

— DRAMA —

## Schiller's *Don Carlos*: The Concept of the Sublime Opera and Theater Productions Grace Washington, D.C.

Whether it was intended as such or not, the unprecedented, nearly simultaneous performances of Friedrich Schiller's "dramatic poem," *Don Carlos*, both in an English-language Washington premiere at the Shakespeare Theatre, and in Verdi's Italian operatic version (*Don Carlo*) at the Kennedy Center, represented a significant political-cultural intervention in the nation's capital during the first weeks of the incoming Bush Administration. Certainly the references to *auto da fé* (burning of heretics) in the play, and the actual scene in the opera, as well as the horror of the Grand Inquisitor, brought to mind the current Administration's commitment to the death penalty, and the dangers inherent in its right-wing, so-called Christian Fundamentalist popular base, as reflected in the Bush Administration's Faith-Based Initiative and its Attorney General John Ashcroft. In addition, the two performances provided a unique opportunity to see the same poetic ideas developed in two different, but related, media: drama and opera.

The impact of the performances was further enhanced by the wonderful "Don Carlo(s) Alive!" project of the education departments of the Shakespeare Theatre and the Washington Opera, which brought students and teachers from nine public, independent, and parochial schools in Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Maryland, to explore these two works over the course of three months [SEE accompanying articles, page 79]. The educational intent of the effort was also reflected in the extensive background notes provided in the program "Asides," and in the Stagebill.

As president of the U.S. Schiller Institute, and the editor and primary translator of three volumes of Schiller's works—including *Don Carlos*, "Letters on Don Carlos," and much of his poetry and aesthetic writings—I must say that



Carol Rosegg

Robert Sella as Don Carlos and Enid Graham as his stepmother Queen Elizabeth, in the Shakespeare Theatre production of Friedrich Schiller's "Don Carlos."

it was a joy to see this play performed in the United States, and I would hope that director Michael Kahn and the Shakespeare Theatre, which also performed Schiller's *Mary Stuart* ten years ago, will perform other Schiller plays, and help spark a renaissance of Schiller—whose works were much more widely known in the period of the Lincoln Presidency—in the United States.

Although Schiller developed as an artist on the shoulders of Shakespeare, he had the advantage of living during the successful American Revolution against the British Empire. *Don Carlos* was begun in 1783 and completed in 1787, eleven years after the Declaration of Independence, four years after the War of Independence was finally won, and only two years before the adoption of the U.S. Constitution and the abortive French Revolution.

As can be seen in *Don Carlos*, in his "Romantic Tragedy" *The Virgin of Orleans*, and in his drama *Wilhelm Tell*—as well as in his early play *Intrigue and Love*, where he takes a stand against

the sale of Hessian mercenaries to the British during the American Revolution—Schiller's passion is for republican freedom, as against an oligarchical imperial system. This conflict, and his political commitment to republicanism, is clear in all of his aesthetic, as well as historical writings. For example, in his lecture, "The Legislation of Lycurgus and Solon," Schiller counterposes the slavocracy of Sparta under Lycurgus, where the individual is merely an instrument of the state, to the freedom of Athens under Solon, where the state is only justified if it serves the development of the people.

### Don Carlos, A Republican Prince

As Schiller makes clear in his "Letters on Don Carlos," the play is not primarily about friendship or about love, as some comments in the Shakespeare Theatre's program notes tend to suggest. As Schiller writes: "And what were thus the so-called unity of the play, if it should not be love, and could never be friendship? From the former proceed the three first

acts, from the latter the two remaining, but neither occupies the whole. Friendship sacrifices itself, and love is sacrificed, but it is neither the latter nor the former, which is made a sacrifice by the other. Thus must still some third be at hand, that is different from friendship and love, for which both have worked and to which both have been sacrificed—and if the play hath a unity, where else could it lie than in this third?”

Schiller then goes on to write that the favorite subject of discussion in the decade prior to his writing *Don Carlos* was “about spreading a purer, gentler humanity, about the highest possible freedom of the individual within the state’s highest blossom.” He continues that, when he became acquainted with the Prince of Spain, he determined to make him the dramatic instrument for realizing this dream. “Everything I found, as through a ministering spirit, thereby played into my hands; sense of freedom in struggle with despotism, the fetters of stupidity broken asunder, thousand-year-long prejudices shaken, a nation which reclaims its human rights, republican virtues brought into practice, brighter ideas into circulation, the minds in ferment, the hearts elevated by an inspired interest—and now, to complete the happy constellation, a beautifully organized young soul at the throne, come forth under oppression and suffering in solitary unhindered bloom.”

