

21M011 (spring, 2006)
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 Lecture IX

Romantic Grand Opera

The key elements of the nineteenth century emphasized last week for the “miniature” repertoire, apply equally well to the “grandiose”:

1. tie to literature
2. tie to individual
3. tie to the supernatural and macabre

Nineteenth-century opera developed along two fronts.

Comic opera continued following Mozart in both its **Italian through-composed** form with recitative (like *Don Giovanni*) and in the **dialogue style common to France, Germany and England**. Giacomo Rossini (1792-1868) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) were two composers whose comic operas sparkled in the early nineteenth century and continue to hold a major place in operatic repertoire today. Dialogue style comic opera evolved into what is now called *operetta* (or little opera), which rose in the second half of the century as Italian opera buffa declined. Three composers stand out: in France, Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880: *Orpheus in the Underworld*, 1874)), in Germany, Johann Strauss, the younger (1825-1899: *Der Fledermaus*, 1874), and in England, Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), especially in his collaborations with W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911).

Serious opera (*opera seria*) also followed divergent paths based on national traditions, although the influence of literary works by Shakespeare, Goethe and Sir Walter Scott crossed all boundaries. *Opera seria* continued in **Italy** with Rossini (*Guglielmo Tell*, 1829), Donizetti (*Lucia da Lammermoor*, 1835, based on Sir Walter Scott) and Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835: *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, 1830). In **France**, grand opera flourished in the hands of Hector Berlioz (1803-1869: *Les Troyens*, 1863), Georges Bizet (1838-1875: *Carmen*, 1875) and Charles Gounod (1818-1893: *Faust*, 1859; *Roméo et Juliette*, 1867). In **Germany**, a national opera based on folk tales and legends grew up through the efforts of Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826: *Der Freischütz*, 1821) and **Jakob (later Giacomo) Meyerbeer (1791-1864), who was largely responsible for the fusion of the three national, European operatic styles**: his first three operas were written for Germany (1812-1814), then from 1817 to 1824 he composed Italian opera for Milan and Venice, and from 1831 to 1865 he wrote French grand opera for Paris. **The two titans of serious opera by the second half of the century, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), were indebted to Meyerbeer’s work and followed his lead in their own unique ways.**

Wagner (1813-1883)

Early influences:

Literary: Shakespeare and Goethe:

1828 (aet: 15) wrote a tragedy based on *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

1830 (17) 7 compositions based on *Faust*

1834 (21) *Das Liebesverbot* (based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*)

Musical:

1829 (16) Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*

1830 (17) wrote a piano reduction of Beethoven's 9th symphony

1834 (21) Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

1838 (25) Mozart's 40th Symphony

Early period (1833-1842)

includes years in Paris (1839-1842); influence of Berlioz (*Symphonie Fantastique*; *Romeo et Juliette*); threatened with prison on account of his debts

The Flying Dutchman (begun 1840; premiered 1843)

2nd period (1843-1849) Dresden; Conductor of the Royal Opera; insurrectionary outbreaks in Paris 1848 heralded as a model by middle-class German liberals; Wagner backed the revolutionaries and was forced to flee to Switzerland with the help of Liszt *Lohengrin* (begun 1845; premiered 1850)

3rd period (1849-1863) Zurich exile; patronage of Otto Wesendonk, whose wife Mathilde became a love interest; lull in composition; theoretical works (*The Artwork of the Future*, 1849; *Opera and Drama*, 1851); beginning of *Ring of the Niebelung* (libretto published 1853); interruption of composition of *Ring* to compose *Tristan und Isolde* (begun 1854; completed 1859; premiered 1865)

4th period (1864-1877) Munich; establishment of Bayreuth (1872); premiere of *Ring* (1876)

last period (1878-1883)

Parsifal (premiered 1882)

first marriage: 1836 (23) to Minna Planner (d. 1866)

second: to Cosima, the daughter of Liszt and Countess Marie d'Agoult (see image in Kerman/Tomlinson, p. 236; and discussion, p. 263); Cosima had been previously the wife of Hans von Bülow, conductor and supporter of Wagner, who conducted the first staged performance of *Tristan* in 1865. Cosima bore Wagner two children out of wedlock; after receiving a divorce from von Bülow, Wagner and Cosima married in 1870.

