

# Florencia en el Amazonas

Music by Daniel Catán  
Libretto by Marcela Fuentes-Berain

## Study Guide to the Opera

The final scene of Florida Grand Opera's 2018 production of *Florencia en el Amazonas*, with Ana María Martínez in the title role.



### Daniel Catán: A Pioneer in American Opera

by Megan Swift

*Florencia en el Amazonas* premiered on October 25, 1996 at the Houston Grand Opera, becoming the first Spanish-language opera co-commissioned by major U.S. opera houses. The composer, Daniel Catán, was influenced by the music of his native Mexico, inspired by the Cuban culture, and developed his musical style through studies in England, the United States, Japan, and Indonesia.

Before his masterpiece *Florencia*, Catán spent six years composing *La hija de Rappaccini* (*Rappaccini's Daughter*), adapted from Octavio Paz's 1956 play and Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story. The enterprising director of Houston Grand Opera, David Gockley, was fascinated with Catán's work and co-commissioned *Florencia en el Amazonas* with Los Angeles Opera and Seattle Opera. Catán said that he "set out to write beautiful music for a story of the journey to transcendent love; it concerns all of us who have lived love with all its intricacies, subtleties, wretchedness, and glorious happiness."



Daniel Catán  
(1949–2011)

Catán loosely based *Florencia en el Amazonas* on the novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, by Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez. A pupil of Márquez, Marcela Fuentes-Berain, wrote the opera's libretto. Catán stated that *Florencia* "is the story of the return journey that we all undertake at a certain point in our lives: the moment when we look back at what we once dreamed of becoming, and then confront what we have now become." Since 1996, opera houses around the globe have performed *Florencia*, dazzling audiences with its magic realism influences, dramatic culture, and poignant themes.

Catán composed two more operas (*Salsipuedes* and *Il Postino*), part of a North American-influenced opera (*Meet John Doe*), and works for orchestra, chamber music, art song, film and television, musical theater, and traditional Latin pop. An audience favorite, *Florencia en el Amazonas* has a rich performance history in the U.S., Mexico, and Germany, due to the opera's contemporary nature and unique Spanish heritage.

# *Florencia en el Amazonas*

**ACT I** The El Dorado, a steamboat sailing down the Amazon from Leticia, Colombia, to Manaus in the early 1900s. On the riverbank, Riolobo, a mystical character who can assume many forms, excitedly announces that the El Dorado is bound for the opera house in Manaus. There, the legendary opera diva Florencia Grimaldi, who has not set foot in her native South America for twenty years, will give a concert to reopen the theater. From among the crowds lining the riverbank and selling their local wares, we glimpse the ship's passengers coming aboard: a young journalist, Rosalba, who is working on a biography of Florencia Grimaldi; Paula and Alvaro, a middle-aged couple journeying to hear Grimaldi in hopes of rekindling their marriage; and the diva herself, traveling incognito.

As the ship pulls away from the busy port, Florencia reflects on the emptiness of her life and her desire to rediscover herself and her long-lost lover, Cristóbal, a butterfly hunter in search of the rare Emerald Muse. Rosalba's notebook is rescued from the river by the ship Capitán's nephew, Arcadio, and they exchange confidences about their longings and desires. Alvaro and Paula attempt to dine on deck, but misunderstandings about the exotic menu lead only to bitter exchanges.

Florencia, awakened by the sounds of the jungle, learns from the Capitán that the butterfly hunter has disappeared into the jungle without a trace. Later, a tempestuous game of cards contrasts the growing affection between Rosalba and Arcadio and the escalating tension between Paula and Alvaro. A violent storm quickly develops, and the ship is carried helplessly in the rushing currents in a downpour of pink rain. Alvaro saves the boat from being crushed by tree trunks but is knocked overboard. With the Capitán unconscious, Riolobo appears in the guise of a river-spirit and implores the mercy of the gods of the river. Arcadio ably takes the helm but is unable to stop the forces of nature as the ship runs aground.

