



S.C Hall of Fame Transcript

Carlisle Floyd

[Sound montage: Susannah overture]

Of Mice and Men Act One, Scene Two beginning

“The Trees on the Mountain”

Cold Sassy Tree epilogue instrumental section]

-BEGINNINGS-

[dissolve to rural natural sound]

Narrator: Who knew that the “dean of 20th-century American opera composers would be born in Latta, South Carolina, son of a Methodist preacher, and spend his formative years moving from small town to small town during the Great Depression?

Carlisle: My first interest in music came when I was about three, because my mother was a pianist, and I thought it was pretty neat what she was doing on the piano, so I told her I wanted piano lessons, too.

When I was in college I wrote songs... Almost all composers for some reason, as long as I’ve had anything to do with it, tend to write songs—the first things that they do.

And so I think mine was again probably a little prophetic, because it was a way of combining words and music, and I’d almost always been equally interested in both.

-SUSANNAH-

Narrator: In the early 1950’s as a music instructor at Florida State University, Floyd wrote his first full-length opera, Susannah.

Carlisle: It was suggested to me by a friend, who was a graduate student in English, who was a would-be writer, and he wanted to do the libretto.



It turned out that I think he must have had the fear of the blank page, because he never gave me any libretto at all. And so after a suitable number of weeks went by, I simply decided I would write it myself.

I went to the Dean of the School of Music there, and in retrospect I think where did I get that kind of brass, but nonetheless I obviously had it at the time. So I told him I had written a full-length opera and that I wanted to offer it to him first to be done at Florida State, but with the proviso that the two leads be professionals.

Narrator: For the role of Susannah, the composer approached Phyllis Curtin, a leading American soprano.

Carlisle: And wonderful lady that she is—she said very, very quickly that she would be happy to do it. So I was on cloud nine after that. And not only—it didn't stop there.

She called Mack Harrell who was one of our great operatic baritones at that time, and said, Mac there's a marvelous role for you here, I think you should have a look at it. And so we went over to his home, so the whole deal was completed in the space of a day or two.

Narrator: After Susannah's successful premiere in Tallahassee, Curtin campaigned for its presentation by the New York City Opera.

Carlisle: She was determined that this opera was to be seen in New York. She was indefatigable, and of course I was too, and she would perform it for a producer and do all the parts if she had to in addition to Susannah, including the chorus...

In retrospect of course I think the opera probably sold itself. But that's how it got done in New York, and then once it won the New York Critics Circle award, then the opera was launched. And so there was a great deal of publicity connected with it.

People said how did you get so much confidence, and I said essentially what did I have to lose? Because I had nothing to lose... Which was the last time I felt that way, I have to say.

-“STYLE” AND STORIES-

Narrator: From the beginning, Floyd wrote the music and the words for all his operas.



Carlisle: It's very unusual. I only know of four cases in all of operatic history that the librettist was also the composer. It's taken me all this time to learn what this very special discipline involves, because it's not play writing. It's not anything except libretto writing—it has aspects of play writing, of course, and other things, but it's a very, very precise discipline.

Narrator: Many of Floyd's operas, like *Susannah*, have a Southern theme.

Tom: It's fair to say that both in his choice of subjects and in his treatment of subjects, he has mined his own life and in some cases almost subconsciously mined his genealogy... So the Southern element in his work is part of his DNA.

Narrator: Another part of Floyd's DNA is his love of literature.

Tom: Carlisle has always been a voracious, an insatiable reader, and these elements leap off the page and he will find a way, if the story and its characters draw him, to make it his own...

It's not so different from all the great world theatre, everything from Aeschylus and Sophocles, to Shakespeare, to our great twentieth century dramatists that have moved him so much.

Narrator: One of Floyd's 20th century adaptations is John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

Carlisle: I had digested the material, and I usually do that with any novel or play. I simply read them three or four times and feel like I've gotten all of the juice I can get out of the carrot, and then I set them aside and then I have to take over.

George: He looks at that wonderful arch, that starts at the beginning, and the end—he's already seen it. Sometimes he's probably seen the end before he sees the beginning.

Narrator: Floyd's *Of Mice and Men* has an astonishing finale.

George: There's just Lenny and George. And George has the gun. And there's the bang. At that point, Lenny just slumps to the ground, and George is there. He just sits back. And all of the ranch hands start coming in. And they see what's happened. And they leave. And so the last thing you see is George sitting there just staring out at the audience.

There's a wonderful, magical moment that you have sometimes, and it doesn't happen often. But you have done what you were put here to do, which is get the audience with you. And you've taken them on a journey.



I personally feel it's Carlisle's greatest work.

Narrator: Carlisle's most recent opera, *Cold Sassy Tree*, based on the novel by Olive Ann Burns, combines his Southern heritage with his love of literature.

Tom: *Cold Sassy Tree* is Carlisle Floyd at the height of his powers. A serious story with humorous elements or if you like the reverse of that, a humorous story with serious, human elements. It's a perfect blend that reflects his veneration for the greatest opera composers of all time.

-PROFESSIONAL CAREER-

Narrator: Some of the greatest vocal talents of all time have been drawn to Floyd's works.

George: Every soprano I know that's looked at *Susannah*—they all want to do it. Because of the drama. The character itself, with the words, and with that glorious music. And it's so lyrical. Carlisle never lost his lyricism. Never!

Narrator: Carlisle Floyd has mentored the next generation of opera composers.

Tom: Jake Heggie and Mark Adamo both sought him out, and he generously gave them the benefits of everything he had learned up to that point. You can look at *Dead Man Walking*, and Carlisle's influence extends throughout in terms of how text and music work most effectively together.

Narrator: Floyd is also a legendary pianist and piano teacher.

George: He studied with Rudolf Firkusny, the great Czech pianist. And Carlisle wrote his piano sonata, which was premiered at Carnegie Hall specifically for Rudolf.

He wrote two volumes of *Episodes for piano*, very short works, but they are just little gems of compositional techniques.

I just regret so much that he hasn't written more for the piano, but by and large it's the opera.

-ACHIEVEMENTS-

Narrator: Carlisle Floyd's reputation among the giants of opera composers is secure, evidenced by a showering of awards...



Carlisle: They crown a very long career. Verdi I think is quoted as saying well if you live long enough, you begin to collect all kinds of recognitions, so in my case that certainly has been true.

Tom: Carlisle is unique among American composers in the sense of the number of operas with which he has had success and his persistence in growing, and changing, and expanding his idiom...

And it's always been a trade off game with deciding who are you going to please—the audience or the critic? And Carlisle has finally gotten to a place in his compositional idiom where he can have his cake and eat it too.

George: You know, you're often asked where does he stand, now at the end of his life. And I think he's at the top. And I think long after I take my last breath, we'll still be performing Carlisle Floyd.