

The psychiatry of opera

20th century composers

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In his sixth and final article on the Psychiatry of Opera, Mark Jones looks at the contribution that 20th century composers have made to the art form.

At the turn of the century, opera was leaderless after the heady days of Verdi and Wagner. Puccini emerged as the new voice of Italian opera, where realism, or *verismo*, was the way forward. But *verismo* could never be the answer to the operatic dilemma that faced the latest composers, since it only gave a musical dimension to a stage painting of 'life as it is', without reference to underlying psychodynamics – I personally have never thought Puccini much of an intellectual. Beautiful his music may be, but as thinking pieces of theatre they are devoid of real challenges. Their appeal and potency lies, to a great extent, in Puccini's obsession with needless suffering.

Psychodrama

Twentieth century opera faces the challenge of building on the achievements of the past, which it cannot ignore, or it must consign itself to a musical mausoleum. In this respect, romanticism gave way to expressionism, led at first by the German school of composers. After his strident, expressionistic one-acters (*Salome*, 1905 and *Electra*, 1908), Richard Strauss turned away from the movement that was to become serial and atonal music, and developed his own gushing teutonic romanticism. Although he himself chose the relative safety of older musical forms, he did produce two of the earliest and most powerful expressionistic operas. Strauss's *Electra* was the beginning of what, to me, the 20th century has come to mean operatically. Here, as with Stravinsky's later *Oedipus Rex*, is an opera based on a Sophoclean tragedy – it looks back at the roots of opera and takes as its model one of the most powerful themes in world literature and psychodynamic theory. Operatic psychodrama exploded onto the musical scene with the Dresden premiere of *Electra*. The claustrophobic, neurotic world which *Electra* inhabits is a place of twisted personalities, paranoia and revenge. Strauss's score remains shocking, even today – it is a blood-curdling musical metaphor for

people in extreme emotional states, at the limit of what their minds can cope with before fragmenting; it is quintessential hysteria.

Librettos that tackled modern living were a rarity in opera up until the 20th century; Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* was a milestone in this respect. Histories and myths have a timelessness that appealed to composers wanting to produce drama without too much offence. Twentieth century opera began to focus its attention on the complexities of modern living, as well as reaffirming the precedents that had been set in the past, both in content and form. The century was, and continues to be, a time of enormous socio-economic upheaval, as well as violent world events. A new musical language needed to be developed which could serve as a mirror to the new society that was emerging. Pain and suffering, conquests and sex, have always been the bread and butter of opera – that opera ritualises life is, perhaps, why it is so potent. Now it was the turn of those who previously had no voice to speak – the down at heel, those neglected, spurned or forgotten by society, as well as animals (Janacek's *The Cunning Little Vixen* of 1924) and inanimate things (the toys in Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* of 1925).

Twelve note composition: Berg and Schoenberg

Increasingly, the opera was played out in the orchestra, and the way forward seemed to be in serial (12 note) composition. The pioneers of this technique were Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg whose operas explored the seedy and decadent side of human nature, and the often violent ends to people's lives (*Wozzeck*, 1925, and *Lulu*, 1937, both by Berg, show this concept worked through most fully). These operas are powerful, musically complex pieces, whose music is interwoven with sung speech: *sprechstimme*, which is meant to capture the rise and fall of the spoken word in a musical way.

Wozzeck is the story of a retarded soldier, used and abused by his comrades and experimented on by

a doctor obsessed by the punctuality with which a cancer will kill his patients. Time cannot pass quickly enough for this man, pleasures only prolong the agony of being alive. He has no time of his own and his metronomic, painful existence is beaten out in the opera in the various themes and variations from which it is constructed. Nothing can console him, and nothing can save him. According to the strutting drum major he is amoral (having a child, yet he is unmarried), but as *Wozzeck* points out, only the rich can afford a conventional morality. The opera ends with *Wozzeck* killing the only thing in his life which gives it any meaning, his lover Marie. He commits this act in a justified jealous rage, and then kills himself. As he drowns, the doctor and drum major hear his last breaths, but he is ignored – he is as insignificant in death as he was in life.

Berg was a disciple and pupil of Schoenberg but, at least in the earlier opera *Wozzeck*, does not wholeheartedly embrace the so-called Dodecaphonic style. Schoenberg wrote only one (3 act) full-length opera (*Moses and Aron*) which remained incomplete at his death in 1951, yet he did take atonal writings to their limits. His first opera is a monodrama for soprano and orchestra, *Erwartung*, which concerns the ravings of a deranged woman in search of her lover whom she eventually finds dead and she is then able to undergo a mourning process. It is all rather surreal, written in an atonal way, but not entirely dodecaphonic. It is the fragmented and dissonant music of this school of composers which served the cause of opera well, at a time when it was searching to express wholly new experiences of the early 20th century, and at the same time attempt a form of musical catharsis. With hindsight, this branch of music is now rather sterile and uninteresting, and has ultimately become a blind musical alley.

