

## 15. From a Tent to the Met: Getting to Know and Appreciate Opera in My Own Slow Way: May 2-10

My first encounter with opera came when I was ten. It must have been the summer of 1954 just after my family had moved to Zwolle's Abel Tasmanstraat. A giant tent had been erected on the nearby Rode Torenplein ("Red Tower Square": The "Red Tower" was a tall red-brick water tower). More commonly, once a year, a similarly big tent there would house a circus. I am not sure whether opera was performed in this setting more than once or even whether opera was featured on a regular basis in Zwolle. There was a large convention and concert hall—now replaced with an ultra-modern building—across from the railway station which could certainly accommodate an opera performance.

The performance was already well underway when, my curiosity piqued, I sneaked inside the tent; tickets were not being collected any more, so my entry went without a hitch. However, out of fear of being spotted as a non-paying intruder, I remained standing close to the entrance from where I had an unblocked view of what was transpiring on the circular stage in the tent's centre. From a poster I knew it was "The Pearl Fishers," a title which intrigued me. Only many years later I would learn that it was by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French composer Georges Bizet. I have only the haziest recollection of the performance. I do not even know if it was performed in the original French or in a Dutch translation (almost certainly the former). I did not have a programme, which would have surely provided me with this information as well with an outline of the opera's story, perhaps even with translated extracts from the libretto. My recollection is of a brightly lit stage peopled by men and women in exotic Asian-looking costumes, a few of them singing in turn words I could not make out and would not have understood in any case if they were French. I did not stay very long—not more than ten minutes, I am sure—then, bored with the incomprehensible singing and spectacle, I left, and that was the end of my exposure for opera for almost for almost fifteen years.

During my first year of studies at the University of Toronto, I was finally ready for a mature experience and, I hoped, enjoyment of opera. Toronto indeed afforded many opportunities. An advertisement of a performance of Richard Strauss's *Elektra* caught my eye. Electra is the central protagonist in Sophocles' tragedy, *Elektra*, as well as in Euripides' drama of the same title, and is also a major character in *The Suppliants*, the second play in Aeschylus' great *Oresteia* trilogy. Watching and listening to Strauss's opera would surely underline for me the artistic affinity between classical Greek tragedy and the opera of the West. The performance was to take place in the then ultra-modern O' Keefe Centre for the Performing Arts which had a good reputation for its excellent acoustics. Foolishly, in order to save money, I reserved a seat in one of the back rows; perhaps a front seat would have afforded me a much greater pleasure from the performance, although I doubt it. In any case, as it was, the whole opera rolled past me without my deriving any real enjoyment from it. The almost bare stage was murkily lit in a bluish light throughout, so that from where I was sitting it was difficult to see what was actually taking place there. My German was sufficient to pick up the odd word which was sung, but there was no English translation of the German libretto (which was

written by Strauss's frequent collaborator Hugo von Hofmannsthal) projected on a screen above the stage, as is the customary practice today, although the printed programme gave me some indication of the story line. This was one of bloody revenge and screaming madness acted out in their full raw force (Electra dies mad at the end of the opera—an invention of Strauss and von Hofmannsthal). Unlike in the Greek tragedies, the major characters (Electra, Orestes, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus) were crudely drawn one-dimensional figures. Thus, I lost for many years any taste I might have otherwise had for opera.

