

Anne LeBaron

CRESCENT CITY

Douglas Kearney
-libretto



ANNE LEBARON

CRESCENT CITY

a hyperopera

Anne LeBaron, music
Douglas Kearney, libretto
Marc Lowenstein, conductor
Yuval Sharon, director
Produced by The Industry

...She drowns you
and sinks you down

CRESCENT CITY



Complete libretto:
bit.ly/1le0JWD

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Act I (CD 1)

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. | Sunset on Crescent City | 5:13 |
| 2. | An Ill Wind Blows | 2:48 |
| 3. | Marie Laveau Emerges from Her Tomb | 4:42 |
| 4. | The Bound Ghost | 4:38 |
| 5. | Marie Invokes the Loa | 11:49 |
| 6. | Cop Discovers Marie's Body | 3:20 |
| 7. | Deadly Belle's First Turn | 5:04 |
| 8. | The Good Man's Song | 4:45 |
| 9. | Nurses in Hospital with Marie | 5:08 |
| 10. | Nurses on Helipad | 6:46 |
| 11. | Homesick Woman's Aria | 5:18 |
| 12. | Carrefour on the Move | 3:37 |

Act II (CD 2)

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|-------|
| 1. | Marie and Baron Samedi | 5:56 |
| 2. | Samedi and the Cop | 5:24 |
| 3. | Erzulie Inhabits Deadly Belle | 11:03 |
| 4. | Report from the Marassa Jumeaux | 2:28 |
| 5. | The Catastrophe | 9:34 |
| 6. | Judgment at the Swamp | 16:07 |
| 7. | Party at the End of the World | 5:39 |

Performers (in order of appearance)

Cop/Baron Samedi	Jonathan Mack
Jesse (Ghost Cop)	Ashley Faatoalia
Marie Laveau	Gwendolyn Brown
Bound Ghost	Marc Lowenstein
Marassa Jumeaux/Nurse	Maria Elena Altany
Marassa Jumeaux/Nurse	Ji Young Yang
Erzulie/Deadly Belle	Timur Bekbosunov
Good Man/Baron Samedi	Cedric Berry
Homesick Woman	Lillian Sengpiehl



Synopsis

Marie Laveau, emerging from her tomb when a final disaster threatens her beloved city, pleads with the pantheon of vodou gods and goddesses (the Loa) to help save her city from impending destruction. They reluctantly agree to come to her aid, but only if they can locate one good person, among the cops, nurses, entertainers, and other denizens. In their quest, they disperse, overtaking the souls and bodies of the city's inhabitants. One of the Loa, the dreaded Baron Carrefour, thwarts their collective mission to try and help Marie. A showdown between Carrefour and Marie leads to the demise of Crescent City.



CREDITS

Music and electronics by Anne LeBaron
Libretto by Douglas Kearney
Directed by Yuval Sharon
Conducted by Marc Lowenstein

CAST (in order of appearance)

Jonathan Mack: COP/BARON SAMEDI
Ashley Faatoalia: JESSE
Gwendolyn Brown: MARIE LAVEAU
Marc Lowenstein: BOUND GHOST
Maria Elena Altany: MARASSA JUMEAUX/NURSE
Ji Young Yang: MARASSA JUMEAUX/NURSE
Timur Bekbosunov: ERZULIE/DEADLY BELLE
Cedric Berry: GOOD MAN/BARON CARREFOUR
Lillian Sengpiehl: HOMESICK WOMAN

ORCHESTRA

Sarah Wass	FLUTE
Brian Walsh	REEDS
Erin Breen Armstrong	REEDS
Christoffer Schunk	KEYBOARDS
Daniel Corral	ACCORDION, CHROMELODEON
Austin Kowalczyk	SAW
Matthew Setzer	ELECTRIC GUITAR
Andrew Lessman	DRUMSET
T.J. Troy	PERCUSSION
Jonah Levy	TRUMPET
Matt Barbier	TROMBONE
Luke Storm	TUBA
Eric KM Clark	VIOLIN
Orin Hildestad	VIOLIN
Cassia Streb	VIOLA
Derek Stein	CELLO
Dave Tranchina	BASS
Philip Curtis	ELECTRONICA & LIVE PROCESSING

Crescent City was performed a dozen times at Atwater Crossing in Los Angeles throughout May 2012. Additional credits related to these performances:

REVELERS: Jordan Baker, Stacia Hitt, Justo Leon, Gabriel Romero, Chelsea Spirito, Max Wanderman

