How *The Scarlet Letter* Came to Be

By David Mason

(adapted from the preface to *The Scarlet Libretto*)

1. The Story

Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, the late Alfred Kazin asked, “Why is there no opera of *The Scarlet Letter*?” His essay was later included in a new edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic novel (1850), perhaps one of the most widely read and admired works of the nineteenth century—but also the scourge of many a disaffected high school student. For Kazin, the operatic properties of the book were owed in part to its extraordinary structural clarity: “The novel opens on a scene, ‘The Prison-Door,’ that is so dramatic in its starkness that one half expects to hear the audience burst into applause.”

Kazin was right about structure, wrong about music history. *Scarlet* had been turned into an opera by Walter Damrosch in 1896. But Damrosch missed some opportunities. His librettist, Hawthorne’s son-in-law, the poet and journalist George Parsons Lathrop, left out a major character, Hester Prynne’s illegitimate daughter, Pearl, so the story lost a key emotional complication. Others have since adapted *The Scarlet Letter* for stage and film, never with great success. Critics panned the version with Demi Moore.

When Lori Laitman and I cast about for a story on which to base our first opera, we considered a number of modern novels, knowing the rights to them might be costly to obtain. *The Scarlet Letter* was attractive in part because we could get it for free. Re-
reading the book, though, we could see immediately that Kazin was right. The prose
might be rather dense for some modern readers, but the lineaments of the story were
simple, clear, and charged with emotional power, as well as significant cultural
implications that kept the story relevant in our time.

The opening establishes an individual, Hester, in stark contrast to her community,
and we can see this in the three levels of the setting. On the ground level we have the jail,
the Puritan crowd, the incongruous rose bush. High above we have the balcony where
elders and ministers stand in judgment. And between them, mounted by Hester with a
baby in her arms, is the scaffold, the focus of guilt and punishment. As Hester is
interrogated from above, gawked at from below, we see at once how primordially strong
she is for refusing to divulge her lover’s name. If we know the story, we also know that
her lover is one of her accusers, and some part of him might be begging to be convicted
even as he fears such a revelation. Arthur Dimmesdale, the pale young minister, is in the
pinch of hypocrisy, caught between private desires and public shame. Hester, bearing the
‘A’ of adultery on her breast and holding an infant in her arms, is stronger than any of the
men who judge her. We might add that her behavior is more in line with the teachings of
Jesus than the public show of Christianity from above. Since moral and religious
hypocrisy continues to be such a common story in American public life, this tale of the
seventeenth century remains perennially fresh.

The novel’s opening also introduces us to a third important figure, Roger
Chillingworth, a doctor and practitioner of darker arts who has been away some years,
living among the Indians. Hester, we eventually learn, is Chillingworth’s young wife who
came to the New World separately from her husband and found him gone when she
arrived. Alone in the new community, thinking her husband must have died, she becomes vulnerable to new attraction. Hawthorne is rather mysterious about motives: why did this beautiful young woman marry an ugly old man? Why is Chillingworth so driven to dark arts, so prone to vengeance? Why is Dimmesdale so cowardly, refusing to take responsibility for his own actions? As the story progresses, as years pass and we see the baby Pearl become a spirited girl, these motives twist like old roots, taking violent hold of the characters. Like the Greek tragedians, Hawthorne understood that human motives are not always explicable. Sometimes character is driven by contradictory forces that resist easy diagnoses.

The town itself and its conventionally minded populace are another character. We see Hester powerfully resisting their efforts to control the wildness in her child. Hester works like a thorn of that jailhouse rose. She taunts the community by living apart from them, reminding them of the very humanity of her crime and their own lack of compassion, their inability to face up to such powerful desires. Her silence, maintained out of astonishing integrity, feels to them like an unbearable accusation.

What lies outside the circle of “civilized” life is yet another character—the vast, as yet unexplored forest of North America, and in another direction the sea these people crossed in order to arrive at their tentative purchase on a governable life. The very systems of law and belief that make possible the regulation of the town endure a challenge only Hester can fully express, as she does in the love duet of Act Two:

This canopy of trees
once sheltered us in love.

Why must we suffer here?
What must we prove?

Hester has already suffered the town’s rejection, its unjust willingness to lay all of the blame for her condition on her alone. As long as she has possession of her daughter, she has nothing to lose by detaching herself from their limited vision of the possible. Dimmesdale, on the other hand, twists inside, tortured by beliefs that limit what he can allow himself to desire. Good Calvinist that he is, he feels depraved, secretly branded. Chillingworth, too, is tortured by guilt at having ruined the youth of a beautiful girl. He feels ugly and acts in ugly ways. But he is also compelled to power, which is an ugliness of its own. The most righteous player in the drama, he is a force for evil that only the truth can deflect.

