



黑与“蓝”： 枪管里的两部让人沉思的歌剧

Black and Blue:
Thoughtful opera from the barrel of a gun

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当涉及大众关注的热门话题时，歌剧往往不及其他艺术门类。常规歌剧剧目大多改编自早已存在的小说或话剧剧本（尽管近几十年来范畴有所扩大，包含电影甚至电视剧剧本），但你要知道，歌剧最原始素材的根源，都是大家熟悉的故事。古希腊神话就是早期歌剧的最爱。

所以，倘若我提议，要了解最近美国各地掀起的反对警察暴力执法的示威活动，你只要去看看歌剧就会找到时事热点，你肯定会感到惊讶。

去年7月中旬至8月中旬，纽约州北部的格里莫格拉斯歌剧节（Glimmerglass Festival）呈献了一部由珍妮·特索里（Jeanine Tesori）与塔兹韦尔·汤

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普森 (Tazewell Thompson) 创作的新歌剧《蓝》(Blue)。多年来，呈现在歌剧舞台上聚焦美国黑人社群的代表作品中，《波吉与贝丝》(Porgy and Bess) 是唯一一部需要规定，必须在常规制作中聘请黑人演员的剧目，而黑人群体长期以来也不断批评《波吉与贝丝》中的情节其实跟他们的日常生活经历毫不相干。

格里莫格拉斯歌剧节的出发点，就是改变这个状况。接到委约的特索里与汤普森肩负使命，致力

挖掘出黑人生活中最大的焦虑点，他们找到的主题就是——死亡。故事发生在纽约市哈林区，焦点放在一宗警察枪杀手无寸铁的黑人少年的案件上。

特索里与汤普森两位都是戏剧界的资深艺术家，两人所编排出的故事绝不会简单。剧中呈现的情节十分鲜明：被害者的父亲是一名黑人警察（他穿着蓝色警服，歌剧题目正取自于此），开枪的警员是父亲的同僚（我们猜他是白种人）。故事中描述的场景细腻之至，令人惊叹。

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右页、上：歌剧《温彻斯特》剧照

格什温兄弟当年准备《波吉》，专门跑到查尔斯顿（Charleston）实地考察，汲取富有当地色彩的生活与方言等养分。毕竟，查尔斯顿这个地方跟格什温兄弟的生活背景没有任何连接点。《蓝》的编剧汤普森同样花了很多时间，接触自己平常生活中没有遇到过的群体——尤其是黑人警察。在广大的黑人团体中，某些黑人警察几经辛苦赢得信任，却又有某些人会引起自己族群的猜疑。《蓝》的大部分桥段源自创作者的个人经验，包括汤普森曾经被警察误以为是疑犯（他们将汤普森误认为另一个黑人）所惹来的麻烦。

歌剧剧中有一个场次牵涉重要“谈话”——正是父亲教导儿子在公众场合要检点自己的行为，尤其

是当有警察在场时。（“我应该做什么？”到处都看到社会不公正的儿子问道。“活着，那就是你要做的”，父亲脱口而出。）其他文献中也曾经描述过这类场景，包括詹姆斯·鲍德温（James Baldwin）撰写的《给侄儿的信》（*Letter to My Nephew*）与塔尼希西·科茨（Ta-Nehisi Coates）近年出版的《在世界与我之间》（*Between the World and Me*），同样的桥段都经过精心磨光、带有文学气质。汤普森访问过很多黑人家长，他们每一个人都曾经历过这类重要“谈话”。汤普森自己年少时候，跟他“谈话”的长辈，是巴尔的摩修道院学校的老师。

《蓝》里面的角色，没有一个人可以简单地归纳为某种典型。儿子是一位优秀的学生，有艺术天赋，

才华横溢，洞悉社会里的不公，对政治有热诚，却又因为疼爱他的父亲代表着压迫族群的社会力量而心里觉得惭愧。在父母的眼中，宗教领袖一方面是解决问题的人选，但也是惹起麻烦的部分原因（我在此要特别强调一下，特索里与汤普森在天主教氛围中长大）。

很不幸，歌剧中展示道德上的模棱两可的不确定性，与歌剧的未来演出同样前途未卜。《蓝》在格里莫格拉斯歌剧节的世界首演大获成功，被誉为“出色的音乐作品”，社会评论引发热议，还赢得了北美乐评论家协会“最佳新歌剧”大奖。然而，原本定好在华盛顿、纽约市与芝加哥——爆发抗议警察暴力执法示威游行的重点城市——的演出场次，因新冠疫情全都取消了。

目前，公众只可以在格里莫格拉斯歌剧节的官网上观赏《蓝》的一些片段，或者参考古根海姆博物馆“作品与过程”（Works and Process）讲座的视频（包括主创的一些具有启发性的精彩讨论）。这部歌剧在今天的社会最为及时，真的盼望有机会在网络上播放。

《蓝》这部歌剧仔细地探索了很多无法找到确定答案的问题。我担心的是一个凌驾于一切之上的更大问题——美国俚语称之为“房间里的大象”（the elephant in the room，意思是一些非常显而易见的可却一直被忽略的问题）——好像被忽视了：美国人对于枪械与暴力所抱有的执念从何而来？我们现在可能无法在歌剧院找到答案，幸好，我们还有陆

