

Souvenir

A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins

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DIRECTED BY ALAN BAILEY

COMMONWEAL THEATRE COMPANY

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Characters, cast, and synopsis of *SOUVENIR:* *A FANTASIA ON THE LIFE OF FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS*

Characters and cast

Florence Foster Jenkins—Stela Burdt

Cosme McMoon—Stephen Houtz

The setting

Souvenir begins in New York City in 1964 and springs backward and forward in time as Cosme McMoon tells the story of his 12-year engagement as accompanist to Florence Foster Jenkins.

Synopsis

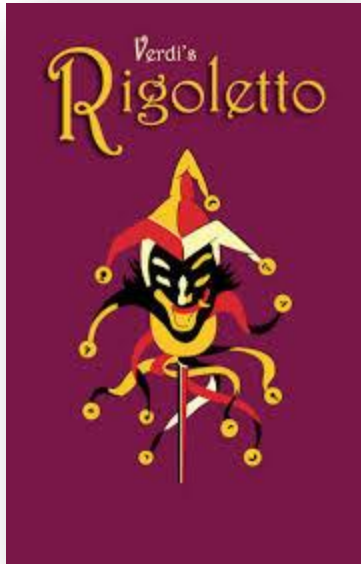
Act I, Scene I. 1964. *A supper club in Greenwich Village. Evening.* Cosme McMoon sits at a piano and plays “One for My Baby” while whipping playfully abrasive bon mots at an unseen audience of patrons. As he begins to play “Crazy Rhythm,” he reminisces about his days as Florence Foster Jenkins’s accompanist. It is the 20th anniversary of her death. He describes her taste for Mozart, the famous stars who attended her concerts, and the posthumous mockery she suffers from those who never heard her. He explains that singers cannot hear themselves sing: “A singer takes a good deal on trust. An *artist* finds his or her true voice. Second-raters sound like everyone else.”

Cosme tells the story of how he came to meet Florence. In 1927, he was 24 years old and a newly arrived pianist-for-hire in New York. For five years he subsisted by accompanying voice lessons taught by retired singers while, at night, he worked on his own material. It was an exhausting lifestyle, so in 1932 when a friend, Florence’s nephew Gil, suggested he serve as the accompanist for her first public recital, he took the opportunity despite Gil’s warning that his aunt had a “unique kind of sound.”

The club transforms into the music room of Florence’s suite in the Ritz-Carlton hotel and, as Cosme steps back in time, she appears.

Scene II. 1932. *The music room.* Florence tells Cosme of her passion for music, exclaiming, “What matters most is the music you hear in your head. Don’t you agree? The impossible ideal, as it were. The beauty not *quite* within our grasp.” As he fights to get a word in edgewise, she describes her previous private performances for friends and family and her need for a pianist who can serve as colleague, collaborator, and soul mate.

She shares her dream of singing the famously challenging Queen of the Night aria from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and tells him about the explosive high note, "the *f* above *c*," that burst from her during a recent collision in a taxicab, thereby providing her with a range broad enough to handle the ambitious piece.



She asks Cosme to accompany her in a rendition of Verdi's "*Caro Nome*" from *Rigoletto*. After Cosme plays a brief introduction, Florence belts out an opening note so shockingly out of tune that Cosme snatches his fingers away from the keys and runs from the piano in disbelief. Time freezes as he wonders to the audience what she could have been hearing in her head: "Was I in the presence of mere delusion or a kind of dementia?" The action resumes and Florence awaits her cue. Cosme continues playing, but her singing quickly dissolves into off-tempo shrieks and hoots. Cosme stops. He confesses to Florence that he hears a "certain want of accuracy." She is surprised but not displeased. He attempts to correct her erroneous melody, but to no avail. Believing she has made the desired adjustments, Florence is thrilled to have found a qualified collaborator.

Cosme subtly inquires about the scope of the upcoming recital. After he is assured that the event will be a modest, invitation-only affair without reviewers, and compelled by the prospect of receiving a handsome fee, he agrees to accompany her performance. In an aside, he explains to the audience that, although her singing was wretched, he was touched by her unwavering, almost childlike belief in herself. He took it upon himself to protect her.

As they continue, Florence admits that hers is not a large voice, but argues that she has something more rare: purity of tone. She confesses that as a young woman her singing had been actively discouraged, but in time she overcame her doubt. In celebration of their new partnership, Florence insists they rehearse Gounod's "Ave Maria," with which she ends all of her performances.

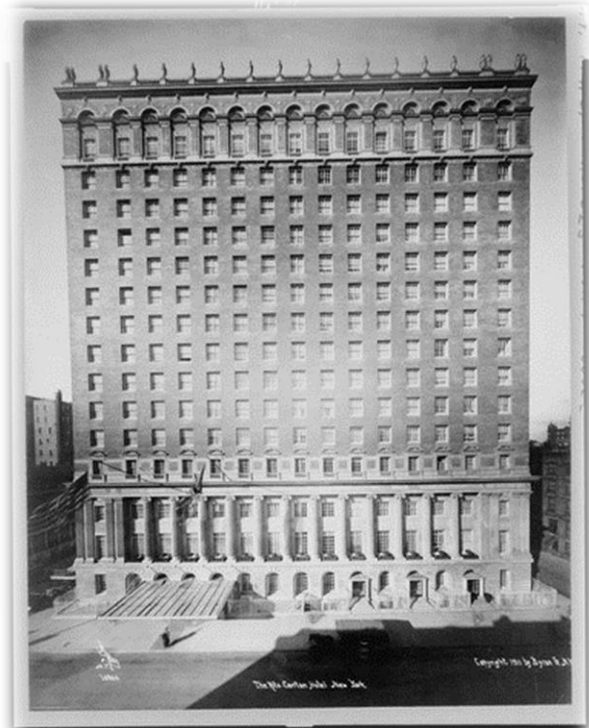
Scene III. 1932. Six weeks later. The music room. The recital has just concluded, and Cosme has slipped up to the music room from the recital hall. He recalls the 25-song program (with five encores!) consisting entirely of false starts and dropped notes. Cosme is attempting to escape unnoticed when he is accosted by Florence. She is ecstatic about the audience's response: they loved it. She speaks of future collaborations and declares

