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Freedom's Great Morn is Dawning

"REGINA" – Albert Lortzing's unique worker and freedom opera of 1848

Since the focus on universal human rights is renewing on this fanaticism-ridden planet, a still unknown work of art like "Regina" appears to be unique. Not only as an industrial memorial set in music, but also in its astounding modernity. This human-rights opera is about terror, suicide terror.

Why Lortzing, of all people? "Regina's" composer and librettist had long been popular in Germany as an author of singspiele like "Zar und Zimmermann" (Czar and Carpenter), "Wildschütz" (The Poacher) and "Undine". In German-speaking countries, Albert Lortzing (1801-1851) was for 150 years the most-produced German opera writer/composer. Yet his most prodigious work, his worker and freedom opera, has been ignored to this day. It was written in Vienna in 1848, in the only few months in his life when police and censorship were absent. In "Regina", Lortzing dumps his, folk-song style, filigree light music, his music- making rising up in protest and anger with early romanticism.

Albert Lortzing, actor and singer, was born into a theater family, his cousin Caroline Lortzing acted "Gretchen" in the first "Faust" performance, under Goethe's direction in Weimar. Her uncle is described as being unusually hard-working, indefatigably engaged in all the various theatrical trades. He was the first composer in Germany, still before Wagner, to write his own librettos. And he was the first to take a contemporary political situation as a subject for a full-evening dramatic opera, even if it remained virtually unknown until the present day. In 1848, as he was finishing "Regina" in Vienna, the German attempt at revolution also came to an end in Vienna. Conceived as an early didactic piece, the opera was never staged in his lifetime. 150 years later it was authentically performed briefly in Germany's Gelsenkirchen. Presently, "Regina" is nowhere to be heard or seen in its authentic form.

When the curtain was to rise in 1848, the librettist and composer wanted "smoking chimneys" to be seen, as well as workers "in great agitation", explicitly "factory workers". In Grand Opera, the protagonists patently were princes and nobles, mythological or legendary historical figures, and principal characters never came from the lower classes. In "Regina", for the first and last time, they were "factory workers".

The opening of the opera is no less than a spontaneous strike by the workers, although the term did not exist at the time. In the factory, tension had obviously been mounting, with trouble brewing between those "at the top" and those "at the bottom", so that right at the opening a mere trifle is enough to let the mood explode. "Herr Simon", the factory owner, is awaited on his return from a business trip and a subordinate department head wants to organize a welcome party with flowers or the like, to please the "master". But by now, the workers have had it. The curtain hardly rises and they lay down their tools and refuse to continue working. They protest they don't want to go on, what with their meager wages, and on top of that, is it their Christian duty to welcome the boss back home? If their hard work isn't acknowledged, none of them will lift a finger!

Here we obviously have a strike for higher wages, a spontaneous strike of the laborers, the first one ever on stage. It has remained the only one in classical opera. These workers in 1848 still rebel against bourgeois criteria such as Christian duty that heap scorn on them on top of their meager earnings. It is hard to find anything similar in opera. True, in Mozart's "Don Giovanni" (Lortzing's favourite opera; he on different occasions sang Don Juan and conducted the orchestra), Leporello, the depraved master's

servant, wants to be a part no longer of his master's frivolous adventures and no longer wants to be a servant, but then is bought off with a gold coin. Yet in "Regina", it is not an unruly individual figure that grumbles, it is the whole choir that rebels, it is the factory workers, the entire workforce, that go on strike.

Knowing Lortzing, one might have expected him to emphasize that the common people downstairs weren't always happy with their lives. For him, they had always been a cranky lot. In "Czar and Carpenter" (1838) the choir insisted "we can sing better on our own", fired the mayor (as choirmaster) and generally derided politicians. In "The Poacher" (1842), the people "on top" blunderously missed their marks. In the "Armorer of Worms" (1846), which for decades after Lortzing's death was still banned from the Royal Berlin Stage for being lower-class minded, the armorer had rather be a doctor and the women sang "The world is in a mess" and "World, you cannot please me". In the finale of the same work you heard that "the town council is afraid a rebellion is brewing", all of which is likely to be greeted by shocked silence in the theater. In the former People's Republic of Germany, these scenes would trigger suppressed laughter, and later in a Leipzig production of 1986, directed by Peter Konwitschny, the same line prompted cautious applause during the scene in a house that a little later lay on the marching route of the "Monday demonstrators".

