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✓ MUSIC MEETS LIFE IN OPERA

Music ...
Synopsis of the

*Lect. J. Amer. Compos
in Aesthetics*

In opera, two heterogeneous elements enter into intimate relationships: the stage action, taking its cues and patterns of presentation from the reality of life, and music, which of all arts seems to be the most autonomous, following its own structural laws, without obvious reference to outside subject-matters. In the present lecture, one particular, eminently practical aspect of the peculiar relationships which are realized in opera is singled out for special attention: the discrepancy of both media in dealing with the element of time.

While the stage action is a stylized replica of the biological and psychological continuity of life, music tends to set up its own time system, dividing time through the agency of the various tonal occurrences much in the manner of a time-measuring mechanism and establishing by inference a new, purely aesthetic continuity of emotional expressiveness.

The history of opera shows various stylistic approaches of the problem of reconciling the opposite principles in an aesthetically satisfactory way. The bulk of operatic composition thus far resting chiefly upon the musical idiom of tonality which offers but a limited number of ways of dealing with the time problem, it is pointed out that the recent mutations of the musical idiom open many new avenues for operatic attempts, up to now neither practically nor theoretically exploited to any consequential extent.

Outline

1. Opera Time and Standard Time.
2. Recitative and Integrated Musical Form.
3. Music and Time. The Problem of Continuity.
4. Stage Action and Time.
5. Pre-operatic Musical Styles and their Relationships to the Problem of Continuity. (Orazio Vecchi, Peri, Caccini, Monteverdi)
6. External Retardation and Internal Acceleration.
7. Various Operatic Realizations after 1600. (Mozart, Gluck, Wagner, Verdi).
8. Opera and the Musical Idiom of Tonality. New Possibilities.

Opera

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Opera is the meeting place of two apparently quite heterogeneous art forms: on the one hand, the stage action, by subject-matter and method of presentation immediately related to the reality of life - on the other hand, music, most abstract of arts, a self-sustained system of auditory symbols, in no tangible way related to any subject-matter outside ~~of~~ itself.

The manifold aesthetic problems arising from this challenging combination of elements have been subject to ~~continuous~~ continuous analyses, but rarely have they been examined on the grounds of the rather obvious observation that opera has a peculiar time of its own, different from that of ordinary life, and also different from that of the stage play without music. Everybody who has to do with opera knows that the application of music to a text, as it is usual in the operatic style, extends the duration of the text to approximately the triple of the duration of the same text, if spoken without music. This is a very simple rule of the thumb that serves composers as well as librettists and does not seem to be in need of particular elucidation. It is, however, interesting to investigate for a moment the far reaching aesthetical implications of this condition.

We know that opera very early developed a tendency towards discriminating sharply between two types of setting the words: the recitative, and the integrated musical form, such as aria, duet, or other kinds of ensemble singing. As far as the time factor is concerned, the recitative approaches most closely the natural speed of the spoken word, so that the action carried on in the recitative sections is hardly slower than it would be without music. In the integrated musical forms, however, action comes frequently to an almost complete standstill that has no parallel in the progress of a spoken play, except in the monologues of the classical tragedy, perhaps.

Discrepancy between the time of ordinary life and the time inherent to the work of art is very conspicuous in opera; it is, however, observable in any dramatic presentation, though less obvious in the spoken play than in the musical drama. Gertrude Stein, in one of her "Lectures in America", makes the following remarks: "The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience." (1)

(1) Gertrude Stein, Lectures in America, New York, 1935. 3. Plays. p. 93

And further: "Then gradually there came the beginning of really realizing the great difficulty of having my emotion accompany the scene and then moreover I became fairly consciously troubled by the things over which one stumbles over which one stumbled to such an extent that the time of one's emotion in relation to the scene was always interrupted." (2)

(2) G. Stein, op. cit., p. 114.

Whether one experiences this state of affairs as a difficulty, or recognizes in it the source of the peculiar aesthetic values of dramatic performances, it is true at any rate that the stylization of action necessary in any dramatic presentation, though in different degrees, depends mainly on the autonomous fashion in which the dramatic action

progresses in time. Opera, in establishing relationships of a most intimate nature between action and music, is a particularly stylized form of dramatic presentation precisely for the reason that it coordinates two time-mechanisms of entirely different properties.