that they will start rehearsing for the next recital immediately. Cosme tries to refuse, but Florence does not let him. She promises to give him time to write his own music, and he agrees to give the partnership a shot.

Scene IV. 1964 at the supper club. Then, 1930s in the music room. Cosme describes how audiences flocked to see Florence's performances at the Ritz. They found her so hilariously dreadful that they would gasp, shriek, and even weep in their attempts to restrain their laughter and maintain some semblance of decorum. He recalls patrons who ran out to the lobby, where they could laugh with abandon. Throughout all this, Florence remained oblivious, assuming that these escapees were "just too moved to stay."

Alone in the music room, Cosme starts to play a jaunty rendition of "Crazy Rhythm." Florence enters and is surprised by his interest in jazz (i.e., "popular" music). He is embarrassed, but she asks him to teach her a verse and muses that including some popular music in her repertoire might draw even bigger crowds. Cosme reminds her that the showings at the Ritz have been sold out for weeks, and she announces that she has been invited to sing at a larger, more visible venue: Town Hall. Cosme is terrified. He sets about dissuading her from what will surely be an immense public humiliation, telling her the acoustics in that large "barn" would strain her voice. Unnerved by this prospect, Florence agrees to avoid Town Hall by adding more performances at the Ritz to their docket. She thanks him for his wisdom.

Scene V. 1964 at the supper club. Then, 1930s in the music room. Cosme recalls all the mockery that occurred at Florence's expense among the sophisticated set of Manhattan and justifies his part in enabling her continued humiliation: "I kept telling myself it was only a part of my life. A means to an end. The money I made kept me going all year." He explains how her patronage freed him to devote time to writing his own songs (which nobody wanted to sing), and that in their comfortable niche at the Ritz they were protected from the crueler audience that would come with greater public notoriety.



Florence enters the music room with news that she has been invited to make a record. “At last,” she thrills. “I shall finally have a chance to really *hear* myself.” She proposes that this would be the perfect opportunity to showcase “The Queen of the Night” and create a lovely souvenir for herself. Appalled, Cosme passionately attempts to stop her by explaining that microphones are not objective and arguing that a recording would seem to diminish her talents. “Sometimes what we hear inside,” he tells her, “with our inner ear—that is the truth.”

She is touched by his protective impulse, but decides to forge ahead. The stage darkens as Cosme reels. Time skips. The lights go up on a Victrola, which plays Florence’s rendition of the Queen of the Night aria. Cosme despairs, but Florence is ecstatic, overwhelmed by the beauty of the recording. Once the song has played, she admits she has one reservation: what she perceives as a slight error on Cosme’s part. During one measure, she notes, “the piano is not *quite* with the voice.” She recommends they correct the imperfection before the record is sent for sale, so as to avoid abuse from the media.

Cosme is outraged and loses control. He attempts to demonstrate her inability to follow the piano in a musical phrase, banging on the keys, barking instruction, and roughly yelling “No!” when she fails to correct herself. When she tells him not to punish himself by continuing, he explodes, “Goddamn it, just sing what’s *written*, you SILLY WOMAN!” He realizes he has gone too far, and immediately softens. A wounded Florence asserts that nothing is wrong with her ear, that it is known for its accuracy. Cosme concedes and tentatively begins to play “Crazy Rhythm,” appealing for forgiveness. She accepts the apology and joins him. He pledges that they will perform the jazz song on her next album. She kisses his hand and presses it to her heart.

Act II, scene I. *1964 at the supper club. Then, 1944 in the music room.* Cosme performs “I Guess I’ll Hang My Tears Out to Dry.” He tells the audience about Florence’s rise to “an honest-to-God celebrity” who was much imitated at parties and sold an impressive number of records. As her notoriety grew, he dropped his teasing friends and “made new friends. Less musically inclined.” He continued his own artistic life, writing songs that remained unknown, unsung, and dismissed. Facing frequent rejection, he began admiring Florence’s ability to avoid self-doubt and unhappiness. As he launches into “It All Depends On You,” he theorizes that she might have been “some kind of genius” who questioned our assumptions about what music is meant to be: “Who’s to say that if one note follows another we call it a tune but a different note makes us wince? Who made up the rules?”

His thoughts turn to the autumn of 1944, the 12th year of their partnership. As Cosme plays Liadov's "Musical Snuffbox," Florence enters. We are in the middle of a rehearsal. Florence sings but is distracted. She proclaims that the piano falls out of tune more frequently as it ages, then begs Cosme to tell her if her voice were to similarly falter as she grows closer to "the day her music will desert" her. He assuages her fears but she remains pensive. She admits to dreaming of reaching a wider audience, then announces with growing giddiness and an uncustomary nervousness that she has been invited to perform a grand recital at the legendary Carnegie Hall. Cosme flattens himself against the piano in horror. Florence adds that she is determined to sing his own composition "Serenata Mexicana" in the concert. Appalled, he tries to discourage her, but she exclaims, "You're not to thank me! It's what you *deserve*."



