

Opera for the Modern World: When Does Verdi Cease to be Verdi?

When we consider opera and its cultural relevance, one could argue we are in a dark age. Opera no longer occupies the place of esteem and pertinence to the average person that it may have once held. Even in popular culture, opera is seen as a dated form of media relegated to hyper-wealthy and elderly crowds. With long antiquated plots and venues only in major cities, opera and even the act of going to one has subtle, unconscious connotations of social elitism that have long failed to attract younger audiences. Much to the MET's credit, through programs like student discounts, 40 Under 40, and the Apollo Circle, the high arts, in general, have had a resurgence in popularity. In the wake of this increased popularity with younger generations, some have come to view the works of Verdi, Puccini, and Rossini as living, breathing glimpses of history, while others find these works to be dated or worse - unrelatable. In an effort to address these issues, the MET Opera has added more recent and contemporary compositions to its repertoire and more controversially, modernized some of these "breathing glimpses of history." This past season the MET Opera opened with *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, a spectacular, modern opera that had a record turnout with young and minority audiences. This recent composition shows that younger audiences can and will go to the opera, but only when they feel like the shows being put on are relatable and enticing to their modern tastes.

The same theory can be applied to modernized renditions of classical operas. As I will discuss below, these modernization efforts raise important questions about opera. If we change the setting, plot, and characters, is it still opera? If we pick and choose scenes or diverge from what the composer wrote, is it still opera? Most of all - if we continue catering to modern audiences, at what point does a Verdi cease to be a Verdi?

The MET's recent production of *La Traviata* starring Soprano Nadine Sierra and produced by Michael Mayer was a classic example of what can be called "traditional opera." The set design, the characters, the staging, and even the costumes all stayed more or less true to the original Verdi

composition. In a dazzling display of the MET's incredible design prowess, Mayer's truly made the audience feel as though they were in a Parisian salon, watching Violetta shock and awe her company until her tragic demise. Like the salons of old, the opera's set was a work of art itself. Flush with moving pieces on the walls, lavish molding, and the occasional tossed champagne flute, Mayer's set felt like an integral part of the opera, moving along and adapting in tandem with the plot.

While the audience is able to "feel" the setting and place themselves in the same parlor as Violetta, truly understanding the culture and norms of the time is a much more arduous feat for the MET to pull off. Making the audience move from feeling the setting to understanding the world of the opera is the greatest challenge a producer faces. Mayer has a long history of putting on spectacular performances on and off Broadway, however, a Verdi Opera represents a unique set of difficulties that he has to address. First and foremost of these difficulties is making the viewer understand the world the opera exists in, something I argue he did not do effectively.

It was evident that there was still more Mayer could have done to make the modern audience better understand the hardships Violetta was facing, or how bizarre it was to see an independent woman with her own agency at this time. Violetta lives and thrives in a world politically, socially, and culturally dominated by men. This overarching patriarchy touches every aspect of her life, and yet here she is, a woman who denounces the need to be loved. The rarity of this phenomenon, for the time she lives in, is not truly "understood" by the modern audience. We see that she is on her own and happy, but Mayer fails to make us understand the world she lives in and how much of a departure she is from the norms of that world. Additional issues like her battle with consumption, the poor timing of written letters, and even the controversy of her career are all aspects of past cultures and times that are lost on the modern viewer. All in all, the MET's approach made the viewer feel the world around Violetta, but they fell short of allowing the viewer to truly understand her world. The subtleties of the power of the restricting culture around her were lost in the pomp and circumstance of the lavish set designs. This issue of feeling versus understanding is not unique to Mayer or *La Traviata* but is emblematic of a larger issue in Opera. When

an opera is felt but not understood by modern audiences, they fall back into the issues of low turnout and stereotypes of elitism that have plagued the art form.

