11 : So Bigger's Better?

A. Brass, Drums, Whatever

1. Class title 1 (*rock concert*)
2. Section title A (Berlioz *Requiem*)
3. — still from the above

I started last week by playing you tiny snatches of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* (1911) and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913), two of the largest works written just before the First World War. But I went on to demonstrate their opposite: theatrical works written by these and other composers on a chamber scale, with under a dozen players as opposed to several hundred. Today, though, I want to follow through on the gigantic scale, raising the question, "So Bigger's Better?" Although scale of this sort is usually associated with the very end of the Romantic period, the music we have just heard is the *Grande Messe des Morts,* or *Requiem*, written in 1837 by **Hector Berlioz** (1803–69), who was never one to shy away from large statements.

4. Berlioz instrumentation

Here is a sample of what Berlioz asked for—far larger than the orchestras used by Mendelssohn or Schumann, especially when you add in those 38 additional brass players, or take up Berlioz' suggestion of doubling or tripling everything! Nonetheless, Berlioz was a serious and even subtle composer. From Mozart onwards, the *Dies Irae* movement would always be the one in which the composer would unleash his largest forces, in an attempt to convey the scale and terror of the Last Judgement—the excerpt I just played came from that. But Berlioz is quite unexpected. Listen first to the opening of this movement in the *Requiems* of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91), four decades earler, and **Giuseppe Verdi** (1813–1901), four decades later.

5. Mozart: *Requiem*, opening of the *Dies Irae*
6. Verdi: *Requiem*, opening of the *Dies Irae*

And listen to how Berlioz begins:

7. Berlioz: *Requiem*, opening of the *Dies Irae*

Do you think Berlioz was right in not plunging into the turmoil straight away? Berlioz was an opera composer too, and his stage works are not small either. His *magnum opus*, *The Trojans* (1858), is basically two epics spanning five hours; he could not obtain an uncut performance. But there is something highly theatrical about sitting in the middle of a concert hall, and seing those groups of blaring brass and thumping drums on all sides, and Berlioz knew it. He himself wooed his future wife—

the Irish actress **Harriet Smithson**—by seating her in a stage box for another composition, and banging away at the drums like a demented dervish himself directly below her seat.

8. Mahler, Strauss, and Brian

Here are some other composers writing huge works in the pre-war years. The so-called *Symphony of a Thousand* (1906) by **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911) actually calls for about half that. It is a sacred work, in part a setting of an ancient Latin hymn in the first part and the closing scene from Goethe's *Faust, part II*, in the second; again size = sanctity. **Richard Strauss** (1864–1949) had no such pretext; the scale in his *Alpine Symphony* (1915) is that of the Alps themselves. The man at the bottom left is a self-taught English composer, **Havergal Brian** (1876–1972), who corresponded with both Strauss and Mahler, and admired them both. His *Gothic Symphony* (1919–27), also a treatment of the Faust legend, is thought to be the largest choral and orchestral work of all time, calling for at least 190 orchestral players and *five* choruses. He had to wait until he was an old man to hear it performed. It has been recorded on CD, but you really need to be there, and the only videos I can find are of snippets only. Still, I will play a rather wonderful promo for an Australian performance, and then a minute or so from the 2011 performance at the London Proms, under **Martyn Brabbins**. There is no way I can adequately render the sound; I show it simply for its visual spectacle. The piece goes on for 2 minutes more, and actually ends quietly.

9. Trailer, *The Curse of the Gothic Symphony*
10. Havergal Brian: *Gothic Symphony*, Proms 2011, closing section (part)

B. What, no Horses?

11. Section title B (Ride of the Valkyries)
12. Maud: *The Ride of the Valkyries*

As Berlioz discovered with *The Trojans,* sometimes a composer's sense of scale exceeded what could be handled in the theatre. That was the prelude to Act III of *Die Walküre* (1856), the second installment in the *Ring* cycle by **Richard Wagner** (1813–1883); it is the famous **Ride of the Valkyries**—the warrior women of Norse myth who gather the bodies of dead heroes off the battlefields and take them up to Valhalla. It is a concept that works fine in painting, and even better in music; there is a reason why Wagner's evocation gained the fame it has. But what do you do on the stage?

