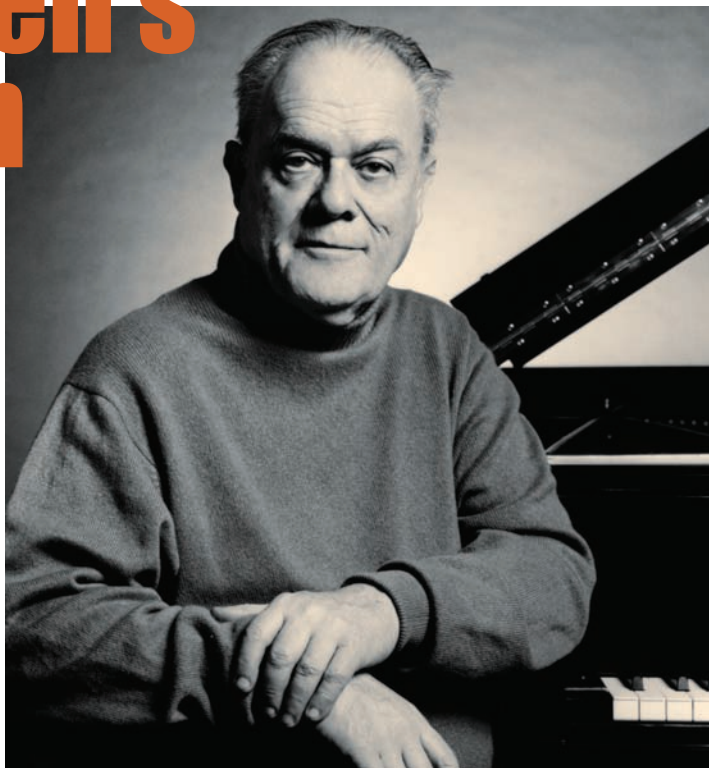


The towering figure of scholar/musician **Charles Rosen** is at the center of a new comic opera by librettist Jeremy Denk and composer Steven Stucky at this year's Ojai Festival.

Rosen's Turn

By Jennifer Melick



Charles Rosen

Back when I was getting a master of music degree, I took a required survey class in the history of Western music. It covered everything from Handel, Rossini and Verdi up to George Crumb and Pierre Boulez, but my main memory of that class is Charles Rosen's *Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*. Rosen's book, winner of the 1972 National Book Award, is the reason, I am almost certain, that the professor whizzed through Baroque, Romantic and all other stylistic periods. It appeared that the course had been arranged so he would have maximum time available for declaiming passages from this book.

Rosen's book is, in fact, a wonder — technically detailed and erudite without being ponderous, written with a beguiling, infectious enthusiasm. In his introductory section leading into the Big Three composers, he manages to make even the triad or the circle of fifths seem interesting and revolutionary. He desperately wants his readers to love and understand this music as he does. "Exciting" is not the first adjective most of us would associate with music by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, or with the classical period in general. But excited is exactly the way Rosen felt about this music, and writing the book was evidently something he not only wanted but needed to do. In his introduction, he wrote that, with the classical period, "We cannot be content with the description of a form: *we need to know* first how the sense of music in general differed from that of the previous age; above all, *we need to grasp* this in specifically musical terms." [italics added]

Rosen's opinions are passionately felt and can be acerbic and hilarious, with music theoretician Heinrich Schenker coming in for especially sharp criticism for his "frequent disregard of audible facts." One can open to almost any page of Rosen's book and be struck by the beauty and clarity of the writing. Here's one exam-

ple randomly pulled from page 96: "The buffoonery of Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart is only an exaggeration of an essential quality of the classical style. This style

was, in its origins, basically a comic one. I do not mean that sentiments of the deepest and most tragic emotion could not be expressed by it, but the pacing of classical rhythm is the pacing of comic opera, its phrasing is the phrasing of dance music, and its large structures are these phrases dramatized."

For more than forty years, Rosen's *Classical Style* has been beguiling classically trained musicians, among them pianist and writer Jeremy Denk, whose first opera libretto is based on the book. (Denk is also music director of the 2014 festival.) The one-act comic opera, composed by Steven Stucky, directed by Mary Birnbaum and conducted by Robert Spano, is in seven blackout scenes and comes in at a little more than an hour. After its June premiere at Ojai it will be repeated later in the month at Cal Performances/Berkeley, then at Carnegie Hall (Dec. 2014) and Aspen (summer 2015). Characters in the opera include not just Charles Rosen and the three title characters from his book but Tonic (a bass-baritone), Dominant (soprano) and Sub-Dominant (mezzo), who are involved in a love triangle. Also present are a disheveled character who turns out to be the Tristan Chord, Robert Schumann (a mezzo), and Donna Anna and the title character from *Don Giovanni*. But, explains Denk, "The real protagonist is music itself, and what it does."

