

# The Rake's Progress

Music by Igor Stravinsky

Libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman

## Study Guide to the Opera

Scottish Opera image: <http://www.scottishopera.org.uk/1-12/the-rakes-progress>



## A Cautionary Tale

by Jill Leahy

In 1947, at an art exhibition in Chicago, Igor Stravinsky first saw an exhibition of British satirist and social critic William Hogarth's engravings titled *The Rake's Progress*. The eight engravings tell the story of Tom Rakewell, the son and heir of a rich merchant, who takes his inheritance to London and proceeds to waste it on women, drinking, and gambling. In the process, Rakewell makes a deal with the Devil that leads him to become mad and end up in London's infamous insane asylum.

Stravinsky, who had come to the United States in 1939 and had become a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1945, wanted to create an opera in English and was drawn to the morality tale of *The Rake's Progress*. Instead of looking to Italy for a librettist, upon the advice of his friend Aldous Huxley, Stravinsky chose to work with the already-famous British poet, Wystan Hugh Auden and his frequent collaborator Chester Kallman. Along with describing Auden as having "a special gift for versification", Stravinsky said that "At the business level of the collaboration, he wrote words for music, and I wonder whether any poet since the Elizabethans had made a composer such a beautiful gift of them as the Lanterloo dance in our opera. Wystan had a genius for operatic wording. His lines were always the right length for singing and his words the right ones to sustain the musical emphasis."

*The Rake's Progress* is Stravinsky's only full-length opera. It's described as an opera in the "Neo-classical" style, which was a trend largely seen in the time between the two World Wars as a way to project order and balance amid modern life's uncertainties and as a reaction to the emotions of the "Romantic" style. And while Stravinsky staged it in 18th-century costumes, some opera companies have chosen to use more modern styles in costumes. Either way, the moral of the story is like the old proverb: "An idle mind is the devil's workshop."

*A simple country boy got chewed up by the temptations of the big city. His girlfriend remained faithful to the end. It was pure opera—and it broke my heart.*

Musicologist David Schiff

OPERA NOTE: Domenico Cimarosa also took inspiration from William Hogarth's paintings (*Marriage à-la-mode*, which mocked upper-class 18th-century society) for his opera *Il matrimonio segreto* (*The Secret Marriage*).

# *The Rake's Progress Synopsis*

Time: 18th Century

Place: England

**ACT I** Anne Trulove is in the garden of her father's country house with her suitor, Tom Rakewell, admiring the springtime. Sending Anne into the house, Father Trulove tells Tom he has arranged an accountant's job for him in the city. Tom declines the offer and the older man leaves. A stranger enters as Tom declares his determination to live by his wits and enjoy life. When he says "I wish I had money," the stranger introduces himself as Nick Shadow, "at your service." Shadow tells Tom that a forgotten rich uncle has died, leaving the young man a fortune. Anne and Trulove return to hear the news, the latter urging Tom to accompany Shadow to London to settle the estate. As Tom leaves, promising to send for Anne as soon as everything is arranged, Shadow turns to the audience to announce, "the Progress of a Rake begins."

At a brothel in the city, whores entertain a group of "roaring boys," dissolute young playboys; together they toast Venus and Mars. Shadow coaxes Tom to recite for the madam, Mother Goose, the catechism he has taught him: to follow nature rather than doctrine, to seek beauty (which is perishable) and pleasure (which means different things to different people). Tom refuses, however, to define love. Turning back the clocks when he sees Tom restless to escape, Shadow commends him to the pursuit of hedonism with these companions. Tom responds with ruminations of love. When the whores offer to console him, Mother Goose claims him for herself and leads him off. As evening falls, Anne leaves her father's house, determined to find Tom, since she has heard nothing from him.

**ACT II** Tom, who is in the morning room of his house in the city, is beginning to tire of city pleasures and no longer dares to think of Anne. When he says "I wish I were happy," Shadow appears, showing a poster for Baba the Turk, a bearded lady whom he urges Tom to marry, because only when one is obligated to neither passion nor reason, can one be truly free. Amused by the idea, Tom gets ready to go out.

Anne approaches Tom's house but is hesitant to knock. As darkness falls, she sees servants enter with strangely shaped packages. A conveyance arrives and Tom steps out. Startled to see Anne, he says she must forget him; he cannot go back to her. Baba calls out from the sedan, whereupon Tom admits to the astonished Anne that he is married. Hurried along by Baba's impatient remarks, Anne faces the bitter realities, while Tom repeats that it is too late to turn back. As Tom helps Baba from the sedan, a curious crowd gathers. Anne hurriedly leaves.

In his morning room, Tom sits sulking amid Baba's curios as she chatters about the origin of each. When he refuses to respond to her affection, she complains bitterly. Tom silences her and she remains motionless as Tom falls asleep. Shadow wheels in a strange contraption, and when Tom awakens, saying "Oh, I wish it were true," the machine turns out to be his dream: an invention for making stones into bread. Seeing it as a means of redemption for his misdeeds, Tom wonders whether he might again deserve Anne. Shadow points out the device's usefulness in gulling potential investors.

