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Freedom and Art

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Metropolitan Opera Archives

The Metropolitan Opera's 1991 production of The Magic Flute, with sets by David Hockney

That great eccentric of the Enlightenment, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, who put into his private notebooks just about everything that came into his head, once jotted down: “Whoever decreed that a word must have a fixed meaning?” He was perhaps the first to recognize the psychic constraint involved in the perception of meaning and the attempt to make it firm.

In his discussion of humor, Sigmund Freud deals with this laconically by a profound reflection. The mechanical structure of psychoanalytical theory is now rightfully laboring under some discredit, but Freud’s literary genius gave him insights that are still valuable. After treating at length the kind of humor that allows a safe and neutralized outlet for the taboo expression of sexual desire and of social aggression, he arrives finally at “pure” humor, the jokes that are innocent of repressive fantasies, but just simple word games, silly puns that are only a form of play. (I can remember

a superannuated example from my junior high school days: “Why do radio announcers have such small hands? Wee paws [we pause] for station identification.”)

To explain our delight in such foolishness, Freud invokes the lallation of very small children, who sit and repeat long strings of nonsense syllables (“ba, da, ma...mow, bow, wow...etc.) at great length for their own amusement. Learning a language, being forced to attach a meaning to a sound, is a burden to the child, who, in reaction, strings together senseless rhyming noises as a form of escape. Even for adults understanding speech is not devoid of effort, and can be a source of fatigue. With a silly play on words, there is a split second when a word suspended between two incompatible senses briefly loses all meaning and becomes pure sound, and for a lovely moment we revert to the delighted state of the child freed from the tyranny of language. Of all the constraints imposed on us that restrict our freedom—constraints of morality and decorum, constraints of class and finance—one of the earliest that is forced upon us is the constraint of a language that we are forced to learn so that others can talk to us and tell us things we do not wish to know.

We do not learn language by reading a dictionary, and we do not think or speak in terms of dictionary definitions. Meaning is always more fluid. Nevertheless, we are hemmed in, even trapped, by common usage. Senses we wish to evade entrap us. The greatest escape route is not only humor, but poetry, or art in general. Art does not, of course, liberate us completely from meaning, but it gives a certain measure of freedom, provides elbow room. Schiller claimed in the *Letters on Aesthetic Education* that art makes you free; he understood that the conventions of language and of society are in principle arbitrary—that is, imposed by will. They prevent the natural development of the individual. The clash between the imposition of meaning and freedom has given rise to controversy in ways that Schiller could not have predicted.

The critical problem of the battle between conventional meaning and individual expression was best laid out many years ago in Meyer Schapiro’s apparently controversial insistence that the forms of Romanesque sculpture could not be ascribed solely to theological meaning but were also a style of aesthetic expression. What that meant at the time was quite simply and reasonably that the character of the sculptural forms could not be reduced only to their personification of theological dogma, but possessed a clear aesthetic energy independent of sacred meaning.

The fallacy that Schapiro was attacking has reappeared recently in musicological

circles with the absurd claim that music could not be enjoyed for purely musical or aesthetic reasons until the eighteenth century since the word “aesthetics” was not used until then. (This naive belief that independent aesthetic considerations did not exist before 1750 without social and religious functions would strangely imply that no one before that date could admire the beauty of a member of the opposite sex unless it could be related to the function of the production of children.) It is true that some thinkers of the eighteenth century would proclaim the fundamental precedence of the aesthetic: Johann Georg Hamann observed with Vico that poetry is older than prose, and insisted that music is older than language, horticulture than agriculture.

We should recall here the extraordinary sixteenth-century controversy about style between the admirers of Cicero and of Erasmus, the former, led by Étienne Dolet, believing that style had a beauty independent of the matter of the literary work, and the latter insisting that the beauty of style was wholly dependent on its consonance with meaning. (Dolet was burned at the stake, but not for his admiration of Cicero. Montaigne took the Erasmian position against pure stylistic shenanigans, but foreshadowed some twentieth-century criticism by avowing that when the style was as masterly as Cicero’s it could be said to have become its own matter.) The contention that pure aesthetic appreciation was impossible before 1700 not only would make the existence of that controversy as early as the 1500s impossible, but also astonishingly overlooks both the innate aesthetic impulses of any human animal and the most obvious characteristic of every form of artistic endeavor—that at some point it inevitably draws attention away from its meaning and function to the form of expression, or from the *signifié* to the *signifiant*, to use the well-known structural linguistic terms that were so fashionable only a few decades ago.

