

THEREMIN:  
AN OPERA IN TWO ACTS

Music  
Anthony Plog

Libretto  
Ronald Kidd

Cast:

Leon Theremin, Tenor (30s-60s) – Inventor  
Lavinia Williams, Soprano (20s-50s) – African American ballet dancer  
Mikhail Fedorov, Bass (40s) – Soviet agent of NKVD, predecessor of KGB  
Ruth Golding, Mezzo (40s) – RCA executive  
George Kennan, Bass (40s) – American ambassador to USSR (double Fedorov)  
Stephanie Burns, Mezzo (40s) – U.S. State Department official (double Golding)

Time: 1920s-1950s

Locations: Leningrad, New York, Moscow, Brooklyn

Running time: 60 minutes

Act One

Scene 1	Theremin's lab, Leningrad
Scene 2	Carnegie Hall, New York
Scene 3	Central Park, New York
Scene 4	Dance rehearsal, New York

Act Two

Scene 1	Apartment, New York
Scene 2	Apartment, New York / Gulag, Moscow
Scene 3	Gulag, Moscow / Apartment, New York
Scene 4	American Embassy, Moscow
Scene 5	Dance studio, Brooklyn

Piano version available

Instrumental version:

Theremin	Glockenspiel
Flute	Xylophone
Oboe	Vibraphone
Clarinet in Bb	Violin 1
Bassoon	Violin 2
Horn in F	Viola
Trumpet in C	Violoncello
Trombone	Contrabass
Percussion	

## Prologue

In the darkness, we hear a SOLO THEREMIN playing a haunting melody—not creepy as in horror movies, but lovely and thoughtful.

LIGHTS COME UP on LEON THEREMIN (tenor), standing alone onstage, singing along or in counterpoint with the theremin. It's a kind of duet, though the theremin is not physically present—for now it's just a sound.

LEON

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be... a sound.

Calling.  
Crying.  
Singing.  
Dying.

A sound  
That slides and weaves,  
That wraps around  
Your heart.

A start.  
A stream.  
A river  
That runs and leaps and dances.

Dances.

(LIGHTS COME UP on an African American BALLET DANCER. He sees her and is riveted. She dances around him as he sings.)

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be... a woman.

Sliding.  
Swaying.  
Moving.  
Playing.

A jump.  
A sigh.  
A life  
That nods and glows and beckons.

Beckons.

She was the one.  
She was...  
Beauty.

Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be a sound.  
Beauty can be found.

(She dances away into the darkness, and he  
gazes after her longingly.)

And beauty can be lost  
Suddenly,  
Shockingly,  
Achingly.  
Dancing into darkness.  
Gone forever.

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.

Beauty can be.

END OF PROLOGUE

ACT ONE

Scene One

In Leningrad, it is 1925. MIKHAIL FEDOROV (bass), an agent of the NKVD (predecessor of the KGB), lurks in the shadows on one side of the stage.

FEDOROV

I live in a place where shadows lie,  
Where agents lurk  
And people die.  
I live in a place that Stalin rules  
And I am his eyes and ears.

I come and I go without a sound.  
I listen and learn.  
I hover around.  
I take it all in. I note each word.  
And this is the life I lead.

So here I stand—silent, alone,  
Drowning in darkness, empty and lost.  
Why do I shiver? Why do I shudder?  
Why am I here? What is the cost?

And sometimes at night,  
When shadows go gray,  
When time slows down  
And spirits decay,  
I gather my guts.  
I walk to your house.  
I knock on your door...  
And take you away.

Fear.

Fear is where I work.

Fear is what I sell.

Fear is what you're buying

On the path to hell.

It's in my eyes. It's on my breath.

My job is pain. My name is death.

Welcome to my world.

(LIGHTS COME UP on the other side of the stage. We are in the electronics lab of 29-year-old LEON THEREMIN, who is surrounded by his inventions. He is happily working on a nearly completed electronic instrument that will become the theremin. FEDEROV watches wordlessly from across the stage.)

LEON

The Russian Edison! That's what I'm called.

The Russian Edison—imagine that.

Power and light.

Current and spark.

Electromagnetic waves.

These are my thoughts.

These are my tools.

These are my children.

(He moves from invention to invention, indicating each in turn.)

A vacuum tube, to boost the flow.

A rhythmicon, to play the drums.

"Distance vision," sending out

Pictures, moving pictures.

You call it... television.

My children.

See them.

Use them.

Love them.

Lean close, and you will hear...

Secrets.

Each one reveals a secret.  
Each one surveys the dark.  
Each one pulls back the cover  
And generates a spark.

To light the way, to tell the truth,  
To journey through the night.  
The world hides secrets in the gloom  
And I turn on the light.

FEDOROV

Secrets.

My secrets.  
See them.  
Use them.  
Love them.

Each secret hides a truth.  
Each truth contains a lie.  
Each lie is sharpened like a knife  
And twisted till you die.

To block the way, to kill the truth,  
And then ring down the night.  
The world hides secrets in the gloom  
And I turn off the light.

