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**Exploring Performance-oriented Analysis Through an Examination of the Title Character's two Arias  
in Carlisle Floyd's Susannah**

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**EXPLORING PERFORMANCE-ORIENTED ANALYSIS THROUGH AN  
EXAMINATION OF THE TITLE CHARACTER'S TWO ARIAS IN CARLISLE  
FLOYD'S *SUSANNAH***

BY

SHANNON COLE

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Department of Music  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis adapts a model of performance-based analysis and utilizes it to interpret the title role in Carlisle Floyd's opera, *Susannah* (1955). Using John Rink's model as a guide, this performance-oriented analysis reveals the relationships between the musical and textual elements within the role, and allows the performer to prioritize which relationships will most strongly guide her interpretation.

The first chapter introduces the opera's libretto and its literary origins, outlines the analytical methodology, and addresses pertinent literature in the field of performance analysis as well as that regarding the opera *Susannah*. The second chapter provides the historical and political context of the opera, including discussion of Floyd's contemporaries and the impact of McCarthyism in 1950s America.

The third and fourth chapters present analyses of Susannah's two arias, "Ain't It A Pretty Night" and "The Trees On The Mountains" respectively. The theoretically-based findings are weighed against actual performance considerations to create an analysis that could feasibly inform a performance. The fifth chapter situates the two arias in the context of the opera, and points to further research possibilities.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION, METHODOLOGY, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* premiered on February 24, 1955 at Florida State University. The opera's libretto is an adaptation of the biblical story of Susannah and the Elders, which Floyd modernizes and moves to a fictional small town in Tennessee. The opera tells the tragic tale of a young southern girl falsely accused of promiscuity by the elders of her town, and it continues to draw critical and public acclaim with its "American" music and exploration of religious persecution and moral injustice.<sup>1</sup> To date, *Susannah* has received more than eight hundred productions.<sup>2</sup> Though some critics have said the opera is merely a regional work, *Susannah* was performed at the New York City Opera the year after its premiere, and it debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in 1999 with Renee Fleming in the title role.

The biblical story of Susannah and the Elders, Floyd's inspiration for the opera, concerns Susanna, the wife of Joakim. Two Elders who are desirous of Susanna spy on her as she bathes in her private pool. They demand that she submit to them, or risk being accused of adultery. She refuses, whereupon the Elders lie publicly about discovering her and a young man under a tree in her garden. Susanna is condemned to die, but the young Daniel is inspired by God to defend her. Questioning the Elders separately, he asks them both the same question but receives a different answer from each man. With

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<sup>1</sup> Many people have described Floyd's music in this way, including Laurence-Scherer, Magiera, and Thomason.

<sup>2</sup> Review of *Susannah*, by Steve Hicken (Florida State University, Tallahassee), *The Tallahassee Democrat*, 6 November 2005.

this proof of the Elders' lies, Susanna's innocence is vindicated.<sup>3</sup> Though the opera follows a plot similar to the biblical tale, in the end fate is not so fortuitous for Susannah Polk. Instead of being redeemed, Susannah is shunned by her community and resolves to spend her life alone on her farm. The biblical moral, that God will protect the virtuous and devout, is not present in Floyd's interpretation of the story. A more fatalistic moral emerges instead, one in which the individual cannot hope to fight against the masses, no matter what the truth may be.

### **Libretto Summary**

As Act I opens, the townspeople of New Hope Valley, Tennessee are gathered for a square dance, excitedly awaiting the arrival of their new preacher. Susannah Polk, nineteen years old, beautiful, and naïve, is getting attention from all the men, and the wives do little to hide their jealousy. The Reverend Olin Blich appears a day early and immediately takes notice of Susannah. He joins in the dancing and asks her to dance. Later that night, Susannah sits with her friend Little Bat ("a shifty-eyed youth, not too strong mentally"<sup>4</sup>) on the porch of her house and dreams of the day she can leave the valley and see the rest of the world. She sings her first aria "Ain't It A Pretty Night," unaware that the elder's wives are jealous of her beauty, and that horrible events are about to unfold. The next morning, the four elders of the church search for a baptismal creek and catch sight of Susannah bathing nude in a creek on her farm. Shocked and outraged, the elders tell the rest of the community and the preacher what they have seen.

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<sup>3</sup> Tomas C. Hernandez, "A Dialectical Approach to Event and Emotion in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," *The Opera Journal* 17, no. 3 (1984), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah* Vocal Score, libretto by Carlisle Floyd (New York, Boosey & Hawkes, 1967), 22.

That evening, at a church picnic, the four elders' wives discuss Susannah's scandalous behaviour and wait for the preacher to arrive. When Susannah arrives with food, she is told that she is not welcome. Back at her house, Little Bat explains that the elders saw her bathing, and that his mother, Mrs. McLean, made him say he had been seduced by Susannah. Furious at his lie, she sends him away and tells him never to come back. Susannah's brother Sam returns home and tries to console Susannah by explaining that some people are incapable of loving the way God intended. Susannah, however, is unable to understand and bursts into tears.

Act II begins a few days later when Sam informs his sister that the community wants a public confession. Though she replies that she has nothing to confess, she starts to doubt herself in the face of so much scrutiny. The creek is now being used for baptisms, and Reverend Blitch has asked Susannah to come to a prayer meeting that evening. Sam leaves to go hunting for the night and he advises Susannah to go to the prayer meeting and face the townspeople.

Inside the church that evening, the Reverend Blitch takes up the collection while the congregation sings a hymn. The charismatic Blitch calls on those who have not yet been baptized to come forward. Blitch singles out Susannah and, as the others stare at her accusingly, attempts to convince her to make a public confession. As if hypnotized, she begins down the aisle toward the preacher, then suddenly comes to her senses and runs out of the church.

An hour later, at her home, Susannah recalls and sings a folk song, "The Trees On The Mountains," which reflects her loneliness and sorrow. When she finishes her song, the preacher appears out of the darkness and tries once more to convince her to repent.

His intentions soon become muddled by lust, and Susannah is too weary to resist him. As the scene ends, Blitch leads Susannah into the house and takes advantage of her. The next day, Blitch tries to convince the community that the rumours of Susannah's promiscuity were untrue, though he cannot reveal the source of his newfound knowledge. Despite his efforts, the elders and their wives refuse to believe him.

Upon returning home drunk, Sam learns what has happened to Susannah and rushes to the baptismal creek with his shotgun. Susannah is shocked as she hears a shot ring through the air. Little Bat runs into her house exclaiming that Sam has killed the Reverend Blitch. The townspeople follow closely behind Little Bat, threatening to kill Sam and run Susannah out of town. Susannah, her innocence shattered, grabs a gun and forces the townspeople off of her property. Little Bat lingers behind, and Susannah encourages him to come close and touch her. When he gets near enough, she slaps him viciously and laughs while he runs away. Completely alone, Susannah has survived the ordeal but is forever changed.<sup>5</sup>

## Methodology

The analytical methodology used in this thesis draws from a number of sources, primarily Rink's "performer's analysis," as introduced in an article in *Musical performance: a guide to understanding*.<sup>6</sup> According to Rink,

the issue is one of analytical technique relevant to the performer – which in this case involves extracting all the different manifestations from the score,

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<sup>5</sup> This plot synopsis has been assembled with some reference to the Hawaii Opera Theatre website. The clear synopsis on that website helped me to organize my own. The words in this thesis are original, however, and have not been directly taken from the website.

"Hawaii Opera Theatre – Synopsis of Susannah." (Accessed 28 February 2007), <<http://www.hawaiiopera.org/showText.aspx?settings=Synopsis%20of%20Susannah&picture=susannah.jpg&name=Susannah>>.

<sup>6</sup> John Rink, "Analysis and (or?) Performance," in *Musical Performance: A Guide To Understanding*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35-58.

juxtaposing them on paper for the sake of comparison, and then weighing up their respective roles within the performance conception.<sup>7</sup>

Rink bases this “performer’s analysis” on five principles:

1. Temporality lies at the heart of performance and is therefore fundamental to ‘performer’s analysis.’
2. Its primary goal is to discover the music’s ‘shape’, as opposed to structure, as well as the means of projecting it.
3. The score is not ‘the music’; ‘the music’ is not confined to the score.
4. Any analytical element that impinges on performance will ideally be incorporated within a larger synthesis influenced by considerations of style (broadly defined), genre, performance tradition, technique, instrument and so on, as well as the performer’s individual artistic prerogatives. In other words, analytically determined decisions should not be systematically prioritised.
5. ‘Informed intuition’ guides, or at least influences, the process of ‘performer’s analysis’, although a more deliberate analytical approach can also be useful.<sup>8</sup>

These principles lead Rink to propose six analytical techniques.

1. identifying formal divisions and basic tonal plan
2. graphing tempo
3. graphing dynamics
4. analysing melodic shape and constituent motifs/ideas
5. preparing a rhythmic reduction
6. renotating the music<sup>9</sup>

Following these techniques, Rink visually reconfigures the various aspects of the music so that the essential motifs and extraordinary musical events become evident. In interpreting the information, he proposes to “explore the dynamic between intuitive and conscious thought that potentially characterises the act of analysis in relation to performance,”<sup>10</sup> so that neither informed intuition nor rationalized analysis dominates the performer’s decision making process but instead, the two exist in a reciprocal relationship. In addition, Rink cautions that his techniques should be “regarded not as an

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>8</sup> Rink, “Analysis And (Or?) Performance,” 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 35.

end in themselves but as a means of heightening one's sense of musical process...temporality and 'shape' are fundamental to this analytical enterprise, as indeed is recognition of the need for a larger synthesis."<sup>11</sup>

My interest in Rink's performer's analysis lies especially with two of his ideas: one, that shape and the perception of music as it occurs in time are more important to a performance than the traditional ideas of form and structure; and two, that each performer must make musical decisions based on his or her own knowledge and understanding, and therefore each performance of a piece will be unique. Though I believe in the basic premise of Rink's work, I have used my own judgement in the application of his analysis. Certain steps, such as the melodic contour analysis for example, lend themselves better to some pieces of music than others. In addition, renotation of the music applies to cadenzas and other metrically flexible musical areas, and is therefore not applicable to either of Susannah's arias. Rather than trying to make the music fit the analytical model, I have used a slightly varied group of tools that closely capture the essence of the music. Thus, in the case of Susannah's two arias, a modified version of Rink's performer's analysis is most effective.

An operatic aria presents additional interpretive opportunities beyond those found in the solo piano music Rink analyses, and makes modification of his analysis necessary. First, there are both vocal and orchestral lines to consider. The voice, while the focal point of an operatic aria, works with the orchestra in the interpretation of the piece as a whole. Because of the collaborative nature of this relationship between voice and orchestra, I analyse not only the vocal line but also aspects of the orchestra such as instrumentation, harmony, melody and rhythm in order to create a complete view of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 42.

“Ain’t It A Pretty Night” and “The Trees On The Mountains.” Performing orchestral analysis allows a singer to understand aspects of a piece that might not be apparent in the vocal line, such as timbre, instrumental texture, and motif occurrence. Because a singer is responsible only for creating one line of the music, she gains invaluable insight into the overall meaning of a work through such an analysis of the other components of the piece.<sup>12</sup>

The second new consideration that must be addressed is the presence and importance of text. Words form an integral part of an opera, as music cannot depict a specific dramatic scenario without the context and detail afforded by text. Within this thesis, the words of each aria are analysed as a separate component of the musical framework, given equal consideration as that given to melody, harmony, or rhythm. Guidance comes from pertinent literature including *Bringing Soprano Arias to Life*<sup>13</sup> and *An Interpretive Guide to Operatic Arias*<sup>14</sup>, books aimed less at scholarly research than at helping singers create dramatically convincing portrayals of the characters they sing by forming text-driven interpretation. The authors of these books relate the text to the music insofar as the music helps the singer depict the situations and emotions detailed in the text. Any reading of an operatic aria that denies or ignores the meanings in the text in favour of a purely musical analysis misses a key component of the work, and cannot lead a performer to a complete understanding of a role; the text is, in fact, the driving element of most arias. The three most important aspects of the text are the poetic or prosaic

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<sup>12</sup> I use the pronoun “she” to describe the performer because the role of Susannah is necessarily sung by a soprano.

<sup>13</sup> Boris Goldovsky and Arthur Schoep, *Bringing Soprano Arias to Life* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Martial Singher, *An Interpretive Guide to Operatic Arias* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1983).

structure, language use, and overall meaning, and these three areas receive the most attention within this thesis.

In summary, the methodological framework of this thesis consists of seven steps, some of which apply to the vocal line and orchestra separately. The steps are:

1. analyzing lyrical content
2. identifying formal divisions and basic tonal plan
3. analyzing melodic shape and constituent motifs/ideas
4. graphing tempo
5. graphing dynamics
6. preparing a rhythmic reduction
7. analyzing the orchestration as it relates to the singer's interpretation<sup>15</sup>

Steps 1, 3, and 7 necessarily consider the voice and orchestra separately, while the other four steps may do so when specific instances in the music dictate such treatment. These seven steps are applied to both "Ain't It A Pretty Night" and "The Trees On The Mountains," Susannah's two arias.

### **Literature Review**

The performers, directors, and conductors of opera today regard Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* as one of the foremost modern operas in the repertory. The opera has been performed more than eight hundred times internationally, including a 1999 production at the Metropolitan Opera in New York boasting Renee Fleming as the title character. Few scholars have written about Floyd, however, even fewer about *Susannah* in particular. The New Grove Dictionary contains a one-page entry that is little more than a plot synopsis of the opera; most of the articles about the opera are performance reviews in newspapers. Detailed research on the opera has been addressed only in a limited number of dissertations and journal articles.

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<sup>15</sup> Steps two through six are taken from Rink, "Analysis And (Or?) Performance," 41. The first and seventh steps have been added for the purposes of this thesis.

Ronald Eyer's 1957 article in *Tempo* is possibly the earliest publication about Floyd's opera. "Carlisle Floyd's: 'Susannah'" recounts the details behind the creation of the opera, including the forging of the relationship between Floyd and soprano Phyllis Curtin, who originated the title role. With an outline of the plot and the presentation of central musical themes, Eyer's article opened the door for further study; it is unfortunate that only a select few followed his lead.

Tomas C. Hernandez's article "A Dialectical Approach To Event And Emotion In Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*" appeared in *The Opera Journal* in 1984. In this article Hernandez explores the dichotomy present in *Susannah* – as in all opera - between the text-based Event and the musically articulated Emotion, coming to the conclusion that "neither libretto nor music is forced to compensate for the inherent weaknesses of the other vis-à-vis Event and Emotion."<sup>16</sup> According to Hernandez, Floyd negotiates the two spheres by setting up "a dialectical process consisting of a series of opposing Events (Theses and Antitheses) and resultant Emotions (Syntheses)."<sup>17</sup> Hernandez does not, however, explore the music in any detail, and both Event and Emotion are accounted for in his examples almost entirely through the libretto.

Lisa S. Ramer's 1993 thesis dissertation from the University of Washington, "A Critical Analysis Of Carlisle Floyd's Opera: *Susannah*," explores both the music and libretto in some detail. Ramer divides her work into considerations of Structure, Literary Themes, and Musical Themes, and her Appendices include the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, the libretto, and an interview with Floyd. This thesis provides a general

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<sup>16</sup> Hernandez, "A Dialectical Approach to Event and Emotion in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

survey of the opera, except that Ramer's labelling of musical motifs is detailed and specific, and provides new insight into the opera.

In 2002, University of Houston doctoral student Todd R. Miller produced a dissertation entitled "Religious Elements In Three Operas Of Carlisle Floyd." The chapter on *Susannah* details the religious source material, Susanna and the Elders, as well as the religious elements created by Floyd, such as the devoutly religious community and the hymns they sing, the visiting evangelist, and the revival meeting. Though *Susannah* is not the entire focus of Miller's document, his work sheds light on a crucial aspect of the opera; the characters are who they are largely because of their religious beliefs and the community in which they were raised. Unlike Hernandez, Miller meticulously examines Floyd's music insofar as it relates to the religious elements of the opera; many of Miller's examples provide proof of similarities between Floyd's composition and familiar hymns, while others help to back up claims about the religious fervour of the people of New Hope Valley.

Carlisle Floyd published a chapter in an Opera America collection entitled *Perspectives: Creating And Producing Contemporary Opera And Musical Theater: A Series Of Fifteen Monographs*. "The Making Of An Opera: Some Considerations" provides the reader with insight into Floyd's decision-making process regarding the choice of subject for an opera, as well as the work that is required in preparing a libretto. In addition, Floyd discusses a composer's responsibility in pacing an opera, determining the point of view of scenes and "creating a musical structure which parallels the dramatic one."<sup>18</sup> A performer can use this information about the composer's priorities to help

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<sup>18</sup> Carlisle Floyd, "The Making of an Opera: Some Considerations," in *Perspectives: Creating and Producing Contemporary Musical Theatre* (Washington, DC.: Opera America, 1983), 24.

streamline her own understanding of the opera. For example, by paying attention to the peaks and valleys of the musico-dramatic structure, a singer can gauge the level of importance of each scene and can plot the course of her own character development accordingly.

Though Carlisle Floyd's music has yet to receive much scholarly attention, the relationship between analysis and performance has attracted an abundance of scholars, especially since the 1980s. When dealing with such a broad research area, approaches to the topic vary. In his *Musical Structure And Performance*, Wallace Berry asks, "Does it matter whether the performer is consciously aware of the elements and processes of form and structure?" His answer is a resounding yes, as he believes that "analysis is a necessary basis for enlightened, illuminating interpretation."<sup>19</sup> Never, for Berry, does performance inform analysis; in his view, rational examination of the music's structure takes priority over all other aspects of the performance process:

Whatever conceptual images it seeks to represent, truly illuminating musical performance is richly informed by analysis, the indispensable, pragmatic basis for resolving problematic decisions of interpretation. Searching, genuinely comprehensive analysis leads to a shaping, conditioning concept that is distilled from many kinds of inquiry into all elements of structure, and that concerns the ways in which structural and expressive elements articulate continuities to be elucidated and rendered convincingly in performance.<sup>20</sup>

Eugene Narmour shares Berry's point of view:

The study of music theory should enable performers to determine not only how individual musical artworks are structured but should also endow performers with the means to discover how different interpretations alter the listener's perception and understanding of living art works.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace Berry, *Musical Structure and Performance* (New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 1989), x.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Narmour, "On the Relationship of Analytical Theory to Performance and Interpretation," in *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas*, eds. Eugene Narmour and Ruth A. Solie (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1988), 317.

Accordingly, Narmour appraises various musical performances on the basis of how well they measure up to his analytical criteria. Especially notable with the vocal example, he chooses his favourite recording based on criteria different from those in his model, perhaps proving that there are elements in performance that cannot be discerned and accounted for through strict analysis.

Many authors aim to open the lines of communication between performer and analyst in a more reciprocal manner. Susan Bradshaw appears to recognize the problems inherent when theorists dictate analysis to performers:

As professional musicologists we can write all we like about matters that ought to be of equal concern to professional performers; but unless our communications can be made to relate to the time in which music unfolds, academic analyses – however imaginative and far-reaching in themselves – can scarcely hope to exert much of an influence on practical music making. Some kind of performance-adapted analysis could and certainly should stimulate performers to become more acutely aware of a multiplicity of enriching relationships...but only if it can be devised less with the purpose of laying down laws or prescribing easy answers and more with the aim of provoking performers first to observe and then to ask their own questions of the text confronting them.<sup>22</sup>

What follows, however, is a shockingly prescriptive analysis wherein Bradshaw exposes her true position, that performers must undertake painstakingly detailed analysis in order to be fit to perform any piece. Bradshaw cannot reconcile her experience as a performer with her desire as a theorist to explain every musical detail rationally. In one case, she draws on her own performance experience to justify her ability to express Beethoven's motivic articulation,<sup>23</sup> yet in another case she derides the "unavoidable intervention of the third-party performer...ultimately responsible for the many slips that come between the

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Bradshaw, "A Performer's Responsibility," in *Composition – Performance – Reception: Studies in the Creative Process in Music*, ed. Wyndham Thomas (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998), 57-58.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

original communicator (the composer) and the eventual communicatee (the listener).”<sup>24</sup> Her priority is fidelity to a pristine score, and she goes so far as to assert, “accuracy is clearly an exemplary way to begin when it comes to laying the foundations for interpretive performance.”<sup>25</sup> Her view of the responsibilities of a performer ultimately positions analysis and obsessive attention to detail as the only method through which a performer may hope to realize properly a piece of Western classical music.

Standing more firmly on the side of performance, Carolyn Abbate writes, “Musical performance on the whole has been seen, analysed, and acknowledged, but not always listened to.”<sup>26</sup> Abbate asks if we could shift the focus, and “take intellectual pleasure from music not as a work but as an event?”<sup>27</sup> Christopher Small coins the term “Musicking” to define the event of music-making. Small believes, “Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do”<sup>28</sup> and “the nature of [the] work is part of the nature of the performance...an important part but only a part.”<sup>29</sup> The central theme of Small’s book is that “Music is performance, and pieces, or works, of music, whether on the smallest or grandest scale, whether written down or not, exist in order to give performers something to perform. Unperformed, only the instructions for performance exist.”<sup>30</sup> In Small’s estimation, then, score analysis provides only one small piece of the puzzle.

