

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

Martin Kratz

Words and music, land and sea: On writing a first libretto

The Mermaid of Zennor is a story rooted in a place where the borders between land and sea are constantly shifting and shaping each other. When he lived there from 1914-1916, D. H. Lawrence wrote a score of letters trying to convince his friends, Katherine Mansfield and John Middleton Murray, to move to Cornwall with him. 'It is a most beautiful place,' he writes, 'a tiny granite village nestling under high, shaggy moorhills, and a big sweep of lovely sea beyond, such a lovely sea, lovelier even than the Mediterranean. ... It is all gorse now, flickering with flower; and then it will be heather; and then hundreds of foxgloves.'¹

Going there today, it feels as if little has changed. I visited in early May to research the libretto for a chamber opera based on the legend and had a small dorm in the Youth hostel all to myself. I saw few other tourists the whole time I was there. The large bay windows of my room looked out onto exactly the scene Lawrence described. The fields extended towards the sea, then opened onto it completely where the gorse fell away. The actual meeting point between land and sea was out of sight, tucked under the cliffs. I knew, that hidden there, lay Pendour Cove, the place where the mermaid, Morveren, had been resting when she first heard the evening hymn being sung by the fisherman Matthew Trehella in the local church:

God be praised for if we drown we know
your loving warmth waits in the depths below.
The rising sun will see us back aboard
casting our nets out in your name O Lord.

(from *The Mermaid of Zennor – A Chamber Opera*)

The hymn is the starting point for the legend. In a reversal of the classic siren myth, Matthew's beautiful singing draws Morveren onto land. Every day she visits the church in disguise, lingering in the pews a little longer each time, but always leaving before the end of the service. Inevitably, one evening

¹ Kinkead-Weekes, Mark. 1996. *D.H. Lawrence: triumph to exile, 1912-1922, Volume 1*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

she stays too long and stumbles as she tries to rush away. She accidentally exposes her tail to the hostile congregation, but Matthew in turn has fallen in love with the beautiful stranger and accompanies her back under the sea. A traditional ending has it, that their singing can sometimes still be heard over the waves.

It is easy to believe in the story of the mermaid when you are in Zennor. There is so much traffic between land and sea, gifts being shuttled back and forth: mist, dust, the toll of the church bell. Why not messages, or a song? The wind kept me up all night, clattering against the shutters, so perhaps I was mostly sleep-drunk, but while I was in Zennor, the ethereal elements of the story gradually assumed the shape of hard facts. The hymn for instance, suggested its own form, rhythm and content. In the traditional story, Matthew is specified as being a tenor. If you listened for it, you could hear the story offering its own operatic potential.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

(from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock')

So writes T.S. Eliot, and it does feel, when you are writing about mermaids, that some sort of anchor in reality is needed. Standing on the South West Coast Path, looking down on Pendour Cove, the sharp snap of the edges of my cagoule in the wind must have crept into this thinking. The cag-clad, hiking-booted Walker would become one of the key characters in the libretto. In our modern retelling, it is she who finds Matthew washed up on the shore, concussed and confused, and acts as the one-foot-in-reality, the voice of scepticism as he recollects the series of events, which lead him there. 'I know this bay. These cliffs. This strand,' he says, 'I know this cove, the black stone stained / by the ocean-fret.' He knows it, because it has not changed in the hundreds of years he has been underwater. I could not quite reach the bay itself from the path, but I knew that if someone were to wash up there, it would be impossible to shout up for help. You would be instantly drowned out by the wind, the tossing of the sea. The cliffs, sloped and curled like an amphitheatre, would almost certainly block a mobile phone signal. Eventually, the cliffs would be played by the audience, and the tumble of rocks on the sand by the small orchestra, heavy on wind section and percussion. The mermaid was there too that day, hidden by the rocks, present in her absence.

