

## A GOOD LIBRETTO

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**M**ANY people think the trouble with opera is the libretto. What are good librettos? In order to explain my feeling about them I have to repeat the story of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* for those who do not know it. Two pleasant young ladies, sisters it happens, and two pleasant young gentlemen are very much in love. They are ingenuous and are quite seriously in love. Naturally enough the young men are convinced the young ladies would not be interested in anyone else, and they say so. A more experienced man about town smiles at this, and makes a bet he can disillusion them. At his direction, they set a trap for the two sisters. The young men pretend they are leaving for the wars; but return disguised as Moscovites. As Moscovites they meet the sisters again, and now each of the young men tries to win the girl the other one loves. To their dismay, the young ladies are not as steadfast as they had promised, and yield to the new suitors. The villain has won his point, the young ladies are put to shame, and the disillusioned young men have to pay the bet besides. But the cynic, after laughing at the young people's ingenuousness, sets everything right by spending the money on a banquet for all five and everybody is happy ever afterwards.

I glanced at the libretto before going to the opera, and was disappointed at the smart cynicism of this story. I didn't like the young men betting on their ladies' love, I didn't like their willingness to plot against them, I didn't like the girls being humiliated. At the time, I took ingenuous love seriously, and I still do and many other people do too. Why should Mozart have chosen this story? . . . \*

Of course Mozart is a tremendous genius, and people told me that it was the magic of his music that transmutes an unfeeling plot. But was he working against a disadvantage? His letters

[\*Dots indicate omissions from Mr. Denby's original article made because of the limitations of space.]

show he argued with the librettist till he got what he needed. And you don't feel any cross purpose when you watch and listen to *Così fan tutte*. When you look at the stage you feel quite ready for any magical transmutation.

The stage is bright and pretty. The people have pretty clothes that make them look pleasant. The young men, beyond this pleasantness, are not particularly interesting as individuals nor distinguishable in their emotions, and the young ladies are the one a little more dramatic and the other a little more lyric. They all might just as well be in love the other way around, or in love with somebody else entirely. You've seen them in other operas, in love with other people. You know it and they know it, too. . . .

The characters are conventional, the situations are conventional, so the story isn't very serious as a real story. So you are not worried by what happens. You aren't worried either when nothing happens, when the action is stopped awhile, and one of the people stands and sings an aria. Real human beings wouldn't of course stop to sing, but these conventionalized characters aren't real anyway, they are professional singers who can sing very pleasantly. In fact you want them to sing. And when they do sing, curiously stepping out of their part in the plot, they become much more expressive. These are the moments you have come for, when the singers sing. These are the moments that have been prepared for your pleasure. The action is stopped, the character on the stage turns to you, you see that his manner is different, that his being is opening out to you. All these things heighten your expectancy, flatter you. You will know in a moment exactly what he is like. And Mozart doesn't disappoint you. When they turn to you his people sound very intimate, they sound as though they were letting you look into their hearts. And while they are singing you are very happy about them because the sounds they make are very beautiful. You hear vaguely what they are saying, it is connected in some superficial way with their situation. But the meaning the music is giving to those conventional words proves that no matter what sort of mix up they have got into, being as pleasant as they are, it doesn't really matter. As long as they are really so beautiful, you feel lenient about it, in fact in love with them whatever happens.

Of course this intimacy doesn't last long. It can't humanly, either for your receptivity or their sincerity. And so when the happy moment has had its course, your attention is diverted to the plot again as to a pleasant sort of joke, an understanding between yourself and the actors, or is it the characters. Of course you don't expect much characterization or much acting from singers anyway who are naturally enough a little awkward when they aren't singing. But both you and they have had enough of singing and flights of feeling for a little, you are satisfied for the moment. In fact it is quite pleasant to laugh at them a little between such moments, it seems more honest in a pleasant way—perhaps it's the ambivalence of emotions, or if you'd rather, the creative recess.



My point about *Cosi fan tutte* is this. An opera is a theatre piece, and for several hours a set of singers are to be the object of the audience's attention. The music is obviously the most important element, as it is the singer's technic of expression. But they can't sing all the time. The libretto binds together the singers' great moments, the libretto is the thing that helps them in and out of these great moments, and gives the audience a chance to relax, by getting interested in something else for a while. The libretto has to take care of the differences of theatrical effects, arrange them, prepare them, give them a theatric continuity. It has to take into consideration that the more credible as individuals the characters are in the action, the greater is the break between action and singing, but the less credible as human beings, the less interesting their moments of emotion will be. Mozart and da Ponte generalize the characters, but make them as credible as possible by emphasizing not the role but the singer's personal contribution, his personality. They give him a chance to under-characterize, to be his natural stage self. While the professional singer is singing you will believe anything he chooses to express, because he can completely interest you, but you can't believe him between times in the same way; as an actor he's not exactly amateurish but something superficially like it. So the play part of the story is made just a little ludicrous, just a little amateurish, so if the singer is limited as an actor he will not break up the atmosphere, the atmosphere he completely creates when he

has a chance to really sing. He will not break it, he will substitute his personal stage atmosphere. Because actually the opera moves on two levels of atmosphere, of truth. This double level of truth, one of intense artistry, one of limited suggestion, of personal statement, so to speak, rather than realization, is a special kind of theatre effect.

