Class 5 : Not Always Serious

Agenda

1. Class title 1 (*The Beggar's Opera*)

I have mentioned opera in most of the previous classes, I know; after all, it used to be my profession. But I have tried to focus as much on other, non-operatic, combinations of stage and music. Until today. This will be a class entirely concerned with opera, but opera of three completely different kinds, all of which could be sampled a quarter-way through the 18th century.

2. *Rodelinda*, *The Beggar's Opera*, and *La Serva Padrona*, CD covers

Here are the three works we shall be sampling, all created within eight years of each other: *Rodelinda* (1725) by **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759), *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), assembled by **John Gay** (1685–1732) with music taken from popular sources, and *La serva padrona* (1733) by **Giovanni Battista Pergolesi** (1710–36)—respectively *opera seria,* ballad opera, and *opera buffa.*

3. *Rodelinda*, *The Beggar's Opera*, and *La Serva Padrona*, prints

I shall spent the first hour on *Rodelinda,* because until *The Beggar's Opera* came along it was basically what opera was. But the success of *The Beggar's Opera* changed everything; we can still see the aftershock on Broadway today. *La serva padrona* took longer to put the cat among the pigeons, but when it was performed in Paris in 1752, it ignited a controversy called *Le querelle des buffons,* or the War of the Players, that involved everybody from the King and Queen, through Rameau and Rousseau, on down. That too had its aftershocks, giving us, *inter alia,* the comic operas of Mozart or Rossini.

A. Handel's "Rodelinda"

4. Section title A
5. Quasi-title page

So what is "serious opera?" Most obviously (but not most importantly), it is opera with a morally uplifting theme, based upon often-obscure ancient history or myth. The story of *Rodelinda,* which comes to us distilled through four different writers, is as obscure as you can get; I'm not even going to bother to summarize it. Here is the opening, with **Renée Fleming** at the Metropolitan Opera in 2011.

6. Handel: *Rodelinda*, “Ho perso il caro sposo” (Renée Fleming, Met)
7. — still from the above

What could you tell from what you *saw*? A woman mourning the death of her husband, presumably, accompanied by a boy whom we assume is her son. What could you tell from what you *heard*? The emotion; before you even know the facts, Handel’s music makes it personal; he does what all great opera composers try to do: he takes you inside the character.

8. Synopsis of opening situation

But knowing the facts requires either listening extremely hard or reading the program. **Rodelinda**, you will learn, is the wife of King **Bertarido**, who is believed dead after having been deposed by the usurper **Grimoaldo**, who has imprisoned Rodelinda and her son **Flavio**. The action of the opera will involve the return of Bertarido and the restoration of the throne—but with impossibly many twists and turns.

9. Handel with his star singers

You remember I said that the serious theme was far from being the most important aspect of *opera seria.* Theme, historical background, even moral content fade into the background compared to its main purpose: **TO CREATE A STAR VEHICLE**. Everything else follows from that. Here is Handel with the leading singers, the soprano **Francesca Cuzzoni** who sing Rodlinda and the *castrato* **Senesino** who appeared as Bertarido. Let’s meet them.

10. Cuzzoni, with quote from Horace Walpole

Actually, although Wikipedia gives this portrait as Cuzzoni, this is wrong—she is actually an actress of the spoken stage. There is a certain resemblance, but the real one had at least one extra chin! You can see the truth of **Horace Walpole’s** description—yet the point is that, despite all these shortcomings, she set the fashion; in a way, she was the Taylor Swift of her day.

11. Senesino, portrait and caricature

Those of you who have attended my other opera courses will know that *the* highest-paid singer was the *castrato*, a former boy soprano who had been castrated before puberty so as to maintain the purity of the boy’s voice with the lung power of a grown man. I say “grown man,” but in fact the operation seems to have made *castrati* grow in odd proportions; this print of Senesino (**Francesco Bernardi**), with a small head on a huge torso, is clearly a caricature, but it must have been based on fact to some degree; it also supports Horace Walpole in calling Cuzzoni “short and squat.”

12. List of numbers in *Rodelinda*

What these stars could do is *sing*—and *opere serie* are constructed to given them the opportunity to do so, in a series of solo arias, collectively covering as wide a range of feeling as possible, but each exploring a single emotion, or at most two contrasting emotions.