LEON

Each one reveals a secret.  
Each one surveys the dark.  
Each one pulls back the cover  
And generates a spark

To light the way, to tell the truth,  
To journey through the night.  
The world hides secrets  
In the gloom...

FEDEROV

Each secret hides a truth.  
Each truth contains a lie.  
Each lie is sharpened like a knife  
And twisted till you die.

To block the way, to kill the truth,  
And then ring down the night.  
The world hides secrets  
In the gloom...

And I turn on the light.

LEON

And I turn off the light.

FEDOROV

(As LEON goes back to his work, FEDOROV strides to the lab and POUNDS ON THE DOOR. LEON jumps, then gathers himself, walks to the door, and opens it.)

Leon Theremin?

LEON

Yes?

FEDOROV

So, this is your laboratory.

LEON

Can I help you?

FEDOROV

No, but I can help you. My employer can help you.

LEON

Who are you? What do you want?

(FEDOROV pushes past him, into the lab, where he admires each invention in turn.)

FEDOROV

A vacuum tube, to boost the flow.  
A rhythmicon, to play the drums.  
"Distance vision," sending out  
Pictures, moving pictures.

LEON

How do you know this?

FEDOROV

My employer is a powerful man. He likes what you're doing, Leon. He can help you. He tells me... you're working on something new.

LEON

Well... yes. Yes, I am.

(LEON indicates the invention he was working on. FEDEROV admires it, intrigued.)

FEDOROV

Please. Tell me about it.

LEON

Well...

I'm a cellist, you know.  
And I wondered...  
If electricity had a sound,  
What would it be?

Power and light.  
Current and spark.  
Electromagnetic waves.  
Interrupt the waves  
And get... sound!

Watch! Listen!

(He flips a switch, then slowly waves his hands around the device. It emits a HIGH-PITCHED SOUND, unpleasant at first, but then, as he moves his hands, becoming a supple, stringlike sound, then a melody. His hesitation changes to excitement as he proudly demonstrates the device, playing it as he might play a cello.)

Calling.  
Crying.  
Singing.  
Dying.

A sound  
That slides and weaves,  
That wraps around  
Your heart.

A start.  
A stream.  
A river  
That runs and leaps and dances.

Dances.



The sound of waves.  
Current.  
Power.

It has a name...  
Theremin.

FEDOROV

I like it. My employer likes it. Very much.

LEON

But... how does he know?

FEDOROV

Theremin. Sound of progress. Sound of the future. Here is our proposal:

A concert tour. You and the theremin.  
First England, Germany, Italy, France.  
Next, America. The United States.  
Boston, Washington, then New York.  
Carnegie Hall.

LEON

Carnegie Hall!

FEDOROV

Just one small favor in exchange.

(The MUSIC STOPS. The next few lines are a  
cappella.)

You join the NKVD. The secret police. And as you tour, you watch. You listen.

LEON

My God. Your employer. Is it... Stalin?

FEDOROV

He likes your work. He likes you. He wants you. You'll report to me:  
(The MUSIC RESUMES.)

Secrets.

They have secrets.  
Watch them.  
Hear them.  
Tell me.

Scientific secrets.  
Scientific clues.  
Scientific progress.  
Scientific news.

Breakthroughs and inventions.  
Cars and trucks and planes.  
Cameras and toasters.  
Traffic lights and trains.

Listen as you travel.  
Hear them as you go.  
Play your little instrument.  
Give your little show.

Then learn about their secrets,  
Sneak around behind.  
Tell me what they're up to,  
Anything you find.

LEON

And what if I say no?

FEDOROV

(Laughing) We say yes. Stalin says yes. Welcome to the NKVD.

LEON

Each one reveals a secret.  
Each one surveys the dark.  
Each one pulls back the cover  
And generates a spark.

To light the way, to tell the truth,  
To journey through the night.  
The world hides secrets  
In the gloom...

FEDOROV

Each secret hides a truth.  
Each truth contains a lie.  
Each lie is sharpened like a knife  
And twisted till you die.

To block the way, to kill the truth,  
And then ring down the night.  
The world hides secrets  
In the gloom...

And I turn off the light.

FEDEROV

And I turn off the light.

LEON

END OF SCENE

Scene Two

In 1928, LEON is onstage at Carnegie Hall, playing unaccompanied theremin. This time the MUSIC is familiar: perhaps a short excerpt from the Prelude to Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 in G Major. As he plays, LEON leans into the instrument expressively, the way he might if it were a cello. The music is beautiful, and we glimpse his vision for the new instrument.

He finishes the excerpt, and we HEAR the APPLAUSE of a large, enthusiastic audience. He bows, and as the applause dies down, a well-dressed RUTH GOLDING (mezzo) approaches, carrying a briefcase.

RUTH

Mr. Theremin?

LEON

Yes?

RUTH

My name is Ruth Golding. I'm with the Radio Corporation of America—RCA.

LEON

RCA? Yes, of course.

