

‘Muddying the Wells’: Modernist Literary Instincts and the Operatic Ideal

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I

Dear Sir,

I have read with interest and approval your article on *An Opera of Good and Evil* in this morning’s *Times*, but wish you could have managed to squeeze in a reference to Eric Crozier and myself. We did the libretto. We worked on it in Britten’s house for several weeks. We might reasonably be credited with having helped to interpret his intentions and his conception of Melville’s intentions.¹

In his letter, E. M. Forster makes a relatively unusual claim for the role of the librettist. Traditionally, the librettist has been figured as a word-smith, subservient to the controlling genius of the composer. Forster, however, makes a claim of interpretative authorship that contests traditional assumptions about the role of music and text, composer and librettist in the construction of opera. Intriguingly, this challenge is not unique to Forster. The twentieth century saw the concerted involvement of recognized British writers in the formation of musical aesthetics and in the writing of opera libretti. Modernist novelists, poets, and dramatists included W. H. Auden, Arnold Bennett, Ronald Duncan, Robert Graves, Stephen Spender, and Montagu Slater; such contemporary writers as Edward Bond, Martin Crimp, and Paul Muldoon now continue this tradition.

The literary involvement in British opera has made the libretto a particularly fruitful site for critical enquiry. The prominent modern operas of composers Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett developed an aesthetic that ensured the unprecedented influence of the literary ‘voice’ – that of the libretto, the source, and the librettist himself. This development invites some consideration of the extent to which the libretto can be considered as a genre in its own right. It also prompts an investigation into the aesthetic motivations of prominent modernist writers. What artistic enterprise did these writers perceive in an art form that traditionally values the expressivity of music over the ‘functional’ libretto text?

II

Britain only saw its operatic tradition declare itself in the twentieth century, with the apparent ‘rise of British opera’ under Benjamin Britten. Emerging from a nation prominently conscious of its literary heritage, modern British opera was preconditioned to a recognition of literary value. As such, it was particularly open to the influence of literary values in the formulation of its emerging modern aesthetic. Such recognition was also encouraged by developments in Europe, which saw composers such as Strauss, Poulenc, and Stravinsky collaborating with well-known contemporary literary figures, and devoting themselves to self-conscious dramatic experimentation.

In 1934, bemoaning the current condition of English music, the critic and composer Constant Lambert advocated a new musical tradition. This tradition would acknowledge and celebrate developments in contemporary fiction and poetry: “It is typical of the hiatus that exists between music and the other arts today that in England, the country where poetry and music have, in the past, been almost indissolubly linked, there are no musical settings of the more important poems of our time.”² Although “there are magnificent settings of early Yeats . . . there are none of later Yeats, let alone of poets more closely in touch with the

contemporary *Zeitgeist*" (206). Lambert articulates the central aim of what soon came to be defined as Britain's 'musical renaissance': to manifest the modernist profundity perceived as already existing in contemporary literature and drama. This aim could only be achieved with a closer interaction between music and contemporary literary enterprise.

Lambert's aim was endorsed and encouraged as much by contemporary literary figures as it was by composers. Many prominent composers of the early twentieth century tended to set poetry from earlier centuries, in so doing implicitly constructing a literary canon that was conservative and nostalgic. Music was misrepresenting 'relevant' literature as much as it was ignoring contemporary musical developments. It is no surprise, then, that self-consciously modernist composers were supported by contemporary writers in their efforts. Michael Tippett, himself the author of an anti-war play (*War Ramp*), corresponded with T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry on the merits of his libretti. Peter Warlock/Heseltine was a member of D. H. Lawrence's circle, and Britten fraternized with such writers as Christopher Isherwood, Auden, Spender, William Plomer, and Forster. This interaction was the product of a common goal: to produce vital art relevant to a contemporary society, primarily by ensuring that music reflected the thematic (if not stylistic) developments in contemporary literary practice.

These aims arguably first manifested themselves creatively in William Walton's *Façade* (1922), received as the first harbinger of a 'new' British music. The work's "scandalous" reception upon performance ensured its subsequent influence and the celebration of Walton as "England's White Hope."³ Significantly, though, *Façade*'s modernity derived as much from its literary approach as from its music. The work was the product of close collaboration between Walton and the poet Edith Sitwell. Dedicated to Lambert, the 'entertainment' consisted of twenty-one poems (recited through a megaphone), all of which referred to literary constructions of Englishness in essentially nonsensical verse. These poems acknowledged the tendency of English recital music to set primarily canonical verse that celebrated pastoral England and the classical beauty of its 'folk' culture. The verse of *Façade* rendered these tropes essentially ridiculous:

In the early spring-time, after their tea,
Through the young fields of the springing Bohea,
Jemima, Jocasta, Dinah, and Deb
Walked with their father Sir Joshua Jebb –
An admiral red, whose only notion
(A butterfly poised on a pigtailed ocean)
Is of the peruked sea whose swell
Breaks on the flowerless rocks of Hell.

Sitwell's text implicitly debunked conventional assumptions that informed the appreciation of 'serious' English recital music. Walton's score similarly attacked these assumptions by declaring an overt indebtedness to modern Continental influences, all the while setting such national folk styles as a 'Hornpipe' and a 'Fox-Trot.' The work exposed the anachronistic relationship between contemporary English musical practice and 'the modern.' In its juxtaposition of music and verse, it signalled a direct challenge to conventional ideas of 'worthy' English art.

