Luciano Berio - La Vera Storia (1982)

1-14. La Vera Storia Alexandrina Milcheva (mezzo-sopran) Mariana Nicolesco (soprano) Oslavio Di Credico (tenor) Roelof Oostwoud (tenor) Alberto Noli (baritone) Giancarlo Luccardi (bass) Orchestra e Coro della Scala New Swingle Singers Luciano Berio - conductor Milano, Teatro alla Scala, 9 marzo 1982

Opera Yes, Opera No

To say what happens in La vera storia is not easy, and I don't know that it's all that useful, granted that this is a work which tells its own story. In fact, I've always thought of La vera storia as a work of musical theatre whose general thrust must be grasped at first contact, just as you understand a book when you read it for the first time (provided you know something about the author), or listen to a story being told (provided you know something about the person telling or singing the story). If I weren't afraid of being misunderstood or appearing rude, I wouldn't even have written these lines.

La vera storia is in two parts. In Part I, a series of events are set out in summary fashion: they establish a paradigm of elementary conflicts, expressed and represented with the familiar resources of a theatre where things are narrated through song: arias, duets, choruses etc. The text of Part II is identical to that of Part I, but it is distributed and segmented in a different way. So Part II offers a transfiguration, and in some respects an analysis of that paradigm of elementary conflicts by placing it in a substantially different musical and dramaturgical perspective. Part I is an opera (though instead of 'recitatives' there are ballads), Part II is not. Parts I and II set out the same thing in different ways, as if two ballad singers each offered their own version of the same event, each giving a different function to the same narrative structure. You might think of either Part as being a varied 'ritornello' - or even a parody- in relation to the other. However much Part I inclines towards the images and scansions of a folk tale, Part II

tends instead to narrate nothing any more: it thinks about Part I. In Part I, made up of closed numbers, stage action predominates; in Part II musical action predominates. In Part I there are protagonists, in Part II only their echo remains. In Part I there are vocal characters (baritone voice, soprano voice, ballad singer, etc.), in Part II there is a vocal collectivity. Part I is real and concrete, Part II is dreamt. Part I embraces the opera house stage, Part II rejects it. Part I is 'horizontal', Part II is 'vertical'. Part I implies summer, and the open air; Part II winter in the city. And so on.

But where then is the true story: in the first or the second part? I don't know. Anyone watching and listening might glimpse the outlines of a virtual Part III that is perhaps more true than either, maybe like those towns and gardens of Calvino's whose terraces look out "only over the lake of our mind".

The origins of La vera storia lie deep in my own personal story, which has involved many encounters with popular music (Quattro canzoni popolari, Folk Songs, Questo vuol dire che…, Coro, Il ritorno degli Snovidenia), but also the need to discover further functions implicit within an established musical proposition (Chemins I-V and Corale). La vera storia is to some extent the synthesis of these two preoccupations of mine which, combined, lead me to search out a musical and dramaturgical space that is open but not empty, a space that can be inhabited by figures and protagonists who are entirely concrete, but changeable: a space that is not inhabited by phantom characters imprisoned in a libretto. ---Luciano Berio (author's note), lucianoberio.org

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