

# The Impresario

(Der Schauspieldirektor)

An opera by

**W.A.Mozart**

(K. 486)

**New libretto**

by

**Ian P. Hudson**

Loosely based on the 1780 German text by Gottlieb Stephanie the younger (1742-1800) from an idea of the Emperor Joseph II (who commissioned the music from Mozart).

Written for a performance by Opera Omnibus,  
Haslemere, England, November 1984.  
Revised 1999.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Frank FITZROY, young, idealistic but impecunious impresario .... Tenor  
Madame Nellie HERTZ grande dame opera singer ..... Soprano  
Miss Jacqueline SILVER, rising young opera singer ..... Soprano  
Reuben BLOOM, friend of FITZROY..... \*Miss DOLLY DEE, soubrette ..... \*  
Rodney, Lord MUMBLES, boyfriend of DOLLY DEE ..... \*\*

\* Speaking parts

\*\* Walk-on part with no lines at all.

*SCENE: The manager's room at the opera house. A desk with a lamp, a "Pillar" telephone and a litter of books; railway timetables; newspapers; The Stage and other such journals. Businessman's chair of period; other chairs and a chaise longue or sofa up centre stage. A side table with decanters and glasses to allow the incumbent to offer drinks to guests. The walls are covered with recent Playbills, costume sketches, etc. Entrances to street and to inner room on opposite sides .*

*PERIOD: 1925 or thereabouts*

*FITZROY is seated at the desk, reading a newspaper. The telephone rings. He picks it up by the stem with one hand and unhooks the earpiece with the other.*

FITZROY

Hello? Yes, speaking ... *[Putting businesslike tone into his voice to cover inner excitement]* Madame Hertz? Well, certainly! When ... *[Less enthusiastic]* on her way? But ... *[Reaches for leather bound desk diary. Leafs through to today.]* Why, yes, of course I do, but ... Very well, I'll expect her very shortly then! Thank you; bye! *[Hangs up earpiece. Stands up, walks over to side table to get a drink. He has barely been away from his desk a few seconds when the telephone rings again. Tries to free hands but fumbles and rinsing goes on a few seconds. Eventually answers with automatic politeness -- not knowing who the caller is yet.]* Hello! ... Oh, hello, my dear! *[Reuben BLOOM enters from street. Frank waves him to a chair]* ... Well, yes! I do very much ... listen, could we make it this afternoon or tomorrow? I'm rather busy this morning ... *[Slowly and patiently]* yes, of course I want to see you, but ... oh, very well ... bye! *[Looks at telephone in surprise, as though caller has already hung up abruptly.]* Morning, Reuben. How are things your end?

BLOOM

Not bad. I've got the place booked from next month. That means once they've cleared out the remains of Chu Chin Chow we'll be able to start stage rehearsals and building the set.

FITZROY

Marvellous! Everything is coming along, then.

BLOOM

So you keep saying, Frank, but you make me nervous! Here you are, fixing a theatre already, and paying rent and wages, and you don't even have a book, a property!

FITZROY

Reuben, I told you: I have a property. It's an opera called *La Gioconda di Venezia* and it has just been discovered in Salzburg. Remember? I intend to make myself a name in serious opera!

BLOOM

Serious opera? How can you put on serious opera? It'll cost a fortune; no-one will back it; and why? Simple! Because that kind of fancy high-brow stuff won't bring in Joe Soap and his missus. Come on, what do I have to do to convince you? You must put on easy, popular shows that'll attract the crowds!

FITZROY

*[With patience and determination]* No! I won't be put off. It need't cost much. Dr Strabismus is letting me use the manuscript for a very modest fee to cover his expenses. All I have to do is get the copies made! Just think! The world première of an opera dating back to Mozart's day! It'll be a sensation!

BLOOM

So it isn't even by Mozart? That would be something. So who did write it?

FITZROY

Well, it isn't signed, so the scholars aren't sure, but it may be the work of a man who was highly regarded by Mozart, though he wasn't famous for his operas.

BLOOM

Oh yes, who was that?

FITZROY

Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf.

BLOOM

Karl Ditters von ... Gives me the jitters! Some hope for the box-office, with a name like that! And you've been signed up to do this thing? Why you?