Façade was significant not for establishing a new musical idiom, then, but for effectively attacking the literary, aesthetic, and social assumptions that informed contemporary expectations of music and musical performance. In many ways, the effect was similar to that of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, which in 1728 had attacked (and, some argue, ended) the dominance of Italian opera on the London stage, but had done little to establish a new operatic style. After *Façade*, Walton tended to be stylistically consistent within his own musical idiom, a consistency that subjected him to criticism from those hoping for innovative parallels with the development of such composers as Stravinsky or Schoenberg. Deeming Walton "fundamentally conservative," one critic concluded that "on the strength of *Façade* and the artistic environment it implied, Walton had been "too hastily classed with an *avant garde* that was, if not wholly mythical, altogether alien" to his own nature.⁴ What such critics fail to note, however, is that the 'newness' of *Façade* lies primarily in its unabashed musical celebration of avant-garde verse. *Façade* redefined the relationship between text and music by associating music with a contemporary literary culture. The music served an experimentalist function primarily in its interaction with Sitwell's text. It was the literary aspect of the project that ensured its perceived radicalism.

This literary importance came to define subsequent valuations of relevance in contemporary music. Discussions of Walton's later opera *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, say much about the unspoken assumptions about musical modernity that Walton himself helped to define in *Façade*. The work has been criticized for its apparent conservatism; it is so "frankly Romantic in tone"⁵ that the composer comes across as deploying "second-hand mastery."⁶ Although critics discuss *Troilus and Cressida* in terms of the allusiveness of its music, their objections are directed less at the work's musical formalism than they are at its approach towards its narrative subject. The music that surrounds the lovers "largely rehearses familiar romantic gestures which belong to another century, to other composers, to another operatic world."⁷ For Mitchell, a romantic relationship such as that between Troilus and Cressida belongs to a past century, and therefore cannot be translated into a contemporary musical idiom. Any attempt to write an opera "which in its plot combines a formal crisis of statecraft with a formal crisis of sex" in "an unquestioning, non-ironic, romantic musical idiom is almost bound to fail today."⁸

Despite articulating their criticism as musical analysis, the chief detractors of *Troilus and Cressida* ultimately find fault in the work's unproblematized, conventional celebration of heterosexual romance. Britten, Walton's acclaimed successor as the 'modernizing' voice of British music, is credited with having initiated the 'rebirth' of British opera. The aesthetic of this opera became defined less by a particular musical style or experimental impulse as by subjects that challenged popular conceptions of opera as a romantic dramatization of heterosexual passion: *Peter Grimes*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Billy Budd*, and *Death in Venice*, among others. No matter its formal similarity to many musical techniques employed by Britten, *Troilus and Cressida* differs most strongly from the operatic idiom defined by Britten in its choice and treatment of subject and source. The opera's reception was unquestionably informed by these changing intellectual approaches towards art and traditionalism, and the frequently blurred line between 'modern' innovation in art and 'new' ways of thinking about society and culture.

In many ways, such valuations of music against contemporary themes in literature answers Lambert's earlier call for a musical recognition of "poets more closely in touch with the contemporary *Zeitgeist*." Lambert, however, was calling for musical settings of contemporary poetry. After *Façade*, the relationship between literature and music changed more radically. The work placed itself specifically within a contemporary literary culture, and in many ways allowed itself to be created and defined by that culture. Furthermore, the verse had been written with a keen awareness of a particular project, and not for independent publication or later setting. The text and music of *Façade* are inextricable from each other as 'the composition,' and ensure that the authorship of the work cannot be attributed to the mediating voice of the composer alone.⁹ In *Façade*, Walton and Sitwell made available for the literary artist a much greater creative role in the musical process.

This role was particularly exploited and celebrated in operatic collaborations. Traditionally, the librettist has been considered subservient to the demands and 'vision' of the composer. The aesthetics that came to define modernity in British music, however, ensured a different dynamic between music and text. In so doing, they necessitated a unique interaction between librettist and composer, literature and music in the articulation of 'the new.' While it is understandable that composers would enlist the collaboration of prominent writers, the motivation for the writers themselves in such projects is initially less clear. They may have gained comparative authority as collaborative voices in musical composition. Nonetheless, these writers were choosing to involve themselves in a form whose collaborative nature necessarily assumes less creative autonomy from individual contributors. Dryden, one of the most acclaimed English librettists of all time, himself noted in the preface to *King Arthur* that he had been obliged to 'cramp' his verses and make them "rugged to the Reader, that they may be harmonious to the Hearer."¹⁰ Centuries later, Auden echoed these ideas when he asserted that a libretto must be judged "not by the literary quality or lack of it which it may have when read, but by its success or failure in exciting the musical imagination of the composer."¹¹

If this were the only goal of the librettist, the concerted participation of modernist writers in the 'rise of British opera' would seem curiously altruistic. Many of the early, most enthusiastic librettists and literary collaborators are known for their involvement in the formation and articulation of modernist literary aesthetics. Intriguingly, the nature of their involvement within British opera suggests a certain dissatisfaction with those aesthetics, and a frustration with the apparent limitations of contemporary literary practice. Their involvement in opera points to the libretto as a manifestation of modern literary anxieties. These writers were participating in a musical form that was valued critically for its alignment with modernist themes. Ironically,

many of the librettists themselves seem to have espoused a very different literary aesthetic in their participation.

