

COVENT GARDEN OPERAS
(ENGLISH OPERA GROUP)

HANS KELLER

**THE RAPE OF
LUCRETIA**

ALBERT HERRING

BOOSEY AND HAWKES

The subliming of Lucieka's chastity
is Sin, & therefore has to take the
form of tragedy; the subliming of
Albert's chastity is wholesome, &
therefore has to take the form
of comedy. Lucieka is a morality,
Henry an immorality play;
together they testify to one
aspect of Büchner's manifest
universality.

To Milton in
gratitude.

14. 10. 47. Hans

COVENT GARDEN OPERAS

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BY

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Guy de Maupassant's short story *Le Rosier de Madame Husson*, on which the story of *Albert Herring* (as also, incidentally, of a famous French film, *The Virtuous Isidore*) is based, is available in English translation. Anyone who reads it will appreciate the skill with which Eric Crozier has transferred the action from Nanterre to Suffolk, and from once-upon-a-time to 1900. Needless to say, a good deal of adaptation has been necessary.

If the comedy of *Albert Herring* is a pendant to the tragedy of *Lucretia*, it is also a pendant to that of *Peter Grimes*. This is not just because of their common setting—Suffolk—but also because the theme of opposition-to-tyranny plays a fundamental part in all three operas and, in the case of *Peter Grimes* and *Albert Herring*, it emerges in a strictly complementary fashion. In both operas we see the individual opposing tyranny. But whereas Grimes suffers from being too independent, Herring suffers from not being nearly independent enough.

The real humour of *Albert Herring* is obvious, yet it is perhaps worth remembering, even as one enjoys

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it, that real humour cannot exist without an underlying, if often concealed, seriousness.

ACT I, SCENE I

The scene is the breakfast room of Lady Billows' house at Loxford, the month is April, the music is a busybody theme (Ex. 1) with enthralling chords on

Ex. 1

Allegro e pesante



the accented beats of the bar. The busybody herself is hurriedly clearing away the breakfast things. It is Florence, the faithful servant of Lady Billows, particularly faithful in matters ethical. 'Florence!' comes the voice of Lady Billows from afar, '... tell the midwife! She's NOT to ...!' The rest of her order is inaudible. There is another rather mysterious half of an instruction, but soon Florence supplies the solution by writing aloud in her household book: 'Doctor Jessop's midwife . . . musn't touch illegitimates. Advert in chemist's window indecent . . . tear it up . . .' It is evident that both Her Ladyship and her housekeeper suffer from chronic morality.

Not that Florence's attitude to Lady Billows is without a trace of opposition. In fact, she indulges in a somewhat despairing aria about the weight of her duties, but just as her confidences promise to become interesting she is interrupted by a knock. In come Miss Wordsworth, Head Teacher at the Church

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School, the Vicar, the Mayor and Police Superintendent Budd. Ordered here by Lady Billows, these responsible citizens have come because something *must* be done about the town's immorality. This is their second meeting to deal with the subject and it has been agreed that a May Queen shall be chosen, to represent the ideals of Virtue, Chastity, etc., in which Loxford is deficient. These leading citizens, complete with their list of candidates, now await the entrance of Her Ladyship.

'Formal musical entrance of Lady Billows, who stalks slowly and powerfully into the room . . .,' to the accompaniment of a delightfully grave and old-fashioned march. The antique music continues, now with Ex. 2. Observe, for instance, the little three

Ex. 2

Largamente

note figure in the third bar, which we find everywhere in classical fugal writing.*

'We've made our own investigations and bring

* Compare Ex. 19 in the Covent Garden Book on "The Magic Flute"

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you our nominees . . .’ This ensemble is sung to the full version of Ex. 2. Then Lady Billows enthusiastically enlarges upon the history and purpose of the May Queen Festival (Ex. 3). Her first four notes constitute the Festival motif, while the accom-

EX. 3

LADY BILLOWS
con anima

May Queen! May Queen!

