

# AS ONE

A chamber opera for two singers and string quartet

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*Commissioned and developed by American Opera Projects*

LIBRETTO

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## **As One**

### Synopsis

*As One* is a chamber opera in which two voices—Hannah after (mezzo-soprano) and Hannah before (baritone)—share the part of a sole transgender protagonist. Fifteen songs comprise the three-part narrative; with empathy and humor, they trace Hannah’s experiences from her youth in a small town to her college years on the West Coast, and finally to Norway where she is surprised at what she learns about herself.

#### **Part I**

In “Paper route,” Hannah rides around her suburban neighborhood delivering newspapers and revels in her more feminine impulses. Her youthful challenges in conforming to gender norms are related in “Cursive,” “Sex ed,” “Entire of itself” and “Perfect boy”—in such disparate subjects as handwriting, sex, a John Donne poem, and exemplary male behavior. However, in “To know,” she discovers that she is not alone in the world and seeks understanding about herself at a local library.

#### **Part II**

During her college years, Hannah struggles with her bifurcated existence in “Two cities,” but also encounters the joy of being perceived as she wishes in “Three words.” In “Close,” she has made the decision to undergo hormone therapy and briefly suffers its vertiginous effects before feeling at one with her own body. “Home for the holidays,” “A christmas story” and “Dear son” all occur around the Christmas season and relate Hannah’s growing distance to her family and her past, which is countered by an immediate connection with a stranger in a local café. In “Out of nowhere,” Hannah escapes a harrowing assault that prompts her to find a link to the larger trans community and end her self-imposed alienation. Reacting to the conflicting voices in her head, she finally resolves to escape in the fragment, “I go on to...”

#### **Part III**

“Norway.” In this extended aria, Hannah finds, in Nature, solitude, and self-reflection, the simple yet surprising equation that will help her achieve happiness.

*[The quartet is onstage when the audience enters. The violist is in a separate space from the rest of the quartet, either offstage or delineated by lighting and/or placement. After tuning their instruments, the introduction begins. At Measure 18 in the music, the violist joins the rest of the quartet. Toward the end of the introduction, both Hannah before and Hannah after appear onstage.]*

## PART I.

### Paper route

#### Hannah before:

Like every other boy  
I have a paper route.  
And like every good boy  
I wake each morning,  
Ride my bike around,  
With my jacket on,  
And enjoy the “thumph”  
Of a well-aimed paper as it lands.

However, unlike every other boy,  
Unlike every other boy,  
I sometimes wake extra early,  
While everyone’s asleep,  
Ride my bike around  
With my jacket on  
And a blouse underneath.

(The blouse I stole  
From a neighbor’s clothesline.  
It isn’t much,  
But fits my twelve-year-old frame...)

#### Hannah before/Hannah after:

And  
Just  
Feels  
So right.

#### Hannah before:

And the papers still get delivered.  
The papers still get delivered.  
  
I’m home.  
Before anyone sees me,  
Before anyone wakes up,  
I remove the blouse  
And hide it where it  
Never will be found.  
I button up a thick, flannel shirt

Put my jacket back on  
And get ready for school.  
One day I’m braver  
And tuck two rolled up socks  
Inside the darts of the blouse.

What could be a breast  
Is gently grazed  
By my throwing arm.

Other girls are  
Getting theirs, too.

#### Hannah before/Hannah after:

It all just feels so right.  
It all just feels so right.

### Cursive

#### Hannah after:

Controlled...  
Constrained...  
It cannot betray me.  
My teachers,  
My classmates,  
My family,  
Cannot know.

#### Hannah before:

A firm grip,  
A taut wrist,  
A watchful eye,  
Maintain  
A controlled...  
Constrained...  
Constricted...  
Cursive.  
As it should be.

#### Hannah after:

I will not repeat  
My mistake.  
The one I made  
In the second grade.  
For one assignment,  
I wrote like my cousin Annie.

