Beyond the Double Bar
Dr. David Cole

Many listeners will hear a piece of music in concert and think “That’s great! I wonder if there are other pieces like it that I might enjoy.” Beyond the Double Bar suggests further listening based on the music of each Masterworks and Small Stage concert, along with links to YouTube videos of recommended performances. If you have questions, comments, or suggestions about Beyond the Double Bar, please e-mail Dr. David Cole at dccole@swflso.org.

Masterworks IV – A Night at the Opera

Space doesn’t permit me to list recommendations related to every piece on tonight’s opera program, so I thought I’d take a slightly different approach to Beyond the Double Bar for this concert.

You’ve now heard quite a few opera excerpts, but perhaps you’re not sure you can sit through three hours of Puccini, much less five hours of Wagner. You’ll be happy to know that there are operas that are more like short stories than novels. I’ve chosen ten of them, admittedly some of my personal favorites. These operas are all about an hour in length, and six of the ten works are in English. Short descriptions of each work are available on the Southwest Florida Symphony website at: http://www.swflso.org/education/concert-program-notes/ Just click on the link for Beyond the Double Bar – Masterworks IV

Béla Bartók: Duke Bluebeard’s Castle (1918)

Opera as psychological thriller. Bluebeard brings his new bride Judith home to his dark and forbidding castle, where there are seven closed doors. Despite Bluebeard’s warnings and entreaties for her to leave the doors alone, Judith insists on opening them all. Hilarity definitely fails to ensue. There is very little stage action, but the opera’s vividly characterized (and lavishly scored) orchestral music and the realistic speech-like singing between Judith and Bluebeard make this one of the most riveting hours in all opera.

Bartók: Duke Bluebeard’s Castle – Christa Ludwig, Walter Berry, London Symphony, Istvan Kertész

Bernstein: Trouble in Tahiti (1952)

A jazz-flavored spoonful of ‘50s suburban angst. Sam and Dinah seem to have everything a successful young couple could want, but can only seem to talk at rather than to each other. The desperate loneliness of their marriage is given an ironic counterpoint by three “backup singers” who function as a kind of Greek chorus to the action. Bernstein’s words and music (he wrote both) are a stinging indictment of the American Dream.

Bernstein: Trouble in Tahiti – Catherine Hopper, Dean Robinson, Psappha Ensemble, Nicholas Kok

Benjamin Britten: *Noye’s Fludde* (Noah’s Flood) (1958)

Long before “community engagement” became a buzzword, Benjamin Britten composed a series of quasi-operatic works designed for church performance by amateur performers, with only a few of the roles intended for professionals. Based on one of the 15th-century “mystery” plays from the city of Chester, the text of *Noye’s Fludde* (in Middle English) is a bit of a departure from scripture, with Noah’s wife and her three “gossips” three sheets to the wind (pun intended) at the ark’s departure. The work is both delightfully entertaining and moving; Britten avoids treacly sentiment in the procession of animals (played with adorable cuteness by the small children of the chorus) by setting it to an absolutely swaggering British march.

Britten: *Noye’s Fludde* – Owen Brannigan, English Chamber Orchestra, Benjamin Britten

W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan: *Trial by Jury* (1875)

G&S meet Judge Judy. Angelina is suing Frederick for breach of promise of marriage. The trial appears to go very badly for Frederick until the judge comes up with a novel solution that sends everyone home happy. This was Gilbert and Sullivan’s first successful collaboration.


Gian-Carlo Menotti: *The Telephone* (1947)

Old-fashioned love collides with modern life in Menotti’s romantic comedy about a young swain’s frustrated attempts to propose to his beloved before he has to catch a train. Every time Ben prepares to pop the question, Lucy’s telephone rings and she insists upon answering. In the end, love triumphs with a friendly assist from (at that time) modern technology.

