3 The Librettist’s Lament

Sir Harrison Birtwistle almost groaned. For, bearing down purposefully along the empty stalls of the rehearsal hall came his publisher with a large envelope and a wicked grin. Sure enough, it was yet another unsolicited libretto by some aspiring unknown. Decades ago, Benjamin Britten was already insisting, “I get lots of libretti in the post but I have never accepted one. A few of the ideas are attractive enough, but I have to be in on it from the beginning.”¹ And Stephen Oliver claimed that many of the libretti he received were simply mad: “Curiously, enough, you can distinguish them immediately: the stage directions are invariably typed in red.”²

Mad or not, such efforts surely represent a triumph of hope over experience, for it is difficult to think of a single opera in the standard repertoire that was directly inspired by a finished libretto arriving out of the blue. These days, it would be far more likely for a composer obsessed with a dramatic idea to contact a potential librettist out of the blue – as Birtwistle apparently approached David Harsent over Gawain (1991) – or to attempt a libretto of his or her own, such as Stephen Oliver’s cogent reworking of Shakespeare’s Timon of Athens (1991). Or, even if invited to co-operate ‘from the beginning’ à la Britten, a librettist may soon find he or she is required to compromise, rewrite and cut endlessly to serve the developing demands of the music.

The rehearsals are liable to bring further shocks, such as just how few words come over in the singing or just how many notions of his own the producer wants to put over in the staging. Come the first night, the applause will inevitably flow to the singers, the conductor and composer if the work is deemed successful – or the notoriety to the production team if it is all found ‘controversial’. Yet, after anything less than a triumph, a librettist may find himself assailed for ‘unsingable’ words or dubious dramaturgy. Ronald Duncan was criticized for years over the poetic diction and pious ending of The Rape of Lucretia (1946), in which, as we now know, he was simply meeting Britten’s exact demands.

Indeed, a history of opera could be written around the relative decline in power of the librettist in this ostensibly most collaborative of arts. Not that the libretto was ever totally supreme: even in that earliest of great operas, the ‘favola per musica’, L’Orfeo (1607), Monteverdi made significant changes to Alessandro Striggio’s text. But a variety of factors tended to sustain, if not the pre-eminence, at least the parity of words with music over the next couple of centuries. In serious opera especially, the choice and treatment of subject were often imposed upon the poet and composer alike by their royal or aristocratic employers. The very form of high Baroque opera, with its regular alternation of lightly accompanied recitatives and florid arias, was calculated to switch the focus between verbal drama and musical expression. Moreover, in candle-lit
auditoriums that were rarely dimmed, it was customary for eighteenth-century audiences to follow the text itself from tiny printed copies (libretto means ‘little book’), something that opponents of surtitles might do well to remember.

Accordingly, a figure such as the Viennese court poet Metastasio was able to influence the entire course of opera seria through a stream of published libretti that composers went on re-setting for generations. Even in the first half of the nineteenth century, when opera was evolving into a more competitive phase, it was still possible for a librettist of the unspeakable fertility of Eugène Scribe to dominate the Parisian scene, so that composers seeking their fortune there, from Meyerbeer and Bellini to Verdi and Gounod, vied for his influential collaboration. Yet, already back in 1781 Mozart was writing to his father that ‘the best thing of all is when a good composer, who understands the stage and is talented enough to make sound suggestions, meets an able poet, that true phoenix’. And by the mid-nineteenth century, Verdi was regularly giving his librettists hell to get what he wanted out of them – a relationship that on a more civilized level was to continue through the famous correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Doubtless, the same is true of Britten’s dealings with the several librettists he subsequently discarded.

Meanwhile, other composers increasingly sought to dispense with librettists altogether. In Pelléas et Mélisande (1893-1902) Debussy set Maeterlinck’s stage play verbatim save for a few cuts – a procedure followed by Strauss in Salome (1905), Alban Berg in Wozzeck (1914-22) and Lulu (1928/34), and with rather more cuts but only a single inserted line, by Britten and Peter Pears in A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1960). With Wagner, of course, came the advent of the composer who did it all himself, initiating not only a succession of composer-librettists from Berlioz and Mussorgsky to Pfitzner and Tippett, but also the more fundamental notion that everything about an opera should emerge organically from its own musico-dramatic donnée. Since Wagner, it has certainly been more difficult for composers aspiring to anything beyond the spills or thrills of a Sullivan or a Menotti simply to take up the old standard genres of comedy, melodrama or whatever without loading them with the kind of mythological, psycho-symbolic or socio-political ballast deemed necessary to ensure ‘depth’ or ‘relevance’.

