

### Interlude 3

This is going to be the most detailed and, I'm sorry to say, negative section of this book, but after suffering now for more than 40 years from the assault on opera by flawed singers and inane stage directors who apparently think that opera is just a visual pinball game, I've had more than enough and so have most audiences—those who disagree with my choice of repertoire and those who agree. What started out as what I perceived, at first, to be mere aberrations have taken off like wildfire, debasing and degrading works of art that deserve a better fate.

These changes started happening in the 1970s, but by the late 1980s it was clear that they were apparently going to be mainstays of opera presentation. Regarding the collapse of first-class voices, this started at first in the late 1960s when a number of major singers who lacked the proper training due to the war years, and were running for a couple of decades on their natural talent, suddenly had major vocal crises and thus had to stop singing, but it was in the mid-to-late 1970s, as I say, that what simply seemed to be the misfortune of a few major names became an epidemic. Some of these singers were able to regroup and continue singing, although with only sporadic control of their once-superb voices, among them Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Nicolai Gedda, Franco Corelli, Cornell MacNeil, Leontyne Price and Sherrill Milnes, while others such as Anna Moffo and Grace Bumbry had to stop singing entirely. In their place, both the Metropolitan Opera and Covent Garden used either domestic artists who could fill the gap for at least the short term or, worse yet, began importing third-rate European singers, many from Eastern Europe, who struggled just to produce a pleasing sound.

A YouTube poster known only as “THIS is opera” uploaded a video in which he makes his own observations and gives his own reasons for this decline.<sup>1</sup> He proffers that

Opera started losing its popularity significantly around the 1970s, and that's also when the bad singing really started taking over. Before that, opera singers sounded pleasant and natural, and they had powerful and exciting voices.

So what happened?

A big change for the worse in technique, and complete loss of aural tradition. The result is that modern opera singing sounds nothing like it should sound. It might as well be a completely different type of music at this point.

But there is more to it. Singing is not the only aspect of opera that has been completely ruined. Acting has also been greatly affected by this decline and, as a result, opera became unbearable to listen to and boring to watch.

The acting in opera has always been done mostly with the voice, so a well-developed voice and good technique are necessary.

Now, TIO and I have some different views of what great operatic singing is. He primarily enjoys the 19th and early 20th-century Italian repertoire and singers who hang onto their high notes for all they're worth, thus distorting the score. The first example he puts up of a great opera singer is tenor Franco Corelli, who undoubtedly had a splendid instrument but absolutely no musical taste whatsoever. (I personally question whether or not Corelli could read a score; it never sounded to me as if he could.) Yet he makes very valid points otherwise. I myself became so frustrated by what I was hearing week after week on the Met broadcasts that, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I did my own research into the methods of voice production which had been taught since at least the early-to-mid 18th century up to the end of World War II. Listening care-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26tarW4K7vU>

fully to the recordings of those trained in the Classic Italian, Garcia, and Marchesi methods led me to conclude that a great many singers coming out of the World War II era simply went with a mouth-based natural production. If their “singing teachers” thought it sounded OK, it *was* OK, and these teachers had connections with major talent agencies and were thus able to get them jobs singing in important opera houses.

One of the most famous and infamous of these singers was German tenor Peter Hofmann, who not only started out as a rock singer but who continued to sing rock music even as he was getting his legitimate vocal training. This clash of styles resulted in a voice that was certainly powerful, but also harsh and ugly, but Hofmann had one thing going for him: he was extremely handsome. He *looked* like a heroic tenor, and so he was cast as Siegfried in the Patrice Chéreau *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth. Much to many people’s astonishment, there were more listeners who liked Hofmann’s voice than hated it, thus an entirely new breed of singer was born: the one who looked good even if his singing sounded abrasive and ugly.

