

'The Dick Van Dyke Show' Opera

By [ADAM SCHWARTZ](#)

Posted January 17, 2011

Consider the sources of operas. There have been operas based on plays, novels, poems, original librettos, short stories, historical events, the Bible, myths, and goodness knows what else.

Now, from a Harvard-trained composer and librettist who plays violin for the New York City Opera orchestra, comes what's likely the first opera based on a TV situation comedy. This September saw the premiere of *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan*, a one-act chamber opera based on an episode of the same name from the 1960s sitcom *The Dick Van Dyke Show*.

The opera was given two performances at Lehigh University, where the composer **Paul Salerni** is a professor of music as well as the the NEH Distinguished Chair in the Humanities. The performances took place at the Zoellner Arts Center; Salerni conducted the **Monocacy Chamber Orchestra**.

Twentieth Century Commedia Dell'Arte

The opera came into being when Salerni needed a companion piece for his one-act opera, *Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast*, which—with a libretto by poet **Dana Gioia**—won the 2007 National Opera Association Chamber Opera Competition.

One evening Salerni and his wife, theater director **Laura Johnson**, were watching a DVD of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, which he describes as his favorite TV series: "I've probably seen every episode twenty times and know most of them by heart." As they watched the show, Johnson told him, "Boy, you need to do something like this. This would be a great companion piece."

"She thought the nature of the episode itself and the show's wonderful comic writing would lend itself to an opera," Salerni recalls, "and she was right."

Explains Johnson, "There's a wonderful tradition in opera of commedia-based pieces—comic opera, opera buffa—that works off of commedia dell'arte. I always felt that Carl Reiner's characters in *The Dick Van Dyke Show* episodes were truly the twentieth century offspring, descendants, of commedia characters."

The Inimitable Dick Van Dyke

The opera uses most of the characters from series—comedy writer Rob Petrie, his devoted wife Laura, human joke machine Buddy, man-hunting Sally, and the perpetually put-upon Mel—but Johnson instructed the performers not to mimic the original actors.

"My first direction to the singers was, 'We are not creating clones of these characters. We are using them as springboard, because the show is, after all, the basic material.'"

Salerni agrees. "No one can imitate Dick Van Dyke. He's inimitable. Rose Marie, Morey Amsterdam? They're iconic. Any attempt to even to try to look like them, mimic their body language, I think would be disastrous."

The cast of New York City-based opera singers includes two Indiana University music school alumni:

- [Branch Fields](#) as Joe Coogan
- [Jan Opalach](#) as Mel Cooley

The rest are:

- [James Bobick](#) as Rob Petrie
- [Nancy Allen Lundy](#) as Laura Petrie
- [Jacquelyn Familant](#) as Millie Helper
- [Cherry Duke](#) as Sally Rogers
- [David Gordon](#) as Buddy Sorrell

What Opera Gives Us

The plot of the original TV episode revolves around a box of love letters written as sonnets, which Rob's wife Laura has kept for many years. To write the libretto, Salerni turned to violinist and lyricist **Kate Light**, author of four volumes of poetry.

Light added a half-hour of new scenes to Reiner's 25-minute teleplay, including arias and duets that bring out the characters' deeper emotions.

“That’s something you can do in opera,” Light says. “Time stops, and the person has their thoughts, but no one else hears except the audience. Then, time continues. That’s something that opera gives us.”

Two Simple Motives

Back when Salerni was a doctoral student in composition at Harvard, he and his classmates would gather at the piano and play what he calls the “iconic” *Dick Van Dyke Show* theme music. The music was composed by **Earle Hagen**, composer of *Harlem Nocturne* and the themes for many TV series, including *The Andy Griffith Show*. A bit of Hagen’s theme for *The Dick Van Dyke Show* can be heard distinctly at the end of Salerni’s opera.

More musically astute listeners might detect phrases from the theme throughout the work. Salerni says the entire operatic score is derived from two simple motives. One of these is the first few bars of the *Dick Van Dyke* theme. “Harmonies, all the arias—all are derived from that.”

The other is the full-octave xylophone lick that occurs at the very end of the theme, which Salerni calls the *yump-bump*. “The combination of the opening melody and the *yump-bump* is all through the piece,” he says.

The Door Is Now Open

Salerni has no plans for another opera based on a TV series, but *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan* may have set the stage for other composers to turn TV shows into operas. At one of the performances, Laura Johnson recalls, an audience member speculated that a new genre of opera has been created: the “sitcom opera.”

“People standing around who overheard this remark just turned and started throwing out their favorite TV sitcom titles,” Johnson remembers. “‘You could do an *Odd Couple*; you could do this, you could do that.’ On a certain level, I could imagine that some of these could work very nicely. The door is now wide open.”

Will all this lead to a *Seinfeld* opera at The Met? It’s not inconceivable. Audiences at the premiere performances of *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan* responded enthusiastically. And since the prestigious **Theodore Presser Company** is going to publish the score, productions by other opera companies are likely to follow.

External Links

- [See more video clips](#) from the opera production of *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan*.
- [Watch the original episode](#) of *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan*.
- Visit the websites of [Paul Salerni](#) and [Laura Johnson](#).
- Visit the websites of poets [Dana Gioia](#) and [Kate Light](#).
- Learn more about TV composer [Earle Hagen](#).
- Learn more about the [National Opera Association](#), the Chamber Opera Competition of which was won by *The Life and Love of Joe Coogan*.

Music Heard On This Episode



Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast
Paul Salerni



The Laws of Falling Bodies
Kate Light