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Textual Theory / Textual Practice:

The Anecdote and the Opera House in the 20th Century

One evening in the spring of 2000, I was having dinner at the American Academy in Berlin, where I was a Fellow. Also at my table was another Fellow, the musicologist Karen Painter, who had just delivered a paper on Mahler and what she referred to as “the aestheticisation of violence.” As a Yale graduate and former faculty member, I probably showed a certain amusement at, what to me, at least, sounded like a very Harvard word – aestheticisation – and during the conversation I too spoke of Mahler. But when I did, I spoke of him as if I knew him.

This perhaps has something to do with my being a conductor. Our job is to understand what is at the heart of any work we perform, to translate it through the sounds emanating from an orchestra and soloists, and then into the hearts and minds of an audience. To do that, we probably “know” a composer better than most. But that was only part of the reason I was talking about Mahler as if I knew him. It also was because two very old men with whom I worked when I was quite young did know him and told me much about their experiences. One was Leopold Stokowski, whose experience was limited to secretly observing Mahler’s preparatory rehearsals for his new 8th symphony in Munich. (“The rehearsals were closed,” the ninety-year-old maestro told me, “and so I would walk in the stage door each day with an empty violin case, say ‘Guten Morgen’ to the Pförtner and hide in the balcony. The orchestra hated Mahler...”) and the other was Hans Spialek, who was in his late eighties when I met him. Spialek was the principal orchestrator of the Broadway shows of Rodgers and Hart – as well as scores by Cole Porter, Sigmund Romberg and others. And, as a boy soprano, he sang in the Vienna State Opera’s Knabenchor, under the baton of Gustav Mahler. Hans was one of those old people whose memory only sharpened with age. He could imitate the way Mahler conducted; the way he walked and why he and the other children used to make fun of him. Hans spoke of standing on stage in 1907 with his young colleagues, wearing a white toga, his arms and face covered in rice powder, as if he were a marble statue, staring at Mahler during the dress rehearsal of one of Mahler’s very last productions at the Stadtoper: Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Aulis*. (“Mahler cried from the beginning of the rehearsal until we left the stage,” old Hans said. “But why, Hans?,” I asked ...).

It was at this moment during dinner at the Hans Arnhold Center on the Wannsee, that Dr. Painter’s patience ran out. With a dramatic and conversation-stopping crash worthy of Mahler’s aestheticisation of violence itself, she dropped her knife and fork onto her plate and said, in a loud voice, “Anecdotes! These are just anecdotes!” That’s when the conversation really got interesting.

I have just told you this anecdote about anecdotes, to open the discussion of how our experience as musicians really gets passed on from century to century. During a break in rehearsals at the Lyric Opera of Chicago last month, I looked at the pencil rack below the music stand of the principal 'cellist. There I saw a pencil that looked familiar. It was half red and half blue. I explained to him the history of that pencil as used by accountants in the old days: red for outgoing and blue for incoming. He said that he used this kind of pencil because he had seen some of Mahler's scores and the composer had marked them in these two colors. I smiled and picked up the pencil on my stand, which also is a red/blue pencil. Then the 'cellist stood up and looked at my score to Mark Blitzstein's *Regina*, marked by me only in red and blue. I had learned to do that from Leonard Bernstein – red for editorial changes, blue for cues – who had either decided to do that as Mahler did, or had learned this procedure from Fritz Reiner, with whom he studied conducting at the Curtiss Institute.

(Yes, another anecdote, and not the last one you will hear from me today. I fear that at this point in my life as a performing musician I have slipped into that final phase, which Phyllis Curtin called “anecdoteage.”)

I had first met Leonard Bernstein at Tanglewood, during the summer of 1971. He was just completing the score to *Mass*, which would open the Kennedy Center that September. As a conducting fellow, I conducted before the maestro and then had him give a critique of what he saw and share his experience with those of us in the conducting program. Earlier in the day of our rehearsal, I had lunch with Mr. Bernstein. My colleagues had mostly disappeared, studying their scores, and I found him without entourage, carrying his lunch tray to one of the benches where we students ate.

