

EUGENE BONNER, TAR HEEL COMPOSER OF OPERA

by Toby Haynsworth

On the dust jacket of the book *Sicilian Roundabout* author Eugene MacDonald Bonner is described as being “North Carolina born-author, composer, music critic, and wayfarer.” Bonner was all of that, and more.

Bonner was born in Jacksonville, N.C., on the 24th of July, 1889, to William Tripp Bonner and Eugenia Higgins Bonner. Sadly, his mother died in childbirth, and as a result was raised by his great aunt, Mrs. Mary MacDonald, wife of Dr. John MacDonald, of Washington, N.C. Eugene’s childhood was a very happy one, and his aptitude for music was fostered by a next door neighbor, Charlotte Brown, who gave the bright eyed, fun loving little boy his first lessons on the piano.

After attending a preparatory school in Warrenton, N.C., Bonner began his serious study of music at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, M.D. He matriculated in 1907 and was awarded an organ scholarship in 1908.

A review of Eugene’s “Records for Session,” i.e. report cards, shows that while all of his professors acknowledged his superior intelligence, some expressed doubts as to his aptitude for performance. For example, Professor of Organ and Harmony, Harold D. Philips commented after his first year, “very slow in getting his pieces up to the mark, but very sure once mastered. Apt to be rough in his pedaling, but shows taste in registration.” Then a year later, “a generally very intelligent student with a good deal of artistic feeling, but very little executive gift and quite out of sympathy with the older music.” Professor Philip’s comments in 1910 seem to predict that Bonner’s musical future was to be in composition. “(He) has a good all around musical intelligence and culture, but no natural gift for concert organ playing. Extemporization and improvisation (are), however, usually good.”

Upon completing his studies at Peabody in 1910, Bonner went to Europe to continue his musical education. From 1911 to 1917 he spent time in England, France, and Italy studying under such teachers as Landon Ronald, Cyril Scott, Herbert Bedford, Liza Lehmann, and Albert Wolff.

It was during this period that the London publishing house, Weeks & Co., brought out a collection of songs written by the young North Carolinian. The magazine *Musical America* commented on three of them (“A Desert Night-Song”, “Pierrot Stands in the Garden”, and “Sicilian Boat Song”) as follows: “Mr. Bonner shows in all three a creative gift that has much promise. It is not yet mature, nor could one expect it to be since the composer is still a young man. His musical ideas a definite, he does not strive to be unusual, and his harmonic sense is keen.

In addition to his studies, he became a music critic for the *London Telegraph* and the *London Music Standard*, and in that capacity met such stars of the day as Enrico Caruso, Arturo Tescanini, and Sarah Bernhardt. He also joined in the gaiety of this “Belle Epoque” both in London and on the continent, and in 1913 he spent a vacation in Sicily as a guest of the poet Robert Garland, the lyricist for two of the songs mentioned above.

When the United States entered World War I, Bonner rushed to serve his country by enlisting in the U.S. Army Artillery. During that terrible conflict he served in both France and Italy, and rose to the rank of master Sergeant. He was, however, revolted by the war, and this revulsion was given expression In his first major work, the opera “Barbara Fritchie”, based upon Clide Fitch’s play about the War between the States.

In both the play and the opera, the legendary gray haired Barbara is transformed into a nubile Southern Belle who falls in love with a handsome Yankee Captain named Trumbull. It is the story of lovers torn apart and destroyed by war. According to a member of Winthrop University’s music faculty, the music is full of tragic melodies not unlike those found in Puccini’s “Madam Butterfly”.

In his book *American Opera and its Composers*, author Edward Hisper says that the French Conductor Clyde Wolff of the Paris Opera Comique was so pleased by the score of “Barbra Fritchie” that he considered producing it himself, but decided against it “as having a story too distinctly American to appeal to a French audience”. And, sadly, the American opera impresarios of the day were too enamored of European Composers to give an American’s work a try. It is yet to be preformed!

From 1920 to 1927 Bonner lived in Europe. He continued to compose and to write music criticism. In addition to publishing a number of songs and chamber works, he collaborated Anatole France to create an opera based upon the Frenchman’s comedy “The Man Who Married a Mute” (“Celui Qui Epousa Un Femme Muette”).

Unfortunately, before it could be produced, Anatole French died. Then there were lengthy squabbles with heirs, producers, and the director of the Theatre Champ-Elysees. The net result of all this was that, once again, a major Bonner work failed to be preformed. As best as this writer has been able to find out, the only time the public had a chance to judge the music for itself was when the Baltimore Symphony orchestra performed a “Prelude to the Second Scene of Opera ‘La Femme Mutte’” on Sunday evening, March 20, 1927.

Bonner spent the years 1927 through 1955 living primarily in New York, but traveling frequently to Europe. By this time he had come to love the island of Sicily, and especially the little town of Taormina, and he included a stop there on many of his European itineraries.

He was the music editor for the Outlook Magazine for two years, and he wrote music criticism for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York World Telegraph*, the *London Morning Post* and *London Daily Telegraph*. And he continued to compose.

