

CLASS 7 : PRIMA DONNA ASSOLUTA

A. SUFFERING SOPRANOS

1. Class title 1 (Marie Laurencin)
2. Section title A (Joan Sutherland)

The picture is **Joan Sutherland** in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, one of many romantic heroines who are driven to madness and death. I call this section "Suffering Sopranos" because I like the alliteration; it might as easily have been "Ballerinas Betrayed," for this class has much ballet clips than opera one. It addresses the position of women in both media during the Romantic Age: their frequent portrayal as helpless victims, the spectacular triumph of the very few *prime donne* who made a fortune playing them, and in the second hour the emergence of female composers and choreographers who took control themselves—though slowly, and much much later.

3. Desdemona (engraving, c.1835)

Most of these female victims have literary origins. **Desdemona**, for example, from Shakespeare's *Othello*. We tend to think of Verdi's magnificent operatic setting from 1886, but the one that held the boards for most of the 19th century was the *Otello* of **Gioacchino Rossini** (1792–1868) that premiered in 1816. Her **Willow Song** begins with a simple melodic line over the simplest of accompaniments, as the dramatic situation demands; but note the way the flute comes in as an echo between the verses, and the far-from-simple way the soprano decorates the line in the second verse—all these are characteristic of the era of *bel canto* (lovely singing) that Rossini ushered it. The singer is **June Anderson**.

4. Rossini: *Otello*, Desdemona's Willow Song
5. Carlotta Grisi as Giselle (1841)

Sorry that cut off so abruptly. It is not just in operas like *Lucia* that you get the heroine driven to madness and death; it is a staple of ballet too. One of the earliest is *Giselle*, conceived by the choreographer **Jules Perrot** (1810–92), together with an older colleague, for the Paris debut of ballerina **Carlotta Grisi** (1919–99) with music by **Adolphe Adam** (1803–56). The right-hand picture might suggest that Giselle is a fairy happily flitting about some woodland grove, but in fact she has become one of the **Wilis**, or ghosts of girls who have been betrayed by their lovers; they take their revenge by ambushing the men at night and forcing them to dance until they drop dead. But that's in Act Two. In Act One, Giselle is a simple country girl who has fallen for the charms of Prince Albrecht, who has disguised himself as a commoner to flirt with him. We'll see the mad scene, when she discovers that the simple peasant is actually a prince, and engaged to be married to a princess. The Giselle is **Alina Cojocaru**.

6. Adam: *Giselle*, mad scene (Royal Ballet)
7. Jenny Lind as Amina in *La sonnambula*

As you see, I am trying to do Romantic ballet and *bel canto* opera in parallel, for they have much in common. The third member of the trio of great *bel canto* composers, coming chronologically between Rossini and Donizetti, was **Vincenzo Bellini** (1801–35). Most of his operas end tragically, with the death of their heroine, and it looks as though **Amina**, the title character of *La sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker, 1831), will do just that. Because her habit of walking in her sleep has taken her into a compromising situation, her fiancé (who doesn't know of her problem) breaks off the engagement. The climax comes when, half mad with the loss of her sweetheart, she is seen walking over a perilous bridge over a mill-race—to the right of this picture of a later prima donna in the role, **Jenny Lind** (1820–87), the “Swedish Nightingale.” Her aria “Ah, non credea mirarti,” sung to a wilted flower, is one of the most beautiful Bellini ever wrote. It is sung here by **Natalie Dessay** in an ingenious staging by **Mary Zimmerman** at the Met. Listen especially to that unique Bellini line; how would you characterize it?

8. Bellini: *La sonnambula*, “Ah, non credea mirarti” (Natalie Dessay, Met 2009)

9. Inscription on Bellini's tomb

What did you make of that vocal line? It is almost without any coloratura at all, isn't it, until the very end. Just that thread of spun sound that made a deep impression on Chopin, who made use of it in his own music. Three years later, when Bellini died, aged only 34, his friends could find no more suitable inscription for his tomb: “*I never believed I would see you die so soon, O flower!*” However, this particular opera has a happy ending. The staging here stems from Mary Zimmerman's conceit of setting the action entirely in the rehearsal studio for some musical comedy, which is presumably what we get here. But listen to that music: the slow section which we just heard (known as a *cavatina*) is now followed by a fast sparkling *cabaletta*; pathos gives way to panache.

