

## Chapter Eight: An Opera

Following swiftly on from the chapter dealing in part with singers, we must now touch upon the vast topic of opera. Of all music theatre, this is surely one of the most stylized. It is essential that everyone in the audience and, indeed, amongst the performers also, should effortlessly suspend their disbelief, together with coat, hat and scarf, at the door on the way into the opera house, or the whole point of the evening will be lost. To appreciate fully an opera you have to have as open a mind as it is possible to acquire. It will, more often than not, stretch your imaginative credulity to its limits.

So, although we are dealing with text in the following example (indeed nothing more detailed than the story line), it will serve to test the conductor's ability to convey the drama, as well as the music, with the utmost sincerity. The success of the performance rests largely upon your skill to transport your audience, and they must leave the auditorium on a different emotional, and indeed spiritual, level from that upon which they arrived. So much responsibility rests upon your shoulders.

The following example is the story from a three act opera, which possesses all the hallmarks of greatness, and you, as conductor, must consider how best to convey the spirit of the music in a convincing fashion. An interesting test would be to try reading it through (as one would with an orchestral score) whilst, at the same time, visualizing yourself as the conductor, portraying the often profound story line with all the seriousness and credibility that is woven into the text...

# *Francesca de Le Fromage*

*or*

## *Quite a Useful Hat*

*Act One: In the palace grounds*

The story begins at twilight in a fair arbour in the grounds of the palace belonging to Patrick, twenty-ninth Baron of Fromage.

His only child, the beautiful Betty has been celebrating her eighteenth birthday. During a game of hide-and-seek she happens upon this arbour, and spies a handsome young soldier asleep therein. (We never find out why he happens to be sleeping there.)

Betty then sings to her first cousin with whom she is very close. So close, indeed, that when her father married Patricia, who was Patrick's father's younger stepsister, who then gave birth to Betty, his only daughter was also, therefore, his niece. Thus Betty was, indeed, *her own* first cousin. (This duality gives the leading characters much more depth.)

She sings the aforementioned gay aria (fortunately, without disturbing his slumbers, despite the fortissimo top B flat) in praise of his rugged good looks and, in a fanciful way, wonders whether he is married, and what he must be like as a lover, or whether she will ever get a boyfriend and lose her maidenhood. But she decides he is probably not her type anyway. However, just as she is about to leave, a crow intervenes (who happens to be none other than Tinker, the God of Mischief in disguise) who drops something messy onto the soldier who awakes with a start.

He spies Betty peeping at him from behind a small potted plant and introduces himself as Kevin, one of the palace servants, who has been called-up to fight in the war and has to leave tonight maybe never

to see his home again. He begs her to lend him her handkerchief to wipe the mess off his uniform, otherwise he will assuredly be severely reprimanded by his commanding officer who has something of an attitude problem. (Apparently it is perfectly acceptable to have blood and viscera on your uniform, but not poo.)

Kevin's mother (now deceased) had also been a servant at the palace, but was the daughter of Patrick's father's half-brother by a previous marriage. Thus making Kevin's mother, unbeknown to Betty, in fact her great aunt. Doubtless Betty felt drawn towards Kevin, being bound together, as it were, as distant cousins.

They sing a duet in praise of the beautiful evening; he of his sorrow at having to leave, and she at the lamentable waste of handsome young men in the war. But as they sing, a third voice is heard – that of Mandy, the Goddess of Love, who appears disguised (rather appropriately) as a rabbit, who, with a twitch of her floppy ears, casts a spell over the young couple. Their hands touch when Betty passes Kevin the handkerchief, which completes the spell (magic chords from the orchestra), and so their hearts will always beat as one until either of them dies, appropriately accompanied by an off-stage heavenly chorus. They take their leave of each other yet, unbeknown to themselves, their lives will be changed irrevocably for always.

After a short, jaunty orchestral interlude, the next scene unfolds with another servant who is now a messenger in the army, a fine young lad and friend of Kevin's, called Francis conversing with Betty's maid who happens also to be called Frances.

The pivotal character of Frances (Betty's maidservant), it is understood, had a mother who had, as had Kevin's mother, also been a servant before her. Frances' father had been a footman whose father, incidentally, was Patricia's uncle's son by his third marriage to Patricia's father's stepdaughter. (So there would seem to be an element of family connection binding the story together, giving it some basis in aristocratic real-life, and therefore that extra realism.)

Francis is (fortunately, some might say, for the sake of simplicity) homosexual - as was his father and grandfather before him, which gives the tale a broader dimension. We don't know any more about his family

history.

Francis sings of Kevin's heroic and manly exploits on the battlefield, followed by Frances singing of her young mistress's unaccountable sadness when she ought to be out enjoying herself with her friends instead of moping about the palace and getting in everyone's way. Francis wistfully suggests to Frances that what he thinks Betty really needs is a jolly good man (though not exactly in those words). Frances giggles (top C). But at that moment, Mandy hops past again with a knowing glance (quite hard to achieve in a bunny costume), spies Francis and Frances, then realizing her mistake, thinks better of it and hops off again.

