



Capriccio

A CONVERSATION PIECE
FOR MUSIC



Libretto by Clemens Krauss and Richard Strauss
Music by Richard Strauss

First Performance October 28, 1942, National Theatre, Munich

Study Guide for Pacific Opera Victoria's Production
February / March 2010

PRODUCTION PATRON: DAVID H. FLAHERTY



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Welcome to Pacific Opera Victoria!

This Study Guide and the attached Activity Guide have been created primarily to assist teachers in preparing students for their visit to the opera. It is our hope that teachers will be able to add this to the existing curriculum in order to expand students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students. Some students may wish to go over the information at home if there is not enough time to discuss in class. The opera experience can be made more meaningful and enjoyable when students have the opportunity to learn about the opera before they attend the performance.

Please visit <http://www.pov.bc.ca> to download this study guide or to find more information about *Capriccio*, including musical selections from POV's Best of YouTube and artist biographies. POV Study Guides for other operas are also available for download.

Teachers: Your comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire at the end of this study guide.

Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their voice for opening night.

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CAPRICCIO: A CONVERSATION PIECE FOR MUSIC

Libretto by Clemens Krauss and Richard Strauss

Music by Richard Strauss

First Performance October 28, 1942, National Theatre, Munich

Dress Rehearsal, Tuesday, February 23, 2010, 7:30 pm

Performances: February 25, March 2, 4, 6, 2010, 8 pm; February 27, 3 pm

The Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

Sung in German, with English Surtitles

The performance is approximately 135 minutes, with no intermission.

Cast and Creative Team

Cast in order of vocal appearance

Flamand, a composer	Kurt Lehmann
Olivier, a poet	Joshua Hopkins
La Roche, the theatre director	Brian Bannatyne-Scott
The Countess Madeleine	Erin Wall
The Count, her brother	James Westman
Clairon, an actress	Norine Burgess
Italian Tenor	Michael Colvin
Italian Soprano	Virginia Hatfield
Servants	Andrew Buckley, Christopher Hinz, Andrew Snyder, Delwynne Windell Steven De Vries, Andy Erasmus Sam Marcaccini, Paul Winkelmans, Doug MacNaughton Patrick Raftery
The Major-Domo	
Monsieur Taupe	
Dancers	Andrea Bayne, Paul Destrooper
Maids	Ashley Green, Tamara Rusque
Musician/Gamesman	Frank Morin
The French Poodle	Intrigues Predominant Legend (Marshall)
Conductor	Timothy Vernon
Director	Robert McQueen
Set and Costume Designer	Christina Poddubiuk
Lighting Designer	Alan Brodie
Choreographer	Paul Destrooper
Resident Stage Manager	Jackie Adamthwaite
Assistant Stage Managers	Steve Barker, Kate Wallace
Principal Coach	Robert Holliston
Associate Conductor	Giuseppe Pietraroia

With the Victoria Symphony

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Introduction

How to solve a love triangle? Commission an opera! ... who knew?

At their chateau outside Paris, the Countess Madeleine and her brother the Count host a group of artists, who rehearse the entertainment for Madeleine's birthday – while eating, drinking, flirting, and arguing passionately about theatre and opera. The poet, Olivier, and the composer, Flamand, are rivals for Madeleine's love. Finally she tells them to collaborate on an opera – and she will decide how it ends. But it's not that simple! This is a woman who wants to have her cake and eat it!

Infused with humour and wit, *Capriccio* is both an entertaining love triangle and a luscious satire on the arts. It is sophisticated (Strauss called it a bonbon for the connoisseur), and it repays with richness and delight the effort of getting to know it.

Anyone can luxuriate in the gorgeous orchestration and elegant ambience. And even as it probes the nature of love and the meaning of art, *Capriccio* is wickedly funny. Here are wonderful comic characters: a tipsy Italian soprano; a tenor obsessed with his fees; a Count for whom art is but the way into an actress's bed; a poet who is infuriated when the composer ruins his verse by setting it to music; a theatre director who insists the public wants just pretty girls, eye-filling sets, and grandiose special effects; and a prompter, who, by the simple act of falling asleep on the job, can sabotage a play and bring the whole edifice of art tumbling down: *When I sleep I become a sensation. The actors cannot go on speaking, the audience wakes up!*

The knowledgeable musician will find *Capriccio* to be a compendium of operatic styles and a guide to opera history. It brims with musical quotations from Couperin, Gluck, Rameau, Verdi, Wagner – and Strauss, who recycles some of his old tunes and slips a number of in-jokes into the fascinating brew.

Synopsis

Strauss originally set Capriccio in a luxurious chateau near Paris at the time when Gluck began his reform of opera, about 1775. Marie Antoinette had just become Queen of France; the French Revolution was yet to come. Pacific Opera Victoria's production is set in the elegant 18th century family home of the Count and Countess, but the time has been moved to the late 1930s – the era in which the opera was written.

Scene 1

The Count and his sister, the Countess Madeleine, are hosting a house party at which a group of artists will rehearse the entertainment for the Countess's approaching birthday. As the opera opens, the Countess is listening raptly to a charming string sextet by the composer Flamand, while the theatre director La Roche sleeps. Flamand and the poet Olivier watch the Countess intently and adoringly – and quickly realize that they are both in love with her. They agree they are friendly rivals in both love and art – words against music.

La Roche wakes up, observing contentedly that he sleeps best to gentle music. Flamand and Olivier are irritated that their destiny lies in such hands as his, but La Roche counters that without his staging, their works are nothing but paper. The discussion turns to the operas of Gluck, whom Flamand and Olivier admire, but La Roche holds forth on the merits of the Italian composer Piccinni.

(The score here quotes the overture from Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*, whose 1774 premiere sparked often

violent conflict between “Gluckists” and “Piccinnists”. Gluck wanted to restore the balance of music and words in opera, making the drama of the work more important than the virtuoso singers who dominated Italian opera with their extravagant ornamentation and brilliant embellishments.)

