

# Introduction

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Opera has generally been regarded as an art of extravagance, dedicated to the melodramatic, the hyperbolic, the sentimental, a form of expression that prefers feeling to thought, sensation to reflection.<sup>1</sup> Given its interest in producing effects that are overdrawn and exaggerated – at times, even kitschy – opera would seem to stand at a substantial distance from the cool formalism we often associate with modernism. Admittedly, the idea that modernism is detached and abstracted – presided over by a God indifferently paring his fingernails – has been justifiably challenged in recent years. But even if we significantly qualify our notion of the modern, it takes a real leap of the imagination to place the cerebral experimentalism of Woolf, Joyce and Eliot alongside the baroque theatricality of opera. And yet, as the following pages demonstrate, opera has produced some of the most memorable and influential works of modernism. Indeed, one might argue that it is precisely because of opera's gestural extravagance that the innovations of its twentieth-century canon are so vividly on display, cast into bold relief by the anti-modernist tendencies of the operatic tradition.

We begin our examination of modernism and opera with Matthew Smith's essay on Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882). Such a point of entry will strike many as peculiar, since Wagner's elaborately plotted and costumed operas, along with those of Verdi, appear to be the very antithesis of the modern. Yet *Parsifal*, which premiered the same year Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were born, anticipates emerging developments in both twentieth-century psychology and aesthetics. Like most of Wagner's mature work, his musical drama was written under the influence of Schopenhauer and therefore focuses on the conflict between matter and spirit. But as the opera reaches toward a vision of transcendence, it begins to strain under its own weight, to splinter and break apart, becoming in the process a proto-modern work that dramatizes the increasingly problematic nature of both the self and representation. In this regard, it is worth noting that the period between the writing of the libretto (1877) and the premiere of the opera "coincides with the medicalization of hysteria" (11) brought about by Jean-Martin Charcot's researches at the Salpêtrière, attended by Sigmund Freud in the mid-1880s. The opera's principal female character, Kundry, is marked through her laughter as suffering from hysteria, a "disease" that was specifically associated with women. In Wagner's allegory, sublimation will be achieved – and the grail community made whole – only if Kundry is cast out and ultimately sacrificed. Related to the opera's interest in hysteria and selfhood is a "developing crisis of representation" (17) in the late nineteenth-century theatre that pointed in two directions – towards a Symbolism that subordinated matter to spirit, and towards a Naturalism that subordinated spirit to matter. Wagner's interest in creating an "invisible theatre" (burying the orchestra beneath the stage, extinguishing house-lighting, etc.) is related to his desire to transcend materiality. But as Smith observes, Kundry "haunts" (19) the opera, "not only as woman . . . but also as the specter of corporeal theatricality" (19). She represents not only a disruptive eroticism, which must be repressed and suppressed, but also an incipient modernism that keeps breaking out of Wagner's nineteenth-century costume drama, expressing itself in that most transgressive of all forms – laughter.

Of course, the most celebrated eruption of modernism into music occurred thirty-one years later with the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's ballet, *Le sacre du printemps* (1913). Around the same time, Arnold Schoenberg produced two revolutionary operas, *Erwartung* (1909) and *Die Glückliche Hand* (1913), compositions that transformed Wagnerian chromaticism into atonal Expressionism. The next two articles in this issue deal with Stravinsky and Schoenberg, but at slightly later periods in their careers when they had moved beyond Expressionism – to Neoclassicism in Stravinsky's case, and serialism in Schoenberg's. Daniel Albright's essay examines Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927) in relation to Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), a work that drew telling parallels between Greek tragedy and the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In Albright's view, Stravinsky's opera is about the subjugation of Dionysus by Apollo. Stravinsky accomplishes this subjugation through a kind of thanatography that extends the logic of death to the opera's words, music and drama. Hence, Stravinsky stages his opera in Latin, a language that is dead both in the sense that it represents a culture that has ceased to exist, and in the sense that it is no longer alive to the

