

Street Scene for the Last Mad Soprano

(A music theater text by William Osborne, completed in 1997.)

A spot rises on the "Mad Soprano" standing profile, center stage, her arms and gaze raised upward at 80 degrees.

She lowers her arms, elbows bent at approximately 45 degrees, hands shoulder height. She turns to public as she lowers her arms, the elbows slightly bent, open palms facing public, face calm, innocent and joyful.

She makes one step forward as arms open wider her from sides in graceful greeting to public.

She takes her trombone and plays in the spot center stage, facing the front, left, middle, etc. She places the trombone on its stand and seats herself on the bench.

She rummages in her bag for her score. She finds it sitting to her right and picks it up.

Friendly, gregarious, energetic, but a little worried, she addresses her imagined public. Act like the words are your genuine concerns:

Tomorrow is my audition!
What will I sing for them.
I wonder what they'll do?

Confidentially, whispered like a secret:

I lied about my age!

She rummages in her bag for a pencil. Troubled:

I feel unprepared!

She flits the pages of her score (three times.) She holds the score up with weary annoyance and lowers it in line with the music, then tosses it down.

What am I going to wear?

With heavy irony.

Armor? Or shack les?

She takes a scarf from her bag.

My scarf?

Shakes out the scarf. Tossing away her concerns:

There's nothing to be done.

Tosses the scarf over her neck, waxes optimistic:

I'll just give it my best.

She takes the score and sings from "Lucia" in a highly stylized manner:

Cast on my grave a flower,

But let there be no weeping,
When 'neath the turf I'm sleeping.
Let not an eye, not an eye grow dim.

She dissolves out of the aria and tosses the score down.

How am I going to sing tomorrow?

In a nervous tick, she tightens the scarf around her neck, bunching about one third of it up into her hands.

I'm horse!

She bunches another third.

No voice!

Bunches the final third.

I'm lost!

She rises and walks downstage center as close to the public as possible. Complete light cross fade to only her upper body.

She enjoys gossiping about "Betty" and addresses specific members of the public with intimate, whispered knowledge.

Soon I'll be just like Betty.

She tightens her scarf, bunching one third of it as before. Addresses another member of the public:

She lives in the box down the street.

She bunches another third of her scarf. Addresses, another member of the public:

She won't sing a note, nothing at all.

Bunches final third. She throws her hands up, suddenly worried, the scarf falls loose.

Me too! I should save my voice!

She grasps her throat. With a touch of exuberance:

But I need to prepare.

The light completely cross fades to the center stage spot as she takes about three steps backwards to it and transforms into her opera character. As if on stage at the Met:

For mid the fields of azure
I go to wait for him,
ah yes, ah yes, ah yes, ah yes,
'Mid fields of azure I wait for him,
ah yes, ah yes, ah yes, I wait.

Dissolving from her aria, she moves back downstage center to the public. Light completely cross fades.

Annoyed:

It's hopeless!
This is just howling.

Tick with scarf.

They'll never listen.

Tick with scarf.

She glides backwards a couple steps, turns, releases the scarf, walks the rest of the way to the bench, and seats herself. With her hand close to her face, she addresses the public while delicately conducting the beat.

We are troubled on every side--

--her other hand at her throat, she bunches her scarf as if music has a strangle hold on her, tick with the scarf--

--yet not distressed.

Conducts:

We are perplexed but not in despair.

She laughs operatically. With giddy confidence:

Tomorrow is my special day!

She takes her score.

What am I going to sing?

She flits through the score. With exuberance:

What will I do if I make the last round?

She pulls a letter out of her bag and removes it from its envelope on the last note of the rummage music. She holds the letter up, contemplating it with wonder. She unfolds the letter and reads with great anticipation:

Dear applicant,

Time: Four thirty five.

Troubled:

Please use...the back entrance.

She tosses the letter back down.

I look and sound ridiculous.

I haven't got a chance.

She raises her hands to an imaginary opera public.

There I'll stand.

Then higher to the balcony:

All alone. Just me.

She sadly lowers them to her lap in line with the low glissando, but she brightens as she thinks of her aria.

