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Intermediality, Hybridity and Disruption, in the Operas of Wagner and Verdi

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'Intermediality' and 'Hybridity' are often discussed as if they apply only to creative works of the last century and of the future, and that their use necessarily entails the presence of contemporary technology. But in our careers as academic, author and artist, we are increasingly reminded of how the most innovative work in performance almost inevitably resonates with that of the past, sometimes quite remote past, and with genres which may, today, frequently seem conservative in their realisation. Recently we have come to see that many of our discussions could relate to a complex, and of course, deeply hybrid genre of performance, so thoroughly embedded in our culture that we no longer perceive how strange and problematic it is, that is Opera.

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Introduction

We intend to explore thematic and analogical similarities in two almost contemporary works by two composers who were themselves exact contemporaries, both born in 1813: Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, premiered in Munich in 1865, and Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlo*, in a French version, in Paris, in 1867. We also intend to use the vectoring which operatic productions impose on, or induce from, the bare musical score, to propose radical approaches to staging Verdi's work in particular. Our underlying primary objective is to exhibit the application of the above terms in analysing aspects of these works.

Blending and Hybridity

Firstly, we will briefly analyse the elements of what might, in retrospect, seem to be the inevitable emergence of Opera as an artform. It is not, contrary to present appearances, a discrete or regulated genre.

This will involve considering the first two terms of our subtitle, 'Intermediality' and 'Hybridity'. Intermediality is commonly defined as the simultaneous use of several different media in the service of a given purpose or work. As a linguistic point, it is interesting to note that the word 'Opera', a Latin noun which entered Italian usage in 1639, can be construed either as singular,'work', or as the plural of *opus*,'works'. Hybridity, in a cultural context, is defined by its 'polar' opposition to such terms as 'purity': it connotes the blending or merging together of previously different traditions or media to produce combinations with a distinct identity of their own.

Now, intermedial works long predate opera. Late Medieval court entertainments involved dramatic enactments with music, and, in religious observance, there were similar combinations both as 'Mystery Plays', and as episodes within the Mass itself. But it is a stretch to say these were direct precursors of the form. A more intimate combination of media had to occur.

Something began to happen in late Renaissance culture. It was discovered that music could absorb words fully, and express a dramatic, though not necessarily a narrative impetus. Madrigals could be sung in cycles, depicting, say, the progress of a love affair (something Schubert would revive in his own tradition of *Lieder*). They could be components of short comic exchanges between singers, the so called 'madrigal comedies'.

By the 1580's several intermedial and hybrid genres emerged in European courts: in France, the *ballet de cour*, and in England, the Masque. Both required sung musical numbers, dance and often a lot of audience participation. But it was in Italy, at the courts of the D'Este in Ferrara, and the Medici in Florence, that the most influential precursor evolved, the *intermedio*. These were spectacularly staged song and dance intermissions performed between the acts of classical Roman, spoken drama; they were often more popular than the plays. They rarely had any long narrative, though they might be allegories commenting on the action of the narratives they interrupted: in effect, meta-dramas.

As a case study of intermediality, the *intermedio* exhibits a fascinating turn. Having absorbed previously spoken texts into songs and choruses, the music itself now had to adapt to maximise its dramatic effect. At this point we can invoke the term 'transmediality', that is, intentions which are not specific to any one medium, but which may use several of them to be expressed. A group of Humanist intellectuals in Florence, known as the *Camerata*, wanted to reproduce the performance practices, and the overwhelming impact, of ancient Greek tragedy. They were convinced that not only were the choruses of these plays sung, but so also were the dramatic exchanges. This transmedial ambition led a composer in their circle, Jacopo Peri, to compose, in 1597, a stand-alone drama, all of whose parts were sung: *Dafne*, now lost, the first recognisable opera (but one which probably recycled material from a previous *intermedio*). It is hugely interesting that such a desire to restore the power of ancient Greek tragic performance was a key motivation for Wagner in stating his own artistic intentions for the Total Art Work (*Gessamtkunstwerk*) of the future (Roberts, 2011: 74)

But the task of making music carry the burden of a dramatic narrative, brought on a technical revolution. Peri's Florentine rival, Giulio Caccini, published in 1602 a collection *Le Nuove Musiche* ('The New Musics'), in the preface to which he argued that dramatic singing could not be simply the old equal-voiced polyphony, it had to involve solo lines of song, phrased so as to express emotions forcefully, *affetto cantando*, with subordinate instrumental accompaniment, which he called the *stile moderno*, the modern style.

