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## HOW TO WRITE AN OPERA REVIEW

Before writing an opera review, at least once in your life it might be a good idea to do the following exercise: walk onto the forestage in a theatre (preferably a big one) and sing a few phrases, accompanied by an orchestra and watched by one or two thousand spectators. Kind of hard to imagine, isn't it? Alright, let's simplify the task. Don't sing. Recite a few lines in French, Italian or German, again in the presence of a conductor, an orchestra and a few thousand people in the audience. Fine, don't sing and don't recite anything. Just walk back and forth on the stage for a while from one curtain to the other. The conductor, orchestra and a couple of thousand spectators are mandatory. Repeat the exercise three times. Some of my fellow journalists could handle the last version of the exercise. I believe in us! As for the previous versions: I doubt it.

Many critics would say there's no point in them doing this: a singer and a music critic are two different professions. Nevertheless, I'd like to ask you a favor: don't consider yourself above those onstage and in the orchestra pit. Try to be a bit more modest. The professions of singers and conductors are a lot more demanding in terms of work and energy, both physically and psychologically, aren't they? And ultimately, setting up a play takes around a month, a month and a half, and it takes even longer to learn the part or music, perfect it and recite it. It's a lengthy and virtually permanent process. Writing a review, even if you factor in the creative process with all its torments, usually takes a day or two. One may argue, "But we went to school for this... They can't write like we do". Yes, of course they can't. And still, I'm asking you once again: don't judge/rate. Try to understand why the play turned out a certain way and explain why. Don't forget that your job is to give a more or less suitable commentary on what other people do.

Now, let's get down to work. It's good to demonstrate some erudition in the opening, such as knowledge of the context, as well as mainstream contemporary theater, and an understanding of "the past in the present" (as the great composer Modest Mussorgsky used to say). Remind the reader of the author and their opera. I recommend to briefly revise the plot so that the reader can see it amid the director's fantasies. Here, it is important to feel the cadence and "give the fountain of eloquence a rest" (Kozma Prutkov).

Let's move on to the main subject: opera. First, you have to talk about the directing. (If you choose to continue in another direction – the conductor, the orchestra, the singers – you risk losing a significant part of your audience.) There are two ways to continue, depending on your aesthetic preferences:

1. You are an apologist of tradition. For starters, ask yourself: why? Why waste time, feel perpetually disappointed and bore others? I recommend you familiarize yourself with the opera announcements and decide: to go or not to go, to write or not to write. Nowadays, getting traumatized at the theater for a person of such views comes at a risk of ninety percent, if not a hundred. Wait for the concert performance: it might be a bit boring, but at least it's safe.

2. You are an open-minded person who is not wary of postmodernism and psychoanalysis. If you can react to all sorts of mental disorders with understanding and even interest, analyzing the concepts of contemporary opera directors may become an interesting task for you. Mental disorders are a typical occurrence in opera anyway. You know, it's part of the tradition. Modern directors simply adapt them to make them easier to understand for the progressive people of today. Speaking of which, ruminations on this topic can be a good background for the opening of your review.

Sexual disorders are a special case and a know-how of contemporary directing. Are you shocked by nudity in the operas of Mozart, Glinka, Donizetti, Bizet, Tchaikovsky, Verdi? Well, get used to it. Not our first time at the theater, as the saying goes. Try to find something positive even in this twist of the director's imagination. A large part of the audience reacts to such things with indignation, but (let's not pretend) everyone finds them interesting.

Other typical solutions, such as walking around in latex, acrobats and clowns (at the worst moment possible), dozens of boys and girls instead of one, women turning into men and vice versa, teleportation and time travel, are completely harmless. Some people may have grown tired of all this, but there's nothing we can do about it. Only someone who hasn't been to the opera theater for the last thirty years could find themselves appalled. That's not our case, is it? So even if you think something isn't right, don't let it show. Let everyone think you understood everything perfectly. After all, even the directors don't know what they want to say with all of this. And when you start writing your review, use your imagination, you'll end up somewhere eventually.

But seriously, try to feel through what you see and hear, and to understand whether this is something that you connect with on a personal level, as well as your sense of time and what lies beyond it. If the answer is "yes", then why? Even hooliganism on the stage can turn out to be a revelation. As the saying goes, let's wait and see. And if you end up being the first one, hey, who made the right guess?

This is where many reviewers go for the coda, adding a few sentences about the conductor and a paragraph on the singers. Why not? You've already covered the main part. Still, some people might want to continue. I suggest two ways of doing so:

1. You can't read notes. In this case, indeed, what should you do? Take heart! There is a solution.

The conductor. You're in a pickle. I can offer you to choose something from the following selection: 'charisma' (has it or not), 'balance' (ditto), 'tempo' (right or wrong), 'discordance between the orchestra and the soloists or choir' (use the latter if you have a feeling of vague dissatisfaction, but you're not sure where it comes from). Leave a separate mention for the 'clean-cut (messy)' wind instruments and the 'penetrating (lackluster)' string instruments. (You can tell the difference, right? Well, even if you can't, no one will know.) Bring up the excellent French horn solo. (It's not too hard to make the French horn player's day, is it?)

What about the singers? Stick to epithets: 'a wonderful cantilena', 'did a decent job', 'messed up', 'steady'/'unsteady', 'smooth'/'not very smooth', 'awful phonetics' (you are a polyglot, after all!). Let's assume you're an expert on singing and you're aware of the vocabulary of the chosen ones: 'didn't hit the high notes', 'vibrato is too fast (bleating)', 'nasal, breathy or throaty tones', 'should've put more chest into it', 'lacks of evenness in scales', etc. And you even suspect what these phrases might mean. This knowledge is praiseworthy, but that doesn't mean you should apply it here. Don't confuse your readers, don't suffocate them with your intelligence.

One more thing: do you think someone started at the wrong time? Or did they, perhaps, finish off too early? Try to recall what the singer was doing at the time: jumping, running, falling, dancing, crawling under a sofa or a table, climbing a ladder, flying up to the ceiling on a swing or on a horse, waving their wings up in the air, riding a bicycle, hanging from a bridge, taking off their dress or trousers? Sometimes they do simply stand on their feet, on the forestage, too. In this case, know that they got lucky. Now, think of the exercises that were offered to you earlier on. "Out of practice – out of breath" (quoted from the libretto from Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride*) doesn't seem like much of an excuse anymore, does it? Apparently, their hearing isn't great, either. A professional singer must be capable of satisfying the director's every whim. (And who's in charge here?) Yet, still, they're people, after all.

2. You can read notes. Did you know that back in the olden days, viewers would visit the opera with pocket-sized scores? That was a long time ago. No, don't bring a score, you will definitely be misunderstood. Instead, well, not to suggest doing anything illegal, but make a phone recording. Later on, download the score. Listen, read the score and summarize your impressions. Do you understand what the instruments are here? Do you know how to use a metronome? Well then, why not? We are professionals, after all. We have to do our very best.

And to conclude, a couple of words on personal matters. Are you planning to become an opera critic and write reviews? Here's my word of advice for you: don't make friends with directors, conductors or singers. Either you're friends with them or you write. One logically rules out the other. Some might say, well,

that's a bit too far-fetched. Indeed, let's look at this issue from another angle. Being friends with the right people can be mutually beneficial. Go ahead, write, make your friend happy! This might also provide you with a modest, but stable income. Your job isn't all that profitable anyway, so why not?

And in the end, chill out, as they say. No one will criticize you. At ease, and create, ladies and gentlemen!

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