

A LIBRETTIST'S REFLECTIONS ON OPERA IN OUR TIMES

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Pierre Boulez may have mourned the death of the opera and suggested setting fire to opera houses (he has repented since and has even written in this musical form himself), but the Old Lady is still going strong. She is no longer as regal and as much admired as in the 18th century; nor is she as popular and vital as she was in mid-19th century for bold young rivals have entered the arena: film, radio, musicals and television. But reviewing the new operas written in this century, from MOSES UND ARON by Schoenberg and WOZZECK by Berg, to works by Luigi Dallapiccola, Ildebrando Pizzetti, Werner Egk, Marcel Delannoy and others, one is taken by surprise by the abundance, versatility and ingenuity in musical, theatrical and ideological terms, of modern opera.

What the musical avant-garde considered a defunct creature, a 'dinosaur' of sorts (this strange animal is over 370 years old), became, to their dismay, a phoenix redux. At times it metamorphosed into political drama (Weill-Brecht); at others it returned to the oratory form (Stravinsky, Honegger, Debussy), and on still other occasions it turns upon itself with laudable irony, as in Mauricio Kagel's STAATSTHEATER. Anything can happen in an opera, all is allowed and, if one may venture to express some optimism – which is not easy in our province – it still has some surprises in store for us.

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Music lovers have been accustomed to think that it is in the nature of opera to address the 'larger issues' – biblical, mythological, historical, national. There is not a single literary work, be it a classic novel or a Shakespearean play, that managed to escape becoming an opera (see the detailed bibliography in Donald J. Grout's book). Stravinsky composed OEDIPUS REX (Sophocles and Jean Cocteau); Alban Berg wrote WOZZECK (Georg Büchner) and LULU (Frank Wedekind); Penderecki wrote THE DEVILS OF LOUDON after Aldous Huxley's novel; LES MAMELLES DE TIRÉSIAS was written by Poulenc after Guillaume Apollinaire; Britten wrote BILLY BUDD after Herman Melville; Roman Vlad based IL GABBIANO on Chekhov, Virgil Thompson wrote THREE SAINTS IN FOUR ACTS after Gertrude Stein; Gunther Schuller used Dürrnematt's play DER BESUCH DER ALTEN DAME for his opera; Egk composed COLUMBUS after Paul Claudel and DER REVISOR after Gogol; Haubenstock-Ramati wrote AMERIKA after Kafka, and there are others, of course.

In the 20th century, the grandiose character of the opera has been modified, and composers turn more and more to the worldly which can be found in the daily press (THE CONSUL by Giancarlo Menotti; ZWISCHENFÄLLE BEI EINER NOTLANDUNG by Boris Blacher; RESAN (THE JOURNEY) by Lars Johan Werle, VOLO DI NOTTE by Dallapiccola and others). The present, dreary as it may be, full of scandals or challenges, infiltrates the contents of operas, reviving and refreshing both the opera and its audience. The opera has rapidly turned into a theatrical work, shedding the eccentricities which suited the conventions and etiquettes of a different era.

More and more, the opera tries to comment on the human condition and social reality in our century, either by an explicit message or by less direct means. The critic Nathan Mishori writing on the success of the opera DIE VERSUCHUNG (Munich, July 1976), says:

It seems to me that the real secret lies in Josef Tal's ability to employ music as a sophisticated means for expressing moral and philosophical attitudes, which concern life and music alike.

I think that this is the only reason why Tal's music has managed not only to provoke the listener's full participation in the action on stage, but also to set him close to the composer's and librettist's critical-moral standpoint. The listener identifies with the positive uncertainties of the young; with the longing for innocent belief in God as he appears in the story of the Creation, and with the admission of that which is beautiful, natural and unique in a man and a woman. But the music alerts the listener to take heed when adulation of a leader becomes irrational; demands that he be able to ridicule distorted reason which might allow evil to take over. The music also chastises the listener, as if accusing him for keeping silent in the face of atrocities committed by a reign of terror. The terror lies in distorting the truth or forcing men to believe in lies, in locking the sane in asylums, brainwashing dissenters and leading them to suicidal protest actions as happened in Vietnam. The sheer force of musical expression and description of all that is taking place on stage shatters the listeners' complacency. It reminds them of things they wish to forget; it instills deep anxiety about the possible future. And yet, the final notes of the opera, which bring us back to its beginning, optimistically and stubbornly maintain and proclaim, in a manner typical of Tal, Eliraz and of all Israelis, that the choice is ours and it is only up to us to ensure a good future. (I'yunim Bamusika, March 1978)

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A libretto might be considered a 'bastard' creation since when it can exist on its own merits – independent of music – it can no longer be taken as a libretto; and when it is able to keep its ground only when supported by music, it can be justly claimed that it is not literature. How is one to find the precarious balance between words and music in an opera?

