

THE STORY OF OPERA: UCT Summer School 2021:

Lecture 4: GERMAN ROMANTIC OPERA: The Two Richards – Wagner & Strauss

Presented by Elizabeth Handley – *MUSIC OF NOTE* 🎵

INTRODUCTION

Before attending an opera: preparation: know the plot and characters!

Opera Production – the behind-the-scenes work: specialists prepare the stage and “front of house”.

A good opera singer requires: a good voice, acting ability, a good teacher, knowing several languages, regular training.

Singers tend to prefer certain roles – which are dictated by their personality and voice type.

I RICHARD WAGNER (1813 – 1883)

- Dominated German opera during the second half of the 19th C.
- Succeeded the composers of French “grand opera”, esp. Meyerbeer, and Weber.
- Parents: Johanna Rosine (1774-1848) and Carl Friedrich Wagner (1770-1813)/Ludwig Geyer (1779-1821), a painter and actor.
- *Die Feen (The Fairies)* (1834): first opera.
- 1836: married German actress Christine Wilhelmine (Minna) Planer (1809-66).

Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes(1837-40): first success, “Meyerbeer-esque”.

Der Fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman) (1840-43): successful early work.

Wagner’s theory of opera (musical philosophy)

- *Gesamtkunstwerk* – (total artwork) - a “synthesis of the arts”: acting, music, etc.
- The subject of his dramas: the inner experience and psychology of the characters.
- Myth: universal communicative power; abstract concepts; the *relationship of ideas*.
- Characters to be abstract and universal, hence his choice of Nordic gods.
- Words and music linked together: *Stabreim* - free verse form, alliteration.
- Music to be continuous: *unendliche Melodie* (endless melody); uninterrupted, flowing.
- The overall structure: large musical forms replaced the separate “numbers” of old.
- Developed the *leitmotif* (leading motive): short musical fragments representing abstract ideas or qualities, appear throughout an opera - provides unity and cohesion.
- Wagner the chorus less significant, commenting on the action as before. The orchestra now had that role, + creating *atmosphere* (cf. Monteverdi). Very large; the Wagner tuba.
- Development of harmony: stretched the classical tonal system to the limits...bitonality.

Tannhäuser (1845): based on medieval legend; about a real *minnesinger* (courtly troubadour, poet-musician) who took part in singing contests.

- Themes: love & redemption, good vs evil, victory of the spiritual over the earthly.

Lohengrin (1850): the best opera for Wagner first-timers; very beautiful.

- Replaced the conventional overture with a Prelude; message & symbolism. Used his *Leitmotif* system, and flowing recitative.
- 1848: Dresden Uprising: exiled from the German states for 12 years -> Switzerland. Formulated his ideas about opera, rejected tradition -> his concept of the “music drama”.
- Began to establish his reputation as a conductor-> Mahler and Richard Strauss.

Tristan und Isolde (1856-59): very revolutionary: harmonic innovations -> Mahler and Schoenberg.

- Women cast as redeeming agents...inspired by Wagner’s numerous affairs.
- In 1861 Wagner granted amnesty: allowed back into all German states except Saxony.
- Vienna. 1862: Wagner and Minna separated.
- 1864: King of Bavaria, Ludwig II, Munich: sinecure; financial support for Bayreuth Opera House and Festival. Significant patron in the history of opera.
- Affair with Liszt’s illegitimate daughter by Marie d’Agoult, Cosima (then wife of celebrated pianist & conductor Hans von Bülow) -> 3 children. Married 1870.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (1867): a “comedy”; about the Mastersingers (middle-class guilds of singers) and a singing contest...Eva.

- 1872: departed Switzerland and settled in Bayreuth (Bavaria).

DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN - “The Ring”: 4 operas

- **Das Rheingold (1851-54), Die Walküre (1851-56), Siegfried (1851-2, 1857, 1864-5, 1869) & Die Götterdämmerung (1848-52, 1869-74)**: many Nordic gods, and *Leitmotifs*.
- **Parsifal (1877 – 82)**: last opera. A tale of suffering and compassion about the quest for the Holy Grail.
- Wagner died in Venice on 13 February 1883.

Summing up Wagner:

1. Tremendous influence: *Gesamtkunstwerk*.
2. Method of continuous music, *unendliche Melodie*, no longer “number opera” format.
3. Mastery of orchestral colour ... huge orchestra achieved overwhelming power.
4. The Festival Theatre at Bayreuth,

II RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 – 1949) – POST ROMANTICISM

- German opera: Beethoven -> Weber -> Wagner -> R Strauss -> 20th Century.
- Strauss added dramatic elements like the Italian *verismo*.
- First two operas: *Guntram* (1894) & *Feuersnot* (1901) = reminiscent of Wagner.
- Parallel career of composing and conducting (Munich Opera and Bayreuth).
- N.B. his tone poems: *Don Juan, Till Eulenspiegel* and *Zarathustra (2001, A Space Odyssey)*, and large orchestral works: *Symphonia Domestica & The Alpine Symphony*.

Salomé (1905): based on a play by Oscar Wilde; one long act.

Elektra (1909): also in one act. Principal theme: family vengeance...matricide. Even more advanced musical language than *Salomé*; dissonance, orchestral colours and textures to match the intensity of the drama.

Ariadne auf Naxos (1912): libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, an adaptation of Molière's play *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (cf. Lully).