In Lortzing's operas, the people, or the lout according to Heine, are always highly active; his operas always began with a work situation. In "The Armorer" the blacksmiths are at work forging, in "Czar and Carpenter" the shipyard workers are carpentering on a ship, singing about what pestilential nuisance their trade is, and in "Hans Sachs" (the opera on which Wagner would later in all detail pattern his "Mastersingers") the shoemakers are soling shoes and wailing "unfair" when Nürnberg's city elders honor the wrong fellow. In 1848, as individual workshops are disappearing to make room for factories, mass production and machines, the choir in "Regina" is no longer made up of craftsmen but dissatisfied industrial workers who have had enough and want to chuck it all. When the foreman chides them for being ungrateful, shame on you, they sing that "Work commands wages and bread, and only death is for free. Don't talk of gratitude. When we apply our bodily strength and get paid for it in due time, then it's your bounden duty. If our willing hands are not honored, we won't lift a finger, none of us will." This sounds like a first tenet in the proletarian's handbook. Of course, there is still talk of willing hands and bodily strength, but regular payment remains a "bounden duty".

The opera "Regina" not only presents the aggression of a new social stratum, but also affords an earliest view of the emerging structures of big industrial entities. Following the small subordinate's stammering about the workers' ingratitude, enters Richard, the chief department manager or executive. Having himself risen from the ranks, Richard listens to the underling, who calls the workmen "the ordinary people" and circumstantially sets out to report what happened. That is when the ordinary people cut him short and in a landmark transition from social to political protest take the opportunity to bluntly state their case: "This is about higher wages and not only that, you have played this ugly game with us too long and in excess, and we have decided to end servitude and tyranny. We want our rights now, and if words don't work, then weapons will."

Today, chanting to use weapons where words have failed will readily invite a heavy dose of executive power. Back in 1848, Lortzing already fully defined radicalism, now termed "terrorism". In the famous March of 1848, his workers call for guns, repeat their call, blaring it out fully five times. Hardly had musicologists discovered these words and music in Lortzing's handwritten texts—the score is to be found in the Berlin National Library on Unter-den-Linden Avenue and is authentically reprinted by RICORDY Publishers—the supposed Lortzing aficionados and friends of the Biedermeier's joyous singspiel-type of comic opera took fright and witlessly began (and still are) calling "Regina" a "Revolution Opera", which has barred the discovery of the opera to this day. As such it already had no chance during the days of absolute obedience under Kaiser Wilhelm II. But "Regina" is something much more complex than a "Revolution Opera", it is a freedom opera and

preaches neither radicalism nor violence, but advocates human rights, liberalism and balance of interests. The left of the political spectrum, too, was dissatisfied with the play, the cultural overseers in the former GDR having their reservations. In a momentous Rostock performance in 1951, Lortzing's freedom and human rights songs were rigorously pruned and the GDR's LP version, still being traded today, also forged and cut: the left nomenclatura had realized early in the game that when it came to revolution, this unique oeuvre was a risky proposition.

Accordingly, a question mark hangs over what the theater man and democrat Albert Lortzing actually wanted to put on the stage. Whereas his workman-become-manager Richard sings an expansive aria as a message to the recalcitrant employees, and it is this aria rather than the earlier wild eruptions that carries "Regina's" message: "We are all born free!" In his first draft libretto, Lortzing underlined "free" and "all", prominently "all". It is not known whether Lortzing ever went to school and where he picked up his knowledge and notions, he certainly never attended university. When he died miserably, he left behind nothing except a large family, debts and old musical scores. His forefathers had been leather traders, skimmers and henchmen, but even somebody like him was aware that in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the "universal" would soon be ignored; **Universal** Declaration of Human Rights was supposed to mean the rights apply to all, regardless of class, race, religion or national origin. As we all know, the opposite was practised, also with the guillotine. Today, cruelties worldwide are reason to recall the early formulations: **universal** rights - for all, boldly underlined.

