



The Rose Elf

An opera in one act
After Hans Christian Andersen
Words and music by David Hertzberg

Premiered on June 6th, 2018 in the catacombs of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn,
in a production by R.B. Schlather

Developed through Opera Philadelphia's *Double Exposure* program in 2016 and 2018

Recorded at Sound on Sound Studios in Montclair, NJ, November 13th and 14th, 2018

Post-production at Swan Studios NYC
Made possible by Noreen and Ned Zimmerman

Conductor, Robert Kahn

Cast:

The Elf, Samantha Hankey
The Girl/Luna, Sydney Mancasola
The Beloved/Horus, Kirk Dougherty
The Brother, Andrew Bogard

Orchestra:

Clarinet, Bixby Kennedy
Horn, Bryn Coveney
Percussion, Bradley Loudis
Piano, Euntaek Kim
Violin I., Gergana Haralampieva
Violin II., Julia Glenn
Viola, Yoshihiko Nakano
Cello, Julian Schwarz
Bass, William Langlie-Mitelich

Recording producer and engineer: Andreas K. Meyer

Executive producers: Samantha Hankey, Robert Kahn, and David Hertzberg

Color photography by Matthew Placek

① Dithyramb. "Behind beginning" [3:02]

② Part I. "Rose – beautiful, blooming rose!" [3:27]

③ "The dew falls" [2:34]

④ "And we must part" [3:49]

⑤ "What's this?" [5:30]

⑥ "The tale you tell" [3:55]

⑦ Part II. "Oh, how she withers" [4:45]

⑧ "A voice" [4:11]

⑨ "Wanton child" [7:08]

⑩ "He does not know" [2:54]

⑪ "I cannot leave her... Drift, darling, drift" [9:41]

⑫ Apocalypse of Petals. [4:17]

Sometimes in music, fate seems to escape from its impalpable place between the bar lines and wind its way into the magically ephemeral realm of musical collaboration. Such was the serendipity when, in the spring of 2016, we were introduced to one another through a workshop-performance of Part I of *The Rose Elf*, presented by Opera Philadelphia. Over the course of the next two years, the seeds sown during those short weeks of creativity and discovery would yield another two workshop-performances, also presented by Opera Philadelphia, and in June 2018, *The Rose Elf* was given its world premiere run in an unprecedented presentation in the catacombs of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, directed by R.B. Schlather, and produced in collaboration with Green-Wood and Unison Media. The resultant work was also an expression of our musical friendship, with a title role tailored to the distinctive bloom and expressive breadth of the voice that brought it to life. We decided to craft a definitive recording.

Along with the uncertainties of self-producing comes artistic freedom, and the circumstances surrounding the genesis of this recording felt similarly charmed. A narrow window in the fall of 2018 turned out to be the perfect time to cull an extraordinary cast and a brilliant roster of instrumental soloists, musical friends from near and far, along with our engineer Andreas Meyer, to a newly designed studio space just outside of New York City. The result was two days of ecstatic music-making, and an alchemy of musical voices and personalities that felt both like an echo and natural realization of our project's auspicious beginnings.

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Opera Philadelphia for fostering our collaboration and shepherding this work into being, to Sound on Sound for

allowing us access to their beautiful space, to the cast and ensemble for their exquisite, full-blooded performances and fearless dedication to this music, to Andreas for his keen ears, inimitable artistry, and for giving us the opportunity to share this music with you, and to Noreen and Ned Zimmerman, without whose support and generosity this recording would not have been possible.

– *Samantha Hankey, Robert Kahn, and David Hertzberg*

My love for opera begins with its incandescent power to illuminate the language of myth, and that language's uncanny euphony with the shapes and shadows of musical form.

Andersen's beautiful, antic fantasy is itself a composite expression, drawn in part from a *Decameron* story in which the nightmarish imagery of putrefaction and plague, the scrim against which those tales unfold, begins to seep into the sinew of its narrative and language. *The Rose Elf* silhouettes this medieval vivisection of grief and violence, of isolation and decay, against a garden of sprawling abundance, wherein a strange, sensuous being, at once near and distant, witnesses human tragedy unravel with fear and fascination, and is changed by it.

