

V I N C E N T

Opera in Two Acts

Music by Bernard Rands

Libretto by J. D. McClatchy

WORLD PREMIERE:

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CHARACTERS *in order of vocal appearance (featured singers in boldface)*

Vincent van Gogh

Theo van Gogh, *his brother*

The Director, *of the Goupil gallery*

Man 1, *at the gallery*

Lady 1, *at the gallery*

Lady 2, *at the gallery*

Daughter 1, *at the gallery*

Daughter 2, *at the gallery*

Woman 1, *at the mine*

Woman 2, *at the mine*

Miner 1, *at the mine*

Miner 2, *at the mine*

Miners 3, 4, 5, *at the mine*

Woman 2, 3, 4, *at the mine*

Anna van Gogh, *his mother*

Elders of the Missionary Society

Theodorus van Gogh, his father

Sien (Clasina Hoornik), *a prostitute, Vincent's mistress*

Painter 1, *at Le Tambourin*

Painter 2, *at Le Tambourin*

Painter 3, *at Le Tambourin*

Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, *the painter*

Customer 1, *at Le Tambourin*

Customer 2, *at Le Tambourin*

Agostina Segatori, *proprietress of Le Tambourin and Vincent's mistress*

Paul Gauguin, *the painter*

Dr. Théophile Peyron, *director of the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum*

Marguérite Gachet, *daughter of Dr. Gachet*

Dr. Paul Gachet

Chorus

ACT I

CD 1

[1] Scene 1 Saint-Rémy, 1889

The show-curtain is a front scrim on which is the word “Vincent” (in VvG’s signature).

As the house darkens and the music begins, a late self-portrait appears on the scrim. [All future scenes will start with a self-portrait as an indicator of his age.]

The light comes up on a man sitting in a chair, his back to the audience.

VINCENT (*from the dark*)

When I feel the terrible need for religion, I go out and paint the stars.

The man in the chair stands up and starts to walk off-stage.

No! No! Don’t leave me, Theo!

Everyone leaves me. I can’t be by myself.

God will laugh at me.

The man returns and sits in the chair, his back still to the audience. Slowly he gets up and faces the audience.

THEO

I have hung one of the Sunflowers in the dining room.

It looks like cloth stitched with satin and gold.

VINCENT (*from the dark*)

No! No! The earth is too slow.

What is a flower next to a star?

THEO returns to the chair. The light fades on him and comes up on VINCENT further back on stage. He is sitting at his easel outside, candles on the brim of his hat. He draws a horizon line on the canvas. As he does, it appears next on the front scrim.

The earth is here. It comes like waves on the shore, lapping at heaven.

Next he slashes a vertical line down left of center. It too appears on the scrim.

The earth crucified God.

This is where they did it. This is how they did it.

As he paints furiously, the front scrim fills in, from right to left, with the bottom half of "The Starry Night."

Waves . . . and clouds, dumb billowing olive trees.

They whisper to each other about my attacks.

But I have no desires.

The village nailed to its spire.

It points to their shame, what they do in the dark.

Sin is a dark flame.

Here. Like this. (*The dark cypress mounts.*)

It licks them. Lick, lick, lick.

But that is not all there is. No! No! No!

He paints furiously, ecstatically. Slowly, on a scrim behind him, the top half of the painting emerges, the cauldron of boiling stars.

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven;

a woman clothed with the sun,

and the moon under her feet,

and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.

And the dragon's tail drew the stars of heaven

and cast them to the earth.

These are the eyes of Christ.

He was the artist I copy,

working not in color but in flesh.

Flesh that swirls and glides, that grabs the light.

God is the lighthouse in eclipse.

This is the world in my mind.

This is why a man paints—

To see the world in his mind.

[2] *The stage darkens. From the darkness at the rear, VINCENT's father, THEODORUS VAN GOGH, emerges, soon after followed by a younger THEO. [We are in 1876.]*

THEODORUS VAN GOGH

No! No, no, no!

God does not want to be praised. He wants to be served.

THEO, *entering, with a sheaf of drawings in the hand*

But look at these, father.

Vincent has talent.

Surely God can be served by those who draw his creation.

Look!

THEODORUS VAN GOGH, *glancing at the drawings*

God's word is not fruit and boats,

or women standing under trees.

Vincent will be a pastor,

like his grandfather and father before him.

THEO

But your own brother, Uncle Cent, is an art dealer.

He lives in Paris.

You must let Vincent work for him.

You must let him study and improve.

Look!

THEODORUS VAN GOGH

Art cannot satisfy my Vincent.

I know my boy.

Art is a shadow.

Vincent wants the light.

THEO

Father, please.

I know what Vincent wants, what he needs.

He will live with Uncle, work in the gallery,

Study and copy and learn.

How could God be displeased?

***THEODORUS VAN GOGH walks back into the darkness, THEO following him,
holding out the drawings.***

[3] Scene 2 Paris, 1876

The Goupil gallery in Paris. Fashionably academic pictures hang on the walls. Fringed velvet settees, discrete employees, white-coated workers transporting pictures, well-dressed gallery-going couples. The gallery's DIRECTOR is talking with the young VINCENT at the side.

THE DIRECTOR

You know I want to help you, Vincent.

I want to give you a future, a future with the firm.

I have spoken with your father . . .

VINCENT

Yes, sir. I am grateful, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

You have talent. A good eye. A sense of things. And you can draw.

Surrounded by great art should be an inspiration to you,
give you a good head for business.

Look at that couple there.

They have paused just long enough for you gently to slip a silver hook in their mouths.
Go . . . go!

Reluctantly, VINCENT approaches the prospective buyers.

VINCENT

Madame. Monsieur. May I be of any assistance to you?

MAN 1

I like cows! A sense of contentment. Yes, cows!

LADY 1 (*to Vincent*)

He likes cows.

MAN 1

They remind me of my board of directors. And their wives!

LADY 1

Bertrand!

VINCENT (*leading them to another picture*)

Perhaps Monsieur would look at this engraving.

OTHER STROLLING COUPLES

The grandeur is sublime!

The seriousness of purpose.

And the frame. Just look at that frame!

