

PHILIP GOSSETT
Chicago-Rome

TO MAINTAIN A MUSIC CULTURE, WE MUST TEACH IT

During the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, opera was widely considered to be a fundamental aspect of cultural life throughout Europe. Although one cannot deny that these art works were known fully primarily among the educated classes, and that they filtered down to middle or lower classes mostly through arrangements – for piano, two or four-hands, for band, for hurdy-gurdy, for popular choirs –, the art form was considered to have importance for the cultural development of society. It was in opera that significant movements in history were celebrated or initiated, whether through performances of such obviously revolutionary works as Auber's *La muette de Portici* or the so-called nationalist operas in Eastern Europe, bringing local languages and/or dialects to the operatic stage. Even at a moment in which operas were presented by and large in the local vernacular, it became clear that they had an inestimable importance. It was well recognized that Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* dealt with the Swiss revolt against Austrian rulers, even if every use of the word 'liberté' in the original (and it is the key word of the opera), was changed in the Italian. So, in *Tell* the concluding phrases in the original French *octosyllabe*, the unacceptable *nonaria* in Italian metrics, read:

Liberté, redescends des cieux,
Et que ton règne recommence.

These verses became simple *ottonari* in Italian:

Il contento che in me sento
non può l'anima spiegar.

Rossini's music had to carry the original sentiment even if the words were rendered banal, since in 1830 one was not permitted to say 'libertà' on the stage of an Italian opera house, in a territory controlled by the Austrians.

But today's ignorance among young students of history (ask a fourteen-year old in the United States about the Korean war or the Vietnam war and you'll be largely greeted with an utter failure to understand what those conflicts meant for several generations of Americans) is only exacerbated when one looks at the issues that were of concern to our forebears in the nineteenth century. And yet, if we do not understand those phenomena, we are doomed – as historians have long affirmed – to relive the traumas of an earlier age. And so, we seek an educational system in which the traumas of an earlier age are not forgotten, but are laid out for all to understand.

I do not mean to suggest that we can do this by simply adapting the instructional methods or intellectual attitudes of an earlier generation. It is clear that today, in a world dominated by translations, even on the backs of seats in the opera house, or by dubbing, for example, there is no point pretending that we live in a world in which local languages will prevail in the presentation of operatic masterpieces in the theatre. In the new Europe knowledge of English alone is not enough, despite calls of the Italian government for instruction in English by professors whose knowledge of English is to say the least rudimentary, and students who can deal with the original languages in which operas were written, will have an unquestionable advantage over those who know only a local language. We must accept the decision made by Casa Ricordi, after twenty years of stalling, to publish the vocal score of *Guillaume Tell* only in French, because few will be the opera venues in which an Italian translation is required. This was, I am sure, entirely a commercial decision by the publisher, but it corresponds to a reality of today's market-place. And so, we depend in the new Europe on the knowledge of multiple languages and we accept that operas in Czech will be performed in Czech, even if we do not know that language.

But it is not only history that lacks. After all, if we study Verdi's *Attila* and his correspondence with the Roman artist, Vincenzo Luccardi, we cannot help but tie in directly with art historians interested in the Vatican rooms frescoed by Raphael and others. Musicologists have too long in Italy held themselves aloof from collaborations with historians, art historians, philosophers, and linguists, and the result has been the increasing specialization of ever smaller realms of knowledge. It is through our concern with teaching that we can change this fragmentation, a fragmentation dangerous for our concerns, and one that leaves us ever more exposed to marginalization. While I believe fundamentally that musicologists have a particular set of skills to bear on these historical issues, and that I can talk about *music* in ways that an art historian cannot, I do not believe that we should be speaking to students about opera in ways that do not draw upon the specialties of our colleagues in the humanities. We cannot present ourselves as interested only in questions that concern musicologists.

But let's take some examples from important historical moments. How can we understand the failure of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in Paris in 1860 without understanding that this artistic disaster was leading up to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and that it is part of an entire French/German competition in the nineteenth century (and how can we really understand World War II or for that matter the difficulties between Merkel and the French government without any awareness of this nineteenth-century history)? And how can we understand why so many French intellectuals, including Debussy and Baudelaire, were attracted to the Bayreuth Festival, unless we understand the nature of the Commune in Paris after the Franco-Prussian War? The truth is that whether

we accept the significance of Wagner's *Ring* per se or not, the work plays a fundamental role in the history of European thought in the 19th century. That a historian of the 19th century in Europe has written a book on *Wagner in Venice* is important both for what Wagner meant as a figure in 19th-century history and specifically for the relationship between Wagner and Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹

The situation is no better in Italy, where work after work must be understood in the context of historical changes. Rossini's setting of *Elisabetta, regina d'Inghilterra* is not just a celebration of Isabella Colbran's diva-like appearance but it also provides elaborate praise of a restored monarch from the Bourbon dynasty in Naples and the downfall of Napoleon. Verdi's great choruses from *Nabucco*, *Ermani*, and *Macbeth* must be understood in the historical context of the Italian Risorgimento, and how can we understand the strange history of *Stiffelio* unless we understand the peculiar attitude toward religion that pervaded Italian society in the mid-nineteenth century. The sexual attitudes of the nervous Austrians will help explain why for generations, the Duke in *Rigoletto* asked Sparafucile for «due cose e tosto» at the beginning of the third act of the opera. And what were these things? «Una stanza e del vino», according to the censors, rather than Verdi's «tua sorella e del vino». And we need to understand that the peculiar setting of *Un ballo in maschera* in Boston reflects Papal preoccupations in the period following the revolt of 1848.

The ignorance of our secondary school students about history is patent, but it is only possible to remedy it by each of us doing his or her part to clarify that history for our students. And this is only possible if our respective governments understand that to maintain not only a musical culture, but any culture whatsoever, we must teach it. It will not be the job of the companies whose business is to make money in the market place by selling the latest hits by Justin Bieber and company to worry about such matters: it falls to us, teachers, cultural historians, art historians, musicologists, to insist that it is only by understanding history, by working together with our colleagues in many disciplines can we hope not only to get our message across to our students, but – even more important – to get it across to the so-called “educational establishment” that will increasingly decree what it is we may or may not teach in the classroom. Yes, to maintain a musical culture we must teach it, but we must teach it as a part of a historical culture more generally.

¹ J. W. BARKER, *Wagner and Venice*, Rochester, NY, University of Rochester Press, 2008.