

Towards a Characterization of Modern Opera

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I Modernist opera?

The terms we use to periodize opera are not necessarily the terms we use to characterize other forms of music. 'Baroque opera,' a term that describes well over a century of works from Monteverdi through the early Gluck, belongs to the same category we apply to all the arts. But although the music of Mozart and Haydn is classified as belonging to the classical style, we do not readily speak of *Don Giovanni* or *Die Zauberflöte* as classical operas. Yet we *do* speak of romantic opera, but this is a relatively narrow term that suggests Weber and his successors up to early Wagner, and it is most often applied to German examples – yet how do we bring the Germans together with their contemporaries Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti? Better perhaps to keep the Italians to themselves and speak of the Age of *Bel Canto*, a period concept intrinsic to opera and not transferable to other music, let alone the other arts.

Modernist opera, however, is a concept that seems to have caught on, if only because the operas we speak of as 'modernist' emanate from composers whom we have already classified with this term. Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, the modernist composers of opera were not primarily 'opera composers.' Very few of the great nineteenth-century opera composers – the most notable exceptions being Beethoven, Berlioz, and Tchaikovsky – created significant oeuvres outside the opera house. By contrast, the twentieth-century composers left their mark in genres such as symphony, chamber music, and song. Even Janacek and Britten, prolific though they were in opera, were equally successful in other musical forms. Modernist opera, in short, is intrinsically a part of modernist music. And it is also, as we shall see, an extension of modernism in all the arts, for the terms we use to characterize modernism – for example, shock, fragmentation, difficulty, irony, anti-realism, among many others – are as applicable to modernist opera as to any of the arts.

To the extent that operatic modernism participates in modernism as such, for the sake of argument let us for now assign it the same general dates as the larger movement of which it is presumably a part. Thus it is dominant throughout the first half of the twentieth century, from *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) to *The Rake's Progress* (1951). At a later point I shall deal with the fortunes of operatic modernism during the second part of the century.

II Not-quite-opera

Much operatic modernism consists of approximations of opera rather than what audiences have customarily viewed as full-blown opera. Concepts of what constitutes an opera, of what is properly operatic, have of course changed over the centuries. But for most of this time audiences (not to speak of composers) retained no memory of earlier concepts, for what they heard in the opera house was the prevailing operatic style of their own time.

It was not until the later nineteenth century that a historical repertory was formed. As a result, audiences formed a concept of opera encompassing their experiences of works from Mozart to *verismo*. Whether in the *bel canto* or French *grand-opéra* mode, the Verdian or the Wagnerian, opera came to mean a good-sized orchestra (increasingly so across the century), a chorus, historical period costumes, voices encompassing a well-distributed number of ranges, and, just as important, an extravagant theatricality combined with a limited array of plots that, however much sex or violence they might contain, carefully remained within certain predictable moral limits.

Seen against this notion of opera, modernist opera does not seem to measure up. Take for example *Pelléas et Mélisande*: with its slowness of movement, its refusal to sing out, it displays an anti-theatricality, an anti-operaticity that still, after more than a century, jars many conventional opera-goers, who keep waiting for the music to open up. When *Mélisande* finally breaks into song in her tower scene, the work for a moment at

least seems to acknowledge its status as opera; yet if this same song had been embedded in any nineteenth-century opera, it would have been deemed distinctly operatic.¹

The refusal to sing out has manifested itself in some alternate modes of vocal expression. Schoenberg employed *Sprechstimme*, a mode hovering between speech and song, in the short opera *Die glückliche Hand* (1910-13) and in the song cycle *Pierrot lunaire* (1912). Or an opera can use a non-singing speaker like the Haushofmeister in the prologue to *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1916). Unlike the alternation of speech and song that comes to seem natural in the traditional *Singspiel* or in operetta, the Haushofmeister keeps interrupting the musical flow of Strauss's otherwise through-composed opera. And note how *The Rake's Progress* from beginning to end undercuts conventionally operatic poses. I happened to attend this opera at its first Viennese production soon after its Venice premiere – and without any preparation except for having heard some of Stravinsky's neoclassic ballet scores. Here, I thought, was a work that was more *about* opera than it was an opera in its own right. Anne Trulove's first-act aria, for instance, refused to give me the emotional satisfactions I was accustomed to demand of a soprano's grand solo piece. To be sure, I could see how the work's self-consciousness about opera had been anticipated in Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, but Strauss somehow had managed to have his cake and eat it too: he could parody operatic convention while also, in the heroine's big aria and in the final duet, letting his characters sing out with full operatic passion.

