



Tulsa

A Bagpipe Opera in Three Acts

Libretto in Scots by [Dr Tom Hubbard](#)

Music by [Dr Lindsay Davidson](#)

The story of Rev. Dr Charles Kerr and his part in the 1921 Tulsa Race War.

Duration 1 hour 30 minutes plus break.

Grand version orchestration 2222 433 timp 2 harps perc (optional) highland bagpipes, borderpipes in A, smallpipes in A, strings
8 soloists plus choir

Chamber version instrumentation: Oboe, 2 trumpets, horn, trombone, tuba, timpani, roto toms, bass drum, susp. cymbals (1 percussionist), highland bagpipes, A smallpipes, Bb smallpipes, A borderpipes, strings (43321)
8 soloists who can also be the choir

Preamble

In 1921 a black youth was accused of raping a white girl in a shaky lift. The Tulsa Tribune newspaper announced he was to be lynched and a mob gathered at the courthouse where he was held. This was one lynching too far for the black community of Greenwood, one of America's wealthiest districts, and they called upon the white minister of the First Presbyterian Church, later to be elected Moderator, Rev Dr Charles W Kerr to intervene. He went to the courthouse and faced down the lynch mob quoting scripture. As the mob dispersed a riot broke out and the Greenwood district of Tulsa was destroyed.

Rev Dr Kerr spent the rest of his life and ministry fighting for justice for the victims of the race riot which is still the subject of heated debate. No compensation has ever been paid and some plots in Greenwood remain derelict after 85 years. The Much Honoured Baron of Ardgowan, a retired professor of international human rights law has taken up the flame and is still fighting for justice.

A very few children who experienced the race riots first hand are still alive, but very old, in Tulsa today. This is not a long distant forgotten history but something which continues to provoke discussion in Tulsa and beyond.

The opera was commissioned by the Much Honoured Baron of Ardgowan with the request that this be the world's first bagpipe opera and in Scots. After much deliberation the following definition of a bagpipe opera was reached:

“An opera in which all of the musical material is derived from the musical language of the pipes, as opposed to an opera which uses bagpipes extensively.”

Having said that, bagpipes are used quite often, and critically there are two piobaireachds embedded in the score, one of which is obvious, the other less so. The musical language of the pipes is extended somewhat to give fuller possibilities for the orchestra and so one may describe the harmony as 'alternative pentatonic' - five fifths piled on top of each other, with one or more diminutions to control and vary tension in the sound, progressing modally and modulating freely. This language is contrasted with much more conventional 18th century harmony to mark out the two main groups of characters - those who are conducting the race war, and those who are opposed. Of course, at times the two languages mix and here lies the musical subtext.

Broadly speaking the architecture of the opera is held together with leitmotiv techniques and the style is aimed at an audience not necessarily familiar with opera, or bagpipes, seeking to appeal more to popular taste than either specialised group. The average Mozart fan will be feel alienated by this music.

Synopsis by librettist Tom Hubbard

Tulsa

The work opens with a song in a negro spiritual style, followed by the projection of a racist headline in Tulsa's local newspaper. The editor, Richard Lloyd-Jones, struts in front of the image. Act One proper opens in the manse of the Rev. Charles Kerr; he and his wife Anna sing of their courting days in a beautiful American landscape, and he expresses his pride in his Scottish ancestry. A darker note enters as they consider their struggle to obtain a new church building and the narrow-mindedness of the prominent white citizens of Tulsa. Charles thunders against those who invoke Scottish Highland tradition to legitimise the Ku Klux Klan and other unsavoury Southern customs. There is a grimly comic intrusion of Filmer M. Kludd, one of the elders of Charles's church and an ingratiating social climber. This is followed by the entrance of the pastor who serves the parish of Greenwood, Tulsa's African-American neighbourhood. He announces that a young black man has been falsely accused of assaulting a young white woman and has been taken to the county gaol, and requests Charles's help in ensuring that justice will prevail.

Act One, Scene Two, consists of Charles's confrontation with the lynch mob on the steps of the county courthouse. Scene Three is occupied by the 'conspiracy scene' between Lloyd-Jones, the police chief Rollingberry and the President of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce and oil magnate Zebulon S. Cake. The oil interests need a branch railroad line and other service installations for the wells, and intend to grab the land occupied by Greenwood. A plan to ethnically-cleanse the area is put into effect. The act ends with a menacing chant by KKK members and their fellow-travellers.

Act Two begins peacefully enough with an evocation of a balmy southern night in the Greenwood neighbourhood. There is more music in African-American style, infused with Scottish elements, not least in the deployment of the opera's leading instrumental feature – the bagpipes. However, the music becomes steadily more

menacing and the opera's climax is reached with projection of images of the actual race riots in Tulsa during 1921. Act Two, Scene Two takes us inside the Holy Rood sanctuary of Charles's church; Charles had been inspired by the sanctuary of Holyrood Abbey in Edinburgh. Charles, Anna and Greenwood survivors tend those injured during the attacks on Greenwood. The Greenwood pastor reports on atrocities committed by the racist mob; the victims include old people and children. Among the dead is the people's own champion, Dr Jackson, the physician to the neighbourhood. Charles and Anna return to the manse for a well-earned rest; Charles sings a ballad on the legend of King David I's foundation of Holyrood. At the end of the act, more outrages are revealed, and there is an alternation of two images representing a struggle of good and evil: the Holyrood stag's antlers-and-cross motif, and the KKK's fiery cross. Charles apostrophises Tulsa with anxious, angry questions.