Mozart: "Venite pur avanti" from Don Giovanni

This is most obviously the case when the signifier, the artistic form, so to speak, seems to have developed a sense somewhat at odds with the ostensible signified. Perhaps the most spectacular depiction of freedom in music may be brought up as evidence of this: the greeting of Don Giovanni to the masked guests at his party, “*Viva la libertà!*” In the libretto, these words are only an invitation to have a good time, but they have often been understood politically. Oddly, the astute Hermann Abert denied the political implication, basing his view on the sense of the libretto. However, Mozart sets this as a call to arms, with trumpets and drums unheard in the

work since the overture, and with an evident traditional martial rhythm, while the singers forte shout the words “*Viva la libertà*” over and over again. In 1789, after twelve years of political agitation since the American Revolution, it is unlikely that anyone missed the political sense.

But the message should not be interpreted naively and one-sidedly. *Don Giovanni* is about sexual libertinage; not only was that considered by conservatives to be the inevitable ultimate result of the arrival of political freedom (although in fact many revolutionaries from Robespierre to Stalin and Castro have installed prudish and puritan measures), but the Marquis de Sade in his best-known pamphlet, “One Step Further,” specifically proclaimed that political freedom had to be accompanied by sexual freedom to be truly meaningful. Mozart’s own position on political liberty may be left undetermined by this page of the score, but the evil Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* was understood very early as a personification of the Empress Maria Theresa, and the Masonic Order of the time, while certainly not a radical revolutionary group, was at least partly in opposition to the central power, although it contained many of the most influential members of Viennese society of the time.

In any case, we can see that the artistic form here in the central or first finale of *Don Giovanni* loosens any fixed meaning dependent on the libretto, and allows for the free play of the imagination. One important note should be added: the amazing exhilaration of this passage is more closely related to the possible political meaning than to the more social welcome implied by the text without the music, as the page is extremely stirring in its traditional martial excitement, unnaturally so in terms of the operatic story.

The partial freedom of, and from, meaning that is the natural result of aesthetic form is made possible by the exploitation of an inherent fluidity, or looseness of significance, naturally present in both language and social organization. This is a freedom often repressed, and attempts at repression and conformity are an inevitable part of experience. That is why aesthetic form—in poetry, music, and the visual arts—has so often been considered subversive and corrupting from Plato to the present day.

Conventions are the bulwark of civilization, a guarantee of social protection. They

can also be a prison cell. Of course, any art has its conventions, too, just like every other activity, and an artist is expected to fulfill them. Traditionally, however, for at least three millennia and possibly longer, the artist is also expected paradoxically to violate conventions—to entertain, to surprise, to outrage, to be original. That is the special status of art among all other activities, although it may indeed spill over and make itself felt throughout the rest of life. It is the source of freedom, prevents the wheels of the social machine from locking into paralysis. From our artists and entertainers, we expect originality and resent it when we get it.

Ideally we expect style and idea, form and matter, to be fused, indistinguishable one from the other. Friedrich Schlegel observed that when they are separable, there is something wrong with one or both of them. Nevertheless, the liberty of the artist rests on the ever-present possibility or danger of their independence. The Erasmian principle that style is, or should be, always subservient to idea is essentially naive. It takes little account of experience. Style can define and determine matter. We can see, for example, how the virtuosity of style in La Fontaine profoundly altered the morals of Aesop's fables. The tension between style and idea, their friction, is a stimulant.

