

Scene IX: The Verismo Revolution (1892-1924)

Having finally escaped from the rabbit-holes of Bel Canto and French Grand Opéra, we now dive down the rabbit hole known as Verismo or Realism operas. The bad news is that this, too, was a very popular form of opera that, like the Bel Canto era, produced a few truly great works and many tune fests that had about as much drama in them as a spicy wiener. The good news is that, as we shall see, this was the exact same era in which composers began to fight back, producing works written on *their* terms, hoping but not *expecting* audiences to respond to them positively.

Before we begin, I'd like to make an analogy for those who enjoy listening to jazz more than to popular music. In an interview that the late, great jazz pianist Bill Evans gave in Norway in August 1980, asked why more young people then listened to jazz, Evans said the following:

I think some young people want a deeper experience...some people want to get inside of something and discover, maybe, more richness...[but] they're not going to be a great percentage of the people. A great percentage of the people don't want a challenge. They want something to be done to them – they don't want to participate. But there'll always be, uh, maybe 15% that desire something more, and they'll search it out, and maybe that's where art is, I think.¹

Many musicologists and “opera experts” like to consider Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* the first verismo opera, but in my opinion that is only due to its plot line about a poor street singer and her aged mother and the final scene, from “Suicidio!” to the end of the opera. Otherwise, 90% of *Gioconda* is simply an Italian version of French Grand Opéra, with most of it consisting of the usual Italian set aria and duet format. In my view, even *Werther* and *Pique Dame* are more “verismo” than *Gioconda*, thus it is not discussed in this book.

***Leoncavallo: Pagliacci* (1892)**

Although Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* preceded *Pagliacci* by two years, and is thus the first official “verismo” opera because it dealt with the lives of lower-middle-class workers and their friends, I decided to start with *Pagliacci* because, for the most part, the music is more inherently dramatic. I noticed this myself as an operagoer after seeing a few stage performances of the *Cav/Pag* pair, the “opera twins,” which have since been separated from each other and, perhaps not so strangely, have lost a great deal of favor in the standard repertoire during the past 35 years or so. Except for Santuzza's “Voi lo sapete,” the Turiddu-Santuzza duet, and the last scene in which Turiddu is stabbed to death, most of the music in *Cavalleria* is of the tuneful type—very attractive to the ear (I own one recording of it) but not really inherently dramatic. On the other hand, although *Pagliacci* contains some very tuneful arias and scenes, its drama is actually quite cleverly and subtly built up. Moreover, the plot of *Pagliacci* is more inherently dramatic because it charts the erosion of a May-December romance between a very young and attractive woman and a man 20 years her senior who took her, starving, off the streets, made her a part of his traveling entertainment troupe, fell in love with her and married her. As a result, even such a hackneyed piece as Canio's “Vesti la giubba,” when done dramatically and in context within the opera—and not just sung in a recital—it is still a very moving piece.

As with Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Leoncavallo used “chiaroscuro” in this opera since, after all, Canio's performing troupe gives a comedy based on the old *commedia dell'arte* play of Pierrot (Pagliacci), his unfaithful wife Colombina, and her secret lover, the Harlequin. Tonio's now-

¹ Posted on the Bill Evans Legacy Organization website, June 14, 2022.

famous prologue was not in the original score, but written expressly for the famous baritone Matia Battistini, who refused to sing the role without a big aria. (The original Tonio, believe it or not, was none other than Victor Maurel, the first Iago, and the premiere performance was directed by Arturo Toscanini, who later came to loathe the opera and refused to conduct it.)

The first sign of dark clouds behind the sunshine comes after Canio's entrance, when he warns the villagers that although he plays the fool in his entertainment, he will not tolerate anyone making advances on Nedda ("Un tal gioco"). Then there is Nedda's "Ballatella" or bird song which, although cute and tuneful, opens with a surprisingly dark recitative in which she expresses her fears of Canio's jealousy...thus her aria is a sort of "whistling-in-the-dark" moment, immediately contrasted with the very dramatic duet with Tonio, who has a crush on her and threatens to tell Canio about her secret love affair with a young soldier named Silvio if she doesn't give him what he wants. This is no children's play, this is serious and fairly seamy stuff. Leoncavallo's music for this scene is just about perfect, and he makes an excellent contrast between the drama of this duet and the one with Silvio which immediately follows it. Most of this is fairly simple romantic love music of its time, Italian-style, but what is more perfect to describe the shallow "love" these two have for each other? Nonetheless, there is a surprisingly dramatic explosion in the middle of the duet, before Silvio brings it back on track with his outpouring of affection for her.

Tonio, who has been eavesdropping, runs off to tell Canio what is going on. The latter interrupts the lovers' tryst and chases Silvio away but doesn't see his face. Canio grabs Nedda and demands to know his name. She refuses; he pulls out his knife and threatens to kill her, but is disarmed by Beppe, who reminds him that it's time to get dressed for the performance. This, in turn, leads to the famous "Vesti la giubba," then the curtain signaling the end of the act.

The second act, after a jolly opening chorus, presents the play-within-a-play. Silvio is in the audience, but only Nedda knows who he is. The performers go through their regular routine until Canio makes his entrance. Nedda has just sung her regular line to Arlecchino, "I will always be yours," but this time it sets Canio into a rage because they were the same words she sang to Silvio before he ran him off. He grabs Nedda and demands to know her lover's name; she plays dumb and keeps talking about Arlecchino. Finally, Canio can stand it no longer. The celli and basses in the orchestra rumble, then he goes berserk, screaming, "No, I'm no longer Pagliaccio! I am a man again, and I want to know your lover's name!" Perhaps the most touching lines in this monologue, however, come when Canio recalls having taken Nedda off the street, starving and alone, gave her a home and sacrificed all for her "with the foolish hope that, for those reasons alone, you would love me back." But Nedda foolishly tries to put the comedy back on track. Canio grabs her, shouting, "Do you think I'm joking? I'll kill you! Tell me his name!" Much to his surprise, she does not back down, but sings out a *fortissimo* "No!" on a high B-flat, and basically tells him to stuff it. The audience, which at first applauded Canio's "realism" after "No! Pagliaccio non son!," is now recoiling in horror; they finally realize that this is no joke. After Canio stabs Nedda, Silvio, spurred to action, leaps out of his seat and rushes up on stage, where Canio stabs him as well. We then hear the famous final line, "La commedia è finita!" But sung by whom? Since 1896, it was sung more often than not by Canio, but in the original score—and in some performances over the decades—it is sung by Tonio. Dramatically, it makes more sense this way. The half-mad Canio would not really be in any position to come up with something that subtle on the spur of the moment, but I'll leave it to those who analyze dramas for a living to dope it out.

Far and away, the greatest commercial recording of this opera is the one with José Cura (Canio), Carlos Álvarez (Tonio), Barbara Frittoli (Nedda), Simon Keenlyside (Silvio) and Charles Castronuovo (Beppe), conducted by Riccardo Chailly—not only note-for-note complete

(believe it or not, not all recordings are), but conducted and performed in such a way that it has the feel and frisson of a live performance. If you can put up with poor 1930s broadcast sound, however, the March 10, 1934 Metropolitan Opera performance with Giovanni Martinelli (Canio), Lawrence Tibbett (Tonio), Queena Mario (Nedda) and George Cehanovsky (Silvio), conducted at white heat by Vincenzo Bellezza, will absolutely blow you away. As Jon Vickers once said, “Canio’s pain is beyond tears, beyond histrionics; it is something internal that he must carry around with him until he can stand it no longer.”

Massenet: *La Navarraise* (1894)

La Navarraise was Massenet’s answer to *Cav* and *Pag*, with a story line about Anita, a low-born girl from Navarre who is in love with the soldier Araquil. His father, finding her unacceptable, insists on her paying her a dowry of 2,000 duros. She is despondent until she hears Araquil’s commandant, Garrido, sing of his hate for the enemy commander Zuccaraga. Anita offers to kill Zuccaraga for the 2,000 duros she owes. Garrido accepts but is suspicious, since he doesn’t know who she is; her answer is, “I’m only a girl from Navarre [*La Navarraise*].” She kills Zuccaraga and gets her reward, but is sworn to secrecy as to how she obtained the money. Thus when Araquil, who returns from battle mortally wounded, sees the money, he suspects that she has sold herself to get it. Eventually he realizes the truth, but dies in front of her eyes. Wanting only to kill herself, Anita goes mad and begins talking to Araquil as if he were still alive in front of her about having the dowry.

In its early years, *La Navarraise* was extremely popular, and in fact was often paired in performance with *Cavalleria Rusticana* before that opera was given more frequently with *Pagliacci*, but by the 1920s it had fallen off the map. Granted, the orchestral prelude is fairly pompous, but even so one senses that the musical style is far in advance of anything that most of the Italian verismo composers were capable of, with its rhythmic variance and rising chromatic chords. Had this opera appeared a few years earlier than it did, it would surely have created a sensation...well, in a way it did. Let’s just say that I think it would have stayed in the repertoire longer had it NOT been paired with *Cav*.

Once we get into the opera proper, there are further delights. Massenet writes for his characters in a sort of sung recitative, but keeps the vocal line moving and varied. Even the first duet between Anita and Araquil does not conform to convention, but keeps on morphing and changing musically. Fat chance that the average operagoer, who wants their tunes memorable and in a regular rhythm, something they can hum to themselves on the way out of the theater, would respond positively to this very sophisticated score. The music is continuous, with few if any pauses for applause. It smolders, as it should, but rarely explodes; it is tailored to match the text, not to please the masses; there are almost no climactic high notes, another failing. In short, *La Navarraise* is too good for most general audiences.

Absolutely nothing in this score is predictable or mundane; even Garrido’s complaint about Zuccaraga is set to appropriate music. Massenet knew exactly when to work within a lyrical vein and when to introduce punchy rhythms (that keep changing), ominous string tremolos, menacing tympani rolls, etc. To my ears, he combined the excitement of the Italian verismo composers with a French ear for orchestration, yet a wholly apropos one. To put it succinctly, *La Navarraise* is a more mature, more sophisticated and tauter version of *Le Cid*.

The Anita-Garrido duet in Act II is clearly a highlight of the opera, just as dramatic as the Santuzza-Turiddu duet in *Cavalleria* but, lacking the more easily memorable melodic lines, it is more tensely and appropriately dramatic. Even better is the Araquil-Anita duet, with the tenor’s frequent cries in the upper register, signaling both his physical and emotional pain. No matter where you turn in this exceptional score, you will find something to both move and surprise you.

Considering how infrequently it is performed, we are fortunate indeed to have two outstanding recordings of this work: the one with Aleksandra Kurzak (Anita), Roberto Alagna (Araquil), George Andguladze (Garrido) and Brian Kontes (Remigo), conducted by Alberto Veronesi, and the classic, mostly French cast of Lucia Popp (Anita), Alain Vanzo (Araquil), Vicente Sardi-nero (Garrido) and Gérard Souzay (Remigo), conducted by Antonio de Almeida. I prefer the latter, but you may prefer the former because of its more modern digital sound.

***Giordano: Andrea Chénier* (1896)**

Considering how popular *Andrea Chénier* was, and for how long, it's rather sad to see it pretty much drop off the operatic map...certainly not to the extent that *La Navarraise* has, but far enough to make performances and, more importantly, recordings of it exceedingly rare. But this is a verismo opera that absolutely needs great voices *and* great acting in all three of its principal roles, Carlos Gérard, Andrea Chénier and Maddalena, and of the few live video performances that exist on YouTube, you normally just get two out of three, which isn't quite good enough.

Like many of its Puccini-composed relatives, there is a good amount of sweetsy-melodic music in *Chénier*, but also a larger-than-normal amount of very dramatic music, and the plot, which is taken from actual history, is fascinating and very involving for any audience member. Set on the brink of the French revolution and immediately after it, the central character is a poet who, although a member of the upper classes, has long pled the case of the lower classes. Gérard, a majordomo, is bitter about the way his aged father, who was also a servant, is being treated. And of course—what would an Italian opera be without a love triangle?—both Chénier and Gérard are in love with Madeleine de Cogny, another member of the elite who sympathizes with the working class. At the time of the revolution, Gérard is made one of the leaders, and afterwards is given the power to condemn or pardon those in the upper class by Robespierre, the ultimate punishment being the guillotine. He is torn between love and honor; he knows full well that although Chénier came from “the classes” and was a friend of the now-disgraced General Dumonez, he has always championed the cause of the poor, but he wants him out of the way so that he can get Madeleine for himself. Chénier and Gérard engage in a sword duel, in which the former wounds the latter; thinking he is dying, Gérard warns Chénier to beware the Inquisition prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville, and the watch over and protect Madeleine. The “Incroyable,” a secret Inquisition spy, later tells Gérard (who recovers) that Chénier has been arrested, urging him to write down the charges against the poet. Gérard hesitates, knowing that Chénier is a good man and innocent, but his desires eventually overtake his honor and he writes out a condemnation of the poet. In the end, Madeleine joins Chénier as he goes to the guillotine. In a last-moment attempt to salvage his honor and save Chénier's life, Gérard pleads with Robespierre to spare him, but the latter replies that “even Plato banned poets from his Republic.” To sum up, this is a hell of a dramatic opera.

Most of the cute music appears in the first act, where Giordano tried to recreate a fancy dress ball and entertainment, but this helps to illustrate the shallow lives and flighty personalities of the upper classes. The orchestration is surprisingly varied and colorful for an Italian verismo composer, using quite transparent textures in what one hears as an authentic French style, and trying as much as possible within the use of an Italian libretto to create a quintessential French sound. The role of Chénier is extremely difficult to pull off well, as the tenor must constantly vacillate between poetic sensitivity and full-blooded Italianate passion, particularly in his first-act aria, “Un di all'azzurro spazio,” familiarly known as the “Improvviso,” where Chénier begins to sing a fairly conventional tune but soon gets wrapped up in condemning the upper class for their disgraceful treatment of the working class and the poor. It calls for a real tightrope-walk between passion, good vocal acting, and stupendous vocal control; it is, in fact, the most difficult

“verismo” aria in the entire canon to sing, which may be one reason why the opera is so rarely done. Most tenors either tear passion to tatters, as Franco Corelli did, with no regard for the shape of the music; belt it out loudly without any real feeling at all, as Mario del Monaco and Plácido Domingo did; or, worst of all, sing it straight without any underlying drama, as José Carreras did. Gérard is somewhat less of a problem; his role must be sung forcefully, but you must always feel the character’s resentment towards the upper classes in every note he utters. Madeleine is actually even more complex a character than the other two, torn as she is between various feelings and dramatic situations. I found it interesting that all three principal roles were given their premiere by noted singing actors of their time—Giuseppe Borgatti (Chénier), Avelina Carrera (Madeleine) and Mario Sammarco (Carlos Gérard)—of which the first two, though of Latin heritage (Borgatti Italian, Carrera Spanish), were noted *Wagnerian* singers of their time.

As we get into Act II, the music not only becomes more consistently dramatic but is more continuous, each scene flowing one into the other almost imperceptibly. There is a wonderful flow here, and although the harmony only changes occasionally and usually quite subtly, it is just enough to sustain one’s interest. Once in a while, as in Madeleine’s narration “Eravate possente, io invece minacciata,” Giordano lapses into fairly conventional melodic lines, yet even here he breaks them up with less regular motifs that add interest to the music. Near the end of the third act, in the scene with Gérard, Madeleine, Mathieu, Fouquier-Tinville, the prosecutor and Chénier, “Perduto! la mia vita per salvarlo!,” Giordano created a wholly dark, dramatic scene, lacking entirely in Italianate rat-a-tat rhythms, which culminates in Chénier’s great monologue, “Si, fui soldato.”

Often ignored or sloughed over are the subsidiary roles—the Incroyable, the novelist Pierre Fléville, the old woman Madelon and the prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville. As in the best operas of Verdi and Wagner, these parts are extremely important to the drama; to underperform them, to just sing the music without giving meaning to the words, is to undercut what Giordano created. It’s really a shame that none of his later operas were anywhere near as great as *Andrea Chénier*, but in my view, better to have written at least one masterpiece than none at all.

Without question, the most consistently dramatic *and* well-sung performance is the old 1941 recording with Beniamino Gigli (Chénier, for once eschewing his normal style of chuckling and sobbing his way through a role), Maria Caniglia (Maddalena) and Gino Bechi (Gérard), a performance which includes star turns from singers soon to be world-famous such as Giulietta Simionato as the Countess, Giuseppe Taddei as Fouquier-Tinville and Fléville, and Italo Tajo as Roucher, despite the somewhat scrappy playing of the La Scala Orchestra of the time, but if you want a good stereo recording—and you should—avoid all the various ones with Franco Corelli or Plácido Domingo as Chénier. The one to hear is the 1989 live radio performance with Franco Bonisolli as a surprisingly sensitive and musical Chénier, Maria Gulegina in shockingly excellent voice as Maddalena, Renato Bruson as Gérard, Claudio Otelli as Fouquier-Tinville and Heinz Zednik as Le Incroyable, conducted with tremendous orchestral color and a nicely relaxed pace by Marcello Viotti.

***Puccini: Tosca* (1900)**

I debated quite a while with myself as to whether or not I wanted to include this opera, Joseph Kerman’s *bête noir*, the “shabby little shocker” he detested so much, but the fact that it attracted, and still attracts, great singing actresses to the title role finally made me decide to discuss it. If you read through the description of this opera on Wikipedia, you’d think it was one of the great masterpieces of music, “structured as a through-composed work, with arias, recitative, choruses and other elements musically woven into a seamless whole. Puccini used Wagnerian leit-motifs to identify characters, objects and ideas. While critics have often dismissed the opera as a

facile melodrama with confusions of plot—musicologist Joseph Kerman famously called it a ‘shabby little shocker’—the power of its score and the inventiveness of its orchestration have been widely acknowledged.”²

But so has Puccini’s maddening tendency to cram as much sugar-coated tunes (with climactic high notes, of course) into the score as possible. So what can we actually make of *Tosca*?

I listened to it again with fresh ears, as if I had never heard it before, and this is what I found. The opening orchestral prelude is indeed quite dramatic, and so is the opening scene in which Angelotti rushes into the church to locate the key to a private chapel to hide in. After that, we get nearly a half-hour of absolutely rubbishy music: the Sacristan’s goofy little scene, Cavaradossi’s simplistic and utterly superfluous aria “Recondita armonia,” and then, after a very brief scene in which Cavaradossi promises to help Angelotti, a long, tedious duet between him and Tosca. It goes on too long. It says very little. And it’s boring. Then, finally, things pick up with the arrival of the Chief of Police, Baron Scarpia. The final scene in this act, with the “Te Deum,” is excellent.

All of Act II is excellent as well, from start to finish. Puccini’s dramatic sense was at its zenith here, depicting the drama in highly original, brilliant music. Even Tosca’s aria, “Vissi d’arte, vissi d’amore,” suits the character as she reflects on her life and its meaning. The final scene in which she stabs Scarpia to death is one of the finest in the entire verismo canon.

Unfortunately, we then get Act III, which is tune time from start to finish, none of it dramatic and some of it almost embarrassingly maudlin, such as Cavaradossi’s two arias, “E lucevan le stelle” and “O dolci mani.” He faces the firing squad, they’re supposed to shoot blanks but they don’t, Cavaradossi dies and Tosca leaps off the parapet—to the tune of “E lucevan le stelle,” an aria which, as Kerman pointed out, she never even heard.

So that’s my take on *Tosca*. About 40% of it quite good (all of Act II plus parts of Act I), the other 60% worthless music. Perhaps someday we’ll reach a point where only Act II of *Tosca* is performed since it is the best part of the opera by far, but somehow I doubt it. I know one man in Brooklyn who owns—and I’m not making this up—more than 300 recordings of the complete opera. Better him than me.

