Il teatro alla moda, or *A Safe and Easy Method of Producing Baroque Operas According to Modern Practice*

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It has often been maintained that Baroque opera (whatever that catch-all term may include) is dramatically dull, literarily inane, socially ridiculous, and musically uneven, if not stagnant. If most revivals of Baroque opera have led us to believe this, we must blame inadequate understanding of what the drama, character, and music really mean in this genre as well as inadequate liaison among the so-called experts in these areas. I have a strange suspicion that many people who have enjoyed seeing certain Baroque operas on the stage have secretly harbored reservations as to whether the experience really compared in dramatic persuasion to *Carmen* or the *Marriage of Figaro*, or to whether the theatrical approach helped or hindered "the music." It seems to me that now, when musicologists are able and ready to provide information and scores, and enlightened musical directors are interested in unusual stage works, it is time that a search be made for stage directors who can understand the musical and characterizational aspects of the unique, but in a way universal, aesthetic of this particular genre. I think the first step is to clear up some apprehensions and misunderstandings, and the second step is to make some positive suggestions about how to go about bringing these works to life.

Baroque operas (which to my mind, include any dramatic work written between 1600 and 1789 regardless of subject matter or stageability) were conceived and executed for many different purposes during the 17th and 18th centuries. They were performed, for example, at court, in public opera houses, in the street, the church, and in concert. They were done with much dramatic action, little dramatic action, or no dramatic action; much costume and machinery, little, or none; a large orchestra, medium, or small; recitative, spoken dialogue, or chant; one language consistently or several mixed (arias in Italian and recitatives in the vernacular, for instance); sexual verisimilitude in casting and costuming or not, etc. The demands of such an occasion may or may not have been a blessing to the particular work, but in any case a specific composer's procedures in such circumstances enlighten us as to the relationship of an opera

with its functions, social or otherwise. In short, there was an enormous variety in types of works produced.

It is clear that the specific conditions under which an opera was composed and produced were not the only ones under which it could be performed. When successful works were revived, very often the circumstances were different and basic changes had to be made. (Most often, composers adapted to the occasion by writing a new opera.) For example, Handel's *Acis and Galatea* (an opera in the inclusive sense) was written c. 1718 for an aristocrat's small stage, small forces, and possibly literary-minded audience. When Handel revived the work in 1732 he re-thought the relationship of the score to the occasion because his purpose was now a different one—he had a public to attract, a competitor to outdo, a budget to cover, and a new cast to suit. The reason these factors led Handel to compose Italian arias for this English opera is not hard to imagine. Perhaps if his cast had been the same, or the money not an object, or any other circumstance different, Handel would not have added or subtracted this or that.

Handel created (or re-created) a theatrical piece *for a certain occasion*. Each production was newly thought out—no old arias were used if singers were no longer available to sing them, no Italian language was used if an audience expected drama in English, and no staging was used if it was considered inappropriate. In the case of *Acis*, there is no question in my mind that the original version was better, but this was not always the case.

Since composers revived and revised old works for new purposes, we nowadays can take the liberty of doing the same (as in fact we cannot help doing), only making sure that we also make the work *suitable* to the new purpose. There are operatic effects that are lost in concert, such as Damon offering Polyphemus a drink (in *Acis and Galatea*),[1] oratorios that become distorted in church, such as *Israel in Egypt* or *Messiah*, and church works that are dimmed in concert, such as Monteverdi's *Vespers* or the Masses of Mozart and Haydn. (In reference to the latter, it must be emphasized that a 20th-century concert hall may be truer to the original in atmosphere and acoustics than a 19th- or 20th-century church.) But all these are possible with a change of emphasis here and there, and the deciding factor will be the work's "eternal charm," that is, its aspects which are worth reviving. In order to grasp a work's possibilities we must

understand the exigencies of its creation and its first performances —in short, the composer's purpose for turning out the work— and seek out the reasons *why* Handel did not stage *Semele* and *Susanna*, not only that he did not do it.

By any high theatrical standards (regardless of the aesthetic), there is not much point in presenting a purely "vocal" opera, one with almost no action or characterization masquerading as a recreation of Baroque aesthetics, when in fact it often lacks Italian diction (not to speak of voice production), it lacks the castrato voice, and it lacks most urgently the directorship of a Handel or a Scarlatti or a Monteverdi. Our audience is as interested in good theater as any ever was and will accept authenticity of spirit more easily than authenticity of letter, although very often the latter is of crucial importance. I firmly believe that English and French audiences, for example, were also interested in good theater, and they knew quite well what it was. I question whether all acting was stylized in the 18th century. Perhaps it was where competent stage direction was lacking, which may well have been the case in many opera houses; perhaps also certain "bejewelled eunuchs" held the clamp on sensitive staging. But consider stylizing Shakespeare: an 18th-century director may well have fallen in with the fashion, and probably have rewritten some sections as well—but it is inconceivable that Shakespeare's men and women (no matter what the sex of actor) could have been lost in the shuffle. So that if Handel did not go to the trouble of seeing that Alcina became a real "acting" person on stage (which is not at all certain), we do know he created that person realistically in the music and through the words and expected that to suffice for the occasion. Is the modern director to stylize Alcina because it was fashionable in the 18th century? Of course not. Alcina must live for our audience as she may or may not have lived in the 18th century.

