

*Virginia  
Opera*

*Susannah*

Carlisle Floyd

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# SUSANNAH

by  
Carlisle Floyd

Libretto by Carlisle Floyd  
after  
the apocryphal tale of  
Susanna and the Elders

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# SUSANNAH

## Premiere

First performance on February 24, 1955, at Ruby Diamond Auditorium,  
Florida State University, in Tallahassee, Florida.

## Cast of Characters

<b>Susannah Polk</b> , a young woman.....	Soprano
<b>Olin Blicht</b> , an evangelist preacher.....	Bass-Baritone
<b>Sam Polk</b> , Susannah's brother.....	Tenor
<b>Little Bat McLean</b> , son of Elder McLean.....	Tenor
<b>Elder McLean</b> , a church elder.....	Baritone
<b>Elder Gleaton</b> , a church elder.....	Tenor
<b>Elder Hayes</b> , a church elder.....	Tenor
<b>Elder Ott</b> , a church elder.....	Baritone
<b>Mrs. McLean</b> .....	Mezzo Soprano
<b>Mrs. Gleaton</b> .....	Soprano
<b>Mrs. Hayes</b> .....	Soprano
<b>Mrs. Ott</b> .....	Mezzo Soprano

## Brief Summary

Setting: New Hope Valley, Tennessee, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

Susannah Polk is enjoying herself at a church square dance unaware that the women are gossiping about her. A traveling preacher, Olin Blicht, arrives for a revival meeting and hears talk about Susannah. The next day the church elders visit a local creek, looking for a place for baptisms. At the water's edge they spy a naked Susannah bathing in the creek. They feel lust, but mask their reactions by expressing outrage at her wantonness. Susannah is unaware that she was observed. The Elders return to town and spread the story of Susannah's wickedness. Elder McLean and his wife bully their son Little Bat into a false confession that Susannah has seduced him. The villagers shun Susannah and agree that she must repent or be expelled from the church.

The revival begins and the Reverend Olin Blicht exhorts the congregation to repent their sins, eventually focusing on Susannah. She is drawn in by the fervor of the moment at first, but pulls away because she knows she has done nothing wrong. Blicht follows her home to continue to entreat her to repent. She is overcome by her inability to prove her innocence and begins to sob. Blicht tries to comfort her but is also attracted to her. Too broken to resist, Susannah allows him to lead her into the house. After seducing her Blicht knows that she was an innocent. He tries unsuccessfully to convince the Elders of this fact. Susannah tells her brother Sam about her seduction. He grabs his gun and heads for the creek where Olin Blicht is conducting baptisms. He shoots and kills Blicht before running away. The villagers confront and menace Susannah at her farm. She laughs derisively and drives them away with a gun. She remains alone in the doorway of the farm, standing strong, upright and resolute as the curtain falls.

# SUSANNAH

## Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

### Opening Music

The short, passionate prelude is expressed in three sections. Thematic motifs are introduced that will be developed later in the opera. The opening section is dynamic with harmonies based on fourths and fifths. The jagged chords suggest conflict and an impending sense of foreboding. The middle section is an expansive lament which is based on the Act II aria, "The Trees on the Mountain." The prelude ends quietly with a coda of dying phrases.

### Act I

The first act contains five compact scenes. The opening music of the first scene reflects the lively square dance occurring outside the New Hope Church. The country fiddle tune was inspired by a passage from J. S. Bach's E-major Violin Partita. It is a hot summer evening and the wives of the Elders begin to gossip about one of the young women enjoying the dancing. Susannah Polk seems to be the center of attention and many of the men are vying to dance in her square. There is a marked contrast with the cheerful dance music when Mrs. McLean sings "She's a Shameless Girl," making malicious comments about Susannah's face, dress and manner. The other Elder wives follow her lead and nod their heads in agreement. The energetic music trails off with the entrance of Olin Blitch, an itinerant preacher who has come to conduct a revival meeting. A hymn-like melody with brass chorale characterizes Blitch in "I am the Reverend Olin Blitch, and I've come to New Hope Valley to cast out devils and conquer sin...." A rousing ensemble ensues. Blitch takes an interest in Susannah, learns of her family background from the Elders, and promises to pray for her soul. He eventually joins the dancing and dances with Susannah. The scene ends with Mrs. McLean's words that Susannah will come to no good.

