

POET AS LIBRETTIST: WORDS FOR MUSIC BY LANG-PO AND NEW FORMALIST POETS

Nosferatu: An Opera Libretto (Based on the Film by F.W. Murnau). Dana Gioia. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001. *Shadowtime*. Charles Bernstein. København & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2005.

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If one were to accept as true W.H. Auden's contention that the job of the librettist is "to furnish the composer with a plot, characters and words," then one could acknowledge poets Charles Bernstein and Dana Gioia as having fulfilled the librettist's most basic duty by supplying their collaborators with each of opera's main ingredients. It is only when one considers the rest of Auden's assertion (that "of these, the least important so far as the audience is concerned, are the words") that one begins to question the poets' motives for attempting libretti in the first place. After all, as Mr. Auden has further insisted, "a poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language," a statement that begs the question why someone in love with language would be content to have the product of his or her passion take a back seat to music, plot, and spectacle.

Make no mistake; there is no doubt that both Bernstein and Gioia are passionate about language. As poets and critics each has well-established credentials, but as librettists their work is more or less unknown. Furthermore, of the two, only Gioia is a relative newcomer to the genre. *Nosferatu* debuted in 2001, while Bernstein's first libretto *Blind Witness News*, dates from 1990. Bernstein, clearly the veteran librettist here, has since gone on to write four more libretti: *The Subject* (1991), *The Lenny Paschen Show* (1992), *Café Buffé* (1999), and *Shadowtime* (2005).

Both Gioia and Bernstein have different reasons for attempting libretti, and, perhaps not surprisingly, their particular works serve as distinct examples of the differences between these two poets, their writing styles, and philosophies. The critic Charles Foley observes that Gioia is a poet who offers us a kind of aesthetic, "dark" Catholicism. He points out that behind Gioia's interest and status in "The New Formalism," an aesthetic movement in poetry that advocates a return to traditional meters and forms, there lies a profound interest in ritual—specifically in the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church. Gioia, a self-proclaimed "Catholic" writer who does not believe in God, validates Foley's claim when he explains in *The Irish Review*

I'm interested in darker subject matter... The basic *donnée* of the Catholic writer is to examine the consequences of living in a fallen world...The dissonance between those two realms of experience, the real and the imaginary, the visible and the invisible, is the fundamental tension of Catholic poetry.

Gioia readily admits that the appeal of opera, for him, lay in its ritual elements. "Music," he writes, "allows the audience to experience the words not intellectually but physically, emotionally, and indeed unconsciously." He contends that under such conditions he was able to explore ways of writing that were quite different from those he might use on the page.

Beyond this admission, Gioia explains that he was led to opera by a fascination with the archaic genre of verse tragedy, opera being the only living form of verse tragedy and the only surviving form of contemporary tragic theater. Interested in experimenting with verse tragedy in his own work, he quickly discovered that there are only two practical alternatives available to the contemporary poet: translation of the classics or writing for the opera house.

Gioia's approach to the art of writing libretti seems to be no different from anything else he has attempted; that is, he appears to have a tenacious single-mindedness when it comes to mastering subjects that capture his interest. This is, after all, a man who established a major literary reputation writing at night and on weekends during what must have been a grueling fifteen-year career as a business executive, one that culminated in his eventual promotion to Vice President of General Foods, no less. In 1992, he left business to become a full-time writer. Since 2003, he has been chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts—and a damned effective one at that, having actually gotten a sizable increase in his agency's budget from a tight-fisted, conservative congress.

His writing reflects such tenacity, exhibiting something of an obsessively methodical reliance on form and structure as is evident in the following passage from *Nosferatu* entitled *Aria: Nosferatu's Nocturne*

I am the image that darkens your glass,
The shadow that falls wherever you pass.
I am the dream you cannot forget,
The face you remember without having met.

I am the truth that must not be spoken,
The midnight vow that cannot be broken.
I am the bell that tolls out the hours.
I am the fire that warms and devours.

I am the hunger that you have denied,
 The ache of desire piercing your side.
 I am the sin you have never confessed,
 The forbidden hand caressing your breast.