Frances, Betty's servant exits. But straight away, after an ominous orchestral interlude where the remaining Francis paces back and forth in troubled thought, the Baron Patrick and his wife the Baroness Patricia enter. We hear the famous 'Pat-Pat' duet. They are accompanied unbeknown to them by Tinker, who puts on a magic hat which makes him invisible (though being a crow you'd think he'd manage to bluff his way reasonably successfully without the hat). Francis reports to the Baron of the great battles he has witnessed, but reports also of Kevin's regiment, who have been in the thick of the fighting, being completely routed. They sing a quartet. The Baron sings of the glory of war and Patricia sings of the futility of war, while Francis and Tinker (still invisible and, apparently, inaudible to all but the audience) join in the chorus.

In the next recitative both the Baron and Baroness express concern over Betty's sullen mood but attribute it to hormones. In the background you can hear the wicked laughter of Tinker.

Then the Baron Patrick, the Baroness Patricia, and Francis exit, and as they do Mandy the goddess of love, disguised this time as a dove, swoops in and knocks the hat off Tinker who, terrified, exits also at high speed. The music becomes expectant - yet who should enter but Frances, Betty's servant. She spies the magic hat, picks it up then exits.

*Act two: In the palace*

Betty and her servant Frances are in the palace. Frances is trying to cheer Betty up by showing her some of the Baron's lithographs which she discovered under the bed whilst cleaning, but Betty confesses to Frances that she is in love with a handsome servant who is now fighting in the war, and she is worried for his safety that he might perish without knowing how much she loves him (against all reason, it would seem to be acceptable to die in the secure knowledge of the other party's love). So to distract and amuse her mistress Frances shows her the hat belonging to Tinker, although neither Frances nor Betty realizes that it is a magical hat. Then for a game Betty snatches the hat and teasingly places it on Frances' head, accompanied by a puff of smoke and a loud chord from the orchestra - Frances vanishes. Betty is so surprised (well, she would be) that she swoons. Lights dim and curtain descends.

As the curtain rises once more the scene depicts the Baron Patrick and Francis (Kevin's friend) discussing military tactics. The Baron gives Francis some urgent dispatches to deliver to the front line. However, Frances (Betty's servant) has been hiding with the magic hat on her head. She decides that she should go to the war herself to find Kevin (if he is still alive, that is) and proclaim to him the news of her mistress's undying love for him. So to give herself a head start, she puts a sleeping potion (which she also found under the Baron's bed) in Patrick's wine flask, and as the Baron pours a glass for Francis and himself to drink before his departure, they both fall asleep.

The next scene depicts Frances (Betty's servant) in a messenger's uniform disguised as Francis (Kevin's friend), (though you'd think owning a magic hat she could go dressed as a clown for all the difference it would make), with Betty (fully recovered), who now understands and (remarkably) accepts the reality of the hat's magical nature. Frances has informed Betty of her plan, and Betty sings a moving aria calling upon Mandy, the Goddess of Love, to protect

Frances on her perilous quest to the war (you can hear the voice of Mandy acknowledging receipt of this prayer from the wings). Frances exits for the front-line with the sound of drums beating and Patricia enters.

Meanwhile, Betty confesses to her mother that she is in love with a handsome young man who is fighting in the war, but dare not tell her that he is only a humble servant. Patricia comforts her by saying that if he is as handsome as she says he is, and if he survives intact, then she would be most interested in meeting him. Betty then sings of her fears that her mother would not approve of Kevin's lowly birth, (notwithstanding the family connection) but on the positive side believes she would probably appreciate his exceptional physique.

Now we see that Francis and Patrick have woken from their sleep with no awareness that anything untoward has taken place. As Francis departs for the front-line the Baron wishes him God's speed. We once again hear the laughter of Tinker off-stage, as he can't allow himself to be seen without his magic hat (actually, he can't be seen *with* his magic hat either).

When the coast is clear Tinker comes out of hiding to enjoy a good gloat, as is the wont of all conscientious villains. But he is immediately joined by Mandy who says that she will personally see to it that no harm comes to the lovers. Tinker retorts haughtily that he has made other plans – Ho ho. They exit in opposite directions. Ominous music. Lights fade.

*Act Three: Back in the palace grounds*

Kevin has briefly returned from the front-line, and is in hiding from the enemy who are not far behind. Then Frances, disguised as Francis, appears, but is wearing the magic hat so that Kevin can't see her.

Just then, the other Francis appears with his dispatches. He sees Kevin who asks what he is doing. Kevin then tells Francis that it is far too dangerous to go any further, as the enemy are all about them, but

that he should return hence to the Baron. Francis explains that the war will be lost if he does not get the Baron's dispatches to the front-line. But as Kevin is begging to dissuade Francis, Frances takes off Tinker's magic hat (puff of smoke and big chord). Kevin and Francis are very astonished to see her pop up out of nowhere (however *do not swoon or inquire* why she is dressed up to look like Francis).