I will go so far as to blame the deterioration of operatic singing since his time on the fact that we now have three to four generations of listeners who were raised on rock music, and thus cannot tell the difference between good singing and bad—even though they *can* apparently make that distinction in the music they like by admitting that the late Whitney Houston had a phenomenal voice (a verdict with which I wholeheartedly agree; she WAS phenomenal). But the majority of female pop/rock singers scream their brains out, as do the males, and the latter also produce sounds that are raw and often uncontrolled, just like the opera singers they now admire. But there is another wrinkle in this that is often overlooked, and that is that, since the 1980s, the really good aspiring opera singers are not put under contract when they are young and their voices are fresh—particularly in the case of sopranos and mezzos, whose voices mature early—but rather forced to go through what seems like an interminable maze of Competitions. It used to be that if a really gifted singer wowed the judges at just ONE major competition, their career was well and truly launched, but nowadays it seems to be a case of them entering more and more competitions because that is what they consider their résumé. And if you don’t believe me, just go online and pull up a few “Biographies” of today’s “major” singers, the few really good ones along with the many really bad ones. Their biography no longer consists of, “Studied with so-and-so, went to this or that Conservatory, won this major competition and then made their debut in this opera,” but merely a laundry list of the competitions they were forced to endure until they were in their thirties and a long string of name-dropping, as if performing with name conductors automatically guaranteed quality. It no longer does, because major conductors don’t have the time to sift through all of the available singers out there and find the gold nuggets that still exist, but are persuaded into hiring whoever has the more powerful agent and impressed by their string of competition wins.

Yet it was the growing inanity of modern stage productions, which started in the ‘70s with Chéreau and a very quirky American named Peter Sellars—fortunately, no relation to the late, great British comedian of the similar name. Throughout his entire career, Sellars has had only one goal in mind: be as outrageous in his productions as he could possibly be so the media would write about them. This, in turn, will lead to exposure for HIM, the halfwit who staged *Antony and Cleopatra* in a swimming pool, *Don Giovanni* as a blaxploitation film, with the Don clad only in underwear and shooting up heroin (a move that prompted *Opera News*, which later supported idiotic stage settings, to brand it “an act of artistic vandalism”<sup>2</sup>), and then set Handel’s *Orlando* in outer space. Conventional thinking would postulate that such an artistic vandal would be banned forever from any future opera productions, but in fact the opposite was true. He was,

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Sellars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Sellars)

in fact, named director and manager of the American National Theater at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. in 1984, when he was only 26 years old, and he is now a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he teaches “Art as Social Action” and “Art as a Moral Action.” And this, you see, is what happens to directors whose only goal is to made people angry and offend them. They get major positions in the arts world and are hailed as geniuses.

Compared to Sellars’ atrocities, Jonathan Miller’s “Mafia *Rigoletto*” and Harry Kupfer’s bizarre Bayreuth *Der fliegende Holländer*, in which Senta is an emotionally unstable woman who imagines her encounters with the Dutchman, both from the early 1980s, almost looked normal, but worse, much worse, was still to come. The primary source for this brand of artistic rape was, of course, the world of film, where anything goes. One of the major influences was producer Don Boyd’s 1987 movie *Aria*, in which ten different directors produced short films, later spliced together, showing ludicrous or irrelevant images set to operatic arias. The most bizarre was surely the scene of a young woman crying in a car that was driving through the rain while the background music was “La vergine degl’angeli” from Verdi’s *La forza del Destino*.

Eventually, the influence of cult films like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the quick-cutting techniques used by modern Hollywood directors (try to sit through Baz Luhrmann’s 2001 “jukebox musical” adaptation of the classic *Moulin Rouge* without going crazy) which do nothing but pile image on top of image for the sake of keeping the viewer fascinated. All these things opened the doors—one would say they were kicked in and destroyed—by a bevy of stage directors whose primary function seems to be to exacerbate the brutal or grisly elements of an opera as well as tacking on as much unrelated nonsense as they possibly can. Before long, inserting Nazis or Nazi-looking characters into Wagner productions became so common that I doubt that there is anyone under the age of 40 who even knows what a real Wagner production is supposed to look like. One of the real gems I recall reading about was a production of *Parsifal* in which huge images of dead rabbits were projected onto a screen during the final scene, but there was also a *Die Walküre* set in an insane asylum with Wotan and Brünnhilde depicted as inmates in straight jackets. And it just got sillier and sillier as time went on—not just in Wagner, but in Mozart (the Zurich *Die Zauberflöte* with Papageno wearing a black suit covered in bird shit and stuck in a cage, and the Queen of the Night as a blind, mole-like creature feeling her way along a wall), Puccini and Verdi.