Serial music and beyond: the British school

Modified and blended with more harmonic and melodious forms, serial technique has become incorporated into general musical language since the 1930s. Following the end of the second world war there appeared a British operatic renaissance, in the form of the young Benjamin Britten, the first in England for more than 200 years. Here was an English composer with a unique style and having European appeal: his early post-war operas had a tight, Verdian theatrical feel, and when the Vic-Wells Opera reopened in June 1945, at Sadler's Wells, it was with Britten's early masterpiece *Peter Grimes*. This opera was derived from one of a series of poems by George Crabbe; set in a claustrophobic Suffolk fishing village, it blends images of puritanical small-mindedness with a touch of sadistic pederasty and the unifying forces of the sea and nature.

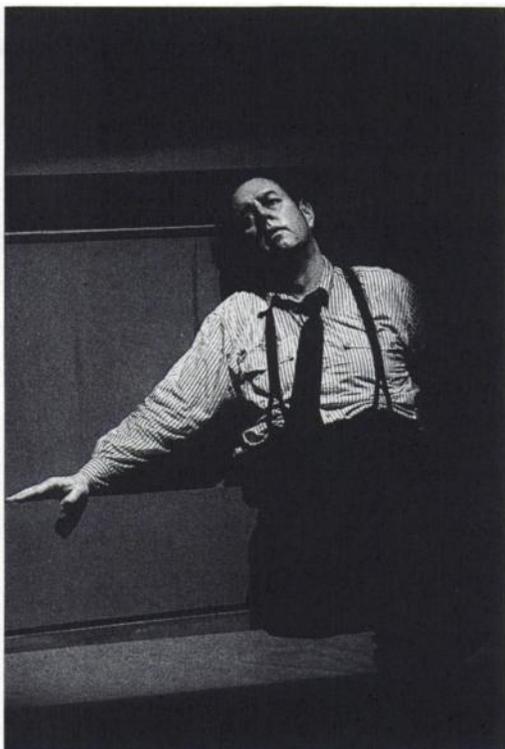
Britten's early promise was, perhaps, never really fulfilled. His later works, all potentially excellent psychological operas, became increasingly conservative and tight-arsed. He was rapidly absorbed into a homophobic British establishment, and his neuroticism about his ability as a composer was justified as his works became more and more stereotyped and vacuous. The themes of lost childhood innocence and the nature of sexual politics continued to preoccupy him until his death in 1971: (*Peter Grimes*, 1945; *Billy Budd*, 1951; *The Turn of the Screw*, 1954; *Death in Venice*, 1971). *Death in Venice* is certainly partly autobiographical; Britten himself always had a passion for thin young men, despite his life-long association with the tenor Peter Pears.

Minimalism: a counter-revolution

Britain, after the War, boasted not one, but two emergent operatic composing talents – the other, also homosexual, but in no way obsessed with public respectability, was (Sir) Michael Tippett. In comparison to Britten, he was writing much more luxuriant musical scores dealing with wider socio-sexual issues (*The Midsummer Marriage*, 1955). In France, Igor Stravinsky was causing a riot (literally) with his brand of spiky, primitive rhythms and beautifully turned neoclassicism (*The Rake's Progress*, 1951; *Oedipus Rex*, 1927), and then, partly as reaction to the explosive and over-effusive nature of expressionism, and frustration with serialism, came Minimalism. The '50s, '60s and '70s saw the development of this form through such composers as Stockhausen, Glass and Cage. This music was contemplative, spacious and silent, as well as being capable of fortissimo effects. Repetitive rhythms and themes, and a sense of evolution over much longer performance times than was previously used for musical imagery became its hallmark. Silence became as important as sound (John Cage's *4 Minutes 33 Seconds*). I personally find such works remote and unedifying, but they do have their supporters. Of late, the new generation of composers are mixing styles to a much greater extent than previously, yet few, if any, truly successful new operas are being written. This is a problem the English National Opera is facing up to at the present time, with a long-term commitment to commission new operas from leading British composers. Last year was the world première of Robin Holloway's *Clarissa*, and this year is the turn of Stephen Oliver's *Timon of Athens*.

A double bill: part of the ENO's '20 + Series'

The final words of this series now focus on two early 20th century works, *Oedipus Rex* (Stravinsky) and



A scene from English National Opera's new production of Bartok's 'Duke Bluebeard's Castle'. Gwynne Howell (Bluebeard). (Photographer: Michael le Poer Trench).

