

## Postmodernism Goes to the Opera

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“Among the performance art-forms flourishing today, none would seem more distant from a postmodernist sensibility than opera.” With those words, Herbert Lindenberger begins his groundbreaking article, “From Opera to Postmodernity”. And yet, this “exotic and irrational entertainment”, to use Dr. Johnson’s terms, is, nonetheless, experiencing a revival that may herald a return to its earlier historical position as a popular, accessible, indeed, “democratic” theater – though its locus and institutional frame have expanded significantly. Thanks to film and televised productions, not to mention advances in the video and aural recording technology, opera can now enter the home with an ease only dreamt of by the first listeners to the Metropolitan’s Saturday Afternoon at the Opera radio broadcasts. Opera houses around the world are moving from being museums of the past to becoming showplaces for the new – for revisionary, iconoclastic productions and even for new operas. The camera closeup and the performing conventions of film have created audience expectations of a new dramatic realism in performances too, and so are born a new look and a style of stage acting. If anything, it would be this conjunction of new creation, re-interpretation, and technology that might make possible the postmodern moment of opera. But, perhaps even more than in other art-forms, this is not an unproblematic moment.

A word of caution is in order, from the start: the use of the word “postmodern” here must be conditioned by the fact that, unlike architecture or even literature, opera has had no particularly dominant “modernist” form to which to respond. Thus, operatic “postmodernism” will exist more by stylistic and ideological analogy with other art forms than by a precise art-history parallel. Indeed, it is less the modernist period than the one from Mozart to Puccini – late eighteenth to early twentieth century – that forms the powerful and persistent canon to be addressed in opera. As Peter Conrad put it: ‘Throughout the twentieth century, opera adheres to a past it rewrites but can never reject.’ (p. 216) Those short, difficult, austere modern operas by Schoenberg/Pappenhaim<sup>1</sup> (*Erwartung*), Stravinsky/Cocteau (*Oedipus Rex*), Bartok/Balazs (*Bluebeard’s Castle*), and Poulenc/Cocteau (*La Voix Humaine*) are, as Lindenberger notes, peripheral to the standard repertoire. Longer works have persisted, but are not exactly central to the canon either: Stravinsky/Auden’s *The Rake’s Progress* – with its parodic play with eighteenth century music and painting – would almost qualify, as we shall see, as postmodern.<sup>2</sup> It is the general view of “modern” music as being difficult and serious – and, since Schoenberg, not traditionally melodic – that has worked against modernist opera becoming as popular and accessible as the nineteenth century repertoire, in particular.

The *performed* operatic text, however, has been given new life by its reinterpretation and leshaping at the hands of a new generation of stage directors, whose often bias and fearless

historicizing and politicizing manoeuvres have been interpreted as “efforts to save opera by minimalizing, pauperizing or sullyng it – by a variety of desecrations” (Conrad, p. 278). Peter Sellars’s much publicized (and televised) parodic resetting of Mozart’s three Da Ponte operas (*Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte* and *Le Nozze di Figaro*), with all their class politics, brought a new audience to opera in the contemporary multiracial United States, even as it perhaps alienated another. In other words, what has become a directorial commonplace in the last decades for Shakespearian productions, for example, has been seen as radical and iconoclastic in operatic circles: Sellars’s work has been called “a powerful assault on performance tradition” (MacDonald, p. 707). Former East German director Harry Kupfer updated duck’s eighteenth-century *Orfeo ed Euridice* to the present day, and when his Orfeo has to sing his “classic” operatic parts, he dons a tuxedo jacket over his jeans and sweatshirt and sings with a libretto in hand. Kupfer’s penchant for reflexive productions means that he will have Handel appear in his own opera, *Ciustino*, as a composer-ex-machina, with the singers performing, in the final scene, with parodic marionettes of their characters. In this way, what, to an audience today, might look like the artifice of a puppet-show plot is here laid bare for what it is (precisely that). Through self-consciousness, Kupfer “recodes” the opera – and its possible appeal for us today. In his “green” version of *Der Ring des Nibelungs* at Bayreuth (1988-92), he used this reflexive “recording” technique to bring out those aspects of the libretti of Wagner’s cycle of music dramas that might make them meaningful to current audiences, with their worries about the ecology and nuclear arms proliferation. It is not that Wagner’s opera transcends time to speak to us today, as might be argued within a humanist tradition; such productions simply acknowledge the postmodern realization that any meaning we give to them today is necessarily historicized through our current frames of reference. In their paradoxically critical yet implicated way, these postmodern productions allow the canon – Wagner, Mozart, Verdi – to persist, but give it a new and different significance.

