

“There’s Something Missing Here...” Milo Rau, Opera, and the Search for the Real (Mozart)

Carlo Lanfossi

Review-essay of *La clemenza di Tito*, music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, li-bretto by Caterino Mazzolà. Orchestre de la Suisse Romande conducted by Maxim Emelyanychev. Stage direction by Milo Rau. Live streaming on February 19, 2021, GTG Digital.

Creative team: Anton Lukas, set designer; Ottavia Castellotti, costume designer; Jürgen Kolb, light designer; Moritz von Dungern, videos; Clara Pons, dramaturg; Alan Woodbridge, choir director.

Cast: Bernard Richter, Tito; Serena Farnocchia, Vitellia; Anna Goryachova, Sesto; Cecilia Molinari, Annio; Marie Lys, Servilia; Justin Hopkins, Publio.

There’s no such thing as *real* opera. Not that there is no ideal or genuine experience of opera. Or even that opera is not “real”: of course it is, otherwise there would be no explanation for its stubborn persistence, against all financial odds, on the stages of every major opera house in the Western realm. Opera is very real for those who pay for it and for those who get paid for it. Mozart, for instance, called the new version of the libretto for *La clemenza di Tito*, which he set to music, a “vera opera”. Not because it was (the) original: on the contrary, he thought it was “real” precisely because it was a heavily revised text which he believed would suit better his musico-dramaturgical taste. For Mozart, opera was real when it let go of its own past. So, when the digital curtain opened for the new production of *La clemenza di Tito* at the Grand Théâtre de Genève and there was no music, no singing, only a few people dressed as artists/performers claiming, in spoken Italian, that “there’s something missing here...” (“qui manca qualcosa...”), I was not surprised.

For many reviewers of this new staging by Milo Rau, however, that was just the beginning of a series of traumatic lacks. There appeared to be defi-



Fig. 1 Serena Farnocchia/Vitellia and Bernard Richter/Tito at the beginning of the show. Still frame from the streamed performance on GTG Digital (February 19, 2021)

nately something missing from this production of Mozart's *Clemenza*: Mozart himself. Caught off-guard by the unexplainable absence of a composer who has been dead for more than two centuries, critics have blamed Swiss-born, Belgian-based, Opera-virgin Milo Rau for a variety of sins:

The Swiss theater artist ventured into Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* in Geneva and imposed on the opera whatever was in his head. Mozart is forgotten in the process.¹

With the approval of the young conductor Maxim Emelyanychev, Rau has drastically cut down Mozart's work: ... a good part of the arias and a large part of the recitatives were replaced by spoken or on-screen biographical accounts.²

¹ "Der Schweizer Theaterkünstler hat sich in Genf an Mozarts *La clemenza di Tito* gewagt und der Oper aufgesetzt, was in seinem Kopf schwirrte. Mozart geht dabei vergessen." Christian Berzins, "Milo Raus erste Opernregie: Ein Abend zum Vergessen," *Tagblatt*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.tagblatt.ch/kultur/milo-raus-erste-opernregie-ein-abend-zum-vergessen-ld.2104910>.

² "Mit Zustimmung des jungen Dirigenten Maxim Emelyanychev hat Rau Mozarts Werk drastisch zusammengestrichen: ... ein Gutteil der Arien und ein Großteil der Rezitative waren ersetzt durch gesprochene oder auf dem Bildschirm eingeblendete biographische Erzählungen." Peter Wolf-Dieter, "Anklage mit Mozart – „La Clemenza di Tito“ als politische

We also came hoping to see Mozart's opera, and we really only get a side view of that. This *Tito*—Mozart's one—is swamped in Rau's agitprop theatre: actually, you feel that maybe any text would have done for his purposes. ... Of course, [Rau's interpretation] is *true*. It's just that, as Mozart might have said, it's not necessarily the slightly less teen-activist point [Rau] was trying to make.³

But opera and classical music are also much more, something which Milo Rau has no feeling for, and perhaps he doesn't even want to.⁴

