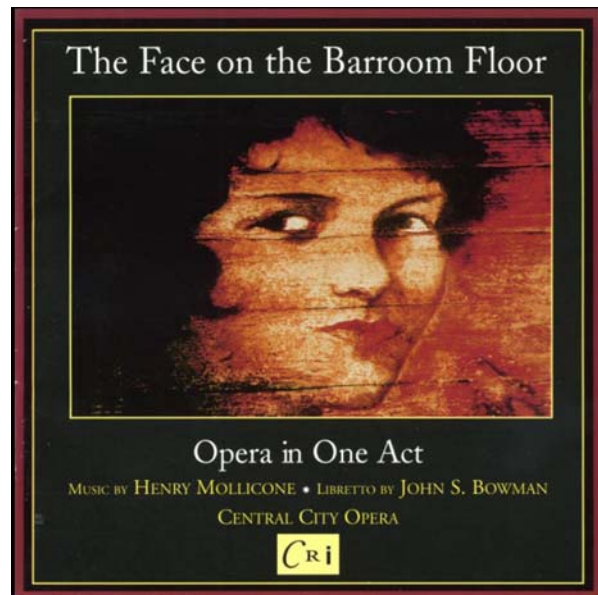


NWCR822

# The Face on the Barroom Floor

Opera in One Act Composed by Henry Mollicone,  
Libretto by John S. Bowman



1. Prelude: "Now this look like the West" ..... (2:48)
2. "A Face..." ..... (1:19)
3. "It was about a hundred years ago" ..... (2:27)
4. "He came to the West" ..... (3:25)
5. "All right, mister..." ..... (1:50)
6. "He paints the portrait of his love..." ..... (2:25)
7. "An insult!" ..... (2:49)
8. "Bravo! Bravo!" ..... (2:24)
9. "The face on the barroom floor..." ..... (1:30)
10. Postlude: "I'll teach you..." ..... (1:55)

George Banks, cello; David Halloway, baritone; Barry McCauley, tenor; Leanne, McGiffin, soprano; Alice Weir, flute; Henry Mollicone, piano, director.

Total playing time 22:53

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## Notes

### Synopsis

The opera tells two tales, separated in time but parallel in characters and theme. In present day Central City, Isabelle, a member of the opera chorus, and her boyfriend Larry visit a local bar. Larry orders champagne and asks about the face painted on the barroom floor. In responding, Tom, the bartender, becomes a nineteenth-century frontier bartender, John, who welcomes the bargirl Madeline as they toast the future of the "Golden West." A disheveled traveler, Matt, enters and orders drinks all around while John tells Madeline to sing. Unable to pay for his whiskey, Matt offers instead to paint a portrait on the floor of the bar of the only woman he ever loved. John discovers the portrait is of Madeline. The two men fight until Madeline throws herself between them as John shoots at Matt, killing her instead. Larry, now back in the twentieth century, laughs drunkenly at the old legend and forces Isabelle to dance with him. Tom reveals his past love affair with Isabelle. Declaring that he still loves Isabelle, Tom challenges Larry. During their fight Isabelle is shot and dies on the portrait of the face on the barroom floor.

### Notes

While some of opera's great love triangles are set in Italy or Spain, one dramatic tale of a beautiful saloon girl and her two jealous suitors plays out in a Colorado mining town. After more than twenty years, *The Face on the Barroom Floor* still captures Central City's colorful past and present in a personal, poignant story of desire and regret.

The Central City Opera House Association commissioned *The Face on the Barroom Floor* to celebrate the Opera House centennial in 1978. The actual painting was done in 1936 by artist Herndon Davis on the floor of the 1872 Teller House

Bar, now called the Face Bar, located next door to the Opera House in Central City. Skillfully combining present day Central City with its nineteenth-century gold camp, Mollicone deftly uses honky-tonk piano to set the scene and gives bargirl Madeline the poignant ballad "He Came to the West" to complete the Old West atmosphere. The highlight of the one-act piece is the lyrical trio, "He Paints the Portrait of His Love," with each character expressing his or her own sense of loss.

