

Morris Henry Partee

APPLAUSE AS PARTICIPATION

THE GENRE OF OPERA

The student of opera, like a one man band, finds many things to absorb his attention. The music, lyric outbursts, drama, and dance each plead for the special consideration of the one, just as the harmonica, accordion, drum, and cymbal provoke the frenzied efforts of the other. Wisely, most aestheticians insist that Apollo and his companions, Euterpe, Melpomene, and Terpsichore speak to him in turn. Thus Monroe Beardsley devotes only a few paragraphs to opera in his book, *Aesthetics*.¹ But the complex genre of opera continues to be written, and audiences continue to respond to its multisensual appeal. As eclectic as the pipe organ, opera transforms music, drama, and spectacle from their original purity into inseparable constituents of the performance. Too often critics have judged opera in terms of the drama.

The majority of great operas have eminently serious themes; *opera seria* has provoked far more discussion than *opera buffa*. *Carmen* and *Otello* present deep human emotions; *Don Giovanni* and *Die Walküre* reflect mythic sagas. But despite the seriousness of the dramatic component, the music of these works makes the term "tragedy" inappropriate. As Northrop Frye points out, tragedy, a form of verbal drama, subordinates music and spectacle to the perception and understanding of language.² Opera, on the other hand, uses every device possible to reach the audience. The variety of approaches at the composer's disposal explains both the occasional vulgarity and the almost omnipresent emotional impact of opera. Although the mingling of verbal and non-verbal art makes categorizing of opera particularly difficult, this combination of elements does possess an integrity of its own. The symbolic interaction of performer and audience in applause suggests the genre of opera to be akin not to concert or drama but to masque.

The participation of the audience is integral rather than incidental to the performance of opera. Through its response of applause, the audience of opera instinctively recognizes its corporate existence. Such a social identification denies the usual effect of tragedy, a direct involvement of the individual with the dramatic action. Applause reveals the alienation of the audience from tragedy just as laughter suggests a superiority of the audience in comedy. But the applause which punctuates a good performance of most operas links audience with singers in a ritual akin to masque rather than to continuous dramatic action. Applause during the performance represents an aural participation in the spectacle. Applause before and after a performance represents more an objective appreciation than a subjective identification. Even the most sustained and coherent plot in opera has certain high points, lyrical moments which invoke a response. Lyric opera gives more opportunities for such response; dramatic works such as those of Wagner or Strauss resist the interjection of applause.

Despite the origins of opera in the sung dramas of Florence and Rome around 1600, opera today depends upon music for substance and unity. The relative prominence of music and drama has changed from period to period, but traditionally, musical lyricism has never been subservient to the text for any length of time.³ An inherent antagonism may exist between language and music. Beardsley states that program music is most successful when short and simple:

But a larger musical work depends for its own musical unity and continuity upon purely musical relations among its parts; it calls for development, for recapitulations, for variations or thematic combination. Now a story depends for its literary unity and continuity upon quite other relations among its parts; motives and fulfillments, character-development and conflict-resolution. If both music and story are complex, then, but must correspond in the main, there is bound to be a tension between them. And the more complex and unified each is, the more they tend to pull apart.⁴

Thus the program music of which Beardsley speaks may be termed a "mixed" art; opera's subordination of intellectual complexity in favor of the emotional power of music represents a more successful synthesis. Observation suggests that composers create the opera, not the librettists. We have heard of Giuseppe Verdi, but not Antonio Ghislanzoni. We know Giacomo Puccini, but not Luigi Illica or Giuseppe Giacosa. A genius like Wagner can be both poet and composer, but music rather than drama gives *The Ring* its true greatness. To make drama primary tends to render the music incidental. Music is

temperamental on the stage—composers seldom achieve a satisfactory compromise between magnificence and Muzak. Incidental music for the most part is just incidentally music; few such creations are memorable. By responding to an aria, then, the audience does not interrupt a dramatic flow or destroy a tragic illusion. In short, as a form of masque, opera depends on music rather than on logic for coherence.

