1

Prologue: Opera as Drama

I make no apology for the Wagnerian title. This book is far from Wagnerian, but the point of view it develops is really the basic one celebrated by *Oper und Drama*, Wagner's chief theoretical statement and the important opera tract of his time. The view is trite, but always freshly suggestive: that opera is properly a musical form of drama, with its own individual dignity and force. Now, what Wagner said over and above this amounts to a very great deal, and gives his writing its particularity, and grows more and more insupportable as the years pass. What remains is his violent championship of the old tautology, opera as drama. Wagner's operas and his writings forced the nineteenth century, and the twentieth, to approach opera with a new high-mindedness. No one has ever pleaded the cause so efficiently.

The cause had many earlier champions, as well as worthy opponents. Since the days of the half-literary, half-musical academy that willed opera into being, musical drama has fascinated critics almost as steadily as composers; the speculative, satiric, and polemic literature is very extensive. And lively, thanks to the interest of Saint-Evremond, Addison, Diderot, Kierkegaard, Stendhal, Nietzsche, Shaw, and many intemperate lesser men. Today, as we look back over all the arguments and battles, perhaps the strongest impression is of a pervasive continuity. The examples change, but the central issues remain, constantly reinterpreted in the terms of the time. Is musical drama viable, and if so, how? Is Lully, or Gluck, or Wagner, or Verdi really doing with the form what we think it is capable of? The postulates and ideals, the dissatisfactions and controversies are renewed for every generation.

Musical drama *is* viable, and I believe that the present intellectual climate ought to be especially clement to the idea. We have certain new advantages; but the old disadvantage is still with us—the seeming contradiction between ideals and corrupt practice. Singers, audiences, and impresarios are irresponsible, as they always have been; artistic values are thoroughly confused by the jumble of good and bad that forms our current repertory. This makes a serious consideration of opera both difficult and rare. Sometimes ridicule can cut true, but we should do without that familiar indiscriminate satire on the genre as a whole, delightful or deserved as often this may appear. At present the greater need is for a reassertion of presumptive virtues. Addison and W. S. Gilbert, delightful writers, have had their bad effect on the course of opera in Britain. The instant appeal of their approach makes it all the more necessary to keep reformulating the humorless, idealistic position.

Today Wagner's terms are impossible; none more so, perhaps. A contemporary view of opera does not owe its novelty primarily to the current situation in the United States, though this seems odd enough in the light of history: the abrupt enthusiasm for opera in the years since the Second World War, for opera that is mostly foreign and old, known mostly from records, broadcasts, and earnest half-amateur "workshops." The novelty is due more fundamentally to the modern approach to an artistic tradition. Historical perspective has led on the one hand to a broader, more imaginative concept of the dramatic, and on the other, to a warmer respect for music of the past than was possible in earlier times. We see much more as dramatic; we see much more as musically expressive. We have the opportunity, the terms, for a quite new interpretation of the operatic problem and the operatic repertory.

In particular, the historicism which so much determined the old view of opera is unthinkable today. Wagner, who found Racine "laughable," would never have given a thought to the operas of Monteverdi, even if he had been able to know them. Music, he was sure, was so simple in the seventeenth century that nothing sensible could be expected of opera. But

today we are sure that this is not necessarily so. As the tradition is studied more carefully and more sympathetically, it seems less and less to fall in with any dialectical march to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of a hundred years ago, to "the Art-Work of the Future." Composers of the past left, not a series of immature experiments, but a number of solutions, each distinct, and each with the potentiality of artistic success within its own limitations. This way of looking at history is no less benign to Wagner in the nineteenth century than to Monteverdi in the seventeenth. Wagner might have cursed it as flabby relativism, but to us it represents a breadth of vision as inevitable as it is hard to maintain. And it does allow us to encompass more.

