

The Regulated Libretto

Richard Homan

Item: In Maryland, Anne Arundel County school administrators have barred elementary students from attending free Baltimore Opera performances of Donizetti's "Rita," on the grounds that the plot, which pits a quick-fisted saloonkeeper against her weak-willed husband, provides a poor "model of marriage" and portrays "sexism and the acceptance of violence as a means of problem-solving."

Item: The U.S. House of Representatives, at the urging of Representative Mario Biaggi (Democrat, New York), has agreed to have a subcommittee investigate Biaggi's charges that some current productions of Verdi's "Rigoletto" are "patently offensive to the Italian-American community."

SUDDENLY, A SPASM of musical censorship has put America on a ban-the-bandwagon that, followed to its logical destination, could protect citizens against seeing anything by any of history's great composers and most minor ones as well.

The target is opera plots—which until now had been taken about as seriously as a vice presidential speech. They're labored, they're impenetrably murky, and on top of it all, they are usually served up in an alien tongue and an elocution that ensures incomprehensibility.

But if operas are now to be scrutinized against the standards of sensitivities in the 1980s, it's clear there is only one thing to do:

Ban them all!

Down through history, sexism and violence have been the stuff of opera. Most of the laughs in the comic operas of the past five centuries are directed at women and men caught in bawdy disarray; most of the tears (and even some cheers) in the tragic operas are prompted by acts of violence, some of them resolving a plot, but others solving problems no more pressing than helping the composer clear the decks for a transition into another twist of a complex libretto.

Richard Homan is a reporter for the Washington Post, where an earlier version of this piece appeared.

Besides all those Italian thugs and lovers, there are other groups stereotyped in "Lakmé" (Brahmans and Hindus), in "Madame Butterfly" (Japanese), and of course, in "Porgy and Bess" (black Americans); the handicapped are stereotyped in "Rigoletto," "Pagliacci," and "Das Rheingold"; and the men-

girls dressing up as boys in "Fidelio," "La Forza del Destino," and "Rosenkavalier."

"Carmen" and "Aïda," two of the world's most popular operas, would likely set a sensitive censor's blue pencil to scribbling. The former has cruelty to animals (a bull, off-stage), murder, smuggling, woman-



tally handicapped in "Lucia di Lammermoor"—with its delicious "mad scene."

Verdi's operas are awash in blood. Mozart's and Donizetti's bounce from bedroom to garden rendezvous and back again. Even Wagner, which in any case lasts beyond any well-brought-up child's bedtime, has a running leitmotif of homicide and woman-as-sex-object. (In "Die Meistersinger" and "Tannhäuser," women are the first prize in song contests!)

A good model of marriage? Certainly not "Otello" or "Marriage of Figaro" or "Masked Ball" or "Don Carlo." Violence? "Luisa Miller" has a double suicide. "Salomé" has a beheading. "Jenufa" and "Il Trovatore" offend with child abuse (incineration, in the latter). Even "Hansel and Gretel," which the Annapolis inquisitors might think sounds like just the right thing for their wards, runs the gamut of depravity from child neglect to homicide and witchery.

Drugs and drinking are chronic concerns of school administrators, thus ruling out another dozen or so popular operas. Drunkenness brings the laughs in "Abduction from the Seraglio," "Barber of Seville," and "Magic Flute." Drugs (or insidious love potions) propel the plots of "Elixir of Love," "Götterdämmerung," and "Tristan and Isolde."

"La Bohème" glorifies a hippie life style. Transvestism abounds, with

as-sex-object, insubordination to authority, and glorification of cigarette-making. The latter has slavery, hostage-taking, suicide, cruel and inhumane punishment (burial alive).

So what's left, besides "Amahl and the Night Visitors," which is already overworked at Christmas time?

Maybe the best solution would be a Biaggi-Anne Arundel adaptation of Benjamin Britten's "Let's Make an Opera," an audience-participation, free-flowing event in which school administrators and legislators could take things into their own hands and produce a rollicking opera without murder, sex, violence, insanity, drunkenness or stereotypes, and everyone could . . . everyone cou . . . ZZZZZZ. ■