William B. Wahl recounts a frustrated interview towards the end of Auden's life: "I began the questions, asking first what he thought of his own plays. They were done in his earlier years; he had for a very long time left off with plays; he wrote libretti now."¹² Asking what Auden "saw as the future of poetic drama in the world of today, especially in England," Wahl could only elicit the response that Auden "had some time ago perceived little future for it, which was why he had changed to writing libretti" (103). Wahl concludes: "had I been interested in his libretti, perhaps the interview would have taken a quite different turn" (107). In his writings, Auden denies the independent literary value of the libretto. This interview, however, reveals that he perceived the writing of libretti as a worthy dramatic, if not literary, project in its own right. Indeed, Auden's creative involvement in opera was such as virtually to *replace* his creative involvement in both poetry and verse drama. Stephen Spender argues that in his later life, Auden had "two main intellectual interests: one, theology; the other, Italian opera."¹³ Identifying a crisis in Auden's poetic career, Alan Jacobs asserts that Auden was liberated from traditional poetic constraints in his operatic projects: since "emotional extravagance is virtually [opera's] *raison d'être*," it became "Auden's unequivocal duty to *unleash*, rather than restrain, the emotional resources of poetic language" (92).

Auden clearly saw in the task of writing the libretto an opportunity to satisfy a poetic instinct that could not otherwise be fulfilled in his current literary context. He lamented what he observed to be the modern necessity for poets to write in a "Drab style," that is, in "a quiet tone of voice which deliberately avoids drawing attention to itself as Poetry with a capital P" ("World" 116). It is no longer acceptable to write poetry for reading or recitation in a "High style":

Opera is the last refuge of the High style, the only art to which a poet with a nostalgia for those times past when poets could write in the grand manner all by themselves can still contribute, provided he will take the pains to learn the metier, and is lucky enough to find a composer he can believe in. ("World" 116)

For Auden, the opera libretto affords the poet an opportunity to write in a manner considered in other literary contexts to be overly performative. By absorbing words within an overwhelming narrative and expressive musical frame, opera affords the indulgence of a guilty literary instinct towards theatrical expressivity in language.

This instinct towards expressivity is articulated in much modernist writing and criticism. Ultimately, however, that instinct is phrased as an ideal, and a practical impossibility. In a modernist context, the "High style" suggests a regressive, uncritical adoption of outmoded artistic practices. These practices, products of a different time and society, ignore the impossibility of 'absolute' artistic communication in literature. To invoke ideals of absolute beauty or expressivity is to imply the potential to articulate universal experience and knowledge – and thus surpass time, history, and individual difference through art.

While lamenting the impossibility of literature to offer elemental expression, much modernist writing idealizes the ability of music to achieve this effect. Modern literature represents and reflects the inevitable fracturing of society and the individual, and the limitations of artistic communication. This representation is necessary, but ultimately frustrating to the artist. In his influential preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Joseph Conrad paraphrases Walter Pater's 1877 contention that "all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music."¹⁴ He phrases the argument less as an observation of an inherent truth than as an artistic manifesto: all art must "strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music – which is the art of arts."¹⁵ Forster articulates a similar ideal for fiction. Frustrated by the creative limitations of narrative convention, he queries the possibility of the 'rhythm' of music as an alternative aesthetic pattern for the novel: "We will not give up the hope of beauty yet. Cannot it be introduced into fiction by some other method than the pattern? Let us edge rather nervously towards the idea of 'rhythm.'"¹⁶ Using the example of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, he differentiates between the beginning rhythm of the symphony, and a more 'difficult' sort of rhythm, that of the symphony as a whole "where, when the orchestra stops, we hear something that has never actually been played" (*Aspects*, 146; 148).

These writers see in music the ability to surpass the structural limitations that face the literary artist. In this structural transcendence, music can express "the truth of life . . . a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile" (*Nigger*,

li). Thus, at a critical moment in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Bernard yearns to surpass through music the restrictions implicit in written language:

Here again there should be music. Not that wild hunting-song, Percival's music; but a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts – how much too deliberate! how much too reasonable! – which attempt to describe the flying moment of first love.¹⁷

In his poem "The Composer", Auden similarly bemoans the limitations of the writer's art compared to the language of the composer:

All the others translate: the painter sketches
A visible world to love or reject;
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches
The images out that hurt and connect.

Unconfined by a mimetic language, music transcends the contemporary "climate of silence and doubt" to express a more fundamental truth that underlies all experience:

From Life to Art by painstaking adaptation,
Relying on us to cover the rift;
Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your song is an absolute gift.

The poem echoes Stephen Spender's alignment of Auden's theological interests with his operatic enthusiasms. For Auden, the "absolute gift" of song is akin to a divine language:

You alone, alone, O imaginary song,
Are unable to say an existence is wrong,
And pour out your forgiveness like a wine.

This approach towards music hints that Auden may have seen operatic collaboration as a means of coming closer to the expression of spiritual reality in art.

Significantly, though, "The Composer" attributes ultimate authorship to the listener, the 'us' who can "cover the rift." That listener, of course, is the reader of the poem, dependent upon the poet's language that invokes the beauty of what is an 'imaginary' song. The song, then, depends upon the implicit contract between reader and poet to conjure its ideal existence and function. The poem begins by eulogizing the composer, but ultimately removes the composer from the celebration. Similarly, in *The Waves*, Woolf's Bernard craves a music that cannot be found in "that wild hunting-song, Percival's music" – presumably an allusion to Wagner's opera. Instead, that music is best invoked as an ideal within the text itself: "painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring . . ." In Forster's *Howards End*, the narrator informs us that "Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is the most sublime noise that has ever penetrated into the ear of man."¹⁸ He goes further, however, to align this work of absolute music with a particular narrative – one that comes to define the thematic resonances of the novel itself. Forster conforms the independent musicality of the symphony to his own narrative pattern. In so doing, he appropriates an authorship of the essential 'meaning' of the work.

