

Interlude 2: Changes in Dramatic Presentation

It might seem a bit puzzling to readers that I was able to go through the first 300 years of operatic history without having to insert “interludes” to explain events that led to changes in both the presentation of opera and its perception as drama, but by comparison with what happened in the 20th century, those shifts were relatively mild and could be attributed to the stage views of certain composers. In the 20th century, however, radical changes in the artistic community in itself led to a seismic earthquake of changes in the texts that operas were based on, which became, as we’ve seen, more and more psychological, and in turn stage acting changed from a sort of dramatic “plastique” to much more overt and realistic character portrayals. In addition, the visual representation of operas, influenced by the heavily stylized Art Deco movement as well as by the more abstract painters and friezes of the time, became more innovative, even shocking to some. This trend, as I indicated in the past two chapters, grew exponentially as the influence of film work—not just standard movie studio productions but also the more artistic and experimental films of Robert Wiene, Luis Buñuel, Fritz Lang and Max Reinhardt—had both an immediate (in some countries) and lasting (in all countries) effect on how operas were staged.

This revolution broke out in full force during the 1950s, and although it had frequent and sometimes violent opposition, the initial stages in its development were both necessary to the continuance of now-ancient repertoire, which the public vastly favored over the “new operas,” and welcome in making real, actual connections with the psychological impact of those operas.

In New York, the conduit for this change was a Broadway director named Margaret Webster. Particularly noted for her innovative staging of Shakespeare’s plays, in which she combined stylized but recognizable costumes with even more stylized stage sets, she was hired by the Metropolitan Opera’s new general director, Rudolf Bing, to create an entirely new production for his revival of an opera not seen at the Met since 1922, Verdi’s *Don Carlo*. Her sets for this opera as well as for a later production of *Aida* were informed by her reading through the complete libretti. Her goal was to bring out the “tragedy of individuals caught up in a conflict with the dictates of an autocracy.” By today’s standards, Webster’s productions were quite beautiful and not really too radical, but in their time they created quite a stir. In *Don Carlo*, for instance, the iron-fist dominance of the Grand Inquisitor was brought out in a way that made it clear that he was the villain of the piece. This set off a firestorm among New York Roman Catholics who apparently thought the Inquisition not only necessary but a good idea in getting rid of Middle Ages religious “subversives.” Picketers showed up at the Met with signs reading “The opera Don Carlo is a mockery of religion,” “Don’t support ‘Met’ opera as long as they hire subversives,” and “Moscow termites invade the Met.”¹

But this was almost *passé* visually compared to the far more radical production of Wagner’s operas staged by his grandson, Wieland (1917-1966) at Bayreuth, beginning with his July 1951 production of *Parsifal*. Trained as an artist as a youngster, Wieland was particularly drawn to the new abstract art of the 1930s and ‘40s. In his stage productions, he produced most of his effects via high creative lighting “as the paints of his new theatrical canvas.” Most of the characters onstage created little movement; each scene was a “frieze” within which he worked to make a strong visual and psychological impact on the audience. This approach was so radical in its time that few of those who spent good money to get to Bayreuth, let alone be able to afford the tickets to the performances, could even accept it as valid, let alone warm up to it. The German

¹ Quotes from Virgil Thomson’s writings in the 2014 collection of his articles, cited by Alex Ross at <https://www.therestisnoise.com/2014/11/picketing-verdi.html>

dramaturge, arts administrator and author Nike Wagner, Wieland's daughter, made the following observation in her book *The Wagners: The Dramas of a Musical Dynasty* (Princeton University Press, 2001), in which I have added one comment of my own in bold print:

Wieland's production of *Parsifal* offended the sensibilities of the traditional Wagnerians to a degree scarcely imaginable today. [**Ummm, I can imagine it today.**] The production left them with no visual reminder of the pieces they thought they knew: they were confronted with emptiness and darkness, with just a few abstract topographical hints as to what was happening on the stage. The outrage was fierce. Old Wagnerians formed a "Club for the Faithful Rendition of Richard Wagner's Works."²

The gauntlet had been thrown down, and although both Margaret Webster's and Wieland Wagner's stage ideas would eventually come to be considered passé, the *idea* behind them, that directors should stage operas based on *their perception of the characters' psychology*, became the dominant theme from the mid-1960s onward. It should also be noted that Wieland went out of his way to hire singers who were known for being great stage actors, both in their projection of drama through their singing and their stage presence. Thus the "new Bayreuth" featured such first-class talents, both German and international, as sopranos Martha Mödl, Astrid Varnay and Gré Brouwenstijn (a soprano so beloved by Wieland that, when she resigned around 1959, he threatened to ruin her career out of pure spite), tenors Ramón Vinay and Wolfgang Windgassen (the latter not much of a stage animal, but pliable and one who projected his characters well through his voice), baritones Hermann Uhde (a truly great stage actor) and George London, and basses Josef Greindl, Hans Hotter and, for one memorable *Die Walküre*, Jerome Hines. (He also created both a local and international furor in 1960 when he signed African-American mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry to sing the role of Venus in *Tannhäuser*). But the crux of Wieland's productions was NOT to impose "his view" on the opera. By reducing the stage direction to static friezes, viewers could interpret it their own way.

