

Auden and Kallman

David Kettle

It was Stravinsky's right-hand man Robert Craft who suggested that Auden and Kallman's libretto for *The Rake's Progress* might be autobiographical. In his 1974 essay *The Poet and 'The Rake'*, he wrote: 'Wystan Auden's devotion to Chester Kallman was the most important fact of the poet's personal life, as well as the real subject of the libretto (the fidelity of true love).'

Is it just coincidence that the central couple in *The Rake's Progress* – a profligate, promiscuous ne'er-do-well and his faithful, ever-patient admirer – are just as mismatched as Kallman and Auden were? Could Auden and Kallman really have been writing about themselves?

The Rake's writers certainly made an odd couple – the thoughtful, reserved, High Anglican English poet Wystan Hugh Auden, and the flamboyant, extrovert American writer Chester Kallman, 14 years his junior. But a couple they were, from their first meeting in April 1939 – when the young Kallman, still a student, went to interview the already lauded poet for Brooklyn College's literary magazine *Observer* – right up until Auden's death in September 1973.

Below: Chester Kallman (left) and WH Auden in discussion with the composer Hans Werner Henze (right) at a BBC Radio studio, 1961.





Their relationship has been called a marriage, or more akin to that between a parent and child. They were lovers at the start – until, that is, Kallman went off with a British sailor who was visiting New York in 1941, provoking Auden’s fury. But the relationship survived. For Auden, Kallman represented a deep, almost spiritual love that he feared he would spend his life searching for, and Kallman too realised that he would never find another companion like Auden.

Nor was this early affair an isolated event. Kallman fell in love easily and frequently, and had many lovers throughout his 34-year relationship with Auden. It seems that Auden quickly realised that to have Kallman, he would have to tolerate his ways – his promiscuity, his endless spending, his insecurities. In Auden’s adoptive homeland of the USA, they lived together in New York and Ann Arbor, and they spent summers in Europe from 1948, first on the Italian island of Ischia and later in Kirchstetten, Austria, where Auden bought a home for them to live together.

It was Stravinsky who approached Auden in 1947 with the proposal to work on an opera based on paintings and engravings by Hogarth, and the poet had a large input into constructing the opera’s scenario. Did his enthusiasm for the project reveal how close he felt to its subject matter? In any case, it went without saying that he would involve Kallman, the arrival of whom took the composer by surprise. Stravinsky was initially disturbed when Auden notified him that he would be writing the libretto with his companion, but the force of Auden’s personality and his formidable reputation finally won the composer round.

In the end, it was Auden who got started first, completing Act I on his own in January 1948, then working with Kallman on Acts II and III, which they sent to the composer the following month. And in the end, Stravinsky was

Above: Before, c.1730–1 (oil on canvas), by William Hogarth (1697–1764).



delighted to have Kallman involved: he found him easier to deal with than the sometimes bad-tempered Auden, and easier to understand. For his part, Kallman was in his element, immersed in the world of opera that he loved, and full of gossip and wicked imitations of the composer with which to entertain his friends.

It might indeed be tempting to see Kallman in the debauched Tom Rakewell and Auden in the devoted Anne Trulove. But the reality is more complex than such simplistic correspondences. Yes, Chester Kallman was flamboyantly gay, and found it easy to attract friends and lovers. And yes, Auden's deep Christian convictions sat uneasily with his sexuality. But it wasn't just Kallman who took lovers. In New York, Auden was in a sexual relationship with Juilliard School student Keith Callaghan from 1948 to 1953, to which Kallman strongly objected. Auden's response, in a letter from 1949, is surprisingly blunt: 'Darling, what do you expect of me? One-night stands with trade? I have neither the taste, the talent, nor the time. A chaste fidelity to the Divine Miss K [Kallman]? Miss God, I know, says that, but I haven't the strength, and I don't think you, sweetie, have the authority to contradict me.' Hardly the words of a devoted partner pining for his one true love. And Callaghan was only one of many lovers that both men had in Ischia, Kirchstetten and elsewhere.

In professional terms, Kallman admitted early on that he felt he was, in his own words, 'writing in Wystan's shadow'. But Auden was supportive and encouraging, even hatching a plan to enter his companion in a prestigious poetry prize when he became visiting professor at the University of Michigan in 1941. He took Kallman's writing seriously, offering supportive yet honest criticism and recommending editors most likely to publish it. Auden and Kallman found they were happiest when collaborating, however, and after *The Rake's Progress* worked on several

Above: After, c.1730–1 (oil on canvas), by William Hogarth (1697–1764).

other projects, creating librettos for Hans Werner Henze's *Elegy for Young Lovers* (1961) and *The Bassarids* (1966), as well as numerous opera translations. It was Kallman who discovered Auden dead on the morning of 29 September 1973. Fifteen months later, at the age of just 54, he would be dead himself. Just as Auden tolerated all of Kallman's excesses in return for his life-long love, so Kallman cooked, organised Auden's life and, most importantly, provided a focus, albeit a flawed one, for the poet's need to express love. Although there's a lot of Tom Rakewell and Anne Trulove in their relationship, that's only one part of a more complex story.

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THE RAKE'S PROGRESS IN SCOTLAND

After its premiere in Venice, *The Rake's Progress* was quickly seen in New York and Vienna before its first British performance. That was given by Glyndebourne Opera on 25 August 1953 at the King's Theatre Edinburgh as part of the International Festival. The reception seems to have been mixed, some people not thinking it modern enough and others simply disliking the idea of modern opera, even with its 18th-century dressing. Elsie Morison and Richard Lewis sang Anne and Tom, with the American bass Jerome Hines as Shadow, and the great Scottish character tenor Murray Dickie as the auctioneer Sellem.

The 1967 Edinburgh International Festival focused on Stravinsky. The composer himself attended. It was therefore a great compliment to Scottish Opera that the Company's first visit to the Festival should be with *The Rake's Progress*. Tom was Alexander Young, the composer's own choice for the recording made a couple of years before. The Dundee soprano Elizabeth Robson sang Anne.

In 1969, Sadler's Wells brought *The Rake* on tour, enabling Glasgow and Aberdeen to see the opera for the first time, as well as Edinburgh. Roderick Brydon conducted, with Gregory Dempsey as Tom, Raimund Herinx as Shadow and Ann Howard as Baba.

In 1971, David Pountney was a young staff producer barely out of university when he created Scottish Opera's second staging. His imaginative, witty production introduced modern elements for the first time – Baba was silenced under a large commercial hair dryer! Alexander Young returned, as did Peter van der Bilt as Shadow, and Johanna Peters added Baba to the Mother Goose she had sung in 1967.

Stephen Fraser operascotland.org, the website for opera listings and performance history.