Composers have always been preoccupied with this issue, just as libretto writers have always regarded it their duty to comment on the ratio in this equation. Even the pretty lady in CAPRICCIO by Richard Strauss is debating (singing all the while, of course) which of her two suitors, the poet or the composer, comes first.

Menotti was right when he set the obvious rule: *The relationship of words and music should be symbiotic, i.e., a mutually nurturing cooperation*. But Menotti never explained what in reality, is 'mutually nurturing cooperation'?

Which comes first then? Does the libretto (including the plot, dialogues, characters, message, ideas etc.) determine the character of the music, or is it music that lends the libretto that single necessary fullness, which takes priority over all else? This is yet another of those questions that must be asked, but that no great effort need be made to answer.

There are some who regard the libretto as a crucial ally in modern opera, so that it should be considered a component of equal worth with the musical texture which could not reach the stage without it; and there are still those who adhere to the traditions of the 18th and 19th century, arguing that librettos are but para-texts, mere 'clothes-lines' for the composer to hang his creative 'washing' on. Or to use W.H.Auden's sarcastic words: *The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a **private letter** to the composer. They have their moment, the moment in which they suggest to him a certain melody; but once that is over they are as expendable as the infantry is to a Chinese general once victory is achieved, they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them.*

Giancarlo Menotti's approach was different: *Most modern composers blame the librettos for their failures, but I am afraid that music is more often the culprit. Opera is, after all, music, and the power to elate and transform is inherent in music. We have abundant examples of 'lame' plays which have turned into highly inspired operas, but not a single instance of a good opera whose main power stems from its libretto.* (Partisan Review, Vol.19 No.1, 1952, p.10)

Here is another argument for the libretto's importance: nowadays, more and more composers choose to write their own librettos (Shoenberg, Blacher, Menotti, Negri, Orff, Pizzetti and others). It seems the libretto is crucial for the composer, and he is reluctant to share his artistic inspiration with a 'stranger'. The words and stage textures, become an element of **personal** creativity on equal footing with the process of composition.

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A few words about writing JOSEF. As on four previous occasions, Josef Tal again approached me with the question: *Have you any ideas? We had been commissioned to write a new opera*. Once again, he gave me 'carte blanche'. In the course of our talks, the outlines began to fill out. We agreed that the opening sentence in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" was loaded with meaning, and that it could give us an exciting story-line: one morning a man wakes up from a nightmare and finds that, in fact, he is now an insect; that he is **different**.

This sentence raises many questions: what was it in those dreams that made the young man wake up being different? What does being different mean? What is the power that makes a man stand up and say: as of now, I do not wish to go on living as I have done? This man, who is Josef Herman (just as he is you or me!) asks: What's the use of getting up for breakfast? What's the use of going to my senseless job at the office again? Where does the long-lasting love for one woman lead me? The man will begin wondering about everything he has never bothered to question before.

His doubts will be limited by his dream sequences. These dreams reveal to him things about his own personality as well as about what is about to happen in the society in which he lives.

The libretto will deal not only with the disintegration of a man who failed to achieve an acceptable modus vivendi between his dreams and the reality of his life, but also with the events which undermine the stability of an entire town. Many ominous signs forebode the imminent crisis, but the citizens, rooted in their ways and used not to question them, remain totally unaware. The crisis in our story begins as a personal and private crisis of Josef and of the Herman family, but it soon engulfs the entire society around them. Only the outbreak of war (following Duke Ferdinand's assassination) lets loose the catastrophe which has been simmering behind a facade of false peace and security.

The libretto uses various motifs from Kafka in a collage-like manner and draws analogies to the Biblical Joseph. It is unnecessary to elaborate here on the similarities and differences between the Biblical Joseph and Joseph K (or my Josef Herman). These, I hope, will become clear in the course of the performance both through verbal allusions and by visual means.

