

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

# Cinderella



**Music and libretto  
by Alma Deutscher**

**Opera in Four Acts**

**Setting: Transylvanian  
Time: Late 18<sup>th</sup> century**

## Characters

Cinderella .....Vanessa Becerra  
The Prince ..... Jonas Hacker  
The King..... Nathan Stark  
Griselda, a stepsister.....Stacey Tappan  
Zibaldona, a stepsister ..... Karin Mushegain  
The Stepmother ..... Mary Dunleavy  
Emeline, the old woman.....Claudia Chapa  
The Minister .....Brian Myer  
Flower Girl .....Helen Deutscher  
Chorus and dancers

Conducted and Directed by Jane Glover

Vienna première: Casino Baumgarten Theatre, December 2016

American première: Opera San José in San Jose, California, December 2017

# Synopsis

## From Opera San José's program of *Cinderella*

Once upon a time, in the Kingdom of Transylvanian, there lived a girl called Cinderella. Her mother died when she was young, and she was brought up by her loving father, the manager of a little opera house at the edge of Brasslichmei, the capital. Cinderella would often entertain her father by singing him the beautiful melodies that sprang into her head. Some years later, her father married again, an aging prima donna with two daughters of her own, Griselda and Zibaldona. When Cinderella's father died, Cinderella's stepmother took over the opera company ...and everything changed.

## ACT I

It is early morning in the opera house. Cinderella has been up all night copying music for the orchestral rehearsal. She must finish copying all the orchestral parts or her stepmother will be angry. After working throughout the night, Cinderella could no longer concentrate on the monotonous double-bass part, and a beautiful melody suddenly sprang into her head. The stepsisters sneer at Cinderella, and the stepmother shouts at her for not finishing the work on time.

In the palace the Royal Minister is worried about the King's failing health and also about the Prince, who has shown no interest in the affairs of the realm, instead spending his time writing poetry. The King summons the Prince and tells him he must marry and produce an heir for the throne. The Prince insists on only finding true love, and storms off. The Minister suggests to the King that he should arrange a masked ball so that the Prince can choose his bride. To cheer up the Prince, they also decide to hold a singing competition as part of the entertainment.

The agitated Prince flees to the forest and, in despair, is about to throw away his book of poems. Just then he runs into a poor old woman. She is having trouble lighting a fire and asks the Prince for help. Instead of helping her, the Prince offers her his book of poems as kindling material. When she sees his sash emblazoned with royal insignia, she is embarrassed and apologizes for her insolence in having disturbed the Crown Prince. Her apology subdues the Prince, who is really determined to become a good King and help people in real need.



Shortly afterwards, Cinderella wanders into the forest in search of firewood. She also encounters the old woman, who is barefoot. Cinderella immediately gives the old woman her own tattered shoes. The old woman promises to return the shoes someday and, in return, insists on giving Cinderella the Prince's

book of poems. Cinderella reads one of the poems and is inspired by the words.

The Minister arrives at the opera house with an invitation to the Ball and also the singing competition. However, the Minister confuses the invitation with the doctor's prescription for the King's ailments. He mistakenly hands the stepmother the doctor's prescription. The stepsisters assume that the prescription must be a poem written by the Prince, and conclude that they are expected to sing it at the Ball. They admire the royal "poem" and try to compose music for it. Cinderella is the only one who is not excited by the prospect of marrying a Prince who can write such silly words. Instead, she opens the book of poems that the old woman gave her, sits down and starts writing a melody for the poem she had read in the forest. She falls asleep in the middle of writing.

The stepmother tries to help her favorite daughter, Griselda, find a good melody for the Prince's poem. She sees Cinderella sleeping at the table and notices the music that Cinderella has composed. In spite of herself she is struck by Cinderella's talent and her beautiful melody. She decides to steal the melody and give it to Griselda to sing in the competition. Cinderella wakes up from a dream about a young poet she met at the Ball. She asks her stepmother to be allowed to go, but her stepmother says that there is simply no suitable dress for her.

## ACT II

A few days later the stepsisters quarrel about who is more attractive. Cinderella has spent the last few days sewing and mending a dress from the discarded old costumes in the opera house. When the stepsisters see her dressed for the Ball they tear at the dress and rip it apart. The stepmother tells Cinderella that no one would ever allow a "beggar girl" like her into the Royal Palace. She and her daughters depart for the Ball.

Cinderella understands for the first time how much her stepmother and stepsisters hate her. In despair, she sings a ballad about a lonely pauper girl who hears imaginary sweet voices enticing her out into the cold night. She goes out into the darkness and searches for the voices all night. Exhausted, she falls into the snow only to hear the voices screaming in her ear, "Go away, no beggars here!" Heartbroken, the beggar girl freezes to death.

