

## Scene XI: Postwar Opera (1945-1959)

There had been wars all through the history of opera, particularly during the 19th century when they didn't seem to stop, and of course World War I caused some major disruptions, particularly in America where German singers sympathetic to their homeland were given the boot, but nothing quite decimated both the populations of the involved nations and the morale in the postwar period quite like World War II. Many of the older singing masters who had taught some of the greatest singers in the world either died off or were killed, leaving few if any like them to take their place. Many singers who had excellent natural voices had to make do with little or no real training, and their careers were either postponed or their debuts stalled until after the war. More importantly, the psychological trauma caused by the war was so pervasive that nearly every nation needed a period of retrenchment and healing, and as a result progress in the arts suffered a bit.

Yet considering all this, it's rather surprising that the first major postwar opera was not a soothing and relaxing work but one which depicted a brutal loner whose mind was constantly on the verge of collapse. Even more surprisingly, this opera became a huge success in its native country (Great Britain) and in a sense set a tone for similar operas by other composers to come.

I am referring, of course, to Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, one of the very few modern operas to eventually sneak into the standard repertoire and stay there, admired by audiences—or, at least, a good percentage of most audiences—the world over, thus it makes the perfect starting-point for this chapter.

### ***Britten: Peter Grimes* (1945)**

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) had a strange and curious rise from his position as yet another rising young British composer to national icon. Born to a middle-class family in Suffolk, the son of a dentist, he showed his musical talent from an early age, studying both at the Royal College of Music and privately with composer Frank Bridge, who, outside of England, is still a woefully underestimates composer. Britten's early style, which incorporated a series of concerti, choral music, string quartets, orchestral works, song cycles and film music in the years 1928-1941 included one opera, *Paul Bunyan*, completed in 1941 when he and tenor Peter Pears, who became his life partner, were living in America as conscientious objectors to the war. Listening to *Paul Bunyan* today, after being familiar with all the other operas, is a bit of a strange experience. After a surprisingly modern, edgy, atonal orchestral opening, the music goes into a slow choral passage before suddenly jumping into highly rhythmic passages reminiscent of his earlier orchestral music but not at all of his postwar operas. But the strangest parts of the opera are when he suddenly breaks into American folk song forms, as in "The cold wind blew through the crooked thorn." Indeed, from that point on, the music sounds much more like an American musical than like an opera, even an American opera, thus we must view *Bunyan* as a failed experiment with too many conflicting styles in it.

Although there had been other homosexual composers in operatic history, all of them closeted in their time—and Britten was no exception—he was probably different from the others in that he was deeply ashamed of his natural state. A devout Anglican, he saw himself as someone caught between trying to do the right thing and simply being himself. Many of his later religious works (the church Canticles etc.) were his way of atoning for his "sinful" state, but his partner, tenor Peter Pears, enjoyed being gay and had no psychological hang-ups about it at all. (Although he didn't broadcast it on the airwaves, Pears was generally open about his homosexuality. I met him on two occasions and found him to be an extremely cheerful, friendly man who genuinely liked people and didn't really care what you thought about him.)

Britten and his librettist, Montague Slater, adapted the script of *Grimes* from a very long poem by George Crabbe, *The Borough* (a series of poems published as a collection in 1810). To Britten, the surly loner fisherman was symbolic of the outsider in society, which he translated in his mind to that of gays and lesbians. Of course, since he remained closeted, this was an undercurrent and not something openly discussed in public, but it was there. The interesting thing is that Crabbe's poem does *not* describe Grimes as a mentally disturbed, semi-psychotic loner but simply a hot-tempered, rebellious social outsider who lived with his apprentices, taken on from the local orphanage, and his wife:

*Old Peter Grimes made fishing his employ,  
His wife he cabined with him and his boy,  
And seemed that life laborious to enjoy:  
To town came quiet Peter with his fish,  
And had of all a civil word and wish.  
He left his trade upon the Sabbath day,  
And took young Peter in his hand to pray;  
But soon the stubborn boy from care broke loose,  
At first refused, then added his abuse;  
His father's love he scorned, his power defied,  
But, being drunk, wept sorely when he died.*

*Yes! then he wept, and to his mind there came  
Much of his conduct, and he felt the shame:  
How he had oft the good old man reviled,  
And never paid the duty of a child;  
How, when the father in his Bible read,  
He in contempt and anger left the shed;  
"It is the word of life," the parent cried;  
"This is the life itself," the boy replied;  
And while old Peter in amazement stood,  
Gave the hot spirit to his boiling blood:  
How he, with oath and furious speech, began  
To prove his freedom and assert the man;  
And when the parent checked his impious rage,  
How he had cursed the tyranny of age —  
Nay, once had dealt the sacrilegious blow  
On his bare head, and laid his parent low:  
The father groaned — "If thou art old," said he,  
"And hast a son — thou wilt remember me;  
Thy mother left me in a happy time,  
Thou kill'dst not her — Heaven spares the double crime."<sup>1</sup>*

Thus, if one takes both the original poem and the changed view of Grimes in the libretto into account, there are actually three ways to play the character: 1) Crabbe's way, as a sad, isolated social misfit who has an uncontrolled violent streak, is misunderstood, and to some extent doesn't really understand himself; 2) Slater's and Britten's way, as a strangely aloof and violent

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/crabbeg/borough/>

man who yearns to be “normal” but simply can’t be; or 3) a combination of the two. Peter Grimes is thus the first psychologically *ambiguous* operatic character which can bear alternate interpretations, the first such in operatic history, and this psychological ambiguity somehow struck a chord in a world where a fairly large number of people were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder due to the war.

In *Peter Grimes*, Britten unveiled an entirely new style of writing. The majority of the opera moves forward, when at all, in a sort of stumbling, stuttering fashion. Even when the music is rhythmic, as in the opening section at Grimes’ trial or when he sings “Old Joe has gone fishing,” the music seems to stumble forward rather than loping along in a predictable rhythmic way. Most of the music sort of “slithers” along in a strange sort of way, like a wave breaking onshore in slow motion. I realize this is not a musically exact way of describing it, but it is an accurate way of describing the effect the music has on the listener. Britten also used a great many open intervals—fourths, fifths and even octaves—which gives the music a sort of “unfinished” quality. Of course, it *was* finished—every phrase, every bar was very carefully calculated—but he did this on purpose in order to emphasize the strangeness of the character. One thing that I’ve not seen too many writers notice is that the entire opera, musically and dramatically, is viewed through Grimes’ eyes. Thus his interrogators come across as gruff and insensitive to him, Ellen Orford sweet and loving, Auntie the whorehouse madam as a cheerful friend, the other citizens of the Borough as simply a mass of people who dislike him and don’t want him around. This was another reason why the music’s rhythm always sounded broken and disconnected; there was a disconnect between Grimes and the citizens of the Borough that was never going to be bridged. If one may forgive a pop music reference, it’s much like a famous song by the rock group The Doors, *People Are Strange*.

The problem was that what worked for *Peter Grimes* and, a bit later, *The Rape of Lucretia*, was further simplified by Britten, tied into more strophic vocal lines, often on just one note (the early example here is Grimes’ monologue, “Now the Great Bear and the Pleiades”), and applied to most of his other operas (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* excepted) forever after, and this became a formula that had little variety and, in fact, even damaged the dramatic impact of such interesting later works as *Billy Budd* and *Owen Wingrave*. But in *Peter Grimes* it worked because it was something new and had not yet been filtered down into a “formula.”

Another reason why *Grimes* worked so well was that Britten, who was very familiar with the British coastline, combined the “sound of water” into his score, which created a superb ambience for each and every scene. Even from just a listening perspective, the opera *sounds* like the sea. Indeed, the “sea interludes” from *Grimes* became concert favorites, admired by many conductors who may or may not have liked any of the rest of the opera. (It was even said that Arturo Toscanini, of all people, admired the sea interludes and wanted to perform them, but couldn’t decide what other works would complement them in a full concert program.)

