



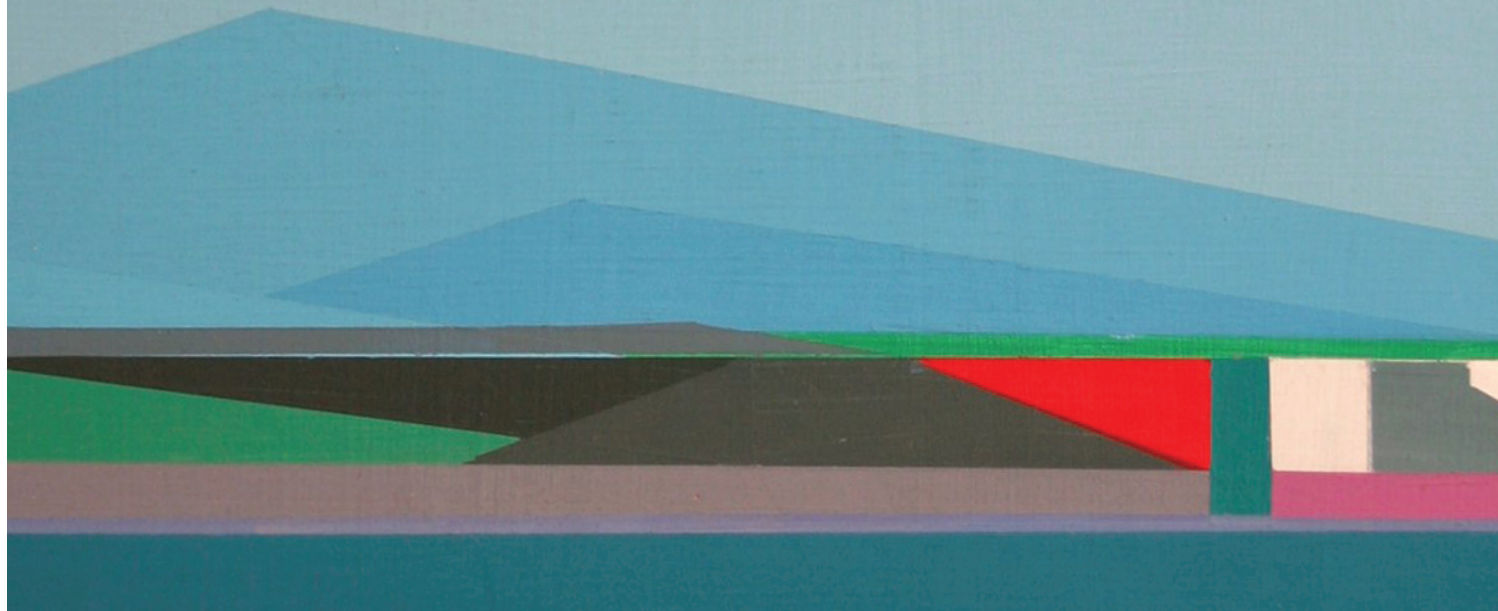
AMERICAN CLASSICS



Tobias
PICKER

Opera Without Words
The Encantadas

Tobias Picker, Narrator
Nashville Symphony
Giancarlo Guerrero



Tobias Picker (b. 1954)

Opera Without Words / Words Without Opera

Tobias Picker has been commissioned to write operas for the Santa Fe Opera (*Emmeline*), LA Opera (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*), Dallas Opera (*Thérèse Raquin*), San Francisco Opera (*Dolores Claiborne*), Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (*Awakenings*) and Metropolitan Opera (*An American Tragedy*). He has also composed numerous works in other genres, including three symphonies, concertos for violin, viola, cello and oboe, four piano concertos and chamber music. His orchestral works have been commissioned and performed by the BBC Proms, Chicago Symphony, The Cleveland Orchestra, Helsinki Philharmonic, Orchestre de Paris, Munich Philharmonic, National Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, ORF Vienna Radio Symphony, and Tonhalle Orchester Zürich, among others. His many honors include the 2020 GRAMMY Award for Best Opera Recording (*Fantastic Mr. Fox*). Picker is a lifetime member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is artistic director of the Tulsa Opera, a post he has held since 2016. His works are published exclusively by Schott Music. He is married to Aryeh Lev Stollman, novelist, neuroradiologist, and librettist for his forthcoming operas *Awakenings* and *The Danish Girl*.