Nevertheless, whenever opera has completely slighted dramatic continuity, reformers such as Gluck and Wagner have appeared to insist that opera make sense. Wagner states in *Oper und Drama* (1851) that the greatest error of lyric opera is “that a Means of expression (Music) has been made the end, while the End of expression (the Drama) has been made a means”.⁵ Wagner is attacking the kind of trivial libretto which focuses exclusively on the lyric. We might object, however, that in practice, music usually compensates adequately for most dramatic absurdities such as Leporella’s “*Madamina, il catalogo è questo*” in *Don Giovanni*. Drama constructs the skeleton for characterization; music gives flesh to the creation. As an integrated art form, opera cannot allow either drama or music to violate the rights of the other. Wagner was reacting to the exaggerated claims of his contemporaries for music:

Music was therefore destined to credit herself with possibilities which, in very truth, were doomed to stay for her impossibilities; herself a sheer organ of expression, she must rush into the error of desiring to plainly outline the thing to be expressed; she must venture on the boastful attempt to issue orders and speak out aims *there*, where in truth she can only have to subordinate herself to an aim *her* essence cannot ever formulate (*fassen*), but to whose realizing she gives, by this her subordination, its only true enablement.⁶

But Wagner, the most symphonic of composers, cannot escape from his music. Where lyric opera uses powerful, basic emotions to counterbalance the natural predominance of music, Wagner had to use mighty sagas. He has created not dramatic characters, but mythic heroes.

Critics today would question the validity of Wagner’s vigorous metaphors in *Oper und Drama*. Even great operas lack the movement and intellectual complexity of drama; such comparisons are usually irrelevant. Where Wagner restricts the term “opera” to a work with a worthy libretto, Joseph Kerman in *Opera as Drama* more tolerantly accepts as opera any work in which the music reflects and intensifies the meaning of the words.⁷ To him *Tosca* fails as opera, not because of its sensational plot, but because the musical themes bear little relation to the action. Northrop Frye, on the other hand,

feels that the music of opera makes the verbal action irrelevant to the usual categories of opera:

The ideal masque places the audience in a position of superiority to discovery. The verbal action of *Figaro* is comic and that of *Don Giovanni* tragic; but in both cases the audience is exalted by the music above the reach of tragedy and comedy, and, though as profoundly moved as ever, is not emotionally involved with the discovery of plot or characters. It looks at the downfall of Don Juan as spectacular entertainment, much as the gods are supposed to look at the downfall of Ajax or Darius.⁸

Viewing opera as musical masque rather than as musical drama helps explain why applause during an opera does not destroy the continuity of the performance. The audience, "viewing the dramatic mimesis through a haze of spectacular exhilaration", responds as much to the phrasing, tone quality, and vocal power of the singer as to the artistic truth of the character portrayal.

The audience's audible response suggests that the qualities of masque Frye has noticed in opera are far from accidental. Indeed, composers have taken pains to provide opportunities for the audience to participate actively in the spectacle. The popularity of "opera highlights" points out the integrity of many arias as song. One reason for the resolution of arias comes from the practice of composers such as Puccini, Donizetti, and the early Verdi to build an aria to a climax, then to allow a pause for the audience's approval. Without this hiatus the applause accorded to the skill of the performer would cover up the following music. This device for an inferior composer may be merely a vulgar request for praise. But applause does not mar the integrity of the performance of a great opera; such reaction does not comment on the dramatic relevance of an aria. The emotional focus provided by the aria depends on music rather than on poetically sound language. In its dramatic context and heightened by music, Butterfly's "*Un bel di*" invokes a poetic response inexplicable in terms of its verse. Even when a composer such as Wagner or Debussy does not provide a convenient interval for applause, the inevitable diminution of intensity after a lyric outburst may provide the necessary opportunity. In other words, the extent to which opera uses aria determines the resultant audience reaction, and thus the work's characteristics as masque or drama.

The opera *I Pagliacci* carries the overt attempt to involve the audience perhaps to its greatest possible extreme. The music, of course, prevents the complete destruction of psychic distance possible in strictly verbal soap opera. The prologue has the clown, Tonio, stick his head through the curtain to sing "*Si Piu*". This aria appeals directly to the audience to accept the pagliacci as

real people with human emotions. The opera itself contains a play within a play, the highly stylized acting of the clown troupe making the actions of the singers more natural by contrast. The famous aria, "*Vesti la giubba*", one of the most popular in all of opera, consists of anguished instructions from Canio to himself, thus baring his soul to the audience. The opera and its interior pagliacci play both conclude with the spoken words, "*La commedia è finita*", again suggesting that all the world's a stage. Of course, the sensational and vulgar *I Pagliacci* has little of the power of Wagner or of the delicacy of Mozart. But then, great art tends to defy classification; mediocre art—such as that of Leoncavallo and much of Puccini—often presents the issues more clearly.

