

Giorgio Battistelli – Hamletica

2 August 2009

Giorgio Battistelli, one of Europe's most prolific opera composers, and Artistic Adviser to the Aldeburgh Jerwood Opera Writing Programme, began his talk by identifying the rare opportunity that the Jerwood Opera Writing week presents to us: the opportunity for *space*. He noted that nowadays unfortunately all too often time is given to the technical sides and forms of musical creation but not to the expression of it. The Jerwood Week provides a mental space for both aesthetic and philosophical reflection: a chance for us to think *about* and *within* the music. Battistelli then grasped this rare opportunity, outlining his thoughts and concepts on composing for Opera. What follows is a summary of his main points and those thoughts that found particular resonance in his audience.

Hamletica

Firstly the title – Giorgio explained that this was employed instil a sense of doubt in us; an active, dynamic doubt. Often doubt is seen as a weakness, but this should not be so because, as René Descartes suggested, truth can be found through doubt: 'doubt is merely the first word of wisdom.'¹ This, Battistelli stressed, is exceedingly important to artists who must face it full on: 'The doubt that lies on a blank page is exciting. There is excitement in overcoming a blank, undefined page – *the doubt of perfection*.' To overcome and satisfy this doubt will enable artists to develop. For Battistelli his ideas must move constantly forward so as not to putrefy. He is convinced that an artist can continue to grow through what they have written or done and not through what they may have achieved.

Battistelli advocates the necessity for musicians to take into account all past musical thoughts. This then forces us to ask for a new aesthetic that should introduce possible distinction in values; a distinction that does not signify a value of quality but simply a need for existence – again the music is necessary. Battistelli insists that the aesthetic of two differing pieces of music becomes irrelevant: if each piece has the right to exist then they can be compared purely on that.

Today there is a lot of contemporary music but not all contemporary music is modern music.

What is it that makes it modern?

Why is it that certain parts of Opera are enjoyable and others not?

In considering these questions Battistelli presents the concept of beauty in art. He believes that beauty is not the intrinsic value of the subject; it is us – the audience – who projects the thought and idea of beauty onto aesthetical things such as art. To exemplify this he drew upon an anecdote of Marcel Duchamp: *I walk alongside a river and find stones where the water ripples around them, if I pick them up and put them on my table, because I like them they will give me pleasure. Yet if I put those same stones in an art gallery then this provokes the question why?* The perception of the stones has been altered. There is always a context in which music lies; the music is always placed between what has gone and what follows. Giorgio illustrated this with the idea that 12 is not just 12, it could have been 5 and 7 before.

The function of music today now gives us the opportunity to listen to it in context of the past, and equally to listen to the past with a different perspective. Giorgio suggested the notion of the three pronged ear; the idea that anthropologically our ear is three dimensional. He stated 'I get excited about the thought that my ears can perceive and hear things that no other ears have had the pleasure of hearing, from Gregorian chants to techno music.' We have in the past thought of music in a horizontal timeline. The consequence of the three-pronged ear notion instigates that through technology this timeline has shifted ninety degrees and has altered our power of hearing. This has complicated the work for composers and all other artists, as each moment can encompass all the others. Writing an Opera today means facing Opera, anti-Opera, anti-anti-Opera, performance, happenings and anything in between. Composers must re-organise their approach to account for this.

¹ Peter A. Schouls, *Descartes and the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1989), p. 37

What is required of music today?

What Opera do we want to write?

An Opera that is necessary for the composer?

Do we write music for ourselves or for others?

Battistelli likes the romantic idea of writing for his audience; however he remains adamant that this wish must not alter what he writes. He insists that he does not, like so many composers today, write superfluous music for pleasure; to console or provide a sense of well-being to his audience. This, he believes is a *non-problematic* way of writing that lets an audience return home from a concert with nothing in their pockets. It must be avoided. Instead he strives to compose music that creates conflict for an audience, leaves questions unanswered, which gives an audience something to consider at the end of a performance. He aims to compose music that is *necessary*. He advises that the way to achieve this is to indeed be aware of the superfluous music that may occur - in order to resist it. This artistic situation, he believes, affects composers more than anyone.