10. Bellini: *La sonnambula*, “Ah, non si giunge” (Natalie Dessay, Met 2009)

B. SHINING STARS

11. Section title B (Giuditta Pasta and Fanny Persiani)

Natalie Dessay presumably demanded a very high fee for her performances; top fees at the Met ten years ago were reportedly \$17,000 per night! Of course only a few singers can command that, but those few can expect to earn huge amounts over the course of their careers. This has been true from at least the 18th Century onwards. In those days, it was the men—or half-men, *castrati*—who earned the big bucks. One of the developments in the Romantic era is the idolization of the female singer, the *primadonna* or *diva*; indeed, the operas themselves were often named after their heroine: *The Lady of the Lake*, *The Italian Girl*, *Norma*, *Anne Boleyn*, *Mary Stuart*, *Lucy of Lammermoor*, *The Daughter of the Regiment*, *Linda of Chamonix*. The slide shows two of these superstars, **Giuditta Pasta** (1797–1865), the original **Amina**, and **Fanny Persiani** (1812–67), who premiered *Amina* in Paris and was the original **Lucia** in Donizetti's opera.

12. Isabella Colbran

And here is Rossini's original Desdemona, **Isabella Colbran** (1785–1845), his muse and soon also his wife. How can we tell what these singers sounded like? In Colbran's case, we have some indirect evidence, in that she was also a composer and published four collections of songs, each dedicated to some princely patron. These were written for amateurs to perform, so they don't call for virtuosity, but they do show Colbran's lovely feeling for the musical line—*bel canto* literally. Several can be found on YouTube, sung by student or amateur singers, as is appropriate. Here is the opening of one, "La speranza al cor mi dice" (Hope speaks to my heart), sung by **Agostina Pombo** with **Jennifer Fitty** on the piano.

13. Colbran: "La speranza al cor mi dice" (Agostina Pombo)

14. Joyce DiDonato in *La Donna del Lago* (Metropolitan Opera, 2015)

Colbran was a mezzo-soprano, or more probably a dramatic soprano with an unusually large range. One singer of today who has laid claim to her repertoire is **Joyce DiDonato**, seen here in the role of **Ellen** in Rossini's *La donna del lago* (The Lady of the Lake), an adaptation of a novel by **Sir Walter Scott** that he wrote in 1819 (Donizetti's *Lucia* is also based on Scott). And you can tell what Colbran could really do by listening to the kind of music he wrote for her. Here are the last few pages of Ellen's aria "*Tanti affetti*" (so many feelings) that closes the opera; it's another that skirts impending tragedy to reach a happy ending. The performance is from a concert in Frankfurt; normally, it would have chorus also. What do you think makes it special?

15. Rossini: *La donna del lago*, "Tanti affetti in tal momento" (Joyce DiDonato)

15z Joyce DiDonato in *La Donna del Lago* (repeat)

So how special was that? Colbran's per-performance fee at the time of her retirement in 1823 was £1,500, or just under \$20,000 by current values. However, she retired relatively young; it is thought that Rossini's vocal demands exacted their toll (he also apparently gave her a sexually-transmitted disease).

16. Taglioni and Elssler

There were similar superstars in ballet. In the 1840, fans were energized by the rivalry between the Austrian dancer **Fanny Elssler** (1810–84) and the Swedish **Marie Taglioni** (1804–84), whose father was an expatriate Italian ballet master at the Swedish court. The writer **Théophile Gautier** described Taglioni as a "Christian dancer," for her coolness and purity of line, and Elssler as a "pagan dancer," meaning that she was more sexy; needless to say, he was an Elssler fan! Let's look at how they danced. Here is **Ursula Hageli** of the Royal Ballet working with **Yasmin Naghdi** to demonstrate how **Taglioni** danced.

17. Ursula Hageli on Taglioni

Now for the "pagan dancer" Elssler, Ursula Hageli has a demo on her too, in which she points out how she uses her entire torso, bending low and rearing backwards. Rather than a lecture, however, here is ballerina Margarer Barbieri in a reconstruction of her most famous number, *La Cachucha* (1836).

18. Elssler: *La Cachucha*

19. Erin Morley as Olympia in *The Tales of Hoffmann* (Metropolitan Opera, 2021)

Ballet and opera became something of a spectator sport. And the *prime donne* could not command those fees unless choreographers and composers could give them something that was not only difficult, but would be *seen* to be difficult. I am going to give you two short excerpts of such virtuosity from later in the century, and ask you what you think is difficult about each. The first is the doll song from *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) by **Jacques Offenbach** (1819–80). Hoffmann has been induced to fall in love with the young woman Olympia, not knowing that she is in fact a cunning mechanical doll. This is the second and more decorated verse of her two-stanza aria, from the Met production by **Bartlett Sher**; the singer is **Erin Morley**. So what do you think is so difficult here?

