

Notes on “Municipal Bands and Opera Tricks”

Lassalle — Jean Lassalle was a French baritone, very popular in London

empty pomposity of the Paris Opera — Many people felt during the last half of the 19th century that the Paris Opera thought it was very important, but didn't have much artistic integrity. So Shaw says the Paris Opera had pomposity, meaning that it was full of pomp, meaning that there was, when you went there, a feeling that very big things were happening. But this is empty, as he puts it, because there was no real artistic achievement in the performances.

chain and bullet — We would say “ball and chain.” This was something used to keep prisoners from going anywhere. A heavy metal ball, too heavy for a person to move, would be attached with a chain to a prisoner's ankle.

stock-in-trade as an actor — The things he's able to do as an actor. The expression “stock in trade” comes from retail stores. A store's stock is the collection of things it has available to sell. “Trade” means buying and selling. So a store's stock-in-trade would be the things it normally has available to sell. The expression then gets used to mean the things that would normally be done in other situations. Like, in this case, the things Lassalle is able to do as an actor.

self-approbation — praising himself

crippled jester etc. — Rigoletto, in Verdi's opera, is a court jester, someone whose job is to amuse a duke and the aristocrats in his palace. Rigoletto is savagely satirical, and the people in the duke's palace hate him. But what nobody knows is that he has a sweet and innocent teenage daughter. This is the only person he loves, and he keeps her hidden from the world.

the great scene with the courtiers — one of Rigoletto's big scenes in the opera, written very high in the baritone range.

Philharmonic pitch, French pitch — in Shaw's time, orchestras didn't all tune to the same A440. They might adopt a slightly higher or slightly lower pitch. Evidently the pitch at the Covent Garden opera house was the pitch adopted in France, which was lower than the pitch at the Philharmonic orchestra in London. So if Lassalle, singing at Covent Garden, was already singing Rigoletto at a lower pitch than he might sing it elsewhere, it's all the more unjustified for him to sing his big scene transposed a whole tone down. (How did Shaw know? Did he have perfect pitch?)

without turning a hair — without seeming in any way bothered

La donna è mobile — the Duke's most famous aria, one of the most famous tenor arias in all opera

the honors of the occasion were carried off by Madame Melba — the best thing in the performance was the singing of Madame Melba. This refers to the only singer in this Rigoletto cast who's still remembered today, Nellie Melba, an Australian soprano. She was one of the leading opera singers in Shaw's time, and is considered one of the greatest sopranos in opera history.

the license in this instance justifying itself by its effect — Verdi didn't write a high D flat at the end of the Rigoletto Quartet. Instead, he wrote a lower D flat, to be sung quietly in the middle of the soprano's range. But singers often add unwritten high notes to their roles in Italian opera,

and in Shaw's time the high D flat is what you'd expect to hear from any soprano who could sing that high. Shaw calls this a "license," meaning that it's a departure from the score that, according to the highest artistic standards, no singer should make. But by saying that the license in this instance justifies itself by its effect, Shaw means that the D flat sounded so wonderful that he can't blame Melba for not singing what Verdi wrote.

Notes on "Herr Mottl's Insight"

Mr Henschel — George Henschel, a German conductor who settled in London and founded a series called the London Symphony Concerts, which later evolved into the orchestra we now know as the London Symphony. Henschel was the first conductor of the Boston Symphony, was close friends with Brahms, and — very unusually for a conductor — started his career as a singer.

spirited cutting-in — Apparently Henschel did something that would never happen today. When he heard that Felix Mottl, a conductor famous in Germany, was going to bring his orchestra to London and give a concert of Wagner excerpts, Henschel decided to give his own Wagner concert, with almost the same programs! Evidently orchestras in the 1890s didn't plan their programs years in advance, as of course happens now.