Battistelli explained that Opera generally moves along in three directions; with the music, the text and the mise en scene or production. If a composer or director accepts these elements they can make precise choices to go with or break an audience's expectations. However one cannot break them from inside, one must reinvent the manner. Gilles Deleuze explains this in reference to the molecular make up of clay: 'The quality of the clay is the source of its form, and the mould merely puts a limit on the expanding the molecular organization of the clay as it fills the mould. The mould does not passively form the clay, but communicates a resonating action throughout the clay that alters the clay's molecular organization.'² Giorgio clarified that the energy inside is not cohesive within the form, it is pulsating, the form enables the energy and strength to be understood from the outside.

What is the fundamental characteristic for an Opera composer?

Battistelli asked this same question to three prominent composers: Hans Werner Henze, Gyorgy Ligeti and Luciano Berio. He reported back to us that, in their own way, all three gave the same answer : 'To be impure.'

Final Thought

'I have discovered that writing music for me is the only way to make myself related to the present. It is my way of translating the present through writing. I like the idea that through our writing us composers can agitate the present.'

A Suggestion:

'Never be sure. Never have certainty, always keep a bit of doubt in the choices you make. Fortunately in Aldeburgh we can think about these things without the pressure of being 'right'.'

² Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze and Guattari* (Routledge: London, 1989), p. 61

In this session Giorgio presented the above titled documentary (produced in 1970), to introduce influential modern composers and their thoughts on Opera, composition and music. He ended the session with a discussion extending his own thoughts on Opera composition. Below are the key points brought up by a wide selection of the composers:

Luciano Berio

Gilbert Amy

For Amy the problem with Opera is that it isn't finished, we haven't found Opera's solution. He does not want to write Opera because, for him, the theatrical space is too old and traditional. Sometimes the space can cramp your thoughts for new work.

Peter Maxwell- Davis

Speaking in the seventies Maxwell-Davis said that - Opera today is depressing, and he'd rather not talk about it - a month later he had a premiere at Covent Garden.

Gian Carlo Menotti

Menotti believes that it is necessary to realise that film has changed music theatre because now we see images closely. This has also affected Opera.

Bertolt Brecht

Brecht was not interested in finding new forms, he used the old forms to criticise society. He asserts that it is the context that gives action its significance. On stage a character who dies is a very serious thing, it is not believable if he sings. To make it believable the whole audience should sing!

Mauricio Kagel

For Kagel theatre starts the moment an individual is aware and conscious of the intensity of his/her experience through time. This intensity can be expressed. In his works musicians are on stage with the actors, he believes that all sounds are musical. For Kagel even conducting is not a technical but a theatrical movement.

David Raskin

Raskin thinks that all music must produce something vital. Therefore he advocates that Opera should become more like an industrial enterprise. He sees no difference between a film composer and an Opera composer.

John Cage

Both in his music and himself Cage said that 'The best form of government is a non-government.' This was a base concept that affected the way he composed, and the results his music produced.

Sylvano Bussotti

Bussotti believed that to create Music Theatre is to make love with the instrument; Opera is always erotic.

Karlheinz Stockhausen

For Stockhausen theatre must always have a ritual dimension. He has found an European solution to Eastern Mythology. He feels that no music or music theatre is aesthetic: It is always tied to reality.

Lucas Force

Force created a collection in order to destroy Opera. For him traditional music doesn't exist, and the only possibility for modern music is to completely destroy Opera.

Giorgio Battistelli

Giorgio highlighted that our problems with writing Operas are not new. As composers we are always looking at the same problems/questions:

The relationship between the text and music.
Whether to write with a narrative or not?
Which instruments should be used, traditional or electric?
Whether it is possible today to write for a full orchestra?
Is Opera theatre?

Giorgio believes that the Opera composer must always decide what will become the most important aspect on stage: how much text there should be, what should be on stage etc. For him the composer must have a clear score, because it is that, that can give a clear answer for the Opera as a whole. Giorgio says that 'The composer must always begin with the music and not the theatre.' He believes it is the composer who must decide when an Opera finishes, what its dynamics are, where the climaxes are. The directors should come afterwards and interpret what has been composed.

Eight months before Mauricio Kagel died Giorgio asked him if it is still possible to write for the piano. He answered by asking him to think of C Major and a cluster of notes: Both are old and have stories. It is the context that gives a sound a particular value. Giorgio explained: 'If I say tomorrow it will be a lovely day – to say this as a fisherman from Alderburgh is different from a person on holiday in Aldeburgh'. This illustrates Kagel's point concerning context.

Giorgio noted that interestingly many of the famous composers speaking in the seventies had believed that Opera was dead – however they and many others have gone on to compose many Operas since.