Afterwards, Little Bat McLean accompanies Susannah home and they talk about the dance. Little Bat fancies Susannah but is afraid of her brother Sam. He tells Susannah that his parents don't like him visiting the Polk farm because Sam drinks and there is bad blood in the family. Susannah, not taking Little Bat too seriously, sings a lyrical aria inspired by the beauty of the summer evening. Susannah's aria, "Ain't it a pretty night?" is the centerpiece of Act I. The aria has spare, open harmony and is resplendent with lovely floating pianissimos. It builds to a wonderful full-voiced climax that represents Susannah's strength of will as she yearns to see the world beyond the valley. Sam returns home and Little Bat runs off. Brother and sister sing a cherished folk song, "Oh, Jaybird Sittin' on a Hick'ry Limb," which returns their focus to the valley and represents an idyllic innocence.

The orchestral timbre that opens the next scene captures a sense of the flowing, sparkling stream. This music draws our attention to the place where Susannah bathes. Susannah's voice is heard, humming the "Jaybird" song. The character of the music becomes more dynamic and discordant with the appearance of the Elders who are searching along the creek for a place to conduct baptisms. As the Elders spy Susannah, who is unaware of their presence, the music builds to a climatic frenzy. As they become aware of their aroused passions, Elder McLean takes the lead in denouncing the sight as a

blasphemous outrage. Parroting the words of Elder McLean, the four Elders chant in unison, "This woman is of the devil. It is a shameful sight to behold..." As the group retreats, intoning "The valley must be told," the orchestra continues to express the Elders' outrage, the unison motif suggesting a *dies irae*. The scene ends with the sound of Susannah's voice, innocent and blissfully unaware.

The mood of scene four is established by an orchestral introduction that reflects the heavy censure and indignation that infuses the Elders and their wives. The congregation has gathered for a church supper. Mrs. Mclean is smug and gloating in her malevolence. As leader of the group of wives, her words begin a round robin of spiteful comments. The Elders comment separately wanting Susannah to confess her sins. Susannah arrives, unaware of the undercurrent swirling about her. She soon realizes that everyone is hostile to her presence. Elder McLean announces that she is unwelcome at the gathering. As the reality of her shunning sinks in, a powerful orchestral statement accompanies her as she puts her hand over her mouth and runs away. The somber scene dies away highlighted by the quiet rumble of the kettle drums.

In the last scene of Act I, a shaken and bewildered Susannah has returned home. Little Bat McLean arrives and excitedly relates what the Elders have been telling everyone. Susannah cannot understand how bathing in the stream was wrong. The Elders are saying she's evil and has the devil in her. Susannah is stricken by Little Bat's words. Then he reveals that his mother and father also forced him to say that she had seduced him. Infuriated by this lie, Susannah heatedly sends him away. Sam awakens and Susannah runs to him. He has heard the whole story. He tries to calm her by explaining that he sees this as human nature, "It's about the way people is made, I reckon, an' how they like to believe what's bad." Susannah asks what she can do, but Sam replies that she can only wait and see how it plays out. In the meantime, "They'll turn this valley into hell." She begins to sob and cries out, begging him to sing the jaybird song. The music swells into concluding chords which ends the act.

## Act II

The first of five scenes begins with repetitive, static chords dominating the music, which reflects Susannah and Sam passing the time, waiting. In the opening dialogue, Susannah asks how long it will be before something happens. Sam replies that the congregation is waiting for her public confession. She replies that she has nothing to confess. The music builds to a climax when she cries out, asking what she has done to deserve this. The orchestra sounds an unsettling tone when the preacher and the baptisms at the creek are mentioned. Further conflict is reflected in the music when Sam says he must be away overnight. Susannah pleads with him not to leave her alone, but Sam says he must check his traps. He tells her that she should go to the revival meeting to show she is not afraid. The music reflects her almost panic-like reaction to his suggestion. Her unease and distress continues but she finally agrees. The music calms as Susannah acquiesces and the scene comes to an end.

