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KELLGREN THE LIBRETTIST

It is hard to say just when Gustaf III got the idea that there would be a national theatre in Sweden. It is, indeed, likely that he had been thinking about it all his life. Certainly, he had inherited his mother's taste for plays and, apparently, spent a good part of his childhood organizing performances in which he and his brother, Carl, would play the leading parts. It was, I suppose, merely a natural extension of that play which led him, in one of his first acts as King, to dismiss the French troupe resident in Stockholm and make plans to "restore the Swedish theatre".¹ When, toward the end of 1771, Petter Stenborg (1719-81), sought royal permission to play in Stockholm during the coming Parliament, the King noted on the paper at some time, "*Förste anledningen till Svenska operans instickelse* [first idea for the creation of Swedish opera]."² That this opera would not merely take place in Sweden but in Swedish, as well, was taken for granted. Opera, in the places where opera was done, was always expected to be in the local language.

This presented a problem. For reasons not apparent today, but apparently obvious in the eighteenth century, the Swedish language, and, indeed, most non-Romance languages apart from English, was considered, even—perhaps especially—by Swedes, to be rude and unsatisfactory for sensitive literary expression. Despite the poetry of Stjernhielm, Lucidor, Messenius, Creutz, Nordenflycht, and others, and the energetic prose of de la Gardie and Dalin, the King and his court had the notion that this was a raw language which would, in some literal sense, damage the ears of its listeners. Thus, the King decided that opera would be the way to accustom

¹See Oscar Levertin, *Teater och drama under Gustaf III* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1920), p. 8.

²Nils Personne, *Svenska Teatern under Gustavianska tidehvarfvet* (Stockholm: Wahlström och Widstrand, 1913), p. 88.

Swedish ears to Swedish words on stage. As Carl Christopher Gjörwell (1731-1811) reported, "*i början och då en svensk theater skulle skapas, var det ganska nödigt att först spela operor, för att under sång och musik dölja språkets hårdheter och oböjligheter, innan det blifvit mera skickligt och inöfvat för dramatisk composition och än mera för dramatisk declamation* [in the beginning, when a Swedish theatre was to be created, it was quite necessary to play operas first, in order to hide the language's hardness and rigidity under song and music, until it became more pliable and practised for dramatic composition and even more for dramatic declamation]." In the same 1774 letter, written after a *représentation académique* of a Swedish translation of Voltaire's *Zaïre* (1732), he then averred that "*svenska språket är ganska dugligt för theatern* [the Swedish language is quite acceptable for the theatre]."³

The King knew just how to deal with this linguistic problem. In what was to be his usual head-on fashion, he wrote a sketch for an opera, in French, of course. He based it, with considerable changes, on a play by Bernard de Fontenelle (1657-1757), and gave it to Johan Wellander (1735-83) to versify in Swedish. This reasonable solution produced *Thetis och Pelée* (1773, with music by Francesco Antonio Uttini [1723-95]), the first Swedish opera.⁴

As an event, *Thetis* was quite successful. It was, however, manifestly unwieldy and was quickly cut from five acts to three, in which form it had

³[Carl Christoffer Gjörwell], *En Stockholmskrönika ur C.C. Gjörwells brev*, ed. by Otto Sylvan (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1920), January 25, 1774, p. 92.

⁴For a general introduction to *Thetis*, see Martin Tegen, "'Thetis och Pelée. An opera's successive transformations,'" in Gunnar Larsson and Hans Åstrand, *Gustavian Opera. An Interdisciplinary Reader in Swedish Opera, Dance, and Theatre 1771-1809*, Publications of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 66 (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 1991), pp. 237-52. Personne, *Svenska theatern*, p. 90, remarks that count Axel Fersen averred that the King chose that text because it was the first opera staged by cardinal Mazarin before King Louis XIV, someone Gustaf greatly admired. I can find no other reference to this effect. *Les Noces de Thétys et Pélée*, with music by Pascal Colasse (1649-1709), was first performed in 1689.

