

# Vera of Las Vegas

A Nightmare Cabaret Opera in One Act

Music: Daron Hagen Words: Paul Muldoon



*Vera of Las Vegas* ..... (57:06)

1. Prologue ..... (3:09)
2. Flight Attendant's Blues ..... (2:36)

3. More Airport Dialogue ..... (1:58)
4. Suckers' Lament ..... (1:33)
5. Forum Shops Dialogue ..... (3:53)
6. Doll's Song ..... (5:55)
7. Dealers' Chorus ..... (3:26)
8. Duet ..... (2:57)
9. Strippers' Chorus ..... (3:48)
10. Duet ..... (5:09)
11. Wedding Chapel Chorus ..... (3:29)
12. Vera's Song ..... (8:54)
13. Dialogue ..... (5:08)
14. Taco's Confession ..... (4:03)

*Doll* ..... Carolann Page  
*Vera* ..... Charles Maxwell  
*Dumdum* ..... Paul Kreider  
*Taco* ..... Patrick Jones  
 The University of Nevada Las Vegas Opera  
 Theater Chorus & Orchestra

Total Playing Time: 57:06

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## Notes

Straight, No Chaser: Daron Hagen's *Vera of Las Vegas*

**Daron Hagen's** collaboration with the poet Paul Muldoon—one of the most fascinating operatic partnerships in American music—has brought forth a group of works which, not unlike the Thomson-Stein operas, have a provocative mix of European sophistication and American know-how that undercuts traditional artistic notions of simplicity and complexity. *Vera of Las Vegas*, a “nightmare cabaret opera in one act,” is their second work for the stage, a relationship that began with *Shining Brow* (1993), a two-act work based on a tragic episode in the life of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Hagen is nothing if not a man of the theater (as John von Rhein said in the *Chicago Tribune*, he is “born to write operas”), but he first built his reputation on impressive series of orchestral works (commissioned by such ensembles as the Brooklyn and New York philharmonics) and on a copious catalog of art songs respected for their natural, conversational prosody and astute literary taste. His memorably melodic music, schooled in the Francophone elegance of Copland and Rorem, glows with sincerity, clarity and hands-on expertise; in contrast, Muldoon—an Irish-born poet who has transplanted himself to Princeton—writes verse which is renowned for its virtuosic, ironic, and morally ambiguous sense of wordplay. When joined, each artist's singular complexity complements the other's. If Muldoon's tone can seem cool, then Hagen's music can turn up the heat; if Muldoon's words sometimes distract us with their dazzle, Hagen's passionate sounds magnify the human element. While the librettist finds multiple meanings for a favorite

well-worn group of words (such as, in the present work, “lemon,” “horn,” “strip” or “bar”), the composer uses a multiplicity of styles—classical tonal, atonal, Broadway, *Ocean's Eleven*-style swing, '70s folk-rock and more—to weld those words to single purpose. The result, as Hagen maintains, is a “postmodern meditation on the death of love.”

The story is such an accurate illustration of their human concerns, and their multifaceted aesthetics, that it seems not so much manufactured as a reflection of facts—that they belonged to Vegas before Vegas belonged to them. According to the composer, the piece “ostensibly relate(s) how two on-the-lam IRA volunteers, Dumdum and Taco, en route to Los Angeles to be on ‘Wheel of Fortune,’ are set up by a rogue INS-agent-turned-stewardess named Doll and her friend, an African-American transvestite lap-dancer named Vera during a layover in Las Vegas.” But Las Vegas is so deep a part of America's heart-of-darkness that we have been confronting its truths all our adult lives: it is there that the country's spirit of freedom—of relentless change, of tremendous risk, of material and sexual indulgence, of malleable identity—reaches its nadir. Or apogee.