Scene II. 1964 at the supper club. Then, October 25, 1944, Carnegie Hall. While performing "Violets for Your Furs," Cosme recounts the preparations for the concert, which included creating a different custom-built costume for each song. He remembers the rush for seats, which sold out almost as soon as the event was announced, and the phenomenal prices that ticket scalpers commanded. Then, the night of the show: he recalls the servicemen and their girls he saw on the street and the crowds waiting outside the theater; he shares the story of giving his own spare ticket to a hopeful young man in uniform; he describes the moments before the show, listening to Florence warm up, wondering how much she really knew and hoping her innocence would be enough to keep her safe. He speaks of his growing sense of pride that not only would he be playing Carnegie Hall, his own music would be heard in the celebrated space.

He relives the overwhelming act of walking onto the stage, and then Florence's entrance in an elaborate gown to thunderous applause. The room becomes Carnegie Hall. She curtsies and begins the concert with "The Bell Song" from Delibes's *Lakmé*. After she finishes, Cosme recalls his relief that the audience seemed prepared to behave politely. Florence reenters wearing a Spanish costume, brandishing a single maraca, to perform Cosme's "Serenata Mexicana." Afterwards, she dances off as Cosme celebrates: "My song had been sung in Carnegie Hall. My God! I was up there with Brahms." He describes the rapt audience on the edge of their seats as Florence returns to perform Brahms's "*Die Mainacht*" dressed as a scholar. As she sings out her final bar, the crowd begins to lose their tact, but she does not notice. "She didn't hear laughter. She heard cheers. Bravos." With Florence outfitted in a jewel-covered golden gown, the concert continues with Gounod's "Jewel Song" from *Faust*, which pushes the audience to the edge. The duo then launches into "Adele's Laughing Song" by Strauss; Florence wears a maid's uniform and

brandishes a showy fan. The crowd goes wild and becomes reckless as Florence, wearing angel wings and a small tinsel crown, returns to sing the encore, "Ave Maria." She hushes her concertgoers into silence, then starts to sing. As she progresses, the audience laughter grows until she cannot help but hear it. Startled, she turns to Cosme, who stares down at the piano keys. The hungry audience begins to clap, to laugh louder, and to shout, drowning out her voice. Suddenly, silence descends. She continues to mouth the words of the song as the lights go dark.

Scene III. Later that night. A back room of Carnegie Hall. Cosme plays "One for My Baby," but falls silent as Florence enters. For the first time, she fears her singing career may have been perceived as a joke, and she asks Cosme why he never told her, why he allowed her to expose herself to such humiliation. He responds by telling her she has had a huge success, but she counters that she heard the audience laughing. He gently offers the explanation of nervous laughter, the kind that comes from being overwhelmed by emotion, and adds that very few singers can provoke this reaction from their listeners. He reassures her that she was in fine voice and provided a performance that no one would soon forget. She is slowly comforted. She sits with him at the piano, speaking of her girlhood dreams of having such a night, and of the melancholy of having it all become a memory. "If only we could live in the music forever, Cosme," she says before inviting him to escort her to the reception. He accepts, and she takes his hands, thanking him for telling her the truth.

Scene IV. 1964. The supper club. Cosme explains that within a month of that performance, Florence was dead. It was not of a broken heart, or of disappointment. He refutes the myth that depicts her as a tragic heroine. He reports that, on the morning after the Carnegie Hall concert, she began planning the next recital at the Ritz. She was buying sheet music when she collapsed on the day of her death.

Returning to his piano, he nostalgically pecks out the opening notes of "Crazy Rhythm" while admitting, "I was surprised how much I missed her." He reminds the audience of what Florence had said on the day of their first meeting about the importance of the music you hear in your head. He admits that he still does not know whether she was incredibly resilient or merely insane, but whatever the case, what the audience heard was one thing, and what she heard was another. He begins to play "Ave Maria." Florence appears and sings: beautifully, simply, her tone pure, the line supple and strong. She is bathed in light until only her face is visible.

Variations on self-delusion

An Interview with Playwright Stephen Temperley



Born in England, playwright Stephen Temperley moved to America permanently in 1977 with his collaborator and now-husband, Vivian Matalon. Since beginning his career in theater at the age of 17, Temperley has written a number of comedies about the power of self-delusion. Below he discusses the process of creating his most successful piece to date, *Souvenir: A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins*.

What is the inspiration for the title of the play?

I call it *Souvenir* because the play is remembered, and all Cosme is left with at the end of his career are these entirely evanescent and ridiculous memories. I use the word “fantasia” very carefully, because I want to make it clear that the play is not intended to be in any way realistic about Florence Foster Jenkins. A fantasia is something new made of old parts and suggests music to me. The piano bar music that Cosme plays is as important as the rest of the music. “Violets for Your Furs” is used to balance the final “Ave Maria.” All of that music becomes part of the fantasia.

