

Jerry Springer – The Opera? Yes, the Opera.

By Richard Dyer

Opera is a plural word for a singular phenomenon—a meeting-place of all the arts that can be just about anything a composer wants it to be.

So is *Jerry Springer: The Opera* really an opera? Well, yes, because it is what Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee wanted it to be, and because many aspects of it have precedents in the established repertory of opera.

The work is a drama that unfolds through music. Yes, the title role is a speaking part in cast of singers—but so is Moses in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. The chorus may represent the studio audience, but it is also the voice of the people, like the chorus in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* or in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, and in a sense the people are the real subject of the piece, as in those operas. It is no wonder that in England the *Jerry Springer* chorus won the prestigious Olivier Award for best supporting actor in a musical.

In the score there are arias, duets, trios, and ensembles which develop and evolve. The music builds on a few *Leitmotifs*, as in Wagner; Jerry has his own theme, which undergoes transformations, and over the course of the evening, the music tells us there is more than one dimension to the "Jerry Springer moment." The second act, which becomes symbolic, also develops music from the first act in new directions. Many of the characters sing over the entire range of operatic voices, from countertenor to bass, although not invariably with an operatic tone quality. Jerry has to cope with the admonishments of his own "Inner Valkyrie," and for the high-note fans, there are three high C's, one for Baby Jane in the first act; the other two, more appropriately, to God, and to the Virgin Mary.

Like the Gilbert & Sullivan pieces, *Jerry Springer* is simultaneously an opera and a parody of operatic conventions; and one dimension of the humor arises from the juxtaposition of the grand manner of opera with a potty-mouth text. But the piece is not a one-trick pony: the public watching the opera, like the chorus, is prepared to feel comfortably superior to all of Jerry's guests, and even to Jerry. The music shows us, however, that their grotesque dilemmas and passions are real, and so are their desperate, inchoate yearnings for validation, even if only for a few sensationalist moments on a raunchy, opportunistic and exploitative television show.

The music ranges across far more styles than most operas. The annual Grammy Awards chop up the universe of music into innumerable categories, and most of them are represented in this score. The piece begins not with an operatic reference but one to Bach's Passions—and in a surprising sense *Jerry Springer* turns out to be a modern morality play. Jerry and his guests, their studio audience, and even the public in the theater, must learn William Blake's lesson in *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell* that "everything that lives is holy."

There are reverences to ancient religious chant ("Jerry Eleison") and to Lutheran chorale (the setting of Blake). Handel is the main influence on the traditional operatic dimensions in the piece, and there are many grand Handelian effects, including long coloratura melismas in which singers are expected loop through 40 notes on a single bravura breath. Innocence is evoked through pastoral music, and people long for old-fashioned meatloaf for dinner. But there are also references to jazz, country music, smoochy 1950s lounge music, rock, soul music, R & B; one movement is labeled "tempo di funk." The predominant thread is probably gospel music, with its patterns of call and response, and its uninhibited vocal expression of emotion. Naturally Broadway is also involved - and, as on Broadway, the composer did not orchestrate the score. And there are memories of the variety shows of TV's "Golden Age"—there are places where we expect the June Taylor Dancers to arrive at any moment, but what we get is the Ku Klux Klan in a tap-dance number.

There is operatic precedent for most of this—there were jazz operas beginning in the 1920s and in 1969 *Tommy* was the first of many rock operas. *Porgy and Bess* is probably the most amazing and successful combination of many different musical styles, classical and popular, and Sportin' Life sings in a completely different style from everyone else. Also Sportin' Life's hit song, "It Ain't Necessarily So," anticipates the irreverent tone towards sacred subjects in *Jerry Springer* that has offended so many conservative religious groups. (As I write this, God and Jesus are in cartoon dialogue on *The Family Guy* in another room.)

It is hard to hear anything in the music of *Jerry Springer* that we haven't heard somewhere else, and that is something no one would say about *Porgy*. But there is something original in the juxtaposition of words and music in it—and something that takes us back the origins of opera, which was invented to add new dimensions of expressivity to spoken language, and to go beyond the places words on their own can get to.

The situations in *Jerry Springer* are grotesque and unpleasant, but they do not lie outside the scope of human experience the way *Leave It To Beaver* did. And the language is coarse and foul; it is the limited language of frustration, insult and anger. Because it is impossible to escape hearing this language every day, even if we don't choose to use it (except, maybe, when behind the wheel), these words have lost their power to shock and offend, or even to express much of anything. In 1968, film audiences gasped at Steve McQueen's delivery of the exit line in *Bullitt*, the first time, probably that the word "bullshit" had been uttered on the screen. It was probably as shocking as when Clark Gable said "Frankly, Scarlett, I don't give a damn," in *Gone With the Wind* 30 years before. Now words like these pass unnoticed. *Jerry Springer – The Opera* however forces us to feel their ferocity again by delivering them at operatic pitch. Our first-alarm response is laughter, but what *Jerry Springer* inevitably leads us back to is the pressure of the real emotions behind the worn-out words, and to make us wonder why we're laughing. We question our own feelings and responses, and that is something that art does.

Richard Dyer wrote about music in *The Boston Globe* for 33 years, 1973-2006.