

# Synopses for Class 6

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## A. The Promise

**PROLOGUE.** Hungary 1944. The young lovers Ava and Teo are to be married. There is defiance in the air. Ava and Teo take their vows before the rabbi.

**ACT ONE.** A year has passed. A large crowd of people who have survived the war have assembled at a railway station. Among them is Ava, who only wants one thing: to find Teo, whom she became separated from when they were deported to Auschwitz just after the wedding.

Ava encounters Gustav, who is on his way home and looking forward to seeing his family again. Ava is distraught as she has no one to return to. Her memory conjures up the dead.

Ava is desperately longing for Teo, and suddenly he appears before her in a dream or hallucination. She is happy that he is close, but the pain arrives as she returns to reality.

Ava looks for Teo on the platform during the night. She comes across the severely traumatized Maria, who tells Ava that she will never find Teo because everyone is dead. Ava too, although she does not yet know it. The dead reappear, among them Ester and Ivan, who speak about what has happened to them.

Ava is sleeping when she is woken by Fritz, a guard who tells her she must leave. Ava climbs on to a train that she thinks will take her to Auschwitz. When Fritz shouts that it is forbidden to board the train, Ava has a frightening hallucination. As she begins to return to reality, she goes up to Fritz, tenderly and alluringly, and he says that he wants her. She makes him believe that she wants him too. He lets her climb on to the train to wash. The train departs with Ava on board. Fritz remains on the platform, angry about having been deceived.

Ava collapses inside the carriage. She is longing for death. As she walks through the train, she trips over a sleeping man, David. He speaks about his guilt. In a nightmarish flashback his sister Rebecca is calling for help, but David does not dare acknowledge her.

Ava wakes him up and tries to console him. They hold each other, but in his confusion and desperation David loses control, and his embrace becomes more and more violent. Ava cannot break free. A girl, Rosa, helps her. Ava starts to beat David uncontrollably, but Rosa makes her stop. David opens the door of the train and jumps to his death. Ava is shocked when she realises that she made David kill himself. She almost follows him, but Rosa stops her.

**ACT TWO.** On the train, Ava and Rosa reluctantly begin to talk to each other. Rosa shares her bread with Ava and tells her about the food her mother used to make. Rosa's heartache turns into an intense daydream. But the happy memories fade and turn into a painful flashback of what had happened when

Rosa became separated from her family. Her brother Josef and mother Elisabeth forced Rosa to hide in a cupboard at home while they tried to escape from the Nazis.

When Rosa wakes up, she is filled with sadness and grief. Ava tries to console her, but Rosa pushes her away. She does not want any help, and she tells Ava that she will never find Teo.

At dawn, Ava dreams that she is looking for Teo, asking everyone she comes across about him. Those who survived the war and Auschwitz pay no attention to her. Ava is surrounded by the dead. Several step forward to recount their story, asking to be remembered.

Ava wakes up when Rosa shakes her. Ava no longer feels strong enough to continue to look for Teo, but Rosa tells her she must, and offers to help. Ava falls asleep, dreaming of Teo.

Finally, Ava arrives at her destination. She manages to locate Teo. He is half dead and refuses to believe that the person talking to him is his wife. He has given up hope. He does not even want to look at her. He only wants to die. Ava's desperate attempts are in vain. But when she finally sings about her love for him, he opens his eye, and sees his beloved Ava.

**EPILOGUE.** Ava, Teo and Rosa walk with a group of adults and children, dead and alive. They speak about how we all come out of a bottomless well. Each drop holds the entire ocean, and every human all of humanity.

*Source: Royal Swedish Opera*

## B. The Passenger

The opera is set on two levels: the upper level depicts the deck of an ocean liner after the Second World War where a German couple, Liese and Walter (a West German diplomat on his way with his new wife to a new diplomatic posting), are sailing to Brazil. The wife, Liese, thinks she recognises a Polish woman on board, Marta, as a former inmate of Auschwitz concentration camp where she, unknown to her husband, was a camp guard. The second lower level develops below the liner deck, depicting the concentration camp. The opera is an interplay between the two levels.

**ACT ONE.** Walter and his wife Liese are on their way to a new life in Brazil where Walter will take up a diplomatic post. During the journey, Liese is struck by the appearance of a passenger she sees indistinctly. The passenger reminds her of an inmate in Auschwitz who was under her orders and who she knows for certain is dead. In shock, she reveals her hitherto undisclosed wartime past to her husband.

