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MOZART IN PERFORMANCE

Andrew Porter

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A demented nun in a habit half scarlet, half emerald-green, dances along the beach. The scene is bathed in yellow light of pure, poignant beauty. A jewelled sword protruding from a crevice in the rocks, stiffly erect, catches the nun's eye, and she fondles it lovingly. Suddenly, along the boardwalk there appears a wheelchair, pushed jerkily—now fast, now slow—by a circus clown. In the wheelchair is an Arab terrorist, dressed in black leather and a mackintosh, wearing dark glasses. The nun takes refuge behind a huge pile of discarded footwear, and she begins pelting the terrorist with sandals, slippers, sneakers, riding boots. Unperturbed, he regards her through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, while the clown patters his commentary . . .

What I'm describing, of course, is the second scene of Don Giovanni, Elvira's 'Ah, chi mi dice mai', as one is liable to encounter it in any contemporary European opera house—or here in America, maybe, at Long Beach, when some Ruth Berghaus disciple has been at work there . . . Honest, I'm not exaggerating: read the reviews in any issue of Opera.

I want here to glance at some of the ways that Mozart's music is given visual form in the modern world. Since it's a huge subject, I have decided to focus on just four prominent and influential Mozart directors whose work has been widely seen on both sides of the Atlantic—Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Sir Peter Hall, St Peter Sellars and Göran Järvefelt. The four are very different, but between them they cover the centre of what might be called contemporary common practice. Obviously, this will be slightly artificial—isolating just one element of the composite and complicated adventure. When critics go to the opera, they do also listen to the music.

I'll ignore the fringes: on the one hand, the lunatic fringe represented by the Don Giovanni I've just described, and on the other hand the perpetuance of the sort of Mozart productions that people of my age grew up with—straightforward, or sometimes over-elaborated, productions, in built representations of decorative 18th-century rooms, the sort of work that Carl Ebert and Oliver Messel did at Glyndebourne and that we saw in Salzburg and Munich and Vienna. The man-
1  Mozart monumental: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's production of La clemenza di Tito at the Metropolitan Opera, New York (photo James Hefferman)

2  Mozart modern: Peter Sellars's staging of Act 1 of Le nozze di Figaro, with Jeanne Ommerlé (left) as Susanna and Susan Larson as Cherubino at the PepsiCo Summerfare festival in the United States (photo Peter Krupernye)
Ronald Crichton once called Ponnelle ‘a man for whom far too much is never quite enough’. His basic Figaro—not the Met version, which he redesigned, but the Salzburg one that was taken up by several other companies, and circulates on film and video—showed not only the rooms of the action but also the adjacent corridors. No one could make a sudden, surprise entry though a door; we’d already seen their approach, outside the door.

Ponnelle abhorred soliloquies, which play an important, powerful dramatic part in Mozart’s operas. Consider now the second act of Figaro begins: the other characters have been introduced in busy dialogue and ensemble; now we have a new character, the Countess, alone onstage, reflecting on her lonely life, embarking without recitative straight into an aria. It is a striking image. But in the Ponnelle version, the Countess is not alone; she shares the scene, ‘Porgi, amor’, with Susanna. In the Ponnelle Idomeneo, Ilia shares her first aria, a soliloquy, with Idamantes and Electra, eavesdropping. During her second aria, which is addressed to Idomeneus, Idamantes plays peek-a-boo behind a pillar, to see how she and his dad are getting along. In Ilia’s third aria, a soliloquy if ever there was one—it begins ‘Pleasing solitudes . . . hear the laments that an unhappy lover confines to you’—Idamantes is right behind her, in full view, taking a sunbath. Ponnelle’s Titus was also peppe up with a touch of vulgarity; it began Rosenkavalier-fashion, with Vitellia still in the big double-bed from which Sextus has just risen.

