

Operatic Texts: Ours, Yours, and Mine

Roger Parker. 2006. *Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio*. Ernest Bloch Lectures. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

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A *Carmen* without Mercédès, Frasquita, Le Remendado, Le Dancaïre, without cigarette girls and gypsies. A *Carmen* where Carmen's husband Garcia (from Prosper Mérimée's antecedent novella) is included and gets killed by Don José—as does Zuniga, who is merely threatened in Bizet's opera as customarily performed. A catfight between Carmen and Micaëla, a slash across the face. A dirt performing space surrounded on three sides by viewers. Sixteen musicians who accompany the singing-actors in a reduced, reorchestrated, cut, and rearranged version of Bizet's music. Such was director Peter Brook's *La Tragédie de Carmen* (with collaboration from set designer Jean-Claude Carrière and composer Marius Constant) performed with much success at the Bouffes du Nord in Paris, and also at Lincoln Center, in the early 1980s.¹ Having attended the production, I can attest to its dramatic efficacy.

Reading Roger Parker's *Remaking the Song* brought Brook's version vividly to mind. Although *La Tragédie de Carmen* does not surface in the book, Brook's staging provides a radical example of the central issue that Parker explores. Bizet's opera was indeed "remade"—or (choose your verb) mangled, cavalierly distorted, imaginatively adapted, rearticulated, effectively reduced to its essence, productively appropriated. With good reason one might ask why Brook did not merely package his production as an adaptation of Mérimée, with assistance from Bizet? Well, might come the reply, most of the familiar tunes *do* put in an appearance. Sacrilege? Where is Bizet's "work"?

Parker voices gentle impatience with the defense of particular operatic texts grounded in authorial intent. Operatic productions change with the times; new contexts produce new readings. Why not push the envelope to the musical texts as well, especially because so many opera composers of the past proved eminently practical when faced with the realities (and limitations) of stage performance? Parker argues for giving variant readings—even those produced when the composer seems to have abdicated control to others—a fair hearing. His approach is two-pronged. In three case studies his argument focuses on the textual history of a single work: the substitution of Susanna's "Un moto di gioia" in place of the more familiar "Venite, inginocchiatevi"

Current Musicology

and the same character's "Al desio" for "Deh vieni" in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*; Luciano Berio's idiosyncratic realization of Puccini's sketches for the end of *Turandot*; and the history of the aria "Dove sei?" from Handel's *Rodelinda*, a history that includes translation (and considerable musical change) as "Art thou troubled?" The remaining two case studies consider musical and dramatic resonances of one opera in another: the "crossed-wires" between Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and *La Traviata* (Verdi wrote the latter while preparing the stage production of the former) and the brief incursion of the "Verführungs" motif from Wagner's *Parsifal* in Verdi's *Falstaff*.

Parker's writing, beautiful and engaging throughout, yields many local-level rewards. For example, he elegantly interprets the citation of *Parsifal* at the beginning of the third act of *Falstaff* as a moment of dislocation apposite to Falstaff's existential anxiety here and a modernist world just beyond—this in an opera usually seen as backward-looking. Old oppositions between Verdi and Wagner need careful reevaluation, Parker suggests (although Wagner's influence could be painted with a finer brush than to suggest that Verdi was really attacking Wagnerism in general when he criticized Bruneau's *Le Rêve*, 84). Parker's defense of Mozart's "Al desio," which marshals what we know about the voice of Adriana Ferrarese, for whom this substitute aria was written, draws attention to some of its salient similarities to "Per pietà" from *Così fan tutte* for the same artist, and therefore invites an understanding of Susanna against the character of Fiordiligi. Few other critics will have previously thought of the frothy trills from *La Traviata* as they listened to similar gestures in the third act of *Il Trovatore* when the count interrogates Azucena and Ferrando recognizes her. What can one operatic world possibly have to do with the other? We may reach for ingenious explanations, writes Parker, or savor the strangeness of the moment, a destabilizing of the work's "identity." But is this moment quite so uncanny? At the risk of appearing simplistic (and dissonant with the wonderful nuance of this book) one might observe that the use of "*Traviata* figuration" in this *Trovatore* scene seems appropriate for the Count's nonchalant and (at first) inconsequential banter with the gypsy. And, given the degree to which the genesis of both operas overlaps, perhaps it would be even more uncanny if echoes of one were *not* heard in the other.