If we unpack the issues listed in this selection of digitally available reviews, the director is blamed for: cutting a good part of the opera's recitatives (true, even though they were not even written by Mozart);⁵ cutting too many musical numbers (in truth, not a single musical number was cut, only a few *da capo* and small sections of the *accompagnati*, while the finale was featured twice and a bonus Fantasia in C minor K.475 was performed by the conductor at the beginning of Act 2, which amounts to the same or even more music than any other recent production of *Clemenza*);⁶ having extensively reworked the different sections of the Metastasian libretto (spoiler alert: Metastasio was already dead by almost a decade when Mazzolà radically transformed the old 1734 libretto into a “*vera opera*”, as Mozart himself noted);⁷ finally, having no predilection toward opera and classical music (there

Attacke an der Oper Genf,” *nmz online*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.nmz.de/online/anlage-mit-mozart-la-clemenza-di-tito-als-politische-attacke-an-der-oper-genf>.

3 Robert Thicknesse, “Moving Beyond the Text—‘La clemenza di Tito,’ Geneva,” *The Critic*, March 17, 2021, <https://thecritic.co.uk/moving-beyond-the-text/>.

4 “Oper und Klassik aber sind auch noch etwas anderes, für das Milo Rau kein Gespür hat, vielleicht will er es auch nicht (wahr)haben.” Reinhard J. Brembeck, “Kunstgeschwätz zwecks Machterhalt—Milo Raus Operndebüt als Stream,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/oper-mozart-milo-rau-1.5213030>.

5 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *La clemenza di Tito*, critical edition by Franz Giegling, *Neue Mozart Ausgabe*, series II, *Works for the Stage*, work group 5, vol. 20, Foreword, x, https://dme.mozarteum.at/DME/nma/nmapub_srch.php?l=2.

6 For a complete list of the musical numbers performed during the 2021 production, see *La Clémence de Titus: Opéra de Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, program notes, February 19, 2021, Grand Théâtre de Genève, https://issuu.com/geneveopera/docs/2021_gtg_la_clemence_de_titus_programme, 22–23. The online streaming of the show (excluding the intermission) lasted ca. 2 hours and 25 minutes. René Jacobs's 2006 recording—“nothing short of revolutionary [... as] it rehabilitate[s] the original score in its entirety”, claims the back cover—clocks in at 2 hours and 15 minutes (HMC 901923.24).

7 See Ruth Tatlow and Magnus Tessing Schneider, “‘La clemenza di Tito.’ Chronology

is no mention of the director's feelings towards theater, which—last time I checked—the operatic genre belongs to).

I believe this last issue to be not only at the very core of Milo Rau's staging of his first opera, but also one that has serious implications for the survival of the genre as such. For the common association of opera to classical music is the product of a category mistake. "Opera" is a genre of live theater inscribed through notation for future performances in which music plays a predominant (but not exclusive) dramaturgical role. "Classical music" is a discursive formation referring to a variety of social practices and cultural ideologies which is not limited to a specific musical genre, and whose body of works, its canon of representative exemplars, is constantly re-negotiated and in flux. Thus, the problem is not whether Milo Rau cares or not about opera or "classical music" (whatever that is). The problem is that we care too much, to the point that we (European lovers of music from the past) are doing more damage than good.

There is no opera, as long as we keep thinking about it as a relic to be preserved intact in a museum of historical musical artifacts, and we find unconceivable to adjust its content to say something about us, today, and to entertain the generations to come. Which is what prose theater has always done and will: I don't see anyone pointing to the critical edition of *Hamlet* when it is staged in modern English with entire scenes and characters cut. For some reason, the same cannot be done with operas. The reasons put forward are many (historical relevancy, financial enormity, cultural distance, linguistic struggles, and so on). Yet none of them really explains such stubborn refusal to allow stage directors to use (yes, *use*) a theatrical genre such as opera to interpret the world we live in (task, I must add, for which not much time is left given the current climate circumstances). Such an obsession to keep opera free from what is presumed as "external" interference (stage directors coming from prose theater, dramaturgs coming from academia, artists coming from other musical cultures) is exactly that: an obsession, and as such it is in desperate need of analysis and consequently also a therapy.

