

Program Notes

In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets” T. S. Eliot coined the phrase “dissociation of sensibility” to discuss what he perceived as the way in which, as Wikipedia puts it, “intellectual thought was separated from the experience of feeling in 17th century poetry.” There was a broader subtext, of course. He was implicitly comparing that era with his own. The arts of high modernism -- not only poetry, but painting, music, and prose fiction -- had become so intellectual and esoteric that they were incomprehensible to most people. There was an artistic gap, and the abhorred vacuum was filled by “popular arts,” literature and painting and music made (and marketed) by professionals to please the masses. A century later the situation remains the same. There is “popular” music (a better term, I think, would be “commercial”) and “classical” music (a terrible misnomer we’re stuck with; “serious” is even worse).

A strange thing happens, though. With the passage of time, we find previously unrecognized merit in these popular arts, and elevate their status. They attract the attention of scholars, critics, and connoisseurs. Selected works become “classics.” It’s happened to movies, jazz, and Broadway musicals. Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, and their colleagues become “The Great American Songbook.” Rockwell hangs next to Renoir. What’s more, there develops a convergence between the “high” and “low” arts, each incorporating characteristics of the other. We get “Rhapsody in Blue” and “Broadway operas” like *Les Misérables*; Truffaut channels Hitchcock; avant-gardiste Julie Taymor stages Disney’s “The Lion King.”

All this as prelude to this evening’s concert of Viennese operetta and Argentine song. Operetta, originating in the mid-19th century and generating successful new works through the early 20th, appealed to a bourgeois audience with its exotic locations, princes disguised as students, sentimental love stories, zany comedy, and happy endings. And lots of hummable tunes. Waltzes -- a dance originally condemned as depraved -- were obligatory. Johann Strauss II, the “waltz king,” triumphed in the genre, especially with *Die Fledermaus*. Later exponents such as Lehar and Kalman enriched the repertory. Opera was serious, operetta popular, but there was plenty of “crossover.” Opera singers sang both; fledgling conductors like Mahler and Klemperer grumbled at being assigned operetta matinees; Lehar composed operas, and Puccini toyed with the idea of a Viennese operetta (it eventually turned into the opera *La Rondine*).

The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges reminds us that tango was born in the brothels of Buenos Aires. It was a truly popular form, like southern blues and early rock and roll. Modernist European composers such as Stravinsky and Ravel exploited its style, as they did ragtime and jazz, without much concern for authenticity. But in Argentina (and Latin America generally) it has evolved into greater sophistication, diversity, and complexity, into the “high art” of tango nuevo, with Astor Piazzolla as its most celebrated avatar. Argentina and tango have become almost synonymous, but as you hear tonight, not all Argentine song is tango-based.

Modern electronic media have brought us music from every time and place. One result is that the gap between “popular” and “classical” is narrowing. Our sensibilities may be re-associating themselves. Perhaps, somewhere, T.S. Eliot is listening to Cats.