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An Analysis of “Little Bat” in the Opera Susannah

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AN ANALYSIS OF "LITTLE BAT"
IN THE OPERA SUSANNAH

A Covering Paper
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
James William Dewey
May 1967

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AN ANALYSIS OF "LITTLE BAT" IN THE OPERA SUSANNAH

To be successful, an opera must externalize the basic philosophical concepts of a story through both action and visible situations. As stated by Carlisle Floyd, the composer of Susannah:

My first consideration in attempting an opera is whether or not the subject is one in which the emotional, psychological, and philosophical concepts of the story can be externalized through action and visible situation and still retain absorbing, multi-dimensional characters. For this reason . . . we have erred too often in favor of situation, leaving character development in a rather primitive, elementary state (1:482).

Using these tenets as guiding principles, Floyd wrote an opera which contains both contemporary and traditional elements interacting to produce a score that is truly representative of America's finest operas. Through the consistent use of hymn tunes, square dances, and arias with a folk-song identity, Susannah is endowed with a rich American flavor. However, Floyd's operatic style is also rooted in the more traditional styles of Puccini and Wagner: Puccini in many of the arias, such as "Ain't it a Pretty Night"; Wagner in the exploitation of the leitmotiv technique (1:483). Through the skillful use of sprechstimme and the effective employment of polytonality and dissonance, the dramatic impact of the more tragic scenes of this opera is heightened.

Although some critics disregard the idea of an opera having a central theme, stating that such themes are too contrived, Floyd mentions that

. . . it is not inappropriate that an opera have a 'theme' so long as it is not tiresomely didactic--the central theme of this opera being persecution and the concomitant psychological ramifications (1:482).

One such ramification becomes apparent when "Susannah's small-minded neighbors almost succeed in remaking her in their own image" (4:11).

To externalize the basic concepts of Susannah, Floyd introduces the character of Little Bat McLean. Vital actions, sudden motions, and sweeping movements characteristic of tension, uneasiness, and climax are all inherent in Little Bat's personality. As Floyd states:

In staging the opera myself, I have always asked the actors who played Little Bat to re-create the physical mannerisms of an untamed cat: furtive, quick of movement, and always ready for instant departure (2).

Examples of this idea are apparent in all three major entrances which Little Bat has. In act one, scene two, Floyd states in the score that

Little Bat is a shifty-eyed youth, not too strong mentally. He possesses, instead, a litheness and feline quality of movement which, coupled with his eyes, gives him a constantly expectant and alert air. He looks about him furtively upon entering (3:22).

In this scene Little Bat expresses that he is "scared o' Sam," Susannah's brother. It is apparent that he is very much at ease with Susannah, but that he is eager to leave when Sam enters.

In act one, scene five, Little Bat again enters, and stealthily creeps toward Susannah. He is anxious to make certain that Sam is not anywhere about before relating his message. Throughout this scene he portrays the nervous, almost neurotic youth who finds his only consolation in being able to purge his conscience of his burden of guilt--his lies about Susannah.

During his final major entrance, act two, scene five, Little Bat loses all control of his movements, relating them entirely to his emotions. He runs on stage, talking and gesticulating wildly. The total impact of the preceding week is now bearing down upon Susannah as Little Bat, steeped in an emotional frenzy, tells her that Sam shot and killed the Reverend Blitch, that because of this he most surely will be hanged, and that the people are coming to "run her out of the valley."

After forcibly ejecting the lynch mob at gun point from the environs of the cabin, Susannah turns her last bitter contempt toward the bewildered Little Bat. As he slowly responds to her seductive beckonings, he is surprised with a vicious slap across the face. Thus, Susannah severs her last contact with the people of New Hope Valley. As Little Bat runs across the yard and leaps off the stage, a feeling of finality begins to pervade the atmosphere. There is little left for Susannah now, except her pitiful

laughter which dies away as she slowly returns to the interior of the cabin and closes the door. The final curtain falls.

Thus, in the character of Little Bat, movement and action are combined to externalize the basic emotions inherent in the opera.

Although at one point Floyd states that Little Bat is not too strong mentally, he further explains that he "envisioned the character as not being feeble-minded, but rather emotionally crippled to the extent that he seems to be" (2).

Little Bat's existence is completely dominated by fear. He attests to this fact constantly by saying "I'm scared o' this or I'm scared o' that" (2). His parents and his unstable emotions engulf him in constant fright. However, he seems to find a perverse pleasure in the very things that frighten him. It is as if he were trying to see how close he could come to touching a flame without feeling pain.