I let the pen guide me,  
My writing like a girl’s.  
Generous loops,  
Graceful swirls,  
Expansive ascenders,  
Crosses with curls.

When I get the paper back  
From the teacher  
She has ordered me to redo it,  
And written in big red letters:

**Hannah before/Hannah after:**

“This is not  
What you were taught.”

**Hannah before:**

A firm grip,  
A taut wrist,  
A watchful eye.  
Controlled...  
Constrained...  
Constricted...  
Confined.

## Sex ed

**Hannah after:**

The boys stand in one line...

**Hannah before:**

The girls in another.  
The boys go to one room...

**Hannah after:**

The girls to another.  
The boys hear one teacher...

**Hannah before:**

The girls hear another.

**Hannah before/Hannah after:**

We have been separated,  
By gender,  
To learn about...  
Sex.

**Hannah before:**

*[Impersonating an instructor.]*

“In the animal kingdom,  
There are only two genders:  
Male and female.  
These two genders  
Have very distinct differences  
And these become most apparent  
During puberty...”

**Hannah after:**

And so on,  
Through...

**Hannah before:**

Testosterone,  
Voice deepening,  
Acne,  
Facial hair,  
Masturbation,

**Hannah after:**

And the rest.

**Hannah before:**

All delivered in a commanding  
But detached voice  
Without looking anyone in the eye.

Most of the boys know these things.  
Most of the boys stifle their laughter.

**Hannah after:**

But this boy only wants to be in  
The other room.

## Entire of itself

*[Late in the introduction of this song, Hannah before, Hannah after, the conductor and members of the quartet mechanically recite the poem “No Man Is an Island” by John Donne, as if they are in a Junior High School classroom.]*

**Hannah before, Hannah after, Conductor, Quartet:**

“No man is an island;  
Entire of itself  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main;  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less...”

**Hannah before:**

In junior high, we are assigned  
“No Man Is An Island”  
By John Donne.

We read the poem,  
Together,  
Then discuss.

[Hannah before, Hannah after, the conductor, and members of the quartet continue the recitation of the Donne poem:]

**Hannah before, Hannah after, Conductor, Quartet:**

“...Any man’s death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind...”

**Hannah before:**

I am the lone,  
Dissenting voice  
In the classroom.  
I rise and declare  
To a sea of non-islanders:  
“It isn’t true,  
I am an island.”

With all the experience  
Of my fourteen years,  
I see no other life  
Than one apart,  
Alone.

I need no one.  
No one needs me.  
I consigned myself  
To my own island long ago.  
Long ago.

I argue, and,  
Satisfied by  
My brilliant discourse on independence,  
Sit back down.  
The classroom is silent.  
The teacher seems impressed.  
(Or was she/he concerned?)\*

**Perfect boy**

[Hannah before jogs and is out of breath by the end of the song.]

**Hannah before:**

I must—must!—be  
The perfect boy:  
The fastest,  
The smartest,  
The strongest,  
The best,  
The perfect boy.

I need to  
Out-achieve  
Out-accomplish

Out-perform  
Out-run,  
Out-scramble,  
Out-do,  
Everyone;  
The perfect boy.

Class president,  
Straight “As,”  
Star quarterback,  
Honor roll,  
All of it.  
Most likely to:  
Succeed,  
Win the game,  
Score the point,  
Make the grade,  
Never get in trouble,  
Never do wrong,  
Ever upstanding,  
Always the best,  
Perfect,  
Perfect.  
And no one will know.

I must run so fast,  
Succeed so much,  
Do so well,  
No one will know,  
No one will know.  
Class president,  
Straight “As,”  
Star quarterback,  
Honor roll,  
All of it.  
Most likely to:  
Succeed,  
Win the game,  
Score the point,  
Make the grade,  
Never get in trouble,  
Never do wrong,  
Ever upstanding,  
Always the best,

Perfect  
Perfect

Achieve  
Accomplish  
Perform  
Run  
Scramble

\* choose pronoun depending on the gender of the conductor

Run  
Scramble  
Perfect  
Game  
Run  
Point  
Run  
Grade  
Run

And no one will know,  
I will run so fast,  
Succeed so much,  
Do so well,  
No one will know,  
No one will know,  
No one will ever know.  
[Offhandedly:]  
Not even me.

