

THE STORY OF OPERA: UCT Summer School 2021:

Lecture 5: Russian & French Opera, and 20th C Trends

Presented by Elizabeth Handley – MUSIC OF NOTE ♪

INTRODUCTION

I The Russians

- The “Five” / “The Mighty Handful”: Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Michael Glinka (1804-57): first Russian “nationalist”: patriotic opera: *A Life for the Tsar* (1836)

1. Modest Mussorgsky (1839-81): *Night on Bare Mountain, Pictures at an Exhibition*.

- *Boris Godunov* (1872) - the greatest bass role in opera, eg. Fyodor Chaliapin (1873-1938) and Bulgarian Boris Christoff (1914-93). Libretto after Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837).

2. Alexander Borodin (1833-87) – a chemist; *Prince Igor* (1890), completed by Rimsky-Korsakov.

II The Czech Republic

- Bohemia, Slovakia and Moravia = provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Czech *nationalism*:

1. Bedřich Smetana (1824-84): “Father of Czech music”: 8 operas; *The Bartered Bride* (1863-66).

2. Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904): a successful amalgamation of nationalistic folk idioms with traditional German symphonic style. 9 operas; Czech libretti; *Rusalka* (1901), Prague, based on Czech fairy tales.

III France

- French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) -> rise of French nationalism.

1. Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 - 1921): more classically French; 12 operas; *Samson et Dalila* (1877).

2. Leo Delibes (1836-91): ballets *Coppélia* (1870) and *Sylvia* (1876). *Lakmé* (1883).

3. Jules Massenet (1842-1912): 8 operas, best known are *Manon* (1884) and *Werther* (1892). *Manon*: greatest operatic success, based on the Abbé Pévost’s novel (also Puccini: *Manon Lescaut*).

4. Claude Debussy (1862-1918): French Impressionism (Renoir, Manet, Monet and Cézanne); *symboliste* poets (Verlaine, Mallarmé and Baudelaire). *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893) based on a play by the Belgian *symboliste* poet Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949). Searched for a language higher than language...found a partner in music.

IV Five Key Works from the 20th C

- 2 fresh directions: innovations in technology -> recording stars (Caruso, Nellie Melba, Luisa Tetrazzini... Maria Callas, Pavarotti). Opera began to address the complexities of modern life...Sigmund Freud and the unconscious.

- Composers abandoned the old definitions and conceptions of music, and created operas about the alarming pace and disturbing isolation of the post-war world.

1. LEOŠ JANÁČEK (1854-1928): *Jenůfa* (1904)

- Created a new sound world: own harmonies and unconventional style - completely original.

- Used folk music (to cast off German yoke) and the inspiration of Nature.

- 8 operas with Czech libretti. Masterpiece: *Káťa Kabanová* (1921). Themes: sometimes sombre, touch on universal human emotions. Elements of Italian *verismo*.

- *Jenůfa*: first success. 3 Acts. Muse: Kamila Stösslová (Shtösslova) (1891-1935); employed “speech melody” <- Moravian music (Lachian dialect): declaiming; strong orchestral blocks.

- Based on the play *Její pastorkyňa* by Czech playwright Gabriela Preissová (1862-1946).

2. ALBAN BERG (1885 – 1935): *Wozzeck* (1914-25)

- Influential teacher: **Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)**: invented the 12-tone method of composition, aka “serialism” (music based on a repeated series/row of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale – all the black & white notes in the octave) -> atonality = music that is not tonal/ not in any particular key.

- Other significant German composers of this period: Anton Webern (1883-1945), Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), Carl Orff (1895-1982) (*Carmina Burana*) and Kurt Weill (1900-50) (*The Threepenny Opera*) = the Second Viennese School.

- **Berg:** 2 operas: *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* (1935)
- **Wozzeck:** expressionist opera, an impressive historical document - a *tour de force*.
- **Expressionism** in modern painting: Edvard Munch (1863-1944) and Marc Chagall (1887-1985): art that represents the inner experience.
- *Wozzeck:* based on the play *Woyzeck* (1837) by German playwright Georg Büchner (1813-37).
- Influence of **Sigmund Freud** (explorations of the sub-conscious).
- **The music:** continuous throughout (no “numbers”); employed Wagner’s leitmotif technique; 15 fast-moving scenes based on Classical forms (recitative, song/aria, lullaby, sonata, military march and fugue); 3 Acts, without intervals; *Sprechgesang* (“speech-singing”), Cf. Janáček.
- The premiere in 1925 a triumph - a *succès de scandale* - international acclaim.

3. **GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898 – 1937): Porgy and Bess (1935)**

- Based on the novel *Porgy* by (Edwin) DuBose Heyward.
- Gershwin already famous for *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924).
- A successful amalgamation of indigenous American theatre and Negro folk-song, jazz, spirituals/gospel and blues and speech patterns with Classical traditions.
- Created new sound-worlds: the first American opera; many recognisable “hits”.
- Première: September 1935 in Boston – lukewarm critical reception; a *verismo* piece.

