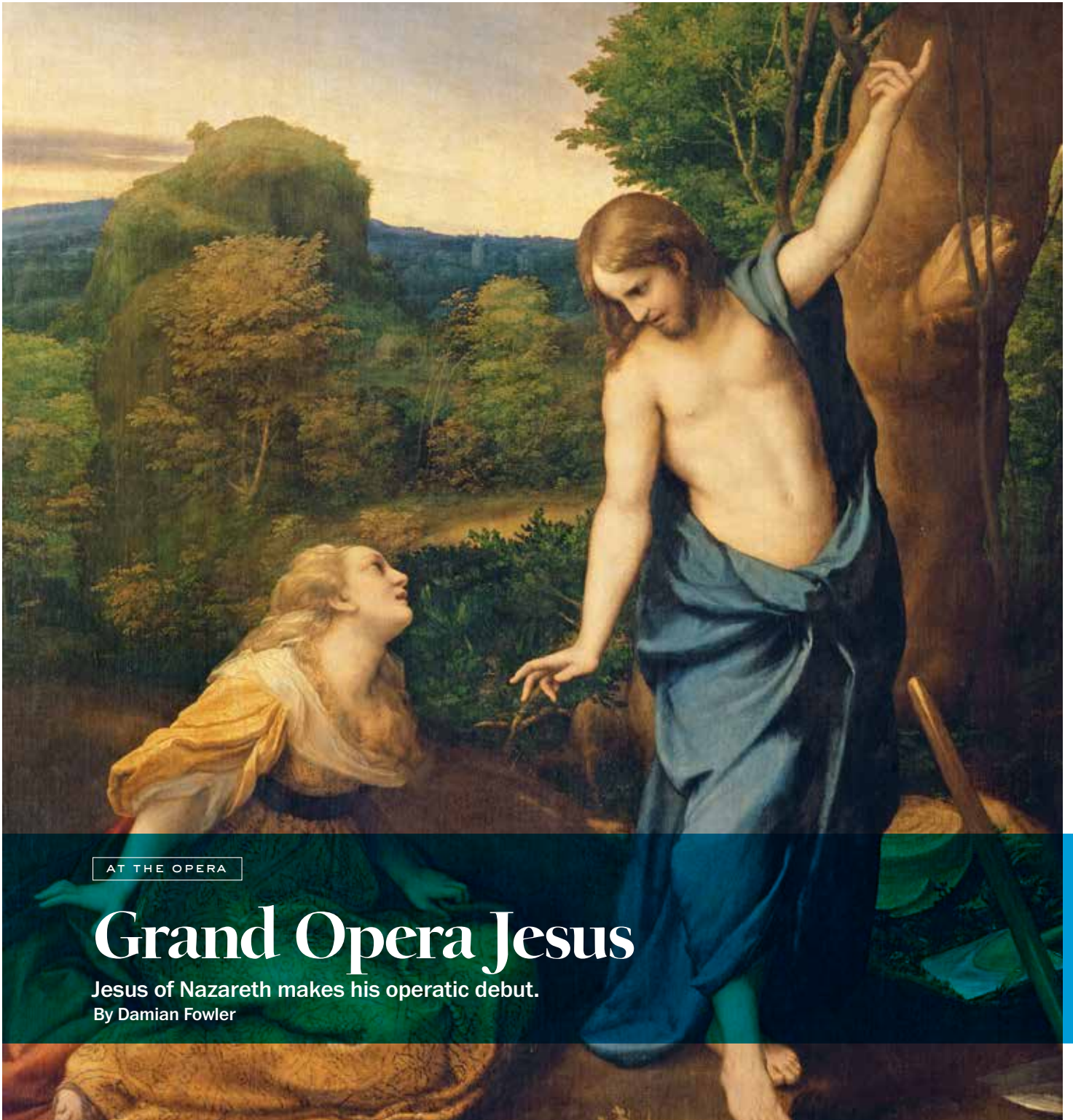


discovery



AT THE OPERA

# Grand Opera Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth makes his operatic debut.

By Damian Fowler



**And certain women, which had been healed of spirits and infirmities....** Mark Adamo's *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* sees its world premiere at San Francisco Opera on June 19.

