

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BOSTON
Opera in One Act

Libretto by Kenneth Koch
Music by Scott Wheeler

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CHARACTERS

in order of vocal appearance

The Opera	tenor
Henry	tenor
Sam	baritone
The Spirit of Boston	dramatic soprano
Beacon Hill	tenor
Robert Rauschenberg	baritone
Narrator	mezzo-soprano
The Storm	bass-baritone
Noon	tenor
Dawn	mezzo-soprano
Moonlight	soprano
Tinguely	tenor
Back Bay	mezzo-soprano
Wharf 1	tenor
Wharf 2	baritone
Niki de St. Phalle	soprano

Chorus

The Construction of Boston, like many operas and other works of musical theater, has changed its form several times. It began life in 1962, when the poet Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) wrote the text, in three inspired days, as a performance piece for the artists Robert Rauschenberg, Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint-Phalle. This first version of *The Construction of Boston* received a single sold-out performance at the Maidman Theater on 42nd St. in New York.

I discovered the play in Koch's book *A Change of Hearts*. It seemed ideal for music -- the verse was beautiful, the subject was funny and original, and the play had never been performed in Boston. Originally the chorus part was spoken by two men, but I was struck by its aptness for choral singing. So I asked for and received permission to adapt the text as a dramatic cantata for SATB chorus, soloists and an orchestra of 16 players.

In this form the work was premiered in January 1989, in a concert performance by the John Oliver Chorale. In January and February of 1990, the Charlestown Working Theater produced a staged version, in a much reduced version for 11 singers and two players, produced and directed by Ron Jenkins. For that production, I persuaded Kenneth to add some explanatory text. At first he balked at introducing a play he had written 27 years earlier, saying "It's like trying to think up an appetizer for my parents' wedding reception." When he was finally persuaded, we settled on the device of a Prologue, which begins with the lines "I am the Opera, here to explain myself./Operas don't usually do this, but it seemed a good idea." The music for this new Prologue was written during the first week of rehearsals in December of 1989.

In February 2002, Boston Conservatory produced the work for the first time with both full staging and orchestra -- that is, as an opera, in a production directed by Patricia Weinmann. For this production, I restored most of the original overture and orchestrated the sung prologue -- I consider this the final version of the piece, and that's the version we are presenting by Boston Cecilia in concert in April 2007, and recorded for Naxos.

When I began the piece in 1988, I phoned and met with Kenneth a number of times. My first question to him was what, in a sung version of the play, we could do about the three artist-builders. Could we change their names? Without hesitation, Kenneth said "we could make them gods and goddesses." But he didn't actually suggest any names. After I had begun composing, I suggested substituting Boston historical names, if possible ones that would preserve the scansion that was already in both the poem and my vocal lines. My only concrete suggestion was that "Rauschenberg" be replaced by (architect H.H.) "Richardson". Kenneth rejected this as adding another and conflicting layer of fantasy. Finally we decided to treat the characters as gods but to keep the original names, which seemed to be burned into the text. Since that decision, the names have increasingly acquired their own historical resonance, that of the art world of New York in the 1960s.

With the addition of the Prologue, I think of *The Construction of Boston* as a one-act comic opera rather than a masque or dramatic cantata, but it has elements of all these. Kenneth referred to it as "a postmodern baroque opera." I dedicated the work to my teacher Virgil Thomson; it takes some of its aesthetic from Thomson's Gertrude Stein operas *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All*. As in the Thomson-Stein works, aspects of nonsense and opacity of meaning are no obstacle to the most serious artistic intent. In *Construction*, there is also a political (or at least civic) message. In

Koch's play, to build a city is noble, and it's hard work. It's also a little silly, and more than a little destructive of natural beauty. The city can no longer be a home for "pure nature". There is no way "to get back bubbling brooks." But the city redeems itself by becoming a center for art and beauty, here represented by Niki de St. Phalle and her magic gun. The moral of this little fable is always applicable, and Boston provides the ideal setting, both because of the fanciful facts of its construction and because of its history of hospitality to the arts.

