Synopsis

Act One

After years of exile in Australia, Sweeney Todd returns to London accompanied by Anthony, who saved Todd from drowning. Todd wanders down Fleet Street and into Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, where he inquires about renting the room above the shop. Mrs. Lovett says the room is haunted: Years ago a young family, Benjamin and Lucy Barker and their daughter, lived there. But Judge Turpin exiled Benjamin Barker to Australia, so that he could rape Lucy, and the apartment has been empty ever since. Mrs. Lovett suddenly realizes that Todd *is* Barker. She tells him that in his absence his wife was poisoned and their daughter Johanna was taken in by the judge as his "ward." Todd vows revenge on the judge, but has no means. Mrs. Lovett suggests that he revive his barbershop.

At Judge Turpin's, Johanna is kept isolated from the world. Anthony catches a glimpse of her through a window and is instantly transfixed. The judge appears and warns Anthony to stay away.

In town, Todd and Mrs. Lovett witness the street barber Pirelli peddling his "miracle elixir" with the help of his assistant, Tobias. Todd challenges Pirelli to a shaving contest, which Todd easily wins. Soon after, Pirelli arrives at the pie shop to reveal that he is in fact an old colleague and that he knows Todd is really Benjamin Barker. Threatening to reveal Todd's identity, he lays out a blackmail scheme that induces Todd to kill him.

As Judge Turpin lusts after Johanna, the Beadle advises a visit to Todd's barber shop on Fleet Street to tidy up. Todd is thrilled to finally have the judge at the barbershop, but is interrupted as Anthony bursts in to tell Todd about his plan to elope with Johanna. The judge recognizes Anthony and leaves in a rage. Furious,

Todd throws Anthony out and swears revenge on society rather than just those who have wronged him. Mrs. Lovett suggests that they join forces, using the flesh of Todd's victims to fill her pies. Todd gleefully agrees.

Act Two

The pie shop business is booming, and Mrs. Lovett has hired Tobias to work in the shop. Carrying out his new plan, Todd kills anyone who comes in to his barbershop, providing more than enough meat for Mrs. Lovett's pies.

Anthony discovers that Johanna has been committed to an asylum and tells Todd, who hatches a plan so that Anthony can free Johanna. Todd then writes a letter to Judge Turpin, revealing Anthony's plan in hopes of luring the judge back to his barbershop. The Beadle visits the bakehouse, having been alerted to foul odors by a beggar woman. He promptly becomes Todd's next victim, which leads Tobias, horrified, to discover the whole operation.

Anthony rescues Johanna, releasing the other inmates from the asylum in the process. Anthony and Johanna rush to the shop, where Johanna hides while Anthony goes to find Todd. Todd returns to find the mad beggar woman in his parlor. He kills her in haste as he hears the judge arriving. Todd then reveals his identity, as he satisfies his vengeance in the judge's death. Todd joins Mrs. Lovett in the bakehouse and, to his horror, recognizes the body of the beggar woman as his wife Lucy. Mrs. Lovett admits that she concealed Lucy's identity from Todd. Todd then takes Mrs. Lovett into his arms and kills her, committing his final murder. Tobias, having witnessed everything, emerges from the dark to slice Todd's throat with his own razor. ✖

Program Notes

By Peter Burwasser

Sweeney Todd first appeared in 1846 in a British "penny dreadful," a kind of literary equivalent to a comic book series, as a character in "The String of Pearls: A Romance." The demon barber of Fleet Street has maintained a robust presence in English popular culture ever since, with appearances in several stage adaptations, film, and even in a ballet score by Malcolm Arnold.

Steven Sondheim was directly inspired to create his own epic version after seeing a stage adaption of the Sweeney Todd story written by Christopher Bond in 1973. Sondheim saw the play in London that same year: "I had heard it was Grand Guignol, and it was something that just knocked me out." Sondheim instantly sensed that adding music would enhance the theatrical power of the tale ("it struck me as a piece that sings"), while at the same time maintaining the Shakespearean complexity of the character that Bond had introduced to the story.

The tale of a psychotic mass murderer, abetted by his dotty landlady and pie-baking co-conspirator, flowed easily from bawdy British music hall tradition, as well as from the descriptions of the sordid urban underbelly of 19th-century London in multiple works of Dickens. But when the musical hit the Broadway stages in 1979, Sondheim's grand rendition of the tale, greatly enhanced by director Hal Prince's sprawling production, shocked and titillated American audiences unused to such blatantly macabre material on the musical-theatre stage. Despite tremendously positive critical response, the musical closed after just a little over a year.

It may well be that regular opera goers are more used to complex, murderous protagonists than the average Broadway maven. Stylistically, *Sweeney Todd* has at least as great a ratio of sung to spoken words as many operas in the core repertoire, to use one yardstick, and certainly more than any of Sondheim's other musicals. The first staging of the work in operatic form took place in 1984 at the Houston Grand Opera, and it has been replicated many times since, around the world.

Perhaps the work was always destined for the operatic stage. It has been reported that on opening night, Schuyler Chapin, the one-time general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, was accosted by a critic who wanted to know why he had not presented *Sweeney Todd* at the Met. Chapin responded, "I would have put it on like a shot if I'd had the opportunity. There would have been screams and yells but I wouldn't have given a damn. Because it is an opera. A modern American opera." ✖