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The challenges of opera direction

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THE CHALLENGES OF OPERA DIRECTION

by

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the**

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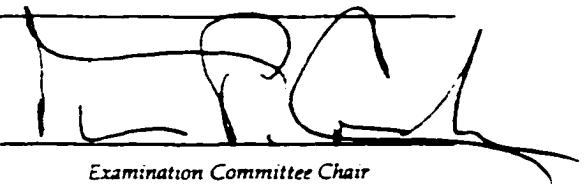
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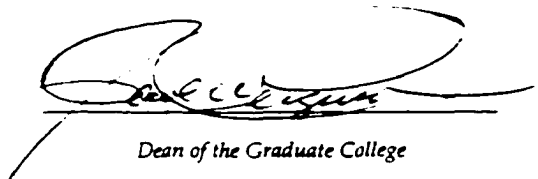
The Challenges of Opera Direction

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



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ABSTRACT

The Challenges of Opera Direction

by

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The Challenges of Opera Direction is an investigation of the art of the opera stage director. In addition to a brief history of opera, the investigation includes opinions of leading international directors. Furthermore it details directing techniques and examples gleaned from the direction of Mozart's *The Impresario (Der Shauspieldirektor)* and Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love (L'elisir d'amore)* both at UNLV and an assistant directing internship with Seattle Opera's production of Delibes's *Lakme*. Also included are chapters on the art of collaborating with conductors, designers and performers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

**"People are wrong when they say opera isn't what it used to be.
It is what it used to be. That's what's wrong with it."
-Noel Coward, *Design for Living*, 1933**

The opera stage director is a rather new breed of artist. Until the twentieth century, staging opera entailed a stage manager laboriously following written instructions from the opera's composer and librettist that were passed down from generation to generation. The result was that there was only one *Aida*, one *La Boheme* and one *Carmen*.

However, after the first World War, people like Max Reinhardt helped to fuse opera with music theatre. The result was a combination of both theatrical and musical elements that led to the development of a total operatic concept. Following World War II, directors like Wieland Wagner, Wolfgang Rennert and Herbert Graf brought the dramatic concept of opera to greater prominence. (Mansouri, 1982) Up to this point, the dramatic concept always played second fiddle to the music. These German directors elevated dramatic concept to the level equal to the musical concept leading to, in some cases, the stage director becoming even more important than the conductor. (Mansouri, 1982)

Directors like Götz Friedrich, Lotfi Mansouri, Franco Zeffirelli and Peter Sellars, because of their flair for innovative ways to communicate to a modern audience, have left

an indelible mark on the operatic tradition. The opera world is now more inclined to talk about Friedrich's *Wozzeck* or Mansouri's *Lulu*, Zeffirelli's *Otello* or Sellar's *Don Giovanni* than any individual conductor's interpretation.

Because of these avant-garde directors, contemporary opera direction continues to be an increasingly complex art form. To be successful, the director must recognize opera as a multidimensional performing art that has the potential to affect an audience in ways that cannot be rivaled. However, this paradigm shift has led some directors down the path to self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement at the expense of the piece. Ultimately, the director must remain true to the spirit of the work--he must serve the art, not make the art his servant for conveying some other agenda. The reason for this is that the director is responsible to not only his audience but also to the composer and the librettist who, most likely, are not available to oversee the production.

In some ways, opera is easier to direct than straight theatre because the composer has created a musical language which the director must be able to understand. In other words, the director must be able to translate what the composer and librettist have created in music and text into a three-dimensional art. If the composers are the gods of the musical world, the director is the priest who delivers his message. One might think that these priests of truth and beauty would necessarily come from musical backgrounds. However, an increasing number of directors who have journeyed from the theatre have proven to be brilliant opera directors--Peter Sellars, John Dexter, Sir Peter Hall and Peter Brook to name a few.

Directing opera is an interpretive art wherein the director is a kind of like a priest interpreting a holy scripture. As such, he is the visionary, conceptualist and organizer

who brings his own imagination, intellect and insight to a piece. As chief collaborator, he must have some understanding and a profound appreciation for the talents of the conductor and orchestra, designers, technical staff, principal singers, chorus and supernumeraries. It is as if he captains a ship through a vast sea of possibility while hoping to reach a desired destination without going adrift or running aground. His most valuable navigational tools are his concept and technique and his knowledge of those who came before.

CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGINS OF OPERA

Italian Opera

Unlike other performing arts, opera has a clearly definable origin. To many, opera is synonymous with Italian opera. Several key factors contributed to Italy being the birthplace of the art form. Italian is innately a musical language because of its emphasis of vowel sounds over consonants. Furthermore, one of the chief elements of the Italian Renaissance was the widespread interest in classical Greek and Roman culture. These factors led to the formation of a philosophical arts club dedicated to classical study under the patronage of Florentine Count Giovanni de' Bardi. This club called itself the Camerata (from the Italian word "camera" meaning "chamber") and consisted of Ottavio Rinuccini, a poet, Guilo Caccini and Jacopo Peri, composers and Vincenzo Galilei, a singer-composer (and father of Galileo). (Somerset-Ward, 1998)

In 1594, Peri and Rinuccini collaborated on a hypothetical idea of classical Greek tragedy entitled *Dafne*. First staged in 1598, *Dafne* is considered to be the first opera (which is a truncation of *opera in musica*, or work in music). (Scherer, 1997) As a follow-up to *Dafne*, Peri composed *Euridice* for the wedding of King Henri IV of France and Maria de' Medici in 1600. Caccini, who by this time had become Peri's chief rival, pirated a good deal of Peri's score and performed his version of *Euridice* in 1602 for a largely unenthusiastic audience. However, one of the audience members found the novel

idea of setting drama to music appealing; he was the person many consider to be the grandfather of modern opera, Claudio Monteverdi. (Scherer, 1997)

Monteverdi (1567-1643) was already an established madrigal composer and a court musician to the Duke of Mantua. (Scherer, 1997) His first opera, *Orfeo* (Orpheus) was produced in 1607 and continues to be performed even today. The reason why Monteverdi's operas triumphed over the efforts of the Camerata is because of his musical inventiveness. Monteverdi improved on the monodic recitative style by combining single voice with a bass continuo resulting in something much more tuneful than his predecessors. Monteverdi also developed rich harmonies and elaborate instrumentation as well as the use of different instrumental color to convey character mood. Furthermore, he introduced *ritornelli* (instrumental refrains) and a chorus accompanied by a full orchestra. (Scherer, 1997)

Monteverdi composed a number of operas adhering to the aims of the Camerata, chiefly that the music should serve the drama. However, after the opening of the Teatro San Cassiano in 1637, the world's first public opera house, the vogue for operatic style soon shifted from the neo-Greek Florentine recitative to a style that was to become known as *bel canto* (beautiful song) in the nineteenth century. (Scherer, 1997)

Elaborate vocal flourishes, trills and long notes accompanied by elaborate stage machinery became the fad for opera until Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714-1787) returned opera to its dramatic roots. His highly influential *Orfeo ed Euridice* minimized vocal embellishment in favor of a more melodic style. (Pogue, 1997) Gluck's return to opera's dramatic roots cleared the path for his chief successor, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Mozart's three greatest Italian operas *La Nozze di Figaro* (1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787) and *Così fan tutte* (1790) with libretti written by Lorenzo da Ponte, mark the abandonment of the mythological in favor of the contemporary. Broadly speaking, the Mozart/da Ponte operas concern themselves with the relationships between the sexes. (Scherer, 1997) Furthermore, they mark a distinctly different style that abandoned the static da capo aria in favor of the more dramatically flexible scene. The result was a much more highly dramatic style that halted dramatic action less frequently so that an aria could be sung.

Mozart's tremendous impact on music and opera may have been even greater had not his life been cut short. It was not until the emergence of Giachino Rossini (1792-1868) that opera took another giant step forward. Rossini, one of the last great opera seria composers, soon found his niche composing comic opera (opera buffa). Rossini's greatest contributions are his patter songs like Figaro's "Largo al factotum," from *The Barber of Seville*. Also, Rossini's use of repetition and crescendo became his trademark. Furthermore, Rossini codified the shift from aria to scena as the building block of action. (Scherer, 1997) Ultimately, Rossini picked up where Mozart left off and provided the bridge to the Romantic era.

The Italian Romantic era was dominated by Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835) and the prolific Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848). What these two composers accomplished was the expression of more realistic emotions in contrast to Rossini's relative generality in the expression of character temperament. However, the two composer's method of composition differed greatly. Donizetti was equally adept at composing both drama and opera buffa. Additionally, he composed a series of operas commonly referred to as "The

Tudor Cycle" that treat on the English monarchy. Unlike Bellini, Donizetti composed about seventy operas in his lifetime in record time. (Pogue, 1997) The common thread throughout his greatest works like *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), *Don Pasquale* (1843) and *The Elixir of Love* (1832) is his brilliance at conveying the inner feelings of his characters.