With its intersection of theatrical and symphonic dimensions, *The Encantadas*, from 1983, anticipates the two directions in which Picker's artistic passions have evolved ever since. It was commissioned as part of a consortium project led by Peter Kermani, past president of the Albany Symphony, to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the Albany Academy. Since Herman Melville had briefly attended the school as a boy, Kermani suggested selecting a text by that legendary writer. Picker initially considered a treatment of *Moby-Dick* but, on the advice of friend and Melville expert Renaud Charles Bruce, he arrived at the idea of using selections from *The Encantadas*.

Published in *Putnam's Magazine* in 1854, three years after *Moby-Dick*, *The Encantadas* provided Picker with

exactly what he was seeking: "something that had a narrative arc but that also existed in the border zone between poetry and prose," he explains. *The Encantadas*, or "Enchanted Isles," mines Melville's experiences encountering the Galápagos Islands while he was at sea on the whaling ship *Acushnet*. His trip occurred less than a decade after Charles Darwin's history-making voyage to the volcanic islands west of Ecuador, and he stored away a host of powerful images from a landscape he perceived as "Plutonian."

The Encantadas, which draws its title from one of the older names for the islands, unfolds as ten heavily symbolic prose sketches, each revolving around striking features of the land and seascape. Picker decided to draw on the now rarely used melodrama genre, in which a text is recited dramatically alongside a score that functions like the incidental music for a play. Unlike in a melodrama as generally conceived today, a plot is barely hinted at, and the entire emphasis is on the character of the islands. The six-movement work is presented as the recollections of an old man thinking back on his youthful adventures.

Picker became intrigued by Melville's obsessive use of alliteration in *The Encantadas*, reflected in his titles for the six movements, all beginning with the letter "D." Overall, the work flows in the manner of a dream, from the opening frame of the narrator looking back in memory to the conclusion at the break of day. The first movement (*Dream*) begins on octave Ds, pulsing on low strings, harp and piano. This ominous tread returns at the end of the first movement, followed by a dreamy violin solo.

Picker does not prescribe any rhythmic patterns to set the words, but the score indicates specifically where the moments of narration are to occur. Sometimes the musical elements are specifically linked to certain words, while in other passages the narrator speaks unaccompanied. The musical language is highly descriptive on its own terms, at times drawing out the implications of a particular image. Picker's focus in both the text excerpts and the music is on the ambiguous,

dualistic aspect of the natural phenomena Melville describes. The cruel, "evilly enchanted" demeanor of these islands comes menacingly into the foreground, but so does their ethereal and spectacular beauty.

Each movement inhabits a sound world of its own, which is enhanced by a spotlight on specific timbres. The apocalyptic landscape of *Desolation* is dry and hissing, while the harsh sonorities of *Delusion* vividly underscore Melville's dark vision of a "fallen" world. *Diversity* encompasses a wide spectrum of moods, touching on the famous tortoises and various birds: downright comical in the waltz-parody given the penguin, and lonely and mysterious in a long piano solo that etches the pensive pelicans. Birds similarly inhabit the fifth movement (*Din*), which arrives at a violent climax suggesting the "dissonant din" of the wild birds' cries. Here, too, the narration is set completely apart from the music. *Dawn* concludes *The Encantadas* with slow, meditative music. Picker's muted strings and languid winds convey the fantasy dissolving, as "nature seemed ... half suspended in jaded expectation of the sun."

For *Opera Without Words*, co-commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra and the Nashville Symphony, Picker developed a radically new form: a purely instrumental work that conveys a secret opera. The score exploits his orchestral virtuosity and command of large-scale structure with the savvy of one of contemporary music's most active opera composers. "There's a gap between these disparate worlds of the symphony orchestra culture and the opera culture," Picker explains. "I've inhabited these two worlds for a long time and have seen how they tend to be unaware of each other. So by returning to one of those worlds, I wanted to bridge that gap for myself and, hopefully, for others."

The title *Opera Without Words* is not merely a metaphor. The work was conceived as an actual opera, from which voices and text have been withdrawn; some of the stage directions are left in as instructions to the musicians. "Music in opera has to push the drama forward and to be the drama," Picker explains, "not an accompaniment to words. It must have the power to communicate the deeper emotional life of the characters;

the words are just an ornament to hear the beauty of the human voice. The music should be telling the story."