续发行的歌剧录音新唱片。

最近，我在家里的邮箱翻出了《温彻斯特》（*Inheritance*）的录音。这是中国出生的作曲家梁雷与美国编剧马特·多诺万（Matt Donovan）的室内歌剧。故事主角是莎拉·温彻斯特（Sarah Winchester, 1839~1922），美国显赫一时的枪械商的后裔。温彻斯特家族的大宅位于加州圣何塞，到了今天，还有很多人好奇地到那里游览。温彻斯特女士 [由作曲家梁雷任职的加州大学圣迭戈分校的



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同事，女高音苏珊·纳鲁基（Susan Narucki）扮演]在公众的眼中富有传奇性，当年盛传她深信因家族枪支生意的兴起而带来了因果报应。在这部歌剧里，经常有一个“鬼魂三重唱组”徘徊在她身边。

如果说《蓝》的故事与现实相关联，《温彻斯特》发展的方向就超越了人世间，因为女主人公时时刻刻都要避开那些用她的姓氏命名的枪械弄死的“亡魂”。《蓝》的时间线循序渐进，尽管有时候会跳跃得很快；《温彻斯特》的不同场景却在过去和现在之间自由地切换。《蓝》的剧本是以一连串精心设计的具有戏剧性的对话展开；而《温彻斯特》的文本却在模糊叙事背景的同时，种下了富有诗意、耐人寻味的种子（尤其当女主人公问道：“当你的姓氏就是你想躲避的武器的名字，你该如何去赎罪？”）。



从音乐角度来看，特索里谱写的乐段显然是从性格和情境的交集中萌生出来的，即使在最棘手的戏剧冲突中，其不断的抒情也让人联想到音乐剧。相比之下，梁雷的风格很不同，他把焦点放在了节奏上，也许他利用节奏来借喻重复的枪声。整部歌剧的音乐架构跟温彻斯特大宅有关：13这个数字隐喻着大宅的13个圆屋顶以及13个台阶（基本上跟中国人因迷信而避开第四层楼相同）。偶尔的微调传达出一种明显的超凡脱俗感，时不时会有一段即兴性的旋律从某种走向突然转向另一个方向，这或许反映了温彻斯特大宅里为了“迷惑鬼魂”而设计的假楼梯与蜿蜒的走廊有关。

虽然两部歌剧的戏剧与音乐语言有着明显的差异，但《蓝》和《温彻斯特》都有着共同之处，就是神话般的底蕴。梁雷或许更明显地运用了形而上学；特索里在古根海姆的讲座里承认，她跟汤普森创作《蓝》的时候，刻意借鉴了古希腊悲剧中那些命运女神的故事：从每一个人出生时起，命运女神就主宰了他的命运。这两部歌剧还有一个雷同的地方，它们都受古典戏剧的影响：两部歌剧都将死亡保持在舞台之外。

归根结底，《温彻斯特》并没有提供解决枪械与暴力的方案，如同《蓝》在最后也没有找到化解种族冲突的灵药。但是，两部歌剧都让我们更深层地考虑那些潜在问题。还记得约翰·亚当斯（John Adams）与彼得·塞拉斯（Peter Sellars）创作的《原子博士》（*Doctor Atomic*）——一部描述原子弹研

右：歌剧《蓝》剧照
左页：位于加州圣何塞温彻斯特
家族的大宅实景



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发的歌剧吗？科技发展促使《原子博士》里的人物被心中的阴影所缠绕——甚至质疑自己有没有失去最基本的人性——《蓝》与《温彻斯特》剧中人面对的心魔同样引起我们的怜悯。

也许莎拉·温彻斯特认为自己被“鬼魂”困扰的问题并非是她失去了理智，而是因为整个世界对于她的家族制造的、具有杀伤力的产品越来越疯狂痴迷。而她，是唯一剩下理智的人。

When it comes to hot topics, opera is rarely ahead of the curve. Most shows in the repertory were adapted either from pre-existing novels or spoken drama (works in recent decades have added films and even TV shows to the list). The very roots of opera, in fact, lay in adapting stories people already knew. Greek myths were an early favorite.

So it may surprise those who were blindsided by the recent protests against police violence across the United States that all they had to do to see the problem coming was to go to the opera.

Last year from mid-July through mid-August, the Glimmerglass Festival in upstate New York presented the world premiere of Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson's opera *Blue*. America's black community has long been represented on the opera stage primarily by *Porgy and Bess*, the only show in standard repertory that specifically mandates a black cast and yet one that black Americans have long claimed has little to do with their daily lives.

Glimmerglass set out to change that. Charged with their mission, Tesori and Thompson began exploring the deepest concerns of black life and found...death. Setting their story in Harlem, they focused on an unarmed black teenager killed by a police officer.

Of course, since Tesori and Thompson both have impeccable theatrical credentials, the story isn't that simple. Rarely have the stakes been painted so starkly: The victim's father is a black police officer (his uniform being the "blue" of the title), his killer a colleague of his father's (we assume he is white). And yet, rarely has

the rest of picture been so finely shaded.