13. Alma Materna, the first Brünnhilde

Wagner apparently gave the Valkyrie leader, Brünnhilde, a real horse; it was a gift from King Ludwig II of Bavaria. But he could not have nine sopranos galloping across the stage; apparently he used little models which were moved across a semi-transparent background. No production that I know of has used real horses, although you occasionally get artificial ones, as these here from Sofia.

14. *Die Walküre* at Opera Sofia, 2023

The soundtrack of clip I showed is from the current production at the Met. Whoever put it together made a montage of old movie footage that works pretty well—until you come to a bunch of large sopranos on what is apparently a bare stage. I chose it to make a point. But actually, the Met production by **Robert Lepage** handles the actual ride rather well; watch:

15. Wagner: *Die Walküre*, Ride of the Valkyries (Met)
16. Robert Lepage's production of *Die Walküre* at the Met

This was one of the better uses of the huge machine that Lepage had built on the Met stage (after first reinforcing it to bear the weight). There were some good moments in *Das Rheingold* too, but as the cycle went on, the machine became a liability rather than a virtue. My point is that scenes that used to be done realistically (which the Ride really couldn't) can now best be tackled by theatrical metaphor that makes no attempt at realism at all. I have not seen it in person, but the Ride that interests me most on video is **David Pountney's** production at the Chicago Lyric Opera. Tell me what you think of it.

17. Wagner: *Die Walküre*, Ride of the Valkyries (Chicago)
18. — still from the above

Did that work? Those last two clips, however, were rather a detour from my main subject, which is how the aesthetic of orchestral music, straight theater, and their combination in opera really expanded in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The big operas at the time were written for this aesthetic, and the great opera houses attracted the audiences they did through their willingness to honor such scale, even when it had fallen out of favor everywhere else. The number of horses you can bring onstage is a kind of index of how grand a production can be. I saw a *Carmen* at the Paris Opera in the 1960s, and counted at least a dozen horses in the first act alone. Now there is no reason whatsoever why you should have any horses at all in *Carmen*—in fact it would take some ingenuity to get them all in. But there they were, testament if any were needed that this was Grand Opera, as grand as you could get!

19. Franco Zeffirelli: *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* at the Met

From the time it moved into its present quarters at Lincoln Center in 1966, and continuing well into the nineties, the Metropolitan Opera's go-to director for spectacular productions was **Franco Zeffirelli** (1923–2019). You can see something of his style from these productions of the double bill of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci.* For the former, he creates an entire Sicilian village, which makes sense during the long prologue in which the village slowly comes to life, as in the big Easter Procession in the middle of the opera. *Pagliacci*, which is supposed to be about a donkey-and-a-cart company of theatrical players, is a bit over the top—but then over-the-top is what Zeffirelli *is!* The New York Times obituary calls him "the emperor of excess." Most of his productions have now left the Met repertoire, but two have become so iconic that there is no getting rid of them. Both are by **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924): *La bohème* (1896) and *Turandot* (1924). For three of its four acts, *Bohème* is an intimate affair, about the loves and tragedies of a handful of impoverished students. But Act I takes place at a café on a square in the Latin Quarter. Zeffirelli goes to town with a two-tier set, chorus and extras numbering at least 250, and at the end a marching band. Here is the concluding minute or so.

20. Puccini: *La bohème*, ending of Act II
21. — still from the above

The New York Times article I mentioned noted that Zeffirelli, seen here working with **Teresa Stratas** and **José Carreras**, started his career as an unusually sensitive director of interpersonal drama; many of the greatest stars, in straight theater as well as opera, credit his mentorship as the foundation of their careers. But as his productions get repeated again and again, successive casts just get slotted in and out, making his contribution solely about the décor. The article also suggests that latterly was all he cared about. So to end this hour, I want us to compare the most spectacular scene from one of his last Met Opera productions, *Turandot*, with the same scene from the **Andrei Serban** production at Covent Garden that I showed in my class on Kabuki. There is no getting away from the fact that Puccini was after something large-scale and spectacular here. But directors have a choice of how to realize it.