The one feature of Grimes’ character which does not seem to be a fit with the image Britten and Slater tried to convey of a somewhat sympathetic character is his brutal beatings of his apprentices (“Grimes is at his exercise”). This shows an extremely brutal side of his nature which does not translate into sympathy for him, which is why some interpreters opted to bring out his more brutal, psychotic side. Grimes’ monologue, “What harbor shelters peace?,” is set to disturbingly edgy string figures, depicting his confused state of mind, and this morphs into a quite violent orchestral passage underscored by the tympani. This, in turn, morphs into an orchestral fantasy on the opening lines of Grimes’ monologue, a notably creative feature of this score which, for whatever reason, he never duplicated in his later operas. The opening scene of Act III, in which Swallow interacts with Auntie’s whores, sounds surprisingly like Viennese operetta—the one and only piece of light-hearted music in the entire opera. And, of course, the climax of the

opera is Grimes' mad scene ("Steady! There you are! Nearly home!"), which remains one of the most haunting (and, in its own way, scariest) mad scene ever written.

Britten wrote the title role specifically for Pears, who, during his lifetime, he wanted to be the *only* tenor to perform the role. In addition to the 1961 complete recording, there are also some remarkable excerpts from the opera recorded in 1947, closer to the premiere date, with Pears as Grimes and the original Ellen Orford, soprano Joan Cross, conducted by Reginald Goodall who led the world premiere, where Pears is in much fresher voice. But there were two problems with his writing this role for Pears and only Pears. First, and most problematic, was that unlike 90% of the world's tenors, the strongest part of Pears' voice was in the notes right around the break in the voice, E-F-F#, where other tenors have great difficulty in projection. And secondly, if one is only going to interpret the role the way Pears did, it was clearly going to limit the opera's survival after both Britten and Pears were gone. When Jon Vickers began performing *Peter Grimes* in the mid-1960s, he brought not only a Heldentenor voice to the role but also a different interpretation of Grimes as an inherently violent, confused man who could sense his problems but had no control over them. Britten *hated* this interpretation but, ironically, Pears *loved* it; he went to see Vickers perform the opera several times and annoyed Britten by praising it. Other reasons why Britten disliked Vickers' Grimes was that he changed some of the text to make it more understandable to Americans and thus more "universal," as well as stretching out some of the notes in his final scene for dramatic emphasis. Because Vickers often used one of Britten's favorite sopranos, Heather Harper, who had been his original choice for Ellen on his own studio recording (she was indisposed, forcing him to replace her with Claire Watson), and conductor Colin Davis, Britten cut them both off as friends.

This brings us to an interesting and, for some musicologists, problematic question. Is Vickers' Grimes valid dramatically even though it is somewhat inaccurate regarding the score? I, and millions of others, say it is, for the simple fact that Vickers' Grimes is a tragic figure of almost Shakespearean proportions, thus elevating both the character and the opera to an extremely high level of dramatic art. Pears' Grimes is almost as intense, but in a different way; he suffers more inside and holds in some of the violence that Vickers let out consistently.

We are extremely fortunate to have not one, but four, outstanding recordings of this opera: first, the 1961 recording conducted by Britten with Peter Pears (Grimes), Claire Watson (Ellen Orford), James Pease (Balstrode), Owen Brannigan (Swallow) and Jean Watson (Auntie); the 1978 recording, conducted by Colin Davis, with Jon Vickers (Grimes), Heather Harper (Ellen), Jonathan Summers (Balstrode), Forbes Robinson (Swallow) and Elisabeth Bainbridge (Auntie); the 1995 recording, conducted by Richard Hickox, with Philip Langridge (Grimes), Janice Watson (Ellen), Alan Opie (Balstrode), John Connell (Swallow) and Ameral Gunson (Auntie). and the live Glyndebourne performance from 2000, conducted by Mark Wigglesworth, with Anthony Dean Griffey (Grimes), Vivian Tierney (Ellen), Steven Page (Balstrode), Stafford Dean (Swallow) and Susan Gorton (Auntie). What makes this assortment interesting is that all four tenors give you a different "take" on the title character, although Langridge had the lightest, slimmest tenor voice of the four, as well as a somewhat different take on the orchestral accompaniment with Britten and Wigglesworth being the most central while Davis is a bit slower, giving more weight to the music, and Hickox is clearly the most exciting and sharply detailed of them all.

### ***Britten: The Rape of Lucretia* (1946)**

Since *Peter Grimes* was such a surprise success, Glyndebourne—which previously had been a home for Mozart and occasionally light Verdi operas—invited Britten to write an opera for their smaller theater. His response was *The Rape of Lucretia*, a two-act opera based on a play by André Obey. Since it used a small orchestra and no chorus—the "male chorus" and "female

chorus” are performed by solo singers—Britten called it a chamber opera, and such it was. The story depicts a dark time for Rome, when it was ruled over by an “Etruscan upstart” Tarquinius Superbus and had sunk into depravity. Interestingly, the two “choruses” represent Christian morality and their interpretation of this “pagan” story.

While Tarquinius and his drinking buddies Collatinus and Junius are getting loaded, a group of Roman soldiers return unexpectedly to Rome to check up on their wives. All of them except Collatinus’ wife, Lucretia, were at orgies having sex with others. Junius goads Collatinus into “testing” Lucretia’s chastity himself. He goes to her home and knocks on the door; although she suspects that nothing good is to come of it, she cannot refuse the prince entry. He decides to stay the night and, while she is asleep, he goes into her bedroom and awakens her with a kiss. She tells him to stop it, but he proceeds to rape her. The next morning, after he is gone, Lucretia sends a note to her husband by messenger (which her servant tries to stop) asking him to come home at once. When he arrives, he caresses her lovingly, but feeling she can never be clean again, she stabs herself. The female chorus despairs at the emptiness of the story, but the male chorus explains that all pain and suffering is given meaning and all sin redeemed by the suffering of Christ.

This was evidently the first of Britten’s pieces involving Christianity as an absolver of all sins, an oblique way of trying to reconcile his strong Episcopal faith with his homosexuality. Taken on its own merits, and ignoring the personal connections, it is still an interesting and dramatic work even though the final scene absolves Lucretia by way of Christianity. This is a problem in terms of dramatic truth because Lucretia is not a Christian, and according to most Christian faiths, non-believers are denied heaven and, thus, redemption. This inconsistency, plus the fact that he didn’t like the music—in this opera, both the male and female chorus sing those one-note strophic lines in place of melodic figures—conductor Reginald Goodall shied away from all future Britten operas. It received its world premiere at Glyndebourne in July 1946. With Goodall staying away from it and Glyndebourne’s resident music director, Fritz Busch, uninterested in it, Britten and Joan Cross (who sang the female chorus) were at a loss for a good conductor to lead the performance. I’ve been unable to find any information online as to how they coerced him to do it, but somehow or other they managed to get Ernest Ansermet, one of the world’s most respected conductors of Stravinsky and the modern French school, to lead the premiere. The role of Lucretia was written for contralto Kathleen Ferrier, who never recorded even an excerpt from it.

The opera opens with the male chorus giving you the background of the story. Not all of his lines, or the female chorus’, are one-note strophes—in fact, this opening solo moves around the scale much like Peter Grimes’ monologues—but they *tend* towards one-note lines, and this is what eventually sticks in your mind. More interestingly, the supporting music, played mostly by a piano banging out isolated chords with interspersed winds and occasional percussion underpinning, makes a dramatic effect but not necessarily a particularly interesting *musical* effect. The rich orchestral complexity of *Peter Grimes*, or even Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*, is missing in this opera, as it would be in many of the Britten operas to follow. (Undoubtedly, this was yet another reason for Goodall to dislike *Lucretia*.) Yet, in a sense, this was a throwback to the *modus operandi* of Monteverdi and Lully, and those operas had been quite dramatically effective using similarly sparse orchestration (although without Britten’s modern sense of harmony). The problem was that too much time had passed, and too many stylistic changes had occurred, between Lully and Britten. People were simply used to richer and more complex orchestral accompaniments to operas.

