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UMI
Opera Productions of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle:

The American Years (1958 - 1987)

by

Kristina Bendikas

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (1932 - 1988) has been internationally acclaimed as one of the leading opera directors/designers of this century. He was a multi-faceted artist who fused a high degree of musical knowledge with a boundless theatrical imagination. The force of his conceptual designs for ballets and spoken plays eventually led him to adopt the role of director for operas on stage and film. As a director he worked with the leading conductors and singer-actors of his day in almost every major opera house in the world. The range of his successes covered an enormous range of operas representing every period, genre and style from Monteverdi and Rossini to Wagner and Strauss. Ponnelle was instrumental in reinstating the seria operas of Mozart into the active repertoire and was a formidable champion for new works such as Reimann’s Lear and Troades.

The scope of this study encompasses operas that Ponnelle staged in the United States, but also includes many references to his productions in Europe and to his opera films. Since the works examined do not represent the totality of the director’s accomplishments, this study does not purport to be exhaustive. However, in choosing the productions the writer considered those that were most representative of his style and which had the greatest critical and popular impact.

The principal argument of this dissertation is that Ponnelle’s productions were noteworthy for the intrinsic role which music played in their conception and realization. The first chapter acquaints the reader with the multi-faceted artist and his repertoire. The second introduces the main points of his musical methodology and includes a discussion of his ideas against his practice. The remaining chapters analyze representative stage productions and films, with an emphasis on how he utilized music in both design and staging.
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Jean-Pierre Ponnelle was born on February 19, 1932 in Beaume, France, into a family that laid the foundation for the eclecticism that was one of the distinguishing features of his career. Theatre and music were prominent influences in his early years, forming what the director later referred to as the two poles of his diverse and prolific artistic life. His theatrical lineage was represented by a grandmother who was an actress, and a maternal grandfather who was a stage director, his musical heritage by a paternal grandfather, who had been a music critic and friend of Richard Strauss. At the family estate it was not uncommon for musicians the calibre of Alfred Cortot, Pablo Casals, and Jacques Thibaud to play chamber music and visit with his grandfather. The director later recalled the extent of this early, informal musical education:

Ever since my childhood I was brought up with music. During my youth I went through different phases of being confronted with music. By no means [am I] confined to the repertoire of opera . . . . Music was always around me and in me. When I at [sic] first got interested in the theatre I started out on drama; opera, more or less by chance, came much later.

Throughout his youth, music continued to be a part of Ponnelle's education, both informal and formal. He began playing the piano at the age of four, and continued well into his teens, during which time he exchanged French lessons for
piano lessons from Hans Rosbaud, who led the orchestra for the South-West German radio station (the “Sudwestfunk”) Ponnelle’s father had established in Baden-Baden, Germany, after the war. As an adolescent, he frequently skipped classes at his secondary school in order to attend the orchestral rehearsals, where he listened to a broad repertoire of music. His formal education was furthered in Baden-Baden where he learned to speak German, in Paris where he continued to study music and painting, and in Strasbourg where he studied Literature, Greek, Latin and Philosophy.

The conservative emphasis of Ponnelle’s schooling influenced his later work as a stage designer and director, in both spoken theatre and opera. He asserted that due to his education in the classics he was able to view characters such as Poppea in Monteverdi’s L’incoronazione di Poppea, or Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play, as more accessible to him than, perhaps, those whose schooling was not so classically oriented. He remained unequivocally opposed to presenting operas or plays written in previous centuries in a late twentieth-century setting and did not engage in the practice of updating operas and plays in this way because, as he said, depicting Poppea as a strip-tease girl, or clothing Hamlet in a costume of the 1920s, simply did not bring him any closer to a personal understanding of these characters. For Ponnelle, there was an inherent link between a work of art and its period of composition, so that an opera such as L’incoronazione di Poppea was as much a part of early seventeenth-century Italy as it was of ancient Rome. Consequently, when he staged the production for the Zürich Opera in 1977, he
devised a setting which suggested ancient Rome, but costumed the characters in
the style of Monteverdi’s time.

At age eighteen Ponnelle met Hans Werner Henze in Baden-Baden.\textsuperscript{11}
When Henze, who was twenty-four at the time, wrote the music for two ballets,
Jack Pudding (Wiesbaden, 1950) and Anrufung Apolls (Wiesbaden, 1951), he
designed the costumes and sets. According to Ponnelle, the composer then secured
his promise to design his first opera, an opportunity which came the following
year.\textsuperscript{12} Ponnelle’s first triumph as a scenic designer came about as a result of
Henze’s Boulevard Solitude, a contemporary retelling of the Manon Lescaut story,
written in equally contemporary twelve-tone method, that premiered at the
Landestheater in Hannover.

Critics were generally impressed by the accomplishment of the young team.
In the Musical America review, H.H. Stuckenschmidt praised the production as:
\ldots an artistic event of the first rank. Johannes Schüler
conducted the orchestra and chorus with amazing security.
Walter Jockisch’s stage direction was fascinating and bold.
Mr. Ponnelle had designed tasteful scenery in the
contemporary French manner, and Otto Kruger’s
choreography was well-integrated with the dramatic
action.\textsuperscript{13}

The performance was an overall success as Stuckenschmidt poetically concluded:
“The premiere was interrupted during the second half with whistles from the
gallery, but these were drowned in the tumultuous applause at the close, as the chirping of crickets is obliterated by a hurricane. It was a beautiful, it was an important evening."14

The premiere of Boulevard Solitude in 1952 was significant for Ponnelle’s career as a set and costume designer in that his profession began in earnest as a result of its critical success. Shortly after the production he was invited to Berlin by Karl Heinz Stroux who employed him as a designer for several productions in spoken theatre. During his work with Stroux, Ponnelle decided to pursue scenic design, remarking later that while Henze had introduced him to theatre, it was Stroux who bound him to it.15

Even though Ponnelle began designing professionally after the success of Boulevard Solitude, operas were not the staple of his assignments. Rather, spoken plays and ballets made up the bulk of his work during the early part of his career. At that time he worked exclusively in Germany, yet many of the plays for which he designed sets and costumes were by French playwrights. Giraudoux, Camus, Ionesco, Claudel and Feydeau were prominent in a list that also included Lessing, Lotar, and Calderon. The playwright to appear most frequently in Ponnelle’s repertoire in the 1950s and 1960s, however, was Shakespeare. As You Like it, Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Merchant of Venice, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream were nestled in a slowly-growing list of operas. Ponnelle never deliberately gave up designing and directing plays in favour of operas. Instead, the transition came about simply because offers to direct operas
were secured years in advance of projects proposed by spoken theatre companies.16 Later in his career he expressed a desire to return to spoken theatre,17 but after 1972 he designed and staged only two more plays, Molière's Don Juan (Zürich, 1979) and Tartuffe (Zürich, 1981).

In 1955, three years after the premiere of Boulevard Solitude, Ponnelle received another opportunity to design an opera when Carl Ebert commissioned him to collaborate on Mozart’s Cosi fan tutte in Berlin.18 This was an important assignment for the young designer who admitted that when he began to work in the theatre, his interest had been primarily in Mozart.19 After this initial production, Mozart’s operas remained at the core of his life’s work. He designed and staged nine of his operas, including those in the standard repertoire: Le nozze di Figaro (1967), Die Zauberflöte (1969), Cosi fan tutte (1969), Don Giovanni (1977), Die Entführung aus dem Serail (1985); as well as the less frequently performed seria operas: La clemenza di Tito (1969), Idomeneo (1974), Lucio Silla (1981), and Mitridate, Re di Ponto (1983).

Mozart was Ponnelle’s favourite composer, the subject of intense study and pleasure: “It is possible, that my being occupied with full scores is a kind of substitute for drugs or what generally speaking is considered life. If I read a Mozart full score for two hours, to me that is somehow erotic, a feeling of greatest satisfaction.”20 He opposed the theory that the composer’s genius was manifested by a subconscious outpouring of ideas not under his intellectual control. In fact, his belief in Mozart’s systematic couching of dramatic ideas in musical terms
spurred him to continually analyze his scores:

You can discuss two bars of Mozart as you can a couplet of Shakespeare, more than the Bible, more than the works of Dostoevsky. Mozart seems inexhaustible to me. He's an intellectual -- one of the best organized brains in history, the equivalent of Leonardo. For me, Mozart is the creator. The challenge is to constantly rediscover what the guy is saying to us.21

Ponnelle’s unqualified admiration of the composer as well as his devoted study of his works led him to re-evaluate the dramatic viability of those operas which, at the time, were outside of the mainstream opera canon. Among the outstanding achievements of his career was his vindication of the critically maligned La clemenza di Tito in a production for the Oper der Stadt Köln in 1969. The realization was not only a popular success at the time, it has since been acclaimed internationally for fostering a renewed interest in the opera, prompting reassessments of earlier criticisms and leading to subsequent stagings by other companies and directors.22

In 1958 Ponnelle began the first phase of his work in America when he was invited to the San Francisco Opera by then Artistic Director Kurt Herbert Adler to design Orff’s Die Kluge and Carmina Burana. The following year Carmina Burana was presented again, along with Ponnelle’s third assignment, the American premiere of Strauss’s Die Frau ohne Schatten. Adler’s paternal anxiety is evident in several letters he wrote to the young designer in the months preceding the
production. He coached him in great detail, in particular, advising him against too much symbolism for an audience unfamiliar with the opera.\textsuperscript{23} The letter suggests that Ponnelle had already begun to incorporate his own conception of the work in his designs, a tendency which accounted for his growing frustration with his limited role, and ultimately led to him to become a director.

Adler’s apprehension was most certainly relieved when the production was highly acclaimed by the San Francisco audience and critics.\textsuperscript{24} After the premiere, the elated Artistic Director wrote in a personal letter to Ponnelle: “The success of the performance was above all expectations, and it was a sensation in Los Angeles just as it was here. In San Francisco the first act received the greatest success, in Los Angeles the second and third. Your set designs and costumes met with tremendous approval.”\textsuperscript{25}

The 1959 production of \textit{Die Frau ohne Schatten} was a critical and popular success, yet the multiple layering of bright blocks of colour in the design was a stark contrast to the subdued style that characterized much of Ponnelle’s later work. Arthur Bloomfield, who was favourably disposed to the design, also disclosed its artistic roots in his \textit{Musical America} review: “[His] decoratively spooky settings were very handsome, and their lightness helped give the production a fairy-tale touch. He takes off from surrealism and in the dyer’s hut the painted wash hung on the line like Dali watches”\textsuperscript{26} (Fig. 1 and 2). Evidently, the painterly influence was still considerable in the work of the young set designer who, when he met Hans Werner Henze, was studying to become a painter himself, most notably with
Fig. 1 Rendering for *Die Frau ohne Schatten* San Francisco Opera, 1959 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)

Fig. 2 Rendering for *Die Frau ohne Schatten* San Francisco Opera, 1959 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
the French cubist Fernand Léger. Later in his career the influence of his early ambition remained visible in the sheer beauty of his designs, in their technical brilliance and occasionally, in his use of specific artistic references. The first act of Verdi's *Rigoletto* (San Francisco, 1973), for example, was staged within a gold frame that formed the proscenium, inside which was a detailed, monochromatic, mural reproduction of "The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus," by Peter Paul Rubens (Fig. 3).

Unfortunately, Ponnelle was unable to enjoy the success of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. While it was still in rehearsal, he was already in Algiers, having been drafted into the French army. Before he left, supporters, including Herbert von Karajan, had written on his behalf to ask that he be excused from service. Adler, in a letter to the French Consul General, requested that Ponnelle be allowed to return to San Francisco to supervise the design of the opera because, he wrote: "It is our feeling that the great talent of this young designer is certainly deserving of special attention and consideration, and we are looking forward to a favorable reply." The appeals were rejected, and Ponnelle served two years in the military, from 1959 to 1961. The designer's distaste for the army, and the fact that he had become a first-time father shortly before being conscripted, made the period particularly difficult. It was not unproductive artistically, however. He managed to complete the designs for the San Francisco production of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (sending each rendering by mail as it was completed) as well as those for six additional productions for various theatres in Germany.
Fig. 3 Rigoletto San Francisco Opera, 1974. (Technical Department Photo. Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)

Fig. 4 Otello Act I. San Francisco Opera. (Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones, 1973)
During his military service Ponnelle reflected on the strongly conceptual tendency of his designs and the growing friction between himself and directors who resisted his ideas. Although he had quickly become a successful set and costume designer, he was displeased with the limited amount of creative input he had in productions: "I discovered that I was unhappy with a lot of directors, because I found that my visual interpretation of a work was rooted in my own theoretical view of it, and this view became more and more dominant in my relationship to the direction." Therefore, he resolved to take a definitive step in his career, to direct as well as to design future productions:

I became a producer after long experience as a stage designer had convinced me that I was unable to present my work as I wanted. There were too many differences and misunderstandings with producers, and I discovered that I could no longer answer for my work. I decided to refuse all commissions that did not give me sole responsibility for the entire production.

Ponnelle began his dual role in the spoken theatre with Camus's Caligula (Düsseldorf, 1961) and in opera with Wagner's Tristan und Isolde (Düsseldorf, 1963). Thereafter, his realizations bore the individual stamp of his thorough artistic control and, as a result, the balance of design and direction changed. In an interview given in 1985 Ponnelle described the new relationship in characteristically musical terms, noting that when he began directing, he deliberately gave the scenery the "soft pedal." Whereas early in his career his set
designs had been typified by the combination of several strong colours, the majority of his later ones were distinguished by their subdued tones (usually black, white, and gray) with, perhaps, one dramatic colour reserved for costumes and/or select set pieces. In Verdi's Otello (San Francisco, 1970), for instance, the gloomy sky of the first scene was pierced by a red flag which hinted at the tragedy to come (Fig. 4). By the third act, this foreshadowing was emphasized in the use of an enormous red baldachin which hovered over Otello as he publicly denounced Desdemona in front of a startled group of Venetians dressed in white (Fig. 5).

As his career progressed, Ponnelle's designs exhibited a more pointed use of form as well as of colour. Many were anchored around a single symbolic prop that succinctly captured essential themes in the stories. Examples abound in his work, ranging from the oversized wood stove in Puccini's La Bohème (Strasbourg, 1977) which represented the Bohemians' emotional and physical longing for warmth, or the omnipresent tree in Tristan und Isolde (Bayreuth, 1983) which paralleled the fate of the lovers in its changing design. In Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande (Munich, 1973) the focal point of the mise en scène was a tree that served as a castle tower in which Mélisande was locked and enveloped Pelléas with its wispy, hairlike branches in a sensual, yet eerie, embrace. In Puccini's Gianni Schicchi (San Francisco, 1975) the two-storey, thirteenth-century interior was dominated by a large four-poster bed in which Buoso Donati lay dying, and around which the comedic action literally revolved (Fig. 6). For Dallapiccola's Il Prigioniero (San Francisco, 1979), its companion piece on the double bill, an enormous statue of the Grand Inquisitor held the prisoner in its shadow as the Jailer tortured him with the hope of release. In the final moments of the opera when the prisoner,
Fig. 5 Otello Act III. San Francisco Opera (Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones, 1973)

Fig. 6 Gianni Schicchi San Francisco Opera (Photo by Greg Peterson, 1979)
believing himself free, began to rejoice, the statue opened its arms and reached out to him for a fatal embrace (Fig. 7).

In Puccini's _Turandot_ (Strasbourg, 1976) which Ponnelle subsequently staged for the San Francisco Opera in 1977, the central icon was a spectacular Buddhalike statue of Turandot herself – from the belly of which the princess emerged for the first time, a miniature of the parasitic icon – in and around which the action took place. According to the director, its size and omnipresence throughout the opera represented her complete domination of her subjects not only during her visible presence, but in her absence as well.37 Perhaps its most memorable contribution to the production was the way it bridged scenic design and acting by participating in events and even commenting on them. For instance, the decision to execute the Prince of Persia was made by the statue when it lowered its arm in a chopping motion, repeating the collective gesture of the blood-thirsty populace (Fig. 8). At the end of the opera, when Turandot surrendered to Calaf, the Buddha, a silent and solitary witness, cried tears of blood.38

Such highly-charged icons were a hallmark of Ponnelle's brilliantly imaginative set designs. Nevertheless, as his mature works attest, his dramatic concern circumscribed ever more tightly around the characters with a corresponding lessening of dazzling visual effects:

Through my work as a director I've become more interested in humanity in the theatre, rather than in what is purely aesthetic or decorative. . . . To give an example, as a young set designer, I would have found the
Fig. 7 **Il Prigioniero** San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1979)

Fig. 8 **Turandot** San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1977)
decor for a clockmaker's shop much more attractive with 20,000 bizarre clocks. Today, I think one typical clock is more effective. As a catalyst.

In 1968, Ponnelle's career took an important step forward with an internationally hailed production of Rossini's Il barbiere di Siviglia at the Salzburg Festival. It was the first of many engagements at the Salzburg Festival which became the cornerstone of his international reputation. Thereafter, he worked in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France, England, America, the Netherlands, Italy and, in the year of his death, for the first time in Israel. In 1969 he made a triumphant return to San Francisco with Rossini's La Cenerentola, a production which charmed audiences and critics alike with its balance of humour and grace. It was a tour de force of Ponnelle's inventiveness in design and his skill as a director of comedy. The New York Times critic Harold C. Schonberg, who would later revile the director's productions at the Metropolitan Opera, praised it as "natural, unaffected and so different from opera as practiced so often on the East Coast, with its overloaded production or its wrenching of the libretto to suit a director's ego. San Francisco is fortunate."

The 1969 production of La Cenerentola marked the second phase of the association between Ponnelle and the San Francisco Opera company which lasted until 1985. The director's fondness for the city of San Francisco, the receptiveness of its audiences to his ideas, as well as his close personal friendship with Kurt Herbert Adler nurtured the lasting and fruitful association with the company.
Between 1958 and 1985 it resulted in a total of nineteen operas designed and/or staged by Ponnelle, including the American premieres of Orff’s Die Kluge (1958), Carmina Burana (1958), Strauss’s Die Frau ohne Schatten (1959), and Reimann’s Lear (1981).

Although Ponnelle’s designs have been used in a number of opera houses throughout the United States, both during his lifetime and afterwards, he personally staged productions at only three American opera houses in addition to the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. At the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1973 he debuted with Rossini’s L’Italiana in Algeri, followed by Wagner’s Der Fliegende Holländer (1979), Mozart’s Idomeneo (1982), La clemenza di Tito (1984), Le nozze di Figaro (1985), and Massenet’s Manon (1987). At the Houston Grand Opera he originated Busoni’s Arlecchino in 1982, which was the first professional stage production of the opera in the United States. He also staged Verdi’s La Traviata (1979), Puccini’s La Bohème (1981), Leoncavallo’s I Pagliacci (1982), and Strauss’s Ariadne auf Naxos (1986). At the Lyric Opera of Chicago he staged only two works, Mozart’s Le nozze di Figaro (1975) and Don Giovanni (1980).

One of the most definitive of Ponnelle’s achievements in both Europe and the United States remains his pioneering work in extending the boundaries of the standard opera repertoire. Throughout his career he presented operas spanning the four centuries of opera history, encompassing vastly different scenic styles. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century operas naturally found a secure place in his catalogue, but he frequently staged twentieth-century works as well. As noted
earlier, Richard Strauss had been a family friend, and this association had an influence on his career. Over his career he designed several of Strauss’s works, beginning with *Der Rosenkavalier* (Hamburg, 1957), *Josephslegende* (Munich, 1958), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (San Francisco, 1959), *Intermezzo* (Munich, 1960), *Der Liebe der Danae* (Munich, 1967), and *Die Agyptische Helene* (Wien, 1970). In the capacity of both director and designer, he staged three of Strauss’s operas: *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Cologne, 1973), *Salome* (Cologne, 1976) and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (Cologne, 1979). His association with Hans Werner Henze began with the world premieres of *Jack Pudding*, *Anrufung Apolls*, and *Boulevard Solitude*, as noted earlier, and continued with the ballets *Pas d’action* (Bayreuth, 1952) and *Der Idiot* (Berlin, 1952), as well as *König Hirsch* (Berlin, 1956) and *Undine* (Düsseldorf, 1961).

One of the most important collaborations of Ponnelle’s career was with Aribert Reimann for whom he designed and directed two operas. *Lear*, based on the Shakespearean play, premiered in Munich in 1978, and was brought to San Francisco in 1981. *Troades*, based on Euripides’s *The Trojan Women* followed in 1986. *Lear* became one of Ponnelle’s most important mature productions. It marked a style of scenic design in contrast to all others he presented in America, a profound display of his versatility and his mastery of a challenging musical composition. Working closely with Reimann he developed a provocative visual interpretation which realized the theories of Adolphe Appia and Vsevelod Meyerhold and succinctly captured the pantemporal nihilism of this contemporary opera.
Along with these new works, Ponnelle incorporated more established modern opera literature, including Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1973), Schönberg's *Moses und Aron* (1982), Hindemith's *Cardillac* (1985), and Berg's *Lulu* (1985). In the final year of his life, his repertoire was characteristically diverse. He filmed Mozart's *Cosi fan tutte*, staged Bizet's *Carmen* in Tel Aviv, and added yet another twentieth-century work to his repertoire, Britten's *Peter Grimes* (Florence). From the earliest days of his career until his death, twentieth-century operas and ballets constituted a significant portion of Ponnelle's repertoire. In fact, more than eighty works that he designed and/or directed (over one quarter of his total output) were works written since the turn of the century.

Although Ponnelle championed contemporary operas, he was also a significant force in catalyzing interest in compositions from earlier periods. As early as 1958 he designed Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* for Paul Hager at the Schwetzinger Schlossfestspiele; in 1965 he designed and directed Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* in Munich; and in 1966 he designed Handel's *Agrippina* for Rudolf Hartmann in Munich. By the 1970s his repertoire regularly included early or rarely staged operas. In 1972, for instance, he designed and directed Haydn's *La fedeltà Premiata*, followed by Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* in 1975, the first installment of a Monteverdi Cycle on which he collaborated with Nikolaus Harnoncourt in Zürich, that also realized *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* in 1977. These were followed by Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Cologne, 1977), Landi's *Il Sant' Alessio* (Salzburg, 1977), and a presentation of Monteverdi's eighth book of madrigals, *Madrigali Guerrieri et Amorosi* (Zürich, 1979).
While the diversity of Ponnelle's repertoire in both Europe and the United States was considerable, it did reveal certain preferences for particular composers and genres. As previously noted, Mozart's operas were central to his work, and Strauss's, which figured more prominently during his design period, returned to the repertoire later when he designed and staged three more of his operas. Following these two composers, Ponnelle staged more works by Wagner, Verdi, Rossini and Monteverdi than any other. His productions of Wagnerian operas total eight, Verdi seven, Rossini and Puccini each five, and Monteverdi four. While the nineteenth-century repertoire was represented strongly by Wagner, Verdi, and Rossini, works by Gounod, Massenet, Moussorgsky, Bizet, and Donizetti were also produced, though more sparingly.

Included in Ponnelle's catalogue were several lighter works such as Kiss Me Kate by Porter (Düsseldorf, 1962), Hello, Dolly! by Stewart and Herman (Munich, 1968), and the operetta La Belle Hélène by Offenbach (Munich, 1970). Although he ventured briefly into the operetta genre he later dismissed it as insipid, because it presented "a world in which all's well, in which the people are ever so amusing, and in which real problems are glossed over." His low opinion of operettas was matched by his disdain for verismo operas. In 1976 he did attempt Mascagni's Cavalleria rusticana and Leoncavallo's I Pagliacci in San Francisco, but even before the production was staged, he revealed his reservations when he remarked that "attempting to create the perfect illusion of life on stage is an illusion itself. I do not think it is possible; it's nonsense. The stage is an illusion and to present an illusion of life on stage is a double, it's a redundancy." The visceral realism which he captured in Cavalleria rusticana included a particularly graphic portrayal
of religious frenzy and resulted in significant criticism of the director.\textsuperscript{47} Ponnelle was stung by the negative reception,\textsuperscript{48} an experience that seemed to have soured him completely on \textit{verismo} operas. The San Francisco productions of \textit{Cavalleria rusticana} and \textit{I Pagliacci} remained his only foray into that genre.

Ponnelle's avoidance of operettas and \textit{verismo} operas hardly limited his repertoire, which still included works from four centuries, in five different languages, by French, German, Italian, Russian and English composers and in a wide variety of styles and genres. After his international reputation had been established, he continued to add works to his own repertoire. Through his interest in early operas, he contributed to their stage viability, and through his enthusiasm for new operas, he supported contemporary composers such as Henze and Reimann. His successes, recorded in reviews and, perhaps more tellingly, in the continued existence of several productions in the active repertoire more than twenty-five years after their original conception, become all the more remarkable in light of the scope of this catalogue of works.

It bears emphasizing that while Ponnelle was clearly interested in developing new operas, reviving ones rarely produced and trying new genres, he did not neglect those in the mainstream opera canon. His frequent revisiting of standard works which he had designed and staged many times before was not undertaken reluctantly, nor with any lack of energy. In fact, after Ponnelle's death, James Levine marveled at his "willingness, his desire to work on the same piece over and over again, changing details, incorporating new knowledge and current experiences, adapting to a different cast, allowing for a different space, continuing
to grow.  

By the third decade of Ponnelle’s career the tremendous variety and output of his stage productions constituted only part of his work. At that point in time he began directing opera films, enthusiastically exploring the artistic possibilities of the medium and embracing its practical value as a means of ensuring the popularity of opera beyond the late twentieth century. His films fall into three categories, delineated by the director himself: those that were simply records of a particular stage production (e.g. Idomeneo, filmed in performance at the Metropolitan Opera, 1982); those that kept the essence of the theatrical experience while using camera techniques to enhance the presentation (e.g. La Cenerentola, filmed on the La Scala stage in 1981 without an audience present); and finally, the “true film” in which the director used cinematic technique as a compositional element to interpret the opera (e.g. Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, 1974).

The variety of films that Ponnelle produced was consistent with his eclectic output as a director and designer of live productions. His first film, based on his Salzburg production of Rossini’s Il barbiere di Siviglia, was made in 1972, followed by Madama Butterfly (1974), which he had not previously staged. His next film, an exuberant studio version of Orff’s Carmina Burana in 1975, garnered the Prix Italia. Subsequent films continued to reflect the diversity which already marked his stage productions, and included Le nozze di Figaro (1976), La Cenerentola (1981), Mitridate, Re di Ponto (1986), the Zürich Monteverdi Cycle (L’Orfeo, L’incoronazione di Poppea, Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria (1979)), La clemenza di Tito

Throughout his career Ponnelle worked almost incessantly on several productions at once, designing, staging and filming. At times he collaborated with a costume designer, most notably Pet Halmen, who created the costumes for several of his productions, including Wagner’s *Der Fliegende Holländer* (San Francisco, 1975) and Reimann’s *Lear* (Munich, 1975).53 Most often, however, he was responsible for set and costume design, as well as direction, a creative tour de force which he modestly dismissed as efficiency:

I find it much more convenient to do everything, that’s all -- from a purely professional point of view. When I know, six or eight months before we start rehearsals, exactly how the set will look, then my concept is much clearer. . . . I can go directly to the carpenters, I’m ready to talk to the painters, and I do my own tech[nical] designs, so I know what the result will be. That way I save myself alot of time -- and them, too. 54

Ponnelle’s involvement in all phases of the production process was an
extension of the eclecticism that characterized his repertoire. It was particularly
evident in rehearsals where he exercised a formidable command over the
developing realization. After attending a rehearsal for the San Francisco
production of Cavalleria rusticana in 1976, one writer captured the ebullience and
authoritative style of the director at work:

He is everywhere at once, stamping his feet, hollering
instructions in a remarkably potent baritone, talking four
languages fluently. . . . In a space of about twenty minutes
he bounded onto the stage to demonstrate a reaction to
the chorus, hissing, grimacing and twisting his body in a
way they couldn’t possibly imitate, told Alfio in German
how to place his hand on Mamma Lucia’s door,
exchanged witticisms in French with someone, and
shouting, clapping his hands and jumping with both feet
off the ground, whipped the ensemble into a reasonable
facsimile of the religious ecstasy he wanted for the
“Inneggiamo” chorus.55

Ponnelle had the reputation of being a demanding stage director, yet one
who was sensitive to the needs of the singer-actor and in full command of the
musical score. Renata Scotto, who worked with Ponnelle for the first time when
she sang Vitellia in the Metropolitan Opera production of La clemenza di Tito,
confirms that, “He asks much but he knows the music — including my part
perfectly. For three weeks I come to rehearsal, say ‘Buon Giorno’ and work till six
without ever feeling tired.”56
As an artist well-grounded in both theatre and music, Ponnelle understood the needs of singer-actors and within limits, supported them in creative ways through his direction and design. As Catherine Malfitano notes: "One always felt a comfort and fulfillment on entering a world that Jean-Pierre had created in order to bring the composer's work to life. He welcomed and incorporated his performers' ideas, but never let these interrupt the cohesiveness of his vision."57 One illustration of Ponnelle's ability to address creatively a singer-actor's practical needs occurred in the San Francisco Opera production of Turandot in 1977 in which Monserrat Caballé played the lead role. Her restricted capacity for movement made it difficult for her to negotiate the enormous set of stairs which was central to the set design, so Ponnelle cast two dwarfs as supernumeraries on whom she could lean when necessary.58 The result was an exotic addition to the mise en scène, yet one which was dramatically supportable and aided the singer-actor as well.

Ponnelle was deeply concerned about appropriate casting and the credibility of acting in his productions.59 In an interview given in 1983 he admitted to having an aversion to opera singers who could not, or would not bother to act convincingly, but he quickly stressed his belief that these were no longer the norm.60 Nevertheless, there were occasional disputes with singer-actors on points of dramatic interpretation. While some singer-actors remembered their time with him very fondly,61 others flatly refused to work with him, some he refused to work with,62 and at least one left in mid-production due to a disagreement about
the dramatic interpretation of a character. Still, throughout his career Ponnelle worked with the most acclaimed singer-actors in the world, including Placido Domingo, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Mirella Freni, Paolo Montarsolo, Luciano Pavarotti, Hermann Prey, and Frederica von Stade, all of whom worked with him in both live performances and in film.

Tragically, the unquenchable energy which generated the phenomenal volume and diversity of Ponnelle's work also contributed to his untimely death. It was the director's custom to work at a tremendous rate, traveling throughout Europe and the United States to numerous opera houses to mount his productions. Frequently, he staged up to a dozen operas per year -- fourteen in 1977. These were not merely remounts of previous productions: nine of the fourteen were ones he had neither designed nor directed before, and they ranged from L'in coronazione di Poppea to Das Rheingold to Il Sant 'Alessio. Such a hectic pace, combined with a penchant for cigarettes and coffee, began to take a toll. Ill health forced him to restrict certain engagements during the last few years of his life, including turning over his 1982 San Francisco Carmen, as well as the 1984 Chicago staging of Der Fliegende Holländer, to assistants.

As his health permitted Ponnelle maintained his busy schedule of designing, directing, and making films of operas. In February 1988 he underwent heart bypass surgery, but was well enough to stage Britten's Peter Grimes in Italy in April of that year, and to film Così fan tutte immediately afterwards. In June he flew to Tel Aviv to direct Carmen where, during a characteristically exuberant chorus staging rehearsal, he fell into the orchestra pit, sustaining a concussion and
broken ribs. He remained under care in Tel Aviv until July 9, then returned home to Munich. While recuperating he continued to work on sketches for a planned production of Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* until August 10 when his condition suddenly worsened. He was admitted to a hospital in Munich where he died early the following day at the age of 56.

In 1911 Edward Gordon Craig envisioned an ideal director as someone who:

- ... is able to take the play and produce it himself,
- rehearsing the actors and conveying to them the requirements of each movement, each situation;
- designing the scenery and the costumes and explaining to those who are to make them the requirements of these scenes and costumes; and working with the manipulators of the artificial light, and conveying to them clearly what is required.\(^{64}\)

Only a handful of artists in the twentieth century have mastered the skills Craig described, not to mention adding that of film maker. Ponnelle was a member of this elite group. Moreover, he applied his protean gifts to an almost unparalleled repertoire that encompassed ballet, spoken plays and operas of every era, style and genre. Over a career that spanned 36 years, his critical and popular success in presenting operas as diverse as Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* and Reimann’s *Lear*, and filming operas like Monteverdi’s *L'Orfeo*, assured these works a place in the contemporary repertoire and earned the director the reputation of being one of the most talented and influential artists of the late twentieth century.
Notes


10 Imre Fabian, *Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 20 and 80. Chapters 3 and 4 detail the reasons for Ponnelle’s objection to updating.


14 H.H. Stuckenschmidt, "Henze's New Manon Opera has Premiere in Germany," 7.

15 Imre Fabian, Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 17.

16 Arthur Kaplan, "For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco -- This Time the Most Popular One of Them All," San Francisco Opera Magazine 1978: 94.

17 Arthur Kaplan, "For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco -- This Time the Most Popular One of Them All," 94.

18 Imre Fabian, Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 17.


28 Imre Fabian, Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 18.


30 Imre Fabian, Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 18.

31 Kurt Herbert Adler, personal letter to Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. 22 Mar. 1959, San Francisco Performing Arts Library, San Francisco, California.


34 Rudolf Hartmann, Opera, 55.


40 Imre Fabian, Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 26.


48 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco -- This Time the Most Popular One of Them All,” 91.


50 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco -- This Time the Most Popular One of Them All,” 92.

51 Imre Fabian, Imre Fabian im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 52.


54 Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, “Retheatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle,” 27.


59 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco -- This Time the Most Popular One of Them All,” 92.

60 Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, “Retheatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle,” 40.

61 Marilyn Horne, Catherine Malfitano, Daniel Helfgot, John Pritchard, “Remembering Ponnelle,” 76.


* Production book source, Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.
Ideas and Method

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s opera realizations were remarkable not only for their quantity and scope, but also as products of a definitive methodology. Regardless of an opera’s genre or period, he used the full orchestral score as the primary source for his conceptions, analyzing it as a stage director in the spoken theatre analyzes a playscript to form his interpretation. Music was not analyzed to the exclusion of the words, but rather, considered first:

I cannot think before I know the score perfectly, I cannot. Not only the piano score: I prefer to work with the full orchestral score. . . . For me, all the information comes from the music. After that follows the dramaturgical analysis, trying to discover the relationships between the characters. . . . When the musical score and the analysis of the libretto are ready, I see my mise-en-scène clearly, automatically.¹

Music was not only the primary source for Ponnelle’s conceptions, it was also the agent that unified his realizations in a manner envisioned by Adolphe Appia. The nature and extent of his musical methodology remains fundamental to a discussion of his work.

The seeds of Ponnelle’s musical methodology were planted in the mid-1950s when he was still a young designer working for Carl Ebert in Berlin. At that time he was influenced by that director’s employment of, and regard for, music: “From Ebert I learned something very important: that is, how one can read a musical
score with the eyes of a director. And also, an absolute respect for the music."²

Although in theory he embraced Ebert's approach, in reality, his early designs for such operas as Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (San Francisco, 1959) did not reveal its direct application. Only after he took on the dual role of director as well as designer did the system of developing a mise en scène from the music become evident in his work.

One significant result of Ponelle's dual role, and a contributing factor to application of his musical methodology, was his close collaboration with conductors. Whereas the sole responsibility for design and direction afforded him greater conceptual control over his work, it also meant a corresponding loss of the creative input of an artistic colleague with whom he could exchange ideas.³ In order to fill this void, he fostered a close association with the conductor, preferring even disagreement to no response at all.⁴ However, the nature of his work with conductors is revealed only in part by this explanation. He became a true collaborator with the conductor also because he was convinced that the work of an opera stage director and that of a conductor were, in fact, the same:

The collaboration between the director and the conductor must be very, very intimate, I feel. . . [I]f you really try to work seriously on a musical score, there are always questions to be answered. You try to find a reason why that's *piano*, why that's *decrescendo*, why we have an *accelerando* here, and so on. And, theoretically, those are the same questions a conductor has to ask himself and
Ponnelle’s definition of opera as a collaborative art form in which the conductor and stage director play key roles contributed to the conceptual unity in his work. Since he considered the musical score the dramatic text, he maintained the importance of the interaction between conductor and director in order to achieve that end. Further, he attached greater value to conductors and directors who not only worked together, but also could work from both perspectives: “A conductor who is not a good dramaturg is not a good conductor. A director who is not a good musician can never be a good director.”

The reciprocity that the director esteemed so highly in his work with conductors characterized his long and fruitful association with James Levine, who collaborated with him on a number of stage and film projects in the United States and Europe, including the Metropolitan Opera premieres of Mozart’s *Idomeneo* (1982) and *La clemenza di Tito* (1984). In an article written after Ponnelle’s death, Levine confirmed the interrelated quality of their work: “There always came certain moments in our collaboration where suddenly he became ‘the ears’ and I ‘the eyes’ — a unique exchange between us which widened our individual perceptions and increased our collective awareness of the work as a whole entity.”

The symbiotic nature of Ponnelle’s association with conductors the calibre of Claudio Abbado, Gerd Albrecht, Herbert von Karajan, and James Levine was possible in great measure because his formidable musical proficiency enabled him
to communicate with them in a way that was impossible for a stage director who lacked such knowledge. This musical adroitness extended beyond his ability to read music and play the piano. Wolfgang Sawallisch, who conducted his staging of Hindemith’s Cardillac (Bayreuth, 1985) and Strauss’s Die Frau ohne Schatten (Milan, 1986), recalls that “A conversation with him about a score whether Das Liebesverbot or Cardillac was a genuine dialogue,” and Aribert Reimann, for whom he directed the premieres of Lear (Munich, 1978) and Troades (Munich, 1986), remarks that upon their initial meeting about Lear it was clear to him that Ponnelle could read the full score and easily discuss individual orchestral parts.

Finally, James Levine recalls his keen ear and sensitive appreciation for the dual nature of opera:

He knew the music, he knew the text, and he understood the technical and subliminal relationship between the two. And he cared how it sounded! He had an innate feeling for the colours of the score, the shape of the phrase, the core of the musical communication, and often commented on the musical attributes not only of singers, but of specific orchestras and even of the individual musicians in the orchestra.

Through his own example, Ponnelle supported his conviction that a thorough knowledge of music was not an option for an opera stage director, but a necessity. One must be able to read a musical score, he insisted, in order to understand it as a structuring element of the drama, and not merely an incidental
accompaniment to it. In his view, the score, that is the full orchestral score, was the dramatic text, a blueprint from which it was possible to build a mise en scène if the dramatic importance of its structural elements (tonality, orchestration, rhythm, etc.) were understood and accepted as manifestations of the composer’s vision. It was more than a metrical contract which necessitated adherence; it was a source of inspiration, a dramatic text written in the language of music, and an open book to those who made the effort to read it. Given the importance that he attached to the score, it is not surprising that he rejected the work of opera directors who did not derive their interpretations from it: “Those who ignore the music, who don’t take it into consideration, or who purposefully direct against the music – these people I consider parasites.”

The realization of operas using the compositional elements of music is not, of course, unique to Ponnelle. The history of opera staging includes both composers and conductors in the role of stage director, a fact that certainly points to an historical precedent for the use of the score as the dramatic text. In the late twentieth-century, however, when many opera stage directors are recruited from the spoken theatre, it is not unusual for the libretto to be used as the dramatic text. In Ponnelle’s case, his thorough grasp of the principles and elements of musical composition enabled him to analyze the full score, independent from the libretto, as the dramatic text from which to conceive his designs and staging. This was an approach specifically for opera, not one imported from the spoken theatre. In opera, his concern was always with the music itself -- not as an enhancement of
the drama, not as something incidental and definitely not as a burden. The music was the dramatic contract which he gladly followed to the letter:

The technique of an opera director is entirely different from a director in spoken theatre. One has a time restriction, a metrical contract: the score. Even if I prefer an allegro, I cannot go against the conductor. As an opera director, I am bound to the timing of the music. Perhaps for a lot of directors in spoken theatre that is a constraint. As for me, I prefer to accept it, and I love it, just as I love Alexandrian verse of classical French literature.18

Certainly, the importation of stage directors trained in the spoken theatre into the opera house has contributed to the vibrancy and sophistication of contemporary opera designs and staging. On the other hand, it has given way to what Roger Savage terms in his essay “The Staging of Opera,” “the ‘creative’ director:” the director who has became the sole master of the visual concept, and whose power has grown in relative proportion to the decline of new works.19 As noted in the previous chapter, Ponnelle’s control over every aspect and phase of his productions was formidable, yet his productions maintained the integrity of the composer’s vision because of his use of the score as the primary source for his realizations.

