

I: REALITY IN OPERA

A. GRUNGE INTO ART

1. Class title 1 (*scene from Die Frau ohne Schatten*)

My name is **Roger Brunyate**. I have a career as an **Opera Stage Director** for over 50 years, 33 of them as Artistic Director of the **Peabody Opera Theatre**. If asked to give you my *credo* in a single sentence, the simplest would be to do so negatively: to prove this man wrong!

2. Dr. Johnson quote

Dr. Johnson famously called Opera “an exotic and irrational entertainment.” There is much truth to this when applied to the composers of his own time, such as Handel. It is unfortunately still true today in a good proportion of the operas you see at the Met or around the world. But as a mantra for training young singers and persuading new listeners to take an interest, it is dreadful. I have lived a life on the basis that opera—artificial though it is—can be real and can really matter. That is the subject of this entire course. But first we have to establish what “reality” is.

3. Audience response graphic

4. — the above with the *Frau ohne Schatten* scene

I’d like to do this experimentally, by offering a number of comparisons and asking you for *your* responses. Let’s start with the scene I used in my title, from a all-too-rarely performed masterpiece by **Richard Strauss** (1864–1949), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (The Woman Without a Shadow, 1919). Most of this really *is* “exotic and irrational,” but there are some scenes that are anything but. I will play the same clip twice, first without and then with the music, and will ask you to tell me what difference it makes.

5. Strauss: *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, Dyer’s shop, silent

What do you think is going on here? Who are these people, and what is the relationship between them? Are they happy? Do both feel the same? As with all the questions I shall ask today, if you know the piece, do not answer. There are no incorrect responses, but I do want them to come from your shared experience, not prior knowledge. Now let’s hear it with the music, starting a little earlier.

6. Strauss: *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, Dyer’s shop, with music

How was that different? It is a glorious tune, whose warmth irradiates even this very edgy scene between husband and wife. The male character is Barak the Dyer (Edem Umerov) who wants nothing more than to have his wife give him children. But since they are already sharing the house with Barak’s three disabled no-goodnik brothers, she does not want another mouth to feed.

B. SOPRANO INTERLUDES

7. Section title B (Dyer's Wife, Countess, Konstanze)

The element that transformed the reality in the Strauss scene from outer grunge to inner truth was an interlude of pure orchestral music. I want to move on to two scenes from operas by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) where an orchestral interlude plays a significant role in showing us the psyche of a female character from the inside: the **Countess** in *The Marriage of Figaro* and **Konstanze** in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. The Countess, married for a few years, has begun to suspect that her husband has been catting around. But what matters most is that she still loves him but feels neglected. Watch **Annette Dasch** in this performance from Paris in 2004. What is real and what is quite unreal?

8. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, “Porgi Amor” (Annette Dasch, Paris 2004)

What did you think? It is easy to see what is not real: the set in this production by **Jean-Louis Martinoty** (1946–2016) is rather surreal, made up entirely of famous paintings, but he has staged the action realistically. Too realistically, perhaps; does it get in the way of the inner reality of the music? Let's watch the orchestral introduction twice more in two British productions: first at Glyndebourne with **Kiri te Kanawa** (apologies for the poor 1972 sound), and then at Covent Garden with **Dorothea Röschmann**.

9. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, “Porgi Amor” introduction (Glyndebourne, 1972)

10. Mozart: *Le nozze di Figaro*, “Porgi Amor” introduction (Covent Garden, 2008)

11. — stills from all three

Again, what did you think? This is a difficult one. Personally, I understand the point of giving the space for Mozart's music to speak for itself, but the near-elimination of action in the Glyndebourne version doesn't cut it for me either. I like the Royal Opera House production by **Sir David McVicar** (1966–) once the servants have left the stage; I think their inclusion has less to do with this particular aria than with his decision to set the entire opera within a realistic below-stairs world.

12. Franck Saurel and Sally Matthews in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*

By this time in his career, Mozart was a complete dramatist. If he includes a 65-second interlude, it is because he feels the character-painting demands it. But only a few years earlier, in his *Abduction from the Seraglio*, he was more intent to show his chops as a musician. The soprano's 7-minute aria “Martern aller Arten” (tortures of every kind) is preceded by a 2-minute introduction, which is a kind of *sinfonia concertante* in which each of the four solo instruments that will feature in the aria itself is given its moment in the sun. Moreover, the soprano has already sung an aria of almost equal length just before this. Perhaps Mozart was just giving her some breathing space; more likely, they were each out to show their technical skills. My point is that, unlike the *Figaro* introduction, this is an entirely artificial confection; what on earth can you do with it on the stage and still retain some semblance of reality?

13. David McVicar in rehearsal

The Glyndebourne production is by **David McVicar** again (though this photo shows him at the Met). The story of *The Seraglio* is an entirely conventional one, based on the Western type-casting of Moslem men as cruel sexual tyrants. The Spanish lady **Konstanze** has been captured by pirates and sold to the harem of **Pasha Selim**; the story is about her fiancé coming to rescue her. The Pasha, however, does not immediately take her as his concubine; he treats her well and tries to woo her. But she has sung two arias by now, and he is becoming frustrated—especially as he senses that under different circumstances she might indeed love him. I’ll pick up with the dialogue just before the big aria. **I must issue a trigger warning here**, because some people may find the action disturbing. But by the same token, I am amazed by the daring of both director and performers (**Sally Matthews** and **Franck Saurel**) in taking a brilliant piece of artifice and treating it as shockingly real.

14. Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, introduction to “Martern aller Arten”

I think it would be crass to require you to discuss that, but I do want to leave space for anyone who wants to express their reaction.

C. POWER PLAYS

15. Section title C (the Gonzagas)

Opera may always have been a species of entertainment, but it began as a very real instrument of political power. The earliest opera regularly performed, *Orfeo* (1607) by **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567–1643) was written for a celebration at the palace of his then employer, **Vincenzo Gonzaga**, Duke of Mantua, and his wife **Eleanora de’ Medici**, sister of the French Queen. Opera was an expensive business, and the kudos accruing to anyone with the funds to present it—let alone the scholarship and acumen to commission it—would have been considerable. Around 1970, the French director **Jean-Pierre Ponnelle** (1932–88) staged all three surviving Monteverdi operas as a trilogy in Zurich (performances which I saw), and made much of their origin in a court setting. I particularly like the way the director of this film makes a play with modern patronage by filtering the opening moments through shots of the wealthy taking their seats in the center of the grand tier.

16. Monteverdi: *L’Orfeo*, opening

17. — still from the above, with Gonzaga portraits

So this is certainly “Opera and Real Life,” but it is not a reality that has much relevance to *our* lives today. So what is a modern director to do? We can’t always put the original period into quotes, so to speak, we need something to appeal to modern audiences. So here are three versions of Orfeo’s principal aria, “Ecco pur a voi ritorno,” before he hears of the death of Euridice. Two are complete, from Barcelona and Berlin respectively; the third is much shortened, as it comes from the trailer of a production in Zurich. Watch, and we’ll compare.

- 18. Monteverdi: *L'Orfeo*, Orfeo's aria (Barcelona)
- 19. Monteverdi: *L'Orfeo*, Orfeo's aria (Berlin)
- 20. Monteverdi: *L'Orfeo*, Orfeo's aria (Munich)
- 21. — stills from all three

What's the reality, if any, in each of these? The Barcelona director, **Gilbert Deflo** (1944–), makes no attempt at modernity, but stages the scene as though in a painting by **Claude or Poussin**; everything is done to seduce you back to the mindset of that time. The Munich director, **David Alden** (1949–), *does* give it all a real context, but it is one safely in the past, this Hippies of around 1970. **Barrie Kosky** (1967–), at the Komische Oper in Berlin, has no specific period, but sets it all in a kind of fantasy world comprised equally of flower children and mythological beasts. If there is any reality there at all, it is that the performers are having such a good time, you want to get up on the stage and join them. [Note, incidentally, that much of the accompaniments in Monteverdi's time were improvised by the musicians, given only the harmony, rhythm, and melody; Kosky commissioned a score from **Elena Kats-Chernin**, who basically takes this improvisation to a level that the players would not dare to do on their own.

22. Nero, Caesar, and Elizabeth

The power-play aspect of early opera is also seen in the fact that so many are about real historical figures. Nominally so, at least; the composers borrowed the names and a few choice anecdotes, then made up a romantic farrago which was not remotely historical in any academic sense. Here are examples from the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

D. IN OUR OWN LIFETIMES

23. Section title D (*Nixon in China*)

Julius Caesar in Egypt, *Elizabeth at Kenilworth*... these titles follow a certain pattern. When I attended an opera conference—it must have been in 1987—and saw a score of *Nixon in China* by **John Adams** (1947–), I assumed that he must have been using the old style as a kind of spoof; Nixon was still in disgrace in those days. But I was wrong. Although the opera has some elements that are deliberately over the top, it is basically a serious treatment of the outstanding foreign-policy success of Nixon's career, his visit to China in February 1972. Nixon, Kissinger, and many of the other characters represented were still alive at the time of the premiere. I will play one scene: the arrival of Air Force One at the Beijing airport. You will see that director **Peter Sellars** (1957–) is extraordinarily accurate in his treatment of the setting and costumes, but is quite stylized in his treatment of the singers, deliberately moving from photo-op to photo-op, while the sound seems to emerge in bursts like ticker tape. It is only in the third act that we really get into the inner minds of the characters, but that is too complex to play. The Nixon is **James Maddalena**.

- 24. Adams: *Nixon in China*, arrival of Air Force One
- 25. Still from *The Death of Klinghoffer*

But dealing with contemporary events can also be problematic. In 2014, the Met sparked a huge controversy by presenting Adams' second opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, about the hijacking of the Mediterranean cruise ship the *Achille Lauro* by Palestinian terrorists in 1985, and the murder of one of the passengers, a Jewish-American called **Leon Klinghoffer**. I myself was struck by the even-handedness with which Adams and his librettist **Alice Goodman** (1958–)—who left the opera world after this to become an Anglican priest—treated both sides. The opera begins, for example, with two long choruses, one for Jews establishing settlements in the West Bank, and another for Palestinians displaced from their homes. I can't play this, but I will give you a short excerpt from a British movie of the opera, in which the Captain has a conversation with one of the hijackers that is, for the moment, entirely reasonable.

26. Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer*, scene on the bridge

But the even-handedness that I so much admired was anathema to the many Jewish and other groups (including then-Mayor **Rudy Giuliani**) that picketed the Met and protested the performances on the grounds that there can be no even-handedness between terrorism and anything else. In hindsight, it is amazing that the opera could have been written when it was and performed in New York; it would be unthinkable in the current climate. My point is that opera *can* engage with reality, but it may be dangerous to do so. I'll leave you with a report by the *New York Times* on the controversy.

27. NYT documentary on the *Klinghoffer* protests at the Met.

28. Class title 2 (Reality at a risk)