On balance the best cast, sound and production of *Tosca* is the DVD of a 1978 Metropolitan Opera performance with Shirley Verrett (Tosca), Luciano Pavarotti (Cavaradossi), Cornell MacNeil (Scarpia) and Andrea Velis (Spoletta), conducted by James Conlon.

***Charpentier: Louise* (1900)**

It’s almost mind-boggling to consider that such a masterpiece as *Louise* premiered the same year as *Tosca*. By comparison with the Puccini work, it is highly sophisticated and even innovative. Yet despite its 1900 premiere date, it took Gustave Charpentier a decade to write. He also wrote the libretto himself, albeit with contributions from Saint-Pol-Roux, a symbolist poet who inspired the surrealists (which, in turn, evolved from a movement by French writers and artists who called themselves the “Incoherents;” the early animated cartoonist Émile Cohl was one of their group). Charpentier, with assistance from Pol-Roux, used all of the denizens of the streets of Paris as a vehicle to bring the city “to life” as an extra, invisible character in the drama.

The other innovation in the plot of *Louise* was that the principal character was seeking love, romance and excitement in her life without wanted to be tied down in marriage. This was, in fact, the central crux of the argument between her and her parents, solid, middle-class people who frowned on such activities as being immoral. In this respect, one might almost see *Louise* as an inspiration for the Beatles’ famous song “She’s Leaving Home,” which follows a similar path.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tosca>

Julien, the lover, is simply a handsome young man with artistic leanings—his friends are poets and writers, though he is not one himself—who falls in love with his pretty young neighbor and vice-versa. The opera is fairly long, more than three hours in performance, yet although it is all extremely interesting, not a lot happens dramatically throughout most of it. The drama is all in the first and fourth act confrontations between Louise and her parents, particularly in the last which is by far one of the supreme dramatic moments in all of opera, French or otherwise. Yet the viewer or listener is never bored because of the way Charpentier constructed his music. Using the by-now accepted French format of semi-arietta music with sung recitatives, he managed to create a believable and fascinating kaleidoscope of sound patterns interweaving all of the street merchants, poets, writers and students, even a comical “crowning” of the “Pope of Fools,” to fill his musical canvas. In many respects, this was a one-off; no one, not even Charpentier himself, was ever able to duplicate the musical variety, drama and excitement by using nearly two dozen subsidiary characters as successfully as this. In this respect, *Louise* was clearly a work of genius, unsurpassed in both dramatic and operatic history. He wrote no other opera before it, only a “symphonie-drame” called *La vie de poète* which was sort of a prelude to *Louise*, and only three other operas after it: *Julien*, its sequel, in 1913, an unperformed opera called *L’amour au faubourg* the same year, and an unfinished opera, *Orphée*, on which he stopped work in 1931, despite living to the astonishing age of 96. Most of his life after the premiere of *Louise* was taken up in coaching sopranos as to how exactly he wanted the title role sung and acted, among them Ninon Vallin and Grace Moore.

Even the orchestral prelude, tuneful but full of *luftpausen*, has a somewhat dramatic feel, alternating as it does between major-key excitement and minor-key dramatic moments, and the opera proper opens excitingly with Julien singing *forte* in his high range, followed by the entrance of Louise. There’s nothing really fancy about the music, and it follows rather conventional tonal lines, but unlike the B.S. that Wikipedia claimed about *Tosca*, it is *Louise* that continually evolves from start to finish in each act along quasi-Wagnerian lines. The difference, of course, is that there are no “long half hours” in Charpentier’s score; all is color and light. Indeed, the orchestration of *Louise* is one of the crowning glories of French opera; it practically explodes with color. Even Massenet was prompted to praise it in this respect. The orchestral score of *Louise* is almost like listening to Massenet or Rimsky-Korsakov on acid. Indeed, in this opera it is really the orchestra that is the star of the show, mirroring not only what the singers are singing about but, much of the time, telling you what they are *thinking* behind their words. Charpentier also used, if not precisely *leitmotifs*, certain orchestral sounds to identify some of his characters, such as the heavy plodding of the double basses when Louise’s father first enters.

One also notes in the opening duet how cleverly Charpentier used little deviations from normal tonality, including chromatic changes as well as constantly varying the meter à la Dargomyzhsky, yet somehow the casual listener remains involved in the music because of the highly melodic yet constantly varied top line. You keep getting the feeling that you’ve heard some of this music before, but if you scour your memory, you realize that you’ve never really heard anything like it. It just keeps moving and evolving, like a real conversation would, except that this is a musical conversation on a grand scale on which you are eavesdropping.

When their blissful duet is broken up by Louise’s mother, it is with stabbing string figures and rumbling string bass tremolos, portending disaster to come. The first confrontation with her father, as already described, is masterfully handled; so, too, is the introduction, one by one at first, of the street people of Paris in Act II. In Act III, the music he wrote for the mother when she suddenly shows up and tells Louise that her father is desperately ill and wants to see her once more is perfect; there is no pathos or bathos in it to set your teeth on edge. Back home with mom and dad in Act IV, the orchestra plays a mocking excerpts from Louise’s third-act aria, “Depuis

la jour,” as if to indicate that her dreams of love are now temporarily trapped. A bit later, when the father is singing, there is another mocking snippet, this time of one of Julien’s love themes.

The ultimate question *Louise* asks, of course, is whether the title character is really in love with Julien or just in love with love—of having someone to love her and lift her out of her drab, everyday existence. But, like all great art, it is a question left unanswered, although we think we know the answer.

Despite its being predominantly tonal, the score of *Louise* was both revolutionary and an end in itself. It was revolutionary in that it brought the Wagnerian concept fully into French opera; it was an ending in that Charpentier did so in a way that could never be duplicated, not even by himself, as well as being the fullest culmination of the verismo style. Although Giordano, Leoncavallo, Mascagni and especially Puccini would write further operas and remain popular, none of them—even all of them put together—could top *Louise*. It was time for the operatic form to move on, and move on it did, whether audiences liked the changes or not.

After listening to all the available commercial recordings of the opera, including the early one with Ninon Vallin and Georges Thill, and a couple of live performances uploaded on YouTube (including one with Grace Moore from 1943), I wholeheartedly recommend the 1977 recording with Beverly Sills as the most youthful-sounding and febrile Louise on records, Nicolai Gedda somewhat past his prime as Julien (his high notes sound hard and just a tad unsteady), José van Dam as a wonderfully authoritarian father, Mignon Dunn as the mother, and a mostly French cast of street characters (including Eliane Lublin, Mirielle Laurent, Jacques Mars and Marie Bertola) conducted with excitement, color and drama by Julius Rudel. No one else, as of yet, comes close to his achievement here with the Paris Opéra Orchestra.

It would be nice to say that verismo developed beyond where it started from this point on, but sadly, the reverse is true. Even Puccini, who was probably the most talented of the group—although the one composer who tried the hardest to continue to have “hits,” therefore he developed the least—had his failures and near-misses. Leoncavallo, Mascagni and Giordano also produced near-misses, but for the most part few if any of their later operas caught on in the “standard repertoire.” All that verismo really *did* develop was a style of Italian singing based on belting and caterwauling which was extremely popular in Italy but put people in other countries off.

But there was already a movement in the wings from other composers to write the very best dramatic operas they could, leaving it to audiences to come to *them* rather than the other way round. This doesn’t mean that they didn’t *care* if audiences liked their works or not; they surely did, including at least a few pleasing elements in most of them to not put people off too much; but they weren’t *trying* to write crowd-pleasers. They simply wanted to return opera to the state of grace it was in during the period of Gluck and his disciples, only in their own personal style and a modern vein. A few of these eventually caught on and entered the standard repertoire, much to the consternation of the bulk of operagoers, while others struggled for decades before finally being revived and performed occasionally.

I will not pretend that every “modern” opera written during this period or after it was a great work of art worthy of being heard. There were certainly some bombs that died a deserved death because the music was just too congested, convoluted and/or ugly to appeal to anyone other than their creators. Among these, just to bring up two, were Paul Hindemith’s *Cardillac* and Sergei Prokofiev’s *The Burning Fiery Angel*. I’ve heard both, and neither one is worth listening to a second time. But the point was that many composers were starting to balk at the consistently tonal, tuneful pap that was being served up at the opera houses, and they wanted to do something entirely different.

In 1902, during one of his stints as music director of La Scala, Arturo Toscanini had the

“audacity” to revive Verdi’s *Il trovatore*. The Scala audiences were insulted; used to getting the newest operas, they had no desire to hear what they felt was an antique from a half-century earlier; but *Trovatore* was a hit, and it began the real process of establishing a standard repertoire of older works. The irony in this is that Toscanini was, at that time, also a champion of such forward-looking works as Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Dukas’ *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* and Strauss’ *Salome* and *Elektra*, and in fact the La Scala audiences booed *Pelléas* while he was conducting it. This only goes to show how early the split between established tonal works and less tonal, more adventurous ones that were struggling to establish themselves after their premieres—whether successful or unsuccessful.

Debussy: *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was, like Hector Berlioz, an outsider in the French culture of his day. Born into a working class family with no musical interests, he showed so much talent by the age of 10 that he was admitted to the prestigious Paris Conservatoire as a student. Originally just a piano major, he eventually chose to move into composition, but just as Berlioz incurred the wrath of Cherubini and the disapproval of the Conservatoire faculty as a whole, so did Debussy rub everyone the wrong way. When in his early 20s, he traveled to Bayreuth to see a performance of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, and was so much taken by its quiet, almost minimal rhythmic movement and “floating,” constantly shifting harmonies that he based his entire style on it.

Interestingly, by the time he wrote *Pelléas* he had only written a few major works, the cantata *L’Enfant Prodigue* which won him the Prix de Rome, *La damoiselle Éluë*, the *Suite Bergamesque* and the celebrated orchestral piece *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (yes, there were others, like the string quartet, but at the time they were not as well liked). He actually began work on *Pelléas* in 1894 after seeing Maurice Maeterlinck’s play of the same name. Maeterlinck (1862-1949), who today is known almost exclusively for this work, was an extremely interesting writer. His plays were a form of surrealism, using the form of a fairy tale but incorporating strange dream images and complex interactions of characters while still, somehow, being able to appeal to average theatergoers. In fact, he wrote some two dozen of these dramas, some of which were not published until after his death. Two other operas that I know of were also based on Maeterlinck plays, Dukas’ *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* and Henri Février’s *Monna Vanna*, which we will get to anon. He, too, was an early member of the Symbolist Movement in France, despite the fact that he was technically a Belgian.

This, like *Aïda* and *Louise*, has a plot too well-known to bother detailing it here, but certain salient features of the drama need to be pointed out just to illustrate how brilliant Debussy’s score was. First and foremost, being a “dream image” scenario, none of the characters in it express strong emotions despite the love that develops between the two principals in spite of Mélisande’s being married to Pelléas’ brother Golaud. I’ve always found this bizarre in the case of Golaud himself, who becomes so angry at his brother that he kills him. Certainly a murder in an opera should evoke some strong, violent music, but neither Debussy’s orchestral score nor his intentions for Golaud called for such a thing. On the contrary, this was an opera that purposely avoided emotion at every turn. The Pelléas-Mélisande love duet has an underlying feeling of rapture, but it is cerebral rapture. Even by the time of Debussy’s untimely death in 1918, however, French casts were starting to inject more passion into at least the love duet and the confrontation scene between Golaud and Pelléas, yet Debussy continued to praise his original Golaud, Hector-Robert Dufranne, who actually recorded scenes from the opera in the late 1920s, for resisting the temptation to do too much in terms of histrionic expression.

This is not an insignificant thing. Indeed, one can point to *Pelléas* as the origination of what came to be known in the 20th century as the “authentic French style” of performing opera,

in which few if any participants expressed strong emotions in *any* operas, but it was a style that grew out of *Pelléas* the same way that the over-the-top Italian style grew out of verismo. There exists a 1926 complete recording of *Carmen* in which none of the principals express much of anything in terms of real drama, and this is a recording highly praised by those who believe that this is the “true French style,” but prior to *Pelléas*, French opera singers were acting up a storm in every opera they sang. Just think of Maurel in *Otello* and *Falstaff*, not to mention the surviving recordings of such outstanding pre-*Pelléas* singers as Emma Calvé, Lucien Fugère, Leon Campagnola, Susan Brohly, Pierre d’Assy and Marcel Journet. Debussy’s first *Mélisande*, the Scottish soprano Mary Garden, eventually walked a tightrope between some emotional expression in her non-*Pelléas* roles (there is a recording of her singing “Mes longs cheveux” with the composer at the piano), but his second *Mélisande*, soprano Maggie Teyte, pretty much stuck to singing French opera and *chanson* in the matter-of-fact manner approved by Debussy. It would not be until the mid-1950s that certain French and Belgian singers eventually started to break this mold once again. Thus here, too, we sense a shift in what was accepted as “drama” in its time.

Even in the opening orchestral prelude, scored for the most part very deeply in the celli and basses with a few woodwind sprinkles, one is aware of the overall orchestral sound of this work. It is dark and purposely blurred; an acquaintance of mine refers to it as “murky.” Well, yes, it *is* murky, but on purpose. Nor are there any metronome markings, just general tempo indications such as “Très modéré” or “Very moderate” at the beginning. There is a *molto diminuendo* marking just before Golaud’s first entrance, but no other indication that the prelude has finished and the first act has begun, and the orchestration, if anything, thins out for the singers. There are also many “pre-echoes” in this score of Debussy’s masterful symphony to come, *La Mer*, particularly in the use of winds and high strings to emulate the lapping of water in the pond that *Mélisande* is staring in to. The setting for the opera is named “Allemande,” which means Germany in French but was interpreted by Maeterlinck to mean “all the world.” Critical reception was certainly not mostly positive; light opera composer André Messager wrote that the third performance was “certainly no triumph, but no longer the disaster of two days before...From the second performance onwards, the public remained calm and above all curious to hear this work everyone was talking about...The little group of admirers, Conservatoire pupils and students for the most part, grew day by day.” Yet one unnamed critic described the music as “sickly and practically lifeless,” and Saint-Saëns, who detested Debussy’s music, claimed that he had forsaken his usual summer holidays just so he could stay in Paris and complain about *Pelléas*.³

Like Dargomyzhsky’s *The Stone Guest*, the libretto of *Pelléas* was taken almost verbatim from a play, thus there can be no question that he served the original faithfully. All of the sung lines are in a conversational recitative style, quite obviously based on *Parsifal*, but this was the cause of a major disagreement between Debussy and Maeterlinck. For the most part, the French, especially those in the Conservatoire, regarded Wagner as a cult figure—and he was considered so by the Symbolists, of whom Maeterlinck was a major figure. Even so, Debussy tried to change this Wagnerian influence in his own music, scrapping his early drafts of the love duet as being too conventional and because “worst of all, the ghost of old Klingsor, alias R. Wagner, kept appearing.”⁴

The opera was thus slow in making the rounds to other countries. The first foreign production was staged at La Monnaie in Brussels in 1907, which Debussy uncharacteristically supervised himself, followed by the La Scala premiere (under Toscanini), another at the Frankfurt Opera and yet another in New York—but NOT at the Metropolitan, rather at Oscar Hammerstein’s

³ All these comments stem from Roger Nichols’ *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴ Tresize, Simon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 74.

rival Manhattan Opera Company. The first Met performance didn't occur until long after Debussy was dead, in March of 1925. That's the Met for you, always on the cutting edge of operatic innovation. But in the interim, of course they had time to stage Victor Herbert's trashy *Natomah*.

Pelléas et Mélisande is a work that absolutely demands that you pay close attention to it, particularly the orchestra which is the primary storyteller—not just the subsidiary storyteller as in *Louise*. Indeed, one could by rights describe it as a long symphony with voices, and it would make the exact same impact. There is also very little stage action to hold an audience's interest, but just enough to not make them entirely bored.

Yet if one considers what Debussy asked for and demanded from his performers, can you really call *Pelléas et Mélisande* a “dramatic” work? Again, it depends on your interpretation of the concept of drama. Having seen at least one stage performance of it, I can attest that, strangely enough, what sounds like almost interminable conversation music when just listening somehow works when you see it. I can't really explain why, but it does, at least if you are open to the music and not simply dismissive of it as “murky.” In performances that emulate Debussy's demands for vocal detachment, the singers often compensate for a general lack of vocal interpretation by acting out their roles onstage. This can work as well; but ever since Herbert von Karajan took the lid off *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1979 with what the critics described as an “overheated performance” with Frederica von Stade (a mezzo-soprano, not a soprano) as Mélisande, baritone Richard Stilwell as Pelléas, José van Dam as Golaud and Ruggiero Raimondi as Arkel, we now have quite a few performances and recordings of the opera in which we *do* hear vocal interpretation, ranging from minimal to obvious.

Is this good or bad? It clearly goes against the composer's intentions, of that there is no doubt, but let's be honest. No one goes to the opera, certainly not nowadays, to hear singers perform with next to no interpretation. Although this was a concept of drama that Debussy more or less invented and superimposed on the French opera world of his time, it is unnatural. It can work on a recording when simply listening at home, but it simply won't fly in the opera house. In a way, then, *Pelléas* remains a highly controversial work more than a century after its premiere.

We also have to decide if we want a *baritone-matin* to sing Pelléas, which was Debussy's original choice, or a tenor, which was often done even from the early days (Edward Johnson was the first Pelléas at the Metropolitan Opera). You can go either way in this respect, I think, since most *baritone-matins* actually have a timbre closer to tenor although their range is more limited.

Ironically, considering that he was the one who changed the way we hear *Pelléas* forever, Karajan left us a superb 1950s performance of the opera in its original concept with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Mélisande), tenor Ernst Häfliger (Pelléas), Michel Roux (Golaud), Mario Petri (Arkel) and Christiane Gayraud (Geneviève) with the RAI Rome Orchestra and Chorus. Insofar as authenticity goes, however, you really should hear the excerpts from the opera featuring Marthe Nespoulos (Mélisande), Alfred Maguenat (Pelléas), Hector Dufranne (the first Golaud) and Claire Croiza (Geneviève), conducted by Georges Truc.

As for a more acted-out performance in stereo, my favorite is the one with Mirielle Delunsch (Mélisande), Gérard Thérue (Pelléas), Armand Araplan (Golaud), Gabriel Bacquier (Arkel) and Hélène Jossaud (Geneviève), conducted by Jean-Claude Casadesus.

Nielsen: *Saul og David* (1902)

With Carl Nielsen's *Saul and David*, we encounter the second of four Biblical/religious-themed operas which, though very highly regarded as dramatic music, are very difficult to stage because there isn't much action going on. These works generally consist of dramatic monologues or dialogues, once in a while group scenes with or without chorus, and that's all there is. *Samson et Dalila* is certainly the least problematic of the four; but since we are discussing opera as dra-

ma and specifically what the *scores* tell us, we must certainly include them no matter how static they are. In a sense, Wagner's *Parsifal* was the granddaddy of these sort of works and, as we've seen, even the non-religious-based *Pelléas et Mélisande* faces similar challenges in staging. An imaginative stage director can, I feel, work around this handicap, but in this day and age there are precious few *imaginative* directors and far too many perverted and psychologically disturbed ones, which is not the same thing.

Composed, for Nielsen, rather slowly over a two-year period, the opera concerns the usual arguments and battles between people who have power. King Saul and his army, waiting for Samuel to come and sacrifice some animal to God, get tired of waiting so Saul does it himself. Of course, that's when Samuel shows up, gets pissed, and puts God's curse on Saul. The latter repents, but Sam won't remove the curse, so Saul sinks into despair. David sings to Saul but Abner, Saul's captain, interrupts him and announces the challenge of the Philistine's champion Goliath. As everyone knows, David kills Goliath, but Saul immediately becomes jealous of the adulation David is getting from the people. (I get the impression that Saul always feels the need to be the center of attention.)

