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MUSIC AND POETRY final RK

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Robert Kelly

SOME MATTERS OF MUSIC AND POETRY

Every child knows it. Hears human voices singing and the orchestra making sounds, hears one voice lifted out from others, singing a tune. “What is he saying?” the child asks.

There are operas I have listened to a dozen times without bothering my head about what he is ‘saying,’ that purring Fischer-Dieskau or radiant Corelli. Janacek’s *From the House of the Dead* I first heard, and many times heard, on a borrowed unlabeled tape—heard it dozens of times before I even learned what it was (though it clearly sounded like Janacek). What was wrong with me, that I took such delight in a plotless, wordless opera, where the shouted and chanted Czech was just more wonderful sound?

But I knew the true story of that opera. It wasn’t what Janacek had in mind, wasn’t the Dostoevsky novella, wasn’t Siberia. It was its own story, a story told exclusively by the sounds. It was the story Janacek’s genius compelled or permitted him to tell, the ‘real’ story of the opera. The story that happens in the head of the ignorant but fascinated listener.

I was a heretic. I came for the music.

Aristotle was perhaps wrong to downgrade *opsis*, spectacle, in his hierarchy of dramatic values. Nowadays opera seems to be sold as spectacle, presumably to an audience equally charmed by Adams as by Monteverdi as long as it's given something 'sumptuous' to behold. Personally, I think of this as the Barnum and Bailey approach to opera.

Wait, enough of my heresies though.

I am a writer, for and in my own practice, words are all-important. To be true to the words, their geneses, their currencies, sounds, shades, nuances, to listen to the words and follow where they lead me — that's the essence of my practice.

When the words come to a composer, let them come in the same way— let them lead to sounds, let sentences lead to song, the urgent paragraph or stanza lead to aria.

Let the words die into the music.

A poem never truly lives till it dies into the reader's sensorium, into the music, into the truly heard. That's the core of what I'm saying here.

Heraclitus left us a haunting fragment: *dying each other's life, living each other's death.*

And that is the relation that compels poetry in opera—the words beget the music and die into it, music fades away and leaves the words as tunes or tones or just some sense behind it.

And of course from music comes poetry, the unknown but vast number of poems that 'come from' rapt hearing of Chopin, Beethoven, Biber, Mahler, Palestrina, no music that has not cast its spell on poetry. I don't talk about it here because it's so obvious. Sometimes I think I would be silenced without music.

But that's music in general, and my sights at the minute are fixed on opera.

I've been impressed for years by the difference between song and opera, which offhand would seem much the same.

In a way, song is the very opposite of opera.

The greatest writer of lieder in our canon, Schubert, left dozens and dozens of songs (Think of The Linden Tree, The Hurdy-gurdy Man) where every syllable is distinct, and hearing the words is as easy, and important, as if the singer were speaking them to you alone. In fact, that privacy, the me-to-thee quality, is essential in Schubert.

But that is not the way of opera. Even Schubert's opera. Poem vanishes into song, the words take wing, their vocalic cores spread wide, their

consonants chipped away. And it is interesting that from the first centuries of opera down through Puccini, when words have to be understood if the drama is to be grasped at all, they're produced as recitative or outright spoken ("before him, all Rome trembled.")

I'm not saying that lexical incomprehensibility is the essence of opera — just think of the catalogue aria in *Don Giovanni*, or Baron Ochs' self-consolings in *Rosenkavalier*, where we get every word, and the punch-lines ring out. If you happen to know Italian. If you happen to know German. If you happen, in other words, not to be an ordinary listener, for whom *keine Nacht dir zu lang* is just a drunk passing out on his way down to low F.

I think about Wilhelm Müller, whose poems we never read in German class. Whose poems Schubert took and made immortal, unmasking the eternity hidden between the lines. The lines were doorways, and he went through. Bringing us with him.

I can't remember offhand the name of the Belgian fin-de-siècle poet whose words Schönberg transfigured in *Pierrot Lunaire*. His settings of those texts are remarkable critical acts in themselves, the way the poems are changed, compressed, made powerful by the curious fact that much of the text gets banished into regions of the voice where we can't follow, are there *sous-rature* so to speak, while what we can discern takes on power not just from the vocalism it allows, but in the way the

music focuses our attention on words that *do* stand up to thoughtful hearing.

Strauss had the good fortune to work intensely and interestingly for years with a very good poet indeed, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose work we did indeed read in German class (and whose “Lord Chandos’ Letter” is a Modernist masterpiece too little known hereabouts). But even that remarkable poet’s verse tended, and rightly so, to shimmer, to vanish into the ardent moonlight of Strauss’s music—think of the trio and duet that conclude *Rosenkavalier*, the most exalted music ever committed to women’s voices after Bellini. After the Marschalin’s half-spoken beginning, who cares, who dares, to interrupt the sublimity of those sounds in search of some verbal approximation of what those women are feeling, deciding, avowing? The music tells us all.

Alas for opera when it talks and forgets to sing, where interminable recitative replaces the rich entanglement of voices in their differences, their interplay with orchestral sounds. Alas for a culture where opera seeks to be relevant instead of being the gnomon against which relevance is measured. Or where opera carouses in opulence or grows sanctimonious with austerity.

Wagner is misread by those who think the gradual disappearance of of aria-singing in his later work intended the death of melody. His leitmotifs, dozens of them in the Ring, in *Parsifal*, are themselves melodies, tiny arias, and those efficient melodies, alone or in ever-

changing combinations, transformation, bring a ceaseless flow of song. *Endlose Melodie*, Wagner demanded, not merely endless sound.

Let's try to help current opera overcome its aesthetic timidity, to overcome its fear of the aria as being old-fashioned, unnatural—as if opera weren't the most unnatural art west of kabuki. Fleeing aria, some make the fatal blunder of fleeing melody with it — leaving not just opera but musical theater in general impoverished, given a little spasmodic life by rhythm and spectacle alone.

A poet thinks: if all goes well, maybe some of my words (words themselves, how dare I call them mine) will die into music. That's what I would call really living.

—RK, October 2014