a reasonable run by eighteenth century standards. It was soon obvious, however, that a new problem now faced this fledgling institution: what to do next? The intense work of readying *Thetis* for performance had shortchanged preparations for a second Swedish opera. It is, indeed, at least possible that there were those who thought there would be no need of a second opera. In the event, Stockholmers were treated to a version of John Gay's (1685-1732) and Georg Fredric Handel's (1685-1756) pastoral, *Acis and Galatée* (1718/1732). This was, apparently, the King's idea of a useful transitional piece, and he gave the assignment of cobbling the whole thing together to one of the court musicians, Lars Samuel Lalin (1729-85). Lalin's problem was that he had to fill a whole evening with what was originally a one-act piece. He had the wit to bring in the esteemed, but aging, composer, Henrik Filip Johnsen (1717-79) to help put together the required new music. The result is a pastiche of Handel, Johnsen, and "flere mästare [several masters]" to fill out the text. Interestingly, Handel's music was the least admired, because it was old-fashioned.⁵

If the first Swedish opera was an adaptation of a French one, and the second a pastiche of an English one, the third "Swedish" opera came straight from Italy, *via* a premiere in Vienna. This was Ranieri di Calzabigi's (1714-95) and Christoph Willibald Gluck's (1714-87) wildly popular *Orfeo ed Eurydice* (1762). It took Stockholm quite by storm and set the direction of Swedish opera for some time to come.⁶ No composer of the period was ever anywhere near as popular as Gluck on the Swedish stage, and this production has the distinction of coming almost a year before the more famous one in Paris in August, 1774.

Thus, in its first year of existence, 1773, Stockholmers saw Swedish opera brought about by three different means. All three—adaptation, pastiche, and translation—continued to be used well into the nineteenth

⁵See Alan Swanson and Bertil van Boer, "A Swedish Reinterpretation of Handel's *Acis and Galatée*," *Scandinavian Studies* 65 (Winter, 1993): 29-49.

⁶See Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell, "Gluck's 'Orpheus och Euridice' in Stockholm. Performance practices on the way from 'Orfeo' to 'Orphée' 1773-1786," in Larsson and Åstrand, *Gustavian Opera*, pp. 253-80.

century. Of the three, adaptation, in the largest sense of that term, was the most common, though few translations were without their "improvements." Only Gluck's operas, it would seem, were mostly spared this indignity. However, none of these methods seem to get us anywhere near Gustaf III's goal of a *Swedish* theatre.

When, by 1774, the opera and the spoken theatre had demonstrated that Swedish was, indeed, a polished stage language that would not coruscate delicate ears, Gustaf's project for the opera began to take expansive shape. Pastiche and translations began to alternate with newly composed scores by Uttini, Johnsen, and, eventually, Johan Gottlieb Naumann (1741-1801) and Georg Joseph Vogler (1749-1814). These new scores were usually set to adapted texts by any number of more or less official poets.⁷ Among these was Johan Henric Kellgren (1751-95).

Kellgren's theatrical pretensions actually began fairly early in his writing career and they centered quickly on the opera.⁸ In 1777, possibly just after he had arrived back in Sweden from Finland, Kellgren wrote a three-act libretto called *Adonis och Proserpina*. The reason for this exercise in a completely different genre from those in which he was then just making a name for himself — lyric and satirical poetry and the formal oration — may not be hard to find. It is probable that as a gifted, young, and up-and-coming opportunist, he cast about for the quickest way to draw royal attention to himself and saw the obvious, that the King was besotted with theatre and, especially at this time, the opera.⁹ To write a libretto seemed a fairly direct approach to the King's heart and wallet. Indeed, Kellgren soon conceived even greater ambitions for his text. After completing only one act, he wrote to his friend, Abraham Niclas Clewberg

⁷The only comprehensive study of this phenomenon is by Bo Bennich-Björkman, *Författare i ämbetet* (Uppsala: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1970).

⁸While still in Finland, he apparently considered translating Voltaire's *Alzire* (1736). *Brev*, ed. by Otto Sylvan, in *Samlade skrifter VI* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1923), of *Svenska författare utgivna av Svenska vitterhetssamfundet IX*. p. 66.

⁹The foundation of a Royal Dramatic Theatre lay about ten years ahead, but the King was always involved, in spurts, with plays at court throughout his reign.

(1754-1821), "*Jag har tänkt att min Opera kunde vara i Ordning vid samma tid som nya Bollhuset blefve färdigt, att den kunde tjena till invigningspiece, och jag har redan arrangerat en Prologue, som skulle tjena vid detta tillfälle* [I have thought that my opera could be ready at the same time as the new theatre would be finished, that it could serve as a dedication piece, and I have already arranged a prologue which would do on that occasion]."¹⁰

There is, of course, no way of knowing the immediate effect of *Adonis och Proserpina* upon its target. If the King made Kellgren a response to the fair copy given him, there is no record of it anywhere (and Kellgren would surely have mentioned it to Clewberg if he had). It was, apparently, never set to music and it certainly did not "serve as a dedication piece" for the new opera house. There are a number of reasons for this latter, but one, at least, lay outside the any problems in libretto itself: the new opera house was nowhere near being finished when the text was, even allowing for the time to compose music. Work on it had, in fact, only begun in 1777 and the building itself was not opened until September, 1782.

