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GERTRUDE STEIN AND VIRGIL THOMSON: THE CONCEPT OF
MODERNISM IN AMERICAN OPERA

The act of creating an opera always involves the close collaboration of a musician and a writer. On many occasions the literary work has to be adapted to the dramatical aspects of opera and it becomes the libretto. This process is commonly accepted among composers, but the ideal circumstance is the existence of an original libretto written exclusively for the stage.

Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson belong to this exceptional and privileged combination that has produced a good number of librettos which eventually unfold into well-known operas (1). Their friendship and artistic links began in the European setting of Paris in 1926.

While looking for the exciting culture of the Old World, the two expatriates arrived at the center of artistic avant-garde. During their long residence in Paris they established relationships with other artists such as Picasso, Hemingway, Cocteau, Scott Fitzgerald, Gide, and most of the leading French composers (2). Thomson became profoundly interested in Erik Satie's music and in the French group of Six.

Stein was also involved in the extremely important cubist movement which she tried to adapt to literature. Her interest in painting was reflected in the great number of paintings she collected in her studio in Paris. She always supported the new and challenging creations of the

modern artists she met.

"The business of Art," she says, "is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to express that complete actual present."

However, this "actual present" evoked by the artist is interwoven with a remote past mentioned in all her works. T.S. Eliot analyzed these aspects in "Tradition and The Individual Talent," an essay compiled in The Sacred Wood, 1921. Eliot himself was a modern writer conscious of the concept of tradition. According to Eliot the past is altered by the present and the present is altered by the past. It is impossible to be out of our "tradition." Every artist is the product of that heritage, so he or she is going to be contrasted and compared with this accumulation of experience.

Stein and Thomson lived in a period of aesthetic revolution in which literature and music substantially transformed their structures. An outstanding example of this is Igor Stravinsky who was a key figure contributing to music; he explored the asymmetrical patterns of compound metres and used devices of prolongation and elision that broke down the tradition of symmetrical phrasing. He was very interested in serial music and became affected by the music of Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. Although his serial music was conceived within a framework of tonal music, Virgil Thomson was basically very eclectic in his concept of new music. He is neo-classical in the combination of traditional forms with contemporary techniques marked by an obvious sense of irony.

The meeting with Gertrude Stein took place in Autumn of 1926; it is described in Stein's Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:

Gertrude Stein had not found George Antheil particularly interesting although she liked him, but Virgil Thomson she found very interesting although I did not like him. (226) ...Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein became friends and saw each other a great deal. Gertrude Stein was very much interested in Virgil Thomson's music. He had understood Satie undoubtedly and he had a comprehension quite his own of prosody. He understood a great deal of Gertrude Stein's work, he used to dream at night that there was something there that he did not understand, but on the whole he was very well content with that which he did understand. She delighted in listening to her words framed by his music. They saw a great deal of each other. (227-23)

As it can be inferred from this text, they shared a common attraction for their respective works and styles. Undoubtedly, this mutual interest had to produce results as had happened between Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russes with The Firebird and Pulcinella.

In 1927, Stein wrote a libretto titled Four Saints in Three Acts, and Thomson finished the piano score a year later. The birth of the opera is described again in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:

Virgil Thomson had asked Gertrude Stein to write an opera for him. Among the saints there were two saints whom she had always liked better than any others, Saint Therese of Avila and Ignatius Loyola, and she said she would write him an opera about these two saints. She began this and worked very hard at it all that spring and finally finished Four Saints and

gave it to Virgil Thomson to put to music. He did. And it is a completely interesting opera both as to words and music. (229)

The opera is set in Spain and its main characters are Spaniards. Stein travelled throughout Spain for a long time and was profoundly moved by the city of Avila and its religious connotations. Saint Therese was a heroine of Gertrude Stein's youth. It seems ironic that a Jewish writer could be so concerned about Catholic saints and their lives. Perhaps, this opera was a means of showing Stein's struggling with religion and perhaps also a means of showing the ever-present problem of authenticity among religions.

Four Saints in Three Acts was first performed on Wednesday, February 8, 1934, in the Auditorium of the Avery Memorial in Hartford, Connecticut, under the auspices of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music.

There is an absence of plot in the conventional sense; instead, the author presents a series of seven pictures or tableaux in which the characters move with minimal action. Stein's libretto lacks continuity and movement, emphasizing a circular, repetitive structure.

The main characters are Saint Therese of Avila, Saint Ignatius Loyola, and Saint Settlement and Saint Chavez, their confidants. The rest of the cast is not relevant in their roles and form part of the male and female choruses. Virgil Thomson used Black artists for the first performance because he admired their clear English speech and their natural approach to religious themes. However, Stein did not like the idea of showing Black bodies representing Spanish saints, and she states it firmly with the following words:

It is too much what modernistic writers refer to as "futuristic;" I cannot see its relevance to my treatment of the theme.