Later, David and his young assistant Abishai sneak into Saul's camp when he is asleep, stealing his spear and water canteen to prove that he went there but did not harm him. David shouts to the crowd from a hilltop, showing these things and asking for reconciliation. Surprisingly, Samuel shows up again, this time near death; before kicking the bucket, he anoints David as the new King of Israel. Needless to say, Saul has more anger issues. He and Abner ask the Witch of Endor to raise Samuel's spirit from the dead. She does, at which point Saul begs his help against the Philistines, but Samuel is still ticked off. He says that Saul and his son will die before the day is out. During the battle, Saul's son Jonathan is mortally wounded; in despair, Saul falls on his sword and kills himself. David thus becomes King, but mourns the loss of Saul, who he really had no beef against.

An interesting thing about this opera is that, like Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, it has a spoken introduction which is almost never given in performance...and not just to the first act, but a spoken introduction to each of the four acts. This is yet another thing to turn off the average opera lover. Although this opera was written in the midst of the verismo era, it is, of course, not a verismo opera in either plotline or musical style. Like Saint-Saëns, Nielsen was not really an opera composer so much as he was a composer of complex instrumental works who just happened to write a couple of operas. As a result, *Saul og David*, like *Samson et Dalila* before it, had more of a symphonic than an operatic structure.

The musical language is fairly modern for 1902, in some ways even more advanced than that of Debussy, and it has much more than just a lack of arias working against it; its musical continuity is the continuity of a symphonic structure, meaning that it uses theme and development, something that is far beyond the pay grade of the average operagoer. Put into literary terms, *Saul og David* doesn't "scan" properly for most opera listeners, which is the principal reason it has never entered the standard repertoire and is, in fact, very rarely performed. The first 15 minutes of Act I, for instance, are like an opening "Allegro" movement, while the remainder of the act is an "Andante" movement—and like any good symphonist, Nielsen completely changes his themes between movements. The orchestration was also quite different from anyone else's in his time except, perhaps, Schoenberg in *Verklärte Nacht* or *Pelleas und Melisande*, but Nielsen found an entirely new way to use brass instruments that wasn't really picked up on by anyone until Alexander Scriabin wrote his *Poem of Ecstasy*. This is not a comfortable musical environment for most opera listeners. Even though the music is essentially tonal, it is not conventionally melodic. One of the most interesting things about the opera, however, is the way Nielsen wrote rhythmic lines for the singers with tremendous vitality that also managed to suit the lyrics of

each specific scene in a dramatic fashion.

One also notes that although *Saul og David* does not stretch the voices the same way Italian opera did, it is difficult to sing due to the extremely tricky, shifting rhythms and meters. As a “symphony for voices,” I think this work also had an influence on Mahler’s Eighth Symphony. Mahler was a composer who kept his “ear to the ground” in terms of sniffing out new works, particularly those in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia which he had a close affinity with.

Although the choral music is intermittent, it, too is written in unusual meters, and when the chorus does sing it is generally in a very prominent fashion that grabs one’s attention. One of the dialogues between Samuel and Saul is particularly interesting when the singers inject some interpretation into the words, particularly Saul’s; Samuel is pretty much just an intoning guy, kind of a crashing bore despite his holy status as a prophet.

Laid out like a symphony, the first section of Act I is the “Allegro con brio” while the second section, beginning with “David’s song,” is the “Andante con moto.” Each section has its different themes and development sections. Those opera listeners who also enjoy symphonies (and there are a few) will, then, undoubtedly get something out of *Saul og David*, but most opera listeners won’t because the music, though primarily tonal, doesn’t conform to their ideas of what an opera should sound like. I should also make note that the role of Abisheï, which can technically be sung by either a light female soprano or a boy treble, is scarcely an easy or comfortable part for the latter, since it calls for his learning some very tricky intervals and demands a fully secure high range—but is very rewarding for those few who can handle it.

The scene with David, Saul and Michal begins as a continuation of the pastoral music in the “second movement” of this sung symphony, but quickly moves into a sort of scherzo (albeit with several rhythmic shifts). In the opening of Act II, we again have an “Allegro” movement, and the vocal writing is particularly challenging, calling for the baritone to sing very tricky intervals. Nowadays, our singers are, for the most part, extremely well-trained musicians, but I can just imagine that it was rather difficult to find singers who could negotiate this music back in 1902. “David’s promise” is an aria for the tenor, but clearly not in A-B-A form; rather, it meanders about musically while retaining a close connection to the meaning of the words being sung, and although he sings a high B-flat and then later a high B, they come in the midst of the music and are not “climactic” high notes. There is also some extremely tricky contrapuntal writing for the chorus.

The third act opens with light, wry, bouncy music, very much like the “Scherzo” of a symphony, as David and Abisheï sneak into Saul’s camp to take his spear and water canteen. Surprisingly, the fourth act opens with slow, quiet music played by two celli in counterpoint to one another, with occasional soft chords interjections from the orchestra, until the Witch of Endor comes bopping along to help Saul try to reconcile with the ghost of Samuel (fat chance).

Bottom line: If you have an open mind, and open ears, *Saul og David* is a dramatically thrilling and intriguing opera that will hold your attention from start to finish. If you don’t have those qualities, it won’t. This opera is the post-graduate version of *Samson et Dalila*. There isn’t a dull or uninteresting passage in the entire opera. It all moves like greased lightning.

There are only three recordings of the opera and, interestingly, each is in a different language. The most famous one, in English, is the 1972 recording with Boris Christoff (Saul), Alexander Young (David), Elisabeth Söderström (Michal) and Michael Langdon (Samuel), but Christoff’s “English” pronunciation is so bad you won’t be able to follow much of it, and both he and Langdon are in horrible voice (this was made just before Christoff took nearly 10 years off to rest his voice and recoup). The only recording in the original Danish is a good one, with Aage Haugland (Saul), Peter Lindroos (David), Tina Kiberg (Michal) and Kurt Westi (Jonathan), conducted by Neeme Järvi, although Christian Christiansen is somewhat wobbly as Samuel (though

not as much as Langdon).

But the recording I most highly recommend, although it is in mono (very clear and well-mixed, however), is the 1957 live performance in Swedish with a consistently superb cast: Sigurd Björling (Saul), Joel Berglund (Samuel), Lars Billengren (Jonathan), Umo Ebrelius (David) and Marianne Pehm (Michal), conducted brilliantly by Tor Mann, not just because of its consistently exciting dramatic involvement but also because it is the only recording to include the spoken introductions to each act (alas, in Swedish).

***Janáček: Jenůfa* (1904)**

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) was clearly an outsider as a composer, even in his native Czechoslovakia. For the first 41 years of his life, in fact, he composed nothing, but worked primarily as a folklorist, collecting Czech folk songs as Béla Bartók and Zoltan Kodály later did with Hungarian Magyar folk tunes. When he did start composing, he was very much influenced by Dvořák. *Jenůfa* was, in fact, the first work he wrote in his own style, which like that of Bartók and Kodály was heavily influenced by his use of the harmonies and melodic structure of folk tunes.

The opera was based on Gabriela Preissová's play, *Její pastorkyňa*, which described a complex web of village relationships. Prior to the beginning of the opera, the two sons of a mill owner, Grandmother Buryja, were both married twice, had children and died. Their wives are also deceased except for Kostelnička, the younger son's second wife and Jenůfa's stepmother. According to local law, only Števa, the elder son's child by his second marriage, will inherit the mill. His half-brother Laca and cousin Jenůfa will inherit nothing. The catch is that Jenůfa is secretly in love with Števa and pregnant with his child. Laca, openly in love with Jenůfa, is bitter that his half-brother will be the only heir. Števa was considered to be drafted into the army but was rejected; nonetheless, he hangs out with the soldiers and gets drunk with them, forcing Jenůfa to dance with him while he is inebriated. Laca returns from work and sees them dancing, then yells at Jenůfa that no other man would even look at her if it weren't for her good looks. She stands up for Števa, which angers Laca so much that he slashes her cheek with a knife.

Eventually the baby is born, but Števa hasn't come to see it yet. Kostelnička corners him and demands that he take responsibility; Števa agrees to pay child support secretly, provided that no one knows it is his child: he no longer loves her, and is in fact engaged to the mayor's daughter. When Laca arrives, Kostelnička tells him the truth about the baby, which would be his stepchild if he does marry Jenůfa. This disgusts him, and he then refuses to marry her. Desperate, Kostelnička lies to him and says the baby is dead; later, in the dark of night, she wraps the baby in a blanket and drowns it in the mill stream. When Jenůfa wakes up, she tells her that the baby died during the night. When Laca returns and comforts Jenůfa, telling her that they will spend the rest of their lives together, Kostelnička tells herself that she acted for the best.

On the day of Laca and Jenůfa's wedding, however, Kostelnička is a nervous wreck. After a girls' chorus sings a wedding song, they hear screams: the baby's body has been found in the mill stream under melting ice. Jenůfa immediately states that this is her baby, which puts her immediately under suspicion for infanticide. Kostelnička, however, admits that she was the perpetrator. Hearing the whole story, Jenůfa forgives her although Kostelnička is carted off to jail for murder. Just about the only bright spot in this grim story is that, when Jenůfa tells Laca that she can't expect him to marry her now, he still professes to love her for the rest of their lives.

Despite a musical style that is completely foreign-sounding to Italian-trained ears, *Jenůfa* is thus very much a verismo opera—in fact, about as “realistic” as one can get. By 1904, Janáček had not yet reached the point where his music sounded wholly modern in the sense that his later operas and string quartets did, but it is clearly far removed from the music of Dvořák despite a strongly tonal bias in most of it. The melodic lines are clearly singable—many a star soprano has

taken the title role, and quite a few dramatic mezzos have sung Kostelnička—but the rhythms are Czech and the melodic construction very much Eastern European. An interesting footnote: at the time of *Jenůfa*'s premiere on January 21, 1904, Dvořák was still alive (he died on May 1 of that year). One wonders if he heard it and, if so, what he thought, considering that his own operas were all tuneful Romantic fantasies.

Needless to say at this point, the opera is through-composed and for the most part conspicuously avoids arias and duets in the conventional sense. In this respect—and one could also apply this to some of the Italian verismo operas *with* arias and duets—Wagner's claim that his music-dramas were the “music of the future” was entirely correct. The vocal lines, melodic but clearly not conventionally tuneful, were not yet too far removed from either Wagner or modern Italian operas... just different in shape and scope. In the early going, there is less drama than that to come, but Janáček suddenly changes the melodic shape, tempo and rhythm for the first confrontation scene between Števa and Laca. From this point forward, the musical gloves are off, and we are engaged in progressively more tense and dramatic music, Kostelnička's being the most completely dramatic of all. All her lines consist of loud, stabbing notes in the upper range and middle of her voice; she is clearly a character of strong emotions, wholly Slavic in this respect. Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Maddalena in *Chénier* have nothing on her.

But the hardest thing to do in a performance is not to bring out the drama. Considering the form and shape of the music, that's the easy part. The problem is to make the entire work sound musically coherent. Like Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, the scenes begin to emerge in a series, but unlike *Gioconda*, *Jenůfa* is written in odd and unusual meters, sometimes conflicting meters within a single line of music, and these need to be pulled together. And then there is the conflict between a studio recording, where certain elements can be controlled better but which sometimes lacks drama, and a live performance where certain details may be less clear but the dramatic projection of the words and music make more of an impression. This is what, in my view, makes *Jenůfa* one of the most difficult operas to pull off well. Add to that the fact that, as the drama continues and Janáček's music becomes ever spikier and more “foreign”-sounding, the tenor who sings Laca must also understand and project his metamorphosis of character, thus you can see why this work took many years to spread to Western opera houses. After Metropolitan Opera performances in the 1924-25 season with Maria Jeritza, Carl Martin Öhman, Rudolf Laubenthal and Margarete Matzenauer (conducted by Artur Bodanzky), it disappeared for a half-century, not returning until 1974 with Teresa Kubiak, Jon Vickers and Astrid Varnay... another great production for the amazing Vickers, who helped to finally establish this opera in the repertoire.

If anything, the music in the second act is even more dramatic, and more rhythmically complex, than the first, although there is an interesting arioso for Kostelnička which evolves into a duet with Jenůfa. Neither last very long, nor do they make an impression on the listener as an aria or a duet due to their brevity. In many respects, Janáček, even at this stage in his composing career, was actually ahead of both Bartók and Schoenberg. This is, then, the doctoral thesis edition of verismo opera.

After Kostelnička's emotionally powerful scene at the end of the second act, much of the third is taken up with semi-parlando vocal writing, sometimes with three voices together but clearly not an “operatic trio” in the conventional sense. This music, too, is written in complex meters and is, in fact, the hardest of all in the score to pull together. The end of the first scene is a series of long-held orchestral chords underscored by tympani. The very last scene ends with a similar device, a much louder, brassier chord in D-flat major.

The only studio recording of *Jenůfa* on which everyone sings well *and* dramatically, and the conductor pulls everything together, is the one with Gabriela Benačková (Jenůfa), Milán Kopačka (Laca), Josef Abel (Števa) and Leonie Rysanek (Kostelnička), conducted by Frantisek

Jilek, but I also recommend the live Metropolitan Opera performance in English with Kubiak, Vickers, William Lewis and Astrid Varnay, conducted by John Nelson. It is available as of this writing on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu9USyY170M>.

***Strauss: Salome* (1905)**

If the previous two operas had considerable problems getting performed in other countries after their premiere, Richard Strauss' *Salome* did not, but that was only because he had been a very popular composer of then-modern orchestral music, and an internationally famous conductor, for nearly two decades. Even so, his first two operas, *Guntram* (1893) and *Feuersnot* (1901) were not well received. *Salome*, however, was in a new and more radical style, it was based on a famous play in French by Oscar Wilde which in turn had been adapted from the Old Testament, and despite its controversial final scene it was for the most part very well-received at its premiere in Dresden in December 1905.

The very features of the story that attracted Wilde—Christian Biblical themes combined with eroticism and murder—were the ones that made the opera so controversial. In order for her to get the severed head of John the Baptist to make post-mortem love to, Salome promises her stepfather Herod that she will do the dance of the seven veils for him. Herod's lust for his stepdaughter was yet another feature of the libretto that repelled well-bred Christian audiences. After its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, with Olive Fremstad as Salome, a famous cartoon appeared in one of the New York papers in which a rich male operagoer showed Salome the fire exit and pointed to it, basically telling her to leave the building and never return. The additional scheduled performances after the premiere were canceled, and it was not staged again in New York until 1934. Banned in London until 1907, it was not performed there until 1910 with the story softened and modified, much to the amusement and consternation of conductor Thomas Beecham. Gustav Mahler tried in vain to get it performed in Vienna, but the state censors forbade it. It wasn't staged in that city until 1918, although Strauss himself conducted a single performance at Graz, Austria in 1906. In addition to Schoenberg and Berg, Giacomo Puccini was also in the audience. After completing *Salome* but before it was staged, Strauss wrote to his publisher stating his desire to write an alternate version in French, the language of Wilde's original play, and was quite enthusiastic about this since it would match the play almost word-for-word. He relied on his friend Romaine Rolland for assistance in this project. I've not been able to find out for certain if Strauss also changed or modified the orchestration for this version other than adjusting the rhythms to match the French language, but the recording of it I've heard certainly *sounds* different in places, and not just because he altered the rhythms.

Since both the plot and the music of this opera are so well known, a recap would be redundant to the reader. Suffice it to say that although the term "verismo" doesn't really apply to *Salome*, it was perhaps the first opera to explore psychologically disturbed characters in this art form. I say "perhaps" because, in their own way, the unnaturally detached characters of *Pelléas et Mélisande* could also be viewed that way, but compared with Debussy's opera, *Salome* is practically a riot of deep-seated psychological obsessions and addictions. Even Herodias, who tries to protect her daughter, is a psychologically conflicted character, as is the sentry Narraboth who ends up committing suicide because he defied Herod's order not to let anyone visit John the Baptist in his cistern-like dungeon.

Strauss was extremely clever in writing this opera, walking a fine line between pure art and an attempt to reconcile this with aurally attractive themes. Like *Saul og David*, the music is essentially symphonic in structure; like *Das Rheingold*, its more than two-hour length is performed without a break. This helps build the psychological tension in a continuous musical and dramatic arc without interruption; the viewer/listener thus sees and hears the whole drama unfold before

his or her eyes and ears without pause. Also, even more so than *Das Rheingold*, the story unfolds in real time. There is no compression of events. Thus one action and one scene leads directly to the next action and scene. The only real break one gets from the slowly building tension is the scene with the five Jewish scholars arguing about their religion. Some have seen this as an anti-Semitic episode, but the Jews are not made to be comical figures in the sense that they are being laughed at for being Jewish but simply because their argument is circular and has no resolution, and such arguments occur even today between different Jewish Biblical scholars.

One excellent feature that Strauss brought over from his instrumental works to *Salome* was his remarkable sense of orchestral color. Unless he was a student of Berlioz, which I doubt, it's difficult to say where Strauss got these ideas from. Not even Wagner's orchestra used such a kaleidoscopic variety of colors as those Strauss invented. There is a direct influence, I think, of his scores for *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben* on *Salome*, and the fact that he was able to modify this orchestration by thinning it out just a tad when the singers are involved, or at least pitch it in parts of the orchestra where their sound does not obscure or interfere with the words being sung, is yet another indication of his genius.

Some musicologists and critics have complained that the music of *Salome* does not so much fit the words exactly in a dramatic sense as it simply matches the emotional mood of each scene as the words are being sung, and that is true; but the music creates its own *psychological* effect on the words as an instrumental commentator on the action, and except, perhaps, for the arguing Jews scene, one cannot say that this is not so. I would also point out that the music of *Salome*, much more than that of *Jenůfa* or *Saul og David*, is constantly changing not only in meter and tempo but also in the breaking up of the themes used into little bits

It's also interesting that, although *Salome* did not use *leitmotifs* in the conventional sense, Salome's sung lines to Jokanaan, about 20 minutes into the opera, are indeed a sort of "Salome theme" which reappears in the last scene. Also interesting is the fact that this is the closest thing to an aria in the entire opera, as well as the most "stable"-sounding music in the opera. Otherwise, the general effect of *Salome* on listeners, even today, is that of a sort of aural confusion since the score never settles into either a continuous theme or a steady rhythm for very long at any point in its more than two-hour length. The fact that such an opera, with all its musical "problems" and dark psychological overtones, has become an established staple of the standard repertoire, is almost miraculous in itself, but much of this is due, I think, to the eventual understanding and acceptance in society of those very features that made it a scandal in the first place. We are now, if not more tolerant, at least more understanding of psychological aberrations in society. The fact that these aberrations not only run wild but, as the character Mortimer Brewster said in the comic farce *Arsenic and Old Lace*, they "fairly gallop," leads us to view *Salome* as a collection of psychologically disturbed characters all put together and all at the very outside fringes of societal norms. We will see these sort of psychological disturbances emerge in a number of operas to come.

But what kind of soprano voice is ideal as the title character? Strauss himself said, often, that his ideal was a silvery voice that sounded youthful but still had the power to carry over his sometimes heavy orchestra. His own favorite exponents of the role both emerged late in his life, the Bulgarian soprano Ljuba Welitsch and the Bessarabian Maria Cebotari. Ironically, Cebotari died, tragically young, the same year as Strauss (1949) and Welitsch had to abandon the role due to vocal deterioration after 1950. Of those sopranos who essayed the role in later decades, Strauss' son proclaimed Leonie Rysanek the best on stage, although Canadian soprano Teresa Stratas gave a tour-de-force performance on a video production in 1978, a role that her modest-sized voice could not have cut in an opera house, conducted by Karl Böhm. And these are my touchstone performances of the opera, the live broadcast with Cebotari (*Salome*), Marko

Rothmüller (Jokanaan), Karl Friedrich (Narraboth), Julius Patzak (Herod) and Elisabeth Höngen (Herodias), conducted by Clemens Krauss; the live performance in stereo with Rysanek (Salome), Waldemar Kmentt (Narraboth), Eberhard Wächter (Jokanaan), Hans Hopf (Herod) and Grace Hoffman (Herodias), conducted by Karl Böhm, as well as the video production with Stratas, Bernd Weikl (Jokanaan). Hans Beirer (Herod) and Astrid Varnay (Herodias), also conducted by Böhm—Strauss' favorite conductor of his own operas.