The revival meeting in the next scene is stirring example of American verismo. The congregation of New Hope Church begins with a chorale, "Are You Saved From Sin." Reverend Blich's voice is heard speaking over the choral music. As he continues, he delivers his message with both sung and spoken dialogue. In an extensive soliloquy he whips himself into a fervor of religious passion, preaching about Judgment Day. At his

signal the congregation quietly begins the hymn, "Come, sinner, tonight's the night." As the chorale builds in intensity, individuals come one by one to kneel before Blitch, seeking salvation. The singing of the congregation infuses the music with passionate zeal. Eventually Blitch directs his attention to Susannah alone. He raises his hand to stop the hymn, and everyone in the church looks directly at Susannah. He continues his entreaty, asking her to confess her sins and beg forgiveness. The chorus resumes the hymn. She walks toward him, following his words as if mesmerized. The congregation's hymn intensifies. At the climactic moment, when Blitch begins to smile in triumph, Susannah cries out on a high note, "No... No!" and runs out of the church. Blitch immediately gives a benediction, his voice betraying great frustration, bringing this dramatic scene to a rapid end.

A short time later Susannah sits alone on her front porch. In a forlorn manner she sings a ballad-like aria, "The Trees on the Mountain." Stark, evocative chords from the solo harp introduce this beautiful aria, which portrays Susannah's desolation, sorrow and fear. Olin Blitch arrives at the conclusion of the aria, startling her. He has come to continue his appeals. After complimenting her singing he insists that she save her soul by confessing her sinful ways. Susannah is adamant that she has done nothing wrong and has not sinned. Spare, open, repetitive chords punctuate their confrontation, which builds to a crescendo that has Susannah sobbing with a sense of despair. Blitch, exhibiting compassion for her distress, begins to leave and then hesitates. He seems momentarily conflicted and then returns. He sings the aria, "I'm a Lonely Man, Susannah," abandoning his spiritual manner and reaching out to her as a human being and a man. The emotionally spent Susannah does not resist his advances. Her exhausted state of mind is perfectly reflected in the music as the slowly descending notes of the muted strings and flutes accompany the pair as Blitch leads Susannah into the farmhouse.

The next day, scene four begins with Blitch alone in the church in great distress, begging for forgiveness in a prayer of entreaty, "Hear me, oh Lord." Through his seduction of Susannah he is painfully aware that she had been an innocent. He hopes to convince the Elders and their wives that Susannah has been done a terrible wrong. The Elders, their wives and Susannah arrive at the church. The music conveys an implicit tension when Blitch tells them he knows that Susannah is blameless and they should all ask for her forgiveness. The Elders and wives are incredulous and suspicious, asking Blitch how he knows this. He replies that the Lord spoke to him during the night while he was praying for Susannah's soul. The Elders scoff at this explanation and they all get up and leave the church. Blitch asks Susannah to forgive him. She says she's forgotten what the word means and laughs bitterly. As she leaves, Blitch falls on his knees, sobbing.

The following morning Sam has returned home a little tipsy. Susannah is angered by his appearance and snaps at him when he asks if anything is wrong. When she tells him what happened the previous night he is aghast and swears he will kill the preacher. Susannah does not take him seriously and makes a flippant reply before going into the house. Sam hesitates only a moment before taking down his gun and running toward the creek with a steadily increasing pace. Susannah calls Sam in to dinner and comes outside when he does not respond. The music increases in intensity and builds as she stands still with apprehension. A shot rings out. Susannah falls to her knees and cries out, "Oh Lord, I never meant him to do it!" Little Bat runs up with the terrible news, saying that Sam shot the preacher who died asking for forgiveness and asking the Lord to bless her. Then

he warns her that, “The folks is comin’ here to git y’!” and tellin’ Susannah she’d better run. Her demeanor becomes stern and uncompromising as the mob arrives. She laughs at them and their threats. She cries out for them to leave and brandishes her shotgun. The mob backs off and leaves, muttering and threatening, while Susannah laughs derisively. She sees Little Bat lingering nearby and beckons to him seductively. When he comes up to her and tries to embrace her, she fiercely slaps his face and laughs scornfully as he runs away. As he disappears she stops laughing and straightens up, standing resolutely in the doorway. She remains there, alone, unyielding and strong, as the curtain falls.

