

Opera Today, Spring 2004

Music, Words, and Supertitles

by

Michael Dellaira

Opera or Music-Theater? That's how the Center for Contemporary Opera advertised its double-cast reading of Susan Yankowitz's and my opera **Chéri** last year. The New York Times covered the performance in a piece titled "Where Opera meets Music Theater a Hybrid Emerges." Similarly, the American Music Center's award-winning Webzine "New Music Box" (www.newmusicbox.org) devoted an issue last summer to the "What is Opera? What is Music-Theater?" question, as did the August issue of Opera News, which contained a conversation on the subject between Renee Fleming and Barbara Cook. Sondheim's **Little Night Music** is scheduled this spring at New York City Opera, while **La Bohème** is on Broadway. Opera or Music-Theater? It's a hot question.

But not a new one. The issue sizzled at the turn of the 17th century when the Florentine Camerata, an association including the likes of Galileo Galilei's father, Vincenzo, propounded a theory which, put simply, was that in the marriage of words and music, the words must always be understood. It was a daring theory made even more so because it was based on the music of the ancient Greeks, or rather on Galilei's conception of it, since neither he, nor anyone else, had any idea what that music actually sounded like. Regardless, the theory sparked a debate between the defenders of *stylus antiquus*, who thought music the mistress of words, and *stylus modernus*, who thought music the master of words. The former dominated opera in the 17th century, but composers -- who tend, after all, to be more excited by sound than word (or the sound of a word more than its meaning) -- began to (re)conceive the voice as yet another instrument in an expanding orchestra. By the 19th century, then, *bel canto* reigned supreme, an example of *stylus modernus par excellence*.

In Act II of his opera **Little Women**, Mark Adamo, who wrote both words and music, has Jo saying to her companion Bhaer as they leave the opera house: "Couldn't they put the words on a banner, unspool it in front of the stage, so you could read what they were saying as they sing it?" Bhaer answers that "it never would work" and the audience laughs, of course, because they're either reading the supertitles themselves at that very moment, or sitting in a theater without supertitles so, like Jo, know what they want, but unlike Jo, are aware of what they're missing.

Still, I remember seeing my first performance of **Boris Godunov** at the Rome Opera about 20 years B.S. (Before Supertitles). Though I knew not a word of Russian, I still felt I understood what the characters were singing about because of what Mussorgsky was able to achieve in his score. I returned for all five performances (composition students got free tickets), but not because I wanted to understand the words; I went back to for the music. But seeing and hearing Boris Godunov was entirely unlike seeing **The Rake's Progress** that same year, a much more frustrating experience since, being a native English speaker, I thought I should be able to understand everything but was, in fact, only able to make out bits and pieces of Auden's riotous libretto. Like Jo, I

must have thought how swell it would be to see the words unspool before me, if for no other reason than I could stop trying to decipher what the singers were singing and sit back and enjoy the music.

The need for supertitles in one's own language reminds us – taunts us, actually – that few words are understood by anyone, in any language, native and non-native speakers alike, when sung in an opera house. So what have we been doing all these years? Have we really been word-deprived, or do supertitles convey the impression that we're supposed to be getting something that really may be just a little beside the point? In the future, will operas be written, or chosen by opera companies, that “play well” to supertitles -- operas that are, in effect, better to read than listen to? Have supertitles brought back a return to stylus antiquus? Or is it the other way around: have supertitles liberated the composer from having to make sure every word can be heard?

However these issues play out in the opera vs. music-theater debate, we should not forget that before words can mean something to an audience they must have meaning to the composer; pace Francesco Maria Piave. His *La Traviata* isn't all that inspiring to read, but takes on an amazing energy once Verdi gets hold of it. And though Lorenzo daPonte's *Marriage of Figaro* is a very satisfying read, with its wonderful double-entendres and puns, they are hardly noticed or missed when attached to Mozart's vocal lines. But certainly they weren't lost on Mozart. Then there's Wagner, capable of self-inspiration. He wrote the words that engendered a music so powerful and unique that I daresay we care more about how his characters “say” the words than what they precisely are saying. Susan Graham, interviewed recently by [Opera News](#) perhaps said it best: “From an intellectual place, it's ‘prima la parola’, but in performance, it's ‘prima la musica.’ Let's face it ... sometimes the words we sing are so trite and repetitive, but the way that the music is set makes it work. Take *Werther*. Now Goethe was no slouch, but when the title character says ‘I'm dying’ for 25 minutes, the only thing that can sustain it is the music.”