

Operaphoria™

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METROPOLITAN OPERA, LIVE IN HD

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Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*

By mid-19th century, Charles Gounod was France's most celebrated opera composer. His *Faust* (1859) was regularly performed all over the world, except perhaps Germany where having a French opera composer speak for Goethe was insufferable. In 1867, when Gounod and celebrated librettists Barbier and Carré (who also wrote his *Faust*) undertook slimming down Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it was the 15th opera version of the play, not

including Bellini's *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* (1830) which was actually an adaption of a contemporary Italian play, not the Bard's. To no one's surprise, *Romeo and Juliet*'s popularity has resulted in over 30 adaptations, including those by once well-known composers D'Indy (1878), Zandonai (1922) and Malipiero (1950).

Hearing and seeing Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* today we are amazed to learn it was roundly criticized by contemporary critics for its "lack of tunefulness." And, the critics warned, they detected signs of Wagnerianism! How these critics missed the lover's four lyrical duets is difficult to explain. We do know that the opera is faithful to Shakespeare's original, with music so completely "Frenchified" as to place the love story in a "voluptuous and sugary envelope," as Winton Dean put it.

The opera opens with a "Prologue" of principals and chorus recounting the fatal costs to Romeo and Juliette of the endless feud between Verona's

Montague and Capulet families. Then very swiftly we are transported to the Capulet's masked ball where we meet the love-sick Romeo, the high-spirited Juliette, her belligerent cousin Tybalt, her would-be lover Count Paris, and Romeo's pals, led by the playful Mercutio. Seeing Juliette, Romeo is immediately smitten, as is Juliette, despite her earlier pronouncement against marriage.

They waste no time. Later that evening, when Romeo appears under Juliette's balcony, the lovers declare eternal love and vow to marry, all this unfolding in one of their great duets. The very next morning, with the nurse's help, the lovers go to Friar Lawrence, who agrees to marry them, hoping their union will end the feuding that has

plagued the families and Verona.

However, things seldom play out so smoothly. Almost immediately after the marriage, Stephano, Romeo's page, provokes a fight with several Cap-

(continued...)



Photo: Metropolitan Opera

Nadine Sierra is Juliette

(continued from front)

ulets and when Mercutio steps in to protect him Tybalt challenges him. Romeo suddenly appears and tries to make peace, asking his new cousin, Tybalt, to set aside the hatred between families.



Photo: Metropolitan Opera

Benjamin Bernheim is Romeo

But nothing has changed for Tybalt, who kills Mercutio. The enraged Romeo in turn kills Tybalt, and when the Duke of Verona appears both families demand justice, which takes the form of banishing Romeo from Verona.

The next act opens in Juliette's bedroom. It is their wedding night, and we are treated to another duet, this time the show-stopping, "*Nuit d'hyménée! Ô douce nuit d'amour!*" [Night of marriage! O sweet night of love!] Romeo must now go into exile, but no sooner has he gone than Juliette's father appears and instructs her to prepare to marry Paris that very day. Desperate, Juliette consults Friar Lawrence, who gives her a sleeping potion that will make her appear dead. Thus, she will escape this second marriage and finally awaken when Romeo has returned. She drinks the potion, and when her father and assembled guests appear to lead her to the altar, she collapses as if dead.

Told of the catastrophe but not of the sleeping potion, Romeo arrives at the Capulet crypt. Here he finds his beloved Juliette. Believing her dead, he plans to join her, and drinks poison. Suddenly Juliette awakens and the lovers launch into their final lyrical duet, a dream of their future together. As Romeo grows weaker, Juliette takes his dagger and stabs herself. With a prayer for forgiveness on their lips, the lovers die. – GD

Tragedy and Reconciliation

We think of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as being one of the greatest love stories of all time, along with *Tristan and Isolde*. We are overwhelmed with the romance. However, the *Riverside Shakespeare* divides the bard's plays into Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, and Romances, and R&J is not a romance. It is categorized as a tragedy, right along with *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Gounod and his librettists understood this, and the opera is even more tragic than the play. For example, in the final scene in the tomb, Shakespeare has Romeo entering, and thinking Juliet is dead, he takes poison and dies. Juliet wakes up and finds him dead, and then takes her life. However, in the opera, Romeo takes the poison *just as Juliette is waking up*. She sees him alive, and believes their plot has been successful, until Romeo then tells her that he has taken the poison and is dying. Helplessly, she watches him slowly slip away. She finds the dagger and he sees her take her life just before he dies.

The music of the opera also presents the sharp contrast between the lovers' consuming irrational love and the equally consuming irrational hatred between the rival families.

Romances amuse us, and tragedies teach us. The lesson here is about divisiveness and sectarian conflict, which is a relevant issue today, perhaps more than ever. One might argue that we have made some progress in our society. However, Montagues and Capulets, by other names, are still killing each other and, if we don't figure out how to manage this problem, sectarian violence will kill us all. *Roméo et Juliette* is a great work of art, to be enjoyed and appreciated, but Shakespeare and Gounod are also telling us to pay attention to the cause of this tragedy. There is nothing subtle about this message. They are not telling us to build better defenses against the bad guys in the other political party.

