



# TWENTIETH CENTURY OPERA (IT'S BETTER THAN YOU THINK)

A PRESENTATION OF THE MERCURY OPERA  
GUILD

Carol Crocca c 2011



## The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester

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## INTRODUCTION

Scope

Did everything change?

Current repertory

At the Met: 15 out of 203

Roots: *Verismo*, Wagner

## The First Decade

Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams

Einstein's Theory of Relativity

Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)

The Wright brothers' first flight

Marconi invents the telegraph

Henry Ford founds his company

Leon Trotsky begins publishing Pravda

## The Twentieth Century Scene

Under the Radar

Over 600 20<sup>th</sup> Century premieres

The Twentieth Century Dilemma

Symbolism

Eclecticism

Expressionism

Nationalism

Naturalism

Realism

Atonality

Neo-classicism

Serialism

## SYMBOLISM: *Pelleas et Melisande*

Paris, 1902

CLAUDE DEBUSSY, 1862-1918

“Like the Impressionist painters of his time, he paints in pure colors, though with a delicate sobriety.”

R. Rolland, quoted in Ticket to the Opera, p.285, see bib.

The expression of emotional and psychological states rather than literal reality

Pelleas et Melisande,  
Deutsche Grammophon, 1992  
Orchestra and Chorus of the Welsh  
National Opera, Pierre Boulez, Conductor

Act III, scene i  
Alison Hagley, Melisande  
Neill Archer, Pelleas

SEX, VIOLENCE and PSYCHOANALYSIS  
SALOME, Dresden, 1905,

RICHARD STRAUSS, 1864-1949

Strauss on Salome (and Elektra, 1909):

"The two operas are unique in my life's work. In them I penetrated to the utmost limits of harmony, psychological polyphony ... and the receptivity of modern ears."

As quoted in The Story of Opera, see bib.

Marie Willich, soprano, on the Dance of the Seven Veils:

"I won't do it. I'm a respectable woman."

As quoted in The New Penguin Opera Guide, p. 889,

see bib.

Some other operas:

Der Rosenkavalier, Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Intermezzo, Arabella, Capriccio

Salome  
Deutsche Grammophon, 2007  
Vienna Philharmonic, Karl Bohm, Conductor

No. 21, 22  
Teresa Stratas, Salome

NATURALISM: JENUFA  
Brno, 1904 Prague, 1916

LEOS JANACEK, 1854 -1928

The “pre-urban” life

“The great thing is to gather new vigor in reality,  
without any preconceived plan or Parisian  
prejudice.”

Vincent Van Gogh

as quoted in The Rest is Noise, p. 78 see bib.

Other operas:

The Excursions of Mr. Broucek, Kat'a Kabanova,  
The Cunning Little Vixen, The Makropulos Case,  
From the House of the Dead

Jenufa

Kultur, 1989

The London Philharmonic  
Andrew Davis, Conductor

Act II, Ch. 14  
Roberta Alexander, Jenufa  
Anja Silja, Kostelnicka

Act III, Ch. 21 The Glyndebourne Chorus

Act III, Ch. 27  
Philip Langridge, Laca

ATONALITY and EXPRESSIONISM:  
ERWARTUNG Prague, 1924

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG, 1874-1951

Letter to Busoni: "Art belongs to the *unconscious!*  
One must express *oneself!* Express oneself  
*directly!*

Letter to Kandinsky: "I strive for complete liberation  
from all forms, from all symbols of cohesion and  
logic."

as quoted in The Rest is Noise, p. 57, see bib.

Other operas:

Die gluckliche Hand, Moses und Aron

## Erwartung, (Expectancy) scene 3

Phillips, 1993, Jessye Norman, soprano  
The Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, James Levine, Conductor

Along a dark path in the wood, a band of moonlight falls on a clearing with tall grass, ferns, and big yellow toadstools. The woman emerges from the darkness.

There's a light ...Ah, only the moon... how good that is...  
(again, rather anxiously)

Something black is dancing there...a hundred hands...

(controlling herself) Don't be silly...it's the shadow...

(musing tenderly) Oh! How your shadow falls on the white walls...but you had to leave so soon...

(a rustling) (she stops, looks around her and listens for a moment)

Are you calling? (dreamily again) And it's so long until evening...

(a light gust of wind – she looks round again)

But the shadow is crawling!...Large yellow eyes...

(in tones of terror) So protruding...as if on stalks...How it glares...

(a rustle in the grass) (terrified)

Not an animal, dear God, not an animal...I'm so frightened...

Darling, my darling, help me...

## SERIALISM: Moses und Aron

Zurich 1957

A more orderly way of composing

“Art is from the outset naturally not for the people...”

