

## Interlude 1

Up to this point, it was fairly easy to incorporate outside elements that affected one's perceptions of opera as drama because they were often part of the composer's stated aesthetic, as in the cases of Monteverdi and Gluck, or integral parts of the opera's presentation as in the operas of Meyerbeer and Wagner, but by the mid-to-late 1920s other, outside elements were in place, or beginning to come into being, which would have an enormous impact on audiences' perceptions of what is dramatic.

The first of these factors was the burgeoning recording industry. Up until 1925, all recordings had been made by the acoustic process, which severely limited the frequency range of a recording to between 100 to 2500 Hz. Occasionally, the range of acoustics could be slightly extended by using a thinner, more sensitive diaphragm, the characteristics of the recording horn and the pliability of the wax, but the bottom line was that mezzo-sopranos and baritones recorded best, tenors and contraltos could have their range severely constricted, and sopranos (the higher the worse) only occasionally sounded like real voices. Although early electrical recording was clearly not high fidelity, it was a big improvement for its time. Using the new microphones, the Western Electric system could finally capture low instruments like celli and basses with something like a realistic sound, which eliminated the need for tubas to substitute for them, and the upper range suddenly jumped from 2500 to around 6000 Hz, after which realistic reproduction declined, but it was enough to make tenors and contraltos sound reasonably realistic for once, and sopranos benefitted greatly from the extended range.

This led to consumers feeling more confident that their financial investment in recordings, provided that they had the new electrical phonographs to play them on, would give them a more dynamic performance, and this in turn enhanced at-home enjoyment of opera. It also allowed the singers to give out more fully in the studio whereas before they had to hold back on certain notes for fear of making the stylus jump out of the groove when recording a wax master. All of this made operatic vocal recordings more dramatically exciting for the listeners, even though the repertoire recorded tended to be on the safe side, meaning the standard repertoire. You could forget about finding most of the innovative music of the day, but recordings of excerpts from *Salome*, *Monna Vanna* and *Nerone* were issued even in the late acoustic period, as were valiant early attempts at Wagner. In the early electrical era one could find extended excerpts from *Pelléas et Mélisande* which had simply not existed before.

Moreover, the operatic singing styles in various countries had reached different points of decadence. Nearly all singers of the bel canto repertoire, but especially the sopranos, had reached the point of singing everything with no feeling for the meaning of the words but also of over-ornamenting the music beyond what the composer had written or permitted, and this was to stay in place until such sopranos as Maria Callas and Leyla Gencer came along in the 1950s. In Germany, a different aesthetic was in place, the harsh, guttural projection of the music—particularly in Wagner—in which the singers used a depressed larynx to give them an artificially darker sound. This became so bad that, after a while, it was referred to as the “Bayreuth bark.” And in Italy, the combination of the emotionally over-hyper verismo operas and, somewhat later, the influence of Chaliapin, led to an entire generation of singers for whom yelling and screaming (but not in a truly dramatic manner) became a substitute for emotion. This unfortunate trend was to continue into the 1960s, a “tradition” kept alive by such singers as Franco Corelli and Mario del Monaco.

The next step in disseminating operatic performances to the public came in the form of sound film shorts made between 1926 and 1932, featuring such singers as soprano Rosa Raisa, tenors Giovanni Martinelli and Leo Slezak, baritones Giuseppe de Luca and Titta Ruffo, etc.

Several of these were performed in costume, which gave theatergoers a good impression of how some of their favorite recording artists moved and acted on the stage. Eventually, even Feodor Chaliapin showed up in a movie, although it was *Don Quixote* and not, unfortunately, *Boris Godunov* (another opera from which extended excerpts were finally recorded).

Yet with the growing tendency towards more modern works, regular operagoers were starting to become restless. Big houses like the Metropolitan Opera tried to limit the damage by presenting some pretty miserable specimens of “new” operas that were more audience-friendly, such as Respighi’s now-buried-in-obscurity *La campana sommersa*, in which popular baritone Giuseppe de Luca was dressed up as a water goblin; Deems Taylor’s two bombs, *The King’s Henchman* and *Peter Ibbetson*; Louis Gruenberg’s *The Emperor Jones*; and Reginald de Koven’s *Robin Hood*. written way back in 1889 but dredged up in the 1920s—ironically, not at the Met but at the Casino Theatre at 1404 Broadway and, I kid you not, at Al Jolson’s 59th Street Theater. This turkey became so popular that by the mid-1930s every school kid in America knew, and could sing, the popular ditty from it, “Brown October Ale,” as well as they knew “Little Brown Jug.”

Although opera in London, Paris, and even Rome was a shade more adventurous, it wasn’t by much. The bottom line is that the big opera houses were doing the best they could to shield their patrons from the changing face of opera. At La Scala in Milan, however, general director Arturo Toscanini was experimenting with some surprisingly new stage designs, particularly those in Wagnerian operas by the now-legendary Adolphe Appia. Appia was among the first to replace two-dimensional painted sets with three-dimensional “living” sets. He believed, according to Wikipedia, “that shade was as necessary as light to form a connection between the actor and the setting of the performance in time and space. Through the use of control of light intensity, color and manipulation, Appia created a new perspective of scene design and stage lighting.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus aside from the innovative music of the operas themselves there was the growing tendency—outside the big media centers—towards more innovative staging and production. The epicenter for this was the Kroll Opera in Berlin on the western edge of Königsplatz Square. The building had, in fact, been around for nearly a century, having first opened in 1848, but it was only after its post-World War I reopening in January 1924 that it really began to take off as the most innovative theater in the world at that time. This occurred in 1927, when it was again detached from the Staatsoper Unter den Linden as a separate opera house, now led by conductor Otto Klemperer. Klemperer made the Kroll Opera a hotbed of dramatic opera innovation, working with such directors as Gustaf Gründgens, Caspar Neher, László Moholy-Nagy, Teo Otto, Oskar Schlemmer and Giorgio de Chirico . Although its influence was stalled by the abominable era of the Nazis, many forward-looking stage directors gravitated to Berlin to see what was going on during those year of 1927-1930. In addition to the innovations in staging, the Kroll Opera is also noted for being the first to create an ensemble company of singers who sang various roles in various operas without the frequent use of “guest stars” in leading roles. Major houses tended to resist this until after World War II, with England being the first to do so, but big barns like the Metropolitan resisted it because “name” singers put fannies in the seats.

