

Prologue

In 1956, Professor Joseph Kerman published his landmark book *Opera as Drama*, in which he analyzed a handful of operas from Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* to Berg's *Wozzeck*, occasionally making brief references to other operas for which he had either praise or condemnation. I was one of millions who bought the book, and in a way it turned some of my thinking around, which was all for the better. I was also fortunate enough to meet Professor Kerman at the 1979 Aspen Music Festival at which, as a promising young music critic, I was one of a handful of invited guests.

Recently, however, I re-read the book, and now in the light of acquired knowledge about a great many other operas old and new over the past 42 years, I realize that it is inadequate in its scope and, to me personally, somewhat irrelevant to the operatic landscape of today. Aside from the fact that Kerman spent what I see as an inordinate amount of space in the book worrying over the dramatic flaws of *Così fan tutte*, which was just a comic farce not meant to be taken seriously as drama, and praises *Die Zauberflöte*, an opera combining outright silliness with the pseudo-religious claptrap of Freemasonry, as Mozart's most coherent and dramatic masterpiece, there are just too many holes in the book, too many operas not examined in whole or part for their dramatic qualities. Gluck is but one example—he gets very short shrift in the book—but there are also operas by Rameau, Méhul, Cherubini, Spontini and Saint-Saëns that get pushed to the side, not to mention Berlioz, Verdi (other than *Otello*) and Massenet. And of 20th century operas, he ignores far more than he discusses.

Of course, one must realize that *Opera as Drama* was not a book that he set out to write. It was, rather, a compilation of assorted articles he had published on the subject which he decided to collect as a book and publish, but this in itself makes the book weak.

In addition, there are many other factors that go into an assessment of opera as drama that Kerman overlooked, either accidentally or on purpose. First and foremost is the question, *What is drama?* That definition has changed, quite dramatically, over the centuries. In addition to the fact that the ancient Greek and Roman wars with their heroes and villains which were the fodder for opera at least through Berlioz' *Les Troyens* now seem rather minor compared to what Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Adolf Hitler unleashed on the world, there is only so much mileage one can wring out of love triangles or lovers spurned. Moreover, what passed for dramatic performances on the opera stage in the 17th and 18th centuries is also quite passé today. The dramatic revolutions caused by such charismatic performers as Feodor Chaliapin, Martha Modl, Maria Callas and Jon Vickers altered forever one's mere concept of "opera as drama," let alone the psychological insight brought to the writing of opera libretti (and music) in the 20th and 21st centuries thanks to the legacy of Freud and Jung. Putting aside the music, an opera like Mieczysław Weinberg's *The Passenger* could never have existed in previous centuries because the sickening actions of guards at the Nazi death camps of the 1940s was not something that could have been conceived by a human mind prior to Hitler. Even I cannot watch or listen to *The Passenger* because the sister of one of my best friends as a small girl was a survivor of the camps, and the stories I heard about them made me "woke" (to use a modern term) to what had gone on in occupied Poland long before I read Elie Weisel's *Night*. Dramatic as they may be, some topics, like the brutal rapes and murders of women, are best left out of opera due to artistic discretion.

In addition to the shift in subjects, the fact that opera has been an *evolving* art form from the time that Monteverdi stopped writing for the Mantuan nobles and put on his operas in public theatres where the judgment of paying operagoers influenced his musical and theatrical decisions. I think that anyone who has seen productions, for instance, of both *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* and *La Coronazione di Poppea* can immediately see and hear the difference between

them. *Ulisse* is, like *L'Orfeo*, a very static opera; there is little in the way of stage action, and very few moments where even two characters appear on stage singing at any one time, whereas *Poppea* is a sprawling theatrical landscape where several characters interact at once and the stage action really does move. By the end of the 17th century, we had not only Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* and *Dido and Aeneas*, two entirely different works which make a completely different impact, but also Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée*, a forward-looking work that had an enormous impact on opera of the early 18th century.

Operatic styles and tastes then changed in the full flowering of the Baroque era; they changed again in the Classical era, then took a left turn towards more entertainment than enlightenment in the Bel Canto period. A number of good composers with good instincts, Verdi and Berlioz among them, struggled to include viable dramatic moments in even their most entertaining works; and then there was Meyerbeer, that stylistic hybrid who deftly created some very fine scores that had entertaining scenes in them. But what Berlioz failed to do due to lack of opportunity, Wagner succeeded in doing just because he was stubborn and had some very powerful and wealthy patrons at his back, thus by the end of the 19th century other composers were moving away from the mid-19th century styles to create entirely new works, which eventually became the "verismo" era.

And so it went into the 20th century, and beyond to our present day. The point I am making is that, once opera went public, it became *ipso facto* an entertainment industry whether you like it or not, thus the entire history of opera from the 1730s onward has been, for better or worse, a constant struggle between high-minded, artistic operas and those geared more for entertainment. As we shall see, one of the major victims of this struggle in public tastes was Richard Strauss, who was forced to abandon the more dramatic style he had presented in *Salome* and *Elektra* in favor of the sweetsy-melodic rubbish of *Der Rosenkavalier*, and once he realized that it was tunes and less abrasive melodies that his public wanted he simply cranked out product after product to meet the needs of his audience without worrying about artistic quality, of which there is very little in most of his later operas. Yet all during the 1910s and '20s, there were a number of composers who were writing more dramatic works that never seemed to click with the public, and this trend has continued to the present day.

Yet the most important ingredient missing from Kerman's book—in part because he *was*, after all, a musicologist, and musicologists are just concerned with the music on the printed page—is that he never took performance quality into account. This is yet another thing I learned over the decades, that you can occasionally take what appears on paper as a weak or mediocre opera and make it much more powerfully dramatic depending on the quality of the performers. In some cases this also has to do with the stage production, and these, too have morphed and changed, even more drastically than the operas themselves, over the centuries. We will investigate this as we get into those chapters in which we can accurately gauge the quality of stage productions and the ways in which *they* have changed.

I think you can see, then, where this is headed: a much wider scope in terms of works surveyed, an analysis (so far as we can judge from contemporary accounts) of performance and production quality, and an admission that opera in any of the major eras is always different to a greater or lesser degree from the ones that preceded and followed them. I may, of course, miss a few nooks and crannies myself; I'm only human, and I don't have that much longer to live, so I can't keep filling in when new information becomes available. Eventually I have to draw a line, not cross it, and consider my work done. Yet I hope that this book will shed some light on all the different aspects I've just discussed and give you an idea of what is happening today and why. Whether or not we can pull out of these latest dramatic doldrums and right the ship is anyone's

guess, but if I were forced to make such a judgment myself I'd have to say that opera is screwed and may never recover from what is being done to it nowadays.

But you never know, and that's the beauty of it. Weirder things have happened in the past, thus something weird that will bring a major correction to our current trajectory could always occur.

One final note. Opera lovers may well wonder why Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Gounod's *Faust* and Bizet's *Carmen* are not included in this book. The answer is simple. Although all three are very well-written, solidly-constructed operas that have stood the test of time, they are not inherently dramatic throughout, but only sporadically dramatic works. Their goal was primarily to entertain, and they clearly do this on a very high level, but the few and very intermittent moments of real drama in each of them does not add up to our concept of opera as drama any more than Verdi's *Ernani* and *Un ballo in Maschera*, Reyer's *Sigurd* or Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers*, which are also omitted from this survey. It doesn't mean that I don't like these operas; I do; but on balance they are peripheral to what I was specifically looking for.