There are other ways that modernist works are "not-quite-opera." One way is to cultivate popular musical forms, as, say, *Mahagonny* (1930) and *Porgy and Bess* (1935) do, and thus to imply that the high-art status that had been granted opera in the late nineteenth century could no longer be upheld. It is as though the introduction of jazz or of instruments ordinarily associated with a world of night clubs returns opera to that earlier state in which, from the earliest Venetian operas in the 1630s until at least the mid-nineteenth century, a distinction between high- and low-brow music had not yet been instituted.

Or the exact theatrical status of certain modernist operas may be uncertain. Although *Moses und Aron* ended up firmly operatic, it started out as an oratorio and retains some oratorio-like characteristics. Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927) also hovers between opera and oratorio: part of Stravinsky's point was that the characters remain statuesquely static, whether they appear as operatically costumed figures or simply as soloists on the concert stage. If *Oedipus* is opera reduced to its bare essentials (which, with its succession of arias in a dead language interrupted by a speaking narrator, means it might no longer really be "opera"), what do we make of *Perséphone* (1934), whose heroine's words are spoken by an actress and intertwined with chorus and orchestra and tenor soloist, or how do we classify that much more minimal piece *L'Histoire du soldat* (1918)? In the latter there are no singers, only two actors, a dancer plus the narrator telling a tale that a small group of instrumental players (constricted by limitations imposed by the First World War) then enacts musically. Kurt Weill, in fact, singled out *L'Histoire*, standing as he put it "between play, pantomime and opera," as a model for the future of opera.² Shall we perhaps call this a 'quasi-opera'? Indeed, once we introduce a generic category such as quasi-opera, all manner of pieces might find their way into the canon of modernist opera, *Pierrot lunaire*, for instance, or the Edith Sitwell/William Walton *Façade* (1922), both of which stage what are essentially song cycles (or, rather, *Sprechstimme* cycles) in a costumed and histrionic manner.

This not-quite status cannot hide the fact that much modernist opera is obsessed with the operatic past and, in fact, with the musical past in general. For modernist opera displays a historical consciousness rarely to be found in earlier opera. Before the end of the nineteenth century, composers had begun to evoke earlier musical styles – for example, those reminders of eighteenth-century music inserted in Massenet's and Puccini's *Manon* operas and Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame*, as though to render musical cues pointing to the time and place in which these operas are set.

The imitation and, as often as not, overt parody of earlier forms is central to such modernist works as *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *The Rake's Progress*. The prologue that Strauss added several years after the premiere of the former work presents the hero and heroine of this opera in the proverbial guise of the vain prima donna and tenor. In the opera proper, Zerbinetta's aria self-consciously parodies early nineteenth-century coloratura arias. In view of the seemingly anti-operatic frame that Hofmannsthal and Strauss later created, even the more overtly operatic sections of *Ariadne* – above all, the heroine's aria "Es gibt ein Reich" and the final duet – raise an audience's suspicions of an ironic undercurrent beneath these ecstatic moments.

The prime example of operatic self-consciousness among modernist operas remains *The Rake's Progress*. From beginning to end the audience feels teased into identifying which elements of the operatic past are being reproduced, whether by overt parody, imitation, or whatever term we choose to describe Stravinsky's

appropriation of his predecessors. What early nineteenth-century Italian aria should Anne Trulove's first-act aria remind us of? Any particular one, or just what we might call the archetypal soprano aria of the period? And surely the card scene must be alluding to the cemetery scene in *Don Giovanni*. Stravinsky has written about attending a two-piano performance of *Così fan tutte* with his librettist Auden while working on the opera, adding, in fact, that "the *Rake* is deeply involved in *Così*."³ But the *Rake* is of course deeply involved in the whole history of opera.

Audiences adept at hearing modernist opera customarily have their historical antennae out for vestiges of the past. In the under-statedness of *Pelléas et Mélisande* they may hear at once the full-statedness of Wagnerian music-drama and the half-statedness of Wagner's final work, *Parsifal* (above all, its two outer "sacred" acts). And in *Salome*'s final scene, as has long been commented upon, we hear a rewrite, as it were, of Isolde's *Liebeshod*, with the perversity of kissing a severed head replacing the uncompromised transcendence that Wagner strove for. Listening to modernist operas, one is never surprised to find references to earlier opera, indeed to the history of music as a whole. In *Peter Grimes*, at one point, we hear what sounds like the Coronation Scene from *Boris Godounov* (1869), at another a group of women's voices intertwined like those in the final trio in *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911). Sometimes these references serve as a reminder that the operatic pretensions of an earlier time can no longer be sustained in the modern world, sometimes simply as a way of giving a new and unaccustomed twist to a memorable idea from the past. Whatever functions we may assign to these allusions, they also in a sense endow modernist opera with an operatic aura to compensate for its "not-quite" status.