But if you think that audiences and critics would complain and throw rotten vegetables at the stage, you are sadly mistaken! These people take this crap *seriously*. They acquire Doctorates in Psychology to write articles pontificating on these productions’ greatness. Critics sit around, rubbing their hands on their chins, trying to “unlock” the mysteries that these “genius” directors have thrown up on stage. *I kid you not!* A perfect example was Hans Neuenfels’ 2011 Bayreuth *Lohengrin* designed as a giant laboratory rat experiment. (I’m NOT making this up!!!)

So what would *you* call this kind of production? The product of genius? Well, yes, folks, that’s exactly what Europeans said about it. Here are two such inmates’ evaluations of this insanity. First, the opinion of an unnamed 40-year-old trauma surgeon from Denmark (*italics mine*):

We are inside a white laboratory. The people are rats. The protagonists seem to be super-rats. Or perhaps not all of them. Lohengrin, who struggles in vain to enter the lab during the *vorspiel*, and Telramund, whose narration is accompanied by a projection of ‘wahrheit’ *may have be placed in the lab as part of the experiment to see what reactions they provoke*. Or maybe not. Because nothing is entirely clear in this challenging production. The lab technicians seem to be always in control, entering and exiting the laboratory manipulating with the rats. Black-white, action-reaction, the people are rats and they are followers. And they choose to follow Lohengrin, *gradually changing their rat-like appearance into human shape*. And who should Elsa follow? Brought in by the rats, covered in arrows, *she takes*

*shape according to her surroundings* – rats, swan, Lohengrin. Love is not an ingredient in this experiment.

A tilted wagon, a dead horse, *rats escaping with gold bars and money*: Ortrud and Telramund are caught by the rats when trying to escape. But why exactly *Telramund becomes a rat after his failed attempt to kill Lohengrin* is less clear to me. And who is this Schützer von Brabant? An embryo capping his umbilical cord? As a reaction to the experiment, perhaps?<sup>3</sup>

Ah, but here is an even more profound analysis of this same production by Nila Parly, Ph.D.:

The mad genius – Heinrich – is standing with an apple in either hand. The apple has, due to Genesis, become the Western mind's most fundamental symbol of divine insight into the conditions of life, the symbol of the Christian civilization's sinful yearning to know 'the truth.' But the apple also plays an important part in Norse mythology, where the apples of Freia provide the gods with eternal life. The apple is here, too, connected to 'the truth,' the truth which only immortal gods are able to perceive.

During the performance we are confronted with three 'truths,' displayed in animated cartoons (each is presented twice). The first "truth," stemming from the fantasy of Heinrich the scientist, is the 'Old Norse truth.' It is shown for the first time during the overture and reveals itself, through repetition, as the truth which the adherents of Telramund and Ortrud propose as the explanation of the miserable condition of the realm.

The second "truth," the "Christian truth," is displayed for the first time in connection with the fencing match between Lohengrin and Telramund in Act One and repeated during the overture to Act Two. This 'truth' is how the adherents of Elsa and Lohengrin explain the German misery.

The third "truth" expressed in a cartoon is the result of Heinrich's reckless genetic experiment, and contradicts his own positive conclusion. As he rejoices, textually and musically, in his belief in the successful outcome of his engineering, we see a film showing the result to be disastrous and self-destructive.

