PART TWO

Trends

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4 Words and actions

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Subject-matter in twentieth-century opera has been shaped by influences as divergent as psychoanalysis, the cinema and television, the preference of many composers for chamber opera, the abandonment of verse or rhymed texts as the standard libretto, and an ironic scrutiny of the form of opera itself. 'Can I find [an ending] that is not trivial?', the Countess asks at the close of Strauss's last opera, *Capriccio* (1942). The problem of triviality confronted many composers after Wagner, whose music-dramas appeared as the pinnacle of operatic development. In the new century it was questionable whether opera as a viable art-form had not been consumed alongside Tristan and Isolde in the passion of the 'Liebestod', or the Teutonic gods in the fiery collapse of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

One solution was to make triviality itself into an operatic subject, as Křenek so successfully did with his *Zeitoper*, *Jonny spielt auf* (1927), which closes with the image of the black jazz violinist Jonny fiddling astride the globe. Another was to absorb Wagner's musical techniques and dramatic ideals into nationally inflected works: Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) owes much to Wagner, but its speech-melody closely resembles the contours of spoken French. A letter Debussy wrote to Ernest Chausson on 2 October 1893 shows how concerned he was to discover a Wagnerian element 'appearing in the corner of a bar' (Lesure and Nichols 1987, 54). One of the major props in his endeavour to avoid such Wagnerisms was Maeterlinck's symbolic text. Its verbal indirection allowed Debussy to set a *Tristan*-like plot as a story of alienation and incompleteness, not passion (Holloway 1979, 61, 68–9). The same evasiveness, it could be argued, helped distinguish Debussy's opera from *Parsifal*, not in terms of the opera's sound-world but because it avoids the Christian allegory of Wagner's last work. Dvořák's fairy opera *Rusalka* (1901), too, absorbed and transformed Wagnerian techniques. It tells the European legend of Undine or Melusine, but borrows characters from Czech legend and introduces folk-like elements into parts of the through-composed score. A third solution to Wagner was to ignore his music-dramas and the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and to rely instead on the alternative tradition of Verdi and number opera. *Verismo* opera first presented itself in Italy as a new direction, but was quickly taken up elsewhere, for example in France with Charpentier's *Louise* (1900) and in Bohemia amongst the younger generation of composers (Tyrrell 1988, 123).

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In understanding the influences shaping opera and operatic subjects in the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century, it is important to look beyond developments in music to other artistic forms. Literary and dramatic schools of thought, as well as new styles in painting and architecture, were important sources of change. Naturalism, a major contributor to *verismo*, was literary in origin; symbolism, which enters operatic history through works like *Pelléas* and Dukas' *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* (1907), was also first literary and dramatic. Working in opposition to the naturalism of Zola and the descriptive tendency of the Parnassian poets, the symbolists transformed Wagner's ideal of the organic art-work into a vehicle for poetic suggestiveness. The evasive, half-spoken quality in Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892) was precisely what attracted Debussy, as he explained in 1902 in his article 'Pourquoi j'ai écrit "Pelléas" ' (Debussy 1987, 62–4). Expressionism was another reaction against naturalism that began in literature and painting around the turn of the century and would likewise significantly shape twentieth-century opera. By the 1920s, expressionism's distorted, highly coloured depictions of human experience and perception had reached the operatic stage in the early works of Hindemith and Weill, as well as Berg's *Wozzeck*. The same decade saw a number of other solutions to the problems Wagner still presented. With Stravinsky's *Mavra* (1922) and Hindemith's *Cardillac* (1926), neo-classicism deliberately turned back to operatic techniques pre-dating Wagner, while the short-lived but influential *Zeitopern* of Křenek, Hindemith and Weill eschewed mythology for contemporary life: gramophones, telephones, cameras, even trains appeared in the stage action, accompanied by jazz tunes and dances reflecting the current craze for American music and culture.