La Roche complains that Gluck's orchestra drowns out the singers – he hankers for the good old days of Italian opera. While Flamand and Olivier scorn the idea of catering to the masses, La Roche calls for human characters that will appeal to the man in the street – a musical comedy, beautiful arias, lots of spectacle, pretty girls. Talk turns to the charming actress Clairon, an old flame of Olivier's.

Noticing that the Countess is still under the spell of Flamand's music, La Roche adds that it's a pity he slept through it himself. All three speak admiringly of her beauty and charm. *And a widow* adds La Roche meaningfully, before whisking them off to get ready to rehearse Olivier's new play.

Scene 2

The Count and Countess enter. Unlike her brother, Madeleine has been carried away by Flamand's music. She comments on the music of Couperin – pretty but shallow – and of Rameau – superb, but spoiled for her by the bad manners of the man (meanwhile the orchestra quotes snippets from these composers). The Count tells her she needs to distinguish the man from his music and suggests that her response to Flamand's composition is coloured by her attraction to him. She counters that his praise for Olivier's play has a lot to do with his interest in the actress Clairon.

The Count then points out that Madeleine has two admirers and asks which she'll choose. *Perhaps neither*, she responds, *for choosing either means I must lose one.*

Scene 3

The others return, and La Roche reviews the programme for the birthday celebrations: Flamand's piece, followed by Olivier's play, in which the Count and Clairon will act the parts of the lovers, and finally, a spectacular production by La Roche's company, featuring fantastic tableaux, a magnificent ballet, and singers with astonishing voices and high trills, performing real Italian opera. But La Roche refuses to reveal any more details.

Scene 4

The famous actress Clairon arrives, and everyone is afluster with admiration. Clairon and the Count read a love scene from Olivier's play. Unaccompanied by the orchestra, their dialogue is entirely words – pure poetry, with no music. It culminates in a love sonnet (*Kein Andres, das mir so im Herzen loht*). Clairon compliments the Count on his reading of the lines, and off they go to the small theatre in the next room to work with La Roche on staging the play. La Roche forbids Olivier to attend the rehearsal, telling him to trust in the director's genius.

Olivier tells the Countess that the Count's reading of the love sonnet was addressed to the wrong person. He then recites the verses directly and passionately to her. As he is speaking, Flamand begins to improvise a little melody on the harpsichord and then, inspired, rushes off to set the words to music.

Scene 5

When the horrified Olivier tries to stop Flamand from meddling with his precious verse, the Countess tells him to wait and see. She then teases him, asking if he has no prose to deliver now that the two of them are alone. He expresses his ardent devotion, but she has half an eye on Flamand who is happily spinning poetry into song. Olivier entreats her to choose between music and poetry and crown the victor, just as Flamand rushes in, flourishing the completed manuscript.

Scene 6

Flamand sings the sonnet to his own harpsichord accompaniment.

*Nothing else flames so in my heart,
no, Lady, nothing is there on earth's whole face,
nothing else that I could sigh for as for you,
in vain would Venus herself come down to grant my will.*

*What joy, what pain your gentle eye bestows;
and if a glance should heighten all that pain...
the next restore my fondest hope and bliss entire;
two glances signify then life ... or death.*

*And, though I lived five hundred thousand years,
save you, miraculous fair, there could not be
another creature hold sway over me.*

*Through fresh veins I must needs let flow my blood;
my own with you are filled to overflowing
and new love then could find not room nor pause.*

The Countess is deeply moved; she feels that the music and the words seem always to have been waiting for one another; the two together transcend either alone.

Meanwhile Olivier mutters furiously that Flamand has stolen his poem: *The rhymes destroyed, the sentences dismembered... Who can hear the slightest sense in the text? ... This lucky man climbs my words like a ladder to victory! ... Is it now his poem, or still my own?*

The Countess declares that the sonnet now belongs to her, and Flamand agrees enthusiastically. The Countess tells the sulking poet, *No matter how you may resent it, dear friend, you are both inseparably united in this sonnet of mine!*

Things are not about to get any better for the poet, for now La Roche comes to discuss some brilliant cuts he intends to make to Olivier's play. Joking about the proposed amputation, the two depart, leaving Flamand alone with the Countess.

Scene 7

Now it is Flamand's turn to declare his love to Madeleine and ask her to make a choice. She vacillates: *Everything is such a tangle – Words are singing, music speaks!*

Flamand tenderly recalls how he first came to love Madeleine one afternoon in her library when she, unaware of his presence, read for a while as he watched, enchanted. As dusk fell, she left, and he picked up the volume she had left open and in the twilight read the lines by Pascal: *In Love, silence is better than speech. There is something of eloquence in silence that is stronger than words and more persuasive.*

Madeleine asks why Flamand, a musician, is resorting to words. He retorts that his music does not yet seem to

have touched her heart. She finally agrees to give him her answer the next morning at eleven, in the library where he first found love; overcome with excitement, he rushes off. The Countess contemplates her dilemma. As the rehearsal in the next room winds up, she calls the major-domo to serve chocolate.

Scene 8

The Count enters, exuberantly reporting on Clairon's charm and revelling in her praise for his acting. Madeleine warns him that he has been captivated by the actress's flattery. She then tells her brother that both the poet and the musician have declared their love for her. The Count tells her that in a choice between words and music, he'd stay with the words.

Scene 9

The others enter, and Clairon graciously praises the Count's spirit and compliments him on his imperturbability: *Our prompter had fallen asleep... and the Count went on reading with bravura, not even once forgetting a line.*

As they all savour their chocolate, La Roche brings in a pair of dancers to perform three short dances – a Passepied, a Gigue, and a Gavotte – in the style of Couperin and Rameau.

