

In Search
of the
Shakespearean
Ideal

William Shakespeare is undoubtedly the world's greatest dramatist—is it any wonder myriad opera composers have turned to his works for inspiration? As HGO prepares to stage Berlioz's *Beatrice and Benedict* and Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Cynthia Greenwood goes back to their Shakespearean roots.



Shakespeare's plays have inspired more than 200 operas, and it is not surprising that much of the opera canon is indebted to the poetry and humanism of the poet and player from Stratford-upon-Avon. Composers from Rossini to Vaughan Williams have been captivated by Shakespeare's complex and universal portraits and their puzzling ambiguity; the grand soliloquies uttered by kings, villains and fools; the multiplicity of viewpoints that belie a single authorial voice; and the multi-layered plots that evoke the ironic, the comic and the tragic within a single work.

In particular, Hector Berlioz and Benjamin Britten, who helped define the operatic sensibilities of their respective centuries, revered Shakespeare's poetry and humanistic representation. Berlioz's *Beatrice and Benedict* derived from Shakespeare's mature comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is based on Shakespeare's early comedy of the same name. In creating these works both composers were drawn to specific qualities considered uniquely "Shakespearean."

It is difficult to imagine a time when the world didn't idolize Shakespeare, but views of the playwright's uniqueness took more than a century to develop. Although his plays were still performed after his death in 1616, it wasn't until the 1700s that a confluence of events helped establish the nineteenth-century phenomenon known as "bardolatry." In his essay "The Mirror Of Life," Warwick University professor Jonathan Bate reminds us that inexpensive editions of Shakespeare's plays became available in the 1730s, and during this period, London's penchant for staging the plays also grew. When actor-director David Garrick staged the commemorative Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769, the business of "selling" Shakespeare to tourists also took hold. Bate notes: "Thanks to the enthusiasm of poets, critics, and translators such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, and John Keats in England, J.W. von Goethe and the Schlegel brothers in Germany, and Victor

Hugo and Alexandre Dumas in France, the grammar-school boy from the edge of the forest of Arden became the supreme deity not just of poetry and drama but of high culture itself."

As in theater and film, fans of opera tend to judge a musical adaptation on how closely it hews to the original. This is natural, and this tendency bespeaks a desire to honor the author perceived as a story's inventor. In *Macbeth Multiplied*, Christoph Clausen reminds us that our expectation that opera remain faithful to a literary or dramatic source goes back to the nineteenth century. With this being the case, and given the adulation of Shakespeare as a cultural high priest, we can't help but ask, "What can an opera composer do to renew the magic of a Shakespearean stage drama? And why should we pay attention to Shakespearean masterworks adapted into the opera idiom?"

Berlioz was a huge fan of the legendary dramatist. He was also keenly aware of the risks of adapting opera from Shakespeare's drama, doubtful that anyone could do so without spoiling the integrity of his original plays. In a letter written in 1856 to Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, mistress of Franz Liszt and a close friend with whom Berlioz discussed *Les Troyens*, he referred to his "thefts from Shakespeare," calling himself a "marauder" of Virgil and Shakespeare in composing *Les Troyens*.

But in his reverence for Shakespeare, Berlioz ignored an important fact. The world's most celebrated dramatist adapted and borrowed heavily from other sources himself. In writing *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare relied on a translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*. For his ideas about love potions and the wildly entertaining transformation motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he is indebted to *The Metamorphoses*, a collection of myths written in verse by Ovid.



A scene from *Beatrice and Benedict*, courtesy Opera Australia

Shakespeare apparently originated the subplot of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which centers on a quarreling couple who hide their true feelings for each other. But the disturbing main plot starring Claudio and Hero derives from sixteenth-century English and Italian renderings of an ancient Greek romance. For Shakespeare, Marlowe, and other playwrights who wrote freelance scripts for London playhouses, such imitation was the custom of invention.

Berlioz composed *Beatrice and Benedict* in 1861, after searching for the ideal dramatic inspiration for a new comic opera. He settled on *Much Ado About Nothing*, a complex comedy that still confounds critics. But Berlioz had a different agenda from that of his literary predecessor. In adapting Shakespeare's work, Berlioz put the verbal jousting, or "merry war," between Beatrice and Benedict in service to a purely comic form.

