Class 8: A Night at the Opéra

A. How Grand Can You Get?

1. Class title 1 (opera/ballet)
2. Scorcese: *The Age of Innocence*, opening (ending on still)

That was the opening sequence of the 1993 **Martin Scorcese** film fo **Edith Wharton's** 1993 novel *The Age of Innocence.* The old money crowd of New York are gathered at the old Academy of Music, ostensibly to hear an opera, but really to see and be seen. Does anybody know what that opera is? And what language it is being sung in?

3. Still from the above, with the Wharton comment

Anyone know, or care to guess? The opera, in fact, is *Faust,* by **Charles Gounod** (1818–93), which premiered in Paris in 1859. The language, however, is not French but Italian, for the reasons so neatly explained (or not-explained) by Wharton herself. There is a paradox here. By the end of the 19th century, and even to a large extent today, support of opera was closely identified with social status. Not just any opera, but **grand opera**—which is a term and concept trandlated directly from the French, *grand opéra*. Yet the status language for operatic singing was and remains Italian! And *Faust,* by any standards, is undoubtedly grand. Here is a photo and clip from the current production by **Sir David McVicar** at the Royal Opera in London.

4. *Faust* in London (David McVicar production)
5. The *Cabaret d'Enfer* scene from the above
6. *Faust* in London (repeat)

B. Paris as Magnet

I am now going back to Paris around 1830, and the interior of the main opera house at the time, the **Salle Pelletier**. The first face who appears is that of **Giacomo Meyerbeer**, then the presiding god of the Opera. Then you will see a bunch of composers from Italy, who were drawn to Paris by the unique opportunities there. Finally we get some of the home-grown French composers who also wrote operas on a similar scale, mostly rather after those of the foreign visitors.

7. Section title B

I have been using the terms “Import” and “Export,” but the situation in Paris does not quite fit either category. What Paris **exported** was the *idea* of a certain kind of opera that its theatres could afford to mount and its audiences enjoyed. But the majority of the composers who wrote operas to those specifications came from abroad (these three are only a few of many); so in that respect, it is all **import**.

8. Grand Opera bullet points (ProblemOperas 07/3)

The specifications in question are best described in connection with the first great success of the gentleman in the middle, **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864), whose *Robert le Diable* was the big hit of 1831. Meyerbeer was born in Berlin, but he came to Paris by way of Italy, bringing with him German orchestration, Italian vocalism, and a desire to use his talents in the service of French taste. What he and his colleagues created was a genre known as ***grand opéra***, characterised by the qualities shown here: large-scale works in five acts (sometimes four), calling for many scene-changes and much theatrical spectacle; subjects taken from history or historical myth, involving clear moral choices; highly demanding vocal roles, requiring large ranges, agility, stamina, and power; use of the orchestra as more than accompaniment, to paint the scene or comment on it; an expanded role for the chorus, who typically open or close each act; and extended ballet sequences, especially in the middle acts.

9. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, original nuns’ scene

I have shown scenes from the unique **Laurent Pelly** production of *Robert le Diable* before, but these particular clips are new. The first, actually, is the ending of a scene whose beginning many of you may have seen before. The basic plot is an attempt to prevent Robert of Normandy— the father of William the Conqueror (remember him?)—from marrying Princess Isabelle, whom he loves, and delivering him to the Devil instead. Robert has already blown his chance with Isabelle, and in desperation he agress to go at night to a ruined convent haunted by the ghosts of nuns who have broken their vows, there to steal a magic branch. This is the expected ballet scene. Naturally, the choreographer here, **Lionel Hoche**, has a more compelling take on the fallen women than merely ballerinas floating around in tutus, but even that created a scandalous success at the time. I have shown the beginning a couple of times before; this is how the scene ends. If you can take your eyes away from all the debauchery, listen to the score simply as a piece of chamber music; it is glorious!

10. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, Act III finale
11. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, original nuns’ scene (repeat)

So Robert goes to the palace and uses the magic branch to put Isabelle’s attendants into a trance. But she pleads with him, and urges him to repent. He does so, and breaks the branch. At which point, the attendants wake and cry for his blood. Note two things about the ensemble that follows: the energy of short rhythmic phrases, which is very much a Meyerbeer specialty, and the way the two solo voices rise above the chorus to make a thrilling finale that **Verdi** would imitate again and again.

12. Meyerbeer: *Robert le Diable*, Act IV finale
13. Two Rossini operas

Most of the great Italian composers wrote for Paris. **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792–1868) got there a little earlier, originally to present one of his trademark comic operas, *Le Comte Ory*, at a different house, and then to write a serious piece for the big house, *Guillaume Tell* (1829), which may have a stronger claim than Meyerbeer's to be the foundation stone of *grand opéra.* But that was his final operatic work; he stayed on in Paris for four decades, living high off the hog and getting extremely fat. Meyerbeer, on the other hand, lived on almost as long, continuing with the *grand opéra* tradition for many more operas.

