

Alan Swanson

ANIARA AS A LIBRETTO

'Librettology' is not a word that has much entered the vocabulary of literary criticism and, to his credit, Johan Stenström's recent book¹ does not use it much. This interesting thesis is, as far as I know, the first large-scale study of the movement of an opera from start to stage, and in this study, the libretto plays a central, but by no means exclusive, role. This is entirely as it should be.

It is odd that no-one has previously tackled the inviting, almost obvious, question of just how the enormously popular epic *Aniara* was converted into the almost-as-popular opera *Aniara*. Stenström's research has yielded rewarding insight into this process (and has also produced a book almost worth it for the illustrative material alone).

My own first encounter with *Aniara*, in the mid-1960's, was a failure. I fought my way through those fake technical terms that now seem so dated; I struggled to avoid laughing at a place not even Americans would call Dorisburg; I tried to ignore the hilarious resonances called up by the improbable name of Daisy Doody.² Then, when I saw the opera, with X:et's supremely silly costumes, Blomdahl's pastiches of 50's pop music, and its relentlessly solemn whining, I knew the cause was lost and put it all out of my mind.

Well, not quite all of it. There were those bits that stuck somewhere in my memory. They were not the parts that bang and clatter with the clumsy apparatus of a science-to-be but, rather, the lyric sections, with their formal

¹About: Johan Stenström. *Aniara. Från versepos till opera*. Malmö: Corona, 1994. Illus. Pp. 457. ISBN: 91-564-1043-3.

²There might be an interesting essay to be written on elements of 1950's American culture and language in *Aniara*. Certainly, for an American of that generation, Dorisburg calls to mind the quintessential movie star of the period, Doris Day, and the idea of a "burg" named after her seems the very image of small-town America. Daisy Doody, on the other hand, forces up the unfortunate memory of Howdy Doody, the title puppet of an extremely popular and exceptionally mindless children's program on 1950's television.

virtuosity, their brilliant images, and their philosophical precision. Once having read it, can anyone forget the metaphor of the bubble in the glass, for instance? And the same is true of the opera. Can we forget Isagel? or the Blind Poetess? Indeed, I think the use of a dancer as a main character is far more important for the development of opera than the use of electronic music, with no apologies needed to Auber or Stravinsky.

There is a real sense in which *Aniara* is very much the child of its time. World War II has left a double-edged scientific legacy, comprising both the fear of complete destruction and the vision of significant improvement in daily human life. Furthermore, as I heard in a recent lecture,³ Swedish interest in science-fiction was coming to a peak in the 1950's. Then, too, the near-hysteria generated upon the opening of the opera in 1959 is explicable, perhaps, in the context of a superbly-orchestrated PR campaign coupled with a sense of relief that there was, at last, something to replace Peterson-Berger's *Arnljot* (1910) as the national opera.

It will strike one as banal to point out that an epic and an opera have rather different aims and that they work in different ways, speak in different voices, we might say. Yet, this simple fact is often obscured in our thinking about the complex we call *Aniara*. Certainly, we do not think of the opera without thinking of the poem: Harry Martinson's fear that the opera would consign the poem to oblivion have proven groundless (p. 44). But it is also clear that, to the extent we are attracted to the opera, its power to realize certain images in the epic colors our perception of those images. For instance, knowing the opera, I doubt we can ever think of the Blind Poetess as other than a depiction of Edith Södergran.⁴ Knowing the opera, I doubt we can ever think of Isagel as other than a lissome dancer. Knowing the opera, we have a physical sense of Chefone and Sandon in a way we have to take on trust when we read the poem. This reading backwards is inevitable, but no cause for alarm, for the honest reader will take these as enriching details rather than as newly-dominant elements. To the point is that an epic works differently toward a different goal from an opera. Crudely speaking, an epic works through words and time to draw its reader through an experience that is essentially intellectual. An opera works through words, sound, gesture, images,

³Given by Dag Hedman at Chalmers Technical University's Humanities Days 1994 in Gothenburg.

⁴See Stenström, *Aniara*, pp. 186-93, for the history of this identification.

and (generally compacted) time to produce a many-layered experience that is largely sensual.

