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Wort oder Ton? Reading the libretto in contemporary opera

By Andrew Blake

This article considers adaptations of existing works in contemporary opera. The author considers the role of the libretto in operatic productions, notes the number of film sources for modern operas, and applies adaptation theories from television and film studies to operas such as *Owen Wingrave*. He considers critical responses to collaborations between composer Harrison Birtwistle and writer David Harsent, discusses Robin Holloway's adaptation of Richardson's *Clarissa*, and focuses on the reworking of *The Tempest* by composer Thomas Adès and librettist Meredith Oakes.

Keywords: Libretto; Dramaturgy; Adaptation; Film; Adès; Collaboration

Introduction

Adaptation is the very lifeblood of opera; indeed, parasitism on existing literary traditions was there at its very birth. Jacobo Peri's *Dafne* (c.1597; subsequently lost) was written and performed at the instigation of the 'Camerata de' Bardi', a group of Florentine humanists who wished to revive the classical Greek drama. Members of the Camerata held that the choruses certainly, and perhaps all, of Greek drama had originally been sung. Opera was therefore not so much an original form as the restoration of an ancient performance practice; meanwhile the first generation of opera composers, such as Peri and Monteverdi, set music to libretti which were versions of ancient Greek theatre and/or mythology. Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607), his first opera, remains in the repertory.

Ever since this originary point, opera has largely lived through a process of adaptation in which words are chosen for musical setting. Existing literary texts – dramas, novels and short stories, poems – have formed the basis for the majority of new operas since Peri's work set the ball rolling. While the debate about the primacy of words or music in Richard Strauss's last opera, *Capriccio* (1942) with libretto by himself and Clemens Krauss – 'Wort oder Ton?' – ends with an affirmation of the importance of the question, rather than a definitive answer, there's no argument that the words ordered by librettists are the *instigators* of the music.

The range of sources for new operas now includes film. Philip Glass has written a trilogy of operas on films of director Jean Cocteau. The 1993 opera *Orphée* was based on the eponymous 1950 film by Cocteau – which itself is closely tied to Christoph Willibald von Gluck's 1762 opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. *La Belle et la Bête* followed in 1994, and the trilogy was completed with *Les Enfants Terribles* in 1996. More recently Olga Neuwirth and librettist Elfride Jelinek's 2003 opera on David Lynch's 1997 cult movie *Lost Highway* has been performed in Graz, Ohio, New York and London. Though original works without any previous textual or dramatic existence (such as Adès's 1995 chamber opera *Powder her Face*, with a libretto, by novelist Philip Hensher, based on the life of twentieth century socialite Margaret, Duchess of Argyll) have also been successful, adaptation

remains the norm for contemporary opera much as it did for its seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century forebears.

It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that there has been relatively little study of the ways in which existing works have been adapted for the operatic stage. This paper aims to add to this small body of work, and will do so firstly by discussing theoretical models for adaptation; then by discussing ways in which twentieth and twenty-first century opera has developed in relation both to literary forms and to the work of poets and novelists as librettists, and finally by using the libretto for Thomas Adès's and (librettist) Meredith Oakes's version of *The Tempest* (2004) as a case study.

Adaptation in Theory: considering text, medium, and genre

'There has been very little theoretical discussion concerning the process of operatic adaptation of fiction', according to Michael Halliwell, while Naseem Winnie Balestrini claims that 'whereas the field of libretto studies is not an entirely new phenomenon, it has not yet yielded clearly discernible and universally applicable analytical standards' (Halliwell 2005, 36; Balestrini 2005, 20). While scholarship concerning opera and adaptation from fiction or drama may be in its absolute infancy, there is as Halliwell goes on to point out a somewhat wider field of scholarly discussion of adaptation in the fields of film and television, and like most authors in the micro-genre of operatic adaptation studies he turns to film studies as the starting point for his own discussion of operas based on the writings of Henry James. One of the earliest writers on film adaptation, George Bluestone, argued that the two genres are entirely different, 'as different from each other as ballet is from architecture' (Cardwell 2002: 45), and that the most successful adaptations are not simply attempts to mirror the original text, but, precisely, adaptations which work through those differences - through which process, Bluestone argued, genuinely new work can and does emerge.

