

Irony at the Opera

The case of The Secret Agent

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We know that music can be ironic. Think of old Bugs Bunny

cartoons, or the Marx Brothers, the way that pompous music is juxtaposed with silly actions, or silly music with pompous characters, to create a sense of anarchy and joyous transgression of social boundaries. There can also be music that invokes irony, but isn't ironic at all, as in the Alanis Morissette song of a few years back: Not only are almost none of her examples of irony ironic, but the music also creates no ironic effect. It's just a tune that carries the words along jauntily and with perfect neutrality. Ironic music is not neutral. It comments, it's got a point to make, generally in opposition to an established order or set of assumptions—and, more immediately, in some contrary relation to the text or lyrics it's supposed to be supporting. Musical irony is about inflation and deflation: Something or someone is puffed up and then a phrase of music bursts the bubble. But how does that work? And especially, how does musical irony work when you're telling a story? Or, more specifically, in the case I'll be presenting, in trying to set a highly ironic novel to music as an opera?

I have yet to read a novel more fundamentally ironic than Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), and in March 2011, I got to see the world premiere of composer Michael Dellaira's operatic adaptation of it, using a libretto by poet J.D. McClatchy. This novel is one of Conrad's very best, but not one of the most widely read, so I'll give a quick review of the plot. Adolph Verloc, the secret agent of the title, is a paid informer for a foreign government living in England. He is summoned to appear at the embassy to meet with his master. There he is castigated as lazy and corpulent. The anarchist faction that he has infiltrated has been entirely inactive and so Verloc's reports are useless. If Verloc wishes to be paid in the future, an anarchist outrage must be perpetrated. The foreign government desires that England crack down on the anarchists and, it is hoped, curtail the country's precious civil liberties in doing so, which would weaken England's prestige and influence. Thus, if the anarchists are

too timid or incompetent to perform an act of terror, Verloc must concoct one himself that can be blamed on them. Verloc leaves this meeting deeply disquieted.

We then see the motley band of anarchists gathered in Verloc's shop, where he sells stationary and pornography. It is clear that this radical crew is, in fact, all talk and constitutionally incapable of any radical action. But we are also introduced to the one character in the novel who takes seriously the radical rhetoric regarding the injustices of capitalism: Stevie, the younger brother of Verloc's wife, Winnie. Stevie has some congenital cognitive impairment. He has been to school and can read, but cannot hold a job or care for himself. In the terminology of the day, Stevie is feeble-minded—though also passionately, even violently, opposed to all injustice and cruelty (especially because he was frequently beaten by his father when he was young), and he seethes when he hears the anarchists speak of the treatment of prisoners and of the poor. Winnie has devoted her life to protecting Stevie; she married Verloc because she trusted that he would provide for them both. Stevie regards Verloc as the perfect and virtuous father he never had, though Verloc is quite oblivious to Stevie's existence.

The novel jumps forward in time, not obviously and without warning. There has been a failed terrorist attack on the Greenwich Observatory. A bomb went off prematurely, and the utterly detonated remains of the bomber have been recovered. The police investigate. Gradually, we learn, in retrospect, that Verloc took advantage of Stevie's idealism and of his devotion to him and made Stevie his accomplice in the attack on the observatory. Stevie, unfortunately, tripped over a tree root and the bomb went off. When Winnie learns of her brother's death, she becomes unhinged and murders her husband with a kitchen knife.

The story then ends in one of two ways. The novel ends one way. A dramatization of the novel that Conrad wrote in 1922 ends another way. We'll get to the consequences of choosing one or the other later in this essay. But even this small plot summary should

make clear, first, that all the novel's characters are loathsome, with the exceptions of Stevie and Winnie, who are ineffectual and out of control; and second, that the narrative is dismally depressing. But what the plot summary does not show is that *The Secret Agent* is also a very funny book. How *that* is possible requires a discussion of how the novel's irony works.