I will, however, take up an issue: in the Bible, Joseph, the believer, is protected by God and solves the divine riddles posed him in a most unique manner in order to lead him to his destiny, whereas Josef Herman, the unbeliever, the disillusioned skeptic, is unable to unravel the complex ties between his dreams and desires, until, as a result of these relentless pressures, he descends into insanity. That very insanity will eventually grip the town's people and then the nation, inevitably headed for disaster and war.

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To return to our reflections on the opera as such. The opera is a work meant for a theatre stage and so, of course, it should be theatrical. The more theatrical it is, the better it works as a drama, the whole, however, can only be perceived in the theatre. The opera, more than the musical, can only come fully into its own (and in this it is closer to the music-hall) when seen as a total creation on stage.

We all agree that modern opera is not merely a 'concert in costume', or that it is simply a suitable opportunity to show off fine voices. Naturally, while writing, both the libretto writer and the composer are conscious of the interdisciplinary possibilities of the text. The opera at last becomes what it should have been from the first – a drama.

Josef Tal's lucid comments on our first opera, ASHMEDAI, in which he forges the link between the 'immediate' and the 'timeless' and insists on the vital integration of various performing arts, are as valid today as they ever were: *For the libretto we selected the Talmudic fable of Ashmedai and King Solomon. The story was freely adapted by Eliraz, and the universal and timeless question of good and evil was put in a contemporary political context. There are no damning preachers on stage, but the implied message is painfully clear. Horror is akin to sentiment; the tragic and the comic walk hand in hand. Today, of course, you cannot write an opera containing long arias. The libretto, in any situation, must suit the language of modern music and its most complex tonal structure. The libretto's special musical requirements call for singers who are also actors and mimes. The choreography of crowd scenes requires a specific style, the set must be timeless yet, at the same time clearly reflect the world around us. The lighting is not designed merely to light the stage, it is an integral part of the musical rhythm. The unconventional action on stage demands unconventional sounds. Electronic music is an integral part of the score. All visual and acoustic elements should merge into an integrated whole, yet leave the material flexible enough for modifications, so that the show's dynamics remain unhampered.* ("Ha'aretz", November 5, 1971)

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Auden regarded opera as an art form *in keeping with the golden age of liberal humanism with its unshakable belief in freedom and progress*. Thus, in his opinion, the ongoing changes make it harder than ever to write operas today. Alfred Einstein argued that the opera is *an impossible art form*. Be that as it may, in our times the impossible is being realized and flourishes in many places around the world. The poet Avot Yeshurun may have been right in his naive belief when he wrote: *I think that music / knows about us all there / is for us to know / about ourselves*.

I do not know if in fact music knows about us what "there is for us to know about ourselves", but if there is any art form which comes close to this goal, it is indeed music. Using its unique gifts it succeeds to tell us something otherwise indiscernible about the human soul. As a poet, I believe that poetry also strives to attain that ideal and must, therefore, be exact and pure to the point of self-obliteration.

In my continuing attempts to write texts for Josef Tal, I have come to recognize the frightening might of **deletion**, that increasing awareness of touching only upon **the absolutely necessary**. What needs to be deleted as superfluous? This issue preoccupies me with every new libretto. From Tal I have learned to take out any word that fails to put up a fight for its survival. The text should not be self-explanatory, it should offer itself as a **cipher** for the music to decode and for the audience to absorb and experience.

Even if the modern libretto regards itself as a vital component of the operatic process, it knows, as does the composer, that it should shed light on **human folly** and cry out against it; be tolerant of the mind's uncertainties and provide a stage from which they may seek understanding. In this way it could create the kind of dialogue, without which the entire artistic process would seem but a deranged excess.

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Today, more than ever, I believe that the libretto is the living core of the opera. It shapes and develops the theme, its roots penetrate into the flow of life and offer the composer a variety of linguistic textures. These forces determine the "musical topography" of the opera.

In our first operas we sought out far sources (not in order to evade the present, but in order to achieve 'metaphorization' and 'transfers'): a Talmudic fable in ASHMEDAI, the historical events in MASSADA, a pseudo-modern fantasy in DIE VERSUCHUNG, or the Genesis in THE GARDEN. I know now, that opera needs to get its teeth into events in the **present**, unafraid to face actual social or political aspects; it wants to participate, without any aesthetic 'handicap' in the flow of real life, to voice opinions and assume responsibility.

