

# CLASSICAL & DANCE

FALL  
PREVIEW

PART  
7

## So Outrageous

As the opera *Anna Nicole* makes its first trip to New York, its composer is having second thoughts.

BY JUSTIN DAVIDSON

 **HERE'S A FAMILIAR PLOT:** A venerable opera company begs a well-known composer for a new work; he delivers a raucous score about a defiantly sexual woman who finds love, glamour, and early death. A few critics grumble about vulgarity sully the lyric stage, but theatrical audacity wins them over, and the piece goes on to triumph. *Carmen* and *La Traviata* had trajectories like that. So has *Anna Nicole*, the 2011 work that had its world pre-

miere at London's Royal Opera House, in the same exuberantly gaudy production by Richard Jones that will be brought in by BAM and New York City Opera this fall.

The music's sparkling raunch made it an event far beyond the opera world. Companies here looked on in envy as a British team commandeered an American saga. But one person who remains unconvinced by the work's success is its composer. "If I'm really honest, I'm quite uncomfortable with it now," says Mark-Anthony Turnage. "I don't think we were trying to be cruel. But it's mocking someone's real life. I wouldn't do it again."

Yet that's exactly why Turnage and librettist Richard Thomas decided to write an opera about Anna Nicole Smith in the first place: She wasn't fictional, highborn, or antique. She was Vickie Lynn Hogan, a high-school dropout who worked in a strip club and bemoaned her flat chest. (In the opera, the chorus shouts: "You need to get some tits!") Equipped with new breasts and a new name, she climbed the ladder of celebrity from *Playboy* Playmate

to wife of an 89-year-old billionaire. Rich, young, and quickly widowed, she became a tabloid obsession and a reality-show star, dying of a drug overdose at 39. "The more we researched her, the more we liked her," the composer says. "She lived a lot in a short amount of time. If you come from a working-class background, as I do, you have to work twice as hard. In England, there's the Oxbridge secret club, and I snuck in. [Smith] came from a dirt-poor background and became famous and wealthy, so she can't have been that stupid."

Though Turnage says he identifies with Smith as an outsider made good, he may be exaggerating the parallel. The composer has abetted the press in playing up his plebeian origins, to his family's distress; if he bypassed the British class system, it was by working his way through the Royal College of Music and a privileged artistic career. Still, he insists that his struggles to make a mark on the world parallel Smith's: "She was very determined, from the early days when she had the boob job. She's quite impressive, really."

To tackle this epic, Turnage,



# ARTICULATED FIVE RINGS MATTER

## HYPERBOLIC

The artist's use of bright colors and bold lines is a testament to her unique style. Her work is a blend of traditional and contemporary techniques, creating a visually striking and emotionally resonant experience. The use of vibrant purple and red hues is particularly notable, adding depth and intensity to the composition.

The artist's attention to detail is evident in the intricate patterns and textures that adorn her work. Each element is carefully chosen and placed, contributing to the overall aesthetic and narrative of the piece. The use of bold, graphic shapes and lines further enhances the visual impact, creating a sense of movement and energy.

