Class 4: Singing Shakespeare

A. A Midsummer Night's Dream

1. Title Slide 1 (Caliban in *The Tempest*)

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 portions 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 is that the source material is in English and readily available. The disadvantage is that it is written as poetry and already has its own implied music. Much of the class will be about resolving the conflict between the two.

2. Britten: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, title

I was at the London première of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1961 (the year after its local premiere in Aldeburgh), and it later became one of my own calling cards as a stage director. It is the only one of the three operas I am playing today that uses Shakespeare's text, considerably cut and somewhat rearranged, but without any word changes whatsoever. The libretto was compiled by Britten's partner **Peter Pears**; it is a cut-and-paste job, but a brilliant one. I shall play two scenes: the first time we see two of the lovers, **Hermia** and **Lysander**, in Act I, and then the quartet from Act III when they all wake up to discover that their correct pairings have been restored. In all of this, we're after two things: how you set the words when the aims of the play and the opera are closely aligned, and how you adapt them to make the ensembles and other structures that opera requires,

3. Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I/1, Hermia and Lysander (beginning)
4. Britten: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, theme for the lovers (piano)

Here is the beginning of the Hermia/Lysander text. You will see that, as usual with Shakespeare, it is all in **iambic pentameters**: ten-syllable lines with five feet in each. Now ten-syllable lines are long for an opera libretto; if you see them printed on a page, you will generally find shorter lines and more whitespace. But Britten embraces this. The moment the lovers enter, you hear a very long-phrased tune that plays in different ways through all the lovers' scenes. There are actually 14 notes in the theme, but only 10 pitches; it is as though Britten wanted to create a musical equivalent of Shakespeare's long ten-syllable line. Using this in the orchestra, he is able to break the singers up into much shorter phases, making their dramatic interplay more natural.

5. Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I/1, Hermia and Lysander (end)

In the play, Hermia ends the scene by swearing fidelity to Lysander and promising to meet him that night. But an opera composer needs a duet moment here. So rather than giving these lines all to one person, Britten (or Pears) alternates them between the two of them. And to strengthen that, he repeats

the phase “I swear to thee” at the beginning of each, strikingly moving to a different key with each entrance. So Hermia’s first line is indeed a pentameter (10 syllables), but each of those that follow have the added prefix. Let me demonstrate, then watch the full scene in **Sir Peter Hall’s** classic production at **Glyndebourne** from 1981.

6. Britten: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* oath duet (piano)
7. Britten: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* I, Hermia and Lysander
8. Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* IV/1, the lovers awaken

Opera needs ensembles; novels and plays do not provide them, so they need to be manufactured by the librettist and composer. Here is the moment in Act IV of the play where the lovers find themselves awake and in their correct pairings. There is more dialogue than this, but you can see it does not automatically translate into a beautiful ensemble. What Britten does is to take the two lines I have put in color, and have the lovers sing them one after the other, in a sort of canon that overlaps more and more until they are all singing the same words together. And once again he changes key with each phrase, not at the beginning of the line, but utterly magically on the word “jewel,” written to be sung *subito piano*. Again, let me demonstrate, then play the scene.

9. Britten: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* III, waking quartet demo (piano)
10. Britten: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* III, waking quartet

B. The Tempest

11. Adès: *The Tempest*, title

This picture from the Met production of *The Tempest* in 2012 shows Caliban with the chorus. The scene in the Shakespeare contains one of the most concentrated passages of sheer poetry in the entire play, the speech “Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises.” Which is surprising, since Caliban is a misshapen monster, and not at all what you would have thought of as a poetic character. But let’s back up a moment, and hear the speech in the Shakespeare play. The Caliban in the RSC production is **Joe Dixon**.

12. Shakespeare: *The Tempest* III/2, with Caliban speech.
13. Adès: *The Tempest* Act II, with Caliban speech.

It’s very short, isn’t it? Yet it is far too good for a composer to pass up. When I did my own adaptation of the play as an opera for performance in schools, I kept the nine lines intact; unfortuantely, I have no recording of that. And the number was also kept intact by American composer **Lee Hoiby** (1926–2011), whose then-new opera I had the honor to direct myself in Kansas City in 1987. I have no video of that either, but I do have an audio of the aria with the original Caliban, **Jacque Trussel**. Listen.

14. Hoiby: *The Tempest* Act II, Caliban aria.

It is a simply glorious aria, but it is all in the music. If I had not put up the text, I don’t think you’d have caught many of the words, and even so I can’t make out what he is singing at the climax at all. But this is

not simply due to the composer's scoring or the singer's diction. Not only Shakespeare's lines but also Shakespeare's thoughts are too long to be set to music and taken in on the fly. This speech relies on syntactical structures that sometimes span many lines; from "Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments" through "I cried to dream again" is a single sentence. But that is not the way the ear works when listening to music; we tend to pick out striking images and ignore the syntax that ties it together. So how do you allow for that?