The entire Kroll cast was placed in the hands of singing pedagogue Frederick Husler, who later spoke on German radio of the special atmosphere that existed there. According to Husler, the singers they had at the time included “Jarmila Novotna, who later went to New York to the Metropolitan Opera. Or Käthe Heidersbach. She became very famous as Eva in *Meistersinger* in Bayreuth. Or Maria Schult-Stormburg and Moie Vorbach, two very distinct personalities. They went to the other house Unter den Linden later. And a very impressive personality: Iso Golland,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolphe\\_Appia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolphe_Appia)

the Russian. He returned to Russia and has become a highly respected pedagogue.” He described the generosity which existed among the singers: “Their comradeship was extraordinary. No intrigues would arise. I remember that before rehearsals for a performance of *Die Verkaufte Braut* three ‘Brides’ were sitting in my room. Novotna, Heidersbach and Zázilie Reich. I remember them discussing, absolutely unselfishly, who of them should sing. Heidersbach said Novotna was the original Czech. Novotna said that Heidersbach had the more suitable lyric voice, whereas she herself was a coloratura soprano. And Reich then put forward an argument (and against herself) the benefit of the whole group. Where could you find such a thing?”<sup>2</sup>

The answer, in those years, was nowhere...but John Christie took note and, when he founded his own little Glyndebourne Mozart Festival in 1934, he hired conductor Fritz Busch, who had been a part of the modern opera scene in Germany during the mid-1920s, as music director, and Carl Ebert, one of the leading actors in Max Reinhardt’s company during the 1920s and firm believer in ensemble casting, as stage director. As noted above, Glyndebourne, like most British opera companies after World War II, combined ensemble casting with a bit of star power. Ebert brought in such singers as tenor Kolomon van Pataky, soprano Aulikki Rautawaara, baritone Willi Domgraf-Fassbaender and basso buffo Salvatore Baccaloni to beef up his casts, but by and large they consisted of good British singers (including his own wife, soprano Audrey Mildmay) to fill most of the roles in the Mozart productions he created. Once again, it was the War that put an end to all this until the early 1950s, but for six or seven years, Glyndebourne was, in microcosm, a guiding light for what a great opera company could be with a minimum of “outside help.”

Yet in the case of Glyndebourne we’re talking mostly about old operas. Kroll, too, gave new life to war-horses like *Fidelio* and *Bartered Bride*, but they did produce some modern works as well. In America, in addition to the “tonal turkeys” that the Met dredged up, there was also the new entertainment form of “book musicals,” beginning with *Show Boat* in December 1927. The music was by Jerome Kern and, ironically, the book and lyrics were written by Oscar Hammerstein II, son of the guy who had given the Met a real run for its money back in the 1910s with his Manhattan Opera House. Prior to *Show Boat*, Broadway musicals were just “revues” with a slim story line around which a houseful of jokes and songs were hung, but by giving musicals a plot line similar to that of a play the entire form was changed. Many operagoers who were either getting tired of the “same old same old” or who started getting restless once the Met starting performing works like *Pelléas* and *Elektra* switched their allegiance to musicals.

It also didn’t help that, as sound films became more popular and production values improved, legitimate opera stars like Grace Moore and Lawrence Tibbett were appearing in films, several of them (like Tibbett’s *The Rogue Song* and *New Moon*, which paired Tibbett with Moore) part of the new “book musical” form. In time there would be a little more legitimate opera singing in films, such as Tibbett’s *Metropolitan* (1935), yet although he performed a couple of scenes in costume, the movie was essentially a vocal recital for Tibbett with no connection to the dramatic aspects of the operas excerpted. When you combine that with radio programs featuring the great German contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink as “Mother Schumann-Heink,” a kindly old German lady singing popular songs of the day, the entertainment environment was clearly helping to sustain the opera-as-entertainment aspect against the growing tidal wave of new works that were thrilling more adventurous audiences abroad.

And there was something else, one might call it the elephant in the room. Not all of the new operas were particularly good music, by which I mean that, in a effort to be more novel and innovative than the next fellow, certain composers were writing really ugly music that, even to-

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kroll\\_Opera\\_House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kroll_Opera_House)

day, has proven to be unpalatable to audiences despite the brilliance or fascinating drama of the libretto, and not all of these bad operas were written by poor or obscure composers. Even I cannot tolerate to listen to Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, Paul Hindemith's *Cardillac* or Janáček's *The Makropulos Case*. This is something that few of my peers and associates can understand. Those who cling to the old stuff can't stand *most* harmonically advanced operas, and thus don't understand how *I* can like *some* of the innovative works but not all ("It all sounds like noise to me!"), whereas those who love all modern music don't understand how I can reject such "brilliant" works as these. But I've always operated on the principle that, old or modern, the music must make sense to me, thus I can reject these three works (and several others like them) the same way I can reject Donizetti's "Queen trilogy" or Puccini's *Fanciulla del West*. Music that doesn't do its job properly, which to me is the carrying of a dramatic (or comic) message, is not on my radar. But no two people in the world hear music the exact same way, so all I can tell you is what affects me.