MUSIC & CULTURE
IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

A SOURCE BOOK

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FRANCESCO MILIZIA
from *Complete Formal and Material Treatise on the Theater* (1794)

Reading begins on the following page

On the Recitative

The din of the overture is followed by the recitative, which is both dull-sounding and neglected by composers and singers alike, and which no one thinks of listening to any longer. In truth, its insipidity and monotony are insufferable. Yet it is the very foundation of opera.

All things in this world, and especially human emotions, have their rests and intervals, and the art of the theater demands that in this respect the course of nature be observed. At performances one cannot always be bursting with laughter or bathed in tears. The leading characters are not always moved by the same intensity of feeling; they alternate between moments of emotional passion and of calm. Those in subordinate roles, no matter how involved in the action, cannot have the same passionate excesses as their heroes. Lastly, even the most pathos-inspiring situation becomes so only by degree; it needs to be prepared, and its effect depends in large measure on what has preceded and led up to it.

There are thus two distinct tempos in opera: the calm and the passionate. The composer must concentrate all his efforts on finding two musical genres that are essentially different and capable of conveying respectively the language of tranquillity and that of the emotions, in all their forcefulness, variety, and disorder. This last genre makes up what is known as the *aria,* the former what is called *recitative.*

When characters on stage discuss, deliberate, linger, and converse together, it would be most inappropriate for them to sing and trill: they must recite. But what will this recitative of theirs be? Performing it in the usual way is soporific; nor can it simply be spoken: an opera that is alternately spoken and sung would be as incongruous as ice and fire. How then to proceed?[4]

3. Tartini's habit of choosing poetic subjects for his instrumental works was also remarked upon by d'Alembert; see Ch. 2, p. 90. [BJB]

4. In the outstanding M. Rousseau's lyrical scene *Pygmalion,* which was performed at Lyons with great success [1770], the words were never sung, and music merely served to fill in the intervals necessary in recitation. With this spectacle Rousseau wanted to convey an idea of Greek *melopoeia* and of ancient Greek theatrical recitation. This is why he wanted the music to be expressive and to depict both the situation and, as it were, the particular emotion the author himself felt. Some sections of the music were composed by Rousseau himself, and the rest by M. Coignet. Why is such an example, which was so successful in France, not imitated in Italy? Would it be so shameful to correct our ways? [Horace Coignet (1735–1821), an amateur violinist, singer, and composer in Lyons, wrote 24 of the 26 instrumental interludes for *Pygmalion;* the music was very popular in France. BJB]

The masters of this art have proved that the foundation of the recitative must be a harmony closely patterned on nature, in other words, something halfway between ordinary speech and melody. Therefore, it must be varied and draw its form and soul from the quality of the words. At times, it must be as rapid as the flow of words themselves, and at times it must proceed slowly. Above all, it must stress those inflections and those accentuations that the power of the emotions has the strength to convey to the expressions.

To be persuaded of the truth of this assertion, one has only to observe recitative that is accompanied by instruments and is called *obbligato.* Why is it that we listen to it with both attention and pleasure, if not because it is natural? Therefore, let all recitative be similar to the *obbligato;* then, instead of being boring, it will become delightful, and the more delightful it is, the more natural and expressive it will be.

Such harmonious recitative would result in a further advantage, that of avoiding the ugly break that occurs between an ordinary recitative and an aria, which shoots off in the middle of things like a rocket gone wild. Certainly there has to be an appreciable difference between the recitative and the aria, but not a leap as from the earth to the sky. Who bursts out in a fit of passion without having first experienced it in various degrees?

On Arias

An *aria* is the development of an interesting situation; it is the peroration and recapitulation of the scene. With four short lines provided by the poet, the composer attempts to express not only the main idea of his character, but also all the associated ones and the gradations. The more ably the composer divines the most secret stirrings of the human soul in each situation, the more beautiful will his aria be. It is here that he must unfold all the riches of his artistry by joining the magic of harmony with that of melody, and the authority of the voices with that of the instruments. The performance of the aria will then be divided between song and gesture, as it requires not only an able singer but also a competent actor. This is what an aria should be. Let us see what it is at present.

The aria begins not with singing, but rather with those introductory ritornellos, which are always useless and often annoying, and which enfeeble the action. This happens because the actor is obliged to stand there with his hands in his belt, waiting for the ritornello to end—which it does not readily do—before giving vent to the passion seething within his breast.

At last he sings, but a host of instruments will so drown his voice that only

from time to time will some remote cry or shout be heard. Why such a rabble of violins? Why do away with the violas, which are midway between violins and basses? Why not reintroduce lutes and harps, whose pizzicato gives the ripienos a certain sparkle?

Those arias in which the voices compete with a trumpet or an oboe, exchanging question and answer until they are breathless, elicit the most enthusiastic applause. What then is imitated? What poetic emotion is expressed? Each aria should be discreetly accompanied by different types of instruments, so that each instrument suits the nature of the words, thus effecting a proper expression of a particular emotion.

He who sings the highest notes in arias is the best, that is, the least melodious. Who does not see that the high notes are for music what the brightest colors are for painting?

Those frequent passages from one musical pole to another, when not required by emotion or a particular feeling, are true interruptions of the musical sense.

What are those endless repetitions of words, verses, of complicated, disordered, and mixed parts if not a maze? Words are not to be repeated unless in the order dictated by the emotions.

The first part of an aria is usually a display of pyrotechnics, the second a boring lamentation, from which one returns to the first part, which (come what may) has to be repeated four times in its entirety and separately in countless fragments so that each member of the audience can leave the theater utterly satiated. The foremost musical minds cannot suffer so much music.