15. Thomas Adès and Meredith Oakes
16. Adès: *The Tempest* Act II, with Caliban speech and Oakes version

Thomas Adès (b.1971) called upon the Australian playwright **Meredith Oakes** (b.1946) to make her own adaptation of the Shakespeare text. Here's what she does with Caliban: you may be shocked. One of the first things I used to teach in libretto-writing is to keep the lines short. But I never imagined anything so short as these lines of Oakes. Yet I think she has it just right. In terms of text to be read on paper, it is a trite travesty of the original. But listen to it when set to music, and listen, if you will, in **two layers**: the singer in the foreground producing this chain of images, while the music in the background provides all the poetry you could want. The task of continuity has been transferred from *syntax* to *sound*, and in opera that is exactly where it ought to be.

17. Adès: *The Tempest*, Act II, Caliban's aria
18. Text for opening chorus of Act II

What Oakes does is to condense the text into its main images, often with only two or three words per line. Her lines make sense as a sequence, but she has no interest in connecting them syntactically; she leaves it to the composer to make his own connections. It seems strange when she is pulling apart a well-known passage of poetry; it makes more sense when she is concoting an ensemble such as the opening Chorus of Act II, picking up phrases scattered over about 50 lines of the Shakespeare and I think adding some of her own. But I think you'll find it works perfectly for amazement of the Neapolitan Court who wake to find themselves in a mysterious place, with their clothes as new as before.

19. Adès: *The Tempest*, Act II opening
20. Text for opening chorus of Act II (repeat)

When I have written a libretto myself, I know of course that a composer is going to set my texts any way he pleases, and that all my poetry will become secondary to his music. But I still like my words to have a certain elegance; I could never bring myself to write texts that read as such a flat travesty of the original, as Meredith Oakes does. Yet I have to admit that she is probably the better librettist, precisely because she keeps her own artistic ego totally out of the way, and allows the composer a completely free rein.

21. Meredith Oakes: text of Act III quintet

But I did balk a bit when I heard what she had done to create a climactic **Quintet in Act III**. We are approaching the resolution. Seeing the repentance of the **King of Naples**, **Prospero** reveals his son **Ferdinand**, whom he thought was drowned, alive and well and in love with his own daughter **Miranda**. Miranda sees all these people in their glittering costumes, and exclaims one of the great lines of

Shakespeare, “Oh brave new world, that has such people in it!” Is this enough for a big ensemble? Not really; the composer needs more time to achieve the restoration the music needs. So he must have requested this particular form: five characters, entering one after the other like a canon, their voices overlapping. It is much like what **Britten** does with his waking quartet in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, except that instead of repeating the same line, Oakes writes a separate couplet for each. Miranda’s rhyme still makes me cringe, but once all the voices come together, all that is forgotten.

22. Adès: *The Tempest,* Act III Quintet
23. Angelica Kauffman: *Miranda and Ferdinand* (1782, Vienna Belvedere)

Let’s end this half with a larger problem that is structural rather than verbal. In the play, Prospero sets Ferdinand the arduous task of piling logs. Miranda comes to help him, and this leads in steady stages to their declaration of love. I sent the text out in advance; there are 97 lines in it, and it takes 6 to 8 minutes in performance; the beauty comes in the slow blossoming of a love that we all know to be inevitable. Let’s watch, this time from to old BBC Television production; the lovers are the real-life cousins **Pippa Guard** and **Christopher Guard**; **Michael Hordern** is looking on as Prospero. As you watch, I’d ask you to think what moves you, and how this might be translated into music.

24. Shakespeare: *The Tempest,* Act III/1 complete (BBC)
25. Oakes: text of the final scene in Act II

So what especially moved you? For me, it was the contrast between the ways they delivered their lines. He comes out with full-blown romantic declarations, but in her modestly and total inexperience, she *underplays* it; I especially loved her “Oh,” after he had finished one of his effusions. But understatement won’t easily work in music. To express love, the composer needs to *linger*, and he cannot waste time getting there. So this version is much, much quicker; "Do you love me?" is Miranda's fifth line! And very soon after that, we are into a lovely but totally manufactured duet, "High on the headland." This leads to some choreographed love-making, and the striking ending: "My lover smiling/Blessed asylum/Beautiful island/All I desire" It looks trite on paper, but it does work. The rapid pace of the action makes it possible for the music to be slow, which is what matters. Oakes and Adès do away with the log-piling business, which I think was a good choice. Director **Robert Lepage** gives the scene a beautiful, because very simple, ending; I think it is a tribute to the end of *Shakespeare in Love*. The singers are **Alek Shrader** and **Isabel Leonard**.

26. Adès: *The Tempest*, Act II, final scene
27. Class title 2 (Still from the above)

C. Hamlet

28. Class title 3 (Allan Clayton as Hamlet)
29. Brett Dean in rehearsal

There are apparently over 40 *Hamlet* operas, but none have made it into the general repertoire. Probably the 1869 opera by **Ambroise Thomas** (1811–96) comes closest, mainly by virtue of its soprano mad scene, which outpaces even the one in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Recently, the 2017 *Hamlet* by the Australian composer **Brett Dean** (b.1961) has entered the spotlight, with a premiere shared between Glyndebourne and the Met, and other productions in Europe as well. Will it last? I am doubtful, for while it is undeniably dramatic, it has few scenes where the music takes over from the drama rather than merely supports it; Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Adès' *Tempest* have many such moments, and Verdi's three Shakespeare operas are full of them. The Thomas *Hamlet* has Ophelia'a mad scene, and I would say that is the crown jewel of this one too; I will play it at the end of the hour.

