

Shakespeare at the Opera! Rare Video Series

Welcome to this special video series. I am truly sorry that I cannot be with you for *Shakespeare at the Opera!* However, with the guidance of Robert Fordham, I have been able to assemble a series of truly rare and beautiful productions inspired by Shakespeare's plays that we believe you will enjoy.

Our first to be shown on **Sept. 15** is Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, the original Italian story that inspired Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. **What to listen for:** This is a bel-canto opera so the emphasis is upon vocal elegance – many notes (melisma!), many repeats (each different!) and much reflection. Bellini also substitutes a mezzo in the role of Roméo for the expected tenor which allows for some spectacular vocal blending.

What to look for: This is an opulent production specially staged for the Ravenna Festival featuring Medieval Tuscan castles enhanced by spectacular lighting. The effects are haunting and an opera experience that you will long remember!

The opera will be completed on **Sept. 22** followed by *William Shakespeare: A Life of Drama*, an especially fine and award-winning documentary. What is important to remember is, the final days and plays of Shakespeare dovetail in time to the rise and development of opera, and this film highlights that.

Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* to be shown on **Sept. 29** is taken directly from Shakespeare's play. But with a big difference! It has been made into a French Grand Opera, a form that requires a huge cast, a huge chorus, and a ballet! Yet all of that centers about Shakespeare's hero for a truly sensitive work. **What to listen for:** Super stars Natalie Dessay and Simon Keenlyside sing Ophelia (Ophélie) and Hamlet. While these two spin out some mesmerizing duets, they also each have incredible arias, especially Dessay's difficult and intricate mad scene and Keenlyside's robust drinking song (Shakespeare's advice to the players).

What to look for: While the design for this Gran Theatre del Liceu production may seem spare and unusually severe at times, it does come close to matching Shakespeare's spare and moody Elinsore. This should be a special treat, for this work is highly distinguished in many, many ways.

Since this is a five-act work, it will be completed on **October 6th**.

Shakespeare's comic *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has inspired a number of fun, rollicking operas by Verdi, Otto Nicolai, and Sir Ralph Vaughan-Williams. However, there is one version rarely seen and much under-appreciated, and that is Antonio Salieri's *Falstaff*. We unfortunately know too much about Salieri from

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the movies, and not enough from listening to his wonderful operas. (No, he did not poison Mozart!). So we will make up for it by seeing this rollicking production on **October 13th**.

What to listen for: This is a joyous *opera buffa* brimming with sunny tunes and melodies. San Francisco Opera's own John Del Carlo sings the title role with great aplomb and comic gusto, creating a truly funny character. He is well aided by Teresa Ringholz and Delores Ziegler as the too-merry wives, and Richard Croft as a very fine Ford.

What to look for: The design and costumes are tongue-in-cheek Edwardian in place of the standard Elizabethan which seem to work just fine. Be sure to watch for glimpses of the charming gold-and-ivory interior of the tiny Schwetzingen Festspielhaus, a baroque gem. The opera will be completed on 20th followed by...

Ambroise Thomas's lovely and witty *A Mid-summer Night's Dream*. Be prepared, this is not Shakespeare's moon-lit fairy fantasy. Rather this a grand French farce with sparkling tunes and wonderful arias. The plot is about what happens one mid-summer night when Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare are forced into taking shelter from a storm in a pub on Bankside.

The results are great fun!

What to listen for: Expect aria after saucy aria, and ensemble after raucous ensemble and especially memorable moments by the Queen and her attendant and Shakespeare in all his ardor. And a most beautiful tryst for the two in the garden by moonlight (the storm having abated!) But also give a close look at the chorus. For there you will see a provocative Antony and his Cleopatra, a lingering Romeo and Juliet, an imperious Julius Caesar, a moody Hamlet, and a leering Lord and Lady Macbeth, in other words, all of Shakespeare's characters.

What to watch for: This Elizabethan-styled production features sets and costumes from the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, and decor by the famous French Théâtre Impérial de Compiègne.

Brevity is not the soul of wit to the French (as it might be to the English and Italians), so this opera will be completed at the two final sessions on October 27th and November 3rd.

These rare productions are just a highlight of the varied operas and composers inspired by Shakespeare's plays that will be a feature of Shakespeare at the Opera at Fromm.

Prof. James Keolker, 2009