# SUSANNAH

## Historical Background

The decade of the 1950s was a special time in the history of American music. It was a golden era for musical theater and a period when opera and musical theater were moving closer together. There was a desire to achieve a truly American operatic style and many creative efforts to achieve this end were generated. Such operas as *The Tender Land* by Aaron Copland and *The Ballad of Baby Doe* by Douglas Moore were written during this period. Other gifted composers of this generation were such luminaries as Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Robert Ward and Gian-Carlo Menotti.

Carlisle Floyd embarked on his career during these exciting times. He was just 28 years old in 1955 when his opera SUSANNAH made its debut in Tallahassee, Florida. The following year it won popular and critical acclaim at its New York premiere, winning the New York Music Critics' Circle Award. The New York City Opera production traveled to Belgium in 1958 for the Brussels Exposition, establishing Floyd on an international level. Since 1955 SUSANNAH has been given more than 300 productions and seen more than 800 performances worldwide.

The impetus for writing SUSANNAH originated in 1953 in a conversation with a friend at Florida State University who thought an updated version of the Apocryphal Book of Susanna would be a worthy subject for an opera. The conversation stimulated Floyd's imagination so thoroughly that he became determined to undertake the venture. His knowledge of the biblical story of Susanna was rudimentary and he did not actually read the Apocryphal tale in detail until after he wrote his libretto. Floyd considers his libretto to be entirely original.

SUSANNAH is consistent with many other operas and stage works of the period in its folkloric quality, lyricism and harmonically conservative music. Some consider it a folk opera, but Floyd identifies it as a musical drama. In his search for authenticity he wrote a plainspoken libretto that resonates with a Southern hill country dialect. The rural setting and parlance was familiar to him from childhood experiences. Much of the opera's music is based on hymn tunes and folk melodies. The vocal lines are both sung and half-spoken. As Floyd stated, "In my opera there is quite a bit of spoken text, *Sprechstimme*, and also half-sung lines. When it comes to full singing, I want it to come from the spoken to the fully-sung text as if to say 'Now do you get the point?'" Additionally, he felt it was essential that the text be idiomatically correct. Floyd's vocal lines present authentic speech regulated by pitch and rhythm, all contained within a dissonant harmonic and polytonal musical language.

The opera was written during a period called "the red scare," a time of public fear and government investigations into perceived Communist infiltration in American government and society. One name associated with this period was Senator Joseph McCarthy whose accusatory style and investigative practices came to be known as "McCarthyism." Floyd said, "The McCarthy era did more than anything else to put a cloak of silence over the country in terms of defending a situation. That underlies very much the story in *Susannah*. The fact that nobody really speaks up or defends her for fear of being accused themselves is all it takes to make a witch hunt." Floyd's opera was a reaction to

the excesses of the McCarthy era without being overtly political. Floyd is engaged more in revealing the timeless issues of human behavior and the flaw in some human minds that sees evil where none exists. He shows that jealousy has its roots in envy and that baseless accusations, intolerance, and mob rule are the natural consequences of zealotry. As Floyd once said, "Zealotry is one of the most frightening elements in the human mind. It proceeds on the assumption that there's one right way, and it's mine. It's a specter that never really goes away. And it's pure projection - you project onto others your own guilt or fears."

SUSANNAH is an opera firmly rooted in American musical tradition and its plot, stage action, characterization, diction, and music are artfully blended. The composer wrote both the libretto and the music and created a highly unified piece of theater. The characters are compelling, the heroine strong and resolute and the underlying themes timeless. The nearly through-composed music is clearly of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but remains understandable and accessible to the opera-going public. Carlisle Floyd's SUSANNAH is one of the masterpieces of 20<sup>th</sup> century American opera and has established itself as a classic in the grand opera tradition.