In writing this piece, the composer continues: "I thought about composers of the past. Mendelssohn wrote *Songs Without Words* without any texts in his mind whatever. There are several purely orchestral recordings of Puccini operas without words. Lorin Maazel created a version of Wagner's *Ring* called *The 'Ring' Without Words*. One of my principal teachers, Milton Babbitt, once wrote a short piece called *Phonemena* for soprano in which the singer has no words, just phonemes. He was trying to merge his own complex compositional technique with the jazz form known as scat singing. I remembered how another of my principal teachers, Elliott Carter, had introduced me to his notion of instrumentalists as 'characters' or 'players in a drama.'

"And so I approached my first purely orchestral work in 22 years as I would an opera. I hired a librettist, Irene Dische. We had long discussions about the characters, the role of the chorus (in this case, a double chorus), and issues of text setting and stage directions, characterization and motivation. I then set her words not to voices but to musical instruments, unfettered by considerations of vocal range and technique. When I finished the score, I removed them all. I kept a separate copy so that *Opera Without Words* could (with some adjustments for the human voice) theoretically be performed as an opera with words, the original words and staging restored.

"Having done away with the words and stage directions, I decided to leave in traces and artifacts of the deleted libretto. Terminology of an unusual nature (for instrumental musicians) remains. I included some terms only an opera singer is accustomed to seeing. A passage may be marked 'pompous,' 'doting,' 'defensively,' 'upbraiding,' 'terrified,' 'self-righteously,' even 'aside to the audience,' and so on.

"*Opera Without Words* is dedicated to the blessed memory of my mother, the artist Henriette Simon Picker (1917–2016)."

Thomas May

The Encantadas

Herman Melville (1819–1891)

I. Dream

Sometimes, even now,
when leaving the crowded city
to wander out July and August
among the Adirondack Mountains...
in some deep-wooded gorge,
surrounded by prostrate trunks of blasted pines...

I recall, as in a dream, my other
and far-distant roving
in the baked heart of the Encantadas.
I behold again the vitreous inland rocks
worn down, and grooved into deep ruts
by ages and ages of the slow dragging of
tortoises in quest pools of scanty water...
and I can hardly resist the feelings that in
my time I have indeed slept upon evilly
enchanted ground.

II. Desolation

Take five-and-twenty heaps of cinders
dumped here and there in an outside city lot.
Imagine some of them
magnified into mountains and the vacant
lot the sea...

And you will have a fit idea of
the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles.
Rather a group of extinct volcanoes
than of isles...

looking much as the world at large might, after
a final conflagration.

Their special curse...
which exalts them in desolation above
Idumea and the Pole...
is that to them change never comes;

neither the change of seasons nor the
change of sorrows. Cut by the Equator,
they know not autumn, and they know
not spring.

Already reduced to the lees of fire,
ruin, itself, can
work little more upon them.
Showers refresh the deserts,
but in these isles rain never falls.

Like split Syrian gourds
left withering in the sun,
they are cracked by an everlasting drought
beneath a torrid sky.
"Have mercy upon me," the wailing spirit
of the Encantadas seems to cry,
"for I am tormented in this flame."

Man and wolf alike disown them.
Little but reptile life is here found...

No voice, no low, no howl is heard.
The chief sound of life here is a hiss.

III. Delusion

In many places
the coast is rock-bound, or, more properly,
clinker-bound; tumbled masses
of blackish or greenish stuff
like the dross of an iron-furnace
forming dark clefts and caves,
into which a ceaseless sea pours a fury of foam;

Overhanging them with a swirl of gray,
haggard mist, amidst which
sail screaming flights of unearthly
birds heightening the
dismal din.

However calm the sea without,
there is no rest for these swells and
those rocks; they lash
and are lashed, even
when the outer ocean
is most at peace with itself.

On the oppressive, clouded days,
such as are peculiar to this part of the
watery Equator,
the dark, vitrified masses, many of
which raise themselves among white
whirlpools and breakers in detached
and perilous places off the shore,
present a most Plutonian sight. In no world
but a fallen one
could such lands exist.

Those parts of the strand free from the marks
of fire stretch away in wide level beaches
of multitudinous dead shells, with here and
there decayed bits of sugar cane, bamboos,
and coconuts washed upon this
other and darker world from the charming
palm isles to the westward and southward;
all the way from Paradise to Tartarus;
while mixed with the
relics of distant beauty you
will sometimes see fragments of charred
wood and mouldering ribs
of wrecks.

Neither will any one be surprised at
meeting these last, after observing the
conflicting currents which eddy throughout
the wide channels of the entire group.