13. Bejun Mehta, with text of “Con rauco mormorio”

Let's hear from Bertarido now. Of course we don't produce *castrati* any more, so these roles are taken by **countertenors**, who have been emerging in increasing numbers in recent decades. Here is one of the current superstars, the American singer **Bejun Mehta**, who appears in a 2017 production from Madrid. This is the one I'll be showing for the rest of the hour, even though the director, **Claus Guth**, sets the whole thing in a modern house; I started with the traditional Met production by Stephen Wadsworth to be sure that we touched base with the original period at least once. In this aria, Bertarido approaches the palace secretly at night. The words are entirely conventional: I am weeping, and everything I hear around me seems to be weeping too. But the music emphatically is not. It starts with a relatively rare thing for Handel, a piece of pure scene-painting, a nocturne for the orchestra. At first, Bertarido's harmonies are more or less conventional, but listen how they twist chromatically upwards after the first minute or so. The second three-line verse is treated in a middle section; listen for the echo effects of the woodwind between the phrases. After a brief line from another character, Bertarido then repeats the opening section, with freely improvised decorations of his own; I'll say more after we have heard it.

14. Handel: *Rodelinda*, "Con rauco mormorio" (Bejun Mehta, Madrid)
15. Score sample

Almost all the arias in a Handel opera are *da capo* in form. This again derives from their main purpose as star vehicles. Typically, they consist of a longish opening section (A), which is then repeated exactly after a shorter bridge passage (B) in a contrasting key. I say "repeated exactly" because any differences in this repeat are never written out; there are simply the words at the end of the B-section "*da capo,*" or back to the top. However, while the singers have to stick to the harmonies and the basic melodic outline of the original, what they do with the repeats is entirely up to them. Later, we shall hear another aria in which Bejun Mehta shows off his *bravura* virtuosity; here, it is a matter a demonstrating simple musicianship. Listen to the opening measure of each version; I have marked the places that are changed.

16. Demonstration of *da capo* changes in the above
17. Duets from *Poppea* and *Rodelinda*

Did you hear the differences? What do they do for you? I wanted to play you the one significant number in the piece that is not an aria, the duet that closes Act II. But as I was listening to it again, I realized it reminded me of the closing duet from *The Coronation of Poppea* by **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567–1643); they have the same exchange of short phrases at the beginning, the same intertwining of soprano voices around the same pitch, and virtually the same words: "I embrace you." Could Handel have known *Poppea*? I doubt it, but I do think that this kind of duet had become something of a tradition, on which different composers rang their personal variations. Of course the situations are different: Nero has finally crowned Poppea, but Rodelinda has been reunited with her husband only to see him arrested and taken to prison. The photos here are from the *Poppea* production we saw before, and the *Rodelinda* at the Met, but these are not the clips I am going to play. Instead, for *Poppea*, I'll play a concert with **Lea Desandre** and **Jakub Jozef Orlinsky**, and will stick with the Madrid production of *Rodelinda*, where Bejun Mehta has been joined by **Lucy Crowe** in the title role. There is one significant difference—other than period—between what you see in these photos and what you will see on the screen; can you work out what it is, and why I might have chosen this particular *Poppea?*

18. Monteverdi: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, closing duet
19. Handel: *Rodelinda*, Act II duet
20. — still of the above

Did you see, by any chance? Both the photos showed the couples embracing—obvious enough, since the words do say "I embrace you"! But the *Poppea* concert has them approach from opposite sides of the stage, and **Claus Guth** keeps the *Rodelinda* couple on separate balconies. I think he understands something fundamental about *opera seria*: no literal action is possible when you hand over to a musical number for seven minutes at a time. You have to find a way of suspending normal time, symbolizing the dramatic situation rather than playing it through, working with *potential* energy rather than *kinetic*. Hence the wonderful tension between musical lines that intwine so closely and a physical staging that keeps the couple far apart. The other figures onstage at the end, incidentally, are other characters in the opera, including the boy **Flavio**, whom Guth makes our traumatized guide to the whole story.

21. Christophe Dumaux sings "Vivi, tiranno"

Up to now, I have only played slow arias and duets, because pathos is something of a Handel specialty in this opera. But there are plenty of fast arias too, mainly for the other characters. And also one for Bertarido, that Handel wrote for a later revival, to give him something spectacular just before the end. Bertarido has been restored to the throne. His first task is to order the execution of the evil counselor Garibaldo, who was basically behind Grimoaldo's coup. But he spares the usurper himself, in the aria "Vivi, tiranno": "Live, tryant, and know that I have a more generous heart than you." Here is another countertenor, **Christophe Dumaux**, singing it in concert—just the first minute.

22. Christophe Dumaux sings "Vivi, tiranno"
23. Bejun Mehta sings "Vivi, tiranno"

Musically, it is a terrific piece, with the combination of two oboes and a bassoon cutting through like trumpet fanfares. I'm sure this authoritarian scepter-waving is a pretty good 18th-century idea of how kings in opera behaved, but it doesn't fit in at all with the pathos of what we have heard from Bertarido in the rest of the opera. So **Claus Guth** has the idea of turning the aria into a different kind of period staple, the **mad scene**. Bertarido has just killed the evil Garibaldo himself—offstage, but he comes in with hands covered in blood. It is emotional overload, and the aria is spent partly in rage against the usurper Grimoaldo, partly in an attempt to kill himself—though in the end he desists. And if you thought Bejun Mehta spectacular before, just listen to what he does with this!

