

## **History Presented in Opera as seen through the eyes of the 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

**Agneta D. Borgstedt  
The Guild of Mercury Opera Rochester**

### **History presented in Opera Introduction to Historical Thoughts**

- **Friedrich Nietzsche complained in *The Use and Abuse of History* that "his" Century was infatuated with History.**
- **In contrast, the preceding Centuries of the Age of Enlightenment dealt with moral "ideas of Reason and Nature".**
  - **Voltaire in his *Philosophical Letters* addressed civilization according to timeless and universal judgment: things were either reasonable or if they were not, they should be changed.**
- **After the French Revolution the German Historian and Philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1822-23) introduced the concept that history evolves according to a particular "dialectic": Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis.**

## Introduction to Historical Thoughts

- This occurred through a process in which forward movements of events regularly were interrupted by reversal of events and this led finally to something new.
- Hegel also drew attention to "Historical Heroes".
- "The Historical Hero" worked for the public end in contrast what he called "historical victims" who lived not for greatness but for happiness. If events frustrated their happiness they considered their life a failure.
- The Hegelian idea of the Historical Hero was further developed by the Scottish writer and historian Thomas Carlyle in 1840 who considered "History the Biography of Great Men". (Quoted from Paul Robinson's book *Operas and Ideas* page 127.)

## Introduction to Historical Thoughts

- The German historian Heinrich von Treitschke at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century developed these ideas further.
- The American historian, music and opera lover Paul Robinson in 1985 published a book, *Opera and Ideas* that gave me the idea for this lecture.
- I will present to you scenes of 8 Operas where these historical ideas are expressed.

**Les Troyens (The Trojans)**  
Music and Libretto by Hector Berlioz  
based on Virgil's *Aenid*. Part II premiered 1863

- The 5 act (2 part) opera deals with the familiar story of the fall of Troy. In "La Prise de Troie" (first 2 acts), the spirit of Hector gives Aeneas the order to rescue the remnants of the Trojan army and sail to form a new empire in Italy. This is the thesis of the events.
- The next 3 acts: "Les Troyens a Carthage" deal with the interruption of Aeneas's journey in Carthage where he falls in love with Queen Dido and temporarily forgets his calling but is reminded by the ghosts of the Trojan heroes that his historical purpose is the founding of an empire in Italy. This is the antithesis. These forces propel him back on his course to leave for Italy.

**Les Troyens**

- Aeneas is the "Historical Hero". Dido, the lovelorn Queen is the "Historical Victim" who ends her life on the pyre.
- The Trojan March in the minor mode is heard when the Greek horse is brought into the city which moves the events to their destruction in the finale of the second act with Cassandra lamenting the demise of Troy.
- In the finale of the 5<sup>th</sup> act after Aeneas tears himself from the unhappy Dido and the Trojans set part to sail for Italy, the March is heard in the Major triumphant mode.
- The choruses of the Trojans and the Carthaginians play an important part in moving the action forward and are part of the drama.
- The new empire in Italy is the new event: the synthesis.

## **Les Troyens**

- **You will hear in succession part of the finales of Part I and Part II of the Troyens.**
- Cut 14 and 15 (No 11), Cut 48 (No 44)**

## **Boris Godunov 1874 version**

**Music and Libretto by Modest Mussorgsky  
based on Alexander Pushkin's drama and the  
History of the Russian Empire by Nicolai Karamzin**

- **After the death of Tsar Ivan IV (the Terrible) in 1584, Boris Godunov became the regent of the feeble son Fyodor I who died in 1598, the last of the Ryurik Dynasty. Ivan's other son Dmitri died of mysterious circumstances in a monastery, allegedly on Boris Godunov's orders. This has not been historically proven.**
- **Boris is crowned Tsar in the Prologue of the Opera. This is a lavish celebration and presented in the opera as a celebration of a historical ruler.**

## **Boris Godunov**

- **After a false pretender appears in 1605, Boris who in a sense was a "Historical Hero" now also becomes a victim of his past.**
- **After Boris's death, the second false pretender is captured and executed in 1612, the Romanov's came to the Russian throne in 1613.**
- **The beginning of the opera with the lavish crowning of Boris is the thesis, followed by the destruction of the "Historical Hero" as anti thesis and eventually leads to the beginning of a new dynasty of the Romanov's whose most celebrated representative is Tsar Peter the Great.**