The music of *The Construction of Boston* is eclectic in the manner of many stage works. Certain bright triadic choral moments are virtually quotations from Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. The entrance of Rauschenberg is announced with Handelian choral counterpoint; that of Tinguely with a reference to chant (marked "Veni Tinguely Spiritus" in the score). The choral responses frequently recall Gilbert and Sullivan. The orchestral music for the building of the city refers to Brecht and Weill's imaginary city of Mahagonny. Smaller roles are characterized by bits of marches, waltzes, or a hint of barbershop quartet. These varied references, inspired by the vivid language and imagery of Koch's verse, culminate in a choral lullaby to the city whose tenderness, while perhaps unexpected, is not ironic.

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Scott Wheeler

2007

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2 OVERTURE

3 PROLOGUE

OPERA

I am the Opera here to explain myself.

Operas don't usually do this, but it seemed a good idea.

The best understanding of a work is always to be gotten from the work
Itself, so I have come out here on stage, personified, to give it to you.

Most operas have a theme of love or vengeance

But my theme is the construction of a city --

The earth's best city perhaps -- at least the coldest

And the darkest at some moments of the year

Which is, you've guessed it from my title, Boston.

Boston! the very word is like the bell

Of Old South Church that clangs in Copley Square!

Tonight, you'll see the city put together

As it was put together once before,

Not as in history it was, but as

It was on stage in 1962,

In New York, near where Forty-second Street

Heads for the Hudson River.

A poet wrote the script.

Three artists built the town, and will tonight.

First Rauschenberg,

Who brings the city people and gives it weather;

Then Tinguely, who brings Boston architecture,

Streets, buildings, docks and landfill, all its shape

Finally, there is Niki de Saint-Phalle

Who brings to Boston art, and beauty

With a magic pistol that she fires.

All this you'll see on stage; you'll see the city

Built by three artists in about an hour,

Which is not quite how it was built before

Then it was gradual, slower, and involved

So many complicated processes

That if you wished to see it thus again

You'd have to sit here for three hundred years.

As William Blake, when looking at a Tyger,

Did not consult texts in zoology, but cried instead

“Where did you get those eyes, that heart, that head?”
Or “Who could dare to make you, tyger, so?”
This is how I see Boston.
Though later one may look to history books
To try to get some clue as to what happened,
One's first impulse is, mine at any rate,
To cry out, as at woman, man, or tyger,
“Boston! who put the dark in you, and light?
What slammed the buildings down, who made the sight
Of Beacon Hill so bending and so bright
When the sun rises? Place, where did you come from?
Did He who made Aix en Provence make thee?”
The answer is what you are going to see.
See me, the Opera, and in seeing me,
See Boston, see three artists build it up.
Inspired to madness by my harmony.

Two present-day Bostonians, Sam and Henry,
Are walking through and marveling at Boston,
At what it is and how it was before.
When suddenly -- well, you will see what happens --
You'll see it rise and hover
Then settle into place before your eyes
So quickly that you may not realize
You had been longing for it like a lover.
Now I begin!

4 HENRY
Hello, Sam.

SAM
Hello, Henry.
See where Boston stands so fair
And cruel. Have you ever thought
Once there was nothing there?

HENRY
I never thought of that!
You mean there was mere space?
No Milk Street, S. S. Pierce, and no South End?
No place where the postman walks, no bend
To turn toward Needham, waiting for one's date
Or for one's fate, no building to sit in?

SAM
Well—even more—before the first man came to pass
This site and called it “Boston,” there was nothing—

Merely grass and sea: three high hills called Trimountain:
Beacon, Pemberton, Vernon,
And the Salt sea—

BOTH
wallahhah!

SAM
And the Cove.

HENRY
And were there nymphs
Inhabiting this grove?
And demigods, and gods
Of Ancient days?