Adonis och Proserpina is, frankly, not a very good text, either as poetry or as a libretto, which is not to say it is without interest. Indeed, as Kellgren's first venture into a genre he came to take quite seriously, it is of considerable interest. Though the pastoral/mythological *topos* seems to us one of the most stilted and worn-out of conventions, it is useful to keep in mind that a majority of operas performed by 1780 were in this pastoral/mythical vein, though this was less true of comic operas than of serious ones.¹¹ This was to be even more the case in Stockholm: of the ten productions on the royal stage through 1777, two *opéras-comiques* and one opera had a non-pastoral/mythological text, but this ratio was to sink steadily in the following years.¹² The *topos* sat squarely in the middle of

¹⁰Kellgren, *Brev*, Letter from July 4, 1777, p. 73.

¹¹I derive this from a perusal of Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of Opera 1597-1940*, 3rd. ed., (Totowa, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1978).

¹²The most reliable repertory list for Operan is K.G. Strömbeck and Sune Hofsten, *Kungliga teatern. Repertoar 1773-1973: Opera, operett, sångspel, Balett*, Skrifter

the genre and, by the late eighteenth century, still fulfilled several expectations, if less easily than before. First, its use in any piece affirmed the validity of, and a continuity with, the main tradition of opera. It was, indeed, a way of demanding consideration as a bearer of that tradition, however much that tradition had been bent and adapted in the course of almost two centuries. Second, its use of well-known stories and actions, rather than inhibiting imagination, allowed imagination to surprise an audience in its deviations from the expectations aroused by those conventions. In fact, this is the easiest way to move an audience from one response to another. From the writer's point of view, it constituted a frame upon which a new content could be woven. Nowadays, only comedies and detective stories seem to understand these rhetorical advantages of convention. Third, in an age of decreasing rather than increasing freedom of expression, the pastoral/mythological subject was, superficially, at least, a safe one. Fourth, a sense of decorum seems to have worked to suggest the pastoral/mythical as the appropriate vehicle for serious musico-dramatic expression. We do not really understand this in our day, when there seems to be no sense of decorum at all, and we can only accept with difficulty the remarks of Kellgren, say, to the effect that he was literally moved to tears by the acting of Caroline Müller in the rôle of Alceste in Gluck's opera.¹³ The use of conventions generally, and pastoral/mythological ones specifically, reduced the amount of "information" a spectator needed to process before he could enter into the emotional center of the piece. That this often called forth a genuine physical response is attested over and over again in theatre history: that it had seriously declined as a response by our day is attested to by the many attempts of

från Operan 1 (Stockholm: Operan, 1974). The private theatre of the time offered little that could be called "opera." Of further interest is that it seems to have been one of the defining characteristics of *opéra-comique* that it did not have a pastoral or mythological text, except as parody.

¹³See Kellgren's letter to Clewberg, March 2, 1781, in *Brev*, p. 103.

writers, and composers and performers, to change the relationship of the stage-world to the audience-world.¹⁴

None of these advantages explains why Kellgren chose to write on the curious subject of Adonis and Proserpina. He himself gives us no explanation and, so, we must assume his reasons were obvious, in the sense of being no surprise, to everyone who considered the question. Nor do they explain why Kellgren chose to pair the adult Adonis with Proserpina, with whom he is normally linked only as a sort-of foster child. On the other hand, why not, since the qualities known to the audience in each character—youth, beauty, and the association with the countryside—were similar? The advantages of his choice did not prevent Kellgren from having difficulty in finishing his project. In the same letter to Clewberg of July 4, 1777, he remarks that, "*Det möter mig mera svårigheter härvid än jag tänkt* [I am running into more difficulties than I had imagined]."

