

**TRANSFORMATIONS** Anne Sexton/Conrad Susa

TRANSFORMATIONS was commissioned by the Minnesota Opera Company.  
The score is dedicated to Robert MacWilliams.

The premiere took place at the Cedar Village Theater, Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 5, 1973.

Philip Brunelle	Music Direction and Conductor
H. Wesley Balk	Stage Direction
Robert Israel	Set and Costume Design
David L. Pape	Lighting Design
John M. Ludwig	General Manager

**CAST**

Barbara Brandt	Witch/Anne Sexton (2)
Catherine Malfitano	Princess (1)
Janis Hardy	Good Fairy (3)
Vern Sutton	Wizard (4)
Yale Marshall	Magic Object (5)
James Rogness	Prince (6)
Barry Busse	King (7)
William Dansby	Neighboring King (8)

**ORCHESTRA**

Richard Wyland	Clarinet/Saxophone
Michael Brand	Trumpet
Steven Lund	Trombone
Kenneth Wolfe	String Bass
William Huckaby	Piano, electric harpsichord, electric piano, electric celeste
Celeste O'Brien	Electric organ
Robin Frost	Percussion
Laura Stotesbury	Percussion

TRANSFORMATIONS is based on an original conception by H. Wesley Balk.

Duration: approximately two hours with intermission.

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It is not enough  
and drink clam chowder  
we must have the answers.
- 7 **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs** The ambivalent relationship of mother and daughter.  
Rolling her china-blue doll eyes  
open and shut.  
Open to say,  
Good Day Mama,  
and shut for the thrust  
of the unicorn.
- 41 **The White Snake** The divine madness of the artist.  
There was a day  
when all the animals talked to me,  
  
And then I knew that the voice  
of the spirits had been let in—  
as intense as an epileptic aura—  
and that no longer would I sing  
alone.
- 65 **Iron Hans** Our ambivalence toward the insane.  
I am the mother of the insane.  
Let me give you my children:

Take an old lady in a cafeteria  
staring at the meat loaf,  
crying: Mama! Mama!  
And you'll move off.

- 101 **Rumpelstiltskin** The Doppelgänger inside us all.  
I am your dwarf.  
I am the enemy within.  
I am the boss of your dreams.  
I am the law of your members.

- 133 **Rapunzel** The need of women for each other.  
A woman  
who loves a woman  
is forever young.  
  
...hold me, my young dear,  
hold me...

- 181 **Godfather Death** The fear of and desire for death.  
Hurry, Godfather Death,  
Mister tyranny,  
each message you give  
has a dance to it,  
a fish twitch,  
a little crotch dance.

- 200 **The Wonderful Musician** The Selfishness of the Artist  
My sisters,  
do you remember the fiddlers  
of your youth?  
Those dances  
so like a drunkard  
lighting a fire in the belly?  
Remember?  
Remember music  
and beware.

- 226 **Hansel and Gretel** Mother love and cannibalism.  
Little plum,  
said the mother to her son,  
I want to bite,  
I want to chew,  
I will eat you up.  
  
Oh succulent one,  
it is but one turn in the road  
and I would be a cannibal!

- 246 **Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)** Epilogue to the entire work. The ambivalent relationship  
of daughter and father.

Daddy?  
That's another kind of prison.  
It's not the prince at all,  
but my father  
drunkenly bent over my bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
my father thick upon me  
like some sleeping jellyfish.

What voyage this, little girl?  
This coming out of prison?  
God help—  
this life after death?

Much of this work is set in a parlando style, indicated by many notes under beams in bars without meter (such as most of THE GOLD KEY). These measures are to be sung so that the natural rhythm of the words is followed. In some places the actual rhythm is notated. But in no case are these recitatives to be made to seem absolutely even (except, perhaps, in HANSEL AND GRETEL, where the whole scene is cold, stiff and strange). Nor is most of the music ever meant to depart from standard Middle Atlantic States pronunciation, except where character voices are indicated. I do not like the sound of vowels distorted for tone's sake. In any case, such a manner would be opposed to the directness of the text. In general, the second half of the show is more 'sung' than the first, partly because the pitches are kept higher. But even there the singers should remember that they are telling stories, not indulging themselves. The music hangs on every word and so does the audience.

Congas, fox-trots, tangos, etc., form the basis for much of the acting movement. It is not crucial that these be actually danced where they occur. Their presence, somehow reflected in the overall acting and singing, however, like the waltzes in DER ROSENKAVALIER, should not be ignored entirely. Just as frequent are directions which call for specific vocal styles based on people in movies, television or public life. These can be adjusted to the abilities and experience of the singers as long as they are not totally ignored or spaced so far apart that the audience fails to perceive a unity of approach.

THE STORIES More nearly short stories, the poems were arranged with Anne Sexton's approval to emphasize the subplot, which concerns a 'middle-aged witch' who gradually becomes a vulnerable beauty slipping into nightmare. For each poem-story Anne Sexton includes a personal prologue which motivates the telling of the story.

