

OBITER

'MIDSUMMER MARRIAGE.' Monteverdi defined opera as *dramma per musica*. True drama is the portrayal of the actions of men and women and their consequences; it may or may not be the vehicle of an allegory but it must be a self-sufficing consistent representation of humanity. Michael Tippett's *Midsummer Marriage*, recently performed at Covent Garden, is not true opera because it is not true drama. Tippett's plot (if indeed it can be called a plot) is so concerned with the allegorical import of its message that it fails to be a human story. Consequently a symbolic quiz is substituted for the normal dramatic participation of the audience.

The symbols derive much of the manner of their representation from the syncretism of Jung's psychology. Greek, Hindu and barbaric elements are mingled in a general mish-mash which so confuses the true significance of the symbols that any meaning they may have in the operatic context is almost entirely arbitrary. To put it simply, the symbols have ceased to be truly symbolic. We are not faced here by Eliot's 'heap of broken images' but by synthetic substitutes. In a series of articles published in the *Observer*, the composer attempted to justify his experiment. 'While collective, mythological material is always traditional, the specific twentieth-century quality is the power to transmute such material into an immediate experience of our day. . . . There is a long tradition associating opera with the marvellous . . . and if we consider this tradition as legitimate, then it should be reasonable in an opera to have a greater percentage of the marvellous to a smaller amount of everyday. For the greater percentage of the marvellous will allow the opera composer to present the collective spiritual experience more nakedly and immediately—the music helping to suspend the critical and analytical judgment, without which happening no experience of the numinous can be immediate at all.' It is certainly true that the 'marvellous' plays a great part in many operas, but there is all the difference in the world between a naïve fairy-tale (as for example *The Magic Flute*) and a presentation of a collective spiritual experience 'in order to 'experience the numinous', whatever these phrases may mean. It is not the business of opera to provide a religious revelation.

The libretto is often obscure and awkward, making the exposition of the search for 'self-knowledge' by the betrothed couple more difficult to follow than it might have been. For example (and it is typical of many instances), take Sosostri's aria in the third Act:

'Who hopes to conjure with the world of dreams,
 Waking to life my visionary powers,
 He draws inexorably out from the vast
 Lottery a dream to dream himself.

The illusion that you practise power is delusion.'

This can be read several times before any meaning is apparent. When it is heard to music it is incomprehensible. Tippett is too good a composer not to know this and it is sad to observe his psychological proselytism getting the better of his musical judgment.

Much of the music *qua* music is very beautiful and makes a deep impression in spite of the subject and a very bad stage production. It has great melodic charm and all the rhythmic vivacity of Tippett's other music. The orchestration is sometimes so heavy that it thereby obscures the voices, whose parts are by no means easy to sing effectively. But it is not dramatic music. There is no characterization and too little contrast in the elaborate contrapuntal texture. The 'Ritual Dances' are perhaps the best thing in the work, and since these can be (and have been) detached and performed separately, may well prove the most enduring music. At the second performance I found my eyes continually closing to avoid watching again the antics on the stage and it was then that I found myself enjoying the music best. The words could be largely disregarded and (save for the rather tedious recitatives) the music perceived as a beautiful flow of symphonic sound. Singers and orchestra under John Pritchard's careful direction certainly gave their best efforts to putting the work over. That they did not wholly succeed was not in any way their fault. For allegory is not the task of opera. The composer seems to have envisaged a presentation of a neo-gnostic rite, a musical substitute for 'outmoded' religious worship, which should be for twentieth-century man what Wagner fondly imagined that *Parsifal* should be for the nineteenth-century. But *Parsifal* can be enjoyed as a medieval story and its repulsive philosophy ignored. Not so with Tippett's opera which has no story other than the representations of its symbols. All symbols point ultimately to their divine Referent without which they lose meaning. Substitution of psychology is utterly ineffectual. And all this muddle, to quote Chesterton, 'because you are frightened of four words: *Verbum caro factum est.*'

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TELEVISION AND PERSONALITIES. The extraordinary thing about television is the mythology it creates: the familiar figures of its parlour-games are by this a sort of *lares et penates*, domestic gods no detail of whose existence is not the subject of fascinated speculation by the