The whole chorus, at times dressed in impressively well-designed laboratory rat costumes with long rubber toes and tails, was almost impossible to take one's eyes off. Only when one of the chorus members during the wedding scene happened to step on another chorus member's tail, so that the tip of the tail came off and was left lying around on the stage, did my focus shift from the chorus to the tail.<sup>4</sup>

Now, mind you, I don't dislike *all* modern productions. Sometimes, when the opera is silly and comic enough, a little modern-day levity can work wonders to hold your attention. A good example is the 2007 Théâtre du Châtelet production of Rossini's *La Pietra del Paragone*, in which the director used several "optical illusions" using blue screens and projected images on the performers to enhance the laugh quotient. One of my favorites is the scene in which Clarice (Sonia Prina) is shown in the kitchen of the wealthy Count Asdrubale, popping in and out of the trash bin. Another is the scene in which Clarice, disguised as her long-lost "brother," an African explorer, arrives in a Dr. Seuss-like cardboard jeep and sings an aria of almost impossible technical difficulty, assertively nodding her head to the audience at the end of each roulade-filled phrase. It's a laugh riot. Also effective was the 2007 Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels pro-

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<sup>3</sup> <https://mostlyopera.blogspot.com/2012/05/bayreuth-lohengrin-rat-experiment.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wagneropera.net/DVD/Lohengrin/DVD-Lohengrin-Neuenfels-Parly.htm>

duction of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* set in Las Vegas of the 1950s. You can do this with comedies, particularly those that really don't need a fixed locale or date. And I freely admit that in directing the chorus and subsidiary characters to move more naturally onstage, modern directors have done a world of good. I recently watched a 1981 Royal Opera House production of *Samson et Dalila* in which ONLY the three stars—Jon Vickers, Shirley Verrett and John Tomlinson—moved around with any sense of naturalness. Otherwise, they might as well have painted the chorus and extras onto the backdrops.

But please note what I just said. Many, many operas *do* have a fixed locale and/or date. You can't update things like *Guillaume Tell*, *Don Carlos*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Falstaff*, *Rigoletto*, *Don Giovanni*, *Contes d'Hoffmann* or *Simon Boccanegra*, but they do it anyway—and ruin our enjoyment in the process. I'm not going to the opera to wonder what psychotic nightmare was going through the head of the directors when they decided to do this weird nonsense. I don't need to see *Les Troyens* with a giant Trojan horse that looks like an Erector set or a *Guillaume Tell* in which plastic chairs come and go onstage almost as frequently as the chorus, and Jemmy stands between two toilet seats while Tell shoots the apple off his head. I'm not into psychoanalyzing the director. I just want him or her (yes, Virginia, there are women who do this nonsense, too!) fired and possibly committed to an asylum. As Heather MacDonald put it in a famous critique of Regietheater from 2007, "*The Abduction from the Seraglio* does not call for a prostitute's nipples to be sliced off and presented to the lead soprano. Nor does it include masturbation, urination as foreplay, or forced oral sex. Europe's new breed of opera directors, however, know better than Mozart what an opera should contain. So not only does the *Abduction* at Berlin's Komische Oper feature the aforementioned activities; it also replaces Mozart's graceful ending with a Quentin Tarantino-esque bloodbath and the promise of future perversion."<sup>5</sup>

The answer as to why all these directors do this nowadays is that they are taught in their universities and conservatories, *pace* Peter Sellars' position, to weaponize art as a form of Social Justice. Nowadays, we have a name for this practice: Virtue Signaling. The problem, of course, is that when you use a pre-existing work of art to say something it was never intended to say, or at the very most was intended to make the viewer/listener think for him or herself, you're putting YOUR viewpoint into it. This would be fine if you were just writing about said opera and not pushing your ideas into every scene of a stage production of it. What these people are actually doing is making the opera about THEM and their viewpoints, and that is not the function of these older operas. As the late Jon Vickers often said in his lecture-recitals, "Great art asks questions, but it does not provide answers." By reinterpreting the libretti of these operas *your* way, you are providing *your* response to what you *think* is in them, but this may be completely foreign to what someone *else* sees and hears in them.

