

Chapter 6

Post-Postcolonial: Figaro South of the Zambesi

I

This chapter is about the globalization of European culture, in the form of grand opera, in the twenty first century. There is a special question to be raised about the appropriation of cultural forms outside of the capitals of Europe and America when the culture appropriated has had a long and egregious Eurocentric history within the colony itself. Opera has had the dubious distinction of playing a major key in the colony, where it was set forth as a tonic center of settler and colonizer distinction, a piece in the vast apparatus used to distinguish European from native in virtue of its proclaimed superiority and exclusive use by the settler/colonizer. Indeed persons of color had been barred from entering the Cape Town Opera House until Apartheid gave way to the democratic transition. And so it was easy to see that for a South Africa at the moment of decolonization or transition, opera was “tainted goods”. No wonder the decolonizing society wished to remove this historical “left-over” from its new life. By contrast when M.F. Husain and Diego Rivera (see Chapters 1 and 2) turned to cubism and surrealism these were modernist forms that played little or no role in colonialism (which was already in decline when they were invented), even if both cubism and surrealism are tainted by colonialist ideologies (in their visions of primitivism for example).

As we have seen (Chapters 1 and 2) decolonizing societies turned to their pasts in an act of rehabilitation, to old culture and ongoing tradition downgraded under colonialism, now adulated as an identity and origin capable of leading them towards their own modernity.

This was a turn away from Eurocentrism, in Husain's case the turn away from British styles of portraiture he had learned at the J.J. School of Art, Bombay. This refusal of remnants like British portraiture and grand opera in favor of past and tradition, often became in the decolonizing society a canon of authenticity: a veritable law about what the proper production of art and culture should be for the new/emergent postcolonial nation. The last thing a postcolonial subject should be singing, it was felt, was more Italian opera.

Colonialism had "gifted" the colony too much of that already. Paradigmatically Eurocentric cultural forms as flower and landscape painting, classical music and opera were widely believed to be politically retrograde--or at best--contemporary embarrassments.

All of this pushed decolonizing societies in the direction of wishing, in certain moods anyway, to cleanse themselves of their Eurocentric "remains". And so interesting questions are raised when persons in a decolonizing or transitional society wish to re-appropriate these "leftovers from the old days".

The questions are not merely academic. Young people today, in South Africa and in other parts of the global world, are turning to paradigmatically European forms like opera, challenging postcolonial canons of authenticity: raising questions about whether the postcolonial world, understood as that which appeared in the immediate moment of decolonization and nation-building, along with at least some of its corpus of writings and theories, is now out of date in the second decade of the twenty first century. Are these young persons simply naïve when they pursue Mozart, Verdi and Puccini? Are they unaware of the larger cultural politics in which they dwell?

Those young people busy appropriating the language of the diva, do not believe opera requires rehabilitation. They think such a position on opera is a form of censorship, an artifact of the world of their elders restricting their freedom. Opera is simply theirs to use at will. The world is their oyster. This attitude, naïve or otherwise, raises the question of

whether they inhabit what could be called a *post*-postcolonial world where standards of authenticity central to decolonization no longer apply, except as the political correctness old people believe which to the young is milk now past its sell-by date. And whether that world where everyone is free to use whatever they like—globally speaking—is one predicated on the failure of historical memory (and even if it is—then so what?)

This chapter explores the voices of young people who are engaged in operatic training and performance in Cape Town and Johannesburg--and also the counter-voices of their young compatriots who fiercely disagree with what they are doing in dedicating themselves to such a European apprenticeship as the grand operatic stage. I am interested in the views of these young people because their experiences of history, and of globalization are interestingly different from their elders. Their views, and debates, are a window into contemporary cultural conditions and, to repeat, these conditions may well differ substantially from the earlier ones characterizing the postcolonial world. That world, to gloss it (and I rehearse aspects of Chapter 1 here), was characterized by nationalism and decolonization, ongoing cultural exclusion and neo-colonial castigation, and a need for the postcolony and the colonial centers of Europe and America to pass beyond those intellectual traditions that were central to the ideology of colonialism and colonial superiority. It was a world demanding ongoing colonial and neo-colonial critique. And also, as I also suggested above, a world characterized by deeply felt canons of cultural authenticity. The modernism of M.F. Husain, Diego Rivera and others (see earlier chapters) existed within this ambit.

The archive of postcolonial theory was about the critique of colonialism, both as a practice and a system of knowledge. It was about the problems and prospects of nationalism, and the nature of the nation state at a moment of decolonization. It was about inequalities in the circulation of new knowledge from former colonies to the still then neo-colonial centers concentrating knowledge in Europe and America. It was about the critique

of the vast intellectual legacies of “the west” because of the way they set the terms for and were recruited into the ideology central to colonial practice. This ideology included the differential and unequal construction of race in relation to character, language, history, culture, and the reputedly unequal possibilities for various racial groups to enter and innovate in the modern world. The postcolonial archive, one of the great intellectual achievements of the twentieth century, was about a world still occupied with the distinction West/Rest.

This archive addressed a world at the moment of decolonization and nationalism that has largely, I have said in the introduction (Chapter 1), given way to a new set of global relations, a new set of priorities and preoccupations, and a decline in the obsession with the nation state and the role of culture in it. It is an archive interestingly challenged--precisely by being *ignored*--by the current generation of young people, or some of them anyway. For them questions of cultural authenticity central to decolonization are irrelevant to their lives, or so they believe.

I am fascinated by their experiences, which are quite relevant to philosophy. The kind of philosophy I learned as a young person was twofold. It was about the need for philosophy to learn from the past, the archive, the great ideas and historical transformations that have produced its ideas. But it was also about dropping all that in the name of a fresh investigation into things. That was the side of philosophy dedicated to starting from what is happening now, from the freshness of new experience and the ability to say “no” to the past. It is this attention to the freshness of new experiences which gave rise to British empiricism, to American pragmatism and to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Fredric Nietzsche after him, trends which contrast sharply to the long recitation of ideas central to the philosophical historicism of Hegel and Hegelian traditions, not to mention the method of

historical recitation central to French education and to that part of Nietzsche having to do with genealogy.

