

## AFTERTHOUGHTS ON OPERA AND *THE SCARLET LETTER*

To speak of a libretto is not to speak of an opera. A famous aria, heard, will tell more about an opera than the libretto, read. And only to speak of, or worse, to analyze either is like closing a door you want to go through.

A libretto is a form, that is a structure, which, at best, guides and excites the creative imagination and, at worst, obstructs or stifles it. The most interesting aspect of a libretto that Boito writes for Verdi is in what it reveals about Verdi and the way he works.

I defy anyone to understand the words during an opera performance, even those in his own or a familiar language; he won't understand simply because he won't listen, for it is not on the words that his attention can rest. There is too much fuss made about libretti on the part of the opera-goer and very often too little on that of the composer.

The words, their arrangement, even their literary quality, are of the utmost importance to the opera composer. From them will emerge the shape of his work, the all-over shape as well as the smaller details of his phrasings; in his day-to-day work, the syllables themselves assume capital importance, the commas, the spaces and the silences. It is upon the word that his conscious attention is primarily fixed. If this attention has been keen enough and his sensibility attuned, a *musical* discourse will result which seizes the essential logic and pace of the text. This achieved, the text loses most of its importance, while remaining fixed fossil-like, in the final artistic expression. Curious, this process, so similar to the formation of diamonds and coal, which includes, in its final form, an element whose real significance in the creation of a given opera is historical, if you will, and not aesthetic. That is to say, words,

though appearing in the end product, are the residue of the means, imbedded there without further artistic function. Seen in this light, the whole question of «opera in English» falls quite rightly by the way.

For this, a given libretto will appeal to a given composer and will be a function of his particular training, his accumulated taste, his way of viewing the world. I read *The Scarlet Letter* for the first time only a few years ago and its operatic «feel» struck me at once. While working upon the opera, many of the reasons became evident: its scope is large-sized, its situation clear and concentrated, its formal structure strongly conceived, its language vigorous and expansive and its principal characters whole, of one piece.

Take, for example, the question of form. In writing the libretto, it was necessary to severely cut, time and time again, the full-blown and resounding Hawthornian rhetoric to the bone. Yet, in doing so, the structure of the story was never compromised; under the verbal volutes and curlicues is a sturdy building, clean, even classical, almost obsessively insistent in statement, its formal lines marking the greatest tension between two points. And for opera, in which verbal speculation is not only lost but is, in fact, a defect, and in which dramatic meaning is communicated to the eye through gesture, to the ear through music, this formal sparseness is essential.

There was some difficulty in deciding on the size of the opera. The breadth of the story, seen in terms of the sentiments expressed, is immense while the physical apparatus is contained, even intimate. Rarely do more than two people appear on the stage at once, yet the degree of tension they generate, the far-reaching significance of their encounters, the very terms of expression, are of a very genuine grandeur. I decided that to give the story a large framework, regardless of the visual intimacy, did less violence to the original novel and to my operatic concept of it. Thus, *The Scarlet Letter*,



an opera about three people who met in pairs, became « grand »; this decision turned out to be the correct one.

My relationship to time is altogether queer; I find it passes in lurches and spells, not in a constant flow, rather as with one who suddenly awakes and finds that next week has come and gone. It is also a deep, I would say an almost central, relationship; the moments of time-awareness are almost always moments of self-revelation, or increased self-awareness, and I suppose that this close time-self relationship is not unusual in an artist, part of whose medium is time itself. Though not every composer feels this; nowadays there is a school of composition part of whose intent is to destroy this impression of « time-passing », which is surely the reason why this particular sort of musical avant-garde remains so foreign to me. And, by the same token, why the music of the 19th century seems so much nearer, where « time-passing » is incorporated into some of its most eloquent formal structures (the sonata, the symphony). In its highest forms (Mozart, late Beethoven), there is nothing more sublime, and more human, than this use of time, in its essential essence, as an expressive device.

Now, *The Scarlet Letter* makes just this use of time. « Time-passing », measured in knots and episodes and affecting isolated and solitary natures, is fundamental to the story, indeed one of the principals, if you will. Note, for example, how time is used throughout Chapter V (« Hester At Her Needle ») as something more than mere fact, how its motion becomes identified with the development of Hester's very constitution. And it is possibly not far-fetched to suggest that one of Pearl's chief narrative functions is to be found in just this measuring of the passing of time. Viewed in this way, there is some fascinating parallel between the formal structure of *The Scarlet Letter* and that found in 19th century instrumental music.

Looking back on the work, I see that I immediately caught the importance of « time-passing ». The opera opens with four



rising chromatic notes, which drop back and rise repeatedly, in an *ostinato* figure (and, if you think about it, *ostinato* is one of the most primitive, I should say almost primaeval, devices for the musical measure of time). This fragment runs, like an obsession, throughout the entire score, changing form and substance, direction and texture, but omnipresent. Surely, this seizes the essence of the novel.