While these writers and texts praise musical expressivity, then, they qualify its independent effect by aligning it with literary creation. In order to do so, they deny the specificity of musical language and qualify (if not ignore) the authorship of the composer. For Auden, opera affords a *refuge* for poets familiar with the literary practice of "those times past." Forster cannot find any novelistic analogy for "the effect of the Fifth Symphony as a whole," but remains certain that there "may be one," for "in music fiction is likely to find its nearest parallel" (*Aspects*, 148-9). For Woolf, Wagner is "like Shakespeare," who "attained in the end to such a mastery of technique that he could float and soar in regions where in the beginning he could scarcely breathe." Such statements suggest that a literary analogy can be found for music's universal expressiveness,

but that it can no longer be maintained in a modern literature informed by contemporary social reality. By denying music its independent language, these writers are more easily able to assimilate music into the realm of literature. If music is not defined by its own specific techniques and can be likened to the rhetorical devices of literature, it can be both imitated and realized just as much through the written word as through musical sound.

It is possible, then, that writers saw operatic collaboration as an opportunity to manifest a musicality in text akin to that they perceived in Shakespeare or poets of “those times past.” They were not inhibited from achieving this musicality by the different ‘languages’ of music and literature, but by the philosophy and aesthetic that informed contemporary literature practice.

A similar approach is suggested by the interest of verse dramatists in the writing of libretti. In 1956, the critical reception of the Royal Court premiere of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* almost single-handedly rendered verse drama instantly regressive. Such verse dramatists as Duncan, Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Christopher Hassall “shared with [Cocteau, Anouilh, Giraudoux, and Obey] a fantasised, non-naturalistic playfulness which set great store by speculation and paradox.”¹⁹ These tendencies did not sit well with those in the English Stage Company, who were bent on naturalistic evocations of the concerns and conditions of contemporary British life. Significantly, though, much of what characterizes verse drama is also present in many modern British operas: speculation and paradox, an emphatic interest in the allegorical potential and contemporary relevance of myth, and a conscious manipulation of various verse forms and verbal images. Operas such as *The Rake’s Progress* (libretto by Auden), *Peter Grimes* (libretto by Montagu Slater), and *The Rape of Lucretia* (libretto by Ronald Duncan) reinforce Duncan’s allegorical aesthetic for verse drama: “all of us live at various levels at one and the same time . . . it is not the dramatists [sic] job to reproduce life naturalistically, but to give it depth.”²⁰

It was not just the subject interests of modern opera that appealed to verse dramatists, however. In an extensive complaint against the English Stage Company, Duncan phrased his ambitions for the modern theatre with an operatic example: “It is too much to hope that we can find the equivalent of a Diaghilev,” a person who was able to “put a Cocteau in touch with a Stravinsky. But it is not too much [to] hope that we could find somebody who is aware of contemporary trends in art.”²¹ His most well-known drama, *This Way to the Tomb*, was inspired by an interest in Ben Jonson’s masques; Duncan had been reading them because he was “interested in dramatic forms which had music integrated within them” (“Introduction,” vii). He wrote the libretto to *The Rape of Lucretia* in the same year in which he wrote *This Way to the Tomb*, perhaps seeing in the libretto a logical extension of his interest in experimenting with the ways in which music might be integrated into drama.

The aesthetic aims of verse dramatists suggest an essential sympathy with the musical instincts celebrated by opera. According to Christopher Fry, “[p]oetry in the theatre is the action of listening . . . pure sound, has logic, as we know in music, and what does that logic accord to if not the universal discipline felt along the heart?”²² At the same time, however, “the truth of poetry deepens under your eye. It is never absolute. There is no moment when we can trumpet it abroad as finally understood” (137). Fry emphasizes the mutability of meaning to be achieved through a poetry which he claims must aspire towards musical effect. In contrast, T. S. Eliot criticizes two passages of his own drama *The Family Reunion* for being so “remote from the necessity of the action” that the passages become “too much like operatic arias. The member of the audience, if he enjoys this sort of thing, is putting up with a suspension of the action in order to enjoy a poetic fantasia.”²³ The play and the language of the play should never be enjoyed “as two separate things,” for “verse is not merely a formalization, or an added decoration” (13; 19). Both dramatists (apparently unknowingly) articulate two sides of an operatic debate: one advocates musical beauty transcending text, and the other argues for the ultimate subservience of musical effect to drama.

Despite the applicability of both sides of this debate to operatic aesthetics, the aims of verse dramatists embody an inherent animosity towards traditional opera. Both Eliot and Fry identify musicality as existing within verse. If he were to translate verse drama into opera, Eliot would have to ensure that his text allow a perfect synthesis with music itself, rather than the musicality of verse. Fry, on the other hand, would have to allow music to fulfill the idealized function to which his verse aspires. A perfect operatic translation of this aesthetic would require that both dramatists deny the artistic function of their verse. The interaction between ‘music’ and text in verse drama is very similar to that between music and text in opera. This similarity, however, ensures that verse drama can never be fully translated into opera as a whole without the abdication of the consciously ‘musical’ versifier.