To gaze on these at dinnertime!

Collecting is a cautious game.

LADY 1

I'm not sure I understand . . .

MAN 1

This doesn't have any cows in it. What is it meant to be? A forest? It looks like a toast rack.

LADY 1

Bertrand!

VINCENT

The engraving is more honest.

MAN 1

How can it be? It's less expensive!

VINCENT

God sees the space between the lines. The clarity of this black is like the pupil of the Almighty's eye. It looks through you.

The couple back away, muttering to themselves, and leave the gallery. Uncle Cent notices them leaving. Vincent, more eagerly now, approaches a lady and her two grown daughters.

COUPLES

The grandeur is sublime!
The seriousness of purpose!

VINCENT

Grandeur, madame. May I interest you in grandeur?

LADY 2

As long as it fits over my new settee, young man. About the length of my daughters there, and in a somewhat paler blue. I was thinking of this garden gate.

DAUGHTER 1

No, Maman, that blue is too bright. It hurts my eyes.

DAUGHTER 2

No, Maman, that gate is all wrong. Not the right size.

COUPLES

And the frame. Just look at that frame!

To gaze on these at dinnertime!

Collecting is a cautious game!

LADY 2

Perhaps they are right, young man. Perhaps . . . Perhaps the fountain over here.

As the ladies move to another picture, VINCENT stays where he is, and calls loudly to them.

VINCENT

The gate or the fountain! Can't you see they are both the entrance to sorrow? Look at this, ladies. (*Pointing to another painting.*) Look! Look!

LADY 2

And what, pray tell, do *you* know about art, young man?

VINCENT

We are not talking about art, madame, are we? Are we? You are talking about furniture and I am talking about God. Look! *This* man understands. This is how we give ourselves to others. This is how we make ourselves worthy of love.

LADY 2 (*calling to THE DIRECTOR*)

Mr. Van Gogh!

THE DIRECTOR (*rushing over to her*)

Madame! I beg your pardon!

He pushes VINCENT to the side, while excusing his behavior to the ladies—though they brusquely leave the gallery. The other customers look on, disconcerted.)

He is just an apprentice, learning the trade—and obviously he has not learned much. A thousand apologies. . . . Madame, of course, madame. Yes, madame. Good afternoon, ladies.

(Catching VINCENT by the arm and pulling him close.)

What was that all about? You young fool!

VINCENT

They understand nothing. How can you let them in here, sir?

THE DIRECTOR

This is a business, Vincent. Your father and I thought you and your brother might join us, but obviously we were mistaken.

VINCENT

Sir, please! I can't live the way you do. Look around. This is not art. But what does that matter! This—none of this—this is not what God asks of us. I have gone to the museums in Paris. I have seen how we may grow rich in God. You know that it is written, "The world passeth away." You know about "that good part which shall not be taken away." It is not art, uncle. It is the word of the Lord. I want to be simple and true.

THE DIRECTOR

This is not the place for that, Vincent. This is not the place for such ideas.

VINCENT

Let me go, sir, please. You're right. Of course you are right. When the apple is ripe, a soft breeze makes it fall from the tree. I feel myself falling, sir. Falling. Falling. Falling into the hands of the Lord.

He rushes out. THE DIRECTOR calls out, then looks at him flee, shaking his head in puzzlement. The gallery couples resume.

THE DIRECTOR

You have talent, boy! Art is good business . . .

The Lord doesn't need you! No one needs you, Vincent!

COUPLES

The grandeur is sublime!

The seriousness of purpose.

And the frame. Just look at that frame!

To gaze on these at dinnertime!

Collecting is a cautious game.

[5] Scene 3 The Borinage, Belgium, 1878

A pit-head at the Borinage. The mine underground has collapsed, trapping several miners. Used to disaster, the crowd of miners and families in the pit-head is anxious. The atmosphere—with storage bins, ventilators, and rough frames—is grimy. VINCENT, who has come as a missionary to work with the miners, arrives to comfort them.

WOMAN 1

How long have they been down there?

WOMAN 2

Two hours now?

WOMAN 1

No sound?

WOMAN 2

No sound. The men can't get to the shaft.

MINER 1

Help me with this hoist!

A group of miners join him in shifting the hoist. A tense moment. They wait for a sound, but none comes.

MINER 1 (*in frustration and anger*)

Again! Again, again, again!

VINCENT (*rushing in*)

Let me! Let me help!

He joins the men at the hoist—until they all stop in despair.

MINER 1

No use.

VINCENT

No! Don't say that! The Lord protects them. Our duty is to push and wait, to wait and pray.

WOMAN 2

Why would the Lord crush their lives, and those of their wives and children? Why would the Lord trap them in darkness? Why would He steal their light and air? Why? Why?

MINERS 2, 3, 4, 5 and WOMEN 1, 2, 3, 4 (*variously*)

Why?

MINER 1

You are a good man, Vincent, and I know you've set about to do the Lord's work, and to help us. Our lives are hard, and you have made yours even harder. But there is nothing you can do now.

MINER 2

This is what miners do. We know the risks. We live with death every day.

VINCENT

If we sing, the Lord will hear us. Sing. Sing with me . . . "Flots mugissants, flots en furie..."

CHORUS

Flots mugissants, flots en furie,

Entourez moi, je n'ai pas peur:

Quoi qu'il en soit, paix infini,

Puisqu'à la barre est mon Saveur.

Le gouvernail, de ma nacelle,

Oh! quel repos Jésus le tient,
Si dans la nuit mon coeur chancel,
Avec Jésus oui tout est bien.
[Et vous, récifs, écueils, menaces,
Qui présagez plu d'un malheur,
Calme, je puis vous voir en face,
Puisqu'à la barre est mon Saveur.]

VINCENT

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Hear us, oh Lord, in our hour of need. Our sins keep us in darkness and suffering—like the darkness of this mine. Though God's purposes are hidden from us, we know that God is good and will lead us from darkness into light. (*He begins to stutter.*) We ha-ha-ha-have no abiding ho-ho-ho-home. Aanhoudend huiswaarts. We wander in . . . per-perpétuel . . . huis . . .

