

Virginia
Opera

A
Christmas Carol
THE OPERA

An Opera in Two Acts

Music and Libretto by Thea Musgrave

Virginia Opera's Student Night at the Opera performance of
A Christmas Carol is sponsored by



A Christmas Carol

T H E O P E R A

Teacher Guide

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Premiere

Norfolk, Virginia, 7 December 1979

Characters and Performance Media (Doublings in parentheses)

Scrooge.....	Baritone
Spirit of Christmas.....	Dancer
Fan, young Scrooge's sister (Liza Fezziwig, Belinda Cratchit, Lucy).....	Soprano
Belle Fezziwig, young Ben's fiancée (Martha Cratchit, Rosie).....	Soprano
Mrs.Cratchit (Mrs. Fezziwig, Aunt Louise).....	Mezzo- Soprano
Bob Cratchit (Mr. Dorrit).....	Tenor
Ben, Scrooge as a young man (Fred, Scrooge's nephew).....	Baritone
Marley's Ghost.....	Actor
Mr. Fezziwig (Topper).....	Baritone or Bass-Baritone

Also: Paper boy, Mollie Fezziwig, Tiny Tim (Scrooge as a boy)

Historical Background

Virginia Opera offered to produce the American premiere of Thea Musgrave's *Mary, Queen of Scots* in only its second season and, as many in this audience must know, it was a great success. A sixth performance had to be added in order to satisfy the demand for tickets. Even before these performances, the company board commissioned an opera from Musgrave to be premiered in Norfolk. Musgrave chose the subject of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." In an interview with Rodney Milnes, the composer discussed the challenges inherent in this story. The first was to work out a skeleton of the plot, the second how to deal with the great number of characters (always a liability in opera). She constructed a number of short scenes and, true to Dickens' story, uses flashbacks and dissolves to keep the action moving ("The story itself is so diffuse that there was a danger of losing the dramatic focus"). At times multiple characters had to be played by one person, an obvious choice being the three Spirits of Christmas: "He could change from being young and mischievous to old and threatening through costume and make-up." Then she further set him apart from the real world (inhabited by the singers) by making him a dancer or a mime. Likewise, Marley's Ghost became an actor, to make him "sound different" from the singers. Other doublings include Mr. Fezziwig and the Portly Gentleman, and Mrs. Fezziwig and Mrs. Cratchit "double to make a kind of Mother Earth figure." Also, Scrooge's nephew, who visits his uncle at the beginning of the book and the opera, plays the young Scrooge as he decides not to marry Belle but instead to turn mean and nasty as the old Scrooge looks on, remembering his past.

Musgrave's libretto and musical setting are masterly. Harold Blumenfeld summed up her success in 1980 (see below) when he wrote, "In her incarnation of the Dickens' tale, Musgrave has succeeded in avoiding. . . dual pitfalls: . . . an all-too-hastily defrosting of Scrooge's character, and a general goody-goody sentiment of all concerned." In fashioning the libretto, Musgrave initially wrote out the dialogue from Dickens verbatim and then turned the descriptive passages from Dickens into dialogue as much as possible. The result was of course far too much text, an inevitable problem in turning a book or a play into a libretto. Certain things were pruned and other parts had to be expanded to allow for arias. She added a scene (a quartet in the penultimate scene) for the Cratchits, to show their reaction to Tiny Tim's death and "to show Bob Cratchit's anger at being so poor and the family's feeling of loss." Above all, Musgrave wishes to create characters with whom an audience can empathize--in *A Christmas Carol* this is true not only for the Cratchits, obvious candidates, but Scrooge himself emerges as an almost sympathetic character, for she has expanded the scene of "Belle's Farewell," letting the audience see why Scrooge believed he must renounce her (mainly fear of poverty). Musgrave believes an opera libretto must be rather bare, because the music "provides all the adjectives and the atmosphere." When she begins to compose, the absolute final draft of the libretto has not been achieved; during the creative process she changes both text to fit music and music to fit text in a two-way process.

As far as operatic tradition is concerned, Musgrave admits that British composer Benjamin Britten "of course was an influence and inspiration, just because he was there and put British opera back on the map." She recalls when she was studying with Nadia Boulanger and was trying to write in a deliberately avant-garde style. Boulanger cautioned her against trying to be original, the only element that mattered being quality.

“Everything’s been done before! The thing about tradition is to use it [and] you can take what you need from the past and rethink it in an entirely fresh way.”

A Christmas Carol is written in a through-composed, conservative modern style, befitting the “old-fashioned” atmosphere of the Dickens tale. The vocal writing is mainly conversational, although arias and choruses are present. It is one of the most tuneful of Musgrave’s scores. Independent instrumental music includes a short orchestral introduction and brief dance sequences. In the *Opera Journal* (1980), Harold Blumenfeld wrote that Musgrave’s “vocal writing is splendid, allowing the text audibility and comprehensibility along with its wide range of expression. The acid recitative of old Ebenezer is counterbalanced by the lyric outpourings of the young Belle-enamored Ben.” Since its premiere by Virginia Opera in 1979 it has received numerous other productions, including a collaboration between Virginia Opera and the Royal Opera House at Sadler’s Wells Theater, and a production in Adelaide, Australia.