4. **IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882 – 1971): The Rake’s Progress (1947-51)**

- Composed in a variety of different styles; enjoyed great success.
- Studied with Rimsky-Korsakov; 3 ballets for Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet (Paris): *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913): novel and revolutionary, shocking: astringent harmonies, fierce rhythms and colourful orchestration.
- World War I -> **Neo-classical period:** 2 main operas: *Oedipus Rex* (1927) and *The Rake’s Progress*. Also: *The Nightingale* (1908-14) and *Mavra* (1922) - a one-act comic opera. Also: 12-tone method.
- **The Rake’s Progress:** <- Hogarth’s prints, Chicago 1947, met WH Auden and Chester Kallman -> a verse libretto; emulated Mozart, esp. *Così fan tutte* -> includes a coloratura aria, a Monteverdian fanfare, and the *bel canto* style.
- Distinctively modern: odd metrical emphasis, spare and angular harmonies; jagged, spikey, quirky.
- **The music:** solos & ensemble (“numbers”), chamber orchestral accompaniment, recitatives with harpsichord.

5. **JOHN ADAMS (b 1947): Nixon in China (1985-87)**

- Collaborator: Peter Sellars (b 1957) not the “Pink Panther”!
- Opera created from the recognizable known world. An immediate success.
- Libretto: Alice Goodman (b 1958)
- About President Richard Nixon’s trip to Beijing (1972) for meetings with Mao Tse-Tung.
- **The music:** spectacular ceremonial action & private exchanges; striking orchestral colours
- **Style:** **Minimalist**, like Philip Glass and Steve Reich: highly kinetic repetitive rhythms and phrases.
- Eclectic: styles ranging from Romantic to Broadway, jazz, pop and blues. Humour ...and poignancy (eg. Nixon’s aria *News has a kind of mystery*)

V **ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER (b 1948): Jesuschrist Superstar (1969-73)**

- 1968: first international success: the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*, with Tim Rice (lyrics) ->
- **Jesus Christ Superstar**, a rock opera.
- **The music:** through-sung, with no spoken dialogue.
- Depicts political and interpersonal struggles between Judas and Jesus (not in the Bible.)
- Incredible diversity, and gift for creating a really good show.

Musical Illustrations

- 1: GLINKA:** Overture to *Ruslan and Ludmilla*
- 2: MUSSORGSKY:** *Boris Godonov*: Act II: the "Clock Scene" ("Mad Scene"): Anatolji Kotscherga (Ukrainian bass) (Warsaw National Opera, Robert Satyanowski)
- 3: BORODIN:** *Prince Igor: Polovtsian Dances: Fly on the wings of the wind to the homeland*: Excerpt
- 4: SMETANA:** *The Bartered Bride: Skocna*
- 5: DVORAK:** *Russalka: O Silver Moon*: Renée Fleming (soprano)
- 6: SAINT-SAËNS:** *Samson et Dalila: Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix (Softly awakes my heart)*: Marilyn Horne (mezzo-soprano)
- 7: DELIBES:** *Lakmé: Bell Song: excerpt*: Joan Sutherland (coloratura soprano)
- 8: MASSENET:** *Manon: Je marche sur tous les chemins*: excerpt: Kiri te Kanawa (soprano)
- 9: DEBUSSY:** *Pelléas et Mélisande : Mes longs cheveux descendent*: excerpt: Mireille Delunsch (soprano) & Gérard Thérue (baritone)
- 10: LEOS JANÁČEK:** *Jenůfa*: Act III: *Village girls' wedding chorus & Jenůfa* (Pavla Vykopalová): cast of the National Theatre, Brno, Czech Republic
- 11: BERG:** Act III Scene 1: Excerpt: *Und ist kein Betrug (And there is no deceit)*: Katarina Dalayman (soprano) & the Royal Stockholm Opera
- 12: GERSHWIN:** *Porgy and Bess: Summertime*: Alexandrina Milcheva (soprano)
- 13: STRAVINSKY:** *The Rake's Progress: Master, are you alone?* Mack Harrell as Nick Shadow (baritone) & Eugene Conley as Tom Rakewell (tenor), Met Opera NY.
- 14: JOHN ADAMS:** *Nixon in China: The people are the heroes now*
- 15: A LLOYD WEBBER:** *Jesus Christ Superstar: What's the buzz?*

Other significant operas of our age:

- Scott Joplin (1868-1917): *Treemonisha* (1911)
- Bela Bartok (1881-1945): *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911, rev. 1912, 1918, 1921)
- Kurt Weill (1900-50): *Die Dreigroschenoper – The Threepenny Opera* (1928)
- Alban Berg (1885-1935): *Lulu* (1928-35)
- Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951): *Moses und Aron* (1930-32)
- Stravinsky: *Oedipus Rex* (1926-7, rev.1948)
- Benjamin Britten (1913-76): *Peter Grimes* (1944-5), *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), *Death in Venice* (1971-3)
- Francis Poulenc: *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (1953-55)
- Leonard Bernstein (1918-90): *Candide* (1954-56) [*West Side Story* (1957)]
- Philip Glass (b 1937): *Einstein on the Beach* (1975)
- Claude-Michel Schönberg (b 1944): *Les Misérables* (1980)

Recommended Listening

Good documentary about **Janacek**: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6fbAbsVN9Q>

Janáček: *The Cunning Little Vixen*

Wozzeck explanation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ys29RoJwdEg>

Adams: *Nixon In China*: Madam Mao's entrance aria *I am the wife of Mao Tse-Tung* (Cf. the Queen of the Night's aria in *the Magic Flute*): YouTube with Korean-American coloratura Kathleen Kim.

Adams: *Nixon in China*: Complete opera, with introduction, conducted by the composer:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEs5cKqHk_0