Thus, the drama, as Schiller writes, treats of an “enthusiastic design, to bring forth the happiest condition, which is achievable to human society, and of this enthusiastic design, how it appears in conflict with the passion” of Don Carlos for his stepmother, the youthful Queen Elizabeth. But for Schiller, Don Carlos “had to pass through the fire of a fearful test and prove himself in this fire. Then only, if we have seen him wrestle successfully with an *internal* enemy, can we promise him victory over the external hindrances, which are thrown against him upon the bold reformer’s path.”

### Schiller’s ‘Sublime’

My major criticism of the performance of the play, as well as of some comments in the program notes, is that this concept

of Don Carlos is not fully realized. From the very beginning, Carlos’s passion must not obscure his potential to rise above that passion, to become such a republican prince. As Schiller writes, “The future great man should slumber in him.” Robert Sella, who played Carlos, did not sufficiently maintain this tension in the character. At the end of the play, Carlos says to Elizabeth: “A purer fire hath purified my being. All my passion dwells within the graves o’th’ dead. No mortal appetites divide this bosom more. . . . O Mother, finally I see, there is a higher good, more to be wished for than possessing thee.” At this point in the performance, when Don Carlos overcomes his passion, the transition is almost out of character, for lack of adequate foreshadowing in the preceding action.

This is compounded by the way director Kahn chooses to end the play. In Schiller’s text, when they are discovered together, the Queen collapses in a swoon, and Carlos rushes to her and takes her in his arms. The King then says to the Grand Inquisitor: “Now Car-

dinal! I’ve done the part that’s mine, / Perform the part that’s yours.” He exits, and the play concludes.

Kahn, however, ends the drama in a sensational manner, which undermines the sublime state of mind to which Carlos has finally risen. In the performance, when the King exits, Carlos is surrounded and apprehended by agents of the Grand Inquisitor. He is confronted with a life-size crucifix, and light effects are employed to suggest that he will suffer the fate of *auto da fé*—being burned at the stake. In the face of the horror of the Inquisition, Don Carlos lets out a terrifying cry.

In a recent article entitled “A Philosophy for Victory: Can We Change the Universe?,”\* Lyndon LaRouche makes the following observation:

“Schiller’s greatest achievement, beyond what Shakespeare accomplished at his best, lies in Schiller’s degree of emphasis upon the principle of the *sublime*. This distinction is shown most efficiently in his treatment of Jeanne d’Arc. Classical tragedy tends too often, to show how a society destroys itself, often by

the deep-going moral defects of those it has chosen to place in positions of great authority, as we might be worried about the newly inaugurated President George Bush, today. That is useful, and uplifting for the audience which recognizes the possibility of a willful choice of alternative to tragedy. However, it were better to affirm the alternative, which, as in the real-life case of the Jeanne d’Arc treated by Schiller, locates the higher meaning of life and purpose of action, as in Beethoven’s Opus 132 string quartet, in the sublime.”



Carol Rosegg

*Carlos appeals to his father Philip II, played by the Shakespeare Theatre’s Ted van Griethuysen.*

\* *Executive Intelligence Review*, March 2, 2001 (Vol. 28, No. 9).

LaRouche writes further: “The comparison of Schiller’s treatment of Jeanne d’Arc to Shakespeare’s tragedy of Hamlet, shows the higher level in Schiller, as Plato’s dialogues supersede the methods of the such great artists as Aeschylus and Sophocles.”

By ending the play as director Kahn does, he effectively undermines the sublime state of mind to which Don Carlos has risen, by defeating the internal enemy of his passion for Elizabeth, so that he may devote himself to the liberation of Flanders from the Hapsburg imperial system of his father Philip II. As early as April 14, 1783, soon after he began to think about writing *Don Carlos*, Schiller had written that Carlos “has the soul of Shakespeare’s Hamlet . . . and the *pulse* of myself.”

