



PERFORMANCES MEMORABLE – AND NOT SO MEMORABLE

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

The series will make digitally available both selected published essays and edited transcripts of unpublished material.

The page numbers in square brackets in this online text mark the beginning of the relevant page in the original publication, and are provided so that citations from book and online PDF can use the same page-numbering.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Performances Memorable – And Not So Memorable

Opera 26 (1975), 116–20

From 1916 to 1920 my parents lived in St Petersburg, or Petrograd as it was called during and after the First World War. The first performance of an opera that I remember at all clearly was that of *Boris Godunov* in 1916. Chaliapin, of course, sang the title role, and his enormous voice filled the Mariinsky Theatre, as much in lyrical legato passages as in the great dramatic monologue, and in the dialogue with Shuisky. I was seven years old at the time, and this naturally meant little to me, save that even then I noticed the enormous difference between the marvellous sensation of those huge, slow, all-sustaining, wholly delightful waves of musical sound, with their almost orchestral effect, and the voices of the other, more ordinary, singers. But what absorbed my attention and fascinated me completely was the scene in which the Tsar sees the ghost of the murdered Prince in a remote corner of the stage, starts back in horror and utters panic-stricken cries. Chaliapin, on his knees, seized the table legs, burying his head in the folds of the tablecloth which hung from it, and on which the map of Russia was stretched for the geography lesson of his young son in the earlier part of this act. Whether deliberately or not, in an exceedingly realistic performance of the scene of panic and hysteria, he pulled the tablecloth and the map over his head. The spectacle of this gigantic figure crawling on the floor, with the rich cloth and his own robes inextricably tangled over him, crying ‘Choo! Choo!’, and waving his arms desperately to drive away the terrible ghostly presence, was something at once so frightening and wonderful that I myself, apparently, began to utter cries of [117] mixed terror and pleasure, and had to be silenced by my parents and the hissing of indignant neighbours. I do not think that I had any idea of what the hallucination really signified, but even children respond to acting of genius.

I saw Chaliapin many times after this, in *Boris* (on one occasion he sang the parts both of Boris and Varlaam in the inn scene – I wonder whether his distinguished successor, Boris Christoff, could not be induced to do this), as Khan Konchak in *prince Igor*, as the Miller in Dargomyzhsky’s *Rusalka*, as Mephistopheles in Boito’s

opera (I never saw him, alas, as *Ivan the Terrible* in Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Maid of Pskov*). But the exciting and fearful memory of that heroic frame crawling on all fours, swathed in the rich tablecloth and map, uttering wonderful cries, and singing at full-throated ease, barbarous and marvellously and consciously artistic at the same time, lingers with me to this day. For a long time after that I thought of opera as a particularly terrifying sort of entertainment. It took a good many performances of French and Italian opera to obliterate this fixed idea.

My parents occasionally took me to Paris from London, where we lived, in the early 1920s, and we invariably saw *Carmen* at the Opéra Comique. One of the proofs that *Carmen* is an immortal masterpiece is its capacity for preserving its shape and essence through the most terrible renderings. Just as the genius of Shakespeare triumphs over the most appalling translations and performances, so the great popular classics – *Figaro*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, [118] *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *La Bohème* – survive the most unspeakable productions and the most appalling singing. That is, indeed, what makes them classics, gives them claim to immortality, and divides them from such masterpieces as the operas of Gluck, or *Fidelio*, or *Tristan*, or *The Ring*, or *Falstaff*, or the works of the twentieth century, few of which can survive such treatment. This is surely true of *Carmen*. I doubt if either Bizet or Meilhac and Halévy would have put pen to paper if they had anticipated the free performance by the Latvian National Opera (in Lettish) which I heard in 1928; the curious renderings in Hebrew (Tel-Aviv, 1962, I think);¹ in English (Carl Rosa in the 1920s, at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith, or perhaps somewhere else); or the most dreadful performance of all, by the Molotov Opera Company, in Leningrad in 1956, in very old-world Russian, sung by some wildly untutored singers from the Urals, whom nature had endowed with bittern-like vocal organs, and produced by someone whose notion of Spain, the entrance to a bullring, bore little relation to nineteenth-century life in any part of Europe. Yet *Carmen* stood up: it defied the forces arrayed against it; it came through – no amount of distortion or misinterpretation, of grotesque acting and terrible singing, could ruin it entirely. This is indeed proof of the vitality of genius. The city of Molotov has long since, for obvious reasons,