This, I learned, happens to the words in a libretto too: they become present in their absence. In a Q&A after a talk I gave with the composer Leo Geyer on creating the opera, I was asked quite bluntly, why, as a librettist, I was

there that evening. No one remembered an opera for the words. The only thing that mattered was the music. It is a question every librettist must be prepared to answer. A libretto is not like a poem, which has learned to stand on its own, and draw its entire strength from its own rhythm and form. An opera with terrible music will not survive no matter how good the writing is. So, a libretto can feel like a half-thing, which will not be anything until it is set to music. Mozart referred to the poetry in opera as music's obedient daughter. Perhaps, the sense that the poetry serves the music is not an entirely bad one, but it does not really allow for any subtlety, any exchange in the relationship. To my mind, Benjamin Britten comes much closer when he says to his librettist Myfanwy Piper of the words in a libretto: 'Don't colour them. The music will do that.'² In this sense, the words support the music, but do not encroach on it where they are not needed.

What I put to my questioner, is that without the libretto, there would be no opera in the first place. If the libretto has done its job properly, then the words inspire the music; and this is only their first job. The libretto continues to support the music even after it has been composed. The librettist and poet Michael Symmons Roberts gave me the advice, that no matter what the composer does musically, a strong libretto undergirds the whole piece with an underlying integrity. It can achieve this for instance through regularity in form. If the integrity is not there, even with strong music, the opera at that point will feel weak. The words also support the singers. In rehearsal, I came across the tenor repeating Matthew's line 'shell splinters bite into my skin'. He told me it was his favourite line, because in this very charged scene, in which Matthew is desperately trying to remember who he is, the consonants give the singer something to hold onto.

The Mermaid of Zennor returns again and again to the point where land and sea meet, probing the borderland, asking where one begins and the other ends. The tension between land and sea is equally the tension between words and music, and this libretto if it is about anything, is about writing a first libretto. Perhaps every first libretto is about writing a first libretto, and must necessarily ask how words and music can be related to each other in a meaningful way. For me, the dynamic is best illustrated back in Pendour Cove, there at the point at which the line is first drawn between sea and land. In fact, it happens, if we let ourselves zoom in, just on the sea's side rather than the land's side, just there, where before it is obscured by deep blue and green, you can still recognise the sand through the water, carrying it, but all you hear is ocean.

² Piper, Myfanwy. 1979. 'Writing for Britten', in *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, ed. by Peter Pears (London: Hamish Hamilton) pp. 8-21

Sebastian Barker

Judging Poetry

For Merrily Harpur

‘Another middle-age departure
Of Apollo from the trade of archer.’
Patrick Kavanagh, ‘Prelude’

i

A poem is a thing I am looking for.
It has its own shape, its own content, its own warmth, its own music, and its
own way of being in the world.
A poem is an animate entity.
It is a creature seen in a forest: a creature that, on inspection, is most
definitely alive.
It is a creature who talks to me.
Who converses on every level I place before it.
A poem is a thing, a courtroom of soul, where matter coheres with meaning,
and the judgement of the day is satisfaction.
Because a poem is a thing, a living creature who talks to us, when I pass
judgement, as in a judge in a poetry competition,
I am looking for this beast in the forest, this animalman at home in its own
ecology.
The poem has come full grown from its unique evolution through the annals
of language.
It is a grown-up voice that knows how to pronounce itself.
The poem reaches out and behaves with perfect manners in a room full of
other poems.

ii

Poetry chisels the word to an empty mansion into which something like the
sun rises, speaking its luminous parables.
A poem is a ewe with her lamb chewing the grass touched by the light of
heaven in a poet’s mind.
A poem is the marriage ring between the lovers of life.
Poetry does not aim at political correctness; it arrives on the bandwagons

transporting successful partygoers wooed by the many politicians.
A poem can travel through six inches of steel like a hand through mist.
The creation of steel itself is unquestionably poetic.
Steel pours from stone, like rivers of fire down a volcano.
Poetry is an objective fact, like a bolt from the blue when falling in love.
It requisitions logic, like a king soldiers.