Str. pizz.

paniment will be seen to derive directly from Ex. 2 (first 7 notes).

To an intentionally idiotic rum-tum-tum on the piano, numerous candidates are now suggested. But if there was hitherto any doubt about the epidemic spread of vice, the tragic certainty of its prevalence is here finally established. For each of the suggested candidates proves—upon Florence’s consulting her household book—to be gravely tainted with debauchery. To cite just one example: A certain Edith Chase, ‘When the postman called one day, opened the door in her nightie!’ The meeting is near despair. In a recitativic quartet, sin, both in general and in particular, is lamented, whereupon Lady Billows plunges into a furious aria wherein the Festival motif (Ex. 3) emerges in a woebegone, ‘impure’ condition (Ex. 4). Florence duly echoes Lady Billows’ eruptions,

EX. 4

LADY BILLOWS

Each sin-gle name Reek-ing im-pu-ri-ties,

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which are eventually brought to a halt by the striking of the clock. Everyone is now exhausted.

But Superintendent Budd comes out with an idea: 'Beggin' your pardon I'd like to say—Has anyone heard of a *King* of the May?'

At first the proposition is rejected as fantastic by Lady Billows and the rest. The Superintendent, however, has a particular boy in view: Albert Herring, the indescribably devoted and virtuous son of Mrs. Herring, the local greengrocer. In a persuasive aria, he presses his point, receiving policemanly support from the bassoon (Ex. 5). His suggestion is

Ex. 5

SUPERINTENDENT
con anima

Al - bert Her - ring's clean as New mown hay;

not yet accepted. But now the Vicar, in an aria that is lit up with beauty, despite the comedy of the situation, maintains that 'all we need to know' is whether Albert is virtuous (Ex. 6) and the ensemble

Ex. 6

VICAR

Is Al - bert vir - tu - ous? Yes? Or no?

(minus Lady Billows) affirms Albert's virtue (Ex. 6 again). At last Lady Billows bursts out: 'Right! We'll have him! . . . That'll teach the girls a lesson.'

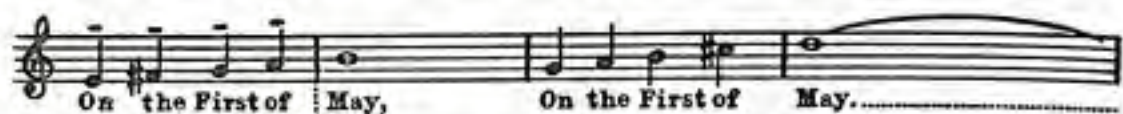
A magnificent, fugal Finale on the Festival motif

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(Ex. 3) is opened by Lady Billows (Ex. 7), and intro-

Ex. 7

LADY BILLOWS



FLORENCE



duced in the orchestra by the three notes with which Ex. 2 starts.

At the end of the Finale, Lady Billows blows the ensemble into an Ode with a fanfaronade, and just as you fear (or hope) that she will go on for ever shouting the same thing (like an obstructed gramophone record, and like a true autocrat), the scene concludes.

SCENE ii

The Interlude is all about and prepares us for the appearance of the village children. They are strikingly represented by an obtrusive tune (Ex. 8) played in

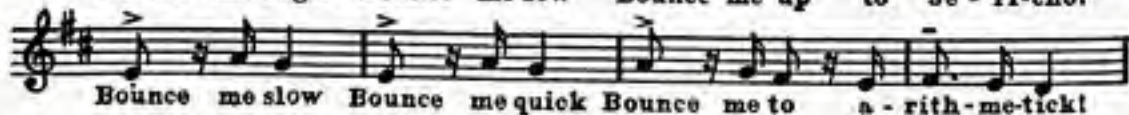
Ex. 8



harmonics on the strings.