THE SUB-PLOT If the general plot seems to be the succession of specially told Grimm fairy tales, then the sub-plot is about the artistic and psychic process of Anne Sexton. There is no need, of course, for the actress to look or act like Anne Sexton because this is not a strictly autobiographical work even though Anne Sexton becomes a creation here as much as Rumpelstiltskin. She is the people in the stories and the people are themselves.

In working the Minnesota production, we found it useful to acquaint ourselves with her other poetry so that the many cross references could take on the proper resonance. We spent two weeks rehearsing the stories as plays even before the music was composed to explore these references fully as possible. However, there were several phrases which we could not understand, so I arranged to fly to Boston in October of 1972 to meet Anne Sexton and discuss these with her. We met at Joseph's Restaurant and talked over baked clams and beer. Here is what I can recall of our conversation regarding these phrases:

CS: In THE GOLD KEY, who are Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor, Jane, Brian, Maryel and the Boy?

AS: They are the names of friends. The Boy, I think, is the audience. Maybe your actress can point to the audience.

CS: How do you pronounce IRON HANS?

AS: So that it doesn't sound like iron hands. Did you find out who Saint Averton was?

CS: We found two.

AS: Really? Well, I meant the one who is the patron saint of the insane.

CS: What about Clifford, Vincent, Friedrich? I imagine that you meant Van Gogh and Nietzsche. But Clifford—

AS: Is Clifford Biers. He wrote *The Mind That Found Itself*. A famous book. The other names are Zelda Fitzgerald, Hannah Green, who wrote *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, and Renée—I can't remember her name—who wrote *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic*

CS: That's a help. But I still find IRON HANS confusing.

AS: So do I.

CS: The most I can make out—if the number three means anything in this fairy tale—is that the black pool and the golden spring and the princess are a unified triad.

AS: What a nice idea! After all, it is a holy story. You know—'Christ's boy-child' and all that...

CS: Ah.

AS: Well, maybe it isn't that clear. Say, what do you put on stage in the RAPUNZEL story?

CS: Why, you and your aunt in the library.

AS: I knew I never should have said all that!

CS: In RAPUNZEL, who are the three Christs of Ypsilanti?

AS: Three guys who thought they were Jesus Christ. The doctors brought them together to see how they would act with each other. Terrible. They suffered. It's all in a book called by that name.

CS: And 'Ann Arbor'?

AS: I lectured there a long time ago.

Then Anne Sexton read THE GOLD KEY and the last part of BRIAR ROSE.

AS: Well? I'm not a very good reader.

CS: I'm really grateful that you've shown yourself to me so openly. I feel I really know you. After all, I've got to become you when I go back to write this opera.

AS: Good luck on that one! I feel I know you too.

## INTRODUCTORY NOTES by Conrad Susa

**T**RANSFORMATIONS is an entertainment in two parts of five scenes each. The text, from the late Anne Sexton's book of the same name, is a highly personal telling of some of Grimm's fairy tales.

**T**RANSFORMATIONS is an entertainment in the manner of story theater through music, a matter more fully discussed below by H. Wesley Balk. This means that it is largely an ensemble piece especially suited for singers who can command popular as well as classical singing styles and who relish chances to play witches, towers, mirrors, greedy fathers or evil queens. Although the work is designed for eight singers and eight instrumentalists, it might be possible to do it for a slightly larger cast, providing that the principal characters and their metamorphoses are kept intact. For, just as Anne Sexton transforms the Brothers Grimm, so is the piece designed to provide many transformations of roles.

THE MUSIC "Transformation" is also used in the sense that it applies to the style of the metamorphoses. For example, I ask that the part of the Wonderful Musician be sung in a Bing Crosby style so that the particular feeling of Anne Sexton's world is strengthened. The singer of this part may wish to do it in another clearly recognizable manner, one more suited to his abilities, and I welcome this. But in any case such a role—and there are many like it—is not to be taken at mere face value. It requires an additional layer of style, an additional transformation, to bring it into the main action of the work. Nor are the instrumentalists free from this process. They are called upon to be familiar with Ethel Smith, Perez Prado, Nino Rota and others similarly to enrich their parts. Naturally non-Americans may not feel inclined to draw upon the inspiration of 'our' 1940's and 50's. They will want to use references drawn from their own cultures and this is as it should be, if only for the sake of the audience. Skillful, entertaining parody, not camping, is what I am after.

Beneath all this is still another layer in which transformation takes place: a great web (I won't call it a system) of borrowings from the musical cookie jar of the last three centuries. These allusions and quotations from all over are my way of rounding out a musical experience by hearing it through filters that help create parallels and happy connections. To my surprise many people, including the singers, missed quotes that I thought were obvious and pointed out to me borrowings of which I could not have been aware—none of which proves a thing. There is no need for me to publish a table of these references since they are meant to amuse, and missing them will not detract from one's enjoyment of the work.