

Class 6 : The Oldest Hatred

A. Gothe

1. Title 1 (*La Juive* in St. Petersburg)
2. *La Juive*, *The Passenger*, and *The Promise*

As you may have realized, I am arranging the classes in this course in order of the oldest opera in each. And believe it or not, one of the foundation stones of French *grand opéra* in the 1830s was an opera by a Jewish composer about Anti-semitic persecution: *La Juive* (the Jewess, 1835) by **Fromental Halévy**. So I am taking it as an excuse to show excerpts from two more recent, and frankly more powerful, operas on the subject: *The Passenger* (1968) by **Mieczysław Weinberg**, and *The Promise* by **Mats Larsson Gothe** from just a few months ago, in 2022. These last two are post-Holocaust operas, set in the postwar years, but they are still pretty searing. So I must admit that I have been judicious in my selection of scenes, so as not to plunge the whole class into doom and gloom. *La Juive* is a hodgepodge anyway, and can look after itself.

3. Gothe and Marko

Susanne Marko, the librettist of *The Promise*, called upon her own family history. The protagonist of the opera, Ava, is a survivor from a concentration camp, and the story is her search for her husband Teo, to whom she was married just before they were both transported. The Promise of the title is their mutual promise in the wedding ceremony with which the opera begins, and shown here on the slide. I am playing it partly because it is brand new, partly because I want to at least start with something upbeat.

4. Gothe: *The Promise*, prologue
5. — poster from the above

This poster shows the ending of the opera, which is a happy one. Ultimately Ava does find her husband. He just wants to die and refuses to believe that she is real, until eventually her love gets through to him. It is very beautiful music—I will put a link to the full opera on the website—but it takes time. So instead, I shall play one of the happier moments. All the way through her dreamlike journey, Ava is accompanied by a poetic chorus of the dead; but there are live people too. Here she is cautiously opening herself to another survivor, a young girl called Rosa, who is even more trapped in her own pain. But then she remembers her mother's cooking. I would love to hear what you think of it, and if this is something you feel you would like to watch more of.

6. Gothe: *The Promise*, Rosa's memories from Act II
7. — poster from the above

So tell me what you thought? Is this effective, or does it seem too cheap?

B. Weinberg

8. Weinberg and Shostakovich

Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–96) escaped from Poland to the USSR just before the German invasion. By some strokes of good luck, he met the composer **Dmitri Shostakovich**, who became a lifelong friend and supporter; you will hear quite a bit of music in the Shostakovich style, and the Russian's later interest in Jewish music was a result of his friendship with Weinberg. All the same, Weinberg remained an outsider. His 1968 opera *The Passenger* received an unstaged concert performance, but that was that. It did not reach the stage until a production by **David Pountney** at the Bregenz Festival in 2010, which is the staging we shall see. Since then, though, it has been done everywhere.

9. The ship's deck from *The Passenger*

When the curtain rises, you see the deck of a ship, a passenger liner crossing the Atlantic from Europe to Brazil. The first two people you will see are **Walter**, a German diplomat on his way to a new posting, and his wife **Liese**. About five minutes into the opera, Lise sees a woman whom she had thought was dead, and the floodgates of her past begin to give way. But let me pick it up from much later in the opera with a scene from near the end of the second act. There is a dance on deck, and Lise is determined to put her past behind her and have a good time. She is claimed immediately as a dance partner by the ship's captain, but before she gets a chance to dance with Walter, the mysterious woman appears once more and asks the band to play a waltz that makes all Liese's terrors come flooding back.

