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“DON GIOVANNI GOES TO PRISON”: TEACHING OPERA BEHIND BARS

When Bard College asked me to teach a three-hour class on Haydn’s *Creation* at Eastern Correctional Facility I did not know what to expect. I accepted out of curiosity. Eastern Correctional Facility is a massive neo-gothic maximum-security prison built in 1900 in rural New York.¹ Crossing into this prison’s mighty walls and passing through the security checkpoint can be intimidating. Encountering the incarcerated students has an even more powerful effect, but a positive one. To me these men seemed to have dissolved the prison walls thanks to their intellectual curiosity and their eagerness to learn. They opened their minds and ears to music that sounded unfamiliar to many of them. Eighteenth-Century oratorios and operas can appear meaningless or dull to today’s listeners not accustomed to this genre of music. Classical

I presented a version of this paper at the panel on “Transmission of Knowledge as a Primary Aim in Music Education” at the International Musicological Society, Juilliard School of Music in New York, on June 21, 2015. Some of my colleagues who attended my presentation encouraged me to post a short version of my paper in the AMS blog, “Musicology Now” (<http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/>), which I did on February 16, 2016. The blog received considerable attention, triggering a modern operatic *querelle* that had little to do with opera itself. The debate was soon carried on in several different sites, including the popular British blog *Slipped Disc*. I thank my colleagues and participants in this debate for the animated discussion on the blogosphere. The feedback I received convinced me to change the wording of my text in a few critical points, hoping that the present contribution in *Musica Docta* will no longer divert its readers’ attention from its central argument and its main purpose, which is an invitation to social action through the dissemination of opera culture among imprisoned men and women and other unconventional audiences, especially among the underprivileged members of our society.

¹ I offered the lecture on “God and Nature in Haydn’s *Creation*” on Friday March 14, 2014. Some of the ideas developed on this occasion ended up in my article on Haydn for the entry “Haydn, Joseph” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Bible and Arts*, edited by Timothy Beal (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015). I am grateful to Jeff Jurgens, co-director of the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison for his great assistance and contagious enthusiasm for this project. The Bard Prison Initiative is the most extensive and active degree-granting prison program in the United States: see <http://bpi.bard.edu/>. The Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison, based at Bard College, also partners with several other colleges, including my institution, the University of Notre Dame, sharing ideas, common philosophy and a vision of education in prison. See <http://consortium.bard.edu/>.

music and opera are acquired tastes like any other genre and style of music and their value is both intrinsic and contextual. Fortunately, the Bards students at Eastern Correctional Facility not only proved to have an open mind and open ears; they had also already carefully read the texts I had assigned, including passages from Milton, Ovid, and the book of Genesis. This allowed us to engage with Haydn's *Creation* on the basis of a shared intellectual background that made the oratorio more easily approachable.

The experience was so positive that I decided to teach an entire opera history class for inmates entitled "Opera and Ideas". I taught it as an adjunct professor of the College of the Holy Cross at the Westville Correctional Facility in Indiana during the Fall semester of 2014.² The operas we studied in this class were: Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Verdi's *Otello*, Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

Most of the debate on education in prison has focused primarily on the issue of whether it is ethical to make educational opportunities available to criminals. In the United States, where higher education is not available at affordable cost, many people resent the idea of a free education being offered to offenders while it is being denied to honest taxpayers. Advocates of educational programs have therefore conducted statistical studies to deploy data proving that education initiatives in prison are good for society at large. The most recurrent argument can be summarized this way, at the cost of oversimplification: considering that a person in prison spends tax money, while a person out of prison, when employed, pays taxes, education for prisoners, as long as it is not heavily funded by tax money, is cost effective because it reduces recidivism and helps ex-prisoners find jobs.³ In 1764 Cesare Beccaria,

² The Westville Prison Initiative, partner of the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison, is organized by Holy Cross College at Notre Dame (<http://www.hcc-nd.edu/westville-education-initiative/>). I am deeply grateful to the Director of the College Operations, Alesha Seroczynski, for her great support of my unusual teaching needs as well as her passionate commitment to the idea of teaching opera in prison. For the class Dr. Seroczynski allowed me to order and deposit in the prison's library multiple copies of the operas' orchestral scores, textbooks, an extensive course packet with critical literature, as well as audio and visual material. The latter proved difficult for the prisoners to use freely. I am grateful to my students at the University of Notre Dame, in particular Shannon Kraemer, Viviana Dewey, Thomas Graff, Vittoria Luchini, Lesley Sullivan, Damian Zurro, and to my colleague Professor Phillip Sloan who volunteered to attend class discussions and organize opera nights for inmates in order to show full operas in video, which were occasionally attended also by security personnel and by imprisoned men not enrolled in my class. All of this would have not been possible without the kind cooperation of the prison's personnel and administrators, especially Ms. Sharon Hawk.