For mid the fields of azure

I go to wait for him,

ah yes, ah yes, ah yes, ah yes,

'Mid fields of azure I wait for him,

ah yes, ah yes, ah yes.

She dissolves from the aria.

Somewhat weary and distant, reflective:

My grace is sufficient for thee:
my strength is made perfect in weakness.

She slowly turns 45 degrees to the right to face an opera light she imagines is shining down upon her. She mimes singing an aria in the direction of the "light," right arm raised, mouthing words in time with the music. The actual spot on her becomes very bright as the melody ascends. As she finishes her fantasy, the light dims to its normal intensity in line with the falling figure.

Subdued:

Will I be presentable?

She gestures to her clothing:

These are only rags.

Suddenly taking heart:

I'll sing it all for them.
Arias and Lieder.

She mimes singing as before, this time facing left with her left arm raised. The actual light gradually becomes very intense. As she leaves her fantasy the lights dim. She appears to be thinking of something new.

She addresses her public:

Maybe...maybe they'd like something...
something original.

She takes a man's old, black, wing tip shoe from her bag.

I could sing about Betty.
It's a VERY private story.

My old friend Betty was repairing her daughter's bike,
when her husband started bellowing.

She lowers her head in a kind of shame, then raises it and resumes singing:

He came out holding some shoes
that she was to have polished.

She moves the heel and toe of the shoe up and down as if it were strutting to the music, and then lowers her head as before. She raises her head and resumes singing, becoming more serious, even fearful:

He couldn't say what he wanted because I was there,
so he repeated:

(A distant voice: Do you see these?)

With an increasing tone of fear and anger:

and held them higher and more demandingly.

She contemplates the shoe darkly then sets it aside.

She goes completely downstage center to the audience. Complete cross fade of light to only her upper body. She smiles, enigmatic, child-like. Almost stepping out of the drama,

she sings the following phrases, each to a different individual in the public, in a warm, soft, lyrical voice.

Would to God
you could bear with me a little--
--pleading slightly--
in my folly,
and indeed
--dark and mystical--
bear with me.

She takes two gliding steps backwards, turns, goes to the bench, sits, takes her score and starts to study it. Complete cross fade to bench. She lowers the score to her lap in dark contemplation, then resumes studying it.

She tries the aria again:

But let there be no weeping
When 'neath the turf I'm sleeping.

Frustrated, she slams the score shut, reopens it, frustratedly flits through the pages, then contemplatively lowers it to her lap. She sets the score aside, pauses a moment in thought, then takes the shoe and holds it as before.

He said: ("My mother never treated my that way.")
She said: ("You don't need a mother anymore.")
And he hit her.
That ended their arguments. He was much bigger.

Holding the shoe before her a little below her chin, she contemplates it in dark memory. She sets the shoe aside, reflects a moment, then stands and pantomimes holding a spear and shield as she walks to center stage. Complete cross fade of light to center spot.

She embodies Brunhilde:

Lang war mein Schlaf; ich bin erwacht:
wer ist der Held, der mich erwecht?
Siegfried ist es, der mich erwecht!

She dissolves out of the role, and steps to the spot downstage center--complete cross fade. She intimately addresses individuals in the public:

Why's it so easy to sing?
Why's it bubble right up,
when you least expect it?

Without turning she glides back to the aria light center stage--complete cross fade. She gradually transforms herself to the character "Mimi." Enchanted:

Yes, I'm always called Mimi,
but my name is Lucia.
My story is a brief one.
I earn my living by sowing and embroidering.
Working gives me pleasure,
in leisure hours I make lilies and roses.

She returns to a more prosaic mood, goes to the spot downstage center, and intimately speaks to the public as before.

That's how I'll get rich,
I'll make it to a big house
with a little practice.

She considers her predicament. The general area light slowly rises. She turns, walks quickly toward the bench, stops, turns around. She quickly walks back front center to address a specific members of the audience. During the interludes she paces left or right, quickly turning to address another member of the audience. The effect should be something like a mad professor.

I'm not saying we have a lot to sing,
But I am saying what we do sing
is not without its problems.
The singing being less problem than knowing what to say,
for there are only so many things to say,
and that is all we can sing.

