

101 OPERAS

My journey to see 101 Operas

#75 Albert Herring

Albert Herring is not so much a chamber opera for me as it is a seek-and-find for the cause of the marching melody sure to become my ear worm companion tomorrow.

I have a great view of the timpani, bassoon, and bass clarinet tonight, and with a stretch the harp and flute. I believe the bassoonist is my culprit. In this delightful tragicomedy the docile title character Albert Herring will have his piety tested after being elected The King of May. The theme, rhymes, and the disparate parts that form this opera's cohesive whole take me back to my old love of poetry and in particular the poet Allen Ginsberg.

In 1965 Allen Ginsberg is elected the King of May in The Czech Republic. I have always loved this idea of being the king of something as ephemeral as Spring. A title anyone young enough can claim in spirit when the tubers thaw and sunflowers begin to rise. Like Ginsberg, Albert Herring will find himself crowned the King of May, imbibe, and then also like Ginsberg – disappear.



Allen Ginsberg, Prague, May 1, 1965. Photo: Karel Syrp

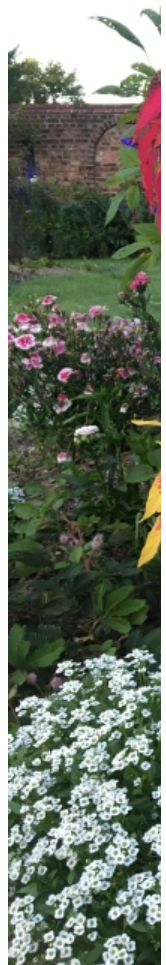
Ginsberg is arrested by the Communist State Police, notebooks confiscated, and put on a plane to London. “So, on the plane to London, I wrote a poem called “Kral Majales”. And then within another day was in a hotel room with (Bob) Dylan and all four Beatles. So I went from one odd scene to another. Actually, sort of having a pleasurable time, but, not acting myself, sort of just falling into situations like [Albert Herring], that were very pleasant situations.¹” Ginsberg’s retelling of events reminds me of how Albert Herring openly embraces the absurd situation he is thrust into. He is a young man with a little rum-courage, a new identity, and money in his purse and I don’t think we need to be the town Vicar to know how that will turn out.

So are the real Allen Ginsberg and Albert Herring shy unassuming men lost in their thoughts, or the Kings of May freed momentarily from the conventions of polite society to

become fully their true selves? The opera raises this question with bells (literally, the timpani is at the forefront and amazing).

The world of Britten's opera might not be the Communist Czech Republic, but Lady Billows played by Ann Toomey does a marvelous job defining its conservative and religious boundaries. She is a hoot of a character-player playing it straight and bringing several laughs from the audience. From the opening melody to later quotes from children's songs Britten creates a wonderful musical landscape of stops and starts that I inhabit completely. The woodwinds get the recital treatment for sure! It builds toward a culminating cacophony of sounds at the end of Act II when the orchestra becomes spoons, knives, spit, and lips while the singers feast in celebration of Albert's crowning. During the intermission I wander the lovely test garden of the Morven Museum and Garden still puzzling the orchestra's interchanges and humming that opening melody.

It takes all of my self-control to let the flowers be and not return with them crowned on my bald head.



Joshua Stewart who plays Herring is the crowned crowd pleaser tonight. Stage magic happens when the other players freeze like mannequins as we witness the impetus of his transformation, lemonade unknowingly spiked with rum. Even in my own May days I don't recall anyone chugging so much so quickly (how did you not burp Mr. Stewart?). Bravo! He lit up the room singing with his whole body.



Lady Billows (Ann Toomey) celebrates the crowning of reluctant May King Albert Herring (Joshua Stewart) during Benjamin Britten's comedic opera Albert Herring at the Princeton Festival. Photo by Jessi Oliano

When Act III opens the melody march of the beginning is replaced with softer and deeper sounds full of implication. With experience will come consequences, for good or bad it is the beginning of lost innocence and there is no going back to the long summers of childhood. There is a tugging melancholy from the orchestra under the polyphony of lamentation when all think Herring is dead. In actuality he was out carousing, drinking and fighting; not dead at all. He emerges no longer the timid boy to let his mother and us know that maybe it's not so bad being like the other boys and girls in town who disregard the Vicar and Lady Billows.



*Superintendent Budd (Eric Delagrang), Miss Wordsworth (Leah Brzyski), and Lady Billows (Ann Toomey) contemplate the possibility of a male May King at the Princeton Festival's performance of Benjamin Britten's comedic opera *Albert Herring*. Photo by Jessi Oliano*

Albert Herring is a fantastic satire that points its finger at stuffy virtue. Why is it that those who preach most are so fixated and hungry to hear about the salacious? *They protest too much I think*. The shy and docile Albert now transformed into a confident man stands proud and defiant in his new independence embodying the true spirit of The King of May.

Impossible I think for a modern audience to truly appreciate how smart and challenging this opera must have been in 1947. Benjamin Britten is a bohemian paving ground for the likes of Allen Ginsberg who will write his groundbreaking "Howl" a decade later and a decade after that be declared the King of May during the free love of the 60's, albeit in a not so free loving communist Czech Republic.

For my 75th opera I am leaving *Albert Herring* with the same excitement and curiosity found in my 1st opera. I find the inventiveness of the composers a marvel, the precision of the orchestra players out of this world, and the interpretations on the stage delightful. Everyone in tonight's ensemble convinced me that the world is full of talented artists worthy of us all turning off our TV's in favor of live performance.

My anticipation is full-on and I can't wait for what May come next.

So What is *Albert Herring* all about? It begins with the delightful premise of the town council wanting to elect a Queen of May, however all the girls in town would make Don

Giovanni blush. They decide to elect a King of May instead and choose nice boy, still tied to his mom's apron strings Albert Herring to be the King to set a pious example for the rest of the townspeople. It's the classic tale of a nice boy going away to college for the first time...

Ann Toomey – *Lady Billows*

Mariana Karpatova – *Florence Pike*

Leah Brzyski – *Miss Wordsworth*

Jonathan Lasch – *Mr. Gedge*

Shawn Roth – *Mr. Upfold*

Eric Delagrange – *Superintendent Budd*

William Huyler – *Sid*

Joshua Stewart – *Albert Herring*

Hannah Klein – *Nancy*

Melody Wilson – *Mrs. Herring*

Alexandra Thomas – *Emmie*

Sienna Grinwald-Alves – *Cis*

Lewis Jacobson Wasden – *Harry*

Rossen Milanov, conductor

Princeton Symphony Orchestra

1 <https://allenginsberg.org/2018/05/may-day-kral-majales/>

Princeton Opera Festival

6/19/22