This is a powerful appeal for reconciliation. – GP

Nadine Sierra

Seven years ago, Nadine Sierra sang Gilda for her premiere at La Scala. She and her Rigoletto, Leo Nucci, sang the rousing cabaletta, “*Si, vendetta*,” which ends the second act, punctuated with the curtain drop. Responding to the sustained applause, Sierra and Nucci stepped out in front of the curtain, and the audience would not be contained. La Scala audiences are notorious for being critical—in the best and in the worst sense of that word—and after hearing the duet, the audience wanted to hear it again. La Scala has a policy against mid-performance encores, but after several minutes it was evident the performance would not continue without an encore. The two stars nodded agreement to each other, they received a nod from the manager, and the orchestra picked it up. When Sierra and Nucci finished “*Si, vendetta*” a second time, in front of the curtain, it was not immediately clear whether the audience would let it go at that. Subsequently, for every performance in that series, the audience made the same demand for an encore after “*Si, vendetta*,” and the management allowed it.

In most respects this was not a remarkable production. Leo Nucci had already sung that role hundreds of times. The set was impressive, but traditional, and had been used in many earlier productions. It was clear that the La Scala audience was applauding for the old pro, Nucci, but even more so for the phenomenal Gilda. Nadine Sierra, then only 27, had made history at La Scala.

Ms. Sierra is one of those rare talents identified early in life, who became an international star while her colleagues were still gaining the maturity needed to tackle major roles. She was trained as a child in the Palm Beach Opera’s Young Artist Program, and had her recital debut at age 17 in



Photo: Metropolitan Opera

Marilyn Horne’s “On Wings of Song” recital series in New York. In 2009, Ms. Sierra won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions (now the Laffont Competition) when she was barely old enough to enter this very important career-making event (she turned 20 just in time to get in). Her first aria was “*Je veux vivre*,” Juliette’s first act aria in which she proclaims her joy of life and love and freedom. It was clear that the joy expressed in the aria could only be coming from someone whose basic personality had an enormous capacity for joy. For her final lines, she spun around on stage. She would not be contained.

Later, at the reception on the Grand Tier, Peter Gelb offered his traditional toast to the winners. *Operaphoria* was there, with our glasses of champagne, toasting Ms. Sierra’s winning. With a twinkle in her eye, she commented on the joy of winning the competition when she was not yet old enough to drink the toast.

Making history at La Scala was only seven years later. Along the way, she won multiple awards and competitions. In 2013 she won a First, plus the Audience Choice Award, in the prestigious *Neue Stimmen* (New Voices) competition in Gütersloh, Germany. She won the Richard Tucker Award in 2017, and in 2018 was a sensation as Nannetta in Berlin’s *Falstaff*, the same year she won the Beverly Sills Award. This performance marks her long-awaited Juliette role debut at the Met. — GP

**Announcing the 2024 2025 season:
Met Live in HD
Featured in the next issue of
Operaphoria - April 20, 2024**

Romance, On and Off the Stage

Sometimes the impulsive, romantic energy of *Romeo et Juliette* merges with the personalities of stars who have performed this opera. One such happy story is that of Leopold Simoneau and Pierrette Alerie, the Canadian tenor and soprano who sang and recorded Romeo and Juliette together, got married, and lived happily ever after. Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorghiu fell in love when singing *Boheme* together, and eventually they were married on the Met stage by the New York Mayor (Rudy Giuliani). They often sang Romeo and Juliette together.

Over one hundred years ago, Jean De Reszke was one of the greatest Romeos at the Met, and women swooned in his presence. One night, when singing Romeo in Chicago, a crazed man seeking attention leaped on the stage and the brave Romeo took charge. De Reszke pulled out his stage sword and pinned the intruder to the scenery, holding him at bay until stage hands arrived to help. When order was restored and smelling salts revived those swooning, De Reszke repeated his great aria, “*Ah, leve-toi, soleil!*” and the show went on.

Lucrezia Bori was raised in a convent where she learned to sing, but at age 18 left the convent for the life of a diva. By age 22 she made her debut at La Scala. Singing Juliette, she fell in love with her Romeo—Edward Johnson, a leading tenor at the Metropolitan Opera for many years, before he went on to become the Met’s General Director.

Adelina Patti is often described as the greatest diva of all time. She and her Romeo upset the opera world. The Empress Eugenie had arranged for Patti’s marriage to a well-connected Count. However, when singing Juliette, Patti fell in love with her tenor—Ernesto Nicolini. Their stage kisses generated stimulating intermission gossip. Patti left her Count, Nicolini left his wife, and the lovers lived together for many years after. – GP

Production

***Romeo et Juliette*, by Charles Gounod**

Sat, Mar 23, 2024 12:55 p.m.

Conductor: **Yannick Nézet-Séguin**

Production: **Bartlett Sher**

Juliette: **Nadine Sierra**

Stéphano: **Samantha Hankey**

Romeo: **Benjamin Bernheim**

Mercutio: **Will Liverman**

Frère Laurent: **Alfred Walker**

Tybalt: **Frederick Ballentine**

2023/2024 Metropolitan Opera Live in HD Schedule

***La Rondine*, by Puccini**

April 20, 2024 12:55 pm

A lyric comedy with a sad ending, set in Paris and the Riviera, full of music to set us dancing. Angel Blue is Magda, a French courtesan who, like Violetta, falls for an idealistic lover who convinces her to abandon her life of excess. Jonathan Tetelman is Ruggero. Maestro Speranza Scapucci conducts.

***Madama Butterfly*, by Puccini**

May 11, 2024 12:55 pm

The Anthony Minghella production, with mesmerizing puppetry and sets. Asmik Grigorian in the role of Butterfly, and Jonathan Tetelman is Pinkerton, the insensitive American who destroys her. Elizabeth De Shong is in the supportive role of Suzuki. Maestro Xian Zhang makes her Met debut conducting this beautiful opera, which is also an important socio-political document.