And where does performer’s analysis fit into the debate? Though it would seem on the surface that performance-oriented analysis dictates another set of guidelines for a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>26</sup> Carolyn Abbate, “Music – Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 508.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 533.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Small, *Musicking* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 218.

performer to adhere to, this is not the case. Rather, performer's analysis works to help the performer ask questions about the music in order to shape an interpretation. Edward T. Cone begins to hone in on the subject when he writes that "Every valid interpretation thus represents, not an approximation of some ideal, but a choice: which of the relationships implicit in this piece are to be emphasized, to be made explicit?"<sup>31</sup> The choice Cone speaks of comes from an understanding of the various relationships within the music, and the realization that no two interpretations will ever be exact replicas of one another.

Peter Hill's article "From score to sound" addresses the question: "how do we begin with the score itself?"<sup>32</sup> He suggests that, rather than focusing on technique or studiously listening to recordings, a performer needs to develop first her own concept of a work. "The ideal is to exploit the precious time when a piece is unfamiliar, when we are most able to bring fresh insights to bear."<sup>33</sup> The type of mental preparation Hill suggests is similar to John Rink's performer's analysis in that it encourages a musician to study a piece away from the practice room not only for "proper" analytical understanding of a piece, but rather with the goal of creating a total picture of the music to be created. Rink's performer's analysis offers a performer the tools to understand music in a temporal/spatial way and the opportunity to interpret her analytical findings as possibilities, not rules.<sup>34</sup> Rink asserts that "analytical expertise should certainly be brought to bear on one's performance if this facilitates one's understanding of a piece,

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<sup>31</sup> Edward T. Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968), 34.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Hill, "From score to sound," in *Musical Performance: a guide to understanding*, ed. John Rink (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>34</sup> Rink, "Analysis and (or?) performance," 35-58.

but that is by no means the only way in which to penetrate the work: sometimes ‘informed intuition’ is sufficient.”<sup>35</sup> Using Rink’s five-step model as an interpretive framework, the performer avoids making uninformed choices, and views the analysis of the music as but one factor in the preparation of a piece.

This thesis aims to bridge a gap that exists in the current literature by utilizing performance-oriented analysis to explore the title character of Floyd’s *Susannah*. Studying an opera score with no reference to performance provides an incomplete knowledge of the work, because an opera will be a different work every time it is performed. The inherent variations from one performance to the next stem directly from the choices made by the performers, thus the task of researching and considering the meaning behind each choice is the performers’ responsibility. The field of performance studies has not yet solidified a means of analysing music through performance considerations, and this thesis aims to contribute to finding that means. Abbate believes that the first-hand experience of performance can serve as a source for scholarly study, yet the analytical work she proposes has more to do with understanding a performance after the fact than preparing for and creating a performance. Alternatively, Emmons and Thomas, and Goldovsky and Schoep (in their respective guides) offer the singer suggestions for building an interpretation prior to performance. Because of their emphasis on text-based interpretation, however, these guides lack the analytical depth necessary for the performer to grasp the entire musical context into which the character’s melody fits. Interpretations such as those offered by Emmons and Thomas or Goldovsky and Schoep find dramatic impetus most often in the libretto and stage directions, and

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<sup>35</sup>John Rink, review of *Musical Structure and Performance*, by Wallace Berry, *Musical Analysis* 9, no. 3 (1990): 328.

rarely in the musical material. Rink's performer's analysis provides a synthesis, whereby a performer uses analytical tools to supplement his intuitive understanding of "the work," all the while prioritizing performance preparation as the reason for the analysis. This thesis expands upon Rink's work by relating his method to the examination of operatic arias, taking into consideration the way additional elements such as the relationship of multiple instrumental lines and the effect of orchestration, the voice as an instrument, and text as a layer of interpretive material affect the singer's interpretation. In addition, considerations of the historical and political context of the opera are also included because they inform a singer's understanding of her character and the events that direct the plot. The context surrounding Susannah's composition lends the opera added significance, as the moral tale it contains is directly relatable to the political climate of the United States in the 1950s.

After more than fifty years Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*, well-known and respected in the world of operatic performance, has barely begun to garner attention in the field of musicological research. This most famous of Floyd's works is interesting on many levels and needs to be studied in greater detail. While the story continues to be politically and socially relevant today, the music appeals to a broad audience with its balance of accessibility and innovation. Like many stories, the most important aspect of this opera is the title character. Susannah's beautiful arias and unique life experience appeal to performers and audiences, and the extreme change in her personality provides the main dramatic impetus for the opera. This thesis analyses Susannah's character in a way that facilitates the performance of the role. Rather than attempting to analyse all of Susannah's music – a task that is beyond the scope of one thesis – the focus is her two

arias, as they form the musical focal point for her character. The following chapter introduces the historical considerations surrounding *Susannah's* composition.

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *SUSANNAH*

### The Composer

Carlisle Floyd was born in Latta, South Carolina on June 11, 1926. Floyd's father was a Methodist minister, and the religious upbringing Carlisle received provided much of the material for the setting and characters in *Susannah* as well as many of his other dramatic works. "His experiences as a child were those of the Southern Bible Belt with its traveling preachers, revival meetings and strong sense of community."<sup>1</sup> In 1943, at the age of seventeen, Floyd began studying piano with Ernst Bacon at Syracuse University. He graduated from the university in 1946. In 1947 he joined the piano faculty of Florida State University in Tallahassee, where he eventually became professor of composition. Floyd stayed at Florida State for almost thirty years, leaving in 1976 for a post at the University of Houston in Texas. In 1996 Floyd retired from teaching but he continues to offer guidance to young composers.

*Susannah* was Floyd's third operatic composition, following *Slow Dusk* (1949) and *The Fugitives* (1951). Floyd's subsequent operas were *Wuthering Heights* (1958), *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* (1962), *The Sojourner and Mollie Sinclair* (1963), *Markheim* (1966), *Of Mice and Men* (1970), *Flower and Hawk* (1972), *Bilby's Doll* (1976), *Willie Stark* (1981), and *Cold Sassy Tree* (2000). In addition to his operatic output, Floyd has composed four song cycles, one piano sonata, and four various

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<sup>1</sup>Staff author, "Lessons Learned in 'Susannah' Are Universal," *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 13 June 2006.

compositions for orchestra. His proclivity toward opera stems from his literary skills; while completing his undergraduate degree he won a playwriting competition.<sup>2</sup>

*Susannah* is in two acts, and is designated a “musical drama” by the composer. In addition to composing the music, Floyd chose the subject matter and wrote the libretto for the opera. The libretto took Floyd ten days to complete, while the composition and orchestration of the music took about a year, beginning in the fall of 1953 and ending in the fall of 1954.<sup>3</sup> “Probably nothing is more critical to the ultimate success or failure of an opera,” says Floyd, “than what material is chosen by the composer and librettist.”<sup>4</sup> When choosing subject matter for an opera, Floyd believes “the two necessary ingredients in opera are action and passion” and “the plot must permit externalization through action.”<sup>5</sup> Other composers have agreed that the story of Susanna and the Elders provides suitable dramatic material; Alessandro Stradella composed an oratorio entitled *La Susanna* in 1681, Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre wrote a cantata entitled *Susanne et les Vieillards* in 1708, G.F. Handel wrote his *Susanna* as an oratorio in 1749, and in 1948 Jerome Moross composed an opera-ballet entitled *Susanna and the Elders*.

Floyd was twenty-eight years old when *Susannah* received its debut performance at Florida State University in 1955. Both the opera and its composer remained relatively unknown until the New York City Opera debut the following year. According to Ronald Eyer, “On September 27, 1956, a new and most promising creative talent was brought to national attention with the production by the New York City Opera Company of Carlisle

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Stillier, “Floyd, Carlisle (Sessions)” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 7 January 2007), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca>>.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Eyer, “Carlisle Floyd’s ‘Susannah,’” *Tempo* new ser., no. 42 (1956-57), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Carlisle Floyd, “The Making Of An Opera: Some Considerations” in *Perspectives: Creating And Producing Contemporary Opera And Musical Theatre* (Washington, D.C.: Opera America, 1983), 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Floyd's two-act musical drama, *Susannah*.”<sup>6</sup> Soprano Phyllis Curtin performed the title role in the opera's premiere as well as in the majority of its performances. She believed so strongly in the work that she became its biggest supporter. Curtin pitched the opera to any companies that would listen, and her efforts helped gain *Susannah* its place in the repertory at that time. Based on the 1956 New York performance, the opera won a New York Music Critics' Circle Award and garnered Floyd a Guggenheim Fellowship.

### **The Musical Climate**

Floyd composed *Susannah* during what many consider to be the Golden Era of American opera. Among the most famous of his operatic contemporaries during the mid-twentieth century were Benjamin Britten, Gian Carlo Menotti, Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, and Douglas Moore. Benjamin Britten was an influential British composer during the 1950s, and though he lived in England his influence was and continues to be felt in the United States. The success of Britten's first opera, *Peter Grimes* (1944-45), left Britten suspicious of large operatic companies. As a result, he began writing smaller chamber operas suitable for performance at places like Glyndebourne, and he eventually started his own festival, the Aldeburgh Festival. This scaling-down effect was also happening in the United States at the time, where composers were attempting to write works that could feasibly be performed by small regional companies. Britten strove to “preserve the classical practice of separate numbers that crystallize and hold the emotion of a dramatic situation at chosen moments.”<sup>7</sup> He resisted through-composition and atonality, believing that opera was an art that “could convey fundamental truths, for example by confronting social majorities (heterosexual, anti-pacifist) with evidence of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Whittall, Arnold. “Britten, (Edward) Benjamin,” in *Grove Music Online* ed. L Macy (Accessed 28 March 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca>>.

their intolerance and insensitivity.”<sup>8</sup> This social conscience defines the work of many operatic composers of Britten’s era.

Gian Carlo Menotti was born in Cadegliano, Italy in 1911. In 1928 he moved to the United States to study at the Curtis Institute, and he remained in the United States for the rest of his life. Menotti’s first successful opera was *Amelia al ballo* (*Amelia Goes To The Ball*) which premiered in 1935. In 1950 Menotti’s first full-length opera, *The Consul*, came to fruition. Like *Susannah*, *The Consul* “uses the *verismo* of Puccini’s day to treat a contemporary situation.”<sup>9</sup> Another of Menotti’s operas, *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954), bears similarity to *Susannah*. It is a drama “set in contemporary New York and concerned with the conflict of the physical and spiritual worlds. Again a contemporary plot is set in a Puccinian manner.”<sup>10</sup>

Samuel Barber met Menotti when they were both students at the Curtis Institute, and the two shared a close working relationship for many years. Menotti wrote the libretto for Barber’s *Vanessa* (1957), and collaborated with him on many of his other projects. Barber’s neo-romantic style helped him gain favour among audiences and he enjoyed great success throughout his career as a composer:

Barber followed, throughout his career, a path marked by vocally inspired lyricism and a commitment to the tonal language and many of the forms of late 19th-century music. Modernist elements – increased dissonance, chromaticism, tonal ambiguity and limited serialism – appear in his music after 1939 only in so far as he could pursue, without compromise, principles of tonality and lyrical expression.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Archibald, Bruce. “Menotti, Gian Carlo,” in *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27 March 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca>>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Heyman, Barbara B. “Barber, Samuel,” in *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 28 March 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca>>.

Though he wrote only four operas, Barber's acclaim as a composer garners him a continued position of prominence in the world of American opera.

The American composers working in a style most closely related to Floyd's were Aaron Copland and Douglas Moore. The works of Copland, Moore, and Floyd are typically described as being American in style, because of the rural American subject matter and folk music idioms explored in their dramatic works. Copland's *The Tender Land* (1954) is similar to *Susannah* in that the heroine is a young, rural girl struggling against social pressure and judgment, and the music is strongly rooted in folk themes. Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956) is based on historical characters, and explores the life of miners in the American west in the nineteenth century. Again, Moore's dramatic work is decidedly American in nature and the opera's story deals with social customs and the everyday life at that time in the United States. In the 1950s, American composers worked to create an American aesthetic in opera and the subject matter and musical style of these works is representative of that aesthetic. Floyd's *Susannah* fits the American style, and is typical of the type of opera being created in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. Through embracing American folklore "American opera has flourished as a unique native expression, and American composers have probed deep into American folklore to establish an individually styled American opera."<sup>12</sup>

A summary of Floyd's contemporaries must conclude with composer Ernst Krěnek and playwright Arthur Miller. Krěnek's name is not among the list of well-known operatic composers, and though he lived in the United States he wrote operas for German theatres. What is fascinating, however, is that Krěnek and Miller each imbued

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<sup>12</sup> Diane Kestin, "Western Folklore in Modern American Opera," *Western Folklore* Vol. 16 no. 1 (Jan 1957), 2.

one of their works with an underlying message about McCarthyism. Krěnek's opera *Pallas Athene weint (Pallas Athene Weeps)*, which premiered in 1955 in Hamburg, compares the fate of Socrates to McCarthyism.<sup>13</sup> Miller's play, *The Crucible* (1953) is set during the seventeenth-century Salem witch trials and was written as a response to the actions of Senator McCarthy. In *Susannah*, Floyd turns a biblical source into a commentary on the political and religious climate of the United States in the 1950s, when McCarthyism and religious fundamentalism created a dangerous climate of unease and distrust.

### **Floyd's Style**

Because of its apparent folk-like simplicity, Floyd's music has not always been well-received by critics. "Early in his career, his music ran counter to the rigorous serialism that dominated American academic music through the 1970s. Key opera administrators distanced themselves. Some observers dismissed his operas as 'regional work.'"<sup>14</sup> His compositional style, however, is rooted in an earlier system which was taught to him by his first piano teacher, Ernst Bacon:

His work is most readily understood as a nostalgic continuation of the populist 'social realism' of the 1930s and 40s, a style of which Bacon was a characteristic exponent. In Floyd's case, this takes the form of an all-purpose substrate of quartal harmonies with numerous parallel 5ths, supporting melodies imitative of various American folk genres.<sup>15</sup>

Although Floyd went on to study with other teachers, Bacon's influence on the young composer occurred at an early age and helped shape his ideas about compositional style.

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<sup>13</sup> Mervyn Cooke, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 161.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Ward, "Maestro's Milestone," *Houston Chronicle*, 11 June 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Stiller, "Floyd, Carlisle (Sessions)" in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 7 January 2007), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca>>.

Though he was influenced by his teacher, Floyd did not ignore the constantly changing operatic climate. After World War II, operatic trends shifted along with the worldview of those writing and performing the works. Primarily, the concept of the hero and the tragedy changed after the war and a change in operatic material followed:

the war was for most Europeans a tremendous shock, and the tragedy of an individual, as it had been understood formerly, now seemed, as Strauss wrote to his librettist, Hugo von Hoffmansthal, 'rather idiotic and childish.' What was one man's striving and failing against a background of millions slaughtered for so little purpose?  
One response was to create a representative hero who might suffer a common tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925), Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), and *Susannah* present the audience with such a hero. The effect of these operas is that the audience is made to feel socially responsible for the downfall of the common man:

[The] jab at the audience, or kick in its shins... is a distinctive quality of twentieth-century tragedy. Instead of the audience feeling purged by watching a great hero fail in some ambitious undertaking, it is made to feel engaged in the failure of some quite ordinary man.<sup>17</sup>

This type of opera was not mere entertainment, as audience members were challenged to examine and take responsibility for their own shortcomings.

The *verismo* style made its way into American opera at this time. *Verismo*, more commonly associated with Italian opera and literature of the late nineteenth century, entails "an impersonal style of narration, a deep interest in the lower social strata, [and] a true-to-life approach in dealing with contemporary reality."<sup>18</sup> In *verismo* opera "Aria

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<sup>16</sup>George Martin, ed., *Twentieth Century Opera: A Guide* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Matteo Sansone, "Verismo," in *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 28 March 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca>>.

forms and lyric declamation no longer merely serve the action, they define the characters by allowing them to express in song their innermost thoughts and emotions.”<sup>19</sup> The *verismo* style is well-suited to the type of opera wherein the common hero meets his demise through societal injustice. Proponents of the American *verismo* movement, besides Floyd, include Menotti, Weill, and Blitzstein.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, as it has throughout history, religion pervades the operas of the mid-twentieth century. A few examples include Menotti’s *Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954) and Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957). Unlike the characters in these operas, however, the religious fundamentalists in *Susannah* are divisive and prejudiced, and through their actions they are responsible for the heroine’s demise. Religious fervour is the weapon that brings down Floyd’s common hero.

### **The Political Climate**

In the years after World War II the American government and public felt a growing distrust toward the Soviets and all Communists. This feeling was somewhat warranted under the circumstances, as many instances of Soviet espionage occurred within the American government at that time:

The fear of Communism in America went back to the Bolshevik Revolution and expressed itself in various ways, from the deportation of aliens to the blacklisting of actors. But during those years, there was also a secret undermining of our institutions by the Soviets and their American surrogates, which was revealed to the public in bits and pieces, so that no one knew quite what to believe. It was in this climate of uncertainty that McCarthyism in all its forms thrived, as an exaggerated reaction to a real threat.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Elise K. Kirk, “American Opera: Innovation and Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion To Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 200.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Morgan, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2003), 546-547.

In February 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy “charged that the Department of State knowingly harbored Communists.”<sup>22</sup> For the next four and a half years McCarthy capitalized on American paranoia and fear for his own political gain:

By the time McCarthy came on the scene in 1950, the threat [of Communism] was a mirage, but a mirage to be exploited, by the blacklist agencies for profit, by the Republicans in Congress for political gain, and by the self-appointed super-patriots to vent and focus their muddled rage.<sup>23</sup>

McCarthy climbed the ranks of government, conducting aggressive trials against supposed Communists, the list of whom included many people who had spoken against him in the past.

By 1953, Senator McCarthy was chairman of the Senate Government Operations Committee. His conduct towards those he charged as Communists and those who would oppose him was unconventionally brutal:

In his verbal combat with the State Department and others, Senator McCarthy quickly established the style of contention that was to be admired (or condoned) by his supporters and to be deplored and even feared by his opponents, a style of which the principal elements were recklessness in accusation, careless inaccuracy of statement, and abuse of those who criticized him.<sup>24</sup>

McCarthy’s abusive treatment of fellow politicians led to his censure on December 2, 1954. Because the actual threat of Communism had died in the late 1940s, the strength of anti-Communism as a political talking point fell away, and McCarthy’s power quickly waned.

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<sup>22</sup>Earl Latham, ed., *The Meaning of McCarthyism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), ix.

<sup>23</sup>Morgan, *Reds*, 547.

<sup>24</sup>Latham, *The Meaning of McCarthyism*, ix.

McCarthy's trademark "scorn for the processes of law and disregard of evidence"<sup>25</sup> further intensified the paranoia already present in the American public. Each citizen knew that he could be branded a Communist with little or no evidence to back up the claim, and that such a label spelled professional and personal ruin. Within the tale of *Susannah*, which is based on the young girl's persecution on the heels of false accusations, it is easy to find a commentary on the McCarthy regime. Though he did not make conscious efforts to reference McCarthyism in the creation of his opera, Floyd believes that it did touch his work. When asked if he specifically intended the opera to serve as a political statement, Floyd said:

I'm too practical a man of the theater; it just struck me as right. But I did write the work during the McCarthy years, and I lived through the terrors. At Florida State an accusation was tantamount to guilt. We faculty had to sign a pledge of loyalty or lose our jobs. It affected me and informed me emotionally. And there it is in the opera. But I can't say I put it there.<sup>26</sup>

Opera after World War II was filled with political messages, and *Susannah* is no exception. Like many other works of the time, this opera speaks to the fears of the common citizen struggling to adjust to the new political climate.

### **Conclusion**

Of the nine operas in Floyd's oeuvre, *Susannah* is the most acclaimed and widely performed. It is the opera that brought the composer into the public eye, and the one that continues to captivate audiences. Musically, *Susannah* fits the *verismo* mould due to its appropriation of folk styles and its character-defining arias. Floyd bucks the trend towards atonality and opts for a more accessible, melodic style that accurately

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<sup>25</sup> Reinhard H. Luthin, "The Making of McCarthy" in *The Meaning of McCarthyism*, ed. Earl Latham (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Taking a Look Into the Soul of 'Susannah'," *The New York Times*, 31 March 1999.

captures the types of music that would have existed in a village like New Hope Valley. Dramatically, *Susannah* is filled with the lower-class characters of the *verismo* tradition, and the plot tells the story of the common hero beaten down by the religious fervour of her peers. In all ways, *Susannah* is representative of the prevailing style in American opera in the 1950s.