The scene is Mrs. Herring's greengrocery. Outside, Emmie, Cis and Harry, the urchins, sing Ex. 9 as

Ex. 9



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they play ball against the door. The rhythm of the song (or of the ball) has been already heard in the Interlude. The ball comes flying into the shop, and Harry climbs in to get it. He takes the opportunity to steal some apples (Ex. 8), but Sid, the assistant from the butcher's, arrives and empties Harry's pockets (Ex. 9 in orchestra). After the children have run away, Sid puts one or two apples in his own pocket. He calls Albert, who presently enters, backwards, carrying a hundredweight of turnips. Sid asks for some mixed leeks and sage, and when Albert tells him the price, he suggests: 'Toss you—double or quits.' Albert: 'Oh no, Sid, gambling's not in my line. Mum wouldn't like it . . .' It appears that no kind of fun is in Albert's, or rather in Mum's line; which prompts Sid to a song in which he expounds his own philosophy of enjoyment, and especially the pleasures of courting. Albert does not listen . . . or does he?

Nancy, Sid's girl friend, arrives. The two sing a duet: 'Meet me at quarter past eight in the street. Don't be late or I'll whistle under your window . . .' (Whistling in 1st violin). The duet broadens into a lovely trio as Albert disapproves of their 'flirting

Ex. 10

Andante con moto
NANCY and SID.

pp

Well walk to the spin-ney Up o-ver the com-mon
The moon will be shi-ning The sky will be star-ry

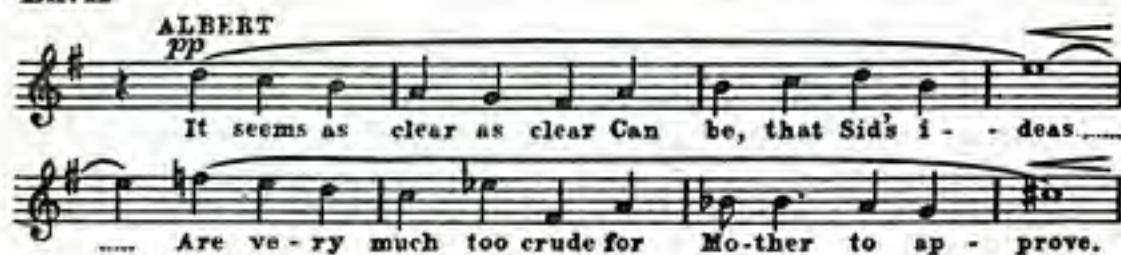
As we walk, {my} hand in {your} po-cket,

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here,' and while they sing of their pleasures to come (Ex. 10) he reflects that he will be sleeping alone in his attic. They go off (not without Sid forgetting to pay) and Albert asks himself whether he really misses 'all the fun because of Mum.' He is torn between her domination and the ideas that Sid has put into his head (Ex. 11). Emmie interrupts this beautiful

Ex. 11

ALBERT
pp



It seems as clear as clear Can be, that Sid's i - - deas.....
..... Are ve - ry much too crude for Mo - ther to ap - prove.

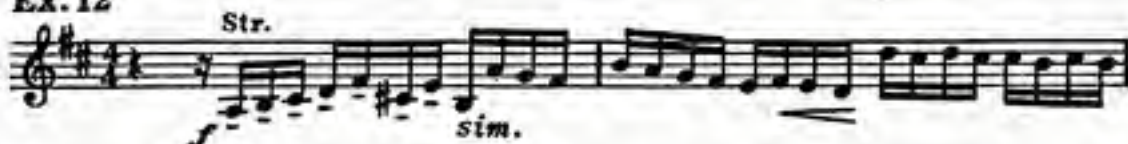
monologue, coming in to buy some pot-herbs, but luckily he resumes it after she has left: 'Oh maybe I'll have the chance to get away. And golly . . . It's about time . . .'

Again he is interrupted by the shop bell (and by a heavy version of the Festival motif, Ex. 3). It is Florence. She asks for Mrs. Herring, to whom she announces the advent of the committee.

