Opera as Dramatic Poetry

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CHAPTER FIVE
Toward a Definition of Opera

Ever since the emergence of the art of the opera in early seventeenth-century Italy, the question has been debated, "Is opera a form of music or is it a form of dramatic poetry?"

There is not doubt that the earliest librettists and opera composers were strongly influenced by Greek tragedy and were, in fact, acquainted with Aristotle's definition of tragedy. They described their works for the theater by such terms as *favola in musica, favola pastorale* or *dramma per musica* ("drama by means of music"). Plato and Aristotle advanced the opinion that music is an imitation of feeling and that dramatic poetry is an imitation of human action. If opera were only an imitation of feeling, it is difficult to understand why opera composers write so much music that describes action on the stage and delineates character. In fact, the opera composers themselves, without exception, thought of their creations as works for the theater, to be performed by singers, actors and dancers before an audience gathered to witness a special kind of dramatic poem whose principal means of expression is vocal and instrumental music.

Experience in the opera house tends to confirm this view. The first thing we hear is usually an overture, a musical description of things to come. Then the curtain rises and theatrical characters appear, speaking or singing their lines. A plot begins to emerge, we become empathically involved with the characters as they struggle with one another and, at the end, when the plot is resolved, a theme, or universal idea, lodges in our consciousness, the result of a catharsis of our aroused emotion into meaning.

Thus, the fundamental element of the pleasure we take in the performance of an opera appears to be our empathic response to the comic or tragic turmoil experienced by a character on the stage. Empathy may be defined as the sympathy we feel for an unreal person in a real situation. When we empathize with Canio, for instance, as he sings "Vesti la giubba", when we respond emotionally to the anguish of a man who has certain knowledge of his wife's infidelity, yet must put on costume and makeup to perform in a

comedy before an audience in which his rival very likely will be present, our feeling of sympathy is as gripping as it would be in real life for a close friend in the same situation.

Pleasure begins, then, with an empathic response to a character in a particular situation or crisis and is then vastly increased by the music that expresses the situation or crisis. Both the musical beauty of Canio's great aria and the thrilling sound of the dramatic tenor voice combine to raise the level of empathic response far beyond what can be achieved by a superior performance of a great role in a spoken drama. So intense is this response that audiences everywhere applaud and cheer a tenor who can sing this aria at the artistic level established in the past by such artists as Enrico Caruso, Giovanni Martinelli, Beniamino Gigli and others.

Early operas were modelled on Greek dramatic poetry, which imitated a series of actions by three means of expression: words, music and rhythmic movement. Today, instead of one unified form, however, we are accustomed to three fairly distinct forms of dramatic poetry: spoken drama (plays, in either verse or prose), sung drama (operas, operettas and scenic cantatas) and danced drama (story ballets).

But if opera is a form of dramatic poetry is it not, therefore, a form of literature? The answer to this persistent question seems to be that it is not. As Susanne Langer has observed, the basic abstraction of literature is the word, while the basic abstraction of dramatic poetry is the act.[1] The veracity of this thesis can be illustrated by a simple hypothesis: if a person who is totally illiterate is given a copy of a play by Shakespeare, he will be unable to read it. But if he is taken to a production of the play, he will be able to enjoy it as much as anyone else in the audience if he possesses histrionic imagination.

Where, then, does dramatic poetry fit in the larger scheme of art? The classical theory of imitation, as expounded by Plato and Aristotle, argues that there are three forms of art based on the three possible objects of imitation: nature, feeling and action. The imitation of nature embodies the art of painting and sculpture, imitation of feeling that of music and the imitation of action falls into two categories, dramatic poetry (plays) and literary poetry (the epic, the narrative and the lyric). Both categories of poetry achieve the same effect as do the other forms of art: the arousal of emotion in the spectator or reader, and the catharsis of such emotion into meaning.