Rau's staging of *La clemenza di Tito* makes brilliant use of the recent technological innovations of the Grand Théâtre de Genève's main stage, in particular the rotating system allowing a double-faced set to display two different planes of representation. The opening side is set as an art museum

and Documents," in *Mozart's "La clemenza di Tito": A Reappraisal*, ed. Magnus Tessing Schneider and Ruth Tatlow, 1–32 (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2018): 13.

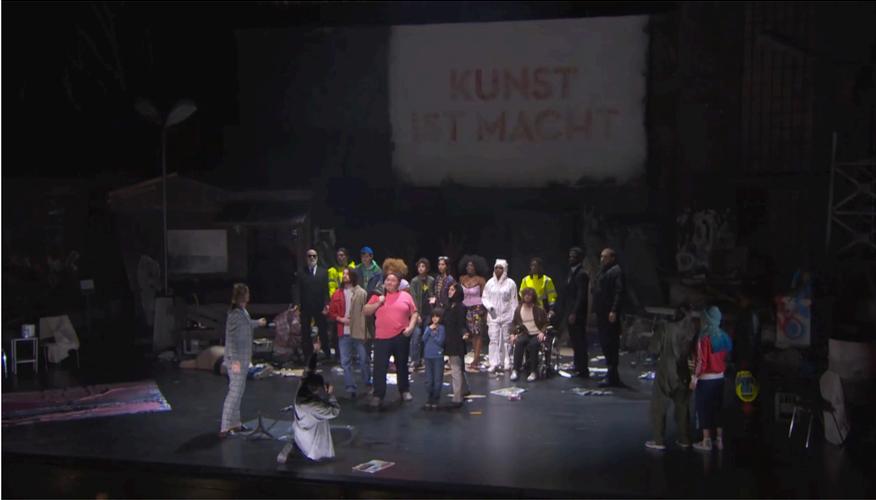


Fig. 2 Bernard Richter/Tito and Anna Goryachova/Sesto arranging a photocall while visiting the "Other" side of the stage (act I, scene 4). Still frame from the streamed performance on GTG Digital (February 19, 2021)

during a trendy vernissage (Rau himself explains that it should resemble the Haus der Kunst in Munich),⁸ while the other side of the stage represents a dilapidated trailer park inhabited by marginalized communities struggling to survive after some post-apocalyptic disaster. Dressed à la Joseph Beuys (Tito), Marina Abramović (Vitellia), and Neo Rauch (Sesto), the protagonists of the play act as a posh-lib collective of artists whose leader, Tito, is on a political mission to help the people from the Other (side of the stage) by showing their desperate conditions with the aid of media coverage, philanthropy for the cameras, selfies complete with depictions of their misery, and artistic renditions of their everyday struggles, including dissent and a failed attempt at revolution.

In keeping with his previous works, and as a partial adaptation of the requests from his *Ghent Manifesto*,⁹ Rau plays with the post-dramatic tradition of contemporary theater by providing the audience — through titles, surtitles and video projections — with details regarding the staging itself: from the biographical background of the company and the local actors/extras to the interpretation of the opera's late eighteenth-century historical context, and from the actor's comments on how they feel as they re-enact

8 *La Clémence de Titus*, program notes, 39.

9 <https://www.ntgent.be/en/about/manifest>.

traumatic gestures to the juxtaposition of different signifiers with similar signifieds (e.g., arias performed while screened interviews explore similar topics to those explored in the musical number). This relentless shifting of the dramatic planes, in which signified and signifier are constantly renegotiated and remediated (and whose *point de capiton*, to use a Lacanian term, never seems to materialize), can certainly be tiring for a production which was intended for a streamed digital event. On experiencing it in front of a screen, the feeling sometimes is that of an overwhelming proliferation of dramaturgical angles and medial frames, leading to a potential confusion over what is going on. I suspect, though, that this is mostly a projection coming from those who have previous knowledge of the opera and who, inevitably, are drawn to disentangle every moment of the show and its many layers. This hermeneutical tour de force would likely be more easily dealt with by coming to it free of preconceptions and expectations informed by tradition.

