TO REVITALIZE OPERA

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IT is fairly evident that, during the last three centuries at any rate, the theatre has been the channel through which the "great public" has become most immediately aware of the music of its own time. The popularity of Handel was at its height while the music of Bach was unknown and rejected by his contemporaries; and while this is the most spectacular example, others readily occur to anyone fairly well versed in musical history. In general it may be said that purely instrumental music of the highest quality, however accessible to the elite of its period, wins recognition far more slowly than the theatre music which in the most general way corresponds to it; there is even some ground for believing that in certain cases the public has been prepared for the understanding of "pure" music by means of successful stage works. The fact for instance that the later works of Beethoven were first made popular by Wagner and his disciples should not be forgotten, even though this led to distortions which later generations have at least begun to correct.

There are obvious reasons for the process above described; they have to do not only with the appeal of the stage itself, but with the type of music best adapted to the theatre, and the concurrence of poetic and visual conceptions with musical ones, by which means is contributed an emotional illumination of much that may at first be aurally difficult. The theatre—as ballet, opera, or incidental music—binds the music in the clearest possible manner to its time and place, and thus at least to its contemporaries gives it an actuality which they are slower to feel in the concert hall.

If dramatic music is, in this concrete though somewhat restricted sense, the most "actual" form which music can take, so is it undoubtedly also the most perishable form. While other

types of music have often won recognition only after decades of neglect, it is scarcely possible to name a single opera which has survived without having achieved notable success at least within its own generation. The case of *Boris Godunoff* may perhaps occur to one as an exception, until one remembers the peculiar history of this work; it is conceivable also that a work like *Falstaff* may still seem to await its true success at some future period. But *Falstaff* too is an exception by reason of the fact that it is the maturest fruit of a long, triumphant, and varied experience of the theatre; a work which embodies the ultimate perfection of that experience, thus transcending in a measure the purely temporal demands of which Verdi was certainly as keenly aware as anyone ever has been. Though "success" does not, certainly, insure vitality, the fact remains that if an opera or ballet is not successful within a few years of its creation, it almost certainly never will be. Likewise it is the earliest of musical forms to grow old, depending as it does on so many complex factors which are strictly subject to the taste of the period.

With such considerations in mind we can honestly examine some of the aspects of the "operatic crisis" of the present day. To be sure, we hear far too much today about cultural "crises" and "problems," since the very use of these words suggests that a solution is possible through thought and effort—possible, that is to say, in terms of technic or of this or that esthetic formula. Ever so often it becomes necessary to reiterate the most obvious of truisms, that the solution of any artistic problem depends first and last upon the genius of the artist; that genius is subject to its own laws, and these alone; and that the gulf between genius and non-genius is not to be bridged by formula or otherwise. The "operatic crisis" in other words can be overcome only by music of real power and dramatic intensity; and it is safe to say that whenever such music appears the "problem" of opera will find one of its many possible solutions.

We may, however, enumerate certain of the basic characteristics of successful opera, and form a reasonably clear idea of certain conditions which the truly successful opera of the future must fulfill, if it is indeed to take shape.

First of all opera is drama; drama in the real sense means vividness of character, situation, motive. It is obvious therefore that the libretto chosen must be one in which these qualities can be achieved. Though such considerations seem axiomatic enough, recent operatic history—especially in the United States—proves that they are by no means always understood. It is difficult to establish any very definite criteria in this respect, since genius has so often shown itself able to breathe life and relevance into the most unpromising material—witness *Die Zauberflöte,* or *Così fan Tutte.* But the very artificiality of the operatic form has at various periods led to the degeneration of opera into "concert in costume"— why the costumes and why the concert?—or a pleasant masquerade in which, say, an anemic exoticism or a faded romanticism supplies a dubious motive for the varied enticements of the opera house. Hence the periodic appearance, too, of operatic reformers who revive an apparently decadent form by replacing the old conventions with new ones.

