The Importance of Being Earnest
(U.S. stage premiere)

Opéra in three acts based on the text by Oscar Wilde
Music and Libretto by Gerald Barry
Production by The Royal Opera

New York Philharmonic
Ilan Volkov, Conductor
Simon Wilding, Lane/Merriman
Benedict Nelson, Algernon Moncrieff
Paul Curievici, John Worthing
Stephanie Marshall, Gwendolen Fairfax
Alan Ewing, Lady Bracknell
Hilary Summers, Miss Prism
Claudia Boyle, Cecily Cardew
Kevin West, Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.

Ramin Gray, Director
Ben Clark, Associate Set Design, after an idea by Johannes Schütz
Christina Cunningham, Costume Design
Franz Peter David, Lighting Design
Leon Baugh, Movement Director
By Christopher Cook

**Act I**

Algernon Moncrieff is playing his own arrangement of “Auld Lang Syne” for solo piano offstage while his manservant Lane lays out afternoon tea, including cucumber sandwiches and bread and butter, for his master’s expected guests: his Aunt Augusta, Lady Bracknell, and his cousin Gwendolen Fairfax.

Lane announces Algernon’s friend Ernest, who is also known as Jack Worthing, and who is utterly besotted with Gwendolen. Algernon has come across Ernest’s cigarette case inscribed with the message: “From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.” He declares that Ernest may not marry Gwendolen until he reveals the true identities of Jack and Cecily. Ernest explains that he is Ernest in town and Jack in the country and that Cecily is his ward. As far as Cecily is concerned, Ernest is his ne’er-do-well younger brother who is always in some kind of trouble. Algernon leads a double life by having an imaginary invalid friend called Bunbury who often requires his presence in the country. So, says Algernon, Jack is a “Bunburyist” too.

Lady Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen are announced. Lady Bracknell asks for cucumber sandwiches and declares her hatred of French music before bursting into her own setting of *Freude, schöner Götterfunken*.

With Lady Bracknell and Algernon safely out of the way, Jack proposes to Gwendolen and is accepted. How can she not love a man whose name is Ernest?

Having discovered her daughter has become engaged to Jack, Lady Bracknell quizzes her future son-in-law about his lineage. When she discovers that he knows nothing of his parents and that he was adopted, having been found in a handbag at Victoria Station, she refuses to countenance the match. Jack manages to give Gwendolen his address in the country, which is also noted by Algernon, who scribbles it on his cuff. As his guests depart, Algernon tells Lane to put out his country clothes as he will be visiting his friend Bunbury.

**Act II**

In the country, Cecily is studying German with her governess, Miss Prism. German grammar, she declares, makes her look plain. Miss Prism, a composer and an ardent Germanophile, breaks into her own setting of *Freude, schöner Götterfunken*.

Now Algernon, masquerading as Cecily’s guardian’s brother Ernest, arrives and quickly charms her. It is Cecily’s dream to marry a man who is wicked and bad and called Ernest. Algernon quickly makes plans for Dr. Chasuble,
the rector, to rechristen him Ernest. Meanwhile, Jack arrives with the sad news that Ernest has passed away in Paris. But Ernest is here, says Cecily.

Never have the trains from London been so busy. Hot on Algernon’s heels, Gwendolen arrives. As Cecily is giving her tea, the two young women discover that they are both engaged to “Ernest” and there is a violent storm over the teacups. When Jack and Algernon return, they are exposed, and Cecily and Gwendolen, united as sisters now, leave their two suitors to quarrel over Bunburying and a plate of muffins.

_Intermission_

**Act III**

Cecily and Gwendolen tell Jack and Algernon that their Christian names are an insuperable barrier to marriage. The men are agreed: Dr. Chasuble will have to rechristen them both.

Lady Bracknell has also taken the train from London, and on arriving in the country, is shocked to discover that her nephew appears to have become engaged to Cecily without her permission. But when she discovers that this is a young woman in possession of a fortune, her doubts are banished. However, Jack—in his capacity as Cecily’s guardian—refuses to give his consent to the marriage until Lady Bracknell permits him to be united with Gwendolen.

This social Gordian knot is unloosed when Miss Prism reappears. Twenty-eight years earlier, while working as a governess in the Bracknell household, she had inadvertently confused a three-volume novel that she had written with her young charge, left the boy in a bag at Victoria Station, and put the novel in the perambulator she was wheeling. On discovering her error, she had fled.

Jack produces the handbag. He is Lady Bracknell’s long-lost nephew and therefore Algernon’s older brother. And his name? The same as that of his father General Moncrieff, says Lady Bracknell. A search of the army records solves the mystery: It is Ernest. Gwendolen is ecstatic. Now the two couples can be married and with them, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble.

