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Word Play

How have opera librettos evolved in the twenty-first century?

By Charles Shafaieh

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A PREVAILING DICTUM REGARDING OPERA— *prima la musica, dopo le parole*—casts librettists as secondary figures. The opposite attitude regarding these frequently unacknowledged cocreators of operas was once commonplace, however. In seventeenth-century Venice, published librettos often printed names of writers but not composers, largely because librettos were recycled. Pietro Metastasio, one of history's most renowned librettists, wrote texts that were set more than twenty times, in some cases more than once by the same composer.

Venice's respect for the libretto was not an anomaly. As former OPERA NEWS editor Patrick J. Smith observes in *The Tenth Muse* (1970), one of shockingly few books on the subject, Pierre Beaumarchais recited his *Tarare* at Parisian salons before Salieri set it to music, just as Philippe Quinault's librettos were

read as poetry separate from Lully's scores. In this respect, Wagner's *Ring* operas might be considered the libretto's apogee. In an 1852 letter, written to Theodore Uhlig shortly after completing the first sketch of *Die Walküre*, the composer asserted, "After this work, I do not suppose I shall ever write poetry again! It is the supreme and most perfect thing that could issue from my brain."

Smith identifies the evolution of the libretto as a cogent lens on Western Europe's aesthetic predilections throughout the past four centuries, as well as its shifting philosophical and political trends. He explores the influence of commedia dell'arte on the characters in Italian opera in particular, the numerous reform movements that, in France, saw mythic tales displaced by bourgeois scenarios inspired by the ideas of Diderot and Rousseau, and the rise of the singular Romantic genius figure who wrote both text and music, as exemplified by Wagner—all aspects of a complex history that casts the libretto in a more privileged light than as a mere tool for the composer.

BY BEING SO ENTWINED with cultural norms and theater trends, opera was constrained in terms of structure and content—such as a focus on Greek myth as a supposed return to Classical traditions (consider Gluck's operatic oeuvre) or grand opera's desire for spectacle. These limitations helped create the panoply of ridiculous plots and superfluous text in many operas that today's directors struggle to make engaging, and which solidified the near-total collective shift toward focusing on the music's ecstatic qualities.

This paradigm is no longer applicable, though. Composers and librettists have shed any adherence to particular plots or forms such as opera seria and opéra bouffe; they no longer require arias, least of all "exit arias"; the tastes of monarchs are inconsequential; and the opera house itself as a performance space is not a necessity. But that freedom also comes at a moment when it is no longer a foregone conclusion that opera as an institution and art form will continue to exist at all, especially considering the extreme cost and time that productions require, as well as the proliferation and popularity of other media such as television and film. Because opera in 2019 is neither an expression of court power nor an art form of mass appeal, librettists, composers and opera administrators alike must ask a fundamental question before embarking on any project: Should this opera be an opera at all?

The answer, in many instances, stems from the libretto. As composer Michael Nyman argues, "Opera isn't a question of merely sitting down to be told a story. It should be more than that." And to quote Poulenc, "A libretto is only of interest if it breaks new ground." These complementary concerns are especially urgent when the source material already exists as a film, play or book. A composer and librettist must convince audiences that their contribution to or extension of a work transcends its original form as well as satisfies a need beyond box-office attraction, the latter often serving as the sole impetus for Broadway's superfluous film-to-musical adaptations. For example, Arrigo Boito and Verdi's *Otello*, with its artful condensation of plot and heightening of the source's emotional content, creates *dramma per musica* that enhances the stage play in ways Shakespeare could not have achieved. The same cannot be said of Meredith Oakes's immature transformation of *The Tempest* (2004) into rhyming couplets, set to music by Thomas Adès.

WHETHER GYÖRGY KURTÁG asked this question before adapting Beckett's play *Fin de Partie* (*Endgame*) for his 2018 opera—arguably the most anticipated and widely praised by critics this decade—is unclear. Morton Feldman, whose *Neither* (1977) is the only operatic setting Beckett endorsed—by writing a sixteen-line poem/libretto specifically for the work—knew better. During a conversation in which Feldman and Beckett sympathized over their mutual distaste for opera, the author inquired why an existing text (such as *Fin de Partie*) wasn't used for the commission. As Feldman recounts, "I had read them all, they were pregnable, they didn't need music.... I was looking for the quintessence, something that just hovered." Kurtág took the opposite route. Based on interviews, it seems that a half-century-long obsession with Beckett's ambiguous masterwork occasioned his composition, and the result regrettably excises the text's mystery and humor. In its place is music that brings to the fore assertive displays of interiority, apocalyptic doom and a singular interpretation of the text. Director Pierre Audi, who reinforced the hauntingly spare yet aggressive score with an equally unnerving *mise-en-scène*, mistakenly praises this very move in his La Scala