Reflexivity, parody, and the kind of re-historicizing of meaning are the field-markings of the postmodern in operatic production. Here, as in other postmodernist art-forms, “style itself [is emphasized] as a way of coming to terms with the traditions of the past as well as the discursive and ideological conflicts in the present” (Collins, pp. 138-9): Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s 1984 film of Wagner’s *Parsifal* illustrates the contention that this, like all of Wagner’s work, cannot be viewed – after the Nazi use and abuse of it – as other than “the assemblage of all its past and present incarnations and appropriations” (Collins, p. 140). Less contentiously, when Ingmar Bergman filmed Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* in 1974 on Drottningholm Castle’s courtly, eighteenth-century stage, his reflexive camera went backstage – to show the artifice and to reveal the everyday reality of the performers – before turning its attention to the audience, cataloguing its various responses. Still other film makers have used opera as a kind of “play within the play” to postmodern, parodic ends: Suzanne Osten’s *The Mozart Brothers* is a film about a fictional Swedish opera company’s attempt to put on an iconoclastic (postmodern) version of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, an attempt that itself reflexively and ingeniously enacts the plot of the opera.

To this familiar parodic/reflexive/re-historicizing mixture, Lindenberger has added other characteristics that a postmodern *opera* (rather than *production*) might manifest: first, an urge

to test the boundaries between opera's traditional "high" art status and popular culture (p. 41) – as can be seen in his example, John Adams / Alice Goodman's *Nixon in China* (1987), with its recent and familiar historical subject and its Amoni's big band inspired music, or perhaps in Michael Nyman's *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1986), whose music's "unexpected metrical shifts and harmonic angularities" have been said to suggest "a curious conjunction between Stravinsky and rock-and-roll" (Morreau, p. 683). Another typical postmodern characteristic, for Lindenberg, would be a desire to rupture the union of word and music which defines the genre (p. 41), as in Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) where the text – made up of bits of newsclips, songs, adds chichés – is not made relevant to either the music or any narrative line. Example of another order might well be *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969) or *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* (1974), two pieces by Peter Maxwell Davies/Randolph Stow written for "extended voice", in which all parts of the human sound spectrum interact with parodic echoings of earlier, more "normal" music and do so in the context of the libretto's exploration of what the "normal" consider "mad".

Lindenberg also believes that postmodern opera would have to attempt to provoke audiences out of either identification or passivity (p. 41). But to provoke an audience without losing it is no mean trick, given the economics of "grand" opera, at least, that work against the taking of too large risks. Once again, in opera, as in other art forms, postmodernism's parodic play with, or even critique of, conventions, traditions, styles must remain in a sense complicitous: its radicality is always going to be constrained by its desire to "speak to" an audience with expectations formed by the operatic tradition. This, of course, is where parody comes in handy, as we shall see shortly. More radical – and less immediately accessible – avant-garde works like John Cage's *Européras* (1987, 1991, 1992), Luciano Berio/Italo Calvino's *La Vera Storia* (1982), or Robert Wilson's *The CIVIL Wars* (1984) have been called postmodern by some (Birringer, p. 175), but seem to me much more a continuation of that "difficult" modernist tradition that goes one step beyond Schoenberg and Berg into multi-media, non-narrative, non-mimetic explorations of both the institutions of music/opera and the "architecturalization" of the performing body. While there are obvious analogies here to what could be called the postmodern, as there are in those moves towards ritualization in works like R. Murray Schafer's *The Alchemical Theatre of Hermes Trismegistos* (1992), or Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Donnerstag aus Licht* (1981), the question of relative accessibility – or of complicity, to use the more negatively coded term – remains for me what distinguishes the modern from the postmodern in opera, an art-form that has persisted in its appeal as *staged* sung drama, despite the escalating costs of production that might have been expected to kill it off by now: in order to hire a conductor, a director, an orchestra, a chorus, soloists, a stage crew, designers and producers of sets and costumes, lighting technicians, and many others, you have to be sure people will actually attend your live performances. (The filming of some staged operas would change the economics somewhat today, but not entirely and not for most companies.)

To be parodic and reflexive *in opera* is not, contrary to expectation, perhaps, to be inaccessible, and the reason is that opera has been, from the start, "drama *about* music, not just accompanied by it" (Conrad, p. 13). From Monteverdi/Striggio's *Orfeo* (1607) through

Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* (1868) to, as we shall see shortly, Corigliano/Hoffman's *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991), some version of the artist/singer/musician /composer figure has been at the center of many an operatic narrative. With realistic or "veristic" opera, in the late nineteenth century, came what has been referred to as opera's need to justify itself by choosing artists as protagonists, for only they would be "at home in the shoddy artificiality of that theater" (*Conrad*, p. 194): Floria Tosca is an opera singer because "only a temperamental soprano can in all conscience be permitted to behave operatically" (*Conrad*, p. 8). Out of the political and aesthetic crises of early twentieth-century Germany came a kind of historical allegorical form of artist-opera that could be called, by analogy, the *Kiinsteroper*: Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina* (1971), Paul Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* (1938) and, a little later, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* (1957) (see Bokina).

