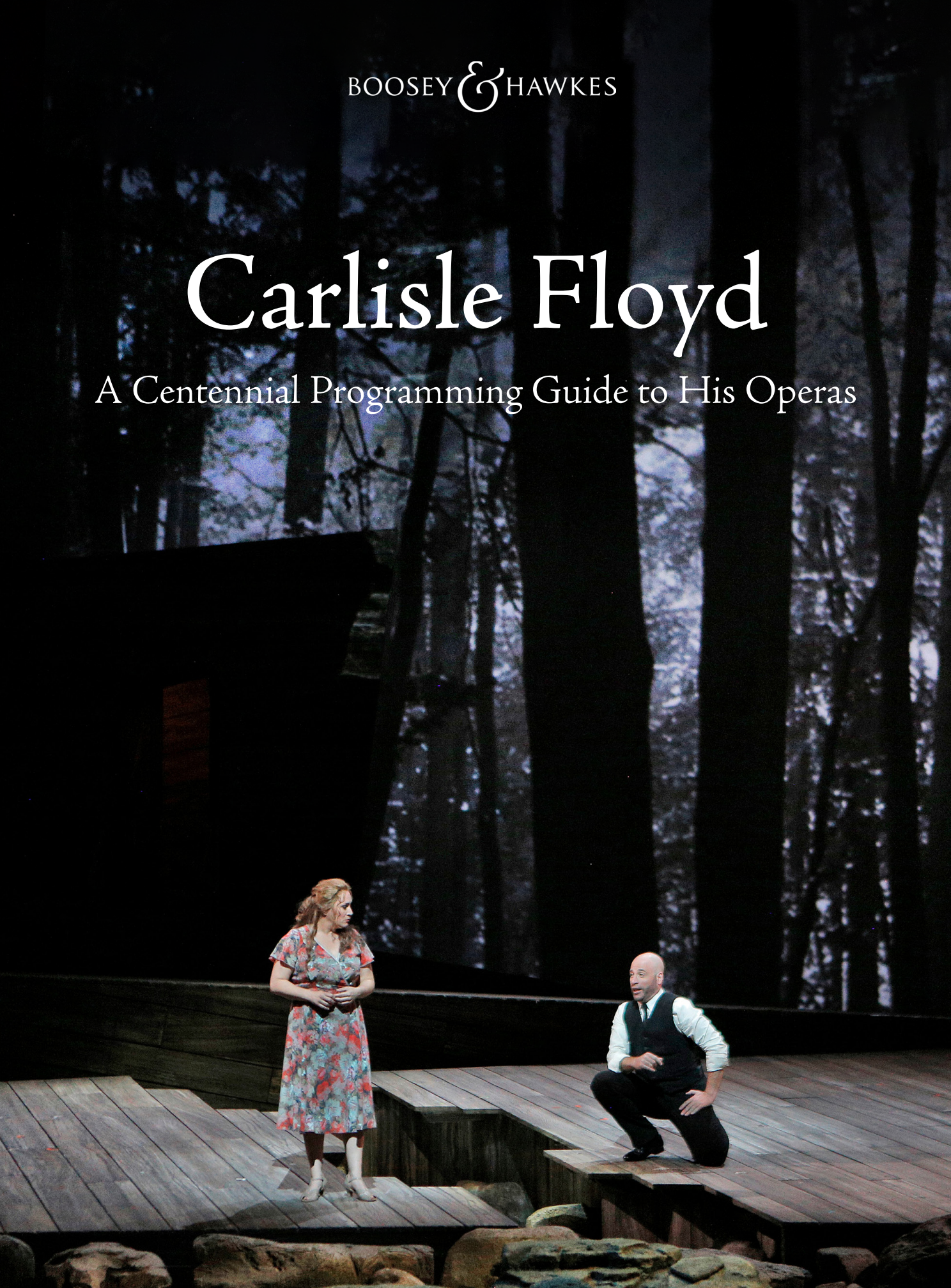


BOOSEY & HAWKES

Carlisle Floyd

A Centennial Programming Guide to His Operas



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Composer Carlisle Floyd (Jun 11, 1926–Sep 30, 2021) created a distinct operatic idiom that embraced his American heritage—stories full of lively characters, English speech patterns, and music from 42nd Street to Appalachia. The legacy of his music and mentorship produced generations of artists who today celebrate their own culture, stories, and sounds, and earned Floyd the title of “Father of American Opera.”

Floyd’s stage works feature clear, strong narratives, with artfully crafted librettos written by the composer himself that often reveal penetrating social commentary. Several of his operas, like *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men*, are bastions of the repertory, but a closer look at the catalog reveals many gems, ripe for rediscovery, that champion relatable stories and charismatic music.

We present this guide to Floyd’s opera catalog and invite you to join international celebrations marking the composer’s 100th birthday in 2026. Explore Floyd’s 12 operas on the following pages, including large-scale classics and their chamber reductions, as well as one-act and monodrama stage works.



Carlisle Floyd, Father of American Opera, 1956
PHOTO: EVON STREETMAN

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Cover image: Patricia Racette (left) as Susannah Polk and Raymond Aceto (right) as Rev. Olin Blitch in *Susannah* (San Francisco Opera, 2014); photo by Cory Weaver
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Carlisle Floyd: Forging a Path for American Opera

An Introduction by David Gockley

One of my life's greatest gifts was to know Carlisle Floyd, both from the personal and professional perspectives.

When I first heard the two *Susannah* arias ("Ain't It a Pretty Night" and "The Trees on the Mountain") sung at the piano by my then-wife, soprano Patricia Wise, it made a huge impression on me—a 26-year-old operatic baritone who was in the process of transitioning from singing to administration. Such unabashed lyricism argued that there *could* be a viable alternative to the atonality and serialism that had hijacked the compositional style advanced by the academic establishment in the US and Europe. At the time, most "modern opera" (in my view, at least) simply kept the public away from the opera house in droves! Carlisle's music, as I came to know it, was largely melodic and influenced by folk sources familiar to us all. It is "in our bones." And his stories cut to the core of the American experience.

I had fortuitously landed a job as business manager of the Houston Grand Opera beginning in the summer of 1970, the year Carlisle's *Of Mice and Men* premiered in Seattle to considerable acclaim. The following year, the Houston board appointed me their general director, and one of my first actions was to plan a trip to Cincinnati to attend *Of Mice and Men*. My ulterior motive was to introduce myself to the composer, who would be present at the old "Zoo Opera," an amphitheater located in the Cincinnati Zoo, where the music was punctuated by the calls of exotic birds and the trumpeting of bull elephants. After the performance, I chased down the nattily dressed composer and blurted out that HGO wanted to commission an opera from him to commemorate the 1976 American bicentennial, to which he responded graciously while remaining non-committal.



"Carlisle's music was largely melodic and influenced by folk sources familiar to us all. It is 'in our bones.'"



Patricia Racette
(center) in *Susannah*
San Francisco
Opera, 2014
PHOTO: CORY WEAVER



David Gockley (left) and Carlisle Floyd (right) discussing the set of *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*, 1991
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

Back in Houston, I pursued Carlisle's publisher numerous times, and within several weeks the commission was a done deal. The result would be *Bilby's Doll*. By that time, I was convinced I wanted to make HGO the leading commissioner and producer of American opera, and guess who was going to be our poster boy!

Right off the bat, we scheduled *Susannah* for the summer of 1972 and *Of Mice and Men* for March of '73, during which time *Bilby's Doll*, a Gothic tale about a young girl unjustly accused of witchcraft, was being composed. *Bilby's Doll* divided critics along the lines that would haunt the composer and us over the years: the New York School vs. Everybody Else. Bill Bender of *TIME* magazine wrote that too much of the action took place offstage, and Allen Hughes of the *Times* said it might be rescued by 45 minutes of cuts. Meanwhile Ann Holmes of the *Houston Chronicle* heralded it as a "triumphant addition to the repertoire." The composer did make cuts for the subsequent performances in Omaha, where it was a big hit. Carlisle otherwise maintained his satisfaction with the opera, and it awaits a first-class revival.