Both the new genre and the new techniques it required attracted the interest of Claudio Monteverdi, a composer working for the Gonzagas in Mantua. In 1607 he presented *Orfeo*, where this new kind of declamatory singing, later called recitative, was inserted between popular sounding songs and choruses: the first Baroque opera. The new style was not popular with everyone, one critic (Giovanni Artusi) had contemptuously called it *seconda pratica* ('second practice'). Monteverdi then adopted this insulting term to highlight his own originality of expression, disrupting the monumental lines of the established *a capella* style of Renaissance composition.

We will not go further into operatic history here, but what this account of its origins suggests, is how *trans*medial ambitions to make *inter*medial works almost inevitably produce new, *hybridised* genres. The lightweight intermission entertainments of Italian courts were repurposed by a project to revive the serious power of ancient drama, in the process catalysing technical stylistic innovation. Monteverdi sweetened the dryness of constant declamation by interpolating fresh and melodically catchier elements in the shape of songs and choruses, and thus the *intra*medial, that is, internally diverse, structure of Recitative, Aria and Chorus, was born, which would inform operatic composition for 250 years.

‘Compare and Contrast’?

So Opera was never a ‘pure’ art form in its origins, and it was certainly not purely aesthetic in its intentions and effects. Baroque examples were often written to glorify ruling dynasties, but later ones could be more subversive: Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*) adapted a play by Beaumarchais considered so anti-aristocratic that it was banned in Vienna. A performance in Brussels of Auber’s *La Muette de Portici* was partly responsible for triggering the Belgian revolution of 1830. And, returning to Verdi and Wagner, their deep political involvements are obvious: Wagner as a protagonist in the 1848 Revolutions, later as a strident German nationalist; Verdi, an increasing supporter of the *Risorgimento*, who had repeated fights with censors, was personally persuaded by Cavour in 1861 to enter Parliament, and later the Senate. Both prospered from the transition of bourgeois nationalism, from being a social threat to the post-Napoleonic restoration, to creating the newly unified Italy and Germany.

We do not propose to indulge in a generic comparison, let alone adjudication, between the *oeuvres* of Wagner and Verdi. There was enough of that in 2013, the 200th anniversary of both. Suffice to say that both composers began their careers within the conventions of early 19th century Grand Opera, from which Wagner departed altogether and later vehemently rejected, but which Verdi developed to a consummate point. Wagner was an artistic despot who innovated performance practice and architecture to accomodate his vision; Verdi was far more a pragmatic man of the theatre who would adjust his works to suit performance conditions. Verdi had warm words for Wagner’s achievement, though he considered him musically digressive to the point of perversity. Wagner despised the tradition in which Verdi remained.

Ecstacy, Transgression and Decorum: Three Moments of The Passion

Operatic history has witnessed a constant tension of balancing the demands of music and words, with such figures as Gluck and Wagner arguing for the primacy of clear word-setting, Wagner even writing his own libretti. We believe that a close study of the words offers clues as to a successful production. As our synopses imply, *Don Carlo* has greater narrative and psychological complexity than *Tristan and Isolde*, but the libretti of the encounters between the lovers in both works show ambivalence and resistance throughout. Structurally, the Wagner work is almost entirely a dialogue between them; through all three acts at least one of the lovers is on stage. By contrast, in the Verdi, three successive encounters between the lovers are interwoven with scenes of court conflict and intrigue. We shall attempt a parallel, alternating narrative of these three moments in each.

Act 1 of *Tristan* shows complex pre-existing layerings of the principals' mutual feelings. Each is presented to us as a 'hybrid' of violently ambivalent emotions. The libretto implies that Isolde already has an unacknowledged attraction to Tristan, who also has overruled his affections by offering Isolde to Marke solely to ingratiate himself at court. When Isolde's second attempt to kill him results in both drinking the love potion, such is the layering of affect, that it acts like a truth drug, exposing these repressed and now irresistible yearnings. By the time King Marke arrives they are both stripped of their previous false consciousness, even though they know its cause; as Tristan declares, in an almost Nietzschean paradox: 'Our bliss now lives from lying! Joy, guile-inspired, I bless you!' (Porter, 1993: 63).

By contrast, Act 1 of *Don Carlo* (much of which Verdi cut from the Paris premiere to let the audience get the last trains home!), sees Carlo, already enraptured by his covert sight of Elisabetta, expressing himself conventionally enough: 'as the soul soars to paradise so my hope flew to her'(Morris,1979: 57). He calls the forest where they meet a 'radiant Eden' (Morris, 1979: 55).[1] But even as Elisabetta and Carlo declare their love, she adds 'A mysterious fear gripped my heart, and I still tremble from it' (Morris, 1979: 67). It is as if, knowing this marriage is a political act, actually being in love with your betrothed sounds too good to be true. And it is. After an ecstatic ensemble where she sings 'If I tremble yet, it is not from terror, I am reborn!' (Morris, 1979: 71), the news arrives: the treaty now hangs on her marrying Carlo's father. Both she and Carlo are in anguish, but Elisabetta has been conditioned to dynastic duty, and already she sings 'To fight against pitiless fate will be less harsh' (Morris, 1979: 75). Implored by her attendants to secure international peace, she accepts the proposal, and lastingly loses her own. An ensemble blends their rejoicing with the lovers' despair.

