

OPERA FOR THE MASSES – NEW OPERA IN A NEW STYLE

Good friends of Giovanni di Bardi, bent on revitalizing true artistic pursuit, and perhaps wishing for a renaissance of artistic values in entertainment of the day, met in the late 16th century in Florence. This group, known as the 'Camerata di Bardi', thought that reintroducing the precepts of Greek dramatic art forms was just the ticket. After all, a Greek renaissance was taking place in so many other areas, architecture, painting, sculpture – and had become highly fashionable. So, why not suggest that instead of a ramshackle song and dance, so prevalent at the time, that a newly evolved art form should be created. A 'Greek' art form - one that would insist on sound dramatic precepts, good poetry, occasional musical interludes and some singing, was to become the idea behind opera, as we know it. When Jacopo Peri's *Daphne* received its first performance in 1597- satisfying these new fashionable criteria, historians were able to give a specific time, a place and an event to the birth of western opera.

To be sure, opera has undergone many changes since, and it is worth touching on some of them. Early operas led to the overwrought 'intermedi' of Cesti and Cavalli. This led to the reforms of the composer Gluck, from whom we derive the *opera seria* and the *opera buffa*, historically allowing Mozart to refine his style. It is the operatic style perfected by Mozart that historically allows the 'bel canto' era of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini – who in turn lead to *verismo* revolutions that bring us through Verdi and Puccini into the modern age. The introduction of Rossini to the court composers of Russia and the commonplace tradition of German and Italian forms in French Opera allow us to concede that almost all of worldwide opera is, in fact, Italian in origin and Italianate in style, with the exception of the late Germanic tradition of Wagner. Forgive me for condensing the history of opera into eight, short printable lines. Not much can be gained from this exercise, but one overriding instinct of operatic reform is entirely consistent- in the form of some questions. What did people want to see as entertainment? What drove people to come and watch? Let us briefly review how popular fashion won out and changed the course of Operatic history.

Firstly, people wanted a proper, succinct story line. That ended the huge and unwieldy evenings of the 'intermedi', which were nothing more than an opulent showing-off of wealth for the extremely rich aristocracy. Then, it seemed, people were less interested in the *opera seria* plots of gods and goddesses, nymphs, lesser mortals, heroes and '*Deus ex machina*' (God coming down from heaven) endings. They seemed far more interested in the love interests of scullery maids, betrayals, jealousies, normal day to day activities and farce. Mirroring human emotion became the driving success of all these operas. The leading comic operas turned into 'verismo' – or *true to life* operas with a range of emotion and depth in music, libretto and staging – all equally and simultaneously present. Opera had stumbled on to a very successful equation. Give the audience a glimpse into their own lives, - let them escape into a story to

which they can relate, - and let them leave at the end of the evening, having enjoyed a diversion from the worries of day to day existence. Does this sound familiar to any of us? Yes, of course it does. This is what we expect from modern cinema and plays. Opera was the great cinematic television of yesteryear. What drove its success is what drives the same success today.

None of our readers will be surprised by, or can fail to acknowledge, the extraordinary innovation and surefooted lead that the National Centre Performing Arts, Mumbai has taken in enriching the lives of our citizenry. A mere five years ago, one might have wondered what Mumbai had to offer? Not any more! It seems that every six months or so, something new and wonderful is added to the roster of events, at the NCPA - that make us proud partners in the building of a new artistic heritage. One such recent offering is the ongoing collaboration between the National Theatre in Britain and the NCPA, Mumbai. For a fraction of the cost one can watch a live performance of any number of the great National Theatre Productions, right here at Nariman Point, in the small intimate space that is the Godrej Theatre. Superior 'surround sound' and first rate screening technology make this a truly wonderful destination for an evening of entertainment. Bridging the gap between Mumbai and the glorious productions of Britain's National Theatre for a few hundred rupees, should make all of us sit up and pay attention. Well, so it has. Now imagine a collaboration with the world's opera houses, bringing to you, in glorious technicolour, live performances of opera from all over the world. Mr. Peter Gelb's successes at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, are in large part the result of bringing live opera to '*a cinema near you*'. The fact that the NCPA has tied up with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, to bring Mumbai's audiences that same discounted feast in a local setting is reason enough for me to write this article, and reason enough for all of you to support the initiative. However, there is something more intriguing for me historically. 415 years after Peri's *Daphne*, the 'world's leading form of entertainment' is about to make its debut as a part of the 'world's leading form of entertainment' with brand new possibilities. What a coup! What a great way to introduce a new continent of people to the wonders of opera. More importantly, in this era, where 15 minutes is the maximum arbiter to win or lose an argument; where small, ineffectual sound bytes are confused with concision; and where quickly oscillating indecisiveness is confused with direction and speed - it is important to step back a moment and reintroduce a pastime that puts a high worth on slowing down.

The NCPA, as part of this new collaboration with the Met Live, will be offering performances of Verdi's *Otello* - so I will finish with some words of enticement. This opera is something of a miracle in musical history. In 1871 *Aida* had been performed and Verdi, laden with honours, was considered to be retiring. There was a whole new swatch of younger talent nipping at his heels and in some ways, he was considered to be old fashioned. Then, fifteen years later, *Otello* roars on to the scene, a ***new opera in a new style***- with Verdi in his seventy-fourth year.

The composer Boito restricted himself to being a librettist and the two of them fashioned the great drama into one of the very best *Shakespearean* transfers to operatic form. The whole opera, it seems, has been fashioned away from tradition and into the service of gripping drama. In fact, Boito and Verdi do away with the whole Venetian first act of the original Shakespeare— starting and ending the story in Cyprus. We must deduce the relationships that unfold, which are marvelously composed in cunningly delivered asides. There is also no formal overture. The first roar of the orchestra brings you, the audience, directly into a Mediterranean storm which leads to the safe landing of our hero Otello and the ‘Esultate’. The role of Otello is a rite of passage open to only a certain number of singers, though frequently, some tenors storm the gates and wish they hadn’t. The maturity of the role and the demands of the musical line, reflect an equally mature Verdi, putting all of his craft into use. The same can be said for the role of Iago, - a rite of passage for Verdi baritones. There is also a craft at work in the orchestration, the use of the chorus beyond the usual Verdi chorus and of course, this extraordinary story of utter evil and the destruction of nobility through jealousy. This is a thoroughly entertaining work, bringing our own human emotions to the forefront, with such force and drive that we are compelled to acknowledge the great power and presence of Shakespeare, Verdi, Opera, Cinema and now, thanks to our very own NCPA, - ‘Opera at the Cinema’ –*new opera in a new style*.

Zane Dalal © 2012

Zane Dalal is Resident Conductor of the Symphony Orchestra of India and is a frequent contributor to ‘ON STAGE’.