The meta-musical is to some the very essence of opera (*Cone*, p. 125). But within opera narratives, characters frequently sing "realistic" song – toasts (*brindisi*), love serenades – as if "they do not hear the music that is the ambient fluid of their music-drowned world" (*Abbate*, p. 119). Opera's rather bizarre illusion is that the characters are unaware that they are singing, that the music emanates from some non-stage source and communicates to the audience alone. But against this illusion operates an equally strong urge to reflexivity – from the romantic artist-figure like Wagner's *Tannhauser* (1845; 1861) to the opera-within-an-opera of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892) or Strauss/Hoffmansthal's *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1916), and on through Ravel/Colette's parodic romp through the history of opera in the playful animation (and vocalization) of the objects in a child's room and garden in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925).

More complex versions of operatic reflexivity can be seen in Strauss/Krauss's 1942 *Capriccio: Konversationsstikk für Musik*, an opera about the theory of operatic form that responds to Mozart/Stephanie's 1786 *Der Schauspieldirektor: Komodie mit Musik* by replacing his competitive sopranos with a composer and poet who compete for the same woman's love by debating the relative importance to opera of music and words. Possible subjects for operas discussed include those of Strauss's own earlier operas, duly cited, to parodic ends, by the orchestra. At the other end of the scale – of moon and impact – is the reflexive structure of Berg's *Lulu*: the palindromic form of the music (with the second half inverting the first) is echoed in the silent film interlude called for by the libretto to show the story of Lulu's arrest trial and imprisonment in the first half, which then reverses itself to show her switch in prison with the Countess Geschwitz and her subsequent escape. The Prologue also frames the opera in the reflexive trope of a circus: the Animal Trainer invites us to view his menagerie of beasts – the wild ones, not the domesticated ones in the opera house audience. Lulu herself is a dancer; Aiwa, a composer – who wonders at one point whether people would believe any opera he wrote about the absurd life of Lulu.<sup>3</sup> Musically, Berg parodies formal conventions – arias, recitatives – but in such a way that he can invoke their traditional power while still contesting their possible reification through ironic recontextualizing: for instance, Isolde's heterosexual love for Tristan in Wagner's *Liebestod* here becomes Countess Geschwitz's dying devotion to Lulu.

It would be no exaggeration, then, to say that opera has been reflexive from the very start. Likewise parodies (as ironic reworkings more than ridicule) have accompanied popular operas for centuries.<sup>4</sup> The writing of parodic operas in and for themselves (rather in tandem with a specific parodied opera) does seem to have increased in frequency over the years to the point that it has been said that “opera in the twentieth century is preoccupied with its history, wondering if it’s an art whose time has run out”. (*Conrad*, p. 226) That negative evaluation from a critic, however, needs countering with the experience of a composer. John Adams’, whose music resonates citations of, and references to, the work of others, has put forward a more positive view: “My attitude towards creation is one of incorporating in my compositions everything I’ve learned and experienced of the past. I’ve never received any powerful creative energy from the idea of turning my back on the past.” His analogy for what he does is the work of postmodern architect Philip Johnson: both worked to the limits of modernism and then tried to develop “a new language that resonates with the past”.

From the point of view of the audience, then, the use of parodic references by postmodern architecture or music can work to counter the austerity of modernism’s formalism and aesthetic autonomy and, therefore, can actually increase accessibility. This might be especially true in opera, where parody has become almost a convention. As Peter Rabinowitz has noted, “[b]orrowing itself, of course, is hardly new: one need only recall the plagiarism and self-plagiarism of the baroque or the operatic pot-pourris of the Romantic virtuosi. But not until this century has the listener’s *awareness* of the interplay between ‘new’ and ‘borrowed’ material become a significant determinant of aesthetic effect in large numbers of musical compositions” (p. 193). It is the fact that we are hearing borrowed music in a new context – as well as watching a borrowed (or parodied) narrative – that gives initial meaning to a new opera like *The Ghosts of Versailles*, based in part as it is on the third “Figaro” play by Beaumarchais, *L’Autre Tartuffe ou La Mere coupable*. The first two had wielded Rossini/Sterbini’s *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816) and Mozart/Da Ponte’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786), and John Corigliano’s music, as well as William M. Hoffman’s libretto, pay due homage to both – and thus draw on their audience’s potential knowledge of these two familiar operas of the canonical repertoire.