During the Passepied, La Roche chats with the Count, expounding on the beauty and grace of the young ballerina, his newest discovery, whom he is grooming for a great future, both on stage and off.

As the Gigue begins, Olivier approaches Clairon, but she is interested in neither his flattery nor his attempts to make peace; it is clear they had a love affair that ended badly. As Clairon walks away from the poet, the observant La Roche notes that Olivier is unlikely to play an impressive role in her memoirs (the real-life Hyppolyte Clairon, a leading actress-courtesan of the Comédie Française did indeed publish her memoirs in 1799).

Only for the Gavotte do the dancers have the attention of the entire company. They finish amid general applause and fulsome compliments from the Count: *Your performance charmed and delighted me. Just as our thoughts free the mind from the body and lift us into a higher world, so does dance overcome the force of gravity. The body seems to hover, accompanied by moving music.*

The Count then points out to Flamand that here his music is merely a delicious accompaniment. Flamand defends his art vigorously: *If it were not for Music, no one on earth would ever dream of moving a muscle.* Olivier chimes in, saying that music and dance are constrained by rhythm and that only poetry offers true freedom and

clarity of thought. Flamand insists that music is replete with meaning – *In a single chord you experience a world!*

La Roche weighs in on behalf of theatre as the supreme art. The Countess agrees: *The theatre unveils for us the secrets of reality. In its magic mirror we discover ourselves.*

The debate continues.

Olivier: *Poetry is the mother of all arts.*

Flamand: *Music is the root from which everything springs ... The cry of pain preceded language.*

Olivier: *The real depth of the Tragic can only be expressed when a poet puts it into words.*

The Countess reminds them that it is possible to create a musical tragedy, at which the Count suddenly cries, *Stop! One more step and we stand before the abyss! We're already face to face with an opera!*

Olivier complains that composers and poets obstruct one another dreadfully and waste untold effort in bringing an opera into the world. The Count adds, *An opera is an absurd thing. Orders are sung; affairs of state are discussed in duets; people dance on graves and suicide takes place melodically.*

Clairon chimes in that she wouldn't mind people dying with an aria on their lips, except that she finds the words so much worse than the music. The Countess brings forward Gluck as an example of someone who makes the words and the music equal. At this, the Count launches into a complaint about the unspeakable boredom of recitatives. La Roche pontificates on the deafening noise of the orchestra, which drowns out the singers, forcing them to shriek. He waxes nostalgic on the subject of song and the beauty of the human voice, mourning the great tradition of Italian song: *Bel Canto is slowly dying!*

To illustrate the magnificence of Bel Canto, La Roche brings in two singers to perform an ornamental little duet from an Italian opera with a text by Metastasio. The words are a sorrowful lovers' farewell, *Farewell, my life, farewell, do not weep for my fate ... Farewell, light of my eyes.*

The Countess observes that the text doesn't seem to suit the music. Flamand and Olivier agree that it takes a certain art to use a cheerful tune to express great sorrow.

The Count and Clairon have a flirtatious interchange, with Clairon agreeing to let the Count escort her back to Paris to read lines with her.

The Countess persuades La Roche to reveal to the group a few details of the grandiose production he is preparing for her birthday celebration. There are two parts, he tells

them. First, a depiction of the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus. La Roche explains the story to his befuddled audience: after Zeus and Metis conceived the child, Zeus swallowed the mother, and the daughter grew inside him until she emerged, fully armed, from his head.

Carried away with amusement, his listeners join in an octet (*The Laughing Ensemble*) and mock the notion of trying to depict this preposterous story on stage. Clairon calls it a bizarre depiction of the joys of fatherhood. The Count, convinced that theatre people are nuts, cracks up at the image of Athena riding in full armour out of Zeus' head to celebrate his sister's birthday. The Italian soprano rhapsodizes about the cake, while the tenor worries they won't be paid for the gig and then berates the soprano for drinking too much.

Flamand imitates the orchestration for the moment when the goddess, with shield and spear, slips out from the head of her father: *Drums and Cymbals! Tschin! Tschin! Boom! Boom!* Olivier anticipates the wonders of La Roche's directorial abilities as Hephaestus swings his hammer to break open Zeus' head so the baby goddess can be born. *His skull throbs! He's relieved!*

The Countess is enchanted by La Roche's intensity and his wild imagination, and a little touched by his seriousness and naïveté. La Roche castigates the younger generation for their irreverence and ignorance in making fun of mythology. *Nothing is sacred! ... No understanding of my inspiration! ... Present-day youth has no respect!*

Seeing that La Roche is offended, the Countess soothes him, explaining that although they are impressed by his brilliant idea, they can't imagine how on earth it could be staged – *We're just amateurs*. But she's sure he'll pull it off with his great skill as a director.

And what is the subject of the second part of your spectacle? she asks. *The Fall of Carthage*, responds La Roche grandly, and this breathtaking production will pull out all the stops – *the town in flames, a sea of fire ... four thousand candles ... a galley of my own construction, pitching and tossing! Lightning and thunderbolts in the middle of the stage...the sails in flames – a burning wreck! Tidal wave in the harbour! The palace falls in ruins...*

Flamand and Olivier scoff at what is sure to come next – *At the end, a gorgeous ballet in the ruins!* Tempers start to flare as a second octet, *The Quarrelling Ensemble*, begins, and everyone again weighs in with an opinion.

Flamand and Olivier are appalled: *The scenery is playing the leading role! ... Words or Music? Ha! The question is Flight Machines versus Trap-Doors! ... Why even have an orchestra when the thunder machine will do so much*

better? ... On top of all this they will sing Italian! Trills! Runs! Cadenzas! They both declare they will have nothing to do with the production.

As Flamand and Olivier are ganging up on La Roche, the Countess expresses her dismay at their brutality and her distress for La Roche. The Count watches with avid glee: *Ha! The noble arts are at loggerheads...their apostles are squabbling among themselves. They show their teeth and start to brawl! ... La Roche in a fix! An exquisite sight! Ha! ... How will he get out of it?*

Clairon, however, is confident that La Roche can take care of himself and that he will shortly strike back.

