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VOX HUMANA: Stereotypes

Think back. A stranger asks, “what line of work are you in?” Do you reply, “organist?” “Musician?” The day job? Do the stereotypes put you off?

Sitting in a recent, excellent, college theater production of *Cabaret*, the pigeonholes took on a baleful edge. *Cabaret*, an influential part of the American lyric stage, rounded some important Broadway corners. The script peers into sinister and gloomy concerns – depravity, social consciousness, Nazism, international politics—hardly the stuff of the merry-go-round and boy-meets-girl pre-puberty of musical theater. But to compare *Cabaret* to one of its dulcet and harmless forerunners (and by only a few years) also having something to do with Nazis, *The Sound of Music*, is to see that something has changed in our notion of the organ.

Remember the wedding scene in *The Sound of Music*, really better pictured from the 1965 film than the 1959 stage original? There, while the Barron and Maria are married in some glorious *Kappel*, Richard Rodgers supplies a dignified and well-hewn organ processional – real music and real-life portrayal of the organ at its quotidian work.

Back to *Cabaret*. In Act I’s finale (an interminable 13 scenes from the top and one of the authentic flaws of the play), the Nazi youth show up at the *Kit Kat* and, against the backdrop of the mad-wheel-of-a-Berlin-party, hardly tweak a pang of Sally Bowles’ conscience as they launch into their anthem “Tomorrow belongs to me.” OK, so what’s so offensive about this other-than-the-obviously-menacing metaphor of evil about to overwhelm amorality? Whether composer John Kander’s call, that of the orchestrator, or the creative genius of the music director or keyboardist, just as the little Nazi dumpling pops onto a stage platform all aglow in her blonde braids and Party-approved blue eyes to begin the first strains of “Tomorrow,” the keyboardist hits the patch on the Korg that probably reads “Church Organ,” or “Cathedral,” and out of the netherworld of blowsy, boozy, smoky, sax-wailing, piano thumping, Kit Kat-girl kicking, and Victoria’s Secret costumed (with lots of retro-punk rips and dangling pieces) depraved Berlin nightclub comes the chaste, evocative tones of an enviable replica of the Great principal chorus. To boot, after an act of chest voiced belting and crooning, this little *maidchen* sings with the purity of tone befitting Boris Ord’s heyday at King’s College.

A quick glance around the darkened house revealed only the tacit acceptance that bad guys, utterly evil guys, nudge the otherwise giddy spin of Berlin life to the sound of the holy of holies. Had anyone asked at intermission, who are you and what do you do, could one have answered, “I’m an organist?” “How interesting! Tell me, does the Reich compensate you well?”

Before one ascribes this assessment to a case of thin skin, consider some of the other prevailing shibboleths in this many-tentacled tale. What did Captain Nemo do in his stateroom? Just which piece by Bach accompanies every ghosts and goblins movie? What wails behind every tear jerker of a scene in a classic soap (and thank God for new technology that has replaced all those B-3’s with little orchestral digital boxes)? Every time Tony Soprano caps a contender and the slob is all laid out so that Carm and the other wives and goohmads can veil up their heads and spill tears on their Rosaries, just what’s playing

behind? Every time some shock jock pokes some bloated hellfire and brimstone bigot in the gut, what's cued on the cart machine? When Oprah plugs her upcoming talk on weddings, what thunders for a second behind the voice over?

Is this a warranted stereotype? Are we genuinely the minstrels to genocidal maniacs, malevolent spirits, self-righteous Bible-thumping bigots, Mafia murders, ego-centric lunatics, miscreant pedophiliacs?

How to reverse the pigeonholing or to harness it for the positive lingers as the question defying prompt solution. Some expectations, for instance, are nothing but good. Walk into the Grand Court at Lord and Taylor's at Christmas and hear the Wannamaker's organ. Associate that with good spirits, and generosity, and cheer (and over-charged Visa cards!). Slip into the dark recesses of a gothic nave on a crowded downtown street for a moment of reflection or rest and hear the inadvertent beauty of the organist at practice. Or just maybe, the next time you run into a music director of a production of *Cabaret*, put forward the simple question. Why do Nazis remind you of organs? After all, isn't Hell's instrument of choice the accordion?

- Haig Mardirosian