Flabby relativism is certainly the danger, as anyone knows who buys an opera season ticket. Under the tacit assumption that everything is all right in its own terms, extremes of beauty and triviality are regularly placed together. In our opera houses, art and *Kitsch* alternate night after night, with the same performers and the same audience, to the same applause, and with the same critical sanction. Confusion about the worth of opera is bound to exist when no distinction is drawn publicly between works like *Orfeo* and *The Magic Flute* on the one hand, and like *Salome* and *Turandot* on the other. As for operatic criticism—but unintellectuality is another odd feature of the current American vogue for opera. Talk is seldom about meaning, but about peripheral topics like opera in English, "modern" production methods, and television techniques; all without an idea of what opera can or should be, and what is in the first place worth translating, producing, and televising. This may be understandable in our first flush of enthusiasm of discovery, but it is hard to think that all our operatic activity can proceed much longer without standards.

A serious search for dramatic values, with the kind of informed respect for the tradition that is elsewhere second nature nowadays, can begin to provide a basis for standards. At the same time, such a search can begin to subvert the general indulgence towards anything that happens to hold the stage; it need not lack Wagner's steady hostility toward cheapness

and philistinism. The postulate is that opera is an art-form with its own integrity and its own particular limiting and liberating conventions. The critical procedure involves a sharpening of musical awareness and an expansion of our range of imaginative response to drama.

2

Opera as drama. What are we to comprehend as drama? There have been many general answers, all necessarily partial. I might start by mentioning briefly some things that drama is not, and then follow up an obvious analogy. Drama is not, exclusively, a matter of the effective deployment of plot. Skilfully contrived situations, clever exits and entrances, and violent *coups de théâtre* do not compose the soul of drama. Neither does strict naturalism in character, locale, or detail; "imitation of an action" does not mean photographic reproduction. Yet when an opera is praised as dramatic, the judgement generally seems to be based on some such limited view. What is meant is little more than "theatrical" or, rather, "effective according to the principles of the late nineteenth-century theater." *Tosca* is "dramatic"; not a very subtle piece, perhaps, or a gracious one musically, but at least "dramatic"—and so it holds the stage.

It should hardly be necessary to observe that other dramatic traditions exist besides the so-called Naturalism of the late nineteenth century, and that they have differed as widely in technique as in range of expression. Dramatic criticism is concerned with Æschylus and Euripides, the medieval stage, Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans, Racine, Goethe and Schiller, Pirandello, Lorca, and Eliot, as well as with Ibsen, Shaw, and their less serious followers. A contemporary account of drama has to rationalize some appreciation of the particular powers and procedures of many very different dramatists. (Two modern classics of dramatic criticism, *The Idea of a Theater* by Francis Fergusson and *The Playwright as Thinker* by Eric Bentley, provide an important place for Wagner too.) Drama in its great periods has been variously conventional-

ized and variously artificial; the slice of life and the well-made plot are by no means essential. Indeed Naturalism, whatever its merits, is less useful to the understanding of opera than are most other modes of spoken drama.

Most of those others are poetic modes; this fact alone brings them closer to opera. The comparison with poetic drama can help us with the problem of *dramma per musica*, as opera was called by the early Italians—drama through music, by means of music. The analogy should probably not be pressed too far, but fundamentally it is just: in each form, drama is articulated on its most serious level by an imaginative medium, poetry in the one case, music in the other. In his essay *Poetry and Drama*, T. S. Eliot put it as follows:

> It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it. The painter works by selection, combination, and emphasis among the elements of the visible world; the musician, in the world of sound. It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action—the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express—there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action. There are great prose dramatists—such as Ibsen and Chekhov—who have at times done things of which I would not otherwise have supposed prose to be capable, but who seem to me, in spite of their success, to have been hampered in expression by writing in prose. This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express.

The function of dramatic poetry is to supply certain kinds of meaning to the drama, meanings that enrich immeasurably, and enrich dramatically, and that cannot be presented in any other way. What is essentially at issue is the response of the persons in the play to the elements of the action. In this area poetry can do more than prose discussion or the placement of actors into physical and psychological relationships. The particular aspect or weight of such relationships, of events

and episodes, is determined by the quality of the verse; and in the largest sense the dramatic form is articulated by the poetry in conjunction with the plot structure. The same can be true of music.

