

# Novel into *Opera*



## 4. Singing Shakespeare

Thursday, October 13, 2022

## Singing Shakespeare

MY INTENTION TODAY is to take a closer look at the two topics we have been examining so far—operatic texts and opera structures—by watching parts of three English-language operas based on plays by Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76), *The Tempest* by **Thomas Adès** (b.1971), and *Hamlet* by **Brett Dean** (b.1961). The advantage of Shakespeare for us is that the source material is in English and readily available. The disadvantage is that it is written as poetry, which already has its own implied music. Much of the class will be about resolving the conflict between the two.

The strategies for adapting the original are different in each case. Britten's libretto, crafted by **Peter Pears**, uses Shakespeare's lines intact, though fewer of them. Dean's librettist **Matthew Jocelyn** also confines himself to Shakespeare's words, though chopping them up and sometimes assigning them to different characters. **Meredith Oakes**, working with Adès, is the most radical, rewriting all the text as a series of images without connecting syntax. I hope that comparing the three will tell us more about libretto writing in general. *rb*.

### A. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960)

Like Verdi did in *Otello*, Britten and Pears cut out the entire first act of the play, so that their opera opens already in the magic wood. But our concern is in seeing how they turned ten lines of dialog into a duet, and expanded two lines for one character into a lyrical quartet.

— **Britten: *A Midsummer Night's Dream***, from Acts I and III

Felicity Lott (Helena), Cynthia Buchan (Hermia),

Ryland Davies (Lysander), Dale Duesing (Demetrius);

Glyndebourne 1981; Bernard Haitink (c), Peter Hall (d)

## B. The Tempest (2004)

For the most part, Adès remained quite close to Shakespeare in *The Tempest*. His most radical departure was in commissioning a libretto from Meredith Oakes that rewrites the text as a sequence of verbal images, all considerably shorter than Shakespeare's iambic pentameters. For his 2012 production at the Metropolitan Opera, **Robert Lepage** had the brilliant idea of making Prospero the director of La Scala, Milan, so that all the action takes place onstage and behind the scenes of a 19th-century theater. We will also compare an aria from the 1986 setting of the play by **Lee Hoiby** (1926–2011).

- **Shakespeare: *The Tempest***, from Act III, scene 2  
Joe Dixon (Caliban); RSC 2016; Greg Doran (d)
- **Hoiby: *The Tempest***, Caliban's aria from Act II  
Jacque Trussel (Caliban)
- **Adès: *The Tempest***, Caliban's aria from Act II  
Met 2012; Alan Oke (Caliban); Thomas Adès (c), Robert Lepage (d)
- **Adès: *The Tempest***, from Act III opening  
Met 2012, as above
- **Adès: *The Tempest***, Act III quintet  
Met 2012, as above, with Isabel Leonard (Miranda), Alek Shrader (Ferdinand), Simon Keenlyside (Prospero), William Burden (Naples), John del Carlo (Gonzago)
- **Shakespeare: *The Tempest***, Act III, scene 1  
BBC Shakespeare 1980; Pippa Guard (Miranda); Christopher Guard (Ferdinand), Michael Hordern (Prospero); John Dorrie (d)
- **Adès: *The Tempest***, final scene of Act II  
Met 2012, as above

## C. Hamlet

Brett Dean and Matthew Jocelyn begin their operatic version of *Hamlet* (2017) with a striking prologue, featuring Hamlet alone in his indecision and madness. This leads to an opening scene that combines elements from three or four separate scenes in the play. After that, though, the creators stick quite close to the Shakespeare,

with the notable exception of a scene from the Players that they treat almost as cabaret. The highlight of any *Hamlet* opera, though, is surely the mad scene for Ophelia, and this one, which pulls in text from all over the play, does not disappoint.

- **Dean: *Hamlet***, Gertrude's narrative from Act II  
Sarah Connolly (Gertrude), David Butt Philip (Laertes); Glyndebourne 2017; Vladimir Jurowski (c), Neil Armfield (d)
- **Dean: *Hamlet***, two views of Hamlet's soliloquy  
As above, with Allan Clayton (Hamlet)
- **Dean: *Hamlet***, Act I, scene with the Players  
As above, with John Tomlinson (Player King)
- **Dean: *Hamlet***, from the opening scene of Act I  
As above, with Barbara Hannigan (Ophelia), Kim Begley (Polonius)
- **Dean: *Hamlet***, opening of Act II  
As above, with Rod Gilfry (Claudius)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/novel-opera/>

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