1-1-1988

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Keywords
Giuseppe Verdi, Un ballo in maschera, Metropolitan Opera

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UN BALLO IN MASCHERA: Performance Practices at the Met

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I shall first address myself to gratuitous and to specified noises in the performance we have just heard and seen, the latest production of Un ballo in maschera at the Metropolitan Opera. In this version, Riccardo is shot rather than stabbed to death. Now whereas a dagger does not affect the ears of the audience, the noise of a pistol shot has the shock value of a kettledrum fortissimo. The audibility of the murder, in short, changes Verdi's orchestration.

The score specifies the sounds Verdi intended for this moment. Only the strings are involved, the bass reinforced by sustained notes of the two bassoons. All these instruments are marked pianissimo. There are no other winds, no brasses, and no percussion. Verdi purposefully reserves the explosion for the identification of Renato eleven measures later when a fortissimo tutti supersedes the eerie pianissimo of the murderous moment. The pistol shot at the Metropolitan clearly spoils the composer's carefully calculated dynamics.

Another instance of this kind of indifference to what one hears occurs just before Riccardo's canzone at the end of the first act. The courtiers and conspirators have entered Ulrica's hut and boisterously ask her to prophesy. In unison they urge her to tell the future, "canta il futuro." The four beats of this exclamation are sounded on C, the impatient repetition on D, and the final double outburst on E-flat, an emphatically high pitch for basses. The rising pitch parallels the rising impatience. The director, practicing one-upmanship on Verdi, has the whole crowd stamping in time to the final request, eight beats in all. This intrusion of realism into a musical structure is a fall from a higher artistic level to a cruder naturalistic one. The impact is here all the more disturbing because of its sudden occurrence.

Comparable nonmusical noise competes with the fortissimo tutti that closes the first scene: the ensemble of courtiers, conspirators, officials, and soldiers breaks into applause. What or who is being applauded? The decision to visit Ulrica? To meet in disguise at three o'clock? The applause on the stage just when the curtain is falling has the cheap effect of inviting the audience, as in a commercial show, to join in.

I have dwelled on these episodes because they show that the currently widespread silliness and ignorance of operatic stage directors can spoil not only the visual but also the musical intent of poet and composer. (Parenthetically I might mention comparable violations at the Met, for instance, the change of scenery tearing apart the unified structure of the second act of Lohengrin or the third act of Otello.)

Verdi's concern with the proper use of noise is well illustrated in the first Ballo finale. He did not hesitate to use noise when it served a purpose. The key is A major; the timpani are tuned to tonic and dominant, A and E. The dynamic climax, heard twice, bursts forth on an A-flat major triad in second inversion. Reluctant to omit the timpani, which quickly thereafter emphasize the closing cadence of the regained main key, Verdi lets them bang away on E-natural against the E-flat of the chord! When he wants noise, he prescribes it; but adding noise when he deliberately avoids it is presumptuous. In the performance we heard, the timpanist certainly played E-flat by either utilizing pedals for quick retuning or an extra pair of timpani. Richard Strauss in his edition of Berlioz's Traité d'instrumentation inserts a specific reference to this spot.

*Comments in the AIVS Series of Lecture-Videotapes, 20 November 1987. The production discussed was first mounted at the Met in 1980 and will be replaced by a new staging for the 1990-91 season (Edd.).
Personally I have reservations about this modernization. When a good composer encounters an externally given limitation, he can turn it to his advantage. Beethoven, for instance, forced by the then limited range of flute or piano to break a line that pushes into the top register of the third octave, often continues to employ the resulting inverted interval as a new motivic element. Though the solution in the Ballo finale is less clear-cut, Verdi deserves respect for making a virtue out of an instrumental shortcoming.

The director's basic unmusical attitude is evident from the very beginning--literally, from before the curtain rises. He fills the Prelude with unnecessary action, thereby challenging the autonomy of music and demonstrating his conviction that music by itself is a bore. The distracting busyness spills over into the opening chorus. Almost predictably he clutters up Ulrica's music with a highly distracting and unnecessary episode involving the behavior and treatment of a hysterical girl.

