

Scene X: Change and Survival (1925-1943)

The difference between operas of this period and the one just preceding it may seem a very fine line to most readers, but in actual practice it became even more complex in terms of musical construction. The gloves were off, particularly after Richard Strauss' modifying of his style to come more in line with popular tastes. It's interesting to note that, until the mid-to-late 1950s, most of those mid-period operas were scarcely performed outside of Germany and Austria—although, to be fair, Puccini's *Turandot* also had no coin outside of Italy, and very little inside it, until the late 1950s as well.

It should also be mentioned that attempts were made by certain composers to write tonal, melodic operas that would appeal to popular tastes. The two most famous are probably Eugen d'Albert's 1903 opus *Tiefland*, a favorite of all those who can't stand the more modern works written during and after that year, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt* of 1920, which still gets occasionally revived for reasons that are utterly beyond me. (It was said that even Korngold's father Julius, who up to that point had been proud of his musical *wunderkind*, complained about the vulgar quality of the music.) But opera had reached a breaking point. Most of the modern composers who wrote operas had decided that, succeed or fail, they would write them the way they wanted to in order to preserve their integrity as well as to get to the heart of truly dramatic music without serving the public's demand for tunes and high notes. And nowhere was this principle more evident than in the first opera to be surveyed in this chapter.

Berg: *Wozzeck* (1914-22, premiere 1925)

Although written between 1914 and 1922, Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* did not get its first performance until 1925, when the famed conductor Erich Kleiber apparently "programmed (the opera) on his own initiative"¹ at the Berlin State Opera. The first performance was on December 14, 1925—a date that will live in history, or infamy for some, as the watershed of modern music. Not too surprisingly for a work of this radical nature, only two singers in the premiere were well-known artists, bass-baritone Leo Schützendorf as *Wozzeck* and tenor Fritz Soot as the Drum Major. The others were little-known artists: Sigrid Johanson (Marie), Waldemar Henke (Captain), Martin Abendroth (Doctor) and Gerhard Witting (Andrés).

Although *Wozzeck* uses the 12-tone scale, it is not completely in the dodecaphonic style established by Schoenberg since it does repeat certain tones before moving on to the next series, and the opera is also written in a fascinating pattern not generally audible to the naked ear when listening. To cite a few examples from Wikipedia:

The opera uses a variety of musical techniques to create unity and coherence. The first is [leitmotifs](#). As with most examples of this method, each leitmotif is used in a much subtler manner than being directly attached to a character or object. Still, motifs for the Captain, the Doctor and the Drum Major are very prominent. *Wozzeck* is clearly associated with two motifs, one often heard as he rushes on or off stage, the other more languidly expressing his misery and helplessness in the face of the pressures he experiences. Marie is accompanied by motifs that express her sensuality, as when she accepts a pair of earrings from the Drum Major. A motif not linked to a physical object is the pair of chords that close each act, used in an oscillating repetition until they almost blur into one another... Berg also reuses motifs from set pieces heard earlier in the opera to give insight into characters' thoughts. For ex-

¹ Walsh, Stephen (2001). "Alban Berg". In [Holden, Amanda](#) (ed.). *The New Penguin Opera Guide*. New York: Penguin Putnam. ISBN 0-14-029312-4, pp. 61-53.

ample, the reappearance of military band music in the last scene of act 1 informs the audience that Marie is musing on the Drum Major's attractiveness.

An almost imperceptible leitmotif is the single pitch B, symbolizing the murder. It is first heard **pp** at the very end of act 2, after Wozzeck's humiliation, after his words "Einer nach dem andern" ("one after another"), and grows increasingly insistent during the murder scene, with Marie's last cry for help a two-octave jump from B₅ to B₃, until after the murder, when the whole orchestra explodes through a prolonged crescendo on this note, first in unison on B₃, then spread across the whole range of the orchestra in octaves.

Berg decided not to use classic operatic forms such as aria or trio. Instead, each scene is given its own inner coherence by the use of forms more commonly associated with abstract instrumental music. The second scene of act 2 (during which the Doctor and Captain taunt Wozzeck about Marie's infidelity), for instance, consists of a prelude and triple fugue. The fourth scene of act 1, focusing on Wozzeck and the Doctor, is a passacaglia.

The scenes of the third act move beyond these structures and adopt novel strategies. Each scene is a set of variations, but not necessarily on a melody. Thus, scene two is a variation on a single note, B[♯], which is heard continuously in the scene, and the only note heard in the powerful orchestral crescendos at the end of act 3, scene 2. Scene 3 is a variation on a rhythmic pattern, with every major thematic element constructed around this pattern. Scene 4 is a variation on a chord, used exclusively for the whole scene. The following orchestral interlude is a freely composed passage firmly grounded in D minor. Finally, the last scene is a *moto perpetuo*, a variation on a single rhythm (the quaver).²

This complex structure gave *Wozzeck* an almost mythic status. It is often used by academics as a yardstick by which to judge, and occasionally berate, other modern operas that do not follow a similarly rigorous pattern. This I find unconscionable; all music should be judged solely on its communicative power, even when complex and modern. I found it interesting, when younger, to learn that critic B.H. Haggin, who generally hated modern music, accepted *Wozzeck* as a masterpiece for those very reasons. He felt that it perfectly captured the confused, borderline psychotic state of mind of the protagonist.

But that is a problem with 12-tone operas. Unless one is trying to project madness or chaos, the angular, anti-legato and anti-continuous vocal lines and orchestra are often unsuited to the subject. This is a lesson that many later composers, to their sorrow, did not learn, and then they blamed the audiences for not accepting their scores in operas that simply did not call for such a style. We will touch on this as the opportunity arises in later chapters, but for now we discuss *Wozzeck* on its own terms. And, interestingly, there are several moments where both Marie and the title character do sing legato lines that have a semi-melodic character. Even the trumpet solo in the first act is semi-melodic; as we shall see, this was also true of Berg's later opera, *Lulu*, but it is by no means true of the majority of later operas composed in this style or in a different but equally complex style. In short, some composers were simply too clever for their own good.

Since *Wozzeck* is undoubtedly the best-known modern opera, a retelling of the story line is unnecessary. What I find utterly fascinating about this opera is the way Berg was able to make every moment, almost every note, count while still maintaining a connection to the text. Although, as noted above, some composers didn't seem to learn from this, some did. And interestingly, *Wozzeck* was performed in America only six years after its premiere, a performance by the Philadelphia Opera Company conducted by Leopold Stokowski, with baritone Nelson Eddy in the title role. Three years later, Adrian Boult conducted a complete concert performance on the BBC; his cast included two of England's finest dramatic tenors, Walter Widdop and Tudor

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

Davies, as the Drum Major and Andrés. Richard Bitterauf sang Hauptmann. This quicker dissemination of a difficult, modern work shows how times were starting the change. Conductors and musicians had finally reached the point where even they wanted to perform more modern and difficult works so long as they felt they were communicative.

Berg was also smart to develop *Wozzeck*'s descent into madness stage by stage, with each succeeding one more intense than the last. His biggest challenge, of course, is that he is living with a "reformed" prostitute who has the hots for the Drum Major, who is bigger, stronger and more handsome than miserable little *Wozzeck*. Marie's music achieves a feeling of sensuality that Berg was to re-channel, in a different way, for *Lulu*, but which later 12-tone composers almost completely neglected. Some of her music even borders on the erotic, an incredible feat considering the idiom he was working in. And of course, one of the finest parts of the score is the scene in which *Wozzeck* walks into the river, trying to recover the knife he used to kill Marie, as rising chromatic sequence of strings accompany his exclamation, "Das wasser ist blut!" ("The water is blood!").

Insofar as recordings go, there are two that I prize, the early-1960s recording with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (*Wozzeck*), Gerhard Stolze (Captain), Evelyn Lear (Marie), Fritz Wunderlich (Andrés) and Helmut Melchert (Drum Major), conducted by Karl Böhm, and the more modern version with Carl Johan Falkman (*Wozzeck*), Ulrik Qvale (Captain), Katarina Dulayman (Marie), Klaus Hedlund (Andrés) and Sten Wahlund (Drum Major), conducted by Leif Segerstam.

***Honegger: Judith* (1925)**

Swiss composer Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) was actually born in France and spent most of his life in Paris. He was, for the most part, better known for his avant-garde orchestral scores, not only his five symphonies but also the short tone poem *Pacific 231* which became something of a popular modern work in the 1930s. He didn't write many operas, and in fact his first four were unfinished and abandoned, but with *Judith* he struck on an excellent formula using his astringent harmonic language and terse musical structures to produce a 44-minute work of compact density and intense emotions. The libretto, taken from the Sophocles play but distilled into a terse, compact form by the distinguished Swiss writer and playwright René Morax, worked perfectly for Honegger's methods.

The downside of such a condensation of the original is that it provides little of the surrounding events depicted by Serov in his 19th-century opera on the same subject. The benefit was that it tightened the story to its basics, which of course was Judith's beheading of the invader Holofernes, which in turn allowed Honegger to create a tense musical drama with few moments of musical or dramatic relaxation. It is, perhaps, not really as effective as a *staged* opera than it is as a *concert* opera, but no one can say that it isn't highly strung or effective.

Typically for Honegger, he worked in a bitonal style which sometimes leaned towards tonality or at least towards modality, yet the score of *Judith* does not use key signatures of any kind, meaning that, technically speaking, it is in C—yet even from the bottom of the second page of the piano score he is already throwing in numerous accidentals (mostly flats, but by page three some sharps are mixed in) indicating that this music is harmonically fluid, at times even leaning towards atonality. Yet the "ground bass" of the opera and its sparse but highly effective orchestration, including a piano, keeps leaning towards tonality. This score sample shows how he kept things "open" yet dense at the same time:³

³ Source: https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/3/35/IMSLP735051-PMLP594493-Honegger_Judith_VS.pdf

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system features a vocal line (soprano) and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "cinq jours... le secours n'est pas ve - nu, nous fe - rons droit à vos pri -". The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "è - res, et nous rendrons la ville au terrible... Ho - lo - pher.ne. Re - ti - rez". There are some markings like 'p' (piano) and 'A' in the piano part, and a circled '7' above the vocal line in the second system.

Although there are only two characters in the opera, Judith and her maidservant, Honegger included a nameless soprano, a chorus (from which, at one point, a wordless baritone voice emerges), and a male narrator to further condense the story. Taking the vocal line by itself and reading through it without seeing the accompaniment, one could easily imagine this music set to quite “normal” harmonies and rhythms, but even in the latter case Honegger kept shifting things around. Despite its tight structure, the music is not consistently fast or edgy; there are several moments of relaxation within it, sometimes strictly choral, which gives the music considerable breadth. Yet the opera is completely through-composed; in fact, its structure is almost symphonic in its use of thematic development. An opera it may have been, but Honegger wasn’t about to abandon his normal composition methods. As in his oratorio, *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, Honegger managed to create excellent “visual” imagery in his music. Even without seeing a stage production, one can easily follow the story through the music alone. This is no small achievement; many a great composer could not do so as consistently as Honegger did in this work.

There are two excellent performances on record. The earlier one, which I prefer for its edginess, stars Natania Davrath (Judith), Blanche Christensen (Handmaiden) and Madeleine Milhaud (narrator), conducted by Maurice Abravanel. The later one features Brigitte Balleys (Judith), Liliana Bizineche (Handmaiden) and Oers Kisfaludy (narrator), conducted by Michel Corboz.

