

# Little Women

Music and Libretto by Mark Adamo,  
based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott

Act 1, Scene 1, *Little Women*, New York City Opera on tour in Tokyo, Japan, May 2005. Image, Joe McNally. <http://www.markadamo.com/little-women/images/>



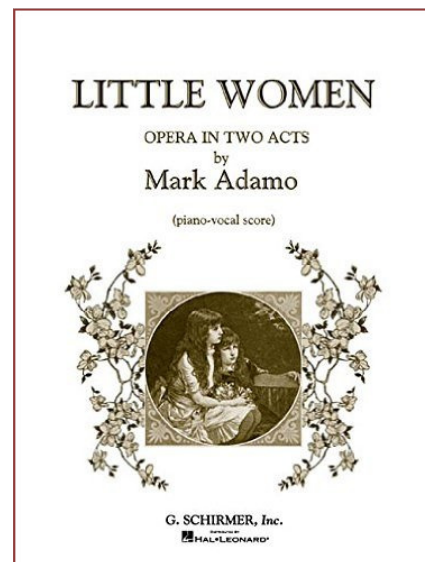
*‘Stay’ is a charming word in a friend’s vocabulary*

—Louisa May Alcott

This quote, in a way, embodies the underlying theme of composer Mark Adamo’s opera adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s timeless and widely published story *Little Women*. Approached by Houston Opera Studio in 1998 to adapt the novel, Mr. Adamo set himself the task of looking at all the musical, stage, and film adaptations of *Little Women* before he would begin to create a libretto. During his research, he found what he called “a *dramatic solution*: a new design of the material which, while clearly visible in the original source, had never been used before.” Thus he arrived at the idea that Jo was in conflict with the passage of time itself. She knew and feared that as she and her sisters grew up they would inevitably grow apart.

The **change** theme is reiterated throughout the opera:

- In the Prologue, Jo mocks her own desire to stop time and the changes she knows will happen when she sings, “Couldn’t I un-bake the breads?”
- During Act 1, though she continues to fight it, it seems that everyone she cares about reminds Jo that “Things change,” while she halfheartedly laments that they were perfect as they are.
- It’s only in the last scene that Mr. Adamo beautifully brings Jo’s thinking full circle, to the place where she can finally say, “Now is all there is.”



From a workshop piece to a full-scale production by Houston Grand Opera in 2000, Mark Adamo’s *Little Women* is one of the most frequently performed American operas, with more than 80 national and international engagements. Filmed for PBS *Great Performances*, the telecast is now available in both standard DVD and Blu-Ray, making it the first American opera to be released in high-definition television.

# Little Women Synopsis

**Time:** Post American Civil War (1870s)  
**Place:** Concord, MA, New York City, and on tour in England  
**Title:** *Little Women* refers to the March sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy

**Act I, Prologue** The opera begins in the March family attic in the 1870s (**Four little chests**). The 21-year-old Jo is alone, writing, when Laurie, a young man now married to Jo's sister Amy, arrives. They make awkward conversation as they reflect on their own past relationship. When Laurie proposes a return to their easy rapport of years ago, Jo becomes upset, and begins the flashbacks that make up the rest of the opera (**Couldn't I un-bake the breads?**).

**Scene 1** Three years earlier, in the same attic, the four March sisters and Laurie are holding a meeting of the Barristers' Club, with much mock ceremony (**Again we meet to celebrate**). Jo is protective of Beth, who has been ill. After a game, they ask each other questions in a game of *Truth or Fabrication*. After the others have left, Laurie stays behind to talk to Jo, telling her that the glove that sister Meg says she lost is actually being kept by Laurie's tutor, Brooke, as a talisman of his love for Meg. Jo is annoyed at the thought of marriage breaking up their family; after Laurie leaves, it distracts her from the story she is writing (**Perfect as we are**).