DESIGN and PRODUCTION: Laura Kay Swanson (Producer); Philip Curtis (Musical Sound Designer); Ivy Chou (Costume Designer); Sibyl Wickersheimer (Scenic Designer); Elizabeth Harper (Lighting Designer); Jason H Thompson (Projection Designer); Eric Nolfo (Technical Director)

VISUAL ARTIST INSTALLATIONS

Mason Cooley (Good Man's Shack); Brianna Gorton (Cemetery); Katie Grinnan (Junk Heap); Alice Könitz (Swamp); Jeff Kopp (Hospital); Olga Koumoundouros (Dive Bar)

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Lyrics in *Under the Sky*, *Mr. Moon*, *Where's the Party*, and additional lyrics in scenes 1, 2, and 3 by Philip Littell. Used with permission of Philip Littell.



This album, culled from live performances of our sold-out world premiere production, is a document of artists who decided to take opera into their own hands.


When I accepted Anne's work for inclusion in New York City Opera's VOX Showcase in 2005, Anne and I both hoped the work would find an established operatic institution as thrilled and overwhelmed by the expansive work as the VOX audiences were. But after a second VOX reading in 2009 without any significant signs of interest from more traditional venues, two hard but necessary truths became clear to me: first, a work this unusual and boundary-breaking would need to find an equally unconventional institution. And so The Industry, my company for new and experimental opera, was born in Los Angeles, conceived as a home for pieces like *Crescent City* that fall far outside the mainstream but have the potential to change the nature of opera.

Second, the piece's chaotic, kaleidoscopic sprawl resists the tidy frame of a proscenium. The production I conceived was consequentially spatial and eschewed tableaux in favor of landscape: the six locations of the op-

era's narrative simultaneously sprawled throughout a 25,000 square foot warehouse, with live and pre-recorded video, lighting, and sound creating an immersive environment. The audience could have fixed seats for the duration of the performance or walk around the warehouse. In this way, the multiplicity of perspectives that define Anne's concept of hyperopera was extended to the audience. There was no privileged perspective or box seat with the ideal vanishing point; in our non-opera house, each spectator had a partial view and a wholly individual point-of-view. The audience became collaborators in their own experience.

What drove me and all of my fellow artists was the audacity of Anne's music and the poetry of Douglas's words. While our adventurous visual realization has come and gone, I am grateful that this record preserves this one-of-a-kind opera, as well as the fearless performances that brought it to kicking, screaming life.

—Yuval Sharon
Original Director, *Crescent City*
Artistic Director, The Industry



*- And where are you bound?
- I think I'll visit Crescent City...*

I've come to think that a musical setting is a materialization of a composer's reading of a libretto. As with the keenest readers, a great composer sees the rhythms of dialogue, conflict, and reflection, the mutability of time when considering recitative versus aria, the emotional possibility of the unfinished sentence—she sees all of this and finds more than what you put down.

Anne's reading of *Crescent City* was rich, richer than I had hoped. What I considered dilapidated, she saw as a grand ruin. A passage I wrote imagining a Blues became a deep Indigo. A man's despair exploded into a seismic force of (super)nature.

The poet, Paul Muldoon, quipped that a song is a poem with holes in it. The idea is that the music and its performance fill the holes – or, put another way, the poem is free to leave more unsaid and undramatized, inviting music to make meaning in cooperation, substitution, or tension with lyrics. Though I love Muldoon's description, I would not say, regarding my work with Anne LeBaron, that I leave holes for her to fill. Rather, I scrawl something to her and she sings it back to me with a polyphony so vivid, it's damn near Technicolor®.

And for this, the least I could do was write a passage to be set to a swamp full of frogs.

– Douglas Kearney
Santa Clarita, CA





Anne LeBaron, *Hyperopera*,
and *Crescent City*:
Some Historical Perspectives
by Nicole V. Gagné

Four decades ago Anne LeBaron first won audiences with *Concerto for Active Frogs* (1975), a theatrical and amusing work for voices, winds, percussion, and tape, and today that piece can be regarded as something of an overture to her career as a composer. It offers a deft and memorable statement of themes to come: concert theater, improvisation, and electronic sound, all infused with humor, ritual, and environmentalism. Throughout the ensuing years she has embraced a wide spectrum of media and styles, producing memorable scores of every stripe, from orchestra to mixed chamber groups to soloist, with and without electronics, as well as vocal works ranging from art songs and choral scores to music theater and opera. She has blended East and West in multi-cultural compositions such as *Lamentation/Invocation* (1984) for baritone and three instruments, with its Korean-inspired gestures and haunting long sustained tones for the voice, and her large-scale celebration of Kazakhstan, *The Silent Steppe Cantata* (2011). Her music can be rich in Americana, as in her blues-inflected opera *The E & O Line* (1993), the lively *American Icons* (1996) for orchestra,