Now I can imagine a different kind of Titus production in which this might work. After all, the plot does largely turn on Sextus’s sexual enthrallment to Vitellia, and a director might well want to stress this from the very start. But it looked absurd in the context of Ponnelle’s large, nobly neoclassical staging. He played Idomeneo and La clemenza di Tito in the same set—a columned piazza, rising at the sides and the back, executed in grisaille, in near-monochrome. In Idomeneo, the vista is closed by colossal stone mask of Neptune; with rather absurd effect, the mask lights up whenever the god’s name is mentioned—which happens often in Idomeneo. In Titus, the vista is closed by a version of the Arch of Titus (which was erected to celebrate his Sack of Jerusalem, one of his less clement actions). The costumes are 18th-century. The effect is of romanticized neoclassicism. The twinned Idomeneo and Titus at the Met stand like a grand serious final statement about two operas that Ponnelle did much to bring before the grand-opera public. They are skillfully matched to Met audience expectations. The worst that can be said against them, perhaps, is that they approximate two operas of very different character—Mozart’s personal, powerful transformations of opera seria, one in youth and one at the close of his career—to a generalized image of opera seria as something conventional, stately and decorative—and in need of peppering-up touches. The sets could serve equally well for Alceste, or Lucio Silla, or Traetta’s Antigone, or Vivaldi’s Tito Manlio.

Peter Hall’s approach is very different. Ponnelle came to opera as a designer; Hall came to it from the spoken theatre. He was born in 1930. He had headed the Royal Shakespeare company when he directed at Glyndebourne, in 1973, a Figaro (the cast included Ileana Cotrubas as Susanna, as Cherubino the young Frederika von Stade, and the young Kiri Te Kanawa as the Countess) that I still remember as the most engrossing and at every moment most exciting performance of the opera I have ever enjoyed. The late John Pritchard—at his best, the most Beecham-like Mozart interpreter of his day—was the conductor. In later seasons the Figaro was followed by Don Giovanni, and then by Cosi fan tutte. The performances were televised and videotaped. To anyone teaching Mozart operas I recommend these as the most honest and the most exciting accounts of the Mozart—Da Ponte operas available. Hall’s approach was at once straightforward and sensitive. I’ll summarize it by telling a story out of school: one season, a revival of the Glyndebourne Figaro was rehearsed by an assistant director, working from the book. Sir Peter came down to see the dress. Before it began, the assistant said anxiously, ‘I’m afraid, Sir Peter, that I may not have got all your blocking exactly right.’ To which Hall replied: ‘Aah don’t give a f— . . . a tinker’s cuss about the “blocking”, so long as the feelings are right.’

Well, the feelings were right—it was the motivations, not the moves that mattered—in those Glyndebourne shows, and they remained so in the enlarged versions of the Glyndebourne productions that have been seen in San Francisco, Chicago, and elsewhere. Mozart—mature Mozart, his music made manifest onstage as an expression of human feelings in all their complexity—was well represented. Hall’s regular designer is John Bury. He shifted the period forward a bit—not onto the Moon, or into Harlem, but into the age of Goya: still period, but without the twirly-whirly crinolines, the powdered wigs, the pinches of snuff. Hall wanted to get rid of the frills and fanciness. It was the characters, the why’s behind the way they sang and the way they moved, that mattered. He never tried to ‘make a statement’. His
approach seemed to be: Who are these people? What are they thinking, what are they saying, what are they feeling?

(And if I use past tenses about someone still very much active, it's only because Hall's new Glyndebourne Figaro, two years ago, was disappointing: fussy, over-active, filled with the modern fad—also prominent in his Bayreuth Ring—for keeping people down on the floor much of the time.)

Göran Järvefelt, who was born in 1947 and died, young, in 1989, began not as a designer or a director but as an actor. He was with the Swedish National Theatre for five years, was influenced by Ingmar Bergman, and was admired as Richard III. He served his operatic apprenticeship with Felsenstein and Götz Friedrich. He made his directing début in 1974 with the Stradella oratorio San Giovanni Battista (a work in which Maria Callas once sang). He developed his Mozart style in Drottningholm, that 18th-century Swedish theatre that survives with its original sets, and he took it to the other European theatres and to Houston, to Santa Fe, to Australia. The Houston Grand Opera last month presented the three Mozart–Da Ponte operas in reconstructions of Järvefelt productions. With his designer Carl Friedrich Oberle he devised what was pretty well a formula: a bare, Drottningholm-inspired perspective room, with different closings at the back, and three practicable portals down each side. This set served for all the operas.

