

Nasty noises and silly stagings

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Aggiornamenti grotteschi

Some years ago I encountered a young organist in London who worked for a firm of music publishers. He told me that the part of his office that dealt with contemporary music was nicknamed the *nasty noises department*.

This remark sheds some light on a key problem in opera today. Opera is a marvellous art, but it is now overwhelmingly an art of the past. It has long since ceased to generate new works that have widespread appeal, even to the opera-going public, let alone to the general public.

The website *Operabase* provides a fascinating analysis of performances worldwide over the five seasons 2013/14 to 2017/18. It shows that, out of almost 118,000 performances, more than 100,000 (85%) were of operas first staged more than fifty years ago. And that more than 58,600 (45%) were of operas by just six long departed composers: in order of numerical importance, Verdi, Mozart, Puccini, Rossini, Donizetti and Wagner. The Paris Opera is staging 21 operas in its current season, of which only one (the new *Berenice* by Michael Jarrell) is less than 84 years old. *Berenice* gets seven performances out of a total of 204. Among the others, the most recent is Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk*, first performed in 1934.

Opera-goers, by and large, show little interest in new or recent operas. They want the same old war-horses over and over again. Not surprisingly, directors want to get some novelty into their performance schedules. But they do this by denaturing the old masterpieces; and since they generally accept that they cannot tamper with the texts

or the music, they resort to grotesque stagings. So we have seen Donna Elvira pacing the streets of La Défense, the modern business quarter near Paris, whisky-bottle in hand (Michael Haneke, Palais Garnier (Paris) 2006); the Rhinemaidens transformed into flaunting tarts in a brash Texas motel (Frank Castorf, Bayreuth 2013); Mimi wandering around on the moon in a terrestrial red dress (Claus Guth, Bastille (Paris) 2018). In a new production of Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, also at La Bastille, Dmitri Tcherniakov stages the great love-duet between Dido and Aeneas in the commonplace canteen of a rehabilitation centre, sitting on very ordinary chairs several yards apart. This wonderful evocation of tenderly passionate love, one of the finest duets of its kind in the world of opera, surely cries out for a romantic setting! According to the score, it should take place in the palace gardens of Dido, queen of Troy. But Tcherniakov follows the example of Castorf, who staged Siegfried's rapturous encounter with Brünnhilde at the entrance to the U-Bahn in Berlin's sordid Alexanderplatz. The heroic reduced to banality.

What has gone wrong?

In the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the public welcomed new operas, often with great enthusiasm. The most recent composer whose works met with this happy fate was probably Puccini, whose last opera (*Turandot*) dates from 1926. Since then, what has gone wrong?

I have a theory that goes some way towards answering that question. In my view, *opera needs good vocal melody*, preferably beautiful and memorable melody. But the art of creating such melody was abandoned, and disparaged, by most serious musicians a century ago. Sibelius once remarked, concerning the English composer Arnold Bax (1883-1959), *he is capable of writing a melody, and he is not ashamed to do so*, implying that other composers (but not Sibelius himself) would be ashamed. More recently, here in France, Pascal Dusapin (born 1955) tells us how another composer refused to shake hands with him, on the ground that Dusapin's music was too melodic. It seems that, since early in the last century, a tacit code of conduct has barred most composers¹ from giving singers any real melody; just as a similar code has restrained most architects from adorning their buildings with even the most discreet decoration.

The distinguished Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, an enthusiastic supporter of Brahms but opponent of Wagner, considered melody to be *die Grundgestalt musikalischer Schönheit* (the fundamental form of musical beauty).² But the 'atonal' composers wilfully undermined that fundament. The most rigorous of them, Anton Webern, became *the revered godfather of an avant-garde that has decreed the virtual demise*

¹ Apart from those such as Bernstein, Lloyd-Webber, Rodgers . . . who compose 'musicals' rather than 'operas'.

² Eduard Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schöne* (Leipzig, 1854), chap. 3.

*of melody as a primary factor in musical experience.*³ Nevertheless, most of us persist in agreeing with Hanslick; we prefer to listen to melody. Perhaps most of us are still behind the times, but I wouldn't put much money on that theory.

Is it really impossible today to compose an opera replete with fine melodies in the form, for example, of the *da capo* aria,⁴ often derided for its formality, but in fact remarkably adaptable, employed by Handel, Bach, Mozart, Gluck, Bellini . . . ? In theory, it is clearly possible. But in practice, any new opera in this form, however beautiful, original and memorable it might be, would be ridiculed without mercy by critics and cognoscenti; supposing, against all probabilities, that any opera house had the temerity to stage it. Such a work would be condemned out of hand as nothing more than *pastiche*. But why?

Are traditional forms obsolete?

Consider this: the poetic form we call the *sonnet* was invented by a Sicilian notary, Giacomo da Lentini in the thirteenth century; yet some of the greatest poets have been using it ever since, at least until the nineteenth century, and sometimes beyond. Among them are Petrarch (fourteenth century) and Michelangelo (sixteenth) in Italy; Shakespeare (sixteenth century), Milton (seventeenth) and Keats (nineteenth) in England; Ronsard and du Bellay (sixteenth), Baudelaire and de Musset (nineteenth) in France; Goethe and Rückert (eighteenth - nineteenth) in Germany. Does anyone accuse these writers of *pasticherie*?

Around 30 BC, the Roman poet Horace wrote many odes in the Sapphic metre, first used by Sappho of Lesbos some 500 years earlier. No-one suggests that Horace was a mere *pasticheur*.

What makes us think that musical forms employed by some of the greatest composers of all time are now unusable, just because they are two or three centuries old? Sibelius, it has been said, *succeeded in stamping his own voice on seemingly worn-out, antiquated symphonic forms.*⁵ But he was reviled by the modernists of his day, who saw his too tuneful orchestral works as nostalgic kitsch. It's a pity that he wrote only one opera, *The Maiden in the Tower* (1896), which was not a success.

³ Alexander Ringer in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Macmillan, 2001), vol. 16, page 371.

⁴ A *da capo* aria is in three sections (ABA), the third section being a repetition of the first. At the end of the second section, the score is marked *da capo* ('from the head'), instructing the singer to go back to the 'head' or beginning of the aria.

⁵ Alex Ross, *The rest is noise: Listening to the twentieth century* (Fourth Estate, London, 2012), page 174.

Some may argue that the elegance and beauty of the old operatic styles have no place in today's harsh and troubled world. Because there is so much misery and ugliness around us, composers feel they must create ugly music - *nasty noises* - to show that they are in touch with present-day realities. But every past age has had its miseries. The plots of *Poppea*, of *Rigoletto*, of *Tosca* are, in their various ways, as sordid as that of *Wozzeck*. Yet Monteverdi, Verdi and Puccini set those dramas to lovely music. Were they all wrong?

The clever Dutch painter Han van Meegeren (1889-1947) produced 'fake Vermeers' that fooled everyone, even the experts, till he found himself obliged to come clean. Someone should compose a fine melodious opera and present it, with consummate deception, as a lost work by Bellini, Weber or Verdi. It might be a great success - unless or until the fraud was exposed!