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The Importance of Not Being Wilde
By Paul Kilbey

There is no sense in which *The Importance of Being Earnest* needs to be an opera. It is not one of those minor, flawed works—John Luther Long’s short story *Madame Butterfly*, for instance, or Peter Benchley’s novel *Jaws*—that works better in an artistic medium other than the one in which it originated. Rather, it’s the most enduringly popular play of the Victorian era, and with good reason. Additionally, its structure is so finely wrought, and its dialogue so crisp, that it does not easily lend itself to the sort of savage cuts that operatic adaptations tend to entail.

Gerald Barry’s opera, then, was a fairly reckless project to begin with. But, perhaps against the odds, in the five years since its premiere in Los Angeles, *Earnest* has become a contemporary classic, raved about from L.A. to Nancy, France, garlanded by the Royal Philharmonic Society, and even nominated for a Grammy. All, perhaps, because of just how reckless the adaptation is.

*Earnest* was written in a mere eight months, to meet the commission deadline from the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Barbican. The composer’s haste is essentially audible: At every moment in it, decisions are made that conventional wisdom would simply not tolerate. The text is heavily cut, but all the references to food are left in, despite their complete irrelevance to the plot. The first scene is written in a style that pastiches the serialist music of Arnold Schoenberg and his followers. And Lady Bracknell is not just played by a man, but by a big, booming bass with Teutonic tendencies. The cumulative effect of all the opera’s oddities is overwhelming: Barry makes his singers—and the orchestra, of course—jump about like manic puppets, making a game of how unguessable his next move is going to be. The whole thing is like one giant, deranged game of consequences. An obscenely long French horn trill comes out of nowhere. Lady Bracknell suddenly interpolates some Schiller, declaiming it like a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song. A line of Miss Prism’s terminates prematurely on the word “explosion.” And so on.

Despite all the plate smashing and megaphone wielding and jackboot stomping, though, the opera also manages to tell Wilde’s story in an effective, critical way. Even after the many cuts to the text, the plot is all still there, and so are many of Wilde’s choicest turns of phrase—some of the opera’s funniest moments, in fact, are Wilde’s and not Barry’s. Barry gives the play an enormously idiosyncratic coating, but he doesn’t smother it. This is his fifth opera, after all: Each one is highly strange, yes, but also eagerly attuned to the text.

Take the way he portrays each character. Jack’s high tenor reflects his status as a romantic lead, but his top notes are seldom ecstatic lyrical climaxes, and more often moments of panic or idiocy. Algernon, a baritone, occasionally functions as the calmer counterbalance to his fellow Bunburyist, but he is not permitted to become the witty, Wildean character he might be. “All women
become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his,” he declares, but the delivery is so stilted and weird that it comes across rather forced, and our sympathies are very much with Jack when he replies: “Is that clever?” It’s an oddity that this opera’s mezzo, Gwendolen, goes off with the tenor rather than the baritone, though admittedly not quite as odd as everything else. But the depth to Gwendolen’s voice adds grit to the profile of this very proper character, and allows her occasional chastising of her mother Lady Bracknell—marked “reproachfully” in the play—to become brazenly hostile. Cecily’s stratospheric soprano, meanwhile, is an appropriately ludicrous response to the character’s airheadedness, which Barry pushes so far as to have her intone a sentence as bland as “They have been eating muffins” with the poignancy of a Puccini heroine, and to unexpectedly declare “I like his hair so much” as an unaccompanied lyrical outburst of bizarre ecstasy. Her desperately skewed priorities become, in a way, rather tragic.

The two supposed authority figures, Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism, both plumb the vocal depths but find little profundity there. They are likewise united by their fondness for Schiller, and both treat us to their own versions of his Freude, schöner Götterfunken (Beethoven’s version, otherwise known as the Ode to Joy, is absent). Lady Bracknell’s is unaccompanied, fast, and monotonous—perhaps tunefulness, like crumpets, is too much of an indulgence—and all the other characters are obligated to join in. Miss Prism’s, on the other hand, meanders with a vagueness that is not compensated for by its garish trumpet-and-vibraphone accompaniment. It is only brief, but sufficient to induce a feeling of dread at the very mention of her having written a three-volume novel.