And the set raised questions about Mozart and his response to specific settings. Figaro ends in a garden, and Don Giovanni begins—or should begin—in a garden: 'Giardino, set out on a line of its own, is the first word of the libretto. Well, who has ever seen a Don Giovanni that opens in a garden? I have never, in over a hundred different productions. It is true that in Mozart's autograph score 'Giardino' is not written; he begins with the second line of the stage direction: 'Notte'. But often he did not transcribe the stage directions of his librettos in full. And gardens are important in Mozart. It's not mere chance that, after three scenes of indoor intrigue, the conflicts of Figaro are resolved sotto i pini, where the brook murmurs and the flowers smile. Something essential in Figaro was lost, I think, in the Järvefelt non-garden staging. Would it be fanciful to suggest that it matters that Don Giovanni begins by breaking the peace of a garden—and all that it represents—by the squall after an attempted rape and then by a murder? The garden of Così fan tutte was also missing in Järvefelt's version—that enchanted garden, conjured up by the woodwinds, in which lovers yield to amorous impulse.

In itself, each of Järvefelt's scenes was attractive. In succession through different operas, the effect—propagated through three continents—became formulaic, almost an abdication of the role that varied décors should play in dramatic communication. Järvefelt set himself problems, and he solved them ingeniously, but sometimes the result looked like puzzle-solving. How, on a bare stage, unprovided with table or desk, would the Countess and Susanna manage to write a letter? A laptop desk was the answer. Well, there were such things in the 18th century. (In a truly 'modern' production it could be a Toshiba laptop.) Järvefelt combined his simplicity of presentation with moments of extravagantly emotional outburst, almost a kind of wildness. His productions don't revive well, I think, when they are simply re-created by the book, as they were in Houston. But maybe I'm wrong. The 1981 Australian Opera season included, apparently with success, revivals of the Järvefelt and Oberle productions of Die Zauberflöte, La clemenza di Tito, Cost fan tutte and Don Giovanni.

And so I come—with some trepidation, I confess—to Peter Sellars. The trepidation arises because, although I find that some people agree with me, I find that far more people—and trusted friends among them—do not agree with me; and so far I have found no way of putting into words persuasively or convincingly why the Sellars productions of the three Da Ponte operas and of Die Zauberflöte seem to me among the most exciting Mozart productions of our day. I'll make another try. His stagings seem to me embody the most passionately vivid responses to the operas that I have ever encountered. Sometimes I feel that I am being preached at—but who minds, who is not stirred by, being preached at by a really eloquent and convinced preacher? Ponnelle elegantly and grandly decorates, and Järvefelt elegantly solves scenic puzzles of his own devising. Sellars sometimes shocks me by what seems to me a realistic sexual explicitness very far from the onstage representations of Mozart that I grew up with. But Daniel Heartz, a sensitive Mozartian, has written boldly about Dona Elvira's orgasms that he finds represented in Mozart's music. Sellars, with equal boldness, shows what he hears and finds.