We talked about the work I was about to conduct for him, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. It was here that he told me that he believed every musical masterpiece had a basic internal tempo from which all the tempos derived, not just the slow introduction and coda of the Tchaikovsky, but also an entire Beethoven symphony and even, he said, an oratorio by Handel. I was amazed that a conductor/composer, who was so famous for his Dionysian performances was speaking to me from the Altar of Apollo.

The idea of tempo as structure as well as the opening of the life-long dilemma for any musician: the dynamic tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of musical performance, were articulated and discussed that afternoon over a sandwich with Leonard Bernstein.

The next summer I became his assistant, and for the next 18 years Bernstein asked for me to help him, and frequently to represent him, and to edit his music and perform premieres when he preferred to be in the audience rather than conduct. This period involved important premieres and transformations of his 1956 *Candide*, the opera *A Quiet Place*, and *Mass*, in such places as London, Vienna, New York, Tel Aviv, and Washington.

Mass had its world premiere on September 8, 1971, and it was the next spring that this production, directed by Gordon Davidson, choreographed by Alvin Ailey and conducted by Maurice Peress, was revived for a limited run at the Kennedy Center, with additional performances in Philadelphia and at the Metropolitan Opera. It was during a preview performance at the Kennedy Center of the revival that I took notes for Bernstein. I have kept my notes, written excitedly in the dark on yellow legal paper. Although my full scores were lost sometime in the 1980s, I have kept my piano vocal score and asked Boosey & Hawkes to send me the newly engraved full score.

Bernstein's comments (in my hand) make for interesting reading, thirty-one years later. They involve tempos, balances, diction, and general notes about expression, as one would expect. But they also include notes about staging, lighting, and technical failures of the electronics. In other words, everything having to do with the theatrical performance of the work, not just the music.

Bernstein was kind enough to let me oversee a totally new production, which took place at Yale's Woolsey Hall during the first months of 1973 and then in Vienna for the work's European premiere.

Having assisted Bernstein before the Washington as well as New York performances, and having his studio recording, of course shaped my conducting of the work. However, I felt that the final canonic *Laudas* made a greater impact if they were slower, conducted in eighth notes, rather than the unequal quarter and dotted quarters Bernstein and Peress employed. Bernstein said, "Sure, why not?" In fact, he was so generous about whatever differences there might have been between his and my reading of the score, that I look back now at this with a certain contentment. After all, I was 27 years old and Bernstein, at 54, was twice my age, and the composer. (His one objection had been to the amount of suspension in the upbeats in the opening *Kyrie* march. Bernstein and I referred to the abrogated, or distended, upbeat as "Jewish upbeats." In Vienna, he told me, "Your Jewish upbeats have become positively anti-Semitic!")

We shall address the matter of Bernstein's recordings of his own music in a few moments, but from a textural point of view, the newly engraved score looks like a real improvement over the photo-copied score I used between 1972 and the mid 1980s. I did miss seeing Bernstein's handwriting in the *Meditations* and the other orchestrator's hands (principally Hershey Kay and Sid

Ramin), since it all now has the look of a single finished entity, one which sprang fully realized from the maestro's head in 1971. Perhaps that is a good thing. It makes Mass feel finished, like the engraved scores of Beethoven and Brahms. But it also hides its history while giving it a kind of artistic credibility the earlier score did not exude: The unassailable auctoritas of the beautifully printed word.

In 1981, when I conducted yet another production of Mass (for the tenth anniversary of its premiere) I noticed that the Thrice Triple Cannon was incorrectly set. The point of constructing such a melody is that all nine bars must be heard once as a simultaneous event precisely in the middle. This never happened, simply because the second voice entered on the third bar, rather than the second. When I showed this to the composer, he said, "Change it." I wrote the words "Change it, LB" on the top of page 54 of my old piano/vocal score. I checked this bar in the newly-engraved full score sent to me last week and it has not been changed.