## **Boris Godunov**

- **You will hear part of the prologue with the Cathedral scene which also emphasizes the role of the Russian people who are part of the forward movement of the events in the opera.**

**Prologue: chapter 3**

### **Simon Boccanegra 1874 version**

**Music by Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Francesco Piave and Arigo Boito**

- The 19<sup>th</sup> Century historians contemplated the causes and effects of revolutions. The American revolution of 1776, the French revolution of 1789 and the failed revolution of 1848, taking place throughout the countries of the European continent, left deep impressions on their minds.
- Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* is what Shakespeare called a history as well as a human and political drama.
- The story is set in Genoa in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. The common people, the plebeians are revolting against the mighty patricians represented by Fiesco Fieschi.
- In the Prologue Paolo and Pietro incite the plebeians to revolt and to elect Simon Boccanegra, a pirate as Doge.

### **Simon Boccanegra**

- Simon loved Fiesco's daughter Maria with whom he had an illegitimate daughter. The heart broken Simon agrees to be elected Doge after he is confronted with Maria's death and her unforgiving father.
- At the end of the Prologue the plebeians topple the patrician statue in the square of the patrician's Fieschi's palace as the symbol of their successful revolt. This is the beginning of Hegel's thesis.
- The reign of Simon Boccanegra shows the corruption of power and the development of forces counter to him as the Doge: the anti thesis
- A love story is interwoven through the political drama.

## **Simon Boccanegra**

- **Simon rediscovers his lost daughter Amelia; he dies poisoned by Paolo who is bitter that the Doge does not give his daughter to him in marriage.**
- **In Italian History of that period the strife between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines is often part of the drama.**
- **At the end the dying Doge gives his blessing to Amelia's love Gabriele Adorno who once opposed him and was accused of conspiring with the Guelphs. Simon declares Gabriele Adorno Doge of Genoa. A new chapter of Genoa's history starts, representing the synthesis of the previous events.**
- **You will see the part of the Prologue of the plebeians revolt.**

## **Andrea Chenier premiered 1896**

**Music by Umberto Giordano, libretto by Luigi Illica**

- **The French revolution was the result of the peasants in the country and the simple workers in the cities who rose against the aristocracy and the king who lived in luxury with little sympathy for their less fortunate fellow men.**
- **The writings of the forward thinking philosophers and playwrights of the Age of Enlightenment such as Montesquieu and Beaumarchais pointed out the societal ills of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century which fuelled the forces that led to the French revolution.**
- **Andrea Chenier was a poet on the side of the suffering populace. His fictionalized life is telling the initially justified forces leading to the revolution and the bloody abuses under Robespierre which eventually led to the rise of Napoleon.**

## Andrea Chenier

- **Andrea's love story with Contessa Maddalena de Coigny and their fate that leads to their death on the Guillotine as a victim is part of the political drama of the revolution.**
- **Another revolutioner is the Valet Gerard in the household of Maddalena's mother La Contessa de Coigny. Gerard leads a crowd of beggars into La Contessa's lavish party and points out the societal injustice, calling it slavery. He leaves to join the Revolution.**
- **Gerard as high ranking official of the revolution has doubts about the bloody motives of Robespierre's regime. Even though he loves Maddalena as well, he helps Andrea Chenier, though unsuccessfully in Chenier's tribunal.**

## Andrea Chenier

- **Gerard makes it possible that Chenier and Maddalena can die together. His action contribute to the many divergent forces within the Revolution.**
- **The suffering of the people is the Hegelian thesis which is counter acted by the abuses of the revolution which in tern represents the anti thesis. The eventual rise of new events: the rise of Napoleon represent the synthesis.**
- **You will hear in succession Gerard's call to revolution as servant in the first Act Chapter 7, followed by Gerard's monologue expressing his doubts about the direction the revolution has taken in Act III Chapter 20.**



### **War and Peace, Russian Premiere 1955**

Music by Sergei Prokofiev, libretto by composer and Mira Mendelson-Prokofiev after the epic novel by Leo Tolstoy

- The French invasion of Russia under Napoleon Bonaparte in 1812 was a catalyst for the National awakening of the Russian people.
- During the battle of Borodino, the Russian Field-Marshal Prince Mikhail Kutusov and his generals finally decide the Russian army has to withdraw and sacrifice Moscow.
- The French army takes Moscow and ransacks the city. Citizens of Moscow start a fire and burn their city in defiance of the French army.
- Here you witness a chain of historical events leading from the French revolution, the reign of terror to first the French republic, then Napoleon elevating himself to French Emperor (this abolished the Holy Roman Emperor) followed by the Napoleonic wars

### **War and Peace**

- These events were leading to the national awakening of the different Continental populations.
  - Napoleon also represents for a period the "Historical Hero" seen with the eyes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century historians.
  - You will see the scene in Part two War and Peace the burning of Moscow, the looting French soldiers and the uprising of the citizens of Moscow.
- Disc 2, Chapter 14, scene 11 "Maskva pusta", stop when the French soldiers point rifles at the Russian population.  
The real "Historical Heroes" are the Russian people.