After a brief, useful, beginning presenting some of the cross-media interests of various artists, performers, and writers of the 1940's, Stenström gets down to the chronological development of the libretto itself, starting with Blomdahl's casting about for a text to set and his enthusiasm for Harry Martinson's epic poem. By 1957, Blomdahl, the great Swedish exponent of absolute music, that is, music without words or program (except for occasionally descriptive titles), music related to nothing but itself, had already changed his mind. He had, by then, set texts of Erik Lindegren and Saint-John Perse and was looking *med ljus och lykta*⁵ for a suitable theme and text for an opera. He had considered setting Dylan Thomas' radio play, *Under Milk Wood* (1954) but, as he wrote his publisher, Howard Hartog of Schott's, London, "The trouble is that I think that play needs a Mozart, and I am no [*sic.*]"⁶ When he then approached Hartog with a plan for *Aniara*, Hartog did not think the idea was commercially reasonable, nor that Lindegren was the right person to make the libretto,⁷ but gave his approval on condition that the vocal score contain a German translation, given Blomdahl's popularity in Germany, but not an English one.

Stenström's first new find with respect to the history of this libretto is the preliminary version Blomdahl and Lindegren literally cut and pasted together from the poem in one June week, the so-called *klippversion*. This text and all its changes constitutes the second part of Stenström's book, liberally illustrated with photographs of the working sheets and the paste-up version. Though this text changed, often considerably, over the year or so of its composition, and some new words by Martinson were required (for Sandon and Chefone), the final product is clearly the result of decisions taken in that first week. It is much to the point that Blomdahl was intimately and actively involved from the very first day in the making of the text he was going to set. Indeed, the whole

⁵Letter to Harry Martinson, April 7, 1957, Blomdahl collection, Sveriges radios arkiv.

⁶Letter to Howard Hartog of Schott's, London, March 7, 1957, Blomdahl collection, Sveriges radios arkiv.

⁷Blomdahl to Hartog, May 6, 1957, and Hartog to Blomdahl, May 14, 1957, Blomdahl collection, Sveriges radios arkiv. According to Stenström, Blomdahl himself first approached Lars Gyllensten to be his librettist, but the latter declined (p. 32).

project was his idea and evolved out of, and was sustained by, his own enormous energy. Of 103 poems, the final libretto used some or all of 29. As Martinson himself remarked, "Det blev en buljongtärning av den oxen." (pp. 41-42)

The version Blomdahl and Lindegren made of the epic is called a *cento*, a sort of textual collage. It is important to note here that what they made was not a condensation of the epic. The libretto is not merely shorter than the poem; it is a new and different piece of work altogether, and it operates in a completely different way from the epic.

The epic *Aniara* consists of two uneven sections, *sånger* 1-29, first published in *Cikada* (1953), and *sånger* 30-103, added in the independent version of 1956. What is interesting about this division is not its uneven structure but the difference in content, and the difference in direction that content suggests. By *sång* 29, almost every important narrative event has already happened and there is a real sense of closure. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing left to happen for there is one important action yet remaining, the journey itself.

Epic poems are not only *about* something, they *are* something. In the case of *Aniara* as, indeed, with most epics, the poem is about a journey, that classical metaphor for learning. We think first, perhaps, of the journeys of Odysseus or Aeneas, who learn something about themselves on their travels. This is not news. What is important to understand, however, is that, if we are honest readers, the poem becomes *our* journey, as well. What is different about *Aniara*, of course, is the anti-heroic nature of the journey; there is no central figure and everyone is fleeing from, rather than going toward, moments of trial (though, with respect to this latter circumstance, *Aniara* begins in almost identical terms as the *Aeneid*). For an epic journey to become *our* journey, *we* must have some physical experience of Time that is similar to the journey's time. The poet's only way to do this for us is through words, to make the poem longer, so that small events have their place in, and derive their meaning from, larger ones.

Martinson called his epic *en revy...i tid och rum*. Almost all discussion of this poem, and all of it hitherto about the opera, has centered upon Space and its space and seems to have overlooked the central role played by Time and its

time.⁸ For Time is at the core of an epic. That is, the experience of the epic is the journey, and journeys take place in Time. The Time of the journey is modulated in a poem by words, whose impact upon us is less sensual than intellectual, requiring time in the brain to process their information completely. Many words take much time. An epic creates its experience through means that imply long duration.