We learn from the past and cannot think without it. We have a duty to think in the light of it. But we also learn from those who are younger than us, fresh to the future and are dedicated to new beginnings. For young people inhabit a world different from the one that we older people were born into and grew up knowing. And they inhabit the same world differently. Central to how the world has changed over the past forty years has been the way decolonization and with it nationalism, has in many respects played itself out. And equally central has been--to state the obvious--globalization. Everyone knows that globalization means India and California are part of a system, China and Senegal, the United States and Bangladesh, etc. There is profound exploitation in these links, in this system, as well as opportunity. And while this set of complex relationships has been much explored in the economic field, they have been less fully explored in the cultural field. And so the question with which I will end is: if opera is no longer grasped in terms of its colonial past but rather as a new global opportunity, what are the linkages that it is embedded in, and how do these produce new forms of inequality? Perhaps opportunity and inequality are two sides of the same system, which the young people singing opera today should do more to understand and care about. I will end with this.

And so I am interested in rethinking canons of authenticity central to the postcolonial in the light of these young people's experiences (as I understand them), and also the contestation between their experiences and the also young people who fiercely disagree with them.

II

In June 2011 Michael Steinberg, then Director of the Cogut Humanities Center at Brown University and now Vice Provost for the Arts, brought the Cape Town School of Opera to his university to mount their production of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. Steinberg sits on the board of the West/East (formerly Israel/Palestine) DIVAN Orchestra, has written widely on music, history and politics¹ and is interested in the globalization of opera. The performance featured singers from the school, and the dazzling Kemal Khan at the piano. The American born and bred Khan, Director of the Cape Town Opera School, took over that position from South African Angelo Gobbato, who steered its transition from a white, Eurocentric outpost south of the Zambezi to a School where the students now reflect the diversity of the country: Xhosa, Zulu, Indian, Afrikaans, English, South Africans all. Before taking up the Cape Town post Khan had worked with James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera Company and pursued an independent conducting career (still active). His first contact with Cape Town was as a guest conductor. It did not take Khan long to realize South Africa had the goods, that is, the voices: powerful African sopranos, contraltos, tenors and baritones, whose sometime lack of classical musical education was offset by an equally articulate musical education in local choirs, which trained their pitch and intonation, above all their ability to listen (to the choir) while performing and adjust sound quality to the overall harmonization of the group. Khan also realized that certain Southern African languages (Xhosa in particular) approximated (by some mixture of coincidence and biology) the phonological rhythms of Italian (particularly in the pronunciation of vowels), allowing singers a natural way of adjusting to singing in the Italian language--although not the German or Russian. (Since all were bilingual or trilingual English was not a problem.) Overwhelmed by the Cape's efflorescent beauty, enthusiastic about the project of building a new South African culture with a new generation of opera singers at the moment of political transition; Khan emigrated to Cape Town.

The production *Khan*, under the good auspices of impresario/intellectual Steinberg brought north of the Zambezi to Brown University was created by Angelo Gobbato and is revelatory. More on that later: I am in the first instance interested in a sidebar to it, also revelatory, a “conversation” organized between the young singers from Cape Town and some humanities postgraduate students also from Cape Town, who were part of an exchange program of study at Brown, and highly trained and intelligent in postcolonial theory and history. Both groups were from the University of Cape Town. All were South Africans. This south-south discussion staged (like *Figaro*) in the global north (at Brown) turned out to be tense, enervating and combative as the postgraduate students challenged the opera performers about why they had sold out, or copped out, or given in to neo-colonial pressure, or simply failed to understand their own position in the postcolonial world, by staking their lives on that paradigmatically elitist, upper class, Western, European art: grand opera, with its legacy as an icon of European superiority in racist world politics. How, these students inquired (“pronounced” is more like it) could authentic Africans of multiple racial and cultural heritages take up as their own a plaything of the European well heeled, an exemplar of Germanic grandiosity cum secular religion (with its temple in Bayreuth), an Italian soccer sport of the voice played by *amici* more than a few of whom believe anything south of Rome is “Africa”, meaning corrupt, degraded and inferior. How could you, it was urged, as black Africans, or persons of Color, or Africans of any stripe or kind, step aside from your own culture(s) to take up this icon of European/Eurocentric power and influence, as if willfully participating in your own ongoing colonization even after colonialism had passed its sell-by date?

What was voiced was frustration, disappointment, confusion that such singers of talent had decided to pursue that paradigmatically western musical form, opera, rather than choir, jazz, dance or any number of other musical or artistic styles rooted in the African past, the

history of township life, in the struggle, or at the very least imported from other regions of the continent of Africa and therefore less tainted by the history of colonialism. Your own African cultures have been downgraded and condescended to for generations. Opera had long been a sign of settler authority in South Africa, of the European claim to superiority and privilege over native populations, an identity badge for rich, elite white culture of the country, an upper crust plaything. The opera houses had been closed in South Africa to people of color, meaning *you*, until the end of Apartheid in 1990. Why, of the countless African traditions that could be learned and sung, do you pursue duets with the Italian/Germanic/Russian devil?

The opera students were flabbergasted. They could not understand how their operatic commitments could possibly represent any kind of cultural, much less political betrayal, any purported lack of authenticity, indeed anything other than the opportunity in the new, free and democratic South Africa to do something they wanted to do. They had no notion that their own cultural authenticity should depend on the finding and reinvention of “their own African roots”, as if they had any clear idea of what these even *were* in the twenty first century. To them, the singing of *Figaro* was African because they sang it! The idea that their operatic training pandered to a legacy of western domination seemed to them false, and a more than slightly rude thing to be said to them by their fellow students. Confused and embarrassed, they remained silent.

