

and made only minor verbal adjustments in four others. He rewrote one aria for Fischer and, in his only substantial exertion of poetic energy, substituted a finale at the end of Act II for two duets and intervening dialogue. Such minor tinkering scarcely bears comparison with what Mozart had him do to *Belmont und Constanze*.

We might ask another question here as well: who among the local composers who contributed to the National Singspiel went on to write opera buffa for the Italian company which superseded the German one at the Burgtheater in 1783? Only two – Mozart and Salieri. For both these composers, the great ease with which they returned from German to Italian comic opera was matched by great unease in the alliance which their lone German operas for the National Singspiel had struck between spoken and musical traditions. Mozart's insistence throughout the genesis of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* that music's prerogatives not be short-changed had to make its peace with the hybrid nature of opera with spoken dialogue. Only to a certain degree could a libretto conceived in a tradition beholden to the overpowering demands of spoken drama be adapted to the musical stage, even to one with the cultural loyalties of the Viennese National Singspiel.

3 *Oriental opera*

Islam and its believers have never been perceived with either objectivity or indifference by the West. Several perceptions and misperceptions, codified during the Middle Ages, enjoyed remarkable longevity in Western attitudes. Europeans recognised Islam as one of the three great monotheistic religions but also as 'the sum of all heresy', in the words of Norman Daniel. 'The two most important aspects of Muhammad's life, Christians believed, were his sexual license and his use of force to establish his religion.'¹

Over the past millennium the relationship of the West and Islamic culture has moved in a vast swing of the pendulum from an initial period of Moorish expansionism, through a lengthy decline ending with the military impotence of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the seventeenth century, into a modern phase of Western imperialism and colonialism, which began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798.

In the areas of literature, theatre, travel and fashion the eighteenth century turned again and again to the East, and usually with a strong sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, what W. Daniel Wilson² has called the medieval 'Crusade mentality' perpetuated in European minds the image of the sabre-wielding Muslim long after the practical military danger posed by the Turks had evaporated. At the same time, most of the leading writers of the Enlightenment turned specifically to the cultures of the East to create heroes directly counter to this popular image. Thus there co-existed in eighteenth-century Europe two contrary paradigms of the Eastern world in 'high' and 'low' culture, directly reflected in Selim and Osmin and in their predecessors on European stages.

Bretzner and the vogue Oriental opera

As a military presence the Turks offered a source of direct concern

only to the Habsburg Empire and to Russia, both of whom went to war with them during the last half of the century. There is no doubt that, even in the 1780s under Joseph II, Austria harboured unhappy memories of the Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, and that some fears still lingered over the potential threat posed by the Ottoman Empire. But we must remember that the text of Mozart's opera was conceived not by Stephanie at Vienna but by a businessman living and writing at Leipzig, who must have regarded current events involving Turkey with mild indifference. Not, however, the Oriental world as it was portrayed and imagined in the century's literature, drama, and opera. No matters of state guided this tradition; rather, it fed on the reports – increasingly numerous – of soldiers, travellers and traders, and on Oriental literature itself.

Western theatrical representations had already developed a set of character types and plot structures for plays and operas set in Moorish or Eastern lands. Some of these works are purely exotic – that is, they not only take place in the Orient, they also include exclusively Eastern personages. The best-known of the group, Grétry's *Zémire et Azor* (1771), also illustrates the penchant for music, magic and the supernatural in this strain.

More often, however, Oriental drama and opera of the eighteenth century transported a set of Westerners to some part of the Eastern world. The two features of Muhammad's life for which he was traditionally reviled in the West – sensuality and cruelty – were projected on to the Muslims peopling these works. Usually these ingredients brought several others in their train: the harem as a part of a general garden of earthly delights; escape as the only hope for the European beauty brought into such a seraglio by capture or purchase; wholesale threats of torture and death; and an utter inability on the part of the Muslims to comprehend European mores and manners.