Yet the questionable modern productions of today go further than to just ruin the experience for operagoers who know what the opera is supposed to be about. They are actually weakening the dramatic crux of many operas by going against the vision of the composer and librettist, who very often coordinated the music in their operas to very specific visuals on the stage. Here, for instance, is Hector Berlioz' detailed description of the way *La Vestale* was staged at the Paris Opéra during its long run (passages in bold print are my emphasis):<sup>6</sup>

...how greatly does the music of *La Vestale* lose when deprived of **the impressiveness of the stage**, especially for those hearers (an their number is great) who have never before heard it at the Opera! It is impossible at a concert to guess in how many effects of various

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.city-journal.org/html/abduction-opera-13034.html>

<sup>6</sup> Berlioz, Hector (translated by Jacques Barzun): *Evenings With the Orchestra*. The University of Chicago Press, 1956/1973, pp. 159-160.

kinds the composer's dramatic inspiration has been abundantly and magnificently displayed. What hearers do grasp is the truth of expression manifested from the very opening bars of each role, the intensity of passion that makes this music luminous from the burning flame focused on it—*sunt lacrimæ rerum* [*there are tears in such things* (Virgil)]—and the purely musical value of the melodies and chord progressions. But there are ideas that cannot be perceived except in a stage performance. A particularly beautiful example among many others occurs in Julia's aria "O god of the unfortunate!" in the second act ("Ô des infortunés, déesse tutélaire!"). The melody is in a minor key and charged with the restlessness of despair; then comes a phrase of heart-rending abandon and sorrowful tenderness, "Let the blessing of his presence cast its charm upon this place awhile." At the end of the aria and the recitative "Come, beloved mortal, I give my life to you," while Julia goes upstage to open the door to Licinius, the orchestra takes up again a fragment of the preceding aria, in which the distraught accents of the Vestal's passion still predominate; but at that very moment when the door opens and lets in the friendly rays of the moon, the phrase "Let the blessing of his presence" re-enters *pianissimo* in the orchestra, this time with a little added ornament in the woodwind. It is as if a balmy breeze pervaded the temple, an exhalation of the fragrance of love, the blossoming of the flower of life, the opening of heaven's gates. And one can see why Licinius' beloved, worn down by the struggle against her heart, **totters to the altar steps, where she sinks to the ground**, ready to give her life for a moment of ecstasy. I have never witnessed that scene without being moved by it to the point of dizziness,

From then on, the musical and dramatic interest increases steadily. One might almost say that the second act of *La Vestale* taken as a whole is just one gigantic crescendo, the *forte* of which does not come till the final scene with the veil.

But what does one see in the stage production of *La Vestale* given at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 2015? I'll tell you. You see a chorus in which all of the women are wearing dark red slips except for Julia, who is wearing a white slip, and all the men are dressed in some generic black costume of a black nylon top with no collars and a V-neck which runs down to their breastbones. Apparently, the costume designer thought that Vestal virgins of the old Roman period ran around in their underwear. The Gran Vestale, however, is dressed in what appears to be a dark blue lounging robe, also of nylon or a similar synthetic fabric, and her "acting" consists of moving her arm up and down in front of her as she sings. In the pivotal Act II, we do get a flame burning in a big pot set up on a wooden sort of structure, but placed low to the ground, which makes Julia's *ascent* to protect the flame ludicrous. During the exciting orchestral passage in the "cabaletta" to her aria, Julia is shown stroking herself sensually with her hands, something that a modern audience would interpret as sensuous lust but clearly not spiritual love for Licinius. After the sacred flame goes out, the chorus sort of runs around in little circles, apparently signaling their confusion at the turn of events. Yet as the music becomes more exciting, some of the women just start spinning around in place with their arms thrown out to the sides. What the hell is THAT supposed to signify? That they want to go on a merry-go-round? It turns a highly dramatic scene ludicrous. But hey, it *looks* good, doesn't it? And it reminds you of a Broadway musical. What more do you want?

