

# The World Is Round

## The Story

Rose is a little girl who wonders, like all little girls, who she is and why and how. Determined to find her place in a "world that was round and you could go on it around and around" Rose forges friendships with dogs, rabbits, lions and especially her cousin Willie whom she admires for his constance of character, "My name is Willie I am not like Rose/I would be Willie whatever arose/I would be Willie if Henry was my name/I would be Willie always Willie all the same." Along with her dog Love and a blue chair, Rose embarks upon a quixotic adventure through the dread wonders hidden in the dark woods, over a blazing green meadow, around an enigmatic dwarf, and onto the desolate summit of a great blue mountain in search of "there." What she finds "there" at the mountain top is her cousin Willie shining a searchlight at her from an adjacent peak. At that moment Rose realizes that "there" is really here and here is really there. It's always been all the same and Willie always knew the trick was not to think too hard about it. In the true cyclical nature of a fairy tale, Rose and Willie discover they are not really cousins at all, marry, have children of their own, and live happily ever after while the world just goes on being round.



## The Adaptation

In Ms. Stein's book the idea of singing is introduced as the most instinctive utterance available to express the

daisy chain of images, feelings and impulses a little person has when confronted with the immense task of fitting into a vast world of things. Rose speaks very little, although she often "sings and cries." Rose's cousin Willie, "was not like his cousin Rose singing did not make him cry it just made him more and more excited." For Rose and Willie, singing offers a more visceral alternative to the insularity of abstract thought, and allows the children to assert their existence in a confusing world. Opera seemed the perfect medium for a story so concerned with the impulse to sing.



**...an elliptical fairy tale of young Rose's journey through a slippery landscape in which people, animals, objects and language collide and identity is elusive...**

In this adaptation, the emphasis is on the the story's quality as a theatrical "landscape" rather than on any causal narrative coherence. This places the dramatic focus on Rose's psychic interrogation of the world around her. In her songs, she contemplates who she is and where she fits in as part of the landscape. Taking literally the idea that Rose's identity is fluid and her perceptions prismatic, we tell the story using three separate Roses who begin at different moments in the narrative but finish together at the end. Willie, being a more grounded and translucent character, remains a single performer caught in a schizophrenic battle between the three competing Rose narrative threads.

This further fragmentation of the narrative allows us to simultaneously juxtapose and overlap shards of Rose's persona which gives the opera a Cubist angularity, while also the-



atricalizing Ms. Stein's idea of the continuous present. The continuous present is that brief moment of cognition devoid of history or projection where pure thought and being can blissfully reside with its instantaneous annihilation. It is a landscape carved into the terrain of forgetfulness that is perpetually overgrown by time. The overriding sensibility of the opera's structure should be of spatial duration and collage rather than linear temporality.

The only solo voices in the opera are those called for in the book: Willie, Rose, the Bicycle Man, Bob the Father, the Owls, and the dogs Love and Pepe. The rest of the voices that make up the terrifying and indifferent universe that Rose must wade through are manifest in a chorus of three Echoes for each Rose. These Echo Choruses reflect the world around each Rose and the troubling image of herself in it, by insistently articulating Ms. Stein's circular prose while urging Rose to continue through to the end of her story.

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## The Music

The World Is Round features a musical score written in the tradition of such minimalist composers as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. This seemed a natural stylistic choice given the amount of mantric repetition inherent in the Stein text.

Taking to heart Ms. Stein's famous theories

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about theater as "landscape," The World Is Round presents the audience with a complex, hierarchical tapestry of superimposed vocal lines, from the monotone chants of Echo Chorus 3 in the background to the bitter-sweet, pleading melodies of Rose 1 in the foreground. Very often there are two or three separate lines being sung at the very same time, leading to a dense mix of tantalizingly unintelligible language and narrative. In this way the story is presented as a sort of moment-to-moment sum of its images and events, to be sorted out by each audience member in his or her own personal way.

While each Rose is present onstage throughout the opera, each begins at a different point in the narrative and progresses at her own rate. Rose 1 begins at Chapter 1. Rose 2 begins at Chapter 5. Rose 3 begins at Chapter 13. Eventually, all three Roses "meet," on top of the mountain, at Chapter 33. The net result of this structural device is a building tension throughout the piece as the Roses come closer and closer to being "in sync" with each other.

Vocal requirements for the opera include 12 altos/sopranos and 2 tenors. Currently the instrumental music (largely a constant, "blank canvas" mix of pulsing pipe organ and maracas) is entirely contained on a single CD, over which the vocalists sing in performance. The total length of the piece is 72 minutes, without intermission.