Operatic subject-matter was further transformed from the turn of the century onwards by the new science of psychoanalysis. At times the influence was direct: Hugo von Hofmannsthal was reading Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria* when he wrote his play *Elektra*, the basis for Strauss's opera of 1909. More importantly, Freud's work became a pervasive influence on how the individual subject could be understood. Not only did inner psychological 'action' become a viable operatic subject, as in Bartók's only opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (first performed in 1918), but the reality of human experience had profoundly shifted away from psychological unity towards fragmentation, conflict and the emergence of the unconscious drives from repression. Works like Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909) and *Die glückliche Hand* (1910–13) – both given their first performances in 1924 – as well as his unfinished *Moses und Aron* (1930–32), Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) and *Lulu* (1928–35, first performed incomplete in 1937), and Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *Death in Venice* (1973) all suggest that the divided individual represented reality.

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Nevertheless, Wagner remained a potent presence, a predecessor who demanded at least acknowledgement if not obeisance. This was nowhere clearer than in the career of Richard Strauss, Germany's most prominent opera composer up to the middle of the century. Stefan Zweig, one of Strauss's librettists in the 1930s, reports the composer as saying, 'with a broad, Bavarian grin', that he had made a detour around Wagner rather than try to climb higher (1943, 279). But Strauss had in fact tried the Wagnerian route, in *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909) as well as the early failure *Guntram* (1894), for which, in direct emulation of Wagner, he wrote his own libretto. *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) represents the beginning of the Straussian detour. A comedy drawing on the format of number opera to represent the pathos and the farce of love and sexual desire, Strauss's and Hofmannsthal's Viennese period-piece is a deliberate step backwards, or sideways, from Wagner. The Strauss–Hofmannsthal works of the 1910s present a variety of solutions to the serious mythologizing of the legendary founder of the Bayreuth Festival. *Ariadne auf Naxos*, first performed in 1912 as the third act to Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* and later revised to be an independent piece, offers a delightfully ironic treatment of myth through the eruptions of *commedia dell'arte* characters into the tragedy of Ariadne, abandoned on Naxos by Theseus. In strong contrast to this deliberate trivialization of a legendary subject, *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919) presents an invented mythological world in which the empress must find a shadow in order to bear children, the only action that will prevent the emperor from turning to stone. Bizarre, densely symbolic, and at times inscrutable, Hofmannsthal's libretto is made credible by a score that provides motivic links between characters, symbols and scenes, and ultimately succeeds in humanizing the spirit empress. Later Strauss operas reproduce the themes of the earlier works: domestic and sentimental love in *Intermezzo* (1924), *Arabella* (1933) and the comedy *Die schweigsame Frau* (1935), and a series of reworked classical myths in *Die ägyptische Helena* (1928), *Daphne* (1938) and *Die Liebe der Danae* (1938–40, first performed in 1952). The 'conversation-piece with music', *Capriccio* (1942), refines the pathos and farce of *Der Rosenkavalier* into a work of sustained musical and verbal wit, leaving the question of trivial endings unanswered.

Sexuality

What is not reproduced in Strauss's operas after 1911 is the grotesque sexuality of *Salome* and *Elektra*. The subject-matter (if not the scores) of this pair of operas shares with the late nineteenth century a fascination

