PROLOGUE

WHY OPERA? WHY (HOW, WHERE) SITUATE?

INTERLOCUTOR: Still another book on opera?

AUTHOR: You mean by me or in general?

INTERLOCUTOR: Both.

AUTHOR: I still have a thing or two to say about opera.

INTERLOCUTOR: Does the world need another book on this topic?

AUTHOR: It's a much bigger topic than it seemed thirty years ago when I first wrote on it. Opera's been exploding all over the place: new audiences, new companies (and in towns where you could never have imagined opera before), new approaches to how one stages the thing, and, to top it off, as I'll show in the epilogue, a whole new area of inquiry that people are calling opera studies.

INTERLOCUTOR: How can you even speak of an explosion when we know that for most people these days classical music is giving way to popular forms?

AUTHOR: That may be true of some classical genres, but opera is flourishing more than ever. When I was growing up in Seattle during the 1930s you got only a single week of opera a year – and this from a touring group called the San Carlo Opera, which did only the most tired of warhorses, and with the flimsiest of sets, and singers who could charitably be described as of bush-league quality. Today, though I no longer live there, the city boasts its own company with a respectably sized season plus a summer *Ring* that draws international audiences.

INTERLOCUTOR: Still, why would you devote so large a chunk of your career – fully a third of the books you've done – to a form as marginal as opera? I don't mean trivial, as some people take it to be, or an "exotick and irrational entertainment," in Johnson's

notorious definition.[1] I just mean that it doesn't carry the cultural weight of categories such as tragedy, epic poetry, or, to cite a subject that you've treated, historical drama. And how must it feel to you to know that most of the people in your field, literary study, really don't care about opera? In fact many of them are positively embarrassed at the thought of having to watch some huge singer, all puffed up, projecting her ridiculous words toward an adoring house. Can't you appreciate how they must feel?

AUTHOR: Probably no different from the way a vegetarian feels sharing a table with somebody audibly sucking marrow from a large bone. That's *their* problem. But please remember, the anti-operatic prejudice is a phenomenon that goes far back in time. I dealt with it earlier in writing on opera. It's not unrelated to the anti-theatrical element in twentieth-century opera that I take up here in Essay 8.

INTERLOCUTOR: You are avoiding the question by intellectualizing it. Let me put it another way: Are you perhaps trying to exploit your own particular taste for opera by concocting a project for yourself?

AUTHOR: Obviously I'm an opera fan. But as musical preferences go, I'm equally a fan of other forms of music (or should I say "classical music?" – for when I was young music meant classical music and pop forms needed adjectives to indicate you didn't mean classical). Yes, I'm as avid about the chamber, the *Lieder*, and the piano repertory as I am about opera. And about ballet and dance as well.

INTERLOCUTOR: So why pick opera among all these forms to write about?

AUTHOR: Because it transcends the usual intellectual categories. Opera extends its tentacles into all manner of territory. The various ways one can relate opera to society – the topic of this book's second essay – are as manifold as that of any aesthetic form. Its particular relations with its audiences over time – the topic of

[1] Johnson, "Hughes," p. 39. Johnson mentions that Hughes wrote the texts for six cantatas that, as he put it, "seem intended to oppose or exclude the Italian opera." This negative attitude toward foreign ("exotick") opera was frequent among eighteenth-century British thinkers from Addison (see Essay 9) onward.

Essays 1 and 9 – show it to be at once responsive to and also assertively manipulative of its consuming public. And by looking at recent experiments on music by neuroscientists, as I do in Essay 5, we can better understand both why opera seeks to maintain a high degree of emotional tension and also the ways that different operatic styles have found their own ways of doing this.

INTERLOCUTOR: Aren't you asking a lot of your prospective audience if you expect them to follow experiments from the sciences, including social science, as you do in Essay 2, where you insist on the relevance of a social scientist, Pierre Bourdieu, to the study of opera?

AUTHOR: I know there are people in the humanities who think that anything coming from all those distant areas has nothing to do with their concerns. They see themselves as the last bastion upholding the traditional cultural values that they assume science and social science spurn. I could easily warn them at this point to skip the neuroscience essay. But actually I want them to read this piece: even if it does not undo their anti-science bias, it may ring a bell for them about how their reactions to music, and to opera in particular, are not all that different from the other, more animal satisfactions in their lives.