From the finished text, we can see that Kellgren's largest problem was form. Despite having chosen a classical motif, with characters whose aspects were more or less given, Kellgren was unable to find the arc whose ends would enclose the narrative. Specifically, it was one thing to be able to create formal lyrical or satirical verse whose span is relatively short to make its point: it was quite another to find the rhetorical level which would sustain a narrative over a long period of time. The virtue of concision that was so helpful in his shorter work proved a liability in this larger piece. *Adonis och Proserpina* is essentially a series of short, lyrical, set-pieces with little development to provide the movement that would help create a dramatic cohesion. It is almost as if we are watching the play from behind the scenes, unable to see all of what is happening, only getting the reactions of the characters as they come off stage. The result is

¹⁴Examples of this impulse are, among others, Strindberg's "intimate" theatre, theatre in the round, street theatre, and "happenings." This has not, of course, prevented a contrary movement from developing: one thinks, perhaps, first of Berthold Brecht's *Verfremdung* and "epic theatre."

that the moments of passion we do see are largely unmotivated and, thus, un-affecting.

I think, myself, that much of this is due to inexperience. Kellgren was, after all, only twenty-six at the time, it was his first theatre piece, and, even in an age of early developers, the jump from lyrical to dramatic poetry is a big one. It is also fairly clear that Kellgren understood that *Adonis och Proserpina* was not writing by which he wished to be remembered: he did not include it among his *Samlade skrifter*, more than a third of which is otherwise devoted to his theatrical production. Bits of it appear elsewhere, however, as independent poems and as material in another opera.

Though the immediate consequence of *Adonis och Proserpina* for Kellgren was likely only the composition of one or, possibly, two prologues to other operas in 1778, it appears that he was encouraged to write a text for an opera called *Yngve*, to be set by Johann Gottlieb Naumann (1741-1801). The work took him a year and was, it seems, never composed. Its text is now lost.¹⁵ It is, however, a reasonable assumption that the commission to him and Joseph Martin Kraus (1756-92) for an opera at Ulriksdal palace was an eventual result of his theatrical efforts. This opera, called, perhaps not entirely surprisingly, *Proserpin*, offered Kellgren a second crack at his material. It is not known if the subject was chosen by the King, but the commission could certainly not have been granted without his assent. For Kraus, no less eager than Kellgren to secure royal favour, this was also the critical opportunity.¹⁶

¹⁵See Sverker Ek, *Kellgren. Skalden och kulturkämpen*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1965, 1980), I:171.

¹⁶Kraus was probably the most gifted, and certainly the most innovative, of the many composers who came or were brought to Sweden during Gustaf's reign. There is no recent biography of Kraus, but generally reliable is Karl Schreiber, *Biographie über den Odenwälder Komponisten Joseph Martin Kraus* (Buchen: Bezirksmuseum, 1928). This is usefully complemented by Irmgard Leux-Henschen, *Joseph Martin Kraus in seinen Briefen* (Stockholm: Reimers, 1978). The standard catalogue of his work is Bertil H. van Boer, *Die Werke Joseph Martin Kraus. Systematisch-thematisches Werkverzeichnis*, Publication 56 (Stockholm: Kungl. musikaliska akademien, 1988).

Proserpin is in one act, and represents not so much a condensation of *Adonis och Proserpina* as a complete rethinking of its material. The convoluted story differs in significant ways from that in the earlier text. More importantly, however, it places the action squarely in front of the spectator, at least, most of the time. Though in one act, *Proserpin* is not a small opera. It requires a medium-sized orchestra, a ballet company, a chorus, three principals (among whom is not Proserpin), three secondary soloists, a recitative singer, and a volcano. While we know that Kraus himself conducted, we have no idea of who sang which parts.

As spectacle, *Proserpin* pulled out all the stops. In addition to the volcano, various gods are required to drop in from on high no less than three times, almost creating a celestial traffic-jam. As music, Kraus took his cue from Kellgren, for the most part, letting himself go in the overture, in one somewhat unexpected bravura aria, and, possibly, in the ballets, only one of which still exists. As text, Kellgren made an advance upon *Adonis och Proserpina*. The motivation of the action is mostly clear, the verse has a greater rhythmic vitality, and at least one character, Proserpin's mother, Ceres, is developed with a psychological subtlety worthy of Busenello, on the one historical end, or Piave, on the other.¹⁷

As an opera, *Proserpin* is not flawless. Kraus's music is always inventive, but he occasionally gets verbal rhythms wrong or makes them difficult to sing.¹⁸ Then, too, the formal subject of the story, Proserpin's fate, is of almost no interest to us whatsoever and is, indeed, hardly dealt with. Of considerable interest from the point of view of Kellgren's development as a librettist, however, is his treatment of Ceres. It is almost as if we can see him learning how to write a libretto as he creates her character, for she takes shape under our very eyes. We can almost point to the moment when Kellgren understands that there is a dramatic

¹⁷Respectively, Monteverdi's librettist for *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1643) and Verdi's for *La Traviata* (1853).