More recently Brian MacFarlane has provided a clear typology of the different ways in which film has adapted fiction. His 1994 study *Novel to Film: an Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* sets up a relationship between film and fiction which apparently distances it from the operatic world: 'Film has seemed to draw towards the novel, assuming through its own practices the narrative complexity and mimetic richness of the earlier medium.' (Macfarlane 1994: vii) It might be agreed that narrative complexity and mimetic richness are not among opera's strengths; but then, it might also be agreed that however much film 'reaches out' for the strengths of the realist novel, it seldom attains them. Indeed, most discussion of adaptation concerns film's mimetic *inability* - its failure to represent the full richness of its source text.

MacFarlane argues against what he sees as the constant critical tendency to refer back to the source text, as if all any film based on a novel could ever do would be to offer an incomplete version of an authoritative and culturally superior original. He claims that four aspects of an existing novel can be transferred to

film: the basic chronological events or story; the plot, or the ways in which the story is told through the actions of characters; the characters themselves; and certain mythic or psychological patterns. He claims that film tends to deal with its source material in one of three ways:

The first category is works which attempt through copying as exactly as possible the narrative, principal characters, etc, to be *faithful* to the source text. An example would be *Howard's End* (directed by James Ivory in 1992 from E.M. Forster's 1910 novel). In this type of adaptation the original text is the repository of all the film's strategies, and criticism which compares the two to the film's disfavour might therefore have a certain applicability.

It's hard to see how operatic adaptations could be seen to be faithful to the source in the *Howard's End* sense. Though one could certainly analyse the relationship between source and opera in, say, Mozart and (librettist) Lorenzo da Ponte's 1786 version of Pierre Beaumarchais' 1784 play *The Marriage of Figaro*; or Verdi, Camille du Locle and Joseph Méry's 1867 version of Schiller's 1787 play *Don Carlos*; or *An American Tragedy*, Tobias Picker and Gene Scheer's 2005 version of Theodore Dreiser's 1921 novel, as 'faithful' adaptations in this sense, all three could also be seen to fall into the second category, below.

This second category is works which aim not to copy but to *interpret* or *comment* on the source text. For example the film *Chocolat*, directed by Lasse Halström in 2000 from the 1999 novel by Joanne Harris, and which, while in many ways following the principal narrative and representing most of the novel's characters, relocates the novel from the 1950s to the present day, and emphasises the moral differences, rather than the clash between magic and religion, among the principal characters. The original text is here a guide rather than a leader, the new work attempts to be an original version rather than an absolute copy, and comparative criticism must bear this in mind.

Most operas based on existing texts can more easily be seen as interpretive versions than copies. Verdi and Antonio Somma's 1859 opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*, for example, is based on Eugène Scribe's 1833 play *Gustave III*. For political reasons this account of the assassination of a King of Sweden could not be transcribed directly for the operatic stage; it was relocated to colonial Boston, while the characters – including the conspirators and assassins – were depoliticised, again to please the censors. I shall argue below that the Ades/Oakes *Tempest* is an interpretive work in this sense.

Macfarlane's final category is works which use the source as a *starting point*, an inspiration from which to construct an *original work* which is yet clearly influenced by the source text. Here an example would be *The Birds*, directed in 1963 by Alfred Hitchcock, which is based loosely on a 1952 short story by Daphne du Maurier. The movie relocates the scenario from Cornwall to California and reworks the story's basics (for no apparent reason, a rural family is attacked by birds) within a framing love story with the usual Hitchcockian psychological niceties. In this approach, the original text is one among many intertextual resources, which might include other fictions (including other films);

there is, therefore, simply no point in comparative criticism which asserts the authority of the single source.

We might look at Wagner's 1882 opera *Parsifal* in this light. Wagner, as ever his own librettist, based his plot loosely on that of *Parzival*, the fourteenth century romance by Wolfram von Eschenbach, while injecting ideas he had taken from his readings of Schopenhauer and in Buddhist thought to produce a work with its own unique – and still highly controversial – theology.