Two other significant works preceded *Of Mice and Men*: *Wuthering Heights* (1958) in Santa Fe and *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* (1962) at New York City Opera. The former was recently issued on a recording by Milwaukee's Florentine Opera to substantial acclaim.



"*The Passion of Jonathan Wade's* powerful score, including larger than life choral numbers and touching arias, perfectly juxtaposes the intimate and the epic."



HGO would commission a total revision of *Wade* in 1989 that I recall was a totally satisfying experience. Its powerful score, including larger than life choral numbers and touching arias, perfectly juxtaposes the intimate and the epic. It is Carlisle's biggest piece.

When Carlisle was appointed to be MD Anderson Chair Professor at the University of Houston, he moved to Houston from Tallahassee. Our friendship took a giant leap forward, with three-times-a-week "hard singles" tennis matches and countless dinners and lunches, one of which gave birth to the idea of the Houston Grand Opera Studio, conceived by us as a top-ranked young artist training program, drawing on the resources of both of our institutions. Its alumni today comprise a "Who's Who" list of prominent American operatic artists, including Eric Owens, Denyce Graves, Joyce DiDonato, Jamie Barton, and Ana María Martínez.

In 1980, Carlisle had another idea for an opera. He asked me what I thought of *All the King's Men*, the 1946 novel by Robert Penn Warren, a semi-fictionalized story inspired by the life of the colorful Louisiana governor Huey P. Long, a character immortalized on film by Broderick Crawford. The idea led to the creation of *Willie Stark*—

Carlisle Floyd with music director Patrick Summers in rehearsal for *Cold Sassy Tree*, 2000
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES





Carlisle Floyd and David Gockley on the set of *Willie Stark*, 1981
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

what a dream role for a baritone, and Timothy Nolen made the most of it. The opening night audience sprang to its feet when Carlisle took his bow, as they did when the opera played at the Kennedy Center a couple of months later. Director Hal Prince created a vivid production that is etched on my mind to this day.

Our final collaboration was Carlisle's only full-scale comic opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*, a hilarious adaptation of the Olive Ann Burns novel that centers on the May-September romance involving the boisterous septuagenarian Rucker Lattimore (premiered by Dean Petersen) and the much younger Miss Love Simpson, a meaty role for Patricia Racette. It brims with delightfully colorful characters and enough down-home humor to keep you rolling in the aisles.

Carlisle's final opera, *Prince of Players*, was premiered in Houston when he was 90 years old, a miracle that can be heard on Florentine Opera's premiere recording, which was nominated for two 2021 GRAMMY awards: Best Contemporary Classical Composition and Best Opera Recording.

I personally hope the American Opera Establishment—not to forget the world's—will rally around its composer laureate in 2026–2027. *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men* will surely receive their due. It's the others that should be widely showcased in the manner they deserve. They are among the greatest treasures of our culture.

David Gockley was the general director of Houston Grand Opera from 1972 to 2005, and of San Francisco Opera from 2006 to 2016.

Classic Operas



Singer Robert Moulson and Carlisle Floyd (at the piano) preparing for *Of Mice and Men*, 1973
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES



“Ain’t it a pretty night
The sky’s so heavy with stars tonight
That it could fall right down
out of heaven”

Susannah

(1953–1954) 105’

A musical drama in two acts

Text Libretto by the composer, based on the story “Susannah and the Elders” from the *Apocrypha*

Scoring Major roles: S, T, BBar Minor roles: 2S, M, A, 3T, 2Bar; chorus; dancers
2.2.2.2-4.2.3.1-timp.perc-cel-harp-strings

Version for reduced orchestra available:

2.1.2.1-2.2.2.0-timp.perc-harp-strings

Written during the McCarthy era, *Susannah* is loosely based on the Apocryphal tale of “Susannah and the Elders.” The opera centers on a young and innocent woman of humble origins who is targeted as a sinner in a small mountain town of New Hope Valley in Tennessee. Floyd embraced folk music and Broadway influences—a vibrant and unexpected choice in the 1950s, when American serious composition was exclusively concerned with German expressionism. Conductor Patrick Summers explains, “Carlisle was one of the people who started to meld the worlds of musical theatre and opera. He made it okay to tell American stories in an American idiom.”

Susannah was chosen to represent American music and culture at the World’s Fair at Brussels in 1958, with a production by Frank Corsaro that featured Phyllis Curtin and Norman Treigle. Today, *Susannah* is one of the most performed American operas, and has come to symbolize the American voice in opera.

Nancy Gustafson (left) as
Susannah Polk and Mark Baker
(right) as Sam Polk in *Susannah*
Houston Grand Opera, 1996
PHOTO: JIM CALDWELL

Scan to listen to an
excerpt of *Susannah*.



Samuel Ramey (left) as Rev. Olin
Blitch and Renée Fleming (right)
as Susannah Polk in *Susannah*
Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2002
PHOTO: DAN REST
PHOTOGRAPHY

Notable Moment: “Ain’t it a pretty night?”

Susannah (soprano), Act I, Scene 2

Affectionately referred to as “the soprano’s national anthem,” this ravishing piece is arguably the best known of Floyd’s arias, and frequently excerpted to sing on stage with orchestra or in recital. Phyllis Curtin once stated, “It is perhaps one of the most natural expressions of anything I ever sang.” The beautiful young Susannah Polk sings this touchingly innocent aria to the night sky and dreams of her future beyond her home in New Hope Valley—all the more poignant considering the events that follow.

Soprano Renée Fleming on Carlisle Floyd

“Carlisle Floyd’s greatest achievement, to me, was in forging an American musical language for opera. His landmark works *Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men* are rooted in American folk music and culture, while rising in expressive power alongside the grandest works of the lyric stage, earning a permanent place in the American canon. I was fortunate to sing *Susannah* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, and in the work’s Metropolitan Opera premiere, early in my career. Singing in English on stage was a rarity for me then, unlike now. Carlisle brought these characters to life, drawn richer and fuller in music, as Thomas Hart Benton did in paint.”



Of Mice and Men

(1969) 120'
 Opera in three acts
Text Libretto by the composer, based on the novel by John Steinbeck
Scoring S, 4T, 2Bar; male chorus
 2.2.2.2.2-4.2.2.1-timp.perc-harp-cel-strings

Version for reduced orchestra available:
 1.1.1.1-2.1.1.1-timp.perc-cel-harp-strings

Of Mice and Men is based on John Steinbeck’s tale of two migrant ranch workers in pursuit of a simple dream: to own a small house and farm of their own. George and his traveling companion Lennie—who has the physique and strength of a giant, a child’s mind, and a love for soft things he can pet—have constant problems with their employers, as Lennie unknowingly (and eventually, tragically) creates difficulties for George and himself.

Floyd was drawn to this suspenseful and ultimately heartbreaking story, creating a dramatically taut stage work that *Musical America* proclaimed as “more powerful a realization of Steinbeck’s story than either the original short novel or the play subsequently made from it.” The composer’s score paints vivid portraits of the characters, with rhythms and musical textures that evoke agrarian life and open spaces.

Above: Anthony Dean Griffey as Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*
 Opera Australia, 2011
 PHOTO: BRANCO GAICA

Opposite page: Anthony Dean Griffey (left) as Lennie and Gordon Hawkins (right) as George in *Of Mice and Men*
 Houston Grand Opera, 2002
 PHOTO: GEORGE HIXSON

Scan to listen
 to an excerpt of
Of Mice and Men.