Szymanowski: *King Roger (Król Roger)* (1924, premiere 1926)

If *Wozzeck* went to other countries relatively quickly, Karol Szymanowski’s *King Roger* went almost nowhere after its premiere for many decades. As a child, Szymanowski was fascinated by the hypnotic power of the Russian Orthodox Church’s religious music though he never joined that religion, and wanted to write an opera dealing with the mesmeric trappings of religion. He and his cousin, Jarosław Iwaskiewicz, wrote the libretto which concerns the enlightenment of the Christian King Roger by a young shepherd who represents “pagan” ideals—he

sees God in nature. After the latter is introduced to Roger and his court, both the Archbishop and the crowd demand that he be punished for being a “heretic.” Ironically, Roger’s wife, Roxana, convinces Roger to not kill him but to pass a fair judgment. Roger orders the shepherd to appear at his palace in the evening, where he will explain himself and then await judgment. When he does appear, Roxana sings a shockingly seductive song to him which arouses Roger’s agitation. As the shepherd describes his faith in detail, the entire court becomes increasingly sympathetic and eventually joins him in a dance of ecstasy. Roger tries to put him in chains but he breaks loose, leaving the palace with almost all of Roger’s courtiers following him as a new Messiah. In the last act, Roger and the Arab scholar Edrisi join Roxana at an ancient Greek theater where the shepherd is holding sway. Roxana tells Roger that only the shepherd can free him of his fear and jealousy; a fire is lit, the shepherd’s followers again begin an ecstatic dance, then they all leave together. Left alone, Roger is transformed, singing a joyous hymn to the morning sun.

This was one of the rare operas of the early 20th century to question established religion as Meyerbeer and Wagner did in the 19th, and sadly, it still has repercussions in modern-day Poland, where the Roman Catholic Church is asserting a theocracy and trying to force all of its citizens to buckle under to its demands. Although Szymanowski’s piano music and symphonies are occasionally performed in that country, *King Roger* remains an outlier on the opera stage. As has been noted by most critics who listen to it, the music is incredibly beautiful and sensuous. Szymanowski created his own little “cathedral of sound” with his blended wind, string and brass mixtures, taking the aesthetics of Debussy and Ravel to a whole new level. He even had his own way of blending the chorus’ music into the orchestral fabric. Tonality is often ambiguous but generally not that far from harmonic consonance. The vocal lines are for the most part strophic but not nearly as angular or far from what was generally accepted by audiences in those days. Like Nielsen’s *Saul og David*, it is a symphony for voices and orchestra that also happens to connect with the dramatic meaning of the text at the same time. Nearly every note and gesture in the score is perfectly placed and perfectly judged; there are no holes or lapses in it. Another interesting feature of the score is that, although it is not based on Middle Eastern modes or scales at all, it has a hint of the Middle East about it, such as the soprano’s high, ecstatic, wordless vocal in the first scene of the second act. And yet, the opening orchestral music of Act II put me in mind of Debussy’s *La Mer* (Szymanowski even uses a little two-note motif taken from Debussy’s score, played by the French horn, which he repeats several times.)

King Roger has only a few loud or dramatic moments, generally when Roger gets agitated but occasionally when the shepherd ecstatically expounds his religion. The ecstatic outburst of the enraptured chorus of people in the last act is one of the most astonishing passages in the entire history of opera; it is certainly among the most unique. Even by just seeing the piano score, one can glean the creative genius that inspired Szymanowski in creating this work. Here are excerpts from Act II, part of the orchestral introduction followed by a page with vocal lines:

The image displays a musical score excerpt from Act II of *King Roger*. It features a piano introduction on the left and vocal lines on the right. The piano part is written for both hands, with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The piano introduction begins with a first ending bracket labeled '1' and includes dynamic markings such as *sf* (sforzando) and *pp* (pianissimo). The vocal line on the right is marked with a '3' and a '7', indicating the start of a vocal phrase. The score is presented in a standard musical notation style with various ornaments and articulation marks.

König Roger. (mit Nachdruck) - Król Roger. (z mocą)

98

Lento maestoso. 64

K.R. Wo - her kommst du?
Skąd i - - dziaasz?

f dolce

diminuendo - molto

p poco allargando

sf

Detailed description: This system contains the first two systems of music for 'König Roger'. The first system is for the voice (K.R.) and piano accompaniment. The voice part has the lyrics 'Wo - her kommst du?' and 'Skąd i - - dziaasz?'. The piano part features a 'dolce' dynamic and includes a triplet. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with dynamics 'p', 'poco allargando', and 'sf', and includes a triplet and a fermata.

65 Andante. Hirt. (mild)
Pasterz. (ze słodyczą)

Aus fer - nem Sü - den
Zu - smie - chu po - tud -

Andante.

pp dolce

p

p

Detailed description: This system contains the first two systems of music for 'Hirt (Hirte)'. The first system is for the voice and piano accompaniment. The voice part has the lyrics 'Aus fer - nem Sü - den' and 'Zu - smie - chu po - tud -'. The piano part is marked 'Andante' and includes dynamics 'pp dolce' and 'p'. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with dynamics 'p' and includes a triplet and a fermata.

66

Hl. Pa. hell und licht, Weit durch die
nio - wych gwiazd. ślad sto - py

pp

p dolce

Detailed description: This system contains the first two systems of music for 'Hl. Pa.'. The first system is for the voice (Hl. Pa.) and piano accompaniment. The voice part has the lyrics 'hell und licht, Weit durch die' and 'nio - wych gwiazd. ślad sto - py'. The piano part includes dynamics 'pp' and 'p dolce'. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with dynamics 'p' and includes a triplet and a fermata.

U. E. 7750.

(Source: https://www.petrucclibrary.us/files/imglnks/music_files/PMLUS02579-Szymanowski_King_Roger_VS.pdf)

Even moreso than Wagner's *Parsifal*, Szymanowski's *King Roger* created its own universe of ecstatic sound, within which the drama fits, and flows, organically. It remains one of the most stunning creations in the entire history of opera, yet the Royal Opera, Covent Garden never performed it before 2015 and the Metropolitan in New York has never staged it. Yet we continue to get performances of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Nixon in China* and *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

On balance, the best recording is the one with Wojtek Drabowicz (King Roger), Piotr Beczala (Shepherd), Olga Pasichnyk (Roxanne) and Romuald Tesarowicz (Archbishop), conducted by Jacek Kasprzyk, although Pasichnyk's trills are a little blurry and the Edrize, Krzysztof Szmyt, has an absolutely dreadful voice in every respect (poor tone, excessive vocal strain and a wobble).

1926 was also the year that saw the premiere of Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, but although there are many remarkable things in it, particularly the orchestration, when you come down to it it's not a particularly dramatic work. As in the case of *La Bohème*, that doesn't mean that I don't like it; I do to a point; but let's face it, the story is so thin it could have been covered in a 50-minute opera and still have had time to spare to toss in those utterly superfluous characters, Ping, Pang and Pong, for a couple of minutes instead of boring us with them for four minutes in Act I and another nine minutes in Act II. And to be honest, if you thought Puccini's *Il Tabarro* sounded anachronistic in 1918, *Turandot* sounded even more out of place in 1926. Thus we will drop the curtain on *Turandot* and move on to something more interesting.

Schoeck: *Penthesilea* (1924-25, premiere 1927)

Othmar Schoeck (1886-1957) was a Swiss late-Romantic composer who was particularly noted for his art songs and song cycles, but he also wrote operas, none of which had quite the impact or the lasting value of *Penthesilea*. His penchant for Germanic music stemmed from his composition studies with Max Reger, but in 1916 he met Ferruccio Busoni who had moved to Zurich to get away from World War I. They had significant differences between them, since Schoeck admired the songs of Hugo Wolf and Busoni hated them, yet they developed a mutual respect and then a great liking for one another. Busoni, in fact, was the one who suggested that Schoeck set Holberg's *Don Ranudo de Colibrados* as an opera. From 1918 onwards there was a significant shift in Schoeck's musical style, thanks in part to Busoni's influence and his visit with Arthur Honegger in 1923. *Penthesilea* was the first and most inspired product of this change.

Schoeck wrote the libretto himself, basing it on the story of the same name by Heinrich von Keist. It concerns the tragic love between Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, and Achilles. The latter defeats the former in battle, but falls in love with her, but because Amazon law stipulates that a warrior can only associate with a man she has defeated, he tells her that *she* defeated *him*. Under this assumption, they fall in love, but eventually she learns the truth and her love turns to absolute hatred. Achilles offers a second battle, at which he plans to come unarmed and let her win, but Penthesilea is so overwhelmed by her hatred that she savagely kills him. (In the heel, of course.)

Unlike Puccini, who dragged the two-scene story of *Turandot* and Calaf out to two hours, Schoeck compressed his much more complex—and dramatic—story into roughly 80 minutes. He also used some advanced techniques to give his music interest. British composer Robin Holloway has noted similarities of themes to Strauss' *Elektra*, but Schoeck used some devices of his own such as the contrast between C and F# major as the underlying basis of the opera, thus making it bitonal.

Once again, we hear an opera which is essentially a long modern symphony with solo voices and chorus, and if you think *Elektra* was challenging, *Penthesilea* is the doctoral thesis on pre-*Wozzeck* German operas. In fact, except for the fact that Schoeck uses several segments of

dialogue spoken over the orchestra, to the naked ear there are some similarities to Berg's opera, not least of which is that it does not just *call* for great singing-actors but absolutely *demand*s them. From the very beginning, Penthesilea must come across as a woman whose emotions are raw and very near the breaking point, as this is one of the underlying reasons for her position of power. Interestingly, the music in *Penthesilea* flows much less than either *Elektra* or *Wozzeck*; it is, rather, almost continually based on sharp, asymmetric rhythms. This keeps the music in an almost continual state of flux; and yet, within this complex web of sound, Schoeck managed to write music that perfectly mirrored the words and moods of the characters through their shifting emotions. One thing it most certainly does is to define not only Penthesilea in particular, but the Amazons in general, as primal, almost brutal women who act and react based on pure emotion rather than reasoning or planning. In such an atmosphere, it seems incredible that Achilles would believe that such a woman could possibly love him.

But Schoeck somehow makes this plausible by backing off a little from the intensity when she exchanges a dialogue with him...not much, but a little. Nonetheless, although Achilles comes across as a man with some strength within him, he is clearly not as close to being psychotic as Penthesilea is. Her "love" for him seems to be a means of escape from her normally febrile nature, and this in itself is an extremely interesting dramatic angle.

Schoeck wrote a much more varied orchestral score than the one Strauss crafted for *Elektra*, often pulling back from the full ensemble, using only small string, brass or wind choirs to support his singers. He also included two pianos, which make their appearance sparsely but tellingly here and there. And, at roughly the 30-minute mark, he actually wrote an aria for the title character, with spoken lines over sweet, salon-like strings (and piano) in the middle, which then turns into a love duet with Achilles—then cuts off short. It was a rare concession to popular tastes in a work that otherwise challenged audiences in an edgy manner; yet, as the duet continues, it builds in volume, tempo and intensity until it becomes almost overpowering, a modern-music parallel to the *Tristan* love duet. Another interesting feature of the title role is that, although in the early part of the opera the soprano singing the title role stays continually high up in her range, much of the music (and particularly this love duet) is written very low in her range, calling for a voice much closer to contralto. This, it seems, was not accidental; the first Penthesilea was Irma Tervani, a Finnish contralto who, in addition to this role, also sang Wagner and Bizet's *Carmen*...yet left us few recordings. The only one I could locate was a song called *Merellä*, which reveals a pretty voice but zero drama. But who knows unless one has heard something different by her? This duet, like the one in *Tristan*, builds to an exciting climax—not one of ecstasy and love, but rather one of hatred, as Penthesilea learns the truth of their battle. She explodes in rage with a raw-sounding chorus of Amazons wailing in the background; he tries to alleviate her angst, but to no avail. Penthesilea is pissed, and she means business.