And there is indeed much variety made to the orchestral accompaniment once the sung drama begins in earnest: the introduction of French horns, swirling strings and flutes, and almost always the thump of a bass drum (but not tympani, just a bass drum as one would have in a nor-

mal drum kit) in the background. The sung lines for Tarquinius, Junius, Collatinus and the rest are, on the other hand, quite rhythmically complex—I could imagine a singer of the 1920s having considerable difficulty learning and performing this music—and in this manner Britten projects the drama in an almost violent manner, even when the situation is not specifically violent. The one piece in the entire opera that comes closest to conventional operatic form is the first half of the Tarquinius-Lucretia duet, one of the loveliest things Britten ever wrote, which he then cleverly morphs into fast-paced, dramatic, and far less lyrical music. Another interesting touch: after Collatinus returns home suddenly, summoned by a servant, there is a forlorn oboe solo over sustained violin chords with a “ground bass” underneath—surely one of the most original touches in an operatic score I’ve ever heard. Yet when Lucretia tells Collatinus and the others of her rape, Britten again retreats to one of those one-note strophic lines. In this specific instance it works from a dramatic standpoint; one would scarcely expect her to sing a lyrical aria, capped by a high note, to describe the experience, yet this is what eventually supplanted all these other wonderful musical moments in his future operas.

Unlike *Peter Grimes*, there are no really dramatic studio recordings of *The Rape of Lucretia*, not even Britten’s own with Peter Pears (male chorus), Heather Harper (female chorus), Benjamin Luxon (Tarquinius) and Janet Baker (Lucretia); though very well sung, it misses the *frisson* of a live performance. Therefore I recommend the live performances with Anthony Rolfe-Johnson (male chorus), Kathryn Harries (female chorus), Russell Smythe (Tarquinius), Richard van Allen (Collatinus) and Jean Rigby (Lucretia), conducted by Lionel Friend, and the 1981 Sydney Opera performance with Robert Gard (male chorus), Nance Grant (female chorus), John Fulford (Tarquinius), John Wegner (Collatinus) and Margaret Russell (Lucretia), conducted by David Kram.

### ***Dallapiccola: Il Prigioniero* (1949)**

Perhaps inspired in part by both Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* and Montemezzi’s *L’Incantesimo*, two short but powerful one-act operas with the second one premiering on the radio, Luigi Dallapiccola wrote this edgy, compact work between 1944 and 1948 as a radio opera. It was given its premiere on that medium on Radio Italiana on December 1, 1949, but unlike Montemezzi’s opera it was not as joyfully received. This was because Dallapiccola wrote it in the 12-tone style devised by Schoenberg, the first Italian opera composed in this form although, like Berg’s operas, it was not strictly dodecaphonic.

But if not too joyfully received, it was a critical success and, more surprisingly, it had enough “legs” to be brought to the stage a year later and keep on premiering in different cities and countries into the early 1960s. The Italian stage premiere in Florence on May 20, 1950, featured such superb singers as soprano Magda László and baritones Scipio Colombo and Giangiacomo Guelfi, conducted by Hermann Scherchen. The American premiere was given at New York’s City Center in 1960 with Anne McKnight, Richard Cassilly and Norman Treigle, conducted by Leopold Stokowski. According to the publisher, the first 12 years after its premiere over 186 performances were given on the radio, concert platform, and stage.

Originally a supporter of Mussolini, Dallapiccola changed his mind around 1930 when he saw the horrible things the Fascists were doing. By 1932 he started working on this libretto, which was intended to symbolize the tortures imposed by El Duce on his home country, but first wrote his three *Songs of Captivity* in 1938-41, based on texts by Mary Stuart, Boethius, and Girolamo Savonarola as a direct rebuke to Mussolini.

The opera’s prologue presents a mother waiting to visit her son in prison. She sings of a dream that has been haunting her: a figure resembling King Philip II keeps approaching her from the end of a cavern before morphing slowly into Death. Her singing becomes hysterical as the

offstage chorus cuts her off. The single act which follows opens in a cell of the Inquisitor's prison. The prisoner sings to his mother about both the torture he has endured and the jailer who has personally brought him hope in the form of religion. The jailer interrupts their conversation with the news that Flanders is in revolt, and the bell of Louis Roelandt could soon ring out. After the mother leaves, the jailer tries to persuade the prisoner to just have faith in God, but he's not taking any chances. He rushes out of his cell, trying to escape through underground passages. Oddly, he seems to be invisible, being ignored by a torturer and passed unnoticed by two monks. He thinks he can smell fresh air, and after hearing a bell which he thinks is that of Roelandt, he opens a door to what he hopes is freedom. In the dark of night, he creeps along towards a cedar tree; reaching out to hug the tree, he ends up embracing the Grand Inquisitor, who has somehow become part of the tree. The Inquisitor asks him why he would want to leave now when he is so close to salvation—i.e., being burned at the stake and “sent to heaven” after being “purified” by fire. The opera ends with the prisoner whispering the word, “Freedom.” Interestingly, the tenor who sings the jailer also sings—at the end—the role of the Grand Inquisitor.

Listening to the opera, it's not hard to understand its appeal. Even compared to Berg's *Lulu*, the music is more lyrical and falls surprisingly gratefully on the ears without sacrificing its dramatic edginess. Dallapiccola very cleverly found that “sweet spot” between artistic excellence and popular appeal. Although the primary auditory impact of the music is generally slow and atmospheric, it is continually moving underneath in a sort of slow motion in the orchestra, and the vocal top lines are close to Italian recitativo style without falling back on strophes. In short, it sounds like an updated version of Montemezzi rather than like an Italian Schoenberg. The jailer has a much more important, and vocally difficult, role to sing than the usual supporting character in an Italian opera. Yet if one digs under the surface of the orchestral music, one will note its rhythmic and harmonic complexity, as shown in the first page of the orchestral introduction:

**Con impeto (♩ = 120)**

(Il alza subito la tela, dietro cui appare un velato nero.)  
 (The curtain rises immediately, disclosing a black curtain.)

*Archi Legni*  
*ff*  
*tridente*  
 Trb., Tuba, (cor.)

**LA MADRE  
 THE MOTHER**

(Dovanti al velato appare la Madre)  
 (Before the curtain appears the Mother)  
*sempre impetuoso*

Ti ri-ve-drò, mio  
 Once more, my son, I'll



voce di uomo. In tanto il suo volto bianchissimo, illuminato spietatamente, fissa gli sguardi allo spettatore.  
 dressed in black. Only her very white face, pitilessly illuminated, is visible to the audience.)

Il - glio! Ti - ri - ve - dro...  
 see you! Oace more, my son...

Trb., Trbn. (cord.) (Sax.)  
 Arce by: p. mp. molto p.

(Source: <https://www.sheetmusicplus.com/title/il-prigioniero-1944-1948-sheet-music/21119237>)

In addition to all this, the opera is imbued with a great deal of atmosphere and, surprisingly for a 12-tone opera, a great deal of sound-color; in fact, I'd compare it favorably to Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* or Szymanowski's *King Roger* in this respect, and I firmly believe that it was this atmospheric quality that made it work so well onstage. One particularly superb moment comes at the end of Scene 3, when the chorus enters. The way Dallapiccola wrote this scene, the effect is almost overwhelming. He was also smart, I think, to purposely avoid using a chamber orchestra, as Britten did in *the Rape of Lucretia*. The fullness of the orchestra is also part of its appeal.