If a Baroque opera is to come to theatrical life, the music and stage directors must believe that that is possible. They must be convinced of the credibility of the characters as expressed by the words, costumes, actions, and music. Not all of these aspects need be the focus of attention all the time—in Baroque opera, the music often indicates to us that a character is soliloquizing, or that his character is being psychologically revealed to us. A stage director should not compulsively create "action" here, but

merely credibility. The endless series of arias in Baroque opera must be faced and dealt with positively, rather than apologized for with stylization, over-action, or no action. Very often subtle or obvious analogy is involved, which action or gesture can help or hinder.

All musical aspects of the performance must be in line with the characterization in the drama. This includes voice-range, orchestration, continuo-realization, aria ornamentation, cadenzas, tempi, relative dynamics, etc. The slightest change of anything affects to a greater or lesser extent the character of the piece and of the protagonist. Obviously, there is no such thing as the "right" solution to some of these problems—characterization must be worked out between music director and stage director, singer and composer. If the latter is unavailable for comment, his best sense must be represented. I believe that characterization carries weight in instrumental music as well, although it is not given a personal aspect.

The entire dramatic production must be focused at and directed to a specific audience (however disparate) by a specific cast in a specific hall. There is no "ideal size" Handel orchestra, for example—this is a function of many factors. Nor are there rules about those necessary cuts, except that everything performed must be in character. Composers often protected themselves against emergencies by writing extra arias of different characters—the selection to be made at the time of performance. One thing can be said categorically, however: no audience (with a few stellar exceptions) truly understands a theatrical production in a foreign language, and the pretence that the work is not literary, but only musical, dismisses the notion of living theater immediately from the listener's mind. Perhaps in some cases it makes better sense to have Italian artists singing in Italian, or French artists singing in French, but English-speaking artists must sing to English-speaking audiences in English, if understanding is crucial. If audiences are interested in conflicts between people, in real people and real situations, in credible or somehow enlightening stories or in humorous chaos (I simplify), it seems to me that we should be seeing more *Poppea*'s, *Giuditta*'s, and *Susanna*'s, and fewer *Guilio Cesare*'s and *Lucio Silla*'s. This choice is within the province of the music director, and he must realize that a role with character is much more persuasive than a role without it, whether sung by Joan Sutherland or not. There

are many fine singers now who can sing this difficult music, but not if the audience's entire attention is focused on their vocal cords.

Now it would seem that I am advocating complete freedom on the directors' parts to do with any opera as they will. True—but the crushing facts are these: first, that Handel, Scarlatti, and other men of genius knew more about all the details of musical theater than most of us do now, so that their judgment and taste (sketched in their scores for us to ponder) should be appropriately respected; second, that the combined good tastes of directors and performers will result in an exciting performance, whereas anyone's poor taste will spoil it. That indefinable quality *taste* is the governing quality that all musical treatises dismiss with pleasure—it is learned only from those that have it. These two humbling notions rear their heads the moment a director chooses to remove a note, a few measures, or a whole piece; to write an ornament, a series of diminutions, or a cadenza; to change a dynamic, instrument, or tempo, or to realize a continuo part. The director must be prepared to indulge in all these activities *as if he were the composer*.

Finally, I would like to encourage groups at universities to help themselves to the Baroque opera literature (as some have already), as a possible supplement to Gilbert and Sullivan. Perhaps some exchanges can be worked out between universities. Staging techniques used in G & S productions are a better start than the very formal attempts at stylization made by some of our larger opera houses, who, of course, have been astonished by the success of these operas. Perhaps their astonishment would be increased if the works were tastefully performed, credibly staged, and sung in English! But much can be done with student forces and imaginative direction. If funds are lacking, perhaps *Acis and Galatea* should be done rather than *Semele*: shepherds may have simple costumes but Apollo cannot descend from a cheap cloud. It is possible to do an opera with twenty people, if need be, but those that involve a chorus might be the most successful at a university. Columbia-Barnard's recent production of *Susanna*, performed in honor of Dr. Lang, proved among other things that for a well-known title, the music and substance were both new and overwhelming. The work has a huge range of emotional activity, from the ultra-religious to the bawdy, from the real to the incredible, from the young to the aged. All characters can

