
Aesthetics: Introduction

London, 2022

An Instance of Baroque Opera



An Instance of 19th c. Opera



An Instance of 20th c. Opera



The Basic Basics

- ❖ Opera is a form of musical drama, combining:
 - ❖ scored orchestral music and singers, sometimes adding non-singing actors as well
 - ❖ a text, the *libretto*
 - ❖ a theatrical setting
 - ❖ sets, props, videos, lighting. . .

Composing an Opera

- ❖ Typically, the composer engages a librettist
- ❖ The librettist will write the words
 - ❖ Sometimes based on a biblical story or myth
 - ❖ Often based on a successful play or novel
 - ❖ Sometimes a fully original dramatic work
- ❖ The composer will score music for the words
 - ❖ Often in close contact with the librettist
- ❖ In some cases, relatively rare, the composer will be his or her own librettist



Producing an Opera

- ❖ The music director of an opera house will engage:
 - ❖ a director, who will determine the theme and setting of the opera
 - ❖ a conductor, who will conduct the orchestral performances
 - ❖ singers, including soloists and chorus members
 - ❖ full production staff, including set-, costume-, and lighting designers, stage directors, and so forth

Types of Opera

- ❖ Traditional Opera, also called Number Opera, comprises two types of singing
 - ❖ Recitative: more or less rhythmic speaking, mainly to drive the plot; in some styles of opera, there is simply spoken dialogue in place of recitative
 - ❖ Set pieces, or numbers: arias (airs) or melodic songs, as solos, duets, or ensembles, including choral numbers, and eventually, especially in France, ballet

Main Periods of Opera

- ❖ Baroque, primarily but not exclusive Italian, beginning in the early 17th c.
 - ❖ Regularly performed and adopted, down to the present day.
- ❖ Opera Seria, primarily again Italian, but also German and French, throughout the 18th c.
 - ❖ Gluck (1714-1787) began to react against the stiff tone of opera seria, as did, especially, Mozart (1756-1791), most of whose great works are comedies written by the librettist Da Ponte—though they are often comedies with poignant and serious underpinnings.
- ❖ A great flowering of opera occurred in the 19th c.
 - ❖ Bel Canto flourished in the early part of the 19th c. featuring such Italian composers as Donizetti (1797-1848), Bellini (1801-1835), and Rossini (1792-1868)
 - ❖ The Golden Age: Verdi (1813-1901) and Wagner (1813-1883)
- ❖ A great multiplicity of styles in the 20th c.

Some Simple Observations

- ❖ Opera is collaborative, comprising many art forms
- ❖ Opera is *demanding* in terms of talent, training, coordination, creativity, money, organizational acumen
- ❖ Opera is *expensive*: it is expensive to produce, it is expensive experience
- ❖ Some people love opera, others find it a drag
- ❖ Compare some more popular affairs, including locally, the ABBA Voyage

About ABBA Voyage

- ❖ Is this an opera?
- ❖ It contains singers (well, holograms, but okay), lighting, sound, co-ordination, direction, sets, props, animation, and, of course, music.
- ❖ Suppose one says: no, this is not opera; it's not even art.
- ❖ It's spectacle.
 - ❖ Spectacle has its place, but let's not get carried away.
 - ❖ A defensible posture? Rank snobbery? Or?

Some Questions

- ❖ Can the expense of opera every be justified?
 - ❖ This is, primarily, a socio-political and economic question.
 - ❖ Note that typically, opera receives both state and private subvention: Berlin, for instance, supports three different opera houses with taxes.
 - ❖ This suggests that opera is regarded as a kind of public good.
 - ❖ Yet invariably opera audiences are small and cultivated minorities, often affluent.
- ❖ What is the point of opera?
 - ❖ Like other forms of drama, including films, it is, from beginning to end, *make believe*.
 - ❖ What is the value, if any, in make believe?

This Question of Value

- ❖ Grown adults go to a theatre and sit quietly for three, four, five, hours watching people singing, pretending to be someone they are not.
- ❖ Same again, of course, for film and literature.
- ❖ Well, one may say: people enjoy these sorts of things. So, the value consists in *pleasure*.
- ❖ Two further questions, then:
 - ❖ Why do people take pleasure in e.g. horror films? Or horrible scenes in opera?
 - ❖ Given, though, that they do, is hedonic value the only value pertinent to opera? To art more generally?
 - ❖ Is there, so to speak, a proprietary value to art? An aesthetic value?

This Question of Aesthetic Value

- ❖ Is there a distinctly aesthetic value?
- ❖ A value to be had in connection with art works?
- ❖ Or perhaps in connection with art works and other types of beauty, including the beauty of nature?