For in opera the question of convention is paramount. The problem of opera from this point of view consists in establishing a set of conventions which will bear the burden of dramatic truth to such an extent that the hearer is able to accept them without undue effort. The same may of course be said of poetic drama or, indeed, of stage drama in any form. In opera however there is not only the added artificiality of words sung instead of spoken, but the perennial conflict between the demands of music and of dramatic action—a conflict which can be solved only through a whole-hearted acceptance of the artificiality of the form, and the establishment of a consistent and convincing framework for this artificiality. The more successful the effort to abolish it, the less effective the result. To be sure, the composer of instinct generally arrives at some kind of solution, though too often the result is not in any final sense satisfactory. Wagner of course demands, in this respect at least, a special chapter; but everyone certainly knows his moments in the Wagnerian maze where he wishes that those people on the stage would keep quiet, in order that he might listen to the music in peace.

This brings us to what is perhaps the central point of all—the fact that opera is first and above all vocal music, and that the

determining character of any operatic convention lies in the vocal style which it embodies. Again a truism; the voice is the medium through which the characters reveal themselves, and the vocal line ultimately the basis on which the opera must stand or fall. The "problem" of opera is therefore also the problem of vocal music and all that this implies, in regard not only to specifically vocal style, but to diction, prosody, vocal technic, and accompaniment as well. If any proof of this were needed, consider the immense extent to which the style and form of opera is conditioned by the language in which it is written. For example: "secco recitativo," which is so extremely effective when properly sung, is adapted above all else to the Italian language of which it is a perfect embodiment, just as the German composers of the late eighteenth century found the "Singspiel," with its spoken words, more adapted to the more ponderous accents of their native tongue.

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With these criteria it is possible to estimate more closely the present operatic situation, and to reach a certain precision in regard to abuses which might well be corrected. Some of these abuses are, indeed, peculiar to the American situation, others more general. Specifically though not exclusively American is the "star system" under which our operatic public has been educated. The "star system" can of course hardly be called new, since it has been, in one or another form, for at least two centuries, the target of operatic reforms. Whether the cause, or only the main element in a tendency, apparently inherent in opera, to lose at intervals its dramatic vitality, it is obviously destructive of the most essential element in adequate operatic production-ensemble, and thus fosters miscomprehensions on the part of the public regarding the essential demands of operatic production. Opera becomes completely unreal and operatic conventions lose their vitality and relevance under such conditions. It is very clear that if there is to be any general revitalization of opera, the star system will have to be eschewed and an ideal of ensemble substituted for that of highly paid and spectacular voices.

Closely allied to this is the question of language. Once more let it be reiterated that opera is drama, and can only be fully

understood as such. This writer is as fully aware as anyone of the advantages of presenting opera in its original language, and has writhed under *Die Macht des Schicksals* in Berlin, *La Flute Enchantée* in Paris, and *Sigfrido* in Italy. Nevertheless, and in spite of all that has been said above, close observation has convinced him that the vitality of opera on the European continent is due at least in part to the fact that the listener participates not only in music and the "story" but in the actual text of the opera, and thus apprehends the work as a complete whole, and not as presented to him from a distorted side view. Good and singable translations of opera into English are indeed rare; but one reason for this lies undoubtedly in the fact that thus far there has been no serious demand for them. Occasional exceptions such as Professor Dent's translation of *Figaro,* prove that the question is by no means insoluble. The objection of purists, that English is not a suitable language for singing, is controverted by too many concrete examples, of which our popular music furnishes by no means the least, to be worthy of serious consideration. The task of translation is one which requires imagination and tact; it is however undoubtedly a possible, and, one must hope ultimately a necessary one. For it is fundamentally as incongruous to present opera at the Metropolitan in German or Italian as it would be to present works of Ibsen in Norwegian on Broadway. Should the change ever be made, two results would undoubtedly occur; first, a more rational attitude, on the part of many singers, toward English diction, and secondly, more careful listening on the part of the public. To hear and understand a singer's words is an acquired aptitude; but it is one which is readily gained with practice, provided the diction be adequate.

