

Scene XII: More Changes (1965-1991)

This is as good a place as any to step back, survey the operatic scene of the 20th century, and try to put things into some sort of perspective.

As we have seen, opera was initially the province of titled folk in Italy, then in France and Germany. Even after it went “public,” the education level of its intended audience had to be rather high in order for them to “get” what was going on, although by the mid-18th century England, Italy, Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic had major opera houses. Yet it wasn’t really until about 1816, with the “Rossini revolution,” that opera really took off as a form of popular entertainment. Around that time, veteran tenor Manuel Garcia brought his own opera troupe (which included his children, baritone Manuel Jr., mezzo-soprano Pauline and the baby of the family, soprano Maria, later Malibran) to America, and it caught on there, too. By the late 19th century, nearly every city and some “big towns” in America had “opera houses” which presented all sorts of non-operatic entertainment in addition to real operas. The point is that, with the explosion of tuneful, rhythmic, easy-to-digest operas, it became a somewhat populist if rather pricey form of entertainment, in the U.S.A. rivaling vaudeville and minstrel shows.

New York’s Metropolitan Opera, which opened its doors in 1883, literally changed the course of operatic history. Founded by a group of very wealthy businessmen, its goal was to procure the talents of the greatest opera singers in the world and present them in seasons full of popular works with a few contemporary operas tossed in now and then to show how “progressive” they were (which they weren’t). Up until World War II, when it became much more difficult to get foreign stars to sing in the U.S.—not counting those Italians who were Fascists or Germans who were Nazis who were unwelcome there—it was noted more for being a singers’ showcase than a viable and forward-looking theatrical endeavor. But people didn’t care. They got the best voices in the world singing the pieces they loved to hear the most, and were happy. During the 1920s, the Covent Garden opera in London tried to emulate the Met, and succeeded to a point, but they really became an important city to sing in from the mid-1930s onward in terms of Wagner’s operas because most of the best singers of that repertoire, who refused to sing in Germany (or, later, Austria) sang in London...and at the Met in New York.

The point is that opera was big business—VERY big business—and the industry didn’t want most of these modern operas because they rocked the boat too much. Unfortunately, once composers were determined to write the way they wanted to, hoping but not expecting the public to accept their works, modern operas once again became the province of those who were educated enough to appreciate and understand both the music and the new theatrical conceptions. Happily, there were enough performances given in small theaters by dedicated (but not always famous) artists who believed in what they were doing, such as the Kroll Opera in Berlin, that a relatively small but loyal audience sprang up to support them to a point.

One thing that had changed since the 17th century was the ability of people who wanted to improve themselves being able to educate themselves. In America, this was largely due to the beneficence of Andrew Carnegie, who almost single-handedly created the Public Library system in almost every city that wanted one. Books were now available to the masses for free to read that had been expensive or even unavailable to them previously. If one was able to devote enough time, one could become educated without having to pay for an expensive college term. Of course, a great many people did not have either the motivation or the time to do so, but many did and took advantage of this to become better acquainted with the arts. During the Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) not only provided manual labor jobs to those who wanted to work again, but also had important divisions for the propagation of theatrical, musical and visual arts projects that brought such culture out of the shadows

and into the limelight for millions of Americans who couldn't access them otherwise. Ironically, considering how evil they were in many ways, both the Nazis and the Fascists also brought musical and visual arts to their people on a level unprecedented in previous generations. (The British lagged behind a bit in this respect, but they did have the BBC which at least gave radio broadcasts of good music, both jazz and classical, throughout the 1930s and '40s.)

Then came the television age. In addition to the complete televised operas mentioned earlier, there were performances like *The Bell Telephone Hour* and *The Voice of Firestone* to provide live opera singing. In the 1950s, NBC started its own "opera theater," initiated with Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* but also featuring such telecasts as the young Leontyne Price in *Tosca*, among others. The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) soon followed suit, presenting televised operas up through about 1958. Among the stars who emerged from these telecasts was the extraordinarily gifted Canadian tenor Jon Vickers. The BBC presented a few operas on television as well, as did the Italians and the French, yet although opera was a visual medium it didn't really seem to catch on, and such programming ended by the late 1950s.

What killed some of the interest in opera was that, both on popular radio and television programs, having famous singers perform a scene from a popular opera was generally enough "culture" for people to absorb. Most of their time was taken up by watching comedy or popular music programming, which was more accessible and easier for them to grasp. As for the hardcore opera audience, they were locked into the standard repertoire, which meant most of the more famous operas written between 1812 and 1924.

But if conservative operagoers were upset with the direction opera had been taking pretty much since 1902, they were in a state of panic during the 1960s, because this was the time when many modern operas became even more musically complex. Among the more famous works to premiere during this decade was Penderecki's *The Devils of Loudon*, a particularly nasty-sounding work that, to this day, I simply cannot get into, but it was pushed—even by RCA Victor, which issued a recording of it—as the new High Art.

To be honest, however, getting into opera through the standard repertoire was the path most of us took when we were young. I first became hooked on opera singing through the recordings of Enrico Caruso and his contemporaries, which for a long time I considered to be the greatest of all operatic singing. My first experiences in going to live performances were a Met student matinee performance of *Carmen* and a Newark Opera production of *Il Trovatore*. I loved being able to hear these operas complete for the first time but, except for a few individual singers, was not all that happy with the casts I heard, but that too changed when I went to a couple of Met performances and so heard singers like Gabrielle Tucci and Richard Tucker in the flesh. Even so, as I matured and went into college, I tried to keep my mind open to new things, and so embraced such "difficult" works as Alberto Ginastera's *Bomarzo* and, hearing it for the first time, Britten's *Peter Grimes*. Britten, in fact, became my favorite contemporary composer when I first heard the recording of his *War Requiem*. Ginastera's and Britten's music wasn't the *most* challenging, but it was challenging enough that I had to expand my expectations of what a modern opera would sound like. In short, I didn't expect to hear a new Verdi or a new Puccini.

All of which brings us to this chapter. The 1960s started out with some very ambitious modern operas by various composers, among them Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* (which I didn't hear at the time), Robert Ward's *The Crucible*, Hindemith's *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Louise Talma's *The Alcestiad*, Michael Tippett's *King Priam*, Roger Sessions' *Montezuma* and Alberto Ginastera's *Don Rodrigo*. Some of them were highly feted (Ward's opera own a Pulitzer Prize), many were not, but they've all pretty much sunk under the waves, and all for the same reason. They over-reached. Their composers were just too ambitious, tried to do too much with

the material at hand, and somehow just ended up failing. In the end, the best new opera of this period was a comedy, Benjamin Britten's wonderful *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The first opera we will be discussing was briefly a hit but although it also fell out of favor, it was an unqualified masterpiece that deserves more exposure.

Pizzetti: *Clitennestra* (1962-64, premiere 1965)

Perhaps there is a silver lining to being a great composer yet living most of your life in the shadows: it gives you the time to reflect and continue creating without being hassled by the media. At least, this was what happened to Ildebrando Pizzetti. Famous only in Italy, and even there famous only on the marginal edges of the music industry, he was able to finish this unqualified masterpiece at the advanced age of 84—older than Rameau or Verdi were when they wrote *their* late masterpieces. Upon its premiere at La Scala in Milan on March 1, 1965, it was hailed by critics as a masterpiece, the Italian equivalent of Strauss' *Elektra*, but from that day to this it has seldom if ever been performed. We are, then, extremely lucky to have a radio recording of the complete opera from that premiere as a testament to Pizzetti's achievement.

Pizzetti's style and methods here were about the same as in the late 1950s, which is to say, a combination of lyricism with "moving" harmonies, continuous development and a keen sense of the dramatic moments. Unfortunately, all I was able to find online for free were the first few bars of this Prelude, but it is enough to give one an idea of the music:¹

PRELUDIO

The image shows a musical score for the Prelude of Pizzetti's *Clitennestra*. The score is written for piano and is marked "Molto largo". It consists of three systems of music, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The first system begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic and features a complex, chromatic texture with many accidentals and slurs. The second system continues this texture with various dynamics including *mf* and *ff*. The third system shows a more melodic line in the upper voice with a steady accompaniment in the lower voice.

¹ <https://www.nkoda.com/instrument?ref=0f65d3a8-3bc6-4c43-aaa6-222cbcb0ba85>

Although the vocal lines are grateful to the singers in that they do not call for extremes in vocal range (no sudden leaps of an octave up or down, and a tessitura within the normal compass of the voices), they are not lyrical in the Puccinian sense. The rhythms are strophic, but the lines move around constantly, sometimes in downwards chromatic patterns. As in the case of *Assassino nella cattredale*, Pizzetti also allows for occasionally “shouting” of notes to make a dramatic point. In this sense, too, the score has a close kinship to Strauss’ *Elektra*, but of course Pizzetti uses what one would characterize as typically Italian lines in order to match the rhythms of the text whereas Strauss’ were Germanic. Yet the effect on the listener is similar. One is immediately brought into the heart of the drama from the first, and Pizzetti’s excellent sense of musical development never flags, creating a cohesive whole. This, of course, means that even when one of the characters sings something like an aria or arioso, it is deeply embedded into the whole sound, including the orchestra, and thus does not lend itself to being excerpted in a recital. He also makes an effective use of the chorus here in the Greek style, the one thing that Strauss did *not* do in *Elektra*. These choral lines, too, are embedded into the fabric of the music; the chorus does not suddenly appear, sing a tune for two or three minutes, and then depart, but rather sings short interjections when the mood and the situation dictate that they should.

If anything, *Clitennestra* is thus a more tightly woven structure than *Elektra*. The sharper, more inherently rhythmic profile of the solo vocal lines in his opera thus create an even more urgent sense of forward propulsion, yet there are some extraordinary moments, such as the duet of the two women in the first act, where he almost creates what one might call an “Egyptian” sound rather than a Greek one. At other times, he shortens the note values in the singer’s lines to create greater dramatic tension, coming even closer to what one might consider a lyrical Italian version of *singspiel*. One of the more subtle things in this opera, which I liked very much, was the continually “moving” bottom line in the orchestra (occasionally underscored by the tympani), almost the modern equivalent of a *basso continuo*). And the soprano’s lines near the end of the opera really “soar” in the best operatic tradition.

Fortunately, the only surviving recording of this opera is not only complete but superbly sung and interpreted, with Clara Petrella (*Clitennestra*), Luisa Malagrida (*Cassandra*), Mario Petri (*Agamemnone*), Raffaele Arié (*Egisto*), Floriana Cavallo (*Elettra*) and Ruggiero Bondino (*Oreste*), conducted by Gianandrea Gavazzeni.