Die Frau ohne Schatten (The Woman without a Shadow) (1919)
Intermezzo (1924), Arabella (1930-32), Die schweigsame Frau (The Silent Woman) (1935), Capriccio (1942) - A Conversation Piece for Music.

Der Rosenkavalier (1911) (The Cavalier of the Rose)

- Strauss's third and best-known opera; immensely successful; still popular today.
- A “comedy for music” combining of intrigue, farce, satire and pathos.
- Imitated Mozart's style....not as dissonant as *Salome* and *Elektra*.
- The last great German romantic opera.

Musical illustrations

1: WAGNER: *Tannhäuser*: Act II: *Dich teure Halle, grüss ich wieder (I greet you again, blessed hall – Elisabeth's aria* Birgit Nilsson (soprano)

2: WAGNER: *Rienzi* (1842): Overture – closing section

3: WAGNER: *The Flying Dutchman: Mit Gewitter und Sturm aus fernem Meer (With thunderstorm and storm from a distant sea)* Rolando Villazón (tenor) Berlin/Barenboim

4: WAGNER: *Tannhäuser: O du, mein holder Abendstern (O Star of Eve)* Tom Krause (baritone)

- 5: WAGNER: *Lohengrin*: Bridal Chorus: *Treulich geführt (Faithfully guided)*
- 6: WAGNER: *Tristan und Isolde*: *Liebestod (Love-Death)* Waltraud Meier (b 1956 soprano)
- 7: WAGNER: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: *Morgenlich leuchtend (Glowing in the Morning: Walther's Prize Song)* Walther von Stolzing James King (tenor)
- 8: WAGNER: *Das Rheingold*: *Prelude (Opening of the whole Ring)* – Rhine leitmotif
- 9: WAGNER: *Die Walküre*: *excerpt with Bryn Terfel & Deborah Voigt*
- 10: WAGNER: *Parsifal*: *excerpt from Act II: Dies alles hab' ich nun – Ich sah das Kind*: Birgit Nilsson (soprano) & Helge Brilioth (tenor)
- 11: RICHARD STRAUSS: *Salome* – *Ah, du wolltest mich nicht deinen Mund Küssen lassen, Jochanaan! (You did not want me to kiss your mouth Jochanaan!)* Christel Goltz (soprano) Recorded 1954
- 12: RICHARD STRAUSS: *Elektra*: *Aegisthus (Gerhard Stolze): Helft! Mörder! Helft dem Herren! (Help! Murder! Help the master!)* Elektra (Birgit Nilsson): *Agamemnon hears you!*
- 13: RICHARD STRAUSS: *Der Rosenkavalier*: *Trio for Act III: Hab' mir's gelobt ihn lieb zu haben (I vowed to love him)*: Marschallin: Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (Soprano), Octavian: Christa Ludwig (Mezzo-Soprano) & Sophie: Teresa Stich-Randall (Soprano)

Recommended listening:

1. Wagner: *Rienzi*: *Allmacht'ger vater (Omnipotent father)*: esp. Jonas Kaufmann (tenor)
2. Wagner: *Flying Dutchman*: *Overture* (a "précis" of the opera, includes an almighty storm)
3. Wagner: *Tannhäuser*: *The Pilgrims' Chorus, Procession of the guests & Festal March*
4. Wagner: *Lohengrin*: *Act 1 Prelude, Einsam in trüben Tagen, Act 3 Prelude, In fernem Land (In a far-off land)*.
5. Wagner: *The Ring: Das Rheingold: The Entry of the Gods into Valhalla*
6. Wagner: *The Ring: Die Walküre: the Ride of the Valkyries, Wotan's Farewell, Magic Fire Music*
7. Wagner: *The Ring: Siegfried: Forest Murmurs*
8. Wagner: *The Ring: Die Götterämmerung: Siegfried's Rhine Journey, Siegfried's Funeral March, Brünnhilde's Immolation*.
9. Wagner: *Tristan & Isolde: Prelude, O sink' hernieder, Nacht der Liebe (Descend on us, O night of love)*
10. Wagner: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg: Overture, Jerum! Jerum! Selig wie die Sonne*
11. Wagner: *Nein! Lass ihn unhenthüllt! Hier war das Tosen!, Nur eine Waffe taugt*.
12. R Strauss: *Salome: Wo ist sie, die den Hauptleuten Assyrians sich gab? In Wahrheit weiss niemand, Ah! Du willst nicht auf mich hören, Es ist kein Laut zu vernehmen, Dance of the Seven Veils*
13. R Strauss: *Elektra: Agamemnon! Wo ist du, Vater? Was willst du fremder Mensch?*
14. R Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier: Kann mich auch an ein Mädels erinnern, Mit mir keine Kammer dir zu Klein, Da geht er him, Mir ist die Ehre widerfahren, Marie Theres!*
15. R Strauss: *Ariadne auf Naxos: Es gibt ein Reich, Grossmächtige Prinzessin*
16. R Strauss: *Die Frau ohne Schatten: Nun will ich jubeln*
17. R. Strauss: *Arabella: Aber der Richtige wenn's einen gibt, Und du wirst mein Gebieter sein*
18. R. Strauss: *Capriccio: Hola! Ihr Streiter in Apoll!, Morgen mittag um elf!*
19. R Strauss: not opera, but highly recommended: *Four Last Songs (1948): Frühling (Spring)* – text by Joseph von Eichendorff, *September, Beim Schlafengehen (When Falling Asleep) and Im Abendrot (At Sunset)* - texts by Hermann Hesse.