One aspect of freedom in the language of literature came to greater critical prominence in the twentieth century and was given novel emphasis with the criticism of William Empson, beginning with *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, but systematized perhaps more importantly with *The Structure of Complex Words*. Here, the great English twentieth-century literary critic explored the way relationships between the different meanings of a word could be brought into play, above all in poetry but also in prose. (One example, the Victorian lady's injunction: "No, you may not take Amelia for long walks; she's delicate." This, as Empson observed, asserts an equation between two meanings of "delicate"—refined on the one hand, and fragile or sickly on the other—and suggests as a subtext that all refined girls are sickly.)

These equations depend on whether a principal meaning implies a subsidiary one, or vice versa, and it permits Empson to understand and explain why "God is love" has a meaning so different from "Love is God." It is certain that the most powerful developments of this hidden source of linguistic freedom are found most often in poetry, but Empson is able to explore it not only in *Paradise Lost* and *King Lear*, but in *Alice in Wonderland* as well, about which he remarks that the unpretentious shepherd of the pastoral genre who is able to enunciate profound truths surprising in one of such a low station in life is replaced by the young child whose innocent observations rival the sophisticated wisdom of adults. Once again we meet with a

freedom of form that amounts to a kind of duplicity.

The ambiguity of spoken or written language is far less than the ambiguity of musical meaning, a disconcerting ambiguity powerfully described by Denis Diderot in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*:

In music, the pleasure of sensation depends on a particular disposition not only of the ear but of the entire nervous system.... In addition, music has a greater need to find in us these favorable dispositions of the organs than painting or poetry. Its hieroglyph is so light and so fleeting, it is so easy to lose it or to misinterpret it, that the most beautiful movement of a symphony would have little effect if the infallible and subtle pleasure of sensation pure and simple were not infinitely above that of an often ambiguous expression.... How does it happen then that of the three arts that imitate Nature, the one whose expression is the most arbitrary and the least precise speaks the most powerfully to the soul?

I have quoted this elsewhere (in *The Classical Style* as an epigraph), but it is important to see how clearly the nature of musical discourse was understood by the second half of the eighteenth century. Felix Mendelssohn found the meaning of music more precise, not less, than language, but that is because music means what it is, not what it says.

The most famous association of music and freedom is illustrated by the première in 1828 of Daniel Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici*, which is credited with starting the revolution that led to the creation of Belgium in 1831, the only opera in history to have had such a powerful political influence. The opera itself has a strong political cast, but if anything in it inspired political action, it must certainly have been the overture, which has a principal theme with a strong jingoistic swing to it like the American "Battle Hymn of the Republic." It certainly sounds exuberantly patriotic, and remained a model for national hymns that superseded the "Marseillaise."

Most of the music that celebrates freedom in the nineteenth century has a character that is more nationalistic than humanistic, and the freedom is not expected to apply to humanity in general. The masterpiece of this kind of music is surely Verdi's *Aida*. The late Edward Said wondered what Verdi thought the Egyptians would think of this work, premiered in Cairo to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. Of course, for Verdi the opera was not really about Egyptians at all, but about Italy, and the

repression of a subject people very like the Austrian subjugation of Italy, although the foreign scene offered a chance for exotic and picturesquely alienating musical effects supposed to be typical of the Near East. It dealt with the very modern case of a cruel society dominated by a wicked clergy; the anticlerical aspect of the opera is emphatic, and certainly resounded strongly in Italy.

The portrayal of freedom in the work is best represented by Aida's nostalgia for her native land, reminiscent of Azucena's longing for her native mountains in *Il Trovatore* ("Ai nostri monti"), taken up later by Bizet's *Carmen* ("Là bas, là bas dans la montagne"). Nostalgia and freedom are often linked concepts. The idea of freedom is usually a vision of a paradise lost. It is probable that Verdi cared not a whit for what the Egyptians thought of his opera, as it was going to be mounted soon afterward at La Scala in Milan, and that was the public he was writing for.