The scene in which Ernest woos and then proposes to Gwendolen epitomizes Barry’s curious, critical approach to the opera’s plot. The first half of this scene, for reasons unknown, is set to a warped version of “Auld Lang Syne” (a song that mysteriously hovers around the fringes of the opera as a whole), and the couple’s dialogue is shoehorned into this melody in a way that makes the inevitability of the storyline seem strange and new. When Jack is forced into reconfirming that his name is Ernest, he is given a dizzyingly high melodic peak on the line “Yes, I know it is,” emphasizing the stupidity of his lie. And when he later tentatively mentions the name Jack, the orchestra’s violent stab chords, though totally out of the blue, highlight Gwendolen’s unwontedly keen disinterest in that particular name. Then, at the proposal, the style switches completely, to an aggressive, ominous, rising chromatic line. This is similar to the rising line that appears later on when Lady Bracknell quizzes Jack about his suspicious origins; it’s a disconcerting musical setting that shines maximum light on the sheer insanity of the class consciousness conditioning the characters’ actions.

The singers are denied the agency that actors would enjoy to shape and interpret Wilde’s lines themselves: It is Gerald Barry’s interpretation that we are given, and his surreal tendencies become a vivid prism through which to consider the stilted social conventions that Wilde’s text sends up. At other times, it is the canonic status of the play itself that Barry’s adaptation ridicules, as when one of the most cherished passages—Lady Bracknell’s advice that Jack “try and acquire some
relations as soon as possible”—is repeated over and over again in a progressively sillier little jig. More effectively than a theater director could ever manage, Barry interrogates the play’s place in history, mocking its familiarity even while celebrating its brilliance.

In *Earnest*, then, Barry and Wilde stand side by side, different and yet together, and the opera thrives on the companionable clash generated by their highly contrasting styles. “Reckless” is perhaps not the right word: Clearly, Barry has realized the vital importance of not being Wilde.

*Paul Kilbey is a writer and editor based in London. He is content producer for ballet programs at the Royal Opera House and writes widely on contemporary music.*

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Wilde’s Holiday Play
By Peter Raby

Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* burst like a firework onto the London stage at the St. James’s Theatre on Valentine’s Day, 1895. Wilde was at the height of his fame. His society comedy *An Ideal Husband* was playing to full houses just down the road. In contrast, Wilde had constructed a Trivial Comedy for Serious People, “an amusing thing with lots of fun and wit,” an exquisite vehicle offering nothing but pleasure. On a freezing February night, the fashionable audience nurtured by the actor-manager George Alexander was cheered into the theater by expectant crowds, with the loudest cheers reserved for Wilde, dressed with elaborate dandyism, according to Ada Leverson, green carnation in his button-hole.

The glittering first-night audience was charmed and delighted, and almost all the critics followed suit. George Bernard Shaw, perhaps predictably, struck a discordant note, finding the play “heartless”—which may be true, though scarcely relevant. The work was, quite deliberately, conceived as a farce, or a farcical comedy, something that Wilde had never before explored. The astonishing thing is that he captured, indeed transcended, the form so perfectly at his first, and, as it turned out, last attempt.

There was one other discordant note to the general air of celebration. The Marquess of Queensberry, father of Wilde’s lover Lord Alfred Douglas, was threatening to disrupt the evening. Alexander cancelled his ticket, and 20 policemen were posted at the entrances. Queensberry, Wilde reported to Douglas, prowled around the building for three hours, and left a grotesque bouquet of vegetables for the author at the stage door. This sinister narrative was satisfactorily averted on the opening night: It would unfold soon enough.

Wilde had written *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the late summer and autumn of 1894. He began with a scenario, which he trailed before Alexander, offering him first refusal for £150 in advance. Wilde was extremely pressed for money, having to keep up his mother’s establishment as well as his own, and “of course,” he added, “am extravagant besides.” Much of this extravagance was caused by the demands of Douglas. Wilde wrote most of the play in Worthing, England, where he took lodgings for his wife and two sons (plus his butler Arthur, and “a horrid, ugly Swiss governess”). Somehow he managed to work on the text even without a writing room, and amid the inevitable chaos of a family seaside holiday. Douglas came and went, Wilde bathed and sailed and entertained his children, as well as boys he met on the beach, and the play lay scattered “in Sibylline leaves” about the room: a holiday context for a holiday play. Wilde seeded the text with local place-name references: the working title was “Lady Lancing,” the off-stage consumer of Algy’s champagne became “Lord
Shoreham,” and, most aptly, Worthing (on the Brighton line) the adopted surname for his supposedly upright guardian, Jack.

Wilde, in spite of his financial circumstances and the increasingly fraught nature of the double life he was leading, was in a buoyant mood. For once happy to be away from fashionable London, he was charmed to open the Worthing Venetian Water Carnival, and found himself surrounded by the full range of Victorian light entertainment. Had he chosen to attend, he could have enjoyed the D’Oyly Carte production of *Utopia, Limited,* or Brandon Thomas’s farce, *Charley’s Aunt.* At Brighton’s Theatre Royal, Sydney Grundy’s *The New Woman* moved from London for a week, featuring Rose LeClercq, the future Lady Bracknell (according to the *Brighton Society,* Wilde’s latest * mots* were discussed in the foyer). *The Foundling,* a farce by Lestocq and Robson, followed, featuring a young man who has lost both his parents, and who was discovered in the seaside resort of Margate, in a bed rather than a handbag.