The post-World War II era ushered in many changes in musical style, and Americans experienced the political backlash of the war as strongly as any European nation. Many of the operas that emerged during this tumultuous time tell the story of the common person beaten down by an unjust social system; these stories have continued relevance in today's paranoid society. The loss of personal privacy and unfounded accusations of the McCarthy era in particular strike a chord with Americans today who are also being told to give up personal freedoms for the security of their country. Films such as *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) remind us that the terrors of McCarthyism bear some striking similarities to events taking place today. Current productions of *Susannah* thus resonate with political undertones that reach beyond any the composer could have intended in the 1950s.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ANALYSIS OF “AIN’T IT A PRETTY NIGHT”

Susannah’s first aria, “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” is an ideal analytical starting point for someone interested in performing the entire role. Positioned early in the opera, the aria introduces Susannah’s inner character and musical personality to the audience. The performer’s interpretation will shape the audience’s reception of the entire role. If the singer succeeds in conveying Susannah’s youthful spirit and naïve optimism, the audience will be on her side. In addition, if the singer goes beyond this basic interpretation and discovers the many other layers of meaning and emotion within the music, Susannah’s transformation from this first aria to her second, “The Trees On The Mountains,” is heartbreakingly powerful. Following the methodology outlined in the previous chapter, the analysis of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” subdivides into considerations of text, form, melody, tempo, dynamics, rhythm, and orchestration. This analysis highlights the musical and textual materials within “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” that are most important to the creation of the role of Susannah.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Reading the Text**

The text of any aria has a strong impact on a singer’s interpretation of the piece, and is arguably the most important dramatic element to consider. Words give an aria specific meaning, though no two singers or listeners will decipher that meaning in exactly the same way. The text is an obvious analytical starting point, as any reading of harmony, form, and the other musical elements hinges on a basic understanding of the dramatic narrative throughout the aria. If the singer does not translate a foreign language

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B for the vocal score.

aria for her own comprehension of the text – an unfortunate mistake made by many developing singers – it is hard to believe that she can create any meaningful interpretation. In the same way, a singer must analyze the meaning of the text when singing an aria in her native tongue. Therefore, this analysis of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” begins with a reading of the text.<sup>2</sup> The structure of the poem or prose, the use of language, and the overall meaning of the text are herein under consideration. First, however, I will provide a brief synopsis of the situation surrounding the aria.

At the beginning of *Susannah* a square dance is underway in the yard of the New Hope Church. The parishioners eagerly await the arrival of the new preacher, Olin Blitch, as he will be leading the upcoming revival. Young Susannah Polk dances innocently with many of the town elders, unconcerned that their wives are watching. Mrs. McLean proclaims to the other wives: “She’s a shameless girl, she is. Showin’ herself to all the men...That pretty a face must hide some evil.”<sup>3</sup> The Reverend Olin Blitch arrives earlier than expected, takes notice of Susannah, and dances with her. At the end of the square dance Little Bat accompanies Susannah home. As she sits on her front porch, she sings “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” Believing the world full of possibilities and new experiences for her, she is excited about what the future holds. This aria is the first opportunity for the audience to know Susannah’s optimistic character, and provides a foil against which her second aria, “The Trees On The Mountains,” is in sharp contrast.

The text of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” is more like prose than poetic verse in that there is no metrical or rhyming structure governing the text. Except for a few recurring ideas, the text follows a stream-of-consciousness narrative, yet it is possible to divide the

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<sup>2</sup> See page 33 for the full text, which has been taken from the vocal score.

<sup>3</sup> Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah* Vocal Score (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1967), 10.

aria into verses based on the changing ideas represented in the text and the structure delineated by the music. The exceptions to this mostly unstructured textual flow are the three statements, “Ain’t it a pretty night,” and the repetition of the second verse at the end of the aria. The through-composed style of prose creates the impression that Susannah is expressing her thoughts as they come to her, contrasting with her later aria where she sings a strophic folk song to comfort herself.

The recurring “Ain’t it a pretty night” fills the moments when Susannah stops to gather her thoughts. The aria opens with this sentence, then Susannah launches into a description of the night sky above her. As she repeats the line for the first time, her thoughts shift to the world beyond New Hope Valley, and in the next three verses she focuses on her desire to see that outside world. The following two verses change topics slightly, as Susannah realizes she would become homesick if she left the valley for too long, and decides that she will leave only temporarily. This change of focus is not marked by a repetition of “Ain’t it a pretty night,” the reason being that the thoughts of homesickness are closely linked to the considerations of leaving. Unlike the preceding sections that are markedly different from one another, this part of the text propels itself forward in a natural thought progression. The final repetition of the title line comes after Susannah has decided she will return to the valley once she has seen what the world holds. Her daydreaming complete, Susannah takes a moment again before repeating the description of the night sky above her. This final pause combined with the repetition of earlier text suggests contentedness and possibly fatigue on Susannah’s part; though she has had fun envisioning her future, for tonight she is happy to be right where she is.

Little Bat is the only character onstage while Susannah is singing “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” and she begins the aria singing directly to him. Although he is her only friend in town, he is a simpleton who does not understand the things she is saying. Therefore, she feels completely safe expressing her desires to him. As the aria progresses and she begins daydreaming, Susannah stops addressing Little Bat in her statements, and begins to sing more to herself than to him. Both of Susannah’s arias represent private moments of self-expression, and it is evident that even when she is happy she is a private person with few people to depend on.

The language used in *Susannah* is region-specific, and gives us some clues about the characters in the opera. Susannah has lived her entire life in a remote mountain village in Tennessee, and as a result her speech is coloured with a rural dialect. Susannah drops many consonants at the ends of words and uses the contraction “ain’t,” which reflects the minimal education she received in her small village. Her natural imagery also stems from her rural upbringing. In describing her home she talks of fireflies and crickets, ponds and straw fields, and the trees on the mountains changing colour with the seasons. The cities she dreams of are full of tall buildings, streetlights and mail-order catalogs, as well as people who speak and dress well. Although her own life is full of natural beauty and comfort, she longs for the glamorous unknown.

Susannah’s first aria paints a picture of a young girl whose ambition to grow beyond the confines of her small town parallels her love for her home. Susannah is hopeful and naïve, completely unaware of the growing resentment the town women feel towards her. Unfortunately for her, the dreams she expresses in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” will never be fulfilled; because of the events that follow in the opera, she will give up her

dreams and lose the supportive community around her. The music in this aria complements the emotions and thoughts brought to the surface in Susannah's text; in some instances it also foreshadows the terrible events to follow.

### Analysing Form

Formal analysis is often the first step in studying a piece of music. Many pieces follow traditional formal models, such as the sonata, the rondo, and the da capo aria, and it is the job of the performer to identify where the conventional sections of a given model occur within each piece as well as to ascertain what meaning the form contributes to a performance. Opera has evolved beyond the days of the da capo aria, and the music in an opera can no longer be expected to follow a conventional formal pattern. Modern operatic form is dictated as much by text as any musical element, which is why I analyze the lyrical content of Susannah's arias before looking at the formal structure.

Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* deviates from tradition in many ways; some would even suggest that it belongs among the ranks of musical theatre rather than opera. Susannah's first aria, "Ain't It A Pretty Night," is formally and tonally irregular, and does not fit into any preconceived notion of form. Table 3.1 outlines the basic structure of the aria.

Section	A	B	C	D	B <sup>1</sup>	D <sup>1</sup>	B <sup>2</sup>
Bar	1-10	11-17	18-23	24-33	34-38	39-46	47-53
Tonality	G-flat major; E-flat major	E-flat major; G major; e minor	E major	E major; e-flat minor	E-flat major; G major	E major; e-flat minor	m. 47 sounds like E-flat major, but it is all G-flat major

Table 3.1. "Ain't It A Pretty Night" Formal Structure

Nothing about “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” suggests a familiar form. Stanzas of text as well as key and tempo changes dictate the section divisions, and the result is an irregular number of measures per section.

**A section**

Ain’t it a pretty night!  
 The sky’s so dark and velvet-like  
 and it’s all lit up with stars.  
 It’s like a great big mirror reflectin’  
 fireflies over a pond.

**B section**

Look at all them stars, Little Bat.  
 The longer y’ look the more y’ see.  
 The sky seems so heavy with stars  
 that it might fall right down out of heaven  
 and cover us all up in one big blanket  
 of velvet all stitched with diamon’s.

**C section**

Ain’t it a pretty night.  
 Just think, those stars can all peep down  
 an’ see way beyond where we can:  
 They can see way beyond them mountains  
 To Nashville and Asheville an’ Knoxville.

I wonder what it’s like out there,  
 out there beyond them mountains  
 where the folks talk nice, an’ the folks dress nice  
 like y’ see in the mail-order catalogs.

**D section**

I aim to leave this valley some day  
 an’ find out fer myself:  
 To see all the tall buildin’s and all the street lights  
 an’ to be one o’ them folks myself.

**B<sup>1</sup> section**

I wonder if I’d get lonesome fer the valley though,  
 fer the sound of crickets an’ the smell of pine straw,  
 fer soft little rabbits an’ bloomin’ things  
 an’ the mountains turnin’ gold in the fall.

**D<sup>1</sup> section**

But I could always come back if I got homesick fer the valley.  
 So I'll leave it someday an' see fer myself.  
 Someday I'll leave an' then I'll come back  
 when I've seen what's beyond them mountains.

**B<sup>2</sup> section**

Ain't it a pretty night.  
 The sky's so heavy with stars tonight  
 that it could fall right down out of heaven  
 an' cover us up, and cover us up,  
 in one big blanket of velvet and diamon's.

Although many elements recur throughout the aria – most notably rhythmic and melodic patterns – only the music from the B and D sections appears more than once in the aria, and even then it is modified from its original form.<sup>4</sup> The only text repetitions in the aria are the three statements of “Ain't it a pretty night” and the slightly altered repetition of the last stanza of text from the B section in the B<sup>2</sup> section.

The tonality of “Ain't It A Pretty Night” is fluid, but the aria could not be considered atonal. Each section has at least one tonal centre, and the first iteration of the B section goes through three different tonalities in the span of seven measures. Though the tonal centre fluctuates often within the aria, it remains within the same six closely related key arias: G-flat major, E-flat major, G major, e minor, E major, and e-flat minor. Each of these keys is associated to at least one of the others either by thirds or in a relative major/minor relationship. The aria opens and closes in G-flat major, and the melodic line ends on the dominant of the G-flat major chord. Full harmonic closure does not occur until the measure after the aria ends, when Sam sings “Ain't it a pretty night” starting on the G-flat.

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<sup>4</sup> The B<sup>2</sup> section is orchestrated in a similar way to the A section; though the B2 section closely resembles the B section, it could also be labelled an A<sup>1</sup> section.

Despite the close relationships among the various tonal centres within this aria, sections D and D<sup>1</sup> feature a modulation from E major to e-flat minor, two keys not sharing a common link. The key of e-flat minor plays an interesting role in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” Occurring at the end of the D and D<sup>1</sup> sections, this tonality signals a significant transition. In the D section Susannah sings about leaving the valley to explore the cities she has never seen. The last four bars of the section are purely instrumental and bring about the sudden shift to e-flat minor. The next section, in which Susannah admits that she would get homesick if she left the valley, begins immediately in E-flat major. The transitional e-flat minor measures represent the sudden change of heart evidenced in Susannah’s words.

In the D<sup>1</sup> section, which begins in E-flat major, Susannah realizes that she can come back to the valley after visiting the cities she longs to see. Her optimism is apparent as she decides that she can have both her dreams. In measure forty-four the orchestra shifts jarringly into e-flat minor. The resolution up to G-flat major occurs at the beginning of the B<sup>2</sup> section when Susannah contentedly returns to her earlier musings about the night sky. In her mind she has worked out the details that will make her future possible, and she is happy. The e-flat minor transition, however, does not only allow for a transition between these two sections; the ominously dark feeling of measures forty-four through forty-six suggests the potential for danger in Susannah’s future. Though she is blissfully unaware of her impending fate, the audience is given a glimpse into the events to come through these three bars of music.

The fluid tonality and through-composed form of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” help create the feeling that Susannah is singing about what she feels as she feels it. There is

little sense of premeditation, as the music meanders in correspondence with Susannah's thoughts. The recurrences of the B section and the final return to the opening G-flat major tonality help ground the aria, bringing Susannah's thought processes back to the main conflict: should she leave or should she stay in the valley? If the form of this aria is considered in terms of its impact through time – in other words, the audience's perception of the form as the aria is being performed – the conclusion is that the formal irregularity of this piece contributes to the spontaneity of the moment, and allows the audience to recognize this as a sincere utterance on Susannah's behalf. With the knowledge that Susannah's guard is down, the audience sees her true nature through "Ain't It A Pretty Night."

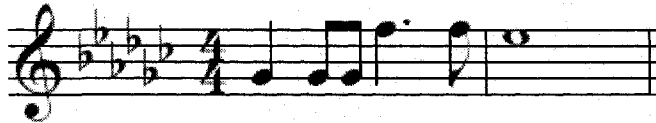
### **Considering Melodic Shape and Motifs**

Studying the melodic shape of an aria as well as its constituent motifs can prove highly informative for a singer. No musician would argue against the importance of knowing the overall form of each piece, and the melodic shape is of the same importance to the solo singer. Armed with an understanding of the melodic contour and the notable motifs within an aria, the performer can easily choose those aspects of a phrase she wishes to highlight and decide where the dramatic momentum should peak or recede. This melody-mapping exercise has additional implications for singers that do not apply for most instrumentalists. A singer is sometimes faulted for placing unwarranted dynamic stress on notes that are near the top of her vocal register, creating an unbalanced or poorly executed phrase. Mapping the overarching shape of the melodic line clarifies its direction, and can help the singer overcome the problem of inadvertently stressing unimportant notes within a phrase. And rather than depending solely on the text to

dictate phrase shaping and meaning, the singer can use melodic contour as another means for interpretation.

The melodic contour of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” is difficult to capture on paper because of the through-composed nature of the music. In the case of a strophic song, the melodic shape of one verse could be delineated with the understanding that this shape governs the melody of the entire piece. With an aria like “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” however, there is no one overarching melodic pattern. Therefore, rather than study the contour of the entire piece, it is more valuable to look at the recurring melodic motifs and their contribution to the shape and meaning of the overall melody.

Melodic Motif 1 comprises the first phrase of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” and it appears two more times in modified form throughout the aria.



**Example 3.1. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Melodic Motif 1**

This short phrase is the most recognizable theme of the entire aria, and its shape is representative of the rest of the piece. The aria is characterized more by leaps than by stepwise motion, and this first phrase immediately sets up that contour. The first occurrence of the motif begins on the tonic G-flat and leaps an unexpected major seventh to F. This leap up to the leading tone creates an expectation of resolution up to the tonic, but Floyd avoids any such resolution by writing a descending major second to E-flat instead. Based on the text that accompanies this phrase, “ain’t it a pretty night,” it seems that happiness and gratitude motivate Susannah to sing this phrase. The dynamic marking of *piano* and the silence in the orchestra create a hushed moment of stillness.

The upward leap need not disturb the subdued atmosphere, as the singer can work to maintain the quiet dynamic throughout the line.

The first repetition of the theme follows the same intervallic structure as the original, but in the key of E major. The third and final statement of the motif, however, is greatly modified. Though the original key of G-flat major has been restored, the theme begins this time on E-flat, leaps up a major ninth to the F, then descends stepwise through E-flat and D-flat to finish with a descending minor third to B-flat.



**Example 3.2. Modified version of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Melodic Motif 1**

Susannah sings this final repetition of the motif after she has considered what her life would be like if she left her village home to move to the city. She has decided that she would never be able to leave for good because she would miss all the beautiful things that surround her in the country. Having come to a sort of conclusion, Susannah is able to sing Melodic Motif 1 with more resolution. The avoidance of the tonic at the beginning of the line allows the ending on the third scale degree to carry an element of finality. Upon hearing this modified version of the theme, the audience is prepared for the aria to come to an end.

Melodic Motif 1 is the most iconic phrase within “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” though Melodic Motif 2 is more prevalent throughout the aria, appearing a total of seven times in somewhat modified forms.



**Example 3.3. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Melodic Motif 2**

Melodic Motif 1 serves one basic function throughout its different recurrences, though Melodic Motif 2 does not work the same way. In most instances this motif heralds the beginning of a new thought, but it does not appear at the beginning of every verse and it occurs once in the middle of a verse. In addition, the motif is not linked to any specific idea in the text. Because the occurrences of this motif follow no discernible pattern, it is difficult to decipher one meaning for the phrase. There is no need, however, to treat all motifs as leitmotifs, and an analysis based on the arbitrary desire to assign a meaning to a phrase would be faulty. Without looking to define the meaning of Melodic Motif 2, the singer can garner information from the shape of the phrase. The contour of the second motif is similar to that of Melodic Motif 1 in that the main feature within the phrase is the leaping motion of the voice, and the phrase first leaps upward and then descends by a smaller interval. This arch-like contour pervades the entire aria, and many parts of the melody closely resemble one of these two melodic motifs without fitting their intervallic patterns. The singer is thus faced with the challenge of creating a long, legato line without the help of smooth melodic motion. By using the direction of the phrases of text as a guide, the singer can achieve meaningful expression despite the obstacles presented by the jagged melody.

The jagged melodic contour of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” inspires me to consider one further interpretation; the upward leaps are elements of word painting that contribute to an overall impression of height and grandeur. The text of the aria is filled with such images, as Susannah marvels at the stars in the night sky, lovingly describes the mountains where she lives, and imagines the tall skyscrapers of the cities she longs to visit. And the dynamic graph to be presented later in this chapter further supports the

picture of Susannah striving for heights beyond her grasp. Even if the performer disagrees with this specific interpretation of the melody, she must decide how to use the jagged, leaping melodic contour to express the meaning of the text. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” contains one of the most memorable melodic lines in the operatic repertoire; the singer’s job is to decide why the melody is so unique and what the contours say about Susannah.

### **Graphing Tempo**

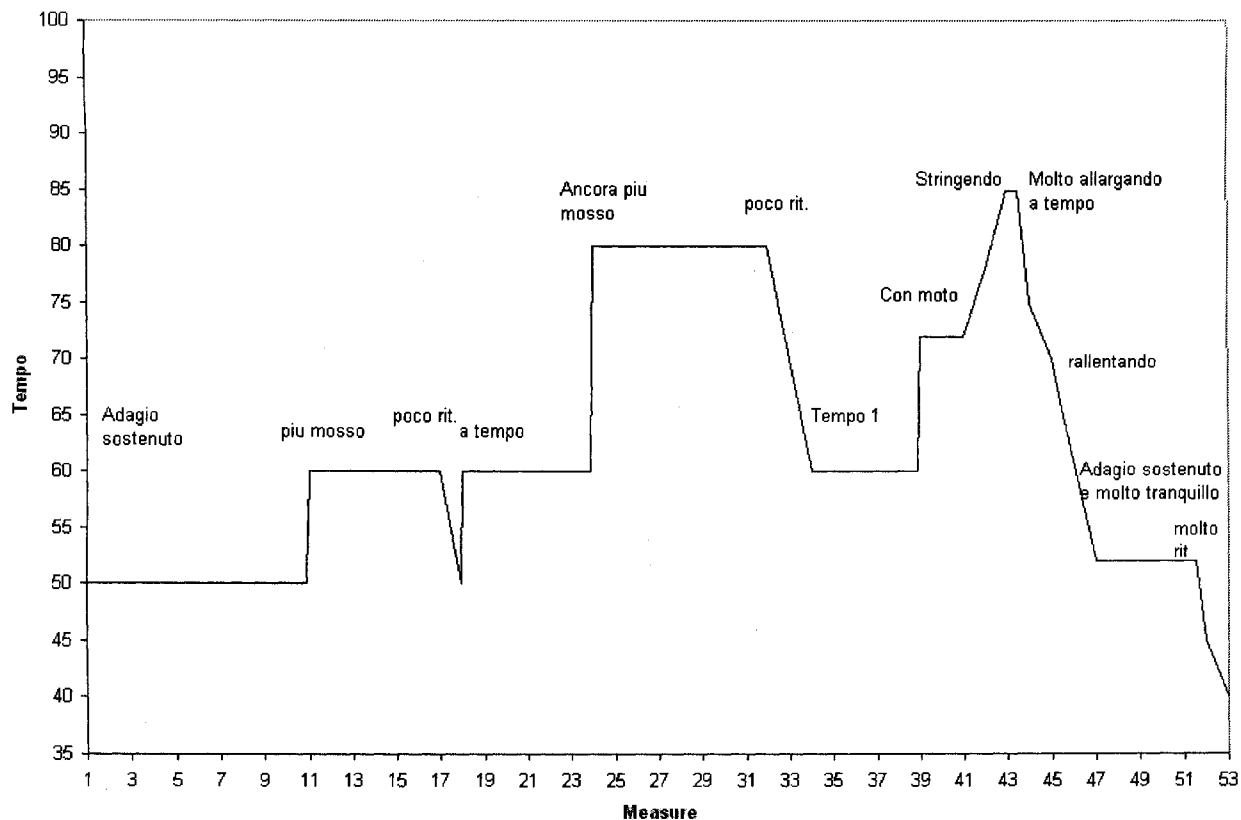
Except for text, tempo defines the mood and meaning of an aria more than any other musical element. No two performances of a piece, even by the same performer, will ever share the same tempi. The performer, however, needs to have a clear idea of the tempo changes within a piece, and the implications of each tempo in relation to the others in order to relate her interpretation to the composer’s intentions. John Rink suggests graphing the tempo of a piece as an effort not to dictate the exact tempi to the performer, but to provide a graphic representation of the “temporal process” that might be “beneficial to performers as an act of analysis *prior* to performance, that is, while developing an interpretation.”<sup>5</sup> The following discussion of the tempo graph for “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” Table 3.2, is intended to aid the performer in visualizing the various tempo indications of the aria in relation to one another, thereby making the task of understanding the overall temporal process much easier. Through the process of graphing tempo the performer gains a new perspective on the work she is performing, and can form her interpretation with this new information in mind.