—Heather Thorwald

*"Face..." celebrates twenty years of success* (from Central City Opera's 1998 souvenir program)

Composer Henry Mollicone reflected on the unprecedented success of the one-act cabaret opera, *The Face On The Barroom Floor*, from his home in California. "I had originally been asked to do a full-length commissioned opera by Central City Opera," said Mollicone. "Then a new artistic director (Bob Darling) assumed the position and noticed no monies were budgeted for the opera. To save the commission, he came up with an inspired idea: he scaled the piece down to a one-act opera to be performed with multiple casts on location in the Teller House Bar. I selected John Bowman to be the librettist."

Working out of Massachusetts, John Bowman remembered searching for a subject. "I understood that we were searching for something with a local setting, preferably having to do with the early days of mining. Through an army buddy, I got a brochure of Central City which featured the painting of the 'face.' I looked up the poem and used it as a point of departure."

Bowman continued, "I thought the concept of tying it to the

actual opera festival and having the flashback would work well, having a mirror image of the two. So I drafted the basic plot and sent it to Henry, who would send back requests like 'I'd like a duet for soprano and tenor here, soprano and baritone there.'"

Composer Mollicone pointed out, "Usually the libretto came first and then I would set the lyrics to music. But in one instance, I wrote a song for Madeline and sent John the music on a cassette. That was so unusual at that time that he had to go to the library to listen to it." Bowman said, "I am not a real musician though I was once a choir boy. So I went around town humming that melody for Madeline until I found the right words." That collaboration became "He came to the West," a poignant ballad solo for soprano which is now often excerpted. According to Mollicone, the famous trio "He paints the portrait of his love" developed from the necessity to have something sung while the artist was painting the Face: "It was John's idea to have an individual reverie for each character, and I tried to weave the melodies among the three voices."

The western style of *The Face On The Barroom Floor* is what makes it distinctive. "I was very conscious we were doing an opera set in Central City," said Bowman. "We were trying to do something for that place, within the spirit of nineteenth-century Central City as a mining center where the characters might really have existed and frequented a bar like that."

"I had moved to California to write movie music as a reaction to the favored atonal music in vogue then," said Mollicone. "So I was delighted to use a more vernacular style. I wanted a little jazz, and even a bit that was cowboyish in feeling, while I unified it to an operatic style."

"I remember that first year we performed it all summer in the Face Bar. I would wander in, sit down at the piano and start playing bar music. Then the singers would enter, talking loudly, and the people in the bar would realize they were trapped in an opera. It was great fun."

The success of *The Face On The Barroom Floor* has amazed both composer and librettist. Bowman said, "When we gave the very first dress rehearsal in the Teller House Face Bar, there were a lot of singers from the festival there as audience—people who sang all over the world. We were expecting some polite applause, but they just went crazy, carrying on so. We were flabbergasted." Mollicone laughed, "When we were writing it, I said it was too bad it was such a local piece, because it won't get done anywhere else. That's a good example of fortunate miscalculation. For me, it was just a wonderful experience. It has been performed all over the United States and led the way for me to get new commissions."

Bowman concluded, "I've seen productions in New York, Washington, Boston, all over. It's the combination of the story and music that just grabs people. It happens every time. I can't believe it's been twenty years since we wrote it."

—Jo Ann Sims

"One of the most distinctive American opera composers."

—The Washington Post, January 1998

A graduate of the New England Conservatory, **Henry Mollicone** has studied composition with Donald Martino, Ron Nelson, Daniel Pinkham, Gunther Schuller, and Seymour Shifrin. His one-act operas *Emperor Norton*, *Starbird*, *The Mask of Evil*, and *The Face on the Barroom Floor* have been performed extensively. *The Face on the Barroom Floor* is one of America's most oft-performed contemporary operas, and has also been produced in various European countries. His

full-length opera *Coyote Tales* (with libretto by Sheldon Harnick), commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, was premiered there in March 1988, and released on CD (Newport Classic). His full-length opera *Hotel Eden* was premiered at Opera San Jose in 1989, and has since been produced in New York and Baltimore. Mollicone has been a Woodrow Wilson Visiting Fellow since 1997, and has served on various panels for The National Endowment for the Arts. He has recently been named associate director of the Ernest Bloch Festival in Newport, Oregon, and director of its composers' symposium; in the summer of 1999, he will be composer-in-residence at the Brevard Music Festival. He is presently planning a musical work based on Albert Einstein, in collaboration with librettist Sheldon Harnick.