He collapses. The hymn dies out. The miners circle him and stare. Suddenly, MINER 1 yells out "Here!" and the men join him at the hoist, again trying to turn it—and everyone ignoring now the figure of VINCENT on the floor.

[6] Scene 4 A Missionary church in the Borinage, Belgium, 1878

A cramped, decrepit missionary church in the Borinage. A cross, a lectern, a few religious hangings, a few rows of pews. From outside, THEO calls “Vin-cent!” Then he appears at the rear door, looks quickly around and calls again.

THEO

Vincent!

There is no response. THEO sits in the front pew, looking through a sheaf of drawings. As he does, VINCENT, who had been sleeping in a rear pew, rises in the distance behind THEO and sees him looking at the drawings.

VINCENT

Not bad.

THEO (*startled and excited*)

These drawings are marvelous! **So much better than they were before, so much stronger.** Marvelous! Look at these trees! This woman! How did you . . . ?

VINCENT (*dispassionately*)

The best way to love God is to pay close attention. One man will love Rembrandt, genuinely, and that man will know God. Another may love a pair of shoes, or a miner’s lamp.

THEO (*putting down the drawings and growing serious*)

If you can do work like this, why do you waste your time doing anything else?

VINCENT

Of what use are we unless we bring the word of God to His people? I belong *here*, doing *this*. Art is just a way to study God's creation.

THEO

Vincent, Father and Mother have come hear you preach. Father was asked to come by the elders of the Evangelical Society.

VINCENT (*suddenly upset*)

Father, here? *Asked?*

As he approaches THEO, his parents appear in the doorway, followed by three dour elders in black.

ANNA VAN GOGH

Oh, Vincent!

His father restrains her.

THEODORUS VAN GOGH

We greet you, my son, in the name of Christ, and have come at the bidding of these elders. Your work here among the miners, it would seem, has met with disfavor.

ELDERS

No, "disfavor" is too strong a word.

Yes, disfavor is the council's word.

Well, disfavor, yes, disfavor is a word.

ANNA VAN GOGH

Oh, Vincent!

THEO

This is his work, Father! This is his life!

Meanwhile, miners and their families are entering and taking their places in the pews.

VINCENT

They are mistaken, Father. In every generation of our family there has been a preacher of the Gospel. You are a preacher. And I follow humbly in your footsteps.

THEODORUS VON GOGH

But I studied, Vincent. Languages, theology, history.

ELDERS

Languages, theology, history.

VINCENT

Languages, theology, history.

What these people need is the word of God.

He rushes to the lectern and begins preaching.

We are strangers on this earth. We come from afar and we are going far. But we have no vision of where we are going. Everything on earth changes. We are not what we once were, we shall not remain as we are now. We are strangers on this earth. Hide not Thy commandments from us. We want to know we are Thine. We want a Father, a Father's love and a Father's approval. We want . . . we want . . .

He breaks down in tears. His father whispers to the elders, and they come up to surround VINCENT.

THEODORUS VAN GOGH

No, son. You cannot see yourself.

You are weak, nervous, not missionary stock.

The Lord doesn't need you! No one needs you, Vincent!

[7] Scene 5 The Hague, 1882

A shabby room that serves as both lodging and studio. Drawings are everywhere, on the walls and floor. VINCENT is working on sketches of a chair. He looks, he draws, he looks and measures, he is dissatisfied. He begins again, and again. There is a knock at the door. He ignores it. Again, the knock, louder.

VINCENT (*annoyed*)

Go away!

Intent on his drawing, he tries to ignore a still louder knocking.

I told you I would pay next week. Next week! Next week!

The knocking continues, and VINCENT goes angrily to open the door, and discovers THEO standing there.

How many times must I-- Theo! Dearest brother! My dear Theo! Come in, come in. (*He tries to straighten up.*) Forgive me. All this mess. Here, sit here. My dear Theo! Welcome! How I have missed you!

THEO

As I have missed you, brother.

VINCENT (*embracing him*)

Theo, Theo, Theo . . .

THEO (*breaking away*)

I have some news. You remember Johanna?

VINCENT

You are going to marry her! (*Embracing him again.*) Oh Theo . . .

Let me make us some tea.

Tell me the other news. Father and Mother? Our sisters? Tell.

THEO

Well. Yes, they are well. Oh, and they send their love. Yes.

VINCENT

But Father still disapproves of me. Is that what you're trying to say?

THEO

Well. No, he loves you. You know that. He has trouble understanding, trouble seeing the world as you see it.

VINCENT

Trouble understanding, trouble seeing the world as I see it.

THEO

It's cold in here.

VINCENT (*showing him a sheaf of drawings*)

Look at these! Look at what I've been working on. Oh Theo, my hand is free because my heart is free. A bowl, a bottle, a chair—

THEO

A bowl, a bottle, a chair—

VINCENT

--these are the shapes of God's love, the signs of our redemption.

THEO

--the shapes of God's love, the signs of our redemption.

I'm not sure I follow . . . But here (*holding out the parcel he has brought*), this is for you.

VINCENT hesitates, then unwraps the parcel. It is tubes of paint, pencils, charcoals, brushes—a trove of art supplies. He goes through it in wonder, then rushes to embrace his brother.

And this too.

He hands VINCENT another package, a portfolio of lithographs. Again, VINCENT goes through it, astonished.

VINCENT

Theo, Theo! Oh, look at this, look at this line! Look how the branches are turned!

THEO

I want you to have these. I believe in you, Vincent, in your art. You could be as great as Millet or Hals. Rembrandt, maybe. Yes. It's true! You have the vision, you need the paint.

VINCENT

I have the vision, I need the paint. I want to paint what is eternal in men and women.

THEO

You want to paint what is eternal in men and women.

The door suddenly opens. SIEN, pregnant and haggard, enters with her swaddled child which she puts on a bed at the rear. SIEN goes to the table and slaps down some coins. THEO stands by incredulous.

VINCENT

You're back.

An awkward pause.

This is my brother. Theo. The one I've told you so much about.

Theo, Clasina Hoornik. You can call her Sien.

