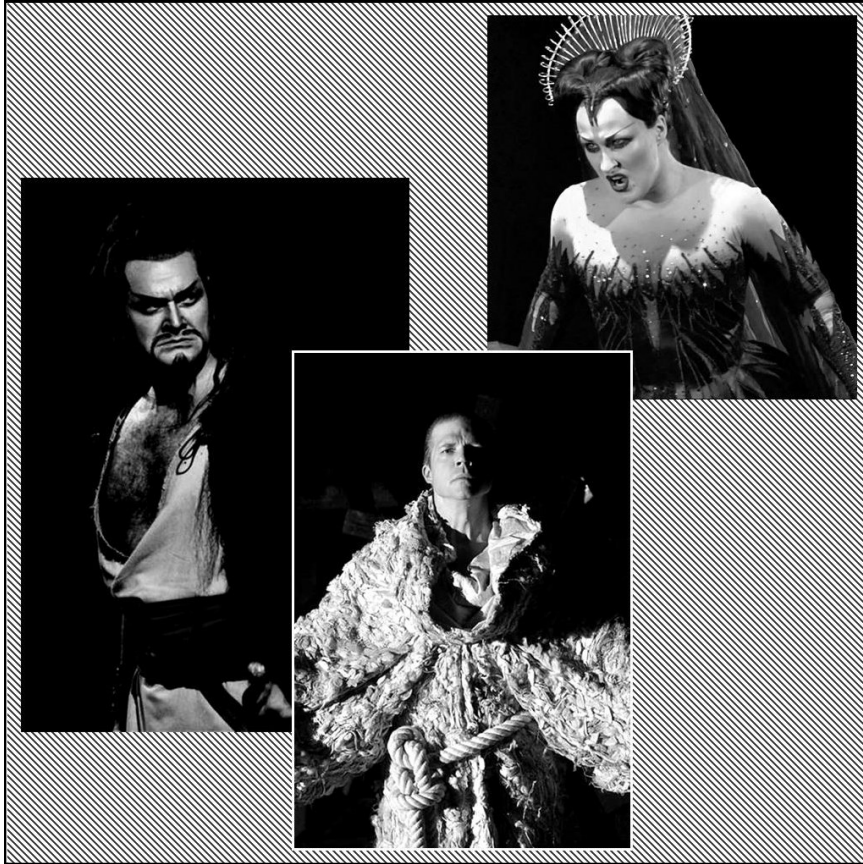


Opera Villains

(plus a few saints)



Osher at JHU

Spring Semester, 2018

Thursday afternoons, 1:00 to 3:00 pm

Montgomery County Campus

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Does the devil really have the best tunes? Not necessarily, but he does have the most gripping drama. Opera composers have long thrived on evil characters: Nero in *The Coronation of Poppea*, Iago in *Otello*, Scarpia in *Tosca*, and Claggart in *Billy Budd*. Operas such as *Faust* and *The Rake's Progress* include the Devil as a major character. And let's not forget the women, such as the title role in *Salome* and Poppea herself. Still evil, but on a lighter note, Mozart based his masterpiece, *Don Giovanni*, around a charismatic evildoer hero, as did Verdi in a more comic vein with the inveterate rascal Falstaff.

While many of these works set their villains against saintly characters, notably Desdemona, John the Baptist, and Billy Budd, the problem of building an entire opera around pure goodness is a challenge. Three of the classes will discuss how the problem was addressed by Beethoven in *Fidelio*, Wagner in *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*, Poulenc in *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*, and Messaien in *Saint Francis of Assisi*.

The following syllabus is an outline only, and there will be many other works discussed in addition to those mentioned. Details of topics and musical selections may change as the class evolves, especially in the later segments.



1. A Rogue's Gallery (February 22)

A taxonomy of villains, male, female, or couples, acting for a motive or purely evil, tragic or even funny, all classified by voice type. Illustrated by video excerpts from Mozart, Meyerbeer, Verdi, and Wagner.

2. The Problem with Saints (March 1)

The problem of portraying good on the stage. Good people coming to bad ends. Knights errant, prophets, and other champions of the good. Video examples from Tchaikovsky, Rossini, Schoenberg, and the featured opera, *Fidelio*.





3. Imperial Immorality (March 8)

Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* is virtually unique in its portrayal of an amoral world. An ambitious woman uses her body to ensnare a psychopath, having him sweep aside any obstacles that stand in her way. Lust and murder triumph, but in one of the most beautiful love duets ever.

4. Mozart's Baritone Seducers (March 15)

For whatever reason, the baritone leads in all three operas that Mozart wrote with Lorenzo da Ponte—*Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*—are presented as seducers; all share similar musical fingerprints; and all three get their comeuppance at the end.



5. Two Devils and a Saint (March 22)

Mephistopheles, the Man himself, the Prince of Evil, as presented in Goethe and Gounod's *Faust*. And returning a century later as Nick Shadow in Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*, now battling a genuine saint, Anne Trulove.

6. Wagner's Grail Knights (March 29)

Wagner's two operas about the Grail Knights—the early *Lohengrin* and his mystical swansong *Parsifal*—cast interesting light on the problems of representing Good upon the stage, and how to overcome them.



7. Two Italian Villains (April 5)

Iago in Verdi's *Otello* is as close to an absolute villain as you get in opera, one who believes in a cruel God who has made man in his own image. The Baron Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*, the ruthless police chief of a fascist state, makes no secret of the source of his evil: his sadistic lust.

8. A Lovable Rogue (April 12)

Shakespeare's Falstaff, and Verdi's: villain or hero? That's the genius of it; the fat knight is both. Glutton, braggart, and serial seducer, not too many of the deadly sins remain untried when Falstaff is around. Yet we root for him and, in the brilliant finale, happily laugh with him.

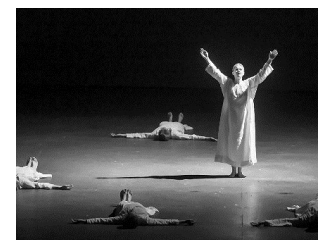


9. The Psychotic Female (April 19)

No survey of villains could exclude Richard Strauss's *Salome*—especially with the paradox that what excites her lust is sainthood. Lady Macbeth is also an icon of evil manipulation, yet in Shostakovich's reincarnation she is as much the victim of her society as a demon.

10. Villain, Victim, and Judge (April 26)

Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, as set to music by Benjamin Britten is the perfect case study of an innocent victim destroyed by absolute evil, and the principled but morally powerless Captain Vere who must judge between them.



11. The French Connection (May 3)

No villains here, not really; we finally get back to saints. Messiaen's *St. Francis* is a meditation on sainthood; François Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* is a study in martyrdom. Both are profoundly devout, yet they are quite different in their approach to the theatre and to time.

12. A Moral Music (May 10)

A final class to catch up on things not covered. Or to consider overreaching themes. Can music itself be good or evil? Do we watch our villains merely for entertainment, or do we learn from their stories? What might the old form of Opera have to say about the real problems of our age?