But Carlos is not a tragic figure like Hamlet. In contrast to Hamlet, who in his Act III “To be or not to be” soliloquy, decides not to change his suicidal behavior for fear of the “undiscovered country,” Don Carlos, by the play’s conclusion, has risen to the level of self-conscious cognition, embracing the “undiscovered country” in his intention to flee Spain to liberate the oppressed people of Flanders. The fact that King Philip delivers him to the Inquisition is not ultimately tragic, but rather, sublime, in a way which anticipates Schiller’s treatment of Jeanne d’Arc in *The Virgin of Orleans*.

This is why the ending of the performance is so wrong. In real life, Jeanne d’Arc was burned at the stake. In his *Virgin of Orleans*, Schiller, as in *Don Carlos*, changes the literal history, to have Jeanne die on the battlefield in defense of the nation of France, which only came into existence decades later under Louis XI, as a result of her decisive, earlier leadership. However, it is as inconceivable that Schiller’s Don Carlos would have responded to the Inquisition in the way Kahn portrays, as that Jeanne d’Arc would have.

(A number of years ago, I saw a performance of Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* in Hannover, Germany, where a similar mistake was made by the director. In that play, just before she is taken away to be beheaded, Mary Stuart, who like

Don Carlos has overcome her youthful passions to rise to the level of cognition, confronts the Earl of Leicester—her former lover, now betrayer—for the last time. In Schiller’s text, Mary tells Leicester that she has risen to the state of mind in which earthly inclinations no longer tempt her; but, in the performance, the director had Mary kiss Leicester at precisely this sublime moment.)

Even in *Don Carlos*, written early in his career, Schiller had already gone beyond Shakespeare in this sense, by emphasizing the principle of the sublime (*Erhabene*). If we look at the protagonists of Shakespeare’s tragedies, such as Hamlet, Lear, Othello, or Macbeth, they are destroyed—and with them, their states—because they refuse to rise above circumstance and their passions, to the level of reason. Their destruction is as inevitable as a conclusion deduced logically from a false-axiomatic assumption.

In the case of Schiller’s heroes, however, even if they are destroyed, they succeed in triumphing over death. In his essay “On the Sublime,” Schiller makes precisely this point about man. Man is not free, insofar as there is even one exception to his freedom, namely, death. By overcoming death through the submission of one’s own will to the Divine Will, one demonstrates that man is not a mere animal, motivated by self-preservation and the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain. It is in the face of death, that man demonstrates his true human nature, as characterized by a super-sensuous, *moral* independence.

### Truth in Verdi

In this light, it is useful to contrast the ending of Verdi’s opera *Don Carlo*, to the play. There are many changes which Verdi introduces to the Schiller original, including emphatically the conclusion.

In the play, after King Philip has the Marquis Posa assassinated, Carlos disguises himself as a monk, in order to make his way to Elizabeth’s chamber past the guards, who superstitiously believe that the ghost of his grandfather, the Emperor Charles V, walks the corridors in monk’s attire.

In the opera, Verdi has Don Carlo rush to the tomb of Charles V in a monastery to meet Elisabetta. When the King arrives to turn him over to the Inquisition, suddenly a monk, dressed as the Emperor, steps from the tomb. The officers, fearing what they believe to be an apparition, free Carlo, who is then led away by the monk.

Thus, even though he changes the ending of the original, Verdi’s conclusion shows that he understands Schiller’s intention. Don Carlo does not die at the hands of the Inquisition. He lives in what LaRouche calls the simultaneity of eternity. Compare this ending to that of *The Virgin of Orleans*, where Jeanne d’Arc’s final words are, “Brief is the pain, eternal the joy,” words which Beethoven set to music in a canon.

Ironically, even though Schiller is critical of the Marquis Posa, it is Posa’s sublime self-sacrifice for Don Carlos and for the liberation of Flanders, which is instrumental in effecting the radical internal change in Don Carlos himself. Schiller makes the same point in his poem “The Pledge” (*Die Bürgschaft*). There, it is Damon’s willingness to sacrifice himself for his friend, which conquers the heart of the tyrant Dionysus. Similarly, in his *Philosophical Letters*, in the section entitled “Sacrifice,” the character Julius writes: “It is thinkable, that I enlarge mine own happiness through a sacrifice, which I offer for the happiness of others—but also then, when this sacrifice is my life? And history has examples of such sacrifice—and I feel it lively, that it should cost me nothing, to die for Raphael’s deliverance. . . . It is indeed ennobling to the human soul, to sacrifice the present advantage for the eternal.”