This is Sien. And her daughter. And maybe her son!

THEO

Are they yours?

VINCENT

Not in that way, no. But they will be. *(He tries to put his arm around her but she shrugs him off.)* I'm going to marry my Sien.

THEO

Marry?

(First embarrassed, then angry.)

Marry! You can't marry this . . . Are you insane?

Sputtering, he leaves and slams the door.

The noise makes the child cry. SIEN tends to it, ignoring VINCENT.

VINCENT

You were out all night.

SIEN

The money's on the table.

VINCENT [bickering duet]

I've told you before, you don't have to do this.

I'll sell my work, you'll see.

There will be enough for us all.

You have to think of the child, of both children.

Please, Sien, please don't do this.

SIEN

How do you propose we feed ourselves?

I don't want to be saved.

I hate it when you talk like that.

Why can't you treat me like a normal woman?

No, Vincent, no, I can't do this.

Exhausted by arguing, they sulk on opposite sides of the room. Finally VINCENT looks up at her tenderly.

VINCENT

You're beautiful when you're angry.

Here. Please.

He poses her on the edge of the bed, and takes down the top of her dress. He backs away, and takes up his pencil and paper. He sketches intently. Times passes,

SIEN

I'm bored.

It seems VINCENT doesn't notice her remark, so intent is he on his drawing.

VINCENT (*without looking up*)

You're beautiful.

Your shoulder is as smooth as a cobblestone, as smooth as a petal.

Your shoulder is a field, and I am its sower, its reaper.

He continues drawing.

SIEN

I'm bored.

He continues drawing. Finally SIEN's daughter begins whimpering from her bed, and she gets up to tend to her. This rouses VINCENT from his concentration.

VINCENT

Are you not happy here?

SIEN

Happy?

VINCENT

Happy. I found you in the street. I took you in, bathed you, cared for you and the child. You know I plan to marry you, and take another man's unborn child as my own.

SIEN

Happy?

You are a kind man, Vincent. But I don't belong here.

THEO enters silently, overhearing them.

VINCENT

Nonsense. We belong together. Look at these! You are my muse, I am your artist. I will make your shoulder famous!

THEO (clearing his throat)

I'm sorry, Vincent. I lost control of myself,

I was rude and had to get some air.

VINCENT

I'm glad you're back, Theo!

THEO (taking VINCENT aside and whispering urgently)

You can't *marry* her. I've heard what people in the café say about her, about both of you. Vincent-- . . . she . . . she . . . walks the streets.

VINCENT

The world's opinion means nothing to me! I will not force a woman, nor will I forsake her. I have pledged my heart to Sien.

THEO

Father will never allow it! (*VINCENT laughs.*) Vincent, listen to me. If you marry this woman, it will make my marriage to Joanna impossible.

VINCENT [**trio**]

Everything I want he will oppose.

When I said "I am an artist," he laughed. He thought I meant "I have found it," but what I meant is "I am looking, I am hunting for it." When I marry Sien, I am searching for a way to keep my promise with God. She is willing to be a painter's wife. I will not break my promise! When I marry her, I will be a better painter!

THEO

You will make my life impossible!

You are my brother, my dearest brother. I have helped you, supported you because I believe in you. Vincent, please, I beg you, do not ruin my life in order to throw your own away. None of this is worth what it will cost us all. If you marry her, you will never be a painter!

SIEN

I have come between the two of you!

I cannot stand this! All I have ever wanted is a room for myself and my children, a window where I can watch the ocean break itself into pieces against the city walls. All I ever wanted was a fire, a baby in my arms. I never wanted to be a piece of paper, Vincent. Not a piece of paper.

THEO

You are stirring up a storm that will drown us all.

VINCENT

The storm may come and the night may fall, but which is worse, the danger or the fear of danger? I would sooner have the reality, the danger itself.

SIEN goes to pick up her daughter. THEO picks up his suitcase. They both head towards the door.

THEO

I'm sorry, Vincent.

He leaves.

SIEN

You don't understand. I don't need you. No one needs you, Vincent.

She leaves. VINCENT stares at the empty door. He slowly returns to the pile of drawings, picks up two of them, depicting SIEN; then sits, staring at them.

A bare space. VINCENT alone at his easel.

VINCENT

The laws of color are beautiful because they are not accidental.

No one believes in an arbitrary God, a capricious miracle-worker. We watch His plan unfold in nature.

Black, black, black.

He covers his canvas in black.

The color of space, the color of God's canvas.

He outlines a table in the lower half of the canvas, and we see it take shape on the scrim above the figure.

The field where they work. The table where they eat.

He coughs violently.

Yes, I can even cough like a peasant! These are the creatures who bend and lift, who dig and reap. These are the people who are used by life, and for that they are closest to God. They alone are the fit subject of my art. I have to get it down. This small light—

He paints a lamp hanging above the table.

--is their light, bright because of the darkness around it.

Furiously sketching in the men and women around the table.

This is their table. This is their altar.

Brown and green-soap and coppery blue. The colors of the places where they work, and here in the places where they eat. They share their work. They share their loneliness. Black in the dress. Gray shadows for their cups. That head like a good dusty potato. Their eyes. I would rather paint the eyes of people than paint cathedrals. Here is God. Here is God among His people.

The huge picture, known as “The Potato Eaters,” is finally finished.

[10] Scene 7 Paris, 1887

The Café Le Tambourin, a lively artists’ bar in the Montmartre. There are paintings on the walls, smoky mirrors, candles. Its patroness, Agostina Segatori, with whom VINCENT has been sleeping, presides at the center of the bustling, raucous scene. Waiters, drinkers and diners are milling. To one side of the room are tables where the painters sit—among them GAUGUIN and LAUTREC. THEO is at a table with VINCENT, both of them animated.

CHORUS

Je l’aime quand est au loin,

[I love her when she’s far away,

Je l’aime quand elle revient.