Parker's overarching concern rotates around the connected ideas of musical work(-concept), authenticity, inviolability of text, and the putatively objective establishment of best versions—none of which he is very happy with. Celebrations of definitive and unalterable scores bespeak the hegemonic collective construct of "our text" (50) a sacred trust unsullied by solipsistic interpretation and guarded by successive generations of performers and critics. Such adherence to supposedly final compositional

intentions ultimately blinds us to much valuable cultural matter. Opera is “inherently mutable” as the dust jacket says. And times change. But in our current musicological climate these hardly seem like the complaints of a maverick. (Or am I merely reflecting my own fundamental agreement with Parker’s position in observing this?) Where are the great defenders of textual inviolability and objective aesthetic standards in Anglo-American writing? The straw men that emerge on the pages of the book are Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp for Handel, Stefan Kunze and even Hermann Abert (writing near the beginning of the twentieth century!) for Mozart. James Webster does get critiqued in a footnote for his apparent dismissal of “Al desio.” Yet in the context of interpreting (and praising) “Deh vieni,” Webster merely reports on what others have said about “Al desio”—hardly an elaborate defense of immutable texts. Here is Carl Dahlhaus on this issue, writing over a quarter-century ago:

If music is viewed less as a corpus of works than as an event, a “communicative process,” then the main emphasis of musical philology and the compiling of musical editions no longer fall exclusively on “authentic” texts, i.e. those reflecting the intentions of the composer. On the contrary, inauthentic versions, being documents of particular modes of reception, enjoy equal rights as historical evidence. (1983:39)

The gap between the last clause and support for the equal rights of inauthentic versions on the stage seems small. Parker writes that although he does not advocate a replacement of “Voi che sapete” with Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel,” this does not mean he feels “empowered *automatically* to dismiss it, to pronounce that it could never work in any circumstance” (12). Surely something we call responsible “criticism” today has an implicit methodological code that enjoins practitioners to resist automatic dismissal (not always easy, to be sure) as they seek to understand the context for any cultural artifact as it travels through time—even a *Le Nozze* that might include “Heartbreak Hotel.” Reception histories do not seem to be in short supply in our discipline. In short, the current musicological enemy lurks largely unseen on these pages.

Parker’s stance seems redolent of long-standing critiques of “positivism” and philology put to the service of protecting incontrovertible genius. My own impression is that such battles were waged quite a few years ago and resolved in a healthy state of pluralism. Resolution was perhaps inevitable because an indictment of modernist mastery implicit in some critiques of “positivism” could always easily be met with a reply that would question how an attempt to establish parameters of compositional intent could possibly represent a crushing of the historical subject. The same critic/scholar need

Current Musicology

not necessarily be drawn to both edition-making and hermeneutics (Parker himself has excelled at both). It would seem that as a community we have come to understand that since the second cannot survive without the first, it is hardly equitable to dismiss the first as manual labor unbecoming of the modern intellectual. Nowadays, isn't there a consensus that to labor on editions that suggest parameters of intent is not perforce to discourage the changeability of texts for evolving critical and practical purposes? (These parameters delineate what *was* intended, *was not* intended, and the wide range of situations where we aren't sure or the distinction is not salient.) Any identification of what constitutes a text adequate to help generate "the work" operates at the behest of the critical and practical ends to which the text is applied: an ontology of "our text" to be sure, but also of "your text" and "my text"²: this, at least, is implicit in Parker's study, and might even have emerged more forcefully as an epistemological premise.

If critiques of positivism-as-perpetuator-of-genius in the academy today are something of a cliché (almost as much as reflexes that once sprang to the defense of authenticity), then to put a more positive spin on this we might observe that the health of any discipline depends on salutary reminders. Outside the academy it is another matter—although Parker, perhaps too readily, lumps together the musicological community with performers (not entirely separate groups, of course) for their uncritical championing of "authentic texts." Journalists and opera producers get censured in his Mozart chapter for their blind defense of an authentic version of *Le Nozze* that necessarily had to include "Venite, inginocchiatevi" and "Deh vieni." Notwithstanding Cecilia Bartoli's decision to use the substitute arias, many performers of international calibre (in my experience) are especially prone to celebrations of authenticity, the notion of humbling themselves before the genius of the composer, except when the budget must prevail or practical performing realities become an issue. The radio interviews and teaching discourse of master artist/teachers are filled with Mozart-wanted-this-Mozart-wanted-that assertions. Even more than in the academic world, insight into genius functions as a guarantor of prestige in the performing economy of classical music. Although Parker's caveats seem more pertinent to this group than to the musicological community, it is not clear that most performers, journalists, and producers maintain an active interest in the epistemological fineries of academic discourse, even when as beautifully fashioned—and jargon free—as in this book. Let's hope the word gets out.