In Music and the Art of the Theatre, published in 1898, Adolphe Appia asserted that since an opera was the product of the composer’s singular vision, its truthful realization could be achieved only if it was derived from the music:
The devices necessary to that mind's communication cannot be divided among several individuals, for these devices are a part of the artist's original intention. It can be stated then that a work of art can preserve its integrity only when all its expressive elements are under the control of its creator.

Of course, Appia was theorizing a plan for reforming the scenic practices being used at the time in the staging of Richard Wagner's operas. In his book he meticulously investigated the means by which a director could translate compositional elements into visual images. The essence of his argument, that a director should not be a separate creative force, but rather a servant of the music, is evident in Ponnelle's view of himself as an interpreter of the composer's dramatic vision recorded in the score.

Certainly, the visualization of the composer's dramatic vision presents difficulties. It is a well-known fact that opera scores often pose profound and numerous questions of both a musicological and dramaturgical nature, due, in part, to the sources from which they have been derived. Those which have been altered, or even pieced together from different manuscripts, can blur the clarity of the composer's initial vision and necessitate significant interpretation by both conductor and director. Ponnelle was well aware of the many factors that can lead to changes in scores, such as transpositions to accommodate certain singer-actors, new arias added to satisfy their egos, cuts in music and dialogue made for the sake of time or current tastes, etc. He acknowledged that these changes were not infrequently the result of very practical considerations, and even, at times, were
made by the composer (a well-known example is Mozart’s Prague and Vienna versions of *Don Giovanni*). Nevertheless, he maintained that it was the duty of the opera director and conductor to consult the original manuscript, and to consider carefully any later corrections against it, in order to realize it with integrity.22

Three examples serve to illustrate the nature and extent to which Ponnelle worked with conductors to fulfill this obligation. The first is from Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, which he and Claudio Abbado presented at the Salzburg Festival in 1969. At that time they decided to present the opera with all of the exact *fioriture* that Rossini had written out in detail for Rosina restored. The range of these ornamentations were such that they cast a mezzo-soprano (the vocal range for which the part of Rosina was originally written) rather than a soprano in the role. The impact of the musical choice as a dramatic one becomes clear in light of the type of characters associated with each vocal level. As Kurt Honolka observed in *Opera*, the lower female range gave a greater sense of strength and resolution to the role, in contrast to the coquettishness traditionally associated with the soprano voice.23

An additional example can be drawn from his work with John Pritchard on Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*. When they had presented it in San Francisco in 1969, they had included two arias, one for Clorinda, “Sventurata! mi credea,” and one for Alidoro, “Vasto teatro è il mondo,” in accordance with contemporary performance practice. However, after the 1969 production, musicological research revealed that neither had been written by Rossini, but both were gifts from Luca
Agolini, and that an aria written for Alidoro by the composer himself in 1821 had recently been discovered. When Ponnelle staged the opera again in 1974 in San Francisco, he and Pritchard included, for the first time in America, Rossini's own aria for Alidoro, "Là del ciel nell'arcano profondo."25

Finally, Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro provides one additional illustration of Ponnelle's concern with the accuracy of the composer's vision as represented in particular musical editions. During preparation for the Salzburg production in 1972, he became convinced that having Susanna sing the High C in the act 2 trio "Susanna, or via sortite!" would not represent Mozart's intentions, but rather only what had become a theatrical convention. The director then persuaded Herbert von Karajan that in the original manuscript Susanna's vocal range was clearly established as somewhat lower than the Countess's (although both are soprano roles), and that the two runs up the score were intended for the Countess.26 Ostensibly, this issue appears to be a musicological one rather than a directorial one. For Ponnelle, however, musicological issues were dramatic issues, and thus he applied himself to addressing it. In two instances the scene was performed according to his reading of the manuscript: the 1976 film conducted by Karl Böhm, with Kiri Te Kanawa as the Countess, and at the Metropolitan Opera in 1985, with James Rudel conducting, and Carol Vaness portraying the Countess.27 However, when the opera was presented at the Metropolitan Opera in 1994, staged by an assistant, and conducted by Levine, the singer-actor playing Susanna took the runs up to the High C in "Susanna, or via Sortite."28
Many examples demonstrate Ponnelle’s concern with musicological as well as dramaturgical matters which arose from his study of the score. Undoubtedly, his thorough understanding of compositional elements contributed to his appreciation of them as dramatic constructs, and may have accounted for his reluctance to make cuts in the scores. Many of his productions were noted for their completeness. One of his most widely-acclaimed productions, Mozart’s La clemenza di Tito (Cologne, 1969) led to a renewed interest in the opera, in part, because his restoration of many musical passages habitually omitted by previous interpreters shed new light on the dramatic viability of the work.29 Even for more frequently performed operas, Ponnelle strongly advocated preserving the composer’s dramatic vision by presenting the score as written: “No note in Mozart is ever wrong from the first to the end. Even the modulations make dramatic sense. It is absolutely criminal, for instance, to cut Così fan tutte. There is always evolution, even in the repeats.”30

Despite such a strong position, Ponnelle did permit cuts in many of the operas that he staged in the United States -- even in Mozart’s. Upon close examination of the production books in which they are documented, however, it is clear that most were minor, encompassing one or, at times, several measures, or repeats.31 One exception is noteworthy, however, because it suggests that the director considered the value of the music of an opera only in relation to its dramatic possibilities. In 1982 he eliminated the ballet which concludes Mozart’s Idomeneo because he believed that it served no dramatic purpose.32
The director’s uncompromising view of the preeminent role of music can be seen not only in his use of the score during the conception of his productions, but also during rehearsals, where it guided his work with singer-actors. He reportedly attended music rehearsals on a regular basis,33 and generally conducted staging rehearsals from the full score.34 Renata Scotto, who worked with Ponnelle for the first time on Mozart’s La clemenza di Tito at the Metropolitan Opera in 1984, told the New York Times with a certain surprise: “He knows the music — including my part perfectly. It is the first time I have ever seen a stage director conduct a stage rehearsal using the score.”35

Ponnelle’s view of the score as a blueprint for staging shaped his directorial style. He did not enter the rehearsal room with what Peter Brook calls “a formless hunch,” that is, an idea which takes shape through the rehearsal process, rather than before it.36 He most certainly worked cooperatively with conductors and singer-actors, but not so as to distribute creative responsibility, an approach he flatly rejected.37 Instead, he conducted rehearsals with the score in hand, ready to realize the mise en scène that he had developed from it. Marilyn Horne, who played Mistress Quickly in Falstaff (San Francisco, 1985) and Isabella in L’Italiana in Algeri (New York, 1973), observed that: “He was the kind of director who told you what to do because he had worked it all out himself.”38 Ponnelle’s own description supports the conclusion that he employed a prescriptive technique: “I must say that when I come to the first rehearsal everything is completely clear to me. Above all, I know the score. I know exactly what I want to do, in every
Ponnelle's prescriptive rehearsal style was consistent with his view of the music as the most important component in opera. For him, singer-actors, like all other production elements, were subject to the mandate of the music. As Appia had noted, this subordination meant that singer-actors were not the sole dramatic exponents, as in the spoken theatre, but rather, true partners with the music.40 There is, however, a paradox in this relationship because, as Appia pointed out, the singer-actor was actually the physical gauge for the entire realization:

Nothing must be left to chance; every movement of the actor is determined by the music. Thus the movements of the actor, even each of his steps, fixed by the music, measuring space as music measures time, give to the tempo of the music form in space, and by consequence, determine all the proportions of the mise en scène.41

In order to illustrate the role of music in Ponnelle's work with singer-actors one may consider his approach in light of Constantin Stanislavski's. In the early twentieth century, Stanislavski developed the legendary style of acting for the stage at the Moscow Art Theatre, a system widely-used by directors from the spoken theatre to coach actors in rehearsal. While Ponnelle never publicly claimed an affinity for any particular school in his work, it is significant that despite his extensive experience in the spoken theatre, as an opera director he distanced himself from this ubiquitous system:
I think Stanislavsky is fine. I read him when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. But I also think that Stanislavsky was especially useful for a director named Stanislavsky, who worked in Moscow at the beginning of this century. He has nothing to do with me in 1984. Oh yes, he gave me some tips, but my own technique is very simple: I try to persuade. I hate to obligate. I hate it. So when they're doing something, they have to be convinced of it. And I try to convince them with words and with gestures and with pantomime. I play the part (Fig. 1).

His approach did indeed differ from Stanislavski's psychologically-based acting system to the extent that it was specifically suited to opera. Stanislavski, who had directed a number of operas at the Moscow Art Theatre, in addition to his pioneering work in spoken theatre, certainly recognized the need for his singer-actors to perform in conjunction with the music. Many of his rehearsals, transcribed by contemporaries, confirm the role of music in his methodology. For instance, during a rehearsal for Puccini's La Bohème in 1927, he directed his singer-actors to "do everything along with the music, drawing only on it. Otherwise you will lapse into naturalism. All live action on the opera stage which is not filtered through the music, ennobled by it, becomes immediately coarse and vulgar."43

Ostensibly, this advice supports a musical methodology. In truth, it did so only in part. According to Stanislavski’s disciple and critic Vsevelod Meyerhold, although the singer-actors' movements were filtered through the music, the
Fig. 1 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in rehearsal for Lear in 1981 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
impetus for them was still derived from a psychological source rather than directly from a musical impulse. Meyerhold objected to this psychological -- and in his view, unmusical -- approach to acting in opera because he maintained that it interfered with the interrelationship of the arts.\textsuperscript{44} For Meyerhold, only a rhythmically-based acting style could forge a synthesis between musical rhythm and plastic rhythm:

[The actor in music drama] will not become a vital element in the [Richard] Wagnerian synthesis until he learns to see [Feodor Ivanovich] Chaliapin's art not in the light of the Moscow Art Theatre, whose actors perform according to the laws of mimesis, but in light of omnipotent rhythm.\textsuperscript{45}

The legacy of Meyerhold's rhythmic style, rather than Stanislavski's system, can be seen in Ponnelle's expressive and highly structured staging. The extent to which this is true can be ascertained from many examples, including his meticulously choreographed treatment of the prelude of Verdi's \textit{Rigoletto} presented in San Francisco in 1973. As soon as the music began, a single spotlight revealed Rigoletto standing over his dead daughter, in a moving foreshadowing of the final scene. Then, as the octaves played by the strings built to a double \textit{forte}, he raised his hands slowly to his face. On the diminished 7th chord, he suddenly stepped back in horror, stood still for two measures, then knelt as the orchestra played up the octave. He fell across the body as the orchestra played up yet another octave on a C- chord, after which he rose to a kneeling position, then stood again. When the octaves climaxed at a double \textit{forte}, Rigoletto whirled around to see the
chorus of courtiers suddenly revealed by an up stage light, standing frozen, in grotesque hunchbacked postures, mocking him.46

Ponnelle’s critics did not consider the rigid quality of his staging an appropriate means of expressing the music. Peter Conrad, in his book A Song of Love and Death, suggests that his close adherence to the metrical contract of the score actually subverted it: “The clockwork precision of Ponnelle’s stagings is a reaction to this constraint, fitting the characters of Rossini or Mozart into the music’s schematic design. It often looks as if he is choreographing the score.”47 To support this charge, Conrad cites an example from the 1973 Metropolitan Opera production of L’Italiana in Algeri in which, “The musical measure is policed by a metronomic flagellation: as [the harem girls] sing their master’s praises, the eunuchs graze the rumps of the captive girls with lengths of rope. . . . Like galley slaves obedient to the drum, Ponnelle’s actors are indentured to the music.”48

Conrad’s observation of the singer-actors’ subservience to the music was not at all inaccurate, but seems to favour a less binding relationship between the music and staging. Such an arrangement was not supported by Ponnelle, or either of his most influential predecessors. Meyerhold, like Appia before him, clearly considered the highly structured nature of a musical approach vital to achieving a harmony of production elements – including acting – and to the fulfillment of a philosophical ideal:

By prescribing a strict tempo, the musical score frees the actor in music drama from the demands of his own
temperament . . . Once the human body becomes supple and agile, it joins the orchestra and the mise en scène as a means of expression, and can begin to play an active part in the dramatic action. Man, performing in harmony with the mise en scène and the musical score, becomes a work of art in his own right.49

Coincidentally, a very practical modern rejoinder to Meyerhold's outlook was made on Ponnelle's behalf by Placido Domingo in 1983: "There is a choreographic logic to his positioning of singers," Domingo wrote in his biography," that, far from being a hindrance to us, makes performing easier."50

The subjugation of the singer-actor to the music was not, as Conrad implies, merely the whim of a despotic director. Rather, it was consistent with Appia's assertion that all elements of opera production should serve the music. In the example cited from L'Italiana in Algeri, this principle was evident in staging that adhered closely to such compositional elements as tempo and rhythm. It was also evident in Ponnelle's use of the period style of the music in the scenic picture.

In Ponnelle's realizations the style of the music generally influenced the scenic style more than the historical period in which the story was set. For example, when he presented the Monteverdi Cycle (Zürich, 1975-1977) he created a mise en scène that incorporated elements of seventeenth-century Italian style although the stories were derived from mythology and antiquity. L'Orfeo, for instance, was presented as if being premiered at the Mantuan ducal palace in 1607. The chorus represented members of the court, and the roles of Apollo and
Hope/Music were taken by singer-actors dressed as the Duke and Duchess of Mantua.\textsuperscript{51} By staging the opera in a visual setting depicting the composer’s time, Ponnelle presented it as if seen through the composer’s eyes. The attempt to show this perspective was consistent with his view of an opera as a product of the composer and his period.\textsuperscript{52}

When Ponnelle did change the period setting of an opera, his objective was to harmonize the visual style with the musical style. Such was the case when he staged Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s \textit{Ariadne auf Naxos}, for the Houston Grand Opera in 1986. Rather than stage the opera in the seventeenth-century setting as indicated in the libretto, he updated it to the early twentieth “because the music written by Strauss is so post-romantic German. The overture is a parody of 17th century idioms and the prologue is so typically 20th century, it makes no sense to stage it in another century.”\textsuperscript{53} The style of the music, not the setting explicitly determined by the librettist, accounted for the visual style of the production. He set the opera in 1916, just four years after it was actually composed, in the home of a rich Viennese gentleman who was presenting a masked ball in seventeenth century style costumes. A huge garage in the gentleman’s mansion served as the backstage area of the first act. In the middle of the garage was an authentic Stoddard-Dayton Speedster, a period piece around and on which the conflicts between the opera singers and actors unfolded.\textsuperscript{54}

In addition to prioritizing the period of composition, Ponnelle’s scenic conceptions often captured the very nature of music. In \textit{Music and the Art of the}
Theatre Appia alluded to Schopenhauer when he wrote, "Music by itself 'never expresses the phenomenon, but only the essence of the phenomenon.'" That is to say, music can suggest a mood, a place, or even a character, but it cannot specifically describe it in the way that words can. According to Appia, the expressive nature of music should be complemented by scenery that also evokes, but does not describe. Thus, for Appia, the painting of realistic scenes on canvas drops, or the use of realistic scenic objects, contradicted the subtlety of music and destroyed the harmony of visual and aural elements.

In Ponnelle's work one finds concordance with Appia’s viewpoint. He referred to his designs as “quotations,” scenic evocations of a period or place, rather than complete recreations. Whereas certain contemporaries of Ponnelle such as Peter Sellars have staged operas in roadside diners and fully-furnished penthouses, he favoured a stylized setting which evoked a social or historical milieu in a dramatic yet discerning manner. For example, when he staged Puccini’s La Bohème (San Francisco, 1978) he designed a garret that consisted of a sparsely appointed, room-sized platform, isolated on the stage, and dominated by an enormous wood stove (Fig. 2). These elements, along with the nineteenth century costumes, gave an impression of the poverty the Bohemians, but in no way offered specific details.

The scenic element which Ponnelle used in a manner most consistent with Appia’s theory of staging music drama was lighting. In his productions it became an expressive, plastic medium integrated into the total dramatic picture as Appia
Fig. 2  *La Bohème* in rehearsal. San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ira Nowinski, 1978)
had envisioned. Appia had considered light the most fluid and expressive of all the stage elements, and therefore a suitable partner for music: "Light is to production what music is to the score; the expressive element in opposition to literal signs; and like music, light can express only what belongs to the 'inner essence of all vision.'" When he pioneered the dramatic use of stage lighting as the coalescing agent between the actor and the scenery, the use of electric light for the stage was still in its infancy. Furthermore, the two-dimensional painted flats still in vogue permitted only what he termed "diffused light," that is general light to illuminate an object. In his own designs, subtle, three-dimensional scenery made possible a "living light" which expresses, rather than merely reveals, a stage image through chiaroscuro.

Ponelle used light in just such an expressive manner and in doing so made it a partner of the music. Many examples may serve to illustrate his application of Appia's theory in practice. For example, Falstaff (San Francisco, 1985) began in the darkened recesses of the Garter Inn, which was later contrasted with the airiness of the brightly lit courtyard between the homes of Alice Ford and Meg Page. The contrast underscored the seediness of Falstaff's plan and highlighted the innocence of the women who, he believed, awaited his sexual advances. Later, Falstaff's self-admiration was amplified in the playful interplay of music and light when he sang of the appeal of his paunch. Bartolo turned up an oil lamp, projecting an enormous shadow of Falstaff on the rear wall for his line "Falstaff immenso . . . Enorme Falstaff." In another example, when Fenton and Nanetta began "Labbra di foco, Labbra di fiore," Ponelle highlighted the sensuality of their duet by casting their silhouettes on bed sheets hung out to dry as they coyly pursued each other.
behind them (Fig. 3).

In the final act of Puccini’s _La Bohème_ (San Francisco, 1978), expressive lighting conveyed the intensity of the Bohemians’ emotional reaction to Mimi’s death. In the memorable final moments of the opera, Mimi lay dying in the tiny garret -- just a crude platform placed in the centre of the stage -- on a bed isolated in a pool of intense white light, while the general lighting on the facades was lowered. At the moment Mimi died, there was no change in lighting, but when Rudolfo rushed to her side crying out for his beloved with the tragic B minor chord in the orchestra, the front lights dimmed on Musetta, Marcello, Colline and Schaunard, leaving only their sculpted shadows, while a spotlight focused on Rudolpho leaning over Mimi. The store facades remained lit, as if the city itself was oblivious of the tragedy which had befallen, while the profound effect of Mimi’s death on the Bohemians was crystallized in the evocative shadow that encompassed them. As the final measures of music were heard, the spotlight on Mimi and Rudolfo faded slowly, leaving the figures profiled in a tragic tableau, until the complete blackout that coincided with the end of the music (Fig. 4).

Finally, choreographed movement and expressive lighting combined in Ponnelle’s powerful staging of the final scene of Bizet’s _Carmen_ (San Francisco, 1981). The set for the last act depicted the exterior of the arena outside of which a crowd had gathered to welcome Escamillo. White light bleached the stage to create the atmosphere of intense heat, as it had in the opening scene. The spectators followed the bullfighter into the arena through a large door on the right side of the stage, which closed after they were all inside. Several spectators, including Micaela,
Fig. 3  **Falstaff**  San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1985)

Fig. 4  **La Bohème**  San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1978)
remained visible through small windows in the upper level of the arena as they watched the fight.

Outside the arena, the growing intensity of the bullfight corresponded to the confrontation taking place between Don José and Carmen. The perimeter lights dimmed, diminishing the "ring" within which the lovers were fighting. The final confrontation became a rhythmic dance of domination and subordination which was confined to the four steps that ran across the stage. Musical impulses generated movements with the quality of a *pas de deux* as side lighting gave way to a focused spot light that reduced the lit area to a small circle just before the climactic murder. When Don José stabbed Carmen, he did so in a concentrated pool of light on the downstage area of the steps, just as a cheer went up from the crowd inside the arena announcing the death of the bull. As he leaned over the dead body of Carmen, a boy ran out of the arena through a small door that pointed an accusing finger of light across the darkness towards the murderer, just before the rest of the crowd filtered out through the main doors. 61

Although in theory Ponnelle shared Appia's hierarchical view of the production elements of opera, in practice, his work did not always realize Appia's vision. Critics charged that he devised scenery and staging which, at times, subverted rather than complemented the music. One of the objections levied against his designs was that it lacked faith in the very music he claimed to hold in high regard. John Rockwell's unfavourable review of *Lear* (San Francisco, 1981) included the following: "Yet another problem is Mr. Ponnelle who is not flouting tradition here. . . but whose visual virtuosity too often calls undue attention to
Indeed, examples from Ponnelle’s productions indicate his tendency to amplify an aural suggestion with a visual one, inconsistent with Appia’s view of music as a complete dramatic construction. Appia had insisted that the visual elements of production should not supplant the suggestion of the music. His own design for Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde was based on this principle of musical supremacy. In act 2, for instance, he designated a meeting place of the lovers through subtle visual evocation rather than representation: “The forms determining and limiting this space are only dimly seen. The quality of the light gives an impression of outdoors. One or two lines of the barely visible setting suggest trees.” Meyerhold, too, followed Appia’s lead when he staged this opera in 1907. At that time he was directly influenced by Appia and consequently, favoured an economical setting that complemented rather than detracted from the aural picture painted by the orchestra:

In Act Two [Wagner] stipulates a ‘Blumenbank’ where Tristan is supposed to place Isolde during the intermezzo of the love duet; yet the garden with the rustling of leaves blending with the sound of the horns is miraculously evoked by the orchestra. The mere contemplation of real foliage on the stage would be as flagrantly tasteless as illustrating Edgar Allan Poe.

When Ponnelle staged the opera in 1983, he parted company with Appia and
Meyerhold. He put real foliage on the stage in the form of a sensual three-dimensional tree. It dominated the stage, a magnificent icon which shielded the lovers under enormous bows decorated with thousands of tiny lights. The magnificent tree reiterated the aural suggestion, a clear divergence from the theories of Meyerhold and Appia with regard to design.

With respect to staging, Ponnelle again often underscored the music with visual elements. He frequently staged overtures or preludes, and even added additional characters to scenes to emphasize dramatic ideas. As one exasperated critic put it: "He is one of those directors who has to underline everything twice, use exclamation points and italics, and nervously introduce stage business when none is needed." One such example can be cited from the beginning of Mozart's Idomeneo, which he staged at the Metropolitan Opera in 1982. The opera began with Ilia, the captured Trojan princess, alone on stage singing about her life as a captive in Crete and her love for its prince Idamante. As she sang, he entered and stood to her left, as if a vision conjured up in her mind. Then, as she expressed her doubt about Idamante's preference for her over Ellettra, the latter made her entrance on the opposite side of the stage. The love triangle was concretized to the dismay of Andrew Porter who took Ponnelle to task for staging such "eavesdropping."

Perhaps the strongest, certainly the most frequent, criticism of Ponnelle's work was that his prioritization of the music frequently led to an almost complete disregard for the libretto. Indeed, while he readily accepted the binding nature of
music, he seemed to reject a similar obligation to the libretto. As opponents have pointed out, he even favoured staging suggestions he uncovered in the music over clear directives written by the librettist or even the composer. Spike Hughes in his book *Glyndebourne: A History of the Festival* cited the action at the beginning of act 3 of *Falstaff* (Glyndebourne, 1976) as a particular example of the director’s indifference to the stage directions.

According to the libretto, 33 bars of music gradually increasing in volume are to be played before the curtain is raised, revealing Falstaff deep in thought seated on a bench in front of the Garter Inn. In Ponnelle’s staging, the curtain was raised, and as the music began, Falstaff entered the stage by climbing out of the orchestra pit — representing the Thames river into which he had been unceremoniously dumped at the end of the previous act. The business, according to Hughes’s account, elicited laughter and applause, but almost drowned out the “wonderful, angry crescendo, from ppp to ff . . . intended to prepare us for the sight of an angry Falstaff.”

Of course, it is not unusual for a stage director to disregard paratextual indications for staging. In the example above, Ponnelle followed modern staging practice when he opted to reject the stage directions. Instead, he used the musical crescendo itself as the catalyst for the stage action, a choice consistent with his methodology, positioning music as more important than the words: “I don’t necessarily follow the literal line of the libretto or the stage directions set by the composer,” he said. “I adhere to something which is much truer and deeper — the
music.71 As Hughes observed, however, in Falstaff Ponnelle's adherence to the music alone -- without regard for the libretto -- apparently also permitted the addition of a silent character to the drama. Mr. Page, from Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor, not in the libretto written by Arrigo Boito, was played by a supernumerary.72

As illustrated by the example from the third act of Falstaff, Ponnelle subordinated indications for staging in the libretto to those that he derived from the music. Customarily, the libretto was a secondary source which he consulted only after he had studied the music.73 When he did use the libretto, he did so first only because the music offered him no stimulating ideas:

Only when I don't love or respect the score -- and that depends on the composer -- do I begin with text analysis. Each moderation, each key change in Mozart has dramatic meaning. Whether it is written in C major or G minor tells me a lot. . . . [There are works] in which the primary thing is the dramatic situation in the music, like Mozart or Monteverdi. In others, the music has no great secrets like Donizetti. Then I leaf through the libretto and score and ask: 'How can I best do this?'74

There were occasions when Ponnelle used not only the libretto, but also original literary sources for inspiration, as he did when he staged Carmen for the San Francisco Opera in 1981. Consistent with his desire to represent the
composer's vision, he staged the original spoken dialogue version rather than the Giraud version with its sung recitatives. However, Mérimée's tale was a significant influence on his staging. In act 2, for instance, the jealous confrontation between Zuniga and Don José escalated to the murderous one taken from the short story, but not included in the libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy. Clearly, the director wanted to include this powerful dramatic moment in the staging regardless of the absence of a musical precedent.

Although Ponnelle sometimes used the libretto and even literary sources, when the music did not inspire him, he remained adamant about their place in his methodology:

Original sources, like the short story by Verga which was the idea for Mascagni's 'Cavalleria,' are a valuable aid for a director. They can also be dangerous; for example, I don't think it's very important to know the Beaumarchais play, but if you know it, you must forget it and remember you are directing 'Le nozze di Figaro.' Music is much more important than going back to the original source.

Without a doubt, music was the primary influence on Ponnelle's conceptions and realizations and accounted for the most profound and imaginative moments in his productions. One of the most frequently praised aspects of his work was its exposure of theatrical conventions and the presentation of fresh and insightful character portrayals in their place. The director worked to achieve this result through his musical methodology: "When you stage a
production the first thing you must do is forget every kind of tradition. You must read the score and rethink the piece." Ponnelle’s consideration of the music apart from theatrical tradition and apart from the libretto, yielded fresh realizations of such well-known characters as Verdi’s Falstaff and Mozart’s Papageno.

Rather than stage Falstaff in a nineteenth-century setting to coincide with the era in which it was composed, Ponnelle staged this opera in the social context of Elizabethan times. In doing so, he acknowledged the importance of that context, described in the libretto, in defining the aging knight’s legitimate claim to social and even sexual prestige:

We must remember that he is the Earl of Falstaff, a true aristocrat. He is a man of war. His duty in this society is to hang around Windsor and round up troops from the other nobles for battle in France. In times of war he travels abroad with the King’s army and collects whatever spoils he can. But at the time of Verdi’s opera, England is at peace. The King has no need of Falstaff so he’s completely out of money. His men Bartolo and Pistol have nothing to do either, yet he has an obligation to pay them. He must never appear to inhabit their social level. Falstaff loves his wine and loves his women, but there is no vulgarity about him. He is a knight. When he pays Alice Ford a visit he goes as a member of the court to visit a family that belongs to the petite bourgeoisie.
Beyond this given social context Ponelle deepened the character interpretation through a reconsideration of the music. Regarding “Quand’ero paggio,” the song which Falstaff sings in act 2 in an attempt to woo Alice Page, he said: “It’s usually played as very funny. But it’s not funny at all. It’s one of those moments filled with genuine nostalgia, almost a lament. It’s one of those moments when Falstaff stops being the fat guy of the opening scene . . . when as a director I can add to him almost geological levels of stratification.”

Since the melody of “Quand’ero paggio” gave the director no indication of vulgarity or pompousness, Falstaff, dressed in all his finery, courted Alice Page with the dignity he would have had in his knightly youth, singing a sweet and courtly song that imparted a sympathetic nostalgia towards the aging knight. The gentle touch was praised in the review for Opera by Arthur Jacobs, who wrote: “What was so refreshing about the production was that it never resorted to slapstick and caricature, and the characters were all conceived as real people. . . . [Falstaff] was every inch the perfect knight, and his “Quand’ero paggio had a tinge of sadness about it that made one realize just how lonely Sir John really was in his later days.”

The highly acclaimed production of Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte (Strasbourg, 1969) provides one additional example of how the director used music to develop a character untainted by convention. In the penultimate scene of the opera, Papageno, after having fallen in love with Papagena, yet unable to see her again, prepares to hang himself in despair. After considering the music, the director decided that the usual broad comedic style of playing the scene was inappropriate, because even though the situation was funny, the music suggested that it was not.
He determined that the key of G minor, which he maintained Mozart reserved for heroic characters such as Pamina, was present in Papageno's music, and thus the composer's sympathies were extended to both. The choice of key was an important sign for Ponnelle that Mozart's sympathies were with Papageno as well as Pamina because of their similar relationship to the key of G minor. For the director, Mozart's dramatic vision was stated clearly in the tonality. Therefore, he concluded that Papageno's suicide should not be staged as a joke, but rather with the solemnity appropriate to the genuine despair of the insensible birdcatcher.

The production of Die Zauberflöte was a critical and popular triumph, and according to contemporary reviews, the pathos of the scene became one of its most memorable moments. In 1978 at the Salzburg Festival the opera was acclaimed as "a unanimous critical and popular triumph for the director and designer, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and the conductor, James Levine, who beamed through nearly twenty minutes of bravos from the normally reserved audience." Six years later the production team received accolades from Leighton Kerner of the Village Voice for the sincerity of the character interpretations. In reference to the scene cited above, he pinpointed the reason for his enthusiasm: "The production is never silly because Christian Boesch sings and acts Papageno with total seriousness... I wonder if there has ever been a more desolate birdcatcher when he hears no response to his 'Eins, zwei, drei,' and therefore no obstacle to hanging himself."

Ponnelle's practice of probing the musical score of an opera for indications
of characterization untainted by theatrical convention is paralleled by directors in the spoken theatre. Peter Brook, in his book *The Empty Space* uses the first speech of Goneril from Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an example of the dangers of making assumptions before reading the text carefully. He notes that this speech simply indicates that the speaker is “a lady of style and breeding accustomed to expressing herself in public, someone with ease and social aplomb.” The monstrous aspect of her character is not present in the words, Brook argues, but in the preconceptions that one brings to the character. “In fact,” Brooks reasons,” if Goneril in her first appearance does not play a ‘monster,’ but merely what her given words suggest, then all the balance of the play changes - - and in the subsequent scenes her villainy and Lear’s martyrdom are neither as crude nor as simplified as they might appear.” Brook, like Ponnelle, advocates a reappraisal of the text unclouded by performance tradition. The objective is the same, but the technique is different. The text, in Brook’s example, is the literary text; whereas for Ponnelle, directing opera, the musical score, not the libretto, was its equivalent.

Ponnelle never publically claimed to be an exponent of Appia’s theory of opera staging, but his numerous statements advocating the primary role of music as the catalyst for his visualizations reiterated the methodology that Appia laid out in *Music and the Art of the Theatre*:

> By means of dramatic representation, music is transported into space and there achieves a material form -- in the mise en scène -- thus satisfying its need for a tangible form, not just illusively in time alone, but quite actually in space. . . . and since music creates this space, it is from
Despite the music that we shall receive all information pertaining to it.  

Although many opera directors have used music as the inspiration for their work, few have pursued a musical methodology in both design and direction, and in such an expansive repertoire of operas on stage and in film so thoroughly as Ponnelle. For this reason his productions constitute a comprehensive body of work which can be studied to understand the application and implications of Appia's vision.
1 Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, “Retheatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle,” Opera Quarterly 3.1 (1985) : 38. It was highly unlikely that Ponnelle was completely unaware of the text of an opera when he was studying the music of an orchestral score. Nevertheless, from this and other comments he made it is clear that he did divide the detailed study of an opera into these two phases.


5 Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, “Retheatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle,” 34.


See Chapter 1 for a complete discussion of Ponnelle’s musical training.


“Das Gespräch mit ihm über eine Partitur wie ‘Das Liebesverbot’ oder ‘Cardillac’ . . . war ein echter Dialog.” (translation by the writer)


Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 54.

Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 38.

Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 42.

Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 42.

“Diejenigen, die die Musik ignorieren, sie nicht wahrhaben wollen oder absichtlich gegen sie inszenieren, betrachte ich als Parasiten. . .” (translation by the writer)


See Julius Novick, “Interlopers in the Opera House,” American Theatre May 1986) 8 - 17. This article gives an overview of the influx into the opera house of stage directors from the spoken theatre.


21 Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 70.

22 Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 70.


26 Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, 45. The complexity of the question of range with respect to the roles of the Countess and Susanna is


29 See Chapter 4 for a discussion of cuts in Ponnelle’s production of Mozart’s La clemenza di Tito.

30 Stephanie von Buchau, “Jean-Pierre Ponnelle The Sensual Stylist,” Ponnelle not only defended the necessity to perform the music of Mozart’s Così fan tutte in its entirety, he also voiced his displeasure about cuts made in the libretto of Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte as the following passage illustrates:


31 Records of cuts from almost all of Ponnelle’s productions in San Francisco, Houston and New York exist in the production books.

33 Marilyn Horne, Catherine Malfitano, Daniel Helfgot, John Pritchard, “Remembering Ponnelle,” *Opera News* 10 Dec. 1988: 66. This observation has also been reiterated by Nancy Adler and Jerry Sherk in personal interviews.

34 Arthur Kaplan, “Jean-Pierre Ponnelle: Lear from Munich to San Francisco,” *San Francisco Opera Magazine* Summer 1981: 38. When Ponnelle began staging *Lear* for the Munich premiere in 1978 there was no piano-vocal score available. His regular use of the full orchestral score for other productions has also been confirmed by Nancy Adler and Jerry Sherk in personal interviews.


37 Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, “Retheatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle,” 43.

38 Marilyn Horne, Catherine Malfitano, Daniel Helfgot, John Pritchard, “Remembering Ponnelle,” 42.


45 Vsevelod Meyerhold, Meyerhold on Theatre, 83.


49 Vsevold Meyerhold, Meyerhold on Theatre, 85.

50 Placido Domingo, My First Forty Years (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983) 123.


52 See Chapter 3 for a complete discussion of Ponnelle’s views on updating.


57 See Chapter 3 for a comparison of Sellars’s setting of Mozart’s *Cosi fan tutte* and Le nozze di Figaro with Ponnelle’s.

58 Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, 76.


60 Thomas Munn, personal interview, 22 Apr. 1994. According to Munn Ponnelle’s directive for lighting the first scene was “I want it white, white, white, bright, bright, bright. It’s got to be so hot you can feel the people sweating.


63 Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, 118.

64 Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, 200.


68 Idomeneo, cond. James Levine, dir. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, with Luciano Pavarotti, Ileana Cotrubas, Hildegard Behrens, Frederica von Stade, and John Alexander. Paramount Pictures Corporation, 1989. Andrew Porter criticized Ponnelle severely for this scene in his book Three More Seasons. He wrote, “Mr. Ponnelle is a great one for eavesdropping — witness his Salzburg ‘Figaro’ — and so there were often characters onstage who had no business being there. Ilia’s lovely soliloquy to the breezes ‘Zeffiretti lusinghieri,’ had to bear the mute contributions from Idomeneus, Idamantes, and Electra; the trio of Act II was staged as a quartet.” This observation was followed immediately by a reluctant concession: “It all sounds deplorable — and yet the production had a sweep, a grandeur, a dramatic force that are present in Mozart’s score but were not captured in any of the nine earlier productions of this increasingly popular opera I had encountered” (36). Porter repeated this criticism of the production in “Mozart on the Modern Stage,” Early Music 20.1 (1992): 134.

69 Falstaff, Music by Giuseppe Verdi. Libretto by Arrigo Boito.


Allan Ulrich, “Ponnelle on ‘Falstaff,’” 55.


Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 40.

Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 40.

Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 40.


86 Leighton Kerner, "My Favorite 'Flute,'" 73.


88 Peter Brook, The Empty Space, 14.

89 Adolphe Appia, Music and the Art of the Theatre, 18.

** Production book source. Courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera.
The integral role of music in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s productions was evident in both staging and design. The staging often consisted of precisely choreographed movements derived from the musical line more than from psychological impulses. The settings frequently revealed a concordance with the period style of the music, even when that style contradicted the stipulations of the composer or librettist. Neither textual nor paratextual writings weakened the director’s conviction that an opera belonged to the era of its musical creation. Consequently, he rejected the relatively common practice of updating, that is, presenting operas written in a previous era in a twentieth-century setting.¹

The merits and drawbacks of updating have, of course, become part of an ongoing debate about the degree of faithfulness accorded to the indications for design and staging, explicit or implicit in the opera score, by contemporary designers and directors. It is a pertinent discourse because in opera, unlike in spoken theatre, the repertoire of works produced in any given season now consists largely of those written before the turn of the century. As Roger Savage in his essay *The Staging of Opera* points out:

It is rather as if, where spoken drama in English is concerned, four-fifths of what was seen on stage was Shakespeare, Sheridan and Shaw. So -- as indeed is the case with late twentieth-century Shakespeare -- how these operatic masterpieces from the past are mounted has become a major issue.²
Savage delineates three trends of late twentieth-century directorial approaches to this canon, each of which shed light on directors' opinions of the operas themselves, of the relative importance of the composer and librettist, and of the audience for which they are realized. The first is a view of the opera text (a term which Savage uses to include notes, words, stage directions, and any other information that can be found to describe the mise en scène) as a record of a particular event which can be repeated. This view leads to historical recreations in period costume and staging. The second view of the opera text is that of a blueprint, containing within it implicit as well as explicit instructions for staging, which the director attempts to follow, given modern circumstances. In fact, this trend can be broken down further into another subcategory. In the first, the director may use the opera text as a blueprint for an interpretation, then construct modern parallels to the dramatic situations. For instance, in Peter Sellars's Le nozze di Figaro (Purchase, 1988) the Almavivas became wealthy Americans living in New York instead of Spanish nobility living in Seville. The third, and final, trend described by Savage is a view of the opera text as a non-prescriptive stimulus for the imagination, unbound by suggestions for staging by the composer or librettist.3

Ponnelle's realizations of Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro and Così fan tutte represented the second trend Savage describes, in which the director follows the blueprint of the opera text, given modern circumstances, but does not attempt to develop modern equivalences. His visual concept was based on an adherence to both explicit and implicit evidence in the opera text, which he maintained bound each opera to the era of its creation. For that reason he staged each in a visual style
in accordance with it.

The history of both *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Cosi fan tutte* in Ponnelle’s repertoire was a long one, and it must be noted that there was no definitive production of either of these operas. Rather, a variety of interpretations represented a progression in the director’s view of the works. *Le nozze di Figaro*, for instance, was among the first operas he designed for Carl Ebert in 1957 at the Städtische Oper in Berlin. In 1967 he both designed and staged it for the first time at the Städtische Bühnen Freiburg, returning to it again in 1972 at the Salzburg Festival. There he presented it within a set design that conveyed a sense of orderliness and power. Photographs taken of the Salzburg Festival production reveal a lavish set design, with Count Almaviva’s villa executed in Spanish period style, and dominated by ornate grille work, that punctuated the otherwise pale scenic picture. When he staged the opera in 1975 at the Cologne Opera the picture was apparently constructed from a more sinister perspective, according to Horst Koegler’s review in *Opera*: “Gone is the Salzburg gloss and polish . . . and instead we are offered an Almaviva household where decay has set in and the mistress’s bedroom looks like one of the chilling chambers in Sarastro’s palace. . . . Ponnelle seems to have stressed the erotic, even frankly sexual content of the action.”