It is obvious that the above considerations apply more specifically to the production than to the creation of opera, though in the last analysis they have important repercussions also on the latter; since operatic conventions, like those of other dramatic forms, depend for their effectiveness largely on the manner in which the taste of the public has been formed. Opera, in other words, is not only the most "actual" form of music, but in a real sense the most traditional, the most closely bound to the cultural

tradition which produced it. Hence the well known "types" of opera—opera "seria" or "buffa," "romantic opera," "verismo" etc.; hence the immense strength of specifically "national" characteristics in the development of operatic convention, since the characteristics of opera are so largely the result of the language in which it is written. Hence too it may be seen that the choice of subject is not without a certain significance, since the opera is even more conventional in this respect than drama of other types. It is of course quite impossible to define what the poetic content of contemporary opera should be—this definition will, let us hope, be given eventually by works and not by theories constructed, so to speak, as advance criteria. What is necessary is of course drama—drama which is real for the composer and which he can communicate as such to his public. It is inevitable that in a period such as ours, so sharply defined by clear historical and social forces, the truly relevant dramatic material should nearly always in some way reflect those forces, either directly, or by analogy or implication. It would be absurd to limit operatic material to our own time and place; but if vital opera is to be produced the dramatic motives will of necessity be relevant—sufficiently real and sufficiently important to both composer and public to stir their imaginations—and not, as is so frequently the case, a merely fortuitous evening's distraction. It is only very rarely and perhaps as the result of extreme maturity both in a culture and an individual that vital drama can be created out of materials which entirely transcend the present and its vital preoccupations. American opera therefore will in some sense be an interpretation of present day America even when the scene is laid in some distant or purely legendary landscape.

If American opera should ever to any extent really develop, it would certainly be in large part the result of a revival of the instinct for idiomatic and musically expressive vocal writing, based on English diction. The reasons for this are obvious; since no tradition is present a new one must gradually be created, and unless sterility is to be the result it must be created with first principles as a point of departure. Signs are not entirely wanting that such a revival may take place—our popular music, a very few more pretentious works by American composers, and a couple

of stage works, may be taken as evidence of this. The same problem exists in Europe as a result of the havoc wrought by the Wagnerian tradition; and there are still more numerous evidences of a vocal renascence there. In any case this is the indispensable condition of solution of the "operatic problem." Inadequate vocal writing cannot be vitalized by the most elaborate and expressive accompaniment: and dramatic music in which the voice does not take part is too esentially dehumanized to carry very far the weight of real drama. A really revived opera will in fact inevitably be mainly vocal, with a vigorous and expressive vocal line furnishing the real motive power of the music, the orchestra once more playing a secondary role, and the whole constituting a really vivid and moving dramatic whole.

There remains the question of specific operatic form, or operatic convention; the external problem, in other words, of the relationship between drama and music and the respective rights of each. It is clear that the solution must depend on many factors which cannot certainly be specified in advance. Quite possibly, for instance, opera will gradually move, bag and baggage to Hollywood and take up permanent residence there. This is not likely to happen immediately or suddenly and can take place only very sporadically until the taste of the public has evolved to the point of creating a definite demand for pictures of a more evolved type than all except a very few yet produced. If it does take place it may very easily prove to be the healthiest possible state of affairs. If one wishes, one can find plenty of excellent reasons for believing that perhaps the ground is already being prepared for this. The presence in Hollywood of musicians of real authority may easily exert a gradual but decisive influence on moving picture production; the extent and nature of such influence will undoubtedly prove to be a factor of serious importance in determining the future of dramatic music. Such a state of affairs will impose upon the composer and his collaborators an entirely new set of problems. It is unlikely, so far as we can see for the present, to entirely supersede operatic production on the stage; it is at all events too early to see clearly what its role will be—there are far too many factors involved.

Meanwhile composers have the task, or opportunity, of creating a revivified opera. There is no reason whatever for believing this to be impossible providing they have the real impulse to accomplish it. Opera, if properly understood, possesses many advantages over spoken drama; its greater emotional precision, greater powers of evocation and suggestion, and even its inevitable conventions, which at best create a framework for an imaginary world, different from the world of reality but definitely a portrait of it. It is this world that composers may rediscover, if they wish, under new and freshly experienced forms —in a rediscovery of the voice and its potentialities, a fresh experience of whatever is dramatic in the actual world, a new vision of the roles which music and words, music and drama, can play in collaboration with each other. And if composers seek a model, a point of departure, what better one could they find than the work which perhaps more than any other of the last hundred years embodies all these qualities, a work which, though nearly half a century old, still remains mysterious in its vitality and wisdom and perfection—the old Verdi's *Falstaff?*