This particular bit of action and the whole setting obviously derive from the witch trials in Massachusetts in the 1690's. We all know that after Verdi had aired his initial resentment of censorship, he was rather satisfied by the move of the plot from Sweden to Boston. "In its new guise the libretto has lost little and even gained something from a change of scene," he wrote to Antonio Somma, his librettist. They agreed on Massachusetts at the end of the seventeenth century. So far so good. The Metropolitan Opera, having to prove its superiority to Verdi's taste and judgment, moved the plot to the end of the eighteenth century, thus placing the conflict within the context of the American Revolution. Now I do not mind at all the resulting anachronism of showing Massachusetts witches one century after the fact. Opera need not be, and rarely is, faithful to history. Opera has its own rationale which is quite independent of factual chronology. But what I found very disturbing in the unnecessary updating is the unexpected demand it makes on our sympathies. Samuel and Tom, two lowdown basses, are assassins depicted as partly sinister and partly ridiculous. You remember Verdi's comment of Wurm in Luisa Miller whose treacherous meanness he hoped to heighten by some comic touches which would make Wurm all the more menacing (letter to Cammerano, 17 May 1849). As planned by Verdi and Somma, at the end of the seventeenth century such characters plotting to get rid of a British governor seem plausible. Moved by the Met to the American War of Independence, the conspirators objecting to British rule find themselves in the company of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, and the rest who were neither assassins nor vicious nor comical. Verdi's and Somma's view is clear; but the Met audience--an American audience--is forced, as a thoughtless byproduct of the later date, to take sides against patriotic liberators.

The American location poses one more, and rather subtle problem. In both libretto and score, Renato is identified as creolo, a creole, that is, somebody born in America of French, Spanish, or Portuguese descent and thus culturally distinct from the British. This foreign character of Renato--missing from the Swedish version as well as from the libretti on the same plot by Auber and Mercadante--has been generally ignored by critics and producers alike. Budden refers to it in a footnote, bluntly declaring that "what Verdi understood by Creole must remain a mystery".1. To Budden, the inclusion among the supernumeraries of whites, blacks, mulattoes, and creoles, as noted in the disposizione scenica of the Rome première, makes the matter only "more complicated." Verdi's correspondence available thus far which I have checked contains no reference to this detail. Clearly Renato's creole background has a very different function from Alvaro's obscure origin in La forza del destino which is the cause for his rejection by the haughty Spanish Calatrava family and thus a prime mover of the plot. I suggest that in Ballo Verdi added the characterization of Renato as a creole for highly personal reasons (and this is my private interpretation for you to buy or reject). We know that he had come to terms with Giuseppina's rather loose love life before she joined him. The point has been made that the stories he chose for his operas in a
critical period of his relationship with Giuseppina offered one way of justifying to himself and to the world a woman's adulterous actions, or thoughts, or attitudes, or temptations. Look at the operas he wrote between 1847, when he and Giuseppina began living together, and 1859, when they finally married. In *La battaglia di Legnano*, on which he worked in '48, Lida's adulterous thoughts are explained by the return of her first lover whom she believed dead. In *Luisa Miller*, of '49, the heroine, though innocent, is forced into a position which her lover interprets as cheap disloyalty. In *Stiffelio*, of 1850, the adultery is in the open, but as in all these works, we are asked to sympathize with the woman involved. *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*, written in '52 and produced in '53, pursue the same theme—the former in its climactic misunderstanding, the latter in psychologically modern refinement. *Aroldo*, in '57, repeats the *Stiffelio* story. In *Un ballo in maschera*, produced six months before Verdi at last married Giuseppina, the libretto provided no explicit excuse, as found in the earlier operas, for Amelia's anguishing adulterous tendencies. By defining her native husband as culturally in sharp contrast to her and Riccardo's English background, Verdi—not very successfully, we concede, but nevertheless—tried to find some excuse for Amelia's behavior. While Verdi's preoccupation with father-daughter and father-son relationships has been amply connected to the early deaths of his children, I submit that Verdi's outspoken sympathy with actually or emotionally unfaithful women can also be tied to a central event of his life, his acceptance of Giuseppina. The performance we just witnessed, by the way, unintentionally carried out Verdi's instruction: Mr. Quilico, our Renato, was born in Canada and is, obviously, of Spanish or Portuguese descent.

