

## RESTATING THE CASE FOR REPRESENTATION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF OPERA

DANIEL GALLAGHER

SACRED HEART MAJOR SEMINARY

### I

Opera *dilettantes* will forever argue over the relative importance of words and music in the creation and performance of their beloved art form. For philosophers brave enough to enter the fray, the issue raises a number of interesting ontological and phenomenological questions. In what does the work of opera primarily exist? What is distinctive of opera as a mode of dramatic presentation?

More recent philosophical treatments of opera have approached these questions through a critical analysis of the commonly accepted terminology in the field of aesthetics. Among these terms, 'representation' and 'expression' have been at the center of a lively debate both in terms of their definition and of their usefulness in understanding music in general, and more particularly music for the theatre. Benedetto Croce (1902) attempted to delineate a distinction between representation and expression that might have furthered the work of aestheticians, but a great many of them found his entire idealistic project too heady to be of much use. Roger Scruton candidly confesses a need to start from scratch in developing a meaningful framework to understand the representation/expression distinction as it pertains to music. Scruton argues that, although there may be instances in which it 'represents' something beyond itself, music must ultimately be understood as a type of *expression*. Even in cases where a composer intends to draw attention to the sounds of a chirping bird or a stormy sea through mimetic effects in his

music, an explicit recognition of these extra-musical subjects is not indispensable for a coherent understanding of the internal subject which is the music itself.

The present paper is an attempt to reassert a case for the language of representation as a means of understanding philosophically what happens in opera. I will proceed by first examining critically the reasons for which Roger Scruton and Peter Kivy are wary of applying representational theory to opera. I then turn to consider some of the differences between ‘representation’ as practiced in the *stile rappresentativo* and ‘representation’ as conceptualized in philosophical aesthetics. I then briefly consider the ensemble as a compositional device that illustrates the commonality within the distinctiveness of operatic styles over time. In doing so, I hope to lay only the initial groundwork for a broader and perhaps more useful conception of representation in the philosophy of opera.

## II

There is little doubt that opera arrived on the stage as the result of thoroughly philosophical and theoretical motives. The members of the *Camerata Fiorentina*, disturbed by the then-current state of music, were in search of a way to apply their knowledge of Hellenistic philosophy and drama to a practical situation: the composition and performance of a new dramatic form. This form became known as the *stile rappresentativo*. Peter Kivy does not fault the members of the *camerata* for assuming a decidedly philosophical stance toward the problem they were facing, but he thinks it unfortunate that they viewed the resultant art form as a type of representation. Similarly, Roger Scruton argues that expression, not representation, is the key to understanding the distinctive aesthetic status of the operatic art form.

According to Kivy, the theory of representation is a direct descendant of the mimetic heritage bequeathed to philosophers by Plato and Aristotle. Kivy notes that even in its early Aristotelian form, representational theory was based on the assumption that all art, including music, is an inspired and mimetic entity that refers to something other than itself. Insofar as the ‘something else’ in the case of music was human character, the performance and use of music were inextricably bound to moral considerations. Music, for example, if it referred to the baser

human passions, re-presents such passions and consequently instills them in its listeners. Conversely, exalted melodies tend to instill the listener with nobler virtues. Kivy notes that the work of the *Camerata Florentina* explicitly aimed to recapture the ethical aim of music (p. 29).

Without completely rejecting the Platonic theory of *mimesis*, Scruton believes that the term both lacks a sufficiently sharp definition and fails to make helpful distinctions between various types of imitation such as representing, expressing, and copying. For purposes of clarity, Scruton opts not to use the term ‘representation’ in reference to music, even when it is composed for the opera, because ‘if music has a role to play in the theatre, it is not because it represents things, but because it expresses them’ (p. 119).

In what cases might the term ‘representation’ be appropriately applied to the arts? According to Scruton, novels, plays, and poems, because they are to a greater or lesser degree narrative structures, are representative. Because they make use of language, and language always refers to persons, things, and events beyond itself, these art forms convey a content that transcends the words themselves. Representation, writes Scruton, ‘involves the presentation of thoughts about a fictional world’ (p. 127). Although language stands as the prime example of representation, perceptions, beliefs, and imaginings, because they intentionally refer to things beyond themselves, are also representational. Music, as previously stated, even when it mimicks other sounds, is meaningful in and of itself. Scruton cautions against limiting representation to resemblance, for resemblance, although a form of representation, denotes a symmetrical and reflexive relation. Representation, however, more generally stands for a non-symmetrical, non-reflexive relation (Scruton, p.122). By non-symmetrical, Scruton means that there is no direct correspondence between that which is represented and the means by which it is represented. By non-reflexive, he understands the means of representation to function in a way much different from a mirror, but rather as objects themselves capable and worthy of consideration. In the case of painting, the object that represents is an object in itself. What we see when we look at Da Vinci’s last supper is a wall covered with pigments. What we ‘see in’ the picture, argues Scruton, is the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples.

