

The Center for Contemporary Opera presents

THE CURIOUS CASE OF

Benjamin Button

by John Eaton with the participation of the Pocket Opera Players
Presented as the opening event of the ACA's Festival of American Music, 2010

ACT I

Scene 1 Birth
Scene 2 Childhood
Scene 3 Yale
Scene 4 Meeting his wife
Scene 5 The War and triumphant return

THE CAST

Alejandro Acierio, *clarinets*
Passerby, Applicant, Frat Boy

Dan Barrett, *cello*
Young Man, Frat Boy

Tony Boutte, *tenor*
Roger Button (father), Roscoe Button (son)

Matthew Burns, *bass-baritone*
Dr. Keene, Child, Applicant, Young Man,
Gen. Moncrief, Coach, Re-enlistment Officer

Jennifer Conner, *soprano*
Child, Cheerleader

Ethan Fran, *tenor*
Applicant, Young Man

Dominic Inferra, *baritone*
Young (old) Benjamin Button in Act II

ACT II

Scene 1 Harvard
Scene 2 Life at home
Scene 3 Re-enlistment
Scene 4 Return to kindergarten
Epilogue Darkness

Margaret Lancaster, *flutes*
Passerby, Child, Applicant, Frat Boy

Linda Larson, *soprano*
Young Teacher, Hildegard Moncrief (wife),
Teddy (grandson)

Ana Milosavljevic, *violin*
Child, Applicant, Young Man, Frat Boy

Christopher Oldfather, *piano*
Child, Young Woman

Jennifer Roderer, *soprano*
Nurse, Registrar, Rita, Nana

Dennis Sullivan, *percussion*
Stage Drummer in War, Young Woman

Chris Pedro Trakas, *baritone*
Old (young) Benjamin Button, Act

Karl Kramer-Johansen, *conductor*

THE CURIOUS CASE OF

Benjamin Button

John Eaton

(libretto by Estela Eaton)

Pocket Opera Players

Center for Contemporary Opera

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SYNOPSIS

The opera, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is based entirely on the very ironic, humorous — but with serious undertones — short story of F. Scott Fitzgerald. (It has nothing to do with other adaptations of it.)

The short story's central conceit is that of a man born at age 70 and gradually un-aging. He revisits at a much actually older (or apparently younger) age various experiences. This gives the story, as well as the opera, loosely interpreted, an arch form. His apparent age is 70 at his birth in 1860 and 0 at his death in 1930. At both ages 4 and 66 he is in kindergarten. In the earlier period he is picked on by the children; in the latter, he bullies them. At 18 — appearing to be 52 — he is rejected by Yale as an old impostor; and, at 48 — a dashing young football star seemingly in his early twenties — he enrolls in Harvard. (Collegiate songs from both institutions are used and deconstructed.) His experience as a hero in the Spanish

American War and his failed re-enlistment as an under-age recruit in the First World War are accompanied by the music popular in those different conflagrations with the use of other, similar musical elements in both.

A list of the actual experience of Benjamin Button in each scene is given in the text and in the running of the DVD itself. For further amplification of the above description, please see the notes of the composer and librettist.



THE MUSIC

One significant difference between my twenty or so previous operas, twelve of them of the Pocket Opera variety, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, is that in my previous ones I have generally avoided using music to evoke an ethos or locality. But in order to deal adequately with the F. Scott Fitzgerald story, and keep both its ironic tone and surrealistic meaning, I found it necessary to “deconstruct” the American music of each of the periods in the story, occasionally throwing in a familiar tune outside of the time and place being evoked, purely for satirical effect.

My usual microtonal musical vocabulary was a great help in this. So too were the techniques of combining different tempi and musics anticipated by great American composers like Charles Ives, Conlon Nancarrow and Elliott Carter, especially in the war and re-enlistment

scenes. I need to tip my hat in the direction of John Philip Sousa, the masters of the ragtime idiom and A. Putnam, the author of the Harvard Fight Song, variations of which form the ragtime and dances that follow. (The dancing in this scene is of course directly related to the work of Vernon and Irene Castle, which changed the way Americans and most other Western cultures took to the dance floor.) There are other tunes used in every scene of this opera. Enjoy the way they fix then promote the dramatic line of the story.

