

## Epilogue

We have thus surveyed four hundred and twenty-two years of operatic history, and explored in some depth what made the best of the early operas great. If there were qualifiers attached to several of them, such as the works of Verdi, it was because opera suddenly became more attractive to a wider audience who did not always have the education to appreciate the more rarified aspects of loftier art prior to the bel canto “revolution,” and this dominance of lyrical, tuneful operas, some great, a few very good and many mediocre to bad, started its decline in the early 20th century while such works were still being produced. Eventually, however, the constant flow of operas based on psychology and/or a psychoanalysis of its characters eventually became the norm rather than the exception. Eventually, in the later 20th century, things reached a breaking point and operagoers simply stopped patronizing the more musically difficult and radical works, stubbornly sticking to the tune-filled works that they could understand and appreciate.

And of course, the major opera houses had to capitulate to this audience because, after all, producing fully staged operas is an expensive business, and with rampant, continually increasing inflation from the 1970s onward, it became more expensive still. This didn’t stop good composers from continuing to write works that were not going to be crowd-pleasers, but note how many of the operas I discussed in the last chapter had their premieres in smaller venues where both the costs and the risks were less.

Nonetheless, the production of what David Hockney of the Houston Opera Company described as “brown and serve opera” simply had to stop. Even if the music, horribly dated, still appealed to audiences, using the same kind of costumes and sets directors had used since the late 19th or early 20th centuries had reached a breaking point. The problem was that stage directors like Hockney went overboard in their artistic vision of stage sets, which of course added extra and unnecessary expense to an already expensive business. But far worse than Hockney were the “social justice warriors” who felt it their mission in life to psychoanalyze operatic characters who needed no psychoanalysis, whose motives and situations were plainly and clearly laid out by their original composers and librettists.

I give you two very simple and undisputable scenes that not only need no reinterpretation but, on the contrary, demand to be staged the same way every time. In the opening scene of Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*, Figaro is measuring his bedroom to see how large of a double bed he can fit in there once he is married to Susanna. There is no room for interpretation in this scene. It is what it is. He is literally on his hands and knees, measuring out the floor space. He is singing the numbers of feet and inches (or meters and centimeters, perhaps) of the floor space. To stage it any other way would be idiotic—and yet they do. Second example. In Verdi’s *Falstaff*, Sir John is hiding in a laundry hamper. Again, there is no ambiguity about this. It’s in the libretto and the stage instructions. To have him hide in anything *but* a laundry hamper would make no sense in relation to the lyrics being sung. And yet they change that, too.

Pre-20th century dramas were, for the most part, non-psychological with the exception of Wagner’s, which were a good half-century ahead of their time, but even he wanted each and every audience member to make their own value judgment of what these characters really represent and why they do what they do. It’s part of the enjoyment of going to a Wagnerian opera. YOU decide who and what they and their motives and actions represent. Wieland Wagner understood this perfectly, which is why he *removed* as much of the stage sets as he could and minimized the actions of the characters. They were, in a sense, living puppets in a pantomime puppet play with singing. Each viewer decided what they were all about. It was not the director’s job to act as an intermediary and *tell* you what they represented. And if such an approach could work for Wagner, it could surely work for other operas as well.

Yet Regietheater continues unabated, particularly in Europe. And why? Because most European opera houses are subsidized by their governments, thus the performances of this rubbish can continually operate at a loss and still make money for the opera company that stages them. In America and a few other countries, opera companies receive grants from large foundations set up for the arts but not nearly the kind of revenue that the Europeans get from their governments. And so the idiocy continues, and multiplies, and becomes ever more pervasive. Despite all this, I have seen a few extremely good, creative yet inoffensive productions while researching this book, not only of some older operas but even of more modern ones, so there is a glimmer of hope if no more than that.

And now, let us get to the psychological bottom of most audiences' addictions to the older operas. To draw a couple of analogies, it is no different than art lovers who refuse to attend gallery showings of any modern art produced from the time of Picasso and Kandinsky onward that does not agree with their aesthetics, or the jazz aficionado who will only listen to the one or two genres of jazz that he or she likes. In fact, if anything the splintering in the jazz world is even more pronounced than that in the classical field. If you take the six major styles of jazz that have evolved from the early 20th century—traditional or Dixieland jazz, swing, bebop, cool jazz, post-bop modern jazz and free-form (which includes atonal) jazz—you have factions loyal to perhaps two of these at most who refuse to expand their mind in either direction to find the good in all of them. The same is true of the classical world today.