All in *Vera* is transformation, of which Vera's physical duality is merely the focal point; it is also a showcase for Hagen's prodigious gift for writing arias. There is the chorus of Girls, who morph from stewardesses to showgirls, to dealers, to strippers, and to a “canned” church choir—Britten's *Death in Venice* changeling, the Elderly Fop, cloned en masse. (After they sing that Vera “embodies the truth at the heart of Vegas,” they divide to sing three different things.)

There are similarities between Doll's and Vera's songs, each in a strictly set style and ending with a pious half-chorale; and there is the delirious Dumdum, "breaking through" to realize that he may have been responsible for a hotel bombing in Belfast, accompanied by music of a strangely uncomfortable nobility. The angry yet nostalgic musings of the tripped-up Taco lie mostly in *quasi-parlando* recitative, where they can help the action move swiftly.

Vera may be fun to listen to, but it is not a particularly consoling piece. Its savage ironies extend to the close: Taco slips into a chair in an interrogation room, undercutting the action of the entire opera we've just heard, while Vera pines for her (imagined?) lover with a scrap of text reminiscent of a fast-food commercial. At the end of *Shining Brow*, a distraught Frank Lloyd Wright, surveying the burnt remains of the house in which his lover and her children lie dead, asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Vegas has a reply: the house always wins.

—Russell Platt

Russell Platt, a noted American composer, is an editor at *The New Yorker*.

## SYNOPSIS

### Scene 1

Taco is in an interrogation center, somewhere near Northern Ireland. He is slumped back on a chair, hands cuffed. Trench and Trilby take turns slapping his face, as if to bring him round. We hear the judder of his blood as the slapping continues. This judder cross-fades into the sound of a landing airplane as Taco slips into unconsciousness. We hear the susurrus of a handful of Women. The Las Vegas Airport is revealed. Flight Attendants swank by. Taco and Dumdum shuffle on, pushing a cart piled high with luggage. They are between planes. Doll, undercover as a stewardess, enters. Doll calls Taco on a courtesy phone, and tells him that he and his friend have won a free day in Las Vegas. Taco and Dumdum decide to stay. Doll tells them to meet Vera, "your Girl Friday, or *more*," at the Forum Shops. Flight Attendants sing "The Suckers' Lament."

### Scene 2

The Forum Shops. Taco and Dumdum meet Vera. Doll reappears and sings about her past. Two shady characters named Trench and Trilby, clad in trench coats and trilbys flit about in the shadows. The quartet decides to go to a casino called the Hippolyta.

### Scene 3

The Hippolyta. The Dealers sing about their customers as they work. Vera wins big at the slots. Doll and Vera sing a duet during which we learn that Trench and Trilby, who are still lurking about, have been sent by one of Vera's assignments, a corrupt judge who she is suing for aggravated assault, to set her up for a crime she didn't commit. The quartet tries to lose Trench and Trilby by slipping away to a stripper bar called the Delphine.

### Scene 4

The Delphine, a bar off the strip, where strippers sing of their lot as Doll and Dumdum settle in to have a drink. Taco and Vera disappear into the shadows. Taco re-emerges, clearly rattled: he's discovered that Vera is a transvestite. "You wouldn't have missed it," replies Dumdum, "if you'd seen *The Crying Game*." Vera and Doll reveal that they know that Taco and Dumdum are IRA volunteers hiding out in the U.S. without green cards. Vera announces that she knows a way to solve all their problems: She'll tear her business card,

which reads "Vera Loman, LAPDANCER" so that it reads, "Vera Loman, LAPD" and run Trench and Trilby off by presenting it to them. Then, she explains, if they all get married, Taco and Dumdum will get their green cards. They set off for a drive through wedding chapel.

### Scene 5

A drive-through wedding chapel. Trench and Trilby lurk. A canned chorus sings something vaguely hymn-like. Vera sings a heart-wrenching aria about her past before presenting Trench and Trilby with the business card. They flee. Taco, at the last moment, backs out of marrying Vera. The lights change. Taco staggers backwards into a chair. He slumps. The others depart. He confesses to a grisly murder. Vera wails into the night, "Where's my Taco Bell?" from off stage as Taco's head lolls to the side.