The director’s assertion that the political and social milieu of late eighteenth-century Europe was integral to the interpretation was, perhaps, most evident in the film he made of the opera in 1976, starring Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Kiri Te Kanawa, Hermann Prey, Mirella Freni, Maria Ewing, and conducted by Karl Böhm. The story unfolded in a realistic Spanish villa filled with rich
details of period furniture and artifacts, through which the camera weaved as the action moved from room to room. The well-ordered home suggested that the aristocracy was firmly in command. Only in retrospect might one wonder about the meaning of the chipping plaster in the villa's hallways, because when the opera was presented at the Metropolitan Opera in 1985 significant crumbling was visible. The cracking plaster on the framing pillars and walls indicated physical decay, but also suggested the moral decadence of Count Almaviva, and even the approaching demise of the nobility itself. According to the designer, there was a definite attempt to reflect the closing century: "We reach the end of an era in 'Figaro.' The old aristocracy will soon march to the guillotine, and in our production you already see physical signs of decay throughout Almaviva's home." Even the garden in the final act of the production was represented only by a single tree, the last vestige of the lush foliage that was the aristocracy.

The relevance of the social milieu of late eighteenth-century Seville to the plot was continually reinforced in Ponnelle's film of Le nozze di Figaro. He made it clear that Figaro's resentment towards Count Almaviva was derived from his outrage at learning of the Count's intentions towards Susanna, but also hinted that it was part of a general dissatisfaction with class differences. In the first act, after Susanna informed him of the Count's interest in her, his anger exploded in "Se vuol ballare." The recitative began slowly and tersely, as Figaro directed his anger towards a portrait of the Count (a gift given to him by "Lindoro" for having helped him win Rosina). Then as the cavatina progressed, he stormed through the garden and the laundry rooms, announcing the injustice to the other servants who
followed in his wake, their own anger evident in their piqued expressions and forceful gestures. Later, when Figaro and the servants gathered together to sing the praises of the Count’s liberal rules in “Giovani lieti,” the latter’s postponement of the wedding caused them to retire with obvious animosity, tossing placards and flowers into a pile ready for burning at the feet of their despised master.

The director also frequently highlighted the animosity between Figaro and Count Almaviva by camera angles and close-ups that showed the latter’s annoyance at being engaged in a mental chess game with his servant, and the former, his face moist with sweat, struggling to outwit his master. Their intense personal conflict, and by implication, their political one as well, was plainly visible during the Count’s recitative and aria “Hai già vinta la causa . . . Vedrò mentr’io sospiro” in act 2. It was staged as a pantomime while the aria was heard as a voice-over. The Count, dressed in judicial robes and wig in readiness to hear Marcellina’s case, tensely eyed his determined servants, who faced him with hands defiantly intertwined, surrounded by other household servants looking equally grim.

Even though political satire is not present to the same degree in Da Ponte’s libretto of Le nozze di Figaro as in the Beaumarchais play upon which it was based,9 the social unrest of the period remains an undercurrent in the story line. The degree of importance that the director accorded it became a decisive factor in the choice of setting. Ponnelle considered the social particulars of the period inextricable from the plot, going so far as to refer to Le nozze di Figaro as a journalistic opera,10 so closely linked to its time that separation would hamper an
audience’s comprehension of it. “If the opera [set] is modern and ‘real’ like a production on Broadway, you can’t understand anything,” he argued. “Mozart is 18th not twentieth century. He wrote ‘Figaro’ two years before the French revolution. The opera is grotesque, funny and sad -- a tragic nostalgia. It belongs to a certain time and place -- the 18th century.”

In contrast to Ponnelle, who maintained that the meaning of an opera could be understood only through its original visual context, other directors take the position that meaning can be enhanced for a modern audience by updating the visual style to their own era. Their objective in doing so is to create the same audience-drama relationship that existed when the opera was initially presented. Peter Sellars, for instance, maintains that operas:

... are written in a code that a previous audience has understood, both in terms of a musical language, and in terms of a series of images. Our task is to crack the code, and re-cast it in systems of reference that have the same heightened possibility of meaning and connection to a sense of national, historic and individual identity for today’s public.

Sellars’s view of opera’s code as an antiquated one that holds little or no meaning for a contemporary audience is diametrically opposed to Ponnelle’s. Ponnelle considered his productions modern, but for him that meant on a psychological level, not on an iconic one: “I do what I believe to be authentic and modern. When I say “modern” it’s not because I’m trying to be fashionably
modish. By modern I mean that it corresponds to what people alive today experience and feel.\textsuperscript{13} 

When Sellars directed \textit{Le nozze di Figaro} at Purchase, New York in 1988, he and designer Adrienne Lobel re-cast the opera into a wholly modern visual idiom. Their realization represented a very specific American cultural context, constructed to parallel the social milieu of eighteenth-century Seville, with the same themes of power and betrayal as dominant motifs. Count Almaviva’s villa became a penthouse in Trump Towers in New York where the Countess agonized over the disinterest of her husband. Figaro, instead of being the Count’s barber, was his disgruntled chauffeur. Susanna remained a household maid, still subjected to the unwelcome advances of the Count. Cherubino was a local street kid dressed in a hockey jersey and jeans, and Barbarina was the daughter of the building superintendent. Within this setting Sellars drew parallels for such situations as Susanna’s helplessness in light of Count Almaviva’s desire to reinstate \textit{le droit du seigneur}, presenting it as sexual harassment on the job. He did not use the opera text as a blueprint to construct a mise en scène as an end in itself, but as an intermediary step from which he then constructed modern equivalences. 

The incongruities destined to arise in modernizing \textit{Le nozze di Figaro} have brought sharp criticisms of Sellars’s work. Yet, his productions have also been strongly defended. Andrew Porter, for instance, argued the following: “Not everything fits. There are surface contradictions . . . . But opera is not a naturalistic art. In real life, people don’t converse, or express their silent thoughts in song, with an attendant orchestra, and in formal musical structures. Amid so many
conventions, it is easy to accept another." Ponnelle’s documented objections to the practice of updating were directed not against the logical inconsistencies, but against what he considered to be its inability to foster genuine understanding of the period or of the characters. He objected to staging the opera within a twentieth-century setting not only because doing so would alter the production blueprint laid out in the score, but because he believed that doing so did not in any way enhance appreciation for the work.

The opposing position was taken by Richard Trousdell in an article for *The Drama Review*, in which he adamantly defended Sellars’s choice, arguing that it did foster understanding by revealing social contrasts between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries which might otherwise be missed by spectators:

Act I takes place in Susanna’s room which, conventionally, would be the theatricalized servant’s quarters of an 18th-century palace. If we have never seen such a palace -- or perhaps even if we had -- its theatrical recreation might not convey much useful information about Susanna’s situation. . . . If that same space is a laundry maid’s room squeezed into a New York highrise we begin to get the important values. An ironing board and rubber gloves suggest the grungy underside of luxury, and the foldout sofa bed which opens to fill the entire room symbolizes the double-duty life of Susanna and Figaro where knowing how to bend, fold, or even
disappear are matters of everyday survival.16

Trousdell, like Sellars, supports the adaptation of the setting to the audience as an aid to re-creating the audience-drama relationship that was present when the opera was first staged. Ponnelle, on the other hand, was less concerned with cultivating the audience’s recognition of the tangible aspects of the opera, seeing these as limited frames through which one could comprehend and, therefore, empathize with the characters. His own interpretation revealed his confidence in a modern audience’s ability to understand an opera composed during a previous era without necessitating revision.

Certainly, the realization of any opera requires significant research on the part of the director. Before he realized Le nozze di Figaro Sellars clearly “cracked the code” himself in order to make meaningful parallels for the audience. Likewise, Ponnelle considered it the responsibility of the director to study and decipher the opera, and he too engaged in significant research and study: “I have to work . . . to find that historical, sociological and psychological reality for the 18th and 19th century. A lot of people have lost the key to understand that. We have to give this code, this key to the audience in the 20th century.”17 However, whereas Sellars himself deciphered the opera then made a subsequent visual translation, Ponnelle tended to simply present his findings, confident that the spectators could construct meaningful parallels themselves.

The specific nature of the social milieu of eighteenth century Europe which catalyses the opera’s plot was developed by the director from the beginning of the
film. He made the overture part of the story by staging it as a pantomime of Figaro happily gathering together his belongings in his cluttered barber shop, ready to begin married life with Susanna in Count Almaviva’s villa. His barber’s paraphernalia was scattered about the room, along with books, sheet music, and bundles of the “Gazetta de Madrid” lying on the straw-covered floor. As the camera panned the room, the viewer was introduced not only to the visual style of the production, but also to a connection between the lively music of the overture and Figaro’s jovial anticipation of his wedding. When the music of the first scene began, he entered his new quarters, belongings in tow, and a mattress on his back.

The staging of the overture was not merely an extraneous visualization of the music, but an opportunity which the director seized to compare the cramped bachelor quarters of the barber (otherwise unseen) with his spacious new room in the nobleman’s house. The contrast was more than one of living quarters, it was one of class. The room which the Count had reserved for Figaro and Susanna in the villa was an open, airy passage between different parts of the house, brilliantly lit with natural light from three sides, a high exposed-beam ceiling and pale stuccoed walls in Spanish style. Indeed, it was a beautiful room that did not convey a sense of the low social status of Figaro and Susanna in the society of their time. Therefore the importance of staging of the overture became clear as an answer to Trousdell’s concern. By showing the contrast between Figaro’s room and the Count’s villa, Ponnelle drew a clear picture of the economic disparity between servant and master in that era for a modern audience.

Although the director adhered to the opera text of *Le nozze di Figaro* to
present the opera within its suggested style, there were occasions when he deviated 
from it in order to clarify or punctuate a specific dramatic statement. For instance, 
in the first scene, although the libretto does not state that a bed should be among 
the items in the incompletely furnished bedroom of Figaro and Susanna, the 
director placed a bed frame in the centre. Thus, Figaro did not merely measure the 
space where the bed was to be placed, but the bed itself and then, in a comical twist, 
his bride-to-be as well. It became a much-used prop, that clarified the relationship 
between Figaro and Susanna and laid the foundation for contrasting it with that of 
the Count and Countess’s. The servants’ joyful anticipation of their wedding night 
was evident when Figaro lay down on the bed and lovingly caressed the pillow, 
then embraced Susanna under the sheet. Later in the scene when Count 
Almaviva entered the room, a far different message was constructed. When he sat 
down on the bed and pulled Susanna to him, not only was his desire for her 
obvious, but evidently, he also felt entitled to the property of Figaro and Susanna, 
and even to Susanna herself as well.

Having established the loving relationship between Figaro and Susanna, the 
director then drew a sharp distinction between it and that of the Count and 
Countess in both design and staging. The joy-filled bustle in the servants’ bedroom 
was completely foreign to the Countess Almaviva’s, which was revealed at the 
beginning of the second act. In the film, it was arranged in a realistic way, with 
dark, Mediterranean furniture evenly distributed against pale walls. The Countess 
languished on her bed singing “Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro” as the camera 
alternated between focusing on her sad face, and slowly panning the rather 
spiritless room, adorned with a variety of religious artifacts and a collection of
In the Metropolitan Opera set design, a dim light emanating through the closed curtains barely revealed the canopy bed, pallid and remote, set far upstage in an alcove. The frigid ambiance of the room was in keeping with the sentiment of "Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro," yet critics were annoyed by the director's choice to literalize her sense of alienation by beginning the aria on the bed. Nevertheless, the remoteness of the Countess during her cavatina and the solemn beauty of her statuesque image in the grand room inferred a tragic grandeur, further emphasized by having Susanna present on stage, listening to the Countess like a confidant in the classical tradition.

The elevation of the Countess's suffering to tragic proportions was not unusual given the aristocratic stature of her character, yet in Le nozze di Figaro the depth of pain was not reserved for noble or principal characters alone. One of Ponnelle's gifts as a director was his ability to capture the full range of human emotions even in minor roles, and in this regard, he made no class distinction. Such was the case with Barbarina, enamoured with Cherubino, and pursued by Count Almaviva, whose loss of a pin became one of the most poignant moments in the film.

Late in act 3 Barbarina's offer of herself to the Count in order to save Cherubino from being banished to the military was answered with a hard slap from her father (not indicated in the music or libretto), and set up the reason for the loss of the pin in the finale. When Antonio saw her near the Count just after
she was entrusted with the pin, he hit her again and caused her to drop it. This loss, which prompts the cavatina “L’ho perduta” was, according to the director, a tragic moment for the young girl on par with the deep emotional despair of Pamina and Kostanza. Her anguish and confusion was caused not only by the loss of a pin, but also by the loss of her virginity for which, according to the director, it was a metaphor. Thus he engendered her simple lament with a poignancy underscored by the contrast between her solitary despair in the semi-darkness on the steps of the villa, and the cheerful wedding celebration which had taken place in the same spot in the previous scene.

The cause of much of the suffering in the plot of Le nozze di Figaro is, of course, Count Almaviva. In accordance with the privileges afforded the nobility of his time, he wielded absolute power over his spouse and entire household. In Ponnelle’s staging he struck his wife for her insubordination and made it clear that he was not beyond forcing himself upon an unwilling female servant. In the film Susanna’s distaste for his advances was emphasized in her facial expressions, caught in tight close-ups, as she tried repeatedly to discourage him. Her fear was spurred by the knowledge that his repeal of le droit du seigneur could be overturned at any moment. Given the social context in which the opera was presented, she was indeed the property of the Count, to be used by him according to his will. Her plight clearly extended beyond the boundaries of sexual harassment, and left her to rely solely on her wits, rather than on the legal protection accorded to her twentieth-century counterpart.

In the film, the director’s portrayal of the Count was almost devoid of
sympathy. He was a brutal husband and tyrannical landowner, whose jealous rage presented a real danger to the Countess, Susanna and Cherubino in the second act staging. He entered the Countess’s room dressed in hunting attire: a brown waist coat, breeches and high riding boots, and brandished a riding crop as he confronted his wife about the reason for her locking the door during the trio “Susanna, or via sortite.” As the argument escalated, he slapped the Countess, already on her knees, hard enough to knock her to the floor, then roughly grabbed her upper arm as he chastised her. His readiness for violence was further reinforced when he returned to the room moments later with a sword, ready to slay the man he believed was hiding in the closet.

In design as well as in staging, the director captured the power and danger of Count Almaviva through the repetition of the hunting motif. At the beginning of the third act he was discovered cleaning his rifle, in an overtly “masculine” study with a large desk, dark wood paneling, and animal heads mounted on the wall, as he pondered the scene which had just occurred in the Countess’s bedroom. At the Metropolitan Opera, the wall of the unit set was almost completely covered with stuffed animal heads, creating a bizarre, and unsettling, display of the Count’s capacity for violence.

Despite the harsh portrayal of Count Almaviva throughout much of the film, the director made it clear that his character was not entirely without hope of redemption. He presented the Countess’s third act aria, “Dove sono, i bei momenti,” as a daydream in which she remembered his attentiveness to her during their courtship. In the flashback they walked and talked together in a lush
garden, completely enraptured with one another. Their tenderness was captured by the slow-motion of the film, and the use of a filtered lens, which blurred the image, and suggested a faded memory. The touching devotion of the couple complemented the initially gentle mood of the aria, but changed suddenly as the camera switched back to reality. The Allegro progressed with the Countess vigorously denouncing her husband’s current callousness, and throwing his love letters towards the fireplace, then ended as she dropped suddenly to her knees, weeping and gathering them to her.

As Michel Saint-Denis has observed in Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style, regardless of a director’s intention to stage a work as a model of a period, he brings to it his own perspective as a man of his time. Ponnelle was certainly aware that his interpretations were shaped, in part, by his twentieth-century perspective. Another factor that affected his realizations was his evolving view of Le nozze di Figaro. By the time he presented the opera in New York in 1985, he had clearly changed his concept of it from a political work to a character drama. In place of the earlier clear-cut divisions of right and wrong there were complex human relationships, and even a milder view of the stratified social system:

When I was thirty I had all the answers in black and white – Figaro blazed a path to the French Revolution by defeating his nasty employer. But now at fifty-two I see shades of gray. ‘Le nozze di Figaro’ like life itself, sways back and forth between certainty and uncertainty, comedy and tragedy.
The director's changing perspective was represented most emphatically in the character of Countess Almaviva. In the film she was a deeply religious woman, almost wholly confined to her room. Ponnelle even connected her suffering to Christian martyrdom through close-ups of the crucifix above her bed, and the other religious artifacts around the room. Further, he reintroduced the theme of Rosina’s virtual imprisonment by Dr. Bartolo, which he had stressed in his 1972 film of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, as a fact in her life as a married woman. In act 2, after Cherubino leapt through her window to escape the Count, Susanna walked over to it, and pulled the security bars closed. These bars were not at all like the decorative grills seen in the 1972 Salzburg production, but thick, vertical bars that evoked the confinement of a prison cell.

The director's "black and white" versus "gray" approach to the character interpretations was particularly clear in the contrast between the 1976 film and the 1985 Metropolitan Opera staging of the relationship between Countess Almaviva and Cherubino. In the film Cherubino, played by Maria Ewing, was portrayed as a sexually frustrated, impetuous youth with straw in his wild hair from his latest romp. He possessed a mortal fear of the Count that made him snap into a forced salute each time his presence was sensed, but he adored his godmother in a way that was sexual in nature, but not overtly so. The tender looks returned by the Countess in light of her godson’s fixation upon her as she dressed his wound in the second act, almost led to a kiss, but the moment, like the dressing of Cherubino in girl’s clothes, remained playful.

By the time Ponnelle staged the work at the Metropolitan Opera the
"graying" of "Figaro" had taken hold. The Countess, an innocent, abused wife in the film, became a character of greater complexity with even a touch of hypocrisy. As Cherubino, Frederica von Stade conveyed the same boyish impetuosity that Maria Ewing had possessed in the film, and which was so clearly described in the opera text. The difference was that the Countess's attention to him, manifested as mere coy fascination in the film, became overt sexual desire when staged. There was a genuine sense of danger in the openness of their attraction to one another that made Cherubino a real threat to Count Almaviva. Whereas in the film his jealousy appeared absurd and exaggerated, particularly in the act 2 confrontation in the Countess's bedroom, in the later stage version his suspicions were justified. When Susanna dressed Cherubino as a girl the sexual nature of the relationship was demonstrated. The director staged the scene downstage center, where Susanna placed a screen behind which Cherubino stood, his — Cherubino was, of course, played by a woman — bare neck and shoulders exposed to create an erotic and ambiguous sexual joke. The (un)dressing apparently titillated the Countess who resisted her attraction to the page with great difficulty, and finally gave in to it by rolling on the floor with him in an embrace.

In addition to the character changes, Ponnelle softened the political overtones as well. Gone was the anger of the populous, so explosive in the film, and replaced with a comical pantomime. In contrast to their militant participation during Figaro's "Se vuol ballare," the chorus became a source of comic relief, waving brooms and pitchforks at Count Almaviva whenever he opened an exterior door. Even the volatile relationship between the Count and Figaro, evident in the film, took on a new dimension. In 1985 the director announced:
This time Figaro and the Count even share some mutual understanding, in spite of their tense relationship. Though positioned on opposite sides of the social fence, both men are battling to keep their position and their self-respect. There are no winners or losers in 'Figaro,' only slightly bewildered people who cope with the game of life.27

In the final scene of the opera it is, after all, both Figaro and Count Almaviva who are humbled. Spying on the meeting between the Count and the disguised Countess, Figaro mistakes her for Susanna and suffers both jealousy and despair at what he perceives to be her infidelity. At that moment he was no longer a political figure, no representative of the pre-revolutionary spirit, but simply a man suffering the anguish of betrayal. In the film he collapsed tearfully on a garden bench during “Tutto è disposto.” Then as the aria “Aprite un po’ quegli occhi” began, a second Figaro in servant attire was superimposed on the screen and sang directly to the camera. The two Figaros: happy bachelor and unhappy husband, were juxtaposed, only to be dispelled momentarily as the groom discovered the truth. The final moments revealed the differences in mood between the 1976 film and the 1985 stage version. The film ended with a tableau of the newlyweds embracing joyfully. At the Metropolitan Opera the happy resolution was overshadowed by the sense that the pendulum may once again sway towards uncertainty and tragedy.

In Le nozze di Figaro the cultural style of eighteenth-century Europe was the
framing device of the stage picture, but within it the emphasis shifted from a political story with clear-cut divisions of right and wrong, to a drama of character that heightened its complexity and melancholy. A similar “graying” occurred between Ponnelle’s 1969 production of Così fan tutte at the Salzburg Festival, which he repeated in San Francisco the following year, and the 1988 film that he made shortly before his death.

The San Francisco production already downplayed the comical elements of the opera, but apparently less so that the Salzburg version. It was enjoyed cautiously by critics such as Arthur Bloomfield, who wrote in Opera:

Ponnel is convinced that ‘Così’ is a very bitter, serious story. Evidently his Salzburg production went quite far up the ‘serious’ road. In San Francisco he struck an excellent balance between merriment and cynicism, with, I should stress, a keen accent on the latter. The production is definitely drier and more tart than what we are used to.28

In the film the director’s somber view of the work deepened the tragic implications of the plot. He considered the opera Mozart’s most amoral, even cruel work,29 and as a result he underscored the end-of-the-century angst with the uncertainty and the profound disillusionment of the characters.

The fundamental stage design for Così fan tutte in San Francisco supported a view of the work as a eighteenth century construct. It was presented in an eighteenth-century box set with a light-gray, false proscenium which divided an upper level where much of the play-within-a-play unfolded, from a shallow
forestage where characters advanced mainly for reflection (Fig. 1). Set changes were made quickly while the traveler curtain was closed, by replacing the wings and adding or replacing drops in openings designed in the false proscenium. In the film the style of the set design was anchored by a neoclassical house with period furniture and artifacts, surrounded by a manicured garden complete with real vegetation, and a life-sized ship that sailed in and out of the adjacent cove.

The costumes in both the stage and film versions also evinced late eighteenth-century style, as well as the director’s penchant for symbolic colours. At the beginning of the stage version, Fiordiligi and Dorabella were clothed in soft pastel gowns that conveyed their femininity and innocence; then black mourning dresses after the departure of their lovers that conveyed their deep sense of loss; and finally, white wedding gowns and powdered periwigs also in eighteenth-century style that (ironically) conveyed their innocence. Ferrando and Guglielmo wore brown waist coats, beige breeches and black boots in the tavern scene, then changed to Albanian costumes of brocade waist coats with matching turbans and veils in burgundy and navy. Despina’s costume changes ranged from a simple mid-calf servant’s dress with slippers and red socks, to a formal black uniform with white apron, matching the attire of the chorus of servants that set the table for the wedding.

The initial visual impression of the stage picture was that of contrasting social and psychological states, between the well-groomed appearance of the lovers and Don Alfonso and the disheveled one of Despina; and also between the naivety of the women and the cynicism of Don Alfonso. Don Alfonso was distinguished
Fig. 1 Ponnelle’s sketch for *Cosi fan tutte* San Francisco Opera, 1970 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)

Fig. 2 Ponnelle’s sketch for *Cosi fan tutte* San Francisco Opera, 1970 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
musically and dramatically in the opera, a character-spectator somewhat outside of the drama, and it was this distinction which Ponnelle reinforced by a solid black costume which delineated his role as stern schoolmaster. Arthur Bloomfield described him in *Opera* this way:

Don Alfonso is played . . . as a rather genial but near-Mephistophelean character, directing the business of deception (behind unsuspecting backs) with an imperious walking stick. He is a self-satisfied type all right, and he plays most of the first scene settled back in a deep-dish tavern chair — a nice touch of conventional realism.30

Costumes made an important dramatic contribution in all of Ponnelle's productions. It was the director's conviction that they were more than decorative items, they defined a culture, and determined character.31 He insisted upon having his singer-actors wear full costumes as soon as possible in rehearsal, and even requested full dress for chorus members who were only partially seen so they could make an organic connection between physical style and psychology.32 It follows then that he rejected productions that failed to establish such a vital connection: "I read that somewhere [that] they did 'Cosi' in modern dress, with the beach at Acapulco, the orchestra in colorful costumes, Fiordiligi and Dorabella in bikinis. That kind of staging doesn't suit opera; it doesn't suit the music; it doesn't suit anything. Besides, 'Cosi' comes at the end of an era, a way of life, a world."33

Ponnelle was strongly opposed to staging *Cosi fan tutte* in any period other
than the late eighteenth century. In 1983 he was asked whether it was possible to stage the opera in a modern context. He replied with three arguments, worth quoting at length, explaining why he flatly rejected that option:

The opera contains information that is not possible to parallel. How people moved, how they behaved is in conjunction with typical eighteenth-century protocol and shouldn’t be ignored. Then there is the concrete information which is specifically temporal: When Despina disguises herself as the doctor to cure the ‘sick’ foreigners with a magnet, that is a reference to Franz Anton Mesmer, whom Mozart knew. . . . And last but not least, God knows, is the music of Mozart.\textsuperscript{34}

The manifestations of these three arguments can be seen in Despina. The style of her music distinguishes her as a simple character. In contrast to the lengthy and complex arias of Dorabella and Fiordiligi, her two arias are shorter and less ornamented. This musical difference also serves to underscore the social distinction between the women. In addition, the libretto suggests that she is overworked and unhappy with her lot as a servant. In scene 3, she questions why her mistresses get to enjoy the taste of the hot cocoa while she can only smell it. This is a question not limited to a servant from the late eighteenth century, but the particular social context in which Ponelle set the opera underscored her personal dissatisfaction with a larger social one. When Despina sat on the steps of the house eating the left-over croissants and drinking the last bit of cocoa as Don Alfonso proposed his scheme, she jumped at the opportunity not only for the gold coin he
offered, but also perhaps, for the opportunity to climb the social ladder by marrying Don Alfonso.

For Ponnelle, the explicit references to the period, in combination with implicit suggestions, such as the style of the music, were irrefutable arguments in favour of staging the opera in a late eighteenth-century setting. In contrast, directors like Peter Sellars have challenged the necessity of adhering to such evidence, contending that period style is an obstacle to comprehension, an unnecessary imposition that gets in the way of Mozart’s meanings.35 In his film of Cosi fan tutte, based on the performances at Purchase, New York in the late 1980s, Sellars set the opera in “Despina’s Diner” in New Jersey and updated references to the present. He then recast the servant as a disenchanted waitress, Don Alfonso as a cynical Vietnam war veteran, and the lovers as modern couples suffering from the same initial idealism accorded them in the opera text. The parallels which the director created evolved from a view of the opera text as a blueprint from which he worked to construct an apposition on stage. Sellars maintains that the important thing in theatre is anachronism,36 and in his film of Cosi fan tutte he juxtaposed a modern visual style against eighteenth-century elements.

When Ponnelle juxtaposed styles in his realizations he did so by opposing the era in which the story takes place with the era of composition, but he protested vehemently against updating operas simply by presenting them in a modern setting. In interviews he repeatedly voiced his disdain for this practice, insisting that the meaning of an opera could be understood only when the cultural style of its original period was realized:
To bring all operas from the 18th or 19th century near to us in the 20th century is not to bring to it, for example, costumes from the 20th century. That’s like taking these pieces, these operas and treating them like a box, and wrapping around the box paper for decoration only. Only the outside is 20th century.\textsuperscript{37}

Peter Brook is another director who has also positioned himself against updating, observing that a modern context and recognizable references do not necessarily ensure comprehensibility.\textsuperscript{38} In fact, Brook notes that the preoccupation with visual context is often a preoccupation with irrelevant artistic questions, rather than with the ones which will reveal the vital meaning of the work.\textsuperscript{39} Ponnelle’s dismissal of its shallowness was even more blunt and uncompromising: “By setting the opera in the 20th century nothing can be gained . . . . It is nothing more than a Public-Relations ploy, under the pretense that people can understand. In fact the contrary is true.”\textsuperscript{40}

Ponnelle’s choice of visual style for \textit{Così fan tutte} was derived from his view of the opera text as a culturally specific work. His approach demonstrated his view of the opera text as a blue print for the mise en scène, to be adhered to as closely as possible, given modern circumstances. For him, visual style was not extraneous to the work; it was integral to it. The observation of Michel Saint-Denis about spoken plays succinctly expresses Ponnelle’s point of view: “There is no meaning or psychological construction in a play which can be separated from its
style. The one contains the other. Style has its own meaning."41

Although the guiding force for the visual style in both the stage and film interpretations of Cosi fan tutte was the era of the composer and the librettist, the director’s assessment of the opera as a cruel work was a contributing factor to the staging, particularly in the film. Not even in the 1969 Salzburg production did he present it as a comical representation of a late eighteenth-century moral education summed up in terms of the bet between Guglielmo, Ferrando, and Don Alfonso.42 In each realization he undercut the lighthearted nature of the plot with staging that showed the anguish that resulted from the loss of innocence. The couples suffered the fate of shattered idealism, but that fate was made even crueler in the film because the initial innocence proved not to be innocence at all. The women did not merely submit to the Albanian suitors in helpless confusion, they deliberately betrayed their lovers and each other.

The stage production began in a dimly lit seaside tavern (Fig. 2) where Guglielmo, Ferrando and Don Alfonso argued about the faithfulness of Dorabella and Fiordiligi. Guglielmo and Ferrando were cast as passionate young men, ready to draw their swords to defend the honour of their fiancées at the provocation of their older friend. At the end of the scene, the men moved to the forestage as the curtain closed, made their bet and exited. The choice to light the tavern rather dimly became clear in the following scene in which the women were revealed for the first time seated on white chairs, under a white umbrella, dressed in delicate pastel dresses, with matching hats, innocently painting their lovers portraits in a garden in front of a blinding bright light and white cyclorama (Fig. 3) — an idealized
view of them held by their lovers.43

The lovers' idealization of one another is an important aspect of the opera and it is, of course, the transition from this apparent state of naivety to one of awareness that constitutes the plot. They idealize one another, but it is clearly established in the opera text that it is the idea of love itself, rather than the individual, with which they are in love. Consequently, the individuality of the characters at the beginning was minimal. In the film, Ferrando and Guglielmo, played by Luis Lima and Ferruccio Furlanetto, were distinguished by the fact that the former was dark-haired, while the latter was fair, as noted in the libretto. However, their physical and emotional responses to Don Alfonso's challenge were identical.

The women were even less distinguishable in their initial physical and emotional states. The natural similarity of Edita Gruberova as Fiordiligi and Delores Ziegler as Dorabella was accentuated by identical wigs and dresses, and further through the staging. In the second scene of act 1 both women sat in the garden like twin statues, calmly drawing portraits of their lovers as they sang "Ah guarda, sorella," until they inadvertently exchanged the portraits in a foreshadowing of the real exchange to come.44 The pastoral tranquility of this scene returned with an ironic twist in the finale of the first act. The sisters were once again portrayed as indistinguishable, in black dresses with matching hats, seated on black chairs, shielded by a black umbrella, but posed on the opposite side of the garden path. Their emotional distress (or was it, perhaps, the frailty of their attachments?) made sketching impossible, and left the garden littered with
Fig. 3  *Cosi fan tutte* San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1973)

Fig. 4  *Cosi fan tutte* San Francisco Opera (Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones, 1973)
crumpled papers, the remnants of their thwarted attempts (Fig. 4).45

In the film, the suggestion that they already anticipated claiming the other's lover shattered the initial innocence of the women in the first scene. The director revealed the two pairs of lovers and Don Alfonso playing cards inside the house of the sisters. Don Alfonso, played by Paolo Montarsolo, sat facing the camera, his black costume a focal point in a room that was otherwise very pallid, with furniture under pale muslin covers. The women were dressed in light colours, the men in white shirts, white pants and white boots, stressing the irony of their initial naiveté even more strongly than in the stage version. The lovers were affectionate with each other, kissing and embracing even as Don Alfonso presented his challenge to their faithfulness by setting out two pairs of face cards on the table and switching the female figures to illustrate the bet. However, whereas in the stage version the women were not privy to the bet, in the film they clearly heard and saw the challenge and left only before the money and the liquor were put up as the wager.

The director introduced the means by which the deception was carried out in the staging of the seductions. In the second act they begin in earnest, with the women taking the initiative by asking the Albanian suitors to take a walk. Guglielmo was seen first in the garden with Dorabella struggling to overcome his hesitation. However, with the help of Don Alfonso, acting like Cyrano de Bergerac by placing words of courtship in his ear, he succeeded in replacing the picture of Ferrando which Dorabella had been wearing, with a heart that Don Alfonso conveniently supplied. Until that point in the opera Guglielmo wore a small veil
across his face, in addition to a moustache and beard to disguise himself. Once the symbolic substitution of the heart for Ferrando’s picture was made, however, Dorabella not only removed the veil, but then calmly removed the fake facial hair as well. This gesture clearly implied that she knew that her suitor was Guglielmo when she gave in to him, and was therefore culpable in the deception of her sister. In addition, there was no mistaking that the the bet was not to be won through an innocent flirtation, but clearly through the consummation of each new liaison. This sexual condition was made plain in the next scene when Guglielmo returned to the house, his clothing disheveled, bragging of his success to Ferrando.

Fiordiligi, unlike her sister, displayed a greater resolve to resist giving in to Ferrando. Her final attempt occurred late in act 2 when she resolved to dress as a soldier and join her fiancé in battle. In the film when she stood in front of a mirror and called Despina to give her Guglielmo’s soldier’s clothes, Despina merely pantomimed putting a coat on her, then in an aside to the camera questioned her mental stability. Immediately afterwards, Ferrando appeared without his veil, and Fiordiligi -- obviously knowing his true identity -- gave in to him as Guglielmo, observing in secret, collapsed in despair.

In Ponnelle’s film interpretation, the winning of the bet by Don Alfonso points to a new age of enlightenment of the lovers, a new sophistication, yet one which came with the burden of inescapable disillusionment. The betrayal of the sisters by their partners and each other destroyed not only their idealization of their lovers, but also their ability to trust each other. In the final moments of the opera the director captured the intersection of both the personal and social, a
glimpse of a new world order, while closing an iron curtain on an age of innocence and bliss.

Ponnelle held that the happy return of the lovers to their original fiancés was an impossibility. Therefore, in the stage version even as the curtain was being lowered, the women, unhappily reunited with their original fiancés, were seen running into the arms of their new lovers. In the film, the director completely obliterated a union of the lovers in any configuration. As the music of the opera’s finale began, Don Alfonso was once again seated at the card table counting the money to which he was entitled. He paid Despina for her services and then poured himself a drink from the bottle that was also part of the spoils of the bet. Despina’s character, which had been the object of mirth in the opera, suddenly displayed a deep and poignant reaction to this rather brusque pay-off. Her dream of marrying Don Alfonso was shattered. She stared at the bills then, crying visibly, tore them up. The couples, instead of reuniting with their original fiancés, or as in the stage version with their new lovers, walked listlessly apart as they sang the final lines of the opera:

Fortunate is the man who takes everything for the best, and in all events and trials allows himself to be led by reason. What usually makes others weep is, for him, a sources of laughter, and in the midst of the world’s whirlwinds, he will find a lovely calm.

This “bella calma” was, apparently, never again to be had by the lovers or Despina. Their expressions and body postures conveyed their anguish as they
collapsed on the steps, against trees and on the bench. Only Don Alfonso, the man of reason, was nonplused, enjoying the spoils of the bet. In this final tragic tableau meaning and style united. The end of the age of innocence for the lovers was actually just the end of an illusion. Clearly, a new era had begun.

Ponelle was deeply concerned about the paucity of new opera compositions and aware of the burdens placed on stage directors to keep the repertoire alive for late twentieth-century audiences.49 At a time when some directors visualized Le nozze di Figaro and Così fan tutte in a radical fashion, in updated or politically charged settings, his eighteenth-century scenic pictures were rather conservative. Ponelle did not consider sets and costumes a matter of individual choice. For him, there was an indisputable logic that led to the visual style: the composer created the drama through his music (regardless of the era in which the libretto was written or the story set), the music reflected the style of the composer’s period, and therefore, the scenic style must also be of that period. He maintained that operas could be enjoyed and understood fully only if the logical connection between their visual and aural elements was evident on stage. Moreover, as Adolphe Appia argued, the derivation of a mise en scène from the music was the only means by which the integrity of the composer’s work could be assured.50 The synthesis that Ponelle achieved in Le nozze di Figaro and Così fan tutte served both the audience and the composer.
Notes

1 Ponnelle voiced his unqualified rejection of updating in numerous interviews. In addition to the statements quoted later in this chapter, he also said: “I’m against modernization. It’s absurd to disassociate a work from its time, whether it’s opera or theater.” Stanley Eichelbaum, “Staging a Fairy Tale Opera,” San Francisco Examiner* 5 Nov. 1969; and “I’m not one of those [directors] who think you can make an ancient Greek play modern by having the actors wear street clothes.” Glenn Loney, “Dual Control,” Opera News 27 Dec. 1969 - 3 Jan. 1970: 25.


8 Gary D. Lipton, “Upstairs, Downstairs,” 38.

9 Rudolph Angermüller, Mozart’s Operas (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) 134.

11 John Heilpern, “A Radical Knight at the Opera,” *Vogue* November 1985: n.p. The argument that an audience experiences an opera more fully when it is staged in the cultural context of its creation is taken up by Paul Robinson in *Opera and Ideas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).


13 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco -- This Time the Most Popular One of Them All,” *San Francisco Opera Magazine* 1978: 91.


15 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 98.


21 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco – This Time the Most Popular One of Them All,” 93.


24 Gary D. Lipton, “Upstairs, Downstairs,” 38.


27 Gary D. Lipton, “Upstairs, Downstairs,” 38.


Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 22.

Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, “Retheatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle,” 42. Also, Eva Jean Mears, archivist, Houston Grand Opera, personal interview, Nov. 1994.

Glenn Loney, “Dual Control,” 25.

Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 98.


39 Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 184.

40 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 98.

"Mit einer Aktualisierung, der Verlegung in das 20. Jahrhundert, wäre überhaupt nichts gewonnen... Es ist eine Public-Relations-Sucht, mit dem Vorwand, so verstehe man da Stück besser. Genau das Gegenteil trifft zu." (translation by the writer)

41 Michel Saint-Denis, *Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style*, 79.


44 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 32.


46 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 95.


48 The final lines of the opera in Italian are:

Fortunato l'uom che prende / ogni cosa pel buon veros,
E tra i casi e le vicende / Da ragion guidar si fa.
Quel che suole altrui far piangere / Fia per lui cagion di riso,
E del mondo in mezzo i turbini / Bella calma troverà.


* Production book source. Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera

** Production book source. Courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera
Expanding the Canon: La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo

One of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's lasting contributions to the world of opera was his expansion of the canon through pioneering productions of seria operas. His realizations of Mozart's La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo, in particular, have been embraced enthusiastically by both critics and spectators and, as a consequence, have remained in the contemporary repertoire. Since he first presented them in 1969 and 1974 respectively, both have been seen in numerous opera houses. They were staged first by the director/designer himself during his lifetime, then by his assistants, and later by other directors throughout Europe and North America whom he inspired to present their own interpretations of these revitalized operas.¹

Ponnelle's staging of La clemenza di Tito achieved immediate critical acclaim when it was first presented by the Cologne Opera in 1969. Stanley Sadie's review for Musical Times is representative in its combination of surprise and delight:

After so much has been said on the musical unevenness and the ineffectual structural mixture of 'La clemenza di Tito' – both with complete truth – it was thrilling to discover that the opera could make an evening's entertainment for which no kind apology is needed. The credit for this . . . goes, besides to Mozart – whom we ought not to have doubted in the first place – to the producer-designer Jean-Pierre Ponnelle.²
La clemenza di Tito was the director's first foray into the seria opera genre, but not his last. It was followed in 1974 by a production of Idomeneo, which was also created for the Cologne Opera. It too impressed critics like Horst Koegler who wrote in Opera: “It is a decorative, picturesque production, beautifully costumed, marvelously lit, with strongly characterized acting. . . . I sincerely doubt whether any opera-house in the world today offers an ‘Idomeneo’ to match Cologne’s first class achievement.”

These realizations of La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo remain benchmark twentieth-century opera productions, both because at the time they were rarely staged by any opera company, and because they were genuine restorations. In contrast to prior productions seen in the United States, Ponnelle presented them almost in their entirety. He did not attempt to improve the works through apologetic revisions or update them so that they would look more familiar to late twentieth-century audiences. Instead, he staged them within an eclectic visual setting that melded the period of composition with the period in which the stories were set. The realizations expressed the director’s confidence in the dramatic interest of the characters and in the historical importance of the operas as expressions of late eighteenth-century thought.