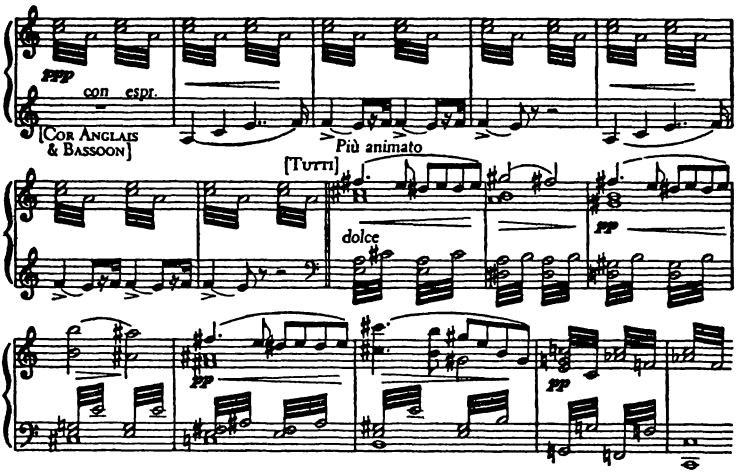
As Eliot says, ". . . when Shakespeare, in one of his mature plays, introduces what might seem a purely poetic line or passage, it never interrupts the action, or is out of character, but, on the contrary, in some mysterious way supports both action and character." More profoundly yet, an extended poetic passage can critically determine the whole course of a drama by its quality of feeling. In such a case poetry becomes the vital element of the action. An example comes to mind (for a special purpose) from *Othello*: the entrance of Othello with the candle in the last scene, before he kills Desdemona. To say that he comes no longer as a jealous murderer, but in the role of judge, is merely to give the scenario of what Shakespeare projects by poetry:

> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
> It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
> And smooth as monumental alabaster.
> Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
> Put out the light, and then put out the light.
> If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
> I can again thy former light restore,
> Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
> Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
> I know not where is that Promethean heat
> That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose,
> I cannot give it vital growth again;
> It needs must wither. I'll smell it on the tree.
>
> *He kisses her.*

Imagery and poetic music combine to give a grave beauty to Othello's behavior. First, I think, by means of the heavy rhythm of the opening repetition, with the recurring soft assonant "is . . . cause" interrupted by the flow of the second line to its majestic halt at the slow, again assonant, spondee "chaste stars." A moment later the repetitions are resumed

and developed, four-fold with echoing t's, and with a particularly beautiful intensification in the rhyming and weighting of "thy light." Second, the metaphors, homely and poignant—putting out a light, plucking a rose. The quiet syntax, imagery, and rhythm combine to create a gentleness, inevitability, and clear-eyed grandeur that no amount of prose or plotting could have matched. This is all brought out by the fine dramatic contrast with Othello's tone at his previous appearance, all k's and p's and spitting rhythms; Desdemona was not a rose but a sweet-smelling weed, "a cistern for foul toads to knot and gender in" and many other complicated things. In turn, the soliloquy reflects forward to the great final speeches in which Othello seeks to summon up his former self-image. One's response to the play as a whole hinges on the feeling of this soliloquy, and on other elements of this sort.

The musician's ear responds to analogous elements in opera, wherein the imaginative articulation for the drama is provided by music. Consider the parallel scene in Verdi's *Otello*—it is not exactly parallel, of course, for Verdi wanted a different quality, and to get it altered the "scenario" (it was not the libretto that altered the quality). Otello enters making the decision, not already resolved; rather than the sobriety of tragic anticipation, Verdi wished to present love and fury tearing at Otello's soul. The scene begins on a celebrated note of menace, muted double-basses interrupting the ethereal close of Desdemona's *Ave Maria*. What defines it as much as the grotesque color and pitch is the key contrast, E thrust into A♭. The double-bass line becomes more mellow, and limps, punctuated by an urgent motive, at first bleak, then flaring up as Otello makes to scimitar Desdemona at once. A crying figure seems to restrain him; answering it, with an abrupt harmonic shift again, a dull-rooted melody grows out of the first notes of the double-bass line, harping on the minor sixth degree, F (Example 1). This turns radiantly into the major sixth, and a beautiful phrase that we recognize with a flash of understanding: the climax of the love-duet of Act I, ardent, articulate, assured. But as Desdemona awakes to his kiss, this possibility is cut off by means of the most wonderful harmonic change



Example 1

of all, a turn from E to F minor which sounds suddenly the real note of tragedy.

