

douglas j. cuomo

in the press

ARJUNA'S DILEMMA

The New York Times

"*Arjuna's Dilemma* [is] an opera with **an appealing and unabashedly eclectic score**, based on the *Bhagavad-Gita* and presented at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Wednesday night. The production, directed by Robin Guarino, was the first full staging of this unconventional 70-minute work, which was developed over nearly eight years.

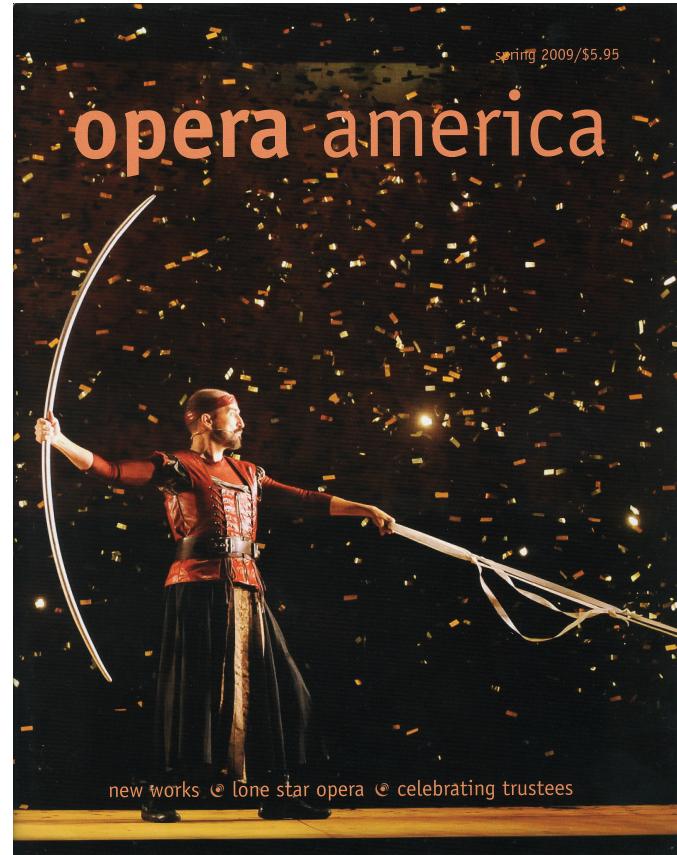
"Mr. Cuomo has written music for classical ensembles, theater, film and television (notably the effervescent, salsa-tinged theme song to *Sex and the City*). In composing *Arjuna's Dilemma* he immersed himself in North Indian music. **The score boldly blends those Indian sources with diverse contemporary music idioms and hints of jazz...**

"Arjuna's vocal lines, a stylistic blend of Indian chant and Western lyricism, are enriched by a chorus of five women, singing in English. There are touches of Philip Glass in the choral writing, especially when the women latch onto a phrase and repeat words obsessively. I liked the score best when Mr. Cuomo pushed the complexity to extremes, piling up Arjuna's solos, choral counterpoint and instrumental textures to create haunting, astringent, multilayered music, with cluster chords in the electric keyboard and spiraling flights in the strings and winds...

"The voice of Krishna is provided by the Afghan-born singer and musician Humayun Khan, who sits atop a platform playing the harmonium and other instruments and sings melismatic, earthy vocal lines in the Indian classical music tradition, including stretches of improvisation.

"Also crucial to the score's visceral allure is Badal Roy, who plays the tabla, Indian hand drums. In crucial episodes of the work he takes off on solo improvised flights, playing streams of percolating cyclic rhythms so eerily pitched that they sound almost like vocal lines.

"Mr. Cuomo's designation of *Arjuna's Dilemma* as a contemporary chamber opera is as apt as any. Still, it is doubtful that the **audience that gave an ardent ovation** on Wednesday cared much about categories." – Anthony Tommasini



The Washington Post

"In this opera, [Cuomo] blends Indian classical singing, jazz improv, the busy minimalist-style patterns that appear to have entered the bloodstream of so many composers and the

jewel-like tones of a four-part women's chorus, **all worked into a seamless whole, like a golden Indian brocade...**

"It struck me that ***Arjuna's Dilemma* has something a lot of new operas don't: appeal.** Opera is an art form that was for many years the ne plus ultra of popular entertainment. That

aspect of it is all to easy to lose sight of, as many current pieces show. Opera, to work, has to have a certain understanding of what drama is, and how it functions. But it also has to have an audience, and *Arjuna's Dilemma*...has a pretty good chance of attracting one."

— Anne Midgette



Cleveland Plain Dealer

"Cuomo [is] **a composer of serious intentions, as his haunting chamber opera *Arjuna's Dilemma* makes clear.** The work's roots lie in *Bhagavad Gita*, the Sanskrit text that explores a discussion between the divine Krishna and worldly Arjuna, who searches his soul to come to terms with obligations as a warrior.