No single work has been isolated among the Oriental operas preceding *Belmont und Constanze* as Bretzner's direct source or model, although various scholars have proposed a number of works from English, German and Italian traditions.³ The libretto is better regarded from a less narrow perspective as one among a clutch of texts drawing on a constellation of plot elements and characters associated with the East.

Writers have pointed out parallels to the plot of *Belmont und Constanze* as far back as Menander and Plautus,⁴ attesting to the venerability of such stock features as a recognition scene involving a

father and a captive who turns out to be his son, or the contrasting of the lowly, visceral urges of a slave with the high-minded actions of his master.

Among eighteenth-century European dramatic traditions, those of the English stage offer the least direct affinities with Bretzner's libretto, although many writers have echoed Edward Dent's claim that it 'was imitated from an English comic opera, *The Captive*, performed in 1769 with music by Dibdin and others'. Isaac Bickerstaffe created this two-act text from the comic sub-plot in John Dryden's tragedy *Don Sebastian* (1689), in which a young Portuguese, bought by an Algerian Muti as a present for his wife, escapes with his master's daughter and his jewels, the fruits of the Muti's extorting and embezzling. Bickerstaffe altered several features to bring the tale into line with the theatrical sensibilities of his day. The hero, now Spanish rather than Portuguese, completely loses his opportunistic concupiscence (in Dryden he tries to seduce the Muti's daughter forthwith; she, however, intends to marry him and become a Christian and warns him not to try 'fing'ring your Rents before-hand'). Bickerstaffe's callow counterpart is also no longer a slave but is working in the Cadi's (Muti's) garden until a ship can take him to Spain. Human defects and excesses reside solely in the Easterners. The Cadi remains Dryden's venal Moor, ever ready to flay and impale those who cross him, while his wife tries hard to tempt the young Spaniard to her bed.

Bickerstaffe appropriated another comic opera he created for Dibdin, *The Sultan, or a Peep into the Seraglio* (1775), from Favart's *Soliman II.* of 1761. Several writers have noticed the proximity of Favart's saucy Frenchwoman Roxelane (an Englishwoman in Bickerstaffe's version) to Blonde. But Roxelane uses her wiles to secure the Grand Sultan for herself alone and even obtains coregency over all of Turkey, while Blonde's commitments are to her personal liberty and to her fiancé Pedrillo.

Recently, Rudolf Angermüller brought to light an obscure French play, dated 1755, *Les Époux esclaves ou Bastien et Bastienne à Alger*.⁵ Osman, commander of the Algerian navy, endeavours to win the heart of Bastienne, a French slave brought by capture to his household together with her husband Bastien. While Osman wrestles with his extreme emotions of love and hate, Bastien plots his assassination with the other French slaves. Bastienne divulges the plot and saves Osman's life; he in turn rewards the couple with their

freedom. It is questionable whether Bretzner could have known anything of this little one-act drama, which survives only in a single manuscript copy in Paris. The parallels with *Belmont und Constanze* indicate, none the less, how the elements of shipwrecked Iberian lovers, a powerful Muslim and his underling, an escape plot and a generous deed to bring about the happy ending came quickly to many writers contemplating a drama about Europeans thrust into the Islamic world.