The crucial tool of irony in *The Secret Agent* is the narrative voice that Conrad created for it—the voice of a consciousness that always seems to know a bit more than it lets on, and that describes each character and action in a way that corrodes their surfaces and reveals the corruptions underneath. This narrative voice tells the story as a continual counterargument to the empty pretensions, hypocrisies, and semi-conscious self-aggrandizements of the characters. The book is already operatic in this sense, always advancing two distinct and opposing melodies. The plot of the novel is dark enough; the experience of reading it is made even darker through this acidic continuo that precludes any moral alternative to the social-political status quo. Police, anarchists, and government ministers are equally corrupt, lazy, and ineffectual. Language itself is a set of clichés and circumlocutions—the “current words,” as one character puts it.

The novel offers a way out, though it's not an entirely comforting one. There is Stevie, the “feeble-minded” or “mentally defective” boy (to use the “current words” of Conrad's time), who grows up listening to the rantings of the anarchists who meet in his home and, as his sister Winnie laments, takes those empty rantings seriously. Stevie is genuinely opposed to selfishness and cruelty. In one of the most crucial scenes of the novel, Stevie observes a coachman whipping his horse and tells the man to stop. The man then tells Stevie of his own financial and personal woes, and Stevie struggles mightily to articulate some ethically essential axiom through which he might understand the unjust society he lives in. “Bad world for poor people,” he finally blurts out. And to top it off, an image appears to

Stevie of taking both horse and coachman into bed with him, for in his experience “a bed of compassion” is the supreme remedy for all ills. The ever-deflating narrator adds that such a remedy has, as its only drawback, its being “difficult of application on a large scale.” So much for private solutions to systemic injustices. But Stevie, in the end, blows himself up; as a police detective in the novel observes, he uniquely is “unaccountable” in an age in which everything can be defined and quantified. This suggests that the potential escape from the novel’s—and society’s—moral and symbolic impasses lies only through mental incompetence, self-detonation, and removal from all means of accounting, which then leaves, again, only the vicious irony of the narrative voice as what passes for the novel’s moral center.

The composer and librettist seeking to capture the tone of *The Secret Agent* must then, first and foremost, find a musical equivalent to the novel’s irony. There should, for example, be a distinct musical style for Stevie, whose cognitive and moral apprehensions are so different from all the other characters—yet even this style can’t lose the novel’s undermining narrative irony. How can a composer write music that will carry the countering voice to all the story’s character and action? In the case of Dellaira, the answer is, unfortunately, that he simply doesn’t. The music he writes is good music. It’s dramatic and moves the story along; it’s modern, though not modernist, in its musical vocabulary, and well orchestrated, with vocal lines that nicely convey the feelings the characters are expressing. It adds up to a kind of updated Puccini in its emotional effect on the audience, which is no small compliment. If one comes to the opera with no knowledge of the novel, one experiences a pretty good night at the opera. And I understand that probably that was exactly Dellaira and McClatchy’s goal. The story is topical in that it involves terrorism, and its cynicism is apparent even without the ironic counter-voice. And the sister Winnie is given several very moving scenes, which were performed exceptionally well by Amy Burton. But Conrad’s *Secret Agent* is working at a far higher level of art and of moral, political, and semiotic understanding. What if a composer aimed

somewhat closer to that level? How would he do it? How have composers and librettists tried for similar effects in the past? A few historical examples suggest a few ways that the opera of *The Secret Agent* could approach the irony of the novel.

In one of the earliest operas, Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* (1642), two brutal, conscienceless protagonists lie and murder their way to power. Yet, in the final scene, when the triumphant Nero and Poppea sing of their passion and love for each other, the music portrays none of the evil that marked these characters through the entire story. The music is sublime, unspeakably beautiful, a music of the purest, highest, most sensual and spiritual love. What could this mean? Can such villainy and such love—and such beauty—really exist together? For Monteverdi, the answer is yes, and emphatically so. The beauty and truth of the music in no way mitigates Nero's and Poppea's evil actions. And yet their final duet proclaims just as surely that their love for each other is real. The incongruity of music to character presents us with a moral paradox about the nature of love and the nature of art, that there is no necessary connection between moral action and either beauty or erotic love.

