

THE EXPRESSIVITY OF “TYPICALLY ITALIAN” ROMANTIC OPERA

In the love of music, as in the love of literature, there are what we call "weaknesses." People of high seriousness and strong aesthetic judgment may yet have a "weakness" for detective stories; or for science fiction; or for Italian opera.

No one has ever been said to have a weakness for Dostoevsky novels or for The Divine Comedy or for Beethoven's late quartets. The logic underlying this distinction in our usage must be that these -- Beethoven etc. -- are strong works of art; love of them cannot be a weakness. Whereas those -- Italian opera etc. -- are inherently limited forms; one loves them indulgently if at all.

I shall not dispute this logic. Nor shall I discuss detective tales, science fiction, Hollywood movies, Victorian parlor music or any other artistic genre other than early nineteenth century Italian opera. But I want to put together a few ideas about the relationship between words and music in Italian opera, and I find it helpful to proceed from this weakness. One of the qualities that characterize all these inherently limited forms (and which their indulgent lovers find endearing) is recognizability, or even predictability.

Imagine a lover of bel canto opera turning on the radio. He hears a few measures that he has never heard before from, say, the middle of an obscure Donizetti opera never performed outside of Bergamo and available now only through a pirate tape recording. Let us further assume that this hypothetical listener has no plot synopsis or libretto before him. The diction of the performers and the quality of the sound reproduction are as usual not such that, even with a good knowledge of operatic Italian, he can understand most of the words. Is he confused? A little, perhaps. Does he lose his dramatic bearings? Probably not. He catches a few key words, like *amore* or *vendetta* or *perduto*. He notices the way the voices are deployed and the character of the melodies. From these he derives quite a good idea of what is happening and what emotions are being expressed.

The fact is that dramatic situations in bel canto opera tend to be "stock" dramatic situations, and that their musical treatment tends to be along lines that are recognizable, if not actually predictable, from one work to another.

For example, if the soprano begins to skip up and down the scale in a brisk dance-like rhythm and with rapid sixteenth-note figures at the end of each phrase, chances are good that she is a bride preparing for her wedding, like Elvira in Bellini's *I Puritani* –

Ex.1: "*Son vergin vezzosa...*"

or like Elena in *I Vespri Siciliani* by Verdi —

Ex.2: "*Merce dilette amiche...*"

Each of these melodies begins with a turnabout kick-off flourish around the dominant degree, rises about an octave in equal staccato hops, and descends a fifth in little rapid steps. The heroine of Donizetti's *Linda di Ohamounix* sings a similar song, though not with all off the same details.

Ex.3: "*O luce di quest' anima...*"

Each of these arias expresses what we might call "bridal" feelings.

There are differences, of course, and these are in many ways more interesting than the similarities. For instance, Elvira and Linda sing in major key, but Verdi's Elena sings in minor, appropriately enough: first, because she is basically a melancholy Sicilian with a sad past, even if she is a bride in this number; second, because, unbeknownst to her, what is about to follow is not her wedding but a bloody massacre, for which the church bells will be the signal. But this difference derives its expressive force from the basic similarity.

When a tenor sings a slow melody, in major key, beginning on the dominant degree and rising immediately to the tonic, a regular listener to Italian opera is likely to guess (correctly) that the character he is listening to is the hero ardently addressing his soprano sweetheart.

Ex.4: "*A te, o cara...*"

In this case, Arturo the Cavalier is addressing the Puritan Elvira with whom he has just been re-united (in *I Puritani*.)

On the other hand, a baritone who sings such a refrain must be ardently apostrophizing an absent soprano that he has no chance of winning, since baritones hardly ever get the girl.