The New York producer [of this play] was very keen to get the words “Florence Foster Jenkins” somehow in the title, but I didn’t feel that was so important. When I was writing the play, I almost called the characters different names because I realized, as I started to write, that I wasn’t really in any way being biographical. I just allowed myself to improvise around the theme of Cosme’s story. I tried to write this play many years ago, but I wrote it about her and it was really not good at all. Vivian suggested that I try writing it as a one-woman play, but we had no luck because then she’s either mad or she isn’t, and either way that’s the end of the story. Then some years ago, Vivian said, “I wish you would look at that Florence Foster Jenkins idea again. Jack [Lee] could play Cosme.” Jack is a very accomplished pianist and a wonderful singer, and as I sat down to write I thought, “Well, yes, it’s about him [Cosme].” So the way the story is told, you never see Florence except through Cosme’s eyes. It really is his story, and everything came from that realization.

What was your attraction to Florence's story initially?

The story is about the difference between the way we see ourselves and the way the rest of the world sees us. It's a story about a man who is nothing but self-doubting who meets a person who has absolutely no self-doubts whatsoever. Is her confidence necessarily a good thing? Is she mad? Does he at the end join her in her madness?

The play is very much built as a set of variations on a theme, and consciously so: in the first scene you start out with a very basic setting out of the relationship, which is then elaborated on in the scenes that come. Cosme never leaves the stage, and every time she comes back on something more embarrassing, more humiliating, and more difficult to deal with is happening. He never tells her a lie. He just never tells her the truth.

The attraction for me, as a performer and writer, is that there is no actor worth his salt that doesn't, in the middle of a performance, think, "Am I just making a complete fool of myself?" I think it is one of the reasons people in the business react to the play as they do. The one thing an actor does not need is self-confidence. This is not an original idea on my part: Vivian is a wonderful teacher of acting and he always says that an actor does not need self-confidence but an actor cannot survive without courage. The two things are different. Self-confidence means to me an inability or unwillingness to question yourself; courage means embracing all the things one can't do as well as the things one can do. Florence Foster Jenkins is nothing but self-confidence. She's like a child.

In your thinking and research about the real Florence Foster Jenkins, did you come to any conclusions about her state of mind?

I don't find the real person a particularly interesting woman. I've never found her recordings funny. I think she was a woman who was insulated by her money and was used by people who thought she was funny. The real woman produced the concert at Carnegie Hall and made a \$2,000 profit. In the play, she never instigates these things. People come to her and propose these performances to her, and she reacts with a completely childlike innocence. Cosme is entirely an invention. The play is very personal to me because as a writer one spends a lot of time trying to get pieces read, trying to get people to do your work, and it's very hard not to think you're just a fool.

The great fun of the piece for me is all the music. My father is a jazz musician, and I grew up listening to people singing standards. "Violets for Your Furs" is the most evocative song about New York City. When I was living in England, that was always the song for me that evoked a New York that never really existed. It's about being young and in love in the city at its most glamorous.

How did you choose the selection of songs Florence performs?

The idea of putting the “Ave” at the end happened at the very beginning of writing this draft, but I thought, “Well she can sing something, and I’ll just call it the ‘Ave’ right now.” I kept looking for a better song and couldn’t find one. So it turned out to be the “Ave,” but which “Ave” should it be? As soon as I stopped to listen to the Gounod, with the marvelous Bach underpinning, it was clear that it had to be that one.

Some of this music she really did sing, like the Queen of the Night aria and the “Laughing Song.” She did not sing the “Ave” that I’m aware of. We put the “Jewel Song” in because, Why the hell not? It’s one of the silliest songs anybody ever wrote. One of the interesting things about the real woman, and this is what gives her folly a grander scale, is that she really did try to sing very good music. I don’t care who you are, you cannot sing the Queen of the Night when you are 76. It’s impossible.

The play is being produced around the country and in Europe, South America, and Australia. When you were writing the play did you suspect it would be such a success? I had no idea. To me the play was no different than any other play I had written. Vivian thought it was a very commercial play, in a good sense, and we began by doing two readings of it off Broadway at the York, and he invited all of the designers to see it because he thought it was going to have a life. But as far as I was concerned, no not really.

I think people find a love story being told entirely through music and work intriguing. Cosme comes to admire her and he wants to protect her, and she looks to him as her protector: an innocent looking to the more experienced to protect her. People seem to read it as a story about believing in oneself. And the music is lovely. And the surprise in the end—it’s wonderful to be in the theater when Cosme starts the introduction to the final “Ave” and Florence starts to appear and the audience starts nudging each other and saying, “Oh my god, she’s going to sing again,” but they don’t know what’s coming. It really is lovely.

Creating the Cuckoo in the Clock

An Interview with Judy Kaye, who originated the role of Florence Foster Jenkins in *Souvenir* on Broadway



Do you feel that you are being true to who Florence Foster Jenkins was?

I believe with all my heart that I am, but I never met the lady. The problem with what is supposedly known about her is that it all comes out as gossip. None of it seems to be anything you can hang your hat on. The title of the play is *Souvenir: A "Fantasia" on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins*. We're not bound by realism; in fact we're promoting a nonrealistic, somewhat whimsical look at the possible relationship between Florence and Cosme McMoon. When we were first breaking the play in at the York, I hoped that somebody who had known her or who had been at her Carnegie Hall concert might still be on the planet. Of course,

there are really *a lot* of those people and they would come up after to talk to me about her.

How do they remember her?

