

## CHAPTER 9

# First the Words; Then the Music

I have had occasion to remark previously that music without words—music for instruments alone—forms but a very small part of the music people ordinarily listen to now, as well as what they listened to in past times. Yet it has, so far, occupied us exclusively in this book. That is because it raises the most distinctively philosophical problems; and this book, after all, is an introduction to a *philosophy* of music and not anything else.

Nevertheless, the combination of words with music cannot be totally ignored by the philosopher of music attempting to introduce his subject. It does raise philosophical issues, and now, in this chapter and the next, is the time to consider them, as well as some related issues.

But, because words and music have been together for such a long time, and the singing of words has existed, and continues to exist, in every culture and civilization we know, it is necessary to limit the range of our discussion. In effect, though, the *modern* philosophical debates and questions surrounding the combination of words with music are easy to locate and circumscribe historically. They begin with two events of great importance to the history of music in the West: the invention of musical drama, or opera, as we usually call it; and the religious movement that historians call the Counter-Reformation. Both occurred during the last half of the sixteenth century: in other words, during the waning days of the Renaissance and the beginning of what historians think of as the 'modern era'—*our* era. The reader is already familiar with my penchant for introducing philosophical issues regarding music with a little history. So it will not be surprising that I do so again in this place.

The Counter-Reformation, in which the Catholic Church,

in the second half of the sixteenth century, tried to 'clean its own house,' in response to the criticisms laid upon it by the Protestant reformers, had, of course, broad historical significance, far beyond the significance it had for the history of music. But it *did* have deep significance for the history of music and its philosophy; and that of course is what concerns us here.

The premier event in the Counter-Reformation was the Council of Trent, a deliberative council of the Roman Church, which met in Trento, Italy, between 1554 and 1563. Many important matters of Catholic liturgy, philosophy, and theology were discussed at this council, among them, the role of music in the Catholic service, and the form this music should take. What was principally at issue, in regard to the music, was the intelligibility of the words. The complaint was that the music had become overly complex and 'luxurious,' making the religious text that it was supposed to express impossible for the congregation to hear or (therefore) understand. Music, the churchmen insisted, was supposed to be servant to the text, not its master. In order to understand the nature of the complaint, and what resulted in the consequence of it, we must know a little bit about the nature of the music itself.

From the late Middle Ages to the middle of the sixteenth century, which is to say, to the late Renaissance, liturgical music had become more and more *polyphonically* complex. I have already introduced the concepts of *monodic* as opposed to *polyphonic* music in Chapter 3. But I now need to remind the reader of these concepts, and to enlarge upon them briefly.

'Polyphony' has both a broad and a narrow sense. In the broad sense, polyphonic music is any music where there are more tones sounded simultaneously than simply those of the melody. A folk song, accompanied by simple chords on a guitar, say, would be an example of polyphonic music in this broad sense. Whereas the folk song sung by itself, without any accompaniment at all, would be an example of 'monodic' music, and would be even if someone accompanied the song by playing the very *same* melody on a flute or clarinet.

But, in the more narrow sense, 'polyphony' is music

consisting of two, three, four, or even more separate melodies, sung or played (or both) *simultaneously*. Of course, the melodies must be so contrived that when they are played or sung together they will combine harmoniously with one another, and sound well. But they must *also* be interesting melodies in themselves. The art of composing music of this kind, constructed of simultaneously sounding melodies, is the art of 'polyphony' in the narrow sense, in contrast to a single melody, accompanied by chords, 'homophonic' music, and to single, unaccompanied melodies, 'monody.'

Now, if you understand that from the late Middle Ages to almost the end of the Renaissance, Catholic church music was polyphonic, in the narrow sense of the word, of ever increasing complexity, and thickening texture, you will understand why the clerics were having doctrinal difficulties with it. If you get five of your friends to recite, all at once, but at different speeds, Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, frequently repeating words and phrases before going on, and try to understand the text, you will have some idea of what the Council of Trent was objecting to in the sacred music of its time. Because the intertwining strands of melody, usually five at once, were all singing the text at once, each melody, at any one time, singing a different word of the text, and often prolonging a single syllable over many notes of music, the text being sung could simply not be understood by the listener. The religious message was being obliterated in the interest of musical pleasure. This, the Council of Trent told the composers, must be 'reformed.'