In Act 2 of *Tristan,* the two sing a protracted ecstatic love duet, whose analogical core is *Liebesnacht* ('Love of the Night'). At the risk of stretching the term, this can be regarded as a hybridised feature in itself, resembling more a 'symphonic poem', that characteristic late-romantic form, than an integral part of the plot. The text offers declarations of mutual infatuation which have now acquired Schopenhaurean connotations of *fuga mundi* (flight from the world) (Schopenhauer, 1966, 1969), filling out a sensory inversion: daylight is the arid 'empty and false' world of action, reason and ambition, the darkness of night is love's true reality. Tristan sings: 'since we are by night enfolded, the envious day, so keen and spiteful, still may keep us apart yet not deceive our heart ... all that remains is yearning ... for holy night, where endless and always true, Love brings laughing delight.' Isolde responds with: 'So let us die and never part!'. Both sing: 'no more Tristan, no more Isolde! Ever nameless, never parting ... endless ever joined in joy, ever-glowing love, highest holy love' (Porter, 1993: 71–76). In a passion that assumes a metaphysically monistic and transcendental idealist disposition, they sing: 'I myself am the world: supreme bliss of being … never more to awaken dreamless' (Porter, 1993: 72). And again: 'endless ever, joined in joy' (Porter, 1993: 75). The act ends with their discovery and violent arrest by King Marke and his men.

So whereas Wagner shows love erupting through dutiful repression, Verdi shows a love quickly dis-couraged, literally, when duty presents, and which has betrayed itself. The second encounter of *Don Carlo* begins with Elisabetta miserably trapped in court decorum. Carlo persuades a friend to set up an assignation with her. Her mood is morbid: 'to see him again is to die' (Morris, 1979: 113) but she still, even in private, addresses him as 'My son!' (Morris, 1979: 115). Carlo wants her to ask his father, whom he detests, to let him govern Flanders, so seeking solace in duty and exile. Her stilted reply wounds him further, calling her 'an ice-cold marble tombstone' (Morris, 1979: 117). This reveals her existential transfer: 'You should understand the honour of my silence. Duty, like a ray of light, shone before my eyes…I place my hope in God'(Morris, 1979: 117). But Carlo throws the religious appeal back at her 'At your words my soul sees heaven open wide!' (Morris, 1979: 117). Heaven is the analogical core of the rest of the encounter; she melts: '… farewell; living beside you on this earth I should believe myself in heaven!' (Morris, 1979: 119). He faints; she thinks he is dying before her. He revives and the encounter climaxes (in all senses) when he cries, in a rather Schopenhauerean phrase 'I love you, Elisabetta, for me the world has vanished from existence!'(Morris, 1979: 123). Here the Christian references turn darkly pagan: she recoils: 'Finish your work, hurry to kill your father … spattered with his blood … you can lead your mother to the altar!'. Like Oedipus, Carlo can only flee singing 'I am accursed' (Morris, 1979: 123), whilst she falls to her knees, declaring 'The Lord has watched over us!' (Morris,1979: 123).

By Act 3 Tristan lies unconscious, having been exiled to his ancestral castle in Brittany. He begins slowly to come round, obsessed with being reunited with Isolde. His servant Kurwenal tells him that she has been sent for. The text here hints at an increasing ambivalence, in which Tristan has a longing for a Buddhistic, absolute obliteration as the only release from the torment of unrequited *Liebe*:

> No healing cure, not death itself
> can set me free
> from the yearing pain
> …
> cast back by night to burning day.
> (Porter, 1993: 84)

Isolde's ship eventually approaches, but Tristan expires on their meeting. After King Marke arrives, now knowing the truth and prepared to free her from her marriage to him, Isolde sings her final incandescent aria *Mild und leise* before succumbing to her own *Liebestod*.