And so a gap in thinking opened up between two small but fascinating populations from the global south.

III

In the years of African decolonization the first generation of postcolonial leaders and intellectuals would in many instances have stood in solidarity with the postgraduate

contingent. Of importance to that generation was Franz Fanon's famous remark that: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip...By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectic significance today."² For the first generation of African leaders the dialectical significance of this devaluation of the past under colonialism was to re-authenticate it. On this Africanist point of view the proper empowerment of the new nation, was to rehabilitate devalued past culture by adopting and remaking the arts, ideas, and moral intuitions of the past. There was an attitude of disapproval around participation in ongoing "Eurocentric" traditions through which the colonial subject had been, as it were, molded into a western lackey, or from which they had been excluded altogether.

In Chapter 4 I suggested post-Apartheid South Africa is in certain respects a postcolonial society while in others a transitional society better compared to post-Communist Europe or post-Fascist Latin America. In the South Africa of 2011, when *Figaro* was brought north of the Zambezi, a clearly postcolonial project remained in force through the legacy of South Africa's second State President Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki's doctrine of the African Renaissance, a term he adopted from the history and politics of the Negritude movement, mandated return to the African pre-colonial past as a way of empowering South Africa, and the African continent, to a new and authentic future. The land and soil of Africa synergize, on this Africanist way of thinking, in unique and poetic ways with African peoples, who, to re-empower themselves after long generations of degradation under colonial and Apartheid rule, must return to their roots, rediscover their true origins, and according to the heritage formula set forth by the European nation state in the nineteenth century, empower their new nations with destiny, a noble future through this rediscovery of the past and its ongoing traditions.

According to the ideology of the African Renaissance opera is all well and good (Mbeki always reserved a place for diversity) but the deeper, truer route to the future is that of finding again the deep cultural roots of the African past and, through the work of research and innovation, setting them forth as moral, social and intellectual guidelines for the future. The African Renaissance particularly celebrated and continues to celebrate all things indigenous, through a notion of indigeneity suitably expanded (since most indigenous South African peoples have either been decimated or merged into the population as a whole through intermarriage and procreation) to include every pre-colonial heritage in southern Africa. Indeed Mbeki's concept of the indigenous extends to everyone who opposed British or Boer rule during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, becoming almost a cipher for political correctness. But the general theme is clear: celebrate African traditions as the (suitably mythologized) origin of the new South Africa, and indeed the route to a noble South African future. Learn from them, they will pave the way to a glorious future for the African continent.

The language of the African Renaissance is utopian, and deeply European, since it takes over from the cultural politics of the European nation state the idea that the past, reconstituted as "heritage", is an origin that is also, thereby a signpost for the future. Under the African Renaissance a program of scientific and scholarly research was set forth for universities, which would codify, praise, and develop what was (in a term taken over from the World Bank) referred to as "indigenous knowledge systems" (as if indigenous peoples were already systematic scientists *avant-la-lettre*).³ This included African moral traditions, music, theater, dance, and carving as well as knowledge of medicinal plants and of the natural and built environment. All of this became in Mbeki's utopian language of heritage the route to reinvigorating the African continent (with South Africa at the helm) for a neo-liberal and democratic twenty first century world. It is this link between the rediscovery or

proclamation of origins (to be found in pre-colonial culture, suitably mythologized) and the route to future “destiny” that is the classic heritage formula, first proclaimed by Matthew Arnold, Fredric Nietzsche and widely, becoming the ideology of the European nation state in the nineteenth century. This kind of re-authentication of the past becomes in the cultural politics of the new postcolonial nation, its way of proclaiming difference from the colonizer’s culture, uniqueness, longevity, unity and an intrinsic noble mechanism for achieving the future. The African Renaissance acknowledges diversity (including opera) but is all about authenticity: about the (more) authentic route to being and becoming an African: a standard of authenticity.

But Fanon’s idea was actually quite subtle. By “dialectical significance” he had in mind in his essay (“On National Culture”) a waffling or alternation between the newly wrought postcolonial state’s desire to empower itself through rediscovering if not mythologizing its past, and an opposing tendency, also found in the postcolonial state, to modernize itself by taking on the aspects of modernity associated with states outside itself, in particular with the global modernity it found in Europe. It was, Fanon thought, by working through this alternation between the gaze within (towards the past) and the gaze outside (towards European modernity) that the state would develop a national culture. But the Africanist ideal adopted by Mbeki stressed the side having to do with re-authentication of the past, perhaps because Mbeki knew that European modernism was already integral to the South African state, economy and society.

The Soweto youths who in 1975 refused instruction in Afrikaans, the language of the National Party and the Apartheid state, at the very moment Mbeki would have been in Swaziland seeking to set up resistance training camps and operations there, would surely have refused the cultural dalliances of Afrikaans culture as well, which included a fascination with German Lieder and opera. But generations change dramatically and one

generation later the South African singers performing at Brown could not even grasp why their pursuit of Mozart should represent historical betrayal or inauthenticity.

This is the second point of interest. These singers took *neither* side of the Fanon equation, neither the side that stresses revaluation of the past, nor the side that stresses a reaching out to European modernity in the name of advancing the postcolonial state. This dialectical equation was to them an unknown and unwanted thing of the past--and along with it, the very idea of a "national culture", as if that could be some univocal project.