FITZROY

Big opera houses plan their schedules years ahead and Dr Strabismus is so excited, he wants to see it staged as soon as possible. It's a unique opportunity!

BLOOM

Yeah, to lose money! Have you seen the manuscript? What's it like?

FITZROY

Yes, of course I've seen it. It's not exactly in Mozart's finest style, of course; but there's some very fine music in it! And I know what to look for when auditioning singers.

BLOOM

I knew it! Voices that can sing Mozart arias! In other words the best singers around! So why should these stars be coming to audition for you?

FITZROY

Because they'll be able to create classical operatic roles, and sing music never heard before, and that's a rare chance these days! *[Wonders at his own word-picture.]*

BLOOM

*[Catches himself getting interested, and recovers his scepticism.]* That's your dream! But it isn't box-office, and stars still won't work for nothing, you know. Look, if you've set your heart on it, put it on ice for six months; go out and hire a nice gang of boys and girls, straight out of stage school and full of energy, for a fiver a week each, and put on a nice cheerful little show that'll bring in the crowds and make some money! Honestly, if you insist on going ahead with Mozart's pal there you won't even be able to pay the bill for the lights after the second night -- especially with the price of electricity going up again already.

FITZROY

Reuben, you lugubrious old Jeremiah: I know you're a good pal and all that and I appreciate how you always have a weather eye open for the bally old red ink in the ledger; but it's no good expecting me to put on P.T. Barnum's circus! My mind is made up; and I've got singers coming to audition today. In fact *[looks at his watch in a bit of a panic]* Madame Hertz is due any minute. Nip out and see if she has arrived, will you?

BLOOM

Not Nellie Hertz, the star of La Scala? She'll cost you your shirt just for the opening night! Frank, you really can't compete with Milan!

FITZROY

Just be a good chap, and see, will you? *[Exit BLOOM, grumbling and skaking His head. FITZROY stands up, and tidies himself and his desk a bit. Re-enter BLOOM followed by Madame HERTZ.]*

BLOOM

Here we are, Madame Hertz: my colleague and friend Mister Frank Fitzroy, impresario and showman!

FITZROY

*[Trying not to gush and at the same time frowning at BLOOM for the "showman".]* So glad you could come along, my dear Madame Hertz.

HERTZ

But I have been fascinated by this plan of yours! Just think: a world première of an eighteenth century opera! What a sensation!

FITZROY

You see, Reuben? Now, Madame, I do hope you didn't mind being asked to audition. I simply want to be able to say that every singer has auditioned in the same way.

HERTZ

That is very fair and I quite understand.

FITZROY

Excellent! Now if you will make yourself comfortable, and then let us hear your piece?

HERTZ

But of course. Thank you. The piece I have chosen is a classical ballad.

*[Madame HERTZ prepares and arranges herself, then sings her audition piece.]*

<b>No. 1 ARIA</b>
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*[The men applaud with the audience, FITZROY enthusiastically but BLOOM looking as though it is only out of politeness.]*

FITZROY

That was absolutely delightful, Madame Hertz! Now, I think there is no question that ... if you will join our company ...

HERTZ

I shall be happy to consider your offer..

FITZROY

Then you will accept ...

HERTZ

*[Confidentially]* My rates are usually rather higher, but for this special enterprise I will accept sixty ...

FITZROY

*[Gulps, already alarmed at the prospect of paying her so much. Glances towards BLOOM, his expression suggesting recognition his associate was right. BLOOM looks back as if to say "I told you so".]* Sixty pounds a week?

HERTZ

*[Momentously]* Guineas.*[Exit BLOOM to street, shaking his head in despair.]*

FITZROY

Oh ... well ... yes ... Certainly! Now, if you will come with me, Madame, we can arrange the contract. *[Gestures for her to lead the way.]*

HERTZ

Thank you. *[Exit to inner room HERTZ, followed by FITZROY.]*

*[Enter BLOOM followed by DOLLY and MUMBLES.]*

BLOOM

Frank ... Oh! He isn't here. Never mind, he can't be far. Listen, Dolly, he's a busy man, always up to something, but I think we can interest him in you as a performer in his new show. [*Enter FITZROY, holding a contract in his hand.*] Ah, Frank, I'd like you to meet this young lady here, Miss Dolly Dee. She's a young lady with quite a lot of experience in the musical theatre

DOLLY

Morning, Mr Fitzroy. [*FITZROY takes her hand.*] Oh! This is Rodney -- er, Lord Mumbles: his father is the Earl of Llanelli, you know. [*They shake hands; MUMBLES mutters an aristocratic howd'you do" sound.*] Rodney is frightfully musical and wants to back your company -- don't you, darling? But of course, he's a frightfully sentimental boy and he especially wants to back whichever show will give me my first star role in the West End!

