

Frederic Larson

Carlisle Floyd served as a teacher for 20 years at the University of Houston. During that period, he launched the Houston Opera Studio.

Celebrating the centennial of an opera trailblazer

By Jef Rouner
CONTRIBUTOR

The "Father of American opera," Carlisle Floyd, has deep roots in Houston, and the University of Houston's Moores Opera Center plans to honor his hundredth birthday with the city premiere this month of two of his more obscure works, "Markheim" and "Slow Dusk," in a double bill.

Floyd, born June 22, 1926, changed the world of opera forever, especially when it came to creating an American style that diverged from the form's European roots. A true auteur who wrote both the music and libretto of his compositions, he pioneered a distinctly American English version of opera based on Southern dialects that found itself competing with Puccini and Verdi on an equal footing. His most famous work, "Susannah," retold the biblical tale of Susannah and the Elders as one set in rural Tennessee against the backdrop of small-town churches and bigotry. Drawing on Baptist folk music, it stood out immediately

In honor of Carlisle Floyd's legacy, two of his lesser-known works are getting local premieres, thanks to the University of Houston, where he spent two decades as a teacher

after its premiere in 1956 and was a worldwide hit. "Looking at his role in American opera and contemporary opera in general, it's just unbelievable," said Moores School of Music director Brian Kai Chin. "He opened the door to what was coming to come later, (John Adams') 'Nixon in China' and (Jake Heggie's) 'Dead Man Walking' these big iconic American operas."

Twenty years after debuting "Susannah," Floyd accepted a teaching position at the University of Houston, a role he held for the next 20 years. There, he added another chapter to his legacy by establishing the Houston Opera Studio (now the Sarah and Ernest Butler Houston Grand Opera Studio) as one of the first places in the U.S. that an opera singer could bridge between being a student and having a professional stage career.

Kathleen Smith Belcher, the director of "Markheim" and "Slow Dusk," had a chance to meet and work with Floyd when she was assistant stage manager at the San Diego production of his "The Passion of Jonathan

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Wade." Floyd came out for the rehearsals, and Smith Belcher reveled in the chance to work alongside a living opera composer, rare for an American, even into the 1990s.

"I hadn't had that experience ever at that point in my career," she said in a phone interview. "At that time, America wasn't producing a lot of new work. That's since changed over the last 20 years."

Rare works

While other performance spaces around Houston are also planning performances of Floyd's work, it was important to Moore's School of Music to tackle something Houston hasn't had a chance to see. "Slow Dusk" is one of Floyd's earliest works and sometimes feels like the prototype version of "Susannah." It focuses on two young lovers in the American South kept apart by feuding families.

"Markheim" is a later work based loosely on the Robert Louis Stevenson short story of the same name. A man robs and murders a pawnbroker on Christmas Eve to pay off gambling debts, only to be visited by a sinister specter afterward. It's a gripping, dynamic story written specifically to give its bass-baritone lead a grand chance to show off in the midst of a spooky, violent melodrama.

Both hourlong operas are pure Floyd: grounded, intense and deeply relatable. Floyd's ability to meld opera and the American idiom is why he remains so beloved and influential.

"The quality of American opera is great, and I think Carlisle started it,"



Cory Weaver

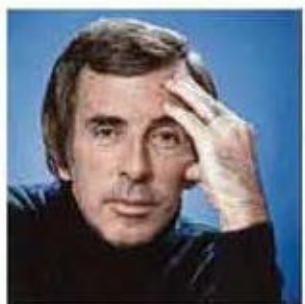
Carlisle Floyd's "Susannah" will open Houston Grand Opera's 2026-27 season.

'SLOW DUSK' AND 'MARKHEIM'

When: 7:30 p.m.
Thursday-Saturday, 2 p.m.
April 19

Where: Moores Opera House on the University of Houston campus, 3333 Cullen Blvd.

Details: \$20-25;
713-743-3388;
kgmcbboxoffice.universitytickets.com



Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

Floyd draws on Baptist folk music for his opera "Susannah."

said Belcher. "He resonates still so much, especially in the South, because he's telling our stories. He's not telling stories of the monarchy or Greek mythology, like opera is. You can go to see one of Carlisle's pieces and see your Aunt Sue up there on stage. You're like, 'Oh, I know that person,' right? I know that lady who's super religious and cranky about her peas."

American innovation

At a time when American opera companies were either sticking to the classics or mimicking them in order to impress the European world, Floyd dared to change the game. He kept faith in the way Americans spoke and sang, and, through his compositions, expanded the definition of opera.

Granted, it didn't happen overnight. It's only in the last several decades that American opera has achieved something like parity with Europe, but thanks to Floyd's trailblazing, the landscape is changing.

"I'm probably overstating all this, but it seems to me that America is a hub of innovation in this art form," said Chin. "You see continued beautiful experiments by composers of all different styles and backgrounds working in opera. It used to be like just one type of musician would write operas and get those produced. Now you see these very, very diverse background musicians. You have people who specialize in electronic music, a mariachi opera, Terence Blanchard doing jazz opera. I see the future of opera as opening up."