## *Intermission*

**ACT II** In the quiet after the storm, Florencia wonders whether she is alive or dead. Arcadio and Rosalba rejoice to find they have survived the storm, but, frightened by the intensity of their feelings for each other, vow not to fall in love and risk disillusionment. Paula laments the loss of Alvaro, recognizing that the wall between them was pride—not a lack of love. Riolobo once again calls upon the mystical and transformative powers of the Amazon. Suddenly Alvaro is returned to the boat, explaining that Paula's voice called him back from the brink of death. On behalf of all the passengers, Florencia thanks him for saving their lives, and they resume their journey to Manaus.

Rosalba finds her ruined notebook, which contained all her notes for the biography of Florencia. Rosalba is distraught by the loss of two years' work, but Florencia tells her she has lost nothing irreplaceable. The two women begin to argue about the source of Grimaldi's talents, and when Florencia passionately declares that the diva's gift sprang from her love for a man, Rosalba suddenly realizes the woman standing before her is the opera singer herself.



With both pairs of lovers reconciled to their need for each other, the ship is about to reach Manaus when it is discovered that no one may disembark because of a cholera epidemic. In despair at being unable to fulfill her search, Florencia's spirit drifts toward Cristóbal in a mystical reunion.

## Characters

**Florencia Grimaldi** *soprano*  
[flo-REHN-see-ah gree-MAHL-dee]  
Opera singer who is to sing at the great Amazonas Opera House in Manaus. She is also hoping to find her lost lover

**Rosalba** *soprano*  
[roh-SAHL-bah]  
A journalist working on a book about Grimaldi

**Arcadio** *tenor*  
[ahr-KAH-dyoh]  
The ship captain's nephew

**Riolobo** *bass-baritone*  
[ree-oh-LOH-boh]  
The mystical figure who introduces the characters

**Paula** *mezzo-soprano*  
[POW-lah]  
A traveler, married to Alvaro

**Alvaro** *baritone*  
[AHL-vah-roh]  
A traveler, married to Paula

**Capitán** *bass-baritone*  
[kah-pee-TAHN]  
The ship's Captain

# Nobel Prize Winning Novel transformed into Contemporary Opera

by Tommi Lynn Barnes

Based on the novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez, the Spanish opera *Florencia en el Amazonas* premiered in 1996. Influenced by Marquez' use of Magical Realism, Catán incorporated it into his opera. In the world of magical realism, the supernatural realm blends with the natural, familiar world.

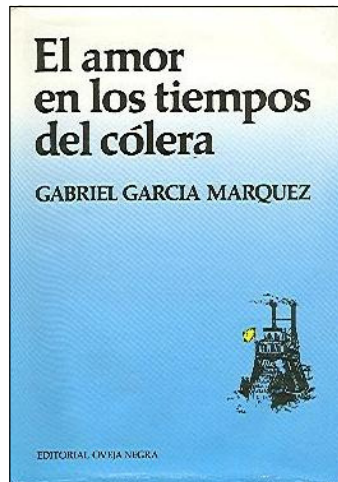
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Gabriel García Márquez was born in Arataca, Colombia in 1927. As a child, his grandmother told him stories of magical events, as if they were fact. These stories helped shape his signature writing style, "magical realism."

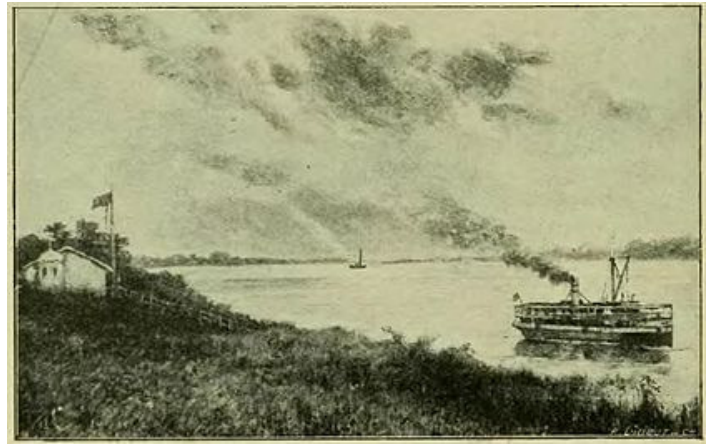
Márquez studied law and journalism at the National University of Colombia and at the University of