SAM
There were. They built this city.
Not ancient Botticelli
Nor sky-inspired Bellini
Ever trembled to
A sight more beautiful
Than Boston in her Ancient days
And during her creation!
They say men came then who were more than men,
Who from one market reared a whole town up,
Made urban weather to give urban dreams
Built high brick walls where once there flowed fresh
streams.

BOTH
Ah, fair to tell!

SAM
But none were satisfied
Until one greater Spirit came, who changed
What they had done and made it beautiful.

HENRY
What kind of Spirit?

SAM
A woman—

HENRY
Beautiful?

SAM
Incredibly so—But

HENRY

What is happening?

SAM

—But now I feel faint

BOTH

Everything is growing dark

5 SPIRIT OF BOSTON

You speak of one men are not fit to know;
Such knowledge is not fit for mortal tongue.
Therefore this darkness. All must come again
As it has come before. You have undone
Three hundred years of building by your chatter
Of sacred things. This darkness signifies
Your crime; and your purgation shall be this:
You must see Boston built again
Just as it was before—perhaps, though, faster.
Oh, tremble, mortals! Now, let there be nothing
But grass, Trimountain, and the answering sea!

(Total darkness.)

6 SEA INTERLUDE 1

(Lights go on. Boston has vanished.)

7 PRIMEVAL PASTORALE

CHORUS

How strange! What freshness steals across my brow!
Delightful breezes, song of twittering birds,
And the faint smell of grass mixed with the spray.
See where the hawthorn blossoms, and the rose!
Ah in this wilderness let me remain
Forever! Here man's heart and brain find peace!
The year is 1630, peaceful year!
How lovely it is here!
And even nature seems to sing in joy!
Huge Beacon Hill cries out in gusty tones,

8 BEACON HILL

“How happy I am now, fat as a cow
And higher than a treetop's loftiest bough—
I'm made of mud and gravel
And squirrels up and down me travel

Which gladly I allow.”

CHORUS

The light summer day
Reflected in Back Bay (*Enter RAUSCHENBERG.*)
Shines like an eye—but stop—who comes here now?
What kind of man is he?
This seems to me no man but more than man!
9 Hail, Populator....
What shall you to this barren coastland do?

RAUSCHENBERG

Bring people!
And manufacture weather for the people.

CHORUS

He hopes to have a city here—
At least a little town—that’s clear—
Or else why bring the people down?

RAUSCHENBERG

That’s clear. Here!

(RAUSCHENBERG *brings people.*)

CHORUS

He’s bringing people.

RAUSCHENBERG

And weather too.

CHORUS

There is already weather.

RAUSCHENBERG

I’m bringing more. Cities need weather different from the country’s.
Otherwise why would people go to the country? I’m
bringing city weather here. I need it for the city.

10 CHORUS

Dark afternoons in autumn he
Brings to Boston peerlessly
And in winter with the hush
Of evening, miles of snow and slush!
Springtime warmth exploding late,
Daisies ’mid the fish and freight;
Sultry summer afternoons
To make the Boston citizens

Dressed in high style, dressed to the tens,
Uncomfortable as baboons—
Oh where has our lovely climate gone?
Ah Rauschenberg, have mercy!
Yet it's lovely,
And seems just right for Boston, I'll admit.

11 NARRATOR

I'd almost swear that I can hear
The weather speaking as he brings it here
To be a part of Boston—
There is a deep gruff voice:

STORM

"I am the storm!
I have a lovely loud mellifluous form
When I'm alone. Ah, but in the city
Bumped against the fire escape,
Mailbox and wall, I lose my shape,
And lightning rods poke into me—
Oh let me be a storm at sea!"

RAUSCHENBERG

"No, no,"

CHORUS

says Rauschenberg,

NARRATOR

And now we hear the summer noon
Whose voice is rather like a croon:

NOON

"Ah in the country let me be!
Tall buildings are the death of me!
They block my light and make me black
And humid: sweat runs down my back!"

CHORUS

But Rauschenberg says,

RAUSCHENBERG

"Noon, march on."

