an eclectic career as a conductor, as a composer of songs and film music, and even as an actor—he played bit parts in several films, including the conductor Carlo Santi in *The Great Caruso* in 1951 (starring Mario Lanza) and the conductor Bruno Fürst in *Rhapsody* in 1954 (starring Elizabeth Taylor). There are many strands to be brought together regarding his life and work, and many details remain uncertain or unexplored, although research has made some strides in recent years: Dr Kathryn Kalinak discussed Hageman's role as composer for John Ford's films in *How The West*

Was Sung for University of California Press; Asing Walthaus and I co-authored a short biography for Uitgeverij Wijdemeer entitled *Making the Tailcoats Fit*, which is the first ever biographical document on Hageman in print; my PhD thesis explored Hageman's developing artistic identity through his songs. Kalinak, Walthaus and I plan to publish further research in 2020.

One thing that is certain is that it was not film but opera that brought about Hageman's first venture into symphonic and programmatic writing. More than a decade before his Hollywood career commenced, Hageman started work on his first (and only) opera, *Caponsacchi*, written as a music drama in a post-Wagnerian style but with an infrequent and casual approach to Leitmotif. The opera is based on the play of the same name by Arthur Goodrich and Rose A. Palmer which, in turn, is based on Robert Browning's epic poem *The Ring and the Book*. Hageman attended a performance of the play in 1927 and was said to have been so inspired by it that he exclaimed, 'These words should be sung, not spoken!'. Soon afterwards he engaged Arthur Goodrich to prepare a libretto, and Hageman's work on his opera began in earnest.

Five years later *Caponsacchi* had its premiere, sung in a German translation by Werner Wolff, entitled *Tragödie in Arezzo*. The production, directed by Walter Felsenstein, took place in the Stadttheater in Freiburg-am-Breisgau on 18 February 1932, with Hugo Balzer conducting. That year marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of George Washington, and Hageman's opera was produced to celebrate this event in Germany. *Caponsacchi* (as *Tragödie in Arezzo*) was thus the first American opera to be staged in the German-speaking world. To mark the momentous occasion, the prologue and first act were broadcast live over the wireless via London to the USA—quite some technological feat at the time. By all accounts the run at Freiburg was very successful, and other performances were scheduled for Münster and Vienna. The

Vienna performance, given at the Staatsoper in March 1935, was again broadcast live to the US. Further details, however, remain uncertain. In 1938, Hageman alleged that subsequent European performances of *Tragödie in Arezzo* were stopped due to a Nazi ban on the work. Whether there is truth in this allegation or whether it was invented by Hageman as polemical commentary on the political situation in Germany (and perhaps as something to intrigue and entice New York's opera-goers) is unclear.

The story of the opera is that of an actual Roman murder case in 1698. The prologue is set in a courtroom in the Vatican, where Count Guido Franceschini and the monk Caponsacchi of Arezzo have been brought before a panel of judges. They are both on trial for Pompilia's murder, which took place the previous Christmas Eve. The three acts that follow form Caponsacchi's testimony, in which he recounts how Pompilia met her fate. It is carnival in the town of Arezzo. The scene is set with a ballet, the music for which includes an Italian folk tune allegedly given to Hageman by Toscanini. Pompilia, unhappily married to Guido, is expecting his child. Guido has tricked her parents out of their money, and they are forced to leave the town and return to Rome empty-handed. Pompilia, wishing to be reunited with them, meets the monk Caponsacchi, who helps her to flee. In a bid to incriminate Caponsacchi and humiliate Pompilia, Guido fabricates the story that his wife and the priest are lovers, by way of forged letters. Guido and his agents ambush the fleeing pair at an inn outside Rome, where they are falsely accused. Caponsacchi is banished as a result, while Pompilia remains with her parents.

The third act opens on Christmas Eve. Pompilia is in despair; her parents have sent her infant child away to a convent to be hidden from Guido. There is word that Caponsacchi has returned to Rome in search of Pompilia and her parents; but when they answer their door, instead of the monk it is Guido and his men, who force their way into

■ *Stars of the first American staging of 'Caponsacchi': Lawrence Tibbett as Guido Franceschini and Helen Jepson as Pompilia*



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the house. A gruesome scene follows where Guido kills both Pompilia's parents while forcing her to watch, and instructs his men to kill Pompilia—but then Caponsacchi arrives at the house, and the murderers rush off. He finds a wounded Pompilia still alive, but she dies in his arms.