*Il Prigioniero* is occasionally revived today, which is a good thing, but unfortunately with screechy, poorly-supported and infirm voices that have plenty of "drama" (if you find defective voices dramatic) but no aural appeal. Thus the best recording of this work is still its first recording, made in the early 1960s by a cast of virtual unknowns: American-Italian soprano Giulia Barbera, Italian baritone Maurizio Mazzieri as the prisoner and Italian tenor Romano Emili as the jailer/Grand Inquisitor, conducted superbly by Antal Doráti.

### **Orff: *Antigona* (1949)**

At about the same time that Dallapiccola was putting *Il Prigioniero* together, Carl Orff, at this point most famous for his "Roman trilogy" which included *Carmina Burana* and *Catulli Carmina*, was fashioning an opera based on our buddies in the House of Atreus. For his libretto, Orff simply set Friedrich Holderlin's German translation of Sophocles' play line by line—no cuts, no changes. The opera premiered in Salzburg, of all places, in August 1949 with Res Fischer in the title role, Josef Greindl as the messenger, Helmut Krebs as the guard, Hilde Zadek as Euridice, Lorenz Fehrenberger as Haemon, Hermann Uhde as Creon and Ernst Häfliger as Tereias—clearly an all-star cast—under the direction of the great Hungarian conductor Ferenc Fricsay. Seldom has *any* modern opera had such a cast to launch it, and throughout the 1950s it was performed fairly often and commercially recorded as well, but in recent decades it has fallen off the map.

It's extremely interesting to hear how Orff adapted his early-minimalist musical style from Roman orgies to Greek drama. Like Britten, he tended towards the strophic repetition of one note in many passages, but unlike Britten he moved those notes around in pitch, some of them high and edgy, others very low in the soprano range, almost like chanting. By the time he came to write *Oedipus der Tyrann* a decade later, this style had, like Britten's, become stodgier and more formulaic, creating a heavy, oppressive musical atmosphere for the listener to slog through (and that's as good a description as any of how bad that music was), but *Antigona* had the same kind of manic drive that characterized his Roman trilogy, only geared more towards drama by the use of almost consistently minor keys. As in his Roman trilogy, too, Orff used a fairly sparse orches-



tration to support the story, in fact at several points omitting the orchestra entirely as Antigone and the other characters sing their lines, yet if anything this accentuates the drama rather than undercutting it. His sense of dramatic “timing,” in this opera at least, was absolutely perfect.

But there is a caveat. Unless each and every singer has a steady, clear voice, with no pitch fluctuations, wobbles or defective tone production, the entire opera falls apart. This is because *Antigone* is an opera built around “pitch” in more than one sense of the word. Every individual feature of the performance must be in perfect attunement to all the others. One mishap in pitch (or rhythm, but particularly in pitch) and the whole thing collapses like a house of cards. It’s that delicately balanced and that tightly constructed. (*Score sample from <https://www.stretta-music.com/orff-antigone-nr-288867.html>*)

### III.

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Molto tranquillo  
*p dolce*

Solo

Chor

Glük - see - - - - - li - ge sol - cher Zeit, - da man

Chor

nicht schme - ket das Ü - bel; denn, wenn sich re - get von Himm - li - schen

Klav. B. pizz. *p*

Chor

ein - mal ein Haus, fehlt's dem an - Wahnsinn nicht in der Fol - ge, wenn - es sich mehrt.

133

$\frac{4}{4}$   $\text{♩} = 60$

*alcuni alternativamente*

Chor

Denn gleich, wenn un - ten, auf Pon - ti - scher See, bei ü -

Rand gr. Tr. Mitte

*m. Paukenschlägel*

Klav. 1-4

*m. Filzschlägel*

Klav. 5. 6.

*m. Paukenschlägel*

Bässe *pp*

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In short, *Antigona* is an opera which, for all its complexity, needs simply to be heard and absorbed by the mind. Although it can indeed be dissected and analyzed, its deceptively “simple”-sounding components are part of its dramatic appeal. And, to be honest, I’m not sure that Orff himself didn’t eventually regret having written *Oedipus der Tyrann*, not just because it was highly unpopular but because even he probably realized that it was musically and dramatically inferior. Lightning does *not* always strike twice, and *Antigona* was just so good that anything he did after it was almost guaranteed to be a disappointment.

To a certain degree, *Antigona* is almost like Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* in reduction. By cutting back the orchestra to such sparse dimensions and focusing on the percussion (particularly the xylophone and tympani), Orff created a score which uses a lot of open octaves. This gives the music a somewhat primitive sound, which is perfect for the dramatic impetus of the story, which is so grim that it almost makes *Oedipus Rex* look like a fairy tale. Everyone dies in this one: Antigona, who hangs herself rather than be buried alive; Creon, who is murdered by his son Haemon; and both Creon’s wife Eurydice and Haemon, who also commit suicide.

Even so, this is an opera that begs for the visual element. One can imagine the stage movements and facial expressions of the singers—well, *maybe*, if one ignores the current trend towards perverted stage productions and imagines one that honors the spirit of Greek drama—but seeing this and hearing the music, together, is what creates the drama. *Antigona* is a unified work of art, just like Gluck’s French *Alceste*, Verdi’s *Don Carlos* or Szymanowski’s *King Roger*. Singing excerpts from these operas in concert—yes, even in the case of *Don Carlos*—ruins the dramatic effect it is intended to create when heard in context.

We are fortunate indeed to have two outstanding recordings of this opera: the one with Martha Mödl (*Antigona*), Carlos Alexander (*Creon*), Fritz Uhl (*Haemon*), Lilian Benningsen (*Euridice*), Josef Traxel (*Teresias*) and Kurt Böhme (*Messenger*), conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, and the one with Inge Borkh (*Antigona*), Alexander (*Creon*), Uhl (*Haemon*), Hetty Plumacher (*Eurydice*), Ernst Häfliger (*Teresias*) and Kim Borg (*Messenger*), conducted by Ferdinand Leitner. You can flip a coin on these two, but if pressed I would put the Mödl performance above Borkh’s simply because it is even more intense.

### ***Pizzetti: Ifigenia* (1950)**

After writing his *Fedra* in 1915, Ildebrando Pizzetti suffered through two World Wars before producing the second opera in his “Greek trilogy,” and this second of them is the shortest of the three, clocking in at less than an hour. Unlike Gluck’s *Iphigenie en Aulide*, Pizzetti’s opera covers the decision by Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter to appease the gods, and particularly the god of the winds who has completely stilled the air so that Agamemnon’s ships cannot sail to Troy to start the Trojan Wars.

Pizzetti’s compositional style had changed somewhat since 1915, although that style was, by 1950, a bit outdated when compared to Dallapiccola or even Montemezzi. Yet unlike Richard Strauss, who purposely allowed his keen dramatic skills to languish on autopilot as he wrote one mechanically-produced opera after another, there is real inspiration in the pages of *Ifigenia*. The music may not be atonal, but it is clearly modern in every other respect: continuous musical development, effective vocal lines that alternate between strophic and semi-melodic, and harmonies that move with the melodic line. This latter was new for him and one of the real advances on his 1915 style.

Yet as in the cases of both his own *Fedra* and Montemezzi’s *L’Incantesimo*, *Ifigenia* demands singing-actors who are not only into their characters dramatically but also have exceptional voices. I cannot stress this enough, particularly in this modern era (2024 as I write this) in which not just the acceptance, but the preference, for defective singing in opera performances

frequently undercuts the dramatic impact of the music. There is something exotically Middle Eastern, sounding, to my ears anyway, almost Egyptian rather than Greek, but this only makes the score sound even more appropriate to Greek drama. He also uses the brass and winds in an ingenious manner to create color and atmosphere.