But of course, I could NOT sing!
And just sit here and be a silent, thinking head.

And then I sing and there I am again,
suddenly raised to breath and concrete form,
no end in sight, thundering along like something real,
something visible and solid.

And then I'm silent, and I fade away into the darkness.
Just like in a dream...as it were.

Perplexed:

But then one might ask, if I'm not real
who is this not singing?

As a matter of course:

For sometimes I just keep the beat you know.

Somewhat astounded:

Of course I should hope that I'm imagining
such a condition as this--

--conclusively--

--but it's not unimaginable that I'm not.

She goes to her trombone (or alternative), takes it to center stage--light brightens center stage. She plays her trombone, occasionally breaking off to address the public. She waltzingly sways her horn from side to side. Looking at her horn, quite perplexed:

Will this help my audition?

Looking at the audience:

Or am I spreading myself to thin?

She plays. She coyly covers her mouth in "alarm" over the sudden, loud, flatulent note she just played, then steps forward and addresses the audience.

And then I stop playing and suddenly I'm gone again,
back to a gossamer thread of silence--

—looking at her horn—

--not even my horn real.

She steps back to center stage and plays, waltzingly swaying from side to side. She looks at her instrument:

Such a noble instrument!

I suppose it could make an impression—

--she sings and moves the instrument as if playing "La Cucaracha"—

---la la la la la la la la la

She snaps out of her reverie, and realizes she must return to practicing, and plays. At the second phrase she turns profile.

I hope this is leading to something more
than my usual collapse!

*She plays. She moves front center to address the audience--complete cross fade.
Calmer:*

These are the problems I have
singing what I want to say,
When I finally know that I want to sing.

She remains standing in the spot, gentle and impassive, then returns to the bench. She rummages in her bag and brings out a humorous object right at the last note of the phrase, replaces it and repeats the process bringing out three other objects. (These gestures are not directed to the public, but to herself, for her own amusement.)

She pulls her scarf/shawl tighter in response to the thunder, and sits quietly wondering what to do. It begins to rain. The light dims. She pulls her scarf more closely about her. She takes her umbrella (about 4 beats after the beginning of the thunder.) It's jammed.

She struggles to open it. It opens on the sfz. She holds the position for a moment. She puts the umbrella over her head.

No sense being a sorry sight at this point.

She cheerfully sings to keep herself happy--thoughtfully, as if formulating a view. Still seated, she moves her feet in simple dance motions during the brief interludes.

No dumps or doldrums to weigh things down.
Full of wit and jocularly.
The jesters at the feast.

As the light cross fades to a general light brightest at the center, she stands, takes two waltzing steps to center stage, fully extends her right arm with her umbrella in her right hand, waltzes two steps to her right, then two back to center, then twirls one complete rotation. She lowers the umbrella to her shoulder, stops dancing and sings center stage.

Ban the maggoty miseries' of stray cats.

She extends her umbrella arm as before, gracefully twirls one full rotation to the left without changing her position, then returns the umbrella to her shoulder.

Shoot the ghouls who grin with ghastly smiles.

She twirls in the same manner as before. On the word "joy" she fully extends her right arm and the umbrella at about a 60 degree angle:

And set yourself upon a spire of joy.

She remains in this exuberant pose for a moment, but the thunder dampens her enthusiasm. She slowly lowers the umbrella to her shoulder, and moves front center--complete cross fade of light. She addresses individuals in the public:

I'm not saying we have a lot to sing,
but I am saying what we do sing,
is not without it's problems.

She makes two slow dream-like twirls back to center stage in line with the falling music--complete cross fade of light to center stage. Her mood transforms as she imagines the aria she is about to sing. She enters the role of "Adrianna" and sings with her eyes closed.

Lascia te mi morire
e chi volete voi che mi conforte
in cosi dura sorte
in cosi gran martire.

Her aria dissolves like slowly awakening from a dream with disappointment and confusion. She returns to her "cheerful" state, but a little more subdued.

Lament not the mournful dread of death,
Nor the dreary plight of the poor.
On the word "life" she extends the arm holding her umbrella as before.
And let a smile of joy light up your life.