[I love her when she comes back home,

J’aime voir ses hanches se balancer,

[I love the way her hips can sway,

J'aime sa façon de se peigner,	[I love the way she holds her comb,
De me tenir la barbichette,	[Or sweetly pulling my goatee,
Ou quand elle grimpe sur mes genoux.	[Or primly sitting on my knee.
Mais ce que j'aime surtout,	[But I love her best
C'est de nous promener en tête-à-tête,	[When she's half-undressed
Sous les ponts de Paris.	[Under the bridges of Paris.

Sous les ponts, les ponts,	[Under the bridges,
Les ponts de Paris,	[Under the bridges,
Sous les ponts de Paris,	[Under the bridges of Paris,
C'est là qu'on attend la chance.	[We wait to see what chance may bring,
Sous les ponts de Paris.	[Under the bridges of Paris.
Dans la clarté des lampadères,	[The lamps all glisten,
Parmi les ombres passagères,	[The shadows listen,
Le fleuve chante, tout nous sourit,	[You'll find true love, the river sings,
Sous les ponts de Paris,	[Under the bridges,
Les ponts, les ponts	[Under the bridges,
Sous les ponts de Paris.	[Under the bridges of Paris.

Applause and shouting.

PAINTER 1 (*imitating the song in a mocking way*)

“Sous les ponts de Paris.”

Under the bridges,

Under the bridges

Under the bridges of Paris!

That's where I'm sleeping tonight!

PAINTER 2

That's where my new show is hanging!

PAINTER 3

That's where my dealer ought to be hanging!

LAUTREC (*climbing on a table*)

Gentlemen!

PAINTERS (*chanting*)

Lautrec! Lautrec! Lautrec!

LAUTREC

Ladies and gentlemen! Let me introduce you to the future of painting. He has been a sailor and a stockbroker. He has scampered in the Andes and sketched with Cézanne. He knows color better than any of us. Ladies and gentlemen, Paul Gauguin!

CUSTOMER 1 (*mockingly*)

Poor starving artists!

PAINTER 1

Rich stinking shit!

CUSTOMER 2

Misunderstood—boo-hoo!

PAINTER 2

Bourgeois cretin!

A general but good-natured melee. Shouts of “Genius—ha-ha!,” “Go home to your upholstered wives,” “Paint is for children,” “You want art? Look up your arse,” etc.

LAUTREC (*trying to restore order*)

Gentlemen! Gentlemen!

I suggest that instead of the shouting, we have some singing. I hope our hostess, the lovely Madame Segatori, will do us the honor.

Cheers and whistles. AGOSTINA steps forward. As she sings, she comes behind VINCENT and sings directly to him.

AGOSTINA

Life is here, and then it's gone,

A glass of wine, a sweetheart's kiss.

Life is yours, and then it's not.

Tomorrow you can reminisce.

Hold me tight, but not for long.

Now's the time for love.

I'll be yours, but not for long.

Now's the time for love.

Now's the time for you and me,

For us, this once, right now, so—

Hold me tight, but not for long.

Now's the time for love.

I'll be yours, but not for long.

Now's the time for love.

Again, applause and whistles. AGOSTINA kisses VINCENT, tousles THEO's hair, and glides over to Gauguin's table.

So, Monsieur Gauguin, if Lautrec says you're a good painter, it means you're the best.

GAUGUIN just smiles and keeps drinking. She turns to LAUTREC.

Is it true, then, Henri?

GAUGUIN (*interrupting LAUTREC*)

True. Absolutely true, Madame, and at your service.

AGOSTINA (*softening*)

You flatter me, Monsieur.

GAUGUIN

"At your service" means "what can you do for me?"

My wife and children couldn't do much,

So I packed them off. Are you a soft touch?

As soft as a brush? It's canvas I caress!

AGOSTINA drifts away towards THEO, as VINCENT approaches GAUGUIN's table.

But if you're proposing a little happiness . . . [**quartet**]

I can give you a night to be impressed.

Then back to what possesses *me*!

VINCENT

I share your passion, friend!

Van Gogh, Vincent Van Gogh.

I know your work, your colors.

You seek the very life with color.

AGOSTINA (*to THEO*)

So have I lost my charms?

Your brother used to like me in his arms.

Suddenly a stranger claims him.

What is art next to a woman?

THEO

He has been moody of late, I admit.

It's not you, Agostina, it's not you.

He feels he has been wasting his life.

He needs a woman like you as a wife!

While they have been singing, patrons have been leaving. AGOSTINA goes to help clean up the tables, and VINCENT comes over to her, takes her in his arms.

AGOSTINA [**duet**]

You used to do this all the time.

Who admires or loves you more?

Who makes you smile, treats you right?

VINCENT

I cannot give you all my time.

It's you alone that I adore.

You make me smile, treat me right.

It is not comfort I want.

It is not pleasure I miss.

A whore doesn't make promises or demands.

A whore doesn't offer tea and reprimands.

What is this fire inside me?

Can you tell me that?

What is this passion in my eye, my hand, my heart?

AGOSTINA (*puzzled and indifferent*)

The passion in your eye, your hand, your heart.

She crosses to be with GAUGUIN, who calls out to VINCENT.

GAUGUIN

Art is your only mistress! Only she can be trusted!

PAINTERS

Only she can be trusted! Art is your only mistress!

Under the bridges,

Under the bridges,

Under the bridges of Paris,

We wait to see what chance may bring,

Under the bridges of Paris.

The lamps all glisten,

The shadows listen,

You'll find true love, the river sings,

Under the bridges,

Under the bridges,

Under the bridges of Paris.

GAUGUIN [**duet, with ensemble softly behind them**]

Here is everything you need, right here in Paris, friend.

Here is everything you need to escape!

You need to be alone, you and the field of wheat, you and the cypress, you and the sun.

The South, Vincent! Flee there. Flee to the South!

There is your passion, your fire, your art!

VINCENT

Here is everything I need to escape!

The South—my passion, my fire, my art!

Suddenly, after drunkenly swirling around, he shouts, bringing the room to sudden silence.

No!

No!

GAUGUIN and THEO

No?

VINCENT (*to Gauguin*)

Will you go with me?

GAUGUIN

What, me? Go with you? No, Vincent, I've been there.

The PAINTERS resume singing softly behind them.

VINCENT

No, I don't mean that. I mean will you paint with me? North, South—wherever.