RUTH

Welcome to New York. We've heard so much about you. The European tour. The wonderful reviews. The instrument. This beautiful instrument. Tell me: How does it work?

LEON

How does it work? Well, you see...

Electricity.  
Current.  
Electromagnetic fields.

Place your hands.  
Move your hands.  
Like this.

(He demonstrates a few notes.)

Now, you try it.

RUTH

Me? I'm not a musician.

(He takes her hands and places them.)

LEON

Two antennas.  
One for pitch.  
One for volume.

(Hesitantly RUTH moves her hands, producing sounds. She tries different hand positions and enjoys the results.)

RUTH

It works! I can do it! This is good! This is fun!

Even I can do it.  
Even I can play.  
Pulling music from the air  
In a sound ballet.

RUTH

Even I can do it.  
Even I can play.  
Pulling music from the air  
In a sound ballet.

LEON

Even you can do it.  
Even you can play.  
Pulling music from the air  
In a sound ballet.

RUTH

It's easy! I love it! Listen, Mr. Theremin...

I have a vision.  
I have a plan.  
Dream along with me—  
See if you can.

Hundreds of hands, dancing.  
Thousands of hands raised.  
Millions of children playing,  
Parents and friends amazed.

RUTH / LEON

Families with music.  
Democracy in sound.  
Instruments for everyone.  
Theremins all around.

(She reaches into her briefcase and pulls out a pen and paper.)

RUTH

The path ahead is clear.  
There's just one way: sign here.

(He hesitates and turns away.)

LEON

But why?  
But how?  
Should I?  
Could I?

I could stay in New York,  
Have to live in New York,  
To work, to manage, to watch.

Good for them.  
Good for me.  
(Sadly) Good for NKVD.  
NKVD.

(He turns back to RUTH.)

I'll do it.

(He takes the pen and paper, signs, and hands them back to her.)

LEON / RUTH

Hundreds of hands, dancing.  
Thousands of hands raised.  
Millions of children playing,  
Parents and friends amazed.

Families with music.  
Democracy in sound.  
Instruments for everyone.  
Theremins all around.  
Theremins all around.

END OF SCENE

Scene Three

A few years later, LEON sits on a bench in Central Park, pretending to read a book, fidgeting nervously. FEDEROV enters and sits beside him.

FEDEROV

You must be proud.

LEON

They like my theremin.

FEDEROV

You must be happy.

LEON

They've been good to me. I have a lab. I'm inventing again—burglar alarms, amplification systems. Sound—it's all about sound.

FEDEROV

No, Leon. It's not about sound. It's about... what's behind the sound. What's under the sound. Finding out—that's why you're here. Your report. I need your report.

LEON

It's not finished. I... I'd like more time.

FEDEROV

(Roaring) More time?

In that black hole where you came from,  
That deep dark place below,  
Lay a body filled with poison  
And a spirit full of woe.



Theremin, they called him.  
Theremin was his name.  
He thought his days were happy.  
He thought he wanted fame.

Theremin, the genius.  
Theremin, the shame.  
Now he lies beneath the ground  
With just himself to blame.

LEON

(Shivering) Awful picture. Awful thought.

FEDEROV

Remember, Leon. Always know...

Who brought you here.  
Who paid the bill.  
Who claimed your days.  
Who watches still.

Who spins a web.  
Who lies in wait.  
Who listens  
And decides your fate.

(LEON, deeply troubled, gets up and paces.  
FEDEROV rises and follows him doggedly, the  
fate that can't be escaped.)

Debts gathered, debts owed.  
Painful journey, rugged road.

LEON

Hopeless debt, endless debt.  
Path of sorrow and regret.

FEDEROV

Dark debt, bloody debt.  
Shiver, shudder, squirm and sweat.

Foul debt, filthy debt.  
See the body. Don't forget...

To listen as you travel.  
Hear them as you go.  
Play your little instrument.  
Give your little show.

Then learn about their secrets,  
Sneak around behind.  
Tell me what they're up to,  
Anything you find.

LEON / FEDEROV

Each secret hides a truth.  
Each truth contains a lie.  
Each lie is sharpened like a knife  
And twisted till you die.

To block the way, to kill the truth,  
And then ring down the night.  
The world hides secrets in the gloom...  
And we turn off the light.

END OF SCENE

Scene Four

In 1937, on a stage in New York, RUTH enters, followed by LEON. On a wall near the door is an electrical panel with buttons, switches, and dials.

RUTH

Leon, thank you for doing this.

LEON

I'm happy to help.

(Moving to the panel, he presses a button and turns a dial. BALLET MUSIC fills the room. They listen for a few moments, smiling, then speak over the music.

RUTH

The new sound system—it's wonderful! "Built and installed by Professor Leon Theremin." It's your best one yet.

LEON

I'm glad you think so. Tell me again: Who is it for?

RUTH

The American Negro Ballet Company. Their first performance. Everyone will be there, Park Avenue to Harlem.