Italian dramatists and librettists, although fond of the Orient, tended away from the exploitation of East-West confrontations.⁶ An exception is a *dramma serio-buffo per musica* which Walter Preibisch has proposed as one of the most direct influences on Bretzner, Gaetano Martinelli's *La schiava liberata*, composed by Jommelli and performed before the ducal court of Karl Eugen in 1768 at Ludwigsburg. Selim, the proud admiral of the Algerian navy, has fallen passionately in love with his captive Dorimene, the fiancée of Don Garzia, a Spanish nobleman. Selim's father Solimano, the Bey of Algeria, has arranged a marriage between his son and Elmira, the daughter of the rich Circassian Albumazar. Selim stubbornly refuses to give up Dorimene, however. Complications arise when Albumazar becomes infatuated with Dorimene's servant Giulietta, herself in love with Don Garzia's servant Pallottino, and when Don Garzia himself arrives from Spain to negotiate the release of Dorimene and the two servants. Albumazar is twice exposed to ridicule – first, when he tries to visit Giulietta while dressed as a woman, and second, when he attempts a hopelessly inept impersonation of the French consul. Selim, meanwhile, spurns Elmira again and again, terrorises the cowardly Pallottino into helping in his pursuit of Dorimene, and in consequence becomes the object of an assassination attempt by Elmira, foiled by Dorimene (an episode Martinelli borrowed from Goldoni's *La sposa persana* of 1753). After a last wild attack on the departing lovers, Selim finally yields Dorimene to Don Garzia and accepts the much-maligned Elmira.

The import of *La schiava liberata* for Bretzner's libretto is partly circumstantial. In 1777, nine years after Jommelli's version, Joseph Schuster set Martinelli's text for the buffo singers at the Dresden court, a production which probably did not escape Bretzner's notice in nearby Leipzig. Yet the points of contact between the two librettos dwindle in their significance beside the many divergences, which reflect two disparate operatic traditions. The lovers can be equated, as Preibisch equates them, only because they are stock types.

Albumazar has little in common with Osmin beyond his ill-starred passion and his swift recourse to violent threats, traits he shares with many other Turks in theatre and literature.

Martinelli's Selim, without direct parallel in *Belmont und Constanze* or any other Turkish opera, incorporates these same two features in a towering struggle which only the accents of serious opera could articulate. Martinelli and Jommelli created this part specifically for the great castrato Giuseppe Aprile. Bretzner could in no way entertain such a conception in his German opera for the minions of Döbbelin's German company at Berlin, just as he had to do without the frequent scene changes and opportunities for spectacle which Martinelli knew the Württemberg court wanted and was willing to pay for.

Germany not only welcomed many Oriental operas from abroad, it also produced a spate of new ones in the decade leading up to *Belmont und Constanze*. Many drew directly on French models. The Mannheim publisher Christian Friedrich Schwan translated Chanfort's one-act afterpiece *Le Marchand de Smyrne* when it appeared in 1770, then turned this into a libretto for young Georg Joseph Vogler a year later; it became *Der Kaufmann von Smyrna*, and was set by several other German composers soon after. In this short action the Turk Hassan and his wife purchase the freedom of the French couple Dorval and Amalie from the rapacious slave-dealer Kaled. The deed is one of repayment rather than generosity, for Hassan himself had been freed once by Dorval under similar circumstances.

An original libretto from 1774, *Der Bassa von Tunis*, which the actor-playwright Karl Friedrich Henisch put together for his friend, the Czech composer Franz Andreas Holty, shares only incidental features with other Oriental operas. The Pasha in this tale is actually an Italian woman who lost her lover Alzindor while he was defending her from pirates. In despair she disguised herself as a man and fought so fiercely for the Grand Sultan that he made her Pasha of Tunis. Later she learnt that Alzindor was still alive. To test his constancy she wrote to him, pretending to be a slave in the Pasha's household. He turns up among a group of captives and proves his loyalty by trying to free her.

The libretto closest to *Belmont und Constanze* was created at virtually the same time, in the Rhineland, by the actor-dramatist-theatre manager Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Grossmann. It is *Adelheit von Veltheim*, written for the composer Christian Gottlob

Neeff. In September of 1780 Grossmann dispatched the finished text to the Leipzig publisher Dyk, and a month later Bretzner wrote an open letter to a local theatrical journal in which he recorded his amazement that he and Grossmann had 'by chance pursued almost the identical path'. *Belmont und Constanze*, he added, had been sent to André in July, a fact corroborated by another writer in a later issue.⁷

Bretzner's claim to innocence of any plagiarism seems genuine. Thus *Adelheit von Veltheim* illustrates again how the popular motifs of Oriental opera and drama could be configured in quite similar ways by dramatists working independently within the same theatrical tradition.