As wonderful and innovative as *Penthesilea* is by itself, it eventually opened the door, 40 years on, to the acceptance of other modern German operas that were also edgy and violent-sounding that 1) had no business being so consistently edgy, because the libretti did not warrant it, and/or 2) were so abrasive to the audience's ears that it almost made *Penthesilea* sound like *Der Rosenkavalier*. In its time and place, however, it was a remarkable achievement, and still remains impressive today when performed well.

Despite the consistently wobbly singing of Theo Adam as Achilles, the best of the modern recordings (there are only two, really) is the one that also features Helga Dernesch as an excellent and consistently intense Penthesilea, Jane Marsh as Prothoe and Marjana Lipovšek as the High Priestess, conducted superbly by Gerd Albrecht, but if you want a really intense performance that will stay with you long after it is finished, you should also get the performance with Martha Mödl (Penthesilea), Eberhard Wächter (Achilles), Paula Brivkaine (Prothoe) and Res

Fischer (High Priestess), conducted by Ferdinand Leitner.

Stravinsky: *Oedipus Rex* (1927 concert premiere, 1928 stage premiere)

Like Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust* and Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* is classified as an opera-oratorio, but whereas the Berlioz piece is only rarely presented as a fully staged work, both *Samson* and *Oedipus Rex* are almost always given on the stage. Despite the fact that Stravinsky had to resort to a concert performance for the work's premiere in May of 1927, it was given as a fully staged opera in Vienna in February 1928, but both its stark music and relative brevity (it runs under an hour, and until recent decades was not usually coupled with Stravinsky's earlier opera, *The Nightingale*) made it an outlier in other opera houses until the early 1960s. Since then, however, it has been a frequent visitor if not a steady member of the standard repertoire.

Compared to *Wozzeck* and *King Roger*, *Oedipus Rex* is fairly straightforward music. Its harmonic language is largely tonal but with frequent leanings in and out of tonality, its sung lines alternate between sung recitative and semi-*arioso* melodies, and its rhythms are fairly easy to follow. It was, along with his later oratorio *Persephone*, the culmination of Stravinsky's neo-Classical period, and is, like *Wozzeck*, hailed internationally as a great work of art.

As I alluded to earlier in this book, the language barrier of opera is often a sticking-point, particularly since only a small minority of operas, and particularly successful operas, have been written in English, yet one must make an attempt to preserve the language used by the composer because his (or her) music is generally geared towards not only the rhythms but also the subtle shadings and accents of that particular language. Stravinsky insisted that all of the singers' lines be delivered in Latin *because* it was a "dead language," but he was very clever to insist that the spoken lines introducing different scenes in the drama be given in the vernacular of whatever country it was being performed in.

Probably because of Stravinsky's musical style in this period, *Oedipus Rex* has a timeless sound about it. The most grating thing in it for neophyte listeners more familiar with Verdi and Puccini is the sound of the orchestra. Whether consciously or not, Stravinsky followed in the footsteps of Berlioz in creating an orchestral sound that relied heavily on astringent wind sounds, pushing the strings pretty much to the background. This sound was perfect for a Greek tragedy like *Oedipus Rex*. In this work, too, Stravinsky made the chorus a "character," realizing that this was also an aspect of Greek drama, and in fact the choral writing in *Oedipus* is one of its greatest glories. It is here that he not only constantly varies the balance of the voices in the chorus (which is all-male) but also the rhythms. Interestingly, too, the role of Creon is generally sung by a powerful baritone while the title role is sung by a light, high tenor. I've always felt that this was done to emphasize Oedipus' helplessness in the hands of fate. What he did was immoral but not done on purpose; he had no idea that Jocasta was the widow of the old king he had killed on the road (his father) without knowing who he was or that Jocasta was his wife.

There are arias—Stravinskian arias, of course, which means that they are largely constructed of strophic lines—for Creon, Oedipus, Tiresias and, eventually, Jocasta, and hers is the most melodic and lyrical of them all. They are delivered in as powerful a style as the singers can muster although, as already mentioned, the high-lying voice of the tenor singing Oedipus somewhat defuses this as in the case of countertenors who sing Gluck's *Orfeo*. Yet even with this handicap—if you consider it such (the Shepherd in *King Roger* also has a high, light voice, despite being the pivotal character in the drama)—*Oedipus Rex* has a powerful effect on audiences. Its almost relentless *ostinato* rhythms, particularly in the choruses, bespeak tragedy in and of themselves even if the top line of the music had been weak, which it is not. Indeed, *Oedipus Rex* is one of those truly rare operas in which the drama is so completely imbedded in the music that

all you need to put it across are strong voices who can deliver the lines without wobbles or vocal strain; adding extra interpretation on top of that is not necessary or, in fact, even much of a help. But you *do* need those kinds of voices to make the drama work, in addition to a conductor who fully understands the relentless drive of the music. The final chorus, in which the people say goodbye to the disgraced, blind Oedipus, is perhaps a bit cheerier in its rhythm and melodic line than one would like; perhaps a slower, more measured pace would have worked better; but in toto, this is still an astonishingly moving work.

The best overall performance is the one Stravinsky conducted in 1951 with Peter Pears (Oedipus), Heinz Rehfuss (Creon), Otto von Rohr (Tiresias), Martha Mödl (Jocasta) and Helmut Krebs (Shepherd), onto which Columbia Records spliced in a French narration by the librettist, Jean Cocteau, for release on LP, but the live 2022 performance on DVD with AJ Glueckert (Oedipus), Alex Esposito (Creon), Adolfo Corrado (Tiresias), Ekaterina Semenchuk (Jocasta), and Massimo Popolizio narrating (also in French), conducted by Daniele Gatti is the preferred version among stereo and digital recordings. You might, however, also wish to acquire the early Colin Davis recording in which Sir Ralph Richardson narrates in English.

Honegger: *Antigone* (1924, premiered 1927)

After using the Old Testament for *Judith*, Honegger turned to Greek tragedy. Although there is no real difference in musical *quality* between this opera and *Judith*, *Antigone* has attracted more attention because the libretto was written by Jean Cocteau, who was at the epicenter of the modern French art movement in the 1920s. Interestingly, he and Cocteau had a falling-out in 1921 over the former's *Le roi David*, which both Cocteau and Darius Milhaud detested, but they mended their fences by 1924. Honegger offered the completed work to the Paris Opéra, which rejected it for being too modern, thus it premiered at the Royal Theater de la Monnaie in Brussels in December 1927, part of a double bill with Milhaud's *Le pauvre matelot*. For the premiere, they used Pablo Picasso's sets and Coco Chanel's costumes created for a 1922 performance of the play. After eight further performances, *Antigone* was premiered in Essen (using a German translation) in 1928 and in New York by the American Laboratory Theatre, a short-lived school/acting lab that taught the Stanislavsky method, in 1930.

Unlike *Judith*, which only had two characters (not counting the narrator), *Antigone* had the whole gang: Antigone, Ismène, Eurydice, Créon, Hémon and Tiresias. None of the original singers were well-known—the lead role was sung by Simone Ballard, La Monnaie's house contralto of the time, and she was the most prominent—and the conductor was the regular at the theater, Maurice Corneil de Thoran. Though often praised, it is seldom revived today.

There is clearly an advance in Honegger's writing even since *Judith*. The edgy, bitonal orchestral opening, which only lasts a few bars, leads immediately into strophic lines, almost a form of French *Sprechstimme*, as the drama unfolds. Indeed, this score has a surprising number of features in common with *Wozzeck*; one wonders if Berg's score provided some inspiration to Honegger. In any event, it is clearly one of the edgiest and most radical scores he ever wrote. Honegger wrote a preface to this opera of his intention to “envelop the drama with a tight symphonic construction without the movement seeming heavy,” but there are moments, such as the massed choral-orchestral passages, where the music is indeed heavy, in fact underscored by rumbling tympani, and this type of scoring sometimes bleeds into the vocal lines which follow. (It was also the first classical piece to make use of the musical saw, here called a “flexatone.”) Yet the composer did manage to at least keep the orchestral writing uncluttered, if not really light, thus leaving holes in the mid-range so the singers' words could be clearly heard. Here, as in many of these modern operas, tight, well-focus voices, perfect pitch and clear diction count.

Although the strophic writing for the singers is dramatically effective, it clearly didn't help

its accessibility for audiences. In *Wozzeck*, one at least had constantly shifting scenes and characters to help audiences become accustomed to it, but in *Antigone* the characters simply come out, speech-sing at each other in a fairly noisy style, and then move off to make room for the chorus or different characters. In this respect, it was more like a play with music than an opera in the sense that people had become accustomed to during its century of extreme popularity (1820s to 1920s), yet in a sense it is a modern descendant of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. Three hundred years had simply changed composers' senses of harmony and rhythm. Yet *Antigone* is effective as a dramatic work, whether one stages it or performs it in concert, because its continual bustle and frequent edginess throw the characters and their situations into sharp relief as well as matching their confusion. One interesting feature of the score is the way Honegger used the specific rhythms of the French language at times as part of the music; one might also say that he used the French vowel-sounds in a musical manner as well, matching them with the instruments.

There is only one recording of this work I could find, but it is a good one, with Geneviève Serres (*Antigone*), Claudine Verneuil (*Ismène*), Janine Collard (*Eurydice*). André Vessieres (*Tiresias*), Jean Giraudeau (*Créon*), Bernard Plantey (*A Guard*); Bernard Demigny (*Hemon*) and Michel Roux (*Messenger*), conducted by Maurice le Roux.

***Janáček: From the House of the Dead* (1928, premiered 1930)**

Here we have yet another opera left partially unfinished at the composer's death. Janáček worked on it almost consistently between February 1927 to June 1928, feeling that his time was short and he had to complete it before he died. The score was found on his desk under his dead body, similar to the fate of Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, although Janáček was much further along in its completion. Only the final scene was unfinished, yet two of his pupils, believing the orchestration was incomplete, filled out large portions of the score (according to Wikipedia) and also changed the ending to make it less pessimistic. Decades later, more of the finished score was discovered and the original ending was restored.

Many musicologists view this dark, pessimistic work, set in a Siberian prison, as an analogy to Janáček's finally accepting his rejection by Kamila Stösslová. The libretto describes the individual situations, likes and dislikes of the various prisoners, among whom is the political prisoner Alexandr Goryantchikov, who is flogged by the prison guards by order of the prison's warden. At one point in Act II, the prisoners stage a play about Don Juan and Kedril as well as a pantomime about a beautiful but unfaithful miller's wife. There is only one female singer, a mezzo-soprano "trouser role" of the young Tartar Aleya, who is befriended by Goryantchikov. When the latter teaches Aleya how to read and write, the young Tartar is ecstatic. One prisoner, Luka, is dying of tuberculosis; another goes mad. The most interesting feature of the story is about Akulka, the daughter of a rich merchant (although she does not appear in the opera), who Filka Morozov, a friend of the prisoner Shishkov, claimed to have seduced, but who was married to Shishkov who discovered that she was a virgin. Yet when Shishkov found out that she still loved Filka, he killed her. Ironically, it is only after Luka dies that Shishkov recognizes him as really being Filka. The only somewhat cheery moment in the entire opera comes at the end, when Goryantchikov learns that he had been pardoned and the prison guard who flogged him apologizes for doing so.

