

What Becomes a Legend Most?

When Operas Portray Historical Figures

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Lucrezia de' Medici, widely accepted to be the subject of 'My Last Duchess'

When the first operas were composed slightly over four centuries ago, starting with works like Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, 17th-century composers looked to the poetry of Ovid and related Greek myths for storyline inspiration.

In the first decade or so of the 21st century, composers are starting to catch up with their Renaissance counterparts.

At Symphony Space, the new-music series Cutting Edge Concerts presented two one-act operas Monday night (which repeat next Monday) inspired by stories from the 14th and 16th centuries: *My Last Duchess*, a tragedy by Theodore Wiprud, and *The Clever Mistress*, a comedy by Robert Sirota. Wiprud's work is even further layered in history, taking inspiration from 19th-century poet Robert Browning's eponymous poem, loosely based on the historical events of Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara. Likewise, Sirota mined Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, a

collection of 100 tales told by a group of young people in 1300's Tuscany.

While both scores on Monday night seemed a little too beholden to their Renaissance sources, they further reassert the dramatic potential of muckraking works from the time of corrupt Italian city states and ruling families like the Medicis and Borgias. Even the Browning source material for Wiprud's opera took almost three centuries to make it into verse. As a result, it flourishes as a deliciously damning work of poetry that is a textbook example of unreliable narrators and plots that require the reader to draw their own conclusions.

The Duchess in Wiprud's opera is believed to be Lucrezia de' Medici, a legendary figure who also inspired Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*. Both Lucrezias were faced with problems, be it poisoning or the catchall "grief." This yields a lot of hot and heavy potential that is somewhat diminished when you learn that their real-life counterparts died, respectively, in childbirth and of tuberculosis. But that's why we have dramatic license.

These sorts of liberties, however, have gotten other composers into bureaucratic hot water. Complying with censors, Verdi—who owes much of his melodramatic flair to Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*—was

famously forced to change the setting of *Un Ballo in Maschera* from the historically-informed Stockholm of Gustav III to Colonial Boston. Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* was equally bothersome to monarchs who believed that it would help to spread the fever of the French Revolution into Austria. Even in recent decades, governments and totalitarian regimes have scrutinized artistic content with a wary eye.

Both *My Last Duchess* and *The Clever Mistress* echo that tradition. One could easily have adapted *Duchess* to fit in with contemporary political love triangles, or *Mistress* with corruption in the church. There's an equal amount of potent relevance in operas like Andriessen's *La commedia*, based on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and carrying no small amount of millennial cynicism. Viewing the present through the prism of the past often yields fresher perspectives.

On the other hand, one wonders if *Nixon in China* would have had the same effect were it allegorically reset in 1812-era Russia. Europeans have a certain amount of luxury with histories that extend into a time where years were triple, rather than quadruple, digits. America is therefore often seen as a country playing cultural catchup, which has resulted in a greater immediacy to many operas (particularly those penned by the original CNN composer, John Adams) that tap into recent years versus recent centuries.

And does that ultimately feel more relevant to American audiences, in the way that the history of the Great Depression, Civil War or the era of mid-century Madison Avenue carry a greater rate of recognition — an ingrained Pavlovian memory of high school history classes that in other countries would have the same effect under the French Revolution, Italian reunification or days of the Baader-Meinhof gang? And, all things considered, could something other than time will tell us the answer?

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