Put another way, this small sample from the new generation of South African youth believe that *The Marriage of Figaro* belongs to them as much as to anyone else. They believe that as citizens of the new South Africa they have every right to pursue their interests in opera without any intervening question of authenticity arising. They are not even *aware* that any question of authenticity does arise. Either these South African students are astoundingly naïve or there is something wonderful in their disinterest in the baggage of history and the proprieties of decolonization, and they signal the fact that we (they) are living in what could be called a post-Eurocentric, cosmopolitan universe where culture is the "property" of all humanity (of the world). Which includes them.⁴

The answer is probably both. On the naïve side these students seem blithely unaware of colonial history and also the cultural politics of decolonization. Steinberg thinks this is because the humanities and arts are all too separated in the South African university meaning these opera students have never had the chance to learn the lessons of history from a history, literature, politics or philosophy class.⁵ He is probably right, if one adds that the advanced study of classical music has always and everywhere been based on the Conservatoire model, in which intensive study of instruments (including the voice) and/or composition is considered so demanding that there is little time for anything else, given the six hours of practice a day required, the endless critique by teachers, and in the case of

opera, also the learning of multiple languages. Every university finds it difficult to integrate humanities with musical study for this reason, although every university should.

Furthermore, there is tendency in post-fascist or post-totalitarian youth to want to get on with life and not think about the past, much less continue to bear its daily gravitas.

Especially when the pursuit of something like opera represents a career opportunity for students born without wherewithal (this as a result of long centuries of oppression). This desire to forget the past and get on with life brings complication; the failure of historical memory. Opera has a Eurocentric history south of the Zambezi just as it has one north of that winding river, and it is a history that requires acknowledgment. To know the story of opera in South Africa is to know that history. This is to know from whence one has come, it is to be sensitive to ongoing residues of that in one's own culture.

There is something naïve about a disinterest in history, and these opera students probably are more than a bit unaware of the larger picture of what opera has stood for in their own country's past. But there is something equally interesting in their attitudes for exactly that reason, since they are claiming opera apart from any historical baggage. Fredric Nietzsche wrote in his famous essay on history that we have both a need to remake the past for the present (to remember and reconstitute memory through writing), and a need to forget it (those excessively concerned with history, he felt, cannot finally live in the present in the right state of absorption and freedom).⁶ History produces us, but we must not be imprisoned by the acknowledgement of it. If these students suffer a failure of historical acknowledgment, they are also actors on the contemporary stage singing their own libretto, not Mbeki's or anyone else's. It is this exciting new relation to history--one of disinterest--that interests me, in spite of the naiveté.

Young South Africans are popularly called "born frees", students born after the end of Apartheid who know of that system of racial degradation only through stories, family

history and historical legacies of class inequality and racial division. They are the first generation of South Africans born into a free and democratic society where they can vote (although South Africa is yet to achieve multi-party liberal democracy), where their rights are in principle (although not always in practice) guaranteed by one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, where they are free to earn scholarships to a School of Opera which a generation ago would not have accepted them (so long as the funding holds out), and where the world is their oyster (scholarships have recently been won by students of the Opera School to study at the Metropolitan Opera School in New York, the Lyric Opera School in Chicago, La Scala in Milan and a number of other top institutions). Their outlook on life, and especially on the past, is conditioned by a strong sense of their place in the new South Africa. Their relationship to globalization has a young peoples' ease (not entirely unlike their compatriots in the global north who think nothing about studying in Thailand for a semester, then working on a farm in Mexico, after which they plan to teach English in China before returning to Chicago or Indianapolis). They are like so many first generations born frees, whether from post-fascist Brazil, Chile and Argentina, or post-communist Poland, Russia or China: disinterested in the past, ready to get on with the world into which they are born, bored with listening to the sad litany of their parents' oppressed lives and less enthusiastic still with the heavy burden of resistance, propriety and political correctness that went with the old days of struggle.

IV

It is worth exploring the colonial mentality in which opera prominently featured in more detail if only to better understand the disinterest these students have in it—and to understand the interest their interlocutors have in it. It was a mentality that operated according to a particular concept of *cultural property*, and of *the gift*.

Eurocentrism can be glossed as the idea that European culture is understood as a kind of *property*: the property of the European, the settler, and the missionary who brought heritage to native populations. Culture is the property of the colonizer in virtue of *being* his heritage. It is not the property of the colonized. The traditions of the colonized are all too standardly (and there are exceptions) deemed inferior by the European settler. For the settler, identification with the European home country and its culture provided him or her with distinctiveness from native populations, superiority, and power.

It is this link between heritage and cultural property that is crucial. Because European opera, modern morals, and the modern sciences arose and evolved in Europe and remained traditions central to bourgeois life in Europe they were believed the unique property of European culture. Europeans believed themselves the only culture capable of practicing these arts. Heritage conveyed character: only people born and bred within these traditions could be capable of grasping and mastering their power and worth. Heritage is a re-scripting of the past into a core set of values and traditions which the relevant people (the nation) share, and which is believed to make them the people they are. If a heritage is not yours you have not been exalted by it, grown into its moral and cultural power, and you lack the relevant “breeding” for mastering it. Breeding is closely associated with race, a kind of middle term between historical background and racial characteristic which the Europe of the 18th and 19th century widely took for granted: about itself and about those who were not European, lacked the heritage and breeding and were in all likelihood unable to master such complex and deft heritage. ⁷

Ownership is inheritance and inheritance is restricted to the relevant family, group or nation, like some rich kid who is born with a trust fund that only belongs to him and allows him to swan around the world in a state of unearned superiority.