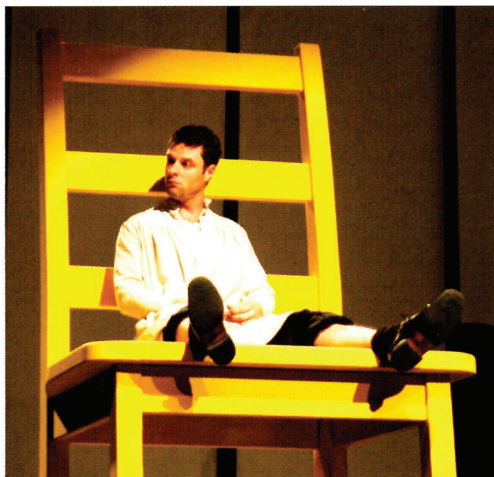
It was this dramatic line that attracted me to *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* in the first place. The story is full of exciting incidents and ironic situations that have you sitting on the edge of your seat while reading it. Another irresistible aspect of the story is the satirical way Fitzgerald uses the “un-aging” process to throw light on his — and still our! — present day institutions such as hospitals, childhood education, university life, family relations and the military.

But finally, even the underlying structure of the story inspired me. Like the story, the opera is cast in an arch form in which Benjamin Button revisits all his previous experiences as a younger, — not an older — person. Hopefully you will notice how the basic musics keep returning after the center, but usually in different guises depending on what period’s music is being “deconstructed.”

A brief word in closing about two aspects of my music and operas: In nearly every moment, there are normal pitches from the chromatic scale and microtones. More often than not, the microtones are there to create not more dissonance, but more consonance, as well as a greater variety of harmonic motion to emphasize the drama.

Secondly, in my Pocket Operas the instrumentalists are always asked to participate in the drama. A relative took me to my first opera at age seven. We had front row seats at *La Boheme*. As Mimi lay dying, I happened to look into the orchestra pit. The horn section was playing cards and the oboist had to be awakened by a flutist in time for a mournful solo. Even then I began thinking of how instrumentalists could become more involved in opera!

—John Eaton



THE LIBRETTO

My father, John Eaton, thought that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* might make a good opera and asked me to read the story. I’d already collaborated on four operas with him, was busy teaching English in Prague, and felt I needed a break. But, when I looked at the story, I could feel its presence on the stage and hear the potential for dramatic and musical climaxes. I was smitten. The Button story practically adapts itself.



As I began, I felt some major changes were necessary and introduced Button’s daughter-in-law, Rita, as a character. There are clashes between Button and his son, Roscoe, which I tried to amplify for dramatic purposes. I skipped over Button’s employment in his father, Roger (Cuff) Button’s business, and his rapid success there. I felt it wasn’t as interesting as other episodes of his life. I also skipped over the long boring period of his marriage before he enters Harvard. We see his boredom later on in his relative youth.

Button’s age reversal is the best kind of literary miracle: one that sheds light on everyday life. He grows up too fast and gets stuck in his shadow. By the time he catches up to his age, there is no one left to relate to. The irony is that age is more of an occupation than a state of mind. (Fitzgerald really got to me with that one.)

I wasn’t trying to be exact in putting the story on the stage, just trying to stay true to its essence. It turned out that my job was a pleasure.

—Estela Eaton

THE COMPOSER

John Eaton was called “The most interesting opera composer writing in America today” by Andrew Porter (*London Financial Times*). He has also received international recognition as a composer of electronic and microtonal music. In the early 1960’s he did the first live performances on modern sound synthesizers.

Of his more than 20 operas, perhaps the best known is *The Cry of Clytaemnestra*, which has received great public and critical acclaim at its nearly 20 performances. *The Tempest* was called a “formidable intellectual as well as musical achievement... an opera of stark beauty” by Michael Walsh (*Time Magazine*) following its premiere by the Santa Fe Opera. The composition of his last grand opera, *King Lear*, was completed September, 2011. In 1993, he formed the Pocket Opera Players, which presented his operatic pieces for a small group

of musicians in a new form, which he developed. Of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Anthony Tommasini (*New York Times*) said, "...opera is a form of drama, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* kept me involved right through."

Eaton has been the recipient of many awards. In 1990, he received the "genius" award from the MacArthur Foundation. His music was chosen to represent the US in 1970 at the International Rostrum of Composers (UNESCO). He has received a citation and award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, three Prix de Rome Grants, two Guggenheim Fellowships, and, among others, commissions from the Fromm and Koussevitzky Foundations and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. He also has been in residency at Bellagio Fndt, Bogliasco Fndt, and a guest of the Civitella-Ranieri Fndt.