Conductor Patrick Summers on *Of Mice and Men*

“*Of Mice and Men* I would venture to say is Carlisle’s masterpiece. I think it’s just perfection—a perfect marriage of material to the emotional world of a composer. Based on Steinbeck’s great novel, it’s about the way people are perceived, and it really brought out some kind of visceral emotion in Carlisle.

What he found in *Of Mice and Men* was a way to illuminate characters from within, musically. Each of the characters is very distinctive, very honest—which are very Floydian qualities. But the opera hits you so deeply because he really went within each person. Lenny particularly has a musical language that totally describes him. We understand Lenny from the inside, not as an observing voice or ego. I find *Of Mice and Men* just so brilliant in that way.”

Notable Moment: “You bet it’s gonna be different!”

George (bass-baritone), Act II

Migrant ranch worker George Milton takes care of his friend Lennie Small, a giant of a man with the mind of a child. They have always dreamed of having a place of their own, but fellow worker Slim says he’s never met a ranch hand who has made that dream come true. George insists that he and Lennie are different—they will not settle for the lonely life of a ranch hand.

“Mr. Floyd’s music is run through with delicately astringent harmonies and ethereal inner voices in the orchestra. Coplandesque passages and fleeting folkloric tunes evoke *Dust Bowl America*.”

—The New York Times





Wuthering Heights

(1957–1958) 130’

A musical drama in a prologue and three acts

Text Libretto by the composer, based on the novel by Emily Brontë

Scoring 2S, M, 4T, Bar, B; chorus

2.2.2.2-2.2.2.0-timp.perc-harp-strings

Floyd’s deeply affecting opera based on Emily Brontë’s novel tells of two remarkable characters, Cathy and Heathcliff, whose all-consuming love affair ultimately wreaks havoc not only on their lives, but on the lives of those around them. Cathy and Heathcliff, childhood companions, fall in love. Their disparate social statuses lead them on divergent paths, and Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights. When he returns three years later a wealthy man of the world, Cathy has married and refuses his advances. When he in turn marries another, Cathy cannot go on living and dies in Heathcliff’s arms. In the final scene, Heathcliff asks the ghost of Cathy to haunt him forever. The opera’s score conveys the windswept Yorkshire moors and the passionate, rebellious nature of the doomed lovers.

“Floyd’s opera is both spectral and emotionally intense ... The writing has about it a florid brilliance entirely in keeping with the themes of love in vain, betrayal and striving for the unattainable.”

—Music Web International

Lilia Milek (left) as Cathy and Guido Kunze (right) as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*
Mittelsächsische Theater Freiberg, 2012
PHOTO: DETLEV MÜLLER

Scan to listen to an excerpt of *Wuthering Heights*.

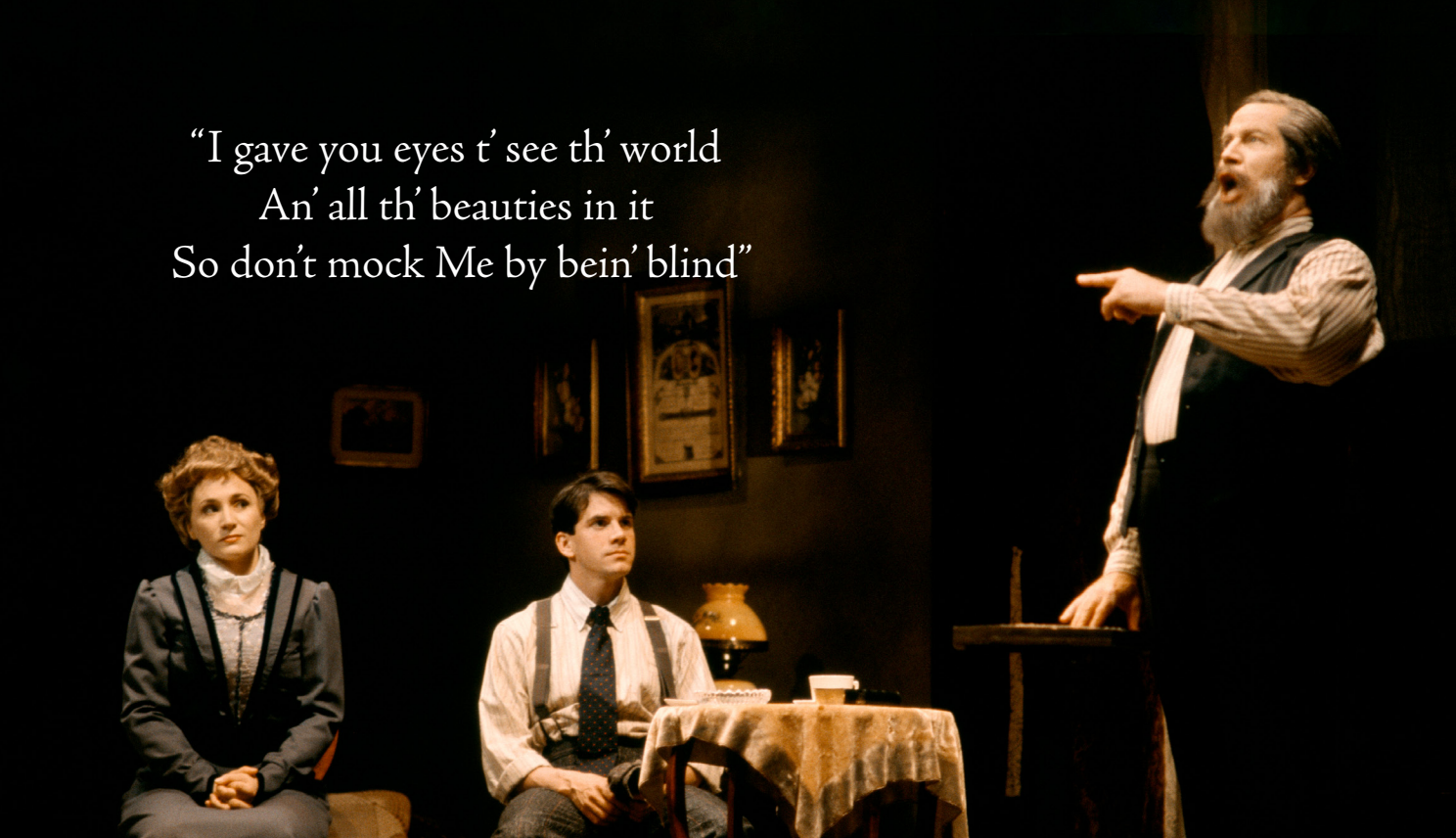


Notable Moment: “It would not degrade you to love me now”
Heathcliff (baritone), Act III, Scene 1

Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights after overhearing his beloved Cathy say that marrying him would degrade her. He has now returned after making his fortune; in this passionate aria, he pleads his case to Cathy, asking her to come away with him.

Guido Kunze as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*
Mittelsächsische Theater Freiberg, 2012
PHOTO: DETLEV MÜLLER

“I gave you eyes t’ see th’ world
An’ all th’ beauties in it
So don’t mock Me by bein’ blind”



Above:
Left to right: Patricia Racette
as Love Simpson, John
McVeigh as Will Tweedy, and
Dean Peterson as Rucker
Lattimore in *Cold Sassy Tree*
Houston Grand Opera, 2000
PHOTO: GEORGE HIXSON

Opposite page:
John McVeigh as Will
Tweedy in *Cold Sassy Tree*
Atlanta Opera, 2008
PHOTO: TIM WILKERSON /
THE ATLANTA OPERA

Scan to listen to
an excerpt of *Cold
Sassy Tree*.