The colonizer/owner of Eurocentric culture might then offer his or her culture as a *gift* to native populations: this is the project of missionary work, of the mission school and colonial church. Like sharing food that one owns with the hungry, the gift of culture is a form of colonial beneficence, Lady Bountiful stuff. Everyone, the great explorer and missionary Dr. Livingstone said, is universally the same before God and deserves baptism, a chance at heaven, and missionary education. This was already an enlightened position in the early part of the nineteenth century when Livingstone, missionary in Southern Africa before becoming explorer of Africa's great rivers, said and lived it. Finding slavery of all sorts abhorrent, Livingstone believed that the opening of trade routes from deepest, darkest Africa to Europe through the discovery of the Nile, would provide Europe a way of ridding Africa of slave traders, and providing new forms of labor and industry. His missionary work was characterized by belief in universal Enlightenment. But this belief was never one of intellectual or cultural equality between native and settler or missionary. Rather it was about raising up the meek, the heathen, the unwashed and unbaptized. About *giving* them something, something that was in origin European, the product of uniquely European agency. Few held the conviction that native could assimilate European culture with a capacity for agency and innovation that the European had. The European produced, the native received. Of course things were more complicated in practice, with subversions of the ideology happening in the villages of the Tswana and elsewhere,⁸ but the ideology was deeply in place and practice nevertheless.

Indeed the tying of the native to the gift of European culture was also a rope around the native's neck.⁹ The native was gifted European modernity while simultaneously dispossessed of his/her own past traditions, which were broken or at least devalued. The project was to attach the native to European modernity, but in a way that placed him or her in a second-class position, like an immigrant to New York driving a cab who speaks with a

funny accent, and can't find the way to Brooklyn across the bridges. This is what colonial mimicry is all about. This native who received the gift (and was believed hardly able to use it), added nothing to a cultural form which was already believed complete, an operatic form complete in the concert halls of Europe apart from exoticism. In no way was he believed capable of innovating within European traditions. His destiny was one of imitation, and bad imitation at that. And so the gift of Eurocentric culture was a way of rupturing the native from his own traditions and placing him in the position of disempowered imitator, a mere appendage, or supplement, to European culture, without agency.

The native then suffered the double indignity of having his or her past devalued (by comparison with European heritage) and being told the gift he was given of European culture was one he could never adequately learn and inherit. Fine art, theatre, philosophy, sculpture and opera were cultural forms offered under these disabling conditions. And they were long known as settler signs of Eurocentric superiority. And so the re-discovery and rehabilitation of the native's past became a declaration of independence (from the colonizer) and a form of national self-empowerment, the recovery of identity and declaration of difference in the name of a new and independent national future. This is what Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance is about: claiming that the African past is a genuine heritage, not just a tradition in fragments but a thing capable of empowering the modern African state with character, dignity and an authentic future, indeed a destiny.

The question is therefore: Does opera still operate under the logic of propriety, and the gift in the new South Africa? Is it irredeemably tainted by its past life South of the Zambezi? Is it a mere sideline at best, because the project of decolonization is still one demanding return to past African traditions repressed under colonialism?

What the young South African opera students have done is instinctively refuse the link between *heritage and ownership* by declaring it irrelevant or not being interested in it--or

because they don't know anything about it. They do not believe that because opera was invented in Italy it remains owned by Italians, or Europeans, or that it remains Eurocentric. Italy is to be praised for having invented opera to be sure. Opera is deep in Italian culture in a way that is impressive. There is a special relationship between Italy and opera as anyone who has been to the opera in Verona or Milan knows. You cannot think Italian modern history without thinking opera. But Italian, and Austrian, and German opera is as much theirs to sing south of the Zambesi as it is for an Italian to sing north or south of the Tiber in Rome. The age of Eurocentric formulation has, one might think, died with the born frees who proudly assimilate formerly Eurocentric forms out of their freedom of choice. Opera now, they feel, empowers the likes of them, and the culture of their new country, rather part of a vast ideology that had stamped it down. Their claim is boldly cosmopolitan: opera is a form circulating freely throughout the world and for the world, including them.

Now the Eurocentric algorithm stated that natives were incapable of anything but imitation when they took on European culture. Their agency was compromised; they were condemned to imitation, and incapable of innovation. Their mastery of Eurocentric forms would always be partial. I am a believer in the importance of knowing where you come from and where what you use comes from. Once one agrees that at minimum the young singers should be made aware of the fierce contestations around Eurocentric culture that have been part of their own recent histories of decolonization, that they should learn about the history of opera in their country, understand that opera has been tainted in the past, and that there are reasons for suspicion about their blithe pursuit of the high C, what follows? Should they tow some kind of line of authenticity and refuse to do what they believe themselves free to do? Must they prove something to someone, their compatriots for example, that would justify their pursuit? Or should they simply get on with it?

The question is not for me to answer, although I am sympathetic to the famous line Cary Grant (aka Roger Thornhill) utters towards the end of Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece *North by Northwest*: "Nobody has to do anything", meaning everyone is finally free to do what they gotta do. Still, even if you choose to pursue opera (or anything else with an historical taint) you should know what you are dealing with, namely a cultural form with a very checkered past.

Since the rehabilitation of Eurocentric forms means the ending of the ideology according to which colonials could only use them badly, one should find signs that these young opera singers are in full mastery of the form (opera). There is easy proof of this: they are being culled from South Africa to La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera Company, the Lyric Opera Chicago, etc. (We shall return to this drainage of talent to the north later). But one wants more proof, I think, than that. One wants to understand how a place is producing genuine innovation in the form in a way that makes it a reflection of their emergent selves. And also in a way, sometimes, that provides a new way for anyone to understand what the form is. The question of earlier chapters in this book was to find ways to understand how modernist artists in Mexico, India and elsewhere achieve similar kinds of mastery, turning European painting into a dazzling new set of arrangements bespeaking themselves, and their life and times. One wants a demonstration that in the twenty first century mastery and innovation in opera may happen in South Africa (and elsewhere), that in adopting and appropriating opera new South Africans are demonstrating creativity and uniqueness in fusing it with their life and times (just as Husain did some half century earlier with cubism and German expressionism). This is the proof of cosmopolitanism: that a form can become something new anywhere across the globe (in principle, and sometimes in practice), that it is truly the "property" of the world, meaning no one's particular property and therefore not

really “property” at all, but something else, a legacy, an opportunity, an occasion of expanding culture.

