“... pour out forgiveness like a wine”:
Can Music “say an existence is wrong”?1
[2009]

It has been claimed that the dreadful wolf’s glen scene from Weber’s *Der Freischütz* of 1821 marks a decisive new departure in the presentation of villainy on the opera stage, introducing a new musical vocabulary for representing evil: tremolos, trills, baseless diminished chords, chromaticism, eerie pianissimo pizzicatos in the double basses, unisono playing, low clarinets, gloomy drum-rolls, obsessive repetitions, etc. (cf. Kunze 1992: 217f.). Stefan Kunze, in a stimulating paper on ‘villains, outsiders, and failures in opera’, finds no evidence of the representation of true villainy in opera prior to Samiel and Caspar in *Der Freischütz*: negative characters in earlier works, from Monteverdi’s Poppea and Nero through Metastasio’s Vitellia to Mozart’s Elettra, Osmin and Queen of the Night, are in their essence manifestations of great passion2, and passions are obviously nothing negative by nature but only turn negative when brought to extremes (cf. ibid.: 214). This is even true for Beethoven’s Pizarro, who is not essentially bad but equally only driven by his emotions, which, admittedly, are excessively forced up into a blind rage of revenge (cf. ibid.: 216). Kunze asserts that early heroic operas of the 18th century do not have villains as protagonists as, at the time, it was unthinkable to represent evil through music because harmony was considered the essence of music, and evil contradicts harmony (cf. ibid.: 211f.). The element of ‘ideality’, which, in 18th-century views, is adjoined to a person or action by music, ‘reduces the reality of evil’3. Thus, as a consequence, when evil was meant to appear on stage, music tended to fall silent, which – in a telling example – is the case in Bouilly and Gaveaux’s predecessor to Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, their opera *Léonore ou L’amour conjugal* of...

1 This is partly a more extensive earlier version of the paper over the published version.

2 This even applies to the powerful scenes of invocation in 17th-century French opera as, e.g., Armide’s invocation of Hate in Lully’s *Armide* of 1686 (Act Three, Scenes Three and Four; cf. Lully 2006).

3 “Denn was die Musik der Person oder der Handlung an Idealität hinzufügt, vermindert die Realität des Bösen.” (Kunze 1992: 216)
1789, where Pizarro significantly appears as a speaking part only.

From Samiel and Caspar onward, however, negativity is no longer in principle a product of excessive emotion but becomes the manifestation of inescapable and malicious fate (cf. ibid: 216), a product of hell, whether in the shape of the Nibelungs, Alberich and Hagen, of Scarpia, or Iago. Iago appears as the representation of ‘essential evil’, but his music, according to Kunze, breaks with the traditional romantic ‘evil’ vocabulary, as characterized above, and suggests his perverted creed by a ‘dissociation of musical texture’4. Yet, generally, still following Kunze, the presentation of evil has always remained problematic, even in the 19th century, with a few exceptions, and also protagonists like Meyerbeer’s Robert le Diable, marking the breakthrough of grand opéra, is no real ‘devil’ but characteristically wavers between good and evil (much like Max does in Der Freischütz), to be finally redeemed by mere serendipity.

Kunze’s survey does not continue into the 20th century where, in fact, the depiction of evil in opera becomes even more problematic, possibly due to the general corrosion of ethical standards and, to be sure, to the horrendous experience of mass evil in that century. What can be observed, however, is that – maybe precisely for those very same reasons – criminals or representatives of evil increasingly became protagonists of 20th-century operas. In what follows I will concentrate on central 20th-century operatic works by Hans Werner Henze, Paul Hindemith and Benjamin Britten in which we find such evil central characters, who, however, – to make a major point right from the start –, do not necessarily appear as, and give the impression of being, evil and are clearly ambivalent in their presentation.

A prime example is Hans Werner Henze’s Elegy for Young Lovers, written in collaboration with W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman and premiered – in its German version – in 1961. It is, together with the libretto of The Rake’s Progress by the same authors, the finest post-Hofmannsthal opera libretto, and in spite of the (now octogenarian) composer’s unbroken productivity, the Elegy is still Henze’s most attractive and most often produced stage work. The story – clearly relevant for our topic – is quickly told. The central example is Gregor Mittenhofer, a famous elderly poet, who spends his summer vacation in the Austrian Alps where he hopes to find inspiration for his poetry through

4 “[...] durch Dissoziation des musikalischen Zusammenhangs” (Kunze 1992: 221).