NARRATOR

And we hear the summer dawn
Complaining now to Rauschenberg:

DAWN

“Bob, this transfer is absurd!
In the country redbirds sing
When they see me: everything
Cries aloud for joy! But here amid
The stench of fish and people
Black roadway and black steeple
What function can I serve? I like to please.”

RAUSCHENBERG

You shall, my tease,
My love, my delectation!
When you come
The city’s heart shall, like a muffled drum,
Begin to beat, and as you go you’ll see
Proffered to you constantly
Every single business day
A great urban-souled bouquet
Of people and their actions!

CHORUS

That sounds fine!

NARRATOR

And now he brings divine
And holy moonlight, which says,

MOONLIGHT

“I
Am interrupted here,”

CHORUS

but Rauschenberg replies:

RAUSCHENBERG

“So by your interruption shall you shine
More brilliantly and wake a million dreams
Instead of one: besides which, we need moonlight in the city.”

[12] And now I have to stock
The city up with people!

CHORUS

We are Irish, we’re Italian,
We are British, why has he
Brought us here to stock this city
As if it were an aquarium,
As if we were human fish?

Every city needs some people,
And a racial mixture functions
Very nicely in America.
You should be glad to be together—
Very exciting things will happen!
Ah I can hardly restrain myself
From singing praise to Rauschenberg
When I see this racial mixture!
How enthralling! How exciting!
And, in the harbor, fish are biting!

RAUSCHENBERG
Now I think I've done—

CHORUS
All hail, great Rauschenberg!

RAUSCHENBERG
And yet there's only one

CHORUS
All hail to you!

RAUSCHENBERG
Thing wrong. We have the weather and the people,
But they, the people, have no way to get
Out of the weather or back into it.
We need some BUILDINGS!

13 VENI TINGUELY SPIRITUS

CHORUS
Tinguely, spirit of the air,
Now descend, and kill despair!
Aid us with your mighty hands
Molding earth to your commands!
O spirit, come!

(TINGUELY *appears.*)

TINGUELY
I am
Arrivèd!

14 Ah! what a lovely layout you have here!
What varied weather and what varied people!
What lovely mountains and what snappy sea!
I'll do it, Rauschenberg, for it inspires me!

Oh it sends great create-
Ive tremors all through me!

CHORUS

All hail to Tinguely! We need houses to live in.

TINGUELY

Peace, citizens—that's where I'll begin,
Quite naturally.

CHORUS

Tinguely, we need public buildings.

TINGUELY

Certainly! And ones with gildings—
That's my next endeavor!

CHORUS

I have never
Seen such immense intense inflamed construction!
Oh like the beaver speeded at his work
Is Tinguely the great architectural Turk!
See how he functions! ah! ah!

15 TINGUELY

But now we need more space!
How shall I solve this problem, tell,
For now we need more space!
Ha! Ha! I've got it! Now!

CHORUS

Help, help!
My God, Tinguely, what are you doing? What are you
trying to do? What are you going to do?

TINGUELY

The city needs more land area. Thus I am going to fill the Mill Pond with the top of
Beacon Hill. Two, I am going to fill the Back Bay with sand, from Needham, Mass.
Thirdly, I am going to extend Boston out into the harbor by means of docks.

CHORUS

O brave ambition!
And see how he proceeds,
Ah mighty Tinguely!

NARRATOR

Yet hear that cry
From Beacon Hill, which rends the sky,

BEACON HILL

“Oh do not dig me, Tinguely!
Oh Tinguely leave me be!”

CHORUS

But he remorselessly
Goes digging on

NARRATOR

and now he fills the Pond,
Which merely gasps, and now he smiles
To see poor Beacon Hill reduced by miles,

CHORUS

And now he turns another way
And contemplates the old Back Bay
And starts to fill it too.
At which the old Bay cries as to the skies:

16 BACK BAY

“Boston, all that I can say
Is, it’s grand to be a bay!
First you’re full and then you’re empty,
Then your friends go to the country—
They come back and fill you in:
All shall be as it has been.
Fill me up with sand and gravel,
No more boats across me travel—
And my chest where children play
Is black by night and brown by day.
Now I feel the sidewalks
Slapping down on me,
And I feel the buildings rising
Filled with chairs and advertising
Where was once a boat capsizing,
Splashes, and a frightened brow—
There is nothing like that now!
Oh the buildings are so heavy—
How they weigh me down!”