Zimmermann: *Die Soldaten* (1965)

If operagoers of 1925 were repelled by Berg’s *Wozzeck*, those of 40 years later had cardiac arrest over Bernd Alois Zimmermann’s *Die Soldaten*. Although clearly a modern German composer in every sense of the word, most of Zimmermann’s previous pieces weren’t nearly as tonally abrasive (or, perhaps more accurately, *atonally* abrasive) as this opera, but as in the case of *Wozzeck* it dealt with a very dark theme, in fact an even darker story than that of Berg’s.

Interestingly, the source for Zimmermann’s opera was even older than Berg’s, having been written by Jakob Michael Lenz in the late 18th century rather than in the early 19th. The plot is even seamier, describing the violation of a young French woman by a unit of soldiers. Despite her being engaged to marry a young draper named Stolzius while her sister Charlotte does needlework, Marie is courted by a noble French officer named Desportes. He invites her to the theater with him, but her father forbids her to go because it would damage their family name if a commoner like her was seen in public with a well-off nobleman.

In the trenches of Armentières, officers discuss the relative merits of comedy, which one of them, Eisenhardt, maintains is evil because it has loosened their morals which have already brought misery to many young women. In the meantime, Marie is confused as to how she should handle the situation between Stolzius and Desportes; the latter knows about the former and ad-

vises Marie not to give him up altogether. Marie writes to Stolzius about Desportes, receiving a stern letter of reproach from him, which depresses her still further. Showing Desportes this letter, the noble officer dictates a stern reply. Once she has sent this and so spurned Stolzius, however, Desportes dumps her but, unknown to her, Stolzius has made arrangements to move closer to her so he can keep an eye on her. In the meantime, however, Marie has started accepting gifts from a Captain Mary; her sister Charlotte has now branded her as a “soldier’s girl.” Interestingly, when the Captain takes Marie out for a drive, the “chauffer” is Stolzius in disguise, and she does not recognize him. Eventually, Desportes and Captain Mary slowly but surely guide Marie into the life of an army prostitute; Desportes even pushes her towards his gatekeeper, who brutally assaults her.

Gradually lowered to the level of a street beggar, Marie runs into her father and begs him for alms. Wesener doesn’t recognize her, but gives her money before himself joining an “endless procession” of enslaved and fallen soldiers in which drunken officers also participate. The procession builds into a human Hell in which one person is raped by another; according to Wikipedia (from whence this synopsis was cobbled together), “one human is raped by another, the individual by the collective conscience and, in this instance, by the power of the army.”²

Quite aside from the formidable complexities of the music, which one conductor after another (including Wolfgang Sawallisch) tackled but then gave up on until 38-year-old Michael Gielen finally tamed it, *Die Soldaten* was literally hell to produce on stage because Zimmermann, who worked on the score for eight years, envisioned the opera being presented on no less than 12 small stages surrounding the audience which would be seated on “swiveling chairs.” When informed that this would be impossible to construct without running into hundreds of thousands of dollars (or Deutschmarks, I suppose), Zimmermann made further late revisions to the opera, trying to get it to conform to a one-stage concept but with numerous projected images on screens surrounding the audience. *Die Soldaten* was, then, the first “multi-media” opera, created long before computer and digital imagery were invented.

Die Soldaten has continued to fascinate conductors and a certain segment of opera singers from the time of its premiere in February 1965 to the present, but even *with* the development of digital imaging the opera has proven difficult to stage. Speaking as a resident of the early 21st century, when such things are now possible, I would personally recommend an “ideal” performance with the best possible singers to videotape the opera in a multimedia setting for DVD release. This would come close to Zimmermann’s original concept and thus present the opera in its best possible light.

To say that the music is atonal is an understatement. It is actually multitonal or, perhaps more accurately, omintonal. No two sections in the orchestra, it seems, are playing the same note, let alone the same key. All is aural confusion except for the fact that the tympani continually repeats an *ostinato* rhythm underlying the frantic orchestral playing. This is the only thing that gives the opening orchestral prelude some form (excerpt on following page³) but, oddly, once we reach the vocal music, Zimmermann pulled back on the harmonic tangle—at least in the first act, where Marie is introduced as a sweet young thing new to her surroundings—to produce some actual lyric (if atonal) lines, including the use of trills. (To the best of my knowledge, this is the first modern opera since Szymanowski’s *King Roger* to require the soprano to sing trills.) By contrast with Marie’s rather lyrical lines, however, those for Stolzius and her mother are jagged and angular, indicating to me that their presence is abrasive, at least psychologically so.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Soldaten

³ https://petruccimusiclibrary.ca/files/imglnks/caimg/3/3d/IMSLP776435-PMLP1229964-Zimmerman_-_Die_Soldaten.pdf

This page of a musical score contains the following elements:

- Top Section (Measures 1-10):** Features a vocal line with lyrics and a piano accompaniment. The piano part includes a prominent triplet of eighth notes in the right hand.
- Middle Section (Measures 11-20):** Shows the entry of the woodwinds and strings. The woodwinds play a melodic line, while the strings provide a rhythmic accompaniment.
- Bottom Section (Measures 21-30):** The choir enters with a vocal line, and the piano accompaniment continues with a steady eighth-note pattern.
- Dynamic Markings:** Various markings such as *ff*, *fz*, *mf*, and *pp* are used throughout the score to indicate volume levels.
- Tempo/Character Markings:** Phrases like "Allegretto" and "Andantino" are present, indicating the intended tempo and character of the music.
- Rehearsal Marks:** Numbered rehearsal marks (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4) are placed at the beginning of specific measures to facilitate rehearsal.

It would, perhaps, have been better if Zimmermann had maintained a more lyrical arc for the music in most of Act I, but as one will notice, the music goes from somewhat fragmented to being split apart into sharp little shards which abut each other without ever coalescing once Desportes, Marie's father, and other characters enter the scene, and this is appropriate as it indicates the angst and confusion into which Marie is suddenly thrown. Incidentally, Lenz always claimed that this story was absolutely true, or (I would think) it was at least told to him as a true story. Looking beyond the surface details, however, one can say that both Wozzeck in Berg's opera and Marie in this one would clearly have had at least some help in their respective eras to extricate themselves from their personal messes that didn't exist at the time the stories were written. I make a point of this because it is important to realize that some stories should *not* be updated in the theater, as they represent societal conditions of their specific place and time and thus are not necessarily translatable to modern terms.

In Scene 5 (subtitled "Notturmo"), Zimmermann suddenly tosses in some frantic-sounding rapid string *pizzicato* figures in the orchestral background that must be absolute hell to play—yet one more example of why this score is so difficult—and this is just one effect among many coming from different sections of the orchestra. In fact, most of the time the orchestra doesn't seem to be playing *together* so much as it is comprised of discrete sections playing *against* one another. I think that, if one were to "space out" the orchestra in the pit during a performance, the audience would hear the orchestral music itself as a multi-media experience, fragmented in a way that doesn't come across on a recording, no matter how superbly recorded unless it was an eight-channel "surround sound" tape. In the second act, Zimmermann writes purposely crude-sounding music for the revels of the soldiers, including (if you can believe it) an atonal-sounding jazz band. There's also a duet between Marie and Desportes in this act that is an absolute bitch to sing, with exposed high notes in their upper registers galore.

All these elements contribute to what is clearly a powerful and, at times, overwhelming theatrical experience that you must be willing to accept on its own terms. Yes, *Wozzeck* is something of a point of reference, but just one such. Zimmermann's sound world in this opera was wholly unique as well as uniquely whole. In the booklet accompanying the original 1965 recording, annotator Heinz Josef Herbort not only includes more score examples than the one I presented here, but also shows how Zimmermann organized his tone rows, used inversion and mirror-imaging as well as developing a series for each scene and relating different tone-row series in such a way that "they occupy two different positions in each three-note group." This, of course, is all very nice from a mathematical and theoretical standpoint, but although some of this is audible to the listener, it is the emotional and dramatic impact of the music that really counts. I would say that *Die Soldaten* was about as far as one composer could go towards creating an opera that combined complexity with a powerful dramatic impact.

Although soprano Nancy Shade, on the recording conducted by Bernhard Kontarsky, has the firmest voice and the most clearly defined trills (which I, for one, really appreciate), the cast as a whole is not as good as the original recording with Edith Gabry (Marie), mezzo Helen Jenckel (Charlotte), alto Maura Moreira (Stolzius' mother), baritone Claudio Nicolai (Stolzius), tenor Anton de Ridder (Desportes) and mezzo Liane Synek (Countess de la Roche), conducted by Gielen, who also produces the most musically taut performance. I would, however, strongly suggest that you also see the Euro Arts DVD with Laura Aikin (Marie), Tanja Ariane Baumgartner (Charlotte), Tomasz Konieczny (Stolzius), Renée Marloc (Mother), Daniel Brenna (Desportes) and Gabriela Benačková (Countess), conducted pretty well by Ingo Metzmacher, simply because the stage sets and direction by Alvis Metzmacher are simply brilliant. Although he does not give us 12 sets, he does provide eight, laid out in a straight line, huge portico windows behind which some silent action takes place while the main characters, in at least 19th-century

garb, mostly sing and act brilliantly. Yes, it would have been nice if Metzmacher's conducting were tighter and more crisp like Gielen's, but this is one opera where seeing as well as hearing it are absolutely mandatory to a full appreciation of Zimmermann's creation.

***Ginastera: Bomarzo* (1967)**

Alberto Ginastera (1916-1983), clearly one of the finest composers of the 20th century, had had several successes with this music over the years, among them his piano sonatas and his *Harp Concerto* (which I was privileged to hear performed by the work's dedicatee, Nicanor Zabaleta), but he had some bad luck with his three operas. The first, *Don Juan*, didn't really get much exposure, but his second, *Bomarzo*, got him plenty of exposure—just not all of it was positive. For his subject, he turned to Manuel Mujica Lainez' 1962 novel about a 16th-century Italian eccentric, Pier Francesco Orsini. Despite the subject coming from a novel, Orsini, who was the Duke of Bomarzo, was a real historical figure. Bomarzo was a small duchy in Italy which Orsini inherited thanks to the close connection his family had with powerful Roman Catholic cardinals. He was a very artistic man who set up an Epicurean society in Bomarzo, surrounding himself with writers and artists, cutting off all contacts with religion—which, of course, didn't please the Church all that much. Orsini was married despite being a stunted hunchback.

In the opera, Orsini drinks a potion which his astrologer claims is magic and will make him immortal, but on the contrary, it turns out to be poisoned. After the poison starts to work, Orsini recalls his life in a series of flashbacks. Among these are a scene from his childhood, when his father dragged him into a room where a large skeleton danced and taunted him. Later, his father is killed in battle and the young, virginal Pier Francesco goes to visit the courtesan, Pantasilea, but seeing his image in a large mirror there, it disturbs him deeply. (Apparently he didn't know what he looked like!) His brother Girolamo falls from a cliff and dies, making Pier the new Duke of Bomarzo. He marries Julia Farnese, who, to his anger and consternation, prefers his other brother Maerbale. At a ball, Pier Francesco has vivid daydreams; he accidentally spills a glass of red wine on Julia's dress while courting her, which he interprets as a premonition of death.