Not all the time (for there are plenty of stale performances of opera in Europe and America so why not South Africa too), but at least *some of the time*. There is no recipe for this.

And that brings us to the production of *Figaro* created south of the Zambezi and brought to Brown. Was it a production carrying the stamp of South African life and times? Did it generate new understanding of the medium of opera?

V

Mozart and Da Ponte’s opera of 1786, *The Marriage of Figaro* is about relations between master and servant in one of the great households of the Europe of eighteenth century Spain, where the Count rules, his lonely and isolated wife mourns, Figaro is the manservant and Suzanna the maid. Based on the play by Beaumarchais (*The Barber of Seville*), which had been banned in Paris because of its reputed licentiousness, it is a progressive and topsy-turvy study of human relations in a system of inequality. Figaro, chief servant to the Count, and Suzanna the maid, are to be married; and the day on which the opera is set begins with Figaro measuring the marriage bed in which their marriage will soon be happily consummated. The Count, in a gesture of progressive thinking, has abjured his “right of lordship” to sleep with Figaro’s bride, but this does not prevent him--he who is used to having his way with the maids of the household given his position as the establishment’s chief honcho—from persistently trying to obtain the favors of Figaro’s bride-to-be, Susanna. The Count finds innumerable excuses to delay the civil part of the wedding while Figaro, Susanna, and the Countess conspire to embarrass the Count and expose his scheming. The Count then tries to force Figaro to marry a woman old enough to be his mother who, lo and

behold, turns out to *be* his mother. Figaro, jealous to the core, suspects Suzanna of being unfaithful with the Count and it all hangs on a lost pin. Finally, in a magical scene in the garden (the fourth and final act of the opera) Figaro and Suzanna succeed in restoring the Count to his wife, and they to each other. All ends happily.

This study of human-all-too-human relations in a closely contained world (the household) where power is unequal (the Count rules) but counteracted by intimacy, scheming and desire, is tailor made for a South Africa long accustomed to the roles of the master and the servant. Director Angelo Gobbato sets the opera on a Cape wine farm. In the old days the so called colored laborers on Cape wine farms were paid in the “dop”, that is, in alcohol, their adherence to the “baas” was something between wage laborer and slave. Miscegenation was rife in that world. Some of this is still in place on certain farms in the Cape Province today.

The performance brought out the brutality of the circumstance, with the part of the Count being acted and sung with a level of threat, and aggression, that is rarely seen in opera north of the Zambezi. The Count, while forward thinking, was clearly a man accustomed to disposing of his servants as he wished, in the manner of chattel. This contradiction between the Count’s progressive gesture of relinquishing his right (to sleep with the bride) and the thuggish, brutal nature of his treatment of his servants brought a shock to the opera, making one—at least making *me*—feel this opera became a mirror of South Africa at a sometimes reluctant moment of political and social transition (from the master-servant relationship to a more democratic dispensation). This is enough to say opera became, in South African hands, a medium expressive of that country, an acknowledgment of self. But there is more. I think the performance restored the opera to its genuine eighteenth century context, where the Count would have likely been more brutal than is currently played in refined and aestheticized opera houses today, and where the

relations between Count and servants would have been more rough and tumble, more terrifying and more chaotic. It stood as a mirror to Europe of its own past. South Africa seemed a perfect venue to retrieve the intensities of the eighteenth century, which Mozart and Da Ponte would surely have brought to their writing of the opera, since they were wholly of that world. Da Ponte had been cruelly imprisoned in Venice for his dallying around, and nearly executed, he knew firsthand the brutal hand of the law, that is, of power in the eighteenth century. And so, my point is that this production seemed to restore to the opera its tough and implacable relations of power. You learned about the origins of opera in the west by studying it in South Africa.

It is this tension between the celestial sound of the Mozart aria and the aggressive world of power in which his operas (*Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* anyway) are set that is at the core of the Mozart/Da Ponte composer/librettist project, also at the basis of their progressive, libertine sympathies. But this tension was largely airbrushed during the long nineteenth century when opera was turned into a heroic and phantasmagoric medium with the tenor or baritone in the role of cult figure and the audience in love with the purity and power of voices. This airbrushing of Mozart's opera (and opera in general) happened with particular clarity to Mozart/Da Ponte's opera *Don Giovanni*. The figure of the Don with his talent for women and his perfect nose (read: perfect pitch) became increasingly understood as a stand in for Mozart himself, and for the figure of the larger-than-life, the libertine and the *Lebenskünstler*: one who lives life with the tempestuous gorgeousness of a work of art, a figure of the Romantic for whom women are the material for his art, that is, for his sublimity of voice. This celebration of the romantic hero who is breaker of the law, capable of rupturing society, and who exists apart from (so he believes, although he will get his in the end) the moral order, and whose instrument of seduction is his voice, becomes adulated

into a paradigm, his narcissism celebrated, his compulsion emulated, his voice an object of cult worship.

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, encapsulating this canonization of the Don and the opera (which began with E.T.A. Hoffman and continued through the long nineteenth century) called *Don Giovanni* the absolute case of opera, believing the opera paradigmatic of the medium, because opera was, to him, about and exclusively about the erotic. The very nature of opera is revealed, unmasked, acknowledged by this tale of the erotic power of voice. For the Kierkegaard of *Either/Or Part I*, the Don is the living incarnation of voice, and nothing but voice: the pure embodiment of music. His romping with women, his sequential monogamy (each “marriage” lasting a few minutes or an hour) becomes, in effect, in Kierkegaard’s thinking, a roman a clef for the erotic power of music. With *Don Giovanni* opera has found its great theme: the relationship between music and Eros. In Kierkegaard’s reading the Don is in effect a stand in for Mozart, whose ability to charm the pants off of all Europe as a child of eight years old, courtesy of his musical talent, was unrivalled. Mozart, like the Don, chalked up successes opus number by opus number, each more redolent than the next. (I have explored this in more detail in an earlier essay.¹⁰) This reading of the Don as an icon of Mozart gives him talent, genius, a genius for women worthy of Mozart’s for music. And makes him virtually divine. And so the true subtext of the opera is opera itself: now understood as a pure aesthetics/erotics of voice.

