

universality in a thoroughly historicised world. But it is in the marxist tradition that historicity in relation to need and to praxis, thus focusing the most insistent and abiding of human problems at the level of science, presents itself most forcibly. These issues may, almost certainly will, finally run beyond the competence of any thinking that could directly be called marxist, but, for the present, it is with reference to this area that they must be pursued. And it is the burden of these reflexions that the pursuit of a marxist framework in which there could be relevant and substantial discussion of human needs, objectivity and universality, is not an eccentric luxury vis à vis politics. Without it, there is no alternative to a continuance of purely rhetorical assemblages of universal claims, scientific method, and basic politics.

A Redeeming Occasion

by Hamish F. G. Swanston

Going to a performance of any opera anywhere—well, almost any opera and almost anywhere, not *Lucia di Lammermoor*, not Glyndebourne—is for me an entrance upon an occasion. An entrance I may make at each performance. An occasion not to be experienced by those who sit amidst contraptions which without a by-your-leave or a letter of introduction thrust the entire chorus and orchestra of La Scala into one's withdrawing room, and which are yet quite unable to bring Parsifal's heavenly voices descending from the ceiling.

This sense of occasion belongs not nearly so much as is popularly believed—by those, for example, who covered the great concrete staircase of the Metropolitan at Lincoln Center with rich red cloth—with chandeliers and plush of a vanishing past, but rather is to be discerned in a common expectation of audience and players and singers. 'It does me good to come here', said my mother during the interval of a recent Covent Garden performance, 'I don't often see so many people looking cheerful. It is not what television suggests to me that the world is like these days'.

Not that opera is to be thought escapist. Contrariwise. The 19th Century convention, for example, of a plot moving along by quick melodramatic incident, like falling in love or shooting a man down, with, before and after the incident, extended arias of comment and interpretation, seems to me not a whit artificial but exactly like the

processes of my ordinary living. Not, of course, that I fall in love all that often, or that I have actually shot any of my enemies, but I do spend ages considering what I should do, and then of a sudden act on an impulse, and then spend further ages wondering if I have done the right thing. Here as at so many other points the operatic structure seems to fit reality quite precisely.

There are a host of such instruments available to the composer as he works within the operatic tradition. The forms are perfectly adapted to the articulation of how he sees things to be. The quartet, for example, may be managed to suggest not the coming together of persons but their severance, not the harmony of a situation but its tugs and tensions. There is a stupendous moment in Verdi's *Don Carlos* when, while the Eboli expresses her remorse for bringing the queen's casket to the king, Philip acknowledges the injustice of his suspicions, Elizabeth laments her friendless life in an alien country, and Posa determines that the time has come for him to sacrifice himself for the nation. There is perhaps an even more wonderful example of Verdi's craftsmanship in these matters at the last act of *Rigoletto*. The convention is made to hold irreconcilable emotions together. Verdi suggests at once the diversities of character and the singleness of doom. There is some rightness, therefore, in the old staging of such things with the four singers ranged along the footlights, for by this device we recognise the operative duality of each character isolated by the situation and each voice highly aware of the others. The formal structure allows full expression of each individual emotion. We are, indeed, confronted with an open affirmation that emotions, even perhaps our own emotions, matter. And this is another important element in the occasion.

It is difficult enough, of course, for any of us to actually say that our emotions are really important, but for the nicest as well as the nastiest of us something like that is the case. To most of us, therefore, the oddity in *Tristan*, if we can be brought by a good performance to recognise it, is not the hugeness of the passions shewn us, or the collapse of a kingdom in a clash of love and loyalty, or the final deaths all over the stage, the oddity is simply that it needs a magic potion to bring all this about when we all know from everything that Wagner has shewn us that love was going to bring about its own tragedy. And if this sense of emotional values derives from some primitive response to the rhythm of a savage dance, it develops into something not to be put aside by any snide anthropological categorisings. The appreciation of an opera as revealing me to myself through my emotions widens often enough into a revelation of others. At no time, not even at the kiss of peace while the liturgical guitars are strumming, do I find it so immediately possible to talk to the stranger next to me.

Even in the most inauspicious surroundings of the Hynes Auditorium in Boston where a sadly depleted Metropolitan cast and or-

chestra gave a poor performance of *Fidelio* to an audience sitting in expensively uncomfortable folding chairs, this sense of communion could come through. An unknown dowagerly lady turned to me at the interval with 'Well, aren't you glad to be here?' And we settled into talk of the great cry '*O Freiheit, kehrest du zurück?*'

It is within this context that we ought to speak of the final burst of applause that provokes six-monthly annoyance among gentlemen who write to *The Times*. Opera audiences are notoriously demonstrative—and not only those in Naples or Hamburg, where roudy booing is common—they find themselves belonging to the occasion and they therefore refuse to allow the pit and the proscenium to cut them off from participation. They clap, almost always, before the last note sounds, not because they are wilfully disregarding the composer's final wishes, but because, as any sane composer knows well enough, they want to have a share in the company of harmony before the door in the hill closes. The clap is as a rush into *Deo Gratias*, an expression not of a thankfulness that the event is over but of a determination not to let the glory fade.

It is, therefore, somehow appropriate that opera singers, Italian singers especially, Italian tenors particularly, and Signor Bergonzi exemplarily, should reserve their intensest emotional response for these plaudits, rather than for the love, danger and death of the action. The singer is making his own life and that of the audience continuous with the opera. And he is doing so at the moment of crisis when the music has ceased and the lights have come up and the illusion has ended. The singer and the audience are keeping hold on the reality created among them. (It is not the same thing, of course, when a singer attempts to grab for himself the continuing communion of the House at the self-centred antic of the press conference on the yacht.)

Where may we discern the source of that sense of occasion manifest in the response of audience and singer? Not, certainly, in the audience. We may have to ready ourselves for the experience, perhaps don ritual garb and eat special foods, but we do not make the event for ourselves. Nor, I think equally certainly, in the singers. A good number of opera-goers have convinced themselves that the joy is in the singing, in the high tension of the note gracefully achieved. They go, they say, for the quality of the sound. Of course the singers are important. They can ruin or rescue a moderately-made opera. Puccini relies almost wholly on a few musical tricks and a great soprano to get him through. But sound, like patriotism, is not enough. Madame Callas' revival of *Medea* will not ensure that opera's place in the lists once she has decided not to sing it again. And there are certainly few singers of her greatness, so it would be folly to rely upon such sound for the survival of the art. Singers are more properly understood as mediators of the composer's version of his world to the audi-

ence. It is through sympathetic obedience to the composer that a singer may come to be received by audiences as the Marschallin or Boris of their time. And that should be satisfaction enough for them. For the sense of occasion arises when an audience perceives that the composer is establishing values that men might live by if they had the creative courage. The singer shews what the composer means for them.

If at the end of *Don Giovanni* we are left wondering what it is all about (and Mozart's recourse to a moralising finale suggests that he knew this piece was somewhat difficult to place), we are generally able to appreciate the reference of what has been going on in Mozart's operas to our own lives. After *Figaro* we see that neither the servant nor the lord offer us suitable terms to live by. Figaro's cheeky determination to defeat the upper classes brings him at last to the claim that he is himself of noble birth with a birthmark to prove it. The Count's single eye for the girls brings him to a whirligig of sexuality in which even the boy Cherubino tempts him. We realise at the ending that it is the ever fixed mark of the Countess' devotion to which we are directed. Figaro's cock-crowing and the Count's bluster are stilled by the Countess' loving kindness. She bestows integrity. And we see how it is that she can do so. After the *Magic Flute* we do not have to fuss about whether Mozart and Schikaneder changed their plot half-way through. We appreciate their directing us to the common truth not commonly realised that we may make some great errors in our estimates of those we first trust, and that from the outside almost every institution, especially an academic or religious institution, looks pretty menacing, however great the wisdom of those who serve it. And then *Giovanni*, if it does not mean that we are to be punished for our sins (and few of us can feel quite easy at the Commendatore's pious revenges), may mean that we are ever frustrated by our efforts at sin—we never see Giovanni successful in an amorous enterprise, every attempt brings its own peculiar retribution.

Perhaps all this puts rather more emphasis on the libretto than musicians and audiences—thought not composers, who are usually extremely careful about the words they are to set, and many of them could be perfectly paraphrased in the expression of Raymond Leppard about realising Venetian opera: 'If it's got a rotten libretto, don't bother'—are wont to do. Certainly the primary communicator of intention must be the music, and there are even times when the music tells the audience not to trust the words. *Così fan tutte* is a striking example of an opera in which the audience is let into the irony not only of the title but of the whole exhibition of society by the subtle inflexion of the music. There are unpleasant and deaf persons who, not expecting from this piece more than a few skilfully deployed conventions in an elegant Trianon mode, are prepared to grin throughout the lovers' muddles. But a man with half an ear should be able to realise the difference between the easy flutters of Dorabella and the passion

of Fiordiligi, and to sense that only when the subalterns are disguised do the couples come appropriately together. The conventions look rather more menacing when the serious-hearted Fiordiligi and Fernando have to return to their original partners. Mozart and da Ponte certainly were offering something more than an elegant trifle.

Such values in the text and music can come across to the audience only if the producer exercises precise attention to what librettist and composer have given him. Often a performance collapses because the producer has not been careful enough of an opera's peculiar demands. Every opera-goer will have his disappointed tales of a reluctant dragon in *Idomeneo*, a Tosca who simply walked off San Angelo's ramparts onto the top of a waiting double decker bus, a Brunnhilde who lay shieldless and obtrusively feminine to be mistaken by Siegfried for a fellow knight, a Salome who didn't dance and was rewarded by an equally unconvincing head on her platter. And sometimes the whole production is a bosh shot. At Covent Garden last season there was an *Owen Wingrave* which missed everything that Hannover discovered this autumn. And a series of sluggish performances of the Ring at Bayreuth these last years demonstrated the proper vitality of the Sadlers' Wells cycle. When, however, a producer does take pains, the effect is, of course, commensurably stunning. As at Peter Hall's production of *The Knot Garden* in which every singer acted every moment and made a barely endurable harmony of their tangled relations. Or the Munich *Ariadne auf Naxos* whose lightness lifted the heart until Dionysus was recognised by all of us. Or the Hamburg *Aida* where the vengefulness of the priests and the humanity of Radames were plain as the ragged remnant of the Ethiopian army dragged itself across the stage to the ironic blare of the Triumphal March. No shade of Caracalla or the equally elephanted Cincinnati here. Or, a tinier example, the 1969 Munich *Figaro* when Herr Fischer-Dieskau hit not the lock but his thumb in his Countly unaccustomedness in wielding a hammer.

The composer may well have to depend for the communication of his estimate of the world on the sensitivity and intelligence with which a producer manages a detail. At the end of *Rheingold*, for example, the gods go in procession to their new fortress, Valhalla. They have purchased security for a while by fraud, robbery, and violence. But who is to accuse the gods? Not the Rhinemaidens who taunted the dwarf with their sexuality, not the dwarf who used the ring to tyrannise over his fellows, not the giants who fell to murderous quarrelling over the gold hoard. Only the trickster Loge sees the end towards which the gods are pacing and can pause to recognise their guilt. But after his muttered expression of his shame to be their companion and his threat to burn their fortress and them in it, we are diverted by the wailing of the Rhinemaidens and the boasts of Wotan. The only way Wagner's moral sanction against these gods can be made is for Loge

to hold back from crossing with them into the fortress. If the producer lets Loge step on the rainbow bridge the meaning of the scene is violated. And the audience will not understand anything of the value-system present throughout the Ring right up to Brunnhilde's calling for Loge to set fire to the walls of Valhalla. It is not mercy, as in *Figaro*, but justice which love excites in this opera. As the lovers burn on the warrior's pyre, as the dwarf drowns in the flooding river, as Wotan's walls turn to ash, the ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens.

Wagner, of course, has willed the end of this world as strongly as he wills the end of Tristan's world. We feel this from the beginning. Verdi did not think it necessary to forward the final emptiness. The world would come to nothing by sheer force of fate. He offers a different order of the world.

Writing in 1867 to the Director of the French Opera, Verdi said that in making his revisions of *Don Carlos* he had 'struck out anything purely musical' because he wanted this to be 'an opera which means something'. Verdi's meaning was always, as Strepponi well knew, that of a man 'not an outright atheist, but a very doubtful believer'. He was, she remarked, one of those who are 'happier believing nothing'. It is not only the final uncertainty of the *Requiem* after the ferocity of the *Libera me*, nor Aida singing at her death: '*O terra addio, addio valle di pianti*', nor Iago proclaiming: '*La morte e nulla*', but his whole musical offering which prepares us for his letter to the Contessa Maffei on the death of her lover:

I think that life is the most stupid of all things and, even worse, useless. What are we doing? What have we done? What will we do? After considering all, the answer is humiliating and very sad:

Nothing!

That *Nulla!* strikes as fearsomely as Wagner's call for *Das Ende*. And nothing of Catholic Italy could convince Verdi of any christian order. He would write a Requiem but not suppose that it would do for a Mass, he would drive his mistress Strepponi to church but not go in himself, he would delight in the rascal friar of *Forza del Destino* but perceive that it was the priests of *Nabucco*, and *Aida* and *Don Carlos* who refused pity to the destitute, the weak and the suppliant. His operas offer the nothingness of existence within which we may not be happy. For Verdi love is the source not of mercy or of justice but of honour. Those who would retain some hope in life should not go to *Ernani*.

That such diverse values may be presented with equal operatic force is evident. It should be evident, too, that an audience should come through such presentations to realise that the operatic form commonly makes an affirmation that something matters. That it is possible to speak of the world within operatic terms and not trivialise it.

The recognition of the composer's values is obviously, however much we may delight in any of them, not enough for the structuring of our lives to be immediately possible. Wallace Stevens' question is pertinent here :

How mad would we have to be to say, 'He beheld
An order and thereafter he belonged
To it?'

We cannot make from our higgledy-piggledy existence a life of total response to the occasion simply by observing the occasion. How do we make our entrance upon the brave new world?

I have suggested that it is the coming together of the formal structure of the music, the composer's conspiracy with the librettist in presenting a viable order of values, and the faithfulness of producer and singers to this order, which convinces an audience that they are to share in the occasion. An incident from one opera, not chosen wholly at random, of course, may show how an entrance may be made upon the occasion.

Everyone, I suppose, acknowledges that one of the great moments of operatic experience is the sounding of the trumpet in Act II of *Fidelio*. The trumpet announces the coming of the Minister just when the prison governor, Pizarro, is about to murder the manacled Florestan. There is a deliberate pre-echo of the Last Trump in the midst of human action. At the sound Pizarro himself exclaims in eschatological terms: '*Höll und Tod*', the jailer Rocco recognises the *dies irae* and the necessity for final loyalty; '*O fürchterliche Stunde, O Gott, was wartet mein?*', and Florestan and Leonora, the reunited husband and wife, sing of '*himmlisches Entzücken*' and '*namenlose Freude*'. The scene is wholly one of divine judgment. This everyone experiences. What everyone does not perhaps notice is the oddity of having the trumpet sound a second time. Surely one Last Trump is enough? We have seen it to be at any rate enough to cause a divine reversal of the action.

A repeat in music brings us back to the original moment. We may then be led out from the same place. The first moment here is one at which the divine judgment sounds for all. The first response of each of the characters is to recognise the intervention as divine. They pause. Pizarro with the dagger raised in the act of murder, Leonora with a pistol in her hand ready to shoot the governor, and Rocco wavering uncertain between them. We all need time to take this in. How have they been discovered, we ask. And having looked we ask Rocco's questions: '*O was ist das gerechter Gott?*' The trumpet sounds again. We look again. Pizarro, still holding the dagger, curses the hour, Leonora has flung away the pistol, the intervention has shewn her that she has no business taking that way out of her situation, she acknowledges that God has saved her husband, and Rocco is de-

termining to serve the tyrant no longer. The single temporal moment of the trumpet has thus two aspects placed sequentially in the music so that we shall be able to appreciate both. The recognition of the divine and the realisation of the significance of the divine for each of the characters, take place one after the other but are aspects of our response to the single situation. The repeat is Beethoven's means of expressing the complex structure of the moment. It is a device the reverse of Verdi's use of the quartet in *Don Carlos*.

It is the moment of Leonora's throwing away of the pistol, the moment when she recovers her appreciation of divine effectiveness among men, that declares her to be redeemed. She has been first seen bringing on more chains to bind the prisoners, being sharp about money matters, deceiving Marcellina. She moves in this scene from her boy's disguise, to the character of a raging woman, and then to that of a divine messenger. In our 1814 version, but not in the 1805-6 versions, Florestan in his cell has a vision of his wife as an angel leading him to freedom. When she comes she brings other hints of the divine order. She persuades Rocco to join her in giving Florestan bread and wine, and his response is of a thankfulness that recognises the giver as sent by God. The connection of a rescue from death, a divine gift, and human community, is presented in fully eucharistic terms. Florestan eating and drinking in the presence of death until the trumpet sound suggests the Corinthian celebration 'until he come'.

In the train home, or at a second performance, we can look more closely at other aspects of the opera. From the trumpet scene we may be retrospectively aware of the strange heavily marked knocking at the very beginning of the opera. Jacquino, Rocco's assistant, goes twice to the door to answer the insistent knocks in the music. Whoever knocked the first time is not seen by the audience. At the second time Jacquino lets in Leonora. Are both the same knocking and are we meant to note a formal anticipation of the trumpet incident? The first knock may announce the entry of the divine upon the action and the second Leonora's function as divine messenger. And then there are other messengers to be considered. Immediately upon our appreciation of the trumpet moment—unless the stage-hands and the wretched 'traditionalists' demand *Leonora III* at this point—we are aware of the forces of light, and brilliantly aware in the present Covent Garden staging. The chorus of ordinary folk, like *chorus angelorum* sing of The Day, 'Heil sie dem Tag', and 'at the command of the best of kings' the Minister releases those that sat in darkness, while everybody joins in the proclamation of the perfection of God's justice: 'Gerecht O Gott, ist dein Gericht'.

Dr Philip Barford in the *Beethoven Companion* declares that 'Beethoven believed in Freedom and in God, and like many others in his day and ours saw no reason to waste time saying what he meant

by these terms'. We may understand his meaning at the end of *Fidelio* where everything is of God.

Gradually through the action of the opera all human values have been called in question. Rocco has learnt to throw away the bag of gold, Marcellina has been undeceived about human handsomeness, Pizarro's trust in power has brought him to prison, Leonora's reliance on will and desire has been shattered by the trumpet sounding, the Minister's authority has been put aside as the townfolk condemn Pizarro and Leonora releases Florestan. Each one has become not an individualist agent but a messenger of the divine for the others. When Florestan rises from the grave they all share the glory. Every *Fidelio* is vindicated. The producer must see to it that Jacquino takes his Marcellina by the hand, and every prisoner is welcomed into that community of freedom for which he prayed in the prison yard.

On hearing a man's plans for the education of his children, Benjamin Jowett commented: 'Is life to be all art and culture and music? —poor people, poor people'. Such a way left out the desirable strife, he said, of coming through the love of man to attain the love of God. But it is through music that Beethoven shows this desirable strife of will and intellect opening upon the love of man. And through music that he shows further that not mercy only, not justice, not honour only, but each of these and more is not to be attained but received from a loving God.

We are brought in this opera to the final wonder through a series of doors, from the street into the House, from the auditorium onto the stage, from the singspiel into the opera, and all the time our hopes have widened. We may have begun in expectation of what Evelyn termed 'a most magnificent and expensive diversion' but we have been brought through a comedy of mistaken identity, and a triumph of courage, to a reconciliation of love. What we come to at last is a sense of each other. We may go out from the opera into the foyer and thence into the street to be one with every other.

Opera, that turning of the musicians in the Venetian Republic from the eternities of the Church to the mutabilities of the Canal, has itself become a way of theologising, of saying something of the divine action among men, of actualising for the audience a redeeming occasion of community.