Richard's beseeching aria "we are all born free" continues: "If you are oppressed, it should be put right, no-one on earth should suffer", and then "Herr Richard" (this is how in a letter Lortzing calls the young "Richard Wagner") appeals to reason and prudence, admonishing that "a stormy sea will hardly get your ship ashore safely." Richard even praises the absent factory owner for looking after each and every worker and describes instances of social assistance rendered by the boss, lauding this early capitalist as "the world's best," drawing in his Simon a likeness of the real-world "Krupp" of the times, a patriarch who despite all his rigor vis-à-vis employees nevertheless proved to be a smart charitable strategist even if he never tolerated labor unions in his territory when they finally emerged.

The uniqueness and pioneering spirit of "Regina" prompt me to hope that this unique piece will sooner or later be adopted into the standing repertory of the four large opera houses in the Ruhr metropolis with its five million inhabitants and twelve major cities, at the latest in 2010, when it becomes Europe's Culture Capital). Bochum's gigantic Century Hall would be an optimal venue. Lortzing actually took the name Simon from the region that is known today as North Rhine-Westphalia. As a young tenor, actor and darling of the audiences he played in Cologne, Bonn, Aachen, Düsseldorf and often Elberfeld and Barmen, where around 1820 Simon factories stood on the banks of the River Wupper. Eduard Simon, was a member of the Paulskirche Assembly in 1848, the first German freely elected parliament, belonging to the Liberation Socialist group.

Decades already before the respective political parties formed in Germany, there appeared in the opening scene of the worker opera "Regina" forces and mindsets which reflected the rift of the left, the tensions between radicalism and sober-mindedness, and ultimately the dissention that in 1933 led to complete lethargy. This is ably described in the thousand-page publication "Aesthetics of Resistance" by Peter Weiss, an exemplary biography of a workman in the twentieth century.

Regina, this early, evidently much too early political opera exactly anticipates the splitting of forces, where a larger part of the workforce follows Richard's let's-be-reasonable arguments, who admonishes them to tread softly, use their brains, and that he, Richard, pledges to further the workers' cause and be their spokesman, the "watchdog of their conscience". At the word "Watchdog" ("Wache" in German), the vowel

"a" is a sustained high tenor note, a marked musical signal for representative democracy. Against party politics. For conscience.

Most of the workers admit they had overdone it simply because it had seemed the thing to do just about everywhere. "Everyone wants to have his little bit of revolution" Nestroy mocks in his political satire "Freedom in Krahwinkel". In "Regina", though, other workmen again choose to follow another path, that of armed force, because it is a fashion, a trend? In the complex course of the first act the clash of methods culminates in a grandiose finale that has two choirs facing one another: the radicals contra the moderates.

In the meantime, ex-worker Richard and Herr Simon's much-loved daughter Regina had exchanged marriage vows. Regina is the namesake of Lortzing's wife, Regina-Rosine, mother of his eleven children. The factory owner returns home and blesses the bond, surprisingly, because Richard is not really a suitable son-in-law, he is "without means". "I must be dreaming" is what Richard sings to Regina.

Nonetheless, Herr Simon, "the best on earth", approves the betrothal and invites one and all to come and celebrate. In the factory yard a company party gets underway. The pacified faction, those who have chosen the "mild" path (around this time Adalbert Stifter in Vienna writes of the "gentle law") celebrate with Richard and Regina. Working men and women chorally hope for "enduringly good times" to come. And Herr Simon sings: "O beautiful moment / enviable destiny / while all around in our country / rebellion rages and storms roar / sweet bands of harmony / twine around us and our house." Apparently all of them Krupp devotees.

For all that, the celebrators are suddenly surrounded by wild armed men, led by worker Stephan. Lortzing meticulously describes the motives of this radical who has visions of an "earthly paradise" (Lortzing had read Heine). The opposing stances now clash, the "wild" threatening the "mild", and in a long double choir passage the world starts to teeter and tremble in massive nine-eight time – on the one side the trigger-happy working-class soldateska with their rough talk ("weapons will give us everything worth having in the world: fame and honour, freedom and money", and on the other, in the deadly clutch of the intruders, the factory workers with Herr Simon the boss, Richard and Regina, weaponless, frozen in shock.