In the concentration camp, Liese and her superior overseer discuss the need to manipulate prisoners and find one amongst each group who can be manipulated to lead the others easily. The male officers drink and sing about how there is nothing to do but how they are less likely to die than fighting on the front against the Russians.

The women of the camp are introduced and each tells of their background and origins. A Russian woman is brought in having been beaten and tortured and the Kapo in charge discovers a note which may cost her her life. Marta is selected by Liese to translate it, but deliberately makes it out to be a love letter from her partner Tadeusz, with whom she had been deported to the camp, but who she has not seen these past two years. Liese believes the subterfuge. As the scene closes Liese and Walter are seen on the boat in the present time trying to come to terms with Liese's newly uncovered past.

**ACT TWO.** Belongings of murdered prisoners are being sorted by the women when an officer arrives to demand a violin so that the Kommandant may have his favourite waltz rendered to him by a prisoner. The prisoner Tadeusz is sent to collect the violin and arrives to discover his fiancée Marta there. Their reunion is overseen by Liese who decides to try and manipulate their relationship so that she may more easily control Marta for her own purposes so as to extend control over all the women prisoners.

Tadeusz is in his prison workshop fashioning jewellery for the officers' private demands. In a pile of his sketches, Liese recognises the face of Marta. Liese tries to get Tadeusz to do her bidding also, but seeing that this would leave him indebted to Liese, he declines, although this will now cost him his life.

It is Marta's birthday and she sings a lengthy aria to Death itself. Liese tells Marta that Tadeusz refused her offer and that it will cost him dear, but Marta understands Tadeusz's stance. The women prisoners sing about what they will do when they return home after the war, although it is clear that this will not happen. There is a death-house selection, and the women are all led away as their numbers are called. Marta resignedly follows although she has not been selected for death. Liese stops her from joining the others and taunts her that her time will come shortly so there is no need to hurry. Liese's final taunt is that she will live to see Tadeusz's final concert before he is too sent to the death-house as a result of her report.

In the present time on the boat, Walter and Liese are still unsure as to whether the mystery woman whose appearance has so upset Liese is really Marta. The porter Liese earlier bribed to discover the woman's identity only revealed that she was British. He now returns to add that although she is travelling on a British passport, she is not English and is on deck reading a Polish book. Walter offers to confront the mystery woman to set Liese's mind at rest before they both decide they are letting their minds run away with themselves. They both resolve to join the dancing in the salon. Liese dances whilst her husband talks to another passenger. The mystery woman is seen passing a play-request to the band leader. The band then play the same tune that was once the camp Kommandant's favourite waltz. This musical coincidence and the still unknown identity of the passenger further convinces Liese that Marta is somehow alive and on the boat. Liese is reduced to terror and shrinks from sight of the mystery passenger retreating from her down the stairs of the liner into the horrors of Tadeusz's final moments.

Tadeusz is dragged before the Kommandant to provide him with his favourite waltz music. Instead he plays the *Chaconne* from Bach's *Partita for Violin No. 2*, making a defiant musical protest. Thus he deprives Liese of her plan to have him executed via her report and deprives the Kommandant of his illusion that he can force people to play him his favourite music under pain of death. Tadeusz seals his

own fate and, his violin being smashed, he is dragged off to his death. All the while, Liese observes the scene whilst still in her ballgown.

**EPILOGUE.** The stage becomes completely empty apart from Liese still in her ballgown who slumps down sitting to the rear silently. Marta enters. She is observed to be wearing non-prisoncamp clothing and with her hair unshaven. She sings that the dead should never be forgotten and they can never forgive. Liese can only observe, unable to have Marta change her attitude and provide her the closure she craves. The scene fades away musically as does the light and the opera ends very quietly in total darkness.

At no point in the opera is the mystery woman on the boat confirmed as Marta nor does Liese or anyone ever interact with her on the boat. Liese's certainty that Marta died in the camp is never contradicted. The final scene, which is designed to be ambiguous, gives no indication as to whether or not Marta survives.