14. Two Donizetti operas
15. — the same with Berlioz critique

I have played both Rossini operas many times before. So I want to turn instead to another Italian visitor who pulled off a similar tragic/comic double-whammy, **Gaetano Donizetti** (1797–1848). Or rather, quintuple whammy, for if you believe this admittedly jealous critique by **Hector Berlioz**, it seems that Donizetti had at least seven works playing at, or promised to, four different Paris theatres! He was the Andrew Lloyd Webber of his day. Several of these have either been lost or did not come to fruition, but it is still a lot. I want to look at these two works, both from 1840, both written to French librettos. *La favorite* is more frequently heard nowadays in Italian as *La favorita,* but *The Daughter of the Regiment* remains in its original French.

16. Kate Aldrich in *La Favorite*

So far, I have been emphasizing the scale and spectacle of Paris grand operas. But of course they had to have interesting characters and emotionally charged arias. So I am going to play you at least the beginning of the most famous aria in *La favorite,* "Oh, mon Fernand" ("O mio Fernando" in Italian). **Leonor**, the title character, has been the long-term mistress of the King. But the King is ordered by the Pope to get rid of her, so he readily assents when **Fernand**, one of his noblemen, asks to marry her. Fernand and Leonor love each other, but he knows nothing of her past. In this aria, she realizes she will have to tell him, and then accept his wrath and whatever punishment is awaiting her from heaven. There is nothing particularly French about this aria; the slow-fast combination was now standard in Italian *bel canto,* but then most of French opera was derived from other sources anyhow.

17. Donizetti: *La favorite,* "Oh, mon Fernand"
18. Natalie Dessay as *La fille du regiment*

There are show-stopping arias and ensembles in *La fille du régiment* also, but the structure is entirely French, with a throughly farcical plot and spoken dialogue between numbers. **Marie**, the title role, was found as a baby abandoned on the batlefield. Since the, she has been brought up collectively by the soldiers, but is especially close to **Sergeant Sulpice**. Here is a duet they sing together early in the opera. The singers are **Natalie Dessay** and **Alessandro Corbelli**; it is another production by **Laurent Pelly**.

19. Donizetti: *La fille du régiment*, duet "Au bruit de la guerre"

C. French Masks

20. Section title C (French masks)

Although most (but not quite all) of the grand opera composers in Paris were born in other countries, French composers gradually began to take over. But not always at the Opéra. As the Berlioz critique indicated, there were other theatres performing other kinds of opera. This last quarter-hour will survey three of them: *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) by **Jacques Offenbach** (1819–80), an obviously comic piece; **Gounod's** *Faust* again (1859), one of the grandest of grand operas; and *Carmen* (1875) by **Georges Bizet** (1838–75), which occupies territory somewhere in between.

21. Offenbach: *Orphée aux Enfers* poster

I imagine I only have to play one scene for you to zero in on *Orpheus in the Underworld,* the famous can-can. The main singer is once more **Natalie Dessay**. Although having nothing whatever to do with *grand opéra*, this too is a French Connection, leading directly to **Gilbert and Sullivan** and thence to Broadway.

22. Offenbach: *Orphée aux enfers,* Can-can
23. Bizet and *Carmen*

If you are looking for grand-opera scale, you could hardly beat Bizet's *Carmen*, which has four separate acts, each teeming with local color and featuring large choruses and a lot of dancing. But *Carmen* started out, not as a *grand opéra* but an *opéra comique*—that is to say an opera with spoken dialogue, though not necessarily comic. But it was a notorious failure at its première in 1875, and Bizet died disappointed. His heirs commissioned another composer to turn the dialogues into sung recitatives, and it was in this form that it was eventually accepted by the Opéra and other Grand Opera houses around the world; it is the fourth most-often performed opera at the Met, coming after *Bohème, Aida,* and *Traviata.* Yet in past decades, many people have come to wonder if Bizet was not right after all. Here is a short sequence from Act II in a production from Paris, from the end of the first number, the gypsy dance, to the beginning of the second, the Toreador's song. Note the effect of the constantly shifting media: song, dance, dialogue, offstage chorus, and full orchestra.

24. Bizet: *Carmen,* scene from Act II
25. Gounod and *Faust*

Oddly enough, *Faust* was also presented as an *opéra comique* with spoken dialogue. But the publisher got Gounod to write recitatives before taking the production on the European tour that cemented its reputation. Even so, Gounod had to add a ballet to the fourth act before *Faust* was accepted by the Opéra—more on that in the next hour. I mentioned that Grand Operas were often build around moral conflicts. Meyerbeer's **Robert** commits sacrilege, but is finally redeemed by the love of a good woman. Donizetti's **Leonor** is an adulteress who atones with her death. Goethe's heroine **Marguerite** bears Faust's illigitimate child, and in the climax of Gounod's Act Four comes to the cathedral seeking

forgiveness, only to be told by Mephistopheles that she is iredeemably damned. It is a terrific scene, especially given this performance in Paris by bass **Paul Gay**, here with **Inva Mula** as Marguerite.

