

# Carlisle Floyd, an Appreciation

## By Patrick Summers, Artistic and Music Director Houston Grand Opera

It was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to carve the names of composers into the proscenium of an opera house, sometimes even enshrining their names on ornate facades as well, as one can still see in grand old houses like Zürich or Barcelona.

The old Metropolitan Opera House in NYC sat on Broadway between 39<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup>, nearly in Times Square, and its decorative gold proscenium (the largest in America) had six names permanently looking over the stage: Beethoven, Glück, Gounod, Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner. The message was clear: however American it might be outside, this auditorium is European.

The most important friendship of Carlisle's life was with David Gockley, a relationship that uniquely affected the history of American Opera. David, as the entrepreneurial young General Director of Houston Grand Opera in the early 1970s, had an overriding instinct that no one else had at that time, though it has now, by imitation, become the standard for artistic leaders in the United States. He knew that a young American city like Houston, a burgeoning boom and bust town with family foundations and wealthy donors, should be more than a just a center of commerce.

As a young baritone, David was deeply moved by a performance of Carlisle's *Susannah*, and saw in it a new future for American opera. *Susannah* was big and symphonic, Verdi if he'd been American, and it required the kind of voices David most admired: rafter-shaking actors who sing rather than singers who act.

Houston Grand Opera has had a unique guardian in Carlisle Floyd (b. 1926). He guided both a postwar American operatic repertoire he had helped create and had strongly influenced in others, as well as a company he quietly fostered for more than half of its history, subtly steering its aesthetics and values.

No other company in the history of opera has had such a long creative relationship with a living composer as has Houston Grand Opera with Carlisle Floyd, who also founded the renowned Houston Grand Opera Studio with David Gockley in 1981.

Carlisle Floyd's first two operas were divergent views of a single theme: the corruptive hypocrisy of religion when it is divorced from the theologies it professes. They are *Slow Dusk*, written when he was 23, and, six years later, by far the most-performed work of his life, *Susannah*, set in Appalachia, based on the Biblical tale of Susannah and the Elders, accepted by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches as an episode from the Book of Daniel, but considered part of the *Apocrypha* by Protestant faiths.

One has to harken back to another era to find an artistic parallel to Carlisle's: the long 19<sup>th</sup> Century career of composer Giuseppe Verdi encompassed 54 years between his inaugural *Oberto* and his final glorious *Falstaff*, but an unprecedented 67 years separate *Slow Dusk* and Carlisle Floyd's last opera, *Prince of Players*, his fifth commission for HGO.

Each of the previous operas were American subjects: *Bilby's Doll*, written to commemorate the American Bicentennial in 1976, was based on *A Mirror of Witches*, exploring spiritual tensions in the Massachusetts Puritan settlements, themes reminiscent of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. 1981's *Willie Stark* was based on Robert Penn's Warren's *All the King's Men*, the incredible story of a life almost too big for opera, the Louisiana governor, Huey P. Long. *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*, from 1991, is a grand family tragedy of Reconstruction Era America, and the autumnal and joyful *Cold Sassy Tree*, set near Floyd's South Carolina birthplace, which was HGO's first commissioned opera of the new century and was, so we all thought at the time, Carlisle's final operatic statement, his *Falstaff*.

Carlisle Floyd was the only composer who could look back upon such a vast sea-change of trends in American musical theater and opera. He began in an era when art was thoroughly segregated between the high and middle-brow.

"High" art, in terms of opera in the 1950s, still meant largely European art and musical modernism, remnants of the second Viennese School, one of the only genuine lines of creative thought that survived the devastating cultural severing of WWI, and which avant-garde composers kept alive within academies, conservatories, and universities well into the 1970s.

“New American Opera” in the 1950s was a decidedly short list. The concurrent era in the American Musical Theater was a golden age of composition and engagement with a broad public: Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Frank Loesser, Irving Berlin, Meredith Wilson, Leonard Bernstein, brought top-level musicianship and theatrical craftwork into a world that had previously been dubbed lightweight.

From the vantage point of European modernism, which was the unassailable lode star of musical composition in the post-WWII years in America, Carlisle Floyd, Gian Carlo Menotti, and a few others wrote popular operas that were considered by some of the critical establishment at the time as safe throwbacks to some mythical past, and vestiges of this haughty view occasionally reappear even now.

Far from being a throwback, Carlisle can now accurately be seen as a revolutionary in his insistence that his operas be fully integrated and understandable for his audiences. His musical language is tonal and dramatic, and has been driven and enlarged solely by the dramatic situations and the librettos of his own imagination, achieving a seamless fusion of words and music, exactly the qualities which are the essence of great opera.

He was unique in being his own librettist, a deep and underappreciated talent that he shares with a few admittedly quite diverse gentlemen as Richard Wagner and Stephen Sondheim. Carlisle was fascinating on the subject of libretto writing, claiming that when composer and librettist go to war in the development of his compositions, it is inevitably the librettist that wins!

Carlisle Floyd had also been present for the exciting and vibrant tectonic shift in which we are currently immersed in American opera: a wealth of new operas around the country on a dizzying array of subjects, and a set of composers who in various ways owe a debt to Carlisle for his own unintentionally radical insistence that opera had an unbreakable duty to emotionally connect with its audience, and that music needn't dumb down nor alienate in order to achieve it.

Even if the geopolitical world of our time is divisive, he thought, culture is still a place where the sharing of extraordinary stories can be a temperate middle ground. Fascinatingly, Carlisle's opera *Willie Stark*, which daringly presented the duplicitous world of American politics as just another brand of show business, did so by blurring the line between opera and musical theater, worlds that were utterly segregated at the time he wrote it. Yet he had seen those worlds continually communicate with each other as the admittedly few great musicals of the later 20<sup>th</sup>

Century took on qualities of opera, while operatic composers slowly started to fuse many traditions of world-music into their works.

The sole unifying quality of 21<sup>st</sup> Century “serious” composition is its thrilling diversity, and in this it is perfectly illustrative of our multicultural world made ever-smaller by technological conveyances unthinkable when Carlisle’s career began.

Carlisle was a shy and unassuming man, the very essence of a type of southern gentleman one might fairly associate with lost era. He wrote letters, or emails these days, in complete and thoughtfully composed paragraphs, and he was well mannered and elegantly spoken. He was artistically uncompromising and considerably demanding, though he rarely felt so because of his gentility. If you were a friend or colleague of Carlisle Floyd, you will understand loyalty because he showed it to you. He was of a generation that believes if you have to *profess* a quality or value, it is because you probably lack it. If he were to be cast in a play, he would be the omniscient Stage Manager of *Our Town*.

There is a moment of supreme tenderness in Carlisle’s opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*, a short aria sung by Will Tweedy in innocent admiration of a young girl, Lightfoot, who protects him. Conducting the world premiere of this opera in Houston shortly into our new century, this was always my most treasured place in the work.

In this more egalitarian age, we no longer carve names above auditoriums, but I imagine instead that certain phrases of music fulfill the same task: vibrating forever in little corners, hovering over us in permanent watch. Great composers create this feeling, an essence of something large that is captured and held, and it is rare that I walk into an empty theater for a rehearsal when I don’t hear one of them in my memory, as I often do this one:

*“So there you were, my guardian angel.  
Just like you’d been sent to me....  
Guardian angels hover overhead just out of sight.  
Then when you’re in need of them  
they appear and spread their wings...  
That’s what guardian angels do”.*

From the opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*,  
Text and Music by Carlisle Floyd