In certain respects, *Fedra* was a more *subtle* score, but *Ifigenia* is more gripping *dramatically*. It has even more *verismo* elements in it, but *verismo* transformed into something more truly dramatic and less cheaply melodramatic. Note, for instance, how at 23:30 Pizzetti uses the chorus to sing a coarse, jingoistic “war march” that is almost as brutally effective as the opening movement of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony. The Ifigenia-Agamemnon duet is particularly dramatic, with Pizzetti turning up the screws on the tension via slightly faster tempi and busier, more frenetic vocal lines for the title character. A bit later in the same duet, he changes the tempo from a straight 4 to an alternation of one quarter note with eighth-note triplets, which again affects the rhythm. And, wonder of wonders, Ifigenia actually gets an aria near the end of the opera, just before the epilogue in which she says goodbye to life and love. Yes, it’s an aria that focuses more on the drama of the situation and not a “set-piece” where the soprano just stands there and warbles a pretty tune for three or four minutes, but an aria nonetheless.

Whereas Agamemnon dominates the early scenes, Antigone comes to dominate the second half. Although the entire world premiere cast of 1950 did an excellent job on the opera (it has only four characters: Agamemnon, Iphigenia, Clytemnestra and Achilles), the standout was clearly basso Nicola Rossi-Lemeni as the King. Indeed, his performance impressed Pizzetti so much that, a few years later, he adapted T.S. Eliot’s 1935 play *Murder in the Cathedral* as a showcase for Rossi-Lemeni. Thus it is fortuitous that the only recording of this opera in existence is a 1950 radio broadcast featuring not only Rossi-Lemeni but also the premiere’s original Ifigenia, soprano Rosanna Carteri. A very young Fiorenza Cossotto sings Clytemnestra, and tenor Ottorino Begali sings Achilles, with Nino Sanzogno conducting. Although the sound is in mono, it is very clear and well-recorded mono, bringing out all the salient details of the orchestra perfectly in addition to presenting a well-sung and dramatically-interpreted performance.

### ***Menotti: The Consul* (1950)**

It almost boggles the mind to consider that Gian-Carlo Menotti wrote his first opera in 1922, two years before Puccini died and *Nerone* was performed, yet lived another 84 years. The hidden fact is that his first opera was written when he was only 11 years old, but still, making it to age 95 is an accomplishment that few composers achieve.

But Menotti (1911-2007) was and remains a controversial figure in the classical world. Wikipedia claims that his inspirations were both Puccini and Mussorgsky, but except for this one opera under consideration you need a magnifying glass to find any Mussorgsky influence in his writing. On the contrary, his principal influences other than Puccini seem to have been Richard Rodgers and Harold Arlen, since the bulk of Menotti’s operas sound very much like American pop or Broadway music tightened up a little and set to something resembling classical form. Though born in Italy, he was Americanized at a young age, and by 1936 wrote his first “hit,” *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, which in turn led to his being commissioned by NBC to write an opera for the radio, which was *The Old Maid and the Thief* in 1939.

The majority of Menotti’s music used light, simple themes based on popular music, resolutely tonal harmonies, and a simple structure that anyone could follow. In 1948, he scored another first when a performance of his opera *The Medium* was broadcast on television. A year later, NBC telecast Arturo Toscanini’s concert performance of *Aida* in two consecutive weekly programs, then in 1951 Menotti was commissioned by NBC to write the first opera expressly for TV, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which was broadcast fairly regularly into the early 1960s. But

in between the telecast of *The Medium* and the writing of *Amahl*, Menotti turned out this work, his first full-length opera and the most dramatic piece he would ever write.

Although an opera of its time, depicting a dark police state in which anyone who opposes the ruling government is hunted down and killed—much like the Communist-run countries of Eastern Europe in that period—the tense dramatic situation of *The Consul* can always be translated by the viewer/listener to any period in which a totalitarian government is in charge. It was inspired in part by the passage of the McCarran Act, which required government registration of American Communist organizations, as well as authorizing the President, in an emergency (defined as invasion, declaration of war, or insurrection in aid of a foreign enemy), to arrest and detain persons who he believed might engage in espionage or sabotage. The principal character of *The Consul* is a political dissident, thus his particular case could qualify under those guidelines.

Typically of Menotti's operas, none of which premiered in opera houses until *The Last Savage* in 1963, *The Consul* premiered in a Broadway theater, in this case the Schubert Theater in Philadelphia. The cast included one opera singer who eventually had an international career, baritone Cornell MacNeil as John Sorel, and three others who had nice but limited careers, soprano Patricia Neway as Magda Sorel, mezzo-soprano Gloria Lane as the Secretary, and contralto Louise Powers as the Mother.

One thing you have to give to Menotti that made him superior to most other composers who wrote operas in English is that his music really did set the rhythms and pace of the English language in such a way that, as long as the singers had good diction, every syllable of every word could be clearly distinguished without the need of a libretto. This gift of his that surpassed any other American opera composer of his time, including Carlyle Floyd, Howard Hanson, Douglas Moore and Aaron Copland, each of whom seemed to be more concerned with writing music that had interesting rhythms and/or development, with the words pretty much an afterthought; at least, that's how their operas sounded compared to Menotti's.

The central idea of *The Consul* is that anyone who wants to leave the country for any reason must apply for an exit visa from his office, but the consul never sees anyone and the process is constantly tied up in a bureaucratic mess of papers and applications that people must fill out. Just as no one ever sees the consul—except, of course, his secretary, who apparently only sees him when no one else is around—no one ever seems to get final approval to leave, but dissident John Sorel bravely sends his wife Magda into the fray to apply for exit visas for their little family, which includes John's mother and an infant child. The tension is built up both by John Sorel's constantly and cleverly evading the secret police as well as he can and Magda's constant daily battle to finally get those exit visas, which of course never come. One woman's application is turned down after a month of papers and applications because her photograph was the wrong size(!). There is a bit of comic relief in the opera in the person of a magician who is also applying for a visa. After doing some magic tricks to entertain the lobby full of people waiting their turn, he begins putting some of them to sleep so that he can move up in line.

One must give credit where credit is due, and in *The Consul* Menotti hit the proverbial nail on the head. Almost nothing in the opera is superfluous (except, of course, the comic relief of the magician in the waiting room) and, for once, one *does* hear the influence of Mussorgsky in his work. Atypically, the opera does not open with an orchestral or a choral prelude, but with a voice on a phonograph record singing a pop song in French. This is interrupted by a violent orchestral outburst, then the sudden arrival of John Sorel, slamming the door behind him, trying to escape the secret police. The little family quickly discusses the tense situation; John doesn't know who betrayed him, Magda doesn't care but just wants him safe. The music, following the rhythms and patterns of the words, rises and falls in cadence with each word and phrase. Menotti also uses the basses playing menacing figures in the minor to underscore the drama, alternating with high

strings playing figures—some of them repeating figures—in a contrasting rhythm. Even in the reduced piano-vocal score, one can see how well he did this:<sup>2</sup>

The image displays a musical score for a scene from 'The Consul'. It consists of four systems of music, each with vocal lines and piano accompaniment.

- System 1:** Magda asks, "Have they gone, Mother?" in a treble clef. Mother replies, "Not yet. Don't move." in a bass clef. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a more complex pattern in the left hand.
- System 2:** Magda asks, "John, are you all right?" in a treble clef. John replies, "Yes, but have-n't they gone yet?" in a bass clef. A stage direction reads "(from his hiding place)". The piano accompaniment continues with similar rhythmic figures.
- System 3:** Magda says, "Don't move. John, don't move." in a treble clef. The piano accompaniment includes a section with a tremolo effect in the right hand, indicated by wavy lines and the word "tremolo". A stage direction reads "(Magda goes to the door to see if they have gone.)".
- System 4:** The tempo changes to **Allegro**. Mother exclaims, "Here they come!" in a treble clef. A stage direction reads "(From across the way the loud, desperate wailing of a woman is heard.)". The piano accompaniment features a more active and rhythmic pattern.

