

SKUNCKE, M.-C. & IVARSDOTTER, A., 1998.

*Svenska operans födelse. Studier i gustaviansk musikdramatik* (The Birth of Swedish Opera 1772–1792 / La Naissance de l'Opéra suédois 1772–1792)

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During the reign of Gustaf III (1771–1792), Swedish opera rose out of nowhere to reach a high level by European standards. Gustaf, himself a prominent dramatist, played a central part in this development. The purpose of this volume is to explore the creation of Swedish opera through studies of representative works (both grand opera and *opéra comique*), focusing on text and music and the relationships between the two. Classical rhetoric is used as an analytical tool.

In creating the Stockholm Opera, Gustaf III was influenced by French *tragédie lyrique* with its emphasis on spectacular visual effects (a point made clear by the letters of the Italian abbé Domenico Michelessi). The development of Swedish opera librettos is studied in chapters 1–2. Chapters 3–4 are devoted to the relationships between text and music: How did librettists and composers solve the problems of mutually adapting words (in a new opera language, Swedish) and music? And how do text and music unite to arouse the emotions of the spectators? Chapter 5 is a study of opera parody and its mechanisms. Chapters 6–8 deal with the use of national Swedish symbols: on the one hand representatives of the common people in the Swedish provinces, including the exotic Laplanders, on the other hand the great heroes of Swedish history, above all Gustaf III's predecessors Gustaf Vasa and Gustaf Adolf. The Epilogue turns to Russia and Catherine the Great's caricature of her Swedish cousin Gustaf III in a devastating parody.

Key-words: eighteenth-century opera, Interart Studies, classical rhetoric, librettology, national symbols, national opera.

THE AUTHORS of this book are specialists in literary history (MCS) and musicology (AI). Marie-Christine Skuncke has written the Introduction and chapters 1–5. Anna Ivarsdotter is responsible for chapters 6–8 and the Epilogue; she has also provided the basis for the musicological analyses in chapters 3–5.

Swedish opera was born during the reign of Gustaf III (1746–92), an enlightened despot in the style of his uncle Frederick II, of Joseph II and Catherine the Great. Created almost from scratch in 1773, Gustavian opera reached high European standards in less than fifteen years. It was a national venture (librettos were written in Swedish and subjects often drawn from Swedish history), but at the same time it was a cosmopolitan enterprise; composers came from Italy (Uttini) or Germany (Naumann, Kraus, Vogler, Haeffner), scenographers and choreographers were often French, e.g. the stage designer Desprez and the ballet-master Gallodier. Imported works – particularly Gluck's operas – formed an important part of the repertoire. King Gustaf, a born stage director and the best Swedish dramatist of the age, wrote several opera librettos together with collaborators who turned his prose drafts into verse.

From the 1980s on, interest in Gustavian opera has intensified and led to publications like *Gustavian Opera* (1991) and to CD recordings. However librettos and the relationships between text and music have received little attention, with the exception of articles by Alan Swanson. From the angle of our respective specialities, literary history and musicology, we explore the following points: the creation of the Swedish opera in 1772–73 (ch. 1); the evolution of opera librettos (ch. 1–2); relationships between text and music (ch. 3–4); opera parody and its mechanisms (ch. 5); the construction of national symbols (ch. 6–8). The works analysed come from the repertoire of the Stockholm theatres, the Royal Theatre (Kungl. Teatern) for grand opera and the private stages of the Stenborg family for *opéra comique*. Among our analytical tools, mention should be made of classical rhetoric, a necessary skill for both librettists ('invention', style) and singers (declamation, gestures); rhetoric also influenced the practice of musical composition.

Founded on the eve of the French Revolution, Swedish opera was a monarchic in-

stitution, glorifying the reigning dynasty and financed by the King himself. In the new Opera House (1782) the auditorium was dominated by the large royal box. Seating was strictly hierarchical, as shown by sources such as lists of subscribers. The Royal Theatre sought to attract spectators through its theatre almanacs, enticing little volumes with fashion engravings. The press, on the other hand, played only a marginal part in the theatrical life of the capital.

