

On Luca Lombardi's *Prospero*

I love *Prospero* — the best opera ever written to a libretto based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—including the remarkable opera-composites of the seventeenth century, one with contributions by Matthew Locke, the other with a contribution by Purcell; and Thomas Ades' moving *The Tempest*; and the opera-length body of superb incidental music by Sibelius; and the riffs on *The Tempest* by Michael Tippett, Michael Nyman, and Luciano Berio.

Lombardi's opera is full of surprises. For one thing the libretto (by F. C. Delius, expertly condensing and re-slanting Shakespeare) is written in three languages: the denizens of the magic island speak Shakespeare's English; the travelers from Naples speak Neapolitan Italian; and the the travelers from Milan speak German—very Ghibelline of them. The music is startling too: opera begins not with a storm but with a long cello recitative. And yet this makes sense: Prospero is a brooding introvert, and furthermore—when he's not casting spells—a talky sort of character, who pretends to be concerned that he's boring his daughter with his long narrative of his escape from Milan, even though it's the most exciting story she's ever heard. Many operas are predicated on a struggle between song and speech, quite explicitly in some cases. One example is Charpentier's miniature opera *Les Plaisirs de Versailles*, in which La Musique and La Conversation debate whether Louis XIV would be more delighted to hear music or to engage in a lively chat—La Conversation argues in favor of talk by singing her lines in a *langue frétilante*, a garrulous gabble above a hectoring bass viol, not too far from Lombardi's loquacious cello, or that of Richard Strauss in some parts of *Don Quixote*. The opening of *Prospero* oddly echoes the opening of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*: not a speech-bound Moses confronting a choral God, but a conversational Prospero confronting La Musique in the form of a choral Ariel. (The choral Ariel has precedents in Vaughan Williams' and Frank Martin's settings of *Full Fathom Five*; and in the 1674 *Tempest* opera of Matthew Locke et al., several different sprites divide up Ariel's lines. The poet W. H. Auden considered that Ariel was himself Music; and to think of Ariel as an eerie, aerial, earthless chorus has come easily to a number of composers.) In a sense Lombardi, during the first act, keeps Prospero wrapped up inside the cello—Prospero has to evolve by escaping from the confines of his own inner monologue, his ceaseless grumbling.

Ariel is a spirit of the elements, particularly water, wind, and fire (“I flam'd amazement,” he says at one point); and I wonder if Lombardi is consciously beginning with the elements, the rudiments, of opera: speech-monody and choral intricacy, Prospero and Ariel, discourse and free imagination of sound. The storm (at least at the beginning) is the quietest *tempesta* in the whole history of opera, full of Sciarrinoesque blown mouthpieces, naked wind, as if the genre of opera itself is only slowly taking shape out of simple building-blocks. At the end the elements return, easy flute-figures and string frills, as if the opera were deconstructing itself into the world of its origin. (The seventeenth-century *Tempest* operas both end with a masque of Aeolus-pacification, a similar sort of ending.)

One of the strangest and most impressive twentieth-century constructions of *The Tempest* is *The Sea and the Mirror*, the 1943 poem that Auden regarded as his single greatest work. Auden understands Prospero as a melancholic—“every third thought shall be my

grave,” as Shakespeare put it—at last wakes up from magic into disillusionment:

As if through the ages I had dreamed
About some tremendous journey I was taking,
Sketching imaginary landscapes, chasms, and cities,
Cold walls, hot spaces, wild mouths, defeated backs...
And now, in my old age, I wake, and this journey really exists,
And I have actually to take it, inch by inch,
Alone and on foot, without a cent in my pocket,
Through a universe where time is not foreshortened,
No animals talk, and there is neither floating nor flying.

But Lombardi’s Prospero seems fascinatingly different. In the second act he learns how to participate in the other characters’ music: he can pronounce the name Caliban to Caliban’s stomping earthy music. Later he conjures the fantastic images of happy marriages, to music oddly like that of the fifth door in Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle*—splendidly extroverted, nothing brooding at all. And in his “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” aria he takes into himself the fourths and fifths of music-with-a-capital-M—La Musique, so to speak—the opposite of the opening cello, maybe, though the cello returns at several places in act two, including “Mein lieber Ariel” near the end, and the epilogue imported from *As You Like It*. For Lombardi it seems that music is itself magic, and to rid opera of magic would be to make the whole genre founder. In the seventeenth-century *Tempest* operas, Prospero neither breaks his staff nor drowns his book: he remains a powerful magician, able to conjure up at the end a sort of anti-storm by providing fine weather for the return journey. Maybe all *Tempest* operas, even those that stick to Shakespeare’s original scenario, secretly want Prospero to retain his gift; to do otherwise is a sort of blasphemy against opera itself.

I could mention many other felicities of the score: the galumphing peasant music for Caliban, quite similar to the earliest Caliban music I know, J. C. Smith’s 1752 setting of *No more dams I’ll make for fish*; the use of something like the main tune of Musorgsky’s *Night on Bald Mountain* as a Caliban motive, as if Caliban were a Russian sort of devil; and Ferdinand’s wonderfully oriental arabesque on the name Miranda, reminding us that the play takes place on an island near Tunis; and much much more. The name Miranda is important in the play: Shakespeare puns on it (“Admir’d Miranda”); Berlioz repeats it endlessly in the peculiar fantasy on *The Tempest* at the end of *Lélio*. Perhaps for Lombardi too the name Miranda is full of magic, as if Prospero’s greatest feat was to create such a daughter.

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