### The Shakespeare Theatre

The best individual performances of the Shakespeare Theatre production were those of King Philip, played by Ted van Griethuysen, the Grand Inquisitor by Emery Battis, the Duke of Alba by Ralph Cosham, Domingo by Floyd King, Count of Lerma by Edward Gero, and Elizabeth by Enid Graham.

In Schiller’s play, the Queen is the most beautiful soul. She is as much a

revolutionary as Posa, and as Carlos eventually becomes, but she suffers neither from Carlos's crippling passion, nor from Posa's tragic delusion about the King. One's heart reaches out to her, in that she has what Schiller describes as both grace and dignity, under conditions in which she is a virtual prisoner in the Spanish Court.

In the scene between Princess Eboli and Don Carlos, Eboli, played by Elizabeth Long, did not convey sufficient emotional depth, in her discovery that Don Carlos still loved Elizabeth and not her, to justify her subsequent betrayal of the Queen and submission to the King's wishes.

The Marquis Posa, played by Andrew Long, is a character with whom Schiller came increasingly to identify in the process of writing the play. Contrary to those who falsely portray Schiller as reflecting the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, his ideas were actually those of the American Revolution. In fact, it has been suggested that the positive model for Posa was the Marquis de Lafayette, who fought in the American Revolution in 1776, and in 1784 made a trip to America which made a great impression in Europe at the time Schiller began to compose the drama.

But, on the other hand, Schiller was harshly critical of the Marquis in his "Letters on Don Carlos," criticizing him for arrogating to himself a "despotic arbitrariness in respect to his friend" and for taking "refuge in intrigue." Speaking of the Marquis, Schiller wrote: "I selected . . . an entirely well-wishing character, entirely exalted over every self-serving desire, I gave him the highest respect for another's rights, I even gave him the creation of a universal enjoyment of freedom as his aim, and I believe myself to be in no contradiction with universal experience, if I cause him, even on the way thither, to stray into despotism."

In the performance, the paradoxical nature of Posa's character needed to be brought out more clearly. One missed opportunity to achieve that was at the end of Act III, Scene 10. The stage directions given by Schiller call for the Mar-



Dwayne Croft as Rodrigo (Marquis Posa) (right) and Paata Burchuladze as King Philip, in the Washington Opera production of "Don Carlo."

quis to kneel and kiss the hand of the King. This is the *punctum saliens* of the play. Posa begins the scene by saying that he would not be the servant of a King; and yet, in the course of the scene, in which he attempts to win over the King to his ideas of freedom, he instead is won over to the delusion that he can bring his ideals to fruition by working through the King, by becoming his servant, despite the King's rebuff of those very ideals. Kneeling and kissing the King's hand, as called for by Schiller, would have helped to underscore Posa's failure at this critical juncture in the play.

Otherwise, the production's period costumes were welcome indeed, at a time when so many performances attempt to appear "relevant" by propitiating today's New Age *zeitgeist*. The scenery was very effective, particularly in conveying the Byzantine nature of the Spanish court.

Although I have not been able to study Robert David MacDonald's translation, the play's most famous line was, unfortunately, translated poorly. In the well-known Act III dialogue between the Marquis Posa and King Philip, MacDonald renders Schiller's stirring call in the mouth of Posa to the King—"Geben Sie uns Gedankenfreiheit"—as the reduced "Give us the right to think,"

when it were better translated, "Give to us the liberty of thought."

### The Washington Opera

The production of *Don Carlo* by the Washington Opera continues the company's celebration of the Verdi Centenary. The performance was excellently directed by Sonja Frisell, and the orchestra and opera chorus beautifully conducted by Sir Edward Downes.

Verdi began working on the opera in 1866, shortly after the successful conclusion of the American Civil War. It was premiered in Paris on March 11, 1867. The original version included five acts, but was later cut to four by Verdi in 1883.

The act which was excised from the original was the first, set in the forest of Fontainebleau in France. This act, which is still often performed, is especially important in setting the stage for the entire opera, and the decision not to include it in this performance, did weaken the audience's comprehension of the character of Don Carlo and of the circumstances of Elisabetta's marriage to King Philip. Although this scene does not appear in Schiller's play, it nonetheless gives the audience an introductory glimpse of the earlier love shared by Don Carlo and Elisabetta. Don Carlo in this scene is portrayed as a "future great



man.” We also see Elisabetta’s nobility and voluntary self-sacrifice for the cause of peace, out of love for the people of France, who have suffered the ravages of war between France and Spain.

