

Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth
(Chamber Opera in One Act)

Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth (41:15)

Libretto by Sheldon Harnick

Music by Jack Beeson

(Based on the story "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" by Nathaniel Hawthorne)

Commissioned by the National Arts Club for its 80th Anniversary

Rachel Lockhart, a widow (soprano) Carol Wilcox
Hannah Moody, a spinster (mezzo-soprano) Judith Christin
Reuben Waterford (tenor) Grayson Hirst
Colonel Killigrew (baritone) Robert Shiesley
Dr. Heidegger (bass-baritone) Alfred Anderson
A Maid (speaking role) Miranda Beeson
Chamber Orchestra conducted by Thomas Martin, music director

The Opera

Several years ago, the National Arts Club approached Jack Beeson with a request to compose a one-act opera to help commemorate its forthcoming 80th anniversary, an event scheduled to take place in the fall of 1978. Mr. Beeson in turn approached Sheldon Harnick. The choice of subject was left to the composer and librettist with the stipulation that it should be, in some unspecified way, "American".

Since the opera was to be performed on the premises of the Club, a building without an auditorium (or even a room with a stage), it was clear that the work had to be of "chamber" proportions. Mr. Harnick suggested as a source for the opera Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment," a short story which called for only five singers, plus one non-singing actress. This consideration also affected the size of the orchestra, which Mr. Beeson decided to limit to eleven players, who play twice that number of instruments.

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is one of those Hawthorne tales in which he delights his reader with moral ambiguities and with events that may be natural, supernatural, or both. However, although such ambiguities may be delightful on the printed page, they can be baffling and exasperating when transferred to the stage. A theatre audience, caught in the flux of action, words, and music, needs to know who is who, where the action is, and when and what-if-anything-is-meant to be ambiguous. It needs the steady escort of the writer and the composer who clearly and forcefully shape their means toward clearly defined ends.

In adapting Hawthorne's story, the supernatural was not invoked: the ghosts in Heidegger's study are in the imagination of the superstitious maid, who dislikes dusting skeletons and over-sized books. However, some ambiguities remain: Is the transformation of the rose a parlor trick? Is the elixir merely a "fine old wine"? As to the transformations of Heidegger's friends, perhaps they really happen; perhaps ". . . only thinking makes it so."*

Those familiar with the Hawthorne story will note that three of the characters were renamed. Since Hawthorne was careful to endow his characters with suitable names, they were not rechristened arbitrarily. Names were changed to make them more singable, and to make them even more appropriate to their characters, as they were developed.

In addition, to achieve a more satisfactory vocal balance, Mr. Beeson suggested that the “four venerable friends” of the story be two men and two women rather than three men and one woman. Hence Mr. Gascoigne became the spinster, Hannah Moody. Mr. Gascoigne, however, did not simply disappear without a trace; his vocation, that of a “politician, a man of evil fame,” was donated to Colonel Killigrew. The addition of a second woman into the story changed the nature of the relationships substantially, and the working out of the plot was altered accordingly.

As the dramatic progression is intended to be clear, so also is the parallel musical progression. The music is intended to follow the dramatic structure and to build character and event. In order to ensure that this be accomplished effectively, it should be stressed that the composer and librettist worked closely on the libretto from the outset, designing structure, character, and event with an eye toward their ultimate musical realization.

The drama calls for the friends often to act in consort; quartets and quintets follow in consequence. A twelve-tone set orders the oddities of the first section and, in part, the entrance of the aged. Its strong tonal implications make possible a transformation to clear major as the “venerable friends” regain their youth. Several “numbers” follow, varied according to who is singing about what. The Widow’s nostalgic waltz becomes the substance of an extended scene leading to the fight, the second transformation, and the repetition of the opera’s opening (now counterpointed against the re-appearance of an earlier quartet with altered text). After a mellifluous solo (with quartet) by Heidegger, the opera ends in C major, the tonic of the dominant-implied row of its beginning, a key several times insisted upon, most importantly in the “To youth” quartet.

—Sheldon Harnick. & Jack Beeson

*In this case Shakespeare, not Hawthorne.

