



The Handmaid's Tale
Poul Ruders

The Music

Poul Ruders was born in Denmark in 1949. He is a wonderfully versatile composer, largely self-taught, and has written many works for orchestra, including *Manhattan Abstraction*, inspired by the New York skyline. When he read the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, Ruders realised that it had all the right ingredients for an opera: 'love, hope, fear, hatred, envy, betrayal, public executions, perversion, sex, good versus evil, violence, and, maybe most important, heart-breaking tenderness'. Poul Ruders' musical style embodies two aspects: on one hand lavish extremes and excess, gothic horror and grotesque humour; and on the other a more meditative, austere quality. The opera brings these two features of his style together. He brilliantly evokes the violence and disturbing aspects of the story and the tender, intimate moments between individual characters, often layering different types of music simultaneously. Although the orchestra often sounds brutal and complicated, the vocal lines are often very beautiful and moving.

Sci-fi

The story is based on a 1985 novel by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Set in the 21st century it is a bleak, futuristic tale depicting the former America as a totalitarian state governed by Christian fundamentalists, in which the only role for women is to provide children. We learn that this new Republic of Gilead was established after an uprising in America, during which the President and members of Congress were assassinated.

This idea of a doomed futuristic city is familiar from literature (Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*; George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*) and film (*Bladerunner*, *Terminator*, *Matrix*, *Minority Report*). In Gilead, as we see in footage shown on a screen in the Prologue, the aftermath of nuclear war has resulted in civil unrest, famine and a low birthrate. Gilead's leaders, reinterpreting a line in the Bible, conclude that it is acceptable to take young fertile women like Offred, the heroine of the novel and opera, and assign them as Handmaids to provide children for the old and barren couples of the ruling elite. Women's rights have been

severely constrained in other ways. Books have been banned by the regime, and social contact between men and women is limited on pain of death.

Politics

The story has roots in real history too. Atwood claims that she was careful to put nothing into the story that had not already happened, or for which we do not have the technology. Personal freedom is the theme at the heart of the novel and the opera. Atwood says she took her inspiration for the combination of strict religion and oppressive rule from the Puritans in seventeenth-century America. More recently, Nazism during the Second World War and the threat of nuclear war have added to our twentieth-century paranoia that the individual has no control over what happens, that the State can have total power. And there are obvious parallels with contemporary politics as well, particularly with the way in which religious language can be used to support or even justify political or even military actions. The war in Iraq is a current example, in which religious rhetoric has been used to reinforce a political agenda. Gilead shows us an extreme but terrifyingly possible scenario.

Women

Atwood's novel was written at the time of the rise of the religious right in America. One of their central views was – and still is – that women belong in the home. We have seen examples of the ways in which women have been repressed and mistreated in other parts of the world, ways that have strong parallels with *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Afghanistan, under the rule of the Taliban, women had no rights at all; in Romania women have been forced to have children; in Iran women have frequently been put in positions of power over other women.

In flashbacks in the novel and the opera we hear how under the regime of Gilead women had their independence removed, and their names taken away: we do not know the real name of Offred, her new name means simply 'belonging to Fred'. While the young women (Handmaids) are treated like cattle, the older ones (Aunts, Wives) treat them resentfully and spitefully.

Time

The structure of the novel is complex, with much of it presented as the memories of Offred, in flashback. Although this would be quite easy to present in a film, it is more of a challenge in opera, where everything happens in front of you on the stage. So the composer, librettist, designer and director have worked hard to differentiate between the past and present.

The main stage represents the Red Centre, where the Handmaids are trained, an austere world of duty and paranoia in which the Handmaids are dressed in red, the Wives in blue and the Aunts in Green. The music is based on medieval chanting and terrifying, violent percussion. Within this space, other rooms and the outside world are presented on a revolving stage. These correspond to different places in the present as well as the 'Time Before'. When this past world

is being represented, it looks and sounds different from the present. It is full of musical pastiche (we hear, for example, one of the characters sing 'Amazing Grace') – often with a jazzy, syncopated beat – and all the characters are miked up, not for purposes of amplification, but to create a distinctive sound, the sound of technology that represents the past, the twentieth century. The lighting for the past is different too, often an artificially bright yellow.

While Offred remains onstage for most of the opera, the music, lighting and scenery shift around her to indicate the change from the present to her memories of the past. There are two singers playing the part of Offred, and in some scenes you see her watching her past self in flashback.

The Story

The action is set in the time of the Republic, in the twentieth and twenty-first century. There are constant references back to the Time Before, and it is framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue, set in the year 2195, in which an academic introduces tapes made by a Handmaid in 2006, following her escape from Gilead. The plot consists of many short episodes which together tell us how Offred came to escape from the regime and leave us with her story.

The Prologue is followed by the Red Centre Prelude, in which we see the horrors of being trained as a Handmaid. Offred is rejected by the others when she tells of her teenage abortion following gang rape; another Handmaid, Moira, is dragged in after trying to escape; and Janine shows signs of mental collapse. Aunt Lydia lectures on the privilege the Handmaids enjoy to 'be fruitful and multiply' for the benefit of the Republic. The singing of individual characters, especially Lydia, is high pitched and harsh; when the women sing together the music is calmer and more chant-like. When they graduate from the Centre they receive their headwings and are then sent to homes to bear children for the Commanders and their Wives.

Act One

On her way to her new assignment, Offred passes the Wall, a place where the bodies of those who have broken the rules of Gilead are hung as a warning. At her assignment, she recognises the Wife, Serena Joy, as a gospel singer from the Time Before. We see and hear a video of her singing 'Amazing Grace', played on the TV during which Offred remembers her boyfriend Luke from the same time; Serena Joy appears on a big screen as they make love.