A similar irony regarding the incongruity of beauty is revealed in Richard Strauss's opera *Intermezzo* (1924), in which a composer and his wife have a dull marriage. He travels a great deal. She enters into a flirtation with a younger man, but it develops no further. The husband returns and there are some mutual recriminations. Finally, domestic accord is restored. The opera's story is intentionally banal; perhaps *banal* is even too vivid a term. The story is dull and the characters markedly deficient in passion or wit. The music, however, is astonishingly rich, inventive, swirling, and profound, as if composed for some other story, other characters. Again one asks why—why freight the tedious narrative with brilliant music? I'm not entirely sure, and it's difficult to consider *Intermezzo* a success in purely dramatic terms. The story drags down the music as much as the music lifts the story, and they struggle more or less to a draw. My sense, though, is that Strauss

intended this loosely autobiographical work—to which his wife, Pauline, responded with anger—as an ironic commentary on the creative process. An artist's life, the opera seems to say, may be completely ordinary, his personality dull, his muse superficial, yet somehow, out of this unlikely soil, comes great art. There's no explanation. The fact of the music must suffice.

Irony happens in nonoperatic music as well. Shostakovich mimicked the heroic style Soviet authorities favored to create ironic pastiches of nationalist gestures and subversive excavations. In Mahler, the juxtaposition of folk and popular genres—including music that sounds like klezmer at times—with high German orchestral seriousness has been argued indicate the composer's sense of alienation from both his Jewishness and his German musical classicism. There seems to be no place for the music to find a home, culturally and tonally speaking; in that sense, perhaps, it's a harbinger of the atonality in Schoenberg's twelve-tone compositions. In all these examples, irony emerges out of a tension between a thematic or narrative element and the music. We can add here the way bebop musicians used old standards and tin-pan alley songs—which were no strangers to irony themselves—as the bases for their improvisations, reinterpreting them by making them cooler or hotter, with detachment and immersion, adding rhythmic and harmonic complexity. Writing sad lyrics to happy melodies is a staple of good pop and country songwriting. Hip hop is full of examples of ironic sampling. And then, of course, there is music for cartoons. Ironic music does not simply or unambiguously express character, motive, theme, or action, but comments on them, often working against them.

So what could Dellaira and McClatchy have done musically that might convey the irony that is inseparable from Conrad's narrative in *The Secret Agent*? Their challenge is different from the sorts that Monteverdi and Strauss took on: It is not beauty that would create the ironic commentary on unlovely action and character, but something not beautiful at all. First, our composer and librettist must

attend to Stevie, the character whom the novel renders as uniquely “unaccountable.” His music must be somehow qualitatively, incomparably different from any other in the opera. There are precedents for approaching this problem as well. In Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio*, the character of the Pasha is unique: Amid all the vectors of desire that construct the plot of this opera, the Pasha’s love for Constanza is rational and ethical—notwithstanding, of course, that he had her captured and confined in the first place. That aside, when he realizes that she truly loves Bellmonte, he releases her and blesses their union. How did Mozart compose music for this rational-ethical anomaly and paragon? He didn’t: The Pasha does not sing. In this comic opera of lovers reunited, there is no music for him. Music is the vehicle and fuel of passion, from which he has been removed. Reason and ethics are expressed in spoken language. It may be that Mozart, in this early opera, did not yet know how to write music of reason and ethics. That skill he mastered when he wrote the music for the Pasha’s mighty successor: Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, whose music, George Bernard Shaw declared, is the “only music which might be put into the mouth of God without blasphemy.” Benjamin Britten, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, deals with a similar problem when composing music for the fairies. Oberon sings as an unearthly countertenor, and Puck doesn’t sing, but shouts his lines. In *Death in Venice*, Britten cast Tadzio, the object of Aschenbach’s fatal desire, as a dancer, always on stage and always silent. Perhaps most relevant to Stevie is Modest Musorgsky’s introduction of the Holy Fool at the end of *Boris Godunov*. The Fool is an outcast, tormented by a small horde of boys who steal his single kopek; he calls to Boris for protection but then refuses him forgiveness, and he ends the opera with a prophecy of Russia’s future troubles. Musically, the Fool is an outcast as well. In an opera dominated by low male voices, the Fool is a high tenor, and amid music that most often is inflected by folk melodies or else placed in enormous architectural harmonies, the Fool’s high melodic lines are

like wails, almost unaccompanied and almost nonverbal. Mussorgsky understood that the Fool had to be distinct and set apart, and musically made him so.