What a story! With room for big choruses at the start and the finish, the story falls back into a pool of time, seen from a distance like some nagging seed at the source of ancestral American guilt. I think of the way it involves ideas of individual freedom in conflict with the thwarted and thwarting community. And the way primal religious instincts, even those associated with magic and witchcraft, are set beside a narrower and more conventional Christianity. There are big questions here about ontology and epistemology, and there is a humane awareness of passion and danger, ostracism and hypocrisy. The three major characters provide a perfect triangle of possibility and destruction abetted by an uncomprehending, uncomprehended world.

2. The Composer

Born in 1955 and educated at Yale University, Lori Laitman is one of the preeminent vocal composers in the United States—regularly compared to Ned Rorem, the
great American composer known for his art songs. Gregory Berg wrote of Laitman in the
*Journal of Singing* (Jan./Feb. 2010):

One hundred years hence, when critics look back at the art songs of our era, there will be many fine composers to laud and applaud, but few will deserve higher praise than Lori Laitman….To paraphrase a comment once made about the prolific Camille Saint-Saëns, Laitman seems to create great songs as easily and naturally as a tree produces apples, and one might add that hers are especially delicious and distinctive.

She has composed more than 200 art songs, two operas and an oratorio. Her music is frequently performed in the United States and abroad, and much of it is available on CD. These days art songs may in some circles be a little-known form of music. Related to the *lieder* tradition in Europe, they involve setting the text of a poem—or, as Laitman has said of her own work, “My goal is to create dramatic music to express and magnify the meaning of the poem.” They are a musical expression of what we find in the words, but like a film adaptation of a novel they also become wholly new works in their own right. Gregory Berg notes, “Laitman clearly loves words and treats them with such reverent care even as she works so tirelessly to enhance them as only music can.”

Over the years, Lori has set poems by canonical writers from Emily Dickinson to Richard Wilbur, as well as many lesser-known poets. She has made hauntingly beautiful song cycles and brief bursts of comedy. Poets love her settings because she is so attentive to the words. Singers love them because they stand out as performances and are clearly intended to be sung—“a simple-sounding proposition,” Berg adds, “but one that defeats many modern art song composers.” Many of her settings come across as mini-operas or
dramatic scenes; they evolve tonally and emotionally even in a relatively brief time. Because this composer respects words and thinks both musically and dramatically, she is perfectly suited for opera. This centuries-old genre, once so popular and now verging on a true renewal, allows both composer and librettist to reach elevations of experience that might be unavailable by other means. Multiple kinds of musical and verbal art come together in the particular spectacle of an opera, and opera demands an audience, often one of exacting standards. This is especially exciting for a poet, who often writes in a beehive of anonymity.

I have never been an expert on opera, though I have enjoyed it immensely. In the 1980s, when I worked as a house painter in Upstate New York, I used to listen to Saturday afternoon broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera. Later, as a graduate student in literature studying to pass a French exam, opera in foreign languages made a pleasant sound wall against which to concentrate. My dissertation on W. H. Auden’s longer poems acquainted me with his work as a librettist, including such works as Paul Bunyan, The Rake’s Progress and The Bassarids, and several more sophisticated friends began to educate me in the field. I have always written narrative and dramatic poetry, and must have developed a structural sense of stories over time. But collaboration with a great composer was the furthest thing from my mind when I met Lori Laitman. That meeting was an unexpected gift, requiring only our mutual assent to begin a series of rewarding collaborations.

In 2004 the West Chester University Poetry Conference, held each year for a few days in June, had commissioned three composers to set a poem of mine to music. Lori was one of them. As it happened, the poem selected was not intended for such purposes.
“Swimmers on the Shore” is a lyrical and personal account of a moment in which I realized my father was descending into Alzheimer’s Disease. Lori’s setting, performed by the marvelous baritone Randall Scarlata, was almost an opera in miniature, developing a scene of richly varied tones. It remains one of my favorites of Lori’s many songs, enhancing the text with her interpretive gestures.

In the summer of 2006, Lori (along with Richard Hundley) represented the US in the Songs Across the Americas Festival, held in both South America and Conway, Arkansas, where the festival’s founder, Kay Kraeft, taught at the University of Central Arkansas. One of the UCA faculty, baritone Robert Holden, performed “Swimmers on the Shore,” and loved Lori’s music so much that he asked her to write an opera. With the support of a new Dean, Jeffery Jarvis, Rob went ahead with plans to raise the necessary money while Lori brought me on board as librettist—an easy yes on my part—and began to cast about for a book we could use. “And soon after,” Lori remembers, “I got a call from Rob saying that he had to get the grant in the next two weeks and that he needed a title/story and that in order for funding to work, the opera would have to be completed for the 2008 season.”