Cartagena. In 1948, he became a reporter and a foreign correspondent in Rome and many other cities, writing short stories in his spare time. His first fiction collection, *Leaf Storm and Other Stories* (1955), introduced the imaginary Colombian village Macondo, used in many of his works. In the 1960s, Márquez moved to Mexico City, where he worked as a journalist, screenwriter, publicist, and where he authored his best-known novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Márquez moved to Barcelona in 1973 and visited Cuba, where he became friends with communist dictator Fidel Castro.

Márquez won the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first Colombian to win. With more than 50 published works, including *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985 novel, 2007 film), *Of Love and Other Demons* (1995), Márquez was one of the most prolific writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author died April 17, 2014.



*Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1985 First Edition, Colombia



The opera's setting, a steamboat on the Amazon in the early 1900s

## PLOT OF THE NOVEL:

Set in South America during times of civil wars and plagues in the late 1870s to early 1930s, *Love in the Time of Cholera* explores life over death, love over despair, and health over sickness. Florentino Ariza, forgotten by Fermina Daza at age 18, loves her passionately for fifty-one years, nine months, and four days. When he sees Fermina again at her husband's wake, she rejects him. In hopes of rekindling the flames they once had, Florentino writes letter after letter to Fermina. In love at the end, Florentino and Fermina sail together on a riverboat topped with a yellow cholera flag and are untouched by the world.

## COMPARE AND CONTRAST:

*Florencia en el Amazonas* brings audience members

together to hear melodies sung in Spanish and to view stunning scenery. *Love in the Time of Cholera*, a novel by Gabriel García Márquez, inspires the opera and features the story of Fermina and Florentino falling in love on a boat. Both art forms portray the themes of life over death and love over despair, though in dramatically different fashions. Both tales have twists and turns that characters must face in a boat on the Amazon River. The novel's main two characters experience multiple conflicts as they try to rekindle the love they once had. The opera has multiple characters experiencing different conflicts, such as the boat encountering a horrific storm that causes death, and mixes reality with magic.







<https://www.resortsonline.com.br/destinos/nacionais/amazonas/>

## What is Magic Realism?

Magical realism, or magic realism, describes literature that weaves fantasy and myth into everyday events. One can ask reflective questions about what is real and what is imaginary. Jackie Craven states that “in the world of magical realism, the ordinary becomes extraordinary and the magical becomes commonplace.” The approach helps readers gain insight about society and human nature.

### CHARACTERISTICS TO LOOK FOR:

1 **Situations and events that defy logic**, such as a woman pouring magic into food in *Like Water for Chocolate*. In this world, anything can happen, like Riolobo, a mystical figure who can calm a storm.

2 **Myths and legends**, including folklore, parables, allegories, and superstitions. In *Florenzia*, the diva passionately declares that her gift sprang from her love for the man Cristóbal.

3 **Historic context and societal concerns**, which mix political events and social movements with fantasy. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, hot air balloons and airplanes are integral to the plot, yet the wars mentioned are not defined.

4 **Distorted time and sequence**, so that characters may move backward or forward in time, as in the sudden shifts of events in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

5 **Real-world settings**, so that the magic in magic realism has deep roots in reality. The many riverboat companies that ferried passengers on the Amazon River lend a solid reality to the magical *Florenzia en el Amazonas*.

6 **Matter-of-fact tone**, that includes a dispassionate narrative voice and characters who do not question surreal situations. In Act 2 of *Florenzia*, when Riolobo appeals to the river and Alvaro suddenly returns to the boat, the other passengers do not react as if magic happened.

Sources: <https://www.thoughtco.com/magical-realism-definition-and-examples-4153362> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic\\_realism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_realism)

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