



# Shakespeare and Opera

*Gary Schmidgall*

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If opera had existed in Elizabethan London, the world's Top Bard, as W.H. Auden called him, might have become the world's Top Librettist. As Gary Schmidgall shows in this illuminating study, Shakespeare's expressive ways and dramaturgical means are like those of composers and librettists in numerous and often astonishing ways. No wonder that well over two hundred operas have been based on Shakespeare's plays. Ranging widely through the Shakespearean canon and the standard operatic repertory, Schmidgall presents a fascinating comparison, focusing on similarities of expressive style, scenic structure, staging, and performance practice. *Shakespeare and Opera* offers extended discussions of issues central to both theatrical genres, including their shared demand for virtuoso display, the comparable functions of set speeches and arias, and the similarities of verbal and musical rhetoric, and the charges of unreality and melodrama that have dogged them both. In addition, Schmidgall provides concise essays on the most intriguing Shakespeare-based operas, including works of Verdi, Wagner, Bellini, Rossini, Berlioz, Thomas, Vaughan Williams, Barber, and Britten. He enriches his argument with the insights of the great composers who never set Shakespeare (Mozart, Puccini, and Strauss among them), major observers of the legitimate stage (from Samuel Johnson to Eric Bentley) and the musical stage (from Joseph Addison to Joseph Kerman), as well as the incisive views of influential artists, critics, and performers as diverse as Walt Whitman, H.L. Mencken, and Laurence Olivier.

For all who love the stage, *Shakespeare and Opera* offers endless insight and fascination. Schmidgall's extended comparison of the two dramaturgies provides a fresh perspective on Shakespeare, musical theater, comparative drama, and theater history.

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