One's response to the drama as a whole hinges on the feeling of this scene in its context. Very obviously so, in this case; for by means of the phrase associated with the kiss, Verdi directly links the scene backward to the early serenity of the first night in Cyprus in Act I, and forward to the opera's final moment:

> I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this—
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

When Otello stabs himself, the motive with the minor sixth is heard again, and there is new pathos now to its transformation into the luminous music of the kiss. Nothing escapes Otello's consciousness; the F returns as a Phrygian cadence to the tonic key of E. Where Shakespeare recalls the past feeling, Verdi, by the force of musical recapitulation, actually recaptures it, and even intensifies it, by means of certain changes in detail. If Verdi's man does not achieve the new integration of nobility attempted by Shakespeare's, he does

recover the fullness of his love, no inconsiderable dramatic feat. It is the music that sums up, forms, and refines.

In a verse play, those all-important feelings which make the difference between scenario and work of art are supplied by the poetry; in an opera, by the music. The speed and mental pliability of words give verse drama an intellectual brilliance impossible to opera, and indeed the luxuriance of detail presents a challenge to the poet, who has to organize it firmly to his central dramatic idea. Poetry is much more precise in the treatment of specific matters; narration, discussion, and subtleties of character development come naturally to verse drama, but have to be treated with circumspection in opera. Eliot's problem about "saying homely things without bathos" is much more severe for the opera composer.

But in spite of all the flexibility and clarity of poetry, even the most passionate of speeches exists on a level of emotional reserve that music automatically passes. Music can be immediate and simple in the presentation of emotional states or shades. In an opera, people can give themselves over to sensibility; in a play nobody ever quite stops thinking. Music is also a natural medium for the projecting of various kinds of mood and pageantry, and is so used in the spoken theater. As dramatic elements, these are often misused, but need not be. And in the larger sense of form, music has the clearer, stronger outlines. Recapitulations, cadences, transitions, interrelations, and modulations are devices that music has learned to handle most powerfully.

These and other differences surely exist, and account for the different forms developed for spoken and musical drama. But in spite of differences, I would emphasize again that the imaginative function of music in drama and that of poetry in drama are fundamentally the same. Each art has the final responsibility for the success of the drama, for it is within their capacity to define the response of characters to deeds and situations. Like poetry, music can reveal the *quality* of action, and thus determine dramatic form in the most serious sense.

In the following chapters, I shall develop this idea in reference to the great musical dramatists. They differ, perhaps,

as widely as Shakespeare and Sophocles and Strindberg in their dramaturgies and in their personalities. But for all of them, opera was not a mere concert in costume, or a play with highlights and an overall mood supplied by music, but an art-form with its own consistency and intensity, and its own sphere of expression. Opera is a type of drama whose integral existence is determined from point to point and in the whole by musical articulation. *Dramma per musica*. Not only operatic theory, but also operatic achievement bears this out.

3

In formulating this view of opera, I certainly had no thought of claiming it as a novelty. It is the view that has kept operatic criticism alive for 350 years, and one that many people today probably hold—but lazily; few seem ready to go and meet it, think it through, and assume its consequences. At present, indeed, there seems to be more vigor in other attitudes, which go against opera as drama, either directly or insidiously.

The attitudes which concerned me in the 1950's, and which I tried to exemplify briefly from the work of prominent writers, still seem to me paradigmatic. Dramatic critics of a pronounced literary bent tend almost automatically to question the dramatic efficacy of any non-verbal artistic medium. They do not doubt that music in the last few hundred years has attained enough maturity to meet very stringent demands; they may be keen music-lovers. But they feel that because of a characteristic lack of detailed reference, music cannot qualify ideas and therefore cannot define drama in a meaningful way. Thus Eric Bentley in *The Playwright as Thinker*:

> . . . every dramaturgic practice that subordinates the words to any other medium has trivialized the drama without giving full reign to the medium that has become dominant. . . . Above all, music performs its dramatic functions very inadequately. Though Wagner and Richard Strauss have carried dramatic music to extraordinary lengths, they not only cannot, as the latter wished, give an exact musical description of a tablespoon, they cannot do anything at all with the even more baffling world of conceptual thought. They cannot construct the

complex parallels and contraries of meaning which drama demands.