It is worth pushing Parker's delicately drawn premise a bit further with Brook's *La Tragédie de Carmen*, a production that, as I have already indicated, used the original music throughout, although reorchestrated and performed out of order. As I also hinted earlier, there may be those who maintain that

Brook developed the essence of Bizet's opera, that the work—or what is deemed some truly meaningful part of it—lay in these “authentic” qualities that transcended adherence to, say, the original sequence of the music. In this case, Bizet's text (as one generator of the work) would be liberally conceived indeed, a position that cannot be defended or refuted in a vacuum. The text of Brook's *La Tragédie de Carmen* might even be assimilated with the text of Bizet's *Carmen* in certain critical (or journalistic or performing) situations. An identification of this production as “Bizet's opera arranged by Brook” belonging to the *same class of text* as “Bizet's opera arranged by Ernest Guiraud” (who famously replaced the original spoken dialogue with recitatives shortly after Bizet's death) will depend on—and be evaluated against—the critical use to which this identification and classification is put. And this despite the obvious fact that Guiraud's text is closer to parameters of intent that we can (imperfectly) reconstruct for the composer. In other words, it would seem more productive to judge the persuasiveness of the critical project at hand than to insist on a (relatively) fixed condition of the text per se. In a mutation from “our text” to “my text,” appeals to putative intention may indeed suit certain critical aims and narrative strategies for constructing history (for example reception history: more on this below), which as readers and listeners we may, or may not, find compelling as a premise for inquiry and experience. Or with Bizet-Guiraud-Brook we might argue that the latter fully realized the violence that lies at the patriarchal center of Bizet's opera, with the bottom line of the piece expressed in Don José's stabbing of Carmen. Here, an interpretation would shape a very broad perception of the text indeed, one that tolerates the music played out of order. Others may find that premise too reductive or a violation of their understanding of authorial intent.

To imagine a compelling justification for Presley's “Heartbreak Hotel” in place of Cherubino's “Voi che sapete” seems even more daunting. A Google search does, however, yield publicity for a band called Cherubino, with the blurb:

The charmingly, and rather appropriately named Cherubino (that's the hormonal youth of Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*; cherubino is Italian for cherub) is a young power trio that's [sic] experienced a whole lotta heartbreak and celebrates that adolescent emotional distress with tuneful bursts of mid-fi indie rock. (Ashlock 2002)

Of course Presley's own performances of the song were nothing if not hormonal. Yet his text brims with *despondency* caused by love (“Well since my baby left me / I found a new place to dwell / It's down at the end of lonely street / At heartbreak hotel / You make me so lonely baby / I get so lonely / I

Current Musicology

get so lonely I could die”), obviously much darker than the content of “Voi che sapete.” Nonetheless (to turn the coin), “Voi che sapete” has a particular status as a “phenomenal song” in *Le Nozze*, that is, one literally presented by the stage character as a vocal piece. Because it stands out from the normative musical discourse of the opera by staging the artifice of performance, why not push that artifice further with an anachronistic substitution? Perhaps it is also worth recalling that in a way Beaumarchais did deal in heartbreak in his antecedent trilogy: the count does succeed in sending Cherubino away—to his death on the battlefield—after *Le Mariage de Figaro*, as we learn in the third installment *La Mère coupable*. The insertion of “Heartbreak Hotel” would be to update an opera with a vengeance, to make a point about character not only with modern costume but with pop music. Could we call the text of such a production “Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*,” as many would have no hesitation doing if the music followed a version sanctioned by the new complete edition but were set in the 1950s or 60s? Yes, we might say, except for “that Presley song” (said in a disdainful or enthusiastic way). But we might continue: “that song” is very much in the spirit of the character and therefore does not *really* detract from a sense of the whole work as Mozart’s opera. Acceptance of this statement would seem partly contingent on different perceptions of “wholeness,” say, either as a composite of many little parts or rather as some sort of reigning dramatic spirit. Or we might reject the statement because we feel that the insertion induces laughter for the wrong reasons, producing comedy with stylistic dislocation rather than a comedy of character. At what point does the semiotic significance get sucked out of a text called “Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*” when insertions of music written by others are made to it? Hard to say—this is rather like the philosophical paradox of the heap—but it seems clear that with some Presley woven in (perhaps even more copiously) an entity called “Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*” would prove difficult to manipulate in criticism, as I hope my brave attempt shows. But who would declare these maneuvers impossible and without potential to build a consensus in a particular community of critics and listeners?

