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 is as much or more about ballet as about opera. In 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—though slowly, and much much later.

3. Desdemona (engraving, c.1835)

Most of these women 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*

We will meet the ghost of Carlotta Grisi again in another ballet by Jules Perrot in a moment. But for now, let's return to opera. 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 such an impression on Chopin. 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 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 sums. 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 the role 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 direct evidence, in that she was also a composer and published four collections of songs, each dedicated to some princely patron. As these were written for amateurs to perform, they do show Colbran's lovely feeling for the musical line—*bel canto* literally—rather than her virtuosity. Several of these can be found on YouTube, all sung by quite young singers (students or amateurs), but that 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 Futty** 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 the 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.

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

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). 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!

17. Jules Perrot: *Pas de Quatre* (1845), engraving

In 1845, Benjamin Lumley, the manager of Her Majesty's Theatre in London, commissioned choreographer Jules Perrot (of *Giselle* fame) to make a work that would bring together the four greatest ballerinas of the day, as a presentation for Queen Victoria; a composer called Cesare Pugni (1802–70) wrote the music. The four were to have been **Taglioni**, **Elssler**, Carlotta **Grisi** (the original Giselle), and the then-reigning *prima ballerina* at Her Majesty's Theatre, **Fanny Cerrito** (1817–1909). Elssler, however, declined, so the part was given to the young Danish dancer **Lucille Grahn** (1819–1907). The piece, called *Pas de Quatre*, begins and ends on the same pose, shown here. In between, each of the ballerinas has an extended solo (called *variation* in ballet) showcasing her particular strengths: Taglioni's poise, Cerrito's vivacity, and so forth. Alas, these are too long for me to play individually, so I'll content myself with the ending where they all come together. These are modern dancers from the **Kirov Ballet**, but

they are executing the steps made for the original cast, so in its way this is a time-capsule from almost two centuries ago! That trivial little tarantella tune when they all gather into a circle is an earworm that has stuck with me ever since I lit a production of the ballet fifty years ago.

18. Perrot: *Pas de Quatre,* ending
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)
21. Petipa: *Don Quixote* (1871)

So what was difficult? Now let's go back a decade to 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. This time the challenge is more subtle. If all the dancing were as fiery as that required of the character Kitri shown here, the difficulty would be obvious. But I am going to show you the role of Dulcinea, Quixote's idealized vision. The dancer is **Svetlana Zakharova**.

22. Petipa: *Don Quixote,* Dulcinea variation (Svetlana Zakharova)
23. Marianela Nuñez as Odette (*left*) and Odile (*right*) in *Swan Lake*

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*. 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 swans 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 place 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 Maliban bears her name to this day. She died in England at the age of 28, however, of complications from the fall from a horse.

29. Pauline Viardot as performer (Gluck/Berlioz *Orfeo*) and salon hostess

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 Meyerbee 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.

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, though I hope to get hold of a professional production by the date of the class. 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 was 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 harship 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 Liepzig, 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. **Glyndebourne** did a production of the original French version last year, but I have not been able to get hold of it yet. So I want to play two excerpts from the beginning of the production at **Bard Summerscape in 2015**. I'll start with 4½ minutes of the overture, partly because the music is so impressive under conductor **Leon Botstein**, and partly because the director, **Thaddeus Strasberger**, uses it so well to set the mood. Then I'll cut to the opening pair of choruses, which show the community both god-fearing and lawless, an inherent contradiction that will bring about the ultimate tragedy. If I played this in any other context, would you have known at all that it was written by a woman?

34. Smyth: *The Wreckers*, overture and opening scene (Bard Summerscape, 2015)

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 embarrasingly 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 choreogapher 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.

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)
38. Nijinska poster

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

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 famous brother, **Vaslav Nijinsky**. The women are treated ritualistically, facing forward, emphasizing weight rather than grace. The use of weight is a characteristic of the woman shown here, **Martha Graham** (1894–1991). Whereas ballet is all about *elevation*, her signature move is the **Graham fall**, the controlled use of the body's weight under gravity to generate movement in a natural way. I have shown her signature work, *Appalachian Spring*, in several other courses, so this time I am going to turn to a lesser-known one, *Diversion of Angels* (1948), a plotless ballet about love, to a score by **Norman Dello Joio** (1913–2008); the women in white, red, and yellow represent respectively mature, erotic, and adolescent love. I think the first few seconds will make my point exactly about Graham's use of weight.

42. Graham: *Diversion of Angels,* excerpt
43. 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 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 legagy outside of Russia, but far more versatile. She was not its greatest choreographer (that was probably Ashton, her *protégé*), but her ballets 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.

44. De Valois: *Checkmate,* excerpt
45. Pina Bausch

The final class will be devoted to artists whose careers extended into the present century, but I do want to end with a clip from a piece, *Vollmond* (Full Moon), created in 2006 by the German choreographer **Pina Bausch** (1940–2009). Bausch, who founded her own company in Wuppertal in 1970, was known for strongly expressionist works that blur even the flexible boundaries of modern dance. I know nothing whatever about the subject of this piece; I am including it for the words spoken by the dancer, getting soaked by a shower of rain at the end. You'll see!

46. Bausch: *Vollmond,* ending
47. Class title 3 (Tamara Rojo)