¹ [Possibly 1963, when Plácido Domingo first sang Don José in that city.]

reverted to its original name of Perm; perhaps *Carmen*, too, now obtains worthier performances by its singers. I must own to never having heard a perfect performance of the part of Carmen in my life. If only Maria Callas had sung the part on the stage and not only on records. The best *orchestral* performance of it I ever heard was by Leo Blech, in Berlin in the late 1920s – better than any, I truly believe, by Beecham or any living conductor; better than the stage or film performances of *Carmen Jones*, or the version where the cigarette factory is situated in Warsaw, of which I once heard a private performance. The dry fire, the passionate pulse, the great lyrical passages were of a standard not again attained in my experience. I cannot now remember who sang in it: it was not Conchita [119] Supervia. I remember now only Blech and the orchestra.

Superb performances and grotesque ones linger in the memory. I shall not forget the Swedish baritone John Forsell, in *Don Giovanni*, conducted by Bruno Walter in Salzburg in the very early 1930s: this was certainly the best performance of that part, and the best performance of the work, I have ever heard. This is equally true of Toscanini's performance of *Falstaff* in 1937, and of *Fidelio* too, both in Salzburg; and of *Don Carlos* in the original Visconti production at Covent Garden, conducted by Giulini and sung by Christoff, Brouwenstijn, Tito Gobbi and many of those who still sing it at Covent Garden.

The oddest performance I ever saw and heard was perhaps Act 2 of *The Marriage of Figaro* performed in an Istanbul cinema (in Turkish); it appeared to take place in a seraglio with a decor that would be more appropriate to *Die Entführung*. The Countess as the favourite European wife of an oriental Almaviva was dressed in half-Turkish, half eighteenth-century Western garments, rather like an Albanian in *Così*; Susanna as the favourite slave, Figaro as a kind of Phanariot Greek or Armenian factotum, Bartolo and Marcellina as a foreign consul with his plump native housekeeper, and Basilio as the chief eunuch – all combined into a fantasy at once farcical and exotic, which I should love to see again.

Far the most absurd moment in opera that I know of was seen not, alas, by [120] me, but by my friend Nicolas Nabokov in Berlin, in the early 1920s. It was during the years of inflation, when there was much poverty and a great dearth of food in Germany. The opera was *Götterdämmerung*. Nabokov described the moment

PERFORMANCES MEMORABLE – AND NOT SO MEMORABLE

when Brünnhilde's faithful Grane, played by an emaciated and evidently starved carthorse, appeared on the stage; a foot away stood Hagen, with a long tow beard suspended from his chin. The horse suddenly lunged forward, whipped off Hagen's beard and devoured it in one gulp. This apparently stopped the performance; while the feeble old horse was being hurried off the stage even the solemn German audience could not contain itself. Animals on the stage are always a potential embarrassment and cause nervous strain both to the performers and to the public. Someone once remarked that they are very inattentive, look for distraction and distract the audience; fear of misbehaviour adds to the strain. Only grand opera of the nineteenth century demands their presence: I cannot think of any work in the twentieth which calls for horses or swans, stags or golden cockerels, or even bumblebees. This indicates some failure of theatrical nerve, but it must be a relief to both singers and producers. The bats which on summer evenings fly above the heads of the audience in the later acts of operas at Glyndebourne add little to the pleasures of those delightful occasions.

© *Isaiah Berlin* 1975

Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online 10 January 2019