Cold Sassy Tree

(2000) 190’
A musical play in three acts
Text Libretto by the composer, based on the novel by
Olive Anne Burns
Scoring 2S, 2M, 2T, Bar, BBar; chorus
2.2.2.2-4.2.2.1-timp.perc-pft-cel-harp-strings

One of the composer’s favorites among his own operas, *Cold Sassy Tree* was premiered in 2000 by the Houston Grand Opera. When HGO Artistic Director Patrick Summers first heard the score, he told the composer, “You’ve written your *Falstaff*.” The comic stage work centers on the May-September romance between septuagenarian Rucker Lattimore and the much younger Miss Love Simpson, and embraces a great amount of eccentricity in the characters and in the musical language.

Rucker Lattimore, proprietor of the general store in a small town in Georgia, announces he intends to marry his employee Love Simpson. He explains the marriage will be a “business arrangement”: Love will cook and clean in exchange for the house and its furnishings. Rucker’s grown daughters, as well as the town, are aghast—Rucker has buried his wife, their mother, just three weeks before, and Love is half his age. The story challenges the hypocrisies of the town community, while following the transformation of Love and Rucker’s relationship to one of healing and renewal.

Notable Moment: “Rented rooms, that’s all I’ve ever known” Love (soprano), Act I, Scene 3

Knowing that Rucker’s grown children are not happy that he has deeded the family home to her, Love Simpson attempts to explain that this will be the first time she has ever had a real home. The *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed, “Young singers should think about adding this and at least four other arias [from this opera] to their concert repertory immediately.”

“There’s nothing cold
about Carlisle Floyd’s new
opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*.
It speaks directly from the
heart to the heart, with
side trips through the
funny bone.”

—Los Angeles Times

Conductor Patrick Summers on *Cold Sassy Tree*

“The first meeting that I had with Carlisle was to discuss his idea for the opera *Cold Sassy Tree*, based on Olive Ann Burns’ extraordinary book. I read the book and thought, ‘Well, this is a wonderful book, but this is completely impossible to make into an opera.’ It’s a real novel narrative, not a stage narrative. But then Carlisle—who has always written his own librettos—turned in the libretto to us.

To this day I’m flabbergasted by that libretto—the language and the architecture that he found. I think *Cold Sassy Tree* has one of the greatest librettos of an opera that you’ll ever find. I remember reading the libretto and thinking you could practically hear the score come out of the libretto because it was so integrated in Carlisle’s creative process by that time.”



“We players hold up mirrors to you in the audience for you to see your reflection.”

Notable Moment: “I was an orphan and a chimney sweep”

Kynaston (baritone), Act I, Scene 4

After King Charles II issues an edict banning men from portraying women onstage—in effect, taking Edward Kynaston’s livelihood away from him—Kynaston responds with this impassioned plea.

“Floyd’s telling of the story has its eyes wide open to some cruelties beneath its exotic, period-piece exterior. Oppressive gender roles, rigid social prohibitions, and the arbitrariness and damaging consequences of absolute power all leave their scars on Kynaston, so that we are as much awakened to his condition as uplifted by his triumph.”

—Opera News

Ben Edquist as Edward Kynaston in *Prince of Players*
Houston Grand Opera, 2016
PHOTO: LYNN LANE

Prince of Players

(2014–2016) 90’

Chamber opera in 2 acts

Text Libretto by the composer, based on the play *A Compleat Female Stage Beauty* by Jeffrey Hatcher

Scoring 3S, 3M, 5T, Bar, 2BBar, mimes; chorus
2.2.2.2-2.2.0.0-timp.perc-harp-strings

Floyd’s final opera, *Prince of Players*, is based on the true story of Edward Kynaston, the last man to perform women’s roles during England’s Restoration Period. *Prince of Players* deals with the crises this idolized star experiences when his enormously successful career abruptly ends by an edict from Charles II: “No He shall ere again play a She on the British stage.”

Kynaston had been acting since he was a boy, taken off the streets as a homeless orphan and trained by older men in the highly stylized acting of Restoration comedy and drama—a common practice at the time. The opera follows Kynaston’s fall from stardom, his descent into the dregs of English society, and his struggle to claim his true identity.

Federico De Michelis (left) as Thomas Betterton and Ben Edquist (right) as Edward Kynaston in *Prince of Players*
Houston Grand Opera, 2016
PHOTO: LYNN LANE

Scan to listen to an excerpt of *Prince of Players*.





Carlisle Floyd (left) and director Hal Prince (right) in rehearsal for *Willie Stark* at Houston Grand Opera, 1981
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

The American Sound

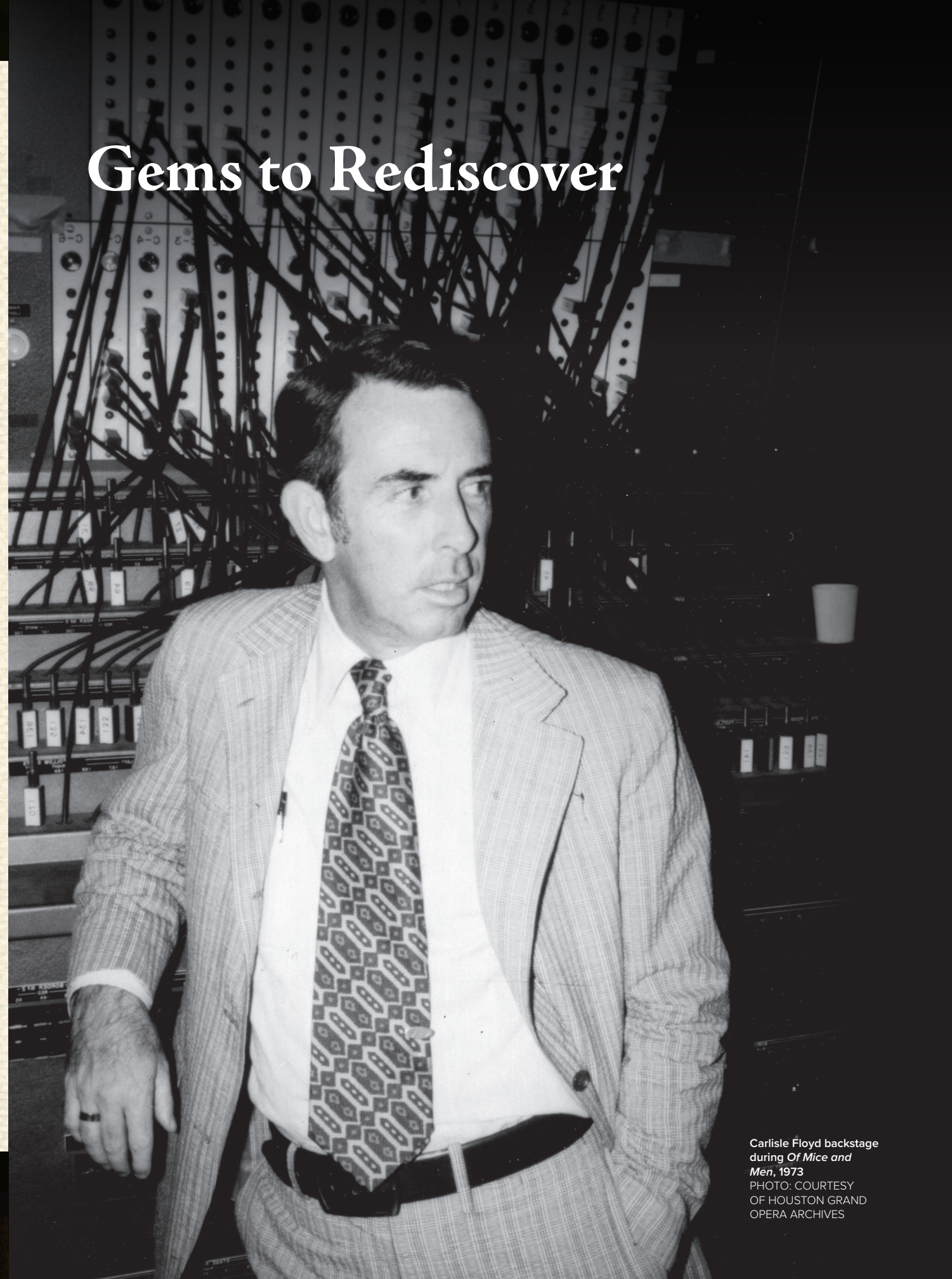
Biographer Thomas Holliday says that Verdi and Britten were Carlisle Floyd's favorite composers, but according to Houston Grand Opera's company magazine *Opera Cues*, it was Aaron Copland alone whose influence in his own music he was consciously aware of. Floyd said he first noticed Copland's influence after he composed *Susannah*: "In particular, a section at the end sounded very Copland-esque. I've never tried to emulate him, but I have tried to produce that very open, American sound," Floyd commented.