It cannot be denied that, at times, Mazzolà's and Mozart's *Clemenza* seems to stand in the way of Rau's project. But as should be clear by now, this is precisely the point: for a modern staging to interpret what it believes to be a relevant aspect of the play, worthy of modern reflection and critique, the historical frictions and the genealogical dispersions are unavoid-



Figgs. 3 and 4 At the beginning of act II, the actor Gor Sultanyan, interpreting the leader of Tito's militia, introduces himself and his son as descendants of a survivor from the 1915 Armenian Genocide. When he had to "kill" his son at the end of act I (at this point, he stops in a moment of commotion), he says he just did it, like he would have done any other scene. The son crosses the stage and Gor holds out a hand to reach him, but the kid falls dead on the floor. Mozart's *Fantasia in C minor K.475* stops, Gor comes back to the mic, and says: "This for me was the moment I understood my son's talent." He then proceeds with the hanging of the rebels, and the "opera" is restored. Still frame from the streamed performance on GTG Digital (February 19, 2021)



Fig. 5 Anna Goryachova/Sesto (act II, scene 10). Still frame from the streamed performance on GTG Digital (February 19, 2021)

able and even necessary. Such dramaturgical juxtaposition of apparently discordant narratives, a trademark of Rau's directorial style, is far from gratuitous. While on a superficial level it makes theater a political act, a representation of societal struggles which—even after centuries—are still at play, it also allows Rau to subject himself to a self-critique. The topic of human exploitation through artistic sublimation is obviously at stake when presenting your political views from the privileged stage of one of the most glamorous opera houses in one of the richest countries of the world: “Obviously, this is self-criticism,” explains Rau in the official *Making of* video for the production, “so I asked myself, in the bourgeois system of the economy of feelings, and the real economy, is there a place for criticism? Or is criticism itself just the capitalization of what is criticized?”¹⁰ On a more subtle level, the simultaneous presentation of the stories' inherent tensions—the constant feedback through which the present elaborates the past, *après-coup*—is what opera is (or at least should be): a visualization of the impos-

10 “Évidemment, c'est une autocritique. Je me suis demandé est-ce que dans le système bourgeois de l'économie des sentiments, est-ce qu'il y a là-dedans... et de l'économie réelle, y-a-t-il une place de la critique ? Ou la critique elle-même est juste la capitalisation de ce qui est critiqué pour vendre cela après ?” Grand Théâtre de Genève, “La Clémence de Titus – Making of,” official video with interviews and backstage footage, uploaded February 18, 2021, 00:09:00–00:09:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jgu_7EsVp1g&t=586s.

sibility of the Real (there is no real history, no real life, no real language on an operatic stage), a vocal performance of the indivisible remainder, a sonic rendering of the fourth wall.

