

MODERN MUSIC

THE OPERATIC PARADOX

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THE crisis in opera today has been the subject of an extensive inquiry conducted by a French periodical, to which the answers were many, the causes assigned diverse. Each man had his own explanation and his own remedy. On one point there was complete unanimity—no one dreamed of denying the existence of a grave situation; at the same time everyone expressed a belief that the future promised improvement.

There can be no doubt, however, that in France as in Germany, Austria and Italy, the stamp of the past characterizes operatic output. There is an abundance of productions, especially in Italy; in fact almost every country in Europe witnesses the introduction of several new works each season. But their quality is not equal to their quantity. Nor is this because Europe lacks great composers. In the last twenty-five years we have experienced a definite growth in the field of instrumental, vocal and even pantomimic types of music. The composers of the twentieth century have greatly enriched these mediums and have succeeded in shaping new forms and processes.

Our epoch possesses its own musical style, varying according to school and country but clearly distinguishable from that of other periods. Despite its special characteristics in France, Germany and England, it possesses a certain undeniable unity. But this new art is apparent only in pure music, in the instrumental, vocal and ballet forms, in operettas, and in those scenic genres which express the comic and grotesque. Opera alone is not revived.

Its instrumentation has indeed felt the new influence but the thought of the composer remains imprisoned in the circle traced by his predecessors. In this century the ballet exists but the opera does not. We are still living on the Wagnerian heritage and the single recent acquisition is the Italian "realism." For it is a fact, extraordinary as it may seem, that the only great works since Wagner, the only ones to bring a new conception, *Boris Godunow* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, have had no more effect on modern opera than if they had never existed. Italian realism, particularly Puccini's, though it may be judged harshly from the aesthetic point of view, has exerted a great influence on opera not only in the country of its origin but in Germany (Schrecker) and in France. (This realism waits for a historian to show that though the musical language employed by our composers is still under the Wagnerian domination, the operatic conceptions of our time, except in very rare cases, tend towards a certain verity.)

Action remains the pivotal center of all our dramatic music whether it is exclusively subjective, like the psychological upheaval in Schoenberg's *Ewartung*, or objective and purely external, brutal and simple, as in the majority of realistic operas. It is always a case of realizing musically a series of events, of finding an equivalent in sound, as clear and as true as possible, for a series of emotions or objective facts. Admitting that music by nature is essentially dynamic, it appears also to be particularly adapted to amplifying stage action, lending it an infinite power to move us.

Our operatic music attempts to be dramatic and is, as a matter of fact hypnotised by the action, by the events depicted. Now this is fatal. History has proved that whenever operatic composers yield to the temptation of dramatic action, they fail to create lasting music, exactly as they fail to create drama, and succeed only in sacrificing their idea to their musical instinct.

Operatic history can be reduced, in general, to a history of its "reforms." Each has been proclaimed a revolt, in the cause of truth, of the dramatic element against the musical—the result of an attempt to translate the so-called action into music as sincerely and as directly as possible. Every century since

Monteverdi has had its operatic iconoclasts who have broken the conventions to achieve a new synthesis in which, theoretically, music should bear the sacrifice. Music has been regarded as an expressive element, valuable and powerful, but one whose development must be carefully watched in order to keep it subordinate to the drama's action. From the point of view of dramatic equilibrium, it has always exhibited a dangerous tendency towards autonomy and towards crystallization into a form that would hinder the full development of the action by conventional restraints.

Certain reforms undertaken in the name of free expression and dramatic verity have resulted in genuine masterpieces, such as, not to mention Wagner's, those of Gluck, Moussorgsky and Debussy. The very fact that each one of these was inspired by the same ideal of truth and sincerity and often launched accompanied by the same manifesto, is evidence that the end was not achieved and that, beautiful as they were, they in no way realized the idea the reformers sincerely pursued and felt they had at last achieved. The great composers, endeavoring to make musical forms more malleable, trying to discard the conventions imposed by the specific character of musical dynamics, succeeded in overthrowing some conventions only to establish others. Their novelty made them less apparent temporarily until such time as they were put into practice and slavishly applied by disciples and imitators; then these new processes in turn revealed their machinery, their artifices, thus provoking a new reaction in the name of eternal verity and direct expression, the goal constantly pursued, always missed.



But let us consider, from another viewpoint, a rather significant phenomenon. When, after a certain period of time has elapsed and one of the great music dramas of the past is revived—Monteverdi's *Orpheus*, *Don Juan*, *Tristan* or *Pelléas*—, after we have rediscovered therein a certain freshness of emotion we perceive perfectly how much convention, artificiality and even

falseness, from the point of view of psychological and dramatic verity, the work possesses. This clarity of vision not only fails to mar our aesthetic joy but is, on the contrary, one of its essential elements. If at the time of its creation the work seemed profoundly realistic and was so considered by its author (I am thinking here more particularly of *Boris* and of *Pelléas*), then later on it is because of its formal elements and its style (which we have completely revolutionized) that it charms us. It is then that we declare the value and significance of a work to consist in a certain formal perfection or, to phrase it differently, in the particular manner with which the composer clothes the dramatic content.

