

PITTSBURGH OPERA  
E D U C A T I O N

Proving Up

Music by Missy Mazzoli • Libretto by Royce Vavrek  
Based on the short story by Karen Russell

Study Guide to the Opera

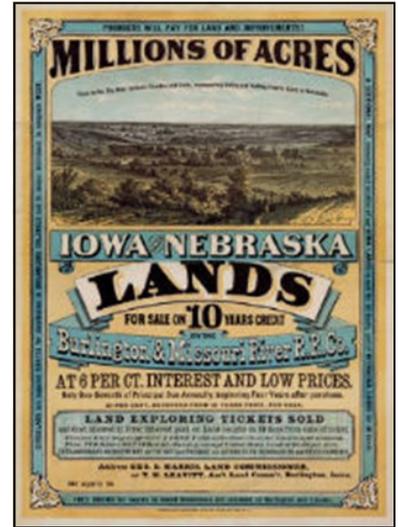
Proving Yourself and *Proving Up*

**Prove yourself** to show that you are able to succeed, to measure up to expectations, and show proof of one’s right to government land. Common usage of this idiom belies the extreme situation of 1870s Nebraskan homesteaders depicted in *Proving Up*. The Zegner family yearns to “prove up” and claim the deed to their land as part of the Homestead Act, to earn “upward mobility”. But the landscape is unforgiving, survival is challenging, and their fears are real. And, the elusive “glass window” stipulated in the Homestead Act is a fragile commodity upon which their future hinges.

When composer Missy Mazzoli and librettist Royce Vavrek chose a short story by Karen Russell for their 2018 opera, they recognized the solitude and desperation in the narrative. The family must work to achieve the American Dream, but it is always just out of reach. Mazzoli and Vavrek’s work is a commentary not only on Nebraskan homesteaders, but also a surreal and newly relevant commentary. Mazzoli said, “The Zegners are a family that does everything ‘right’ and are still undermined by forces beyond their control. The characters have parallels in our contemporary world: a mother who tries to maintain control through domestic order, a father who turns to the bottle under the pressures of supporting a family, children forced to take on responsibilities beyond their years, a lone, deranged man who resorts to violence and destruction. These are ordinary people in an impossible situation, a brutal world where dead children sing, pigs and horses become the audience for one’s deepest secrets, and zombie-like sodbusters wander the desolate prairie. Pushed to the edge by poverty and ultimately undermined by fate, the Zegners’ fixation on ‘Proving Up’ never wanes.”

Mazzoli proved herself a “gatecrasher of new classical music” (*NPR Turning the Table*) and crafted a score to represent the harrowing story. She included imagined fiddle tunes, Baroque gestures, scrap metal percussion, acoustic guitars, and harmonicas in the score.

Vavrek demonstrated why he is such a sought-after writer. He has said that the secret to his enduring collaboration with Mazzoli is a shared “curiosity and desire to make the psychology of a dynamic character sing.”



The promise of “free land” generated waves of westward migrations in the 1800s. Hundreds of thousands of people moved to the Great Plains, where fields of buffalo grass, little blue stem, wire grass, prairie cord grass, Indian grass, and wheat grass could be cut to create sod “bricks” for a house. Whole families moved west in search of a better life.



Michael Slattery as Miles Zegner, holding the elusive “glass window” in the 2018 Columbia University production of *Proving Up*.

# Proving Up Synopsis

Opera in Seven Parts  
Time and Place: 1877 Nebraska  
Premiere: January 19, 2018,  
Washington National Opera

- Part 1: The Settler's Scar
- Part 2: Miles will Prove Up
- Part 3: How Pa Obtained the Glass
- Part 4: Strange Dreams
- Part 5: Nore at a Soft Canter
- Part 6: Sodbuster
- Part 7: Epilogue

*Proving Up* is an opera about the American dream, told through the story of Nebraskan homesteaders in the 1870s. A family dreams of “proving up” and obtaining the deed to the land they’ve settled. They obsessively list the requirements of the Homestead Act: five years of harvest, a sod house dwelling, and perhaps the most elusive element—a glass window. With their eldest son incapacitated, Ma and Pa Zegner send their youngest living child, Miles, on a mission to share the valuable commodity with their distant neighbors who are expecting a visit from a government inspector. Miles mounts his gray mare with the window wrapped in burlap and gallops across the land. The elements, natural and otherwise, have other plans, and Miles comes face to face with a strange man who turns out to be the ghost of a neighboring farmer, driven mad by the requirements of “proving up.” The willowy figure knows all too well the cost of the American dream, and the window soon becomes a broken mirror reflecting great tragedy.