I would also recommend, however, the very exciting recording in French with Sofia Soloviy (Salome), Vincenzo Maria Sarinelli (Narraboth), Costantino Finucci (Jokanaan), Leonardo Gramegna (Herod) and Francesca Scaini (Herodias), conducted with surprisingly light, clear textures by Massimiliano Caldi.

***Rachmaninoff: The Miserly Knight* (1906)**

At this point, we need to discuss the single most important operatic actor in history, the Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938). From the time of his precociously early debut at the age of 21, a time when most male singers are still getting their voices settled as well as trained, he was recognized as an outstanding singer, although at first he had stiff competition from the cavernous and powerful Lev Sibirjakov, the more lyrical Vladimir Kastorsky whose vocal range was more like Chaliapin's, and Dmitri Bukhtoyarov, whose voice lay between those of Sibirjakov and Kastorsky's in range, but by the late 1890s Chaliapin was already considered a legend in Russia, and by 1908 his fame was so universal that he was invited to the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Among other things, Chaliapin holds the distinction of having sung on stage with the four greatest Italian tenors of his time: Enrico Caruso, Giovanni Martinelli, Aureliano Pertile (the only one of the four to sing the false Dmitri opposite his *Boris Godunov*) and Beniamino Gigli. The latter, who was not known for paying compliments to his colleagues, once raved about Chaliapin as both actor as singer, stating that too many people overlooked the fact that Chaliapin had one of the most beautiful and best-trained voices he ever heard in his life.

One of the reasons, among many, why Chaliapin is so important, particularly during this exact period, is that he had an enormous influence on the singing actors in verismo operas. Caruso and Gigli, being very poor stage actors, admired him without learning anything from him, but both Martinelli and Pertile gained from their stage experiences with him, and he also impressed (at least vocally) such singers as Claudia Muzio and Rosa Ponselle. Nor was it just Italians who benefitted from their exposure to Chaliapin: whenever he sang with German or French artists, they too picked up numerous ideas from the great bass, and several of these singers, in their old age, passed this tradition on to their pupils. It is not overstatement to say that Chaliapin had the most powerful influence on the evolution of opera as drama of any singer of the 20th century.

In the late 1890s, Chaliapin was invited to sing at the Mamantov Private Opera in Russia, and it was there that he met young Sergei Rachmaninoff, the assistant conductor there. The two remained friends for the remainder of their lives, and in 1906 Rachmaninoff wrote this opera specifically for Chaliapin. Unfortunately, a few days before the official premiere, the opera was performed unofficially at Rimsky-Korsakov's apartment, and after this performance Rimsky complained that Rachmaninoff had concentrated too much on the orchestral accompaniment to the detriment of the sung lines. Because of this, Chaliapin withdrew from the opera, leaving a chagrined composer to hurriedly find and rehearse another bass for the official premiere. But Rimsky was wrong; the opera is a good one, perhaps Rachmaninoff's finest stage work.

The plot concerns a Baron-Knight and his son, also a knight, named Albert. The latter just plays around with jousting and courtly pleasures such as gambling, but he has now run up some heavy debts. Dad is wealthy but frugal, and so refuses to bail his kid out, which prompts Albert to seek a loan from someone else. A money-lender, knowing that Albert could never pay him

back, refuses the loan but offers him poison to kill his old man; appalled, Albert refuses, going to a Duke to make his appeal. The Duke has a meeting with both Albert and his dad the Baron present, asking the latter to support his son, but the Baron accuses Albert of wanting to steal from him; having finally filled his sixth and final treasure chest with gold, the Baron is dismayed to realize that if he dies his son will inherit it and fritter it all away on gambling and drink. The Baron challenges his own son to a duel, which Albert accepts, but the horrified Duke rebukes the Baron and banishes Albert from court. The stress of all this gives the Baron a sudden heart attack; as he lies dying, his final request is not for his son but for the keys to his gold chests.

In this work, the normally melodic Rachmaninoff style comes through but is transformed by the use of minor keys and dark orchestration—ironically, not too dissimilar from Musorgsky—into something far less attractive in a tuneful way. The opening orchestral prelude immediately tells you that here is a piece by this composer out of the norm; there is a certain feeling, not perhaps consistently ominous but clearly dark and brooding, that runs throughout the score, even when the tempo picks up for the opening scene. There are only five characters in this relatively short work, and not one of them is a female singer. Albert and the money-lender are tenors, the Duke is a baritone, and both the Baron and his servant Ivan are basses. This, too, keeps the music in predominantly lower pitches, which also contributes to the dark mood. Listening to the musical progression, one senses, as I say, not so much a mood of coming dread but, you might say, of a “dark night of the soul.” Rachmaninoff clearly chose in this piece to present the Baron and his obsession with money as a sad, tragic quality that colors his entire perception of life, not completely evil but clearly a choice that makes life dark for him.

Albert’s opening music is set to a fast-paced, bouncing 6/8 rhythm, although with interesting tempo shifts. In some ways, his music bears a resemblance to that of Hermann in *Pique Dame*, which is perhaps not too surprising. There are little *ariosos* but nothing that breaks out into a full-fledged aria, yet the music remains lyrical but not memorable. The money lender comes across almost like a Shuisky type of character, perhaps not surprising. Their dialogue is in a sung *parlando* style...again, not unattractive to the ear, but clearly not in accepted duet form, and the orchestral backdrop uses sub-tone clarinets, cellos and basses to underscore the gloom.

The second scene, in which the Baron-Knight gloats over the money in his cellar, opens with low-pitched string tremolos (probably violas and celli) and, again, low winds. One is constantly surprised by the skill with which Rachmaninoff used only portions of the orchestra in most of this work; although the arrangement is quite different from the kind that Debussy used, the underlying principle is the same. This, of course, is the miserly knight’s big monologue, and those listeners familiar with Chaliapin’s recordings of other music will not have to stretch their imaginations too much to hear his voice singing this music, lyrical but dramatic, again in a style similar to the one Tchaikovsky used in *Pique Dame*. It’s a very long monologue for the Baron, and in the middle of it, Rachmaninoff wrote an extended orchestral postlude that builds up in both volume and dramatic intensity. Although it’s sad that Chaliapin never sang this opera, it’s even sadder than he never recorded even a portion of this scene, which fit him like a glove.

The final scene, which includes Albert, his miserly father and the Duke, also uses a semi-*parlando* style in which Rachmaninoff cleverly contrasted the darker music of the Baron with the somewhat lighter music of his son, and when they duet with each other, he crosses some of the felling over from the one character to the other. He then slowly, almost imperceptibly, keeps raising the pitch as he more obviously increases the volume, making the climax of this scene, in which the Baron challenges his son to the duel, is almost unbearable in its dramatic intensity. Again, because it was Chaliapin he was writing for, Rachmaninoff made this scene perhaps longer than it might have been if another singer performed it, but dramatic it most certainly is. The opera ends with stabbing brass chords.

There are a few recordings of this piece available, but for me the prize version is the one with Mikhail Guzhov as the Baron-Knight, presenting an interpretation not far removed from what Chaliapin might have done, the excellent tenor Vsevolod Grivnov as Albert, Andrei Baturkin as the Duke and Borislav Molchanov as the money lender, conducted by Valery Polyansky.

***Dukas: Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* (1907)**

Ariane et Barbe-Bleue is the second of three operas we will discuss based on plays by Maeterlinck. In this one, the plot is very similar to the one used by Béla Bartók for *Bluebeard's Castle*, except that the “new wife” who frees all the others is named Ariane, not Judith. Maeterlinck took the name Ariane from the legend of Ariadne and the Cretan labyrinth in which the Minotaur was trapped; the names of the closeted wives were all taken from previous plays of his. *Mélisande* is in this one, too, but here she is a minor character, although Paul Dukas cleverly used three bars of music from Debussy's opera to introduce her when she arrives.

Interestingly, Dukas actually settles into tonality less often than Debussy did; the score is almost consistently in a state of harmonic flux. Also, whereas *Mélisande* in Debussy's opera can be sung by a soprano or a high mezzo, Ariane is clearly a mezzo-verging-on-contralto role, its lower tessitura out of the range of the average lyric soprano—and yet soprano Georgette Leblanc created the role in the world premiere. But one must remember that Leblanc was Maeterlinck's live-in lover, who he kept trying to foister on opera houses, and was frequently rejected because of her poor vocal quality, inexact singing style and pitch problems. (Check out some of her pathetic recordings on YouTube, particularly her “rendition” of Lully's “Bois épais” from *Amadis de Gaule*.)

Fortunately, despite Leblanc's inexact singing, the opera was extremely well-received at the premiere since it was conducted by Alexander Zemlinsky at the Vienna Volksoper. Arnold Schoenberg and his prize pupils, Anton Webern and Alban Berg, were all in the audience and had high praise for it. The opera was also conducted in performances by Ernest Ansermet and Arturo Toscanini, both of whom admired it greatly.

The musical style is something like *Pelléas et Mélisande* on acid: the extended chords typical of the French impressionist style are used frequently, but there is much more vigor. The music often has tremendous rhythmic drive, pushing the drama forward. Dukas also uses swirling strings in a manner that was fairly new at the time; in fact, the entire score seems to be a clash or contest between high, swirling strings and winds (primarily flute, clarinet and piccolo) with low strings and brass, sometimes with tympani underscoring them. Despite their stylistic differences, there are moments in *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* in which one can hear pre-echoes of the kind of writing that Bartók later used for his opera.

Another interesting aspect of this work, probably because Maeterlinck's lover was the star of the show, is that most of the music is sung by Ariane. Barbe-Bleue (Bluebeard) barely gets five minutes' worth of music in the entire opera, but when he does appear he makes an excellent impression; his music is scored fairly low in the baritone range, and for his scenes Dukas suddenly scaled back the orchestra, using a sparse collection of instruments to support him. For a great singing-actress, however, Ariane is an ideal role; since she is the primary singer, and because she sings quite a bit by herself, it is her job to sustain interest. Dukas helps her quite a bit by varying tempo and range in the role, at times using biting strings and brass to convey the drama, but if the Ariane has an infirm voice and especially if she is also an uninteresting actress, the work will fall flat. Here, as in the case of Chaliapin, the rise of the singing actress in opera was to have an enormous impact on the concept of drama in the art form.

The prelude to Act II has a certain impressionist feel to it. Here, Dukas pulled back on the style he used in the first act and instead channeled his inner Debussy without copying any of his

signature themes or motifs. Dukas increases the dramatic tension through the orchestra as Ariane encounters and frees Bluebeard's other wives. Also, as in the Debussy, Nielsen, Janáček and Rachmaninoff works already discussed, we see (and her) the growing role that the orchestra is now playing in creating dramatic tension in the new operas, and this was only to increase, not wane, as time went on...but this is exactly the reason why so many operagoers turn their backs on all operas that do NOT focus on the vocal line, especially arias, and particularly arias with climactic high notes. They know what they like, and this "new-fangled" opera isn't it. (At one point, one of the other wives sings staccato high notes in counterpoint to Ariane's lines: the effect is dramatic, but *musically* dramatic, not *viscerally* dramatic.) Unfortunately for them, in the end Wagner was right; his concept of music drama, which concentrated as much if not more on the orchestra as on the vocal line, was to be the future of the art form. What Gluck, Spontini, Beethoven and Berlioz did with their operas, though not nearly as orchestra-oriented as these new works, was now not only accepted but preferred. From this point forward, a holistic approach to operatic writing in which everything combined to produce the drama was now the norm. Operas written in the older lyrical style, concentrating on the voices and the sounds the voices produced, was not *entirely* frowned upon—good musicians and artists clearly recognized the value of works like Mussorgsky's and some of Verdi's and Massenet's—but no one was going to write a new opera in that style. And why should they? The 19th century was a world unto itself, but so was the 20th century. The times they were a-changin', as Bob Dylan sang, and if you were still on the Good Ship Lollipop with *La Traviata*, you were welcome to test your works out somewhere but they probably wouldn't be accepted by musicians and critics.

The performance I own, and recommend, is a live one featuring the great mezzo Viorica Cortez (Ariane), Aage Haugland (Barbe-Bleue), Eleonora Jankovic (Sélysette) and Suzanne Sarrocca (Mélisande), conducted by Gary Bertini, but this may be hard to find. Of the commercially available recordings, the best is the one with Lori Phillips (Ariane), Peter Rose (Barbe-Bleue), Patricia Bardon (Nurse) and Daphne Touchais (Mélisande), conducted by Leon Botstein.

***Strauss: Elektra* (1908)**

Following *Salome*, Strauss plunged headlong into writing *Elektra*. The libretto was by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who became a close personal friend and supplied libretti to the composer into the 1920s. Although based on Sophocles, Hofmannsthal's text minimized some aspects of the myth were minimized in order to focus much more on Elektra and her obsession. One section that was completely eliminated was Agamemnon's earlier sacrifice of his daughter Iphigénia, which was Klytemnestra's motive for murdering him. Some writers have detected hints of incest in the libretto's depiction of the relationship between Elektra and her brother Orestes.

Only three of the singers in the original cast are recognized nowadays by collectors of early opera recordings: Margarethe Siems, one of the leading soubrette-coloratura sopranos of her time, as Chrysothemis; Fritz Soot, a pretty good dramatic tenor, as one of the servants; and the acclaimed contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink as Klytemnestra. Neither the original Elektra, Annie Krull, nor the original Orestes, Karl Perron, made recordings, thus their voices are lost to history.

Schumann-Heink's participation led to a funny incident. At one of the rehearsals, she turned to Strauss and said, "Richard, why you hire me for dis part? All it is is a lot of screaming!" (I don't know what Strauss' answer was, but it probably amounted to, "Yes, but you scream better than anyone else!") Needless to say, she never sang the role again, nor did she record anything from it. At the world premiere in Dresden in January 1909, the audience reaction was, if anything, even worse than it was with *Salome*. After the final crashing chord, there was no ap-

plause at all. Nothing. Just silence. Strauss, who had conducted the premiere, turned to the audience and said, “Well, that was fun!”

Surprisingly, considering its extremely radical nature, *Elektra* was first performed in London the very next year, 1910, with Edyth Walker in the title role and Thomas Beecham conducting...the first-ever performance of a Strauss opera in the United Kingdom, thus the Brits heard *Elektra* before they heard *Salome*. The U.S., having already heard (and been shocked to their core) by *Salome*, wanted nothing to do with *Elektra*. The first U.S. performance was in 1931—not at the Metropolitan, but at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia, with Anne Roselle as Elektra, Margarethe Matzenauer as Klytemnestra and Nelson Eddy as Orestes, conducted by Fritz Reiner. Embarrassed by the success of the Philadelphia performance, the Met finally staged it in 1932 with Gertrude Kappel in the title role.

More so than in *Salome*, *Elektra* is, as Schumann-Heink complained, pretty much a “scream fest.” Except for Orest, nearly all the characters are yelling their music at full blast from start to finish, and here Strauss went even further in setting their texts to music that was not only strophic in character but very angular in its musical line. The voices thus bounce around the score like ping-pong balls—one might say, very large and noisy ping-pong balls—yet the heightened tension this creates immediately establishes, and maintains, an environment of frenzy. There is nothing calm or even slightly tuneful or whimsical in *Elektra*, as there was in *Salome*; it is musical bedlam.

Strauss keeps applying the screws to his high-tension drama in this fashion. relaxing the tempo (but not the intensity) of the music, then ramping it up again for scene after scene. The only tender moment in the entire opera is the scene in which Elektra finally recognizes her brother Orestes, and the music here is wonderfully tender and touching without resorting to pathos or bathos.

The dangerous influence of *Elektra* was that it prompted some composers, among them Ferruccio Busoni and Paul Hindemith, to create works in a similar vein that were far less appealing to the ear than *Elektra*. Strange as it may sound, there are many sections in *Elektra* that at least attempt a lyrical line, although if you analyze these sections they are just like the frenzied fast ones in form and shape, only slowed down to allow the singers to hold notes a bit longer and thus inform their music with some *legato* phrasing. The problem with *Elektra*'s imitators was that they lacked Strauss' genius in modifying the vocal line in this manner. And of course, like *Salome*, *Elektra* is a continuous two-hour opera without a break. Once the lights in the house have dimmed and the conductor gives the downbeat, you are committed to sitting through it all unless you can find a way to slink out of your seat unnoticed and flee the theater.

Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg and even Puccini again congratulated Strauss on his achievement, but when the former encouraged him to continue writing operas in this vein, he was appalled to learn that Strauss' next opera would be a tuneful comedy, *Der Rosenkavalier*. Mahler again tried to push him back into writing innovative dramatic works, but Strauss had “learned” his lesson from the limited appeal of these two works. “No, no,” he said to Mahler, “I give them what they want.” And so none of Strauss' operas, until *Daphne* late in his career, had any real substance. They were, as critic B.H. Haggin pointed out, the “simulation” of great music, technically well-written to be sure—Strauss was too good a composer to write really bad music—but operas with no dramatic connection between words and the music. *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, *Intermezzo*, *Die aegyptische Helena*, *Arabella*, *Die schweigsame Frau* and *Friedenstag* were all works whose scores made good wallpaper for your music room, but weren't worthy of his genius. By and large, Strauss was “done” as a great composer after *Elektra*. Had he continued in this vein, or at least a similar vein, he might easily have occupied a chapter to himself as Gluck and Wagner did.

Without question, the greatest recording of *Elektra* is the one with Birgit Nilsson in the title role with Regina Resnik (Klytemnestra); Tom Krause (Orest), Marie Collier (Chrysothemis) and Gerhard Stolze (Aegisth), conducted by Georg Solti, but for an equally exciting historic version I recommend the early-1950s recording with Varnay (Elektra), Res Fischer (Klytemnestra), Hans Hotter (Orest) and Leonie Rysanek (Chrysothemis), conducted by Richard Kraus, but for an historic *Elektra* that will blow your head off, try to locate the abridged 1936 performance with the incredible Hungarian soprano Rose Pauly in the title role and Enid Szánthö as Klytemnestra, conducted at white-hot intensity by Artur Rodziński.

For a video production, I recommend the 1981 Götz Friedrich production with Leonie Rysanek (Elektra), Astrid Varnay (Klytemnestra), Caterina Ligendza (Chrysothemis), Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Orest) and the Vienna Philharmonic led by Karl Böhm, Strauss' favorite conductor of his own operas, despite Varnay's by-then screechy, wobbly voice.

***Février & Rachmaninoff: Monna Vanna* (1909)**

No other opera discussed in this book is as obscure or forgotten as *Monna Vanna* (pronounced "Mah-na Vah-nah") by Henry Février (1875-1957) based on the play of the same name by Maurice Maeterlinck, and I will go out on a limb and say that no once-well-noted French composer in history is as neglected as Février. If you don't believe me, go online and put his name in a Google search. All you'll get on him are three short sentences on Encyclopedia.com and a brief bio on Wikipedia. Yet in its time, *Monna Vanna* was a sensation, both a popular and an artistically acclaimed work.

