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Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Perversion in Opera

Sex and opera seem at first glance to be poles apart. A tight straitjacket of bourgeois conventions and Puritan customs and manners, imposed on opera by the nineteenth century, has become its icon, marginalizing the frivolous contents of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* or *Così fan tutte*. These two works are among the few early operas that combine musical sensuality with permissiveness by openly proclaiming somewhat shocking views on love and faithfulness. In a mocking and bitter way, they ridicule Italian 'moral correctness'. It is not to them, however, that I want to devote this text. What is to be learned about operatic perversion seen from the angle of operatic works and the immediate sense that they carry is not much. At least when compared to the guide to operatic perversion as designed by opera listeners.

A pretext for the idea of this text was the book *Phantasmagoria. A Sociology of Opera*.¹ Already the preliminary discussion encourages one to take a closer look at the sociological perspective of opera. Familiar complaints about the methodological crisis in historical research and aesthetics, and a glorification of the sociological perspective and active cognition (in place of passive perception), temporarily discouraged me from traditional analyses and allowed me to remember that the concept of 'opera' comprises not only the richness of Mozartian phrasing or Wagnerian harmonic turmoil, but also the phenomenon of the three tenors or a commercial using the melody to 'Nessun dorma'. Moreover, the perspective of viewing works 'as they really are' should not obscure the perspective of seeing them 'as they are occasionally'. The Derridean desire for reinterpretation, the urge to show that the work functions in a situation different from that prevailing when it was created, among different people living in a different reality, reveals the existence of an alternative operatic discourse, closer to mass culture than to 'high-brow' culture, yet

¹ David T. Evans, *Phantasmagoria. A Sociology of Opera* (Aldershot, 1999).

consequently – paradoxically – intentionally closer to the conception of opera as such.

But enough of this methodological armoury. Why dwell on theoretical points when the examples of operatic perversion that I intend to describe are current and very real? In particular, I shall touch upon the two aspects that have made themselves strongly felt in modern ‘opera culture’ and that are related to gender studies, a popular and rapidly developing discipline in recent years. First, I shall discuss opera from the perspective of fetish and pornography. Second, I shall take a closer look at how opera functions in the gay community. Both aspects, extensively explored within American musicology, where ‘community musicologies’ (e.g. feminist or gay musicology) have been cultivated and treated quite seriously for many years, with their own extensive (half-scholarly, half-popular) subject literature, sound at a Polish university somewhat ‘exotic’, to use a fashionable word. It would not be wise, however, to disregard them altogether.

Operatic fetishism has been a fact for a long time. Originally, it did not have a sexual connotation, although at present the word is used chiefly to describe a sexual perversion. In the opinion of the author of the *Sociology of Opera*, its determiners relate, on the one hand, to the very phenomenon of the technical reproduction of sound in recordings, and as a consequence the standardization and infantilism of reception, manifested by random, fragmentary, non-contemplative and sensual listening. On the other hand, they are related to the operatic snobbishness that makes people, as in the past, treat opera as a social status symbol and a ‘temple of art’. This dichotomy redefined the social function of opera, where the one-off artistic event and social gathering was supplemented by the category of reproduction. The perspective of attending (performances) was supplemented by that of possessing (records). And finally, as fetishist was considered the cult of personality, or rather artistic personality, omnipresent in opera. Opera divas became substitutes for perverse sex (would any non-perverse person delight in the sensuality of Jessye Norman?), while male stars entered the sports arena (for instance, the three tenors).

Star fetishes are, in the opinion of ‘true’ opera critics, ideal and perfect, branded with superlatives *ad nauseam*. This kind of operatic fetishism was depicted particularly aptly by Grzegorz Musiał, who presented the figure of a famous Polish Opera Critic in a distorting mirror.

And so – Racing Goose. He writes on opera, lace, prima donnas and deli food. He settles himself down in the most comfortable armchair, grabs the biggest glass right away, from a pile of canapés he pulls out the richest one, of course with a nut on the top ...

