

**Synopsis of *Psyche & Delia***  
**Music by Anne LeBaron**  
Libretto by Gerd Stern and Edward Rosenfeld

*Psyche & Delia* charts the powerful historical ramifications—cultural, political, and spiritual—set into motion by Albert Hoffman’s discovery of LSD in 1943. Characters populating this opera are drawn from the fields of mythology, science, literature, journalism, publishing, intelligence, politics, entertainment, medicine, and shamanism. A chorus functions variously as groups of prisoners, divinity students, reporters, and the high-stepping Georgetown Ladies. The panorama of dramatic events encompasses scientific discoveries, murders, CIA classified experiments, festivities, and extraordinary meetings of minds with iconic figures such as Aldous Huxley, Albert Hofmann, and Timothy Leary. Interwoven throughout are poetic ruminations drawn from Huxley’s *Doors of Perception*.

LSD, a semi-synthetic substance that jump-started the counterculture movement, was formerly ostracized, demonized, and feared. Yet, it was being simultaneously appropriated for nefarious uses by government agencies and other organizations. Practically half a century had to pass before the value of LSD as a therapeutic agent in medical and psychiatric settings began to once again gain traction and respect.

The opera will be scored for an orchestra combining Harry Partch’s instruments (tuned with 43 tones to the octave) with Western and non-Western instruments. The fluid manipulation of tuning systems is intended to have a direct perceptual and dramatic link to the events, action, and characters in *Psyche & Delia*.

In the fifteen scenes of *Psyche & Delia*, we intend to explore the dynamics of pop culture related to the promises of revelation and salvation that religion and science still offer us, through the kaleidoscopic lens of a remarkable yet controversial substance, lysergic diethylamide acid. The opera commences with the increasingly demented overture of Phil Graham, President and CEO of the Washington Post, addressing the 1963 American Newspaper Publishers Conference with an extreme loss of composure as he spills the secrets related to JFK and his mistress Mary Pinchot Meyer, who were evidently experimenting with LSD in the White House. Graham, suffering from a bi-polar disorder, went on to commit suicide a scant three months before the Nov. 22 assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. The seven scenes in the wake of this overture introduce most of the principle characters. Albert Hoffman, the Swiss scientist who first invented LSD in 1943, intentionally ingested a small amount in 1946 as an experiment, and rode his bicycle home from the lab, hallucinating all the while. “Bicycle Day” is now celebrated throughout the world on the day of his ride, April 19, by LSD aficionados. Hoffman on his bicycle becomes a recurring metaphor of the centrality of LSD to the large cast of characters in the opera. Humphrey Osmond and Aldous Huxley meet at Huxley’s home in Los Angeles, 1953; James Watson and Francis Crick discover the double helix and celebrate at a pub in England. Sid Gottlieb heads the secret Project MKUltra, a mind-control program manipulating people’s mental states through the surreptitious administration of LSD and other drugs. In doing so, he violated the Nuremberg standards and fought off lawsuits for the rest of his life. MKUltra was activated on the order of CIA director Allen Dulles. Albert Hoffman and his wife Anita meet with Aldous and Laura Huxley; and the last scene of Act I involves the acquaintance of Mary Meyer with

Timothy Leary. In Act II, we hear from Cary Grant and Steve Jobs; Richard Alpert spikes the champagne at a wedding attended by Gerd Stern (one of our librettists who was there); Laura Huxley assists Aldous on his deathbed; Mary Meyer, who knew too much, is murdered one year after JFK's death (still unsolved)—friends and relatives race to find her diary; Cord Meyer, her ex-husband, tells the truth about her murder years later from his wheelchair in a nursing home; Sid Gottlieb, who retired to run a leper colony in India, returns as a goat-herder in Virginia and is surrounded by all the surviving characters in his log cabin, extolling the Zen of Now.

**Psyche**, goddess of the soul (countertenor)

**Delia**, goddess of doorways, thresholds, and sacred flames (coloratura soprano)

**Phil Graham**, publisher and co-owner of *The Washington Post* (dramatic baritone)

**Albert Hofmann**, chemist who first synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide (tenor)

**Francis Crick**, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA (lyric baritone)

**James Watson**, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA (baritone)

**Allen Dulles**, fifth director of CIA (bass)

**Sid Gottlieb**, head of CIA's secret Project MK-Ultra (dramatic baritone)

**Maria Sabina**, a Mazatec curandera (dramatic alto)

**Humphrey Osmond**, psychiatrist who coined the word 'psychedelic' (tenor)

**Aldous Huxley**, writer (lyric baritone)

**Laura Huxley**, wife of Aldous (mezzo-soprano)

**Richard Albert**, aka Ram Dass, spiritual seeker/teacher and writer (tenor)

**Timothy Leary**, psychologist and writer, instigator (high buffo tenor)

**John F. Kennedy**, 35<sup>th</sup> President of the U.S. (lyric baritone)

**Mary Meyer**, JFK's lover and confidant (lyric soprano)

**Cary Grant**, actor (baritone)

**Steve Jobs** (tenor)

**Katherine Graham**, widow of Phil Graham and publisher/owner of *The Washington Post*  
(dramatic mezzo-soprano)

**Cord Meyer**, CIA official and Mary Meyer's ex-husband (bass)

**Mixed chorus** of medium size (functioning as prisoners, divinity students, reporters, and Georgetown Ladies)

\*these roles are intended to be double or triple cast:

Phil Graham/Sid Gottlieb

Francis Crick/Cary Grant

James Watson/John F. Kennedy

Allen Dulles/Cord Meyer

Humphrey Osmond/Richard Alpert/Steve Job

Orchestration:

Flute, clarinet/bass clar., bassoon, contrabassoon, horn, trumpet, piano/celesta, percussion, 2 violins, viola, cello, contrabass; Partch instruments: kithara, harmonic canons, chromelodeon, diamond marimba, bass marimba, cloud chamber bowls; adapted guitar; adapted viola; electronics