CHORUS

Now you’re the town,
Back Bay—you mustn’t complain!
It’s wonderful to be a part
Of an existent urban heart
Where on hot summer days
The heat sings its own praise

By sheer cement!

BACK BAY

“I know that’s true—
And I knew what you meant
Before you said it; still, my dear, do you
Know what it’s like to feel upon your body
A seven-story home where there was only foam
Before? What used to be my shore
Ça ne l’est plus encore!”

17 TINGUELY

Back Bay, you’re lucky. You and Mill Pond are.
I am going to put
Sumptuous buildings on you that
Will make you lovely as a star.

CHORUS

What? More?
What? More?

TINGUELY

Come buildings, ah my airy darlings, come!

CHORUS

... Oh hear, hear how that noise of bumping fills
The atmosphere! and feel that weight upon us!

TINGUELY

Now! Now! I’ve done it! they are a part of it!
Now to the seaside to fill in the sea!

18 SEA INTERLUDE 2

19 CHORUS

Fairest Tinguely, we the wharfs,
Splintery helpless wooden dwarfs,
Make appeal to you:
We love the water.

WHARF 1

And if you’d be our friend, great building man,

WHARF 2

O build us into her,

WHARF 1

thus let our natures

Sink down in her,

CHORUS

oh let us fill the harbor
Till Boston's two times Boston's present size.

TINGUELY

Sweet wharfs, I'm glad to see you are in love;
Your plan is just what I was thinking of.
Yes it's exactly what I thought about—
I'll build you up and spread you out
Until we have a coastline that's in fact
A kind of wood and water pact,
A marriage of the forest to the sea!

CHORUS (as water)

What do I feel sink into me?

CHORUS (as wharfs)

Ah, it's only we, dear harbor—
Oh sweetheart, sister, mother!

CHORUS

O close-clutched ecstasy!

TINGUELY

Well, wharf and water seem well satisfied—
I hope the city will be too. Now what have I to do
But plant a few more buildings here
And then rush back to Scollay Square
And, after, glance about
To see what things I have left out—
Ah, Commonwealth Avenue!
I must make you, and then I've finished!

20 CHORUS

See how the smiling city takes its shape;
Fair Scollay shining like a stem of grape;
And Beacon Hill, though cut into,
Still like an orange to the view
Of one who sees it from Longfellow Bridge!
O Tinguely, Rauschenberg, it's fine
And yet I can't help feeling
Something divine is gone: pure nature; roses; sparrows singing; redbird; bluejay; twit-twit-
twitter-twee!
It seems such a short time ago we had that here!
O tell me, how can we get back what's gone?
I miss the fresh air and the lovely feeling!

RAUSCHENBERG

Don't you like cities? It's
A fine time to ask me,
A fine time to bring that up!
Why Tinguely is already underground
Building the subway, and you ask me how
To get back bubbling brooks?

CHORUS

You don't know how?

(Enter NIKI.)

NIKI

Well, I know how!

21 What this town needs is beauty, what Boston needs is art!
Let every heart rejoice,
Rejoice in every part
Of Boston!

(TINGUELY emerges from the subway.)

TINGUELY

Well, the subway is finished.

NIKI

But Boston is not quite.

22 CHORUS

Men say she has a magic pistol
Which can turn plain glass to crystal
And can change an apple cart
To a splintery work of art!
Shooting at a person she
Makes him a celebrity!
Everything she does
Is not what it was—
Niki, bring us beauty's virtue!
Fire at that ancient statue—
Perhaps it has retained some value.