A review of the premier of *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991) at the Metropolitan Opera in New York claimed that this new work restored the fun and excitement of the past to opera and did so “partly by stripping away the barnacles of accrued tradition, partly by making a big joke of them” (*Feingold*, p. 89). On the contrary, I would argue that it relied on the audience’s knowledge of that tradition, ironizing it only somewhat but mostly drawing on its continuing power and on the audience’s remembered pleasure in a way parallel to postmodern architecture’s parodic recalling of the classical tradition or postmodern fiction’s playing with realist as well as modernist narrative conventions. The same review went on to assert that the composer and librettist had invented “something new and distinctively American: a huge melting-pot melange of styles, events, and ideas that suggests a vaudeville show or a *Ziegfeld Follies* as often as it does a traditional operatic drama or comedy” (*Feingold*, p. 89). But what is even more clear than the Americanness of this opera is its postmodern-ness: its parodic, reflexive re-historicizing of the traditions and conventions of opera. Called *A Grand Opera*

*Buffa*, *The Ghosts of Versailles* depends on its audience's recognition of the paradoxical («portemanteau») generic mix of "grand opera" and "opera buffa" – its ironic recognition that an opera commissioned by the Met (with its 3,800-seat capacity) was not going to be an ordinary, cozy "opera buffa" like Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the bourgeois, comic alternative to the aristocratic classicism of "opera seria". indeed, this new opera made full use – through over 40 featured roles, a large chorus, elaborate stage sets and costumes, and both a pit and a stage orchestra – of the full institutional facilities and resources of nineteenth-century grand opera that the Met seems to exist to perform. And perhaps its portmodern complicity – and accessibility – can be traced through its critical and commercial success, despite what might seem like real difficulties.

For instance, *The Ghosts of Versailles* manages to be even more complex in narrative structure than the earlier two operatic adaptations of Beaumarchais' plays had been. It exists on three experiential planes, so to speak. The first is the frame world, a ghost world: the time is the present; the place, Versailles; the characters, the ghosts of Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette and their court, and the playwright Beaumarchais who, in order to entertain the Queen, with whom he is in love, writes an "opera buffa" called *A Figaro for Antonia* – whose parodic echoing of the music of Mozart and Rossini' works towards making it "unthreatening to most listeners", as a reviewer tellingly put it (*Keller*, p. 23). This opera-within-the-opera is played a bit more realistically than the stylized and defamiliarized, special-effect world of the ghosts. Nevertheless, these two planes merge in Act II, scene 2, when Figaro, the character, refuses to stick to his creator's text and therefore help Marie-Antoinette escape the scaffold. Beaumarchais enters his opera's fictional world to right matters; then Marie-Antoinette brings Figaro into her world so that she can argue against his harsh evaluation of her. In order to change his mind, she asks Beaumarchais to show Figaro her actual (and here, future) fate at the hands of the Revolutionary Tribunal. We then enter the third world: the historical streets of Paris in 1793, during the Terror. At the end the three planes overlap as the historical Marie-Antoinette is executed, the cast of the "opera buffa" plot escapes Paris in a balloon, and the ghosts of Beaumarchais and his beloved "Antonia" (as he familiarly calls her) walk off into the fictional gardens of Aguas Frescas, the home of the Almaviva family in the Figaro plays and operas.

The complex plot of Beaumarchais' play *La Mere coupable* continued the narrative of his earlier two plays about the trials of courtship and marriage of the Spanish Count and Countess Almaviva. In this one, the mutual love of the illegitimate children of both partners is threatened by the hypocritical, lying, manipulative Begearss. Set in Paris at the end of 1790, the Revolution is present (the Almavivas can no longer be addressed by their noble titles) but is not a major plot force of any kind. Hoffman's libretto departs from this by setting the action in Paris, but in 1793, at the height of the Reign of Terror. Begearss is still a dangerous hypocrite, but this time he is also a spy for the Revolution and, as we shall see, is parodically portrayed according to yet another set of conventions, those of the melodramatic villain.

All three narrative planes are presented as the sites of reflexive self-consciousness. The ghost courtiers complain about how boring they find opera, an art which, in their day, was said to offer "an imposing and pretentious world, consistently sublime in tone, pompous and even soporific to some, and essentially humourless" (*Johnson*, p. 7387). One of them even enters

in full (and anachronistic) Walkure gear to denounce the proceedings at hand: “This is not opera! Wagner is opera!” Louis XVI laments the plot complexity: “I couldn’t follow the last act of *The Marriage of Figaro* and this is even worse.” Hoffman is careful not to rely on his audience’s memory too much: he has his Beaumarchais fill in the earlier plot details for the courtiers – and for us. The intermission between Acts I and II is the same for the theater audience of *The Ghosts of Versailles* and for the ghosts audience of *A Figaro for Antonia*, who return to their seats less quickly and obediently than the others. But then again, as Hoffman’s historicizing humor underlines, our convention of silent watching in a darkened hall is post-Wagnerian – too recent for the eighteenth-century ghosts to be expected to know about.