## Biographies

**Carolann Page** (*Doll*) Known for her superb dramatic flair, Ms. Page was seen on Broadway as Marjorie in *Allegro* with the Encores Series, Cunegonde in Hal Prince's Tony-winning first revival of *Candide*, and *Music Is* directed by the legendary George Abbot. Off-Broadway, she created the roles of Eleanor Roosevelt and Evelyn Lincoln in LaChiusa's *First Lady's Suite* for the New York Shakespeare Festival at the Public Theater, Gertrude Stein in *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* for the WPA Signature Theater, Mother in *Woof*, and Justine in *A Mind of its Own* for the Young Playwright's Festival 2000 at the Cherry Lane Theater.

With "her lyric soprano that exultantly ravishes the ear" (*The Guardian, London*), Ms. Page has earned critical and popular acclaim internationally as the creator of a number of leading roles in many world premieres. Most memorable was her creation of Pat Nixon in the landmark Emmy-and Grammy-winning *Nixon in China* by John Adams, directed by Peter Sellars. Others include Mamah Cheney in Daron Hagen's *Shining Brow* and Celia in Carlyle Floyd's *The Passion of Jonathan Wade*. She has appeared with major symphony orchestras around the world.

**Charles Maxwell** (*Vera*) began his studies as a tenor, but soon discovered his very special talent as a countertenor with a vocal range of three octaves. In 1994, he made his debut in Vienna as Apollo in Britten's *Death in Venice*, in 1995, his New York debut in the world premiere of Daron Hagen's *Merrill Songs*. Successful engagements followed as Aziz/Thief in Moritz Eggert's *Helle Nächte* in the Berlin Biennale 1997, as well as Purcell's *Faire Queen* at the Bayerische Theater Akademie in 1997. In 1998/99 he appeared in Chicago at the Theater an der Wien. During that same season he also sang *Dido and Aeneas* in Bielefeld and returned to Vienna in the role of Prince Orlofsky.

In 1999/2000 Charles Maxwell sang the Swiss first performance of Salvatore Sciarrino's opera *The Deadly Flower* at the Theatre of Lucerne under the baton of Beat Furrer and the roles of Mago Cristiano, Araldo, and Donna in *Rinaldo* at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich. In January 2001, Charles Maxwell sang the role of Mephistophiles in Alfred Schnittke's *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, the Austrian premiere produced by the Neue Oper, Vienna.

**Paul Kreider** (*Dumdum*) serves as general director of the Southern Nevada Opera Association and as chair of the department of music at Northern Kentucky University. Mr. Kreider's many performing credits include numerous roles with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and a three-year residency as principal baritone with Salzburg's Landestheater. Mr. Kreider has performed with world-renowned singers, conductors, and stage directors, including Leonard Bernstein, Claudio

Abbado, Jean Pierre Ponnelle, Placido Domingo, and Kiri Te Kanawa. International credits include the Vienna State Opera, Maggio Musicale in Florence, and the National Opera of Slovenia. Television appearances include PBS national telecasts from the Lyric Opera of Chicago in *Eugene Onegin*, *Madama Butterfly*, and Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Kreider's credits also include a Deutsche Grammophone recording of *La Bohème* conducted by Bernstein, and recent recordings on Arsis Audio, featuring works of Daron Hagen.

**Patrick Jones** (*Taco*) appeared on Broadway as Ubaldo in *The Phantom of the Opera*. He has sung with the Vancouver Opera, the Santa Fe Opera, Opera Malaga (Spain), Chautauqua Opera, Madison Opera, and Teatro Lyrico D'Europa. In addition to his operatic work, Mr. Jones has sung as tenor soloist for the Verdi *Requiem*, Handel's *Messiah*, and the Bach *Magnificat*. He has sung Loge to James Morris's Wotan in Wagner's *Das Rheingold* in Valencia, Spain, and sung the roles of Pirelli (*Sweeney Todd*), Don Basilio (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Pong (*Turandot*), Bardolfo (*Falstaff*), Beppe (*Pagliacci*) and Scratch (*The Devil and Daniel Webster*).