III Modernism, Hard and Soft

Let's define a "hard" modernist opera as one that audiences, at least its early ones, find forbidding, inaccessible, unfriendly to those who want to enjoy themselves listening to hummable tunes. Or even if it should offer such melodies, a modernist opera may be hard to take because it seeks to provoke its audience, often, in fact, to scandalize it.

Given this definition, it is not difficult to list a canon of hard-modernist operas. Most any non-tonal opera would qualify. This canon would also include tonal operas strong on dissonance, most notably Strauss's *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909). And it would include as well operas that sharply undercut their audiences' notions of what an opera should be, like many of the not-quite-operas discussed in the preceding section: for example, Hindemith's *Cardillac* (1926), with its rigorous, seemingly unemotional baroque musical forms accompanying the unrelenting violence of the dramatic action; or, exactly contemporary with this opera, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, with its static, larger-than-life characters, or the two Virgil Thomson/Gertrude Stein operas, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), whose music sets words with a minimum of referential content and whose plots, by any conventional narrative standards, seem to go nowhere.

The hard-modernist canon is conspicuously marked by a number of works that evoked outrage from segments of their early audiences or from political authorities in the locales in which they were performed. Strauss's *Salome* set a pattern that was repeated in one form or another in subsequent years. The original Wilde play was sufficiently blasphemous to prevent its realization on the British stage – but the less stringent moral standards in many German cities made possible a famous production by Max Reinhardt that Strauss witnessed, after which he quickly got to work on his operatic version. The premiere was marked by strong responses from varying groups: the avant-garde-friendly young, including Arnold Schoenberg, hailed *Salome* for its musical progressiveness; Strauss's German-Jewish supporters showed approval of his portrayal of the five Jews, whose musical discourse clearly satirized Eastern European Jews, whom they saw as their cultural inferiors; and of course there was ample room for the shock of ordinary opera-goers, who found the whole project sensational enough to flock in numbers that enabled the composer, as he liked to put it, to buy his famed villa in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.⁴

The financial success of the opera was certainly not diminished by the fact that it was prohibited in Vienna, where even Mahler, then still director of the Vienna Opera, could not get it performed in his own house. *Salome*'s fortunes at the Metropolitan Opera two years after its 1905 premiere illustrate the extra-musical considerations affecting many hard-modernist works. The soprano assigned the title role, the great Olive Fremstad, was publicized going to the New York City morgue to find out for herself what the head of a

dead man likely weighed. The Met's boxholders were so shocked after the first performance that the opera was immediately withdrawn – not to be performed in the house again for several decades, though its later rival company, the Manhattan Opera, mounted a *Salome* within a couple of years.

In hard-modernist opera the moral element can never be fully separated from the musical. Had *Erwartung* (1909; performed 1924) and *Lulu* (1935; performed partially 1937, complete 1979) been heard widely soon after their composition, one wonders what strong reactions might have manifested themselves and what form their audiences' reaction might have assumed. The controversy surrounding *Mahagonny* at its Leipzig premiere in 1930 was more moral than musical in nature, for the opera set off demonstrations by Nazis to the point that a number of productions scheduled in other German opera houses were canceled.

Of course the most celebrated scandal surrounding a modernist musical work was not concerned with an opera at all, but the rioting occasioned by the opening of *Le Sacre du printemps* in Paris in 1913. Yet this work's distance from opera is not that great, for the audience was reacting not only to the radicality of Stravinsky's musical style but at least as much to the boldness with which the music's primitivism was realized visually in the ballet's choreography. The sense of shock central to hard modernism, whether the medium is painting, poetry, or concert music, becomes all the more acute when spectators are gathered together to be bombarded both by the sounds and sights that surround them.

Or rather *were* gathered together, for shock wears off over time. *Salome* and *Elektra* can never exercise the same bite that their first audiences experienced. The usual way to return an opera such as *Salome* to its hard-modernist roots is by way of innovations in its stage production, providing, say, a head of John the Baptist still visibly bleeding or, as has been the usual formula, encouraging the heroine to shock audiences by way of her body. When I was a student in Vienna during the early 1950s, local rumor had it that the reigning *Salome*, Ljuba Welitsch, customarily ended her dance by baring her private parts to her various Herods at stage right (though decidedly not to the audience). Well before the end of the twentieth century it had become *de rigueur* (at least for those sopranos with sufficiently trim bodies) to denude themselves frontwise, if ever so briefly.

