

A PLEA FOR TRUE COMEDY

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ONE of the greatest obsessions of contemporary criticism is trying to figure out whether the works that are liked—and those that are not—are going to survive; or whether, in centuries to come, they will fall into complete oblivion. This is illogical not only in regard to music but all the other arts. Paint and paper made today are destined to chemical disintegration, and thousands of volumes accumulating on library shelves will fall in shreds before the century is over, as bodies preserved in hermetically sealed tombs crumble to dust on contact with the air. The sciences of chemistry and physics represent the great triumphs of our age but chemistry is the science which has destroyed the durability of modern art. Thanks to the chemist, our civilization will disappear and all the critical essays, intended to survive the arts, will themselves vanish, the victims of chemistry.

In opposition to this critical concern with the future, we see a fervent desire to return to the sources of music, every effort to find a new road having been exhausted. The wisest hope to create a new language by drawing on the beautiful period of the Renaissance, which, in music, ended with the seventeenth century. Others are returning to the works of the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Some time ago, one of my friends asked me: "What are the possibilities of the opera buffa and of the cantata buffa, like the *Amfiparnasso* of Orazio Vecchi? Can we find its traces in certain modern works and is the resurrection of that form possible?"

The opera buffa represents the spirit of an era which did not support intense drama and which liked good cheer without vulgar degeneration. It was formed in a musical language harmonious with the spirit of its age and consequently with the comedy on

whose words it was constructed. Is it possible that the musical material of the time of the opera buffa can belong to today? Can the spirit of the eighteenth be revived in the twentieth century? Musical development must be the spontaneous expression of its age. The most powerful artists have been unable to avoid the influence of their time. Despite his conquering personality, Johann Sebastian Bach remains a man of the eighteenth century. Richard Wagner is the heir of Beethoven; he is a romanticist who gained recognition through his personality but he is fundamentally the contemporary of Johannes Brahms and of Schumann.

Wagner is the most important figure in the present and future development of music because he took such vigorous possession of the current language that he squeezed it out like a lemon and left nothing for his successors. Debussy represents a digression; this exquisite musician, this super-aristocrat could not be the starting point for a school. We may consider Monteverdi the father of the whole Italian melodramatic school, even of those who have no spiritual link with him, because everything he invented could be assimilated and exploited by his heirs. But the Italian melodrama, as it has endured until our day, can no longer be considered a fruitful musical form because of its subordination to the singers.

The opera buffa's development in France and Italy owed its impetus to those writers who created the gay comedies of the eighteenth century. The best Italian opera buffa librettos are quite good comedies which might amuse us even today if the music did not drag them out so and if the faults of a precocious improvisation, masquerading as genius, were not so obvious. But this, fundamentally, is the shortcoming of all music dramas from about 1750 to 1850. Giambattista Lorenzi's *Socrate Immaginario* is one of the best Italian comedies. But Paisiello's music is the feeblest he has ever written. Girolamo Gigli, Carlo Goldoni, Casti, Rainieri Calsabigi wrote librettos for opera buffa which no musician immortalized. On the other hand, the opera buffa which has survived is based on libretti of slight literary value, for example Pergolesi's *Serva Padrona*, Cimarosa's *Matrimonio Segreto*, even Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia* which represents an eighteenth century that already had the Napoleonic era behind it.

Today the great foe of opera buffa is the musical pastiche called operetta. To study the modernization of the opera buffa is to study the modern spirit. When Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi enthused Venice there were no "pochades." They had the refinement and depth of spirit of Molière, Marivaux, Regnard, Beaumarchais and others in France. The banal platitudes of the pochades would not have amused the audiences which laughed at the masterpieces of these authors. Consequently opera buffa maintained a level with comedy.



Up to the first half of the nineteenth century, musical art appeared only in the form of chamber music, symphonies, oratorios, and comic and serious melodramas. Popular music was a thing apart, distinct from authentic art. The songs and dances of village fêtes were fine in character and relied on folklore; from the dances of the aristocracy all vulgarity was banished. It is the second half of the nineteenth century which has caused the mischief in music. The banal novelties of music and concert halls have spread like wildfire over the world. The most worthless cabaret song, if it is a hit, is distributed even by airplane. The composer is often a man who knows nothing about music and will never be able to learn anything about the art. It is strange to see how these slight, feeble works, whose words moved the whole world to tears a few years ago, now seem silly and antiquated, a ridiculous and grotesque effusion. Stravinsky has, it is true, invented a musical grotesque (see *Petrouchka*) which bases itself properly on a conflict of words (or the dramatic situations which take their place) and music, but cases like this are rare. Stravinsky, though always attempting something new, was unable to ignore the *Amfiparnasso*. The book of that madrigal-drama is constructed in a synthetic and purely musical fashion which enables the author to create a symphonic atmosphere with the voices while the mimed comedy is developed separately on the stage. *Renard*, *Les Noces* and *L'Histoire du Soldat* are thus fundamentally related to the *Amfiparnasso*.

Before the resurrection of the opera buffa can take place, the grossness of the operetta and of the pochade will have to be renounced. Music is a delicate art; demoralized by vulgarity it falls into the deepest pit of degradation. It is really time to end this confusion; let us stop calling certain productions of sound by the name of music.

Vecchi's *Amfiparnasso* is a perfect masterpiece because its beauty is not limited to the historical presentation of a period but has the qualities of immortal art which enable it to survive its era. Opera buffa has been completely abandoned in Italy. Even Donizetti's *Dom Pasquale* and Verdi's *Falstaff* have not achieved the popularity of the musical melodramas that are full of preposterous episodes. The possibilities of the opera buffa depend on a revival of the spirit. If the spirit merely sleeps, a revival will be possible but if it is dead, the opera buffa is dead too.

After the shock of the war, in a mechanical age like ours, can there arise a music which will be gay without being vulgar? In our day the gloomiest holes, the most macabre tombs have become places of amusement where one must laugh at any cost in order to forget that tomorrow will be as sad as today. But art is no pastime; it is food for the spirit, while the machine is a product not of the spirit but of science.