

# The Contemporary Opera

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Contemporary music has often been described as “modern,” “experimental” or “avant-garde,” all terms which denote an attempt on the part of the composer to grapple with a new intellectual problem, and, by solving it, to arrive at a new reality. Such an effort is indispensable to the creation of any original work of art or science.

In a work of art, however, the problem can be implicitly understood, though not explicitly stated. In that case, a solution may be sought through a process of experimentation. This can sometimes lead to a new experience, but where there is no understanding of the problem the results must necessarily be superficial—“modernistic” rather than truly original and modern. In our day work of this kind is very common; and it always betrays a fundamental inconsistency of thought, a cleavage between the basic concept and its development. An aesthetic problem, for instance, might be worked out in terms derived from technology or—in another sphere—a programme for the advancement of social or political liberties might be set in a rigid ideological framework and so waver between the opposing extremes of tolerance and intolerance.

In the present age of mass media, experimentation in the arts has largely replaced independent creativity. Our art forms have become the products of chance: now startling, now confusing, now illuminating and now destructive. Their beauty, where it exists, is a beauty entirely derived from the play of accident. Rilke described it in his essay “Beauty—the beginning of Terror”：“The juggling of letters of the alphabet and of fragments of speech with the object of creating a montage of new entities, free of any meaning—that is merely the lowest level of lyricism. It is usually worthless, yet sometimes there are also discoveries, like magnificent shells washed up on the shore by a whim of the seas. They are of a perplexing beauty which promises much and yet nothing; they might equally be the traces of a different splendour or the beginning of terror.”

An experiment in the arts is always revealed as superficial where the façade—the outward form—of a work is unrelated to its total conception.

Works of this kind are created precisely by those who decry individuality while proclaiming the cult of experimentation for its own sake.

The necessity for experimentation cannot be dissociated from the idea of development, but at present the very notion of development is unfortunately discredited owing to its association with the unpopular concept of tradition. Tradition has come to be viewed with suspicion owing to a fear of a premature atrophy of the creative powers. The truly creative artist, however, proceeds differently. He develops his work from behind the façade, transforming it from within, a process which can take some time. The full meaning of the work is revealed, as Adorno puts it, only after "the material becomes antiquated and the main features of the façade are no longer offensive to taste." But, at this point, the work is, in fact, already a part of tradition.

The seed of an idea, by its very nature, is driven to its gestation, growth and refertilization. The seed itself already manifests a fragmentary form. The assemblage of fragments is the primary stage. Where the fragments are vital, they combine into meaningful entities. Even an entity devoid of meaning can still, at this stage, give the appearance of having an intact skin. This skin will soon shrink, however, because it lacks inner substance.

Let us consider these theories more specifically in relation to the problems of operatic composition.

It is often claimed that the opera is an outmoded musical form, but I believe, on the contrary, that only now is it beginning to realise its true potentialities. It is the most complex and comprehensive of all forms of art, and its technical capabilities have developed immeasurably in the past hundred years. Instead of a series of static episodes cast in traditional forms, one is now offered a continual succession of novel experiences. With its use of developed theatrical techniques, modern orchestration, electronic music and so forth, the contemporary opera is uniquely well-equipped to present a modern perception of beauty in its fullness. The audience has only to compare its own experience of life with the interpretation offered on the stage; it will find its own experience there, while at the same time heightened presentation will make it aware of a new kind of aural and visual beauty.

In the opening section of "Ashmedai" I have tried to make full use of this potential of the modern opera. The stage and décor are not merely static *mise-en-scène* but consist of objects in motion which form and reform themselves into a coherent unity resulting from the interplay of

energy and mass. A corresponding effect is achieved by the surging and receding waves of electronic music which billow from every part of the theatre.

One must also consider the problem of the libretto. If the work has a form but no specific meaning, then the libretto will consist of verbal fragments which can be arranged in accidental patterns. On the other hand, if a work has meaning, then the libretto must depend on one central idea to which all developments are related and which also dictates the nature of the music.

In the case of "Ashmedai," the central idea is the significance of the principal figure. Ashmedai is a demon who changes all things into their opposites: good into evil, man into beast, order into confusion. A many-faced devil of many tongues, he is the very genius of permutation. Now, a major characteristic of the Hebrew language is its constant permutation of letters, yielding changes of word-forms and meanings. Hence, in this case, the nature of the language affects the action of the opera through its perpetual transformation of words and concepts, and this is also matched in the permutation-techniques of the musical composition.

The work is based on a talmudic legend: the demon Ashmedai persuades the king to allow him to take his place and rule the kingdom in disguise for the space of a year, while the king goes out unknown amongst the people. It is essentially a statement of the ever-recurrent theme of the conflict of extremes (represented here by the tolerant king and the intolerant Ashmedai), leading to a general destruction. Fantastic though the legend may seem, its theme is one of universal purport; thus the constant permutations in the words and music can themselves convey a message to the audience without any recourse to explicit moralizing.

I have characterized each of the principal figures by an interval series and a personal time-concept which denote his essential nature and personality. Once this has been established, the technique of permutation facilitates the emergence of variant forms which can reverse the original situation completely into an absolute chaos of tumult and uproar, as expressed in the score by aleatorical means. Such is my musical treatment of the problem of tolerance and intolerance.