Although the effects of most hard-modernist operas have softened with the years, not so the four Schoenberg operas, all but one of which remained unproduced until many years after their composition. *Erwartung*, composed virtually a century ago, for me at least remains powerfully disconcerting after repeated hearings. By contrast, many Neoclassical operas that once proved formidable have acclimated themselves well. Although *The Rake's Progress*, as I indicated earlier, at first struck me as a bit academic in its examination of operatic conventions, many subsequent hearings and viewings have transformed this work for me – to the point that at certain moments, for example, Anne's deeply moving lullaby to the demented Tom, I experience an expressiveness of the sort one does not readily associate with Stravinsky.

One can also speak of a tradition of works that count as soft-modernist from the start. I refer to the many operas that 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. Let me insist at this point that I do not intend 'hard' and 'soft' as value judgments of particular works; rather, I use these terms to describe a phenomenon peculiar to modernism within the arts, namely, the fact that modernist art at certain moments assumed extreme positions to a degree scarcely discernible in earlier periods. These positions could not be sustained over long stretches of time: a musical dissonance can disturb for only so long until we absorb it, and a dramatic situation loses its power to disorient or to outrage in something of the same way.

Strauss's operatic career provides perhaps the most obvious instance of a composer's transition from hard to soft modernist. Whereas *Salome* and *Elektra* set a model for how radical modernist opera can be, his notorious shifting of compositional gears to the more easily digestible operas that followed *Elektra* – a retreat for which Schoenberg and the musical avant-garde never forgave him – did not actually represent an abandonment of modernism. *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* could not have been composed a decade or two before. Each is innovative, both musically and dramatically, in its own way – as, for instance, in the bitonal moments in *Rosenkavalier* or in the theatrical self-consciousness of *Ariadne*.

Yet the later Strauss operas display a certain musical timidity when viewed next to *Salome* and *Elektra*, not to speak of the works of Schoenberg and his school. Nor do they scandalize. The opening scene of *Der Rosenkavalier* showing the Marschallin and Oktavian in bed was little more than a tease compared to the final scene of *Salome*. Even the ekphrasis of an orgasm in the prelude to this opera remained discrete, for only in retrospect, after the curtain rises, would the viewer be aware of what Strauss was describing. Compare this

ekphrasis to the one in Shostakovich's brashly hard-modernist *Lady Macbeth of Mzensk* (1934), in which the orchestra tells us in no uncertain terms what is going on between the lovers onstage (though in some productions they retreat briefly to an alcove or neighboring room during this graphic musical interlude). Whether or not it was this particular scene that set off Stalin's ire when he attended a performance two years after the premiere, the official response to *Lady Macbeth* may well constitute the most devastating operatic scandal of the last century, if only because it discouraged Shostakovich from continuing his career as an opera composer.

Again, let me emphasize that my categories of 'hard' and 'soft' are independent of my judgment of a work's greatness. To me at least *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919) are just as important as the two operas that preceded them. Similarly, Benjamin Britten's operas, great though some like *Peter Grimes* (1945) and *Billy Budd* (1951) may be, belong to the soft-modernist category, for they live off certain modernist techniques developed earlier in the century. Nor did they scandalize in their time despite the homosexual themes that run discretely through many of them; *Death in Venice* (1975), which treats this matter overtly, dates from the mid-1970s, by which time the staging of these themes had become publicly acceptable. Yet at least one Britten opera, the relatively little known chamber opera *Curlew River* (1964), through its inventive instrumentation, its design for performance in church rather than in the opera house, and its mixture of Japanese Noh dramatic convention and Western medieval musical style, shows the distinct markings of a hard-modernist experiment.

If Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1947), in its surrealist madness and with its plethora of popular song types, is clearly hard-modernist, the later, more musically tame and ideologically pious *Les Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957) belongs to the soft-modernist genre. Janacek, with his insistent melodic repetitions and transformation of Czech speech rhythms into musical phrases, achieved a compactness and dramatic intensity that, from *Jenufa* (1904) onwards, was hard-modernist to the core.

Yet what does one make of those twentieth-century composers who steadfastly refused the summons to make themselves into modernists? In the midst of writing this paper, I read of the death, at 95, of Gian-Carlo Menotti, who, with a keen sense for theatrical effect, was able during the 1940s and 50s to give a certain musical pleasure to consumers intent on nothing more challenging than the early Puccini operas they loved. Menotti does not deserve the label "modernist" (even soft), a category he obviously shunned.