Needless to say, the High Priest has an unsteady, wobbly voice, something that wouldn't have been heard in a performance even from the 1970s, let alone the first decade of the 19th century. Suddenly, at one point after an outburst from Julia and just before the High Priest begins singing again, there is a ray of what could be considered theatrical moonlight—at the wrong time and in the wrong place, illuminating Julia and the other Vestals as they sit on the floor. It makes no dramatic effect, but merely a modern *theatrical* effect. To her credit, soprano Ermone-la Jaho, whose voice flutters with no real "core" to the voice, does her best to infuse this aria, and

all of her music, with subtlety and dramatic meaning, but the production works against her.

At the end of Julia's response to the High Priest, others rush in and pull the "hair" off her head...it's just a wig. So Vestal virgins wore wigs on their heads? As the High Priest condemns her actions in fast-paced, exciting music, the chorus gathers around Julia and moves like performers in a Broadway show, some with an arm outstretched. And of course, when she goes to let Licinius in, there IS no moonlight. And this is one of the *better* productions out there.

Now, how can you possibly say that you're doing the composer proper service to his (or her) work of art when you so completely disregard the intended staging? Yes, of course you can update the costumes a bit, as La Scala did in the 1954 production featuring Maria Callas. A bit of stylization is perfectly OK. But to run counter to the intended visual effect that the composer meant to be synchronized with the music severely weakens the opera a work of art. And this was considered to be one of the *better* modern stage productions. But hey, just listen! The conductor is leading a small orchestra playing on PERIOD INSTRUMENTS! Let's all cheer for that!

It's total nonsense. In a more recent production of Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* in London, the musical values of the performance were near-perfection. Antonio Pappano conducted an alternately sensuous and dramatic reading of the score, and his interpreters, Elna Garanča as Dalila, Seokjung Baek as Samson and Lukasz Goliński as the High Priest, were beyond reproach. Yet the production didn't even try to simulate the era or the events depicted by the composer and librettist. This time, the chorus members were dressed in mixed and uncoordinated outfits, some looking like hoodlums from the inner city raiding their fists in some sort of protest; one chorus member was dressed like a drag queen. Huh?? Here, the High Priest wears a black jacket and blue jeans. The Philistines are dressed like modern-day Muslim terrorists, silently burning a flag with a Star of David on it. (Maybe it's just me, but I find that incredibly insensitive in these politically-charged times.)

In the third act, instead of being chained to a mill and pushing the big wheel around, Samson just stands at the base of a staircase, looking lost, walking up a step or two before falling back, as he sings "Vois ma misère, hélas." This is patently ridiculous since the orchestral introduction was specifically written to simulate the slow grind of the mill wheel. A giant slot machine with a clown face on it is pushed onstage, obviously meaning to represent the decadence of the Philistines—but nothing of the sort is supposed to *be* onstage in that scene. Rather than pushing the pillars apart to make the temple fall on the Philistines, Samson simply walks up a broad staircase without handrails (a blind man?), then shakes the ceiling of the makeshift rectangle (but how does he know it's there since he can't see it?) they're all standing in. This "shaking of the rectangle" magically makes the Philistines fall to the ground as if they were buried in marble. Except they aren't. (Does this make *any* sense to you?)

The more symbolic the opera nowadays, the more idiotic the staging is. In another new production, this one of Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel*, Director Emma Dante—clearly an appropriate name, since her productions are hell to watch—gives us a mad-looking man in a woman's tutu (apparently, having at least one obvious drag queen per production is a modern-day requisite) who dances a sort of crazy kazatsky as one of Renata's "visions." There are other unnecessary distractions, such as the insane inn guests who writhe in their beds and make moronic faces while Ruprecht and Renata interact. Apparently, Dante's directing style is to cram the stage with mute bodies that look like stupid people twitching and rolling around, and hope they have some remote symbolism to connect them to the plot of whatever opera she is staging.