¹⁸I think this is not due to his incomplete knowledge of Swedish: there is some curious word underlay in the choruses of his earlier oratorio, *Der Tod Jesu* (VB 19 [VB² 18], 1776), as well.

possibility in her which can be realized when words and music come together to move as one, the moment when he learns to step away from the text and let the music complete our understanding. It is a moment that Kraus understands, as well, and rises to join.

Though incomplete as a musico-dramatic product, and probably best seen as a transitional or learning piece, *Proserpin* has within it all the seeds that were to bear fruit in Kellgren's remaining three libretti. Despite hopes of both authors that it would be taken up on the public stage in town, the opera had but one performance. Criticisms were made and accepted but never acted upon, probably because there was no need to do so: this opera's history had reached its end. As with *Adonis och Proserpina* and *Yngve*, *Proserpin* found no place among Kellgren's *Samlade skrifter*.¹⁹

That, at least, was not to be the problem with the next opera, the epically-proportioned *Aeneas i Carthago*. Indeed, *Aeneas* might be called Kellgren's most well-known unknown opera. Certainly none of Kellgren's theatrical progeny gave him so much trouble, most of it in vain, as it turned out, but its history is quickly told.

Whatever its autonomous merits, *Proserpin* was surely the convincing argument that lead the King to award Kellgren and Kraus the signal honour of composing the dedicatory piece for the new opera house expected to be completed within a year or two. Kraus reported to his parents in the summer of 1781 that he had the text and his hands were now full of work. He was especially keen to note that the King had done everything but the versification.²⁰ By the middle of February, Kraus had finished the overture, the prologue, and the first two acts. Then, disaster struck. Carolina Müller, the irreplaceable soprano who was to sing Dido, fled Sweden with her husband to avoid debts. Because the opera required almost literally everyone who worked in the operatic and theatrical

¹⁹For a complete discussion of *Proserpin*, see Alan Swanson, "Kellgren's Libretto to *Proserpin*," in *Gustav III and the Swedish Stage, Opera, Theatre, and Other Foibles. Essays in Honour of Hans Åstrand*, ed. by Bertil van Boer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), pp. 213-230.

²⁰See Leux-Henschen, *Kraus...Briefen*, p. 240.

establishment of the city and because, therefore, each part was written with specific people in mind, Müller's flight rendered production of the piece impossible. There were simply no reserves to be called upon.

Kraus' consolation was a long travel journey funded by the King, who asked him to study the current theatre abroad. Kellgren, on the other hand, was given a new commission, which became *Gustaf Wasa*, into which he soon pitched himself.

Aeneas was not about to disappear without a trace from Kellgren's life, however. Sometime in the summer of 1787, there was renewed interest in the project. Kraus was back in Sweden and, presumably, the King was again desirous of having *Aeneas* staged. Apparently, Kellgren had, in fact, worked on the text in the intervening years, for in asking for a copy of it from Clewberg, he remarked that "*Krausen äger den ej correct* [Kraus does not have the correct version]." ²¹ Nothing came of this burst of interest, though the flame apparently still burned, if low, for a couple of years. By the Fall of 1790, however, Kellgren had to write, "*Eneas är ingen fråga om. Stackars Kraus! Är det ett öde för geniet, att glömmas bort, medan Charlataner från alla världens ändar reussera* [There is no question of Aeneas. Poor Kraus! Is that a fate for a genius, to be forgotten while charlatans from all corners of the world succeed]" ²²

This was still not the end of matters, for neither Kraus nor Kellgren. Kraus apparently worked on the music until it was finished, by 1791, at the latest, and Kellgren continued to polish his text, probably with the intent of including it in his projected collected works. Kraus died in 1792, some months after the King, while Kellgren, dying in December, 1795, did not live to see his *Samlade skrifter* in print. Neither saw *Aeneas i Carthago*, their joint labour of love, in its complete form, nor have we to this day.

This sad history disguises the fact that had *Aeneas* ever come to the stage, it probably would have greatly startled its audience. First, its sheer size surpassed anything that had yet been put on a Swedish stage. Its length was greater than any previous production; it would have taken over

²¹Kellgren, *Brev*, p. 170.