“Ain’t It A Pretty Night” begins at a tempo of 50 to the quarter note, with the indication *Adagio sostenuto*. While the *Adagio* marking tells us that this opening is

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<sup>5</sup> Rink, “Analysis and (or?) Performance,” 46.

unhurried, the addition of *sostenuto* further necessitates a sustained, legato line. The opening text of the aria is ponderous and calm, as Susannah describes the beauty and wonder of the night sky. In the eleventh measure of the aria the tempo increases to a *piu mosso* 60 to the quarter note, a tempo change that aligns with the moment Susannah begins talking to Little Bat. At this point, she breaks out of her semi-meditative state to engage Little Bat, and her “speech” rhythm increases slightly. For interpretive purposes I view this tempo change as an indication to show a shift in Susannah’s train of thought rather than a direction to speed up the tempo.



**Table 3.2. Tempo Graph of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night”**

The next significant tempo change occurs in the twenty-fourth measure of the aria. Susannah begins to sing about her intention to leave the valley in order to experience life in the city, and the tempo changes to 80 to the quarter note, *Ancora piu mosso*. Her excitement and anticipation are made evident through the sudden increase in

tempo; in the graph it is notable that this tempo is almost the fastest of the entire aria, surpassed as it is only by the *stringendo* section near the end.<sup>6</sup> The tempo comes back down to 60 in the thirty-fourth measure of the aria, as Susannah questions whether she would be able to leave the valley for good. The slower tempo appropriately represents Susannah's trepidation about leaving, yet her hesitation vanishes once she decides that she can leave for a while but can always return home. The tempo in the thirty-ninth measure of the aria picks up to 72 to the quarter note, accompanied by the direction *Con moto*, and the *Stringendo* section from measure forty-one to measure forty-three further increases the excitement.

Floyd's *Stringendo* marking allows for various interpretations, as it directs the performer to press forward or accelerate the tempo without specifying an end tempo. In my tempo graph I interpret the result of the *Stringendo* to be the fastest tempo of the piece. There are two reasons for this interpretation. First, with a starting tempo of 72, the singer needs to accelerate beyond 80, the fastest written tempo of the piece, to make a marked difference. Secondly, the *Stringendo* section is immediately followed by an indication *molto allargando a tempo*. In order to create a dramatic juxtaposition between these two sections, and to allow enough temporal space for a *molto allargando* back to 72, the tempo of the *Stringendo* section must accelerate beyond 80 to the quarter note. In my opinion, the tempo graph provides a conservative representation of the possibilities inherent in the *Stringendo* marking.

The final section of the aria returns to the slow tempo of the beginning.

Following the *molto allargando a tempo*, measure forty-five of the aria has a *rallentando*

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<sup>6</sup> This point is debatable because of the subjective nature of my analysis of the *Stringendo* section. Further discussion follows in this section.

indication that leads into the new tempo of 52 to the quarter note, *Adagio sostenuto e molto tranquillo*. The tempo indication of this section provides all the emotional direction the performer needs through the addition of the words *e molto tranquillo*. At the beginning of the aria Susannah was happy and pensive, and by the end she is tranquil and content, completely at peace with the future that lies ahead of her.

“Ain’t It A Pretty Night” is a contemplative aria in which the audience is afforded a glimpse into Susannah’s hopes and dreams. The predominant tempo, between 50 and 60 to the quarter note, is slow enough to capture Susannah’s contentment, while the faster sections portray the excitement of the unknown. Though the performer needs to be aware of the tempos marked by the composer, she does not need to follow rigidly the numbers on the page. The singer should work to capture the emotion and dramatic intent of each tempo, as well as the meaning behind each tempo change, rather than expecting simple adherence to the written tempo to be enough. Therefore, the basic temporal structure should remain intact even if the performer varies some elements of the tempo in her interpretation.

### **Graphing Dynamics**

Dynamics are often perceived as non-formal elements of music, meaning that they are not integral to the structure of a piece but rather layered on top of the more fundamental elements like harmony, melody, and rhythm. Whether or not they form a part of the basic structure of a piece, dynamics contribute significantly to the expressive potential and energy of music. Additionally, dynamic variation over the course of a piece of music is yet another tool a performer can use to create shape and direction, and like tempo, dynamics are best understood when put into context within a piece. Rink suggests

graphing dynamics in the same way as tempo so that the performer may study “a graphic representation of the music’s ebb and flow, its ‘contour’ in time”<sup>7</sup> while forming her interpretation.

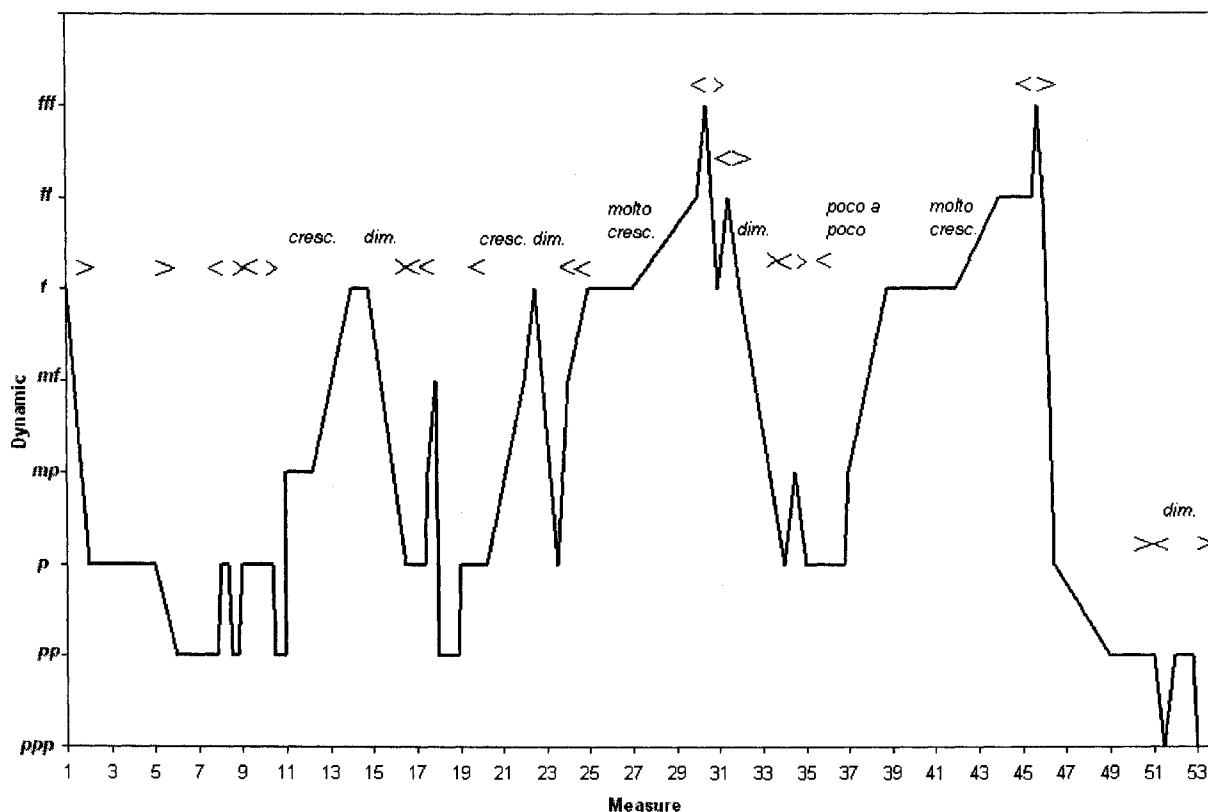
Though dynamics play an important role in varying the expression of a piece of music, composers differ greatly in their approach to dynamic markings. Floyd writes detailed dynamic instructions into the score of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” and a performer should closely follow, or at the least study his guidelines before developing her interpretation. Table 3.3 contains the dynamic graph of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” and includes each crescendo, decrescendo, or other dynamic marking beyond exact dynamic levels such as *piano* and *forte*. The specific dynamic levels are indicated on the side of the graph and it was therefore unnecessary to repeat them. In this section I examine the graph of the dynamic markings in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” and explore the implications it holds for a performer.

The most apparent visual clue afforded by Table 3.3 is that the dynamics vary widely throughout this aria, rising and falling in a multitude of peaks and valleys. In this aria Floyd exploits every dynamic from *triple piano* to *triple forte*, and there is no one prevailing dynamic for the singer to return to. The beginning and end of the aria, however, are both quiet in relation to most of the middle section; except for the *forte* marking in the first beat of the first measure, the beginning and end sections lie between *piano* and *triple piano*. The dynamics indicate a substantial increase in intensity and energy each time Susannah sings about the big city and her dreams of exploring more of the world. More than any other element of the music, the dynamics signal Susannah’s

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<sup>7</sup> John Rink, “Translating Musical Meaning: The Nineteenth-Century Performer As Narrator,” in *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 234.

changing state of mind as she fluctuates between moments of serenity and moments of anxious excitement.



**Table 3.3. Dynamic Graph of "Ain't It A Pretty Night"**

An aria with as many dynamic markings as "Ain't It A Pretty Night" presents a large challenge to the performer, as it is her job to learn and decipher each marking. The task is less daunting because of the creation of a dynamic graph that visually represents the flow of the dynamics in the real time of the aria. When the dynamic graph is compared with Susannah's text, the specific, detailed dynamic markings become less important, as the larger meaning of the dynamics is made apparent. This graph makes each dynamic indication fit within a larger scheme; assumedly the composer intended such a scheme. Though the performer must study the dynamics of her score as actively as she studies the words and melody, a graph helps identify the purpose behind the many

dynamic markings and therefore helps the singer better decipher and retain the information she sees on the page.

Based on my interpretation of Table 3.3, I believe that Susannah is a more complex person than the townspeople recognize. Although the Elders do not give Susannah much credit beyond being a nice girl, Susannah has big dreams. She is, however, as naïve as she seems. She wears her heart on her sleeve throughout “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” as she has no reason yet to be guarded or distrusting. The large dynamic peaks that stretch to *forte* and beyond coincide exactly with the parts of Susannah’s text where she talks about leaving the valley to see the world. These heightened dynamics serve the same purpose as they would in speech; when a person is excited, she often speaks at an increasing level of volume until she finishes the thought or realizes that she is shouting and silences herself out of embarrassment. In this case, Susannah has no reason to be embarrassed because the only person who can hear her is Little Bat, and she knows that he is smitten with everything she does. Thus, she is able to explore her fantasy, then the aria quietly tapers off.

On its own, the text of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” tells the story of a young girl whose excitement to leave her hometown mounts daily, even though she is strongly attached to the valley. The music brings the story to life, and the dynamics in particular allow the performer to express Susannah’s serenity and naivety at the opening and close of the music, and her exhilaration and anticipation throughout the middle sections. Through exploiting the full expressive potential of the dynamic fluctuations in this aria, the performer can capture the essence of Susannah’s character and emotions.

## Analysing Rhythm

Rhythm plays an integral role in outlining structure and creating musical meaning. A minuet rhythm, for example, implies a different set of possible meanings than those suggested by a militaristic march. In conjunction with tempo, rhythm can establish the mood of a piece of music, while its relationship to form often brings structural elements to the fore. Rink proposes the use of a rhythmic reduction to illuminate the phrase structure of a piece, which helps a performer envision the overall musical shape. While I find this analytical process valuable, I am also interested in analyzing the smaller rhythmic cells that hold interpretive and dramatic meaning. Because of its through-composed nature, “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” lends itself more successfully to analysis of select rhythmic cells than a larger rhythmic reduction, while a rhythmic reduction is more informative for analysis of an aria like “The Trees On The Mountains.” Therefore, the following analysis of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” focuses on an analysis of rhythmic motifs, and that of “The Trees On The Mountains” in the next chapter combines elements of both Rink’s rhythmic reduction and my own rhythmic cell analysis.

The first phrase of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” contains one of the aria’s most significant rhythmic motifs, shown here in Example 3.4.



**Example 3.4. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Rhythmic Motif 1**

This rhythm, Rhythmic Motif 1, appears to be closely associated with Susannah’s exclamation “Ain’t it a pretty night,” though not exclusively linked to the phrase. From measure eighteen to measure thirty-two the motif is repeated constantly in a fugue-like

pattern. The different instruments of the orchestra pass the theme around among themselves, and though each plays it at a different pitch, the rhythm is always exactly as written in Example 3.4. During this section, the motif never appears in the vocal line, nor does Susannah sing the words “Ain’t it a pretty night.” The text describes the world Susannah imagines beyond the mountains, and reveals her desire to leave the valley and see that world.

Ain’t it a pretty night.  
 Just think, those stars can all peep down  
 an’ see way beyond where we can:  
 They can see way beyond them mountains  
 To Nashville and Asheville an’ Knoxville.

I wonder what it’s like out there,  
 out there beyond them mountains  
 where the folks talk nice, an’ the folks dress nice  
 like y’ see in the mail-order catalogs.

I aim to leave this valley some day  
 an’ find out fer myself:  
 To see all the tall buildin’s and all the street lights  
 an’ to be one o’ them folks myself.<sup>8</sup>

The meaning behind Rhythmic Motif 1 therefore has more to do with Susannah’s excitement for the future than with the beauty of the night around her. If the performer agrees that this rhythmic motif is associated with Susannah’s feelings of anticipation and desire to leave, the first statement of the phrase “Ain’t it a pretty night” is linked to those feelings because of its incorporation of the rhythmic motif. Therefore, the interpretation of that initial phrase should foreshadow the excitement and hope Susannah reveals when she sings about the world “beyond them mountains.”

Rhythmic Motif 2 is introduced in measure six of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.”

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<sup>8</sup> Floyd, *Susannah* Vocal Score (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1967), 26-27.



**Example 3.5. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Rhythmic Motif 2**

Unlike Rhythmic Motif 1, this motif never occurs in the vocal line, but the rhythmic cell pervades the instrumental lines from measure six to measure eighteen, and later from measure thirty-four to measure thirty-nine. The text from measure six to eighteen describes the beauty of the night sky.

The sky’s so dark and velvet-like  
and it’s all lit up with stars.  
It’s like a great big mirror reflectin’  
fireflies over a pond.

Look at all them stars, Little Bat.  
The longer y’ look the more y’ see.  
The sky seems so heavy with stars  
that it might fall right down out of heaven  
and cover us all up in one big blanket  
of velvet all stitched with diamon’s.<sup>9</sup>

From measure thirty-four to measure thirty-nine, Susannah sings once more about the beauty of her home and questions whether she could ever leave.

I wonder if I’d get lonesome fer the valley though,  
fer the sound of crickets an’ the smell of pine straw,  
fer soft little rabbits an’ bloomin’ things  
an’ the mountains turnin’ gold in the fall.<sup>10</sup>

This second rhythmic motif is connected to Susannah’s sense of home and the love she has for New Hope Valley. This motif contrasts with Rhythmic Motif 1 because it is in 6/4 time and follows the consistent pattern of two eighth notes followed by two quarter notes. Susannah’s desire to explore the world stands in opposition to her feelings of contentment in her hometown, and the differences between Rhythmic Motif 1 and

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

Rhythmic Motif 2 help make that opposition apparent. Rhythmic Motif 3, however, introduces a compromise between the two positions.

Rhythmic Motif 3, a variation of Rhythmic Motifs 1 and 2, combines elements from both motifs.



**Example 3.6. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Rhythmic Motif 3**

Like Rhythmic Motif 2, this motif appears only in the orchestral lines. The opening pattern of a quarter note followed by two eighth notes is derived from Rhythmic Motif 1, and like Rhythmic Motif 1, Motif 3 repeats in a fugue-like pattern throughout the orchestral lines from measures thirty-nine to forty-four. The 6/4 time signature of Rhythmic Motif 2 is present in Rhythmic Motif 3, and the pattern of quarter notes and eighth notes from Motif 2 is reversed to make Motif 3. In relation to the text, Rhythmic Motif 3 appears at a time when the ideas from Motif 1 and Motif 2 combine; Susannah has decided that she will leave the valley and come back when she gets homesick.

But I could always come back if I got homesick fer the valley.  
 So I’ll leave it someday an’ see fer myself.  
 Someday I’ll leave an’ then I’ll come back.  
 when I’ve seen what’s beyond them mountains.<sup>11</sup>

Rhythmic Motif 3 represents the meeting of Susannah’s excitement and readiness for change with her love of her home and the security of the valley.

In addition to these three main rhythmic motifs, there exist two other significant rhythmic patterns in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” Neither is pervasive enough to be

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28.

considered a major motif, but each represents a transition point in the aria. Rhythmic Transition 1 occurs in measures thirty-two and thirty-three.



**Example 3.7. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Rhythmic Transition 1**

Right before this point in the aria Susannah sings, “I aim to leave this valley someday an’ find out fer myself: To see all the tall buildin’s and all the street lights an’ to be one o’ them folks myself.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout this line the orchestra is repeating Rhythmic Motif 1, and the tempo has increased to 80 to the quarter note. After Susannah finishes the line the orchestra begins playing Rhythmic Transition 1, and the tempo gradually decreases by means of a *poco ritardando*. The next section begins at 60 to the quarter note, with the orchestra playing Rhythmic Motif 2 and Susannah singing, “I wonder if I’d get lonesome fer the valley though.”<sup>13</sup> Rhythmic Transition 1 creates the necessary separation between the two disparate sections, allowing the performer time to portray Susannah’s changing thoughts and feelings.

Rhythmic Transition 2 occupies measures forty-four through forty-six.



**Example 3.8. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Rhythmic Transition 2**

Like Rhythmic Transition 1, this rhythmic cell creates distance between two contrasting sections of the aria. Before Rhythmic Transition 2 Susannah sings about coming home

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

once she has seen “what’s beyond them mountains,”<sup>14</sup> and the orchestra repeats Rhythmic Motif 3. After Rhythmic Transition 2 Susannah repeats text from earlier in the aria, admiring the night sky and revelling in the wonder of her surroundings. The orchestra returns to Rhythmic Motif 2, reminding the singer and the audience of Susannah’s contentment in New Hope Valley.

Rhythmic Transition 2 performs another role in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” In the two sections surrounding Rhythmic Transition 2 Susannah’s optimism is apparent, as she believes that her life dreams are waiting to be fulfilled and New Hope Valley will always be the safe, warm place in which she grew up. By contrast, the audience has heard the women of the town gossiping about Susannah, and saying she will come to no good. Most audience members have a sense that something bad is going to happen to Susannah, and the music in Rhythmic Transition 2 confirms those suspicions. The dotted rhythmic pattern, *fortissimo marcatisimo* marking, and strong minor chords combine to foreshadow something dire about which Susannah is oblivious. Rhythmic Transition 2 not only distinguishes between two sections in the aria, it also stands in contrast to Susannah’s optimism and reminds the audience that Susannah’s life might not go as she plans.

“Ain’t It A Pretty Night” is a complex aria in many ways, and the importance of the rhythmic variations throughout the aria cannot be overstated. There are three main rhythmic motifs in the aria, as well as two rhythmic transition points, all within the space of only fifty-three bars of music. Each rhythmic motif corresponds with an emotion Susannah expresses, and the rhythmic transitions mark pivotal moments within the aria. By analyzing individual rhythmic cells and their meaning throughout “Ain’t It A Pretty

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Night,” the singer gains knowledge of further indicators of structure in the aria and the flow of Susannah’s emotions. The rhythmic patterns in the aria complement Susannah’s text so well that they can almost be thought of in the same way as leitmotifs; every time a specific rhythmic pattern repeats, it can be associated with a specific meaning.

### **Considering the Orchestration**

The orchestration of an aria is something singers often overlook. If the singer is learning the aria outside the context of the opera, or performing the opera with a small company, chances are that she will never have the opportunity to perform the music with an orchestra. Even in these situations, it is important for the singer to find and study the orchestration in the score and on recording if possible. The performer should know what instruments play the most important role in an aria, and she should also be aware of the way the orchestration changes throughout the piece. This information contributes to the performer’s ability to ascertain the mood of the music and the climactic points of the aria. The following analysis of the orchestration in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” aims at uncovering the effect Floyd’s orchestration has on the shape of the aria, as well as specifying moments in the aria where significant orchestral events occur. Table 3.4 outlines the sections of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” and the corresponding orchestral forces used.