Kivy also finds severe weaknesses in representation as an adequate theory for understanding

both absolute music and the dramatic musical form of opera. In the second part of *Ossian's Rage*, Kivy presents an elegant and cogent explanation of how post-seventeenth-century developments in psychology and philosophy supplied a new way of approaching problems presented by the operatic enterprise of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The classical tradition of *mimesis*, Kivy argues, proved itself incapable of supporting the theoretical representational foundation of opera as conceived by the *Camerata Florentina* and embraced by the earliest composers of the *stile rappresentativo*. It would be up to the German Romanticists to flesh out a more ample and comprehensive theoretical context to understand not only the opera of their contemporaries, but the opera envisioned by the very creators of the *stile rappresentativo*.

### III

The first point to be made regarding the foregoing critique of representational theory is historico-linguistic in nature. What the earliest operatic composers meant by *stile rappresentativo* does not seem to correspond neatly to what philosophers have meant by 'representation'. Monteverdi, for example, employed the term in a general way to indicate the delivery of a text in a style that lies somewhere between spoken and sung speech moving freely over an underlying chordal accompaniment. Whether this understanding was a genuine rediscovery of authentic classical Hellenistic tragedy is another matter. The point is that the term *rappresentativo* was adopted as a descriptive term for a dramatic type that was quite novel in the world of music and the theatre. Although this dramatic type was founded upon an utterly theoretical and philosophical foundation, the term chosen to describe the new art form was not meant to convey *in toto* the substance of that theoretical foundation.

So what did the term designate? Quite simply, we cannot be certain. However, a cursory glance at the early operatic repertoire gives us a hint. The earliest examples of the new *stile rappresentativo* were previously staged classical dramas. *Orfeo*, the best known of the earliest operas, was already widely familiar to the Renaissance audience. Monteverdi chose to 'represent' the story of Orpheus and Eurydice by means of a partially spoken, partially sung dialogue supported by instrumental accompaniment. The 'representation' of thoughts, feelings,

and emotions was not a primary consideration in the selection of the term. That is not to say that this type of representation did not take place. Rather, what was primarily represented in the new form of *stile rappresentativo* was the dramatic story of Orpheus and Eurydice, not their thoughts and feelings.

This may seem like an oversimplification. If it is, it is not meant to be an oversimplified refutation of Scruton and Kivy's respective analyses. Scruton rightly shies away from holding representation as an adequate operatic theory philosophically. Kivy's analysis carefully teases out the relationship between the problems that opera presents and the inadequacy of its inventors' original theoretical framework for solving those problems. However, rather than leaving the representational theory behind as we penetrate the deeper philosophical issues of opera, the philosophical endeavor might well benefit from a closer look at the philosophical implications of the reasons for which the term *stile rappresentativo* was chosen to designate the new art form.

In the preface to his *Eurydice*, Jacopo Peri describes the basic problem confronting him as a composer of works in the new *stile rappresentativo*: 'Whence, seeing that I had to do with dramatic poetry and that, accordingly, I had to reproduce speech by song (and surely, no one ever spoke in song), I thought that the ancient Greeks and Romans—who, in the opinion of many, sang the entire tragedies on stage—used a kind of harmony which, going beyond ordinary speech, remained so far below the melody of the song that it constituted an intermediate form' (p. 20). Peri clearly expresses in this passage a nostalgic desire to return to classical theatrical forms. This same desire is evident in Monteverdi's choice of scoring his operatic compositions according to the instrumental conventions of the ancients (Monteverdi, 23). The lyre, for example, was called upon to represent the city, whereas the flute was more apt to convey the feeling of country life. It is crucial to note, however, that Monteverdi did not provide a theoretical basis as to *why* the lyre was better suited to 'representing' the city and the flute the country. Rather, Plato was invoked as the authoritative source for determining the conventions of the early *stile rappresentativo*, and the composer's task was to organize the intermediate spoken/sung drama on the basis of these conventions.