(The African American BALLET DANCER enters without noticing them. She stretches, then begins dancing to the MUSIC. LEON watches, entranced. He can't take his eyes off her.)

LEON

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be... a woman.

Sliding.  
Swaying.  
Moving.  
Playing.

A jump.  
A sigh.  
A life  
That nods and glows and beckons.

Beckons.

She is the one.  
She is...  
Beauty.

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be a sound.  
Beauty can be found.

(The BALLET DANCER pauses and approaches them.)

RUTH

Wonderful, dear. That was lovely.

(To LEON)

I'd like to introduce a friend of mine. Leon, meet Lavinia Williams.

(To LAVINIA)

Lavinia, meet Leon Theremin.  
Leon does our sound.  
Leon is our guest,  
Visiting from Russia.

(LEON and LAVINIA gaze at each other. He is transfixed. She smiles, then moves off, caught up in her dancing.)

LAVINIA

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be... movement.

Sliding.

Swaying.

Moving.

Playing.

A jump.

A sigh.

A life

That nods and glows and beckons.

Beckons.

(LAVINIA looks back at LEON, who is still gazing at her. RUTH notices, concerned, and steps between them.)

RUTH

Leon? I think it's time to go.

(She takes his arm, but he doesn't move. LEON and LAVINIA continue gazing at each other.)

LAVINIA

Theremin—an odd name.

Theremin—intriguing man.

So different.

So distant.

But something in his look,

Something in his gaze—

Cool... and yet behind it,

I feel a fire blaze.

RUTH

(Trying to guide LEON away) Leon, we're done here. We should leave.

LEON

She dances through her world.

I seek and spy in mine.

I am east,

She is west—

RUTH

You're dark and light,  
Black and white.  
Opposites in every way.

LEON

But magnets carry opposites.  
Plus and minus poles.  
Drawn together, incomplete.  
Complementary roles.

LAVINIA

He listens in his world.  
I turn and twirl in mine.  
I am west,  
He is east—

RUTH

You're dark and light,  
Black and white.  
Opposites in every way.

LAVINIA

But dancers can be opposites.  
Strong, or small and slim.  
Sway together, move as one,  
He to her. She to him.

(LEON shakes off RUTH and moves toward  
LAVINIA.)

LEON

He to her. She to him.

(She takes his arm, and they begin walking  
slowly together. As they walk, FEDOROV  
enters, a shadowy figure at the other end of the  
stage. He watches them from one side, while  
RUTH, worried, watches from the other.)

RUTH

They're dark and light,  
Black and white.

He's my friend.  
 She's my friend.  
 But they cannot be... friends.  
 It's dangerous.

Stop and think, the two of you.  
 Stop and step away.  
 Look at what you're doing.  
 Live another day.

FEDOROV

Leon is working. Leon must learn

To write the report  
 To toe the line.  
 Never doubt  
 That Leon is mine.

RUTH / FEDOROV

I see trouble up ahead—  
 Grief and hurt and pain.  
 Darkening skies, lightning bolts,  
 Thunderclouds and rain.

RUTH / FEDOROV

I see trouble up ahead—  
 Grief and hurt and pain.  
 Darkening skies,  
 Lightning bolts,  
 Thunderclouds and rain.

LAVINIA

Dancers can be opposites.  
 Strong, or small and slim.  
 Sway together  
 Move as one,  
 He to her. She to him.

LEON

Magnets carry opposites.  
 Plus and minus poles.  
 Drawn together,  
 Incomplete.  
 Complementary roles.

LEON

Drawn together, incomplete.  
 Complementary roles.

(He sees FEDOROV at the side of the stage  
 and quickly looks away. LAVINIA notices  
 FEDOROV and studies him, curious.)

LAVINIA

Leon, who is that man?

LEON

Never mind, darling. Never mind.

(He pulls her away)

Sway together, move as one,  
He to her. She to him.

LAVINIA

Sway together, move as one,  
He to her. She to him.

(They walk together, holding hands. Then,  
facing each other, they sing as if exchanging  
vows.)

LEON / LAVINIA

Sway together, move as one,  
He to her. She to him.

LEON

He to her.

LAVINIA

She to him.

(RUTH backs off, frowning. FEDOROV scowls,  
then exits in the shadows. The MUSIC swells.)

END OF ACT ONE



## ACT TWO

### Scene One

In 1938, LEON and LAVINIA are happily unpacking boxes, moving into their new apartment. His theremin is off to one side.

LEON

Leon and Lavinia,  
A new thing in the world.  
A place to go when I feel bad.  
A song to sing when I am sad.

LAVINIA

Leon and Lavinia,  
A match, a team, a pair.  
An "I" that's suddenly a "we,"  
An "us" instead of him and me.

Knowing joy, breathing free.  
This is how it feels to me.

(To express her feelings, she dances to a few bars of MUSIC.)

Bending, not bowing.  
Moving, not still.  
Leaping, not lying.  
Simple steps a thrill.

(She turns to LEON.)

Now you try it.

LEON

Me? But I can't dance.