– Oh, Luisa Tetrazzini! That cow ... idiot. Divine voice, but what taste... and her waist! Like a beached whale. She took her lovers by force.
– Taniewska?... I met her in New York, Countess Grabaev introduced me.
... and suddenly he yells: – Oh, My God! My show is on!!!
And we are done. One Racing Goose jabbars from the box while the other comments from his armchair.²

No further comment is needed.

Another aspect of operatic fetishism, in this case directly related to music, is pointed to by David J. Baker, in 'High Notes and Pornography'.³ The concentration of opera fans on single, usually high, notes performed in specific fragments of specific works by specific singers in a specific time and place displays the characteristics of pornography. It also concentrates on anatomical details, thereby ignoring the 'human context'. Opera fetishists of this sort are turned on by this high C by Zinka Milanov from the first act of *Gioconda*, as recorded in 1954. It should also be noted that this recording, produced two years later, was deprived of the unique glamour of that earlier one... In *The Queen Throat. Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, Wayne Kostenbaum admits to his first operatic fetish: 'a restrained, dark and slightly false sound' that Anna Moffo, as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, produced on the word 'disvelto'.⁴ Thus, a false note or a characteristic timbre of voice may also become a fetish.

Another type of acoustic fetish is surely noise and crackling coming from recordings, which led some opera consumers to invent a simple functional relationship: the older, the better. Who sings like that today? they cry, while the record market digs out, not only classical recordings, but also archival trash, sensing excellent business in their reproduction. There have even appeared on the market recordings purposely 'uncleaned', satisfying the needs of lovers of operatic perversion hungry for noise and crackling. A similar fetishist function in opera may also be attributed to coloratura. For instance, of the Rossini type – breathtaking, riveting, acrobatic, breakneck and impossible to perform, the one that obscures the line of the melody or the logic of the harmony.

Finally, as the last manifestation of operatic fetishism – this time quite palpable – one may consider record collecting. Not without reason do the collectors of opera recordings hold a statistically privileged place among other record collectors. A record may become a fetish when it ceases to function as a means to an end (getting to know a work or a particular rendition) and becomes an end in itself. The devotion which opera

² Grzegorz Musiał, *Czeska biżuteria* (Gdańsk, 1983), 140–141.

³ David J. Baker, 'High Notes and Pornography', *Opera News* 1991/12, 218–51.

⁴ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen Throat. Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York, 1993), 39.

fans show for their collections of records straddles the thin line between the sacred and the pornographic. The colour and texture of the cover or the smell of the booklet become sensual experiences supplementing the acoustic pleasure derived from communing with music. All the senses unite in record collectors at the service of pornographic commerce. It is also worth mentioning that record collectors as a rule are unwilling to share their lovers.

An especially prominent group among opera consumers is the gay community. Indeed, it seems that the operatic fetishism mentioned above affects this community in a more conspicuous way. The author of the *Sociology of Opera* already quoted here contrasts opera queens with opera philistines. To remain on the level of symbol, whereas queens take a fancy to plumes, philistines put on plain ties. This transferral of operatic reality – colourful and wild performances – into a ‘non-artistic reality’ or even the creation of opera in everyday life is surely one of the stronger signs of contemporary gay culture. Long lines of fantastically dressed drag-queens, making annual ‘gay prides’ even more colourful, are irresistibly associated with opera. It matters not that most of them are accompanied by techno music. This will probably pass, but opera will not. Contact with opera satisfies educated gays’ appetite for high art. This is exactly why opera, and not bawdy operetta or musical, is their cult form of art. This is the place – or artistic space – which is worth visiting and speaking of.