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with the figure of the castrating woman, as well as growing interest in sexual complexes and neuroses (see Kramer 1990 and Tambling 1996, 161–85). However, Salome's kissing the head of Jochanaan and Elektra's invoking the name of Agamemnon in an incestuous obsession with the father also initiate a characteristically twentieth-century fascination with sexuality, both in its sordid and its redemptive aspects. Sexual jealousy disfigures the lives of the characters in Janáček's *Jenůfa* (1904), both literally (Laca's slashing Jenůfa's face in Act I) and metaphorically, when the Kostelnička drowns Jenůfa's illegitimate child, an act for which she later forfeits her own freedom and subsequently her life. Such jealousy also emerges in murderous form in the prisoners' narratives in Janáček's last opera, *From the House of the Dead* (1927–8, first performed in 1930). Sexual desire and brutality are also closely linked in the work of Puccini's that comes closest to the conventions of *verismo*: *Tosca* (1900). Sexual promiscuity plays a role in almost all of Puccini's works, from the buying of a Japanese wife in *Madama Butterfly* (1904, revised in 1906), to the demands of Jack Rance for Minnie's favours in *La fanciulla del West* (1910), and to Magda's reluctance to leave the demi-monde for a settled, but tedious, domesticity in *La rondine* (1917). In *Turandot* (1926), the opera in which Puccini finally turned his back on *verismo* for a fantastic orientalist fable, sexuality ironically plays a role by its very absence from the icy Chinese princess.

Selfless love or willing sacrifice of the kind Puccini popularized in the characters of Mimì, Cio-Cio-San, Liù and others was always in tension, however, with the early Straussian heroines, the forebears of some important evocations of femininity as inherently sexual. The title role in Berg's *Lulu* embodies an endlessly enticing but elusive, even empty, femininity that is finally brought to ground by Jack the Ripper. Her changeability is signalled by the many names men give her: Eve, Nelly, Mignon, Lulu. The only character to love Lulu, rather than wish to possess her, is the Countess Geschwitz, the first portrayal of lesbianism on the operatic stage. Homosexual desire was later explored more fully by Britten, covertly in *Peter Grimes* (1945), *Billy Budd* (1951) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), and more openly in *Death in Venice* (1973). Taken together, these operas present a 'homosexual vision' that is largely negative in some readings, but does contain redemptive moments (Brett 1983, 192). This pattern was picked up by Tippett in *The Knot Garden* (1970), where both gay and straight relationships become tangled in psychological destruction before provisional solutions are reached. Tippett's earlier opera, *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), recounts the quest for sexual and spiritual wholeness with less hesitation, borrowing from Jungian psychology to do so.

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Less than a decade later, the Argentinian composer Alberto Ginastera produced the first of three operas that treat sexuality as a central, and violent, aspect of legend and history. *Don Rodrigo* (1964) tells the legend of the eighth-century King of Spain whose rape of his ward Florinda leads to his downfall and the country's invasion by the Moors, while *Beatrix Cenci* (1971) stages the sexual excesses of the Count whose rape of his daughter leads to his murder and the family's torture and execution. Ginastera's second opera, *Bomarzo* (1967), is based on a fictional account of the sixteenth-century nobleman Pier Francesco Orsini, whose sexual neuroses and fantasies are replayed through flashbacks. The opera's subjects – 'sex, violence and hallucination', as the composer described them – led to a municipal decree prohibiting performance in Buenos Aires, but the work proved highly successful at its Washington premiere (see *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 7–8 (1967), 293, and Urtubey 1968, 21). Sexual subject-matter caused a more prolonged controversy in Austria in 1980 when Gottfried von Einem's opera *Jesu Hochzeit* was due to be premiered in Orford Church in a double-bill with Britten's *The Prodigal Son* (1968). Einem's inclusion of a scene in which Christ has an erotic encounter with a female, Death, prevented performance in an ecclesiastical setting, and demonstrations came close to preventing the work's production at the Theater an der Wien. Clearly, then, sexuality remained a provocative topic throughout the century, simultaneously able to draw large audiences (as both *Salome* and *Elektra* did) and to engender controversy and occasionally censorship.