Bellini, on the other hand, chose to work much more slowly and as a result only composed ten operas. Unlike Donizetti, Bellini tended to stick primarily to tragedy and had his greatest success with *La Sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker, 1831) and *Norma* (1831). Bellini's greatest talent was his knack for composing long, tender melodies that have a nearly hypnotic effect. (Scherer, 1997)

While Donizetti and Bellini represent icons of an emotional Romantic ideal, Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) made drama the lifeblood of his opera. The beauty of Verdi's operas manifests itself in his memorable melodies and eloquence of musical language. In contrast to Donizetti's juggernaut of an operatic canon, Verdi composed only twenty-eight operas. However, the development of his genius is much more apparent than is Donizetti's.

Perhaps Verdi's greatest contribution to the development of an evolving operatic style manifests itself in the fluidity of his drama. Instead of composing orchestral introductions and applause signaling closures, Verdi created a flowing musical idiom wherein melodies move from passage to passage through a sustained musical profile. (Scherer, 1997) Furthermore, Verdi's *La Traviata* laid the foundation for the *verismo* (or realist) movement in opera because of its portrayal of contemporary bourgeois characters in a naturalistic manner.

However, contemporary bourgeois characters were not the impetus that fomented a young Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) to devote his life to composing opera. It was only after having trudged twenty miles to Pisa for a performance of *Aida* that Puccini took such a dramatic step. (Scherer, 1997) Puccini is considered the last in a long line of Italian masters whose work have fixed themselves permanently in the international opera repertoire. Perhaps it is Puccini's fascination with women that assured him his place among the masters. Characters like Mimi (*La Boheme*, 1896), Floria Tosca (*Tosca*, 1900), Cio-Cio-San (*Madama Butterfly*, 1904) and Princess Turandot (*Turandot*, 1926) are arguably the most memorable women in all of opera. However memorable his female creations are, one of Puccini's greatest contributions to operatic style arose from his efforts to move away from melodrama in favor of realism. *La Boheme*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Il Tabarro* (The Cloak, 1918) all significantly eroded the overly dramatic stigma associated with opera and led the way into the twentieth century.

French Opera

Opera took a while to catch on in the French court of Louis XIV. The dominance of ballet and the spoken dramas of Racine and Corneille largely prevented the art form from flourishing. However, a young Florentine, Giovanni Battista Lulli (1632-1687) arrived in the French court to teach Italian to the king's cousin and eventually changed the topography of opera in France. (Scherer, 1997)

In 1661 Lulli changed his name to reflect his French nationalization and was appointed court composer. Soon thereafter, he was collaborating with Moliere on the first of a series of comedie-ballets. Meanwhile, Italian opera began to catch on, and in 1669 two of Lully's rivals, composer Robert Cambert and poet Pierre Perrin received

license to build what would eventually become the Paris Opera. (Scherer, 1997) Cambert and Perrin collaborated on *Pomone*, the first full-length French opera, but soon thereafter landed in debtor's prison. Lully then proceeded to usurp their license and collaborate with poet Phillipe Quinault to create *Cadmus et Hermione* (1673). (Scherer, 1997)

Lully set out to create an operatic style distinctly different from its Italian counterpart. Because of dramatic import, recitatives were spoken in French rather than sung in Italian. Additionally, the French did not share the Italian virtuoso singing tradition, and, therefore emphasized drama over highly embellished singing. The French had a penchant for dance resulting in the prominence of ballet and majestic orchestral passages. furthermore, the French appreciated mammoth visual spectacle and therefore employed elaborate stage techniques to create flying gods, sea monsters and just about anything else one can dream of.

While Lully's musical style can best be described as tuneful and dance-like, his successor, Jean-Phillpe Rameau (1683-1764) created what some call a revolutionary richness of harmony coupled with detailed instrumental color. Because of the vast difference of musical styles, a twenty -year debate among French opera enthusiasts as to whether Lully or Rameau had the superior style. The debate only subsided when an Italian opera buffa troupe arrived in Paris. The proponents of the buffa style attacked Rameau's tragic mode, and he answered their attacks with the hilarious *Platee* (1745) and put an end to the arguments as to who was funnier. This "War of the Buffoons" resulted in the creation of *opera comique*. (Scherer, 1997)

With his success already established in Florence, Gluck traveled to Paris where he produced French versions of *Orfeo* and *Alcete*. Similar to the effect he had on opera in

Italy, Gluck's reformations marked a separation into two distinctly different styles of French opera. The first, opera or *tragedie lyrique* focused on classic plots, included sung *recitatif* and emphasized scenic spectacle. The other, *opera comique*, featured lighter plots, spoken dialogue and interspersed songs and arias.

Following Gluck's reformation, the next major advance in the world of French opera was the creation of grand opera. Championed by composers like Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864) and Hector Berlioz (1803-1869), the state-subsidized opera continually proliferated and expanded the old ideas of Lully. French grand opera reflected the mid-nineteenth century fascination with Gothic, Renaissance and Rococo design which manifested itself in set design and furnishings. Great pains were taken to create three-dimensional scenery that was historically accurate. Grand opera abandoned plots based on classical mythology in favor of medieval and Renaissance history. Furthermore, operas took place in four or five acts and frequently climaxed with some spectacular catastrophe, i.e. volcanic eruptions, explosions, battles or auto-de-fe. Additionally, adding to grand opera's spectacle and appeasing the French public's love of dance, grand opera included at least one ballet sequence and often times several. Because of the Paris Opera's reputation of having the finest orchestra in the world, grand operas were composed for huge orchestras and included stage bands as much as possible. Finally, grand opera employed large casts of solo singers as well as a massive chorus and supernumeraries for festival, prayer and battle scenes.

Grand opera was primarily an outgrowth of *tragedie lyrique*, but *opera comique* continued to expand as well. The wide gap created between grand opera and *opera comique* facilitated the birth of *opera lyrique*. Lyric opera treated tragic plots but still

maintained spoken dialogue. However, many composers later opted to set spoken text to music and convert it into *recitatif*. The chief *opera lyrique* composer was Charles Gounod (1818-1893) whose most popular works include *Faust* (1859), based on Goethe's epic poem, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1867).

One of the most influential of Gounod's contemporaries was Georges Bizet (1838-1875). Bizet's greatest contribution to the opera world is undoubtedly *Carmen* (1875). What is so innovative about *Carmen* is that it is the tale of common people, overwrought passions and violence. As such, *Carmen* was an early precursor of Italian *verismo*. regarded today as one of the all-time greatest operas, it is difficult to conceive that the opera flopped when it was first performed. Apparently, the Theatre de l'Opera Comique was a middle-class rendezvous who took objection to Carmen's torrid ways and the opera's violent end. (Pogue, 1997)

Opting not to infuriate his public, Jules Massenet (1842-1912) found that blending Gounod's eroticism with Wagnerian symphonic principles created delicacies that delight the French palate. Operas like *Herodiade* (1881), *Manon* (1884) and *Thais* (1894) all have female sexuality at their core. But Massenet was also adept at composing more than just tales of lust. *Werther* (1892), based on Goethe's novel reflects the romantic ideal, and *Don Quichotte* (1910) demonstrates Massenet's skill at composing comic opera. (Scherer, 1997)

Rebelling against Massenet's crowd-pleasing musical style, Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) abandoned memorable melodies in favor of a Symbolistic and Impressionistic musical style. However, in the midst of mid-twentieth century dissonance, Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) composed in a somewhat old-

fashioned musical style. His *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (1957) has become the most frequently performed French opera composed after World War II. (Scherer, 1997)

German Opera

George Fridric Handel (1685-1759) was one of the first and arguably the best of the early composers of the Hamburg Goosemarket Theatre. Goosemarket was the first permanent opera house in Germany that presented operas written by Germans with German libretti. However, after cutting his teeth in Hamburg, Handel travels to Italy to refine his craft and then on to London where he continued to prosper under the sponsorship of King George I. (Somerset-Ward, 1998)

Although Handel's roots were German, he composed primarily in Italian while living in England. Hamburg, without royal sponsorship, had to cater to the tastes of a middle-class audience who demanded opera in their native language. The result was the Singspiel (songplay). Like French opera comique, Singspiel was primarily comic and employed spoken dialogue interspersed with song. (Scherer, 1997)

Mozart was perhaps the greatest Singspiel composer with works like *Der Schauspieldirektor* (*The Impresario*) and *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*, 1791). Commissioned by fellow Mason and public theatre owner Emannuel Shikaneder, *The Magic Flute* marked the first time Mozart composed for the public rather than the crown. The result was most successful run of any of his operas during his lifetime--197 performances and it remains a perennial favorite. (Scherer, 1997)

After Mozart's death, Romanticism soon started to infiltrate the world of German opera. Structurally, Romanticism is marked by a departure from single-mood da capo

arias in favor of arias with contrasting moods, tempi and form. The revolutionary ideals of Romanticism appealed to composers like Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) who only composed one opera, *Fidelio* (1814) which he re-wrote some fourteen times. (Pogue, 1997) The end result dramatized a universal philosophy that is not the archetypal German Romantic opera. (Scherer, 1997)