²²Kellgren, Letter to Clewberg, November 23, 1790, *Brev*, p. 305.

six hours to perform in its entirety.²³ Further, it would have taken nearly every human and material resource available: the piece would have needed about 200 people on and off stage and required all the considerably machinery in the new opera house.²⁴ Such enormity would hardly be seen before Berlioz' *Les Troyens* (1863). Yet, its size must not be seen as a matter of vulgarity, though showing-off the new house and the splendour of a Swedish opera company was central to the intent of the opera, for, second, though its theme was well-tried, Kellgren and Kraus rose to the epic scope of it.

Though the King and Kellgren had an earlier French tragedy on the subject near them as they wrote,²⁵ and though Pietro Metastasio's (1698-1782) *Didone abbandonata* (1724) was well-known, Kellgren harked back to Virgil more than to these writers. He places his text within the divine plane, against which the strenuous endeavours of Æneas and Dido are but futile gestures in a context they do not control. Kraus' music, too, reaches into the heart of this expanded world-view with bold effects, achieved in part by an approach to orchestration that was on the cutting edge for its time, something we are only now beginning to realize. There were, in short, new sounds to be heard and new dramatic spaces to be occupied.

In *Æneas*, Kellgren shows what he had learned from his work in *Proserpin*. He begins his story with a noisy prologue, which quickly and efficiently provides both the background we need and pitches us full force into the action. His recitatives are charged with animation and passion and Kraus almost makes them into ariosos. The arias, too, have a directness of expression that Kraus can enliven musically. The libretto is certainly not without problems: few libretti are. It is, in fact, just at those points where

²³Personal communication of this guess from the editor of the modern score (in progress), Bertil van Boer.

²⁴This is my reckoning based on the personnel list in the published libretto of the one and only, and cut, production in 1799 (Stockholm: Johan Pehr Lind, 1799).

²⁵Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan's (1709-84) tragedy, *Didon* (1734, rev. before 1746).

Kellgren abandons Virgil, especially in the last act finale and Dido's unexpected apotheosis, that Kellgren's writing comes closer to fustian than poetry, (though one might argue that fustian is what the last, celebratory, finale is all about, anyway).²⁶

The almost-comic events which prevented *Aeneas* from fulfilling its destiny did not prevent Kellgren from being commissioned to produce another libretto. On May 27, 1782, after *Aeneas* had been cancelled and Nauman's *Cora och Alonzo* scheduled instead, and with Kraus about to leave Stockholm on his much-extended study trip,²⁷ Kellgren wrote to Clewberg, "*jag håller på att skriva en ny Opera, efter Kungens plan, kallad Gustaf Vasa, ämnad att sättas Musik till af Nauman, och att spelas i höst; men jag fruktar det går med den som med de förra; ty jag lär såkert vara prédestinerad att skriva Operor, som ej spelas* [I am busy writing a new opera, according to the King's plan, called Gustaf Vasa, intended to be composed by Nauman and to be played this Fall; but I fear it will be with this one as with the others, for I am surely predestined to write operas that are never performed]."²⁸

Kellgren's relations with Johan Gottlieb Naumann, his new composer, were, to say the least, strained. As the composer of what came to be the dedication opera, the older man had, of course, the full confidence of his abilities. He also had clear ideas about what a libretto ought to consist in and what a librettist's function was in the natural order of things. That Kellgren did not always share these notions is clear from his letter of August 6, 1782, to Christopher Zibet (1740-1809), the middle-man between the King and his operatic establishment, wherein he complains that "*Nauman har redan talat om retranchement* [Naumann has already spoken of cuts]." He goes on, then, to speak in great detail about the importance of the recitative and accuses composers, except Gluck, of just wanting to dash from one aria to the next. He also objected that the

²⁶For more on the shaping of *Aeneas*, see Ek, *Kellgren. Skalden och kulturkämpen*, I:307-09, II:93-105.

²⁷He was gone from about the end of October, 1782, to Christmas, 1786.

²⁸Kellgren, *Brev*, p. 109.

composer took all the credit for the final product.²⁹ This, of course, is the lot of most librettists through history and Kellgren was ploughing a well-traced furrow here. Nonetheless, we can now see that he was one of several prophets in his understanding of the dramatic importance of the recitatives, the narrative part, of opera. Though composers and librettists gave up the aria/recitative distinction and the so-called "number" opera only with great reluctance (and some never at all), Kellgren's understanding of the recitative places him in the forward group of librettists and theorists of the eighteenth century who were looking for a closer integration of narrative and music.