As Macfarlane points out, one of the problems in adapting fiction into film is to encompass not the narrative as such but its *enunciation* - the ways in which narrative is displayed and organised. First-person narration is problematic for film (even – or perhaps especially – through voice-over), which can mean that the camera all too easily becomes the god-like 'omniscient narrator' of the realist novel: the story does not have to be *told* because it is *presented*.

Television studies of adaptation from literature have had to engage with a similar set of issues, though these tend to be seen in contrast to film but not to other forms. As Sarah Cardwell has pointed out, television's adaptation of classic texts has suffered from the same kind of critical comparison, with the source (and its author) granted authority over the adaptation, usually to the detriment of the adaptation (Cardwell 2002: 1; 22-3; 32). This is doubtless one reason why television adaptations of classic fictions, while occasionally modestly adventurous in scenario and script, have adopted a uniformity of glossy and 'cinematic' realist *look* which has been reflected in operas produced for television even when such a look jars against the style of the libretto and/or music - such as the 2003 Channel Four version, directed by Penny Woolcock, of John Adams's 1991 opera to Alice Goodman's libretto, *The Death of Klinghoffer* (Cooke 2005: 289).

The study of opera on film and television has also faced the issue of the supposed primacy of the original – as in the above case, however, it is often the opera as seen in the opera house whose authority is challenged through filmic adaptation. At times such authority is simply denied. Jeremy Tambling, for example, claimed in a 1987 text which wears its 1980s heart on its sleeve, that 'there is no primary, authoritative text ... texts remake themselves and are remade ... intertextuality implies that at each stage in a text's fissured and discontinuous history, it enters into new relationships, it meets other texts, it changes as it is placed in these new positions' (Tambling 1987: 23) Meanwhile, he argues, 'through film, operatic texts are opened up for a new kind of examination that cannot assume the simple hierarchical structure of the opera house, which imposes a way of seeing on the audience, and also a way of hearing'. (Tambling: 5)

For all the old-fashioned feel of this deconstructive discourse, there are some helpful suggestions about the matter in hand, especially in Tambling's treatment of the work of Benjamin Britten. Tambling argues that Britten provides an 'instance of an opera composer whose technique owes much to film, the medium for which he wrote much of his work in the 1930s' (Tambling 1987: 84-5) – such

as his score for the Post Office Film Unit's 1936 short film *Night Mail*, setting words by W. H. Auden, the librettist for his operetta *Paul Bunyan* (1941). A good example of the 'cinematic' in Britten's more mature operatic work is the use of Captain Vere's memory – in a form of flashback – as the principal organiser of the narrative in his 1951 opera, based on the eponymous novella by Henry Melville, *Billy Budd*. (This involved an act of resurrection by Britten and his librettists, E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier. In Melville's story, Vere has been killed in action). Tambling suggests illuminatingly that Forster and Crozier's work also points the work in a cinematic direction: 'the prose of the libretto, by deducing arias and melodies alike, ensures a firmer narrative line, which is more analogous to the cinema than to the theatre.' (Tambling: 87; see also Cooke 2005: 280)

There is an interesting – and, again, helpful – oddity in Tambling's treatment of Britten's work. He devotes chapter five of his book *Opera, Ideology and Film* to Britten and librettist Myfanwy Piper's 1971 adaptation of the Henry James short story *Owen Wingrave* – without dwelling on the crucial point that this was not an existing opera filmed (as are the others he deals with, such as Joseph Losey's 1979 version of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1982 rendering of Wagner's *Parsifal*) but an original work commissioned for television. Though Tambling doesn't deal in detail with the differences between film and television as technical hosts for opera, or with the processes of the adaptation from James, he argues that *Owen Wingrave* works specifically as a *television* opera by using the medium's facility for allowing a relatively large number of short scenes, something unusual, indeed difficult to realise, in the opera house 123. Calling up the famous essay by George Benjamin, Tambling claims that 'the work of art exists here *for* mechanical reproduction' (Benjamin 1969; Tambling 1987: 124). The point is well made – though in fact within four years of its television premiere *Owen Wingrave* had been produced both at the Royal House, Covent Garden, and the Santa Fe Opera, it has not remained in the stage repertoire as have many other Britten operas. There has been one subsequent television version, directed by Margaret Williams for Channel Four in 2001.