At the bottom left of the score, the number "41369" is printed.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/the\\_consul\\_vs\\_30696](https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/the_consul_vs_30696)

Unlike Menotti's other operas, where the rhythms are fairly simple so any ear could grasp them, *The Consul* constantly shifts and changes tempo which puts listeners in a state of disorientation and tension. This conflates their own feelings with the tension of the story. To a certain extent, although Menotti was by no means as skilled a writer as Berg, *The Consul* has more in common with *Wozzeck* than with Montemezzi. Even Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero* is more lyrical and easy to listen to than *The Consul*. When one does hear a lyrical, tonal passage, such as the Magda-John duet in the first act which then becomes a trio with the mother, it comes more as a form of temporary relief from the almost constant tension of the rest of the score, and these moments are actually less pop-music-like than, for instance, the duet of the lovers in *Il Tabarro*.

In Act II, the mother's keening little melodic line bemoaning John's predicament bears a striking resemblance to the lament of the Simpleton in *Boris Godunov*, but the central dramatic moment in the opera is Magda's Act II monologue (one cannot really call it an aria), "Papers! Papers!" in which she explodes at the secretary over the futility of filling out forms when her husband's life is at stake. The one time she comes close to seeing the consul, she has to wait for his "very important visitor" to leave his office. The visitor turns out to be the secret police agent shadowing John; when he emerges from the consul's office, Magda collapses in a faint.

In the opera's extremely bleak ending, everyone ends tragically: the baby dies from lack of medical care, the mother from a heart attack; John is arrested by the secret police, and Magda commits suicide. They are simply pawns in the government's insistence on keeping power by eliminating dissenters at any cost. One interesting plot twist is when the secretary, who maintains a cold-blooded presence throughout most of the opera, opens up when she is alone and admits that she feels compassion for these people but is forced to put on her cold bitch act.

There is but one fully complete recording of this opera that garners constant accolades, and that is the 1995 live performance with Susan Bullock (Magda), Louis Otey (John), Jacalyn Kreitzer (Mother), Charles Austin (Secret Policeman) and Victoria Livengood (Secretary), conducted by Richard Hickox. This performance was supervised by the composer, who liked it very much. My sole complaint is that Kreitzer has a loose vibrato which gets on one's nerves, but everyone else in the cast sings splendidly and, for the most part, their diction is not only good but sounds American, which it should, rather than British, which all of them were.

***Schoenberg: Moses und Aron*** (1931, premiere 1954, Act III composed by Kocsis in 2010)

Like Puccini's *Turandot*, Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* was an opera that could easily have been finished had the composers not kept putting it off. In fact, Schoenberg clearly had much more time to do so but, for whatever reason, didn't bother. The first two acts were fully completed by 1932, yet although he lived another 19 years, all he left of the third act was the libretto and a few musical sketches. Schoenberg wrote only a few smaller works during the remainder of his life, thus it has never been clear why he failed to finish *Moses und Aron* except, perhaps, because it was based on the Old Testament. He was always very sensitive to exposing his Jewish background, despite the fact that he was actually a Protestant.

The plot, which began life as a play before Schoenberg decided to make an opera of it, is essentially a *Sprechstimme* drama between the two principal characters. Moses reluctantly accepts the order from his God to become a prophet and lead his people from their bondage in Egypt. Since he does not feel properly equipped to be an eloquent spokesperson for this mission, he takes on his brother Aron as his spokesman. Aron expressing Moses' ideas in terms that the common people can understand, yet they quickly start misunderstanding each other. Moses assures him that love is the key to unlocking this mystery, but Aron praises God for hearing prayers and receiving offerings. Moses cautions that the purification of one's own thinking is the only reward to be expected from tributes. Other characters do make their appearance, among them



Ephraimite and several unnamed young women who claim to have seen God in different manifestations. The missing third act is generally performed as a recitation of the text that Schoenberg left, despite the fact that composer-conductor Zoltán Kocsis completed the last act in 2010 with the permission of Schoenberg's heirs.

Unlike the atonal operas of Berg and Dallapiccola, *Moses und Aron* is set strictly to the composer's 12-tone row, which dictated that no tone in the row could be repeated until each of the 12 semitones were used. In time, composers came to realize that this system was more restrictive than liberating; in fact, it was one of the reasons why Aaron Copland abandoned it in the 1940s, but Schoenberg stuck to his guns. In fact, in addition to forcing himself to use the 12-tone row in its strictest application, Schoenberg also set himself the task of writing in a *specific* 12-tone row that was constructed from cells:



This row was then combined with different versions of it so that the first half of each one still provided six different pitches:<sup>3</sup>



In short, *Moses und Aron* was a huge, complex Sudoku puzzle. Yet, ironically, this strict scheme is what made Stefan Kocsis' reconstruction of the last act somewhat easier to produce.

The amazing thing about *Moses und Aron* is not how complex the music is, but how well it works as a musical drama. Schoenberg was able to set and sustain a mood of mystery wholly appropriate to the story; it's almost as if the events in this musical play take place in the minds of the characters. These musical "thoughts" progress somewhat slowly, although a good conductor can pull them together to produce an interesting and unified whole. Sometimes, the opera is presented, as in the case of Berlioz' "opera-oratorio" *La damnation de Faust*, in a concert version with the singers standing at podia singing their roles in front of a somewhat bare stage set. This, of course, could lead one to wonder if this work should be included in this book at all (it is because of the oratorio aspect that I omitted *La damnation de Faust*), but it is fully staged often enough to allow me to consider it an opera in the full sense of the word.

And somehow, Schoenberg was able to write surprisingly lyrical lines for Aron. This is, however, a very difficult role for the tenor because its tessitura lies very high; "baritenors" should not attempt to sing this role. Indeed, the contrast between the rather gruff Moses, whose lines are all in *Sprechstimme*, and Aron, whose lines are all sung, is part of the work's fascination. In part due to the strict layout of the music, Schoenberg managed to create a sense of continually rising lines for Aron while Moses' *Sprechstimme* is all over the map in terms of pitch. This also creates dramatic tension, and gives one a somewhat surprising "take" on the principal characters. It is Aron who almost always sounds mystical whereas Moses sounds frequently

<sup>3</sup> Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses\\_und\\_Aron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_und_Aron)



grumpy, reluctantly following his God's orders with no pleasure or full conviction that they are convincing enough to move the Israelites to obey him.

Another interesting feature of this work is that the music, particularly that of the orchestra which is continually fascinating and often moves against the vocal line rather than with it, works better in a smaller environment. Having too much "space" does not enhance its mystical quality but, on the contrary, detracts from it. One's appreciation of this score depends on hearing every single facet of the music working together as an organic unit rather than as separate entities reverberating in a theatrical space. Perhaps this was one reason why Schoenberg was loath to complete the opera. He understood what staged operas sounded like, and possibly felt that *Moses und Aron* wasn't a good fit for a large opera house.

One also wonders, despite the excellence of the score, whether music composed in this fashion really suits a Biblical story. Had this been a Greek drama, I would have no qualms about its appropriateness, yet although it is very effective music, and certainly dramatic in its own way (particularly the almost frantic scene about a half-hour into Act II), I still have my qualms about its *appropriateness*. This is, of course, a very subjective and personal assessment on my part, but I do not and never have pretended to speak for others. No two people in the world hear music in exactly the same way, but for me, personally, *Moses und Aron* is a masterful score that I appreciate very much, and is certainly dramatic, but somehow seems to be not only in a different space but on a different planet from its text.