become alive if they are believed to be alive. There are grounds for omitting the part of Chelsias, Susanna's father, among them the fact that Handel did. But he can become an additional comment about age in the drama, as well as a person whom one would expect to meet in that company. The work, like many which are based on Biblical stories (this one is Apocryphal), has very distinct relevance for our time—the questions of sexual desires in old men, judicial corruption, fickle crowds, and female safety are still very much with us. And we quickly recognize the boy Daniel, standing up for Susanna and justice, being "put in his place" by the authority of the elders. The song "Tis not age's sullen face, wrinkled front and solemn pace that the truly wise declares" needs no further interpretation today. But although the wicked old men are led to death at the end, we are sorry for them because Handel has created rich, personal, real music for them which we cannot forget. The "crocodile" air sung by the first Elder when Susanna is condemned to death resembles Mozart's "Deh' vieni non tardar" (*Figaro*) in that the original comic intention of the character is sharply contradicted by the deep feeling and serious intent of the music, so that we are left with mixed feelings—as we would be about any human being. Handel's *Susanna* is especially rich in this particular subtlety of characterization, but many operas contain these elements inherently if one is sensitive to them. The music is a constant indication of this, whereas the text may be flat and the theatrical indications, particularly with regard to character, almost non-existent.

Apropos of the latter, character may often be enriched by consulting source material, such as Biblical or Greek mythology, or other uses of the story. One need be tasteful, though—Handel (and his librettist) *deliberately* omitted any reference to Susanna's four (or six) children! All too often, Beaumarchais' characterizations are ignored when Mozart's *Figaro* is staged (obviously they are only a clue, also).

The texts all too often are dismissed as doggerel and regarded as blemishes to otherwise fine works. The anonymous text of *Susanna* almost dissuaded me from producing the work. But it turned out to be an extremely clever text, and the consistent condemnation it has received can only be attributed to the fact that it has been read and recited, rather than sung and listened to.

I would like to give one specific example of "applied" musi-

cology, or performance practice, as it is called by musicologists. The problem of the "Da Capo" is not always easy to solve, despite my own forewarning to deal with it positively. Handel very often abridged them, and sometimes left his singer with the final line of B-text rather than A-text.[2] Occasionally Handel allowed his singer to end in a foreign key in order to follow up the B-section with the next action.[3] In *Susanna*, in several cases, the ritornelli after the B-sections are long and final (ending in the tonic) and the action continues naturally afterwards, without any "Da Capo."[4] In these cases we did not feel that a repeat of the A-section (ornamented or not) would aid the piece in any way, except perhaps in symmetry, and I believe that this notion was gradually losing popularity at that time, particularly in comic opera. Moreover, I think the ritornelli were made long and final to permit Handel to cut the "Da Capo's" in performance if he felt it necessary to do so. In "Guilt trembling" (No. 37), however, the Da Capo is motivated by the all-too-late return of Joachim, and Susanna has all the reason in the world to repeat her story to him—with a few embellishments, of course. Notably, this ritornello (bridging the end of B with the beginning of A) strikes up the A mood directly, and does not make either a gradual connection or a possible ending. I must emphasize that the Da Capo's should be sung if possible and if effective; if not then the following priorities: decorate it (in character), shorten it (à la Handel), omit it, and finally, if all else fails, omit the aria. Except under rare circumstances, omitting a B-section will produce a poetic and musical oddity. Doing this is equivalent to saying "the play's the thing" without "wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." Perhaps, too, this is the moment to frown on long cadenzas that use more than one breath (cf. Quantz's rule), on scales and arpeggios introduced without regard to style or character, on endlessly held 'cello notes in recitatives (they indicate duration of harmony, not duration of note, cf. Caccini), on distracting harpsichord improvisations (not to be confused with interesting ones), on breaths taken in the middle of words (which usually means that the aria is being sung too slowly), on cadences left devoid of even the simplest decoration when needed, on French Overtures played mechanically, unmelodically, and too slow, and, most of all, on meaningless repeats, which are as boring as a person who always repeats what he said exactly the same way. Any of these failings are acceptable

now and then when in character, but usually result in annoying the listener, whether he knows it or not.

I will be happy if some of these ideas and provocations spur more productions of Baroque operas from all points of view, just as Lionel Tertis once cheered a reviewer who had given him a poor review with the words, "It was the most wonderful piece of publicity for the viola: in it, you mentioned the viola at least thirty times. . . ."

NOTES

[1] This is a detail mentioned in Homer and, I think, understood by Handel as being part of the action. Greek, Roman, and Biblical sources often supply such details not specified in the score.

[2] "O had I Jubal's Lyre" from *Joshua*.

[3] "Let the Bright Seraphim" from *Samson*, or "Why do the Nations" from *Messiah*.

[4] "The torrent" (No. 21), "If guiltless blood" (No. 23), and "Blooming as the face of spring" (No. 19).