**WHEN JESUS APPEARS** in the first act of Mark Adamo's new opera, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, he's described in the libretto's stage directions as a "gaunt young lion of a man, thirty but seeming younger." Thrust into the heart of the drama, Yeshua — he sports the Hebrew version of his name — is called on to pass judgment on a woman accused of adultery. In Adamo's conceit, which conflates different biblical characters for dramatic purposes, the woman is Mary Magdalene. During this first encounter, Yeshua and Mary make a powerful connection that stirs them body and soul, sparking the drama so characteristic of a man and a woman in grand opera.

But what's remarkable is that this Jesus — singing as ardently as Alfredo, Calàf or Des Grieux — is grappling with the meaning of love, desire and destiny. The world premiere of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* at the San Francisco Opera on June 19 marks a watershed moment in the history of grand opera: it's the operatic debut of Jesus Christ, the person. "I don't know another opera that has Jesus as a character," says David Gockley,

general director of the San Francisco Opera, who commissioned this large-scale work from Adamo more than six years ago.

Of course, the Passion of Jesus Christ has inspired hundreds of choral works over the centuries, most notably the sacred oratorios of J.S. Bach (the *St. Matthew Passion* and *St. John Passion*) and Handel's *Messiah*. But the difference, according to Adamo, is that such treatments of scripture do not seek to unsettle home truths or question Jesus's motives. Inevitably, they treat the Bible as law, not art. "One of the differences between opera and oratorio, regardless of what the subject is, is that oratorio rests on consensus," says Adamo. "Opera is a form of theater that rests on conflict, where you thrash out different views that compete to be taken as true."

In Adamo's telling, Yeshua is still figuring out, well, how to become Jesus.

Wagner considered the subject of Christ as the basis for a drama or an opera. Ever drawn to the idea of the messianic hero, the composer drafted what he called a "poetic sketch," titled *Jesus of Nazareth*, around 1848. He

sought to impose his own philosophy on the familiar New Testament story, but ultimately dismissed the sketch as unworthy of an opera. Wagner's version of Jesus, however, may have prefigured some of the heroes of his later operas, for whom death is catharsis.

Perhaps the most recent precedent for Adamo's idea to put Jesus on stage is the Massenet oratorio *Marie-Magdalene*, first performed in Paris in 1873. While the composition does have operatic elements — and a duet between Jesus and Mary Magdalene — Massenet hedged his bets by referring to the work as a "sacred drama." At the time, the piece created a sensation (and, most likely, elicited a shudder from conservatives), though Massenet was praised by Saint-Saëns for handling the sentiments between Jesus and Mary Magdalene with the "utmost tactfulness." The work later moved Tchaikovsky to tears, though at first he had reservations about the subject matter. He wrote in a letter to his patroness and friend, Nadezhda von Meck, "I started with a certain prejudice. It seemed to me too bold to make Christ sing arias and duets, but it appeared that the work is full of merits, elegance and charm."

Those nineteenth-century taboos about depicting Jesus outside of a church or a sacred setting still linger. When Gockley first heard about Adamo's idea for an opera about Mary Magdalene, he says his first reaction was something like, "Wow, this is going to be a hot potato." Gockley says it was clear to him that "hallowed belief was going to be challenged." And yet Gockley was fascinated by the story, which he saw as a work of art, "not a work of history... or a work of spiritual truth."

The composer's interest in Mary Magdalene was sparked by "The Saintly Sinner," an in-depth article by critic Joan Acocella that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2006. The article suggested that the long-standing perception of Mary as a reformed prostitute was a papal fiction, a conflation of various women, created by the church as a kind of cipher for all female sexuality. Adamo also took advantage of new scholarship surrounding the Gnostic gospels unearthed in Egypt in 1945, which include the

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Gospels of Thomas and Philip, and the Gospel of Truth. These esoteric works cast light on an earlier Gnostic text discovered in 1898, the Gospel of Mary, and, more importantly, gave Adamo the artistic room to reimagine Jesus’s canonical story.

“The first challenge was to see if there was enough psychological detail in the scriptures, which were not really a history of persons,” says Adamo. “They were written to be mythically varied guides to preaching that took on a little grain of historical sand and then spun into a beautiful pearl. So I didn’t know if there was enough in them to build a character that wasn’t going to be a handy megaphone for homily.”

