Arts & Humanities

# A Master of the American Opera

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**When Jack Beeson was only seven,** he made his parents a proposition: “I told them that if they would buy me a piano,” he says, “I would practice it. I don’t know why I wanted a piano, but at any rate they bought one—and I did practice with some consistency.”

A few years later, he discovered his lifelong pursuit: the opera. “When I was about twelve the Met started regularly broadcasting on Saturday afternoons—and I was seduced. With what spending money I had, I bought scores, and I would place the score up on the piano, and with a little radio on the piano and a big radio across the room—I would accompany the Met.”

While still in his teens, he began writing his own music and libretti, the early beginnings of a career that would eventually establish him as one of the most prolific American composers and one of the most important American composers of opera. His catalog contains 128 works—ten operas, including *Hello Out There* (1953), the New York City Opera signature piece *Lizzie Borden* (1965,) *Cyrano* (1994), and *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1999), as well as music for solo instruments, symphony orchestra, and song and choral cycles. As Duke Johns put it in *Music Educators Journal*, “Few contemporary American composers have grappled with the problems of composing for the opera stage as long and as hard as has Jack Beeson, whose works have been staged, televised, revived, and recorded with uncommon frequency and success. . . . [His operas] have placed him firmly in a tradition of musically eclectic, dramatically cogent, and quintessentially American opera writing that has included such earlier composers as Virgil Thomson and Douglas Moore.”

And like Douglas Moore, who chaired Columbia’s music department from 1940 to 1962, Beeson in his half-century on Morningside Heights had his own enduring

impact on the music department—as well as on the creative lives of hundreds of students. According to Jacques Barzun ’27C ’32GSAS, for many years Beeson’s contemporary on campus, “It isn’t true that in the arts only those who can’t do, teach. But when those who can do also teach, they bring to their teaching a quality that is theirs alone. Professor Beeson in his long years at Columbia taught music in this insider’s mode to a large company of gifted students. Many of them have become noted professionals in several divisions of the art. But I must add—none has equaled their master in creation. Jack Beeson stands out in his generation for having endowed this country with a live body of operas on native themes that the public keeps applauding at every fresh production. He is a worthy successor of those in the music department who have been distinguished composers, beginning with its founder in 1896, Edward MacDowell.”

Beeson did his graduate work at the Eastman School of Music, where he studied composition, theory, and orchestration with Edward Royce, Burrill Phillips, Bernard Rogers, and Howard Hanson. After finishing at Eastman, Beeson decided to go to New York to study with Béla Bartók ’40HON. When Hanson pointed out flatly that Bartók didn’t teach, Beeson said just as flatly that he thought he’d give it a try anyway. It took him months to compose the request. “The crux of my letter,” he says, “was that I was going to be in New York and that I would like to show him my music for him to comment. I understood he did not teach composition, and I supposed he had good reasons for that, but I thought that it was possible for one to learn something about composition from someone who thought he couldn’t teach it. And that, apparently, was the sentence that did it.” Bartók agreed to work with Beeson, and the two met from October 1944 to March 1945.

Beeson’s career at Columbia began with a chance encounter. “About a week before Christmas in 1944,” he says, “I went over to have breakfast at the Chock Full O’Nuts. There was a guy sitting there reading a newspaper, and I leaned over to look at a review of a concert I’d been to the night before. Though he noticed me looking, he avoided the W.C. Fields joke: ‘Why don’t you have part of my doughnut?’ I said, ‘Did you attend the concert?’ And he said yes, and I said there had been a wonderful soprano. He smiled and said, ‘That’s my wife.’”

The man was composer Otto Luening ’81HON, then a professor at Barnard College. The two chatted and eventually went for an hour’s walk in the snow along Riverside Drive. Luening invited Beeson to hear a performance of a Pergolesi opera being performed at Columbia’s famed Opera Workshop.