Has this now gone too far – have such requirements merely become inhibiting and wearisome conventions in themselves? In this respect, the premieres of Gawain and Timon in 1991 were not unsuggestive – if paradoxically. Birtwistle’s massive, wave-like score of slow-grinding textures seemed so exactly matched to the portentous repetitiveness of Harsent’s libretto and to the grey ponderousness of the designs and production of Alison Chitty and Di Trevis, that Gawain was hailed in some critical quarters as a well-nigh Wagnerian achievement. Yet it hardly began to rival the flexibility of pacing with which Wagner actually managed to unfold his seemingly slow-
moving dramas. Nor was it easy to imagine what scope its indulgent, symbol-
laden ritualism might offer for alternative interpretations. Stephen Oliver’s
opera, by contrast, was widely panned by those same critics, ostensibly on
the periodic inaudibility of its text – though one heard more words than in
Gawain. What ought to have been praised were the economy and variety of
the handling of both words and music that, without pretentiousness, brought
a fresh range of implications to Shakespeare’s text – in a sense, indeed,
‘completing’ an incompletely realized play – through an eclectic but apt array
of musical ideas. One could hardly claim that, as a composer, Oliver matched
Birtwistle’s uncompromising radicalism. Yet his musico-dramatic treatment
suggested more ways forward.

What then of the aspiring librettist about to get down to work with the
composer he or she has just teamed up with? Previous experience will
doubtless be an advantage, if only to be prepared for the usual dismissal
of opera by unmusical realists as artificial and absurd. In fact, all theatrical
forms have their conventions, including realism: people do not actually live
in houses with one wall missing or agonize around the kitchen sink in strictly
consecutive dialogue. And whatever opera’s peculiarities, it has evolved
ways of varying the flow of dramatic time, heightening lyric expression and
simultaneously conveying contrary feelings in concerted ensembles beyond
the power of any other theatrical form. Admittedly there remains a perennial
argument as to whether opera’s conventions should be disguised as far as
possible or openly flaunted as in Handel, Bellini or Strauss – the reformer
who wants to rein in vocal writing and restore ‘truth to diction’ has been a
recurrent figure, witness Gluck, Dargomîžhsky and Janáček. Doubtless it will
help if our librettist is aware of all this and able, early on, to establish with the
composer which line to follow.

Aware, too, of how, over time, musico-dramatic approaches have tended
to swing between the poles of number opera and music drama. There is
nothing like the Wagnerian continuum for conveying the oceanic depths of
myth, symbolism and the collective unconscious, even if, lacking any formal
principle distinct from the libretto, or ‘dramatic poem’ as Wagner called it,
the music is rather obliged to go ‘up and down’ with the actions and emotions
of the text. Sequences of set forms – arias, ensembles, choruses – may be
shorter-winded, but they can nevertheless imply a critical counter-structure
to the drama – as in those Mozartean moments of sublime detachment where
the characters are all agitation yet the music goes its own sweet way. Of course,
many composers, from the later Verdi to Britten have contrived various
compromises between number opera and music drama, and these offer a
further range of models. Or maybe our librettist and composer will attempt
to jettison all such traditions for the hopeful freedoms of ‘music-theatre’: an
acting space, a few singers and players, some props and lighting, a book of
words – what could be more liberating? Yet they should know that they are likely to find themselves back at square one, having consciously to tackle the basic problems of form and expression that have already been solved over the 400 years of ‘conventional’ opera.

Not least, the librettist will need to be aware of the riskiness of the wager in which he or she is involved. A mere glance at that graveyard of past aspirations, Alfred Lowenberg’s *Annals of Opera* 1597-1940, will reveal how tiny a proportion of operas staged over the centuries have meaningfully survived; nor, apart from the Britten canon and *The Rake’s Progress* (1948–51) of Stravinsky, along with the honourable runner-up attainments of Tippett and Hans Werner Henze, has the second half of the twentieth century proved any more encouraging. Again, once text and score are submitted to the marmoreal grindings of the production process, there may be little more that librettist or composer – unless the latter is a Britten – can do to influence the result. Even before that, though, the librettist will need to recognize that, no matter how skilfully the prose sentences and verse forms, the line lengths and sequences of vowels and consonants have been devised to draw the best from the composer, the result is most likely to succeed or fail on the basis of the work’s ‘pacing’ – that supreme instinct that Mozart, Wagner, Verdi and Britten shared for fusing music and drama in a way that transcends the static theatricality of masque on the one hand, and mere sung play with background music on the other, to attain a dramatic momentum all its own.

Above all, perhaps, the librettist must really feel that his or her own words are insufficient; that their meaning, emotion and poetry, can only be truly realized through opera. That highly literate composer, Robin Holloway – who has both written the libretto for his own *Clarissa* (1976) and worked with a gifted lyricist, the late Gavin Ewart, on his as-yet unperformed comedy, *Boys and Girls Come out to Play* (1991–95) – recalls that, long before either, he thought of turning Nathaniel West’s dystopian novella, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, into an opera. With the assurance of youth, he wrote to W. H. Auden inviting a libretto. The poet’s reply was kindly but firm: it was an interesting idea, but he couldn’t do it because the characters in the story were all too miserable to sing.

NOTES
