FILM MUSIC:
OPERA

Professor Roger Parker

My topic this lunchtime concerns a fraught relationship, one of the longest in film's more than century-long history, and between two unlikely partners. Film and opera have always tended to stare at each other across a divide, a divide assiduously patrolled by border guards of many kinds. I'm referring to emerging gap between elite culture and popular culture, terms that became newly defined and hardened at just the time when films, emphatically at the popular end of the spectrum, began to become public entertainment. From soon after its inception, the film industry made periodic attempts to elevate its status by dabbling in opera. And at the same time opera, increasingly dogged in the twentieth century by its reputation as the most elite of elite cultures, attempted to shake off its burden (not to mention fill its always cavernous and echoing coffers) by exposing itself to film. This was particularly the case during film's earliest, so-called 'silent' era. In 1915, Cecil B DeMille lured Metropolitan Opera star Geraldine Farrar to Hollywood in order to feature her in a film version of Bizet's *Carmen*, a venture that proved influential enough to spawn a host of other progeny in succeeding years.

Now: those of you of an acutely analytical persuasion will already have noticed that films of operas in the 'silent' era might seem to be confronted by a rather significant obstacle. Geraldine Farrar was doubtless a fine actress and visual presence; but her principal means to impress in *Carmen* were inevitably vocal ones, and film in 1915 had no way of reproducing them. Instead, she merely acted the role, with live music (presumably relevant bits from the opera) played as accompaniment. This *Carmen* was not, then, exactly a 'silent' opera, but even so it would to us seem a strange affair indeed. There is a nice story (so often repeated that one doubts its veracity) about Farrar seeing an early edit of the film and being so displeased with the way she looked that she leapt up and tried to claw her image from the screen. The tale is of course neatly self-serving: it allows us to laugh or marvel at the naivety of our ancestors, and bask in our own super-sophistication; it tells us how very far we've travelled in developing a tolerance for and understanding of the moving visual image. But Farrar's anger might also remind us of something else: that when opera is put on screen, something vital is going to be lost. That was easy to understand in the very old days, because the missing 'something' was sound; but even in the present-day world of hi-fi opera and hi-tech visual reproduction, seeing and hearing opera onstage and seeing and hearing it on screen are still very different activities.

Let's switch immediately to the present, and to recent DVDs of operas, fast becoming the prime way in which we consume the art form domestically, taking over from video, before which came sound recording, before which came vocal scores and piano scores around which people crowded in the nineteenth century. We twenty-first-century consumers demand so much - and so much that is contradictory. We now seem to prefer our recorded opera to be 'live', with evidence of audience response, sounds of coughing and the clumping of stage feet, and with obligatory establishing shots of the maestro marshalling his musical troops. But the recording must also be visually sophisticated, with as much shot/reverse shot as the music will allow, plus fancy lighting, tracking shots and extreme close-ups. At the sharp end of these new demands are the singers who must also be actors. They have, of course, always sustained this dual role, but operatic acting in the old days (and as recently as fifty years ago) used to be art displayed at a distance: extravagant make-up would be matched by equally extravagant gestures, both of them needed to communicate to the back of a large theatre; movement around the stage would be minimal and deliberate. Productions (stage sets, action, etc.) also tended toward the generic, and for good reason. If the leading tenor caught a cold, you could spirit up another one at three hours' notice, walk him through his movements in thirty minutes, and then launch him toward his destiny. If he happened to have learned the role in a different language, then never mind: opera had, after all, always been foreign. A more serious crisis might be finding those extra yards of material that his costumes would now consume: in the very old days, the best singers would bring their own frocks, and never mind what anyone else was wearing.

None of these old-style operatic manners bothered contemporary film directors very much, as they rarely dreamt of capturing 'live' events. Recall how, half a century ago, film viewers were comfortable with extreme dissociation between the filmic and the operatic worlds. In the 1953 screen version of *Aida*, directed by the aptly named Clemente Fracassi (*fracasso* means 'loud noise' in Italian), Verdi's opera is given a radical filmic makeover. We see nothing of the singers...