The authors wanted to present something shocking in every detail, beginning with the title which creates confusion in terms of exactness. Stein mentions three acts in the title but in fact the opera has four.

Act One takes place in Avila. The stage represents the steps and portal of the cathedral. Saint Therese is introduced by Compère. (The Compère and Commère speak to the audience and to each other about the progress of the opera.) At the third tableau she rises and asks "Can women have wishes?" In the seventh, Saint Therese rocks an unseen child in her arms. Act Two represents a garden party in the country near Barcelona. There are party games and Saint Plan, having gone to get his mantle, returns with a telescope. Saint Therese looks through it, and the vision of a heavenly mansion appears in the sky. Act Three takes place in the garden of a monastery on the seacoast. Saint Ignatius converses with Saint Therese and describes his vision of the Holy Ghost and predicts the Last Judgement. Later on it gets dark. Everyone is a little frightened. Saints form a devotional and expiatory procession, singing hymns as they cross the stage.

Act Four takes place after a short instrumental intermezzo, the Compère and Commère discuss in front of the curtains whether there is to be a fourth act. When they finally agree, the curtain rises, revealing all the saints reassembled in heaven. They sing their happy memories of life on earth and join in a hymn of

communion, "When this you see remember me."

This is, briefly, the action of the opera. As it can be seen, the acts are not connected by an organized succession of events. Nevertheless, the idea of continuity is established by scenery.

According to Richard Jackson, in the absence of a plot Thomson's painter-friend Maurice Grosser devised a scenario, or series of tableaux and processions, for staging the work. (3) Indeed, what Stein and Thomson were looking for was totally opposed to verisimilitude. Their reaction reflected Europe's attitude to realism in the theater and, of course, to other arts. Sound and rhythm were the basis of Stein's poetry and this is what Thomson proclaims essential in a libretto:

My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, that meaning will take care of itself. And the Stein texts, for prosodizing in this way were manna You could make a setting for sound and syntax only, then add, if needed, an accompaniment equally functional. I had no sooner put to music after this recipe one short Stein text than I knew I had opened a door. I had never had any doubts about Stein's poetry; from then on I had none about my ability to handle it in music. (67)

Sonority is the essence of Stein's text and it is achieved by using devices like:

Puns: "Face place in place of face to face."
(179)

Alliteration: "Let Lucy Lily Lily Lucy let."
(148)

"With renounced where where ware and wear
wear with them." (153)

Assonance: "In clouded/Included:" (134)

Rhymes: "With seas/With knees/With keys." (54)

Homonyms: "Add sum/Add some." (109)

Stein was absolutely convinced about her role in the new context of poetry; therefore, she tried to present a totally revolutionary concept of the word. During her lectures in Oxford in 1926 she stated:

We all know that it's hard to write poetry in a late age; and we know that you have to put some strangeness, something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun.

Vitality is the key-word because the Steinian libretto is conceived in an unquestionable challenging structure. Nothing could remind us of the traditional Verdi or Puccini operas with their heroes suffering fate's relentless fury. On the contrary, Stein presents the action as one of her "landscape plays":

All the saints I made, all saints together made my landscape. All these things might have been a story but as a landscape they were just there and a play is just there. I also wanted it to have the moveme of nuns very busy and in continuous movement but placid as a landscape has to be because after all the life in a convent is the life of a landscape, it may look excited, a landscape sometimes does look excited.

As she explains, people, things and stories are present on stage but not progressive in the given moment. This conception of action derives from what could be called an "evocative present," detached from any climactic situation. Consequently, what the public is offered acquires a disconcerting character without the logical succession of events. Saint Therese is not the XVIth century woman who

was the founder of a holy order and tried to reach God over all things. Stein introduces a new woman in harmony with her time but evoking the mystic image of the Saint.

As for the musical aspects, Thomson shared all the previous ideas with Stein and his score echoes them although he had to arrange the original text establishing a prologue and four acts.

Richard Jackson defines Thomson's style in this opera as follows:

The scores consists of elements that were to be characteristic of much of Thomson's subsequent work: simple diatonic harmony (with occasional bichordal clashes), short tunes in Protestant-hymn style, extended parlando and chant passages reminiscent of Anglican liturgy, quotations of familiar airs (e.g. "God Save the King" or "My Country 'tis of thee"), popular dance rhythms (especially the waltz and the tango), and careful, highly polished prosody. (4)

Two main characteristics can be singled out in this accurate analysis. First, Thomson's insistence on the necessity of incorporating melodies which formed part of everyday life and second, the use of very simple and clear musical structures. This musical vision is clearly linked to the Satian ideals of simplicity and clarity in opposition to the grandeur achieved by Wagner and the Post-Romantics.