Adaptation in Practice: Making opera from literary texts

The starting point for a consideration of actual operatic adaptations would be Joseph Kerman's *Opera as Drama*. Kerman asserts that the libretto is the inspiration, while the composer is the real dramatist – a claim echoed by poet and librettist W.H. Auden, who as the librettist of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* made a significant contribution to an opera Kerman points to as exemplary drama. It's notable in fact that, the self-librettist Wagner aside, all the operas Kerman thinks of most positively have librettos written by people thought to be among the leaders in the field – such as da Ponte reworking Beaumarchais for Mozart, and Arrigo Boito reworking Shakespeare for Verdi. Patrick J. Smith in *The Tenth Muse: a historical study of the opera libretto* redresses the balance somewhat, claiming that the literary status of the libretto has to be asserted in order for the relation between text and music which together make the work as a whole to be fully appreciated.

As Michael Halliwell points out, libretti are 'at the edge of literature', since they tend to emphasise the communication function of language rather than its aesthetic function (Halliwell 2005: 10). Irene Marra, on the other hand, argues more forcefully than Smith that if, as so often in the twentieth century, recognised novelists, poets and dramatists are providing the libretti, we need to reconsider the primacy of music which is assumed by Kerman and most others who write about opera '... one must ask why literary figures would agree to write a libretto unless they were able to perceive a literary, musical or creative aspect to their participation which as yet remains unacknowledged.' (Marra 2007: 8)

Before returning to this vital question, we should ask what does a librettist try to achieve when confronting a literary text? The principal tasks will include condensation, dramatisation or re-dramatisation for the operatic stage, and what might be called 'vocalisation', preparing a singable text. Condensation is necessary even for the adaptation of drama, partly because singing simply takes a longer time than other forms of communication: this can merely involve making cuts in the original. Britten and Peter Pears's libretto for Britten's 1960 version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, involved removing about half of Shakespeare's text; similarly York Höller's libretto for his own, 1989, opera on Mikael Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (first published in abridged form in Moscow, 1966/7) is derived almost entirely from the novel's dialogue (Bruhn 2007: 26). Secondly, condensation is necessary because opera functions best by representing psychological and emotional conflicts and their resolutions, rather than the development of a long narrative: 'opera cannot compete with drama for action and pace; therefore, its strengths lie in presenting extreme emotional and psychological states and situations' (Halliwell 2005: 42).

Dramatisation is also of course a vital part of the task in turning a work of fiction into libretto form, and many extant dramas have to be re-imagined for the operatic stage. The author's narrative voice will often have to be turned into speech, and sometimes into a narrative frame for the chorus or a narrator (though in many instances the orchestra acts as a chorus-like mediator between the audience and the drama, being a vital part of the narrative strategy in Wagner's mature work and that of his immediate followers such as Richard Strauss). Dialogue will often need to be invented where the narrator's voice cannot reach, or where the original author's dialogue is simply too 'literary'.

Vocalisation usually involves agreeing with the composer where the characters' emotions can be expressed at length, and where a more immediate form of communication – such as recitative – is necessary. Auden, for example, willingly rewrote several passages of his libretto for *The Rake's Progress* in order to accommodate Stravinsky's requirements (Marra 2007: 23). Such changes are not always at the composer's behest: E.M. Forster had a rather more traditional concept of the nature of what he called 'grand opera' than Britten, and Forster and Eric Crozier's libretto for *Billy Budd*, making room for big-number arias for each of the principal characters, was rather closer to nineteenth-century models than Britten had originally envisaged (Marra: 97). Partly as a result, Britten felt

unhappy with the original 1951 four-act version; the libretto of its two-act revision in 1960 is credited to Crozier alone.