Was that anecdote worthy of an editor's consideration? As the story-teller, must I suffer from the suspicion of self-aggrandizement and hyperbole? I don't blame you, because that is quite possible. What would constitute an unimpeachable source for correcting this error, one that the composer clearly did not notice and even recorded? And if I say to you that Lenny said, "Fix it" and it isn't fixed, is this just another semi-fascinating story, signifying nothing?

During the years of editing and performing Bernstein's music for him, I learned more than one could ever begin to speak of here. That, in the wake of the critical and public failure of his brilliant opera *A Quiet Place* he accepted a simple, but total restructuring of the work, says much for the willingness of an opera composer to adapt and collaborate. What had been an enormously complex one-act sequel to the cartoon-like *Trouble in Tahiti* was of such an harmonic density that the public could not make the aural and temporal transition from one to the other. The first scene of the new opera was as long as all of its prequel. Yes, I was the person who suggested a three-act opera, with *Tahiti* as a Fellini-esque flashback imbedded in the second scene of *A Quiet Place*. This version had its world premiere in Milan. Although La Scala wanted Bernstein to conduct – and so did I! – he did not feel up to the task and he wanted it to be me.

The world premiere of *A Quiet Place* had taken place on June 7, 1983 in Houston's Jones Hall, under the musical direction of the Houston Grand Opera's then Music Director, John De Main. That theater had such poor acoustics that everything – pit and stage – was amplified and balanced electronically. Much of the orchestration of the new opera had been done with the help of Bernstein's two great orchestrators, Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal. But these orchestrations were frequently impossibly overwhelming for an unamplified acoustic environment.

What happened next should give you all a sense of how little we have progressed since the seventeenth century. This new set of parts, with its orchestrations adapted and corrected for the acoustic of La Scala, was shipped to Washington after the Milan performances. They were left on the tarmac during a rainstorm and made illegible. An entirely new set of parts had to be copied practically overnight for the Kennedy Center performances. This new set of parts was then used for those performances, which were also under my musical direction.

During the Scala period, the Vienna State Opera expressed an interest in presenting the new opera, but only on condition that Bernstein conduct it. (I said to Lenny something like “That makes me feel pretty awful,” to which he said, “How do you think it makes me feel?”) Because of the music copyists’ collective bargaining agreement in the United States, any reuse of parts (recording, broadcast) incurs a complete repayment of all the original fees to the copyists. It was determined that for Bernstein’s Vienna performances and its live recording and video-taping, it would be cheaper to copy out a fourth set of parts in Europe, which was done. Thus, there are now four separately copied sets of parts for anyone brave enough to attempt a critical edition of Bernstein’s one and only full opera, one that was written only twenty years ago.

The transformations of *Candide* could fill a book, but what makes the saga particularly interesting is its ending. I had helped make what one might call two interim versions of the 1956 operetta between 1973 and 1988, when I helped create a final version, with the composer’s active participation and which had its premiere in Glasgow, at the Scottish Opera on May 19, 1988.

Lenny finally conducted a concert performance of this version in December of 1989, ten months before his death. He already knew something ominous was growing in his lungs and he was in pain. He also was suffering from bronchitis and influenza. His principal singers also fell ill. During the rehearsals Bernstein made a number of changes, including the ending of “Glitter and Be Gay.” Much of the recording was “tracked,” which is to say the orchestral accompaniments were laid down by Bernstein, and the singers came in later to overdub themselves onto Bernstein’s tempi, which in some cases were remarkably different from anything he had ever heard me do over the sixteen years I had performed this score in his presence.