I must admit that already at this time I was not particularly fond of musicals, at least the large majority of them, although a good staged—as opposed to a filmed—performance was almost certain to hold my interest. My different response must be due to the live-physical presence of a staged performance which, as I experience it, draws you in in a way a movie cannot. Thus I fondly remember such a performance of *Zorba the Greek*, the musical, during my years of studies at Western; the same is true of the staged musicals to which my friend Terry in Vancouver has taken me over the past two decades. My general dislike of filmed performances stems probably from the 1954 movie, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, which my uncle Kees—my mother's youngest brother, or rather half-brother—took me to when I was staying with opa and oma van Dam, my maternal grandparents, in Gouda. I gather that this movie won both critical and popular acclaim, but I found it altogether unbelievable and imbecile, in both its story line as well as the singing and the dancing. Years later, *The West Side Story*, the 1961 movie, also a great hit with the critics and the public (I saw it on television), left me altogether cold. There are only two filmed musicals made during the sixties and seventies which I immediately liked: *The Sound of Music* (1965) and *Cabaret* (1972), the latter being one of my all-time favourite movies. The sheer charm of Julie Andrews's and the children's singing truly captivated me. There was a good, if unabashedly sentimental story and all the music and singing were convincingly and beautifully integrated into it. The flawless integration of the music, singing, and dancing with a compelling story and superb characterization set in Berlin of the early thirties makes *Cabaret*, in my judgment, the supreme musical of all time; I doubt if it will ever be equalled.

My interest in opera lay in abeyance for well over a decade after I saw *Elektra*. But it was revived, in an uniquely powerful way, by the *Jahrhundertring* (“Century Ring”) performance, at the Bayreuth Festival, of the entire four-opera cycle of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. This marked the centenary of its first performance in 1876, and was filmed for television in 1979 and 1980; I saw it a few years later on the PBS network. I watched much of the sixteen-hour production and was enthralled by it. It was a modernist production which did away with the paraphernalia (costumes, settings etc.) of the medieval Germanic legend which Wagner had faithfully reproduced, and set his operatic tetralogy against the background of the might of the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, a world-historical turn if there ever was one, of which the 'cycle' might be interpreted as a revolutionary critique. It was a brilliant innovation thanks to which the *Ring*, which was always in danger of becoming a showpiece of fusty Germanophilia, gained a new contemporary urgency. More recently,

shortly after Scott's death almost eight years ago the Ring gained a very personal meaning for me as I played over and again the majestic orchestral piece, "The Funeral of Siegfried," in the last opera of the tetralogy, "The Twilight of the Gods." Somehow the stirring symphonic music of mourning, gathering in a mighty crescendo, alive with the *Ring's* great leitmotifs, towards a stupendous outburst of triumphant proclamation of tribute, radiant with trumpet sound, to heroic virtue, was of great comfort to me in those difficult days.

This was my direct first encounter with Wagnerian opera, although I had known about him already for many years as seen through the eyes of Friedrich Nietzsche. When Nietzsche was writing his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy*—ancient Greek tragedy, of course, and its legacy to the West—he was still a devotee of Wagner, and his treatise was written as an unalloyed eulogy of the Master. Nietzsche saw in the works of Greek tragedians, above all Aeschylus and Sophocles, a perfect coming together of the rational and irrational elements in human nature. These he named respectively "Apollonian"—after the Greek god Apollo—and "Dionysiac"—after the god Dionysus. In the composition of his operas Wagner, as Nietzsche asserted, was following in the trail-blazing footsteps of the Greek masters. Later, of course, he was to repudiate Wagner for his German nationalism and exceptionalism laced as they were at times with a spurious Christian piety—as in *Parsifal*—but, even more, with a virulent anti-Semitism.

Wagner himself, too, deeply admired Greek tragedy and made a profound study of them. He wanted the kind of opera he composed, like its ancient model, to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, "an all-embracing work of art," in which all its elements, the singing, the music, the stage setting, and, last but not least, the text, came perfectly together, none of them upstaging the others. Modern western opera, he argued, was generally deficient in its librettos; they were too often banal and lacking in vigorous lyrical impact; the texts of his operas, by contrast, would receive as careful and sustained an artistic attention as the music. I believe he was, to a large extent, right in his criticism and that, at least in the operas I have listened to (*Tristan und Isolde* and parts of the *Ring*), he produced superior librettos.