We can see the process at work in the making of *Owen Wingrave*. As Britten put it, when writing to Myfanwy Piper about proposed changes to the libretto, 'I'm convinced ... that the audience needs the tunes, it needs the lyricism of the aria and the ensemble, rather than the realistic side of perpetual recitative.' (Marra 2007: 233) The libretto, while condensing James's ghost story, included an invented opening scene, in which we meet Owen at Spencer Coyle's military academy during a lesson: Piper read Clausewitz to get a feel for lessons in military tactics. Piper herself records that 'When we turned our attention to the libretto, we went on ... analyzing the text, getting to know the characters through James's description so that even when he had no dialogue for a particular scene we knew enough about them to invent it.' (Piper 1979: 14) And invent they did, giving various characters aspects of the narrative which James had kept for the third-person narrator; this included inventing a brief role for a chorus: in the ballad heard at the opening of act 2, sung by a 'narrator' (in his only appearance) alternating with offstage chorus, which provides a narrative of the whole, in microcosm.

Narrator: There was a boy, a Wingrave born
A Wingrave born to kill his foe
Far away, on sea and land,
The Wingraves were a fighting band
Chorus: Trumpet blow
Paramore shall welcome woe

...

Narrator: They called for him to toll the bell
The bell was for the child he slew
They found him lifeless on the ground
Of that same room without a sound
Chorus: Trumpet blow
Paramore shall welcome woe

(Piper 1971: 25-6)

In Macfarlane's terms, *Owen Wingrave* would be an interpretation, as would Harrison Birtwistle's second full-length opera, *Gawain* (1991, revised in 1994 and 1999). David Harsent's libretto uses the medieval source poem – *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – as more than a starting point, less than a defining authority. Harsent claimed to have 'retained little of the original save the essential narrative drift' (Morra 2007: 46), deviating from that narrative by inventing a new character, a Fool, and emphasising the role of Morgan le Fay; at the end of the piece, she rejoices that Gawain's journey and trial have sown discord at King Arthur's court. In creating dialogue he necessarily abandoned the reported speech, alliterative, and highly formalised verse of the original. However, the published libretto emphasized the range of cultural and historical sources he had used in researching and writing his version (Harsent 1991).

On the face of it this retelling of the Gawain poem would seem ideal for Birtwistle, with his interest in ritual and the variation of pattern, and indeed the libretto contains aspects which correspond with these interests. However, Irene Morra argues that Birtwistle's repeated and accumulating patterns do not always correspond to the repeated textual phrases in the libretto. So for example Morgan le Fay's 'night after night the same dream', and Gawain's 'Cross of Christ', are repeated frequently throughout, but the music doesn't represent or echo this repetition, so the dramatic and thematic importance of the story as presented by the libretto, Morra claims, is arguably undermined by music which goes its own way. This might account for Harsent's slightly ambiguous statement about his libretto: 'You can see *Gawain* is poetry on the page; in the opera house, I'm not so sure' (Vianu 2006). A more sophisticated account of the ways in which *Gawain's* music and libretto work across each other is provided by David Beard, who argues that the contradictions and multiple narrative layers of both libretto and music should be seen in a positive light; in his view the whole is a successful collaboration, and the dramatic outcome is fully supportive of Harsent's idea that 'Gawain should develop a sense of his own identity'. (Beard 2002: 159) Either way it is worth noting that the collaboration continues: Harsent was also the librettist for Birtwistle's next opera, *Minotaur* (2008).

No such problems exist for the composer who doubles as librettist. Another of what we now have to call the senior generation of English composers, Robin Holloway, wrote his own libretto for *Clarissa* (written 1976; first performed 1990), an adaptation of *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, Samuel Richardson's 1748 epistolary novel. In condensing the longest novel in English Literature into a viable evening-long opera, Holloway produced a libretto based largely on the novel's reported speech. Putting to one side the novel's attempts to grapple with the politics of family, class and gender, the work – the scenario, words and the music – focuses on the heroine's psychosexual development (Holloway 1989). Far from presenting the result through the alienating lens of musical modernism, the score has a Bergian, even Straussian richness. The result was turned down in the moment of its completion, but eagerly taken up by English National Opera towards the end of its great 1980s moment of confrontational productions under the directorship of David Pountney and Peter Jonas. Pountney's production, involving (as the score suggests) dancers to represent multiple facets of the principal characters, seemed to some critics to exaggerate the work's sexual focus and actually to celebrate Clarissa's rape by the libertine Lovelace as a wished-for sexual fulfilment. The resulting controversy may have helped to kill an opera which, despite the romantic generosity of its harmonic invention and lush orchestration, has not entered the repertoire (Reynolds 1992; Gilbert 2009: 428). Holloway's subsequent attempt to play the ENO game, with an opera on the brothel madam Cynthia Payne, was turned down: by 1994 times had changed, and *Boys and Girls Come Out to Play* has yet to be staged. Meanwhile the composer has preserved what he can from *Clarissa*: a *Clarissa Symphony* was first performed in 1982, while 1998 saw the first performance of a suite for soprano and orchestra, *Clarissa Sequence*. Like the opera itself, this work has not yet been recorded for commercial release.