24. Bejun Mehta sings "Vivi, tiranno"
25. Lucy Crowe

Rodelinda has one more aria, which I won't play. Basically, its text is, "Darling, I love you!" There is no action; it is simply a way for the soprano to get one more chance at applause before the curtain falls. But by turning Bertarido's aria into a mad scene, Guth now gives Rodelinda a real dramatic purpose: to use her love to restore her husband to his senses. And so we go to the **finale**, marked *Coro,* but really just a simple ensemble for everyone in the cast to sing. I need not wait for the second hour to get in a bit of comedy. Modern productions of *opera seria* tend to go for humor wherever they can find it. There is not much chance in *Rodelinda*, but the absurd convention of the ensemble finale finally gives Claus Guth a change. Note, however, that for the boy **Flavio**, his trauma cannot be so instantly cured. While all the adults are outside celebrating, he is left inside the house with the monsters who had invaded his imagination in previous scenes. I'n not sure if it works, but it is a brilliant idea.

26. *Rodelinda* finale
27. Class title B ("opera trauma")

B. Gay's "Beggar's Opera"

28. Section title B (*Rinaldo* march)

That was a march from another Handel opera, *Rinaldo* (1711), the first he wrote for the London stage. In the original, the context is very serious: it is a march of Crusader knights gathering to liberate Jerusalem. But *The Beggar's Opera* gives it to highwaymen in a London tavern, gathering to rob some coaches.

29. Rich and Gay

The lyrics are quite clever, as in this witty comparison of a highwayman to an Alchemist, turning lead to gold. They, and the play in which they are set, are the work of **John Gay** (1685–1732), a relatively minor poet and playwright. Minor, that is, until this one big success. Mounted by the impresario **John Rich**—who had run some of the companies for which Handel himself had written—the production ran for a then-unheard-of run of 62 performances, making (as wags would have it) "Rich gay and Gay rich."

30. Hogarth: scene from *The Beggar's Opera*

The chorus we heard was stolen from Handel, but most of the songs were set to popular songs of the day. So to what extent is is a satire on opera? The play opens with the supposed author of the piece, here called the **Beggar**, explaining the idea to a wealthy angel; we may take these as avatars of Gay and Rich. The Beggar makes four points: (1) that his text uses similes as in real opera—and he runs down a list of familiar tropes; (2) that it includes a prison scene—as, for eample, in *Rodelinda*; (3) that it has two leading ladies neither with a larger part than the other—more on that in a minute; and (4) that it uses spoken dialogue rather than recitative, which he calls "unnatural."

31. *Beggar's Opera* (Daltrey) introduction
32. Cuzzoni and Bordoni

The bit about the two sopranos is well taken. There were two leading *divas* in London—Francesca Cuzzoni, Handel's Rodelinda, and **Faustina Bordoni**, whom he brought to London in 1726 to sing alongside Cuzzoni in his next five operas. Good for box office, perhaps, but hell on wheels to manage. The rivalry between the two became legendary, to the point where fights broke out in the audiences between the fans of each singer. We see this reflected in the opera too. **Captain Macheath**, the highwayman hero, is too fond of women for his own good. At the start of Act II, he is shopped to the authorities by a fence called Peachum, in order to get him clear from his daughter **Polly**. Polly (whom he has secretly married) comes to visit him in Newgate Prison, only to find that the jailer's daughter, **Lucy Lockit** also has an understanding with him. The three numbers they sing back to back are a perfect cat-fight, and the third of them even breaks out into coloratura to drive home the *diva* reference. The singers are **Carol Hall** and **Rosemary Ashe**, with **Roger Daltrey** of *The Who* as the baffled Macheath.

33. *Beggar's Opera* (Daltrey), Act II catfight
34. Script of the above

The musical numbers are very short, as you see. When they come thick and fast like this, that is not a problem, but there are long stretches of the play where there is simply not enough music to satisfy a taste for musical theater, let alone opera. Then there is the question of what to *do* with the music. The tunes are printed in the text without accompaniment, introductions, or postludes, let alone musical development. Adding a simple accompaniment is a no-brainer, but the versions that try to do much more than this lose the period flavor. However the revival of interest in early music over the last few decades has led to at least two productions that try to keep things simple. **The BBC film** with Roger Daltrey (1983) that I have been playing is probably as close to musically authentic as you can get.