Lortzing had taken part in the street-fighting in Vienna in March 1848, and was at first enthused over the uprisings that not only chased the Kaiser away, but also the police- and censorship-hungry chancellor Metternich. But then he was disturbed seeing the workers pillaging, looting and threatening to burn. Heine, Engels and Marx called them the lumpenproletariat, or rabble proletariat.

In "Regina", when the workers are faced with the bloody horror of pointed rifles and the leader of the armed rabble is making outrageous demands, the shocked, paralyzed seven-soloist double choir sings: "Horror and terror / freeze the blood / we implore heaven / to keep us calm and courageous". Seldom has such an early opera so accurately anticipated political future and terror, insanity and fears, in all of which the victims pray to remain calm and courageous. And seldom has such an early romantic horror vision been shrugged off so thoroughly.

Foreman Stephan, the leader of the armed band, mixes political and private life, another exercise that has been known to flourish luxuriantly. He demands Regina's hand in marriage, the hand of the one who with the blessing of the factory boss had just become engaged to Richard. Stephan, too, wants Regina, who "revealed to me an earthly paradise". When the factory owner refuses, and Regina with him, Stephan's men pillage and set fire to the factory, and kidnap Regina. Tumultuous end of the first act.

The felons, with their curiously mixed agenda of "Fame and Honour, Freedom and Money", abduct the factory owner's daughter, take her to the hut of one of the workers' mother who sings in vain of peace: "It can't go on like this / you barely have enough to eat, and its getting worse, this wretchedness / this misery / ...stabbing, shooting / drawing blood / has become great fun for the people". Regina abductors do indeed enjoy their new liberties, they get drunk and sing coarse, rebellious songs:

"Throw out, throw out, without delay / everything that is useless to the country, throw out, kit and caboodle, the entire gang of Jesuits / throw out the corrupt councillors / who never stood up for the good of the people / those with stolen glory / who only fill their own pockets, who believe that you are scum if you're not a nobleman".

These men have few qualms ("the entire gang of Jesuits"). Not so Lortzing's protagonist Richard, Regina's fiancé: His melancholic theme "I think I'm dreaming" winds its way through the entire opera, from the very overture. Whereas the drunkards blare out their boozing songs with great zest, accentuating each line with a martial "druidum" that reduces to a "dum dum dum" babble fully 16 times before the drunks fall asleep.

Regina's duet with kidnapper Stephan is, at 368 bars, longer than the overture; she beseeches him to make a fresh start, to flee to America (after 1848 a very popular choice): "flee to foreign parts where your name and your offense is unknown". The kidnapper, of course, is loath to listen to reason; he wants money and power and Regina, and, finally we are given to understand through the music, he ravishes her.

When Richard and the moderate worker faction surround Stephan, the kidnapper flees with Regina to a gunpowder magazine, on which he stands and from there, waving a burning torch, threatens to blow himself up, and everything around him. "Look here, this old tower is our solace / the powder magazine / the torch will fly through that window / and all lamentation will end / first I will spread horror and destruction among the enemy ranks / then all hell will break loose". This is "Freedom" as licence to kill, to create a bloodbath. In 1848 Stephan sings his violent threats in waltz time, the fashionable beat of the day, and he forces the kidnapped woman to a dance of death on the gunpowder volcano.

These moments that see Regina abused, trembling with fear and scared to death, are very rare indeed in opera literature. The freedom play "Regina" is a drama of methods that pits violence against human rights. After the revolutionary frenzy of March 1848, Lortzing was not only appalled at the inordinate types on the one side and the panic-stricken on the other, he also mocks the cognoscenti who had always wanted amusing stories from his pen, and nothing else. In the only uncensored months of his life he took the liberty, just once, to stop operating indirectly, to go beyond ridiculing the vested interests and now, in 1848, unveil the political background. "I can't help them, they'll simply have to swallow my latest oeuvre," But as we all know, things turned out differently with freedom, and with his opera. At the end of October 1848, as Lortzing was writing the last few bars of "Regina", Vienna was retaken by the military and executions began.

