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Shakespeare as Opera in English:

Britten's *Dream* and Adès' *The Tempest*

Paper presented at: PCAS / ACAS Convention

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I want to make the case that we learn Shakespeare better when we study him against the adaptation. My undergraduate students are not necessarily expected to have a proficiency in classical music. Yet some of the dramaturgical and adaptation choices made by opera composers and librettists, then, especially--and on a further and highly creative remove from a scripted, scored adaptation --by stage designers in recent productions, provoke our abilities to critique a production concept for its innovative staging, and for what we learn about the original.

Verdi's *Macbeth*, *Falstaff*, and *Otello* rank as towering achievements. Though they may not be the centerpiece of Italian tragic-romantic opera, they do represent the subgenre well. France in the nineteenth century cannot be overlooked as a theatrical world entranced by adaptation of Shakespeare. The *Hamlet* by composer Ambroise Thomas, with a libretto in French by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier, along with the *Roméo and Juliette* of Charles Gounod and the same book team of Carré and Barbier deserve studies of their own. However, two more recent

compositions, with the book in English (not Italian nor French), are supremely rewarding. These two are Benjamin Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) and *The Tempest*, composed by Thomas Adès.

Gary Schmidgall's almost exhaustive *Shakespeare and Opera* (1990) does not mention the latter, which premiered in 2004, but we have this connection, taken from the booklet that accompanies the Met's restaging in 2012:

When *The Tempest* opened at London's Royal Opera House in February 2004, the anticipation couldn't have been more intense. Composer Thomas Adès -- only 32 at the time-- had already been thrust into the international spotlight in the previous decade and found himself having to live up to recurrent comparisons with his similarly precocious compatriot and predecessor Benjamin Britten. Despite all this pressure, the overwhelming, almost unanimous response to Adès second opera seemed to confirm the parallels. "Only time will tell whether the first night of *The Tempest* in 2004 was a moment to set alongside the first night of Peter Grimes in 1945 in the history of British music," wrote *The Guardian* the day after the occasion. "But it felt that way in the theatre." (Thomas May, Booklet to accompany DVD of Metropolitan production, 8)

I put together these two operas in English not simply because they are the two English scripted musical adaptations that tower above all others, but because particular recordings of productions of the Britten *Dream* and the Adès *Tempest* crystallize what we talk about when we talk about a concept approach to a production. The original Adès *Tempest* recorded from the "commissioned" premiere for Covent Garden continues to be available from Opera Addiction dot com. It was done around a dozen times (or in one estimate performed 50 times) including in Santa Fe (also available on Opera Addiction) before the 2012 restaging for The Met. And then,

that unique concept with design by Robert Lepage received a November 2012 broadcast in HD and a single airing on PBS. The DVD won the Grammy for best recorded Opera of 2013.

The Metropolitan's *Tempest* is designed to convey the modern Thomas Adès *Tempest* as if experienced by a troupe of Italian opera aficionados. In the words of The Met's web description: "[Director] Lepage has expanded its aura of magic into a metaphor for artistic performance itself, envisioning Prospero as an 18th-century impresario of La Scala, the opera house in Milan, which he has recreated on the island of his banishment as a reminder of home." The Adès *Tempest* with libretto by Meredith Oakes, simplifies much of Shakespearean language to efficient rhyming couplets, yet it captures quite eloquently Prospero's angst, the Ferdinand-Miranda love at first sight plot and the tension created by Caliban and Ariel; it premiered in 2004 and has enjoyed many productions, quickly surpassing *The Enchanted Island* as a truer adaptation of Shakespeare's island romance.

Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1960) is not without controversy, yet the imaginative staging by Gran Teatre del Liceu Barcelona Opera House which I discovered when it was available streaming with excellent captioning at YouTube, in honor of Britten's centenary (2013), alerts us to the issues of appropriation and adaptation: Britten composed for an Oberon who was a counter tenor, and left out much of the first scene of Shakespeare's Act One (There is no Egeus' complaint to the Duke nor pre-announcement of Hermia and Lysander's elopement; the announcement of the Duke's nuptial entertainment and the Mechanicals' first meeting are shifted to later). Yet Britten preserves more of Shakespeare's dialogue than any other opera. Staged on a green carpet-like raked surface that we immediately perceive is really a full stage double bed, with two plush pillows that are themselves bed-sized, the Barcelona staging is refreshing and instructive.

Listened to only, the music of Opera might strike our students much like the mysteries of the island described by the Boatswain, only as "strange and several noises." Yet those of us who teach Shakespeare should not shy from adding to our collection of resources and teaching strategies those productions of operatic adaptations of Shakespeare that challenge our notions that Shakespeare's texts are always the best and or most ingenious versions of the plays in production.

