



Osher at JHU, Fall 2022

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Novel into *Opera*

ADAPTING A NOVEL FOR THE STAGE involves several processes. You will probably have to cut characters and episodes for reasons of length. You may have to reduce the number of settings to what can be handled on the stage. And you will have to convert indirect speech into actual dialogue that can be spoken or sung. So far, this applies equally to spoken theater and opera.

But the addition of music both opens wider possibilities and imposes further restrictions. Music can take over much of the mood-painting and even scene-setting of the original, but you have to leave room for it to do so, which means further cutting. It offers the possibilities of solo arias and ensembles; these can replace dialogue in many instances, but you need to build them into what will eventually be a much a musical structure as a dramatic one. And words to be sung are different from those to be spoken; you will need to think in terms of short images rather than extended syntax, and provide vowels that can be colored by the singer and sustained as a musical line.

After addressing such issues through short examples, we shall watch three English-language operas complete, then look at how the same story has been adapted by multiple composers.

A. How Opera Works

Four classes about opera structures, the way it handles time, and the kind of words most suitable for singing.

1. Stopping the Clock

September 22

We start with Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689), not based on a novel, but short and in English. Purcell addresses the problem that faces any opera composer: how to combine drama that moves at one kind of pace with music that often requires another.

2. The Opera Aria September 29

Arias are the emotional core of opera. We shall first look at how they are used by Handel, Mozart and others. Then we shall consider what kinds of text are most suitable for lyrical singing in English, distinguishing what opera can do well from what it can scarcely do at all.

3. Opera Structures October 6

We compare scenes from *The Lady of the Camellias* by Dumas and *La Traviata* by Verdi to dissect the construction of an operatic duet. We shall also look more briefly at ways in which Verdi, Rossini, and/or Mozart use larger ensembles to create a dramatic climax.

4. Singing Shakespeare October 13

English-speaking composers adapting Shakespeare face the challenge of whether to retain his words or no. We will see how this plays out in Meredith Oakes' libretto for Thomas Adès' *The Tempest* (2004) and Matthew Jocelyn's for Brett Dean's *Hamlet* (2017).

B. Three American Authors

Three operas with American literary sources, all played complete and analyzed in detail.

5. Roman Fever October 20

My adaptation of the 1934 story by Edith Wharton for the Pulitzer-prizewinning composer Robert Ward, was written to provide material for sopranos and makes no claim to greatness. But it does offer a compact example that I can address with some authority.

6. The Turn of the Screw 1 October 27

Myfanwy Piper's libretto for Benjamin Britten's chamber opera *The Turn of the Screw* (1954) is one of the great opera texts of our time. It is based upon the 1898 novella by Henry James, a ghost story about a young and inexperienced Governess who comes to take charge of two children in the country, only to become convinced that they are being haunted and manipulated by the ghosts of her predecessor and the former valet, who may have driven her to suicide.

7. The Turn of the Screw 2 November 3

Act II and discussion of the Britten opera.

8. Moby Dick 1 November 10

In adapting Herman Melville's 800-page novel for their 2010 opera, composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer may have found its bulk a boon, for it was no longer an agonizing decision about what to cut out, but the surely-simpler one of what to keep *in*.

9. Moby Dick 2 November 17

Act II and discussion of the Heggie opera.

C. Fraternal Twins

Three novels (all French) that have inspired more than one operatic setting.

10. Manon's Two Lovers December 1

When Giacomo Puccini decided to set Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* as an opera (it premiered in 1893), he was undeterred by the success of Jules Massenet's *Manon* in 1884. "A woman like Manon can have more than one lover," he said. We shall sample both.

11. The Bohemian Life December 8

Puccini again, in his adaptation of some of the Parisian stories of Henry Murger to make *La bohème* (1896). We also look at the opera with the same title by *Pagliacci* composer Ruggero Leoncavallo (1897), and perhaps also at Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1997).

12. Carmen Translated December 15

In adapting Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella *Carmen*, Georges Bizet intended a realistic tragedy of the common people. We shall look at two attempts to maintain that aim: Calixto Bieto's 2010 production for the English National Opera sung in English, and Oscar Hammerstein's 1943 all-black reworking, *Carmen Jones*.

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