You've heard me inside you speak in your dreams,
 Sigh in the ocean, whisper in streams.
 I am the future you crave and you fear.
 You know what I bring. Now I am here.

The structure, too, of *Nosferatu* is steeped in tradition—it follows the conventional operatic format for the old tried-and-true tragedy in six acts. Furthermore, Gioia's libretto is nothing if not populist—it is based on F. W. Murnau's 1922 silent vampire film of the same name (a work which borrowed heavily from the Bram Stoker horror classic *Dracula*) and tells a now familiar story. A young man, Eric Hutter, newly wed and living in poverty in the town of Wisborg with his pretty young wife Ellen, is sent to Hungary by his new employer to sell a local property to the Dracula-esque Count Orlock. During their initial meeting, Orlock becomes transfixed by a small portrait of Ellen in Hutter's possession. Orlock feeds on Hutter, drives him mad, and vows to make Ellen his own. Meanwhile, Ellen has been having nightmarish visions alerting her to her husband's peril and the true nature of the Count. Orlock arrives in the town of Wisborg to make good on his plan, and leaves a trail of grotesque and mysterious deaths in his wake. Hutter returns from Hungary, but is confined to an asylum for the insane. He believes that he has become wealthy from his business venture with Orlock, and begs Ellen to join him in their new mansion (the asylum). Ellen devises a plan to destroy Orlock and save her husband from madness. She invites Orlock to her room with the intention of keeping him with her till dawn. Ellen prolongs their tryst as long as she can, but just as the first rays of sunlight enter the room Orlock realizes Ellen's ruse. He has just one chance to escape, but Ellen bares her neck and he chooses to embrace her instead. As the Count crumbles into dust Ellen dies in her bed. This is pretty stock stuff.

Gioia's libretto was written for the neo-romantic composer Alva Henderson, whose music, though certain to please on the popular level, sometimes comes across as simply typical—thrilling at turns, but not surprising. The printed libretto is framed by two essays: Anne Williams "Listening to the Children of the Night: The Vampire and Romantic Mythology" and Gioia's own "Sotto Voce: Notes on the Libretto as a Literary Form." Both are well worth the read, especially Gioia's well-written piece on the tradition

of writing libretti. Here the reader will find that perhaps the most useful information is Gioia's eloquent assertion that a libretto, dependent as it must be on music, cannot be considered or judged solely by literary standards, but rather how well it functions in the completed work of art. The implication is that one requires a well-developed sense of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or, synthesis of arts (that melding of *phanopoeia*, *melopoeia*, and *logopoeia* as Pound would have it) when considering any libretto.

If Gioia's offering is an aesthetic, "dark" Catholicism, then Bernstein's is a kind of secular Jewish response—albeit one that is likely derived from the Jewish mystical tradition's insistence that everything is holy—that steers poetry away from the allegorical, the high literary, and the religious, and more towards the simple details of the ordinary. This is a notion present throughout *Shadowtime* and quite evident in the following passage from Scene VI:

These stones are the bread
of imagination. Reading the notices
on the urinals, *things withstand my
gaze*. Such joy in the mere act
of unrolling a ball of thread. One becomes
tender, fearing that a shadow falling on
paper might hurt it. It's too noisy here.
I must note how I found my place.
Seeing only nuances. As when
the intensity of acoustic impressions
blots out all others. The solitude of such
trances works as a filter. Yet I am disturbed
by a child crying.

Unlike Gioia, Bernstein has always been much less concerned with using poetry to explore the consequences of the fallen world, and more interested in poetry's social context, or what it becomes within the process of what he calls "doing" poetry. As he explained to one interviewer:

Poetry's social function is to imagine how language works within its culture, while pursuing a critique of the culture; this suggests that poetry can be a countermeasure to the reinforcement of cultural values at the heart of both popular entertainment and consumer politics. At the same time, poetry's aesthetic function is to refuse even this "value" in the pursuit of what Louis Zukofsky calls the pleasures of sight, sound, and intellect.