FITZROY Excellent. Excuse me a moment, won't you Miss ... er ...? [*Drawing BLOOM downstage, fearing the worst*] What singing has she done?

BLOOM

[*To DOLLY*] Er, Dolly, what singing have you done lately?

DOLLY

I played Dick Whittington in St Albans last Christmas. I had to sing Blue Eyes, and Romany Rose, and ... [*she notices they are not listening.*]

FITZROY

[*Aside to BLOOM*] What did she do before that?

BLOOM

[*Aside to FITZROY*] What do you want from me? She was a chorus girl! At least she's pretty, and she can act and sing some. But listen, Frank, this is a great chance! This boy has money to burn, and you need the backing!

FITZROY

[*To DOLLY*] No, I'm sorry, Miss ... er ... Dee ... [*aside to BLOOM*] Reuben, I can't hire girls just to get my hands on their boyfriends' money! We are talking about opera, not pantomime! I need sopranos, not soubrettes. Which reminds me ... [*Looks at his watch*] Look, get rid of them before I bring Madame Hertz in, will you? She's still in there ... She'll get quite the wrong impression if she comes back and meets them. And I want to see her off before the next singer comes. It wouldn't do at all for those two to meet either!

BLOOM

What? Who else have you got lined up?

FITZROY

Jacqueline Silver, the new rising star at Covent Garden. [*Looks at his watch again.*]

Oh, dear, look at the time! Reuben, I've got to go out and meet her when she arrives. Here's the contract for Madame Hertz. We must get her off the premises without meeting these other people. Go and keep her from coming out here, till we can show her out another way, will you? *[FITZROY pushes the contract into BLOOM's hand, and exits hurriedly to the street.]*

BLOOM

You must excuse Mr Fitzroy, Dolly love; he's a very busy man and he has an appointment.

DOLLY

Is he interested?

BLOOM

Well ... He's a teeny bit worried that you haven't had all the singing experience he needs. He's setting up what will be, musically, a very demanding show.

DOLLY

*[Bridles.]* What does he want? Who has heard of him, anyway? And who will come and work for his little company if he's too proud to take someone with all my experience? Why, in Dick Whittington I sang six numbers!

BLOOM

Sure. Look, just stick around a little while longer. *[Confidentially.]* It never hurts to pick up some more tips on how to do a successful audition! Now you'll have to excuse me for a moment: I've got work to do. Sit yourselves down there and give me a little time, will you? I must pop out for a few moments.

DOLLY

*[Sulky and doubtful.]* Okey-dokey, then ... but I'm beginning to think we're wasting our time coming to him! *[Goes and sits on the sofa upstage, taking MUMBLES with her.]*

BLOOM

Good girl. I'll not be long. *[Exit to inner room.]*

DOLLY

Rodney do you think I can sing in an opera? *[Fades into a confidential discussion in the background.]*

*[Enter Miss SILVER followed by FITZROY.]*

SILVER

*[Oblivious to the other people in the office]* ... And then of course I had to meet Gloria Vanderbilt for coffee in Claridges and, well, you know how she talks! But here I am; I'm so excited about this plan of yours! Just fancy, being able to create an original great classical role! And of course I think you're such a dear upright man to make me audition like everybody else.

FITZROY

*[Clearly more than a little enamoured of this lady]* Yes, well ... it is only proper, my dear ...