To be accurate, moreover, this is not Milo Rau's first encounter with opera. I can still feel in my body the emotional exhaustion and commotion I felt after attending his 2018 masterpiece *La reprise. Histoire(s) du théâtre (I)*. At the end of this play—a re-enactment of the April 2012 events and discourses surrounding the murder of Ihsane Jarfi, Muslim and gay, in Liege, but also a reflection on the role of re-enactment and theater in representing history and society—the actor impersonating the protagonist takes the stage alone to deliver Henry Purcell's so-called "Cold Song" from *King Arthur* ("What Power Art Thou?"). Performed over an electro-synth arrangement of the aria taken from the 1981 version by another tragic gay figure, Klaus Nomi, the actor's voice—with all its frailty and the almost unbearable weight of the several histories chained to those words and notes—delivered what I believe was an instance of opera of the Real, of the devastating impossibility for audiences to experience the same *jouissance* as the interpreter, and for the interpreter to experience the same *jouissance* as the interpreted. Behind such a powerful embodiment of quintessential theatricality, there is a deep understanding of the theoretical implications of modern re-enactment and genre adaptation for contemporary society. In this, Milo Rau is not alone. Directors coming from very different backgrounds such as Barry Kosky and Romeo Castellucci (not to mention Peter Brook), or companies such as the Wooster Group and Third World Bunfight, have all brilliantly demonstrated how "operatic" a show can be when deconstruction is explored to *bring to the fore* (rather than destroy) the core of a play. And Rau is someone who takes very seriously not only theater and politics, but critical theory, too, the very same one that helped me disentangle (and ultimately enjoy) his staging of *La clemenza di Tito*. Formed as a sociologist under the guidance of scholars such as Todorov and Bourdieu, the director has always been vocal and self-conscious about the mechanisms governing his approach to theater and the politics of realism (a particularly cogent one in the case of opera):

Realism as an aesthetic method is a deficiency: namely, to accept you don't know how to do it, but you have to keep trying no matter what. ... Realism is indeed something completely artificial, but also completely artistic. Realism does not mean something real will be represented, but that the representation

is itself real. —That a situation arises that carries all the consequences of the real for those involved, which is morally, politically and existentially open.¹¹

The tension between representation and the represented is explored by Rau with an explicit reference to psychoanalysis:

Ultimately, what happens here [in theater] is the famous psychoanalytical phrase “Je sais bien, mais quand même...” or “I know, but still...”. Thus, the main characteristic of human understanding is: “That everything is only an image, a play, and I am only an onlooker. But nevertheless...” ... This “nevertheless” is, of course, the irrevocable, the *So-Sein*—the essence—of the REAL (in the Lacanian sense): these figures ... fall out of the general symbolic agreement.¹²

We were, of course, extremely relieved when the Rwandan spectators [of Rau’s play *Hate Radio*, a reconstruction of a Rwandan radio broadcast, based on historical events] said, “It was exactly like that!” – although we didn’t completely understand what they meant because it wasn’t “exactly like that.”¹³

Such a dramaturgical translation of the Freudian “fetishist disavowal” applies even more aptly to the operatic realm, as already noted by Slavoj Žižek in relation to Wagnerian metaphysics and psychoses.¹⁴ Interviewed by Clara Pons, the dramaturg for his staging of *Clemenza*, Rau displayed an uncommonly deep understanding of opera’s peculiar dramaturgy:

MR: What struck me when I first saw [*La clemenza di Tito*] was that everything that is mentioned in it, everything that is talked about, none of it is in any way visible. There is talk of betrayals, disasters, putsch, and all these things are not in the opera at all. ... [In opera] being political means being explicit. To make implicit things explicit, to make the invisible visible. ...

I chose to represent the elite (i.e., the main characters of the opera) as artists. They are not only locked together in their own bubble, but they also literally feed on the misfortune of others to create an art out of which they can make a

11 Milo Rau, *Globaler Realismus/Global Realism*, trans. Lily Climenhaga (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2018), 176–77.

12 Rau, 172–73.

13 Rau, 158–59.

14 Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, *Opera’s Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 114–17.

living. This staging is therefore a *mise en abyme* of this process, a meta-fraud! I would even say an auto-meta-fraud because I include myself in this process.

CP: *How do you translate this into staging?*

MR: We must make what happens on stage real and concrete. One of the characters has to kill his son; another is stripped and his heart exposed, while an artist captures the image of the hanged men in a painting à la Neo Rauch. ... It is the dream of a bourgeoisie in an enlightened politics, the elitist dream of a post-political utopia. It is a dream from which we are slowly waking up, a dream that we are currently finishing dreaming. ...