20. Offenbach: *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Olympia (Erin Morley, Met 2021)

20z Morley as Olympia (repeat)

21. Petipa: *Don Quixote* (1871), start of Kitri variation

So what was difficult? Dancers get virtuoso challenges like this also. That was a glimpse of **Mariela Nuñez** as the fiery **Kitri** in the ballet *Don Quixote* (1871), by the Russian choreographer **Marius Petipa** (1818–1910); it was his revision of the original *Giselle* choreography that we were in fact watching earlier in the hour. But rather than continue with this, I want to show you a more subtle challenge. This is Dulcinea, Quixote's idealized vision. The dancer is **Svetlana Zakharova**. What is difficult here?

22. Petipa: *Don Quixote*, Dulcinea variation (Svetlana Zakharova)

22z — still from the above

What was difficult about that? What strikes me is how long the dancer has to remain poised on one leg without touching the ground with the other foot, first in the long poses in the slow section, then in the turns in the second part. And of course the pirouettes at the end are a *tour-de-force*.

23. Mariela Nuñez as Odette (*left*) and Odile (*right*) in *Swan Lake*

Those turns on one foot, activated by repeatedly kicking out the other, are called *fouettées*; they will play a big part in the second of the last pair of clips I am going to show before the break, the dual roles of Odette and Odile, respectively the White Swan and Black Swan in **Petipa's** *Swan Lake* (1877), with music by **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–93). Its plot is a romantic fairy-tale tragedy. While out hunting, **Prince Siegfried** is told by his mother, the **Queen**, that he must choose a bride the next day and settle down. Despondent, he wanders off alone, and finds himself at moonlight by a lake of swans. He is about to shoot one of them when she transforms into a beautiful maiden called **Odette**. She tells him that she and the other women have fallen under the spell of the evil magician **Rothbart**, which can only be broken if a man who has never loved before swears eternal love. Siegfried says that he can be that man, and rejects all the candidates at the palace ball the next evening—until Rothbart arrives with his daughter **Odile**, transformed to look exactly like Odette, but glittering like jet whereas she had been soft as swansdown. Of course, Siegfried succumbs, but sacrifices himself in the final act, so that the spell can be broken. I'll play a small section of the *pas-de-deux* with Odette in Act II, followed by the end of the scene with Odile in Act III. His dancing is pretty spectacular, but watch for her notorious **32 fouettées** shortly after she enters, and the look of sheer triumph she gives at the end. In terms of **Gautier's** "Christian" and "Pagan," there could hardly be a better example of the two main types of role given to

women on the Romantic stage, or the virtuosity required to perform them. The dancers are **Vadim Muntagirov** and **Marianela Nuñez**, both of the **Royal Ballet**.

- 24. Petipa: *Swan Lake*, White Swan pas-de-deux, extract
- 25. Petipa: *Swan Lake*, Black Swan pas-de-deux, coda
- 26. Class title 2 (Misty Copland)

C. THE STAGE IS THEIRS

- 27. Section title C (Malibran and Viardot)
- 28. — the same without title

Sticking with operatic superstars just for a moment, meet two sisters, 13 years apart, but respectively the operatic idols of their day. Their father **Manuel Garcia** was a celebrated Spanish voice teacher and impresario, whose international career included bringing his family to New York. The elder sister, who performed under her married name **Maria Malibran** (1808–36), was an expert in the *bel canto* repertoire. She too was a celebrated Amina in *La sonnambula*; in 1835, she donated a performance to the rebuilding of a dilapidated theater in Venice; the Teatro Malibran bears her name to this day. She died in England at the age of 28, however, of complications from a fall from a horse.

29a Pauline Viardot

Her younger sister **Pauline Viardot** (1821–1910), also a married name, had a different kind of career. She was a contralto, and sang a rather heavier repertoire, including premieres for the likes of Meyerbeer and Gounod. Hector Berlioz started writing the role of Dido in *The Trojans* with her in mind, but ultimately cast it differently; however, he did make a new version of Gluck's *Orfeo* around her, singing the title role that had previously been given to a castrato or high tenor. This was the version most commonly performed until about the 1970s.