And, as I say, this idea was not confined solely to the Met and Bayreuth. David Webster, who took over as general director of London's Royal Opera, Covent Garden in 1945, introduced innovations of his own in the 1950s. One of the first was to finally stop performing Italian, French and German operas in English; opera in the vernacular of each country had been *de rigueur* since at least the 18th century *except* at the Metropolitan in New York, in part because it was the first major opera house to boast having a roster of internationally famous stars, and they clearly weren't going to re-learn their repertoire in English (although, at times, these foreign stars *did* have to re-learn their parts in Italian, French etc. even if they were used to singing them in another language in their home countries). From the mid-1950 onward, Webster introduced a number of both new operas and shamefully neglected older works, like Berlioz' *Les Troyens*, in brilliant modern productions using stylized costumes and creative lighting. He also began hiring more and more singers whose emphasis on drama was as important as their voices, such as the Welsh bass-baritone Geraint Evans, British soprano Amy Shuard and Canadian tenor Jon Vickers. To this basic core he added great international name as needed, put the focus on opera as drama, and created a sensation.

Perhaps the most interesting and often-overlooked innovations were made at the home of opera, Italy, during this time. For some reason, despite several of their productions being reported in both British and American opera magazines, the full scope of their activities during the period 1950-1962 doesn't seem to have been noted by too many opera historians. Yet during that period in Italy, a surprising number of older operas by such composers as Spontini, Cherubini,

² Quoted on <http://www.wagneroperas.com/indexwielandwagner.html>

Méhul and Gluck were suddenly revived; more modern works by Stravinsky, Pizzetti and others were also performed. Moreover, the stage productions for these and other revivals were, in a milder form, based on the innovations of Margaret Webster and Wieland Wagner, with fairly minimal sets and modern, stylized costumes. Renata Tebaldi was featured in Spontini's *Fernando Cortez* and Maria Callas in his *La Vestale*. Anita Cerquetti was the star of Cherubini's *Gli Abencerrogi*, and the marvelous Italian tenor Mirto Picchi, little remembered today, was featured in both some of the revivals and several of the modern operas. The Italian stage sets were more traditional than those of Webster or Wagner, but now became sparser and more abstract. In addition, this period of Italian opera led to the rise of several new conductors who were more precise and more dramatic in their presentation of the music, such as Fernando Previtali, Mario Rossi and Gianandrea Gavazzeni. For both better and worse, however, this era is primarily remembered as the Era of Maria Callas, the most celebrated singing actress of her time. Although she was clearly a superb interpreter and a great dramatic figure on the stage, she stubbornly clung to the older, more lyrical and tonal repertoire, primarily bel canto roles but also a few outliers like Giulia in *La Vestale*, Iphigenia in Gluck's *Iphigenia en Tauris*, and of course the title role in Cherubini's *Medea* which became one of her calling-card roles, in addition to some Verdi heroines and a few verismo roles such as Tosca. She very rarely sang in French but never in German or her native language, English, which eventually limited her appeal beyond the fanatics who considered her a *prima donna assoluta*.

The rise of Callas and her peers Tebaldi and Cerquetti, as well as tenors Mario del Monaco, Giuseppe di Stefano and Franco Corelli and baritones Tito Gobbi and Ettore Bastianini, led to a Renaissance for most fans of the same old same old. In America, music critic Henry Pleasants threw the gauntlet down in his 1955 book, *The Agony of Modern Music*. His basic argument was that

Modern music is not modern and is rarely music. It represents an attempt to perpetuate a European musical tradition whose technical resources are exhausted, and which no longer has any cultural validity. That it continues to be composed, performed, and discussed represents self-deception by an element of society which refuses to believe that this is true.³

But Pleasants, who was anything but (believe it or not, he was also a top American spy in post-war Germany), didn't just stop at bashing Berg, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Honegger, Hindemith etc. He also didn't much like Verdi's *Otello* because it didn't have good enough tunes in it for him. Yet millions of operagoers agreed with him and rallied round the book...at least for a while.

We can see, then, that the poop was really starting to hit the fan about this time. Although, as I say, the real damage wouldn't start happening until the late 1970s, the seeds had already been sown and, as in the case of the 1920s innovations in staging and costumes, the initial motivation was benign and largely beneficial, to make audiences think a bit more about the characters, their motivations and the dramatic background of the operas they were going to see. Even as conservative a conductor and director as Herbert von Karajan got into the act, and although he was often criticized for making his productions too dark—unlike Wieland Wagner, he apparently never took lighting classes—no one ever thought his stage ideas were irrelevant to the operas they represented or idiotic in their concept. The collapse of common sense and artistic intelligence in operatic staging thus came slowly at first, with certain features being questionable in an otherwise valid overview of the works being presented, but come it did.

³ Pleasants, Henry: *The Agony of Modern Music* (Simon and Schuster, 1955/1967) from back cover blurb.