Pasha Selim and the figure of the noble Turk

With only a few exceptions, the comic and serious Westerners in these Oriental operas represent stock types that see use again and again. The Turks, nearly always male, are far more intriguing and more variable from opera to opera. The ambiguity in Western apprehensions of Islamic culture, stressed by Wilson, resonates in the Muslims of these operas. In character they range from the unstintingly admirable – Hassan in *Der Kaufmann von Smyrna* or Achmet in *Adelheit von Veltheim* – to the irredeemably nasty – Kaled in *Der Kaufmann von Smyrna* or the Cadi in *The Captive*.

But more often the Turk appears as a mixture of the benign and the malevolent, of the dangerous and the risible. The social message these works embody is similarly mixed. Sometimes these Easterners function as external vantage points from which to fire criticisms at the failings of the West – a technique which goes back to Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* of 1721. But the trade can also run in the opposite direction. As an example, in *Adelheit von Veltheim* Miss Flour fairly bristles over Muhammad's having granted a man dominion over a dozen women or more. 'You cannot imagine,' she tells the others, 'how such a thing inflames me – a free-born Englishwoman.' In *Der Bassa von Tunis*, on the other hand, one Moorish beauty in the Pasha's harem observes drily that European men are allowed one wife by law 'and secretly they have even more than our Muslims'.

The most interesting Turks in these operas are those thwarted by the one major theme we can extract from all of them – the conflicting sexual mores and values of East and West. Nearly always the Muslim in question has had the misfortune to fall in love with a European

captive. The Western stereotypes of Islamic violence and sexual licence, which both intimidated and fascinated the European mind, inevitably lose their power and terror once the Muslim is coerced into acting and thinking like a European lover. At the end of a long line of such lovers stands Pasha Selim in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

Bretzner's Selim is the least developed and least significant of the six principals in his drama. He appears only twice and does not sing at all. He does, however, add a new twist to the operatic conception of the Oriental potentate, for Selim is not really a Turk by birth but a renegade. We never learn the reason for which he forswore Christianity and the West, since Bretzner seems to have introduced the idea as a necessary preparation for the revelation of Selim as Belmonte's father. But a secondary benefit accrues, for the concept helps explain Selim's comportment toward Constanze. In Act I Pedrillo tells Belmonte that the renegade Selim 'has retained so much delicacy as to force none of his wives to his love'. Bretzner downplays Selim's polygamy by not allowing his other wives to appear on stage, as they do in Grossmann's *Adelheit von Veltheim*. Nor does Selim ever directly threaten Constanze – he simply reminds her of the power he holds over her. Only the betrayal of his trust and goodwill by all four of the lovers drives him in Act III to order them all to be strangled.

Stephanie expanded Bretzner's Pasha into a more complex and interesting character. In the added scene with Constanze in Act II Selim intensifies the tone set by their interaction in the preceding act, urging his suit with a veiled threat of tortures should Constanze refuse him. But then he reacts to her 'Märtern aller Arten' with a monologue of humane sensibility: he now recognises the futility of threats as well as pleas in his efforts to win her heart, and upon recovering from his astonishment at her outburst he charitably ascribes her open defiance to the workings of despair.

The capital gesture which etches Stephanie's Selim most sharply in our minds is his magnanimous forgiveness of the lovers in the last scene of the opera. Stephanie undertook this change in Bretzner's original ending not because he found the latter improbable – the chances of Belmonte's being the son of Selim's arch-enemy are no better than those of his being Selim's own son – but for the edifying example it enabled Selim to set.