His compositions are handled by Hal Leonard, G.Schirmer (A.M.P.), and the American Composers Alliance. They have been recorded on American Decca, Tournabout, C.R.I., Aguava, Albany, E.M.F. and A.U.V. records.

THE LIBRETTIST

Estela Eaton is a published poet who has written five libretti for her father, all of which have been received with popular enthusiasm and critical acclaim: *Travelling with Gulliver*, *Youth*, "... inasmuch," *Pumped Fiction* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. These Pocket Operas have been performed in New York (Symphony Space), Boston (Boston University's University Theater), and Chicago (Roosevelt Library Theater), and elsewhere. She has also collaborated on operatic projects with other composers. She has taught English to non-speakers, as well as poetry and English and American literature in Seoul, Prague, New York City and SEE University in Tetovo, Macedonia. She received a BA from the University of Iowa and a MFA in poetry from San Diego State University.



THE CAST

Alejandro Acierto, clarinets

Passerby, Applicant, Frat Boy

An active soloist, collaborator, chamber musician, improviser and composer, he has played throughout Europe and the USA in festivals and concert halls.

Dan Barrett, cello

Young Man, Frat Boy

He has played extensively for PBS as well as at the Radio France Festival, Paris's Presence Series, the Gulbenkian Festival, and in the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, Orchestra of St. Luke's, NYC Opera and the American Ballet Theater.

Tony Boutte, tenor

Roger Button (father), Roscoe Button (son).

He made his professional debut as the title role in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Further roles were leads in *Don Giovanni*, *Acis and Galatea* and *Satyagraha*. He has also performed in *Les Arts Florissants*, *Tafelmusik* and the Salzburg Festival.

Matthew Burns, bass-baritone

Dr. Keene, Child, Applicant, Young Man, Gen. Moncrief, Coach, Re-enlistment Officer

Recently he performed Paolo in Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* with the Los Angeles Opera, Don Giovanni with the Cleveland and Boston Lyric Operas, and Collatinus in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*.

Jennifer Conner, soprano

Child, Cheerleader

She has performed operas, art songs and musical theater in the USA, Scotland and Italy. Most recently she has done Gretel in a New Jersey State Opera production of *Hansel und Gretel*.

Ethan Fran, tenor

Applicant, Young Man

An active freelance singer in the New York area, he has performed with the New York Virtuoso Singers, Bach Vespers at Holy Trinity, the New York Opera Forum and at the Bard Summerscape Festival.

Dominic Inferrara, baritone

Young (old) Benjamin Button in Act II

Roles include Son in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Celebrant in Bernstein's *Mass*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, Silvio and Marco in *Il Pagliaccio/Gianni Schicchi*, Lescaut in *Manon Lescaut* and Musetto in *Don Giovanni*.

Margaret Lancaster, flutes

Passerby, Child, Applicant, Frat Boy

"New Music Luminary" (*New York Times*), she has built a large repertoire of new works created specifically for her. Performance highlights include the Lincoln Center Festival, the Spoleto USA Festival, the Edinboro Festival, and the *festival D'Automne*. As an actress she appeared in the Obie-winning *Mabou Mines Dollhouse*.

Linda Larson, soprano

Young Teacher, Hildegard Moncrief (wife), Teddy (grandson)

She has sung leading operatic roles throughout the USA under such auspices as the New York City Opera, Opera Illinois, The Syracuse Opera, the Tri-Cities Opera, the Indianapolis Opera and Opera Memphis. Known for her commitment to new music, she has performed with the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society, the ACA Festival, and the Brooklyn New Music Collective among others.

Ana Milosavljevic, violin

Child, Applicant, Young man, Frat Boy

Acclaimed as "an imaginative artist willing to think big" (*The Strad*), Ana is an award-winning performer, composer and recording artist. She has performed in the US, Europe and China with solo appearances at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center among other renowned venues.

Christopher Oldfather, piano

Child, Young Woman

His eclectic career has taken him from Moscow to Tokyo. The New York Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony and *Ensemble Moderne* have presented him as a soloist. He is a longtime member of Boston's acclaimed Collage New Music Ensemble. In addition to playing the piano, he was the vocal coach for this opera.

