

My 'America's Game' as an Audio Opera

by [Richard Kostelanetz](#) (July 2017)



The Awl, by Tommervik



Some years ago I composed a 60-minute audiotape of and about the sound of baseball as indigenous to the Americas. As it included passages in both Spanish and French-Canadian, I thought that my electro-acoustic composition, to recall a 20th-Century epithet, represented all of North America.

It has two sections, each 30 minutes long, each opening with sounds typical of the beginning of a game and closing with the ending sounds. Within each section were sounds unique to baseball, such as balls hitting bats or gloves, crowds gossiping and cheering as they do only at baseball games, players urging each other with imprecations likewise unique to Americas' game, all while suggesting narrative that, though primarily acoustic, they reflect people moving and clearly speaking (their movements and words clearly audible), without suggesting any particular images.

Sometime later, I realized that I'd composed a sort of opera, indeed perhaps a uniquely American two-act opera, that would exist only on audiotape and thus take its place among operas produced initially for radio, mostly in Europe, as far back as the 1920s. Shorter than staged operas, these should not be confused with the more familiar theatrical operas, even when the latter are broadcast and rebroadcast on radio. Indeed, some audio operas were less than fifteen minutes in length. I recall that prior to composing *Americas' Game*, I was listening to operas, particularly George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, initially because I wanted the pace of his aria "Summertime," as baseball is a warm-weather game.

The latest *Wikipedia* webpage identifies the first radio opera as probably *The Red Pen* (1925) that the BBC commissioned from Geoffrey Toye to a libretto by A. P. Herbert.

"The 1930s proved to be the high-point of radio opera, with at least twelve productions composed by German, American, Czech, Swiss, and French composers."

Among those produced in America were Charles Wakefield Cadman's *The Willow Tree* (NBC Radio, 1932), Vittorio Giannini's *Flora* and *Beauty and the Beast* (CBS Radio, 1937 & 1938), Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief* (CBS, 1939), and Randall Thompson's *Solomon and Balkis* (CBS, 1941). I've not heard any of them, though now I wish they were more available. Nor have I ever heard Amy Kohn's *1, Plum Square*, which WNYC broadcast in 2005.

From knowledge of most of these composers' other works, may I suspect that these radio operas were closer to "soap operas," say, in their narrative specificity and to Broadway musicals with songs, rather than to Audio art? From that distinction alone, may I claim that my *Americas' Game* might be the Great American Audio Opera that has, to my knowledge, no competitors?

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