Mythology and neo-classicism

The attempt to control the body and bodily pleasures forms the subject of Hans Werner Henze's *The Bassarids* (1966), with a libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. Adapting the story of Pentheus and his attempt to control the new cult of Dionysus from Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, the opera shows how classical mythology continued to provide pertinent subjects for the modern age. Although early mythological operas like Ernest Chausson's *Le roi Arthus* (1903) inevitably owe a debt to Wagner, younger composers were able to distance themselves from his example. Stravinsky's 1928 opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, based on Sophocles, became an important model for a less fervent treatment of myth or legend. Jean Cocteau's French libretto was translated into Latin, a 'dead' language, in order to underscore the monumental nature of the drama. The interventions of the Speaker, who recounts the well-known story in the vernacular, create a further barrier between the action and the

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audience's emotional response. Stravinsky's statuesque work was followed in later decades by Carl Orff's series of classical operas, *Antigonae* (1949), *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959) and *Prometheus* (1968), the last using the original Greek of Aeschylus. The story of Antigone had earlier been set by Honegger, a year before Stravinsky's influential work, and also with a libretto by Cocteau. George Enescu, too, had considered dramatizing the Oedipus story as early as 1910: his four-act lyrical tragedy, *Oedipe*, was composed over the course of the 1920s and premiered in Paris in 1936.

The fascination in the interwar years with Greek stories in which the individual is pitted against the gods may derive from a modernist rejection of the recent past in favour of an older tradition, which offered an apparent sense of timelessness. Paradoxically, the problem for many modern artists was an acute awareness of history that prevented any sense of working within a living tradition. Nowhere was the irony of modernism more consciously articulated than in the works of Stravinsky after *Pulcinella* (1920), the piece that ushered in his long neo-classical period. The culmination of this body of works was *The Rake's Progress* (1951), the century's greatest neo-classical stage-work (see Chapter 7). Based on William Hogarth's series of eight paintings (1733–35) – housed in the Sir John Soane Museum in London – and with a libretto by Auden and Kallman, the opera presents its tale of moral failings and redemption through a sustained pastiche of both eighteenth-century verse (see Mendelson 1993, 606, 615) and Mozartian musical forms. The type of story itself – a morality – along with period touches like the mock pastoral of the opening scenes, further 'dates' the opera to Hogarth's time. This thorough stylization in the artistic and aesthetic dress of another age might well have prevented *The Rake* from entering the repertoire, were it not for the equally emphatic twentieth-century elements. First, the irony (if not the wit) of the enterprise is wholly un-Mozartian, underlining the 'neo' of the work's classicism. In the second place, many aspects of the drama have a contemporary resonance. Nick Shadow's false-bottomed machine for turning stones into bread satirizes modern enterprise and commercial know-how, while Sellem's auction provides a sharply funny commentary on greed and complacency, the very things that have led Tom Rakewell into his devilish predicament in the first place. Even the ambiguous sexuality of Baba the Turk marks the opera as belonging to Auden's, not Hogarth's, time. Finally, and most importantly, the theme of redemption through love might be seen as a response, though not a solution, to twentieth-century suffering. 'We must love one another or die', Auden wrote in his poem 'September 1, 1939' in New York on the eve of the Second World War. Later, he revised the line to read 'and die': so Tom/Adonis, having gained his Anne/Venus and lost his

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wits, loves and dies. Although the Bedlam scene is one of the few retained from Hogarth, Tom's madness strikes a distinctly contemporary note: in the modern economy of the emotions, love always comes at a price.

Nationalism and politics

The Rake's Progress is a decisively international work: premiered at La Fenice in Venice, with a Mozartian score by a Russian who had been naturalized first in France then in the USA, and a book devised by another naturalized American, the opera rejects in every possible way the nationalism of Stravinsky's great *bête noire*, Wagner. Yet nationalist topics did not cease to interest composers after 1900. Stravinsky's teacher in the early years of the century, Rimsky-Korsakov, produced the culmination of a long line of folkloric and nationalistic operas in his *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya* (1907). Arguably a more representative opera than Rimsky's *The Golden Cockerel* (1909), the love of Fevroniya and Vsevolod is depicted in spiritual and symbolic action influenced by Christian mysticism, pantheism and Russian folklore, and incorporating the history of the Mongol invasion of Russia in the thirteenth century. Prokofiev's epic *War and Peace* (1941–52) gives a more overtly patriotic account of nineteenth-century Russian history, especially in the second ('war') section. His adaptation of Tolstoy is the most important, and certainly the most extended, historical operatic project of the century. Far removed from the witty modernism of the same composer's *The Love for Three Oranges* (1921) or the dark sexual theme of *The Fiery Angel* (1919–27), *War and Peace* engages the listener on a number of levels, pyschological and historical, private and patriotic.