One result of this "modern" view of the libretto is that *Gustaf Wasa* has an extremely tight structure. Its three acts are crowded with activity, indeed, spectacle, which yet manages to gather emotional speed toward the end. To be sure, there is much clanging of armour in this surprisingly festive "*lyrisk tragedie*" and, as the first truly *Swedish* opera, it had to bear an obvious nationalism of approved colour, but the whole piece has, nonetheless, an energy that propelled it to an immense popularity, even in its own time. One of its choruses even came close to being something like a national anthem in the days before there were such things.³⁰

This libretto is one of the theatre texts that the King spent a great deal of time with. He heavily revised the extensive scenario and fussed over it in considerable detail. Clearly, the King understood the historical weight this opera would have to bear. Despite this close royal involvement, the

²⁹Kellgren, *Brev*, pp. 112-13. Gunhild Bergh shows that Kellgren's remarks appear related to those by Francesco Algarotti (1712-64) in an essay from 1755: see the *Kommentar* to the present letter, p. 62, n.112:7-32.

³⁰This was, of course, the much-loved, but no longer heard, "*Ädla skuggor, vördade fäder, Sverges Hjeltar och Riddersmän! Om ännu des sällhet er gläder, Gifven friheten lif igen!*" [Noble shadows, honoured forefathers/ Sweden's heroes and knights!/ If its blessedness yet pleases you,/ Grant freedom life again!]" (Act II:1).

text is clearly Kellgren's. Though guided by the King's expectations, he was not consumed by them.³¹

There are three other important respects in which this libretto continues the modernist direction of *Æneas*. The first is structural. The complexity of *Æneas* allowed by its sheer size has here been simplified drastically to concentrate our attention. The opera opens in the deep dungeon of the castle Tre Kronor, where the captive noble Swedish women and children are bemoaning their senseless fate. The pathos of their situation is quickly raised when the small son of Sten Sture the elder, one of those executed in the Stockholm Bloodbath (a fact that would have been known to all the audience) is thrust into the prison. What Kellgren has done in the opening of *Gustaf Wasa* is to plunge us even faster into this story than he did in *Æneas*, for the distress we are shown prepares us to see the Danish conqueror in only one way. It is a compelling, indeed, modern, stroke of theatre on the part of Kellgren and the King to begin this otherwise heroic opera from the point of view of those in the most desperate situation, the innocently imprisoned women and children. This view literally from below is symbolic of the whole spatial plan of the opera. We move from a deep dungeon in Act I, to the throne room, to Gustaf's siege tent, to the palace walls. The move from inside to outside, from below to above, is mirrored in the quickening of the action and in the expansion of the numbers of people involved.

Second, Kellgren, having learned from his work on the character of Ceres and sharpened his technique of characterization with Dido and *Æneas*, here takes a different tack. In the character of the Danish admiral, Severin Norrby, Kellgren exercises his capacity to paint a figure of considerable complexity, caught between his duty to his king and his

³¹See Oscar Levertin on the development of the text to *Gustaf Wasa* in his *Gustaf III som dramatisk författare* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1894), and the considered reappraisal in Ek, *Kellgren. Skalden och kulturkämpen*, I:334-49. See also the remarks by Sven Åke Heed, "Från Gustaf III:s fransyska till Kellgrens libretto," in the program for the 1991 production at Kungl. teatern, Stockholm, pp. 9-19, for a short view.

humanitarian instincts. He is far and away the most interesting character in the opera. Indeed, even Christjern has some brief doubts about what he is doing. Ironically, it is, in fact, only Gustaf, of the principal men, who is fairly monochromatic, even dull.

Third, if the celebration expected in *Aeneas* was of a building and an institution, the opera (and, in some sense, of music itself), the celebration in *Gustaf Wasa* was of a much more personal nature: little interested this Francophone German king more than his putative Swedish ancestors. The third Gustaf came to be absorbed more and more by the first two, and onto them he projected, through his scenarios, a view of himself as the enlightened, forgiving, but nonetheless victorious, despot, the very embodiment of his country's national will. Indeed, in *Gustaf Wasa*, the title character almost literally takes the nation unto himself when, during the siege of the castle, he insists, against all military sense and stage decorum, upon bearing the Swedish flag himself.