I said to him, not completely kidding, “Now you’ve ruined everything!” Indeed, in the last months of his life, Bernstein had given his first complete performances as the conductor of *Candide* and did things that he felt needed to be done then and there, from his point of view at that point in his life. Does it remain definitive? Does the beautifully engraved publication of the “Scottish Opera Version” with uncredited emendations made in London, constitute anything definitive? And more troubling, do people now expect *Candide* to be performed at some of the glacial tempos chosen by Bernstein in 1989? Bernstein’s recording of *Candide* won a posthumous Grammy for ‘Best Classical Album.’”

Recorded performances under the direction of composers are, after all, another kind of publication. It is another way for a composer to put his stamp on a work. But using this material adds a new level of complexity as to what constitutes an “edition” of twentieth century opera. Bernstein is a good example. The Bernstein of the recording studio was invariably a slower Bernstein, one who wanted to hear everything and made that possible through distention. This can be a revelation, but it is absolutely not what he asked for in the theater.

The process of creating works for the lyric stage in the twentieth century does not seem so different from earlier periods. Losing operas to rising water is well known to scholars of Monteverdi. I was grateful to have access to various versions of *Madama Butterfly* for a new production at the English National Opera some twenty years ago. Puccini had gone through an agonizing process with that opera, something not unlike what Bernstein had experienced. What we ultimately performed was neither the Ur-text nor the final version made for Paris, but a selective use of all texts. What was achieved was so successful that this production is still being performed today in London.

The same held true for *La Forza del Destino*. Having access to the St. Petersburg version and comparing it to the Milan version, made it clear to me at least, that Verdi had terribly compromised his score for the Milan public, and yet he had also rewritten a number of scenes and made them musically superior to their original settings. There was no way, in the last years of the 20th century, to justify the new overture, with its implied happy ending, except that it became an instant “hit” with the public in Verdi’s Italy. In that sense he was right. (As Irving Berlin said, “I always write for the mob, and, as far as I am concerned, the mob is always right.”) But a happy ending to an overture to a tragedy called *The Force of Destiny*? And so, for a new production in Glasgow we opted for a version that adhered to Verdi’s original dramaturgy (the original prelude and finale and scene ordering) but whenever Verdi rewrote a scene to improve its music, we used that version. Once again, this would be anathema to purists, but proved to be a sensationally successful production, causing even representatives from La Scala to fly from Italy to see it.

Anyone who has ever been part of the creation of a work for the lyric stage knows that it is a complex process, a process that is full of people with opinions. Even Wagner was not immune to the realities of the stage. If Wagner could take his one-act opera, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, and cut it up into three separate acts and transpose the soprano’s aria down a whole tone so she might get through it, then he stands right alongside Verdi, Puccini, Leonard Bernstein and Andrew Lloyd Webber as a practical man of the theater. Lord Andrew was the most surprising man to work with, by the way. He allowed all of the recitatives for his one-act, one-woman opera (the song part of *Song and Dance*) to be rewritten for Bernadette Peters in order to make them fit her voice. Does this not sound familiar to those of you who study the process of operas in the eighteenth century?

My biggest challenge was to convince him to allow Madonna to sing “Don’t Cry for me, Argentina” in B-major for the film version of *Evita*. Webber had written the song in D-flat major and he only can hear his songs in specific keys. This came as a surprise to me, not because I denigrate his achievements, but because composers for the lyric stage have always rewritten their vocal lines and transposed their music for certain singers. Once I brought up Wagner and Verdi, Lord Andrew seemed mollified. I also pointed out that the keys for women’s songs in the cinema are always lower than on the stage. That is because they do not need to hurl their voices over an orchestra, and the intimacy of the camera makes those higher keys seem silly. Thus we parody Janette MacDonald’s “Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life,” but never Marnie Nixon’s “Hello, Young Lovers!” in *The King and I*, where the keys are usually a whole tone lower than on Broadway.

The point of all these anecdotes, so far, is to represent the fact that rarely is there a definitive single text for an opera, and it behooves us to find the ways to represent the process in critical editions. An editor must make choices, of course. Otherwise you might as well print everything that exists and each of us would take one look, scream, and call up Edwin F. Kalmus! But musicologists must have creative imaginations, too. You must be as creative as we are in making choices. This comes from understanding how the theater works now and has always worked.

