

The Rose Elf

Music and Libretto by David Hertzberg
Based on *The Elf of the Rose* by Hans Christian Andersen

Study Guide to the Opera

Samantha Hankey as The Elf in the 2018 world premiere of *The Rose Elf*, in the catacombs of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, in a production by R.B. Schlather.

Color production photos of *The Rose Elf* by Matthew Placek.



Can a chamber opera be “new and improved”?

In 1842 Hans Christian Andersen wrote *The Elf of the Rose*, a fairytale that is typical of his sophisticated and multi-layered stories. The perception that the Danish author wrote simple children’s fables has persisted in translations, retellings, and media adaptations, but careful study of his literary style reveals that he was a shrewd observer of human nature who could craft narrations to evoke the power of oral storytelling in a distinctive voice. Andersen used everyday language to communicate in a direct, informal way.

Andersen’s tales were revolutionary and sensational, because nothing like them had been created before. Instead of writing children’s fiction consisting of pious stories intended to teach moral values, his magical tales were refreshingly familiar and warm, rich with earthiness, comedy, and fantasy. His tales could be read to children, but he intended adults to be listening in.

Almost two centuries later, composer David Hertzberg created an operatic version of Andersen’s *The Elf of the Rose*, renaming it *The Rose Elf*. The chamber opera is a new treatment of the story, certainly. Instead of using the fairytale prose literally, Hertzberg crafted a libretto that is magical in its own way, choosing elements of the story that work well in a theatrical telling, such as having The Elf, rather than a narrator, describe the rose at the beginning:

O rose, beautiful, blooming rose!

Stretch out your pale limbs and greet the warm embrace of the midday sun!

And after a dastardly deed and sad events take place during the opera, Hertzberg wrote lyrics to bookend the drama in an uplifting final scene, with The Elf singing directly to the jasmine flowers in full bloom:

O, how you’ve blossomed –

How you’ve disclosed your beautiful white bells! –

And how sweet and delicious is your fragrance!

Just as Andersen intentionally avoided the typical, formal language of literature, Hertzberg crafted a luscious tonal color palette from only four singers and nine instruments, instead of a more traditional opera cast and orchestration. The opera is truly a new telling of the fairytale in a fresh theatrical treatment, improved by the careful use of words and music.

The Rose Elf

MUSICAL SECTIONS

- Dithyramb. “Behind beginning”
- Part I. “Rose—beautiful, blooming rose!”
 - “The dew falls”
 - “And we must part”
 - “What’s this?”
 - “The tale you tell”
- Part II. “Oh, how she withers”
 - “A voice”
 - “Wanton child”
 - “He does not know”
 - “I cannot leave her . . . Drift, darling, drift”
- Apocalypse of Petals

THE STORY, CONDENSED from ANDERSEN

In the midst of a garden grew a rose-tree, and in one of the roses lived an elf. One night, he found all the roses closed up, so he went to the honeysuckle to sleep. Two people were in the honeysuckle arbor—a handsome young man and a beautiful lady—deeply in love. “We must part,” said the young man; “your brother does not like our engagement.”

And then they kissed each other, and the girl wept, and gave him a rose; but before she did so, she pressed a kiss upon it so fervently that the flower opened. Then the little elf flew in. The young man took the rose as he walked through the dark wood alone, and kissed the flower so often and so violently, that the little elf was almost crushed.

There came another man, the wicked brother of the beautiful maiden. He drew out a sharp knife, and while the other was kissing the rose, the wicked man stabbed him to death; then he cut off his head, and buried it with the body in the soft earth under the linden-tree. “Now he is gone, and will soon be forgotten,” thought the wicked brother. “He was going on a long journey. My sister will suppose he is dead.” Then he scattered the dry leaves over the light earth. But he was not alone; the little elf accompanied him in a rolled-up linden-leaf.

At dawn, the brother went into his sister’s room; she lay sleeping and dreaming of her love. Her wicked brother laughed hideously and the dry leaf fell out of his hair. The elf slipped out of the leaf, flew by the ear of the sleeping girl, and told her, as in a dream, of the murder.

“So that you may not think this is only a dream that I have told you,” he said, “you will find on your bed a withered leaf.” What bitter tears she shed. She found the head in the woods and placed it in a flowerpot with a spring of jasmine.

The jasmine grew from her tears while she grew paler and then died in her sleep. Then the elf told the bees what the wicked brother had done. But when they flew in to sting him, they found the brother already dead from the jasmine spirits’ spears.

Hans Christian Andersen | Biography, Fairy Tales, & Books | Britannica



Facts:

Chamber opera in English.
Shadow play in one act and two parts.
Length about one hour.

Premiere:

June 6, 2018 in the Catacombs of Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York City in a production directed by R. B. Schlather and conducted by Teddy Poll. The opera’s debut recording was released October 31, 2020, by Meyer Media LLC.