While writing these lines, I am already working on the libretto for the new opera, QUIET PLACE, which the Rostock Volkstheater in Germany has commissioned. The libretto will deal with burning issues, in more sense than one: What do you discover when you decide to take a very close look at what goes on in a small town? It is then you find the things which its people have been trying to hide: the hostility to all minorities and to immigrant labourers, which can manifest itself in extreme hate and violence. This is not restricted to certain German towns, but is widespread in places far and near, in Europe and elsewhere. The difficulties in majority/minority relations are surprisingly more acute in democratic regimes, in those shadowy areas of right and wrong. The role the media play in this immediately comes up: to what extent do the media reflect such events, incite them or possibly even 'create' them?

These and other pertinent questions will serve as foundations of the plot and will shape the characters. The problem arises, of course, to what extent is the music able (or willing) to express these tensions using its unique tools.

Opera can no longer be mere entertainment (though if it opts out of being that as well, people will not come to see it), neither can it be simply a display of virtuosity. The libretto comes, therefore, dangerously near to the realm of bona fide theatre.

As modern drama relies increasingly on contemporary documentaries, so does the opera wish to touch upon the **immediate present**. It shuns the didactic (of the Brecht-Weill-Dessau spirit), but it must be involved. There will be no more reclining on soft chairs and letting beautiful, undemanding music caress the ear. Contemporary audiences, like it or not, are not going to get away from their reality when they enter the opera auditorium. They won't find there the romantic escape or the easy, passive voyeurism. They are going to be the heroes in the action, and as such pay the total price of suffering, humiliation, responsibility, but at the same time they will experience elation and catharsis.

Such concept would require today's libretto writer to use tools somewhat different from those used by librettists of the past. There will be no more sentimentality, mythical mists or cowering behind the composer's domineering orchestration. The libretto writer must seek characters who can speak their mind with utmost conviction, because they know they have aware audiences, who want to hear and understand what is being said. The music shall no longer cover for the argument, but will expose the existential fears and hopes in a reality in which the threat of extinction is graver than ever before.

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A libretto is not simply a sequence of events and the formulation of the characters involved, but also (and often more importantly) the working within the **language**. The libretto cannot do without what it is in essence – **words, language**. It refuses to give up as poetry, and through it seeks the greatest freedom possible, until music comes and sets the proper place for it. Music does not limit the libretto, it only brings discipline to it, demanding that it make room for the music.

The awareness of words puts the libretto in an opera at the same starting point as the music. In fact, it doubles the force of the music, and becomes (in its own way) music itself.

The libretto's materials are always words borne by the soul. It is in the nature of these words to bring action to the stage and feed not only the eyes of the audience (and of the composer), but their ears as well. The awareness and sensibility of the ear makes the libretto the grammar of the music in an opera.

The reality presented in the opera cannot be simply the social reality (which is always there behind the words). With its special usage of language, the libretto infuses the 'existential' with a dream dimension. With its mischievous linguistic elements, the libretto lends reality a 'lining' of the meta-real. It does not lead the action on stage toward the mythical, but rather endows it with "a root in eternity" (as Bernard Noël put it).

Words, unlike Auden's simile, do not disappear like the Chinese soldiers who vanish after the general's victory. They are the laws of the regime, the foundations on which the emperor builds his empire, and (through poetry) lets it participate in something beyond the 'transient'. The care the librettist bestows on his characters' language is, therefore, one of the vital supports he may provide to his friend, the composer.

The sorrow felt by the libretto writer when his work is translated into a foreign language, and the music is composed to that other, foreign language, is understandable. I have lived through this painful experience with the translations of the texts of ASHMEDAI, THE TEMPTATION and THE GARDEN, as against those which retained in the original Hebrew: MASSADA 967 and JOSEF.

Though the translation preserves the 'action', it deprives the libretto of its unique 'breathing' quality, and much can be said about that. The French contemporary poet Andre du Bouchet says: *Poetry is a statement made not to be talked about. Time and again it objects to the statement itself*. That was true as long as poetry had not met with music. Once poetry and music meet, it suddenly discovers its true nature: it opens up, becomes a voice and the listener shares its joy.

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