I do have a quibble with the scope of Parker’s method. From one point of view, associating intertextual analysis with a critique of the fetishization of original versions makes good sense: compositional agency in the latter gives way to the riffing of one text on another in the former, the story of how compositions are about other compositions regardless of intent. But—here’s the rub—Parker does not seem particularly inclined to downplay authorial agency except where it became muted in the posthumous history of a Handel aria or the realization of *Turandot* sketches. Moreover, a critical approach favoring the interpenetration of texts is not necessarily dissonant with proposing parameters of textual authority. One might credibly defend

both as discrete operations in the discipline: the text scholar (or artist such as Brook) produces a text—a critical and musical undertaking in itself—and the intertextual explorer makes this a premise of inquiry. Texts are certainly fragile for all kinds of reasons and authenticity is a very loaded concept, but to recognize all of these contingencies does not preclude a normative basis for a hermeneutics centered on influence or quotation and grounded in the performing materials associated with any work. Against this epistemological model, it is difficult to see what intertextual references have to do with the material scope of a text, especially if compositional agency is implied at some level. *Falstaff*, for example, is filled with allusions to many different works of music and literature—Parker might have added *Die Meistersinger* to the Wagner side for the act 1 finale, with its contrasting groups—but regardless of the quantity detected, the textual identity of *Falstaff* (in all its complexity) would scarcely seem threatened.

My puzzlement about the place of intertextual reference (with its attendant hermeneutics) in Parker's plea for a liberal approach to texts stems partly from a premise that the conglomeration of materials established by compositional agency produces the object of reception history, or rather the subset of it involving posthumous textual history called *Wirkung* in German-speaking lands, curiously unmentioned in Parker's study even as he discusses the English re-textings of Handel's "Dove sei?" Explanatory power in Parker's discussion of this phenomenon derives from consideration of an object (however nebulous its borders) that changes over time, that is from a paradigm that involves the piling of different meanings and adaptations upon one set of cultural matter conceived as discrete from other cultural matter. In *Remaking the Song*, something called "the song," after all, is remade.

Parker does, however, float the idea that the kind of intertextuality triggered by quotation might encourage a broadening of the textual parameters for an opera. For example, on the matter of the intrusion of *Parsifal* into *Falstaff* he fantasizes:

One might imagine performances that switched the orchestral preludes to *Falstaff* Act II, scene 1, and *Parsifal*, Act II, an operation that would certainly make audiences at Bayreuth sit up and take notice; but there is in truth little likelihood of enticing or outrageous substitutions, of external ways in which we can destabilize these operatic works. However, we might all the same ponder the fact that a late point in Verdi's last opera is marked by a curious incursion from another work. (89)

Parker goes on here to reinforce the point that the *Parsifal* citation undermines our previous understanding of *Falstaff*. Is the proposition of performing Wagner's second act prelude at the beginning of the third act of

Current Musicology

Verdi's opera a credible consequence of this critical reorientation? Perhaps, but I am unconvinced that this is an effective way to advocate the mutability of opera. The gravitational pull of the mass of materials associated with a theatrical work called *Falstaff* in such a combinatory performance would, in most critical contexts, do little to weaken our sense of Verdi's (or Wagner's) opera as textually distinct, or (to use Parker's term of reference) less stable. Indeed, it would be just as likely to remind us of their differences: the very salience of Parker's observations about *Falstaff-as-Angst*-inflected derives from the implication of a certain distance between these composers. Parker mines the *Parsifal* citation for its hermeneutic implications precisely because it is foreign in important respects, recalling the commonplace idea in literary theory that the "Other" contributes to a sense of identity. He calls it a "curious incursion." Should we protest at the desecration of two monuments if an orchestral prelude from *Parsifal* made its way into a performance of *Falstaff*? Of course not, as we consider what is achieved and to what end. But it is difficult to see how the debate could avoid taking the construct of two separate works as its premise. My guess is that said discussion, as with the more widely spanning intertextuality of "Heartbreak Hotel" in *Le Nozze*, might posit limits (however vague) to their textual mutability, at least to the extent that titles attached to composer names perform useful critical work and function as viable categories to structure experience.

