

# Operaphoria™

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METROPOLITAN OPERA SIMULCAST

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## *Florencia en el Amazonas*, by Catán

The Amazon jungle is a source of mystery, with its steaming darkness and its terrifying natural forces, with animals devouring each other and threatening humans. We imagine piranhas, and 45-foot snakes. The Amazon is full of things we fear but sometimes do not respect. In the historic struggles of the Amazon are metaphors for human relationships. For those reasons, and more, setting an opera in the Amazon makes sense.

In the plot of this opera, the fictional title character, Florencia Grimaldi (often called “La Grimaldi”) is taking a river boat down the Amazon from Leticia, Colombia, to Manaus in the early 1900s. La Grimaldi is a true diva, and has the luxury of being able to cancel her scheduled performance at La Scala in order to reopen the celebrated opera house in Manaus, which had been closed. She had been there once before – twenty years earlier. At that time, she had fallen in love with a man who searched for exotic butterflies in the Amazon jungle. Her exotic lover (Cristobal) had offered her his total love, but she settled for the immediate gratification of a passionate affair, and then went back to the world where she would develop her career. She was fabulously successful, and is now returning triumphantly, not only to bask in this gloriously improbable setting, but hoping to find Cristobal, long lost for 20 years. She is also searching for herself. How better to do this than in

the Amazon, on the river.

For her entire career, Florencia had never granted an interview with the press, and she always traveled incognito. She wanted no recognition until the curtain went up, and when the curtain came down she wanted nobody to know where she went. Her appearance in Manaus was a very big deal, a publicist’s dream. One of the world’s greatest divas would be “unlocking a long silent opera house.”



*Ailyn Pérez is Florencia*

The entire opera takes place on the river boat, El Dorado. Only the ship’s captain and his first mate, Riolobo, know Grimaldi is on board. A journalist, Rosalba, is also on board, working on her notes. She is hoping to be the first person ever to interview La Grimaldi. Her notebook is precious to her – two years of hard work, which she hopes to publish, after the hoped-for interview. She idolizes, but has never met the elusive Florencia, and does not even know she is on board. Even as she is actually speaking

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**Operaphoria™**: *A state of ecstasy induced by opera*

(continued from front)

to Florencia about her project, she does not know who she is speaking to.

An older couple – Paula and Alvaro – are on the boat, and seeing Grimaldi in Manaus is a fulfillment of a life-long dream. However, they are a contentious couple, often arguing while contradicting themselves.

Towards the end of the first act, they are caught in a storm, and Rosalba's precious notes fall into the turbulent water teeming with deadly piranhas. Riolobo, a magical character, jumps in to save the notes, and emerges with enormous wings – an example of the “magical realism” popularized by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, whose pupil, Marcela

Fuentes-Berain wrote the opera's exceptionally beautiful libretto.

The opera is also about gaining understanding in relationships. The characters on the boat make some good changes in their attitudes towards their loved ones. They survive the storm, come together, and eventually they arrive at the city of Manaus. However, yellow warning flags are all over the harbor, which means the cholera epidemic has taken over Manaus, and nobody is allowed to disembark in the harbor. They sail past the city, not knowing what to do next. Florencia sings the final aria of the opera to her lost image of Cristobal, the love she has now lost twice. – GP

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## Daniel Catán



Daniel Catán  
composing

The late Mexican composer Daniel Catán (1949-2011) was the son of a Russian mother and Turkish father. He spent his youth in England, where he studied philosophy at the University of Sussex and music at the University of Southampton, and then completed his music studies at Princeton with a

PhD. Soon after this he returned to Mexico City, but his interest in the music of the Orient led to further study of Japanese music in Tokyo and an Indonesian residency to study Balinese gamelan music, all influences which would later show up in his works.

These works range from ballet to chamber music, including choral works, scores for TV, theater and film, plus contributions to traditional Latin pop music. But he is best known for his operas, in which he was first recognized for *Rappaccini's Daughter* (1989). With a libretto adapted from Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz's early play based on

Hawthorne's short story, the opera enjoyed delayed success but finally found its way into major opera houses. Then came his commission from Houston Opera, *Florencia en el Amazonas* (1996), today's Met presentation. Then, after a long pause, came *Salsipuedes: A Tale of Love, War and Anchovies* (2004), which also premiered at Houston Grand Opera. An anti-war tale with frequent touches of the zany, as its title suggests, the work was also unusual for a score with a pronounced Caribbean flavor, as well as an orchestration without violins or violas. Then followed *Il Postino* (2010), adapted from the film of the same name, which is set on a remote Italian island. A fictitious account of the real poet, Pablo Neruda and his postman, it tells the story of the postman's desire to learn to write poetry so he can woo his beloved. A work of comedy and tragedy, it was Catán's last completed opera. At the time of his death, he was working on an adaptation of another famous film, Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe* (1941).

In addition to Catán's music and operas, his many honors include being Mexico's first composer to have an opera produced in the United States, which came in 1994 when San Diego

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*(Daniel Catán ...continued)*

Opera produced *Rappaccini's Daughter*. Then, in 1998, Catán received the Plácido Domingo Award for his contributions to opera. His connection with Domingo was further extended in *Il Postino*, where he wrote the part of Neruda for him. Then in 2000, Catán was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for his extensive career writing on music and the arts, all of which reflected his wide understanding of world literature.