The significance of Ponnelle’s achievement is apparent in light of the production record of these seria operas. His 1969 Cologne presentation of La clemenza di Tito, in particular, stands as a pioneering realization of Mozart’s most discounted work. From the very time of its composition La clemenza di Tito was plagued by critical dismissal. In Mozart’s Operas, Edward J. Dent recants
the famous, if now disputed, story of Mozart's hasty composition of the opera in eighteen days, and its subsequent denunciation by the Empress Maria Luisa as "Porcheria tedesca," German priggishness, after its premiere during the coronation festivities for Leopold II as King of Bohemia in 1791. Despite such an infamous dismissal, La clemenza di Tito achieved a measure of popularity and acclaim in the years following the composer's death, owing in part to the efforts of his widow, Costanza, who included excerpts from it in concerts held to raise money for herself and her children. In 1798 Franz Niemetschek, Mozart's first biographer, praised the work repeatedly in Life of Mozart, apparently recording the sentiment of the time. He wrote: "'La clemenza di Tito' is considered from an aesthetic standpoint a fine work of art, and is thought to be the most polished." It apparently had more than provincial appeal, since it was the first of Mozart's operas to be performed in London, in 1806.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, interest in La clemenza di Tito had diminished, and it was rarely performed. In the early twentieth century, critical opinion of the opera contrasted sharply with Niemetschek's early appraisal. In Mozart's Operas, Dent dismissed the work, comparing it with Idomeneo, written when the composer was twenty-five years old:

Here is Mozart, definitely in his 'third period,' being forced to revert to the style of his first. It was impossible. 'Idomeneo' is the work of a young man at the height of his powers, anxious above all things to
express his emotions and to put in everything that he could give; 'La clemenza di Tito' was written by a man in broken health, exhausted by overwork, and forced to write in haste against his will.10

The connection which Dent made between Mozart's alleged health and attitude during the composition of La clemenza di Tito led to his dismissal of the opera as a mere curiosity. "For the stage of to-day," he wrote, "it can only be considered as a museum piece."11

The rejection of La clemenza di Tito as an old-fashioned opera, composed by a reluctant, if not fatally ill, composer, was not unique to Dent. From the middle of the nineteenth century, critics devalued the work until long after Dent's words were immortalized in print. John Rice has referred to this trend in W.A. Mozart: La clemenza di Tito as the "Romantic critical tradition," which dominated opinion of the opera from the middle of the nineteenth century until about 1970.12 According to Rice, the tradition was perpetuated by critics who, like Dent, considered La clemenza di Tito against nineteenth-century values of artistic creation, and subsequently accorded it little merit.13

The unfavourable critical assessment of La clemenza di Tito apparently persisted into the twentieth century since it was rarely produced in European houses, and not at all in the United States until 1952. When the opera finally was performed that year at the Berkshire Music Festival, staged and conducted by Boris Goldovsky, it was presented in a heavily edited text, and in an English
translation prepared by himself and Sarah Caldwell. In the performance in 1971 at New York's Julliard School, again there was little faith shown in the viability of the opera as written, as attested to by the major revisions. As late as the 1979-80 season, a decade after Ponnelle's breakthrough Cologne production, the New York City Opera presented the work using a revised scenario by the director Frederik Mirdita. In 1984, Ponnelle's production, which had been receiving international accolades at performances in European opera houses since its debut in 1969, was presented by the Metropolitan Opera for the first time in its history. Finally, American audiences saw the opera in a complete and almost unedited version. The production, designed and staged by Ponnelle, was conducted by James Levine, with Kenneth Riegel as Tito, Tatiana Troyanos as Sesto, Renata Scotto as Vitellia, Ann Murray as Annio, and Gail Robinson as Servilia.

Although Mozart's *Idomeneo* was not subjected to the critical dismissal that haunted *La Clemenza di Tito*, it fared only somewhat better in popular opinion. In 1856, Otto Jahn, in his biography *W.A. Mozart* had written that *Idomeneo* "has been given from time to time on different stages, without exciting as much interest in the general public as the better-known works of Mozart; the judgment of connoisseurs, on the other hand, has always distinguished it." Despite critical acclaim, *Idomeneo* was not, however, performed regularly in Europe or in the United States in the nineteenth century, and in the early part of the twentieth century, like *La Clemenza di Tito*, underwent revisionist editing. The opera finally premiered in the United
States in 1947 at the Berkshire Music Festival under Boris Goldovsky,\textsuperscript{19} and in
1975 was produced by the New York City Opera.\textsuperscript{20} Ponnelle’s realization, based
on his Cologne Opera production of 1974, was presented by the San Francisco
Opera in 1977, and finally by the Metropolitan Opera in 1982, with James Levine
conducting Luciano Pavarotti as Idomeneo, Frederica von Stade as Idamante,
Ileana Cotrubas as Ilia, Hildegard Behrens as Elettra, and John Alexander as
Arbace.

One of the most impressive aspects of Ponnelle’s visualization of \textit{La clemenza di Tito} and \textit{Idomeneo} in America was the manner in which he
addressed Roman and Greek antiquity in the design and staging. He did not
introduce realistic elements in an attempt to recreate the period, nor did he
remove the stories from antiquity completely. Rather, in the tradition of
Vsevelod Meyerhold, he presented the essence of antiquity in a mise en scène
stylized as his theatrical predecessor defined the term:

\begin{quote}
With the word ‘stylization’ I do not imply the exact
reproduction of the style of a certain period or of a
certain phenomenon, such as a photographer might
achieve. . . . To ‘stylize’ a given period or phenomenon
means to employ every possible means of expression
[in] order to reveal the inner synthesis of that period or
phenomenon, to bring out those hidden features which
are deeply rooted in the style of any work of art.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}
Both La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo shared a neutral playing area of stylized antiquity. The layout of the San Francisco and Metropolitan Opera designs, like the Cologne originals, consisted of a set of semi-circular stone steps framed by classical columns, indicating a piazza. The American productions differed from each other in the angle of the opening (owing most likely to the difference in width of the prosceniums in the two houses) and the use of a convex semi-circular platform in the San Francisco plan compared with a concave semi-circular platform in New York (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 ). In Idomeneo the rear vista was dominated by a colossal stone head of Neptune, whereas in La clemenza di Tito it was filled with perspective backdrops.22

Within this setting Ponnelle further emulated Meyerhold’s theatre with stylized staging that captured the grandeur of antique theatre. In Idomeneo the chorus conveyed a statuesque formality. The director arranged them in precise groupings, and gave them highly stylized gestures to execute with the music. The tableaux which they often formed corresponded to musical changes suggestive of emotional states. For instance, in response to the musical storm that washed Idomeneo and his soldiers onto the shore during “Pietà, Numi, pietà,” they raised their hands as if to shield themselves against the wrath of Neptune and held that position until their exit. This gestural stylization, which characterized much of Ponnelle’s staging, followed in the tradition of Meyerhold’s rhythmic style.23

The director choreographed the movements of the chorus to reveal collective emotional states of the Cretan populace. At times he combined movement with striking scenic effects that created powerfully emotive tableaux.
Fig. 1 Floor Plan for Idomeneo San Francisco Opera, 1977 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
In act 2, for example, when Arbace advised Idomeneo to send Idamante away with Elettra in order to avoid sacrificing him to Neptune, Ponnelle cast an ominous foreboding over the exchange by lighting the enormous head of Neptune that hovered over the set, suggesting that the god was privy to their plan. As Idamante and Elletra readied for departure, the people of Crete, still oblivious to the vow, wished the couple well in “Placido è il mar, andiamo.” When Idomeneo tried to join the hands of the pair, the wind, which had gradually increased in intensity, tore down the sails, and revealed Neptune glowing fiercely on the suddenly darkened stage. As Idomeneo stood alone in a spotlight, his subjects literally encircled him, kneeling and clutching his arms, as they sang “Qual nuovo terrore!”

The formalist style of the staging struck some reviewers as exaggerated, but others as powerfully emotive. When Ponnelle presented Idomeneo in Zürich in 1980, Gerold Fierz praised the complementary relationship the director forged between music and movement. He wrote in Musica:

The form that this ‘Idomeneo’ takes on stage is a strange but, in its logical consistency, fascinating mixture of dramatic spontaneity and a conscious stylization of a Baroque court. What is constantly remarkable is that on every level these formalized movements and structures remain inherently musical and music-oriented.24

In 1984, New York Times critic, Donal Henahan, warmed more slowly to the gestural style: “At first, all this stylized movement seemed rather outlandish and called such attention to itself that the singers themselves were diminished. But
once his idea made itself clear, Mr. Ponnelle's treatment of the essentially static drama was highly effective in its magnified way."25

In Idomeneo the figure who most emphatically embodied the statuesque magnitude of Ponnelle’s staging was Elletra, the daughter of Agamemnon, who was in love with Idamante. She was a dramatic foil for the gentle Ilia, expressing her volatility with a vocal flamboyance that sharply contrasted the reserved lyricism of the Trojan princess. The director evidently coached Hildegard Behrens, who portrayed Elletra at the Metropolitan Opera premiere in 1982, to give full vent to her character’s tragic rage. In “Tutte nel cor vi sento” she responded to the news of Idomeneo’s death with obvious indignation at the possibility that Idamante, as the new ruler of Crete, would choose a Trojan slave over her. Her violent motions reinforced the fury of the storm resounding from the orchestra. Behrens used menacing gestures, stretched out her hands and fingers as if accusing the entire audience while she sang, and at one point circled her clasped hands above her head as if she held a dagger.

Elletra’s elevated style of physicalization climaxed during the vengeful “D’Oreste, d’Ajace.” In this scene she reached her full stature as the larger-than-life persona, whom the director considered “the greatest hysteric figure in opera."26 The principals and chorus stood absolutely still on stage as she sang. Her violent gestures and physical detachment from the other characters registered her disgust with Neptune's decision to unite Idamante and Ilia. She finished her tirade by collapsing on the stage in fatal convulsions, after which she was carried out by supers. The New York Times critic, Donal Henahan, showered praise on
Behrens who "flung herself into the villainous role of Elettra with vocal and
dramatic abandon. . . . When she collapsed in a rage at the end and had to be
carried off the stage, one could almost believe she had thrown a real fit."  

The heightened style of Behrens's acting and the statuesque plasticity of
the chorus in Idomeneo exemplified Ponnelle's view that the similarity between
opera and classical Greek theatre lay in the stylized grandeur of the characters:
"Opera, you know, is not naturalistic theater. Figures in opera always stand on
kothurnoi, they always appear on another level."  

This position recalled the vision of Meyerhold, who had sought to create a New Drama which would
embody the colossal quality of antique theatre. For Meyerhold, an exalted style of
acting signified a revival of classical Greek theatre itself.

Although there were certain elements characteristic of theatre in classical
antiquity in the set designs and staging for both Idomeneo and La clemenza di
Tito, there were others which pointed to the director's view of these operas as
primarily eighteenth-century constructs. For instance, the perspective backdrops
in La clemenza di Tito were executed in monochromatic shades of gray. The
reserved scenic palette was not just typically Ponnellian. According to the
designer, the drops were influenced by the eighteenth-century drawings of Gian
Battista Piranesi. In Idomeneo, the director's treatment of Elletra's character
encompassed both antiquity and the eighteenth century, as does the libretto of
Gianbattista Varesco. The dramatic heritage of the character extended back to
Aeschylus, but the libretto constructed her as an antagonist of eighteenth-century
values. She represented irrationality and immoderate emotions, which opposed the values of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{31} Dramatically and musically she was a grand anomaly and the director emphasized her paradoxical nature in her costume. Her black farthingale gown with its lace hanging sleeves suggested her dark motives, her large red wig the intensity of her passions. Yet, beyond the characteristically Ponnellan use of symbolic colours in costume, was the fact that she was dressed in eighteenth-century fashion. Her elevated acting style evoked her classical heritage, but her costume placed her squarely in the late eighteenth century.

In the versions of \textit{La clemenza di Tito} and \textit{Idomeneo} seen in the United States, the difference between set and costume periods became more pronounced than in earlier realizations. Pictorial evidence from the Cologne production of \textit{La clemenza di Tito} in 1969 reveals a strong Roman influence in the stage picture. The chorus members were costumed in togas and antique hairstyles, and Tito, too, was clearly presented as a Roman emperor.\textsuperscript{32} By the time Ponnelle presented the work at the Metropolitan Opera, however, eighteenth-century style was dominant in the costumes. The chorus was dressed in working class garb and Tito changed from ancient Roman battle regalia to a robe and collar inspired by the composer's era.

The juxtaposition of eighteenth-century costume styles against the classical set design also became evident in productions of \textit{Idomeneo}. In 1982, Ponnelle presented Arbace, Idomeneo's advisor, as an eighteenth-century gentleman, in a full-length robe with ruffled collar and full-bottomed wig which gave him the
appearance of a magistrate. Ilia made the transition from Trojan slave, in a simple cream-coloured robe with fluted sleeves that mirrored the massive Doric columns of the set, to Idamante’s wife in a tight fitting gown with hoop skirt and circular décolletage in vogue in the late eighteenth century. The change signified her emotional and social alliance with Idamante, while the style of her dress continued to reflect her Trojan heritage with lower sleeves constructed out of fluted material, rather than eighteenth-century lace. In the San Francisco production of Idomeneo in 1977, the chorus was costumed as Cretan people. Both men and women wore white, full-length robes with shawls loosely draped around their heads. At the Metropolitan Opera in 1984, they were dressed as members of the eighteenth-century working class.

The shift in costume style from antiquity to the late eighteenth century had a corresponding change in the set designs. At the 1969 premiere of La clemenza di Tito in Cologne, and at the Bayerische Staatsoper in 1971, there was no evidence of decay in the architectural set. The columns and piazza had a polished, almost pristine appearance that suggested first century Rome. By the time the opera was presented at the Metropolitan Opera, Ponnelle chose to show columns that were cracked and worn, as if the drama was unfolding in a period long after Roman antiquity. When Stanley Sadie reviewed the presentation in the New York Times, he noted the detail and puzzled over the decay: “I am unsure why the columns looked so time-worn: Rome was still quite new in Titus’ day.”

The worlds of Tito and Idomeneo (both were presented in the deteriorating piazza depicted by the decaying columns) were not intended to be, in Sadie’s
terms, historically accurate. They were conceived to capture a view of antiquity as seen from an eighteenth century perspective. Because of the stories of La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo Ponnelle did not entirely dispense with the Roman and Greek period, but he did not allow the librettos to be the sole scenic determinant. In his realizations the visual style was subject to the period style of the music, the period of its composer.

Ponnelle’s approach to the staging of Mozart’s operas had developed in the early 1970s, while he was conceiving the Mozart Cycle for the Cologne Opera. At that time he became convinced that in order to truly understand these works, they must be considered from the composer’s perspective:

I tried to see all Mozart’s works in the spirit of his own age: as the most perfect expression of the eighteenth century, the century of the Enlightenment and of humanism. With this key I arrived at a common dramatic denominator, a continuous ‘red thread.’

As the changes in the set designs of Idomeneo and La clemenza di Tito reveal, over the years the director’s sensibility leaned more and more to a view of Mozart’s operas as expressions of the late eighteenth century. By 1984 he asserted that “the style of the production must be in the style of the music... the time must be the time of the composer.” For Ponnelle, as for Adolphe Appia, the visualization of an opera was essentially the translation of music into space. In practice, this meant that a mise en scène derived from the music, would
necessarily be stylized and correspond to the period style of the music. The director’s goal of considering Mozart’s works from the composer’s perspective corresponded with Appia’s objective of deriving mises en scène from the music and led to the eclectic stage pictures of La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo.

The director’s artistic individuality, evident in every aspect of his productions, characterized them as distinctly “Ponellian,” but paradoxically they were equally so because he resisted imposing his own viewpoint upon them. One of the most notable features of his work in general was that he had no political axe to grind, no modern critique of any period. His designs for Idomeneo and La clemenza di Tito were not conceived as “readings” but rather as illuminations of the composer’s view of antiquity and the eighteenth century. Thus, the decaying columns of his design can be understood as a pastiche of antiquity. In the director’s words the set design was “eighteenth-century classical architecture with a nostalgia for antique architecture. So it all becomes a ‘nostalgie’ for both the real antique past and the eighteenth century. It’s neo-romantic and classical at the same time.”

Since Ponnelle held to the principle that an opera was the product of an individual composer writing from a specific historical perspective, in his view, although the stories of La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo took place in antiquity, the operas were not about antiquity. Rather, they expressed the values of the late eighteenth century and of Mozart himself. For the director, the only means by which to understand a particular work was to view it through the eyes of the composer. This objective led to a biographical component in his visualization of
Idomeneo.

As the story goes, while sailing home from the Trojan War, Idomeneo and his men were plagued by a storm. Fearing that all would be lost, the king made a vow to Neptune, offering the first person whom he encountered upon landing in Crete as a sacrifice in exchange for a safe voyage. By coincidence that person turned out to be his son, Idamante. Idomeneo’s subsequent inability to carry out the vow angered Neptune who sent a sea monster that killed thousands of Cretan people. Idamante slayed the monster and when he discovered the reason behind Neptune’s wrath, he offered himself in sacrifice. Just as Idomeneo raised his sword to kill his son, Neptune stopped him and rewarded Idamante by declaring him the new king of Crete.

Certainly, Idamante’s ascendance from the shadow of his father to become the king of Crete shares some similarity with the young composer’s emergence as a mature composer after many years under his father’s careful tutelage. Leopold Mozart had always been a force in his son’s creative life and even acted as an intermediary between Mozart and Gianbattista Varesco while he was composing Idomeneo.40 Although Mozart did not write the libretto for the opera, Ponnelle suggested that he connected the continual presence of Neptune in the plot to the dominance of his father in his own life. In this light the mask of Neptune which towered over the stage could be interpreted as representing the role of Leopold Mozart in his son’s affairs:

I used the face of Neptune to express the father complex, because this is the key to the opera. Mozart
finally found a way to be free himself from his own father's tyranny. . . . [He] eventually found his own personality, independent of his father's, when he worked on 'Idomeneo.'

The mask was constructed in the style of classical statuary, painted gray to appear like weathered stone, with a mouth large enough to be the main entrance through which Idomeneo and the ragged Cretan sailors were spewed onto the shore. The gaping mouth remained an open portal, looming over the drama like a cannibalistic monster, a constant reminder of Idomeneo's vow (Fig. 3). In addition to being configured as a mask, the face of Neptune was painted on a scrim lit at crucial points in the opera, to convey the god's awareness of the unfolding events. It was visible during Idamante's declaration of love for Ilia, "Non ho colpa, e mi condanni;" during Arbace's "Se il tuo duol, se il mio," in which he advises Idomeneo to send Idamante away with Elletra; during the choral number, "Corriamo, fuggiamo," after the destruction of Elletra's ship; and in the final scene of the opera, when it interrupted the sacrifice of Idamante.

The continual presence of Neptune's head worked on two levels. Given the antique elements in the scenic conception, it represented the active role that the gods had in the belief system of the ancient Greeks. At the same time, the eighteenth-century elements suggested that it was a metaphor for the influence of Leopold Mozart in his son's life while he was composing Idomeneo. Taken as a whole, however, the mise en scène extended the meaning of the opera beyond a coming-of-age drama. Ponnelle's insightful staging of Idomeneo's struggle
Fig. 3  Idomeneo San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1977)
between his personal and political responsibilities portrayed not only the downfall of an antique ruler, but ultimately, given the eclectic nature of the mise en scène, the change of an era.

In 1974 Horst Koegler praised the director's ability to create empathy for the aging king. He wrote in Opera:

Through stressing the individual psychology the stereotyped roles become characters of their own -- here again the conventions of opera seria are swept aside, and the human substance is brought forward, nowhere more so than in the desperate Idomeneus torn hither and thither between his political reason and paternal love for his son.42

The emotional turbulence of the king struggling to come to grips with his vow was evident from his first moments on stage at the Metropolitan Opera. Luciano Pavarotti, as Idomeneo, clearly regretted making the vow even before meeting Idamante on the shore and was moved to tears as he learned his victim's identity. Later, when the chorus officially greeted their leader in "Nettuno s'onori," he listened dutifully, but at one point tried to cover his ears, as if wishing he had perished rather than be obligated to carry out his vow. His intense love for his son and his self-loathing obviously tore him apart. He turned his back on Idamante, later attempted to reach out to embrace him, only to recoil again at the last moment.

In act 2, Idamante's confusion and despair were heightened by his father's...
rejection of him in Ilia's second aria. The princess, freed from her bondage to Crete, entered Idomeneo's chamber to welcome him home as her new father in "Se il padre perdei." As she sang she looked into the wings as if seeking encouragement. The object of her diversion soon became clear. Idamante appeared on stage looking very tentative in the presence of his father, apparently asking for his blessing as father and father-in-law, as well. The staging interpreted the aria as an attempt by Idamante to make peace with his father through Ilia. As soon as Idomeneo recognized their intentions, he turned away, realizing that sacrificing Idamante would also affect Ilia.

Idomeneo's struggle with the ramifications of his vow encompassed a broader generational conflict, evident even in his appearance. When he landed he was still wearing full antique battle regalia, in contrast to his grown son who had adopted elements of eighteenth-century dress and, by implication, its values. The Greek war hero had returned, but his costume suggested that he had landed in the future. He was a man out of his time, plagued by his inability to fulfill a vow that an enlightened monarch would not have made in the first place. This important visual detail became a microcosm of the larger social conflict between ways of thinking, between reason and superstition, between the old way and the new.

Ponnelles realization of Idomeneo as an expression of the eighteenth century was particularly apt in the final scene where the transfer of power from father to son also signalled the progression from the old order to the new. In the libretto, just as Idomeneo raised the sword to kill his only son, the voice of
Neptune announced "Ha vinto amore," and indeed love had triumphed. The reconciliation of divine and human orders was made possible through the selfless love of Idamante. By the end of the opera, Idomeneo had learned the principles of humanism, but it was Idamante who exemplified them in action and was thus the worthier ruler. Once absolved not only of his sacrificial duty, Idomeneo was also relieved of his role as ruler over Crete in favour of his son. The presentation concluded simply with the old king celebrating his personal victory in "Torna la pace al core," then exiting upstage quietly and without pomp.44

In the concluding moments of the presentation, the eighteenth-century elements of the mise en scène supported the period values couched in the story. Elletra, the demonic force of irrationality so contrary to the Enlightenment, died, divine power proved itself merciful in the tradition of the New Testament,45 and Idamante and Ilia, the new generation of enlightened leaders, were left in the middle of their optimistic eighteenth-century subjects, who sang praises to them in "Scenda Amor."

The merit of Ponnelles's realization of *Idomeneo* has always been eclipsed by the unprecedented success of his staging of *La clemenza di Tito*. In truth, the director conquered the more formidable obstacle of critical derision when he premiered his interpretation of the latter in 1969. *Idomeneo* had always been acknowledged as a quality composition, whereas *La clemenza di Tito* was still being dismissed as a dramatic impossibility. Dent's comparison was to be echoed by critics such as Erik Smith, who in 1968 alluded to *Idomeneo* in his assessment
of the opera: "It is undoubtedly static in its stagecraft, wooden in its
classification, when one thinks of the life and humanity of Mozart's other
masterpieces."\textsuperscript{46}

In part, the criticism levied against \textit{La clemenza di Tito} (more so than to \textit{Idomeneo}) stemmed from a certain level of discomfort with the seria opera
genre. Erik Smith called seria opera "a dull formal medium,"\textsuperscript{47} a view shared by
others who attended performances expecting to be bored.\textsuperscript{48} The solution to this
"problem" for many directors was to engage in extensive editing of the opera. In
contrast, Ponnelle disavowed the negative assessments of the opera and
demonstrated its dramatic viability when presented in its entirety.

Ponnelle's production of \textit{La clemenza di Tito} pioneered the restoration of
previously unperformed cuts. For instance, one of the most often edited scenes
was the first one of the opera between Vitellia and Sesto. In the Metropolitan
Opera staging, the director set the scene in a bedroom, suggested by the placement
of a bed upstage center, where Vitellia languished through most of her first
speech, and from behind which stepped Sesto. The sexual nature of their
relationship was made clear not through a physical closeness but by the presence
of the bed. The staging for the remainder of the scene clarified the sexual power
that Vitellia had over Sesto and therefore, the reason for his betrayal of Tito. In
his review for \textit{Musical Times}, Stanley Sadie was pleased with the director's
choice: "[Ponnelle] makes Sesto so clearly Vitellia's creature, responding in his
actions to her every phrase, and to phrases in the orchestra that accordingly
acquire a new suggestiveness."49

In the film he made in 1980 he introduced Sesto and Vitellia talking intently as they walked about the ruins. Carol Neblett, who played Vitellia, captured the character's sensual allure, as well as the intensity that almost destroys both her and Sesto. She physically dominated the meek and indecisive Sesto, played by Tatiana Troyanos, using grand gestures and sweeping movements. During "Deh se piacer mi vuoi," she circled her hapless lover followed by the camera, as if through Sesto's eyes, creating a dizzying perspective of her manipulative nature.

Before Ponnelle's staging demonstrated the inherent interest of the first scene, its long sections of recitative o semplice had been heavily edited by directors who considered them too static.50 Yet, as Andrew Porter has pointed out, the complete scene is necessary to introduce Vitellia and Sesto fully. If the recitatives are maintained, Porter argues, drama and music intensify each other, because, "Mozart's first musical number becomes more than a pretty piece of music: Sextus' would-be resolute line collapsing in spaniel curves, Vitellia's proud, scornful leaps and incisive rhythms, and the flash of strings which accompanies her take on theatrical meaning."51

The second "problem" of La clemenza di Tito which Ponnelle tackled was the perception of Tito as a predictable and therefore, dramatically uninteresting character. Alfred Einstein typified this perception when, in 1945, he wrote in
Mozart, His Character, His Work: "Titus is nothing but a mere puppet representing magnanimity, renouncing his chosen brides when he learns that they are already promised, and tearing up death sentences that he has already signed." Yet, this view failed to acknowledge the internal struggle which precedes Tito's acts of kindness. In Ponnelle's interpretation the main character gained interest because his acts of clemency came only after his struggle to prioritize public duty over private longing, reason over passion.

Evidently, Ponnelle did not consider the "problem" of Tito's character a problem at all. Rather, he maintained that the character would be of interest to a twentieth-century audience despite its association with a distant historical period. "I am convinced," he said in 1975, "that all of us, even if we are not ourselves Roman emperors, can be interested in their actions and their psychology." Putting his faith into practice, he developed his production as an exploration of Tito's psyche.

In the opera text, the emperor makes his initial appearance in the fourth scene of act 1, accompanied by dignitaries who gather with the Roman people to announce that they wish to build a monument in his honour. Ponnelle dispensed with the stage directions for this scene in favour of portraying not Tito's magnanimous generosity - he declines the honour, suggesting instead that the money be spent to assist victims of the recent eruption of Mount Vesuvius - but rather the emotional price which he paid in sending Berenice away. At the commencement of the Marcia the chorus was revealed on either side of the stage. Berenice stood alone upstage near the ship that was to take her away, looking at
Tito, whose gaze remained fixed upon her. As the Allegro began, Tito ran up to Berenice and embraced her passionately before being separated by Publio, who hastened her into the ship. When the chorus began singing their prayer to keep the emperor safe in “Serbate, o Dei custodi” Tito covered his ears, as if their words were literally causing him pain -- a gesture similar to Idomeneo’s when his subjects sang “Nettuno s’onori” after his return.

After the departure of Berenice in the Metropolitan Opera stage version, Ponnelle emphasized the impact of Tito’s personal sacrifice by a dramatic scene change. As the chorus exited on the Marcia following his recitative, black cloth drops obscured the vista behind the arches through which Berenice’s ship had been visible, and created an image of mourning.54 The visualization not only emphasized the emperor’s despair, it gave dramatic life to the functional exit music.

The film that Ponnelle made of La clemenza di Tito in 1980 followed the psychological approach even more emphatically than the stage versions which preceded and followed it. He filmed it in Rome among the present day ruins of the Forum and the Baths of Caracalla. Alan Blyth was critical of his choice in the Opera review: “[T]he rather decrepit surroundings and the outdoor setting predictably dwarfed the acting-singers who were further hampered by outlandish 18th century garments and wigs, which did not in any case march [sic] with the antique ‘sets.’”55 In contrast, Caroline Seebohm writing in The Wall Street Journal defended Ponnelle’s use of the dramatically charged setting, because in it “the singers in their imperial roles are . . . dwarfed and therefore humanized by
their Roman-ruin surroundings. For the director, the ruins of magnificent structures from the ancient world evoked a certain nostalgia that he attributed to the composer:

With 'Tito' [Mozart] was close to several endings. He may or may not have known that his life was coming to a close, but I think he was conscious that he was working on the last opera seria and, at the same time, that his century was almost at an end. In 'Tito' Mozart knows that he is putting the final period at the end of a long tradition.

From the very outset of the film, Ponnelle integrated the scenery into the staging to explore the thoughts behind Tito’s actions. It began with a montage, constructed in perfect synchrony with the overture, that introduced the fundamental conflict of public responsibility and personal desire. The first shot was of the emperor wandering amid the ruins trying to forget Berenice, whom he had apparently already sent away. As the scene developed, each shot was coordinated with the repeated themes, and rhythmic changes in the music. The opening fanfare revealed the emperor lost in thought, glancing from a statue of himself, to a suit of empty armour, to a crowd of statues, in conjunction with the repetition of the fanfare. Tito was clearly contemplating his role as a public figure, concerned with how the Roman people viewed him, and given the setting of the ruins, perhaps even how he would be remembered in the future.

In the lyrical passage which followed, Berenice appeared as a barely discernible figure reflected in a pool of water. Then, as the theme was repeated,
the camera tilted to show her full-length, a haunting vision, dressed in flowing white robes, sadly reaching out to Tito across the a pool of water — evoking both the figure of an angel and death. This passage, which is followed by an abrupt key change, corresponded with a scene change to Tito wandering alone in a grove of trees. It became clear that he was not only thinking of Berenice but also of her replacement, because the camera suddenly cut to a close-up of Vitellia, then Servilia on the repetition of the initial fanfare. The figure of Berenice returned once more with a repetition of the lyrical theme, this time simply standing in a field looking longingly towards the camera, a vision which dissolved as the final measures of the overture turned, not only to a repetition of the initial fanfare, but also to Tito. He stood alone facing a statue of himself, at the base of which were the Roman people, his expectant subjects.

Ironically, the people of Rome were not real people at all, but statues of identically clothed male and female figures, variously arranged for their scenes. The choice to portray the people of Rome as a faceless mass served two purposes. First, it focused attention on the principals as the most important, and literally the only, characters in the drama, consistent with Mazzola’s revision of the original libretto by Pietro Metastasio.58 Second, it made the Roman people constructs of Tito’s subconscious mind. Whereas in Idomeneo the Cretan people were living, breathing human beings who literally pressed upon their leader, in the film of La clemenza di Tito, the statues represented the responsibility Tito felt towards the Roman people rather than the people themselves.

In live performance Tito’s relationship to the Roman populace (portrayed
by singer-actors) changed somewhat depending upon the theatre in which the opera was staged. Ponnelle’s success in the vastly different houses in which he staged operas was based on his ability to manipulate the dramatic potency of space. A striking illustration of this point can be seen in the difference between the 1971 production of *La clemenza di Tito* at the Cuvilliéstheater and the 1976 staging at the Felsenreitschule in Salzburg. In Salzburg he created an imperial stage picture by integrating into the staging one of the theatre’s unique features -- the three levels of stone arcades that form the natural backdrop for the stage. Rudolf Angermüller in *Mozart’s Operas* described the overall effect that was obtained in this formidable space: “Emotive passion and enormous extravagance characterized this production in the Felsenreitschule. It tended unmistakably toward Romanticism and grand opera.”

Ponnelle did not execute the change in design without a consequent dramatic effect. According to the director, theatres carried within them the potential for different interpretations based on changing spatial relationships. Consequently, the realization of *La clemenza di Tito* at the Felsenreitschule was different from the production he had staged at the Cuvilliéstheater not only because of the size of the stage, but because the dramatic relationships changed as a consequence. An illustration of this contrast occurred when the chorus was present on stage. At the Cuvilliéstheater, they stood in the archways that surrounded the courtyard, and the size of the resulting semi-circle created a sense of intimacy. At the Felsenreitschule, the members of the chorus stood in the vast expanse of arcades, creating a panoramic stage picture against which the lone
figure of Tito was seen. At the Cuvilliéstheater Tito appeared among and therefore connected to the people of Rome; at the Felsenreitschule the stage picture conveyed Tito’s isolation and loneliness.

The primary focus of Ponnelle’s productions and film of La clemenza di Tito was on the character of Tito. His greatest triumph in this respect was to disprove critics’ appraisal of the emperor as a wooden figure of predictable generosity. In his interpretations he became a fully realized character in whose actions and psychology a twentieth-century audience could take interest. Nowhere was this transcendent humanity more evident than in the heart-wrenching confrontation between Tito and Sesto after the attempted assassination.

In the film, after Sesto’s role in the plot against Tito was revealed, Publio led him away to prison. The next time that he was seen, he stood dwarfed in the cavernous chamber as the chorus sang “Ah grazie si rendano al sommo fattor,” giving thanks to the gods for sparing Tito’s life. At the sound Sesto cowered in remorse and self-loathing. When Tito went to the prison to try to persuade him to reveal the reason for the plot, the musical passage served to underscore his cautious approach. After Sesto’s final refusal to reveal his reasons, the emperor was clearly frustrated, but his affection for his friend remained strong. They embraced before the emperor left him alone in the immense space to ponder his fate alone.

In the Metropolitan Opera stage version Sesto was brought to Tito under
the watchful eye of Publio. The emperor himself gently removed the chains that bound the hands of his friend. Tito’s heart-felt persuasion was unsuccessful, nevertheless, and two guards took Sesto back to prison after his aria. The prison was created solely by a light template that cast bars of shadow across the stage floor on the upper level. Sesto was pushed into the space and remained visible, standing hunched over in remorse, while Tito considered his fate in the recitative “Dove s’intese mai,” as if only an image in the emperor’s mind. When Tito decided to grant clemency to Sesto, a brilliantly lit backdrop obscured the prison upon which was painted a Roman breastplate with the figure of an eagle, the symbol of Jupiter, holding an olive branch. The symbolism and dramatic lighting captured Tito’s triumph over vengeance in “Se all’impero, amici Dei.”

Tito’s clemency was not the act of a gullible and predictable character, but a hard-fought victory over emotion and irrationality. Even when his faith in the goodness of humankind was tested once again in the final scene, when Vitellia confessed her involvement in the plot, he triumphed over his doubt and granted absolution to all. In the stage production, the Emperor stood downstage centre, flanked by Servilia and Annio on one side, and Publio, Sesto and Vitellia (whose hands he personally joined) on the other. In the film, the scene revealed him sitting in an arena amid the stern statues which represented the populace, with the principals assembled. After his final lines, Tito strode confidently toward the stationary camera, so that the final frame focused not on his face, but on the imperial herald carved into his breastplate.

Ponnelè’s landmark interpretations of La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo dispelled the biases against seria operas, much to the surprise of critics and to the
delight of audiences. His restoration of passages generally thought to be unnecessary, and his imaginative realization of characters he refused to dismiss as one-dimensional, revealed the dramatic logic of the operas and helped to restore interest in them. In later years, he modified his visualizations to contextualize them as products of late-eighteenth century thought and compositional style, and in doing so deepened the audience's understanding of these works.

The many productions of *La clemenza di Tito*, in particular, by other directors and opera companies that followed in the wake of Ponnelle's 1969 Cologne realization attest to the tremendous influence of this pioneering interpretation. Of those that came later, however, none garnered the extensive international critical and popular acclaim lavished on Ponnelle's. The director's most profound historical achievement was to cultivate an understanding of, and restore appreciation for, Mozart's final opera.
Notes


4 John A. Rice, “Composition and first performance,” in La clemenza di Tito. In his discussion about the opera with Imre Fabian in 1983, Ponnelle expressed his belief in the evidence advanced recently by scholars that Mozart was at least preoccupied with the subject of “Tito,” and may have even composed certain parts of it, well before he received the commission to compose it.


6 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 104.


8 Rudolph Angermüller, Mozart’s Operas (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) 271.

9 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 119.

10 Edward J. Dent, Mozart’s Operas, 213.


13 See John A. Rice, “The Romantic critical tradition,” in *La clemenza di Tito*. According to Rice, assessments of *La clemenza di Tito* by nineteenth-century writers, and those later influenced by the “Romantic critical tradition,” were based on four factors 1) that a great work of art derives from inspiration rather than from a commission, 2) that the seria opera genre was old-fashioned, 3) a revulsion towards the *musico* roles, and 4) the view that the composer should be the supreme dramatist rather than a collaborator with the librettist and singers.


19 Metropolitan Opera video notes. Courtesy of Lincoln Centre Stagebill. John Dizikes in *Opera in America* (552) cites the first performance in America in the 1960s, but does not specify the location or producing company.


38 Robert Jacobson, Magnificence Onstage at the Met, 122.


41 Robert Jacobson, Magnificence Onstage at the Met, 118.


44 The Metropolitan Opera production adhered more closely to the 1781 Munich version than to the 1786 Vienna version with several exceptions: Elletra’s aria “D’Oreste, d’Ajace” and Idomeneo’s aria “Torna la pace al core,” which were not in the Munich version were included, and the ballet, which Mozart wrote to end the opera, was cut. Two other significant cuts were made in that production. The first was Idamante’s aria “No, la morte” in which he convinces Idomeneo that he is at peace in the face of death. The second was the brief scene in which Ilia offers her own life in exchange for Idamante’s. Therefore, Ponnelle’s realization jumped from Ilia’s initial interruption of the sacrifice immediately to the voice of Neptune calling a halt to it.

45 Julian Rushton, W.A. Mozart: Idomeneo, 159.

46 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 137.

47 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 137.

48 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 136.


50 Andrew Porter, Music of Three More Seasons, 461.

51 Andrew Porter, Music of Three More Seasons, 461.


53 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 138.
The director used the same technique to great effect in two other productions. In the Salzburg Festival staging of Mozart’s Don Giovanni in 1977 a black curtain fell from the flies to obliterate the scenic backdrop in act 1 at the moment Donna Anna recognized Don Giovanni as the murderer of her father. (Dale Harris, “A Lavish Onegin, A New ‘Giovanni,’” rev. of Don Giovanni, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Musical America January 1978: 34.) It was also used in his 1983 realization of Richard Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde at the Bayreuth Festival in combination with a lighting effect. In act 2 when King Marke and his followers discovered Tristan and Isolde together, a gray curtain fell at the moment the love duet was interrupted and obscured the forest. (Peter G. Davis, “Opera à la Carte,” rev. of Tristan und Isolde, by Richard Wagner New York Magazine August 1983: 66.)

Quoted in John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito, 139.


Rudolph Angermüller, Mozart’s Operas, 262. Also, see “Metastasio the romantic,” and “Mazzolà’s revision,” in John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito.

Rudolph Angermüller, Mozart’s Operas, 272.


62 Production photo in Rudolph Angermüller, Mozart's Operas, 272.

63 John A. Rice, La clemenza di Tito.
Comedic Style: Irresistible Rossini

For almost a full decade after 1959, when Jean-Pierre Ponnelle designed Die Frau ohne Schatten for the San Francisco Opera, he remained in Europe, designing and staging spoken plays and operas. During that time the scenic style of his productions changed radically, owing in part to his newly-proclaimed dual role as both designer and director and to his application of his musical methodology. When he returned to San Francisco in 1969 to create Rossini's La Cenerentola, American audiences saw for the first time the pale scenic picture and rhythmic staging that were to become the hallmarks of his mature style.

The San Francisco La Cenerentola, his first production of this opera, immediately became an unqualified success, praised highly by the American press. In his book 50 Years of the San Francisco Opera, Arthur Bloomfield sums up the tone of contemporary reviews:

The 1969 season proved one of [Kurt Herbert] Adler's best, but it would have made its mark if only because of the immensely stylish and mercurial production of Rossini's 'La Cenerentola,' staged and designed by the long-absent, now-celebrated Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and conducted by London's Charles Mackerras. Rarely do all components come together in such inspired fashion: stage direction so musical, musical direction so stage-conscious, a cast which sings, and acts, so well, and scenery which keeps one guessing as to what it's going to
do next. Ponnelle’s staging was characteristically French in its discriminating elegance, but this didn’t keep the show from being full of fun. Things were lively, never rowdy.  