30. Shakespeare: text of Gertrude's "There is a willow" speech

But whatever I think about the opera as a whole, it makes a fascinating contribution to my exploration of how to translate Shakespeare into opera. Just as I started my discussion of *The Tempest* with a famous short speech (Caliban's), let's look at Queen Gertude's famous speech from Act IV, in which she describes Ophelia's death. I sent it out in advance, but here it is again. As you watch it sung by **Sarah Connolly** from the première, note how the libretto by **Matthew Jocelyn** differs from the Shakespeare, and also how his strategies differ from those of Meredith Oakes in *The Tempest*.

31. Dean: *Hamlet*, Act II, "There is a willow"
32. Text of the above, with the Shakespeare compared.

What did you notice? For me, there are three main points. **First** the fact that while Oakes rewrites almost everything, Jocelyn scarcely ever does; almost all his text comes from somewhere in the Shakespeare; there are even several complete iambic pentameters here, and many of the scenes have even more. **Second**, Jocelyn cuts a lot and rearranges others: the lines in blue all come from somewhere in the main speech, though most of them are left incomplete without their verbs, and others are comprised of very short phrases.; the lines in gold come from the very beginning of the scene, and those in pink from where Gerturde visits the grave in Act V. **Third**, Dean keeps turning solos into ensembles; you will notice that you hear echoes of Ophelia's voice offstage, and that Gertrude's aria eventually becomes a duet with Laertes; I like this aspect a lot.

33. Allan Clayton as Hamlet

Let's look at what Jocelyn and Dean do with something even more famous, **Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy**. Fragments of this come in at several moments in the opera, but only fragments. For example, we get the "…or not to be" part but not the opening "to be." I will play two sections, the Prologue, with Hamlet alone on a darkened stage, looking into an open grave, and then where the speech would come in the actual opera, just before his big scene with Ophelia. This will speak for itself, I

think, but the Prologue needs further explanation. It is five minutes long, far too much for me to play complete, and in includes instruments and voices scattered around the theater, singing lines from elsewhere in the play; it is deliberately disorientating; indeed, I think we are meant to understand the entire action from inside Hamlet's madness.

34. Dean: *Hamlet*, Prologue, beginning
35. Dean: *Hamlet*, "…or not to be" scene
36. Hamlet and his father's Ghost

I'd like to have played you a substantial portion of one of scenes with the Ghost of Halmet's Father, but they are long and deliberately unpleasant to listen to—besides, we have had enough gloom for the time being! But I can show you a photo and point to one of the opera's most brilliant strokes, casting the Ghost, the Player King, and the Gravedigger with the same singer, **John Tomlinson**. Which is my cue to bring in the first moment of real levity in the piece, the scene where Hamlet interviews the traveling Players. Matthew Jocelyn simply throws away all of Shakespeare's verse here, replacing it with a sort of cabaret collage of all the greatest hits from the big speeches. To add to that, Brett Dean accompanies the scene with a button-accordionist live onstage, and director **Neil Armfield** turns the flats all around to show the backs of them. The touch of comedy is very Shakespearian, and a good deal less creaky than, say, the comedy he writes for the Gravedigger. The Polonius at the top of the clip is **Kim Begley**.

37. Dean: *Hamlet*, scene with the Players
38. David Butt Philip (Laertes) and Barbara Hannigan (Ophelia)

One of the things that disappointed me a bit about the opera was that, although there were highly inventive moments such as that scene with the Players, for the most part the opera played with the same dramaturgy and much of the same text as the play, which made me question why I was bothering to watch it in the opera house rather than at a theater. But perhaps my expectations had been set too high by that long but extraordinary Prologue, and then by the big banquet scene, into which librettist and composer crammed material from many different scenes in the play. To give you a taste of the flavor, and also to prepare you for Ophelia's big scene, here is a brief snatch in which she is bullied first by her brother Laertes and then her father Polonius. David Butt Philip is the Laertes, and the fragile, already half-mad Ophelia was sung at the première by the brilliant Canadian soprano **Barbara Hannigan**.

39. Dean: *Hamlet*, opening scene, Laertes, Ophelia, and Polonius
40. Barbara Hannigan as Ophelia

I will end with a longer scene, the riveting opening of Act II. Laertes is angry about his father's death. King Claudius swears he is not to blame; he will later recruit Laertes into a plot to murder the real culprit, Hamlet. But first Ophelia enters, in her underwear and covered in mud. It is an extraordinary mad scene, combining text from her two entrances in the play, and from much else besides. Don't analyze; just sit back and watch the amazing artistry of Barbara Hannigan, a fine piece of staging, and some of the best musical writing in the entire opera.

41. Dean: *Hamlet*, Act II opening and Ophelia's mad scene
42. Closing title