Seconds before Stephan can throw his torch into the gunpowder, Regina shoots him. A woman has taken up arms and shoots! The stage directions demand that "working people of all classes rush to the scene from all sides", again "of all classes". "From all sides, messengers of freedom approach under "waving flags", i.e. black, red and gold, (the romantic medieval reflex). "From all sides" – that was the situation in this mad year of 1848, and the Viennese who thought that only Vienna had gone mad were surprised to hear the news from Paris, Berlin, the Rhine, from the Palatinate, from Baden. The operatic document Regina opened an optical and acoustic window into a memorable European year. The scenery of the finale was an enormous back-drop by Frederic Sorieu that has the people of Europe converging "from all sides" to meet under the Goddess of Freedom. It is only after the violence has ended that Richard, Regina's savior, sings of

"peoples" and "freedom", and that is when Lortzing repeats a line that he had wanted to be sung already back in 1830 in his earliest work, a one-act play called "Andreas Hofer", which was promptly forbidden by the censor. Andreas Hofer would have sung: "The great Morn of Freedom dawns".

"Regina" ends in grandiose antiphony between the tenor and the working people in heavy three-four time. It is not about Germany's freedom, in spite of the prevailing Fatherland pathos popular at the time, but about universal freedom of all mankind, of all peoples and all classes. That was not only the essence of basic human rights, but also the intention of the best thinkers of the Frankfurt Paulskirche National Assembly who thought European, like Robert Blum, Lortzing's friend. Together with him, Lortzing had plans for a political opera called "The Treasury of the Inka" which in 1836 told the tale of a people's extinction in South America to denounce also Europe's misery, circumventing censorship and illustrating by way of a bloody exotic allegory the conditions in Germany during the years that led up to the March 1848 revolution. But, again, that work of Lortzing's never reached the stage.

Blum was a captivating popular speaker. Richard, the tenor, is Lortzing's memorial to him. On November 9 in 1848, as Lortzing was writing the final notes of his score, Robert Blum was executed in Vienna by the victorious soldateska. The final bars of the overture (Lortzing used to write the music for his overtures after that for the opera proper) are missing, omitted in shock over his friend's execution. The overture was doubtlessly intended to end with the finale of the opera (also the overture of his other "serious" opera closed with the finale, Undine's dream of eternal peace), and also the "Regina" overture was to end with the responsive voices of Richard (Robert Blum) and the choir of "workers of all classes".

This final manifestation begins with "Heil", or "hail". If only in the twelve Nazi years (of Heil Hitler!) people had greeted each other with the last words of an opera of the ever so popular, ever so harmless Lortzing: "Hail to you, freedom, you pride of peoples (rather than pride of Germany), for you we live, for you we die / let's move and unite / that is the people's glory, on to splendour... / to glory, to victory, to the bright path of fame... / the people won't be mocked!" The workmen and workwomen sing in a hymnal a cappella – this is choral and vision and high mass – but how the people had to endure mockery after 1848. Glory and freedom were not to follow, but nationalism and the extinction of peoples. The opera "Regina" of 1848 marked a turning point, the failure of an alternative called democracy.

The a-capella passage, "the people will not be mocked", with an incantational slowing of tempo, is followed by a doubling of tempo, the singers are ecstatic, enflamed, transported, "onward, onward", they are pressing for change. And then the curtain falls. That was all too early to become true. Pacifist Lortzing died miserably a short time later, highly indebted, leaving a large family, exploited by publishers and theatres as hardly ever an artist was before him. His comic operas were widely staged for more than a hundred years. On the eve of his death in his birthplace Berlin, four different theaters were playing his operas, but he had nothing to show for it. ("Just what would we gain from it?" the workers in "Regina" sang at the beginning). Royalties became common practice only after this public idol's death. Lortzing's last comment on his freedom opera was: "Wait for better times". Theater associates draped his coffin in black-red-gold, the colors that were forbidden after 1848.

Meanwhile, the memory of Lortzing is fading. If he was really ever truly known. In the repertory of the Berlin "Kommische Oper" the last time a comic opera by the Berlin master of light German opera was staged was in 1959. But never his freedom-and-justice opera. On his 200th birthday (2001), the German-language theater ignored this extraordinary man of the theater, this democrat, this light-music virtuoso. "Regina" is absent on radio and TV stations, not seen or heard on stage. On CD / DVD, all we have is the East German forgery. A scandal in the opera business? The "better times" never arrived for

this work of art that in 1848 was dedicated by a popular musician to basic human rights, to what we today must recognize as democratic virtues, must recognize with growing urgency and relevancy.

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