

The Termites Are Winning

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Several months ago I read (and then misplaced!) an article which quoted a number of opera producers, designers, and directors, - all of whom expressed derision and contempt for traditional opera and its performances. More recently, in a book about opera and opera singers, I found this expression of disdain for opera: it is “a type of music which seemed...to be a relic of the past...a form of melodrama deemed fit only for the museum...” Which raises a basic question: why do these persons with a strong distaste for traditional opera, devote their time and energy to it? (Of course, all these individuals are being well supported and encouraged by others.) I suggest that one can best begin to understand this seemingly contradictory phenomenon by looking at a very different situation, but one which involves (or involved) the same mental outlook.

During the first half of the twentieth century, one of the most famous and controversial figures associated with the Catholic Church, was the Jesuit priest-scientist Teilhard de Chardin. Early in his career, de Chardin was involved in the Piltdown fraud. After being exiled to China because of his questionable ideas, he became involved with the finding of so-called “Peking Man”. To prevent de Chardin from spreading his dangerous ideas, he was forbidden to publish any of his writings – a ban he obeyed. Many of de Chardin’s non-Catholic friends realized that his ideas were quite different from those of the Catholic Church. So he was asked why he was remaining in the Church, even though he rejected a great many of its basic teachings. His explanation was simple. If he left the Catholic Church to join his non-Catholic friends, he would have as little influence on the Church as they. But, by remaining in the Church, he hoped to help to reshape it to a religion in accord with his own thinking. He realized that those outside the Church could never destroy it, but those within it could do a great deal in that direction. With that in mind, he entrusted his writings to his non-Catholic friends, with instructions to publish them after his death. (Once he had passed away the Church could no longer excommunicate him.)

De Chardin’s plan worked to a degree no-one could possibly anticipated. When his books were published, they became immediate best-sellers, read avidly by priests, nuns, and laymen, all eager to read what had been “banned” – and absorb his ideas. The massive rebellion which swept through the Church after Vatican II was fueled, in large part, by the ideas of de Chardin and his disciples. (Recall that tens of thousands of priests and nuns abandoned their vocations within a few years.) If the ideas of de Chardin were accepted as

valid, it certainly made no sense to remain a Catholic priest or nun. And I am quite certain that a great many of those now exposed as sexual predators, were great admirers of de Chardin. Similarly the elderly nuns still campaigning for Church approval of abortion, contraception, homosexuality, the ordination of women, etc., were almost certainly influenced by the writings of de Chardin. Thus, one man working quietly from within, like a termite, accomplished more than a thousand open enemies on the outside.

I suggest that the situation in the field of opera is similar – though with one noticeable difference: there are many termites in the world of opera. They realize that they would be having absolutely no effect on opera (which they despise) if they had remained “outside” of it. But by moving into control of opera productions, opera houses, opera festivals, opera publications, they are making rapid progress toward their goal of destroying traditional opera – even while most opera-lovers are ignorant of what is happening.

Obviously, if one looks at a building infested by termites from the outside, it looks sturdy and strong – with no visible weakness. The structure danger is virtually invisible – even when it is near fatal for the structure. (This is true, of course, with formal organizations like the Catholic Church as well as with loosely-knit groups like opera companies.) So it is no surprise that most opera lovers (and most Catholics) would laugh at the suggestion that opera (or the Church) is in danger. It is easy, and perhaps convenient, to overlook the way “modernist termites” are weakening the very foundations of opera: the great works of the past, the art of singing, the power of beautiful music, the effect of realistic staging...and replacing it with vulgarity and ugliness, with noise and porn-opera.

While my primary interest is opera, this movement to eradicate past traditions and deride great masterworks has a much wider target: all of what we call “Western civilization” and “western culture”. After all, Western civilization was essentially a Christian civilization. And nothing is more “out-of-style” and “out-of-favor” today than is Christianity in any of its manifestations or forms. It was the religious music of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that led to the development of opera (even though its founders were looking to pagan Greek models). And it was opera that led to the invention of the symphony and the concerto – and the foundation of symphony orchestras. Virtually all the great paintings and sculpture of the Middle Ages was religious in nature. That of the Renaissance was much more worldly, but always in a Christian context. Baroque art again was often very religious in nature. It was not until the introduction of “modern art”, “modern music” and modern philosophy that there was a simultaneous rebellion against beauty AND Christianity. For if Christian art aspired to be supremely beautiful, the anti-Christian had to strive for ugliness. (Of course, members of the Jewish faith believe in the same God as do Christians. And Jewish artists also strove for beauty in their compositions.)

But where do we stand today? The infestations of opera by the “termites” probably began a half century later than that of the Church. However, as with modern technology, it has progressed much more rapidly. What took three or four decades in the first half of the twentieth century can often be accomplished now in three or four years. With the collapse of the Communist Empire, its anti-Western, anti-Christian supporters have had to adopt a different strategy. The West could not be defeated from the “outside”. But now its enemies

are working from the inside – on its most vulnerable parts: its culture and arts. And opera may be the most vulnerable of these arts because it is so complex: a combination of many different art forms. Furthermore, it has really never taken root outside of Europe and the United States. If the Catholic Church loses its foothold in Europe and North America, it can hope to survive in South America and parts of Asia and Africa. Opera has no such option. It must survive in “the west” or it will disappear – as did the Greek drama and the forms of entertainment popular in ancient Egypt and Rome and Babylon.

Having once visited the scattered ruins of the once great city of Carthage, I can't help but recall the ancient slogan: “*Delenda est Cartago*”. (Carthage must be destroyed.) While today's enemies of opera may not rely on any slogan (termites don't need slogans), they have certainly devoted their energies to the goal: “*Delenda est Opera.*”