The director's one-upmanship on librettist and composer shows further in silly little details. The first scene of the third act is supposed to take place in Renato's studio with "a magnificent full-length portrait of Riccardo on the back wall and a table in the middle of the room." Riccardo, though not physically present, is meant to dominate the entire scene (a device Verdi had successfully employed in the second act of *Rigoletto*). Riccardo's presence, as it were, motivates Renato's jealousy, Amelia's despair, Renato's change of mind, the conspiratorial agreement, and the plot to murder him. The Met shows a magnificent full-length portrait, not of Riccardo, but of Renato, Amelia, and their son on the back wall and a table on the right side of the room. In order to address Riccardo in the aria "Eri tu"—"it was you who ruined my marriage and it is you and not Amelia whom I am going to kill"—Renato, in the absence of Riccardo's portrait, throws something that looks like a family photograph on the ground which cannot be identified by the audience and hence remains dramatically ineffective. The shift of the table away from the center necessitates in the given arrangement Amelia's handing the lot she has drawn to Samuel rather than to her husband—again another nonsensical and dramatically weakened gesture. In compensation for all this loss, the director has placed a child's rocking horse in the center of the stage, apparently to justify the existence of the boy in the painting and in Amelia's aria. On the word "memorie," in the middle of his aria, Renato caresses the horse. What with the smashed picture frame on the floor and the rocking horse center stage, the otherwise elegant room looks rather messy. Was Renato's severe studio really used as a playroom while the parents were meeting at midnight under the gallows? All these points may seem like trivia, but they testify to the insipid approach and vapid imagination of operatic stage directors today. If you have wondered about the scenery of the second act which on the screen looks like the scaffolding of a New York contractor rather than a moonlit hill, let me assure you that in the house the effect, as I experienced it, is even uglier.

The singers are all professionals who do what they can. I credit Pavarotti highly with abstaining from the traditional interpolated giggles in the first-act quintet. Whether Bonci or Caruso was the first to introduce them, they have become part of a universal practice which even Toscanini in
fortissimo within eight measures, all dynamic markings move between one \( p \) and four \( p \)'s joined by such admonitions as *morendo*, *dolcissimo*, and—in the lyrical melody here played by solo winds and subsequently associated with Riccardo—*con espressione e sempre sottovoce*. Now there is a conductor at the Met whose main device for becoming *espressivo* is to slow down. Patane, the conductor of our *Ballo*, seems to identify expressiveness with loudness, notwithstanding *sempre sollozzo* and three \( p \)'s. Throughout the Prelude (and don't forget the distracting action on the stage) all these subtly differentiated shadings vanish. Similarly in Riccardo's *"La rivedrà,"* which repeats the expressive *sottovoce* melody of the Prelude, are not only the three \( p \)'s ignored, but the conspirators, joining the solo lines of Riccardo and Oscar and, logically enough, warned to express their sentiments *sottovoce* and *sommessamente*, lustily and loudly compete for attention. Renato, after later joining the assassins, behaves like them: he shouts the exposed password *"Morte,"* which he is supposed to convey to Samuel and Tom *sottovoce*, so loudly that it cannot possibly escape the attention of the other people in the room. Moreover, the strong dynamic contrast with the following fortissimo is lost. The same kind of effective contrast of a sudden outburst after a hushed atmosphere is erased in the second-act trio because the *sempre sottovoce* exhortations by Amelia and Renato are sung at what a friend of mine calls "mezzofortissimo."

Tempi throughout the performance moved on the whole within traditional norms. Two kinds of tempo manipulations are typically thoughtless. A frequent one, derived from following an ill-considered instinct, consists in drastically breaking the established tempo within a through-composed and unified number because of a new or contrasting thought or emotion. In most such cases, the composer has taken care of this circumstance by one device or another; and if he adheres to the tempo while changing another musical quality (for instance, orchestration, dynamics, harmony, etc.), an arbitrary additional shift in the movement will only cheapen the desired effect. I regretted one such instance in the second-act trio when Amelia, briefly left alone and expressing her readiness to sacrifice herself for Riccardo, breaks the continuity of the music by suddenly switching from *Allegro mosso* to something almost twice as slow. Even more disturbing is this kind of wavering tempo in the final scene of the opera where it tears apart two parallel statements first from each other and then from the following epode. The pulse of dying Riccardo must not be confused with the pulse of the composition.

The other kind of tempo manipulation is merely a symptom of sloppiness. By neglecting to prepare properly Verdi's explicit *Un poco meno* or *Un poco meno mosso*, the conductor leads into Riccardo's *"La rivedrà"* or the ecstatic section of the love duet without providing for the music the special setting it merits. He impatiently tampers with the suspense after the three chords introducing Ulrica so as to detach rather than connect the melodic motion initiated in measure. The star singers are not innocent either. Asked by her husband in the second-act finale to follow him, Amelia sings a parenthetical "*Mio Dio!"* defined in the score by an isolated *Presto* marking as a "throw-away." Ricciarelli does the opposite by drawing out these three notes. Pavarotti left to his own devices in his big solo scene gratuitously interprets a pianissimo phrase as ritenuto, thereby overdoing and spoiling the composer's metrically written-out slowdown; and in a measure marked *con slancio* (officially translated as 'impetuously like a rocket'), he holds back very pointedly in order to show off his high B-flat. In his sailor's song in Ulrica's hut, Pavarotti takes over altogether: slighting the prescribed *Allegro giusto* and *con brio* by a deliberate slow start; fluctuating in tempo throughout the piece in conflict with the steady dance meter; breaking lines by willful pauses; and, quite apart from tempo problems, pawing pretty Miss Blegen for no particular reason.