Act Three: Charles and the pastor approach the stage from the back of the auditorium, walking up the aisles between the audience. They inspect the ruins of the black people's church. Charles offers his existing church building, inadequate as it is, to the pastor's surviving congregation as well as his own – that is to say, whatever will be left of his white congregation, in view of his notoriety as a 'nigger-lover'. The scene changes to the manse, where Charles, Anna and the pastor have foregathered. Enter Filmer Kludd with an offer from the elders – Charles will get his new church, provided he renounces his support for the blacks and aids the re-apprehension of the young black falsely accused of rape (during the confusion at the time of the riots, the black World War I veterans were able to spring the young man from gaol before a lynch mob was able to reach it). Charles makes no secret of his joy that the boy has escaped and - as Lloyd-Jones with his co-conspirators enter to check on Kludd's progress - he dismisses them and their offer with cold contempt. Charles turns to the pastor and embraces him as a brother minister; their material resources will be limited, but their joint congregation will be the sign of their moral victory. Charles speculates on the future of race relations in the USA, against a backdrop of images of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement of the 1960s and of the new threats of the 21st century.

The vision for production with limited resources

Our common starting point was Tadeusz Kantor, with whom Tom was personally friends. Kantor gave us a few critical elements in our vision:

- Minimal props – simple furniture, a box for a pulpit, other boxes for rocks and suggestions of the Tulsa courthouse at the side of the stage. Projections onto the stage area should enhance this very bare approach.
- Masks – to depersonalise the characters and thus universalise them. This also has the benefit of being able to reduce the number of soloists and divide the work evenly between them. This may be of especial use for amateur operatic societies and choral groups
- Use of dummies where desired by producer – again to depersonalise the characters and to help create crowds where necessary.
- Use of auditorium as performance space where appropriate – not only for characters to sing from the audience but for the pipers to make an unexpected and dramatic entrance at the finale of act 1 from behind the public.
- Extensive use of projections, especially of images of current day racial conflict – act 2 has several extended sections of music without any singing, or with spoken commentary where it is intended that dramatic projections will have an impact on the audience.

Concert suite

In 2004 Prince Edward paid a visit to Cracow, Poland where the composer lives. A concert suite was extracted from the opera for him and performed in a private audience by Celtic Triangle. Shortly after it was given its Hungarian premier funded by the British Council, performed by local artists.

The suite has been performed extensively by various artists in several countries to universally positive and indeed strikingly enthusiastic responses.

It has also been arranged for choir with and without an orchestra.

Scores available upon request.

Conductors and cast

A short run of performances was planned in Scotland in 2005 but unfortunately the sponsor experienced some difficulties a matter of weeks before the premier.

Jan Jazownik and Alberto Massimo have both prepared the score for those performances and are able to conduct it at short notice.

All of the material has been sung and approved and a number of singers know various parts.

<http://www.lindsaydavidson.co.uk/Anna.mp3>

Please click here to listen to an extract (MP3 format) from Act 1 performed by [Celtic Triangle](#), [Katarzyna Wiwer-Monita \(soprano\)](#), [Irena Czubek-Davidson](#), Lindsay Davidson (smallpipes). Anna here portrays a picture of the idealism with which settlers came to America and Oklahoma and is joined by Charles (here replaced by smallpipes) for an idyllic duet...

Please note that the original pitch of this is a whole tone lower than the sample, which has been specially arranged to include smallpipes (which can only play in one key). The pipes do not play in this section of the opera.

Press Release for Church Bulletins

“Presbyterian Church of the USA honoured in the world's first bagpipe opera!

The 144th Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of the USA, Rev Dr Charles Kerr has been honoured in an exciting new opera composed by Scots composer Lindsay Davidson, PhD called 'Tulsa'. Risking his own life, in 1921 Dr.Kerr saved the life of an innocent Black youth by dispersing a lynch mob at the Tulsa County Courthouse. Dr. Kerr gave sanctuary to racially persecuted Blacks in his church during the worst race riot in the United States, and later sought full compensation for the injured Black people. Details may be found at:

<http://www.kerr-of-ardgowan.com/Christian-Testimony.html>

This is one of the few modern operas to represent Christianity and particularly the Presbyterian Church in a positive light and has received extensive publicity.

Further details, an information pack, and a sample, can be downloaded from:

<http://www.lindsaydavidson.co.uk/tulsa.htm>

Church groups interested in performance of the chamber version of this opera

or the concert suite extracted from it may contact the composer at lindsaydavidson@lindsaydavidson.co.uk A grand version of this opera also exists, requiring a full orchestra and chorus.

The world premier of the entire opera has not yet taken place! Do you know someone who could make this happen.....?"

More information

Rev Dr Kerr was a very well known character and is still remembered fondly in Tulsa today.

More information regarding the artistic team can be gained from the website <http://www.lindsaydavidson.co.uk>

Call for action from composer

I would like to call upon all interested people to consider performing the opera, with whatever resources they have available. This is about race relations and finding inspiration in every individual to try and do our bit to make the world a better place. I am at your full disposal to help make this happen.

Thank you

Lindsay Davidson
Composer