With structural echoes of Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Beaumarchais is driven to enter his own fictional world when Figaro improvises, calling his ghost creator’s beloved, Marie-Antoinette, a “spoiled, arrogant, decadent” vampire and vulture. At her outrage and at his own shock at this independence (“Singers have no minds”), Beaumarchais attempts to force Figaro to obey him and participate in a plot to change history and to help Marie-Antoinette escape her death at the guillotine. He shows himself to his terrified characters, identifying himself as a “ghost” – to the music of the Commendatore’s ghost in Mozart/Da Ponte’s *Don Giovanni*. In the Met production, holding out a finger to touch Figaro’s – in a visual parody of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel creation of Adam by God – he identifies himself further: “I am your creator.”

Besides the *Ghosts*’ clear musical and narrative parodies of the earlier operas inspired by Beaumarchais<sup>7</sup>, the villain Begears’s outrageous “Aria to the Worm” – suggested by Arrigo Boito’s poem, // *Re Orso* – is a parodic, evil “credo” worthy of Verdi/Boito’s ligo (in their *Otello*). The choice of the worm as the metaphoric analogue might well be an operatic allusion not only to Wagner’s dragon (*Wurri*) in *Siegfried* (1876), but to Wurm, the adviser to the devious and corrupt aristocrat in Verdi/Cammarano’s *Luisa Miller* (1849), a character also directly involved in marriage trickery. Any opera set in the time of the French Revolution and with this particular plot potentially recalls a rich set of intertexts<sup>8</sup>: Giordano/Illica’s *Andrea Chenier* (1896) about the indictment and death of a poet and his beloved at the hands of the Revolutionary Tribunal, not to mention von Einem/Bra-Cher’s *Dantons Tod* (1947), Benjamin/Cliffe’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1957), Poulenc/Bernanos’s *Les Dialogues des Carmelites* (1957), and Eaton/Creagh’s *Danton and Robespierre* (1978). Puccini even began an opera about Marie-Antoinette’s imprisonment, trial and execution (see *Greenfeld*, p. 182), but decided that the French Revolution was already an “over-exploited” subject<sup>9</sup> (*Ashbrook*, p. 97).

This turbulent period in history saw the revival and great success of the “rescue opera” genre, whose politics were useful for revolutionary purposes. Cherubini/Bouilly’s *Les Deux journées* (1800), about the escape of an aristocratic couple from political danger through class benevolence and egalitarianism (*Arblaster*, p. 48), is typical of the genre. *The Ghosts of Versailles* ends with the death of the historical Marie-Antoinette, but also with the rescue of the Almaviva household from revolutionary Paris and the shared spectral love of Beaumarchais and his Antonia. But what is striking about this postmodern opera is that it not only recalls

the rescue opera genre and all those grand operas on historical and political themes – from Auber/Scribe-Delavigne’s *La Muette de Portia* (1828) to Verdi/Piave’s *Simon Boccanegra* (1857) – but it equally obviously draws on popular cultural intertexts. Corigliano, who wrote the score for Ken Russell’s film *Altered States*, here also uses a cinematic musical technique of “cross-fading” to unite structurally the interconnecting levels of action (*Keller, p. 23*). And when the ghostly Beaumarchais tells the spirit of Marie-Antoinette that he will help her escape her historical fate and that they will live forever in the New World, in Philadelphia, the ghost of Louis XVI sardonically interjects: “If you call that living”, thereby recalling W.C. Fields’s own epitaph: “On the whole, I’d rather be in Philadelphia.”<sup>10</sup>

Popular television and film culture today is also the current home of melodrama, that radically polarized form of dramatic confrontation and purgation that was born in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Originally, as defined by Rousseau to describe his *Pygmalion* (1770), melodrama sought new emotional expressivity through the use of music combined with monologue and pantomime. The historical flourishing of this particular form in post-Revolutionary France<sup>11</sup> might have been one of its attractions for Hoffman and Corigliano, who, as contemporary opera creators, might also have been trying to find a form with democratic appeal in which to write about the same period in history and about the death of French royalty. Peter Brooks, in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, has argued that melodrama illustrates and contributes to the “epistemological” moment of the Revolution, one “that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the mouth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society” (*p. 75*). It is tempting to draw a parallel between the apocalyptic discourse that has formed and informed current discussions of postmodernity and Brooks’ articulation of this revolutionary moment, but the difference might be that today the stage (musical or dramatic) is less often the scene of the “escape” into the radical “excess” of melodrama, with its “mode of heightened dramatization” (*Brooks, p. ix*), its hyperbolic extravagance and concentrated intensity, and most of all its “moral manichaeism” (*p. 5*) through a polarization of ethical forces into good and bad: the site for this “escape” today is more likely television drama (including soap opera) and certain genres of Hollywood film. But it is with the self-conscious awareness of melodramatic entertainment as “escape” that Hoffman locates his melodrama specifically within the eighteenth-century reflexive and parodic opera-within-an-opera *A Figaro for Antonia* – Beaumarchais’ attempt to distract and entertain Marie-Antoinette.