In the third act, completed by Kocsis, everything is reduced to a conversation between the two siblings. From Wikipedia:<sup>4</sup>

Aron is put under arrest, accused of fostering idle hopes with his imagery such as that of the Promised Land. Aron insists that Moses' word would mean nothing to the people unless interpreted in terms they can understand. Moses declares that such sophistry will win the people's allegiance to the imagery and not God; by misrepresenting the true nature of God, Aron keeps leading the people back into the wilderness. When Moses tells the soldiers to let Aron go free, Aron falls dead. Even in the wilderness, Moses says, the people will reach their destined goal — unity with God.

Kocsis' music for this act fits what Schoenberg composed despite sounding a bit lighter and airier, yet it is still not regularly performed. I'm not sure why. No one seems to bat an eye over the completed versions of *Khovanshchina*, *Turandot* or *Lulu*, but somehow this completed third act of *Moses und Aron* still bugs them. I don't know why.

Without question, the best performance of this work is the recording with speaker Werner Haseleu as Moses, tenor Reiner Goldberg as Aron, soprano Renate Krahmer as the young girl, tenor Armin Ude as the young man and baritone Karl-Heinz Stryczek as Ephraimite, conducted by Herbert Kegel, although for the completed Act III you need to have that portion of the opera with Wolfgang Schöne as Moses and Daniel Brenna as Aron, conducted by Zoltán Kocsis.

### ***Reutter: Die Brücke von San Luis Rey* (1955)**

Insofar as musical academia, the classical music industry and operatic history is concerned, Hermann Reutter (1900-1985) was a composer who did not exist—and this is ironic since he himself worked as an academic teacher and university administrator in Germany, the United States and Japan as well as a recitalist, and accompanist. His short but powerful opera based on Thornton Wilder's novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, though also shamefully forgotten, was one of the great landmarks of 1950s opera. The story, for those who do not know it, concerns the in-

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses\\_und\\_Aron](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_und_Aron)

dividual events in the lives of several unrelated people who all die in the collapse of an Incan rope bridge in Peru in 1714. A friar who saw the accident begins investigating the individual lives of the victims, seeking some cosmic connection between them in trying to understand why they all had to die at once.

Although Wilder admitted that the event was entirely fictional, the book at least managed to hold the imaginations of readers for several decades, but I suppose that today, after such more powerful real events in the world, it doesn't seem like much. Still, the connections that an opera audience could make to the various characters is clearly not much different from many other operas also based on fiction. Among the characters and situations are the following (from Wikipedia, the only online source I've found)<sup>5</sup>:

Doña María, Marquesa de Montemayor. She was the daughter of a wealthy cloth merchant, an ugly child who eventually entered into an arranged marriage and bore a daughter, Clara, whom she loved dearly. She also brings along her companion Pepita, a girl raised at the Convent of Santa María Rosa de la Rosas. When she learns that her daughter in Spain is pregnant, Doña María decides to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Santa María de Cluxambuqua. Pepita goes along as company and to supervise the staff. When Doña María is out at the shrine, Pepita stays at the inn and writes a letter to her patron, the Abbess, complaining about her misery and loneliness. Doña María sees the letter on the table when she gets back and reads it. Later, she asks Pepita about the letter, and Pepita says she tore it up because the letter was not brave.

Esteban and Manuel are twins who were left at the Convent of Santa María Rosa de la Rosas as infants. The Abbess of the convent, Madre María del Pilar, developed a fondness for them as they grew up. When they became older, they decided to be scribes. They are so close that they have developed a secret language that only they understand. Their closeness becomes strained when Manuel falls in love with Camila Perichole. Perichole flirts with Manuel and swears him to secrecy when she retains him to write letters to her lover, the Viceroy. Esteban has no idea of their relationship until she turns up at the twins' room one night in a hurry and has Manuel write to a bullfighter with whom she is having an affair. Esteban encourages his brother to follow her, but instead Manuel swears that he will never see her again.

Captain Alvarado goes to see Esteban in Cuzco and hires him to sail the world with him, far from Peru. Esteban agrees, then refuses, then acquiesces if he can get all his pay in advance to buy a present for the Abbess before he departs. That night Esteban attempts suicide but is saved by Captain Alvarado. The Captain offers to take him back to Lima to buy the present, and at the ravine, the Captain goes down to a boat that is ferrying some materials across the water. Esteban goes to the bridge and is on it when it collapses.

Uncle Pio, who acts as Camila Perichole's valet, and, in addition, "her singing-master, her coiffeur, her masseur, her reader, her errand-boy, her banker; rumor added: her father." The story tells of his background. He was born the bastard son of a Madrid aristocrat, has traveled widely engaged in a wide variety of dubious, though legal, businesses, most related to being a go-between or agent of the powerful, including (briefly) conducting interrogations for the Inquisition. His life "became too complicated" and he fled to Peru. He came to realize that he had just three interests in the world: independence; the constant presence of beautiful women; and work with the masterpieces of Spanish literature, particularly in the theater.

He finds work as the confidential agent of the Viceroy of Peru. One day, he discovers a twelve-year-old café singer, Micaela Villegas, and takes her under his wing. Over the course of years, as they travel from tavern to tavern throughout Latin America, she becomes beautiful and talented. Uncle Pio teaches her and goads her to greatness by expressing perpetual disappoint-

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Bridge\\_of\\_San\\_Luis\\_Rey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bridge_of_San_Luis_Rey)

ment with her performances. She develops into The Perichole, the most honored actress in Lima.

There's a lot more to the plot, but this is a good overview of the characters involved. The story shifts back in time to the day of a service for those who died in the bridge collapse. The Archbishop, the Viceroy, and Captain Alvarado are at the ceremony. At the Convent of Santa María Rosa de la Rosas, the Abbess feels, having lost Pepita and the twin brothers, that her work will die with her. A year after the accident, Camila Perichole seeks out the Abbess to ask how she can go on, having lost her son and Uncle Pio. Camila gains comfort and insight from the Abbess and, it is revealed later, becomes a helper at the Convent. Later, Doña Clara arrives from Spain, also seeking out the Abbess. She is greatly moved by the Abbess' work in caring for the deaf, the insane, and the dying. The novel ends with the Abbess's observation: "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."

At only 68 minutes long, the opera compresses this story and its various subplots by giving several interludes to a narrator who tells the story before the principal characters sing. The music is modern but not off-putting; there are discernible melodies here, particularly in the solos and duos for the women. The melodic lines are grateful to the voice and do not require the kind of atonal, angular lines one hears from many modern German operas from Alban Berg's *Lulu* on forward. But it's not the kind of work that is conducive to stage action; most of the story consists of conversations, monologues and reminiscences by the various characters, which obviously makes for pretty circumscribed stage movement.

Reutter's music is modern in a style that harks back to Zemlinsky with a touch of Hindemith in it—not cutting edge for the mid-1950s, but it didn't have to be. It's effective in conveying the drama, using an alternation of lyrical and sharply accented rhythmic passages. Were the narration in English, I'm sure it would be understandable to British and American audiences, but it struck me when listening to it that perhaps the fact that it has so much narration, and compresses so many characters and events into its 68 minutes, may be a detriment to its acceptance nowadays. But perhaps not. There are many more complicated operas out there nowadays, the plots of which are far less interesting than this one.

Brother Juniper's lines are somewhat atonal but not forbidding; compared even to Berg, they are quite acceptable for an average audience. I was also surprised to hear a chorus sing interjections during the characters' monologues. Although I know the general outlines of the story, without a libretto I really can't tell exactly what they're singing, but since the characters involved in each scene are identified on the track downloads, I could tell who's singing most of the time. Thus by lining up the characters with Wilder's story one can follow, to a point, what is going on. My guess is that the chorus is making a commentary on the stories being told by the different characters. It is both musically and dramatically effective, despite being mostly slow music, sounding a bit like the chorus in a Greek drama.