If Holloway has had trouble finding the recognition his technical adeptness and expressive power as a composer would seem to deserve (and the ambiguity of the representation of sexuality in *Clarissa* may provide a clue to this failure), then arguably the opposite is the case with Holloway's former pupil, Thomas Adès, already the most-recorded young British composer since Britten. *Powder her Face*, with its own controversial representation of female sexuality and its consequences, was one of the operatic successes of the 1990s. This triumph led to a commission for a full-scale work for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. After an abortive attempt to set a libretto about the Jonestown massacre, and with the rehearsal schedule approaching uncomfortably, the composer turned back to opera's home base: the adaptation of classic texts. The resulting version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was premiered in February 2004, in slightly controversial circumstances (gossip, so far uncontradicted, had it that the final stages of the orchestration had been shared out among Adès's friends in the weeks before the opening night; the 2007 revival at Covent Garden, with a score apparently revised throughout by the composer himself, presented a more coherent-sounding work. This revised production, with much the same cast as the original, was commercially recorded, and the resultant disc led to Adès's successful nomination as 'composer of the year' at the 2010 BRIT awards.¹)

The Tempest was in its way a brave choice. Though there have been several dozen operatic versions of the play, with Michael Nyman's *Sounds and Sweet Airs* (1993) among the most recent, none of them have become standard repertoire works: the only large-scale musical setting with a continuing impact has been that of Sibelius, whose incidental music for a 1926 production in Copenhagen was among his last compositions, sharing the musical thoroughness and intensity of *Tapiola*.

The libretto for this latest *Tempest*, provided by the playwright and music critic Meredith Oakes, is in essence a parody of Shakespeare's text; I use the word 'parody' as a descriptor and without hostile intent. Eschewing the mixture of prose, iambic pentameter blank verse, and songs which characterises the play, Oakes responded to the task with a libretto in contemporary English, employing lines of varying length (though mostly short), the majority of which are arranged in rhyming couplets or other simple rhyming schemes. Sometimes a small group of Shakespeare's words is used, though they are often re-ordered; more usually they are echoed. Read in the absence of music, the libretto's lines have more the flavour of the 'book' of a musical than the libretto for an opera. A taste:

Ariel: I have been captive
With you twelve years
I must be active
In higher spheres
Spirits must rise
Or atrophy
I only thrive

¹ Thomas Adès, *The Tempest*, conducted by the composer, EMI 50999 6 95234 2 7, 2009

In liberty

(Oakes 2009: Act I scene five. All further references are to this edition)

Although the fluidity of Adès's setting ensured that the result was not in fact a sequence of simple matching phrases, many critics found this way of writing in the shadow of the master somewhat hard to take – virtually all reviewers made a point of mentioning Oakes's reduction of Shakespeare's 'full fathoms five thy father lies' (Shakespeare 1989: Act I scene two) to 'five fathoms deep/your father lies' (Oakes 2009: Act I scene five). Thus criticism of the new work immediately fell into the mode of comparison so detested by in film and television studies by Macfarlane and Caldwell respectively.