Of course this effect was for da Ponte a natural heritage from the *Commedia dell'Arte*; it is a technic the theatre of the nineteenth century has estranged us from. By the theatre of the nineteenth century I mean the theatre where we get psychological unity of character—an actor comes on in his part and remains in it till after the curtain is down and the audience has gone home. His inability to get out of his part used to be considered a special excellence, whereas it's really only a straight jacket on everybody's imagination, and in human fiction. After all an actor is more of the time Mr. Lunt and only at intervals Petruchio, and everybody knows it. This kind of loose but satisfactory characterization we have always enjoyed in a few great actors, but more obviously in revues, night club singing as well as in the classic ballet. And similar effects charm us when they happen by accident in amateur performance. It is the shift on the stage of an actor into and out of his part, a piece of magic that we should not have allowed our theatre entertainers to forget. But in opera we can't lose sight of this double level. Singing is a medium that, like dancing, cannot be kept up indefinitely; so the rest must be accounted for in the arrangement of the whole—by the musician by stopping his aria, by the librettist by substituting something else. I think that is the whole problem of a libretto, to realize that the singers are people who can be their best only when singing and who can't sing all the time. And that the inevitable transmutation in full sight of the audience is something peculiarly beautiful. . . .



Mozart and da Ponte have a natural, a humane attitude—humane to the singers, to the audience, humane in its respect for the representational possibilities of the musical stage; the humane attitude that respects all the participants in the evening's entertainment, allows them to enjoy high moments and low moments by giving each a place and a telling place.

What about good operas other than theirs? Rossini's *Figaro* is agreeable, you still have some Commedia "lazzi," you have musical persiflage, but in the main you have less intimacy, you have instead more of the hurry, more of the gangster trick that Mozart's *Figaro* also used; the libretto is left fewer possibilities of diversion, but still raises its head. But in *Lucia* you get a new function of libretto—and *Lucia* still works on the stage in its own fascinating, ridiculous way. . . . It is a raw, insensitive but honest opera, music and libretto. It works if you give it that sort of performance, if you keep it going, works very well. If you are young and energetic you can manage.

The libretto of *Trovatore* is like that of *Lucia* in style. I am very fond of it. Its senselessness has a wonderful buoyancy, and suits the effectiveness, the healthy juvenile narcissism of the music. It seems difficult to produce because so much action is indicated; but this action is never carried out in the sense of activity. The timing of the libretto makes that impossible.

Wagner undoubtedly has the worst librettos of any of the admired operas. It's his own fault, of course, because he wrote them himself. I am amazed he didn't notice how bad they were when he tried producing them himself; but from the stage directions his production ideas seemed to be those of an august scene shifter. The fact is Wagner's senselessness hasn't any buoyancy in the present system of production, although it's generally called authoritative. His singers are not treated as human beings, not even as athletic go-getters with no sense beyond a voice. It is true a race of freaks has been developed who can sing his music proficiently and a feeling of horrified pity seizes you when you watch them, these large people, standing on the stage carrying their monstrous vocal organs around like so many trombones, scarcely allowed to sit down, sometimes, like the poor Fire God, required to hop in one spot for an hour steady. . . . It's all inhuman, it's forcing human beings out of shape. The trouble with Wagner is that he wants his singers to look bigger than life; and singers can for a moment when they're at their best, those magic moments Mozart and da Ponte worked out carefully. But Wagner acts ill tempered. He doesn't allow his people a clear cut rest, all they can do is try to cover over their weak moments, and

covering over is a thing that doesn't really work on the stage. The humane thing would be to produce these dramas with puppets, balloon-like puppets that you could blow up bigger and bigger at the important moments; that way no one could miss the deeper significance of the Wagnerian symbolism. Theatric magic is a thing particularly easy to achieve in the opera form, provided you watch out for the human requirements of magic. . . .