In the drama itself, as Floyd mentions, "Little Bat functions very much like the messengers in Greek drama in that he is almost always a bearer of bad news and, of course, unwittingly he is one of the contributing factors to Susannah's downfall" (2). He is the central figure that unites the various facets of the story. Many of the implied

events which are not staged are confirmed by Little Bat's statements to Susannah. Such examples as his declamation that "My ma says there's bad blood in yo' family" (act 1, scene 2), his retelling of the incident where the elders saw her bathing (act 1, scene 5), and his description of the shooting of Blitch (act 2, scene 5), substantiate this generalization.

The composer finally states that "Little Bat, along with Blitch and Sam, are as much victims of the tragedy as Susannah--Blitch through his lust, Sam through his passivity, and Little Bat through his overriding fear" (2).

For cohesiveness beyond that which has been achieved by the characterization of the performers, Floyd employs a few basic motives throughout the entire opera, stating them in their original form, in augmentation, in diminution, and with rhythmic variation. Little Bat's music can always be related to one of these motives through analysis of the orchestral accompaniment below his solo recitatives.

In act one, scene two (page 22, score 4, measure 3), Little Bat expresses his distrust and fright of Sam. In this passage the vocal line, which is lyrical in style, discloses a limited tessitura. No definite motive appears in the accompaniment, but the rhythm is similar to the rhythm at letter E, page 117, where Sam is leaving to kill Blitch.

Beginning at letter C, page 24, Little Bat reminds Susannah of the fun they had at the square dance, how pretty she looked, and how all the men were anxious to dance with her. The voice parts and the accompaniment express the rhythmic flavor of the square dance motive heard in act one, scene one.

In act one, scene five (pp. 51-55) the motive associated with the elders' discovery of Susannah bathing in the creek is repeated in the accompaniment of Little Bat's monologue. This motive consists of one measure treated in cyclic style. The motive, beginning on a B-D-F[#] chord, is repeated three times. The cycle concludes with one statement of the motive founded on an F[#]-A-C[#] chord. The above device is repeated twice. The tension is heightened by the angularity of the solo line with its wide leaps to dissonant tones.

Beginning at letter D, page 55, the second motive introduced by the elders in scene three is again heard in the accompaniment. The notes are an exact repetition of the accompaniment at letter F, page 50; however, these were derived from the motive at letter G, page 41, where the elders are saying, "This woman is of the devil."

Beginning eight measures after letter D, page 55, the bass accompaniment repeats the notes found at the opening of scene four, page 44. Both passages are again derived

from the motive introduced by the elders at letter G, page 41. This accompaniment, eight measures after D, is much like that found at D, except that the accent is changed to the first note (eight measures after D) from the last note (at letter D).

The accompaniment at letter E is a fragment of the elders' motive introduced at the beginning of scene three (page 35, score 4, measure 2). The solo line leaps the distance of an octave in an attempt to express the emotional climax of this moment.

On page 57, two measures after F, the same climactic accompaniment is used as was heard when the elders first saw Susannah in the creek (page 38, five measures after C). The high tessitura of the solo line adds to the exhaustive purging of Little Bat's conscience. From letter G and continuing to the exit of Little Bat, the melodic material of "The Trees on the Mountains" is heard in the orchestral accompaniment.

In act two, scene five (page 120, two measures after I), the same motive and cyclic sequence is again used as was employed in act one, scene five.

Beginning at letter J, page 121, the orchestral accompaniment repeats the second motive introduced by the elders at letter G, page 41. These two passages concern the people of New Hope Valley and their impressions of this

"woman of the devil." At letter J, the chorus also states the motive, first with the tenor and bass parts, then adding the soprano and alto parts. The extreme range of the solo line during this passage (low C# to high B) helps to express the wide range of emotional implications evident at this moment in the story.

One measure after letter O, page 130, the accompaniment again states the first three notes of the motive heard at letter G, page 41. As Susannah slaps Little Bat, the music changes to the strongly accented measure heard at letter F, page 50. Susannah is left standing alone, a victim of her own self-exile.

Using both a unique character development and an interweaving of the main motives found throughout the opera, Little Bat emerges as one of the prominent characters in the opera Susannah. Certainly Floyd does not leave Little Bat's "character development in a rather primitive, elementary state" (1:482); but through Little Bat's personality, many of the basic philosophical concepts of this opera are externalized.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Ewen, David. The Complete Book of 20th Century Composers. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959. pp. 482-83.
2. Floyd, Carlisle. Personal letter to James William Dewey. April 9, 1967.
3. Floyd, Carlisle. Susannah (vocal score). New York: Boosey and Hawkes, Inc., 1957.
4. Opera News. XXI:11, November 5, 1956.

