

Class 2 : To Praise the Prince

A. Lully and Louis XIV

1. Title 1 (Louis XIV dancing)

This class and the next are cued to relatively early in the course, because their oldest work is from the French baroque era, 1676 and 1735 respectively. But half of them at least will be taken up by a twentieth-century work: **Dvorak's** *Rusalka* next week and **Britten's** *Gloriana* today. I am devoting most of this class to the Britten because it is an interesting piece I haven't shown before, and a particularly nice example of how an opera composer, writing for a royal patron and choosing a theme from national history, may find his own inspiration butting awkwardly against the requirements of real life.

2. Montserrat Figueras as La Musica

3. Menu for the class

You remember that **Monteverdi** wrote his *Orfeo*, with which I started last week, both to please the taste of his employer, the Duke of Mantua, and to serve his political advantage. Nothing is especially explicit, but the figure of **Music**, who introduces the story, makes no bones about saying that no praise for the Duke is high enough. I moved on last week mainly to commercial concerns, but today I want to return to that first topic of *Pleasing the Prince*, to see how it played out with **Lully** and **Mozart**, and then to leap ahead to *Gloriana*, the opera written by Benjamin **Britten** for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

4. Boris Terral as Jean-Baptiste Lully in *Le Roi danse* (G rard Corbiau, 2000)

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. Here is in action, with the King dancing, in the 2000 film *The King Dances* by **G rard Corbiau**. I'm sorry it is not a better video; it is prohibitively expensive to buy the whole thing. And for that reason, I have no idea who the people are whom we see talking in the middle of it, but their words give some sense of Lully's position at the time, and his obvious talent for court politics.

5. *Le Roi danse*, *Idylle sur la paix*

6. Prologue to *Atys*, original design

All of Lully's operas and *op ra-ballets*, the hybrid form he invented, involve noble subjects from classical mythology. They typically contain allegorical masque sequences, in which abstract ideas would be presented in allegorical form. And many of them, like Monteverdi's *Orfeo* prologue, would involve

specific praise of His Majesty. All these things are true of his opera *Atys* (1675) and can be demonstrated in the opening of the Prologue. [I have shown this more than once before, but it is inescapable here.] It begins in the palace of old **Time**, who sings the praises of the Great Hero—Louis XIV. A chorus backs him up. Then **Flora** arrives to herald the Spring. This is significant because at the time of the performance it was winter, and Louis was impatient to resume his wars against the Netherlands in the spring. This 2011 production by **Jean-Marie Villégier** adds a lot of comic business on the side, plus Lully himself directing operations on the stage itself. And he certainly gets the drama!

7. Lully: *Atys*, Prologue

B. Mozart and Leopold II

8. Mozart in 1791

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 by, for, and starring the man in the middle here, **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, generally with lots of stage magic and comedy, in which he starred himself. Here is a brief glimpse of the premiere from the film *Amadeus* (1984); Mozart is conducting and his nemesis **Salieri** is watching from a box; the aria is for the Queen of Night.

9. *Amadeus*, premiere of *The Magic Flute*

10. *La clemenza di Tito* title slide

The other commission was *La clemenza di Tito* (The Clemency of Titus), to celebrate the coronation of **Leopold II**, the Holy Roman Emperor, as King of Bohemia. Mozart turned to an old form he had abandoned long since, *opera seria*, and reused an old libretto by **Pietro Metastasio** (1698–1782) that had already been set by several other composers. The story concerns the magnanimity of a Roman Emperor who, following the discovery of a plot on his life, pardons the offenders. So it's a perfect tribute to an Enlightenment Prince. It has recently seen a rise in its reputation and received quite a lot of productions. Unfortunately for our purposes, nobody seems to want to go back to the classical style of this engraving, and most directors add several layers of additional story. **Claus Guth's** 2017 production at Glyndebourne begins with a filmed overture in which Tito and his friend Sesto—the one who gets trapped into the assassination plot—are shown as boyhood friends in a sort of bucolic Eden, until Sesto shoots a magpie with his catapult. That explains both the ravaged-Eden setting and the magpie that flies across the scene at the end, but I'm not even going to try to explain the rest. Believe me, the others are even more off the wall. But you *will* hear the music, sung beautifully by **Richard Croft** as Tito and the mezzo-soprano **Anna Stéphany** in the countertenor role of Sesto, and that is what matters.

11. Mozart: *La clemenza di Tito*, finale (Glyndebourne, 2017)

C. Britten and Elizabeth II

12. Britten, Plumer, and Queen Elizabeth

The 1953 **Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II** is something I remember well. I was 12, and got out of school for it. My uncle and aunt got my cousin and me places in a second-floor Park Lane apartment from which we could watch the grand processions go by before and after, then go indoors to watch the ceremony at Westminster Abbey on TV. News of the **Conquest of Everest** had broken the day before, London was packed with people, and the mood was euphoric. A few days later 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. I was not into opera at that time, and so knew nothing of the event, but this Pathé newsreel should show what an event it was.

