Anything can be set to music, true,
but not everything will be effective.

Giuseppe Verdi

Literature and Opera

In the 1880s Emmanuel Chabrier addressed Shakespeare's last and perhaps greatest play with the idea of turning it into an opera. He wrote to his publisher explaining his views about its stage-worthiness:

> I now know *The Tempest* by heart; there are many good things in it, but Blau has reason to want some expanding of the love story, otherwise papa Prospero would get to be a bore. As for drama properly so called, where is it? Are they genuinely dramatic, those conspiracies of the old fogies Alonzo, Antonio, Gonzalo, Stefano? And those two debauchees Caliban and Interpocula [i.e., Trinculo]—who cares about their peregrinations around the island?
>
> So the interest will have to be spiced up elsewhere: first, in the idyll between Ferdinand and Miralda [*sic*] which is of the finest order; second, in the whole nuptial atmosphere and the spirits of air in Act IV; third, in the buffoonery with the drunkards. Is that enough to make an opera?[1]

The answer to the question appears to have been no. Chabrier never wrote his *Tempest* opera, and—to judge from his cavalier and ominously bumptious attitude—we can be thankful he did not. His letter is a reminder that when masterly literature is taken up for operatic treatment, literary values do not necessarily loom importantly in the process. In this case the composer seemed almost completely oblivious to the complicated levels of meaning in the source and has focused upon the least interesting aspects of the action: the clowning scenes and the Ferdinand-Miranda love affair, surely the most insipid in all Shakespeare. Chabrier's heart, here at least, was closer to the blithe spirit of the *boulevard* than to the grand style customary at the Paris Opéra.

Chabrier was not alone in his failure to come to grips with *The Tempest*. At least twenty-five operatic attempts have been made upon

structure, for there are splendid "number" speeches imbedded in Shakespeare's dialogue. *Othello,* in short, required the style of late Verdi. The play is rich in what can only be described as operatic moments—for instance Othello's despairing renunciation:

> O now, forever
> Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
> Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
> That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell!
> Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
> The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war! [3.3.347-54]

From this to Verdi's *Ora e per sempre addio* in Act II is but a small step—the playwright even giving Verdi hints for the orchestration of his noble dirge. Introduced into the continuous texture of the opera are such standard operatic set-pieces—drinking song, love duet, vengeance duet, prayer—as Shakespeare provided musical "space" for in his play. George Bernard Shaw emphasized the fortunate parallelism between two artistic styles when he called *Othello* Shakespeare's one tragedy written in the form of an Italian opera.

This equivalence of sensibilities or form occurs in many ways. The most obvious is in the actual insertion of "musical" moments in the original—for instance Desdemona's "Willow Song" or, to take another play, the King of Thule's ballad, the Song of the Flea, and Mephistopheles' Serenade in *Faust.* Beaumarchais included nine musical events in *Le Barbier de Seville,* some of which were taken up by Paisiello (1782) and Rossini (1816) in their operatic versions of the play. Sometimes there is a particular hint that music would make a natural addition, as in Bazile's speech on the art of calumny in *Le Barbier.* Here Beaumarchais included musical metaphor in his text by using the terms *pianissimo, piano piano, rinforzando,* and *crescendo.* Both Paisiello and Rossini took full advantage of this occasion with crescendo-based arias.

In other cases an incipient operatic structure lies just below a seemingly undramatic or awkward literary format. Consider Goethe's

Sorrows of Young Werther. The collection of Werther's letters which constitute the novella might seem problematic for a librettist, but in fact the flow of correspondence is highly operatic. That is, almost all the letters represent a particular emotional climax—either of elation, depression, or a wracking mixture of both. They are the passionate highlights of Werther's year-and-three-quarters struggle with a hopeless love. They describe exalted states of consciousness, and this was exactly the potent material that Massenet turned into the highly charged lyric explosions of his *Werther.* Thus, for example, Werther's letter dated October nineteenth—its full text is simply "Oh, this void, this dreadful void in my breast! Often I think that if just once I could press her to my heart, it would be filled!"—becomes in the opera the hero's palpitating little aria in Act II, *J'aurais sur ma poitrine.* Such verbal outpouring Massenet was able to transform frequently in his score. Indeed, the title role is made up of numerous highly affective but brief lyric moments which parallel the epistolary structure of the source.

Equivalence of musical style and subject may sometimes hinge upon the language itself, as when Stravinsky found himself delighted with the Latin translation of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* for his 1927 opera-oratorio:

> What a joy it is to compose music to a language of convention, almost of ritual, the very nature of which imposes a lofty dignity! One no longer feels dominated by the phrase, the literal meaning of words . . . The text thus becomes purely phonetic material for the composer. He can dissect it at will and concentrate all his attention on its primary constituent element—that is to say the syllable.