The pressure was on. Once we had decided on The Scarlet Letter as the basis for our opera and I had outlined a structure—six scenes in two acts—I toyed with the sort of lyric voice that might be required and fell to work on the opening scene. Lori was soon sketching notes everywhere, including on the backs of envelopes. From there our method of collaboration was quickly established. While I forged ahead with the libretto in Colorado, Lori worked separately at her home in Maryland or her apartment in New York, building the music from my words. Periodically, sometimes daily, she would call
me up, place her phone on the piano and play for me what she had composed, warning me ahead of time that she’s not really a singer, so I would have to use my imagination.

This was not hard to do. Her melodies were immediately arresting, so beautiful and dramatic that I was often trembling when I hung up the phone. As she conceived the music, I was in turn inspired, moving forward with the words. Occasionally she would ask me for small alterations—repetitions of lines for emphasis, reversals of phrases, clarifications—but we never argued. I considered it a gift to hear what I had written so stunningly interpreted. We trusted each other, learned from each other, and each found the process of collaboration intoxicating. What had always been solitary for me, even deeply isolating, was now a relationship allowing both of us to grow as artists.

We have since collaborated on an oratorio, *Vedem*, which premiered in Seattle in 2010, and are at work on an opera based on my verse novel, *Ludlow*, aided by our colleague the visionary New York City Opera stage director Beth Greenberg. We maintain our separate projects as well—I can step out with other muses, Lori with other poets—but the creative team of Laitman and Mason has taken on a life of its own.

3. Opera Language

James Joyce, with Shakespeare and Ibsen in mind, considered dramatic art the highest calling, transcending what the epic and lyric genres could achieve. Yet opera, as Joyce well knew, exists on a highly artificial plane. “It deals in big emotion,” the poet and librettist J. D. McClatchy has noted. “You have the singer belting out these words
over a 100-piece orchestra to people who have had two drinks and are wearing tight-fitting clothes. How subtle can you be?”

Having studied Auden’s libretti, I found him a particularly helpful model as I set out to find a voice for *Scarlet*. Readers will notice here a fair amount of meter and rhyme (or assonance), which occasionally breaks down under pressure of emotion. I did worry at times whether my tidy measures would prove limiting for Lori, but she laughed it off: “Oh that’s okay, I’ll just ignore them.” Her musical rhythms and keys could create complex variety even in my more regular passages, and of course she could fashion resounding melodies for the chorus, the lullaby, the climactic death scene, etc.

“In song,” Auden wrote with typical perversity, “poetry is expendable, syllables are not.” Auden thought precisely, as always, and while he may have gone too far in some of his assertions, he was trying to keep categories in place. “A verbal art like poetry is reflective; it stops to think. Music is immediate, it goes on to become.” This is, of course, why collaboration with musicians is so attractive. Poets can’t help being aware not only of the strengths, but also of the limitations of their art—the earthbound properties of words. The librettist must learn how to simplify the texture of a phrase. In truth, set by a composer as skillful as Laitman, nearly any kind of poetry can be made singable. But libretti are another kind of balancing act—not just word and line, but also character and dramatic arc.

“The job of the librettist,” Auden wrote, “is to furnish the composer with a plot, characters and words: of these, the least important, so far as the audience is concerned, are the words.” He had a point. Opera is a composer’s art more than a poet’s, and song has a way of meaning what it means, being what it is, whether we catch the words or not.
But experience is a matter of degrees more than absolutes, and in another sense Auden was being disingenuous. Modern audiences do want to know at least some of the words, which is why modern opera companies often use surtitles. If the script is good, we want to know it. Singers, too, feel better about eloquence than they do about *dreck*—though even *dreck* in the hands of a great composer can be made to seem sublime. Now maybe I’m the one being disingenuous; the words do matter, don’t they? At least they do if we want the fullest available experience for heart, mind and ear.

Lori Laitman happens to be a composer who loves and is constantly inspired by words. My goal in writing this libretto was to distill Hawthorne’s plot, illuminate his characters, and give Lori the best words I could muster to inspire musical possibilities. I wanted less to guide her inspiration than to liberate it. And I also wanted to create a compelling drama out of ideas and emotions that still grip us in the present day.

Many opera libretti fail to edify on the page. A cliché might prove as singable as a fresh metaphor, and the opera listener is not typically playing the literary critic. The emotional lineaments of the story must be lucid and immediate, and scenes must end with a hook pulling the audience into the next revelations. Hawthorne’s structure was a gift, but I had to find my own language, simpler and more lyrical than his. I had to use lines in my opening that would convey the evolution of the town and its conservative ethos. So the townspeople declare there is

One law for the sea we crossed.