The fact that two of the century's more overtly nationalist operas are Russian raises the issue of how to define 'national' opera, a title often reserved for works composed and produced on the fringes of Western Europe (Russia, Bohemia) or in the New World. Ethan Mordden's definition of a 'national opera' as one that 'aims at a celebration of cultural ambitions' (1978, 167) provokes a re-evaluation: in this sense, not just works like Pfitzner's *Palestrina* (1917) or Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* (1947) qualify as national operas, but also the works of Strauss, Puccini, Janáček, Britten and Menotti, along with those of Rimsky-Korsakov and Prokofiev.

A similar difficulty accrues to the definition of political opera. In recent years, the term 'political' has shifted its meaning to include any work that is ideologically motivated, a definition that in its loosest interpretation might include all opera. For the purposes of this chapter, it is

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more helpful to restrict 'political' subject-matter either to themes drawn from historical rebellion, revolution or unrest; or to works that have deliberate designs on the listener, aiming to influence his or her values and beliefs. Examples of the second type can be found in a number of avant-garde works from the postwar period, especially in Italy. Giacomo Manzoni's *La sentenza* (1960) mixes musical and political radicalism, and was followed five years later by *Atomtod*, a work that provoked interventions from political and ecclesiastical authorities. Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*, as the title suggests, explored questions of political and social conscience through a collage of texts and images; his later *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (1975) was produced in collaboration with the Moscow theatre director Yuri Lyubimov, and incorporated material concerning the Paris Commune of 1871 and industrial unrest in 1950s Turin. Luigi Dallapiccola's *Il prigioniero*, first broadcast in 1949 and staged a year later, offers a symbolic – and pessimistic – treatment of liberty. Just before the Second World War in the United States, political and proletarian themes began to occupy Marc Blitzstein, in *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937) and *No For an Answer* (1936–40, first performed in 1941). In the late 1930s, Strauss also produced his only overtly political work, the pacifist opera *Friedenstag* which, ironically enough, was first endorsed by the Nazis as an embodiment of their principles before falling into disfavour. Ten years earlier, Brecht's and Weill's *Die Dreigroschenoper* had subjected bourgeois values to a remorseless irony, while less than a year after the Wall Street Crash their *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* criticized capitalism and greed through the techniques of Brechtian epic theatre.

More recently, Britten's television opera *Owen Wingrave* (1971) set out its composer's strongest dramatic statement of his pacifist convictions; six years later, David Blake's *Toussaint* adopted Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation technique) to depict events in Haiti during the independence movement led by the former black slave, Toussaint l'Ouverture (1746–1803). Alan Bush's *Wat Tyler* (1953), significantly staged in the newly formed German Democratic Republic rather than Britain, similarly turned to historical rebellion to make a political point. In a related vein, Rimsky's *The Golden Cockerel* and Boris Blacher's *Preussisches Märchen* (1949) both satirize militarism, a recurrent twentieth-century reality. The same issue was taken up with greater seriousness, but only partial success, in Henze's *We Come to the River* (1976), with a libretto by the left-wing playwright Edward Bond. 'Political' operas that are historical rather than ideological have also occupied a number of composers. They include Gottfried von Einem, whose *Dantons Tod* (1947) condenses the play by Georg Büchner (1813–37) into a compact

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drama on the French Revolution that also reflected the condition of post-war Europe; and John Adams, who has turned to contemporary political history and conflict in *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991). Philip Glass's *Satyagraha* (1980) draws on the history of Gandhi's peaceful protests in South Africa early in the century to explore the 'truth-force' of the opera's title in past, present and future.

