



SURTITLES

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Surtitles

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[8] It is a truism, though an important one, that the words to which composers set their music are of crucial importance to the act of composition, especially in opera, where the words are an intrinsic element not only of the expression of the meaning of what is sung, but of the dramatic action; and not only the words, but syllables, inflections, accents, rise and fall, emphasis. Hence the natural concern of musicians and of the most responsive part of the public that opera be sung in the original language of the libretto; and hence, too, the opposition to this by those who, with no less reason, want the libretti translated into their own languages if they are to grasp the meaning of what is sung, and of the relation of the words both to the unfolding story and to the music – to its shape, texture, melodic, rhythmic, harmonic structure, its movement, nuance, accent, inner pulse and other attributes – all that makes the total pattern essential to its full aesthetic and psychological impact.

The difference made to appreciation of words set to music between understanding and not understanding exactly what is being sung is far greater than those who are content merely to listen to the music (or very nearly so) might begin to imagine. This may be more obvious in the case of the operas of Wagner or Debussy or Berg than in, say, those of Donizetti or Gounod, or even Handel; but it is very great in all works of genuine artistic merit. Consequently there arises a problem: should accessibility of the meaning of words be sacrificed (and, if so, to what degree) to fidelity to the composer's intended fusion of word and sound? Or, on the contrary, should the fidelity on which purists insist yield to intelligibility? Is there an inescapable incomparability between the two approaches? Are the alternatives mutually, or even largely, exclusive? Some would say that this is a matter of degree: libretti have, after all, been translated with reasonable success, even if

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many translations are grotesque. I cannot, in this connection, help remembering Dent's grotesque translation of a line by the poet Pushkin in the libretto of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* (Act 2, Scene 2), which begins the aria of Prince Gremin:

Onegin, I should not be human
If I did not adore that woman.

The German version of *Don Giovanni*, the Russian version of *La traviata* do well enough: but, all the same, something – at times too much – is lost. Poetry, said someone, is what is lost in translation.¹ Most libretti are, as often as not, a pretty debased form of poetry, some more so than others; but Boito, Hofmannsthal, Auden, even Wagner at times, wrote poetry; Metastasio, da Ponte, Meilhac and Halévy have stood up pretty well. Why, then, it may be asked, can the real opera lovers not read the libretti in languages they do understand – and in this way follow every bar, or at least every phrase, of the opera in a foreign language? If they truly want to obtain a full experience, they must do their homework. This, after all, applies in many spheres of life: is this not all it comes to? I believe not.

To obtain full enjoyment one would have virtually to memorise the text. Can one really demand this of ordinary listeners, however musical, however sensitive? A general sense of the knowledge of the story of the opera read in Kobbé, or even in a double-column libretto with translation, does not, and cannot, do much more than give one a general sense of what is going on. Let me take the least esoteric example: Rigoletto's famous words (Act 2, Scene 2), which convey at once fear and hatred of the courtiers of Mantua, and an effort to ingratiate himself with them in order to discover where his daughter is after her abduction, the falsely jaunty 'La rà, la rà, la rà, la rà ...' (offstage), followed by apparently insouciant, mocking repartee which half conceals his agonised suspicion, until he finally bursts out into 'Cortigiani, vil razza dannata ...'.² This marvellous, desperate, profoundly moving, broken-hearted pass[9]age, unique

¹ Robert Frost in conversation with Louis Untermeyer, quoted in the latter's *Robert Frost: A Backward Look* (Washington, 1964), 18.

² 'Courtiers, vile, damnable rabble'.

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in opera, must be followed word by word if its impact is to be fully responded to – and the effort is supremely worth it.

This, of course, applies even more to the majority of Wagner's operas, where the words play an immeasurably more significant role than in, say, Weber's *Oberon*. I should like to urge that the least imperfect solution is the use of surtitles: ideally, of the entire text – even of ensembles when the various characters may all be saying something quite different – but if this last is impracticable, as it may well prove to be, then at any rate the words of the arias, dialogue, choruses, recitative – or at the very least the words that matter most – should be illuminated above the proscenium. But will this distract attention which should be concentrated only on the stage? Undeniably, to some degree. But not enough to be a serious obstacle to the vast majority of the audience.

The difference that the simultaneous appearance of words and music can make seems to me immense. There is no doubt in my mind that the extraordinary, wholly unexpected, success of the televised Bayreuth Chéreau-Boulez *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, while no doubt it owed a very great deal to the originality of the conception and the gifts of the conductor, director, designer, singers, owed even more to the captions, which even in translation brought home to the millions of viewers the truly organic unity of music and meaning, sound and word, which, in Wagner's fully developed style is everything. Many of that television audience, I suspect, had never seen any other production of *The Ring*, consequently they had no basis of comparison: yet they were undoubtedly fascinated, deeply affected, and some no doubt converted to Wagner's art, which, it may be, they had not initially expected to enjoy so much.

This courageous experiment alone seems to me to support strongly the thesis that opera-goers – and above all those who may either underrate the beauty and depth of operas because they cannot follow the words, or perhaps be deterred from going to see opera altogether – can be converted and illuminated and made enthusiastic by becoming able to understand the meaning, musically and emotionally, of what is going on, instead of being made to listen to mumbo-jumbo. Everyone has that experience of this last, and I need not labour the point. This is true, sad as it may be, even of opera in the public's native language. Articulation in opera is notoriously imperfect: English texts, whether original or translated,

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which should be so much more intelligible to British audiences than German or Italian, rarely succeed in being so; occasional sentences articulated by singers with exceptional powers of clear diction can achieve this, otherwise, as often as not, one grasps one word in three, in four, in five, or, at the very best, in two.

There is, of course, an obvious difference between a television screen which can be taken in – stage and subtitles – in a single glance, and the stage of an opera house, where subtitles do require a brief upward look; but I cannot persuade myself that such interruptions need materially interfere with attention to the action on the stage; not even the openings of trapdoors, or assassinations, are so unexpected in an opera that reading the surtitle could cause a serious distraction of attention. Of course, a great deal depends on precise synchronisation, the angle of vision, the size of the letters, the type of illumination, punctuation, the exact position above the proscenium and, where this is unavoidable, selection and condensation of the text. Other techniques have been suggested – of special spectacles which reveal the illuminated text to those who wish to see it and them alone; or of illuminated words on the back of the seats in front of those who wish to read them, screened from adjacent seats, so that only those who wish to switch them on need do so, without fear of disturbing others. But the last seems to me to be inferior, since it requires constant bobbing up and down. Even so, this would be an improvement on the present ‘non-titled’ situation.

The advantages of surtitles seem to me greatly to outweigh the shortcomings. Understanding of opera would be transformed, to the great profit of performers and audiences alike. Opposition to this method is, I suspect, based on mere conservatism, habit, misplaced aesthetic canons, or an obscure psychological resistance to a small but beneficent, pleasure-enhancing innovation. I feel sure that a poll of opera goers, certainly of those who watch opera on television, would produce a very significant majority in favour of this method, and that the sceptical would be converted. Glyndebourne Touring Opera is a brave and enlightened pioneer in this regard. Like all other beneficiaries of this new departure, I wish to offer it my gratitude and admiration.