Jazz clarinetist Artie Shaw, who started in what was the standard jazz form of the late 1920s (which we now call Dixieland or traditional jazz) yet eventually played swing, bebop and cool jazz before leaving music at the age of 44, had some very interesting things to say in an interview with then-young Loren Schoenberg in 1984:<sup>1</sup>

One of the things I've learned, and I say it over and over, some people get it and some don't, whether you paint or write or play or sculpt, is the that more you know about everything, the richer anything you do will be. Now, it may not be apparent to the obvious listener or viewer, if you're a painter, or writer, but it's there, the points of reference, *your* reference. And the points become more numerous, and more varied, and more profound, so when you see into things you make allusions to other things, and you're not aware of it all the time. But your mind jumps, you know, it becomes discursive, and discursiveness is *good* because you're not stuck to a single theme.

Most people don't understand it, but...an artist's job is to develop *himself* into his *own* personal thing, in public, unfortunately. So we take people, very often, we scold them or we chide them for not doing as well as we think they should. And the statement is that they're not doing what we think they should do, but they're not doing what we think we MIGHT do if we were what we think they are.

This is, in some ways, a more practical and less theoretical way of saying what Bill Evans said, of people who create music tapping into the "universal overmind," but the result is the same. Creative musical artists are going to produce what they think is their best work, sometimes regardless of what the public wants. Even Verdi stuck his neck out a few times; he paid a price for it by not having what he considered some of his best work being appreciated by the larger public for a long period of time, but he wrote it anyway because it was what HE wanted. Composers of modern operas, though far more harmonically and structurally complex than Verdi, simply feel that the time has come for the creative artist to STOP compromising his or her principles in order to gain public acceptance—and Verdi's struggles are part of that stance.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcribed from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySqQGy5Ok0g>.

As for what I believe, personally, should be the repertoire of a large opera house like the Metropolitan, Covent Garden, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Milan or St. Petersburg, is an opera season with one-third or less of standard popular operas, staged imaginatively but sparsely—less clutter on the stage, not more. Another third of their repertoire should be some of the great “modern” operas of the last 125 years. This clearly need not always include such thorny, difficult works as *Die Soldaten*, *Bomarzo*, *Ulisse*, *Lear* or *The Minotaur*, but once every few years, why not at least one of these? The remaining “modern” works would range from the era of Nielsen, Schreker, Février and Zemlinsky up through late-period Pizzetti. One very famous modern-day mezzo-soprano told me on Facebook that she would *love* to sing some of these works, but also admitted to me that many (but not all) of her colleagues want to stay “in their comfort zone.” But there are a great many opera singers out there who, like her, are more than willing to take some risks. More than half of today’s opera stars are true artists at heart, and don’t mind trying new things at all so long as it’s something they believe in.

The other third of the opera season should consist of some of the great neglected works of the pre-modern era. I think I’ve brought up enough of these in the first eight chapters of this book to fill at least six full opera seasons. There are a lot more Gluck operas to be performed than just *Orphée*, *Iphigénie en Tauride* and the more common version of *Alceste*, not to mention some of the works of Lully, Rameau, Méhul, Cherubini, Spontini, Dargomyzhsky, Meyerbeer, Serov and others that have been kicked to the curb over the centuries. And, in my view, the majority of bel canto operas should be banned forever from the repertoire. It’s time to say farewell to this light classical pop music of the 19th century. The majority of these operas not only aren’t musically or dramatically interesting, they’re actually *bad music*, no different from listening to those drecky love songs of the 1930s and ‘40s that have, for the most part, died a deserved death.

Will any major opera company take me up on this? They’d surely save money by presenting the “classics” with minimalist stage sets *à la* Wieland Wagner, and with good stage acting and first-class voices, they’d still put fannies in the seats. And honestly, I think that one-third of the season devoted to great earlier, more tonal operas of the 1700-1910 period would fill seats as well. From this period, opera companies are staging far too many of the least interesting and more formulaic Baroque operas simply because they want something tuneful to sell tickets. It’s also time to kick most of Vivaldi and Handel to the curb. They wrote nice tunes. Their operas are not great or even good theater.

At the moment, I’m just one lone voice crying in the wilderness, “Prepare ye the way for alternate opera!” But if you will join me, and find a few thousand or million others to join me, we can make it happen. All it takes, as Artie Shaw said, is a willingness to learn more about an art form that you claim to love.

Oh, one final thing. Taking a course in musical composition would also help your understanding. And don’t tell me that it’s too complicated. If people can understand all the positions and rules of American football or British cricket, which are so convoluted that even fans of these sports don’t know them all, you can certainly learn why some modern operas are clearly better than others. It wouldn’t hurt.

But of course, this would be my solution in a world that respects the art of the past for what it is and doesn’t keep trying to force new “interpretations” on it as well as a world in which operagoers are open-minded to seeing and hearing more modern, challenging works. As a dreamer, I always hope that this world will emerge from the tangled mess that currently inflicts the opera world, but with those in power thinking the opposite of me, I don’t see it happening. Thus I predict that the future of opera as a *real* art form and not as a “reinterpreted” or “reimagined” art form is murky at best, headed for isolation from those who value true art at worst.