In fact, if one reads closely, the Common Core State Standards, adapted by most states, unadopted by only a misunderstood few, emphasize specifically the idea of comparative production analysis as a means to better understand both American Drama and Shakespeare.

Schmidgall, who is a great counter –of lines and scenes--gives us facts about the construction of *Dream*, to which I will return in a moment. He also regrets the omission of the frame set up in Act I scene one and the great speech of Theseus which addresses the imagination from the admission that it takes "a lunatic, a lover, and a poet." Schmidgall has counted well enough to claim that the one not original to Shakespeare line in the over 1,000 lines he does use references the "law of Athens" as the force which the young lovers are appealing and asking him to rule on. Student papers on just why Egeus is relevant to Shakespeare's take but whose character makes a convenient section to omit when forced to streamline might yield some important insights. But the staging of this particular dream I am going to refer to as the Barcelona production based on where it was filmed (it originated in Lyon), gives us an excellent introduction to those features that, with a little prodding merit attention as creative adaptation. I mention when I teach the play that the changeling child is often an understood part of staging history. This production uses an inert doll that is lovingly handled until Oberon gives it to Puck when he is thrilled that he has won back Titania.

Those trained in Music might examine the production for the parodic values of the Pyramus and Thisbe scene. Schmidgall comments:

"Pyramus and Thisby" is a mere 124 lines in all, and Britten knew precisely what to do with Shakespeare's miniature send-up of Elizabethan drama: transform it /289/ into a miniature send-up of "number" opera. He made his satirical intentions clear by switching from English to melodramatic Italian directions when the rustic actors enter Theseus' palace. Thus, Wall discharges his lugubrious part in a *lento lamentoso* and Bottom's suicidal "passion" is an *allegro disperato*. That Britten's parody of opera should fit Shakespeare's parody of his own dramatic methods reiterates the theme of synonymy in "Shakespearean" and "operatic."

. . . But what is most vividly caricatured is the progression from aria to aria, with chit-chat and brickbats from the aristocratic audience in between. Wall gets his all-too-earthly entrance aria (in Schoenbergian *Sprechgesang* and notation, a wicked bit of Britten satire), then comes Bottom with a recitative ("O grim-look'd night," marked *moderato ma tenebroso!*) and an aria ("And thou, O wall") that ends as most nineteenth-century Italian arias do, *con espansione*. The heroine's first appearance is accompanied, predictably, by harp and flute in a prim *allegretto grazioso*. Seconds later, love is naturally being plighted in an *allegro brillante*.

Shortly afterward, Snug presents his Lon and, fearful that genuine fright might sweep through his audience, sings his part at first *leggiere*, then *dolce* and *intimo*. Still, Britten gives him a *presto feroce* to drive Thisby offstage. [Schmidgall quotes the final Bottom speech.] Thisby soon appears to converse, as Donizetti's Lucia does, with an imitative flute, then shifts into an *adagio lamentoso* for the aria that brings her to stab herself and end the opera.

(289-290)

[A PowerPoint Slide show of the features of the Barcelona / Lyon production highlights some of the staging. Not included in this Digital Commons Posting, but see references for the DVD of this production.]

[The following clips from the reviews of the Met Production were prepared as a handout and referred to in passing.]

‘Thomas Adès’s *The Tempest* is an exemplary reminder of why we go to the opera... *The Tempest* is not a multimedia pageant, a musical with pretense, or some brave new hybrid. It is fresh proof of the sinew still left in an aged genre. You know it from the first minutes, in which a high, crystalline chord is shattered by a sonic gale, and Miranda appears onstage, fretting over the damage in agitated melodic leaps, while gusts of orchestral music whip around her voice... this remains a drama powered by a marvel of a score... [Adès] showers the audience with a spangled rain of sounds, haloing vocal lines with shimmering harmonies.’
***New York Magazine* (Justin Davidson), 28 October 2012**

‘[T]he effect on the night was clearer, more moving, more human, and more rich than any production of *The Tempest* I’ve seen... what emerged at the Met this week was proof of *The Tempest*’s ever-deepening musical and theatrical power... The notes of *The Tempest* have a crystalline precision that makes you feel that not one of them is out of place or surplus to requirements. It’s a bejewelled rightness that releases the emotions and personalities of his characters, so that there’s an absolute connection between what they are singing and what they are feeling and the experience they give to the audience... *The Tempest* is among the most important and successful operas of the 21st century, and in this production, it’s revealed to its full potential.’
***The Guardian* (Tom Service), 26 October 2012**