I have been talking about the libretto as an arrangement of stage effects; a libretto is also a word pattern of course, an arrangement of syllables, of word flow, of sense even, with regard to effects of musical form. For the arias the job is clearly defined. The words have to be words you can sing, that is, their sound value is more important than their sense. The librettist has to smooth the words so they can readily be slipped on to a melodic line, he has to watch out for enough long vowels—vowels that will stand lengthening in case the composer wants to hold them—or short syllables that will, through their consonants, keep separate one from the other. Of course he has to make repetition easy, and phrasing. This is not the same as writing poetry, because English poetry has come to be a spoken music, not a sung music. Book poetry is written to have its music inside it already, there is no need for composer's music besides, and no room for it, even. But if he tries, a poet can write arias better than other people. A number of good Italian poets have written them—Rinuccini, Metastasio, Boito. Our contemporary American is by no means an unsingable language. There are plenty of examples. If someone would print a good selection from our popular songs of the last twenty years, I'm sure literary critics would be serious about their frequent felicities. And our greatest poet has furnished a still better example of language for singing in *Four Saints*.

But besides the aria there is the rest of the opera to be written. The part that explains the action, sets the scene, gives the characterization, the local color, the jokes. For the musician this part is the recitative. Virgil Thomson says that's the hard part for the musician, and it's certainly the hard part for the librettist, if the composer wants to have it all sung. The act of singing pre-

supposes either a lyric state in the character, or a character so unnatural, so stylized as they say now, that you're not surprised at anything else he does. To make either of these possibilities fit an exposition scene is no fun. (Of course the librettist has to be careful too, when he writes a scene of dramatic climax, because the composer has to look at it lyrically, explicitly, whereas the playwright can express it with few or even ironic words, implicitly, in the action. But this part is not confusing.) It is in the informative, the recitative parts where the librettist gets confused.



Personally I prefer the easier way out, the "*Singspiel*" method, the way of Mozart and da Ponte, that gets across the necessary information by speaking, or by a sort of partly spoken, partly chanted recitative, accompanied by very little musical sound. Even here the words are not the playwright's kind of words, they are so just as little as the words of an aria are those of a book poem. Just as little as the dramatic words of an opera are those of a play. A playwright puts the emotion into the words, and has to have actors to color them and carry them and bring them to their conclusion; but the librettist has to get across only the necessary information as rapidly as possible, and then build up to an aria, to a lyric scene. For example, a spoken recitative is almost uniform in tempo, because the dramatic variations of speed are better left to the more expressive moments of the opera, that is the singing. But it is quite possible to tell the story of an opera without subterfuge, if you will interrupt the music for awhile and let some words be spoken.

But suppose the composer wants music all the way. As soon as the librettist writes a serious play, the music will only be kidding the show, by exaggerating the lyricism, which isn't pleasant for a whole evening, though it can work for bitterness well enough, as in *Gianni Schicci*. If he writes delicately as Hoffmannsthal does, the orchestra makes the scene blatant and slow. If he goes off into symbolism, lifting recitative halfway to aria by an unnatural lyricism, he can write his information in doggerel like Wagner, but the music will turn to singsong. Or it turns into a freakish hysteria of uninterrupted emphasis, like *Die Glückliche Hand*. Or if his language is full of latent poetry, on

the edge of lyric flight so to speak, he makes the opera a succession of beginnings—as in *Porgy and Bess*—that never reach their climax, because a real climax would stop the continuity. In other words this is a confused problem.

Gertrude Stein solves it in her way. Antheil - Lowenfeld's *Transatlantic* tried another way—heightening the characters into the types of contemporary American legend, and therefore obvious to the audience though not naturalistic. Schiffer's bright text for Hindemith's *Neues Vom Tage* goes in for kidding the show, using the obviousness of revue language. Ramuz and Stravinsky get a speaker to explain. Cocteau who writes librettos that for sound are a model of fluency and definiteness, got trapped by the orchestra in *Le Pauvre Matelot*, but the words worked well with the speaker and ballet of the *Tour Eiffel*. Brecht in *Mahagonny* uses the European legend of the American West and couples with it the legend of the western dance-hall—the dance-hall we know best from Chaplin's *Dog's Life*. This allows him to write almost realistically but really poetically, and, by depressing the lyric intimacy of the arias, to merge them with the recitative, giving the whole a sort of unexpressed symbolism. Brecht is a good poet, and the libretto shows it. He is also a poet who uses the contrast between the informative part of a show (*der Lehrwert*) and the theatric effect (*das Artistische*), and the contrast of stage personality in relaxed moments against technical proficiency at others—in other words the Mozart *Singspiel* tradition. But from all these various honest attempts by good poets, it is clear that the recitative remains a shaky part of the librettist job; in fact the only clear thing is our confusion.

Because three hundred years ago the opera started with the pre-conceived notion of sung recitative as Greek and good, whereas we start each new time from a lot of negatives but no clear cut positive. But there is a clear cut positive. The immediate problem is what can the singers at our disposal actually do on the stage so as to be interesting and occasionally pleasing to the audience. How can we show them at their best, and be humane about it? We are, Corbusier says, at the threshold of a new hundred years of humaneness and joyousness. How can we get the musical theatre to perform its happy magic transmutation in this new opera all over again?