Ex.5: "*Ah, per sempre io ti perdi...*"

This is Riccardo, again in *Puritani*, singing of Elvira, whom he has lost forever. In Donizetti's *Poliuto*, Severo sings the same sort of thing about Paolina, who has married another:

Ex.6: “...*Celeste Iddio propizio...*”

Basses in Italian opera tend not to be so interested in sopranos, or even mezzo-sopranos. When we hear a bass singing in the ardent apostrophic vein of the above excerpts, he is likely to be addressing a place that he loves. Conte Rodolfo in Bellini's *La Sonnambula* sings to his dear and pleasant old haunts —

Ex.7: “*Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni...*”

Verdi's fierce patriot Procida sings a similar strain to his beloved Palermo in I, Vespri Siciliani —

Ex.8: “*O tu Palermo...*”

Such correspondences between musical setting and dramatic situation, recognizable from one work to the next, abound in Italian romantic opera. They are not rigorously organized like Wagnerian leitmotifs; they could not be, being more like a musico-dramatic lingua franca than like a code conceived for a unified work. These correspondences are seldom mentioned and never, to my knowledge, systematically discussed. They seem to be an embarrassment to those who want to take Italian opera seriously: you can find almost every writer on Verdi wriggling out of or squirming with the problem of what he thinks of as Verdi's "conventionality" — his persistent use of the *cabaletta*, for instance, right down through *Aida*.

The fact is that our aesthetic standards in music are mostly based on the notion of the integrity of single unified works; there has, I believe, not been very much development of musical "genre aesthetics." The result is that it is difficult intellectually to legitimize the pleasure one obviously feels in recognizing something familiar done well again, or done well with a nice difference. "Set pieces" are not aesthetically respectable.

But I have been drawing myself into the issue that I said earlier I would not dispute. I want to describe a few elements of the Italian operatic lingua franca, not try to justify its whole existence. My point is semeiological rather than aesthetic.

The word "semeiology" was introduced into linguistics by the great linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the 20th century. He meant to name the study of the nature of the signs used in human systems of expression. He distinguished between signs which have

an inherent connection with what they denote and those which are arbitrarily connected to their denotations and which function as signs by convention rather than by inherent likeness or contiguity or some other non-arbitrary association. He pointed out that in ordinary language the connection between linguistic signs and their meanings is basically arbitrary or conventional. (For example, the sounds d-o-g of the word "dog" bear no particular resemblance to the idea of a dog or to actual dogs.) Only at the fringes of ordinary usage — in such areas as onomatopoeia — do inherent qualities of the sign come into play in establishing the semeiological connection. (For example, the onomatopoeia "bow-wow" does resemble somewhat the sound a dog makes.)

Poetic language differs from ordinary language in purposefully augmenting through poetic artifice the amount of inherent connection between words and their semantic burden, for example, by choosing and arranging words so that the pattern of their vowel timbres corresponds in some way to the pattern of their meanings; or by underlining semantic equivalence with metrical equivalence or with rhyme. When we speak of language as being "expressive," we mean there are strong inherent non-arbitrary connections between sign and meaning.

The musical setting of words is a rather complex semeiological phenomenon. Taken by itself, music is a system of signs whose meanings are almost absolutely inherent. A melodic succession of notes means itself: among other things, its own length in time, and the relationships of pitch and rhythm among its tones. This length and these relationships may additionally be suggestive of other extra-musical things, however, so that the meaning of the melody can easily range beyond itself. When the melody is sung, for example, the length of a phrase can mean the length of a human breath; the onset of the melody indicates an overcoming of bodily inertia to make a vocal attack; a high note or a rapid rhythm is a bodily exertion.

When music is used to set a text, it functions semeiologically both with respect to the words of the text and to the meaning, dramatic or otherwise, of those words. Its connection to the words is almost always at least somewhat non-arbitrary, if only because it usually reflects the metrical values of the text, however remotely. Its relationship to the meanings of the words may be totally arbitrary. (For example, the tune of "The Star-Spangled Banner," which was originally a drinking song, metrically fits Francis Scott Key's words

well enough, but is often felt to be out of keeping with the patriotic sentiments or with the occasions on which it is sung.) To the extent that music is felt to be non-arbitrarily connected to the words, meanings or situations which it accompanies, it is said to be "expressive" – an obvious enough point, but worth making as a background assumption, I think. The introduction to the German Philharmonia pocket score of *Rigoletto* contains the following statement:

The work achieves true dramatic expression notwithstanding the typically Italian character of the music.