At a time when comic opera was receiving acclaim at a number of European courts, Gustaf III went in for grand, heroic opera. Two factors throw light on this choice (chapter 1). First, there is Gustaf's experience of French opera when he visited Paris as crown prince in 1771. In Moreau's magnificent opera house he saw *Pirame et Thisbé*, a typical French *tragédie lyrique* with lavish stage machinery and song and dance *divertissements* (he was at the Paris opera when he learnt of his father's sudden death). Secondly, there are the reports of the Italian abbé Domenico Michelessi on the creation of the Swedish Opera in 1772–73. Writing from Stockholm to his protector Bonomo Algarotti, Michelessi recounted the progress of the King's preparations, while at the same time describing an initiative of his own: together with a cosmopolitan team he was working on the libretto of a Swedish historical opera, *Gustaf Ericsson Wasa*. An analysis of the manuscript, still extant in the Royal Library in Stockholm, shows the libretto to be a Swedish attempt in the Italian *opera seria* genre. The work was never performed.

The King, meanwhile, opted for the French model when he devised the libretto of the first Swedish opera, *Thetis och [and] Pelée* (1773), with a wealth of ballets and spectacular stage effects. Grand opera, uniting the powers of poetry, music, scenography and dance, was an ideal political tool for influencing public opinion.

The libretto analyses in chapters 1 and 2 concentrate on dramaturgy, ideology and rhetorical patterns. After *Thetis och Pelée*, based on a French seventeenth-century work by Fontenelle and Colasse, we turn to *Birger Jarl* (1774), an adaptation of *La Princesse de Navarre* by Voltaire and Rameau – a 'medieval' subject in rococo garb, designed for a princely wedding. *Proserpin*, by the young poet Kellgren and the young German composer Kraus (1781), is altogether different. It too is based on a French work, *Proserpine* by Quinault and Lully; yet while Quinault glorifies royal absolutism, Kellgren presents a fragmented universe with characters swayed by passion, not far from the spirit of *Werther*. The work was not performed at the Royal Theatre.

In the 'Peruvian' opera *Cora och Alonzo* (1782) on the other hand, the poet Adlerbeth imposes classical restraint on Marmontel's verbose prose in the novel *Les Incas*;



at the same time he omits the Frenchman's criticism of European colonialism. *Gustaf Wasa* (1786), finally, is a grand national venture, a historical opera staging the fight for independence of Gustaf Vasa (Gustaf III:s ancestor) from the Danish yoke in the sixteenth century. In the libretto by Gustaf III and Kellgren the King draws on a variety of sources, e.g. *Gustaf Ericsson Wasa*, but achieves dramaturgical cogency and scenic power, at a time when he was planning a war against Denmark.

The relationships between text and music are explored in chapters 3 and 4. The Swedish debate on opera, still modest in scope, must be seen in a European context. As concerns the language question for instance, advocates of Swedish as an opera language attributed to the Swedish tongue the same musical qualities as Rousseau praised in the Italian. Regarding the vexed question of the primacy of text or music, we study the changing views of Kellgren, both librettist and opera critic. In theoretical writings of the time – e.g. by Rousseau, Diderot and Grimm or by the Italian Francesco Algarotti (Bonomo Algarotti's brother) – one is struck by the presence of classical rhetoric as a frame for their discussions. In Gustavian Sweden stress was laid on *pathos*, poetry and music uniting to arouse the emotions or 'affections' of the spectators.

How do librettists and composers solve the problems of mutually adapting words (in a new opera language, Swedish) and music? How do verbal and musical expression concur to stir the emotions of the audience? We seek to answer these questions through five analyses of scenes from Gustavian works. First two comic operas where the librettist provided new words to extant music: *Zemire och Azor* by Grétry, with the young woman poet Anna Maria Malmstedt translating Marmontel's libretto, and *Kronfogdarne* (The Bailiffs), a *comédie en vaudevilles* by Carl Envallsson. We then turn to three grand operas with new music set to new words: *Thetis och Pelée*, with amateurish poetry by Wellander but competent baroque music by the Italian Uttini; *Proserpin*, two scenes by Kellgren and Kraus in a 'preromantic' vein (we compare them to the equivalent passages in Quinault and Lully); and lastly *Gustaf Wasa* – a scene in the 'deliberative' genre of classical rhetoric, with the hero torn between honour and filial love, to the patriotic strains of Kellgren and the composer Naumann.