<b>Section</b>	<b>Measure</b>	<b>Orchestration</b>
<b>A</b>	1-3	<b><i>a cappella</i></b>
	4-5	cello, bass
	6-10	strings, solo horn
<b>B</b>	11-12	string, solo oboe
	13-17	strings, oboe, flute, horn
<b>C</b>	18	horn, viola, cello, bass
	19	viola, cello, bass
	20-22	strings
	23	strings, trombone, horn
<b>D</b>	24	strings, trombone, horn, timpani
	25	strings, clarinet, bassoon, timpani
	26	strings, clarinet, bassoon, oboe
	27-28	strings, clarinet, bassoon, oboe, flute
	29-33	<b><i>all instruments</i></b>
<b>B1</b>	34-37	strings
	38	strings, flute, oboe, bassoon, clarinet, horn, snare
<b>D1</b>	39-41	strings, flute, oboe, bassoon, clarinet, horn, snare
	42-43	strings, flute, oboe, bassoon, clarinet, horn, snare, timpani, cymbal
	44	<b><i>all instruments</i></b>
	45	viola, cello, bass, bassoon, horn, trombone, tuba, timpani, snare, cymbal (all bass instruments)
	46	viola, cello, bass, horn, trombone, tuba, timpani, snare, cymbal (no bassoon)
<b>B2</b>	47-48	<b><i>a cappella</i></b>
	49	strings, solo horn
	50-53	strings, horns

**Table 3.4. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” Orchestration**

The orchestration of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” is based upon the string instruments. The woodwinds, brass, and percussion also make significant appearances throughout the aria, providing a variety of colours and textures to the sound. The cello and bass feature prominently in the beginning of the aria, and their sound quality is one of the defining characteristics of the opening of the aria. In the first three measures Susannah sings “Ain’t it a pretty night” a cappella. In measures four and five the cello echoes Susannah’s melodic line over a bass pedal on the G-flat tonic. The warm, hushed

tones of the cello reflect Susannah's reflective mood, while the bass grounds the soaring melody with its deep, rich presence.

The oboe also stands out as a solo instrument, and though it only plays a solo for two measures, it has a powerful effect on the colour of the music. From measure six to measure ten, the french horn combines with the strings to accompany the vocal line. Though the horn is labelled as a solo, it does not cut through the orchestral texture enough to be considered the dominant presence in these measures. In measure eleven, however, the oboe takes over the solo line, and the colour change from horn to oboe is apparent. In addition to drawing attention based on its unique tonal quality, the oboe also stands out because it outlines the same melody Susannah is singing. The meaning or emotion attached to the sound of an oboe is not the most important point to consider here. The performer may interpret the instrument's sound in many different ways, but she cannot deny the change in sound quality from measure ten to measure eleven. This change signals a shift in Susannah's attitude and expression, and should therefore correspond to an appropriate adjustment in the singer's portrayal of the character.

There are two a cappella sections within the aria, one at the beginning and one ushering in the final B<sup>2</sup> section. By contrast, the D and D<sup>1</sup> sections in the middle of the aria contain measures in which all the instruments play together. The sonic texture thus builds in an arc to the middle of the aria, and tapers toward the end. Though individual instruments within this aria help colour the music, the varying combinations of instruments – or lack thereof in the case of the a cappella sections – give the music shape. Like the tempo and dynamic graphs, recognition of the orchestral shape of a piece helps the performer find large-scale patterns within an aria. By reading the cues within the

orchestration, as well as those in the tempo and dynamic graphs, the singer can choose which of the climactic moments in the aria to bring out in her performance. And the way the orchestration grows and changes throughout the duration of the piece can guide her understanding of the character's emotional journey. The sonic textures created by the various combinations of instruments provide as much insight into the character and situation as any of the other musical elements.

Although the orchestration of "Ain't It A Pretty Night" is the final element in this analysis, it should not be assumed that its impact is of the least importance to the music. This discussion of orchestration falls at the end of the analysis only because the singer has no direct control over this aspect of the music. Yet she has complete control over her own knowledge of and reaction to the orchestral events occurring throughout the aria. The singer who recognizes the cues in the orchestration and blends some of those elements into her interpretation is able to incorporate the colours of the various instruments, and the textures created by their combinations, into her performance.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of an aria for the sake of performance might appear to be a daunting task, if only because of the number of elements to consider. It can be tempting to gloss over the details of orchestration and all other matters that appear to concern only the orchestra; after all, ignoring these "details" does not make learning the music inherently more difficult. A singer can learn an entire operatic role without considering the rhythmic and melodic motifs found in the instrumental lines, or the specific instrumentation used at any given moment in the music. Each of the seven musical and textual considerations analysed in this chapter - text, form and tonal structure, melody,

tempo, dynamics, rhythm, and orchestration – contributes significantly to any aria, and analysis of these aspects of the music furnishes the singer with the necessary knowledge to go beyond learning the music to creating a viable interpretation. I am not suggesting that a performer must spend many hours analysing each piece of music she sings; performers have demanding schedules and are often given short deadlines within which to prepare a role. The tools utilized in this chapter and the next can cut down the amount of time a singer requires to learn a piece, because the clear analytical steps outlined here help the singer recognize the important aspects of rhythm, melody, etc. that she can readily use in her interpretation.

“Ain’t It A Pretty Night” is the first aria in Floyd’s *Susannah*, and it introduces the audience to the inner workings of the opera’s title character. Though Susannah is introduced in the earlier hoedown scene, this aria is the first chance for her to express her wishes and dreams for the future, and for the audience to see her true nature. The text and form of this aria are mainly through-composed, and give to the aria a feeling of spontaneity and earnestness. Jagged leaping lines characterize Susannah’s melody, and two distinct motifs repeat numerous times throughout the aria. The first melodic motif always coincides with Susannah’s sentiment “ain’t it a pretty night,” and represents her contentment and awe. The second motif has a variety of functions within the aria, often signalling the beginning of a new thought and a change in expression.

Tempo and dynamics are both represented graphically in this chapter. The shape of each graph helps the singer envision her performance of the aria as it unfolds in time rather than considering each tempo or dynamic indication as a static element of the music at one specific moment. The tempo fluctuations in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” help the

singer move back and forth from calm serenity to anxious anticipation. The dynamics change rapidly in this aria, painting the picture of Susannah as someone who is bubbling over with excitement, and who unabashedly expresses her innermost thoughts, if only in front of Little Bat. The constant rising and falling of dynamic levels are also reminiscent of the leaping melodic line, and suggest the heights of the mountains, the sky, and the tall buildings Susannah describes.

The rhythmic motifs in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” do as much to delineate Susannah’s changing moods as any other aspect of the aria. The orchestra moves back and forth between three significant rhythmic motifs and two rhythmic transitions, and each shift coincides with one of Susannah’s new realizations. The orchestral texture in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” grows and subsides like one large arch spanning the entire aria. The cello, bass, and oboe in particular colour certain phrases and help the singer reveal shifts in her character’s state of mind, while the strings underpin the majority of the aria and give the music a flowing, rich sound quality. Through analysing the main elements of Susannah’s first aria, the performer comes to understand her character’s initial temperament and position in her community. Applying the same analytical tools to Susannah’s second aria, “The Trees On The Mountains,” illuminates the changes Susannah experiences in the course of the opera. This second aria takes place near the end of the opera after Susannah’s future has been destroyed, and it is important for a performer to juxtapose the two arias in order to map the transformation Susannah undergoes throughout the opera.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**ANALYSIS OF “THE TREES ON THE MOUNTAINS”**

Susannah’s second aria, “The Trees On The Mountains,” is the antithesis of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” Musically and textually, the two arias reveal Susannah’s character at two specific points in time; because of the events that take place between the arias, the girl who sings “The Trees On The Mountains” is a different person from the girl who sang “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” Just as “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” followed the church hoe-down, “The Trees On The Mountains” directly follows the new preacher’s revival meeting. Each aria allows Susannah to express the emotions stirred by these large public gatherings; the intensity of the revival meeting pushes Susannah over the edge. This chapter explores the musical and textual indicators of Susannah’s mental state as well as the ways the performer can exploit these resources for the purposes of character and plot development.<sup>1</sup>

**Reading the Text**

Following the same analytical framework of the previous chapter, I begin this chapter with a textual analysis of Susannah’s second aria, “The Trees On The Mountains.” Once more, a consideration of the structure of the poem, the use of language, and the overall meaning of the text follows a brief synopsis of the situation surrounding the aria. “The Trees On The Mountains” opens Act II, Scene 3. Susannah stands wrongfully accused of sinful behaviour and has been shunned by the townspeople of New Hope Valley. She knows she is innocent but her resolve is fading in the face of so much animosity. In Act II, Scene 2 she attends the annual revival meeting, where she

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix D for the vocal score.

becomes the focus of attention. The preacher and congregation work fervently to convince Susannah to confess, and in an exhausted trance she almost gives in. Reverend Blicht sings directly of her:

There's one in our midst tonight who pays no mind to the wooin' o' God in her heart.

I've wrestled with the devil  
 Fer her soul and prayed  
 That she'd accept the savin' grace o' the Lamb.  
 An' put aside her sinful an' shameful ways  
 An' still she don't heed my pleadin'.

Give over, sister, while the congregation sings one more verse. Publicly confess yer sins an' ask fergiveness o' the Lord an' the good folks present tonight.<sup>2</sup>

Susannah begins to walk up the aisle toward the preacher, at which point he grins broadly in victory. The young girl suddenly snaps out of her semi-hypnotic state and screams "No! No!"<sup>3</sup> before running home.

Act II, Scene 3 opens with Susannah sitting alone on the front porch of her house. She sings "The Trees On The Mountains," which she later describes as a folk song her mother taught her when she was young.

**Verse 1 (A)**

The trees on the mountains are cold and bare.  
 The summer jes' vanished an' left them there  
 like a false-hearted lover jes' like my own  
 who made me love him, then left me alone.

**Verse 2 (A)**

The coals on the hearth have turned gray and sere.  
 The blue flame jes' vanished an' left them there,  
 like a false-hearted lover jes' like my own  
 who made me love him, then left me alone.

**Chorus (B)**

Come back, O summer, come back, blue flame.

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<sup>2</sup> Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah* Vocal Score (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1967), 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

My heart wants warmin', my baby a name.  
 Come back, O lover, if jes' fer a day.  
 Turn bleak December once more into May.

**Verse 3 (A<sup>1</sup>)**

The road up ahead lies lonely an' far.  
 There's darkness around me an' not even a star  
 to show me the way or lighten my heart.  
 Come back, my lover, I fain would start.

**Verse 4 (A)**

The pore baby fox lies all cold in his lair.  
 His mama jes' vanished an' left him there,  
 like a false-hearted lover, jes' like my own,  
 who made me love him, then left me alone.

**Chorus (B)**

Come back, O summer, come back, blue flame!  
 My heart wants warmin', my baby a name.  
 Come back, O lover, if jes' fer a day.  
 Turn bleak December once more into May.

**Chorus (B)**

Come back, O summer! Come back, blue flame!  
 My heart wants warmin', my baby a name.  
 Come back, O lover, if jes' fer a day.  
 Turn bleak December once more into May.

**Codetta**

Come back! Come back! Come back!<sup>4</sup>

Reverend Blitch, who has come to her house to try once more to save here, overhears Susannah singing. In his weakness, he confides in Susannah that he is lonely, and asks her to go inside the house with him; broken and emotionally drained, Susannah allows him to lead her inside. "The Trees On The Mountains" is a pivotal aria, standing as stark contrast against the fervour of the revival meeting, and providing a glimpse at the changes in Susannah.

"The Trees On The Mountains" consists of four verses and a chorus as well as a one-line codetta. The rhyming scheme of each verse as well as the chorus couples the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 93-96.

first two lines in one pair, and the third and fourth in another. Each line consists of approximately ten syllables, though this metre is not entirely consistent; some lines have nine syllables while others have as many as twelve. The almost strophic structure of Verse-Verse-Chorus, which is twice repeated, echoes the style of many folk and popular songs. Arias are more commonly through-composed or have an ABA structure.

The third Verse, labelled A<sup>1</sup>, deviates from the overall structure. The rhyming scheme of Verses One, Two, and Four are identical: the first two lines end in [er]<sup>5</sup> and the last two end in [ōn]; the rhyming scheme of Verse Three is different, as the first two lines end in [är] and the final two contain an added “t,” [ärt]. In addition, the syllabic metre is the most varied in this verse, with the second line containing twelve syllables and the fourth line containing nine. Overall, the textual format of this verse is entirely different from the other three. The first, second, and fourth verses are all variations of the same text, with two and a half identical lines.

jes’ vanished an’ left them there  
like a false-hearted lover jes’ like my own  
who made me love him, then left me alone.<sup>6</sup>

The third verse incorporates none of these lines, and therefore appears to present a new idea within the aria. The meaning of the text verifies this suspicion.

The Codetta bears structural significance, as its presence breaks from the traditional folk style. Unlike strophic folk songs that end with a verse or chorus, “The Trees On The Mountains” trails off with Susannah’s pleas, “Come back!”<sup>7</sup> This line disrupts the end of the aria and reveals the turmoil and unrest inside of Susannah.

Generally, the textual structure of “The Trees On The Mountains” is clear; Floyd creates

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<sup>5</sup> The letters within square brackets represent symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet.

<sup>6</sup> Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah* Vocal Score (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1967), 93.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

a believable folk song for Susannah to recall. However, the deviations from the norm, in Verse Three and the Codetta, give the singer clues to Susannah's emotional situation, and the sadness that has compelled her to sing this melancholy yet aching nostalgic song.

As with all of *Susannah*, the text for "The Trees On The Mountains" is flavoured with a regional dialect. In this aria "just" becomes "jes'," "and" and "warming" both lose their final letters (becoming "an'" and "warmin'"), and the "pore baby fox" has lost his "mama."<sup>8</sup> In addition, the imagery within the song reflects Susannah's upbringing and the natural surroundings she has always known. The song compares a jilted lover to barren trees, the coals of a fire gone cold, and an abandoned baby fox; imagine how a girl born and raised in New York City might depict the same heartbroken situation. The only world Susannah knows is one of a simple country life, having grown up with meagre means and a strong association to the natural world. By examining the language Susannah uses, the performer gains a substantial amount of information about her character.

On the surface, the words in this aria have no specific relevance to the drama unfolding in the opera. Susannah is singing an old folk song to comfort herself; the words existed long before she ended up in this desperate situation. The performer, however, can deduce a secondary meaning behind the singing of this aria, as Susannah's intense sadness is mirrored in the anguish of the folk song. The text paints an image of barren trees left to die by the fleeting summer, a fireplace gone cold, and a baby fox abandoned to freeze. Each of these images speaks of coldness and desolation, an object abandoned to die. In Susannah's lifetime she has lost both of her parents, and in the face of the Elder's accusations she has lost the companionship and respect of the townspeople,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 95.

too. Even her loving brother Sam has failed her by sending her to the revival meeting where she was confronted and shamed. At the moment Susannah sings “The Trees On The Mountains,” Sam is hunting and drinking in the mountains overnight, making Susannah vulnerable to the advances of Reverend Blicht. Though Susannah may not be aware of Blicht’s impending visit, she probably feels a sense of foreboding in being left alone during the darkest time she has ever experienced.

Verse Three is about Susannah’s own plight. The structure of the text, the key, and the melodic line all change in this verse, letting the performer and audience know that something is different here. Susannah’s fear and isolation come through in the text:

The road up ahead lies lonely an’ far.  
There’s darkness around me an’ not even a star  
To show me the way or lighten my heart.<sup>9</sup>

The final line, “Come back, my lover, I fain would start,”<sup>10</sup> ties the verse back into the original meaning of the folk song, though it does not diminish the impact of the previous three lines. Susannah knows her plight has barely begun, and she can sense that matters are only going to get worse. A singer learning this aria, whether as part of the role or on its own, could find ample dramatic intent in the third verse to shape the meaning of the entire aria.

“The Trees On The Mountains” is a haunting piece of music, starkly simple in declamation yet filled with layers of meaning. While the music aptly creates a sense of melancholy and despair, the text offers the performer the means to find specific dramatic intent and emotional shifts. The structure of the text provides a roadmap for the singer, which, if she takes the time to decipher it, gives impetus and direction to the aria. The

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

linguistic style of a character can speak volumes, especially when the character speaks in a specific dialect. Susannah's regional "accent" may not give the audience pause, yet for the performer it is one more key to a complete understanding of her life. I use the term "accent" cautiously here, as both Carlisle Floyd and Phyllis Curtin (the original Susannah) caution against adopting an accent for the performance of this role. Curtin advises, "[Y]ou want to use your most direct, ordinary sound. Sometimes singers will try to do exactly the dialect that's written in the score, but it comes out in an artificial way, like it's put on."<sup>11</sup> Floyd says, "I've always insisted that the accent or dialect be played down. It's all too easy for urban types to patronize rural Americans. The reason I chose this is that I needed a very remote part of the world in which this kind of super-fundamentalist religion was still practiced."<sup>12</sup> Finally, even though "The Trees On The Mountains" is a folk song within the opera and not a direct expression of Susannah's situation and emotions, the combination of the text and the music serve to communicate the real subtext, her sorrow and desperation.

### **Analysing Form**

Although "The Trees On The Mountains" is a folk song within the opera, Floyd does not borrow anything from the existing folk literature, choosing instead to compose the entire aria from original material. In this way the composer establishes a folk idiom while at the same time furthering the dramatic momentum of the opera. The formal plan of the aria - one of the most important contributing factors to its believability as a folk song - demonstrates a simplicity that is well-suited to the idiom, and it is important as a

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<sup>11</sup> William R. Braun, "In the Beginning," *Opera News* 63 no. 10 (1999), 25.

<sup>12</sup> Carlisle Floyd, "Definitely not the Beverly Hillbillies," interview by Rupert Bottenberg, *Montreal Mirror Online*, (Accessed 31 January 2007), <<http://www.montrealmirror.com/ARCHIVES/1999/042299/music1.html>>.

performer to recognize the intentional lack of complexity as a fundamental expressive element of the piece. Susannah sings this song to try to comfort herself, and were it not for the disturbance of the A<sup>1</sup> section it is possible that she could have found solace in the music. The A<sup>1</sup> section betrays Susannah's inner anxiety, which is further revealed through the anticlimactic release of the Codetta and the asymmetrical nature of the phrases.<sup>13</sup> An analysis of these three formal elements presents the performer with a large number of interpretive possibilities; the audience is aware only of the song as it occurs in time, so it is in the performer's best interest to maximize the expressive potential of each formal deviation as it happens in the music. Though the overall formal relationship of each section may reveal itself at the end of the aria, without direction and shape throughout the piece, the *meaning* of the music will have passed the audience by.

The A<sup>1</sup> section (Verse Three) of "The Trees On The Mountains" contains the most significant deviation from the norm within the aria. As illustrated in Table 4.1, this verse follows the first occurrence of the Chorus (B), and introduces the only key change in the aria, a swift modulation from G minor to E-flat minor, which resolves back to G minor immediately at the end of the A<sup>1</sup> section.

Section (as delineated through text)	A	A	B	A <sup>1</sup>	A	B	B	Codetta
Bar	1-8	9-16	17-24	25-32	33-40	41-48	49-56	57-59
Tonality	g minor	g minor	g minor	<i>e-flat minor</i>	g minor	g minor	g minor	g minor

Table 4.1. "The Trees On The Mountains" Formal Structure

<sup>13</sup> The text for this aria is found in Appendix E, and a complete explanation of the dramatic situation surrounding the aria follows in this section.

This key change holds great importance for an interpretation of the aria; this section of the text speaks to Susannah's own situation more intimately than any of the other parts of the aria. The modulation highlights the verse as a significant moment, while the fact that the key modulates down a third helps indicate the mood of the section within the new key. I am not about to speculate on the colours of different keys, and the meanings held therein, as my interpretation of this mood shift is altogether simpler than that. By virtue of the descending tonal shift, the music in this section becomes darker and more sombre, a feeling amplified by consideration of the voice.

The soprano voice blooms in the higher registers, usually near the top of the staff and above. The middle of the voice, still resonant, can attain a tonal quality and colour relatively near that of the upper register. Once the soprano voice descends to the bottom of the staff and below, the singer is faced with new interpretive options and a different set of tonal qualities are at her disposal. She can no longer expect to have the same amount of resonance in the voice, and if she wants to maintain the more "beautiful" vocal quality characteristic of the higher voice she must allow the sound to become quieter, as it will do naturally. If the singer chooses this option, which would make Verse Three softer than the rest of the aria, a possible interpretation is that Susannah is sorrowful and introspective at that moment. An alternate use of the voice in the lower register, however, involves allowing more chest voice into the mix of sound, so that the voice is more powerful but also more raw sounding; this type of mix is a healthy and useful part of the soprano voice, though it creates a vocal quality that differs from the norm. If the performer of "The Trees On The Mountains" chooses to access her chest voice for the lower notes in the third verse (probably the D to F), there will be an audible difference in

tone, and the volume and intensity of the sound will be more than with the previous option. This usage of the voice might suggest an interpretation that Susannah is despairing and her fear is threatening to overwhelm her. In either case, it is clear that the modulation down a third forces the singer to navigate her voice differently than she can throughout the other verses and the Chorus, and it informs her in making an interpretive decision about her character's state of mind.

