

May 23, 2019 – John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*

On this week's WCPE Opera House I'm pleased to present John Harbison's adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's iconic 1925 American novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in honor of James Levine's 25th anniversary with the company, it had its roots in Harbison's 1985 concert work, *Remembering Gatsby*. The composer, a professor of music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote his own libretto and the 1920s-style jazz songs that appear in the work. *The Great Gatsby* premiered on December 20, 1999.

Following an overture, stockbroker Nick Carraway (baritone **Dwayne Croft**) visits Daisy Buchanan (soprano **Dawn Upshaw**) and her husband Tom (tenor **Mark Baker**) at their Long Island home. Also present at the Buchanan house is golfer Jordan Baker (mezzo-soprano **Susan Graham**). When Jordan mentions Nick's next-door neighbor Jay Gatsby (tenor **Jerry Hadley**), Daisy becomes flustered. We soon learn that Tom has a mistress in New York City, and that Daisy is unhappy with Tom.

Tom drags a reluctant Nick to a garage to meet Myrtle Wilson (mezzo-soprano **Lorraine Hunt Lieberson**), whose husband George (bass **Richard Paul Fink**) is the owner. After Tom sends George on an errand, he and Myrtle dance. Myrtle's insistence on talking about Daisy angers Tom, who bloodies her nose. That evening Gatsby throws a party at his mansion. Meyer Wolfsheim (bass-baritone **William Powers**), a shady businessman, arrives and tells Gatsby that their business ventures in Philadelphia and Detroit are in trouble. Later, Gatsby asks Nick to arrange for him to meet Daisy, with whom he'd had an affair five years earlier in Louisville. While Gatsby was away fighting in World War One, Daisy acquiesced to her parents' wishes and married Tom. Gatsby and Daisy re-establish their old feelings, and he begins to plan their future together.

As the second act opens, the Buchanans arrive at another of Gatsby's parties, and Tom is introduced to their host, who dances with Daisy while a band vocalist (tenor **Matthew Polenzani**) sings. Tom invites Gatsby to their house the following Sunday. On a hot afternoon at the Buchanans', Daisy flirts with Gatsby, annoying her husband. They all decide to drive into the city, and Daisy rides with Gatsby. The group takes a suite at the Plaza Hotel. Daisy turns on her husband, suggesting she's never really loved him. But eventually she decides to stay with Tom.

On the way back to their Long Island homes, Myrtle is killed by a hit-and-run driver, and George Wilson determines to find the driver. Early next morning, movers carry furniture out of Gatsby's house. When Nick accuses Gatsby of leaving the scene of the accident, he reveals that Daisy was behind the wheel. Wilson arrives and shoots Gatsby to death.

Gatsby's father arrives for the funeral. Awed by the splendor of the house, he shows Nick his son's youthful self-improvement manual. When partygoers find no party at Gatsby's house, they move on. A minister conducts a brief funeral service, with only Nick and Gatsby's father present. Nick is left alone to reflect on what has happened.

James Levine conducts the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus in this performance recorded "live" on January 1, 2000.

Here's a trailer from the current Semper Opera production of *The Great Gatsby* in Dresden: <https://www.semperoper.de/spielplan/stuecke/stid/Gatsby/60545.html>.

Please join me next Thursday, May 30th, for Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* featuring **Angela Gheorghiu** (Violetta Valéry), **Frank Lopardo** (Alfredo Germont), and **Leo Nucci** (Giorgio Germont). **Sir George Solti** conducts this 1995 Decca/London recording of a Royal Opera House, Covent Garden production.

The WCPE Opera House is heard every Thursday evening at 7 o'clock in the Eastern time zone on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We're streamed online at <http://www.theclassicalstation.org>, or you can listen on WCPE's Android or iPhone apps.

Bob Chapman

W. Robert Chapman, Host of the Opera House