In a more ironic version of *The Secret Agent*, the scene with the horse and the coachman could be a scene in itself, not just presented early in the opera as a recollection, as Dellaira and McClatchy portray it. Stevie must act, and there must be strange, stammering, difficult music in which his thoughts partially cohere: *Bad world for poor people*. The scene could be a nightmare, unsettling and strange, with a distinct contrast between Stevie's vocal lines and whatever the orchestra is playing; for the orchestra is, at that point, the world as it is, the world proceeding normally with its normal senselessness and brutality. And then there could be—perhaps the opera is lost without it—an aria for Stevie's "bed of compassion" idea, to which the orchestra would respond with the same restrained ridicule as the narrator, that such a solution to social ills has only the one drawback of being "difficult of application on a large scale." In this juxtaposition, the story's politics would be most brutally exposed.

The real politics in *The Secret Agent* is not terrorism, as the opera's creators seem to believe. The explosion itself is not an act of terrorism, but a paid provocation and an act of manslaughter. *The Secret Agent* centers around the systemic impossibility of justice, the fact that there is no valid vocabulary for it, or in the case of opera, no music for it. The music for Stevie—the voice of justice, incommensurable, unaccountable, mentally damaged and ultimately destroyed—must find a way to convey this. In contrast, the orchestral music must be the poisonous, ironic echo chamber of the status quo, the "current words," the way of thinking that precludes all others, the universal currency of self-interest and self-regard. How is this to be done? One possibility is to use and distort popular forms, to employ almost cartoonish music, or to formalize ballad and dance forms along the lines explored by Kurt Weill—any way that the orchestra can establish itself as not organic to the vocal lines, or to the characters' thoughts and motives. None of the characters, of course, think

of themselves as morally or physically grotesque. All believe they act with the best of intentions. In their words and voices, they tell us what they want to tell us, the anarchists, the diplomats, the police, Verloc. The music tells us otherwise. And in that gap would reside the opera's irony and meaning—a gap that Dellaira and McClatchy never open.

Or not quite never. At one point in the opera, Dellaira composes in a direction close to the one I am indicating. At a party at the house of the rich patroness with political pretensions, the assistant commissioner of police comes to pay his respects and mingle with the assorted artists, anarchists, government ministers, and diplomats. This is after the mysterious, potentially destabilizing explosion, after the police discover the remains of the bomber and the piece of his jacket, to which an address label had been sewn. (“How do you account for this?” he had demanded of the chagrined police inspector. ‘I don’t account for it at all sir,’ the inspector had stammered. ‘It’s unaccountable.’”). As the party and its minglings proceed, there is musical entertainment: A newly arrived singer performs Schubert’s “Der Erlkönig” for the guests, allowing a brilliant touch by Dellaira and McClatchy. This song, set to Goethe’s poem—one of the most famous and emotionally powerful in the classical canon—tells the story of a boy and his father riding home through the forest. The boy feels the presence of the erlking, a magical being who abducts children, and tells his father, but the father dismisses his fears. Again and again, the boy cries out at the erlking’s presence. At last, the erlking takes the boy’s spirit, and the father reaches home carrying his corpse. The song recapitulates the opera’s story. Stevie is walking with his sister’s husband, Verloc, the secret agent, whom he idolizes and regards as a father, though Verloc, in fact, has no paternal feelings for Stevie and uses his devotion to persuade him to venture the bombing of the observatory. Stevie then carries the bomb toward the observatory, slips and falls, and dies. The father figure returns home with not even a corpse. Dellaira and McClatchy’s cleverness lies in

recontextualizing the action, giving it a new reference against which to create meaning. Stevie's horrible death is juxtaposed with an elite culture that cares nothing for him and will soon regard him as a danger to decent society who, fortunately, destroyed himself before he could harm others. Schubert's song, set at a social gathering where the currency is trivia and deception, becomes part of the "current words," the dominant ideology from which Stevie is excluded.