Schoenberg, 1928, as quoted in The Rest is Noise,  
p. 198, see bib.

“These intervals will always shake the air. They will never become second nature. That is their power and their fate.”

Alex Ross, The Rest is Noise, p. 35, see bib.

Moses und Aron  
EuroArts, 2009  
ChorWerk Ruhr, Bochumer Symphoniker  
Michael Boder, Conductor

Act II, scene 5  
Dale Duesing, Moses  
Andreas Conrad, Aron

EXPRESSIONISM II: Wozzeck  
Berlin 1925

ALBAN BERG 1885 – 1935

“There is a bit of me in [Wozzeck’s] character since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact, humiliated.”

Letter to his wife, 1918, as quoted in  
The Rest is Noise, p. 68, see bib.

Other opera: Lulu, 1979 (complete version)



Wozzeck  
Arthaus Musik, 1970  
The Hamburg Philharmonic State Orchestra  
Bruno Moderna, Conductor

Act I, scene i,  
Toni Blankenheim, Wozzeck  
Gerhard Unger, The Captain

Act III, scene ii  
Sena Jurinac, Marie

NATURALISM II:  
The Cunning Little Vixen  
Brno, 1924

LEOS JANACEK, composer of Jenufa

- “You must play this for me when I die.”  
as quoted in The Rest is Noise, p.115, see bib.

Opus Arte, 2003  
Deutsche Synphonie-Orchester, Berlin  
Kent Nagano, Conductor  
Geoff Dunbar, Director  
The European Opera Center

## ECLECTICISM:

### Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, Leningrad, 1934

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH 1906 – 1975

“I wanted to unmask reality and to arouse a feeling of hatred for the tyrannical and humiliating atmosphere in a Russian merchant’s household.”

Shostakovich, as quoted in The Rest Is Noise, p. 226, see bib.

“Is its success abroad not explained by the fact that it tickles the perverted bourgeois taste with its fidgety, screaming, neurotic music?”

Pravda, 28 January 1936

Other operas: The Nose, The Gambler (unfinished)

### Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk

Opus Arte, 2006

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Mariss Jansons, Musical Director

Act I, scene i

Eva-Maria Westbroek, Katerina

**NATIONALISM: War and Peace**  
Moscow, 1944 (concert); 1959 (staged)

SERGEI PROKOFIEV 1891 – 1953

“I am prepared to accept the failure of any of my works, but if you only knew how much I want War and Peace to see the light of day!”

Prokofiev to a friend, 1947

as quoted in The Rest Is Noise, p. 254, see bib.

Other operas:

The Gambler, The Love for Three Oranges,  
The Fiery Angel, Semyon Kotko, Betrothal in a Monastery, The Story of a Real Man

**War and Peace**

Arthaus Musik, 2009  
Opera National de Paris  
Gary Bertini, Conductor

Part I, Peace, scene vi

Olga Guryakov, Natasha  
Elena Obraztsova, Maria, her aunt

Part II, War, scene x

Anatoli Kotcherga, Marshal Kutuzov  
Scene xi, the people of Moscow  
Chorus

## REALISM: PETER GRIMES LONDON, 1945

BENJAMIN BRITTEN 1913 – 1976

“I believe in roots, in associations, in backgrounds, in personal relationships. I want my music to be of use to people, to please them...I do not write for posterity.”  
speech, Aspen, Colorado, 1964

Other operas:

The Rape of Lucretia, Albert Herring,  
Billy Budd, Gloriana, The Turn of the Screw,  
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Owen Wingrave,  
Death in Venice

## Peter Grimes Kultur, 1981 The Royal Opera, Covent Garden Colin Davis, Conductor

Prologue, Jon Vickers, Peter Grimes  
Heather Harper, Ellen Orford  
Act III, Heather Harper

## NEOCLASSICISM: The Rake's Progress Venice, 1951

IGOR STRAVINSKY 1882-1971

"I find qualified justification in the methods of old opera by which the atmosphere generated by the dramatic movement of a scene is concentrated in a single, closed piece (the aria)."

Ferruccio Busoni,  
Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music, 1916

Other operas:

The Nightingale, Mavra, Oedipus Rex, and ?

## The Rake's Progress Arthaus Musik, 1975 The London Philharmonic Orchestra Bernard Haitink, Conductor

Act I, scene I  
Leo Goeke, Tom Rakewell

Act I, scene iii  
Felicity Lott, Anne Trulove

Act III, scene ii  
Samuel Ramey, Nick Shadow

American Opera: Porgy and Bess  
George Gershwin 1934

EMI Classics, 2001  
The London Philharmonic  
Simon Rattle, Conductor  
Act I, scene ii  
Cynthia Clarey as Serena

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