

### **OPERA AND DRAMA: DIFFERING VIEWS**

Opera and drama are two closely linked disciplines in the world of performing arts; although many view these as individual aspects which should be combined to create a greater result, others seemingly view opera as drama although it would be seen as illogical to view drama as opera. The mere fact opera has a narrative, although told through music and libretto, combines the two.

Michael Tippett's opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*, contains influences from other established forms (drawing examples for Wagner and Verdi) as well as containing Tippett's own futuristic ideas. Tippett writes about the heightened style of opera and also later argues that although this is a marvellous event, the categories of music and drama must be coherent and specific to the desired product.

...there is a long tradition associating opera with the marvellous... it is clear that the composer, or his librettist, must be able to condense...<sup>1</sup>

This heightened style and its subsequent audience is discussed by Joseph Kerman in *Opera as Drama*, who compares the style of opera to its worth and subjectivity. Kerman recognises that 'no distinction is drawn publicly between works like *Orfeo* and *The Magic Flute*'<sup>2</sup>, describing opera as a huge umbrella with seemingly no sub-categories.

In Kerman's book he discusses how the opera (or the musical aspect) plays to the drama on the stage – the music is used to develop and enhance the drama. This is demonstrated in the musical example shown on page 8 where the music reflects the agony of Desdemona. Tippett also has a similar view on the relationship between the

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<sup>1</sup> Tippett, Michael. 'The birth of an opera', in Meirion Bowen (ed.), *Tippett on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 203-204

<sup>2</sup> Kerman, Joseph. 'Prologue', in *Opera as Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 3

music and the drama, stating that: ‘in opera the musical schemes are always dictated by the situations’<sup>3</sup>

Although opera has been established as a marvellous and a heightened format of entertainment, Tippett later discusses the smaller, ‘little moments’ and the need for simplicity in order to engage the audience. This is seen in the naming of the characters of his opera, *The Midsummer Marriage*, where names such as Jack and Bella contrast against a more Americanized King Fisher. In this instance, the drama contrasts the opera as simple contrasts against the complexity of the score. Kerman comments upon this analysis of opera as drama and opera as a musical piece of entertainment, writing...

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.<sup>4</sup>

Although scholars, composers and music writers alike would argue the case of opera as drama, it seems there is no right or wrong answer. It is certain that opera could not function without drama, however, the necessity for combining these two genres for purposes of analysis seems somewhat contrived.

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<sup>3</sup> Tippett, Michael. ‘The birth of an opera’, in Meirion Bowen (ed.), *Tippett on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 205

<sup>4</sup> Kerman, Joseph. ‘Prologue’, in *Opera as Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 12

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