Opera, of course, has its origins in the culture of music and theatre of early 17<sup>th</sup> century Italy. For a while, though, influenced by the great inspiration Wagner derived from Greek tragedy, I was inclined to think of it as a significant precursor to the opera of the West even if its Italian creators did not have this supposed legacy in mind. However, opera and Greek tragedy are substantially different as performing arts of the stage. The libretto of the opera is sung throughout whether as dialogue, *recitativo*, or *bel canto*, and in addition there are the purely orchestral sequences. In Greek tragedy, by contrast, all the text is recited by the actors; even the highly lyrical choral odes are recited by the members of the chorus. There is musical accompaniment, to be sure, with the flutes being the dominant instrument and drums and trumpets coming in wherever needed for theatrical effect, but all of this is only background—incongruously, the only modern parallel I can think of is rapping! The average length of a Greek tragedy is 1200 verse-lines; moreover, Greek tragedy was performed in a sequence of three dramas,

and this trilogy was followed by a much shorter so-called satyr-play, which, in contrast to tragedy, was serio-comedic in tone. One can imagine how much time it would have taken if the entire text of such a performance had to be sung. To underline the radical difference between these two forms of theatre even more: all the actors in classical Greek drama (not just tragedy) wore masks and female roles were acted by men. In composing an opera, therefore, the composer may certainly be looking to Greek tragedy for thematic, emotional, and even aesthetic inspiration, but he or she is working within an entirely genre and tradition of the theatrical arts.

I am glad, though, that Wagner fed a lasting interest in opera in me. Although I will never be a true aficionado like my friend Terry in Vancouver, to whom I am greatly indebted for directing me to Verdi, whom he considers the classic composer of opera. I have watched and listened with great pleasure to tapes of Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* which he presented to me years ago. As I discovered recently, the movie theatre in my small town in Nova Scotia regularly features filmed opera live-streamed from the Metropolitan at the Lincoln Centre in New York and I plan to attend regularly from now on. A few weeks ago I took in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*—based on Alexander Pushkin's verse-novel which is one of the supreme classics of Russian literature. The singing and the orchestral music are indeed often stirring, but now that I have started to read the novel (in translation, of course), they have also made me cognizant of the fact that their total impact does not and cannot convey the story in all the narrative, emotive, and ironic complexity of Pushkin's masterpiece. Neither does, for that matter, the excellent 1999 British film version starring Ralph Fiennes in the title role. Thus, more often than not the watcher and listener in me will steer me to the reader which I continue to be.

#### **Postscript: May 14**

Yesterday I had the pleasure of taking in the Met's performance, again live-streamed in HD film, of Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. It was a magnificent achievement with gifted performers and sumptuous settings which captured perfectly the social and cultural ambiance of pre-World War I Vienna, very comedic, as one might expect, but also with an aspect of high seriousness, especially in the character of the Marshallin. Here I think opera was the perfect medium for accomplishing what it did; ordinary spoken drama could not have done it so well. With the role of Octavian performed by a woman the production was, I thought, a daring move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I felt actually this was almost unavoidable, although it surely would and could not have been done even a few decades ago. Octavian is a young man still in his teens: can his role be believably acted and sung by a middle-aged man, which is what the overwhelming majority of male opera performers are? I sent an e-mail to Terry about this what you might call “genderfuck”—the word is sometimes used by avant-garde, playful gay men—but he immediately set me 'straight' to the effect that the roles of young men are often and traditionally taken by (usually) mezzo-soprano singer-actresses; such a role is called a “hosenrolle.” In addition to her superb acting and singing, the woman who played Octavian's role was certainly perfect physically, in her thirties or early forties, I guess, but very youngish, not at all matronly looking, and

suitably boyish in military uniform. I must admit, though, that some of the interactions, especially the love-scenes, between Octavian and the Marshallin and later between Octavian and Sophie, whom Octavian falls in love with and eventually marries, had, in my eyes at least, a bit lesbian about them.

I will be on the lookout in the Met's 2017-18 programme for opera of the later twentieth century. I am truly interested how opera has fared since the Second World War, or even World War I. Thus far, I only know a few names. Has the genre evolved artistically? It surely must have. I have learned that the Canadian singer-composer Rufus Wainwright is working on an opera, which he should have completed by next year, on the love-relationship between the Roman emperor Hadrian and the young Antinous; this would be, I am certain, the first openly male-homoerotically themed opera in the history of western opera.