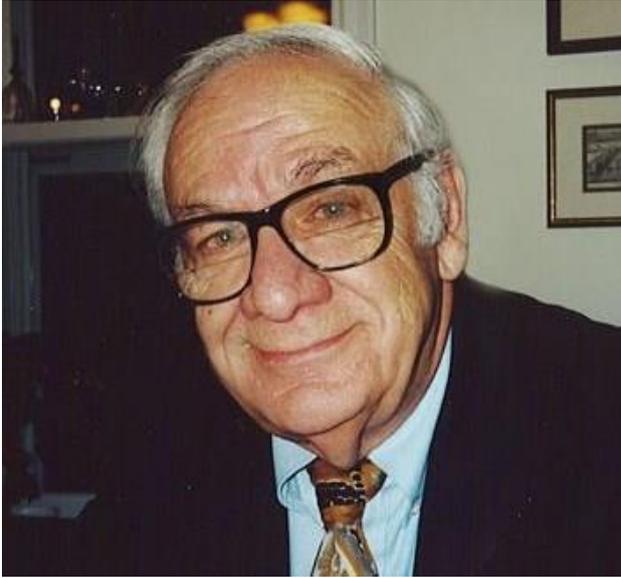


## Dominick Argento (1927-2019)

*The quiet hero of American music whose talents won him a coveted Pulitzer Prize*



Very much the quiet hero of American classical music in the years following the Second World War, Dominick Argento stood aside from the many stylistic rivalries that so often bedeviled twentieth century music and walked his own meticulously crafted path. As an unabashed and unrepentant traditionalist, he achieved remarkable success in adapting the traditional qualities of Italian opera to the more demanding requirements of the American stage. Proving no less adept as a composer for orchestra, choir or solo instruments, in 1975, his elegant song cycle, *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*, expressive settings of extracts from her diaries, won Argento a well-deserved Pulitzer Prize.

The eldest son of Sicilian immigrants, born in York, Pennsylvania, after graduating from his local High School, Dominick Joseph Argento then spent some years in the army working as a cryptographer. Subsequently enrolling at the Peabody Institute, there he studied with Alexander Sklarewski and Nicholas Nabokov. Awarded a Fulbright Fellowship in 1952, he then travelled to Italy to work with Pietro Scapini and Luigi Dallapiccola. Upon returning home, he then further refined his technique in the company of Henry Cowell before, in 1954, entering the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. There his teachers included Howard Hanson, Bernard Rogers and Alan Hovhaness.

That same year, Argento married the renowned soprano, Carolyn Baker. Throughout their half century of marriage they invariably spent each summer in Florence, renting the same apartment close by the Ponte Vecchio. Teaching at Hampton Institute, Virginia from 1952 until 1955, he returned to Florence once more in 1957, the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. The following year he joined the Music Faculty of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, teaching composition until he retired in 1997 as Regents Professor. In 1964, together with long-time associate, John Olon-Scrymgeour, he helped found Center Opera, which later became Minnesota Opera.

As an unabashed eclectic, Argento became the leading conservative composer in American music. And yet, while he wrote in an appealingly approachable and strongly characterful idiom, his music rarely lacked the power to challenge or intrigue. Invariably compared to Benjamin Britten, like him, Argento was noted for his lucid textures and impersonally skilful orchestration. Fluent was the adjective most regularly used with regard to his output. Such graceful fluidity also made him ideally suited over the decades to the world of opera, to which he made more than a dozen definitive contributions. His links to Minnesota Opera afforded him a ready outlet for so many of his creations.

His first operatic venture, subsequently withdrawn, was based on Pirandello's *Sicilian Lines*. Other early works included *The Masque of Angels*, *The Shoemakers' Holiday* and *Postcard from Morocco*, a one-act work of considerable substance. In *Postcard*, proving himself a deft parodist, he hilariously sent up Wagner by creating a clever ballet sequence which he entitled 'Souvenirs de Bayreuth'. Throughout the 1960s, Argento also worked closely with the distinguished actor and director, Sir Tyrone Guthrie, providing incidental music for a number of his Minnesota productions, including *St Joan*, *Volpone*, *S.S. Glencairn*, *Oresteia* and *House of Atreus*, by far Guthrie's biggest hit during his time in the city.

Not everything enjoyed success, however. *Miss Havisham's Fire*, created specifically in 1977 as a powerful vehicle for the charismatic diva, Beverley Sills, was quickly lost when Sills had to withdraw

for health reasons. Proving far more successful was Washington Opera's 1990 production of *The Aspern Papers*, a somewhat torrid tale of lust, duplicity, rejection and revenge, composed for a stellar cast headed by Frederica Von Stade, Elisabeth Söderström and Richard Stillwell. In the interim, *The Dream of Rudolf Valentino*, composed in 1975, attempted to explore the somewhat tempestuous personal and private life of the first screen god and sex symbol, Rudolf Valentino.

*Casanova's Homecoming* was yet another in a long line of rather unusual operatic creations in which, as well as composing the music, Argento also created his own libretto. This comedy, based on the memories of the 18<sup>th</sup> century rake, Giacomo Casanova, was commissioned to celebrate the opening of the company's new home, the luxurious Ordway Music Theatre in St Pauls in 1985. The following year it won the National Institute for Theatre Award, subsequently being translated into both German and Italian. Not at all easy to stage, with a construct that involves an opera within an opera, it requires a cast of some twenty soloists to tell the Venetian adventurer's colourful life story.

If there is one thing that makes an immediate impression about Argento's vocal writing, it is the close bond between emotional sentiment and musical content. Nowhere is this more apparent than in song cycles such as *Ode to the West Wind*, *Six Elizabethan Songs*, *Letters from Composers* and *From The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, first performed by Dame Janet Baker and accompanist Martin Isepp, which in 1975, won Argento a coveted Pulitzer Prize. *Casa Guidi*, based on the letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and first performed by Frederica Von Stade and the Minnesota Orchestra conducted by Sir Neville Marriner. Their subsequent 2004 recording won a Grammy Award.

The directness that pervades so much of Argento's vocal music remains a prime feature of his extensive instrumental output. The early *Ode to The West Wind* makes an immediate appeal by its melodic charm, harmonic resource and no little originality. Likewise, *Bravo Mozart! For an Imaginary Biography*, scored for oboe, violin horn and orchestra, which cleverly incorporates music by the maestro himself. More programmatic is *The Mask of Time for Orchestra and Soprano*, which takes words from Shakespeare's plays as subtitles for six of the seven movements and sets a text from *Romeo and Juliet* for the last. Offering contrast is the more cerebral, *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*.

While initially known in this country for his operas, courtesy of productions at Glyndebourne and elsewhere, it was Donald Hunt who brought his music to a wider audience when he conducted the European premiere of the impressive *Te Deum for Choir and Orchestra* at the 1993 Three Choirs Festival. Composed six years earlier to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Buffalo Schola Cantorum, the work cleverly allies a medieval English text to the Latin hymn of praise. It has subsequently been widely performed and warmly received on both sides of the Atlantic. One can readily see why: its language is communicative and its form and content ingeniously dramatic.

Elected to The American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1979, the George Peabody Medal followed in 1993. The following year Argento compiled a retrospective entitled *Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir; A Composer's Life*, each chapter being based on one of his compositions. Following his wife's death in 2004, he composed *Evensong: Of Love and Angels* in her memory. First performed in Washington's National Cathedral in March 2008, intimate in detail, expansive in outlook and sophisticated in execution, this beautifully judged essay in choral sonority brings together the many disparate elements in the composer's technique, all handled with the skill of a master craftsman.

### **Kenneth Shenton**