## To know

### Hannah after:

Then, I see her on TV.  
There she is.  
*She* is.  
And I hear the word.  
The real word.  
The magic word.  
Finally a name for this.  
That is me.  
That is *my* word.  
I repeat it,  
Over and over.

As soon as I can,  
I go to the library,  
The Lewis and Clark Library,  
Named for explorers.  
When the coast is clear  
I creep to the card catalog,  
Thumb through the cards,  
My hands trembling.

“Transatlantic Travel”  
Farther...  
“Transfiguration, The”  
Farther...  
“Transylvania”  
Too far...  
And there it is,  
The word,  
The magic word.

Typed,  
On a yellowing card.  
[Hannah before appears out of nowhere and impersonates a snoopy librarian.]

### Hannah before:

“Need help, young man?”

### Hannah after:

I slam the drawer shut,  
And come face to face  
With the beady eyes  
Of a stealth librarian.  
“No th-thank you, sir.”  
How could I have let this happen?  
How did I let down my guard?  
Never again,  
Never again.

Later I grab a book  
With the magic word,  
And hide it in  
Another book.  
And slip to the darkest corner  
Of Lewis and Clark...

### Hannah after/Hannah before:

And I read.  
And learn.  
Read.  
And I learn.  
Learn  
There are others.  
There are others.  
To learn  
I’m not the only one.  
The relief,  
The power,  
The power!  
Just to know.  
Just to know.

### Hannah after:

I return to Lewis and Clark many times.  
And hide new books  
In the same old one.

### Hannah before:

(To the world it might look like  
I’m becoming an expert on  
The Transvaal War.)

## PART II.

### Two cities

#### Hannah before/Hannah after:

Now I live in two cities  
Adjacent to each other.  
To one I bring  
The outward trappings  
Of femininity  
In a small bag  
And drive across  
The bridge that connects them.

The bridge itself  
Is very high,  
Suspended,  
Aglow in light,  
With a lovely view.

Once in  
My other city  
I put on my things  
And am overcome  
With joy.

#### Hannah after:

I glide  
I fly,  
Suspended,  
Free,  
Free.

#### Hannah before/Hannah after:

Too soon I have to go back  
To my other city.  
I cross the bridge  
Now choked by fog.

My small bag grows,  
So do the frequency  
Of my trips  
Across the bridge.

It feels like compulsion,  
Something I should control,  
Not allow.  
How do I contain it?  
Subdue it?  
End it?

And yet I still drive

To my other city.  
Drive  
Across the bridge,  
Very high,  
Suspended  
Aglow in light,  
With a lovely view.

#### Hannah after:

I glide  
I fly,  
Suspended,  
Free.  
Free.

### Three words

#### Hannah after:

“Pardon me, miss.”

I hear  
Three words.

“Pardon.”

“Me.”

“Miss.”

Three words.

Pretty dull  
As words go.

But they mean  
Everything to me.  
Everything.  
For I have passed.  
To the man  
Who said those words in passing,  
Three small words.  
Just three words.

And I feel  
A rush of contentment  
For once.  
All the jarring noises  
Resolve in harmony,  
All the warring voices  
Are at peace.  
Because I'm perceived,  
Finally perceived,



Finally seen,  
Finally,  
As I am  
As I am.  
As I am.

## Close

### Hannah before:

Some yellow pills,  
A stiff martini to wash them down,  
And it is done.

### Hannah after:

I wait.  
Days.  
A week.  
Weeks.  
I devise corporeal variations on  
“A watched pot never boils.”

### Hannah before:

Is my skin really softer?  
Is my face really fuller?  
Am I just imagining it?

More pills.  
Months.  
No, I'm not imagining it.