There is and always has been an internal battle in every composer between an image of artistic integrity and the vicissitudes of this complex art form. Most of the changes Wagner made to his *Dutchman* are those of orchestral balance. What worked in Dresden did not work in Paris, and two of those reasons are 1) the different acoustics of the two theaters and 2) the varying quality players in the orchestra. That is what Mahler was doing in Munich that so exasperated his orchestra. “He kept changing the orchestration,” Stokowski told me. He was balancing the work so that it sounded the way he imagined it when he notated it.

This is why Stokowski felt it was his responsibility to change the orchestrations depending on the hall and orchestra he was conducting. Any conductor, from Toscanini on down, who says he is only doing what it says, is either not telling the truth or does not understand a principal function of a conductor when a composer is not present.

My favorite new anecdote on this subject is only a few weeks old. My new chorus master at the Pittsburgh Opera, showed me his score before preparing the Pittsburgh Opera chorus for *Dutchman*. He had gotten a series of editorial changes that reflect, he said, the “old Bayreuth traditions” of *Dutchman*. Throughout the score the vowels and phrasing were changed. The Wagnerian equivalent of Yo-Heave-Ho, had all been changed. The phrasing of short to long notes were all reverse, and in some cases final short notes were removed altogether. He had gotten the

Bayreuth changes from the Lyric Opera of Chicago's chorus master, Donald Palumbo, who had gotten them from Norbert Balatsch, the now retired Bayreuth chorus master, who had succeeded Wilhelm Pitz at what we once called Neue Bayreuth, now over fifty years "neu." These "old" traditions apparently were created during the past thirty years to help the Bayreuth chorus sing together in the specific acoustic of that theater, a theater in which the co-ordination of pit and stage is enormously difficult, since the sound from the pit reaches the stage so late. Assistant conductors on platforms are needed to help keep the chorus together.

Dutchman was never performed at Bayreuth during Wagner's lifetime, of course, but it says a great deal about the Mecca of Wagner performance that pitches, vowels and phrases have been changed to make a better and more controllable performance. And Wagner probably would have been the first to assist in this process.

We live in a time when letters are not written, where scores do not appear in the composer's hand but directly into computer files that can be updated and altered without leaving much of a trail. We might find that new editions of operas will best be achieved in interactive computer files which would allow us to see at any moment what alternatives you have found for us, so we do not have to read through a volume of footnotes which must be cross checked with each bar of the edition.

Unfortunately, we also live in an era when musicologists and performers continue to show little respect for each other. Imagine my surprise to learn that the Metropolitan Opera library, the Lyric Opera of Chicago library and the Seattle Opera library do not own a copy of the critical edition of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Robert Sutherland, the Met's librarian, told me that the Met's materials reflect an active tradition that goes back to a time when the people who performed it at the Met knew Wagner and that the house's traditions were both practical as well as valid. The Schott edition was published without orchestral material, which makes it even less useful. "And," as Sutherland explained "if we were to copy all the editorial decisions into a set of public domain parts, the Met could be sued for copyright infringement. And so the musicologists and the publishers have painted themselves into a corner."

The Schott Edition is represented in America by Warner Bros. Publications, who do not hold it in stock, but will order it, for those who are curious, from Mainz at more than \$400 a volume plus shipping. There are four volumes for *Der Fliegende Holländer*. In the 1940s Warner Brothers' most prolific composer was Max Steiner, whose *Gone with the Wind* is only one of his more-than-300 film scores. Steiner was credited for having invented film scoring. He is reputed to have said, "Don't be ridiculous. Film scoring was invented by Wagner." The irony of Wagner being represented by the institutional descendants of Harry and Jack Warner, whose studio housed two other Jewish émigré Wagnerians, Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Franz Waxman, should not go unmentioned.