Of course, one way out of the dilemma would have been to abolish polyphony altogether. Before the advent of polyphonic music, the musical part of the Catholic service was monodic. A single melody was 'chanted' by a celebrant or by the choir. Part of the Catholic service has always been sung in this manner. It is known to us as Gregorian Chant, because tradition assigns a major role in its codification to Pope Gregory the First, who reigned at the end of the sixth century.

The abolition of polyphony was indeed seriously contemplated by the Council; but in the end the music-lovers prevailed and a compromise was reached. The

composers were directed to simplify their polyphony, and be more faithful to the rhythm and pace of ordinary speech. In that way, the text would be understandable, while there would still remain an interesting enough musical structure to pleasure the musical taste. One way of putting this, I think, is to say that what the composers were essentially being told was to 'represent' human speech in musical tones, since speaking words, obviously, is the most effective way of making them understood.

What makes this way of looking at things even more plausible is that there were others besides the princes of the Church who were, at that time, or shortly afterwards, concerned with the problem of how to set words to music and still make the words understandable. We have met them before in the second chapter: the members of the Florentine *Camerata*, who were in the process of 'inventing' the music drama, or opera, which, you will recall, they thought of, really, as a revival of the way they thought Greek drama was performed in Classical times.

Like the Council of Trent, the *Camerata* was highly critical of complex polyphony, in the narrow sense. The members of the *Camerata* were convinced, by the testimony of Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient authors, that Greek music (which, of course, they knew only through this written testimony) had had a profound emotional impact on its listeners. Complex polyphony—the music of their own times—had, they believed, no such emotive effect. The cause of this, they thought, was the combination of the different melodies, with which this music was constructed, and which tended, so to speak, to 'garble' the emotive message. Like the Council, but in far more explicit terms, they urged upon composers the task of representing the human speaking voice. But, where the Council stuck with a 'moderated' polyphony, in the narrow sense, the *Camerata* went for a very different sort of thing entirely: something close to monody; a harmonically accompanied musical 'declamation,' hardly a 'melody' at all, sung by a single performer, following closely the cadence and tone of emotional speech. Thus: a lone singer, a single melody, a completely intelligible emotive 'message' at any given point in the performance.

What the *Camerata* developed, then, was essentially the representation, in music, of human conversation. And this musical conversation was to form the basic structure of the first music dramas, which they sometimes called *dramma per musica*, and which became what we know as 'opera.'

Now opera, the theatrical staging of musical drama, was, from the start, a controversial artistic endeavor, and continues to be to this day. The attempt to fit music to words and stories, or, if you like it the other way round, the attempt to fit words and stories to music, is problematic just because, as I argued in the last chapter, absolute music is crucially different in form from the literary and dramatic arts. Opera is only the extreme case of the problem. Whether we are talking about setting the words of a simple poem or lyric, the setting of the Catholic mass, or the setting of unstaged drama, which is called oratorio, it is the *same* problem: making musical and literary aesthetics compatible when *inherently* they are not. But, because opera presents the problem in its most extreme, most visible, and most written-about form, in discussing it we will be discussing *all*, with the problem 'writ large.'

Well then, what is the problem? To understand it we must return to a point made *against* the fictional interpretation of absolute music in the preceding chapter.

You will recall the disanalogy I pointed out towards the end of Chapter 8 between the repetitiousness of music as opposed to the ongoing, directional character of fictional narrative. This disanalogy is the crux of the opera problem, and the problem, as well, of almost all music with text.

The repeating of musical material—both internally and externally—is what gives absolute music its shape. It is what gives it closure and inner structure. The so-called closed musical forms are constituted by the occurrence and subsequent reoccurrence of melodies, melody fragments, and whole sections. An example here would help.

The simplest and perhaps the most immediately satisfying closed musical form is the ABA pattern: in other words, a large self-contained section of music, a second contrasting, self-contained section, and the repeat, either literal or

modified, of the first section. Many kinds of musical composition exhibit this pattern, from large symphonic movements to popular ballads. Other patterns feature a regular return of the first section: ABACADA . . . etc. And there are many more musical patterns that illustrate the basic fact that musical form is a function of musical repetition.

There's the rub, though. For narrative fiction, as we have seen, does not, for the most part, repeat itself. It is not cyclical, like musical form; rather, it is linear, one directional: it moves towards a goal, without doublingback on itself (although its movement towards the goal may be complicated by 'flashbacks' and by beginning in the middle of the story, in *mediis res*, as the ancient writers described the procedure). And that directional flow is what causes the 'problem of opera,' and, to varying degrees, the problem of setting *any* text to music.

