

Comedy in Song



11. A Magical Morality Tale

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L'ENFANT ET LES SORTILÈGES is surely unique among operas, and not just because of its almost untranslatable title ("The Child and the Enchantments" just doesn't cut it). Composed by **Maurice Ravel** to a text by **Colette**, and premiered in Monte Carlo in 1925—this is its centenary—the 50-minute show tells of a naughty child locked in his room by his mother, only to be confronted by all the objects and animals he has carelessly injured.

Because it is a fantasy and involves the combination of people and objects on quite different scales, *L'enfant* is catnip for inventive directors. The 2012 Glyndebourne production by **Laurent Pelly** is unusually coherent, but it is only one way to go. Before watching it complete after the break, we will explore separate excerpts in the first hour, in different media and from several different productions. *rb.*

A. Scattered Playthings

The **Child** 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, he really goes wild, until he is shocked by the armchair suddenly coming to life.

- **Paris, 2018:** trailer
- **Film, 1967:** the Child's tantrum
- **Ballet, 1998:** Mother scene and tantrum (Nederlands Dans Theater, Jiri Kylian, *choreographer*)

The 17-century **Armchair** dances an old-fashioned dance with an 18-century easy chair (**Bergère**). 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 random phrases of Chinese or Japanese.

- **Concert:** Teapot and China Cup (Élodie Méchain, Antoine Normand; Orchestra of Radio France, Mikko Franck, *cond.*)
- **Montage:** Teapot and China Cup (Lyon 1019, Lyon 1999, Film 1967, Glyndebourne 1988)

The Child goes to poke the **Fire**, which leaps out into the room to terrify him.

- **Concert:** Fire aria, opening (Sabine Deveilhe, Orchestra of Radio France, Mikko Franck, *conductor*)

Ravel now changes the mood by bringing on the chorus in an 18th-century *pastorale*, as the shepherds and shepherdesses in the **Wallpaper** that the Child has torn.

- **Film, 1967:** Wallpaper scene (opening)

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 his 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.

- **Lyon 1999:** Princess and Arithmetic (Alketa Cela, *Princess*; Marie-Belle Sandis, *Child*; Léonard Pezzino, *Arithmetic*)

Two Cats appear, make love entirely in meows (plus hisses and snarls), then go out into the garden. The Child follows.

- **Concert:** Transition into the garden (as above)

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 her 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 only the wide world and love of freedom.

- **Lyon 2019:** Squirrel and Frog

The **Animals** gang up on the Child, vying to be the first to punish him. In the melee, the little Squirrel breaks one of its paws. Showing compassion for the first time, the Child binds it with his handkerchief, then collapses. Realizing that he is good after all, the Animals call for the Child's Mother.

- **Ballet 1988:** the ending of the opera (as above)

B. The Pieces Reassembled

- **Glyndebourne 2012:** complete opera (Khatouna Gadalia, *Child*, with other singers in multiple roles; Kazushi Ono, *conductor*; Laurent Pelly, *director*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/ComedySong
I will always respond to mail at rogerbrunyate@gmail.com