At its London premiere I thought *The Tempest* one of the most inspired, audacious and personal operas to have come along in years. I feel this even more strongly after the Met’s fantastical production... For *The Tempest* he fashioned a language that on its surface may seem seductively tonal. But at every moment all sorts of complex, subtle things are going on in this music.
***New York Times* (Anthony Tommasini), 24 October 2012**

The opera was simply magnificent, and I felt so proud and excited to have been anywhere near such an act of transformation... Sometimes, something excellent gets the treatment it deserves. This was one of those occasions

***The Independent* (Philip Hensher), 26 October 2012**

‘The new production of Thomas Adès's opera *The Tempest*, which opened at the Metropolitan Opera on Tuesday, is magical in every respect. Based on Shakespeare's play, the opera is one of the most compelling new works of recent years, and the production by Robert Lepage matches it in imagination and originality... Creating art is a potent alchemy, these artists are telling us, and this particular variety of it is just the sort of thing that the Met should be doing... The musical moods of the score shift constantly, underlining its seamless dramatic arc... the effect is pure, sensual enchantment...’

***The Wall Street Journal* (Heidi Waleson), 24 October 2012**

‘The score manages the nearly impossible task of our postmodern era: being eclectic without feeling inorganic or inauthentic. It runs the gamut from the jazzy rhythms of the very beginning to a Baroque-inspired quintet near the end, and it never sounds like pastiche. It all sounds like Adès.’

***The New York Observer* (Zachary Woolfe), 24 October 2012**

‘Shakespeare calls for “solemn and strange music” in his 1612 play about a group of humans and spirits made to share an island in the wake of a shipwreck. In Adès’ adaptation, the 41-year-old English composer provides both, along with sharp psychological insight, humor, magic, and a lingering air of melancholy. Shot through with the archaic beauty of Meredith Oakes’ libretto and brought to life in a dazzling and thought-provoking production by Robert Lepage, *The Tempest* is one of the most satisfying operas to blow onto the stage of the Met in years.’

***The Classical Review* (Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim), 24 October 2012**

Promotions for the Adès *Tempest* stress over and over again that the language of Shakespeare is unsuited for singing but that poet Meredith Oakes crisp modern couplets are the right solution for the modernization. (The libretto is available in book form.) So unlike Britten's *Dream*, we have the issue of Shakespeare not in Shakespeare's language. We also have the unbalance of the large chorus of shipwrecked "opera-goers." Prospero becomes a moody, troubled, introspective magician. But that is much in keeping with modernizing the artful magician, giving him a soul once Ariel instructs him with her line, "Mine would were I human"

(play text, 5.1.19). The opera, too has glimmers of what Marjorie Garber pointed out in her lecture on *The Tempest*, available from Harvard's Continuing Ed website. She tells her audience that, for senior faculty in her department, it seemed inconceivable to think of Caliban as "heroic": they had not kept up with post-Colonial lit crit or what an Oxford volume terms *Tempests After Shakespeare*. [This title is a 2002 Oxford University Press publication by Chantal J. Zabus, subtitled: *A Reading on Three Movements: Post Coloniality, Post Patriarchy, Post Modernism*.] Indeed, many productions of the play, including the [no longer] streaming production featuring the incomparable Christopher Plummer from Stratford Ontario, give the last stage moments to Caliban: he might pick up the staff Prospero has broken and dance triumphantly. One college production that streams on YouTube leaves a female Caliban alone on stage, hoping to gain insight from Prospero's discarded book. More impressively haunting are the final strains of the Adès production, especially as staged by the Met. It is a risky move to end any full stage, full company production on such a quiet note, but in the Adès remake, at least we get an Antonio - Prospero confrontation. (When teaching the play, I make my students notice that Antonio is all but silent in the last scene, with Prospero addressing his grievances to the fellow leader.) In the Met production, when Prospero drops his staff, it crumbles into bits. Ariel rejects Prospero's plea to "Stay with me" and seems to climb / crawl vertically straight up into the fly loft, singing her ethereal "A-i-e." Then the high tenor of Caliban expresses aloneness. He has his island back, yet he is poignantly lonely. He sings in lingering strains:

Who was here?
Have they disappeared?
Were there others?
Were we brothers?
Did we feast?
And give gifts?

Were there fires
And Ships?
They were human seeming
I was dreaming.
In the gleam of the sand
(Ariel now singing her single word, A-i-e, far off)
Caliban.
In the hiss of the spray
In the deep of the bay
In the gulf in the swell
Caliban.
ARIEL *(Offstage)* A-i-e

And blackout, with the lingering strain holding the audience from applauding until the final silence.

Unlike many dramatic endings of opera, where the music and the emotional impact often collide for a massive surprise or crashing revelation, this ending is eerily soft and subdued, yet it is in its own way powerfully moving. Caliban, who has been so strong in resenting his captivity, now alone, mourns that loneliness.