The involvement of verse dramatists in the writing of libretti gives further credence to the possibility that literary librettists – novelists, poets, and dramatists – perceived the libretto as an alternative literary genre, one that would allow for the expression of literary ideals of musicality. This musicality, however, implicitly sets itself against that of the composer. In the Britten-Forster-Crozier collaboration on *Billy Budd*, for example, Forster wrote what he envisioned to be an aria for one of the characters. This musical plan conflicted with that of Britten, who did not set the text as an aria. Forster wrote an angry letter to Britten that clearly signals his intention to define musical effect in the libretto: “I want *passion* – love constricted, perverted poisoned, but nevertheless *flowing* down its agonising channel; a sexual discharge gone evil. Not soggy depression or growling remorse.”²⁴ The completed opera therefore manifests an unresolved *musical* conflict between libretto and score.

In apparent recognition of the potential of the librettist to encroach upon the traditional authority of the composer, Auden himself asserted that, in writing a libretto, the poet must “take the pains to learn the metier” (“World,” 116). The verses of a libretto “are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer.” Their moment of glory exists in “the moment in which they suggest [to the composer] a certain melody”; once that is over, “they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them” (“Notes on Music and Opera,” 473). The poet should never hope to say that “Poetry should be as much like music as possible”: “the people who are most likely to say this are the tone-deaf. The more one loves another art, the less likely it is that one will wish to trespass upon its domain” (“Making, Knowing, and Judging,” 52).

Nonetheless, Auden frequently found that composers were unwilling to collaborate with him (and his frequent co-librettist, Chester Kallman) on operatic projects.²⁵ Despite believing that a composer ultimately defines dramatic tone through music, Auden was equally certain that a librettist could envision (and dictate) an appropriate musical style. Hans Werner Henze acknowledges a quotation from J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* at the end of the intermezzo to *The Bassarids*: “this is something Auden wanted. He was never very keen on explaining what he wanted, but I think the reference is completely clear.”²⁶ Although Henze places the aria musically in the opera, he is ultimately left, like the audience, to interpret the meaning of that quotation. Robert Craft notes that talk between Auden and Stravinsky frequently “turned to the Wagner and Strauss operas that [Auden] most admired but that were far from Stravinsky’s present interest.”²⁷ When Stravinsky mentioned that he wished to write a one-act opera (*Delia*), Auden decided, “I see that what he wants is a Jonsonian Masque, (I have lent him the Masques to read).” He roots the project in a literary tradition and thereby assumes the role of both musical and literary mentor towards the composer. He further asserts his musical taste by satirizing specific compositional schools: “the comic antimasque will, of course, present some of our bugaboos like Twelve-Toners, Sociologists etc.”²⁸

These conflicts between the ‘musical’ inclinations of composer and librettist were further exacerbated by the musical conservatism of many of the writers. Huxley, an early correspondent of Tippett’s, structures one of his most modernist texts, *Point Counter Point*, according to a fugue pattern, and opens the novel with an extended description of a performance of Bach’s Suite in B minor. In “Music at Night” (1931), he writes effusively of the poignant beauty of Beethoven’s music. Auden published pieces that exalted such melodramatic works as *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, and refused to work with Henze on *The Bassarids* until the composer agreed to attend a performance of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle. Henze complied, and “sat through *Götterdämmerung* – quite joylessly.”²⁹ When the narrator of *Howards End* declares Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony to be “the most sublime noise,” he effectively devalues more contemporary music by comparison: Brahms’s Four Songs “rang shallow in Margaret’s ears,” and the German companions “flee” from Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance* while others banter about trivialities (*Howards End*, 28-9). It is Forster who offers the most telling indication of what seems generally to have been a shared conservative musical aesthetic among prominent modernist writers. Writing of how he would have adapted George Crabbe’s *The Borough* for Britten’s *Peter Grimes*, he asserts:

I should certainly have starred the murdered apprentices. I should have introduced their ghosts in the last scene, rising out of the estuary, on either side of the vengeful graybeard, blood and fire would have been thrown in the tenor’s face, hell would have opened, and on a mixture of *Don Juan* and the *Freischütz* I should have lowered my final curtain. (“George Crabbe and Peter Grimes” 178)

The controlling instincts of these librettists, encouraged by the cultural endorsement of literary values in modern British opera, extended to an attempt to determine musical style. In their work on *The Bassarids*, for

example, Auden and Kallman demanded that the opera refer recurrently to the music of Bach. The libretto specifies, "tune: Chorale in the Intermezzo." The Chorale in the intermezzo had been marked with: "The tune – Matthäuspassion? – or a variant of it, we shall hear again when Pentheus' body is brought in" (292). Such demands elevate the role of the librettists by allowing them a greater musical authorship. They also ensure that the unique musical authorship of the composer is qualified into a constant musical acknowledgment of earlier creations. Such prescription of musical style had the potential to thwart the individual, modern musical aesthetics of the composer. They also ensured the identification of an opera's modernity in the subject and themes of the libretto.

It is a telling indication of the extent to which opera was redefined by the involvement of literary writers that such assumptions could be accepted and endorsed by composers. Michael Tippett borrowed from a modernist writer to articulate his operatic aesthetic: "My motto will tend also always to be the simple one of Ezra Pound's: 'Make it new.' Adventure will in the end take us further than repetition."³⁰ For Tippett, the "adventure" upon which composers must embark to make an opera 'new' is to be found in the subject and text of the libretto; music is implicitly secondary. In writing of his first opera, *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955), Tippett refers to having written a magic "musical veil" to "clothe" his "strange libretto so that the final product [had] the appearance of that indissoluble unity of drama and music that is opera" ("The Birth of an Opera" 49). The 'strangeness' of the drama is to come from the libretto and be discovered beneath the deceptive covering of the music. Tippett's comments suggest that music has disguised his libretto to give the illusion of a traditional opera. It is left to the discerning audience to separate the ostensible unity of music and drama, remove the "magic musical veil," and discover the dramatic truth of the opera in its libretto ("Birth," 49).