More the paradigm, Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) composed *Der Freishutz* (*The Free Shooter*) which premiered in 1821. A serious Singspiel, *Der Freishutz* is based on German legend and concerns itself with German folk life. *Der Freishutz* also serves as an example of the desire for German composers to break free of Italian operatic influence. Weber's opera included all the key elements of this Germanic identity: nature, the supernatural, folk culture and legend. However, some German composers desired to create a form that included sung recitative in lieu of spoken dialogue and a lengthier more continuous dramatic texture. (Scherer, 1997)

This desire for a German musical identity coupled with a reformatory approach to composition proved to be fertile ground for the genius of Richard Wagner (1813-1883). By 1843, the opera world was being dominated by the music of Rossini, Donizetti and Meyerbeer. In contrast with their relatively simple and short scenes, Wagner composed *The Flying Dutchman* with richer harmonies, disturbingly moving melodies with scenes of unprecedented length. For all its innovations, *The Flying Dutchman* is still, in many ways Italianate. In 1849, Wagner wrote "The Artwork of the Future" wherein he details his desire to create a "complete work of art" (Gesamtkunstwerk). In his return to the aims of the Camerata, Wagner set out to define music drama where poetry, music, song, drama and the visual arts combined to create a unified whole. (Somerset-Ward, 1998)

Lohengrin (1850) begins to reflect Wagner's desire for musical continuity. It begins to erode the Italian form of numbers linked by recitative. By 1865, his *Tristan und Isolde* demonstrate Wagner's goal of creating an "endless melody" where the action never takes a pause for applause until the end of the acts. (Scherer, 1997)

Because of Wagner's desire to create a unified whole, he opted to write his own libretti and even established his own Festival Theatre in Bayreuth. A revolutionary theatre, the Bayreuth auditorium was constructed with a fan-like seating arrangement instead of the traditional horseshoe design. The result was clearer site lines and superior acoustics. Furthermore, Wagner covered the orchestra pit in an attempt to balance the sound of voices with the orchestra. Perhaps even more significantly, Wagner bucked the social tradition of leaving the house lights on during performance. By darkening the auditorium, he effectively forced audiences to pay attention to what was happening on stage. (Pogue, 1997)

As well as turning the social traditions of opera going on their ear, Wagner also upturned the traditional emphasis on what amounted to vocally "showing off." He dispensed with cadenzas and embellishments in favor of complementary orchestral sound. Additionally, he used the orchestra to convey the inner psychological life of characters and events with his series of "leitmotifs." His momentous composition of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, a series of four operas, marks the most ambitious composition of any composer to date. After working on it for more than twenty years, its completion was the realization of music drama as a synthesis of all the arts. This concept along with Wagner's blurred chromatic harmonies, eventually led to the breakdown of classical tonality and therefore ushered in the twentieth century. (Scherer, 1997)

One of assistants, Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921) incorporated Wagner's symphonic and thematic complexities with the melodic style of German folk music in his *Hansel and Gretel*. While superficially a children's story, it is an example of the offspring of Wagnerian music drama theory. Another child of Wagnerian theory, Richard Strauss (1864-1949) created deeply psychologically disturbing operas like *Salome* (1905). It's original production was declared immoral and caused such a scandal on it's premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1907 that J.P. Morgan, the lease holder of the opera house, forbade any future performances. With his reputation as an iconoclastic composer firmly secured, Strauss embarked on the creation of *Elektra* (1909). It's incestuous implications combined with explosion and lyricism was, according to Strauss, "the extreme limits of...what ears today can accept." (Scherer, 1997)

After *Elektra*, Strauss adopted a more classical approach in *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911) and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912). Although these two operas are perhaps the most frequently performed of his works, Strauss's earlier works, marked by their atonality, impacted composers Alban Berg(1885-1935) and Kurt Weill (1900-1950). (Pogue, 1997)

Berg composed only two operas: *Wozzeck* (1925) based on the play by Georg Buchner and *Lulu* (1935) based on two plays by Frank Wedekind (which was left unfinished at his death). Both works are dark, atonal and episodic. Additionally, both operas feature the *Speechgesang* singing style which is kind of half-way between singing and speaking. The result of this drastically different style is opera that largely resembles drama with incidental music ala film scores. Because of its radical subject matter and atonality, the Nazi government labeled the operas "degenerate art" and forbid their performance. (Scherer, 1997)

Between the wars, Kurt Weill began collaborating on an updated version of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* with playwright Bertold Brecht. Their version, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*, 1928) translated the tale into 1920's Berlin and naturally reflected popular contemporary musical. As a result, *The Threepenny Opera* is usually performed in musical theatre settings rather than in the opera house. Weill explains this phenomenon: "I write for today. I don't give a damn about posterity." (Scherer, 1997) However, another collaboration with Brecht, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930) definitely has its place in the opera house.

Speight Jenkins, General Director of Seattle Opera says it best when asked, "What is an opera?" He answered, "An opera is an opera if the composer called it an opera." (Jenkins, 1998) As one can see by this brief chronology of the development of the art form, there are numerous developments and divisions of sub-genres. What is important for the director to know is the style of the piece--that is the logic of the work. He must understand the structure of the opera (or Singspiel or operetta) in order to direct it, because each style makes different demands as to how it should be staged.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR

Modern stage directors are often regarded as visionaries, conceptualists, interpreters or re-inventors, however, it is still difficult to define the opera stage director's job, or the aspects of performance for which he can rightfully take credit. Some directors attempt to assume responsibility for the intellectual content of the work, which undoubtedly would surprise the composer and librettist. In fact, the opera director, working in an unchangeable musical framework, has less control over the ultimate shape, structure and meaning of the piece than a film director, who can cut dialogue, eliminate characters and sub-plots and change the order of scenes to tell his own version of the story.

Some directors charge the conductor with total responsibility for all the audience hears while claiming everything it sees-much to the chagrin of set, costume, make-up and lighting designers. The director's contribution has become so difficult to pinpoint because of the modern theatre's emphasis on collaboration. Opera production is a team effort requiring the talents of designers, singers, musicians, conductor and an administrative staff without whom a director's creativity cannot be an influence or possibly even materialize. Götz Friedrich encapsulates the essence of theatrical collaboration: "My ideas are filtered before they come to the audience-a thousand times, by everybody I work with. I may have a strong idea in the beginning, but it is filtered-

sometimes corrupted, sometimes developed." (Harries, 1986) When teams of artistic collaborators change, so do the stimuli and also the director's influence. Opera directors sometimes reflect this desire for change in a constant search for fresh collaborators-a particularly vital source of inspiration when frequently confronted with having to stage operas they have directed multiple times.

Because the director contributes to a production on a plethora of levels, defining and assessing his qualities often times is difficult. At the core, the director is responsible for translating what is on the page into movement on the stage, coordinating what happens physically as much as the conductor co-ordinates what happens musically. However, on a more profound level, the director acts as an interpreter, offering his own "spectacles" through which to view the piece. In lending his vision, he inevitably offers a statement of the work and a comment on it. Michael Billington, theatre critic for *The Guardian* comments on this later aspect of the modern director: "Peter Hall was the visionary who changed the face of things by putting great emphasis on meaning. You don't just drum up another *Madam Butterfly* or *Rigoletto*, you ask what the work is about and try to get the meaning across to the audience." (Harries, 1986)

In offering his understanding of "meaning," the director may sacrifice the intentions of the creators. At one extreme is the concept that direction should be confined to realizing what the composer had in mind. In some extreme cases, productions have become virtual exhumations: original sets, designs, costumes, props and movement. Such a production of *Aida* was mounted in Venice in 1983. This type of re-creation would probably have delighted Verdi who rejected the notion that every performance should be a fresh creation: "This is a principle that leads to exaggeration and artificiality. I want to

have one single creator, and all I ask is that what is written down shall be performed simply and accurately." (Harries, 1986)

Ironically, Verdi seemingly contradicts his "single creator" precept in that three of his most performed operatic creations (*Otello*, *Macbeth* and *Falstaff*) are virtual lessons in creative inspiration. Written by Shakespeare, the texts were then adapted into Italian and set to music. These are, in essence, re-inventions of Shakespeare plays. Prohibiting the director his interpretation suppresses the very type of creativity that Verdi used to compose these works. The fallacy of undertaking such a historically authentic production is the inevitable creation of a "museum piece" that lacks "meaning" for a contemporary audience.

For both purist and practical reasons, adherence to the composer's instructions should, theoretically, enable the director to serve the spirit of the work. This re-staging approach is not uncommon in larger American opera houses where, in an attempt to satisfy the appetites of an opera devouring public, the modern impresario must serve up a steady diet of opera classics in short order. The re-staging process allows directors a common foundation on which he can quickly build in short rehearsal periods that may be as short as a few days.