Applied to *Aniara*, we can see that Martinson's unusual structure (the relationship of the two parts is, roughly, 1:2) with its radically displaced external action (mostly confined to the first third) suggests something different about its meaning when compared to classical epics. Aeneas learns his heroic task through the course of the whole epic, but *Aniara* is not about the outward learning that takes place in Time through action. Rather, it is about the inward learning that takes place in Time through contemplation. Much of *sånger* 30-103 is recollection of, and looking for meaning within, moments that took place during or before the events of *sånger* 1-29. Relatively little new happens that affects the narrative. What Martinson seems to have understood when he wrote the latter section of *Aniara* is that the events of the journey are not its significant part. What is important is to understand the implications for the characters, and for us, of those events. Martinson's only means to force us to move beyond a simply intellectual understanding of our experience into an æsthetic sense of the poem is to give us the experience of Time, that is, to stretch out our physical experience with intellectually powerful words. Part of the "meaning" in the epic is that we must ourselves undergo this experience in order to get to the ambiguously hopeful "Nirvanas våg." All poetry, but especially epic poetry, works through a physical experience that allows little instant response. Hence, though this poem moves inevitably forward in Time, its greater part looks backward at what has been. In this, it distinguishes itself from classical epics, for its theme is Memory. But how does one write an opera about Memory?

⁸This is even true of its two recordings. The 1960 (American) Columbia recording calls it "An Epic of Space-Flight in 2038 A.D." and only gets to the subtitle on the libretto page, where it is translated as "A Revue of Mankind in Space-Time," not, perhaps quite what Martinson had in mind. The recent Swedish Caprice recording, from 1985, does not even go that far, announcing it only as "Aniara. Space Opera by Karl-Birger Blomdahl," avoiding the subtitle altogether.

The decision made to write an opera based on *Aniara*, the problem was not how to shorten the available material. Though difficult, because of the large amount of superb verse, at issue was an essentially musical matter: what language in the epic would work best with music. Rather, the problem was how to make epic material into opera material: that is, how to turn a text essentially looking backward into something that, by its nature, could only go forward.

An opera can only move forward because music is always about Becoming: notes move toward new notes, chords dissolve into yet-unheard chords, melody seeks resolution. Music generally, and opera in particular, is, in this respect, narrative: one musical event leads to another in ways we understand or come to accept as reasonable.

Opera, as a form distinct from, say, oratorio, has several specific expectations attached to it. The first, and greatest, of these is the expectation of a story. An opera, by contrast with an oratorio, shows us, rather than tells us about, events, and events suggest order and, therefore, Time. From the perspective of being a potential opera, the problem with the "events" in the epic *Aniara* is that most of them come early because, as I have suggested, Martinson's poem is not about "events."

Stenström tells us that in thinking about making an opera from the poem, Blomdahl began with a list of "Tänkbara scenbilder" and their related *sånger* (pp. 64-69), which shows us that he first thought in terms of what could be put on the stage. It is clear from the final version of the libretto, however, that "events" had to come first. In fact, the shortness of the opera - something over an hour and a half - and the fact that all the "events" of the epic are in the opera, gives those events a prominence there not accorded them in the poem. Further, there are events on stage that are only spoken of in the poem. This is perfectly natural, perhaps even inevitable, probably even desirable. In an opera, something must happen or else one gets oratorio.

Another expectation in an opera is that situations will be created where, in some sense, the natural response is to sing something. So strongly was this expectation felt in the making of this opera that situations were made where interesting characters who have no verbal part in the epic were literally embodied: Sandon, Chefone, Daisy Doody, and, above all, Isagel. The case of the Blind Poetess is special because, although she has a long speech in the epic, she is given none of those words in the opera.

The third expectation, indeed, the basic premise, of an opera, as of all music, that it can only move forward, would seem to be the most difficult problem to solve in the shift from epic to opera. It is, in fact, one Blomdahl easily got around. It is a clear psychological fact that, although music can only move forward, the ability of the mind to retain some aural recollection of what has happened allows the composer to play with remembered musical moments by recapitulation, transposition, and thematic transformation. Blomdahl uses these techniques, and others, as a way of reflecting in the music the sense of reviewing what has gone before that we see in the structure of the epic. Thus, though the libretto works in the present, the music offers those glimpses backward we see in the epic.