Florence was, as my mother used to say, a queer duck. She believed completely in herself and her abilities, and what is important is that she was not setting things up. She was not singing badly on purpose. She really was sincere. She thought she was a great artist and that she was serving the muse and the music. The play would be one joke if it was just about a woman who sang badly, and it's not about that at all. It's about Cosme's journey and how this woman affected it. They forged a friendship in a very peculiar, wonderful way. Alongside that, you have her devotion to art and perfection and the question of self-delusion. How many of us are deluding ourselves? Aren't we all?

That seems like a terrifying prospect to confront eight times a week onstage. do you ever worry, "what if I'm like Florence and nobody is telling me?"

Actors go through that every five seconds. That's what makes us get up in the morning. Everybody thinks that actors have these huge strong egos, but it's only the slightly talented amateur who has that much confidence. Everybody else is filled with doubt.

How do you sing poorly well?

Pitch is created in the brain. It's not in the throat. It is a cognitive activity. So when I'm doing this material it's almost like I'm singing an alternate melody. The performance is very set. It has been worked out over a rehearsal period, and my costar, Donald, has to be able to follow me. It's like all good comedy: a Swiss clock. It's honed and I'm giving it as much care as if I were singing very well.

Was reading this script your first experience with Jenkins?

Not my first hearing, no. Listening to her recordings has been a rite of passage for vocal music students since those recordings came out in the '40s. You'd go to a party and somebody would say, "Oh, you have to hear this new soprano. She's so brilliant." They'd put it on, and slowly the room would dissolve. That's the thing about this play: it's very funny, but it's also very touching, and the audience is pulled up short. They feel, at some point, at least a little embarrassed that they have laughed at this lady, and we have all laughed at her. And it's healthy that we're embarrassed.

Florence Nightingale

The Story of the Legendary Florence Foster Jenkins, a Soprano without Peer
by Brooks Peters (2001)

In the pantheon of unforgettable divas, there never has been a soprano to rival the legendary Florence Foster Jenkins. She stands alone, a true *rara avis*—especially when she appeared onstage sporting a pair of gigantic angel wings strapped to her back. At the height of her popularity in the 1940s, Lady Florence—as she liked to be called and invariably signed her publicity stills—was compared to Frank Sinatra for the contagious effect she had on audiences. High society stepped out in droves, bedecked in evening attire, jewels, and furs (and paying top dollar) to hear her warble. Cole Porter composed a song for her and never missed a concert. Beatrice Lillie was an ardent fan. Thomas Beecham played her albums on British radio as examples of his favorite recordings. Fashion aficionados gasped at the extraordinary gowns she designed for herself and wore at the invitation-only soirées she gave in the grand ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Early on, Enrico Caruso was an enthusiastic friend. Lily Pons is said to have shed tears after hearing her sing.

For those poor unfortunates who have never heard of her, or sadly, never heard her, these accolades must seem perplexing. If such a superstar existed a mere half-century ago, why isn't she better known today? Perhaps it's because the key to Madame Jenkins's everlasting allure is the overwhelming fact that she was perfectly awful. To put it bluntly,

she couldn't sing at all. Well, that isn't really fair, since she definitely sang, and quite often, year after year, for decades, cooing with abandon for her ever-growing circle of sycophantic devotees. The issue is more precisely, Why did she choose to sing? Ira Siff, of La Gran Scena Opera Company, which ingeniously skirts the nether regions between parody and performance art, dubs her "the anti-Callas." "Jenkins was exquisitely bad," he says. "So bad that it added up to quite a good evening of theater, which is a major achievement unto itself. She would stray from the original music, and do insightful and instinctual things with her voice, but in a terribly distorted way. There was no end to the horribleness. It was infinite—bless her." Like many budding opera buffs, Siff spent hours during his youth playing Jenkins's records. "I would collapse onto the floor and dissolve into laughter. They say Cole Porter had to bang his cane into his foot in order not to laugh out loud when she sang. She was that bad. And yet, think of all the mediocrity in the world. Florence was one of a kind. She was way off the mark. But she was not mediocre."



To describe her voice, one must rely on metaphor, since adjectives do not exist to capture its inherent *je ne sais quoi*. Imagine the shrill caw of an aging turkey buzzard. Or the wail of a wounded wolverine caught in a trap. Or the caterwauling of Citizen Kane's hapless protégée, Susan Alexander. Even to the untrained ear, Florence Foster Jenkins sounds peculiar. A critic in the 1940s likened the kick one got listening to her albums to that of smoking pot. In the '60s, she was considered psychedelic; people dropped acid while playing her pieces with headphones on. Her coloratura, if analyzed electronically via sound waves, would look like the hemi/demi/semi quaverings of an incriminating lie-detector test. Her notorious high f, the lucky result, she confessed, of being jostled in a taxi during a traffic accident, was as faint as a dog whistle; but not even the most devoted mutt, his ear

cocked to a Victrola, could have warmed to it as "his master's voice."

For all her flaws, Florence Foster Jenkins was immensely popular. A crowd of two thousand unlucky ticket seekers had to be turned away from her 1944 concert at Carnegie Hall. Today, her original 78s, recorded at Melotone, a little-known vanity studio, are highly cherished collector's items. The two classic LPs, *A Florence! Foster!! Jenkins!!! Recital!!!!* and *The Glory (????) of the Human Voice*, released after her death, are

increasingly hard to locate. But unlike many songbirds of yore, Jenkins can be found on cd, as fresh and astonishing as ever.

