Cohen looks at the influence of politics on art

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

Photo by Yulia Rock

Dr. Mitchell Cohen.

"I'm a professor of politics and I've been politically concerned since I was a teenager, and music has always been of great interest to me, along with the tensions between what is created artistically and what political ideas are embedded or may be embedded—sometimes consciously, sometimes not so consciously—in various types of artworks."

This opening statement may surprise many, but it shows how professors like Dr. Mitchell Cohen cross disciplinary boundaries to explain how the world works.

At first, Cohen's path to academia seems pretty straightforward for a professor of political science. This native of Manhattan obtained his bachelor's in political science from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio and went on to receive two master's degrees and a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University. Today he is a professor of political science at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in Baruch College.

Cohen looks at the arts, particularly music, from the angle of someone trained to study politics, and he sees politics in opera. "I have a theory—and I'm not the first person who has argued something like this—that Mozart and his librettist, the remarkable Lorenzo Da Ponte, put politics in opera through the tension between social classes."

Like many other great traditions of the western world, opera had its beginnings in Florence, Italy during the Renaissance. At that time, the political power of the city was in the hands of the Duke. "I suggest that in Florence the only voice that counted was the Duke's. All the aristocrats had their titles, but they had no real power. The real power was that one voice, so I see a type of symmetry between what's going on politically and what leads to early opera."

If we look at some early operas such as The Coronation of Poppea by Claudio Monteverdi, the debates between Nero, an out-of-control ruler who moves from one thing to another on the basis of his own emotions, and the other characters get represented in the types of voices that are used. "Seneca, who is trying to wise him up on native reason, uses slow bass-measured tones in contrast to Nero's hysteria. So there's a musical dimension to what's being argued politically about the proper role of a ruler," explains Cohen.

When one thinks of opera and politics, the first thought that comes to mind is Richard Wagner and his anti-Semitism, which made him Hitler's idol. "It's not just the fact that he was an anti-Semite, because this is well known. The fact is Wagner wrote a whole essay titled 'Judaism in Music,' which is sort of a perfect example of racism and prejudice. So the question becomes: Are these attitudes embedded in any of his operas?" asks Cohen. "There is an argument over one particular piece sung in The Mastersingers of Nuremberg where I think it is the case, a piece identified with synagogue music," Cohen responds to himself.

Although for many of us music and religion seem to go hand-in-hand from early times, that relationship has not always been so cordial. "Religion and musical art create a constant issue. If you go back to Saint Augustine in his City of God, he says that music is a problem for him, because he thinks that when he hears music or prayer set to music or to chant, it distracts him from the true meaning of the prayer," explains Cohen.

The same thing can be said about Catholicism and Freemasonry, a relationship so bad that the Catholic Church once condemned Freemasons with excommunication. So how did Catholics such as Mozart, who was also a Freemason, handle those tensions? The Magic Flute, which is filled with Masonic symbolism, is a good case study. "Some people think that Mozart and Schikaneder, his librettist, worried that Austria was going back into the dark, and they wanted to reassert the need for enlightenment," says Cohen.

In looking at issues like these, Cohen finds special intellectual satisfaction. "One of the marvelous things about working in this field is you just keep coming up with interesting connections. If you look at Mozart's major works, almost every one of them touches on some major political issue, even though he doesn't write it directly. You have class and gender conflict in Figaro, and you also have it in Don Giovanni, an opera about an aristocrat who just fulfills his needs and doesn't care what happens to anyone else."

Despite these interesting discoveries, what scholars find is not always pleasant. "There's an unusual problem with intellectuals. On one hand, we live in a society in which a lot of people are made uncomfortable by intellectuals. On the other hand, I do think that many intellectuals and some professors live in ivory towers and don't have enough connection with the problems that everyday working class or immigrant populations, for example, have to cope with. Intellectuals deal often with the development of the big ideas, but big ideas can also be too big," says Cohen.

Cohen concludes with a couple of thought-provoking ideas. "I think intellectuals, especially political intellectuals, have to remain really tuned to people who don't have the privilege of reading books all the time and have to worry about their kids paying tuition and things like that. For almost twenty years, I was the coeditor of a political magazine called Dissent, and that was always one of our real preoccupations. We would always insist that if you write for Dissent, you write for a reader. You don't get lost in intellectual or academic jargon. We insisted that people could make very sophisticated arguments using straightforward prose."

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