The capriciousness of the tides of air
sympathizes with those of the sea.
Nowhere is the wind so light, baffling,
unreliable, and so given to perplexing calms,
as at the Encantadas.

IV. Diversity

One noon my ship was cruising in close vicinity
to the isles. Partly by way of freak, and partly by
way of spying out so strange a country, a boat's
crew was sent ashore.

It was after sunset when the adventurers
returned. Ropes were dropt over, and
presently three huge antediluvian-looking
tortoises were landed on deck. These were
none of your schoolboy mud-turtles... but
black as widower's weeds, heavy as chests of
plate, with vast shells medallioned and orb'd
like shields, and dented and blistered like
shields that have breasted a battle. Shaggy,
too, here and there, with dark green moss,
and slimy with the spray of the sea.

The great feeling inspired by these creatures
was that of age: dateless, indefinite endurance.
They seemed newly crawled from beneath the
foundations of the world.

These mystic creatures, suddenly translated
by night from unutterable solitudes to our
peopled deck, affected me in a manner not
easy to unfold.

As I lay in my hammock that night, overhead
I heard the slow weary draggings of the three
ponderous strangers along the encumbered
deck. One ceased his movements altogether
just before the midwatch.

At sunrise I found him butted like a battering-
ram against the immovable foot of the foremast,
and still striving, tooth and nail, to force the
impossible passage.
In that strange infatuation of hopeless toil
which so often possesses them...

they seem the victims of a
downright enchanter.
I have known them in their journeyings
to ram themselves heroically against rocks,
and long abide there,
nudging, wriggling, wedging, in order
to displace them,
and so hold on their inflexible path.
Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse
to straightforwardness in a belittered world.

To gaze abroad upon the Encantadas there
is the noble point of
observation... Rock Rodondo.
Two hundred and
fifty feet high, rising straight from the sea.
When first seen afar, it is invariably mistaken
for a sail.
When four leagues away of a golden hazy noon,
it seems some Spanish admiral's ship,
stacked up with glittering canvas...
But coming nigh the enchanted frigate is
transformed apace into a craggy keep...
sole survivor
of some perished castle.

From a broken, stairlike base, washed
as the steps of
a water palace by the waves,
the tower rose in entablatures of strata to
a shaven summit. These uniform layers
at their lines of junction project
flatly into encircling shelves, from
top to bottom, rising one above
another in graduated series.
All these rocky ledges are alive
with unnumbered sea-fowl.
Eaves upon eaves, nests
upon nests.

Let us first glance low to the lowermost shelf
of all. What outlandish beings are these?
Erect as men... they stand all around the rock
like sculptured caryatides, supporting the next
range of eaves above.

Their bills short...
their feet seemingly legless... the members
at their sides are neither fin, wing,
nor arm. And truly neither fish, flesh nor
fowl is the penguin...
without exception the
most ambiguous creature yet discovered
by man. Though dabbling in all three
elements... and indeed possessing some
rudimental claims to all...
the penguin is at home in none.
On land it stumps;
afloat it sculls;
in the air it flops.
As if ashamed of her failure,
Nature keeps this ungainly child hidden away
at the ends of the earth.

But look, what are you woebegone regiments
drawn up on the next shelf? Pelicans. A pensive
race, they stand for hours together
without motion. Their dull ashy plumage
imparts an aspect as if they had been powdered
over with cinders. A penitential bird,
indeed, fitly haunting the shore of the clinkered
Encantadas... whereon tormented Job himself
might have well sat down and
scraped himself with potsherds.

§ V. Din

Rodondo is the Aviary of Ocean.

Birds light here which never touched mast
or tree; hermit-birds, which ever fly alone;
cloud-birds, familiar with unpierced zones
of air. As eyes ascend from shelf to shelf, we
find the tenants of the tower serially disposed
in order of their magnitude: gannets, black
and speckled haglets, jays, sea-hens, sperm-
whale birds, gulls of all varieties. Thrones,
princedom, powers, dominating one above
another in senatorial array. All would have
been bewitchingly quiescent, were it not for the
demoniac din created by the birds. Not only
were the eaves rustling with them, but they flew
densely overhead, spreading themselves into a
winged and continually shifting canopy.

With ear-splitting cries the wild birds celebrate
their matins. Each moment, flights push
from the tower, and join the aerial choir
hovering overhead, while their places below
are supplied by darting myriads in dischord of
commotion.

As day advances the dissonant din augments.