But there was — in fact, Adamo found enough information to see these objects of religious reverence as human originals. The Gospel of Philip, for example, departs from the New Testament with this revelation: “The companion of the Savior was Mary Magdalene. He loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended. . . . They said to him, ‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’ The Savior answered and said to them, ‘Why do I not love you as (I love) her?’”

Another Gnostic find, from Thomas, has Peter declaring to Jesus: “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life.”

As a librettist, Adamo could imagine the possible conflict among the dramatis personae, especially Mary, Jesus and Peter. He pictured putting the three characters in a room together to work out their differences. There were rich possibilities here, big questions about the nature of spirituality and sexuality. Would Jesus side with Peter or Mary? And then there was the thorny question of Jesus’s legitimacy and why, even in the canonical Gospel of John, Jesus is perceived as being “born of fornication.”

“If the opera were going to be about one question — the most important ache, if you will — it is ‘What is the place of sexuality in godly life?’” says Adamo. For the composer, who was raised Catholic, this is very much a personal story, an attempt to reconcile his own sexuality with his faith. “When I came

of age, I realized I would not be falling in love with the people who the church expected me to fall in love with, and knew that the rhetoric that was being presented to me — that it was a choice, that it was wicked — did not square with my experience,” he says. “This is my piece, which is both the biggest topic I could take on and the story of my life.”

While Adamo’s opera is speculative, departing from the well-known version of Christ’s narrative, he maintains this isn’t a fantasy in the vein of Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* or Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Adamo weaves his story from all the available theology. He researched every reference meticulously, going so far as to footnote his libretto, citing his sources. While he let his imagination fill in the blanks, the composer considers the piece a factual fantasia.

Fundamentalists will likely object to Adamo’s incursion into this sacred realm since holy texts and images for them are exempt from the tampering of an artist. And yet, the intention behind *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* seems anything but disrespectful. It’s the fervent dream of a disaffected Christian who wishes to go back to the tender, human story before the myths took hold, before the magic and the miracles distracted the eye and heart from what Adamo believes is the story’s real value. He doesn’t want to ruin the sacred truths; he wants to restore them to their pre-institutional origins. “Before it was glamorized into miracle and hardened into dogma,” he says, “it was people struggling with what it means to be godly in a human body.”

Adamo’s work shares something with Colm Tóibín’s novel (recently adapted for the Broadway stage) *The Testament of Mary*, in that both works imagine the reality of biblical characters before their tale became set in stone for two thousand years. Tóibín presents a portrait of Mary (the mother of Jesus, not Magdalene) as a grief-stricken, sometimes angry figure resisting the attempts by the writers of the Gospels to define the Christian narrative. They cajole her like aggressive tabloid reporters, pressing a reluctant source

to create an image of Jesus that serves their own ends. Tóibín cites the José Saramago novel *The Gospel of Jesus Christ* as a precursor to his own humanist take on the Christian story, although his work is the first play to use Mary as a human character. He acknowledges that such empathetic reimagining threatens some people. “Many like the line between fact and fiction to be clear,” he says. “And for many, this is sacred ground and it is not for mortals to walk on. This is called belief, maybe, but it often can become intolerant.”

In *The Testament of Mary*, Jesus’s divinity is refracted through the eyes of a woman who wonders if her son is “out of his mind.” But Tóibín, like Adamo, trades the certitude of the preacher for the invention of the artist. “The theater, as much as the novel, is essentially a secular space. It is where we humans dramatize our fears and our dreams. It is not an altar,” he says. “I think I know the difference between a stage and an altar, between a human voice and a tone that suggests the world beyond us.”

Still, in Tóibín’s drama, Jesus remains offstage, the subject of someone else’s story. This is in keeping with the more recent theater tradition — although there are notable musical-theater exceptions, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. “Serious modern drama has largely steered clear of Jesus as a main dramatic character,” writes Andrew W. Hass in *Jesus in History, Thought and Culture*. “Perhaps this is in part because the role of Jesus must be assumed by a live actor, and as the success of novels and poetry has shown, and indeed the Gospels themselves, Jesus is more alive when he is narrativized and re-narrativized in the imaginative constructs of the text.”

Adamo’s attempt to put Jesus and Mary on stage, however belatedly, is already an audacious move. And with a cast of twenty-four, a chorus of forty-eight and a Richard Strauss-scaled orchestra of eighty musicians, *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* promises to be a grand affair. It will be up to baritone Nathan Gunn and soprano Sasha Cooke to make us believe. ■