

- Theodore Chanler; with text by Hester Pickman (after Grimm)
1. *The Pot of Fat*: An opera in six scenes with prologue and epilogue ..... (42:00)
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|---------------------------------|----------|
| Dixie Stewart (soprano) .....   | Mouse    |
| Arthur Burrows (baritone) ..... | Cat      |
| Bruce Abel (baritone) .....     | Narrator |
| CRI Chamber Orchestra           |          |
| Jorge Mester, conductor         |          |

There is a grandeur about *The Pot of Fat* which makes this domestic tragedy larger than life. Yet the husband in the opera is a cat and his wife is a mouse.

The libretto is based on a Grimm fairy tale, *The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership*. The plot is simple. A cat and mouse live together happily while the cat cheats the mouse. When the mouse discovers the cat's duplicity, he devours her in his rage.

I wondered why warm, friendly, fun-loving Theodore Chanler wanted to make an opera out of it. In 1955 he wrote to tell me how it all came about: "*The Pot of Fat* begun when my wife's grandchildren were visiting us during the summer of 1952. I read Grimm's fairy stories aloud... and the one most often in demand was *The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership*."

"That same summer my sister Hester Pickman and I had collaborated on a piece for our mother's ninetieth birthday celebration. We had done occasional pieces of this sort before, but this was our most serious effort. We thought, why not go on? . . . I got her to read *The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership*. . . . I urged her to try it out as material for a short opera. . . . She agreed. . . . Once she began work on it, however, the story seemed to reveal new, and unsuspected dimensions. It is, of course, not 'funny' to grown-ups in the way it is to children. But it contains, or at least implies, the drama of a broken marriage. . . . One seems to discern, too, the dim outline of a symbol or parable, like the all-but-obliterated trace of a prehistoric drawing in a cave. Might this story be the record, in code form, of some political event? . . . Some of these secondary meanings or suggestions we brought into the open, others remain latent in the rich 'folk' soil. We kept to the original outline of the story almost literally." So Chanler wrote of the genesis of his opera.

Although librettist Hester Pickman has kept to the original outline of the story, she has taken the short, stark tale and changed it from a Grand Guignol horror-thriller into a philosophical drama. At the end of *The Pot of Fat*, one is not shocked, but saddened, as when witnessing the conclusion of a friend's unhappy marriage. She has transformed the cat and mouse into believable human beings. Her characters are not good or bad, but like people, they are good or wrong, or even good and wrong.

This is borne out in Chanler's own description of the cat, the mouse, and the narrator—the opera's total cast: ". . . they are really people—Cat an attractive ruffian, Mouse a gentle, appealing little fool, perhaps, I should add appetizing." About the Narrator he wrote, "we think of him as representing Nature itself—or Fate, or Fortune, whatever you want to call it. . . ."

To each performer in the opera itself, Chanler has allotted a characteristic vocal line. The mouse's pattern is a quick succession of notes followed by a sudden, sustained pause which captures the feeling of a tiny, frightened animal running and then stopping to look around to see what has happened. Compared to the cat, the mouse's vocal line is purposefully normal, more lyrical, even sentimental, and somewhat pedestrian. The cat's vocal line is usually slower and heavier, and filled with feline leaps. The cat is a liar, and throughout the opera there is a theatrical exaggeration to what he sings. Melodically the cat has to leap broad intervals, frequently a skip of a ninth up and down. The mouse does so rarely, except when she is frightened. Chanler further exaggerates the cat's vocal line with strong, arbitrary rhythmic accents which make the cat sound as if he were justifying what he is saying. He is.

When the Narrator is telling the story, he sings ballad-like straightforward tunes. When he becomes involved in the action, his lines become tinged with the emotion and the music.

The musical forms Chanler uses in *The Pot of Fat* are not traditionally found in opera. We find theme-and-variation, fugue, and even a movie cartoon underscoring—but no arias. The cat does have a brief monologue, and the narrator has six short apostrophes, but for the most part, the opera is dialogue scenes and trios.

Although Chanler was a composer who wrote ideally for the voice, the shape of this opera is not determined by vocal forms, but instead by the action of the scenario. Even an abstract musical form, like a fugue, bows to the plot. Chanler extended the fugue in this instance because the stage action required extra music.

His unusual theatrical instinct led him to sweep aside the convention of scene breaks. Instead, the opera is divided into large musical sections which end when Chanler feels the audience needs a pause. The first one comes at the end of Scene Two. In so doing, Chanler is free to weave the exposition into a single tapestry. Such continuous flow generates some of the opera's excitement.

Chanler said that the work “starts as a *bouffe* and ends as a melodrama.” Throughout the first section, there are some enchanting musical jokes. For instance, he takes the tune of “The Old Refrain” and gives it to the mouse to sing when she starts to tell how mice nibble at the pot of fat. This is her way of life and it is her old refrain. Then when the cat and mouse steal the pot of fat, Chanler develops the “Old Refrain” theme into a rhapsodic fantasia in the best movie cartoon style.

Perhaps the most telling difference between the *bouffe* style of the beginning and the melodramatic ending can be heard in the change that occurs in the waltz which first appears when the cat proposes to the mouse and which reappears when he kills her.