The very first operas, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, were constructed of just the kind of monody of which I have now been speaking. These operas were, in effect, 'conversations in tones': not so much music, but *musical*. The cadence and tone of emotional speech were represented with great faithfulness—the most successful project of its kind in the history of music.

Yet a heavy price was paid for making speech the master and music the slave. For just because language does not have musical form, the musical representation of it cannot either. The price the so-called *stile rappresentativo*, the 'representational style' of the early opera, paid for its faithfulness to human speech was its forfeiture of musical form: forfeiture of the 'closed' forms of music, with their necessary repetitions, which give us so much of the pleasure and satisfaction we call 'musical.' Of course, we are not dealing with 'absolutes' here. The operas of which I am speaking did possess some 'closed' musical movements: short songs, choruses, and movements for instruments. But the driving force, the altogether dominant feature, was the 'conversation in tones,' the *stile rappresentativo*. That being the case, whatever pleasures and satisfactions early opera could provide, and indeed still does provide, which are many and deep, true musical pleasures, the pleasures and satisfactions of

absolute musical forms, it could not and cannot give, except in its 'peripheral' aspects.

The problem of opera was, and always has been, the problem of making some sort of accommodation between pure musical form, with all of its necessary repetitions in place, and fictional drama, given its non-repetitious, one-directional character. It is a problem, really, that *cannot* be solved, but that, at various times, has resulted in deeply satisfying if unstable solutions. And I think the problem itself can better be understood if we take a look at what two of the most satisfactory solutions have been.

It would be a good idea first to understand the time frame. The first operas, the kind in which speech was closely followed by the so-called *stile rappresentativo*, the representational style, were being composed at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The greatest practitioner of this art was the great Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). He is credited with having composed the first operatic masterpiece, *Orfeo* (1607); and his only other surviving operas (he wrote approximately ten), *The Return of Ulysses to his Homeland* (1641) and *The Coronation of Poppea* (1642), are still, along with *Orfeo*, performed with great success. But, as great as these works for the musical stage are—and they *are* great works—they fail to provide the 'solution' to the 'opera problem' just because they fail to give musical form, with its internal and external repetitions, to the 'musical speech' that they largely consist in.

But, while the great Monteverdi continued reaping the harvest of early, *stile rappresentativo* music drama in the first forty years of the seventeenth century, a very different form of musical drama was developing, which reached its culmination in the first thirty years of the eighteenth century, in the operas of the great German composer Georg Frideric Handel, who occupied the seemingly paradoxical position of a German composer, writing Italian opera for an English audience. (He made his home, from 1710 to the end of his life, in London.) This form of opera, known as *opera seria*, was, unlike the music drama of the *stile rappresentativo*, a highly successful, as well as highly controversial, compromise between the demands of drama, and those of absolute music.

*Opera seria*, as can easily be inferred from its Italian name, was Italian opera, even though it flourished in many countries besides Italy, composed by non-Italians as well as Italians; and was always on *serious* subjects, usually drawn either from ancient history or from ancient and medieval legend. *Opera seria* is a form of 'number opera': that is to say, opera consisting of separate, self-contained musical movements, 'numbers,' connected by a very rapid musical speech, accompanied by the harpsichord, which pushed the plot forward. The musical movements, or numbers, in *opera seria* were almost exclusively arias, which is to say songs for a single singer, accompanied by an orchestra. The idea was that the opera could serve two masters at once. The rapid speechlike music, called *secco recitativo*, literally 'dry' recitative, because of its lack of expressive character, as close to speech as music can get without ceasing to be music, provided a musical conversation that essentially told the audience what was happening, as dialogue and monologue would in spoken drama. The arias, on the other hand, occurred at points where it was logical for one of the characters to step forth and express his or her emotional reaction to what was happening: anger, fear, love, or whatever. But, unlike the *secco recitativo*, the arias were perfect, closed musical forms, almost always in the ABA pattern. Thus, the *opera seria* provided a solution to the problems both of how musical drama could conform to the demands of linguistic expression and of how it could conform to the demands of pure musical form. It simply put them into separate compartments, and joined the compartments together in a temporal chain. It obviously must have been a deeply satisfying solution. It lasted more than a century, and operas in this form by Handel and Mozart are still performed today to enthusiastic audiences.

But the *opera seria* solution to the problem of opera was, I suggested earlier, an unstable solution. The instability lay in its most unstable part, the aria, about which I must now speak briefly.