Equations of musical and painterly styles are common: Mozart with Fragonard for their polished intimacy; Berlioz with Delacroix for their liberation of expressive coloring; Debussy with the Impressionists for their subjectivism and rejection of "line"; and Schoenberg and Berg with Klee, Munch, and Kokoschka for their Expressionist starkness and violence of utterance. Similarly, there are often remarkable equivalences in musical and literary ambience. For Diderot, this concept of equivalence was an artistic necessity: "It would

be absurd to abandon the old types of music while retaining the old forms of poetry, since the poet's style must conform to that of the composer." Certain operas in the repertory encourage one to agree with Diderot: *Le Nozze di Figaro, Pelléas et Mélisande,* and *Wozzeck* to name a few. But these are a tiny minority. The exigencies of literature as opera more usually draw us into problematic areas: where the librettist (and, with increasing frequency in operatic history, the composer) finds in a source what he is looking for, but also qualities he must jettison; where he struggles gamely but in vain with an alien aesthetic in his source; where quirks of personal taste or autobiographical identification govern the process of translation. Sometimes peculiar facts surrounding the premiere—the availability of a great soprano, an excellent chorus, for example—subvert loyalty to the literary source. That Purcell was writing for Josiah Priest's Boarding School for Young Gentlewomen in Chelsea and Berlioz for the gargantuan forces at the disposal of the Paris Opéra led to extraordinarily different versions of Virgil, *Dido and Aeneas* and *Les Troyens*. Sometimes the source is simply made to fit the Procrustean bed of current operatic fashions.

The only escape from these varieties of artistic impasse is compromise. The subject of literature as opera is largely one of compromise between the excellences of the written or acted word and the unique and separate splendor of musical expression. The necessity of this spirit of compromise was finely summarized by an eighteenth-century French musical theorist:

> The theater has its own laws, statutes and conventions which, in more than one way, conflict with the methods of music. In this contest (even enmity) of two arts which are associated in order to produce one and the same effect, the task of balancing their prerogatives, regulating the sacrifices which they must make reciprocally, and pronouncing between them a pact of union from which the perfection of the performance results—this is the most difficult task we have to fulfill.[2]

Idealistic and worthy though Michel de Chabanon's sentiment is, it has little to do with the real operatic world. His equipoise of the

demands of literature and music is sometimes hard to share when we encounter an opera that fails astonishingly to approach the beauties and intentions of a literary masterpiece or, on the other hand, when wretched doggerel or melodramatic plotting inspires glorious music. Which *coups de théâtre* and *coups de musique* to condemn and which to let pass (radical though the departure from the source may be) is made all the more difficult when one realizes that the sheer length of most sources makes enormous amounts of excision necessary. Composers and librettists are almost always forced to reduce a large fresco into a miniature form while somehow—through the amplifying power of music—retaining the original's expressive magnitude. Donizetti's plea to his librettist—*"la brevità, per pietà, la brevità"*—has echoed throughout operatic history.

The beauty of radical departures may often be defense enough. Ought one to chide Verdi's decision, in his first version of *Macbeth,* to give the hero a death scene on stage in accordance with eighteenth-century English theatrical and nineteenth-century operatic conventions? Ought we to condemn Berlioz in *Les Troyens* for seeking inspiration for that most wonderful of all love duets in French grand opera (*"O nuit d'ivresse"*) not in the *Aeneid* but in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice?* Ought we to rebuke Tchaikovsky for giving us in *Eugene Onegin* the full seriousness of deep emotions which Pushkin in fact satirized in his original poem? The answer in each case, at least for this writer, is no. But questions such as these are helpful in raising issues about the limitations upon the process of transforming literature into opera. Very often the examination of such issues illuminates the working mechanisms of opera itself, a point that will be made on numerous specific occasions in the following chapters.

What Is Operatic?

In his *Devil's Dictionary* Ambrose Bierce defined opera thus:

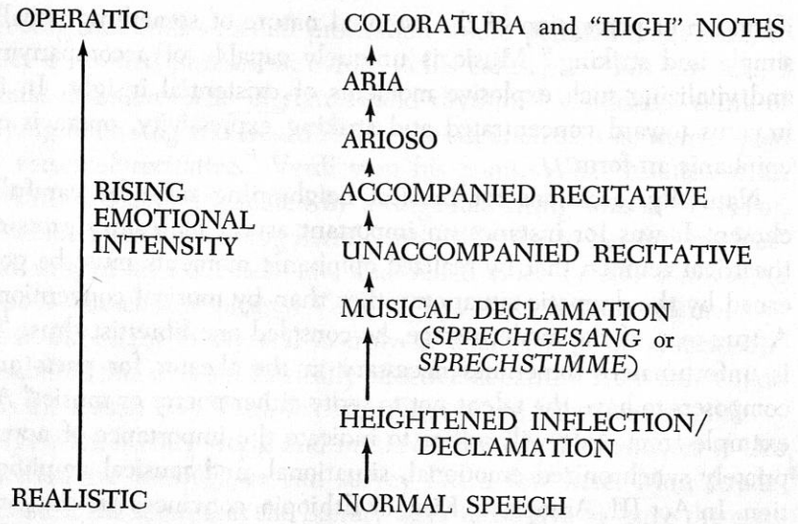
> A play representing life in another world, whose inhabitants have no speech but song, no motions but gestures and no postures but atti-

tudes. All acting is simulation, and the word *simulation* is taken from *simia,* an ape; but in opera the actor takes for his model *Simia audibilis* (or *Pithecanthropos stentor*)—the ape that howls.

Acerbic tone and nefarious etymology aside, Bierce does pinpoint opera's characteristic features: its divorce from artistic naturalism, its gestural mode, and its stylization. The unreality of opera is an old complaint. Finally, I am inclined to think, the ability to accept this fact of operatic art cannot be instilled by logic or persuasion. It seems the world is divided into two classes of people: those "poor, passionless, bluntminded creatures" (Stendhal's words) who dislike opera, and those to whom it comes naturally and who subject themselves as willingly to its absurdities as to its compelling expressive powers. One can speak in favor of opera, at best, on a personal and subjective level.