Three (or Maybe Four) Questions for the Seminar

- ❖ In virtue of what does art qualify as art?
 - ❖ Can art be defined?
 - ❖ This is a question in the *ontology of art*.
- ❖ How are art works to be interpreted and understood?
 - ❖ Do, for instance, an author's intentions determine the meaning of a work of art? Historical situations? Formal aspects?
 - ❖ This is a question in *hermeneutics or interpretation*?
- ❖ In virtue of what, if anything, and in what ways, if any are works of art valuable?
 - ❖ Is there a specifically aesthetic value? Do art works have objective value? Subjective value? Both? What is the difference.
 - ❖ This is a question in *value theory*.
- ❖ One question which tends to cut across these three: what is beauty?

A Slightly Deeper Dive into *Nabucco*



Background

- ❖ Composed by Giuseppe Verdi in 1842
 - ❖ After a period of loss, during which he had reportedly determined to give up composing opera altogether.
 - ❖ Partly for commercial reasons, partly because he was impressed by the libretto, by Temistocle Solera, based upon Psalm 137, he agreed to begin anew.
 - ❖ As the story has it, he took the libretto home and it fell open to *Va, pensiero* and was somehow hooked.
- ❖ The opera, Nabucco, recounts the history of the exploitation and exile of the Jews at the hands of the Babylonian king, Nabucco (= Nebuchadnezzar). The scene we've just seen is the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves (*Va, Pensiero*), which is the most famous piece of the opera.

The Lyrics

Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate;
va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,
ove olezzano tepide e molli
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!

Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,
perché muta dal salice pendi?
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,
ci favella del tempo che fu!

...

Del Giordano le rive saluta,
di Sionne le torri atterrate.
O, mia patria, sì bella e perduta!
O, membranza, sì cara e fatal!

Fly, my thoughts, on wings of gold;
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs
of my native land smell fragrant

Greet the banks of the Jordan
and Zion's toppled towers.
Oh, my homeland, so lovely and so lost!
Oh memory, so dear and so dead!

...

Mindful of the fate of Solomon's temple,
Let me cry out with sad lamentation,
or else may the Lord strengthen me
to bear these sufferings!]

The Reception of this Chorus

- ❖ Verdi regarded this opera as a turning point in his career: ‘This is the opera with which my artistic career really begins. And though I had many difficulties to fight against, it is certain that Nabucco was born under a lucky star.’
- ❖ At his funeral, the citizens of Milan spontaneously broke into this chorus as they followed his coffin in procession.
- ❖ Some weeks later, the eminent conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted a chorus of hundreds of singers performing the piece at his interment.
- ❖ The chorus has a broad political resonance in Italy, and some scholars understand it to contain a coded appeal to the unifying nationalist moment of Italy in the 1860s.
 - ❖ So, e.g., the lines: ‘O my country, so beautiful, and lost’ (‘O mia patria, si bella e perduta’) were thought to be a sort of plaintive cry for the fate of Italy.
 - ❖ For decades after Verdi’s death, it was a rally cry for Italian unity s Italy’s national anthem; in 1981 there was serious discussion of its being adopted as Italy’s national anthem, and the cause was taken up again by the Italian senator Umberto Bossi as late as 2008.
 - ❖ Bossi, as it happens, leads Italy’s occasionally secessionist party, the Northern League, which has also adopted the chorus as its anthem, to be sung at all party gatherings.

Relevant to Interpretation?

- ❖ That may be all very interesting as history, as politics, as a form of cultural studies.
- ❖ Two questions:
 - ❖ Is this at all relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the work?
 - ❖ Do you in fact now hear it differently?
- ❖ Two answers:
 - ❖ Yes, inevitably and, in any case, unavoidably.
 - ❖ No, that is all perfectly fine, but it does not speak to the aesthetic merit of the piece, which is an internal matter: the chords are the chords, the melody is the melody, the words speak of the exile of the Jews.

Relevant to Value?

- ❖ It seems plain that some Italians locate a value this chorus that will be mainly absent for, say, a Hoosier from the US state of Indiana.
- ❖ Indeed, even among the Italians, it seems plain that members of the Northern League political party will locate a value in this work absent for, say, a resident of Palermo, in Sicily
- ❖ Yet the text and music are the same for all.
- ❖ Does this imply that the value of art is *subjective*?

Subjective and Objective

- ❖ A property Φ is subjective $=_{df}$ Φ constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- ❖ A property Φ is objective $=_{df}$ Φ is not subjective.