Another irony is that, around the same time Février was finishing *Monna Vanna*, Sergei Rachmaninoff decided to write an opera on the same play by Maeterlinck, and in fact completed the first act, but in requesting the rights to compose a full three-act opera, he was turned down because Février had already secured them. Rachmaninoff never finished his version, yet *his* is the one that has received not one but TWO commercial recordings, one in English with Sherrill Milnes as Guido and the other in the original Russian. Why? Well, because he's Rachmaninoff, a very popular composer, while no one knows who Henry Février was. Yet although the single act that Rachmaninoff finished is quite good, the completed Février opera is just as good if not better. Sadly, all we have of the Février version are two very poor-sounding and incomplete radio broadcasts from Besançon and Rennes in 1958 with a cast of largely unknown singers.

Since the opera is virtually unknown and the story quite complex in its interactions of the characters, I made a decision to give a full synopsis rather than a reduced one. To begin with, the general tenor of this piece is entirely different from *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Rather than have his characters bottle up their emotions, only expressing themselves when they needed to verbalize, the denizens of *Monna Vanna* are highly emotional, sometimes almost violently so. This is undoubtedly the result of the fact that the characters in *Vanna* are Italians, and Italians tend by nature to be extroverted in their feelings.

The story is set in 15th-century Pisa at a time when the city was under siege by Florentines. At their wits' end, they are not only out of arms and ammunition but also of food. Since they are slowly starving to death, the commandant Guido Colonna has sent his own father, Marco, to negotiate peace terms with Prinzivalle, commander of the enemy army, but in reality a mercenary and not a Florentine himself. Prone to being gloomy and pessimistic by nature, Guido has little hope of this, but when Marco returns it is with news that Prinzivalle has agreed to peace as well as to provide the Pisans with both food and arms as long as Guido's wife Giovanna, nicknamed Monna Vanna, will visit him at night clad only in her cloak, the promise being that she will be returned home the next morning. Horrified, Guido refuses although after questioning his father a bit further he learns that Prinzivalle claims to be in love with Giovanna although the

latter claims she has never even laid eyes on him before. Guido asks her directly if she would agree to this strange demand for peace, and much to his surprise, she says that she would. Shocked and disgusted, Guido sends her to her fate.

At Prinzivalle's tent headquarters, a lieutenant arrives to announce that Marco has not returned to give himself up, which means that Monna Vanna has accepted his request to come. Trivulzio, a Florentine spy, has learned of Vanna's treacherous mission and so tries to stab Prinzivalle, but latter is too quick and too strong for him and he disarms Trivulzio and turns him over to his guard. When Giovanna enters, Prinzivalle suddenly becomes tender and solicitous, saying he has loved her for years. He then relates how they met when she was a child of eight and he a boy of twelve, recalling each little incident in the times they were together until his father suddenly took him away without giving him a chance to say goodbye. After long wanderings, he finally located her house only to find it vacant and overgrown with weeds...and worse yet, that she was the wife of a Tuscan lord. This, he tells her, was the reason he became a mercenary for the Florentine army, hoping that he could find her again. His obviously sincere and tender relating of this tale awakens long-dormant feelings in Giovanna's heart although she still outwardly remains faithful to Guido.

Realizing, however, that he means her no harm and will not touch her sexually without her consent, she puts her trust in Prinzivalle. Suddenly his private secretary Vedio suddenly arrives, informing him that a Florentine commissioner who has just arrived in camp has proclaimed Prinzivalle a traitor, and since he has 600 men behind him, Prinzivalle must leave instantly. Monna asks him where he will go; he replies that it makes little difference, that somewhere he will find refuge, but she insists that he return to Pisa with him as an honored guest.

Back at the ranch, Guido is, of course, writhing in misery and despair, assuming the worst of his wife and Prinzivalle while his father Marco tries to keep him from performing violent acts on her or himself. Guido's response is that he will only pardon her when "that man" no longer lives. He then hears the roars and cheers of a crowd outside, welcoming Monna Vanna's return, accompanied by Prinzivalle who hides his face to avoid being recognized. Marco strews flowers for her to walk on when entering the house, and embraces her. He tries to lead her to Guido, but the latter, in imperious tones, tells both the crowd and his officers to go and leave them alone. He coldly rejects Giovanna's endearments; catching sight of Prinzivalle (but not knowing who exactly he is), he grabs a halberd from one of his soldiers and moves to hit him with it, but Giovanna intercedes, shouting out that it was he who saved her. "Yes," replies Guido bitterly, "when it was too late!" Monna explains that this is Prinzivalle himself. This sends Guido's brain into a rage; feeling that he now has his hated enemy in his grasp, he intends to kill him, refusing to listen to his wife's insistence that he treated her with the utmost respect and that they did not have sexual relations. Learning from his wife that Prinzivalle is deeply in love with her, Guido refuses to believe it although Marco accepts it as fact.

Guido begs Giovanna to tell the truth, promising that both she and Prinzivalle will go free if she only confesses to her sin, but since she continues to insist that nothing happened, he orders his soldiers to throw Prinzivalle into the deepest dungeon and telling Vanna that she will never see him again. In order to save his life, Vanna throws herself between them and claims that she lied, and Prinzivalle really did take her sexually as he threatened, that she hates him and only desires vengeance, thus she and she alone will be his jailer. She pretends to bind Prinzivalle's hands together while actually making the rope loose enough for him to break free of himself. As she leads him away, Vanna whispers to him that she loves him and will rescue him. She then almost faints, being caught by Marco, who alone realizes the meaning of this scene. Marco whispers in her ear that he understands and will help her.

In the very brief fourth and last act, really just a scene, Prinzivalle removes the cords that Vanna had lightly tied around his hands but wonders what Vanna can do: “Doesn’t she know that hatred is stronger than love?” Suddenly the cell door opens; it is Vanna. Prinzivalle rushes forward; after embracing passionately, they disengage as she says in a low voice, “Silence! We have only a moment! They don’t know that I have the key to the other door—come!” Astonished, Prinzivalle lets Vanna lead him to freedom as they leave Pisa together.

American writer Emma Goldman, banned from her native country for 15 years due to her avid support of the Communist Revolution in Russia (she learned her lesson once Stalin took over, and thus begged the American government to let her return), wrote a very curious article discussing her interpretation of this play back in 1914. Goldman, oddly, viewed *Monna Vanna* as

a wonderful picture of the new woman -- not the new woman as portrayed in the newspapers, but the new woman as a reborn, regenerated spirit; the woman who has emancipated herself from her narrow outlook upon life, and detached herself from the confines of the home; the woman, short, who has become race-conscious and therefore understands that she is a unit in the great ocean of life, and that she must take her place as an independent factor in order to rebuilt and remold life. In proportion as she learns to become race-conscious, does she become a factor in the reconstruction of society, valuable to herself, to her children, and to the race.⁵

Honestly, I don’t know what she meant about her being “a unit in the great ocean of life”; Vanna is just looking out for herself and the man she loves. No “ocean of life” is involved in this plot. I also have no idea what she is referring to in regards to becoming “race-conscious.” No one’s race is ever discussed in either the play or the opera. The closest she comes to explaining herself, which I don’t think really explains a thing, is to say that, at the end, “It is only at this psychological moment, a moment that sometimes changes all our conceptions, all our thoughts, our very life, that Monna Vanna feels the new love for Prinzivalle stirring in her soul, a love that knows no doubt. The conception of such a love is revolutionary in the scope of its possibilities -- a love that is pregnant with the spirit of daring, of freedom, that lifts woman out of the ordinary and inspires her with the strength and joy of molding a new and free race.”⁶

Personally, I see *Monna Vanna* as a more serious version of Mozart’s comic opera, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, where Belmonte, going to a foreign land to rescue his beloved Constanze and his servants Pedrillo and Blonde, assumes that the Pasha Selim who is the sworn enemy of his father will kill them all if he is caught and found out, but who, in the end, learns that the Pasha is an educated and humane man who decides to let them all go free as a gesture of peace towards his old enemy. The only really feminist trait in *Monna Vanna* is her taking hold of the situation on very short notice and concocting a plan to save Prinzivalle and free herself. But I suppose that living in a world where American women weren’t even given the right to vote until 1920, *Monna Vanna* must have seemed like really hot stuff to the feverish mind of Goldman, who apparently never saw a performance of *Fidelio*.

The world premiere cast of *Monna Vanna* featured three major names in the opera world of that time. The title role was sung by Lucienne Bréval, the great Swiss dramatic soprano who was as well known for Wagnerian as for French roles. Prinzivalle was created by Lucien Muratore, a tenor highly regarded as a credible stage actor as well as a singer, and Guido Colonna was given to Jean-Émile Vanni-Marcoux, a bass-baritone widely regarded as “the French Chaliapin.” Both male singers left us recordings from the opera; poor Bréval made no commercial recordings at

⁵ https://www.theatredatabase.com/19th_century/maurice_maeterlinck_002.html

⁶ Ibid.

all, her voice being preserved on but one “live” cylinder recording made at the Metropolitan Opera at the turn of the 20th century, part of the duet from *L’Africana* with tenor Jean de Reszke.

The one available recording is not so starry. The only name I recognized, having heard her on a couple of other recordings, is that of soprano Suzanne Sarroca in the title role. Our Guido, Georges Le Coz, is a somewhat infirm-sounding bass-baritone, but he was apparently a pupil of Vanni-Marcoux, thus in spite of his vocal infirmities he is an intense interpreter of the role. Baritone Pierre Nougaro sings the part of his father Marco, and we get not one but two tenors splitting the role of Prinzivalle, René Damiro and Pierre Fleta, because the first two acts stem from a performance at Besançon in April 1958 with Damiro while Act III came from a performance at Rennes in May 1958, with mostly the same cast and conductor (Marcel Ficheret) except for the tenor. And unfortunately, the sound quality of both broadcasts is rather poor, congested and tinny but also with the orchestra in particular distorted by the bad radio sound. But it’s all we have.

The vocal music is written in a modern version of French vocal *parlando* style, which emphasizes the dramatic content of the text over lyricism. Février scored the orchestra during these scenes using low winds and strings; set in a minor key, this emphasizes the import of the drama. Perhaps a bit conventional, but clearly effective. In moments when the dramatic mood tightens up, such as when Guido sees Marco enter and suddenly becomes excitable, asking “What miraculous boon has restored you to us, when I had lost hope!” By contrast with Guido’s nervous-sounding, broken lines when he sings, Marco’s are much more lyrical, almost like an *arioso*, indicating his much calmer demeanor and more rational, less emotional response to the events going on around him. The recorded performance is an abridged one; certain lines are missing if one follows along with the libretto, and I don’t think it’s because the tapes (or acetate discs) were missing any segments, because the musical continuity in the orchestra is smoothly joined even as lines are omitted. Part of this first Marco-Guido dialogue are also cut; in short, there are numerous small abridgements or “paper cuts” throughout the score, and the last act is missing. But at least it exists, and for this we must thank baritone Pierre Nougaro, who not only sang the role of Marco in this production but was also the director of the Rennes opera beginning in 1958. It was he who expanded the repertoire by staging both operettas and unusual operas like *Monna Vanna*.

Février’s rapid alternation of meters within monologues, and sometimes even within single lines of music, have by now become commonplace. On p. 14 of the piano-vocal score, for instance, we suddenly shift from 3/4 to C (4/4), with the rhythm distributed with different accents in each bar, then just five bars later, on p. 15, a jump to 5/4. At the bottom of p. 16, one bar in C before returning to 5/4 again. The predictable rhythms of Italian and older French operas were now very much becoming a thing of the past—albeit a past that the majority of operagoers were tenaciously clinging to like a favorite childhood toy.

In many respects, the operas of this period, including *Monna Vanna*, were modern versions of the operas of Lully, Rameau and later Gluck, only using more contemporary harmonies and the more continuous musical lines which were the influence of Wagner. We even saw some of this in *La Navarraise* and *Louise*, but a decade or so down the road the process was being refined. In *Monna Vanna*, as in several of Wagner’s works, Février lapses into arias, but the mood and the musical contour matches the words more carefully, there are few if any high notes, and the text always came first. I also noticed that, when Février does use strong rhythms, they are typically French... something like the rhythm of the *Marseillaise* or something similar, though they do not go on for too long before shifting back to something either slower or more strophic. Sadly, the older French composers who were still around and writing operas at this same time, Saint-Saëns’ *Déjamire* excepted, couldn’t or wouldn’t learn this lesson; they continued to write operas that became increasingly more vapid, both musically and dramatically uninteresting. But

of course they weren't alone. The "verismo boys" also, for the most part, kept writing works in the older style, many of which went nowhere unless their name was Puccini.

Interestingly, the title character of Février's opera doesn't make her appearance until roughly 20 minutes into the first act, but when she does she makes an immediate impact. It's clear from her music that Février was writing for a dramatic soprano voice, not a lyric who might possibly be able to sing dramatically. Though he does not exploit the high range as the Italian composers did, but rather keeps the tessitura of the role in the middle of the voice, her lines are to ring out with authority. She is not a Mimi or a Butterfly. She is indeed a French relative to Abigaille in *Nabucco* or Leonore in *Fidelio*.

And Février keeps on altering his tempi, rhythms, and tonality as the musical drama continues, doing his best to keep up with the mercurial moods of Guido and the reactions of those around him. Guido explodes with rage when Monna says she will accept Prinzivalle's request to come to him, and this is in the music; so too her calmer responses, knowing that the fate of hundreds of her fellow-citizens hang in the balance. What is unstated, but clearly implied in the dramatic thrust of her music, is that she is a woman who can take care of herself if need be. Perhaps it was this aspect of Monna Vanna's character that so strongly appealed to Emma Goldman. What I find interesting is that, for whatever reason—probably male ego—Guido does not see (or hear) this in his wife, but automatically assumes that she will be taken advantage of. Guido's monologue in the midst of his confrontation with Monna is very Mussorgsky-like, using the kind of vocal line and sparse orchestration one hears in *Boris Godunov* (which, in 1908, received its Paris premiere—the first performance of this opera in the West).

The prelude to Act II is also unusually scored with sparse orchestration, relying primarily on middle-range winds with occasional high string interjections over low strings and brass—again, not far from Mussorgsky (or at least Mussorgsky-cum-Rimsky, which is the way it was first introduced in France and other Western European countries). Prinzivalle's sung monologues clearly suggest a tenor voice bordering on lyric spinto, a type of French tenor which, though still around in 1909, was slowly but surely disappearing on the world's stages (the tenor on the recording is adequate but not nearly ideal). When Prinzivalle tells Vanna that he loves her, the music practically explodes out of nowhere. Dramatically we expect it because it's in the synopsis, but musically, it's still a surprise when it happens the first time we hear it. The Vanna-Prinzivalle love duet is highly unusual in construction, even by Wagnerian standards, the music consisting of short lyrical lines with brief strophic interludes, somehow strung together to create a cohesive whole. In its latter stages, Février subtly increases the tempo little by little to create tension; this adds to the underlying erotic quality of the music. Unfortunately, the recording runs out before the duet, and the rest of the act, is over.

Février continues in this vein in Act III, giving an interesting *arioso* to Marco which is part of the duet with Guido. He also builds the scene into the happy sounds of the people announcing Vanna's return from Prinzivalle's camp; this is far from the tuneful stuff that Verdi wrote by the bucketful in his early and middle periods. The confrontation scene between Guido and Vanna is also well written, the music heightened by short outbursts from him and strong-voiced responses from her. Once again—maddeningly—the music breaks off in the middle of this duet. To quote Hamlet, "The rest is silence." A very sad situation.

If one were to make a modern recording of this opera, I would want a singer like Ludovic Tezier doing Guido, Anja Harteros singing Monna Vanna, and a tenor like Russell Thomas or Anthony Dean Griffey as Prinzivalle. The role of Marco, which calls for a richer, warmer baritone voice than Guido, is harder to cast nowadays because really firm baritone voices of this type are rarer, but Mattia Olivieri might be ideal. And this is most definitely an opera that needs and deserves to be recorded in modern sound.

Moving on to the Rachmaninoff version of Act I, we hear what is essentially a Russian version of Février's style. The music is not quite as innovative as *The Miserly Knight*, but it is very good music nonetheless, taut and dramatic. Because Rachmaninoff couldn't finish it, he left the first act in piano-vocal score only; it was later orchestrated by Gennady Belov. The prelude is exceptionally brief, only about a minute long, and just as in the Février version, the first voice we hear is that of Guido—also sung by a baritone and written in dramatic-strophic lines, but here he has Guido musically conversing with Borso (tenor) and Torello (bass), not with Marco. This would surely have been a fine achievement had he finished it although the harmonic language is not as modern as Février's, nor is the music quite as rhythmically varied. In Scene 3, just before Vanna's entrance, he incorporated a wordless chorus to give the music atmosphere; it is very cleverly done, both musically and dramatically effective, gradually rising to a crashing climax. Guido sings first, then Vanna and Marco; the orchestra creates a wave of sound behind them. Rachmaninoff's Monna Vanna has a gentler, more lyric soprano voice, rich and seductive but not powerful. Like Février's version, his *Monna Vanna* is also written in a continuous style; he, at least, clearly understood that this was the future of opera. And interestingly, he, too increases both tempo and volume to heighten the rising tension in Guido's rising agitation.

There are two recordings of the Rachmaninoff version, one in English with Sherrill Milnes (Guido) and Blythe Walker (Monna), the other in Russian with Vladimir Avtomanov (Guido), Evgeniya Dushina (Monna) and Dmitry Ivanchey (Marco), but although Milnes is excellent I recommend the Russian version simply because Vladimir Ashkenazy's conducting is much tighter and more dramatic.

Saint-Saëns: Déjanire (music 1898/opera 1911)

So far as I can ascertain, this was the first instance in operatic history where the orchestral music was written long before the vocal music. The story goes like this.

In 1898 Fernand Castelbon de Beauxhostes, part-owner of a newly-built arena in Béziers (southern France) which was used then, and is still used today every August, for bullfighting, also wanted to present open-air operas there. He approached Saint-Saëns with the idea of writing a score to accompany a dramatic presentation, without singing, of Louis Gallet's epic verse-drama *Déjanire* to inaugurate this aspect of the arena. Based on Sophocles' play *The Trachinae*, it presents the story of the great hero Hercules in a less heroic and more violent situation. After killing King Eurystus of Oechalia in Thessaly, he has sacked the city intending to take Eurystus' beautiful daughter Iole as his wife. But there's a fly in the ointment: Hercules is already married to Déjanire. Loath to making his intentions immediately obvious, Hercules orders Philoctète, another Greek hero and a great archer, to inform Iole of his intentions, which is an uncomfortable situation because Philoctète is already her lover and she informs him that she loves him and only him. At the same time, Phénice is sent to convince Déjanire to leave Hercules, but when the hero's intentions are revealed Déjanire tries desperately to win back her husband's love.

When this fails, Déjanire comes up with Plan B: she gives Iole a nice little gift, a tunic soaked with the blood of Nessus. How very thoughtful of her! It turns out that, before he died, Nessus told Déjanire that his blood had "magic powers" that could make the unfaithful return, so this is what she expects to happen. What she didn't know (and probably Nessus didn't either) was that his blood was tainted with a terrible poison. Iole innocently passes the tunic on to Hercules as a wedding-day present. He puts it on joyfully but quickly begins suffering from an excruciating, burning pain; in agony, he throws himself into the wedding pyre and dies. Unfairly to both of his wives, the dead Hercules ascends to Mount Olympus.

Saint-Saëns liked the story—he had already used the Hercules as a basis for two of his orchestral tone-poems, *Le Rouet d'Omphale* and *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*—and also admired Gallet,

but objected to having it performed in this “abominable temple of blood.” Happily, Castelbon persuaded the composer to come and see the arena for himself. He was surprised by a group of hidden musicians playing his music in his honor. Told also that the then-fatally ill Gallet would attend the premiere, Saint-Saëns capitulated, tweaked Gallet’s play a bit and set it to music. The only sung passage was the “Hymn to Eros,” sung in 1898 by one Mlle. Bourgeois. At the premiere on August 28, 1898, conducted by the composer, Gallet did indeed attend although, as Saint-Saëns sadly wrote, “he heard nothing” as he was by then stone deaf.

