

## Operas for March

|                |                      |                 |
|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| <b>March 6</b> | Béatrice et Bénédict | Berlioz         |
| <b>13</b>      | Salome               | Richard Strauss |
| <b>20</b>      | Proserpin            | Saint-Saëns     |
| <b>27</b>      | Le Roi Arthus        | Chausson        |

### **Béatrice et Bénédict [Beatrice and Benedict]**

**Berlioz**

Béatrice et Bénédict is an opera in two acts by Hector Berlioz. Berlioz wrote the French libretto himself, based closely on Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Berlioz composed the score of *Béatrice et Bénédict* following the completion of *Les Troyens* in 1858. It was first performed at the Theater der Stadt, Baden-Baden on 9 August 1862

The first performances of the opera in France took place at the Opéra-Comique in 1890. It was again produced at that theatre in 2010. Although rather infrequently performed and not part of the standard operatic repertoire, other recent productions have included Amsterdam and Welsh National Opera tour in 2001, Santa Fe Opera in 2004, Strasbourg in 2005, Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2007, Houston Grand Opera in 2008, and Opera Boston in 2011.

Time: The 16th century. Place: Messina, Sicily.

#### **Act 1**

Don Pedro, prince of Aragon, is visiting Messina after a successful military victory over the Moors, which is celebrated by all of Sicily. He is joined by two friends and fellow soldiers, Claudio and Bénédict. They are greeted by Léonato, governor of Messina, together with his daughter, Héro, and niece, Béatrice.

Héro awaits the return of her fiancé, Claudio. Béatrice inquires about and scorns Bénédict. They trade insults and tease each other. Bénédict swears to his friends that he will never marry. Later, Claudio and Pedro scheme to trick Bénédict into marrying Béatrice. Knowing that he is listening, Léonato assures Pedro that Béatrice loves Bénédict. Upon hearing this, Bénédict resolves that Béatrice's love must not go unrequited, and so he decides to pursue her. Meanwhile, elsewhere, Héro and her attendant, Ursula, manage to play a similar trick on Béatrice who now believes that Bénédict is secretly in love with her.

#### **Act 2**

To celebrate the pending wedding of Claudio and Héro, Léonato hosts a masquerade party. A local music teacher, Somarone, leads the group in song and everybody enjoys themselves except Béatrice who realizes that she has fallen in love with Bénédict. As she turns to leave she is met by Bénédict, prompting an exchange in which they both attempt to conceal their love for each other. A notary solemnizes the marriage and, as arranged by Léonato, asks a second couple to come forward. Bénédict summons the courage to declare his love to Béatrice and the two sign the wedding contract along with Héro and Claudio.

### **Salome: Richard Strauss**

Based on a play by Oscar Wilde written in French and translated into German by Hedwig Lachmann.

Time: A.D. Place: 30Judea.

The opera is in one Act of four scenes.

From the moonlit terrace of King Herod's palace, Narraboth, captain of the guard, gazes rapturously inside at the Princess Salome, who is feasting with her stepfather and his court. The voice of the prophet Jochanaan echoes from a deep cistern, where he is imprisoned by the king, who fears him. Salome, bored with Herod's lechery and his coarse guests, rushes out for fresh air and becomes curious when she hears Jochanaan curse Herodias, her mother. When the soldiers refuse to bring Jochanaan to her, Salome turns her wiles on Narraboth, who orders that Jochanaan be summoned. Salome is fascinated by the prophet's deathly pallor and pours out her uncontrollable desire to touch him. The prophet rejects her, speaking of the Son of God who will come to save mankind. When Salome continues to beg for Jochanaan's kiss, Narraboth stabs himself in horror, and the prophet descends into the cistern, urging her to seek salvation in the Messiah. The girl collapses in frustration and longing.

Herod appears, followed by his court. When he slips in Narraboth's blood, he becomes unnerved and begins to experience hallucinations, which Herodias scorns. Herod's thoughts turn to Salome, who spurns his attentions. Renewed abuse from Jochanaan's subterranean voice harasses Herodias, who demands that Herod turn the prophet over to the Jews. Herod's refusal incurs an argument among several Jews concerning the nature of God, and a narrative of Christ's miracles by two Nazarenes.

Herod begs Salome to divert him by dancing and offers her anything she might wish in return. Salome makes him swear he will live up to his promise, then dances, slowly shedding seven veils and finishing her performance at his feet. Salome demands the head of Jochanaan on a silver platter, ignoring Herod's desperate alternatives - jewels, rare birds, a sacred veil. The terrified king finally gives in. After a tense pause, the arm of the executioner rises from the cistern, offering the head to Salome. As clouds obscure the moon, Salome seizes her reward passionately, addressing Jochanaan as if he lived and triumphantly kissing his lips. Overcome with revulsion, Herod orders the soldiers to kill Salome.

### **Proserpine: Saint-Saëns**

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921) was a truly prolific composer, writing in most genres. He wrote twelve operas and collaborated with Dukas to complete Ernest Guiraud's *Frédégonde*.

Of his own operas only *Samson et Dalila* is today performed with some kind of regularity, but during his lifetime *Henry VIII* was a repertoire work and some scholars maintain that *Ascanio*, written immediately after *Proserpine*, is a much better work than even *Samson et Dalila*. *Proserpine* was his sixth opera. It is a relatively short work, with a playing time of just under 100 minutes.