But the Don is not just a voice, he is a powerful and scheming seducer, who has been known to force women, kill their fathers and storm through the world in a state of insatiable lust powered by money and the sword. He exploits his wealth and position to steal away brides at their wedding, and is not above doing the damage to the same woman more than once (he is a repeat offender). His goal is to lengthen the list (the archive of his phallus) each and every day and “come” what may. His phallic grandiosity is not merely an abundant

narcissistic imagination through which he wakes every morning to the thought that the world is his oyster and life beneficent. It is an aggressive power throbbing desire to own and dispose of women. He wakes the hunter, then, after the kill leaves the clean up work to his servant Leporello. It is never clear whether the Don is motivated by insatiable lust, power or compulsion, he clearly enjoys the act of love (is in love with his own voice), demands power over women.

Kierkegaard finally believed Don Giovanni morally compromised (as others in the nineteenth century also did) but the philosopher's admiration for the character, and the opera, remained nevertheless intact. The Don gets his in the end. He is consigned to the fires of hell by a larger-than-life statue of the Commendatore, whom he killed in the opera's opening moments, and everyone applauds. But the Don's "heroic" refusal to abjure his ways only confirmed his magnificent stature for the nineteenth century. Eventually he became some kind of god. And so plot and the brutality of the character disappeared into a celebration of his voice, the Don's criminality became transmuted into that of a rule-breaking libertine with heroic *force majeure*. His depth of devilry became iconic of the deep subjectivity, which this century, the century that invented psychiatry and psychoanalysis, would plumb and celebrate. Opera became aestheticized as pure voice, mythologized as heroic, adored in the way Hollywood films with their special effects are today as the world's greatest entertainment.

All this led to a loss of focus on the brutal social world of the Mozart/Da Ponte plot, and of the brutal times in which they together wrote. Opera became distant from its original sources in the eighteenth century.

On my reading of the Cape Town production it restored to *The Marriage of Figaro* the tough, implacable world of its times, and its plot and its characters: the threatening nature of the Count and his iron-clad rule over his domain and the people in it, the depth of

inequality in the master-servant relationship, which in turn allowed one new understanding of Figaro's scheming (not to mention his own patriarchal jealousy) and of the power Suzanna wields courtesy of sensuality, youth and seduction. Figaro and Suzanna's power is very real, but also deeply compromised by their positions, and this too emerges with crystal clarity. They can be screwed by the Count at any moment, and they know it. The humanity all the main characters achieve by the end of the opera shows that within a system of power and inequality human desire and reconciliation can be achieved, up to a point, but the system of real inequality remains, and this production makes one feel it in one's bones. Most productions today do not.

Most productions cause one to forget just how unequal, and terrifying the system of power is. They emphasize sublimity of music (Mozart's) and shared forms of desire between the various characters (to be known and acknowledged, to find love, to live in the balance between manipulation and intimacy, to avoid being found out). They revel in the cult of voices and are the legacy of the long nineteenth century. What the Cape Town opera production does on my reading is not only South Africanize the opera by setting it in the world of the baas and the farmworker, a world of real inequality. In doing so, it also reveals something profound about the nature of the eighteenth century and operas set there/then, about the tough world from which opera in the eighteenth century emerged, and about the tension between that and the sublimity of Mozart's music at the core of his operas. The Cape Town production returned us to the social world in which the opera was written, by providing a likeness of it south of the Zambezi. The production is therefore a contribution to *knowing what opera is*, a way of removing the refined veil of the aesthetic, which draped opera in the gorgeousness of voice and airbrushed its characters.

The other thing this performance did was assert the role of youth in opera, something often forgotten when singers are routinely thirty years older than the characters they play.

Since the performers were mostly under the age of twenty-five, they brought an energy, wildness and animation to the opera which is wholly in the music, and in the characters. Of Cherubino for example, often, on the German opera stage sung by a diva of forty-five or fifty, with elegance and refinement, and with the slower movements of a middle-aged person. Cherubino is in fact a crazed youth overwhelmed by the onset of sexual desire. He is out of control, a frenetic body lunging at everything in skirts, an adolescent quickly packed off the army to learn discipline and manners, not to mention as a way of getting him out of the house. In the Cape Town production Cherubino was played by a woman of around twenty, whose youthful voice, electric hair and rapid kinetic movements restored one to that character's wildness.

This is I think the proof that south of the Zambezi opera is not merely mastered by the new generation of "born frees" but in a way that brought the culture of South Africa to it, and added a new dimension to the medium globally. If this is not a way for South Africans to make opera their own, to break out of the Colonial/Eurocentric algorithm, which says, you can only ape the culture of Europe by producing stale and bad imitations, through mimicry, and without innovation; then nothing is. Khan, Gobbato and their gang made opera their own, enlivening it through the world they are of, and the results were globally revelatory.

This production (on my reading of it) illustrates the case for a truly post-postcolonial attitude to culture, namely one no longer caught up in the obsessions of the first generation of decolonizing nations with their notions of cultural propriety and their suspicions of all things that had played a Eurocentric role. Postcolonial studies largely arose as a way of thinking through the predicaments of *this first generation*, in terms of the social, political and cultural condition of decolonization and nationalism. But times have changed and Fanon's brilliant dialectical insights no longer quite apply to this young crowd and their experiences. They no longer, I think operate under postcolonial rules, prescriptions or

demands of authenticity or responsibility. Indeed the bigger point is that there is no longer a *standard of authenticity* or as to what it is to be an African prescribed by the heritage formula, decolonization and the demands of nation building other than a general demand to contribute to one's place, time and country however one does this. Proof is in the pudding: in what one makes of what one is free to choose insofar as one is free to choose it, in this case opera, and whether and how one can make it one's own, south of the Zambezi.

