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Internal Exiles

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This is a fascinating project, and I have learned a great deal about Mozart from Armitage's Lecture I and about recent operas in Lecture III's general introduction and the detailed discussion of *The Consul*. I make two minor criticisms and then broaden the topic by thinking of what I shall term "internal exile"—deprivation of rights and full citizenship that happens to some groups of people within the borders of a state, although nominally they are citizens thereof. This is a rich theme for operas, past and present. And at least some of these exiles triumph over rules.

The composers on whom Armitage focuses are said to have led settled lives with respect to citizenship. Quite a few have been internal exiles in my sense. But to stick with his sense of exile: Verdi spent much of his career without a secure national identity—not only, as Armitage acknowledges, at the time of writing *Nabucco*, when there was as yet no Italian republic, but perhaps even more later. In particular, in the late 1860s, while he was writing *Don Carlos* for the Paris Opera and was required by a contract that he proved unable to break to spend long stretches of time in Paris, the Austro-Prussian war broke out, and he was afraid that his home in Sant'Agata would be destroyed by invading troops. He wrote anguished letters saying he longed to return and fight with his countrymen, even though he probably would be a poor soldier. Austro-French domination menaced Italy, but so too, and in collaboration with that threat, did papal rule, since Pope Pius IX, a militant enemy of national self-determination, as well as of artistic and political freedom—all being listed prominently in his "Syllabus of Errors"—targeted all leaders of the Risorgimento, including Verdi, a former member of the Chamber of Deputies and a leading cultural icon. Verdi worried about the Pope even more than about the armies. In 1866 he wrote to his friend Giuseppe Piroli that if war broke out he would be "the first target—not of the Germans but of the priests." Things went better than he expected: his home remained intact, and papal power was curbed by the formation of a united Italian state in 1871. But during that decade he was anguished at having to keep his contract in Paris rather than returning to suffer with his countrymen. Of *Don Carlos*, he said "This opera was born in fire and flames."

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My second minor criticism concerns music. If we turn to opera for insight, it must be because there are insights conveyed by the music itself, not just the words of the libretto. This means, I think, that we should look to operas that are musically excellent. I think that *The Consul* is a musical mediocrity—melodramatic, full of unearned hype, with a poorly written libretto (by Menotti himself) and music that is treacly and faux-Puccini, exactly suited for a Broadway run, which to Armitage is a sign of musical success, but to me a sign of likely musical commercialism and mediocrity. (When Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* opened on Broadway, a lot of Brecht's more challenging lyrics had to be altered. Comparing the Broadway version's English with Brecht's original shows what does and does not make for a long Broadway run.) The one barn-burning aria that we have heard magnificently sung is often performed still by dramatic sopranos, and I have learned and sung it (in my poor amateur way). But it is not very interesting musically, and it is the best thing in the opera. The ideas about statelessness conveyed by its words are laughably vague and utterly Broadway: "The day will come, I know, when our hearts aflame will burn your paper chains," poetry so bad that one wonders how well Menotti had mastered his second language. And the key to its Broadway success is that it recommends no concrete course of action that could actually threaten the New York audiences. The real-life event took place in New York, but in the opera it is removed to a far-away unspecified place in Eastern Europe. It is all sentimentalism and virtue-signaling, and no politics. I think it is a terrible opera and terrible political thought, because it does not seriously grapple with a very serious and difficult set of issues. Every bureaucrat is a cardboard cutout, and nobody raises the real issues about borders and migration, which an opera could certainly raise if not resolve.

Armitage says that Joseph Kerman "withdrew" his criticism of the opera in the later (1988) edition of *Opera as Drama.* I see no retraction there. Kerman says that in order to make room for new material he cut a number of passages, including the whole discussion of *The Consul*, which he now finds "unduly shrill." He goes on to say that he cut a number of other "wisecracks," believing that the norm prevalent in his later time is that the critic should interpret rather than pass judgment. He clearly never says he was wrong about *The Consul*; his objection is stylistic only. And he doesn't offer any different view of the work: he doesn't seem to think it worth retaining any discussion of it; after all, by then it had basically disappeared from the repertory. If Armitage wants to revise this now-ignored work, he will need other allies.

By internal exiles I have in mind people who are nominally citizens or at least subject to the legal jurisdiction of a particular nation, but who are cut off from legal protection of their rights and from meaningful participation in the political community. Three such groups stand out. First and most obvious are racial subgroups. Members of these groups are only now beginning to write operas telling their stories, and I believe that it is too soon to know which of

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these will prove musically durable, though many new works show some merit. However, their stories have long been the stuff of opera. One of the most popular operas of all time, Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), is a work of consummate musical genius by a composer who was always a rebel and always sympathized with the subordinated. Bizet's heroine is a Roma woman, who, with all her people, was stigmatized and ostracized, both in the Spain of the opera's setting and in the France of its production. But she is a rebel, determined to seek her own freedom. Throughout the opera she engages in a series of subversive acts, tricking the police, masterminding a smuggling operation, and successfully asserting her will against a society that treats her as a mere object. That she dies at the end is only to be expected, but she dies triumphant, without compromising her values. Bizet was continually pressured to change the plot and make her less of a heroine, but he too refused to compromise. The opera was a failure at its opening, and the composer died before the opera triumphed, though its deeper challenge is often avoided.

