

The winds of change

Nowhere in the arts is the gulf between tradition and innovation so marked as in opera. Antonia Couling talks to José Cura, one of the leading lights among a new generation of performers who believe that change must be embraced wholeheartedly for opera to survive in the 21st century

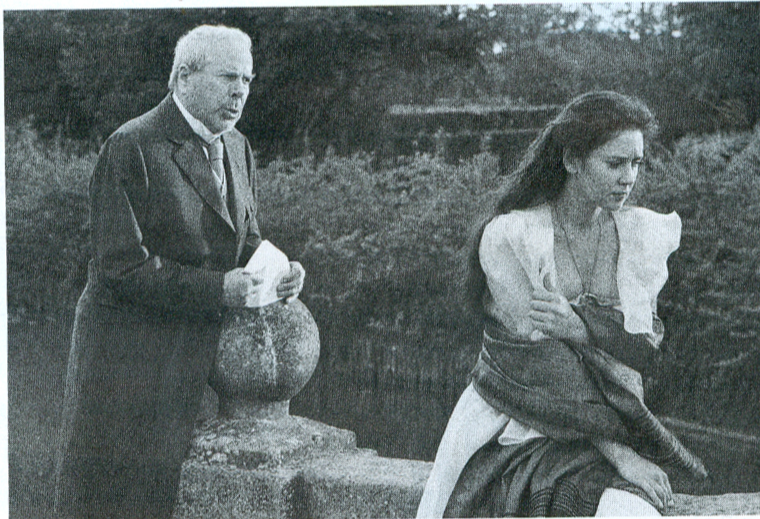
Where are we going? When it comes to opera, there are areas to which you can apply this question with some certainty of find-

ing answers: new operas, new interpretations on the part of directors, new singers, new opera houses, new audiences – all indicate a future for an art form whose performances tend to rely on a historical repertoire.

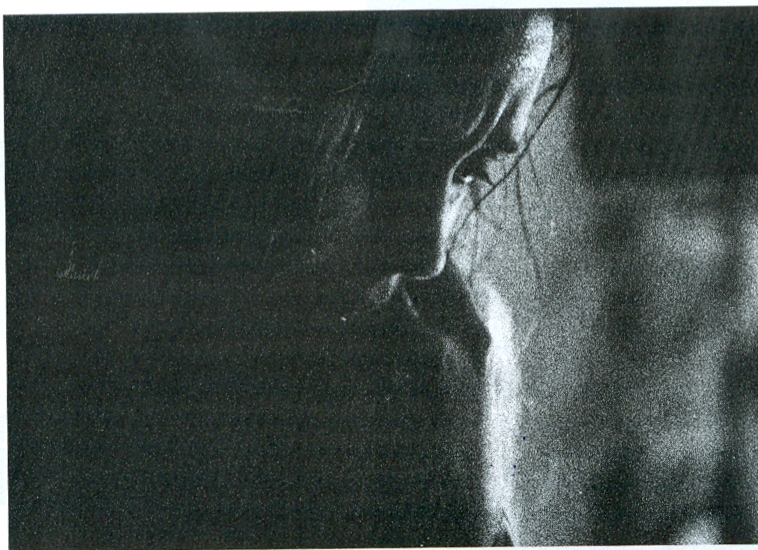
The end of the 20th century saw new approaches to another facet of opera: its manner of presentation. Think of Houston Grand Opera's modular stage, complete with video screens and banks of speakers, opera relayed on huge screens in Covent Garden's piazza, the rising number of live webcasts on the internet, and even amplification within opera houses themselves – signs that opera is slowly taking part in the global technological revolution, though whether for good or bad remains to be seen. For many, the tried and tested traditions of opera are the only ones worth hanging on to.

This summer, a number of elements of new technology came together to produce a live television transmission of *Traviata – Life and Death in Paris*. José Cura and Eteri Gvazava starred as Alfredo and Violetta, in what was a stunning feat of filming with fine performances all round. We were treated to sweeping 360 degree cinematic shots and close-ups of the most intimate moments of Verdi's heart-rending opera. Brilliantly con-

cealed microphones meant that our belief was not suspended for a moment. Over two evenings, the world tuned in and was, it seems, overwhelmingly gripped. There was the imme-



ACT II, *fennant*, VIOLETTA, DUET.



ADDIO DEL PASSATO...

diacy of a live performance and all its risks to keep you on the edge of your seat, plus the perks for those who ordinarily would not be able to afford front-row seats: the close-ups gave us all a chance to really appreciate the emotional engagement of the singers.

But there were a few who disapproved. It wasn't so much the criticism levelled at the Three Tenors that 'popularising' opera is a bad thing; this time the handle seemed to be the medium and style of the whole operation. The *Tosca* from Rome, relayed in 1995 with Catherine Malfitano, Plácido Domingo and Ruggero Raimondi never came in for such criticism, but then it wasn't so high-tech and was

still performed within confined, 'authentic' spaces. This *Traviata* had to approximate some of the settings for the opera's scenes and the whole of Act II in the surrounding fields of the couple's country house. Criticism focused not so much on the performances of the singers as on the lack of an 'authentic' experience of opera. Such quotable phrases as 'This is not opera!' were seen in certain newspapers. One letter to the Italian magazine *L'Opera* said that the transmission had 'nothing to do with Verdi's *Traviata*' and was simply a 'hybrid of multi-mediality [sic] and television expression', and ultimately predicted that such events 'could only lead to the death of opera'.

In a recent discussion with tenor José Cura about his role in the relay, the topic of how opera should be represented came up. Cura is committed to opera having a healthy future and has strong views on how this can be ensured. 'It's impossible to achieve absolute "authenticity" in today's opera, even in our so-called "traditional" productions. In Verdi's time, they didn't perform *Aida* with a chorus of 150 and an orchestra of hundreds, and 400 extras, and elephants and everything. The conservatives

that criticise – *Traviata* – *Life and Death in Paris* can't say that the *Traviata* that they propose is the ideal as was conceived by Verdi. Verdi wrote with an orchestra of 40-45 musicians in mind – we play with more than 60 or 70; Verdi wrote for a pitch of A435.32 – we now perform at almost 445. That's nearly half a tone higher. At the time of the first opera, there was no lighting, they used candles; there were no computers, everything was done by hand. If we really want to be authentic, we have to perform like that, because anything else will be ... different! If art always has to be performed in its original shape, then we are all getting it wrong – all of us.'

Reduced to the absurd, I point out, the authenticity argument would mean that we should build no new theatres, use no modern mechanisms in theatres and not listen to music on CDs. 'It's all "wrong";' agrees Cura, 'Even your job is wrong, because a magazine like yours would not exist because you are showing pictures that it would not be possible to take under normal "original" conditions of performance.'

I asked Cura if he felt there might have been an element of fear and ignorance of technology that fuelled much of the criticism of *Traviata*? 'An idiot in Italy [Cura is not one to mince his words] wrote, in the country's most important newspaper, that the mikes that the singers used in *Traviata* were the equivalent of Viagra for impotence. But we were not using amplification! The mikes were only to pick up the sound, since it wasn't a Charlie Chaplin silent movie. It was only the basics for film-making – sound and image. And for that you need mikes! It's more than just the technology,' insists Cura. But, 'it's a question of adapting to the way we think today.' Apart from the arrogance of claiming to know the intimate workings of a composer's mind with regard to 'authenticity', Verdi did not put his works into a shoe-box under his bed – he presented them to the world? surely then, they become the property of the world. Conversely, many people complain when the authenticity of a live performance is recreated in a recording studio – an approach which has occasioned criticism of



Patrizio Grifti, GUZZOVA
(Directing the scene were the near ALFREDO in the mirrors)



ALFREDO, ALFREDO... ACT II finale (II)

Cura: 'According to the critics, if you try to sing on your CD with the emotions and intensity and the noises of a live performance, you are doing wrong because it is a CD and not a live performance. So – what do they want? Please tell me! Help!'

I express exasperation at such conservatism, but Cura counters with his own brand of Darwinism: 'I thank the people who resist evolution, because they make fighters of the other side, stronger fighters. And I think that the moment that the criticism stops, we will lose that punch, that ingredient which is very, very important.' Always one for an outrageous metaphor, Cura comes up with a wildlife analogy for the relationship between performer and critic: 'If the performer is the lion who hunts,' he ventures, 'then the critic can choose

to be either the hyena who picks at the carcass that has been caught, or he can be the wind that helps the lion keep upwind and hunt successfully.'

Any process of evolution is bound to involve an element of strife, but it still strikes me that the kind of vitriol flying about in the opera world is holding the art form back too much, and at a point in its history when opera has the opportunity to broaden its horizons in leaps and bounds. Accepting change is key to the future of opera. 'There's evolution everywhere, and for everything,' agrees Cura, 'and the internet, TV, the big screen are the ultimate revolution in the times that we are living in. Forty years ago, when manually operated stage curtains were changed for electrically mechanised ones, that was a revolution too. Stages were once lit by candles, but now we have spotlights that can follow the singers all around. TV monitors show the singers the conductor's movements, and sound monitors allow us to sing, to perform and to act in a more natural way, because we can use the whole stage. Fifty years ago, it was imperative to stand at the front of the stage to deliver an aria because it was the only way to hear the orchestra and to see the conductor. Now we can create productions in which we can really act, thanks to technical innovations.'

Far from seeing itself as a bastion of tradition, opera's future lies in its ability to show the world that it can be many things and is on offer to many

people. As lovers (and critics) of opera, shouldn't we be opening our ears and listening out for quality, in whatever from it comes, rather than making judgements based on narrow criteria such as 'tradition' or 'authenticity'?

The photos seen here were taken by José Cura during the rehearsals and shooting of *Traviata – Life and Death in Paris*: 'There were a couple of photographers, and one special photographer who took *The making of* – a great photographer who taught me a lot. But because of my privileged position of being inside the set, while I was acting, rehearsing and singing, I always had my camera hidden somewhere – under the bed, under the chair – so the moment I knew that the camera was not filming me, but somebody else, I just produced my camera and took pictures.'