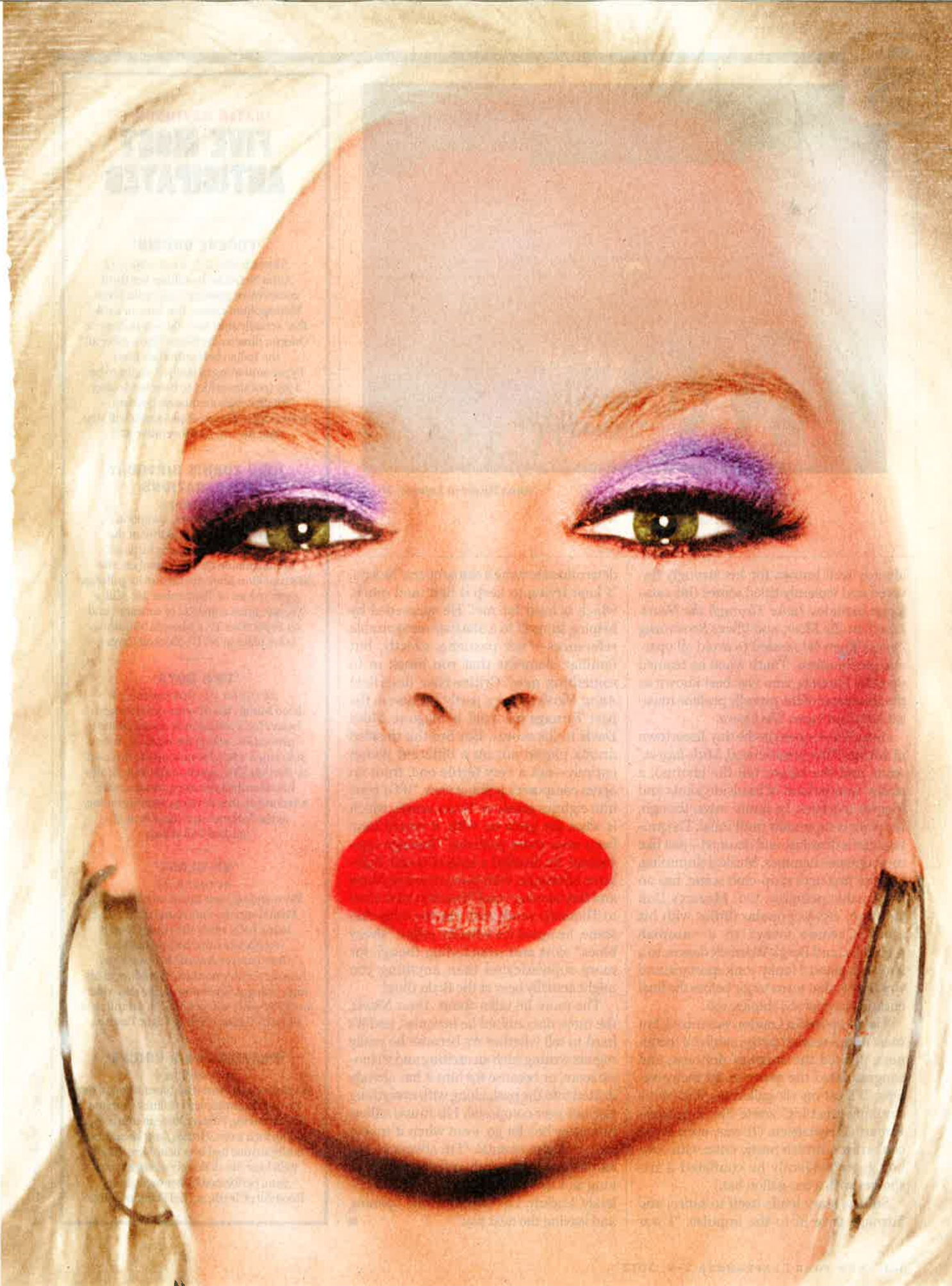
The artist's work is a testament to her creative vision and technical skill. Her ability to combine different styles and techniques into a cohesive and compelling whole is a true testament to her talent. The use of vibrant colors and bold lines is a key element of her style, creating a visually striking and emotionally resonant experience.

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Anna Nicole in *London*, 2011.

already well known for his strongly flavored and violently titled scores (his catalogue includes *Twice Through the Heart*, *Blood on the Floor*, and *Three Screaming Popes*), knew he needed to avoid all operatic preciousness. That's when he teamed up with Thomas, who was best known as the co-creator of the proudly profane musical *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

*Anna Nicole* opens in the tiny Texas town of Mexia ("It's pronounced *Muh-hay-a*," Anna and the mayor tell the chorus), a trashy wonderland of roadside joints and piggish truckers. In many ways, though, the piece is supremely traditional. The protagonist is dissolute and doomed—just like most operatic heroines. Musical slumming, like the first act's strip-club scene, has an impeccable pedigree, too: Mozart's Don Giovanni enjoys popular ditties with his meal, Carmen sways to a vampish seguidilla, and Berg's *Wozzeck* dances to a barroom piano. Honky-tonk spectacle and wry humor that turns tragic before the final curtain are operatic staples, too.