We could work side by side. Learn from each other.

GAUGUIN chuckles and shakes his head.

I can't stand being alone. Besides, the only true company for an artist is other artists. I want you *all* to come with me! The poverty among painters lies in the divisions between them.

The PAINTERS lose interest and turn away. GAUGUIN sits staring at his glass.

Come with me! All of you!

As if to shut VINCENT up, a drunken PAINTER suddenly starts singing "Sous les ponts de Paris," reeling through the company. The group soon picks up the melody and sings along. AGOSTINA goes over to him, to take him to bed. He ignores her, and goes over to GAUGUIN.

You'll come with me, Paul. You'll come with me, won't you? Just us two, Paul! Two painters and the world! We'll have it all to ourselves! The world, Paul! We'll have the world!

The PAINTERS continue singing drunkenly. GAUGUIN slowly, reluctantly gets up. He and VINCENT, arm in arm, leave.

ACT II

INTERLUDE

As the curtain rises quickly, there is a blaze of light. The stage is a vast shimmering wheat field. A huge sun is rising at the rear. In silhouette, the figure of VINCENT, with his easel, enters, crosses the field, sets up his easel, and begins painting.

The sun gradually turns into one of Van Gogh's sunflowers.

CD 2

[2] Scene 1 Arles, 1888

The small Yellow House in Arles. Upstairs are two bedrooms, VINCENT's and GAUGUIN's. Downstairs is a large common room, with a cooking fireplace, table and chairs. Much disarray. VINCENT is upstairs, at work. In his bedroom, he is finishing one of his Sunflower paintings. He uses tubes and a knife, then his fingers, to work up the image. His room has many of his own paintings on the walls, but the other bedroom, to be GAUGUIN's, is covered only with other Sunflower paintings. When VINCENT finishes the latest one, he goes to hang it above GAUGUIN's bed. There is a knock at the door. Excitedly, VINCENT tries to straighten things up, and rushes downstairs to open the door.

VINCENT

Paul! At last!

GAUGUIN enters, with a suitcase and painting gear.

Good, you have your things. Let's begin!

GAUGUIN

Vincent, Vincent. May I unpack first? Will you show me around?

VINCENT

Of course, of course. Come with me. Let me show you your room.

He leads GAUGUIN upstairs, and shows him his room.

GAUGUIN

But these are marvelous, Vincent! You've put me in a church, surrounded by stained glass windows!

VINCENT

Come, let me show you where we'll work.

They return downstairs. GAUGUIN stares suggestively at the bottle of wine on the table.

Please. Let me.

He pours two glasses.

Theo can't send me paint fast enough. Wait till you see this place! Light doesn't fall on things, it bursts out of them. The olive trees are like women in their kimonos. This is our Japan, our Eden! Everything we have wanted!

GAUGUIN

Except that today it is raining.

VINCENT

Well, yes. Today we work inside. But we will work together.

With GAUGUIN's help, he goes about setting up their easels and canvases. GAUGUIN is settling into his chair, when VINCENT suddenly takes his own chair and places it in the corner.

Here. If I can't paint a tree . . . The whole point is to take a stick of used furniture and make a tree out of it.

He begins rapidly painting the picture we know today as “Van Gogh’s Chair.”
GAUGUIN looks on, bemused. VINCENT talks as he paints.

I tell you, Paul, I’ve had enough of the artist’s life. Paris ruined me. Since I’ve been in Arles, it’s been fresh air, simple food, not too much wine, a good night’s sleep. And the town is a wonder. The fruit trees in bloom—a storm of blossoms! There is a Gothic portico, Zouaves and poets, bars and brothels, little girls all dressed up for their First Communion, and a priest in his surplice who resembles a dangerous rhinoceros!

He finishes the painting.

There! That’s my pipe! My pipe . . . Good for the nerves, pipes are. Now I’ll put my name on it. Oh Paul, I want to put my name on the whole world!

I’m so glad you’re here. We have it all to discover for ourselves. And we’ll work, work hard. The other ones will join us. We will have a whole community of artists. We will make the art of the future, Paul. It will be lovely and young. We will express the terrible passion of humanity by red and green, by yellow, Paul, the sun’s own yellow!

GAUGUIN

The future I envision tonight, Vincent, is a bottle of absinthe and a pair of luscious breasts.

VINCENT

Of course, Paul. Of course. Wait until you see this town!

He goes with GAUGUIN out of the door, and as they do, the Yellow House splits in two, each half disappearing into the wings, revealing a café in Arles, a pool table at its center. It is an extended replica of Van Gogh’s famous painting “The Night Café.”
Patrons and prostitutes.

[3] THE DANCES AT ARLES

[4] Scene 2 Arles, 1888

The Yellow House. Each man is in his bedroom with a prostitute. GAUGUIN is sitting up, obviously worried. VINCENT is still asleep. GAUGUIN slowly gets up, puts on his clothes and goes downstairs. He begins packing up his gear. The noise wakes VINCENT, who comes down. (The prostitutes continue sleeping.)

VINCENT

What are you doing?

GAUGUIN

I'm leaving.

VINCENT (*pleading*)

You've only been here two months. We're just beginning. The community . . . It's all just beginning.

GAUGUIN

Then it's beginning without *me*.

VINCENT

I don't understand.

GAUGUIN

I came here to paint, not to be lectured at.

VINCENT

I don't understand.

The prostitute in GAUGUIN's bed wakes up, rouses herself, and comes downstairs to him.

GAUGUIN

If we talk about women, or wine, or the weather . . . If we speak of enemies or friends . . .
If we argue about the price of bread or brushes . . . fine! But if we talk about art . . . you
lecture,

Vincent. On and on. And of late that's all you want to talk about. On and on. On and on.

VINCENT (*shouting*)

I don't understand.

GAUGUIN

No, that's just it, Vincent. You don't understand.

VINCENT (*louder*)

I don't understand! *I don't understand!*

His outburst wakes the prostitute in his bed, who gets up, annoyed, and slowly starts to get dressed.