By 'typically Italian character' we can understand this German editor to mean, among other things, a reliance on set pieces and other devices which are recognizable from one Italian opera to another. I said earlier that I would not dispute what seems to me to be the prevailing aesthetic theory of strength and weakness in art, though I do have some doubts about it, and I do not want on this occasion to tackle the editor of the Philharmonia pocket score as to what constitutes "true dramatic expression." But I would like to talk about a few devices of dramatic expressivity in music with a typically Italian character. For, if the definition of expressivity which I offered above is acceptable, then it will be clear that dramatic expression is not excluded from or exceptional in Italian opera and that certain kinds of dramatic expressivity are what give it its typical character.

I suggested earlier that the meaning of a melody can easily range beyond itself to include the body, and by extension, the feelings and character of the singer. It is this semeiological fact about melody that is perhaps the most important vehicle for Italian operatic expressivity. An obvious use of it emerged in the parallel tenor-baritone-bass arias that were excerpted above: namely, that the assignment of a melody to one voice-type rather than another has immediate significance for the drama because of the age, sex and character traits associated with the voice-type. This can, of course, be true for any operas, not just Italian ones, but it is especially true of the "genre" forms of the Italian tradition — the dramatic expectations which voice-type provokes are very strong.

The "bridal" arias I excerpted illustrate another aspect of Italian opera's use of the inherent extended meaning of a melody sung by the human voice. The brisk dance rhythms, the skipping intervals, the rapidly executed figures would all indicate unconstrained high energy in the singer if the arias were in fact spontaneous utterances. By extension, they

indicate exuberant high spirits in the dramatic character. Those bridal passages could be contrasted with any number of scenes where the heroine is mournfully lamenting the fact that she may never be united with the hero, and her voice moves slowly, one step at a time up and down a limited part of the scale, as in "Ah! non credea..." from Bellini's *Sonnambula* or "Anch'io dischiuso un giorno" from Verdi's *Nabucco*.

Of course, this kind of expressivity is by no means exclusively Italian. It is typically Italian, however. It really stands out in early 19th century Italian opera, perhaps because there is comparatively little else going on — the orchestra is not usually waxing symphonic; everything tends to focus on the soloists, on their breath and the moving about of their voices. The often bare accompaniments tend to highlight the way the singer is breathing, her way of getting from one note to the next, her pushing or pulling at the orchestra's tempo, and other singerly options which are inherently capable of expressing physical and mental states. These singerly choices, largely implicit in the scores of Bellini and Donizetti, are often spelled out in great detail on Verdi's pages.

I would like to present three pairs of parallel passages and try to isolate a few of the expressive devices which each member of a pair has in common with the other. Though the parallels are quite striking and the passages very famous, the correspondences have received no attention that I know of. The existence of the parallels can perhaps certify the claim that the expressive devices are typically Italian, and I hope to provide a few small indications of how semeiological study of Italian opera might proceed, or, to put it very ambitiously, how one might begin to write a "grammar" of the Italian operatic lingua franca.

Salvatore Cammarano wrote the libretti for Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and for Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. It is not surprising, therefore, but unremarked as far as I know, that the heroines of these operas make their first appearances in almost identical manner. And it is to me a discovery full of interest that Verdi's treatment of this scene, one of his best and most famous arias for soprano — "Tacea la notte" — is so like Donizetti's "*Regnava nel silenzio*," one of his best and most famous; and this also has not been noticed.

The second scene of each work opens mysteriously and nocturnally (it's twilight, actually, in *Lucia*) on the headstrong heroine accompanied by duenna. The heroine is drawn to the scene by the power of a dangerous forbidden love. The duenna urges caution, but is also

curious, and elicits from the heroine an excited tremulous narrative in recitative. As the heroine comes to the most exciting part of the narrative -- the appearance of the ghost in one and of the troubadour in the other -- the duenna asks "what are you saying?" or "what happened?" The heroine answers "Listen!" and we are ready for the aria, in which the heroine essentially starts the story over again.