The "American sound" is achieved in part by wide intervals, which help to convey the vastness of America. Also, many of Floyd's subjects were American; some contain folk-like music and Southern speech patterns. Because of this, Floyd was often pigeonholed as a composer of folk

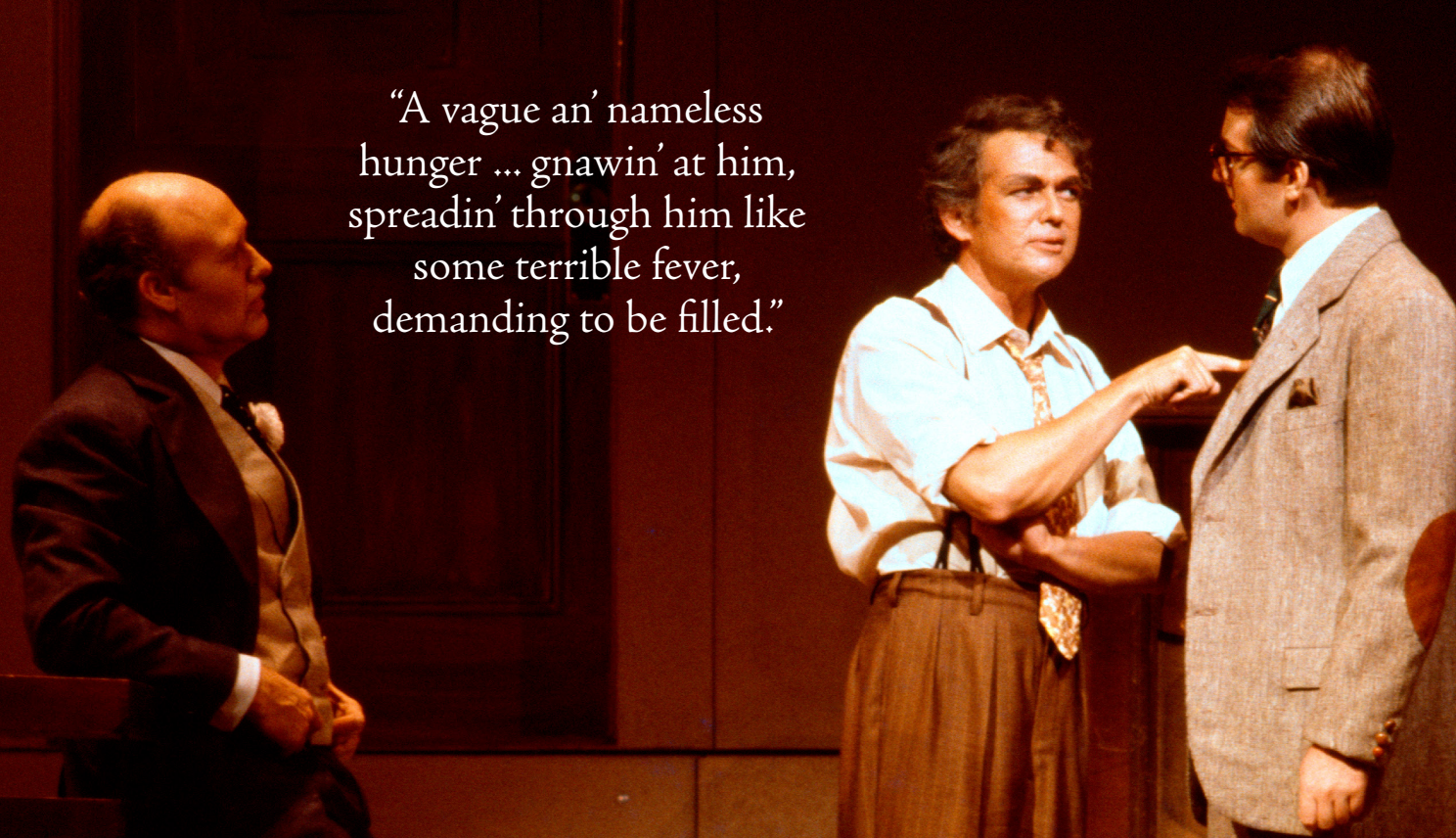
opera, a term he disliked. But he was proud to be in the American music camp. He chose it early in his training, when the alternatives were the idioms of Schoenberg, Hindemith, and Stravinsky. Some critics thought his music was not as purely "operatic" as it should be, conditioned as they were to the European styles; reviews of *Willie Stark* mention the controversy over the work's blend of operatic and Broadway traditions. Combining various traditions was one of the very freedoms of American opera that had attracted Floyd in the first place, and it is widely accepted today.

Floyd was a pioneer, and as such, he had an incalculable influence on American opera composers who came after him. As Jake Heggie said, "He's given us the courage to speak in our own voices."

Gems to Rediscover



Carlisle Floyd backstage during *Of Mice and Men*, 1973
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES



“A vague an’ nameless
hunger ... gnawin’ at him,
spreadin’ through him like
some terrible fever,
demanding to be filled.”

Composer Jake Heggie on Carlisle Floyd

“*Susannah* and *Of Mice and Men* were revelations to me when I first heard them in the 1990s. It was thrilling and inspiring to hear his brand of soaring lyricism on the American lyric opera stage. Carlisle’s courage astonishes me, and it is heartening to know that his energy, ideas, passion, grace, enthusiasm, and brilliant theatrical gifts will resonate and inspire many, many generations to come.”

Notable Moment: “Single Bed Blanket”

Willie (baritone), Act I, Scene 2

Governor Willie Stark is facing impeachment for manipulating the laws in order to implement his populist agenda. The influential Judge Courtney Burden supports impeachment, and Willie has gone to visit him and try to change his mind. The judge deplores Willie’s “contempt for the law.” In this attempt to justify his behavior, Willie compares the law with three people in a bed who have only a single-size blanket: Just as they would try to stretch the blanket to keep them all warm, so Willie has stretched the law.

Timothy Nolen as the title
character in *Willie Stark*
Houston Grand Opera, 1981
PHOTO: JIM CALDWELL

Willie Stark

(1980) 140’

Opera in three acts and nine scenes

Text Libretto by the composer, based on the book *All the King’s Men* by Robert Penn Warren

Scoring S, M, 4T, 2Bar, 4 speakers, mime; chorus

2.2.2.2-2.2.2.1-timp.perc-harp-cel-strings

Left to right: David Vosburgh
as Tiny Duffy, Timothy Nolen
as Willie Stark, and Alan
Kays as Jack Burden
in *Willie Stark*
Houston Grand Opera, 1981
PHOTO: JIM CALDWELL

When *Willie Stark* first premiered in 1980, critics were divided on Floyd’s blending of musical theatre elements—*The New York Times* mused: “Is it opera, or is it closer to Broadway musical theatre?” Today we applaud Floyd’s candid embrace of dynamic American musical styles.