The music is bitonal bordering on atonal and the rhythms change fairly often, but the extreme dynamic range and incredibly complex cross-lines of Szymanowski's score for *King Roger* are not to be found here. Janáček's score almost looks "normal" to the untrained eye, but is clearly not. What did surprise me, however, was that the music in this opera isn't nearly as abrasive or flat-out annoying as that in *The Makropulos Case*.

Here, as in so many of the modern operas we are discussing, the role of the conductor is of

paramount importance. He (or she) *must* establish a tense, edgy mood that continues throughout the performance, and unfortunately most conductors do not. And once again, having a cast of outstanding singing actors who have both good voices and interpretive skills is a must. One of the few missteps that Janáček made in this opera is the overture or orchestral prelude (whichever you wish to call it), which goes on for seven minutes—at least half too long. This is the kind of opera you want to get into as quickly as possible, and a seven-minute overture doesn't cut it. As is often the case in works like these, however, Janáček wisely did not break off the music or slow down the pace once he reached the sung portion of the opera.

I've been thinking about the consistently strophic quality of the sung music in most of these operas. Did these composers have to write everything this way in order to maintain drama? Surely, a few ariosos here and there couldn't have hurt; you don't have to be Puccini-ish in order to inject some lyricism. But this was clearly the trend of the time, and if you haven't noticed, composing trends tend to not only be cross-influential but also keep going for long periods of time. Although this is getting ahead of ourselves, there was a point during the revival of lyricism from the late 1970s through the mid-1990s when it seemed as though every composer was at least trying to write arias and ariosos, hoping to capture an average audience, but these were written in a far different style from the set aria format established during the bel canto period and maintained through the time of Puccini. The few times composers tried to emulate that older style, the results were generally inferior Verdi, or Wagner, or Giordano or Puccini. Some listeners have ascribed this to a lack of talent on the part of modern composers. This may indeed be true to a point, but it's not the whole answer. The full answer is much more complex than that, and the first thing to keep in mind is that the best composers of the past, such as Verdi and Wagner, invented so many attractive melodies that even they sometimes ran out of inspiration for them. Even they wanted to write operas with *less* such pieces in them, which they did, and these turned out to be their less popular works. In a nutshell, I think that composers simply said to themselves, I'll write the way I feel the music should go and leave it at that.

But the one thing that writing in a personal modern style did for these composers and their operas was to kill "tradition," by which I mean a sense of musical style which later singers doing older music could modify to their own personal way of phrasing and dynamics shadings. Just to discuss tenors for a moment, there were numerous different shades of phrasing, slight or more exaggerated modifications of tempo (*rubato* and *rallentando* effects) or dynamics, not to mention the ubiquitous addition of unwritten high notes, which stamped their singing as very personal despite singing the same repertoire as every other tenor in their category within the "standard repertoire" did. This was not only accepted by operagoers but encouraged and rewarded with buckets of applause; but this kind of "tradition" simply would not work within the tighter frameworks of these modern operas, where keeping to the score meant just that and nothing more. In a way, this was a good thing, as it ensured more musically consistent and accurate performances, and eventually this spilled over to the standard repertoire as well, and this too was a good thing, but the lack of variety in one's vocal approach to opera came to irk the average listener. Slowly but surely, "vocal tradition" died off, and audiences were not happy campers.

Composers like Janáček, Stravinsky et. al. were not interested in creating "musical beauty" because their operas were much deeper and more meaningful than those of old. They were interested in creating, as Mussorgsky did, "musical truth." And as Leonard Bernstein once said at a lecture in Boston in 1972, "I believe that, no matter how serial or stochastic or otherwise intellectualized music may be, it can *always* qualify as poetry as long as it is rooted in earth."

Just listening to *From the House of the Dead* is a fascinating and all-absorbing experience. Despite the lack of truly melodic music in the vocal lines, Janáček created, as he had done in *Jenůfa* and *Kat'a Kabanova*, lyrical episodes, particularly in the orchestral accompaniment

which in this case acts more as a support for the action and less as a psychological depiction of the characters' states of mind, but also occasionally in the vocal lines. This is especially true in the music for Aleya, whose music is sweeter and less abrasive than that of the older, more hard-bitten male prisoners. (You wonder what Aleya was doing in a Siberian prison; he probably stole some food because he and his family were starving.) Even the orchestral music is lighter in mood during the scenes with Aleya. As is *Kat'a Kabanova*, Janáček also did an excellent job emulating a Russian style in this score (such as the music at about the 40-minute mark (in Act II), which sounds, again, a bit like Varlaam's aria from *Boris Godunov*), albeit more mixed here with Czech rhythms. Watching a good stage performance of the opera, however, would surely redouble the dramatic impact, but unfortunately modern-day "Regietheater" directors have ruined this experience for us as they have with dozens of more conventional repertoire operas.

I've scoured online sources for various performances of this work, but although there are a couple of pretty good recordings, none equals the sustained intensity of the live performance featuring José van Dam (Goryantchikov), Hubert Delamboye (Lukas/Filka), Jiří Sulzenko (Commandant), Gaële le Roi (Aleja) and Jerry Hadley (Shishkov), conducted by Marc Albrecht.

***Wellesz: Die Bakchantinnen* (1928-29, premiere 1931)**

If Henry Février and his *Monna Vanna* are forgotten and obscure, much the same can be said about Egon Wellesz and his opera *Die Bakchantinnen*. Born in Vienna in 1885, his parents were Hungarian Christians but had some Jewish ancestry; Wellesz had a Protestant upbringing but later converted to Roman Catholicism. Like so many other composers, Wellesz started out in another profession, in this case law, but decided to devote himself to music after attending a performance of Weber's *Der Freischütz* staged by Mahler at the Vienna Court Theater. Wellesz' first composition teacher was none other than Arnold Schoenberg (the latter's first private pupil), in addition to Guido Adler, who founded the musical institute in Vienna in addition to being musical editor of the Austrian *Denkmäler*. These dual influences, according to Wikipedia, influenced most of Wellesz' mindset in both music and scholarly musical research. His 1913 string quartet was published by Universal Edition, which made him also the first of Schoenberg's pupils to get one of his works into print. In 1922, Wellesz, Rudolph Reti and others founded the Internationale Gesellschaft für Neue Musik, which became the International Society for Contemporary Music a year later, with its headquarters in London. Wellesz' musical links to England turned out to be helpful in 1938, when Hitler invaded Austria and Wellesz, by a stroke of luck, was in Amsterdam to hear one of his orchestral works performed. This allowed him to get out of Europe and go to Great Britain, where he spent the remainder of his life. He died in 1974.⁴

Perhaps unfortunately, when in England, Wellesz spent the bulk of his time doing extensive scholarly research on the music (including opera) of the 17th-century Byzantine era. Among his musicology pupils were the well-known Spike Hughes, Frederick May and Nigel Osborne.

Die Bakchantinnen or *The Bacchae* was technically his fourth opera if one does not count the "stage drama" concert work *Die Opferung des Gefangenen*. It was based on one of Euripides' last dramas, *The Bacchae*, which concerns King Pentheus of Thebes, his mother Agave, and their punishment by the normally-friendly god Dionysus (Pentheus' cousin) who arrives in Thebes all ticked off because his aunts have been spreading the lie that he is not the son of Zeus. To prove this, Dionysus intends to introduce his rites into Thebes and show the King and the people that he is the real deal. Typically of Greek drama, it has a cheery ending: Pentheus is torn apart by the women of Thebes, and Agave bears his head on a pike to her father, Cadmus. Wikipedia tells us that this is considered to be one of Euripides' greatest plays. Although Wellesz wrote his own

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egon_Wellesz

libretto, he remained faithful to Euripides' play.

Die Bakchantinnen's music is somewhat atonal but not consistently so; on the contrary, there is a surprising amount of melody in its sung lines, even those for chorus. It also has a frequently regular rhythmic structure (albeit with changes from a straight 4 to 3 or even 5 now and then), which makes it easier for an audience to acclimate. At the same time, Wellesz zeroes in on the drama in a way that I found similar to Gluck's best operas; since he was a musicologist, I'm willing to bet Wellesz was quite familiar with Gluck's Greek-based dramas. The first solo voice we hear is not that of Pentheus but Dionysus, who is really the principal character of this drama. This music is rather more strophic in character, and thus more modern-sounding, yet it, too, has more melody than we heard in the operas of Szymanowski or Janáček. I would say, honestly, that this arioso (for such it is) was somewhat modeled after Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, which, as I pointed out, was in its own way more melodic than *King Roger* or *From the House of the Dead*. Some of the orchestration (but not all) also sounds Stravinskian, using those biting, acerbic wind and brass combinations to create unusual orchestral colors. This actually puts Wellesz' music more in line with the sort of thing that general audiences were getting used to, which makes the lack of widespread success for *Die Bakchantinnen* relatively surprising.

As in the case of *Il Tabarro* and *Wozzeck*, the orchestra indicates the state of mind of the individual characters, just not quite as frequently. Wellesz also (rightly) makes the chorus an important "character" in the drama, following the principles of Greek drama. By and large, the characters only sing one at a time, too, which is also in line with Greek drama practices. Unfortunately, I see this as a handicap for its working onstage, similar to the problems faced by *Nerone*. Audiences simply won't sit still for long monologues by the principal characters, particularly if they don't have attractive melodies they can hum along with in their heads. This, I'm sure, is one of the main reasons why *Die Bakchantinnen* is so infrequently performed. Once again, we encounter an opera that is in the tradition of Handel's *Samson* and Berlioz' *Damnation de Faust*, a great musico-dramatic work that functions best in a concert setting. Let's face it: when Greeks or Romans start arguing in a drama, they tend to go on for a bit.

If anything, the opening music of Act II is more lyrical than that of Act I, but the meter changes are more frequent and thus more confusing to the average listener. Some of the vocal lines are also a bit more angular and delivered with more dramatic force as the drama becomes ever more intense—yet the first extended choral section is extremely soft and melodic. There is also more interaction in this act between the various characters, sometimes, up to three of them are singing in the same scene, and thus I could see this as something that could be staged dramatically as well as sung that way. One thing is certain: with the course of the music always in some state of flux, the music is far from boring or monotonous. You clearly can't claim, as some have of *Pelléas*, that the music "never gets going." It goes, all right, though not necessarily in a direction that some listeners will find comfortable. Yet the soprano role of Queen Agave has several high notes within it, just not "terminal" high notes at the ends of ariosos with pauses afterward so the customers can explode in applause and bravas.

I've located three commercially issued recordings of *Die Bakchantinnen*, but for me the greatest performance is the live one from Vienna in 1985 featuring baritone Heinz Jürgen Demitz (Dionysos), soprano Brenda Roberts (Queen Agave), bass Wolfgang Müller-Lorenz (King Pentheus), bass László Polgár (Teiresias, the Seer) and conductor Peter Gülke.

Casella: *La donna serpente* (1928, premiered 1932)

This is a really strange one. Outside of this opera, Alfredo Casella (1883-1947) is a pretty well-known composer whose instrumental works are often performed, but except for a few rare revivals *La donna serpente* has fallen off the face of the earth. It's based on a fable of the same

name by Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806), one of the few highly respected Italian dramatists of his time, which had been previously used by Wagner for his early opera *Die Feen*. (Another one of his stories was the basis of Puccini's *Turandot*.) The plot concerns a fairy princess, Cherestani, whose marriage to a mortal Farruscad was opposed and given a curse-like condition by her father, the fairy king Demogorgon. Farruscad is made to swear never to curse Cherestani, no matter what she does. If he does, she will be transformed into a snake for 200 years. Casella changed the names of the principals to Miranda and Alidór.