In the Verdi, Elisabetta has become the more powerful character, one could say, a hybrid one, as the tragedy turns on her vain attempts to smother a transgressive love with religiosity, even if this entails her Eros inevitably becoming Thanatos, a death wish. In the third encounter, she awaits Carlo, and her 'heart has one sole desire: the peace of the grave!' (Morris, 1979: 219). She has just discovered that her sense of marital duty is not even reciprocated; a courtier has confessed to her that she is the King's mistress. To Carlo she now says 'I beg only that you forget and live' (Morris, 1979: 221) by opposing his father's cruelties in Flanders. It is as if she can only imagine duty as a remedy for his passion, as it was, unsuccessfully, for her. Carlo, however, sees only his own end in so doing: 'I will go to them supremely happy, if, in triumph of death, I have praise or tears from your thankful heart' (Morris, 1979: 223). Carlo thinks he has sublimated his passion: 'honour has vanquished love within me ... Now that all is over'(Morris, 1979: 225). It is now Elisabetta who weeps, but she has now theologised, so to speak, and deferred, their love: 'we shall find, in the bosom of the Lord, the longed-for bliss that always eluded us on earth!' (Morris, 1979: 227). Both sing together 'we shall forget all the names of earthly love' (Morris, 1979: 227). In an immensely moving duet they bid farewell, calling each other 'son' and 'mother' (Morris, 1979: 229). Decorum is reconciled with a future consummated sexual love.

There is, as we have hinted, an explicitly Schopenhaurean philosophical context to the Wagner work that Verdi's does not have, but his dialectic of transgression is the more complex. Wagner presents a shamelessly transgressive sexual passion which obliterates any recognition of marriage and propels its victims into a quite separate metaphorical universe from others, and, as the term *Liebestod* suggests, carries with it its own immolatory force. No wonder young women were debarred from its first performances. By contrast, Verdi traces how a *failure* of transgression, caused by Elisabetta's love meeting the equal and opposite force of her sense of duty, is gradually resolved into a religious, posthumous deferment by both lovers, whose passion has not carried death with it, but who both finally long for death to express it.

Transgressive Productions

Of course, there are clear musical differences between these works. Whereas with Verdi the old distinctions between Recitative, Aria and Chorus are dissolving, the work still progresses through discrete numbers, each with their own melodic base. For

Wagner, the abandonment of these is complete, in favour of the 'through composed' score, where all dramatic action was incorporated into a continuous orchestral flow. And though Verdi could rely on his melodies being spread in popular arrangements throughout Europe, the opening passage of *Tristan*, containing that celebrated, utterly complex, 'Chord', left music in a condition 'after which nothing could ever be the same again'(Tom Service (2016)). Had it been an arresting device which then settled down into orthodox tonality, the Chord might not have had an effect on musical history. But it triggers a vastly extended dissonance and harmonic suspension across four hours of performance, in which the music frequently progresses towards new keys yet repeatedly postpones a key-strengthening cadence, creating repeated 'harmonic suspensions', an unprecedented developmental principle, and not resolved until the final Scene of Act 3 in the *Liebestod* sung by Isolde. As Barry Millington succinctly puts it: 'the cadence, like the coitus, is *interrruptus*' (2006: 81).

So, without making any fatuous evaluations, Verdi here continued a tradition, Wagner here began a revolution in musical tonal structure. And this is where we want to turn to the matter of Productions. Perhaps the innovative nature of *Tristan and Isolde* has encouraged daring ambitions, or perhaps some synaesthetic references in the final scene have prompted new thoughts on intermediality, but it has certainly been the object of original stagings.

In 2016, we attended a controversial production of it at the English National Opera (ENO), a company with a policy of using and surtitling libretti in English, facilitating our association of music and text (See images and interviews on the ENO *Tristan and Isolde* Website, 2016). Directed by Daniel Kramer, it was met with very mixed reviews, for instance, for Michael Tanner it was: 'a lethally perverse production' (2016), and for Fiona Maddocks: 'a fascinating, vexing riot of ideas' (2016) and according to Andrew Clements, the performance was 'musically fine but a confused and illogical staging' (2016).

The sets, three for each act, were spectacular and huge.[2] According to Anish Kapoor, the sculptor who designed them, this was in order: 'to hold the human figure at a certain scale', though he was: 'not interested in illustrating either the music or text' (Macleod, 2016). The use of light was extraordinary: 'colour gives a quantity to an object which is illusionistic, that's why I am loving working with light here' (Kapoor quoted by Christiansen, 2016).

Act 1 took place in a massive partitioned wooden sculpture with three separate spaces coming to a point upstage, presenting a pyramidal shape, reminiscent of a ship's sails. Isolde's space was on the left and Tristan's on the right, with the centre space used for both subsequently coming together, and for the chorus. Kapoor adds 'I was not bothered about referencing the ship; rather, I wanted his world and her world. A space where worlds collide' (Macleod, 2016). The visual array was completed by some eccentric choices of costumes, designed by Christina Cunningham. Isolde, sung by soprano Heidi Melton, was in a baroque panniered skirt which inhibited movement. Tristan, the Australian Heldentenor Stuart Skelton, was progressively dressed onstage as a samurai warrior. Their two respective servants were in 'classic servant fops in the mode of a Cruikshank cartoon' (Maddocks, 2016). King Marke's soldiers (who were also the chorus) were *Star Wars* troopers.