APPENDIX A

Letter from Carlisle Floyd

CARLISLE FLOYD

April 9, 1967

Dear Mr. Dewey:

In response to your recent letter asking for my ideas about the character of Little Bat in my opera SUSANNAH let me say simply that I envisioned the character as not being feeble-minded but rather emotionally crippled to the extent that he seemed to be. He is completely dominated by fear (the constant "I'm scared of this or I'm scared of that" attest to this) and yet he finds a perverse kind of pleasure in the very things that frighten him. In the drama he functions very much like the messengers in Greek drama in that he is almost always a bearer of bad news and of course unwittingly he is one of the contributing factors to Susannah's downfall. I also feel that he, along with Bitch and Sam, are as much victims of the tragedy as is Susannah: Little Bat through his overriding fear, Bitch through his lust, and Sam through his passivity. In staging the opera myself, I have always asked the actors who played Little Bat to re-create the physical mannerisms of an untamed cat: furtive, quick of movement, and always ready for instant departure. These are a few of the things that occur to me and I hope they will be some help to you.

Best wishes to you for a successful musical future.

Sincerely,

Carlisle Floyd

Please note:

The signature has been redacted due to security reasons

APPENDIX B

Selections from vocal score of Susannah

Please note:

Pages have been redacted due to copyright concerns.

Non-contiguous pages from this score have been redacted due to copyright restrictions:

Floyd, Carlisle. *Susannah* (vocal score). New York: Boosey and Hawkes, Inc., 1957.

APPENDIX C

Susannah Program

Central Washington State College Production

February-March 1967

IN OBSERVANCE OF ITS SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

Central Washington State College

JAMES E. BROOKS, PRESIDENT

presents

Susannah

BY

CARLISLE FLOYD

McConnell Auditorium — 8:15 P. M.

Ellensburg, Washington

February 28 Through March 4

SUSANNAH
AN AMERICAN OPERA BY CARLISLE FLOYD

THE CAST

Susannah	Pamela Roether — 1, 3 and 5*
Sam	Dave Urquhart — 1 and 5*
Rev. Blitch	Tom Blaylock — 1, 3, and 5*
Little Bat	James Dewey
Susannah	Robin Marvin — 2 and 4*
Sam	Ed Provancha — 2 and 4*
Rev. Blitch	John T. Bonney — 2 and 4*
Sam	Robert Rudhe — 3*
Elder McLean	Charles Stephens
Elder Ott	Mike Johnson
Elder Hayes	Frank DeMiero
Elder Gleaton	James Creevey
Mrs. McLean	Sue McMurray
Mrs. Ott	Janet Ewalt
Mrs. Hayes	Sandra Kupfer
Mrs. Gleaton	Julie Hayes
Chorus Ladies	Cheryl Hutchinson, Diann Marshall, Dianne Oswalt, Glenda Beach, Diane Lord, Dodie O'Connor, Patsy Thompson, Lynn Erickson
Chorus Gentlemen	Ray Broyles, Monte Swenson, Leslie Domingo, Larry Potts, Gerry Potts, Bill Rhodes, Robert Rudhe
Children	Vincent DeMiero, Tyke Gaskell, Kevin Smith, Kerry Smith

*Performance: 1 — February 28 2 — March 1 3 — March 2 4 — March 3 5 — March 4

THE ORCHESTRA

<p>VIOLIN I Ethel Cays *Herbert Bird Tamara Nagley Janai Lindsay Leota Merkley Paula Kody Janie Strong Karen Kirsch Jan Sigurdson Julie Hall</p> <p>VIOLIN II Marilyn Bentson</p> <p>VIOLA Mary Madden Cathy Currie</p>	<p>CELLO Damian Sokol Jennifer Smith</p> <p>BASS Kaye Shull Joe Bynum</p> <p>FLUTE Wilma Herbison Claudia Johnson</p> <p>OBOE Donna Jones Shirley Leeper</p> <p>BASSOON Bonnie Tomkinson Hans Sohler</p> <p>CLARINET Doug Sorensen John Smith</p>	<p>FRENCH HORN *Richard Jenson *Karla Kaatz Nita Sorenson Steve Pugh Virginia King</p> <p>TRUMPET Mike McDaniel Greg Goss Tom Beebe</p> <p>TROMBONE Wayne Torkelson Mike Gibson Mike Sullivan</p> <p>PERCUSSION Bill Franklin</p>
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*Members of the faculty and community

THE STAFF

Production Director..... *Milo L. Smith*
Musical Director..... *John DeMerchant*
Conductor..... *Charles Fuller*
Choreographer..... *Molly Young*
Publicity and Promotion..... *Office of Information*
Designer..... *Milo L. Smith*