10. Weinberg: *The Passenger*, Act II, the shipboard dance

11. Liese and the unknown woman

We have heard that waltz before, in the prelude to the second act, one of the most Shostakovich-like sections of the score; I'll play it in a moment, but first let me set it up. Liese is forced to confess to her husband that she was in the SS, a concentration camp guard in the war. She believes the mysterious woman to be a Polish Jew named **Martha**, whom she had cultivated as a *Kapo* to keep the other prisoners in order. Underneath the ship's deck, we see a section of the camp itself, and Liese in her uniform in flashbacks to her former life. In this scene that opens Act II, the Commandant has asked for a violinist to play him his favorite waltz, and Martha is searching through the seized belongings to find a suitable instrument. But when the violinist comes to collect it, she finds that it is her own fiancé, **Tadeusz**. Incidentally, it is a characteristic of this opera that all characters sing in their own languages: German, Polish, Yiddish, Greek, and English; this painful but beautiful scene is in Polish.

12. Weinberg: *The Passenger*, Act II, opening scene

13. Elena Kelessidi and Artur Rucinski in *The Passenger* (Bregenz, 2010)

I cut off the scene of the shipboard dance rather abruptly. In fact it leads straight into the final scene of the opera, where Tadeusz is brought before the Commandant to play that waltz. But he doesn't. Instead, he begins to play the Bach *Chaconne* for solo violin, thus throwing an *echt*-German cultural icon in the faces of his captors. Of course, the end is predictable. But Liese is defeated too. She never gets the

closure she seeks. She never learns if the mysterious passenger was indeed the former *Kapo*. But Martha herself appears at the end, neither in camp pajamas nor dressed like the woman on the ship, but in our own time, in modern clothing. Kneeling at the front of the stage, she sings what is essentially a *Kaddish* for her lost family. It is very beautiful, and restorative, but also long, so I am afraid I have had to cut to near the very end. As you watch this scene, I'd like you to think about its shape, and whether it manages to strike a balance between its powerful emotions.

14. Weinberg: *The Passenger*, Act II, final scene

15. Main title 2 (still from the above)

C. Halévy

16. Meyerbeer and Halévy

Three composers in particular were responsible for creating the genre known as French *grand opéra*: **Gioacchino Rossini**, **Giacomo Meyerbeer**, and **Fromental Halévy** (1799–1862). Of these, Rossini was Italian and Meyerbeer German; only Halévy was French. But he was a Jew and, unlike Meyerbeer and many others, he refused the token conversion to Christianity that was the normal key to success. This is why, I think, his opera *La Juive*, despite all its popular elements catering to the taste of the time, still has the ring of authenticity, in parts at least.

17. Set designs for *La Juive* and *Les Huguenots*

Halévy's opera begins with a scene in the main square of medieval Constance in which a Christian mob attacks a Jewish goldsmith **Eléazar** for having the temerity to work on a holy feast day. But it would be wrong to treat it as a Holocaust opera a hundred years too soon. What Halévy was writing was a *grand opéra*, a blockbuster entertainment in an age of blockbuster entertainments. His story had all the required ingredients: five acts, spectacular scenery, lots of chorus, and a romantic plot set within some great historical conflict. Compare this original set design to the one for Meyerbeer's opera *Les Huguenots* a year later. That two used a religious conflict to stir the blood—only his was between Catholics and Protestants, whereas Halévy has Christians and Jews.

18. Back-story to *La Juive*

I do have to give you a bit of **back-story** here: *As a younger man, the Jewish goldsmith ELÉAZAR had lived in Italy near Rome and witnessed the condemnation and executions of his sons as heretics by COUNT BROGNI. Eléazar himself was banished and forced to flee to Switzerland. During his journey, Eléazar found a baby near death, abandoned inside a burnt-out house, torched by bandits, which turned out to be the home of the Count. Eléazar took the child and raised her as his own daughter, naming her RACHEL. After discovering the ruins of his house and the bodies of his family, Brogni became a priest and later a cardinal. He is now in Constance as representative of the Pope.*

Despite the improbability of the plot and the the mechanics of the *grand opéra* mish-mash, there are moments of true religious feeling. One such is the **Passover Seder** at the beginning of Act II. Listen to the music of Eléazar's prayer. Ignore the yellow gloves that everybody seems to be wearing in this modern-dress production; I'll explain more in a moment. But do keep an eye open for the man at the far right at the table who discreetly refuses the *matzoh* he is offered; I'll explain more about him too.