modern auditor, who registers its sounds as so many semantic abstractions. At the same time, Stravinsky effectively kills off the opera's music by pastiching compositional devices from Gluck, Verdi and Handel, which are then assembled into the musical equivalent of a Dadaist collage. The result is to rob the music of its organic integrity, to turn it into a cultural echo chamber that produces acoustic specters. Finally, Stravinsky seriously undermines the drama of *Oedipus Rex*, giving us characters who address the audience rather than interacting with each other, framing his theatrical "waxworks" – as Stravinsky called it – with the interpolated monologues of a narrator, and breaking down the stage into smaller theatrical spaces that render the action as a kind of "Cubistic tessellation" (28). Albright concludes his essay by evoking one of the great theorists of modernism, Theodor Adorno, who championed Schoenberg at the expense of Stravinsky. While rejecting Adorno's negative assessment of Stravinsky, Albright nevertheless finds revealing a passage in which the philosopher writes that in Stravinsky the "I exalts the *Not-I*," taking off its "mask" to show "there is no face under it, only a knob" (31). Such an image, evoking the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, reminds Albright of a passage in which the composer, Ernst Krenek, compares Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* to the Surrealism of de Chirico. As Albright memorably remarks, for Krenek Surrealism is "entropy in visual plastic" (31). With *Oedipus Rex*, Stravinsky has given us the death-head of opera itself – killed off the grand operatic tradition, leaving us with nothing but a collection of moldering body parts.

If representation in Wagner has reached a breaking point and in Stravinsky has become an operatic mausoleum, in Schoenberg it turns philosophical and political. Richard Begam's article considers Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* (1932) as an extended response to the National Socialist discourse on *entartete Musik* or "degenerate music." The Nazis famously equated modernism with degeneracy, arguing that the breakdown in traditional representation was the result of a Jewish influence that would in turn lead to a breakdown in traditional values. As a matter of polemical provocation, Schoenberg accepts the Nazi equation of modernism with Judaism, but if the crisis in representation begins with Moses and the Second Commandment's prohibition against making images, Schoenberg argues that it extends to the very heart of German culture – the critique of *Vorstellung* or representation undertaken by Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. What is more, Schoenberg asserts that moral degeneracy results not from the rejection of mimesis but precisely from its opposite: the fetishistic and idolatrous worship of the image, as the episode of the Golden Calf demonstrates. The principal conflict of the opera centers around a debate between Moses and Aaron on the status of representation. Schoenberg does not, however, align himself with either of his title characters. Moses's commitment to abstraction is so uncompromising that it ultimately leads to the end of music, exemplified both by Moses's use of *Sprechstimme* and an unscored Third Act. On the other hand, while Aaron better understands the contingency of representation than his brother, Schoenberg is equally critical of Aaron's penchant for conjuring up striking images, for pursuing a mimesis that is dangerously incarnational. What Schoenberg seeks and his opera delivers is a compromise between Moses's rigorous abstractionism and Aaron's seductive pictorialism. In addition to engaging with the problem of representation, *Moses und Aron* establishes a counter-dialogue with Wagner, whose "Judaism and Music" (1850/69) provided the basis for the anti-Semitic polemic on Jews and degeneracy. Schoenberg responds by parodying a number of Wagner's best-known *Leitmotive* – instances of music at its most mimetic – identifying in the process such German ideals as Siegfried and the Rheinmaidens with violence and lust. In so doing, Schoenberg shows that it is representationalism rather than abstractionism that leads to degeneracy.

The next two articles in the issue shift our focus from the Continent in the 1920s and '30s to England in the 1950s. Allen Frantzen's essay examines Benjamin Britten's *Billy Budd* (1951) in relation to the Festival of Britain, treating the opera as an example of a more conservative "mid-century modernism" (57). The Festival was designed to affirm the idea of "modern Britain" by illustrating "the British contribution to civilisation, past, present and future" (57), but the final selection of operas included several by non-English composers, and even Britten's work – based on the Melville novella – does little to memorialize English culture. At the same time, the opera's homosexual theme "underlined a certain anxiety about social change" (57), illustrating a "mid-century modernism, which [is] transgressive in both tonality and text, yet subtle" (58). Frantzen analyzes in depth the changes Britten's librettists, E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier, made to the novella by Melville. The latter emphasizes the contradictions both between and within the characters of Billy and Claggart. Forster and Crozier, on the other hand, removed many of these contradictions in an effort to "disambiguate . . . an allegory that would redeem homosexual love" (63). While Forster in particular wished

to focus on Billy and Claggart, Britten preferred to situate Vere at the moral center of the opera, as the editing of the libretto reveals. Obviously English modernism was less extreme than its Continental counterpart, and Britten's opera offers an art that seeks to establish itself within English society and culture – and therefore avoids the shock-effects of Strauss, Stravinsky and Schoenberg – but that nevertheless makes clear, both in its music and text, that change is on its way.

