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No word from Tom...

No word from Tom... he has been sent to perdition by the devil in disguise.

"Love hears, Love knows, Love answers him across the silent miles and goes..."

But as Scottish Opera stages *The Rake's Progress* for the first time in 40 years (opening night was yesterday), I had a bit of a ponder about why operatic rakes are so damned irresistible. [Short version in The Independent the other day](#). Full-length director's cut below.

Things do not look good for Anne Truelove. "No word from Tom," she sings, while her beloved vanishes to London, led astray by the sinister Nick Shadow. That is just the start of her problems. Stravinsky's neoclassical masterpiece, *The Rake's Progress*, concludes with a heartbreaking scene in which Anne sings her Tom a lullaby as he dies by inches in the lunatic asylum of Bedlam.

What does Anne see in this wastrel anyway? David McVicar's new production for Scottish Opera – the company's first staging of the work for 40 years – will no doubt offer insights of its own. But in general, women in operas do love their rakes too much. And so do we. From Monteverdi's Renaissance glories onwards, through centuries of operatic drama, it's not the devil who gets the best tunes: it's the cads, the bounders, the nogoodniks.

They cause heartbreak at best, multiple deaths at worst. Some redeem themselves musically, like Monteverdi's Nero in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Having murdered and executed in order to secure a throne for his mistress, he finally sings with her such a heavenly duet that we forgive them everything.

Others get their come-uppance. Mozart's Don Giovanni is dragged away to hell by a

ghost, and good riddance to him. Puccini's Lieutenant Pinkerton has to witness the suicide of his former beloved, Madame Butterfly. Perhaps we enjoy their punishments vicariously, for in real life there is usually no such satisfaction, unless it lies in watching news reports of the fall of Silvio Berlusconi.

But even in opera it doesn't always happen. The Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto* is awarded one of Verdi's most memorable melodies – and he gets away with everything, blithely unaware that the heroine has given her life to save his, while he sashays on towards his next victim. Typical tenor, some would say.

Yes, the good guys are left standing while the rakes loop the loop around our hearts. Don Ottavio, the kind, upstanding fiancé of Donna Anna and possessor of a pair of fine arias, is a wimp of the first order beside Don Giovanni and his sidekick Leporello; he is way too nice to be interesting.

Tom Rakewell manages to remain hero rather than villain, since his fate is not really his fault: Nick Shadow – the devil in disguise – has planned it all. Tom's decline and fall is not punishment, but tragedy. His secret is nevertheless quite clear. He is that great operatic rarity, a well-rounded character.

That may explain the appeal of those stage rakes: we see more sides of them, especially their human frailties, and perhaps that inspires their composers to greater heights than a bland, single-facet 'hero' could.

Wotan of Wagner's Ring Cycle is the ultimate example. If it were not for his philandering and the punishment meted out for it in *Die Walküre* by his wife, the rest of the saga would not happen at all.

Wotan is the most fascinating figure of the Ring, his tortured self-questioning making him more human than superhuman. His anguished farewell to his daughter as he puts her to sleep in a circle of fire is, IMHO, the most beautiful passage in all four operas. Meanwhile, Siegfried, touted as a great hero, is a brawny dolt whom it is hard to empathise with, let alone like.

But in the end, this is all about human nature. Many are the women who have fallen for the irresistible rogue rather than his sensible brother with a faithful heart and a proper job. It's always been that way and probably always will; and if opera reflects this, that makes it all the more true to life.

Bring on the Rake, then – and the great music that goes with him.

The Rake's Progress, Scottish Opera, opens at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, on 17 March. Box office: 0844 871 7677