

Class 11: A Magical Morality Tale

A. Scattered Playthings

1. Class title 1 (Glyndebourne 2012)
2. Ravel: *L'heure espagnole*, poster

This is another class with only one work, *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, or “The Child and the Enchantments” but always given in French, by **Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937). Ravel was not primarily an opera composer, though he did write a one-act *opera buffa* in 1907 called *L'heure espagnole*—a pun meaning either literally “The Spanish Hour” or “The Spanish Clock.” It is a farce about a woman who hides her lover inside a grandfather clock whenever her clockmaker husband returns home—but she ends up with the porter who is strong enough to carry the clock from room to room. The Opera of Monte Carlo wanted a second one-act to make a double-bill. Ravel, who had been traumatized in the War, was slow to comply. But he eventually agreed to set a fantasy libretto by **Colette** (Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, 1873–1954). The double-bill received its premiere in Monte Carlo in 1925, a century ago this year. As *L'enfant* also contains a Grandfather Clock among its characters, I hope you will permit the following pun:

3. Two Clock Tales
4. Different media shown

The opera is about a naughty child who tears up his homework and trashes his room, only to find that the objects and animals come to life in order to punish him. Although written for the stage, it is obviously impossible to present literally. After the break, we shall watch one very good stage production complete: **Laurent Pelly's** staging at Glyndebourne in 2012. Before that, I want to give you an idea of what to expect, with half-a-dozen excerpts from the opera. But I will also show them in several different media: a concert performance, a film, a ballet danced to a recording of the music, three different stage productions in addition to the one we are going to see complete, and a hybrid version played in front of an onstage orchestra while animated drawings are projected onto a front scrim. Let's start by comparing three of them. The **Child** (a boy but sung by a woman) is bored and wants to take it out on everything around him. His **Mother** comes in with a snack but, seeing how naughty he has been, takes it away and locks him in. As soon as she leaves, the Child really goes wild, until he is shocked by the Armchair suddenly coming to life. I'll show parts of this in a trailer from a recent stage production in Paris, a film made in 1967, and the ballet version from 1988. Note especially the emphasis on the Mother's skirt at the end of the ballet clip; it will become important later.

5. Paris trailer
6. Film, tantrum
7. Ballet, Mother and tantrum

How does each medium handle the difficulties? What works best for you? Although all three of these clips show moments from the start of the opera (plus much more in the trailer), they are not consecutive, but for now on I'll concentrate on telling the story. We saw the **Armchair** wake up. The 17th-century chair dances an old-fashioned dance with an 18-century Bergère, or easy chair. The **Grandfather Clock** goes berserk because the Child has broken his pendulum and he can no longer tell the time. A **Teapot** (presented here as a Cockney bruiser speaking now-dated English slang) dances with a **China Cup**, singing entirely random phrases from Chinese or Japanese. Let's listen to their duet. Rather than playing a single stage production, I'll give you an orchestral concert to show Ravel's considerable debt to American dance bands, followed by a montage of short clips from four other productions to show the range of approaches that *L'enfant* inspires.

8. Concert, Teapot/Teacup duet

9. Montage of Teapot/Teacup duet

10. — stills from the above

These are so different, that comparison is almost pointless. Given the music, I thought the *film noir* quality of the first was quite appropriate, though I could have done with some color; you will get more in the other clip from this hybrid production I'll show later. The film, as again you will see later, simply cuts between one setting and another, without the need to integrate them that you would have onstage. Next the Child goes to poke the **Fire**, which leaps out into the room to terrify him. Impressive though this always is on the stage, it all stems from an extraordinary piece of vocal writing for the coloratura soprano, as demonstrated by **Sabine Develille** in another concert clip, though with the same Finnish conductor, **Mikko Franck**.

11. Concert, Fire aria

Ravel changes the mood by bringing on the chorus in 18th-century style, as the Shepherds and Shepherdesses in the **Wallpaper** that the Child has torn. We watch this from the 1986 film once more, though only the first half of three three-minute scene.

12. Film, Wallpaper scene (first half)

The first lesson to touch the Child emotionally occurs when the beloved **Princess** from his storybook appears. But he will never learn what happens to her because he has torn out the last pages of the book. His lament for her loss is possibly the simplest and most beautiful page in the entire opera. But the mood is abruptly broken by the arrival of the figure of **Arithmetic** from one of his schoolbooks, spouting story-problems backed by a children's chorus of numbers that simply don't add up. We watch this extended sequence, beginning with the departure of the Princess, in an earlier and more normally-staged production from Lyon in 1999.

13. Lyon 1999, Princess (end), lament, and Arithmetic

Two Cats appear, make love entirely in meows (plus hisses and snarls), then go out into the **Garden**. The Child follows. Different productions treat this transition in different ways, but there is nothing as

amazing as the sound world that Ravel builds up with his instrumentation (note the slide-whistle!) and layer upon layer of voices imitating the sounds of the insects, frogs, and birds in a garden at night.

14. Concert, transition to the garden

With the move into the garden, everything changes. Although there are still solo episodes as mentioned below, the stage fills with people, and most of the solos take place in the context of the thriving natural world. A **Tree** complains that he is still bleeding from the Child carving his initials on its trunk. A **Dragonfly** looks in vain for its mate, captured by the Child and pinned to a board. There is a **Ballet** of little frogs. The **Squirrel**, who has escaped from a cage in the Child's room, warns a nonchalant **Frog** of the danger. The Child replies that he only caged the Squirrel to admire its bright eyes, but the animal replies that his eyes should reflect the wide world and love of freedom. We watch this in another video from the hybrid 1999 production in Lyon, acted out in front of the onstage orchestra, but with a brilliant combination of live stage action and projections on a front scrim. The addition of color goes well with the blossoming lyricism of the Squirrel's line.

15. Lyon 1999, Frog and Squirrel

The last soloist to torment the Child is the **Bat**, whose nest with all her young ones he has destroyed. **Jiri Kylian**, the choreographer of the ballet version, matches this vision of a bereft mother with the appearance of the **Mother**, now as a huge effigy. I wish I could go directly on to the end, but it is too long, so I'll make a four-minute cut and pick it up. The Animals gang up on the Child, vying to be the first to punish him. In the *mélée*, the little Squirrel breaks one of its paws. Showing compassion for the first time, the Child binds it up with his handkerchief, then collapses. Realizing that he is good after all, the Animals call for the Child's Mother, first in almost inarticulate speech, then in an eight-part chorus which gradually gets more and more harmonious and uplifting. And all through this, in the Kylian production, you will see the Mother's skirt taking on a very special function.

16. Ballet, Mother and ending (2 clips)

17. Class title 2

B. The Pieces Reassembled

Finally a complete performance of the opera from Glyndebourne. The conductor is **Kazushi Ono** and **Laurent Pelly** is the director.

18. Ravel: *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, complete (Glyndebourne 2012)

19. Class title 3 (Ravel's Pastoral Morality)