

GODDESS, MUSE, CREATOR



7. PRIMA DONNA ASSOLUTA

April 4, 2023

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OPERA AND DANCE OF THE ROMANTIC ERA was dominated by its female stars, with the top few earning enormous sums for performing roles of great difficulty written for them by male composers and choreographers. But the heroines they portrayed were often depicted as victims, driven to madness or suicide or often both. It was only with the 20th Century that a few women began to take the reins, as composers of opera and increasingly as choreographers of dance. These are their stories. *rb.*

All the items listed below are videos.

A. SUFFERING SOPRANOS

Despite the title, this section includes ballerinas as well, as we look at three out of many helpless heroines who fall victim to a heartless lover or society at large.

Rossini: *Otello*, Desdemona's Willow Song (June Anderson, Turin 1988, c. John Pritchard)

Adam: *Giselle*, mad scene (Alina Cojocaru, Royal Ballet)

Bellini: *La sonnambula*, "Ah, non credea mirarti" (Natalie Dessay, Met 2009; d. Mary Zimmerman)

Bellini: *La sonnambula*, "Non si giunge" (production as above)

B. SHINING STARS

We look at a few of the opera and ballet stars of the Romantic Era, the rivalries between them, and the works written for them that both taxed their skills and displayed their strengths to the utmost.

Colbran: "La speranza al cor mi dice" (Agostina Pombo, with Jennifer Fitty, *piano*)

Rossini: *La donna del lago*, "Tanti affetti" (Joyce DiDonato in 2012 concert in Austria, c. Andrés Orozco-Estrada)

Perrot: *Pas de Quatre*, ending (soloists of the Kirov Ballet)

Offenbach: *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Olympia (Erin Morley, Metropolitan Opera 2021; d. Bartlett Sher)

Petipa: *Don Quixote*, Dulcinea variation (Svetlana Zakharova as a guest artist in Japan)

Petipa: *Swan Lake*, White Swan pas-de-deux, extract (Royal Ballet, Marianela Nuñez and Vadim Muntagirov)

Petipa: *Swan Lake*, Black Swan pas-de-deux, coda (as above)

C. THE STAGE IS THEIRS

Two composers of opera in the first decade of the 20th Century, one composing chamber opera for performance in the *salon* she ran as a retired *diva*, the other conceived on such a large scale by a composer so uncompromising that it could barely obtain performance at all.

Viardot: *Cendrillon*, Fairy Godmother's aria (Olga Peretyatko in concert with Pavel Nebolsin, *piano*)

Smyth: *The Wreckers*, overture and opening scene (Bard Summer-scape, 2015; c. Leon Botstein, d. Thaddeus Strassberger)

D. WOMEN IN MOTION

Five choreographers of the 20th Century who either challenged the ballet establishment from within or, by working outside it, laid the groundwork for what we now know as modern dance.

Duncan: *Moment Musical* (Schubert), danced by one of her pupils

Ashton: *Five Brahms Waltzes in the Style of Isadora Duncan* (first two, danced by Tamara Rojo)

Remembering Nijinska, documentary with Tamara Tchinanova and Nathalie Krassovska

Nijinska: *Les Noces*, opening; music by Igor Stravinsky (Kirov Ballet, c. Valery Gergiev)

Graham: *Diversion of Angels*, excerpt; music by Norman dello Joio

De Valois: *Checkmate*, excerpt; music by Sir Arthur Bliss

Bausch: *Vollmond*, ending; music from *Café Mambo* by Kenneth Bager; the dancer is unidentified

FULL NAMES OF ARTISTS MENTIONED

Adolphe **Adam** (1803–56, *French composer*), Frederick **Ashton** (1904–88, *English choreographer*), Pina **Bausch** (1940–2009, *German choreographer*), Vincenzo **Bellini** (1801–35, *Italian composer*), Arthur **Bliss** (1891–1975, *English composer*), Fanny **Cerrito** (1817–1909, *Italian ballerina*), Isabella **Colbran** (1785–1845, *Italian singer and composer*), Norman **Dello Joio** (1913–2008, *American composer*), Ninette **de Valois** (1898–2001, *Irish choreographer*), Isadora **Duncan** (1877–1927, *American dancer*), Fanny **Elssler** (1810–84, *Austrian ballerina*), Lucille **Grahn** (1819–1907, *Danish ballerina*), Martha **Graham** (1894–1991, *American choreographer*), Carlotta **Grisi** (1819–99, *Italian ballerina*), Jenny **Lind** (1820–87, *Swedish singer*), Maria Garcia **Malibran** (1808–36, *Spanish singer*), Bronislava **Nijinska** (1891–1972, *Polish choreographer*), Jacques **Offenbach** (1819–80, *German-French composer*), Giuditta **Pasta** (1797–1865, *Italian singer*), Jules **Perrot** (1810–92, *French choreographer*), Fanny **Persiani** (1812–67, *Italian singer*), Marius **Petipa** (1818–1910, *French choreographer*), Gioacchino **Rossini** (1792–1868, *Italian composer*), Ethel **Smyth** (1858–1944, *English composer*), Igor **Stravinsky** (1882–1971, *Russian-American composer*), Marie **Taglioni** (1804–84, *Swedish ballerina*), Pyotr Ilyich **Tchaikovsky** (1840–93, *Russian composer*), Pauline Garcia **Viardot** (1821–1910, *Spanish-French singer and composer*)

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