Speaking in a rather generalizing way, we may say that music acts upon time exactly in the manner of a clock, that is to say, music measures time. Any musical process consists of a certain amount of tones each of which begins to sound and stops sounding at appointed moments, reckoning from the beginning of the process. By these occurrences the time span taken up by the process in question is subdivided in a number of time units. Time is divested of its character of a continuum and is imparted a sort of granulated texture. This explanation seems a little startling, because nobody appears to experience music in such a manner. And not even the admission that the acoustical occurrences in a musical process are far more involved and diversified than the ticking of a clock-work would account for the essential difference between hearing time cut to little pieces by an intricate machinery and listening to an Adagio by Beethoven. The essential point is that we are sure to experience motion floating between, and connecting intimately, the single elements of the musical process, while no such motion seems to take place between the time units carved out of the continuum by a mechanical contrivance. We speak of a melody as moving through different pitches, of a harmonic progression as moving from degree to degree, we speak of rhythmic drive, and use freely a great deal of kinetic terms in discussing music. Actually it is these kinetic concepts that make music something different from a succession of premeditated noises. But it is just as well to know that we are fully responsible for this interpretation of what we hear, because actually in a melody nothing whatever moves: one tone stops sounding, and another tone begins to sound. Even the most primitive listener, without knowing it, supplies something behind and underneath the tones of the melody: a kind of silent, streaming energy, a sort of primordial psychic force whose subtle and immensely rich motion can be estimated in its beauty by correlating those points at which it bursts forth onto the surface of audibility, these points being the tones of the melody which we actually hear. In other words, it is our mental powers that invest the process with the idea of a continuum of motion after the process by its very nature had divested time of its continuity. Thus the new, artistic continuity of motion, as represented in music, takes place in time spans which are, in a manner of speaking, lifted out of their original context ~~and~~ within the natural continuity of ordinary life.

As compared to these conditions the dramatic action is much closer related to the continuum experienced in real life, since the dramatic action represents the manifestations of biological and psychological energies without the intervention of an artificial medium. If a person on stage lifts a glass of water, it is more or less exactly the same action as if he would lift the glass in his sitting room. The stage ^{action} may have, and of course ought to have, an entirely different significance due to its symbolic qualities within the context of the drama. But we know of this special significance only through the information which we have received by watching the whole

drama and taking in its particular poetic assumptions. We do not conceive of the stage action as a mechanism dividing and measuring time and we do not need to imagine a spiritual agency behind the action which would put the single elements together into a new form of continuum as we do in listening to music; we rather accept the stage action as a peculiarly significant replica of the familiar continuity of life processes.

It is necessary now to contemplate what happens when two processes of so different characteristics are brought together as it occurs in opera. At first, we have to distinguish two different types of musical configurations. Not all music is equally distant from the continuous character of ordinary time. Music that follows in rhythm and meter closely the inflection of speech is nearest to, music that rests upon rhythmic and metrical systems of a different type is farthest remote from, the continuity of life. It is quite significant ~~that~~ and rather surprising that the flowering of opera so far coincided with the prevalence of the second type of music. Plain Chant is generally known as the prototype of music closely connected with the inflexion of prose. We do not know of any musico-dramatic works in the style of Plain Chant. The measured music, musica mensurabilis, of the Ars Nova differs from the earlier stages mainly in that the duration of the tones of a melody is regulated according to viewpoints other than the inflexion of speech. Thus music develops its own rhythmic system which, in the ceaseless recurrence of groupements of basic rhythmic units of equal lengths, is the forerunner of the anti-continuous clockwork quality mentioned before. However, since the regular rhythmic pulsation of medieval music does not yet imply an equally regular distribution of accents, much of the old continuity of pre-polyphonic music is retained. And yet, still no combination of music and drama on the grounds of that style. The spectacular ascent of opera is reserved for the moment when the regular rhythmic pulsation in the music of the Renaissance is joined by the equally regular system of recurring accent patterns, by the periodical organization so familiar in Western music ever since 1600.

It is well known that our opera came into being concurrent with the secularization of art music, that is, with the acceptance by art music of the principles governing folk-music during the middle ages. The modest musico-dramatic attempts of those earlier times, such as Adam de la Hale's Robin et Marion, are all based on the clockwork type of music, that is, on the regular distribution of accents in symmetrical periods. It is interesting to notice that the artistically trained composers who made the first attempts in real opera writing tried to avoid this influence which obviously contradicted the continuity of dramatic action. Orazio Vecchi, in his curious Amfiparnasso, tried with great ingenuity to derive whatever he could of continuity from a flexible handling of the madrigal style, that is, technically speaking, he mastered whatever was left in the madrigal style of free accent distribution in order to match the quick pace of the comedy. Peri's and Caccini's experiments and much in Monteverdi's Orfeo come closest to a kind of grafting principles of Gregorian declamation on the new harmonic style, and it is precisely in this respect that these composers come also closest to the diction of the Greek tragedy which they strove to revive. However, the future of opera lay elsewhere. It was the same Monteverdi who, apparently against his own repeatedly professed doctrine, introduced more and more metrically bound elements into his dramatic style and established the division be-

tween recitative and integrated musical form. And we have to admit that the tremendous attraction exerted by opera ever since rests not upon the expeditious parts of the music which are best adapted to follow the continuity of the action, but on those sections which are musically most elaborate and bring the action virtually to a standstill.