THE PRODUCTION CREW

Assistant to the Director..... *Dale Westgaard*
Production Stage Manager..... *Dale Westgaard*
Theatre Manager..... *Larry Sharpe*
Wardrobe Mistress..... *Sandra Bennett*
Rehearsal Accompanist..... *Pat Frazier*
Construction and Painting..... *Terry Parker, Terry Uppenberg, Mike Parton,
Bill Dunlap, Bob Smith, Mark Pfouts, Tom Triplett*
Properties..... *Esther Bates*
Lighting Operators..... *Terry Parker, Mike Parton*
Lighting Crew..... *Speech 268 Class*
Makeup Crew..... *The Cast*
*Assisted by the Speech 268 Class: Virginia Beebe,
Judith Bolyard, Susan Clow, Bill Dunlap, Sylvia
Erickson, John Hepfer, Patricia Holmgren, Lawrence
Kratzer, Susan Middlebrook, Robert Satnik, Semro
Harrison, Kenneth Shoemaker, Daniel Smith, Harley
Triplett, Terrence Uppenberg, Dalene Youngbloom*
Ushers..... *Intercollegiate Knights, men's service organization, and
SPURS, sophomore women's honorary*

THE TIME *The Present*

THE SETTING *New Hope Valley, Tennessee*

THE PROGRESSION

Act I. Scene 1 *Monday night, New Hope Valley Churchyard*
Scene 2 *The same evening, the Polk cabin*
Scene 3 *Tuesday morning, the woods*
Scene 4 *The same evening, the churchyard*
Scene 5 *A half-hour later, the cabin*

— TEN MINUTES INTERMISSION —

Act II. Scene 1 *Friday morning, the cabin*
Scene 2 *That evening, the church interior*
Scene 3 *An hour later, the cabin*
Scene 4 *Saturday morning, inside the church*
Scene 5 *That evening, the cabin*

THIS IS SUSANNAH

"Susannah" is a modern American Opera, written by an American, to be performed in English, on an American theme. The author, Carlisle Floyd, identifies his work as a "musical drama" but the classification is perhaps more commercial than accurate. It is opera, in its form and treatment, and aside from the contemporary quality of its music and story line, it could have been written from the neo-classical opera formula.

Having had its world premiere at Florida State University of Tallahassee, in February, 1955, it was introduced professionally and commercially by the New York City Opera in September, 1956. This premiere won for its author the acclaim of the professional music critics when it was given the New York Music Critic's Circle Award for the "Best Opera of 1956."

Phyllis Curtin, soprano with several noted opera companies, originated the role of "Susannah" in both premieres. Eridh Leinsdorf conducted the New York production.

"Susannah" has since become a part of the standard American Opera repertory season at the New York City Center, and last year was featured by the Metropolitan Opera Touring Company.

"Susannah" is a modern tale, set in the Tennessee hills, and based on the Apochryphal story of Susannah and the Elders. Because of her appeal to all men, including the itinerant preacher, the beautiful young Susannah suffers the wrath of the pious people of the small valley community. The drama is not only powerful and gripping, it is strikingly realistic. The story and setting is universal and exciting.

The music, which borrows from traditional forms, is equally exciting in its modern technique and its strongly concomitant relationship to the dramatic ideas. This is most desirable but often not the case in musical theatre. "Susannah" is an amalgamation of the best of all the performing arts and appeals to the opera "buff" and the uninitiated alike. The author has carefully constructed a work in which each element supports every other element. Music does not suffer at the expense of the drama.

In the original story, Susannah and the Elders, the wife of the mayor of ancient Babylon was threatened with public castigation and destruction if she did not submit to the lustful desires of two of the elders of the town. Only at the eleventh hour did Daniel manage to have her exonerated of the charge of adultery which had been brought by the elders after Susannah had refused them.

Mr. Floyd's retelling of this well known story uses as characters people from the East Tennessee Hill country. The lovely "Susannah" of this version is envied by most of the other women and is temptuous in the mind's eye of most of the men. Their guilt which is ironically revealed to them by Olin Blich, the itinerant evangelist, is fraught with lies and deceit not unlike those elders of ancient Babylon. Out of the despair brought to "Susannah" because of her innocence comes the modern tale of passion and possession.

The musical styles employed by the composer range from an authentic sounding bit of hoe-down music and hymns to dramatic arias of beauty and quality. The former employs simple harmonic structure and insistent rhythms usually associated with folk music and revival songs of the 19th century revival movement. Dissonant and irregular blasts of orchestral accompaniment reminds one of the contemporaneity of the work.

It is virtually impossible to trace all of the musical influences on Floyd's style. The most apparent are the folk and religious musical tradition of the South. The arias as well as the ensemble pieces bear this stamp. Connecting and narrative material is tuneful and free. By exclusively operatic standards, the score of "Susannah" may fall short. However, by the standards of musical drama, which it purports to be, and the general standards of good entertainment, "Susannah" is a work to be reckoned with.