The most famously humane plea for political freedom in music is surely Beethoven's *Fidelio*. His revisions to the first two versions, both called *Leonore*, are almost all improvements of efficiency, tightening up the score by removing repetitious phrases, but the change of the overture from *Leonore 2* or *3* to a more conventional, partially buffa-style introduction reduces the political character of the opera, as the earlier variant overtures clearly foreshadow the prison rescue that will be the climax of the opera. And it has always seemed wonderful that such prominence should be given in the first act to the simple desire of the prisoners for light and air. Some have derided Florestan's cry at the opening of Act 2, "*Welch dunkel hier!*" ("What darkness here!"), as unnatural, since he should have noticed it was dark after many years in the cell, but surely any prisoner in solitary must have sudden intense moments of despair at the conditions of his confinement.

In the prison quartet, Leonore's passionate intervention, "First kill his wife!," is an unsurpassed thrilling effect in the unexpected change in both harmony and tessitura, and the music is dramatically far more explicit than the text. The effect requires a clearly articulated musical language in which a B-flat in a D major tonality can have a dramatic effect, and the dissonant and startling B-flat is used here to foreshadow the B-flat trumpet fanfare that is the ultimate climax of the quartet and signals the beginning of the resolution of the action.

The "Ode to Joy" finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony must be considered here, since there is a well-established theory that the *Freude*, or joy, of the final ode was intended to be understood as an obvious substitute for the overly inflammatory word

Freiheit. Too enthusiastic or insistent a declamatory use of the word “freedom” would send a message to any government nervous about its power that someone is out to make trouble. Freedom and joy are of course not incompatible and go together remarkably well. Most of the choral finale of Beethoven’s last symphony, however, is somewhat more apt for the concept of freedom than joy. The B-flat scherzo variation with the percussive, so-called Turkish sound effects is in military style, and a combat for freedom is more reasonable than a fight for joy. In the following variation, after the fugue has completed the battle imagery, the great musical representation of the starry heavens implies more easily a spiritual view of freedom, while joy on the contrary lacks the dignity of the spacious sound imagined by Beethoven. It would be a mistake to try to pin down too specific a political meaning for the triumphal air of the last pages, but the sense of victory is everywhere evident.

The spectacular musical representation of freedom in these monumental works is the result of historical conjunction. Political freedom was fashionable just then, although the taste for it had been growing steadily since Machiavelli. After 1776 and 1789, it had become inescapable. Later in the nineteenth century, it would lose some of its golden aura. After 1848, the evident sarcasm in the title of Johann Nestroy’s great comedy *Freiheit in Krähwinkel* is telling (*Freedom in New Rochelle* would be a good translation of the title for Americans). Its central monologue informs us that particular freedoms, like *Gedankenfreiheit* (freedom of thought, valid as long as the thoughts remain unexpressed, for example) or billiard freedom in cafés—freedoms in the plural—make sense, are comprehensible and available.

But what is fashionable now is singular-case Freedom in general—except that this is an unobtainable chimera and nobody knows what it is. The ideological disaster of 1848 throughout Europe as a whole degraded what was left of much of the hope and idealism of 1776 and 1789. (Perhaps particularly in Germany; Lewis Namier called the German revolt of 1848 “a playful cow.”) By the beginning of the twentieth century, when Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in the “Chandos Letter,” asserted the inadequacy of language to express anything profoundly individual and subjective, one of the first words to have completely lost its meaning for him was “freedom.”

The triumph of Beethoven’s musical image of freedom depended on more than just the contemporary popularity and relish for the idea. It needed an adequate musical language for its expression with subtle and complex articulations. These articulations had thickened within a few years after his death, making way for a powerful and rich chromaticism. Art may offer us a chance of liberation but we are chained by its

limitations. When we reach the great works of Verdi, who was so deeply and ideologically involved in the struggle for Italian freedom, the representation of freedom for him, as we have seen, offered a choice between a coarse but thrilling jingoism or a passionate nostalgia for an existence of the past in a country far away. This is a natural process in the history of styles. We are always haunted by the past, even when we try to destroy it. Novalis defined freedom as *Meisterschaft*. When Richard Strauss at the end of *Der Rosenkavalier* needed to represent the innocence of teenage love, all his mastery had at its command was only a flagrant pastiche of Mozart. Our freedom is hemmed in on every side. We must be grateful for what remains.

Strauss: "Ist ein traum" from Der Rosenkavalier