The Codetta affords a singer another opportunity to express Susannah's emotional situation. In the final three bars of the aria Susannah repeats the plea "Come back!" with a fermata on the first two utterances of the word "back." These three measures break from the almost strophic nature of the rest of the aria, and it is worth questioning what they mean. Why does Susannah cry out in this way? Once again, this final utterance shows how utterly alone Susannah is, and it also reminds us that she is quite young and still desires protection. It is also plausible to believe that Susannah is longing for the happier days of her past and willing them to return. If Reverend Blitch did not interrupt Susannah right after this line, what might she have done? Would she continue singing to herself? Would she have begun to cry? Or is there another possibility? Neither the music nor the text answers these questions; the performer should answer them for herself and by so doing she gives her character purpose and direction rather than waiting for an interruption Susannah does not know is coming. The seemingly small Codetta asks a lot of the singer, and its interpretation provides numerous answers about Susannah's changing personality.

A final formal consideration is the offset phrasing throughout "The Trees On The Mountains." As shown in Table 4.2, the primary division of the main sections of the aria

is negotiated around the text. A secondary division, based on musical phrasing, creates subsections that are slightly skewed from the primary sections.

Section (as delineated through text)	A	A	B	A <sup>1</sup>	A	B	B	Codetta
Bar	1-8	9-16	17-24	25-32	33-40	41-48	49-56	57-59
Subsection (as delineated through phrasing)	1 (missing the pickup bar)	1	2	1 <sup>1</sup>	1	2	2	3
Bar	1-7	8-15	16-23	24-31	32-39	40-47	48-55	56-59

Table 4.2. Subsections of “The Trees On The Mountains” as evidenced through phrasing

The end of each subsection is marked by a fermata, which always falls one measure before the completion of the verse’s text.<sup>14</sup> Except for the first occurrence of Subsection 1, both the main sections and the subsections are eight measures long; each subsection begins in the eighth measure of a main section, creating an overlap.

The repeated fermatas, when regarded in relation to the text-based sections, create moments of heightened expression. The singer should consider whether each fermata serves to emphasize the text preceding it, the text that follows, or whether it serves another purpose altogether. In Verses One, Two, and Four, the fermata is situated in the same place, between “like a false hearted lover jes’ like my own who made me love him” and “then left me alone.” The performer must decide whether Susannah is pausing to reflect on the false-hearted lover, or whether she is hesitating to speak of being left alone. In the first case, Susannah’s mind is drawn to her betrayal, and the deceit she has been subjected to; in the latter scenario her mind is occupied with her own isolation.

<sup>14</sup> The fermata in section 1<sup>1</sup> comes at the beginning of the seventh measure of main section B. This deviation is not significant to the interpretation of the overall structure.

Obviously either interpretation has validity, and the singer could even choose to interpret the same line differently from one verse to the next. The difference in terms of audience perception will probably be negligible, though the decision will influence the singer's sense of direction in the overall aria.

The text in Verse Three (Section A<sup>1</sup>) is different from the other verses, and therefore the fermata in the corresponding subsection (Subsection 1<sup>1</sup>) needs to be interpreted differently. This fermata lands on the second word of the statement "Come back," strongly emphasizing this statement. Perhaps the singer would draw a correlation between this event and the repetition of the same statement in the Codetta; alternately, based on the preceding text, "[T]here's darkness around me an' not even a star to show me the way or lighten my heart," this pause could be perceived as representing Susannah's fear in beginning along the dark path ahead.

The Chorus (Section B) is also punctuated with fermata, and requires yet another interpretive decision on the part of the performer. The fermata separates the text "[T]urn bleak December" from "once more into May." The significance lies in the fact that, unlike the rest of the chorus text that deals with an abandoned lover and her illegitimate child, Susannah can relate directly to this final line. Her prospects are bleak, and she longs to return to the simpler, happier days of her past. Perhaps Susannah pauses here as she realizes how profoundly these words speak to her situation, or she is overwhelmed and has trouble completing the sentence without choking up. As with the fermatas in each verse, this too should be treated as more than a pause in the melodic line. If the performer considers each section independently and as one piece within a larger whole,

she is able to make decisions about the meaning behind each fermata rather than regarding them as repeated pauses.

### Considering Melodic Shape and Motifs

Unlike “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” the melody of Susannah’s second aria lends itself well to the melodic contouring Rink suggests. Applying Rink’s melodic analysis to Susannah’s second aria, “The Trees On The Mountains” maps the overall shape of the musical line as it unfolds throughout the piece. “The Trees On The Mountains” is divided into A, A<sup>1</sup>, and B sections, referred to as Verses (A and A<sup>1</sup>) and a Chorus (B). Each verse follows the same distinct melodic shape, while each repetition of the Chorus follows another. Example 9 contains the melodic contour of the A section or Verse, while Example 10 shows the B section, or Chorus, contour.



**Example 4.1. Melodic Contour of “The Trees On The Mountains” A section (Verse)**

The verse consists of two iterations of a four-bar phrase, with the repetition being slightly more embellished than the original statement. The overall shape of the four-bar melodic phrase is one of downward movement, with the highest notes occurring in the first bar, and the line finally coming to rest almost an octave lower. The repetition of the phrase introduces a high G where the first statement rises only to an F. Because the melody spans only a ninth, the difference of a major second creates a noticeable upward stretch within the framework of the verse melody.

The performer can take many cues from the melodic shape of the verse. The singer must be careful not to create a climax on the high pitches, because doing so would bankrupt the rest of the phrase's dramatic potential. The downward movement of the line strikes me as the central melodic theme of the verse, relating to Susannah's broken spirit. Not only does the line fall, but for a soprano it sinks into the lower tessitura, the least resonant part of the voice. Whatever the dynamic marking, notes in this part of the voice will not carry as well as notes in the higher register. In that case, given the choice between interpreting Susannah's emotional state as passionate and anguished or depressed and defeated, I favour the latter choice.

The upward stretch to the high G in the fifth measure of the verse leads to more interpretive considerations. Why does the line deviate in this way? And what could this mean for the singer? One possible answer can lie in the text's relationship to this melodic line.<sup>15</sup> In each repetition of the verse, the text structure follows a pattern. The first four bars of music coincide with descriptions of situations far removed from the protagonist of the folk song. These analogies give way to personal emotion – “like a false-hearted lover jes' like my own” - at the moment the music reaches the peak of the high G. This G could thus be interpreted as an expression of bitterness or sorrow, on the part of either the original folk song protagonist, or Susannah, or both.



**Example 4.2. Melodic Contour of “The Trees On The Mountains” B section (Chorus)**

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix E for the full text of the aria.

The Chorus or B section of the aria creates a powerful contrast to the verses. Structurally the two sections share many features, as the Chorus also combines two statements of a four-bar phrase, the repetition slightly altered from the original. Like the verse, the top notes in the second occurrence of the Chorus' four-bar phrase extend higher than those in the original statement, this time reaching the highest point of the entire piece. Despite these similarities, the difference between the two sections creates the most interest. The shape of the first four-bar phrase within the Chorus consists of two high-reaching convex curves followed by a lower lying curve (as Example 10 illustrates). Most of the line sits near or above the top of the staff. The reiteration of the phrase removes some of the lower dips, creating one large high curve and one lower curve. Remnants of the verse's descending line exist in the second half of each phrase, though the high tessitura material features most prominently throughout the melody.

The melody of the Chorus appears to be simple. The only noticeable deviation from a basic folk-like melody appears in the leap up a tenth to the high B-flat, but this deviation is significant. This moment constitutes the climax of the Chorus, combining melodic complexity with the highest pitch material of the piece. Whereas the performer should avoid accenting the high notes in the verse, emphasizing them in the Chorus strengthens the overall dramatic expression. Just as the verse creates a picture of Susannah's weariness, the Chorus allows the performer to reveal her intense sadness. The high B-flats present a strong interpretive opportunity in that they allow the singer to express Susannah's mourning over what she has lost.

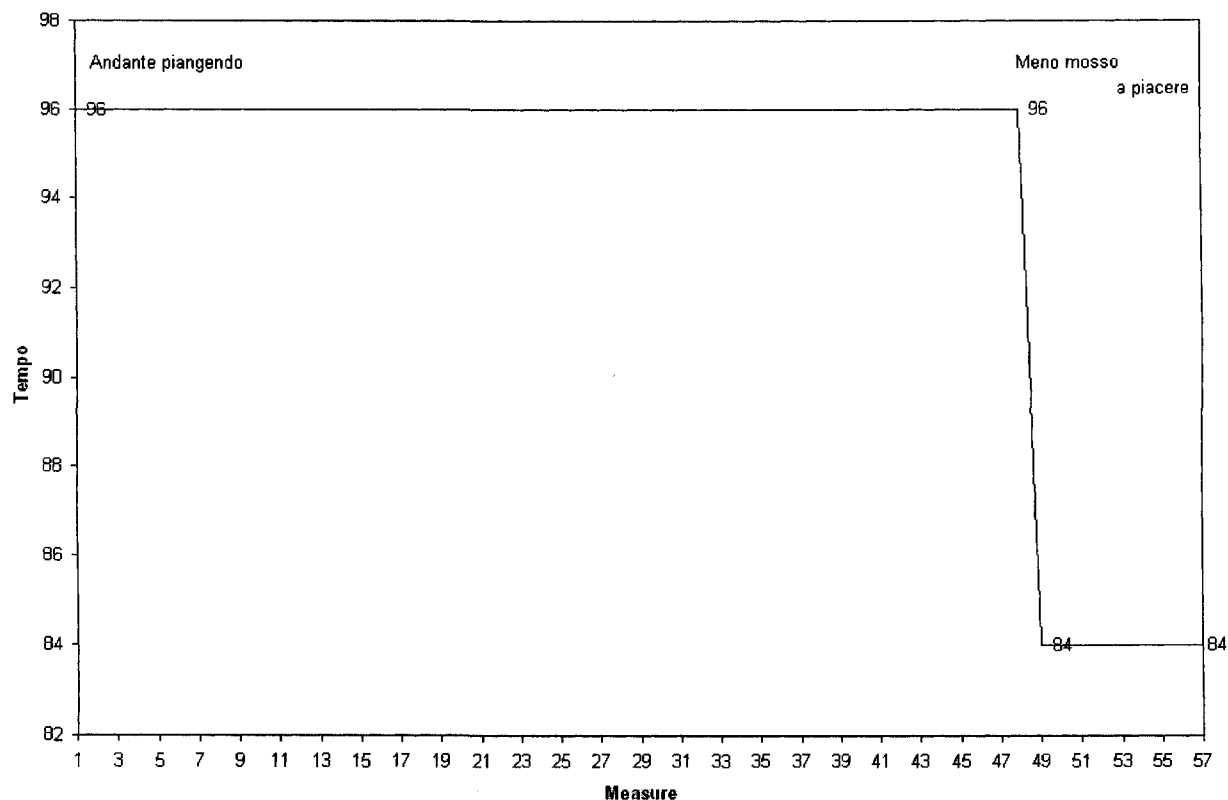
In addition to the standard interpretive considerations facing a singer, “The Trees On The Mountains” presents a specific, unique challenge for performance. Though not a traditional folk-song, this aria exists as one within the opera. The aria does not detail Susannah’s emotions or her situation; rather the fact that she resorts to singing a folk song, this specific folk song, speaks to her state of mind. When attempting to inflect this piece with Susannah’s character, the performer should be careful not to disturb the simplicity of the melodic line. If the singer makes the aria complex, she risks compromising the meaning of the scene. Of course, none of the suggestions garnered from melodic contour mapping, or any of the steps of performer’s analysis should be taken as the final word on interpretation of any given piece. As Nicholas Cook says, “analysis should be seen as a means of posing articulate questions, and not...as a source of answers.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Graphing Tempo**

Often in the course of analyzing a piece, some elements of the music offer less of a contribution to the analysis than others, that is to say, while they are important considerations, the analysis of said element is much less complex than the others. In the case of “The Trees On The Mountains,” tempo analysis proves to be an uncomplicated undertaking. Graphing of the tempo, as shown in Table 4.3, outlines the basic tempo indications of the piece. A brief discussion of the graph expounds the expressive potential of tempo in “The Trees On The Mountains.”

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Cook, “Analysing Performance and Performing Analysis,” 248-49.



**Table 4.3. Tempo Graph of “The Trees On The Mountains”**

Susannah’s second aria begins at a tempo of 96 to the eighth note, with a description of *Andante piangendo*. The addition of the term *piangendo*, which literally translates to “crying,” sets the tone of the piece more capably than the metronome marking could on its own. Taken as a whole, the starting tempo description is the first indicator of the sombre, sorrowful tone of the aria. This tempo is constant - though not necessarily rigid<sup>17</sup> - until the beginning of the final Chorus at measure 49, at which point it changes to a *Meno mosso* 84 to the eighth note. This relatively small shift in tempo contributes to the stillness of the final Chorus, which is also perceptible in the hushed dynamics and static accompaniment figure. Interpretively, the singer might utilize the

<sup>17</sup> The folk-like nature of the aria allows the singer some liberties in taking time between verses and otherwise slightly altering the tempo for dramatic effect. Still, the overall tempo should remain faithful to the metronome marking given by the composer.

tempo shift to introduce an emotional state of heightened pathos; an alternate interpretation might be that Susannah's resignation provides a reason to slow the pace. The final two-and-a-half bars of the aria consist of a repeated octave leap with fermatas on the upper note, a high G. Above the first fermata Floyd writes *a piacere*, and the orchestra is instructed to play *colla voce*. The singer is free to take as much time during this final statement as she feels necessary; the amount of rubato will depend entirely on the performer's interpretation.

A final note must be made about the effect the fermatas in "The Trees On The Mountains" have on the aria's tempo. The sections of this piece are eight bars long, and every eighth bar of the music contains a fermata. Therefore, in each section of music Floyd creates a tempo disruption. Because of repetitiveness of the aria, it is normal that the fermata would occur in each reiteration of the same musical material; it is also reasonable to question the merit of performing the fermata and the following measure the same way with each repetition. Singers know that repetition of text requires varied interpretations, and the same should hold true for repetitions of a musical gesture. The performer can vary this gesture effectively by altering the tempo of the lines directly before and after the fermata, making sure to return to the indicated tempo by the start of the next section.

In all music, tempo plays a vital role in setting the tone of a piece, and "The Trees On The Mountains" is no exception. A sensitive singer will learn the piece at the tempos marked by the composer and consider the meaning that can be gleaned from said tempos. Some deviation from the indicated tempo is absolutely valid and even necessary in forming an original concept of the piece, as long as the performer retains the overarching

shape of the music. Thus, tempo variation should not completely change the character of a given section, nor should the basic tempo be changed arbitrarily. The ideal performance would include a well-rehearsed tempo “map” that leaves the audience with a strong sense of the mood and direction of the aria.

### **Graphing Dynamics**

Dynamics are often considered in terms of the character they give to a piece of music, or the emotional variation they allow a performer to create. Although these are two of the most important functions of dynamics, I want to consider the ways in which dynamic variation helps shape “The Trees On The Mountains,” thereby contributing to the overall dramatic trajectory of the music. Before discussing the implications of the dynamics in this aria, I must first outline some peculiarities of note within the score. Most surprisingly, the dynamic markings found in the piano reduction of the aria do not match those in the orchestral score. Table 4.4 gives the dynamics as they are written in the orchestral score.

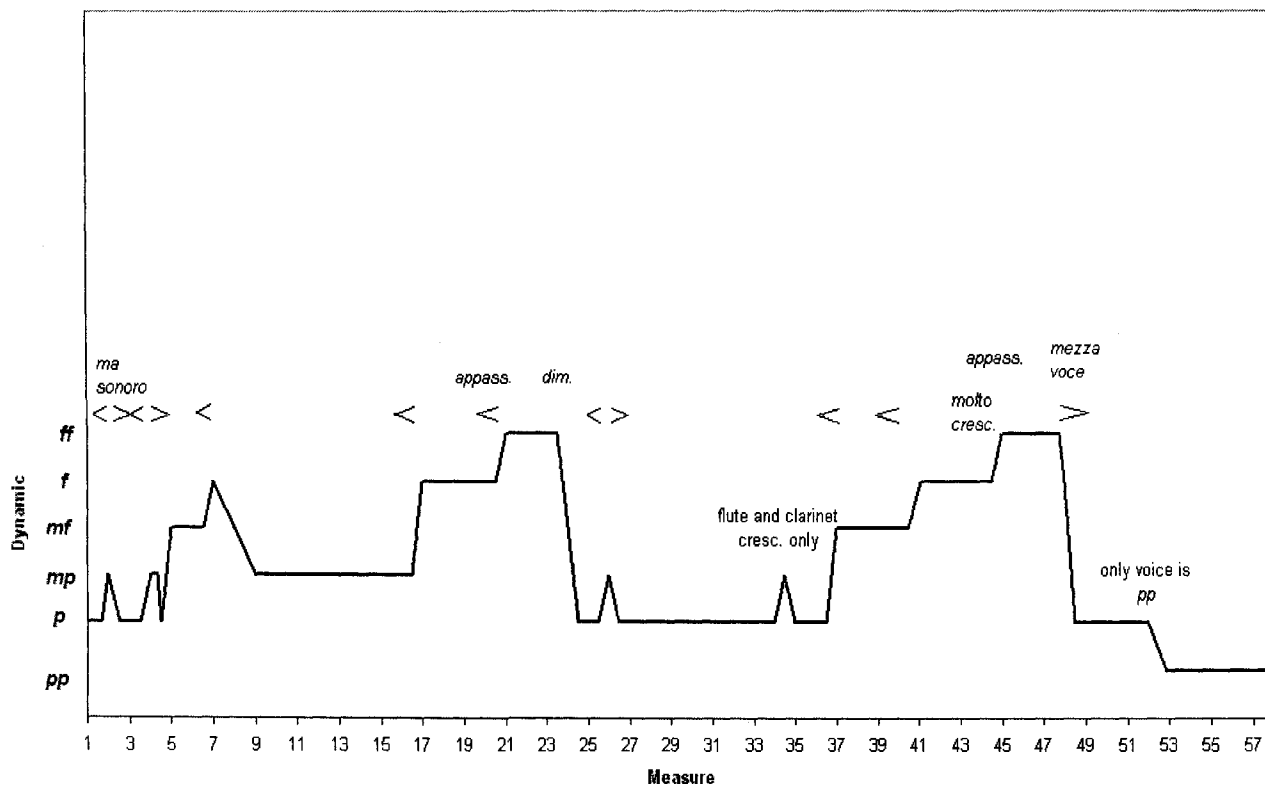


Table 4.4. Dynamic Graph of "The Trees On The Mountains"

Two of the changes occur in the first verse, where *crescendos* and *decrescendos* are inexplicably absent from the piano reduction. In measures one and two there is a *crescendo-decrescendo* marked in the orchestral score, but none is present in the piano reduction. The *decrescendo* in measure four is also missing, as is the *crescendo* in measure six. Though the piano is incapable of producing a *crescendo* on a held chord, the same could be said for the only instrument playing in the first verse, the harp. In any case, this argument gives no explanation for the removal of *decrescendos* or the *crescendo* in measure six, which carries through two chords and could easily be brought out. A few more dynamics are altered in the piano reduction, including an added *pianissimo* in measure thirty-one, and the incorporation of dynamics written above the vocal line only into the piano part in measures forty-nine and fifty-three.

Within the orchestral score, note that a number of dynamic markings only affect specific instruments. In measure thirty-four the flute and clarinet alone have a crescendo-decrescendo marking. The vocal line in the final Chorus has separate dynamic markings of its own: measure forty-nine has an indication of *mezza voce*, and measure fifty-two is marked *pianissimo*. The orchestra does not decrescendo to *pianissimo* until measure fifty-seven. Except for these specific instances, all other dynamic markings are written in the various lines of the orchestral parts, never in the vocal line. This practice is somewhat standard in orchestral scores, and the singer is meant to adhere to the dynamics written in the orchestral parts except in those instances where the voice is given its own marking.

As Table 4.4 makes apparent, dynamics reveal a shape when considered over the duration of a piece of music. “The Trees On The Mountains” consists of extreme peaks and valleys, with two climaxes and a definite drop toward the conclusion. Verse One begins quietly, and builds gently into Verse Two. The peak up to the first Chorus is abrupt, introduced by way of a quick crescendo from *mezzo piano* to *forte*, and climaxing to *fortissimo* for two-and-a-half measures; the conclusion of the Chorus contains an equally sudden shift back down to *piano*. The build-up through Verse Three to the second Chorus is a more gradual, stepwise ascent through *mezzo forte*, creating a greater sense of building intensity. The Chorus returns with the same energy, only to drop off again suddenly to *piano* for the final statement of the Chorus. When creating her interpretation, the singer should note that the first two statements of the Chorus are equal in dynamics; they jump dramatically higher than any of the verses or the final Chorus. These two moments could therefore be considered the most emotionally expressive

sections of the aria, as Susannah is overcome with her own anguish and leaps to melodic and dynamic heights otherwise unmatched within the aria. While this interpretation has validity, I also question how to interpret the final Chorus section, which drops from *piano* to *pianissimo* for the conclusion of the piece. This final Chorus holds the key to Susannah's true emotional state; she is outraged at her treatment by the townspeople and is in despair, and most importantly at this point in the opera, she is tired and has lost all hope. If a singer manages to capture the drastic dynamic variations within "The Trees On The Mountains," this final Chorus will stand out as a bleak contrast to the preceding surges of rage and sadness, revealing the fact that Susannah has given up fighting and opening the door for Reverend Bitch's desperate advances.