Brooks points out that the “affective structure” of a form like melodrama, with its grandiose emotional states and vivid self-dramatizations, has much in common with the experience of dreams (*p. 35*). And it is perhaps not coincidental that critics have noted the importance of a kind of dream-logic, with elements of nightmare, to the effect of the spectral frame of *The Ghosts of Versailles* (*Kerner, p. 83*): the ghostly courtiers are restless; Marie-Antoinette is traumatized, reliving over and over the terror of her trial and death. Dream and nightmare conflate as fiction and history also meet in the re-enactment of that terror at the end of the opera.

So many of the conventional staples of melodramatic narrative are invoked in *Ghosts* that they become a major intertextual point of reference: against all historical evidence, Marie-Antoinette is turned into the very image of persecuted innocence (p. 20), wandering into the typical garden of innocence (p. 29) that Aguas Frescas has come to symbolize; the *topos* of the interrupted fete (p. 29) frames Begears's seeming triumph; the melodramatic public hearing that restores right (p. 37) is both evoked and ironized in the Revolutionary Tribunal trial of Marie-Antoinette.<sup>12</sup> In almost every scene, spectacular stage effects also recall those of melodrama (p. 46). All of the melodramatic bag of narrative tricks – mysteries of parentage, disguised identities, secret plots, occult power – also make their way into *Ghosts*, but appear under the sign of irony.

However, in the *A Figaro for Antonia* narrative, as in melodrama, the characters have no psychological depth; but where Brooks argues that, in melodrama, this is because they stand for pure psychic signs – Father, Daughter, Persecutor (pp. 35-36) – in the new opera, these very roles are ironized: part of the plot involves trying either to figure out or to hide the complex parentage of a daughter and a son. The Persecutor, as in Beaumarchais' play, masquerades as a Protector, and successfully fools everyone but Figaro. Moral epithets typical of melodrama ("That man is a saint") are attached to Begears, the hypocritical friend/enemy. Parodying the melodramatic villain – "a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice" (Brooks, p. 17) – Corigliano and Hoffman cast Begears as a character tenor and make enormous demands on the upper range of his voice." The histrionic acting style demanded of melodramatic villains as the expressionistic external-izations of their evil and excess (Brooks, p. 47) would seem to have guided director Colin Graham's conception of Graham Clark's Begears in the Met production. This is fitting for a character introduced by Beaumarchais himself within the opera as the "villain" of the piece, who himself openly admits he "can't wait to betray Almaviva": "It is true, Im low base, vile. But don't they know the king of beasts is the worm?" His "Aria of the Worm", with its defiant "Long live the worm" refrain, functions as the self-revealing soliloquy of melodrama: "It is the villain who most fully articulates the stark monochrome of his moral character, his polarized position in the scheme of things" (Brooks, p. 38). An active force, even the motor of plot Begears is the pure villain, reducing innocence to powerlessness through his incitement of the dangerous mob of Parisian women who are loud in their determination to have Marie-Antoinette's head.

The setting of the opera in the context of the French Revolution, however, is what makes *The Ghosts of Versailles* the operatic equivalent of what has been called postmodern "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon) – reflexive, parodic and contesting of the given narratives of History. The appearance of characters based on – and named as – actual people on stage is nothing new to opera, of course. And Hoffman's Beaumarchais does bear some resemblance to the actual, historical personage who wrote those plays and at least one libretto,<sup>14</sup> who was a secret agent for Louis XV and Louis XVI,<sup>15</sup> who was "a radical, but also an opportunist and an entrepreneur" (*Arblaster*, p. 23). But in the opera, his anti-aristocratic sentiments seem to have turned against him, for he has fallen in love with no less than the former Queen of France.<sup>13</sup>

The operatic ghost of Beaumarchais tries, not only to cheer Marie-Antoinette up, but to save her from her historical fate, to show her history “as it should have been”. He is stopped from doing so only by Marie-Antoinette herself. The librettist of *Ghosts*, however, could be said to have changed history in another sense. Whether the reasons be a feminist rewriting of history or simply sentimentality, the woman most historical accounts have presented as a frivolous, extravagant, imprudent Queen who contributed to the popular unrest of the Revolution is here re-visioned as a sympathetic victim of villainous evil and mob persecution. Her first aria in the opera juxtaposes her happy memories of Versailles (sung to a haunting chromatic theme, “Once there was a golden bird”) with her relived terror of her trial and execution (spoken harshly in *Sprechgesang* reminiscent of Berg’s *Lulu* – another ambiguous tale of a female as victim/victimizer). The historical pre-Revolutionary “Affair of the Diamond Necklace” (used to discredit the monarchy through accusations of Marie-Antoinette’s moral impropriety with a churchman) gets recoded into its rather more innocent sale to finance the rescue and escape of the imprisoned Queen.

