

Daniel Catán

Bio and Works



The music of Daniel Catán (April 3, 1949 – April 8, 2011) is among the most significant and best-loved of any composer in the 20th century. Known principally as a composer of operas, Catán's oeuvre spans works for orchestra, chamber music, and art song, as well as music for film and television, music theater, and even traditional Latin pop. His opera, *Rappaccini's Daughter*, was among the first Spanish language operas ever produced by a notable opera company in the United States (by San Diego Opera in 1994), and he is primarily responsible for the adoption and popularization of the Spanish language in contemporary opera and art song. A keenly interesting departure from this lifelong mission, his last opera—the unfinished *Meet John Doe*—would be his first major opera with a libretto written entirely in English.

Catán experienced an extraordinarily cosmopolitan upbringing and superior education on multiple continents. Born in Mexico City of Russian Sephardic Jewish heritage, his mother felt it was important for him to receive proper instruction in reading and playing music, and, so, piano lessons began. His father, who loved to sing boleros and Cuban son, instilled in the boy a love of the human voice.

In 1963 and while still a young teenager, Catán moved to England, where he was admitted to boarding school. He continued his piano studies in England, showed promise on the instrument, and won local performance competitions. It was while in England as a teen that Catán was first introduced to opera during long hours of listening to LPs with friends. Remaining in England as a young adult, Catán took degrees in philosophy at the University of Sussex, and also in music at the University of Southampton. In 1973, during his early 20's, He moved to the United States to complete his studies in composition, where he received a Ph.D. from Princeton University under the care of noted American pedagogue and serialist composer, Milton Babbitt, as well as with James K. Randall and Benjamin Boretz. In addition to philosophy and music, Catán was an avid scholar of literature, and the critical review of works by Spanish writers and poets served to augment his activity as a composer throughout his life.

Upon completing his university studies in 1977, Catán returned to Mexico, taking a post as an administrator at the Palacio de Belles Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) in Mexico City. Apart from his duties at the Palace of Fine Arts, he founded and conducted a small chamber orchestra, allowing him to hone his skill as an orchestrator. His first opera, *Encuentro en el ocaso*, had him bringing his own living room furniture to the stage.

Fascinated by oriental music, Catán pursued and received a scholarship to live and study in Japan during the late 80's. His experience in Japan informed his compositional style, and influenced later musical works, including, for example, his duet for harp and flute, *Encantamiento*.

As a result of his essays about and correspondence with Mexican literary titan Octavio Paz, Catán developed a friendship with the great writer. Paz's *La hija de Rappaccini* (*Rappaccini's Daughter*)—written in 1956 and based on the short story of the same name by Hawthorne—served as the subject

matter for Catán's most notable early opera. The 1991 world premiere of Rappaccini's Daughter, brought to the stage by his friend and conductor Eduardo Diazmuñoz, failed to achieve the critical success the composer needed, even though Catán's time in Japan had convinced him it was necessary to discard his initial score and rewrite it entirely anew prior to its premiere in Mexico City. Subsequently, he found himself despairing over his future prospects. To support himself, the composer took a job as a loan officer at a local bank.

When Paz won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, this turn of events—along with the promotional efforts of John Dwyer, an American poet and diplomat working for the U.S. Information Agency—recast much needed international attention on Catán's operatic setting of Paz's play. The media descended on the composer at the bank much to the composer's joy and the surprise of his co-workers, especially as cameramen co-opted the use of the bank manager's office to photograph and interview him. In addition to facilitating recordings of Rappaccini to U.S. opera houses, Dwyer helped arrange for Catán to visit them in person. This led to a March 1994 booking of Rappaccini's Daughter in San Diego, where the opera commitment to opera and his role as a major proponent for the use of the Spanish language in opera. It also convinced Catán that the United States, home of the largest Spanish-speaking population outside of Mexico, was soon to be the epicenter of Latin American culture.