But to return to my dealings with the story. It being so close to my personal time-awareness, I could not fail to be impressed by the fact that Hawthorne arranged his narrative into a series of episodes (usually nothing more than encounters between the protagonists), thus gathering time into nodes, by virtue of which the psychological development of the characters became manifest. Not only: it constituted an excellent dramatic framework, per se. It is interesting, in this respect, that most people are not aware that the novel is carried forth, at every crucial moment, in dialogue. With one exception: the Hester scene (Chapter V) mentioned above, in which the effects of solitude are described in narrative prose. Furthermore, I found that by extracting the major scenes in dialogue and placing them side by side in the original order, the basic outline of the libretto was drawn. From then on it was a question of cutting, of writing the Hester scene (using phrases and ideas from the narrative) and of developing, for reasons of formal balance and contrast, the Five Women in the final scene. As I got into the work, I saw that two further details, of some importance in the novel, had to be eliminated: the mysterious, and exquisitely symbolic, meteor which appears in Chapter XII and the final revelation, the «ghastly miracle» of the letter seared on Dimmesdale's breast. Both of these episodes would have inevitably appeared grotesque, and even comic, in an opera of the kind I had imagined. I replaced the meteor by the moon emerging suddenly from the clouds (for unexpected illumination is essential to the scene) and simply deleted the «miracle» since Dimmesdale's death was feasible without it (his poor health is stressed throughout the work) and I

had, from the start, excluded the earlier scene in which Chillingworth discovers the mark on Dimmesdale's chest.

Once the libretto took on its final form, I begin to wonder if the very concentration in the development of its theme, the very spareness in the formal structure, would not result in unrelieved operatic monotony. In the novel, Hawthorne separated his « scenes » with prose narrative, descriptions and speculative digressions. In cutting out all this and putting the scenes side by side, where was I to find the variety essential to any lengthy stage-work? With Shakespeare, Mozart and Verdi as active, though often unconscious, models, how was I to loosen the tight insistence of the libretto, give it leavening and range?

The answers to these queries came only as I began composing the music; it was at that moment that I discovered the incredible *internal* rhythm, at once varied and essential, of the Hawthornian dialogues as they appeared in my libretto. They seemed to breathe, to rise from the prosaic to the poetic, drop back and recondense, to gather into animation, then relax, then return. It was thus that I was guided to a kind of Gluckian solution, where recitatives and airs blend, then separate, alternate, always this coming and going, this departure and return.

Now, what is important is that formal structures such as this suggested most of the musical accompaniment. This suggestion was very often based upon a return of identical or, in any case, similar verbal rhythms at moments where a psychological relationship was also indicated. Dimmesdale first abandons himself to a more or less explicit reminder of their former union in the phrase:

« Thou and I, Hèster... »

Later, as though too exhausted to seek escape, he says:

« A'òne, Hèster... »

Even a phrase in Hester's earlier reply:

« We said so to each òther »



corresponds to her later reply:

« Thou shalt not go alone! »

In fact, the music in these two places is almost the same, and both mark a similar psychological situation, the withdrawal from reality into their mutual love.

I found the Hawthorne text to be full of such returns. In the final scene, for example, when Dimmesdale, dying, turns to Hester and says,

« ...and twine thy strength about me »,

I found that the same melodic phrase was suggested immediately after in:

« ...with all his might »

and later on, when Dimmesdale speaks to Chillingworth with a similar spirit of resignation and forgiveness,

« May God forgive thee! »

« Thou, too, hast deeply sinned! ».

Or, at the end of Scene II, Act IV, when Hester calls to Pearl: « Come, dearest child! How slow thou art! », « Here is a friend of mine... », « ...and come to us. », « ...like a young deer », « Thou strange child », « ...not come to me? », « Hasten, Pearl, or I shall be angry with thee! ». Such a reiteration of pattern could not fail to determine the style of this particular recitative.

And again. In Chillingworth's first encounter with Hester (Act I, Scene II), he says, « ...what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own? », followed shortly thereafter by, « ...of that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path ». Much later, in Act IV, Scene I, in Chillingworth's second encounter with Hester, I came back, at a certain moment, to the same rhythmical figure which accompanied their first encounter; I soon saw why this seemed both logical and inevitable when I set the phrase, « Let the black flower blossom as it may! » The relationship is this:

with youth and beau — ty	like thine own?
that scar — let let — ter	blaz-ing....path!
Let the black flower	blòs-som....mày!

All three sentences thus fit a similar melodic figure, to the great advantage of dramatic, psychological and musical unity.