The Workshop had been established in 1943, when such programs were unknown in the United States. Offered in the School of General Studies through an inventive scheme making use of GI Bill monies, it attracted major talents like James McCracken and Teresa Stich-Randall to Morningside Heights. Before long, Beeson himself was an integral part of the Workshop. He accompanied, coached, and also served as assistant conductor on the annual premieres of commissioned operas that included Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium* and the Gertrude Stein/Virgil Thomson *The Mother of Us All*. The American opera premieres formed a part of the American Music Festivals (1945–1952) that featured first performances of such works as Aaron Copland's *Dickinson Songs* and the first Appalachian Spring in New York, Samuel Barber's *Medea*, and symphonies of Toch and Sessions.

The operas were commissioned by the Ditson Fund, established in 1940 by a bequest from Alice M. Ditson (widow of Charles Ditson of the venerable music publishing house) that turned Columbia into a focal point for the growth of American music. Jack Beeson became secretary of the fund in 1962 and for nearly three decades oversaw countless awards involving prominent composers and conductors. Ditson grants supported the American Music Festivals, sponsored a nationwide contest for a one-act opera in the early fifties, and assisted innumerable music groups, some at Columbia, among them the Group for Contemporary Music, the Da Capo Players, and the Performers Committee for Twentieth Century Music. In the sixties, seventies, and eighties, the Fund supported more than 35 new-music publications at Columbia University Press and also made possible the establishment of a groundbreaking record company for American contemporary composers, Composers Recording, Inc. (CRI).

Beeson joined the Columbia music department in 1945, eventually becoming the MacDowell Professor of Music. In the middle sixties, he worked to establish a doctorate in theory as well as degrees in ethnomusicology. "I busied myself about trying to do what I could before I was chairman," he says, "and then while I was chairman [1968–1972] I went about extending the reach of the department in directions that students of the time, and potential hirers of the time, found important." Together with Luening and then-provost Barzun, he inaugurated the Doctor of Musical Arts in composition in 1965. In 1989 there were 68 graduate students in composition alone, and at one point one third of Columbia's Guggenheim fellowships derived solely from Columbia composers.

As chairman of the Music Department, his commitment to arts within the university led him to convince the Mellon Fund to award $25,000 for an enlargement of offerings in film, writing, and theater. “I came back uptown and was talking to the provost and the president about my ‘extracurricular activities,’ and they later went down to the Mellon Fund and turned it into a quarter of a million dollars for enlarging the curriculum to include several of the arts not formerly included.”

Beeson’s activities also sparked imaginative cooperation with other New York institutions. He carried on talks about a possible connection between Columbia and the Juilliard School or the Manhattan School of Music. “It’s always been my impression that the good ideas are all simple ideas,” he says, “and they’re often sophomoric. Walking by the Juilliard School and knowing what it had in its physical plant and knowing what we didn’t have, it occurred to me that the natural thing was for Juilliard and Columbia to form some sort of liaison.” Though the idea was dropped after his term ended, an alliance between Columbia and Juilliard was finally formed in 1989.

He also participated in (and still has his hand in) numerous organizations crucial to the promotion of American music, at one point having been on the boards of twelve of them, often holding high-level positions such as co-president of Composers Recordings, Inc., chairman of the board of the Composers’ Forum, member of the board of governors of the American Composers Alliance, the board of ASCAP, and treasurer and vice president for music at the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1998, in celebration of the Academy’s centennial, he wrote a work for soprano and piano entitled “Pull My Daisy” to the poetry of Allen Ginsberg ’48C and with art by Paul Resika, both also Academy members.

Though he has been tagged several times throughout his career for first-rank administrative positions in this country and abroad, he turned them all down, knowing—even as a young man—that he would avoid the most time-consuming administrative work to make room for composing and teaching.