One law for the forest dark.

One law for the savage heart.

One law for the babe in arms.
This is the absolutist stance that underlies religious fundamentalism, and the dramatic energies of Hawthorne’s story oppose it while sadly acknowledging its power. My job is not just to convey the idea, but also to provide a striking enough refrain: “One law. One law. One law. One.”

When I came to the jail scene in which Chillingworth confronts his estranged wife, I had a rather more difficult job. While the older man tests and questions Hester, he must reveal aspects of his past, his vulnerability as well as his Faustian desire for power. In the face of Hester’s integrity, her refusal to reveal her lover’s name, Chillingworth’s long-suppressed shame twists into anger and, ultimately, a sick devotion to vengeance. A lot more must go unstated, leaving interpretive room for the singers. Here I’m thinking of how much goes unexplained in the dramatic works of Chekhov, Pinter and Stoppard.

It must also be clear dramatically that Hester’s primary devotion is now to her daughter, Pearl, which is why I chose to end the scene with a lullaby. Yet even this tender song can offer a thread of exposition, hinting at what their lives will be in the future—how Hester will make her living with embroidery and guard her daughter with her life.

Not having had Christian education as part of my upbringing, I had to imagine the Calvinist context of the story. A faint memory of Protestant hymns heard in the rather marginal setting of a west coast Unitarian Fellowship gave me a pattern for the choral interlude in which time passes:

- Time is vaster than the earth.
- Time is larger than our law.
- Time before all human birth
- and all we have no image for.
This secular sense of time is, I have hinted, one of Hawthorne’s conceits. He tells the story at some remove, so we feel its tragedy as an old twisted root of the America we live in now. We seem unable to escape a kind of Puritanism in our national culture.

When it comes to the witch’s accusatory song and Dimmesdale’s guilty aria (Act One, Scene Four), well, perhaps any middle-aged man can empathize with such excoriating self-laceration. Dimmesdale would be despicable if his agony didn’t humanize him.

O God, O God,
the heavens seem indifferent
to all our suffering here on earth.

I am a man,
a single life beneath these stars,
a beggar on an empty road.

In opera the climaxes must come frequently, each one building on the last. Dimmesdale’s isolation and despair lead to Hester’s realization that, out in the forest, there is not one single law governing human life. Her bracing sense of possibility—very much present in Hawthorne—leads to the love duet in which she and the minister conclude, “Our Eden here is love.” But the belief in America’s meliorating properties is usually naïve. Dimmesdale cannot simply throw off his history like an old cloak. He remains checked and thwarted by his own weighty sense of sin, which he finally confesses before he dies. We have already established that this story happens in a deeper sense of time, a deeper sense of American history, so the final chorus allows for a kind of
pulling back. The townspeople may not understand the implications of what they have witnessed, but they can see it as part of the human condition.

    What can we do but kneel and pray,
    be kind to the neighbor, day by day,
    measure the meanest word we say.

    All honor to the story told.
    We understand as we grow old
    only the mystery we hold.
    Only the mystery.

I hope you can see an effort to write with uncluttered eloquence in these lines, using rhyme for resonance when called for, and withholding it in more tortured passages.

    The historical sense of this libretto links it to other books of mine, including *The Country I Remember* and *Ludlow*. Readers are welcome to see it as part of an idiosyncratic vision of America in verse. Still more, I hope they will seek out the music and productions in which they can hear Lori Laitman’s gorgeous music.

4. Performances

    The University of Central Arkansas first commissioned our opera of *The Scarlet Letter* and Robert Holden performed the role of Chillingworth there with brio. All honor to him for getting the production launched. After being delayed for funding reasons, *The Scarlet Letter* had its professional premiere at Opera Colorado in Denver’s Ellie Caulkins Opera House in May 2016. This was a fully-staged production, with orchestra conducted
by Ari Peltro, a large chorus, and a starkly brilliant set. The three lead singers—Laura Claycomb, Dominic Armstrong and Malcolm MacKenzie—were joined by a wonderful cast, stage directed by Beth Greenberg. A CD will be available this summer from Naxos.

Lori and Opera Colorado also produced a concert version of the opera, including much of the music without the full choruses or orchestra. The company’s Young Artists premiered this version, scored for five singers and a piano, with the idea that it could be taken on tour. About one hour in length, this is the version West Chester participants will be seeing and hearing. It’s not the full spectacle, but I hope it will move you and leave you with some unforgettable drama and songs.