The tenor gives up all hope of collecting his fee, then joins in as the tipsy soprano sings a reprise of their duet, this time bidding a tender, heartbroken farewell to their money.

La Roche then launches into a monumental tirade, scolding both poet and composer for arrogantly judging him while they themselves have done nothing for the theatre. He tells them their little poems and chamber pieces, while nice enough in their way, have neither the dramatic structure nor the human passion essential for great theatre. He agrees that public taste has become vulgar and brainless, but tells them, *You despise these goings on and yet you tolerate them. You share the guilt because of your silence.*

La Roche goes on to glorify his role in preserving culture, and tradition: *I serve the eternal laws of the theatre. I preserve ... the art of our fathers ... I reverently preserve the old, hoping patiently for the fruitful new, expecting the works of genius of our time! Where are the masterpieces that touch the heart of the people, that reflect their souls? Where are they? I cannot find them, hard though I search.*

He challenges Flamand and Olivier to either come up with a theatrical masterpiece of their own or stop criticizing him. *I want to people my stage with human beings! People who resemble us and speak in our language! Let their sorrows move us deeply and let their joys fill our hearts with gladness!*

He finishes in top form: *On my tombstone you will read the inscription: Here lies La Roche, the unforgettable, the immortal Theatre Director. The Friend of Comedy, the patron of Tragic Art. A father of the stage, guardian angel of artists. The gods loved him, and mankind admired him! Amen.*

This bombastic, but deeply felt manifesto is greeted with stormy applause and Clairon's witty *La Roche, you are monumental!* The soprano bursts into tipsy sobs and is led away by the irritated tenor.

The Countess picks up on La Roche's challenge and commands Flamand and Olivier to work together in harmony to create a glorious new work. They latch eagerly onto the idea as the Count moans that now he'll be the victim of an opera.

Talk now turns to practical matters. La Roche starts giving advice. To Flamand: *Give the aria its due! Always consider the singers – keep the orchestra quiet!* To Olivier: *Don't put the Primadonna's scene at the beginning. Make the verses comprehensible and repeat them often so there's a chance they'll be understood.*

Then comes the question of a subject for the opera. Olivier suggests *Ariadne auf Naxos*, but Flamand dismisses it as having been done too often before (to an orchestral quotation from Strauss's own opera by the same name). Flamand then proposes *Daphne*, but Olivier objects that staging the heroine's transformation into a tree would pose a problem (as it had in Strauss's 1938 opera *Daphne*, until Clemens Krauss came up with the solution.)

Ironically, the Count, who doesn't want an opera at all, comes up with the topic: an opera exactly as La Roche wants, depicting the conflicts and events of the very day they have been living. La Roche is a little hesitant (Will it be too indiscreet? It would be a challenge to stage). However, everyone is intrigued, and Flamand and Olivier are eager to begin. As the guests prepare to leave, the Countess bids them adieu and exits.

Scene 10

The Count and Clairon depart for Paris, and La Roche ushers out the singers, assuring them their money will be ready the next day. As Flamand and Olivier prepare to depart, still jousting over whether the words or the music will have pride of place, La Roche admonishes them not to forget his big scene – the high point of the piece – in which he will direct everyone in a rehearsal. And, above all, they must take care to give him a really great exit.

La Roche then leaves with Flamand and Olivier.

Scene 11

Eight servants enter. As they tidy up, they comment on the goings on – the soprano's appetite for cake, the shouting about theatre (it's all Greek to one; another explains that the director wants to make some theatre reforms before he's dead; a third suggests they may soon let servants have roles in opera). All agree that the Count is looking for a tender adventure and the Countess is in love but doesn't know with whom – *and to make up her mind she lets them write her an opera.*

Their opinions on opera are much like the Count's: *They have it sung so you don't understand the words. And that*

is very necessary, or else you would rack your brains about the muddled content.

They mention their favourite entertainments – tightrope dancers, marionettes, that ghastly play about Coriolanus, who stabs his own daughter! As the servants wonder about putting on an amusing show for the Countess's birthday, the major-domo gives them the good news that as soon as they serve supper they'll be free for the evening. They go off happily.

Scene 12

The prompter, Monsieur Taupe (his name is French for mole), emerges unexpectedly from the small theatre where he had been left asleep and forgotten.

He tells the major-domo about the life of a prompter: *I am the invisible ruler of a magical world ... Only when I sit in my prompt box does the great wheel of the theatre begin to turn. The deep thoughts of our poets – I whisper them to myself in a quiet voice, and everything comes to life. Reality is mirrored in front of me ... My own whispering lulls me to sleep. If I sleep I become an event. The actors stop speaking, the audience wakes up!*

The major-domo, politely amused, offers M. Taupe something to eat and promises to arrange a ride back to Paris for him.

Scene 13

It is evening and the moon has risen. The Countess enters. The major-domo tells her that Olivier will meet her to discuss the ending of the opera – the next morning at eleven, in the library. She is alarmed, realizing that Flamand will be disappointed to find Olivier in the library instead of her.

And as for me, she wonders, I'm supposed to determine the opera's ending ... Is it the words that move my heart or the music that speaks more strongly?

She sings the sonnet, interrupting herself partway through: *It's fruitless to try to separate them. Words and music are fused into one ... One art redeemed by the other!*

Regarding herself in a mirror, she asks herself what to do. *In choosing the one, you will lose the other. Doesn't one always lose when one wins?*

Again she asks the Madeleine in the mirror, *Do you want to be consumed between two fires? You mirrored image of Madeleine in love – can you advise me, can you help me find the ending, the ending for their opera? Is there one that is not trivial?*

The major-domo announces that supper is served; Madeleine smiles at the mirror and walks into the dining room, humming the sonnet.