Willie Stark, based on the book *All the King’s Men* by Robert Penn Warren, is inspired by the life and career of Louisiana governor Huey Long. The title character has risen from a humble background to become governor of a state in the deep South. He is the grassroots champion of the working class, but behind his “country boy” image Stark is also a shrewd and ruthless politician, willing to stretch the law whenever he feels constricted by its boundaries.

The story follows Willie’s schemes to avoid impeachment for re-ordering the state’s legal system to achieve his political ends. Although his attempts to do so are successful, Willie leaves many ruined lives in the wake of his political ambition. Inwardly he is torn by a profound conflict between the idealistic man who entered politics several years before and the corrupt politician he has become.





Bilby’s Doll

(1975) 135’

Opera in three acts, eight scenes

Text Libretto by the composer, based on the novella *A Mirror of Witches* by Esther Forbes

Scoring Major roles: 2S, M, CA, 2T, Bar, BBar, B;

Minor roles: S, T, 2Bar; 3 speakers; chorus

2.2.2.2-4.2.2.1-timp.perc-harp-cel-pft-strings

Bilby’s Doll is Floyd’s psychological thriller, based on the novella *A Mirror of Witches* by New England historian Esther Forbes. Set in a Puritan colony in Massachusetts during the Salem witch trials, the opera is about a French orphan girl, Doll Bilby, who is raised in a Puritan home and fears, because her birth parents were suspected witches, that she may be one as well. The opera takes an ominous turn when Doll begins to believe she is a witch, and is seduced and abandoned by a “demon”—later revealed to be a clergyman’s son—and then convicted of witchcraft when those around her fall mysteriously ill.

Notable Moment: “I picked these wildflowers on the way”

Titus (baritone), Act I, Scene 2

Titus Thumb, a young seminarian, has come to the home of Jared Bilby to ask his foster daughter, Doll, to marry him. This moving aria is possibly the most lyrical moment in the work, and Carlisle Floyd’s favorite among his operas.

Catherine Malfitano as Doll
Bilby in *Bilby’s Doll*
Houston Grand Opera, 1976
PHOTO: JIM CALDWELL



Carlisle Floyd in rehearsal for *Willie Stark*, 1981 | PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

Carlisle Floyd as Librettist

It’s rare for an opera composer to write a libretto, and rarer still to have written *all* of them. But for Floyd, who had already studied writing extensively, writing his own libretti didn’t seem like much of a stretch, plus it gave him ultimate control over the final product. Still, he admitted that the process of writing a libretto was very difficult and that he didn’t think an opera could overcome a bad libretto regardless of the quality of the music.

Floyd was often asked in interviews about his process. He said he always started by writing the libretto, which is not surprising—that’s the way it usually works in opera. What might be surprising is that Floyd always insisted that as he was writing the libretto, he had nothing particular in mind about the music that would go with it.

The saying “writing is rewriting” is particularly applicable to Floyd. He was ruthless about scrapping lines, arias, and entire scenes that didn’t advance the narrative. The story is everything—the music and the libretto are in service to each other and are equally important. Anthony Tommasini, reviewing *Prince of Players* for the *New York Times*, writes: “Mr. Floyd knows everything about writing for the voice. Lines segue subtly from declamatory stretches, where words dominate, to lyrical passages in which emotions take over.” To be sure, Floyd must have been particularly pleased with this assessment.



“We kinna live here while
our heart’s back there or
we’ll lose the present and
have no past.”

The Sojourner and Mollie Sinclair

(1963) 75’
Opera in one act
Text Libretto by the composer
Scoring S, M, T, Bar, BBar; chorus
1.1.1.1-1.1.1.0-timp.perc-harp-strings(or 1.1.1.1.1)

The Sojourner and Mollie Sinclair was written to celebrate North Carolina’s tercentenary in 1963. While exploring the history of colonial North Carolina, Floyd was intrigued to learn of Scottish settlers in the eastern part of the state who clung steadfastly to the social structure and customs of their native country, while also vehemently protesting colonial taxation. These polarities became the basis of this comedy-drama, which pits Dougald MacDougald, a vainglorious old Scottish laird who fiercely maintains the ways of the old world, against Mollie Sinclair, a middle-aged Scottish woman consumed by the fever of revolution and protest, who eagerly embraces the new.

Floyd writes: “The collision of these two characters, I felt, would provide the necessary conflict out of which could come both comedy and drama, and each had his or her own adherents: the old laird’s dutiful and blindly loyal clansman on the one hand, and on the other, Mollie Sinclair’s rag-tag brigade of scruffy young men who, with her as their commander, were marching on Wilmington.”

Above and opposite page:
*The Sojourner and
Mollie Sinclair*
East Carolina Opera
Workshop, 1963
PHOTO: EAST CAROLINA
OPERA THEATRE
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Scan to listen to an
excerpt of *The Sojourner
and Mollie Sinclair*.



Soprano Patricia Racette on Carlisle Floyd

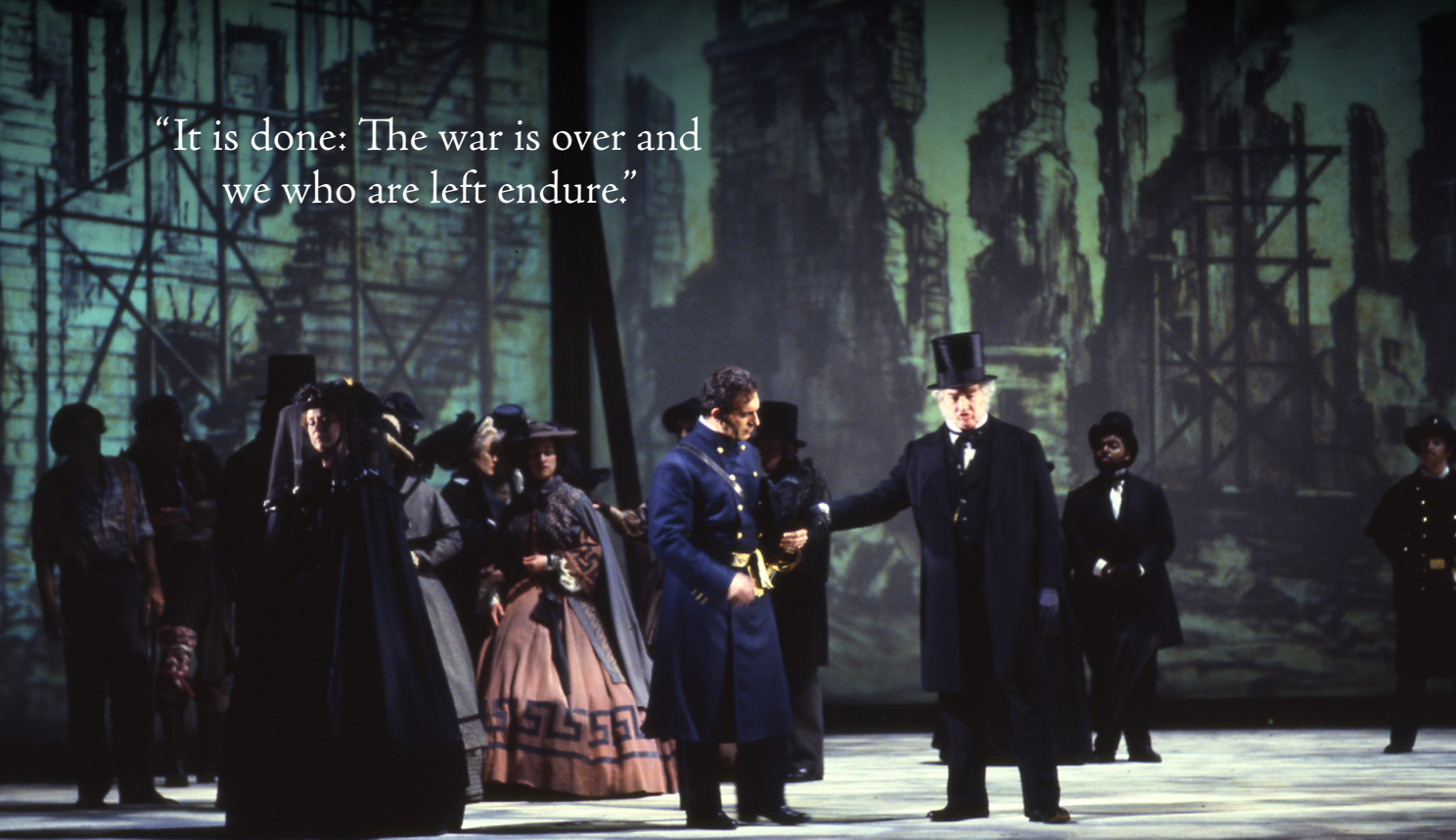
“When I think of American opera, I think first of Carlisle. He told our stories and captured such rich essence of the human experience through his memorable melodies and lush, flavorful orchestration. I was lucky enough to claim the title role of *Susannah* as the first full operatic role I ever sang, and now I have the privilege to keep telling her story—and Carlisle’s story—as a director. Carlisle’s absence is palpable, but his music will continue to live through all of us!”