Frances is naturally very relieved to have chanced upon Kevin. She straightaway wastes no time in imparting the tidings of her mistress's love for him. Kevin is quite overwhelmed at the news (not least since he already has rather a lot to worry about at present - such as the problem of trying not to get shot by the enemy), and nervously inquires as to who Frances's mistress might be. But suddenly, as his hand falls once again upon the poeey handkerchief (which he'd retained as a souvenir, though with every intention of returning at a later date), it dawns on him (with a little helpful intervention from the off-stage heavenly chorus who can always be relied upon to take a hint), who his admirer is and, with a subtle change of key from the orchestra, he suddenly becomes aware of the overpowering feelings awakening within his own breast.

He, there and then, informs Frances that Betty's feelings are reciprocated (we hear the triumphal voices of Mandy plus heavenly chorus from the wings), and that he is greatly looking forward to proving it when he returns home.

Francis, meanwhile, sings a touching recitative to Frances, full of longing and regret, since (to him) she looks a lot more attractive dressed as a boy. Such is the turmoil and anguish within Francis' breast. This is the most poignant aria in the opera in which Francis, with the very real prospect of imminent death all around, confronts his own sexuality.

Frances then suggests that with the magic hat on, she can go anywhere with comparative safety (possibly true, although she still won't be bullet proof), so why doesn't she go to the front-line in place of Francis? Kevin and Francis think she is a mug, so of course agree to the plan. Frances puts on the hat again (puff of smoke etc.) and exits followed by a longing coda sung by Francis.

Just then, Patrick enters, and seeing Francis in the arbour inquires angrily why he has not executed his orders with the urgent dispatches.

Francis is too embarrassed to tell the Baron that he has just sent Frances, a maidservant disguised as himself, and wearing a magic hat which makes her invisible, into danger in his stead. He thinks the Baron might not believe him (though it's hard to know which part he wouldn't believe, one wonders). So he hurriedly exits to try and overtake Frances and tell her that he has had second thoughts regarding her kind, though reckless offer. Kevin pleads to him to take care. All exit.

You next see Frances with the hat on (yes, the audience *can* see her) followed by Francis who *doesn't* see her, followed by Tinker who seems to find this all very amusing, followed by Mandy (disguised this time, for reasons unexplained, as a deer) who is looking very serious (what does a serious deer look like?).

They sing a complicated quartet affirming their individual quests. Yet as they are about to go their separate ways, Tinker sneaks up behind Frances and swipes his hat back (apparently he can *also* see her as well as the audience). Mandy is enraged; the stage goes suddenly dark, thunder rumbles, and you see the power of Mandy starkly revealed in a fierce light. She there and then casts a powerful spell on the cowering Tinker that will make him not only *visible* to all mortals whenever he dons the hat, but *mortal* too. The high personal price she has to pay for executing this spell, is that *her* fate will be inextricably linked to that of Tinker's. (Subtle twist.)

Francis, who is also suddenly able to see Frances, inquires of her where the magic hat may be? Frances says she was sure she had it a moment ago. They start to search the stage for it. Francis then asks Frances, in the meantime, whether she has any brothers.

But just at that moment Betty enters dressed up as Francis – she doesn't notice Frances or Francis.

She sings that she is much troubled by recent events, and is feeling somewhat guilty at having sent her maid into danger, so has decided to go in her stead, also disguised as a messenger (there must be a plentiful supply of messenger uniforms at the palace), to seek for her beloved Kevin (if he's still intact), and maybe borrow the magic hat (which, of course, would have been quite hard to locate if it's in place on Frances' invisible head).



Unfortunately, she bumps into Tinker (with hat) who erroneously believes himself to be invisible. They are both pretty surprised. Betty sees that he has the magic hat (but doesn't seem at all surprised that she can *see* him wearing it) and concludes that he must have killed Frances for it, and tries to wrest it back.

But at that moment the Baron Patrick and Patricia arrive. He sees Betty struggling with Tinker and thinks that he is molesting his daughter. So he gets his gun out and shoots Tinker. (Always a wise policy to shoot first and ask questions later with evil deities.)

This is not turning out to be a good day for Tinker, or Mandy for that matter, who staggers onto the stage as she too has also been mortally wounded since, in fulfillment of her powerful spell, her fate has been bound up with Tinker's.

Just then, Kevin and Francis run onto the stage having heard the shot. They all see Tinker lying wounded and inquire as to who he is (by the way, he is not disguised as a crow any more).

Mandy sings the beautiful 'Swan Song' aria (something of an accomplishment when one is a dying deer) which satisfactorily explains everything. The others all join in and sing a verse each to affirm their understanding of the rather complex implications of the situation. The Baron acknowledges that he probably shot Tinker for *slightly* the wrong reason, but nonetheless is still glad that he did – no one else expresses any strong feelings regarding the Baron's moral justification.

In the final aria, Betty prays to the angels to let Mandy live - in respect of her good conduct (notwithstanding that none of this would have come to pass had it not been for her meddling in the very first place). You once again hear the heavenly choir graciously agreeing to this suggestion. Betty and Kevin embrace, Frances and Francis embrace, and Patrick and Patricia embrace.

Tinker dies in the true melodramatic fashion loved by all villains, and Mandy shows her gratitude by casting a good spell over them all. (We never find out what the war was about, *or* which was the winning side, *or* who gets to keep the magic hat.)

*The End*



Tinker.