Felix Mottl, an Austrian conductor, regarded in Shaw's time as one of the best conductors in the world. He had been an assistant conductor at the world premiere of Wagner's Ring, and was chief conductor of the opera house in the German city of Karlsruhe

good taste would have meant moral cowardice — Shaw is saying that having "good taste" means never taking any risks, being too cowardly to do anything with any real meaning.

always anxious to be kept in countenance — always anxious to encourage

flourish of trumpets which heralded Mottl's arrival — his upcoming visit made people very excited

decline to admit the pretensions of the stranger etc — refuse to admit that someone from another country could teach us how to conduct Wagner

creditable to the challenger — more to his credit; he should be praised for making the challenge

put to shame — shown to be inferior

before the Rienzi overture was half through — Rienzi is one of Wagner's early operas, best known for its overture. Evidently the Rienzi overture began Mottl's program, and Shaw is saying that even halfway through that opening performance it was clear that Mottl was going to be better

to which we have become so inured here etc — Shaw is saying that there are bad things in Wagner performances that people in London have gotten used to, so much so that they no longer blame conductors for not fixing the problems. But when Mottl conducted, those bad things vanished.

Richter - Hans Richter, a Hungarian conductor, born János Richter, who then settled in Germany and became known as Hans. He worked closely with Wagner, but also was friendly with Brahms. He conducted the world premiere of the complete Ring, and came to London as an assistant conductor when Wagner led concerts there. He stayed in London, founded his own Richter Orchestra, and later became the first conductor of the London Symphony when it was founded (growing out of Henschel's London Symphony Concerts) in 1904. In Shaw's time, he was considered the leading conductor in London.

the overture to Tannhäuser — Tannhäuser is one of Wagner's operas. The overture (which exists in two versions) is often heard on orchestra concerts. (Or it used to be often heard. I haven't noticed it on orchestral programs recently, but maybe I just haven't seen it.)

the three trombones — they play the slow and noble pilgrim's march theme in unison

an Italian singer — in Shaw's time, and well into the 20th century, Italian singers used a lot of portamento when they sang. Instrumental players used it, too (just look at all the portamento markings for the violins in Mahler symphonies), but less than singers did

strict Procrustean time for the florid work of the violins — while the trombones play the pilgrim's march, the violins play extremely fast rhythmic figures. Procrustes, meanwhile, is a sinister blacksmith in Greek mythology, who either stretched peoples' bodies or cut off their legs to make them fit perfectly in an iron bed. And so (from Wikipedia): "The word "Procrustean" is thus used to describe situations where different lengths or sizes or properties are fitted to an arbitrary standard." Shaw is saying that most conductors take this passage in an extremely strict tempo to keep the trombones and the violins together, disregarding the needs of the individual parts.

give the time to the whole band - set the tempo for the whole orchestra

the great passage at the end of Die Walküre - Die Walküre is the second of the four operas of Wagner's Ring. Wotan, the main character, ends the opera with a broad and striking phrase, which is repeated (or as Shaw would say, reaffirmed) by the brass. In the orchestral repertoire, this comes at the end of the orchestral excerpt called *Wotan's Farewell and the Magic Fire Music.* Much as in the Tannhäuser overture, the brass (in this case, four trombones, joined by three trumpets and tuba) play a broad melody in unison (well, with the trumpets in a higher octave and the tuba in a lower one) while the violins and six harps play quicker rhythmic figurations.

the Flying Dutchman overture — The Flying Dutchman (Der fliegende Holländer) is another of Wagner's operas. Its overture is (or used to be) a familiar piece on orchestral concerts. It tells the story of a Dutch sea captain (male, of course), who is cursed to sail the seas until he finds a woman willing to sacrifice herself for him. To me, that's such a horrible (or at best, obsolete) view of woman that I can't bear to see the opera performed. But maybe that's just me. The overture has two main themes, one that depicts the furious raging of ocean storms, and another, which of course is more lyrical, that represents the Dutchman's salvation, thanks to the woman he meets.