GAUGUIN (*forcing him to sit down, trying to calm him*)

The world is bits and pieces of things. Our job is to put them together, and in doing so to give them depth—you know, a symbolic depth. All you want is . . . intensity. There is no line in your work, no gradation of tones. Everything is violent and pure. That's not painting, Vincent. It's just paint.

VINCENT [**duet**]

Everything has an inner force.

That is its permanence, its immortality.

You don't understand.

GAUGUIN

Bits and pieces of things, Vincent.

Art is the line between things, Vincent..

You don't understand.

GAUGUIN has packed. He puts his arm around the prostitute and walks towards the door.

VINCENT

Wait! Paul, wait! I have something to show you.

He rushes to the chair and rummages through his drawings. Finding what he is looking for, he holds it out to GAUGUIN. His speech is hysterical.

Here! Here it is! (*GAUGUIN takes the drawing.*) This is why we must stay together! That road. You know it. We have both drawn it. And you knew even then that it was the road we must both walk on. It is the road to God. It is the road, Paul. It is the road. It is . . . the . . . road.

GAUGUIN hands him the drawing, then turns and leaves with the prostitute. VINCENT sits in the chair, exhausted.

It is the road. I know it. I have been there. I know its color. You don't understand. It cuts through the sky. The blue is not dark. The road . . .

He takes a razor from his pocket, and stares at it. The other prostitute comes downstairs, looks at him, and goes to the fireplace. VINCENT suddenly opens the razor, and violently cuts his ear. The prostitute screams, frozen where she stands. VINCENT, blood running from the side of his head, reaches down and picks up the piece of his ear that has fallen to the floor. He takes one of his drawings and carefully wraps the piece. He stands uncertainly, and gives it to the prostitute as if it were a present. Then he collapses.

[5] Scene 3 Saint-Rémy, 1889

The courtyard of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, the mental asylum, with its heavy, half-sawn tree. Patients, in various stages of stupor or anxiety, cross. THEO enters, and sits on a bench. He looks at his watch, as if waiting for someone who is late. He rises when the hospital's director, DR. PEYRON, a small, impeccably dressed man in his mid-sixties, enters and walks towards him.

THEO (*shaking his hand*)

Doctor.

DR. PEYRON

Sit, sit. (*They both sit on the bench.*)

Your brother will be glad to see you.

THEO

You wrote that he is better.

DR. PETRON

Yes. Much better. He won't eat the food, you understand. But, between us, neither would I. A nun brings him soup and bread.

A cold bath three times a day, lots of sleeps. His mind seems clearer. I think the rest is helping him improve.

There are still episodes, mind you, and we continue to be quite careful. As I've told you before, his epilepsy is unpredictable and can be the cause of terrible outbreaks.

But for now, he is calm. I have let him start to paint. He has even been out in the fields—with supervision, of course.

THEO

That is good news, Doctor. Very good news.

The cloister bell rings.

DR. PEYRON

That would be the Angelus.

INMATES (*in a confused and half-hearted effort that soon falls silent*)

Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae.

Et conceptit de Spiritu Sancto.

Ave Maria

DR. PEYRON (*over this*)

Look! There he is.

VINCENT enters. Carrying a sheaf of drawings and a canvas, he moves slowly, and is dressed plainly. He brightens when he sees THEO. He takes his brother's hand and holds it.

Hello, Vincent. You're looking well today.

VINCENT (*to DR. PEYRON*)

My brother.

DR. PEYRON

Yes, Theo is here to see you. He has some news. I'll leave you now.

DR. PEYRON leaves. VINCENT and THEO sit together on one bench.

THEO

A nice man. His treatments seem to be working.

A pause.

VINCENT

A nice man.

THEO

He tells me you're painting again.

VINCENT

A nice man.

THEO

Painting again?

VINCENT (*as if drawn back from far away*)

There are people who love nature even though they are cracked and ill. Those are the painters.

I don't know why, Theo, but my mind is not right.

THEO

The Doctor says you are better, and I believe him. He says you are painting in the fields.

VINCENT

A nice man.

THEO (*taking a sheaf of drawings from him*)

May I?

He looks through it.

I have never seen anything like this, Vincent. These olive trees and clouds. Are they clouds? Your pen is like a storm. Jagged, coiling . . .

VINCENT (*showing him the canvas*)

And this self-portrait.

THEO (*looking at it, and then at VINCENT*)

But it's a tree.

Oh, I see, it's this tree, right here.

VINCENT (*as THEO stares at the canvas*)

Part of me was hit by lightning and sawn off. The green is saddened by gray. Those empty stone seats. The last flower, here. The sickly greeny pink smile.

The painting releases me, Theo. See how things move?

THEO (*as if trying to change the subject*)

I . . I have news. Johanna and I are having a baby. If it's a boy, we mean to name him Vincent.

VINCENT

You mean to name him Vincent.

THEO

Yes, we mean to name him Vincent. For you. Would you like that?

VINCENT

A nice man.

THEO

Well, I must be going.

He gathers his things, embraces VINCENT, and leaves. VINCENT takes the canvas and sets it up, to do further work on it. He opens his box of paints and brushes. A few patients wander aimlessly by.

VINCENT (*talking to the tree*)

You mean to name him Vincent.

He will be a painter.

(He puts paint on the canvas, then pus his thumb into it.)

The branches are his thumbprint.

(He takes up tubes of paint and begins applying it to the canvas.)

The shadows are blue.

The road cuts through the blue.

I am the painting!

I am the painting!

He begins squeezing the tubes of paint into his mouth, swallowing it, smearing himself with it. Inmates gather and watch him. In the background, a woman's panicked voice screams out "Doctor! Doctor!"

[6] Scene 4 Auvers, 1890

The salon of DR. GACHET's house. Its walls are host to paintings by the famous Impressionists. He is sitting, his head propped in his hand, in the pose of his famous portrait. An easel with the nearly completed portrait stands near him. His grown daughter Marguerite comes in with a cup of tea and places it on the table near him. He mouths an exaggerated "Thank you," and we realize that he is stiffly holding a pose. She tidies the room until she can stand it no longer.

MARGUERITE

Really, Father! How long to do intend to sit there?

Her father does not answer her at first.