The vast majority of arias in traditional *opera seria* are known as *da capo* arias. This is because their tripartite design, ABA, is achieved by literally repeating the first section of the aria after the second section has ended (although the singer

was expected to add embellishments to her part the second time through, for variation). The end of the second section bears the instruction (in Italian) *da capo*, literally, 'from the head,' or, in other words, 'from the beginning.' A typical *da capo* aria, then, consists of a first section, in which a certain emotion, say love, is expressed by a character in the drama, a second section in which a contrasting but related emotion is expressed, say jealousy, and then a literal repeat of the first section, making a perfectly satisfying, unified ABA form. It is also satisfying from a dramatic point of view, from the point of view of verisimilitude, because the music is made to conform to the emotions being expressed by the character, by being expressive of those emotions itself: alternately, love, jealousy, and love again.

But the *da capo* aria, as satisfying as it was (and still is) from the purely musical point of view, eventually came to be seen as problematic from the dramatic side, from the side, that is, of dramatic realism. For, it was argued, people expressing their emotions or thoughts in life do not express them in ABA form. They do not, in other words, repeat themselves in musical form. There is seldom a *da capo* in human discourse. Nor are emotions, in life, experienced in the kind of static way that the *da capo* aria expresses them. The *da capo* aria dwells on emotions; in life emotions rush on unchecked.

In the heyday of *opera seria*, and, particularly, in the operas of Handel and his contemporaries, these criticisms were unfounded. For the *da capo* aria in the operas of Handel, during the first thirty or forty years of the eighteenth century, was, in its way, *both* perfectly suited to how the emotions were understood, philosophically, and, at the same time, perfectly suited to the kinds of characters that populated these operas. The theory of emotions was, at this time, as we have observed in Chapter 2, the Cartesian one: that is to say, the theory that René Descartes had put forward in 1649, in his *Passions of the Soul*. The emotions were seen as somewhat static, limited in number, and, therefore, well suited to expression in the somewhat static musical pace of the *da capo* aria. Furthermore, the characters in the operas, kings, queens, knights, ladies, magicians, temptresses, gods and goddesses, are all, as it were, larger

than life and emotionally obsessive as well as 'overwrought.' In other words, they are just the kinds of characters that would express their emotions in static, stately form, and in an obsessively repetitive way. Their mode of expression is no more inappropriate to the *da capo* aria than verse is inappropriate to Shakespeare's kings.

But, after all, theories of the emotions change, as does musical taste. The last half of the eighteenth century saw a revolution in emotive theory and a revolution in opera along with it. A new solution to the problem of opera was called for, and forthcoming.

First, the new theory of the emotions. It emerged in Britain, out of a theory of psychology based on the 'association of ideas.' 'Associationism' was an attempt to understand how human consciousness works. The notion was that a person's consciousness is a train of ideas, and that it is possible to know how this train proceeds: that is, to know why one idea and not another has followed an idea currently present to the mind. An example will make plain what the associationist psychology was about.

When I think of Chinese food I frequently think right after that of my best friend in high school. That is because the first time I ever ate Chinese food was with her. Of course I don't *always* think of her. Often, when I think of Chinese food, I think right after that of jury duty. That is because in Manhattan, where I live, the court houses are right next to China Town; and when one has jury duty, one tends to have Chinese food for lunch. Thus, the idea of Chinese food has become 'associated' in my mind with the idea of my best friend in high school, and with jury duty. And these associations explain why just now I thought of my friend or thought of jury duty. It is because just before that I happened to think of Chinese food, and these associations were in place. You, of course, will probably have different associations from mine with the idea of Chinese food, so your train of ideas, in that respect, will be different from mine. Nevertheless, the associationist psychologist will tell us, every idea that you or I get is the result of a previous idea, and an 'association' with it.

Emotions, on the associationist view, are very different from

the Cartesian emotions in four important respects that are the result of how the associationist thinks the emotions are acquired. Indeed, *that* the associationist thinks the emotions are acquired, rather than innate, is the first difference. For, on the Cartesian view, we are hard-wired, as we would say, with basic emotions—six, according to Descartes—whereas the associationist thinks we are hard-wired only to feel pleasure and pain, and the emotions are the result of our associating various things with pleasure or pain.