**John S. Bowman**, librettist, was hooked on opera at age 15 after seeing his first Metropolitan production, *Aida*. At Harvard, he became directly involved by producing and translating operas for the Lowell House Music Society; with the army in Germany, he translated, produced, and staged operas under auspices of Special Services and the U.S. Information Agency; back in the States, he worked under Boris Goldovsky at Tanglewood, Pittsburgh, and on a tour with *The Marriage of Figaro*. In 1970, he and Mollicone collaborated on their first opera, *Young Goodman Brown*. After their 1978 collaboration on *The Face...*, they collaborated on a third work, *Emperor Norton*. A versatile writer, he is the author of numerous books including a guide to Crete, a book on Atlantis, and several more on the history of baseball.

**Leanne McGiffin**, Scottish/American coloratura soprano and Ohio native, has appeared in leading roles with Opera Omaha, Central City Opera, Opera Illinois, National Grand Opera, Eastern Opera Theatre, Opera Northeast, Ohio Light Opera, Westchester Lyric Festival, and the Blossom Festival (summer home to the Cleveland Orchestra) to name a few. Roles that have won her particular acclaim include Lucia, Violetta, Constanze, Rosalinda and Donna Anna. No stranger to twentieth-century opera, she has premiered and recorded operas of Henry Mollicone and Libby Larsen. She was voted most outstanding apprentice at Central City (receiving the McGlone Achievement Award) and has placed several times in the Metropolitan National Council Auditions. As first place winner in New York City's Da Capo Opera Theatre's vocal competition, she was awarded an Avery Fisher Hall debut to perform with Maestro Dino Anagnost and the Little Orchestra Society.

**Barry McCauley**, tenor, made his Santa Fe Opera debut as Wilhelm in *Mignon*, with Frederica von Stade in the title role, and his Lyric Opera of Chicago debut as Gerald in *Lakmé*. Other engagements throughout North America include new productions of *La rondine* and *La traviata* and a televised appearance as Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor* for New York City Opera; Pinkerton in a Ken Russell staging of *Madama Butterfly* for the Spoleto (USA) Festival; the title role in *Faust* for the San Francisco Opera; and a return engagement to the Lyric Opera of Chicago for the inauguration of new Ring cycle as Loge in *Das Rheingold*, conducted by Zubin Mehta.

**David Holloway**, baritone, opened new productions at the Metropolitan Opera as Le Mari in Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* and as Lescaut in *Manon Lescaut* and *Manon*. He also sang Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. In 1985, he debuted with the Glyndebourne Festival Opera as Escamillo in *Carmen*. In the ten years that Mr. Holloway lived in Germany, he sang eighteen premieres with the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in that

company's two host cities, Dusseldorf and Duisburg. Mr. Holloway sang numerous roles at Central City Opera including the title role of *Macbeth* and *Scarpia* in *Tosca*.

### Central City Opera

In 1877, the citizens of Central City, located forty miles west of Denver at 8500 feet in the Rookies, organized a fundraising drive for a grand new opera house befitting the gold mining town's reputation as "the richest square mile on earth." Many of the town's residents were Welsh and Cornish miners, who brought with them a rich tradition of music from their homeland. While locals pitched in during construction, the organizers also retained some of the best building professionals in the area. Prominent Denver architect Robert S. Roeschlaub provided an elegant, understated design for the stone structure, and San Francisco artist John C. Massman added elaborate *trompe l'oeil* murals to the interior.

The early glory years following the 1878 grand opening were short-lived. When the Central City mines were played out, the Opera House fell into disrepair. Fortunately, a volunteer-

driven effort led by Ida Kruse McFarlane and Anne Evans led to an extensive restoration of the Opera House in 1932. That summer, the legendary actress Lillian Gish presented *Camille* on the Opera House stage, launching an annual tradition of summer festivals featuring both opera and theater; more recently, the six-week festival has been a celebration of opera and operetta. In addition to Lillian Gish, other stars of the opera and stage have performed in the Central City summer festivals, including Beverly Sills, Jerome Hines, Helen Hayes, Samuel Ramey, and Catherine Malfitano. Each year, the summer festival features three main-stage operas as well as performances of *The Face On The Barroom Floor* in the Williams Stables across the street from the Opera House. *The Face On The Barroom Floor* showcases young singers from Central City Opera's Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Artists Training Program. On the final weekend of the festival, a special performance of *The Face On The Barroom Floor* is staged in the Teller House Bar, where the "face" of the title still graces the wooden floor.

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## Production Notes

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