



THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom

RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN **Oklahoma!**

The piece that changed musical theatre forever: from a genre of entertaining and comic ambition to one of Broadway shows that could tell a story movingly and dramatically through their book and through their songs. Of course, *Oklahoma!* emerges from the context of everything that its composer and librettist had realised in their previous creative partnerships, yet this show, the first Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration, crystallised a new ambition and achievement for the musical.

It's the same in the story of opera, because for all the continuity of the repertoire from Monteverdi to Thomas Adès, there have always been pieces that seem to rewrite the music-theatre rule-book, works that are a reaction to what had gone before but which manage to say something that speaks directly and sometimes shockingly to the audiences of their time.

Mozart's *Idomeneo* is one such opera. Mozart knew that he was pushing himself with the composition of this piece for Munich in 1781. He had just turned 25 when *Idomeneo* premiered, and he thought of it as the summit of his creative life, an operatic crucible in which he would simultaneously show how he could take on the behemoth of *opera seria*, the highest and grandest of late 18th-century operatic forms, and do something with it that no other composer had dared. Mozart dissolved the static forms of *opera seria* – such as aria and recitative – into a dynamic dramatic flow, so that the music and narrative are fused together. This story of fidelity, duty, shipwrecks and monsters is told through Mozart's protean transformations of the

musical texture, from chorus to instrumental to aria to quartet. The sense of Mozart pushing himself, his audiences and operatic form pulses through every note of this opera, arguably the single most self-consciously ambitious work of his life.

By the 1860s, **Wagner** had already revealed new visions of music-dramatic possibility in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* (the most performed of all his works in his lifetime, incidentally), but it was his erotic-mystical-love-death-music-dramatic-organism *Tristan and Isolde*, finally premiered in 1865, that changed the possibilities of opera most radically. That's because Wagner liquidated the rules of musical harmony just as surely as this piece dissolved the boundaries of good taste and civic morality in realising the story of Tristan and Isolde's potion-addled, society-confounding love on the operatic stage. Munich's aristocratic young ladies were banned from seeing it, Clara Schumann thought it the most repulsive thing she had ever witnessed, and the rest of musical and aesthetic history has never quite recovered from the shock of this opera's dangerous dissonances.

And in Britain in 1945, the world awaited the premiere of **Britten's *Peter Grimes***, the biggest statement by the most vaunted talent of the younger generation of English composers. *Peter Grimes* wasn't a piece that went further than previous operatic composers, either in its musical language or its story, however grimly, ambiguously dark is the tale of Grimes, Suffolk's ultimate loner, and the disastrous fate of his young apprentices. *Grimes* isn't as musically extreme as **Berg's *Wozzeck***, which was already 20 years old; nor does it create a new kind of music-theatre, like **Weill's** Weimar Republic-era

shows such as *The Threepenny Opera*. Yet *Peter Grimes* had both a national and a global significance because it turned the tide for opera in the 20th century, by showing that opera in English could have its place in the repertoires of opera houses all over the world. And the territory that Britten opened up with *Peter Grimes* is even more fertile today, as the operas of Judith Weir, Sir George Benjamin, Oliver Knussen, Julian Anderson, Tansy Davies, Thomas Adès – and many others – so vividly prove.



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