

Opera for Cyborgs: Allegro Molto Con Brio King Kong



by **Jim Ellis** in Canadian Theatre Review
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Allegro molto con brio king kong, subtitled “a digital opera,” is a fascinating and compelling investigation of the intersections between technology, culture and myth in the modern era. The opera premiered April 8-10 at Dancers’ Studio West in Calgary; the principal collaborators were Doug DeRoche, who wrote the libretto, choreographer Danielle McCulloch, and composer Kenneth Doren, who was also responsible for the original concept and the various multi-media aspects of the production. The music is based on Beethoven’s score for the 1804 ballet, Die Geschöpfe Des Prometheus, the Creatures (or Creations) of Prometheus, and the ballet’s interest in the Prometheus myth remains. Doren sampled a recording of the piece (one of many thefts of fire) and reworked it on a computer; Matt Firmston (who also conducted) transcribed the result for a string quintet. For the libretto, Doug DeRoche provided a series of reflections on television shows and pop culture figures, from Fay Wray and King Kong to the Streets of San Francisco, which were sung in classical opera style by Patrice Jegou. In one of the opera’s truly brilliant and entirely appropriate strokes, we see Jegou only on a monitor suspended from the ceiling, flanked by two other monitors on which images resonating with the songs appear. Prometheus’s creatures are in this version three female dancers (Stephanie Cumming, Lauren Diemer and Nicole Tritter), dressed by costume designer Conroy Nachtigall in the outfits of sporty teenage girls: shorts or shiny track pants, crop tops and chunky sneakers. The choreography is stunning: a mixture of classical gestures and awkward but exuberant moves that evoke both the sadness and joy of creation.

Beethoven wrote the music in 1804 for a ballet by Salvatore Vigano. The details of the production are for the most part lost, although the number of performances suggests that the ballet was quite successful. The work seems to have been a high Romantic version of the myth: Prometheus creates two statues out of clay, a male and a female, and then steals fire from the heavens to animate them. He quickly realizes the limitations of his creations, however, and takes them to Apollo. Apollo in turns brings the creatures to a number of figures on Parnassus, who furnish them with gifts: Melpome gives them emotions; Thalia laughter; Terpsichore dance; and Bacchus merriment and wine. The ballet as a whole is very much influenced by nineteenth-century Romanticism’s celebration of heroic individualism, as well as its belief in the arts as the highest and noblest of human achievement.

One of the principal themes of the story of Prometheus has always been an account of what separates the human from the animal. In Western culture, two of the most enduring distinctions have been speech and reason. The Prometheus legend is interesting from a late twentieth century perspective, because it suggests that the true division is technology. This connection between humans and technology has become a preoccupation for our culture; Donna Haraway argues that “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.”¹ Although the language may have shifted over the centuries, this is still very much a Promethean view of humankind.

We can, in fact, see a version of the cyborg in Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound, when Prometheus laments: "hear what troubles there were among men, how I found them witless and gave them the use of their wits and made them masters of their minds . . . For men at first had eyes but saw no purpose; they had ears but did not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion. They did not know of building houses with bricks to face the sun; they did not know how to work in wood. They lived like swarming ants in holes in the ground, in the sunless caves of the earth." Prometheus's gifts are principally technological ones, and these advances lead to culture, to "seercraft" and even, we might note, to psychoanalysis; "I first adjudged what things came verily true from dreams," says Prometheus, who passes on these arts to his human creations.² Prior to the gift of fire, which we see here to be essentially a gift of technology, human culture does not exist. Even language is a result of Prometheus's theft.

In the Platonic dialogue Protagoras, a further consequence of technology is the worship of gods, which again is posed as a direct result of the original gift of fire: "Since man thus shared in a divine gift, first of all through his kinship with the gods he was the only creature to worship them, and he began to erect altars and images of gods."³ In our own era, this is perhaps a jarring connection, given the post-Enlightenment separation of science from religion, and the construction of them as opposite and antagonistic forces.

The Prometheus legend is interesting in that it does not necessarily involve the optimistic view of culture that seems to have characterized the Beethoven/Vigano collaboration. This was so even during the Romantic era, when Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, first published fourteen years after the ballet, appeared. That work, subtitled "A Modern Prometheus," is to some degree a critique of a rationalism that has lost sight of what it means to be human, as well as the heroic and ultimately anti-social individualism that Beethoven and Shelley's fellow Romantics celebrated. Victor Frankenstein is, in the age of cloning and genetic manipulation, more than ever a relevant figure.

