CHAPTER 7

Aeschylus and Western Opera

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7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I want to gather together as many factors as possible, from antiquity to modernity, that seem to have negatively affected the adaptation of Aeschylean tragedy into opera, a process that by its very nature confronts a vast ‘cultural divide’ created by differences not only in genre, but also in time, space, and ethos. Indeed, the very structure and content of Aeschylus’ surviving dramas have likely contributed significantly to their limited use for opera, a situation that has only begun to even out since the later part of the 20th century, when changing musical and dramatic aesthetics increasingly fostered the deliberate embrace of the artistic challenges inherent in Aeschylean texts.

The first section of this chapter begins by briefly reviewing the reception of Aeschylus’ dramas from the 4th century BC through the Renaissance (the time of Western opera’s accepted ‘birth’),1 noting some ways in which composition and content appear to have affected the plays’ impact. It then highlights some important trends in the reception of tragedy into non-comic opera2 from the latest 16th through the 18th centuries and suggests that even from the genre’s beginnings, Aeschylean dramas did not readily lend themselves to prevailing operatic styles. The second section offers some more specific reasons why this might have been the case. It first examines some general challenges associated with presenting Aeschylean scenic composition, choruses, and characters in operatic contexts, and notes some ways in which these features of Aeschylean tragedy converge with or diverge from the organizational principles visible in opera down through the 18th century. Next, this section looks more closely at

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1 Iacopo Peri’s Euridice of 1599 (premiered in 1600) is the earliest surviving work for the musical stage that is conventionally acknowledged as an ‘opera.’ Peri’s similar Dafne of c. 1597, based on the Apollo-Daphne myth, is now lost: see Porter (1965), especially 170–172.

2 While Italian operas of the 17th century, for example, might incorporate lighter elements into their otherwise nominally dramatic plots, I nevertheless include them in this analysis. My definition of “comic” opera therefore excludes from this discussion later developments in the 18th century and beyond, such as German-Viennese Singspiel, Italian opera buffa, and French opéra bouffé, including explicitly comic treatments of ancient tragedy and mythology like Jacques Offenbach’s Orphée aux enfers (1858, rev. 1874) or La belle Hélène (1864).
Aeschylean content to highlight some cultural concerns and matters of taste that may have circumscribed the use of this material for earlier opera. The third section of this chapter moves forward into the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries to note briefly some important changes in operatic aesthetics that seem to have invited increasing numbers of artists in more recent times to confront the challenges discussed in the second section. The result is that Aeschylus has enjoyed burgeoning levels of operatic interest in the later 20th and 21st centuries. A total of six operas receive closer discussion in Sections II and III: Legrenzi’s *Eteocle e Polinice* (1675), Salieri’s *Les Danaïdes* (1784), Taneyev’s *Oresteya* (1895), Orff’s *Prometheus* (1968), Theodorakis’ *Antigone* (1999), and Simpson’s *The Furies* (2006).

### 7.2 Aeschylus from Antiquity through the Early Centuries of Opera

Aristophanes’ comic *Frogs* of 405 BCE presents what we might consider the earliest ‘review’ of Aeschylean drama. The play features representations of the deceased poets Aeschylus and Euripides, who are to compete, through their poetry, for the privilege of returning to the mortal world. In a staged confrontation between the two dramatists (*Ra.* 830–1478), Euripides is portrayed as creating baser characters, focusing on a plainer style of speech, depicting highly emotional women, composing his music in a newer style, and having little respect for traditional social values, including religion; Aeschylus is noted for the contrived structure of his dramas, his emphasis upon heroic and martial themes, the complexity of his language, and his piety. In the end, of course, it is Aeschylus, the old-fashioned edifier, whom Dionysus decides to bring back to Athens (*Ra.* 1471) for the social and political good of the city (*Ra.* 1419–1421, 1433–1436). Despite its lampoons of individual figures and situations, traditionalism and civic loyalty to the rule of the *dêmos* were characteristic of Old Comedy, and the Aeschylus character seems to have served in this case as a metonym for those impulses.

An Aeschylean victory in the contest of the *Frogs* was also in keeping with the general artistic history of the 5th century. Euripides, after all, won far fewer prizes during his lifetime than either Sophocles or Aeschylus did. The statistics are still striking: with a ‘victory’ being awarded to a set consisting of three

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5 This is Henderson’s central argument (1990).