program note. The opera, he writes, “‘betrays’ the original conception of the play ... [in] that it turns it into an emotional existential drama which builds to a powerful tragic climax.” In principal, such betrayal could prove fascinating, but only if it illuminated both music and text through an act of contradiction and refusal. Interiority and dire apocalyptic impressions are so critically absent from Beckett’s oeuvre that staging them —on a scale as grand as that of opera, no less—makes both music and text suffer. As a result, *Fin de Partie* acts as a caution to those who mistake fascination with an existing work of art as sufficient reason that it should become anything more than what it already is.

Philip Venables provides a counterexample with his adaptation of Sarah Kane’s final play, *4.48 Psychosis*. Like Kurtág, Venables treats his source with extreme faithfulness, although “faithfulness” is complex in this case, considering that Kane’s nonnarrative, nonlinear meditation on and dramatization of depression has no stipulations regarding characters, number of actors or setting. But it is precisely this ambiguity that has long inspired theater directors and, in turn, Venables, who wrote for a sextet of women who could be refractions of the same person or manifestations of her unconscious as much as they could be distinct individuals. Despite its sometimes hyperexplicit content, the play is intentionally open-ended, and although it is dramatically different from Beckett’s plays, it gestures at what Feldman calls “the quintessence.”

The act of singing Kane’s text—an expression of mental health issues that much of society would rather ignore—is one reason opera has a purpose today. Director and librettist Peter Sellars articulates this understanding of the form in relation to his and John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic*. Sellars eschewed a conventional narrative about Robert Oppenheimer and instead tells a story of the first atomic-bomb test using diverse snippets of text ranging from metaphysical poetry to, most critically, declassified government documents. Speaking about the latter in a way that also applies in part to *4.48 Psychosis*, he says, “One of the great functions of opera is to take people’s secrets and ... the secrets of civilizations and entire swathes of history and not just whisper them but sing them aloud with power and some kind of grace and create something that you have a visceral reaction to.... Something that’s not allowed to be spoken, therefore has to be sung.”

In addition to this exclamatory function of opera, what Venables and Sellars grasp, as Wagner did before them, is the necessity for textual ambiguity, which can be heightened by music and the other trappings of a form that is multifaceted by definition. “Opera,” being the plural of “opus,” or work, contains multitudes that cannot be reduced either to a singular meaning or to music alone.

CLARITY AND EVEN COMPREHENSIBILITY, in a normative sense, are therefore not mandatory qualities of the libretto, as witnessed in Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson’s ultra-abstract *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), which is more severe than *4.48 Psychosis* in eliminating structure and plot. A similar example is Constance DeJong and Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha* (1980), whose Sanskrit text, extracted from the *Bhagavad Gita*, was intentionally untranslated for audiences of Phelim McDermott’s 2007 ENO–Met coproduction.

Satyagraha’s recent surge in popularity notwithstanding, adherence to narrative cohesion and clarity remains strong, despite the freedoms librettists and composers possess today. Recent choices for adaptations and original works alike illustrate this conservatism. Case in point: Roxie Perkins and Ellen Reid’s *prism* (2018) progresses away from abstraction after an ambiguous Act I that holds the embryo of a more effective and necessary piece.

It is this reticence for the indefinite that David Lang lays bare in *the whisper opera* (2013), which is as much an exemplary work of the Internet age as it is a staging of the current operatic moment. Scored for just flute, clarinet, percussion, cello and soprano, the sixty-minute piece pushes ambiguity to the extreme with a libretto Lang assembled from search-engine results that follow four specific queries: “When I am alone I always...,” “They said I was crazy but I...,” “When I think of you I think of...,” and “It’s not my fault that I am so...” No matter how hard audiences seek comprehension, the resulting text, which the soprano sings at a whisper while roving out of earshot of potentially every spectator, cannot be anything but disjunctive and

incoherent. In addition, Lang prohibits recording, filming or amplifying the piece, which intensifies the juxtaposition already present of the assumed clarity search engines provide and opera's potential for multiplying and complicating meaning. "If live performance is to be meaningful, we need maybe to invent new reasons to keep it," he says. By using text that is paradoxically both perfectly suited to his goals and devoid of content, Lang provides one such reason and shows that the libretto matters—precisely when it may seem to matter least of all. ■

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