

A New Opera Style for the American Theater

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To speak about a new idea for American Opera is slightly embarrassing for me since I am about to finish a new operatic work along the lines which I shall discuss presently. I hope, however, you will not mind this circumstance. After all, it seems natural enough that a person who has an idea tries to realize it practically, or that somebody who does something new speaks about the idea behind it.

More than any other musical art, opera depends in its outward appearance on the conditions under which it is produced. When real opera came into being about 1600, it found a quite generous reception, as it seems. Monteverdi, the unsurpassed musico-dramatist of those early days, employed in his "Orfeo" an elaborate chorus and a colourful orchestra with many fancy instruments vanished since. Thirty years later he was left with but a few leading characters, almost no chorus and an orchestra more or less confined to stringed instruments. Economic changes had made dwindle the financial resources of operatic production at that time. Again thirty years later, however, opera re-appeared as a super-glamorous spectacle, as for instance in the productions of Galli Bibiana at the imperial court of Vienna. I do not know whether they had in their vocabulary anything equivalent to what is so appropriately called "thrilling



fantasound", but in effect it must have been something of the kind.

The important thing in all these ups and downs is that the artistic evolution was not affected at all by their impact. Monteverdi adjusted readily his apparatus according to the opportunities of the period, but he did not give in as far as his musical intentions were concerned. It is due to this unswerving attitude that opera remained an essential branch of the musical movement and ~~thus~~ kept its significance as a showplace of progress. Applying this experience to our situation, we have to conclude that American opera will flourish and gain historical import to the extent as it keeps abreast with the evolution of music proper and adjusts itself to the practical conditions.

What are the practical conditions? Realistically seen, there is no opera house in this country which would be ready to put across new operas using the traditional apparatus of full-sized orchestra and chorus. The only institution endowed with sufficient equipment is, of course, the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. For reasons which I do not wish to analyze here this institute takes as little active interest in <sup>modern</sup> ~~contemporary~~ works as the temporary operatic establishments in different cities, formed after its image.

Therefore, the new American opera needs a new framework. Our requirement that the new opera should employ advanced musical means implies careful preparation, that is: ample rehearsing time. Considering the practical possibilities, we will get what we want only if we compensate the expenses involved in comprehensive preparation by keeping the size of our apparatus as small as possible. This, in turn, will enable us to move easily from place to place and to



make up for the lack of serial performances in one place by having many of them in different places.

These circumstances determine the outline of a new operatic style which ~~once~~ might truly be called the American Style because it grows out of the will to march in the frontline of evolution and because it rests upon the specific conditions offered in this country. I assure you that, if a period in the history of opera shall be called the American period, it will be so only in account of its artistic importance, regardless of what subjects have been treated by composers and playwrights. No one would find Italian opera ~~worth~~ considering if it had had no other merits than having elaborated on provincial topics, and it is certainly not the amount of quaint Teutonic stuff that made Wagner a towering figure in the history of opera; his artistic vision is all that counts.

The ~~smallness~~ of the orchestral apparatus which may consist of not more than six instruments calls for a very circumspect handling in order to avoid overworking and monotony. Therefore certain sections of such a play will be filled with spoken dialogue. This, in turn, makes a flexible dramatic technique necessary. The device known as "living newspaper" will be quite valuable. It breaks up the continuous flow of dramatic action and introduces the element of critical discussion. This is a distinctly new idea in opera since it destroys the factor of illusion which played a decisive part in the development of romantic opera. From the technique of the movies we take over sovereign dealing with time and space. This, in turn, requires thorough simplification of scenery which is well in keeping with our intention to reduce the paraphernalia of our production to a minimum.

During the last few years many of these ideas have al-



ready been discussed here and there, and people interested in the promotion of American opera agree on those principles in general. I seem, however, to observe that many think first of suitable adaptation of the traditional repertory, or assume that new plays based on ~~new~~ the ideas set forth here have to be distinctly popular - whatever that may mean. Adaptation of older operas might be interesting and necessary as long as new material is not available. But it were a fatal mistake to believe that the problem can be solved from the side of performance exclusively. New impulses of a creative nature are indispensable. As far as popularity is concerned, nothing could be worse than to underrate the capacity of the audience. Time and again I observed that talking down, or playing down to an audience is a most pernicious attitude. I know from three years of experience with all kinds of people that the American public is many times more intelligent, capable of efforts and willing to make them than most of its commercial caterers dare to believe.\*

In some cases the new opera was launched as a ~~children's~~ children's or students' play. That may be an interesting sideline, but it should never be thought of as more than that. This concept again involves a limitation of the artistic content while the only way to create a new operatic style is the one in which all aspects are limited except the artistic level. The new style requires trained performers - not opera stars who are petrified in routine, but young singers who are musically intelligent and have a definite talent for acting. ~~that~~

Here are the two points where school and education come in: on the one hand, we need performers thoroughly

\* Therefore, it would be equally mistaken to promote continuously pretty, witty short skits. We have to remove the prejudice that opera can be at best just entertaining and deals with unimportant matters only.



trained in music and drama, people who have flexible voices, perfect articulation of text in singing and speaking, good readers with a keen ear who do not balk before unusual intervals, and who know how to behave on stage as human beings, not as freaks with peculiar throats. There is a tremendous task for our voice and drama departments. On the other hand, schools would be the most appropriate and dignified centers for the new venture.

The creation of a new opera style is one of the noblest opportunities offered to this nation. The problems involved can not be solved ~~of course~~ from a commercial angle. Training interpreters for the new musical assignments, educating the public throughout the country so that opera would become a part of the intellectual life of the nation instead of being a luxurious pastime for a few wealthy metropolitans - these are the tasks before us. It would be only natural that the great teaching centers of America attend to them with customary zeal.