Did Florence Foster Jenkins truly believe she had talent? It's a question that may never be answered. "Florence didn't think she was pulling anyone's leg," says Albert Innaurato, playwright and opera-lore expert. "She was compos mentis, not a lunatic. She was a very proper, complex individual. It was a different era, when there was still a distinction drawn between high- and lowbrow art. Florence represented the last gasp of that world." She was born Florence Foster in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, sometime around 1868. Her father, Charles Dorrance Foster, was a banker and member of the Pennsylvania legislature who instilled in his daughter a passionate respect for music. Providing her with piano lessons, he discovered she was a child prodigy. At the age of eight, she gave a recital in Philadelphia. By the time she was 17, she yearned to study music overseas and make the grand tour. Her father, disapproving, refused to sponsor her. Perhaps to spite her father, Florence soon ran off with a doctor named Frank Thornton Jenkins. They quickly married and settled in Philadelphia. By 1902, however, they were divorced. Unable to rely on her father, Florence scraped by, giving music lessons and playing piano at ladies luncheons. But in 1909 her father died, leaving her his fortune. At last she was free to move to New York and make a name for herself.

Florence Foster Jenkins began her curious artistic odyssey by becoming the chairman of music at the Euterpe Club, a gathering of dilettantes and connoisseurs. At one of the club's evenings at the Waldorf-Astoria, she met the dashing, if somewhat ghoulish, English actor St. Clair Bayfield, who became her consort and confidant, and by his own account, her lover.

Sixteen years her junior, he'd had a modicum of success as an actor but had an earlier checkered career as a sailor, a soldier, and a sheep and cattle rancher in New Zealand. "We were never married in the conventional way," he confided to a journalist. "She told me that if she ever married again, it would be a common-law marriage. She was very superstitious about it." He claimed they lived together at his apartment on West 37th Street for the next 36 years, although Florence maintained a suite at the Hotel Seymour, where she gave interviews and presented a less bohemian front. In 1912, Florence founded the Verdi Club, an ambitious endeavor that sponsored musicales of the composer's work. It cost her \$2,000 a year, but it was her ticket to the inner sanctum of knickerbocker society.



It's not clear when the prospective diva first took up singing, but she studied voice with Carlo Edwards, a maestro at the Metropolitan Opera. Soon Florence was giving recitals in Newport, Washington, Boston, and Saratoga, the elite spots at the time. In 1928, at the Barbizon Club, she was introduced to Edwin McArthur, a gifted musician and later accompanist to Kirsten Flagstad. Florence engaged him as her pianist for the next six years, but she ultimately fired him for guffawing during one of her numbers. McArthur was succeeded by Cosme McMoon, a stylish pianist and composer, who set her sonnets to music and managed somehow to keep a straight face.

At first, Florence contented herself with organizing small recitals at the St. Regis, the Sherry-Netherland, or the Ritz-Carlton hotels. As word of her unusual act spread across Manhattan, as many as 800 fans packed the salons to hear her. No tune was too difficult to add to her arsenal: “*Vissi d’arte*,” *Lakmé’s* “Bell Song,” enchanting melodies by Ivor Novello, cantatas by Bach. In 1937, at the Ritz, she made a splash by essaying Zerbinetta’s notoriously difficult coloratura aria from *Ariadne*. It was only the second time the aria had been heard in New York, noted one of her bemused reviewers, giving the impression that it wouldn’t be done again any time soon—at least not by her. She earned enthusiastic applause for her spirited rendition of Adele’s laughing song “*Mein Herr Marquis*” from *Die Fledermaus*, although the number usually had her listeners

stuffing handkerchiefs into their mouths to keep from responding in kind. Perhaps her signature number was *The Magic Flute’s* treacherously pyrotechnic aria, “The Queen of the Night,” which she tossed off with customary abandon. As one critic noted, “Mme Jenkins gave her interpretative abilities full and untrammelled sway.”



Her star turns were equally notable for their jaw-dropping costumes. She would appear garbed as a Jean-Baptiste Greuze shepherdess, a Mexican señorita, or draped lavishly in an 18th-century white silk hoopskirt and tiara, looking like a

cross between Marie Antoinette and Margaret Dumont. She invariably capped her outfit with an outrageous hat, or twirled a parasol, or fanned herself with giant ostrich plumes. Sometimes her efforts would exhaust her. At the end of one concert, Florence asked her audience to forgive her for not singing an encore, but she was too tired. She requested instead that they send her letters telling her which songs they liked best. “It may not be important to you,” she insisted, “but it is very important to me. Next week, I am singing in Ithaca.”

So, in 1944, it came as little surprise to her fans that Florence—who claimed to be in her sixties but was closer to 76—should attempt to scale the highest of heights: Carnegie Hall. She rented the space. Broadway veteran Cris Alexander, who photographed the Patrick Dennis classics *Little Me* and *First Lady*, attended her debut. “Yes, I was there. I went with Gian Carlo Menotti, who was a great fan of hers,” he recalls. “She really was divine. Heavenly. It was one of the funniest nights in the theater. For one number, she came out with a large salad bowl filled with rose petals that she scattered onto the floor. After the song was over she got down on her honkers, scooped them all up, and did the entire number over again. It was one of the highlights of my entire theatrical life. Right up there with Laurette Taylor in *The Glass Menagerie*.”