Act 2 saw the stage dominated by a massive textured hemisphere excavated out with a cave-like interior: 'a kind of garden of delight', which raises the singers up so they are above the stage. According to Kapoor, it suggests 'falling in love, a state apart, where all reality disappears', almost 'a world removed where love happens' (Macleod, 2016). It was lit by a deep blue nocturnal light. And it did not permit the singers much room for manoeuvre.

When the lovers were discovered by King Marke, the Act ended not with Tristan's arrest, but with him and Isolde being strapped to hospital beds by paramedics in modern surgical dress, as if they were self-harming mental patients. This departure from stage directions was probably the most unpopular of all. In discussing this, Kramer relates 'I spent about two years listening to the score to find original ideas'. His deepest 'understanding of how sick they were, was at the climax of the opera ... it was from the sick image of "so let us die and never part" that I realised Tristan and Isolde were committing suicide' (Macleod, 2016).

In Act 3, the hemisphere of the previous act was now hidden behind a scrim with a huge tear in it giving the resemblance of 'a cave', 'a vagina' or 'an abyss', for now Tristan is 'locked out of the garden of love', attended to by his servant Kurwenal, now dressed as a down-at-heel clown in a fashion that Kramer attributes to the influence of Beckett's *Endgame* (Macleod, 2016). Movement was accordingly confined to the front of stage. As the act progressed a blood red image was projected onto the scrim, giving the impression of 'an open wound' (Kramer interviewed by Macleod, 2016). These stunning video projections, as elsewhere, were by Frieda Weiss, for whom they 'all represent bleeding and suffering which eventually transforms all perception of space and leads to a blackout of all light and hope' (Weiss, 2016).

In another controversial departure, Tristan died in Isolde's arms, but, whilst singing, she led him, revived, into the now unveiled aperture, at the centre of a blood red stain of light, resembling an open wound, where they 'transfigured' together in the 'garden' of the previous Act. Some critics were not convinced, for instance: 'in one of his most outrageous interventions Kramer had Tristan resurrected while Isolde sang, ignoring the crucial point that the whole pathos, as opposed to the ecstasy, of the last 20 minutes of the drama is that the lovers die apart, and deluded' (Tanner, 2016). For Melton, singing Isolde: 'Daniel has made a bold decision to address the notion of the afterlife and the souls being able to be together. That's brave ... I find it really quite sublime' (Macleod, 2016).

In defence of this departure, it was probably Liszt, Wagner's future father-in-law and indefatigable populariser of *Tristan*, who used the term *Liebestod* for Isolde's final aria. For Wagner, it was the Prelude that originally had this term, calling the final aria 'Transfiguration' (*Die Verklärung*). It is certainly a weirdly transcendental expiry by the standards of operatic death, rather closer perhaps to a massive overdose of LSD.

It is not our purpose to offer an unqualified defence of this production; we thought it very well sung, but, as an intermedial experience, as a *Gessamtkunstwerk*, somewhat incoherent, even on a sub-rational level. It was, however, a brave attempt to renew the blend of visual spectacle and music, which was the source of Opera's original attraction. By breaking with the rigid conventions of much staging, it tried to reproduce the impact those conventions had when they were innovative and fresh. We hope future directors will have the courage to take this process further, but there are pitfalls.

At the Digital Research in the Humanities and Arts (DRHA) Conference in 2019, Watermans Arts Centre, West London, we heard a somewhat critical paper by Amy Borsuk on the use of avatar technology in a Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She argued that the heavily sponsored digital interventions had not so much enhanced the play as 'Disneyfied' it, creating effects that did not add to its immersive power. There is a danger that these wonderful digital toys remain just that.

A Renewed Don Carlo*?*

Which is where we return to *Don Carlo*, and make a proposal for an intelligently innovative Production.

Obviously, one can reject any scruple about historical authenticity. The libretto is a free adaptation of a Schiller play which has little relation to history beyond the names of some characters. Politically, Don Carlo speaks the language of a 19th century bourgeois liberal; his father the King sounds like some cynical Metternich. The opera is set in a virtual past, layered with concerns contemporary to Verdi himself.