Aristotle's *Poetics* is an effort to analyze dramatic poetry within the

general framework of imitation, and very little has been added to his analysis except for various efforts to clarify his terms. For instance, he says he is defining tragedy and that he will provide us with a treatise on comedy later. But as he worked on his study of tragedy, he must have discovered that there is really very little difference between comedy and tragedy. One can test this view by attending successive performances of *Die Meistersinger* and *Tristan und Isolde*. The only differences lie in the nature of the emotions aroused through empathic responses to the situations of the principal characters. Aristotle thought that tragedy arouses emotions of pity and fear. Comedy probably arouses emotions of laughter and charm. But is accurate identification of these emotions important? Aristotle's own catharsis theory suggests not. It is the catharsis of emotion into meaning that matters, not the nature of the emotion itself. In view of this, it is plain why he never wrote a commentary on comedy—it wasn't worth the trouble. He had said all he had to say on the subject. If one simply shortens his phrase, "arousal of the emotions of pity and fear" to "arousal of emotion"* it can be seen that his treatise describes not only tragedy but all the other forms of dramatic poetry as well.

Aristotle's analysis of dramatic poetry is built around three fairly distinct concepts: imitation, probability and catharsis. Although he does not define imitation in his treatise, enough was written about it in Greek literature so that a definition can be reconstructed, as has been done by Richard McKeon: "Imitation is the presentation of an aspect of things in a matter other than its natural matter, rendered inevitable by reasons other than its natural reasons."[2] The key idea here is that of inevitability. A work of art is—as it *is*. It can't be changed. It can't be improved. If left unfinished at the time of the artist's death, it can't be completed by someone else. Who could compose the third and fourth movements of Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony"?

In art, inevitability is the product of the laws of art that are established by the creative imaginations of the great artists; the inevitability of a tree is determined by the laws of nature. A painting of a tree by a great artist is, thus, the presentation of an aspect of the tree by means of paint on canvas (in place of wood and leaves), which is rendered inevitable by the artist (rather than by nature.) Likewise, music is the presentation of an aspect of human feeling and poetry is the presentation of an aspect of action. And

* The emotion being that of empathy with the feelings of the characters on the stage.

inevitability is achieved in both art forms by the composer or poet, not by nature.[3]

Thus, Aristotle defines dramatic poetry as an imitation of a series of related actions, expressed by means of words, music and rhythmic movement. The "series of related actions" is described in the *Poetics* as the plot, and plot construction is thoroughly explored. The plot should have a beginning, middle and end. The episodes of the plot must be probable and the linkage between them must seem necessary. The problem of the dramatic poet, Aristotle tells us, is to make the improbable probable. A central technique in this process is that of the *hamartia,* the hero's mistake in judgment, that leads to consequences of a magnitude vastly greater than that of the mistake itself. (The translation of *hamartia* as "tragic flaw", in which the hero's downfall is brought on by a flaw in his character, is no longer defended by classical scholarship.)

Dramatic poetry is filled with examples of mistakes in judgment that have disastrous consequences. Oedipus makes a mistake in judgment when he decides to leave Corinth after hearing the prediction of the oracle that he would murder his father and marry his mother. Why didn't he confront the king and queen of Corinth with this disturbing prophecy? Surely Polybus and Merope would have told him the truth—that they were not his parents. Shakespeare builds his plots on various mistakes in judgment. Othello puts too much trust in Iago, Lear should not have divided his kingdom, Hamlet should have killed Claudius while he was praying and Macbeth should have ignored the weird sisters. In opera, Tristan should not have agreed to go back to Ireland to bring Isolde to King Mark. Rigoletto places too much trust in Sparafucile, and Azucena should have told Manrico who he really was.

If the audience is able to accept the mistake in judgment, it suspends disbelief and becomes involved emotionally with the leading personages in their struggles. The audience's empathic response to the plight of unreal personages in real situations is what Aristotle meant by arousal of emotion, and he believed that if probability is absent, emotion will not be aroused. This seems to be borne out in practice. If the action is not convincing, we lose interest in the proceedings and empathy becomes impossible. His theory of probability is perhaps Aristotle's most inspired insight into the nature of dramatic poetry.