She holds that pose as she gently sways side to side with the music. (If necessary she can move slightly to find the most attractive light.) She coyly looks up at the thunder and lowers her umbrella to her shoulder.

She moves to a spot about three meters downstage right. The light cross fades to a spot only on her upper body. Long pause as she impassively looks at the public. She speaks with such calm dignity that she almost breaks out of her drama. (During the pauses, as she waits for the cues, she continues to impassively look at the audience.)

First low gliss.

Sometimes I think people are listening.
Short pause. Or am I only imagining?

Cascade.

I thought I heard them breathing.

Cascade.

I just made that up about Betty. *Short pause.*
It's really me who's beaten.

Whispers.

He does it for his--*short pause*--satisfaction.

Second low gliss.

I don't remember people anymore.

She stands impassively looking at the audience. Wind.

She returns to the bench, closes the umbrella and hangs it back over the left arm rest--complete cross fade of light. She stands and walks with her head slightly lowered to center stage as the light completely cross fades. As the high D drone emerges she looks up as if responding to a distant muse or rising light. She becomes "Mimi."

I dearly love those flowers,
they delight and enchant me,
they speak to me of love,
of love and spring time,
they speak to me of dreams and of illusions,
of those wonders the world would call poetic.
Do you understand me?

She leaves her role, steps front center stage, and addresses individuals in the public--complete cross fade of light.

The lights will rise on me,
all doubts will fall aside,
and I'll sing from my heart.

Hesitantly, doubting:

But...but what will I sing about?

She moves to the same spot three meters downstage right. The light cross fades to only her upper body. Long pause as she impassively looks at the public. She speaks with the same dignity as before.

Cascando.

If I stay here, he'll beat me for singing.
But I have to practice.
Tomorrow, I'll be all bloody.

Cascando.

That's why I think of Mozart playing billiards.

Cascando.

One ball hitting the other,
and on and on by perfect chance
till all is silence.

Cascando.

That's what it's like here at night.

Whispers.

I hear all those little sounds.

Whispers.

A click here, a clack there, till stillness reigns.

Wind.

She stands in silence, impassively looking at the public. She returns to the bench, complete cross fade of light. She takes the shoe and holds it before her as earlier. She sings to the public.

That's when the plot thickened.
She said: You don't need a mother anymore.

Without letting it go, she dives the shoe toe first into her lap on the "plop" sound, and holds it in that position.

Took the shoes
and dumped them in the frog pond.
He didn't like that.

She holds the shoe before her in horrific memory. On the spit sound her head slowly jerks to the side, then she raises her hand to touch her face. She remains immersed in her memories, then rises and goes to her aria position center stage--complete cross fade. She looks at her "gallery" slightly to her right and enters the role of "Desdemona."

The poor soul that's pining alone and lonely

There on the des'late strand.
Oh Willow! Willow! Willow!
Upon her bosom her head inclining.
Willow! Willow! Willow!

*She goes to the audience, downstage center--complete cross fade to only her upper body.
With an impassive dignity, but dark and somewhat incredulous:*

It's getting dark.
Tonight, Betty will be beaten.

She remains motionless. The light slowly fades to darkness in line with the music.

During the blackout return to the bench, place some blood in the palm of each hand and on the corner of the mouth. The music continues in darkness. She raises her arms above her head. The bench spot slowly rises to a very dim light in line with the crescendo of the low drone. She sways her arms from side to side like wheat in the wind. She lowers her arms. The light rises to a fuller intensity in line with the high drone. She takes a paper tissue from her bag, wipes the blood from her hands, then from her mouth as she winces slightly. She picks up her hat, brushes it off, straightens it out, and sets it aside.

Today is my audition.
Last night, Betty was beaten.
She'll tell them it's her stage makeup.

She moves downstage right and assumes the "noble" poses described in appendix 3. As the high C drone begins she looks up to her imagined gallery. Cross fade to general stage right.

These pitiful words, careening out of heart or gut,
The span of mandible and height of teeth,
Giving character to flesh's songs and grunts.

She holds her pose a moment, then moves to downstage center and assumes the second pose--light cross fades to downstage center. Again she looks up to the gallery as the high drone begins.