Otherwise, the performance was magnificent. Paata Burchuladze, as King Philip, was excellent in conveying this complex character. Daniel Sumegi, as the Grand Inquisitor, was blood-curdling. Elizabeth Bishop, as Princess Eboli, was excellent in conveying the character, although the “veil song” in Act One, Part II, was not as energetic as one would have liked. Veronica Villarroel played Elisabetta beautifully, with tremendous nobility throughout. The only criticism I have is that, at times, early in the performance, her voice was drowned out by the orchestra. Miguel Olano, who substituted for Ramon Vargas owing to illness, and who had performed in the opera *Turando* the night before, gave an admirable performance as Don Carlo, as did Dwayne Croft as Rodrigo.

#### Artistic Composition and History

Since Verdi clearly altered the Schiller text in composing his opera, and since Schiller himself altered historical detail in writing the original drama, it is useful to reflect on the relationship between an artistic composition and historical detail. The fact is that a work of art is never an historical documentary; nonetheless, it must always be truthful. As Schiller writes in his essay, “On the Pathetic,” “It is the poetic, not the historical truth, upon which all aesthetical effect is grounded. The poetic truth does not exist therein, that something has actually occurred, but rather therein, that it could occur, therefore in the inner possibility of the matter.”

In his aforementioned essay, Lyndon LaRouche elaborates on this point as follows: “The idea presented on the Classical stage,

must be a truthful representation of the idea underlying the sensory experiences of the panorama, but, the panorama and the stage are different media, differing to that effect, that, to present the idea of certain events on a vast area and lapse of time, *compactly* on the stage, the composer must, as Schiller did with the figure of Posa in *Don Carlos*, create on stage the *idea* which may not correspond exactly, in every detail introduced, to the actual history, but corresponds, with historical truthfulness, to the essence of the historical reality referenced. The truth remains the same in both cases, but the media upon which the truth is staged, differ. There is no excuse, for writing tragedy as fiction, nor for interpreting Classical tragedy as the writing of fiction. Thus, no great tragedian would ever compose a work in response to some arbitrary choice of subject-matter; he would always choose a subject whose treatment was faithful to real history, and would choose only subjects for which he had first discovered a truthful representation of the real-life tragedy, a truth demonstrable on stage, by the means available to him.”

Thus, the fact that Schiller altered

historical detail in his drama, or that Verdi reworked Schiller’s play for the opera, in no way detracts from the historical and poetical truthfulness of both presentations, which is to be found in the *idea*. Both the play and the opera correspond to the essence of the historical reality referenced. Moreover, both performances, employing different media, call upon their audience to act today to bring about the liberation of mankind—a liberation not achieved by Don Carlos, Posa, or Elizabeth.

As Schiller writes in “On the Pathetic”: “Poetry can become to man, what love is to the hero. It can neither advise him, nor strike for him nor otherwise do work for him; but it can educate him as a hero, it can summon him to deeds and to all that he should be, equip him with strength.”

Having viewed these performances, we are moved to complete the republican revolution of which the Marquis Posa, Don Carlos, and Elizabeth dreamed. We are moved to emulate Elizabeth’s grace and dignity, to fight for Posa’s republican ideal, while avoiding his recourse to intrigue and despotism, and to imitate Don Carlos in overcoming our own passions—even if, as in his case, it involves an injustice perpetrated against us—and to rise to the level of cognition, before humanity as a whole is plunged into a new Dark Age, much like that which the Spain of Philip II visited upon Europe in the Sixteenth century.

As Heinrich Heine wrote in his essay attacking the Romantic School: “Schiller wrote for the great ideas of the Revolution; he destroyed the Bastilles of the intellectual and spiritual world; he helped to build the temple of liberty, that very great temple which is to embrace all nations like a single community of brothers; he was a cosmopolitan . . . . Schiller threw himself heart and soul into history, became enthusiastic about the social progress of mankind, and wrote about world history.” Contrasting Schiller’s works to those of Goethe, Heine writes, “Goethe’s works do not beget deeds as do Schiller’s.” Ultimately, it is the inspiration to action for the betterment of mankind, which constitutes the truly noble aim and purpose of Classical dramatic art.

—William F. Wertz, Jr.



Margot Ingoldby Schulman, The Washington Opera

Elizabeth Bishop as the Opera’s Princess Eboli.