Wilde’s writing for the theater often bore a marked but superficial resemblance to existing works. His hugely successful society comedies, beginning with *Lady Windermere’s Fan,* were often compared to the well-made social dramas of Dumas fils and Sardou, while Wilde, perhaps with tongue in cheek, wrote to Frank Harris, “I wonder can I do it in a week or will it take three? It ought not to take long to beat the Pineros and the Joneses,” thereby admitting that he was in direct competition. In his first assault on farcical comedy, he might seem to be recycling many familiar elements of the genre: the foundling, the domineering matriarch, confused identity, competing lovers, the imaginary invalid. Outlining the plot to Alexander, he admitted how conscious he was of following tradition: “the local doctor, or clergyman, must be brought in, in the play, for Prism.” But these devices and motifs are the staple building blocks of comedy, including models such as Alfred de Musset and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Wilde gave his experiment an entirely fresh dimension, by clothing it in a distinctive style of language. He read it delightedly to his close circle of friends.

So pleased was Wilde with his creation that he expanded it to four acts. Then he conceived a new scenario for a more serious social comedy, *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry,* and sold that to Alexander, diverting “Lady Lancing” to a rival manager, Charles Wyndham. Alexander was fully occupied with Henry James’s *Guy Domville.* However, that play suffered a damaging outburst of first-night boooing. Alexander came to an agreement with Wyndham and put *The Importance of Being Earnest* into rehearsal as a replacement. He persuaded Wilde to return to a three-act form, and made further substantial cuts, overriding the author’s protests. Some of Wilde’s late suggestions were inspired: It was only in rehearsal, for example, that “Lady Brancaster” became “Lady Bracknell.” Alexander found Wilde’s interventions distracting, and finally suggested that he should go away “like a good fellow and come back again for the first performance.”
Allan Ayresworth, who played Algernon opposite Alexander’s Jack, said that in 53 years of acting, he never remembered a greater triumph than that first night. The critic William Archer commented that “farce” was “far too gross and commonplace a word to apply to such an iridescent filament of fantasy.” That Wilde had created something extremely special, if not unique, was immediately apparent. The language, so expansive and yet so crisp and precise, maintains its spell, with each voice, or pair of voices, distinctive yet infinitely malleable, superbly balanced against and responsive to each other. Some jokes and epigrams may have been sacrificed in the rehearsal room, but both Alexander and Wilde had fine judgment in their sense of overall timing, so that practically no scene, no sequence, outstays its welcome. W. H. Auden called it “the only pure verbal opera in English,” and there is a rhythm and panache to the phrasing that delights the ear. In matters of grave importance, as Gwendolen comments, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.

The originality of The Importance of Being Earnest was swiftly recognized. On March 2, 1895, Ada Leverson’s parody The Advisability of Not Being Brought Up in a Handbag: A Trivial Tragedy for Wonderful People appeared in Punch. (“Title for Punch quite charming,” Wilde cabled his friend. “Rely on you to misrepresent me.”) Tragedy was about to overtake Wilde, who by this time had already found Queensberry’s fatal card at the Albemarle Club: The play’s run could not survive the trials and conviction that followed. In the early 20th century, after Wilde’s death, Alexander revived the play repeatedly. It has been performed successfully ever since, and the role of Lady Bracknell in particular has attracted wonderful interpretations, notably from Edith Evans (in John Gielgud’s productions of 1939 and 1942, preserved in Anthony Asquith’s film). Other formidable Lady Bracknells include William Hutt (Stratford, Ontario, 1975), Judi Dench (National Theatre, 1982), and Maggie Smith (Aldwych, 1993). This is a role, like Falstaff, that steps out of its immediate context and permeates English culture. But, in truth, the whole play exists in more than one guise: As a great comic masterpiece of the fin de siècle, and as an infinitely portable artifact positioned, like Alice, through the Looking Glass, at once purely playful and slightly alarming, and bequeathed to future playwrights like Tom Stoppard or composers like Gerald Barry to be played with. The audiences, like the servants, drink the champagne.

Peter Raby is a fellow emeritus of Homerton College, Cambridge, where his research focuses on drama, theater, and the history of ideas from the 19th to the 21st century. He has written several books on Wilde, edited The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays for Oxford World’s Classics, and is the editor of the Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde and co-editor of Wilde in Context for Cambridge University Press.

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