(Laughing, she takes his hand and tries teaching him to dance to the MUSIC. He fails comically and goes to his theremin.)

LEON

Knowing joy, breathing free.  
This is how it feels to me.

(To express his feelings, he plays a joyful melody on the theremin.)

Playing and singing,  
Searching for sound.  
Shaping music in the air  
Warm and full and round.

LAVINIA

That's lovely. Can I try it?

(She moves to the theremin, and he demonstrates.)

LEON

Two antennas.  
One for pitch.  
One for volume.

(She plays, haltingly at first and then steadily improving.)

LEON

That's good! That's very good!

LAVINIA

It's easy. It's like...

Dancing with your hands.  
Moving through the air.  
Gliding, turning, leaping.  
Like you and me, a pair.

Can't you see it? Can't you hear?  
Don't you realize?  
This new thing we're becoming  
Right before our eyes?  
This new thing we're becoming  
Right before our eyes?

LEON / LAVINIA

Leon and Lavinia—  
Present and past,  
Into the future,  
Together at last.  
Dreaming the future,  
Together at last.

(They kiss, and she resumes unpacking. He opens a few more boxes, then heads for the door.)

LEON

Going to get more boxes. Back in a minute, darling.

LAVINIA

Love you.

LEON

Love you.

(When LEON exits the apartment, he finds FEDOROV waiting in the shadows outside.)

FEDOROV

Hello, Leon.

LEON

Oh! You scared me.

FEDOROV

I'm here for your report.

LEON

Of course. I... I'm working on it.

FEDOROV

(Angry) Working on it?

Fear is where you work.  
Fear is what you sell.  
Fear is what you purchased  
On the path to hell.

It's in your eyes. It's on your breath.  
Your job is pain. My name is death.

LEON

Can't you see it? Can't you hear?  
Don't you realize?  
This new thing I'm becoming  
Right before your eyes?

FEDOROV

Stalin waits. Stalin knows.  
Loving stops. Terror grows.

LEON

Here I stand—  
Silent, alone,  
Drowning in darkness,  
Empty and lost.  
Why do I shiver?  
Why do I shudder?  
Why am I here?  
What is the cost?

(LEON looks desperately back at the  
apartment, where LAVINIA works happily.)

LAVINIA

Hopeful. I feel hopeful.  
Red and blue and bright.  
Beginnings stretch before me,  
Pulling like a kite.

LEON

Hopeless. I feel hopeless.  
Gray and grim and black.  
Beginnings turn away and leave,  
Never coming back.

LEON

Hopeless. I feel hopeless.  
Gray and grim and black.  
Beginnings turn away and leave,  
Never coming back.

LAVINIA

Hopeful. I feel hopeful.  
Red and green and bright.  
Beginnings stretch before me,  
Pulling like a kite.

Turn to me.

LAVINIA

Torn from me.

LEON

Endless time.

LAVINIA

No more time.

LEON

FEDOROV

And sometimes at night,  
When shadows go gray,  
When time slows down  
And spirits decay,  
I gather my guts...  
And take you away.

(FEDOROV grabs LEON and drags him off.)

END OF SCENE

Scene Two

Days later, we find LAVINIA dancing desperately, frenetically, wordlessly in the apartment. She whirls faster and faster, finally collapsing in a heap.

LAVINIA

Leon. Leon.  
“Back in a minute.”  
That’s what you said.

I didn’t guess. How could I know:  
Those were the last words I would hear.  
The words were nails  
Hammering shut  
A door.  
A passage.  
A life.

I love you.  
Do you love me?  
Dream of me?  
Long for me?

Where are you?  
Where did you go?  
Why did you go?

People didn’t like it  
When we met.  
Black and white,  
We gazed  
And moved  
And touched  
And joined together.

Did they take you?  
Did they hurt you?  
Did they kill you?

That man. Hiding in the shadows.  
That Soviet man.  
Who was he,  
And what did he want?

Did he take you?  
Did he hurt you?  
Did he kill you?

Oh, Leon.  
Where are you?

(Across the stage, we see LEON arriving in  
Moscow with FEDOROV.)

FEDOROV

Welcome to Moscow. Welcome back to my world.

LEON

Lavinia.  
Where is she?  
I need to see her.  
Speak to her.  
Touch her.

FEDOROV

Lavinia is fine.  
But she will never know.  
She isn't dead...  
But she is dead to you.

LEON

That's not right. It's not fair.

FEDOROV

Your job was simple:

Learn about their secrets,  
Sneak around behind.  
Tell me what they're up to,  
Anything you find.

You had a good life.  
Now you've got this.

LEON

What is it? Where am I?

FEDOROV

A gulag.  
A very special gulag...  
For scientists.

Work for Stalin—  
Not with muscles  
But with brains.

Now you'll create for the state.  
Pay back the debt you owe.

LEON

How can I live? What have I done?  
Where can I go, Lavinia?  
What can I do, Lavinia?

END OF SCENE



Scene Three

A few months later, LEON is working at a gulag lab in Moscow, which should look different and somehow more primitive and menacing than the lab where we first saw him.