[Although the presentation version of this paper used the finale of the Met's *Tempest* to underscore these points, I have been disinclined to use it in class. As with exercises with other Shakespeare plays, I did find myself going back to the "Harpy" scene, often playing the Adès version against two different ways of staging the scene from filmed productions of the play. Thus, I find the exploration of operatic adaptations, whether they lead to discussions about what

the adaptors changed from Shakespeare, or to debates about how production style might be applied to Shakespeare's own text, an important addition to classroom teaching.]

Resources Referenced

The Common Core State Standard: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.) <<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12>>.

Adès and Oakes. *The Tempest* perusal score 253 pages at Fabermusic.com Available: <https://www.fabermusic.com/music/tempest-the-3269/score>. Formerly at the address, <<http://scorelibrary.fabermusic.com/The-Tempest-21496.aspx>>

Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After All*. The book was published by Knopf in 2004, with a paperback version the following year. The video series, produced by Harvard University Extension School, took place in the fall of 2007, covering in 13 videos the 11 plays of Shakespeare's later career. Lecture number 12 on *Tempest*, <https://marjoriegarber.com/online-lectures.php>. Also available at the YouTube Playlist, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLw4-Fp0S2dJZxt7cIjyX7tj8IqmyQighi>

Oakes, Meredith. *Tempest Libretto*. Available separately as a 48-page booklet, as listed on Faber and Faber's website. Libretto 0-571-52337-4

Britten and Pears. Libretto for *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Available as rtf, in two columns. Note that Thisbe of Shakespeare is Thisby here. There are other changes in names in the cast or spellings of Shakespeare's characters, notably Hipólita, Elena, Demetrio, Lisandro, <www.operamanager.com/libretti/1736.rtf>

Adès, Thomas, and Tom Service. *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises: Conversations with Tom Service*. Faber and Faber, 2012. Accessed selected sections at Google Books.

LePage, Robert. Designer for Met Production. Website includes slide show with the touring cast. Now archived at WayBack Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20190201074628/http://lacaserne.net/index2.php/opera/the_tempest/. Originally available, http://lacaserne.net/index2.php/opera/the_tempest/
The Original Covent Garden DVD of *Tempest* has been available at OperaPassion.com

At the time of the paper presentation, the entire Metropolitan Opera production of Adès' *Tempest* streamed at <<http://youtu.be/GAQf3cwR-WQ?list=PLgf5UgnWKWQmmIk1ujcKcTSSqN70gafPi>>

As explained in my PowerPoint that accompanies classroom coverage of this topic (but not included here), Barcelona's complete Britten *Dream* had been available streaming. There are other productions which stream in entirety. The longest cut of the Barcelona production available is the 27 min. Pyramus and Thisby episode. Originally available:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feKjzKdGs44>>. Some clips from the same stage setting are available here,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yM73OMc4G8Y&list=RDyM73OMc4G8Y&start_radio=1&rv=yM73OMc4G8Y&t=0

And here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REvUZvwnFIc>, Bergen National Opera.

Both productions now continue to have high-quality DVDs available.

JSU Houston Cole Library patrons may access these as listed:

A midsummer night's dream Le songe d'une nuit d'été: opéra en trois actes de = Ein Sommernachtstraum: Oper in drei Akten von / Benjamin Britten; livret de = libretto by Benjamin Britten et Peter Pears; a coproduction of ARTE France, Gran Teatre del Liceu, François Roussillon et associés with the participation of TF1. **Call number: M 1500 .B827 M5 2005.**

The tempest / composer, Thomas Adès; libretto by Meredith Oakes; a co-production of the Metropolitan Opera, L'Opéra de Québec, and the Wiener Staatsoper, Vienna, in collaboration with Ex Machina. **Call number: M 1500 .A588 T46 2013.** The Met's *Tempest* offers the additional clips that were broadcast on PBS (including the conversation back stage with Adès during intermission). Includes a booklet. Audra Luna sings Ariel; Simon Keenlyside is Prospero; Robert Lepage directs.

Different productions of Britten's opera are available streaming, including this from Brazil:

Britten 100: Award winning project and part of the British Council's TRANSFORM initiative. A midsummer night's dream. Brazilian premiere. May 2013. Part one Andre Heller-Lopes, stage director. Roberto Tibiriça, conductor. Part one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3neoPCqQIJk>, Part two,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y8aRw8Yg7g>. From the YouTube channel of Andre Heller-Lopez.

[Since the delivery of this paper, an additional opera in English, the Glyndebourne *Hamlet* premiered. Composed by Brett Dean with lyrics by Matthew Jocelyn.]