After his marriage, Bomarzo becomes impotent. As time goes by, he creates large stone sculptures on his estate which symbolize his tortured feelings. Believing that Julia is having an affair with Maerbale, he orders his servant Abdul to kill him.

This brings us full circle to where we started: wanting to thwart Bomarzo's actions, the astrologer Silvio mixes the magic potion, but now we learn that it was Pier Francesco's nephew Nicolás who poisoned the drink. Bomarzo dies; end of opera.

Unlike *Don Juan*, *Bomarzo* received a big push from the Opera Society of Washington, D.C., which premiered it in May 1967. The same production was then given at New York City Center in March 1968. Thanks to this kind of push, the complete opera was recorded by Columbia Records, but curiously, the album was only released by their Canadian affiliate. In the meantime, Argentinean president Juan Carlos Origania canceled the premiere in Ginastera's home country which was scheduled for August 1967 on the basis of the opera's overt sexuality. Although later performed in England in 1976 and in Spain in 2017, *Bomarzo* has pretty much fallen from grace.

Part of this is due, of course, to the serial techniques that Ginastera used in this opera, also mixing in quarter-tones and, according to Wikipedia, "controlled stochastic textures of non-synchronous repetitions of motifs and cells."⁴ Of course, some of this was also in his *Harp Concerto*, but here, using a large number of vocal soloists with orchestra, it created a very eerie effect, and your standard operagoer simply isn't into very eerie effects.

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bomarzo_\(opera\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bomarzo_(opera))

Bomarzo thus combined the story of a very early historical (if cult) figure with exceptionally modern music. This is part of what turned people off. The other part, of course, is that both Lainez and Ginastera put this 16th-century figure through 20th-century psychoanalysis. You may say that *Wozzeck* and *Die Soldaten* did the same thing, but not really; in both operas, though the *music* is psychologically disturbing, reflecting the characters' states of mind, the psychoanalysis, as with *Peter Grimes*, is left up to the audience. Although Orsini/Bomarzo was real, some of the sexual adventures depicted in the libretto were concocted by Lainez and do not come from confirmed sources.

Despite the serial and quarter-tone techniques used in this opera, the sung lines almost come as a balm to the ears after *Die Soldaten*. In fact, even *Clitennestra* has less lyricism than *Bomarzo*, although, of course, the fact that Pizzetti's opera was a Greek drama called for more sharply-etched lines. Divorced of the orchestral accompaniment, some of the vocal lines in *Bomarzo* could easily be set to conventional, tonal music which would make it not only palatable but probably quite acceptable to the average listener. Some of it resembles plainchant, but much of it is quite edgy. Oddly enough, some of the most atonal music is given to Pantasilea, the prostitute, who sounds about as seductive as a female factory welder. (Well, who knows what those 16th-century whores sounded like? I sure don't!)

But it is the orchestra that, in many ways, tells the story, even more eloquently than the sung lines. If one pays close attention, the orchestra will tell you most of what the characters are feeling and thinking, and Ginastera created such unique sound-colors with it that it becomes quite mesmerizing. In the one and only recorded performance, we are at a disadvantage because the principal character is sung by a tenor with a very abrasive, overly-bright voice that is also unsteady in held notes, thus despite his strong dramatic projection of the character, he gets on your nerves. Perhaps that was Ginastera's idea, perhaps not. We may never know. At about six minutes into the second act, Ginastera uses a quote from the Witches' Sabbath section of Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*.

Another interesting aspect of this opera is that, by and large, it moves at a leisurely pace; this in itself marks it as different from *Clitennestra* and *Die Soldaten*, which are almost consistently edgy. This, plus the timeless atmosphere created by the orchestra, which almost never moves to a regular metered pace, almost gives the whole opera the aspect of a disturbing dream.

In its one and only recording, Orsini/Bomarzo is sung by tenor Salvador Novoa, his father Gian Corrado by bass-baritone Michael Devlin, Silvio by baritone Richard Torigi, Girolamo by baritone Robert Gregori, Maerbale by baritone Brent Ellis, Julia by soprano Isabel Penegos and Pantasilea by mezzo Joanna Simon, conducted by Julius Rudel.

***Dallapiccola: Ulisse* (1968)**

Unlike *Die Soldaten*, which is almost consistently loud and abrasive, or *Bomarzo*, which is frequently so, Luigi Dallapiccola's *Ulisse* is primarily made up of transparent textures and often quiet, if completely atonal, music. As Wikipedia reveals, here as in his previous operas Dallapiccola's "declared theme was 'the struggle of man against some force much stronger than he.'"⁵ To this end, he changed the story. As Andrew Clements put it in his review for *The Guardian*:⁶

The Ulysses at the centre of this opera is not the exotic adventurer of the Greek epic. Dallapiccola's Ulysses is a more reflective, less heroic figure, whose wanderings are a metaphor for the search for a spiritual centre to his life. His operatic journey ends not with a return to cosy domesticity with his wife Penelope, but alone on his boat, at night,

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulisse>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/sep/19/classicalmusicandopera.shopping1>

beneath a star-strewn sky.

The second [act] presents his homecoming and reunion with Penelope before the final solitary moment at sea. It is a beautifully proportioned, wonderfully allusive text, set by Dallapiccola to music of great subtlety that is generated by a family of 12-note rows. None of these explicitly represents Ulysses himself; revealingly, he is identified instead with the sea, which serves as the point of reference for the whole work.

More information comes from Wayne Shirley on the Library of Congress website:⁷

The Moldenhauer manuscript is a sketch for the opening scene. In fact, it is the sketch for the opening words of the opera: the start of Calypso's monologue, which forms the first scene of the Prologue. Calypso speaks in apostrophe to the departed Ulysses.

Once again you are alone, your heart and the sea.
Desolate, Calypso, the goddess without love, weeps for you.
You revealed yourself to me, murmuring in deep sleep:
"To look, to marvel, and to look again."
I understand: it was all a lie,
Your longing for your son, for your homeland,
For your old father, for your wife...

Calypso's monologue, sketch and score, begins (through the words "tornar a guardare"--"to look again") by presenting the basic tone row in its four main forms: original, retrograde (starting with "desolata," final measure of the facsimile), retrograde inversion (starting with "Ti rivelasti"--"You revealed yourself", and inversion (starting with "Guardare"--"To look".) This kind of exposition of the row in its four principal forms--the Grand Row Tune--occurs at the beginning of many large-scale serial works: one can almost depend on it at the start of a late Schoenberg serial piece.

This, then, is a much different text than the one Monteverdi used in the 17th century. In keeping with so many other operas we've encountered in the 20th century, even many Italian ones, it is the psychology of the characters and their internal reactions to isolation or difficult life experiences that create the drama.

To this end, then, Dallapiccola created an extremely complex score—it took him eight years to finish it—and despite its being nominally structured as a Prologue and two Acts, its structure, as critic Lewis Foreman pointed out in his review of one of the recordings revealed, is a "palindromical form" in "13 sections arranged in a symmetrical arch. At its centre comes Dallapiccola's vision of Ulisse's sojourn to the underworld. The whole is based on a related set of tone rows, which would need much closer analytical study to fully identify; even so, they give the music a very 'sixties surface, but also a remarkably beautiful, quite luminous sound."⁸

The one-page score sample which follows⁹ shows, at least in part, the extreme delicacy of his orchestration: clarinets (in two different keys), oboes, horns, celesta, light percussion instruments and strings, delicately scored with plenty of space between them. Dallapiccola maintains this orchestral balancing act in various different combinations throughout the opera.

⁷ <https://www.loc.gov/collections/moldenhauer-archives/articles-and-essays/guide-to-archives/ulisse/>

⁸ <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/feb04/Dallapiccola.htm#ixzz7fMH9scXQ>

⁹ <https://www.stretta-music.com/dallapiccola-ulisse-nr-390150.html>

Ulisse

Opera in un Prologo e due Atti

Prologo

Primo episodio Calypso

by Alfano

Molto tranquillo (♩ = 40)

(esitando -----) a tempo; molto flessibile (♩ = 50)

1^o Flauto
2^o Clarinetto (Si)
Clar. Basso (Si)
2^o Fagotto
2^o Coro (Fa)
Cembalo
1^o Arpa
Tutti piccolo
Tutti viola
Tutti grande
Timpani grande

(esitando -----) a tempo

Sipario. Tratto di spiaggia sull'isola Ogygia. Vasto orizzonte.
Calypso è sola sulla scena e sta guardando lontano.

1 Violini I
1 con sord.
4 Violini II
4 Viola (sord.) dir.
4 Violoncelli con sord.
2 Contrabbassi con ped.

(appena apre)

As one online critic put it, it would be easy to listen to *Ulisse* once, put it on your CD wall and then ignore it, but in fact frequent listening continues to reveal further treasures each time. You can't ask more from a work of art than that.

Foreman's very detailed review on MusicWeb International adds a few other things about Dallapiccola's rewriting of the Ulysses story:¹⁰

Dallapiccola's vocal writing is remarkably demanding and tends to have a jagged profile – enormous leaps often of difficult intervals and a very wide tessitura and a habit of asking for sudden extremely high notes to be sung pianissimo. The first two singers we hear – the rôles of Calypso and Nausicaa – have to play this trick, the first up to a top B-flat the second with repeated hits on top Ds or Cs, and generally these are supposed to be floated ppp... this is a portrait of a man trying to find himself; of his search for a woman and his uncertainty about himself; about his abandoning of women.

Ulysses' own uncertainty about his place in the worlds he visits is underlined when he arrives in Ithaca but is not recognized. Now we have the most familiar part of the story, the loutish suitors for his wife Penelope, and we have a British counter-tenor, Christopher Wells, as his son, Telemachus, strongly sung.

The suitors are contemptuous of the ragged stranger, but the prostitute Melantha – who entertains the suitors - begins to suspect something is up – she has 'never seen eyes like that'. Here Dallapiccola does not achieve the immediate realistic drama that Britten and [Vita] Sackville-West did in *The Rescue*, but it is a key moment. Ulysses kills the suitors to prove he is who he is, though Dallapiccola does make a big thing of it. But there is no reconciliation with Penelope (Colette Herzog, who earlier sang Calypso) and the opera ends (beautifully caught, this) with Ulisse's great scena, as Ulisse at one with the sea and the stars is still questioning. He finally embraces his vision of God in his closing words: 'All highest! No more alone are my heart and the sea'. In fact it is the sea – and hence the orchestra - which is the principal character of this opera, the sea upon which Ulysses has been carried round the known world and on which, at the end, we find our hero, alone beneath a sky of stars as he ponders the ultimate questions: 'You stars: how many times, under how many skies have I watch'd you, and ponder'd your pure and tremulous beauty!' It is with this soliloquy that the opera ends.