³ One of the most convincing studies in favor of education in prison is J. M. TAYLOR, "Should Prisoners Have Access to Collegiate Education? A Policy Issue", *Educational Policy*, VIII, n. 3, 1994, pp. 315-338. This essay also offers a special

in his influential book *Crimes and Punishments*, addressed this issue in equally rational, but simpler and less materialistic terms. Beccaria wrote: "the most difficult but also most effective method to prevent crime is to perfect education".⁴ To explain why he takes this position, he refers to Rousseau's *Emile*, claiming that education has the power to "lead to virtue through the easy road of feelings".⁵

The humanistic study of opera (or music in general) may not provide job opportunities to ex-offenders, but it may be more effective than computer science or economics to help anyone, including former offenders, to understand and therefore control human emotions, and to reflect on ethical issues. Giuseppina La Face wrote that "musical education is an essential discipline to form citizens", not because of music's power to trigger immediate psychophysical reactions, as in Platonic conceptions of music. Rather, music education is a discipline that develops intellectual and cognitive competence

focus on the case of the State of Indiana, where I currently work. An extensive report, analyzing a broader pull pool of data than Taylor, is W. ERISMAN - J. BAYER CONTARDO, "Learning to Reduce Recidivism: A 50-State Analysis of Postsecondary Correctional Education Policy", *The Institute for Higher Education Policy* (November 2005). Through a demographic profile of the incarcerated population, this study reaffirms that "prisoners are, in particular, far less educated than the general population and, before incarceration, were significantly more impoverished" (p. 5). Once in prison, education improves the condition and behavior of the entire population: "many corrections officials point out that postsecondary correctional education can produce positive results within the prison itself, including improved communication between corrections staff and inmates, the development of positive peer role models for prisoners, and reduced problems with disciplinary infractions" (p. 7). The third and most lengthy argument is the effectiveness for society at large and tax payers in relation of to the measurable positive effects of education on the reduction of recidivism rates (pp. 7-12, 47-48). Another study, which includes an extensive review of existing literature, and addresses the positive effects of education in prison, and as well as the negative effects of the crisis as consequent to The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, is M. E. BATIUK, "Disentangling the Effects of Correctional Education: Are Current Policies Misguided? An Event History Analysis", *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, V, n. 1, 2005, pp. 55-74. For a more recent, readily available, and concise essay on this issue see A. HU, "How to Stop Revolving Prison Doors with Books", *Harvard Political Review*: <http://harvardpolitics.com/covers/covers-spring-2015/stop-revolving-prison-doors-books/>.

⁴ C. BECCARIA, *Dei delitti e delle pene* [Livorno, 1766], critical ed. by F. Venturi, Turin, Einaudi, 1994 (1965), chapter XLV, 102. On Jefferson's interest in and respect for Beccaria see Venturi's introduction, p. xxxiv.

⁵ *Ibid.*: "spingere alla virtù per la facile strada del sentimento". The reference to Rousseau is cautiously indirect although hard to miss. Beccaria refers to him as "a great man who sheds light on the humanity who persecutes him". On this reference see Venturi's critical apparatus, p. 102, note 13.

for the understanding of and respect for musical cultures of different times and places.⁶ Lorenzo Bianconi, in his essay “La forma musicale come scuola dei sentimenti”, writes that “the secret of vitality and longevity of opera is that it has represented a powerful school of feelings”. “Opera”, Bianconi continues, “has shown to many generations of viewers-listeners the beneficial or devastating dynamics of passions, representing them in musical forms that are immediately suggestive in their sonic fragrance”. Musical forms convey feelings with immediacy only when understood, structurally, historically, and contextually.⁷

When Don Giovanni entered Westville Correctional Facility during my opera class, the prisoners gave him a very warm welcome.⁸ Their previous study of Metastasian opera equipped them with a powerful tool for understanding the differences, similarities, and influences between opera buffa and opera seria. For example, when confronting Donna Elvira’s entrance aria,

⁶ G. LA FACE BIANCONI, “Il cammino dell’Educazione musicale: vicoli chiusi e strade maestre”, in *Educazione musicale e Formazione*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and F. Frabboni, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2008, pp. 13-25: 14. The essay addresses the thorny issue of why musical education, even at the most elementary level, must include the study of music as culture and not be limited to music making. On this same issue see also her article, “La musica e le insidie delle antinomie”, in *La musica tra conoscere e fare*, ed. by G. La Face Bianconi and A. Scalfaro, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2011, pp. 11-18. Music classes for prisoners are unfortunately often designed as General Music classes teaching introductory lessons on how to play or sing. Their purpose is to let inmates “kill” time.

⁷ L. BIANCONI, “La forma musicale come scuola dei sentimenti”, in *Educazione musicale e Formazione* cit., pp. 85-120: 85, 107, 109.