35. Ben Purkiss and Kate Batter

But I want to end with a couple of scenes from a more recent production, made for the **Edinburgh Festival** in 2018, and touring the capitals of Europe after that. It is under the baton of baroque specialist **William Christie**, conductor of the *Poppea* we saw last week; he keeps the arrangements in 18th-century style, but he is quite willing to repeat music when the staging calls for more. And the staging by **Robert Carsen** often does call for more. The show is updated to the present day and calls for several extended dance numbers. Textually, it is not authentic at all, with all the dialogues entirely rewritten and the lyrics largely so. All the same, I am showing it for its moments of real excitement, and because it has by far the sexiest Macheath in **Ben Purkiss**. I'll play his love scene with Polly Peachum (**Kate Batter**) in Act I—another scene in which the songs come thick and fast—followed by the Act II tavern scene, and the music I played at the top of the hour.

36. *Beggar's Opera* (Carsen), Act I love scene
37. *Beggar's Opera* (Carsen), tavern scene

C. Pergolesi's "Serva Padrona"

38. Section title C (*Il prigioniero superbo* into *La serva padrona*)
39. *Commedia dell'arte* characters

That was a graphic and aural representation of my subject for the last twenty minutes. First, a rare staging of Pergolesi's three-act 1733 *opera seria,* "The Proud Prisoner." Then, breaking into it, a number from his "The Maid as Mistress," a comic *intermezzo* designed to be played in two parts between the acts—though not necessarily of his own opera. I am pretty sure that this did not originate with him; theaters might well have encouraged clowns from the old street theater known as *commedia dell'arte* to entertain audiences between acts, and I'm sure Pergolesi was not the first composer to write music for these little interludes. But he does have the distinction of writing the first complete *intermezzo* that has survived, and the first to be played alone as a freestanding piece. And after that famous revival in Paris in 1752, he became the posthumous grandfather of the entire genre of *opera buffa.*

40. Columbine and Pantaloon (Meissen figurine, 18th century)

La serva padrona is entirely a working of a standard *commedia* idea: the wily maid, **Columbina**, running rings around her elderly employer, **Pantalone**. The maid character is known as a ***soubrette***; she appears in just about every comic opera you can think of, most always with names ending in -ina or -etta; here she is called **Serpina**, or "little serpent." The Pantaloon character—here called **Uberto**—is less steretyped, but his music has certain recurrent characteristics. Listen to his first full aria, "Sempre in contrasti," and see if you can tell what these are. Basically he is saying that his servant, Serpina, is driving him up the wall. The man whom he addresses at certain points is **Vespone**, a mute, so he knows he can't respond. It is a *da capo* aria like Handel's, but quite different in effect. While I love the singers in this video (which I have shown once before), I deplore the director's notion of adding a *second* mute character, and having them upstage the main action virtually throughout. The Uberto is **Furio Zanassi**.

41. Pergolesi: *La serva padrona,* "Sempre in contrasti"
42. Some bullet points from the above

So how *is* this musical language different from Handel's? Here are my own ideas.

43. Some bullet points for the Serpina aria

The Serpina is the young **Sonya Yoncheva**, before she graduated to the big Puccini heroines. Her aria, "Stizzoso, mio stizzoso" (My dear old grouch), shows exactly how she can wrap him round her little finger. He wants to go out; she forbids it. As you listen, think how many ways this could get bossy and strident. But with this music and this singer, it always retains a certain charm. that Again it is *da capo*, and Yoncheva ornaments the repeat very prettily. But note the wonderful way she alternates caresses with telling him to be quiet, that long "Chieto" followed by "Zit," which is the Italian way of saying "Ssh!" Music as gesture; that's what *opera buffa* is all about.

44. Pergolesi: *La serva padrona*, “Stizzoso, mio stizzoso”
45. — still from the above

Uberto tells Vespone to find him a wife—any woman would be better than this minx. But she suggests marrying her instead, “I know you want to.” And so to the duet that closes this first *intermezzo*. “Lo conosco a quegli occhietti” (I know from those little eyes), where the two voices really strike sparks off one another. In this politically correct era, I suppose one really should disapprove of her "no really means yes" argument, even with the genders reversed! Look what Pergolesi does with his musical gestures: the falling octaves, the repeated figures as she flirts with him on "graciosa" and "bella" (especially the second time, when taken out of tempo), the rising chromatics, the phrase that drops the words entirely (here taken by the orchestra!), and so on. I would be wrong to omit that much of the fun in this performance also has to do with the conductor, **Diego Fasolis**.

46. Pergolesi: *La serva padrona*, “Lo conosco a quegli occhietti”
47. Class title 3

My closing slide comes from an updated touring production in Seattle. I find it rather classy.