

HUGO WEISGALL

THE TENOR

OPERA IN ONE ACT (1950)

BASED ON THE PLAY BY FRANK WEDEKIND

LIBRETTO BY KARL SHAPIRO AND ERNST LERT

RICHARD CASSILLY TENOR

RICHARD CROSS BASS-BARITONE

DORIS YOUNG SOPRANO

DOROTHY COULTER SOPRANO

CHESTER LUDGIN BARITONE

JOHN KUHN TENOR

VIENNA STATE OPERA ORCHESTRA

HERBERT GROSSMAN

CONDUCTOR

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based on *Der Kammersanger* by Frank Wedekind

libretto by Karl Shapiro and Ernst Lert

RICHARD CASSILLY (TENOR) — *Gerardo*

RICHARD CROSS (BASS-BARITONE) — *Maurice, Gerardo's Manager*

DORIS YOUNG (SOPRANO) — *Young Girl*

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CHESTER LUDGIN (BARITONE) — *Valet*

JOHN KUHN (TENOR) — *Bellboy*

Vienna State Opera Orchestra — *Herbert Grossman* (CONDUCTOR)

RE-ISSUED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE ALICE M. DITSON FUND OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) was himself not only the author of plays regarded as extremely daring and violently provocative in the Germany of the turn-of-the-century (he was, incidentally, born in San Francisco, of a doctor father and actress mother, but brought up in Switzerland), he was also a well known actor, cabaret artist, and song-writer. Thus, in dealing with the trials and tribulations of a Wagnerian tenor on tour, with especial attention to the lures and wiles of feminine admirers and to the paradoxical situation of the operatic star in free enterprise society as matinee idol and manager's meal-ticket, Wedekind knew much of his subject matter at first-hand. But where the figure of the Manager in Wedekind's play remains until the very end merely an off-stage shadow behind the contract which Gerardo dares not break, even though it means the suicide of the only woman who has truly loved him, he becomes in the Weisgall-Shapiro-Lert opera the most powerful motivating figure of the drama, overshadowing Gerardo on stage at the point where the intruding Young Girl is firmly but gently shooed off the scene, and dominating him offstage to the very end when he rushes from the hotel room over Helen's prostrate body to make the train for his *Tristan* performance in the next city.

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The musical language used by Weisgall in *The Tenor* is freely chromatic—post-Bergian, one might say, but more vital rhythmically. There is active but flexible polyphonic texture, which reaches its formal peak in a 4-part vocal fugue on a 12-note theme that comes as the climax of the scene with Gerardo, his Manager, and the Young Girl (near the end of Side 2). NOTES PREPARED BY D. H.

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CRI COMPOSERS RECORDINGS, INC.
170 West 74th Street, New York 23, N. Y.

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Notes from CD Reissue NWCR757

Hugo Weisgall's *The Tenor*, a chamber opera in one act, was one of the most serious and substantial American operas of the 1950s. Weisgall's musical style recalls German models. The dense, developmental texture often crystallizes into strong set-numbers, and supports a complicated system of musical da capos, thematic recurrences, and even references to *Tristan and Isolde*. This thematic structure is complicated but effective; the piece does not appear to me overcomposed for the theater.

Dramatically, the opera is likewise intense. Based on Wedekind's *Der Kammersänger*, the libretto concerns a present-day matinee idol, a man who has sacrificed personal integrity to his self-image in the role of Tristan. Women fall for him in droves, but when one of them gets serious his insufficiency becomes plain. Gerardo cannot face his Manager's threat to revoke his contract if he is associated with any scandal. Helen, however, has left her husband, and she implores Gerardo to quit the stage-life that he himself realizes is stifling him. He is on the point of agreeing when the Manager telephones; Gerardo reneges and Helen shoots herself. Terrified, the tenor steps over her body to obey the Manager's summons — his career wrecked, of course. The success of this libretto, incidentally, is due partly to some bold rewriting of the original play by Karl Shapiro and Ernst Lert.

Illusion, manipulation, and crumbling identity are powerfully projected by Weisgall, though he has his musical problems. There is a certain neutrality to the musical style and the lyric sections do not quite "sing" as they should. But we can take some stiffness and some blandness in a first opera that shows a superb instinct for the right musical idea for the right occasion. When Gerardo and the Manager are getting rid of a persistent intruder, the triple fugue is ominous and riotous, and perfectly placed for both musical and dramatic coherence. When Gerardo, trying to placate Helen after finally rejecting her, breaks out unconsciously into the music of *Tristan and Isolde*, we understand by means of the single grisly stroke how he has no real voice of his own. This is no trick illusion; it sums up and clarifies musically the fundamental dramatic idea.

In fact, *The Tenor* would appear to have been written because the composer had something to say, not just because it seemed to him a good idea to write an opera. A rare, precious quality indeed. —Joseph Kerman, 1959