Nonetheless, most directors vigorously argue against re-creating the past. Personal experience of the present affects the way we view the past-Peter Brook: "It is rare for a historian or a philosopher to escape from the influence of his time, and for the worker in the theatre, whose livelihood depends on his contact with his audience, this is impossible. Consequently, however hard [a director] may strive to mount a classic with

complete objectivity, he can never avoid reflecting a second period-the one in which he works and lives." (Harries, 1986)

One of the most outspoken crusaders against theatrical recreation is Peter Sellars. Rather than re-create an opera or play in its original style, Sellars has transposed his theatrical creations in the vernacular of the twentieth century. Part of his reason for this approach is his belief that it makes it easier for performers to express the composer's original ideas: "They can feel free to do things that they understand completely, rather than existing in some nether world which they're pretending to understand. By the time they've exhausted themselves in the effort of imagination of what it was like to live in the sixteenth century, they have little mental space left for the primary issues of the play." (Harries, 1986) As a by-product, the audience finds these issues easier to ingest: "I think a very important function of the drama is to operate in images that are so immediately buried in the audience's daily experience that there's not that initial leap that has to be made to get at the material. Frequently operas are written in code. They are written in a code that a previous audience has understood, both in terms of a musical language and also in terms of a series of images. Our task is to crack the code, and recast it in systems of reference that have the same heightened possibility of meaning and connection to a sense of national, historic and individual identity for today's public." (Harries, 1986)

Some of Sellars's twentieth century interpretations include *Lear* complete with a Lincoln Continental, *Così fan tutte* set in a 1930's diner, an *Orlando* with action divided between Cape Canaveral and outer space and *Don Giovanni* set in Spanish Harlem with Giovanni portrayed as a drug pusher who eventually is sucked down into a hellish sewer by a chorus of topless women. However, "updating" opera is a practice Sellars despises:

"I hate updating as a gambit, I resent it actively-it's cheap and vulgar and obnoxious and not the point. My productions are never updated." (Harries, 1986)

Sellars's productions are decidedly post-modern combining diverse ideas where different periods, contexts and cultures coexist: "It's the old Eisenstein thing-we work by montage. By juxtapositions, combined with a ferocious exactitude, you can have two ideas which you get at terribly precisely, and by putting them next to each other, a chemical reaction results which is extremely stimulating and puts a number of other ideas into the air. It's building up these little detonator points...to set up a visual counterpoint." (Harries, 1986) His visual counterpoints include aspects of Noh drama, television and contemporary politics. One might find these elements incongruous, but Sellars maintains that they are like puzzle pieces left for the audience to assemble: "I leave huge room in my productions for the audience to enter and participate. What they bring to the theatre is three quarters of it. If you have a hundred readings, you know you have something truthful. The minute you have one reading, you have something fascistic." (Harries, 1986)

Sellars has received a great deal of criticism for straying too far from the original, but he maintains that he is only attacking the nonessential--not the piece's intellectual and emotional core: "Why does a composer go to all this trouble of writing an opera? Not, ultimately, because of preoccupations with a certain style or a predilection for certain types of costumes. The central issue is always subject matter. I don't care what period a production is set in....What I care about is that the things which are happening between those people are happening and they could be happening in any other set....I invite all

this materialism on stage to its funeral...to break down finally the lie that anybody's life is based on what they're wearing or the furniture they're sitting on." (Harries, 1986)

Sellars sees himself as a second-class creator whose aim is to serve the work. His tools for doing so simply have a sharper edge than those who are more conservative. Even Sellars will not completely scrap the directions of the composer when it comes to entrances and exits as well as other on-stage business. As Johnthan Miller notes, there are stage directions appended to the libretto and those are built into the score. This is where a director who listens for stage directions can seem like a genius: "When Susanna exits the closet in *Figaro*, there's a moment when the music builds up to a tension and then quite suddenly there's a change in tempo and she comes out...If you listen to what Mozart is actually saying, not what he or his librettist writes in the score as stage directions, but what he actually writes in the notes, you can generally tell when someone must turn, when someone must enter, when someone must embrace." (Harries, 1986)

This is not to say that there is only one prescribed piece of action for a given piece of music. In the *Elixir of Love*, there exists a couple of little filigrees just before Nemorino slurps down his bottle of wine that sound an awful lot like trickling liquid. However, while working on *Lakme*, there is a section just after the ballet begins which sounds markedly different from the rest of the ballet. Director Stephen Terrell used this music to draw focus to the principals. He went to far as to improvise lyrics that were actually mnemonic stage directions. This is an excellent technique which often can seem quite humorous to the performers. In that instance, there was an exchange between Miss Rose and Mistress Benson wherein Terrell directed, "She says come here. Rose says uh-uh. Then she goes upstage and brings her downstage." What this demonstrates is that

composers do not always have a clear image of what might be happening onstage. There was no direction in the libretto to suggest the preceding bit of business. It is up to the director to provide interpretation. Every production of *Lakme* will probably interpret this moment a little differently which is how it should be according to Elijah Moshinsky: "If opera is to be alive...it has to be what Shakespeare has become at the Royal Shakespeare Company--you can perform *Much Ado* five times in five different ways, and each time it becomes another fragment of the endless meaning of the play." (Harries, 1986)

When departing from traditional interpretations, what is crucial is developing a metaphor that lies at the work's center. The metaphor is the audience's window to understanding. Götz Friedrich maintains that as a director, "You have to recognize that you're not playing the opera for the time it was written." (Harries, 1986) Because of this, the time that has passed since the work's creation has written it or at least co-written it. Therefore, producing an "unfaithful" version of cannot happen unless we accept a single objective existence of the work. Most might consider the original production to be this type of paradigm. However, with any performance art, be it a play, ballet or opera, it only truly exists in performance which can never be repeated with flawless exactitude.

Recognizing that each director invents and re-invents his own aesthetic, it is impossible to make too many generalizations. However, crammed program notes seem like a director excusing himself for creating a concept that is too obscure for the general public. Furthermore, to do so would seem to defy an audience's expectations. Nevertheless, some credit the imaginative impact of the director for keeping opera alive and enabling it to thrive. Wieland Wagner put the rise of the director into its proper perspective: "Have [the older generation] not grasped what difficulties are involved in

maintaining the operatic stage against these new mass media [radio, television and cinema] and in keeping them alive in the changed social conditions of today? The increased importance [of the director] is certainly attributable to this necessity." (Harries, 1986)

CHAPTER 4

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The definition of "conceptualization" differs from one director to another. To some it may involve a whole system of religious, philosophical, social, political, literary or artistic schemas. To others it may be as nebulous as the determination to stage the work in modern dress or envisioning the setting as outdoors rather than indoors. To Ronald Eyre it is "a matter of finding a little way into a work which isn't an arbitrary expression of self-satisfaction or self aggrandizement...it is some little series of keys with which you can open the doors that are already put there in the music and libretto."

(Harries, 1986) However, a director's conceptualization may not be fully formulated prior to rehearsal commencement. Some directors use the rehearsal process to find their 'fix' on the work. But most directors, on some level, must have some grasp on a work to serve as a port from which to depart on the artistic journey.

Hans Werner Henze wrote, "The real [director] is always the same, namely the musical score," and some directors derive their operatic concept chiefly from music. One might expect that Sir Peter Hall, given his penchant for 'textual seriousness', might work chiefly from the libretto. But for Hall, the music is the text: "The primary expression that the audience receives is musical, not verbal. I have the same feelings towards the music in opera as towards the text in literature." (Harries, 1986)

Other directors, such as David Poutney, chose a different emphasis: "The motivation of the music is on the stage and not the other way around. It is drama though music, not music through drama." (Harries, 1986) However, this in no way advocates an approach of simply directing the libretto. Moreover, the libretto must be examined within the context of the music and can serve as a source of directorial inspiration as well as being the touchstone for research into the opera's historical, personal and literary background-the chief elements of preparation.

Historical background may guide a director to examine the historical context of the work. Colin Graham articulates his approach in such cases: "I do as much historical work as I possibly can then find out about the conditions of life at the time, all facets of life. Then compute all that with what the composer and librettist have done, find out what choices they have made and what emphases they are making? The composers are very interested in what happens to the characters at the moment of a particular event, but not terribly interested in the historical aspect of what was really happening in the country at the time? Inevitably, the composer will go for the emotional impact of a story's director and designer, you can point these things up with a social and historical context." (Harries, 1986)

Such was the case in directing *The Impresario* and *The Elixir of Love*. In the case of the former, I chose a modern context to convey what I thought was Mozart's core theme of "art will survive regardless of individual ego." In the latter, changing the historical context to an 1930 Louisiana farm served to highlight the socio-economic and racial differences between protagonist and antagonist which are eventually overturned by the power of love. Contrarily, the historical context of a Victorian Raj India, rejects this

romantic ideal by stating that love cannot defy socio-economic, religious and cultural disparity.