Beeson retired formally in 1988, but he continued as a member of the Society of Senior Scholars at Columbia to share his expertise with graduate composers in a seminar on the use of the voice and the setting of English. He has said that he can give a composer only very practical advice, that he and other composers know well that composition itself cannot be taught. As he says in the March 1999 SCI newsletter, “One can only teach aspects of composing, not composition: notation,

some aspects of instrumental and vocal usage, and orchestration (when, if ever, it's separable from creation): clarity and projections, texture, coherence, and shaping time over short and long spans—not to speak of line-writing, pitches, and rhythms. Which of these elements dominate and to what expressive end are what forms a style. And that is none of the teacher's business."

His teaching also continues outside the classroom. "When I retired from Columbia," Beeson says, "I thought I'd left my three hundred-some composition students there—and others elsewhere—behind me. But a number of them, and often other composers I hardly know, still send scores, tapes—even operas and libretti—for comment." Along with his reputation for generosity, he's known for his incisive wit. Joan Tower '65GSAS '78SOA, fellow composer and a former student of Beeson's, says, "He's an intrepid soul—and one I've always appreciated because of his basic honesty. One can survive—at least I think I can—his sharp tongue and caustic humor because there is a basic trust in his underlying kindness—which he doesn't hide that well."

John Kander, composer of *Cabaret*, *Chicago*, and many other important musicals, also studied with Beeson. "I just realized that Jack has been my mentor and friend for fifty years," he says. "That makes me a very lucky fellow."

When Beeson was six and beginning to show signs of a problem with his metabolism, his father, a physician, took him to see the head of medicine at the University of Chicago. "Dr. Beeson," said the doctor, "I'm sorry to say that your son has about six months to live."

Despite the ominous prognosis, Beeson has enjoyed more than eighty productive and healthy years. Though he did eventually develop type II diabetes, he credits his illness with giving him "a leg up." "I've always thought that having a chronic, incurable disease is of some help in life," he says, "because it teaches you that you can't live forever, as youth used to think before AIDS, and gives one a sort of carapace emotionally."

Beeson speaks simply and eloquently about the tragic death of his son, Christopher, who died at 25 in 1976 when his car hit a tree on a flooded road during a hurricane. "Our son died, and we never recovered," he says. At the time, he was working with Sheldon Harnick on the opera *Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth*, based on the Nathaniel Hawthorne short story in which the characters imagine they have regained

their youth, and which, Beeson notes, “deals with how one uses one’s youth and how one can wish—or not wish—to relive it.” Mentor Otto Luening advised him, Beeson says, to “remember that those of us who make things have the advantage of being able to put these energies into the piece that we’re writing. Ordinary people don’t have that outlet. They just grieve.” Beeson says, “Given the subject matter, I have no doubt that some passages, and the treatment of the whole, are more affecting than they would have been, uninflected by that death.”

Beeson calls the opera “a family affair.” His wife of 55 years, Nora ’60GSAS, was the first woman to earn a Ph.D. in the Slavic languages and literature department at Columbia; she is also the daughter of medical historian Henry E. Sigerist, who translated treatises of Paracelsus, the Swiss alchemist, physician, and writer on medicine. Excerpts from Paracelsus are included in Dr. Heidegger, and Beeson’s daughter, Miranda, a trained dancer and actress, played the role of Heidegger’s maid at the premiere, speaking the words her grandfather had translated.

Although in the nineteenth century and to some extent the twentieth the composer was viewed as a “great artist” receiving inspiration from on high, Beeson seems to concur with Igor Stravinsky’s idea of the composer as craftsman. “Most everybody uses words, has drawn a little, has whittled or played with Play-Doh,” Beeson says, “and so has some understanding of writers, painters, and sculptors. But composers read and write in code, in musical notation, and are thought therefore to be magicians by everybody else. They are not: they master their code, learn about instruments and voices singly and in combination, find out how to manage their dimension—time, short-term and long-term—summon aural ideas, and shape them into pieces of music. I suppose the only mystery is what distinguishes memorable pieces from forgettable ones. Whether they are one or the other, if the composer keeps on writing, it becomes what he does—at worst a habit, at best, ‘Let’s see what happens if. . . .’ Since my first piece 68 years ago, a March in F# Major for piano, it’s always been that way.”

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