A version of the Festival motif (Ex. 3), and then Ex. 12 (see Ex. 2), proclaim the entrance of Lady

Ex. 12

Str.



sim.

Billows and the others. In a martial tune, she declares Albert King of the May, the other committee members breaking in to say the same thing, while Mrs. Herring and—still more—Albert are audibly taken aback. This big ensemble having finished, Lady Billows'

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deputation leaves again, via Ex. 12, which is now inverted.

Mrs. Herring meanwhile, has enthusiastically accepted the prospect, particularly in view of the £25 that Albert is going to receive as a prize. He, on the other hand, wants to refuse (Ex. 13 : Festival motif, cf. Ex. 3) and actually ventures to oppose his mother.

Ex. 13

ALBERT

Why should they come And dress me up like a blink-ing swan,

In the ensuing quarrel different versions of the Festival motif (Ex. 3) reappear. Mrs. Herring finally sends Albert upstairs, and the children, who have been watching from outside, sing a rude variant of Ex. 9. The act ends upon a note of maternal exasperation.

ACT II, SCENE i

A short prelude, with horn calls on the Festival motif (Ex. 3) prepares us for the May Day celebration.

When the curtain goes up, Florence and Nancy, inside a marquee, are preparing the feast. Sid ought to be here to help, but he isn't. When he at last arrives, Florence reproaches him : the tune has been heard in the prelude and will be heard again.

She departs, and Sid delivers an ironically dignified aria on what he has just seen in church, adding, 'And Albert!—sitting there in his pew, the poor kid looks on tenterhooks. He's in the mood to escape if he could. I'd like to see him go for good!' Pause : Festival motif (Ex. 3). Then Nancy : 'Sid, tell me

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the truth about why you were late . . . You've got some scheme!' He tells her—outside.

In an enchanting presto, Miss Wordsworth arrives with the children for a dress rehearsal of the festive song with which they are going to greet Albert. The rehearsal itself defies description; music and action combine to make this scene a little gem of comedy.

The rehearsal ended, if not completed, she shepherds the children out, and Sid and Nancy return. Sid's scheme now comes to light. He has bought some rum and proceeds to pour it into Albert's glass of lemonade, to the accompaniment of the potion chord from *Tristan*.

Bells offstage (Festival motif, Ex. 3) announce the arrival of the party from the church. First again Miss Wordsworth and the children (each carrying a bunch of flowers) enter and take up their positions; then come Superintendent Budd and Mrs. Herring (bassoon figure from Ex. 5), the Mayor and Florence, the Vicar and Lady Billows. They sing part-versions of previous tunes; Florence the ill-tempered melody from the beginning of the act; the Vicar Ex. 6. The bells have meanwhile repeated the Festival motif (Ex. 3) which now greets the arrival of Albert. He is dressed in white, 'with a straw-hat crowned with a circlet of orange blossom.' The children's festive song breaks forth in all its hideous power. Then the children recite their poems, and present their flowers, more or less successfully. The Vicar introduces Her

Ex. 14

VICAR

To in-tro-duce Her La-dy-ship, And ask her if she will

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Ladyship and asks her to make a speech (Ex. 14). She does, and is followed in turn by the other members of the committee, each in his or her characteristic vein, and each introduced and acknowledged by the Vicar (cf. Ex. 14). Albert receives his presents, ranging from Lady Billows' purse of otterskin (with 25 sovereigns inside) to Miss Wordsworth's *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. With a supreme effort to overcome his diffidence, he says: 'Er, 'er. Thank you very much.' The Vicar 'understands' 'the modest phrase' (cf. Ex. 14), and the orchestra's inverted upbeat from Ex. 2 leads him to Ex. 15. All rise

Ex. 15

VICAR



Albert the Good! Long may he reign! To be re-e-lected a - gain and a - gain.

and join in.