In the opening scene, at least, there is a close kinship to Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, not a bad thing, as the music occasionally includes a few words of *Sprechstimme*. When the orchestral music sounds somewhat jumbled and confused, it generally reflects the characters' states of mind: once again, a psychological interpretation of an old story based more on action and reaction than on reflection. Interestingly, although some of the vocal lines are jagged, calling for the singers to make leaps of an octave or more, they are not nearly as abrasive to the ear as those we hear in some contemporary German operas of this era or, later on, in the operas of British composer Thomas Adès, and much of this has to do with Dallapiccola's more leisurely pace and the greater transparency of his orchestra.

The slower pace of the vocal writing also allows for more nuance in interpretation from the singers. The 1960s was the era when more and more "singing actors" arrived on the scene to complement the very few we had from the 1940s and '50s, and if these singers were agreeable or even enthusiastic about singing modern music, they often gave excellent performances combining both vocal excellence with dramatic interpretation. This is no small thing. We have a few such singers today, though not nearly as many with solid, dependable voices. In the second act,

¹⁰ <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/feb04/Dallapiccola.htm>

Dallapiccola used more “curved” than sharp vocal lines for Ulysses as he begins to grapple with his problems.

This is very much an opera built around monologues and conversations between two characters at a time—one cannot really call them “duets” in the conventional operatic sense. As Foreman adds in his assessment of the opera:¹¹

While it is perfectly possible to run these CDs, mutter ho-hum and place them on a shelf, I have to emphasise that this is an incredibly complex work, and the many rewards which come from accessing it on CD with the vocal score and a commentary are well worth making the effort.

The one weakness of the opera, not from an intellectual but from simply the standpoint of listening appreciation, is that by writing it as a palindrome the second half of the music inevitably sounds much like the first half, since it is, written in reverse. Of course, Dallapiccola was making a philosophical as much as a musical point, that despite our best efforts to escape our destiny we eventually arrive at the point where we started. But with a good stage production (don’t hold your breath nowadays) and interesting singing actors, it can be made to work because the action is not all that static.

The first performances of this opera, which were given at the Deutsche Oper Berlin in September of 1968, were sung in German rather than Italian because Dallapiccola felt it extremely important for the audience to understand exactly what was being sung at any given point, but nowadays the use of SurCaps or Supertitles would make this unnecessary. A recording exists of one of the 1968 performances, with baritone Erik Sædén as Ulisse, soprano Annabelle Bernard as Calypso/Penelope, Catherine Gayer as Nausicaa, bass Victor von Halem as Re Alcinoos and Jean Madeira as Circe/Melanto, but although, as Foreman points out, the sopranos in this performance capture the light, pointed high notes perfectly, the singing of Claudio Desderi (Ulisse), Gwynn Cornell (Circe/Melanto), William Workman (Antinoos), Stan Unruh (Demidoco/Tiresia), Colette Herzog (Calypso/Penelope) and Christophe Wells (Telemaco), conducted in a live 1975 performance by Ernest Bour, is excellent and has far superior sound, which allows you to hear the richness and delicacy of Dallapiccola’s orchestration much better

Britten: Death in Venice (1973)

Britten’s last opera was both one of his best and certainly his most controversial. Based on the novella of the same name by Thomas Mann, it explores his struggles with his homosexuality, which, like Britten’s, he was embarrassed about and ashamed of. Despite the fact that Mann was actually only 37 years old when he wrote it, and lived to the age of 80, many literary critics believe that it is at least autobiographical in terms of how he fought against his natural urges. Quite aside from the social stigma associated with gay men at that time (1912), one must also consider the fact that Sigmund Freud had come to prominence by then, and Freud’s opinion of gay men is that they were emotionally stunted and therefore sexually confused.

By 1973, however, Britten and his partner Peter Pears had been together for 32 years, and Britten viewed the completion of this opera as a gift to Pears to thank him for all those years of comfort and love. Yet although the New York Stonewall riots had already occurred, being gay or lesbian, both in England and America, carried a stigma with it. Such noted Hollywood actors as Rock Hudson, Raymond Burr, Marlene Dietrich, Lily Tomlin and Jim Nabors remained closeted for years. “Coming out” was not only still taboo, it could be dangerous to your health.

¹¹ Ibid.

If Britten thought that wrapping Mann's story in music and putting it on a stage would soften the blow somewhat, he was only half-right. Many operagoers were willing to accept the opera on its own terms, but many more were not, particularly since none of Britten's operas, not even *Peter Grimes*, were particularly popular. I was 23 years old when I went to see the first Metropolitan Opera production in the fall of 1974, and the house was sold out—but I'm willing to bet that many of those in the audience were gay themselves. To me, however, it didn't matter. I found the opera surprisingly likable musically and utterly fascinating dramatically. Not knowing Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten*, I assumed that *Death in Venice* was the first multimedia opera. There were shifting backdrops on which different images were projected, unusual stage effects created with lights, silent dancers performing their roles in mime, and the voice of Apollo piped in through the overhead sound system rather than being sung by an offstage singer standing in the wings. Britten and his stage director had created a dazzling kaleidoscope of sights and sounds—including the novelty of having the lead baritone sing seven different roles.

And, of course, Aschenbach, the aging writer who goes to Venice, encounters the teenaged young man Tadzio, falls in love with him but then dies of cholera without actually acting on his desire was a product of Mann's genius, to describe the emotions going through Aschenbach's head but never have him act on his impulses. *Death in Venice* is not just about homosexuality; it is about the inability of people to understand innocence.

Perhaps because I *did* see it, and the performance was so riveting as a whole experience, I still have trouble just listening to this opera. For me, personally, it is inconceivable to think of *Death in Venice* as a purely auditory experience, and in this respect it is indeed different from *Peter Grimes* or *The Rape of Lucretia*. *Death in Venice*, in my view, has to be seen to be fully appreciated because of the multiple character parts and the way both the acting and singing interact with each other and with the orchestra. Even after seeing an excellent DVD performance of *Die Soldaten*, which is indeed enhanced by following Zimmermann's instructions as much as possible for having multiple stages, there is just an extra dimension to *Death in Venice*. I do own one audio recording of it, but when I play it I'm always running that 1974 Met production through my mind. (Footnote: I went backstage after the performance to congratulate Peter Pears, who gave an absolutely riveting performance, and had the eerie sensation of seeing him strut vigorously into his dressing room in his Aschenbach costume, but then emerge 15 minutes later looking like a little old bookshop owner. It was one of the most startling transformations I had ever seen in my life.)

In some respects, Britten's approach to this opera reminds one of *Peter Grimes*. His vocal writing is less dependent on one-note repetition, but rather "moves around" the scale both lyrically and rhythmically. In other ways, however, it is clear that this is a later development of the *Grimes* style; his harmony is more adventurous, the orchestration richer and bolder in sound. It is also richer in terms of its drama, bringing out aspects of the Mann novella that were merely literary suggestions and making them stage presences. One of the most interesting was his giving no less than seven different roles to the lead baritone—a Traveler, an Elderly Fop, Old Gondolier, Hotel Manager, Barber, Leader of the Players and the Voice of Dionysus—each of which represents an aspect of death. Dr. Louis Leslie, co-founder of the Gregg Shorthand Method and an avid operagoer since 1917 (he was the only person I knew who had heard Enrico Caruso in the flesh), went to see this production. I expected him to hate it, but on the contrary, he was mesmerized by it, saying that he was amazed at how well Britten turned Mann's largely psychological drama into a stage work. Incidentally, he was also riveted by Peter Pears' acting and stage presence, which he compared—believe it or not—to Feodor Chaliapin. Quite a compliment.

As opposed to some of the operas in between *Grimes* and *Death in Venice*, the music in the latter is actually developed, much like a symphony. Add this to the kaleidoscopic visual imagery

which Britten helped create with his stage director and set designer, and you have a complete theater piece that is both mesmerizing and creative. There are no “dull spots” in *Death in Venice* because, even when the singers are not singing, the music continues to hold your attention as it morphs and develops. Every so often, the accompaniment is reduced to a solo piano (i.e., Aschenbach’s soliloquy in the Lido Hotel lobby). In addition, there are many more rhythms in the music that keep the average listener engaged.

Britten and his librettist, Myfawnwy Piper, were also very clever to develop the story slowly and in stages. Prior to meeting up with Tadzio, Aschenbach sings of his appreciation of beauty in all its manifestations. This leads us to incorporate Tadzio into that aesthetic, even though Aschenbach himself suddenly realizes that his attraction to Tadzio goes further and deeper. For some of the music accompanying the frolicking of Tadzio and his friends on the beach, Britten also used some Balinese gamelan music, of which he was very fond. (At the time I saw it, I had no clue what gamelan music was; I just enjoyed the effect.) In some ways, the diversity of musical styles used in this opera creates a kaleidoscopic effect which defuses its musical unity at times. This was something that even music critics more seasoned than I was at 23 could understand, and they took it as a weakness in the score, but in retrospect it works *because* it is so diverse.

Aschenbach is finally warned by a young man that it is cholera spreading throughout Venice, and suggests that he leave that very day before travel restrictions are put into place. Yet, he does not leave immediately. Feeling that his life had achieved its purpose, he does not exactly welcome death, but he does not fear it, either. He almost spits out the words, “Let the gods do what they will with me!” as he collapses. A bit later, he allows the hotel barber (remember, another manifestation of death) touch him up cosmetically to bring back “the appearance of youth.” Aschenbach then sings, “All hail to my beauty!” He then removes the wig and makeup, goes to sit on the beach, watches Tadzio one last time and expires.

Like it or not, *Death in Venice* was Benjamin Britten’s masterpiece. It has so many different layers to both plot and music that one must really see and hear it a few times just to catch all the nuances.

The audio-only recording with Philip Langridge as Aschenbach, Alan Opie in the various baritone roles and countertenor Michael Chance as the Voice of Apollo, conducted by Richard Hickox, is the best sung and most atmospheric of the studio recordings, but to get a better idea of the strange theatrical flavor of this work, you really should see the video production with tenor Robert Tear as Aschenbach, Opie as the Traveler/Elderly Fop/Old Gondolier/Hotel Manager/Barber/Leader of the Players/Voice of Dionysus, Chance as the Voice of Apollo, baritone Gerald Finley as the English Clerk and dancer Paul Zeplichal as Tadzio with the London Sinfonietta, conducted by Graeme Jenkins. Though filmed on a much smaller stage, which limits somewhat the effects that were created at the Metropolitan, it captures the strange, hypnotic flavor of the opera much better than the famous 1981 Tony Palmer film version shot in Venice. Spreading the creative stage effects over a wider, more realistic canvas actually detracts from the creativity of this opera.