But unfortunately, this is the only instance of an ironizing, recontextualizing use of music. The rest simply propels the opera's story without comment—ably, dramatically, but finally, for me, without meaning. This lack shows itself with renewed force in the revision of the novel's ending. In the 1907 novel, Conrad's 1922 dramatization, and McClatchy's libretto, when Winnie discovers that Verloc was responsible for her brother's detonation, her horror and rage overwhelm her sanity and she stabs Verloc to death. She is then overcome with fear of the law and execution, and at that moment, Ossipon, the most dashing and despicable of the anarchists, drops in. Winnie throws herself at his mercy, pleading for him to save her. When she shows him the money that Verloc withdrew from the bank, Ossipon proclaims himself her champion. Here the novel and the opera diverge. In the opera, Ossipon takes the money and tells Winnie to wait there at home while he goes to purchase train and boat tickets. After he leaves, the police inspector enters, finds Verloc's body, and tries unsuccessfully to question a now utterly traumatized Winnie. Then, another police officer enters with Ossipon in custody. Ossipon is assumed to be the murderer and is taken away. There is a brief interchange with another anarchist, the Professor, who has just wandered in, in which the inspector informs him forcefully that he and all terrorists are nothing but "blood and dirt. The whole lot of you." And the opera ends with Winnie, as the official synopsis puts it, "curled in a corner, ruined and alone."

It's quite a sad ending, but also the wrong one—even though McClatchy took it from Conrad's own dramatization of the novel of 1922. Fifteen years after he wrote the novel, Conrad apparently felt

that Winnie's deranged presence was required at the end, to create the right dramatic, tragic effect. But he shouldn't have second-guessed himself, because the novel had it right. Winnie's absence in the original ending allows the novel's narrative irony to reach a more crushing conclusion than a scene of madness does. Here is how the novel ends. Winnie and Ossipon leave the shop where Verloc's body lies. They go to the train station where Ossipon purchases, with Winnie's money, tickets for the train and a boat across the channel. At a stop just before the harbor, Ossipon takes the money and, leaping from the train, abandons Winnie. The next scene is some weeks later, in a café, where a noticeably disheveled and dispirited Ossipon obsessively reads a newspaper clipping reporting the news of the "lady suicide" who jumped from the channel boat: "an impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang forever over this act of madness or despair." In this journalistic exclamation, the "unaccountable" merges with the "current words," and Ossipon—a faux anarchist thoroughly associated with the current words in every sense—descends into unaccountability as Winnie has now, like Stevie, sunk into oblivion. This is not a tragic ending; it is thoroughly hideous and horrifying, without any of the redemptive promise that tragedy can offer. In a preface Conrad published for a later edition of the novel, he protested that he had not "intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind." We can well understand how he thought the novel might have this effect. In fact it does; and it should. Stevie's and Winnie's fates, and the social structures that facilitated them, are nothing if not gratuitous outrages.

But how could the original ending work musically? In our more ironic opera of *The Secret Agent*, we would hear the transformation of Ossipon's music from a lighter, popular, perhaps dancehall sort of music to something resembling Stevie's stammering tones, the movement from "current words" toward the "unaccountable," with the orchestra—like the newspaper, like the culture at large—maintaining its insouciance through every violation of human life and

dignity. Who would have the final word? The orchestra, I think, the agent of irony.

I think this could be done. If I had the compositional ability, I'd try to do it myself. There is melody and countermelody, and melody at cross purpose; there is music that knows what the operatic character does not know. There may or may not be any music of the spheres, but there is certainly a music—there is a lot of music—of the realm of social understanding, the “current words.” And there must be then the possibility of a music for what the current words cannot account for.