26. Gounod: *Faust,* scene from Act IV
27. Opening night of the Metropolitan Opera, 1883

I am ending the hour, as I started, with *Faust,* because it was the opening production at the **Metropolitan Opera in 1883**. All the boxes at the previous New York opera house, the Academy of Music, were leased to the old money crowd, and the *noveaux riches* like the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers could not get in. So they built their own opera house, starting what is known as the **Opera War**—and had the money to win it. But only Grand Opera would do; the only comic piece in the inagural season was *The Barber of Seville.* The Metropolitan would do almost everything by Meyerbeer and Wagner, plus a lot of Verdi, before it would mount another comedy, *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1894. This is the main effect of the **French Connection**: that the particular kind of opera in favor in Paris in the 1830s, and even its French name, Grand Opera, would come to define what was fashionable for wealthy Americans 50 years later. So let me end with a glimpse of Marguerite's celebrated *Jewel Song*, first with **Angela Gheorghiu** in the London production, then continuing with the first Metropolitan star, **Christine Nilsson**, in Julian Fellows' 2023 reconstruction of the Opera War in *The Gilded Age.*

28. Gounod: *Faust,* Marguerite's recitative
29. *The Gilded Age,* Christine Nilsson performs
30. Class title 2 (*The Gilded Age*)

D. Wraiths and Wilis

31 Section title D (Meyerbeer ballet)
32. Filippo and Marie Taglioni

That was a brief reconstruction of the original ballet sequence for Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831); I have no idea why they are performing it under the Leaning Tower of Pisa! The original sequence was choreographed by the Italian dancer **Filippo Taglioni** (1777–1871), featuring his daughter **Marie Taglioni**, who was apparently the first ballerina to dance *en pointe*; this was more or less her debut. The success of *Robert* led Taglioni *père* to make a full-length ballet around his daughter the next year, using a story provided by **Adolphe Nourrit**, who sang the title role in Meyerbeer's opera. This was *La Sylphide,* about a wood spirit who enchants a young Scottish lad called James and seduces him away from the nice local girl he is supposed to marry. Both the choreography and the original music have been lost. But in 1836, the Danish choreographer **August Bournonville** (1805–79), a French ex-patriate as the name suggests, created his own version,commissioning a new score from **Herman Severin Løvenskiold** because he could not afford to rent the original one. Not only did this ballet survive, but so did many other. **The Royal Danish Ballet**, founded by Bournonville, became the principal repository of the French tradition of ballet, preserving the repertoire and training methods to the present day. So we have an

unusually complex French Connection: a French-born choreographer reproducing a ballet originally created by an Italian colleague in Paris, using a Scottish setting, and danced to a Danish score!

33. Marie Taglioni in *La Sylphide*

Marie Taglioni apparently did not have the figure for classical ballet, so she concentrated on effect. And her ability to rise *en pointe* created the illusion of unearthly figures who floated above the ground rather than walking upon it. This played into the prevailing French Romanticism to spawn a whole series of works about unearthly creatures; hence my title, **Wraiths and Wilis**. Here is the opening of Act II of *La Sylphide* in a performance from Paris. You will see two different species of supernatural: first, some **Witches**, who are very much on the ground, and then the **Sylphides** themselves, who not only dance as though floating but actually enter through the air, on wires!

34. Bournonville: *La Sylphide,* opening of Act II
35. Carlotta Grisi as *Giselle*

The print you just saw of Marie Taglioni as *La Sylphide* is virtually identical to this one, of another Italian ballerina in Paris, **Carolotta Grisi** in *Giselle*, the 1841 ballet by **Jules Perrot** (1810–92) and **Jean Coralli** (1779–1854) to music by **Adolphe Adam** (1803–56). That's because Taglioni started a fashion. In Act One, as you recall from last week, the bored Prince comes to Giselle's village and toys with her. When his fiancée arrives to claim him, Giselle goes mad and kills herself. The second act takes place at her grave in the woods, where she has become one of the Wilis, or ghosts of girls abandoned by their lovers. I'll give you the magical effect of her first entrance, simply crossing the stage *en pointe,* then cut to later in the act, where the Queen of the Wilis summons her followers.

