

SUSANNAH  
PROGRAM NOTES by Stephen Lovely  
CEDAR RAPIDS OPERA THEATRE  
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If you didn't know much about American opera, and someone offered you tickets to *Susannah*, by Carlisle Floyd, you could be forgiven for responding like this: “*Susannah*? Are you sure you don't mean *Shenandoah*? Are you talking about a Broadway musical? I didn't even know there was such a thing as American opera. Hold on. *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin. Wasn't that an opera?”

It was. *Porgy and Bess* premiered in 1935, and is often considered the greatest of American operas. But it wasn't the first, and it wasn't the last. Operas by American composers appeared as early as the 1730s. *Darby's Return*, by William Dunlap, premiered in New York in 1789 in the presence of newly-elected president George Washington. In 1845, William Henry Fry's *Leonora* premiered in Philadelphia. Many American composers wrote operas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they were laboring under European artistic hegemony, and failed to engender a distinctive national style. Besides, operas were supposed to be written in Italian, French, or German. How could you work toward a distinctive American style when writing operas in English was taboo?

During the nineteenth century, Russian and Czech composers such as Glinka and Smetana wrote operas in their native languages, cracking the Italian-French-German cartel. In England, in the 1870s and 80s, Gilbert and Sullivan churned out witty, comic operettas in English that became hugely popular in the United States and profoundly influenced the burgeoning development of American musical theater, which was also assimilating minstrel shows, tent shows, vaudeville, African-American spirituals, Yiddish theater, ragtime, and – most importantly – jazz. American opera got off the ground in the early twentieth century when composers of popular music like Jerome Kern and George Gershwin aspired to create extended musical narratives that would draw on American musical styles – jazz, blues, ragtime – and American colloquial speech to tell stories

about American people. Gershwin conceived of *Porgy and Bess* as a fusion of classical and popular music traditions, and while he approached the project from the popular side, other American composers like Marc Blitzstein and Virgil Thomson approached from the classical side, consolidating a bipartisan cross-fertilization between Broadway and opera that continues to this day, and often renders the genres indistinguishable.

Out of all the American opera composers of the post-war period – Gian Carlo Menotti, Leonard Bernstein, Douglas Moore, Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, Samuel Barber – perhaps only Carlisle Floyd achieved Gershwin’s ambition in a single work. In 1953, Floyd was in his mid-twenties and teaching at Florida State University when a friend suggested he write an opera based on the apocryphal story of Susannah and the Elders. Floyd transferred the story to the Tennessee mountains, and, in telling it, drew on his experience growing up the son of a Methodist minister in small-town South Carolina, where he had been exposed to itinerant preachers, revival meetings, creek baptisms, and the intense religiosity of the Bible Belt. Floyd had also paid attention to the way people talked: the characters in *Susannah* speak in a breezy, hill-country dialect which locates the story firmly on American soil and creates an eerie surface over the undercurrents of envy and lust, persecution and cruelty.

Floyd chose the *Susannah* story, and wrote his libretto, while immersed in and disturbed by the political climate of the early 1950s. McCarthyism, the demagogic anti-communist mania spawned by the emergence of the Soviet Union as a global, atomic power, a Maoist victory in China, the outbreak of the Korean War, and a senator hungry for attention and power, led to widespread paranoia and the persecution of hundreds of innocent citizens. It’s estimated that over 10,000 people lost their jobs during this period due to alleged involvement with communism. Floyd has said that McCarthyism and the fear it caused “permeated everything at that time...it took all kinds of forms: suspicion, and the idea that accusation was all that was needed as proof of guilt. It terrified and enraged me.”

The idea that an accusation, in certain social, political, or religious circumstances, is enough to constitute proof of guilt is an important one in *Susannah*. When the church Elders of New Hope Valley see Susannah bathing naked in a creek and run off to tell the townspeople, no one questions their account. No one asks for specifics. Apparently it’s

irrelevant that Susannah was not bathing in public, as accused, but on private property, her *family's* property, deep in the woods. As Susannah's brother Sam says, people "like to believe what's bad."

Sam is a drunken misanthrope, a rambling hunter-fisher-trapper who has little to do with the society of New Hope Valley. But Sam is perceptive and wise. He understands human psychology, and he has a lucid perspective on the town's hypocrisies. He's sweet with his sister, and we're meant to see his gentle, custodial nature in sharp contrast to the rough, condemnatory zeal of the townspeople, and especially of the Elders' wives, who have had it in for Susannah since the curtain went up. In Act 1, Scene 1, Susannah is "flushed with high spirits and excitement" at a square dance, uncommonly beautiful in a brightly-colored dress. She's getting way too much attention from the menfolk. And we're not just talking about the young bachelor bucks. The four men we see maneuvering to get into Susannah's square are married church Elders. Floyd is telling us something about the ubiquitousness of human fallibility, the power of biology, and the ease with which we slip into hypocrisy when we rush to judgement – this last point made quite explicitly by none other than Jesus Christ. The ringleader of the Elders' wives, however – the vindictive, slanderous Mrs. McClean, who might very well be Floyd's stand-in for Joseph McCarthy – has apparently never sinned, and can always be counted on to cast the first stone. Watching Susannah dance, Mrs. McClean denounces her as a "shameless girl," and a "wench." She mocks the cut of Susannah's dress, the way she throws her head back in exhilaration as she dances. "That pretty a face must hide some evil," Mrs. McClean says, and in this pronouncement we find what is surely the central idea of the opera, the bass note against which all others resonate, the  $E=MC^2$  of the *Susannah* universe. Which might be written as:

To accuse/pray for = to desire/be jealous of

This may look funny at first, but when you read or hear the opera with these equivalences in mind, you begin to see how much everything derives from them. All four church Elders clearly desire Susannah sexually, and after they discover her bathing in the creek – when they are confronted directly with their desire – they become indignant and

outraged; in a twisted act of transference, they blame Susannah for their lustful stirrings and declare that *she* must be brought to repentance. Though Mrs. McClean doesn't desire Susannah sexually, one can tell from the envious, spiteful language of her condemnations that she desires to be *like* her – young, beautiful, fawned over by her husband – and since this isn't possible, the next best thing, apparently, is to label Susannah wanton, wicked, in need of saving.