Envy, to take an example, is a feeling of pain at the accomplishments or good fortune of someone else. But I am capable of envy, possess it as part of my emotive 'repertoire,' only if at some time someone's accomplishments or good fortune caused me pain: for example, that person won a tennis tournament I very much wanted to win myself. If that happens, then whenever he, or someone else, accomplishes something that I want to accomplish, that is associated in my mental train with pain, and pain is what I will feel upon viewing the accomplishments of other people, if I am an envious person. On the associationist's view, envy is just, by definition, pain felt at the prospect of other people's accomplishments or good fortune.

The story just told about envy can be told, the associationist insists, for any of the other emotions. Each is a propensity to feel pain, or pleasure, in some determining situation that makes it the emotion it is; and each is acquired by association with the feeling either of pleasure or of pain.

But, just as associations are many, varied, and highly personal—your associations are *yours*, mine are *mine*—the associationist's emotions are not, like the Cartesian's, hard-edged and discrete. Rather, they are vague, blurry around the edges, and fade into one another. Furthermore, they are constantly changing, not static, innate, set pieces, like the Cartesian ones. That is because we never cease to acquire new associations, so our emotions, being built up of associations, are in continual flux. Finally, the whole associationist picture suggests an emotive life of rapid change, of fleeting, evanescent emotional states, as opposed to the Cartesian model of sluggish, stable emotions that must run their course before others can take their place.

One can readily see that the *da capo* aria, with its stately, deliberate ABA pattern, was ideally suited to represent in music the emotive set pieces of the Cartesian psychology. An emotion runs its course in the first section, and comes to a full close. A second, related emotion runs its musical course in the second section and comes to a full close. And then the first section, with its emotion, returns to close the circle. A perfect match between emotional reality, as the Cartesian saw it, and musical form has been achieved in the *da capo* aria, and the *opera seria* in which it is the major player. Opera at its best, in its ideal form, is what I like to call 'drama-made-music.' The *opera seria* and the *da capo* aria, in the age of the Cartesian psychology, achieved that ideal state.

But the gradual change in people's ideas about what emotions and the emotive life are like made *opera seria*, and the *da capo* aria, seem very remote from life—a poor musical representation. It is this fact, I think, more than the so-called absurdity of a character repeating what she had already said when the A section of the *da capo* aria returns, that made the *opera seria* obsolete, and urged composers on to other operatic forms. As long as we have *music*, after all, we will have *repetition*. The challenge is to make the repetition congruent with dramatic, which in opera usually means emotive, similitude.

Who knows whether the new direction opera took was an example of art imitating life or life imitating art? In either case, a musical form emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century that matched the new associationist psychology as neatly as the *da capo* aria had matched the Cartesian. It was what is called 'sonata form,' and we have spoken of it a little early on.

Sonata form, which was the form that many if not most movements took in the major instrumental works of the late eighteenth century, and the nineteenth century as well, was very different from *da capo* aria form in many respects: but in one in particular that is most relevant here. The sections of a *da capo* aria are almost always monothematic and, to coin a phrase, mono-emotive: the first section is based on one theme, expressive of one emotion, the second section again based on one theme, again, expressive of one emotion.

But sonata form presents a broader canvas of themes and (therefore) emotions. To understand this let us first remind ourselves what the general outlines of sonata form are.

You will recall that a sonata-form movement consists of three sections: an *exposition*, in which the themes of the movement are presented; a *development*, in which these themes are varied, 'worked out,' in effect 'played with' by the composer, in whatever ways style dictates and his creative imagination suggests; and a *recapitulation*, in which the original themes are presented, usually (but not always) in the same order as in the exposition, but varied as to key, to make a proper close. For, whereas the exposition (usually) moves the music to the dominant key, the recapitulation must return to the tonic, the original key, to achieve a satisfying and *conclusive* musical resolution.

I hope the reader has not failed to notice that in one very obvious and important respect sonata form and *da capo* aria form are the same. They both exhibit a tripartite, ABA pattern, although in the *da capo* aria the return of A is literal, whereas in sonata form it is altered, in the way just now described. They are both closed forms, with clearly discernible patterns that completely satisfy our pure musical 'sense.'

But sonata form, as I have said, presents a broader and more varied musical canvas than the basically monothematic *da capo* aria. It is, therefore, capable of reflecting, musically, the broader, more varied emotive canvas of the associationist psychology. Sonata form can present, in its exposition, three or more themes, expressive of different emotions. The development can increase the expressive palette even further. The associationist picture of the emotive life is of a quickly changing, moving panorama of emotions. It is just this kind of dynamic emotive experience, not the stately, static Cartesian one that sonata form is ideally suited to represent in music.