***Ullmann: Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (1944, premiere 1975)**

Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944), a Silesian-born Austrian composer and conductor, may well have ended up being one of those unfortunately forgotten composers of his day had he not been arrested by the Nazis and sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where his life was terminated on October 18, 1944. Yet even before then, he was often a fish out of water. David Schiff, writing in the *New York Times* on March 23, 2003, said that “Like other assimilated German-speaking Czech Jews as Kafka and Mahler, Ullmann lived a life of multiple estrangements, cut

off from Czech nationalism, German anti-Semitism, and Jewish orthodoxy.” Even so, Ullmann was fortunate to have Alexander Zemlinsky as a friend and mentor, under whose direction Ullmann served as conductor at the New German Theater in Prague until 1927. He also worked in the Czech Radio department of music, “wrote books and music reviews for various magazines, wrote as a critic for the *Bohemian* newspaper, lectured to educational groups, gave private lessons, and was actively involved in the Czechoslovak Society for Music Education.”¹² By the mid-1930s, Ullmann’s own music had broken free of the heavy influence of Schoenberg, evolving into an atonal but not entirely forbidding style of his own.

All of this ended in mid-1942, when he was initially sent to Theresienstadt before his deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau where he was eventually gassed. While in the latter camp, he wrote this ironic, sarcastic work, which the Nazis even forbade to be performed there for people who were scheduled to be gassed. Thus the score had to wait until 1975 to finally be presented on stage at the Netherlands Opera.

Here we have yet another work representing a political struggle against oppression. Brilliant though it is, we must ask ourselves the important question: Are such works destined for posterity if they are a reaction to a specific period in history, no matter how widespread or infamous it was? I think so, since the *larger issues* raised in the opera, the oppression of people by a We-Say-So, all-powerful government, could easily represent the Soviet Communists or any other totalitarian society that oppress freedom and personal autonomy.

Most people are unaware that the subtitle of this opera is *The Disobedience of Death*. The plot is both simple and very clever. A singspiel sort of narrator is heard at the beginning and at a few other points in the opera, introducing the characters and explaining some of the action. It is set in the year 1948; in his scenario, Hitler has won the war and rules the world, here called Atlantis. The description of his fictional society, one that is “unable to enjoy life, nor to embrace death,” makes more sense in a world that Hitler rules. In the opera, he launches a second war, “a holy war against all.” This time, his intent is to cleanse the earth of all human life, as the “Emperor” states in his final aria:

If only my plan was successful! If only the earth was freed from humans, the land would stretch out in unmown fields. Ah, had all of us been destroyed, the firests would flou-rish, the forests we had ravaged...

Clearly, this was not an opera that would comfort, in any way, the doomed audience it was intended for. Like George Orwell’s “Big Brother” in *1984*, Ullmann’s “Emperor Overall” has not actually been seen in years, though large photos of him dominate the landscape. The character of “War,” a drummer girl, is his official spokesperson. There is a simple soldier, a 15-year-old girl named Bubikopf who has only known life under the Emperor. Death appears as an ancient warrior, Life as a clown (harlequin). The latter two lament the state of the world when War interrupts them with an official proclamation that he has decided on a “Holy war of all against all.” The Emperor assumes that Death will be part of it, but Death is insulted by such impertinence and quits his job, so from now on, no one will be able to die but continue forever in a living hell. The Emperor, locked up in his palace, follows the events of the war on a computer console. The loudspeaker informs people of the latest events. One strange event has occurred: although a terrorist was hanged an hour ago, he has still not died because Death has quit his job. Cleverly, the Emperor puts his own spin on this, announcing that henceforth he will offer a secret elixir that will grant immortality to anyone who drinks it.

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Ullmann

The Soldier and Bubikopf rebel against the Emperor and confront each other. Bubikopf shoots the Soldier, then is herself shot by the other soldiers, but of course neither of them can die. Instead, they fall in love as the Soldier describes the beauty of the world prior to the reign of the Emperor. Meanwhile, the loudspeaker reports on the growing number of “living dead,” which the people are starting to grow sick of. Eventually, the Emperor confronts Death and asks him to resume his duties. Death agrees on one condition, that the Emperor be the first to die. In a bind, the Emperor agrees but points out that his death will not mean the end of war, that the fires of hatred will continue to burn. As he dies, he comforts War with the thought that there will be other wars and other tyrants. The End.

Ullmann’s music for this work is, as noted above, not tied to the atonal system. It is, rather, more modal, in fact using some actual “tunes” to represent Life, Death, and Bubikopf. He obviously wished to make this piece as accessible as was possible within his style so as to hold and keep an average audience. In short, the music sounds like a more serious, sometimes Middle Eastern, version of Kurt Weill. One difference is that Ullmann’s strong sense of continuity allowed him to write a more continuous musical narrative in which every facet of the score was fully integrated into every other part of it. A good example is Life’s (the Harlequin’s) opening narrative, not-quite-an-aria, which is wedded seamlessly into the ensuing scene, etc. The bottom line is that, for a modern opera and particularly one with such a dark scenario, it is not forbidding but, rather, somewhat appealing to average tastes.

Despite the music’s basic appeal, however, Ullmann managed to alternate these more lyrical sections with edgy ones using open harmonies and occasionally unresolved chords. There is a somewhat lyrical orchestral interlude which walks a fine line between lyricism and an uneasy feeling. Death has an interesting soliloquy in which he presents himself as more of a benevolent than an evil and fearsome figure. The music assumes a feeling of uneasy peace as Death resumes his duties, the Emperor dies, and the opera comes to an end.

From the early 19th century, when opera’s popularity suddenly took off, until the mid-1970s, opera was generally given in the vernacular of that country everywhere except in America. I am personally against this practice most of the time for the simple reason that operatic scores are often written with the music mirroring the specific flow and accents of the language it is set in, thus translations which are not done by the composers in question (as they occasionally were by Verdi and Strauss, among others) do not integrate well with the music. In the case of this opera, however, I have found that knowing what the singers are singing at every point in the score is a decided plus. Thus I recommend, for English-speaking readers, the only performance I’ve found in English from the Cincinnati Opera in 2004 with baritones Thomas Goerz (Loudspeaker) and Andrew Gangestad (Death), tenors Mark T. Panuccio (Life) and Ray M. Wade, Jr. (Soldier), mezzo-soprano Allyson McHardy (War/Drummer Girl) and baritone Brian Leerhuber (the Emperor), conducted by Patrick Summers. This broadcast is available for free streaming on the Internet Archive. If, however, you wish a good commercial recording, I recommend the German-language performance with Wassyl Slipak (Death), Sebastien Obrecht (Life/Soldier), Anna Wall (War/Drummer Girl), Natalie Pérez (Bubikopf) and Pierre-Yves Pruvot (Emperor), conducted by Facundo Agudin.

Reimann: Lear (1978)

We now reach one of the most problematic yet interesting operas in this book: problematic because its musical language is not merely modern but extremely abrasive and even off-putting (I myself hated it upon first listen, before analyzing it), interesting because, if you take the opera at face value, the composer did an admirable job of compressing *Lear* into a manageable operatic form, and you have to admit that the music often supports the drama inherent in the text.

Aribert Reimann (1936-2024) studied music with Boris Blacher and Ernest Pepping, yet his music sounded like neither of theirs. Blacher's music was rather neo-Romantic for its time, although using a few modern harmonies to spice things up, while Pepping specialized in Protestant sacred music. Reimann, on the other hand, sounds heavily influenced to Berg and Zimmermann. He was primarily known for his very "literary" operas, of which *Lear* was the one that put him on the map, but also of *Die Gespenstersonate* (1984), based on August Strindberg's play, and *Das Schloß* (1992), based on Franz Kafka's novel of the same name. None of these works became popular, even in Germany, because of Reimann's severe writing style, but *Lear* receives occasional revivals because of its generally high quality.

As we shall see, Reimann was forced to compress Shakespeare's *King Lear* into roughly 140 minutes' worth of music due to time considerations. But of course there is more to it than that. Whereas theater buffs will gladly sit through full performances of Shakespeare's plays, opera audiences want Readers' Digest versions. In part this is because most Shakespearean actors are excellent at holding one's interest in the characters via their stage presence and histrionic skills, but even today there really aren't that many opera singers whose acting skills are *that* good. Another reason is, perhaps, that modern audiences just don't have time to sit through four-to-five-hour operas as they did in Wagner's day, which is one reason among many why Wagner in particular suffers from fast-paced and irrelevant stage sets and productions.

But *King Lear* was a problem child for a long time. Perhaps the most famous attempt at a *Lear* opera was the one Giuseppe Verdi kept tinkering with but eventually abandoned, in part because, unlike *Otello*, there's a lot of dialogue and not much action, and as we've seen, an opera with static stage action is often doomed to failure. Finnish composer Aulis Sallinen, one year older than Reimann and (at this writing) still with us, took an entirely different approach in his 1998-99 *Kuningas Lear*, which we will not be discussing. Sallinen's score, though fairly dramatic in places, is far less edgy than Reimann's, but in the end its failure is that it doesn't really capture the dramatic tension. Sallinen continually undercuts drama by inserting embarrassingly puerile melodic arias that sound like bad Menotti, thus his work as a whole must be dismissed because important parts of it are musically inadequate and dramatically inappropriate.

As it turns out, Verdi wasn't the only famous composer to eventually abandon an operatic *King Lear*. So too was Benjamin Britten. Baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, a friend and colleague of Britten (the baritone part in the *War Requiem* was composed for him), asked the composer in 1968 to write an operatic *Lear* for him. I don't know how long Britten toyed with the idea—perhaps weeks, perhaps a few months—but in the end he, too considered it impractical and turned the project down. That was when Fischer-Dieskau approached Reimann with the same idea. Upon reading the play once, Reimann also said no, but less forcefully; Fischer-Dieskau kept pressing, and eventually Reimann read the play several times and began working on it. Over the next few years he wrote some ideas down and "filed" others in a "sort of drawer somewhere in [his] head" for future use, but after he was offered firm commission for the opera in 1975, Reimann finally got serious about it once and for all. With Claus Henneberg as his librettist, it was completed and premiered in 1978.

Reactions to both the play and the opera have been mixed. Marc Brooks makes the argument, which I don't entirely agree with, that

No one is going to make a successful case for bringing *Lear* into the standard repertory. Musically it isn't original enough and it doesn't sufficiently preserve the profundity of the source material. But it has a lot going for it. The librettist crams Shakespeare's already action-filled play into a tidy two hours and Reimann imaginatively deploys his array of compositional techniques to make sure there is no let-up in the tension. The re-

sult is dramatic and, more importantly, much of the music is worth hearing for its own sake.¹³

I disagree with Nielson because I view *Lear* as simply old and exhausted, unwilling to continue to rule. His one flaw, however, is in asking his daughters to *tell him* why they love him rather than trusting his own judgment—which is that he knows that Cordelia loves him the most.