Although **Jack Beeson** is best known as an opera composer, he has written a hundred other works, many of them, to be sure, settings of words for solo voice or chorus. As a child in “Middletown USA” (actually Muncie, Indiana, where he was born in 1921) he studied piano, clarinet, and xylophone—and composed. In his teens he wrote two libretti, *Beatrice Cenci* and *Redwing* and adapted Byron’s *Manfred*. One of his submissions for entrance to the Eastman School of Music was a rewrite of the “Wach’ auf” section from *Die Meistersinger*.

After receiving degrees from Eastman, some courses at Columbia University, and private study with Bela Bartók (1944–45) he spent several years as a coach, assistant, and associate conductor of the Columbia Opera Workshop, assisting in the premieres of several operas by American composers.

Among other awards he has received the Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships, the Rome Prize, the Fairchild Award, the Marc Blitzstein Award for Musical Theatre, and the Gold Medal for Music of the National Arts Club. He is a member of the American Academy-Institute of Arts and Letters. He is successor to Douglas Moore as MacDowell Professor of Music at Columbia University and has been chairman of the department there. He also serves a large number of musical organizations as board member or officer.

With this original-cast album of *Heidegger* there are now five of Mr. Beeson’s seven operas available on records. Those that are recorded are indicated by asterisks in the following list: *Jonah*, based on a play by Paul Goodman; *Hello Out There** and *My Heart’s In the Highlands*, both based on plays by William Saroyan (these, and *Jonah*, with the composer as librettist); *The Sweet Bye and Bye** and *Lizzie Borden**, libretti by Kenward Elmslie (the latter based on a scenario by Richard Plant); and *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*,* libretto by Sheldon Harnick, based on the play of the same title by Clyde Fitch.

Although known primarily for his work with words, as lyricist and librettist, **Sheldon Harnick** has a long and ongoing history as both a composer and performer. Mr. Harnick began the study of violin at the age of eight; ten years later found him playing in several dance orchestras in and around Chicago (where he was born in 1924). After serving in the army for three years, Mr. Harnick continued his music studies at Northwestern University, majoring in the violin, at the same time contributing songs to the annual student revue, the WAA-MU show.

In 1950, Mr. Harnick abandoned his career as a violinist and moved to New York to attempt a career in the musical theater. After contributing songs to several on- and off-Broadway revues, in 1958 he met and began to collaborate with composer Jerry Bock, an association which resulted in a string of musicals including *Fiorello*, *She Loves Me*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *The Rothschilds*.

In the 1960s Mr. Harnick expanded his activities by translating such works as *L'Histoire du Soldat* (for the Bill Baird Marionettes and the Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra); *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (for the Manhattan School of Music); and, most recently, *The Merry Widow* (for the New York City Opera production featuring Beverly Sills).

The 1970s saw Mr. Harnick's entry into the field of opera. (In 1965, he had made a brief foray into the field with a six minute 'mini-opera' entitled *Frustration*.) Introduced by a mutual friend to composer Jack Beeson, they began a collaboration which has thus far resulted in two operas: *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines* and *Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth*.

Among those contributors who have made this record possible are the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation and The National Arts Club.

The recording is, in part, a memorial to Cella Hecht, a music-lover throughout a long life. The donors to this memorial are Robert Maguire; Joseph and Hattie Mandelbaum; Ben Meiselman; her family, Maressa Hecht Orzack and Louis H. Orzack; and many other friends.

Players:

Joseph Schor, first violin; Ronald Oakland, second violin; Ronald Carbone, viola; Michael Haber, cello; John Beal, bass; Karla Moe, flute; Charles Russo; first clarinet; Mitchell Kriegler, second clarinet; Ruth Negri, harp; Gerald A. Brown, piano, celesta, and harmonium; Joseph Passaro, percussion.

The National Arts Club was founded in 1898 to promote the mutual acquaintance of art workers and art lovers in all the arts. Over the years it has built up a continuing service to music from composer to performance. *Dr. Heidegger's Fountain of Youth* had its world premiere in the Club Gallery November 17, 1978, at 15 Gramercy Park, New York City.

Produced by Carter Harman

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(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)