and *Traces of Mississippi* (2000) for chorus, orchestra, poet narrators, and rap artists – and, for that matter, her evocation of Edgar Allan Poe, *Devil in the Belfry* (1993) for violin and piano, as well as her setting of Gertrude Stein, *Is Money Money* (2000). LeBaron's inclinations toward theater are another fundamental, from the harp solos *I Am an American ... My Government Will Reward You* (1988) and *Hsing* (2002) to her dramatic works for soprano and chamber musicians: *Pope Joan* (2000), *Transfiguration* (2003), and *Sucktion* (2008), or the full-scale operas *Croak (The Last Frog)* (1996) and *Wet* (2005).

An essential factor of LeBaron's composition is her musicianship. A gifted harpist, she utilizes electro-acoustic set-ups and extended performance techniques, many of which she has invented and disseminated. LeBaron is also a superb improviser and has honed her skills playing with an array of creative composer/musicians, including Anthony Braxton, Muhal Richard Abrams, Evan Parker, George Lewis, Derek Bailey, Leroy Jenkins, Lionel Hampton, Shelley Hirsch, Davey Williams, and LaDonna Smith. Her ability to put together changing sounds in real time also characterizes her composition, where she likewise demonstrates a sensitive ear for

how different sounds relate. This talent for bringing together elements of numerous musical genres and cultures, as in her recent *Breathtails* (2011) for voice, string quartet, and shakuhachi, springs from LeBaron's recognition of the relationships – compositional, gestural, spiritual – through which seemingly disparate things connect and support each other.

Her gift for creating dynamic connections was raised to a new level of expression with the 2012 premiere of *Crescent City* (produced by The Industry in Los Angeles) which embodies LeBaron's concept of hyperopera, defined in her notes for the program: "an opera resulting from intensive collaboration across all the disciplines essential for producing opera in the 21st century – in a word, a 'meta-collaborative' undertaking. Collaborative relationships, which are normally, in opera, cemented in established top-down hierarchies, are reassessed, encouraging a more holistic process of artistic collaboration among composer, librettist, director, designers, musicians, and vocalists." Hyperopera might seem to have roots reaching back to Richard Wagner's vision of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the united/total/universal artwork that would synthesize architecture, scenic painting, singing, instrumental music, poetry, drama, and dance). However,

LeBaron's concept of hyperopera goes further by breaking down the usual hierarchical structures that define the roles of individuals on creative and production teams, and shifting into a more lateral and inclusive collaborative arrangement.

For most of the 20th century, the cost and logistics of opera production made the genre increasingly inflexible, and no modernist opera composer became the kind of game-changer Wagner had been. It was the postmodern avant-garde – notably Robert Ashley, Meredith Monk, and Robert Wilson – who transformed opera in the 1960s and '70s. In his epochal video opera for television *Perfect Lives* (1977-1980) and the major works that followed, Ashley used small groups of players to create a non-dramatic multimedia form of music theater, centered in improvisation and rooted in electronic sound, blending pop, jazz, rock, atonality, and noise.

With Robert Ashley's death in 2014, the question of new directions in 21st-century opera has become more acute – and Anne LeBaron's development of hyperopera is even more urgent. Like Wagner and Ashley, she sees in opera the perfect nexus for the arts, and her hyperopera *Crescent City* (2012), with a libretto by Douglas Kearney, can be regarded as a bridge between

those masters of 19th- and 20th-century opera. LeBaron, like Wagner, relies on the voices of the operatic tradition; but as in Ashley's operas, you're just as liable to hear those voices in pop, blues, jazz, rock, or experimental stylings. She abandons the Wagnerian orchestra and, like Ashley, combines her singers with smaller and more specialized forces of instruments and electronic sound, which also move readily among stylistic genres; unlike Ashley, the instrumental and vocal parts are, for the most part, as faithfully notated as the score of *Parsifal*. LeBaron also differs from Ashley in that she is not a minimalist. Her music at certain privileged moments can become completely still or hushed with simplicity or lost to the world, but she has not walked away from contrast, drama, and story. Like Wagner, she aspires to create a repeatable theatrical drama that will rivet an audience; but like Ashley, she fragments her opera through a prism of video work and performance freedoms and simultaneities.