I enjoy his jokes, even if they are sometimes a bit larky: Dr Ruth seems to me a fair modern translation of the 18th-century Dr Mesmer, that modish medical mountebank with his electric-fluid jacuzzis—a topical allusion in Da Ponte's libretto. I like his freely eclectic, unformulaic manner, ranging freely between naturalism, ges-
3  Mozart musical: the opening scene of Le nozze di Figaro in Sir Peter Hall’s 1973 staging for the Glyndebourne Festival, with Knut Skram as Figaro and Illead Cotrubas as Susanna (photo Guy Gravett)

4  The court theatre at Drottningholm, Sweden, where Göran Järvefelt staged the Mozart operas and where Elisabeth Söderström is now the artistic director
tures of the Oriental theatre, and then, especially in ensembles, suddenly formal patterning of the musical and emotional structure. Many of his images stay with me vividly; when, in the first duettino of Figaro, Figaro looks up and from his task and sees Susanna, in bright light, trying on her bridal veil—and one's heart stops at the rapture and tenderness in his glance. Few Figaro productions make one feel so keenly, right at the start, what an important day this is for him, all that fills his heart. I spoke earlier of how we first meet the Countess, alone with her unhappiness; and in the Sellars production it was a memorable Mozartian image. I find his sets (by Adrienne Lobel or George Tsypin), his costumes (by Dunya Ramicova), and his lighting (by James Ingalls)—a regular team—uncommonly beautiful. Giotto and Harlem conspire in the scene in which Don Giovanni is set. Elvira's 'Ah taci, ingiusto core' is one of the great, complicated moments of opera: heartbreak on the balcony; below, a cycnic intent on a cruel jest but, also, a strange new twist on the relationship between master and man. Sometimes it is represented with monochromatic pathos, and sometimes it's mere buffoonery, belying the intricacy of the music. Sellars, I think, got it just right. In Cosi, he and his collaborators, moving out of Despina's Diner, fully created the romance of the garden by the sea, in which instinctive responses prove more powerful than conventional imperatives. The scenic and musical romance embraced the theatre; the television version, which is all that many people saw, could not do it justice.

I did not think that everything was wonderful, or, so to speak, 'right', about these Sellars performances. I had strong reservations about much of the musical execution. And I felt that all three productions were unbalanced in being so constantly intense. They put one through an emotional wringer. Don Giovanni goes to Hell damned, defiant, despairing. But is it 'right' to assume—and to be shown—that everyone else in the opera is in Hell, too? Well, Sellars thought so and heard so: three women whose marriages have been wrecked, all by a combination of the same man and their personal failings; two prospective bridegrooms, ditto; and the servant who has played along and has been corrupted. It may not be my reading of the score, but it was a very stirring and disturbing reading to share in so vividly.

That's my point. Critics don't go to a performance thinking that there is only one right way for a work to be performed. Like any open-minded member of the public, they go intent on discovering, responding to, and sharing someone else's perceptions. They may admire some things, may deplore others—and then, when describing them, perhaps try to sort out reasons why. If about Peter Sellars we seek, instead of conflict, some sort of consensus, it might be this: that, like or leave it, he responds to Mozart's operas as intensely as any director of our day, and more intensely than most. And embodies these responses in unforgottably vivid and direct imagery.

There is much more that could be said. I haven't spoken about 'authentic' stage reconstructions for four, linked reasons: first, there haven't been enough of them to be significant; second, there is surprisingly little material to go on (less than for some 17th-century and for many 19th-century operas); third, outside such a theatre as Drottningholm it would be hard to make them effective; and fourth—the overriding reason in my case—I haven't seen enough of them. The famous and beautiful Schinkel designs for Die Zauberflöte (Berlin, 1816) have been revived a few times; in their Prussian neoclassicism they strike me as somewhat unmatched to the friendly tone of the opera. David Hockney's designs, first seen at Glyndebourne, have achieved wide circulation: in San Francisco, Chicago, La Scala, Kansas City, and this season at the Met. Perhaps I should say something about the big, heavy Zeffirelli productions of Mozart—the Met's latest Don Giovanni has three scene changes during the overture alone—but I would rather not. In The Financial Times I read of the Vienna State Opera's new Figaro, directed by Jonathan Miller. 'A triumph!', it says: 'a living organism of 18th-century social politics . . . the setting is sepiab-coloured . . . the costumes are inspired by Chardin.' Sounds to me as arty and artificial as much of Dr Miller's work—but of course I shouldn't say that till I've seen—and heard—it myself.