§ VI. Dawn

I found myself just before dawn of day close
under the moon-shadow of Rodondo.
Its aspect was heightened, and yet softened,
by the strange double twilight of the hour.
The great full moon burnt in the low west
like a half-spent beacon, casting a soft mellow
tinge upon the sea... like that cast by a waning
fire of the embers upon a midnight hearth.

Along the entire east the invisible sun sent
pallid intimations of his coming. The wind
was light, the waves languid; the stars
twinkled with a faint effulgence. The twilight
was just enough to catch Rodondo in its perfect
mood, without tearing away the dim investiture
of wonder. All nature seemed to supine with the
long night watch, and half-suspended in jaded
expectation of the sun.

Nashville Symphony



Photo: Kurt Heinecke

One of Tennessee's largest and longest-running nonprofit performing arts organizations, the Nashville Symphony has been an integral part of the Music City sound since 1946. Led by music director Giancarlo Guerrero and president and CEO Alan D. Valentine, the 83-member ensemble performs more than 160 concerts annually, with a focus on contemporary American orchestral music through collaborations with composers including Jennifer Higdon, Terry Riley, Aaron Jay Kernis, Michael Daugherty, John Harbison, Jonathan Leshnoff, and the late Christopher Rouse. The orchestra is equally renowned for its commissioning and recording projects with Nashville-based artists including bassist Edgar Meyer, banjoist Béla Fleck, singer-songwriter Ben Folds, electric bassist Victor Wooten, and composer Kip Winger.

The Nashville Symphony is one of the most active recording orchestras in the US, with more than 30 releases. Together, these recordings have earned a total of 25 GRAMMY Award nominations and 13 GRAMMY Awards, including two for Best Orchestral Performance. Schermerhorn Symphony Center is home to the Nashville Symphony and widely regarded as one of the finest concert halls in the US. nashvillesymphony.org

Giancarlo Guerrero



Photo: Lukasz Rajchert

Six-time GRAMMY Award-winning conductor Giancarlo Guerrero is music director of the Nashville Symphony and the NFM Wrocław Philharmonic in Poland, as well as principal guest conductor of the Gulbenkian Orchestra in Lisbon, Portugal. He has championed contemporary American music through numerous commissions, recordings and performances with the Nashville Symphony, presenting eleven world premieres of works by Jonathan Leshnoff, Michael Daugherty, Terry Riley, and others. As part of this commitment, he helped guide the creation of Nashville Symphony's Composer Lab & Workshop initiative. In North America, Guerrero has appeared with the orchestras of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Toronto, and the National Symphony Orchestra. He has developed a strong international profile working with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Brussels Philharmonic, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra. An advocate for music education, he works

with the Curtis Institute of Music, Colburn School, the National Youth Orchestra (NYO2) in New York, and the Nashville Symphony's Accelerando program, which provides intensive music education to promising young students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. giancarlo-guerrero.com

Tobias
PICKER
(b. 1954)

The Encantadas (1983) 30:05
(Text: Herman Melville, 1819–1891)

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|----------|----------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Dream | 4:38 |
| 2 | II. Desolation | 2:46 |
| 3 | III. Delusion | 3:30 |
| 4 | IV. Diversity | 10:19 |
| 5 | V. Din | 3:27 |
| 6 | VI. Dawn | 5:21 |

Opera Without Words (2015)* 27:44

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|-----------|------------------------|------|
| 7 | Scene 1: The Beloved | 5:12 |
| 8 | Scene 2: The Minstrel | 5:03 |
| 9 | Scene 3: The Idol | 6:42 |
| 10 | Scene 4: The Gladiator | 4:02 |
| 11 | Scene 5: The Farewell | 6:43 |

*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

Tobias Picker, Narrator **1–6**
Nashville Symphony
Giancarlo Guerrero

The sung texts are included in the booklet, and may also be accessed at www.naxos.com/libretti/559853.htm
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AMERICAN CLASSICS

Tobias Picker, hailed as “a genuine creator” by *The New Yorker*, has written extensively for the stage and for symphonic forces, and these two approaches are represented in this album. *The Encantadas* (an older name for the Galápagos Islands) derives from a novella by Herman Melville. Picker has set it as a melodrama, exploring the enchanted isles in all their quietly menacing and spectacular beauty. In a radical new form, Picker’s *Opera Without Words* is set to a libretto by Irene Dische that has now been removed, allowing the music alone to bear the expressive richness and intensity of this “secret opera.”

www.naxos.com

Playing
Time:
57:59