Albert drinks to Lady Billows (no doubt here about what the orchestra says) and likes it, but promptly gets hiccups. He is eventually cured by drinking a glass of water from the wrong side, and 'the curtain falls on a general roar and babble from the whole table!'

This is at first continued by the Interlude. Gradually, the music bids farewell to May Day and goes over to May Night: A moving nocturne for bass flute and bass clarinet, and including the Festival motif (Ex. 3).

SCENE ii

The short, but musically rich second scene is inside the shop, in the evening. Albert, neither quite sober nor quite drunk, comes in singing an exceedingly gay

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version of Ex. 15. He calls his mother, repeating Ex. 14, but then remembers that she has gone to his aunt. It being dark (nocturne resumed) he looks for matches, indeed he calls to them yearningly: 'Swan Vestas! Swan Vestas!'; but when he lights the gas the mantle explodes. He reflects on the party, on the food, the lemonade . . . on the way Nancy looked at him. The music develops into a beautiful aria on Nancy (Ex. 16). But, 'She belongs to Sid, not me.

Ex. 16

ALBERT

Why did she stare..... Each time I look'd up at her?....

We've never talked or walked light-heartedly through the woods . . . ' (The music alludes to the trio in Act I, Scene ii.) Then there is whistling down the street. 'Sounds like Sid serenading under her window . . . Sid doesn't suffer from shyness or timidity, gets what he wants by directness and simplicity . . .'

The first part of Albert's impressive scena ends as Sid and Nancy appear outside the window. Nancy is heard pitying Albert. Sid: 'He's all right . . . once he's sown a few wild oats, he'll live that down.' A love duet follows (Ex. 17); they kiss and go.

Ex. 17

Allegretto

SID.

Come along, darling, come follow me quick! Time is racing us..... round the clock,

The second part of Albert's scena develops from the excitement produced in him by what he has just

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witnessed. In the course of his growing rage at his own virtue, he gives a contemptuous version of Ex. 15. Then: 'The tide will turn, the sun will set, while I stand here and hesitate. The clock begins its rusty whirr, catches its breath to strike the hour. And offers me a final choice that must be answered *No* or *Yes* . . . I'll toss for it—and damn the risk! . . . Heads for *Yes* and Tails for *No* . . . it's come down HEADS! Well, you've gone and done it now!' Sid's whistle is heard from afar; Albert, hesitantly at first, whistles in his turn. Then off to meet Vice with so capital a 'V' that we never come to hear all about it.

The nocturne is resumed, and Mrs. Herring comes home. Believing Albert to be already asleep, she goes to bed herself.

ACT III

The racing prelude is based on the rhythm of the man-hunt for the missing Albert.

This rhythm holds the first part of the present act (in the shop next day) together. 'Nancy is alone, occupying herself by miserably polishing the scales.' Emmie comes in: 'Someone was saying it's *felo-de-se*.' Nancy: '*Felo-de* what?' Emmie: 'Done himself in . . .! Unless he's been murdered!' Nancy: 'Oh no!' Cis pops her head in: 'Come on, Emmie! Got your compass?' Nancy gives three verses of bitter regret (cf. Ex. 18) untinged by comedy.

Ex. 18

NANCY
pp

We did it for fun O we should-n't have done!

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The clarinet's tune, sympathizing with her, has already been heard at the outset.

Sid arrives, tired from, and of, the hunt. 'I'm sick of the sound of *Albert! Albert! Albert!* all round!' The two quarrel in a duet. Sid's part is angry and amusing, Nancy's (Ex. 19), though equally

Ex. 19

NANCY *furioso*

You're heart-less - and sel-fish and thought-less and cru-ell

angry, is not amusing at all. In fact the tragic aspect of this act's tragi-comedy expresses itself to a considerable extent through her.