In Denk's telling, he came up with the idea after dinner at the house of his neighbors — cellist Fred Sherry and his wife, Carol Archer, who knew Charles Rosen well. "I suddenly got this idea, and I wrote down a cast of characters for it, just as a joke for myself," says Denk. "'Who would be in *The Classical Style* by Charles Rosen, the opera?' And I sent it around to some friends for yuks. It kept getting more serious in my mind as time went

by.” Then he had his first meeting with Tom Morris, artistic director of the Ojai Festival. Morris asked if Denk had any ideas for Ojai’s annual theatrical evening. “And I said I’d always had this dream, as a joke mostly, of doing an opera based on Charles Rosen’s *The Classical Style*. Tom clearly fell in love with the idea. In the meantime, I had become rather close with Charles, and I spent a lot of time playing lessons for him. The project has a lot to do with Tom believing in it, and then having this idea, and my relationship with Charles — all of it sort of converged.” Rosen gave his approval for the project before he died, in 2012, and Denk began working on “a presentable libretto to convince a composer to write something.”

That composer wound up being Pulitzer Prize-winner Steven Stucky, for whom this is a first opera. “I had been wanting to try opera, but I had to be persuaded that I had the chops for it, because it’s a pretty tough assignment! But as I began to read drafts of the libretto, and I began to laugh out loud, pretty soon it was irresistible.” As Stucky tells it, “The show opens on the Big Three in heaven, a sort of retirement-home rec room, bored out of their minds, playing Scrabble and arguing — and discovering from *The New York Times* that classical music is dead and may have become irrelevant. Then they discover a copy of Charles’s book on the shelf, and they think that maybe Charles can help them regain their mojo. And they go on a quest to find Charles and talk to him. They’re very funny, I think. Jeremy has made them quite themselves.”

In the opera, Rosen does get to declaim some of the great passages from the book, and then there are comic scenes that “spin off Charles’s serious proclamations,” says Denk. “I had fun writing the opening scene. In heaven, Mozart/Beethoven/Haydn don’t feel as revolutionary as they used to be, and it’s a scene about the ennui of canonization. Through time we’ve reduced Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn to these caricatures. It’s basically a comic scene, but there’s also this thread running through it, this sadness of dwindling into history. Beethoven was a great deal of fun for me to write, with his Germanic seriousness. Mozart is a little bit like his character in *Amadeus*, but taken even to further extremes. Haydn, as in real life, is a somewhat neglected figure.” Denk says one of the reasons he wrote this opera is “that a lot of the most abstruse musical concepts aren’t really that inaccessible, but people just *think* that they are. I’ve tried to aim the humor in some instances rather high, and in some instances rather low, just like it would be in *Don Giovanni*, actually — a sort of Mozartean mixture of the broadest kind of almost filthy humor, at times, and really insider-y jokes.”

One of the challenges for Stucky was that it required him to “write pretty good fake classical music, which is very plausible and grammatical and so on, but not good enough to be mistaken for the real thing. Part of the satirical situation is that the classical language is well understood, but the gulf between our common understanding of it and what the Big Three were able

to do is unbridgeable.” Stucky is quick to point out that though it was important to “make the thing keep moving, and stay funny, we never make fun of Charles, not once. Charles is a character onstage, and there is a certain comedy about him, as a sort of absentminded, voluble, noble-spirited person. But we don’t make fun of him. The book is important in the construction of the language of the piece, and even the plot to a certain extent. It really is about our funny relationship with classical music, which is at the same time worshipful and trivializing, because we turn it into pop culture.”

“I was a big admirer of Charles Rosen,” says Denk. “And I was very happy to play for him and get his ridiculously copious knowledge. It was also overwhelming. He was sort of speaking nonstop, and with an array of details. That was one of the key things about Charles, that he knew more than any person should reasonably have a right to know. He was a complicated figure, and a truly fearsome intellectual. In the first scene that we see him in the opera, Steve wrote a very touching aria about the birth of *The Classical Style*, how it emerged. Charles had this tremen-

dous love for this music, and that’s the most fundamental thing about him — it’s what drove him, his admiration of the masterpieces, and just reveling in their details, in their wonder. That was the thing that I loved most about Charles, was the childlike kind of wonder. And I think Steve wrote an aria at the beginning that really captures that element of him.” Today, Denk says, “There is a lot of fresh thinking and entrepreneurial thinking” in the classical-music field but “a little dearth of Charles Rosen-ish thinking and the sort of way that Charles broadly incor-

porated his thoughts about music into the wider world of art and literature and so on. It’s a passion of mine, I like doing that, and that’s what I share with Charles, in a certain way.”

“Mozart is taking on a very high importance in my life these days,” says Denk. “It’s music that I often think gets a more cursory rehearsal and more cursory performance than it deserves, because it’s so well known. There’s actually nothing more difficult than to get into the grammar of Mozart and find all the nuances. It’s tricky. I have a great deal of respect for comedy, and the funny scenes in *Don Giovanni* are a source of ceaseless admiration for me — like that first scene where Donna Elvira is singing and Don Giovanni is in great admiration of her, and then he realizes it’s a woman he already slept with. It’s just the perfect joke, and the music supports it in every angle, and it holds together in this amazing way. I keep looking at those scenes with some trepidation and despair, but I also try to take a little inspiration from them. What he does is sort of a satire of a Handelian aria to bring out her Victorian prudishness. People don’t think of Mozart as a satirical composer, but he often is. I think a satirical opera is not the worst tribute to Mozart in the world.” □



Composer Steven Stucky, left, and librettist Jeremy Denk

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