### **Maria Stuarda, Premiere 1834**

**Music by Gaetano Donizetti, libretto by the composer and G. Bardari after a play by Friedrich von Schiller**

- **Friedrich von Schiller took historical liberties to achieve the dramatic effects of his plays.**
- **Felice Romani was not available as a librettist. Donizetti had read Schiller's play in the translation by Andrea Maffei. Donizetti and Bardari followed the structure of Schiller's play.**
- **The central part of the opera and the play is the meeting of the Scottish Queen Maria Stuart (in Italian Stuarda) and her cousin the English Queen Elisabeth I.**
- **The two Queens never met in real life.**
- **The Earl of Leister, Elisabeth's favorite is in love with the unhappy Scottish Queen in the play and the opera.**

### **Maria Stuarda**

- **In 1588 both Queens were advancing in age, but Schiller and Donizetti render them young again.**

**You will see the dramatic confrontation of the Queens.**

**Act 2, Chapter 26.**

### **La Fanciulla del West, Premiere 1910**

**Music by Giacomo Puccini, libretto by Guelfo Cimini and Carlo Zangarini after a play by David Belasco**

- **History is not just about wars, famous leaders of a country or community but also about different cultures and the lives of the common people.**
- **This opera deals with the harsh life of the miners in the gold mines of California in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.**
- **When gold was discovered in California desperate as well as entrepreneurial men came from the East to mine the gold. They lived in camps, socialized in saloons. Gambling and drinking was common. They were lonely and longed for their family back East who they tried to support.**
- **Bandits took advantage of them and they had to defend themselves. They had their own code of justice.**

### **La Fanciulla del West**

- **The miners often elected one of them as sheriff to enforce law.**
  - **In the midst of so much misery and hardship there were good human beings who tried to improve the miner's lives like Minnie, the Saloon keeper, and miners who looked out for each other.**
  - **David Belasco told the story of the miners of the American Wild West in a play that Puccini saw in London. The opera is based on the play and the miner's lives and the stereo typed view of the Indians are seen through Puccini's eyes.**
  - **The beginning of the Opera shows the miners harsh life.**
- Act 1, Chapter 3 and 4 " American Frontier Life in a Saloon"**

## **Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg**

**Music and libretto by Richard Wagner**

- **The 16<sup>th</sup> Century was the beginning of the rapid development of the bourgeoisie in Europe. They took their place increasingly in the emerging social structure of the towns.**
- **Citizens of different trades were united in Guilds. Members of these looked out for each other and furthered their trades.**
- **The Fuggers in Augsburg in Germany were the bankers not just to the increasingly wealthy citizens of the towns but also to the emperor.**
- **The different Guilds were also the center of the artistic cultural life, furthering music, poetry and paintings.**

## **Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg**

- **In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century one of these masters of the Cobbler Guild Hans Sachs was particularly famous for his songs.**
- **With the slow decline of the fortunes of the aristocracy, some of their members sought a new life in the towns.**
- **Richard Wagner's opera: "The master singers of Nuernberg" deals with a fictitious episode in Hans Sachs's life. Eva, the daughter of the goldsmith Veit Pogner, will be the bride of the winner of the "master song" (Preislied). She is in love with the knight Walter von Stolzing who wins her with the help of Hans Sachs.**
- **They represent the new social structure of the town of Nuernberg.**

## **Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg**

- **Richard Wagner also sees the Guilds and their masters as representatives of the German culture with the eyes of the new National awareness of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German population.**
- **In the Finale Hans Sachs warns the citizens and the young couple not to forget the masters who are the bearers of the cultural life.**
- **You will hear Hans Saschs's monologue: "Verachtet mir die Meister nicht" (don't look down on the masters)**

**Disc 2, Act III, Chapter 22**

- **History has many stories to tell and many heroes, good and bad. It is not always accurately presented in opera, but always a good drama.**