Now just what music *can* do is of course a famous aesthetic problem. According to the classic solution of the seventeenth century, music depicts "affects." But the twentieth tends rather to discern certain kinds of "meaning" in music, significances impossible to define in words by their very nature, but precious and unique, and rooted unshakeably in human experience. Meaning cannot be restricted to words. If even ostensibly abstract instrumental music is thought to have meaning, the case is surely stronger with opera, where the specific conceptual reference is continuously supplied—by the libretto. Supplied as clearly as possible by the presentation of situations and conflicts, and by the use of words in their "denotative" aspect.

Around such references music is free to indulge its most subtle connotative, expressive powers. Mr. Bentley leans towards the "drama of ideas," which Wagner took over as enthusiastically as he took every other aesthetic notion known to him. But literary drama has more regularly—and more successfully?—dealt with qualities of experience, not principally with ideas. Feelings, attitudes, and meanings "beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life" (in Eliot's words) do not necessarily find expression in the most elaborate scenario or in the most trenchant dialectic. No artistic medium that exists in time and on the stage can be denied at the very least a theoretical opportunity to articulate drama. Music has done it very well.

Music critics, however, have not seriously challenged or disproved the intransigently literary point of view. Most of them, I think, do not even recognize the problem. Perhaps they are to be excused for having an elementary notion of drama; but with *Tosca* as a dramatic ideal, "opera as drama" really has no import at all. While we have developed considerable insight into the means whereby music can and does contribute to drama, this insight has rarely been integrated into a full account of the complete work of art. Musicians,

doubtless, are no duller in the theater than literary men are in the concert hall. But however this may be, dramatic unawareness underlies almost all current writing about opera, from the most philistine to the most professional.

A striking recent example of the latter was *Mozart's Le Nozze di Figaro*, an exhaustive, not to say scholastic, monograph by Siegmund Levarie which was first published in 1952 and reprinted in 1977. It included the first wholesale adoption in English of the influential theories of Alfred Lorenz, the German Wagner analyst of the 1920's. The assumptions and procedures of Lorenz's analytical method are questionable enough, but the main point is this: the system is in fact a preexisting purely musical one, for which dramatic details are regularly invoked to "explain" musical details that do not fit. The "explanation" is made with a logical naïveté that matches the dramatic insensitivity. Thus the "unity" of the work as a whole is ultimately proved by reducing it to a cadence formula, I–IV–V–I; and regarding the peripety, it is said:

> The reconciliation of the married couple takes place in G major, the Countess' realm; but the final scene is in D major, in which a straightened-out Count may be expected to prove his dominance over a supporting wife.

No amount of harmonic explication can explain this mistaking of the Almavivas' domestic situation. As in the worst peripheral excesses of the New Criticism (which was innocently invoked to support Levarie's method), the work of art has been lost in ticker-tape. For the work in this case is a drama, not a harmony exercise. Lorenz and his followers show the absurdity of an intransigently musical view of opera.

More popular writers on music eschew, indeed scorn, any close analytic approach to opera. Having no dogma and no intractable mass of detail, they lose the work of art in other ways. Some can never really accept the basic operatic convention, try as they may; so it is ridiculous for starving Florestan to start singing on a loud high G. Some lack the courage of their own presumptive love of music; in the concert hall Beethoven can sustain the *Ode to Joy*, but in the theater he cannot

sustain the ending ecstasy of *Fidelio*. Some have inherited Victorian qualms about operatic music; *Otello* is somehow vulgar as compared to a good fugue by César Franck. Contradictory timidities mix to produce a characteristic vagueness of position, at best alleviated by an occasional insight. Here bad music is excused as suitable to some crude theatrical effect, there drama is dismissed, or bad drama is excused, as a pretext for pretty music.