Alix B. Williamson, who was the press agent for Richard Tucker and the Von Trapp family, was also in the audience that momentous evening. “I went to several of her concerts,” she recalls. “It was unbelievable, let’s put it that way. Jenkins had no voice of any kind. She was a large, big-busted lady. Everyone would laugh out loud when she sang. She would go to change her costumes and say to the audience, ‘Now don’t go away.’ Then she would reappear in her ‘Angel of Inspiration’ costume or come out trilling ‘Like a Bird’ by Cosme McMoon.”

But was Mme Jenkins serious? “I had a friend who knew her,” Williamson says, “and he thought she was very sincere. She took him aside once and said, ‘I really like you, so I’m going to sing for you privately.’ She wasn’t spoofing anything. I imagine that she was tone-deaf. The more people laughed, the happier she was. I’ll tell you a funny story. One day I was meeting with [conductor] Eugene Ormandy. He wanted to do a concert version of a Strauss opera, but he needed a coloratura soprano. So I said kiddingly, ‘Do you know Florence Foster Jenkins? She might be ideal for that purpose.’ He’d never heard of her. So I took him up to my place at the Essex House and put on her record. I sat there deadpan. He was deadpan, too. I could see him start to squirm. He didn’t know my taste or what to do. I went out of the room, because I just had to laugh. I finally came back in and said, ‘You can laugh now, too.’ He almost killed me.”

There are those who believe that the unusually harsh reaction Florence endured during and after her recital at Carnegie Hall was the blow that killed her. Her friend Francis Robinson, who was assistant manager at the Met and penned the liner notes to her first album, vehemently denied this, claiming she went to her grave with a “happy heart.” Yet there’s no denying that the barbs flung at her after her debut hit home. Perhaps because it was Carnegie Hall, with three thousand paying attendees, critics didn’t pull punches. Earl Wilson ridiculed her, complaining of “dizziness, a headache, and a ringing in the ears.” She suffered a heart attack a few weeks later and never recovered. She died on November 26, with her trusted squire, St. Clair Bayfield, by her side.

Bayfield, prey to all kinds of superstitions, had cautioned her against performing that one last evening. “I opposed the concert at Carnegie Hall,” he told an interviewer after her death, during a protracted will contest in which he sued her heirs—15 of her second cousins—for his share of her estate. “I didn’t think a person of her age should take on that strain. There is something in a vast audience that draws the magnetism out of a person. It sucks you dry. My wife would be alive today if she’d stuck to her regular Ritz concert.” And what did he think of Florence’s singing? “She had perfect rhythm,” he noted. “Her interpretation was good, her languages wonderful. She had star quality. You could feel that in the applause. People may have laughed at her singing, but the applause was real. She was a natural born musician. But the instrument—there was very little instrument.” Perhaps Florence herself put it best. “Some may say that I couldn’t sing,” she admitted toward the end of her life. “But no one can say that I didn’t sing.”

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From Behind the Piano

An Interview with Cosme McMoon

Introduction by Lesley Gibson, ACT Publications

At the center of Florence Foster Jenkins’s performances, but on the periphery of her legacy, was her longtime accompanist Cosme McMoon. The identity of this fantastically named pianist has been shrouded in mystery and speculation among those who remember Mme Jenkins, and subject to ever obscuring rumor over time. Some allege that “Cosme McMoon” was an identity-shielding alias for a series of accompanists who were ashamed to be professionally associated with Jenkins. Most often, the moniker is falsely linked to Edwin McArthur, the pianist and operatic conductor who collaborated for many years with legendary Wagnerian soprano Kirsten Flagstad before serving as the musical director of the St. Louis Metropolitan Opera. McArthur did in fact accompany Mme Jenkins from 1928 to 1934, but she fired him when, after six years of service, he momentarily lost composure and laughed during a public performance.

Cosme McMoon came into Jenkins’s life in the early 1920s, as a young composer and pianist. Born Cosmé McMunn in Mexico in 1901 and raised in San Antonio, Texas, he made his New York debut in 1922 in a piano recital at The Plaza Hotel. He initially collaborated with Jenkins as a composer, appearing occasionally alongside her as a guest accompanist in early recitals when she performed his compositions. In 1934, McMoon became her permanent accompanist, a position he held until the end of her life. From 1934 to 1944 he appeared in all of her recitals and on each of her recordings. He was

known as a good-looking and gifted pianist who had the ability to change the key of any piece instantly while playing, an invaluable skill when accompanying the erratic Jenkins. He also had an extraordinary ability to maintain composure during her excruciating numbers. He lived a relatively quiet life, and following her death, supported himself teaching piano lessons and coaching singers. He died in August 1980.

Before his death, McMoon was interviewed on *Weekend Radio*. The following is a transcription of the broadcast.



Toward getting as complete a picture as possible, Mr. McMoon, would you be willing to tell our listeners something about Mme Jenkins's history prior to her belated concert career?

I think I could. Mme Jenkins was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, around 1868, of very wealthy parents, but very early she demonstrated this desire to sing, and her parents objected to the excruciating quality of her voice, and in her early teens she ran away from home and went to Philadelphia to try to make her way. There she suffered great hardships and privations until her father, hearing of it, came down to town and took her back home. She was restored to her social and wealthy position, but with the proviso that she wouldn't sing anymore. Therefore, during the whole lifetime of her father, she did not sing but she had this terrific repression. Finally, when he died, he left her very well provided for and her mother was a little more lenient . . . so she was allowed to take singing lessons again, but not to sing in public. And her mother died in 1928, and at that time she was left this additional fortune and completely free to pursue her own way, so that is when she decided to make her concert career. At that time she must have been about 60 years old.