In 1931, one of his major works was finally performed on Broadway. It was referred to as a “little opera” and entitled “The Venetian Glass Nephew”. The work was based upon a short novel of the same name written by Elinor Wylie and published some five years earlier. The story is a delicate satire-fantasy that spoofs the artificialities of the eighteenth century Venetian aristocracy. The opera’s form was very old, having been used by Mozart, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others of their time, but the music was entirely original. As Bonner himself described the work in an article in the *New York Times* it is “a straight” little comedy which starts off more or less operatically, but which slips into the spoken drama whenever there’s anything of importance to be said or discussed.” The critics, including such famous names as Brooks Atkinson, Arthur Ruhl, and Gilbert Seldes, all spoke enthusiastically about the high quality of the music, but somewhat despairingly of the overall production.

Some of the specific comments were: “Bonner’s music has a delicate sweetness...but when undistinguished actors and singers apply their poor talents to period fantasy, the pleasure runs out of it” (Atkinson). The music was “in keeping with its subject and period and genuinely charming” (Ruhl). “Mr. Bonner, the composer, came off very well” (Seldes). “Mr. Bonner writes with competence and ease in terms of waltzes, folk songs and minuets, and can make emotion mount to recitative, sonorous climaxes...He can be gay, sad, triumphant or severe...He can be elegant, light and fleeting, can put the nocturne note into a serenade, and provide a crisp dance for a Watean interlude” (unsigned, *The Christian Science Monitor*).

Unfortunately, the show did not catch on, and it closed a week later on the 2nd of March, 1931. I would choose the words of social commentator Dorothy Parker as it’s epitaph, “the ‘little opera’ (was) a moon-lit haven from the boop-boop-a-doops and goddams of Broadway, and as I look back and listen on it, I think many have spoken too soon about my heart’s being completely broken over the current theater.”

Throughout the Depression and World War II, Bonner was unable to get any of his operatic works staged, although a number of his pieces, songs, and orchestral compositions were performed by such famous musicians

as John Barbirolli's New York philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy's Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra.

In the postwar, Bonner returned to one of his favorite haunts, Taormina, Sicily. One of the by-products of his visits to this beautiful island with its long and fabled history was the publications in 1952 of his delightfully different travelogue in book form, *Sicilian Roundabout*. Unlike the typical tourist guide book, this was not simply a listing of sights to see, but a story about the sights of Sicily that Bonner had enjoyed over the years. Regardless of whether or not the reader intended to visit this fascinating corner of the Mediterranean he would find both knowledge and entertainment in the pages of this remarkable work.

During the years immediately following the war, Bonner also wrote and saw published, *The Club in the Opera House*, subtitled, "The Story of the Metropolitan Opera Club." It too was written with grace and humor, and one not need be a devotee of opera, or even listen to classical music, to enjoy the many anecdotes and tables of intrigue that surrounded the evolution of both the Metropolitan Opera and the club of gentry who adopted its name for their own organization.

In 1956 Bonner decided to move-bag, baggage, and grand piano-to Taormina. He rented a studio apartment from Antonio and Eva Strazzeri, whom he had met and stayed with on earlier visits to Sicily.

Once settled in his new home, Bonner became a well known, popular member of the Anglo-American/artist community of Sicily. He continued to write and compose, and he played the organ every Sunday at the small Saint George's Anglican Church in Taormina. It was in this environment that he composed his last major work; an opera entitled "The Masque of Susannah." Sadly, the score was misplaced when Bonner sent it to New York for performance consideration. He is said to have sent it to "a conductor" in New York. But no matter, a microfilm copy was recently found by his old friend Alan Hartman, and forwarded to the library at Winthrop University. Plans are being made there for a production of all or part of this work in the near future.

Not too many years after Eugene moved into Casa Strazzeri, a tragedy befell the household that must have brought back memories of the early death of his own mother. Antonio and Eva's daughter and her husband has been blessed with a handsome infant son, but very soon after his birth, the child's father was killed in an accident. Then, shortly thereafter, his mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage, leaving the baby orphaned, and in the care of his grandparents. By the time, Bonner had really become a member of the Strazzeri family, and the double calamity hit him hard. He grieved along with Antonio and Eva, but he then decided to assume paternalistic role in helping to raise this boy into a man.

Turi, as the baby was called, became Bonner's special music student and protégé. he taught him to play the piano and the organ, and he encouraged his natural enjoyment of music. Later, when Turi was older, and Bonner found it more difficult to play the church's small pump-organ himself; Turi added the duties of the organist ant the Anglicans Church to those he already had that this own Roman Catholic Church. The orphaned boy and his surrogate father shared a great love that can still be seen in the eyes of Salvatore LoGuidice, the now grown man himself a father.

by this 94th year, Eugene Bonner had become somewhat enfeebled, but he was still alert and took great pleasure in watching the newest member of the Strazzeri clan, Turi's son, take his first steps. On the 8th of December, 1983, Bonner did not feel well. He asked to be helped to the bathroom and once there, he splashed on some cologne and fell over dead. As an Italian obituary writer put it, "To a gentleman, it is important to attend and important meeting looking his best and smelling good." And so the long happy life of North Carolina native Eugene MacDonald Bonner came to an end.

In recent years, there had been a revival of interest in Bonner's music. In 1985 the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra performed his tone poem "White Nights" under the direction of Leon Driehuys, and in 1989 the Brevard (NC) Music Center celebrated his centennial with a performance of "Quintet" for piano and strings

with Marilyn Neely at the keyboard. In addition, the Rock Hill Chamber Orchestra, directed by David Lowery, included the suite "Taormina" in its spring program. If the popularity of the artist continued to grow, Eugene Bonner will not be the first artist to achieve greater fame in death than he did in life.