Yet the emotion and dramatic impact of that performance continued to haunt Saint-Saëns. Twelve years later he began setting the spoken play to sung music, turning *Déjanire* into a full-fledged opera, which premiered in Monte Carlo on March 14, 1911. For his cast, Saint-Saëns had singers who were highly skilled in dramatic works: the great Russian-born Félia Litvinne as Déjanire, French soprano Yvonne Dubel as Iole, tenor Lucien Muratore as Hercule and mezzo-soprano Germaine Bailac (de Boria), who had already impressed the composer with her performances of Dalila in his earlier opera, as Phénice. These were BIG voices; both Dubel and Litvinne sang Wagnerian roles as well as French and Italian ones, and although Muratore never sang Wagner he was well known as a major singing actor in big roles who learned his dramatic craft by working opposite Sarah Bernhardt.

As an admirer of the Gluck-Spontini-Berlioz school of opera, Saint-Saëns brought his art even further forward here, so much so, in fact, that prior to the premiere he wondered if audiences would respond to the music, calling it “a strange score: people will either not like it at all, or will like it enormously.” Saint-Saëns played around with both harmony and rhythm, changing both on a dime when he felt like it. The music is clearly his, but with greater *gravitas* in the choruses which narrate the tale like the spoken chorus of a Greek drama. As with *Samson et Dalila*, the work almost has more the feel of an oratorio, but is darker in mood than most. Its “arias” are tied to the text and the mood of the characters and are sometimes quite brief. A trumpet fanfare introduces Hercules, who in his first monologue (set to strong, strophic music) makes it clear that he feels that Juno, for some reason, made him fall in love with Iole: “A reprehensible love, for which I live, for which I die!” Philoctète’s response that this causes “bitter mourning for my heart” goes over Hercules’ head; he is unaware that his friend and Iole are in love. Here, Saint-Saëns uses “biting wind” sounds, mixed with trombones, that one heard in Berlioz. Yet what impresses the listener most is the continuous line he developed, an updated version of the Gluck aesthetic.

Conducted properly, *Déjanire* moves forward at a gritty, dramatic pace. Lovers of conventional arias will surely recoil from it; it’s not quite *parlando* but not quite melodic in the usual way. They may also balk at the fact that Saint-Saëns made the orchestra a full partner in the drama. The orchestra in *Déjanire* reflects the emotional and mental state of the protagonists as they act out their well-written lines. Without even knowing or following the libretto, your ears tell you of the confusion and anguish Iole is suffering when she is told that Hercules will marry her. This sort of psychological penetration of character continues throughout the score, the only deviation being Déjanire’s aria in the midst of her Act III duet with Hercules. Solos and duets develop and intersperse with one another in a natural, organic way, and there is even some Wagner-like continuity of line as the music continues to develop, both lyrically and dramatically, in each act with an unbroken line from start to finish. One can glean an idea of how he accomplished this from this one score example, page four of the autograph:⁷

⁷ A printed piano-reduction of the full score can be found at [https://vmirror.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/3/34/IMSLP36798-PMLP81925-Saint-Sa%C3%ABns_-_D%C3%A9janire_\(vocal_score\).pdf](https://vmirror.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/3/34/IMSLP36798-PMLP81925-Saint-Sa%C3%ABns_-_D%C3%A9janire_(vocal_score).pdf)



Déjanire's first scene is not only dramatic but, as in the best of Wagner, the shifting tempi, rhythms and harmonies—the latter reflecting some of the harmonic innovations of Debussy (but not his soft textures and slow, blurred rhythmic movement, which Saint-Saëns detested—it reflects her shifting, agitated states of mind. One of the few arias in the classic sense occurs at the beginning of Act II, where Iole reflects on her sad state:

*Unlike you I do not weep for the ruined temples,
 Nor the deserted palaces,
 Nor the warriors fallen by the sword,
 Nor our wounded pride!
 I weep for my slaughtered father!
 For myself, delivered
 Into brutal hands!
 For all out shattered hopes!*

This brief excerpt from the libretto clearly reflects the excellent quality of Louis Gallet's text, more truly poetic than the norm. This, too, was an advance on earlier French opera, particularly the popular rubbish turned out by Massenet (except for his two best works, already discussed) and Thomas. It is doubtful that *Déjanire* would even appeal to audiences today; the majority of operagoers are not into poetry as drama or opera as dramatic poetry. All they want is high notes, arias and high excitement. But for me, it not only suffices, it surpassed my expectations. Just one example is the Hercules-Déjanire duet where the music for each character reflects their inner feelings and not the other's—another rare achievement. This eventually reaches a

climax as Saint-Saëns suddenly ups the tempo, adds a bass drum to the orchestra and lets Déjanire explode with rage:

*I unmask you, traitor!
In vain you seek to deceive me!
Go! Not for nothing are you the son of Jupiter!
And I, like Juno, henceforth forsaken,
Can count on nothing but your betrayals!*

Later, singing with Philoctète, Hercules rationalizes his love for Iole by suggesting that since he shed her father's blood, he "owes her a husband's support." This, too, is set to music reflecting the ambiguity of his thoughts and actions. But the whole score is admirable this way. Although their composing styles were quite different, I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that at least the choruses in *Déjanire* influenced Igor Stravinsky when he wrote *Oedipus Rex*; there's a certain raw energy in the choruses of the latter that mirror what one hears in *Déjanire*. There's also a certain terseness in this music that sounds like a predecessor of the Stravinsky opera; despite its being four acts, the music flies by swiftly. Even the slow sections, conducted properly, do not drag—and then there are the biting winds in the orchestration, which also prefigure Stravinsky. Act IV is the most pastoral and lyrical, opening with ballet music in the Prelude before we move into the initially serene love music for Iole and Hercules; but once he puts on the tunic of Nessus and begins feeling his body tortured, so too does the music reflect this. It ends in a blaze of torment.

For the lone recording of this opera, Palazetto Bru Zane gave us pocket-sized equivalents of the original singers. Kate Aldrich (Déjanire), Julien Dran (Hercule), Anaïs Constans (Iole), Jérôme Boutillier (Philoctète) and Anna Dowsley (Phénice) are not going to bowl you over with their power, which ideally is what this opera should have to make its best effect, but at least they can all sing, and although Aldrich reveals an unsteady wobble in her opening scene (the voice improves as the performance goes on), they are first-class musicians who give as much of themselves as they can in a studio environment.

Montemezzi: *L'Amore dei tre Re* (1913)

Italo Montemezzi (1875-1952) was the Italian verismo composer whose work didn't quite fit into the standard norm of his time. When his three-act opera *L'Amore dei tre Re* premiered at La Scala in 1913 with but one prominent name in the cast, basso Nazzareno de Angelis as King Archibaldo, it received mixed reviews, yet surprisingly managed to become part of the standard repertoire for the next quarter-century or so before falling into oblivion. It was revived in Italy in the 1950s, the most interesting decade in Italian opera house history, but then disappeared again. It is occasionally revived but not very often, in part because of its short length, only about an hour and a half, since there is really no other short Italian opera of that period that really goes well with it.

The story is based on a very interesting play by Sem Benelli which, taking its cue from other contemporary playwrights like Maeterlinck, is filled with psychological allusions. The blind Germanic King Archibald, who conquered the country of Altura 40 years previously, now faces opposition from their people to being controlled by a German. But there is a complication: his son Manfred is married to the Alturan princess Fiora, although she is having an affair with an Alturan prince, Avito. Archibald suspects her infidelity but cannot secure proof, in part because his two servants—both Alturans—will not cooperate with him.

The first two acts present various scenarios of varying intensity, including two love duets between Manfred and Fiora and a scene where he begs her to show him affection—all interspersed with scenes in which Archibald continues to prod and question her. Finally in a frustrated fit of rage, Archibald strangles her at the end of Act II. In Act III, as her body is laid in state for mourners to pass by, Archibald has secretly poisoned Fiora's lips so her lover will die if he dares to kiss the corpse...and of course, he does. As he lies dying, he tells all of this to Manfred, but instead of being glad that his rival in love is dying, he is grief-stricken that his father killed her and so also kisses Fiora's poison-covered lips. Archibald enters just in time to see his son die as well. (In this scene, Montemezzi suddenly channels a bit of Strauss' *Salome* music.)

As in the case of some operas we have already discussed, and one or two we will get to, it is not so much the *plot* of *L'Amore dei tre Re* that carries the drama so much as the *orchestral music*. Montemezzi wrote an extremely complex score that managed to combine Italianate passion with the harmonic subtlety and rhythmic complexity of Debussy. The rhythms are stronger, but remain extremely complex and varied; the music, though containing lyrical episodes like the two love duets, is pretty much continuous; and there are no "climactic" high notes to thrill the masses, thus it remains an outlier in the verismo pantheon. But a fascinating work that is inherently dramatic it most certainly is.

And even when the vocal lines seem somewhat conventionally melodic, they are short and often interrupted by strophic lines that sound more like sung recitative. Montemezzi thus walked a fascinating tightrope between entertainment and art, sometimes leaning strongly in the direction of the former but never sinking into predictability. Also, since the orchestra is the primary storyteller, often reflecting the inner thoughts and moods of the characters behind the words being sung, the conducting in this opera is of the utmost importance, something that surely affects the impact of other good or great verismo works, but here of much higher importance. I've heard a few earlier performances and recordings of this work, including one from the late 1950s led by Tullio Serafin, in which it was obvious to me that he simply did not understand the style. Fine conductor though he was, and make no mistake, he was a very serious musician, Serafin just didn't grasp the right direction to take through the constantly shifting meters while still giving it forward momentum. Several moments in older recordings of *L'Amore dei tre Re* just sound too static, and this kills the music.

In some ways, the vocal lines of *L'Amore dei tre Re* are a throwback to late-period Verdi, reminiscent of *Don Carlos* and the revised *Simon Boccanegra* although with a far more sophisticated orchestral accompaniment, while the second Avito-Fiora duet in Act II almost sounds Wagnerian. Yet just as the music of *Carlos* and *Boccanegra* was essentially of a high quality, so too the lyrical lines of *L'Amore* have the same kind of sound, except that here the music never comes to a final resolution but continues, in a Wagner-Debussy vein, into the next scene and the one following without a break. The mental states of the characters are brilliantly brought out by the orchestra in a way that the words of the libretto does not and cannot. We are clearly in the midst of a psychological-musical revolution, here even in the realm of "popular" Italian opera of the verismo period. The problem is that 90% of operagoers really don't know that much about music, particularly orchestral music designed to carry the drama *in lieu* of the voices. The entire concept is foreign to them, such as the long orchestral passage after the Act II Avito-Fiora duet clearly depicting the conflicting thoughts of the latter.

Since there are so few recordings available of this work and most of them are old mono radio broadcasts with constricted sound, it's easy to recommend the best recording because it's the only one in stereo: Cesare Siepi (Archibaldo), Pablo Elvira (Manfredo), Anna Moffo (Fiora) and Plácido Domingo (Avito), conducted splendidly by Nello Santi. Trust me, this one's so good you won't need another version.

Pizzetti: *Fedra* (1915)

Despite a career as a composer that extended into his mid-80s, Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1968) is barely known today. In part, this was due to his wholehearted embrace of Mussolini's Fascism, which put a black mark on him after World War II, but I think that much of it is due to the complexity and lack of audience-friendliness of much of his music. A true intellectual, Pizzetti was a musicologist and music critic in addition to his career as a composer. Director of the Milan Conservatory from 1923, he also succeeded Ottorino Respighi as director of the National Academy of St. Cecilia in Rome following the latter's unexpected death in 1936 and was also named to the Royal Academy of Italy in 1939. He wrote 16 completed operas and three unfinished ones between 1897 and 1965, but our attention will be focused on his Greek-drama trilogy which spanned an incredible half-century beginning with *Fedra*.

By comparison with his later works, *Fedra* is in some respects the least taut and innovative of the three, but one must judge an opera in its time and not necessarily by later achievements, just as Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* is clearly not on the same level as his later works, and by the standards of 1915 *Fedra* was a fine accomplishment. It was based not on the Racine play (taken from Euripides and Seneca) but on an adaptation of it by Gabriele d'Annunzio in which Fedra (Phaedra) becomes almost insanely infatuated with her stepson Ippolito (Hippolyte), whose father is now her husband but whose mother was Queen of the Amazons. She keeps trying to kiss him, even when asleep, but he constantly fights her off; though distraught by her insatiable love, Fedra is also angry at his rejection. King Teseo (Theseus) arrives at the palace in time to see Ippolito flee without answering his father's repeated calls to him. Fedra tells her husband that Ippolito raped her; at first he brushes this aside, but when she conjures up some sort of proof he believes her and calls on Poseidon, god of the sea, to kill his son that very day. When Teseo learns the truth, he throws himself at Fedra and kills her.

If anything, *Fedra*'s music is even subtler than Montemezzi's; it also flows in a more legato fashion, and is not as rhythmically insistent. The harmonies, however, are also a bit more conventional. I get the feeling that, whether consciously or by chance, Pizzetti was more strongly influenced by the Italian verismo composers of his day, although there is a curiously Francophile vibe about the music that ties it partly to Debussy while being more consonant in its harmonic resolution. The voices drop in and out of the musical discourse; their lines are yet another line of music that fits into the orchestra. Although they ride over the top when they are singing, one can just as easily imagine them being played by instruments; even the ensemble singing, sometimes just three voices rather than a full chorus, have an instrumental "color" about them. The music is thus fascinating in its own way, combining a more traditional Italian *legato* with both *Pelléas* and, in some places, music that is clearly based on the modes of early Greek music, which, being a musicologist, Pizzetti was probably very familiar with. Occasionally the vocal lines coalesce into quasi-melodic parlando, but in an Italian rather than in a French or German manner.

Yet, I think this continuity of the musical line makes *Fedra* a less effective *stage* work than its successors. Like Nielsen's *Saul og David*, the conversations between characters never stops, but this slows down stage action to a bare minimum, and without set arias and duets to fill that gap it becomes somewhat static. This was a problem that affected many of the more innovative operas writing during this period, although an imaginative stage director who provides a thoughtful solution and not one filled with inane and superfluous stage imagery would probably be able to overcome this. I've seen it happen with interesting productions of similar operas such as Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Debussy's *Pelléas*.

There is a hint of Middle Eastern exoticism in the opening music of the second act, where he briefly uses an offstage chorus to good effect. He also ramps up the tempo suddenly for the confrontation between Fedra and Ippolito, and this quickly creates a tenser, more dramatic musi-

cal environment, the voices underscored by rumbling tympani which he have not heard up until this point. Pizzetti also created an ecstatic musical environment for the Act III Fedra-Ippolito duet, but it is not ecstatic in the Puccinian mold, but rather more like Février.

As I say, Pizzetti's two later Greek operas are more individual and personal in style, but in 1915 he was clearly trying to create a work that combined a certain amount of popular appeal. The first Fedra was none other than Salomea Kruscelnisca, the Ukrainian dramatic soprano who was also Puccini's first (ill-fated) *Madama Butterfly*. Even more interesting, the first Ippolito was "Eduardo di Giovanni," the Italian pseudonym of Canadian tenor Edward Johnson, later general director of the Metropolitan Opera.

Of the two existing recordings, both Italian broadcasts from the 1950s, the better is the one with Régine Crespin (Fedra), Gastone Limarilli (Ippolito), Dino Dondi (Teseo) and a surprise cameo appearance by the great bass Nicola Rossi-Lemeni as Eurystheus, King of Tiryns, conducted by the excellent Gianandrea Gavazzeni, himself a composer and musicologist.

***Zemlinsky: Ein florentinische Tragödie* (1917)**

Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942), sometimes known as Alexander von Zemlinsky although he had no noble blood, came from an ethnically diverse family. His father, Adolf, was raised in the family religion, Roman Catholicism, but married a woman whose father was a Sephardic Jew which, oddly, led his entire family to convert to Judaism. Alexander studied composition with, among others, Johannes Fuchs and Anton Bruckner, and was highly admired in his early years by Johannes Brahms, who recommended his Clarinet Trio to his own publisher, Simrock. Zemlinsky met Arnold Schoenberg in the mid-1890s when both were young, and admired each other's music; later, they became brothers-in-law when Schoenberg married Zemlinsky's sister, Mathilde. In 1897 he also gained Gustav Mahler's support when the latter conducted the premiere of his opera *Es war einmal*. In 1899, Zemlinsky became a Lutheran; a year later, he fell in love with Alma Schindler, and thus became enmeshed in a love triangle with Mahler, who eventually married her. After a year as Kapellmeister of the then-new Vienna Volksoper, Zemlinsky was appointed principal conductor of the Deutsches Landestheater in Prague.

This libretto by Zemlinsky was based on a German translation of Oscar Wilde's unfinished play of the same name. The opera premiered at the Staatsoper Stuttgart, conducted by Max von Schillings; it was well received but stayed fairly "local" among theaters, with further productions in Vienna, Prague and Graz the year of its premiere. It was later given in Leipzig, Aachen, Brno, Schwerin and Freiburg im Breisgau, but eventually tailed off to nothing.

Set in 18th-century Florence, it portrays the wealthy merchant Simone who believes he is being cuckolded by Prince Guido when he finds him at his home with his wife Bianca after returning from a business trip. He takes her to her room and asks her to spin fabric, which she refuses to do; after he leaves, she declares her hatred for him and wishes him dead. After Guido and Bianca declare their love for each other, he is about to leave when Simone challenges him to a duel. First they use swords, then daggers, but when neither one can gain an advantage, Simone says the hell with it and just strangles Guido to death. Ironically, this greatly impresses Bianca, who is suddenly attracted to Simone because he's a big, strong man who can protect her, and they reconcile. But Guido's still dead, so it's a tragedy.

This was the second of several operas written in those years (Montemezzi's being the first) in which the plot was not quite as dramatic as the music; it almost sounds like something Strauss would have written after *Elektra* had he not chosen to abandon his creative urges in favor of popular acclaim. Bitonality reigns supreme, and the orchestral score is indeed so powerful that it sounds like a symphony with voices. Even the opening prelude is complex.⁸

⁸ https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/9/90/IMSLP39990-PMLP87665-Zemlinsky_Florentine_Tragedy_Op16_A.pdf

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1.2. Flöte
kleine Flöte
1. Oboe
2.3. Oboe
1.2. Klar. in B
Klar. in Es
Bass-Klar. in B
1.2. Fagott
Kontra-Fag.
1.2.
3.4. Hörner
5.6.
1.2. Trup. in C
3.4.
1.2.3. Pos.
Bass-Tuba
Trommeln in D
Becken
gr. Trommel

Keurig stürmend, nicht allzusehr schnell.

1. Violinen
2. Violinen
Violen
Kellern
Kontrabasse

The vocal line is anything but graceful or melodic; it is not merely strophic, but emerges in sharp shards of sound, at times surprisingly close to Schoenberg's *Sprechstimme*, yet there are several moments where snippets of melody emerge, and these are strongly reminiscent of *Elektra*. To put it bluntly, there was nothing in the world that sounded anything like *Ein florentinische Tragödie* at the time of its debut, or for a few years thereafter. To my ears, this opera is a halfway point between *Elektra* and *Wozzeck*. Simone, who (rightly so) gets the lion's share of the singing, is a character whose anger rules his entire psyche, thus he sounds the closest to both anger and insanity. His only lyrical lines come in his duet with Bianca, yet even here he quickly moves on to anger when she refuses to spin for him. He's just a nasty guy with too much testosterone for his own good. Interestingly, Prince Guido is a high, light lyric tenor—I say that because the dense orchestration is somewhat difficult for such a voice to cleave through—who, from a character standpoint, sounds like a foreign element in this high-tension conflict between husband and wife.