⁸ In their Course Evaluation forms at the end of the semester, the students answered the question “What were the best things about this class for you?” by providing some answers that are worth mentioning: 1. “Being able to understand the opera music and have intelligent conversations about the music”; 2. “Learning about the history of opera because I never thought I would be interested”; 3. “Learning opera! It is awesome! The technical side is complex and wonderful”; 4. “Exploring a world I knew nothing about”; 5. “Opening the world of opera and finding how it applies to so many other faces of life, even politics and religion. ... I think I would speak for all the students saying this is our favorite class. Also, it is the most difficult one”; 6. “It broadened my cultural views”. When asked, “What could be done to improve this class the next time that it is taught?” all complained about the limited access to audio and video recordings. Here is a selection of their feedback: 1. “Having access to the music”; 2. “More access to the music ... I want more opera!”; 3. “Ability to listen and study the operas more often and more easily. More study halls?”; 4. “We need access to the operas!”. One year later, the Director of the College Operations in Westville Prison, Alesha Seroczynski, communicated to me: “I wanted you to know that a couple of WEI students have recently named your course as ‘most influential’ and ‘biggest surprise’ in interviews with the media”.

"Ah chi mi dice mai", students detected similarities with rage arias in heroic opera. However, the presence of interjections and asides by Leporello and Don Giovanni, seemed to them to belong to a different genre, for seria arias are typically impenetrable to other characters who can only listen to them in silence. Compared to rage aria in *Giulio Cesare* this one also displays a limited amount of coloratura. One man commented that this is a funny moment and we are supposed to laugh at this betrayed silly woman. A second student immediately pointed his finger at the first, shouting that it is never funny when a woman suffers. "Never!" he repeated three times in a frightening crescendo. Hoping to diffuse the tension, which in prison can rapidly, I encouraged my students to look closely at the score and analyze Mozart's dramatization of emotions (see example).

Mus. Ex. 1 – W. A. MOZART, *Don Giovanni*, act 1, scene V, aria n. 3, Donna Elvira's "Ah chi mi dice mai", mm. 1-6 (New York, Dover, 1974, p. 51; edition used in class).

As in many arias in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, the orchestral introduction provides information on the primary affects and dramatic situation represented in the aria. What do the first four measures mean, with their fragmented descending groups of three-note legato scales played *piano*? Why is this followed by the detonation of a loud ascending octave leap? Why hold on the highest note before precipitating into a descending rapid staccato scale? Learning to pose and address these questions, without providing or expecting preconceived answers, empowers students to explain their own intellectual and emotional responses to this aria and its dramatic situation. To do so they need to acquire the competence to use the appropriate terms to describe melodic contour, phrasing, dynamics, orchestral and vocal texture, and so on, and thereby reflect on and understand their meaning and expressive value. Without an understanding of the formal elements of music, opera can trigger emotional responses, but cannot be a school of feelings. It is important to resist the temptation of teaching easy music appreciation or 'musicology for dummies'. In any kind of learning environment, it is essential to respect students and trust that they can and will engage with music and text at the highest intellectual level. The students enrolled in my opera class in prison also met with my graduate students to watch together a video recording of *Don Giovanni* and to have a debate following the video screening. My research assistant, who was present during the discussion, was amazed to see how "the men were very

passionate and animated”, and yet they were “always supporting their opinions through analysis”.⁹ Other students, both graduate and undergraduate, shared with me similar impressions. It became apparent to all of us that Mozart belongs to anybody who engages with his music. Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* is an opera that allows those who study it carefully to better understand real-life emotions that, when repressed or out of control, can be destructive: fear and fearlessness, guilt and remorselessness, sexual passion leading to compulsion, sexual abuse, even to rape and murder. It became obvious to all of us, all the more so in prison, that our world is full of Don Giovannis. There is no other place than prison where, even when played through small portable speakers, the hymn “Viva la libertà!” resounds with more power than in an opera theater.

The idea that Mozart’s music is an imposition on people who do not share Mozart’s ethnic or cultural background is wrong, but it has been and can continue to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, like the idea that Mozart’s music (or every kind of music) can be shared by all humanity in the same way. What fulfills these prophecies is human action. Nobody today can reasonably claim that music is a universal language. Thanks especially to the contribution of ethnomusicology to music studies in general we learned that the value and meaning of any music is context-bound and that the context is culturally and socially defined. Yet, value and meaning can be unbound. Culture is not in anybody’s blood, but travels through the ideas of the people who do not reject it, but embrace it. Opera is part of a culture that can be acquired, shared, redefined, carried across social and national boundaries, and even cross prison walls.

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⁹ Lesley Grace Sullivan, report on the screening of *Don Giovanni* and class discussion, submitted via e-mail to me later that night, on September 26, 2014. The video recording screened in Westville was the version recorded live at the Royal Opera House on 8 and 12 September 2008, conducted by Charles Mackerras, stage directed by Francesca Zambello, with Simon Keenlyside as Don Giovanni and Joyce DiDonato as Donna Elvira (DVD Opus Arte OA1009D, 2009).