INTERLOCUTOR: What makes opera so special among these satisfactions?

AUTHOR: Where but in opera, except maybe in Shakespeare, do you find the most melodramatic, silly, banal material transformed into something sublime? Where else can you find a form that keeps you in a state of intense rapture without let-up for three, and, in a few cases, even five hours? And where else, once you're sober enough to analyze what it's all about, can you find a medium situated within so many heterogeneous contexts as opera?

INTERLOCUTOR: Is that what you mean by the word *situating* in your title? What precisely *do* you mean?

AUTHOR: Opera is situated in places like the eighteenth-century theater boxes in which the local nobles play cards during the recitative while waiting for the castrato to begin his aria (Essays 2 and 5); or in the contemporary opera house where the society matrons enter on

opening night to display their latest designer gowns and their latest cosmetic surgery (Essay 1); or, to move to more serious territory, opera is situated in an aesthetic theory such as Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which sought to overturn the longstanding classical system insisting on the separation of the arts (Essay 6); or in such pleasure centers of the brain as the thalamus, the ventral striatum, and the insula (Essay 5); or in the cryptic allusions within modernist writing to the full-blown passion of nineteenth-century arias (Essay 1); or in the lovemaking of opera queens while a screechy Callas *roulade* blasts from their speakers (not further developed in this book); or in the double shock within some modernist works to scandalize both by means of musical sound and of the actions transpiring onstage (Essay 7); or in the contemporary offshoots that use and distort the operatic past to pioneer new theatrical forms (Essays 3 and 4); or in the imperial cultural policy and international power games that instigated the commissioning of what turned out to be a classic opera (Essay 2); or in the parody of what might seem too highfalutin an operatic tradition (Essays 1 and 8).

INTERLOCUTOR: You are clearly seeking to move in a multitude of directions at once. It's only honest at this point to warn you that your readers will likely feel disturbed by your shifting, and I might add, quite unconventional, modes of presentation as they move from essay to essay, like the lexicon that shapes your piece on *Il trovatore* (Essay 1), or the vignettes about specific operatic occasions in your so-called consumers' history of opera (Essay 9), and your survey of recent operatic – or rather quasi-operatic – experiments (Essay 4). And then there's that very formal essay full of theories about the various arts (Essay 6), a piece in which you abandon any attempt at wit and assume the mantle of a theorist, or at least a historian of theory. How can you claim any sort of unity, any argument even, in a book that flaunts so many incongruous styles and topics at its reader?

AUTHOR: For one thing, the three words of my subtitle – period, genre, reception – help shape nearly every essay. But I confess I prefer to pursue variety rather than unity. And I find raising

questions more interesting than finding answers. In fact, readers will discover a number of paragraphs among these essays in which interrogative sentences outnumber declarative ones.

INTERLOCUTOR: So where are the answers?

AUTHOR: Readers can mull the questions over and enter into dialogue with me.

INTERLOCUTOR: And whoever heard of a prologue like this one in which the author is openly in dialogue with himself?

AUTHOR: And an epilogue too, which continues in this mode.

INTERLOCUTOR: Maybe you think you can soften your reader's resistance by advertising your own skepticism to this project. I'd like to hear you justify yourself.

AUTHOR: This book is only doing in a more overt way what I've been doing all along.

INTERLOCUTOR: How so?

AUTHOR: My way of conceiving a project is to hook a bunch of diverse essays around a single subject. My first book, for example, was unified only by the fact that all the essays – each of them in fact using a critical method different from the rest – engaged with a single work, namely, Wordsworth's long poem *The Prelude*, which I sought to place within a whole range of contexts: within the tradition of epic, of long poems in general, within modern poetry, within a long line of writings obsessed with time, within the political conflicts of the poet's time.[2] I made it clear in my introduction to this book that readers should not expect a single, overriding argument the way they could do with other people's books.

INTERLOCUTOR: That sounds plausible enough if all those heterogeneous pieces concentrate on a single work, but how do you justify writing on so amorphous a genre as opera?

