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MASKE UND KOTHURN

INTERNATIONALE BEITRÄGE ZUR THEATER-, FILM- UND MEDIENWISSENSCHAFT

Lorenzo da Ponte

Ed. by

Michael Hüttler

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Notes on Librettology (1999/2007)

KLAUS HEINRICH

1

Librettology assumes the existence of books with texts, and requires that they all be collected, but this does not adequately define its task. Indeed, it serves to research an exciting tension specific to opera that would not be tangible without the text documents. To my mind, a history of this exciting tension can definitely contribute to not just the history but also the theory of European Modernism. That as an initial approach.

2

Modern librettos have an illustrious ancestor in Ancient Greek cult and entertainment theater; there, they are called tragedy and comedy, and to this day are considered part of European world literature. Even the minutest fragments of them are carefully compiled, emended and annotated. Like ours, the opera stage in Classical Antiquity underwent different fates in the relationship between the sung and the spoken word. The choruses in Attic tragedy were always sung, as was probably the dialogue with the chorus, perhaps more so in the case of ensemble scenes in tragedy than in comedy. On Roman opera stages, recitation was increasingly put to music, and by the end was no doubt completely subject to composition; in fact the amount of music (and of pantomime dance) gradually gained an independent role. In the case of a tragedy such as Ovid's *Medea*, of which possibly the major opening solo has survived in the *Medea* book in his *Metamorphoses* (Met. VII, v. 192 sq.), the recitations and the arias may well have corresponded to those in Baroque opera. What is more important is that they, too, will have developed their own exciting tension, again one specific to opera, namely the potential of the singing *Triebwesen*, or instinctual being, to protest against the compulsions of fate acted out in them.

3

It looks as if for a long period text and composition were the product of one and the same hand, and there is no reason to assume that the refinements in the tension innate in the text's structure (e.g., by introducing a third protagonist onto the stage) did not have a correspondence in the tense structure of the music. Hand in hand

with this, the roles of the librettist and of the composer drifted apart, first probably only for certain highpoints, such as the great arias, and later for the entire oeuvre staged. This also marks the point where both bid farewell to cult theater. The rediscovery – heralding as it does a new ‘art religion’ – of the dual authorship of Classical Antiquity as the purported original unity of word and music is what in the end constitutes the archaism, the embarrassment and the problem of the opera stage in Richard Wagner’s work. Here, the ancient cult theater gives way to an archaicizing modern theater, while the tension of Italian opera, engendered by the power of the human voice to protest, continues to contain the rejection of it.

4

The Italian rediscovery of the opera of Classical Antiquity did not tread the path of dual authorship (which Arnold Schönberg emphatically championed again in *Moses und Aaron*). Here (and this begins immediately at the point where ancient heroes and heroines are brought back to life as modern individuals), the genres encounter one another and soon collide, as music and language want on each occasion to be conveyed anew. This also engenders an opportunity, namely to deliberately counterpoint the respective unique qualities of the genres, for example to allow the “instinctual beings” singing in ensemble scenes to create *unification* through their song (their voices present this to us in both a utopian and a realistic vein), while the text that they have to sing speaks of self-destruction and vendetta.¹ The exciting tensions given compositional form here all hinge on the individual being torn apart, and giving them separate voices is a step to striking a balance between them. One of the key inner driving forces behind the more than a century old ongoing production of librettos is the need to practice both, namely such disruption and such balance (and what is more against the acid test of the never-ending tension between the sexes that evokes death and life at once). And of course it also is the force behind the constant new revisions of and interventions in existing librettos, frequently by first the composer and then the author. A complete collection of librettos, their precursors and their rival successors down through the centuries (the material of Don Juan is a classic example of this) would allow us to reconstruct the history of this exciting tension. It would provide a manifestly real component for a theory of the subject that does not rest on introspection.

1 See my essay “La fiamma di costanti affetti / Notizen über die italienische Oper”, *Musik*, ed. Reinhard Kapp, Berlin, Wien: Medusa 1982 (Notizbuch 5/6) p. 93 sq.

5

It goes without saying that this would also be the history of political tensions, evidenced by the censorship omnipresent not only in Europe under Metternich, which had to be taken into account, either before the event or to meet the constraints it set (classical examples: Mozart's *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*). A collection of the librettos influenced in this way, often only the torsos of the respective librettos, would amount to more than historical documentation. It would be an instrument that would enable us to see into the very details of how social consciousness is formed, indeed precisely at the point where the artist is forced to step out of the merely musical and into a decidedly public space. To be more exact, what we have is the *opening* of such a space as is achieved by opera by using the instinctual powers, or *Triebmacht*, of music, for which it seeks allies in mythological and historical subject matter, with the help of which it appeals to contemporary allies and binds them to its cause (Verdi's operas, as of *Nabucco*, are telling examples of this). The fear of the libretto and the battle for it create a truly arresting space.

6

Much of such actions is lost, of course, in translations. In part, the nuances cannot be expressed, in part the intention gets redirected or deliberately elided. A classic example of this would be the translation made in Wilhelminian times of the confessional aria offered by Floria Tosca "Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore", which turns this into "Nur der Schönheit weiht' ich mein Leben" (only to beauty did I dedicate my life) and thus eliminates the potentially fatal resistance of art and love which characterizes her love to the point of self-destruction, in favor of an aestheticism that is as lifeless as it is harmless. Yet precisely for this reason, the history of translations must be part and parcel of an understanding of the exciting tension specific to opera. It expands our perception of the zones of political and social conflict to a greater degree than does a consideration of opera texts only in the respective *lingua franca*, and, for example, enables us to understand the transition from Enlightenment music theater to nineteenth century music theater in the respective national language as a decidedly programmatic process that still has an effect to this day.

7

In short, librettology is both a documentary and itself a programmatic discipline. It is situated in a form of theater and music studies that includes music theater. Its specific task today is to make the performative part of polarized public contexts

tangible and comprehensible by concentrating on the public aspects and the attendant *poignancy* of musical tension. The modern opera stage is the protagonist of such poignancy, as its counterpart in Classical Antiquity was in its day, and thus its text-books, which as a rule are ignored qua ephemeral, deserve just as much attention as their Classical Greek or Roman antecedents receive.

8

It would seem obvious that we must constantly re-ask the question as to the spatial and temporal limitation and transgression of this discipline and the objects it collects – looking backwards for example in the direction of the stage performance of Christian mysteries, and forwards in the direction, for example, of operettas, musicals and film. However, here I would also recommend not only affording space to pragmatic points of view, but viewing these as respectively dependent on researching the polarized musical and social contexts that define the *current* understanding of the relationship between word and music (the central problem of opera from the Renaissance to today). In this setting, librettology has not only a documentary and programmatic function, but also an enlightening one.

(trans. Jeremy Gaines)