In a time when many of us are living *sub rosa*, watching unfathomable devastation unfold from a distance, in which the pain of loss and separation can be difficult to bear, it is my hope that this love-woven work of collective imagination can speak to the transformative power of nature and perhaps, in turn, offer a glimmer of hope.

– *David Hertzberg*

The Rose Elf

i. dithyramb

An invitation, a beckoning dance.

I.

Midday. A garden in ripest bloom. A glut of flower and form.
And a secretive stranger, caressing their petals, breathing their fragrance.

Nightfall. A shiver, a first frisson.

And here?

Heavy human husks. Leaden lovers, grotesque, askew.
And our vain voyeur leering, listening, vexed.

What's this? A haven-hull exhumed with her hot kisses?

Void of crimson chaos;

Violence in the cavern of collapsing columns.

"Pssssst – sister, silver sleeper:

Your brother has laid low your lover.

Dig for him."

II.

Winter. An enclosure. Wan light. Slow, soft asphyxiation.

The encounter. The resignation.

And yet –

A first and final fissure, a wriggling out of the egg,
A thousand thawing streams from veins engorged with salt and soil.

A bloom, a breath,
An apocalypse of love and petals.





Libretto

The Rose Elf

shadow play in one act and two parts

Persons of the drama:

The Elf, Mezzo/Soprano (*Cherubino, Urbain, Mélisande, Annio*)

The Beloved/Horus, Tenor

The Girl/Luna, Soprano

The Brother, Bass-baritone

There are three distinct areas of the stage:

In the center stands a giant rose, which is illuminated in different colors.

Downstage right there is an area that is first shown as the bower, represented by a bench overgrown with vines, then as The Girl's bedroom, represented by a bed, a nightstand, and a door at the far end, and, in part two, a flowerpot with jasmine sprigs that sits on the nightstand.

Upstage left there is a scrim, on which persons and things are shown only in shadow.

i. Dithyramb.

Darkness. Lights on Luna and Horus, upstage left and upstage right, respectively. Only their masked faces are illuminated. Hers is the mask of Melpomene shaped as a crescent moon. His is a falcon wearing the Pschent.

Luna:

- ☐ Behind beginning, in the swath of selves,
I reap the slum of swollen motion. It gives

Of lurid love and soil. There is no yawning.
I cannot see nor know how I am halved.

Horus:

I linger for the mawning fissures, ever
In the ripe of ending; all that is
Without I blind and tether, melding line
And glaucous shadow into form undone.

For in those distended wakings every
Aching separation is a blossom.

Darkness.

I.

A garden, overgrown with vines and flowers. Midday, the sun is shining. In the center stands a deep red rose. The Elf lies in the blossoms. He caresses the petals and nestles his wings against their walls. He inhales their fragrance.

The Elf:

- ☐ O rose, beautiful, blooming rose!
Stretch out your pale limbs and greet the warm embrace of the midday sun!
How soft is the delicate flesh of your blushing petals,
More supple than the softest earth –
And how sweet and delicious is their fragrance!
O, how I could cozy myself so wholly
Behind each and every one of them,

Bathing in their sweet perfume,
And be forever in perfect happiness –

O rose, most beautiful, blossoming rose!
Yawning in the ripe of day –

I too will greet the midday shine –
And dance on the wings of the butterfly,
And measure the steps it takes to trace
The roads and paths in the green veins
Of a single linden leaf –

Farewell, sweet, supple rose!
Until our quiet evening tryst I leave you yawning –

The Elf, seemingly poised to spring away, is caught in a ray of sunlight, and lingers there for a moment, languorous, transfixed. Coming to, he begins to frolic in the garden. He traverses the paths in the veins of a linden leaf, moseying about. He stops to breathe the fragrance of a sprawling white flower. He starts. He meanders. He wanders here and there. Soon it is late.

- ③ The dew falls,
And the wind blows,
It is late –
And I have just begun my task!
I'd best be home –

He flies back to the rose, which has closed in the cold. It is shown in dark green.

Ah! She is all closed up,
My darling rose!
O what am I to do?
Never have I spent a night

Outside the cozy warmth
Of her ruby chambers,
Never have I slept without
The secret brush and fragrance of her petals –
O, this is a frightful lot –
I will surely wither this way!