Background of *Capriccio*

Who among the younger generation can really imagine a great city like Munich in total darkness, or theatre-goers picking their way through the blacked-out street with the aid of small torches giving off a dim blue light through a narrow slit? All this for the experience of the Capriccio première. They risked being caught in a heavy air raid, yet their yearning to hear Strauss's music, their desire to be part of a festive occasion and to experience a world of beauty beyond the dangers of war led them to overcome all these material problems. ...

Rudolf Hartmann, producer for the premiere of *Capriccio*

The concept of *Capriccio* originated with Stefan Zweig, the Jewish librettist for Strauss's opera *Die Schweigsame Frau* (*The Silent Woman*).

Die Schweigsame Frau had its premiere in Dresden in 1935, after Zweig had already fled into exile in England. Torn between permitting the performance of an opera by a Jewish librettist – something that was against the law in Nazi Germany – and prohibiting an opera by the internationally respected Strauss, the Nazi government permitted the premiere.

However, when Strauss wrote an intemperate letter to Zweig expressing his contempt for the Nazis (a letter intercepted by the Gestapo), and then refused to remove Zweig's name as librettist from the program for *Die Schweigsame Frau*, top Nazis boycotted the premiere, and the opera was banned shortly thereafter.

Nevertheless, at Strauss's urging, Zweig remained quietly involved with his next operas, *Friedenstag*, *Daphne*, and *Die Liebe der Danae*, providing comments and acting as a guiding force for Joseph Gregor, the Aryan friend he had recommended to Strauss as a replacement librettist.

During his exile in England, Zweig also found the germ of *Capriccio*. In 1934, while doing research in the British Museum, he had come across a little one-act libretto by Giovanni Battista Casti, *Prima la musica e poi le parole* (*First the music, then the words*), which had been set to music by Antonio Salieri and premiered in 1786 in a double bill with Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor*.

Zweig developed a rough sketch, sent it to Strauss, and recommended Gregor as the librettist. However, this concept languished until 1939, when Strauss trotted it out again. But Gregor's efforts did not satisfy Strauss, and the composer eventually brought in Clemens Krauss, who had suggested the gorgeous transformation scene at the end of *Daphne*.

Strauss was 78 when *Capriccio* premiered on October 28, 1942 at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, in the midst of World War II. He had completed the score in August 1941 and a few months later moved his family from Garmisch-Partenkirchen to Vienna to protect them

from ongoing harassment by Nazi officials – for his family included a Jewish daughter-in-law, Alice, and two beloved grandsons.

Strauss's international eminence as a composer is probably what allowed Alice and her children to survive the war. But he was unable to save Alice's grandmother, who was taken to Theresienstadt concentration camp while he was working on *Capriccio*.

By the time *Capriccio* premiered, Strauss had been trying unsuccessfully to arrange for safe passage to Switzerland for Alice's grandmother, who would be among 26 members of Alice's family to die in concentration camps.

By that time too, Stefan Zweig had settled in Brazil and committed suicide.

As the premiere for *Capriccio* approached, the problem of nightly air raids had to be considered. Since raids usually occurred between 10 and 11 pm, the performance started at 7 pm, and ran in a single extended act without an intermission so that the audience could, with luck, find their way home before the air raids began.

Rudolf Hartmann, who produced the opera's first performance, recalled, *The première was a success, to an extent hardly anticipated by composer, librettist and all those associated with it. Afterwards it was difficult to relinquish the liberating and uniting atmosphere created by the artistic quality of the new work. But outside the blackened city waited, and one's way homewards was fraught with potential danger.*

Capriccio continued to play to sold-out houses in Munich until, almost exactly a year later, the opera house was destroyed by bombs.

Strauss was distraught, recalling what that opera house had meant to him and to art: *The place consecrated to the first Tristan and Meistersinger performances, in which 73 years ago I heard Freischütz for the first time, where my good father sat for 49 years in the orchestra as 1st horn – where at the end of my life I experienced the keenest sense of fulfillment of the dreams of authorship in 10 Strauss productions.*

A Conversation on *Capriccio* with Timothy Vernon

Timothy Vernon is the Conductor for this production of Capriccio. He is the founding Artistic Director of Pacific Opera Victoria and has led most of its more than 80 productions since the company's inception in 1980. Recently awarded the Order of Canada, Timothy is also Music Director and Principal Conductor of Orchestra London. His enterprising artistic vision for POV has included Strauss' Daphne and Blitzstein's Regina (both recently broadcast across Canada on CBC Radio's Saturday Afternoon at the Opera, as was last season's Semele).

Timothy Vernon is also a recipient of Opera Canada's 2005 Ruby Award as Opera Builder -- a fitting recognition of his contribution to opera over more than a quarter century. He continues to bring to Pacific Opera Victoria a unique vision that has engaged the community and made POV a nationally recognized symbol of artistic excellence.

This production of Capriccio is very special, because Timothy Vernon has a direct connection with the opera. Read on to learn why ...

POV's original production of Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* is an extraordinary event, not just because the opera is a gorgeous rarity being produced on stage for the first time in Canada, and not just because it will be recorded for broadcast by CBC – but because our own Timothy Vernon is a “grand-student” of both Richard Strauss (*Capriccio*'s composer and co-librettist) and Clemens Krauss (co-librettist and conductor for the opera's 1942 premiere).

POV's third foray into Richard Strauss, following productions of *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Daphne*, is thus a source of particular joy for Timothy.

In 1965 Timothy left Victoria for 10 years in Vienna, where he studied under the guidance of Hans Swarowsky, who had studied conducting with both Strauss and Krauss.