The bottom line is that, for the most part, no director has any right to stage an opera in a way foreign or counter to the historical setting and/or the specific set descriptions of the composer or librettist. You want to mount some nightmare production with Nazis, mutilated women (I purposely avoided discussing all the female mutilation imagery in opera productions nowadays),

insane people, giant rats, bloody bunnies etc.? Fine. Write your own damn opera and leave the classics alone. You have no license to change what someone else already staged to such a degree that your production has no relationship to reality. As a verification of what I've just said, lo and behold, here is a comment from composer Ned Rorem:

The trouble with all those directors: they're trying to breathe life into dead horses. Why doesn't Chéreau coerce his friend Boulez into writing an opera instead of doing the *Ring*? They spend their energies on masterpieces that have long since proved themselves. They're not taking any real chances. The important thing is new music. It always was until our century [this was written in the late 20th century]. Now all we do is these eternal revivals. The so-called "alternative versions" of the *Ring* or *Manon* or whatever, say, Frank Corsaro touches, all dealing with updating, so that today's public will find it relevant. They update the costumes, sets, direction, viewpoint—everything except the music. But why not the music, too? Why not add a "beat," as someone once did to Bach, adding tom-toms to *The Well-Tempered Clavier*? Because then it would be a truly new opera. Well, then, just commission new operas instead of sprinkling bitter sugar—expensive sugar!—on old chestnuts.

And that is my point precisely. In most cases, taking an established opera out of the time in which the action is supposed to take place makes no sense because the historical trappings of that time, as well as the social conventions which no longer exist today, make the plot difficult to comprehend. The other two favorites of these stage directors are setting operas based on legends, Greek drama or other plots based in antiquity in such things as insane asylas, cocktail lounges, mousetraps, ersatz outer space settings, 19th-century libraries, or worst of all, some sort of updated Nowhere world with the characters dressed in business suits or tuxedos, and using a lot of nudity, cross-dressing, or perversions of religious symbols. Although not religious myself, I find these insulting and revolting. Such productions say much more about the psychosis of the director's own mindset than they do about the work in question. You can also add to this list the presence of superfluous and childish objects to the stage set and overloaded extras on stage, all of whom are in motion most of the time as well as productions where the singers themselves are forced to be moving at all times: dancing walking, strutting, waving their arms in the air, etc. Arm-waving in particular seems to be the new substitute for dramatic stage acting.

And the worst part of it is, the defenders of this arrant nonsense are everywhere, just waiting to attack anyone who, like me, has negative things to say about it. On my website are the following posted replies to my article on Regietheater (since they use pseudonyms, I have no real names to give you):

1. Imagine having this shallow and staid a view of art that you allegedly "care" about.
2. Silly. Really. Such hateful comments. There is enough museumlike opera out there for all of you ... stop complaining if not everything is to YOUR liking ...
3. But don't you think that every opera, at some point, reaches its end? I always found modern staging to be necessary to keep a genre alive which otherwise would follow Adorno's prophecy of collapsing into itself because it bled dry. Of course one could write his own opera, but the reality is that ninety percent of the operas played (in Germany in 2016, at least), are by composers dead over a hundred years. And the aspect of faithfulness to the original can very much be reached over the meaning and not over words repeated so often that they become meaningless in the process. I understand the frustration with the shock value often put forward by unimaginative directors but the condemnation of all of Regietheater seems a bit harsh to me. There is much, after all, to be learned from these new interpretations! Even if it's laboratory rats illuminating Lohegrins detachment from the truly mortal.



