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Peter Sellars

ADAM WASSERMAN salutes the distinguished achievement of the OPERA NEWS Awards winner.



Photographed at the director's home in Los Angeles by James Salzano
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Great artists often run the risk of being misapprehended during their lifetimes. So when Peter Sellars's career was taking off during the early 1980s, perhaps it was inevitable that more than a few operagoers would fall back on facile descriptions such as "*Don Giovanni* in Harlem," "*Orlando* in Outer Space" and "Nixon Sings," instead of perceiving the detail and nuance on display in his productions. That people seemed eager to write off Sellars as an enfant terrible attempting to shoehorn opera into a pair of Nikes was likely the result, I think, of his ideas hitting uncomfortably close to home.

Fortunately, times have changed, and more than three decades into his incomparable career, it now seems clear to me that the most apt way to describe the artistry of director Peter Sellars is with a phrase coined by Wagner and adopted by critic Andrew Porter — "Deeds of music made visible." That Sellars has always valued the opera score as a blueprint from which genuine drama might emerge is no surprise to those who have been willing to look closely at his work; yet his brilliance remains all the more conspicuous amid our current overabundance of directors inclined to treat composers' music merely as the soundtrack to their own onstage drama or special effects. If there is currently no other director capable of staging the byzantine Act II finale to *Figaro*, or the ballroom scene in *Giovanni*, or the political theater of "Va tacito" with such staggeringly inventive visual virtuosity as Sellars achieved, it's not just because they may be unable to read music or identify dance forms or the subtleties of orchestration or underline how the mores of one period might correlate to those of another. It's also because there's likely no one so inspired or exuberantly creative as Sellars directing opera at the moment.

For an artist with the stated goal of "re-energizing spirituality in a secular context," it makes sense that the stage would be the closest thing to a sacred place. So it seems appropriate that Sellars's best work has always exhibited a choreographer's understanding of form and stillness, along with a percussionist's acute appreciation of silence. (At times, Sellars has seemed to me a kind of artistic lovechild of Andrei Tarkovsky and Busby Berkeley, with Otto Klemperer having served as a surrogate.) Watch the DVD of his stunning Glyndebourne production of *Theodora*, and note how he slowly brings the beatific Lorraine Hunt Lieberson downstage left and surrounds her with a penumbra as she covers her eyes and genuflects during the first verse of "As with rosy steps the morn." Next, pay a visit to his astounding production of Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin* — an opera in which very little happens by way of action, but every incandescent, unsettling strain of sound emerging from the orchestra plays out on the faces of Dawn Upshaw and Gerald Finley. Likewise, witness Finley perform "Batter my heart, three person'd God" in the director's production of *Doctor Atomic* while moving toward an eerily backlit curtain obscuring the ghostly atomic bomb, and just try to keep from running straight to the nearest fallout shelter.

Sellars's accomplishments would certainly be impressive enough from a technical standpoint were they efforts purely in the service of entertainment. But concurrent to every step in his career, the director has shown himself to be an artist eager to engage with the most difficult questions facing the public in the hope of arriving at a more humane, syncretic answer. Revisiting Sellars's decade-long consideration of the Mozart–da Ponte trilogy through the DVDs, one is particularly astonished by the *Giovanni*, with its ability to evoke a certain nostalgia for a grittier moment in New York City's history, when an impoverished empire appeared to be slipping through the cracks on its slow descent into hell, and all we could do was observe from under the dining room table. I suppose it's somehow apt that, to a child of the '80s, the *Giovanni* now comes across more as a disarmingly honest, Reagan-era *dramma giocoso* than as overblown farce or an unwieldy mixture of art and pornography. I'm also hard-pressed to think of another living artist capable of bringing life to works such as *Desdemona* and *El Niño*, which ask us to parse the stories of our collective history — our tragedies and nativities — from the points of view of the most disenfranchised among us. Anyone who has ever perceived a Sellars production as frivolous would probably do well to seek out his stagings of *Mein Herz schwimmt im Blut* and *Ich Habe Genug*, which urge us to consider the idea that maybe Bach's music might be able to show us how to die with grace.

Few artists have the ability to draw truly meaningful connections between their present circumstances and the great artworks of the past; fewer still are honest and perspicacious enough to create something that can anticipate the memories of audiences in the future. In making himself an artist whose preoccupations and concerns grapple with nothing less than the fate of humanity, Peter Sellars has created a body of work that will transcend epoch and place, style and fad. It will be esteemed as timeless, because it will still find a way to speak directly to audiences even after our time has run out. ■

ADAM WASSERMAN