## **Susanna and the Elders**

### A Tale from the Apocrypha

The origin of the word **Apocrypha** comes from the Greek word *apokryphos*, which means “hidden things.” It is the word used by Saint Jerome early in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century to identify the biblical books that were part of the Greek version of the Old Testament but were not part of the Hebrew Bible. Saint Jerome’s larger task was to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin. His finished work was called the Vulgate, the Roman Catholic Bible. The Apocryphal texts were made part of the Catholic Bible. Over the centuries the status of the Apocryphal material has been discussed and debated by church scholars and theologians. Among its many literary forms are popular narrative, religious history and philosophy, morality stories and poetry. Since the 19th century, the Apocrypha has been studied for its historical value. It is considered by some to bridge the gap between the end of the Old Testament narrative and the beginning of the New Testament. Much of the disagreement about these texts centers on whether they can be considered sacred canon. During the Reformation these texts were removed from the new Protestant Bible. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the King James Bible, the standard used by English-speaking Protestants, placed the Apocrypha in an appendix. The Apocrypha are still part of the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.

### The Story of Susanna and the Elders

In Babylon there lived a wealthy man of the Jewish people named Joakim. He was married to Susanna, a beautiful and pious woman raised according to the Laws of Moses. Because Joakim was held in such high esteem among his people, the Elders met at Joakim’s house for meetings and to hold their trials. There was a walled garden attached to the house and it was to this garden that Susanna would retreat when the Elders were in attendance. Two of the Elders became aware of Susanna and observed her going into the garden. After a time they began to lust after her and decided to sneak back to spy on her and hope for a time to catch her alone. One hot day, Susanna and her two maids went to the walled garden and Susanna decided to bathe. She sent her two maids out for soap and olive oil and told them to lock the gates as they left. She then prepared to bathe.

The two Elders, who were hiding in the garden, saw their opportunity and revealed themselves. They told the shocked Susanna that they greatly desired her and they wanted her to sleep with them. If she refused they would say they found her in the garden committing adultery with a young man. Susanna refused them, and cried out. The elders promptly shouted over her cries for help. When people gathered, the Elders made their accusations. Everyone was shocked, for she was thought to be a virtuous woman. The two Elders made their case and demanded her death. The people believed the Elders and agreed she should be stoned. Susanna proclaimed her innocence and appealed to God for help. The young Daniel was inspired to come to Susanna's aid. He stopped the proceedings and chided the hastiness of the crowd. Daniel asked that the two Elders be questioned separately. When Daniel asked each one about the details of their story, the Elders contradicted each other. Daniel knew then that they were lying. Daniel proclaimed their crime and the people realized the Elders were guilty of bearing false witness. Susanna was set free and returned to her overjoyed family. The two Elders were condemned to the same punishment Susanna would have received – they were stoned.

## Notes on Susanna and the Elders

The story of *Susanna and the Elders* has been the subject of hundreds of paintings, many of them found in the great art museums of the world. Old Testament figures and themes were a popular subject in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings. Susanna's story not only captured the imagination of artists but it created an opportunity to paint the female body, both naked and partially clothed. Some of the paintings focus on Susanna alone, but many show the two Elders as well, either as menacing figures in the background or intimidating Susanna directly.

Painters of *Susanna and the Elders* included such Old Masters as Titian, Tintoretto, Rubens, Van Dyke, Rembrandt, and Veronese, to name only a few. One artist currently of great interest whose first known painting was *Susanna and the Elders* is Artemisia Gentileschi, who painted this subject in 1610 at the age of seventeen. She has become something of a feminist heroine since being brought forward as an example of a highly talented but neglected woman painter of the past.

There is also a musical adaptation of the biblical *Susanna and the Elders* by Georg Friedrich Händel. Händel composed his oratorio *Susanna* in 1749.

## An American Master: Carlisle Floyd

Carlisle Floyd was born in Latta, South Carolina, on June 11, 1926. His father was a Methodist minister and his mother was a pianist who was his first piano teacher. He was a creative child interested in both piano and painting. Settling on music, he attended Converse College at sixteen and studied piano with Ernst Bacon, following him to Syracuse University in 1945. Floyd received both his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from Syracuse University. He began teaching piano at Florida State University in 1947, eventually adding instruction in composition and opera workshops. He remained at Florida State until 1976 when he accepted a professorship at the University of Houston. While at Houston, Floyd helped establish the Houston Opera Studio, a joint venture between the University of Houston and Houston Grand Opera.

