

Woman standing with a dog on the porch of a log cabin  
Photo credit Superstock / Bridgeman Images



MARCH 14, 17, 19, 22 (M), 25, 28 (M)

# Susannah

A musical drama in two acts, ten scenes

Libretto and Music by Carlisle Floyd

Sung in English

First performed by Sarasota Opera on February 1, 1971

Conductor  
Stage Director  
Scenic Designer  
Costume Designer  
Lighting Designer  
Hair & Makeup Designer  
Chorus Master  
Assistant Conductors  
Surtitle Supplier  
Surtitle Designer

Jessé Martins  
Martha Collins  
R. Keith Brumley  
Howard Tsvi Kaplan  
Ken Yunker  
Sue Schaeffer  
Artyom Pak  
Andrew Downs, Pierre-Nicolas Colombat  
Words For Music  
Victor DeRenzi

## CAST

Susannah Polk  
Sam Polk, *her brother*  
Olin Blitch, *an evangelist*  
Little Bat McLean  
Elder McLean  
Elder Gleaton  
Elder Hayes  
Elder Ott  
Mrs. McLean  
Mrs. Gleaton  
Mrs. Hayes  
Mrs. Ott

Hanna Brammer  
Jeremy Brauner  
Jason Zacher  
Dylan Schang \*  
Brian Kontes  
David Freides \*  
Nathaniel Catasca \*  
Drew Comer \*  
Lindsey Polcyn \*  
Krista Renée Pape \*  
Mary Burke Barber \*  
Gabrielle Barkidjija \*

Sarasota Opera Orchestra  
Chorus: Sarasota Opera Apprentice Artists

\*Studio Artist  
\*\*Apprentice Artist

Production sponsored by an Anonymous Donor

# SUSANNAH SYNOPSIS

*The Recent Past, New Hope, Tennessee*

Written during the McCarthy era, *Susannah* is based loosely on the Apocryphal tale of Susannah and the Elders.

## ACT I

In New Hope Valley, Tennessee, Susannah – a pretty and well-mannered young woman of humble origins – is faced with hostility from her church community. The opera opens at a square dance given by her church; a group of wives, jealous of Susannah's beauty and the attention it brings from their husbands, are gossiping about her. Mrs. McLean, one of the wives, states that you can't expect more from someone who was raised by her drunken brother. Finally, the Reverend Olin Blitch, newly arrived to lead the congregation, enters and asks Susannah to dance despite the gossip. Later that evening, Susannah tells her admirer Little Bat – son of Mrs. McLean and her husband, an elder of the church – about the dance; Little Bat leaves abruptly once her brother Sam returns from hunting.

The next morning Susannah is innocently bathing naked in the creek near her home; she is discovered by the elders, who are searching for a baptismal stream. They conceal their lust with outrage and tell the community of her wickedness. Susannah arrives at a church dinner that evening and is sent away, much to her confusion. Later, as she is pondering why she has been shunned, Little Bat tells her that the elders have denounced her for bathing in the nude, and admits that he was coerced into saying she seduced him.

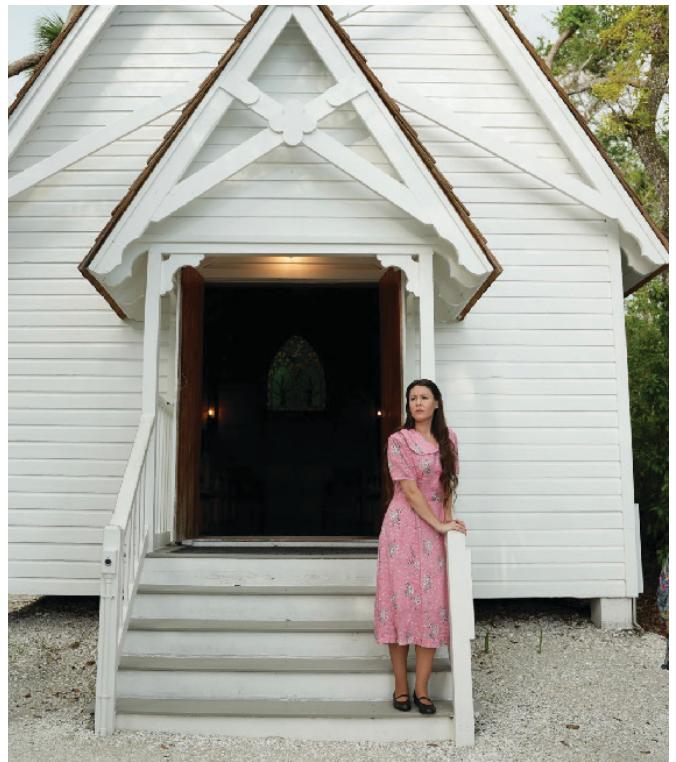
## INTERMISSION

## ACT II

Sam informs Susannah that she must make a public confession in order to be absolved. Though she claims she has nothing to confess, she goes to the service where Olin Blitch is preaching. When she is singled out to come forward, she runs away. Once the service has ended, Reverend Blitch goes to Susannah's house and offers to pray for her soul; upon discovering that her brother is away, Blitch rapes her.

