

New Orleans opera

Charlie Parker's Yardbird EDUCATIONAL STUDY GUIDE



THE BASICS

Charlie Parker's Yardbird

Premiered on June 5, 2015 at Philadelphia's Perelman Theater

Music: Daniel Schnyder (b. 1961)

Libretto: Bridgette A. Wimberly (b. 1954)

Based on the life of Charlie Parker

CHARACTERS

Charlie Parker	Virtuosic jazz saxophone player	Tenor
Addie Parker	Charlie's mother	Soprano
Dizzy Gillespie	Virtuosic jazz trumpet player	Baritone
Rebecca Parker	Charlie's first wife	Mezzo-Soprano
Chan Parker	Charlie's common-law wife	Soprano
Doris Parker	Charlie's third wife	Soprano
Baroness Nica	Charlie's friend and patron	Mezzo-Soprano
Byrd	The spirit of Charlie's music	Mute

SYNOPSIS

Imagine having an opportunity to realize one final dream before you die. Charlie Parker has just passed away and while his body lies unidentified in the Bellevue morgue, his ghost appears at Birdland, the New York City jazz club named after him. He will try to compose a musical masterpiece before the news of his death becomes public. As the opera begins, Charlie Parker's spirit finds itself at Birdland, the jazz club named after him. He has just died; his body is still at the segregated hotel suite of Nica de Koenigswarter. Panicking about the scandal that will ensue when his body is found in her rooms, Nica finds his spirit at Birdland. She wants Chan, Charlie's wife, to identify his body; but Charlie begs Nica not to tell Chan where he is, to keep his secret for a while, until he has time to compose a masterpiece.

Looking for inspiration, Charlie remembers growing up in Kansas City. His neighbors complain about all the noise he makes, learning to play saxophone—particularly the tritone, "the Devil's interval"—while his mother, Addie, worries about his lifestyle in the age of Jim Crow laws. Rebecca, Charlie's first wife, joins Addie in a lament about the challenges of being a wife and mother to black males in the United States. Hoping to save his life, Addie tells Charlie he must leave Kansas City. He promises to make her proud one day and asks her to take care of his wife and son. Charlie's third wife, Doris, tries to help him find peace; but there are still unanswered questions. Dizzy Gillespie, on the other hand, brings Charlie inspiration, and together the two musicians triumph as Bebop is born. Charlie then remembers how he met Chan and went off to conquer California with Dizzy, despite his heroin addiction.

Meanwhile, Addie remembers her pride upon hearing Charlie play on the radio. In California, Charlie hears from Chan that their two-year-old daughter, Pree, is dead. Charlie breaks down and ends up in Camarillo State Hospital. Music facilitates his recovery. By now Charlie's body has been discovered. Addie wants him buried in Kansas City, but Chan wants to bury him in New York. Doris and Rebecca join the argument over where Charlie is to be buried while the world sings, "Bird lives!" Charlie realizes that playing the saxophone was his life's work, his masterpiece. He makes peace with himself, frees his soul, and sings lines from Paul Laurence Dunbar's classic poem, "Sympathy."

THE MUSIC OF CHARLIE PARKER

Charlie Parker is known for a style of jazz we call Bebop. Created by a younger generation of jazz musicians in the 1940s, Bebop experiments with tempo, complex chord progressions, and improvisation. While not as danceable as swing, bebop became a "musician's jazz," a style of music better suited to listening than dancing. Since bebop is such a nimble and challenging jazz style, the classic bebop instrumentation is smaller than its big-band swing predecessor: sax, trumpet, piano, guitar, upright bass, and drums. Bebop compositions are generally written in an A-B-A format: an ensemble "head" piece is played to open the piece, followed by a long section of improvised solos and finally a restatement of the opening theme.

Use this playlist to listen to five different examples of Charlie Parker's saxophone playing and his musical style: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3GKObP3pYpk5gTeFOHrgrV?si=835e71d003604cfb>

OPERA & FANTASY

The word **fantasy** is defined as “the activity of imagining things, especially things that are impossible or improbable. We see fantasy in all elements of entertainment media: comic books, classic literature, tv shows, movies, etc. We also explore lots of fantasy in opera from the fairytales *Hansel and Gretel* and *Rusalka (The Little Mermaid)* to the Norse mythical creatures in Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*.

In this opera, the librettist and composer have developed a different kind of fantasy: when the opera begins, Charlie Parker has just died. His body lies misidentified in the morgue, but in this “limbo” he wants to compose a long piece for a large orchestra, something he was never able to do in his life. All the important people in his life come to visit him, ranging from his fellow musician Dizzy Gillespie to his own mother. In the end, Charlie is never able to get his composition down on paper, which is a symbolic way to reflect on his genius for spontaneously improvising music.

ACTIVITY

During the final moments of *Yardbird*, Parker finds peace with his life and sings lines from the famous poem “Sympathy” by African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Read Dunbar’s poem, listen to this musical setting of the poem by African American composer Florence Price, and then discuss the meaning of the poem. You might talk about the natural elements of the poem, the metaphors, imagery, and subtext of the poem.

Here are two articles that shed more light on the background of this poem:

- **Library of Congress Blog Post:** <https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2013/06/the-caged-bird-sings-paul-laurence-dunbar-at-the-library-of-congress/>
- **The Guardian Article:** <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/sep/28/paul-laurence-dunbar-sympathy>

“Sympathy”

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—

I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;

For he must fly back to his perch and cling

When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting—

I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

Florence Price art song setting: <https://youtu.be/eNVCvlj4MO4>

In Dunbar's poem, the bird sings but does not achieve freedom talked about in the poem. In *Yardbird* however, the poem has been adapted to show Parker finding freedom and peace. Read the lyrics below as they have been adapted by librettist Bridgette A. Wimberly:

I know when the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
I know when the caged bird sings, ah me,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings,
The bird caged no more sings ooh,
 This bird is free.

Now it's your turn. Dunbar and Parker both dealt with obstacles in their own lives and this poem and its version in the opera are excellent examples of how these two men expressed their own frustrations. Identify an obstacle in your own life that you have either overcome or are working to overcome and create something to reflect that struggle. You can write something (a poem, song, rap, essay, short story, etc.) or create a piece of art (drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, etc.) - whatever best depicts your journey of struggle. Share your pieces with your class and celebrate what each other has created!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This study guide was compiled from the following sources:

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