*Proserpine*, a lyric drama in four acts was set to a libretto by Louis Gallet after a play by Auguste Vacquerie. It was premiered at the Opera-Comique, Paris on 14 March 1887.

The characters and artists singing them in the recording we're playing are as follows:

Proserpine – Véronique Gens (soprano)

Angiola – Marie-Adeline Henry (soprano)

Sabatino – Frédéric Antoun (tenor)

Squarocca – Andrew Foster-Williams (bass-baritone)

Renzo – Jean Teitgen (bass)

Orlando – Mathias Vidal (tenor)

Ercole – Philippe-Nicolas Martin (baritone)

Filippo / Gil – Artavazd Sargsyan (tenor)

Une Religieuse – Clémence Tilquin (soprano)

The Flemish Radio Choir and the Münchner Rundfunkorchester conducted by Ulf Schirmer.

### **Synopsis**

**Act 1** - The setting is Italy in the 16th century and Proserpine, a courtesan, gives a feast in her palazzo. She rejects all her past or future lovers and only sighs “Sabatino has not come”.

This young man is attracted to the courtesan and she is secretly in love with him, keeping him, however, at arm’s length. But when she learns that he is going to marry his friend Renzo’s sister Angiola who is in a convent in Turin, she decides to spy on him, making use of a well known villain, Squarocca, who has been caught red handed trying to steal her jewellery.

**Act 2** - In the second act we meet Angiola there when she is visited by her brother Renzo, and Sabatino. He and Angiola express their love to each other and exchange rings.

A group of pilgrims arrive, among them is Squarocca, who has been sent by Proserpine to find out who Angiola is.

He quickly establishes that the girl is so beautiful that Proserpine may well die of jealousy.

**Act 3** - In the third act we are in the mountains, where a group of gypsies are dancing a tarantella. Proserpine, disguised as a gypsy girl is waiting for Squarocca. She is furious at his news but the villain has arranged that when Renzo and Angiola pass by, their carriage will break down and Squarocca, pretending to help Renzo repair it will, instead, tie him up to a tree.

In the meantime Proserpine pretends to tell Angiola’s fortune and warns her that she has to break off the engagement with Sabatino.

Angiola tries to escape and is stopped by Squarocca but Renzo has managed to free himself and rushes in and saves his sister.

**Act 4** - In the short last act we meet Sabatino in his apartment, where he is waiting for his bride-to-be. Instead Proserpine unexpectedly arrives and confesses that even though she pretended otherwise, she has always loved him. He rejects Proserpine's plea, wanting no more of his past dissolute life, and asks her to leave through a back-door when he hears the carriage arriving. But Proserpine hides behind a curtain and observes the encounter between the lovers. She realises that they really love each other and in a rage, attacks Angiola with a stiletto. Sabatino manages to prevent her from hurting Angiola and Proserpine, realising that she has lost, stabs herself instead. But before dying, wishes Sabatino and Angiola a happy life together.

### **Le roi Arthus**

### **Chausson**

Le roi Arthus (King Arthur) is an opera in three acts by the French composer Ernest Chausson to his own libretto. It was composed between 1886 and 1895, and first performed 30 November 1903 at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, after long delays. The musical style is heavily influenced by the works of Richard Wagner, particularly *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, as well as César Franck. The scenery at the premiere was designed by Albert Dubosq and the symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff; it was executed by Dubosq's atelier

together with Chausson's brother-in-law Henri Lerolle and under the supervision of Chausson's widow.

## **Le Roi Arthur**

### **Act One: Tableau I**

Arthur, in his castle of Carduel, celebrates his victory over the Saxons. He publicly praises Lancelot, who is also congratulated by Queen Guinevere. Mordred, who is jealous of both, plots vengeance and discovers the secret of a nocturnal tryst that the Queen has promised Lancelot.

### **Tableau II**

Mordred takes the lovers by surprise, but falls to the knight's sword, and Lancelot, at Guinevere's urging, takes flight into the forest.

### **Act Two: Tableau III**

The peace of Nature and the song of a ploughman contrast with Lancelot's inner torment as he waits for news from Guinevere. She brings news that Mordred was only wounded, and has talked. Of the court, only Arthur still believes Lancelot to be innocent, and he has summoned him to Carduel. Despite the urgings of the Queen, who has lied in public, Lancelot refuses to perjure himself. He instead decides to flee with Guinevere in order to be able "to love without having to lie".

### **Tableau IV**

Sadly, Arthur awaits the knight and, eager to know the truth, calls on Merlin the wizard, who predicts the fall of his kingdom. At this, his illusions dispelled, the old king sets off to wage war on his betrayer.

### **Act Three: Tableau V**

In the battle, Lancelot's courage fails him when he recognizes Arthur with his sword Excalibur and he takes flight. Guinevere scolds him and he returns to the battle, where he seeks only to avert any danger to the King and to die. Left alone, Guinevere strangles herself with her hair.

### **Tableau VI**

Regaining consciousness despite his mortal wounds, Lancelot calls on Arthur to avenge himself. But Arthur, having risen above human troubles, forgives him, and calls on divine mercy. Voices summon the old king, inviting him to peace and oblivion, and a heavenly chariot comes down to hear him off to a better world, where he will find rest whilst waiting to take up his great work again and embody once more his noble ideal.