—Publisher, G. Schirmer, Inc

## Orchestration

Violins, Viola, Cello, Bass  
Flute / piccolo / harmonica  
Clarinet / bass clarinet / harmonica  
Bassoon / contrabassoon / harmonica  
Horn  
Trumpet / harmonica  
Percussion / 7 suspended acoustic guitars  
Piano  
Harp



Watch a video of *Proving Up*'s haunting prologue, featuring baritone John Moore. Mazzoli creates an eerie electronic landscape around an 1850 text by Jesse Hutchison, Jr., a text originally written to encourage westward expansion. Shot on location by the composer and librettist Royce Vavrek in Nebraska and South Dakota in August, 2020. Watch the video at <https://youtu.be/iEFAifMfSQk>

## Characters

### Miles Zegner

*tenor*

A thirteen-year-old runt, his voice barely changed, who describes the glass window that is required by the government inspector and tells the pig that the family needs meat. He is sent on Nore, the mare, to deliver the window during a rainstorm and then a blizzard. He asks, “Does a window make a home? Does a deed make the land yours?”

### Mr. Johannes “Pa” Zegner

*baritone*

The father, whose hand is permanently scarred by using the plow for five years to reap the required harvest, says that “Farmers need to look out for farmers, so we will share the window with the Stickels.” He stumbles drunkenly around the sod house and field, while he lists the family’s struggles—drought, hail, locusts, dust, and snow.

### Mrs. Johannes “Ma” Zegner

*soprano*

The mother, who has lost two daughters, and is always asking “Where is God’s rain?”

### Littler Zegner Sister

*soprano*

Sleeping in a grave under the tufting gama grass

### Taller Zegner Sister

*mezzo-soprano*

Sleeping in a grave under the tufting gama grass

### The Sodbuster

*bass-baritone*

A black-lipped stranger, who rants and says, “The west is a land of infinite beginnings.”

### Peter Zegner

*non-singing role*

Sixteen-year-old brother, bloodied in a steel tub

## Music by Missy Mazzoli

An American composer and pianist who is on the composition faculty of Mannes College of Music, Missy Mazzoli has received critical acclaim for her chamber music, orchestral compositions, and operas. Born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, she knew at the age of 10 that she wanted to be a composer, not an astronaut or a nurse. She discovered classical music through public television and the local library. She persisted, and today she is described as a boundary-defying composer who composes *dramatic* music for opera, orchestra, chamber ensemble, film, television, and her own band, Victoire. In 2018, she and composer Jeanine Tesori became the first two women ever to receive a commission from the Metropolitan Opera. In 2022, Mazzoli was named Composer of the Year by *Musical America*. She says that writing opera is her music destiny, and likes to think of instruments as characters. Praised for her “consistently inventive” music (*The New York Times*), and her “apocalyptic imagination” (*The New Yorker*), her music has been performed by the Kronos Quartet, orchestras worldwide, and major instrumentalists.



