

## Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*

By Carol Crocca

*Dead Man Walking* was composer Jake Heggie's first opera, the libretto by Terence McNally, premiered in 2000 by San Francisco Opera. It is one of the most popular 21<sup>st</sup> century operas, having had hundreds of productions around the world. In the book of the same title on which it is based, Sister Helen Prejean, a Catholic nun, tells of her experience as the spiritual advisor of a death row prisoner, Patrick Sonnier, who was executed in 1984. It is also the account of her education about the death penalty as adjudicated and administered in Louisiana, resulting in her life-long commitment to work for its abolition.

In the words of Barnaby Hughes (November 13, 2019, [stageandcinema.com](http://stageandcinema.com), reviewing the Lyric Opera of Chicago's production): "There's no doubt that this is a thoroughly American opera, and a very contemporary one. Although the debate on capital punishment has moved forward considerably since this opera's premiere, the conversation on prisons remains timely. But *Dead Man Walking* isn't a political piece; it's a very human story of love and redemption."

This opinion is echoed by [Anthony Tommasini](#) (The New York Times, Sept. 16, 2002, reviewing New York City Opera's production). He writes: "Two of the best moments in the opera are scenes where she [Sister Prejean] is accosted by the parents of the murderer's young victims. These confrontations keep the opera from being a one-sided argument for prisoners' rights and against the death penalty. The parents' and Sister Helen's points of view are expressed in a musically compelling quintet."

This is not to say that the opera consists only of affecting moments of emotional argument. A graphic scene in the first act portrays the murders for which the death penalty was imposed.

On the negative side, Tommasini also comments:

*Dead Man Walking* was the first big success by Jake Heggie, who has gone on to write the opera *Moby Dick* and many independent songs. He writes well for voice and exceptionally well for orchestra. His palette is tonal and accessible, including some influence of Gian Carlo Menotti and Benjamin Britten plus touches of gospel and rock.

Still, the problem remains that Mr. Heggie's score seems like just one element of the drama, along with text, sets, staging and movement. Opera is a form of theater that has always been driven by music. However appealing, Mr. Heggie's music is just not strong enough to take on this complex story.

However, in [Jake Heggie: Dead Man Walking](#), reviewing its premiere at San Francisco Opera, Classics Today expressed what amounts to the consensus:

Although Heggie doesn't break any new ground in his first opera, he and McNally have created an enormously effective piece of theater that's punctuated by some truly lovely music. Several writers commenting on Dead Man Walking have opined rather nastily that the best music of the evening was a "spiritual" titled "He Will Gather Us Around". Yes, it's a glowing gem of a song, heard near both the beginning and end of the opera, but it's not borrowed material—it's a Heggie original. The way he uses that one emblematic tune, first as an expression of Sister Helen's somewhat naïve optimism and later as an assertion of the rock-solid strength of religious belief in the face of misery and ugliness, is impressive, as is the luminous yet heartbreaking aria that Mrs. De Rocher sings in desperate defense of her son at his pardon board hearing.

The Met's Live in HD presentation on October 21<sup>st</sup> stars Joyce DiDonato, whose portrayal of Sister Helen Prejean for the Houston Grand Opera in 2001 was described by Steve Smith in the New York Times (Feb. 2, 2001) in the following terms: "...her extraordinary mix of vibrancy, gravity and exacting nuance amounted to a portrayal that easily ranked with her finest work."

There is an interview with Jake Heggie and Joyce Di Donato in the October issue of Opera News.

In the end, "Dead Man Walking" takes us to uncomfortable places in uncommonly effective ways, luring us to its message through the luster of Heggie's score and the ingenuity of McNally's libretto. Surely it will be performed for as long as society opts to execute killers and dares to contemplate why. [Howard Reich](#) (Chicago Tribune Nov 03, 2019 at 9:36 am, review of Lyric Opera of Chicago's production).

**Note:** I have followed my usual practice when writing about an opera I haven't seen, is not available on DVD, and about which, because of its recency, there is little or no scholarly treatment. This is to cull and quote what I hope are useful reviews.