As she watches *A Figaro for Antonia*, Marie-Antoinette identifies with the victimized young daughter, recalling her own arrival in Paris, lonely and homesick at age 14. Beaumarchais reminds her “Oh, how the people loved you” – setting up the contrast with the Begearss-instigated mob who will demand her head. She is obviously tempted by Beau-marchais’s offer to risk his soul to change history for her, but warns him: “It’s dangerous to change history.” To this Louis XVI responds: “It’s only an opera.” This single exchange, with its mixing of the historical and the reflexive, is emblematic of the historiographic meta-operatic postmodernism of *Ghosts* as a whole. Nevertheless, although the King’s humorous asides undercut Marie-Antoinette’s histrionic desire to live again (“Excessive in life, excessive in death”, he mutters), she remains touching in her vulnerability, both to the audience and to Figaro, whom she manages to convince to save her from mob (in)justice and an unfair trial. Her decision in the end not to be rescued, not to have history rewritten for her, but to accept her historical destiny, is attributed to her realisation that Beaumarchais’ love and art offer a way out of suffering “in endless night” through “forgiveness” as the “only way to freedom”. The clearly melodramatic plot ending of virtue rewarded and order restored is thus simultaneously invoked and “made strange”: reward comes, but only in the next world. What, by the end, seems to look less like a feminist re-visioning and more like a sentimental, nostalgic conclusion may well be the most complicitous aspects of this postmodern opera. Its critical and even commercial success might well be the result of this sentimental rewriting of history two hundred years after the fact. No one, to my knowledge, responded to this as a feminist statement.<sup>18</sup> One critic called the score “so fertile, so warmly tuneful, often so atonally wild, and just as often so disarmingly dizzy that you don’t have time to worry about dramatic motivation and other proprieties” (*Kerner, p. 83*). Perhaps, but, as with all postmodern works, the means of providing such access warrant some attention, if not always worry.”

This question of accessibility, important to the selling of novels and to the building of buildings too, is crucial to an expensive art like opera. This is what, I think, most hampers any radical potential of postmodernism in this art-form. Lindenberger’s final evaluation of what constitutes the postmodern is a more extreme and avant-garde one than my own, and perhaps

his view of the operatic may be more conservative than mine: “To the extent that the term ‘postmodern’ challenges most everything we associate with opera, from the performing personnel to the role of consuming audience, any operatic work that rigorously pursues a postmodern program must seek its audience, if it can, outside the opera house” (pp. 46-47). There is no doubt that postmodern opera – by either of our definitions – is taking place outside the opera house: in small theaters (Nic Cotham /Anne-Marie MacDonald’s *Nigredo Hotel*, 1992, a marriage between Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Jung’s psychology), at academic conferences (John Beckwith /James Reaney’s *In the Middle of Ordinary Noise...: an auditory masque*, 1992, on the life and work of literary theorist Northrop Frye), even theme parks (Robert Lepage, Laurie Anderson, and Brian Eno are working together on “The Real World”, an avant-garde theme park to open in Barcelona in 1995).

However, as the popularity of *The Ghosts of Versailles* shows, the postmodern may even be glimpsed at what one wag called the Metropolitan Opera Museum. Both Sellars’s updating of Mozart – an act that reveals less a “radical commitment to the work’s universality” (MacDonald, p. 707), than a historicizing interpretation in line with current cultural norms – and the new, filmic “realism” of recent (often filmed) productions might have been read as conservative moves, were they occurring in another art-form. But in opera, where acceptance of a norm artifice and convention has long guided audience expectation, new stagings and new operas too can play with a long history of parody and reflexivity, while introducing a historical dimension that may be less radical than inevitable. This is clearly not the “new noise” that Jacques Attali sees coming, one that “can neither be expressed nor understood using the old tools” (p. 733). It is rather through those very “old tools” that canny (commercial) complicity can and does co-exist with the critical re-visioning in opera’s postmodern moment.