But what is operatic? All art is fundamentally the translation of experience into another form; what makes the operatic translation unique, if indeed it is? When we say that a work, or a scene, or a character is "operatic," do we really mean that in some sense it is poetic? concentrated? simplified? exaggerated? Can the epithet be rescued from its more common pejorative connotations? The following chapters may provide some answers to these questions, but it is worth beginning with a few tentative general comments upon the nature of opera. Laying down rules in this matter can be foolhardy.[3] One can nevertheless isolate certain qualities that many operas share. Several are mentioned here—each as a frequent hallmark rather than a *sine qua non.*

When W. H. Auden was asked why he wrote librettos, he replied that it was because opera was the last refuge of the high style. Opera has to do with heights. Exaggeration is part of its essence—whether the composer is writing for the Queen of Cathay in *Ariodante,* a seventeen-year-old maiden in *Eugene Onegin,* or a demented barber in *Wozzeck.* The world of opera is one of high relief, magnification, escalation. Metaphors of ascendancy fairly leap to mind. What results is a spectrum of increasing expressive intensity that is available to the opera composer (this holds most strongly for nineteenth-century opera):



The composer's impetus is upward along this scale, and so he and his librettist must search for moments in literature—call them lyric or explosive or hyperbolic—which permit them to rise to an operatic occasion. They must, in short, think primarily as artists willing to forgo prosaic or rhetorical niceties as well as the values of realism in order to seek moments of expressive crisis—nuclear moments in which potential musical and dramatic energy is locked.

The realism of natural motion is one of the qualities we bargain away by taking opera seriously on its own heightened level of expression (though masters of stage realism like Franco Zeffirelli have in recent decades softened the bargain considerably). The power of music on the stage, if it is effective, is intensifying; just as water naturally seeks a level, music seeks emotions, characters, and situations suitable to amplification. The genre is inevitably possessed of what the Expressionists called a *Steigerungstendenz,* an inclination toward enhancement.[4] The advantage of this is an increased clarity of intention and a larger-than-life motive force in the presentation of human actions. One might compare these qualities with the effects of the epiphanies in the writing of James Joyce. The epiphany—literally a "showing forth"—is defined by Webster as "a sudden man-

ifestation or perception of the essential nature of something usually simple and striking." Music is uniquely capable of accompanying and vitalizing such explosive moments of existential insight. In its impetus toward concentrated and striking expressivity, opera is an epiphanic art-form.

Naturally, occasions for musical heightening must be carefully chosen. It was for instance an important aspect of Verdi's growing theatrical acumen that he realized epiphanic moments must be governed by the dramatic situation rather than by musical conventions. A true man of the modern stage, he consoled one librettist thus: "It is unfortunately sometimes necessary in the theater for poets and composers to have the talent not to write either poetry or music." An example from *Aida* will suffice to indicate the importance of appropriately synchronized emotional, situational, and musical amplification. In Act III, Amonasro, King of Ethiopia, convinces his daughter Aida to betray her love for the Egyptian warrior Rhadames in order to learn the Egyptian army's battle plans. The father's persuasive tactics are urgent and brutal; it takes Aida's last particle of psychic energy to submit finally to his will. For this duet the librettist Ghislanzoni, following common practice of the time, supplied lines for a closing *cabaletta* (usually a short, brilliant aria in a pronounced rhythm and suited to coloratura variation). *Cabalettas* are excellent vehicles for expressing exhilarating emotions—most often joy, vengeance, or mastery; they are a means of moving a character's and an audience's adrenalin. For his *cabaletta* Ghislanzoni hit upon a stanza in which Aida enthusiastically agrees to deceive Rhadames.

Verdi resisted setting these lines, not only because it would have meant an implausibly sudden change in the quality of Aida's love, but also because an up-tempo expression of emotion would be psychologically ludicrous after Amonasro's torturing curses:

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How are literary works and music connected? The answers to this question are various; we can survey but a few here. Most fundamental is the sense that the literary work must give or leave the composer something to say. This point was made very early on, in Mainwaring's eighteenth-century biography of Handel:

> If it [poetry] abounds with noble images, and high wrought descriptions, and contains little of character, sentiment, or passion, the best Composer will have no opportunity of exerting his talents. Where there is nothing capable of being expressed, all he can do is entertain his audience with mere ornamental passages of his own invention. But graces and flourishes must rise from the subject of the composition in which they are employed, just as flowers and festoons from the design of a building. It is from their relation to the whole, that these minuter parts derive their value.

Once a subject with expressive potential for music is chosen, the problem becomes one of mediating between the two art-forms. In this some composers are more receptive (Gluck, Mussorgsky, Britten) and others less receptive (Mozart, Berlioz, Strauss) to literary or linguistic "domination." Berlioz, however, best summarized the nature of the composer's difficulty: "The real problem lies in finding the means of being *expressive* and *true* without ceasing to be a musician, and to find new ways of making music dramatic." The difficulty is to avoid following the text too slavishly, on the one hand, or, on the other, ignoring it and composing thinly disguised absolute

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music.[5] Rossini issued a warning against the former extreme: "If the composer sets out to follow the meaning of the words with equal steps, he will write music that is not expressive by itself, but is poor, vulgar, mosaic-like, and incongruous or ridiculous." Composers who have attempted to follow Shakespeare's iambic pentameter—Britten notably excepted—have felt the force of Rossini's observation. Perhaps the most remarkable instance of an attempt to reproduce the qualities of natural speech (aside from *Pelléas*) was Mussorgsky's Gogol opera, *The Marriage*.[6] About this work the composer wrote: "My music must be an artistic reproduction of human speech, as the external manifestation of thought and feeling must, without exaggeration or violence, become true, accurate music." To the composer's friends the score was a curiosity, and he was sufficiently discouraged never to finish it. This is not surprising: Mussorgsky's experiment subverted the heightening power which is part of opera's *raison d'être*.