13. Gala premiere of *Gloriana* (Pathé newsreel, 1953)

14. Premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* in 1953: masque from Act II

You notice that we never see the composer or librettist, and there is not even a mention of the opera these dignitaries all came to see! As one experienced in reading the mood of opera-lobby crowds, my heart would have sunk on seeing this one. For how could even the best opera succeed with an audience that was there entirely out of diplomatic duty, most of them with no investment in opera at all? As this photo shows, the Royal Opera went all out on the spectacle and color. And Britten included all the ingredients: lots of **fanfares**, an allegorical **masque** (shown here), and lots of genuine-sounding **Elizabethan dances**—which he had to ask an assistant to research, since this was well before historical reconstruction became popular. Alas, there are no films of the actual performance, but here is a clip of one of these dances from the 1966 production of the opera by **Colin Graham** (which I also saw), the first step towards reviving the opera's reputation after its initial failure. [Actually, the video is from the 1984 repeat of the same production.] The situation is a grand ball. **Queen Elizabeth** is miffed to see that the **Earl of Essex**, her favorite and in some respects her lover, has dressed his wife up in an even more splendid gown than her own. So she calls for the most vigorous dance possible, the **lavolta**, so that the ladies will sweat and have to go off to change. I'll explain more later. Meanwhile, enjoy the brilliance (even in an old video), and the exhilarating rhythm of that dance.

15. Britten: *Gloriana*, Act II, scene 3: the *lavolta* (ENO, 1984)

16. Premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* in 1953: Joan Cross as Queen Elizabeth

If Britten's opera had been an act shorter and contained little other than pageantry, masques, and dances connected by some simple story, all might have been well. But Britten was not about to write a mere celebration of Merrie Olde England. Instead, he and William Plomer, basing their opera on a book by **Lytton Strachey**, alternated these public scenes with intimate ones involving Elizabeth's probably unconsummated love for Essex, and her difficult decision to order his execution when he is found guilty of inciting rebellion. It ends with the Queen as an old woman, wigless and un-made-up, lamenting her wasted reign as she approaches her death.

17. Covers of the *Young Elizabethan*, 1953 and 1954

Her death?! Britain at the time was barely emerging from a long period of post-war austerity. Rationing had only just ended. True, there had been the Festival of Britain in 1951, but all in all it was a rather threadbare affair, morale-boosting on a budget. But then in 1952 we had a new Queen, still in her twenties, surely a reincarnation of the first Elizabeth and the glory days of Shakespeare, Drake, and Sir Walter Raleigh! A new magazine came out for children my age, *The Young Elizabethan*, perfectly capturing the mood of fresh hope. So even without that stuffed-shirt audience, Britten's refusal to pander to the national myth was wildly out of tune with the times. It is not merely a question of whether the Queen herself liked it or not. Here is a brief talk by Britten biographer **John Bridcut** describing the premiere.

18. **John Bridcut: the premiere of *Gloriana***

19. **Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* at the Royal Opera House in 2013 (Richard Jones d.)**

So what did the Royal Opera House do in 2013, when they mounted a new production on the 60th anniversary of the original? Director Richard Jones took advantage of the fact that we are all Post-Modernists now, and view our myths and history with a heavy dose of irony. He eliminates all suggestion of reality by presenting the whole thing frankly as theater, and amateur theater at that. The second act of the opera takes place while the Queen is "on progress" (a kind of royal national tour), attending celebrations put on in her honor in Norwich. Jones makes this the framework for his entire production, having the Queen—the current Queen, not her Tudor namesake—arrive at a makeshift theater in some kind of civic hall. So he is essentially recreating the original premiere—the newsreel we have just watched—but in a way-downmarket, provincial context. And whatever I think about the production as a whole, I am amazed the Jones and his designer ULTZ have captured the style of those times; this is exactly the Britain in which I grew up. I have put together three clips from this production: the opening, the beginning of the Norwich masque, and the closing. If you look closely, you will see representations of Britten and his partner Peter Pears looking on from the wings.

20. **Britten: *Gloriana*, excerpts (Richard Jones, 2013)**

21. **Main title 2 (still from the above)**

D. Reality and Artifice

22. **Phyllida Lloyd and Josephine Barstow**

Richard Jones was not the first director, though, to play *Gloriana* within a theatrical metaphor. Twenty years earlier, for the work's 40th anniversary, **Phyllida Lloyd** (whom those who took my Shakespeare class may remember as the director of the all-female *Henry IV* and *Tempest*) mounted a production for Opera North in Leeds. It was a splendid and basically straight production, as you will see in a moment, but that's not the point. In 1999, in conjunction with a revival of that production, the BBC commissioned a 100-minute film of the opera. But as the opera runs 150 minutes, that was a problem. She had to cut considerably, so decided to eliminate the Masque and much of the side intrigue, concentrating instead on the relationship between Elizabeth and Essex, the thrust of Lytton Strachey's original book.

Moreover, she decided to reframe it, making it not just a filming of her own stage production, but a film in which the onstage element was only one component. Here is what she says:

23. — the same with Lloyd quote

I have had to cut Lloyd's cut version down still further to fit into the hour, but I hope that it will make a kind of sense. I too have focused on the **Elizabeth/Essex** relationship, and on those moments when she expresses the difference between being a **Woman** and a **Prince**; it is a theme that comes up again and again with the present Queen Elizabeth, if you have ever watched *The Crown*. The one thing I regret is that, to distinguish between the onstage and backstage worlds, Lloyd uses bright lighting only for the stage scenes, and not for all of those—so the film is rather dim. Elizabeth, as you have heard, is the English soprano **Josephine Barstow**, and Essex is the African American tenor **Tom Randle**.

24. Britten: *Gloriana*, excerpts (Phyllida Lloyd, 2000)

25. Main title 3 (still from the above)