Something we have not made clear yet, is that this opera has three supernatural episodes: firstly, when Carlo, whilst waiting for Elisabetta, meets a friar, intoning a dirge about earthly miseries, who looks and sounds like his dead grandfather, Charles

V; secondly, when at a crowd scene where heretics are burnt alive, a voice from Heaven sings ‘Soar towards heaven, fly, poor souls, fly up to enjoy the peace of the Lord!’ (Morris, 1979: 173); and most crucially, when in the last minutes the friar, now dressed regally and recognised in terror as Charles V, drags the bewidered Carlo into the cloister where his own tomb lies. We can only guess whether this is an escape or some morbid transfiguration. These, we suggest are ripe for avatar treatment.

We hope that our analysis of the lovers’ scenes shows how analogically rich is the libretto, despite Verdi’s known preference for textual brevity. We also know that he was vaguely dissatisfied with the opera’s reliance on personal confrontations, and its lack of big set pieces, when compared to his next one, *Aida*. This perhaps gives a clue as to how a future production would enhance its dramatic content. With close attention to the text and Verdi’s own attentive word-setting, we propose that dynamic lighting and continuous set transformation amplifies the contours of the action, which is often merely verbal.

As we have hinted before, there are two transmedial analogical forces in this work, which we can label Eros, authentic personal desire, and Thanatos, the dead weight of subservience to convention and religious authority (scenes and sub-plots show Verdi at his most anti-clerical). These should be visually expressed as they are musically: the lovers’ Eros is manifest in forests and gardens; the Thanatos of absolutism is shown in church and palace interiors, in the King’s speeches to courtiers and, most of all, by the figure even the King fears, the Grand Inquisitor. We envisage a constantly shifting projected duality of rich dappled greens and yellows, in contrast to hard shafts of blues and purples. When the lovers first ecstatically meet in the forest, the impermanence of their joy in the face of diplomatic imperatives can be rendered by a narrowing column of pastoral light on them as the rest of stage turns mauve. When Elisabetta and Carlo both seek solace in ideas of duty, they should be bathed in lighter shades of blue. King Filippo and the Grand Inquisitor should be surrounded by the deepest purple.

Unlike *Tristan*, each of whose three acts is a single scene (permitting Kapoor’s monumental structures), the five acts of *Don Carlo* demand eight scene changes. So we propose a single virtual set which redefines itself mainly by colour and projection mapping. We have in mind varying slender columns ending in ribbed spreading vaults at their tops, which, depending on lighting colours and direction, can imply trees, or dark, back-lit architectures, or flames (for the scene of heretics being burnt alive). The outlying parts of this could be lower and cage-like, a bit like a Louise Bourgeois spider, appropriate to the imprisoning forces of court etiquette, duty and religious intolerance.