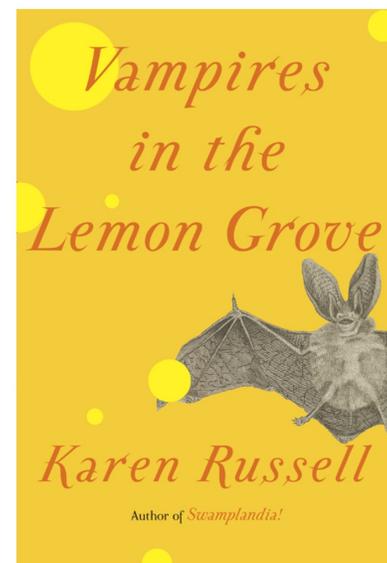
## Libretto by Royce Vavrek

Canadian-born Brooklyn-based creative Royce Vavrek writes librettos, plays, dance scenes, musical theater works, and films. He has collaborated with composer Missy Mazzoli on *Song from the Uproar*, *Breaking the Waves*, *Proving Up*, *The Listeners*, and *Lincoln in the Bardo*. He also has worked on operas with David T. Little, Mikael Karlsson, Ricky Ian Gordon, Paola Prestini, and Du Yun. Before Vavrek graduated from high school in Alberta, Canada, he wrote 17 plays, studied piano, and focused on musical composition. His works have been commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and dozens of other companies worldwide. In 2017, his opera *Angel's Bone* with composer Du Yun was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music. When Washington National Opera asked Missy Mazzoli to create a new chamber opera, she and Vavrek chose Karen Russell's short story, “Proving Up”, because it was timely, unusual, and uniquely American. The characters are ordinary people in an impossible situation—a narrative that is newly relevant at this moment in US history.



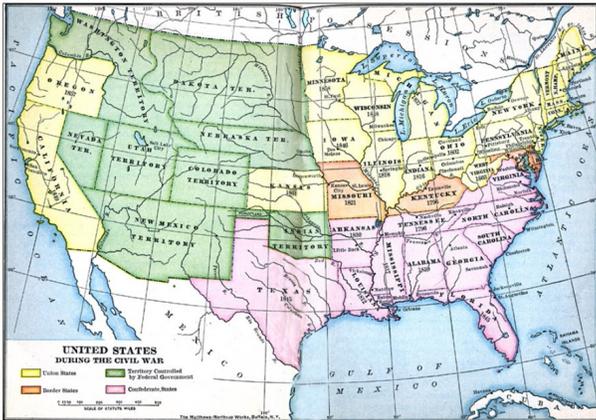
## Short Story by Karen Russell

*Proving Up* is the fourth short story in Karen Russell's second collection, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. The story is a haunting look back at the early, brutal days when homesteaders settled Nebraska. Some lost their humanity, some their sanity. Most homesteaders did not meet the requirements to become the rightful owners of their 160 acres, so a visit by the Inspector was a major life event. In the Hox River region, there is only one glass window, and the families install it for the inspection, and then pass it on to another family. Events that happen during the story include terror, hints of the supernatural, and descriptions of the homesteaders' losses. Literary themes of The American Dream, Perseverance, Survival, Family, and Isolation, coupled with symbolism, foreshadowing, and imagery make this a rich story deserving of inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories 2018* anthology and a finalist for the National Magazine Award for Fiction.



# Manifest Destiny, Westward Expansion, and the Homestead Act of 1862

United States During the Civil War, 1861–1865



In 1931, James Truslow Adams coined “the American Dream” in his book *Epic of America*. He described “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and

fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” That ethos dates to the Declaration of Independence, with its ideals of representative democracy, rights, liberty, and equality. Over decades, the Dream has been evolving and changing, and oft debated.

In the 1840s, newspaper editor John O’Sullivan used the term “**Manifest Destiny**” to describe the concept that Americans were God-ordained to settle the perceived abundance of land in the west. Companies and land speculators advertised the area west of the Mississippi as an open paradise full of fruitfulness and opportunity (green territories on the 1862 map above). Railroad expansion in the 1850s, discovery of gold in the far west, and rich silver mines all drew people westward.

Even the lyrics to “Uncle Sam’s Farm”, a song based on a poem by Jesse Hutchinson, Jr. in 1848, popularized the idea that moving west would make for better lives:

Of all the mighty nations in the East or in the West,  
O this glorious Yankee nation is the greatest and the best.  
We have room for all creation and our banner is unfurled,  
Here’s a general invitation to the people of the world.

Chorus: Then come along, come along, make no delay;  
Come from every nation, come from every way.  
Our lands, they are broad enough—don’t be alarmed,  
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm.

The **Homestead Act of 1862**, one of a series of land-grant pieces of legislation in US history, parceled out millions of acres of land to settlers. The Act resulted in a flood of homesteaders moving west and it transformed the country, sparking conflicts with Native Americans and violence against minorities, altering the environment, and reshaping society. *Proving Up* forces us to reflect on the American Dream, US history, and concepts of land ownership. Who pays for progress? Who owns the land?

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## Homestead Act of 1862 stipulations:

- US citizen at least 21 years of age
- A house of sod
- Acres of grain on a 160-acre plot
- Five years of harvest
- A window of glass

## For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

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