Notable Moment: “Dougald, I would speak with thee”

Mollie (mezzo-soprano)

The crusty Scot Dougald MacDougald left his heart in his beloved Isle of Skye when he emigrated to the American colonies some 20 years previously. In this poignant aria, Dougald’s kinswoman Mollie gently reminds him why he left and helps him understand that he can’t straddle two cultures.





“It is done: The war is over and we who are left endure.”

The Passion of Jonathan Wade

(1962, rev. 1989) 140’

Musical drama in three acts

Text Libretto by the composer

Scoring Major roles: 2S, M, 3T, Bar, BBar

Minor roles: S, 2boyS, 3T, 7Bar, 2B; chorus

2.2.2.2-4.2.3.1-timp.perc(2)-harp-strings

Floyd’s epic grand opera portrays the South in the early days of the post–Civil War Reconstruction era. The title character is a Union officer who arrives in Charleston, South Carolina, to administer the city in the months immediately after the war. He marries Celia Townsend, the daughter of a local judge, creating tensions with the embittered Charleston townspeople and the eager New Englanders seeking to profit from the Reconstruction. Their love is destroyed by the intolerance and hate of those around them.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Floyd explains: “I tried to show the Civil War as the collision of two entirely different cultures, which is what it came down to. It was the cavalier culture of the South, which was really more close to the samurai culture in valuing the family and its virtual worship of ancestors, versus the entrepreneurial Yankee ideals.

“The character of Wade demonstrates the impossibility of a man of moderation and reasonableness to survive in a climate of extremism. This is, I learned, the Goethian idea of tragedy, where a character is trapped in circumstances that permit no solution.”

Left to right: Sheryl Woods as Celia Townsend, Dale Duesing as Jonathan Wade, and Julian Patrick as Gibbes Townsend in *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* Houston Grand Opera, 1991
PHOTO: JIM CALDWELL

“Dramatically thrilling, colorful, effective”

—Salzburger Nachrichten



Carlisle Floyd with Robert Penn Warren, author of *All the Kings Men*, on which the opera *Willie Stark* is based
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

The American South

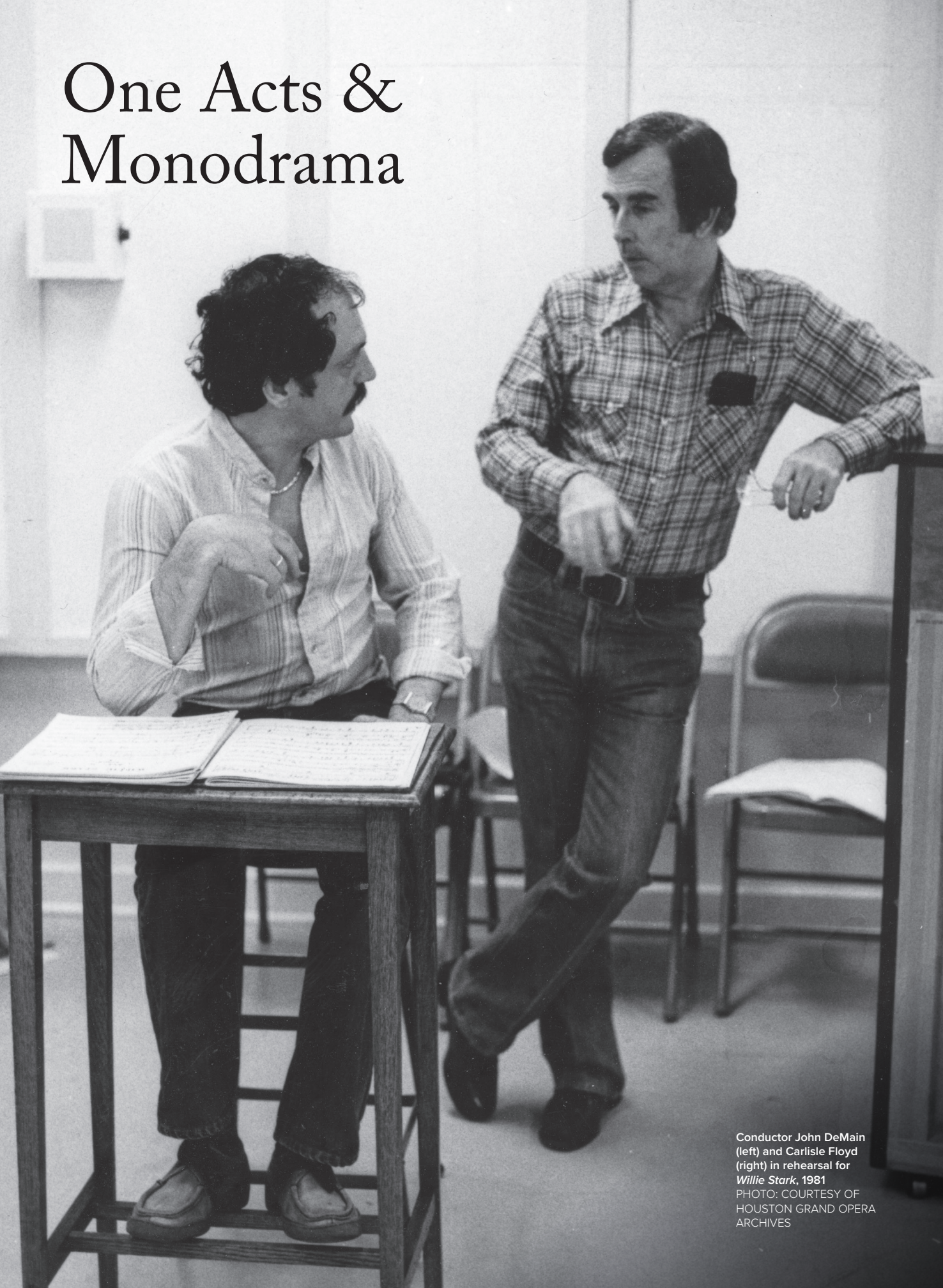
Born in Latta, South Carolina, Carlisle Floyd was thoroughly, and often harshly, indoctrinated in Southern manners and mores by his parents. He never lived outside the state of his birth until he left Converse College in Spartanburg for Syracuse University in 1945—and there, he was exposed to a much larger world, highlighting the differences between his upbringing and that of his classmates. As his boundaries expanded, he developed a love-hate relationship with the South.