Before we go on, I think it would be appropriate if you could tell us some of the most memorable numbers she performed.

Well, I might say that every number was memorable, the way she performed it, because it was not only a performance of this sort that we hear on the records, but she added histrionics to every number, generally acting the action, if it were an aria, or other appropriate action if it were a descriptive song, or else she would go into different dances during these numbers, which were extremely hilarious. I might say that I think her most unusual number was a fast Spanish song by the name of "*Clavelitos*." During this, she insisted on having introductory music, to which she danced a Spanish step in the style of a fandango. She came out dressed in a high comb and mantilla, with a gorgeous Spanish

shawl and carrying a basket of carnations. During the actual singing of the number, she would pause altogether and toss these flowers out into the audience, with shouts of *¡Olé!* And this created such a pandemonium at the end that she was forced to repeat it always. Then of course she had thrown the flowers out, so she asked the audience if they would return them so she could toss them out again, and many brought them up to the stage, others threw them up. When the basket was refilled, she started again, only this time they accompanied the whole thing with hand-clapping and each toss of a flower, for instance at Carnegie Hall, was accompanied by a great salvo of *¡Olé!* from the whole house of several thousand people. There were many other unusual numbers, each one in its own costume and action.

In what way was the audience able to contain itself, or to maintain some semblance of approval during all this, Mr. McMoon?

Why, there wasn't any question of semblance of approval, because they approved of it wholeheartedly, but the audience nearly always tried not to hurt her feelings by outright laughing, so they developed a convention that whenever she came to a particularly excruciating discord or something like that, where they had to laugh, they burst into these salvos of applause and whistles and the noise was so great that they could laugh at liberty.

Perhaps what's even more important, how did Mme Jenkins herself rationalize these performances? How was she able to interpret this audience reaction as encouragement? She had gotten a conception that is because, at that time, Frank Sinatra had started to sing, and the teenagers used to faint during his notes and scream, so she thought she was producing the same kind of an effect, and when these salvos of applause came, she took them as great marks of approval of some tremendous vocal tour de force, and she loved that. She would pause altogether and bow, many times, and then resume the song.

At this time, she was led to draw comparisons, wasn't she, between herself and other serious divas of the opera stage.

Oh, yes! Naturally she must have made comparisons, but I do think that she could not hear her own work in the proper pitch, and that's one of the characteristics of her singing. Now, I know sometimes she had at homes [receptions], with different guests, and she would put two records on the Victrola to have a voting upon which was the better. She would put "The Bell Song" by herself and by [Amelita] Galli-Curci, and then she would hand little ballots out and you were supposed to vote which one was the best. Of course they all voted for her, and one woman once voted for Galli-Curci so Mme said, "How could you mistake that! My tones are much fuller than that!" So she really didn't hear the atrocious pitches in these things. She used to sit delightedly and listen for hours to her recordings.

I know a lot in the public's mind has been made of the great final appearance she made at Carnegie Hall. Would you be willing to recount some of the unique characteristics or some of the especially interesting things that happened during that performance?

Yes, her performance in Carnegie Hall was the most remarkable thing that has happened there, I think. I was supposed to play for her that night, and when I approached the hall I could hardly get near it, because the crowd stretched all the way to the Little Carnegie and around Seventh Avenue, and you could hardly mill through them. You had to prove your identity to get in, and inside the house held a



record audience. It seemed that the people were hanging on the rafters, besides taking up every inch of available standing room. When she came out to sing an old English group [of songs], she came out in a sort of shepherdess's gown with a shepherd's crook, holding it, and the ruckus was so great that it lasted five minutes before there was enough quiet for her to begin. Then the concert went on with the most noisy and abandoned applause that I have—I have never seen such a scene, either a bullfight or at the Yale Bowl after a winning touchdown. When she sang "*Clavelitos*," one famous actress had to be carried out of her box because she became hysterical.

During the years since Mme Jenkins's death, there have been many attempts, have there not, to imitate her, on the part of other singers less qualified, or less completely sincere, as she was, about that type of vocal art?

Oh, yes. Such a golden shower as the audiences which she was able to attract are certainly a temptation to anyone, and many have tried since to give studiously discordant recitals at Town Hall and different places, or trying to make the music funny that way, but they have no success at all, and they just make a dismal evening, and the reason is that they're not sincere in their efforts, as Mme Jenkins was. She is inimitable, and many have tried also to imitate her, but without success.



Painted cityscape for set of *Souvenir* at Commonweal Theatre; by scenic designer Kit Mayer

Common Ground: What's Your View?

We invite you to consider the topics below and discuss—either before the play, at intermission, or after the show. Perhaps you will join cast members at Commonweal Encore, our post-performance gathering, so that we can all put our heads together—audience and artist alike. And you can continue to chat on your drive home, at work next week, or over coffee with friends. We would also love to hear your thoughts which you can share on our Facebook page or you can email us at marketing@commonwealtheatre.org.

Let's start the conversation:

- ❖ In the play, Florence refers to her singing voice as a “souvenir” she’ll recall fondly in her later years. What aspect of your life do you think you’ll hold most dearly in your own later years?
- ❖ Have you found the person who spurs you to be your best self? Or can just one person ever inspire another person enough to be all they need?
- ❖ Enthusiasm is infectious. If you’re not already an opera fan, does Florence’s enthusiasm for this music make you want to explore it further?