## NOTES

- 1 Admittedly, this double-name referencing is awkward and untraditional. Throughout this article, however, the first name will refer to the composer of the music and the second to the librettist. This is a literary critic’s perhaps futile attempt to restore to the writer of the operatic text some sort of recognition, in the face of musicology’s seeming reverence for the composer alone. Where only one name appears, the composer has been responsible for the libretto as well.
- 2 Modernist literary texts – especially those of Thomas Mann – have been made into operas which could be seen as both modern (Benjamin Britten /Myfanwy Piper’s *Death in Venice*) and postmodern (Harry Somers / Rod Anderson’s *Mario and the Magician*). In Mann’s novel *Doktor Faustus*, Adrian Leverkühn writes a modern opera on *Love’s Labour’s Lost* that parodies nineteenth-century opera: parody, argues Leverkühn, is central to modern art, thereby articulating and illustrating Mann’s own belief and practice.
- 3 Nicholas Muni’s recent production for the Canadian Opera Company reflexively worked with this remark and kept Aiwa present on stage always – sitting in a director’s chair, playing with a model stage action.
- 4 Parodies of popular operas performed at the Paris Opera in the eighteenth century played at the theaters of the Parisian fairgrounds, the Theatre des Italiens and the Theatre de la Foire. See *Johnson*, p. 1388.
- 5 The following citations are from an interview with Jonathan Cott in 1985, printed in the notes to the Nonesuch CD recording of *Harmonielehre*, whose very title invokes Schoenberg’s 1910 study of harmony – which he dedicated to Mahler.
- 6 Figaro’s first aria is a parodic reworking and homage to Rossini /Sterbini’s „Largo al factotum” aria in // *Barbiere di Svegliata*; among the Mozartian echoes are those in the Aguas Frescas memories of the Countess about Cherubino

- and in the scene at the Turkish ambassador's party, where nineteenth-century "Turkomania" (a. k. a. orientalism) and Mozart / Stephanie's *Die Entführung aus dem Sera*<sup>7</sup> are both signalled and mocked through the singer Samira's comic complaining cavatina, partly sung in Arabic.
- 7 To help its audience's memory, the Met scheduled both *Le Nozze di Figaro* and // *Barbieri di Siviglia* in the same season as *Ghosts*.
- 8 See Noiray, pp. 366-71 on the many operas about the French Revolution written and performed in Paris at the time and on the changes in content and tone from 1790 to 1794. Not many of these have become part of the repertoire, however. Many were propagandistic but, as Noiray points out, «la Revolution represents l'un des temps les plus forts de la musique francaise» (p. 378).
- 9 This hasn't stopped contemporary directors from resituating operas set in other periods in the tense and dramatically suggestive time of the Revolution, of course. Frank Corsaro moved Prokofiev/Gozzi's *L'Amour des Trois Oranges* from 1761 to 1789 where it reflexively took place in a Paris street theater (*Conrad*, p. 294).
- 10 In the Met production, Beaumarchais complains that he loves a woman who "cares for me", and then pauses before adding: "not".  
This seems a patent allusion to the irony mark for a world that doesn't understand irony: the "not" made famous by the film, *Wayne's World*.
- 11 Opera also flourished in these years and became not an expensive and exclusive form of "museum culture", but a popular and increasingly bourgeois form of live entertainment. See *Arblaster*, p. 45. From performing one new opera a week before the Revolution, Paris theaters doubled or tripled their production with the opening of new houses and the end of the royal "privilege" to determine what would be put on stage. See Noiray for complete details.
- 12 Hoffman's use of the language of historical records for the trial scene could be read as a comment on melodrama as well. As Brooks says: "Like the oratory of the Revolution, melodrama from its inception takes as its concern and *raison d'être* the location, expression, and imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths" (p. 15).
- 13 By making Beaumarchais, the lover, a bass-baritone, they inverted the tradition of the tenor as hero/lover, but set up a tension: baritones who fall in love in opera are often ingeious and will be punished in the end (Dumas, p.90).
- 14 His libretto to Salieri's music for *Tarare* was political in theme: egalitarian, anti-clerical, contesting the abuses of power. See *Spinelli*, p. 1333. *Tarare* is also described by critics as aiming at a fusion of the tragic, the fantastic, and the comic – not a bad description of *The Ghosts of Versailles*. See *Noiray*, p. 363.
- 15 Louis XVI hired Beaumarchais to go to London to stop a libelous text about Marie-Antoinette from being published: given that he almost succeeded, in history, as in operatic fiction, he was almost her savior.
- 16 The historical Beaumarchais' play, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, with its attack on the aristocratic *droit de seigneur* and its elevation of merit – goodness and cleverness – over rank, had been banned by Louis XVI, though he did let the first play, *Le Barbier de Seville*, be put on at the theater at the Petit Trianon at Versailles, with Marie-Antoinette playing the heroine, and directed by the playwright.
- 17 As mentioned earlier, Beaumarchais refers to Marie-Antoinette by the affectionate Antonia, much to Louis XVI's irritation, but there is also an operatic echo here of the sacrificial Antonia in Offenbach /Barbier's *Les Contes d'Hoffman* – who dies in order to sing. The librettist's name (Hoffman) may not be utterly without relevance in this postmodern play with names.
- 18 There has been surprisingly little feminist response to opera in general, as many critics have recently noted. See, however, the important work of Clement and McClary.
- 19 See *Felsin*, p. 77, on the use of mass media representations within postmodern visual art as a means of providing (positive) access.

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