Swarowsky is also responsible for the most notable lines in the *Capriccio* libretto. In 1939, as Strauss and Krauss were working on *Capriccio*, they cast about for an authentic French love sonnet to represent the cause of words in the words-vs-music debate within the opera. Swarowsky, who was working for Krauss as a dramaturge, was charged with finding an appropriate 18th century poem. When his research revealed that love sonnets had gone out of fashion at that time, Swarowsky suggested a sonnet from the *Continuation des Amours* of the 16th century poet Pierre de Ronsard.

Swarowsky translated Ronsard's poem into elegant and lyrical German, and the delighted Strauss immediately set it to music, first as a Lied for voice and piano, then, with some changes, as the pivotal sonnet whose iterations form the core of the opera.

Swarowsky went on to make his mark as a conductor and as one of the most influential teachers of the

century, counting among his students Claudio Abbado, Bruno Weil, Zubin Mehta ... and Timothy Vernon.

Timothy remembers Swarowsky as a man of great charm, with a sly and sardonic sense of humour. *We students could look forward to a bracing dose of having our heroes dumped upon, for Swarowsky was a harsh critic of much standard practice.* He insisted that musical interpretation should go back to the score and remain true to the text of the composer – a modern approach very much in tune with Strauss's own.

Timothy found Swarowsky to be an outstanding teacher, with encyclopedic knowledge and a rigorous, autocratic approach to analyzing every note of a score for function, meaning and structure – rationalism trumped the emotional side of music. Timothy recalls Swarowsky asking students to name the greatest work by Wagner. The usual suspects emerged, including *The Ring Cycle* and *Tristan und Isolde*. But no – for Swarowsky, the greatest Wagnerian opus was the **text** of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. For Timothy this epitomizes Swarowsky's intellectual and analytical bent, which is what made him such a superb teacher and such a fine translator – as his contribution to the libretto of *Capriccio* makes clear.

Timothy first saw *Capriccio* as a student in Vienna, in a production conducted by one of Strauss's great colleagues and proponents, Karl Böhm, to whom *Daphne* is dedicated.

Capriccio took some time to grow into Timothy's affections. As he explains, *It doesn't have the immediate éclat of Salome or Elektra, both products of Strauss's early enfant terrible days, nor the upfront sentimental emotions of Der Rosenkavalier. It is a late work, and like the late works of the greatest composers, Capriccio is an astonishing distillation of Strauss's genius. With its limpidity, its lack of anything*

extraneous to either text or score, the urbane and knowing text, the beautifully constructed scenes, the in-jokes for those who love opera – it is little wonder Strauss considered this Conversation Piece for Music his artistic legacy.

In fact, even as he was completing *Capriccio*, Strauss was writing to Krauss, *Do you really believe that after Capriccio...something better or even just as good could follow? Is this D flat major [the opera's final key] not the best conclusion to my life's work for the theatre? After all, one can leave only one testament!*

Strauss's last completed opera, *Capriccio* shares a quality of transfiguration – a sense of reaching beyond – with the other works of Strauss's magnificent late flowering, including *Die Liebe der Danae*, the second Horn Concerto, the 1946 Oboe Concerto, the poignant *Metamorphosen*, and the transcendent *Four Last Songs*.

Timothy again: *The music is unflagging in its inspiration: marvellously witty and wise and ripe, with a terrific sense of delight and of the ineffable evanescence of life itself; it gives off an iridescent flash of vigour and life and humour, and such human and mortal beauty; it is quite consoling.*

As with the greatest opera composers (think Mozart, Puccini, Verdi) Strauss's sense of the theatre is as

strong as his musical inspiration. Timothy sees La Roche, *Capriccio's* pragmatic, over-the-top man of the theatre, as something of a mouthpiece for Strauss, advocating for the entire theatrical experience. Strauss obsessed over every aspect of the creative process – witness his fascinating, detailed correspondence with a succession of librettists – Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Stefan Zweig, poor Joseph Gregor (who never quite “got” Strauss), and Clemens Krauss. Strauss was definitely not the kind of composer to take a ready-made libretto off the shelf, stir and add music!

When asked what he would add to the words-vs-music conversation in *Capriccio*, Timothy responds, *Well, the opera is so well structured that there are not a lot of dangling edges. I don't know that I would have come down on either side at the end. Though I might add that with Strauss, the composer becomes the dramaturge. Pace, plot, moments when tensions mount, moments of resolution – everything is moved forward by the music. The composer really is in charge – but he must be inspired by the text.*

As he did for *Daphne*, Timothy Vernon is reducing the score for *Capriccio*. Strauss' scoring uses normal string and brass sections, but some 15 woodwind parts need to be reduced to accommodate the eight Victoria Symphony players.

The Music

Richard Strauss has never been surpassed for beauty of orchestral colour, and his ravishing score for *Capriccio* perhaps gives the edge to music in the words-vs-music debate of the opera. Here are a few musical highlights.

Opening String Sextet

The opera opens with pure music. A rehearsal of Flaman's newly composed Sextet is in progress. As the musicians play, the countess listens, enraptured, while the director La Roche dozes. The composer, Flaman, and the poet, Olivier, realize they are both in love with the countess and agree that they are friendly rivals, both in love and in art.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18DHMYL6oUo>

Concert performance of the Sextett from *Capriccio* by the Ensemble Altrerisonanze.

Kein Andres, das mir so im Herzen loht

The justly famous climax of the opera is the gorgeous final scene, in which the Countess sings the sonnet, *Kein Andres, das mir so im Herzen loht*, in its fourth iteration within the opera.

The final scene of the opera is introduced by a ravishing orchestral interlude. The Countess discovers she will be alone for dinner, but that both poet and musician have arranged to meet her in the library the next morning to learn her decision – words or music; poet or musician. As she struggles with her dilemma (for she loves them both), she sings the sonnet. Words and music are now inextricably linked.

Here are two excerpts from this wonderful final scene.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV4Up9m03xs>

Beginning of the Final Scene of *Capriccio*, with Renée Fleming, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Patrick Summers. Opening Night Gala, 2008-2009 Season.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQIplmUJ50Y>

Dame Kiri Te Kanawa sings *Kein Andres, das mir so im Herzen loht*.