Like it or not, and there are still portions of it that grate on my ears, Reimann's music is *wholly* original; in fact, he always seemed to me a composer who went out of his way to be original at the expense of sounding like *anyone* else. As for its composition, Fischer-Dieskau recalled in 2005 that even after accepting the commission, Reimann ran into problems constructing certain scenes, but felt that he and Henneberg did, overall, an excellent job in bringing out all the psychological problems that *Lear* encounters, and particularly in arranging the scenes "synchronically." Going a bit further, Fischer-Dieskau lamented the multitude of quarter-tones and other devices for the singers, who received "no help" from the orchestra, thus I deduce that he, too had a few qualms about the music's difficulty and lack of audience appeal even as he recognized that Reimann often hit the drama straight on.¹⁴

Compressing the play compresses the action, which is primarily based on antagonism and family infighting. This, in turn, led Reimann to create an edgy, abrasive score with a craggy profile, meant to be grating because the dramatic situations call for some of this. The only score sample I could find on the Internet appears on the following page, and although it is difficult to read because the notes are so compressed in the image (undoubtedly their intention), one can get some idea of Reimann's working methods from it.¹⁵

Basing his libretto on a German translation of the play by Johann Joachim Eschenburg, an 18th-century "literary historian," Henneberg omitted the opening scene between Kent and Gloucester. He starts with *Lear* explaining that he is old and "tired of the duties of office," telling his daughters that the one "that displays the greatest love shall surely have the greatest share" of his kingdom. None of the words in this opening monologue are Shakespeare's. The first line of Goneril's reply, "I love you more than words can say," is close to Shakespeare, but for the rest of her response their words paraphrase his but are mostly different. I'm not sure why they made this decision; in a largely atonal opera, surely Reimann could have found music to match a more literal German translation of Shakespeare. The dramatic effect, however, is the same. Later in the scene, Henneberg quotes Shakespeare almost exactly in this exchange:

Lear: Does that come from your heart, child?

Cordelia: Yes, father.

Lear: So young and so untender?

Cordelia: So young, and so true, father.

But then he diverges again. Thus we need to view this *Lear* more as a paraphrase of Shakespeare than a literal setting. In some ways, Henneberg made the text clearer to a modern audience, stating outright things that Shakespeare only suggests. This is not a bad thing in an opera, where directness is effective, but the libretto clearly lacks much of the *nuance* of the play.

As in the case of other Shakespeare operas, some characters are minimized, in this case Kent and Edmund, the villain of the piece, but if you see the whole play, Edmund's part is only a

¹³ <http://www.musicalcriticism.com/recordings/cd-reimann-lear-0809.shtml>

¹⁴ As stated in a YouTube video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRLqHMAHc58>.

¹⁵ <https://www.stretta-music.com/reimann-lear-nr-352945.html>

5. Zwischenpiel I
J. op. 76-80

Fl. Ob. Klar. Fag. Tromp. Horn Tromb. Tuba

Vcl. I Vcl. II Viola Cello Kontrabaß Piano

bit bigger than in the opera. He is not a villain who manipulates in the open, like Iago, but one who manipulates events more sneakily, behind the scenes. In the scene in which Edmund appears with Lear, Gloucester and Edgar, the former makes this telling speech, somewhat akin to Iago's "Credo" in Verdi's *Otello*—not in the original play, but explanatory of his character:

Edmund: I owe no gratitude,
none to my father, none to my brother,
I'll fight to get my natural rights.

Since the entire opera is seen (heard) through Lear's eyes, and Lear is going mad, the music reflects his mental anguish and discord. One of the things that got on my nerves, however, was the constant thumping of the tympani; another was the persistently busy, quadruple-time quarter-tone string figures. Reimann gives the listener little or no respite from his musical assault, and you are either with him or agin' him. There is no middle ground in this opera. Eventually, after three listenings, I came down on its side, but only due to its drama. One interesting aspect of the opera is that the jester/fool, the only character besides Cordelia who really understands and sympathizes with Lear, is a speaking role and not a sung one.

The roles of Lear (particularly) the Fool and Edmund (brief though it is) are the ones which call for the greatest interpretation, the latter being the subtlest in the entire opera. Fourth in line is probably Gloucester, who, to be honest, is an even greater victim than Lear, having his eyes gouged out for being a "traitor" only because of Edmund's forged and lying documents. This makes *Lear* the only Shakespeare play/opera in which there are actually two tragic victims, and Reimann did an excellent job of portraying both with equal intensity. On the flip side, there are also dual villains: not only Edmund, but also Lear's two eldest daughters, although the latter work out in the open while Edmund keeps sneakin' around in the woodshed. One of the few moments of respite from the aural assault is the Part One Intermezzo, played primarily by a low flute over equally low, soft, sustained brass and string chords.

Reimann compressed and conflated Shakespeare still further in Part Two, where scenes Two, Three and Four are played and sung simultaneously. These scenes include (2) Goneril, Edmund and Albany, (3) Cordelia, and (4) Edgar and Gloucester. Dramatically, this was a master stroke, but musically and vocally, it is a bit confusing and hyper-abrasive. Yet there are some extraordinary soft, reflective moments, too, such as Cordelia's very tender arioso, followed by one from Lear, which are set to soft bass rumbles and equally soft, high violins. At the end of the opera, after Cordelia's death, Lear has the last word:

Lear: A plague on every one of you!
You traitors! Murderers!...
Look there, her lips...
Look there, look...

I've spent a great deal of time on this opera because I feel it is a watershed work. This is as far as you can take modern music at its most complex and abrasive and still make it dramatic, still make it connected to the mood of the text. Of course, this didn't stop future composers from trying to top *Lear* in style instead of backing off from it somewhat.

Of the two commercial recordings, the original 1978 performance with Fischer-Dieskau (Lear), Julia Várady (Cordelia), Helga Dernesch (Goneril), Hans Günter Nöcker (Gloucester), Werner Götz (Edmund) and Rolf Boysen (The Fool), conducted by Gerd Albrecht, is by far the better sung in the subsidiary roles and therefore the more palatable.

Nørgård: *Siddharta* (1979, premiere 1983)

Per Nørgård, who is still with us at this writing (b. 1932), enjoyed some notable exposure from the late 1960s through the early '80s, particularly for his operas *Gilgamesh*, *Siddharta* and *Det Guddommelige Tivoli*, but somehow or other his fame became elusive in the West. This was probably due to the dual factors of his own music's difficulty and the rise, and popularity, of the much easier-to-assimilate style of minimalism.

Nørgård bases much of his music on number sequences, particularly the infinity series for serializing melody, harmony, and rhythm in musical composition. The method takes its name from the endlessly self-similar nature of the resulting musical material, comparable to fractal geometry. That sounds pretty intimidating, but when you listen to the actual music he turned out, it sounds relatively tonal and melodic, albeit using complex rhythms and melodic "cells" that are repeated later in the work with a different rhythm and/or different orchestration, thus producing an entirely different effect.

Siddharta, which he has described as an "opera-ballet," follows the same pattern. Within his sound-world, Nørgård creates a complex and sometimes polyphonic web using a sparse and very colorful orchestration leaning heavily on percussion and high strings. Despite the fact that *Siddharta* has no arias, the vocal line is not really too difficult for the ear to follow so long as one is not trying to sing along with it. As Nørgård himself put it in the liner notes:

What I express as desirable is a combination of the "familiar and safe" — and the "un-familiar and titillating". The sparse use in the first act of a technique involving a change of accentuation almost becomes an orgy of transformation music in the second act, where theme after theme, orchestral passage after orchestral passage, is revealed on closer hearing (or reading) being identical with earlier passages or themes. A "new metric structure" is solely responsible for this illusion of musical change! For example, the ambiguity of the "Ball-music" in opening of the second act is immediately manifested in the two main themes underlying the dance in youth's 'eternal' noon. One of them is merry — festive — square cut, while the other is restless — elegant — scudding. But the notes of the two passages are identical; the change is hidden in a 'new metric structure'.

The opera's libretto starts with Siddharta's father, Suddhodana, planning to raise his son in an artificial atmosphere of only love and joy, not allowing him to see or comprehend sickness, disability or death, and ends with his "awakening," the realization that what he has been experiencing is a lie. Siddharta's companions knew that there was really disability, illness and death; they were just trained to hide them from him. Siddharta's realization of this starts him on the path to enlightenment, which is the crux of the opera.

Siddharta isn't world-beating drama, but Nørgård holds your interest, as Szymanowski did in *King Roger*, by creating hypnotic music. He achieves this with extraordinarily light scoring, giving a particular emphasis to light, high percussion instruments, usually mixed with strings. One of the more interesting aspects of this work is its form as an "opera-ballet," combining elements of both art forms. The music works surprisingly well on its own, divorced of any visual stimulus, although I am sure that a video production would be extremely interesting to watch. Unfortunately, I've not found any online. Once again, as in the cases of Beethoven, Nielsen, Szymanowski and Vaughan Williams, we are dealing with music by a first-rate symphonic composer, thus there is a great deal of thematic development going on here. The following score sample gives some idea of his methods:¹⁶

¹⁶ https://issuu.com/scoresondemand/docs/siddharta_21615

The opening chorus is built around very short phrases at first, but these develop and intertwine with one another. As the basses enter into the chorus, singing an opposing line, the harmony suddenly moves away from its primarily tonal basis to a sort of mixed-modal bitonal realm; the voice of Siddharta's father emerges from the ensemble to sing a few solo lines before the chorus resumes. The vocal writing is highly unusual, falling into a sort of hybrid between lyrical and strophic lines; the principals sing intervals, but they follow Nørgård's own little pattern based on the infinity series. Even more so than in *King Roger*, the music is continually developed, although he aids the inexperienced listener by taking things quite slowly. In terms of both mood and pace, this opera is the opposite of *Bommarzo* and *Lear*. Pentatonic and whole-tone scales also find their way into his score to heighten the mysterious sound of certain scenes.

Nørgård describes the evolution of the opera to

the landing of an aircraft. From high up the overall view is the greatest though the details be obscure, while on ground level the overall view is lost though the details become visible, scented and audible. The main theme of the legend, as enacted here, is the sheer loneliness and despair that Siddharta feels when the successful deception of his father and everyone around him — carried out with the best of intentions — is revealed. And how he rejects a manipulated existence based on a lie.¹⁷

Interestingly, the orchestral prelude to Act II has a jazzy feel to it, perhaps indicating a hip Buddha. And, of course, the story is built up in stages; in this second act, for instance, his father arranges a game, offering a gold ring to three princesses who view each other anxiously as competitors. Yasodhara, the oldest and wisest of them, takes the ring and starts dancing with it, which causes Siddharta to fall madly in love with her. Despite the jealousy of the other two princesses, Siddharta and Yasodhara marry. After living with him for some time and bearing him a son, the story takes a more dramatic turn in the third act, when the princess Amra collapses while dancing from her illness. This is when it finally hits Siddharta that there is illness and death, and he becomes enlightened. Nørgård has a different musical "feel" for each scene; the second act, in particular, has more fragmented and diffuse music than the first as he uses more "space" in the form of short silences. The Siddharta-Yasodhara "love duet" features him in lyrical lines and her singing high, sharply angular ones as the tempo suddenly increases and the lines of the three princesses become quite agitated. In these moments, the listener must pay attention to the music; it is not so complex that it will completely lose the average audience member, but at least trying to follow its arc pays great dividends. Yasodhara's dance is a fairly lengthy instrumental interlude, yet although it is musically fascinating, the rhythms are rather complex for dancing. The argument of the princesses is also represented by instrumental music, in this case rather discordant and confrontational. Nørgård has a musical response to each step in the unfolding story.