I knew about  
The outer changes—  
Weight migrating,

### Hannah after:

Edges rounding,

### Hannah before:

Hair softening—  
But I am not prepared for—

### Hannah before/Hannah after:

The inner changes.  
These are intense.  
Sudden.  
Disorienting.

### Hannah after:

Emotional vertigo.

### Hannah before:

Hypersensitivity,

### Hannah after:

Crying at the weirdest things.

### Hannah before:

Burnt soup,  
Dumb pop lyrics,

### Hannah after:

Diamond commercials.

### Hannah before:

I fight it.  
What am I fighting?  
Who am I?  
The new me, the old?  
What is happening?

And then I finally learn  
To accept the changes,  
To trust,  
To see them as integral,

### Hannah before/Hannah after:

Natural.

### Hannah after:

And that's when  
A tremendous euphoria  
Takes over,  
Joy.  
Joy.  
At feeling  
Aligned.  
At peace.  
As one.

### Hannah before/Hannah after:

I see myself in the mirror  
And think...

Close.

## Home for the holidays

*[Hannah before composes a letter to her parents.]*

### Hannah before:

Dear Mom (and Dad!):  
I wanted to call you,  
But thought it  
Better to write.  
I'm sorry, but  
I don't think  
I'll make it home  
For Christmas  
This year.  
I have so much work to do,  
And so much going on.  
And I really can't afford  
A plane ticket  
At this late date.  
It will be my first Christmas away  
And I'll miss you guys,  
And the tree,  
And the house  
All done up  
For the holidays.  
And the snow.  
I know you're disappointed.  
At any rate,  
I might get home this Spring,  
And that's just around the corner.  
But I'll call you on Christmas Day.  
In the meantime  
I send you both  
A lot of love.  
—H.

## A christmas story

### Hannah after:

Christmas Day.  
Late afternoon  
At a coffee shop,  
Blessedly open.  
I sit with the others exiled  
By the holidays—  
Self-imposed  
Or otherwise.  
I'm writing,

And look up to see a guy  
Smiling at me.  
A very sweet smile.  
The kind that you can't help  
But smile back at.

And soon he's at my rickety table,  
Asking if he can join me.  
A momentary panic—  
No one told me how to do this!  
How to flirt!  
Is this how it starts?  
What does it mean?  
I say "yes."  
He asks what I'm writing.  
I say "I'm not sure."

We talk and talk.  
He's very cute.  
Pierced and inked,  
But not overly so.  
I like being  
On this side of the table.  
But flirting this way  
Is a new thing.  
(As if one puberty  
Weren't awkward enough.)  
But soon we're just two  
Exiled people  
Denying our exiles  
And connecting.

The sun is setting,  
And we notice the fog come in.

For all the flirting  
We acknowledge,  
Silently and sweetly,  
That this will not go  
Any further.  
That this connection suffices.  
And that's the beauty of it,  
The beauty I feel  
When he kisses me lightly  
On the cheek.  
A beauty I feel  
In the warmth of his hand  
As he places it in mine  
And says, "good night."

## Dear son

[Hannah before reads a letter from her mother.]

### Hannah before:

Dear son:  
 It snowed all day.  
 The Coopers dropped by  
 Like they always do.  
 Everyone asked about you.  
 I love the new sweater  
 And am wearing it now.  
 And your Dad thanks you for  
 The box set of Classic Movies.  
 Thanks also for your call  
 On Christmas Day.  
 You sounded quiet.  
 I just want to know  
 You are happy.  
 We love you.  
 —Mom

## Out of nowhere

### Hannah after:

Out of nowhere  
 He sticks out his arm  
 To block me from getting in my car.  
 He snarls, “What are you?”  
 His breathing is hard,  
 His eyes are inflamed.  
 There’s no one around.  
 The lot is not lit.  
 He shouts it.  
 He shouts it this time:  
 “What are you?”  
 I ask him to stop,  
 To leave me alone.  
 Where’s a weapon?  
 Anything!  
 “What the fuck are you?”  
 Keys, anything.  
 And suddenly  
 He clutches my neck,  
 He tightens his grasp.  
 With all of my strength  
 I leverage a kick.  
 I jump in the car.  
 He reaches for me.  
 I slam the door.  
 Start,  
 Car,

### Hannah before:

[In a completely separate space or from offstage, far apart from Hannah after, Hannah before speaks in a quiet and robotic voice, reciting a roster of transgender people who’ve recently been slain.]

