
Opera

By Dion Boucicault



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Opera

THE form of Drama called Opera was invented about two hundred years ago. It reached its zenith of popularity during the first half of the present century, but during the last twenty or thirty years it seems to have declined in favor, if we may judge by the failure of those managers who have devoted themselves to its support. Paris, London, and New York have recently left Opera more or less "out in the cold." Sundry reasons have been given for this condition of affairs, but no one contends that it is not so. This kind of entertainment has never been thoroughly popular, because it is of foreign extraction, it is exotic, and found no root in the heart of the people. It has been sustained by government aid, or by private subscription. It has never been, like the Drama, self-supporting.

It is not in any spirit of depreciation of Music as an Art that I permit myself to discuss how far the Drama can be made, properly made, a vehicle for music, as it is used in opera. Whatever charms this thing may display; whatever merits it may claim, I protest, as a Dramatist, against its pretension to be a drama in any form or shape. It may be something finer, better, more ethereal, more divine,—I concede all the superlative adjectives,—but it is not a Drama.

It is no more a Drama than a mermaid is a Woman!

It is no more a Drama than a Centaur is a Man!

The Sphinx and the Satyr do not belong to the Human Race. And Opera like these monsters presents an incoherent form. It is a misconception produced by the improper association of two Muses.

I protest, as an actor, against the pretense of opera singers to be regarded as actors and actresses. They are not so. Their art is not mimetic, it is a conventional parade.

I have seen but one actor on the operatic stage deserving of [341] the name, and that was Georgio Ronconi. And he could not sing. When old Lablache began to act in opera, he stopped singing, he talked. But these men knew well that operatic acting is ridiculous sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Let us inquire precisely what a Drama is, what matters are essential to its form and existence, without which it can have neither the one nor the other.

A Drama is an imitation of a human suffering by persons skilled in counterfeiting emotions, so the spectators may be led to sympathize with the feelings they witness, and thus a species of illusion is created in their minds to the extent of believing the scenes they behold, and the feelings in which they share, are real.

To create this illusion is the great object of the poet and of the actor. The mirror they hold up to Nature is so fine and delicate that an untoward word or incident may shatter it.

There are three forms of Drama: the transcendental: which is regarded as the highest form, in which the personages are grander than Nature, their acts more important, their sufferings more heroic. As the human figure in the paintings of Buonarotti is represented of Titanic size, so the great poets give heroic proportions to their characters. But to render these heroic proportions acceptable, they select distant periods in which to place their plots, they magnify the characters of the past, relying on the imagination of the audience to assist in the illusion.

If another Shakespeare arose in this day, and placed "Hamlet" in 1880, and in Edinburgh, or "Romeo and Juliet" in New York, these plays, however poetic in treatment, would appear absurd in modern attire, because it would be impossible for the spectators to maintain the illusion that such people, speaking such language and acting in that manner, exist in Scotland or in the United States at the present day.

The second form of Drama is the natural and realistic. Here the personages are life size,

their language and acts are not exaggerated nor heroic; the object being to present a faithful copy of our daily life as it is, or might be.

In both forms, the action must be profluent, coherent, consistent, for life is such.

The third form of Drama is the romantic, into which the supernatural may enter,—spirits of Good and Evil, scenes in which the poet relies on our superstition to raise the illusion,—but he [342] must, even in this supernatural world, make his action coherent, continuous, and profluent. So in the "Tempest," and in the "Midsummer Night's Dream," the admixture of the fanciful is in pursuance of the action, not at war with it, arresting or diverting it. It is brought into familiar association with the characters, to aid the belief in the existence of such sprites. Such means Shakespeare uses in the ghost scene in "Hamlet," and Goethe uses constantly in "Faust." Some dramatists consider the romantic to be a part of the transcendental Drama.

Now let us turn to Opera and compare that production with the Drama. The first kind of Music-Drama that became popular was what we call Italian Opera. The action of a play was taken and reduced to its simplest form. All the fruit and foliage was stripped off the tree, its trunk alone was retained. On this form was wreathed a string of melodies, in a particular order, something after the following fashion Chorus—aria—trio—scene and cavatina—septette and chorus. The music rarely betokened the sentiment or the action that upheld it. It had little to do with that. The music was the food and the scenes were the plates and dishes on which it was served.

As this performance was sung the audience would be naturally unable to catch the words of the singer, which must be distorted in articulation. But still less could they understand what was going on when three, four, and six actors were all speaking at once, and a chorus of thirty or forty more were shouting at the same time. To enable the spectators, therefore, to discern what the Drama was about, a very popular subject was taken, in which every incident was known, and to give fuller aid and light to the obfuscated spectators they were liberally supplied with books. Against the Italian Opera, with its wreaths of impertinent melodies, there arose a protest in Germany, and the school which eventually produced Wagner insisted on regarding this Italian mosaic of melodies as a trivial composition. It claimed that a musical language exists which can interpret the feelings and passions with deeper eloquence than vulgar speech—a grand universal tongue, such as might have existed before Babel—such a vernacular as angels use in their Heavenly intercourse. They contend that this language applied to Drama raises Opera to the level of Tragedy, and Music becomes as immortal as Poetry. Can this be so? We should not dismiss lightly a claim [343] so earnestly made by the great thinkers. Can the sense of sound be so cultivated and developed? Let us remember that Music contains no great abiding truths: we may be momentarily the better for it, but it is evanescent,—it loses its charm by repetition, it becomes old-fashioned. The new music of to-day obliterates the old music of our fathers. Rossini and Donizetti put Mozart and Cherubini on the shelf. These were set aside by Gounod and pelted into a corner by Offenbach and Sullivan.