The simultaneous presence of sonata form and the associationist psychology, then, pointed opera in a new direction, although with the same old purpose: to achieve staged drama in musical closed form: drama-made-music, as I have been calling it. But another circumstance came into play

as well. And I turn to that now.

You will recall that the basic structure of the *opera seria* is a string of arias joined by the 'song-speech' called *secco recitative*, that is, 'dry' recitative. The arias are static points where the action stops and a character expresses his or her emotion in musical, ABA form. The arias are the real music of *opera seria*. The *secco recitative* is borderline music—'music' of little if any musical interest. The paradox is that where there is action there is no music, and where there is music there is no action. That, in essence, is *opera seria*'s solution to the 'problem of opera.'

But, the theoreticians and lovers of drama-made-music will ask (and did ask), cannot we have it both ways? Cannot we have music where there is no action *and* music where there is action as well? The answer is 'Yes.' And this gift was given to us by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91), in the form of what we call 'dramatic ensemble,' of which he is the universally acknowledged master.

The great American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein once pointed out that in opera, unlike spoken drama, 'everybody can "talk" at the same time.' (His remark, as I recall, was directly aimed at Mozart.) This, of course, is the principle on which vocal polyphony (in the narrow sense) is based, and which the dramatic ensemble exploits. (There was no Council of Trent, in the eighteenth century, to forbid it!)

In Mozart's great comic operas—for it was in comedy that the dramatic ensemble first became a major player—large sections of the plot are played out in a continuous musical fabric in which three, four, five, or even more characters take part. This does not mean that they need all sing together all of the time. Characters can enter, exit, sing alone, or in twos and threes, and so forth. But the point is that the music is continuous, with no break for *secco recitative*, and can advance the plot by the musical dialogue, and the comings and goings within the ensemble.

The crowning achievement of this kind of operatic ensemble is, I think everyone would agree, the finale of Act II of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, in which eight characters participate, and which consists of 939 measures—a good

twenty minutes of continuous music without a break for *recitative*. And, although you will not find in it a strict adherence to sonata form (which you *will* find in other of Mozart's dramatic ensembles, such as the Trio in the first act of *Figaro*, and the Sextet in the third), you will recognize in it what Charles Rosen calls the 'sonata principle,' which is to say, the sense of a progression to the dominant key, and a sense of return, a 'feeling' of recapitulation, if not, literally, the thing itself. To sustain an operatic ensemble of this length and of this complexity and of this variety of emotional states, one required a psychology to make it seem a possible course of human events, and a musical form to 'represent' it. The former was provided by the associationist psychology, the latter by sonata form. Together they constituted the second 'perfect' solution to the 'problem of opera.'

I put 'perfect' in quotation marks, 'scare quotes,' as philosophers call them, to remind the reader of something I said a while ago about 'solutions'—there are those scare quotes again—to the opera problem. I said they were 'unstable.' Another way of saying that is to say there is no perfect solution to the problem of opera: to the problem of having something that is *both* music *and* staged drama, with all the things both of those art forms imply.

At this point I would like to introduce a somewhat artificial but useful distinction between what I shall call 'opera' and 'music drama.' It is not strictly observed in people's ordinary talk about such things, or the talk of the experts either. But it *is*, I think, informally observed, and will serve a good purpose.

By 'opera' I shall mean those kinds of musical theater in which an attempt is made to preserve the closed musical forms and still maintain some acceptable degree of dramatic and (especially) emotive verisimilitude: dramatic and emotive 'realism.' (In a moment I will introduce the term 'music drama' for something else.) Handel's and Mozart's operas are examples of 'opera' in my sense of the word. For both composers tried to preserve the closed musical forms, *da capo* and sonata form, while contriving to make those forms 'fit' the prevailing psychologies of their day (whether they were consciously aware of the psychological theories or, as is

more probable, were intuitively aware of them as part of their general intellectual and social backgrounds).

Opera, however, even in these 'perfect' solutions, remained a controversial art form. Many people could not (and still cannot) accept the 'absurdities,' so called, of a drama where characters sing to each other in closed, repetitive movements, and then revert to an equally 'absurd' song-speech, *secco recitative*, which is neither music nor speech, just to get out of the way, as it were, all of the events that there is no time to sing, or can't be sung, that motivate the plot.