36. Perrot and Coralli: *Giselle,* entrance of Giselle
37. Perrot and Coralli: *Giselle,* entrance of the Wilis
38. Act II of *Giselle*

Scenes like this, with stages filled with ballerinas in filmy white dresses, are known as ***ballets blanches,*** or "white ballets." They are significant French exports, having traveled to Russia for use, for example, in *Swan Lake*, or to America, for numerous ballets by **George Balanchine**.

39. Ballerinas at the old Paris Opéra

I mentioned that Gounod had to add a ballet to Act IV of Faust before it could be accepted by the Opéra. This was to represent a ***Walpurgisnacht*** or Witches' Sabbath. This had nothing to do with the opera plot, but I was a wonderful effect. I saw *Faust* at the Opéra as a teenager, and what happened at this point was that the back wall of the stage flew out, so you saw all the way back into the *salle de ballet* behind, gold columns and chandliers, with a bevy of ballerinas at least 100 yards away who slowly came forward onto the stage. The dance is usually cut in modern productions of *Faust*—with one exception: David McVicar's production in London includes an abbeviated ballet with a modern twist. It begins as a tribute to *Giselle* Act II, as you will see. But then we get an obviously pregnant Marguerite and…

40. Gounod: *Faust,* ballet scene (London)

41. French ballet terms

France gave ballet to the world, and it also gave the language in which it is described. Here is a short clip of a class at the Paris Opéra conducted by **Andrey Klemm**. A Russian ballet master addressing French professionals: what languages does he speak?

42. Andrey Klemm class
43. French ballet terms (repeat)

Did you hear? He was speaking English! The France dancers speak no Russian, and apparently he has no conversational French—yet the terms he used to describe the steps were *all* in French!

E. Return from Russia

44. Section title E (Stravinsky ballets)

This makes a nice segue to my brief concluding section. In the mid-19th century, French ballet made a home in Russia. Actually, the ground was prepared much earlier, when **Peter the Great** introduced French dance to Russia as part of his program of Westernization. But the key step was taken in 1846, when the Franch dancer **Marius Petipa** (1818–1910) was persuaded to leave the Opéra and join the Boshoi. He became Imperial Ballet Master, and was the choreographer of the great **Tchaikovsky** ballets that are the glory of the Russian School.

45. Sergei Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes*

Russia returned the compliment in 1909 when Russian critic-turned-impresario **Sergei Diaghilev** (1872–1929) came to Paris with a company that he called the *Ballets Russes,* which stayed until 1929 and changed the course of 20th-century ballet for ever. Although most of the artists that Diaghilev brought with him were also Russian, many stayed for years, becoming in effect honorary Frenchmen. This is certainly the case with **Stravinsky** and **Prokofiev**, and arguably so with **Balanchine** and **Fokine**. In addition, Diaghilev sparked collaboration from French artists such as **Debussy** and **Ravel**, **Matisse** and **Picasso**. And the influence spread abroad: Balanchine went to America, and the English dance tradition that grew into the Royal Ballet was founded by an Irish dancer, **Edris Stannus** (stage name **Ninette de Valois**), who originally came over to work with Diaghilev.

46. *Le spèctre de la rose* and Nijinsky in *The Firebird*

Both these pictures show Diaghilev's star dancer, **Vaslav Nijinsky** (1889–1950), in two roles that show the range of Diaghilev's company. At bottom right, one of the exotic highly colored ballets with music by Stravinsky—I think this is *The Firebird* (1910)—that were Diaghilev's most startling innovation; more on those in a moment. At top left, an artist's impression of the 1911 ballet by **Michel Fokine** (1880–1942), *Le spectre de la rose,* which is essentially Romantic ballet revisited. How so? Because it is based on a

poem by our friend from last week, **Théophile Gautier** (1811–72), about a girl visited by the spirit of a rose she has brought back from her first ball. The poem was set to music by **Berlioz**, but for this Fokine used Berlioz's orchestration of a piano piece by **Carl Maria von Weber** (1786–1826), *Invitation to the Dance.* I'll start just before the male dancer arrives, in one of the most spectacular entrances in the repertoire; Nikinsky apparently had the ability to seem to pause in mid-air. The dancers are **Nikolai Tsiskaridze** and **Zhanna Ayupova**.

47. Fokine: *Le spectre de la rose,* excerpt
48. Leon Bakst: costume design for *L'oiseau de feu*

In addition to colorful décor and new musical sounds, the *Ballets Russe* introduced several works based on Russian folk material, which was stimulating fare for audiences growing bored with the same old Western myths. All three great ballets by **Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971)—*The Firebird, Petrushka,* and *The Rite of Spring*—are of this kind. Here is part of the performance of *The Firebird* you glimpsed under my title. I'll start where **Prince Ivan** summons the help of the magical **Firebird** in his battle against the infernal **King Koschei**.

49. Fokine: *L'oiseau de feu,* excerpt
50. Class title 3