Compositions by **Daron Hagen** (*Composer*) have been commissioned by many of America's foremost musical institutions, including *Philharmonia*, commissioned for the 150th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic; *Much Ado*, commissioned for the 75th anniversary of the Curtis Institute of Music; *Angels*, commissioned for the 100th anniversary of the artist retreat Yaddo and premiered by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra; Concerto for Brass Quintet, commissioned for the 100th anniversary of the University of Wisconsin; *Heliotrope*, commissioned for the 75th anniversary of ASCAP and premiered by the Brooklyn Philharmonic; *The Waking Father*, commissioned by the Kings Singers; *Seven Last Words*, a concerto for piano left hand and orchestra commissioned for Gary Graffman to introduce with the New Mexico Symphony and Buffalo Philharmonic; *Pieta*, a double concerto commissioned for Jaime Laredo and Sharon Robinson to introduce with the Buffalo Philharmonic, Milwaukee Symphony, and Puerto Rico Symphony.

Hagen's numerous song cycles and operatic works are especially beloved by singers and critics, who write that he is "born to write operas," (*Chicago Tribune*) and is possessed of "a sophisticated, wide-ranging musical mind" (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*). "No other American composer in his generation sets English so persuasively, so easily, or with such immediate feeling" (*NATS Journal of Singing*). Hagen "sustains the idea of non-minimalist tonality as a still-viable medium" (*Village Voice*). His music is variously described as "utterly brilliant" (*New York Times*) and "of considerable artistic achievement and of uncompromising seriousness" (*Times of London*). He has been described as "an inspired melodist" (*Fanfare*) and the creator of "dangerously beautiful melodies" (*New York Post*). "Daron is music." (*Opera News*).

Mr. Hagen has received the Bears Prize (from Columbia University), the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Barlow Foundation grant and prize, multiple prizes from the BMI and ASCAP Foundations, including the ASCAP-Nissim Prize for Orchestral Music, Opera America's "Next Stage" Award, a production grant from the Readers Digest Opera for a New America Project, the Kennedy Center Friedheim Prize for orchestral music, and a Rockefeller Foundation Grant. He has served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and is a member of

the Corporation of Yaddo, where he has composed many of his works.

Recordings of the music of Daron Hagen are available on CRI, Albany, Klavier, Cambria, Sierra Classical, Bleecker Street Media, and Sanctus. In the mid 1990s Daron Hagen began a non-exclusive relationship with the Arsis label that has so far yielded nine CDs devoted to his song cycles, choral works, concerti and wind ensemble works, most composer-supervised—some are composer-conducted or performed as well.

A passionate mentor of and advocate for young composers, Hagen served on the faculty of Toni Morrison's atelier at Princeton University in 1999. From 1996 to 1998 Hagen served on the faculty of the Curtis Institute. From 1988–1997 he taught composition as a professor at Bard College. During this period Hagen also served several semesters on the faculties of New York University and the City College of New York. Hagen was composer-in-residence for the Long Beach (CA) Symphony Orchestra from 1991–1992 and served as impresario and performer for over forty concerts in Philadelphia and New York City of works by his contemporaries from 1983–1993 as founding director of the Perpetuum Mobile Concert Series. Married to composer Gilda Lyons, he has lived in New York City since 1984.

Daron Hagen was born in Milwaukee on November 4, 1961. He began the study of piano, music theory, conducting and composition at the age of fourteen at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music. He continued his studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Curtis Institute of Music, and the Juilliard School, working with teachers as diverse as Ned Rorem, Joseph Schwantner, David Diamond, and Witold Lutoslawski. Hagen received international popular and critical acclaim for his first opera, *Shining Brow*, about the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, premiered by the Madison Opera in 1992. His music is published by Carl Fischer and E.C. Schirmer.