CP: *So, there is no way out of this paradox for you?*

MR: At least not at the Grand Théâtre de Genève or the Wiener Festwochen. Institutions are built on this paradox, including opera. There is obviously the very positive aspect of the sign of equality that is placed between the value of individuals and the beauty of art. But for me, as a newcomer to opera, this institution implies a negative work, in the Adornoian sense—i.e., that it represents the opposite of a utopia. ...

Because of the very structure of opera, I have no elements to work with: I don't have the rhythm, the text, the music, to fight against this "negativity". I am the servant of the structure as it is, and I can only use this structure by showing something that is already in it, perhaps by showing what is false in it. But I cannot tell any other story than the one that the structure carries. This is what is "negative" in the process. Even if I deconstructed, I could not bring another truth. So, I try to understand what I have to tell. This music is over 200 years old. You can't transpose it or update it. ... The choice of staging therefore thematizes the lie, the discrepancy between the discourse and the facts, in which we are fully involved.¹⁵

A product of negative dialectics and an act of therapeutical resistance, the 2021 production of *La clemenza di Tito* brings about much more than just a fresh take on eighteenth-century opera or the role of cultural politics and art in a postmodern (post-critical?) world. Milo Rau's Mozartian opera(-tion) is a deliberate exposure of the gaps and lacks inherent to the genre's production system, a re-enactment of its own constitutive deadlock. The

¹⁵ *La Clémence de Titus*, program notes, 39–41.

1791 *Clemenza*, as one was constantly reminded of throughout the Geneva production, came to light as an Enlightened musical drama celebrating the ruler's clemency at a time when a post-Enlightened society was ready to behead their own masters. It was an outdated musical project in the first place, and Mozart's music underlined such discrepancy with its beautiful, *passé* style. The 1791 *Clemenza* was "meta" long before Milo Rau's: Mozart and Mazzolà showed their own nervous, aristocratic patrons the end of the *opera seria* culture. Their *Clemenza* was a radical look back to the origins of opera and to the intellectual genealogy of Absolutism, which marked the genre's slow but inevitable shift from the stage of aristocratic theatre to the bourgeois museum of canonical works.¹⁶ Given the deadliness of opera's historical trajectory, Rau's staging of *Clemenza* as a museum of realist art translates in Lacanian terms as an imaginary mausoleum of Real works, where the impossibility of the Real is an almost ironic representation of art that has not been symbolized yet, of opera before its discoursification—a dramaturgy that is still able to evade the "stage to page" paradigm. The explicit political urgency of any of Rau's staging is not only directed at questioning the artistic exploitation of everyday traumas by cultural institutions and discourses, but it also functions as a generational call to free opera from its own historical *impasse*, to defend it against its devotees.

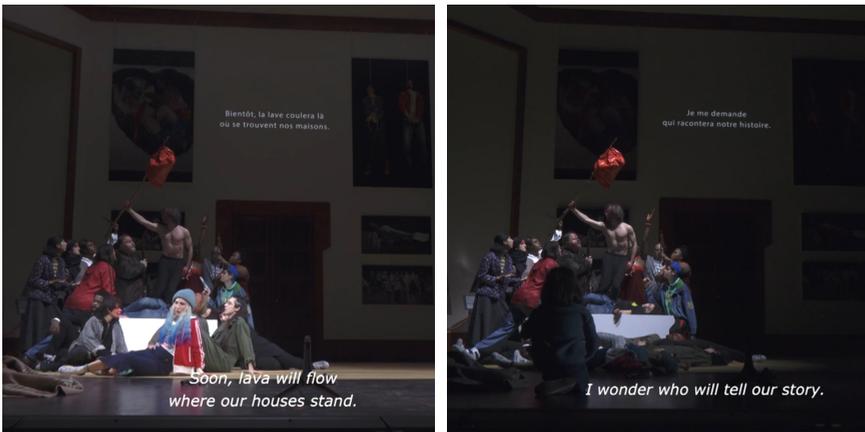


Fig. 6 and 7 Final scene. Still frame from the streamed performance on GTG Digital (February 19, 2021)

¹⁶ The obvious reference is to Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992; rev. ed. 2007).

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