Stenström's reconstruction of the elaboration of the final libretto contains much new information, especially the *klippversion*. Though detailed, he is clear and has much insight into the shaping of the central characters and the movement of the narrative. What brings this study to a new level, however, is his next section, a fine analysis of just how all this got onto the stage.

Here, as elsewhere, Stenström impresses upon us that this was very much Karl-Birger Blomdahl's show. Though he had the use of some of the most famous names in the Swedish opera world to work with, people far more experienced in the theatre than he, they did his bidding in making the final result. In addition to the well-combed printed literature on the opera, to show us this part of its making, Stenström has had the use of three video-tape recordings, production logs, interviews with participants *and* has had the good fortune to recover X:et's original paintings for the sets, many of which he generously reproduces in full color in the book. Furthermore, he has many rehearsal and costume photographs to illustrate his presentation of the progress of the piece. This is an original contribution to the study of opera and the study of this opera. It is also the part least able to be reviewed adequately here, relying heavily, as it does, on visual evidence. It must suffice to say that the illustrations combine well with his discussion of the original production and its Stockholm revival (the only one he deals with⁹).

⁹I myself wish Stenström could have made some comparisons with Leif Söderström's 1977 Malmö production, for which there is a certain amount of photographic material that suggests a quite different and, to my eyes, more interesting scenographic approach. Still, that would have opened the door to comparing the three foreign productions, as well, and the result might have been, perhaps, too

Stenström's book consists, then, essentially of two parts, describing the coming into being and development of the libretto and the embodiment of the result on the stage. In both of these sections, Stenström has made original contributions to our understanding of the problem, contributions that repay their study.

In that context, then, it may seem churlish to remark that there are two parts missing from this project. The first is what seems to be an inadequate understanding of how epics, in general, and the epic *Aniara*, specifically, work. I have tried to sketch an approach to this issue above.

More problematic is the second gap, a useable discussion of a) how the music came into being and b) how it works in the opera. Music is, after all, a considerable part of what opera is about and it is certainly what sets it apart from spoken theatre. It is also Blomdahl's greatest contribution to his opera. To be sure, Stenström has tried to suggest something of how the music works without, I think, having a useable method of doing so. This is not entirely his fault, as the methodological equipment available is weak and contradictory, to say the least. It is also true, alas, that many qualified on the textual side know too little about music, however well-disposed they may be toward it, and, one must add, too many on the musical side have but a weak appreciation of the texts they work with. As to the development of Blomdahl's music itself, a subject at least as central to Stenström's purposes, I should think, as the development of the libretto, this would require access to, and analysis of, Blomdahl's drafts and sketches. As it is, the music is largely missing from discussion of this opera and that presents a serious problem for knowing it as completely as Stenström wishes us to. I myself do not know where the drafts and sketches for this opera are, or even if they exist,¹⁰ but some closer musical analysis needs to be joined to this study to make it complete. It remains curious that most writing about this opera talks of everything but the music: I believe the only musical analysis of *Aniara* ever done is a brief 1960 article by Martin Tegen, calling attention to a number of musical aspects, among them its "modified twelve-tone technique" and Blomdahl's use of so-called "spiral

unwieldy to lead to useful results.

¹⁰The completed manuscript is in the Royal Library (KB).

series."¹¹

Aside from the fact that it comes from an epic poem, the text of *Aniara* is non-traditional in that there is little dialogue. On the whole, people make speeches: to the audience, to each other, to themselves. Yet, this does not, in the end, produce a static series of numbers, as one might expect. Indeed, Blomdahl's musical ingenuity is such that there is steady movement from one point to the next, by means of continuously developing musical themes. Further, he creates a theatrical world in which this is the natural way to communicate with one another.

He has, I think, two ways of making these transitions. One is by means of that ancient theatrical technique, the narrator, who simply sets us up for the moment to come. Benjamin Britten had used this device to similar effect in his *Rape of Lucretia* (1945-46, performed in Stockholm in 1958). Like Britten's narrators, Blomdahl's Mimarobe links all the parts of the story but, unlike them, he also plays an active role in that story's development.