Tippett's reaction to criticisms of *The Midsummer Marriage* further points to his isolation of the libretto as the most important element of an opera. He notes delightedly that "the bulk of the serious criticism was directed in any case at the libretto": "it meant that critics, instead of ignoring what was being sung . . . and simply talking about the quality of the singing and orchestral playing, now actually engaged with the drama."³¹ Nowhere does Tippett equate drama with music; to him, the attention granted the libretto is not misplaced. Indeed, Tippett suggests that if the libretto were to be ignored, critics would naturally next concern themselves with the opera's staging and performance. Stage effects 'enhanced' the music of *King Priam*; David Webster (General Manager of the Royal Opera House) "had watched the stage with such intensity" that "he had been mostly unaware of the music." Tippett asserts: "it was the effect I had intended for *King Priam* and it is an essential of the opera."³² He attributes a greater dramatic effect to staging than to music, and notably fails to mention critical reactions to his music, or to suggest that music might collaborate with the libretto to achieve dramatic effect.

For Tippett, then, the libretto provides an opportunity for musical embellishment of words, but more importantly demands consideration as serious and potentially autonomous drama. Indeed, he tends to place his own works within a literary, rather than musical, dramatic tradition. He likens the construction and thematic interests of *King Priam* to those of *Hamlet*.³³ The only theatrical movement upon which opera should depend is "verse drama: the theatre of Auden, Eliot and Fry" ("Birth," 49), and he speaks of the aesthetics of opera and drama from the Camerata "to the time when verse drama returned in English theatre, through figures like Christopher Fry, W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot" ("Love in Opera," 214). Finding it "perfectly right to accept the example of Shaw and Butler, and deploy the intellect as part of one's creativity" (*Those Twentieth-Century Blues*, 16), Tippett likens *The Midsummer Marriage* to dramatic works by Auden, Eliot, Fry, and Shaw ("Birth," 52). Indeed, he insists that opera's primary influence be derived from spoken drama rather than the operatic tradition: "the opera, however much it seems to us a mainly musical experience, is always ultimately dependent on the contemporary theatre" ("Birth," 49).

With his writings prioritizing literary composition over musical endeavour, Tippett seems to marginalize the musical role of the composer. Even his valuation of verse drama, a form celebrated for the musicality of its text, disregards the importance of sound. In his writings, Tippett equates language with idea, and seems almost persistently to disregard the importance of musical effect in either score or text.

Tippett's approach contrasts neatly with that of Auden, the most prolific of the literary librettists. Indeed, a juxtaposition of the two approaches reveals the extent to which the opera libretto became a site of intermedial exchange between ideas of literary and musical composition. Auden notes that he and Kallman "found it helpful to let [their] choice of words and style be guided by a platonic idea of a suitable melody." Although they were "not such fools as to breathe a word about this" to their composers, to their "utmost astonishment

and delight, every time, both Stravinsky and Henze composed actual music that corresponded to [their] platonic ideas" ("World," 93). No matter the "astonishment" of the librettists, a slight glance at any of Auden's libretti reveals that he perceived in the libretto an opportunity to determine musical effect through dramatic structure. In *Paul Bunyan*, Auden specifies musical style; one section is entitled "blues" while another is entitled "lullaby."³⁴ Auden's next opera, *The Rake's Progress*, goes further by stipulating which lines in specified duets, trios, and quartets should be sung with those of other characters, and which should be sung individually. The libretto dictates musical texture by specifying "recitative secco" and "orchestral recitative," and simultaneously determines musical style, form, and tempo when it indicates that a duet should be sung "prestissimo" with "voices in canon" (63).

Intriguingly, Tippett similarly proclaimed the authority of the libretto, but he did so by emphasizing the literary importance of its text. This emphasis seems to come from his recognition of the changing aesthetic valuations of modern British opera. When the ideology and narrative of *The Midsummer Marriage* were attacked, Tippett reacted defensively against the increasing credence given to literary figures writing libretti. He noted that "all the other operas receiving premieres at Covent Garden in the 1950s had libretti by well-known playwrights or writers," and argued that "this was no guarantee of the operatic viability of their texts" (*Those Twentieth-Century Blues*, 219). Tippett's subsequent opera, *King Priam*, reveals Tippett's need to affirm his compositional 'credentials' in the face of (what he perceived to be) an undue critical interest in the literary qualifications of the British opera librettist.

He defines those credentials in primarily literary terms; the opera demonstrates a concerted effort to call attention to its literary qualities. Where Auden and Kallman's libretti attempt to dictate musical structure, style, and allusion, Tippett's libretto is replete with literary references: Hermes' aria concludes with Yeats's line, "mirror upon mirror, mirror is all the show," the chorus sings in the second interlude of Dylan Thomas's "force that through the green fuse drives the flower," and the concept of the "loop in time" at the end of the opera is borrowed from Eliot's *The Family Reunion*.³⁵ Referring to the Thomas allusion, Tippett notes that "very few people know that quotation is there in *King Priam*. If you're not a literary person and you write your own text, you have to be willing to take things from a variety of sources whenever the underlying concept is traditional and everlasting."³⁶ Tippett has argued that a musician is rarely accorded intellectual respect. In order to obtain this respect, Tippett attempts to validate his opera by demonstrating his own literary awareness and knowledge in the text of the libretto.