Finally, he describes the effect that dramatic poetry has on the spectator in the audience as "achieving a catharsis of the aroused emotion." A popular

interpretation of this cryptic remark holds that the word was being used in its most elementary medical meaning: that is, a cathartic is employed to rid the bowels of impurities, so the effect of dramatic poetry is to purge the spectator of unwanted emotion. But how one can be purged of emotion by means of the emotion itself has never been made clear, and students of Aristotle have turned to a more plausible interpretation of the term.

In modern psychiatry, catharsis denotes the release of emotional tension by means of verbalizing or intellectualizing the emotion during interview therapy. In Aristotle's time, intellectual concepts, philosophic speculation and deductive reasoning were thought to be closely related to feeling, emotion and intuition. It is, therefore, not out of the question that what he was saying was that the arousal of emotion in the spectator is followed by a catharsis of the emotion into meaning, understanding or knowledge. This is a special kind of knowledge, however, not the kind acquired by reading books, attending lectures or observing life. It is intuitive, *a priori* knowledge, knowledge that is prior to thought. As such, as Wittgenstein has observed, it cannot be conveyed to others by means of language. It remains locked up within us, a portion of the total storehouse of knowledge that we possess at any given moment of our lives.

This process, in which the audience senses meaning in a work of dramatic art, is the exact reverse of the way in which the dramatic poet instills meaning into a play or an opera. In his *Critique of Judgment,* Immanuel Kant ranks poetry first among the arts because poetry "raises itself aesthetically to ideas."[4] That is, "the poet renders sensuous thematic ideas about the realms of the invisible, the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as manifestations of experience such as death, envy and all the sins, love, fame and the like."[5] In doing so, the poet unites the worlds of thought and feeling into a single artistic statement.

How does the dramatic poet render a thematic idea sensuous? Usually, he begins with a situation involving two or three characters, a situation that provides opportunity for speculation on such ideas as, for example, jealousy (Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*), erotic and spiritual love (Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*) or tradition in art (Pfitzner's *Palestrina*). He then elaborates the situation into a plot structure capable of exploring the fundamental thematic idea and providing for the development of character.

Aristotle thought that character is revealed by choice, especially moral choice. For example, Macbeth's character is revealed to us by his decision to murder King Duncan while the latter is asleep in a room in Macbeth's

own castle, a place where he especially owes protection to his sovereign. So the plot must allow for moral choices as well as choices of taste, jokes, clothing, food, drink and all the other kinds of activity that tell us what kind of a human being a particular person really is. If the plot makes possible the appearance on the stage of believable, well developed characters, then the audience will respond emotionally to their trials, triumphs and defeats. And if the ending of the plot makes clear the resolution of the thematic idea that underlies the dramatic poem, the audience will experience—in a mirror image of the poet's achievement of rendering the idea sensuous—an enlargement of its understanding of the idea by means of a catharsis of emotion into meaning.

The principal value of Aristotle's catharsis theory is that it enables us to separate art from entertainment. In the theater, a good performance of *My Fair Lady* is not so very different from one of *The Magic Flute*. We empathize with Eliza and Higgins just as we do with Pamina and Tamino, and the thematic idea of both plots has to do with the thirst for knowledge. But emotions aroused by the musical play die out as soon as we leave the theater, while those aroused by the opera transmute themselves into a special, incommunicable kind of knowledge about the universal human desire to know. For this reason, dramatic poetry may be regarded as an instrument of education, while entertainment in the form of dramatic poetry arouses emotion merely for its own sake.

From the foregoing, the following definition emerges:

Opera is an imitation of a series of related actions, expressed by means of music, words and rhythmic movement, acted not narrated, arousing emotion in the spectator and achieving a catharsis of such emotion into meaning.

Through statements they have made in letters, memoirs, aesthetical essays and in their creations for the lyric theater, all the opera composers who have been considered here have displayed a conviction that opera is, indeed, a form of dramatic poetry, that catharsis is achieved through audience involvement with plot and character as expressed by music, words and rhythmic movement. Although text and music need not be the product of a single creative imagination, the tendency of the times is in this direction.