

Operas for December 2018

5 December	Fromental Halévy	La Reine de Chypre
12	Benjamin Britten	Albert Herring
19	Jacques Offenbach	Christopher Columbus
26	Peter I Tchaikovsky	Cherevichki

Notes on the Operas

La reine de Chypre (The Queen of Cyprus) is an 1841 grand opera in five acts composed by Fromental Halévy to a libretto by Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges.

La reine de Chypre, first performed at the Salle Le Peletier of the Paris Opéra on 22 December 1841 with Rosine Stoltz in the title role and Gilbert Duprez as Gérard, was regarded in its time as one of the composer's greatest achievements. Joseph Mazilier was the choreographer, and the ballet starred Adèle Dumilâtre, Natalie Fitzjames, and Pauline Leroux with Marius Petipa and Auguste Mabile. The publisher Maurice Schlesinger was reputed to have paid the enormous sum of 30,000 francs for the rights to the opera.

The opera prompted an extended eulogy from Richard Wagner, who was present at the first night, in the Dresden Abend-Zeitung, for which he was a correspondent. However, since the 19th century it has been rarely revived.

Roles

Andrea Cornaro, Venetian nobleman	bass
Gérard de Coucy, French chevalier	tenor
Jacques de Lusignan, King of Cyprus	baritone
Catarina Cornaro, niece of Andrea, betrothed to the King	contralto
Mocénigo, senator, member of the Council of Ten	baritone
Strozzi, chief rogue	tenor
Herald of arms	bass-baritone

Synopsis

Time: 1441

Place: Venice (Acts 1–2); Cyprus (Acts 3–5)

Act 1: In the Cornaro palace in Venice, Andrea is about to marry his daughter Catarina to Gérard. Mocenigo however announces the decision of the Council of Ten to marry her to the King of Cyprus; otherwise Andrea faces execution. He is given one hour to make up his mind. Andrea revokes his promise to Gérard, to the scandal of all present.

Act 2: Catarina's chamber in the Cornaro palace. Andrea asks Catarina to forgive him. No sooner has he left than, by a secret passage, Mocenigo appears, with a bunch of assassins, and insists that Catarina tell Gérard when she sees him that she no longer loves him otherwise Mocenigo's companions will do away with him. They retreat to the passage while Gérard enters and, to his bewilderment, hears his dismissal from his lover. When he has left Mocenigo reemerges and seizes Catarina to take her to Cyprus.

Act 3: A feast, in Cyprus, awaiting the arrival of Catarina. Mocenigo is informed that Gérard may be lurking in the vicinity. He sets his swordsmen on Gérard, who is saved by the

intervention of a stranger (in fact the King of Cyprus in disguise). Each tells the other his story - as is the custom in such melodramas, without actually giving away their true identities - and they promise eternal brotherhood. The guns sound for Catarina's arrival.

Act 4: At Catarina's marriage festivities, Gérard seeks to revenge himself by slaying her husband, but recognises him at the last moment as his deliverer. The King is equally astonished but prevents Gérard from being slaughtered by the crowd and delivers him to prison.

Act 5: Two years later. The King is dying, and reveals that he knows of her love for Gérard (whom he has spared from execution). He hopes she may be happy with him. Enter Gérard, as a Knight of Malta - he announces that the King is fact dying of Venetian poison and hopes that he can still be saved. Enter Mocenigo to tell them it is too late to save the King, and that Catarina must hand power over to him. Catarina and Gérard however successfully resist the Venetian invasion. Mocenigo is captured. The King with his last breath hands his crown to Catarina, to whom the people swear fealty. Gérard renounces his love.

Albert Herring, Op. 39, is a chamber opera in three acts by Benjamin Britten.

Composed in the winter of 1946 and the spring of 1947, this comic opera was a successor to his serious opera *The Rape of Lucretia*. The libretto, by Eric Crozier, was based on Guy de Maupassant's novella *Le Rosier de Madame Husson*, with the action transposed to an English setting.

Roles

Lady Billows, an elderly aristocrat	soprano
Florence Pike, her housekeeper	contralto
Miss Wordsworth, a schoolteacher	soprano
Mr. Gedge, the vicar	baritone
Mr. Upfold, the mayor	tenor
Superintendent Budd	bass
Sid, a butcher's assistant	baritone
Albert Herring, from the greengrocer's	tenor
Nancy, from the bakery	mezzo-soprano
Mrs. Herring, Albert's mother	mezzo-soprano
Emmie	soprano
Cis	soprano
Harry	treble

Synopsis

Time: April and May 1900

Place: Loxford, a small market town in East Suffolk, England

Act 1: Housekeeper Florence Pike is run ragged. Her mistress Lady Billows is organising the annual May Day festival and has gathered all the important people of the village to elect the May Queen. But Florence has dug up dirt on every single girl nominated, proving that none is worthy to wear the once-much-coveted crown. Lady Billows is depressed. Superintendent Budd suggests that the solution may be to select, this year, a May King instead. He knows of a young man in town who is as certainly virginal as the girls are not: Albert Herring.