But wait –

I recall a beautiful bower
Overgrown with honeysuckle
At the far end of the garden
Nestled in their blossoms' painted blades
I can rest, until morning –

The Elf flies over to the bower. The Girl and The Beloved sit on a bench overgrown with vines, gazing intently at one another. The Elf watches from a distance.

Hush! A beautiful, blooming girl,
and her handsome sweetheart –
What heavies them?

(listens)

He speaks...

The Beloved:

- ④ And we must part –
I have been cast away
And sent to wander far and wide
Over mountains and seas.

Whether I will rest my hand
Upon your blooming cheek
Or kiss your rosy lips again I cannot say –

Know that you are to me
As the sleeping earth beneath us,
Giving gentle, hushed abundance
To the garden bower:
My heart aches for you,
My lips burn for you,
And when I sink in sober slumber,
My lids close for you.

They kiss.

The Elf:

(from afar)

O, the unhappy pair –
Their heavy human woes,
They make me weary –

The Girl takes a rose from her hair.

☐ What's this?
A ruby blossom?

She presses it to her lips and kisses it.

How the seedling opens for her kisses!
Oh–oh! I've found my cozy chamber!

The Elf flies into the rose, which is again illuminated. The Girl presses the rose to The Beloved's chest. They exchange a longing glance and he departs. The lights dim over the bower. The stage is dark except for the deep red rose.

I cannot sleep, cannot rest a moment in these leaves,
His beating heart sounds a swelling, unabating din in my ear,
And the white heat of his flesh makes me sweat,

I fear this chamber.

The silhouette of The Beloved holding the rose under a tree appears right-center on the scrim. He holds the rose to his lips in a beckoning pose, gesturing upwards and center.

O how he kisses the sweltering blossom,
Splayed agape on his chest as from the scalding heat

Of the midday sun –

His kisses crush me,
His lips, they burn me,
O this will surely be my end!

The silhouette of The Brother wearing a hat appears on the far end of the scrim. The Brother slowly nears The Beloved.

I cannot bear them any longer,
His flaming lips that scorch my flesh,
And kisses that crush my brittle bones!
Stop, unhearing lover! Smother your furtive fire!
Another kiss and I will crumble!

As The Elf speaks these last words, The Brother, who has been moving slowly and inexorably toward The Beloved, enfolds him in a coat, and silently smothers him in an

embrace that is ambiguously violent or rapturous. The Brother releases him revealing the silhouette of a blade. The Beloved, listless, slowly, lets the rose fall and sinks beneath the scrim. The Brother kneels down after him.

(numb)

O, horror...

The scrim and rose go dark. The Girl's bedroom is illuminated. She is seen sleeping on a bed next to a nightstand. The Brother is seen in half shadow at the far end of the room by the door, wearing a hat, which he hangs on a rack there. He leaves. The Elf emerges from shadow, entering from the darkened area where the rose stands.

She sleeps a sponsored sleep,
The blooming girl,
I cannot let her languish,
In unknowingness,
She must be told the dark
Indifference of the deed.

He goes to her bedside and speaks to her in sleep.

Darling,
While you slumber still and undisturbed
Dreaming on him for whom you linger
The cold night stirs.

Deep within the woods,
The man with whom you dwell,
Your next of kin,
Has felled your sweetheart,
And buried his corpse,

And his crown,
In the sleeping soil beneath the linden tree,
A few leaves cover the disturbed earth,
And fragrant jasmine sprigs
Surround the spot.
Now you know the motions
Of my murmur,
And can sleep in waking.

The Girl:

- ⑥ The tale you tell is frightful,
And I feel the sunken welling
Of an oceanic sorrow
In my breast.
How am I to know
That this is not the work Of spirits
Or the myth of dreams?

The Elf:

When you wake you will find
On your bed a wilted linden leaf,
That traveled from the selfsame spot
Beneath your brother's hat.
That is how I happened here.

He leaves and vanishes in shadow. She wakes and finds the leaf in her bed. She leaves through the veiled door at the far end of the room. The room goes dark and the scrim is illuminated. Her silhouette is seen kneeling on the ground under the tree. She holds up the head and kisses it in shadow.

The Girl:

O, that God might take me too!

