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OPERATIC STAGINGS: POSITIONS AND PARADOXES

A REPLY TO DAVID J. LEVIN

The battle between traditional and new stagings is one of the oldest topics of Verdian discourse. Arguments pro and con have been made for decades on behalf of each side of this virtually sectarian dispute. Since the debate usually collapses into impassioned embraces of shopworn, pre-formulated positions, it is difficult to imagine that further airings of the topic are going to change many minds. In addition, as David Levin notes, the new availability of the emphatically prescriptive Ricordi *disposizioni sceniche* only heightens the issues at stake, leaving us «suspended between two equally unappealing alternatives», the «deferential» or the «defiant» model of interpretation.¹ Even while calling for «a more nuanced conception of *mise-en-scène*»² – an appeal with which one can scarcely disagree – and notwithstanding a few caveats scattered about, the burden of Levin's argument appears to center around the idea of aligning the deferential model with an absence of thought («*Va, pensiero*»), with an operatic culture of thought-less reiterations of what Mike Ashman called «historically informed fourthwall naturalism».³

But at bottom, this, too, is more of the same. Just as traditionalists and “historical” production-book advocates have their favorite arguments,⁴ pro-

¹ D.J. LEVIN, “*Va, pensiero*”? *Verdi and Theatrical Provocation*, in this volume, p. 466.

² *Ibid.*, p. 473.

³ M. ASHMAN, *Misinterpreting Verdian Dramaturgy: History and Grand Opera*, in *Verdi in Performance*, ed. by A. Latham and R. Parker, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 42-46.

⁴ See, e.g., my earlier article complementary to this one, J. HEPOKOSKI, *Staging Verdi's Operas: The Single, “Correct” Performance*, in *Verdi in Performance* cit., pp. 11-20. While aspects of the present discussion might seem skeptical of the claims made on behalf of modernist, postmodernist, or otherwise innovative or «defiant» stagings – at least as laid out by Levin – that earlier essay sought to explore some of the intractable conceptual problems at hand in any insufficiently problematized ad-

ponents of modernized staging typically activate a cluster of orthodox positions, often delivered from an assumption of a superior sophistication of thought, *de haut en bas*. These include a largely dismissive stance vis à vis the reiterative tradition, the obvious preference for up-to-date stage technology, an enhanced relevance to current audiences (especially younger ones), the individual rights and self-expression of the stage director, a fresh reinterpretation of an old classic, a defamiliarization of things taken-for-granted, an imperative for political or social advocacy in an unsettled world, and so on. To put it mildly, within the context of the broader debate, these positions are no longer innovative. They, too, have become faded, predictable – deeply “traditional” in their own way.

Regardless of the style of the individual argument, the central requirement of this side of the *mise-en-scène* debate is conceptually to separate the staging from the essential “work”. On the one hand, then, we have that “work” (usually understood to be the words, plot, and music – though not the stage directions in the libretto or score); on the other hand we have the creative (re-)interpretation that is the staging, commenting on or filtering the “work” through another’s imagination. (Traditionalists normally will have none, or at least very little, of this argument, insisting that important aspects of the stage-picture and action belong to the “work” as well.)

Even though in popular or more disputatious discussions, as here, the argument is generally carried out superficially, the entire issue is philosophically complex. (What is an operatic “work”? How fixed in its details might that “work” be? How much of an original “work” is accessible, under any staging-practice, to current audiences under vastly altered conditions and cultural presuppositions? And so on.) At least for now, we might wish only to notice Levin’s frequent invocations of «the work», «the drama», and related terms as if their meanings were commonsensical and self-evident. They are usually construed to imply something conceptually distinct from staging. One could cite any of a number of examples. Here is a nodal assertion:

Put more concretely, I want to consider the relationship between the authority vested in (or that accrues to) those who exercise power within the work versus the authority vested in (or that accrues to) the *disposizioni sceniche* [sic, plural], which I take to be a symptomatic textual trace of authority exercised over the work.⁵

vocacy on behalf of “historical” or “production-book-guided” stagings. As such, the two essays might be considered as two sides of the same issue.

⁵ D. LEVIN, “*Va, pensiero*”? cit., p. 469.