Kellgren's fears of writing operas that would never be performed were almost realized with *Gustaf Wasa*, as well. Though the music was finished sometime in 1783, production of the opera was delayed by almost three years, to January, 1786. Once brought to the stage, however, it became the most-performed Swedish opera, a position it achieved in Kellgren's own lifetime and still holds today.³²

While awaiting *Gustaf Wasa*'s production, Kellgren was put to versifying the King's vision of *Drottning Christina* (1785) for a private court performance in the new theatre at Gripsholm Palace. The King had by no means foresworn opera, however, any more than he was about to foreswear his ancestral visions, and his next task for Kellgren was the text for a more domestic piece, *Gustaf Adolph och Ebba Brahe*, based on a well-known piece of gossip about Gustaf II Adolph and already a play in

³²At 177 performances to 1972, it still has a commanding lead over the two next most popular Swedish operas, Erik Lindegren's and Karl-Birger Blomdahl's *Aniara* (1959) and Wilhelm Peterson-Berger's *Arnlfjot* (1910). Its recent revival (1991), however, was catastrophic, for reasons apparently having nothing to do with the merits of the opera itself.

prose by the King. Ek argues that Kellgren, who was known by his friends to be unhappy with these royal visitations upon his time, probably had to tackle this piece because the King had just made him a founding member of the Swedish Academy.³³

Whatever Kellgren thought of this work, and his letters from this period tell us almost nothing useful, much of *Gustaf Adolph och Ebba Brahe* can be seen as moving in a new direction. On one level, this has to do with theme. Despite occasional bursts of the usual patriotic enthusiasm, and the presence of war with the Danes at the back of the stage, this opera is far away from the world of *Aeneas* and *Gustaf Wasa*. If they can be seen as dealing with matters of great consequence (cosmic or national), *Gustaf Adolph* projects a world that, while emotionally tumultuous, is also one that is more immediate, more enclosed. The two worlds of complex court intrigue, on the one hand, and simple rural candour, on the other, are connected by a strong current of sentimentality, centered around *amour* and *amour propre*. We have here two love stories with two, differing, endings, drawn together in the oil of national feeling.

The venture is a new direction, too, because Kellgren here has the opportunity, for the first time, of using prosodic means to characterize people and social levels: while the court uses the high style he had already worked out for his previous libretti, the peasantry are characterized with entirely different rhythms, usually a three-beat line, and simpler rhetorical gestures. The musical possibilities inherent in this contrast set deeply upon the work's composer, the abbé Georg Joseph Vogler.

Vogler had an enormous reputation as an organ virtuoso even before coming to Sweden, one he capitalized upon after his arrival in 1786. As a composer, most of his work has been forgotten, save for the Swedish Christmas perennial, "*Hosianna, Davids son*." His somewhat simple style, however, made him just the man to compose this opera and he hit his stride in the pastoral second act, for which he provided mostly a series of tunes in the folk manner. Even today, when the opera is performed, this act is the part everyone remembers. It is unrelentingly genial and its

³³See Ek, *Kellgren. Skalden och kulturkämpen*, II:78-93.

studied naiveté is coherently managed. Vogler seems to have responded in part here to the rising popular interest in the "*visa*," the folk-like song, which finally found ample expression in Olof Åhlström's (1756-1835) *Musikaliskt tidsfördrif*, which began collecting and publishing this kind of material in 1789. Apart from Act Two, the music is competent, certainly, but not especially ingenious, save for a surprisingly magnificent, fire-filled, duet in the first act between the Queen Mother (the evil genius in the play) and Ebba Brahe.

The second act, the most remarkable of the three, is, I think, also a response to a growing movement in the private theatre of the 1780s. Carl Stenborg (1752-1813), Petter's son and a musical bureaucrat who sang Gustaf Adolph, also ran the chief private theatre in Stockholm, whose clear and greatest success came from performances of *opéras comiques* (of varying quality), parodies by Carl Israel Hallman (1732-1800) of royal operas, and bourgeois comedy. The strict genre division compelled upon the theatres by the King did not permit the royal stages to perform these "low" genres, but the resonance of their popularity can be seen in the rather elevated country style of the second act. In the event, *Gustaf Adolph och Ebba Brahe* turned out not to be a success. It was performed only twice in its first season (Spring, 1788), and disappeared from the repertory after 1794.

Kellgren was not the only royal poet to versify the King's theatrical longings, and he soon tired of the task. It was not his natural form of expression. He took it seriously, however, and pushed it farther than did, say, his principal colleague, Carl Gustaf Leopold (1756-1829),³⁴ and left us on the brink of a new kind of libretto, whose Swedish fulfillment lay far in the future.

³⁴Who wrote the libretto for the King's *Frigga* (1787, music by Olof Åhlström).