SILVER

Well, I shall just get ready. *[FITZROY sits at his desk as Miss SILVER finishes removing her hat, gloves, and stole and arranges herself to sing, still gazing downstage and unaware of the others upstage. At this moment BLOOM re-enters. FITZROY waves to him to sit down and listen as Miss SILVER sings her audition piece.]*

<b>No. 2 RONDO</b>
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FITZROY

Quite beautiful. My dear, I can't wait for you to sign up with us. *[Rises, comes round table towards her. Re-enter BLOOM from inner room, still holding the contract for Madame HERTZ in his hand.]*

BLOOM

Frank, my boy. Can I have a word with you? *[FITZROY turns absent-mindedly, as BLOOM holds the contract out pointedly.]* About that other matter? *[Miss SILVER reaches out and seizes the contract. She looks at the visible part.]*

SILVER

*[Delighted]* Sixty guineas a week! That seems fine.

DOLLY

Sixty guineas a week, Rodney!

SILVER

*[Unfolds contract to look it over and sees the name on it.]* Oh!... Madame Hertz? *[Enter Madame HERTZ at that moment.]*

HERTZ

*[Very frostily]* How do you do?

SILVER

*[Equally frosty]* I think this is for you. *[Proffers the contract.]*

HERTZ

*[Comes forward, and takes contract and glances at it.]* Quite.

SILVER

*[To FITZROY]* Sixty guineas, Frank? *[Both ladies looks at FITZROY, who looks from them to BLOOM who is hiding his eyes in financial despair.]*

FITZROY

*[Coming to himself.]* Yes, of course, my dear! Oh, I'm sorry ... Madame Hertz, may I present Miss Jacqueline Silver, one of our rising young singers.

HERTZ & SILVER *[Together]* We have met.

DOLLY

*[Rising and coming downstage]* Well, I can see this outfit is going to be far too grand for the likes of me! Come on Rodney! *[MUMBLES rises.]* Let's leave them to it. *[DOLLY takes MUMBLES' arm and makes for the exit from the office, then turns as if suddenly inspired. It has only meant a momentary pause in her speech.]* Since these two fine ladies are both going to be paid the same, we'll leave them to fight over who'll be top of the bill! *[Exeunt DOLLY and MUMBLES. This is the first time it has occurred to the singers to worry about this delicate point.]*

HERTZ

*[Cautiously]* I understood I was to be accorded the principal position!

SILVER

Oh, Frank, you as good as promised me I'd be top of the bill!

HERTZ

I am sorry, but I have my position in the operatic profession to maintain, you know.

SILVER

But I ...

FITZROY

Ladies! Ladies, please ...

<b>No. 3 TRIO</b>
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*[As the applause subsides, the ladies retire to their corners and sulk. BLOOM comes downstage to FITZROY.]*

BLOOM

*[Confidentially to FITZROY.]* Now do you understand why you should listen *[Indicating himself, of course]* to the expert? You've not only signed up expensive talent; you've gone and got yourself into the classic showbusiness dilemma: you need the young pretty one for her box-office appeal, and you also need the older one for prestige with the purists, so they'll take you seriously. But you didn't take care of the billing order from the outset, so you'll probably lose them both!

FITZROY

No! You just keep in the background and watch. I've an idea. I've got to make this work.

*[BLOOM retires upstage. FITZROY beckons to the ladies who during his speech join him downstage and position themselves for the Finale.]*

FITZROY

Ladies, ladies! This will not do! here we are, putting an enterprise together in the cause of high art, to bring beautiful music that has never been heard before to the ears of the world; and you are worried about the height of your name on the billboard! Come, we must not let personal considerations threaten our high ideals. I fear I am to blame: my devotion to the cause has led me to neglect these finer points, matters that are the stock in trade of the experienced impresario. Forgive me, and allow me to suggest a new approach to star billing: you shall have equal billing. We shall say to the public: "In this special production, the music gets top billing and the singers support it!"

SILVER

Oh, Frank, you are clever! It was very selfish of me to start worrying about that when you are trying to organize this incredible project all by yourself! I agree; don't you, Madame Hertz?

HERTZ

Oh, very well. I think I can persuade my agent to go along with that -- although I've already persuaded him to waive my usual fee for you he is not going to be at all happy!

FITZROY

That is marvellous. I was sure we could find away to work together. I am determined to succeed, if only to prove old Bloom here wrong.

BLOOM

I've got to hand it to you, Frank: if you can get everyone else to work on that basis you have my whole-hearted admiration!

SILVER

It just shows how easily high ideals can be threatened by personal ambition. I am glad we can agree on a plan so that will not happen.

**No. 4 FINALE**

*[CURTAIN]*