

November 25, 2021 – Mark Adamo's *Little Women*

On this Thanksgiving Day edition of the Thursday Night Opera House, I'm delighted to present Mark Adamo's adaptation of a nineteenth-century American literary classic, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, it was first performed by their Opera Studio on March 13, 1998. An expanded version was premiered two years later on HGO's main stage, and PBS telecast it on August 28, 2001 on *Great Performances*.

Set in Massachusetts during the Civil War, the opera opens with a prologue set in the dark attic of the March family house. Jo March (mezzo-soprano **Stephanie Novacek**), distraught, greets her friend Theodore Lawrence, a.k.a. "Laurie" (tenor **Chad Shelton**). He's just married Jo's younger sister Amy March (soprano **Margaret Lloyd**); but has he married Amy only to stay near Jo? Worse: Laurie adores Amy — nothing is as it was — and the opera spirals back in time to show why Jo tried to keep it so. Act I opens two years earlier, in the same attic. Jo and her sisters Meg March (mezzo-soprano **Joyce DiDonato**), Beth March (soprano **Stacey Tappan**), and Amy make games of their chores. Laurie tauntingly tells Jo that his tutor, John Brooke (baritone **Daniel Belcher**), keeps Meg's glove because he loves her. Jo, alone, sketching a story, fearfully denies that Meg might love him too. Two weeks later, Brooke courts Meg. Jo urges the family to reject him. Cecilia March (mezzo-soprano **Katherine Ciesinski**), the girls' aunt, also scorns Brooke: but Meg, resolved, accepts him. Her family celebrates; but Jo accuses Meg of abandoning her. The following summer, Meg and Brooke adapt their parents wedding vows. A feverish Laurie pleads for Jo's love. She spurns him; stung, he flees. Beth, secretly ill, collapses as Meg cries for help.

The second act begins in the offices of the *Daily Volcano*, a New York City fiction tabloid. A triumphant Jo sells a story; back at her boarding house, she writes her increasingly atomized family. A new acquaintance, Friedrich Bhaer (baritone **Chen-Ye Yuan**), invites her to the opera. Meanwhile, at Jo's boarding house, Jo and Bhaer engage in flirtatious debate while, in Oxford, Amy tests Laurie's feelings for Jo. Beth rages at the piano. Bhaer ardently recites Goethe to Jo: then Alma's desperate telegram interrupts them. Jo flees to Concord. Three sleepless nights later, Beth dozes as her family keeps vigil. Jo bursts in; Beth bids her family leave. Beth urges Jo to accept her impending death. The following spring Cecilia baits Jo with Amy's letter about loving Laurie. Jo wearily admits Bhaer may have abandoned her. Cecilia urges Jo to choose solitude; refusing, Jo retreats to the attic. Back in the attic, as in the beginning, Jo is distraught. Laurie, appearing, again reminisces; but now Jo rejects the past. Her sisters materialize as memories: Jo, in emotional exorcism, celebrates and releases them. Bhaer — her future — appears: Jo extends her hand to him.

Patrick Summers conducts the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra in this 2001 Ondine recording.

From the 2001 Houston Grand Opera production aired on PBS, Meg (**Joyce DiDonato**) sings "Things change, Jo" to her sister Jo (**Stephanie Novacek**):
<http://youtu.be/ktQebl1w6f4>.

As a bonus, we'll hear highlights from the 1992 Gioachino Rossini Bicentennial Concert at New York City's Avery Fisher Hall, featuring **Samuel Ramey**, **Marilyn Horne**, **Chris Merritt**, and a host of other Rossini specialists.