Father? Father!

DR. GACHET (*finally breaking his pose*)

Damn it, Marguerite! I was just getting used to it!

MARGUERITE

You are wearing your hat indoors.

He snatches it off.

Precisely how long will Mr. Van Gogh be here? That's what I'd like to know.

DR. GACHET

He said he'd be right back. He needed something in his room.

MARGUERITE

No, Father. I mean, how much longer will he be staying with us?

DR. GACHET

I promised his brother that Vincent can stay with us until he is well.

MARGUERITE

You know he has gone to his room for the alcohol he hides there. He belongs in a hospital.

DR. GACHET [**duet**]

You're wrong. Well, not about the alcohol. But he needs a home, not a hospital. He needs company, the chance to paint, a calm routine.

MARGUERITE

You're wrong. He's killing himself in your salon, Father. He belongs in a hospital. The painting disturbs him. He needs a hospital's calm routine.

VINCENT has entered, and stands in the doorway listening to them arguing. He looks pale and pre-occupied. When they see him, they are embarrassed.

VINCENT

I should leave.

DR. GACHET

And who would finish my portrait, eh? I'm not sure the eyes are quite right. Come, let's get back to work.

He resumes his pose. Chagrined, MARGUERITE leaves. VINCENT sits at his easel. About to resume painting, he suddenly puts his brush down and looks at DR. GACHET.

VINCENT

I was mad. I feared I was mad. I loathed my life. Men talked and shouted all night long. My companions in misfortune.

Thank you, Doctor. You trusted me. The attacks will come again, but you know what they are, you know what I am, what I do. I am ill.

DR. GACHET

Yes, you are ill. But you are stronger now.

VINCENT (*wryly*)

I plough my canvas the way a peasant ploughs his field.

MARGUERITE returns with a cup of tea for VINCENT.

DR. GACHET (*rising and going to admire to the pictures on his walls*)

Look at them.

Very pretty things. Gardens washed out by light. A moment suspended in bits of brushwork. All surface. You want something more.

On the other side of the room, VINCENT and MARGUERITE engage in a secretive, hushed conversation.

VINCENT (*looking gently at MARGUERITE*)

Marguerite. Thank you.

He takes her hand.

You know my feelings for you.

She withdraws her hand and looks away. But he takes it again.

MARGUERITE

Please, Vincent. Not again.

I am here because my father needs me. That is all.

I do not . . . will never share your “feelings.”

Now let go of my hand.

He does so, mortified. He fumbles with the brushes as DR. GACHET walks back over and sits down.

VINCENT (*after looking at the portrait-in-progress, and then at DR. GACHET, who stiffens in his pose*)

Each face has a history, like each leaf on a tree. A face is a landscape. It is rained on and walked on. It is open to whatever happens. Its character is in the color. The background is forward. The blues and yellow are heavy, like the gold in a mosaic . . .

In his excitement, he knocks over the cup of tea. MARGUERITE rushes to clean up the mess. VINCENT, disturbed at his clumsiness, rises. They stare at one another.

DR. GACHET

It's nothing, Vincent, nothing.

VINCENT (*hastily packing up his gear and easel*) [**trio**]

I shouldn't be here.

DR. GACHET and MARGUERITE

It's nothing, nothing at all.

VINCENT

I shouldn't be here. Shouldn't be here. Shouldn't be here.

He rushes out of the room.

[8] Scene 5

The same vast wheat field as at the beginning of Act II. No sun this time, just an intensely blue sky. VINCENT is painting the field, his large canvas facing the audience, and duplicating in its way the field. VINCENT is furiously painting black cloud-strokes at the top of the picture.

VINCENT (*addressing different sections of the painting*)

This is sadness.

This is solitude.

The roads don't lead to the blue.

Don't lead out of the field.

The field and the sky.

Sadness and solitude.

He gets up and walks away from the picture, looking at it and then at the distant scene.

I knew it would come.

I didn't know when, but I knew it would come.

He walks in angry circles.

Theo has a wife and a child.

Theo has a family.

The Doctor has a family.

Gauguin has a family, and he threw them out.

He sits down again at the easel and begins adding crows to the picture.

Theo has a family.

Gauguin has a family.

Doctor Gachet said I could stay but I am not a family.

The attack is coming.

The world is coming closer.

The Doctor said another attack would come.

I will not be a burden on them.

I can stop it.

I can stop it.

I can stop it.

He staggers up from his chair, and walks towards the center of the field.

He takes out a pistol.

He holds his arms out towards the audience, begging their pity.

Then, suddenly, he turns the pistol on himself and shoots himself in the chest.

[9] Scene 6

An empty stage. The light comes up on a man sitting in a chair, his back to the audience, as at the beginning of Act I. Slowly the figure of DR. GACHET enters with MARGUERITE, who is weeping. He puts his hand sympathetically on the man's shoulder, and he and his daughter leave.

The man gets up and faces the audience. It is THEO.

The upstage light comes up on VINCENT in bed, dying.

VINCENT

Don't leave me, Theo!

Everyone leaves me. I can't be by myself.

THEO takes the chair, walks to the bedside, and sits there, placing his hand on VINCENT's.

THEO

I am beside you, Vincent. Where I have always been.

VINCENT

I will not be a burden.

THEO

You know better than to say that.

VINCENT

You have your baby, your new Vincent. He is not ill.

THEO (*distressed*)

Do you want me to leave?

Is that what you want? I will. I will. I will.

VINCENT

No, Theo, don't leave me.

Nobody needs me, but I need you.

Those sunflowers you like so much. Keep them. Do you know what I had always meant by them? It was not the flower itself that rose at dawn, not the disk of black seeds, not the fiery petals and steady stem. It was how I painted gratitude, Theo. Gratitude.

I cut the flower, Theo. I stole the sun.

I used it to look at the world.

This is the world in my mind.

This is why a man paints—

To see the world in his mind.

I wish it were all over now.

The music fades out. THEO gets up and closes his brother's eyes. As he slowly leaves, the music rises. Above, the boiling stars in "The Starry Night" again appear, surrounding VINCENT's bed.

CURTAIN