Possibly for visual reasons, I find it easier to compose music to a text which has a verse shape. When I first extracted the dialogues from the novel, I copied them out in their original prose form, thinking to leave them as they were. Later, as I was cutting and reworking the libretto, I felt as though the music which I sensed was contained in the sentences was somehow not being released, was not reaching me. I can describe the feeling in no other way. Rather by accident, I began to break the sentences down on the page so that they had the semblance of blank verse; suddenly the words loomed with music. This is perhaps the result of some personal idiosyncrasy, or that the shorter phrases, with their hints of breaks and pauses, simply resembled musical phrases more closely. What is pertinent here, and what this « versification » process revealed, is the immense musicality of Hawthorne's prose. Even a cursory comparison of the « verse » form of the libretto and the original text will demonstrate this. And this special quality of Hawthornian prose is evident in all his mature writing. Take, casually, any page of his work, such as, for instance, *The Minister's Black Veil*:

« Have patience with me, Elizabeth! » cried he passionately. « Do not desert me, though this veil must be between us here on earth. Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil — it is not for eternity! O! you know not how lonely I am, and how frightened, to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity forever! »

Its music becomes manifest in the following form:

Have patience with me, Elizabeth!  
Do not desert me,  
though this veil must be between us here on earth.  
Be mine,  
and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face,  
no darkness between our souls!  
It is but a mortal veil —



it is not for eternity!  
 O! you know not how lonely I am,  
 and how frightened,  
 to be alone behind my black veil.  
 Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity  
 forever!

I soon became aware that Hawthorne, in his dialogues, used proper names to very special purpose. Very often the placement of a name, and its particular form, revealed at once the tone of the conversation. Many of the individual dialogues begin with the utterance of a name, often as a way of putting distance between the speaker and his listener, sometimes for the opposite reason, that is to bring the listener nearer. In the first Act, when Dimmesdale finally and reluctantly addresses Hester on the scaffold, he starts: «Hester Prynne...». Chillingworth, alone with Hester in the prison cell, begins his re-evocation of their past life with: «Hester...». Dimmesdale, when he learns that Chillingworth is Hester's husband, exclaims: «O Hester Prynne...» On the other hand, under strong emotional stress, the name often appears only after some initial exclamation: «Believe me, Hester, I shall seek this man...», «Who is that man, Hester?», «Thou and I, Hester, never did so», «Hush, Hester!» etc.

More important is the use of names to give emphasis or furnish a desired rhythmic pattern. One of the most frequent devices, and one which insensibly imposed a melodic equivalent, was a repeated imperative, separated by a name: «Hush, child, hush!», «Come, Hester, come!», «No, Hester, no!», etc. Or the name was used to give added weight to a negative: «Thou and I, Hester, never did so!». And surely one of the most moving moments in the libretto is the simple exchange of names when Dimmesdale and Hester meet in the forest, after so many years. Here the use of names is at its most tactile, is a genuine touch, a kind of ascertainment of disbelieved fact.



To illustrate how Hawthorne uses names to furnish a desired rhythmic effect is more difficult because they often affect the pace of entire scenes. Dimmesdale uses Hester's name often during their «love» scene, almost as if he were fondling it. At one moment he exclaims:

Think for me, Hester!  
Thou art strong,  
Resolve for me!

Take away the name and the build-up falls flat. Place it after the second sentence and one feels the interruption. Place it after the third and the whole becomes rhetorical and common. Try and place it before any of the sentences and the «hammer» effect, essential to the depiction of tension, is lost.

Or, again, when Chillingworth says;

Dost thou know me so little,  
Hester Prynne?  
Are my purposes wont to be so shallow?

That «Hester Prynne», at once so formal and consequently so menacing (for the two of them are alone), rounds off the first question rhythmically and creates an effective space between it and the second question, giving both an increased emphasis. It also avoids the repetitive pattern of the last word of each question («little» and «shallow»), lending the first one greater force by ending on a single strong syllable («Prynne»).

These are no longer literary questions, but musical ones. Nor do I wish to suggest that the above observations reveal anything of importance about Hawthorne's literary techniques. What I am getting at is that the existence of such patterns have an immeasurable effect on the composer who sets them to music. The pause between the two questions posed by Chillingworth, easily overlooked in reading the passage, is of considerable importance to the composer, where the spacing of sentences, their closeness or distance,

is essential to the establishment of the «right» dramatic pace of any given scene. Most of these considerations are not consciously made as one works, the composer having to trust to those selections determined by personal taste and sensitivity. In a good libretto, however, one is grateful for such things as that «Hester Prynne» placed at the end of the first question. It creates the necessary space of its own.

