

## *Josephine* - Program Note

Josephine Baker was an acclaimed entertainer, a war hero, a wealthy businesswoman, an activist for civil rights, and a towering personality. As critic Michael Rogin noted in the *London Review of Books*, hers was “a triumphant career, honored by a full-scale military funeral, and yet it was contaminated at every major turn.”

And why should that life have been such a mix of triumph and disaster? What made her so mercurial, so volcanic, so alternately charming and volatile? That’s the question I pursued as I composed the opera.

In creating the libretto for *Josephine*, I was inspired by her own words. Indeed, the more controversial, more colorful statements are direct quotes. Musically, a snippet based on Bix Beiderbecke’s 1927 piano work, *In a Mist*, appears at several climactic moments in the score. In its *Debussy-ish* harmony and jaunty rhythm, the work seemed to me the perfect emblem of Jazz-Age Paris.

Jean-Claude Baker, often called the thirteenth of Josephine Baker’s twelve adopted children, wrote, “Josephine was like the sun. We need the sun for the flowers to grow, ...but if you come too close, you can get burned, you can die. Everyone who came too close to Josephine got burned.”

T.C.  
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