

At the opening of your fable, see to it that the stage is furnished with characters involved in some event of consequence arousing expectation and wonder. Forget the modest principles of tragedy and epic; and imprint it on your mind that, at the rise of the curtain, the public will grow cool if it is shown two characters discoursing gravely about their private affairs. You need an abundance, if not of characters, then of supers. A coming ashore, a moresco, an exhibition of fighters or other such thing will make your spectators stare, and they will bless the money they left at the door.

In the second act you must consider the development of both the plot and the passions. Slight misunderstandings, changes of costume, written messages, portraits (all devices so looked down on by tragedians) should be held high in the esteem of your authors of operas; thus, having dropped the strict verisimilitude of Greek, French, and, yes, Italian tragedy, you will boldly appropriate the ingenious complications of the Spaniards. I do not mean by this that you are to drop all verisimilitude from your incidents, but let this precious verisimilitude of yours not prevent you from preferring the marvelous. Let the means by which the events take place lack verisimilitude, too, if you like; but then let the events themselves be plausible, and you will provoke the astonishment and applause of your audience. Let the passions be various and opposed. If possible let hatred be opposed by love, love by hatred. Anger, too, must play a part. But the amorous passion must triumph over all: let the others merely serve to bring love to the fore, which, being common to all mankind, is seen with the greatest pleasure. True, you must cherish honesty for the good of the State; but that being preserved, the amorous affection is of the greatest utility to the citizenry, urging it into legitimate unions, whence spring the benefits of a growing population, the very soul of states.

In the third act you must consider the dénouement, or resolution, which may even be brought about by the machine, if the impresario will have one; and certainly its marvelous appearance will make it most welcome, even if the complication may possibly not have been worth troubling a Divinity to descend from heaven to untangle it. Let there be recognitions and reversals of fortune. In recognitions let us be easily deceived by a sudden costume change; by certain objects found in the cradle of a character when he was an infant, now brought onstage or described in order to identify him. But as for reversals, you had better show than narrate them; for that which strikes the senses pleases the public better.

They have come to see, not to think. Let the reversals always be from bad fortune to good, and there let the opera end by means of wedding festivities; and in this dénouement let the poet resolve, for the good of the State, that the virtuous shall be rewarded with happiness, the vicious severely punished, though not with death: for deaths are out of place in these entertainments, which are meant to cheer, not dishearten the audience.

Having disposed of the economy of the plot by measuring it off into acts, you must next think of dividing each act into scenes; and this will not be the least of your labors. First you will need to know how many principal singers you are to have, in order that you may give each one an equal share in the action; else what endless squabbling between those fearless maidens and those bold castratos! You must also consider their voices and alternate them so they will favor rather than hinder the intentions of the composer. But before you cut the cloth of the acts into scenes, I exhort you to show it all to the composer and ask him which voice, in his judgment, you should place at the beginning, middle, and end of each act. You must however stipulate (he won't object) that each act shall contain one *scena di forza*, so called because of some violent or unusual opposition of contrary passions or some untoward event unexpected by the audience. Thus laid out, the opera, I warrant, will be successful; and now you will have nothing left to do but cast your drama into verse.

It must be made up entirely of recitative and ariettas, or canzonettas, as they are called. Every scene must contain either recitative, or an arietta, or (the usual case) both one and the other. Anything in the way of narration or unimpassioned expression should be expressed in recitative verse. But whatever is motivated by passion or somehow reflects greater vehemence tends towards the canzonetta. The recitative we prefer to have short enough so that it will not put us to sleep with its tedium, and long enough so that we will understand what is happening. Its sentences and syntax must be easy, and compact rather than extended; this will make it more useful for the composer, the singer, and the listener: for the composer, because he will then be able to enliven the recitative, a dead thing in itself, with a variety of cadences; for the singer, since he will thus be able to catch his breath when he sings it and renew his vocal powers at the rests; and for the listener (unaccustomed as he is to the changes wrought by music in the ordinary sound of words) because he will have to strain less than if the meaning had to be wrested from a tangle of inverted sentences. The recitative must be contained in verses of seven and eleven syllables, alternated and mixed as seems best; and if the cadences, at least, are rhymed, that will only enhance the charm of the music. What I have said regarding the brevity of recitatives must suffer some qualification in the scenes I have termed *scene di forza*: for here the recitative must predominate at the expense of the ariettas, since it is better able to convey the pulse of the action and place it in the foreground. And here the poet may vent himself somewhat and offer a modest sample of his

talent; a prudent composer will allow it; nor will the singers, experts at staging, refuse him; and the impresario will be obliged to like it.

Canzonettas are either simple or compound. We shall call them simple when they are sung by one voice only, compound when sung by two or more voices. Those sung by two voices we will call duets; those sung by more may be termed choruses. Of the simple arias, we shall call some entrances, others exits, and others intermediate. From these expressions their use can be deduced. Entrances are used when a character enters upon the stage, and these tend to be acceptable in soliloquies; and the apostrophizing [rhetorical] figure is of their very essence. But of these you shall make sparing use. The same caution is advisable for the intermediate [arias]; for they have a chilling effect when, in mid-scene, mute actors are obliged to stand about and listen while another actor sings away at his leisure. Here, therefore, we should have some accompanying action, so that the others may at least be given something to do and not stand idle; in that case these [arias] will produce an excellent effect. . . . Exit arias must close every scene, and no singer may exit without first warbling a canzonetta. Whether 'tis verisimilar does not matter. It is much too pleasant to hear a scene end with spirit and vivacity. Mind, however, that when you end a scene with an exit aria you do not begin the very next one with an entrance aria. That would rob the music of its chiaroscuro. The instrumental ritornelli would tumble over each other and instead of helping would hinder the effect. Hence it is that entrance arias usually make their best effect at the beginning of an act.

Duets are heard with pleasure in mid-scene because they afford action to more than one actor; but I should also like to see a duet at the end of the second act. Choruses at the end of the last act are inescapable, since the public enjoys hearing the combination of all the voices it applauded singly in the course of the opera; and the noise made by the singers and instruments causes everyone to rise and leave replete and elated with the music they have heard, and wishing to come back for more.

These ariettas or canzonettas must be so distributed that the singers with the highest standing are given an equal number, for the singers' professional jealousy is unbending and exact; and for that matter it is useful to the production of the drama that the best voices should be displayed equally to the audience. . . .

Piero Weiss, *Opera: A History in Documents*
Translated from Pier Jacopo Martello, *Della*
tragedia antica e moderna (1715)