The overall effect of these allusions, potentially elliptical to the average listener, is to encourage a literary appreciation of the libretto independent of the drama and music. Only a reading of the libretto will reveal the inserted quotation marks that draw attention to the opera's specific literary allusions. By placing himself simultaneously within musical and literary tradition, Tippett implies his independent intellectual, literary, and musical mastery of the opera. As if in recognition of Tippett's ambition, the composer's critics articulate a similar competitive literary spirit in their analyses. Bowen notes that Tippett's later opera, *The Knot Garden*, is "steeped" in "back-references to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," and "sports one of the most successful, indeed virtuoso pieces of libretto-writing to be found in any contemporary opera."³⁷ At the same time, as he attempts to validate the worth of the libretto by praising it in literary terms, he echoes Tippett in his suggestion of the superiority of the composer to the literary dramatist: "The themes and preoccupations of Tippett's four operas are widely encountered in plays and films by his contemporaries . . . Tippett's music, of course, places him at an advantage. It could well be used, for instance, to breathe life into the characters in R. D. Laing's play *Knots*" (*Michael Tippett* [1981], 87). Reinforcing Tippett's self-identification as a dramatist in a literary tradition, Bowen further asserts that in *The Knot Garden*, "Tippett manipulates his characters in the manner of Shaw in *Heartbreak House* or Edward Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" (*Michael Tippett* [1997], 115).

Tippett and his biographer want the best of two apparently separate worlds; recognizing the greater intellectual reputation to be achieved in literary, rather than musical endeavor, they place his works in a literary dramatic tradition. At the same time, they elevate Tippett's operas within this tradition by invoking the poetic beauty of music. These claims react against the increasing creative authority of British writers in operatic composition. Nonetheless, that authority is enabled by people such as Tippett himself, who isolate opera's primary worth in its text and ideology. Although he invokes the authority of a composer to do so, Tippett ultimately reacts against outside encroachment upon what he defines as the most important element of opera – its libretto. Tippett discussed with Eliot "whether Auden had not bemused Stravinsky with a poetic *tour de passe-passe*, in their collaboration on *The Rake's Progress*" ("Birth," 64). He is unable to perceive,

however, that he discursively creates a similar capability for the composer-librettist towards his own musical score.

Where Tippett appropriates the language of literary composition, then, Auden and Kallman attempt to appropriate the language of musical composition. Their libretto to *The Bassarids*, for example, is so controlling in its attempt to determine musical style and structure as to limit the creative independence of the composer. Henze responded to the libretto as a competitive musical vision against which he could only occasionally compete. He acknowledged, for example, that it was the decision of the librettists to subtitle the work, "Opera Seria with Intermezzo in One Act." Auden clearly applied the term in an attempt to dictate musical structure and style:

In the early days of opera it was the custom to sandwich a one-act opera buffa between the two acts of an opera seria. Such a convention provided a musical and verbal contrast which both we and Henze felt would be desirable if it could be made an integral part to [*The Bassarids*]. ("World", 113-14)

After Auden's death, Henze admitted to not appreciating the intermezzo. Considering the intermezzo "a literary, rather than a theatrical device," he removed it to "considerably [increase] the dramatic tension."³⁸ He also did so to allow "listeners a clearer insight into the form and nature of the great central Adagio that is the seduction scene between Dionysus and Pentheus" (433-4). Henze defines his motives as dramatic, but emphasizes the importance of appreciating the musical form of his Adagio. In so doing, he underlines the competing musical influence of his librettists's decision.

This competing 'musicality' is also evident in the language of the libretto itself, whose verse and meter defy vocal setting:

Hunter and hunted on those high hills
Whirled as one in a wild daedal,
Renewing life. Ichneumon's children
Fed on the paralysed flesh of Arachne,
So fell before to flies (276).

Henze saw the impossibility of setting the text in its entirety, and omitted a number of the lines. In apparent recognition of the independent musicality of his verse, Auden asked Henze that the libretto text be published as written. Only then, he argued, would justice be done to the libretto's metrical complexity: "In listening to your opera, the ear cannot, of course, detect this," but when lines are "also omitted from the printed text, the reader's ear will be vexed".³⁹

No matter his claims of ultimate subservience to the composer, then, Auden clearly perceived in the libretto a distinct musical and interpretative creation. Ironically, the authority of his creation could only be fully achieved by enforcing a distinction between the two musical scores – that of the composer, and that of the librettists. Ultimately, neither the musical score nor the libretto as performed manifests the intentions of any of the collaborators. The librettists and the composer were left to plead for the potential of their work independent of (necessary) collaboration.

III

As early as 1910, Forster had his heroine Margaret Schlegel acknowledge an increased intermediality between the arts:

'[Wagner] has done more than any man in the nineteenth century towards the muddling of the arts . . . Every now and then in history there do come these terrible geniuses, like Wagner, who stir up all the wells of thought at once. For a moment it's splendid . . . But afterward – such a lot of mud; and the wells – as it were, they communicate with each other too easily now, and not one of them will run quite clear. That's what Wagner's done.' (*Howards End*, 37)

To some extent, this assessment is borne out by the literary valuations of modern British opera, and by the idealisation of musical expression by modernist writers. It is also acknowledged in the varying ideas of

'musical' and 'literary' language espoused equally by composers and librettists in the construction of modern and contemporary opera.