Thomson admired the French composer Satie and defined his aesthetic values in this way:

It has eschewed the impressive, the heroic, the oratorical, everything that is aimed at moving mass audiences... it has directed its communication to the individual. It has valued

in consequence, quietude, precision, acuteness of auditory observation, gentleness, sincerity and directness of statement.

Certainly, all these peculiarities portray Thomson's own music, especially Four Saints in Three Acts in which the composer followed the rhythm of language paying attention to the stresses and cadences of the text.

The score presents a very plain harmony combining an endless succession of tonic, dominant and subdominant triads. Sometimes, chords are found in homophonic sequences imitating the repetitions of the libretto. Thomson attempted to reproduce in music many of the significant parts of the lyrics so that the musical signs and the sounds exactly reflected the words. This effect in music is called symbolism, and no doubt is in agreement with the general character of the opera.

An example of this device is the question:

The musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is a treble clef with a melody of quarter notes. The lower staff is a bass clef with a harmonic accompaniment of quarter notes. The lyrics are: "How many how many saints are there in it" on the upper staff and "One two three four and there" on the lower staff. The music is marked *mf* and includes dynamic markings *mp*, *del*, *mosso*, and *docu*.

The numbers are represented by four quarter notes.

Another way is the following line in which the music descends by thirds:

The musical score is for "Chorus II" and is marked *S. deliberamento*. It features a single treble clef staff with a descending melody of quarter notes. The lyrics are: "Sound them with the thirds and that." The music is marked *A.*

Several other devices define Thomson's originality; some of them should be mentioned, particularly, the syllabic construction of music,

meaning by this that a syllable corresponds to a note; the frequent use of unison; and the presence of soundless rhythmic recitatives.

It is worth mentioning that Thomson represented Saint Therese by using two singers dressed exactly alike. Saint Therese I is a soprano who asks and Saint Therese II is an alto who responds. An explanation for this decision could be the ever present ambiguity of the libretto or the interest of showing the ambivalence of a woman like Saint Therese of Avila.

Four Saints in Three Acts meant in all senses a new conception in antitheses to the realistic operas. Thomson was conscious of his role in contemporary music and in his book American Music Since 1910 he expresses this consciousness:

Too early to say here but history may confirm that Thomson's innovations for American Opera compares with that of the original composers of opera in Florence with authors like Peri and Caccini, etc. (84)

According to William Henry Fry, music critic of the New York Tribune, Virgil Thomson was the first composer of a grand opera because he mastered the subtle art of combining words with music. (5)

The composer must also treat the English language with reference to the peculiarities necessary to effective stage declamation and to the genius of melody as universal dialect, which claims, indeed, supremacy over words; and as the ordinary structure of English verse ill coincides with such requisites, an amount of eccentric lyrical labors is necessary that must deter dramatic writers from the undertaking, unless a proper

estimate be set upon this required mastery of the language, rendering it flexible to the musical touch and malleable for all the forms into which composition requires it to be beaten.

Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein embody what Bernard Bergonzi has defined as the modern artist who was alienated from the everyday social world, and yet who had a vision of a new, unified, and transformed order of things.

Four Saints in Three Acts can be considered a modernist "Gesamtkunstwerk" in the sense that music, image, and text are intimately related, forming a unity in which none of its elements is any more relevant than the others.

The authors expressed their idea of connection among the arts with their opera whose première caused a scandal in the musical world of the 1920s. It was performed again in New York on April 16, 1952, and Cecil Smith wrote that,

...after eighteen years, the opera remained a masterpiece-- wayward and ambiguous, alternately profoundly serious and tongue-in-cheek, but worthy of respect and affection as a piece far superior to the mere temper of the time in which it was first produced.

As many other avant-garde operas it never had a lasting place in the traditional repertory because the twentieth century public has always maintained a very conservative attitude to everything new in music. In spite of this, it remains one of the main representative works of modernism in American opera.

Notes

1 See R. Jackson, "The Operas of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson," diss., Tulane U., 1962.

2 For an excellent description of this, see Mellow, James R. Charmed Circle. Gertrude Stein & Company. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974.

3 For further information on these aspects see The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Edited by Stanley Sadie, Macmillan, 1980.

4 See Jackson's article in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Edited by Stanley Sadie, Macmillan, 1980.

5 The reading for general background I found most useful for a musical approach to Virgil Thomson is K. Hoover and J. Cage. Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music. New York: 1959.

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