The epilogue returns the action to the papal courtroom. The judges are about to announce the verdict they will recommend to Pope Innocent XII, who is to be the final judge. The people are demanding Guido's release, but the Pope, who has been hiding behind a screen in order to listen to the proceedings undetected, reveals his presence and pronounces the verdict: Guido and his men are to die the following day, Pompilia is to be posthumously exonerated and praised for her virtue, and Caponsacchi is to be set free.

During the first half of the 20th century, the music world in the United States was more and more focused on developing an infrastructure, one that would establish an educational platform for the schooling of native musicians at home instead of in Europe, and that would bring the US culturally onto a par with Europe. This notion was particularly strong in the 1920s and '30s (during which period operas were written by Louis Gruenberg, Virgil Thomson and George Gershwin) and eventually resulted in the 'opera boom' of the 1950s and '60s with Douglas Moore, Gian Carlo Menotti and Carlisle Floyd emerging as important opera composers in the US. In that early period the Metropolitan Opera mainly staged works from the standard operatic canon rather than new American operas—even *Porgy and Bess* had to wait half a century for its first Met staging—but there were exceptions, and Hageman's *Caponsacchi* was one of them. Hageman conducted the opera's first US performance at the Met on 4 February 1937, with American soloists in the leading roles: the tenor Mario Chamlee sang the

monk Caponsacchi; the baritone Lawrence Tibbett was the wicked nobleman Guido Franceschini; and the soprano Helen Jepson sang Guido's wife, Pompilia. George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein had founded a touring company called American Ballet in 1935, which was made up of members from their School of American Ballet, and at the time of *Caponsacchi's* premiere American Ballet was resident at the Met; this led to Balanchine choreographing the ballet scene in the opera. To US critics, for whom establishing an American artistic identity was high on the agenda, Hageman's opera sounded rather old-fashioned, and the opera did not enjoy the same kind of critical success it had had in Germany earlier that decade. Hageman pointed out in his defence that he had consciously not written the opera in a new style, but had rather composed music that could be enjoyed by the audience. Still, whatever the judgement on Hageman's compositional style, the work made an impact: in 1950 the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* cited that first American production of *Caponsacchi* as one of the 'splendid accomplishments' of Edward Johnson's regime as the Met's general manager.

Sadly, the 1937 season was the last time that *Caponsacchi* was staged in its entirety at the Metropolitan Opera. During the ensuing years Hageman conducted excerpts from the opera in concert performances in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. The most prominent of these took place as part of San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition, on 24 September 1940, when he conducted the San Francisco Symphony in an all-American programme. The overture to the opera, the carnival music (the ballet scene) and Pompilia's two arias (sung by Helen Jepson) were recorded, and these excerpts remain the only recordings of the opera currently available. Following that San Francisco concert, subsequent performances of excerpts followed with Hageman conducting, in addition to the performances mentioned above. Helen Jepson kept the arias in her repertoire until around 1945. Thereafter the work fell into complete obscurity.

Research into Hageman's many-faceted life as a composer, conductor and pianist continues, and it is clear that *Caponsacchi*, his only opera, played an important role in the inauguration and the development of his artistic identity. Hageman's legacy as a composer may be cemented in his songs and his film scores, but it was *Caponsacchi*, and the way in which he dealt with the various aspects of opera as a larger medium, that prepared him for his career in Hollywood.

Newsdesk

Pappano stays on

Following long speculation about their mutual plans, the Royal Opera House and Antonio Pappano have confirmed that he will remain in post as Music Director until at least the end of the 2022-23 season, while taking (as reported in last month's Newsdesk) a sabbatical year in 2020-21. Pappano, who at the end of the current season will

become the longest-serving Music Director in the ROH's history, said: 'This place feels like my home and I am so excited to continue my artistic journey here.'

Financial scare in Linz

The authorities in Linz have announced plans to abolish the subsidy paid to the city's Landestheater—apparently without