As the Buddha begins to understand the cycle of life and death, the music becomes more agitated and atonal, both in the vocal and orchestral parts. Musical confusion echoes his mental and emotional confusion, which eventually resolves into a lovely bitonal *a cappella* chorus. The harmony resolves somewhat for Siddharta's solo and duet, not quite in a comfy tonal realm but harmonically resolved enough to make the finale sound comfortable as well as musically "right" as one hears a repeated soft flute motif over Middle Eastern drums. The end is sudden.

The only recording of *Siddharta* is a good one, with tenor Stig Fogh Andersen in the title role, bass Aage Haugland as Suddhodana, soprano Tina Kiberg as Yasodhara and mezzo Edith Guillaume as Prajapati, conducted by Jan Latham-Koenig.

¹⁷ <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/21615/Siddharta--Per-N%C3%B8rg%C3%A5rd/>

Hoiby: The Tempest (1986)

I find it interesting that, in this later modern era of opera, Shakespeare suddenly became a more regular source of opera libretti, not because I don't think his plays are worthy of such settings but because the melodic and harmonic language of modern opera is so radically different from what existed in his time, but if you think about it, presenting Shakespeare in terms of the lute song form that he knew, though musically appropriate, is dramatically insufficient. Shakespeare's plays, though wordy and using an archaic form of English, are not only fraught with dramas that cannot be expressed in those kind of musical terms but, rather, cry out for what you might refer to as edgy music—the same as Greek drama.

In addition to this, *The Tempest* is often considered to be Shakespeare's most contradictory play. After the very dramatic opening scene, in which a ship is caught in a terrible storm and washed up on a remote and unknown island, the remainder of the play takes place in a sort of artificial "fairy land" which contains improbable non-human characters, songs and dances (already written for that purpose, be it noted). In addition, the plot itself is improbable dramatically because it involves sorcery and too many "magical" and thus improbable events. Prospero, the Duke of Milan, is usurped *before the story begins* by his brother Antonio and his pal Alonso, the King of Naples. Prospero and his infant daughter Miranda escape by boat and set up shop on this remote island, where he uses his magical powers to keep the island's only inhabitant, a half-man, half-monster named Caliban, as his slave, and a local fairy spirit named Ariel as a servant. (So apparently, Prospero pays Ariel, which makes him a servant, but doesn't pay Caliban, which makes him a slave.) But Caliban had to be born of someone or something, so where are either of his parental units? Probably dead. So, slave or not, Caliban probably had mixed feelings of relief when Prospero showed up because at least he had someone to talk to other than Ariel.

And *of course*, the ship that gets wrecked at sea just *happens* to have Antonio on board, and *of course* the raging storm was conjured up by Prospero to get his brother just where he wants him, at his mercy on an uncharted isle where HE reigns as king. It's just all very silly. When I saw a performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* at a Shakespeare theater in Connecticut while a college student, I got so confused and became so bored by it all that I just shut my eyes and took a nap through it.

But Shakespeare was Shakespeare and now, older and (somewhat) wiser, I see *The Tempest* as an allegory for in-family fighting and a fairly complex story with interesting plot twists, not the least of which is the fact that Prospero is a complicated and contradictory character. Among the ship's passengers is Alonso's son Ferdinand, who for some reason Prospero decides to make him fall in love with Miranda and possibly marry her. Meanwhile, behind his back, Caliban tries to use Trinculo, the king's jester, and Stephano, his drunken butler, to stage a coup against Prospero. In addition to this, Antonio and Sebastian, Alonso's brother, are conspiring to kill Alonso and Gonzalo, an old councilor, so that Sebastian can become king. Prospero orders Ariel to stop this conspiracy. Disguised as a Harpy—a half-human, half-bird—Ariel confronts Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian, which makes them flee in guilt against Prospero and each other. Prospero then asks Ariel to put on a masque play which features the classical goddesses Juno, Ceres and Iris to bless and celebrate Miranda's engagement to Ferdinand, but this play is halted when Prospero suddenly remembers the plot against his life. He orders Ariel to stop it. When Ariel brings the three conspirators (Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian) in front of Prospero, who surprisingly forgives them, which prompts Alonso to restore Prospero's title as Duke of Milan. And you thought the adventures of Sinbad and Ulysses were a crock of bull??

In a sense, *the Tempest* was Shakespeare's *dramma giocoso*, his *Don Giovanni*, if you will, only with a lot more magic and sorcery involved. But I can see where opera composers are

drawn to it, because its fanciful elements make for entertaining theater, and there is just enough drama in the play to make things interesting (if improbable).

In recent years, the edgy, often noisy 2004 operatic version by British composer Thomas Adès has become a *cause célèbre* in the opera world, but 18 years earlier this far superior version was written by American composer Lee Hoiby (1926-2011), a child prodigy who studied piano under the legendary Egon Petri, composition with Rudolf Kolisch, Schoenberg's brother-in-law, and avant-garde composer Harry Partch, in whose ensemble he played. Later on, however, he was mentored by Gian-Carlo Menotti, who turned Hoiby's attention to opera. One of his first operas was one of his most famous, a setting of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*, but the musical style was just too close to Menotti's more treacly operas to sustain much interest in later decades.

With *The Tempest*, however, Hoiby found exactly the right balance between Menotti's strange stylistic hybrid of Puccini and Mussorgsky and his own, which included somewhat more advanced harmonies. Listening to it, it is clear that this style would never have worked in the context of such edgier Shakespeare plays as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* or *King Lear*, but with so many fanciful elements in its story, *The Tempest* came out just fine. Using light orchestration and a primarily tonal style, the opera is more in line with Copland's *The Tender Land*, a form that was clearly out of date by 1986. This is undoubtedly the main reason why it has been ignored. Melodic, tuneful operas were *passé* by then. One need only consider another very fine (but not terribly dramatic) work that premiered in 1976, Frank di Giacomo's *Beauty and the Beast*, which after its release on LPs sunk without a trace. But as I say, Hoiby's *the Tempest* is more harmonically advanced than that, and its fairy-tale sound clearly matches the mood of the play.

The orchestral prelude is very neo-Romantic, with a wordless chorus in it, describing the sea-storm. The first voice one hears after this Miranda's, describing the shipwreck of "A brave vessel, which had, no doubt, some noble creatures in her," followed by Prospero stating that he did "No harm, no harm." Hoiby's music is very pictorial and far more harmonically advanced than *Summer and Smoke*, showing a great advance over that early, Menotti-ish opera. It is also much more through-composed, with linked scenes and musical development underlying its structure. Like several of the operas we've encountered in the 20th century, it has an almost symphonic form, here on an even grander scale than Vaughn Williams' very terse, tight *Riders to the Sea*. Much of the music is in a semi-parlando style, melodic but not "tuneful" yet always in keeping with the text being sung. Even in the midst of a character's monologue, i.e. when Prospero utters the words "in darkness," Hoiby is alert to the specific meaning, suddenly dipping the music down at that specific point and changing the chord to indicate a sudden shadow of darkness passing over the music. Ariel's entrance is supported by what one might describe as "sweeping wind music" indicating his/her ability to fly, and the character's vocal lines flow like a quick breeze over the listener's ears, occasionally ornamented with *staccati* and trills, devices which Hoiby borrowed from the Bel Canto Boys. (I couldn't help but feel that, in his own way, Hoiby was also gently parodying bel canto opera with Ariel's scenes. A bit later, when Trinculo enters, he sings some shakes which are clearly a parody.)

Caliban, cast as a dramatic tenor, is surprisingly much more emotional in the human sense than one might expect from a half-monster. In his scenes, Hoiby had particularly challenging lines to set to music, as they had a speech-rhythm but not, if you follow them in the libretto, a music-rhythm. Thus these demanded, and received, much more care in their setting. The end result was that Caliban's music, though still tonal, is in its own way some of the most dramatic in the entire opera, just as Trinculo's is the funniest. The scene between these two contrasting characters is one of the little highlights of the entire opera. In the second act, the scene with Ariel, Trinculo, Caliban and Stephano is much more in *parlando* style, with extremely light orchestra-

tion and several little pauses in the music, yet it again matches both mood and specific words perfectly.

And still, everything flows, not just each scene into the next but each moment into the next which is surprising when you read the booklet and note the changes—mostly cuts—that Hoiby was forced to make in the score. In short, this is extraordinarily subtle music, although the second and third acts became more conventional, which disappointed me; but subtlety, as we've seen over and over, does not sell to operagoers, thus after its premiere *The Tempest* languished for years, occasionally revived by universities and conservatories while never breaking into the more prominent opera houses. Thomas Adès' *Tempest*, a particularly noisome and musically repulsive score, was and is performed in the world's big opera houses because *he* is Thomas Adès, while Hoiby's version still languishes in the domain of conservatories and small houses.

The only studio recording of this opera, with soprano Catherine Webber as Miranda, bass-baritone Robert Balonek as Prospero, soprano Molly Davey as Ariel, tenors Joshua Benvenuto as Caliban, Anthony Caputo as Ferdinand, bass JungBum Hao as Alonso and contralto Rasdia Wilmot as Trinculo, conducted by Hugh Murphy, is an extremely good one despite the two sopranos' struggles in enunciating English clearly and Benvenuto's consistently infirm voice production, capturing the drama as well as the unique ambience of this score.

Monk: Atlas (1991)

Some of my readers have undoubtedly wondered why I have not yet included an opera by a woman composer. Sadly, the answer is that so few were composed by women prior to the late 20th century, in part because they had no hope of getting them produced, that precious few even exist. The one notable exception, Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* (1906), was forced to be rather conventional musically in order to get it performed at all, and then later heavily cut to save time, thus in some ways the music simply does not match the dramatic situation.

But Meredith Monk (b. 1942), an iconoclastic American composer and performance artist whose vocal works, though generally wordless, also include dance, was commissioned in 1989 by the Houston Grand Opera, Minneapolis' Walker Arts Center and the American Music Festival Center in Philadelphia to write an opera for them, and so this, her only full-length work in the genre, was born. After premiering in those three cities, it was also given the following year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Then...it completely disappeared except for the superb audio-only recording on the ECM label.