As with *Porgy*, which brought the Gershwins to Charleston to absorb the flavor of a life and verbal dialect much removed from their own, Thompson spent time with people he didn't usually encounter—particularly black policemen, whose standing in the greater black community variously ran from hard-earned trust to active mistrust. Much of *Blue*, though, came from personal experience, not least of which being Thompson's own run-in with policemen who'd confused him with another black man.

The opera also has “the talk”—a scene where the father tells his son how to act in public, especially

where policemen are concerned. (“What am I supposed to do?” the son asks, seeing injustice everywhere. “Stay alive, that's what you're supposed to do,” the father erupts.) Thompson had a fine array of literary precedents, from James Baldwin's “Letter to My Nephew” to Ta-Nehisi Coates's more recent *Between the World and Me*. But those were just nicely polished versions of the discussions that every black parent Thompson interviewed had with their kids. Thompson himself got “the talk” from teachers at his convent school in Baltimore.

Appropriately enough, none of the characters in *Blue* fits into convenient categories. The son is a fine student and talented artist, yet socially conscious

and politically motivated, tremendously embarrassed that his loving father also represents the forces of oppression. For his parents, religious leaders become not just part of the solution but also much of the problem (for the record, both Tesori and Thompson were raised as Roman Catholics).

Unfortunately, the opera's moral ambiguity also mirrors



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its murky future. Despite being heralded at Glimmerglass as both a fine musical work and a striking piece of social commentary, handily winning Best New Opera from the Music Critics Association of North America in June, subsequent runs in Washington DC, New York and Chicago—all prominent centers of anti-police protests—were cancelled because of the Covid pandemic.

Currently, *Blue* exists only in brief excerpts on the

Glimmerglass website and in a preview event recorded at the Guggenheim Museum’s Works and Process series, which also includes illuminating discussions with the creators. At a time when this opera has become more timely than ever, the best we can hope for is to find it somewhere available for streaming.

So many questions in *Blue* were deftly explored with no definitive answer that it made me realize

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右页、上：歌剧《温彻斯特》剧照

that the biggest issue of all—the elephant in the room, as we say in America—was barely mentioned: Where did America get its fundamental obsession with guns and violence? We might not find the answer right now in the opera house, but fortunately new recordings continue unabated.

Recently I found in my mailbox a copy of *Inheritance*, a new chamber opera by the Chinese-born composer Lei Liang and American librettist Matt Donovan. It concerns Sarah Winchester (1839–1922), the real-life firearms heiress whose mansion in San Jose, California remains a popular if quirky tourist attraction. Winchester (played here by soprano Susan Narucki, a colleague of the composer at the University of California, San Diego) also loomed large in the public imagination, famously

believing she was cursed by bad karma from source of the family fortune. In the opera, she is often flanked by a trio of ghosts.

If *Blue* traffics in palpable reality, *Inheritance* ventures in unearthly directions, with Winchester constantly trying to elude the spirits of those killed by the rifles that bear her family name. Where *Blue* follows a conventional timeframe, albeit with significant leaps in time, *Inheritance* freely alternates scenes between past and present. The libretto of *Blue* unfolds as a series of well-calibrated dramatic conversations, whereas the text of *Inheritance* plants poetically evocative seeds (“How to atone,” the heiress asks, “when your name is the same as the weapon you hide from?”) while blurring the narrative ground.

Musically, Tesori's score clearly germinates from an intersection of character and situation, its constant lyricism reminiscent of musical theatre even during its thorniest dramatic moments. Liang's score, by contrast, concerns itself primarily with rhythm, inspired perhaps by repeating rifle shots. Much of music's structure derives from the Winchester mansion itself, with a recurring use of the number 13 representing the mansion's 13 cupolas and 13 steps (making it essentially the American equivalent of a Chinese four-story house). Occasional microtones convey a palpable otherworldliness, and every so often a melodic riff will point one way and veer another, perhaps reflecting the Winchester mansion's false staircases and winding corridors designed "to confuse the spirits."

Despite their stark differences in dramatic and musical language, *Blue* and *Inheritance* both share a certain mythic underpinning. Liang may wield his metaphysics more overtly, but even Tesori admitted in her Guggenheim talk that she and Thompson fashioned *Blue* in the spirit of the Fates, the goddesses of Greek tragedy who predetermined a person's destiny at birth. And regarding another classic theatrical influence, both operas keep their deaths off stage.

Ultimately, *Inheritance* doesn't answer questions

about guns and violence any better than *Blue* solves racial conflicts, but both make you ponder the underlying problems in greater depth. Not since *Doctor Atomic*, John Adams and Peter Sellars' operatic account of the making and testing of the first atomic bomb, have operatic characters been so haunted—or had their humanity so called into question—by technological advancement.

Perhaps Sarah Winchester's underlying problem in thinking she's haunted by ghosts is not that she's going mad but rather, in a world that becomes so obsessed with her family's products, she's the only sane one left. 🍷



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