There is one great early twentieth-century opera that not only avoids any discernibly modernist musical style but actually allegorizes the dilemma of a composer who refuses to be caught up on the modernist bandwagon. I refer of course to Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina* (1917), whose hero insists on retaining the older polyphonic style against both the Counter-Reformation's demand for a simpler, more communicable style and the Florentine theorists advocating monody. *Palestrina* is in a late nineteenth-century idiom, Wagnerian in a sense but largely diatonic and in a voice distinctly Pfitzner's own. In the perversity and intransigence with which it defies the new aesthetic, *Palestrina* surely deserves the label 'honorary modernist.'

IV Modernist Opera in Historical Perspective

Now that modernism is receding into the past, how does modernist opera look different to us from opera in earlier periods, and how innovative is it compared to other modernist music and other modernist art forms? I have already shown how modernist operas often seem diminished, sometimes distinctly unoperatic in relation to opera of the preceding century. And I have also indicated that certain key works created their modernist identity by provoking their audiences with new musical techniques and with controversial moral and political stances, often both at once.

I start with a factual observation: the major modernist composers have been conspicuously unproductive compared with their forebears. Whereas Handel and Rossini each composed around forty operas, Vivaldi supposedly a hundred (of which only a small percentage is extant), and Verdi close to thirty, the most productive modernists – Strauss, Prokofiev, Janacek, Britten – put out at best between half a dozen to a little over a dozen works. The two most celebrated modernist composers, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, each produced a single full-length opera (one not even completed) plus a few short operas. If Wagner, with the mere ten operas that comprise his mature canon, proved less productive than his contemporaries, this also indicates that his characteristic approach to operatic composition – the long gestation periods, the delays

between composition and eventual production, the new styles he devised from one opera to the next; the difficulties he created for his audiences – helped set up a model that later modernist composers could develop.

The decline in opera productivity can be attributed in one sense to the difficulties composers found making a living from opera – Strauss's commercial success, even with his most 'difficult' operas, being a notable exception. Throughout most of operatic history, the major European cities possessed institutions – most often government-subsidized, though sometimes capitalist ventures as in seventeenth-century Venice – that offered composers and librettists (not to speak of singers, instrumentalists, and designers) a regular outlet to display their talents and make a living. And of course the public remained eager for new operas and rarely expected revivals of older ones. Each country of course differed in the way the opera industry, to use the term John Rosselli employed to describe the Italian system of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was organized.⁵ In nineteenth-century France, for example, the goal of any ambitious composer was to be produced at the Paris Opéra. The industry that Rosselli depicted was succeeded in the later nineteenth century in Italy by a system in which the music publishers, most notably Ricordi, brought together composer and librettist and arranged productions of new operas at the major theaters. As long as new works were in vogue, the public could count on some way of getting them created and performed.

But by the start of the modernist period older operas within the repertory had become the norm, and the demand for new ones, especially if they proved difficult at first hearing, was decreasing. Yet in Germany, at least, the presence of state-supported opera houses in cities large and small provided a venue for new work, even of a forbidding character. Such challenging operas as Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) and Schoenberg's *Von Heute auf Morgen* (1930) premiered in major houses, but, as with most hard-modernist operas, there were few subsequent performances; the former did not gain a real public until the 1950s, and the latter has never had much of a performance history. The Janacek operas were generally premiered in the provincial house in the composer's home town of Brno and did not even reach Prague, let alone the rest of Europe, until a good bit later. Britten's early operas were able to get produced by being attached to festivals – and eventually of course the composer created his own festival in Aldeburgh to help facilitate performances of his own works.

But the relative slowness of modernist composers in producing operas can be attributed not simply to economic conditions but also to the fact that the modernist aesthetic in all the arts demands that artists create their own styles independent of one another. However distinct the styles of, say, the so-called *bel canto* composers were, they each possessed a set of period conventions – for example, the shape of an aria, the distribution of arias and choruses – to fall back upon. Modernist composers, like modernist poets and painters, have to a great degree been forced to set up their own conventions (if we can even usefully employ the word *convention* in this period). Ezra Pound's celebrated command to his fellow poets, "Make it new," stands as a tag applicable to modernism in general – and of course Pound even tried his hand (twice!) at composing modernist opera. Moreover, many modernists have felt it incumbent upon themselves to recreate their styles, sometimes several times over, in the course of their careers. Stravinsky's *Nightingale* (1914, and itself straddling two distinct stages in the composer's career) is worlds apart from *The Rake's Progress*, Prokofiev's *Love of Three Oranges* (1921) from *The Gambler* (1929), and the latter just as far removed from *War and Peace* (1946). Yet the Janacek operas, by contrast, are all of a piece.