Those familiar with Casella's instrumental music will immediately recognize his style from the short prelude to the opera: lyrical and Italianate, with just enough bitonality and altered chords to make it sound somewhat modern. Indeed, even this small snippet from the piano score will give you an excellent idea of how he handled his musical materials:⁵

The image shows a musical score snippet for 'Tempo di Marcia' by Casella. The score is in 3/4 time and marked 'Tempo di Marcia' with a tempo of 126. It features a 'Trombe' part with 'molto marcato' dynamics and a 'Tubi militari' part. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings like 'ff' and 'p'. A section marked 'allargando' leads to a section marked 'a tempo'.

I've always thought of him as the next step up from Montemezzi and Respighi stylistically, but in the body of the opera Casella uses the same kind of frequent key tempo changes (and occasionally, fast key changes) that characterized some of the music we reviewed in the previous chapter. Here, however, he varies the approach to the vocal music much more than many of the other modern composers who preferred strophic settings. He uses strangely serrated lines (fast notes set apart by a third or more, sung in a rapid style) for the fairy king and his daughter Miranda, which to my ears showed the influence of Stravinsky. At the same time, he gives Demogorgon lines that emphasize his demanding nature while Miranda's, though no less edgy, seem a bit diffident, as someone who has the same genes but is used to cowering before him. Since the

⁵ Source: <https://www.nkoda.com/instrument?ref=27418248-6317-42b9-a445-0dcb9653f853>

libretto is in Italian, it also has a patter-like quality about it, something like Rossini but not as cheery despite the use of rapid tempi.

About 11 minutes into the first act, Casella pulls back on the rapid tempi to present a quieter, more legato section played by the strings—but it doesn't last long, and we are soon back to the nervous, lumpy rhythms of the opening scene, only now strictly instrumental for a while. Nothing in this score, however, sounds hackneyed or mechanical. His meticulous musical mind took every facet of the score into consideration, and this fairly long instrumental passage has an excellent development section. Indeed, the superb pacing of this score is what separates it from *Die Feen*, where Wagner's "long half hours" got very much in the way of what he was trying to convey. Later on in the first act, when Alidór arrives, *his* music has more of the semi-parlando style we are familiar with from other works of this period and a bit earlier. It was as if Casella tried to make a distinction between the way the fairies talked (sang) and the mortal did.

But giving a scene-by-scene description of *La donna serpente*, or even generally characterizing each act, is self-defeating because the pleasure is all in the listening. Like Gozzi's original story, Casella's opera is both a dramatic and a semi-comic work: a 20th-century updating of Mozart's *chiaroscuro*. (Lorenzo Fiorito, writing on the website bachtrack in July 2014, likened it to *Die Zauberflöte*.) The whole opera, if well conducted and sung by first-class voices, is a treat for the ears; despite the occasional slow moments, the music flies by you like greased lightning. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that there is not really another opera in the entire world that sounds like *La donna serpente*. This was a one-of-a-kind stroke of genius.

The second act opens with just a couple of bars of light, bouncy strings before the singers enter, this time with somewhat more strophic lines but still with many lyrical moments. It is conversational but not monotonous musically; Casella even has the two male voices singing opposite each other in counterpoint. Indeed, not only the mood but the rhythms and harmony undergo more frequent and more rapid changes in this act than in the first. In my mind, while listening to it, I could envision an imaginative (but not idiotic) stage director coordinating the movements of the characters on stage to the musical rhythms, which I think would be most effective. One of the vocal ensembles, which includes a chorus, reminded me somewhat of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition despite the fact that it was taken at a slow tempo and sounds somewhat serious in tone; the succeeding passage, sung and played very quickly, sounded on the other hand quite dramatic. In this way, too, Casella upsets our expectations on how the music should go. We really can't tell from one moment to the next. No matter if the current situation of the moment is comic, dramatic, or a combination of both, the music mirrors it perfectly. The music in the third act leans more towards the serious side, with much less of what, for lack of a better term, I'd call his "serious-Rossinian" style, but the music does not drag or become tedious (or predictable) in any way.

There are a couple of recordings of this opera available, but the best by far is the live June 1959 performance with Magda Laszlo (Miranda), Mirto Picchi (Alidór), Guido Mazzini (Demogorgon), Laura Londi (Armilla) and Plinio Clabassi (Togrul), conducted by Fernando Previtali.

***Shostakovich: Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934)**

Dmitri Shostakovich's first successful opera—and, as it turned out, his most successful—was based on a novella of the same name by Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895), who was also known as M. Stebnitsky. Despite this, the libretto by Shostakovich and Alexander Preys has several differences from the original.

The opera's (and the novella's) title suggests that the principal character of this drama shares the same evil nature and lust for power of the original Lady Macbeth, but such is not the case. In this story, Katerina Ismailova, unhappily married to the merchant Zinovy, complains about her loneliness. Her father-in-law Boris complains that she is lonely because she hasn't

produce an heir for his son, who as it turns out, is sterile. Although she swears to Boris that she will remain faithful to Zinovy, she begins an affair with a young workman named Sergei. With his encouragement, she murders both her father-in-law and her husband (in that order), which then makes her the owner of his mill, but her crime is discovered. Both she and Sergei are arrested, tried, and sent to a Siberian prison, where he falls in love with a female convict named Sonia. Enraged, Katerina wrestles with Sonia, and both are plunged into the river where they drown.

This cheerless plot is so typically Russian you can almost smell the vodka as you listen to or watch it, but it was this very fatalistic story that evoked both passionate admiration and equally passionate condemnation from the time of its premiere in 1934. In 1962, hoping to soften it a bit for public consumption, Shostakovich revised it and retitled it *Katerina Ismailova*, but as he told his good friend Mstislav Rostropovich, he preferred the original version, thus the revised score is rarely performed.

One of the more interesting things about the music is that it is not consistently edgy, as in the cases of Stravinsky, Janáček or Wellesz, but it is not “lovely” lyrical music either. Rather, it occupies a sound world halfway between these two extremes, sometimes breaking out in astringent, bitonal passages but generally sounding sad and gloomy rather than irritating. Moreover, in this work Shostakovich modified his usual style of somewhat vulgar orchestration, focusing much more on the strings and using the orchestra to both accompany the sung lines and make occasional commentary on the evolving story. Also of interest is that he avoided writing strophic lines for the singers as Szymanowski had done in *King Roger*; the majority of the vocal music has a melodic contour though it does not break out into arias or duets. Even the solo monologue for Katerina does not have a conventional “aria form,” although it is as close to an aria as she gets in the entire work.

Yet as I say, the almost continually dark atmosphere of the plot and its evolving characters can get rather heavy for many listeners. Next to Greek drama, Russian drama is surely among the least happy in the world; if you simply reflect on the plots of any Russian dramatic work, even a predominantly lyrical one like Glinka’s *A Life for the Czar*, there never seems to be any light at the end of the tunnel for any of the characters. If they don’t bring their fate upon themselves, which is generally the case, fate has a way of dumping six tons of scrap metal on their heads. Plain and simple, Russians are generally not happy campers.

Another thing to note is that *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* is one of the most word-specific scores ever written. The accents and rhythms of the Russian language are as much a part of the *sound* of the opera as the orchestral score. Even the little pauses at times between syllables is factored into the music. They are so inseparable, in fact, that no matter how clever the translation, no matter how well it fits the rhythm of the music, the overall “sound” is all wrong. Of course, this is the case with a great many operas going all the way back to Gluck, but this one is almost a *locus classicus*, the standard by which to judge opera in translation. Much better to read a translation on projected Super Titles than to hear the wrong language.

The second act is particularly noisy in the scene where Zinovy catches Sergei sneaking out of his bedroom window, catches him and whips him in public as a burglar. Yet even in the quiet passages in this act, the lyricism of the first act is gone. In place of the soft, lyrical strings, one hears edgy wind and brass mixtures to underscore the relentlessly growing drama.

There is only one truly excellent recording of this opera, the early (1978) digital one with Galina Vishnevskaya (Katerina), Werner Krenn (Zinoviy), Dimiter Petkov (Boris) and Nicolai Gedda (Sergey), conducted by Mstislav Rostropovich. All the other recordings have shrill, unsteady and/or downright unpleasant voices in the cast, which get in the way of appreciating the drama of the music.

Vaughan Williams: *Riders to the Sea* (1927, premiere 1937)

In the midst of edgy, “problematic” operas that alienated general listeners, Ralph Vaughan Williams wrote this extremely creative but surprisingly accessible one-act work in 1927; yet, because it was a short one-act drama using small forces (both a moderate-sized orchestra and only five solo singers), the larger opera houses in England and Scotland took a pass on it when he finished it in 1927. It was not premiered until a full decade later, and then at the Royal College of Music in what was essentially a student performance. It remained the province of student and amateur performers for the next 15 years until it was finally staged at Sadler’s Wells in 1953.

The opera’s libretto was written by the composer, based on the story of the same name by John Millington Synge. It concerns a working-class Irishwoman named Maurya who has lost her father-in-law, husband, and four of her six sons to the sea. (One would think that, after the first couple of deaths, the rest of the family would think about going into raising cattle or making Irish whiskey as an alternate career choice, but apparently they loved going out on big boats and not coming back home.) As the opera opens, her daughters Nora and Cathleen receive word that a body has been found and that it might be their brother Michael. Happily for this beleaguered family, the sixth and last son, Bartley, is planning to go to the Galway Fair to sell horses, but unfortunately the only way to get there is to ride along the seacoast. Maurya begs him to stay, but he refuses to do so; she predicts that by nightfall, she will have no living sons, but blessed him anyway in the hopes that her prayers will protect him. In the meantime, the clothing of the dead man confirms that it is indeed Michael. When Maurya comes back from seeing Bartley off, she claims to have seen the ghost of Michael riding behind her last son, and predicts that he, too will die. And he does. The end.

When I say that the music is largely tonal, I rush to add that it is not consistently so; in fact, the orchestral prelude and some of the accompanying orchestral figures are often bitonal, although they often resolve tonally. Like so many British composers of the time, including Frank Bridge and his protégé, the young Benjamin Britten, he did an excellent job of simulating the sound of waves washing up on the shore, in his case often by using loud cymbal washes across the winds and strings. The sung lines, however, are largely strophic; in this case, he was very much of his time and place, although the vocal music is quit moderate in its vocal range, emphasizing the words and not putting any undue strain on the singers’ ranges. It s very much a mood piece, and in a way the orchestra actually dominates. It would not have been difficult for Vaughan Williams, who was a first-rate symphonist, to have turned *Riders to the Sea* into a symphonic synthesis lasting perhaps 18 minutes or roughly half the length of the complete opera.