A work like *Tristan* profoundly moves us by the truth it seems to contain, by its psychological content, so to speak. It is not until long afterward that we perceive how this truth is conventionalized and even made false under the imperious pressure of musical thought which is essentially alien to real life in its objective as well as subjective aspects.

Sacrifice of human action and feeling to the greater glory of the music is the *sine qua non* of all opera. The evolution of the opera thus appears strangely paradoxical because, for every effort made to reestablish the rights of dramatic action and psychological verity, there is a corresponding new victory for the music. In diverse ways, it does regain autonomy, and rules the field again from a new vantage.

We cannot avoid the conclusion that the realistic conception, or, in the broadest sense of the term, the pursuit of a direct expression of life, has always actuated the great creators and has had the happiest influence on operatic development. But it has never been achieved, not merely because musical instinct has always brought the necessary corrective to the composers' ideas but really because the end itself can not be attained,—in effect, musical realism is only an illusion. The incompatibility between musical and dramatic dynamics, between music and dramatic action, is fundamental.

If one accepts this point of view, it is clear that the peculiar problem of modern opera is due to the fact that our composers today, even more energetic than their predecessors in the pursuit

of this elusive harmony between music and drama, have not developed stylistic processes to conceal or reduce the inherent contradiction which is at the root of all music-drama. They must have recourse to conventions of the past, or, as I have indicated above, they must plunge into musical anarchy, depriving music of autonomy by conditioning it on the sentiments, gestures and emotions of the personages of the play, thus creating a type of continuous drama wherein the musical development can only follow, without interrupting to develop its own natural lines. To relate music to real life and thus render it adequate to the action, one must write imitative or descriptive music, or employ rational concepts such as Wagner's. Either to mechanize or rationalize music—there are no other alternatives for the composer who would translate the drama into sounds and who wishes, so to speak, to glue the music to the action. We see also that the two dramatic musical forms wherein this adaptation is most perfectly achieved are, first, the ballet, where, by a rhythmic mechanization, the music itself develops parallel with the plastic movements, and second, in the musical comedy, in fact, in all the comic and grotesque genres, where the rational element plays an essential part. If, however, the composers discard imitation and description, and if they also reject the use of rational associations, then these realistic conceptions cannot come to life.

The essential contradiction between the scenic representation of events and their musical expression is in their different relation to the element of time. While in the drama it is a question of reducing the time, of vanquishing it by means of the multiplicity and rapidity of events which occur (catastrophes, inner crises, etc.), in music, on the contrary, it is the duration and passage of this time which become the object of our attention. Drama focuses the mind on the events occurring within the time, the latter being unimportant, with no quantitative significance to define the limits of the action. It is, on the contrary, this specific quality which music emphasizes by organizing time into proper musical forms.

Whatever their theories, the great operatic composers, obeying a sure instinct, always sought means to detach music from the

drama and this is precisely what renders their work so musically expressive and dramatic, the dramatic course of music which is true to itself being so different from that of action.

The usual method employed to lift music out of the matrix of drama has been to interrupt the latter, stop it momentarily, in order to permit the music to realize its lyric role and to establish a certain spiritual continuity—by means of the aria, or of vocal ensembles, later by means of the Wagnerian *récit* which permitted great symphonic developments. Another method for freeing music from the prison of the drama is to retard the action to the utmost, reducing it to two or three great events or pivots, between which there is complete stagnation. Is not this, after all, the way in which *Tristan* and *Pelléas* were constructed? The ideal then, it seems to me, would be for the events and the catastrophes to occur between the different scenes, the latter only marking the pauses in the drama, the states and not the acts. This, of course, is contrary to accepted tradition, for it is believed that music, because of its dynamic quality, is perfectly suited to the representation of movement, of action. There may perhaps be still another method, that is, to break all bonds between the music and the drama, and to establish them each on a different basis—the music no longer to follow the drama as a commentary but freely to pursue its own formal conventions. The admirable designs of Nijinska for Strawinsky's *Les Noces* prove that unity of the music-drama can be perfectly maintained under such conditions, the dances developing in counterpoint to the music, the choreography completely repeating in gesture and attitude the work of the composer. Here the transposition was complete; the plastic concept maintained perfect independence. The inverse method, to recreate musically and transpose quite independently an action based on the sonorous concept, should have just as happy a result.

This, it appears to me, is the best possible solution of the contradiction which is at the root of all opera, unless one frankly turns from any concern with realism to the form of traditional music-drama, with its arias and ensembles.