While researching the historical background of the setting may prove to be fertile for a director's imagination, the historical background of the composition may yield a greater cornucopia of imaginative fruit. Götz Fredrich maintains that the milieu of the composition must be taken into account: "It is first of all necessary to read what composer and librettist have written, and to study what it meant in that time in terms of its social implications, their artistic aims, any personal relevance it may have had for them...Every artistic work is a combination of the subjective and the objective--in the subjective expression you find a mirror for the objective circumstances of the time." (Harries, 1986)

This subjective/objective approach can eventually lead a director to try and convey the revealing aspects of the time the opera was composed as well as the time in which the opera is set. The result is a kind of telescoping vision wherein the audience peers through its own time at the composer's era looking at an even more distant period. One directing technique employed with increasing frequency to achieve this effect is to have the chorus costumed as an on-stage audience contemporary with the composer.

Occasionally, the circumstances of the composer or librettist's life can provide for the basis for conceptualization. Understanding that *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*) is a veiled Masonic ritual for which Mozart is rumored to have been secretly murdered could prove useful for the director. Similarly, Da Ponte, Mozart's librettist for *Don Giovanni* may have been inspired by his close relationship to Cassanova or by his own well-documented series of failed marriages and relationships. (Pogue, 1997)

More often, however, opera is based on an existing work that can provide plethora of ideas. One technique advocated by Ande Anderson, is to return to the source after having studied the score and libretto to discover, "which part of the source he has caught in which passage of the opera: why he has written *this* phrase in *this* way over *these* words." (Harries, 1986) The pitfall of doing so is an inclination to want to include certain aspects that did not survive the adaptation to opera. However, knowing the source, having studied it and being influenced by it can often serve as the compass that at least points the direction of the artistic journey.

Conceptualization is the road map the director uses to navigate the production. In order to translate metaphor into theatrical reality, effectively communicate with designers, convey the emotional core of the work, and ultimately arrive at the desired creative destination, a director must rely on his conceptualization.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONDUCTOR

According to Francis Hodge, "Opera, no matter how it is staged, is always a musical event, and it is the conductor who is in charge of the total production." (Hodge, 1988) However, with the advent of the modern director as conceptualist and hub for collaboration, some directors beg to differ with Hodge's view.

Lotfi Mansouri describes the perfect director/conductor collaborative relationship as one where the director and conductor are like one mind with two bodies. However, this is rarely the case. Director Jonathan Miller believes, "[Directing] simply is a highly expert job...just as complicated as the job of the conductor. I like conductors to recognize that." (Harries, 1986) Some conductors have attempted to direct and conduct simultaneously. However, the technical aspects of the modern theatre combined with the demands of an orchestra usually would prohibit a conductor from doing so. It would seem unlikely that a conductor could devote enough attention to the stage while still conducting an orchestra.

Furthermore, as Raymond Leppard demonstrates, few conductors have the type of technical training a director needs: "I haven't got any technique of stage direction....I have a musical theatrical instinct, but I don't have a movement theatrical instinct. I can look at a stage action and see that something is wrong, but I can't analyze what it is. Whereas I can analyze if a fiddler plays in a certain way-I can say, 'Either take three bows

to articulate that or do a different fingering'...I can reduce that to a technical lingo, which a pro must use in any profession." (Harries, 1986)

Conductor Claudio Abbado also recognizes the necessity of the director: "I sometimes have ideas about being a producer, but I've promised myself never to do it. I think with a good producer you can always find something better. Like using a soloist for a symphony solo-I can play the piano, I was a pianist, but with a good pianist you can find something better. The director, the soloist--I know they know better than me. I may suggest things to the director, and if he likes it-good. With collaboration you can always find something better for the music and the opera." (Harries, 1986) Finding something better through collaboration should be the aim of a healthy conductor/director relationship.

In some cases, the conductor will utilize the director as a catalyst for musical interpretation. Conductor Mark Elder describes what he wants from a director: "Really what I'm asking a director to do...is to tell me how they want every line inflected; I want a play-reading with the director really. What I'm interested in working with the singers on is clarity of intention, thought, color, text...getting them to color the words, getting them beyond the crotchets and quavers and the complexities of the music in to the thought behind the music." (Harries, 1986)

In the most productive collaborations, there is an interplay between the two artists. In such optimal case scenarios, when the director and conductor are comfortable working with each other, they can assist each other productively without bruising each others egos. Conductor Colin Graham feels, "The conductor's perfectly within his rights to say, 'I really feel the scene should flow and build to this great climax, and what you're

doing is splitting it up into little sharp movements." (Harries, 1986) He should be able to see that and feel free to tell you-just as [the director] should be able to say, "If you really take it as slowly as that, then the audience will have forgotten what the last word is before you get to the next one and we've lost the flow and the wonderful tautness of it, you're dissipating it." (Harries, 1986)

What a director needs to realize is that the action, décor, lighting and everything else that appears on the stage must appear as a function of the music. Carlo Maria Guilini blames the mass media for a director neglecting this precept: "This generation is getting all its intellectual experiences only through looking....Television and the cinema have affected the young [directors], who now pander more to actions than to anything else. They have forgotten that in opera actions have to be done to music. The visual part has become so important that the music of *Traviata*, for example, becomes like movie music-a comment, not the central issue." (Harries, 1986)

The central issue of any opera should always be the dramatic imperative. However, because of the style of opera, some directors neglect this concept and find certain pieces as "undramatic." Conductor James Levine explains: "[If a director believes that] performing a certain cabaletta in a Verdi opera is undramatic, my answer should be that Verdi was a man of the theatre par excellence, and knew more about the theatre than a hundred of you. Your job is not to change it but to make it work." (Harries, 1986)

As every director who has come from the theatre to the opera house discovers, "making it work" will inevitably entail staging singers so that they can see the conductor while still pursuing some sort of objective. As conductor Julian Smith explains: "Directors want singers to go upstage with a marvelous exit-and the conductor needs their

eyes to take them off the final note." (Harries, 1986) A director who is also trained as a musician can recognize this in a score, but even the most astute director could miss it. In a productive director/conductor collaboration, during the musical rehearsals (where a director is not usually required to attend) a director can call on the conductor's expertise in these types of situations.

Frequently, as was the case in Seattle, conductors earn a reputation for conducting certain operas or operas in a particular style. Maestro Patric Fournillier had conducted the opera on three previous occasions in Europe. This type of experience can prove invaluable to a director who chooses to draw on it. For example, the conductor usually knows where the applause comes and where singers need to be to see him and still sing. In one instance, during the staging of the second act of *Lakme*, there is a musical entrance of a group of sailors. The Maestro expressed a concern in that the director had them positioned upstage right on a small flight of stairs. The potential problem was that they would not be able to see the conductor nor would they be able to hear the orchestra from such a position. In this instance, the director's judgement was right, and his refusal to change the staging proved to be a moot point.

However, in another instance, the collaboration sort of broke down. At the culmination of the first act duet between Lakme and Gerald, director Stephen Terrell had blocked the singers to embrace as if they were about to kiss. Immediately thereafter, Lakme notices her father coming from off in the distance and the kiss is abandoned. When Gerald finally departs, he runs back to Lakme and passionately kisses her before she leaves. The problem arose in performance when, at the culmination of the duet, the audience applauded and the conductor held the orchestra until the applause had subsided.

The result was that the singers were now forced to improvise the staging so that Lakme could still see her father while in the arms of Gerald but still saving the kiss for the end. Had the conductor informed the director that customarily there is a thunderous applause at that point in the score, some other staging could have been devised.

What a director needs to remember is that the conductor is also a performing artist and should be treated as such. Just as singers often reprise performances of certain roles, conductors reprise their performances as well. To negate this experience is egotistic.

Realizing the limitations of the operatic stage is another element that a director must learn to accept and embrace. The orchestra's presence invariable encroaches on the fourth wall. In *The Impresario*, rather than ignore them, every effort was made to recognize that there was an orchestra in the pit with the conductor as another character. The fact that the orchestra never receives the recognition that it rightfully deserves is a sort of travesty.

Otto Klemperer explains: "Opera is in my view a unified organism in which the orchestra and the stage must be in precise accord. As, however, it is in the first place a musical art, in so far as everything should flow from the music, I consider that the conductor is artistically justified in also taking charge of what happens on the stage." (Harries, 1986) In performance, the director's hands are tied. There is a point where the director must let go of the artistic reigns and hand them over to the conductor. Developing the trust to be able to do so is the core of the director/conductor collaborative relationship.