La Cenerentola was the second successful Rossini production Ponnelle had directed. At the Salzburg Festival the year before, he had staged a well-received version of Il barbiere di Siviglia, upon which he based his first opera film in 1972. A third Rossini opera L’Italiana in Algeri marked the director’s debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1973, with a production he had created for the Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf the year before. Several other Rossini productions followed throughout his career, including Il Turco in Italia (Düsseldorf, 1979), a film of La Cenerentola in 1981, Otello (Venice, 1986), and L’Occasione fa il Ladro (Pesaro, 1987).

Although each of these realizations found a measure of success, none exceeded the enduring international appeal of La Cenerentola. It bears the distinction of being the most successful and widely-seen production of Ponnelle’s career. The critical and popular praise which was lavished upon the original San Francisco production has been echoed many times over in opera houses throughout the world. In 1981, for instance, it was seen for the first time in Munich, Germany and, according to at least one reviewer, its charm was undiminished after twelve years. Beate Kayser observed in Opera: “The public considered it unimportant that they were not among the first to see this brilliant commedia dell’arte jest, and acclaimed the producer with an enthusiasm generally
reserved only for tenors."² At this writing, the set and costume designs continue to be used by opera companies in Europe and North America, and still draw critical acclaim, even though the staging has long since been turned over to other directors.³ While the interpretations of Il barbiere di Siviglia and L'Italiana in Algeri showed ample evidence of the director's gift for comedy, La Cenerentola deserves the most attention, as a testament to his skill at blending reality and artifice, buffoonery and pathos, in musical staging that captured both the humour and humanity in Rossini's opera.

Fundamental to Ponnelle's approach to designing and staging operas, regardless of genre, was his use of the music rather than the libretto, as the primary source for his conceptions.⁴ Before designing the set for La Cenerentola, he characteristically weighed the nature of the story against the quality of the music. In an interview given in 1969, he summarized the reasoning that led to his famous design:

'[C]enerentola' is very complicated for me. The music is fantastic -- to me it's richer than that of 'Barbiere' -- but the story, the characters are very simple, a fairy tale. Now, the music is not like that at all . . . It's dry, trocken. So I don't think the answer is to be found in the storybook atmosphere, not in the Brothers Grimm or in Andersen. I'm not looking for the naïveté of a medieval fairy tale at all. Instead, I'm trying to recapture the naive quality of some Italian sketches from the Biedermeier
period, 1820-30 -- that kind of milieu. A picture post card out of the past.5

The designer's use of the postcard metaphor suggests that he wanted to create a world somewhat removed from that of the spectators, yet not so completely unrealistic as that of a fairy tale. The aesthetic distance which he established in the mise en scène permitted the comic characters to behave in an exaggerated manner, yet at the same time allowed them, in select moments, to become recognizable human beings with genuine emotions.

On stage the opera was introduced by Alidoro, who entered the stage alone and with a gesture, "magically" caused the main curtain to rise.6 The two-dimensionality of the set design, as also suggested by the postcard reference, was immediately evident. Initially, it appeared to consist solely of a large, off-white canvas drop on which the dilapidated exterior facade of Don Magnifico's house was sketched with broad brush strokes in black paint (Fig. 1). The house was a two-storey structure of stone, with ornate architectural details that suggested a former wealth, lost to neglect or misfortune, as evidenced by the broken shutters and crumbling walls. The flat stage picture was broken when Angelina raised individual drops to reveal a cut-away interior view of the house. The post card came to life with much of the stage action taking place in front of the structure.

When Ponnelle filmed the opera, he established a similar degree of aesthetic distance during the overture by employing the camera as a spectator (even
suggesting a nineteenth-century tourist) attending the performance. It began
with a visual tour of La Scala, the opera house in which it was filmed, in order to
emphasize that the opera was not intended to be viewed within a realistic
framework, but rather as a theatrical construct. A long-shot of the exterior
gradually changed to a close-up of the main entrance, and then to an antique show
poster on which production credits were listed. The director further emphasized
the fact that the camera was the spectator by filming the remainder of the overture
at eye level. It proceeded through the main doors, and into the marble foyer,
where a slow pan of the hall was punctuated by sharp zooms towards the marble
busts and statues of Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi, in conjunction with rhythmic
changes in the overture. The camera then appeared to “notice” another area of the
foyer and advanced slowly towards a life-sized marble statue of Rossini,
foreshadowing the magical effect that the director created for Alidoro’s aria “Là del
ciel nell’arcano profondo.” As the overture drew to a close, the camera moved
into the auditorium, panning the boxes and galleries before coming to rest on the
closed stage curtain, ready for the performance to begin.

One of Ponnelle’s ongoing concerns in conceptualizing set designs was to
maintain a relationship between the style of the music and the scenic style. In La
Cenerentola his use of early nineteenth-century costume styles (including a living
representation of Rossini himself) served as a reminder of the period in which the
opera was composed. When he realized L’Italiana in Algeri at the Metropolitan
Opera in 1973, he created a fanciful depiction of a palace in Algeria, as required by
the story line (Fig. 2). An architectural backdrop of Moorish arches represented
various locations in the Bey’s palace, altered by the use of latticed screens and sheer
Fig. 2 L’Italiana in Algeri San Francisco Opera (Photo by Marty Sohl, 1992)
curtains. Once again, however, he acknowledged the composer in the stage picture by costuming the characters in the style of his period.

In contrast to the fanciful set designs of La Cenerentola and L'Italiana in Algeri, Il barbiere di Siviglia contained a certain degree of social realism. Ponnelle had toyed with the effect he wanted to achieve before conceptualizing his original Salzburg production: “For months while working on this opera I was faced with a serious problem – I was uncertain whether one ought to emphasize the artificial element of this type of opera comique, or whether one should use a realistic approach.” He was considering realism with respect to the portrayal of the social context in the design. The opera was, of course, composed in 1816, but the story takes place in seventeenth-century Seville. There were occasions when he resolved this contradiction by realizing operas in a combination of period styles. In the case of Il barbiere di Siviglia, however, the social circumstances of the drama apparently outweighed the period style of the music as a factor in determining scenic style. Ultimately, he decided in favour of a more realistic picture:

The scenographic conception was dominated by the idea that Bartolo’s house must not be shown in complete isolation from its surroundings, but must seem part of a definite landscape: of Seville, with a suggestion of its climate, its social conditions and also, of course, its strict Catholic mores, which explain why Rosina cannot leave her guardian’s house.
Consequently, the production was filled with many realistic touches in both the scenic design and staging. On stage, the square in Seville was constructed mainly on a revolve, which later played a role not only in scene changes, but also in the comic mayhem of the first act finale. In the film, even more details were added. The square was constructed as a full scale studio reproduction, surrounded by Spanish houses which faced a working fountain, a large crucifix, and several plants. It was divided by a central street that led upstage to a perspective backdrop that gave the stage picture depth.

Ponelle’s staging of the film action complemented the attention to particulars in the setting. It began at the end of the overture with Fiorello’s early morning arrival into the darkened square with the hired musicians who accompanied Count Almaviva’s serenade to Rosina. The mayhem of the gathering drew the attention of a soldier, whom Fiorello promptly dispatched with a bribe. After the serenade was sung, the musicians clamoured for more money and created enough noise to wake the residents. At that point, lights in the houses were turned on and angry citizens in nightclothes leaned out of their windows to curse the serenaders. One even emptied the contents of a bedpan on the group. As the musicians dispersed, dawn began to break slowly with a general increase of light, and a night watchman walked through the square extinguishing the gas street lights. The established realism continued later as the square came to life with children playing, nuns hurrying to church, and a man leading a donkey up the street towards the vanishing point.

Although Il barbiere di Siviglia was filled with numerous touches of
everyday life, it did not embody realism as a theatrical style. Rather, the director used only enough to construct the environment which prompts the dramatic conflict. There was one scene, however, which he handled in the film with a high degree of verisimilitude: the rain storm in act 2. When he staged the opera at the Kleines Festspielhaus, the creation of pouring rain was facilitated by the technical capabilities of the theatre. During the storm the revolve was turned so that the interior swung away and Bartolo’s house was shown again from the exterior as it had been in the first scene of act 1. In this way the audience could see Figaro and Almaviva climbing up to Rosina’s balcony before the set turned back around to the interior of the house in time for the recitative and trio, “Ah! qual colpo inaspettato” to begin. In the film, a torrent of rain poured down on the square, and people who had been seen in the beginning of the opera, such as the nuns who had hurried from one side to another, returned from the opposite direction, and the man and his donkey, caught in the downpour, walked dejectedly across the square.

Ponnelle’s authentic treatment of the storm in Il barbiere di Siviglia was in keeping with the overall scenic style. In his production of La Cenerentola, however, the faithful recreation of the storm was contrary to the established visual style. Realizing a storm was certainly a requirement of the story line, but it was executed with a degree of realism that indicated an additional motivation. In 1969, the War Memorial Opera House had no rain mechanism in place to create the desired effect. Ponnelle however, regarded this as an opportunity to engage in creative problem-solving in a direct, hands-on way rarely necessary in European opera houses with greater technical capabilities and a larger staff. It was one of the
reasons that he enjoyed working at the San Francisco Opera. Rather than relying on a stylized storm (or paying to have a system professionally installed), he and the technical crew simply created a soaker system of their own, using garden hoses. According to contemporary accounts the make-shift system worked perfectly, and gave spectators the first sight of rain inside the War Memorial Opera House.

One of the most striking features of La Cenerentola, certainly in comparison to the productions he had designed a decade before, was his selective use of colour. He used it differently than he had in prior productions seen in the United States, due to his new role as director, as well as to his view of the relationship between the music and the mise en scène of an opera. When he was strictly a designer, he felt unable to fully express his concepts visually. After he became a director he found a new balance in the two roles, and as a result, he gave his scenery "the soft pedal." Thereafter, his scenic designs were often characterized by a muted colour scheme, often confined to black, white and gray, with select accents in costumes or props. The designer said of the change in his style: "I began by using too much color. Eventually I found that monochrome and variations are more satisfactory for the stage. Then one contrasting color becomes much stronger than presenting many colors all at once."

In comparison with his earlier designs, which were strongly influenced by painting, Ponvelle's later work showed a more focused use of colour as a dramatic exponent. The subdued scenic palette of La Cenerentola introduced American audiences to the mature style of a director who had come to distinguish
between the decorative nature of painting and the dramatic nature of set design:

Onstage everything is a symbol. Color takes on a
dramaturgical significance. It’s like a tonality for a
composer in this aria or that — it all has its meaning. If
you put red or green here and there, it may be fine for a
painting but not for the stage. I use color to enhance the
drama of the piece.19

Many examples from La Cenerentola confirm the extent to which Ponnelle
gave colour dramatic value. For instance, he designed the ballroom in Don
Ramiro’s castle simply by using multiple prosceniums on a bare stage. The first
proscenium was decorated very ornately with rococo female nudes and satyrs
while multiple inner prosceniums reiterated the design with the delicacy of
eighteenth-century pen and ink sketches. Into this elegant, but almost colourless,
setting, Angelina arrived in a black ball gown with a bell-skirt, long white evening
gloves and a small black veil over her face. The style and colour of her dress both
distinguished her from her step-sisters, who wore bouncing pastel gowns with
childlike ribbons and bows that satirized the excesses of the Biedermeier period
(Fig. 3), and established her suitability to royal status. The elegance and colour of
the dress complemented the stately set design and linked her visually with Don
Ramiro, who appeared equally regal in black evening clothes.

An absence of colour in stage sets and its presence in costumes characterized
many of Ponnelle’s scenic pictures. The principle behind this practice recalls
Adolphe Appia’s view of colour as a fluid element, similar to light and music,
Fig. 3 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s costume sketch for Clorinda. (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
which, he maintained, should adapt to the body of the singer-actor: "The
dramatist-stage-director is a painter whose palette should be living; his hand is
guided in the choice of living colors, their mixture, their arrangement, by the actor.
Then the actor himself is plunged into this light, realizing in time what the painter
could conceive only in space."20 The result was that the stage picture was
continually reconfigured as the actors moved, rather than frozen in an immobile
and lifeless painting.

The director's use of the "living palette" was perhaps strongest in the
costuming of Prince Ramiro's courtiers. Unlike in L'Italiana in Algeri where the
eunuchs wore identical pale costumes and masks that seemed to blend into the
background, in keeping with their minor role in the opera, in La Cenerentola there
was some distinction among them. They wore their hair naturally, a few had facial
hair, others were clean-shaven. Nevertheless, their matching hunting outfits and
evening dress, as well as their actions, harmonized them into a collective, implied
by their musical unity as well. The visual similarity of these sixteen courtiers
made them a powerful compositional element in each scene in which they
participated, and turned them into the bearers of dramatic ideas.

For example, at the beginning of the opera, the interior décor contained no
bright colours, mainly black, white, beige and brown of the clothes and furnishings.
Into this drab setting came the prince's courtiers, bearing the invitation to the ball.
In their bright red hunting jackets, white jodhpurs, and crisp black boots, they
seemed to bring love itself (each held a single red rose as well) into the pale
atmosphere of the crumbling Magnifico house. Upon seeing Tisbe and Clorinda
they responded politely, but with obvious dismay. When they saw Angelina, however, they expressed immediate approval. As the two step-sisters argued during "O figlie amabili," the stage picture was reconfigured to draw focus to Angelina (otherwise almost undistinguished in brown and beige rags in a colourless set) as the courtiers (in bright red jackets) encircled her in admiration.

When Ponnelle staged L'Italiana in Algeri he once again created a stunning infusion of colour in combination with inventive staging, to capture the dramatic impact of Isabella's arrival at the Bey's palace. In order to create anticipation of her entrance, the sinking of her ship was pantomimed by Mustafa's attendants, using a toy ship and tiny cannon, after which the shipwrecked Isabella entered from the rear of the stage, backing towards the front. Suddenly, on a musical cue, she turned to the audience.21 Frank Merkling described the delightful effect in Opera News:

> Into the world of magnificent beards and harem pants steps Marilyn Horne as a mid-nineteenth century borghese. Fresh from her shipwreck, she arrives with the unruffled insouciance of Gina Lollobrigida in Beat the Devil — white gloves, a flowered straw hat over her top knot, a Black Watch traveling suit that makes us think of Scottish romances so popular in Italy then. Isabella is a role tailored to Miss Horne's comic gifts not to mention her spectacular vocal endowment; Mustafa is no match for this practical Amazon.22

Throughout the production the pale backdrop created by the arrangement of
the eunuchs was complemented by the brilliant and, at times, symbolic colours of the principals’ costumes. From the moment Isabella landed in Algeria, it was clear that she was totally unsuited to her older traveling companion Taddeo, who followed her rather timidly, wearing a nondescript gray suit. Instead, she was associated with Lindoro, who, in crisp white slacks and a nautical blue blazer, matched her tailored look. Elvira, Mustafa’s neglected wife, was dressed in white, whereas the Bey was clothed in black. Isabella and the Bey were paired not only as lead characters, but as worthy opponents. When he began to court her, he wore a stunning outfit in black that rivaled the ostentatiousness of Isabella’s bright pink costume.

For Ponnelle style, like colour, in costume was a dramatic exponent of his chosen interpretation. One pointed example of this can be drawn from a comparison between the costumes of Figaro and Count Almaviva. In the film of Il barbiere di Siviglia both men wore a white shirt and string tie. However, the Count’s shirt was very white, and his tie was neatly tied, whereas Figaro’s shirt was somewhat off-white, his collar was open, and his tie hung haphazardly about his neck. Both wore high boots, according to the fashion of the day. Yet, Figaro’s appeared worn and dusty, compared to the clean black ones of the Count. Finally, whereas the barber himself was unshaven, the Count was smooth-skinned. The similarity of their costumes suggested that they were two aspects of a similar man, one sophisticated, one coarse, but fundamentally similar. Indeed, in the opera, although the Count employs Figaro to help him, they relate as companions. It is an interesting footnote then, that when Ponnelle filmed Mozart’s Le nozze di Figaro (a work written earlier but portraying these same characters several years
later, set in the late eighteenth century) he marked the social changes through distinct clothing styles that left no doubt as to their new roles as servant and master.

Numerous examples, such as the one cited above, attest to Ponnelle’s gift for making a strong dramatic statement in a succinct visual way. This capacity was also evident in his use of lighting in a pithy revelation of the psychological states of Figaro and Don Basilio in Il barbiere di Siviglia. The first occurred during Figaro’s aria, “Largo al factotum.” As it began, the camera moved slowly across the square from Dr. Bartolo’s house to Figaro’s barber shop, above which he was discovered sleeping in a hammock. During the first part of the aria, Figaro put on his boots, and opened his shop for business. The shop was a small storefront space inside of which all the paraphernalia of a barber was clearly visible. As he began to describe how much in demand he was, the shop grew dim, and footlights were brought up, distorting Figaro’s face. The camera then cut back and forth between the wig blocks, on which faces of men and women representing Figaro’s clients were painted, as if they were clamouring for the attention of the harried barber.

The second occurrence came later in the act, during Don Basilio’s aria, “La calunnia è un venticello,” in which he proposes a campaign of calumny to destroy Count Almaviva’s reputation and thus prevent the abduction of Rosina. It was staged with lighting effects that highlighted the maliciousness of which he was capable. As he sang, he mixed together a concoction from Dr. Bartolo’s laboratory into a bucket set on the floor. While describing the effect of the campaign, Don Basilio raised and lowered the flame at will. At the same time, the general lighting
in the room was diminished and his ominously large shadow, which grew like the flame, was cast on the rear wall.

At first, these two scenes, outside the established natural quality of the production, seem to have been created for a purely theatrical effect. However, they were not without dramatic significance. The suggestion that the barber's life was not merely filled with light-hearted romps, but with hard work, yet had afforded him only a hammock above his shop, or that Don Basilio had the capacity to inflict serious harm, gave the production a depth that extended beyond the apparently harmless plot. Ponelle railed against the idea of presenting nothing more than two hours of entertainment for an audience. Thus, in his own work he often incorporated moments of subtly-expressed, but profound, character insights or social commentary. It must be stressed, however, that although these scenes provided insight, they did so without adopting a particular critical position.

In contrast, contemporaries of Ponelle, such as Ruth Berghaus, have presented distinctly political readings of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. When Berghaus staged it at the Bavarian State Opera in 1974, she adopted a highly critical interpretation in her setting. Instead of depicting a square in Seville for the first scene, as indicated in the libretto, she and designer Andreas Reinhardt centered a massive nude female torso, apparently made out of bricks and mortar and representing Bartolo's house, on a bare stage. In her first scene, Rosina appeared in a windowlike opening in the left breast. This feminist deconstruction left no doubt as to the political view of the director, and at the same time created a specific framework within which she wanted the modern spectator to see the work.
Rossini's La Cenerentola has also been presented in a way that has emphasized a director’s personal viewpoint. One such example was the formalist structure in plexiglass and steel, designed by Max Schoendorff for the Paris Opéra production in 1977, directed by Jacques Rosner. The cynicism of the producing team was evident in the size and type of materials used. On one side of the stage a spiral staircase, about 120 feet high, represented Don Magnifico’s home; on the other side a caged platform presented an ominous image of Don Ramiro’s castle. In the opinion of one reviewer the production was not without imagination, but seemed to lacked an organic connection to the opera: “In short,” wrote Charles Pitt in Opera, “madly ‘with it’ as this production may be, it certainly is not ‘with’ Rossini’s work.”

One of the most distinguishing features of Ponelle’s work in general was its absence of political rhetoric. He rarely asserted even the mildest political statements in his productions and disapproved of modern stagings of operas as completely unsuitable to the very nature of opera. His objective was to present the thoughts and deeds of the characters as he interpreted them, rather than his personal view of the work or the ideas contained within it. In directing and designing his objective was aesthetic, rather than political; to visualize the music, not an ideology:

One must [instead] find a fusion of the music with its object, to find a visual style that conforms to musical development so that music does not remain purely aesthetic. Only in this way can musical reality become theatrical reality and re-establish the original text-music
balance -- because the mise en scène, the movement,
then derives from the reading of the score.27

For the director, music was the foundation of opera, and he used it as the most important structuring element in choosing the general visual style as well as the specific elements of the realization. For instance, the jealousy between Tisbe and Clorinda established in the initial musical argument ("Si,si,si,si" "No,no,no,no"), was also visualized in the floor plan. In both stage and film versions, the separate bedrooms established their individual territory on either side of a foyer into which their argument spilled both vocally and physically. In her room, Clorinda, dressed in petticoats and a skirt hoop, practiced ballet steps, while on the opposite side, Tisbe, in a long housecoat and turban, applied cold cream to her face. Meanwhile, in the center of the foyer between two staircases, Angelina (played by Frederica von Stade in the film) sat in front of a modest fireplace in traditional rags. She was literally an outsider, confined to a functional space between the cluttered bedrooms of her half-sisters. Likewise, her languid song contrasted with their excited patter, as distinctly as her slow and graceful movements contrasted their frenetic ones. The director clearly emphasized associations in physical style. Angelina's refinement matched that of Don Ramiro (played by Francisco Araiza in the film), whereas the sisters, Dandini and Don Magnifico were sharp contrasts, moving quickly, and with comedic exaggeration.

Ponelle's gift as a director of comedy was amply evident in La Cenerentola. He obviously coached the performers to develop the contrast between the romantic elegance of Angelina and Don Ramiro and the broad physical humour of the
comic characters, and developed inventive staging for set pieces in concordance with the musical design. One of the highlights of the production and a stellar example of the director’s wit was revealed in the staging of Don Magnifico’s cavatina “Miei rampolli femminini.” The father figure was played in buffo by Paolo Montarsolo in both the San Francisco Opera stage version and in the film. In the scene, he rose angrily from his bed, after being awakened by his daughters. In retribution for having been denied the conclusion of his prophetic dream, he threatened to dump his chamber pot on them, but threw a pillow instead. In his haste to tell them the details of his dream, he started down the nearest staircase, which had rotted away, caught himself, and continued across the hall to the other staircase, finishing the details of the dream in the central foyer area. The cavatina ended with Don Magnifico picking up the pillow which he had thrown at his daughters to silence them and referring to it as a baby. He pantomimed feeding, tickling and spanking the royal baby, all in time to the music.

The musical precision of the comedic business in Ponelle’s staging of La Cenerentola was evident throughout the production, and included all characters. One of the best ensemble examples occurred during the entrance of Dandini. The scene began as two courtiers entered with a long roll of red carpet which they proceeded to unroll in time to the music during the introduction to “Scegli la sposa.” They were then followed by the rest of the courtiers who entered two by two, and took their place in a line just upstage of the carpet. Their red hunting jackets formed a brilliant backdrop for Dandini (disguised as Prince Ramiro), who made an overtly theatrical entrance, complete with top hat and cape), to the sound of horns for the aria “Come un’ape.”
During brief interludes in the music, Clorinda and Tisbe each approached the "prince" in a way that promoted their physical assets. Clorinda advanced first, strutting in time to the staccato triplets in the violins, baring her shoulder and rolling it seductively as she moved. Tisbe approached next, puffing out her chest on each beat. Later in the aria when the triplets were repeated, each daughter approached again with a bouncing step on the beat of the music. As Dandini sang "spalancata la breccia è di già, e frai colpi 'un doppio cannone," they ran back to hide behind their father, as if overwhelmed by the vocal flourish on the word "spalancata." Since both Tisbe and Clorinda wore dresses with huge skirts, buoyed by hoops, their bouncing made them appear like mechanical dolls, stiff and uncomfortable in the presence of royalty. In comparison, in the finale of act 2, when the sisters, having had to relinquish all hopes of marrying the Prince, approached Angelina to ask forgiveness, their movements were slow and docile, in direct contrast to the vain prances displayed in act 1.

The staging of Dandini's entrance demonstrated Ponnelle's careful attention to the choreographing of distinct movements for his singer-actors and to his ability to visualize the music in his staging. The pantomime of the stepsisters as they approached the "Prince" was compelled by the rhythm of the music, but also acknowledged their individuality. They were given different tactics to use in order to fulfill their dramatic objective of impressing him. The result was a realization of fully constructed characters, and a plastic rhythm which matched the musical rhythm. This unification of the visual and aural elements of the drama created a stylization which Vsevelod Meyerhold maintained was the very basis of operatic art.28
One scenic element which always played an important and integral role in Ponnelle’s productions was light. Particularly when it came to the realization of La Cenerentola on film he was able to use it to achieve effects that were not possible in live performance. One scene which was enhanced in this way on film was the sextet “Siete voi?”... Questo è un nodo avviluppato.” Late in the opera, the identification of Angelina by Prince Ramiro as the mysterious lady from the ball is met with disbelief by her family, and it is this moment which prompts the sextet. As the music began, each character froze in profile, and the front lights were extinguished, leaving only back lights that cast each figure in deep shadow. Then the characters changed places, but remained in profile to create a group daguerreotype. When they began to sing in unison, they formed a literal knot by intertwining their hands, and moved slowly in rhythm towards the front of the stage and into the light. The rhythm of their steps was reinforced by their trilling the “r” on the word “gruppo,” which created a drum-like beat.

The extent of Ponnelle’s skill as a director of comedy can be supported by his obvious command of the variety of comedic styles that La Cenerentola requires. The broad style was best represented by the mercurial finales of the first acts. In La Cenerentola, the finale takes place at Don Ramiro’s castle during the ball. As the guests attempted to guess the identity of the strange lady, Dandini invited them to supper. Ponnelle introduced the banquet table to the guests, rather than vice versa, by having the courtiers simply roll it into view. During the rest of the finale, the guests eyed the feast on the table eagerly, straining towards it as they sang, but resisting being the first to dig into the sumptuous feast. At the end of the finale, however, they all attacked the food with gusto, falling on the table which collapsed
under their weight as the curtain came down. Throughout this mayhem, Angelina and Don Ramiro remained oblivious, gazing romantically into each other’s eyes, with the obvious approval of Alidoro, who then led them away.

An equally broad comedic style, but with more precise comic business, characterized the finale of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. During the finale a troop of soldiers come to arrest the drunken soldier, who is in fact Count Almaviva, and wreak havoc on Dr. Bartolo’s house in the process. In Ponnelle’s staging the action came to an abrupt halt as Count Almaviva surreptitiously revealed his rank to the arresting officer by pulling off his fake moustache. Everyone stood immobile except Figaro, who noticed that Dr. Bartolo was slowly collapsing at the news, and quickly placed a chair under him. During the *Sestet* each singer-actor remained frozen, staring towards the camera as they sang together. Only Figaro, moved among them, mirroring the independence of his vocal line. At the beginning of the *Stretta*, he clapped his hand in Dr. Bartolo’s ear and the entire company erupted into chaos as they rummaged about the doctor’s house. During the *Vivace* the company gathered into a tight portrait grouping, and swayed slowly from side to side in time to the music. In the 1968 Salzburg production, the entire revolve took part in the chaos, turning left and right during this section as well.29 This grouping was repeated again when the melody was repeated, this time with Figaro holding up a portrait of Dr. Bartolo with a ridiculous comical expression on his face. This staging alternated with frenetic movements by the principal characters and soldiers in and around Dr. Bartolo’s house during the sections which begin “è il cervello, poverello.” A final chaotic section broke loose as the soldiers began to turn Dr. Bartolo’s house upside down, leaving the doctor in a rocking chair
looking very much like the portrait.

The precisely choreographed chaos of the finale was characteristic of the plethora of comic business which filled *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and for which Ponnelle was both praised and criticized in contemporary reviews of the Salzburg production. Although the critical assessment was somewhat mixed, George Movshon noted the popular reaction to the performance in *Musical America*: “There have been complaints of overproduction (whatever that means), but the balletic grace and good humor with which it is done brought delighted gasps from the audience all through the evening -- and from me as well.”

Clearly, the detailed, rhythmic staging that characterized Ponnelle’s Rossini productions enhanced their humour, just as his subdued designs, and brilliant costumes gave them elegance and wit. These attributes, however, do not completely account for the enduring appeal of *La Cenerentola*. The key lies, perhaps, in the director’s success in balancing the humour with a humanity that gave it a depth not achieved so successfully in productions by other directors. For instance, in keeping with his consideration of music over literary sources for inspiration, he did not follow the lead of the Cinderella fairy tale in casting the stepsisters. They were not, as in the Brothers Grimm version, “beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart.” Neither Rossini’s music, nor the libretto, described their looks, but their music, such as the initial musical argument between the two, suggested a certain silliness, rather than a vileness. The director apparently viewed them as a comical pair, and in the tradition of vaudeville, cast two physically distinct singer-actors for the roles. Clorinda, played by Margherita
Guglielmi in the film, was a petite woman, with a flaming red wig worn in an ornate style on top of her head. Tisbe, played by Laura Zannini in the film, was a head taller than her sister, with straight, dark hair.

The step-sisters with their doll-like dresses and vain poses appeared immature and foolish, but not menacing. When they berated Angelina for singing her folk song, she persisted, apparently unintimidated. Her boldness indicated that they posed no real threat, and that fact sustained the comical element in their exchanges. As recently as 1996, when the opera was staged by Albert Takazauckas for the Canadian Opera Company, the success of Ponnelle’s original conception of the step-sisters apparently remained intact:

Working within the strong visual impact of the famous Ponnelle designs, the director has astutely worked toward rounded, human detail, and a gentle, unexaggerated comedy. The step-sisters, for instance, so often cringe-making and grotesque in other productions, are here presented without the cruel mockery, but as possible people.32

Eric Bentley, among others, has pointed out that there is an element of cruelty in comedy.33 The circumstances of Angelina’s life are most certainly tragic, yet Ponnelle’s interpretation struck a balance between the pathos and the comedy. For instance, when Alidoro brought in a birth register to challenge Don Magnifico to explain the existence of the third daughter listed therein, his denial was followed by a pause in the music during which he sobbed, “Morte.” A moment
later he peeked through his handkerchief to check the effect, and when Alidoro, Dandini and Don Ramiro responded with a scowl, he looked directly at the camera, and shrugged his shoulders in resignation at having been exposed. This moment, while situationally very disturbing — Don Magnifico publicly denying Angelina’s very existence — remained comical.

In Ponnelle’s conception, although Don Magnifico and the step-sisters frequently berated and threatened Angelina, they never actually inflicted physical harm upon her, nor gave the impression that they carried out their threats — to do so would have completely removed the humour from their roles. According to one reviewer this was precisely what happened during the 1985 Glyndebourne production staged by John Cox. In his Opera review, Rodney Milnes wrote that Don Magnifico was at first “merely an amiable buffoon, but gradually his cruelty and servility showed through the surface skin, and the way his face grew twisted with hatred as he announced the ‘death’ of his third daughter was absolutely chilling. No release through comedy was allowed.”34

There are, of course, different styles of comedy, ranging from broad slap-stick to biting social satire, to a more gentle humour, and Ponnelle’s productions seemed to touch on several. Luigi Pirandello in his essay “On Humor,” makes a distinction among the different styles, and notes that human folly can be treated sharply or with compassion, according to the writer:

The comic only laughs at it . . . the satirical writer will be upset by it. But not the humorist: through the ridiculous side of this perception he will see the serious and grievous
side of it. He will analyze the illusion, but not with the intention of laughing at it. Instead of feeling disdain he will, rather, in his laughter, feel commiseration.35

It was this commiseration, or empathy, that Ponnelle found in the composer's treatment of Bertha and Dandini, and to which he always gave importance in his staging. In his approach to Il barbiere di Siviglia, Ponnelle had said that "it was important to get away from the operetta style, from a world in which all's well, in which the people are ever so amusing, and in which real problems are glossed over. Instead, I tried to present this opera as a human and realistic comedy in the tradition of Molière or Beaumarchais."36 The director's objective was fulfilled in the staging of the aria "Il vecchiotto cerca moglie" sung by Bertha, the housekeeper.

After Dr. Bartolo has ordered a servant to fetch Don Basilio in order that he may draw up the marriage contract for Rosina and himself, Bertha sings of her own love for the doctor and of her wish to be married to him herself. The aria clearly describes the pain that Bartolo's fascination with Rosina has caused her. The music is lyrical and without any indication for humour. The director staged it simply. Berta alternated between singing to the portrait of Bartolo hanging on the wall and to herself in a small mirror. This heartfelt scenario was a sympathetic portrayal of the old woman whose loneliness was underscored by the staging, rather than belittled by it. This scene serves as but one example of the director's attention to bringing out the humanity in even minor characters.
A similar sympathy was extended to the moment of reversal in *La Cenerentola* in the second act when Don Ramiro decided to once again become the prince and pursue the strange lady who had left her bracelet at the ball. His decision brought a corresponding return of Dandini to his role as valet, and an opportunity for the director to further define his character in the staging of his reaction. Ponnelle's contemporary, Roberto De Simone chose to play up the humour of the hapless valet in his production for the Houston Grand Opera in 1995. Dandini reacted to his demotion with a grand sigh that brought a burst of laughter from the audience. Ponnelle, on the other hand, contrasted the many comical scenes in which Dandini was involved with a moment of pathos. In the film, he reacted by turning away from the camera, perhaps in an attempt to conceal his disappointment. In the next scene he was discovered wandering alone in the garden in serious reflection.

Dandini was not, however, ready to give up playacting until absolutely necessary, and, therefore, it was with relish that he tormented Don Magnifico with the revelation of "Un segreto d'importanza" in the following scene, and marked his return to an exuberant style. The rhythm of humour and pathos in the production was clearly established early in the opera, and its extremes charmingly presented in the quick change from the poignant reversal to this delightful sketch. In the staged version Don Magnifico and Dandini moved downstage, in front of the main curtain, whereas in the film the exchange was played in the garden of Don Ramiro's castle. In both, Ponnelle brought up footlights and presented the duet like a vaudevillian act with Don Magnifico as the straight man. The business began when Dandini (still pretending to be Prince Ramiro) invited Don Magnifico
to sit in a chair (provided by Tisbe and Clorinda eavesdropping in the bushes), then removed it at the last minute. Not wanting to upset the “Prince,” Don Magnifico remained in a seated position, sans chair. The bit was repeated several times during the duet, corresponding to the musical repetitions, until Don Magnifico, finally realizing that Dandini was indeed the valet of the Prince and not the prince himself, left in a huff. Dandini, victorious, calmly carried the chair off the stage, and out of frame.

In the conclusions of the films of both Il barbiere di Siviglia and La Cenerentola the director once again reinforced the sense of having watched the story behind a postcard or photograph. In Il barbiere di Siviglia, as the principals and chorus spilled out into the square to sing “Di si felice innesto,” Figaro moved among them, much in the same way that he had during the first act finale, to convey his dramatic importance as the orchestrator of the marriage. For this scene, Ponnelle added a red carpet on which the principals (except for Figaro) stood, and hundreds of candles which decorated the square. At the end of the finale, the colours on the screen faded into sepia, and a red line appeared around the end of the screen to capture the group in a postcard snapshot from Seville.

The finale of La Cenerentola took place in the ballroom of Don Ramiro’s castle, where Angelina entered on the arm of Alidoro, in a wedding dress that resembled the style of her ball gown, but completely in white. Her sisters and father wore solemn gray tight-fitting suits. The chorus of courtiers once again provided an elegant and unified backdrop in black evening clothes. At the conclusion of Angelina’s aria “Nacqui all’affanno,” the principals and chorus
grouped together as Alidoro set up a nineteenth-century camera on a tripod for a wedding photo with the proud enthusiasm of a match-maker. In the film, the camera then zoomed in for a close-up of the inside the camera lens, framing the final image as a wedding photo – upside down.

It was, of course, Alidoro who facilitated the match from the beginning, and through him that Ponnelle made his strongest creative assertion that the composer was the dramatist. Throughout the opera he was both participant and spectator with the power to see through the motives of Don Magnifico and the step-sisters. At the beginning of the opera, when he dressed as a beggar to test the characters of the sisters, he wore dark glasses, signifying blindness. Although not specified in the opera libretto, blindness gave Alidoro a prophetic air in the tradition of the blind seer Tiresias, as depicted by Sophocles in Oedipus Rex. Further, the director suggested that he not only saw through the characters, but in fact, created them.

In the original version Alidoro’s transformation was staged in front of the bow curtain. The director used side lights to create a shadow of the sorcerer as evidence of his magical powers during “Là del ciel nell’arcano profondo.” In the film he exploited the medium’s technical possibilities for a more sophisticated treatment. A fog enveloped the screen at the beginning of the aria, and back lighting obscured the identity of the person singing it. As the camera moved slowly towards the figure, presumably as Angelina did, a light from the front revealed that the singer-actor standing on the pedestal was dressed to resemble the marble statue of Rossini in the foyer of La Scala shown at the beginning of the film.
In depicting the magician who controlled, and in the case of Angelina “created,” the characters as the composer Ponnelle clearly advanced his belief that the composer was the dramatist. Indeed, in his realization, Alidoro possessed significant influence over the unfolding of events. It was he who motioned for the curtain to rise to begin the action, led Don Ramiro to Don Magnifico’s house to meet Angelina, conjured up her dress for the ball, rushed her back home, advised Don Ramiro to pursue her, and finally, became the wedding photographer, the recorder of the marriage, capturing the image of the happy resolution for posterity.

The unparalleled success of Ponnelle’s La Cenerentola in the same year as his stellar productions of Mozart’s Così fan tutte in Salzburg and La clemenza di Tito in Cologne boosted his growing reputation as one of the most formidable directors of the late twentieth century. Since then, it has remained his best-loved production, regularly produced and acclaimed in opera houses throughout Europe and North America since its 1969 premiere. La Cenerentola marked the director’s return to America with a new, pale scenic palette that expressed the fully defined musical methodology that guided his mature works. The production’s witty set and costumes designs, as well as its inventive stage business, confirmed his flair for comedy and led to other impressive productions of Rossini operas. The appeal of Ponnelle’s realization of La Cenerentola endures, however, not only because of the successful pairing of comedic exhuberance and scenic elegance, but because of the director’s compassionate revelation of the pathos behind the laughter.
Notes

1 Arthur Bloomfield, *50 Years of the San Francisco Opera* (San Francisco: San Francisco Book Company, 1972) 268.


4 See Chapter 2 for a complete discussion.


6 All references to the stage production refer to the 1969 San Francisco Opera production. Information was drawn from the Production books, courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.


11 Chapter 4 provides a detailed description Ponnelle’s combination of period styles in Mozart’s *Idomeneo* and *La clemenza di Tito*.

12 Rudolf Hartmann. *Opera*, 129.


15 Arthur Bloomfield, “50 Years of the San Francisco Opera,” 268.


18 See Chapter 1 for photographs of Ponnelle’s renderings for *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.


30 George Movshon, "A Dubious Don, an Ingenious Barber," 29.


36 Rudolf Hartmann, Opera, 129.

Madam Butterfly: An Opera Film

When Jean-Pierre Ponnelle began to make opera films in 1972, the genre already had a history almost as long as the medium itself. Even during the silent era of motion pictures the filming of operas flourished. Since then it has drawn the talents of such notable directors as Max Reinhardt, Claude Renoir, Ingmar Bergman, and Franco Zefferelli, and has featured the voices of Geraldine Ferrar, Tito Gobbi, Renata Tebaldi, and Luciano Pavarotti, to name just a few. With the advent of television the number of opera films intended for the cinema diminished, but those recorded specifically for television broadcast or video release filled the void. Today, this market for filmed operas has developed into an important channel for the dissemination of a wide variety of works, and a means for the preservation of the accomplishments of opera artists.

Ponnelle’s contribution to this body of work was extensive. Over a sixteen-year period he was involved in eighteen film projects. The subjects of these were as diverse as his stage productions, ranging from Monteverdi’s La favola d’Orfeo, to Orff’s Carmina Burana, to a portrait of Placido Domingo entitled Homage à Sévilla. They were also diverse in their form, falling into three categories: filmed stage productions, such as the Metropolitan Opera’s presentation of Rossini’s L’Italiana in Algeri (1973) and Mozart’s Idomeneo (1982), which were filmed during performance and later broadcast on television and released on home video; modified stage productions, such as the Monteverdi trilogy of La favola d’Orfeo, L’incoronazione di Poppea, and Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria (1978-1979), and
Rossini’s *La Cenerentola* (1981), which were filmed in an opera house but without an audience present; and finally, the true films, such as Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1974), *Carmina Burana* (1975), and Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* (1980), which were filmed in a studio or on location.

