

OPERA NOTE

Kenneth Clark on Opera

Adolph Capurro forwarded the following several paragraphs to me from Kenneth Clark's Civilization. In this selection, Clark extols opera in a rather ingenious way. I think that we can agree with him about the fact that the plots are fanciful and totally unrealistic at times, but it is the expression of music and singing that often convey human emotion and the human predicament so much more actively, beautifully and better than other media. I liked the piece so much that I decided to add it as an extra feature to this month's Bulletin.

-Jim Boitano

“Opera, next to Gothic architecture, is one of the strangest inventions of western man. It could not have been foreseen by any logical process. Dr. Johnson’s much quoted definition, which as far as I can make out he never wrote, ‘an extravagant and irrational entertainment’, is perfectly correct; and at first it seems surprising that it should have been brought to perfection in the age of reason. But just as the greatest art of the early eighteenth century was religious art, so the greatest artistic creation of the Rococo is completely irrational. Opera, of course, had been invented in the seventeenth century and made into a form of art by the prophetic genius of Monteverdi; it came to the north from Catholic Italy and flourished in Catholic capitals—Vienna, Munich and Prague. Indignant Protestants used to say that Rococo churches were like opera houses—quite true, only it was the other way on. The opera house in the Residenz at Munich, by Cuvilliés, is exactly like a Rococo church. Opera houses came in when churches went out and they expressed so completely the views of this new profane religion that for one hundred years they continued to be built in Rococo style, long after that style had gone out of fashion. In Catholic countries, not only in Europe but in South America, the opera house is often the best and largest building in the town.

“What on earth has given opera its prestige in western civilization—a prestige that has outlasted so many different fashions and ways of thought? Why are people prepared to sit silently for three hours listening to a performance of which they do not understand a word and of which they very seldom know the plot? Why do quite small towns all over Germany and Italy still devote a large portion of their budgets to this irrational entertainment? Partly, of course, because it is a display of skill, like a football match. But chiefly, I think, because it is irrational. ‘What is too silly to be said may be sung’ – well, yes; but what is too subtle to be said, or too deeply felt, or too revealing or too mysterious—these things can also be sung and only be sung. When, at the beginning of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, the Don kills the Commendatore, and in one burst of glorious music the murderer, his mistress, his servant and the dying man all express their feelings, opera provides a real extension of the human faculties. No wonder that the music is rather complicated, because even today our feelings about Don Giovanni are far from simple. He is the most ambiguous of hero-villains. The pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of love, which had once seemed so simple and life-giving, have become complex and destructive, and his refusal to repent, which makes him heroic, belongs to another phase of civilization.”

- Kenneth Clark, Civilization, pp. 241-43