Portraits

Satyagraha was the second of three stage works that Glass calls 'portrait operas'; it was followed by his portrayal of the Egyptian king Amenhotep IV in *Akhnaten* (1984), and preceded by *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), a seminal work in the American minimalist school. The historical figure of Albert Einstein is not portrayed in naturalistic action, but through a series of verbal signs and visual images representing his ideas and influence: chanted numbers and sol-fa syllables, trains and space-ships. Glass's collaboration with the experimental theatre director Robert Wilson thus pushes the idea of historical portraiture into new dramaturgical territory.

Earlier 'portrait operas' by Pfitzner and Hindemith were more conventional in their dramaturgy and, in the case of *Palestrina*, markedly more conservative. Pfitzner's reactionary opera dramatizes the life of the sixteenth-century Italian composer and his conflict with the Council of Trent in order to comment indirectly on musical modernism and political liberalism. Hindemith's ideological leanings are worked out in a more complex and compelling form in *Mathis der Maler*, composed in the early 1930s when Hitler came to power and produced – in neutral Zurich – in 1938. Based on the life of the painter Matthias Grünewald (?1480–1528) and his great Isenheim altarpiece (housed in the museum at Colmar, France), the opera explores the rôle of the artist in times of political turmoil. Hindemith's painter, who embodies the composer's own predicament as a German artist in the 1930s, first involves himself directly in the Peasant Revolt of 1525, but later comes to see that his art is a more appropriate response to human suffering.

An opera that takes legend rather than history as its starting-point also deserves mention under the heading of 'portrait operas': Ferruccio Busoni's *Doktor Faust* (1916–24, completed by Philipp Jarnach in 1925). Another exiled artist-figure, Faust discovers that when his magical powers are paid for with his soul, the marker of humanity, they ultimately prove as illusory as Helen of Troy. Yet the work ends, like Stravinsky's *Rake*, with the possibility of redemption: at Faust's demise, his dead child is reborn as a youth, and Mephistopheles gains Faust but not his aspirations: 'Was ich versäumte, / schöpfe du nach' ('What I neglected, you shall achieve', final scene).

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Literature and librettists

Busoni's source for *Doktor Faust* was, interestingly, not Goethe's tragedy but the puppet-play tradition dating back to the sixteenth century. *Literaturoper* ('literary opera'), however, forms an important category in twentieth-century opera, alongside historical and political, national, neo-classical, sexual and psychological concerns. The richness of works that adapt 'classic' texts without departing too far from the spirit or letter of the original can be seen in operas as different as Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) and Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960), both of which feature libretti prepared by the composers themselves.

Berg's opera is closely derived from Büchner's fragmentary drama *Woyzeck* (1837). Joseph Kerman has argued that the libretto for *Wozzeck*, like those for *Pelléas*, *Tosca* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, allowed the composer to set dialogue that was comparatively 'ordinary', closer to real speech than the conventionalized verse libretti of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1989, 179). While this is true, Büchner's text has an intensity that does not sound like naturalistic writing. The complex interplay of images of fire, knives, blood, stillness and movement combines to produce a dense poetic text, the starting-point for one of the most carefully structured operatic scores of the century. The close matching of mood, image and tone in the opera suggests that Berg's imagination was stimulated as much by the verbal textures of Büchner's play as by its enigmatic conversations or its quasi-cinematic cross-cutting.

The 'madness' of Britten's *Dream* is of a different order, but the opera is similarly enriched by Shakespeare's words, which were carefully retained by the composer and his co-librettist Peter Pears (see Cooke 1993). Although the number of lines is reduced by half, often by the loss of purely 'poetic' rather than narrative elements, the libretto retains the magical qualities of the moonlit 'nightrule' presided over by Oberon. Indeed, the only significant interpretative decision taken by Britten and Pears was to remove the Athenian first act and to open the opera with the quarrel of the fairy king and queen. The result is a stage-work in which the daylight 'reality' of Athens is framed by, suspended within, the world of dreams, night and fairyland. The common-sense interpretation advocated in the play by Theseus in his speech on lunatics, lovers and poets is not allowed to colour the opera's dramatic and musical world. The large-scale structural change does not prevent the opera from being recognisably the same drama, however.