It is characteristic of modernist opera that, both because of its small public and the difficulty of preparing adequate performances, there is often a time lag between their completion and first staging. *Pelléas et Mélisande* waited some seven years (although Debussy put off finishing the full orchestral score until he was assured of a production); *Wozzeck* waited three years; Prokofiev's *Fiery Angel* waited virtually thirty years, during which time several proposed productions failed to materialize. By contrast the ink on the scores of some of the most famous operas of past centuries was scarcely dry by the time their first curtains went up.

Since modernist opera shares what one might call an aesthetic of difficulty with the other modernist arts, one might ask at what point its avant-garde breakthroughs came about in comparison with these other arts. The most radical development in twentieth-century music – at least from the point of view of a long-resisting public – remains Schoenberg's break with tonality in 1908 – specifically with the third movement of his Second String Quartet. This was one year after Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, generally considered the start of cubism; and it is three years after the Fauve experiments with color. More relevant to Schoenberg's own milieu is the development of Expressionist painting, both the composer's own paintings and those of his friend Kandinsky. Schoenberg ultimately chose not to pursue painting, and his work never became abstract as Kandinsky's did. But Kandinsky's series entitled *Compositions* did not fully give up representational elements until *Composition VII*, which dates from 1913.

Within German poetry, the first radical experiments with language were those of August Stramm and, more successfully, of Georg Trakl. These took place several years after Schoenberg's break with tonality. Trakl's first linguistically distorted poems, which date from late 1912, resulted from the poet's reading a German translation of Rimbaud, whose own experiments in *Illuminations* of 1872 can count today as the earliest examples of modernism in literature from a stylistic point of view.⁶ Mallarmé's own experiments with poetic form followed soon after, but I know of no poetry in the other European languages before the second decade of the twentieth century that played with language as radically as Trakl's did. And at very much the same time as Schoenberg's break with tonality, Gertrude Stein was rethinking the language and structure of narrative in *The Making of Americans* (1906-11; not published until 1925).

The abandonment of tonality affected operatic composition in a particular way. Without a system for organizing a composition, Schoenberg felt forced to write relatively short pieces. But setting texts gave him a crutch, as it were, to sustain a piece. Schoenberg's two short operas, *Erwartung* and *Die glückliche Hand*, were considerably longer, by dint of their being based on texts, than his individual instrumental writings of the early atonal period, for example, the Opus 11 piano pieces (1909) and the *Five Pieces for Orchestra* (1909). Similarly, Berg's full-length *Wozzeck*, sustained as it was by the play on which it was based, allowed him to create a structure much vaster than his instrumental works. By the early 1920s, of course, Schoenberg had evolved his twelve-tone system, which encouraged him and Berg (though distinctly not Webern, who remained committed to the short piece) to undertake longer instrumental pieces.

If Schoenberg's two early operas stand at the forefront of modernist experimentation during the first years of the twentieth century, several operas composed nearly two decades later are key representatives of that phase of modernism within the arts that we call the classicism, or neoclassicism, of the 1920s. I refer to works such as Busoni's *Doktor Faust* (1925), Hindemith's *Cardillac*, and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. What holds these operas together is a disdain for Wagnerian music-drama, indeed, for the whole romantic tradition. All use elements drawn from baroque style as a means of foregrounding artifice over overt expressiveness. And each is organized as a number opera in contrast to the unencumbered flow of music drama; indeed, much of the energy exerted by these number operas derives from their self-conscious defiance of the Wagnerian tradition.

Just as Schoenberg's early operas share the radical distortions of traditional forms with the paintings and poetry of their time, so the Neoclassical operas of the 1920s find their parallels in, say, Picasso's Neoclassical paintings of the early 1920s or in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), each of whose episodes, drawn as they are from the *Odyssey*, cultivates a distinctly different literary style. Or one might also cite T.S. Eliot, whose anti-romantic fervor manifested itself in an anti-subjective theory and practice of poetry together with proclamations of his allegiance to classicism. Even *Wozzeck*, despite its standing as a music drama, manifests its own form of classicism through the fact that each of its short scenes is modeled after a traditional musical form.

V Postmodernist Opera, Perhaps?

I took a stab at defining postmodern opera twenty years ago when assigned a berth in a collection called "Post-Modern Genres," mine being the only piece that did opera.⁷ The term *postmodern* was much in the air at that time, and critics representing the various art forms were intent on locating the particular traits that separated postmodern from modernist within these forms. In architecture one could point to the echoing of various past styles (often several styles in a single building) in, say, Michael Graves or the later Philip Johnson, who practiced a mode of artifice contrasting sharply with the clean lines of the modernist International Style. Or in painting there was that move from the subjectivity associated with Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism to such anti-subjective, often also anti-elite-art postmodernist movements as Pop, Op, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art.