Obviously, if essential aspects of «the work» included certain features of staging – which need not be tied rigidly only to the production books – one would not claim, for example, that any style of staging can exercise authority over “the (presumably separate) work”. Or consider:

[...] in the opera house – at least in opera houses in the U.S. – Verdi’s works have been subjected to the very protocols of repression whose devastating effects they register with such astonishing insight. [...] [If] we consider the production history of the work [*Don Carlos*] it would appear that stage directors have merely (and ironically) reproduced – need I say, reiterated – the repression, instead of engaging it. And thus, the work in production has allied itself dramaturgically much more with the Inquisitor’s position – a kind of drastic, old school inflexibility [...] than with Elisabeth’s or Posa’s or Carlos’s positions.⁶

As will be obvious to most readers, the language of Levin’s paper threads in an additional, stridently hyperbolic feature, one of a seemingly moral urgency in the face of «protocols of repression», «scripted reiterations of [...] power», and subservient, unwitting alliances with nothing less than «the Inquisitor’s position». (By 2001 such inflated language, perhaps seeking to capitalize on influential precedents in the writings of Foucault and many others – *surveiller et punir* – is commonplace, though probably already outmoded.) The corrective is to recall that in the matter of practical staging we are dealing with affirmations of interpretive or hermeneutic genres, not with regimes of dictatorial power in any normal sense of the term. To communicate within any genre is to appeal to a shared frame of reference within which meaning can happen. One should be able to make elementary distinctions. Within current theaters the «sanctioned» or «institutionalized» staging of Verdi does not mask an ethical lapse that is accurately portrayed as structurally homologous to the «protocols of repression» wielded by the Grand Inquisitor. The presumed villain in this scenario – perhaps even lesser in stature than the wizard behind the curtain – turns out to be little more than a hopeful appeal (intermixed with obvious commercial interests) to opera enthusiasts and status-seekers of various stripes, many of whom might harbor a stubborn interest in the preservation and repetition of beautiful things.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 472 f.. Or again: «We can all agree that the drama of Verdi’s *Don Carlos* (and its musical affect) elaborates a critique of entrenched, inflexible authority. And yet, the sanctioned means of depicting that critique (and indeed, the institutionalization of those means via the *disposizioni sceniche*) arguably rest upon the very grounds of entrenched, inflexible authority that the drama seems intent upon undermining» (*ibid.*, p. 470). Here the «critique» in the plot and music of «the drama» is treated as conceptually separate from any (?) stage directions given in the libretto, score, or subsequent *disposizione scenica*.

In any event, I am not eager to take sides in the broader debate at hand: historicist versus modernist or postmodernist stagings. My own view is that magnificent and thoughtful work can be done on either side of the divide. (Levin also suggests this at one point: «a *mise-en-scène* that appears traditional can be more compelling than a resolutely radical one».⁷) It also seems advisable that one not generalize about presumably appropriate audience responses. What is compelling to one audience-member can be quite the opposite to the person in the adjacent seat. Much of the question pivots on personal preferences – what one individually seeks from an operatic experience.

A more fundamental issue, though, is that most arguments of this type, especially when carried out for polemical purposes, overlook some basic points. Why should we presume, for instance, that any current production – traditional or revisionist – is able to comment upon the text and music in an unmediated manner? Is it really possible, sidelining the traditions as stale, to study the source materials afresh (here, usually the sung text and the related music, what Levin appears to regard as the essential «work» or «drama»), to block out past conceptions of the opera, and then in the staging to comment directly on those source materials, as if short-circuiting further encounters with past memories and histories of interpretation? While such a claim might be a selling point within a commercial or academic context (perhaps in pursuit of a sought-after counter of prestige in an ongoing game involving the *prises des position* within one's chosen field),⁸ under closer examination the assumptions involved, at best, seem rickety.

This leads us into a central paradox of staging. Because of the general necessity of background practice as a frame of reference and rule for interpretation, no production of *Don Carlos* (for instance) can be conceptually autonomous. Rather, it is inevitably staged in dialogue with a constellation of norms passed down from prior productions. Not everyone in the audience will know this, but many will. (Many will be aficionados of the most loyal kind.) And, of course, the stage director is professionally aware of this as he or she makes staging decisions. Moreover, these decisions are not always sortable into simple binary categories – traditional or radical. Rather, there exists a continuum of possibilities, ranging from modest, almost unnoticed inflections, to explicit re-creations of historical stagings, to updated, manifestly interventionist defor-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 465.

⁸ The reference here is to the socially advantageous “position-takings” within a contested cultural field, as proposed in the general sociological model provided in the essays included in P. BOURDIEU, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by R. Johnson, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

mations of original intent. We should not set up this issue in only two opposed categories.

Nonetheless, even when – perhaps especially when – supposedly radical staging choices are made – Rodrigo as an environmental activist, perhaps, or the Inquisitor as Senator McCarthy – they are still made against an implied composite picture of more traditional productions from the recent and not-so-recent past. The particulars of this composite backdrop surely vary from person to person, but within certain guidelines there are probably similarities among them. (Most spectators will realize that *Don Carlos* was not originally set in twentieth-century America, for example.) And in any case the scripted instructions of convention may be unearthed, if one likes, in the libretto, score, and other sources.