For my Pittsburgh performances of *The Flying Dutchman*, which start tomorrow night, I have made use of all four volumes and have come to understand that what remained constant between 1840 and 1880 was as important as the relatively minor changes Wagner made during his lifetime. It has also allowed me to understand the compilation made in 1896 by Felix Weingartner, which is in public domain. All of this information will inform the text we use, but will not insure a good performance. That, ironically, is the other side of the continuum. Apollo will be assuaged, but unless we summon Dionysius tomorrow night, all the research into the research will have been in vain.

We know from his writings that Wagner hated slow tempos for his music and yet what conductor has ever been criticized for slow Wagner? We know that Verdi frequently asked about the tempos in the performance of his music and this author has demonstrated in a number of papers that metronomic pulse is a fundamental building material in Verdi's operas, one which can even be associated with certain characters and become referential to previous dramatic situations, almost like a Tempo-Leitmotif. In spite of these facts and findings, I have yet to see any conductor praised or faulted, hired or fired, encouraged or discouraged, by the use/non-use of proper texts as the source of his or her performance. Critics, who in general can be seen as lapsed musicologists, are clearly divided on the importance of textual fidelity. The public is also ambivalent about hearing their favorite operas performed in alien and alienating ways, even if we can demonstrate how correct we are. This is one of our great dilemmas: the passing of unwanted information to the very people who love the music we are working so hard to reveal to them.

An editor, like a conductor, must be willing to take a risk, to trust his/her talent to evoke the times, conditions – the “feel” of the piece. You too are an essential part of the creative process, not objective mechanics. We are all translators: Music depends on us. I have always said that composers are fundamentally optimists. They absolutely depend on the kindness of strangers, otherwise they would not write music. The dilemma will always be choice. As Carlos Fuentes wrote earlier this month in a review of a new translation of *Don Quixote* by Edith Grossman, “Nothing (is) harder for the traduttore, if he or she is not to be seen as the traditore, than to render a classic in contemporary idiom and yet retain its sense of time and place.” We performers need to see and understand what I call “the parameters of choice” left by the composer and his closest associates, in order to render a viable contemporary translation for our time.

And that is what you are called to do: Give us the texts and help us find those parameters of choice. I have always preferred the name used in America for what I do: conductor. The Germans say director – Dirigent. The French have a chief.- chef d'orchestre. The Italians have a master – un maestro. But we are in fact conductors, as much in the physical as well as metaphysical sense of the word. The text should be the primary source of both the conducting as well as the conduction.

We cannot even replicate the conditions of yesterday, so 1903 or 1803 or 1703 and 1603 are equally to be imagined. At the same time, people have not changed all that much, even if certain aspects of society have. The language of Western music is heard and understood by more people today than ever in history, thanks mostly to the orchestral scores of the cinema. For this we can be grateful. And while the twentieth century might just be the last century in which musicologists of operas, as defined in Florence in 1598, will toil, there will always be lyric theater and it will always be messy and always be indispensable. It will need you.

And, when it comes to editing operas, we need you to understand that what happens today in the lyric theater is what has always happened, even back when Sophocles was demonstrating dance steps to his recalcitrant attic chorus line.

Decisions in the music theater happen quickly and pragmatically. If Leonard Bernstein said to me “fix it,” in 1981, I fixed it. But you and all those who perform or study Mass cannot know that unless it is somehow passed on. If someone were to ask me, I would tell him my anecdote about this little bar of music. Will he believe me? Do you believe me? Will my correction ever make it into print? And if so, will it make a difference? Have I made up this whole story to make myself seem more important than I really am? Was that Schindler knocking at the door, or Beethoven? That is for you to decide. I know that whenever I conduct Mass, should I ever do that again, when I come to bar three of the Thrice-Triple Canon, I will definitely fix it.

Dominus vobiscum. The anecdote is over. Go in peace.

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