Doren's digital opera, aside from being vastly entertaining, asks searching questions about these conjunctions of technology, civilization and spirituality that lurk at the heart of the Prometheus myth. The modern separation of spirituality from science has guaranteed its monstrous return, so that the question of spirituality always lurks at the fringes of cyborg culture, whether it results in the benign new age wisdom of the Star Trek world, the various cults of alien worship, or the naïve and grotesquely amoral visions of "transcending" the body offered by such fantasists as Christopher Dewdney. There is a visual echo of this transcendence in the presentation of the disembodied opera singer, although this is offset by the onstage quintet, whose bodies are visibly involved in the production of the music.

The opposition represented by the singing head on the monitor and the onstage musicians echoes the more complicated compositional process of the music. Doren digitized a CD recording of a performance the Beethoven score, which he subsequently manipulated on the computer, "layering, repeating, extending and opening up sounds

from the recording” (as he says in the program notes). Firmston’s arrangement for strings reproduces the idiosyncracies of this kind of digital manipulation, while at the same time placing it back into a somatic context. The theft of Beethoven’s music (itself a time-honored compositional practice) is also a reanimation.

The libretto might seem, at first glance, a confirmation of some of the worst fears of critics of postmodernism. There appears to be a certain flattening of history, and an abandoning of any principles of selection and evaluation. Facts, names and dates jumble together in a seemingly random series of reflections. The Pantheon includes not just John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, but also Roger Moore and Ted Cassidy, “the man who played Lurch from . . . the Addams Family.” The libretto can obsessively list the names of John Wayne’s friends, but be flatly uninterested in getting other details straight: “he won the oscar award for True Grit / or Rooster and Cockburn or The Shooter.” The first line of the work- “I like television because it entertains me” - suggests a banality and valuelessness that the opera engages with and overturns.

The first sign of this cultural renovation or reevaluation is that the libretto is not affectless or joyless. The idea that pop culture stars have replaced the older gods and goddesses is not exactly a novel idea, but what is unusual is the seriousness and directness with which this proposition is taken here, and the lack of despair that generally accompanies that such an observation. We do not have here the classic postmodern stance of “bored but frantic,” and these reminiscences are not licenced by a superior ironic pose. Nor is this Frankenstein’s pop culture monster, much decried in the culture wars of the 1980s. What he have instead is a weird spiritual record, the Confessions of a T.V. Augustine, a tangle of modern myths that recount the birth of a new creature brought to life by this new technology.

The spiritual side is particularly evident in the various hymns to M*A*S*H, which was probably, for better or worse, the most potent ethical teacher for its culture. (Star Trek would subsequently take up this role for the next generation.) Very much like the Greek myths, the series offered a blend of moral teachings, life lessons and randy comedy. As the libretto puts it, it was “both funny, serious, distressing, struggling and jokable too.” Significantly, the centre of M*A*S*H was Hawkeye, a Promethean trickster figure who week after week attempted to give life to his battered humans, forever contravening the dicta of the more powerful gods. What the M*A*S*H example points out is the continuity, rather than the discontinuity (which is nonetheless there), in this new form of spirituality.

We can see a kind of spiritual progression or growth traced out in the choreography. The dancers first appear in the blue light of the television monitors, staring at the screens as they sit passively in front. This gives way to a series of energetic, awkward and ultimately joyful movements, as if the dancers were just learning how to use these new limbs, how to celebrate and imitate the gods and stories that animated them, giving them life. The costumes, along with this mix of classical gestures and gawky athleticism, occasionally give the viewer the sense that this is what modern dance would have looked like if it was invented by three teenage girls in a rec room, rather than by Martha Graham. The mood modulates and is sometimes infused by a certain sadness and solemnity, as in the “Gott segne King Kong” movement, when

one dancer is carried by the other, as a third shoots an imaginary pistol at them. This could be the final moments of King Kong, it could be the conclusion of a Clint Eastwood movie, or it could equally be the tragic end of a Greek myth (minus the gun). Regardless of what is being acted out, there is strange grace and gravity to the proceedings, which is echoed in the final moments when the dancers reach up and touch the t.v. screens, as if reaching out, one last time, to the gods.

It does something of a disservice to this cyborg opera to separate out its various parts for discussion, because of the powerful ways in which these parts combine with or comment on each other. The repeated gestures by the dancers match the repetitions in the libretto, for example, just as Patrice Jegou's serious but sometimes bemused facial expressions match the complicated tone of the libretto. The classical style of singing matches the classical gestures in the dance, but both are disrupted by more the contemporary elements. Together, these elements combine to form a provocative meditation, neither despairing nor entirely celebratory, on the technologies that animate us and on the beings we have become.

¹ Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," in Linda J. Nicholson, ed. Feminism/Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1990), 191.

² Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, trans. David Grene, in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds, Aeschylus II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 155, 156.

³ Plato, Protagoras, trans C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 14.