1-1-1962

The Theater (Article by Henrik Ibsen)

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Recommended Citation
Harris, John B. (1962) "The Theater (Article by Henrik Ibsen)," BYU Studies Quarterly: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 7. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol4/iss1/7

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The Theater

(—The second of two articles by Henrik Ibsen on the nature and function of art, being an article written by Ibsen in his younger years when he was a reporter on his friend's not too successful paper, *Manden*—when his wages for writing theatrical reviews was only a free pass to the plays. Written on May 25, 1851, the article was perhaps intended for that periodical, but it did not appear in print until it was published in Ibsen’s posthumous papers. Translated by John B. Harris.)

"How was *William Tell*?" I heard one student ask another after the performance of that opera.

"Excellent! The music is really outstanding."

"And the libretto?"

"Oh well, there isn’t anything outstanding about the libretto—But in opera, the libretto is merely a tributary element."

This line of reasoning is not at all uncommon; most people can remember either having used it themselves or having heard it used by others. The so-called appreciators of music are particularly fond of expressing themselves in this way, because it is usually they who consider opera as a mixture of two separate entities, music and text, in which, according to them, the one can perform its function completely even though the other is somewhat less than successful. Even real artists subscribe to this view, so it is therefore not unusual to hear a complete opera presented in a concert hall. Nothing can be more warped than such a concept of the purpose of operatic music, and I must, therefore, beg permission to dwell a bit on this subject.

Opera is that dramatic art form which, through a plastic\(^1\) musical medium, reproduces reality in an ideal picture. Consequently, this medium is, in its very basis, a composition of two elements, of which one alone is insufficient for the fulfillment of the intended goal. Each revelationary form in the

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\(^1\)Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Verker* XV, 66-68.

\(^2\)In this article, Ibsen uses the term "plastic art" in a most liberal application, using it to refer to *any* visual art—hence, acting.
arts has its boundaries, beyond which its power has not the
capacity to stretch. Now music is basically of a lyrical, where-
as the plastic art form is basically of an epic nature; but the
opera is a unity of both and cannot, consequently, reveal itself
through a medium whereof one element is missing.

The complete fulfillment of operatic music lies, therefore,
precisely in its inability in and of itself to express the com-
poser’s creative thoughts, just as the libretto’s fulfillment lies
in the fact that it is not complete so long as it is not expressed
through the unity of music and the plastic form. The most
heartfelt harmony must thus take place between the music and
the text: music is the soul of opera, the text its concrete form
by which it is bound together, so that when in opera we find
ourselves in the realm of the ideal, we demand a complete
cooperation between content and form. Because music in the
opera is characterized as content (not as form), it must be
admitted that it must negate its won existence when it strives
to become objectified of and by itself. Certainly a content
without form is, in reality, merely an empty abstraction. The
very existence of operatic music thus ceases when it is pre-
sented out of the theater, in that it strives to create of itself
a self-sufficient entity.

Therefore, when the “appreciators of music” say that they
prefer to sit with their eyes closed during the performance
so that they might not be distracted in their appreciation of
the music, they do so either for affectation or because their state-
ment is founded upon a total miscomprehension of the mean-
ing of operatic music. This sort of thing is possible in a con-
cert hall; truly, here the presentation is immaterial. The
music is, in and of itself, everything. But that is not the case
in opera where music, as content, is experienced primarily
through the medium of the plastic form.

It will hereby be perceived that that view which holds that
the plot in an opera is to be regarded of secondary signifi-
cance proclaims a completely erroneous understanding of what,
precisely, an opera has to say. Any singer who does not have
acting talent is unqualified to appear in an opera, for it is
only through the dramatic that he can make understandable
the poetry of music and let its thoughts express themselves.