Working at the greengrocer's, Albert is teased for his timidity by the easygoing butcher Sid. Sid's girlfriend Nancy comes in to do some shopping, and the couple share a tender moment while Albert looks on. The lovers leave, and Albert reflects on his miserable existence under his mother's thumb. The Festival Committee arrives with the news of his selection as May King. Mrs. Herring is thrilled by the prize of £25, but Albert balks at being paraded in swan-white and mother and son quarrel to the mocking commentary of the village children.

Act 2: It is the day of the festival. Sid and Nancy are preparing the banquet tent, and they take the opportunity to slip some rum into Albert's lemonade glass. Together with a crown of flowers and the gruesome but improving Foxe's *The Book of Martyrs*, Albert is awarded twenty-five pounds in prize money. Asked to make a speech, he is tongue-tied and becomes an object of pity at the feast in his honour, but after draining his lemonade glass (which Britten satirically underlines with a Tristan chord, alluding to the philter in that opera). and having a fit of hiccups he manages a few hip-hip, hurrahs.

That night, Albert arrives home alone and quite drunk. In the street, Sid keeps a rendezvous with Nancy, and the two discuss their sympathetic pity for Albert before going off together. This is the breaking point for Albert, who has overheard. He takes the prize money and heads out looking for adventure.

Act 3: The next morning Albert has not returned, and the village is in a panic. Superintendent Budd is leading the search, while the guilt-stricken Nancy tends to Mrs. Herring. A boy shouts that a "Big White Something" has been found in a well, and the village worthies file in to break the news en masse that Albert's crown of flowers has been discovered, crushed by a cart. A lengthy threnody of grief follows, but is interrupted by the surprise return of Albert. He thanks the Festival Committee for funding his night out. They, in turn, are outraged by his tale of drunken debauchery and leave in a huff. Albert finally stands up to his mother and invites the village children into the shop to enjoy some fruit at his expense.

Christopher Columbus: Music by Jacques Offenbach, book and lyrics by Don White, score compiled and edited by Patric Schmid.

Synopsis

This is the sort of operetta Offenbach might have written and uses much of the music he had intended for a work for America, together with other gems that lie hidden in unperformed Offenbach scores. The racy, witty and brilliantly zany story concerns the amorous adventures of the polygamous Columbus, who, against his will, is sent across the sea pursued by three wives and a fiancée to find the riches of the Indies. He unwittingly comes across an even greater treasure in the shape of a Cola nut, thus discovering not only a new world but one of America's greatest treasures, Coca Cola! Although not an adaptation, this work has been performed successfully by amateurs and is suitable for companies who perform opera or prefer original versions.

The Story

ACT 1: A Square in Cordova in 1492.

The young ladies of Cordova, bored with snapping their castanets, shouting 'Ole', are delighted when Beatriz tells them she is engaged. The object of her affections, Christopher Columbus, explains to the young men of the town that he has discovered the art of seduction - marriage. We soon discover it is an art he has been practising all over Europe, for his past

catches up with him in the shape of Rosa, Fleurette and Gretel, wives he has wooed, won and walked out on in Italy, France and Switzerland. Columbus tries to hide from this trio of termagants in the middle of a demonstration organised by the Round Earth Society, led by Luis de Torres. To no avail. Columbus' wives accuse him of quadrigamy, and Cordova's sensitive Chief of Police arrests him - along with everybody else in sight.

ACT 2: The Royal Palace

Queen Isabella has a hangover. Her attempts to recall the events of the night before are interrupted by a disturbance outside the palace. The prisoners are brought before her. Guilty or not guilty? Columbus is asked. He replies that dazzled by Isabella's beauty he has quite forgotten the defence he had prepared. Case dismissed, says Isabella. And so is everybody else - except, of course, Columbus, who is left alone with Her Majesty to fight for his honour. Just in the nick of time, King Ferdinand arrives. Isabella hastily explains that Columbus was showing her a new way... to the East. Ferdinand thinks this is a splendid idea for replenishing the coffers left empty by Isabella's shopping expeditions, and offers Columbus the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria cheap. Isabella loans her jewels to pay for them (at 49½%) and, as his crew - all of his fellow disturbers of the peace.