Persons of the drama:

The Elf *mezzo/soprano*
The Beloved/ Horus *tenor*
The Girl/ Luna *soprano*
The Brother *bass-baritone*

Instrumentation:

Clarinet, horn, 2 violins, viola, cello, bass, percussion, piano

Areas of the stage:

- A giant rose, which is illuminated in different colors.
- A bower, represented by a bench overgrown with vines, then as The Girl’s bedroom, and in part two, a flowerpot with jasmine sprigs that sits on the nightstand.
- A scrim, on which persons and things are shown only in shadow.

Meet a Gifted Composer/Librettist

Davidhertzbergmusic.com



David Hertzberg (b. 1990, Los Angeles) began his musical studies at the Colburn School and received his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees with distinction from the Juilliard School, but even with that foundation, one could not have predicted the success and praise that have followed him:

In 2012 he began serving as Composer in Residence for Young Concert Artists.

In 2015 he was named Composer in Residence for Opera Philadelphia and Music-Theatre Group.

In 2015, Hertzberg's *Spectre of the Spheres* was programmed by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra as part of its Composer of the Year program.

The 2017 premiere of his opera *The Wake World* won the *Music Critics Association of North America's Best New Opera Award*. "Mr. Hertzberg is prodigiously gifted . . . his music has an early 20th-century aura, with the sheen and muscle of Strauss wedded to the diaphanous spirit of Debussy, but with a distinctly modern edge . . . this composer is a find," stated *The Wall Street Journal*.

The 2018 premiere of his opera *The Rose Elf* was an unprecedented presentation in Brooklyn catacombs and described as "voluptuous and passionate" by *The New York Times*. The premiere "turned out to be just

about everything you want opera to be. *The Rose Elf* shocked, confounded, disturbed and in the end, exalted", raved *The New York Observer*. Following the premiere, WQXR named it the "Opera Event of the Half Year", saying, "Hertzberg is a masterful dramatist . . . this one signals the arrival of a major compositional personality." *Opera News* called the work, "a compelling and welcome addition to the operatic canon." *The Rose Elf* was subsequently named among "New York's Most Memorable Concerts of 2018" and awarded *Operavore's* "Freddie" Award for Best New Opera.

The 2020 debut recording of *The Wake World* was described as "a rapturous nirvana" by the *Financial Times* and "astonishingly imaginative" by the *BBC*.

David Hertzberg, both composer and poet/librettist, also skillfully writes about his opera:

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.

From the 2020 CD booklet for *The Rose Elf*
Meyer Media LLC (MM20044)

What do you know about Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales?

Danish author Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) authored plays, autobiographies, novels, poems, and travel books, but it was his fairytales that achieved international renown.

Andersen was born near Copenhagen, and attended a school for poor children before seeking a career as an actor. Jonas Collin, a director at the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen, helped the struggling writer get a university education. By 1837, Andersen was publishing collections of fairytales in his chatty, informal style.

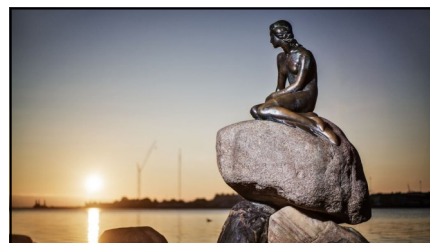
Some of Andersen's more than 160 fairytales have become immortalized in monuments, sculptures, music, radio, ballet, stage productions, opera, video games, television, awards, web series, events, place names, holidays, postage stamps, theme parks, and cultural references.

A select list of familiar Andersen fairytales:

The Emperor's New Clothes
The Fir Tree
The Ice Maiden
The Little Match-seller
The Nightingale
The Princess and the Pea
The Snow Queen
The Tinder-box
Thumbelina



Hans Christian Andersen



The twin-tailed statue of *The Little Mermaid* was unveiled in 1913 and sits on a rock in the harbor of Copenhagen, Denmark; the statue is a top tourist attraction. Sculpture Edvard Eriksen made the bronze statue 25% larger than life-size and stipulated in his will that all copies must be smaller.



Erected in Central Park, New York, this tribute to Andersen commemorates the author's 150th birthday. A 1956 bronze by Georg John Lober, this statue depicting *The Ugly Duckling* is meant to be climbed on by children.



Explore parks and streets in Odense, Denmark (Andersen's birthplace) to discover 16 sculptures of the author and his fairytale figures, including *The Wild Swans*.

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In the midst of a garden there grew a rose bush, quite covered with roses, and in the most beautiful of them all there lived an elf—an elf so tiny that no mortal eye could see him. But he was as well made and as perfect as any child could be, and he had wings reaching from his shoulders to his feet. Behind each petal of the rose he had a tiny bedroom . . .

Opening lines of *The Elf of the Rose* by Hans Christian Andersen

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

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