Ponelle’s interest in filming operas derived both from pragmatic and artistic considerations. He championed opera films because he considered them necessary for enhancing the popularity of the art form: “Not only does filming opera interest me very much, but I find it essential. . . . [I]t permits millions of people who would never go to the opera house to see and hear opera, either in the movie theatre or on television.”

Indeed, the television broadcasts of his films, as well as their availability on home video, have contributed significantly to the exposure of operas otherwise rarely seen by a wide audience. In 1982 Nicholas Kenyon speculated in *The New Yorker* that “it seems reasonable to assume that some part of [the televised version of Ponelle’s Monteverdi Cycle] has been seen by more people than have ever, in the preceding three hundred and seventy-five years, seen any performance of any Monteverdi opera.”

In addition to supporting opera film making as a means for audience development, Ponelle experimented with a number of cinematic techniques in his screen visualizations and even in stage productions. Superimposed images, split screens, slow motion photography and particularly frequent and imaginative camera movement were just a few of the methods he employed to convey his interpretations. His enthusiasm for the flexibility and versatility of the viewing
position in film, as opposed to the singular perspective to which a theatre spectator was confined, led him to experiment with aesthetic distance and the use of on site locations, such as Rome for *La clemenza di Tito* (1980) and Mantua for Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1982).

Among the many superb films that Ponelle directed, including the award-winning *Carmina Burana*, his 1974 interpretation of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* stands as one of the best examples of his work in the medium. The strength of the film derived from the combination of a conception which extended and deepened the tragedy, and a sophisticated cinematic visualization that was closely bound to the music. The film was conducted by Herbert von Karajan and starred Mirella Freni as Madama Butterfly, Placido Domingo as Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, Robert Kerns as Sharpless, Christa Ludwig as Suzuki, and Michel Sénéchal as Goro.

In general, Ponelle’s opera films and stage productions can be described as apolitical. He was not given to promoting ideologies or presenting modern “readings” of operas. “I have nothing against politics, you know,” he said in 1983. “But when the ideologies become more important than the final artistic result, then I go on strike.” Nevertheless, *Madama Butterfly* was his most political production. Although the director chose not to dwell on the Nagasaki location or to engage in anti-imperialist dogma in his interpretation, he did visualize the deleterious effects of the adoption of American culture in the physical portrayals of Goro and Butterfly.
Goro the marriage broker is an unscrupulous profiteer who encourages the match between Butterfly and Pinkerton without regard for the possible consequences. Ponnelle captured the seedy nature of the character by costuming him as part gangster, in a plaid suit, polka-dot bow tie, two-tone wing-tipped shoes, a boater, and a walking stick. Apparently, Goro had adopted a Western clothing style as completely as he had adopted capitalism. Yet the garish style of his suit, which contrasted so sharply with the dignified gray attire of Sharpless and the other men from the Consulate that attended the wedding, exposed him as a clown. Indeed, the director made the connection by including a large handkerchief in Goro’s breast pocket and a carnation in his lapel. In addition, he reinforced the association by staging Pinkerton’s payment for the wedding as a vaudevillian bit in which the groom rhythmically placed dollar after dollar in the marriage broker’s outstretched hand.

Whereas Goro’s actions made him a scoundrel, his garish appearance made him grotesque, and as such, he was more ridiculous than villainous. Butterfly, on the other hand, the only other character in Ponnelle’s film who tried to embrace the American culture, was portrayed as worthy of deepest sympathy. Her alienation from her own culture, which began in act 1 when her relatives rejected her for having adopted Christianity, developed into a pitiful image in act 2 of an abandoned wife, unable to claim legitimate status in her husband’s culture and rejected by her native one.

The director introduced the full extent of Butterfly’s tragic predicament through setting and costume at the beginning of the second act. A colourless shot
of the house against the gray sky and the gray-brown colour of the grass conveyed a somber mood, underscored by the woodwinds in the opening bars of music. In the foreground a long streamer, apparently the tail of a kite, was caught in a leafless tree, trapped indefinitely like Butterfly herself. During the rising thirds (which, in the score accompany the raising of the curtain), the scene changed to an interior, split-screen shot which revealed Suzuki in one half, praying in front of a small Buddhist altar. In the other, Butterfly knelt before a large cabinet in the next room, as Trouble played at her feet.

This fractured image encapsulated Butterfly’s dual identity. On one side Suzuki represented the culture of her birth, on the other were the few items that connected Butterfly to America. The mahogany Victorian cabinet, an imposing piece of furniture in the otherwise traditional Japanese décor, was decorated with four whiskey bottles, and an American flag evidently left by Pinkerton. The picture of Jesus, which Butterfly had brought with her on her wedding day, was placed to one side of the wedding photo. In appearance, too, the director depicted Butterfly’s duality. Whereas Suzuki remained dressed in a traditional kimono as she had been in act 1, Butterfly had adopted European style clothing. She wore an Edwardian outfit with a full-length navy skirt, white blouse and a crucifix pinned to the bow at her neck. Her hair, however, remained pinned up in the same style as before her marriage.

Ponnelles’s externalization of Butterfly’s partial Americanization conveyed her entrapment between two cultures. The result contrasted with two other contemporary American productions in which Butterfly’s predicament was made
more or less obvious. For example, when Frank Corsaro staged the work for the New York City Opera in 1967, he not only costumed her in Western clothing, but also had her hair cut short. Only in the moments before her suicide did she attempt to embrace the culture of her birth once again by donning a long black wig. When Renata Scotto took the role of director for a Metropolitan Opera production in 1987, she rejected costuming Butterfly in Western clothing and kept the heroine in a traditional kimono.

Ponelle's depiction of Goro and Butterfly as the only characters who embraced an American style of clothing was evidently a dramatic choice and not intended as a reflection of the sartorial phenomenon occurring in Japan at that time. The "Westernization" of the country included a revolution of sorts, during which men, in particular, rejected the traditional kimono in favour of western suits. The director, however, costumed all of Butterfly's relatives in traditional Japanese clothing and in doing so, indicated that they retained Eastern values. Indeed, the fortitude of their disdain for Western culture became apparent when they joined forces with the Bonze in his vigorous rejection of Butterfly for having adopted Christianity.

The most political, and the most problematic character in the opera is Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton, the irresponsible young naval officer whose dramatic roots stemmed from two different sources. The first is a short story by John Luther Long published in 1898 entitled Madame Butterfly. In Long's story Pinkerton is a minor character, who insults Butterfly's family, isolates her from them by insisting
that she adopt Christianity, and takes advantage of her poor knowledge of English
with cruel jokes. The second source is the 1900 stage adaptation of Long’s story by
David Belasco. In Belasco’s Madame Butterfly, Pinkerton does not appear until
near the end of the play, since it begins at the point when Butterfly has already
been waiting for the return of her husband for three years. When he does return
he expresses his remorse at the suffering he has caused by offering a handful of
money to make amends.

In the original version of the opera, the two librettists of Madame Butterfly,
Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, crafted from these sources a character of
disturbing cultural insensitivity and arrogance, although to a lesser degree than in
Long’s story or Belasco’s stage adaptation. In the first version of the opera,
presented in Milan in 1904, Pinkerton’s chauvinism was glaringly evident in his
treatment of Butterfly and also in his derogatory comments about her servants and
relatives. During the wedding reception, for instance, he referred to the servants as
“scarecrows” and dismissed the food as “candied flies and spiders.” Subsequent
revisions eliminated several of the most offensive remarks and added the arietta
“Addio, fiorito asil,” in which he expressed regret for his actions. The changes
softened the originally repellent depiction, but the boorish nature of his character
continued to present a dramatic obstacle to directors. As Rodney Milnes has
pointed out, if Pinkerton is nothing more than a despicable figure, he cannot hold
the audience’s attention for three hours. However, if he is allowed to glimpse the
implications of what he has done and express remorse “the audience is forced to
become involved in the tragedy of a trusting human being and un homme moyen
Ponelle addressed the problem of Pinkerton's character in two ways. First, in keeping with his tendency to minimize the political content in his productions, he opted to present the 1906 Paris version of the opera, rather than the 1904 Milan original. This choice enabled him to construct a character capable of eliciting a greater degree of empathy from spectators. Second, he engaged music as a catalyst for an initial impression of Pinkerton that underscored the remainder of the film. It provided the spark for a scene which paved the way for the characterization of Pinkerton as a misguided lover and a deeply remorseful antagonist.

The strategic role of music in the characterization of Pinkerton began with the opening scene where it catalyzed the staging of a disturbing glimpse into his ultimate fate. The film began with a silent exterior shot of a traditional Japanese house in black and white. The stillness of the picture created suspense and heightened the surprise of the first moving image and sound. When the first notes of the overture sounded, the position of the camera shifted to catch Pinkerton bursting through the shoji walls of the house and running into the field beyond in slow motion. As the theme repeated in the strings, he ran past Sharpless, Kate, and Goro, who were standing in the field, then turned towards the stationary camera, an expression of horror distorting his face. At the end of the canon – the point in the score at which the curtain is marked to rise – Pinkerton's face almost sank out of the frame, rising again briefly before veering out completely. At the end of the brief prelude, this disturbing image dissolved into a full-length colour shot of a confident young naval officer, his jacket slung jauntily
over his shoulder, smiling at the house he had just leased from Goro.

The unusual introduction to the story through the use of slow motion and black and white photography suggested that it was to be viewed as Pinkerton's flashback or recurring dream. Although it would not be clear until the end of the film, this scene actually foreshadowed the ending. In Ponnelle's tightly constructed realization, the first scene was also the last. The initial impression of Pinkerton served as a subliminal reminder to the spectator that eventually he would be forced to face the consequences of his actions.

Ostensibly, the director's use of slow-motion photography against the turbulent music of the prelude appears to reveal a discordance between visual and musical ideas. In fact, the contrast resulted from the director's conceiving the opening scene from the sound of the music, rather than from its thematic association or from the pantomime suggested in the libretto. According to Ponnelle, the staging was inspired by Karajan's musical interpretation: "[T]he way he tears into the opening fugato -- he makes it so tragic. You know, it is really Goro's theme, but the way Karajan plays it gave me the idea for the opening shot." The result was a separation of Goro's musical theme from that character in exchange for an evocation of Pinkerton's ultimate remorse.

In his films, as in his stage productions, Ponnelle followed in the tradition of Adolphe Appia who championed music as the primary source for the mise en scène of an opera. This did not, however, result in staging that always mirrored
the music. For the director, the supremacy of music meant that the visual elements should maintain a relationship with it, a relationship defined by a director whose knowledge of the music enabled him to make informed choices. He flatly rejected the interpretations of stage directors who could not read music, or who did not use it in their interpretations, and he insisted that an opera film director must also demonstrate a high degree of musical knowledge and sensitivity: "An opera film director must be musical. I insist that the primacy of music be accepted, that he does everything through the music, in the music, perhaps even against it, but that he thinks and acts in relationship with the music."17

At times Ponnelle’s staging clearly mirrored the music, at others it contradicted it, but it always maintained an obvious relationship with it. For instance, twice he repeated the tearing of the shoji in the initial scene like a musical theme, to reinforce the sense of destruction that Pinkerton brought to the world of Madama Butterfly. He repeated it when Goro proudly showed Pinkerton the sliding walls of the traditional Japanese house he had leased. The naval officer ridiculed the structure as a frail one, then demonstrated his point by poking a hole in the shoji as the camera zoomed in for a close-up of his hand. He reinforced it again when Suzuki punctured the shoji with Butterfly’s hairpin at the beginning of the vigil.

Later in the film, the director contradicted the music with a visual image which created a disturbing impression of Pinkerton’s American wife, Kate. Although Kate is, as Sharpless later tells Butterfly in the Paris version, the
innocent cause of her suffering, her portrayal suggested that the tragedy which engulfed Butterfly would also consume Trouble in his new life. In the penultimate scene, she arrived with her husband and Sharpless, just after Butterfly had been ushered off to bed by Suzuki. She remained outside, a solitary figure in a gray Edwardian suit, with a parasol and a small hat and veil that obscured her face. The director delayed a close-up view of her until she asked Suzuki to convince Butterfly to trust her to treat Trouble as a real mother. The delay created an unpleasant surprise when Kate’s face suddenly filled the screen. It was a startling contrast to her gentle words and lyrical music. It was the thin, stern face of an aging school mistress, rather than that of a loving step-mother. Clearly, her promise to care tenderly for Trouble would not be kept.

The director’s use of music in the opening shot of Madama Butterfly established its importance in his interpretation and contributed to the development of greater empathy for Pinkerton. This characterization was consistent with the Paris revision which depoliticized Pinkerton to a degree. As Arthur Groos points out: “Whereas Illica’s draft presented us with a hero whose main concern was to impose American business logic on all his affairs, the revised Pinkerton believed primarily in enjoying himself, using his ingenuity to take advantage of a Japanese custom. . . . Pinkerton is no aggressive Yankee, but a sexual adventurer.”

Throughout the first act the director diminished the role of Pinkerton as a political figure and heightened a more individualized conception that focused on the personal dynamics emphasized in the Paris revision of the opera. For instance,
although “Dovunque al mondo” clearly expresses the officer’s hedonist philosophy it also suggests an imperialist American viewpoint through references to “Yankee” and the inclusion of several bars from “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In staging this aria, however, Ponnelle minimized the political connotations and implied that the sentiments were Pinkerton’s and not a generalized viewpoint of American sailors. As Pinkerton sang, he showed Sharpless photographs of himself and different women with whom he had apparently formed liaisons in other ports. The gesture narrowed the philosophy expressed in the aria to an individual one because the photographs catalogued the specific actions of one man and his agenda.

Although the director clearly wanted to develop empathy for Pinkerton, he did not eliminate all the controversial aspects of his character. Rather, he presented them only during the first act to stress the reformation of the character by the end of the opera. For instance, in the Milan version Pinkerton gave Sharpless a handful of money to turn over to Butterfly, as a means of making amends to her, just before his final exit. Ponnelle did not use this gesture at this late point in the opera, but he did retain the image of its chauvinism in the opening scene. Pinkerton silenced Suzuki’s chatter with a few dollars, and casually handed Goro his payment for arranging the wedding.

Throughout the early part of the opera the director revealed both the boorishness and the charm of Pinkerton’s character. This inconsistency is evident in the metrical structure of “Dovunque al mondo” and in his admission in “Amore o grillo” of his uncertainty about his feelings for Butterfly in response to Sharpless’s query. The tenderness of the lyrical music conveyed a vulnerability
which was supported by staging that conveyed his sincerity. He leaned against a wall papered with silhouettes of birds in flight as he sang of his desire to capture the delicate Madama Butterfly. The gentle quality of the music matched his casual body posture and indicated his genuine affection for her. Shortly afterwards, however, this tenderness was eclipsed by the delight with which he accepted his permission to return home from Sharpless and the enthusiastic toast he offered to the day when he would find “a real American wife.”

Ponnelle's interpretation captured the shifts in Pinkerton's character from arrogance to tenderness and back again. He was not merely a reprehensible cad, but a rather ambivalent, and perhaps youthful individual whose better judgment, like Butterfly’s, was eclipsed by misguided emotions. This conception was consistent with the Paris revision of the opera which, as Groos points out “draws attention to the fact that the tragedy no longer lies exclusively in the clash of cultures, but also in a contradiction between the principals’ fantasies about each other and reality.”

One technique which the director used to illustrate Pinkerton’s idealization of Butterfly was the point-of-view shot, a cinematic technique in which a shot or scene is filmed from the vantage point of one character. He first used it for the entrance of the radiant bride, which the spectator saw through Pinkerton’s eyes. Initially the camera cut between the groom, hurriedly putting on his blazer, and a view of an empty horizon shrouded in a fine mist in which the figure of Butterfly was barely discernible. As she slowly approached her new home accompanied by her friends, it became clear that she was not an objective construction, but a fantasy
envisioned by Pinkerton. She was dressed entirely in white, in a traditional Japanese kimono and white face paint. She embodied complete innocence in an almost angelic image reinforced by the delicate voices of the female chorus. In presenting this exquisite image of Butterfly, the director seemed to suggest that Pinkerton's desire to marry her was blameless, stemming from a genuine, if fleeting enchantment with a fantasy woman.

The skill with which Ponnelle employed various cinematic techniques in his interpretation of Madama Butterfly should be considered against the technical obstacles to creating a successful screen realization of an opera. These have been addressed by a number of proponents of opera film. As early as 1951, Herbert Graf advocated writing operas specifically for television, in order to overcome the difficulties in adapting a grand art to a rather compact medium.21 Ponnelle was keenly aware of the different nature of opera and film, and that developing one art form from another required a certain transfiguration.22 For instance, both opera sets, typically designed for a live audience of a thousand or more, and the theatrical acting style appropriate to match them are unsuited to a medium which gravitates towards close-ups of individual characters. Further, the poetic illusion generated by scenery and lighting on stage can be diminished in the penetrating eye of the camera, particularly on television, the "small screen" on which most of Ponnelle's films were presented.

Ponnelle responded to the obstacles of filming operas with creative techniques such as point-of-view shots and selective close-ups which helped to
characterize Pinkerton less as an imperialistic American sailor engaged in a
business transaction than an impetuous young man who in the heat of passion
makes a tragic mistake. This characterization was nowhere more effective than in
the realization of the pivotal moment in the drama when the tragedy might have
been averted, in the brief scene just before the wedding ceremony when Butterfly
told him of her religious conversion.

The scene began when Butterfly led Pinkerton into the house away from the
guests and confessed that she had rejected Buddhism in favour of Christianity.
Like her initial entrance, it was filmed largely from Pinkerton’s perspective
through the use of an over-the-shoulder shot. The close framing of her face
looking up tenderly at Pinkerton was a possibility unavailable on stage. The
director pointed the camera down towards her, seeing her as Pinkerton did, a
trusting young girl eager to please her new husband. When it turned again to
Pinkerton’s face, it became evident that he was beginning to realize his error and
the potentially tragic result of his actions. The close-up created a subtle, but
powerful, insight into his character as he struggled with self-doubt.

The close-up is a fundamental cinematic technique which Ponelle used to
translate stage productions effectively to the screen. Yet it was also one which
presented an obstacle of its own. As Brooks Riley cautioned: “Without skilled
acting and expressive blocking of the characters, television, a medium that loves to
get close, is left with little more than an open mouth or recital-oriented hand
gestures, whose tedium is compounded by an aria’s length.”23 In his films
Ponelle fulfilled television’s desire for intimacy with camera work that not
only catered to the needs of the medium, but also exemplified the cohesive relationship that he maintained was possible between music and film.

Although opera films have enjoyed a long history, the art form has had its detractors. Critics such as Siegfried Kracauer have contested that opera and film are two incompatible entities which together do not result in a work of art. He argues the point with an invidious edge in *Theory of Film*:

> Opera on the screen is a collision of two worlds detrimental to both. This does not invalidate the relative usefulness of films which merely aim at reproducing some opera performance as faithfully as possible. . . . But there are also more ambitious films which, in the name of Art, try to fuse the two conflicting worlds into a new and superior whole. As should be expected, this allegedly superior whole invariably reveals itself as an eclectic compromise between irreconcilable entities -- a sham whole distorting either the opera or the film or both.24

According to Kracauer, opera and film are diametrically opposed because opera loses its quality of "magic" under the unrelenting gaze of the camera's eye, an eye that hungers for the realistic visual detail that is the antithesis of operatic art.25

When Ponnelle filmed his stage productions, he astutely addressed the camera's hunger for realistic detail. In Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1972), for instance, he constructed a full scale version of his stage setting and moved the
camera almost a full 360 degrees around it to give the illusion of being in the midst of the town square. In Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* (1976), the action took place almost entirely inside Count Almaviva's villa, so that the camera was always close to the singer-actors. In addition, it moved with them, following them from room to room or along garden paths, to give the spectator a heightened sense of immediacy and proximity to the action.

In *Madama Butterfly*, too, Ponnelle satisfied the camera's appetite for intimacy with close-ups and camera work that diminished the aesthetic distance between the spectator and the characters. Yet, he also created a poetic work that rivalled the stylization of his stage productions. The poetical nature of *Madama Butterfly* resulted from the successful merger of film and music. In contrast to Kracauer, the director did not consider the camera the rival of music, but an instrument through which he could visualize it: "I see and think of cinematographic technique, be it the camera's traveling, or film editing, or whatever, in musical terminology. There are dynamics, harmonies and rhythms characteristic of film which are complementary to the musical score."  

Certainly, in film criticism the vocabulary of music, such as pacing, rhythm, dynamics and harmony, is regularly applied to describe the visual product. However, the use of musical terminology in describing a film after the fact reflects solely on the visual elements, not on the relationship between the visual elements and the musical score. In Ponnelle's *Madama Butterfly*, the principles and elements of musical composition in the score guided the camera work and
established a relationship between the music and the visualization. The nature and extent of this relationship was exemplified in the finale of act 1.

The sensual mood of the scene was introduced at the section of the duet between Butterfly and Pinkerton marked *Andantino calmo*, during which the bride made preparations for the wedding night. The director heightened the intimacy of the scene by filming it in almost total darkness. The only light came from an inner room into which Butterfly slipped to change from her wedding kimono. Outside the room, Pinkerton lit a cigarette and watched her shadow on the *shoji* as she undressed. The camera moved from the interior to the exterior of the house, as Butterfly emerged in a flowing white robe, just prior to the *Andantino lento*, and walked slowly outdoors into the darkened field beyond the house, followed by Pinkerton. Night had fallen, and the field was dimly lit so that Butterfly and Pinkerton were isolated from all but their immediate environment. As the duet increased in intensity and intimacy the director mirrored the change by using voice-overs, instead of dubbing.

In all of his films Ponnelle used dubbing, in which singer-actors' voices are previously recorded on a soundtrack with which they lip-synch during filming. Although used widely, the technique has not been without its opponents. Walter Felsenstein, for instance, rejected dubbing his films in favour of having his performers sing and act simultaneously. In order to avoid close-ups of the singer-actors’ mouths wide open, however, he instructed them to substitute expressiveness for volume. “[I]n this fashion we have avoided the impression of a continuous changing of distance,” the director observed, “something that could
happen very easily if in making the film every 'close-up' were to correspond to a 'forte' and vice versa.”30

Ponnelle’s interpretation did not fall into the trap of predictability because the relationship between the visual and aural elements of the film was not bound by similarity. In the finale of the first act, he contrasted the intensity of the music and the passion of the lovers by pulling the camera up and away from them as they began to sing in unison. The choice to use a bird’s eye view shot, when it is customary to enhance the intimacy of a scene with close-ups, was not the result of any modesty on the part of the director.31 Instead, it illustrated the director’s use of the camera as a complement of the music. When the passion of the couple climaxed in unison octaves, the camera reached a height of about twenty feet directly above them. At the end of the vocal part, it descended slowly until it focused on Butterfly cradling Pinkerton’s head. As the last bars of music faded away, the final frame was filled with the peacefulness of her dreamy expression.

Unlike Ponnelle’s other opera films, Madama Butterfly preceded rather than followed a staged production. In fact, he did not stage the opera until 1982 when he designed and directed it for the Opéra du Rhin. Before he began working on the film his impression of the opera was that it was insipid romance.32 During the making of the film, however, his view changed significantly. In an interview given in 1978 he admitted: “Ten years ago, I said that I would never stage it because I’d always found it unbearable in the theatre. It was only in preparing [the film] that I realized the quality of this masterpiece.”33 In particular, his impression of
the character of Butterfly developed into admiration. He considered her "one of the greatest feminine characters in all of literature. For me, she's like Joan of Arc. She becomes a heroine and is crushed just like you would crush an ant."34

Ponnelle's characterization of Butterfly as a martyr carried with it an impression of her strength in the face of death and also a consideration of the didactic element in her suicide. Indeed, the director staged her death not as an acceptance of her fate, but as a lesson for Pinkerton's benefit. In the second act three key scenes lead Butterfly from hope (Flower Duet), to doubt (Vigil) and finally, to death, and in these three scenes, the director followed the arc of her fortune with camera work inspired by music. The strength of this relationship rivalled the cohesion between music and staging in Ponnelle's stage productions and made Madama Butterfly a true opera film.

Ponnelle's staging of the Flower Duet linked it to the opening sequence. Like the first scene, it was filmed in slow motion and inspired by the manner in which Karajan conducted the duet.35 In contrast to the first scene, however, the action mirrored the tempo of the music. As Butterfly and Suzuki began to sing together, the action followed that indicated in the stage directions -- they scattered flowers around the threshold and inside the house. Then in the section marked Un poco meno the tempo of the duet slowed to a pace which seemed to suspend the notes in time, and the tempo of the film slowed down as well. As the women tossed the blossoms in the air, their movements were filmed in slow motion, as a gentle dance in perfect synchrony with the music. In the midst of this delicate and
sensuous choreography, Trouble played along, scooping up the falling petals and tossing them over his head as he moved between and around them.

On stage Madama Butterfly has been presented in two and sometimes three acts depending upon the version staged. At the 1904 Milan premiere the opera was presented in two acts, divided only after the love duet between Butterfly and Pinkerton. The later versions separated the second act into two parts with another break occurring during the vigil.\textsuperscript{36} In the spoken play by David Belasco the vigil had been a sensational fourteen minute play of lights which captured the passage of night sunset to sunrise in a very realistic way, using the full range of the lighting technology of the day.\textsuperscript{37} Modern opera directors have taken different approaches. For instance, when Renata Scotto’s staged the opera at the Metropolitan Opera in 1987 she opted for two breaks, bringing the curtain down after the love duet as well as during the vigil, maintaining that it was important to give the audience a chance to reflect on the events of the preceding section before advancing.\textsuperscript{38}

The extended length of the orchestral music, which represents the passage of night, presents a difficulty in translating the opera into a film. Herbert Graf, who in the 1950s championed opera produced for television, has castigated directors who add visual content to opera overtures and interludes, for fear of losing the spectator.\textsuperscript{39} Yet, as Franz Kraemer has argued, one of the genuine problems of viewing opera on the screen as opposed to viewing it on stage is that “one may not stop the picture; one cannot close one’s eyes, so to speak. Even if this were technically permissible... it would still not be possible to achieve in this medium
the overpowering effect of a suddenly predominant orchestra such as one experiences in the opera house."40

Ponelle addressed the obstacle of translating the interlude to the screen by creating a montage of scenes that visualized Butterfly’s shifting emotions in conjunction with indications in the music. For him, there was nothing “lost” in the translation from stage to screen, but there was a need to accept film as a medium that could visualize such interludes effectively. He did not consider the camera an imposition or a distraction from the music, but a partner: “The language of the camera is so rich in nuance and dynamic rhythm -- it adds a complementary richness to an opera score.”41 The montage of the vigil represented a prime example of the director’s utilization of the medium’s techniques in a manner that captured the expressive quality of music itself.

During the humming chorus, the camera focused on the gradually darkening landscape around the house and ended with a close-up of the resolute face of Butterfly. As the third act music began, the director explored Butterfly’s imagined reunion with Pinkerton. The first part consisted largely of happy images in which the couple defied her doubting relatives. It began with Pinkerton standing just outside of the house, waving enthusiastically to Butterfly, until he noticed Yamadori, the Bonze, Butterfly’s Mother and Sharpless in the distance glaring at him. In the next instant, Butterfly ran from the house hand in hand with Pinkerton to join him on his ship. The clip, like many in the vigil, was filmed in black and white, and in slow motion, which captured the sense of the
dream. The next clip was that of Butterfly and Pinkerton on his ship, embracing passionately, and headed for America. Then, having arrived in America, she presented Trouble to Uncle Sam, Whistler's Mother, and Buffalo Bill who sat together as if in a family portrait.42

In the second portion of the vigil, introduced by the voices of sailors in the distance, these happy images gradually turned to ones that indicated Butterfly's growing insecurities and doubts about Pinkerton's return. In one scene Pinkerton suddenly pulled a large hairpin from her hair (which he had done very slowly and suggestively on their wedding night) and stood behind her holding it menacingly, as the Bonze had done when he denounced her. On the repetition of the sailors' theme, as Butterfly knelt in the grass paralyzed with fright, the camera swung from a view of her Japanese relatives scowling at her from behind Suzuki's altar, to Uncle Sam, Whistler's Mother and Buffalo Bill scowling at her from behind the Victorian cabinet. As she looked desperately from one to the other, the sailors' voices in the distance interrupted her vision and a very brief blackout followed. When the music changed again in key and tempo, the frame changed to a close-up of Butterfly kneeling rigidly in the dark house, with Trouble sleeping across her lap, and Suzuki on the floor beside her.

When the tempo of the music picked up thirteen bars later the camera turned again to Butterfly and in conjunction with the anxiety suggested by the new tempo, the film focused on her growing concerns. The shoji opened suddenly, but instead of seeing Pinkerton smiling at her (an image she had imagined earlier in the vigil), Yamadori and Goro stood there laughing and pointing towards the
cabinet in the field. As they did, it crumbled, revealing Pinkerton being caressed by several women. That was followed by a quick cut to a wedding photo of Pinkerton and a blond wife, then to Butterfly’s frightened face. A moment later, the first hint of Butterfly’s suicide was introduced when Pinkerton ran (again in slow motion) past the Bonze, who held out the dagger that Butterfly had brought with her on her wedding day. Her fears were dispelled, however, by a subsequent scene of her and Pinkerton running away from the house, hand in hand, then standing together on the deck of the Abraham Lincoln with Trouble. In the final moments of the vigil, Butterfly envisioned the *shoji* opening and Pinkerton standing there, exhausted from running up the hill, but smiling. In contrast to the libretto which states that dawn has already broken when the curtain is raised, Ponnelle’s sequence faded into a bleak view of the empty horizon, lit only by the filtered gray light of morning as the music of the vigil subsided.

Throughout his career Ponnelle received critical praise for his sensitive use of music in staging and just as frequently, derision for his disregard for the libretto. In response, the director maintained: “I adhere to something which is truer and deeper -- the music.” Of course, it is common stage practice in the twentieth century for directors to dismiss suggestions for staging in the libretto and often the very setting itself. In Ponnelle’s staging of Butterfly’s suicide the actions which originally corresponded to particular musical cues were altered and delayed to emphasize his interpretation of it as a moral lesson staged for Pinkerton.

According to the librettists’ directives in the Ricordi score, the suicide of
Butterfly is supposed to take place on stage with Trouble, blindfolded but present, as the only witness. In Ponnelle's realization, however, it became a forceful lesson for Pinkerton, made with the help of Suzuki, and without the heart-wrenching presence of the child. It is necessary to quote at length to discuss his diversion from it: "Butterfly takes the child, seats him on a stool with his face turned to the left, gives him the American flag and a doll and urges him to play with them, while she gently bandages his eyes. Then she seizes the dagger, and with her eyes still fixed on the child, goes behind the screen." After a crescendo in the strings to a double forte, "The knife is heard falling to the ground and the large white veil disappears behind the screen. Butterfly is seen emerging from behind the screen; tottering, she gropes her way towards the child. The large white veil is round her neck; smiling feebly, she grasps the child with her hand and drags herself up to him. She has just enough strength left to embrace him, then falls to the ground beside him" -- just before Pinkerton is heard calling out her name.

Ponnelle made two major changes in his staging of the final scene. First, Trouble was not present for Butterfly's suicide because after "Piccolo Iddio" she sent him away. Second, the director made Suzuki a helpmate in the ritual suicide. In the libretto Suzuki asks to stay, but is pushed outside by Butterfly. The presence of Suzuki in Ponnelle's interpretation gave greater depth to her role as a helpmate even in death and demonstrated the extent of her devotion to Butterfly. Her compliance with Butterfly's wishes, and her participation in the suicide, indicated that she too accepted the motto on the sword: "Con onor muore / Chi non può serbar vita con onore" (Death with honour / Is better than life with dishonour).
In the final moments of the opera, the director's adherence to the music was definitive. After Butterfly sang her farewell to Trouble ("Piccolo Iddio") she gently pushed the child away, then remained kneeling on the floor. Suzuki came up behind her holding a long white veil with which she ceremoniously tied Butterfly's legs together. Suzuki then went to the altar to retrieve the dagger which she solemnly handed to Butterfly on the sforzando (if the stage directions were followed, Butterfly would have stabbed herself on that chord). After handing Butterfly the knife, Suzuki moved calmly behind her and stood there throughout the remainder of the scene, a silent witness to Butterfly's suicide and Pinkerton's reaction. During the crescendo in the music, she slowly wrapped the handle of the knife with a white handkerchief, stopping briefly as Pinkerton called her name for the first time. There was no reaction on her face, which remained calm, her eyes directed towards the far end of the room. When Pinkerton called her name the second time, she pointed the dagger at her throat, holding it firmly with both hands. The third time that Pinkerton called her name the camera angle changed to a position just over Butterfly's right shoulder and pointed toward the shoji.

Ponelle did not stage Butterfly's suicide as an acceptance of her fate, but rather, as an emphatic lesson for Pinkerton. She deliberately waited for Pinkerton to come up the hill, and forced him to confront the tragic consequences of his actions in the most forceful way possible. The suicide was staged for Pinkerton, and his reaction to her death surpassed the importance of the act of suicide itself. At the far end of the room, Pinkerton pulled open the shoji, repeating a gesture from the vigil when Butterfly imagined him opening the shoji upon his return. At this tense moment however, his face was contorted in horror as he stared at
Butterfly poised to stab herself. The final bars of the music are *Andante energico*, octave chords, played with a deliberate force that, according to the score, accompanied the entrance of Pinkerton and Sharpless who discovered Butterfly before she died. In Ponnelle’s staging, four of these measures passed as Pinkerton stood dumbfounded, staring at Butterfly. On the second sustained chord, before the second repetition of the octave chords, Butterfly thrust the dagger into her throat, collapsing slowly over two measures of music and falling over on the penultimate chord. The viewer can not see Butterfly’s face, the insertion of the knife, or any blood -- only Pinkerton’s reaction to each of these. In the libretto Pinkerton escaped seeing her take her life because he entered after the act. In Ponnelle’s visualization he was forced to witness it.

The tragedy of Madama Butterfly was deepened in Ponnelle’s interpretation, because it was not limited to Butterfly herself, but extended to Pinkerton and Trouble as well. The original stage directions for the final scene read: “[T]he door on the right opens violently. Pinkerton and Sharpless rush into the room and up to Butterfly who, with a feeble gesture, points to the child and dies. Pinkerton falls on his knees, whilst Sharpless takes the child and kisses him, sobbing.”\(^{48}\) The stage directions indicate the sorrow and remorse of Pinkerton and Sharpless’s tender embrace of Trouble gives the impression that he will be tenderly cared for. In Ponnelle’s interpretation that possibility had already been eliminated by his disturbing characterization of Kate.

The return of the initial image -- Pinkerton’s horrified reaction to her suicide -- as the final one indicated that Butterfly’s suicide continued to torment
him, perhaps even to the point that one can view the film itself as his recurring
nightmare. The final image of the opera captured the impact that her death had on
her estranged husband. The final chord of the opera was reserved for a change in
camera focus to the field just beyond the house — the exact position it was in for the
first shot -- and just long enough to capture the black and white still frame of
Pinkerton leaping through the shoji wall.

Ponnelles haunting film not only overcame the technical obstacles of
filming an opera, it also challenged the aesthetic skepticism of critics like Kracauer
who argued that opera and film were irreconcilable entities. Robert Jacobson wrote
in Opera News: “Under the imaginative, discerning eye of designer-director Jean-
Pierre Ponnetelle, the often hackneyed 'Butterfly' emerges a fresh dramatic and
musical experience, filled with passion and a kind of heightened reality, its action
logical amid a parade of poetic images.” In Madama Butterfly Ponnetelle
demonstrated that the camera was not the enemy of music, but its partner in a true
opera film.
Notes


2 Richard Evidon, “Film,” pp. 194 - 200.

3 Richard Evidon, “Film,” 198.


6 Richard Evidon, “Film,” 199.


11 The complete 1904 libretto and revisions is printed in Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly ed. Nicholas John (New York: Riverrun Press, 1984). Ponnelles’s choice to portray cultural divisions in costumes was a dramatic one and not historically accurate. According to Jean-Pierre Lehmann a “sartorial revolution” occurred at the turn of the century in concordance with the European
presence in Japan. At that time Japanese men, and to a lesser extent women, began
to wear Western clothes in place of the traditional kimono. Jean-Pierre Lehmann,
"Images of the Orient," Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly ed. Nicholas John

12 Arthur Groos, "Lieutenant F. B. Pinkerton: Problems in The Genesis and
Performance of Madama Butterfly," The Puccini Companion (New York and

13 Nicholas John, Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly, 78. "Qua i tre musi.
Servite ragni e mosche candite."

Butterfly cond. Herbert von Karajan, dir. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, with Placido

15 Stephanie von Buchau, "Jean-Pierre Ponnelle: The Sensual Stylist,"

16 See Chapter 2.

17 Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (Zürich und
Schwäbisch Hall: Orell Füssli, 1983) 54. "Opernfilmregisseure müssen musikalisch
sein. Ich verlange, dass sie das Primat der Musik akzeptieren und dass sie mit der
Musik, in der Musik, vielleicht auch gegen sie, aber in einer Relation zur Musik,
denken und agieren." (translation by the writer)

18 Arthur Groos, "Lieutenant F. B. Pinkerton: Problems in The Genesis and
Performance of Madama Butterfly," 188.


21 Herbert Graf, Opera for the People (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951) 230.


25 Siegfried Kracauer, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, 155.


29 All of Ponnelle’s videos viewed for this study, listed in the Bibliography, were filmed after a pre-recorded soundtrack was recorded.

31 The year before filming Madama Butterfly Ponnelle had requested (but was denied) permission to use topless dancers in his realization of Verdi’s Rigoletto for the San Francisco Opera. (Transcription of a Telecommunication: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle-Kurt Herbert Adler, August 25, 1973. Property of the San Francisco Performing Arts Library, San Francisco, California) His production of Puccini’s Turandot (San Francisco, 1977) shocked at least one reviewer because the statue cried tears of blood when Calaf kissed Turandot. (Dale Harris, “San Francisco,” rev. of Turandot by Giacomo Puccini, Music and Musicians, February 1978: 45.


33 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time,” 92.

34 Arthur Kaplan, “For the Fourth Time,” 92.


42 Some critics cited this brief scene as evidence of the director’s Anti-Americanism. Ponnelle objected to the criticism by maintaining that the images of America reflected Butterfly’s naiveté rather than his politics: “It is Butterfly’s vision of America, not mine. She is the one who thinks Buffalo Bill and Uncle Sam really exist.” Stephanie von Buchau, “Jean-Pierre Ponnelle: The Sensual Stylist,” 15.

43 *Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly*, 114.

44 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this controversial aspect of Ponnelle’s methodology.


46 *Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly*, 125.

47 *Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly*, 124.

48 *Madam Butterfly/Madama Butterfly*, 125.

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s staging of the works of Richard Wagner spanned twenty-four years of his career. The first opera which he both designed and directed was Tristan und Isolde for the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf in 1963. His next production of a Wagnerian opera did not come until 1975, when he realized Der Fliegende Holländer for the San Francisco Opera, followed by a complete cycle of Der Ring des Nibelungen for the Baden-Württembergisches Staatstheater in Stuttgart (1977-1978). In 1979 he staged Der Fliegende Holländer once again for the San Francisco Opera, and for the first time in New York for the Metropolitan Opera. A new production of Tristan und Isolde followed in 1981 at the Bayreuth Festival, Das Liebesverbot in 1983 at the Bayerische Staatsoper, and finally, Parsifal for the Théâtre Halle aux Grains Toulouse in 1987. Der Fliegende Holländer has remained Ponnelle’s only Wagnerian production in the United States.

When Der Fliegende Holländer premiered in San Francisco contemporary reviews were divided: some expressed delight, others, condemnation, reflecting a similar mixture of responses by the audience. “Controversy has returned to the San Francisco Opera house with ‘The Flying Dutchman,’” reported Blake Samson in the Contra Costa Times. “Roaring cheers were intercut with scattered boos. Wagnerian purists reviled Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s daring production in the lobby, but most praised it.”1 When the opera was presented in New York in 1979, the interpretation elicited a blanket condemnation in the New York Times review by Harold Schonberg: “It is a production full of absurdities and misconceptions, all in
the name of reinterpreting Wagner and supposedly bringing new light to the opera for modern audiences. When is this nonsense going to be brought to a halt?“2 The intensity of this review apparently reflected an equally passionate response from the New York audience, with a report of at least one fist fight having broken out in an aisle after the performance.3

An interpretation that altered the plot sparked the controversy surrounding Der Fliegende Holländer. The director did not simply present Wagner’s musical depiction of the story of the Flying Dutchman and his salvation by Senta through her self-sacrifice. Rather, he told it from the perspective of the Steersman, a minor character in the original version. The reasoning behind this change was that it made the opera more acceptable to contemporary tastes. “I wanted to tell the story on a different level than the primitive legend,” Ponnelle stated in 1975, “so I decided to turn the entire opera into a dream of the Steersman. In that way, it can catalyze all frustrations and complexes as well as become theatrically more believable.”4 This directorial conception did not alter any of Wagner’s music, yet detractors argued that it did affect the opera’s artistic integrity because it clearly contradicted the intentions of the composer. The production remains one of the most significant of Ponnelle’s career because it illustrates the extent to which he used, and rejected, the libretto, paratextual writings, music, and even the composer’s philosophy, in his psychological interpretation of Wagner’s work.