CHAPTER 6

COLLABORATION

Set Design

Let's face it; a certain standard of spectacle has come to be expected with opera. Extravagant sets, pyrotechnics and elephants all have their place there and patrons pay good money to see them. Even with its high design budgets, scenic design must ultimately serve the drama. As Brecht wrote, "Whatever does not further the narrative harms it" which might lead some designers down the path to minimalism. (Goldovsky, 1968)

Unfortunately, stripping the set down to what is "essential" can alienate an audience like nothing else. Jocelyn Herbert explains: "You can't put just nothing on the stage, because the stages are so big. Think of somebody sitting about a mile away up there, with one little figure on stage. Personally, I think it would be marvelous if there was nothing there, but the audience would feel cheated, they'd feel they hadn't got their money's worth. Even at the Royal Court in the late fifties when I did *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* with minimal scenery, the lights went down and a voice behind me said, 'Oh Lord, it's one of those.' I know exactly what she meant." (Harries, 1986)

As a general rule of thumb, minimalism and opera don't mix. Patrons cry out for what they broadly call "realism." However, Jonathan Miller states: "There's no realism in art. Even if you look at the so-called realism of Courbet, it's always a realism which is

seen through an imagination. In the same way, a designer who works with realism does it within the framework of the artificiality of a theatre." (Harries, 1986) Furthermore, what many refer to as "realism" amounts to interior decorating and is expensive.

So, what does a director want from a scenic designer? Ronald Eyre says, "[the designer is the person who must] help to create the world in which the work can live-can be born, live its course and die." (Harries, 1986) No matter how much directors try to make opera "realistic," it simply is not. It is stylized and therefore, the scenery should reflect the same kind of aesthetic as the opera. Not surprisingly, designers, like directors and performers get type-cast. They are experts at different styles: baroque, renaissance, minimalist, etc.. One can imagine the disastrous effect of combining a dark, stark piece like Berg's *Wozzeck* with a designer who specializes in baroque architecture.

According to Götz Friedrich, the scenic designer must, "create the artistic, aesthetic environment in which the wonders, the miracle of the story-through-music happens. The set has to build a special area-it cannot be the real world, or even a slice of the world, it must always be a special world existing by itself, a microcosm." (Harries, 1986) It must be a world where people do break into song and explore their deepest felt emotions with two to three thousand people. As one can see, there is not one thing realistic about that.

Furthermore, the visual aspect has done a great deal to harm the work of the set designer. For instance, the rented set for *Lakme*, which was universally despised for its darkness and lack of spatial logic, did very little to suggest India. Stephanos Lazardis explains: "There's so much television and film-people can get all that visual information from there. When Puccini wrote *Madama Butterfly*, how many people had been to Japan?

Everybody knows or has an idea of what Japan looks like today." (Harries, 1986)

Similarly, people know what India looks like and expect to find something that they can latch onto that says, "This opera takes place in Victorian Raj, India." Now, if creating a historical production, which can be the bane of any director and designer's existence, incorporating the lack of knowledge of the locale can open a whole world of possibilities.

Lakme is such a great example of the pitfalls of design work. One has to look at the time in which the piece was composed and envision what its audience knew. The style of *Lakme* is fanciful. It makes no pretense at being realistic--it is evocative. One of my biggest complaints when I first encountered the opera was that it did not sound very Indian to me. But, it certainly sounded exotic to a French audience in the mid-nineteenth century. This fanciful, familiar yet exotic quality could easily have been translated into a metaphor or design concept.

Fundamentally, *Lakme* is about the insurmountable barriers between people that are created by religion, race and nationality. Numerous times during the production I felt as though one of the characters encountered some sort of psychological or cultural barrier that prevented them from fulfilling their desires. I only wish that the designer would have seen the same thing and created a physical barrier to symbolize and dramatize this. For a director, creating these types of images is necessary for telling the tale. Therefore, images and metaphors are the best tools a director has to communicate with a scenic designer. As John Bury, Head of Design at the National Theatre so succinctly puts it: "Always go for the minimum possible to create the image you need." (Harries, 1986)

When I collaborated with John Santangelo on *L'elisir d'amore*, I gave him some sketches of what I had in mind. We talked about the concept of the opera as well as the

location in which it would be set. Basically what I did was throw some ideas at him, told him how many exits and entrances I needed and then let him loose. The results were far better than I imagined. He articulated how expensive of realism could be and then offered alternatives that could suggest what I wanted to convey. The fact that he mentioned designers who I had heard of and was familiar with helped as well. The result was something that was versatile, communicated and did so with the minimum possible to create the image we needed.

Lighting

Because music and mood are so inexorably linked, lighting can play such a vital part in making the inner life of the character exterior. According to John Bury, "The scenery is light, light is what you see. You have to think of the design as all one thing- the scenery's not there to be seen but to be lit you put the scenery in the areas where you want something solid to stop the light, or reflect light." (Harries, 1986)

While working on *Lakme*, the production staff universally disliked the first and third act sets. Fortunately, because of the deft skill of the lighting designer, the set became so unimportant that it was hardly noticeable. The set was the weakest member of the team and the lighting was the superstar player who made up for it. What was clear to me was that the designer had listened to the score for its drama. Like listening for movement cues, the lighting designer listens for changes in light. In an interview F. Mitchell Dana explains, "Here is a big build, here is a crescendo-there should be some upswelling, some change in the light. Here we have a real ritard-we should be isolating down on something." (Harries, 1986) This is the kind of analysis that a director loves.

Additionally, because there are often unique factors in opera such as asides and one person singing amidst a group, rising to the challenge requires a little technique. In the theatre, especially in Shakespeare for example, there are many instances when characters break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience or soliloquize. This is a little trickier on the operatic stage because singers spend such a great deal of time looking forward at the conductor that it can be difficult to communicate an aside.

Furthermore, operatic characters often sing their thoughts while in the presence of someone else who supposedly can not hear them. One way to communicate this is with light. Spotlighting a performer or having them step into an area that denotes a personal bubble is just one of many techniques that are somewhat more simply addressed without the concern of looking at the conductor.

Ultimately, lighting can be a valuable tool or a director's worst enemy. What a director wants in a lighting designer is someone who is extremely aware of tone, rhythm and drama. The end result should be a design that makes an impact without bringing attention to itself.

The Choreographer

The choreographer is a collaborator that a director will not necessarily have on every opera. If it is a French opera, chances are there will be one. Dance can be a touchy subject in opera. Some feel that it has no place in opera and others feel that it is a contributory factor making it a more total art form. Nonetheless, ballet in opera is more often than not superfluous to the central action. However, by working with a skilled choreographer, they can create a kind of interpretive dance that can either forward the

plot, foreshadow what is to come or at the very least comment on what has happened so far.

As a stepping off point to collaboration, the director needs to find what the imperative is for the dance. Sometimes it is ritualistic, other times it is ostensibly entertainment for characters on stage and still other times it is accompanied by singing. In any case, the director and choreographer need to have some sort of a game plan that they can agree on as to what the ballet's purpose is. Once this is established, if the director is not himself a choreographer, the best rule of thumb is to stay out of the choreographer's way and let them create. The results often turn out to be better than what a director could have imagined.

The Assistant Director

In the theatre, the role of the Assistant Director is rarely ever well-defined. However, when one is employed, union regulations dictate certain areas of responsibility for the AD. For instance, he is solely responsible for taking down and recording staging for archival purposes. While stage managers will record exits and entrances, it is the AD who is responsible for making a record of everything that happens on stage. Furthermore, with large chorus or group scenes, this aspect of the job can become quite stressful and extremely valuable for a director.

With a large chorus, name tags can assist the AD in charting exactly who stands where and when they move. Additionally, the AD should try and learn everyone's names. The advantage of this is that they can easily identify who might be out of place, and

knowing their names helps to bridge the gap between viewing them as a group or a group of individuals.

Assistant directors are also sometimes called upon to stand in for performers while in rehearsal and they also sometimes are beneficial in working with supernumeraries. Because he usually works with "group" performers i.e. the chorus and supers, the AD sometimes is responsible for communicating director notes. Once in dress rehearsals or technical rehearsals, the AD's chief responsibility is to take the director's notes. Unlike in the theatre, it is rare to have note sessions with the performers and director, so the AD is frequently called upon to type up notes so that the director can meet with performers individually.

As in the theatre, AD's are usually people that the director knows and trusts. The best AD/director collaborations arise when the director can concentrate on the "big picture" and let the AD focus on the minutiae. In any case, if a director and AD can agree on what their areas of responsibility, the assistant director can be an invaluable member of the production team.

Supertitles

Supertitles have become a standard feature in American opera houses. The reasons are obvious-most operas are not performed in English. Their prevalence has made opera much more accessible to audiences that might not normally have ever developed and interest in the art form. However, supertitles can present a whole series of problems for a director.

In larger opera houses, sometimes there is a staff member whose responsibility is to translate the libretto and transfer them to slides or a computer program. What the director has to ensure is that the translation matches the stage action. During technical rehearsals, a director is usually given the opportunity to suggest alternate translations or different titles. However, some opera houses have no translator/titler position. In these cases, opera houses buy existing slides from some other production. When this is the case, the director can feel a bit restricted. What he can do is direct the opera with the supertitles in mind. In other words, the director may have to study the supertitles in the same way that he studies the libretto. Ultimately, the director must direct for his audience, and if his audience is reading what is going on, then he must adjust to what their reading.