Maestri di cappella are normally very careful to express the words of an aria. They sweeten the notes at the words *calma, sposo, padre* (calm, husband, father); they express the word *cielo* (heaven) with high notes and the words *terra* (earth) and *inferno* (hell) with low ones; they impetuously glide over words like *fulmini* (lightning) and *tuoni* (thunder), and with a dozen vocal outbursts forcefully express the words *mostro furioso* (furious monster). But these and other similar childish devices are not those that express the condition of the soul or the sense of an aria; they only explain a few words, and destroy the overall feeling. The same problems are to be found in the duets.

The choruses are even more poorly produced; they are so insipid that no one deigns to listen to them anymore. Yet if they were properly laid out by a poet, and expressed with simplicity the sentiments of a people voicing their hatred of a tyrant's cruelty by means of brief imprecations, or applauding a beneficent hero with joyful acclamations, they would become pleasing and interesting, at least if they were set to expressive music.

Choruses can even be sung in recited tragedies, as was once done in Ferrara

in the case of Giraldi's *Egle,* Lollio's *Aretusa,* and Tasso's *Aminta.*[5] These tragic choruses should always praise virtue, condemn vice, and console the unfortunate. These choruses should be set either to plaintive or cheerful music, or a mixture of the two, according to their subject matter. This gives pleasure and relief to the listeners who are at times tired and filled with the powerful effects produced by the tragedy itself. In this way, they can catch their breaths and rest at the end of each act, since the choruses serve as appropriate intermezzos, unlike those most unsuitable ones that are at present used both in tragedies and comedies.

From what has been said so far, it clearly seems that the great illness of modern Italian music lies in excess. This excess has given rise to ornamentation of all types, flourishes, trifles, embroideries, and all sorts of oddities. These, in turn, have caused us to lose sight of the main aim of music, which consists in expressing poetic sentiment in the most natural and simple manner, so as to touch the heart in the most vivid way possible. Do you really want touching ariettas, capable of etching themselves in everyone's memory? Then have them depict and express the poet's feelings; have them be as natural as possible, or, as they say, speaking (*parlanti*). Only beautiful simplicity can imitate nature. It was this simplicity that made Vinci and Pergolesi famous. Intricate artistic embellishments may cause surprise, but they fail to go to the heart.

If you want music to be simple and touching, use more melody and less counterpoint. Counterpoint is made up of various parts: one is high and quick-paced, the other low and slow, and both must exist together and strike the ears at the same time. How then can counterpoint produce in the soul a given passion, which requires a specific rhythm? Happiness requires a very fast tempo, with an intense and high-pitched tone; sadness requires a slow tempo, with a restrained and low-pitched tone. Melody, on the other hand, always proceeds at the same tempo and with the same tone up to the end, and is thus particularly suited to arousing a given emotion. Melody does not require such profound learning as does counterpoint, but it does require exquisite taste and the greatest discretion in judgment.

Proof of this are those musical intermezzos[6] and short comic operas, which

5. Milizia evidently did not know the works firsthand, for Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cintio's *Egle* (1545; the music by Antonio dal Cornetto is lost), Alberto Lollio's *Aretusa* (1563; music by Alfonso della Viola, lost), and Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* (1573) are all pastorals. [BJB]

6. From the days of ancient chivalry up to the beginning of the last century, it was customary at the feasts of distinguished princes and lords to perform a sort of dumb show between one course and another with the aid of machines, that is, a theatrical representation in which there were human figures, strange animals, trees, mountains, rivers, seascapes, and boats. All this was interspersed with characters and birds that moved about the hall or on the tables, representing actions evoking warlike and chivalric deeds, especially those of the Crusades. Such amusements, which served to entertain the dinner guests between one course and the other, were called *entremets,* that

are more pleasing than heroic operas because their music is simpler and expresses the subject matter better, both in its entirety and its separate parts. These operas are composed with greater simplicity, as they usually concern very ordinary characters who cannot be expected to perform all the secrets of the art or the treasures of learning. This is why composers are compelled to keep to what is simple, and with simplicity imitate nature. It is the burlesque opera *La serva padrona* that caused Italian music to triumph in France.

Thus, properly composing an opera requires much more than just a few hours stolen from libertine pursuits, as some composers boast. Long and serious meditation is required to understand thoroughly and to express a drama, both in its entirety and in its parts.

From *Trattato completo, formale e materiale del teatro* (Venice, 1794; repr. Bologna: Forni, 1969), 50–59.

VITTORIO ALFIERI

Preface to *Abele: Tramelogedia* (1796)

Having conferred an unusual name on this theatrical production of mine (whatever it may be), I feel compelled to provide a brief explanation of the title I have given it.

Tramelogedy, a term which time will judge either barbarous or Italian, seemed to me the most appropriate to characterize this work, about which it will perhaps be easier for me to say what it is not than what it is.

It is not tragedy, since it violates various basic rules of the tragic genre, and it avails itself of means that a sound tragedy cannot and absolutely must not allow.

It is not comedy, since its action depicts characters who, on account of their antiquity, are most venerable, its reversals (*peripezie*) are doleful, and its outcome is supremely tragic. Although because of the simplicity of its subject matter it seems to bear some analogy with a pastoral, it is nevertheless quite different because of the extremely complex manner in which it develops and progresses, the marvelous elements it contains, and the denouement of the plot.

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is, "between courses." From these were derived the *intermezzos* in theaters. Perhaps the *desserts*, which today are in fashion at meals, have their origin in those *entremets*. Today, however, the term *entremets* means a more general and voluptuous kind of luxury that is repeated daily and presents us with all the sensual laxity or the boredom of the Sybarites. He who thinks too much of his table thinks too little of virtue.