Superintendent Budd enters shortly before she 'goes off tearfully.' His kind of trouble is less seriously handled by composer and author: 'Give me a decent murder with a corpse . . . But God defend me from these disappearing cases . . .' Harry pops his head in at the door: 'Super., Lady Billows wants you up at her house! Immediate!' The poor Superintendent reacts strongly: 'My Lady Billows—self-appointed Chief Constable!' (Here Lady Billows' fanfaronade from the 1st scene's Finale.)

Nancy has meanwhile fetched Mrs. Herring, whom the Superintendent asks for a photograph of Albert, 'To send round the stations for identification.' The oboe sobs and so does Mrs. Herring. The photo, she recalls, 'was took on the pier at Felixstowe when his Dad was alive, in a studio . . .'—a remembrance introduced by the whip, and accompanied by delightfully sentimental pier-barrel-organ music. Then the Mayor appears at the window and excitedly beckons Super.

and Sid, who tip-toe cautiously out. Mum doesn't notice.

Nancy tries to console the lamenting Mrs. Herring ('He'll come back again, my dear . . .'), and Miss Wordsworth and the Vicar, who have quietly arrived, extend the piece into a quartet.

Harry, through the window: 'Hi! Hi! . . . There's a big white something in Mrs. Williams's well!!!' Mrs. Herring collapses; Nancy runs to help her: 'No, no! I'm sure it isn't him . . .' her part continuing to be serious.

Accompanied by her own fanfaronade from the end of the first scene, Lady Billows appears with Florence. '. . . Blundering fools! . . . I'll ring up Scotland Yard myself . . .' In a duet with Florence, she suggests 'Modern methods . . . electro-magnets! . . . Call in Conan Doyle—Telegraph the Strand Magazine . . .'

But now the Superintendent, the Mayor and Sid arrive, solemnly uncovering, from a tray, the wreath off Albert's May King hat, 'found on the road to Campsey Ash . . .' 'Crushed by a cart . . .' Albert's death, then, seems certain.

The musical climax, a threnody, follows. It is a nonet, and again, like the funeral march at the end of *Lucretia*, an ostinato, growing out of the chorus of Ex. 20, and with an individual verse for each of the characters. It is a most intense and overpowering piece.

Albert arrives at its culmination, 'dirty, dishevelled, and stained with mud': 'What's going on?' he asks, as it ends and they see him. There is a terrific

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Ex. 20

In the midst of life is Death. Death a-waits us one and all.

Death at-tends our smallest step, Si-lent, swift and mer - ci - ful.

outburst of indignation; his being 'sorry' makes things only worse. Then he is questioned. First he only replies with nods to the general onslaught, while Nancy and Sid break in: 'Stop prying and poking and probing at him with your pious old faces delighting in Sin!' Then he begins his narration to the sounds of the previous act's nocturne (not the only backward glance of the orchestra in the following scene), offering what he finally calls 'a general sample of a night that was a nightmare example of drunkenness, and dirt, and worse!' Everybody is aghast. As his report proceeds, he drastically warms up. With a virtuosity proportionate to his loss of virtue, he turns on Mum: '... It was

Ex. 21 Amabile

ALBERT
grazioso

And I'm more than grate-ful to you all For kind - ly pro-

-vi-ding the where - with - all

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all because You squashed me down and reined me in . . .’

The whole point of the opera, Albert's emancipation, is summed up in 4 bars—i.e., Ex. 21, which is thrice repeated to different words, between shouts of ‘Preposterous!’ etc., and an ineffective tirade from Lady Billows. Both the opera's humour and its warmth are compressed into Albert's little song.

The late Festival committee stalks out. Mrs. Herring tries to round on Albert, who, however, faces up to her: ‘That'll do, Mum!’ and pushes her gently but firmly off. As soon as she has gone, Nancy kisses Albert; the children outside try the rude version (see end of Act I) of Ex. 9, but Albert invites them in and offers them peaches. Result: A victorious version of Ex. 9, sung now also by Sid and Nancy. Before the curtain goes down, Albert throws the May King wreath into the audience.