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Ernst Krenek: Music and Text -- Reflections of a modern  
composer on lied and libretto

It gives me great pleasure to appear here at this symposium devoted to the problems of lied, libretto and related matters as they were reflected in the oeuvre of the Vienna classics, and I am much obliged to Professor Zeman for inviting me to sound the keynote for this meeting. The only qualification I can produce for this distinction is the fact that I have written about twenty operas, most of them on my own librettos, and several song cycles, also on my own words. Evidently, I have devoted much thought to the relationships of language and music, of word and tone. Facing so many learned experts who gathered here coming from faraway parts to discuss these matters in the light of the classical period, I shall not try to delve into historical detail of which my knowledge is negligible, but limit myself to a few remarks on libretto and lied as seen from the vantage point of a present day composer.

The linguistic substructure of an opera is called a libretto, a term that carries a somewhat belittling connotation, and not surprisingly so, for it is a diminutive derived from the Italian word for book: libro. A libretto is just a little booklet, a minor preparation that does not quite live up to the specifications of literature, which tacitly implies that a self-respecting littérateur would hardly consider writing librettos, unless driven to it.

It seems that music, in the process of assimilating a text in order to produce an opera somehow brings it down from the lofty levels of literature. How, and exactly why does this happen? Everybody that has anything to do with opera knows that the application of music to a text 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 hardly needs much explanation. It is,



however, interesting to look for a moment into the aesthetical implications of this condition.

We know that opera very early developed a tendency towards discriminating sharply between two types of setting the words: on the one hand the recitative, on the other hand the integrated musical form, such as aria, duet, or other kinds of ensemble singing. As far as the time factor is concerned, the recitative section approaches most closely the natural speed of the spoken word, so that the action carried on in those sections is hardly slower than it would be without music, whereas in the integrated musical forms, especially in the ensembles, action frequently comes to a complete standstill [when the singers are not even communicating with each other, but presenting simultaneous monologues, a stylistic convention of opera which audiences have learned to accept without questioning its obvious absurdity.]

Opera is a particularly stylized form of dramatic presentation because it coordinates two time-mechanisms of entirely different properties. 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 number of tones, each of which begins to sound and stops sounding at appointed moments, reckoning from the beginning of the process. By these events the time span taken up by the process is subdivided in a number of time units. Time is divested of its character of a continuum and imparted a sort of granulated texture. This may sound a little startling, because nobody appears to experience music in this manner. And not even the admission that the events occurring 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 into little pieces by an intricate machinery and listening to an Adagio by Beethoven. The crucial point is that we are sure to experience motion floating between, and intimately connecting, the single elements of the musical process as they follow each other, 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 various pitches, of a harmonic



progression as moving from degree to degree, we speak of rhythmic drive, and use freely a great many kinetic terms in discussing music. It is these kinetic concepts that make music something different from a succession of premeditated noises. But it is just as well to realize that it is we who are fully responsible for this interpretation of what we hear, for actually in a melody nothing whatever moves: one tone stops sounding, and another begins to sound. Even the most primitive listener, without knowing it, supplies something behind, and underneath, the tones of a melody: a kind of silent, streaming energy, a sort of primordial force, whose subtle and immensely rich motion can be estimated 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 artificial continuity of motion, as represented in music, takes place in time spans which, in a manner of speaking, are lifted out of their original context within the natural continuity of real life.

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. Our opera came into being concurrent with the secularisation of music, that is, with the acceptance by art music of the principles governing folk-music in the Middle Ages. The modest musico-dramatic essays of those earlier times, such as Adam de la Hale's Robin et Marion, are all based on the clock-work type of music, on the regular distribution of accents in symmetrical periods. It is interesting to notice that the artistically oriented composers who made the first attempts at 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 mustered 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 the ancient, free Gregorian declamation onto the new harmonic style, and it is precisely in this respect that these composers also come closest to the diction of the Greek tragedy which they so assiduously strove to revive. However, the future of opera lay elsewhere. It was the same Monteverdi who, apparently against his repeatedly professed doctrine, introduced more and more metrically bound elements into his dramatic style and established the division between recitative and integrated musical form. And we have to admit that the tremendous attraction emanating from opera ever since issues not from the expeditious parts of the music which are best adapted to underscore the continuity of the action, but from those sections that are musically most elaborate and bring the action virtually to a standstill.