Yet, as with *Elektra*, the music is just so fascinating (and, of course, continuous) that one is gripped by its power from start to finish. It doesn't even matter if you are sympathetic to Simone or Guido; all three characters are caught in this tight, complex and often loud web of sound which depicts their states of mind, and Zemlinsky does not let go until the very end, again similar to *Elektra*. About 31 minutes into the opera, in fact, one hears a Richard Strauss-like waltz tune, an extraordinarily normal moment in this abnormally high-pitched work. Another interesting aspect is that, although she is the center of the drama, Bianca sings very little, just as Bluebeard sings very little in Dukas' *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*. Guido's part is much more prominent and calls for a superb combination of vocalism and interpretation.

The best recording of this work is the one with Wolfgang Koch (Simone), Charles Reid (Guido) and Heidi Brunner (Bianca), conducted by Bertrand de Billy, not so much for Brunner's superb singing as for Reid's. He is clearly the best tenor on any recording of this opera, which is important, and de Billy's conducting is every bit as intense as that of Riccardo Chailly's.

Schreker: *Die Gezeichneten* (1914, stage premiere 1918)

Franz Schreker, originally Schrecker (1878-1934), was one of the few Teutonic composers of his time (he was actually Austrian, not German) who worked primarily in the operatic field. Wikipedia describes his composing style as "aesthetic plurality," being a mixture of "Romanticism, Symbolism, impressionism, Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*," the latter ("New Objectivity") being a *reaction* to Expressionism, so in a way Schreker was fighting one of his own influences. Like so many of the composers we've been discussing, particularly Strauss, Février and Montemezzi, he experimented with different orchestral timbres, extended harmony and creating "total music theater."⁹ The complete opera premiered in Frankfurt in April 1918, a time when World War I was still raging around them. It received two dozen productions throughout Austria and Germany before Schreker's music was completely banned by the Nazis in 1933.

Die Gezeichneten (*The Stigmatized*) was like a modern version of *Rigoletto* with rather different circumstances. In this opera, the hunchback is not a lowly servant to a perverted nobleman but a nobleman himself, a young Genoan named Alviano Salvago. Fully aware of his deformities, he has no dreams of love, but wants to devote the island paradise he has created for himself, called "Elysium," to the people of Genoa. The problem is that his friends are dissolute noblemen who use an underground grotto on Elysium for debauched orgies with young women kidnapped from prominent Genoan families, and they petition Alviano to stop his transfer of the island to the people. One of these, Count Tamare, has been trying to seduce Carlotta, the daughter of the

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Schreker

Podestá, but she rejects his advances because, despite his deformities, she is deeply attracted to Alviano because of his beautiful soul. This infuriates Tamare but he has no recourse. The citizens of Genoa do indeed go to Elysium, where they are awed by what they see; Carlotta confesses her love to Alviano, who goes to her father to ask for her hand in marriage; yet somehow or other, Carlotta, who apparently has a good heart but isn't very bright, is seduced by Tamare who is wearing a mask. Her father accuses Alviano of setting up this abduction. Eventually, Salvago invites everyone to the underground grotto, where Carlotta is lying unconscious on a bed while Tamare boasts of his conquering abilities. Carlotta awakens but is apparently dying; rushing to her side, Alviano hears her call not for him but for Tamare with her dying breath. Alviano goes mad, stumbling his way through the stunned crowd as the curtain falls.

From the opening notes, one is aware of the exquisite manner in which Schreker combined qualities of both the French and German schools. The music is extraordinarily colorful, with a prominent part for harp in the overture; the winds and upper strings swirl around the lower strings which carry the bulk of the themes presented here. Despite his use of occasional extended chords, however, Schreker's music is rooted in tonality, and has a definite rhythm, but the overall impression is of an orchestral sound that completely envelops the listener.

When we get to the singing, however, we are suddenly thrown into the midst of what we now recognize as the modern German style of the 1930s and '40s, except this is 20 years ahead of its time. The vocal lines are not only strophic, but constantly seem to skirt tonality while the orchestra goes in and out of support for them. When they do coalesce into tonal sections, they are constantly morphing and changing around; one hears occasional melodic continuity, but this is frequently subverted by Schreker's breaking up the lines again, along with further sections on the edge of bitonality. This fully suits the frustrated and complex character of Salviago, but one can easily hear why this opera did not travel outside of Teutonic countries until well into the 21st century. Being ahead of your time makes you a musical prophet but not a popular icon. Even Strauss' two fully dramatic operas were closer to established harmonic norms than this, although *Elektra* was quite obviously further-out than *Salome*.

The second act relies more heavily on *parlando* writing than the first, though again melodic lines sneak through. Once again we hear an orchestral concept of opera, the orchestra leading the voices rather than just supporting them, playing music that probes the psyches of the characters beyond the words being sung. Carlotta is a tricky role to cast: her music is on the light side, calling for a soprano with a silvery tone and flexibility, yet at the same time her music is technically very tricky, moving up and down throughout the soprano range which calls for a singer with not only great flexibility but also a wide vocal range. Indeed, the whole opera gains in attractiveness with a cast of singers who have well-placed voices and sing "on pointe," almost as if in an opera by Meyerbeer. This gives the opera an almost fairy-tale-like aspect which suits the music perfectly; it almost cries out for delicacy despite the obvious emotion called for in Salviago's part. (Compare this to Strauss' technically correct but uninspired writing for the voices in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Arabella* or *Die frau ohne Schatten*.) Schreker significantly enhances the Carlotta-Alviano love duet with a sudden orgiastic outburst of French horns and strings.

This ballet of voices continues into the third act, where Schreker creates a hypnotizing web of sound by writing for both the voices and orchestra as a single unit. You almost feel as bad as Alviano does when Carlotta betrays his love, not because it crushes his spirit but because it reveals Carlotta as someone who is much more shallow than you had expected her to be. And there is very much a Strauss-like sweep to the orchestral music about 19 minutes before the end of the last act, before Alviano learns that Carlotta no longer loves him alone and goes mad. At the same time, one's attention is drawn—again, as much by the orchestra as by the words of the text—to the symbolic aspects of the story, the eternal conflict between sexual and altruistic love...and

Alviano's mad scene, delicate, atonal and dramatically effective, provided a template for both Berg and Britten to use in their own operas.

Unfortunately, none of the three commercial recordings of this work, despite excellent sound, come close to capturing the mood and magic of this work as well as the 1960 concert performance with Helmut Krebs (Alviano), Thomas Stewart (Tamare), Evelyn Lear (Carlotta), Ernst Wiemann (Podestá) and a star turn by the great German bass Franz Crass as Adorno and the Captain of the Guards, conducted in an absolutely ecstatic fashion by Winfried Zillig, a little-known German conductor who had "been there" back in the late 1920s when *Die Gezeichneten* was a popular opera in Austria and Germany.

***Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle* (1912-17, premiered 1918)**

Inspired in part by the success of Dukas' opera, Béla Bartók decided as early as 1912 to write his own on pretty much the same subject, but whereas the Dukas work was based on a play by Maeterlinck, which was loosely based on Charles Perrault's literary tale *La Barbe bleue*, Bartók and his librettist, Béla Balász, went directly to Perrault for their source. Ironically, Balász originally wrote his libretto for Bartók's friend and colleague, Zoltán Kodály, between 1908 and 1910, but Kodály decided not to set it to music. Bartók chose to do it in 1911, after the libretto was entered into the Ferenc Erkel Prize Competition.

Bluebeard's Castle was not an opera that "took off" internationally. There were two isolated German productions, at Frankfurt in 1922 and Berlin in 1929 (how much do you want to bet the latter one was at the Kroll Opera?), in Florence, Italy in 1938 (with the great Hungarian bass Miklós Székely as Bluebeard) and then in 1951 under Ferenc Fricsay in Naples (with Mario Petri in the title role). But the good old United States, ever on the cutting edge of modern music, didn't hear it even once until a 1949 radio broadcast conducted by Antal Doráti; the first Met performance wasn't until 1974!!! Yet in this case, for the most part, audiences were ready for it, and decades of exposure to Bartók's brilliant orchestral and ballet music has somewhat softened the blow of his whole-tone scales and modal harmonies based on Hungarian folk music. In short, it didn't sound as "foreign" to their ears as some of the other modern operas that succeeded it.

Since it is a repertoire piece, a detailed plot summary is unnecessary. We now all know that it involves Judith's arrival at Bluebeard's dark, gloomy castle, her desire to bring more light into its dark spaces by opening as many doors and windows as she could, and the secret behind the sixth door which turns out to be his three former wives, still alive. What is interesting is that the late Hungarian conductor István Kertész felt that the plot line went far beyond the fairy tale, relating to Bartók's own desire to keep his inner self hidden from the world.¹⁰ On the other hand, the opera may be an allegory, as one commentator on YouTube put it, to the three stages of Bluebeard's life which he shared with each of the three wives behind the last door: the morning, afternoon and evening of his life, with Judith now being "the one who shares with him the darkness, the infinity of death."¹¹ Many listeners are not aware that there is a spoken introduction to the opera, seldom recorded, in which the narrator tells the audience that the story they are about to see and hear may actually occur in their imagination.

By and large, the score of Bartók's opera emphasizes the minor second, used in both slow and fast passages to emphasize sadness and unease, but this can be stressed too much by analysts. More importantly for our purposes, the majority of the music is bitonal or polytonal, emphasizing more than one key at a time—but again, never in a way that completely alienates an

¹⁰ Smith, Erik. 1965. *A discussion between István Kertész and the producer. DECCA Records* (liner notes for *Bluebeard's Castle*).

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9Aq2WWds8k>

average audience. Still, there are no set pieces in the score that really qualify as arias, even though the music is much more melodic than *Pelléas et Mélisande* or *Saul og David*. What I find extremely interesting about *Bluebeard's Castle* is that, in addition to setting and sustaining a mood of mystery and unease, mirroring the states of mind of Bluebeard and Judith, the orchestra is fully integrated into the vocal line. The latter's insistently melodic (and tonal) contours thus complement and contrast with the orchestra. Taking both the orchestral and vocal parts separately, they could stand on their own as completely independent compositions, but put together as they are they create an entirely different whole which is greater than the sum of both parts. None of the music is formulaic or predictable, but as you listen to it, the end result somehow seems inevitable. This is not necessarily the way you might have imagined it would proceed, but when each event occurs it sounds right and proper for that specific scene and the words in the libretto. Of course, this should be how every great opera is constructed, but as we have seen, this was hardly the case in the past. (Early-to-mid-period Verdi is a good example of what I mean. His music in those operas I discussed is good but not consistently great or even in quality.)

It is also quite obvious to those who have seen or at least heard the opera that Bartók built his drama very, very carefully, in slow stages rather than in a constantly febrile musical environment that keeps the listener on edge. Thus, when the more dramatic moments occur (like the walls dripping with blood), the effects are all the more telling. And Bartók, with his librettist, was not shy about being somewhat graphic in his blurring the lines between the mundane and the horrific, between reality and what may possibly be—as the spoken introduction suggests—horrors that the minds of the observers create. Even though these effects are generally shown on stage in a good production, they still may be only what the audience *expects* and not what is *really* happening. In this respect, *Bluebeard's Castle* bears some resemblance to a classic surrealist film of a little later, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, even though the film eventually lets us know what is reality and what is in Francis' imagination. Or does it? We never really know for sure, and such is the case with this marvelously ambiguous psychological drama.

We have been extremely fortunate that there are several excellent recordings of this wonderful opera, among them the live performance with Sigmund Nimsgern (Bluebeard) and Tatiana Troyanos (Judith), conducted by Rafael Kubelik, the studio recording with Kólos Kováts and Sylvia Sass (which includes the oft-omitted spoken prologue) conducted by Georg Solti, and the once-elusive recording in English with Jerome Hines and Rosalind Elias, conducted by Eugene Ormandy. There is also a superb performance, at this writing available for free streaming on YouTube, from 1988 with Robert Lloyd (Bluebeard) and Elizabeth Lawrence (Judith), conducted by Adám Fischer. Every single one of these gives a slightly different “take” on this opera, and each “take” is valid.

***Schreker: Der Schatzgräber* (1918-18, premiere 1920)**

Although there were some who saw Schreker's work as a promotion of decadence and amorality, the majority of audiences and critics realized that his work was a condemnation of the festering evils in modern German society. In this light, *Der Schatzgräber*, which turned out to be his most popular opera, took on—in a symbolic way—the decadence of the Weimar Republic, in which not only hedonism but a complete breakdown of morality in people's efforts to validate their lives under the misery of hyper-inflation and decadent cabaret life was addressed.

The Queen's jewels have been stolen; her will to live is gone. She has become sick and withdrawn, and for some reason new jewels bought for her by the King cannot revive her. The King's fool (jester) suggests that he bring in Elis, a traveling minstrel who, it is said, can locate stolen treasures with his magic lute. The King promises the fool that if this is successful, he may choose any woman he wants for his wife. In the meantime, a woman named Els has been coerced

into marrying a wealthy but brutish nobleman who she despises by her father, an innkeeper, but the day before the marriage Els has sent him to town to bring her a certain gold chain decorated with emeralds and a small crown. After he leaves, she calls in her servant Albi, who loves her, and orders him to kill the nobleman on his way back and bring the chain to her. As it turns out, Albi has done this before with other errand-runners fetching jewels for her; only she and he know that this is the last piece from the Queen's missing jewels, which Els herself stole.

Els comes to the inn; Els is fascinated by his song about a dream in which a hunted deer was changed into a predator with five green eyes. Els recognizes this as a symbol of the chain. Following the hunch of his dream, Els went into the forest where he found the chain on a branch, which he gives to her. Albi, returning from his murderous mission, cries out the alarm that a body has been found in the woods. Most of the people run to find the nobleman's body, and Els is arrested for murder. Meeting the fool at the gallows, Els begs him to help her. Though Els doesn't know Els' name, the jester figures this out and promises that he'll be safe. As Els is about to be taken away by the bailiff and his soldiers, Els tells him to stall for time before his execution by singing a farewell song, and at this point he confesses his love for her.

But Els is saved at the last minute by the King's order that he be released provided that he uses his magic lute to recover the Queen's jewels. Suddenly terrified at being found out as the thief, Els orders Albi to steal the lute. Els comes to her, equally terrified because now that his lute is gone he can't find the jewels. Els begs him to trust her BUT ask no questions; during their night of love, she hands over all of the Queen's jewels to him. At a festive banquet, the Queen is back to her old self, wearing her jolly jewels, but Els is frightened. When a toast to the Queen is called for, Els is pressured into explaining how he found the jewels *without* the lute. He sings a ballad of his night of love with Els, insists that they were HER jewels, and demands that they be returned to her. Just at this moment, the bailiff arrives and tells how he tortured the truth out of Albi. Els is arrested for second-degree murder and ordered to be burned at the stake—but the fool, claiming his reward, demands Els for his wife. Bound to his word, the King agrees. A year later, Els visits the hut of the jester and Els, who is dying. She dies in his arms.

Schatzgräber's music swirls around the listener like a storm that never ends until the final note. Both the words and music conflate the clash of reality with what is imagined, leaving the listener to decide. Schreker's parable about the role of an artist in a sick, greedy society is swathed in music that only occasionally resolves itself. Most of the score features tonality that is undermined, and as in *Gezeichneten*, Schreker ends the opera with a chord mixing D major and D minor. *Schatzgräber* sounds like a Strauss opera that *should* have followed *Elektra*; its basic elements, while not as original as what he made of them, were clearly effective and genuinely dramatic. The ear tells us that Schreker leaned heavily not only on Strauss, but also Wagner; at one point, we even hear the *Tristan* chord. Yet it is great because it is inspired, which most Strauss works of this time were not: in every wholly dramatic moment, the music rings true.

Considering the extremely complicated plot, the large number of characters, their complex interaction, the symbolism and music that never stood still, *Schatzgräber's* popularity was quite amazing. In his liner notes for Marc Albrecht's recording of the work, Gavin Plumley wrote:

Rather than a retreat from the serious questions posed in *Der ferne Klang* and *Die Gezeichneten*, the disparity between imagined reality and real imagination in *Der Schatzgräber* shows a continued investigation into the position of the artist within society... In a dystopian world of greed, murder and rootlessness (emotional and harmonic), only art can offer resolution.

Of the two commercial recordings, the better by far is the one conducted by Gerd Albrecht with Harald Stamm (King), Peter Haage (the Fool), Gabriele Schnaut (Els) and Josef Protschka

(Elis). It is complete and so powerfully sung and conducted that it sweeps you away in its vitality, despite Schnaut's insistence on singing her soft high notes in a strenuous *forte*.

Leoncavallo: *Edipo Re* (1918-19; premiere 1920)

This little-known setting of the famous Greek tragedy, which preceded Stravinsky's by seven years, has gotten a bad rap for more than a century. Written specifically for the great Italian baritone Titta Ruffo, it was nonetheless left unfinished at the composer's death and completed and orchestrated by Giovanni Pennacchio, an Italian conductor and musicologist who, astonishingly, lived to be 100 years old. The opera is frequently criticized as being brash and colorful without being dramatic, and there are some musicologists who argue that Leoncavallo didn't write a note of it. It was premiered at the Chicago Opera in 1920 with Ruffo in the title role, but by that time soprano Mary Garden and the "French faction" was itching to take over the company for their own purposes, and Garden made sure that the work was heavily criticized. A few years later, when Ruffo wanted to revive it at the Metropolitan Opera, general director Giulio Gatti-Casazza believed the critical reviews and refused to stage it. The irony of all this is that Ruffo, who detested the Fascists, was stripped of his honors after his retirement from singing, yet the opera was finally performed in Italy while Mussolini was still in control, in a 1939 radio broadcast, and this is still the best source we have for this opera.

Listening carefully to *Edipo Re* and knowing the story, one can imagine how Leoncavallo set the story to music. There are *ariosos*, including one for Edipo about a quarter of the way into the opera, but although it is melodic and set in accepted aria form, neither it nor the others are conventionally melodic or pretty, and they do not end with climactic high notes—but they are quite effective within the conventions of the *verismo* style for carrying the dramatic situation, and they are seamlessly woven into the ongoing fabric of the music.

We must, then, compare *Edipo Re* not to Stravinsky's masterpiece, which is in an entirely different style, but to Puccini's late works, *Il Tabarro* and *Turandot*, which although they are just good enough to qualify being in this book are clearly not as good overall as *Edipo Re*. Like these Puccini works, Leoncavallo keeps falling back here and there on tunefulness to carry the libretto. Giocasta's *arioso* has some of the earmarks of *Pagliacci* in it, and for the late 1910s that is unfortunate, but I honestly feel that there are enough strong passages in it to warrant its being performed now and then. If one assembles a strong cast of singers who have both good voices and interpretive abilities, it can still make a telling effect.

Towards the end of the opera, roughly the last third or quarter of it, one does note the replacement of craft for inspiration in the music. These are the passages I would ascribe to Pennacchio. Even if he used some themes or scraps of themes left by Leoncavallo, the music here, although not really too bad—nothing as awful as Franco Alfano's completion of *Turandot*—simply does not sound as spontaneous as most of that which precedes it. (I do, however, question whether or not Giocasta's *arioso* is really by Leoncavallo; it's not nearly as good as Edipo's.)

Much of the middle part of the opera is in a semi-*parlando* style that one will recognize from Leoncavallo's *La Bohème*, which was actually a pretty good dramatic representation of the original story, just not as full of tunes and fun as Puccini's version. In these sections, too, Leoncavallo very cleverly and intelligently matched the rhythm of his music to the rhythm of the words rather than trying to artificially "force" the words into a pre-set tune. Moreover, Leoncavallo (or Pennacchio, or both) "builds" the characters fairly well. Yes, there are some weak moments in *Edipo Re*, but on balance it is much more of a success than a disaster, and it clearly deserves to be performed.