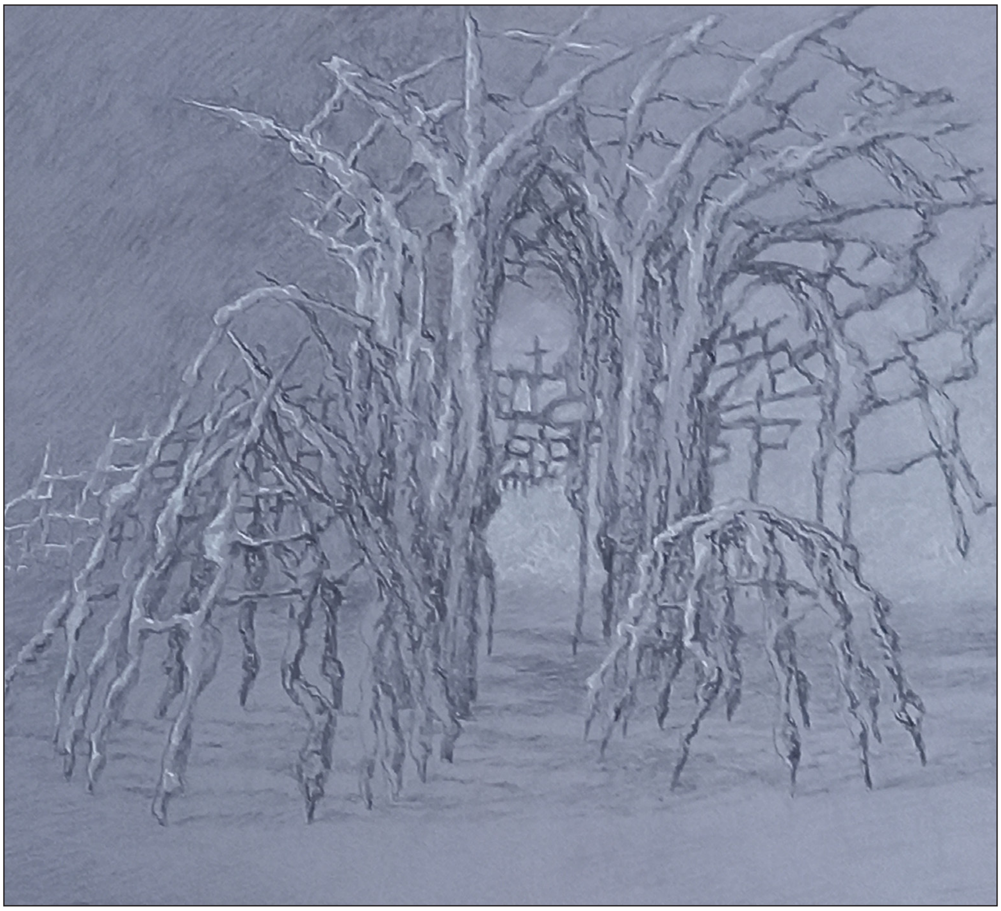

Figure 1: Sketch proposal of mise en scène for an imaginary production of *Don Carlo*. Different lighting will create different environments. Image by Neil M Harvey. Photo by Susan Broadhurst, 2021.

As academic and artists, we am constantly using that vague, yet comprehensive, term mis en scène, to remind students how the success of their work depends on the complex, and, again, 'intermedial' relationships they set up within it. It seems to us that opera has to meet the same test; it cannot simply be the arbitrary, unthought juxtaposition of different artifacts and actions. The immense valedictory pathos that concludes *Don Carlo* is as powerful as that of *Tristan*, and it marks the end of a tormented journey for both lovers through violently opposed emotions. We think such elements as stage blocking, costume and gesture have to reflect this. All should progress through a slow transition from convulsive, angular heaviness to a wistful, smoothly paced entropy and spatial detachment. As Don Carlo and Elisabetta place their happiness in a future life, so they should *appear* to transcend their surroundings.

It could be useful, in realising such an internal dynamism, to consider adopting the multi-modal approaches of ensemble Troika Ranch, who merge theatre, digital media and dance, but for whom interactive media and technology are essential to the 'performance' of their 'work'. They create 'hybrid performances that unite dance, theater and new media' and their 'aim is to question the deepening entanglement between human beings and new technology' (Coniglio and Stoppiello 2023). Coniglio and Stoppiello encourage all in the company to share ideas, techniques and processes, in order to create aesthetically rich, multi-layered, real-time interactive performance works. They utilize digital software tools such as Isadora, to construct visual and aural materials so central to their work and also as a means of allowing individual performers to express themselves through performance. Sensory devices are used to allow the movements or vocalizations of a performer to manipulate in real time some aspect of the performance's media – such as sound, video or light. Perhaps such an application of interactivity to Opera would enhance the intermedial uniqueness of each performance.