Plot Synopsis

The Spirit of Christmas forces Scrooge the miser to view the consequences of his mean and nasty nature. As a result, he undergoes a change of heart and attempts to make what amends he can to those he has wronged. In a scene added to Dickens' story, Scrooge the young man (looked upon by the old Scrooge as a visual embodiment of a memory) feels he is forced to reject his beloved Belle, whose theme is "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," one of two pre-existing, familiar tunes heard in the opera.

In act 2, the Cratchit family mourn the death of Tiny Tim, another scene added by the composer. The Christmas carol, "God rest ye merry, gentlemen" is sung at the end of the opera and is also heard in earlier scenes, transformed or fragmented.

Meet the Composer Thea Musgrave

Thea Musgrave has been as adept at composing instrumental music as she has works for the stage, including both ballets and a variety of types of operas. She was born in Barnton, Midlothian, on 27 May 1928. In 1947 she entered the University of Edinburgh as a pre-med student, but then turned to the study of music, with Mary Gardner Grierson (piano, harmony, and analysis) and Hans Gál (composition, theory, and counterpoint). In 1950 she received a Bachelor of Music degree, receiving the Boucher scholarship and the Donald Francis Tovey Prize. The pianist Clifford Curzon, a friend of Grierson, recommended that Musgrave study with Nadia Boulanger, which she did from 1950 to 1954, both at the Paris Conservatoire and privately. Of Boulanger's teaching, Musgrave has said: "It wasn't the piano accompaniment class; we never did any accompanying on the piano, but it was so much more. We did some reading, figured bass, transposition, and of course, Stravinsky. It was a wonderful general music education." Also, "there were her incredible dinner parties where one would meet her students from way back, composers, all kinds of visitors from all over." At the end of her first two years of study with Nadia Boulanger, Musgrave received the Lili Boulanger Memorial Prize in composition, named after Boulanger's younger sister, a composer who had died at a young age. Also in Paris Musgrave studied piano with Marcel Ciampi.

Upon returning to Great Britain, Musgrave was offered commissions from an impressive and diverse number of sources: foundations and trusts, opera houses, ballet companies, the BBC (with whom she has had an extensive, cordial relationship), American colleges, English schools, and the city of Glasgow. She composed a number of major instrumental works, including a second Piano Sonata, a String Quartet, and a Trio for flute, oboe, and piano, and wrote a one-act opera, *The Abbot of Drimock* (1955), which is partly in the neo-classical style of Stravinsky. By the late 1950s, having closely studied the twelve-tone works of Schoenberg and Webern, Musgrave began composing using serial techniques. In 1959 she came to the United States on a scholarship award from the Tanglewood Summer School. Here she met Aaron Copland and Milton Babbitt and became familiar with the music of Charles Ives, which was to subsequently influence her. After returning to England she continued to compose but was also involved in teaching and presenting lecture series. Miss Musgrave was especially prolific in the early 1960s. In 1961 she visited the USSR briefly as a delegate from the Composers' Guild of Great Britain.

She was commissioned to write her second opera, *The Decision* (1964-65), a work about a Scottish mine disaster characterized by Hugo Cole as "a closely worked, contrapuntal, freely chromatic score," befitting the "glim and claustral mood" of the libretto. Her vocal writing before *The Decision* tended to be florid but was less so in this opera. In the late 1960s appeared a number of instrumental works, the most important of which is a series of concerti, based on certain aspects of vocal and theatrical style, works in a rhapsodic, virtuoso style, making use of indeterminate notations. She herself referred to these works as "dramatic-abstract": "In my instrumental music, I have gradually evolved a style where at times certain instruments take on the character of a dramatic personage, and my concern is then directed toward the working out of a dramatic confrontation." This freer, more personal style was reflected in her chamber opera, *The Voice of Ariadne* (1972-1973), with a libretto by Amalia Elguera based on Henry James,

which not only uses the orchestra in a complex manner but also employs electronic tape, an aspects that shows her genius for using “new sounds” in a theatrical manner. This work was commissioned by the Royal Opera House for the English Opera Group. Subsequent operas were all composed to her own libretti and show a wide variety of subject matter with an attendant sensitivity to musical style. In *Mary, Queen of Scots* (Edinburgh, 1977), libretto by Musgrave, using parts of a play by Amalia Elguera and one of her most significant creations, for example, she writes on a grand scale, displaying a true sense of theater. The work has been likened to Verdi’s *Don Carlos* and Britten’s *Gloriana*. By contrast, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (premiere 1982, BBC broadcast), based on a Civil War story by Ambrose Bierce, is a radio opera and works perfectly within the limitations and possibilities of that genre. The score calls for a soundtrack of pre-recorded natural sounds such as wind in the trees and horses’ hooves. Most of the action in Bierce’s story takes place in the protagonist’s head, represented by a baritone singer, so musically the real and imaginary worlds are combined. An intensely moving work by her is *Harriet, the Woman Called “Moses”* (premiered in Norfolk, 1985), about a woman with a sense of a divine mission--Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. In addition to her achievements as a pianist and composer, Musgrave has very capably conducted a number of her own works, including her operas *The Voice of Ariadne* and *Mary, Queen of Scots*. In 1976 she conducted the renowned Philadelphia Orchestra in the American premiere of her *Concerto for Orchestra*. She has also conducted her works with New York City Opera, Scottish Opera, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and many other groups.