ACT 3: Aboard the Santa Maria

Columbus is seasick. The rest of the crew are finding the sea voyage most pleasant - until their first Atlantic storm, and the discovery that they have gone off the map. Once again Columbus is blamed for their misfortune and despite Beatriz' plea for clemency, he is put into a longboat and cast adrift. As they plan to turn back to Spain, the lookout cries 'land ho!'

ACT 4: A deep forest, somewhere in downtown Manhattan.

The ladies feel quite sure that they have not reached the Indies and an attack by Red Indians confirms their doubts. They are saved however by Columbus who, wasting no time, had immediately married Princess Minnehaha on his arrival the day before and is now honorary chief of the tribe. What is more he has discovered gold - not quite the kind they'd been thinking of, but enough to make millionaires of them all. Pausing long enough only to name the New World, and for Luis to announce his engagement to Beatriz, they set sail back to Spain.

Cherevichki (Russian: Черевички, Cherevichki, Čerevički, The Slippers; alternative renderings are The Little Shoes, The Tsarina's Slippers, The Empress's Slippers, The Golden Slippers, The Little Slippers, Les caprices d'Oxane, and Gli stivaletti) is a comic-fantastic opera in 4 acts, 8 scenes, by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. It was composed in 1885 in Maidanovo, Russia. The libretto was written by Yakov Polonsky, and is based on the story "Christmas Eve", part of a collection called Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka, by Nikolai Gogol. The opera is a revision of Tchaikovsky's earlier opera Vakula the Smith. The work was first performed in 1887 in Moscow.

Roles

Vakula, a smith	tenor
Vakula's mother, a witch	mezzo-soprano
Chub, an elderly Cossack	bass
Oksana, Chub's daughter	soprano
A devil from Hell, a fantastic character	bass

Schoolmaster	tenor
Pan Golova, Chub's crony	bass
Panas, Chub's crony	tenor
His Highness	bass
Master of Ceremonies	bass
Attendant	tenor
Old Cossack	bass
Wood Goblin	bass

Synopsis

Time: The end of the 18th century

Place: In the village of Dikanka, Ukraine; St. Petersburg

Act 1: The widow Solokha agrees to help the Devil steal the moon. The Devil is annoyed with Solokha's son Vakula who painted an icon mocking him. The Devil decides to create a snowstorm to prevent Vakula from seeing his beloved Oxana. While the storm rages, Solokha rides up to the sky and steals the moon, while Oxana's father Chub and the Deacon are unable to find their way. Oxana is alone and lonely at home. She passes through several moods and the music follows her with gradually accelerating tempos. At one point, Vakula enters and watches her admiring herself. She teases him, and he says he loves her. Chub comes back out of the storm, and Vakula, not recognizing him, chases him out by striking him. Seeing what he has done, Oxana sends Vakula away in a miserable state. Young people from the village come around singing Ukrainian Christmas carols. Oxana realizes she still loves Vakula.

Act 2: In a peculiar and amusing first scene three men and the Devil wind up in three sacks at Solokha's hut after successively trying to seduce her, and Vakula winds up hauling the heavy sacks away. Outside three groups of carollers contend. Oxana shames Vakula into getting her the Tsaritsa's boots or else she won't marry him. He runs threatening suicide, leaving two bags which turn out to have the Deacon and Chub.

Act 3: A forest sprite warns water nymphs that Vakula is coming and that he wants to commit suicide. The Devil jumps out of Vakula's sack and tries to get his soul in exchange for Oxana but Vakula instead climbs on the Devil's back. Vakula forces the Devil to take him to St. Petersburg. The Devil puts down Vakula in the tsaritsa's court and disappears into the fireplace. Vakula joins a group of cossacks who are going to see the tsaritsa. In the hall of columns, a chorus sings the tsaritsa's praises, a polonaise. Vakula requests the tsaritsa's boots in a minuet, and it is granted because it is an unusual and amusing thing to ask. The Devil takes Vakula away as Russian and Cossack dances commence.

Act 4: The Act opens in the town square on a bright Christmas morning. Solokha and Oxana think Vakula has drowned himself, and mourn for him. Oxana runs off weeping when villagers invite her to the Christmas feast. Vakula returns with the boots, asks Chub to forgive him for the beating and asks for Oxana's hand in marriage. She enters, tells Vakula that she wants him, not the silly boots. Chub calls for the kobzari (the lutenists), and everyone celebrates.