Duke Bluebeard's Castle (Bartok), and one outstanding producer of the 1980s and 90s: David Alden. He is a provocative and exciting producer, whose operatic focus has been at the ENO in London, where these two contrasting works were recently put on by him. I chose these pieces for two reasons: musico-dramatically they represent much of what opera has been, and secondly they were milestones in the development of 20th century opera. Both have enormous psychological impact, which comes from the powerful themes in each and their tight construction – they cover a lot of ground in their short one hour of performing time.

These operas are dramatically static, and in different ways represent 20th century psychodrama well. Much of what happens in the works is a musical expression of characters' thoughts (not always in the vocal line); the orchestra, as in later Wagner, becomes the dynamo of the opera and a sounding board for emotions. Unlike some other operas of the same period, Bartok's Bluebeard's Castle is, essentially, a tonal work, using luxuriant orchestration and two voices (soprano and bass-baritone). It charts the psychological battles a couple fight in order that each

'door' in Bluebeard's Castle can be opened to let 'light' into its dark and airless corridors. Judith is in love with the legend of the Duke. It is also the story of the struggle of two wills: the young impulsive woman who tests the bounds of love, and the older man whose past is best forgotten, but who 'open's up' against his better judgement.

The island-like isolation of Bluebeard mirrors Bartok's own lonely life – a solitary existence and silence, that even his closest friends found difficult to penetrate. Judith's desire to prise open the seven doors in her husband's castle is an attempt to shed light where there is darkness and doubt – she wishes to uncover the inner persona, and it is an invasion of personal space that their relationship cannot survive. Bluebeard's past is best left alone since it is one which runs (literally) with blood and tears; his castle sighs in despair. We see family dynamics from the inside in this opera, as Judith uses all manner of manipulation and sexual politics to achieve her goal.

Stravinsky's opera is all spikey neo-classicism, which the composer called an operatic cantata. The libretto is part spoken by a narrator and is in Latin, being translated and condensed from the Greek tragedy by Sophocles. The story is well known. The young Oedipus, having been separated from his family at an early age, and not knowing who they are, accidentally kills his own father at a cross-roads after an argument with a servant. He hears of the Sphinx that is destroying the city of Thebes, and goes to defeat it. The prize for this conquest is the hand of the Queen, Jocasta (whose husband had been killed some time before). A plague strikes Thebes, and the Oracle at Delphi says that this is the punishment of the Gods for the murder of the King, and the culprit is among the people. Events tumble over themselves and eventually the incestuous couple stumble on the awful truth: Oedipus had killed his father and married his mother. Jocasta hangs herself, and with the pin that she used to fasten the noose, Oedipus puts out his eyes.

David Alden's productions of Oedipus and Bluebeard

David Alden's impressive new double bill at the English National Opera seems relatively restrained after his controversial productions of the 1980s. These are contemplative productions which do not offer overt explanations – as always with Alden, you are invited to think. Nigel Lowrey's simple triangular box set, with moveable and adaptable front and back cloths is an evocative space in which to place (mainly for Oedipus) post-modern, expressionistic elements: a tape recorder for the voice of the narrator, a huge screen with dentures protruding through it as an impression of the Sphinx. In Oedipus, destiny grinds



A scene from English National Opera's new production of Stravinsky's 'Oedipus Rex'. Philip Langridge (Oedipus). (Photographer: Michael le Poer Trench).

on relentlessly, the singers tumble, literally and vocally, over the truth – it is, in a sense, a discovery of the past as seen in a psychotherapeutic session. The realisation of what is happening and how it has come about might seem a bit 'off the wall', but it is understandable. Like so many of our patients, Oedipus is cast out of his society because of his 'crime', and the stigma now attached to him. As with indiscriminate illness, he is a victim of circumstance.

Bluebeard is simpler as a design concept, but the relationship of the central pair becomes the focus of Alden's production. There is no need for overt threats of violence in this opera (although, of course, they are implied); instead careful use of red-shift lighting in this red box set is menacing enough. The huge door swings open each time Judith writes the number of the door on it (or the floor) with some chalk. These are not really physical doors, but ports of entry into someone's mind. What she sees, at first, is what she wants to see – some time later the true nature of what is there becomes apparent. Judith's fascination with Bluebeard's past does not allow him

to be free to live in the present, and because she insists on reflecting on a past that is too painful to relive, she must join his three previous other wives in death. Bluebeard's isolation again becomes a way of life. All the themes of opera are here – behind each of the doors lies the vocabulary of operatic language: the armoury, the torture chamber, the jewels, the lands that have been conquered, the tears and the dead. In the late 20th century opera seems to have lost its way, but it is at least still alive.

I hope that this small series has communicated something of my excitement in this progressive art form, and you have been able to take away something from it in terms of understanding operatic 'subtexts'. I cannot claim to have provided many answers, but those which have been set down over the last year and a half were arrived at after many years of watching and talking about opera. I feel there is still some way to go in researching this area, where historical psychiatry could offer so much, and in this respect I would value any additional thoughts my professional colleagues may have.