It is not so with Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, Molier, Sheridan, Burns, or Goldsmith. We never tire of their music—they never become old-fashioned, these great high priests of Human Nature! They do not pretend to have discovered a new language—the last of them does not efface his predecessors.

Art is not a delirium; but music seems to unsettle by intoxication the brains of its lovers when indulged in to æsthetic excess.

Let us return to Earth.

If from the whole of an opera we remove the words, and leave the music to stand alone, we find it incoherent, confused, without symmetry, or direction, or completeness. Let this wordless opera be compared with a symphony, and its imperfection as a musical form will be apparent.

If from the whole we take the music, and allow the words to stand alone, we reveal the meagre, weak, and wretched frame called a libretto. We find a grand dramatic work of Shakespeare murdered for the use of its bones, of which we take up one like an osteologist, and say, "This once belonged to *Hamlet*."

Let us ask ourselves frankly: If Beethoven had published the score of his great work as simply a piece of music, and had called it, as Mendelssohn might have done, "an opera without words," could any musician have discovered the plot, character, and passions in "Fidelio" by means of the music alone? Could he have imagined what it was all about? If Wagner had done likewise, would any Wagnerite pretend to say he could have had the remotest idea of "Lohengrin?"

Music, in its simplest form, may be called a sensuous art acting upon the nervous system; it appears to be, to a great extent, a physical faculty of appreciating the quality and consonance of certain fine vibrations of the air. It excites passions and emotions, especially an excitement which might be called "*hysterica musica*," but it cannot describe or bring form or action to the [344] mind. It is, as it were, color without outline. It emits joy, grief, triumph, despair, love; but unless we are helped to the knowledge by explanation, we fail to understand what it is joyful, plaintive, triumphant, or despairing about! It is a language of vowels without consonants. It is inarticulate. Among the arts, therefore, it is the most sensuous and the least intellectual. Being understood without effort, it gratifies equally the savage and the child, and the reptile; it inflates us with volatile emotions, requires no brains to enjoy its charms; it makes us dance without cause, and cry without reason, and so it is the most popular of all the arts.

The recent representation of an opera composed by M. Verdi, entitled "Otello," and the criticisms on the work, brought forward in my mind these reflections, and caused me to put to myself these simple questions:

What position does Shakespeare hold in this work. "Othello" is a purely domestic tragedy; it is one of the best constructed of all the poet's works. The prefatory action in Venice, and up to the arrival of the wedded pair in Cyprus, is managed with great skill. The play really commences with this attitude, but the characters have been so skilfully developed in the first act that, as instruments, they are ready and familiar. The musical composer sweeps away the Act 1st and begins with Act 2d. He then strips the remainder of the piece, using it as a form on which to arrange his music, as the sculptor twists a frame of iron rods into a suitable shape to support the figure he is about to model in clay. One rod passes into the arm, and another up the back through the neck into the head, and so each limb depends on some internal stay of this kind, which is covered up by the figure, but without which it would fall to pieces. The frame is previously bent and its parts inclined to follow the intended subject. Shakespeare served as the iron frame—the skeleton form—on which M. Verdi shaped his music.

Some years ago Balfe asked me to write the book of an opera for him. We selected a subject and I went to work. I remember the summer evening, in 1843, when we met to read over my first act.

It would not do at all. I was ignorant of the musical plan on which an opera is constructed. Balfe was writing at this time for the French opera with Scribe and St. George, past masters, as librettists, so it is needless to describe the respect with which I [345] listened to the information Balfe gave me, as to their method. I kept for many years the diagram he furnished on that occasion. It is reproduced from memory, but it is correct in all the essential points.

ACT I.

Chorus and
introduction.

Scene and duet.

Scene and cavatina.

Scene, recitative, aria.

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Scene, sistette and stretta.

The Dramatist is invited to put flesh on this skeleton—he must subordinate his drama in every respect to the necessities of the musical form! Feeling unable to accomplish the feat, the work was abandoned.

Some years afterwards Sir Julius Benedict asked me to give him the "Colleen Bawn" in operatic shape. I related my experience with Balfe, over which we laughed together very heartily, but Benedict clung to his affection for the Irish play, and we took John Oxenford into our counsels. Our names are coupled on the title page of the libretto, but all my share in the business consisted of witnessing how my lamb was butchered into a marketable shape, and called the "Lily of Killarney." All the sentiment, all the tenderness, all the simple poetry was swept away. We attended the first performance and I could have cried over it, but it was so drolly burlesque that as I sat and witnessed the attempted murder of *Eily*, laughter got the best of us both. "Yes," said John, "but listen to that!" The house was on its feet, and amid

enthusiastic shouts the singers were called out to receive an ovation.