## Characters

**Tom Rakewell** *tenor*  
A Rake

**Anne Trulove** *soprano*  
His Betrothed

**Nick Shadow** *baritone or bass*  
A Devilish Manservant

**Baba the Turk** *mezzo-soprano*  
A Bearded Lady

**Father Trulove** *bass*  
Anne's Father

**Sellem** *tenor*  
An auctioneer

**Mother Goose** *contralto*  
A Whore

**Keeper of the Madhouse** *bass*

## *The Rake's Progress* Synopsis (cont.)

**ACT III** On a spring afternoon, the same scene (including the stationary Baba) is set for an auction. Customers examine the various objects: Tom's business venture has ended in ruin. Amid rumors as to what has become of Tom, Anne enters in search of him. An auctioneer, Sellem, begins to hawk various objects—including Baba, who resumes her chatter after the crowd bids to purchase her. Indignant at finding her belongings up for sale, she tries to order everyone out. She draws Anne aside, saying the girl should try to save Tom, who still loves her. Anne, hearing Tom and Shadow singing in the street, runs out. Shadow leads Tom to a graveyard with a freshly dug grave, where he reminds the young man that a year and a day have passed since he promised to serve him: now the servant claims his wage. Tom must end his life by any means he chooses before the stroke of twelve. Suddenly, Shadow offers a reprieve: they will gamble for Tom's soul. When Tom, placing his trust in the Queen of Hearts, calls upon Anne, and her voice is heard, Shadow realizes he has lost. In retaliation, he condemns Tom to insanity. As Shadow disappears and dawn rises, Tom—gone mad—imagines himself Adonis, waiting for Venus.

In an insane asylum, Tom declares Venus will visit him, whereupon fellow inmates mock the idea. The Keeper admits Anne. Believing her to be Venus, Tom confesses his sins: "I hunted the shadows, disdaining thy true love." Briefly they imagine timeless love in Elysium. With his head upon her breast, Tom asks her to sing him to sleep. As she does, her voice moves the other inmates. Trulove comes to fetch his daughter, who bids the sleeping Tom farewell. When he awakens to find her gone, he cries out for Venus as the inmates sing "Mourn for Adonis."

**EPILOGUE** The principals gather to tell the moral that each finds in the story. Anne warns that not every man can hope for someone like her to save him; Baba warns that all men are mad; Tom warns against self-delusion, to Trulove's agreement; Shadow mourns his role as man's alter ego; and all concur that the devil finds work for idle hands.

## Composer and Librettists

by Jill Leahy



**Igor Stravinsky** (1882 – 1971) was born in Russia and, though he loved music, was pushed by his parents to study law. In 1902 he stayed with the composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who encouraged him to take lessons in musical composition. After the death of his father that same year, Stravinsky focused more on studying music and less on law. By 1909 he was married, had children, and was composing orchestral works. In 1910, his ballet, *The Firebird*, premiered in Paris to rave reviews, launching him on a path to becoming one of the most celebrated 20th-century composers.

Stravinsky continued to live and work in Paris throughout the 1930s until the death of his wife in 1939. With the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, he sailed to the United States and settled in West Hollywood. His circle of friends reads like a "Who's Who" of creative people: Otto Klemperer, George Balanchine, Arthur Rubenstein, and Aldous Huxley. On the advice of Huxley, Stravinsky began his work with the British poet W.H. Auden on *The Rake's Progress*.

**W. H. Auden** (1907 – 1973) had become a U.S. citizen in 1946. Collaborating with poet **Chester Kallman** (1921 – 1975), Auden used Hogarth's tale as a model for *The Rake's Progress*. According to Dana Gioia in the *W. H. Auden Society*, "Auden felt it was the only area of contemporary drama, as poet and librettist, in which the poet remained an essential contributor, and opera was the form that gave the poet most imaginative freedom."

## Interesting Bits about Stravinsky and Auden

by Jill Leahy

When Stravinsky debuted his ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, in Paris in 1913, it almost caused a riot. Here's a description of what happened: "The audience was accustomed to the grace, elegance, and traditional music of *conventional* ballets, i.e. Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Opposition to Stravinsky's work literally happened within the first few minutes of the piece as members of the audience booed loudly in response to the inharmonic notes accompanying the unrecognizable bassoon's opening solo, the work's unnatural choreography (dancers danced with bent arms and legs and would land on the floor so hard their internal organs would shake), and the Russian pagan setting. Those in favor of the work argued with those in opposition. The arguments turned to brawls and police had to be notified. They arrived at intermission and successfully calmed the angry crowd. As the second half commenced, police were unable to keep the audience under control and rioting resumed. Stravinsky was so taken aback by the audience's reaction, he fled the scene before the show was over."



*No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible.*

Poet W. H. Auden

When Stravinsky collaborated with Auden and Kallman on *The Rake's Progress*, the process of creating the libretto story was also unconventional: "Early the next morning, primed by coffee and whisky, we began work on *The Rake's*

*Progress*. Starting with a hero, a heroine, and a villain, and deciding that these people should be a tenor, a soprano, and a bass, we proceeded to invent a series of scenes leading up to the final scene in Bedlam that was already fixed in our minds. We followed Hogarth closely at first and until our own story began to assume a different significance."

W. H. Auden may be familiar to American audiences because of the poem recited during the 1994 movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The poem begins:

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

The collaboration between Stravinsky and Auden (along with Kallman), was "one of the few opera scores that are really love letters to the libretto," according to composer Zeke Hecker.

Sources: Pacific Opera Victoria Study Guide  
<http://classicalmusic.about.com/od/20thcenturymusic/qt/rite-of-spring.htm>  
<http://www.successories.com/iquote/author/863/w-h-auden-quotes/1>

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