For the composer, the character of the Dutchman was a timeless, universal symbol. In A Communication to My Friends, he wrote: “The figure of ‘The Flying
Dutchman' is a mythical creation of the Folk: a primal trait of human nature speaks out from it with heart-enthraling force. This trait, in its most universal meaning, is the longing after rest from amid the storms of life."5 The ongoing significance of the wandering sailor was evident to Wagner, who noted that the figure had appeared in various forms in literature dating as far back as Homer's Ulysses.6 In fact, it has recurred since that time, in poems such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner in 1798,7 and, more immediately for Wagner, in Aus den Memoiren des Herren von Schnabelwopski written by Heinrich Heine in 1834, which he had read prior to composing the opera.8

Despite the recurrence of the wanderer as a literary figure, and Wagner's own assertion of its universality, Ponnelle doubted that it retained any spiritual relevance for a late twentieth-century audience. As for the opera itself, he considered it merely the work of a romantic, German youth, without any philosophical value.9 More interesting to him was considering what the opera actually revealed about the composer himself:

[T]he scientific knowledge that we possess today also allows us occasionally to interpret a work beyond the express desires of the author. All of the analytical methods at our disposal, be they Freudian, Marxist or whatever, permit us to scrutinize . . . the music and the characters clothed in that music in order to discover what the author reveals of himself through his treatment of
those characters in his score.10

Through a psychological interpretation, Ponnelle addressed what he considered the major obstacle in producing the opera for a modern audience: its dated romantic idealism. In his conception, this feature of Der Fliegende Holländer was not attributed to the composer, but to a lonely, nineteenth-century Steersman, to make it more palatable.

In order to construct the dream context, Ponnelle combined (for the first time in the opera’s history) the character of the Steersman with Erik, the hunter engaged to Senta, the daughter of Daland, a ship’s captain, through the use of a Ballet Double. The segue into the dream began at the conclusion of the opening chorus, when Daland asks the Steersman to keep watch while the other sailors go below and rest. In accordance with the libretto, the Steersman obliged, and to keep himself occupied, sang "Mit Gewitter und Sturm aus fernem Meer;" but as he grew bored and tired, his singing ceased, and he drifted off to sleep at the helm. The Ballet Double was hidden from view, just upstage of the centre platform, and in the brief blackout following the song, he and the Steersman changed places, so that the singer became Erik, while the Ballet Double acted the part of the sleeping Steersman.11 Thereafter, two levels of dramatic action occurred simultaneously: the exterior drama, which consisted solely of the reactions of the sleeping Steersman (Steersman/Ballet Double), and the interior drama on the deck of the ship, which included the Steersman/Erik. Just before the conclusion of the opera, the Steersman and the Ballet Double switched back to their original roles during another brief blackout.
In Ponnelle's interpretation, the character of the Steersman gained the importance that the Dutchman lost. He became the prism through whom all others were seen, and thus, his subconscious rather than the Dutchman's angst, constituted the focus of the drama. The director constructed a character beyond the lonely sailor who sings of his longings in "Mit Gewitter und Sturm aus fernem Meer." From this catalyst, he considered the life of a nineteenth-century sailor, and developed a psychological profile which guided the nature of the images revealed in the dream:

A young sailor of Wagner's time had to spend ten or eleven months of the year fishing for mackerel out in the North Sea. He naturally dreams of what is awaiting him upon his return home, that is, money and a woman. Given the fact that his horizons are limited to the boat on which he lives . . . the Steersman fixes upon the captain's daughter in his love fantasy.12

The visualization of a sailor's circumstances was consistent with Ponnelle's desire to make the opera appeal to the audience on a realistic level. In keeping with this objective, the design of the ship showed a high degree of practical detail -- which was consistent with the composer's vision. In his "Remarks on Performing the Opera 'The Flying Dutchman,'" Wagner had requested a realistic handling of the first scene, noting in particular, that "the treatment of the ship cannot be naturalistic enough."13 The action began on the raked deck which appeared to be sailing directly towards the audience (Fig. 1). The Steersman clung desperately to a large helm placed down stage center as the storm raged around him, while behind
Fig. 1  Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s sketch for Der Fliegende Holländer San Francisco Opera (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)

Fig. 2  Der Fliegende Holländer San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1988)
him, the crew of sailors, almost obscured in thick fog and falling snow, pitched rhythmically back and forth as they sang "Hojohe, Hallojo." Meanwhile, wave machines, controlled by stagehands underneath the ship, simulated violent waves on either side of the hull, as the ship's hatches banged open and shut.  

The realistic treatment of the ship in Ponnelle's production was somewhat of a departure from contemporary trends. Wagner himself had, as noted, insisted upon a realistic style, and after his death Cosima Wagner staged the work as he had prescribed. His choice of set design was, however, already being contested by Adolphe Appia, who argued for a more expressive scenic style that would complement that quality of music. "A simple indication suffices to place the action in the external world," Appia asserted in Music and the Art of the Theatre, published in 1898, "and once this is done, the setting has only to express what there is in the place chosen by the dramatist that corresponds to the inner essence revealed to us by the music. . ." A 1929 production by Jürgen Fehling at the Krolloper in Berlin began a period of dematerialization of the set design for Der Fliegende Holländer when designer Ewald Dülberg reduced the Dutchman's ship to three red squares, and Daland's to a single orange rectangle. In 1959, Wieland Wagner's design for the first scene, executed in a realistic style, marked a return to that described by the composer, a style which by no means defined a trend, but one which Ponnelle's design followed as well.

The external appearance of naturalism in Ponnelle's setting was, however, only temporary. Whereas Wagner's scenic visualization leaned towards realism,
with the mythical figure arriving in a real vessel and descending on terra firma where the remainder of the story unfolded, Ponnelle’s, in contrast, soon rejected realism and captured the fluidity and potent dramatic symbolism of dreams. In an interview given at the time of the first San Francisco production, he had dismissed the use of symbolism in the opera, saying, “Music theater, in my opinion, is the artistic expression of human behavior and does not have a great deal to do with idealistic symbolism.” Certainly, there was nothing in Ponnelle’s production that could be described as “idealistic,” but symbolism was present in both design and staging.

Daland’s ship was the focal point of the setting and a prime example of the multiple layers of meaning that Ponnelle’s design generated. It was divided into three levels: the lowest level, downstage of the helm, was the stage floor; a second deck above, which housed the several hatches through which Daland’s crew entered and exited; and finally, an upper deck had a central cabin door through which the Dutchman first emerged and eventually retreated with Senta. The staging on each of these three levels suggested that each represented different locales, and even realities. Since the main action of the opera was staged on the middle deck, it served not only as part of the ship, but also as the shore, and Daland’s house. The upper deck, above which dangled the corpses of the Dutchman’s sailors caught in the nets was a frightening place, suggesting certain death, and avoided by all but the Dutchman and eventually, Senta. The lowest level, where the Steersman/Ballet Double slept, was actually the stage floor, an area which represented the external drama, and to which the dream figures never strayed.
Upon the arrival of the Dutchman’s ship, the seeming realism of Daland’s gave way completely to the first nightmarish vision of the Steersman. This was achieved through a lighting effect that washed Daland’s ship in red, and created the eerie impression that it was actually enveloped by the Dutchman’s. Another allusion to the distortion of reality in dreams was constructed during the musical interlude accompanying the arrival, when the music and stage directions in the score indicate that an anchor is plunged into the water. This occurred during the descending chromatic scale as indicated, but instead of giving the impression that the anchor was functional, Ponnelle opted for a more supernatural association. It dropped downstage center in front of Daland’s ship, and remained suspended there only until the ascending chromatic scale shortly afterwards when it was raised into the fly space. As in the libretto, the Steersman was momentarily startled from sleep, but in this presentation, his restless motions were mirrored by the Ballet Double. Once the arrival of the Dutchman’s ship was established, it retained the form of Daland’s for the remainder of the opera, revealing its ghostly origins only when sudden bursts of red light, corresponding to the playing of the Dutchman’s theme, revealed the rotting corpses of ensnared sailors above it.

The merging of ships in Ponnelle’s production was not a unique feature, but rather a common departure from the earlier stagings of the opera in which two distinct ships were used. The design for the model production presented at the Court Opera in Munich in 1864 by Heinrich Döll and Angelo Quaglio, established this practice and even assigned specific sides of the stage to each. Pictorial evidence from the production shows Daland’s ship on stage right, and the Dutchman’s on stage left in act 1, and reversed in act 3.21 Ponnelle’s contemporaries have,
however, used modern stage technology, as he did, to enhance the eerie appearance of the Dutchman’s ship. In the 1969 Bayreuth production, designed by Josef Svoboda and staged by August Everding, for instance, the stern of Daland’s ship and the bow of the Dutchman’s became a singular central image as the bow of the Dutchman’s ship loomed over Daland’s, vanishing only in act 2 when lighting effects highlighted selective interior elements of Daland’s house.22

The characters in Ponnelle’s realization, like the set design, exhibited both an adherance to and divergence from the composer’s directives. The initial entrance of the Dutchman himself, which followed soon after the appearance of his ship, was crafted with the same ominous overtones as Wagner had envisioned for him. The composer had written that the Dutchman must retain “a certain terrible repose in his outward demeanor, even amid the most passionate expression of inward anguish and despair.”23 Following this directive, the director created a figure with the same gloomy deportment. Dressed in black pants and boots, with a black cape over a long, black leather coat, and white face make-up, his figure conveyed solemnity and apprehension. The apprehension was actually even more pronounced since he did not go on shore before “Die Frist ist Ums” during the musical phrases Wagner wrote to accompany his first steps on land, but remained in his open portal until he began to sing.

The appearance of the ghostly sailor, like that of his ship, caused the sleeping Steersman and Ballet Double to shift anxiously, drawing attention to the existence of both images in their dream. Characteristic of Ponnelle’s staging was the care that he took to choreograph these movements, and all others, by the Ballet Double.
These physical responses stemmed from psychological states of fear, anger, etc., to be sure, but like dance movements, they were timed exactly to the music. Such was the precision of Ponnelle’s choreography, that when the opera was presented in Chicago in 1984 by assistants, due to his illness, they cut the role of the Ballet Double to avoid inaccuracies, so that the Steersman simply took the role of Erik, beginning and ending with the same blackouts described above.24

Throughout the opera, Ponnelle continued to clarify the psychological state of the Steersman through staging that captured the sailor’s perspective. One example occurred midway through “Die Frist ist um.” The Dutchman stood on the second level at the top of the lower left stairs, the Steersman/Erik slept on the centre platform, and the Steersman/Ballet Double below him on the floor level. As the Dutchman sang the line “Dich frage ich, gepries’ner Engel Gottes, der Meines Heil’s Bedingung mir gewann,” Senta entered downstage right and walked slowly across the front of the stage to down stage left, as if she was a vision conjured up by the Dutchman’s words. While he sang to her, all three men watched her pass, simultaneously reaching out to her with the same slow arm gesture, underscoring the Dutchman’s desire for Senta as an expression of the Steersman’s own.

The character of Daland was also the sum of the Steersman’s fear of his Captain, and his loathing of his beloved’s father. Wagner’s own description favoured a realistic interpretation. For the composer, Daland was simply:

...a rough-hewn figure from the life of everyday, a sailor who scoffs at storms and danger for the sake of gain, and
with whom, for instance, the -- certainly apparent -- sale of his daughter to a rich man ought not to seem at all disgraceful; he thinks and deals, like a hundred thousand others, without the least suspicion that he is doing any wrong.\textsuperscript{25}

Whereas Daland’s offer of his daughter to the rich stranger prompted Wieland Wagner to personify him as capitalistic greed by costuming him in red and white striped trousers, a blue jacket and stovepipe hat to resemble Uncle Sam,\textsuperscript{26} in Ponnet’s realization, he was presented not as the director saw him, but as the Steersman envisioned him. He was a man capable of physical violence, and a greedy merchant whose love for his daughter was easily overshadowed by his desire for financial gain. When he discovered the Steersman asleep at the helm, five supers dressed exactly like him awoke the truant sailor by beating and kicking him. The multiple Dalands suggested the extent of the sailor’s fear of Daland and reinforced the distorted sense of reality characteristic of dreams.

In the Steersman’s dream, Daland was not a guiltless man of his time, but a reprehensible father figure. Even the Dutchman was reduced to a common thief and rival whom the Steersman/Erik feared would steal Senta from him. This characterization was highlighted when the Dutchman introduced himself to the Captain and offered him the treasures of his ship in exchange for his hospitality. Although the Dutchman sings of how richly his ship is laden, in Ponnet’s production he threw open his huge cape with a grand gesture, revealing a lining studded with jewels, and suggesting that he was more petty criminal than mythical giant. According to the San Francisco production book, the Dutchman then asked
“Hast du eine Tochter?” and when Daland answered “Fürwahr, ein treues Kind,” he removed the cape and threw it down on the deck in front of the Captain. During their duet Daland eyed the cape, then as he agreed to the terms of the bargain, he put on the cape, jeweled side out and “holding self and cape gleefully in place” proudly proclaimed the virtues of his only child. In response to this “sale” of Senta, the sleeping Steersman/Ballet Double curled up in apparent agony.

Through the interjection of such responses, the Steersman/Ballet Double became a constant reminder to the audience that they were watching a dream. In this way the subconscious of the dreamer became the prism through which the audience witnessed the action. Action and reaction were presented simultaneously, on two different levels; a split screen image that remained throughout the presentation. The exterior drama formed part of the visual impression, while at the same time framing and commenting on the interior dramatic action.

The use of this dual image was not only confined to a view of the dreamer in relief against his dream, that is to say, the exterior drama against the interior; but also within the interior drama of the dream itself. When Senta sang her ballad “Traft ihr das Schiff” in the second act, retelling the Dutchman legend to the women gathered around her, the stage directions in the San Francisco Opera production book indicated that she should begin singing in an intimate tone, with her “right hand reaching out with tension – stretch forward with music ‘trying to reach him.’” As she sang “Hui! Wie saust der Wind” with the chromatic scales in the accompaniment indicating the blowing wind, she swayed with the chorus until
a tempo change two pages later. Shortly afterward, when she sang "Hui! Und Satan hört's Johohe, Johohe!" again to the accompaniment of chromatic scales, special lights projected the image of the Dutchman's ship behind her. This vision was actually the one she saw in her mind, rather than the tangible portrait of the Dutchman in Wagner's original staging. The spectator was shown an image of the Dutchman, through a Senta who also was merely an image in the Steersman's mind. The "portrait" then was not just a visualization of one character; instead, it was the sum of several interpretations.

In Ponnelle's interpretation of Senta the crucial difference between his view and that of the composer became fully evident. For Wagner, she was a pivotal dramatic figure whose offer of her life to the Dutchman represented the pinnacle of true love. He viewed her as a progressive woman, who had a significant role to play in his Utopian vision: "[S]he is no longer the home-tending Penelope of Ulysses, as courted in the days of old, but the quintessence of womankind; and yet the still unmanifest [sic], the longed-for, the dreamt-of, the infinitely womanly Woman -- let me out with it in one word: the Woman of the Future." Ponnelle, however, dismissed the composer's faith in this expression of altruism with a certain disdain: "It is an idea of Wagner's about finding the ideal woman who will be faithful until death. I just don't believe in that kind of thinking. It could only come from the head of a . . . misogynist. Well, I am certainly not a misogynist." Ponnelle was not the only director who considered the story, and particularly Senta's self-sacrifice, hopelessly dated romanticism. Contemporaries
such as Harry Kupfer, who staged the opera in 1978 at the Bayreuth Festival, also viewed the resolution of the drama as uncomfortably naive, and like Ponnelle, opted to realize Der Fliegende Holländer as a psychological exploration. Kupfer presented a radical revisioning of the story both visually and thematically. He and designer Peter Sykora conceptualized a production that took place in Senta’s mind and thus presented the action of the opera from her perspective, as Ponnelle had done through the Steersman in his realization. Ulrich Melchinger, to give another example, also resisted any suggestion of romantic idealism. When he staged Der Fliegende Holländer at the Kassel Staatstheater in Germany, the Steersman dreamed the action of “Die Frist ist um” as a black mass during which the Dutchman killed a naked girl lying on an altar by driving his sword into her vagina. While this production clearly emphasized the more sinister aspects of the Steersman’s imagination, like Ponnelle’s, it stemmed from a psychological rather than a philosophical approach.

Ponnelle’s psychological interpretation succeeded in problematizing Senta’s character beyond the composer’s description of her as simply “an altogether robust Northern maid” — completely absorbed in saving the Dutchman. She was desired by Erik, the Dutchman, and the Steersman, whose fear of Daland, and despair in knowing that he could not realistically expect to marry the captain’s daughter, prompted her depiction in symbolic and contradictory images in the mise en scène of act 2.

Although she was an object of desire, she was clothed in a highly restrictive
and concealing costume. Designer Pet Halmen clothed her and all the women in full-length dresses made from heavy quilted wool fabric that weighed about forty pounds a piece, not counting the heavy petticoats underneath.35 The thick material and the headpieces that covered their ears and necks allowed only minimal head and arm movements; making them appear like Russian dolls, their faces and bodies tightly encased within the shape of their costumes. The colours of the costumes for the chorus women and Mary were drab browns and grays, while Senta’s costume was bridal white, connoting her innocence, as well as her readiness to become the bride of the Dutchman (Fig. 2).

The confinement which Ponnelle and Halmen depicted in the costumes was emphasized in the set design of act 2 through another highly provocative image. A brief blackout followed act 1, after which the women were revealed seated on the deck of the Daland/Dutchman ship. They were arranged on the deck in a triangular formation, with Mary on the upper deck and Senta in the middle foreground. They sat very rigidly on the edge of small, three-legged stools and were instructed, according to the 1975 San Francisco Opera production notes, to remain immobile with “expressions like sphinxes.” Each chorus woman sat behind a small helm which represented a spinning wheel and held part of a single rope which wound down from Mary. The impression was that Mary was driving a team of horses (Fig. 3). The chorus members were not allowed any extraneous movement, except to turn their helms in time to the music, and to maintain tension on the rope.36 Only Senta remained unattached by the rope. The provocative image of her in a confining costume amid the harsh, animalistic arrangement of the women, as if caught in a web of domestic activity, left open
Fig. 3 Der Fliegende Holländer San Francisco Opera, 1975 (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
several possible interpretations: perhaps it represented the repressed desire experienced by the Steersman, or his sense of entrapment on the ship which may have prompted his dream of a life as a hunter, free to roam and work at will, and engaged to Senta. Whatever its meaning for the spectator, its lack of a definitive association remained consistent with the complex and contradictory images of dreams.

Since Ponelle rejected the character of Senta as Wagner had conceived her, he simply attributed the objectionable aspects of her nature and actions to the subconscious desires and fears of the Steersman. In contrast, contemporaries who have also distanced themselves from Wagner’s philosophical viewpoint, have taken a more personally critical approach to the role. For instance, in Kupfer’s Bayreuth production in 1980, when Senta appeared in act 2, she was literally walled inside Daland’s house, a prisoner of her own desires. The only opening was a small window out of which she threw herself when committing suicide. In Herbert Wernicke’s production, first seen at the Nationaltheater in Munich, in 1981, the Dutchman represented a release for Senta from the stifling life of the bourgeoisie, even making his initial entrance through a symbolic open window. The troubled existence that Kupfer and Wernicke attributed to Senta was absent from the innocent setting for act 2 which Wagner described in the libretto:

A large room in Daland’s house; on the side-walls pictures of sea-subjects, charts, etc. on the further wall the portrait of a pale man, with a dark beard, in black Spanish garb. Mary and the maidens are sitting about the fireplace,
and spinning. Senta, leaning back in an arm-chair, is absorbed in dreamy contemplation of the portrait on the further wall.40

In his realization, Ponnelle retained Senta’s ardent fixation on the mysterious Dutchman and the frightening aspects of that supernatural bond. However, the visualization of their union made it clear that his interpretation of the opera stemmed from a fundamental disagreement with the point of view that engendered it.

Taken as a whole, the critical reaction to Ponnelle’s realization of Der Fliegende Holländer focused on the latitude he exerted in his interpretation of explicit and implicit indications for staging given in the musical score. While contemporary stage practice permits, and even encourages, directors to devise their own visualizations rather than relying on stage directions, his detractors charged that he had not even adhered to the spirit of the story, much less to the elements of presentation that the composer had described. The Opera News review by Martin Bernheimer was representative: “Though innovation is the lifeblood of the theatre, Ponnelle’s concept for the composer’s early work proved so perverse, so arbitrary, and so anti-musical and -- textual, that one suspects a search for novelty at any cost, integrity [sic] tossed to the wind.”41 Julius Novak in The Village Voice was merciless: “It was all totally arbitrary, totally frivolous; it cast no new light; it clarified nothing; it weakened the opera’s emotional impact by weakening the focus on the Dutchman and Senta, both yearning for a transcendent love. This was a ‘Bright Idea” opera with a vengeance.”42
It has been noted in a previous chapter that Ponnelle generally considered the music of an opera a blueprint from which to build a production. It has also been noted that he was not opposed to side-stepping textual or musical directives when he considered them dramatically weak. Although he maintained that he held Wagner in high regard as a composer, he asserted his directorial prerogative to make changes to the visualization of Der Fliegende Holländer in order to improve its dramatic viability:

With all that Wagner was able to bring to opera in the way of theatrical innovation -- and he was a great avant-gardiste -- he was still a child of the nineteenth century theater, whereas his musical innovations are timeless. Today, therefore, we can get beyond what the composer was able to imagine in theatrical terms during his lifetime and still remain faithful to his work.

Ponnelle's separation of the work itself -- that is the music -- and its realization on stage recalls Appia's observation of the Wagnerian contradiction between his operas and their contemporary staging, a contradiction that he, too, had attributed to Wagner's acceptance of theatrical convention: "Obviously his sense of visual form was not appreciably developed beyond this convention, which did not offend his own vision. . . . In accepting the traditional means of staging and setting for his dramas, Wagner displayed a defect which explains why he failed to recognize the limitations of the decorative methods of our stage." The changes which Appia championed for Wagner's dramas, however, were reserved for the
staging itself. In contrast, Ponnelle’s realization of Der Fliegende Holländer, went beyond the scenic execution, and affected not only the plot, but also the composer’s philosophy contained within it. Senta’s climactic self-sacrifice, and the subsequent final moments of the opera, became the most controversial feature of the production, and shed light on Ponnelle’s view of Wagner’s ideas.

In his libretto, Wagner described his vision of the ending of the opera: “She [Senta] casts herself into the sea. The Dutchman’s ship, with all her crew, sinks immediately. The sea rises high and sinks back in a whirlpool. In the glow of the sunset are clearly seen, over the wreck of the ship, the forms of Senta and the Dutchman, embracing each other, rising from the sea, and floating upwards.”

Ponnelle’s resolution of the opera removed the spirituality which Wagner envisioned. For the composer, the Dutchman “in his passionate remonstrance against [Senta] sharing in his fate… becomes a human being through and through, whereas he hitherto had often given us but the grim impression of a ghost.”

Ponnelle’s conclusion, however, included neither the physical actions described by Wagner, nor its metaphysical implications. Due to the dream structure of the production, it incorporated two exits: the first from the interior drama (the dream) and the second from the exterior drama (the opera itself), necessitating a two-fold closure. The final moments were depicted as follows: the Dutchman stood waiting at his portal listening to Senta sing her pledge to be true until death, while the Steersman/Erik begged her to stay. As soon as she finished singing, Senta turned upstage and walked to the Dutchman waiting at the edge of his portal, where he enfolded her in his caped arms as the stage darkened. In the
blackout which followed the Ballet Double exited, replaced by the Steersman who took a sleeping position downstage of the helm. Once the exchange was made, the lights came up slowly as the redemption theme played, revealing not the Dutchman and Senta soaring upwards in ecstasy, nor even a lighting effect that would signify their transfiguration, but simply a drowsy Steersman asleep below the helm in the position the audience had last seen the Ballet Double. With the dream concluded, the exterior drama remained to be resolved. The lights gradually intensified, the snow began to fall as it had at the beginning of the opera, and the wave machines churned again to recreate the realistic atmosphere of the ship. The Steersman walked to his position at the helm and, perhaps in recollection of his dream, tossed his head back and laughed as the curtain fell.

This was not the first time nor the last that a director had rejected Wagner’s intention to depict a spiritual transfiguration for the Dutchman and Senta in favour of a more realistic ending. In Wieland Wagner’s 1959 production, the Dutchman died onstage and Senta simply vanished into the darkness. In 1962, at the end of Joachim Herz’s production at the Komische Oper in Berlin, Senta died of a “sudden numbness in her heart” before saving the Dutchman, a condition which Wagner himself had attributed to naive Norwegian maids in reference to Senta. Kupfer’s 1978 version ended when she threw herself from a window out of despair instead of saving the Dutchman. In Wernicke’s 1981 production, the Dutchman, whom Senta saw as offering an escape from her stifling bourgeois lifestyle, viewed her as offering the domestic comforts for which he longed. Their conflicting desires resulted in tragedy: Senta’s anguish caused her
to stab herself with Erik's hunting knife in the presence of the Dutchman, who remained seated in the armchair next to the fireplace in Daland's parlor.54

Whereas interpretations such as Wernicke's contained political overtones, Ponnelle's resisted such a context. Instead, the director's interest lay in probing the subconscious mind of the Steersman, leaving other characters to exist as figments of his imagination. "I make no attempt to analyze the psychology of the Dutchman or to explain the motives behind Senta's behavior," the director emphasized. "To me, Senta and the Dutchman are complete characters who stand as they are, characters who do not evolve throughout the course of the work because they are creations of the Steersman's subconscious."55 The effect on the audience of their remaining un-evolved was pondered by at least one reviewer who, after seeing the San Francisco premiere, wrote:

If the Dutchman and Senta are merely to become phantoms in a mad dream . . . their very human plight becomes a matter of empty poses. Ponnelle's Dutchman is stripped of tragic pathos, just as his Senta is denied any semblance of womanly urgency. One can watch these two puppets in their endless love duet and only be fascinated by the director's bold theatrical manipulations.

One cannot be moved.56

The degree of emotional involvement by the spectator was, in fact, a critical element in the production. As noted earlier, the exterior drama commented on
the interior drama, through the reactions of the sleeping Steersman/Ballet Double. Such a contextual element, theoretically, impedes the spectators' complete emotional involvement in the interior drama because it increases the aesthetic distance. The presence of the Steersman/Ballet Double acted as an alienating device, similar to those employed by Bertolt Brecht, such as titles projected above the stage, and an acting style in which the actor did not become completely involved in his/her role, but rather maintained an objective distance from it, acting and reacting simultaneously. Of course, Brecht's theories of staging were diametrically opposed to those of Richard Wagner, who had striven to create a sense of hypnotic abandonment in his spectators. They also contradicted Appia's goal of revising the staging of Wagner's operas in order that dramatic expression of the artistic vision could attain its full transcendental power: "... it will create a new vision for all, which the spectator will no longer be able to shape according to his own desire, but which he will of necessity vividly experience through the vibrations which the music sets up in his entire being." Ponnelle professed no such theoretical objectives, but rather, as noted earlier, explained his realization as the result of having used music -- rather than the libretto or the composer's writings -- as his interpretive guide.

It has been stressed that Ponnelle's revisioning of the opera preceded and followed in the wake of other productions of Der Fliegende Holländer (such as those referenced in this chapter) that also differed from the production described by the composer himself in the opera text and in production notes. The reverence given to Wagner's directives by Cosima Wagner had, of course, long since fallen
out of favour by 1975 when Ponnelle first staged the opera. Some evidence exists that suggests that Wagner himself may not have been satisfied with the materialization of his dramatic vision because, as specific as his notes for staging were, he also wrote that they "must remain puzzles for aesthetic criticism until they have filled their purpose as technically fixed points in a complete dramatic representation, as hints for acting, as stimuli for the creative imagination."60 Ponnelle's interpretation must be considered in terms of a preference for music over words, and beyond.

One may look to a number of factors in order to construct, in part, the reason behind Ponnelle's particular interpretation of Der Fliegende Holländer. The first may be the director's view of his role in relation to the work itself. Ponnelle's contemporary, Wieland Wagner, for instance, made no apologies for his divergence from his grandfather's directives in the realization of his works: "The function of the stage director," he asserted," is interpretation, not arrangement. Stage direction is a re-creative activity; it is not the rehashing of existing patterns and worn-out cliches."61 Ponnelle's interpretation of the opera indicated that he, too, defied the necessity to follow the mise en scène described by the composer or librettist. In fact, in explaining his interpretations of this and other operas, he was very clear: "I don't necessarily follow the literal line of the libretto or the stage directions set by the composer. I adhere to something which is much truer and deeper – the music."62

The need to consider Wagner's music apart from his paratextual
indications for staging was advocated by Appia, who wrote in *Music and the Art of the Theatre*:

> If we are to understand the significance of production in Wagner's work . . . we must first determine which of his intentions (as he has revealed them to us by his writing and by his actual production methods) he was able to fulfill. Only then can we evaluate, through the principles of the hierarchy created by the music, his conception of production, and judge what influence this conception has exerted upon the construction of his dramas.63

Accordingly, Appia weighed what he interpreted as Wagner's artistic intentions in light of the finished work and its realization. In his visualization of *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Ponnelle did not change, or rearrange, any of the music of the opera (nor indeed did he change any words, merely the assignation of roles). Even so, his staging of the climactic final moments challenged the relationship of words and music as interdependent artistic expressions of a single creator, a choice which affected not only the artistic vision but also the philosophical position of the composer conveyed through the work and related writings.

In *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Wagner composed specific musical themes which suggested accompanying visualizations, such as the Dutchman's motif, the storm motif and the redemption motif. Each recurrence strengthens the association between the musical and dramatic themes. For instance, the Dutchman's entrance is anticipated long before he actually appears by his musical
theme and accompanying references to him in the libretto. Ponnelle even emphasized this relationship throughout the opera by using a blood-red lighting effect to illuminate the stage each time the theme was played. Thus, when the Dutchman finally appeared, the coincidence of the aural and the visual elements (the musical theme and the actual appearance) provided a satisfaction of the anticipation which had been created.

The most significant musical idea in Der Fliegende Holländer is the redemption theme, which is introduced in the overture, and heard again in act 2 during Senta’s ballad. Wagner himself had considered it central to the dramatic construction, referring to it in 1851 as the “thematic seed of all the music in the opera.” The theme took on an even more important role in the revised version, which Ponnelle staged. It became an aural premonition of the sacrificial suicide of Senta and therefore closely associated with the dramatic action. In the final, and most significant moments of the opera, Ponnelle’s staging undercut the musical-dramatic association already established and thereby weakened the musical resolution of the opera. When the redemption theme played, the Dutchman and Senta were no longer visible, and its function was reduced to underscoring the awakening of the Steersman and his return to the helm.

The rejection of redemption at the end of the opera was not a first. In Wieland Wagner’s 1959 production at Bayreuth, the Dutchman died before he was able to return to his ship, and before Senta was able to save him. But Wieland Wagner had used the original Dresden score in which there is no repeat of the redemption theme in the end. Ponnelle used the revised version of the score,
which does restate the redemption theme. If, as Ponnelle has asserted, the music embodies the drama, then a particular theme is not only part of the score, it is a dramatic construct also. By separating the music and the staging, particularly at this critical point in the drama, he shattered the musical framework to which he said he remained faithful.

A deeper reason for this choice becomes evident in light of Ponnelle’s staging of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde in 1981. In that production he once again undercut the theme of redemption in the final moments of the opera, inviting criticism in an otherwise highly acclaimed realization. The scenic picture was overall a magnificent visual feast dominated by one of Ponnelle’s most characteristic central props: a tree. In the first act, the sail that separated Isolde and Brangaene from Tristan was held up by a mast that resembled a tree trunk. In the second act, it reappeared as an enormous tree filled with hundreds of tiny lights, a poetic shelter for the lovers who knelt together under its lush foliage. In the third and final act, the opulent tree of the second act was nothing more than barren, cleaved trunk. At the base of this tree a feverish Tristan lay dying from his wounds. When Isolde appeared to sing her “Liebestod” she did so through the shafts of the tree trunk, then disappeared when the ship carrying Brangaene and Marke arrived. It was then that Tristan realized that Isolde had not come at all. Instead, she had been merely a vision derived from his delirium. No metaphysical comfort existed, no redemption through the love of a woman, only solitude and death symbolized by the shattered tree. Tristan and Isolde were denied transfiguration. The bleakness of the ending once again thwarted Wagner’s optimistic belief in the power of love, dismissing it as naive idealism.
Ponnelle's realization of the ending of Tristan und Isolde was based on an objection to Wagner's belief in redemption through love. In an interview given in 1983, he asserted that he had deliberately disregarded Wagner's intentions because he viewed the transfiguration of the lovers as uncomfortably naive and contrary to a modern sophistication. In his view, the tragedy of the opera was accentuated by Isolde's being already dead (at least for Tristan) when she sang her Liebestod. It was Kurwenal then who, through his deep friendship with Tristan, took her place and became "death's midwife" as he comforted his dying friend by playing his flute.

In 1975, when Ponnelle initially staged Der Fliegende Holländer, he had raised the same objections against the self-sacrifice of Senta for the Dutchman, objections which lead to the rejection of it in his staging. The attainment of spiritual peace for the Dutchman through Senta's love was at the foundation of the opera's dramatic construction, as well as its musical construction; it was explicit in both. Therefore, Ponnelle's staging of the ending without a reference to redemption did alter the opera as a musical-dramatic unity. The redemption was invalidated because the musical theme which had prepared the spectator for it was played without the expected corresponding action. The ending of Der Fliegende Holländer, which was prompted by the director's objection to Wagner's philosophy, as well as his rejection of the composer's stated artistic intentions, did not merely change the staging, but more specifically, the staging that was strongly suggested in the music.
Although Ponnelle's realization adhered to the composer's vision in certain physical aspects, philosophically it diverged completely. At the end of the production, when the Steersman awoke to realize that he had been dreaming, it was clear that Wagner's romantic idealism had been replaced by cynicism. The final image of the laughing Steersman hardly disguised Ponnelle's sobering suggestion to the modern audience that the utopia envisioned by the composer was possible only in a dream.

No other production by Ponnelle aroused so much wrath and indignation as Der Fliegende Holländer. The director's critics charged, and his staunchest supporters conceded, that it represented an extreme example of an adherence to music alone, without regard for the libretto or the composer's directives.
Notes


3 Virginia Irwin, personal interview, June 11, 1994.


9 Imre Fabian, Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (Zürich und Schwäbisch Hall: Orell Füssli Verlag, 1983) 50.

10 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, untitled director’s note, San Francisco Opera Magazine 1979: 59.

11 All references to staging were taken from the 1975 San Francisco Opera production book. Additional information courtesy of Virginia Irwin, Assistant to
the Director for the 1975 San Francisco production, and 1979 Metropolitan Opera production.

12 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, untitled director's note, 59.


16 Adolphe Appia, Music and the Art of the Theatre, 46.


18 Richard Wagner, "Remarks on Performing the Opera 'Der Fliegende Holländer,'” 330.

19 Richard Wagner, "Remarks on Performing the Opera 'Der Fliegende Holländer,'” 332.


24 All references to staging were taken from the 1975 San Francisco Opera production book. Additional information courtesy of Virginia Irwin.


27 Richard Wagner, Der Fliegende Holländer (New York and London: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1897) piano-vocal score, 77. All references to staging were taken from the 1975 San Francisco Opera production book. Additional information courtesy of Virginia Irwin.


33 Richard Wagner, "Remarks on Performing the Opera 'Der Fliegende Holländer,'" 335.

34 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, untitled director's note, 59.

35 Joan Chatfield-Taylor, Backstage at the Opera (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1982) 84.

36 All references to staging were taken from the 1975 San Francisco Opera production book. Additional information courtesy of Virginia Irwin.

37 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, untitled director's note, 59.


43 See Chapter 3 for a discussion of this approach.


45 Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, untitled director's note, 59.

Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, 114


Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, untitled director’s note, 59.


66 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 130.


68 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 132.

69 Imre Fabian, *Im Gespräch mit Jean-Pierre Ponnelle*, 132.

70 Armisted Maupin, “Dealing in Dreams,” (The published version read: “I have an aversion to bombastic endings because they are abstract,” but the unpublished quote in an early draft read: “I have an aversion to bombastic
endings because I prefer to leave the business of redemption to Jesus Christ."
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Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.

71 At least one enthusiastic patron has ventured to defend Ponnelle’s staging of the final scene of Tristan und Isolde as a musical one. In a letter published in Opera January 1983: 41, the following point was made: “... in all the controversy surrounding Ponnelle’s ‘Tristan’ at Bayreuth in 1981 and revived this year, I have yet to come across a comment on the explicit musical clue which justifies treating act 3 as Tristan’s hallucination. In every production I have seen (and recording I have heard), the shepherd’s second (happy) ‘tune’ is not played on the cor anglais specified by Wagner for both ‘tunes.’ Therein lies the clue. Ernest Newman tells us that Wagner later added that ‘the cor anglais should produce the effect here of a very powerful natural instrument such as the Alpine horn’, going on to suggest that either the cor anglais is re-inforced by other instruments of that a special wooden Swiss Alpine horn be made. In any event, Wagner wanted a totally different sound. When I noticed at the first night in Bayreuth that, instead of ‘playing’ the second tune, the shepherd, was advancing, shepherd ‘cor anglais’ in hand, towards the delirious Tristan, the hallucination idiom became instantly obvious and logical, heavily reinforced at the end by the silhouettes of Mark and Brangäne.” (Michael Varcoe-Cocks, London)

In 1978 the world premiere of Aribert Reimann’s Lear at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich marked a milestone in opera history and in Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s career. The opera was based on the Shakespearean play, yet it was undeniably modern. Its contemporary musical idiom and ageless themes were expressed in a pantemporal setting conceived by Ponnelle, with costumes by Pet Halmen. The critical and popular acclaim lavished on the opera and its production was unprecedented. James Helme Sutcliffe wrote in the International Dictionary of Opera: “Few operas premiered during the second half of the twentieth century have received such immediate acceptance by public and critics alike as Lear.”1 Reviewers hailed the work as an indisputable triumph and the capacity audiences in attendance at all nine performances of the first run concluded each with standing ovations for the composer, conductor, director and cast.2

Three years later, Kurt Herbert Adler brought Ponnelle’s production to the San Francisco Opera as part of its first Summer Festival in 1981. In contrast to the overwhelming enthusiasm of the Munich audiences, however, the American press and audiences expressed serious reservations about the work and its presentation. Many of the superlatives bestowed on the composer and director at Lear’s premiere were replaced with blunt dismissals. Andrew Porter’s extensive article in The New Yorker critiqued the opera as a musical version of Shakespeare’s play and concluded: “One can read Reimann’s composition diary... and admire his intelligence, seriousness, and dexterity. But those are not virtues enough to ensure a powerful music drama. For all the elaborate artifice, the music
itself is commonplace — and unworthy of a ‘King Lear.’”3 Other reviewers, like Alfred Frankenstein, were even less impressed by the mise en scène. He wrote in Musical America: “[Ponelle’s] setting was an illogical and ineffective mixture of two old-fashioned styles. . . . a worn-out naturalism was mixed with constructivism that ran its course in the 1920s.”4

In addition to finding fault with the music and the stage picture, several American reviewers were critical of the English text, which had been prepared by Desmond Clayton from the German libretto by Claus H. Henneberg. Henneberg had explained that, “Transforming a Shakespearean play into an opera libretto requires reduction, tightening and lyric-dramatic intensification. I have cut from Shakespeare’s text what music can express.”5 In fact, the German libretto compressed 3,300 lines into about 1,200.6 Clayton’s translation, which naturally followed Henneberg’s lead, was subjected to comparisons with Shakespeare’s original verse. John Rockwell, for instance, flinched at hearing the condensed language. “The gain in audience understanding was enormous,” he wrote in the New York Times, “but in English, the loss of Shakespeare’s poetry — even with as many verbatim lines as possible — is felt more keenly than it is in German.”7

The decision to perform the work in translation for the San Francisco premiere was an unusual one for Ponelle, whose other productions in the United States were presented in their original languages. In an interview given in 1978, he had expressed his conviction that since an opera is composed as a musical-dramatical unity, the original language should be the language of performance; the
only exceptions being pieces intended as popular works. Yet, when Adler and he discussed the possibility of bringing Lear to San Francisco, he immediately expressed his support for staging it in translation, in order to make it more accessible to the English-speaking audience.