Opera had always been of particular interest to Floyd and he began writing opera early in his career. He also wrote his own librettos from the outset. This facilitated the smooth integration of text and music that is a hallmark of his operas. His earliest operatic efforts include *Slow Dusk* in 1949 and *Fugitives* in 1951. Floyd's first major success was the opera *SUSANNAH*, a work he produced when he was just 28 years old. The opera premiered at Florida State University on February 24, 1955. Eighteen months later it had a second premiere at New York City Opera where it received a rousing reception. In 1957 Floyd won the New York Music Critic's Circle Award and the opera was chosen to be the American operatic entry at the 1958 Brussels World Exposition. *SUSANNAH* quickly became a part of the operatic repertoire and has gone on to become Floyd's best-known and most frequently produced work.

In succeeding years Floyd produced many works, including *Wuthering Heights*, *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*, *The Sojourner and Mollie Sinclair*, and *Markheim*. His next unqualified success came in 1970 with the opera *Of Mice and Men*, based on the John Steinbeck novel. Floyd's long and successful association with Houston Grand Opera began in 1976 when its director, David Gockley, having seen *Of Mice and Men*, convinced Floyd to relocate to Houston. Floyd composed a series of operas for Houston Grand Opera. First was *Bilby's Doll* in 1976, based on the Esther Forbes novel, *A Mirror for Witches*. In 1981, he premiered *Willie Stark*, based on the Robert Penn Warren novel, *All the King's Men*. Floyd then began a major rewrite of his 1962 full-length opera, *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*. By its completion Floyd had essentially created an entirely new opera. It enjoyed enormous success in 1991 and heightened critical interest in him as a composer. Floyd retired from teaching in 1996 but did not stop composing. He received a joint commission from five opera companies to write the opera *Cold Sassy Tree*, based on the novel by Olive Ann Burnes. Its premiere in 2000 was the crowning achievement of his illustrious career.

Floyd has also composed several non-operatic works. These include two song cycles, *The Mystery*, written for soprano Phyllis Curtin, and *Citizen of Paradise*, based on the writings of Emily Dickenson and written for mezzo soprano Suzanne Mentzer; the cantata *A Time to Dance*, written for chorus, bass-baritone soloist and orchestra; a piano sonata and a variety of orchestral pieces. Over his career Floyd has won numerous awards, honors and commissions. In 2001 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

# SUSANNAH

## Discussion Questions

1. How does the opera SUSANNAH compare with its literary source, the biblical tale of *Susanna and the Elders*?
2. What are the similarities between Susannah Polk and the biblical Susanna?
3. How does Susannah Polk's story conclude compared to the biblical Susanna?
4. Does the character of Olin Blicht appear in *Susanna and the Elders*? If so, which character does he correspond to?
5. How does the use of the Southern mountain dialect add to the realism of the story?
6. Do you think Susannah Polk is a victim?
7. The composer, Carlisle Floyd, says that the Susannah he created is a heroine. Do you agree with him?
8. The Revival Meeting in Act II is considered by many to be one of the finest examples of dramatic realism in American opera. What elements in this scene contribute to its drama and realism?
9. What do you consider to be the major themes of the opera?
10. How do you evaluate the character of Olin Blicht? Is he a villain? Is he honorable?
11. Compare the differences between the Reverend Olin Blicht and the biblical Daniel in determining Susannah's innocence.
12. Discuss the symbolic importance of the creek in the opera and describe the nexus of events that involve the creek.
13. In what way is Susannah Polk an "outsider?" Is she viewed that way by the villagers? Does she come to view herself in that manner?
14. Describe how Olin Blicht is in conflict with himself. How does the music further his characterization?

## A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



# The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*), which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice, which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b><i>Soprano</i></b>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<b><i>Mezzo-Soprano</i></b>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<b><i>Tenor</i></b>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<b><i>Baritone</i></b>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<b><i>Verdi Baritone</i></b> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<b><i>Bass</i></b>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<b><i>Buffo Bass</i></b> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	<b><i>Basso Cantate</i></b> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

# Opera Production



Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team, which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions. As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.