Ex.9: "*M'apparve l'ombra sua...*"

Ex.10: "...*ed era volta lunga stagion...*"

In the aria, the heroine tells the duenna the story of an important night in her life -- how quiet it was ("*Regnava nel silenzio*," "*Tacea la notte*"), how the moon shone, and how out of the quiet came a sound which was to have great meaning for her ("*Quando un sommesso gemito...*," "*Quando suonar per l'aere...*")

Both arias are in 6/8 time; both are basically in a major key (Lucia's in D, Leonora's in A), but begin in the parallel minor key. Leonora's first phrase, like Lucia's, consists of an arching upward leap, followed by stepwise descent, followed in turn by two measures of hovering in or just above the "chest voice" region.

Ex.11: "*Regnava nel silenzio...*"

Ex.12: "*Tacea la notte...*"

The phrase is then repeated, somewhat modified. In both arias, these first two phrases are devoted to description of the night of the story. The modification of the second phrase brings the first eight measures to a close in the relative major of the opening key (F and G, respectively), just in time for the "quando," which will introduce the more eventful part of the story, told in accelerating tempo.

Ex.13: "...*colpia la fonte un pallido...*"

Ex.14: "...*la luna il viso argenteo...*"

Here the musical treatments diverge, appropriately enough, since for Lucia the event is the appearance of a ghost, which sends her quickly up to a high G in fright, then down to a low C in recoil, and finally makes her call out "Ah!" back up on an F: whereas for Leonora the event is the appearance of the troubadour; in imitation of whose sweet and mournful lute, she expands slowly and chromatically up the scale.

These typically Italian passages seem to me to be full of dramatic expression, and some of

the expressive devices are quite plain: the modulation to the word "quando", the acceleration of tempo as the story becomes eventful. The most typically Italian and, in this case, the most elusive, kind of expressivity, however, is in the use of the registers of the voice in the opening phrases of the arias. The arching upward leap from the chest voice into 'passaggio,' followed by a slow descent, is like a surveying gesture, like an actor's arm outstretched and then slowly drawn in an arc before him. The heroine is surveying the silent night. Then the voice retreats back to the chest and hovers there: the aloneness of the heroine within the landscape is emphasized.

Violetta's moment of disgrace in the Act II finale of *La Traviata* is very like Amina's in the Act I finale of *La Sonnambula*. Each heroine is publicly and unjustly accused of a false heart. Each, as she recovers from the shock (Amina emerging from sleep, Violetta from a swoon), sings of the purity of her intentions — in 12/8 time, in little sinuous phrases that break off, heartbroken, in the middle of each measure. The orchestra confines itself at first to underscoring the strong center of the heroine's phrases and lets her break and start again, isolated, with only the barest accompaniment.

Ex.15: "*D'un pensiero...*"

Ex.16: "*Alfredo, Alfredo...*"

Then, as the other characters respond to the heroine's plight, the orchestra begins to play continuously on every beat, and soon principals, chorus and orchestra are swinging together in sympathetic triple-time oscillations.

In these utterances of Amina and Violetta, the combination of short-breathed phrases, slow tempo, and pitch which slides back and forth step by step, is inherently expressive of a weakened, incapacitated bodily state, or of quiet self-pitying weeping. It is highly characteristic of Bellini and Verdi to exploit the power of a sung melodic line to denote the bodily state and feelings of the character that the singer is portraying. What distinguishes their kind of dramatic expression from others which the editor of the German *Rigoletto* score (my convenient scapegoat) may consider truer, is that it is not pure and independent: it requires the artful breathing of a singer to make its effect. It makes its effect by exciting the compassion of the listener, who also breathes, and who cannot help knowing what different kinds of breathing tell about energies and emotions.

When, in the last moments of *Il Trovatore*. Leonora, having sacrificed herself for Manrico, lies dying at his feet and wishes to impart a dying thought, she begins on G above middle

C, rises stepwise upward, chromatically at first, then diatonically. She attains A above the staff, then drops an octave, interrupts a grammatical clause to rest (for a sixteenth of a measure between the words "io" and "vulli"), and then rises again, musically, that is, to finish the clause, at which the tenor bursts in with lamentation.