Britten's insistence on fidelity to Shakespeare in the *Dream* is in contrast to Luciano Berio's *Un re in ascolto* (1984), an examination of the nature of perception and artistic creation. Here, the impresario Prospero (borrowed from *The Tempest* and various adaptations or

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commentaries on that play) is 'condemned to listen, waiting in the midst of some vast web of noises whose meaning must be grasped and interpreted' (Vogt 1990, 174). Shakespeare provides the point of departure for an opera whose metaphysical dimensions reflect postmodern concerns with communication and interpretation. Earlier in the century, Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Sir John in Love* (1929) might also be seen as a vehicle for the exploration of contemporary currents of thought. An adaptation of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a play that casts a satirical London eye on rural life, Vaughan Williams's lush opera instead reflects the composer's 'anti-urban, anti-industrial-age bias' (Schmidgall 1990, 326). Nevertheless, the composer's decision to interpolate contemporary lyrics (from other Shakespeare plays, as well as Jonson, Campion and Sidney) is 'thoroughly Shakespearean' (327).

Swiss composer Frank Martin deserves mention for his *Der Sturm* (1956), an operatic setting of A. W. von Schlegel's translation of *The Tempest*. Schlegel's early nineteenth-century translations of Shakespeare are themselves German literary classics, and Martin's libretto follows Schlegel/Shakespeare closely with only minor abridgement. The opera presents a convincing musical portrait of the magical island, its creatures and the magus himself, both irascible and forgiving, full of an elegiac sense of loss over his magical powers but finally redeemed by his restoration to ordinary humanity. Many other composers throughout the century also turned to Shakespeare as a source for operatic material, including Bloch (*Macbeth*, 1910), Holst (*At the Boar's Head*, 1925), Wolf-Ferrari (*Sly*, 1927), Boris Blacher (*Romeo und Julia*, 1947), Marcel Delannoy (*Puck*, 1949), Samuel Barber (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1966), Stephen Oliver (*Timon of Athens*, 1991) and Henze (*Venus and Adonis*, 1997). While Shakespeare has remained an important source of dramatic material since the operas of Verdi, even where the operas are adaptations rather than complete settings of the plays, other literary classics have likewise offered operatic material to twentieth-century composers. Manuel de Falla turned to Cervantes for a single episode from *Don Quixote* in *El retablo de Maese Pedro* (1923), Prokofiev to Dostoyevsky's novella *The Gambler* for an opera of the same name (1929) and Leonard Bernstein to Voltaire's satirical short story of 1759 for his musical *Candide* (1956), while Walton drew on Chaucer and Boccaccio for *Troilus and Cressida* (1954), Dallapiccola on Homer for *Ulisse* (1968) and Bruno Maderna on the Roman satire by Petronius for *Satyricon* (1973). (For further discussion of literary adaptations in the Soviet Union and United States, see Chapters 11 and 12 respectively.)

But the most thorough exploration of opera's capacity to transform literary texts into musico-dramatic works remains Britten's operatic

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oeuvre. From the sympathetic interpretation of the solitary fisherman Peter Grimes in George Crabbe's *The Borough* (1810) and the moral questioning onboard *The Indomitable* (renamed from the original *Bellipotent*) in the floating world of Melville's *Billy Budd* (1891, published 1924), to the unnerving Jamesian ghosts of *The Turn of the Screw* (published 1898) and finally to the encounter with beauty-mortality in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (published 1912), Britten simultaneously offered homage to literary figures and ushered their works into the rich fabric of a new form.