The director’s concern regarding the language of the opera indicated that he hoped a translation might pave the way for an acceptance of Reimann’s aggressive score. Unfortunately, his expectation for a less enthusiastic response from the San Francisco audience compared to the Munich one proved to be accurate. The negativity towards the opera expressed in the press reflected the public response at the performances. Janos Gereben described the atmosphere at the premiere in the Northwest Arts review: “Only a few of the capacity, 3,000-strong audience left during the performance; scores were fleeing, however, during the intermission.”

Despite Lear’s lack of critical and popular success in America, Ponnelle’s production deserves attention as a formidable illustration of his artistry. In this work, each production element — costumes, movement, lights, and even the stage itself — was a tightly woven, interdependent component of a stylized mise en scène that succinctly captured the essence of the drama. The production represents the director’s greatest technical and artistic achievement in the United States, a cohesive musical realization in the spirit of Adolphe Appia and Vsevelod Meyerhold that became a powerful exegesis of Reimann’s work.

In many respects, Reimann’s opera proved a formidable undertaking for the
San Francisco Opera Company. The orchestra pit had to be enlarged to accommodate the 82 musicians required, the prompter’s box extended to include a keyboard to assist the singer-actors, and a larger conductor’s podium constructed to hold the oversized score. The musicians faced a complex work that had its musical roots in Strauss, Schönberg and Berg with tonal clusters at times written out individually for the 42 stringed instruments, free flowing rhythms, and surges of brass and percussion alternating with small string groups. The singer-actors had to master a lack of traditional metrical organization and to find their pitches independent of the complex orchestral sounds. Thomas Stewart, who played the lead role, discovered that his vocal part challenged even an experienced performer: “You know, the learning process I’ve used and fallen back on for many years -- and I’ve learned a number of contemporary things with it -- I simply find lets me down at times. . . It just doesn’t fit the music.”

According to Gerd Albrecht, the conductor for Lear in both Munich and San Francisco, Reimann’s music challenged the listener as well: “The first twenty minutes are very, very difficult because Reimann takes in the entire musical material, and he gives us -- the musicians, the public -- no time in which to understand it. It overwhelms you completely.” Later in the opera, however, Albrecht observed that the listener is offered music that becomes more recognizable: “Gradually it becomes easier, easier, still easier. The second act becomes very simple at times, until by the end it sounds like ‘Eine kleine Nachtmusik,’ or even Tchaikovsky.”
The complexity of Reimann’s work and the fact that it was a new composition presented a particular challenge to the director as well. When Ponnelle began the task of conceiving the opera for the stage there was no piano reduction and no recording to assist him. Instead, he had to rely on his discussions with the composer and his ability to read a full orchestral score to understand the work. Perhaps because of his musical training and directorial credits which at the time included twentieth-century works by Henze, Orff, and Strauss, he was undaunted by the necessity of conceiving his visualization and conducting rehearsals from the full orchestral score of this difficult work. In fact, he preferred it: “It’s much easier to work on a complex piece directly from the orchestral score, where I can imagine the sonorities, rather than from a piano reduction. . . . In any case, there was no piano reduction, and since ‘Lear’ is not primarily a melodic work, it would have made no sense to listen to it on the piano.”

Ponnelle’s ability to master Reimann’s difficult music freed him from a reliance on the libretto or Shakespeare’s play as the basis for his visualization and enabled him to follow his usual practice of drawing ideas for design and staging from the score. Certainly, given the common subject matter of the opera and the play there were similarities that were also evident in the mise en scène. In addition, King Lear was the subject of well-known contemporary critical and dramatic reassessments of which the director may have been aware. Among them, Jan Kott’s Shakespeare Our Contemporary, first published in 1964, which insisted on the relevance of its nihilism in modern society; Peter Brook’s black and white
film in 1970 which presented a stark vision of the play in a setting that captured the tenuous balance between primitivism and futurism, and Edward Bond’s 1971 play Lear, which constructed a shockingly brutal post-apocalyptic world. For Ponnelle, however, the connection between the subject matter of the play and the opera was superseded by Reimann’s music. It created a new work of drama, the text of which was music. For this reason, he distanced his scenic conception from a literary or theoretical source and looked to the music as the catalyst. “You have to forget your Shakespeare,” he asserted, “and base your entire dramaturgical and visual concept on the music when you’re dealing with opera. Having accepted the invitation to stage Reimann’s opera, the guiding factor was Reimann’s music.”

When it came to the external presentation of an opera Ponnelle was always concerned with establishing an organic connection between musical style and visual style. In Lear his scenic conception supported this objective. The catalyst of Reimann’s music led to a visualization vastly different from his previous designs and wholly unlike any other production of his seen in America. The opera’s modernity inspired a realization in which traditional scenic dressings were banished from the stage:

[Reimann’s opera is a contemporary work, so why use all that old stuff – velvet drapes or painted drops or a cyclorama or whatever? And then I discovered that I could open the proscenium to a width of forty meters. That was the great thing. Expose the entire stage. I found I could use all the pipes on the wall for the storm scene,
and so on. A kind of mixture of ancient myth and circus.23

The first visual impression of Lear was immediately remarkable for a lack of the opulence characteristic of traditional opera stage designs. Instead, the absence of flats, drops and curtains was replaced by the presence of “scenery” on the floor.

The stage of the War Memorial Opera House was divided into nine sections. The three centre sections each measured 12 x 32 feet and could be raised individually to create a hollow space below stage level. Attached to these three sections were three corresponding wings on each side, measuring 12 x 16 feet, that could be raised and lowered individually by a system of counter weights (Fig. 1). The movement requirements of the design had been within the impressive technical capabilities of the stage at the Bayerische Staatsoper, but the War Memorial Opera house in San Francisco did not have a movable stage at all, much less one capable of moving nine sections independently. Therefore, the San Francisco set construction crew spent several weeks building a completely new stage for the production at a nearby armory where the rehearsals were also conducted, then assembling it in the theatre for the performances.24 As in Munich, the stage was completely stripped of curtains so that the bare walls of the theatre, the lights and rails were completely exposed.

Ponnelle’s stripped stage did convey a certain self-awareness, characteristic of the Elizabethan period. However, it differed in that it was not simply a platform for the drama, but a hostile environment that became part of it. It embodied the tragic pessimism that the composer highlighted in his transformation of the play
Fig. 1. Set design for Lear showing platforms (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
to the opera. Among the differences that critics observed between *King Lear* and *Lear* was that of focus. Whereas the former traced the king's development of self-awareness the latter described a state of being. The following observation was made in several reviews: "Though Reimann possesses little vocabulary for the maturing process that Lear must undergo . . . he still manages never to fail in the labyrinth of evil insinuations, hideous injustice and acts of brutality.25

In stripping the stage of its conventional *accoutrements* Ponnelle created a savage emptiness that became emblematic of the human condition that Reimann described in his music. The harshness of existence, as suggested by the often violent waves of atonal chords that punctuated vocal passages, was visualized by what was missing as much as by what was present. There was no soft place on stage, no chair, no bed, no building, no sense of a sheltering interior except a dark hollow space, made by the raising of the centre platforms, into which the Fool disappeared and never returned. All eleven scenes in the two acts of *Lear* were played out entirely on this inhospitable heath, where changes in locale were created solely through lighting and the adjustment of the platforms and wings, rather than through any addition of tangible scenic elements.

Still, this seemingly barren, unforgiving landscape was a rich stage environment which generated multiple layers of meaning. The director was well aware of the dramatic potency of this "empty" space:

In stripping clear the traditional theatrical space, I wanted to arrive at a kind of no-man's land. I said to myself that an empty stage would take on a completely
anonymous character much more than if I’d used a black velvet masking or something similar. The bare stage represents a total emptiness, a kind of theatrical end of the world.26

Whereas in many of Ponnelle’s stage designs towering vertical structures anchored the action, in Lear there was no such eye-lifting icon. Rather, the stage floor was a focal point, integrated into the overall stage picture, and imbued with life. Once the nine platforms were assembled, the floor was covered with differently-coloured ground cloths, then dotted with a maze of various sized rocks among which dried grasses were added (Fig. 2). These were scattered about the floor, representing, perhaps, the shattered remains of a castle, or simply an inhospitable piece of earth.

In contrast to later directors and designers of Lear, like Harry Kupfer and Reinhart Zimmermann who filled the space with a plethora of eclectic artifacts that hung over a raft-like structure representing the remains of Lear’s world,27 Ponnelle used a dramatic economy in his visualization. The king’s throne, for instance, was represented simply by a flattened rock on which he stood to address the court. It seemed a paltry symbol of power, a rock in the middle of a wasteland, yet it quickly became an icon of the territorial struggle to follow. Goneril and Regan stood on it when they each inherited half the kingdom, and when Edmund jumped up on it for “Wherefore Bastard?” it became clear that the struggle for the barren plot of land would be a bloody one. In the first act the throne rock was a muted version of the central prop that the director incorporated into many of his set designs, a focal point of physical action and thematic symbolism. In the second
Fig. 2. Set design for Lear showing ground cloths and rocks (Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera)
act it was replaced by a smaller rock amid the others on the stage. Imbued in the first act with symbolic significance, its subsequent absence was as noteworthy as its presence had been.

Although Ponnelles asserted that his set was influenced by the contemporary idiom of Reimann’s music, in fact, both possessed timeless and multicultural elements. For example, although the composer used the twentieth century twelve-tone method of composition, the pervasive percussion and droning tonal clusters evoked a primitive sound. In addition, the melismas that Edgar sang when disguised as Poor Tom were influenced by the composer hearing a muezzin in Jerusalem,28 and the rhythmic alternation of orchestral surges and vocal lines suggested Japanese Kabuki and Noh drama.

The director matched the temporal and geographical multiplicity of the music in the mise en scène from the very outset. Since the composer had rejected the traditional overture to begin Lear, the director conceived an equally non-traditional opening for the action. The main curtain was already up by the time the audience began to filter in, exposing the stage as stage. As the house lights were lowered, Goneril, Albany, Regan, Cornwall, France, Cordelia, Edgar, Edmund, Gloucester, and Kent assembled for their audience with Lear, all before any music was heard.

Against the austere scenic backdrop the tableau of principal characters presented an eclectic picture that defied an association with any one era or place. The three sisters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia wore off-white full-length dresses,
made of rough cloth with matching white and silver turbans, that seemed both primitive and post-apocalyptic. After Goneril and Regan inherited the kingdom they donned opulent gowns and headdresses of no specific period and wore the chalk white make-up of characters in traditional Japanese theatre. Edgar and Edmund were dressed in similar black and gold outfits like medieval knights for the initial scenes. Edmund continued to wear a black costume throughout the opera in reference to his treacherous nature. Edgar changed into scant rags to portray Poor Tom, then into a white tunic, pants and boots for his dual with Edmund. The Dukes of Cornwall and Albany were dressed identically throughout in black pants, tunic, boots and armour. Gloucester and Kent wore similar full-length dark brown robes.

The staging that Ponnelle devised also reflected the eclecticism in the opera. Lear made his entrance toward his court for the first scene in a manner that complemented the stylization of the setting and costumes. In complete silence he emerged from an invisible upstage trap, a gray-bearded old man in a regal red gown with a matching crown. In one hand he carried a walking stick, the other he kept on the shoulder of the Fool. His solemn entrance toward the front of the stage was made with the same deliberate pace that characterizes the entrance of the principal character in Noh drama up the long bridge or hashigakari. 29

Ponnelle rejected the psychological approach that he had employed to stage other operas in favour of a stylization that evoked the exalted grandeur of traditional Eastern theatre:

Through the intermediary of Oriental theater, which
serves as a catalyst, we can perhaps rediscover a kind of mythical sense that was evident to the Greeks but that is lost to us. For that reason I used certain Oriental elements — be they Chinese or Japanese — without making King Lear into a Japanese ruler, of course.30

The heightened style that Ponnelle used to give Lear a mythical grandeur was a reflection of his interest not only in creating a profound theatrical experience that he believed could be found in stylization rather than in representation, but also in establishing an organic connection between the music of an opera and its mise en scène. Opera, the director asserted, was an art form that resisted realistic contemporary settings.31 Even Reimann’s modern music did not suggest modern scenery or a realistic acting style to Ponnelle. In contrast, it did to directors like Jacques Lassalle, who staged Lear at the Paris L’Opéra in 1983. Lassalle set the opera on a bare stage with few props, and clothed the singer-actors in contemporary everyday clothes. Charles Pitt praised the fine performances by all the principals in his Opera review of the production. Still, he felt unsatisfied by Peter Gottlieb’s portrayal of Lear:

What he finally lacked for me is the quality of grandeur — that quality that made Donal Wolfit’s Lear tower above all others. Some might call it ham and many modern actors, including the intelligent Mr. Gottlieb, avoid it. But it is a quality I need from a Lear.32

Ponnelle’s stylized visualization of Lear captured the grandeur that Pitt missed and recalled Vesevelod Meyerhold’s assertion that stylization was the very basis of
operatic art because it was the visual equivalent to music.33

Each scenic element in Ponnelle’s mise en scène – set design, gesture and movement, light – embodied music. The stage floor, for instance, became a powerful dramatic antagonist introduced during Lear’s initial entrance. As the king approached his assembled court he was forced to negotiate the sea of rocks in his way. He meandered among them slowly towards the front of the stage, almost led like a blind man by the Fool. When he arrived at his throne rock he appeared as if worn out by a long and arduous journey. He was a tired, overwrought man, ready to relinquish his responsibilities. When he spoke of his need to give in to his overpowering longing for sleep it seemed that the very terrain over which he struggled had exhausted him.34 In no other production did Ponnelle use the stage floor as such a vital element of the visualization and a powerful dramatic component. He incorporated it as a compositional element within the overall stage picture in a manner that realized Meyerhold’s vision of it as the pedestal upon which the performer could truly become a work of art:

The greatest obstacle [to this achievement] is the flat surface of the stage. If only one could mould it like a sculptor moulds his clay, the broad expanse of floor could be transformed into a compact series of surfaces on varying levels. Lives would be broken up, characters could be grouped more closely in delicate curves, beautiful chiaroscuro effects could be achieved, the sound would be more concentrated.35
In Ponnelle’s hands the stage floor was modeled into a component that
developed a dramatic life of its own as an adversary, an obstacle against which the
very act of crossing the stage became an effort that pitted the characters against it in
a graphic contest of wills. Since much of the action took place on and among the
rocks, they hid, elevated, and even hampered the singer-actors as they walked
among them. Their movements were defined by it and evoked erratic rhythmic
patterns that complemented the unpredictable rhythms of Reimann’s music. The
stage became a rhythmic space to which the singer-actors’ movements gave life
through resistance. It was not simply a dead space filled with inanimate objects,
but an active force in the drama, responding and even commenting upon it. It
participated in the dramatic conflict like an actor, becoming an integral part of the
dynamic mise en scène. It was as Adolph Appia had envisioned: “The opposition
has created life in the inanimate form, the space has become living!”36

The extent to which the director pursued the idea of a “living” stage can be
seen in two examples in which it acted as if it was a living entity, an actor that
responded to the dramatic action by the raising or lowering of its elevators and
wings. When Lear and his knights were in the middle of a drunken revelry in act
1, scene 2, he was confronted by his angry daughters. The knights watched with
trepidation as Goneril berated Lear for their riotous acts of sword-fighting, drunken
meandering, fighting over wineskins, and even vomiting.37 Their behaviour, like
their appearance, was animalistic. They wore neutral-coloured jackets that
resembled medieval armour, and horned helmets that hid the upper part of their
faces, giving them the appearance of Vikings.
As the sisters discussed reducing the number of Lear’s knights, the side-wings of the stage begin to rise and force the men to recoil upstage. They rose slowly as the rejection of both the former king and his knights became imminent and continued to rise as the scene progressed. The chorus notes called for, "A big reaction. The side walls are coming up. You feel imprisoned." The knights huddled together in a mass as they were gradually robbed of their territorial claim by the sisters and by the collapsing stage which threatened to crush them. The shrinking stage was charged with an expressiveness that captured the fear of the knights as their way of life was stripped from them by the king’s daughters, and embodied the power of Goneril and Regan as it threatened to crush them. In short, Ponnelle did not confine the function of the stage to that of representing a place. Rather, he elevated its status to that of an actor actively participating in the drama.

The most spectacular dramatic participation of the stage occurred during the storm in act I, scene 3, when Lear, having been rejected by his daughters, defied the elements. The storm was built aurally and visually through orchestral effects of wind and rain, and the deepening blue of the stage lighting. As Lear stood alone on Platform A calling for the storm, the platforms and wings began to heave, as if an earthquake was rumbling underneath the stage floor. In the space above Lear’s head, rows of rails (used to hold scenic drops in the flies of the theatre) moved up and down through blinding flashes of lightning, and a rhythmic “breathing” of the lights that created pulsating shadows across the stage. The stage seemed to come alive in its resistance to the old man who stood on it, as if trying to shake him off with its violent undulating. Ponnelle’s inhospitable heath opposed the human body both in stasis and motion. The shifting platforms, like the rocky terrain
which the actors had to negotiate in order to walk, created a dynamic resistance, a forceful conflict between humanity and earth. In the final moments of the storm, as the music subsided, the stage, too, seemed to exhale, as if it exhausted by its efforts. The direct participation of the stage in the dramatic action marked this production as a technical and dramatic milestone in Ponnelle's career. In Lear the director extended the role of the stage beyond providing a surface for the sets and singer-actors and gave it a dramatic viability that remained unsurpassed in any other production.

In every aspect of Ponnelle's mise en scène the integral role of music was evident. It served as an inspiration for characterizations drawn from specific cues in Reimann's music that immediately described the different temperaments of the older sisters in a more forceful way than Shakespeare's lines indicate. The staging of Goneril and Regan's declarations of love for their father, for instance, illustrated the director's use of music as a guide for the physicalization of characters. Reimann's composition diary described Goneril's music: "Stiff chords contrasting with each other, at first in the woodwinds and some brass, into which gradually rising strings mix. The voice is guided through remote intervals." When Goneril was called upon to declare her love, she approached Lear in a very direct physical way by running to him and kneeling abruptly before beginning to speak. This straightforward approach matched Reimann's description of her vocal style as "quiet, direct, only rarely flexible."

In contrast to her older sister, the composer described Regan's vocal line as "Nervous, melismatic, with appoggiaturas, brief coloratura, hysterical and always
exaggerated. High woodwind, diminutive figurations, chopped-off splintered sequences of notes." The director's staging of Regan's declaration was consistent with her distinct vocal style. The production score for the San Francisco Opera production of 1981 called for her to approach Lear "like a sex cat." She moved very close to Lear using seductive flirtatious movements in contrast to her sister's direct approach.

Finally, the composer wrote about Cordelia's musical characterization: "Lyrical, always rounded and balanced. Discover a 12-tone row for her from which Edgar's is derived. These rows, structured like a cross, permeate the whole work and are handled canonically. They form in effect a motif for Cordelia and Edgar, a complex epitomizing truth and purity." Indeed, Cordelia (like Edgar) possessed an understated elegance that matched her music. More striking, however, were her dancelike movements that the director choreographed in direct response to the rhythmic impetus of the music.

Ponnelle's use of music as a catalyst for staging in Lear was not confined to specific musical cues for characterizations. It also stimulated movement that had no purpose except to underscore the expressiveness of the music. Meyerhold has written that:

The essence of stage rhythm is the antithesis of real, everyday life. Therefore, the actor's approach must be one of artistic invention, sometimes, perhaps based on realistic material, but expressed ultimately in a form far from what we see in real life. His movements and gestures should be
in accord with the stylized dialogue of his singing.\textsuperscript{43}

Ponnelle's staging was frequently characterized by precisely choreographed movements that mirrored musical changes.\textsuperscript{44} However, few of his productions were as distinguished as \textit{Lear} for evocative movement that seemed to be drawn from the impetus of the music itself. In \textit{Lear} the musical movement style advocated by Meyerhold, in which expressive sculptural plasticity rather than mimetic illustration was the defining feature, can be seen in its most forceful realization.

For instance, after Cordelia refused to declare her love for Lear, she was rejected by Lear, who then gave her to the King of France. Her emotional distress was expressed musically with bongos and tom toms banging out an irregular rhythm that seemed to amplify her heartbeat. The director fortified the suggestion in the music with violent convulsions that shook the actress's entire body as she attempted to protest. She stuttered her lines, fighting against her seemingly involuntary response to the force of the percussion rhythms.

Reimann's violent musical depiction of Edmund's rage in "Wherefore Bastard?" was also a key factor in shaping his stunning physicalization. After the land had been divided and the court dispersed, Edmund utilized his momentary privacy with Edgar to advise his younger brother to flee from Gloucester for having aroused his wrath. As Edgar exited, Edmund jumped on the throne rock and cried "Wherefore Bastard?" The vigorous percussive music and the declamatory vocal line were matched by violent movements that punctuated the
text. For instance, on his climactic line "I'll have your land and all your rights, yet!" he jumped down to the floor, and as he sang "all your rights" pounded his fist on the floor, reiterating the three percussive strikes in the previous bar. Another percussive strike preceded "Now gods," after which he half rose on another strike, then stood fully on the two successive strikes before "Stand up for bastards!" just before Gloucester approached.

"In the word-tone drama, the actor receives not merely suggestions for his playing, but also the exact proportions which he must observe," wrote Appia in *Music and the Art of the Theatre.* Although many of the reviews of *Lear* focused attention on the loud passages of violent dissonances which were certainly present in Reimann's music, these were balanced by others that were lyrical and understated, such as the reconciliations of Gloucester and Edgar, Cordelia and Lear. Ponelle's staging showed the same breath of emotional range in response to these musical changes. For example, after Lear was rejected by Goneril and Regan, he wandered out into the heath during the developing storm. There he met with Kent, and Edgar disguised as Poor Tom. As Lear and Kent began to sing together, Tom howled, and all four men gathered together in a vertical line with the Fool sitting on the ground, Kent hovering over him, Poor Tom sitting on the raised stage platform and Lear behind him. They reached this position just as Lear sang the line, "Is man no more than this?" They faced directly front and swayed in counterpoint -- a king, a fool, a servant, and a madman. The agitation of their rocking increased according to the *fioriture* sung by Poor Tom until a pause in the music ceased their movements. The silence and stillness was then broken by Tom singing "Tom's a cold" accompanied by a shiver, which was echoed musically by
the strings, and physically by Kent and the Fool.

The gestural stylization in *Lear* which resulted from the correspondence of music and movement was matched by a spatial stylization. As noted earlier, the heath was a microcosm of the disputed kingdom. It had no formal boundaries, except the darkened wings of the stage, and the director introduced none. Still, the playing area was often subdivided by the raising and lowering of particular platforms, by the use of light and shadow, and by the director's assignment of characters to particular areas of the stage. The relational axes which he delineated in the initial scene remained consistent throughout the drama and created a dramatic syntax that reinforced the power struggle.

For instance, the director created an association between Regan and the stage left area, and between Goneril and the stage right area from their initial declarations of love for Lear right up to their deaths. For instance, when they confronted Lear regarding his drunken knights, they approached from their respective sides, a two-flanked attack which enhanced the power of the threat as they advanced from their territory into his. The blinding of Gloucester, in which Regan participated, took place on stage left as Goneril made love to Edmund on stage right. Finally, the sisters died on their respective sides of the stage. Cordelia, on the other hand, although in the first scene she stood downstage right (apart for her sisters), through much of the second act she occupied stage centre, in a vulnerable space delineated solely by light.

Ponnelle's use of space in *Lear* characterized it as more than a physical
reality. It was a dramatic component in its own right and an element of the mise en scène that connected the characters in their self-awareness:

Both in the scenic and the philosophical sense, there is often a geographical proximity of characters, although they may have no interaction in a given scene. Certain characters may not know what the others are saying, but since they are there in the background, there is a kind of dialectic linking created in the mind of the audience between the characters without the characters themselves aware of what is happening.47

Although the director had used silent characters in other operas to link dramatic ideas for the audience,48 in Lear, their presence created a running commentary on the action and a dialectic among the characters that seemed to turn the drama in on itself.

The blinding of Gloucester provides an example of Ponnelle’s use of a spectator-character to create a subtextual commentary. The scene took place downstage left in a pool of light that separated it from the stage right area. It began when Gloucester was brought downstage to face Cornwall’s accusation of betrayal. Albany, who had been dismissed by Cornwall to form an army, began to wander slowly upstage, physically distancing himself from the scene, but continually looking back on it. As the blinding of Gloucester began, Goneril and Edmund moved to the stage right proscenium where they pantomimed making love, oblivious to the torture of Gloucester. Among the rocks Albany remained a silent witness to the savagery of Regan and Cornwall and to the infidelity of his wife.
Gloucester was brought in and held by two of Cornwall’s men while Cornwall questioned him. These two supernumeraries were instructed in detail regarding their reactions to the treatment of Gloucester. The “Super Notes” in the production book read: “You are brutal and rough with him because you have to be, but inside you are not at all certain that you are doing the right thing.”49 One soldier knelt down on all fours downstage while Gloucester was lowered backwards over him. During the blinding by Cornwall they held him while “shrinking back in horror, but not daring to run away.”50 The revulsion of the soldiers to this cruelty was physicalized by Albany’s movement away from the scene. Cornwall stabbed out Gloucester’s first eye after which the servant protested by trying to physically stop him. In the ensuing struggle, Cornwall was stabbed accidentally by him, and Regan reacted by stabbing the servant in turn. She then stabbed out Gloucester’s other eye. At that point, Albany exited upstage left in an emphatic break from his wife and former allies. Gloucester’s screams were answered only by Regan’s hysterical laughter, building from a ppp to a fff, then replaced by physical shaking, until Gloucester’s subsequent call for Edgar stifled her outbursts. With a terse poise she called for the soldiers to throw Gloucester out.

Although all of the characters participated as observers in the course of the drama, the one who fulfilled this role most emphatically was the Fool. In both King Lear and Lear the Fool was an astute commentator on the dramatic events. However, in contrast to Shakespeare’s tumbling youth (who may have also doubled in the role of Cordelia) Reimann’s Fool was a bearded old man. He appeared to be a shrunken version of Lear, an old clown wearing an oversized red robe -- perhaps a hand-me-down from the king -- that he could barely escape
stepping on. He wore a coxcomb that was an oversized version of Lear’s crown. This shrunken monarch not only resembled his patron, at times he even he mirrored Lear’s actions. When Lear banished Kent from his kingdom, the Fool pointed at Kent in direct imitation of the King himself (Fig. 3 and 4).

Reimann followed the dramatic estrangement of the Fool in *King Lear* by conceiving the opera character as a speaking role. In contrast to the other principals, the Fool declaimed, rather than sung, his lines in a strident tone to the accompaniment of a string quartet. Ponnelle reinforced the dramatic and musical ostracization of the Fool by making him an alienating device that drew attention to the drama as drama. For example, after Lear banished Cordelia, the Fool scurried downstage quickly (in physical imitation of the two bars of sixteenth note quintuplets) and leaned over the prompt box to watch the ensuing action. In scene 3 of the first act, when Lear and Kent began to look for a hovel in which to take shelter after the devastation of the storm, the Fool made a slow cross from downstage centre to downstage right and sat on the ground through all of Poor Tom’s entrance and song. He remained in a concentrated spotlight, a visible but silent observer of the dissolution of Lear’s world.

As Jan Kott has pointed out in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*: “A fool who has recognized himself for a fool... ceases to be a clown... The clown is subject to alienations because he is a clown, but at the same time he cannot accept the alienation; he rejects it when he becomes aware of it.” Ponnelle, too, interpreted the exit of the Fool as an indication of his awareness of his true role. Whereas Shakespeare’s Fool left without comment, Reimann’s was given a provocative
Fig. 3  Lear San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1981)

Fig. 4  Lear San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1981)
pantomime to end the first act.

In the final scene the French troupes came to take Lear to safety in Cordelia’s camp. After Lear was carried away the Fool and Poor Tom were left standing on opposite sides of the stage. According to the director, the Fool said good-bye to the theatre by giving Poor Tom his coxcomb, the laurel wreath for actors. In fact, the Fool also put his cape around his shoulders and handed him the torch that he had just taken from one of the soldiers. Then the near-naked Fool crossed to stage center with a miserable, slouching walk and climbed down to the darkened lower level of Platform A. He stood there, staring straight out as the platform began to descend like an elevator into an underworld in a manner that implied suicide. The platform slowly descended until it was level with the rest of the stage floor, and the scene darkened for the intermission, leaving Poor Tom literally holding the torch.

Adolphe Appia had written that, “Light is to production what music is to the score; the expressive element in opposition to literal signs; and, like music, light can express only what belongs to the ‘inner essence of all vision.’” The manner in which Ponnelle used stage lighting in the mise en scène of Lear made it a dramatic exponent on par with the singer-actors and the stage and the visual equivalent to music. Lighting was a scenic value that the director integrated into the total stage picture to create space, paint moods, and signify the passage of time. It subdivided the heath into specific playing areas, and depicted atmospheric effects through changes in colour and intensity. The director used only white and blue lights. White created the harsh glare of day, blue the coldness of night.
More importantly, however, stage lighting in *Lear* became an integral dramatic component of the mise en scène that underscored and even commented on the dramatic action. Certainly, many modern directors are able exponents of stage lighting as an expressive commentator rather than as merely a functional component that illuminates the setting. In Ponnelle’s hands, however, particularly in *Lear*, stage lighting joined the set design and the staging to synergize into a “living” mise en scène that fully realized the drama. For instance, when Edmund declaimed “Wherefore Bastard?” his figure was lit by low front light that projected a huge shadow on the bare wall of the theatre behind him. Gloucester, who had remained on stage, was upstage to his left. Consequently, his shadow, too, was projected on the wall, but his distance from the light source resulted in a much smaller shadow than that of his son’s (Fig. 5). The shadow which was just stage left of Edmund’s and about one quarter the size was a forceful revelation of Edmund’s dominance over his father and an ominous foreshadowing of the coming betrayal of Gloucester.

The director reserved the most expressive and technically brilliant role of stage lighting for the final moments of the opera. After the defeat of Edmund by Edgar in a sword dual, the former confessed that he ordered Cordelia to be hanged. Almost immediately thereafter Lear entered from underneath the platforms, pulling with him the dead body of Cordelia and howling in agony. He pulled her so that her dead body knelt in front of him as he clasped her to him and sobbed “Never, never, never, never, never” before eventually collapsing beside her. Their dead bodies lay together at center stage, flanked by those of Edmund, Goneril and Regan just visible in the dimness of the sides of the stage. As the last bars of
Fig. 5: Lear San Francisco Opera (Photo by Ron Scherl, 1983)
music faded away and a silence enveloped the stage, powerful, white stadium lighting grew in brightness as the stage platforms slowly returned to their original position and the iron girders were pulled into the flies. For almost a full minute the stage was bathed in an ever-increasing intensity of white light that burned into the bodies with an apocalyptic ferocity. The merciless glare proclaimed a Pyrrhic victory over the dead bodies and left the scorched earth a fatally wounded kingdom for Edgar to rule. At the peak of the light's intensity, and in complete silence, the curtain descended slowly.

Ponnelle's production of Lear was the greatest technical and artistic achievement of his career. His mastery of Reimann's demanding music (without benefit of a recording or piano-vocal reduction) enabled him to realize details of characterization and movement in the score that distinguished the drama of the opera from that of Shakespeare's play. Moreover, music provided the basis for a visual interpretation in which each element of the mise en scène participated in a powerfully dramatic, rather than decorative, way. The design and staging of Lear, drawn from the music, harmonized into a living work of art, to use Adolphe Appia's expression, that sprang organically from the work itself.54
Notes


8 Arthur Kaplan, "For the Fourth Time: Jean-Pierre Stages a Puccini Opera for San Francisco - This Time the Most Popular One of Them All, San Francisco Opera Magazine 1978: 93.


16 Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, "Words to Music: 'Peer Gynt' and 'Lear' at the Munich Opera Festival," 62.


30 Arthur Kaplan, "Lear from Munich to San Francisco," 40.

31 See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion.


34 The staging of the opening scene gave the impression that Lear was physically frail, as did the hesitancy of the first measures of music. This prompted Andrew Porter to question the old king's competence in an article for The New Yorker in 1981. He argued (curiously) that Henneberg implied Lear was faltering well before the division of his kingdom and was not a great leader who simply
made a tragic error of judgment as conceived by Shakespeare. He concluded: "The opera, it seems, has missed the point of the play." (71) Ponnelle did not directly address this issue but noted that the overall impression of the character depended, at least to some degree, on the physicality of the singer-actor playing the king. He compared the very different impressions given by Tom Stewart to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who had premiered the role in Munich:

Tom looks like a man who is still in the prime of his life. When he plays an old man, you have the feeling that 10 years ago Lear must have been a man of extraordinary strength and power, and you see and feel the collapse of that strength and power. Fischer-Dieskau is a huge man, he's as tall as a basketball player. But he's got a very small head, very spindly legs and very small feet. So you have a kind of Eiffel Tower built on a very weak foundation, which gives a different character to the role. With Fischer-Dieskau you see the full physical results of Lear's collapse, and you wonder if Lear ever really was the powerful man he claims to have been, or if all along he's been an extraordinary frail king. (Arthur Kaplan, "Lear from Munich to San Francisco," 40)

35 Vsevelod Meyerhold, Meyerhold on Theatre, 92.


Aribert Reimann, “Thoughts on Lear,” 58.

Aribert Reimann, “Thoughts on Lear,” 58.

Aribert Reimann, “Thoughts on Lear,” 58.

Aribert Reimann, “Thoughts on Lear,” 58.

Vsevelod Meyerhold, Meyerhold on Theatre, 85.

See Chapter 2 for specific examples.


See Chapter 2 for specific examples.


51 Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 130.

52 Arthur Kaplan, "Lear from Munich to San Francisco," 40.


*Production book source. Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera.*
Conclusion

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle clearly ranks among the most gifted and prolific theatre artists of the twentieth century. Even among his many highly accomplished contemporaries he was distinguished in talent and versatility. Like Wieland Wagner, he was a master of both design and stage direction. Yet, unlike Wagner who focused on realizing the operas of his famous grandfather, Ponnelle developed a broad repertoire of works that, at the time of his death, included well over 150 ballets, spoken plays, and operas belonging to every genre, style and period. In addition to his impressive credits in stage productions he, like Franco Zefferelli, embraced film directing and championed the development of new audiences for opera with eighteen projects created specifically for cinema and television.

In each of Ponnelle's stage productions and films the consummate imprint of his creative style was profoundly evident. The technical brilliance of the designs, the symbolic central props, the pale scenic backgrounds that offset brilliant costumes, and staging that was precisely choreographed to the music were just a few of the visual characteristics that could be cited as typically "Ponnellian." More importantly, however, the external presentations were endproducts of a well-defined methodology, a musical methodology that guided his work in two ways. First, it determined the scenic style. Unlike directors such as Peter Sellars, who often juxtapose musical and visual styles by using a contemporary setting for a period work, Ponnelle sought to unify the visual and aural elements of an opera with a realization that complemented the style of the music. Further, music provided the basis for staging that was closely bound to the score. For Ponnelle the
musical score, not the libretto, was the primary dramatic text from which he worked: "[All] the things I see in the dynamics, in the rhythm, in the orchestration, are to me like signals, signifying the emotional relationships between the actors, between human beings. For me, all that is contained in the music." Certainly, he was not unique in claiming music as the inspiration for his realizations. Still, he was one of the few directors whose ability to translate musical cues into scenic reality elevated his productions to a truly outstanding level of artistic accomplishment.

While Ponnelle’s vigorous defense of music as the most important element of opera brought him acclaim from supporters who praised his attentiveness to its subtleties, critics argued that his scenic choices frequently subverted it. American reviewers, in particular, found fault with his relative disregard for the libretto, and charged that his choreographed staging was too busy, his towering designs were too overbearing and, not infrequently, dismissed both as “unmusical.” In viewing the stage productions, videos, and photos of Ponnelle’s work one must acknowledge a basis for such reservations. There was a tendency, at least at times, to overvisualize the music, or to draw attention to it by underscoring even minute changes with sometimes distracting movements or scenic effects. Significantly, however, despite the negative press Ponnelle remained constantly in demand in the leading opera houses of the world and regularly collaborated with world-class conductors and singer-actors including Claudio Abbado, Daniel Barenboim, Herbert von Karajan, Istvan Kertész, James Levine, John Pritchard, Placido Domingo, Maria Ewing, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Mirella Freni, Paolo Montarsolo, Luciano Pavarotti, Hermann Prey, and Frederica von Stade, to name just a few.
Moreover, at this writing, his stage productions of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Idomeneo, La clemenza di Tito*, Rossini's *La Cenerentola* and Puccini's *Turandot* can still be seen in opera houses in North America and Europe. After Ponnelle's death, James Levine recalled the frequent disparity between the critical reception of the artist's work and the fact that throughout his career he was one of the most sought-after director-designers in opera: "In all the years when I read lots of negative press comment, I was never once asked by a member of the press what it was that we all found so inspiring or significant in his work."\(^2\)

Although Ponnelle's directorial methodology often invited controversy, it is abundantly clear from the reflections on his work offered both during his lifetime and after his death that it was grounded in a profound commitment to preserving the composer's vision. He consistently directed with a thorough understanding of the music, the drama, the needs of singer-actors, the physical characteristics of individual opera houses, and with the unwavering conviction that a quality production was the key to both the enjoyment and understanding of operas. The ongoing acclaim for his stage productions in the contemporary repertoire almost a decade after his death bears this out. In conclusion, the observation of William J. Collins in 1993 remains apt: "To disagree with his concepts, one has to rethink one's own ideas, to confront the possibility of atrophied or unexamined acceptance of traditionalism for its own sake. In a climate of polemics and deconstruction, he provides both visual pleasure and the pleasure of informed debate."\(^3\)
Notes


## Appendix A

**Productions Designed and/or Staged by Ponnelle in the United States**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Company</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td><em>Die Kluge</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td><em>Die Frau Ohne Schatten</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td><em>Carmina Burana</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td><em>La Cenerentola</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td><em>Cosi fan tutte</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td><em>Otello</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td><em>Tosca</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td><em>Rigoletto</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td><em>L’Italiana in Algeri</em></td>
<td>Metropolitan Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>Der Fliegende Holländer</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>Gianni Schicchi</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>Le nozze di Figaro</em></td>
<td>Lyric Opera of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>Cavalleria rusticana</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td><em>I Pagliacci</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td><em>Idomeneo</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td><em>Turandot</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<td>1978</td>
<td><em>La Bohème</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td><em>Il Prigioniero</em></td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td><em>La Traviata</em></td>
<td>Houston Grand Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td><em>Der Fliegende Holländer</em></td>
<td>Metropolitan Opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Don Giovanni</em></td>
<td>Lyric Opera of Chicago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Opera</td>
<td>Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>La Bohème</td>
<td>Houston Grand Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Lear</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>Idomeneo</td>
<td>Metropolitan Opera</td>
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<td>Arlecchino</td>
<td>Houston Grand Opera</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>I Pagliacci</td>
<td>Houston Grand Opera</td>
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<td>Metropolitan Opera</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Falstaff</td>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Ariadne auf Naxos</td>
<td>Houston Grand Opera</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Manon</td>
<td>Metropolitan Opera</td>
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** Production book source. Courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera
*** Courtesy of the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

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Dress Rehearsal Videos


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Opera Quarterly
Opernwelt
Oper und Konzert
San Francisco Opera Magazine
Theatre Crafts
The Drama Review
The New Yorker
Village Voice
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