### **Analysing Rhythm**

The sixth step in analyzing "The Trees On The Mountains" is to perform a rhythmic analysis of the aria. This analytical process reveals the various functions rhythm fulfills within the aria: rhythmic variation within the orchestral accompaniment reinforces the formal divisions found in the piece, while some of the rhythmic cells within the vocal line contribute to the dramatic unfolding of the aria. Though rhythm is often taken for granted, its contribution to the effect and meaning of an aria should not be overlooked.

"The Trees On The Mountains" is divided into distinct sections, with four verses, three repetitions of the Chorus, and a final codetta. The aria is in 6/8 time, with the typical stress on beats 1 and 4 of each measure. The orchestral rhythm of the first verse is simple, as it consists of a series of two or three chords per measure, with no faster-moving melodic line. The next verse becomes slightly more complex, with a consistent

sixteenth-note figuration and a dotted-rhythm pattern that recurs four times.

Interestingly, the piano reduction contains a line doubling the vocal melody and dotted rhythm, but such a line does not exist in the full orchestral score. The first occurrence of the Chorus in the orchestral score does, however, introduce a line that rhythmically resembles the vocal line. As a result of the changes made in the piano reduction, the singer might come to believe wrongly that the rhythmic texture of the piece becomes simpler at the beginning of the Chorus section. The rhythmic density increases from the first verse to the second, and though the individual figures change from the second verse to the Chorus, the level of complexity remains consistent.

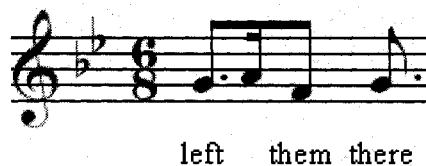
Verse Three returns to the orchestral rhythm first heard in Verse One. Though the rhythm is not exactly the same in these two verses, the similarity is sufficient to group the two in the same category, and to mark a clear distinction between the climax of the Chorus and the paucity of detail in these two verses. Likewise, Verse Four reprises the rhythmic figures of Verse Two. The rhythmic structure of the aria groups the verses into pairs so that the overall form becomes A-B-A-B-B-Codetta, rather than A-A-B-A-A-B-B-Codetta as the text suggests.

Although the second statement of the Chorus is rhythmically identical to the first, the third Chorus differs dramatically. The orchestral accompaniment for the aria's final section is reminiscent of the first and third verses. The static nature of this figuration works with the dynamics, tempo, and orchestration to bring the aria to its subdued conclusion. The three-measure Codetta remains in the same style as the final Chorus. In terms of the overall shape of the aria, a rhythmic analysis suggests that the aria swells from a simple first verse, gradually increasing in complexity through the second verse

and first occurrence of the Chorus. Verse Three returns to the level of Verse One, and the swell repeats itself through Verse Four and the second Chorus. The third Chorus and the Codetta bring the rhythmic momentum back down to its simple beginnings, closing the aria in the same mood with which it opened.

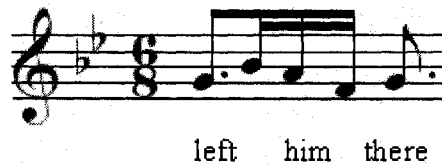
In conjunction with this analysis of the orchestral rhythm and its ability to convey musical shape, it is also helpful to the singer to note the dramatic impact created by rhythmic cells in the vocal line. The melodic line of the verses in “The Trees On The Mountains” bears out many occurrences of dotted rhythms. The Chorus utilizes a pattern of longer note durations than the verses and therefore conveys a different message. In order to explain the impact of the rhythmic cells within each verse and Chorus, as well as within the context of the entire aria, I will focus my attention on the most important rhythmic elements of the melodic line and their potential for meaning.

Verses One, Two and Four are so rhythmically similar that they may be considered together. A steady eighth note pace is the dominant declamatory rhythm, and dotted rhythms create interest and potential for textual emphasis or emotional expression. Often, the sixteenth note following a dotted eighth note functions as an arpeggio, as shown in Example 4.3.



**Example 4.3. “The Trees On The Mountains” Rhythmic Ornament 1**

In Verse Four this same figure is expanded, further emphasising the decorative nature of the sixteenth notes.



**Example 4.4. “The Trees On The Mountains” Rhythmic Ornament 2**

The concluding measure of each verse contains another example of ornamentation, characterized by the rare appearance of running sixteenth notes.



**Example 4.5. “The Trees On The Mountains” Rhythmic Ornament 3**

The circled notes in this figure form the melodic structure of the measure, while the remaining notes are embellishments. These two types of ornamentation, while also melodic in nature, are apparent because of their rhythmic peculiarity; the rapidity of the sixteenth notes emphasizes the non-structural nature of the pitches. It could be argued that the C and not the A in Example 4.5 might be the structural pitch, because the harmony suits either pitch; my choice of the A is based on the original pattern shown in Example 4.3, and my opinion that the turn-like gesture G-A-F-G is a more likely folk melody than the leaping G-C-F-G.

It might be obvious to explain the ways recognition of ornamentation can affect a singer’s interpretive possibilities. In any music, ornaments indicate potential for heightened emotion or dramatic potency. The mood of a piece determines the style and number of ornaments that are appropriate, and of course performance practice of twentieth-century music guards against adding ornaments beyond those advised by the composer. The ornaments discussed above are found in the score, and may guide the

singer in a sensitive realization of the text. The first ornament, Example 4.3, highlights the sense of abandonment in the line “The summer jes’ vanished an’ *left* them there,” and the third, Example 4.5, performs a similar function in emphasizing “left me alone.” Though the ornamentation is uncomplicated, it stands out against the plain rhythmic background of the rest of the verse material.

Verse Three is distinct in breaking the patterns found in all of the other verses. Notably, the concluding measure is altered completely, and in the place of running sixteenth notes is a dotted rhythm that blends in easily with the rest of the verse. In this instance, the change takes emphasis off that part of the line, allowing it to be placed elsewhere in the verse. A series of sixteenth notes five measures earlier, also unique to this verse, demands attention because of the abrupt increase in movement it creates. Finally, all but one of the measures in Verse Three begins with the same rhythmic pattern, detailed in Example 4.6.



**Example 4.6. Prevailing Rhythmic Pattern in “The Trees On The Mountains” Verse Three**

This repetitive motive is one more indicator that Verse Three is different from the others and should be interpreted differently by the performer.

The Chorus takes on a rhythmic shape unlike that of the four verses, with longer average note durations and fewer dotted figures. Textually, the verses tell the story, while the Chorus pauses the action for expressive purposes. The longer note durations add to the pleading, expressive nature of the Chorus and help the audience hear the shift from storytelling to introspection. In keeping with the folk idiom, however, the Chorus cannot be too complex or stray too far from the overall song structure. The final measure

of the Chorus contains the same rhythmic figure found at the end of Verses One, Two, and Four (Example 4.5), which reinforces the semi-strophic facade of the piece.

The Chorus is differentiated enough from the verses to assume a place of dramatic importance within the aria, but maintains enough of the roots of the folk song's rhythmic structure to fit securely within the style. The rhythmic cells within Susannah's vocal line serve many purposes: they emphasize key moments in the text by way of ornamentation; they differentiate between the verses and the Chorus and convey the drama as it shifts from one section to the next; and they reinforce the folk song role this aria serves within the opera's storyline. Consideration of the overall effect of rhythm within this aria reveals its most important function to be its ability to highlight sections of interest while maintaining a simple appearance.

### **Considering the Orchestration**

Singers often underestimate the importance of the orchestration of an aria. The orchestral accompaniment to an aria is the one factor the singer has no control over, yet its contribution to an aria is vital in terms of the colour and depth of a piece, its texture. Many questions about a piece, including dynamics, mood, and colouration are often answered by taking note of the orchestral accompaniment. Analysis of the orchestration of "The Trees On The Mountains" proves that this aria is no exception. For the sake of clarity when discussing sections of the aria, I have reproduced Table 4.1 from the above discussion of Form.

Section (as delineated through text)	A	A	B	A'	A	B	B	Codetta
Bar	1-8	9-16	17-24	25-32	33-40	41-48	49-56	57-59
Tonality	g minor	g minor	g minor	<i>e-flat minor</i>	g minor	G minor	g minor	g minor

Table 4.1. "The Trees On The Mountains" Formal Structure

"The Trees On The Mountains" begins a cappella, though Floyd includes a note, "the first two or four bars of the accompaniment may be played as an introduction and repeated if necessary."<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the intended beginning is abrupt and painfully soft. The ensuing chordal accompaniment by the harp, which lasts the duration of the first A section, does nothing to take away from the stark effect. The sparse, uncomplicated texture helps establish the folk-song identity of the piece, and the beautiful yet quiet tone of the harp sets the sombre mood. The tonal qualities of the harp could serve as a model for the singer's own sound in this initial section; the haunting, delicately ringing tones of the harp indicate that the singing should be relatively quiet, and that Susannah's sadness should be apparent in the voice from the beginning of the aria. In the next part of the aria, another A section, the two clarinets enter with more active lines of sixteenth notes, and the bassoon alternates from a static participation in the chordal accompaniment to a more active, flowing line at the ends of phrases. The strings also join in, playing chords as well. The accompaniment remains understated in this section, but the singer should notice more movement and presence in the orchestra with the addition of the above-mentioned instrumental lines. There is nothing in the text or the singer's melodic line to suggest the same type of growth; all of these cues lie in the orchestration.

<sup>18</sup> Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah* Full Score (New York, Boosey & Hawkes, 1967), 299.

As noted in other aspects of this analysis, the A<sup>1</sup> section differs from the previous two verses in many ways. The orchestration is no exception, as Floyd employs only the harp and string section for this verse. Though more full than the opening verse with harp accompaniment, this verse feels static and subdued after the climactic Chorus. Such a marked contrast in orchestration from one section to the next can signal a strong emotional or dramatic shift. In this case, Susannah is suddenly speaking of her own situation, and her fear and loneliness are reflected by the subdued instrumental quality. The final A section, which follows immediately after the A<sup>1</sup> section, once again introduces a new orchestral texture. The harp drops away, and the flute, clarinet, and horn re-enter. In place of the harp's chordal accompaniment, the flute and clarinet create melodic lines in counterpoint to Susannah's own singing.

The first occurrence of the Chorus (Section B) introduces a flourish of orchestral activity. The oboe, french horn, flute, and cymbal enter into the music, while the harp becomes silent. The second occurrence of the Chorus is orchestrated in the same way, the orchestra being fully present with the exception of most of the brass. If it is not already apparent to the singer through studying her own line, the orchestration makes it clear that the choruses are the climactic moments of this aria. The third repetition of the Chorus therefore comes as a surprise, returning as it does to the more muted texture of only harp and strings. This instrumentation reminds us of the A<sup>1</sup> section (Verse Three), during which Susannah sings of her own plight. Perhaps the return of these instruments tells the singer that this final Chorus is about Susannah as well. This instrumentation remains the same for the Codetta, making the conclusion of the aria seem atypically anticlimactic. Many arias end with the most emotionally dramatic material, and are

therefore at the peak of dynamic and instrumental intensity. The end of “The Trees On The Mountains,” not traditional in this respect, remains the emotional climax of the piece nonetheless. The difference is that Susannah’s turmoil is of an introspective nature at this point in the opera, and a loud, full finale to the aria would be inappropriate in expressing that inner distress.

Colour and texture are two aspects of a musical composition that are difficult to define or categorize, but that contribute greatly to the mood of a piece. For a singer, many clues about her role and the performance of individual arias are to be found in the orchestration. The extensive presence of the harp, absence of brass, and rare occurrences of percussion all contribute to the subdued, melancholy feeling of “The Trees On The Mountains.” Textural changes from one section to the next aid in directing the drama of the piece, thereby creating a vivid, realistic portrayal of the range of emotions Susannah is experiencing. The singer, even if she is performing “The Trees On The Mountains” with piano accompaniment, gains insights into the aria through looking at and/or listening to the orchestral accompaniment. This step can aid interpretive decision-making that might otherwise take lengthy analysis and experimentation to complete.

### **Conclusion**

“The Trees On The Mountains” occupies a pivotal position in *Susannah*, as it represents the moment of Susannah’s character transformation. Until the revival meeting Susannah continued to make efforts toward remedying her situation, and she believed that it was possible to go back to the life she loved. “The Trees On The Mountains,” the first music after the revival meeting, makes it apparent that Susannah’s spirit is broken;

the final scenes of the opera reveal a tired, hardened woman in the place of the optimistic young girl.

“The Trees On The Mountains” mimics the folk song style with its strophic form and simple rhyming scheme. The aria is a folk song that Susannah’s mother taught her, and in this scene Susannah sings it to comfort herself. The downward melodic contour of the verses underlies Susannah’s sadness, while the Chorus’ interjected upward leaps suggest the desperation and passion within her. The tempo of this aria is consistent, with only one slight slowing of the tempo for the final Chorus. This simplicity coincides with the overall folk style, and the slowing near the end denotes Susannah’s exhaustion and defeated attitude.

In comparison with “Ain’t It A Pretty Night,” the dynamics in “The Trees On The Mountains” are also uncomplicated. The two large dynamic peaks occur during the first two climactic Chorus sections, while the lowest dynamic levels occupy the final, melancholy Chorus repetition. The rhythmic texture of this aria swells and recedes in the same manner as the dynamics, peaking during the first two Chorus sections and becoming sparse for the final Chorus. The orchestration also creates peaks and valleys, and the overall shape of the aria depicts Susannah’s emotional transitions between depression and passionate desperation. This analysis provides the performer with the means to express Susannah’s grief and instability. It also brings out the elements of the music that could be used to foreshadow Susannah’s surrender to the negative events and people around her.

The analysis and interpretations contained in this and the previous chapter are intended to aid the performer in interpreting the key elements of the Susannah’s music

and text. A study of the opera's other characters is beyond the scope of this thesis, as there is still more to be discussed with regard to Susannah. In order to put the analyses of Susannah's two arias into perspective, I will further investigate the positions these arias occupy within the opera both in terms of character development as well as musical and plot progression.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

The performance-oriented analysis of “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” and “The Trees On The Mountains” completed in Chapters Three and Four illuminates many aspects of Susannah’s character progression during the time between the two arias. “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” paints the young girl as naïve and optimistic. She is someone who believes in the good in other people and the possibilities for happiness in the world. The leaping melody of the aria combined with the constantly peaking and falling dynamics show Susannah’s excitement and energy, while the moments of hushed reverence when she sings the text “ain’t it a pretty night” remind the listener of her sweet, simple nature. “The Trees On The Mountains,” by contrast, shows Susannah at her weakest. Her spirit broken by the false accusations against her, she is nearing a breakdown. “The Trees On The Mountains” is a strophic folk song Susannah remembers from her childhood, and she sings it to comfort herself. Although the text does not relate to the plot of the opera, the musical material depicts Susannah’s sadness and instability.

Each of the analyses presented in this thesis are useful individually if a singer is learning either of Susannah’s arias out of the context of the whole opera. In order to make this analytical work relevant to a performance of the entire role, the two analyses must be linked together within the context of the opera. Though Susannah’s character is given depth through her arias, these relatively small musical numbers do not represent her entire story, nor do they illustrate her psychological transformation from beginning to end. A condensed analysis of all of Susannah’s music helps situate her arias within the opera, and allows the performer to view the complete development of her character, a development that can be only partially understood by studying the arias on their own. A detailed performance-based

analysis of the entire opera, however potentially enlightening, would not further serve to illustrate the value of performance-oriented analysis. Instead, the condensed version offered here completes the profile of Susannah's character without introducing unnecessary analysis.

### **Situating the Arias**

In Act I, Scene One the whole community of New Hope Valley has gathered in the churchyard for a square dance. Though Susannah is present from the beginning, she does not sing or speak throughout the entire scene. Instead, the women of the town gossip about her as she dances innocently in the background. Despite Susannah's pleasant demeanour, Mrs. McLean convinces the other women that the young girl is a sinner and that no good will come to a girl like her. When the new preacher, Reverend Blicht, arrives at the square dance, he too is informed about Susannah's supposed evil nature, and he vows to pray for her soul. Nothing in Susannah's actions suggests such wickedness, but because she has yet to utter a word, her disposition remains mysterious throughout the scene.

Susannah breaks her silence in Scene Two, as she and Little Bat reminisce about the excitement of the square dance. Her first lines are in an *Allegretto giocoso* tempo and her melodic contour leaps up and down to highlight her excitement and energy. In her conversation with Little Bat she proves herself patient and gentle, and she exhibits a wonderful lack of prejudice toward the young man who is "not too strong mentally."<sup>1</sup> Everything about her music and text in the first part of Scene Two contradicts the negative image painted by the town wives in Scene One; Susannah is not wicked, but innocent and naïve. Her earnestness and excitement in singing "Ain't It A Pretty Night," which follows in Scene Two, complete the portrait of the girl. Contrary to what the townswomen say, Susannah is carefree, kind, and full of youthful optimism.

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<sup>1</sup>Floyd, *Susannah* Vocal Score, 22.

Susannah's older brother Sam arrives home just as she finishes "Ain't It A Pretty Night." Though Susannah is nineteen years old, she scoffs at Sam's suggestion that men may be courting her. She asks him to sing to her the Jaybird song because their father used to sing it to her before she went to bed. The sudden shift into C minor and the lilting downward direction of her melodic line show the sadness that tinges Susannah's request, but also suggest that she is pouting in order to convince her brother. When Susannah interacts with Sam, she seems very young, and the audience is reminded that she is only a teenager.

Act I, Scene Three is the pivotal scene wherein the town Elders happen upon Susannah bathing nude in the creek. The staging is written:

The Elders continue their search until Hayes suddenly looking up, shouts, "There it –!" His voice breaks off abruptly, and the other Elders look up and follow the direction of his raised arm. They all stand rooted in their tracks for some time, expressions of shock on their faces being gradually supplanted by those of lust. Eventually, McLean shatters the moment when he realizes what he is feeling and doing, and draws himself up indignantly. At the sound of his voice, the other Elders, horrified and deeply disturbed, too, at what they have felt, quickly adopt his outraged tone and stance. They continue to look, however.<sup>2</sup>

In order to relieve themselves of the guilt of lusting after Susannah's naked figure, the Elders direct their shame at the young girl and become outraged at her supposed blasphemy. Except for the sound of her humming and singing to herself, Susannah is neither seen nor heard throughout this scene. The juxtaposition of Susannah's childlike singing with the Elder's accusations is jarring. Thus far in the opera, whenever something negative is being said about Susannah she is always too far away to hear it or defend herself. Although they accuse her of many things, the Elders and their wives cannot bring themselves to do so directly.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 38.

In Scene Four the townspeople gossip about Susannah while they set up a church potluck. The music is ominous and tense, and creates a foreboding atmosphere. Once again, the young girl is offstage while the others spread their rumours, and only her entrance hushes them. Although Susannah brings a dish of peas that she has prepared, she is greeted with stony silence. Bewildered, she begins to explain her tardiness, her music sweeter and more melodic than that which preceded her entrance. She tries to act undaunted by the cold reception she is given until McLean tells her “you ain’t welcome here.”<sup>3</sup> The music immediately erupts into the melody heard in Scene Three, when the townsfolk sang “This woman is of the devil. ‘Tis a shameful sight to behold. She must be brought to repentance. All the valley must be told.”<sup>4</sup> Susannah manages only to repeat “excuse me” before running offstage.<sup>5</sup>

Little Bat comes to Susannah in Act I, Scene Five and reveals that the Elders saw her bathing naked in the creek. Little Bat’s declamation is frantic and disjointed, and Susannah’s interjections are angular, devoid of melodic beauty or continuity. Little Bat also admits that his parents coerced him to say that Susannah let him sleep with her. Susannah is horrified, and sings “You didn’t! You didn’t! You couldn’t have! It’s a lie! It’s a lie! You know it is!” while the orchestra plays strains of “The Trees On The Mountains.”<sup>6</sup> This underlying music reveals the first instance of Susannah’s deep despair, an emotion fully realized when she sings the aria later in the opera. Susannah orders Little Bat to leave, and her brother Sam enters from where he has been hiding watching the conversation. Sam tries to comfort her

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 57.

with his aria “It Must Make The Good Lord Sad.” He tells her that she is facing a hard road ahead, and that she just has to wait it out.

Three days have passed when Act II, Scene One begins. Susannah and Sam are onstage at the beginning of the scene, and their static poses demonstrate the helplessness they feel. Susannah asks Sam how long this state of limbo can continue and he tells her the townspeople are waiting for her confession. Both of their lines gravitate around the pitches of C and G, and it feels as though the music is stuck as well. Susannah finally breaks the drone when she says, “But they ain’t nothing fer me to confess, Sam.”<sup>7</sup> The passion of her convictions becomes evident through the music, as she finally sings a more complex, moving melody. When Susannah tells Sam that the Reverend Blicht invited her to the revival meeting that night, Sam encourages her to go. He tells her he will be out all night hunting, and he does not want to leave her alone. Fear grips the young girl, as the only person she trusts is abandoning her in her time of need. Susannah finally agrees to go to the meeting though it is clear that she feels betrayed by her brother. Her final line in the scene, “I cain’t wait ‘til pretty things looks pretty agin,”<sup>8</sup> is a heartbreaking reminder of the happiness that prompted her to sing “Ain’t It A Pretty Night” only a few days earlier.