Further exploration in long forms and motivic development in support of a narrative pointed Catán toward the allure of film and television music. Catán's ability to crossover into multiple stylistic practices while crafting entirely accessible tunes was made evident with his music for the 1994 telenovela, *El vuelo del águila* (The Flight of the Eagle)—an immensely popular historical romance focused on the life and times of late Mexican president, Porfirio Díaz. The soundtrack was recorded in the fall of 1993 also under the baton of Diazmuñoz, who later led the orchestra for the U.S. premiere of Rappaccini in San Diego. In his first contractual negotiations with a major producer of any kind, Catán made no royalties from the success of the hit television series, the net result causing the composer to refocus his attention on music for the stage.

Lean times followed his initial acclaim in San Diego. Under tremendous financial duress, Catán continued to solicit multiple opera companies via correspondence and his recordings. David Gockley, the enterprising director of Houston Grand Opera, took interest in the composer's work, and shepherded a co-commission with Los Angeles Opera and Seattle Opera. The result was *Florencia en el Amazonas*—a work which was inspired, like its predecessor, by another revered Latin-American author—the Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The opera was immediately embraced wholeheartedly by singers and the public alike, albeit its premiere met with some degree of circumspect by Los Angeles critics until its restaging in 2004 by Opera Nova Santa Monica under the baton of Sean Bradley. Importantly, however, *Florencia's* winning debut among singers in Seattle, Houston, and Los Angeles in the mid-90's, would garner an important champion of his works—legendary tenor, Plácido Domingo. Catán and Domingo would forge a lasting partnership that would leave an indelible mark on the operatic landscape and on Spanish-speaking culture generally.

After the premiere of *Florencia*, nearly eight years passed before the completion of his next major work, *Salsipuedes*, a Tale of Love, War, and Anchovies—interesting not only for its Caribbean flavor, but for its orchestration, which dispenses entirely with violins and violas. The libretto for *Salsipuedes* was drafted by Catán's close friend, the Cuban writer Eliseo Alberto, son of Eliseo Diego, whom Marquez regarded as "...one of the greatest poets in the Spanish language". After receiving the commission for *Salsipuedes*, the composer traveled to Cuba and then to Miami, where his interest in music from his father's homeland started to grow.

Cuba had always played a significant influence in the composer's life. Catán's grandfather had immigrated from Turkey, but had made a five year stopover in Cuba while en route to Mexico, presumably falling in love with the culture there, thereby influencing Catán's father, and in turn Catán himself.

Upon landing in Miami, Catán looked for steadier employment to sustain his composing. At first, he considered New York, and did indeed move to there, but felt it less than fertile ground for his true calling. Ultimately, Catán was introduced to a post at the College of the Canyons in Los Angeles county by former student and head of the college's composition department, Bernardo Feldman. It was during this time, too, that Catán connected with a romantic interest first sparked while he was an administrator in Mexico City: Andrea Puente—former principal harpist of the Orquesta del Teatro de Bellas Artes—would become a major influence on the composer, and, upon re-uniting with her in Los Angeles, the two would be married a few years later. Catán's increasing use of the harp in his operas and chamber music is plainly evident—and his composition of Encantamiento for flute and harp was written expressly for her and her long time collaborator, flutist Salpy Kirkonian. Catán references his wife subtly but directly in the libretto for his next major work—an opera that would become a watershed moment for him, and the crowning jewel of his career during his lifetime.

Il Postino was an opera that almost never came to be. Catán—having explored well the rich literary traditions of Latin America—was challenged to some degree by the collaborative process of working with librettists. Having since developed a compelling and wholly unique story model demanding a more seamless integration of words and music, the composer labored to find inspiration for a new work capable of following and surpassing his previous operatic successes. Finally, Catán found that inspiration in a screenplay which straddled both comedy and tragedy alike. The film *Il Postino* is the fictitious account of a relationship between real life Chilean poetry star Pablo Neruda, and a provincial mailman, Mario Ruoppolo. The setting is a small Italian island where Mario aspires to learn poetry from the revered master of words in order to win the love of his life. Prior to having a commission in hand, Catán risked significant personal expense to acquire the rights to use the screenplay as the basis of his new opera. The composer and his wife traveled to Italy to secure the rights of the story by appealing directly to the heirs of Massimo Troisi—the writer and star of *Il Postino*. The task was a delicate and daunting one, inasmuch as there were five heirs to the Troisi estate, brothers and sisters.