One need look no further than Bernstein's evocation of Zukofsky as a stark indicator of his differences with Gioia's brand of poetics. In his essay "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles

Reznikoff,” Zukofsky expands on the basic principles of Objectivist poetics stating that in sincerity “writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody,” and that objectification relates to “the appearance of the art form as an object.” While this position echoes Pound’s belief “in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (from the 1918 essay “A Retrospective” which was a major influence on Zukofsky), much of Bernstein’s technique is derived from the tenets of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which is often perceived as being more stilted than sincere. That said, although Gioia is more than willing to write with the “three *poeias*” in mind, he still seems much more at ease in his role as librettist in the tradition of conventional opera. Conversely, it is Bernstein who seems much more comfortable with breaking opera’s rules and stretching its limits and possibilities. Much like Pound in the role of “librettist” (see “Out of Key and of This World: Pound’s Musical Ambition,” *NDR* 20), Bernstein is content to allow the words to lead him to new discoveries that break with tradition and forge something unexpected. Nonetheless, one wonders when all is said and done with *Shadowtime* whether one is witnessing an opera or “song cycle.”

Rather than being arranged in acts, *Shadowtime* is divided into seven “scenes” that explore in very experimental language some of the major themes in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, for those readers who need reminding, was a dynamic German-Jewish philosopher, essayist, and cultural critic who combined ideas of Jewish mysticism with historical materialism in a body of work which was an entirely novel contribution to Marxist philosophy and aesthetic theory. He allegedly committed suicide in Port Bou at the Spanish-French border, while attempting to escape from the Nazis, when it appeared that his party would be denied passage across the border to freedom. Bernstein’s libretto, clearly the product of great respect for and interest in the life and work of Benjamin, is purposely disjointed, fragmented, and difficult. It lacks all of the familiar, populist appeal of *Nosferatu*, and, while *Shadowtime*, like Gioia’s libretto, possesses more than a modicum of “darkness,” it is a darkness that is strictly and unsettlingly psychological rather than Gothic, and therefore all the more terrifying when experienced.

While my focus in this review is on the libretto for the two operas in question, I should note that *Shadowtime* had its North American premiere at the Lincoln Center July 2005 to audiences that exhibited impatience if not open hostility to the two-hour, intermissionless performance. Critics’ reports tell of everything from mass exoduses in some performances to constrained applause at the opera’s close. One reviewer went so far as to

describe it as the concert experience that brought him closest to physical pain. Rather than accepting such a remark as being merely flippant, perhaps one would do well to consider it in terms of Artaud's "theater of cruelty." Just as Artaud believed that the text had been a tyrant over meaning, and advocated, instead, a theater made up of a unique language halfway-between thought and gesture, Bernstein advocates one capable of containing

the intertwined natures of history, time, transience, timelessness, language, and melancholy; the possibilities for a transformational leftist politics; the interconnectivity of language, things, and cosmos; and the role of dialectical materiality, aura, interpretation, and translation in art.

Bernstein and his collaborator, composer Brian Ferneyhough, were shrewd to call their project a "thought opera," simultaneously performing a preemptive strike against negative criticism, and playing up to what one can imagine as Bernstein's audience's personal sense of being open-minded and poised to recognize the aesthetically valuable—even at the risk of offending the traditional sensibilities of the opera aficionado. Be that as it may, it is not surprising that *Shadowtime*, with its studied concern for words and word-play (guess how many anagrammatic permutations of the phrase "I'm a lent barn Jew" it's possible to set to music) may appear to many observers to verge on the pretentious.

Walter Benjamin spent much of his career exploring the notion of critique as *Ergänzung*, the "fulfillment" or "completion" of the work of art. He claimed that critique was immanent to art itself, and is therefore less something contingent to art than it is something that acts as a necessary supplement. As I understand it, Benjamin's claim is that there would be no art without criticism, not because criticism has priority over art but because the work of art is itself unfinished and thus already critical from the start. To this end, it is ultimately possible to perceive both *Nosferatu* and *Shadowtime* as works of criticism: one as perplexingly incomplete as the life and work it celebrates, and the other even more so, critically and immediately, incomplete because it is simply the latest installment (permutation?) in an enduring line of delicious twee: an opera based on a screenplay based on a novel, which was based on several literary precedents all based on a body of folklore which was, and is, a treasure trove of psychological investigation masquerading as a whole hell of a lot of fun.