Not all literary styles are suitable to operatic escalation. Ferruccio Busoni declared, "What I desire from an opera text is not only that it conjures up music, but that it allows room for it to expand."* Perhaps the best way to appreciate this quality is to think of writers for whom the idea of operatic translation is virtually inconceivable—Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Anthony Trollope, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Bernard Shaw, and Virginia Woolf, to name a few from English literature. Pater's belief that music and prose literature are "the opposite terms of art" helps to explain why. What these authors have in common is a special dependence upon the powers of language as itself a descriptive instrument; the core of their artistry is descriptive and analytical, rather than lyrical and expressive. One might say that they are prosaic rather than poetic at heart. They may treat the strong and violent emotions that opera calls for, but these are strained through a dense conceptual or stylistic filter. Much of their drama is syntactical.

One can often say of seemingly unoperatic literary works that theirs is a theater of words, whereas opera requires a theater of action, emotion, engagement, movement, and spectacle. Consider this short

* This and other quotations in this chapter are drawn from Ulrich Weisstein's *The Essence of Opera* (1964), the best anthology on opera currently available.

passage from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* describing that event so often celebrated in opera, falling in love:

> Not that the phrase is at all to my liking; for to say that a man is *fallen* in love,—or that he is *deeply* in love,—or up to his ears in love,—and sometimes even over head and ears in it,—carries an idiomatical kind of implication, that love is a thing *below* man:—this is recurring again to Plato's opinion, which, with all his divinityship,—I hold to be damnable and heretical; and so much for that.
>
> Let love therefore be what it will, my uncle Toby fell into it.

There is no apparent room for music here. The interest is verbal, ironic, and discursive—all qualities which, in quantity, subvert the simplifying and at the same time heightening impetus of lyric drama. Writers who hew closely to the terra firma of analytical prose neither entreat nor encourage musical enlargement. This assertion, though—like many one is tempted to make about opera—is subject to exception, as the chapter on Britten's *Death in Venice* will demonstrate.

A librettist, then, fashioning his text from a literary source, will naturally gravitate away from passages of discursive complexity and toward those that issue in psychological or physical action. A clear instance of this bias is found in Verdi's setting of *Macbeth*. Macbeth's first great monologue (1.7.1-28) is missing from the opera, and it is not difficult to see why. In this speech Macbeth weighs the implications of an assassination. It is abstracted and—to use a Shakespearean epithet—thought-sick. Nothing happens; Macbeth decides not to act. This soliloquy is consequently a dense and rhetorically involved one, as its opening lines will suggest:

> If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly. If th'assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
> With his surcease, success; that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'ld jump the life to come.

Much more attractive for operatic purposes was Macbeth's next monologue, the famous dagger speech (2.1.33-64). There is much movement here (partially, of course, only imagined by Macbeth):

the clutching after the dagger, the marshaling to action, the figure of "wither'd Murther" moving like a ghost, and Macbeth himself treading the "sure and firm-set earth." And there is also a palpable conclusion for action:

> I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
> Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell,
> That summons thee to heaven or to hell. *Exit.*

This moment of resolution is one of the most famous in dramatic literature, and just such moments are a staple in opera. No wonder it inspired one of Verdi's finest accompanied recitatives (*Mi si affaccia un pugnal?*). Another line from the dagger speech—"Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath brings"—is but a variation on Verdi's own admonition to his librettists: *"poche parole, poche parole, stile conciso."* And it is to the heat of deeds and passions that operatic composers have most commonly and successfully turned, spurning as best they can the cold breath of too many and too rhetorically involved words.

Literature that is too musical may also pose difficulties. Schiller's play *The Bride of Messina* was written with operatic devices in mind, and yet it has proved one of the least attractive of his plays as operatic material. The second part of Goethe's *Faust* is extraordinarily operatic in conception.[7] And yet it is the first part which has provided the better quarry for composers. The style of Gertrude Stein presents another, admittedly special case where highly musical prose—on the contrary—encouraged the addition of a real musical dimension. Stein's prose seems almost incomplete without music; in fact, none of her plays was performed in her lifetime without it, something Stein complained about ("They could though and it would be interesting but no one has yet"). The composer Virgil Thomson, who specialized in setting Stein to music, offered the obvious explanation. He said that her writing *"likes* music. Much of it, in fact, lies closer to musical timings than to speech timings." And so it was that in composing *Four Saints in Three Acts* Thomson set exactly what Stein wrote from beginning to end. In any case, the result as lyric drama is at best curious—the music acquiescing excessively to Stein's disingenuous and yet subtle text.