Peri and Monteverdi also turned to the authority of Aristotle and Plato in choosing the

rhythmic and modal features of the supporting instrumental music. An examination of how such choices were made reveals a concern for the expressive qualities of the orchestral accompaniment. ‘And having considered which modes and accents we use to express pain, joy, and related feelings, I made the bass move in time with these, either fast or slow, according to the emotions to be expressed, and held to this firmly through right and wrong proportions’ (Peri, p. 20). It is worth noting that even in identifying these expressive features, Peri maintains that both the music and the text were to be taken together as constituting a single form through which the drama was represented. Rather than itself embodying fully the expressive import of the drama, the music simply heightened the expressive force of the half-spoken/half-sung text.

It should be asked, then, whether, as Kivy argues, the more developed philosophy and psychology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century retroactively helped to solve some of the problems posed by opera in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In some ways, Kivy’s analysis suggests that the pioneers of the *stile rappresentativo* were attempting to accomplish more than they realized. They did set up challenges for themselves, but they were not necessarily the problems that later operatic composers set up for themselves. I would like to suggest that Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini were not so much providing better solutions to the problems posed by the *Camerata Fiorentina* and faced by Monteverdi and Peri, as they were setting up for themselves *new* challenges based on the developments of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and psychology. Wagner, for example, did not occupy himself so much with critiquing the accuracy of the *Camerata’s* attempt to rediscover, and Monteverdi and Peri’s attempt to reproduce, the essence of Greek drama. Rather, he himself attempted to reconceptualize the entire Hellenistic dramatic project by drawing upon the monumental philosophical and psychological developments of the Romantic period.

#### IV

I now turn to consider the operatic ensemble as a way of illustrating the preceding points. Rather than providing a better solution to the original problem presented by the *Camerata Fiorentina*, the operatic ensemble can be viewed as an attempt to highlight the new philosophical and psychological problems introduced after the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In order to retain

the clarity and forthrightness of the poetic style, the earliest practitioners of the *stile rappresentativo* concerned themselves with keeping the components of musical harmony in a subordinate position. This is what Peri meant by ‘intermediate form’ (Peri, p. 20). In respect to the established ends of the *stile rappresentativo*, elaborate trios and quartets would have only introduced clutter. The re-presentation of the thoughts and feelings of Orpheus and Charon as the former charms the latter with his singing in Act III of *Orfeo* would not necessarily have been enhanced by the harmonic complexity of a duet. Indeed, such a compositional device would have been unthinkable given the deliberate arrangement of the roles of vocalist and orchestra according to the established ends of the *stile rappresentativo*. If we choose, we can ‘re-present’ the drama in a completely different way according to a different set of ends, as Gluck did in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in his *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

Ensemble singing such as that heard in the famous quartet in Act III of *Rigoletto* are the result of more than purely musical developments taking place between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The ends of re-presenting operatic narratives had considerably changed over the intervening quarter-century. It would be absurd to claim that the re-presentation of the thoughts and feelings of Rigoletto, Gilda, the Duke, and Maddalena becomes muddled through the ensemble arrangement. Undoubtedly, musical developments between the time of Monteverdi and Verdi that led from a horizontal style of musical progression to the vertical arrangement prevalent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century provided a tool for the latter composer that the former did not have. But it would not do justice to the uniqueness of the *stile rappresentativo* to claim that its own aims would have been more easily attained had its composers had access to the same compositional tools available to Verdi. But such a conclusion seems to be implicit in both Scruton’s and Kivy’s analyses.

In sum, the idea of representation during the initial development of opera at the time of the *stile rappresentativo* was not constrained by strictly theoretical considerations. Given the underlying classical theory of *mimesis* employed by the founders of opera, the composers within the *stile rappresentativo* tradition established for themselves certain ends that they hoped would result in an enhanced experience of classical tragedy. Those ends were just as much a *result* of the theory underlying the *stile rappresentativo* as they were a part of its *a*

*priori* theoretical framework. If this is the case, then the representational theory so closely aligned with the invention of opera might in reality be an element common to its particular instances over time, allowing for unique musico-dramatic ‘re-presentations’ of the tales of Othello, Faust, and Orpheus.

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