To create great opera, composers must possess sufficient artistic integrity to treat the audience with dignity. Time, the greatest critic of art, has pronounced stern sentence on Rossini while giving high praise to Mozart. Without an adequate structure to link the lyric highlights, aria becomes song and the humanity of opera is lost. Calling opera "musically organized drama", Northrop Frye states that "Opera and movie possess, unlike the masque, the power of producing spectacular imitations of mimetic drama. The opera can only do this by simplifying its musical organization, otherwise its dramatic structure will be blurred by the distortion of acting which the highly repetitive structure of music makes necessary" (*Anatomy*, p. 288). Applying Plato's argument in *Republic X* to Frye's definition, opera would be an imitation of an imitation of an imitation. Fortunately, such a spectacle bears little resemblance to the realistic drama which Plato thought likely to deceive or to confuse the unwary. Opera, then, resembles masque in its insistence on the connection between the audience and the community on stage; opera differs from masque in allowing a sustained imitation of the drama.

Since opera is a relative of masque, purists should adopt a more tolerant attitude towards the social pomp and circumstance accompanying opera. Progress and democracy have dulled the common taste for the stylized and the archaic. Rather than expressing a developing culture, opera asserts a formal appreciation of the past. A glance at the great opera house offerings in any season will reveal a far greater preponderance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works than almost any dramatic repertory company would dare present. Like baseball, opera honors the past—Caruso, Gigli, Martinelli, Bjoerling are the great tenors. They live in the mind of opera lovers as much as do Vickers and Corelli. In addition, the ceremony of attending opera usually exceeds that of going to a play or concert. The potential snobbery and artificiality of the

audience of opera have made the bejewelled dowager and bored husband common cartoon caricatures from *Bringing Up Father* onwards. Certainly, the grand entrance was standard at La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera until recently. Perhaps not too far-fetched, then, is the conjecture that the fantastic costumes of the singers have their counterparts in the equally fantastic costumes of the audience.

The ceremonial nature of opera increases the audience's consciousness of itself. Such a social identification precludes a tragic response to the drama on stage. Music heightens the emotions of the listener, but increases the psychic distance from the action. A good audience by accurate critical response to an aria not only stimulates the best efforts of the singer, but reaffirms the critical judgment of each member of the audience. Often the audience will respond to an exceptional performance with applause limited only by the stamina and sensitivity of the palms. Joan Sutherland's first *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Metropolitan was such an occasion. On the other hand, an insensitive audience can wreak havoc with the performance. Automatic applause at one of the intervals suggested by the composer may encourage a slipshod performance; unappreciative silence following a well-executed aria, particularly in a place traditionally filled with applause, may likewise discourage the singer. But whether sensitive or insensitive, applause asserts a social harmony between members of the audience which insulates the spectator from identification with the tragic figures on the stage.

To summarize the argument so far, active audience participation, sanctioned by the composer and formalized by tradition, contributes integrally to the powerful emotional appeal of opera. As masque, the quality of the opera depends on the quality of the audience. Now, since the audience reacts primarily through its own creation of sound, the various forms of such applause should be distinguished. Clapping is the most typical response although some modifications such as shouting, whistling or booing are possible. Unfortunately, English has no word of its own to express approval: "Bravo" or "Encore" must serve. Silent tributes are of course possible. The audience may praise a favorite singer with a shower of roses or, as the fans of one singer once treated a rival, express disapproval by an avalanche of carrots.

Applause before, during, and concluding a work reveals differing meanings. At the beginning the audience of opera, like that of drama, may respond spontaneously to its first sight of an impressive setting or to the entrance of a well-known performer. The response to a singer suggests both appreciation for past work and anticipation of the role to be sung in the present performance.