While during arias, and especially in ensembles the visible progress of the dramatic vehicle is interrupted (~~because the singers are not even addressing each other, but are carrying on simultaneous monologues -- a stylistic convention of the genre which opera-lovers have learned to tolerate in spite of its obvious absurdity~~), 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 unfold logical structures according to its own laws. In other words, the most autonomous, most concentrated and coherent musical structure is the most efficient and eloquent messenger of emotional energies. Therefore it is possible in the most fully organized musical forms in opera, which are most anti-naturalistic because of their breaking-up the continuity of real 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 on the verge of the ludicrous in a spoken dialogue, or ~~even~~ in recitative 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.

From all this it will appear fairly obvious that the expectations a composer entertains toward his libretto are highly specific and in many respects different from the working principles of the playwright so that he eventually turns to a specialist who will adapt existing plays or make new ones according to specifications. Many professional librettists were hackwriters who would produce librettos by the ream although some of them were imaginative dramatists, as, for instance, Busenello who wrote the extraordinary text for Monteverdi's great opera L'incoronazione di Poppea, which he derived from Seneca, or Daponte and Metastasio, who worked for Mozart. The treasures of dramatic literature from Sophocles through Shakespeare, Goethe and Schiller up to Strindberg and Wedekind were exploited for opera in adaptations made by librettists or, in recent times, by the composers themselves. Ever since Richard Wagner composers have become more and more enticed to write their own librettos, which is interesting enough, be it only because it was Wagner who did away with the routine division of old opera in secco recitative and integrated musical forms so that the mechanics of time perception that I discussed earlier were not so conspicuous any longer. Since music was freed of the obligatory periodical patterns, versification, heretofore deemed indispensable, also became optional. It is perhaps these circumstances that in modern times have encouraged even some writers and poets of literary fame, such as Hoffmannsthal, Auden and others, to turn out librettos for composers of stature. But even a libretto with freely fluctuating diction requires such subtleties of timing that many composers feel



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that only they can control them to full satisfaction.

Another point is that composers eventually have become more aware of having their own ideas about the content of their operas so <sup>that</sup> they wanted to be sure of seeing them articulated in their librettos. Frequently we hear a criticism of this trend to the effect that opera is no place for expressing ideas because the words can not be understood anyway. To some extent this argument applies to certain developments of the operatic style in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when under the influence of bel canto aficionados opera was reduced to glorified entertainment and nobody cared about the text - that is: nobody except the composer who even to this day, among conductors, stage directors, singers and audiences, seems to be the only one who consistently takes the text seriously. We only have to remember the arguments that Mozart and Verdi had with their librettists. And, of course, phonetic perceptibility of the words is a purely technical matter, depending on sensible and judicious orchestration on the part of the composer and patience and relentless insistence on the part of the conductor.

A necessary condition, of course, is that operas be produced in the language of the presumptive audience. It has been a prejudice of long standing, fostered by the attitudes of mainly Italian voice teachers, that operatic music is so identified with the sounds of the original language - especially as long as this language is Italian (on the assumption that worthwhile operas could not be written in any other language) that any translation would destroy the unique charm of the work. Obviously this argument has no merits whatever. It has prevailed in this country for a long time because it appealed to the dominating puritanic mentality that regarded opera as a morally dubious product imported for the entertainment of the jaded wealthy that could be tolerated at least as long as one could not understand what those clowns were singing about. Fortunately this has rapidly changed in our time while, ~~curiously enough~~, curiously enough, in Europe the fad of opera in the original languages has gained some, although insignificant ground. Of course, an aversion for opera in translation could well be ~~as~~



defended by exhibiting the perfectly atrocious translations that have littered opera houses all through the nineteenth century up to our own time. Obviously this would not have to be so, and it happened only because competent people found the task below their dignity. Fortunately, this too has changed, and more respectable writers have come to the rescue of this neglected field.]