**Paul Muldoon** (*Librettist*) was born in Portadown, County Armagh, Northern Ireland, in 1951. When he came to Queen's University Belfast in 1969, he gave up writing in Irish because he felt he "didn't have a real command of the language." At Queen's, Seamus Heaney, whom he had met before and who had helped publish some of his poems, was his tutor. He joined him, Michael Longley, the critic Michael Allen, and other writers in weekly meetings where new poems were discussed. In 1973, while still at university, Faber & Faber published his first volume of poetry, *New Weather*.

In that year, he graduated from Queen's with a bachelor's degree in English literature and started to work at BBC Belfast where he had 'somehow wangled a job' as a radio and television producer. He is currently Howard G.B. Clark professor of the humanities and creative writing at Princeton University where, since 1990, he has also been the director of the creative writing program. Paul Muldoon has been awarded the Sir Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award in 1991, the T.S. Eliot Award for *The Annals of Chile* in 1994, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature in 1996, and, most recently, the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize for his *New Selected Poems*. He has written the librettos for three operas by Daron Hagen: *Shining Brow*, *Bandanna* and *Vera of Las Vegas*.

He is president of the Poetry Society. In May 1999, he was elected professor of poetry of Oxford and, following James Fenton, is the forty-second poet to hold this honorary position that involves giving three lectures a year for a period of five years.

*Vera of Las Vegas* Orchestra

Violins  
Teresa Ling (concertmaster)  
Martha Gronemeier

Viola  
Bernadette Bedia

Cellos  
Andrew Smith  
Timothy Stanley

Contrabass  
Kevin Thomas

Oboe/English Horn  
Juanita Tune

Clarinet 1/Soprano Sax/Bass Clarinet 1  
Steven Dawson

Clarinet 2/Alto Sax/Bass Clarinet 2  
Dan Philippus

Bassoon  
Janis McKay

Trumpet  
Daniel Pass

Trombone  
Nathan Tanouye

Drum Kit  
Chris Benham

Additional Percussion  
Samuel Provost

Acoustic Guitar  
Priscilla Shoals

Acoustic Guitar/Electric Lead Guitar  
Abe Rein

Electric Bass  
Christopher David

Fretless Bass  
Benjamin Milstein

Acoustic Yamaha Piano  
Lynn Trippy

Clavinova P-100 Keyboard  
Rachel Eckroth

Alesis QS6.1 Synthesizer  
Daron Hagen

Subliminal Voices  
Gilda Lyons

Samuel Provost  
Aaron English

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## Production Notes

Production and Postproduction

Orchestra Conductor: Donna Hagen

Chorus Master: Lynn Trippy

Executive Producer: Daron Hagen

Producer: Benjamin Milstein

Recording Engineers: George Safire, Jeff Basso

Postproduction and Mixing Engineer: Benjamin Milstein

Mastering Engineer: Adrian Carr

Music Publisher: Carl Fischer LLC (ASCAP)

Project Management: William Rhoads, Sozo Arts LLC

Music Preparation: Burning Sled Music Service

Recorded live to 24 tracks on March 8–10, 1996 at the Artemus W. Ham Concert Hall of the University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV.

Postproduction mixing, editing, and recording: April-May 1996 at the Bard College Electronic Music Studio, Annadale-on-Hudson, NY.

Mastering: September 2002 at Adrian Carr Music Designs, New York, NY.

The University of Nevada Las Vegas commissioned *Vera of Las Vegas* in 1996

The staged premiere was given by the Center for Contemporary Opera at the Leonard Nimoy Thalia Theater at Symphony Space in New York City, June 25-26, 2003.

Visit the *Vera of Las Vegas* official website: [www.daronhagen.com/vera.html](http://www.daronhagen.com/vera.html)