A RIOT, A HARANGUE, AND A (FAILED) UPRISING: THREE SCENES FROM NINETEENTH-CENTURY OPERAS

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The Riot Scene (Act 2, Scene 7)

Let us begin with the most famous riot in nineteenth-century opera, if not all opera. This riot scene is also the least typical, and its unusual features will set in relief the other scenes to be discussed here; often we can better understand a phenomenon by understanding what it is not. In the final scene of Act 2, a fight between the apprentice David and the Meistersinger Beckmesser attracts the attention of the townsfolk and triggers a general riot, rather like the usual free-for-all barroom brawl in Hollywood Westerns. Here are the events that concern us.¹

David, thinking that Beckmesser is wooing his love, Lene, attacks him with a cudgel. Nine of the twelve Meistersinger come into the street in their nightclothes and soon take up fighting among themselves for no apparent reason, Vogel starting by striking Zorn.² In the course of the fray, there appear the apprentices, blaming this or that group (for example, the tailors, the cobblers, the locksmiths) for starting the fight; the journeymen (Gesellen) and even the Masters and older citizens (die Meister und älteren Bürger) join in. The women (Nachbarinnen) exhort their brawling men folk to stop and eventually pour buckets of water upon them; this and the simultaneous sounding

¹ Readers unfamiliar with the opera may consult one of the many available plot summaries, for example, Barry Millington, “Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Die,” Grove Music Online (accessed 14 July 2009).

² The score identifies the nine Meistersinger (all those but Sachs, Beckmesser, and Pogner), but the libretto simply refers to them as Nachbarn (neighbors) and presents their lines without giving a sense of the heated dialogue between the individual characters. Although the stage directions indicating violence are limited to the “neighbors,” some of the lines of the women establish that it is a general brawl (for example, “Seht dort den Christian, er walkt den Peter ab!” [Look at Christian, he’s thrashing Peter!])—neither name belongs to a Meistersinger).
of the night-watchman’s horn (in a foreign, unexpected key) produce a
general panic. The combatants flee in all directions emptying the stage.\(^3\)

The cause of the riot? No charismatic leader goads the men into
action—David’s attack on Beckmesser suffices. A few lines suggest that
there were grudges, old scores to be settled—for example, Köthner
shoves Nachtigall: “Euch gönnt ich’s schon lange” (I’ve owed you that
for a long time). Nonetheless, I think we should agree with the view
Hans Sachs expresses in the “Wahn” (Madness) monologue in the next
act: “How that happened, God knows. A goblin must have helped: a
glow-worm could not find its mate; it set the trouble in motion”\(^4\)
(a foreshadowing of the butterfly’s flapping wings beloved of chaos
theorists). Unusually, the very randomness of the riot is thematized.
This is only one of a number of atypical aspects of this scene. In most
operatic riots or uprisings, one group attacks another group or an
individual, but here it is a free-for-all. Appropriately, the musical setting is
of great complexity, far greater than anything to be encountered in
nineteenth-century French or Italian opera.\(^5\)

That a group attempts to stop the riot recalls Alessandro Manzoni’s
depiction of the bread riot in *I promessi sposi*:

> In popular uprisings there are always a certain number of men, inspired
> by hot-blooded passions, fanatical convictions, evil designs, or a devilish
> love of disorder for its own sake, who do everything they can to make
> things take the worst possible turn. They put forward or support the
> most merciless projects, and fan the flames every time they begin to sub-
> side. Nothing ever goes too far for them; they would like to see rioting
> continue without bounds and without an end. But to counterbalance
> them, there are always a certain number of other men, equally ardent
> and determined, who are doing all they can in the opposite direction,
> inspired by friendship or fellow-feeling for the people threatened by the
> mob, or by a reverent and spontaneous horror of bloodshed and evil
> deed. God bless them for it!”\(^6\)

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\(^3\) Wagner’s stage direction: “… wirkt auf alle mit einem panischen Schrecken.
Nachbarn, Lehrbuben, Geselle und Meister suchen in eiliger Flucht nach allen Seiten
hin das Weite, so dass die Bühne sehr bald gänzlich leer wird …”

\(^4\) “Gott weiss, wie das geschah?— / Ein Kobold half wohl da! / Ein Glühwurm fand
sein Weibchen nicht”

\(^5\) Millington, “Meistersinger”; “The music of the Riot Scene … which contains more
than a dozen polyphonic lines, is notoriously difficult to perform; a simplified version,
initiated by Toscanini, is used in many houses.”

Manzoni’s original reads: “Ne’ tumulti popolari cè sempre un certo numero d’uomini
che, o per un riscaldamento di passione, o per una persuasione fanatica, o per un