Opera in America

A Cultural History

John Dizikes

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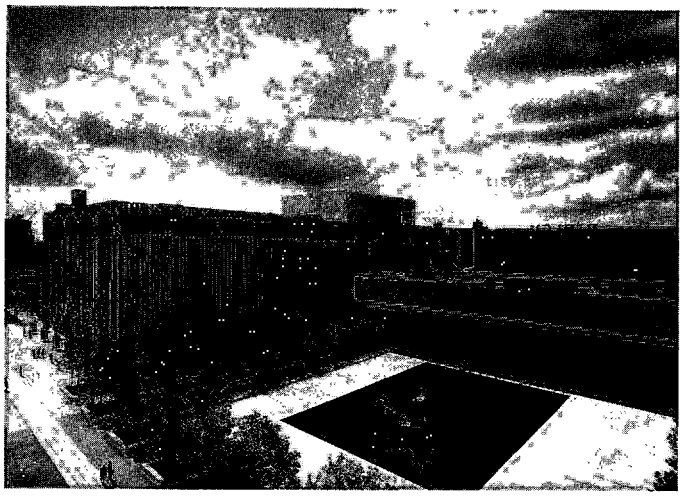
higher wages for orchestral musicians have raised the level of orchestral performance, most notably in the case of the Metropolitan Opera, where James Levine has shaped a first-class ensemble. The impresario opera house builders have also disappeared; an opera house is now woven into the complex fabric of governmental, trade union, and corporate power.

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts was conceived as the powerhouse of American culture: a symphony hall, theater, chamber music hall, park, library, music school, and two opera houses, on four city blocks. Its planners and builders were preoccupied with the worldwide importance of the project. New York, "the cultural capital of the world . . . deserves a monumental focus as criterion of free world music, art, theatre and dance." "We're building something that will be here for 500 years."[6]

Three coincidental events made Lincoln Center possible: the decision to build a new Metropolitan Opera House; the proposed demolition of Carnegie Hall, which meant a new home was required for the New York Philharmonic; and the Federal Housing Act of 1949, which provided money to cities for slum clearance and urban renewal. New York identified a seventeen-block area around Lincoln Square as an area suitable for clearance.

These three things might well have meant nothing in relation to each other except that John D. Rockefeller III, the one person with power and money and influence enough to bring order out of coincidences and possibilities, took up the idea that the Lincoln Square site might combine new housing with a center for various of the city's arts institutions. Rockefeller established an Exploratory Committee for a Musical Arts Center in 1955. The next year that group recommended the incorporation of a nonprofit organization, the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. By 1957 the Metropolitan Opera, the Philharmonic, and the Juilliard School of Music agreed to join Lincoln Center and to make it the site of their future homes. In 1958 Lincoln Center, with federal funds, purchased the Lincoln Square area from the city. This



A view of New York's Lincoln Center, the prototype of the late twentieth-century performing arts complex, showing the new Metropolitan Opera House on the left: a monument to corporate wealth. Photograph by Bob Serating.

required negotiations with Washington and Albany, in which the influence of John D. Rockefeller was of inestimable value. (It also helped that the governor of New York was his brother.) "He was adept at the delicate art of choosing the people to make a project move." There were 188 buildings to be demolished, 1,647 families to be relocated. Lawsuits were filed to prevent the project happening. Lincoln Center got its way in the courts, as elsewhere. The groundbreaking ceremonies on May 14, 1959, dramatized the power that had been marshaled. Much of the corporate and banking might of Wall Street was there, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower flew up from Washington.[7]

Lincoln Center was planned as a group of free-standing buildings in a setting of plazas and parks, accessible to the city life swirling about it. Although each building was designed by a different architect, unity was derived from similar modernistic arches and columns and from the use of the same light-colored limestone facing. Wallace K. Harrison (1895–1981), who had worked for the Rockefeller interests for thirty years and had been chief architect of the United Nations buildings, was chosen as overall supervisor and as architect for the Metropolitan Opera House.

An important addition to the original group of institutions comprising Lincoln Center was forced upon it by chance and political necessity. New York State was committed to the development of a World's Fair in 1964 in Queens and, with the support of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, the state legislature appropriated fifteen million dollars for a theater in Lincoln Center which would be the site of the fair's musical and theatrical programs and then be sold to New York City. This became the New York State Theater, the home, in 1965, of the New York City Opera and the New York City Ballet. Although it welcomed the New York City Ballet, the Metropolitan Opera bitterly opposed the City Opera. Politically, however, the people's theater was not easily denied a place in the people's culture center. When the presence of the City Opera became inevitable, the Metropolitan attempted to gain administrative control over it. The City Opera successfully resisted this effort.[8] Inadvertent though it was, placing two separate opera companies adjacent to each other was symbolically appropriate for this new operatic age.

Building costs soared. The original estimate for Lincoln Center, $75 million, rose to $102 million in 1960, $120 million by 1963. Philharmonic Hall cost 250 percent more than its first estimate, the Metropolitan Opera House and the Vivian Beaumont Theater 100 percent more. The New York State Theater was a bargain at only 50 percent more. When completed, Lincoln Center cost $184 million. City, state, and federal governments contributed some $40 million. The Ford Foundation gave $25 million, the Rockefeller Foundation and John D., personally, an equivalent amount. Half of the cost came from individuals and corporations.