Even Ernest Newman, the most widely read and one of the best early twentieth-century opera critics, could write as follows of *The Magic Flute*:

> . . . undue stress has been laid on its "ethical" virtues—its laudation of Virtue, Justice, Humanity, Universal Brotherhood, and all the rest of it. These academic expressions seem a little fly-blown today, and we have got past the stage when we can take a work of art to our bosoms merely because it spouts lofty sentiments: in a work of art it is only the art that finally matters. Still, these sentiments played a large part in making the music of such works as *The Magic Flute* and the choral finale of the Ninth Symphony what it is, and so we must be content, for the time being, and for purely artistic reasons, to accept them at the valuation Mozart and Beethoven placed on them, just as when watching *Hamlet* we do not admit that ghosts exist, but merely suspend temporarily, for the sole purpose of playing the game along the lines laid down by the poet, our disbelief in them.

The worst of these critics have made Puccini's *Tosca* into a sort of *locus classicus* for musical drama.

I think it may be worth while to consider *Tosca* a little. Let us look at the last act, at least. The fact that it shows some similarities to the final act of *Otello*—and does not Scarpia invoke Iago in Act I?—should facilitate analysis.

Like Verdi, Puccini found himself beginning his last act with memories of great tension and violence, and with a situation conducive to an impressive hush before the catastrophe. With the "Willow Song," Verdi made this into an ominous hush which seems directed; as Puccini did not capture this quality, his scene seems rather to wait. He too employs a folk song, sung off-stage by a Shepherd Boy as a misty, pink

dawn is about to break. Presently a lengthy orchestral passage overloaded with church bells introduces the hero Cavaradossi, who converses briefly with the Gaoler; unlike the orchestral entrance of Otello, this is static, a single mood. Left alone, Cavaradossi recalls a rather warm dream of love in his famous aria "E lucevan le stelle." Tosca enters with news of the "reprieve," and the score is heavy with leitmotivs. As soldiers come, the action progresses swiftly to the final *coups de théâtre*. Tosca leaps off the parapet, and the orchestra concludes *tutta forza con grande slancio* with a repetition of the melody of "E lucevan le stelle." The scheme is, again, superficially like that of *Otello*.

Now the first part of this act, up to the entrance of Tosca, is one of the most undramatic things in opera; *not* because nothing much happens on the stage, but because nothing happens in the music. It is indeed the penultimate demonstration of Puccini's insufficiency before the demands of Sardou's obvious melodrama. (The ultimate demonstration is the curiously passionless dialogue with Tosca that follows.) Possibly the Shepherd's song might have been integrated dramatically, but Puccini wished only to strike a mood of melancholy, which is inappropriate to Cavaradossi's position on its own, and doubly so when it leads into the attenuated bell-passage at his entrance, then into his mawkish aria. If Puccini had no more insight into or sympathy with the condemned hero's feelings at this crisis, he would have done better to leave them alone, as Verdi did with Manrico's at the end of *Il Trovatore*. But patently Cavaradossi was not the primary concern. What mattered was not his plight, but the effect it could make on the audience. Puccini's faint emotionality is directed out over the footlights; he will let us have a good cry at Cavaradossi's expense. This at once makes for a complete extinction of the poor painter as a dramatic protagonist, and forms a shield against any serious feelings which Sardou, even, might have hoped to arouse in us.

As for the Shepherd's folk song, it appears then to be as extraneous as the choirboys and the cardinal of Act I, an insertion not for any dramatic end, but for display of floating

lyricism. It is hardly necessary to contrast the parallel element in *Otello*, the "Willow Song," which not only makes Verdi's hush, but also wonderfully fills Desdemona's character and clarifies her fate. In the last act of *Otello*, the music for the hero's entrance, too, is crucially involved with the drama. Never once in four acts does Verdi interpolate pageantry or lyricism without a telling influence on the drama.

