This is the original postmodern opera: Igor Stravinsky, in an unlikely collaboration with W.H. Auden, resurrected the centuries-old formulas of opera buffa and delivered a parodistic commentary on them at the same time. Composed in 1951, and based on William Hogarth's...
Igor Stravinsky completed The Rake's Progress in 1951. The composer had toyed with the idea of writing an opera since he had emigrated to the United States in 1939. In 1947, his inspiration finally came to him in the form of a set of eighteenth century engravings by William Hogarth depicting the self-ruin of an Augustan rake. Stravinsky asked his publisher to contact W.H. Auden to see if he would be interested in a collaboration on the subject; Auden agreed. Their rapport was immediate, and within a week, the scenes and individual numbers had already been worked out. This was one of the few works by Stravinsky that was not commissioned; he simply wanted to do it.

Auden enlisted Chester Kallman to help hammer out the particulars of the libretto, and Robert Craft acted as the composer's personal assistant. The result is perhaps the last word in neo-Classical opera. While the musical syntax is definitively Stravinskyian, the structure is clearly reminiscent of Mozart, whose operatic touches frequently appear in The Rake's Progress, though morphed into the Russian composer's own harmonic language and counterpoint.

In his leading man, Stravinsky created is a sort of antipode to Mozart's violent and charismatic Don Giovanni. Stravinsky's hero, Tom Rakewell, is the opposite of the Don, whose courage, vigor and decisiveness might have saved the rake from his lazy, floundering self. Throughout the opera's three acts and two and a half hours, Tom always looks for the easy way out, whines, and allows himself to be led about by his late uncle's demonic manservant, Nick Shadow. While the Don is unable to back down from a challenge, Tom is unable to accept one. Even when an affluent existence is handed to him, he cannot take control of his legacy. Shadow convinces Rakewell to squander love and fortune in favor of bad business and unrelenting, tedious hedonism.
The first performance of this opera took place on September 11, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. Stravinsky conducted; the reviews were mixed. Many doubted the continued relevance of the composer's neo-Classical experiment, which had already seen its definitive statement in his Symphony in C. However, there were several conventions of eighteenth century music that Stravinsky had still left untouched until this point. Recitatives accompanied by harpsichord are a case in point; the composer's distinctive language makes the recycling of a dated convention relevant and striking. Nevertheless, The Rake's Progress was to be the composer's last neo-Classical work.

The Rake's Progress makes so many references to operatic history that one could spend a lifetime garnering the knowledge of opera necessary to understand them all. However, the piece's appeal rests in its effective drama and well-realized characters rather than its stylistic elements or intrinsic cleverness; it is an excellent piece that has become deservedly entrenched in the operatic canon. The best-known excerpt from the work is Anne Truelove's two-part aria, "No word from Tom." As much as any portion of the opera, it represents the freshness and vitality that Stravinsky brought to forms and ideas borrowed from eras past, and it has become a standard concert piece for sopranos. ---John Keilor, Rovi

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