LEON

Back to the basics. Back to sound.  
Not making sound... but hearing sound.

Listening for secrets.  
Hearing what goes on.  
Seeing through the window  
When the shades are drawn.

Listening for secrets  
In this wretched lab.  
Twitching like a body  
Dying on a slab.

Bug—that's what I'm making.  
Bug—a funny word.

Funny like a scorpion,  
Like a scream or shout.  
Funny like a cockroach  
Scuttling about.

Make a bug.  
Plant a bug.  
Monitor a bug.

Listening for secrets,  
Listening for... Lavinia.

Lavinia, where are you?  
Lavinia, can you hear?  
Monitor my heartbeat  
Listen for my fear.

Do you still want me?  
Do I still have a chance?  
Do you still love me  
Do you still dance?

(Across the stage, LIGHTS come up on  
LAVINIA, dancing. She starts out wordless, her  
movements accompanied by instrumental  
MUSIC of beauty and deep longing. After a  
while, she stops and sings, then joins LEON in  
a duet of doom.)

LAVINIA

Theremin. Theremin.  
A word, a sound, a man.  
A promise that was broken.  
An unrequited plan.

Theremin, I hate you.  
Theremin, my love.  
Caged inside my memory  
Like a mourning dove.

LAVINIA / LEON

Do you still want me?  
Do I still have a chance?  
Do you still love me?

LEON

Do you still dance?

END OF SCENE

Scene Four

In 1952, at the American embassy in Moscow, U.S. Ambassador George F. Kennan is working at his desk. The Great Seal of the U.S. hangs on the wall behind him. On the desk is a nameplate: *George F. Kennan*. He picks it up and looks at it thoughtfully.

KENNAN (Double Federov)

George F. Kennan, American ambassador.  
Chosen by Truman. Posted in Moscow.

Cold War expert. Soviet guru.  
A lifetime of study. A lifetime of plans.  
Papers. Memos. Leading to this room.

(He sets down the nameplate, rises, and walks around the room, examining the Great Seal and other items.)

Here is what I told them,  
Here is what I wrote:

Containment.  
Contain Stalin.  
Surround him.  
Throw a rope around him.  
Tighten it, like a noose.

This room is where we do it.  
This room is where we meet.  
This room is where we keep...

Secrets.

Our secrets.  
Make them.  
Grow them.  
Guard them.

Each secret hides a plan.  
Each plan contains a plot.  
Each plot provides a strategy  
For tightening the knot.

Contain the spread, inflict the pain,  
Take but never give.  
Our darkest secrets make us strong,  
And this is where they live.

(Lights come up across the stage, where we  
see LEON wearing headphones and listening,  
taking notes.)

LEON

Make a bug.  
Plant a bug.  
Monitor a bug.

Listening for secrets.  
In this wretched place.  
Listening to Kennan.  
Hear without a trace.

Listening for secrets.  
Writing down the plots.  
Noting every name and place  
Then connect the dots.

Contain the spread. Inflict the pain.  
Defend. Delay. Deny.  
Your darkest secrets make you strong  
And this is how they die.

LEON

Contain the spread. Inflict the pain.  
Defend. Delay. Deny.  
Your darkest secrets make you strong  
And this is how they die.

KENNAN

Contain the spread, inflict the pain,  
Take but never give.  
Our darkest secrets make us strong  
And this is how they die.

(Lights go down on LEON. Across the stage, U.S. State Department official STEPHANIE BURNS arrives outside Kennan's office, carrying a briefcase. She knocks firmly on the door. KENNAN crosses and opens it.)

BURNS (Double Ruth)

Ambassador Kennan?

KENNAN

Yes.

BURNS

Stephanie Burns, State Department. I flew in yesterday from D.C.

(BURNS pushes through the door and circles the office, looking around.)

KENNAN

(Sarcastically) Won't you come in?

BURNS

You have a leak.

KENNAN

A leak? Pardon me?

BURNS

Somewhere in here, a listening device. A bug.

KENNAN

That's absurd. This office is swept once a week.

BURNS

You need a better broom.

KENNAN

What do you mean?

BURNS

"This room is where we do it.  
This room is where we meet.  
This room is where we keep..."

“Secrets.

“Our secrets.  
Make them.  
Grow them.  
Guard them.”

KENNAN

My words. Oh, my God.

BURNS

The British heard you on a Soviet radio channel. They told us, and here I am.  
(She sets her briefcase on the desk, opens it,  
and takes out a sound meter.)

KENNAN

What’s that?

BURNS

A better broom.

(She begins carrying the meter around the  
room, holding it against various objects and  
checking it. KENNAN watches her, panicked at  
the thought of a bug in his office.)

KENNAN

Impossible!  
Unthinkable!

BURNS

Outrageous!

KENNAN

Incredible!  
Astonishing!

BURNS

Calamitous!