Menotti: *The Telephone* – Emmy McNairy, Jose Rubio, Brava! Opera Theater, Laurie Ann Hunter

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Der Schauspieldirektor* (The Impresario) (1786)

Mozart’s affectionate farce on the vanity of opera singers pits Madame Herz (Heart) against Mademoiselle Silberklang (Silver Tone) in a winner-takes-all audition for the best roles and the top salary in the opera company. Of course the house tenor, Monsieur Vogelsang (Birdsong) has to make his case as well. The amount of music is rather small, interspersed with a large amount of spoken dialogue, but the music is absolutely delightful.

Mozart: *Der Schauspieldirektor* – Soloists, Boston Baroque, Martin Pearlman

Henry Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas* (1689)

A Cliff Notes version of a portion of Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Over the course of one hour, boy (Aeneas, fleeing the sack of Troy) meets girl (Dido, Queen of Carthage), they fall in love, and are separated by the machinations of a witch and her evil minions. Aeneas sails away to found Rome; Dido, heartbroken (*SPOILER ALERT*), stabs herself, but not before singing the touching farewell aria *When I am Laid in Earth*, set over a repeated *passacaglia* bass line.
Purcell: *Dido and Aeneas* – Maria Ewing, Karl Dramond, Collegium Musicum 90, Richard Hickox

**Giacomo Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* (1918)**

By far the best-known (and perhaps the best) part of Puccini’s operatic triple bill, *Il Trittico*, *Schicchi* is renowned for its meltingly beautiful central aria “O mio babbino caro,” immortalized in movies like *Moonstruck* and *A Room with a View*. Yet *Schicchi* is far more than an operatic one-hit wonder. Extrapolated from an episode in Dante’s *Inferno*, Puccini’s sparkling comedy pits the scheming down-at-the-heels Donati family (all of whom have been shortchanged in the will of their late wealthy Uncle/Cousin Buoso) in a battle of wits with the wily local “fixer,” Gianni Schicchi, who has been reluctantly pressed into service to impersonate the dead moneybags and dictate a new will.

Puccini: *Gianni Schicchi* – Leo Nucci, Orchestra de la Teatro de La Scala, Riccardo Chailly

**Maurice Ravel: *L’Enfant et les Sortileges* (The Child and the Spells) (1925)**

A “children’s opera” that’s far too good just for children. With a libretto by Colette, Ravel’s one-act fantasy tells the tale of a naughty Child confined to his room where his furniture, toys, pets, books and even the animals outside his window spring to life to chastise him for his bad behavior. Ravel’s music ranges from the hysterically funny (the British teapot and the Chinese teacup dance a fetching jazzy foxtrot and spout fatuous nonsense in both English and Chinese) to the touchingly poignant (I defy you to maintain dry eyes when the Child regrets tearing up his book of fairy tales which destroys the love of his life, the storybook Princess). The Child redeems himself with a selfless act of kindness, and receives the forgiveness of both his possessions and his mother.

Ravel: *L’Enfant et les Sortileges*—Orchestra and Chorus of Opera de Lyon, Louis Langrée

**Viktor Ullmann: *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (The Emperor of Atlantis) (1943)**

A voice from the Holocaust speaks from beyond the grave. Ullmann and his librettist Peter Kien created the opera in the Terezin (Thereseinstadt) concentration camp near Prague in 1943. The Nazis shut down the camp’s production of the work because of its obvious lampooning of Hitler and the Third Reich. Both Ullmann and Kien perished in Terezin, but the manuscript had been entrusted to the safekeeping of the camp’s librarian who survived the camp and the war. The morality tale of the plot is a simple one: what happens when war becomes so pervasive even Death refuses to participate? The music is an eclectic mix of modernism (indebted largely to Hindemith and Schoenberg) and music from “traditional” German culture. The Lutheran chorale *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* is quoted, and there are stylistic borrowings from cabaret, opera house, and concert hall. The opera was orchestrated for the instruments available at the camp, including banjo, saxophone and harpsichord.

Ullmann: *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* – Christian Miedl, Stephen Owen, Opera de Lyon, Jean-Michaël Lavoie

Ullmann: *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*