But what could I do with postmodernist opera? Opera, I quickly realized, is a relatively conservative form, and despite the powerful hard-modernist breakthroughs in the early part of the twentieth century, there was little comparable in opera during the latter part of the century. I spent a good bit of my essay comparing the art museum and the opera house and trying to account for the greater welcome that greeted daringly new

forms in the former. To be sure, I came up with a few operatic examples, most notably John Adams's *Nixon in China* (1987), which sent some controversial recent political figures to the operatic stage singing against pulsating minimalist rhythms; or the Robert Wilson/Philip Glass *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), which stretched the limits of opera through its use of electronic media and its absence of individual singing voices. My primary example of a postmodern approach to opera was not the creation of new works but rather the recreation of familiar old operas by iconoclastic directors who challenged a conservative opera public by giving these works unexpected settings and often a new social message to boot.

When I adapted this essay for a collection of my own essays in 1990, I was able to add a few examples not available three years before – for instance, Peter Sellars's resettings of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas in improbable contemporary American settings; or John Cage's *Europerras 1 & 2* (1987), whose aleatory method and improvisational contributions by its singers accord easily with what counts as postmodern in other arts (as they well should since Cage helped institute these procedures in mid-century).⁸

Yet in the intervening years I began to wonder how useful the term *postmodern* is in describing opera. For one thing, as Daniel Albright has shown in his searching study of operatic and other theatrical experiments of the 1920s and 30s, many elements I took to be postmodern had been anticipated decades before.⁹ Moreover, the most radical pieces I described in my essay have not been developed much further at this point. After their Frankfurt run, Cage's various versions of *Europerras* have been performed – and in diminished form – only under the aegis of Cage and his disciples. Glass's operatic career after *Einstein on the Beach* has moved in a more conventional direction – notable for the nearly two dozen operas (a productivity more typical of nineteenth-century composers) that, unlike *Einstein*, use real singers and could best be classified as soft-modernist works. Steve Reich's *The Cave* (1993), with its electronic sounds and taped spoken voices, scarcely lends itself to presentation in the opera house. What would easily count as postmodern demands a different kind of performance space – and one not dependent on subscribers intent on hearing operatic voices and symphonic orchestras. Generically, postmodern opera, like many postmodern artifacts within that larger realm we call the arts, belongs to that classification 'mixed media' used by museums to designate items not confined to such traditional materials as oil, graphite, or charcoal.

VI Operatic Modernism in Retrospect

If we place such works as *Einstein*, the *Europerras*, and *The Cave* in a category related to but also different from opera, a late twentieth-century form, say, of "not-quite-opera," it is possible to look back at the last century as a period of continuing modernism that achieves much of its identity through its dialogue with nineteenth-century opera. Consider the nature of nineteenth-century opera: from Rossini through Verdi, from Meyerbeer through Massenet, from Weber through Wagner, whatever the differences in national styles, here was a period that distinguished itself from the preceding two centuries of opera in certain conspicuous ways. For one thing, opera at the start of the nineteenth century became considerably louder than it had ever been before – with larger, more full-bodied voices, an increasingly larger orchestra, more massive choral forces, and above all a largeness of conception encapsulated in the French term *grand opéra*. Most significant nineteenth-century opera remained in the tragic mode; after Rossini, comic opera, which had flourished during the eighteenth century, became increasingly rare. Indeed, as we now look back at four centuries of opera, nineteenth-century opera stands out above all for its grandeur and its solemnity.

In its dialogue with its nineteenth-century predecessor, modernist opera plays upon some crucial similarities and differences. When it goes loud, as in *Salome* and *Elektra*, it does so with a violence and a perversity unheard of earlier. When it goes florid, as in *Cardillac* and *Oedipus Rex*, it eschews earlier notions of vocal beauty to produce sounds that seem deliberately strained, even grotesque. When it seeks tragic effect, as in *Wozzeck* and *Katya Kabanova*, it does so with a concision and an unbearable intensity rarely equaled earlier. When it undertakes what seems a traditional operatic plot, as in *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Doktor Faust*, it does so with understatement or irony.

Impressive as the canon of modernist opera looks today, it is a fact that few, if any, hard-modernist works are performed with the frequency (or are embraced as heartily by the opera-house audience) that marks some twenty or more operas of the preceding century as well as the Mozart operas. Perhaps only *Salome* comes close. Among what I have called soft-modernist operas, only *Der Rosenkavalier* belongs in this category.