Historically, the most important thing about Lincoln Center was that American business corporations were mobilized to finance it. "No one had ever gone to big business for big money to support the arts." A professional fundraising firm organized this corporate campaign, but the assistance of prominent corporate leaders was crucial. Clarence Francis, chairman of the board of General Foods, was designated manager. He knew that his request seemed odd to many corporate executives. "New

York City was just No-Man's-Land as far as its cultural reputation was concerned," Francis said. Corporate leaders saw the city as solely "a financial institution—it was profits, it was money, money, money. And this was wrong. The thing that fascinated me was that New York now could be made the cultural center of the world." John Rockefeller often went with Francis. "They went where the money was to be found. A company president would listen carefully, then say, 'John, you really *do* believe in this?' And Rockefeller would answer, 'Yes, I do believe in it. I believe it is important for our city. I believe it is important for our country. I believe it is important for the world.'"

The campaign began with a list of several hundred serious givers. This soon became a list of ten thousand names. "Someone was even put to work tracing genealogies to check if any member of a wealthy family had an obvious interest in the performing arts." The handful of fundraisers grew into a highly organized group of five thousand. Small contributors were welcomed, but Lincoln Center was a monument to corporate wealth. George Moore, the vice president of the First National City Bank and chairman of the center's Patron Committee, would never ask for less than $100,000. American arts sponsorship entered a new stage with the emergence of corporate patrons.[9]

The New York State Theater was the first of the two Lincoln Center opera houses to be completed, in 1964. Designed by Philip Johnson (1906–), the one-time boy wonder of architectural modernism, the theater's sober and rational exterior enclosed an elegant interior, suggesting eye-filling ceremonial pleasures, regal amusement from a European past. Above the functional entrance lobby, Johnson created a spectacular social space, the Grand Promenade, "a royal room of cream and gold," two hundred feet long, sixty feet wide, fifty feet high, running the entire width of the opera house, glass-fronted, with a gold-leaf ceiling and three tiers of gold-screened balconies looking down from the inside, "the baroque spirit domesticated by democracy." After such bravado, the 2,729-seat auditorium, a five-tiered, flattened horseshoe, somehow conveyed a sense of "quiet dialogue between amplitude and intimacy."[10] Its sight lines (the theater had initially been intended for ballet, not opera) were excellent, but its sound was poor.

And then there was, after decades of anticipation and disappointment, the new Metropolitan Opera House. But first the old house, "this interminably inconvenient, unquestionably difficult and unforgettable place," had to be vacated and destroyed. No possibility of saving it was allowed. On April 16, 1966, a stagefull of famous singers closed down the great old singers' house—Marian Anderson, Lotte Lehmann, Birgit Nilsson, "wearing in pride the gold wreath that had been presented to Christine Nilsson on the night the theater opened" in 1883. Soon enough the past dissolved into the excitement of opening the new house, heralded by unrestrained exaggeration as "the single biggest theatrical event in all human history": "the biggest house, the fanciest trappings, the highest budget, the most careful planning, the most talented artists, the hardest work, the loftiest hopes . . . nothing less than the cultural superevent of the cultural center of the culture capital of the civilized world." It was a costume party, with "hundreds of formally dressed tycoons, aristocrats, nabobs,

bankers, moguls, diplomats, potentates, fashion plates, grand dames and other assorted Great Society over-achievers," who paid $250 for orchestra and box seats. It was also an affair of state. Three boxes had been converted into a state box, in which sat the wife of the President of the United States, the secretary of defense, the ambassador to the United Nations, and President Ferdinand E. Marcos of the Philippines and his wife, the tiara-topped Imelda.[11]

This excess overshadowed the evening's opera, the world premiere of *Anthony and Cleopatra* by the American composer Samuel Barber, conducted by Thomas Schippers, with an entirely American cast headed by Leontyne Price. In fact, "almost everything about the evening, artistically speaking, failed in total impact." The staging was drab, the set dismal, and Barber's score didn't please—neither traditional nor modern, lacking in ardor, big in sound, meager in melody. Anyway, what chance did the opera have compared with the opera house? Wallace Harrison aimed for grandeur. Five enormously tall, deeply recessed, glass-filled arches formed the front and conveyed grandness of scale, as did two large murals by Marc Chagall on either side of the lobby, in which the central double-staircase should have commanded attention, but didn't. That was claimed by two large white-marble slabs, on which were etched in gold the names of the contributors—143 individuals and families on the left, 73 corporations and foundations on the right—who had paid for the house. The enormous five-tiered auditorium seated 3,788, with twenty-nine boxes, rented according to "seniority," in the parterre and twelve in the grand tier. The orchestra pit was spacious, the proscenium arch commanding, sight lines unobstructed, and sound very good. To make up for the notorious insufficiencies of the old house, the new one prided itself on its mechanical and electrical marvels: turntables; elevators; raked, raised, and lowered stages; moving footlights and scenery; and a computerized lighting system.

It wasn't the Metropolitan of Wallace Harrison's dreams, however. He had conceived an innovative building, a structurally independent auditorium within an arcaded shell, but the Metropolitan board resisted it. "We couldn't have a modern house," Harrison said ruefully. "I finally got hammered down by the opera people." Inside, the board and patrons got what they wanted: the gilded trappings of tradition. Swags and tassels on the tops of the boxes, a gilded cheese-straw pattern around the proscenium. "The opera people wanted those," Harrison explained. The Metropolitan's ambitions were as conventional in the 1960s as they had been in the 1880s. The new opera house was "a monument manqué."[12]

The Pentagon of American cultural centers, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington was designed by Edward Durrell Stone (1902–1978), who "can be credited with the creation of a major post–World War II style—that of the classic pavilion, a simple rectangular box surrounded by a colonnaded porch on three or more sides."[13] An oblong 630 feet long, 300 feet wide, 100 feet (six stories) high, its interior plan was simple. A corridor, the Grand Foyer, running the length of the Potomac River side of the building, was cut at right angles by two corridors which divided the interior space into three auditoriums: the 2,200-seat, four-level Opera House; a 2,750-seat, rectangular Concert Hall; and the fan-shaped, 1,142-seat Eisen-