(As she searches the room, the two of them continue in an extended, punctuated, syncopated fugue or canon, made up of these exclamations. Then, across the stage, LIGHTS come up on LEON. Still listening through the headphones, he joins the fugue with words such as the following, in various combinations.)

KENNAN

Impossible!  
Unthinkable!

LEON

I hear them.

BURNS

Incredible!  
Astonishing!

LEON

They're searching.

KENNAN

Preposterous!  
Appalling!

LEON

They know.

(The fugue gradually builds to a climax when BURNS reaches the Great Seal. She takes it from the wall and pokes around inside it. The MUSIC STOPS. She pulls out a small metal device and holds it up.)

BURNS

I found it—the bug!  
Hidden in the Great Seal of the United States!

KENNAN

This can't be.

(Hearing them, LEON removes his headphones and begins tearing down the listening post and packing up his things. As BURNS examines the bug, KENNAN shakes his head in dismay.)

KENNAN

Outrageous!  
Calamitous!

BURNS

Brilliant!

This bug contains

Nothing electronic.  
That's the reason why  
Your sweep didn't find it.

Just a resonator  
Turning on when triggered  
By radio waves.

It's better than our best.  
My God, who made it?

(To Kennan) This Great Seal—where did it come from?

KENNAN

It was a gift. From Soviet schoolchildren.

BURNS

When did we get it?

KENNAN

In August... 1945.

BURNS

1945! Seven years ago?

KENNAN

(Nodding) Seven years of...



KENNAN / BURNS

Secrets.

Our secrets.  
Make them.  
Grow them.  
Guard them.

Each secret hides a plan.  
Each plan contains a plot.  
Each plot provides a strategy  
For tightening the knot.

LEON

Listening for secrets.  
Writing down the plots.  
Noting every name and place  
Then connect the dots.

LEON / KENNAN / BURNS

Contain the spread. Inflict the pain.  
Defend. Delay. Deny.  
Our darkest secrets make us strong  
And this is how they die.

(LEON goes back to his packing. Across the stage, BURNS examines the bug again.)

BURNS

The radio waves  
That trigger the bug  
Would have to be nearby.  
Close by...

(She gazes into the distance, in the direction of LEON, who continues packing.)

I wonder...

(She heads across the stage and KENNAN follows, out of the lighted office and into the darkness. A moment later, they emerge outside Leon's listening post. BURNS calmly opens the door and faces LEON.)

Hello there.

(LEON, startled, fumbles to hide what he's doing.)

Do you speak English?

LEON

(Pausing) Yes. Yes, I do.

BURNS

We know about the bug. Who made it?

LEON

I did.

KENNAN

Who are you?

LEON

My name... is Theremin.

KENNAN

Theremin. Theremin.  
Where have I heard that?

LEON

I used to live there. In America.

(A solo THEREMIN begins to play. For a moment, the three of them are lost in thought.)

KENNAN

A concert. At Carnegie Hall. That instrument.

LEON

A theremin.

KENNAN

You made it. You played it.  
The sound... it was beautiful.

(Shrugging)

And kind of creepy.

BURNS

Your bug... it's brilliant.

LEON

A job. A requirement. A duty.

KENNAN

Would you like to go back with us? Back to America?

LEON

(Hesitating) I live here now. I'm married. I have children.

KENNAN

I'm sorry.

LEON

So am I.

A sound called Theremin.

A land called America.

A woman called... Lavinia.

It must have been a dream

Floating up above.

A hopeless wish, a foolish thought—

That I could ever love.

A woman called Lavinia.

Her gaze could blaze and burn.

She danced around me, out of reach,

Then loved me in return.

We walked together happily

I wanted so to stay.

But then they came to get me

And dragged me away.

Not love, but fear.

Not joy, but pain.

Coal-black clouds.

Permanent rain.

And then I met a woman

Who helped me when she could.

Not beautiful, but nice.

Not wonderful, but good.

So this is where I'll stay.  
A spy, a life apart.  
Listening to secrets.  
With secrets in my heart.

Lavinia. Lavinia. Lavinia.

(To KENNAN) And now, if you don't mind...  
Could you do something for me?

END OF SCENE

Scene Five

LAVINIA, older now, is in a dance studio in Brooklyn, exercising and dancing to MUSIC.

LAVINIA

Back to the basics. Back to dance. Back to life.

I searched and searched for Leon,  
From New York to Berlin.  
I didn't want to give up  
But finally I gave in.

I opened up a studio,  
Taught the things I know.  
Watched my dancers practicing,  
Saw my circle grow.

I met a man—not Theremin,  
Not wonderful, but nice.  
Together we had daughters,  
Were blessed not once, but twice.

And sometimes in the night  
I hear that lovely sound  
Calling gently, tenderly,  
Soft and pure and round.

Singing in the darkness  
Like a mourning dove  
Leon, can you hear it too?  
Are you there, my love?  
Are you there, my love?

(There is a KNOCK at the door. She opens it  
and finds KENNAN standing there.)

KENNAN

Lavinia? Are you Lavinia Williams?

LAVINIA

Yes, I am.