As we'll see in the next two chapters, there are indeed modern operas being written which do just that, present a different viewpoint on historical events or present their opinion of current trends—and some of these operas are very good. But you still can't run around desecrating older works just because *you* think that they're too static or, worse yet, that you have the hubris to assume that your viewpoint is a majority one. Yet once in a blue moon, an imaginative production *can* change your mind about a certain opera. The one I will never forget was a production of *Così fan tutte* at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. I had always thought it insulting to women to depict Fiordiligi and Dorabella as women too stupid to even recognize their own fiancés just because they were disguised as foreign soldiers, but in this production, updated to the early 1960s, they were typically unenlightened housewives of the time; Don Alfonso was their worldly-wise neighbor, Despina one of the women's housekeepers, and when returning from "war," Ferrando and Guglielmo became pot-smoking Hippies. Yet somehow it worked, and in that environment I suddenly realized that not only were there upper-middle-class women who could be so easily duped, but that their boyfriends were actually *almost as dumb as they were*, while Despina, the third woman in his comedy, was as sharp as a tack. This staging completely changed my mind about this opera; but again, it was a *comedy*.

The really sad thing is, those who like these productions cannot see the artificiality and shallowness of what is being done to opera, because they believe that every sort of stage work is "open to reinterpretation." Well, yes, of course I want *imaginative* staging, but you can only go so far before you hit the wall of inanity, and whether you want to admit it or not, we crossed that bridge more than 40 years ago and have since burned it to the ground. To return to Rorem's main point and expand on it a bit, the way I see it, what these directors are doing is taking pre-Freudian operas and imposing psychology on them. But to insert false "facts" into an historical opera is not imaginative, it's just lying. Take the case of *Lucia di Lammermoor* which, going back at least as far as a production several years ago with Diana Damrau, Lucy Ashton is supposedly pregnant with Henry's child and either has an abortion or kills the baby once it is born. Yet this was neither part of her real history nor in Sir Walter Scott's book (go check online if you don't believe me). To add such a grisly detail is, again, just pandering to the prurient interests of the fools who attend these performances. (One such even had the temerity to say that he wished the opera house in question would stage more "historical" operas like that!)

I thus see modern opera productions as related to Kōbō Abe's brilliant novel, *The Woman in the Dunes*. She keeps trying to dig herself out, but all she is really doing is digging herself in deeper. We don't just need to throw a lifeline to opera in order to pull it out of its sand dune, we need to fill that hole in and make sure that no one dares go near it again, and the only way to accomplish this is to develop some good taste and reject all productions that go not only over the edge but into the abyss.

But for the very last word on this topic, I turn again to Mr. Berlioz in the Epilogue of his *Evenings With the Orchestra*. Although written in 1852 and largely complaining about the monstrous, four- or five-act "Grand Opéras" currently in favor, much of what he said eerily applies to today as well, to wit:

As you well know, gentlemen, it is not only with its sisters, dramatic poetry and the dance, that music must join nowadays in the theater, but far more with certain inferior arts clustering around to stir up a childish curiosity and distract the attention of the crowd away from the main point...being also convinced and rightly, that the public's attention at its best cannot be kept alert...they have introduced into their...operas all that the most restless imagination can conceive by way of din and bustle and dazzle for the crude excitement of the senses.

Ability in a manager of large opera houses now means his greater or lesser skill in making the public *endure* (great) music.<sup>7</sup>

And that, dear reader, explains everything. Modern audiences listen with their eyes, not their ears, because they have no capacity for understanding the subtleties written into the great operas, whether Baroque, Classic, Romantic, impressionistic, bitonal or atonal. This also explains why we now have staged performances of *song cycles*, particularly Schubert's *Winterreise*; audiences no longer have an attention span to take in an 80-minute song cycle without dancers behind the solo tenor or baritone. The goal of modern stage directors is to *bypass* the audiences' ears, which usually aren't sharp enough to catch the subtleties of great music—even Henry Pleasants admitted as much when he stated that an opera audience “still prefers the personal and *mystical* [italic mine] glamor of a kind of music it doesn't fully understand.”<sup>8</sup>—and just appeal to their eyes to provoke and shock.

I rest my case.

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<sup>7</sup> Berlioz, *ibid.*: pp. 302-303.

<sup>8</sup> Pleasants, *ibid.*