

Ambroise Thomas – Hamlet (London 2001)

Written by bluesever
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1. *Part I* 2. *Part II* Judith Howarth - soprano George Mosley - baritone Graeme Broadbernt – baritone, bass Elizabeth Laurence - mezzo-soprano Alan Oke - tenor Chelsea Opera Group, London Howard Williams – director

Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet* was one of many attempts during the nineteenth century to adapt a Shakespearean play into a dramatic opera. Most efforts to this end met with little or no success, but Thomas' work endured at the Paris Opera until the early twentieth century. The work's premiere on March 9, 1868, was met with critical and public acclaim; audiences particularly loved Ophelia's mad scene, which Thomas had specifically adapted to the talents of the Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson. Critics hailed the opera as a masterpiece, and it was viewed as the composer's greatest work to that point. *Hamlet*'s success came on the heels of acclaim for Thomas' *Mignon*, and this one-two musical punch catapulted the composer into the first ranks of French opera.

Hamlet's libretto was written by M. Carré and J. Barbier, who used as a source an 1847 stage adaptation by Alexandre Dumas père and Paul Maurice. The Dumas-Maurice libretto changes the ending of the play: Hamlet lives to be crowned king. Carre and Barbier followed this formula, which was roundly criticized -- most vociferously, and none too surprisingly, by the British. To appease his critics at Covent Garden, Thomas composed an alternative ending which makes use of Shakespeare's original scenario. Although the "happy" ending may seem a sacrilegious departure from Shakespeare, such elements were a tradition in French opera and fully expected by the public.

The rest of the opera conforms to the spirit of the original play. Thomas especially captures

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Shakespeare's dramatic intensity in the recitatives; Hamlet's speeches, the king's musings, and Ophelia's grief are all amplified by their spare musical treatment. Emotions and texts are set to a speech-like declamation entirely within French operatic tradition. The opera is further noteworthy for the experimental spirit of its orchestration, which introduces saxophones, cannon, and bass saxhorn into the ensemble.

Several moments in the libretto provide Thomas ample opportunity for effective scene painting. The ghost's appearance on the ramparts, Ophelia's funeral procession, and the coronation of Gertrude all allow for plenty of action, atmosphere, and pageantry. The device of a play within a play, during which Hamlet tries to trap his uncle into revealing his guilt, is an especial dramatic centerpiece. ---Rita Laurence, Rovi

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