During the period to which this symposium is devoting special attention Vienna was not particularly blessed with operatic geniuses. The outstanding work that immediately springs to mind is, of course, Beethoven's Fidelio, an opera that has remained a moving humanitarian document not only because of some powerful music of great emotional impact, but also because of the seriousness and dignity of its dramatic intent. Granting this, one has to admit that the libretto suffers from the childish and unbelievable transvestite charade by which the librettist seems to have tried to make a lofty drama a little entertaining, introducing elements of routine intrigue. It would appear that Beethoven, according to his nature, chiefly interested in mankind as an abstraction, tended to overlook such details, unlike Mozart who passionately cared for individual human beings. In his Don Giovanni Leporello's cynical clowneries do not detract from his master's abject grandeur, but rather put it into proper perspective, much like the Shakespearean fools who throw into relief the tragedies in which they appear.

Franz Schubert whose fame was established on the groundwork of six hundred songs entertained a lifelong unrewarded love-affair with the operatic medium. Noticing the quasi-dramatic design of many of his songs with their recitative and arioso sections one feels acutely how he must have been longing to express himself in this style, and considering the wealth of dramatic contrasts, jolting surprises, and theatrical gestures that enliven many of his lyrical creations, we do not doubt that he would have well qualified as an opera composer. For various reasons he never seemed to be able to face a real opportunity for testing his talents in that direction. In the first place the Vienna operatic scene at



that time was totally dominated by the easy-going Italians who furnished the glorified entertainment of routine comedy and vocal fireworks, a backlash from the Napoleonic wars, desired by a public recovering from past tribulations. More important probably was the fact that Schubert was out of luck with his librettists whom he sought and found mainly in the circle of his friends, well-intentioned amateurs and semi-professionals who had neither brilliant ideas nor much original imagination and very little experience in the uncharted territory of German opera, which at ~~that~~ time could offer only very few precedents. And to reach out for the first rate dramatic literature of the period, such as Goethe, Schiller or Kleist, was apparently out of question under the conventional limitations of social conduct in those days, although Schubert did not hesitate to use the poetry of these writers for his songs. One may regret that Franz Grillparzer, a more than competent playwright of better than provincial stature and distinguished literary style, never felt tempted to produce a libretto for Schubert whom he knew and admired. But Grillparzer belonged to the circle of the friends of Beethoven with whom he for a while planned an eventually abortive opera project, and Schubert who for Beethoven was filled with inhibiting awe perhaps did not dare to approach the poet. Incidentally, it is interesting that later Romantic composers who excelled in the field of the lied did not leave any marks in the dramatic medium either. Robert Schumann hardly tried, and Hugo Wolf's operatic essay, The Corregidor is really a string of songs that he could as well have incorporated in his Spanische Liederbuch.

Although at face value the two media seem to be closely related, it appears that lied composition requires a markedly different approach. While even the static elements of opera, the arias and ensembles, are directly referring to preceding or forthcoming action, the dramatic happenings that are reflected in songs, as for instance the subject matter of a ballad, are merely narrated, as observed from a distant viewpoint. But the majority of song texts do not at all refer to action, but rather focus on emotional states,



ideas occupying the mind, images of nature, atmospheric vibrations of the soul, contemplation of all this, and many other intangibles. All these manifold and fleeting concepts are lifted out of the context of real time and pinned down as in an instantaneous photographic picture, as in a snapshot.

Considering the staggering number of Schubert's lieder and their frequently rapid succession in the sequence of his works, we must ascribe to him an extraordinary sensitivity for the stimuli emanating from a poem and triggering his creative impulse as well as a minimum reaction time between reading the poem and conceiving its musical Gestalt. The camera of his mind apparently was constantly searching for poetic images and scenes that would reflect at any given moment some facet of his personality so that he could identify with them and immediately produce a musical quasi-negative of the image that had kindled his imagination. The term "snapshot" which I have just used brings to mind the ~~concept~~<sup>idea</sup> of travel, and this is closely associated with the concept of the form of the song cycle, which Schubert created singlehandedly, ~~after~~ he had brought the lied to new, spectacular life. Of course, the song, the vocal solo, the lyrical monologue had existed since time immemorial when, long before opera, Meister- and Minnesingers, Troubadours and Trouvères had expressed themselves in this way. It seems that opera interrupted the tradition of the solo song when the virtuoso vocal display of the aria absorbed the public attention. It was Franz Schubert who revived the contemplative lyricism and expanded it into the new cyclic form. There is in this a certain relation to the category of drama, for here, at journey's end, a ~~certain~~<sup>sort of</sup> catharsis is reached, but not so much through the interplay of adversary forces, but rather as a result of the intimate clarifying processes that the lyrical subject was experiencing while passing through so many stations of the inner or outer landscape, registering his reactions at any point. At least, this is what I recognized as one of the most invigorating lessons to be learned from the Viennese master when at various phases of my life I felt the urge to take inventory of my problems, thoughts, and feelings in cycles of songs.