Maurya’s tragic losses and heartbreak, for instance, is portrayed by a forlorn-sounding solo oboe, playing against low strings; the rhythmic movement of the vocal line is insistent although set to irregular meters, but the orchestral movement seems more amorphic, playing against the sung lines in a cross-current of sound. All of this took enormous imagination to produce; what sounds relatively “simple” to the untrained ear is far from it when you examine the score:

24 [14] Poco più mosso

Fl. *f*

Ob. *p*

B. Cl. *p*

Bn. *p*

Hn. *loos sord.*
 Solo — from the west and south? If it is-n't found it-self, that wind is rais-ing the
14 *Poco più mosso*
 Vn. 1
 Vn. 2
 Va. *pizz. p cantabile*
 Vc. *pizz. p*
 D.B. *p*
 Fl. *22*
 B.Cl.
 Ba.
 Hn.
 Solo sea, and there was a star up— e-against the moon, and it ris-ing in the night...
 Va. *arco*
 Vc. *arco*
 D.B. *arco*

(Source: https://petruccimusiclibrary.ca/files/imglnks/caimg/ffd/IMSLP601163-PMLP252260-Vaughan_Williams_-_Riders_to_the_Sea.pdf)

As I say, for someone like Vaughan Williams, this sort of musical balancing-act was, if not exactly child's play, not too difficult to pull off. Ever since the period in which he wrote the song cycle for tenor and piano quintet, *On Wenlock Edge*, he had had an excellent grasp of musical structure as well as a wonderful knack for projecting both dark and light moods in a subtle way. To my ears, at least, the orchestral score of *Riders to the Sea* is simply an expansion of what he did in that earlier song cycle, adding a few little Stravinsky-isms (most composers of this era were affected if not directly influenced by Stravinsky) to the French impressionist world of *Wenlock Edge*. Absolutely nothing in this score is out of proportion to any other part of it; the music is neither too verbose nor too terse, but exactly right for what he was trying to project. I believe it

was the most perfect British opera since Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, the principal difference (other than the vastly more open harmonic language) being its being a continuous piece without pauses or breaks between its sections.

Parts of it are more emotionally affecting than others; one of the best moments comes in Maurya's declaration that "Bartley will be lost now," in which the alternately long-held notes and emotional swelling of the strings redouble the dramatic impact of the singer's delivery. Later in this scene, the other singers, in the background, form a small chorus behind her, giving the scene an even more haunting quality. (Young Ben Britten clearly knew this score; he adapted this scene for Peter Grimes' mad scene seven years later.) Vaughan Williams also ramps up the drama by slowly but insistently increasing both the volume and the tempo in its amorphous way.

In its own way, *Riders to the Sea* shared the same "flaw" as Verdi's *Don Carlos* in that it was too subtle for its time. Just as average operagoers run from hard-hitting, tonally abrasive dramatic works, they are "bored" by music that depends on subtlety for its message. Plain and simply, they just want to be hit over the head by a big voice belting out music they can follow and throwing in high notes whether written or not.

There are at least two excellent recordings of this opera, the one with Kathleen Reveille (Maurya), Nicole Percifield (Cathleen), Evanna Chiew (Nora) and Gary Griffiths (Bartlett), conducted by Łukasz Borowicz, and the one with Linda Finney (Maurya), Lynne Dawson (Cathleen), Ingrid Attrot (Nora) and Karl Daymond (Bartlett), superbly conducted by Richard Hickox.

Berg: *Lulu* (premiered in 2-act vers., 1937; 3-act vers., 1979)

As if *Wozzeck* wasn't "bad enough" for audiences to assimilate, Berg next worked on *Lulu*. Based on two plays by Frank Wedekind about a morally ambiguous young woman who attracted men like flames draw moths, *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box*—both written around the same time that Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis were being put into practice—it was sure to create a scandal when finally produced, just as Georg W. Pabst's 1929 film version (starring American actress Louise Brooks as Lulu) had done.

Male sexual desires do not merely run through *Lulu*; to paraphrase playwright Joseph Kesselring, they fairly gallop. The male characters in this opera fairly go berserk with desire for this woman, who opens the opera as a high-class mistress, becomes Dr. Schön's wife, then slowly but surely descends to the level of a prostitute. Walter Schwarz, an artist, Dr. Ludwig Schön and his son, the artist Alwa, and an old man named Schigolch all pursue Lulu, sometimes leading to physical violence. Eventually, as a hooker, Lulu becomes involved in a lesbian relationship with Countess Martha Geschwitz. Just at the point where the Countess resolves to leave this sordid relationship, return to Germany to become a lawyer and fight for women's rights, Lulu and then she are brutally murdered by Jack the Ripper.

The surprising success of *Wozzeck* made Berg financially independent enough that he could work on *Lulu* uninterrupted by other demands starting in 1929 (the year of Pabst's film), but unfortunately he died on Christmas Eve 1935, leaving the third act incomplete. Nonetheless, his reputation was so high as a composer at that time, thanks as much to his late Violin Concerto as to *Wozzeck*, that the incomplete two-act version was premiered in Vienna in 1937. In the 1970s, Austrian composer Friedrich Cerha was finally able to complete and orchestrate the Act III sketches that Berg left, with the finished opera finally premiering in 1979. Unlike the completed *Moses und Aron*, the completed *Lulu* has become the standard edition of the opera.

Musically, *Lulu* picks up where *Wozzeck* left off. Indeed, Berg's obsession with symmetry led him to write *Lulu* as a sort of musical palindrome, the most obvious of which is the contrast between the splendor that Lulu lives in at the opera's opening to the squalor of her environment in the end. According to Wikipedia,

This mirror-like structure is further emphasized by the film interlude at act 2 at the very center of the work. The events shown in the film are a miniature version of the mirror structure of the opera as a whole (Lulu enters prison and then leaves again) and the music accompanying the film is an exact palindrome – it reads the same forwards as backwards. The center of this palindrome is indicated by an arpeggio played on the piano, first rising, then falling (shown here on the top staff).⁶



Yet in some ways, *Lulu's* music is sometimes more lyrical than that of *Wozzeck*, possibly to defuse some of the violence and sexual tensions in the story. There are moments, particularly in the first act, where the music has a flow similar to the more relaxed moments in Strauss' *Elektra*. In the orchestration, too, Berg uses the strings as a section more frequently than in *Wozzeck*. There are also stretches of spoken dialogue, a feature that does not appear in *Wozzeck*.

Berg also added a whimsical touch to the opening. An “animal trainer” step out of the wings, whip in hand, and introduce a “rare specimen” to the audience: Lulu, who comes out and, for the first and last time in the opera, steps out of character to preen for the audience as if she were a maid for hire. It's the only comic moment in this otherwise grim story, but it works in the sense that it defuses much of what you see thereafter. You've been warned that she is not a real person, but a theatrical creation.

Here, too, many of the *parlando* lines as well as the spoken lines have a distinct musical rhythm of their own which matches the orchestral score. This is different from *Wozzeck*, where the rhythm of the sung and *parlando* lines often runs counter to the orchestra. This was a further refinement that Berg brought to this score. At times, in fact, his writing for the strings is downright lush, although avoiding a simply “pretty” sound...yet his tempo and meter changes are so frequent, and so abrupt, that it is very difficult to memorize the title role in particular.

Moreover, singing and conducting *Lulu* with a more lyrical style brings out a surprising amount of beauty in the score that is not apparent when it is presented in an angular style *à la* Karl Böhm or Pierre Boulez, and this more lyrical flow is entirely in keeping with the Viennese style. If you listen, for instance, to the Erich Kleiber-conducted *Wozzeck*, despite its being sung in English, you will note a similar pattern, and so far as I know Berg never once complained about the way Kleiber interpreted his first opera. Also, the way one interprets the principal character is of paramount importance. Although her music is fiendishly difficult to sing, not only because of the strange intervals but also due to the extremely high tessitura of the role, singing it in a lyrical style not far removed from the way one would sing, for instance, Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*, gives the character a more coquettish quality so long as you don't overdo it. You get enough drama out of the male singers, particularly from Dr. Schön in his duet with her at the end

⁶ Boulez, Pierre (1979). *Lulu – The Second Opera*. Griffiths, Paul (translator). DGG CD booklet, pp. 28–33.,

of Act I, without making Lulu sound a bit shrewish. In fact, I will go so far as to say that the more perfectly (and effortlessly—that is *always* a key) the title role is sung, the more the opera makes sense. Lulu must always sound as if her seductive personality is embodied by beautifully-placed high notes, effortless trills and little seductive turns or *grupetti* in the music—the very things that those who love *Lucia di Lammermoor* or *La Traviata* live for—only here set to largely atonal music which gives her entire persona an other-worldly sound. (The first Lulu was a singer with the unlikely name of Bahrija Nuri Hadžić, the first Bosnian soprano to achieve an international career—yet she never made a single recording.) In the Act II scene, “Wenn sich die Menschen um meinetwillen,” Berg emphasizes this by pitting her high notes and *staccati* against a running pizzicato bass line.

Musically, the reconstructed third act sounds like Berg but not exactly, particularly the orchestration which suddenly shifts from an emphasis on high strings and winds to French horns, which were seldom heard in the first two acts. There are also moments, as in the section “Ich brauche nämlich notwendig Geld,” where the music actually sounds microtonal—a nice effect, but not something Berg himself ever really experimented with. But it’s effective and, from a theatrical standpoint, necessary to round off the drama. It should be pointed out that, even today, some productions of the opera omit the third act because it isn’t completely by Berg.

There are two truly outstanding recordings of the opera. My performance of choice is the 1991 one with Patricia Wise (Lulu), Wolfgang Schöne (Dr. Schön), Peter Straka (Alwa), Graham Clark (Painter), 82-year-old Hans Hotter (Schigolch) and Brigitte Fassbaender (Countess Geschwitz), conducted by Jeffrey Tate, although if you can find it, the 1996 performance with Christine Schäfer (Lulu), Wolfgang Schöne (Dr. Schön), David Kuebler (Alwa), Norman Bailey (Schigolch) and Kathryn Harries (Countess Geschwitz), conducted by Andrew Davis, is nearly as good.

***Hindemith: Mathis der Maler* (1935, premiere 1938)**

Mathis der Maler (*Matthias the Painter*) was, in my view, Paul Hindemith’s operatic masterpiece. Written as a subtle rebuke against the intrusion of the Nazis on artistic freedom, it concerned the life of Matthias Grünewald, the famed late 15th-early 16th-century painter whose work, particularly the Isenheim Altarpiece, influenced many early 20th-century artists. Like several operas before it, it also put religious beliefs into question, depicting the public demonstrations (and sometimes riots) which took place in those years between the Roman Catholics and the then-new Lutherans.

And yet, it was a masterpiece that failed, despite his writing in a surprisingly accessible (for him, anyway) musical language. Eventually, wanting to salvage what he felt were the best musical themes and ideas from the opera, Hindemith wrote his symphonic synthesis using the same title. This, ironically, has become an iconic and popular concert piece for symphony orchestras while the opera itself continues to languish, largely unperformed.

It is the height of irony that when Hindemith completed his opera in 1935, he could not get it performed in Germany due to Nazi censorship, despite the fact that the composer didn’t have a drop of Jewish blood in him. But the Nazis detested him because he was the closest thing to a dissident. They initially ignored him, but by 1935 branded his music as “decadent,” and the underlying political message of *Mathis der Maler* was pretty much the last straw. It was finally given its premiere in Zurich in May 1938, but not performed again until the following year in Amsterdam, after which it disappeared until the 1950s. It was given in Edinburgh in 1952, then in Cologne, Germany and Boston, Massachusetts in 1956 before disappearing from the boards.

In the opera, Grünewald decides that he can’t continue his comfortable life as a court painter while the peasants are struggling for justice in the streets. Though he joins their revolt on

moral grounds, he is repelled by their violence. As a result, he takes refuge in the forest, dreaming that he is St. Anthony who was the subject of his Isenheim altarpiece and paintings. In a scene based on one of the panels, St. Paul the Hermit tells him that it was wrong for him to turn his back on his God-given artistic gifts, that he must offer “the holiest creation of your inmost faculties” to become “great, a part of the people.” Matthias thus returns home and finishes his life in a draining, creative burst of energy.⁷

Yet there is much more to the story than this. Some of the violence of the mob, for instance, is a riot between the Lutherans and Roman Catholics; a Cardinal arrives and promises the merchant Riedinger to countermand an order to burn books, but later gives in to Pomerfeld, who points out that he cannot defy Rome. Mathis, reunited with Riedinger's daughter Ursula, makes a passionate plea to Albrecht not to join in the suppression of the peasant's revolt. The peasant army, capturing the Helfensteins, marches the Count to execution and humiliates the Countess. Asked for their demands, one of the peasants replies, amongst others, that they do not accept any ruler save the emperor. Mathis remonstrates and is beaten down. The federal army arrives and the disheartened peasants prepare for battle but are quickly overrun; Schwalb is killed and Mathis barely saved by the Countess. He flees with the orphaned Regina. So there's a lot more going on here than just Mathis wrestling with religious ideals.