Costumes

Costumes should be the means to an end rather than the end itself. Fundamentally, costumes should be the tools for telling a story, but not the basis of character. Designer Luciana Arrighi explains: "If you notice the costumes, you've done a bad design; they should be part of the landscape."

Unless mounting a new production, chorus costumes are often rented from companies who have done the opera on a previous occasion. When this is the case, a technique employed by Seattle Opera can be quite beneficial to the imagination of the director; taking polaroid pictures. Since the chorus is a permanent fixture at Seattle Opera, the costume shop is at liberty to call choristers in for fittings and take their pictures at the same time. The pictures are then forwarded to the director and designers

so that they have a visual representation of colors and faces that can be used for staging and design purposes.

As Janice Pullen explains, when designing costumes for choristers, she tries to present sketches of a cross-section: "You'll select a small short man, a big fat man, a tall good-looking man, and an unshapely man, a short plump girl with a big bust, a tall elegant girl...so the [director and designer] gets to see what the costumes look like on a good range of chorus. You can make drawings of costumes on girls with swanlike necks and endless arms, but you've got to see it on stage on a girl who's four foot ten with a thirty-eight-inch bust."

Since period costumes are a fixture of the majority of opera productions, rehearsal costumes and props can often assist the director and performers in envisioning how one moves and negotiates the stage. Good designers like Sally Jacobs recognize that, "[the performers] know better than anyone else what they're developing for this performance. They may not understand spatial relationships and the theory of color and visual phenomena the way I do, but they understand from the inside what is developing....They have got tremendous responsibility on that stage--they've got to be listened to and they have to feel right. Gwyneth Jones has to go on stage as Turandot and do this enormously demanding role; and if the costume is dragging in the wrong way and she feels she doesn't look the part, it's going to undermine the whole performance. It's not a question of indulging them--it's serious, it has to be worked out." (Harries, 1986)

Once the concept is worked out, a talented designer should be left to their own devices. Like other designers, they possess an expert knowledge of their field that a director must respect. While pictures are often helpful, a costume designer who has the

liberty to design what they want often will give a director more than he could have imagined. As a general rule, the director should suggest rather than dictate, but by the same token, the designer must be open enough to adjust and change ideas if necessary.

In the case of *L'elisir d'amore* at UNLV, Shahnaz Kahn designed costumes and built when necessary. This typifies a healthy collaborative effort. As the director, I suggested some things to her, showed her some pictures after having done some homework, and even gave her a copy of a movie set in that time period. The result was that when she showed what she had pulled or sketches of her designs, I felt as though she had read my mind and knew exactly what I was looking for (even though I did not). It is as though establishing a framework that the designer is left to fill eventually leads to something that tells the story, pleases the director and satisfies the artistic needs of the designer.

CHAPTER 7

REHEARSAL

The Principal Singers

Unlike actors, operatic singers are usually expected to arrive at rehearsal already knowing their part. However, unlike actors, operatic performers are not paid for rehearsal (at least if they are represented by AGMA) and stage directors in the professional opera rarely have anything to do with principal casting. Nevertheless, a director cannot come to rehearsal unprepared.

Andrei Serban begs to differ: "The chemistry between the performers and myself is not always the same. It's like an act of love-it doesn't always work. I never write down a blocking at home. I never come what is called 'prepared.' Very often in that sense I create a lot of panic in the stage management and administration and the singers- everybody's in corners muttering, 'Does he know what he's doing?' because I don't really do much at all at first. When I come, I look at the singers to see what they can do, and then to see what is possible in the situation." (Harries, 1986)

The prevalence of the ensemble mentality of the theatre coupled with the desire to collaborate with performers to create an organic whole are both noble endeavors. But unlike in the theatre, operatic performers usually have a standard repertoire and have performed the role several times before. Furthermore, the time allotted for opera rehearsals are less than what usually occurs in the theatre. Because of the strain on the

vocal instrument and the sheer cost of putting on an opera, major principal roles are often double cast and fewer performances of a single opera occur.

These factors necessitate that a director have a rehearsal strategy as well as several techniques at his disposal. AGMA dictates that singers can only rehearse a specified number of hours per day. Because of this, many opera houses employ staff members that do nothing but schedule rehearsals and ensure that the performers are there. Nevertheless, at some point before rehearsals start, the director must sit down with a calendar and figure out a game plan. As Jonathan Miller explains, "There's a strategy, but the tactics are worked out on the floor." (Harries, 1986)

According to Boris Goldovsky, there are basically four tactics or methods a director can use to communicate his ideas and desires: (a) he can ask the performer to accomplish a particular task; (b) he can sing and act out pieces of the role, thereby demonstrating the relevant musical-dramatic connections; (c) he can have the score played on the piano; and (d) he can physically manipulate the singers. (Goldovsky, 1968)

While these might seem obvious, some might think that opera is an extremely stylized art form that require some vastly different from the theatre. Graham Clark explains: "People tend to think that opera is stylized, a stylized ritual that one has to go through--if it has a musical framework, there is a stylized ritual--it's not true--and people like Miller and Poutney and Ponelle have broken right away and pointed out that there are as many different answers as there are in the straight theatre." (Harries, 1986)

One valuable technique that predominates in the theatre that is rarely accomplished in opera is a table work session wherein the cast (and hopefully conductor) read the libretto and investigate the characters' dramatic motivation. However, this can

present complications as, more than likely, the libretto will be in a foreign language and will not read very well as a work of drama. Another technique borrowed from film that I'd like to attempt in the opera is the use of a story-board. Obviously there are limitations to this technique as there are not different camera angles or cuts that can be made. However, I think that this graphic representation could be a valuable tool for communicating with designers and performers.

As much as a director would like to pretend that he is directing actors, operatic performers are first and foremost musicians. As such, there are limitations, according to James Bowman: "Singers don't like being grabbed, or pushed around, because it upsets the diaphragm. And the actor gives you far more on stage, the actor is really talking to you at close quarters. Eyes are the secret; if you watch singers, they never look at each other. It's partly because it's embarrassing, partly 'Does my breath smell? Am I flat?'-so many layers of inhibitions which actors don't have.' Singers suffer (if suffer is the word) from 'the inhibition of the singing voice.' A third force to be considered all the time perpetual throat-clearing and worries about whether the voice is working." (Harries, 1986)

Because of the physical demands placed on the modern opera singer, H. Wesley Balk believes that the director is at least partially to blame for the premature decay of operatic voices: "Physical tension of any kind in the body effects a subtle drag on the voice.... You put that drag on for ten years and you have an erosion." (Harries, 1986) One of the tools to help slow this erosion is the practice of "singing in." Once a singer has learned not only the notes but also where they must be placed and where to breathe, direction then becomes easier because both singer and director know what the performer

can and can not do on any given piece of music. Matthew Epstein: "Any great singer you talk to will tell you this-the singing in of a role is the crucial thing about this role.

Physically knowing how the voice has to function through the role-here comes the high note, here comes the low note, here comes the long phrase-knowing how to do it, having it thought through." (Harries, 1986)

Once the role is "sung in" the rest is pretty easy. What is not easy for some singers is to act when they are not singing. Few singers are trained as actors and yet we expect them to perform as if they were. Fortunately, because of the framework of music, giving detailed stage directions can be as exact as "wipe your brow with the handkerchief on the first beat in the second measure." (Harries, 1986)

However, and this can be a little unnerving, because principal roles are frequently double or even triple cast, a director ends up giving a particular piece of stage direction multiple times. One might think that singers would scrutinize the performance of someone else playing the same role. The advantage in doing so is that one's own performance becomes an amalgam of collaboration between the director and conductor as well as the fellow singer. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. Some singers are of the opinion that they have done a particular role many times and they received rave reviews so why should they change it? Other singers feel that because they are not called to a rehearsal where the other person singing the role is rehearsing, that there is no need for them to be there. Of course, there are always exceptions. There is no one way to direct all performers and have them perform it the same way. What a director must understand is that each individual singer will hopefully bring their own personality and interpretation to the role and no two performances will be the same. The best a director can hope for is to

create a structure or framework wherein the performer can create.

The Chorus

In any opera production, the chorus may be a major artistic asset or a director's biggest nightmare or both: nonetheless, it requires fastidious and expert handling. How a director manages a large chorus is one of the chief aspects that differentiates opera direction from that of musicals and plays. In professional American opera companies, choruses are represented by AGMA (The American Guild of Musical Artists). In Seattle, the chorus consists of several different pools that can be drawn on as needed: regular chorus, alternate chorus and auxiliary chorus.