The next day Blitch, having discovered that Susannah was a virgin, comes to her and begs for forgiveness. He throws himself at Susannah's mercy, but she refuses to forgive him. When Susannah tells Sam the story he threatens to kill Blitch; he leaves for the baptismal service, carrying his shotgun. Convinced that Susannah led her brother to murder, the community heads to her house to drive her out of the valley. However, Little Bat has warned her in advance, and when the vigilantes arrive she is waiting with a shotgun. They retreat, but she has effectively severed her ties with the community and her world.

**World Premiere:** Ruby Diamond Auditorium at Florida State University, February 24, 1955.



Photos by Hallie Geyh, Sarasota Opera, 2025

## SUSANNAH BACKGROUND

Carlisle Floyd crafted one of the most enduring and frequently performed American operas with his masterpiece, *Susannah*. In this year, the centenary of his birth, it is fitting to bring this opera back to Florida, the state where it premiered in 1955 when Floyd was a young professor at Florida State University.

Written during the McCarthy era, *Susannah* is loosely based on the biblical tale from the Apocrypha of "Susannah and the Elders", but Floyd puts it into an updated American context; Susannah is a young and innocent woman of humble origins in a small mountain town in Tennessee who is falsely targeted as a sinner. The resulting raw, intense work explores themes of religious hypocrisy, isolation, and loss of innocence.

Floyd wrote both the music and the libretto, bringing to life a world he knew intimately from his youth. His father was a Methodist minister and Floyd rebelled against what he felt was religion's oppressive control. "I hated revival meetings as a child.... They were frightening. It was a mass coercion of people. It's fascism; it's very offensive and angering; it's the imposing of one's moral code on others."

When asked if his opera intentionally addressed McCarthyism Floyd said: "It was not something I set out to do, but I felt that if a strong moral message came through the drama, then all the better. I lived through that period, which was the darkest period that I've ever lived through in my life. A lot of false accusations were made, and that really enraged me. People that I knew were evicted from the university, even friends. At Florida State an accusation was tantamount to guilt. We faculty had to sign a pledge of loyalty or lose our jobs."

In creating the opera, Floyd says he drew inspiration from a creative writing teacher in college who advised to "write what you know". The libretto, which he completed in ten days, is a taut, intense drama that would stand on its own as a theater piece. The story and characters are all brought to life in the natural dialect and speech rhythms of the American south. To this he added music of exceptional beauty and variety. His score is renowned for its melodic accessibility and directness, blending American folk melodies, traditional folk hymns and powerful operatic drama which perfectly depicts the moods and tension of this Tennessee setting.

His belief in the work gave him the confidence to approach the esteemed soprano Phyllis Curtin to consider taking on



the role of Susannah for the premiere. It only took him playing Susannah's two arias for her at the piano to convince her of the worthiness of the opera. While the premiere took place at Florida State University, it was her backing that persuaded New York City Opera to program the work for the next year. "I love the opera and am convinced that it is a really great work."

Carlisle Floyd described his compositional style in *Susannah* as an effort to create an accessible American opera, combining traditional classical forms with American vernacular music to "redress the balance" of drama and music. His hope was that the opera would be widely accessible: "I felt that there was a large audience in this country who had never gone inside an opera house... I wanted to write an opera that would seem comfortable for that audience, if we could get them inside."

The longevity and popularity of this American work attests that he was successful. Though a young and relatively inexperienced composer when writing *Susannah*, with its premiere he burst on the scene to immediate success. The opera was awarded the New York Music Critics Circle Award for Best New Opera in 1956 and was chosen to represent American music and culture at the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958.

*Susannah* continues to be one of the most powerful and frequently performed American operas which seems as relevant today as it was during the McCarthy era in which it was written.

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**Martha Collins**, Director of Education at Sarasota Opera, is an acclaimed stage director praised for her insightful character portrayals and dynamic productions. Her most recent Sarasota Opera credits include *Cavalleria rusticana* & *Pagliacci* (2025), *Carmen* (2024), *Ernani* (2023), *Attila* (2022), and *Roméo et Juliette*, along with earlier contributions to the company's acclaimed *Verdi Cycle*.