In a review of the première of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Johann Friedrich Schink objected to the Pasha's generous deed in forgiving his enemy – a nobler motivation for freeing the lovers than

Bretzner's recognition scheme, he admits, 'but also – as is always the case with such noble acts – incomparably more unnatural'.⁸ Why, then, did Stephanie trouble to include it, especially in view of his general policy of preserving as much as possible of Bretzner's original text? Schink offered an answer:

In general these endless acts of magnanimity are a wretched thing, and in fashion on scarcely a single stage any more save the one here. And one can almost be sure that such a work containing handsome feats of magnanimity, generosity, recognition, and forgiveness will make a great splash, even if these things are brought about in the most unnatural way.

The word Schink invoked here, 'unnatural', saw much use at the time in discussions of opera seria. Under Joseph the genre was quite out of fashion at Vienna, but it served as the well-spring of such culminating musical moments as the Act III recitative and duet of Belmonte and Constanze. Something of this operatic tradition guides the behaviour of Selim as well. In the Metastasian canon a final gesture of forgiveness and clemency such as Selim's amounted to a cliché.

Yet another tradition also seems to be at work. Upon first confronting the lovers and their deceptions, Selim fairly seethes with thoughts of Mosaic requital, of an eye for an eye, of visiting the sins of the father upon the son. He emerges as something approaching an imitation of Christ, forgiving his enemies and even seeing to their safe passage home.⁹

Behind this Biblical parallel there lies a pattern established by several earlier operatic Turks and already followed by Selim in his added scenes with Constanze in Act II, an instinctive inclination to violent action which reflection transforms into self-control, resignation and generosity. One catches only a hint of this in the last finale of *La schiava liberata*, where the hot-headed young Selim's yielding to necessity appears dramatically forced and psychologically abrupt, as is often the case in opera buffa texts of the period. Similar situations in French and German traditions capitalise on the usefulness of spoken dialogue for fashioning more careful and convincing scenes. The Sultan in *La Rencontre imprévue* and the Pasha in *Adelheit von Velheim*, both far less dagger-happy than Martinelli's Selim, grant freedom and forgiveness to the intercepted lovers in scenes that must not have been lost on Stephanie when he revised *Belmont und Constanze*.

Bretzner had improved upon these earlier models in one important way – he established a source for Selim's ambivalence by making

him a renegade. On one front, this offered Western audiences the comfort of interpreting Selim's magnanimity as a happy residue of his Occidental upbringing, and his occasional tendency to torture and violence as a foreign, specifically Turkish trait. But it was Stephanie who also saw in Selim's Western past an opportunity to establish him in our minds as a sympathetic character, as one who has suffered losses: 'It was because of your father, this barbarian,' he tells Belmonte, 'that I was forced to leave my homeland. His unbending greed tore a love from me whom I valued above my own life. He deprived me of rank, fortune, everything. In short, he destroyed all my happiness.'

Bretzner had no doubt had his reasons for conceiving of Selim more as a father than as an absolute ruler. Stephanie, for his part, could not fail to think of Joseph, the guiding spirit behind the creation and development of the National Singspiel. In contrast, what did Bretzner care about the benevolent despots either in his own home or at Berlin, for whose German theatre he wrote *Belmont und Constanze*? The Elector of Saxony had by 1780 lost what little interest he ever had in German opera, and Frederick the Great had always regarded it with utter disdain.

Then, too, the German stages in Saxony, Prussia and the rest of north and central Germany were almost all in private hands and served largely non-court audiences. For them Bretzner's familial tableau of recognition, reunion and rejoicing formed a fitting and familiar conclusion. Stephanie's Selim, in contrast, presented Burg-theater audiences with a statesman rather than father. Ultimately, he is a ruler of the opera seria stamp, and this is perhaps why Schink found him 'unnatural'. The suddenness and extent of his magnanimity form an essential trait of the model monarchs created by Metastasio. And in the same tradition, the new closing number of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* allowed Mozart to shower Stephanie's Pasha Selim with not only the gratitude of those he has pardoned, but also the encomia of those over whom he will continue to rule.