Mucosal membranes
hugging shapes with the help of tongues.

She holds a bit as before, then moves downstage stage left and assumes the third pose (facing slightly toward the center) as the light cross fades to general stage left. She looks upward as the high drone begins.

Lips locking and unlocking verbs and loves,
spat up beyond the cave of mouth.

She moves to downstage center and assumes the fourth pose as the light cross fades. She looks upward as before:

With these workings of timid tissue,
and resonated gasses--
--she makes eye contact with the public--
we declare our love.

As the center stage spot fades in, she takes several dream-like operatic bows while slowly stepping backwards toward the bench. Then she takes her trombone and moves to center stage--completely cross fade to center stage. She plays the trombone, facing slightly stage left. She returns the trombone to its stand and sits on the bench.

She addresses her imagined public, calm, dignified, but slightly bitter, but also with a slight irony:

Sometimes they look at me, and sometimes they
applaud...like when watching pigeons.
They feel better for it, then walk on.
It's not art. It's a question of...entertainment.

She gestures to the world around her:

I lie here in my smelly rags, surrounded with refuse from
my bags. Then before they disappear through the grids and
tubes of the city...they stand and stare an instant, because
they think I'm...dead.

Her madness seems to increase. Her tick becomes more apparent, she hears and lips some words to imaginary voices, then clasps her hands in prayer. With operatic élan, but somewhat sarcastically:

Shrugging off her concern: So I sing, operatically rolled R's in my prayers.

With a tone of anger:

But I don't feel bad. We're ALL homeless.

With more anger:

Shall I crawl on my stomach
and beg for some thing to sing?

Very matter of fact, she takes her scarf:

Shall I crawl on my stomach and sing?

No, I shouldn't soil my outfit.
I have to go to my audition soon.

She takes the shoe. She becomes lost in her thoughts, an abstracted reverie:

Holding on to the heavens
that they wouldn't fall,
--she momentarily looks at the heavens then back to the public--
my sky Atlas tires,
not knowing that as she sleeps
the stars pass by floating by themselves
in love's order.

She angrily tosses the shoe into the gutter. She rises with her gaze directed slightly downward and moves toward center stage. After a step or two her face slowly sweeps upward to the center stage light which is slowly cross fading in. Completely cross fade to center stage light. Lost in her abstractions, she sings to the light which gradually increases to laser-like intensity by the high point of the melody.

We'll sing emerging into the light,
shoulders and hands in and out of the light,
from the sides comes the face into the light,
forward deeper into the light,
--the light slowly fades to normal intensity--
a hand, a breast.

She returns to the bench and sits. Complete cross fade of light. She sings a vocalise.

She nervously cogitates with building intensity. Each group of statements between the "hammers" is self-contained, conveying a sense of desperate finality, but then more thoughts arise.

It's time for my audition, and I'm worried I'll never sing again. How will I live? Sit here and be pretty?

Factual, but angry:

I'll just have to go unprepared, without a song,
nothing to show for myself.

Inflect the word "something" as if having great doubt about what it might be:

No. I can't do that. I'll work on something.

A piece to keep me going.

With increasing desperation, becoming almost a shout:

I don't know what to do. There's no time left.

Do you know what it means to be without a song?

People will step on you.

She stands and slowly walks to center stage as she sings. Her arms gradually rise upward until they are extended at about a 45 degree angle when she sings the G--cross fade of light to center stage. Her arms slowly lower, then she walks completely downstage center and looks at the audience--complete cross fade of light. Softly, in a hoarse voice:

They'll think...I'm crazy.

She turns, walks to the bench, sits and puts all of her belongings in her bag. Then she puts her hat on.

Tomorrow night the lights will rise,
floating by themselves in loves order.
And far from this corner on the street--

--she takes her bag, stands and walks to center stage, complete cross fade of light--
we'll sing from our hearts.

She sings to the public:

You and I.

She raises her hands to chest level and sings to the public:

We'll sing from our hearts.

She looks upward:

You and I.

She turns full profile to her left and raises her arms to the same position with which the performance began.

You and I.

She remains motionless as the light fades to black.