22. Puccini: *Turandot*, opening of Act II, scene 2 (Met)
23. Puccini: *Turandot*, opening of Act II, scene 2 (Covent Garden)
24. Class title 2 (stills from both the above)

Which do you think works best for you*?*

C. Heaven's On Fire

25. Section title C (KISS: Heaven's on Fire)
26. Cigarettes After Sex poster

I knew that if I were to do a section about **Bigger is Better**, I would have to include something on **rock music**. But this is not at all my scene, and I had never been to a rock concert. So thought I'd put that right, and paid $184 for a back-row seat right here at the Merriwether Post Pavillion for a concert by **Cigarettes After Sex**, a group I'd never heard of, but the title sounded promising. Alas, I ahould have paid more attention to the name, which captures the mood exacly: you take a long slow drag on a cigarette, then lie back and murmur as you exhale, "Wow, that was g-o-o-o-d!" The stage was filled with smoke, as this forty-ish man stood in a spotlight and whispered one slow number after another; I left after the sixth or seventh, once it had become clear that while there were lots of the cigarette thing, there was not a hint of sex! So I *still* haven't been to a rock concert! Here is a small sample:.

27. Cigarettes After Sex, short excerpt

It may not have been rock, but I learned a lot. First, the venue is *huge*; the experience was much more like going to the ballpark than the concert hall. The group was no more than a trio—chamber music, really—so they had to project to fill that space. They did this partly with the effect of the spotlights isolating the singer in the midst of the sea of smoke, partly by the details on the big tv screens on either side of the stage and throughout the stadium, partly by images projected on the back wall; at one point at the concert I saw, the singer, **Greg Gonzalez**, was performing against a huge image of himself, shown

in real time. *Cigarettes* is described as a **dream-pop band**, and their objective is to lull the audience into a kind of trance.

28. Don Broco

Hard rock concerts, on the other hand, from what I can gather, aim to do the exact opposite: to stir the audience into a wild frenzy. While this can be supported by massive amplification, hyperkinetic light-show and even pyrotechnics, the best kind of energy originates from the artists themselves. Out of the two-dozen or more videos I watched, I have chosen the British group **Don Broco** for the way it shows how the performers—young and quite charismatic—work up that enthusisasm from the crowd. Note that although this video contains obvious live footage, various effects have also been added in the editing. WARNING: STROBE EFFECTS!

29. Don Broco: *Everybody*
30. Simon Delaney and Rob Damiani of Don Broco

I mentioned the video editing, because pop groups depend as much on music videos as airplay to get the audiences into their shows. Cigarettes After Sex had some wonderful videos that they showed in the hour we were waiting for the show to start; the trouble is that it was full of nubile girls, and had nothing to do with the three fortyish men we actually aw!

31. LEBO M. (Lebohang Morake)

This is the singer and composer **Lebohang Morake** (1964–), known professionally as **LEBO M**. Born in South Africa, he was brought aboard by Disney as the composer of several of the numbers in the various version of *The Lion King*, especially those that used Zulu texts. Anyway, here he is performing his "Circle of Life" in Budapest, as part of what is billed as a "Symphonic Concert Show." As you will see, it combines a symphonic orchestra, two or three separate choirs, about two dozen dancers, and various scenic effects. As rock stadium shows get more elaborate, and the big megamusicals pack in the crowds year after year, such huge crossover ventures will get more and more common. And they work; you will catch at least one audience member wiping her eyes.

32. LEBO M: *Circle of Life*
33. — still from the above

D. Magicians from Montreal

34. Section title D (opening of *Aqualuna*)
35. Cirque du Soleil

How could I do a class on Bigger-is-Better without mentioning *Cirque du Soleil*? Founded in Montreal in the 1980s by two street performers to provide a tent—literally—under which they and other practitioners of the arts normally associated with a circus—though with the complete exclusion of animal shows—it soon grew into a theatrical endeavor that toured all over the world. Human skill is still at the center of it, but in recent years, *Cirque* has become best known for its design, lighting, technical equipment, live music, sheer scale, and all those things that make it more like an arena rock show than rock shows themselves. Each show is the product of prodigious imagination. Mostly, they deal in fantasy, like you see here, but they are also capable of evoking other cultures or periods, such as the steampunk evocation of the late Victorian era you get in this next clip. I chose it because the technical elements are played down, it features an honest-to-goodness circus performer (the juggler), and the music is not just a background but something that involves all the performers—including that wonderful percussion break on leather suitcases.

36. Cirque du Soleil: KURIOS, excerpt
37. Cirque du Soleil: KURIOS, poster

All *Cirque de Soleil* shows contain live music, but they are not primarily about the music. Nonetheless, they have poetry. To demonstrate this, I want to play a longer clip from their show LUZIA. The beginning is pure poetic imagination—a butterfly being chased by a horse—very simple ideas made possible by precise control of the technical equiment, in this case a treadmill set into the floor. Then that dissolves and, still in the same set, we have a display of pure acrobatic skill: diving through hoops.