Of his music, Catán wrote, *"I have inherited a very rich operatic tradition. In my work, I am proud to say, one can detect the enormous debt I owe to composers from Monteverdi to Alban Berg. But perhaps the greatest of my debts is having learnt that the originality of an opera need not involve the rejection of our tradition... but rather the profound assimilation of it."* He also provided the following wisdom about today's opera: *"Florencia is the story of the return journey that we all undertake at a certain point in our lives: the moment when we look back at what we once dreamed of becoming, and then confront what we have now become."* – GD

## Production

### *Florencia en el Amazonas*, by Daniel Catán

Sat., Dec 9, 2023 12:55 p.m.

Conductor: **Yannick Nézet-Séguin**

Production: **Mary Zimmerman**

Florencia: **Ailyn Pérez**

Rosalba: **Gabriella Reyes**

Paula: **Nancy Fabiola Herrera**

Alvaro: **Michael Chioldi**

Ardadio: **Mario Chang**

Riolobo: **Mattia Olivieri**

Captain: **Greer Grimsley**

## Manaus

The idea of bringing opera to the Amazon first occurred to a group of rubber barons in Manaus, Brazil, in the 1880s. Manaus had become a center for the rubber industry in the Amazon Basin. Industrialists had more money than they could imagine, and so they decided to bring the Belle Epoque to Brazil. They hired European architects and engineers to build an opera house, and started construction in 1885. It was completed in 1896, and this beautiful monument to fabulous wealth still stands. The dome is covered with ceramic tiles from Alsace. The stairs are Carrara marble. A painted ceiling compares with the best of European cathedrals. Lavish artwork, stained glass and tapestries were brought in, along with electricity and 198 chandeliers, many from Murano glass.

However, the wealth of the rubber barons was relatively short-lived, as there were no plans to harvest the rubber in a sustainable way. At about the same time Michigan's hardwood forests were being clear-cut with no thought of conservation, the Amazon rubber trees were tapped dry. Indonesia learned how to develop a rubber industry to satisfy the needs of B.F Goodrich and the automobile industry. Manaus sank into poverty for most of its citizens, and people moved away. The spectacular opera house fell into disrepair, with periodic attempts at revival, starting in 1929. Then, after a long dry spell it was restored again in 1974. After cyclical periods of glory and decline, the house is once again the cultural center of that growing city – now about 2.2 million inhabitants. Money has come in for regular maintenance and restorations, and the opera house is now home to several music organizations, and home to an opera festival.

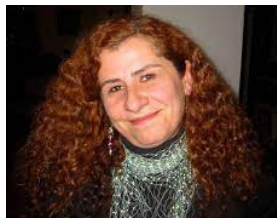
At times, Manaus was labelled as the Paris of the jungle. – GP

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**Next Simulcast:** January 6, 2024  
*Nabucco*, by Verdi

## Collateral Information

*Florenxia* is experiencing a revival of interest since its premiere at Houston in 1996, having been co-commissioned with Los Angeles and Seattle. Francesca Zambello, director of the Los Angeles production, had travelled to the Amazon



Poetic Librettist  
Marcela Fuentes-Berain

to visit Gabriel Garcia Marquez, along with his student, Marcela Fuentes-Berain, who wrote the libretto for *Florenxia*. They had all been captivated by the “magical realism” of Marquez, who had

written the popular novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and then won the Nobel Prize for his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Magical realism is characterized by scenes that defy logic, by mixing real events with fantasy, and the distortion of time and sequence. Magical events are common, not experienced as amazing.

Because this is a somewhat unusual approach to opera, viewers might want to prepare for the experience by reading some collateral materials. We recommend reading the libretto, which is only 37 pages, reads quickly, and is the best introduction to the story. It is beautifully poetic, and the super-titles might not be able to convey the richness of the text. Find the libretto at: [https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/florenxia\\_lib\\_26750](https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/florenxia_lib_26750)

When Pittsburgh presented the opera, they also prepared an excellent “Study Guide” which is available on the internet. It provides more information about Marquez. Also recently posted on the internet is a video of the complete opera, staged in Mexico City. No English sur-titles. – GP

## Happy Birthday, Maria!

Florenxia was a super-diva, in the category of Maria Callas, whose 100<sup>th</sup> birthday we celebrate on December 2, about the same time *Florenxia* is staged at the Met.

## 2023/2024 Metropolitan Opera

### Simulcast Schedule

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#### *Nabucco*, by Verdi

January 6, 2024 12:55 pm

A classic Met staging of the Elijah Moshinsky production, in which the legendary Met chorus is shown at its best. George Gagnidze makes his Met debut as Nabucco, with Liudmyla Monastyrskaya as the vengeful Abigaille. Daniele Callegari conducts.

#### *Carmen*, by Bizet

January 27, 2024 12:55 pm

The English director Carrie Cracknell shapes a new production of this passionate opera. The dazzling Aigul Akhmetshina sings Carmen, with Piotr Beczala as Don Jose, and Angel Blue as Micaela. Kyle Ketelsen sings the swaggering Escamillo. Conducted by Daniele Rustioni.

#### *La Forza del Destino*, by Verdi

March 9, 2024 Note: 12:00 noon.

Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts the met’s first *Forza* in almost 30 years. Lise Davidsen brings her big voice to Leonora, one of the most spectacular heroine roles in all of opera. Brian Jagde sings Leonora’s forbidden lover Don Alvaro. Judit Kutasi is the fortune teller.

#### *Romeo et Juliette*, by Gounod

March 23, 2024 12:55 pm

#### *La Rondine*, by Puccini

April 20, 2024 12:55 pm

#### *Madama Butterfly*, by Puccini

May 11, 2024 12:55 pm