If you're still doubtful, look at the magnificent community church meeting in Act 2, in which the fiery, self-important Olin Blicht preaches in the stifling heat, sweating, breathing heavily, eyes gleaming, terrifying the congregation – Susannah among them – with images of hellfire and the gnashing of teeth. As offering plates are passed, Blicht exhorts the congregation to “dig deep...Remember, what you give to me you give to the Lord.” He reminds them of the “widder”, who “give all she had.” When it's time for the sinners to come forward, and Susannah does not, he tells the congregation, “There's one in our midst tonight who pays no mind to the woin' o' God in her heart.” It's unclear at this point who exactly is doing the woin'. It's impossible not to read this scene as a community's attempt to seduce an individual, and if you were a certain kind of English professor, you might be tempted to call Blicht its phallus. As the congregation chants “Come, sinner. Come, sinner. Come, sinner. Come!” Susannah floats toward the pulpit, but when she sees Blicht's “smile of triumph” she snaps out of her trance, shocked at how close her compliance has brought her to submission. She turns and flees, leaving Blicht – the thwarted suitor – angry and frustrated.

Later that night, when Blicht goes to Susannah's house to press his case, he finds her desolate and alone, singing “The Trees on the Mountain are Cold and Bare.” Notice how much work this song does here, what a skillful dramatist Floyd is. Not only does the song give us insight into the character of Susannah's absent mother, who taught her the song (the Jaybird song similarly brings to life Susannah's father) but the song's barren imagery – “darkness around me an' not even a star...The pore baby fox lies all cold in his lair/His Mama jes' vanished an' left him there” – is meant to be contrasted directly with the much brighter imagery of Susannah's Act 1 aria, “Ain't it a Pretty Night?” Here, the sky is “all lit up with stars...like a great big mirror reflectin' fire-flies over a pond” and the valley is resplendent with “the sound of crickets...the smell of pine straw...soft little

rabbits and bloomin' things...the mountains turnin' gold in the fall." Prior to Susannah's persecution, she is full of life, vibrant, imaginative, sensitized to the beauty around her, and the natural world, by projection, is equally vibrant, teeming with life and possibility. By the middle of Act 2, Susannah has been beaten down, pummeled, robbed of her self-esteem. The summer has "vanished," she sings, and turned to "bleak December."

Floyd believes that the strictures and doctrines of fundamentalist Christianity do not save souls, as they claim to do, but ruin souls, strip them of their most exceptional human capacities. Floyd portrays the scorching fundamentalism of New Hope Valley as opposed to, and at war with, the natural world: the harvesting of souls, in *Susannah*, is akin to strip-mining or clear-cutting. Elder Ott informs us that the creek used for baptisms the previous year has dried up, and Sam warns Susannah that the townspeople will "turn this valley into hell" in their effort to make her repent. But Floyd intends Susannah to resist their assault, defy it, and survive – though far from unscarred – with her integrity intact. Susannah is Floyd's heroine, his artistic flip of the middle finger to McCarthyism. When Sam reminds Susannah she will continue to be ostracized until she makes a public confession, she tells him, "There ain't nothin' for me to confess...I still don't feel no sin in me, an' I cain't lie jes' fer them." It's hard not to contrast her incorruptibility with the pathetic acquiescence of Little Bat McClean, who, intoxicated with and perverted by the accusatory vitriol around him, claims falsely to have been seduced by Susannah. It's also interesting to hold Susannah and her attackers to the standard of the American playwright Lillian Hellman, who, in 1955, defiantly told the House Un-American Activities Committee, "to hurt innocent people...in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions."

*Susannah* isn't perfect. One can't help reading the libretto without feeling that Blich's seduction of Susanna is preordained and inevitable, which makes his inner conflict and distress less believable than it might have been. On the other hand, Blich is written with complexity. He has dimensions and depth, as do Susannah and Sam. The Elders and their wives do not: they're flat characters, pre-programmed to condemn, a compliant, robotic zombie-mob of sin-haters. Floyd might have given us a few Christians worthy of admiration. Floyd might also have written a scene in which one of the Elders'

wives breaks ranks with Mrs. McClean, or at least wrestles with the possibility, and/or a scene in which this Elder wife seeks Susannah out with an olive branch or an expression of empathy.

But this would have been to necessarily enlarge the opera, which Floyd may have been reluctant to do. Susannah packs a punch precisely because it is short and spare, as lean and chiseled as Greek tragedy. Opera emerged in the early seventeenth century out of a series of discussions among Florentine poets and musicians who theorized, correctly, that music played a key role in the performance of Greek tragedy. Watching *Susannah*, following the muscular contours of its scenes, listening to Floyd's music – the dramatic, lashing rhythms, thunderous cadences, sweeping melodies, sprightly phrases, exquisitely beautiful songs; the multi-layered textures, somber, then silken, pompous, then plaintive, flavored throughout with echoes of square-dance music, Quaker hymns, gospel anthems, and Appalachian ballads – in the presence of *Susannah*, we're in the presence of an American tragedy as forceful and arresting as anything Greek, written by a composer and dramatist who would have made both Gershwin and Sophocles proud to be his predecessors.