As for rhythmic deviations, no microphone can be held responsible. I shall not bore you with my long list, which anyone following the performance with a score can
his 1913 production at the Met and his 1954 NBC Radio broadcast did not suppress. The inserted arbitrary chuckles, as Budden writes, have firmly imbedded the quintet in the jargon of tenors, as "the laughing song from Un ballo." Yet Verdi's intention, I am convinced, was different. The brief pause between the two-note groups, which have invited the giggles, are gasps of a man scared to death. His breath fails him. The piccolo doubling his broken line two octaves higher only reinforces the spooky atmosphere. When Verdi wants chuckles, he prescribes them, as in the second-act finale.

Having earned his brownie point for respecting the score by acting scared rather than amused, Pavarotti forfeits it in the next act at the end of his big C-major duet with Amelia. What tenor can resist joining his partner in a final high C although he is supposed to descend to E to give fuller sonority to the closing triad? To secure the effect of the end, both singers drop out for a couple of measures and then for a few extra notes before reaching for the top, which they then hold (Ricciarelli a bit on the flat side) long beyond the prescribed cut-off and the orchestra.

And what sexy tenor can resist the proximity of a pretty woman without repeatedly grabbing her, holding her, clutching her, while forgetting all the while that Judith Blegen in her role as Oscar is not a female? Just before the reprise in the quintet we can witness the least opportune moment for such an episode: Oscar is left alone on a high C when Pavarotti sneaks up on him or her and grabs him or her from behind by the shoulders. It speaks well for Judith Blegen not to be vocally shaken during such an exposed and risky musical phrase.

Ricciarelli as Amelia and Quilico as Renato sound generally so competent that I failed to understand their arbitrary deviations in the cadenzas at the end of their respective arias from notes, words, tempo, phrasing, and dynamics. In all four numbers, Verdi's intentions are meticulously indicated, down to the most minute shadings. Both our singers, I am confident, possess the necessary technique and range to cope with the prescribed demands. Their arbitrary changes signify a misinterpretation of the notion of "freedom" or "liberty" and are not an improvement. A similar distortion is heard in the a cappella end of the first-act trio when disregard of the clearly defined rests and accents only saps the force out of the intended thrust.

Ricciarelli apparently hates to kneel down. There are two telling moments in the opera when the printed score, generally sparing in such details, specifically echoes the explicit instructions in the dispozione scenica, for the good reason that the music clearly wants to be accompanied by Amelia's genuflection. Shortly after her entrance during the prelude to the second act, the cantabile and pianissimo strings, sustained by pianissimo harmonies in the four horns and harp-like arpeggios in flute and clarinet, repeat the earlier melody of the solo flute in a version and mood traditionally and unambiguously associated with prayer. "A questa ripresa Amelia s'inginocchia e prega," says the score and does not let her rise until a sudden fortissimo interrupts the episode. No such drama in our performance, in which Amelia all through the prayer music indulges in a multitude of busy histrionics. Her other prescribed kneeling-down to implore Renato's mercy is melodically spelled out by an expressive stepwise descent across one and one-half octaves. In the performance we witnessed, Amelia defies both her husband and the descending scale by assuming a particularly proud stance.

It is not quite fair to judge dynamic subtleties controlled by a radio engineer rather than by the conductor. Still the spoilage of some carefully composed effects cannot be blamed on the microphone. The orchestra at Riccardo's appearance at midnight is not supposed to burst out, as we heard it, but rather in a dramatically and psychologically plausible manner to pass quickly through the indicated stages of piano-crescendo-forte-crescendo-fortissimo. Very typical, because it occurs frequently, is the disregard, be it by the conductor or singers, of Verdi's articulate request for sottovoce. In the Prelude, except for the short fugato section which grows from mezzo-forte to forte to
duplicate or surpass. Upbeats were approximated, dotted rhythms slackened, note values and words altered, phrasing and articulation modified, rests not observed, fermatas both ignored and added, and, almost predictably, final notes of a number stretched beyond due and even beyond the orchestra cut-off.

Because my comments have sounded rather critical, let no one assume that I did not enjoy the performance. I hope you have, too. A real opera fan takes his operas on any level. Perfect evenings are, anyway, extremely rare. We settle for what we get and trust that the quality of the music prevails, whatever our reaction and whatever the shortcomings of a production. Viva Verdi!