The role of Neruda was written especially by Catán for Plácido Domingo, and with Domingo's input. Moreover, the composer drew upon a circle of close musician friends to help vet the orchestration. But, by this point in his career, Catán had already obtained complete and total mastery of his craft, both as a storyteller and composer. *Il Postino* served to galvanize Catán's fan base internationally, and reinvigorated Los Angeles Opera as an institution which commissioned and presented new music. Immediately following the premiere, free public video screenings of the Los Angeles Opera performance were presented in the city's center under the auspices of Catán's close friend, presenter Michael Alexander. Near riotous applause confirmed Catán's music had found its way into the consciousness of contemporary culture—bridging great art with popular appeal.

Even so, the composer, after decades of artistic toil and financial struggle, and with retirement looming, Catán considered devoting himself more intensely to teaching the next generation of opera composers. Having won a commission from the University of Texas in Austin, and an opportunity to cultivate a potential post at the University, he took up a visiting professorship there. In Austin, he poured himself into the venerable task of mentoring young musicians and singers, while painstakingly committing to paper what would be his last contribution to the operatic repertoire.

Like *Il Postino* before it, *Meet John Doe* is based on a screenplay. *Il Postino* explores the nature of art itself, the role of the artist and his or her admirers, as well as romance, and the tragic insertion of politics between these fragile human relationships. *Meet John Doe*, however, is intended to be a radical departure, highlighting instead the story of everyman's struggle against and reconciliation with the will of society at large. Whereas, one could argue in Catán's previous operas—if it is possible to tease from them hints of an autobiography—the composer most frequently framed his own point of view in the role of a captain, as a patriarchal leader. Moreover, whereas *Florescencia* tells the story of a character in search of her messiah, *Meet John Doe* tells an even more deeply raw and personal story—the story of one man's confrontation with forces bigger than himself, a story of personal sacrifice and salvation. While Catán regularly stamped the presentation of his themes with a uniquely Latin perspective, *Meet John Doe* incorporates decidedly North American colors into its music, and even playfully incorporates the rhythms and harmonies of vintage, mid-century pop music—transporting us easily back into the era of big bands

and dancehalls.

While the characteristics of Catán's music considered as an original and signature style includes a penchant toward symmetrical formal structures, shimmering polytonal harmonies, lush and inventive orchestrations, perfect elision between background accompaniments and gratuitously linear and diatonic vocal melodies, all of which are propelled by world rhythms and the inventive inclusion of musical devices ranging from folkloric to pop...it is these musical constructs coupled with a deep understanding of story which drives the success of his works. Impeccable pacing, and the stirring juxtaposition of linear but diametrically opposed plot and character elements are characteristic of the composer's use of language. The overarching impression is invariably romantic and charming, while yet remaining sophisticated, worldly, and highly accessible among the broadest sampling of listeners. Like Puccini, a composer to whom Catán was frequently compared, the maestro left us before his last opera could be finished, but not before his music would echo on forever. Upon listening to both, the man and his music makes devoted friends of us all.

***from catanfoundation.com**

Key Works:	Career Highlights:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">●● En un Doblez del Tiempo (A Fold in Time)● (1982; orchestra)●● La Hija de Rappaccini● (1983-9; opera)●● Mariposa Obsidiana● (1984; orchestra)●● Florecia en el Amazonas● (1996; opera)●● Salsipuedes (2004; opera)●● Il Postino (2008; opera)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">●● 1977 Awarded PhD in Music Theory and Composition from Princeton University, NJ●● 1980 Music Administrator at the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City●● 1994 US premiere of La Hija de Rappaccini at San Diego Opera●● 1996 Premiere of Florecia en el Amazonas at Houston Grand Opera●● 2006 European premiere of Florecia en el Amazonas at Heidelberg Theatre●● 2010 World premiere of Il Postino

***from schirmer.com**

Critical Acclaim:

Catán's music is outwardly conservative but colourful, often beautiful. His flair for dramatic orchestration, as well as his melodic language, is an update on the tradition of Puccini and Respighi [with a] lushness of the score. — *Fanfare*

Catán's orchestral originality went beyond his use of unconventional instruments. — *The Wall Street Journal*

He knows how to write for the stage and for the voice, and has devised an attractive postmodern musical style. — *The Times*