NIKI

Here are streams—there are flowers
For the Public Garden's bowers! Let the flowers fall!

CHORUS

O Niki de Saint-Phalle!
We knew that Boston could be beautiful,
But it was not until you came along.
Where were you, fairest of them all?

NIKI

Busy in Rome and Istanbul,
In Florence and in Paris;
Shooting landscapes in Shanghai
And portraits in Pekin;
Shooting rainbows in the sky,
Shooting the mosaics in
Saint Apollinaris.

23 I bring beauty and detail
By the shots which cannot fail
To delight the nation.
I make ugly statues fall,
And I give the palace wall
Lovely rustication.
I put features on the face
That is much too solemn;
I give a Corinthian grace
To the Doric column.
Why should I do anything
But be glad to make you sing
Praises to my shooting?

In my hand I have a gun,
And it is the only one
That gives columns fluting!
It's the only pistol which
Makes an empty canvas twitch
And become a painting!
It's the only gun that fires
Answers to the soul's desires—

CHORUS

Ah you are so pretty!

NIKI

Therefore on this summer night,
Citizens, for your delight,
I'll shoot up your city!

24 CHORUS

She'll shoot up the city.

There she goes!

From the top of old Beacon to the muddy Back Bay
There's a mumble of pleasure on this sunny day
As the shooting is heard to resound boom boom—
As the shooting is heard, like the cry of a bird,
And it's covering old Boston Ground
With love and pleasure.
Well has she finished?

NIKI

Yes.

25 And now, at last, my time is past, I must be drifting homeward—
I go to treat art's plastercast, both Parisward and
Romeward!
Farewell, delicious citizens brought here
By Rauschen—Rauschen—what's his name? And dear
Great heavy streets of Tinguely, oh, farewell!

CHORUS

Now she drifts out to sea like a great bell!
How grand she is and fair!

26 We who feel our new creation
Run through us like syncopation
In the arms and tail
Praise her without fail!

NIKI

Oh love which makes us new—
Newer than Rauschen—what's his name?—

CHORUS

Oh, Niki, love for you,
It is which makes us new!
And like a nightmare which does not come true
This Boston now, which seems so old, is new
As if we saw the place for the first time
From the sublimest view-
Point: Mystic River Bridge—
And here is what we see, and it is beautiful,
Niki de Saint-Phalle, all because of you:
You have shot Boston full of love for you!
Ah, see how fair—
The outsize obelisk of Bunker Hill!
All hail to Tinguely for this masterpiece!
Below, on the left, the Boston Naval Shipyard,

Where Rauschenberg's creations slip
Up and down riggings of a full-rigged ship!
Beneath hot summer days he's given them.
What sight so fair
As in this air
A seacoast made of ships!
To Rauschenberg then praise!
And there North Station, Beacon Hill,
Public Garden, swan with bill,
Restaurants where eat their fill
Fishermen and salesmen!
Here is Boston Latin tall,
There majestic Faneuil Hall,
Here's the Charles, and there's the Mall
And the Charles River Basin!

Who can count its beauties wholly?
Let us summarize them solely
Lest our praise proceed too slowly,
Niki dear, to you!

(TINGUELY *and* RAUSCHENBERG *kneel to* NIKI.)

27 TINGUELY
Niki, all this city's buildings
With their warm old-fashioned gildings
I dedicate to you.

RAUSCHENBERG
Niki, all these sunlit people
Or in shadow of a steeple
I consign to you.

NIKI
And yet without you two, what could I do?
We must have people and they have to live
Inside of something: therefore I shall praise
You equally, for fashioning this maze!
For I cannot exist without the rest
Of life, although I am perhaps what's best.

28 Now, citizens, sunset cover you
Oh fairest sunset cover you
Now fairest Boston mother you and cover you and smother you, fair Boston cover you,

CHORUS
Now, citizens, sunset cover you
Oh fairest sunset cover you

Now fairest Boston mother you and cover you and smother you, fair Boston cover you,

NIKI

cover you,

And until then, ADIEU.