AUTHOR: I did it earlier with something perhaps even more amorphous: historical drama.[3] Every one of the five sections of that book – centered around a large bundle of plays about history from totally

[2] Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth's* Prelude. [3] Lindenberger, *Historical Drama*.

different periods and cultures – drew upon a theoretical construct quite different from the others. When, soon after, I decided to do my first book on opera,[4] I had a model based on my earlier work: so I could draw on social theory in one chapter, while in another I did an iconographical study showing how the act of attending an opera created some of the crucial scenes in a number of classic novels.

INTERLOCUTOR: Sounds as though you've not done what other people in most fields do, that is, commit yourself to a particular method or point of view. You surely know that readers expect this sort of thing.

AUTHOR: Committing oneself is tough when you don't really believe strongly in a single way of doing things. The harder I look at any particular method, the more holes I see in it. After my Wordsworth book came out, a well-known theorist labeled me a "perspectivist."

INTERLOCUTOR: So you think that using multiple perspectives will get you closer to the truth?

AUTHOR: Not if you aren't searching for a particular truth, or even truths. People who go for some grand theory that'll hold everything together are a bit too earnest for my tastes. I much prefer being playful with the particular perspectives I employ.

INTERLOCUTOR: Does that account for those abrupt stylistic changes that I find in what you're presenting to us now?

AUTHOR: I began to experiment with those in my second book on opera.[5] In one chapter I juxtaposed two seemingly antithetical modernist composers, Arnold Schoenberg and Kurt Weill, and then I further juxtaposed these two with the political events of the year 1930 in Germany, and I added a further complication by organizing the chapter into some seventeen brief items, much like the consumers' history of opera in this book or the essay on *Il trovatore*. And like the latter, these items in the Schoenberg-Weill chapter display their arbitrariness by organizing themselves simply in alphabetical order.

INTERLOCUTOR: Why the alphabetical organization for the piece on *Il trovatore*? Isn't this just a gimmick?

[4] Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art*. [5] Lindenberger, *Opera in History*.

AUTHOR: The essay (if you allow me to call it that) seeks to explore as many facets of audience reception as it can: *Il trovatore* as it made its way into popular movies, into Montale's hermetic poetry, into the ears of listeners greedy for their high *c*'s (even when Verdi had left them out). The only way to cover this heterogeneous material – though it's all centered on how we've devoured this warhorse of an opera over the years – is to find what you call a gimmick that will hold it all together in a rational way. The order of the alphabet provides this rational cover.

INTERLOCUTOR: So I assume you aren't expecting your reader to look for or discover an argument in this book.

AUTHOR: If readers find any argument, it's that opera, like most aesthetic phenomena, lends itself to a variety of critical voices.

INTERLOCUTOR: But with all your stylistic tricks, it's hard even to find an argument in any of your individual essays.

AUTHOR: Some offer arguments: for example, Essay 8 contends that some of the most significant operas of the twentieth century, like *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Moses und Aron*, are deeply anti-theatrical in nature.

INTERLOCUTOR: But why do you need a whole long essay to say that? Isn't it a bit obvious?

AUTHOR: Probably so, I suspect, but the purpose of that argument is to hold a bunch of otherwise diverse operas together in order to show the quite different ways that each of them reveals its anti-theatrical stance. The argument, one might say, serves as an excuse to say something that I hope will seem interesting about these works. What a difference, for example, between the understatedness that Debussy uses to challenge Wagnerian theatricality and the parodying of earlier operatic styles in *The Rake's Progress*!

INTERLOCUTOR: We seem to be going in circles. You speak with pride of your unconventionality and now you tell me you're also amenable to conventional writing. How do you reconcile all these things?

AUTHOR: Why not simply let the curtain go up – and on *Il trovatore* to boot?