The pompous operas of the Royal Theatre were deflated by parodies staged by the private theatres of the Stenborg family, with words by Hallman and music by Carl Stenborg. Thetis and Pelée became Petis and Télée, Arcadia gave way to taverns. In chapter 5 we analyse the mechanisms of opera parody: *comique descendant* (Corinne Pré), with a systematic deformation of text, stage settings, gestures and music.

Though largely dependent on foreign models, the creators of Gustavian operas often attempted to give their works a 'Swedish' character. Chapters 6 to 8 are devoted to the use of national symbols in an *ancien régime* system before the breakthrough of modern nationalism. As an 'old nation of Europe' (Hugh Seton-Watson), Sweden could draw on a well-established set of symbols from the 'Gothic' (*götisk*) tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Sweden as an exotic, Northern clime, the glorious country of the Pole Star. In Gustavian works, 'Northern' elements, the people of the provinces and the heroes of Swedish history are used to magnify and often to legitimise the reigning dynasty.

The 'Northern' elements function in a variety of ways. In the Prologue to *Amphion* (with music by Naumann, 1778), the Winter King recedes when Felicity (i.e. Gustaf III) brings the warmth of civilisation to the North. Exotic Laplanders are used in several *divertissements*, as mysterious soothsayers in *Birger Jarl*, elsewhere as faithful subjects praising the Swedish King. The 'Lapland' character was restricted to costumes and magic drums, but no attempt was made to render Lapp singing (*jojk*) on the Swedish stage; in *Birger Jarl*, the Lapps were danced by French character dancers. Scandinavian mythology figures in Gustaf III's opera *Frigga* (1787), a weird work with decors by Desprez which blend Greek, Egyptian and 'Northern' elements, and with music by the Swedish composer Åhlström.

In the *divertissements*, the inhabitants of various Swedish provinces, invariably faithful royalists, are often employed to glorify the King with their picturesque costumes, folk tunes and folk dances (e.g. 'Daldansen'). A favourite with Gustaf III was Dalecarlia, the scene of his ancestor Gustaf Vasa's legendary adventures. – In Swedish comic operas from the Stenborg theatres, we meet with genre scenes from both rural and urban life.

Gustaf III, who had been brought up with the cult of his great predecessors on the Swedish throne, wrote a number of plays and operas with subjects drawn from Swedish history. His choice – already in the 1780s – of grand opera as a medium for presenting heroes from national history is an original contribution in a European perspective. In *Gustaf Wasa* with its strictly aristocratic world, the King appealed to the Swedish nobility. *Gustaf Adolfs och Ebba Brahe* (1788), performed at a time when Gustaf sought the support of the lower Estates, is an interesting experiment combining 'high', aristocratic codes with 'low', popular codes in text, music and costumes; peasants and fishermen are presented not as an anonymous collective but as individuals with a dignity of their own. The work points forward to the 'discovery of the people' in the nineteenth century.

The Epilogue centers on two works about Gustaf III, a satire and a panegyric. While war was raging between Sweden and Russia, Catherine the Great devised a devastating caricature of her Swedish cousin in the comic opera *Gorebogatir Kosometovich* (1789), with music by Vicente Martín y Soler; Gustaf III is there exposed as a 'paltry hero' with ludicrous war ambitions. Three years later, the King was assassinated at the Stockholm Opera. At the funeral in the Riddarholm Church, a Cantata by Kraus was performed, extolling the virtues of the late monarch in a 'Northern' scenography. The Cantata was closer to opera than to church music, an appropriate exit for the 'Theatre King'.