Nakia Ladelle Baker  
 Nashville, Tennessee  
*Trauma to the head*  
 Stefania Koppi  
 Rome, Italy  
*Violently beaten, skull bashed in*  
 Thanawood Wiriyananon  
 Phuket, Thailand  
*Strangled and beaten*  
 Silvana Berisha  
 Hamburg, Germany  
*Stabbed to death*  
 Dilek Ince  
 Ankara, Turkey  
*Shot in the back of the head*  
 Katia Otacilio Vilela  
 Jatai, Brazil  
*Stabbed*  
 Diksy Jones  
 Wellington, New Zealand  
*Blunt force trauma to the head*  
 Agnes Torres Sulca  
 Atlitxco, Puebla, Mexico  
*Neck wounds, burned, thrown in a ditch*  
 Thapelo Makutle  
 Kuruman, South Africa  
*Throat cut, partial decapitation, genitals stuffed in mouth*  
 Erica Keel  
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
*Run over repeatedly by a car*  
 Elly “Sayep” Susanna  
 Jakarta, Indonesia  
*Stoned and drowned by police*  
 Kellie Telesford  
 Thornton Heath, UK  
*Strangled*  
 Dayana Nicole Castillo Garcia  
 Tarapoto, Peru

Car,  
 Start!  
 He pounds at the window.  
 Start, start,  
 Please, God.  
 Oh God.  
 “You bitch.”  
 Pound. Pound.  
 “I’m going to kill you.”  
 I’ll kill you, I’ll kill you.”  
 I drive off.  
 He chases still shouting.  
 I drive and drive,  
 My heart is pounding.  
 I have escaped.

*Stabbed to death*  
 Marion Lanza  
 Honduras  
*Shot*  
 Krissy Bates  
 Minneapolis, Minnesota  
*Stabbed*  
 Ashley Sweeney  
 Detroit, Michigan  
*Shot in the head*  
 Selma Diaz  
 Chicago, Illinois  
*Drowned*  
 Shelley Hilliard  
 Detroit, Michigan  
*Murdered, decapitated, dismembered, burned*  
 January Marie Lapuz  
 British Columbia, Canada  
*Stabbed to death*  
 Ruby Molina  
 Sacramento, California  
*Drowned*  
 Noor Azian Khamis,  
 Johor, Malaysia  
*Stabbed*  
 Islan Nettles  
 Harlem, New York  
*Beaten to death*

I am safe.

[During the orchestral interlude, Hannah gets safely home, locks the door, retrieves her laptop and turns it on. She searches online for other incidents of violence against transgender people.]

### Hannah after:

Later,  
 Alone at home,  
 I look online.  
 I look online.  
 There are others.  
 I am not safe.

### Hannah before:

Emanuelly Colaco Taborda  
 Paraná, Brazil  
*Strangled*  
 Patricia Murphy  
 Albuquerque, New Mexico  
*Shot several times in the head*  
 Menakshiammal  
 Krishnagiri, India  
*Burned and throat slit*

### Hannah before/Hannah after:

Kamilla  
 Volgograd, Russia  
*Shot to death.*  
 Amanda Gonzalez Andujar  
 Queens, New York

### Hannah before:

Unidentified  
 Guayaquil, Ecuador  
 Unknown  
 Milan, Italy

**Hannah after:**

I am not an island.  
I am not an island.

**Hannah before/Hannah after and Quartet:**

Unidentified...  
Unknown...  
Unidentified...  
Unknown...