Parker also reflects on value judgment in his broader effort to query such notions as work, authenticity, and inviolability of text. His goal here is to undermine "original is best" ways of thinking (significantly, philologists have long spoken of "corrupt" texts) by celebrating later variants, to critique the circular use of value judgement in order to shore up a sense of authenticity (good because authentic, authentic because good). Fair enough, but to my mind the recognition of later versions as aesthetically satisfactory ultimately does little to dislodge a premise of reception history that reinforces a sense of original identity. Textual criticism seems an effective way, though not the only one, into understanding just how broadly defined that identity might be. And in shaping an understanding of the text, the semiologist's *poietic* phase would seem difficult to ignore: original texts may not be the best in every context, but they remain important protagonists in historical (and critical) narratives. To treat the entire historical mass of textual materials associated with any work in a synchronous, undifferentiated, hypertext/hyperlinked manner (and I do not want to suggest that Parker advocates this) would be akin to the universalizing impulses of the original *urtext* builders, where narrative impulses wither before textual immutability (in one case) and obsessive comprehensiveness (in the other). Now, some readers will prefer the politically less neutral qualifier "inclusive" to "comprehensive" in this

last sentence. That all voices deserve equal hearing rhymes well with our sensibilities today, but (in another register) so does protection of intellectual and artistic property.

Berio's realization of the *Turandot* sketches works well within the framework of the argument. Although based on materials left behind by Puccini, the Berio version not only creates a much different sound world from Puccini's style but also fleshes out certain dramatic implications, like, for example, a musical prolongation of Calaf's erotically charged kiss. Parker maintains that this setting helps the opera achieve "contemporary acceptability" (his discussion is musically sensitive and critically insightful in a way that cannot be reproduced here). Without updating, works risk becoming outmoded and irrelevant. Such is the impulse behind director's opera. Again, fair enough. Perhaps we need to wait longer for the lines of operatic convention to be further attenuated, for habits to be broken, to reach a point when the past can be restored in all of its archaic fullness to produce aesthetic pleasures grounded in its strangeness and dissonance to contemporary mores. Parker criticizes Franco Alfano's earlier realization of the sketches partly because his setting of Calaf's kiss represents sex as a "barbaric, messy business, overwhelmingly concerned with power" (98). If we were to begin expurgating operas in the repertory for offensive representations of gender and sexuality, then we would certainly have our work cut out for us. Engaging with the strangeness of the past partly involves engaging with its unsavory representations. If these are not counterbalanced by an aesthetic payoff in some other aspect of any work, it may well indeed fall into oblivion. Another parallel with *urtext* builders emerges: we universalize "the song" by making it relevant to different times and places through revision.

Along another branch of his probe into Berio's realization, Parker suggests that "it is important not because it has in some way 'saved' *Turandot*, but rather because it underscores the fact that we can indeed rethink operas by rethinking their music" (119). We constantly change works under pressure of the moment, he argues, through cuts, adjustments to vocal lines, reorchestration, and piano-accompanied performances. It is the performative moment that counts, not the score. There is an irrefutable logic in grouping the realization of sketches with the employment of other textual materials associated with any opera, and (we might add) making a distinction between this and the insertion of pieces composed from scratch by someone else. But I think we do need to be careful about a completely unhierarchical approach that does not differentiate between an autograph full score and a fragmentary sketch: most often, the sketch derives its entire value from critical appreciations of other, more "complete" textual material associated with the work. Berio only undertook the project in the first

Current Musicology

place because of what Puccini had actually completed. Likewise, the reason that folding “Heartbreak Hotel” into something called “Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*” would likely command interest (if it were to command interest at all) is the consensus built long before around the quality of Mozart’s opera. This would seem to lend the voices of Puccini and Mozart a certain authority, however difficult it is to fold the consequences of that authority into criticism and performance.

In the final analysis, Parker strikes a moderate tone himself, “one that denies that there are entirely objective rules for aesthetic appropriateness but that nevertheless resists the view that accords everyone, regardless of experience and knowledge, the right to an equal hearing in making aesthetic claims” (13). (I would, however, rephrase the first part of the statement to suggest that there may indeed be objective rules for aesthetic appropriateness according to the purpose at hand—merely a repackaging of Parker’s ostensible intent.) In other words, we need to know something about contexts, those synchronic with the work’s composition and diachronic in its performance history. But, might ask the devil’s advocate: wouldn’t limited knowledge be the best path to refreshing rearticulation? Yes, there is much to be gained on that premise, we might answer, but traditionalists are valuable as a reminder of what there is to lose as we avidly fashion works in our own image. Beyond reporting on his own lack of interest in working “Heartbreak Hotel” in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, I wish that Parker had told us somewhat more about just why *informed* reception is a compelling criterion of performance and criticism. I suspect the answer might invoke the construct of a dialogue with the past, one where authorial intent, as amorphous as it is, is not discounted entirely and where diachronic mutability comes up against an ontology where “our text” means your text, my text—and the composer’s.

Notes

1. For a more complete account see the review by Hilary U. Cohen (1982).
2. For a wider perspective on this issue see Bohlman 1999.

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