The visual aspect of Mozart's music dramas is the least precisely notated, the most open to diversity of interpretation. His notes are more or less fixed in pitch, and relative durations, and simultaneousness of sounding. But the costumes, the décor, the moves, the gestures are indicated by no more than a few far from detailed stage directions (Metastasio was much more specific)—and perhaps by a few imperatives dictated by the score and by the drama. Here I have examined just some of the visual diversity which has proved possible, and presented some of the responses of one particular critic to that enriching, ever-fascinating diversity.

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performed in English; in 1982 he produced Die Entführung aus dem Serail for the Indiana University Opera Theatre.

When this paper was delivered in New York its suggestions and assertions were supported by ‘evidence’ in the form of nearly 100 projected illustrations of the scenes described.

Discussion

WILL CRUTCHFIELD I had very different intellectual and emotional reactions to the Peter Sellars productions. Usually the first time I saw them I felt angry, and then I felt bored. What is depressing is that Sellars assumes that singers today and audiences today don’t have the ability to imagine emotional worlds that are different from their own. So it only works if we bring it right smack into the present. That is very limiting: after all, the music isn’t from the present. On the other hand, the emotional reaction I have is often very powerful, and just seeing those pictures of his stagings makes me remember the penetration with which he staged those moments. And he does know the music, in great detail, so you can’t attack him on that score. I think someone who can listen that carefully really deserves respect.

[FROM THE FLOOR] I have problems with opera productions where setting, casting and evident motivations contradict not only the letter of the text and the music, but also the coherence and plausibility of the opera as a whole. Peter Sellars is a useful case, but I’ve seen sillier things in Hamburg and Amsterdam. My question is whether you feel this is properly a response to Mozart’s operas or whether it is an exploitation of them by a director with ideas and purposes of his own for which the operas are a convenient vehicle.

ANDREW PORTER My answer is that Sellars’s productions are an honest, straight and powerful response to the operas and not an attempt to impose on them; that, at least, is what I observe when watching and hearing them.

JAMES WEBSTER I did see all three Sellars Mozarts in the theatre and then I began to watch the television versions. It seems that a translation to the small screen loses even more than a translation of a symphony orchestra onto your compact disc player. The vividness and immediacy of these productions was nearly unique in my experience, but most people will see them on television, where the impact cannot be the same. I did think, by the way, that he neglected one very important thing these operas are about, and that is class, social relationships based on class distinction, and this was too often missed.

ELISABETH SÖDERSTRÖM I would like to say a word about Göran Järvefelt’s productions at Drottningholm, which occurred at the same time as Arnold Östman’s important attempt to bring to the orchestra pit the sounds of the 18th century. What we saw on stage, though, was modern acting and my stomach was upset all the time by this. But Järvefelt learnt and later adapted the acting to a style to match the musical sound. I found his production of La clemenza di Tito more moving than any other I have ever seen. As for Peter Sellars, I saw his Die Zauberflöte on a very rainy evening in Oxford and there were great problems with the music and I wondered why, if he wanted that sort of action, he did not perform the music with synthesizers? Then you would have a Carmen Jones type of show, which is a very good example of how an old work and a modern interpretation can meet.

ANDREW PORTER I’ve never been bothered in the theatre by a clash of styles and periods. When Mme Söderström appeared in Ligeti’s Le grand macabre, she was an 18th-century figure, but she didn’t sing 18th-century music. when you see Hindemith’s Cardillac, which is set in the 17th century, do you mind that it is not 17th-century music?

ROBERT LEVIN We’ve been spending this conference thinking about the symbols and directions of Mozart’s own scores and believing that there’s much to be gained from trying to do what he indicated. But here we are now sanctioning an approach which is quite different. If we are able to sanction this degree of artistic licence, and I am not for one second opposing it, should we approve of the performers who play piano where forte is marked, or staccato where legato is prescribed, because they are brilliant people whose individual perspective is as legitimate as Mozart’s specific directions? At the least this approach throws an intriguing wild-card into our proceedings!