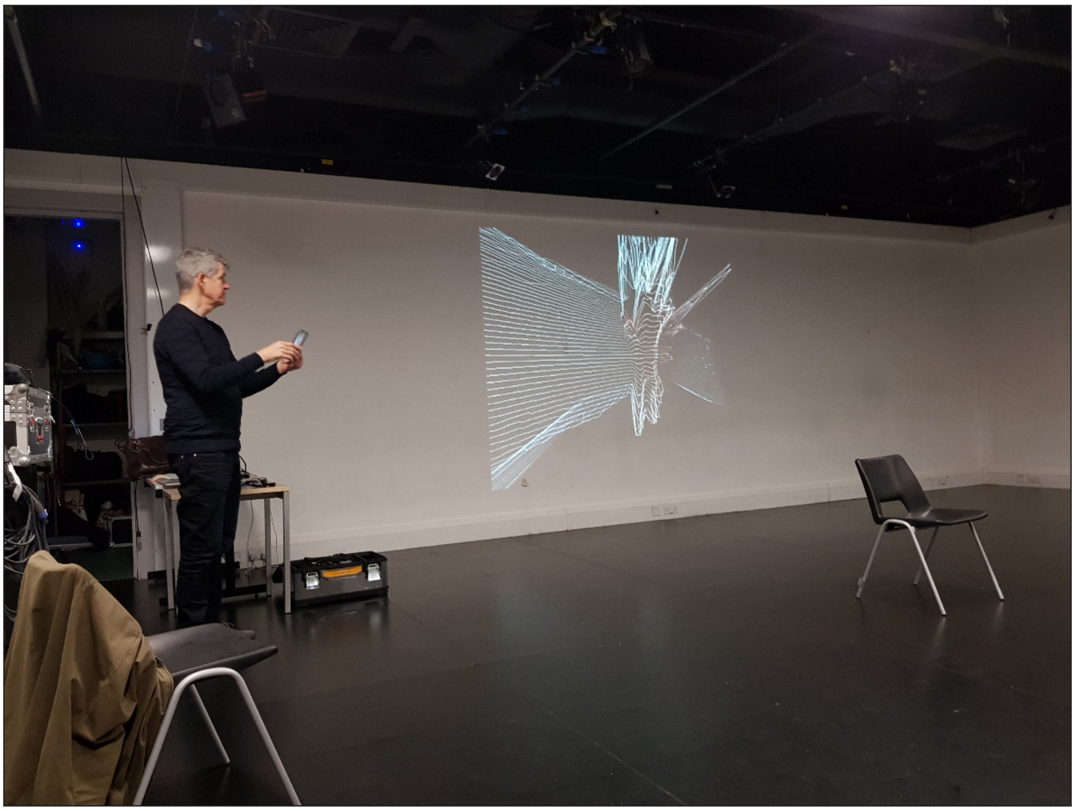

Figure 2: Conglio demonstrates his self-authored software 'Isadora'. Brunel University London. Photo: Susan Broadhurst, 2019.

Figure 3: Coniglio and *loopdiver*, 2009. Brunel University London. Photo: Susan Broadhurst, 2019.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, there is the matter of the music itself. Early in his career Verdi adopted the ensemble of interwoven yet conflicted narratives and emotions, as found in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and to which we have alluded. He also frequently uses sung asides and soliloquy. Now this will really upset some critics: we suggest using pre-recorded and acoustically modified passages of singing to indicate such secret thoughts and pains. Just as we accept the filmic convention of the voiceover as representing spoken thoughts, why can't we attempt the same with opera? Just a suggestion. It did occur to us to propose screen enlargements of the principals' upper bodies at certain moments, but perhaps that is just too redolent of rock concerts!

Conclusion: Commercial Unrealities

Now there is an obvious reason why opera evolved in the courts of absolute rulers: its expense, both to stage, and sadly nowadays, to attend. This explains the obdurate conservatism of productions, trapped in a vicious circle of having to get the custom of wealthy, aged, and even more conservative audiences. In 2020, the Royal Opera House in London, intended to stage a revival of a 2013 production of *Don Carlo* which, though musically successful, can be described as ‘stripped-down historical’. There was no strong desire to risk commercial failure for original artistic success. This is a great pity when one considers the intermedial genres which have evolved in paralell with opera. *Zingspiel*, of which *The Magic Flute* is a prime example, mixed spoken dialogue and arias, and is the ancestor of the modern musical, hardly a non-commercial proposition. The early Romantic period produced *Melodrama*, which is, strictly speaking, spoken dialogue underpinned by music, which is, of course, the foundation, almost the default technique, of modern cinema. No one thinks of these as minority tastes. Opera needs original minds to animate it. There have been some of these: the late Jonathan Miller springs to mind. Despite commercial pressures, nowadays asphyxiating further innovation, there are stil innovators working in Opera.

One such collaboration that springs to mind and echoes our above concepts relating to a technological presentation of *Don Carlos*, is that of the Italian Director and Choreographer, Davide Livermore and D-Wok Video who collaborated on Verdi’s *Aida* (2021) for Opera Australia and ‘created a total sensory experience for the Melbourne stage. Visually the sets were stunning with D-Wok’s large movable digital screens bringing brightness and spectacle to the stage, seeming, at times, as if a kid was playing with a new toy’ (Angus, 2021).

In December 2023, Livermore again worked on *Aida* for Opera Australia and Opera Queensland. According to their website: ‘Verdi’s music makes this epic an enduring favourite’ and ‘Livermore’s radiant production is a thrilling theatrical experience. Ten towering digital screens create ever-changing floor-to-ceiling set pieces. Immersive digital video design ranges from rich symbolism to vivid landscapes’ (*Aida* at Queensland Performing Arts Centre, 2023).

Perhaps we should remind ourselves of just how strange and historically contingent the birth of opera was. We end with a quote from Caccini:

> Having thus seen, as I say, that such music and musicians offered no pleasure beyond that which pleasant sounds could give – solely to the sense of hearing, since they could not move the mind without the words being understood – it occurred to me to introduce a kind of music in which one could almost speak in tones, employing in it (as I have said elsewhere) a certain noble negligence of song.
> (1980: 44)

Considering the originality of Caccini’s proposal, we do not think we should apologise for what we can add to it in our age.

Notes

[1] Translation by Gwyn Morris (1979) of libretto by Josephy Mery & Camille de Locle, after Friedrich von Schiller, translated into Italian by Achille de Lauzieres. Booklet to EMI Recording Cond. Giulini 1970).

[2] See performance images at BBC Radio Galleries http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04967nc/p04966f6. Accessed 21st October 2023.

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