Irene Morra carries forward Allen Frantzen's analysis by showing how the conflict between words and music that was contested in *Billy Budd* can be extended to almost all modern British opera. What is perhaps most distinctive about the British scene is the extent to which libretti were written by major writers, including such figures as E.M. Forster, W.H. Auden, Arnold Bennett, Robert Graves and Stephen Spender. Morra takes the composition of the avant-garde *Façade* (1922), on which William Walton and Edith Sitwell collaborated, as the starting point for what became an intermedial form of operatic composition, where text and music were inextricably linked with one another. Indeed, within British modernism some writers, such as Auden, turned to the creation of the operatic libretto because it enabled them to indulge in an "emotional extravagance" (74) that the formal austerities of modernism seemed to prohibit. In this sense, the debate between Moses's abstractionism and Aaron's pictorialism is replayed within British modernism, but in less floridly experimental ways. Interestingly, one of the factors that drove literature toward opera was the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), which "almost single-handedly rendered verse drama instantly regressive" (76). For writers like Auden, Montagu Slatter and Ronald Duncan, much of what had characterized verse drama before Osborne would also characterize the modernist libretto: "speculation and paradox" (76), an interest in myth and allegory, and the use of versification. Increasingly modernist writers came to view the libretto "as an alternative literary genre, one that would allow for the expression of literary ideals of musicality" (77). The final result was a turn toward intermediality, a phenomenon Forster himself had predicted in *Howards End* (1910), and which he attributed to that proto-modernist, Richard Wagner.

We end this issue with Herbert Lindenberger's article, which synthesizes many of the individual observations in the previous essays into a summational account of modern opera as a whole. Lindenberger regards the modern canon as "not quite opera" in its resistance to the theatricality of traditional opera, its forays into popular musical forms, and its use of imitation and parody to quote opera of the past. In his view, modern opera divides itself into two kinds: the "hard" and the "soft." Hard-modernist operas are typically regarded as "forbidding, inaccessible, unfriendly" (86), favor dissonant tonality (early Strauss), pastiche Neo-classicism (Stravinsky) or atonality and serialism (Berg, Schoenberg), and often exploit shocking subject matter that deals with sex and violence. Soft-modernist operas "utilize techniques, both literary and musical, that had been pioneered in hard-modernist opera but that turned out to be less radically new and also less likely to scandalize, whether on moral or musical grounds" (87). Notable among the practitioners of soft-modernism are later Strauss and Benjamin Britten. Lindenberger goes on to consider the question of postmodern opera, but he is less persuaded now than he was previously that this is a useful term, especially given the extent to which one can find so-called "postmodern" elements in "modernist" operas. Lindenberger concludes by considering the future of opera. In recent years an impressive array of new operas has been commissioned and played to enthusiastic audiences and favorable critical notices. Still, one must consider the possibility that opera as we know it will cease to exist – that, as Lindenberger puts it, "the opera house, like the symphony hall, [may be] destined to become a museum" (92).

What, finally, does the twentieth-century canon of operas tell us about modernism? Modernism is by its very nature a movement that defines itself oppositionally – in relation to what comes before it. In a real sense, the modern thrives on the antithetical, on its capacity to function as a negative dialectic. Perhaps nowhere is the antithetical character of modernism more evident than in the way it approached the highly alien genre of opera. But even more remarkable is the manner in which modernism remade opera in its own image, renewing what had become a largely antiquated form, breathing new life into old traditions, discovering fresh opportunities in a past that seemed increasingly obsolete.

## Notes

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1. See, for example, Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera : The Extravagant Art*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).