iii

Waterfalls recall it, a vaporising image of something thunderous.
You can slap it on a table, presenting a book full of it – a book no one can
open without scales falling from our eyes.
There is a tempo to poetry, which is the tempo of the heart beating.
No one dissects it, not even a critic, poring over the black holes in his
own invention.
There is a subject-matter to poetry which is not explicit: the poet like the
reader sees a vision, an insubstantial vision, which is nevertheless
necessarily there.
This is true of the poem ‘Jerusalem’, which brings down to earth the
possibility of –
‘And did those feet in ancient time’.

iv

Were it not for poetry, governments would direct the soul.
Plato knew this, which is why he feared it.
When governments recite poetry, beware, for the inauthentic is the short-cut
to hell.
Across the fiery waters into the Greek inferno, the poets stroll, some
arm-in-arm, with even the great mystery of life and death perhaps a
subject for jokes.
For poets are the pragmatics of thinking.
What they think is what they create.
And what they create is what God creates through them.
For poets are God’s fountain pens, his incandescent computers printing out
the complexities of subatomic particles and moral decency.

Poetry does not butter up its admirers.
 The admirers of poetry are those who are full of sense.
 And what we sense in our poets is the fragrance of a perfume only to be
 sniffed on the other side of the path perilous
 On any ascent up the magic mountain.
 For inauthentic poetry is immoral, the gorgeous virgin turned malodorous
 slut, cut wings pasted to a dead phalanx of words.
 And what of the poems fallen in unattended orchards, the rotting apples that
 might have fed thousands?
 What do we know of unborn and unknown poems?
 There is, in theory, no limit to their number.

Plato loved poetry, poets, and poems tuned to the heavenly – but most
 definitely not tuned to the ungodly and the wicked.
 Poetry is therefore a medium through which both good and evil may flow,
 like history through an accurate memory.
 The main point about poetry is that it is the tie-up between man and God,
 God and man.
 When poetry fails, reach for your torch, for we will all be travelling in
 darkness.
 When it succeeds, there is nothing like it, because we have the end of a
 string
 Which instructs us through the dark labyrinth into immaculate spaces.

Poetry is the campus of the king and queen of heaven.
 It is the university where the university is taught.
 Bells roll over fields: it is the summer: birds are the lyrical masterpiece of
 June.
 As joy sinks into a haystack, so does poetry twinkle in the streams.
 Poetry shines in the light of nature, like a bride by her wedding altar.
 Poetry comes to a soul like a flower into blossom, like a tree into blossom,
 Like the unfolded rose into the buttonhole of a bridegroom.

Poetry is not rhyme and reason, logic and learning, mathematics and
marshmallows: it is all of these
Dancing in a starry night to a band of inspired musicians.
It rocks and it rolls.
It has the temperature and feel of adult love.
There is about it the ripping of the veil of the sky to reveal the engines of
the machinery of Being.

When poetry touches your heart, you realise that until that very moment
you scarcely had one.
There is compassion in the deep well of it.
For no stone is left unturned by the detectives on its trail.
Poetry goes where man himself may not.
We may not cross the boundary of the living and the dead with impunity –
but poetry can, because T.S. Eliot told us so, with this proviso:
‘the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language
of the living.’

The tongues of fire flicker on the Irish grass.
This is a green that hurts the eyes.
What we get is more than what we can see.
For the unravelling nature of Being is burgeoning in the fields, the
floodgates of seeing are assaulted,
And that which is impossible is slowly taking place.
This is the *viriditas* of God, the green of the wild ecologist, the eco-warrior
theological love.
Poetry is born in the fields of superabundance.
Men and women fall in love in its seismic embrace.
The ground is not safe when poetry rumbles.
All is the path perilous and nothing is the archer turning into Apollo.