

■ Research Report

'Balaam and his ass':¹

Defining the relationship between composer and librettist

W.H. Auden (1907-73) is one of the greatest English poets of this century. He is also a poet who tendered his art to the services of opera, 'the last refuge of the High Style'.² Over a period of thirty years Auden collaborated with such eminent composers as Benjamin Britten (*Paul Bunyan*, 1941), Igor Stravinsky (*The Rakes Progress*, 1951; *Delia*, 1953), Hans Werner Henze (*Elegy for Young Lovers*, 1961; *The Bassarids*, 1966) and Nicholas Nabokov (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 1972). In an era in which opera appears to be in its death throes—though not for lack of aspirants—this list signifies a significant and substantial contribution to the genre.

I have recently been recipient of a postdoctoral fellowship with the aim of examining the nature and products of these collaborations. Although literary critics have praised Auden for his ability to adapt his art to music, the libretto has traditionally been viewed as a menial form of poetry. Rarely have correspondences been noted between Auden's poetic dramas—sections of which Auden described as libretti *manqué*—and his libretti. Few have recognised the translation of the themes of his poetry to the events of the operas. Nor has any attempt been made to investigate the inheritance which Auden himself claimed from the history of opera.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that the libretto ranked as literature in its own right. Stendhal referred to the words for an Italian aria as 'excruciating doggerel' amid a widespread disdain for the text.³ The rehabilitation of the librettist came about with Wagner's theories of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the indissoluble union of words and music. Like Wagner, twentieth-century composers such as Hindemith, Schoenberg, Shostakovich and Tippett have all written their own libretti. Others have adapted stage plays: Debussy set Maeterlinck's play in *Pelléas et Melisande*, Berg's *Wozzeck* is taken from Büchner's prose tragedy and Britten set Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, among other literary evergreens. In adapting Oscar Wilde's French drama for *Salome*, Strauss purged it of 'purple passages to such an extent that it became quite a good libretto'.⁴ Nonetheless the most exceptional libretti in this cen-

tury have been written by poets or dramatists with a knowledge of music. In this category belong the successful collaborations of Hofmannsthal and Strauss, Brecht and Weill, Cocteau and Stravinsky, and Auden and Stravinsky.

As well as being a renowned poet, Auden was an accomplished pianist, of sufficient competence to be able to accompany Britten and Stravinsky in duets. He also possessed, thanks to the influence of his friend Chester Kallman, an extensive knowledge of the operatic repertoire. From this unique standpoint as both professional poet and amateur musician, he was aware that certain qualities of poetry cannot be transferred to opera, and that poetry itself does not belong in opera. The problem for the poet was to restrain his poetic instincts when writing words for music, knowing that they are as dispensable 'as infantry to a Chinese general'.⁵

My study of *Paul Bunyan*, the first of Auden's operas, is complete. It reveals Auden as the dominant and domineering partner in the venture. His personal sway over Britten is evident throughout the score, in which Auden airs grandiose ideas about America to the tune of Britten's deliberately simplistic and humorous music (the work was intended for schools). It is clear that their aims were not compatible and this may in part account for the hostile reception of the work in New York. Preliminary results reinforce the argument that for a successful outcome the composer must be the dominant partner.

There is an abundance of primary source material now available for this project, although references to these sources are as yet scant in published discussions of Auden's work. Correspondence and manuscript drafts are preserved in archival collections: relevant sections of Auden's correspondence can be found at the New York Public Library, the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel. Britten's manuscript of *Paul Bunyan* is in Aldeburgh, and sketches of *The Rake's Progress* are in the University of Southern California Library and the Sacher Stiftung. Chester Kallman's drafts of the libretti for Henze and his notes

on opera are available at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin. While the drafts of the libretti have recently been published, only cursory study has yet been undertaken of Stravinsky's sketches.

Auden himself wrote extensively about opera, among a myriad of other subjects, in his contributions to periodicals (which number over 900). Each of the composers has made a modest contribution to discussion of their operas, Henze in *Essays* (Mainz, 1964) and Stravinsky in *Themes and Episodes* (New York, 1966), *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (New York, 1969) and *Dialogues and a Diary* (New York, 1963). Humphrey Carpenter's biographies of Auden and Britten (London, 1981 and London, 1992) have provided anecdotal information about *Paul Bunyan* and Britten's years in America (1939-42) which complement musicological studies by Eric Walter White, Philip Reed and John Frayne. A small number of dissertations discuss Auden's collaborations with Stravinsky and Henze, while there have been numerous studies of *The Rake's Progress*, most notably Stephen Walsh's *The Music of Stravinsky* (London, 1988) and Paul Griffiths's *Igor Stravinsky: The Rake's Progress* (Cambridge, 1982) which includes contributions by Robert Craft and Gabriel Josipovici. By comparison with the body of criticism of

The Rake's Progress, discussions of the operas of Henze and Nabokov are scarce and mostly limited to the occasion of their first performances.

Recent studies of the nature of the libretto and its impact on the opera it spawns have made a major contribution to the methodology of opera criticism. Herbert Lindenberger's *Opera: The Extravagant Art* innovatively applies literary and cultural theory to an analysis of opera. Similarly *Reading Opera* (Princeton, 1988) and its offspring the *Cambridge Opera Journal* focus on the libretto, its poetry and dramaturgy. These studies suggest the possibility of a broader approach to the study of opera, an approach which I aim to utilise in further identifying the substance of Auden's contribution to the genre.

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Notes

¹ See W.H. Auden, 'Balaam and His Ass', *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 107-45.

² W.H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber, 1968), p. 116.

³ Henri Beyle Stendahl, *Life of Rossini*, trans Richard N. Coe, rev. ed. (New York: Orion, 1970), p. 368.

⁴ 'Reminiscences of the First Performances of My Operas' (1942) in Richard Strauss, *Recollections and Reflections*, ed. Willi Schuh, trans. L.J. Lawrence (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1953), p. 150.

⁵ Auden, *Dyer's Hand*, p. 473.

C A L L F O R C O N T R I B U T I O N S

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