**I go on to...**

**Hannah before:**

They continue.  
The voices.  
In my head.  
You won't be happy.

**Hannah after:**

You won't be happy.  
You can't go back.

**Hannah before;**

It is wrong.

**Hannah after:**

What are you doing?

**Hannah before:**

What are you thinking?

**Hannah after/Hannah before:**

The noise is too loud.

**Hannah before:**

The noise is too loud.  
I cannot go on.  
I cannot go on.  
But somehow, somehow...

**Hannah after/Hannah before:**

I must go on.  
I must go on.

**Hannah before:**

I go on  
To...  
Norway.

## PART III.

### Norway

**Hannah after:**

Norway.  
Where else?  
Norway.  
A friend of a friend  
Rents out a cabin  
In Norway,  
In the middle of nowhere,  
Just me and the Northern Lights,  
Which I've always wanted to see,  
Just me,  
The middle of nowhere,  
Neither here nor there.  
—Perfect.

Soon, I'm lurching past fjords  
And road signs with slashed "o's."  
I attempt a yodel,  
Then remember that yodeling  
Isn't Norwegian.

A fjord.  
Fields,  
Mountains far off,  
And the cabin.  
Which is really just a shack  
With cabin aspirations.  
No one around for miles.  
And I think:  
Here is a setting for  
A moment of transcendence.  
Or murder.

I go inside the shack.  
It smells of goat.

I throw down my bag.  
And weep.

That night,  
I don't sleep.  
Grief.  
Loneliness.  
Doubt.

Why am I here?

The following day,

I decide to make jam.  
I gather berries.  
It takes forever.  
And tastes awful.  
I throw out the bitter fruit.

A few more sleepless nights.

One day,  
I take the wooden skiff  
Out on the water.  
Clear, Calm, Deep.  
Clear. Calm. Deep.

Halfway out,  
I realize it has a leak.  
But make it back in time  
With a boat half-filled of icy water.  
And sit on the shore  
Out of breath.

Why am I here?

I realize that I  
Have not spoken to anyone in days.  
I am alarmed because  
I have this realization  
Out loud.

I also realize  
That I've spent four days  
As I am.  
As I am.  
Without regard to  
Anyone else,  
Or what they think.  
I only care if I pass  
To myself.

Every night  
I go to the water  
And sit beneath the  
Shuddering stars.  
And wait for the Northern lights  
To make an appearance in the sky.  
A glowing glimmering shimmering in the sky.  
It doesn't happen.

Every night:  
Nothing.  
Not even the faintest glow.

I think:

Nature doesn't always comply  
With our wishes.  
Nature just is.  
Nature also doesn't work  
In metaphors  
Like leaking boats,  
Or bitter fruit.  
It just is.

And here,  
On my self-imposed island,  
I connect with the universe.  
And the universe tells me:  
"You are an idiot."

It's a very simple equation:  
You are not happy.  
You can be happy.  
There is an echo  
And it repeats  
"You are not happy.  
You can be happy."

And so  
I resolve  
To make myself happy.  
And the only way to do that  
Is simple.  
And nautral.  
No metaphors.

I sleep that night  
Like never before.

The next morning,  
I rise,  
And make jam again.  
This time with better berries.  
I fix the hole in the boat,  
And even try a yodel.

And...

I write a dozen postcards.  
My first communication  
With the outside world  
In a week.  
I let my hand guide me  
As I write  
And sign each card with my  
New name.  
I look at the handwriting.  
My teacher would not have approved.

Graceful swirls,  
Expansive ascenders,  
Crosses with curls.

My writing is not  
Like a girl's,  
Or like a boy's,

**Hannah before/Hannah after:**

It is mine.  
It is free.  
Free.  
Glimmering  
Shimmering  
Northern Lights.

**Hannah before:**  
Northern lights.

**Hannah after/Hannah before:**

Northern lights.  
And I go home  
As one.

*[The End.]*

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