Despite a pretty good performance in German issued by Opera Depot, I still prefer the 1939 radio broadcast with baritone Mario Basiola (Edipo), mezzo-soprano Rina Corsi (Giocas-

ta), tenor Ettore Parmeggiani (Créonte), bass Luciano Neroni (Tirisia) and conductor Giuseppe Podestà. The sound, of course, is not ideal, but the version issued on the Opera Discovery label has surprisingly acceptable, digitally enhanced sound.

Janáček: *Kat'a Kabanová* (1921)

A lot of water had flowed over the dam for Leo Janáček in the 17 years since *Jenůfa*. His follow-up opera, *Destiny*, was completed in 1907 but rejected by two theaters; it did not premiere until several years after his death, in 1934. From 1908 to 1917, he worked on an opera titled *Výlet pana Broučka do měsíce* or *The Excursions of Mr. Brouček to the Moon and to the 15th Century* which premiered in 1920, but by then he was in a very strained marriage to his wife Zdenka. This started with his meeting and having an affair with singer Gabriela Horváthová in 1916, which led to Zdenka's attempted suicide and their "informal" divorce, and a year later he met the love of his life, Kamila Stösslová. She was neither an artist of any sort nor single and available, but 39 years his junior, a married woman with a son. Janáček began a sort of affair with her which lasted to the end of his life, although she was ambivalent about his feelings for her and tried to distance herself from him as much as possible. Ordinarily I would not discuss a composer's personal life, but in Janáček's case this deep infatuation inspired some of his most creative later works, including *Kat'a Kabanová*.

Janáček wrote the libretto himself, based on a play by Alexander Ostrovsky titled *The Storm*. The story takes place in a small, isolated Russian village on the banks of the Volga. Trapped in an unhappy marriage to Tichon, who is dominated by his controlling mother Kabanicha, Kat'a (or, sometimes, Katya) feels stifled and tries to escape. (Obviously wishful thinking on Janáček's part regarding Kamila!) Tichon leaves for a business trip and Kat'a, encouraged by her foster daughter Varvara, begins a torrid love affair with Boris, who has loved her from afar, but when Tichon returns she cannot live with what she has done, and so throws herself into the Volga. Tichon's friend Kuligin, seeing this, runs to him for help; he tries to rescue her but is restrained by Kabanicha who wants her to die for her sins. After she drowns, Kat'a body is fished out of the river and Tichon, who after all was not a bad guy, sobs uncontrollably over her death while his mother coldly thanks the bystanders for their help.

Onto this seamy and typically Russian story, Janáček poured some of his finest music—but music that was almost entirely Russian in character, not Czech. The slow, dark, moody prelude features strings in the middle and low ranges which play in the minor, setting a decidedly ominous mood; when the tempo increases, the tune he wrote, though at a faster tempo, is also in the minor and again sounds Russian. By and large, this opera's music has more in common with *Pique Dame* and the operas of Rachmaninoff than with the Czech operas of Dvořák.

Not too surprisingly by this point in time, many of the sung lines are strophic rather than conventionally melodic, though they do employ a somewhat varied note-range. Nonetheless, Janáček constantly varies the musical line, as the other operas before it did, by changing tempo and meter—in this case, fairly frequently. Although the orchestra here also plays an important part in the ongoing drama, it acts more as commentator than as a reflection of the characters' inner thoughts. In other words, it acts more as an accompaniment, albeit an interesting and richly-scored accompaniment. Although the score does use some extended chords in the orchestra, the music is primarily tonal in character, which makes it more accessible to the listener than *Ein florentinische Tragödie* or even *Elektra*.

Unlike Tchaikovsky, however, Janáček never really settles into anything resembling an aria. He was done with arias; from here on out, his music would carry the drama in as straightforward a manner as possible. Despite the occasionally lush harmonies, the music's focus was on carrying the words in a dramatic fashion. In the second act, for instance, the music which carries

the conversation between Kat'a and Varvara almost, but not quite, coalesces into a melodic duet; the explosive passions of the two women often overrides this tendency to present their words wrapped in rhythmically exciting music. Occasionally, the orchestra plays phrases reminiscent of Strauss, but more often it doesn't. Only the solo by Varvara's boyfriend Váňa Kudrjaš in the second act coalesces into a form like an aria—a Russian aria. By contrast, the Kat'a-Boris "love duet" emerges in short, broken lines of music, reflecting her conflicted state of mind regarding it. Later on in their duet, the orchestra, aided by thunder effects and tympani, fairly explodes behind them. All of this, of course, has made *Kat'a Kabanova* an outlier for many opera listeners, but beauty is in the ear of the listener. What is "beautiful" to many—the treacly melodies of Puccini—is simply pretty on a surface level to others. It is music related to popular forms, not art music in the strict sense of the word.

Sir Charles Mackerras, the British conductor who became such a passionate interpreter of Janáček that even the Czechs accepted him, left us two studio recordings of the opera, but neither is as intense dramatically as his Metropolitan Opera performance of March 1991 with Gabriela Benáčková (Kat'a), Leonie Rysanek (Kabanicha), Allan Glassman (Tichon), Wiesław Ochman (Boris) and Aage Haugland (Dikoj). This one will absolutely floor you.

***Boito: Nerone* (1924)**

Although this is another work by an Italian composer, *Nerone* is not a "verismo" opera in the tradition of Leoncavallo-Mascagni-Giordano-Puccini. In fact, *Nerone* in form and concept actually belongs to the period preceding this one, since the composer first started working on it in 1862, but he kept adding to and rejecting parts of the score over the next 66 years until his death in 1918. As Guido M. Gatti and Theodore Baker pointed out in their excellent 1924 monograph on the opera, published in *The Musical Quarterly* (although only Gatti's name appears on the title page as author), Boito actually conceived of this opera before he wrote *Mefistofele*, his only completed opera.¹² As Gatti put it:

Instead of throwing off a sketch such as his imagination might suggest, based on a few psychological traits and facts in the life of the Caesar as narrated by the writer of the "Annales," he preferred to proceed, according to his wont, to a more searching investigation in order to learn whatever he could concerning the career and mental attitude of Nero;—and not of him alone, but also of the men surrounding him and, in a word, the historical environment of the decadent Empire. This period possesses an interest equaled by few others by reason of the variety of its external influences, the conflict of opposing forces, and its extravagances of luxury and corruption.¹³

The dualism and conflict between good and evil was a continuing thread in Boito's work, not only in his own *Mefistofele* but also in his libretti for Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* and Verdi's *Otello*. Nero was a natural choice for the subject of his masterpiece, exploring the emperor's "good" creativity and "evil" destructiveness. In this opera Boito contrasted Nero the poet, musician, artist and creator of beauty with Nero the deranged monster who destroys everything in his path; he described him as a "grotesque combination of fascination and revulsion." Asteria, who interrupts Nero burying his mother's ashes, is both drawn to and repelled by him. Nero goes from guilty matricide to extrovert performer to simpering coward; he suspects that the Senate knows that saying he killed his mother for plotting against him is a lie. When Nero discovers Simon Mago trying to deceive him using Asteria to act as a goddess, he destroys the temple. As Donal Henahan put it in a *New York Times* article, "Most obviously, it depicts Nero as an abort-

¹² https://www.jstor.org/stable/738477#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹³ *Musical Quarterly*, October 1924, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 596

ive artist who wanted to be not only an emperor beloved of the masses but also author, producer, stage manager and leading man in his bloody circuses. Against his Evil genius, there stands the improbable Goodness of his Christian enemies and victims.”¹⁴

The plot is not a continuous narrative, but rather a series of scenes during the period in which Nero was Emperor of Rome, showing the tensions that existed between the Imperial religion and the early Christians, who at that time (and, to a certain extent, still today) were part of a cult based on superstition and unbelievable tales. The opera ends with the Great Fire of Rome. In the opening scene, Simon Mago is making preparations for the funeral of Nero’s mother while the Emperor himself is in the throes of anxiety. Asteria, a Roman woman, is deeply moved by the Christian Rubria’s prayer for the soul of the deceased, but later rejects the Christian god in favor of the Emperor himself as her deity. Fanuèl, a Christian apostle, says goodbye to Rubria and leaves Rome; Simon interrupts Rubria as she is trying to confess a sin to Fanuèl while Nero is celebrated by the people.

In Act II, Simon tries to use Asteria, disguised as a Goddess in the Gnostic temple, to seduce Nero (we’re not told exactly why he wants to do this), but the plan fails and they are caught. Simon must prove that he can fly in the circus while Asteria is threatened with the snake pit. Act III is set in a Christian garden where Fanuèl recites the Sermon on the Mount. Asteria, now bleeding, warns Rubria and Fanuèl about Simon Mago. Rubria again tries to confess her sin to Fanuèl but is interrupted again by Simon, who arrests Fanuèl.

In the last act, Asteria sets fire to Rome to prevent the execution of Simon Mago and the Christians. Nero wants to have Rubria executed since, when she was disguised as a vestal virgin, she begged him to pardon the Christians. Simon is forced to jump from a tower. Rubria *finally* gets to confess her sin to Fanuèl in Asteria’s presence: she was both a vestal virgin and a Christian. Fanuèl blesses her and declares her his wife shortly before she dies.

After finally being able to see a stage production of this opera, albeit one ruined by Regie-theater idiocies, I realized why it was, and is, almost never performed on stage. It just doesn’t move, and although the music is continually interesting, it is more in the nature of Part II of Mahler’s Symphony No. 8, a discussion of religious and philosophical topics. Yes, there are a few moments when something happens other than just standing around and discussing religion and philosophy, but not many.

As I say, though, the music is really outstanding. Conductor Arturo Toscanini, a longtime friend of Boito’s, helped to complete the orchestration with the help of Vincenzo Tommasini and Antonio Smareglia. the latter an obscure opera composer who died in 1929. Boito conceived the role of Nero to be sung by the great Italian dramatic tenor Francesco Tamagno, who created Otello, but he had died in 1905. The original Nero in the world premiere was the superb dramatic tenor Aureliano Pertile, with Asteria being sung by the formidable soprano Rosa Raisa. The rest of the cast was also well chosen, with the great baritone Carlo Galeffi as Fanuèl, Marcel Journet as Simon Mago and Ezio Pinza as Tigellino.

What may not work well on a stage, however, can often work well in a concert setting, and we will encounter a few other modern operas in future chapters that work equally this way. The opera opens not with any instrumental music at all but with a chorus of women, after which Nero explodes with rage and the game is on. Of course it’s difficult to tell how much of the finished *Nerone* dates from the 19th century, but I hear very little in it of Boito’s *Mefistofele*. Most of it sounds very much like the operas we have been discussing, somewhat Wagnerian in concept but also using snippets of music that sound like something that might have existed in Nero’s time. The vocal lines alternate between strophic and melodic, with nothing coalescing into set arias or

¹⁴ Henahan, Donal: *Opera: Boito’s “Nerone.”* April 14, 1982, Section C, Page 17

duets; even the monologues recorded after the premiere by Pertile and Journet do not have the sound of arias about them. This was clearly an audience-unfriendly Italian opera, but a great musical and dramatic concept. Its one failing is that it is often (but not always) rhythmically slack, which leads to a paucity of forward momentum, but if you are listening to opera-as-drama in the interconnected sense of music and words together, it is a brilliant work.

Describing the opening scene will give one an idea of how Boito constructed this opera. Among the ruins, Simon Mago is digging a grave; at the roadside another man is gazing motionless at a sentry on the alert, Tigellino. Far away, the voices of women are heard in song. Suddenly, accompanied by a wild orchestral outburst, Nero arrives dressed in his funeral toga, closely holding the funeral urn with the ashes of his mother, Agrippina. Calmed by Tigellino's words, Nero sits down. A procession crosses the stage by torchlight; Nero begins playing the zither. When the procession has passed, one hears the announcement, "Nerone—Oreste, il Matricida!"¹⁵ Immediately, the orchestra plays a motif expressing Nero's terror and remorse at the matricide:

The image shows a musical score for the opening scene of the opera *Nerone*. It features two vocal parts: Nerone (Tenor) and Simon Mago (Bass). The tempo is marked 'Adagio' with a metronome marking of 54. The key signature is one sharp (F#). Nerone's vocal line starts with the lyrics 'Si-mon Ma-go dov'è? Qui sup-pli-can-to.' The piano accompaniment is marked 'p lamentoso' and 'espress.' The score includes a variety of musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

One could go through the entire opera section by section like this, but it would bore the reader since the music (and the sung drama) move faster than one can read, but we do eventually get the sudden, spectral appearance of Asteria in the tombs with snakes entwined around her neck; thinking her to be Erinys, he flees the scene. Incidentally, almost none of Boito's very detailed stage directions were used in the video production I saw, so perhaps a staging that actually follows what the composer-librettist wanted would work a bit better than what I saw.

The reason I am now bringing up the names of specific singers in connection with various roles is that, if we are to try to give "historically informed performances" of instrumental works, why not operas? Prior to the late 1890s, we unfortunately had no idea what most of the active singers sounded like, and many of them did not record. And, of course, many composers did not write the roles of their operas for specific singers. Yet as we saw in the case of Verdi preferring Adelina Patti to all other exponents of *Aïda*, there were indeed instances where specific name singers were chosen for the various roles of an opera—not most of the time, certainly, but sometimes. (Puccini, for instance, always preferred a dramatic *spinto* soprano for Butterfly while everyone else in the world wanted a lyric soprano, preferably a light lyric soprano with some "bite" in the upper register.) When composers write a role for a specific singer, they are well aware that the singer in question will not live forever to create the role the way they heard it in their minds, but we should at least try to come as closely as possible when staging those operas conceived for specific voice types.

Of the two commercial recordings of *Nerone*, the one from 1975 is extremely fine in all respects. Tenor Bruno Prevedi clearly did not have a Tamagno-sized voice although it was a lyric *spinto* with a good cut up top, but in a broadcast performance that was good enough to make the

¹⁵ Source: https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/d/d0/IMSLP605749-PMLP820323-ABoito_Nerone_solopiano_USolazzi.pdf

grade at that time. Ilva Ligabue, a woefully underrated lyric spinto soprano, sang Asteria with great feeling and fire, and the rest of the cast as well as conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni did an outstanding job, thus this is the performance of choice.

Schoenberg: *Erwartung* (1909, premiered 1924)

The month after *Nerone* premiered in Milan, *Erwartung* premiered—15 years after it was written—in Prague, conducted by Schoenberg’s good friend and former pupil Zemlinsky. The soloist was soprano Marie Guntheil-Schoder, who Mahler had hailed as “a musical genius” and was widely praised as one of the most adventurous singers of her day (earlier in 1924, she sang Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, and was noted for her “strangely Nietzschean” interpretation of Carmen), but all that survives of her on records are a few 1902 G&T recordings.

Written while Schoenberg was still putting the finishing touches on his massive oratorio *Gurre-lieder*, *Erwartung* clearly has many 12-tone elements although it is not nearly as advanced or forbidding to the average listener as *Pierrot Lunaire* or the works which followed it. On the contrary, it is often described as Schoenberg’s only lengthy work using a melodic structure—modern and advanced, but still melodic and thus easily singable by a good trained voice. But it was not; *Gurre-lieder*, even the second, more atonal second half, also uses a recognizably melodic structure. But *Erwartung* was the first acknowledged monodrama in operatic history as well as the first piece to elongate, rather than compress, the action. Whereas most operas, even those that try to follow events in “real time,” either omit time segments or compress the action into brief scenes, Schoenberg said that in *Erwartung* “the aim is to represent in slow motion everything that occurs during a single second of maximum spiritual excitement, stretching it out to half an hour.”¹⁶

But what exactly does this mean, and how was it molded for the opera? Here is the opening part of the woman’s monologue, translated into English via Deep-L translate:

*In here? ... You can see the way
... How silver the trunks shimmer ... like birches ...
(looking down at the ground)
Oh! Our garden ... The flowers for him
Are surely withered ... The night is so warm ...
(in sudden fear)
I am afraid ...
(listens to the forest, trembling)
What heavy air rushes out ...
like a storm that stands ...
(wringing her hands, looking back)
So horribly quiet and empty ... But here
at least it's bright ...
(she looks up)
The moon used to be so bright ...
Oh! Still the cricket with its
Love song ... Do not speak ... it is
so sweet with you ... The moon is in the twilight ...
The moon is full of horror ...*

The first difficulty for the soprano is, then, not one of extreme vocal range but of knowing how to express the meaning of the text in a way that is both subtle and dramatic. The other challenge is that the score has so many meter and tempo changes that it almost looks like a crazy-

¹⁶ Schoenberg, Arnold: *Style and Idea*. University of California Press (Los Angeles, 1984), p. 105 (ISBN 0-520-05294-3)

quilt of bits from too many contrasting scores. Interestingly, unless the casual listener is paying very close attention and not just absorbing the music as it goes by, the score comes across as simply having no fixed rhythm at all. Here is a page of the score to illustrate what I mean:¹⁷

The image shows a page of a musical score for Schoenberg's 'Erwartung'. The score is divided into two systems. The first system starts at measure 80, marked 'beruhigend' (calm) with a tempo of quarter note = 100. The second system starts at measure 85, marked 'langsam' (slow) with a tempo of quarter note = 70. The score includes staves for various instruments: 1. kl. Fl., 1.2. gr. Fl., 1.2. Ob., 1. Klar. (B), 2.3. Klar. (A), Bss-Klar. (B), 1.2. Fg., 1.2.3. Hr. (F) m. Dpf., 1.2. Typ. (B) m. Dpf., 1.2.3.4. Pos. m. Dpf., Frau (vocal), Br. m. Dpf., Vcll. m. Dpf., Kirbss. m. Dpf., 1. kl. Fl., 1. gr. Fl., 1. Ob., D-Klar., 1. Klar. (B), 2.3. Klar. (A), Bss-Klar. (B), Fg. 1. and 2., 2.3. Hr. (F) m. Dpf., 1. Pos. m. Dpf., Hrf., and Cel. The vocal line includes German lyrics: 'kommt auf mich zu... Nicht her!... laß mich... Herr... gott hilf mir... Es war nichts, nur schnell, nur schnell...'. The score is characterized by complex, non-rhythmic patterns and frequent changes in dynamics and articulation.

¹⁷ Source: https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/1/16/IMSLP528621-PMLP185510-schoenberg_erwartung.pdf

The basic tempo of the performance also determines how the drama is imparted. A really brisk performance, such as the ones conducted by Hermann Scherchen or Ajtony Csaba, makes everything more taut; the more relaxed performances of Giuseppe Sinopoli or James Levine helps increase the dream-like aspect of the music. You can go either way with it and still be effective, provided that your soprano is locked into both the music and the meaning of the words. Despite the melodic *contour* of the vocal score, actual *melodies* only occasionally coalesce in this score; the vocal part, like the orchestral accompaniment, is frequently in a state of flux, with only some moments here and there where things settle down enough to extend the vocal line into something resembling but not exactly a melody that one can hold on to.

I will, then, recommend one of each type. For the faster style, there is Magda Laszló with Scherchen conducting; for the slower, Jessye Norman—who, in her day, owned this role—with James Levine. I keep returning to the Norman performance most often, however, because it is so attractive vocally and penetrating histrionically.

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As it turns out, we discovered quite a few outstanding operas during the “verismo” era, including a few that were indeed in the accepted “verismo” style, but also a great many works that fit that description from a dramatic standpoint but just weren’t full of Italian tunes. Sadly, we will not encounter any other period from this point on as rich as this one, but there are many operatic miles to travel and works to discuss.