KENNAN

Thank goodness. I've been looking for you.

(He hands her his card.)

My name is Kennan. Ambassador George F. Kennan.

LAVINIA

Ambassador? My goodness.

KENNAN

May I come in?

LAVINIA

Yes, of course.

(He enters, and she shuts the door behind him.  
He looks around.)

KENNAN

A dance studio. This is lovely.

LAVINIA

Mr. Ambassador—

KENNAN

He said you were a dancer.

LAVINIA

(Suddenly alert) You said "he." Who is "he"?

KENNAN

Leon Theremin.

(LAVINIA staggers back. KENNAN reaches out  
to keep her from falling.)

KENNAN

I'm sorry. I know it's a shock. Here, this letter will explain it all.

(He takes a letter from his pocket and hands it  
to her. As she begins to read, the LIGHTS go  
up across the stage to reveal LEON.)

LEON

Lavinia, my love,

I wish that I could see you.  
I wish that I could hold you.  
I've made that wish for twenty years.  
I wish that I had told you.

I'm a spy.

I worked for Stalin.  
All those years,  
All those times,  
Spying on America.

Music, yes,  
But secrets too.  
Finding them.  
Taking them.  
Passing them.  
To Stalin.

Remember that man,  
The Soviet man?  
Hiding in shadows.  
Lurking around,  
Watching?

He took me that night.  
Dragged me away,  
Carried me back  
To Moscow.

Before I could tell you.  
Before I could call.  
Before I could say...  
I love you.

All those years  
I loved you.  
All those days  
I wept.  
All those nights  
I cried and kissed  
A picture that I kept.

I could see you.  
I could feel you.  
Moving. Spinning. Dancing.

I could love you.  
Even here.  
In this hole.  
In this pit.

All that saved me,  
All I had  
Was sound...  
And you.

And so, my darling,  
I must go.  
I leave you just this note.  
And one more thing  
If you want it.  
If you'd like it.  
If you'd ever use it.  
Mr. Kennan has it.

Goodbye, my dear.  
Remember...

I love you.  
I have always loved you.  
I will always love you.

With all my heart,  
Leon.

(Deeply moved, LAVINIA looks up from the letter. LEON watches her.)



LAVINIA

You saw him? How is he? How did he seem?

KENNAN

Sad. Tired. Brilliant.

LAVINIA

The thing he mentioned. He said you have it. What did he mean?

KENNAN

Do you want it?

LAVINIA

Yes! Yes, I do!

(KENNAN goes out the door and returns a moment later, lugging a big box. He sets it in front of her.)

LAVINIA

Such an odd, big box. What is it?

KENNAN

Open it and see.

(She opens the box and, with his help, pulls out a strange, bulky object, covered with a dropcloth. She removes the dropcloth.)

LAVINIA

A theremin! Leon sent me a theremin! But how...

KENNAN

He told me to see a woman named Ruth Golding. An executive at RCA.

LAVINIA

Ruth! Of course!

KENNAN

She told me...  
RCA built these.  
Sold these.  
Had high hopes for these.

LAVINIA

Yes, I remember.

Families with music.  
Democracy in sound.  
Instruments for everyone.  
Theremins all around.

Wonderful vision.  
Wonderful dream.

KENNAN

The dream died.  
The vision failed. But...  
They had a few left over.

(Hesitantly, LAVINIA reaches out and touches the theremin. KENNAN plugs it in and flips a switch.)

KENNAN

Now, try it.

LAVINIA

Two antennas.  
One for pitch.  
One for volume.

(She steps up and begins moving her hands. We HEAR the theremin playing—awkwardly at first, then with more confidence. Eventually a lovely melody emerges, and she smiles.)

It's easy. It's like...

Dancing with your hands.  
Moving through the air.  
Gliding, turning, leaping.  
Like him and me, a pair.

Leon and Lavinia—  
Present and past,  
Into the future,  
Together at last.  
Dreaming the future,  
Together at last.

(The LIGHTS take on a bright glow that illuminates LEON and LAVINIA, who step forward as if in a dream. The MUSIC changes and returns to the opening theme.)

LEON

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be... a sound.

Calling.  
Crying.  
Singing.  
Dying.

LAVINIA

A sound  
That slides and weaves  
That wraps around  
Your heart.

A start  
A stream  
A river  
That runs and leaps and dances.

Dances.

LEON

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be... a woman.

Sliding.  
Swaying.  
Moving.  
Playing.

A jump.  
A sigh.  
A life  
That nods and glows and beckons.

Beckons.

You were the one.  
You were...  
Beauty.

LEON / LAVINIA

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.  
Beauty can be a sound.  
Beauty can be found.

And beauty can be lost  
Suddenly,  
Shockingly,  
Achingly.  
Dancing into darkness.  
Gone forever.

Beauty.  
Beauty can be.

Beauty can be.

(The GLOW slowly fades. The theremin plays  
in the darkness as in the Prologue, then finally  
fades. Blackout.)

END OF OPERA