Returning for a moment to the libretto, I should like to cast a glance at later developments. It is obvious that the staging of opera, as of any theatrical production, and thus the overall style of the entire project, is decisively determined by the sources and disposition of the light available. Before the invention of electric, or at least gas light it was impossible to create on stage any illusion of reality. The great stage designers of the Baroque, such as Galli Bibiena, were virtuosos in engineering dazzling trompe l'oeils through setting perspectives ad infinitum, and machinery suggesting the most outlandish goings-on in heaven, earth and underground. But atmospheric shadings and, what in German is called Stimmung, remained elusive as long as the light was static and the orchestra sitting on stage. Opera was a spectacle arranged for the entertainment of the audience, and its artificiality was not camouflaged.

Aided by the innovations in illumination, Richard Wagner changed all this. The new technology made it possible to create atmospheric nuances and to represent even miraculous happenings as real. The orchestra disappeared into a partly covered pit so that the reflection of its lights would not disturb the scenery (apart from acoustical considerations.) The Gesamtkunstwerk was designed to transport the viewer, at least as long as he was under its spell, into the world of gods and heroes, and make him feel that this world was real, far above his humdrum every day's life. There is a certain irony in that just when advanced technology allowed Wagner's most extravagant sleights of hand to be performed with ease and elegance, his grand-son did away with all of it and put his shows on a bare and pitch-dark stage.

Apparently, he must have sensed the new trend that questioned the validity of total illusion. We are again aware that all of this is just pretense, that the show is put together for our enlightenment or entertainment, and we do not mind witnessing how it is put together.



This vision of dramatic processes taking place simultaneously on various planes and levels and their integration with complex musical processes requires very accurate coordinating and synchronizing all parameters, which again recommends to some composers taking control of all aspects of such a project and writing their own librettos.

equipped with a crystal ball, I shall refrain from making any guesses as to how it may go on from here - for such would also be far beyond the framework of the present symposium.

When, in 1930, I asked the great Viennese satirist and poet, Karl Kraus, for his permission to set music to a group of his poems, he granted it because I was his friend and he had confidence in me. But he said that basically did not appreciate the fusion of his words with music because, as he put it, "you dissolve my poem into a hash of vowels and consonants, and nothing is left of what I wanted to say." This conversation haunted me for many years, and eventually, in 1965, I opened my Quintina, a brief cantata for solo voice, with the lines:

Sprache schenkt Musik das Wort, wird stumm  
im dunklen Klang, im Ton verweht ihr Sinn.

Language lends the word to music, becomes mute  
in the dark sound, in tones it loses its meaning.

But, then, if music makes language mute, it says at the end of the poem: Es gellt aus Musik der Stummheit Schrei ins Ohr.  
Der Trauer bietet Trost ihr Klang am Ende.

Absurd, prae-logisch, steht Musik am Anfang.

Out of music the cry of muteness pierces the ear.  
Solace to the sorrow is extended by sound in the end.

Absurd, pre-logical, music stands at the beginning.

So much for the mystery that cloaks the relation of word and tone.

In conclusion let me say that I hope that some of these scattered remarks may offer you a few cues for the deliberations upon which you are about to embark. It gives me great satisfaction that my old homeland, Austria, has made itself represented with such distinction in my new homeland, California, and that I have the privilege of appearing here under the auspices of this endowment.



It has been tried to turn the calamity upside down and to write an opera with a libretto consisting of nonsense syllables while the music would suggest the conventional expressive clichés for hope, despair, desire, joy, love, hate, disappointment, anger, grief and what not. The experiment, called "<sup>tract</sup>abs~~urd~~ opera", predictably failed inasmuch as the audience took it for a hoax. It could have had any validity at all only if the public had not been told that the text was nonsense and had reacted as if it had listened to a normal opera with, as expected, unintelligible words.

For a normal opera-text to be understood as clearly as it may be possible under prevailing circumstances,