

**LA GRANDE BRETÈCHE**  
A One-Act Opera: Prologue and Two Scenes

Libretto by  
**GEORGE R. MILLS**  
after Balzac's story of the same name.

Music by  
**AVERY CLAFLIN**  
The Vienna Orchestra and Soloists conducted by F. Charles Adler.

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**THE CAST**

Wife ..... **PATRICIA BRINTON**, Soprano  
Husband ..... **RICHARD OWENS**, Baritone  
Lover ..... **WILLIAM BLANKENSHIP**, Tenor  
Maid 1 ..... **SHEILA JONES**, Soprano  
Pierre, the Gardener ..... **EARL GILMORE**, Tenor  
Male Trio ..... **WERNER HARMS, KART NURMALA,**  
**EUGENE HARTZELL**

Singers prepared by **SERGEJ RADAMSKY**

Engineer in charge.....**OTTO KACZAROWSKI**  
Musical Supervisor .....**ROBBINS LANDON**

This recording was made on January 15 and 16, 1956 in Vienna at the Columbia Studio.

Playing time: 50 minutes.

## THE COMPOSER

AVERY CLAFLIN was born in 1898 at Keene, New Hampshire and graduated Cum Laude from the Phillips Exeter Academy in 1916. Enrolled at Harvard in the class of 1920, he left college after one year to drive an ambulance in France. In 1917 he was wounded at Verdun and returned to Harvard. In 1918, back in France with the French Red Cross, He received his Croix de Guerre. In 1919, again in the United States, he hastily finished up his Harvard requirements for a war degree and went to work in New York.

All this time he had been a musician, studying the piano with John P. Marshall, organist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and being introduced to the compositional techniques by the Harvard music faculty, chiefly Dr. Archibald T. Davison. In Paris, at the end of World War I, he knew Milhaud, Auric, Poulenc - all young then - and had much counsel about his compositions from the father of them all, Erik Satie. By 1921 he had finished his first opera, "The Fall of Usher," on a libretto, after Poe, of his own. The music is striking, dramatically apt, mature. Nevertheless, Claflin became a bank messenger. The loss of an index finger as part of his Verdun wounds made it impossible for him to think of earning a living by keyboard engagements (though to this day he plays the piano quite accurately with nine fingers). So he went to work for the French American Banking Corporation, retiring thirty-five years later as its President.

During this period he continued to write music and to hear his works performed. In 1926, on the basis of his "Fall of Usher" he was pointed out by Aaron Copland in "Modern Music" as one of "America's Young Men of Promise". In 1929 he composed a "Moby Dick Suite" for orchestra. In 1932 he completed his second opera, "Hester Prynne," after Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter," on a libretto by Dorothea Carroll. During the next two decades he composed two symphonies, a string quartet, a ballet, another orchestral work "Fishhouse Punch," a devotional oratorio "Mary of Nazareth," a violin sonata, keyboard pieces and choral works. An early Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano was published in France in 1924. In 1935 scenes from "Hester Prynne" were produced in Hartford, Connecticut by the "Friends and Enemies of Modern Music." The production had scenery by Victor White, costumes by Roy Requa, staging by John Houseman and musical direction by Virgil Thomson.

Recent works include “Teen Scenes” for string orchestra, “Larghetto and Shuffle” for full orchestra, “Seven Meditations for Holy Week” for small orchestra, “Four Pieces for Orchestra” (entitled “Hurricane Carol”, “II is just II”, “Bull Market” and “A Portrait of Ike”) and the now famous “Lament for April 15.” This last, a madrigal setting of Federal Income Tax instructions, has gone round the world.

## THE OPERA

“La Grande Bretèche,” Claflin’s third opera, was completed in 1947. The libretto, by George R. Mills, is based on a story by Balzac. This story is one which Balzac himself retold several times and which has been made into an opera by at least four composers. Balzac first published it in 1832 in “Scenes from Private Life.” It next appeared in his “Scenes from Provincial Life,” which are dated 1832-36. Its final appearance in his work was, in still another telling, in the fifth edition of the “Scenes from Private Life,” which are dated 1839-42. William H. Royce, Balzac authority, considers that Poe cribbed some details from one of the early versions for his “Fall of the House of Usher,” which was published in 1839.

Balzac takes some pains to give the quality of a real incident to his tale about “La Grande Bretèche,” the name of an imaginary estate in the Loire Valley, by telling it through the mouth of a visiting doctor who claims to have had it from an elderly notary, former administrator of the property, and also from a chambermaid who had been eye witness to the tragedy. Briefly stated, it is about a husband who, suspecting correctly that his wife has hidden a lover in her bedroom closet, calls in a mason and has the closet walled up before her eyes.

## THE LIBRETTIST

George Roswell Mills was born in Buffalo and grew up in Montreal. “The family fortunes were checkered and my education, consequently, of the sketchiest,” he writes. “There being no nonsense then about child labor, I was working at fourteen for the fine sum of \$4 a week.