The reception in London was mixed, but most critics reveled in the subject's trashiness, praised the creators' deftness, and congratulated the genre on its inclusiveness. "I'll eat my six-gallon hat if it's not a stonking great hit," wrote the *Telegraph's* Rupert Christiansen. (It was, even if you can't trust a British music critic with cowboy gear: Evidently he conflated a six-shooter with a ten-gallon hat.)

Smith's story lends itself to satire, and Turnage gave in to the impulse. "I was

determined to write a comic opera," he says. "I kept trying to keep it light and quick, which is hard for me." He succeeded by helping himself to a stash of recognizable references—"not pastiche, exactly, but familiar elements that you break in to something new." Critics have described *Anna Nicole* as jazzy, partly because in the past Turnage has paid homage to Miles Davis in his scores. But Smith's tinsel drama played out on a different planet entirely—not a very fertile one, from an opera composer's point of view. "If I'd gone into eighties music or Texan music, which is what she grew up with, it would have been even more pastiche," Turnage says. Instead, he distilled a kind of manic high-brow burlesque, with heavy-tread rhythms and fast-moving vocal lines that stick close to Thomas's wordy text. For the strip-club scene, he opted for what he calls a "sleazy blues," slow and smoldering, though far more sophisticated than anything you might actually hear at the Bada Bing!

The more he talks about *Anna Nicole*, the more discomfited he becomes, and it's hard to tell whether it's because he really regrets writing such an exciting and virtuosic score, or because for him it has already drifted into the past, along with everything else he's ever composed. His music afflicts him once he's let go, even when it makes everyone else ecstatic. "I'm always polite, and I'll go to rehearsals and everything, as long as I don't have to go and see it endlessly. Luckily, I'm coming to the opening and leaving the next day." ■

## JUSTIN DAVIDSON'S FIVE MOST ANTICIPATED

### 'EUGENE ONEGIN'

SEPTEMBER 23–DECEMBER 12

Anna Netrebko headlines her third consecutive opening-night gala at the Metropolitan Opera, this time in a role that actually suits her: Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin*, directed by Fiona Shaw. After all the Italian bel canto she's been hyperventilating in lately, it ought to be a joy (politics aside) to hear her to sing Tchaikovsky's meditative lyricism—in Russian. (Marina Poplavskaya will step into the role on November 23.)

### JOHN ZORN'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

SEPTEMBER

The tireless composer, saxophonist, impresario, and godfather of the downtown music scene turns an unimaginable 60 in September. The Metropolitan Museum throws its galleries open to him on September 28; Miller Theatre hosts a quartet of concerts; and on September 15, a Masada Marathon takes place at NYU's Skirball Center.

### 'TWO BOYS'

OCTOBER 21–NOVEMBER 14

Nico Muhly, the 32-year-old stand-bearer for a ridiculously accomplished generation, enters the ranks of elder statesmen when his new opera, directed by Bartlett Sher, opens at the Met. Muhly has described the story, about a toxic relationship that develops entirely online, as the Internet-age equivalent of a masked-ball drama.

### 'UP-CLOSE'

OCTOBER 28

Even among new-music connoisseurs, Michel van der Aa's name didn't ring many bells when the young Dutch composer won the prestigious Grawemeyer Award this past year. Lincoln Center noticed, though, and his high-voltage, innovative cello-and-video work *Up-close* will get its U.S. premiere at Lincoln Center's White Light Festival.

### 'PARTITA FOR 8 VOICES'

NOVEMBER 4

In another bolt-from-the-blue moment, the 31-year-old singer and violinist Caroline Shaw won the Pulitzer Prize in music this spring for a work, *Partita for 8 Voices*, that hardly anyone had ever heard live. Finally, we'll hear this delicately wrought vocal gem, performed by her own group, Roomful of Teeth, at (Le) Poisson Rouge.