38. Cirque du Soleil: LUZIA, butterfly and hoop diving

E. Sir Andrew Lloyd Mega

39. Section title E (Sir Andrew Lloyd Mega)

Of course this class was bound to end with Broadway **megamusicals**—defined by Wikipedia as “a large-scale musical produced for large commercial profit […utilizing] spectacle and increased." But there is some grounds for saying that the megamusical was not an American invention at all, but a British export, sparked by the works of **Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber** (1948–). Hence my changing his name to Andrew Lloyd Mega!

40. Some Lloyd Webber musicals

As you heard, he wrote a whole lot of musicals, and quite a bit else beside. However, the two that are usually cited as the first megamusicals are *Cats* (1981) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). I'll play a short excerpt from *Phantom*, just to give you an idea of what a megamusical is like, then spend the rest of our time on *Cats,* which I find the more interesting of the two. The *Phantom* scene comes from Act II, when the Phantom gatecrashes a masquerade ball at the Opera. If you think this is not the original theater production, but a later special staged at the Royal Albert Hall—a non-theatrical space (the same as we saw from the Havergal Brian symphony)—it should give you some idea of what the original must have been like.

41. Webber: *The Phantom of the Opera,* masquerade scene
42. TS Eliot: *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, cover

All of Webber's shows prior to 1981—*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), and *Evita* (1976)—had had linear storylines, so his decision to set a non-narrative collection of poems for childen by **TS Eliot** (1888–1965) fell way outside the box. Here is the opening, in which Eliot's tribe of **Jellicle Cats** introduce themselves.

43. Webber: *Cats,* opening
44. — still from the above

Does that work? What makes it work, if so? I am particularly impressed by how well it builds up the cat world, using people, but treating them in a totally different way from anything else on the stage. You may be interested that the number didn't even exist at the time that rehearsals began. Indeed, the show began life as a series of songs to be performed in concert!

45. Andrew Lloyd Webber on *Cats*
46. Trevor Nunn, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Gillian Lynne

Partly to reassure the backers, Webber hired the well-known director **Trevor Nunn**, then head of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, to direct the show. He brought along his RSC colleague **Gillian Lynne** as choreographer. Although I hate these Alamy photos with watermarks all over the place, I needed a shot of the them talking together, rather than posing on the stage of the finished product, because the show as we know it is largely due to Nunn. When rehearsals began, it was just a collection of separate songs. Nunn convinced Webber that it needed **an opening**, it needed **a narrative through-line**, and it needed **an emotional arch**. Nunn brought in the writer **Richard Stilgoe** to assemble a text for the opening whose beginning we just heard—a job he completed virtually overnight during the first week of rehearals. Nunn provided the through-line, albeit a thin one: *this is the night of the Jellicle Ball where the Jellicle patriarch Old Deuteronomy makes his annual appearance to choose one of the cats to be reborn into a new life on the Heaviside Layer*; most of the separate numbers are bids by the other cats to be the one chosen.

47. Elaine Page as Grizzabella

And what about the emotional arch? Nunn and Webber decided to expand the role of **Grizzabella, the Glamour Cat**, a character created by Eliot, but rejected from the published book as being too sad for

children. The part was orginally written for Judi Dench, but when she tore an Achilles tendon a week before previews, Webber brought in **Elaine Page**, who created the role of Evita in his previous show. Together, they created the character of a worn-out prostitute at the end of her days, avoided by all the other cats, but herself seeking redemption. *She* is the one who gets to ascend to the Heaviside Layer at the end. But the show still needed its emotional core. Nunn provided it at the eleventh hour by writing the text of a new song, "Memory," writing his own words but plundering some other bits of Eliot in doing so. It became the hit of the show. So here is a short number from the first act, where the other cats talk about Grizzabella, followed immediately by "Memory," sung by Elaine Page herself.

48. Webber: *Cats,* Grizabella 1
49. Webber: *Cats,* Grizabella 2
50. John Partridge as The Rum Tum Tugger

But I wouldn't leave you with a downer. So here is a very different animal, the tom-cat of tom-cats, the **Rum Tum Tugger**, played here with marvelous swagger by **John Partridge**. Enjoy!

51. Webber: *Cats,* the Rum Tum Tugger
52. Class title 3