29b Pauline Viardot as Orphée

- 29. Pauline Viardot as performer (Gluck/Berlioz *Orfeo*) and salon hostess
- 30. Pauline Viardot in old age (transformation video)

But it is not Viardot the performer who interests me now so much as Viardot in old age, **as a composer**. For years, she used to keep a *salon* in Paris attended by many of the musical and literary luminaries of the day. And for these occasions, she would write songs, piano or organ works, chamber music, and several small-scale operas.

31. Viardot: *Cendrillon*, score cover

One of these, *Cendrillon* (Cinderella), written to her own libretto in 1904, has recently been getting some performances—mostly in colleges or with smaller companies. But I was wowed by the sheer beauty of the aria of the **Fairy Godmother**, sung here in recital by a Russian soprano, **Olga Peretyatko**. I can't

make out whether she is singing in French or Russian, but I have added titles on the assumption that it is the former.

32. Viardot: *Cendrillon*, Fairy Godmother's aria (Olga Peretyatko)

33. Dame Ethel Smyth: *The Wreckers* (1906)

Women might write operas, but getting them performed is another thing entirely. Early in the 20th century, the English composer **Ethel Smyth** (1858–1944) started work on an opera, *The Wreckers*, about an impoverished community on the coast of Cornwall which depended on salvage from wrecked ships to survive. And it's a small step from that to setting false lights to lure the ships onto the rocks and *make* them sink. It is realist story of hardship in a remote region of the country, just like Italian *verismo*, but its musical language akin to Wagner and Strauss. Smyth's occasional lover (she was bisexual) Henry Brewster wrote the libretto in French, I don't know why, and for some years she tried to secure a French performance. But this failed, and she resorted to using old contacts in Leipzig, Germany, where she had studied, to obtain a performance in German translation there. This was in 1906. It was a great success, but the conductor insisted on massive cuts and refused to restore them, so Smyth marched into the pit and took all the scores, hoping to get a better reception in Prague. She had no luck there, but **Gustav Mahler** expressed an interest at the Vienna State Opera, then he lost his job and couldn't follow through. Back home in England, **Sir Thomas Beecham** put on a performance in an English translation in 1909, but since that time it has hardly been presented at all. I want to play an excerpt from a rare production at **Bard Summerscape in 2015**. It is a chorus near the beginning showing a community both god-fearing and lawless, an inherent contradiction that will bring about the ultimate tragedy.

34. Smyth: *The Wreckers*, chorus (Bard Summerscape, 2015)

34y A scene from *L'amour de loin* (Met, 2017)

I know we are on shaky ground when trying to assign gender to music; a man may write "feminine" music and a woman "masculine" music. Were I listening to this in any other context, I would hear nothing to suggest a female composer. On the other hand, I have no problem thinking of Viardot's high floated writing for the Fairy Godmother as "feminine"—nor when I flip forward a century and hear a very similar sound-world in the music of Finnish composer **Kaija Saariaho** in her 2000 opera *L'amour de loin* (Love at a Distance). This is part of an aria sung by the Pilgrim (**Tamara Mumford**) who serves as a go-between the distant lovers in Northern Europe and North Africa respectively. The production is the 2017 one by **Robert Lepage** at the Met—the first opera by a woman there since 1903! Note the way the offstage chorus gives an added shimmer to the Pilgrim's sound.

34z A scene from *L'amour de loin* (Met, 2017)

D. WOMEN IN MOTION

35. Section title D (Isadora Duncan)

The rest of this class will be devoted to dance created by women, mostly in the earlier 20th century. This is one area in which women did not merely do what men were already doing, but created new approaches which revolutionized the art in the decades that followed. The picture shows the American dancer **Isadora Duncan** (1877–1927) who, tiring of the limitations of classical technique, advocated a return to dancing as a sacred art rooted in nature. As Wikipedia has it: “*She developed from this notion a style of free and natural movements inspired by the classical Greek arts, folk dances, social dances, nature, and natural forces, as well as an approach to the new American athleticism which included skipping, running, jumping, leaping, and tossing.*” And in her own words: “*Let them come forth with great strides, leaps and bounds, with lifted forehead and far-spread arms, to dance.*” There are no filmed records of her that I can find, and the ones of her pupils look embarrassingly amateurish, as you’ll see. Fortunately in 1976, the English choreographer **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88) created *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Style of Isadora Duncan* for the ballerina Lynn Seymour; I find this far more convincing than the black-and-white movies, since Ashton seems to have distilled Duncan’s essence as one choreographer to another, and presented it in an entirely professional way, without any hint of the amateur. So I’ll give you a minute of a Duncan pupil dancing to a piece by **Schubert**, then switch to **Tamara Rojo** of the Royal Ballet in the first two of Ashton’s dances. How would you describe Duncan’s style, at least as Ashton saw it?

