

## Paper Mache for 6-12-26 by David Read

I don't usually write about the same subject, in this case opera, two weeks in a row, but circumstances suggest that I make an exception. My first opera experience was in Los Angeles. My best friend's mother was a Julliard trained opera singer who was written up in Life magazine and traveled the world at the height of her career. She took us to the LA Music Center to hear Norman Treigle as Mephistopheles in Gounod's *Faust*. A year or so later, we were off to the Shrine Auditorium for the ultimate operatic challenge for both singer and audience member alike, *Das Rheingold*, which is part of Wagner's massive Ring Cycle.

Last weekend, Abbie and I attended two very different productions at the San Francisco Opera: Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and Richard Strauss's *Elektra*. One is a bright comedy filled with mistaken identities, clever servants, and youthful romance. The other is a dark psychological tragedy fueled by grief, revenge, and family dysfunction. They could hardly be more different, yet together they offered a compelling answer to a question that surfaces in discussions about the arts: Does opera still matter? I believe the answer is an emphatic yes. Opera survives because it continues to tell human stories that transcend time and place. While the costumes, settings, and musical styles may reflect the eras in which they were created, the emotions at their core remain remarkably familiar.

*The Barber of Seville* was first performed in 1816. It revolves around love, social barriers, deception, and the desire to outwit those who wield power. Figaro, the barber, becomes the ultimate problem-solver, helping two young lovers overcome obstacles placed in their path by an older guardian with plans of his own. The story is funny, fast-paced, and surprisingly modern. Today's audiences still recognize the overbearing authority figure, the resourceful friend, and the young couple determined to chart their own course. More than two centuries later, the opera's themes remain relevant because people still seek freedom, still challenge conventions, and still find creative ways to overcome adversity. Rossini's brilliant and familiar score simply makes the journey more entertaining.

If *Barber* shows us the lighter side of human nature, *Elektra* takes us deep into its shadows. Based on an ancient Greek story, Strauss's 1909 masterpiece explores trauma, obsession, and the destructive power of unresolved grief. Elektra is consumed by the murder of her father and lives only for revenge against those she blames. Modern audiences may not relate to royal family feuds or bloody vengeance, but they certainly understand the emotional consequences of trauma. Today we talk openly about mental health, generational wounds, and the lingering effects of violence and loss. Elektra definitely could have benefited from counseling. Seriously! The opera confronts those issues with astonishing intensity. Its emotional landscape feels surprisingly contemporary, reminding us that while technology changes, human psychology changes very little.

Opera also matters because it asks audiences to slow down and engage deeply. In an era dominated by short videos, scrolling feeds, and endless distractions, opera demands attention. It combines music, theater, visual design, literature, and performance into a single, spectacular experience. It invites us to listen, reflect, and feel. Perhaps most importantly, opera connects us to a larger cultural conversation stretching across centuries. When audiences gather today to watch *The Barber of Seville* or *Elektra*, they are participating in a tradition that has entertained, challenged, and inspired generations before them. The stories endure because the human condition endures. Love, jealousy, ambition, grief, humor, hope, and resilience remain as relevant today as they were when these operas were first written. That is why opera still matters. It reminds us that while the world changes, people remain wonderfully, frustratingly, and beautifully more or less the same.