

The Rape of Lucretia: Britten's Timeless Opera Explores War, Violence, and Human Nature at Philadelphia's AVA

Cumhur Görgün discusses Britten's challenging 1946 opera exploring sexual violence, war, and societal brutality, performed at Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts.

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An Academy of Vocal Arts production of Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* opened in February. Few operatic compositions are as difficult—or as influential—as this Britten opera from 1946. I will be Collatinus, Roman general and husband of Lucretia. What a challenge!

The opera recalls Roman mythology to explore the harsh reality of violation. Rome, sunk into depravity, is fighting off the Greeks. Two choruses—one male and one female—narrate the inner thoughts of the male and female characters, respectively. They begin by declaiming to the audience their role as Christian interpreters of a pagan story about to be performed. The choruses offer a distinctive fusion of a formal text with overtly Christian themes.

Its reputation as a "difficult" opera is largely because Britten introduces brittle, suppressed, concise, and regulated phrases subverting traditionally overt manifestations of emotion in opera. His insight into the lyric art form was to make the silences just as important as the spoken word [voiced lyrics?].

This reputation the enormous strength of the opera. Nowhere else in the repertory do you find such deep intimacy and such a dark mood. Looking upon the bleak landscape produced by Nazi paganism, Britten wrote the opera just after World War II. When asked why he wrote the piece Britten gave a cryptic response: "because I'm rather interested in that kind of thing."

Despite its origins in Roman myth, *The Rape of Lucretia* emerges as a startlingly modern composition. It resonates with Britten's own experiences during the closing phases of World War II. Britten makes a clear connection between the tragic brutalization of a woman and the masculine demands of war. In the opera, rape and war are intertwined, share the same impulses, and are both violent crimes.

With its frequently problematic text, difficult subject matter, and novel use of silences, *The Rape of Lucretia* remains a challenging piece to produce in the modern period. The power of opera, however, comes from its braveness. Taboo subjects and intense emotions inspire people to sing. To cry out grief, rage, joy, or love in song is a fundamental form of human expression.

The opera explores rape as a painful fact of modern life. It manifests in the form of Trump (rape of a woman) and Putin (rape of Ukraine). These awful examples are two small snowflakes on the tip of an iceberg of psychopathy. Consider our dictatorial politicians, our self-centered billionaires, and the minute percentage of rapists outed by victims. The psychopathy is the same, Britten holds, and it runs deep, far, and wide. Lucretia's terrible situation serves as a powerful global emblem of how all of us are victims of horrible crimes.

"The Rape of Lucretia" is peculiar, uncomfortable, and intensely personal qualities guarantee that it will always be regarded as a work of singular force, troubling audiences for as long as the crime at its core plagues humanity. The opera is a timeless and vital work of operatic repertory because it forces us to confront the darkness inside ourselves and society as we grapple with the difficult realities it portrays.

In April 1939 Britten and his friend tenor Peter Pears sailed to North America, going first to Canada and then to New York. The position of pacifists was ever more difficult in an increasingly bellicose Europe. W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood had left England for America in January. In 1942 Britten returned to England funded by a grant to write the opera *Peter Grimes*. This opera, based on 18th century Suffolk poet George Crabbe's "The Borough", is a paean to England's simple rural life. "To talk about Crabbe is to talk about England" E.M. Forester said in a BBC interview Britten read. Writing this opera is where Britten found refuge during the last years of the war, immersed in pastoral simplicity. It opened at Sadler Wells on June 7, 1945.

The Rape of Lucretia was Britten's next work. A pacifist already dismayed at the start of war, Britten was profoundly impacted by horrific wartime events, the Holocaust, Dresden, then the capstone of atomic bombs. His accounts of the atrocities of the war raised awareness of the consequences of violence on the mind, the misuse of authority, and human misery.

It was against this background that Britten aimed to convey his thoughts on the links between personal brutality and war in "The Rape of Lucretia." The opera investigates the psychological effects of violence and the damaging effects of conflict on the individual. The horrific tale of Lucretia is used as a metaphor for the brutality and violations that people who are caught up in a battle endure. The dehumanizing consequences of power abuse are at the heart of the opera.

There are many challenges for opera singers, like me, whose first language is not English. Learning vowels and consonants in English is different from many other languages. How do you what's a 'photi'? Why, it's a fish!—the 'ph' in 'photo', the 'o' in 'women,' and the 'ti' in 'nation'.

But in addition, many of my colleagues who are native speakers of English have also expressed that they have difficulty articulating Britten's lines. I'm intrigued by this. I've often thought a singer can express himself more easily in his own language. This is because I feel more comfortable when I sing Turkish lyrics. Clearly this is subjective. I learned English in Turkey and have gained fluency in America, but learning an opera with an English accent was a different experience. I was like Eliza Doolittle: "The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain." I learned many vowels and diphthongs in English I didn't realize existed. Once I learned them, I tried to observe how native speakers use accents and how they intonate certain consonants. I realized that almost everybody has a different accent. When I asked the coaches I worked with how I should pronounce certain words, they actually said that it should be a collective decision. As you can imagine, it can be a bit confusing, but it is also very fun and enjoyable to discover the different colors of a language.

I sing the role of Collatinus, an important general of Rome and one of the king's right-hand men in the bureaucracy. He is a close friend of the king's son Tarquinius and Junius Brutus. He is also married to Lucretia, the most virtuous woman in Rome.

A summary of the first act will tell you all you need to know about the plot. Tarquinius, Collatinus and Junius are drinking together in an armed camp outside Rome. The previous night some soldiers rode unannounced to Rome to check on their wives. All were caught betraying their husbands, with the exception of Collatinus' wife Lucretia. Junius, whose wife was among the faithless majority, goads young Tarquinius, the king's son, into testing Lucretia's chastity himself. The impulsive prince calls for his horse and gallops off to the city alone.

You can guess the rest.

Wow! How do I put this into song? Collatinus is a strong, intelligent and embracing character. After the incident happened, he tells Lucretia it doesn't matter, he is always there for her, and her spirit is not about the rape. She feels her morality is too deeply stained however, stabs herself, and dies. After losing Lucretia, Collatinus strikes against the Roman monarchy. His revolution leads regime change in Rome.

Portraying Collatinus is emotionally challenging, especially when confronted with scenes of intense nature, such as a rape scene. The gravity of the subject matter requires actors to navigate through a spectrum of emotions, from vulnerability to distress, and it's crucial to acknowledge the potential impact on one's mental and physical health.

Singers often strive for a deep connection with their characters, but there are instances where a delicate balance is essential. In the case of Collatinus, the actor must be vigilant about not getting too deeply immersed in the character, as the emotional toll can be significant. This isn't just about the risk of losing oneself in the role; it's also about safeguarding one's emotional well-being. By maintaining emotional distance, protecting vocal health, and fostering open communication within the production team, singers can navigate the challenges of these roles while prioritizing their well-being, finding the delicate balance between realism and self-care is not only an artistic pursuit but also a commitment to one's own mental and emotional health.

Ava's production will be on stage between February 17th and 24th! The opportunity to delve into this complex character is both exhilarating and challenging. Can't wait to bring Collatinus to life and be part of an incredible operatic experience.