The conductor commonly suggests to the resident chorus master or music staff the distribution of choral voices-not merely the number of sopranos, tenors, etc. but also how many soprano cigarette girls he wants in the first scene of *Carmen* and how many gypsies in the second act, how many tenors will be soldiers or smugglers. A director may be able to influence the conductor in a new production, but the two greatest factors are the company's budget, i.e. how much money is set aside to pay the chorus, and if it is a revival of a production, the number of extant costumes there are for particular roles. In the end, the chorus master, knowing the singers best, usually casts the choral parts. A director's intervention is usually not advised as he may infuriate a chorus member who, for example, has always sung first soprano and is now asked to sing second soprano with the rest of the ladies on stage left.

Unlike the principal singers, choristers do not usually already know their music at the commencement of the first rehearsal. It is the chorus master's responsibility

to teach them the notes as they quite often have choral music from several different operas occupying their minds at any given time. With some more complicated works, the chorus master may have to work with choristers individually or in small groups. Such was the case in *Lakme*. The second act curtain rises on a busy market scene with a plethora of singing merchants, a detachment of British soldiers as well as three soloists: a fortune teller, a jewelry salesman and a thief.

Perhaps the most beneficial thing a director can do to contribute to the welfare of his chorus is to treat them as individuals. En masse, the chorus can be quite intimidating. Martin Handley, Chorus Master at the English National Opera confirms: "As far as one can tell, choruses are made up of very nice individuals, but stick them together as a unit and they seem like a totally uncontrollable monster with no human feelings whatsoever. If you start treating them as a unit, firstly they sense it and resent it, secondly you get terribly paranoid." John Dexter, who makes great use of the chorus in his staging, forcefully asserts, "The chorus should be at the heart of the opera house: when the circulation isn't running, you're in trouble." (Harries 1986)

If the costumes are already built, a director may find it advantageous to have a photograph of all the individually costumed choristers. These photos, as well as a stage manager or assistant who knows all the chorus members, often can aid a director in creating an identity for the chorister. One of the easiest ways to think of the choristers individually is to give each of them a prop. By doing so, Mary Jo Soprano can become a lovely flower girl or Bobby Baritone can become the local barber and thus give them a raison d'être on stage rather than just being there to sing.

While a director may give diction notes to the chorus, especially if they are singing in his native tongue, the task is usually the responsibility of the chorus master or a language coach. Large opera companies sometimes have several assistant chorus masters who may specialize in a particular language. However, some languages that may be particularly difficult (Russian for example) require a special language coach who teaches the chorus the music syllable by syllable. To Peter Burian, Chorus Master at Covent Garden since 1984, articulation and intelligibility are paramount in choral preparation: "The basis of choral-singing is the clear delivery of the text-the right placing of consonants and vowels. A well-defined final consonant in a word is both the key to the understanding of that word-until it is closed, it will remain vague-and a spring board to the next." (Harries, 1986)

For some unusual operas (as well as for many choristers) the music is easier to learn in conjunction with stage direction. For instance, Phillip Glass's *Akhmaten*, with its chorus singing hypnotic, monotonous rhythmic pulses, often as variations of one note, with words in ancient Egyptian, Akkadian and Hebrew, would be much easier for choristers to commit to memory in combination with staging rehearsals.

In conclusion, it is always important for a stage director to acknowledge and respect his chorus. While often a thankless, low-paying job, choral members are the backbone of many operas like *l'Elisir d'amore* and *Lakme*. Since spectacle and opera go hand in hand, and orderly management of a chorus is one of the quickest ways to achieve this, the opera director needs to become accustomed to

imagining the movement patterns of sometimes fifty to a hundred people. Once he can do this, he will save the opera company loads of money in overtime and engender a great feeling of community among the individual chorus members.

CHAPTER 8

21st CENTURY OPERA

One might wonder why opera continues to be so popular, especially in a city like Seattle when it struggles to survive in a city like Las Vegas. Seattle values the arts in a way that many other cities do not. For instance, a percentage of city sales tax is specifically appropriated for the arts. The result is a thriving ballet, symphony, numerous theatres and a well respected opera house. Moreover, according to Speight Jenkins, Seattle has the boasts the largest opera attending populace per capita of any city in America.

One of the possible reasons for this is the large number of new millionaires borne out of the computer technology industry in and around Seattle. Because of this "new money," Seattleites yearn for fresh and innovative opera. Seattle has built its reputation on its ingenious productions of Wagner's Ring Cycle. As a result, operas like *Lakme*, which are rarely performed, are a bit of a gamble.

In Seattle, most operas enjoy an eight performance run. However, this was not the case with *Lakme* as Speight Jenkins felt that its rarity might put off all but the most devote opera fans. In dress rehearsals, however, there was a buzz about adding an eighth performance to allow the silver cast another performance. Unfortunately, after financial analysis, Jenkins decided not to do so. What did happen was the opera played to sellout

crowds for all of its seven performances and an additional one could have been financially sound.

Speight Jenkins has an enviable rapport with his audience. After each performance, he would stand in the lobby with a microphone and answer questions about the production and the opera company. The level of his approachability engenders a friendly feeling among subscribers--the backbone of any professional opera company.

The demographics of the subscriber base at Seattle opera is observably younger than some larger, more established companies such as San Francisco Opera or The Metropolitan Opera. However, in what appears to be an attempt to capture younger audiences and keep the art form alive, both SF Opera and The Met commission new operas on a yearly basis. Some such projects include an operatic realization of *The Great Gatsby* by the Met and SF Opera's commission of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. These new operas mark something significant: the emergence of an American art form. While opera is well appreciated in the United States, most of it has an exotic foreign flavor.

As the theatre has evolved into a much more collaborative effort, the opera has followed suit. It used to be that playwrights and composers worked in isolation and then emerged with a completed work. Building on the theory that multiple minds are better than one, the art of playwriting has developed into a workshop format. Opera composition has mirrored the workshop idea wherein a composer, librettist, director and singers collaborate on a new work with each of them giving input to composer and librettist in each of their individual areas of expertise.

Perhaps this style of democratic creation could only have begun in America, and the results of this type of creation are varied. John Adams *Nixon in China* and *The*

Death of Klinghoffer were both created in this fashion. And currently, SF Opera has commissioned the creation of an operatic version of the hit novel and film *Dead Man Walking*.

The future of opera is largely uncertain, but what is predictable is that melodies will undoubtedly endure. Most operatic compositions of the latter 20th Century have been experimental sojourns into the atonal. No one can say for certain if Phillip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* will be receiving reprisals a hundred years from now, but it is fairly safe to assume that Bizet's *Carmen* or Puccini's *La Boheme* will.

What is quite peculiar is the treatment opera has recently been receiving by modern composers. A couple of developments have done much to engender interest in opera among the young. The smash Broadway production of *RENT*, an updated version of *La Boheme* addressed AIDS as well as a plethora of other topical issues. Similarly, Elton John has composed a musical interpretation of Verdi's *Aida*. What these landmark productions have done is fuse opera and musical theatre to create something new and different.

As is the nature of art, it must constantly evolve and change to survive. As demonstrated by the success of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphosis*, a dramatization of Ovid's mythological tales, classical literature continues to speak to new generations. As the Italian Camerata examined classical Greek and Roman literature through a Renaissance Italian sensibility, re-examination through a modern sensibility might also yield some rewarding ideas.

The truth is that no one can predict the future of art. However, as long as it reinvents itself and periodically returns to its roots, opera will grow and evolve well into the 21st Century and beyond.

CHAPTER 9

PERFORMANCE

For most directors, opening night represents the end of an artistic journey. On opening night, sometimes an energy exists that is unique to opera. Sir Peter Hall describes: "Music, because it had no literal meaning, is immediately emotional. Music immediately charges the proceedings with a sensuality and an atmosphere which is much stronger than the spoken word." (Harries, 1986)

If the director is worth his salt, hopefully he will have tapped into this emotional meaning and brought it to life. There comes a time when the director must let go of his creation and let it live and eventually die. However, if the collaboration between director and conductor has been an effective one, the director can take solace in the thought that the conductor will watch over the production as if it were completely his own. Walter Felsenstein: "During the performance, the conductor alone is that evening's producer, responsible for the validity and comprehensibility of that evening's conception, and mentor and friend of each of the creative performers." (Harries, 1986)

At the core of any type of direction, be it film or theatre or opera, is the creation of illusion--a control of time and space for a desired effect. As much as a director might want to control every single second of time on stage, have it filled and communicate, there comes a realization that he can not do so. However, with the structure of music, opera is the single art form where the most control over time and space can be

accomplished. Peter Sellars notes, "I'm a very firm believer that every performance must be different.... In every show I put in a series of random elements which means that every night there will be a genuine chemical reaction.... After one acquires some craft, it has to do with setting up a series of structures which every night intersect with each other as slightly different points.... Music-drama is by definition present-tense, unrepeatable--things happening at this moment between you and the people on-stage which will never happen again--a priceless moment of time." (Harries, 1986)

Creating priceless moments of time, ones that flows into each other without interruption, should be every director's goal. When done well, opera stands at the pinnacle of what the human imagination is capable of, and it touches the human spirit like no other form of art.

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