If we are to regard askance any attempt to move beyond the Shakespearean original, then there are arguably greater problems in the condensation and re-dramatization of the work. In order to produce a singable text, the play was of necessity compressed from five acts to three; therefore several scenes vital to the original's meaning were lost (the mariners' and courtiers' responses to the opening storm and shipwreck, for example, which put the political plots into immediate perspective, were reduced to a brief offstage interjection by the 'Court' – the opera chorus – of 'Hell is empty/All the devils here' – a remark later attributed to Ferdinand by Ariel in Shakespeare's play). The magical wedding masque of Shakespeare's Act IV scene one is also missing: this in turn is in part because the Prospero of this opera is not the all-seeing magician of the play, and Ferdinand and Miranda's love happens 'naturally' rather than as part of his revenge-and-mend scheme. The comic conspiracy subplot among Caliban, Gonzalo and Trinculo is reduced, though we see much of the Court, with its own political conspiracies. At the end, Prospero has had his revenge, but far from remaining in control after the abjuring of his rough magic, he stumbles away powerless and uncertain without Ariel, who is freed at the cost of her ability to speak, thus leaving the island in the hands of an articulate if puzzled Caliban, who is given the final word.

This, then, is an interpretive version of *The Tempest*; it is not an attempt to copy a manifestly superior original. Both libretto and music have to be seen in this light. In which case, given the manifest sophistication of the music, how can the seemingly glib libretto be read? I suggested above that much of the rhyming can give the impression of superficial cleverness associated with the 'book' of a musical, and that many of the opera's immediate reviewers have commented on precisely that superficiality, seeing only a libretto which lacks the weight of Shakespeare's text. In fact, in attaining the status of interpretive version rather than mere simulacrum, the libretto has a clear set of trajectories.

After the chorus's brief offstage cry, the first voice we hear is Miranda's condemnation of the storm, which, she assumes, has killed those involved in the shipwreck. She repeats 'woe the day' before Prospero is allowed to answer. When he does so, he does not reassure her that the ship's crew is unharmed, but goes into a fierce rant about the ways in which he has been harmed through his brother Antonio's politicking. There's a similar exchange when we first meet

Caliban in scene 4. This Prospero is neurotically charged, driven by his desire for vengeance: 'Fate has brought my enemies to this shore/They must suffer as I did before'. (Act I scene two) This Prospero owes something to popular culture's greatest commentary on *The Tempest*, the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet* (Directed by Fred M. Wilcox), in which the hatred for his fellow creatures felt by Morbius – a character clearly based on Prospero – is embodied in his monstrous and destructive 'id'.

Unsurprisingly Prospero's insubstantial alter ego, Ariel, is committed to the destruction of her master's foes. Delivering short lines of sloganised anger (and set to music in an agonisingly high tessitura), Ariel mirrors Prospero's hatred:

Fear to the sinner
Fire to the impure
Storm to the villain
Harm to the wrongdoer (Act I: scene 3)

Of course this is too much too soon, and Prospero's intervention – he wants them to learn their lessons, not just to die - changes this to

Balm to the injured
Peace to the targeted
Life to the inundated
Love to the hated (Act I: scene 3)

The first scene between Prospero and Caliban gives the monster an emphatic viewpoint not only about his rule over the island having been taken, but also of Prospero's ungrateful response to his kindness on their arrival: 'All I had you were given/But now you have forgotten' (Act I: scene 4). Both this dialogue and the later encounters between Caliban and the courtiers echo the literary scholarship which would make the political events on Prospero's island analogous with the first European encounters with the islands of the Caribbean (Brown: 1996; Carey-Webb: 1999). This is echoed by Ariel's pleas for freedom – which occur only after we have heard Caliban denouncing Prospero's ingratitude. Prospero responds to Ariel's request with Morbius-like anger. He then learns, uncomfortably, about the limits of his own power as Miranda and Ferdinand fall in love at first sight - if not against Prospero's will, then certainly without his intention. His early anger at Ferdinand's interest in his daughter provokes a response from Miranda: 'Let him go, or I won't love you!' (Act I: scene 6), which also undermines Prospero's will. That will is only finally broken when Prospero considers his revenge to be complete, and when he has even – grudgingly, but explicitly - forgiven Antonio. Having proved the efficacy of his own power, he announces the breaking of his own pride alongside the breaking of his staff. Meredith Oakes's *Tempest*, then – echoed by Adès's settings both of Ariel's stratospheric creativity and Prospero's fear, anger and uncertainty as well as power and forcefulness - is at the same time an essay in the deconstruction of white masculinity, and a register of its continued, deeply problematic, hegemony. A *Tempest* for our times.

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