Looking more closely into the interrelation between the various types of operatic music, we discover that only the external action is stopped, or slowed down, by the circumscribed musical structures. During arias, or ensembles, the visible progress of the dramatic vehicle is interrupted to a great extent, however, the stream of emotion pervading the whole is intensified, which in many cases amounts to an internal acceleration of the action, setting off its external retardation. The reason is that the peculiar faculty of music of throwing emotional forces into relief grows in straight proportion with the amount of freedom granted to music in order to develop logical structures according to its own, inherent laws. In other words, the most autonomous, most concentrated and intrinsically coherent musical structure is the most efficient carrier and the most eloquent messenger of emotional energies. Therefore it is possible in the musically most fully organized operatic forms, which appear ~~rather~~ most anti-naturalistic in their breaking up the continuity of ordinary time, to depict with surprising brevity emotional movements the magnitude of which in a medium consistent with ordinary time would require lengthy psychological preparation. An emotional about-face, for instance, which might appear dangerously on the verge of the ludicrous in a spoken dialogue, or even in recitative musical treatment, can be made entirely convincing in a coherent musical structure in which the decisive turning point is presented as inevitable crisis brought about through the stringent logic of the musical process. Thus opera proceeds in richly variegated relationships to actual time inasmuch as it has various speeds according to the varying degrees of compactness of the musical construction. The secco recitative of the classical opera is to be considered fairly synchronized with the progress of ordinary time. However, ascending gradually to higher organized musical structures, we arrive at a state of things comparable to those astounding motion pictures which show an imperceptibly slow process, such as the growth of a tree, in a few minutes, by projecting in rapid succession a sequence of pictures taken at far distant moments of the process.

Inspecting the short history of opera, we observe that clear-cut separation of the varying degrees of internal and external speed was the stylistic ideal of the 18th century, while the early beginnings of opera in the 17th as well as the evolution of the 19th show a tendency toward assimilating the divergent elements. That observation is well in keeping with the fact that in the 18th century the clockwork type of music - regularly pulsating accompaniment, symmetrical periodicity - was flowering. The romantic doctrine of the 19th century abandoned gradually these musical features and made music more flexible so that in the late works of Wagner and Verdi a fairly complicated and not easily extricable fusion of the different time relations is obtained. It is interesting to notice that the most articulate innovators of opera, Monteverdi, Gluck and Wagner, always have been in favor of such more involved arrangements, in the name of emotional intensity and psychological truth.

They were aware of the fact that music is particularly capable of registering even minute psychological nuances indicated by the text, and they wanted to escape the stifling influences of formalism which seemed to be implied in the constant use of the strictly regulated structures of the clockwork type. It is true that the clean-cut division into swiftly moving recitative sections and static blocks of symmetrical musical forms suggests a highly mannerized and generally playful style of the stage action which seems to counteract the unpredictability of strong dramatic accents and the tragic mood of uninhibited emotion. The fact that the pedigree of the integrated operatic forms reaches way back to folk-song and dance leads quite spontaneously to a stylization of the stage action after dance-like patterns, especially because the dramatic plot during the presentation of the integrated musical forms is hardly moving on at all, which invites a rather ornamental treatment of the stage in those sections. That it is possible to reconcile such heterogeneous stylistic features is proven in the operas of Mozart. In the final scenes of Don Giovanni, for example, the extraordinary combination of the genuine playfulness of opera, as suggested by the formalism of the musical structure, with the unbridled flow of tragic emotion exploiting the sensitivity and flexibility of music grown into maturity and fully capable of such expressive versatility, is an almost uncanny achievement.

All the considerations devoted here to the interaction of different time principles in opera apply to opera as far as it rests upon the musical idiom of tonality, for opera came into being not until the polyphonic idiom of the church modes had given way to the bi-modal and essentially harmonic world of the major and minor keys. In our own time we would be able to witness one of the most interesting and most significant mutations of the operatic style inasmuch as the tonal idiom is again giving way to a different orientation which is basically polyphonic and exhibits a fundamental structure of the material far remote from that of the major and minor keys. This new idiom is at times called atonality. We are, however, not yet able to observe how opera behaves under ~~these~~^{so} changed circumstances because only very few operatic attempts of any consequence have been made in this idiom, and they are very little known, and still less analyzed, or understood. The situation is obscured by the enormous cloud of neo-classicism which today overshadows practically the entire horizon of musical practice. Curiosity, courage, adventurous spirit, the legitimate attributes of youth at all times, seem to have deserted almost completely the generation now coming to mature age, and the few pioneers alive are growing old and lonesome, watching ~~the futile efforts of~~ younger people in their futile efforts of playing safe. And yet, how extraordinary potentialities are offered by a musical idiom which has evolved new types of time relationships. How interesting would it be to test the dramatic possibilities of a musical idiom which combines the rhythmic and metrical liberties of Plain Chant with the rich complexity of full-grown polyphony. We shall not know about the copious harvest which we are entitled to expect on the vast new fields, as long as composers persist in writing down to the questionable taste of a commercially-minded minority easily satisfied with the worst, instead of writing up to the potentialities of all uncorrupted human beings who have every right to claim the best.