The glamour, the intoxication produced by the music not only covers and conceals the wretched thing on which it rests, but it transmutes the poorest acting into admirable effort. The most wooden of tenors becomes a miracle of tragic passion when he pronounces an upper D from the chest.

Let us take one of the best of the operas, "Lucia di Lammermoor," and select the most dramatic scene in the work, which occurs at the end of the second act, when *Ravenswood*, who has received the plighted troth of *Lucy*, returns from abroad to discover that she is about to wed his rival, *Bucklaw*. He appears in the midst of the marriage ceremony. The family, consisting of *Henry*, with the guests (basses), *Arthur Bucklaw*, with his friends (tenors), *Lucy's* friends (soprani), are struck with dismay and rage when *Ravenswood* tears his betrothal ring from *Lucy's* hand, an assault which neither *Lucy's* lover nor her brother see fit to notice excepting by making an abortive rush of two steps, and [347] then returning to their places in the sistette and chorus that follows in this manner:

Raimond.

—Hence, begone! or sure thoul't perish.

Arthur and Tenors.

—Madman, hence! our rage exciting. (All together)

Henry and Basses.

—Madman, hence! our fury fearing.

Raimond.

—Life and rank thou holdest, cherish.

Arthur and Tenors.

—O'er thy head thy fate suspended. (Together)

Henry and Basses.

—O'er thy head thy fate is pending.

After more of this, *Lucy* and *Ravenswood* address each other simultaneously.

Lucy.

—God protect him in this moment.

Rav.

—Let me die before this altar.

Before they can complete the rest of their feelings *Raimond* interferes, and the three are crying together.

Lucy.

—My prayer will never be rejected.

Rav.

—Hour of vengeance now fulfilling.

Rai.

—Hence betake thee.

Then in comes *Alisa* to the hubbub, and we find *Lucy*, *Alisa*, *Ravenswood*, *Arthur*, *Henry*, *Raimond*, all raging at each other in line, with the choruses behind them. Here is the dialogue:

"Go! or thy blood shall quickly flow.

Go—yes—flow. Yes—yes—shall flow.

Thy blood. Go—go—go hence! Yes,

On thy head. Go—go! Yes—yes—fall.

Shall fall! Vanish! Yes, shall fall.

Go! Ah, yes! Ah, yes! Cease, oh, cease!

Madman! Our rage exciting, on thy head

Shall fall. Yes! Go! Thy head—ah, yes!

Shall fall—shall fall—Thy blood.

Yes, on thy head shall fall. It shall

Fall! Thy blood it shall fall.

It shall fall. Hence, then hence
Then thy blood shall fall. Yes,
Thy blood shall fall!"

During this, the six characters are charging the audience in line, all ejaculating together, all repeating again and again what they have said, until *Lucy*, in despair, seizes hold of *Ravenswood*, who drags her about the stage. Her lover and brother make a plunge at them, but remembering they have more to say they return to the charge at the audience without accomplishing their purpose, which, indeed, would have interrupted the *sistette*, and therefore was not to be thought of. So they allow *Lucy* and *Ravenswood* to struggle it out. He ends by throwing her in a heap, and rushes [348] out on the last note, which, of course, is his upper C, if he has one, and the curtain falls on this supremely ridiculous scene amid the enthusiastic plaudits of an unreasoning public.

With the music, which forms, of course, the greatest part of this exhibition, I have nothing to do. With the singers, as singers, I have no concern. But with the Drama that is degraded, and with the actors who present the figures in this performance, I have some business. The more so, as the press (who know better) have encouraged this misbegotten thing to assume a royal place in the theatre, to which it has no title. If the press has a vocation, so far as art is concerned, it is to guide and admonish the public, of which it is the brain. It has failed conspicuously in its duty in this respect to the Drama. Let us ask the wildest melomaniac on the press this simple question: If any of your tenor *Romeos*, or your soprano *Lucias*, should lose their voices, and find themselves obliged to tender their services as juvenile tragedian or leading woman in any dramatic company, where would they stand? Do you think Brignoli could have replaced Irving in a satisfactory manner? Do you think that Gerster or Adelina Patti could take the place of Ellen Terry or Ada Rehan? Divested of the glamour of the music, in what shape would these operatic artists appear?

You know that this is so, and knowing it, you write in the Parisian journals, in the London press, and in the American papers, in a strain of ridiculous extravagance concerning the dramatic powers of the singers! Why must I read with contempt of your pens that "Signor F., in the character of *Othello*, attained to such ideal perfection, in the scene of the bedchamber, that the artist had to repeat the *morceau* again and again amidst a *furor* rarely paralleled?"

And you fail to perceive the astounding absurdity contained in all this! *Othello* is called on to play a scene over again, and this is paraded seriously by you as evidence of his ideal perfection in the character! You cannot find adjectives in our language adequate to glorify this solemn buffoonery!

Either I am suffering under an aberration of mind—an artistic and literary cecity—or there is an idol in the sacred precincts of our Temple which diverts the worship of a portion of the people from their true and pure devotion to the drama.

Out with it!

Dion Boucicault.