Reutter also did an excellent job of writing music in different styles to match the personalities of the different characters—stately music for Juniper, light-hearted music for Pepita, etc.—which shows a good sense of characterization. In Scene 11, the choral music that comes in after the Marquisa's monologue is particularly eerie, using three different keys—two for the chorus (female voices pitted against the male) and a third for the orchestra—which gives it an unusually eerie, unsettled effect. In the scene between Manuel, Estéban and La Perichole, Reutter used a modified *parlando* style, using different pitches so as not to incur monotony, and the accompaniment is quite minimal, consisting of a solo flute, light pizzicato violins and an occasional sustained note on bass or cello. In the second half of this scene, once La Perichole leaves, the musical conversation becomes more heated; the rhythm increases in tempo and Reutter punctuates their dialogue with staccato trumpets; then, after a pause, with flute, piano and solo bassoon before the trumpets return, surprisingly colorful for a German composer writing in a modern style.

*Die Brücke von San Luis Rey* thus falls into that category of opera-oratorio like so many other works. Despite all of the appearances of the various characters, there only seem to be a few scenes, particularly those including two or more characters, that call out for stage action. But let's be honest. Such was the case with *many* of the earlier operas, at least up to the time of Rameau. when more stage action was appropriate in the presentation of stage works. Yet this is clearly not an insignificant work; in addition to its musical quality, it is both theatrically and philosophically interesting, and should clearly be revived, at least in smaller opera houses.

Thankfully, the one surviving recording, from a Vienna radio concert performance, has excellent sound for its time, and the cast is a very fine one: Julius Patzak (Brother Juniper), Hilde Rössl-Majdan (La Perichole), Emmy Loose (Pepita), Gertrude Schretter (Mother Maria), Walter Berry (Estéban), Waldemar Kmentt (Manuel), Alois Pernerstorfer (Alvorado) and Peter Klein (Uncle Pio), conducted superbly by Michael Gielen.

### ***Poulenc: La Voix Humaine* (1959)**

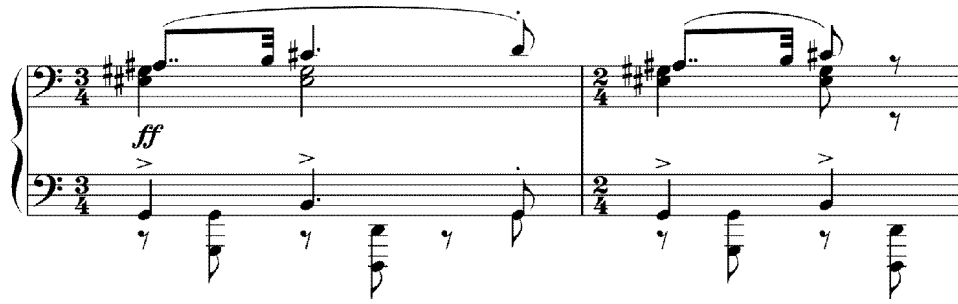
Francis Poulenc is best known in the opera house for *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, but since I have zero sympathy with the principal characters and, in addition, heartily dislike the music (the only major work by Poulenc, in fact, that I do *not* like), I will not be discussing it. Rather, I will end this chapter with the opera I consider his operatic masterpiece.

By 1959, the idea of a monodrama wasn't new, being preceded by Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, nor was the concept of an opera featuring a woman on a telephone, being preceded by Menotti's 1947 comedy *The Telephone*, but in *La Voix Humaine* Poulenc made the character of the unnamed woman (known simply as "Elle," or "Her") and the nature of her phone calls more dramatic. Another interesting feature of this opera is that not only the librettist, Jean Cocteau, but also the creator of the solo role, soprano Denise Duval, worked closely with Poulenc in creating this work. In preparing the opera for the stage, Poulenc wrote specifically for the strengths of Duval's voice while Cocteau designed the lighting and costume in compliance with her physical attributes.<sup>6</sup> The drama consists of a series of phone calls from the woman's former lover who has left her for another woman. In them, she tells him that she has attempted suicide since he left her. Much of the drama, however, is in the woman's movements and facial expressions as well as in her vocal inflections. In between conversations with her lover there are two wrong numbers.

Although most of the vocal writing is conversational, including pauses and silences, but in the more dramatic moments Poulenc wrote more challenging lines with very dramatic passages and high notes. The music also departs from his previous style in that it uses tonal ambiguity via unresolved dissonances. Yet the music does not fully reject tonality but constantly delays its appearance. The following excerpts, taken from the 1959 Ricordi score and uploaded on Wikipedia,<sup>7</sup> give some idea of how he accomplished this:

<sup>6</sup> Waleckx, Denis; Sidney Buckland (ed and trans); Myriam Chimènes (ed) (1999). "A Musical Confession: Poulenc, Cocteau and "La Voix humaine"". *Francis Poulenc : Music, Art, and Literature*. Brookfield, US: Ashgate.

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La\\_voix\\_humaine#cite\\_note-14](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_voix_humaine#cite_note-14)



“Exasperated waiting” motif

Poulenc also stated that in a performance of this opera, the pauses and held notes shall be led by the singer, and be worked out in advance with the conductor. This gives the opera itself a fluid form within the parameters of the score. The most unusual performance of it I’ve ever seen is the one conducted by Barbara Hannigan, who is also the soprano. In this performance, there is no actual telephone; rather, her upper body is projected on a screen so that the audience can see her hand movements (between leading the orchestra) and facial expressions, reacting to the phone calls. Because she is not only an outstanding soprano but also a brilliant actress as well as a first-rate musician (at this writing, she is planning to stop singing and go into conducting full-time), it works despite the lack of the “prop” of the phone, although she occasionally holds her hand up to her mouth as if talking on one. But as we shall see later on, this sort of brilliance is extremely rare in modern stage productions of *any* opera, and I would hope that, once she goes exclusively into conducting, Hannigan will also consider being a stage director.

Although a good knowledge of French will help immensely in one’s appreciation of this opera, just knowing the libretto in one’s own language is enough to appreciate the brilliance of this work. Thanks to the short but numerous pauses in the music, which heighten dramatic tension rather than relieving it, Poulenc manages to keep the listener/viewer on the edge of his or her seat. What could easily have been a fairly dull or at least routine 45 minutes thus results in it being a form of sustained tension. Part of this is due to the very rapid pace of the sung lines; the text uses relatively short words with sharp consonants which Poulenc wrote to equally rapid, sharp-edged music. As in the case of Strauss’ French version of *Salome*, the rhythmic precision of both text and music combine to create a unique listening experience.

Yet one thing, often left unsaid, that needs to be present in a stage performance of this work is that the soprano must look somewhat young and reasonably attractive. Cruel as it may sound to some readers, we live in a visual age and image means a great deal in the believability of a character. Even if Lauritz Melchior were to come back from the dead and take the stage, looking as he did in his prime, a big, chunky man in his mid-forties who didn’t act on the stage, he’d probably be rejected by many as a believable Tristan, Siegmund or Siegfried, no matter how well he sang, and the same is true here. There is a video extant of a famous British soprano performing this role who is an excellent singing actress, but unfortunately she was 64 years old at the time she filmed it, looked every minute of 64 despite her stage makeup and, I swear to you, she actually appeared to age as the performance went on. Not good theater, no matter how superb her voice. On the other hand, in addition to the film versions by Duval and Hannigan, there is also one with Danielle de Niese, who filmed it at age 43, but is so drop-dead gorgeous that she could easily pass for her late 20s or early 30s, and her histrionic skills are second to none (Antonio Pappano is the conductor). All three, then, are recommended recordings of this superb work.

Thus we take leave of this postwar period, at least in terms of discussing operas. Next up is an interlude on the tremendous shift in the *visual* presentation of opera, which actually took root in the 1950s before eventually exploding into the disheveled mess we now know as Regietheater.