Offred goes to the shops, with her shopping partner Ofglen, where they spot a heavily pregnant handmaid, Ofwarren, who is actually Janine from the Red Centre. On the way back they visit The Wall. When she returns, Offred remembers another episode from the Time Before, when she and Luke were contemplating marriage and her mother declared her feminist views. When she enters her room the Commander is in the doorway. Once alone, she wonders

about his forbidden visit and finds an enigmatic message in Latin scrawled inside her wardrobe, perhaps by a previous Handmaid.

A doctor examines Offred and offers to help her become pregnant to save her from being sent to the Colonies for failing to conceive; grotesque and graphic musical effects are employed. In another flashback she remembers playing hide-and-seek with Luke and their daughter. The voice of Aunt Lydia – accompanied by her appearance on a large screen above the stage – reminds us that the children of Handmaids born in the Time Before have all now been placed with fit parents; Handmaids are not considered fit.

Offred remembers the day when the President and members of Congress were shot. Returning to the present she finds herself with Nick, Rita and Serena Joy, watching the television. They praise Gilead's successes in the ongoing war. The Commander enters, reads from the Bible, and once Nick and Rita have left, the monthly impregnation ritual is performed. A sinister drum beat runs through the whole scene. Afterwards, Offred enters her bedroom to find Nick there, a violation of the rules of no-contact. He tells her that the Commander wishes to see her in his study tomorrow night.

In the Red Centre Wives and Handmaids gather to witness the birth of Ofwarren/Janine's child. Against the ritualistic singing that accompanies the birth, Offred remembers the Time Before: Moira and her mother describe the increasing restrictions on individual rights and Luke reports being fired by the University. 'Amazing Grace' is heard again, combining with the other music. Back in real time, Ofwarren (Janine) gives birth to a girl who is immediately handed over to one of the Wives. Offred meets the Commander in his study – this contact is forbidden. He wishes only to play Scrabble, which Offred wins. As she leaves, the Commander gives her the secret code for future visits and asks for a kiss. Back in her room Offred realises the hypocrisy of it all, and laughs hysterically, collapsing on the floor.

Act Two

Rita finds Offred still asleep on the floor. In another assignation the Commander gives Offred fashion magazines to read. The Commander becomes increasingly affectionate towards her, and she angrily tells him not to do so in the presence of anyone else – it is too dangerous. As Rita gives her tokens to buy food, Offred has another flashback in which she remembers how she and Moira were fired from their jobs and their bank accounts frozen; women were no longer allowed to hold property. As she leaves the house, she notices Nick's cap is on sideways – the secret sign for an assignation with the Commander that evening.

She meets Ofglen, and they go to pray. Here they are able to speak openly and Offred learns of a secret organization – 'Mayday' – whose purpose is to help those trapped in Gilead and to overthrow the regime. As they walk back past the Wall, Offred learns the secret password of the rebels. She then remembers

another episode from the Time Before: she and Luke gaze upon their sleeping child while the orchestra creates the sound of a music box; they were preparing to escape from Gilead with fake passports by taking a supposed daytrip.

Back in the present Offred asks the Commander about the Latin message inside her wardrobe. He identifies it as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down', and Offred learns that the previous Handmaid hanged herself. From another flashback we learn that Offred, Luke and their daughter were seized and separated at the Canadian border. A Handmaid – Ofwarren – is now hanging on the Wall. Ofglen suggests that Offred try to obtain secret documents from the Commander.

At home, Serena Joy suggests to Offred that she should try sleeping with another man, Nick, in order to conceive. Although this is illegal, Joy offers to obtain a picture of Offred's daughter as a bribe; Offred agrees. This is followed by a moving 'duet for one': the two versions of Offred sing together; although initially in conflict, they gradually reconcile, singing in unison.

On another visit to the Commander, Offred is dressed in a provocative costume, wrapped in a cloak belonging to a Wife, and driven to Jezebel's, a private club in a former hotel that breaks the rules of Gilead that men and women should have no contact. We hear pastiche cabaret music. She sees Moira who tells how she nearly escaped but was caught. 'Amazing Grace' returns as Offred goes to meet the Commander, but she is unable to continue the rendez-vous when she recognises the room as the one where she and Luke had met once before.

Serena Joy confirms with Nick that he will go to Offred tonight. Back in her room, Serena Joy shows Offred a picture of her daughter, and then Offred and Nick make love tenderly.

The Wives and Handmaids have gathered for a 'Salvaging': a Handmaid is hanged for adultery and a Wife for murder. This is followed by a 'Particution': a Guardian accused of rape is beaten to death by Handmaids. Here the violent music melts into a quotation from the music of Bach – this underlines the supposed religious authority of the regime, but for the audience this also gives the prisoner a sense of dignity. Offred is horrified by Ofglen's enthusiastic participation, but Ofglen says he was part of the resistance and so she was helping to knock him unconscious in order to spare him further pain.

Later on at the Wall, Offred learns that Ofglen has been replaced by another Handmaid: she was discovered to be a member of the resistance and hanged herself.

Serena Joy confronts Offred: she has found lipstick on her cloak, produces the Jezebel costume and accuses her of being with the Commander. Offred, Serena Joy, the Commander and Rita explore their feelings privately, each standing in a

separate room. 'Eyes' burst into the house and seize Offred; Nick quietly assures her that it is the Mayday resistance coming to save her.

In the Epilogue the Professor makes some concluding remarks, and tells us that we do not know what happened to Offred.

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