The scrim goes dark. The Elf watches from the gloomy distant vantage between the areas of the scrim and the rose.

The Elf:

My little heart cannot withstand
This agony of grief –
How I long for the covered solace
Of my darling's ruby chambers!
There I must fly –

The Elf flies to the rose, which has withered. It is shown in spotted brown and green.

Ah!
Can it be,
My sweet rose is wilted?
Must I go and find another?

(sighs)

O, how quickly the good and beautiful pass away...

The lights dim. Darkness.

II.

The Girl sits still on her bed. She stares at a flowerpot filled with jasmine blossoms on her nightstand. The Elf speaks from a rose perched in a planter on her windowsill.

The Elf:

Ⓣ O, how she withers, the blooming girl...

With every passing day she grows more pale and more faint,
Color has fled her gentle bloom,
Life grows dim in her eyes,
Her lids are heavy now with solemn sleep,
She gives the lulling motions of her self,
In frail kisses to the jasmine buds,
And waters the aching flowers,
Until their bed is overfull with her salt tears –
She has no more to give them –
Would that the seedlings knew,
The grief on which they grow –

(he listens)

Ⓣ A voice –

(he listens again)

He nears...

The Elf withdraws and watches, silent and unmoving, from the vantage of the window-rose. The Brother enters, he stands by the door in half shadow.

The Brother:

(to The Girl)

9 Wanton child –
Why do you sit there crying endlessly over that pot?

(pause)

Answer me.

(pause)

Are you deaf?

(pause)

Are you dumb?

(slight pause)

Have you become a fool?

(long pause, she slowly presses her lips to a flowerbud and kisses it)

So you are deaf.

You are dumb.

You've become a fool.

A wise fool peddles his pot in the gutter.

He leaves. There is a long pause. The Girl slowly leans her head against the flowerpot and closes her eyes. Moments pass. The Elf speaks from the window-rose.

The Elf:

The brute –

10 He does not know that fecund soil,
And cannot know
Whose lids are closed there,
And whose burning ruby lips have become earth there –

(gazing at the Girl)

I can see her drifting away...

(pause, with indignation)

I cannot bear it any longer, This heavy human mire,
Here are too many mirrors for misery –

(he starts, to leave, then stops)

And yet –

11–12 I cannot leave her bereaved
My heart aches for the grieving girl
I must go to her bedside
And comfort her, as I can –

(he goes from the window to her bedside, and whispers in her ear)

Drift, darling, drift,
Into softest sleep,
Let go your heavy lids
And your wearied brow,
And let me whisper to you
About the quiet love of the elves:

Where in happier days you have laid and dreamt,
In the cool shade of the garden bower,
Overgrown with honeysuckle,
There, elves make their little homes,
Coddled by the blades and nestled
In the sweet fragrance of the sprawling flowers,

They scutter and whisk about the roads and paths
In the green veins of the linden leaves,

They shiver when the dew falls,
And when the wind blows,
And rejoice in the midday sun
On the wings of butterflies,

And in the fullest, most abundant bloom,
Where roses stretch their pale limbs to greet
The warm embrace of the midday sun,
They cozy themselves behind each and every rose petal,
Whose flesh is more supple than the softest earth,
Taking in its sweet perfume,
And in perfect, simple happiness,
Sink softly into silent sleep.

(he gently rests his hand on her motionless head and slowly strokes her hair, once)

She's gone now – the blooming girl..

(he looks at the pot with the jasmine flowers, which are in full bloom)

O, how you've blossomed –
How you've disclosed your beautiful white bells! –
And how sweet and delicious is your fragrance!

(slight pause, innocently)

I suppose you have no other way to cry over the dead..

The Elf lingers for a moment, then unhurriedly returns to the rose, nestles himself between the petals, and falls asleep. The stage lights dim and the rose is illuminated. The Brother walks in at half light and sees The Girl with her head resting on the flowerpot. He gently takes the pot from under her, letting her head rest on the nightstand. He then takes the pot behind the scrim, and places it on what appears to be a nightstand next to a bed. He lies down in shadow, and as the lights continue to dim and the rose is shown in deep crimson, the silhouette of the jasmine flowers grows and blossoms. The curtain falls slowly.

The End.



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