One might add here that lyric dramas structured upon philosophical, aesthetic, or conceptual material rather than upon character, conflict, and dramatic situation tend to be difficult pieces for stage directors and audiences alike—though the music may prove sublime and carry all before it. Works in this category are Mozart's *Zauberflöte,* Beethoven's *Fidelio,* Wagner's *Parsifal,* Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande,* Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron,* Strauss's *Capriccio,* and Britten's *Death in Venice.*

In music as in nature, rhythm is life and its absence is death. Rossini turned this into an operatic theorem: "Musical expression lies in the rhythm; and in the rhythm lies all the power of music." Rhythm implies movement, and movement is a necessary quality in the opera house. Hofmannsthal described this necessity in a letter to Strauss concerning their problems with *Ariadne auf Naxos:*

> The basis of all drama is action, whether it be violent or gentle, mechanical or psychological. In opera the music comes to the support of the action—like two streams that mingle and flow on together. In this case, where there is only one real "set piece," the music does not lend assistance, does not press onward to the dramatic goal—on the contrary it has a retarding influence. Thus the thin and sluggish stream of action is constantly interrupted by passages of musical description, and the simple instinct of the public, which wants to get on with the plot, becomes restive and impatient. [letter, 8 August 1918]

Dramatists, librettists, and composers attempt to create effects of stasis or ennui at great risk. Perhaps only Beckett has truly succeeded in this on a regular basis, and then only through a paradoxically tense dialogue. *Pelléas et Mélisande,* an exception, tends to prove the rule. Lying behind Maeterlinck's play is the Symbolist desire not to name but to suggest the substance of life; the play is based upon an aesthetic of indirection and motionlessness for which Debussy's style—in its focus upon a level of almost subliminal sensation and rejection of linear progression—was perfectly suited. The opera is evocative of the mood of the original play, and for this very reason it is difficult for most operatic audiences. The average listener tends to respond to it just as G. K. Chesterton responded to the Maeterlinck play: "If we take a play like *Pelléas et Mélisande,* we shall find

that unless we grasp the particular fairy thread of thought the poet rather hazily flings at us, we cannot grasp anything whatever."

Sometimes the sheer symphonic powers of a composer overwhelm the possibilities for genuine dramatic development. Jean Cocteau well observed that "certain masterpieces of the theater are not theatrical in the proper sense but scenic symphonies, which make no concession to the setting." Cocteau then cites *Boris Godunov* as a case in point, and this indeed is one possible source of that opera's problematic structure. The same balance in favor of the symphonic at the expense of the dramatic is also felt in Schumann's *Scenes from Faust* and Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Damnation of Faust*—three examples of works that occupy a middle ground among symphony, oratorio, and opera. Even more remarkable is Beethoven's *Fidelio,* in which we are constantly reminded of the composer as symphonist: the rustic geniality of the Seventh Symphony is mirrored in Rocco; the good humor of the Eighth in the Marzelline-Jaquino affair; the monumentality of the "Eroica" in the overtures; and the ecstasy of the Ninth in the Finale of the second act. The awkward aspects of *Fidelio* are partially explained by this mixture of salient symphonic moods.

This tension between absolute musical expression and the demands of the theater is also frequently felt in Tchaikovsky's operas, and we have an admission from the composer himself that his bias was finally in favor of the music: "Uniting as it [opera] does so many elements which all serve the same end, it is perhaps the richest of musical forms. I think, however, that personally I am more inclined to symphonic music, at least I feel more free and independent when I have not to submit to the requirements and conditions of the stage." In search of an ideal in this situation we are brought back to Berlioz's desire to be expressive and true without ceasing to be a musician, or to Alban Berg's desire to "give to the theater what belongs to the theater." This requires not merely a sense of drama (what could be more dramatic than the conversation of a Haydn quartet or the intellectual self-communing of a Beethoven piano sonata?), but a sense of the theater and the requirements of the stage.[8] This necessitates a search for what Verdi called the *parola scenica*—theatrical word—that is at the same a *parola musica.* "Theater! Theater!" was

Verdi's constant plea to his librettists; that instinct is a hallmark of the greatest writers for the lyric stage.

Busoni, a too fearless lawgiver, set it down as a "fact" that opera must consist of a series of short, concise set-pieces. Whether true or not, Busoni's assertion could be supported by pointing to many works in the standard repertory. It is a matter of common sense that variety and vivid contrast are important. Verdi realized this: "To make music, one needs stanzas for cantabile sections, stanzas for ensembles, stanzas for largos, for allegros, etc., and all these in alternation so that nothing seems cold and monotonous." Berg was likewise aware of the necessity for variety when he confronted the quick succession of scenes in Büchner's play *Woyzeck.* Realizing that mere through-composition would induce boredom ("and boredom is the last thing one should experience in the theater"), Berg scrupulously differentiated each of his fifteen scenes through elaborate musical architecture. And *Wozzeck* does demonstrate the need for what Berg called, in a lecture on that work, "operatic caesurae" or stopping-points.