Much though one may admire and also love *Mahagonny*, *Lulu*, and *The Rake's Progress*, nobody expects crowds to flock their way the way they do to *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Rigoletto*, and *Carmen*.

The relative lack of opera-fan enthusiasm for modernist opera has by no means deterred the composition of new operas. Most twentieth-century composers of stature have produced at least one opera, even Steve Reich, who has advertised his dislike of operatic voices (to the point that he created *The Cave* out of a combination of speech and “non-vibrato” voices). During the first half of the twentieth century a goodly proportion of new operas – for example, Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini* (1914) or Braunfels's *Die Vögel* (1920), not to speak of those Puccini operas composed during the new century – could not be called modernist so much as derivations of late nineteenth-century opera. This was also the period that witnessed the significant hard-modernist operas, very few of which, though notably that uncompromisingly austere work, Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* (1983), date from the later part of the century.

Yet composers and impresarios have remained endlessly optimistic about producing new operas in full knowledge of the resistance audiences feel toward unfamiliar works. Still, the past couple of decades have witnessed a resurgence of operatic commissions by major companies. The formula for success usually includes these elements: famous singers to attract an audience; a director to give the work theatrical flair; music drawing on one or more earlier modernist styles; and, more often than not, a plot deriving from some well-known book, play, or film familiar to the audience. To cite several American examples, note such operas as the following: André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (drawn from the play and movie), San Francisco Opera, 1998; John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* (drawn from the novel), Metropolitan Opera, 1999; Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* (drawn from a book and a movie), San Francisco Opera, 2000; William Bolcom's *A View from the Bridge* (drawn from the play), Chicago Lyric Opera, 1999; and *A Wedding* (drawn from a Robert Altman movie), Chicago Lyric Opera, 2004. All of these were reasonably accessible, classically soft-modernist works, and all gained a goodly amount of national attention. Most have gone on to productions at other opera houses – but of course it is too early to tell whether any of these works has the staying power to attract audiences over the years. (This of course was hardly an issue during earlier centuries when nobody expected an opera to survive for longer than the season for which it was prepared.)

I end this retrospect with a prospect – or rather a set of questions about the operatic future. Might we be entering a new era of opera different from modernism – without its shock effects, whether moral or musical? Is it conceivable that any of the acknowledged high points of modernist opera – for example, *Oedipus Rex*, *Wozzeck*, *Mahagonny* – may at some point gain a following comparable to that of the nineteenth-century war-horses? Or is the opera house, like the symphony hall, destined to become largely a museum for pre-modernist and perhaps also classical modernist works, with the more controversial operas relegated to special performance places, like those museums devoted to the most contemporary art? Will operatic composers meld Western and non-Western forms of music, like the recent Tan Dun *First Emperor* (Metropolitan Opera, 2006), which not only adds some Chinese instruments to the orchestra but also makes vocal music out of Chinese speech inflections? Will works such as *Einstein on the Beach* and *The Cave*, with their absence of operatic voices, provide models for mixed-genre events that call themselves something the like of ‘performance pieces’ or ‘musical entertainments’? As the population that grew up on rock becomes dominant in our society, could the venues developed for popular music provide an institutional framework for these forms? Might the older repertory languish for want of interest and, consequently, funds? Might opera as we have known it these past four centuries finally lose its identity?

Notes

¹ For a detailed study of anti-theatricality in *Pelléas et Mélisande* and three other operas, see my essay “Anti-theatricality in Twentieth-Century Opera,” *Modern Drama*, 44 (2001): 300-17.

² Kurt Weill, “Die neue Oper,” in *Musik und musikalisches Theater: gesammelte Schriften mit einer Auswahl von Gesprächen und Interviews*, new and rev. ed., ed. Stephen Hinton and Jürgen Schebera (Mainz: Schott, 2000), 44.

³ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 158.

⁴ See Sander L. Gilman, "Strauss and the Pervert," in *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Gross and Roger Parker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 306-27.

⁵ John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁶ For a detailed discussion of how Trakl turned Rimbaud's breakthrough into a new way of conceiving poetry in German, see my chapter "The Discovery of a Style" in *Georg Trakl* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 58-80.

⁷ Herbert Lindenberger, "From Opera to Postmodernity: On Genre, Style, Institutions," *Genre*, 20 (1987): 259-84.

⁸ Herbert Lindenberger, *The History in Literature: On Value, Genre, Institutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 163-88. For a detailed discussion of *Europas 1 & 2* and their significance within the history of opera, see Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera in History: From Monteverdi to Cage* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 240-64.

⁹ Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).