Such modern stagings may be regarded as personally inflected adaptations or even as metaphors, typically reminding us that as a type the Inquisitor-Figure was not restricted to sixteenth-century Spain; that without knowing so we continue to reweave narrative threads of the *Don Carlos* project into our own lives. In a modern or radicalized staging the physical acoustic presence that floods the opera – what we hear – provides something of a literal ventriloquism: whatever the “modern” characters that we see on the stage think they are doing – or appear to be doing – what we are being told is that they are unwittingly re-enacting a very old plot indeed. In such a staging we are not “seeing” Verdi's *Don Carlos* but rather encountering the sound-world of the original used as an agent of disclosure that continuously writes over the material reality of what is being visually presented on stage. Or vice-versa. Either way, an aesthetic gap is thereby opened up, and with this disconnection we are distanced both from Verdi's *Don Carlos* and from the normal or expected discourse of the seemingly incongruous image that is enacted before our eyes. Exploiting that gap, surely, lies at the heart of the new, innovative, or defiant model of staging.

Additionally, however: Since all such staging choices are made against a memory-field of preceding notable or conventional productions – as a necessary frame of reference – that silent but conceptually charged backdrop must continue to exist as a rule for perceiving what is interventionist about the new production. Consequently, the production's grounding principle lies not in the palpable, physical surface of what is put onto the stage but in the implied dialogue between the new staging and the abstracted, composite backdrop of more standard productions.⁹

⁹ Put another way, the “work” being put onto the stage may be conceived more broadly. It

This is a familiar paradox: New and aggressively deformational productions are in fact heavily dependent on a shared knowledge of common rerun interpretations to guide them into a framing context that makes the accessing of their own specific meaning possible. The more radical the production the weightier the obligation to perceive the deviation from common practice. Within any radical staging what one does not do on the stage (traditional actions, traditional costumes, traditional locations) is as important to the production as what one does do. Self-consciously absent features – familiar features written over with new decisions – are crucial to any controversial staging, and in their invisibility they are expected to be perceived. Whatever their claims, interventionist productions cannot abolish the authority of the past: We dwell in that authority and it is not ours to abolish. On the contrary, they help to reinscribe that past, since they ground the terms of their own effectiveness upon our memory of it. In short, traditional and radical stagings are not mutually exclusive: 130 years into the history of the *Don Carlos* dispersal – and on this side of the modern-commercial and technological divide – each relies on the other for its impact.

Finally, and very briefly, one might ask blunter questions: What do we wish to get out of any staging? What kinds of experiences – *pensieri*, if you like – do those who are interested in opera expect to encounter? Why are people drawn to operatic productions at all – and to Verdi in particular? Obviously for diverse reasons – not many of which prioritize issues of professional interest to scholars in colleges, universities, and round tables. What most spectators hope for, I suspect, is simply another encounter with a work they love – a rich encounter with conventionalized spectacle, sumptuously and brilliantly performed. It may also be the case that in a world in which all that is solid melts into air, they want to touch the tradition – or at least to touch the illusion of stability within the tradition – not to resist it. Above all, they want to see and hear great singers performing the repertory most compellingly linked with great singing. Opera houses, as commercial enter-

would include not merely the sung text and the music *tout court*, as “raw” documents (along with, perhaps, some aspects of staging), but also the main lines of what in Germanic hermeneutics would be called the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the artwork. The opera’s “history of effects” or inexorable accruing of interpretive and reception traditions over time may also be regarded as a central aspect of the “work” as it has come down to us. Indeed, this is an aspect that, while one may pretend to suppress aspects of it on the surface of any individual interpretation, can never be overcome in the broader world of understanding. It is in this manner that any individual staging enters into an ongoing, ever-expanding dialogue with other, past realizations of the opera’s “meaning”. Within the inescapable *Wirkungsgeschichte* tradition, no individual production can be an isolated statement, set apart only for itself.

prises, are interested primarily in continuing to attract audiences, and in a world of declining interest they will do so by any means possible. If either old or new stagings – or something in between – will be of marginal help, there is plenty of room for all kinds of it. *Va, pensiero*.

RIASSUNTO – Le argomentazioni pro o contro gli allestimenti di tipo tradizionale delle opere di Verdi sono sempre le stesse e tendono a trasformarsi in prese di posizione tanto passionali quanto dogmatiche. A parte la sua retorica insolitamente esagerata, il ragionamento di Levin è ben noto e non aggiunge nulla di nuovo alla discussione. Il problema principale, sotto tutti i punti di vista, è la riluttanza a formulare l'intera questione in termini più meditati, termini che ci possano condurre a esaminare i più ampi paradossi insiti in ogni tentativo sia di recuperare sia di sovvertire gli allestimenti di stampo tradizionale.