San Francisco Opera, David Runnicles, Conductor.

The Sonnet

The original of the sonnet that forms the core of *Capriccio* is a French poem, *Je ne saurois aimer autre que vous*, from the *Continuation des Amours* of the 16th century poet Pierre de Ronsard. When Richard Strauss and Clemens Krauss were working on the concept for *Capriccio*, they cast about for an authentic French love sonnet to represent the cause of words in the words-and-music debate within the opera.

Hans Swarowsky, then a young conductor working for Krauss as a dramaturge, was charged with finding an appropriate 18th century poem.

When his research revealed that love sonnets had gone out of fashion at that time, Swarowsky suggested the sonnet by Ronsard and translated it into elegant and lyrical German, which Strauss happily set to music. Immediately set it to music.

In *Capriccio* we first encounter the sonnet, ostensibly written by the poet Olivier, as it is recited by the Countess's brother in a play within the play. For the Count, this is a chance to embark on his newest amorous adventure by impressing his leading lady, the glamorous actress Clairon.

Moments later the sonnet is recited "for real" as Olivier declares his ardent love for the Countess. Flamand, the composer, then snatches it away and rushes off to set it to music. When Flamand returns to sing his musical version to the Countess, Olivier is dismayed:

*The rhymes destroyed, the sentences dismembered . . .
Who can hear the slightest sense in the text? . . . This
lucky man climbs my words like a ladder to victory! . . .
Is it now his poem, or still my own?*

The Countess, however, is enraptured by the musical setting and declares that the sonnet now belongs to her, and that poet and composer are now joined for all time in the sonnet – no matter how much the poet resents it!

At right are the original sonnet by Pierre de Ronsard, in Middle French (note that many of the spellings differ from modern French), followed by Swarowsky's translation, and finally by a translation into English of Swarowsky's German version of the sonnet.

Continuation des Amours (1555)

Sonnet en vers de dix à onze syllables

By Pierre de Ronsard

Je ne saurois aimer autre que vous,
Non, Dame, non, je ne saurois le faire:
Autre que vous ne me sauroit complaire,
Et fust Venus descendue entre nous.

Vos yeus me sont si gracieus et dous,
Que d'un seul clin ils me peuvent defaire,
D'un autre clin tout soudain me refaire,
Me faisant vivre ou mourir en deux cous.

Quand je serois cinq cens mille ans en vie,
Autre que vous, ma mignonne m'amie,
Ne me feroit amoureux devenir.

Il me faudroit refaire d'autres venes,
Les miennes sont de vostre amour si plenes,
Qu'un autre amour n'y sauroit plus tenir.

Sonnet from Capriccio

Translated into German by Hans Swarowsky

Kein Andres, das mir so im Herzen loht,
Nein, Schöne, nichts auf dieser ganzen Erde,
Kein andres, das ich so wie dich begehrte,
Und käm' von Venus mir ein Angebot.

Dein Auge beut mir himmlisch-süsse Not,
Und wenn ein Aufschlag alle Qual vermehrte,
Ein andrer Wonne mir und Lust gewährte
Zwei Schläge sind dann Leben oder Tod.

Und trüg' ich's fünfmalhunderttausend Jahre,
Erhielte ausser dir, du Wunderbare,
Kein andres Wesen über mich Gewalt.

Durch neue Adern müsst' mein Blut ich giessen,
In meinen, voll von dir zum Überfließen,
Fänd' neue Liebe weder Raum noch Halt.

English Translation

Nothing else flames so in my heart,
no, Lady, nothing is there on earth's whole face,
nothing else that I could sigh for as for you,
in vain would Venus herself come down to grant my will.

What joy, what pain your gentle eye bestows;
and if a glance should heighten all that pain...
the next restore my fondest hope and bliss entire;
two glances signify then life... or death.

And, though I lived five hundred thousand years,
save you, miraculous fair, there could not be
another creature hold sway over me.

Through fresh veins I must needs let flow my blood;
my own with you are filled to overflowing
and new love then could find not room nor pause.

POV's Production of *Capriccio*

In 1942, the Nazi war machine was operating at full power, grinding its way over Europe. In October, a gorgeous lyric bauble about a flirtatious 18th-century countess putting on a private opera was first performed in Munich.

Bloomberg News

Critics are divided on whether *Capriccio* is frivolous escapism or a subtle defence of art against those who would destroy it.

Strauss set the action far away from the war – in a luxurious chateau near Paris at the time when Gluck began his reform of opera, about 1775. Marie Antoinette had just become Queen of France; the French Revolution was yet to come. With its frequent references to such 18th century figures as Gluck, Rameau, and Voltaire, the opera seems firmly lodged in 1775.

Yet, given the backdrop against which it was written and Strauss's frequent skirmishes with the Nazi authorities, there is behind the banter a frisson of impending tragedy.



So why not keep this production in the elegant 18th century family home of the count and countess, but move it to the time in which it was written? Director Robert McQueen and Designer Christina Poddubiuk are doing exactly that.

As Robert McQueen explains, *Without anyone's acknowledgement that they are directly in the path of imminent destruction, this group of artists meet to discuss and engage in the activity of creation ... an act of profound bravery and, perhaps, denial.*



This is a house whose appearance is testament to generations of devotion to, and love of art ... a house of such outstanding artistic wealth that it will shortly be a prime target in Hitler's campaign-of-acquisition during the war. This is a house that has the look and feeling of luxury and leisure in a world about to explode.

The set model at top shows the design for the elegant, traditionally beautiful room in which Pacific Opera Victoria's production is taking place. The furniture and costumes are from a more modern time: the 1930s.

At left is a photo of the actual set as it looked in late January while under construction in POV's production shop, with Director of Production Ian Rye on the left and Artistic Director Timothy Vernon on the right. Most of the construction is done, and painting is well underway. Some of the furniture is on display, as well as a couple of the costumes, also still "under construction".