Also like Ashley (and unlike Wagner), LeBaron believes in collaboration. For Ashley, collaboration took place among the immediate musicmakers: himself and the other vocalists, along with the instrumentalists and sound designers. But while LeBaron suitably tailored parts to her players – she could write Marie Laveau's part so star-

tlingly low only for a contralto of Gwendolyn Brown's range! – the collaborations in *Crescent City*'s realization occurred on an even deeper level. The world premiere production, conceived and directed by Yuval Sharon, engaged six visual artists to participate in the collaborative process by designing and building installation set pieces as the various locales of the opera's action. Lighting, video, and sound designers also worked together in the development of *Crescent City*. Furthermore, the orchestra itself performed guided improvisations at specific musical junctures, such as the ever-shifting sheen it created to color the fully notated piano and voice parts in the Homesick Woman's Aria.

Hyperopera can also claim inspiration from Harry Partch, a composer especially relevant to Anne LeBaron and *Crescent City*. When Deadly Belle headlines at The Chit Hole, her wheezy and woozy accompaniment is a chromelodeon: a pump organ retuned to Partch's system of 43 tones to the octave. LeBaron has also written for Partch instruments in her 1994 chamber piece *Southern Ephemera* and is writing for them in her newest opera, *LSD: The Opera*, an investigation into the historical/cultural ramifications of LSD.

Harry Partch took the Gesamtkunstwerk idea so seriously that he built his own instruments as objects of sculptural beauty, tuned them to his own just-intonation system, and featured them onstage in his music theater works. They were played by costumed musicians who not only interacted with singers, actors, and dancers, but also were charged with singing, acting, and dancing. But woe to those who call what Partch did any kind of "opera." As Partch explained in his notes for the premiere of *Water! Water!* (1961), "Singing is always involved in these works, recitatives and choruses frequently, yet they are never opera."

An apocalyptic satire that features a Deluge, Partch's *Water! Water!* – although not an opera – serves as a kind of missing link between Kurt Weill's *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and Anne LeBaron's *Crescent City*. The same can also be said of a few other not-operas of roughly the same time. Manuel de Falla's scenic cantata *Atlántida* (completed posthumously by Ernesto Halffter in 1961 and revised in 1976) includes the submergence of Atlantis; the Biblical story of Noah and the Flood is retold by Benjamin Britten in *Noye's Fludde* (1957) and by Igor Stravinsky in his "musical play" for television, *The Flood* (1962). Of course, the rogues gallery that populates Bertolt Brecht's city of Mahagonny as

it rises and falls makes it an essential precursor for *Crescent City*. The fundamental vision of LeBaron's hyperopera, however, is not the political analysis of Brecht and Weill but rather the common concern of Partch and Falla and Britten and Stravinsky: our fatal, catastrophic disconnect from the undying spiritual forces that surround us. People have settled for what they can buy and sell, what they can eat and fuck, and none of that helps when the waters start rising.

Throughout *Water! Water!* Partch wove his own English rendition of the first two lines of Chapter 8 of the Dao De Jing: "The highest goodness is like water. It seeks the low place that all men dislike." Water does indeed seek the lowest point, and no place is lower or more detestable than the shambles that is *Crescent City*. . . which means that the oncoming flood must be a good thing. (The imminent hurricane does already have the name Charity.)

Responding to Marie Laveau's plea, the jaded Loa (gods and goddesses from the Vodou pantheon) deign to manifest themselves, prowling the streets of Crescent City like angels in Sodom as they search for good people to justify sparing the city from disaster. But the only people who

attract the Loa and become their 'vessels' are social misfits: a pair of cokehead nurses, a drag chanteuse, men who kill. (These characters become possessed by their archetypal Loa, so that each singer takes on two roles.) Marie Laveau, like an improvising composer who is expert at putting different things together, truly understands the old maxim, as above so below. In Scene 6 she declares, "All my power don't come from Loa. Some of it comes from lower," and makes a suggestive movement. These two power sources – as well as an appetite for poetry and pun, gods and lowlifes – make themselves available to you when you have one foot in dirt and one foot in water and are home on land and in the river. And when you have all that, so what if your name is mud?

RECORDING CREDITS

Produced by Anne LeBaron
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final two live performances:
Atwater Crossing, Los Angeles

E. M. Gimenez - Production Sound
Designer & Recording Engineer
Ryan Ainsworth - Associate Sound
Designer & Mixing Engineer
Michael Marshall - Sound Intern/
Deck Audio
Mastered by Greg Reiersen at Rareform

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