Wagner thought it sufficient etc — Shaw is saying that Wagner thought the contrast between the two themes should be obvious, so much so that he didn't specifically mark in the score that they should be played at different tempi (the salvation theme of course being slower than the storm theme). And yet, Shaw says, everyone in his time was used to hearing orchestras dragged (by their conductors) through the two themes at about the same tempo. Which meant that the storm theme would go too slowly, and the salvation theme would go too fast. (Wagner, by the way, believed that each new theme in a piece should be played in its own tempo, and

specifically thought that Beethoven's symphonies should be done that way. That should tell anyone interested in a composer's intentions how he wanted his operas to be performed.)

a true allegro con brio — a truly spirited allegro, rather than an allegro pompous, a pompous one.

reminded me of Wagner — Shaw evidently saw Wagner conduct this piece when Wagner visited London in 1877. I wonder how he knew that Wagner swore at the orchestra for not playing these chords loudly enough! Shaw was in his 40s when he wrote these reviews, and would have been 21 when Wagner gave his London concerts.

cannonade - continuous heavy gunfire

the drums — the timpani. E.M. Forster also had one of his characters call the timpani the "drum." I guess other kinds of drums just weren't common in orchestras back then.

the accents of the music — the rhythms

Tannhäuser's paeon to Venus - Tannhäuser, the main character in Wagner's opera, is torn between a chaste Christian life and a wildly sexual pagan way of living. He's shown visiting Venus - yes, quite literally, the Greek goddess of love — and singing a song in praise of her sexuality. (A paeon is a song in praise of something.) An instrumental version of this song is the second main theme of the overture. The first main theme is the pilgrim's march, representing the Christian life.

galop - a lively country dance, which became popular in the 1820s in fashionable society

the two trumpet blasts - the orchestral version of the song is played by the violins, with the trumpets doubling the first two notes

as if someone had tipped two out of a row of iron railings with gilding - as if someone painted them with gold paint

the true accent of oratorical passion - when someone gives a speech, if it's especially long and powerful it might be called an oration. So oratory is the art of giving such speeches, and an orator is someone who gives them. Oratorical passion would be the excitement that inflames someone giving an oration. When Tannhäuser sings his paeon to Venus, he's in effect giving an oration, and Shaw says that when the two trumpet notes are properly played, they make the melody sound like passionate speech. Which, he says, is how it should sound, rather than like a march or a dance.

his self-possession is completed instead of destroyed by excitement - the more excited he gets, the more he seems completely in control of himself

It must not be supposed — here Shaw starts a new thought, and I'm surprised he didn't make this sentence the start of a new paragraph, to make clear that it starts a new thought

just the opposite mode of musical feeling - slow and otherworldly (ethereal), rather than fast and passionate. Lohengrin of course is another of Wagner's operas. The prelude (also once very popular on orchestral concerts) begins with very soft, slow music played very high in the violins.

Needless to say, the band fell considerably short — Shaw means that even with Mottl conducting, the violins couldn't make this music sound calm, peaceful, heavenly. Or in other

words, they didn't play it well enough to create the effect Wagner intended. This is interesting to read because the violins in orchestras today can play this music very well. Apparently that wasn't true even for the best orchestras in Shaw's time.

the Venus strain — before the song to Venus appears in the orchestra, there's softer music for the clarinets, which is meant to sound sweet and sensual.

at the end of the Tristan prelude, etc — The Wagner excerpt here is the Prelude and Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde.

came stealing in — began almost imperceptibly

giving the right time to the band — setting the right tempo

veil the cheapness and Rossinian tum-tum of the Rienzi overture— Rienzi isn't considered a very profound work. Shaw is saying that the overture sounds cheap, or in other words empty and shallow. And also because it's filled with the kind of simple rhythms found in Rossini. Shaw says that Mottl "veils" this, meaning that he managed to conduct in a way that made the audience not hear the cheapness.