Wagner was demanding and difficult in his professional life; he placed his own needs and desires above friendship and patronage (as seen in his love life); and he remains permanently scarred by his anti-semitic attacks on Jewish composers Mendelssohn,

Meyerbeer, and Halevy, each of whom had been an important musical influence and two of whom, Meyerbeer and Halevy, had personally assisted Wagner in his career. His writings were taken up by the Nazis in the 20th century, and his music was made a musical symbol for their political party. Wagner, more than any other composer perhaps, raises the issue of whether a person can be separated from his or her work. Nevertheless, Wagner's importance can be gauged by the fact that almost everyone holds an opinion about his music, whether they like it or not and even whether they know it or not. Wagner's music is without question among the most important in the history of Western composition. Happily, *Tristan und Isolde* raises fewer of these questions than some of Wagner's other operas.

Tristan und Isolde (1854-1865)

Ancient Celtic legend

first written down in the 12th century

1854—first ideas

1856—first sketches

1857—completed the text

1858-59—composition

1860—prelude performed

1865—first performed; conducted by von Bülow

the opera commemorates and celebrates Wagner's love affair (probably never consummated) with Mathilde Wesendonk, the wife of his most supportive patron; it was ultimately conducted by von Bülow, the husband of the woman he would steal away and marry, who was Liszt's daughter; *Tristan* has strong musical ties to "Die Lorelei" a song by Liszt and *Nirwana*, a symphonic poem by von Bülow

there is a strong (and clearly intended) relation to Romeo and Juliet; forbidden love; the importance of magic potions on which the plot hinges; and the uniting of the lovers in death.

The opera tells of the Irish maiden Isolde who is betrothed to Morold, her kinsman. He is killed in battle in Cornwall by Tristan, who, mortally injured himself, disguises himself and seeks out Isolde to cure him with her medicinal arts. Although Isolde recognizes him, she spares and saves his life, as her pity and love have been aroused. Tristan, returning in health to Cornwall, has offered to claim Isolde as a bride for his uncle, King Mark. The opera opens on board ship as Isolde is being transported with her maid, Brangäne, from Ireland to Cornwall.

Isolde's anger about Tristan's treachery is exacerbated by rude songs about Irish maidens sung by the sailors, and she is distraught at the thought of being forced into a loveless marriage. Brangäne, who had not been aware that Tristan is the same person she watched Isolde nurse back to health, thinks to mollify her mistress by reminding her that she can bind King Mark to her with the love potion. However, this serves only to remind Isolde of the death potion, and she resolves to kill herself and Tristan. Brangäne, in horror,

substitutes the love potion, which Tristan and Isolde drink just as the ship arrives in Cornwall and King Mark appears to claim his bride.

Act II depicts the lovers' nighttime tryst. Heedless of Brangäne's sung warning and of the growing dawn, they are interrupted by the arrival of King Mark and his retinue. Tristan is wounded by one of Mark's courtiers, Melot.

Act III takes place at Tristan's castle in Brittany where he lies dying and delirious. Isolde arrives by ship just in time to have him die in her arms. King Mark's ship, closely following, arrives immediately after and despite his intention to allow the lovers the freedom to be together and his pleas for calm, there is fighting in which both Melot and Kurwenal, Tristan's devoted servant, are killed. The opera ends with Isolde's transfiguration during which she sinks onto Tristan's body and is mystically united with him in death.

Prelude K 4:16-20

Philter Scene K 4:21-23

DVD: National Theater Munich during the Münchner Opernfestspiele, 1998: Waltraud Meier (Isolde), Marjana Lipovsek (Brangäne), Han Wilbrink (Helmsman), Zubin Mehta, conductor

Wagner's use of

1. small motives, as in the miniature character pieces, spread over a huge canvas, and with specific meaning (*Leitmotiv*); that is, an opera should not divide into recitative and aria "as if it were a concert featuring self-contained musical pieces" (Jon T. Finson, *Nineteenth-Century Music: The Western Classical Tradition* [Prentice-Hall, 2002] p. 165)
2. chromaticism
3. deceptive cadences
4. rich orchestral tapestry, with "the artistic position and status equal to that of the greatest symphonic music" (Rey M. Longyear, *Nineteenth-Century Romanticism in Music* [Prentice-Hall, 1973] p. 170); "the orchestral accompaniment [should] play an active role in the drama, [avoiding] periodic phrasing...[and containing] its own melody composed of motivic presentiments [*Leitmotiv*]" (Finson, p. 166)
5. vocal *sprech-gesang*: "Wagner's vocal melody [is] often just another strand in the orchestral texture and chiefly devoted to expressing the text" (Longyear, p. 175); "vocal lines [should] avoid virtuosic display, bel canto, and regular, repeated phrases" (Finson, p. 166),
6. *Gesamtkunstwerk* (integrated unity of plot, poetry, music, scenery, costume and action); "focus on dramatic interactions between characters rather than scenes inserted merely to produce spectacle" (Finson, 166).