Tosca leaps, and the orchestra screams the first thing that comes into its head, "E lucevan le stelle." How pointless this is, compared with the return of the music for the kiss at the analogous place in *Otello*, which makes Verdi's dramatic point with a consummate sense of dramatic form. How pointless, even compared with the parallel orchestral outburst in *La Bohème*, supporting Rudolfo's surge of pain at the memory of Mimi's avowal ("Sono andati? . . . voli con te solo restare"). But *Tosca* is not about love; "E lucevan le stelle" is all about self-pity; Tosca herself never heard it; and the musical continuity is coarse and arbitrary. Once again, this loud little epilogue is for the audience, not for the play. What a shame (we are to feel), what a shame that butterflies are broken on this excellently oiled wheel. For they are, after all, still the fragile butterflies of the new Arcadia that is Puccini's Bohemia, flirting, fluttering, carefully fixing their crinolines in garrets. Cavaradossi is Marcello, with a commission, but with no more sense of reality; Mimi is caricatured as La Tosca, with her simpering "Non la sospiri la nostra casetta" and her barcarole love-theme. But what had a certain adolescent charm in the earlier opera is preposterous here, with Spoletta, Sciarrone, Baron Scarpia, and the head-screw. I do not propose to analyze the musical texture of *Tosca*; it is consistently, throughout, of café-music banality. If Joyce Kilmer or Alfred Noyes had taken it into his head to do a grand poetic drama on Tosca, that would have been something analogous in the medium of language.

But it is scarcely believable that such a play would have held the stage, or that it would be bracketed with Shakespeare, or that it would have become a favorite criterion for poetic drama. It would have its adherents, no doubt; and be-

fore those who would be impressed by the quality of the verse, one could only maintain discreet silence, as before those who are awed by Scarpia's chords or touched by the "Vissi d'arte." The really insidious error is the idea that Puccini's banality and Sardou's can somehow excuse one another and elevate each other into drama.

The more fully one knows the true achievement of the art of opera, the more clearly one sees the extent of Puccini's failure, or more correctly, the triviality of his attempt. This is a secondary consideration, however. This book aims much more at an appreciation of important works of art than at the divestment of unimportant ones. The positive accomplishment of *dramma per musica* will occupy our attention, happily—from the first attempts of Monteverdi to the arrogant structures of Wagner, from a huge tradition that culminates in Mozart to another that culminates in Verdi, from Purcell to Stravinsky, from Metastasio to Alban Berg. In 350 years opera has established an impressive canon of fine works. Among them are some masterpieces. Among them, also, are some excellent operas in which the dramatist's vision is not entirely sustained; and in dealing with these, I shall make no effort to gloss over limitations. Both the *Orfeo* of Monteverdi and the *Orfeo* of Gluck, for instance, fail to encompass the final catastrophe implicit in the Orpheus legend within their different, and in some ways opposite, dramatic conceptions. But these operas fail in quite a different sense than *Tosca*. With all their imperfections, they are still seriously dramatic, still works of spirit and sensitivity and beauty.

Of the many current partial attitudes towards opera, two are most stultifying: the one held by musicians, that opera is a low form of music, and the one apparently held by everybody else, that opera is a low form of drama. These attitudes stem from the exclusively musical and the exclusively literary approaches to opera, to which I have already indicated my objections. Opera is excellently its own form. The role of music in this form has been defined simply but exactly by Ed-

ward T. Cone, in the course of an essay on Verdi's late works that one might wish were more typical of operatic criticism:

> In any opera, we may find that the musical and the verbal messages seem to reinforce or to contradict each other; but whether the one or the other, we must always rely on the music as our guide toward an understanding of the composer's conception of the text. It is this conception, not the bare text itself, that is authoritative in defining the ultimate meaning of the work.*

The final judgement, then, is squarely musical, but not purely musical, any more than it is purely literary. Music articulates the drama, and we can no more suppose that a small composer can write a great opera than that a poetaster can make a great play. To estimate the meaning of a work of art of the past, to reconstrue the composer's conception in terms that are meaningful now—this takes an imaginative effort, as always. Strangely or not, something of the same effort is required to comprehend the contemporary masterpieces, which complement and continue the great operatic tradition.

*"The Old Man's Toys: Verdi's Last Operas," *Perspectives USA* 6 (1954).