“From the moment I could read I wanted to write, and later, when I understood what music can be, it became my second abiding enthusiasm. I left Montreal for New York when I was eighteen, sure I could make a mark in either literature or music. I found out in a hurry it’s not so easy and there’s less to starving than some poets pretend. I went to work for a publishing company and, aside from the odd short story and a good deal of criticism, have always been a professional journalist.

“When Mr. Claflin suggested the Balzac episode as a basis for an opera, I visualized a somewhat insensitive but not unintelligent man profoundly in love with a woman he felt he had lost but whom he hoped by some overwhelming show of force to hold. But he did not really know this woman and was engulfed in hopelessness when he found out what his show of strength had done to her.”

## SYNOPSIS OF THE OPERA

After an atmospheric prelude, the curtain rises on a misty night scene in the garden of a chateau. Light can be seen at the edges of a bedroom window. Two voices are heard in love duet. During a pause in this duet, the scene changes to the bedroom. The significant objects in the room, which is decorated ornately and with fantasy, are a heavily draped bed on a dais, a large ivory crucifix on the bed table, a chaise longue and an irregularly shaped closet door.

A woman is on the chaise longue, her lover kneeling beside her. The love duet continues, rising to a climax. As the lovers embrace, men are heard off-stage. It is the woman's husband and some companions returning after a night of gaming and wining. As the voices approach, a maid enters to warn the lovers, whose voices now mingle with those of the male quartet outside.

The husband is still singing as he approaches the bedroom. His voice is thick and ponderous. As he knocks at the door the maid gets the lover into the closet. She next goes to admit the husband. Meanwhile, the lover darts out and presses into his beloved's hands a silver crucifix he has been wearing round his neck. He then darts back. The shutting of the closet door and the opening of the bedroom door are simultaneous. The husband, entering unsteadily, pulls himself together after a few steps, draws the curtains to let in the morning light and throws open a casement window.

Sounds are now heard which could be the lover stumbling in the closet. Realizing that he may have seen the closet door shutting as he came in, the husband questions his wife. She answers that there is no one there. As he starts to verify, she bars his way, swearing on her marriage vows that she is alone. He takes her in his arms roughly and sings of his love, but his mind is bitter with jealousy. Picking up the ivory crucifix, he demands she swear on the cross that she is alone. At first she cries, “Ah! No!” but as he handles her more and more roughly, she finally sobs out the oath.

His attitude changes immediately; he becomes the passionate husband. She asks to be left alone for an hour to make herself presentable for his love. This request for delay arouses his suspicion again. He breaks off his love song to announce that the closet door is ugly. "It shall be wall'd." She spurs for time to no avail. He rings for the maid and tells her to summon the gardener, as soon as he is up, to bring bricks and his mortaring tools. There is further and increasing altercation, but the scene ends with both persons wary and watching.

The orchestral interlude is an Aubade, or morning pastoral. As the curtain rises on Scene II, still in the bedroom, the gardener is at work and has nearly completed his wall. Husband and wife are at breakfast, he eating with relish, she preoccupied, the maid frankly worried.

The husband torments his wife lightly as she stares at the wall. The gardener sings as he stops to mix mortar. The husband rises from the table and walks about. He picks up the ivory crucifix, examines it. The lines of pain bring home his own sorrow at losing his dear wife's fidelity. "So might my heart be carv'd if anguish were an awl." She, meanwhile, in an aside to the maid, tells her to promise the gardener anything he asks for to leave a small chink in the wall.

The husband now questions his wife about the silver crucifix, an unfamiliar object in this room. She denies all knowledge of it. He identifies it as belonging to a Spanish friend of her brother. "I saw him yesterday in town. He gave it to you!"

At this point of tension, and with the wall approaching its completion, husband and wife sing in duet, but not in sympathy, "How much the world owes to its walls." Stirred finally to action, the wife demands urgently to be left alone. The husband pretends to calm her, examines the wall, discovers the chink, instructs the gardener to seal it. While she sings despairingly, he takes her in his arms and sings of love, then leaves the room with gardener and maid.

"Dear Christ, how could I know to what abyss love leads?" The wife cries to her lover through the wall and attempts to break it down. She succeeds only in dislodging a few bricks. She is lying exhausted at its base when her husband returns. There is no longer any disguising the truth. He accuses her of infidelity. She pleads with him to open up the wall, offering her love forevermore in return. He spurns the role of cuckold. "There is no cure in love's defeat. Forever in your golden flesh the savor of his kisses lives."

As she is drawn once more toward the wall, he seizes her roughly and throws her on the bed. Jealousy and spurned love have brought him to a breaking point. Still singing of the wife that used to love him, his jealousy takes over and he kills her. As her death screams echo away, he falls before the ivory crucifix, demented, sobbing.

Notes by VIRGIL THOMSON

*(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*