As I noted earlier, in this opera Hindemith made a conscious decision to avoid the harsh, bitonal quality of his previous opera, *Cardillac*, instead using surprisingly tonal (but not banal) harmonies and melodic lines which, if not conventional in the more lyrical style of Strauss, were nonetheless easily assimilated by the average listener. I also find it interesting that, although Hindemith was, to a certain degree, questioning the efficacy of organized religion in the face of a tyrannical political regime—and the Roman Catholic Church, specifically Pope Pius XII, did nothing to excommunicate or even issue public proclamations against Adolf Hitler—he inevitably turned to the “God within” Mathis/Matthias as the inspiration for his creative work, stating that because he had this gift it was the means by which he could most effectively make a statement, but that the finished art must come from his inspiration and NOT be based on his political beliefs. It's an interesting moral tightrope that he walked, and is one of the reasons why *Mathis der Maler* is such a fascinating work.

Another surprise is that the orchestral prelude is quite long, about nine minutes. In an era when composers were getting to the action in their operas in considerably less time, this in itself was unusual. The vocal lines are not strophic in the way that Szymanowski's were, but actually closer in style to late Strauss. Although the harmony is primarily tonal, it moves and shifts beneath the vocal lines. To a certain extent, this is what Strauss would do in *Daphne*, and although the rhythms typically change frequently, the emphasis on a somewhat conventional rhythmic base diffuses their “strangeness,” letting the listener assimilate them more easily. In the early going, there is even a remarkable chorus which simulates religious music, and quite successfully, too. This is clearly the most accessible Hindemith composition next to his song cycle, *Das Marienleben*. Even when things become more agitated (immediately following the scene with the chorus), there is only a little of his normal edginess, and again, he keeps the rhythms fairly regular. And all the while, the music mirrors the words and dramatic situation perfectly. In order to give the music some popularity, Hindemith also included a female character, in this case Regina who is the daughter of the peasant revolt leader Hans Schwalb; she has a fairly long duet with Mathis in Act I. Later on, he also threw in another female voice, that of Ursula who is the daughter of the wealthy Protestant Riedinger, but like *Boris Godunov*, this is an opera that focuses on

⁷ Reduction of plot synopsis at <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/710/symphony-mathis-der-maler#:~:text=Hindemith's%20Mathis%20story%20is%20based,justice%20is%20exploding%20around%20him.>

the male characters and particularly on Mathis.

Hindemith continued to produce interesting yet still somewhat accessible music throughout the score, even in the somewhat aggressive-sounding chorus of peasants at the beginning of Act II. Here, the harmonies are more astringent, reflecting the hostile mood of the peasants, and it is set to a muscular 6/8 rhythm. In the choral writing, however, Hindemith resorts to using open fourths and fifths, which (again) gives the music an edgy quality, but then again, this scene isn't supposed to sound cushy or comfortable. As the music proceeds through the second act and into the third, in fact, the vocal lines—though clearly not repeating the same notes in the classic strophic style—become choppy and less melodic, although the composer still grounds most of the score in tonality.

By and large, however, the opera is not only dramatic but exciting to hear. It covers a lot of ground, dramatically and philosophically, in its three hours' length, giving the audience a lot to absorb and consider. In short, it is a complex work involving religious, philosophic and political elements, with enough going on onstage to keep an audience involved in the story. For the life of me, I don't know why it is seldom performed nowadays and, in the rare occasions when it is, roughly 20 minutes' worth of music is usually excised from the score. It's an interesting and gripping story set to interesting and largely accessible, if not lyrically beautiful, music.

Although there are a few recordings available, the best overall is still the one with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (Mathis), James King (Albrecht), William Cochran (Hans Schwalb), Urszula Koszut (Regina) and Manfred Schmidt (Capito), conducted by Rafael Kubelik.

***Strauss: Daphne* (1938)**

For many listeners, I think, Strauss' *Daphne* is yet another of his "throwaway" operas. It's relatively tonal, has very few harmonically edgy moments, and just seems somewhat innocuous. But from the first time I heard it, I fell in love with it. I heard the various layers he put into the music, the way he constructed both the sung lines and the orchestral accompaniment, and immediately realized that, although it was clearly not *Elektra*, it was a masterpiece.

Subtitled a "Bucolic Tragedy in One Act," *Daphne* was written as a gift for conductor Karl Böhm, who was a champion of all of Strauss' popular operas and attracted the admiration of the composer. The libretto by Joseph Gregor, a relatively late collaborator of the composer, was based on the legend from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with elements from Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Daphne is a chaste "nature sprite" who enjoys living in the woods, sings hymns of praise to nature, but although she care for him she cannot return the love of Leukippos and refuses to don ceremonial clothes for the coming festival of Dionysus. Her mother, Gaea, tries to nudge Daphne in the direction of marriage but she will have none of it. Her father, Peneiros, tells his friends that the gods are planning to return to earth and advises preparing a feast to welcome Apollo. Suddenly, a stranger appears; Peneiros calls for Daphne to take care of him.

The stranger tells Daphne that he has observed her from his chariot, repeats her hymn to the sun, and tells her she need never be parted from it, but when he starts to talk of love she becomes tearful and runs out. During the feast of Dionysus, Leukippos is dressed by the women in one of Daphne's frocks; joining in with the women, he then invites Daphne to dance. Thinking he is a woman, she agrees, but the stranger stops the dance with a thunderclap and says she has been deceived. He reveals himself as the god Apollo, but when Daphne refuses his advances, he takes it out on Leukippos by killing him with an arrow.

Although Daphne did not want to marry Leukippos, she loved his sweet and gentle nature and mourns him deeply. Apollo, repentant, asks Zeus to give her a new life as one of the trees she loves so much, which would also extend her life-span. She is transformed into a tree, singing a rapturous, almost mystical melodic line for the finale.

Ever since Böhm's 1964 recording of a live performance with soprano Hilde Güden in the title role, critics have pushed for her kind of very light, silvery soprano as being "ideal" for Daphne, but prior to that the role was *never* sung by so light a voice, nor has it been sung often by such a voice since. The original Daphne was Margarethe Teschemacher, a soprano with a pretty but fairly large voice who also sang Aida and the more lyrical Wagnerian roles of Elisabeth and Elsa. In 1944 Böhm performed it again with Maria Reining, who also had a lyric soprano voice; other Daphnes have included Anneliese Kupper, Rose Bampton, Renée Fleming and June Anderson, all of whom had fairly large lyric voices, thus we can see that the "Güden syndrome" is simply an affectation on the part of several powerful critics who feel that they can push their readers into agreeing with them. It should also be pointed out that all of the recorded performances before 1982, including both of Böhm's live performances, had cuts in the score.

Lyrical and bucolic *Daphne* may be, but if you listen carefully it is clearly much better-written than any Strauss opera since *Elektra*. Not just the themes, but their musical development, are exemplary; everything holds together well, and the scenes actually include some quite dramatic music (even in the orchestral prelude) that are clearly first-class Strauss. The vocal lines, though seldom coalescing into aria form, suit the mood and situation of the words and drama perfectly. Once again, we have before us a "symphony for voices and orchestra," one might even say Strauss' finest symphony since its only real rivals are the *Alpine Symphony* and the *Sinfonia Domestica*, both of which the composer called "tone poems for large orchestra."

One of the delights of *Daphne*, which you will notice if you listen carefully, is that the orchestral chords "move" with the singers, up and down as the vocal line moves, providing an underlying cushion of sound which also redoubles the rhythmic movement of the music. In Daphne's opening monologue, too, one hears the rush of strings (from the basses up through the violins) behind her at one point, emphasizing the meaning of her words. There is no question that *Daphne* is even more harmonically *conservative* than all those operas between it and *Rosenkavalier*, but it is far more *creative*. There is much about *Daphne* that puts you in mind of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, particularly the chorus of women who dress up Leukippos as a woman in order to lure Daphne into dancing with him. Even the ballet music celebrating the feast of Dionysus (which uses a chorus) is folded neatly and organically into the score. One could go on and on about the wonderful things in this work; there are so many layers to it that it takes several listening to unpeel them all; but the delight is in the listening, not in reading about it. *Daphne* is a feast for the ears that keeps on morphing and evolving from first note to last. The musical invention never stops or becomes formulaic, every aspect of the score fits together like a giant jigsaw puzzle, and although the drama is clearly a mild one when compared to *Elektra*, it is, in its own unique way, a model for other composers to study and appreciate. I just can't say enough about *Daphne*, but of course the most extraordinary music of all is Daphne's transformation scene at the end. This is music so magical that it even makes the wonders of Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* sound ordinary. Years later, Strauss tried to write a deeply felt piece called *Metamorphosis for Strings* with a similar form but absolutely no emotional content to equal the finale of *Daphne*.

Insofar as recordings go, I am of the opinion that conductor Semyon Bychkov "owned" this opera—his performances of it have a rapturous quality about them that even surpasses Böhm—thus both of my recommendations are conducted by him, the 2004 live performance with Ricarda Merbeth (Daphne), Walter Fink (Peneios), Marjana Lipovšek (Gaea), Michael Schade (Leukippos) and Johan Botha (Apollo) and, even better, the 2005 studio recording with Renée Fleming as Daphne, Anna Larsson as Gaea, Kwanchul Youn (back in the day when he didn't have a horrendous wobble in his voice) as Peneios, and both Schade and Botha reprising their roles from the live version.

***Sutermeister: Romeo und Julia* (1940)**

Heinrich Sutermeister (1910-1995), not to be confused with Heinrich *Cornelius* Sutermeister (1792-1855), was a Swiss composer who became famous almost overnight as a result of this opera, written and premiered before he turned 30. Commissioned by conductor Karl Böhm, who led the premiere performance in Dresden and hailed the composer as a “genius,” it spread across Europe like wildfire, but its last major performance seems to have been at Sadler’s Wells in the mid-1950s.

Sutermeister was clearly influenced in his musical style by Carl Orff as well as by Igor Stravinsky, yet although Orff was still considered a vital contemporary composer in the 1950s, Sutermeister’s work was deemed too conservative for the new postwar fashions in new classical music, thus both he and this opera were forgotten. The sole recording of this work, made in 1980 with a fine cast, was assembled for the studio only. No live performances of it occurred at that time, or later.

Yet British music critic and professor of music Erik Levi has hailed its genius. According to Wikipedia, he has claimed that this opera “presents a synthesis of Romantic and impressionist elements. It marks a ... return to the conception of opera as a sequence of closed forms, incorporating ... stylistic features related to madrigal, oratorio and pantomime.”⁸

When I wrote a review of this work on my blog in November 2020, I came to the conclusion that, although it was extremely interesting in places, it was not quite as musically satisfying as a musical representation of Shakespeare’s play as Berlioz’ “dramatic symphony” and Prokofiev’s ballet score, but at that time I was not listening to the opera specifically as a representation of the story as a musical drama. Perhaps due to his use of so many varied musical devices, Sutermeister produced a score that was, to my ears, less unified than his later *Requiem Mass*, but considering it in the light of this book’s stated perspective, I found it quit satisfying.

