

Opera and Real Life



2. To Please the Prince

March 8, 2022

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THIS CLASS WILL TAKE AN HISTORICAL THEME—the necessity to flatter a noble patron—and move to more recent times to show that such issues are not the exclusive problem of the baroque era. Lully and Mozart knew on which side their bread was to be buttered. But Benjamin Britten, writing *Gloriana* for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, found he had not only to address needs of state but also to be sensitive to the national mood.

A. Lully and Louis XIV

Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–87) was a self-taught Italian street musician and dancer, brought to France at the age of 14 by a minor royal as dancing partner for his daughter. But his ability was noted by the young **King Louis XIV**, still a teenager himself and a passionate dancer, and from then on, he became in turn the composer of all court ballets, the Superintendent of Music to the King, composer of the Royal Opera, and ultimately the person with veto power over any opera presented *anywhere* in the whole of France. Like many of his works, his 1675 opera *Atys* begins with a masque that includes both explicit and allegorical tribute to the King, who was then impatient for the arrival of Spring so that he could pursue his war in the Netherlands.

Gérard Corbiau: *Le Roi danse*, excerpt

Film 2000; Boris Terral (Lully), Benoît Magimel (the King)

Lully: *Atys*, opening

Paris 2011; c. William Christie, d. Jean-Marie Vilégier

B. Mozart and Leopold II

In 1791, the last year of his life, **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) wrote two operas, virtually back-to-back, although he was already quite ill. They could hardly have been more different, not only in content, but in the real-life conditions of their performance. *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) was written for his fellow Mason **Emanuel Schikaneder** (1751–1812), a playwright and actor who

owned a commercial theater on the outskirts of Vienna and put on popular entertainments in German, in which he starred himself. The other commission was *La clemenza di Tito* (The Clemency of Titus), to celebrate the coronation of the Holy Roman Emperor, **Leopold II**, as King of Bohemia. Mozart turned to an old form he had abandoned long since, *opera seria*, and reused an old libretto that had already been set by several other composers. The story of the magnanimity of a Roman Emperor was a perfect tribute to an Enlightenment Prince.

Peter Shaffer: *Amadeus*, premiere of *The Magic Flute*

Film 1984; d. Miloš Forman; Tom Hulce (Mozart), F. Murray

Abraham (Salieri)

Mozart: *La clemenza di Tito*, final scene

Glyndebourne 2017; c. Robin Ticciati, d. Claus Guth; Richard Croft

(Tito), Anna Stéphany (Sesto)

C. Britten and Elizabeth II

A few days after the coronation of **Queen Elizabeth II** came the gala premiere of *Gloriana*, the opera about the first Queen Elizabeth commissioned from **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76) and his South African librettist **William Plomer** (1903–73) to celebrate the event. Britten put in all the necessary fanfares, masques, and dances, and Covent Garden did not spare the spectacle. But the opera also had a private level that showed a different side to the old Queen from what the public knew and needed.

Pathé newsreel: Royal Gala at Covent Garden

Britten: *Gloriana*, Act II, scene 3 excerpt

English National Opera 1983; c. Mark Elder, d. Colin Graham (1966);

Sarah Walker (Queen Elizabeth)

John Bridcut: On the premiere of *Gloriana*

Britten: *Gloriana*, opening, masque, and closing

Royal Opera 2013; c. Paul Daniel, d. Richard Jones; Susan Bullock

(Queen Elizabeth)

Britten: *Gloriana*, extensive excerpts

Film 2000; d. Phyllida Lloyd, c. Paul Daniel; Josephine Barstow (Queen

Elizabeth), Tom Randle (Essex)