1 | Anatomy of a warhorse: *Il trovatore* from A to Z

ABOUT

What is *Il trovatore* "about?"

a. the standard *dramatis personae* of Italian Romantic opera: heroic tenor, yearning soprano, unpleasant and unsuccessful baritone, wronged and vengeful mezzo-soprano, loyal bass, plus these people's various attendants.
b. the Romantic Middle Ages.
c. the Middle Ages as romanticized in the later novels of Sir Walter Scott.
d. the Middle Ages as further romanticized by Scott's followers, above all, in the dramas of Victor Hugo and *his* followers – most notably for *Il trovatore*, in the play *El Trovador* by Antonio García Gutiérrez.
e. the characteristic structure of arias and duets of its time: recitative leading into the cantabile, then the *tempo di mezzo*, and, finally, the cabaletta.
f. the dangers posed by gypsies (though gypsies did not yet reside in Aragon at the time the play was set).[1]
g. the gypsy's revenge, revenge becoming an emotion the audience can identify with since it is mediated by a romantically distant setting and by music that seeks to overwhelm any moral compunctions we may have (see VIOLENCE).
h. very little in the present and a lot in the past (see NARRATING).
i. two brothers separated in infancy after a gypsy bewitches one of them and, in punishment, is sent to the stake, after which her daughter steals this child and, in revenge for her mother's death,

[1] See the introduction to García Gutiérrez, *El Trovador*, p. 20.

seeks to throw him into a fire but mistakenly tosses her own child in, after which she raises the noble son, who, when grown up, attracts a young woman who also happens to be loved by the other brother, with whom he fights a duel, after which, having spared his rival in this duel, he in turn abducts the woman they both love from the convent she was about to enter and then, just before his impending marriage to her, goes into battle to save his supposed mother, who had been captured by his real brother, who in turn captures and jails the brother who had outwitted him in abducting the mutually beloved and who thinks he has finally won the latter, after she agrees to sleep with him if he releases the man she loves but actually poisons herself before he can enjoy her body, with the result that the brother who holds the power in turn executes his rival but is then informed by the original gypsy's daughter of his kinship to his victim.

j. the characteristic disposition of musical numbers of its time: arias, duets, trios, choruses, and a concertato at the end of a middle act.

k. the war between the Carlists and the Liberals in the Spain of the 1830s, this war being the contemporary subtext of García Gutiérrez's play,[2] though Verdi and his librettist Cammarano would likely have been unaware of this, or, even if aware, would scarcely have cared.

l. whatever a contemporary director chooses to make it about (see X-RATED).

BRAINWORM

What can be more banal than Manrico's refrain from inside his tower cell during the Miserere? Outside the context of *Il trovatore* these notes come back to me obsessively at the most inopportune times and without giving me the opportunity to turn them off, as I can a CD player or an iPod. They belong to a musical genre that Oliver Sacks, looking at this phenomenon as a neurologist, has

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 24–26.

labeled "brainworms."[3] Maddening as these notes may be, when I hear them within their appropriate context – interspersed with the male chorus solemnly intoning the Miserere and Leonora frantically assuring her lover that she will never forget him (see QUOTING and THRUST) – what can be more sublime?

c″

Any aspiring tenor looking through David Lawton's critical edition of *Il trovatore* will notice that Manrico is never granted a high *c* in Verdi's score. Not even a *b*, though at one point, inconspicuously in the first act trio, he gets a *b* flat, with the option of even lowering it to *d* flat.[4] And in what has become his showpiece, the cabaletta "Di quella pira," the critical edition reproduces nothing higher than an *a*. By contrast, Leonora is amply rewarded with high *c*'s and even a *d* flat in her two arias, while Azucena gets to show off a high *c* on top of the deep chest tones that define her personality. The Count, moreover, is expected to display an uncommonly high tessitura.

So what can a self-respecting tenor do? He simply inserts his own resounding *c*'s into "Di quella pira." Indeed, it's been that way since within a few years of the premiere of *Il trovatore*, when Enrico Tamberlick, asking the composer's permission to violate the original score after he had tried out the *c*'s in some provincial theaters, supposedly received this reply: "Far be it from me to deny the public what it wants. Put in the high *c* if you like provided it is a good one."[5]

Is Verdi's statement sufficient evidence to warrant – or even to demand – the high *c*? At one extreme one finds Riccardo Muti's insistence on playing Verdi's scores as the composer originally composed them and, as a result, brazenly challenging the audience's desires, as was evident at a performance of *Il trovatore* that he conducted in 2000 on a La Scala opening night and that invited the

[3] See the chapter entitled "Brainworms, Sticky Music, and Catchy Tunes," in Sacks, *Musicophilia*, pp. 41–48.
[4] Verdi, *Il trovatore*, ed. Lawton, p. 84 (m. 261).
[5] Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. II (1978), pp. 98–99.