It may seem paradoxical to add that the variety of stage action must somehow issue in a unity and simplicity of impact. However, the effects of simplification from the original can be seen in almost every one of the operas examined in this study. Composers and librettists are not only frequently obliged to make cuts that affect the central intentions, focus, or balance of a literary work, but they must also often cut extraneous, ambiguous, or complicated material. Verdi's experience with Shakespeare exemplifies this: his art fed on focused, set-piece situations but was boggled by the overabundance of themes and complexities of double-plotting such as occur in *King Lear.* This may help to explain why, after nearly fifty years of planning for a *Re Lear,* he gave up the project. No wonder he was attracted to *Macbeth,* Shakespeare's simplest and most direct tragedy, and *Othello,* in which an entire first act and subplots could be easily ignored. At the core of Verdi's art was a desire for unified impact, and this was perhaps best expressed in a famous letter he wrote to Du Locle rejecting the idea of a new Parisian opera:

> In short, everybody would have to follow me. A single will would have to rule throughout: my own. That may seem rather tyrannical

> to you, and perhaps it is. But if the work is an organic whole, it is built on a single idea and everything must contribute to the achievement of this unity.

It is not entirely coincidental that Verdi's finest operas were written after he had gained the stature and financial security to press this "tyrannical" viewpoint in preparing his works for the stage.

One might add as a final note the most important operatic ingredient of all: eloquently passionate characters. Writing about "The Tragic Art," Schiller observed: "The state of passion in itself, independently of the good or bad influence of its objects on our morality, has something in it that charms us. We aspire to transport ourselves into that state, even if it costs us sacrifices." We seek passion in the theater especially. Hamlet even defines the theatrical experience as a "dream of passion." And passion is at the heart of opera. W. H. Auden explained its importance in one of the best essays ever written on the nature of this art-form:

> Opera in particular is an imitation of human willfulness; it is rooted in the fact that we not only have feelings but insist upon having them at whatever cost to ourselves . . . Opera, therefore, cannot present character in the novelist's sense of the word, namely, people who are potentially good *and* bad, active and passive, for music is immediate actuality *and* neither potentiality nor passivity can live in its presence . . . The quality common to all great operatic roles, e.g. Don Giovanni, Norma, Lucia, Tristan, Isolde, Brünnhilde, is that each is a passionate and willful state of being.[9]

Auden's remarks serve to conclude this brief survey, summarizing as they do some of the elements of opera we have already isolated. It remains for the reader, in the following chapters, to test these suggested connotations of the epithet *operatic* and to judge their relative importance for himself.

The Really Interesting Questions

Lytton Strachey once wrote that "the really interesting question is always the particular one, though it's always the general one that it's possible to discuss." The present format represents an attempt to

cope with this paradox. Because the subject of literature as opera is full of pitfalls, unique instances, and peculiar transformational imbroglios, there is a preponderance of really interesting specific questions, and often only through them can we begin to see clearly the more general issues. I have therefor chosen particular examples from the operatic repertory for intensive analysis. My choice, however, has been made to give the reader as broad an overview of literature as opera as is possible within the purview of a mere dozen works.

First, I have considered varying "angles" on the process of translation. What happens when literary masterpieces are submitted to the vagaries and traditions of opera and to the unique technical problems of putting an opera on stage? Why are some attempts spectacularly successful, some indifferent, and some abject? Why are certain works congenial to operatic treatment and others intractable? Which operatic conventions undermine literary values, and, conversely, which amplify them? How do contemporary fashions, artistic trends, historical events, and personal aesthetics affect the translation of literature into music? Some answers to these questions will be found in the following chapters. There I have examined specific connections throughout operatic history in which the work of author, librettist, and composer coalesced in an illuminating way—sometimes with breathtaking ease, sometimes disastrously, and sometimes with a maddening mixture of fidelity and insensitivity.

Second, this study is organized according to the major periods or genres of operatic history. If operatic composers are not bound to follow aesthetic commandments chiseled in stone, they are nevertheless affected by their intellectual environment. Dryden observed that "every Age has a kind of Universal Genius, which inclines those that live in it to some particular Studies," and it follows that if we are to understand the distinctive operatic styles of succeeding epochs, we must give some attention to the "Universal Genius" of those periods. The task is one of setting composers in a larger milieu—a principle of intellectual history that goes back at least as far as Wölfflin's description of Renaissance and Baroque architectural style: "To *explain* a style then can mean nothing other than to place it in its general historical context and to verify that it speaks in harmony with the other organs of its age." In those chapters particularly concerned

with stylistic parallels (Chapters Two, Three, Eight, and Nine), I have consciously attempted to make some of the extra-musical connections Wölfflin encourages. The style of a given operatic composer and librettist does not exist in a vacuum. Their creations do not spring complete from their brows, any more than Shakespeare's plays are purely Shakespearean. They are also Elizabethan, Jacobean, English, and Renaissance masterpieces.

My choice of composers and operas was thus in part governed by a desire to give a sense of the various distinctive aesthetics in operatic history. Methods and conventions that delighted one age may often prove ludicrous or impossibly constricting for another. Mozart forsook the conventions of opera seria; Wagner razed the unwieldy *scena* and *cavatina* of the bel canto period; and the musical Expressionists in turn pulverized Wagner's through-composition, "endless" melody, and elaborate leitmotiv system and also freed themselves from the restrictions of tonality. Such changes radically, if temporarily, upset the expectations raised by established fashions. They destroyed the kind of "pact" Wieland refers to: "Opera presupposes a silent agreement between the work of art and the listener." If we are to understand the nature of this silent agreement upon expectations (and how it is overturned by innovators), we should know more about opera than musicologists and biographers are able to tell us. Operas based upon important literary works, I think, provide a unique opportunity to make this more extensive exploration.