In 1970 Miss Musgrave was again in the United States to teach at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where she met violist Peter Mark, for whom she has written an *Elegy* for viola and cello and a piece for tape and viola called *From One to Another* (1970) and a Viola Concerto (1973). They were married in London in 1971. She eventually moved to the United States where she has been intimately involved with Virginia Opera. Musgrave has served on many arts panels, including, in this country, the Opera-Music Theater Panel for the National Endowment for the Arts, and has been awarded a number of prizes, fellowships, and honorary doctorates. In 1974 she was given the Serge Koussevitzky Award, and she has received two Guggenheim fellowships. In *The New Yorker* she has been characterized by Andrew Porter as “one of the ablest composers we have” and in the *Glasgow Herald* Malcolm Rayment referred to her as the sure choice for “The First Lady of Music.” In an interview prior to the November 1981 Australian premiere of *A Christmas Carol*, Thea Musgrave noted, “I think it is terrible if a work of art doesn’t move you in some way--allow you to make some discoveries about people, about life, about yourself.” Earlier, she had said, “I hope my music is dramatic, that it is accessible if given a little time to get to the listener, that it has warmth, perhaps a certain amount of humor. . . .I hope I have a style that is recognizable and individual.”

A Short History of Opera

The word *opera* is the plural form of the Latin word *opus*, which translates quite literally as *work*. The use of the plural form alludes to the plurality of art forms that combine to create an operatic performance. Today we accept the word *opera* as a reference to a theatrically based musical art form in which the drama is propelled by the sung declamation of text accompanied by a full symphony orchestra.

Opera as an art form can claim its origin with the inclusion of incidental music that was performed during the tragedies and comedies popular during ancient Greek times. The tradition of including music as an integral part of theatrical activities expanded in Roman times and continued throughout the Middle Ages. Surviving examples of liturgical dramas and vernacular plays from Medieval times show the use of music as an “insignificant” part of the action as do the vast mystery and morality plays of the 15th and 16th centuries. Traditional view holds that the first completely sung musical drama (or opera) developed as a result of discussions held in Florence in the 1570s by an informal academy known as the *Camerata* which led to the musical setting of Rinuccini’s drama, *Dafne*, by composer, Jacopo Peri in 1597.

The work of such early Italian masters as Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi led to the development of a through-composed musical entertainment comprised of *recitative* sections (*secco* and *accompagnato*) which revealed the plot of the drama; followed by *da capo arias* which provided the soloist an opportunity to develop the emotions of the character. The function of the *chorus* in these early works mirrored that of the character of the same name found in Greek drama. The new “form” was greeted favorably by the public and quickly became a popular entertainment.

Opera has flourished throughout the world as a vehicle for the expression of the full range of human emotions. Italians claim the art form as their own, retaining dominance in the field through the death of Giacomo Puccini in 1924. Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Leoncavallo developed the art form through clearly defined periods that produced *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, *bel canto*, and *verismo*. The Austrian Mozart also wrote operas in Italian and championed the *singspiel* (sing play), which combined the spoken word with music, a form also used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio*. Bizet (*Carmen*), Offenbach (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Meyerbeer (*Les Huguenots*) led the adaptation by the French which ranged from the *opera comique* to the grand full-scale *tragedie lyrique*. German composers von Weber (*Der Freischütz*), Richard Strauss (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), and Wagner (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) developed diverse forms such as *singspiel* to through-composed spectacles unified through the use of the *leitmotif*. The English *ballad opera*, Spanish *zarzuela* and Viennese *operetta* helped to establish opera as a form of entertainment which continues to enjoy great popularity throughout the world.

With the beginning of the 20th century, composers in America diverged from European traditions in order to focus on their own roots while exploring and developing the vast body of the country’s folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.

The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
Soprano	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
Mezzo-Soprano	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball)
Tenor	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
Baritone	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
Bass	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

A Christmas Carol Essay Questions

Literature

1. Compare and contrast Musgrave's *A Christmas Carol* and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Find symbols, characters and imagery common in both; how are they different?
2. Discuss the role of Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. At what moment in the Opera or novel do you think Scrooge chose to change and become a better and more understanding individual?

Music

3. Mrs. Musgrave's music is contemporary and may sound different from other operas you are use to hearing. Do you feel that even though it is different, that it still provides the meaning and emotion for each scene in *A Christmas Carol*? Agree or disagree and give examples.

History

4. What do you think Christmas was like in England before the writing of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*? Do a little research find out how things may have changed.