Sutermeister may have been influenced by Orff and Stravinsky, but he clearly had his own voice as a composer. The opening chorus is very much Orff-like in its use of a quick *ostinato* rhythm and a single chord underneath, with the top line shifting slightly in harmony as the rhythms change as well. It has a very strong *Carmina Burana*-like feel to it, including two speaking roles which interject a few words from time to time. But Sutermeister’s orchestration is far more colorful than Orff’s, sounding not unlike Stravinsky’s *Petrouchka* (a work that, I still feel, was incredibly innovative and unfairly overshadowed by *Le sacre du Printemps*, great as that ballet is). Moreover, Sutermeister wrote here in a more continuous manner than young Orff; each scene blends seamlessly and skillfully into the next, creating a musical and dramatic flow that Orff would not really achieve until the 1950s.

There are also actual arias—brief, but still arias—set to interesting yet essentially tonal musical lines, and this was something Orff was never able to really achieve. For all his brilliance, Orff’s solo spots for singers always consisted of strophic lines, often centered around two or three pitches, and nothing melodic in the true sense of the word. In addition to Orff and Stravinsky, I also hear some influence of Hindemith here, particularly in the latter’s opera *Mathis der Maler*. Sutermeister also wrote duets in this opera, something Orff almost never did. I also felt that there was a certain resemblance in the way Sutermeister handled the rhythm of the words to Viktor Ullmann’s much more famous *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, which we shall discuss later. Yet there is no doubt that Sutermeister handled the story and its presentation in music much more dramatically than either Berlioz or Prokofiev, and there are many interesting orchestral touches that leap out at you (such as the downward trombone slurs near the end of band 1).

⁸ Levi, Erik: “Romeo und Julia,” *Grove Music Online* (8th ed.), Oxford University Press, doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630, quoted at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_und_Julia_\(Sutermeister_opera\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_und_Julia_(Sutermeister_opera)).

By the time you reach track 3, however, the Stravinsky influence really does seem to have overshadowed Orff...but again, it's not thievery. Sutermeister clearly had his own way of dealing with the Stravinskyisms in his score, blending and morphing them in ways that Igor never thought of. Still, it's an interesting reference point.

As we get deeper into Act I and the interaction between the two young lovers, the vocal lines become even more lyrical, and there is a note of the tragedy to come in some of the music. Sutermeister laid out his dramatic and musical path in this work with unerring dramatic accuracy. There's also a nice unaccompanied vocal madrigal between Juliet, Romeo and Friar Laurence in the midst of Act II, Scene 4. As one gets deeper into Act II, one notices that the music is almost symphonically developed, much like Berlioz' *Les Troyens* or Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Sutermeister also included his references to madrigal music very cleverly, balancing them against the irregular rhythms necessitated by his using a text in German.

Perhaps the one miscalculation Sutermeister made was the inclusion of so much light music in the first act, particularly the instrumental ballet music, but he was clearly trying to establish a light mood before things took a turn for the dramatic. In a sense, I think that those critics who feel the music is too "conservative" are confusing this artistic choice on Sutermeister's part for a weakness in keeping the score more modern in tonality, but how else is one supposed to write modern madrigal music? Like Penderecki? I don't think so.

Indeed, one of the things that impressed me (and probably impressed Böhm) was the opera's organic unity, which is relatively strong. Even in its lightest and most jovial moments, none of the music in this score is cheap or panders to the gallery as in the Gounod opera. Of course, this was probably also one of its downfalls because people want cheap, tuneful solutions to scenes that should be more tense and dramatic. Perhaps as good an example as any comes in the "Queen Mab" scene in Act I, Scene 3. Although the music assumes a light aspect, neither its melodic line nor its rhythmic progress are as "regular"-sounding as Berlioz' much more famous scherzo; in fact, Sutermeister introduces this scene with slow, somewhat ominous music, suggesting that the fairy is not all sweetness and light. In addition, Romeo's monologue which follows it is sung very softly, accompanied by nothing more than one clarinet playing an equally soft, sustained E behind him. There are all sorts of little touches like this in the score which show the ingenuity of his writing. Essentially, this opera is a modern-lyrical work which in its own way ties styles and techniques of the past to those of the late 1930s. Personally, I find his Julia-Romeo duets far more attractive and moving than the more syrupy and long-winded creations in Gounod's operatic version. There is more contrast in the music, more of a dramatic undercurrent that mirrors what Shakespeare wrote rather than what Jules Barbier and Michel Carré decided to write in place of Shakespeare. The few times that Sutermeister's music rises to loud crescendos and climaxes also makes a greater effect because they are so few. In short, he judged the full measure of the drama with far greater sensitivity than Gounod.

Although tenor Adolf Dallapozza (Romeo) was a shade past his prime when he made the recording, he is still good enough that his voice does not grate on the ear and his sensitivity to words is outstanding, but soprano Urzula Koszut (Julia) is superb in every way, as is bass Nikolaus Hillebrand (Friar Laurence), and the rest of the cast is vocally up to the challenge of their music. Heinz Wallberg's conducting could have been more emotionally involved (why, oh why didn't they make the recording a year or two earlier, when Karl Böhm was still alive and could have conducted it?), but he's at least good and not really cold or uncommitted. I can imagine a slightly better, more modern operatic version of this most famous Shakespeare story, but in and of itself it's a splendid piece that conveys both the exquisite ecstasy of the two lovers as well as the darkness of the machinations which eventually cost them their lives.

Montemezzi: *L'Incantesimo* (1943 radio, stage 1952)

A lot of water had flowed over Italo Montemezzi's dam since the premiere of *L'amore dei tre Re*. Horrified by Mussolini and his Fascist policies, he finally couldn't take any more and, with the help of Arturo Toscanini, emigrated to the United States in 1939 where he lived in California until 1949, when he eventually moved back to post-war, post-Mussolini Italy.

In the very short (43 minutes) *L'Incantesimo*, Montemezzi was reunited with Sem Benelli, his librettist for *L'amore*. He had started writing the opera in 1933 but was constantly distracted and interrupted by the Fascists, thus he did not complete it until after his move to America. Set in the Middle Ages, the action takes place in the dank, wintry castle of a braggart nobleman named Folco whose wife, Giselda, had previously had a romance with Rinaldo who (ironically enough) is one of Folco's closest friends. He has sent for Rinaldo but worries he won't come due to the heavy snowstorm. Giselda asks her husband why he sent for her old lover, who she hasn't seen since their wedding. He replies that Rinaldo is bringing a magician who he hopes can explain a disturbing encounter he had while hunting recently.

Upon their arrival, Folco sings the aria "Allora ascolta!" in which he describes how, while chasing a wolf recently, he saw a white female deer with the face of Giselda. Bewildered, he stabbed the animal whose sad eyes seemed to be begging for mercy before fleeing, horrified, into the forest. The necromancer, Salomone, explains that if Folco's love for his wife is to continue he must revisit the forest, find the wounded deer, and bring it lovingly back to the castle as if it were Giselda herself. Folco sets off on his assigned task, and immediately Rinaldo puts the make on Giselda, telling her that he has never stopped loving her but, on the contrary, often imagines he is holding her when he is lonely. Giselda scoffs at his assertion that love can accomplish anything, asking him if it can turn the wintry garden into spring. If he can do that, she will return his love; Salomone tells her that if she loves, she will see the spring.

Folco returns without the wounded deer, which he could not find, and now, mysteriously, he can't see Giselda either but, rather, sees the dead body of the animal where she is standing. Suddenly the garden blossoms into spring, Giselda sings ecstatically of its ravishing beauty, and gives herself to Rinaldo.

L'Incantesimo was not the very first opera to receive its world premiere not onstage but on the radio—that honor belonged to Geoffrey Toye's lighthearted 1925 comedy, *The Red Pen*, followed by Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*—but unlike Menotti's opera, which really had to be seen to be appreciated, Montemezzi's actually benefitted from this presentation. With only four singing roles and a static locale (the whole opera takes place in one room of Folco's castle), one didn't have to bother with scenery and costumes. Each radio listener could imagine his or her own stage setting, action, scenery and apparel. For the first time, opera as drama also became opera of the imagination. The world premiere was given in Studio 8-H with Toscanini's NBC Symphony Orchestra on October 9, 1943; the cast was baritone Alexander Sved (Folco), soprano Vivien Della Chiesa (Giselda), tenor Mario Berini (Rinaldo) and bass Virgilio Lazzari (Salomone) with the composer conducting. Miraculously, this performance had survived (after all, NBC recorded every broadcast of their orchestra for posterity), but the drawback is that it has the same dry, boxy, claustrophobic sound of nearly all Studio 8-H broadcasts.

The soft orchestral opening, strangely bitonal and atmospheric, suffers the most from this sound problem, but with a little imagination one can hear "through" the boxy sound to what Montemezzi was trying to accomplish. The entire opera is through-composed; even the short arias are wedded to the score, which makes everything flow. To a certain extent, the melodic and harmonic language used here sounds somewhat dated by 1943, but not nearly as dated as Puccini's operas. The difference, of course, was that despite Montemezzi's lyricism, he did not use simplistic melodic lines the way Puccini did, thus the score was not a popular success. But it

works very well, in part because of the way Montemezzi used the orchestra to redouble the drama. In the brief scene in which Folco explains to Giselda the reason he has invited Rinaldo to his castle, the orchestra suddenly dips into bitonal, darkly disturbing music before returning to consonant tonality.

Indeed, moreso than in *L'Amore*, *L'Incantesimo* relies much more on the orchestra to carry the drama in those moments when the singers are interacting. What Puccini attempted, with some success, in *Il Tabarro* is brought to a much higher level in *L'Incantesimo*. One constantly marvels at the variety of the orchestral accompaniment, which almost sounds like a chamber-orchestra version of what Strauss did. Among many such examples, Folco's aria and ensuing scene, about 15 minutes into the opera, is suddenly redolent of one of the more lyrical episodes in *Elektra*, even though the vocal lines are strongly imbued with Italianate passion. This is especially evident in the trio with Folco, Rinaldo and Giselda, which seems to vacillate in style—though the music is well-integrated and valid in construction—between a Straussian aesthetic and something by Boito.

One of the most interesting pieces in this opera is the Rinaldo-Giselda duet. Here, Montemezzi slowly but surely increases the tempo, which in itself heightens tension, while at the same time also gradually raising the tessitura of the tenor's lines to underscore his rising passion—and all without giving the listener blatant (and unnecessary) high notes to make them cheer. Then, he backs off the fast tempo and lowers the range of the music for Giselda's cool answer as she scoffs at him.

Despite the brevity of this opera, Montemezzi actually “slowed down time” by stretching out the characters' lines over several minutes of music, but such is the power of this score that, like Strauss' *Daphne*, it keeps you involved in the ongoing musical progression from start to finish. At the end, when Folco can no longer see Giselda, the courtyard has bloomed into spring flowers, and Giselda has given herself over to Rinaldo, a wordless chorus is added to the orchestra to highlight her growing ecstasy.

Because of the outstanding singing and interpretations of the four roles, Montemezzi's original broadcast performance is still a riveting one, but to fully appreciate what the orchestra does in this work one must also obtain the performance with Vladislav Sulimsky (Folco), Dana Bramane (Giselda), Irakli Kakhidze (Rinaldo) and Romans Polisadovs (Salomone), conducted by Janis Liepins, even though the singing really isn't as good.

Thus we come to the end of this interwar period, which began at the time of the first electrical opera recordings and ended with the first world premiere of an opera on radio. And once again, the concept of opera as drama had changed significantly, moving with the times into new dimensions.