Third, my choices were also affected by the wish to survey a full range of literary genres from various national literatures. Thus, in the present study are represented an Italian Renaissance epic romance, a French domestic comedy, a German historical drama, an English romantic-historical novel, an Italian Renaissance autobiography, a Shakespearean tragedy, a long satiric Russian poem, a *fin de siècle* one-acter by an English aesthete writing in French, a short German proto-Expressionist play, and a modern German novella. Finally, I wished to represent works by composers from all the major opera-producing nations.

The underlying assumption of this study is a simple one: questions of literary history, milieu, and style ought to be of crucial concern when we approach operas based on important literary works. And

my hope is to demonstrate that a comparison of a source with its operatic "edition" can illuminate the nature of opera as much as strict musical analysis or biography. It follows that the strengths and limitations of musical drama will frequently become apparent when we turn to its literary sources. Why a librettist or composer (or both) chooses a particular novel, short story, drama, or poem; what the intellectual environment of the source was; how loyal the musician was to the spirit of his source; how the ambience of source and opera compare—the consideration of such questions gives valuable insight into the composer's personality, his aesthetic, the operatic fashions he labored under, as well as into the distinctive features of literary and musical art. Surprisingly, no one has attempted a systematic study of "literary" operas with a desire to relate them to their cultural milieu—and beyond to the course of intellectual history. It is even more astonishing when one considers the large number of operas, some of them among the greatest in the repertory, that are based upon literary masterpieces.

The reason is not far to seek. There is a peculiar but common inclination not to take opera seriously and put it to the same tests of analytical rigor as, say, sculpture or poetry. There is, of course, a large and avid audience for opera, but this avidity often inspires merely an interest in trifles, personalities, high C's, and high-camp distractions. It is popular to think of opera as "bombastic and extravagantly odd" (Wagner's epithets for Meyerbeer). One is reminded of Beaumarchais's remark that one may perfectly well sing what is not worth saying, and a Beaumarchais scholar, J. B. Ratermanis, has even gone so far as to yoke opera as a "subrational entertainment" with harlequinades, spectacles, buffoonery, and low farce.

It is also hard to take opera seriously because it is so beautiful. In the sheer triumph of vocal beauty, unfortunately, we are often willing silently to sacrifice other more subtle artistic values, among them dramatic momentum, integrity of plot, intelligibility, and balance. For many who like opera, beauty is sufficient. This is partly because, as Shaw pointed out, many people "have little or no sense of drama, but a very keen sense of beauty of sound and prettiness of pattern in music."

And so opera has tended to drift out of the cultural mainstream,

an art-form viewed with some bemusement or intellectual detachment—often by those who are most addicted to it. It was therefor with startled pleasure that many received Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama* (1956), which asserted what ought to have been obvious but was largely unrealized or at least unspoken, namely, that opera is "properly a musical form of drama, with its own individual dignity and force." I see this study as a kind of sequel and counterpart to Kerman's book: although he approached the theatrical values inherent in opera from a musicological perspective, I intend to approach the musical values of certain operas from a literary perspective. Though our vantage points differ, I conceive our final intention to be the same, that is, to bring opera back into the mainstream and reaffirm its intellectual ties with the sister arts that help constitute this most complex of all creative genres.

The book is neither definitive nor exhaustive. It could scarcely be otherwise, for this enormous topic contains so many possibilities. I have, even in this lengthy study, been able to chart only certain parts of an extraordinarily variable terrain. The result, appropriately, is an overview. One should after all have some overall sense of the landscape before rushing in with more elaborate and precise cartographer's tools.

Consequently and inevitably I was forced to ignore some famous composers and many operas that would seem to fit comfortably into a discussion of literature made into opera. An initial decision to treat no more than one work by any author or composer precluded examination of many operas that would have resulted in interesting chapters—among them *Don Carlos, Falstaff, Boris Godunov, Elektra, Peter Grimes, Billy Budd, The Turn of the Screw, A Midsummer Night's Dream.* In two cases (*Benvenuto Cellini* instead of *Les Troyens* and *Macbeth* instead of *Otello*) my priorities might seem perverse at first, but these choices are fully explained in the chapters on Berlioz and Verdi. I have also overlooked operas in which the composer and librettist have so grossly trivialized the artistic values of a source as to vitiate a "literary" approach. Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and Rossini's *Otello* fall into this category. So does *Faust:* the Germans emphasize Gounod's failure as a translator of Goethe by insisting on calling his opera *Marguerite.* I also hesitated to de-

vote full chapters to works that, however important in operatic history, are not based upon literary sources that are either masterpieces in their own right or archetypes for a particular genre or period. As a result, Massenet and Puccini and Meyerbeer—who never set literature of sufficiently enduring or significant stature—are not represented at all. I made the difficult decision not to include *Carmen* or *Pelléas et Mélisande* for the same reason (in any event, much has already been written upon these operas as literary translations). Mérimée's Carmen story is certainly a minor work; the author himself referred to it as a "petite drôlerie" when it first appeared. And though Debussy wrought a unique and undeniable masterpiece from his source, Maeterlinck's play and dramaturgy have been convicted by time and can at best be seen as a tiny backwater in the mainstream of theatrical history.