Meanwhile, from his room in the palace, the Prince watches the first guests arriving at the palace. Instead of putting on his splendid royal gown, he decides instead to wear a very modest garment and remain incognito under his mask.

The old woman arrives at the opera house to return the shoes to Cinderella. She reveals herself as the Fairy. She sings to Cinderella a song about a star called Hope. She then conjures up an exquisite ball gown and transforms Cinderella's shoes into glass slippers. Before leaving, she warns Cinderella to be home before midnight.

## ~ INTERMISSION ~

## ACT III

At the masked Ball, a modestly dressed young man asks the stepsisters to dance, but is rudely rejected. They are looking for the Prince. Cinderella enters. Her slipper falls off, and the same young man gives it back to her and asks her to dance. During the dance, Cinderella and the Prince discover how much they like one another.



The Minister announces the start of the singing competition. Griselda starts singing Cinderella's beautiful tune, but with the words of the doctor's prescription. Cinderella runs out to the balcony to hide her shock that the music that she had composed for the beautiful poem from the forest had been stolen from her and debased with such foolish words.

The young man runs after Cinderella to the balcony. She can't explain to him why she is so upset. Instead, she tells him that she has heard this melody before, but with much more beautiful words. Intrigued, the young man asks Cinderella to sing the song with the original words that she had heard. She sings to him her melody with the original words.



It's now the young man's turn to be shocked. After repeated questions, Cinderella finally admits she was the one who composed the music. The young man reveals that he wrote the words. He takes off his mask and introduces himself as Prince Theodor. Cinderella is horrified to discover that her newly found friend is actually the Prince. Surely, he would never lower himself to be associated with a girl like her, a mere beggar.

Suddenly the clock strikes twelve, and Cinderella realizes that she must run home. The Prince can't understand why she wants to leave. Too scared to reveal her lowly status, she answers him cryptically by singing the end of the sad ballad about the pauper girl who went out into the snow in search of loving voices, and froze to death when those voices mocked her as a beggar.

## ACT IV

The Prince has not slept all night. He was pacing up and down, trying to understand why the mysterious girl had to leave. Haunted by the sad ballad that she sang as she fled, he is convinced that it explains her sudden flight. But he only remembers the first few notes, and cannot remember the rest of it.

The King comes in and cheerfully questions the Prince about the girl he danced with. The King is not amused to discover that the Prince knows nothing about her background or status, or that he doesn't even know her name. When the Prince insists that he wants only to marry this particular girl, the King loses patience and tells him that he must find her within a day.

The Minister tries to help the Prince and, during their conversation, it dawns on the Prince how he can find the girl. He has never seen her face, but he had heard her melody. He will go to every house in the Kingdom and sing the first few notes of the song that he remembers. Only the girl who wrote the music will know the rest of it.

Meanwhile, the stepsisters are in a foul mood because *they* didn't manage to find the Prince at the ball. The stepmother suspects that the mysterious girl at the ball was Cinderella, and locks her in the cellar.

The Prince is in despair. He has searched high and low, in every corner of the Kingdom, but no one could continue the song. In the forest he runs into old woman, who sings him her song about the special star called Hope. The star will direct the Prince to the one house at the edge of town which he hasn't yet tried.

The Prince arrives at the opera house and asks Griselda and Zibaldona to complete the song. They try, but cannot. He is about to leave when he hears the sound of Cinderella's ballad coming faintly from the cellar. He pushes past the stepmother and the stepsisters, and frees Cinderella from the cellar.

The Prince and Cinderella marry in the Royal Chapel and live happily ever after.



# Alma Deutscher

**Born: February 2005 (age 12) in Basingstoke, England**



Alma Deutscher, born in 2005, is a composer, violinist and pianist. She started playing the piano when she was two years old and the violin when she was three. Soon afterwards she started improvising simple melodies on the piano. Her attempts at composition started aged four, when she began writing an opera about a pirate called Don Alonzo.

When Alma was six she composed her first full piano sonata, and at seven she composed a very short opera called *The Sweeper of Dreams*. There followed various compositions for violin, piano, and chamber ensembles. At age nine, Alma wrote a concerto for violin and orchestra, which she premiered in 2015. Her first piece for symphony orchestra, *Dance of the Solent Mermaids* was also premiered in 2015. A chamber version of her opera *Cinderella* was performed in Israel in 2015. A fuller version was premiered in Vienna in 2016 under the patronage of Maestro Zubin Mehta. Aged 12, she completed her first piano concerto and played it in Austria alongside her violin concerto.

Alma has featured prominently in the international press and media. In 2017 she was the subject of an hour long BBC Documentary and was featured on CBS *60 Minutes*. Her YouTube channel has more than 4 million views. As a soloist on both violin and piano, Alma has performed in England, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Uruguay, USA, Israel, China and Japan.

Alma currently plays on a violin by Guarneri del Gesu kindly lent to her by Beare's International Violin Society.