Perhaps the strongest operatic fetish of gays is the icon of Maria Callas. To some degree, her biography might have been a factor, in particular her unhappy love for a gay – Luchino Visconti. Obviously, the case of Callas cannot be pigeonholed easily. It combines all the characteristics of operatic fetishism referred to above, and so it is worth taking a closer look at. Callas is the one who could sing in all the voices (three octaves!) – extremely high and extremely low notes (to anyone interested, I recommend a pirate recording of Rossini’s *Armida*); she could sing both dramatic soprano parts (Isolde, Kundry) and coloratura ones (*bel canto*). She took great care to generate maximum expression, whilst at the same time showing the utmost technical proficiency. Such aporias are manifold. Moreover, she was deeply human – unhappy in the characters she portrayed and in her life. Is there anybody else who could serve better as a gay icon? ‘We can tell the differences in the timbre of her voice as easily as recognizing Cadillac models. That of 1949, that of 1955, that of 1974...’⁵

Modern popular culture may be read best through film. In *The Lisbon Traviata*, by Terrence McNally, two partners try to escape reality in dif-

⁵ Koestenbaum, *The Queen Throat*, 42.

ferent ways. In one of the scenes, each of them watches a different film – one a documentary on Callas, the other a porno film. One is not surprised that it is thanks to Callas that the attorney in *Philadelphia* recognizes the right of the protagonist ill with AIDS to be protected against discrimination. Callas gives Tom Hanks human characteristics out of gratitude for his fetishist adoration. She helps him to understand his alienation. Perversion reaches the Absolute. The ‘operatic nature’ of *Philadelphia*’s protagonist is stressed equally by his homosexuality and his illness. In a sense, he is an artistic continuation of nineteenth-century opera heroines suffering from tuberculosis. A Traviata of the twentieth century.⁶

An opera, however, may also be used as a medium of indeterminacy and understatement in a game between characters. Let’s stay in the domain of film. The game is umpired by a brilliant director, Visconti – Callas’s intended lover. The circle thus closes. The subtlety of interaction in *Conversation Piece* is far from the literality of Hollywood productions. The presence of opera is marked here both as a fetish (a black disc scratched by a needle rotates continuously during the scene) and as a sign of mystery. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio* (Oh, Lord, I would like to explain, concert aria K. 418) builds an intelligent and poignant discourse with the situation (more sophisticated than Gustav Mahler’s *Adagietto* in *Death in Venice*). The interplay of text, image and music appears to be one of the more interesting reinterpreted and discursive endeavours involving opera. For a moment, it ceases here to be mass entertainment and takes on the guise of a secret code of understanding which the characters themselves are not yet aware of. The emotions existing between the characters are neither clearly negative or positive nor unequivocal. The nature of the relationship between the antique-loving, aesthete professor and the ‘modern’, happy-go-lucky individual remains a mystery until the very end.

It is hard to arrive at a wise conclusion to this text, to pick up a common thread among the tangled strands. Perhaps it is worth questioning the sense of the American ‘community’ musicologies, emphasizing new divisions with a ‘ghetto-like’ persistency, or their status and relationship to their European counterparts. One should not, however, depreciate them altogether. They deserve respect for their direct tackling of present-day reality and their fresh approach. What discourages one, though, are their bias, exhibitionism, obsessive alienation and sensational overtones. The discussion of Franz Schubert’s alleged homosexuality that swept across serious American and German journals⁷ several years ago was, in terms of methodology, closer to the methods used by Lt. Columbo than to

⁶ See Linda and Michael Hutchson, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (London, 1996).

⁷ Cf. *Musikkonzepte* 97/98 (1997): Franz Schubert, ‘Todesmusik’, 112.

scholarly discourse. The abundance of the citations of these frequently pseudo-scholarly and musicologically amateurish publications in serious texts by recognized academic luminaries seems rather surprising or even shocking.

It is also worth giving a thought to the question as to whether opera only occasionally happens to be perverse, manipulated by its perverse consumers, or whether its nature encourages perversion by itself. Its extreme conventionality, the artificiality or downright absurdity of its message, and its substitutability allow us to believe that not only the audience is responsible for the perverse power of opera. All for nothing were Christopher Willibald Gluck's or Wagner's experiments in reviving the lofty pseudo-Greek ideals of the founders of the *Camerata*. The garish *Tosca* has blinded the subtle *Euridice* forever. And against Beethoven's will, faithful spouses have given way to passionate lovers. Yet the immanent sense of operatic perversion induces one to write another text.

Translated by Michał Żebrowski