19. Halévy: *La Juive*, Act II opening

20. — still from the above

The young man says he is a Jewish artist named **Simon**, but in fact he is **Prince Léopold**, who has taken that disguise, rather like the Duke in *Rigoletto*, so that he can seduce **Rachel**, the Jewess of the title. Later in the act, she will discover that he is Christian, but not his true name. All the same, she almost agrees to elope with him—until they are surprised by her father, who orders the man to leave the house. In the next act, Rachel follows him back to the palace of **Princess Eudoxie**, and offers herself as a servant so as to find out more. She does not yet know that her would-be lover is in fact Léopold's wife. I will play this scene because it is the first of two magnificent scenes between the two women, the sopranos **Cornélie Falcon** and **Julie Dorus-Gras**, that are the lyric glories of the piece. It also shows the comedic touch of **Peter Konwitschny**, the director of this Antwerp production, who is quite prepared to play some scenes from this tragedy for the entertainment that they really would have been. Oh yes, and you will see that the yellow hands in the previous scene indicated that the characters were Jews; the Christians all have blue ones; needless to say, this is Konwitschny's idea, not Halévy's!

21. Halévy: *La Juive*, Act III opening

22. Corinne Winters and Nicole Chevalier in *La Juive* (Antwerp, 2019)

The friendship between these two women is one of the surprises of the score, and it will become important later. [Corinne Winters, incidentally, who plays the title role, is a former student of ours at Peabody.] But you will have noticed her surprise when she sees Léopold in the bed, and realized who he really is. So when Eudoxie calls a grand assembly to present her husband with the jewelled pendant she had ordered from the goldsmith Eléazar, Rachel puts a stop to it, and denounces him as a seducer. Konwitschny's idea of turning her into a suicide bomber is rather over the top, but it doesn't distract from the musical glory of one of the slow ensembles of astonishment that would become a fixture of the Act II or Act III finales of grand opera, a tradition that would continue right through Verdi.

23. Halévy: *La Juive*, Act III finale (part)

24. Neil Shicoff as Eléazar in *La Juive* (Vienna, 2003)

Prince Léopold is arrested, as are Rachel and Eléazar for daring to oppose him. But Eudoxie comes to the jail in Act IV to beg Rachel to withdraw her accusation, and she at last agrees. In Konwitschny's production, the two then wash the blue and yellow pigments off their hands, and realize that they are actually just the same. I wish I could play it, but I need to get on to the great aria for Eléazar that ends the act, **Cardinal Brogni** has come to the jail offering to spare Eléazar if he will convert. But Eléazar refuses, knowing that by revealing Rachel's true identity he can get his revenge on the man who murdered his own children. He is quite prepared to die—until he realizes that he would be condemning

Rachel too. It is the kind of creaky plot-point that gives opera a bad name. But Halévy makes up for it by the magnificent aria he gives to Eléazar: “*Rachel, quand du Seigneur.*” And for this, I am going to a more conventional production starring a tenor, **Neil Shicoff**, who like many of the great Eléazars (**Richard Tucker** and **Jan Peerce** among them), started out as a cantor. I think it shows.

25. Halévy: *La Juive*, Act IV, “*Rachel, quand du Seigneur*”

26. Design for Act V

And so to another grand-opera staple, the death scene. Eléazar and Rachel are to die by being cast into a cauldron of boiling water. I don't quite know why Konwitschny dresses them as though for a wedding, but the hostility of his crowd is palpable, as is the anguish of the Cardinal, who knows that they are about to kill the one man who can give him information about his daughter. At the last moment, Eléazar tells Rachel that she will be spared if she will convert. But she refuses, and ascends the steps to the scaffold with new determination.

27. Halévy: *La Juive*, Act V, ending

28. Main title 3 (scene from the above)