But the South is what he knew, and it is no surprise that it was the setting for several operas,

including *Susannah*, *Cold Sassy Tree*, the one-act *Slow Dusk*, and *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*, set in the aftermath of the Civil War. The love-hate relationship with the South can be seen clearly in *Jonathan Wade*: Floyd’s hero is not a defeated Confederate, but a kind and honorable Union colonel sent to oversee Reconstruction in South Carolina. And yet the chorus opens the opera with “It is done: the war is over and we who are left endure,” a beautiful, aching passage that captures all the South has lost.



One Acts & Monodrama



Conductor John DeMain (left) and Carlisle Floyd (right) in rehearsal for *Willie Stark*, 1981
PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

“What’s to become of our poor sandy souls?”



Slow Dusk

(1948–1949) 40’

A musical play in one act

Text Libretto by the composer

Scoring S, M, T, Bar

2.2.2.2-2.2.2.0-timp.perc(1)-harp-strings

Robert Balonek (left) as Jess and Janice Meyerson (right) as Aunt Sue in *Slow Dusk*
little OPERA theatre of ny, 2014
PHOTO: NICK SOLYOM

Floyd’s first opera is based on his own short story “A Lengthening Shadow,” which takes place in the sandhills of the Carolinas and features familiar themes of poverty and religious fundamentalism. Sadie and Micah plan to marry, against the wishes of Sadie’s family who oppose the relationship because their families belong to different religious sects. Despite their poor land prospects, they dream of working hard and building a future together. While Sadie’s aunt Sue attempts to dissuade her, tragedy strikes, dashing the young couples’ hopes.

Notable Moment: “Sadie’s Lament”

Sadie (soprano)

This compact one-act opera ends with this soprano aria: Sadie’s torrent of grief after the accidental death of the man she loved and hoped to marry.



“His breath is still in this air that I breathe, trapped in this room, still moist with life.”

Markheim

(1966) 70’
Opera in one act
Text Libretto by the composer, after the story by Robert Louis Stevenson
Scoring S, 2T, BBar; chorus
2.2.2.2-4.2.2.1-timp.perc(2)-harp-strings

A Christmas tragedy based on a story by Robert Louis Stevenson, *Markheim* is “a dark Victorian tale of murder and the supernatural ... a tour de force for baritone” (*Opera News*).

On Christmas Eve, pawnbroker Josiah Creach is visited by a client, Markheim, a depraved aristocrat who asks for a loan to pay his gambling debts and avoid being killed. Creach toys with Markheim at length, forcing him to admit to all of his corruption—and then refuses to grant the loan. Enraged, Markheim demands to know where the money is and after a brief struggle, Creach falls dead. At this moment a mysterious stranger appears at the shop, and presents a Faustian-like bargain. Markheim is faced with a choice to accept responsibility for his actions or to descend into complete immorality.

“Set on Christmas Eve, it’s a classic English ghost story of the season, and Floyd makes it into a gripping opera. The skillful libretto reveals character and drama, is always singable, and the music is inventive and expressive, constantly upping the drama as the plot takes unexpected turns.”

—New York Classical Review

Left to right: Angela Mannino as Tess, Tyler Putnam as Markheim, and Mathew Tuell as A Stranger in *Markheim*
little OPERA theatre of ny, 2014
PHOTO: NICK SOLYOM

Scan to listen to an excerpt of *Markheim*.



Flower and Hawk

(1972) 45’
Monodrama for soprano and orchestra
Text Libretto by the composer
Scoring soprano; 2.2.2.2-4.2.2.1-timp.perc-cel-harp-strings

Flower and Hawk is based on the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine, arguably the greatest woman of the Middle Ages. In her long life of 82 years she was born the Duchess of Aquitaine and Countess of Poitou, became Queen of France through marriage to Louis VII, and later became Queen of England when she married Henry II.

The monodrama takes place in Salisbury Tower, where Eleanor has been a prisoner for nearly 16 years: Henry II had her confined there after she and her sons led an unsuccessful rebellion against him in France. Overcome by feelings of despair, abandonment, and betrayal, she relives memories of becoming the Queen of France, the many conflicts she endured with her two husbands, and her son Richard’s death.

She finally releases herself from the guilt and self-doubt surrounding this tragic event of her son’s death. She is able to re-assume her role as Queen when the tolling of the bells announces the death of Henry and her liberation from Salisbury Tower.

Composer Mark Adamo on Carlisle Floyd

“It’s commonplace now, in our current golden age, that new American opera can say something substantial, and legible, about the way we live now. But Carlisle began that project in a time when many doubted it; and continued it through a catalog of 12 matchlessly clear and often emotionally devastating scores. As an artist, a mentor, and a friend, he was exemplary: America was fortunate to have him.”



Carlisle Floyd in rehearsal | PHOTO: COURTESY OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA ARCHIVES

Morality

Carlisle Floyd, the son of a Methodist minister, grew up steeped in church services, potluck dinners, and revival meetings, so it’s not surprising that church people appear in Floyd operas. Perhaps because his father was quite a different person in the pulpit than he was at home, according to Floyd’s biographer Thomas Holliday, Floyd was interested in hypocrisy—not just religious hypocrisy but the broader issue of why people’s behavior doesn’t always match what they profess to believe.

We see hypocrisy in *Susannah’s* Reverend Olin Blitch, who preys upon an innocent girl, and in the churchgoers who lie about her. And there’s Willie Stark, at first an ordinary Joe who runs for political

office because he wants to help others. Once he’s elected governor, he begins to lose himself as he grows ever more corrupt.

Other characters have a moral code that Floyd seems to approve of: the sexually ambiguous Edward Kynaston in *Prince of Players* (as compared with his male lover, who buckles to societal expectations and decides to marry a woman) and Rucker Lattimore from *Cold Sassy Tree*, who delivers an impromptu “sermon” calling out the townspeople’s religious bigotry, for example. They are not perfect, but they bravely speak their truth. They are not hypocrites.

Abbreviations

Scorings in this brochure are listed in full or are a combination of the below abbreviations. The standard order of scoring instrumentation is as follows:

fl.ob.cl.bn—hn.tpt.trbn.tuba—timp.perc—other—vlnI.vlnII.vla.vlc.db

Voices

- S soprano
- M mezzo-soprano
- A alto
- CA contralto
- T tenor
- Bar baritone
- lyrBar lyric baritone
- BBar bass baritone
- B bass

Woodwinds

- picc piccolo
- fl flute
- ob oboe
- corA cor anglais (English horn)
- cl clarinet (in A or B-flat)
- Ebcl clarinet in E-flat
- bcl bass clarinet
- bn bassoon
- dbn double bassoon or contrabassoon
- asax alto saxophone

Brass

- hn horn
- tpt trumpet
- trbn trombone

Percussion

- timp timpani
- perc percussion

Other

- cel celesta
- pft piano

Strings

- vln violin
- vla viola
- vlc cello
- db double bass or contrabass

Contact

Boosey & Hawkes is Carlisle Floyd’s exclusive publisher. For further information and programming resources for specific works, please contact:

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Celebrate Carlisle Floyd at 100 in 2026

“With a commitment that rivals Smetana’s in Bohemia or Britten’s in Britain, Floyd has striven to create a national repertory ...

He has learned the international language of successful opera in order to speak it in his own accents and to enrich it with the musical and vernacular idioms of his own country.”

—*The New Yorker*