Next are women, especially women of unconventional sexual behavior. Of course women too have rarely told our own stories in opera until too recently for me to judge them—but we have had good friends. Perhaps the best friend and mouthpiece of women (though Mozart is also in this category) is Leoš Janáček, the Moravian composer whose operas obsessively depict the struggles of women against stifling social convention. I focus only on *Jenůfa* (1904), his first produced opera, rather late in his career (he was 50 at the time of its premiere). He worked on the opera in close collaboration with his chronically ill daughter Olga, who gave him lots of feedback, dying shortly before the premiere, at the age of 21. *Jenůfa* concerns a young woman who becomes pregnant with her fiancé Stiva, who then jilts her for a richer woman. So she faces the worst of all stigmas in her small rural town, and is in effect a total exile from society. Her stepmother hides her, both before and after the birth, telling people she is traveling abroad. But then a suitor comes for Jenůfa—Laca, Stiva's brother, who loves her and is eager to marry her, but is unwilling to raise his hated brother's child. Jenůfa, however, wants to keep the child. Loving Jenůfa more than her own moral purity and even sanity, the stepmother drowns the infant and tells Jenůfa that it died during the night. Jenůfa accepts Laca's offer of marriage, and the ceremony is under way when news comes that under the newly thawing ice the corpse of a baby has been found. Immediately the stepmother confesses, exonerates Jenůfa, and turns herself over to the police. Jenůfa generously forgives her stepmother and gives Laca a chance to desert her. But he refuses. Finally, she sees what real love can be, and at the end they unite, determined to make a life for themselves far from the town.

That is the story but what makes it a great opera is the music. Janáček invented a musical technique all his own, basing musical phrases on speech rhythms and melodies, in which he believed the soul of inner emotion and thought are revealed. Famously, he notated the sighs of pain Olga uttered as

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she lay dying—not out of callousness, but hoping to honor her pain and grief. Throughout the opera the music piercingly expresses the confinement of Jenůfa within her stifling society, her lack of comfort and love. In Act 2, her exile is musically vivid, as she hides at home, unable to see anyone. And in Act 3, when Laca shows her real steadfast love, she can hardly believe it, and her inner speech expresses, first haltingly and then with soaring joy, the exit she accepts from her exile. At the end, as she says "Come, Laca, come," they join together in the musical speech of freedom, as they depart from the town and announce what love has given them.

The final group of internal exiles I want to consider are gay men, whose sex acts were illegal in Britain until 1967. (Sex between women was never illegal because lawmakers didn't take it seriously.) During the postwar period when Benjamin Britten rose to prominence as a composer—after returning from exile in the US, as Armitage notes, an exile that pertained to his wish to avoid military service, not to his sexuality, since in that respect the US was just as bad—many prominent British men were subjected to cruel penalties, even mathematician Alan Turing, whose codebreaking had saved the nation. Sentenced to chemical castration, he committed suicide in 1954. So when Britten returned, he knew he was facing danger, and he was once interviewed by the police. He soon got conscientious objector status, but his sexual status was not legal until near the end of his life. For thirty-nine years, he and the singer Peter Pears lived together with dignity, facing down the law. They chose not to hide their love, though their style was physically discreet. Instead they expressed love in music. Britten wrote more or less everything he wrote for Pears's voice, and in two vocal works in particular the two made daring and rather explicit declarations of passionate love: the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* (1940) and *Canticle I* (1947). But these were intimate works for piano and voice (Britten always at the piano), not works for a mass audience —although Britten still wrote that it felt like taking his clothes off in public. Opera, with its mass audience, was obviously more dangerous, and metaphors for the internal exile of gayness had to be sought—until his last opera, *Death in Venice*, in 1973, six years after decriminalization and three years before Britten's death, where the same-sex theme became explicit.

In *Peter Grimes* (1945), Britten wrote a role for Pears that is a metaphor for the internal exile of the person perceived as different, in a closed rural English society—indeed the opera, based on a poem of George Crabbe, is set on the seacoast of Suffolk where Britten and Pears lived, and swam in the frigid sea every morning. Just as the music memorably depicts the battering of the sea on the coast (you may know the "Four Sea Interludes," often separately performed), so it also depicts the battering of the crowd at the inner life of Grimes, hounding him without mercy. *Grimes* is generally acknowledged to be one of the great operas of the twentieth century. Grimes's alleged crime is not sexual, it is physical cruelty to his apprentices, but the repeated phrase "Grimes is at his exercise" ominously suggests something unspeakable and is surely in part a metaphor for English society's phobic depiction of gay men as

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predators. Britten's use of the chorus—one of opera's great advantages over nonmusical drama—gives a chilling depiction of unthinking crowd behavior and its destructive power. What is of greatest interest is the musical depiction of Grimes's psychological deformation under pressure of society's assault, his inability to find love of any sort. Britten and Pears always refused to use the word "gay," because they thought it falsely prettified the lives of men who chose same-sex love, since in fact society had made their lives anything but gay. By being generalized, however, Grimes's predicament becomes a powerful metaphor for all types of internal exile, boldly written by just such an exile, albeit one who managed to avoid the law and to find lasting love, so this too is a story of triumph in its own way.

I warmly applaud Armitage's project, and propose adding a further category of exiles to its already rich portrayal.

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