In *Beatrice and Benedict*, Berlioz deftly captures the electric romance between two lovers who revel in pummeling one another with insults. In appropriating *Much Ado's* lighter conflict, Berlioz dispenses with the sinister plot involving Don John and his devilish cohorts, who maliciously set out to destroy the marriage plans of Hero and Claudio. In addition, he de-emphasizes the Hero and Claudio story in order to embellish the tale of Beatrice and Benedict. The comic musician Somarone, whom Berlioz called a "musical caricature" and dubbed the "fat ass," is the composer's own creation. In another letter to Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein from 1862, Berlioz wrote: "...Beatrice and Benedict jeer and nibble at each other gracefully. There's also the sentimental couple, Hero and Claudio, who make an excellent contrast with the other two."

Shakespeare scholars are quick to remind us what the Berlioz adaptation lacks, as Anne Barton does in her head note to *The Riverside Shakespeare's* second edition of *The Complete Works*. But if we remember that Shakespeare also borrowed for his own purposes, we can move beyond the derivative roots of Berlioz's libretto, and judge his opera on its own terms. In the assessment of conductor, critic and University of California, Davis, professor D. Kern Holoman, Berlioz gave us "a curious blend of the comic stage

and light opera." Playful and humorous, the two-act opera offers an enchanting use of woodwind, strings, guitar and tambourine.

Shakespeare probably wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* around 1595–96, possibly for a private wedding. The play was loathed by many for centuries: the diarist Samuel Pepys wrote that it was "the most insipid, ridiculous play I ever saw in my life." Until Harley Granville-Barker's 1914 staging at London's Savoy Theatre, producers blithely cut and reworked the actual script, even presenting it as a song-and-dance spectacle. In the unadulterated original, Shakespeare's *Dream* is richly complex: the irony evoked by its labyrinthine triple plot is brilliant, but it is daunting on the page and not easily followed onstage. *Dream* addresses youth, innocence, and the youthful tendency to embrace illusion at the expense of reality. Britten was deeply attracted to these themes and the operatic possibilities inherent in *Dream's* three distinct worlds.

In adapting the play, Britten respected the contrasts between the natural and supernatural realms and successfully evoked the multilayered worlds of the lovers, the fairies, and the rude "mechanicals" or rustics—the tradesmen who are rehearsing a play. In doing so, Britten created a disparate sound garden. In his essay "The Composer's *Dream*," he noted, "in writing the opera I have used a different kind of texture and orchestral 'color' for each section (level of society)." Whereas Shakespeare devises hilarious parody when the rustics mount a play called *Pyramus and Thisby*, Britten allows his mechanicals to cleverly lampoon the style of Italian opera buffa.

It took Britten seven months between 1959 and 1960 to compose *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He acknowledged that Shakespeare's language made the composition much more challenging than *The Turn of the Screw* or *Peter Grimes*. Britten collaborated with tenor Peter Pears on the libretto, working primarily from the earliest available editions of Shakespeare's script. Knowing that sung text absorbs much more time than spoken drama, Britten cut the play in half. The entire libretto of Britten's *Dream* is taken verbatim from Shakespeare's *Dream*, with a tiny addition. According to Britten, "We stuck faithfully to Shakespeare's



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words, actually adding only one line: ‘Compelling thee to marry with Demetrius’ — which explains why the lovers Lysander and Hermia were forced to flee Athens.

In her 2004 book *Shakespeare After All*, Harvard professor Marjorie Garber offers an interpretation of Shakespeare’s timeless quality: “Shakespeare always presents both his ideas and his character types contrapuntally, offering a response and a qualification, another way of looking at things, within the play itself.” Such ambiguity is the essence of what it means to be Shakespearean. Operatic masterworks such as Verdi’s *Rigoletto* are esteemed for being “Shakespearean.” In opera this signature suggests the work’s ability to evoke wide-ranging emotions and themes found in both comedy and tragedy.

Music critic Michael Kennedy finds this unique Shakespearean signature in Britten’s *Dream*. According to Kennedy, Britten’s rendering of “tonal ambiguity” throughout *Dream* sets his opera apart from others. Kennedy explains that the opera’s “series of major triads, connected by glissandi on the strings, which so vividly depict the wood, covers all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. As they are in false relation to one another, Britten again (as in *Billy Budd*) creates a tonal ambiguity which is continued in the music given to the fairies on their first appearance, Lydian G major spiced with D major and F-sharp major.” Britten’s ending includes a Mahlerian F-sharp major, as Oberon utters his final pronouncement about fairies and mortals. “On the journey to that magical moment, Britten creates a Shakespearean opera to rank with Verdi’s masterpieces,” he says.

Though Berlioz and Britten are indebted to Shakespeare for their librettos, both have successfully re-imagined his tales, and, in turn, have given the world musical dramas that are uniquely satisfying.



Costume designs by Dale Ferguson for
A Midsummer Night’s Dream

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