For the rest, it was a question of not having world enough, time, or space. Two important topics, I finally concluded, could only be treated adequately in separate and probably lengthy studies. One was a look at operatic versions of Greek tragedy, touching for instance upon such works as Cherubini's *Medea,* Strauss's *Elektra,* Orff's *Antigone,* Milhaud's *Oresteia,* Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex,* Honegger's *Amphion,* and Henze's *Bassarids.* The other concerned Wagner—either *Der Ring des Nibelungen* or *Tristan und Isolde.* Wagner, however, is in the matter of literary translation—as in seemingly all aspects of his art—a law unto himself. To struggle with the immense Medieval epic sources and then with the composer's involved personal and aesthetic preoccupations seemed, frankly, more than a mere chapter could possibly achieve. Finally, I have left untouched a number of peripheral or rarely performed operas that nevertheless would have offered fascinating insights into the task of making literature musical: Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas,* Busoni's *Dr. Faustus,* Janáček's *From the House of the Dead,* Prokofiev's *War and Peace,* Ezra Pound's *Le Testament de Villon,* Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts,* Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra,* and Carlyle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men,* just to name a few at random.

I used the term *systematic* above, and this may raise expectations that will not be fulfilled. This study is systematic only insofar as it is ordered according to the major periods of operatic history. It is not,

however, an aesthetic treatise—and for good reason: elaborate theory rarely precedes the decision of a composer or librettist to set a literary work. What concerns him may instead be dramatic impact, the message or inherent music perceived in the source, the ways it will appeal to a reigning impresario—in short, any of countless contingent considerations. The decision is more often than not untutored in aesthetic niceties.

Theory comes after the fact. And I have often thought something of opera's lifeblood is lost in the more philosophical search for absolute aesthetic truths about this hybrid art-form, especially as it is pursued by writers like Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and—in modern times—Theodor Adorno. Nietzsche once observed that Wagner always affected superiority toward the word *opera,* and this one feels when reading much of the literature on the aesthetics of opera. Concerted efforts to philosophize upon this genre succeed all too often in estranging it from the theatrical exigencies and realities that are to a considerable extent the concern of this study.

Herbert Graf has told of his experience directing Mozart's *Figaro* under two of the great conductors of his time, Bruno Walter and Wilhelm Furtwängler. At a climactic moment in Act II when Susanna (and not the supposed philanderer Cherubino) emerges from a closet to the amazement of both Count and Countess, there is a brief falling sequence of three-note phrases (see EX. 6, Chapter Three). Walter insisted that Graf have Susanna move at this point, since he believed Mozart was describing her "tiny steps" in his music. Graf repeated this blocking for Furtwängler, who at the same point demanded that Susanna remain motionless. His reasoning: the music represented the heartbeats of the stunned Countess. This anecdote is telling for any study of opera. Opera exists in a realm of practicalities, plural possibilities, and compromises—not material out of which fine theories may be constructed or material that encourages hasty and exclusive assumptions. Philosophers of art are valuable spokesmen, but it is doubtful that they influence the crucial decisions that are the present interest: why and how to mould a piece of literature into a form workable on an opera stage. Nor are the theoreticians the final arbiters of success, though they may be helpful in explaining it. That, after all, is for time and operatic audiences

to decide. Generally speaking, operatic history has not developed according to nice aesthetic principles but through pragmatic response to particular fashions and technical innovations—simply because the complexity and expensiveness of opera have actually served to make its practitioners extremely practical-minded (Wagner being the most obvious example of this paradox). One might add, too, that composers do not always conform in practice to their own explicit theories.[10] For these reasons I have largely forsaken theory in favor of practice in what follows.

A last word should be added about the musical discussions in the following chapters. "Do not be alarmed," Shaw once wrote in a review. "I am not going to perpetrate an 'analysis.' " Of the technical analyses Shaw had in mind this study too is innocent. Though, I do attempt to comment upon the relationship of the musical language to the literary aesthetic that it seeks to vitalize. I am concerned with what the composer and librettist have to express, that is, what in the source they chose to give musical substance to and what they chose to ignore. Such discussion inevitably requires examination of the music, and the reader will find that I turn to the music primarily to illuminate the ways a composer gives life to his source, and to observe how well his musical personality agrees with the literature confronting him.

The reader will recall Michel de Chabanon's plea for equipoise. I have attempted in the following chapters to emulate his spirit and have avoided condemning what seems like radical surgery without first pursuing the symptoms of stage conventions, artistic necessity, or contradictory creative purposes that may have led to extreme measures. And I have sought to position myself between the demands of literature and the demands of music—as someone, rather like a neutral observer in a buffer zone, able to look upon both frontiers with interested detachment. It has been my experience and observation that the study of literature and music is a sadly neglected field. Professors of literature are by and large indifferent, if not hostile, to musical translations of works within their domain. Professors of music are for the better part preoccupied with performance, strict musical analysis, and musical history. This provincialism is unfortunate, since so much of the great vocal literature could be more fully appre-

ciated, not to say more intelligently performed, if studied in an integrated way as literature *and* music. My concern is opera, but the art-song repertory also offers stupendous potential for comparative study.

Writing a general book on a topic over which specialists from both sides naturally exercise a skeptical, rigorous, and perhaps even jealous dominion represents an obvious risk. I thought the risk worth taking. Literature as opera is too large and intriguing a subject to be left entirely to either literary or musical faculties. The intention of the present study, then, is to encourage a better rapport between the two disciplines and a willingness to make those reciprocal sacrifices Chabanon speaks of. Readers unable to take the words of Shakespeare's Coriolanus to heart may find this a maddening book: "On both sides more respect."

two

ORLANDO ARIODANTE ALCINA