Act II, Scene Two opens as the revival meeting is beginning. The townspeople sing hymns in four-part harmony while the collection is taken, and Susannah sits alone on the last bench in the church. When Reverend Blicht begins his sermon, the entire congregation becomes silent. As the Reverend becomes more passionate, his voice changes from his speaking voice into a powerful singing voice, and his fervour takes over the congregation. Finally, he asks all the sinners to come kneel before him at the altar, and the choir resumes

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 73.

singing the hymn. Various members of the congregation come forward, and the Reverend “lays his hands on their heads, throws his own back, and with closed eyes, speaks to the Almighty.”<sup>9</sup> The sound of the choir and Reverend Blitch’s voice become increasingly intense until he motions them to stop. He turns his attention to Susannah, pleading with her to confess her sins. The choir begins singing again, the repetition and intensity becoming hypnotic. Suddenly, Susannah stands up and begins moving slowly down the aisle towards the Reverend. Confused and afraid, the young girl approaches him in a trance-like state. As she comes nearer to him, Reverend Blitch smiles triumphantly; instantly the spell is broken and Susannah recoils from his outstretched hand. She looks around at the stern-faced congregation, screams “No!” on a high C, and runs out of the church.

“The Trees On The Mountains” at the opening of Act II, Scene Three provides a stark contrast to the previous scene’s religious fervour and tension. Susannah’s sadness and desolation lead her to sing this folk song in an effort to find comfort. Her character transformation is obvious, as she no longer believes that there is any way to convince the townspeople of her innocence. In addition, the two people she trusts most in the village, Sam and Little Bat, have abandoned her when she needs them most. The temporal and melodic structures of “The Trees On The Mountains” differ greatly from those of Susannah’s first aria and the rest of her music in general. The tempo in Susannah’s music often ebbs and flows in relation to her levels of excitement, but throughout “The Trees On The Mountains” she maintains the same unexcited tempo, only slowing further at the *Meno mosso* marking for the final chorus. Susannah’s characteristic melodic material is full of large leaps and unexpected intervals, as introduced most clearly in “Ain’t It A Pretty Night.” The melody of “The Trees On The Mountains,” however, is flowing and smooth and her intervallic leaps are predictably

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 85.

tonal. The large leaps in the chorus continue to express Susannah's passionate outbursts, but unlike before, her energy is desperate and agitated.

As Susannah finishes singing her second aria, Reverend Blich approaches her. He has come to her house to ask again for her repentance, but she maintains that she has done nothing wrong. She reveals the truth of her condition, singing:

I ain't never spent sich a week as this.  
 Not never in all my life.  
 I don't know what it'd be like to feel happy agin,  
 Or to wake up in the mornin' without this awful thing weighin' down on me  
 So's I don't even want-a git up an' see what the day's like.  
 An' all the things people's said about me an' the looks people's give me  
 An' the way they treated me at the picnic supper,  
 An' the way you treated me tonight.  
 I don't know what it'd be like to be happy agin.  
 And if I thought this was the way the rest o' my life was gonna be,  
 I'd kill myself right now!<sup>10</sup>

The Reverend tells her that it is the sin inside her that makes her feel this way, and Susannah screams a final protest: "It ain't!"<sup>11</sup> As she lies wracked with sobs and defeated on the ground, something changes in Reverend Blich's demeanour, and a combination of sadness and hesitation come through. He sings of his weakness in "I'm A Lonely Man, Susannah," confessing that he longs for a woman's touch. As the scene closes, the Reverend leads Susannah into her house, and she says, "I'm so tired. I jes' cain't fight no more."<sup>12</sup>

Act II, Scene Four opens at the New Hope Church where Reverend Blich is kneeling in prayer. Through his encounter the previous night he has realized that Susannah is innocent of all the claims against her, and that he alone has defiled her. He has called the Elders, their wives, and Susannah to the church so that he may clear her name; their arrival catches him by surprise, and he picks himself up off the ground so that they will not know the entirety of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 104.

what he has done. Though the Reverend pleads with the Elders and their wives to believe that Susannah is innocent, they are suspicious of his sudden change of opinion. As the townspeople leave, they exchange glares with the young girl. Only Reverend Bitch and Susannah remain in the church, and she begins laughing coldly. Susannah's youthful optimism is completely gone, as evidenced by her only sung line in the scene, a bleak combination of middle C, D, and B-flat. Reverend Bitch begs her to recognize the effort he made, and as she leaves the church he asks: "Please try an' fergive me."<sup>13</sup> Her spoken response, "Fergive? I've forgot what that word means,"<sup>14</sup> brings the preacher to his knees with the realization that he has forever scarred this woman.

The final scene of the opera, Act II, Scene Five, returns to the front porch of the Polk house. The orchestra opens with the theme from "The Trees On The Mountains," making it clear that Susannah's depression still hangs over her. Sam returns from his hunting trip to find Susannah angry and bitter. He asks what has happened and she recounts the events of the previous night, questioning: "An' where was you, Sam? Where was you?"<sup>15</sup> Sam vows to kill Reverend Bitch but Susannah turns and walks into the house disbelievingly. After a few moments Susannah calls for Sam to come inside for supper; to her dismay she realizes he has left. In the distance a shot rings out, and Susannah sees that Sam's gun is missing from the rack. She falls to her knees crying to the Lord to forgive her: "O Lord, I never meant to harm nobody."<sup>16</sup> Her passion elevates her melodic line, the tessitura of which lies between E-flat at the top of the staff and high B; as her outburst subsides into despair the melodic line drops significantly, coming to rest on a low B-flat.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 119.

Little Bat runs onstage to tell Susannah what has happened: Sam shot Reverend Blicht in the baptismal creek, and before he died the Reverend prayed for forgiveness for himself and the Lord's blessing for her. The townspeople have vowed to hang Sam and chase Susannah out of New Hope Valley. As Little Bat explains all of this to Susannah the sound of the townspeople singing - which echoes the theme from the Act One, Scene Three chorus, "This woman is of the devil" - grows nearer, but despite the threat Susannah stands firm on her porch. The townspeople arrive at Susannah's house, and the Elders condemn her for sending Sam to kill Reverend Blicht. As they speak, "Susannah begins to laugh mockingly,"<sup>17</sup> her laughter incensing the townspeople further. As they draw closer, Susannah stops laughing and shouts at them:

Git out! Git out!  
 You cain't run me off my place till I'm ready to leave,  
 An' that'll be some time to come.  
 So git out! Git out!  
 Git away from here afore I blast you all to kingdom come!  
 An' don't come 'round here agin  
 Less y' don't care nothin' bout livin'.<sup>18</sup>

Her vocal line jumps around wildly, spanning almost two octaves from a high A to a low B-flat and consisting predominantly of leaps of a third or more. As she sings she takes a gun from Sam's rack and threatens the crowd with it. Susannah has lost all of her former propriety and is teetering on the brink of insanity.

Frightened by Susannah's threats, the townspeople begin to exit. Susannah laughs menacingly as they leave, and she puts the gun in the rack. Little Bat is hiding upstage, and when Susannah notices him she stops laughing. In a seductive voice she invites Little Bat to touch her. Though her voice is quiet and the melodic line lilting, the tremolo flute reveals the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 126-128.

underlying tension in the situation. Frightened, Little Bat is drawn in by Susannah. As he tries to put his arms around her, she slaps him across the face and begins laughing maniacally. Little Bat runs offstage, and as soon as he is gone Susannah stops laughing. “She turns around, straightens her body in the doorway and remains standing there, an inviolably strong and inexorably lonely prisoner of self-imposed exile.”<sup>19</sup> The opera closes with an instrumental occurrence of the chorus, “This woman is of the devil”; this theme has pervaded the opera, and its message finally fits.

### **Conclusions about Susannah**

The totality of Susannah’s character cannot be grasped through her arias alone; situating those arias within the drama allows the performer to discover the scope of her character’s transformation. Many times the musical material in scenes other than her arias help the interpreter gain understanding of her state of mind. In Act I, Scene Five, for example, the orchestra’s introduction of the theme from “The Trees On The Mountains” gives the first glimpse of Susannah’s terrible sadness. Another example is found in the repetition of the chorus’ theme “This woman is of the devil. ‘Tis a shameful sight to behold. She must be brought to repentance. All the valley must be told.” From Act I, Scene Four. Each time this theme recurs it brings with it a reminiscence of the horrible way Susannah is bullied by her community. Susannah’s breakdown does not occur until after her second aria, and without knowledge of the extent to which she changes and the reasons for her transformation, the singer’s understanding of the desperation behind “The Trees On The Mountains” is incomplete. The arias reveal Susannah’s nature and her inner thoughts, but the drama within the opera dictates why and when her emotions build up or her disposition is altered. The extended music and plot synopsis above illuminates the context around

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

Susannah's fall from grace and reveals the moral threads that govern the plot development in this opera. Susannah is not a fragile girl beaten down by the reality of life, nor is she a vixen whose cunning leads to her downfall. Susannah is a typical *verismo* heroine, an average woman whose only wrongdoing was being naive and beautiful. The blame for her spiritual and emotional demise rests with the town Elders, their wives, and the Reverend Olin Blicht. Mob mentality and religious fervour combine to ruin the young woman's life.

### **Final Considerations and Implications for Further Research**

The primary intention of this thesis has been to utilize performance-based analysis to facilitate the interpretation and performance of the title role in Floyd's *Susannah*. The focus on the opera's title character has allowed for in-depth exploration of the analytical framework as well as a detailed musico-dramatic analysis of the character, but has necessarily excluded many important aspects of the opera. The other main characters in the opera, Sam Polk, Little Bat McLean, and Reverend Blicht, could be the focus of further performance-oriented analysis. Sam is a kind-hearted drunk whose aria, "It Must Make The Good Lord Sad," reveals great sadness brought about by wisdom of the ways of the world around him. Though his role in the opera might appear straightforward to an analyst, the performer must find depth and personality in this man to avoid portraying him as a two-dimensional background figure. Similarly, Little Bat's role threatens to become a caricature if misunderstood or mishandled. The libretto immediately identifies him as being mentally unstable, but he cannot be played with only this feature in mind. Although Little Bat is fearful of most adults he meets, he has unwavering trust in Susannah. The shame he feels when he admits his lies to her shows that his sense of morality is intact, even though he is too

feeble-minded to resist peer pressure. Performance-oriented analysis would reveal the truth about this character: he too is a victim of the overzealous townspeople.

Reverend Blitch makes an especially interesting case study because of the way his fate intertwines with Susannah's. Each new tragedy in her life is brought about, willingly or not, by the Reverend, and his downfall is a result of his misdeeds toward her. In addition, musical and vocal analysis of Reverend Blitch's character would undoubtedly uncover many layers of interpretative material for the performer. It is easy to play the Reverend as a hypocritical villain, but study of his character reveals much more under the surface. Susannah's complexity of character is evident throughout the course of the opera, but the performers must work harder to make Sam, Little Bat, and Reverend Blitch into three-dimensional people.

The town Elders and their wives should be studied as a group, for their actions as individuals play little part in the opera. These townspeople represent the angry mob for whom accusations are "tantamount to guilt."<sup>20</sup> Musically, it would be interesting to study the choral numbers within the opera, as they are always sung by the townspeople. Whether a church hymn or a threatening chant, each of these choruses provides insight into the way the Elders and their wives convince themselves of Susannah's guilt and their own righteousness. Mrs. McLean acts as a ringleader in the accusations, and as such she exposes more of her true nature than any of the other townspeople. For the performer interested in any of these secondary roles, it would be relevant to study the biblical verse *Susanna and the Elders* as well as readings on Senator Joseph McCarthy and the McCarthy era to gain perspective on the way each individual townspeople contributes to the larger community.

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<sup>20</sup>Tommasini, "Taking a Look Into the Soul of 'Susannah'."

Performers are not the only people who could benefit from the type of analysis exemplified in this thesis. Directors and possibly conductors can utilize this analysis to shape their artistic vision of the opera. Performance-oriented analysis would encourage them to regard the music and drama as creations of the characters rather than as abstract contributions to some overarching message from the composer; in a *verismo* opera like *Susannah* a character-based narrative is especially appropriate. By examining each character in detail in the methods described herein, the director can make specific, quantifiable decisions about each scene that help him and his cast create believable characters and situations.

Additional study about the character of Susannah would yield further discoveries. As the title character of the opera, she is the only person with two arias, and the interpretation of those two arias has been the focus of this thesis. The two most integral events in the opera, however, take place when Susannah is offstage. First, the Elders spy her bathing in the creek on her property. Then, in the second Act the Reverend Olin Blich takes her into her house to take advantage of her. An interesting study could be made into the effect of offstage action in *Susannah* and the way it directs the onstage drama. In addition, the question could be raised: is the action more or less effective because the audience never sees it?

Another non-musical topic of interest within *Susannah* is the nature of the relationships between Susannah and the other characters. From an early age she was allied with the outcasts of the village, her drunken older brother and the mentally weak Little Bat McLean. As an orphan she is vulnerable, and the jealousy of the women of New Hope Valley further isolates the young girl. She is welcome in the community, however, until Mrs. McLean voices her concerns to the other town wives. Because of her marginal status in the village

Susannah becomes an easy target for prejudice and judgement. Any research project regarding this topic would necessarily include further study of the McCarthy era and the parallels between that historical period and the events represented in *Susannah*.

Regardless of the aria, role, or opera under consideration, the performer must understand her character's intentions. Instead of thinking of the music and text as creations of the composer and librettist, she should think of them as a creation of the character. For example, Susannah sings "The Trees On The Mountains" because she is lonely and depressed, and it reminds her of her mother. As a character she has not been directed to sing this aria, she is inwardly motivated to do so. Thinking of the music in this way places the responsibility on the performer to find the reasons behind the music, the text, and the actions. In order to take responsibility for all of these elements, the performer must know her role thoroughly; performance-oriented analysis allows the singer to decipher the various aspects of her role so that she may form her own interpretation. Unlike reading a formal analysis or coaching a role – both of which can be worthwhile endeavours – participating in this type of analysis requires that the singer question what she sees in the score, and that she find her own answers for performance. This thesis has asked a series of questions about the role of Susannah and in most cases has provided one possible answer for each question. The interpretation herein, thoroughly researched and well-founded as it is, is only one of many possible interpretations of the character. The most wonderful thing about live musical performance is the element of the unknown, and a well thought-out operatic interpretation should be unique from any other that has existed before.

The detailed musico-dramatic analysis of Susannah's arias in Chapters Three and Four as well as the larger synthesis of the role found in the opening part of Chapter Five provide a

performer with the groundwork for creating the character. The historical and political context provided in Chapter Two completes the basis of knowledge necessary for a well-informed performance. Therefore, any performer intent on singing the title role in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* would find all of her preliminary research already completed in this thesis. The work left for the performer then is to cull the information she believes to be most relevant, decide how it informs her interpretation, and apply it to her rehearsal process and performances. Even with all of the information provided here the performer's task is a daunting one. Musicological research such as the analysis found in this thesis works to provide the background from which any dedicated performer can build a musically and dramatically unique operatic experience.

19 Adagio sostenuto (♩ = 50)

Su: *Ain't it a pret - ty night!*

*f*  $\rightarrow$  *p*

Su: *The sky's so dark and vel - vet-like and it's all lit up with stars. It's like a*

*mp espress.* *sempre molto legato*

Su: *great big mir - ror re - flect - in' fire - flies o - ver a pond.*

*mp*

*più mosso* (♩ = 60)

Su: *Look at all them stars, Lit - tle Bat. The long - er y' look the more y' see. The*

*mp* *crescendo*

13  
Sus. sky seems so heav-y with stars that it might fall right down out of heav-en and cov-er us

*diminuendo*

15  
Sus. all up in one big blank-et of vel - vet all stitched with dia-mon's.

*poco rit.*

*p*

18 **20** a tempo (♩ = ♩) (♩ = 60)

Sus. Ain't it a pret - ty night. Just think, those stars can all peep down an'

*mf*

*p cantabile*

20  
Sus. see way be - yond where we can: They can see way be - yond them moun - tains to

*crescendo*

21  
Sus. Nash-ville and Ashe-ville an' Knox-ville. I wond-er what it's like out there, out there be-yond them mount-ains where the

*mf*

*f*

*diminuendo*

23

Sus. folks talk nice, an' the folks dress nice like y' see in the mail-ord-er cat-a-logs.

*p* *mp*

24 Ancora più mosso (♩ = 80)

Sus. I aim to leave this val-ley some day an' find out fer my-self: To

*mf* *f largamente*

27

Sus. see all the tall build-in's and all the street lights an' to be one o' them folks my-

*molto crescendo*

30

Sus. *self.*

*ff* *f* *dim*

poco rit.

♯ (21) Tempo I (♩ = 60)

Sus. I won-der if I'd get lone-some fer the val-ley though, fer the

*p*

36

Sus.

ten.

sound of crick-ets an' the smell of pine straw, fer soft lit-tle rab-bits an' bloom-in' things an' the

*poco ten.* *poco a poco crescendo*

38

Sus.

Con moto (♩ = 72)

moun-tains turn-in' gold in the fall. But I could al-ways come back if I got

40

Sus.

stringendo

home-sick fer the val-ley. So I'll leave it some-day an' see fer my-self. Some-day I'll

42

Sus.

molto allargando a tempo

leave an' then I'll come back when I've seen what's be-yond them mount-ains.

*molto cresc.* *ff marcatis.*

45

Sus.

*rallentando*

(72) Adagio sostenuto e molto tranquillo (♩ = 52)

Ain't it a pret-ty night. The

49

Sus.

sky's so heav-y with stars to-night that it could fall right down out of heav - en an' cov-er us

*pp e rubato* *colla voce*

51

Sus.

up, and cov-er us up, in one big blank-et of vei-vet and dia - mon's.

*molto ritardando* *ppp* *pp* *dim.*

(Sam has come on unobserved during Susannah's aria. At the end of it, he says in echo to announce himself, "Ain't it a pretty night?" At the sound of his voice Susannah looks up, surprised, while Little Bat leaps to his feet, ready for immediate departure. It should be immediately apparent that the bond between the brother and sister is one of loyalty, warmth and tenderness. Sam, the uncomprehended poet and recluse, is gentle by nature and tragically passive, until the one thing of beauty left in his life is attacked. He has the same dark good looks as his sister and is in his thirties.)

(To little Bat who is edging off-stage)

23 **Moderato** (♩ = 76)

Sus.

SAM

Saml when did y' come? I'll see y' to-mor-row night at the pic-nic sup-per.

Ain't it a pret-ty night.

**Moderato** (♩ = 76)

*sfz* *p* *p agitato* *tr*

Andante piangendo (♩ = 96)  
SUSANNAH

The trees on the mountains are cold — and bare. The summer jes' va-nished an'

*p ma sonoro*

4

left — them there like a false-heart-ed lov-er jes' like — my own who made me love him, then left me — a — lone. The

*sempre arpeggiando* *mf*

9

(76)

coals on the hearth have turned gray — and sere. The blue flame jes' va-nished an'

*mp*

12

left — them there, like a false-heart-ed lov-er jes' like — my own who made me love him, then

16  
Sus. left - me - a - lone. Come back, O sum - mer, come back, blue flame. My

19  
Sus. heart wants warm-in', my ba - by a name. Come back, O lov - er, if

22  
Sus. jes' fer a day. Turn bleak Dec - em - ber once more in - to May. The

25 (77)  
Sus. road up a - head lies lone - ly an' far. There's dark-ness a - round me an' not - e - ven a star to

29  
Sus. show me the way or light - en my heart. Come back, my lov - er, I fain - would start. The

33  
 Sus. pore bab - y fox lies all cold in his lair. His ma - ma jes' va - nished an'

*p cantabile*

36  
 Sus. left — him there, like a false-heart - ed lov - er, jes' like — my own, who

*mf*

39  
 Sus. made me lovè him, then left me a - lone. Come back, O sum - mer, come

*cresc. f*

42  
 Sus. back, blue flame! My heart wants warm-in', my bab - y a name. Come

*molto cresc.*

45  
 Sus. back, O lov - er, if jes' fere a day. Turn bleak Dec - em - ber once more in - to May. Come

*ff appass. p*

44 **78** **Meno mosso** (♩ = 84)

Sus. back, O sum-mer! Come back, blue flame! My heart wants warm-in', my ba - by a name. Come back, O lov-er, if  
*sotto voce* *sempre arpeggiando* *pp.*

54 *a piacere*

Sus. jes' fer a day. Turn bleak Dec-em-ber once more in - to May. Come back! Come back! Come back!

Blitch **BLITCH** (Who has come onstage and stood listening)  
 That's

*colla voce pp*

**Più mosso** (Turning, startled)

Sus. Who is it? *(Agreeably)* I

Blitch might-y pret-ty sing-in', Su-san-nah. It's yer frien', the preacher. Do you a-lers sing sopret-ty?

**Più mosso**

**79** **Tempo primo**

Sus. sing to my-self when I'm sad or lone-some. It keeps me comp-ny.

Blitch That's a

**79** **Tempo primo**

*p e piagnevole*

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