As we have seen, the modern opera libretto says much not only about the aesthetic consequences of such apparent intermediality, but also about the libretto itself as a site for aesthetic debate. This debate extends to essential differences between the arts, and to the potential conflict between literary instinct and prevailing philosophy in defining modernist aesthetics. More than anything, it reveals a constant desire on the part of both literary and musical artists to stretch that art, to achieve an artistic language that encompasses the perceived achievements of both music and literature.

Notes

¹ Forester, qtd. in Eric Crozier, "The Writing of *Billy Budd*," *Opera Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1986): 26.

² Constant Lambert, *Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (London: Faber, 1966), 206.

³ Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Walton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 134.

⁴ Peter Evans, "Sir William Walton's Manner and Mannerism," *The Listener* 20 August 1959: 297.

⁵ David D. Boyden, rev. of *Troilus and Cressida*, comp. William Walton, *The Musical Quarterly* 41 (1958): 239

⁶ Paul Müller, "'Troilus and Cressida': Two Further Opinions," *Opera* 6 (1955): 91.

⁷ Donald Mitchell, rev. of *Troilus and Cressida*, comp. William Walton, *The Musical Times* 96 (1955): 36.

⁸ Arthur Jacobs, rev. of *Troilus and Cressida*, comp. William Walton, *Opera* 14 (1963): 420.

⁹ Perhaps in an effort to separate his compositional achievement from that of the Sitwells, Walton composed a number of subsequent versions of *Façade* between 1924 and 1978; some of these were purely orchestral arrangements, while others offered different performance and vocal settings, reconfiguring assumptions about the work's authorship.

¹⁰ John Dryden, preface, *King Arthur. Works of John Dryden. Plays: King Arthur [sic], Cleomenes, Love Triumphant, Contributions to the Pilgrim*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California P, 1996), 6.

¹¹ W. H. Auden, "The World of Opera," in *Secondary Worlds* by W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 90. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as "World".

¹² William. B Wahl, "My Impressions of W. H. Auden: His Last Interview," *Poetic Drama Interviews: Robert Speaight, E. Martin Browne and W. H. Auden. Poetic Drama and Poetic Theory*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1976), 103.

¹³ Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 271.

¹⁴ Walter Pater, "The Dialectic of Art: The School of Giorgione," *Essays on Literature and Art*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (London: Dent, 1973), 47.

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, 'Preface,' *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (London: Penguin, 1989), xlviii. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Nigger*.

¹⁶ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and Related Writings* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 112. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Aspects*.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 197.

¹⁸ E. M. Forester, *Howards End* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 25. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Howards End*.

¹⁹ Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London: Routledge, 1999), 151.

²⁰ Ronald Duncan, "Introduction," *Collected Plays* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), viii. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Introduction."

²¹ Ronald Duncan, "Artistic Policy of the English Stage Company," in *Ronald Duncan the Man and the Artist*, by Krysia Cairns (Plymouth: University of Plymouth, 1998), 114.

²² Christopher Fry, "Why Verse?" *Vogue* (March 1955): 137.

²³ T. S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama* (London: Faber, 1951), 28.

²⁴ E. M. Forster, *Selected Letters of E. M. Forster*, ed. Mary Lago and P. N. Furbank, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983-85), 2: 242.

²⁵ The rift that developed between Auden and Britten following their collaboration on *Paul Bunyan* (1941) is often thought to have established Auden's reputation as a difficult collaborator. Tippett (and undoubtedly others) perceived Auden as having performed a "poetic tour de passe-passe" with *The Rake's Progress*; when Auden asked him to collaborate upon an operatic project, Tippett became "uneasy at the prospect of working with such a domineering librettist" (Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* [Boston: Houghton, 1981], 428). Auden met Harrison Birtwistle with a similar hope, but allegedly lectured the composer on opera and libretto to such an extent that nothing came of the project (Carpenter, 428).

²⁶ Hans Werner Henze, interview with Paul Griffiths, "The Bassarids," *The Musical Times* 115 (1974): 832.

²⁷ Robert Craft, "The Poet and the Rake," in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 150.

²⁸ Auden's letter to Kallman, in *W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman: Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden, 1939-1973*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 630.

²⁹ Hans Werner Henze, "The Bassarids: Tradition and Cultural Heritage," in *Music and Politics: Collected Writings, 1953-1981*, by Hans Werner Henze, trans. Peter Labanyi (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 143-144.

³⁰ Michael Tippett, *Music of the Angels: Essays and Sketchbooks of Michael Tippett*, ed. Meirion Bowen (London: Eulenberg, 1980), 203.

³¹ Michael Tippett, *Those Twentieth Century Blues: An Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1991), 219. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Those Twentieth Century Blues*.

³² Michael Tippett, *Moving into Aquarius* (London: Routledge, 1959), 49.

³³ Michael Tippett, "At Work on 'King Priam'," *The Score: A Music Magazine* 28 (January 1961): 62.

³⁴ W. H. Auden, *Paul Bunyan* in *W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman*, 3-46.

³⁵ Ian Kemp, *Tippett: The Composer and his Music* (London: Eulenburg, 1984), 363.

³⁶ Meirion Bowen, *Michael Tippett* (London: Robson, 1981), 158.

³⁷ Meirion Bowen, *Michael Tippett*, 2nd ed. (London: Robson, 1997), 43-44.

³⁸ Hans Werner Henze, *Bohemian Fifths: An Autobiography*, trans. Stewart Spencer (London: Faber, 1998), 433-434.

³⁹ Auden letter to Henze in *W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman*, 682.