A further note on “Camp”

On librettist William T. Hoffman’s charge that straight critics who use the word “camp” as a pejorative are guilty of homophobia.

To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion. — Susan Sontag, in “Notes on Camp” (1964)

Just in case you were wondering what has happened to the discussion of Camp in the age of political correctness, more than thirty years after Susan Sontag published her famous Notes on the subject, consider the following passage from K. Robert Schwarz’s article in the April issue of Opera News, a publication of the Metropolitan Opera Guild. Mr. Schwarz’s topic is the critical response to The Ghosts of Versailles, composed by John Corigliano, with a libretto by William M. Hoffman, which had its world première at the Met in 1991:

Those who criticized Ghosts sometimes employed a peculiar vocabulary, one not often encountered in classical-music reviews. Edward Rothstein wrote of the opera’s camp humor and perversely campy villain; Bernard Holland accused the creators of dressing the twentieth century in Mozartian drag; Peter G. Davis denounced the irritingly camp Rossini finale. Considering that both Corigliano and Hoffman are openly gay, might these words amount to coded references?

Hoffman’s reply is unequivocal: Calling it campy is homophobic, absolutely. When they’re saying there’s camp in Ghosts, what they’re really saying is it’s gay. The same people who talked about camp values in Ghosts would never use the word when talking about Mozart or Rossini and I can’t think of anything campier than L’Italiana in Algeri. Why is it permissible for Rossini and not for us? Because knowing of the sexual orientation of the artists, they feel they can apply values to us that they don’t dare apply to Rossini or Mozart.

Thus in the age of political correctness it is deemed permissible for artists who are openly gay to characterize Mozart and Rossini as camp while it is forbidden for critics of Ghosts to describe that work in similar terms. Calling [Ghosts] campy is homophobic, absolutely, says Mr. Hoffman, putting the critics on notice that the language police now enjoy the
support of the Metropolitan Opera Guild.