On this page are sketches of some of the costumes designed by Christina Poddubiuk. All are in the style of the late 1930s.

At left is a simple, elegant gown for the Countess Madeleine.

At top right, the Director La Roche looks every inch the impresario. Below the actress Clairon wears a stylish coat and dress ensemble

Below at far right is a footman's costume. At bottom is Monsieur Taupe with his hat and his prompter's book.



Robert McQueen is intrigued with the concept of setting this opera in the 1930s, creating a production *whose witty narrative is set on the eve of chaos*.

He explains, *It brings to mind a cinematic work like Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini or a Chekhov play in which "nothing much happens except that one world comes to an end and another begins". It is a setting that I feel fits perfectly with Timothy's description of the work as "unflaggingly beautiful with that late Strauss evanescence, which is so heartbreaking"*.

What would Strauss think of setting his opera in the time in which he wrote it? The old man probably wouldn't mind.

Remember that Strauss himself plays merrily with anachronism throughout *Capriccio*. The opera dips into many eras: a 16th century sonnet and its 20th century translation, music from the 18th century alongside echoes of Verdi, Wagner, and Strauss himself.

Amid such eclectic borrowing, it seems natural to add another contemporary voice to the fascinating mix that Strauss created as he ranged over half a millennium of art and human folly.



Links

Capriccio

<http://www.opera-guide.ch/libretto.php?id=363&uilang=de&lang=de>

Libretto in German

http://www.pov.bc.ca/pdfs/capriccio_pov_libretto.pdf

English Libretto based on POV's Surtitled text

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18DHMYL6oUo>

Concert performance of the Sextett from *Capriccio* by the Ensemble Altrersonanze.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV4Up9m03xs>

Beginning of the Final Scene of *Capriccio*, with Renée Fleming, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, Patrick Summers. Opening Night Gala, 2008-2009 Season.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQIplmUJ50Y>

Dame Kiri Te Kanawa sings *Kein Andres, das mir so im Herzen loht*.

San Francisco Opera, David Runnicles, Conductor

Richard Strauss

<http://www.richardstrauss.at/html/index.html>

Richard Strauss Online: a site presented by Richard and Christian Strauss, grandsons of the composer, with biographical information and discussion of his works and family life.

<http://www.netnebraska.org/extras/composer/cmstrauss.html>

Biography of Strauss and discussion of some of his works.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,883043,00.html?promoid=googlep>

Bad Boy, an article about Richard Strauss that appeared in Time Magazine July 25, 1938, just before the premiere of his opera *Friedenstag*.

Clemens Krauss

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clemens_Krauss

Biography of the co-librettist of *Capriccio*, who also conducted the premiere.

Hans Swarowsky

<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=41:55628~T1>

Biography of the conductor Hans Swarowsky, who found and translated the sonnet by Pierre Ronsard that forms the core of *Capriccio*. A student of both Strauss and Krauss, Swarowsky became a conductor and a noted teacher, counting among his own students Claudio Abbado, Zubin Mehta, Bruno Weil, and Pacific Opera Victoria's own Timothy Vernon, who is conducting this production of *Capriccio*.

The Real Clairon

<http://everything2.com/title/Mademoiselle+Clairon>

Biography of Mademoiselle Clairon, known variously as Claire-Hippolyte-Josèphe Legris de Latude, dite Mademoiselle; Hyppolite Clairon; Claire Josèphe Hippolyte Leris de LaTude; and simply Clairon. The real-life model for the character of Clairon in *Capriccio*.

<http://www.archive.org/details/memoirsofhyppoli01claiiala>

Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon, the celebrated French actress: with reflections upon the dramatic art, written by herself, Volume 1, translated into English. The memoirs (not necessarily accurate!) of the actress/courtesan. Enjoy her commentaries on being an actress, the importance of memory and enunciation (lispng is an obstacle!). Choice of reading formats.

<http://www.archive.org/details/memoirsofhyppoli02claiiala>

Volume 2 of *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon, the celebrated French actress: with reflections upon the dramatic art, written by herself*, translated into English.

<http://www.archive.org/details/memoiresclairon00claiuoft>

Mémoires d'Hyppolite Clairon et réflexions sur la déclamation théâtrale, publiées par elle-même. Memoirs of Clairon in French.

Pierre de Ronsard

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_de_Ronsard

Introduction to Pierre Ronsard

[http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Continuation_des_Amours_\(1555\)](http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Continuation_des_Amours_(1555))

Continuation des Amours de Pierre de Ronsard. *Je ne saurois aimer autre que vous*, the poem on which the sonnet in *Capriccio* is based, is No. 28 in the section called Sonetz en vers de dix à onze syllabes.

http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/speccol/gordon/gordonimages/Gordon1554_R65_No_6/index2.htm

Continuation des Amours de Pierre de Ronsard Vandomois. Facsimile of the first edition. Select Titles 18 and 19 to see the poem *Je ne saurois aimer autre que vous*, the poem on which the sonnet in *Capriccio* is based.

http://poesie.webnet.fr/lesgrandsclassiques/poemes/pierre_de_ronsard/index.html

Links to many of Ronsard's poems in French

http://www.bewilderingstories.com/issue177/Ronsard_Helene.html

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle, Ronsard's most famous poem, with three translations, including the beautiful free translation by William Butler Yeats, *When you are old and grey and full of sleep*.

For Fun

<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/texts/twain.german.html>

The Awful German Language, a humorous essay by Mark Twain about his efforts to learn German. Even as he makes fun of the language and his own attempts to speak German, Twain recognizes the poetry of the language: *There are German songs which can make a stranger to the language cry. That shows that the SOUND of the words is correct – it interprets the meanings with truth and with exactness; and so the ear is informed, and through the ear, the heart.*