Ex.17: "*Prima che d'altri vivere...*"

In her last moments, Violetta (*la traviata*) who has also sacrificed herself for the sake of a tenor, or at any rate for the sake of his family, also wants to convey her dying wish. She begins on G# and rises three chromatic steps. She does not directly continue her progression stepwise nor to the same height as Leonora, but a few measures later (at "*di chi nel ciel fra gli angeli*"), she rises, like Leonora stepwise to A above the staff, drops an octave (broken by an appoggiatura), rests in the middle of a grammatical clause (between "*prega*" and "*per lei*"), then rises again to finish her thought. Second soprano, tenor, baritone, and bass all now respond with lamentation.

Ex.18: "*Se una pudica vergine...*"

Was Verdi short of inspiration in these passages and the others I have talked about, so that he had to fall back on imitating his predecessors or his own previous work? Anyone who has heard *Traviata* or *Trovatore* must know that they are not lacking in melodic inspiration. The years in which they were written were surely among Verdi's most fertile. How then do we account for the detailed parallels among these passages I have discussed?

In my opinion, what we are dealing with here is neither coincidence nor plagiarism, but a case of similar dramatic situations evoking similar musical settings. If we return for a moment to semeiology and say that the elements of musical setting are signs and the libretto (its words and its dramatic situations) is what those signs must denote or "mean", then we can also say that in the "language" (the system of connection between signs and meanings) of romantic Italian opera, melody (one kind of sign) is typically connected to meaning in non-arbitrary ways. In other words, tunes are not simply tacked on to texts, but are (typically though not unfailingly) designed to express the meaning through the voice and breath (i.e., the body) of the singer. Since the nature of voice and breath remain essentially constant (though there are surely important differences from singer to singer and, through differences in training, from one era to another), it is not so surprising that Italian operatic composers should have evolved something like a common language of vocal expression.

The expressivity of the death scene melodies in *Trovatore* and *Traviata* (Exs. 17 and 18) again lies in the bodily implications of the melodic line. The higher the note, the greater the physical effort the singer must make to sustain and support it. A slowly rising musical line, if sung, implies an incremental marshalling of breath and strength. A sudden drop in pitch, conversely, indicates a sudden reduction of effort required to sustain the note.

Some people find operatic utterance radically implausible. For them, emotions or intentions are incredible when sung, and they point to the sometimes lengthy arias of dying operatic characters as the ultimate contradiction of verisimilitude. To such people there is no reasoned answer that I at least would try to give — you either accept the basic convention of opera or you do not. But if you accept that convention, then there is another kind of implausibility of musical utterance, a much more interesting kind, that you can examine. It would certainly be implausible if the dying Violetta or Leonora were to rise from a low note to a high note in a single leap — where would she be getting the energy for such an exertion? But if her melody slowly rises, painfully at first, in chromatic half-steps, then we can hear her love for the hero, which is still strong, slowly gathering energy for a temporary victory over her physical weakness, in order to convey one last thought to him. And when the line suddenly drops an octave in mid-sentence, before she has been able to complete her thought, then we hear that her love is not strong enough to withstand fast-approaching death, and the effect is poignant indeed.

Perhaps the most famous death-bed scene in Italian opera is Mimi's in *La Boheme*. It is not properly a part of the subject matter of this essay, which is early nineteenth century Italian opera, but perhaps it can serve as a pendant example to the two middle-Verdi scenes. The opening theme of Mimi's first aria, "Mi chiamano Mimi," is another slow chromatic ascent. It is a characteristically reticent beginning to her self-description in that aria. As she gains confidence and becomes absorbed in the things which move her, her self-description is expressed in enthusiastically swelling phrases. In the last scene of the opera, the slow chromatic beginning comes back, but as a final utterance this time, a final attempt to rise to life. Its effect is similar to that of the Verdi phrases I have just discussed, with the additional dramatic force of its recalling to us the Mimi that we first knew, who was ill but apparently still full of life, and who, we now realize, was even then struggling to overcome death.