If we can say that the use of a narrator is at its heart a verbal technique, Blomdahl's other method is a musical one. That is, the situations the narrator introduces, and occasionally comments upon, are essentially specific emotional moments, whose central meaning is best carried by music and gesture rather than words. Hence, the dance sequences, the choruses, and the use of a dancer as a main character. Thus, we meet the Blind Poetess suddenly. She is evidently already in a visionary condition, from which we get only an ecstatic vocalise, in short, pure music. The opera is organized around those moments in the epic which have the greatest emotional weight attached to them. This is not particularly operatic news. What is important in this opera is that these moments are given to us less through traditional narrative development than as a sequence of sharply focussed verbal and musical images which, when considered together, allow us to experience for ourselves the journey that is *Aniara*.

I have written elsewhere about the structure of the last scene of the opera and of the dramatic function of Edith Södergran's poetry there.¹² What is

¹¹See his "Aniara," in Gunnar Bucht, et al., "*Facetter*" av och om Karl-Birger Blomdahl (Stockholm: Stims informationscentral, 1970), pp. 94-115. This is reprinted from *Musik och Ljudteknik*, 3(1960).

¹²Alan Swanson, 'Södergran and *Aniara*: A 'New' Poem by Edith Södergran', *Scandinavica*, 31(May 1992): 43-51.

musically evident is that Blomdahl uses the scene not only to draw together the threads of his musical argument, as we would expect in as tightly conceived a work as this, but also to underline musically an important idea that runs through the text.

In the very first music we hear, Blomdahl builds for us a twelve-tone chord covering six octaves which begins on a very low "C" and ends on a very high "Gb." This interval by itself is called the "tritone." The tritone is handy because, balancing on the very center of the octave, it allows the composer easily to resolve the interval in any one of several directions. It is, therefore, an unsettled, perhaps also unsettling, interval. This musical fact returns to us at the end of the opera, where we have a condensed version of the opening music, ending similarly to where we began. When the Poetess begins her curious elegy using Södergran's words, the orchestra begins its reshaping of the opening chord, beginning now on a low "Gb," while the Poetess sings her words to a variation of her motive¹³ [Ex. 1¹⁴],



© 1959 by Schott and Co., Ltd. Used by permission.

a variation which, however, in contrast with the all-encompassing musical statement in the orchestra, is incomplete with respect to the tone-row and, by its falling endings, creates an ambiguity with respect to the words [Ex. 2¹⁵].

¹³Martin Tegen notes Blomdahl's Wagneresque use of *Leitmotiv* in "Aniara," pp. 99-101.

¹⁴Vocal score, *Aniara*, ed. Alexander Goehr, Edition Schott 10690 (London: Schott, n.d. [1959]), p. 137.

¹⁵Vocal score, p. 178.

mf elegiaco

Jag a - nar dö - dens skug - ga ..
 Mir ahnt des To - des Schat - ten ..

(Vc. solo)

poco espr. molto

The compacted tone-row

© 1959 by Schott and Co., Ltd. Used by permission.

Indeed, it is odd that all speech-phrases in this final scene end with a falling interval, as if pointing us to the final "C." But that final "C" is the only certainly in the musical world Blomdahl gives us. It is a world which is otherwise one of violence, oppression, and, above all, ambiguity. Through his music, the composer gives us another reading of the Poetess' words that she is "all too happy." The music tells us that this is likely a vain hope.

To be fair to him, Stenström defines his subject as "*Aniara*-textens förvandlingar," but as he then goes on to add what happens on stage, it is clear he aims to do more than what he states. Indeed, he acknowledges that "det är uppenbart att operan är en symbiotisk konstform, en blandgenre, som ställer krav på kompetens inom flera estetiska vetenskaper för att kunna utforskas och förstås i sin komplexitet" (p. 8). If this is so, and I think it indubitable, then an understanding of the interaction of the words with the music must play a significant part. The whole point is, of course, that, whatever the claims of 'librettology' as an area for literary study, a libretto is not just a literary phenomenon.

In this thesis, Johan Stenström has gone beyond his own stated goals. We have here two-thirds of an understanding of what happens when epic becomes

opera. There is more to be said, but until someone chooses to say it, this will be a stimulating demonstration of what can be done to extend our understanding of how opera comes to be.