*Source: Wikipedia*

## C. La Juive

*Constance, 1414*

**Before the opera begins.** When he was young, the Jew 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 which turned out to be the home of the Count. Bandits had set fire to the house, attempting to kill the entire family of Brogni but unaware that the Count himself was in Rome at the time. Eléazar took the child, a girl, and raised her as his own daughter, naming her Rachel. Brogni discovered the ruins of his house and the bodies of his family upon his return. He subsequently became a priest and later a cardinal. At the beginning of the opera, in 1414 Rachel (now a young woman) is living with her adopted father in the city of Constance. The forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund have defeated the Hussites, in battles where Prince Leopold has distinguished himself. The Council of Constance, convened by Antipope John XXIII, has been arranged to resolve Church matters. The Pope is represented there by Cardinal Gian Francesco Brogni, who was a historical personage. His part in the story of the opera is, however, entirely fictional.

**ACT ONE.** *The main square of Constance.* Eléazar is a goldsmith. The crowd condemns him for working during a day dedicated to Church festivities. He is saved from a lynching by the arrival of Brogni, who in the process recognises Eléazar as his old adversary. Prince Léopold arrives in disguise as a young Jewish artist Samuel. Rachel is in love with Samuel and knows nothing of his true identity. Local laws reflect prejudice against the Jews: if a Jew and a Christian have sexual relations, the Christian is excommunicated and the Jew is killed. Léopold is thus taking a great risk in this affair, especially as he is

already married to the Princess Eudoxie. The crowd returns to attack Eléazar, but 'Samuel' secretly instructs his troops to calm things down. The act closes with a grand triumphal procession.

**ACT TWO.** *Inside the house of Eléazar.* Rachel has invited 'Samuel' for the Passover celebration in Eléazar's house. He is present while Eléazar and the other Jews sing their Passover prayers. Rachel becomes anxious when she notices that 'Samuel' refuses to eat the piece of unleavened bread that she has given him. He reveals to her that he is a Christian, without telling her his true identity. Rachel is horrified and reminds him of the terrible consequences of such a relationship. Princess Eudoxie enters to order from Eléazar a valuable jewel as a present for her husband, at which point Samuel (Prince Léopold) hides. After Eudoxie leaves, Léopold promises to take Rachel away with him. She tries to resist, worrying about abandoning her father, but as she is about to succumb to his advances, they are confronted by Eléazar, who curses Léopold before the latter runs off.

**ACT THREE.** *Magnificent gardens.* Rachel, who has followed 'Samuel' to the Palace, offers her services as a lady's maid to Princess Eudoxie. Eléazar arrives at the palace to deliver the jewel. He and Rachel recognise Léopold as 'Samuel'. Rachel declares before the assembly that Léopold seduced her and she, Eléazar and Léopold are arrested and placed in prison, on the instructions of Cardinal Brogni.

**ACT FOUR.** *A Gothic interior.* Princess Eudoxie asks to see Rachel in prison, and persuades her to withdraw her allegations. Rachel agrees; Cardinal Brogni agrees to commute Léopold's sentence, and to spare Rachel and Eléazar if they convert. Eléazar at first answers that he would rather die, but then makes plans to avenge himself. He reminds the Cardinal of the fire in his house near Rome many years before and tells the Cardinal that his infant daughter did not die. He says that she was saved by a Jew and that only he knows who he is. If he dies, his secret will die with him. Cardinal Brogni begs him to tell him where his daughter is, but in vain. Eléazar sings of the vengeance that he will have in dying, but he suddenly remembers that he will be responsible for the death of Rachel. The only way to save her is to admit that the Cardinal is her father and that she is not Jewish but Christian. The act ends with the opera's most famous aria, Eléazar's 'Rachel, quand du Seigneur'. He does not want to sacrifice Rachel to his hatred of Christians, and renounces his revenge. However, when he hears the cries from a pogrom in the streets, he decides that God wants him to bear witness in death with his daughter to the God of Israel.

**ACT FIVE.** *A large tent supported by Gothic columns.* Eléazar and Rachel are brought to the gallows where they will be thrown into a cauldron of boiling water. Rachel is terrified. Eléazar explains that she can be saved if she converts to Christianity. She refuses and climbs to the gallows before him. As the people are singing various prayers, Cardinal Brogni asks Eléazar if his own daughter is still alive. Eléazar says that she is and when Cardinal Brogni asks where she can be found, Eléazar points to the cauldron, saying "There she is!" He then climbs to his own death while the Cardinal falls on his knees. The opera ends with a chorus of monks, soldiers and the people singing "We are avenged on the Jews!"

*Source: Wikipedia*