THE GENRE OF OPERA

Also before performance, an audience may recognize the conductor—and through him—the orchestra. The applause concluding a work represents, of course, appreciation for that specific performance. As in most forms of the performing arts, opera concludes with the ritual exchange of roles. The artist, who has dominated attention throughout the performance, expresses his subservience to the audience by bowing. The audience in its turn rewards the hired entertainer (albeit often hired for a princely sum) by applause.

Just as final applause comments on the specific performance, applause within a work focuses on a particular well-executed speech, song, or event. But what is spontaneous in concert and drama receives careful planning in opera. Until recently the Metropolitan Opera used clagues—paid cheering sections for high culture—to encourage and to direct the applause. The applauders might be paid with money or merely with free tickets. The leader of a clique, usually a professional, must possess exact timing as well as durable hands and lungs. La Scala continues the tradition, and their well-trained clique can often provoke an extra encore for the singers. In addition, the bought loyalty of the clique can rescue a singer from deserved ignominy. Occasionally a singer will miss a note. For instance, during an excellent performance of *Rigoletto* at La Scala several years ago, the tenor, Gianni Raimondi, had a note stick in his throat. Despite the audience's immediate gasp of indignation, the clique helped drown out the resulting thunder of catcalls and raspberries after the aria.

Although superficially the same, applause following an aria differs in function from that after a song in concert. As in drama, the action of opera continues when the aria or speech is finished. Both drama and opera can have lyric as well as dramatic moments. A soliloquy such as "To be, or not to be" is analogous to an aria: the audience accompanies the performer with the appropriate mumbling or singing. Nevertheless, the simplified dramatic structure of opera precludes for the most part the intellectual response to unraveling a complex plot. The spontaneous applause such as that usually after the screen scene of Sheridan's *School for Scandal* or at the resolution in Molière's *Miser* seldom occurs in Italian opera. Yet, a comic structure like that of *The Marriage of Figaro* does permit the excitement of intellectual discovery; such operas, incidentally, are performed often in translation.

The enthusiastic response of the audience following the often trivial words of an aria illustrates the importance of music to the effect of opera. With the exception of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and possibly of some of Wagner's works, opera librettos cannot be performed by actors as a drama.

The music of opera modifies and obscures verbal subtleties in the action and thought. Thus partly lacking the intellectual demands of language, this simplified dramatic structure allows the audience to respond with music-heightened emotions. In no sense is opera "program music". Vivaldi can suggest a dog's barking in *The Four Seasons*, and Beethoven can invoke a storm in his pastoral symphony. But music by itself can imitate directly only the sounds of man and nature. Wagner's leitmotifs are musical signals, or words, representing dramatic themes.⁹ Using leitmotifs or even less conscious themes, music can contribute to the poetic ambiguity of language by juxtaposing musical symbols with verbal symbols. Obviously, Verdi's *Otello* is far more than a simplified version of Shakespeare's play with incidental music attached. The complexity of the opera is non-verbal and emotional rather than poetic and intellectual.

In short, the tendency of the audience of opera to applaud throughout a performance indicates the masque-like character of the genre. Drama and concert may occasionally invoke such response; the Elizabethan audience probably reacted to a soliloquy as we do to an aria. Although some dramatic continuity is necessary, music rather than verbal concepts organize opera. Joan Sutherland is notorious for her muffled enunciation, yet the Italians term her "La Stupenda". Maria Callas and Franco Corelli can act, but they are not just singing actors. The infrequency of performances in translation suggests that the impact of opera depends little on verbal understanding. Applause during the dramatic and musical flow emphasizes the aria, the lyric rather than the dramatic. Such integral response indicates in opera an unincremental repetition antithetical to tragedy. Freed from the limitations of verbal drama by the immediacy of music, opera directly and integrally evokes the participation of the audience.

1. (New York, 1958), pp. 348, 365-6.
2. *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 282-293.
3. See Michael F. Robinson, *Opera Before Mozart* (New York, 1966), pp. 11-17.
4. Beardsley, 351.
5. *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William A. Ellis (London, 1893), II, 17.
6. Wagner, p. 23.
7. (New York, 1956), pp. 7-22.
8. Frye, p. 289.
9. Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature* (Athens, Georgia, 1948), pp. 93-6.