Verdi (1813-1901)

1st period (1839-1849) mainly in Milan: 14 operas, many associated with the movement toward Italian independence from Austria, France and the papacy through their political subjects; e.g. *Macbeth* (1847) based on Shakespeare and dealing with political unrest in Scotland

2nd period (1849-1857) spent a lot of time in Paris; revised *I Lombardi* for performance in Paris; operas of this period (for Italy) more typically about “personal relationships between characters (rather than on grand political conflict)” (Finson, p. 146); e.g. *Rigoletto* (1851) and *La traviata* (1854)

3rd period (1857-1874) experimentation with French grand opera culminating in *Don Carlos* (Paris, 1867); in 1860s Verdi closely associated with the movement toward independence and unification of Italy (“Risorgimento”), for which he “served as both champion and symbol” (Finson, p. 152); last name taken as acronym for the cry to have their chosen monarch unite Italy under secular rule: “Vittore Emanuele, Re D’Italìa” (Victor Emmanuel, King of Italy); Victor Emmanuel became king in 1861; unification complete in 1871; in 1874 Verdi “elected to an honorary position in the Italian senate”; in 1871, Verdi “finally succeeded in combining elements of French grand opera and traditional Italian opera in a completely way” in *Aida*, “commissioned for the Cairo opera house in celebration of the new Suez Canal” (Finson, p. 152)

4th period: (1875-1879) retirement to his farm; in 1875 his publisher Ricordi suggested an opera based on Shakespeare’s *Othello* with a libretto by Arrigo Boito; *Otello* (1885); then *Falstaff* based on Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1893).

Aida

- 1870 commissioned on basis of written scenario by the Egyptologist Auguste Mariette; librettist commissioned to write the full libretto (Ghislanzoni); Verdi and Ghislanzoni worked closely; Verdi pressuring Ghislanzoni
- 1871 premiere delayed by Franco-Prussian War, “the siege of Paris having trapped the sets and costumes in the French capital” (Roger Parker, “*Aida*,” *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy); further problems with casting; premiere 24 December

Set “at the time of the Pharaohs,” the opera takes place during hostilities between Egypt and Ethiopia. Young “Radames is appointed to command the Egyptian armies. Loved by the Pharaoh’s daughter Amneris, he himself is in love with Aida, Amneris’s Ethiopian slave, captured during a previous campaign.” It is unknown that Aida is daughter to the King of Ethiopia, who himself is captured by Radames in the current campaign. Meeting with his daughter, the king “bullies her into persuading Radames to betray an important military secret.” Learning of this Amneris betrays Radames, with the intent of saving him if he will pledge his love to her. Only after he refuses to be false to Aida and is condemned to die by entombment, does Amneris realize too late what she has done. All her efforts at this point to have him pardoned fail. In the last scene, a spectacular, specified

vertically split stage shows Radames entombed below with the priests intoning above; Aida has crept into the tomb unobserved; Radames is at first horrified, but Aida envisions the angel of death approaching in “radiance.” Aida sings her farewell to earthly sorrows, seeing the heavens open to eternal day; Radames repeats this with interjections by Aida; finally they sing it together as above them Amneris in a monotone prays for their souls to rest in peace. The duet melody, taken over by the violins, implies their death and ascendance (compare to the end of Dido’s “When I am laid in earth,” where the repeating bass ascends to the highest register in the violins and descends the full scale after Dido’s death)

Final scene K 4:12-15

DVD: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, 1988: Aprile Millo (Aida), Plácido Domingo (Radames), Dolora Zajick (Amneris), James Levine, conducting

As Kerman/Tomlinson illustrates, the scene begins in recitative, moves through an *arioso* for Radames, followed by one for Aida, then a duet. With each segment, the music becomes more simple and clear in organization and more lyrical as the characters pass from reality to transcendence.

1. recitative: Radames—largely monotone (first move away from monotone when he speaks Aida’s name)
2. recitative: Radames—more agitated; and Aida—more melodic, but note death knell—the sound of a low-pitched tolling bell—in the orchestra
3. arioso: Radames—more tuneful but orchestra very subdued and hesitant
4. arioso: Aida—classical a a’ | b a’ | c pattern with full Romantic harmony
5. duet: Aida and Radames: aa’ | ba’ | c (x4!) (compare to *In paradisum* in terms of context and repetition; compare to the end of Dido’s Lament in terms of the orchestra taking over the melodic function after the voices cease)