36. Duncan: *Moment Musical*, danced by one of her pupils

37. Ashton: *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Style of Isadora Duncan*, #1 and #2 (Tamara Rojo)

37z Duncan’s scarf

If we know one thing about Duncan, it is how she died, when one of the long scarves she loved to wear got caught in the wheel of her motor car in Monte Carlo. She was a one-off, an oddball, but she took the essential step of moving from the restrictions of ballet to the freedom of **modern dance**.

38. Nijinska poster

My next choreographer, **Bronislava Nijinska** (1891–1972), was almost as innovative in her approach, but she worked within the structure of an established ballet company (albeit a revolutionary one), **Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes**, and devoted a long life to training future generations in other companies. Hers were new techniques instilled with the meticulous discipline of classical training. Listen to the respect in the reminiscences of the two old ballerinas in this clip, **Tamara Tchinarova** and **Nathalie Krassovska**. The tiny dance excerpts in that look quite conventional, but I will follow it with the opening of her 1923 ballet *Les Noces* (The Wedding) to music by **Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971) for four pianos, percussion, and singers. What do you think is unusual about her style here?

39. About Nijinska, documentary

40. Nijinska: *Les Noces*, opening (Kirov Ballet)

40z Nijinska poster (repeat)

What did you see in that? Although the dancers still wear ballet shoes, and the Bride has several movements *en pointe*, little else has the lightness, poise, and three-dimensionality of classical ballet. It is very similar to *The Rite of Spring*, the ballet she worked on two years earlier with her brother, **Vaslav Nijinsky**. The women are treated ritualistically, facing forward, emphasizing weight rather than grace.

41. Ninette de Valois

In 1923, the year that Nijinska mounted *Les Noces* for Diaghilev, the young Irish dancer **Edris Stannus** joined the *Ballets Russes*, taking the stage name **Ninette de Valois** (1898–2001). She only danced actively with the company for a year before a leg weakness stemming from childhood polio moved to her to the sidelines. But she watched Diaghilev and learned the management skills that would enable her to found a series of her own companies on her return to London, eventually evolving into the Royal Ballet. So I include her not so much for her innovations as a choreographer, but as the woman who raised British ballet to its position as the world's greatest keeper of the classical legacy outside of Russia, but far more versatile. She was by no means its greatest choreographer (that was surely Ashton, her *protégé*); her few surviving ballets now seem overdramatic and old-fashioned, but they were the bedrock of the company. Here is a scene from *Checkmate* of 1937, to a score by **Sir Arthur Bliss** (1891–1975); the Red Knight triumphs in a duel with the Black Queen, but cannot bring himself to kill her, because he loves her. She, however, has no such compunctions.

42. De Valois: *Checkmate*, excerpt

43. Paul Meltsner: *Martha Graham Dance Class* (1939, Wichita)

My fourth Woman in Motion, the American **Martha Graham** (1894–1991), checks all the boxes of the other three and then some. She was a mesmerizing dancer, even into old age. She was one of the most significant choreographers of the century, with works like the iconic *Appalachian Spring* (which I will show in another class). And not only did she lay the groundwork for an entirely new technical approach to dance, she founded a company that is still in existence today.

44. Martha Graham

Whereas classical ballet is all about *elevation*, defying gravity, the Graham technique admits its existence and uses it. Her signature move is the **Graham fall**, the controlled use of the body's weight under gravity to generate movement in a natural way. You can see this in her 1947 work *Errand Into the Maze*, with music by **Gian Carlo Menotti**. It is a version of the legend of Ariadne and the Minotaur, only in this case it is Ariadne who must follow the thread and enter the maze. The bull-man, when he appears, is not a monster so much as the personification of her doubts and fears—identity, personality, sexuality, you name it. The only way she can conquer fear is to enter the maze and face it. The moves you see from the woman at the beginning (**PeiJu Chien-Pott**) are something that would be impossible in ballet: the collapse of the core, pulling into itself. I will take it to her first victory over the Minotaur figure (**Ben Schulz**); it is only temporary, but you will see her rise again to full classical ballet elevation.

45. Graham: *Errand into the Maze*, opening, with fade-out

46. Class title 3 (Tamara Rojo)