The nature of its instrumentation allows the twenty-one man orchestra in *The Pot of Fat* to change quickly from a Viennese dance hall ensemble to a sleazy Parisian café combo, or to a symphony orchestra. This Chanler accomplishes with masterly economy and in so doing provides as with remarkable variety of sound. His music, like the man himself, has a sense of humor which is gentle and understanding. Some highlights from the three-page autobiography he once put to paper give us a measure of insight into a man who could laugh—especially at himself:

“I was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1902, the youngest of eight children. In 1906, my parents bought a place in Geneseo, in the western part of New York State. . . . For entertainment, we children were thrown on our own resources; and every summer Hester would write and produce a play in verse, in which we and the children of the neighbors would be called upon to act.

“ . . . In 1914, my parents tried the experiment of taking me out of school and sending me to the Institute of Musical Art in New York. . . . I worked with absorbed concentration on such things as cutting scenery out of muslin and painting it to look like a forest . . . but at the piano, I mooned.

“The following year I was sent to Middlesex School in Concord. I stayed there for two uncooperative years and did not graduate.

“ . . . By 1917 I had begun to compose. . . . I lived at home and studied piano with Hans Ebell and harmony with Arthur Shepherd. I composed a good many songs and was on the way to becoming a fair pianist.

“ . . . I took entrance examinations for Harvard, and would have entered there the next fall had I not met Ernest Bloch. I was bowled over by him . . . I began to study with Bloch,

followed him to New Hampshire in the summer of 1920 and to Cleveland the following winter.

“ . . . Again it was decided that I had better get a normal education, and in January 1923 I went to Oxford, England. . . . My mother took an apartment in Paris that winter, and I spent the long Christmas vacation with her. We met Nadia Boulanger through a mutual friend, Blair Fairchild, and I began to study with her. She at once galvanized me into action, making me write a page of music a day. Ideas began to flow. . . .

“I spent that summer in Geneseo and returned to Paris in the fall to resume my studies with Nadia Boulanger. I remained there two years. . . . I composed a violin and piano sonata which was performed by Samuel Dushkin and Marcel Ciampi at an SMI concert, along with other products of the ‘Boulangerie’ . . .

“After this major achievement I seem to have rested on my laurels . . . a long rest of about five years. Of course, I was still ambitious and hopeful. But I was undisciplined.

“ . . . In 1930 I composed a *Mass for Women’s Voices and Organ*. The following year I married Maria de Acosta. We spent the first three years of our married life in New York. I wrote some reviews for *Modern Music* . . . took piano lessons with Egon Petri, and did some analysis with the late Hans Weisser, a pupil of Heinrich Schenker. What he showed me of Schenker’s theory of the *Urlinie* gave me a new approach to musical form.

“In 1934 we moved to Boston and there the *Herald* took me on as musical critic. This job lasted about six weeks. My articles were considered offensive . . . We went to Europe in the summer of 1935. On our return to Boston, I began to compose again, almost effortlessly, and by the following spring had completed a cycle of songs, *Eight Epitaphs*, on poems by Walter de la Mare—a work that I must ruefully admit, twenty years later, is still the best music I have written.”

Chanler wrote this before *The Pot of Fat* had reached completion, and before he had won awards from both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Guggenheim Foundation.

As this is written, there have been more performances of *The Pot of Fat* in Britain and in Europe than in the United States. Now, with this recording, Americans will have their opportunity to hear Theodore Chanler’s only completed opera.

*Notes by Richard Stuart Flusser*

*Richard Flusser produced and staged the After Dinner Opera Company’s production of The Pot of Fat, which received its New York City premiere on February 22, 1956 (the world premiere had taken place at the Longy School of Music in Boston, May 9, 1955). The After Dinner Opera production was also given at the Edinburgh Festival in August of 1956, a success which culminated in a widely acclaimed tour of Europe.*

**Dixie Stewart** (Mouse) is a graduate of The Juilliard School of Music, where she received her diploma in opera in 1962, along with the Alice Breen Memorial Award. Previously she had studied at the Eastman School of Music. She was recipient of the Music Foundation Award in 1961. Miss Stewart has appeared extensively throughout the eastern United States in opera, oratorio, and recital, as well as in leading roles in summer theater productions.

**Arthur Burrows** (Cat) is a Juilliard graduate and has sung with the Chautauqua Opera Association, the Joffrey Ballet, and the New York Pro Musica. In 1972 he became assistant professor of vocal music at SUNY Purchase, and in 1973 joined the N.Y. Soloists Quartet.

**Bruce Abel** (Narrator), after receiving his master’s degree at Juilliard, went to Stuttgart, Germany, to

continue his studies. During this period he won prizes in four international competitions. Mr. Abel has toured throughout Europe and became an Associated Professor at Oberlin Conservatory in 1971.

**Jorge Mester** was born in Mexico City and at age eleven came to the U.S., to study at Tanglewood. He attended Juilliard and joined the faculty before graduating. He conducted the Juilliard Opera Theatre and was the violist of the Beaux-Arts Quartet. In 1968 he became musical director of the Louisville Orchestra, and in 1971, musical director of the Aspen Festival.

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(*Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket*)