On the other hand, Simon Stone's recent rendition of *La Traviata* flipped these shortcomings on their head with his introduction of modern characters, conflicts, and settings to Verdi's original compositions. In doing so, Stone lost the feeling of a Parisian parlor, substituting it for runways, billboards, and a stage lit up with the lights of a modern Paris. By moving Violetta into the modern era and transforming her into a jaded model and influencer, Stone made the character more relatable to the modern viewer. While younger audiences may not understand the struggles of a 19th-century courtesan, pop culture has made the struggles of Instagram influencers, models, and 'it-girls' facets of daily life. We can understand that Violetta is so focused on her career that it takes a toll on her health, we can understand that her life is beautiful on the surface but deeply hollow, and most importantly we can understand why Violetta is so scared of the unknown and the changing social world around her. Stone's changes feed into the modern idea of a jaded performer. While the audience may not understand the hollowness Mayer's Violetta feels as she spends her time in the public eye, drinking, dancing, and singing, we can instantly recognize and relate to Stone's Violetta and her internal shortcomings as she achieves the peak of influencer success and recognition.

By bringing the scene and characters into the modern world, Stone made the opera more relatable, bridging the gap between the viewer's culture and Violetta's. Comparing the two renditions of *è strano*, Mayer's feels historical while Stone's feels familiar to the modern viewer. In Mayer's rendition of *è strano*, Violetta remains still for most of the aria, giving a stiff and almost trapped impression to it. She sings alone, walking from end to end of the room, trapped within the confines of her salon. Even in such a powerful scene, the audience is not able to truly understand Violetta. Contrasting this to Stone's rendition and we are given a more detailed insight into Violetta's life and struggles. As Stone's Violetta sings, the background around her changes giving the audience the illusion of moving through Paris alongside her. In the modern retelling, Violetta moves from billboards of her face and name, symbols of her success and

vanity, to a small square, where she is ignored by the two lovers behind her. While both Mayer's and Stone's Violettas sing to themselves, Stone's introduction of nameless characters who ignore Violetta adds to the depth of her loneliness and longing for love. Stone additionally adds subtle hints to the disease and career his Violetta has in a way that Mayer simply fails to include. As she walks the streets of Paris alone, Violetta checks her phone and holds a cigarette to her mouth, reminders of how consumed she is in her shallow life. These subtle hints to the world around her, her isolation, and her self-inflicted sabotage all feel relatable to the modern viewer, making it captivating to watch. The scene alone is a perfect example of the divide facing opera: to make it relatable or historical. However, in his attempts to alter the scene and make it more "understandable," Stone is still careful not to overstep his bounds.

When altering an opera, remaining within the realm of "allowable" is extremely important - the audience came to see a Verdi production and expect a Verdi production. Within an opera, or any performance for that matter, four broad components exist that define the piece and set it apart from others: characters, plot, setting, and score. Altering one component but keeping the others fixed yields a new and innovative performance that is still "allowable" and recognizable to the original. Upon changing multiple, the work ceases to be true. For example, Stone's *La Traviata* with its modern-day setting but consistent other components is recognizably a reinterpretation of Verdi's original work, but the same reinterpretation without Giorgio is no longer *La Traviata*, but could as easily be a retelling *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, or *La Tosca* (or any other work where the heroine dies in love). Stone addresses these concerns of overstepping with his alterations by staying true to the plot, characters, and overall score of the play. The end result is a modern retelling that still falls within the limits of alteration.

Producers and directors have to walk this fine line between overstepping and innovation whenever they create their reinterpretations. While it may seem trivial, these reinterpretations bring life back into historical productions. Contemporary directors absolutely have an obligation to create these reinterpretations and push the frontiers of modern art. After reading a few reviews of Stone's rendition, it seems critics have a similar view. To summarize a few reviews from Operawire, Letterboxd, and

Operanews, critics and young audiences alike found this rendition to be an innovative and fresh take on Verdi. While some points stretched imagination or relied on plot armor, Stone's attempts to "modernize" were largely successful. These reviews solidified my belief in the duty contemporary directors have towards art and opera. By breathing new life into operas, Stone and others give opera more cultural relevance. By moving beyond just "feeling" like we are in the opera to "understanding" who the characters are and the world they live in, modern viewers gain a better appreciation for the stories being told. With minor alterations to aspects of the opera, directors like Stone keep the traditions of Verdi alive - innovating but simultaneously paying homage to the greats that came before.

-Aditya Khera