ALEX TEMPLE

↖ SWITCH ↘

A SCIENCE-FICTION MICRO-OPERA

for singing cellist,
flute, violin, percussion
& pre-recorded electronics

LIBRETTO

composed in 2013 for Cadillac Moon Ensemble

1. Confessions of a Hand Offender

I have a confession to make: I was born right-handed. Does that shock you? I realize that my telling you this is dangerous, given the current political situation. But I've always been inclined to take risks. It's part of why I found it impossible to live as a righty. That sober lifestyle never suited me. And besides, you're here, which means you're in violation of the Transit Code. Turn me in, you'll be turning yourself in too. And don't think you can make an anonymous phone call either. They can trace it. If you want to hold on to the scraps you call freedom, you'll take my secret to your grave.

Why did you come here, anyway? Nobody spends ten hours riding an unlicensed bus through thick black smoke without a good reason. Someone must have told you that there was something important out here. It's true: There are things they don't teach you in Civilization. Things you're not allowed to talk about.

I was born in what now seems like an enlightened age. Traditional roles were beginning to dissolve. Righties were making art. (Cerebral art, naturally.) Lefties were opening businesses. (Eccentric ones, of course.) And lefties were gaining political rights for the first time: the right to vote, the right to run for office, the right to live independently without a righty to watch over them.

But for me, it wasn't enough. I couldn't form an image of myself as a righty. Even as an artist, I was expected to be cold, rational, businesslike, to favor drab blues and grays. I felt sick when I wrote with my right hand, and people called me sick when I didn't. So I left, and started a life as a lefty in the Dark States.

They weren't called the Dark States back then. That scorched, ruined landscape hasn't always been there. A few years ago, it was a fertile plain called the Free Zone.

A new world, unbound by the rules of Civilization! The first colony was only 60 people. By the end of the second year, we were over 60,000 strong. Heretics, dissidents, dropouts. Off the grid. Self-sustaining. No need for assistance from the East.

2. Song of the Free Zone

I think often of the people that I knew there—
The misfits who willingly withdrew there
So they could cast off the shackles of Taboo there:

Roger, who had been accused of flagrant
Mockery of nature, just for writing ambidextrously.
Donna, who'd been living as a vagrant.
I don't know what happened; she was never quite direct with me.

And Harry, once a lefty, now a righty.
Carolyn, who worshipped Aphrodite.
And Martin, who'd been known to use his fingers in his sex life.
Jack, who was convinced he'd reach nirvana in his next life.

We knew that we were entering an era
Where there'd be no such thing as impropriety.
If it's true that art's a hammer, not a mirror,
We would hammer out a perfect new society!

No landlords there to check which hand you write with.
No codes of dress, de jure or de facto.
No judges that you have to be polite with
To keep your reputation intact. Oh,

We watched our rebel state continue growing.
The future had been written in advance.
Our luck would always rise, without plateauing,
And a backlash from the old guard? Not a chance.

But we received a startling transmission
In October of the third year:
The voice of a rabid rhetorician
Filling the airwaves with absurd smears,
Invoking the glory of tradition
And using us to stir fear.
We heard clearly:

3. Radio Rant

Righties and lefties have occupied traditional roles for centuries! Yes, it's true, as my opponents say, that in the Middle Ages lefties were considered "sinister" and persecuted. But *I've* never dragged a lefty through the street, bound and screaming, affixed them to a post and set them on fire! Nor have my parents! Nor have my parents' parents! Nor have my parents' parents' parents! Why must we righties be made to answer for the crimes of our ancestors? All this talk of "right privilege" is nothing but simple bigotry! And however excessive our Medieval forebears may have been, at least they understood the Law of Nature! AND THE LAW OF NATURE MUST BE ENFORCED BY THE LAW OF THE LAND.

God made lefties and righties with different temperaments so that they might occupy separate spheres in our society! *Science* tells us that the left brain, seat of rational thought, controls the right hand, while the right brain, seat of creativity, controls the left! And what is the meeting point of God and Science? What else but the Law of Nature? AND THE LAW OF NATURE IS THE ONLY LAW THAT EXISTS.

So now lefties complain of being second-class citizens. But they are only encouraged to express their natural strengths! And likewise, if a righty is insulted or ostracized or beaten for degrading their hand class by *painting* or *playing music*, surely they must understand that they are only being set back on the straight and narrow path — the Path of the Law of Nature! AND THE LAW OF NATURE HAS A STRONG HAND AND A LONG ARM.

And is it any coincidence that this country's strong, firm, decisive party is called The Right Wing, while the soft, gentle, nurturing party is called The Left Wing? And does it not follow from the names of these parties that it is the intrinsic, inescapable and incontrovertible *duty* of the Right Wing to take its soft and gentle counterpart in *hand*, to care for it, to lead it away from the temptations of the bizarre and perverse agenda promoted by those delusional agitators in the Free Zone? Must we not remind our colleagues on the opposite side of the aisle that we were put on this Earth to lead them through the wilderness, in accordance with the Law of Nature?

4. Invasion

[tape interlude]

5. Aftermath

They crushed us completely. Burned the trees, blackened the sky, crucified the heretics, and mutilated the hand offenders. There are things they don't teach you in Civilization. Things you're not allowed to talk about.

But I'm here, hands still attached, fingers unbroken. And I'm not the only one. There are five of us. And we're building something new, out in the glow of the oil field fires. We've started clearing rubble. We've assembled some structures out of scrap metal.

Somebody told you that there was something important out here. It's true. But we need your help. Go back to Civilization. Identify potential dissidents, and send them to us. Be careful. Be discreet. And remember, you know what we're up to, which means you're in violation of the Knowledge Code. Turn us in, you'll be turning yourself in too.

6. Song of the Dark States

I know that some day we'll unscorch the earth here,
Stop the fires and turn the water blue again.
And once we've set the stage for a rebirth here,
We'll break the chains of stigma and taboo again.

In the course of this neverending night, we
Have come to see the dangers of myopia.
But now we're looking through our glasses brightly,
And there's still time to reify utopia...