VI

But I have not finished with the postgraduates and their disappointment with the opera singers. Part of what the University of Cape Town postgraduate students were getting at was the elitist nature of opera. Here they are, these children of the poor, who are performing Figaro for the rich and well heeled--and in a mid-resourced country where the geni-coefficient (the wage differential between the richest and poorest earners) is among the greatest in the world. How can you--perhaps these postgraduate students were thinking--spend your time working in an art for which your parents could never pay the price of admission, which is restricted to upper class captains of industry, cardiologists and heads of state? Most Africans, the thought might have been, can never afford to go to the opera you have put on. So is it right to spend your time in such an elite occupation? Of course most Americans cannot afford to send their children to the opera, nor to Brown University or the University of Michigan where I teach. American opera, and American universities are also elitist.

The postgraduates are also afraid, I think, that the diverse flowering of African traditions in the new South Africa (celebrated by Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance it should be said) is fragile and could fall into ruins at any moment--leaving the country with opera and little else, which really would turn South Africa (or any related country) into a

Eurocentric leftover. Opera is part of a vibrant culture restituted from colonial and Apartheid repression *only if* there is also gumboot dancing, jazz, Christian choir, Afro-rock and many other cultural quarters heard from. It would be absurd to say: perform opera and nothing else! Just as it would be absurd to say in a newly re-scripted South African university: Read Dickens and nothing else! That really would be Eurocentric.

I still believe in the importance of historical memory. In knowing something about the history of something you are making central to your life, in knowing where things come from. But that is, as Nietzsche says, debatable like so many issues of responsibility. At the very least a person should be taught that history, whether they wish to forget it or not.

But there is also a more insidious neo-liberal point to be made, whether the postgraduate students made it or not, which is that the very success of the Cape Town School of Opera is compromised by its global drain of top students to the great opera programs of the global north. The pride that school takes in students who are now at La Scala and the Met is a double-edged sword. For it bespeaks a country (South Africa) which cannot keep its best and brightest, cannot provide venues, audiences and wages for them, but instead flocks to the Metropolitan Opera simulcasts when they are broadcast in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. If colonialism is no longer in place—nor the postcolonial thinking that went with its first generation of decolonizing countries--then neo-liberal economy has provided a similar concentration of resources in the global north to the expense of those living south of the Zambezi. South Africa's school of opera provides at the end of the day enhanced resources for those great opera houses of Europe and America which can only get better, while South Africa provides the talent. In the old days of colonialism this would have been called "raw materials" being drained from India to Manchester England. Now the drain is one of human resources from South Africa to New York. Colonial inequality has given way in the twenty first century to *neo-liberal inequality*.

The very success of the school both affirms the innovation in global approaches to opera. But the school is also dedicated to sending its singers abroad, where they will plié their wares in the first world Capitals rather than in their own lands. It is hard to know what to do about this, hard to know how to correct such a dramatic economic imbalance generally which steals South African singers for the first world with its concentration of opera houses and roles but also lends the school prestige.

The point goes way beyond opera. Such are the politics of *Figaro* today, caught between a refusal to tow the line of the authenticating postcolonial past, while also vulnerable to first world pressures and drainage. Without the best singers there is also less chance for new South African music compositions to be well performed, less chance, that is, for compositional innovation in opera rather than merely performance innovation. When the best singers are being recruited as the next divas of the European opera houses, their ability to create new and vital conditions for opera in a South Africa are compromised. After awhile they are no longer working for Africa, but for La Scala. In our time Neo-liberalism with its global concentration of talent/workplace and access to global distribution has replaced neo-colonialism as the system of inequality between first and other worlds.

But is even this right? South Africa is a BRIC country, a country of significant wealth should it wish to use it. Were there real interest in sustaining the careers of these young singers within the country subsidies could be offered, ticket prices reduced, new, small theaters created, and without, ideally the usual corruption around tenders and contracts. A culture could be created.¹¹ And so the big theory of neo-liberal inequality might not quite be right after all, given the choices—consciously or unconsciously, with or without debate—countries around the world like South Africa make. And what should their choices be?

¹ C.F. for example, Michael Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity and Nineteenth Century Music* (Princeton Press: Princeton and London, 2004).

² Frantz Fanon, "On National Culture," in Patrick Williams and Ian Chrisman, eds., *Colonial and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 37.

³ The idea of "indigenous knowledge systems", formulated by the World Bank, mandated profit sharing with local peoples when global corporations seek to exploit their local knowledge of medicinal plants, agriculture and the like for big profits, by describing local knowledge "intellectual property", a way of "owning" that knowledge. For a longer discussion of how this concept of profit-sharing through intellectual property becomes part of Mbeki's African Renaissance, see my *Heritage, Culture and Politics in the Postcolony* (Columbia: New York and London, 2012).

⁴ For an excellent discussion of cultural cosmopolitanism see Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (Norton Co: New York, 2010).

⁵ He made this point in a session on the topic he and I jointly gave at the University of Cape Town in October 2014.

⁶ Fredric Nietzsche, "On The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, edited Daniel Brazeale, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and London, 1997), pp. 57-124.

⁷ For more on this see my *Heritage, Culture and Politics in the Postcolony* (Columbia Press: New York and London, 2012).

⁸ See the work of Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1991), and *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1997).

⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1992).

¹⁰ Herwitz, "Kierkegaard Writes his Opera", in *The Don Giovanni Moment*, edited Lydia Goehr and Daniel Herwitz (Columbia: New York and London, 2006).

¹¹ I rely on ideas of Lucia Saks in making this point.