~ From the Opera San José program of *Cinderella*

## Cinderella: The Video (December 2017)

**Starring Vanessa Becerra, Jonas Hacker; Jane Glover, conducting**



Tell an opera impresario to pull together a professional production of a new work in six months, and they'll laugh. Tell them to do so for a score written by a 12-year-old, and they'll probably start questioning your sanity. Somehow, Opera San Jose and the Packard Humanities Institute have managed the impossible. Precocious composer Alma Deutscher has expanded her *Cinderella* for its first, full-scale staging, which comes complete with a 44-piece orchestra, renowned conductor Jane Glover, lavish sets and costumes, and a young and talented cast. *Cinderella* isn't without its flaws, but it illustrates its composer's prodigious gift.

Deutscher has repeatedly said that she prizes beauty in music. *Cinderella* is indeed pretty in a traditionally melodic way. A good sign for Deutscher's future as a writer of opera: Her best musical ideas encompass a variety of characters and moods. The stepsisters get charming, frivolous duets and ariosos full of trills and ornaments. (They are opera singers, after all!) This self-consciously operatic music is both funny and well-executed. Similarly, the Stepmother sings a thrilling short aria ("I must get rid of her") with clear references to "Der Hölle Rache" (from Mozart's *Magic Flute*) in both affect and stratospheric top notes.

*Cinderella's* beggar girl song boasts the most original and interesting tune (hinging on surprising dissonance) and is also where Deutscher makes the most of the interaction between voice and orchestra. The clarinet dialogues with Cinderella's voice in classic Mozart fashion, and the strings and woodwinds

work together to create the dark, wintery atmosphere the story demands.

Deutscher plays the violin and piano (and plays both, plus the organ in the wedding scene, as part of this production). It may be her violin-playing that leads her to rely so heavily on the strings in her instrumental writing. The overture to *Cinderella* starts with a soft shimmering that swells into a full, soapy sound dominated by the violins. Melodies repeat without developing. Occasional comments from the brass suggest moments of drama, but those promises remain unfulfilled. The much shorter overture to the fourth act makes more balanced use of the orchestra and has a driving sense of purpose. The music builds up to the curtain's rise and the Prince's exasperated, "But why?"

Those who whine that modern operas lack hummable tunes will have nothing to complain about here. That is partly because Deutscher's simple melodies are catchy (and sometimes haunting), and partly because the score makes generous use of repetition. The recurrence of the same tunes, both within and across scenes, can become grating. There's enough excellent material here for a two-hour opera, but the run time is three hours.

*Cinderella's* weakest point is its libretto. The underlying premise — Cinderella and the Prince are brought together by her music and his poems, rather than good looks and a glass slipper — is a smart revision of the classic fairytale. However, the actual words, which have made their way through Hebrew (for the opera's premiere in Israel) and German (for a Vienna production), are a problem, at least in this English version. Stilted spoken dialogue and directionless recitative intermingle. Bad poetry sinks otherwise good set pieces. The short, rhyming couplets sound childish — especially when awkward word order forces the rhymes ("when hope shines bright / dispelled is the night"). It's ironic that the music, written by a child, seems mature, while the libretto, which several adults helped Deutscher shape, seems puerile.

Opera San José didn't skimp in staging *Cinderella*. Late 18th-century costumes by Johann Stegmeir and sets by Steven Kemp dazzle. The ballroom scene (for which Deutscher wrote a toe-tapping waltz) is choreographed with stately grace by historical dance expert Richard Powers.

The high production quality extends to the casting. At the palace, Nathan Stark hammed it up in the comic bass role of the King, his chatty demeanor contrasting with tenor Jonas Hacker's fiery, sweet sound as the Prince. Brian James Myer gave both a great comedian to play off of in the spoken role of the Minister. Back at the opera house, Karin Mushegain (Zibaldona) and Stacey Tappan (Griselda) deployed sparkling voices and catty attitudes as the stepsisters, while Mary Dunleavy wowed with her powerful soprano as the Stepmother. Vanessa Becerra sang Cinderella with the warmth and honey the character demands. Mezzo-soprano Claudia Chapa showed off crunchy low notes as Emeline, the fairy godmother who brings the lovers together. The orchestra, conducted by Jane Glover, gave Deutscher's score bright presence and forward momentum, even with its recycling of ideas.

Make no mistake: Alma Deutscher is a genius. If I were judging her opera merely as the product of a 12-year-old mind, I would have nothing but superlatives to write. Instead, I've engaged with *Cinderella* as a fully realized opera worthy of criticism — because it is. It could use improvement, mostly a much stronger English libretto and judicious cuts. But it's remarkable evidence of Deutscher's talent as a composer. This is not yet her masterpiece, but there's no doubt that she'll produce one.

By Ilana Walder-Biesanz  
Freelance Theater and Opera Reviewer