Jennifer Roderer, soprano

Nurse, registrar, Rita, Nana

She has starred as the Witch in the NY City Opera production of *Hansel und Gretel* and Fricka in *Die Walkure* at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires. Other roles include Mrs. Grose in *The Turn of the Screw*, Mistress Quickly in *Falstaff*, Cecilia March in *Little Women*, and Ruth in *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Dennis Sullivan, percussion

Stage Drummer in War, Young Woman

An advocate of new music, he has premiered multiple new and contemporary works throughout the USA and Europe with such groups as Newband, The Argento Ensemble, Tactus, The Lugano Percussion Group, and the Cleveland Orchestra. He won the Grand Prize at the *Van Rooy* Competition and a *Stipend Preie* at *Darmstadt*.

Chris Pedro Trakas, baritone

Old (young) Benjamin Button, Act I

His operatic roles include *Harlekin* (Met), *Pelleas* (Theater Basel), *Dandini* (Washington Opera), *Don Giovanni* (St. Louis Symphony), *Count Almaviva* (Spoleto), and *Figaro* (Minnesota Opera). A champion of new music, he has sung premieres of compositions by Bolcom, del Tredici, Kim and Lieberman, among many others.

PRODUCTION STAFF

Karl Kramer-Johansen, conductor

A Norwegian conductor and also a virtuoso horn player, he is the winner of many prizes and awards such as the American Horn Competition, the American Scandinavian Society Cultural Award and a working grant from the Northern Manhattan Arts Association. Tremendously active as a performer and conductor, he regularly conducts the ACA concerts and the Pocket Opera Players.

Marco Capalbo, Director

He has written and directed films, *3 days in L.A.* and *Sandman*, music and music videos such as Karheinz Stockhausen's *Helicopter String Quartet*, and theater pieces. He also recently edited *The Promise of Music* about Gustavo Dudamel, which won best documentary at the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival.

Mary Catherine Blezak, stage manager

She is very active in New York theater and musical productions and is considered a superlative stage manager by all who have worked with her.

Steven Quandt, lighting director

He designs lighting for theater, musicals, opera and dance in New York, regionally and internationally in venues like Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, the Manhattan Center, the Joyce Theater and the Southbank Center in London.

Janne Larsen, scenographer

A practicing artist and scenographer, she has exhibited at Outpost, Workspace, the L.A. Municipal Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Washington, DC. She was asked to design a *Medea* for the Daveli cave outside of Athens by the Greek Ministry of Culture.

Shawn Duan, projection design

A New York designer, consultant and programmer, his credits include *Tommy*, *Citizen Ruth the Musical*, *The Love of Don Perlimplin* and *Icarus of Ohio*. Recent operas have included *Moby Dick* at Houston and *Esther* at the New York City Opera.

April Mercedes Garcia, costume assistant

A freelance producer of documentaries, reality documentaries and commercials, she has also pursued photography, painting and fashion, which aided her in the making the nearly 60 paper costumes used.

Lyndsay Werking, supertitles

She has interned as a *dramaturg* with *PVG Tanz Freiburg-Heidelberg* and as a Dramaturgy and Projected Titles Intern at Glimmerglass Opera.

Ken Chamberlin, Master Electrician and Lighting Board Operator

David A. Schnirman, George Bruner, Alfredo Marin and Nick Nelson, sound design and sound-recording assistants.

Alex and Tanya Meillier, video taping

Michael Levine, DVD editing



PRODUCING ORGANIZATIONS

The Center for Contemporary Opera, James Schaeffer, General Director; Eric Salzman, Artistic Director; Michael Dellaira, Composer-in-Residence; Sara Jobin, Musical Director

Founded in 1982, The Center for Contemporary Opera is the leading proponent of new opera in the United States. Based in New York City, the company focuses on producing and developing new opera and music theater works and reviving rarely seen American operas written after the second World War.

The American Composers Alliance Festival of American Music, Gina Genova, producer. The American Composers Alliance is a non-profit, alternative American concert music publisher in New York City (BMI affiliated). With a history dating to 1937, ACA provides services for composers and distributes their printed and electronic scores for performing artists, ensembles, libraries and other users of sheet music. Our catalog of works is one of the most interesting and diverse collections of American music in the United States and includes compositions from the early 1900s to the present day. A Festival of American Music is produced each year, as well as other concerts.

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