**Scene 2** A few weeks later, Jo and Laurie are out walking when they see Meg and Brooke together; Brooke is telling Meg a story hinting at his love (**There was a knight, once**), which Jo interrupts. Before they leave, however, Brooke asks permission to speak with Meg's father. Back at home, Beth sings a hymn she has composed as Jo teases Meg, who says that she will refuse Brooke if he proposes, since her father thinks she is too young to marry. But when Brooke appears, she hesitates, and with Jo prompting her from behind the curtains, she refuses him. The girls' wealthy Aunt Cecilia arrives, and as Brooke talks to Meg's parents, Cecilia warns Meg not to throw herself away on a poor man and hints that Brooke is only interested in Meg because of Cecilia's money. When Meg responds that she will marry Brooke for love, Cecilia storms off, telling Meg she will be written out of her will. Meg accepts Brooke, then tries in vain to get Jo to accept her decision (**Things change, Jo**).

**Scene 3** On Meg and Brooke's wedding morning, the March parents repeat their own wedding vows, which Meg has asked to use, for the family (**We stand together**). Meanwhile, Laurie takes Jo aside, and though she tries to forestall him, he proposes (**It's time**).



*Croquet Scene* by Winslow Homer (1836-1910)

## Characters

**Meg** *lyric mezzo-soprano*  
The eldest of the four sisters: languid, pretty, with the talent of a singer, but not the drive.

**Jo** *low lyric mezzo-soprano*  
Jo is a year younger than Meg: big, bony, brown, tomboy, writer, ringleader of amateur theatricals and all-around maniac.

**Beth** *lyric soprano*  
Two years younger is Beth, the dormouse: quiet to a fault, a pianist, and composer.

**Amy** *lyric coloratura soprano*  
The youngest by a year is that darling of the golden ringlets. She wants to paint like Raphael!

**Alma March** *mezzo-soprano*  
Mother of the four sisters

**Gideon March** *bass-baritone*  
Father of the four sisters

**Cecilia March** *mezzo-soprano/contralto*  
Aunt of the four sisters

**Laurie (Theodore Lawrence)** *lyric tenor*  
Jo's childhood friend; Amy's husband-to-be

**John Brooke** *lyric baritone*  
Laurie's tutor; Meg's husband-to-be

**Friedrich Bhaer** *bass-baritone*  
A friend of Jo

**Mr. Dashwood** *bass-baritone*  
New York publisher

**Quartet of female voices**

**things change, Jo, between us**). Jo refuses, telling him that they could never be happy together. Laurie runs off, crushed. Amy, who has feelings for Laurie herself, has overheard; she upbraids Jo for her cruelty to Laurie. As they argue, Beth, who has been ill, collapses and the entire family rushes to help her as the act ends.

### Intermission

**Act II, Scene 1** A year later, Jo has come to New York City to stay, in the hopes that Laurie will forget her and things will go back to the way they were. She sells a story to a magazine. Through the letters she writes and receives, we learn that Laurie is now a sophomore at Oxford, that Brooke and Meg are the parents of twins, that Amy is on a tour of England at Cecilia's expense, and that Beth is not improving. Friedrich Bhaer, another resident of Jo's boarding house, arrives to take her to the opera. Jo tells her parents not to worry: he is 39, with one foot in the grave.

**Scene 2** At the boarding house that night, Jo and Bhaer discuss the opera, art, and love. At the same time, in England, Amy and Laurie talk about Jo, and Beth tries to compose a finale for a chorale. To convince Jo that there is more to art than the sensational stories she has been writing, Bhaer sings a setting of a Goethe poem, first in German, then in English (**Kennst du das Land/Do You Know the Land**). They are interrupted by a telegram from Meg's mother, telling Jo that Beth is worse and asking Jo to come at once.

**Scene 3** Beth is asleep in her bedroom, ill with scarlet fever, but she wakes up when Jo arrives. Jo is frantic, but Beth is calm and resigned and tries to teach her sister to be the same (**Have peace, Jo**). Beth asks if she can sleep for a minute, and as the chorus sings her chorale, she dies peacefully. Jo turns to Meg for comfort, but Brooke is comforting her. Jo exclaims, "I've lost you all."

**Scene 4** The following spring, Jo and Cecilia discuss Amy's latest letter; she and Laurie are finally in love. Jo also admits that Bhaer has not written to her. Cecilia praises Jo's strength and tells Jo that she has left her fortune to her, since only she, with her solitary, unchanging ways, will appreciate the gesture, isolated as she is from fickle lovers or friends (**Duet: You, alone**). Jo, faced with this vision of her future, finally realizes that change is a necessary part of life.