"Cuomo's background in jazz and ethnomusicology appear to have given him the ideal grounding to create such an opera. His music embraces both Western and Indian classical music traditions, with voices used in notated chants and improvised episodes.

"The score is **a mesmerizing blend of vocal and instrumental possibilities.** Arjuna is assigned to a tenor who must negotiate high-lying lines, tender gestures and dramatic points, all the while singing in Sanskrit. The role of Krishna is divided between an Indian vocalist and a chorus - on this recording [members of] the remarkable female ensemble Anonymous 4 - that sings in English.

"However *Arjuna's Dilemma* unfolds in the theater, it is **a gripping experience** on compact disc. The excellent performers include tenor Tony Bouthé as Arjuna, Amit Chatterjee as Krishna and an instrumental ensemble that features the adventurous string quartet known as Ethel." — Donald Rosenberg

Opera Today

"Arjuna's Dilemma has been created by a composer who trusts sound, a few fine voices and a few fine virtuoso instrumentalists, to reveal his message in the same way that the great opera composers trust the sounds will bring to us. The singers' art (and the instrumentalists' art) is the central focus of the work. The message is not made explicit and ordinary...its meaning comes to us subtly, open to our different levels of understanding, on the beauty of the human voice, of melody working sinuously to take us into trance states while we meditate, line by line, on the brief story being told us. Tony Bouthé impersonates Arjuna, dancer John Kelly (who has also choreographed the piece) plays – but Humayun Khan sings – Krishna, advising, consoling, manipulating, guiding him. Their words are taken up, repeated, sung in canon, tossed about, harmonized by a chorus of five women, and the beauty of the sounds they make expresses a message never made explicit. We draw our own moral. The instrumentalists, too, are virtuosos, and take part in the dialogue. No message goes on too long before it evolves into a new manner of presentation, giving us in this brief space some hint of the breadth of the message, the universality of it.

"The piece concludes without a gimmick: they have said what they wanted to say, we have taken in what our individual senses and understanding have prepared us to take. A tale has been told. We have not been told what to feel. We feel for ourselves. *Arjuna's Dilemma* is a modern opera, a tale told through singing." – John Yohalem

KYRIE from *On Earth, Peace: a Chanticleer Mass*

All Music Guide

"Cuomo's *Kyrie* is one of the most musically striking of the newly commissioned movements. His eclectic use of speech juxtaposed with tightly chromatic clusters is **hugely effective musically, as well as awe-inspiring** for the security with which Chanticleer performs it." – Stephen Eddins

San Francisco Examiner

"Chief among the mass's attractions is the "Kyrie" of Tucson-born Douglas J. Cuomo. Bay Area-raised, the New Yorker's equal facility with the sacred and the profane (his oeuvre extends from a sacred cantata on the Bhagavad Gita to the theme for the TV series "Sex and the City") has created **an irresistible work that moves from heavenly simplicity to contrapuntal complexity.**" – Jason Victor Serinus

San Francisco Classical Voice

"American composer Douglas Cuomo's *Kyrie* began the series of commissioned works auspiciously. The work's architectonic structure is a palindrome. Cuomo builds outward through countertenor cluster chords, unison and octave chanting over Arvo Pärt-esque oohs

and hums, a well-sung tenor solo, and a more dissonant Christe section. Everything then goes backward. Cuomo's 36-fold *Kyrie* managed not to seem overly long" — Thomas Busse

San Jose Mercury News

"In the *Kyrie* it was Eric Allatore whose rich bass practically set the basillic vibrating. **A fine spun backdrop that evoked the slow melting of a brilliant pane of glass, the effect was rather awesome.** Funny, in that Douglas J. Cuomo, the *Kyrie*'s New York composer, is widely known for writing the theme for "Sex & The City"

ATOMIC OPERA

The New York Times

"Not the least of its strengths is a musical score by Douglas J. Cuomo that blends electronically treated classical fragments and vintage kitsch into an eerie sound track that suggests the breaking down and reconstitution of matter into something ominous and uncontrollable." — Stephen Holden

Backstage

"A supple score/sound design from Douglas J. Cuomo is whimsical and witty for the satiric sections — loved that mambo beat for the 50's stuff -- but easily turns stark and dramatic to underline the serious times. A long aria of lament about Hiroshima is **sweet, scary, and lingers on in one's memory**, especially as passionately sung by Mia Kim" — Michael Sommers

New York Newsday

"Set in the middle of this cock-eyed kaleidoscope is a haunting elegy to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The operatic aria is gloriously delivered by Mia Kim, alone and nearly immobile center-stage, clad in red dress and Japanese robe. **The song — part of Douglas J. Cuomo's excellent score and sound design — provides an arresting contrast, the critical mass so important to popping nuclear reaction.**" — Aileen Jacobson