"stripped naked with a ruthless hand" — Shaw says that in contrast to Mottl, Henschel conducted the Rienzi overture in a brutal (ruthless) way, which made stripped any cover off its emptiness, leaving that plainly heard

not merely turning an empty phrase in compliment to a Bayreuth reputation — Wagner built an opera house in Bayreuth, in Germany, where his operas could be performed under his direction. This opera house became famous throughout Europe, and people who loved Wagner's music were said to make a "pilgrimage" to Bayreuth (as if they were devoted followers of a religion, making a journey to a sacred shrine). It was taken for granted that performances in Bayreuth were supremely good, and people would assume that anyone who was a star at Wagner's theater (as Mottl) was, would be one of the world's great musicians. Shaw is saying here that in praising Mottl, he really means that Mottl is terrifically good. And that he isn't merely putting empty words together ("turning an empty phrase"), to praise Mottl only because of his reputation in Bayreuth. (When Shaw went to Bayreuth, he was honest enough to say that the performances weren't as fine as people said they were, especially because the singers weren't very good. This must have been a shock to many of his readers, since he was so well known for his passion for Wagner. The Bayreuth festival, by the way, continues in the present day, performing only Wagner's operas, in the same theater that Wagner built.)

Mr Schulz-Curtius — Alfred Schultz-Curtius was a German manager, famous for popularizing Wagner's music. Apparently he was the one who arranged Mottl's performance in London.

the concert room is, against its own nature, doing the work of quite another social organ — The Wagner works conducted at these concerts are all excerpts from Wagner's operas. Shaw is saying that because of this, the music is really meant to be heard in an opera house, not in a concert hall. Putting opera excerpts in a concert hall goes against the nature of a concert hall, Shaw says, because in a concert hall, you simply sit and listen, as opposed to hearing the music in the context of a full theatrical performance.

We have, unfortunately, no Wagner theatre here — Shaw is saying that because there's no Wagner theater like Bayreuth in London, the choice there is between not hearing Wagner at all, or hearing only orchestral excerpts from his works. Lying behind this statement is something all of Shaw's readers would have known, so Shaw has no need to mention it — that Wagner's

operas were only rarely done in London's opera houses. Thus there's no way to hear them, except when orchestral excerpts are played.

an arrangement of the Liebestod for a band — an arrangement for an orchestra.

the Miserere scene from *Il Trovatore* or a Pinafore pot-pourri — *Il Trovatore* is one of Verdi's most popular operas, and the Miserere (for soprano, tenor, and chorus) is one of its most popular pieces. Pinafore is shorthand for H.M.S. Pinafore, one of the most popular Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, which were new and very popular in Shaw's time. A potpourri (we now spell it without the hyphen) is a mixture of spices and flower petals, used to make a room smell pleasant. It also can mean a medley, a musical piece that's a collection of shorter pieces. (Shaw is exaggerating here, in my opinion. To play the Miserere at an orchestra concert, you'd have to make an orchestral arrangement of the music that combined the vocal and orchestral parts. The orchestral accompaniment by itself - since it's nothing but rhythmic patterns of chords — wouldn't mean very much. But the orchestral part of the Liebestod is so absorbing and elaborate that you can in fact perform it by itself, simply omitting the vocal part. And it sounds perfectly fine, as if Wagner wrote it that way.)

Parsifal prelude — Parsifal is yet another Wagner opera. Its prelude is very slow and much of it is quiet. Surely not the way we'd end a concert program these days

Wakürenritt — A Wagner orchestral excerpt, better known to us as The Ride of the Valkyries.

take these chronological programs backwards — apparently these Wagner programs put the music in the order in which Wagner composed it. So they'd start with the *Rienzi* overture, from one of Wagner's very early operas, and end with the Parsifal program, since Parsifal was Wagner's last opera. Shaw wants the order reversed, so Wagner's later music (which Shaw thinks is the best; I'd agree) comes first. He says that ending with the very loud *Rienzi* overture would wake us all up when our attention has been dulled. I can understand why he'd think ending this way would demoralize the orchestra, put them in a bad mood (presumably because they'd already played much better music). But I'm not sure why he seems to be saying that this is a good thing, or at least acceptable.

so far over the heads of the public — Shaw thinks Richter is so good that the public can't understand how good he is. Therefore few people know whether he's conducting his best, because nobody can tell. And so few people demand that he do his best. But if Mottl conducted regularly in London, Shaw says, then at least "a considerable body" of people would hear the difference between Mottl's best and Richter's second-best.

put on his mettle — put in a position where he has to show how good he is

(I'm not going to say anything about the three pianists Shaw goes on to talk about, because what he means is clear even if we don't know the names.)