For composers to whom these so-called 'absurdities' really were unacceptable, two courses lay open: one, to tinker with operatic form in the hope of ameliorating if not totally removing the 'absurdities'; the other, to reject the 'problem of opera' altogether and strike out in a different (not, as we shall see, totally new) direction. What the tinkerers came up with was, essentially, a halfway house between sung opera and spoken drama: it is called *Singspiel* in German, literally sing-talk, ballad opera in English, *opéra comique* in French. The compromise was that the closed musical forms, aria and ensemble, should remain intact, but that the dialogue, instead of being sung in *recitative*, would be spoken.

This kind of musical theater seemed particularly suited to the popular taste, witness the 'operettas' of Gilbert and Sullivan, as well as, in our own times, the 'Broadway musical.' But it also took the form of serious drama, of which Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* is the most famous and frequently performed example.

Whether, however, opera in which characters sometimes sing and sometimes speak is any less 'absurd' than those in which they sing throughout—if, that is, you think opera 'absurd' in the first place—is questionable. And those who do find opera an 'absurd' art form, either half-sung or all sung, are inclined to seek another solution entirely to the problem of musical drama than the operatic solution of closed musical forms interspersed with *recitative* or speech. It is for this solution that I have reserved the name 'music drama,' not without some precedent in ordinary speech and the history of music.

Two splendid 'experiments' in music drama were

performed in the eighteenth century, one a failure, the other a notable success but without future progeny. The failure was an odd sort of work for the stage known as 'melodrama.' The aesthetic thinking behind it is something like this. The villain in opera—what makes it 'absurd'—is the spectacle of dramatic characters conversing in musical tones, instead of speech. So let's, instead, have the characters speak their lines, while accompanied by a background of music expressive of what is being spoken. Melodrama was invented in France, and flourished very briefly in Germany. It failed, though, to satisfy the craving for *real music* that, after all, is the driving force of all musical theater worthy of the name, and the music of melodrama was merely a kind of musical background noise. But melodrama did actually survive in two rather different ways. It survived as a technique in opera, to supplement *recitative* and the closed musical forms, and is used, for example, by Beethoven in one of the crucial scenes in *Fidelio*, to accentuate a dramatic moment.

But melodrama survives in our own day, really, in the most influential of twentieth-century art forms, the *movie*. For, both in the silents, and in talkies, movies have, with few exceptions, been accompanied by music. The reasons for this are not altogether clear, and cannot be gone into here. However, the failure of melodrama to satisfy the yearning for a truly musical drama is underlined by its success in the movies. Because, whatever its success in the movies amounts to does *not* make the movies musical theater, and no one perceives them as such.

The second splendid eighteenth-century 'experiment' in 'music drama' (as I am using that term) was executed by the German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-87). Gluck was frequently referred to, and still is, as the man who 'reformed' Italian *opera seria*. The most famous of his so-called reform operas, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, is very popular, and still frequently performed. But the two most fully realized examples, *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, both based on Greek myths surrounding the onset and aftermath of the Trojan War, are, unfortunately, seldom mounted. (They are, by the way, settings of French, not Italian texts.)

The two *Iphigenias* are not 'revolutionary' works of art, in

the way that melodrama is. Rather, they make use of all the resources of opera that were available to Gluck. But, by radically changing the dimension of opera's inner components, especially *recitative* and aria, Gluck produced something close to what I want to call music drama, without, in the process, giving up entirely the closed musical forms.

One of Gluck's major 'reforms' was the elimination of *secco recitative*: the rapid 'tone-talk' interposed between the arias, and accompanied by the harpsichord. What now did the work for it was what is known as 'accompanied recitative.' In traditional *opera seria* there was a kind of middle ground, which I have not mentioned before, between *secco recitative* and aria, accompanied by the full orchestra, and saved for moments of heightened emotional tension. It still maintained a speechlike musical declamation; but it was much closer to real song than the rapid 'parlando' of *secco recitative*. Also, the orchestral accompaniment was far more elaborate and responsive to the text than the simple chordal accompaniment of the harpsichord. Accompanied recitative, therefore, had real musical attractions, unlike the 'let's-get-it-over-with,' throwaway character of *secco recitative*.

There were, from the 'reformers' point of view, three advantages to the replacement of *secco* with accompanied recitative. First, it eliminated the discontinuity many people felt, and still feel, between the aria, accompanied by full orchestra, and the *secco recitative*, accompanied only by the harpsichord. For now, with accompanied recitative holding exclusive rights, the musical fabric is a continuous orchestral fabric: the orchestra has become the ever-present 'commentator' on the dramatic events; a kind of 'Greek chorus' without words.

