

COMING OUT OF THE TUNNEL: TOWARD A CLEAR VIEW OF OPERA IN OUR TIME

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The worldwide pandemic of 2020-2021 succeeded in accomplishing what years of shrinking, progressively less sophisticated audiences, graft laden internal politics, destructive national policies, and sheer administrative incompetence could not; the total shutdown of operatic performance around the world.



There have been a plethora of filmed opera-like events produced for digital distribution of varying artistic and technical qualities, many of which had the whiff of desperation about them to demonstrate the ongoing activity of the producing entities, but they are not opera. I

was fascinated to see how small the audiences actually were for these projects. These are videos conceived to be viewed on televisions, and, more often, on smartphones. This is not opera. Perhaps this tragic hiatus from live performance can be used as a moment of reflection, and critical clarity.

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As we apparently seem to begin to emerge from this nightmare of isolation, and we can recommence activity in the opera house, which requires several thousand people in one room, I would propose that we clarify some issues, and attempt to impose some critical criteria on what will be called “opera”.

Let us examine what constitute the fundamental components of an operatic performance. The art form is so wonderfully complex that I think it requires a critical look at each of its ingredients. Let us also agree that there are objective standards of basic technical proficiency that can be applied to many of the components parts that have nothing to do with “taste”, or “preference”.

Let us first address the matter of singing, by definition the primary focus of opera. Singers must be technically proficient. This sounds ridiculously reductionist, but it is not. Merely possessing diplomas, the imprimatur of prestigious young artist training programs, or arriving by whatever path onto the stage does not a priori bestow fundamental technical competence upon a singer put before the public. Singers must sing in tune. We do not promote pianists who miss fistfuls of notes, violinists who play out of tune, or ballet dancers unable to do leaps and turns. But we have increasingly seen the acceptance, rationalization, and apologizing for out of tune singing. Singers must be technically capable of singing all the notes in the role in which they present themselves to the public.

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Voices, while variable in the strength of their various registers, must at least possess a mastery of their instrument from top to bottom. A chest voice register may not have the power of the top of the range, but it must be audible. The top portion of a singer’s voice must be easily accessible from whatever precedes it, and should be exciting, and beautiful, and not cringe-worthy or alarming. The singer may not skip over the parts of a role that they can’t really sing. The singer must have the breath control to artistically make phrases without breaking down, and even breathing between syllables of words. The singer must have a mastery of the languages in which they sing in order to render the text comprehensible. They must be proficient not just in the basic mechanics of the language, but have progressed up to a sophisticated understanding of inherent rhythm and of idiomatic nuance. This includes the proper production of consonants, and, more importantly vowels. Each language has a

particular color palette of vowels that must be respected. Singers must be technically able to sing coloratura, rapid scales and arpeggios accurately, and in tune. Historically even the largest voices could do this (listen to Chaliapin) as it is a fundamental skill.

In second place, we must move on to the conductor and his/her role. There is no Platonically Ideal performance of an opera, or, indeed, any piece of music. A performer brings his particular skill set and applies it to the textual matrix supplied by the composer. The assiduous and honest application of each individual artist to this process guarantees the wonderful variety of interpretations of a given work.

The role of the conductor is to possess total mastery of the basic materials of a piece (the notes, both of the singers and the instrumentalists, the words, the dramatic instructions, the performance style of the piece, the acoustic of the performance venue, the attributes and limitations of the performers), process all of them, and lead an assembled company to produce a carefully crafted, nuanced, intelligent and aesthetically pleasing whole. The preparation for this job, as you can see, is daunting, and never-ending. He/She must be able to control the internal balances in the orchestra, and make them produce a precise, organized sound.

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Regarding the relationship with the singers, he/she must possess a thorough understanding of the technique of singing, fluency in the languages involved, and the possibilities and limitations of the human voice. He/She must have a firm conception of the music which he communicates to the singers during the rehearsal process, and understand how to maximize their capabilities to fulfill his vision. It is a collaborative effort. Optimum tempi must be established and maintained. Acoustical balance between the singer and the orchestra must be established and imposed. At the most basic level, if the singer on stage is not coordinated with the orchestra, you cannot hear the singer, or cannot understand the words, the conductor is not doing their job.



Now we discuss the stage director. We must understand that the existence of this job is a relatively recent development in opera. As late as the beginning of the 20th century there was no such animal. The conductor staged the works, as he was often the composer, and knew exactly what he intended. He was the individual in the theater with total mastery of the score. There was a stage manager, who was responsible for organizing the scenery, props, etc., and indicating entrance and exit points for the singers. I would direct you to Harvey Sach's excellent book "Toscanini: Musician of Conscience" for a detailed description of his work as director of La Scala.

A combination of factors led to the establishment of Stage Director as an actual discreet job. Firstly, the twentieth century saw a development in legitimate theater of more and more naturalistic acting styles, and more stylized entire productions. Then, there was the increase in the volume of opera performances internationally, which inevitably led to a lot of routine, and just bad productions in the traditional style. In the attempt to make something "new" and

“attractive”, directors began to create productions based on concepts, and viewing the works through particular social prisms, thereby narrowing their interpretive possibilities instead of broadening them. Many productions became simply visually confusing.

I would propose the following: if you do not understand what you are watching onstage, it is not your fault. The director has failed the work. If singers appear to be doing nonsensical things, they probably are, and the director has not helped the singers to interpret the work. If they are physically placed in parts of the stage where you cannot hear them, that is a simply incorrect, and technically inept. I am reminded of a passage from a letter from Arnold Schoenberg to Vasilij Kandinsky wherein he writes, “I would like that on the stage nothing impede the comprehension of the public, of the listener, because if the public does not understand what it is seeing it distracts from the music.”

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, opera requires an actively engaged public of informed listeners. Serious members of the opera going public must cease reading reviews immediately. I do not believe, based upon my reading, that there is currently a single critic, either “professional” or dilettante (and I use the word in the literal and not pejorative sense) who has had the cultural preparation, and is free of some kind of agenda qualified to help form someone else’s opinion. With apologies for the substitution of a single word to the late George Steiner, “It is not criticism that makes music live.” If you go to the opera merely to let soporific waves of sound wash over you (an enjoyable reason, but a severely limited one), that is fine, but you are not prepared to form an educated opinion about the performance. The more you can bring in terms of cultural preparation to experiencing a performance, the richer and deeper your evening will be, and you will have that much more to think about and to which to react. Quite simply, a better public will produce better opera.