

The Liberation of Richmond

Opera Libretto in a Prologue and Two Acts

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A Note on the History, Music, and Structure

The story is true. It took place in Richmond, Virginia, April 3-15, 1865, just after the Confederacy has lost control of its capital, with a prologue set on April 2. All the main elements of the story, such as the last train to leave Richmond, the Lumpkins' relationship, the chaplain reuniting with his mother, and President Lincoln's walk through the city, are entirely authentic. Even some of the dialogue is historically accurate. So are the details, such as "'Till death *or distance* do you part" as a part of slave wedding vows. Some details, such as Angel as a ten-year-old seeking her mother, happened generically; that particular story is from Maryland, not Virginia.

At the same time, this opera is not a history lesson. I hope readers (and, later, the opera-goers) will come to *care about* the characters as much as I do. I think they will. I have tried to get across the historic facts via passionate statements plausibly made by people who seem real and therefore important.

Word usage is from the time. Most Americans, black or white, used the "n-word" more freely than we do today, so I must use it where historically appropriate. The U.S.C.T., "United States Colored Troops," remind us that "colored" was also commonly used; usually it implied no disrespect. All Americans talk in dialect, using pronunciations like "comin.'" Many Southerners still use "ain't" and "might could." I use these expressions in the libretto and mean them to be spoken by all characters, of both races and various educational backgrounds, where appropriate.

Note on the Music

Of course, the music plays a key role in getting audiences to invest in the characters and storyline of any successful opera. I do have a few ideas as to the music. Some are indicated within the libretto. As well, there are various points of symmetry and repetition in the libretto, and I hope for something similar in the music. But I understand that I'm no composer, so they are mere suggestions. I trust the composer to have his/her own ideas and look forward to happy collaboration in a subordinate role. The music might be classical (contemporary eclectic), jazz-influenced, whatever! There are a few invocations of music from the 1860s, such as "John Brown's Body" and "Slavery Chain Done Broke at Last." Perhaps every word will be set to music; or perhaps much of the dialogue will be spoken; again, that's up to the composer. Whether a full

orchestra is involved or a small ensemble is again up to the composer and the performance forces available.

Note on the Structure of the Work

The opera has a Prologue, Act I (one continuous scene), and Act II (three scenes). It is about as long as “standard” operas such as *Turandot* or *Boris Godounov*. The Prologue takes place on the last evening of Confederate control of Richmond, April 2, 1865. It has 2,720 words, including stage directions, set descriptions, etc. Act I begins at dawn on the next day, April 3, when United States Colored Troops (USCT) enter the city. It has 5,830 words. Act II has three scenes but totals just 4,050 words, so it is perhaps shorter than Act I. Scene 1 takes place the next day, April 4, at 9AM. Scene 2 is at 3PM that day. Scene 3 is eleven days later, April 15, shortly after dawn. Grand total: c.12,600 words.

Note on the Ensemble Nature of the Work

Some operas are conceived from the start as star vehicles for two or perhaps three lead singers. *Carmen*, *Turandot*, and *Bluebeard’s Castle* are examples. *The Liberation of Richmond* is an ensemble piece. Other ensemble operas include Beethoven’s *Fidelio* and Mozart’s *Così fan Tutti*.

The six main roles, in order of number of lines, are:

Chaplain Garland White, 260
Angel Walker, 218
Robert Lumpkin, 210
Mary Lumpkin, 203
Pompey, 193
Mrs. White, 83

The chaplain has the most lines, but that’s because a substantial part of them are from the double wedding that he officiates. His role does not stand out as larger than the other five. His mother Mrs. White has substantially the fewest lines of the six, but her role includes perhaps the most intense scene in the entire opera, when she and the chaplain realize they are mother and son, as well as the finale. Hence her role does not seem smaller than the other five.

Two secondary roles deserve mention: Abraham Lincoln (53 lines) and Henry Wallace, “free Negro,” 48 lines.

The ensemble nature of the work is also evident by the number of duets and larger ensembles. There are few extended solo arias. I hope to find a composer who likes these ideas.

Set Suggestions

The same set is used throughout the opera. In center stage is some rubble – bricks, etc. – laid out to imply a street intersection. At right is a two-story structure, a balcony really, with a sign hanging from it by two chains that reads "NEGRO TRADER." At least eight feet of the second story is visible to the audience, with a bar across it at about 30" and spindles to keep children from falling through. This is the balcony of the Lumpkin family home, which is implied to the right. It is furnished with a small table and three chairs. To the left of the balcony, holding it up, is an open spiral staircase. "Behind" the balcony (to the right) is part of a bedroom. The rest is implied.

Along the floor below the balcony, in back of it, running at an angle at the side of the stage from front far right to rear medium right, so the audience can see it, is a series of doors made of metal bars — a slave jail.

Running along the left side of the stage from front to back but at an angle so the house can see it, is a scrim on which is initially projected a black-and-white photo of an old railway station and part of a train. On the back wall are suggestions of a couple of modest buildings, one perhaps the home of a free black family.

Please note: the above are just suggestions. If the director and producer have a different vision, want scene changes, whatever – fine!

Main Characters (in order of appearance)

Robert Lumpkin, slave trader (bass-baritone), European American, 50 to 60 years old, overweight, not in good physical condition

Mary Lumpkin, Robert's slave and then wife (range not specified, maybe alto), African American, 30 to 50 years old

Angel, initially called Flukey, initially one of Lumpkin's slaves (soprano), African American, 18 to 30 years old, attractive

Pompey, initially one of Lumpkin's slaves (range not specified, maybe tenor), African American, 18 to 30 years old, attractive

Garland White, Chaplain, United States Colored Troops (range not specified), African American, age 28

Mrs. White, former slave, mother of Garland White, we learn (contralto), African American, 50 to 75 years old

Minor Characters (in order of appearance)

Several chorus members, including children, have short solos. They are African American, ranging in age from as young as practicable to elderly. These include two adult chained slaves, an enslaved child, Henry Wallace (an older African American resident of Richmond), and a couple of workers. In addition are these minor characters, not members of the chorus:

Charles, son of Robert and Mary Lumpkin (could be daughter, if need be; soprano), African American (interracial), 6-12 years old

Confederate officer at train (range not specified), European American, 18 to 50 years old

Confederate soldier (range not specified), European American, 18 to 50 years old [could also play U.S. Private, below]

Captain Logan, commands United States Colored Troops (range not specified), European American, 20 to 50 years old

U.S. Private (unnamed) (range not specified), European American, 17 to 30 years old [could be played by Confederate soldier, above]

Abraham Lincoln (tenor), European American, 56 years old, beard, height, etc., to resemble Lincoln

Rev. Minnigerode (range not specified), European American, 50 to 60 years old