Second, the more elaborate character that accompanied recitative took on, now that it had the full resources of the orchestra, rather than the thin support of the harpsichord, provided the composer with an additional, and powerful dramatic tool. The orchestra could be used to emphasize dramatic and emotional points in the recitative text in ways that the simple chordal accompaniment of the harpsichord could not possibly duplicate.

Finally, as accompanied recitative possesses real musical

value and interest, its exclusive presence is a musical plus for musical theater. That is simple arithmetic, which applies even to works of art.

Gluck's second innovation in his 'reform' operas was the drastic curtailing of the aria's musical dimensions. The *da capo* aria, and other 'luxurious' aria forms, must inevitably slow the pace of the drama. By reducing the length of the arias to almost 'songlike' size, Gluck thereby increased the dramatic pace. No longer was there such a marked disparity between recitative and aria. In short, the musical fabric of Gluck's last operas began to follow the pace of ordinary conversation more closely than anything on the musical stage (with the exception of the short-lived melodrama) since the early operas of the *stile rappresentativo*.

What, in effect, Gluck's two *Iphigenias* were approaching was what is sometimes called 'through-composed' music drama, which is to say, a musical setting of the text in which there are no external or internal repeats at all. As the text unfolds, new music unfolds along with it. There is never a pause for arias or other of the closed musical forms. The drama is a seamless musical web even to the extent of avoiding cadences—that is to say, musical resting places. The master of this form of writing for the musical stage, which is the most completely realized example of what I have been calling 'music drama,' was the great German composer Richard Wagner (1813–83).

It is an exaggeration to say that there are no internal repeats in Wagner's most imposing music drama, the *Ring of the Nibelungen*, which gave the phrase 'of Wagnerian length' its meaning in our language. It is, in fact, four separate music dramas; and Wagner knit them together, musically, with what are called 'leitmotifs': musical phrases and fragments associated with particular characters, ideas, and events in the plot, which occur and reoccur, periodically, to represent or emphasize dramatic events. These leitmotifs do, indeed, lend a kind of continuous symphonic texture to the work. Nevertheless, the leitmotifs never literally repeat themselves, as Wagner has endlessly ingenious ways of altering the harmonies that accompany them, to suit the dramatic situation. And the overall impression is of a musical fabric that

faithfully follows the meaning and emotive import of the words and events. It is a seamless musical fabric in which the *orchestra*—a giant one by the standards of Wagner's day—is the principal player. Needless to say, closed musical forms such as aria or dramatic ensemble are totally rejected.

In an obvious way Wagner's idea of music drama was not new, but, in effect, a return to the earliest conception of musical theater, as envisioned by the Florentine *Camerata*. It was opera, as I am using that term, with its attempt to reconcile drama with closed musical form, and with internal and external repetition, that was the innovation. However that may be, the division between opera and music drama is remarkable in its propensity for generating dispute, not just among theoreticians, composers, critics, and even philosophers, but among the public of music-lovers as well. There are music-lovers who can't abide the 'absurdities' of the musical theater at all, in particular, the 'spectacle' of conversation in music. But even among those who can accept that premise, there is a remarkable difference in tastes that seems irreconcilable and even, at times, violent. Wagner's music, in particular, has a tendency to generate either frenzied devotion or outright disgust. And, on the other side, there is no more fanatically committed audience than that for 'grand opera,' as well as no other art form so consistently lampooned, ridiculed, satirized, and generally just plain laughed at.

The source of these passions lies, I am convinced, in the deep divide that separates the literary and visual arts, on the one hand, from absolute music on the other, of which I spoke in the previous chapter. As great a 'pure' musical mind as Wagner possessed, and even his enemies cannot deny him that, the *Ring*, for many music-lovers, does not satisfy the 'pure' musical craving. And, as for the two universally acknowledged masters of opera, as I use that term, Mozart and Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901), they, for their part, do not fully satisfy the 'pure' dramatic craving of the sophisticated theatergoer. Even for someone who can accept drama in verse, the step to drama in closed musical forms is a difficult one and, for many, impossible.

But these brief, summary remarks on the problems of

opera and music drama do not yet, for our purposes, close the book on either the question of 'literary' music in general, or musical theater in particular. And, in order for that book to be closed, we must go on to talk about another attempt to bridge the gap between the arts of content and the art of absolute music. That will occupy us in the next chapter.