**Scene 5** Back in the attic, as in the Prologue, Jo wonders, with all of this change, what endures? Laurie arrives, and the scene from the Prologue is repeated, but this time, Jo tells Laurie that things can never be as they were, but that they can remain friends despite the changes. Meg remembers her sisters together, and says her goodbyes to those days (**Quartet: Let me look at you**). As the memory of her childhood fades, Bhaer arrives. He asks her if now is a good moment, and she replies, "Now is all there is."

Adapted from <http://usopera.com/operas/littlewomen.html>

## Meet the Composer, Mark Adamo

by Jill Leahy

Born in 1962, Italian-American composer Mark Adamo first attracted national attention with the libretto and score to his successful debut opera, *Little Women*. Introduced by Houston Grand Opera in 1998, *Little Women* has since enjoyed over 80 national and international engagements.



Comparable acclaim has greeted his other works, including:

- *Lysistrata, or the Nude Goddess*, an opera adapted from Aristophanes' comedy, but including elements from Sophocles' *Antigone*.
- *Four Angels: Concerto for Harp and Orchestra*, commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra.
- *Late Victorians*, an orchestral song cycle.
- *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, an opera commissioned by San Francisco Opera.
- *Becoming Santa Claus*, a coming-of-age story of Santa and the importance of acts of kindness.

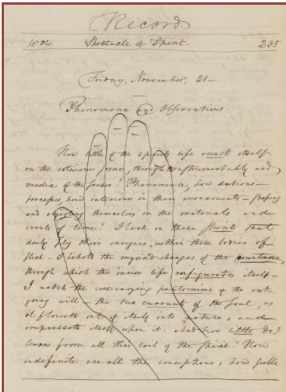
Adamo was composer-in-residence at New York City Opera from 2001–2006, where he led the *VOX: Showcasing American Composers* program. Since 2007 he has been the principal teacher of American Lyric Theatre's Composer-Librettist Development Program.

# Meet the Author, Louisa May Alcott

by Jill Leahy



Louisa May Alcott (1832 – 1888)



Bronson Alcott traced the hand of two-year-old Louisa May in his journal and wrote that she “manifests uncommon activity and force of mind at present.”



Orchard House, Concord, MA

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on her father Amos Bronson Alcott’s 33rd birthday. When she was about two years old, the family moved to Boston, where her father pursued his various dreams, including setting up an experimental school and espousing the philosophy of transcendentalism. Although he was a brilliant man, and a friend of some of the most well-known and educated people in 19<sup>th</sup> century New England (Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, to name just two), he was apparently a disastrous provider. After Bronson’s school and other ventures failed in the 1840s, the family eventually settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where the Alcott family home, Orchard House, still stands as a museum and National Historic Landmark. In 1847, Alcott family members were staunch abolitionists who were part of the Underground Railroad and it’s believed they housed a runaway slave for at least a week in their home.

During her life, Louisa was an early feminist who took many different jobs to try to help with the family finances. In her later life, Alcott became an advocate of women’s suffrage and was the first woman to register to vote in a school board election. She always

wanted to be a writer and had been publishing poems and short stories since 1851 under the pen names Flora Fairfield and A.M. Barnard, but it wasn’t until after she recorded her experiences as a Civil War nurse that she gained some level of fame. After her book *Hospital Sketches* (1863), Alcott began to publish stories under her real name in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Lady’s Companion*. A conversation between Thomas Niles, an editor at the publishing house of Roberts Brothers, and Bronson Alcott in 1868 really turned the tide of the family’s financial situation. Niles asked for “a smart, lively novel for girls.” Bronson asked Louisa to try writing one. She wasn’t thrilled with the idea, but, wanting to help her father, she “produced 402 manuscript pages in two months,” never dreaming they would become the best seller *Little Women*.

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### Selected Louisa May Alcott books:

*Little Women, Good Wives, An Old-fashioned Girl, Little Men, Eight Cousins, Rose in Bloom, A Modern Mephistopheles, Under the Lilacs, Jack and Jill, Jo’s Boys, Lulu’s Library, A Garland for Girls*

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