

CHIAROSCURO

A beautiful word from the Italian, “chiaroscuro” literally means “light dark” or “clear obscure.”

From Webster:

“the interplay of light and shadow”

“the interplay or contrast of dissimilar qualities”

“the quality of being veiled or partly in shadow”

It applies to both the opera double bill as a whole and the individual works on the program today. Princess *Iolanta* actually moves from darkness to light, while in *Bluebeard’s Castle*, there is a dramatic struggle between Judith’s desire to bring light to Bluebeard’s domain and the weight of darkness she finds there. *Iolanta* has a happy ending, while *Bluebeard* has at the least a shaded one.

Both stories originate in fairy tale. *Iolanta* is a straight-forward story with a happy ending and perhaps an allegorical subtext that love is a motivating and healing force. *Bluebeard* is more complicated and subject to more than one interpretation. It has been transformed from Perrault’s horror story in which Bluebeard really is “diabolical” and Judith is saved from death in the nick of time, into a 20th century parable of the soul or self. The librettist Béla Balázs had this to say:

At our worst we are all Bluebeards because we build our own ‘better world’ only by the usurpation of other men’s souls, whereas redemption can be achieved only through self-sacrificing love. The castle of Bluebeard is a symbol for the closed soul. When Judith recognizes the secret of Bluebeard’s soul and his greatness, it is too late: the magic circle closes and she too becomes a prisoner of the castle.

quoted in Martin, George, Twentieth Century Opera, A Guide, p.276

What is Bluebeard’s “greatness?” Why is it “too late?” What “magic circle?” Even the explanation is obscure (at least to me.)

(Continued Over)

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Some further ideas:

the castle as Bluebeard's unconscious or subconscious, which Judith seeks to probe, violating the limits of legitimate privacy

the relationship as an allegory of the search for intimacy;

the castle as a symbol of Bluebeard's unconscious: the well-spring of the artist's creativity, which must remain whole, untouched by illumination or rationality;

the failure of 20th century humankind to overcome alienation and the consequent loneliness of each individual.

I leave you to ruminate.

Like some other 20th century composers, e.g. Leoš Janáček, Bartók became interested in folksong, which he sought out in remote places of his native Hungary, Eastern Europe, Turkey and North Africa, and recorded. In the words of Alex Ross (*The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, p.83): "He came to understand rural music as a sort of archaic avant-garde, through which he could avoid all banality and convention." There are features of these folk songs in the opera, such as the decorated first beat; a sharpened fourth note, producing the interval C-F#; and the libretto itself, which is modeled by Balázs on octosyllabic peasant verse.

- Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester