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THE POLITICAL USES OF OPERA IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

"Music", Crane Brinton once wrote, "is of all the arts the most difficult to fit into a synthesis at bottom sociological. Possibly, music is above sociology... The French Revolution was not a revolution in music ... The Frenchmen, all minor people, Grétry, Méhul, Gossec, Gaveaux - wrote operas and provided the music for the 'chants nationaux' of revolutionary propaganda, but always in the style of their unrevolutionary predecessors" [1]. Professor Brinton, one of America's important historians, has been among the few who in recent decades have reappraised and reinterpreted the French Revolution in the light of modern political and socio-economic thought. Unfortunately, in musical matters, he, like many a fellow historian, relied on the traditional musicological view that, except for Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the late eighteenth century offers little worthy of detailed consideration.

Strangely enough, the entire history of opera in eighteenth century Europe contradicts Professor Brinton's proposition that " possibly music is above sociology". For it was in the eigtheenth century that opera became a bloodless battle ground reflecting socio-political rather than intrinsically musico-dramatic forces. As d'Alembert remarked in his essay on the freedom of music, by 1760 opera buffa partisans were readily identified with republicanism or, for that matter, atheism [2]. Similarly, when Gluck in 1774 used the dedicatory preface to his "Iphigénie en Aulide" to tell the king of France that he would do well to emulate the example of the ancient Greeks who considered the arts as "precious links in the chain of politics", he made no secret of his awareness of the potential of opera as a political weapon. Not one to limit himself to words alone, Gluck concluded his "Iphigénie" with a rousing battle song "Partons, volons à la Victoire", for unisone chorus with drum accompaniment [3]. Whether or not the composer had Rousseau's recommendation in mind that spectators should be turned into active participants in dramatic performances, in accordance with Spartan and Genevese precedents [4], this astonishing Chorus uncannily anticipates subsequent revolutionary usage. Inevitably, Gluck's essentially aristocratic audience was totally bewildered by such an unprecedented ending, and the composer found it expedient to substitute quickly a finale from his earlier "Paride e Elena". But even this temporary retreat did little to affect his growing influence with the many artists and intellectuals who made "revolution that was accomplished before it occurred" and without which, as Chateaubriand shrewdly observed, the political revolution could not have materialized. That Gluck remained nevertheless identified with the queen's party at court is typical of a period in which paradox and progress went often hand in hand.

The ingenuity with which Mozart used his mature Italian operas to advocate socio-political change has been amply documented. But it may bear reiteration that "Don Giovanni", hailing a group of masked strangers to the strains of martial music with the slogan "Viva la Libertá" was as politically "relevant" in his time as were the women's liberation heroines of "Le Nozze di Figaro" and "Cosî fan tutte". Needless to say, Mozart's eager response to the general sense of freedom that animated the enlightened rule of Marie-Antoinette's remarkable brother Joseph II never impinged upon the subtle restraints that were so basic to his superior artistry [5]. Nor did Mozart deal with issues such as these theoretically, let alone ideologically, like Beaumarchais whose "Marriage of Figaro" had offered him his first socio-political platform [6]. The Viennese Freemáson simply shared the Salzburg youngster's instinctive mistrust of the Colloredos of this world. Beaumarchais, on the other hand, haunted but undaunted

by Suard, the royal censor, prefaced his "Tarare", composed by Salieri in 1787, with a manifesto addressed to "opera subsribers who would like to like opera", that summarized the post-Gluck situation sharply and succinctly [7].
Proclaiming himself totally uninterested in opera as a special prerogative of the leisure class Beaumarchais speaks from the perspective of one who has witnessed a growing "general desire to enlarge thought and intelligent research and to increase the happiness of all by the use of reason". He hails what he calls a "happy kind of crisis" that has people concerned and agitated, ever ready to innovate and reform. Such an era of rapid change no longer has a place for opera houses that are, in the words of Voltaire, "but a social meeting place where one goes on certain days, without quite knowing why". By the same token, the time has come for musical drama dominated by a "great philosophical idea", in the case of "Tarare" the democratic maxim with which the opera ends: "Man! Thy merit on the earth,

Does not depend upon thy birth:

It springs from character alone".

Within two years after Salieri and Beaumarchais exploded their operatic bombshell political philosophy yielded the political action. As Arnold Hauser has said, the real aim of the Revolution was not "the participation in the enjoyment of art of the classes excluded from privileges of culture, but the alteration of society, a deepening of the feeling of community and the arousing of an awareness of the achievements of the revolution" [8].
In other words, the arts were made to serve the cause of politics. But if this attitude pertained to the arts in general, opera gained very special significance in the eyes of the Revolution's political leaders because they saw in it the modern equivalent of the public drama of classical antiquity. Shortly after the storming of the Bastille, Gluck's ideal of 1774 was well on its way toward socio-political reality.
Once its potential as an instrument of politics was officially recognized, opera necessarily went through some drastic music-dramatic changes. This is not to say that the Italianate variety favored by the old regime was left without worthy successors. On the contrary, the artistic ideals of Piccinni clearly influenced respected composers like Grétry, Dalayrac, Devienne, Della-Maria, Kreutzer and Martini. But while their ingratiating tunes satisfied the nostalgia of many a reluctant republican, it was the post-Gluck school of Méhul, Lesueur, Cherubini, Berton, and Catel that received both official encouragement and the enthusiastic applause of the new public that filled the excellent Théâtre Feydeau and its counterpart, the Théâtre Favart, night after night, while the Opéra, a persistent hotbed of royalism, lapsed into stagnation.
Meanwhile, the Revolution managed to turn all of Paris into one huge outdoor stage. A provision for public festivities designed to arouse and unite public opinion had been written into the constitution as early as 1791. But it was only during the so-called Terror that tout Paris participated in a veritable avalanche of events of this type: funeral processions for Jacobin heroes, triumphal celebrations of republican accomplishments and, last but not least, outdoor religious festivities, crowned in 1794 by the „Fête de l'Etre Suprême", mounted in the Champ-de-Mars by David, the director-general of this mammoth artistic enterprise.
The technical challenges of these novel "complete works of art" fired the inspiration of a whole host of young artists, foremost among them the composers of the post-Gluck school whose often brilliant solutions understandably influenced the more traditional operatic fare as well. This is how wind and percussion instruments, but sparingly used in the past, began to dominate operatic orchestration; how organically conceived ensemble and choral scenes began to displace the previously ubiquitous aria; above all,

this is how the classicistic tragédie lyrique was superseded by a new genre of opéra comique that presented human figures of flesh and blood in realistic situations, bravely facing individual hatreds and adverse social forces, because they were sure that in the end virtue would prevail. And so it did, as witnessed by the countless "rescue" operas that moved the hearts of thousands during the Revolution and still aroused the undivided enthusiasm of Beethoven.

Never before in French history had so much music appealed to so many. In 1791 when Gluck's "Iphigénie en Aulide" was played in direct competition with its spoken counterpart, the opera attracted much larger audiences [9]. Indeed, it didn't take long for operatic attendance to become a symbol of republican fervor. By 1794 the Opéra-Comique took in nearly 682,000 pounds in daily ticket receipts, while annual subscriptions, once the mainstay of operatic income, declined to some 7,500 pounds from a pre-revolutionary high of 450,000 pounds [10].

"I started from the conviction", Beaumarchais wrote in his preface to "Tarare", "that the public cannot err". Twelve years later Méhul, the Revolution's operatic favorite, echoed this thought in a preface of his own. When his much delayed "Ariodant" was finally presented, he offered it to public opinion as the sole arbiter in both artistic and political matters. During the preceding decade, especially in the course of the fateful years 1793 and 1794, public opinion had, of course, been thoroughly guided, goaded and monitored. Méhul's "Mélidore et Phrosine", for example, could be performed only after the word "liberté" had been inserted repeatedly in the text [11]. The first performance of his "Adrien" announced in 1792, was postponed several times until 1799 when the triumph of an emperor aroused no longer serious objections [12]. Méhul accepted such interference and delay quite readily, no doubt in the sincere belief that censorship was a legitimate function of the unprecedented importance the Revolution accorded his art. Indeed, it was not the so-called Terror, which gave at least temporary "power to the people", that shook Méhul to the core of his moral and artistic convictions but the Thermidorian reaction. Unlike his friend Cherubini, he never managed to find his way with the "golden youth" of the Directoire nor, for that matter, with the non-ideological pomp and circumstance of the Napoleonic era. The citoyen Méhul had been the musical incarnation of the élan terrible that typified the radical, if but temporary, transformation of French society under the impact of Jacobin ideals. The rapid rise to power of the bourgeoisie after 1794, and its eventual surrender to the authoritarian genius of Napoleon, on the other hand, deprived a composer of Méhul's political notions not only of devoted audiences but also, and much more tragically, of his basic sources of inspiration. A fellow composer like Lesueur responded to the momentary needs of 1793 by composing a unisone chorus for the Jacobin bandits of "La Caverne", yet a decade later gladly accepted the directorship of Napoleon's chapel. Not so Méhul. In „Mélidore et Phrosine" he had denounced inherited rights and the arrogance so often connected with authority derived from title alone. Thirteen years later, long since heart-broken over the rampant materialism that had taken hold of France so quickly after 1794, he produced what was to be for all intents and purposes his final artistic testament: "Joseph", the story of the biblical lad who repaid injustice with magnanimity.

That some forms of operatic censorship persisted even after 1791, when the freedom of the theater was written into law, was, of course, not unrelated to the authorities' unswerving faith in the moral powers and hence the political implications of musical drama. But there was also the rather obvious problem of minimal standards of good taste, once any citizen with sufficient means and in good political standing could open his own theater. As I have pointed out elsewhere, many of the new theatrical entrepren-

eurs "catered to the ever growing quest for popular shows in which the circus elements often outweighed the feeble remnants of operatic tradition" [13]. A case-in-point is that of an extravaganza by Leonard Bourdon entitled "Le Tombeau des Imposteurs et l'inauguration du Temple de la Vérité", which in December 1793, as the Terror gained momentum, offered a staged parody of a Roman Catholic Mass that poked musical fun at the "Pater Noster", while presenting grotesque renditions of pieces by the citoyen Grétry who happened to be old enough to have enjoyed a good deal of success prior to the Revolution [14]. Such ludicrous attempts to cater to the lowest instincts of the mob quickly aroused the powers-that-be. On December 22, 1793, Robespierre and Barrère released the following statement:

"The Committee of Public Safety anxious to discourage all counter-revolutionary maneuvers designed to disturb public tranquility through the renewal of religious quarrels, in its determination to enforce the decree for the protection of religious peace and freedom issued by the National Convention on the sixteenth Frimaire, herewith prohibits presentation in the theater, the opera, and elsewhere, of the piece entitled 'Le Tombeau des Imposteurs et l'inauguration du Temple de la Vérité' as well as similar pieces liable to produce the same results, under the penalties listed in the preceding decrees aimed at those who abuse the theater for the promotion of views inimical to the Revolution" [15].

Needless to say, the public was subject to close supervision no less than theater directors and opera singers. Thus, on September 21, 1793, a secret police agent reported: "Last night I went to the theater in the Rue Feydeau, which gave a piece entitled 'L'Officier de Fortune'; the spectators greeted all patriotic references with the greatest possible enthusiasm" [16].

Unfortunately, as the Abbé Barthélemy observed shortly before the Revolution in his highly influential treatise on ancient Greek culture, "it is much more difficult to reform a nation than to police it" [17]. In the wake of the Thermidorian reaction the practical implementation of the Platonic notion that music in general, opera in particular, could be used effectively for purposes of social engineering was rapidly superseded by mere lip service, on the one hand, and, on the other, the romantic fantasies of increasingly alienated artists. Assertions like Grétry's that according to "all earliest legislation and moral philosophies ... harmony alone ... can transform man into a being capable of sharing with others life in the same society" [18], were but faint echoes of the action-oriented pronouncements of a Danton who supported the political uses of opera in the firm belief that "exaltation is what makes the building of republics possible". While it is true that the post-Thermidorian regimes continued to favor opera, they did so largely because they deemed it an intrinsic aspect of their "bread and circus" approach to social problems. What they looked for in dramatic art, whether spoken or sung, was not political activism but political neutrality combined with an emotional appeal strong enough to divert public attention from the socio-political realities of the day.

The first operatic masterwork fully responsive to this fundamental change in attitude was Cherubini's "Les deux Journées", based on what Goethe regarded as the best libretto ever written. Characteristically, however, this brilliant exercise in middle class esthetics enjoyed its greatest and longest success in Germany where a Schelling could proclaim with impunity that "the ideal drama is divine worship" [19]. The Napoleonic era found its ideal drama instead in Spontini's "Vestale", just as bourgeois France thereafter was to recognize the embodiment of her dramatic aspirations in Meyerbeer. Romantic Germany, on the other hand, having agreed with Carl Maria von Weber that

"what love is to man, music is to the arts and to mankind, for it is actually love itself"[20], had little reason to question the inevitable Wagnerian conclusion that, if the essence of music, like that of Christianity, was love, the musical drama might as well replace traditional worship altogether in a nation of poets and musicians, slated by providence to redeem a wicked world from the deadly evil of materialism.
"No man can give what he has not got", A.B. Marx wrote in 1854, "nor can any era. Art is always and everywhere the secret confession and immortal monument of its time"[21]. As individual artists, Méhul, Cherubini and their revolutionary brothers-in-arms, though by no means "minor people", were certainly lesser gods. But if ever opera reflected the grand aspirations of a dynamic era, it did so in their best works. Without the musico-dramatic revolution they wrought „Fidelio" could not have been written. But that revolution, in turn, could not have been wrought, had it not been for a group of radical politicians, children of a classicistic age, who valued musical drama as an effective propaganda fidei, a unique key to the reign of virtue in their ideal republic.

Footnotes

1 C. Brinton, "A Decade of Revolution 1789-1799", New York/London 1934, 253.
2 Cf. R. Rolland, "Musiciens d'autrefois", Paris 1912, 213.
3 The unusual three-bar patterning of Gluck's chorus was to become a characteristic trait of many Revolutionary Hymns, including Méhul's famed "Chant du Départ".
4 Cf. J. J. Rousseau, "Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles", Oeuvres complêtes, Paris 1824, II, 176.
5 Cf. A. L. Ringer, "Mozart and the Josephian Era", Current Musicology 9, 1969, 164.
6 An interesting exchange took place recently in Music and Letters. F. Noske in an article entitled "Social Tensions in 'Le nozze di Figaro'", had argued that "Mozart only registers the social climate without taking sides". Cf. M & L 50, 1969, 61. B. Brophy in "'Figaro' and the Limitation of Music" reasserted her view that "Figaro" is "a bloodless-revolutionary opera arguing for reform of the social system ..." Cf. M & L 51, 1970, 27.
7 All quotations are from the English translation in "Pleasures of Music", ed. by J. Barzun, New York 1951, 228-235.
8 A. Hauser, "The Social History of Art", New York 1951, II, 638.
9 Journal encyclopédique et universel 2, 1791, 492.
10 A. Pougin, "L'Opéra-Comique pendant la Révolution", Paris 1891, 124.
11 As reported by the librettist, Arnault, who was told: "it is not enough that a work is not against us ... Bring your opera into harmony with our institutions". Quoted in A. Pougin, "Méhul", Paris 1893, 87. In just three months time in 1793 censors reviewed 151 theatrical pieces; thirty-three pieces were rejected, twenty-five corrected. Cf. St. Petit, "De la Censure dramatique", Paris 1907, 15.
12 For the whole pathetic story see A. Pougin, "Méhul", Paris 1893, 159-172.
13 A. L. Ringer, "Cherubini's 'Médée' and the Spirit of French Revolutionary Opera", in Essays in Musicology in Honor of Dragan Plamenac, Pittsburgh 1969, 285-286.
14 Cf. E. et J. de Goncourt, "Histoire de la Société Française pendant la Révolution", Paris 1918, 293.
15 "Recueil des Actes du Comité de Salut Public", IX, ed. by F.-A. Aulard, Paris 1895, 582.

16 P. Caron, "Paris pendant la Terreur", Paris 1910, 157-158.
17 Cf. A. L. Ringer, "J.-J. Barthélemy and Musical Utopia in Revolutionary France", Journal of the History of Ideas 22, 1961, 363.
18 Ibid., 358.
19 F. W. J. von Schelling, „Sämmtliche Werke V", Stuttgart/Augsburg 1859, 736.
20 Cf. C. M. von Weber's review of E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Undine" (1817), as translated in O. Strunk, "Source Readings in Music History", New York 1950, 804.
21 A. B. Marx, "Die Musik des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts", Leipzig 1855, 77.

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SOZIOLOGISCHE ASPEKTE DER OPERNINSZENIERUNG

I

Der Begriff „Inszenierung" darf als Zentralbegriff der Theatertheorie ebenso wie der Theaterpraxis gelten. Er bezeichnet den schematischen Entwurf eines Theaterkunstwerks, in dem die intendierte Bühnengestalt und gleichzeitig deren darstellerische Entfaltung intentional angelegt sind. Eine jede Inszenierung beinhaltet nämlich die in ihr entworfene Bühnengestalt nur als ein System von Bestimmtheiten, das alle nach Ansicht seiner Urheber notwendigen inhaltlichen und formalen Informationen bereit hält, mittels welcher die Bühnengestalt dann vom Publikum in voller Konkretion vermeint werden kann. Die dabei vom einzelnen Zuschauer individuell geleistete Ergänzung der Bühneninformationen gehorcht weitgehend, aber eben nicht ausschließlich, einer in die Informationen selbst gelegten Weisung; das auf der Bühne visuell und hörbar Entfaltete suggeriert dem Publikum Weiterungen, die zwar nicht zu sehen oder zu hören, dennoch aber deutlich vorhanden sind.
Soziologische Aspekte besitzt die Inszenierung in zweierlei Hinsicht. Zum einen, weil die Inszenierung als schematisches Gebilde auf psychische und geistige Aktivität des einzelnen Zuschauers angewiesen ist, deren gesellschaftliche Bestimmtheit aller Theatersoziologie thematisch sein muß. Und zum anderen insofern, als die Inszenierung als ein dialektischer Vermittlungsprozeß zwischen konstanten und variablen Gegebenheiten zu begreifen ist. Zu den Konstanten etwa zählen: der Wort-Ton-Text der Partituren, das in ihm entworfene Verlaufs-, Ereignis- und Handlungsschema sowie seine dramatisch-szenischen Implikationen. Als Variablen wären zu nennen: die optische und die akustische, also die dramatisch-szenische und die musikalische Konkretisation des Wort-Ton-Textes in der Inszenierung, die abhängt von Stil, Geschmack, Bewußtsein, Selbstverständnis ihrer Urheber und - mittelbar - wiederum auch ihres Publikums. Die Inszenierung hat ferner zu vermitteln zwischen der spontanen Aktualität des Theaterereignisses und seiner Indienstnahme für die Reproduktion bedeutender, aber eben geschichtlicher Werke, zwischen der sozialen Bestätigung retrospektiver Einstellungen des Publikums und der Aufgabe allen Theaters, bewußtseinserweiternd, aufklärend zu wirken. Die Inszenierung steht mithin in einem sozio-kulturellen