But I, dear reader, was lucky enough to actually see a few scenes from the opera around 1995. The event was a symposium on music by women and particularly feminists at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, and although I generally get suspicious when any art is presented to me as a social theme, I was absolutely blown away by it. At that point, I had never even heard of Meredith Monk, let alone seen or heard any of her work, and of course the format—a complete opera in which not one word is sung!—struck me as odd, but the score and its presentation as a primarily *visual* work with sung *accompaniment* was so striking and so original that I was immediately hooked. I asked the presenters where they had obtained the film, and was told that it was on loan from Houston Grand Opera, thus I foolishly assumed that there would be a VHS video release of it sometime soon...but that didn't happen, thus from that day to this, all I have to go on are my memories of what I saw and heard. Fortunately, there is a nine-and-a-half-minute excerpt from the 1992 Brooklyn performance available (at the moment) on YouTube, and although the picture quality is darker and grainier than I remember it from the Houston videotape, it will give you an idea of just how mesmerizing it really is.

Of course, since then I have seen other videos of Monk's smaller works, and so can attest that they resemble the effects she produced in *Atlas* without being on their grand scale. Accord-

ing to Wikipedia, the opera was again produced onstage at Los Angeles in 2019, directed not by Monk herself but by Yuval Sharon. There is, alas, no video footage of that production to be found. There is a 52-minute series of excerpts from the opera staged by UNC Opera in 2021, but here it is performed by a cast of youngsters (aged 12 to 20), and although they do a competent job of simulating the vocal lines, the opera is accompanied only by a piano and presented on a bare stage as a puppet-play, which has absolutely *nothing* to do with the work, with all of the performers wearing masks to try to scare Covid-19 away. It doesn't work. (Neither the performance nor the scaring away of Covid-19.)

The plot is simple on the face of it, but in many ways this is the psychological opera *de luxe*. A teenaged young woman named Alexandra, living in a suburban home, dreams of traveling to distant lands while her father is very worried about her future. Suddenly, her Spirit Guide appears to her in the form of a horse, giving her the courage to travel. A few years later, the adult Alexandra—apparently having made enough money from her job to take a few months off to travel—selects her companions for the journey. They are Cheng Quing from Hunan province, who wants to test his courage, and Erik Magnussen from Jørpeland, Norway, whose earliest memory is “my first pair of roller skates” and who wants to see the world. The third applicant, Franco Hartmann, is not accepted at first, but is later added to the troupe along with Gwen St. Clair from Montserrat in the Caribbean. As they explore the world, they undergo ordeals which test their inner resources; Erik does not come through his in good shape, but rather succumbs to the lust for power in a “militant, technocratic society run amok.” The other four try to pry him away from his mania, but to no avail. Eventually, they come to a “timeless, radiant place where they come into spiritual knowledge.” In the last act, now much older and wiser, Alexandra sits at her breakfast table and sipping a cup of coffee, which was her first memory. She has come full circle, finding what she was looking for in the everyday pleasures of her domicile. She no longer needed to circle the earth looking for something and not finding anything personally relevant to her there.

Part of *Atlas*'s hypnotic charm is its orchestration. Eschewing the conventional symphony orchestra, Monk used a small chamber orchestra which included a shawm and a glass harmonica. In addition to the nine solo vocal roles—Alexandra as a 13-year-old, her mother and her father in addition to the six principal soloists—there is a small chorus, but only 18 voices in all. According to Tracy Monaghan in his blog post *I Care If You Listen*:

No score is available for the 1991 version of *Atlas* commissioned by Houston Grand Opera because it doesn't exactly exist. The singers learned the music and movement *en rote* taught by Monk herself, and Monk was therefore able to rewrite and tailor some of the composition to the specific performers that she cast in the production. Monk was so ensconced in the opera's process, start to finish, that producing the work again was perhaps too large or inaccessible an undertaking for another company—until the La Phil commissioned the updated version to be performed 28 years later.¹⁸

Thus we can view, and hear, *Atlas* as a Zen moment in time, a purposely unrepeatable ideal, but no work of art can exist solely in the mind of its creator and be expected to survive. Fortunately, there is now a score of *Atlas* available, published by Boosey & Hawkes. Hopefully, other adventurous opera companies will take the plunge and produce it.

I'm sure that some of my readers may feel that, in this case, I've put the cart before the horse by giving so much detail into the mechanics of the opera without first describing the mu-

¹⁸ <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2019/06/meredith-monk-groundbreaking-spectacular-atlas-los-angeles/>

sic. Yet, as I tried to explain, *Atlas* is so much of a total audio-visual experience, particularly since she also choreographed the movements of all concerned, that we will always be at a disadvantage with an audio-only recording. You can see this for yourself in the one surviving clip from one of the original productions, "Choosing Partners." The 13-year-old Alexandra is standing dead center on a dark stage, holding a suitcase. A very Eastern-sounding instrument is heard droning in the background, joined shortly by a wordless voice imitating its drone. Then one person enters from stage right, goes and stands behind her: it is adult Alexandra. The young Alexandra puts the suitcase down and exits stage left as the adult Alexandra (Monk) steps forward and picks it up. This may seem like a nothing moment, but I found it very profound; it is a passing of the baton, so to speak, from a woman's past to her present. Suddenly, on the black background, there is a large projection in the upper left-hand corner, an I.D. card, if you will, with her name and place of birth ("Rockland, Illinois, U.S.A."). This is followed by two other cards: "First memory: the smell of morning coffee" and "Aspiration: To seek the unknown." The drone ends, there is a moment of silence, then a string quartet picks up the thread of the music, playing a soft, forlorn little figure. A spotlight suddenly reveals a small table and two chairs off to Alexandra's right; she walks over, puts the suitcase down and sits on the table. She begins singing one of her little motifs, the "Hey-yo" theme. She then stands up again and begins waving and spreading her arms, trying to describe physically her vision of the vast expanse of the world. Then she begins singing happy but strange-sounding chirping sounds. It's typical Meredith Monk music: tonal, somewhat minimalist, but changing and morphing, creating an emotion and a mood, all without words. She then sits down at one end of the table as a man enters from stage left, taking the seat opposite her. Although there are no sung words in *Atlas*, there are occasional spoken lines; this turns out to be Cheng Quing, who introduces himself, states that he is strong. (Although there are no *sung* words, there are occasionally *spoken* lines.) "My heart is broken," he tells us. then "I am a...*good cook!*" He then starts moving his hands in the air in their own sort of arc, turning around and mimicking some dance steps. He then sings his own "Hey-oh!" motif which runs opposite of hers in a sort of counterpoint.

A knock at the door. Quing moves to the other side of Alexandra as Franco Hartmann enters from stage left. "I own my own equipment!" he says, adding, "I got a strong stomach" and "I'm good-looking!", then belting out his own hearty Hey-oh tune, purposely doing so off-key (which prompts some funny glances between Alexandra and Cheng). He is rejected. Then it's Erik Magnussen's turn. "I have desire!" he says. "I have a dry sense of humor!...Good hiking boots!" During his "Hey-oh" tune, he does a little clog dance, which makes the audience laugh. But Alexandra joins in, and he's accepted as part of the group.

Clearly not drama on the level of the Greeks, but in its own little microcosmic way, it defines how people introduce themselves and the impression that they make, which they themselves are not always capable of assessing.

Without the visuals, the music is alternately pleasant and dramatic, depending on the scenario being depicted, but clearly not avant-garde except in terms of rhythm. And we also take into account that both *Siddharta* and *Atlas*, and to a lesser extent *The Tempest*, were operas of their time, the music aimed at creating a mystical feeling based on Eastern religion and meditation. It started with The Beatles going to see Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India in the late 1960s and later mushroomed into a cottage industry. This rather dates these works in terms of their overall ambience but, in my opinion, takes nothing away from their quality or originality.

What Monk generally did was to put her own personal twist on plainchant and minimalism. The former is enlivened by means of rounds, canons or even fugues, almost always set to very simple accompaniment (often just a solo piano), the latter by means of alternate figures and sometimes development sections. Put the recording of *Atlas* on, have no preconceptions and let

your mind wander, and you'll be gently coerced rather than sucked into its hypnotic spell despite the absence of sung text...but you won't really get a flavor for what is going on unless you see it. If, by any chance, either the Houston or Pittsburgh Opera Companies have a complete video of *Atlas*, they really need to get her permission and issue it commercially. Like *Death in Venice*, there is so much going on that is not audible, but is important to our conception of the work, that we are missing half of it. This is particularly true of track 9 on the first CD, titled "Travel." All we hear is tap dancing and no music. On stage, this was undoubtedly a meaningful scene to watch.

Still, *Atlas* has its charms, even on the CD. For one thing, it is Monk's most through-composed piece. Even in the first act, where much more is going on visually than we can experience on the record, the music itself is more continuous than in her extended suites such as *Facing North* or *Turtle Dreams*. In addition, the exotic flavor that she adds to the score by the use of shawms and didgeridoos marks this as richer than her usual working methods. On the recording, the section titled "Choosing Companions" is much shorter than on the video (by a minute and a half overall), mostly due to the slightly faster tempo but also because some of the little arm movements or dance steps need not be presented audibly because there is no point to them here. On the other hand, the "Hungry Ghost" segment in Act II works well even from a purely aural perspective because Monk wrote surprisingly edgy, dramatic music for this scene.

Also for the recording, Monk deleted a few scenes, one of which she apparently took out between premiere performances in different cities, the finale titled "Return to Earth and Conclusion," according to Monk, in order to "leave the listener in motion, as it were, at journey's end," but the ending used does not end in motion at all. It comes to a dead stop. The other omitted section, "Arctic Bar," was later re-used in her suite *Facing North*, and was recorded in duet rather than choral form on the album of that name. I find that replacing both actually enhances the work. There is a live performance by Monk and her vocal ensemble doing the latter on YouTube, although the sound is a little hissy. As for "Arctic Bar," I don't know for certain where it came in the opera, but since it is piano-accompanied it sounds to me as if it fits in between "Forest Questions" and "Desert Tango." Originally, it was thought that it went somewhere around "Ice Demons," but both the mood and the tempo of that section are so radically different from "Arctic Bar" that I just don't hear it fitting in there.

Despite my qualms about just listening to *Atlas* and not seeing it, the studio recording, which used the world premiere cast, is a very fine one, with sopranos Dina Emerson (young Alexandra) and Monk herself (older Alexandra), mezzos Wendy Hill (Mother) and Dana Hanchard (Gwen St. Clair), tenor Stephen Kalm (Franco), countertenor Randall K. Wong (Spirit) and baritones Thomas Bogdan (Father), Robert Een (Eric) and Shi-Zheng Chen (Cheng Qing), conducted by Wayne Hankin with an ad hoc orchestra.