I did not intend, in the beginning, to write the first scene of Act I myself. I thought of preparing as much of the libretto as was possible with the dialogues already present in the novel and then turn to someone with greater experience in writing to fill in the empty spaces. By the time I had gotten the rest of the libretto into shape, I was so impatient to begin composing the opera that one evening I wrote the missing scene myself. In doing so, I kept as closely as possible to the prose images in Chapter V (Hester At Her Needle) and Chapter VI (Pearl). Mistress Hibbins' appearance is taken from the end of Chapter VIII (The Elf-Child And The Minister).

The central theme for the scene was taken from Hester's opening exclamation: «O Father in Heaven, if Thou art still my Father...», quoted from Chapter VI. I developed it later on into «O Father, Thou who teachest of love...» and, at the end of the scene, into «Father in Heaven, protect me...».

Hester's aria grew out of a prose passage in Chapter V

The days of the far-off future would toil onward, still with the same burden for her to take up, and bear along with her, but never to fling down; for the accumulating days, and added years, would pile up their misery upon the heap of shame.

It was necessary to underline the passage of time between this act and the one preceding it, thus the «Seven years... seven years of eyes that look...». Hawthorne remarks that «Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee» and this element became, «To flee, to hide...». The ambiguity of her non-flight is expressed in the final phrases of her aria, where «my shame» is the direct reminder of «my joy...».



This scene also suggested a way to make Pearl a « presence » on the stage without recurring to the disagreeable solution of having a small-statured soprano apeing a seven-year-old child. In fact, Pearl presented a number of problems. She couldn't be done away with, for her symbolic function in the novel was of equal importance to the libretto, also because her symbolism is so often visual (crimson dress, liveliness, etc.). Hawthorne helped me here, too, for he gave Pearl two large scenes, of capital importance, in which her non-speaking is part of the dramatic impact, namely during her interview with John Wilson and later in the woods when Dimmesdale kisses the child. Going on the principle that a skillful child actress is easier to find than a capable child singer, I decided to make Pearl an acting rôle. But I kept her on-stage as little as possible, so as not to make her non-singing too evident. I subsequently had the happy idea of introducing her vocal « presence » in Hester's scene by having her singing at play just outside the house. At the opening of Hester's second big scene with Chillingworth, followed by that with Dimmesdale, the lights go up just as Hester is sending Pearl off to play by herself. In Dimmesdale's mad scene, I was forced to a compromise; she had to be on-stage and she had to speak, so, taking advantage of the stage darkness required by the midnight hour, I put Pearl's « voice » behind the scaffold, in the hopes that theatrical licence would permit this brief moment of ventriloquism.

It's interesting that the « Pearl-music » was the most difficult to bring off, for Hawthorne, himself, presents her flatly, contrary to the other principal characters. She rarely rises above the purely symbolic, and is thus a convention, a mere doll. Also, to return to an earlier point, she has no dialogue, no personal rhythm of speech, to suggest a rounded musical conception. Only in the Dimmesdale kiss-in-the-woods episode does she cast more of a shadow and, in fact, the music at that point is more varied and of richer dramatic range. Which would seem to confirm my notion that the « wholeness » of characters in a libretto will excite a similar « wholeness » in their musical treatment.



With unexpected ease, I wrote the added dialogue of the Five Women (who, incidentally, replace the conventional «chorus») in the final scene of the opera. Hawthorne gave a number of clues as to the changes of attitude towards Hester and the scarlet letter among the local people over the years, and I sought to incorporate them into this reappearance of the Women. Actually, they turn out to be more fully characterized than Hawthorne bothered with, and in depicting the cruelty, the ignorance and basic vulgarity of the common Puritan mind, I seemed to be drawing upon a source of information which I hardly knew I possessed.

This should not have surprised me. Hawthorne's puritanical novel written against Puritanism has long been recognized as an exquisitely American product. And it is. My attraction to it, and the curious identity and comprehension I experienced in working with it, contain just this paradoxical twist which marks almost everyone whose training has taken place in a puritanical atmosphere. No American escapes completely its touch; an alert mind will find it springing up in unexpected places, at unexpected times, in the simplest actions and most spontaneous thoughts. More than a mode of behavior, it is a moral attitude; that is, the Puritan mind tends to view every action in the light of a primitive morality or, more simply, in terms of right and wrong. When right is identified with discomfiture and wrong with pleasure, actions of the greatest cruelty and savagery can result. When right is identified with wealth and wrong with poverty, the greatest selfishness and vulgarity can result. When to submit to established convention is right and to seek personal evaluations is wrong, injustice and chaotic rebellion can result. But this same force, which seeks to penetrate to the moral center of action, present in a vigorous and generous mind, can result in a broad and coherent view of life. All these aspects of puritanism are depicted in Hawthorne's novel, thus its wholeness, its shine of truth and its value.

ROBERT W. MANN