Britten worked with a number of librettists throughout his career, including Auden, E. M. Forster, Ronald Duncan, Montagu Slater, Eric Crozier, Myfanwy Piper and William Plomer. Many of them were writers in their own right, sometimes with strong dramatic ideas of their own; it may have been partly for this reason that Britten did not establish long working relationships with any of his librettists until later in his career. By contrast, Strauss established a fruitful relationship early on, one that produced some of his best-known works (*Der Rosenkavalier*, *Elektra, Arabella*) as well as more enigmatic operas like *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. The long working relationship between Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal remained the century's most important collaboration between a composer and writer. As Strauss discovered, Hofmannsthal needed careful handling, but his preference for solitude means that we are fortunate in having a large body of correspondence, at times written almost daily, charting the details of their collaborations from *Elektra* to *Arabella*, the libretto for which Hofmannsthal was drafting when he died in 1929. The letters offer a fascinating insight not just into two contrasting characters – Strauss good-humoured, even bluff, Hofmannsthal precise and cautious – but into the nature of operatic collaboration itself. 'Discussions of this sort, which show how each of us visualizes the joint work, are indispensable', Hofmannsthal writes on 25 May 1911 in reply to Strauss's detailed ideas for *Ariadne*: 'This is the only way to collaborate ... We must not merely work together, but actually *into each other's hands*' (Hammelmann and Osers 1961, 83; emphasis in original).

'Working into each other's hands' meant that Strauss took the final decisions on dramatic and stylistic matters, as well as initiating many of the changes during the process of drafting a libretto. But it also meant that Hofmannsthal had an unusually high degree of influence, not just over stylistic details, but dramatic structure and even the choice of subjects. It is striking that from the early days, the writer felt free to judge Strauss's enthusiasms and to veto any he found either boring or vulgar, as his letter of 1 October 1906 makes clear: 'I should like ... to explain to you my notions (fairly liberal as they are) of what I consider possible opera

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subjects and what, on the other hand, I consider absolutely out of the question nowadays' (9). Strauss's hopes of a 'Semiramis' opera based on Calderón came to nothing, though he was still putting the idea forward to his librettists in the 1930s, as did his enthusiasm in 1916 for either a realistic domestic comedy (which found fulfilment, without a Hofmannsthal text, in *Intermezzo*) or a spy intrigue set in Vienna during the Congress of 1814–15. Instead, he set *Ariadne* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, both ideas that originated with the writer.

Thus from *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne* to the symbolism of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* and finally the more sentimental *Arabella*, Hofmannsthal played a major role in shaping the types of opera Strauss produced. The librettist's choice of subjects, like his concern with their right interpretation (e.g. 'Even the musical, conceptual unity of the whole opera would suffer if the personality of the Marschallin were to be deprived of her full stature', 12 July 1910; 61) helped to shape what was in effect a nationwide operatic project in Germany during the first three decades of the century. Without Hofmannsthal, Strauss's joking threat to become 'the Offenbach of the 20th century' (5 June 1916; 250), a sentimental purveyor of operetta or Bavarian kitsch (see his letter to Stefan Zweig dated 21 January 1934 in Schuh 1957, 55), might have come more nearly into existence, in place of the fascinating and at times problematic series of mythological, sentimental and parodic operas we have. Strauss's need for the support Hofmannsthal gave him cannot be better gauged, finally, than by reading the composer's frustrated attempts to get Joseph Gregor to write workable librettos in the mid-1930s: 'Handlung und Rollen! Keine Gedanken! Keine Dichtung! Theater!' ('Action and character! No ideas! No poetry! Theatre!' (Tenschert 1955, 30)). At one time or another, Hofmannsthal had met these requirements.

Strauss's explosive prescription can stand for twentieth-century operatic texts as a whole. The words librettists have provided for composers to set, whatever their subject or their starting-point, whatever their tradition or their influences, can be judged successful only if they can be transformed into dramatic, and musical, action.

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