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The Orphic Myth and America: Representation of Emigrants in Puccini's *La Fanciulla Del West*

Opera is founded on a contradiction: it is not simply the art of singing on stage but is composed of an array of highly diverse forms of artistic expression, such as dance, drama, visual art, and, in more modern productions, video installation. The two basic elements, however, reflected in the very name of the genre (or one variation thereof, i.e. *dramma per musica*) are music and words. The age-old dilemma, *prima la musica e poi le parole* (posed by Salieri and later used by Strauss as a motto for his *Capriccio*), i.e. the argument about the primacy of music over words or vice versa, relies on the juxtaposition of these two elements of drama that results, in turn, in marginalizing either one element or the other, and perceiving it as a semantic surplus. Since opera is very often discussed with a zeal that borders on the religious,¹ theorizing about libretti, especially when carried out by non-musicologists, has been deemed a highly suspicious activity. Arthur Groos crisply sums up such sentiments: “Libretto-bashing has a distinguished tradition in the blood sport of opera” (*Reading Opera*: 2).

Examples of such an approach to the act of reading libretti are numerous: “Libretti are no longer on the margin of literature, but beneath it” (5) – thus Groos summarizes a common eighteenth-century perception; in the nineteenth century one may encounter the view that “an opera libretto, however carefully prepared, cannot be other than a degradation of poetry and poets” (Ferdinando Fontana (1884) qtd. in Maehder *Reading Opera*: 97). In the past century W.H. Auden, an opera aficionado, voices a similar sentiment: “No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not

¹ Edward T. Cone explains the allure of opera in the following manner: “it is not simply the combination of elements that gives opera its peculiar fascination; it is the fusion produced by the mutual analogy of words and music – a union further enriched and clarified by the visual action. ... [I]t would seem to follow that opera, with the added third dimension of the stage, must offer the most intensely satisfying experience of all” (21).

sing when they are feeling sensible” (*Time* 29 Dec 1961); if we follow this line of reasoning, one can imagine how senseless it appears to critique opera libretti.²

Thus, the understandable helplessness with which libretti are approached: the demands of musical phrasing, combined with the necessity of composing words that are by definition to push the action forward, make the art of writing libretti almost impossible. Roger Parker discusses changing approaches to the interconnectedness between words and music, concluding, “perfect marriages are not of this earth” (*Reading Opera*: 305). I will address the question whether we should see this inference as pessimistic – not of this earth and thereby fantastic – or optimistic – not of this earth and thereby divine – with reference to the libretto of Giacomo Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West*.

The starting premise for my reflections on the representation of immigrants in operatic texts is that the beginnings of opera as a genre coincided with European settlement in America: the year 1607 saw two important events: the founding of Jamestown in America and, in Europe, the premiere of what is often considered the first opera, Monteverdi’s *Orpheus*.³ Their fates are entwined not only temporally but, more importantly, ideologically: opera may be seen as an inherently ambiguous expression of European angst over the emergence of the New World. Indeed, opera may be seen as Europe’s projection of its ideas about itself and the new continent on the supposedly blank screen of an American cultural wilderness.

Traditionally, the novel has been seen as the “modern” genre, voicing new democratic ideals (as suggested by, e.g. Malcolm Bradbury in *Dangerous Pilgrimages: Transatlantic Mythologies and the Novel*). It seems, however, that opera permits a more productive and fuller imagining of the new, as is signaled in its founding myth of Orpheus. The first opera, one among many on the same theme to follow, helped establish the connection between Orpheus, the mythic hero in search of his lost love object in the underworld, and the redemptive power of music. It is a myth of salvation and loss, song being instrumental to both. As F.W. Sternfeld puts it in *The Birth of Opera*, “[Orpheus] is the superhuman figure who ‘discovers’, who penetrates the realm of the dead, who ‘harrows Hell’. He miraculously returns from that ‘undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns’” (9). The metaphor of traveling is thus interconnected with music and its power of salvation. As Wayne Kostenbaum puts it, “Every opera revives Orpheus, the art form’s genesis” (“Artistic statements”). Kostenbaum also states, “Operas

² The attitudes are changing nowadays: “As adaptations of pre-existing literary works, libretti pose questions of intertextuality, transpositions of genre, and reception history; as verbal artifacts, they invite the broad spectrum of contemporary reading strategies ranging from the formalistic to the feminist; and as texts for musical realization, they raise issues in the relation between the two media and their respective traditions. According to such perspectives, libretti are not ‘beneath contempt as literature,’ but very much within the purview of contemporary humanistic scholarship” (Groos 10).

³ There exist analyses, e.g. Slavoj Žižek’s, in which opera’s decline is seen as coincidental with the rise of psychoanalysis, but what seems even more promising is to concentrate on the beginnings of opera, not its postulated – and not so obvious – death.

are works of mourning” (178). The founding myth confirms Baudrillard’s intuition about America as the place where things come to an end. Stepping down to the netherworld becomes itself a metaphor for immigration, and *that* is the original premise of opera.

One might be tempted to see *The Girl of the Golden West* as yet another variation on the theme of Orpheus and Eurydice. The libretto of Puccini’s opera, based on David Belasco’s play of the same title, is simple: Minnie, an innocent damsel who is at the same time the owner and bartender of the Polka saloon,⁴ falls in love with Ramerrez (Dick Johnson), a good man driven to banditry by socio-political upheaval. Pursued by the relentless Sheriff Rance, Dick and Minnie are forced to flee California. Leaving California amounts to leaving an earthly paradise, a land so Edenic that it is tantamount to afterlife. As the narrator of Belasco’s play puts it, “to these two, whether in the depths of the vast forest or, as now, at the edge of the merciless desert, stretching away like a world without end, their environment seemed nothing less than a paradise.” This “world without end” only *seems like* a “paradise”; what is betrayed in this comparison is an intimation that it might just as well be Hell. And Minnie, following her lover on a path out of paradise, just like the mythical Eurydice, looks back: “she paused as if almost overwhelmed with emotion, saying at length with a deep sigh: ‘Oh, that was indeed the promised land!’”⁵ She is not punished for looking back in the same way that Eurydice is; instead, her lover reminds her, “We must always look ahead, Girl – not backwards. The promised land is always ahead.” A not so subtle expression of manifest destiny, this advice is, at the same time, a curious deviation from the idea. The movement is no longer toward the west, but back eastwards: hence it might be seen as

⁴ Susan Sontag in her novel *In America*, in which Minnie is a peripheral character, deals with this paradox – the innocent girl as the only woman in a mining camp full of brutal men treating her in an uncommonly courteous manner – when she has Minnie describe her past in the following way: “I had this saloon where all the miners came, the Polka, I call all my saloons the Polka, and most of ‘em treated me real respectful, like I was their little sister, even though some didn’t and there wasn’t much I could do about it, I mean they were good customers” (286–287). Sontag brought the character of Minnie back to life, rescuing her from the realm of opera and giving her a second chance in the novel. We bid Minnie farewell at the end of the opera as she says goodbye to California and escapes triumphantly with her new lover. She comes into life in the novel long after the events rendered in the libretto. She is no longer the innocent girl; now she is a mature, though somewhat bitter, woman. Minnie tells the story of her life-after-opera, talking about what happened in the period of her life not covered in the libretto, once again confirming the impossibility of escape and the inevitability of return. The reader learns that Minnie did not stay with Ramerrez, “the bandit,” but returned to Sheriff Rance. Sontag’s novel seems to prove that the happy ending of the opera is an impossibility. The novel corrects the mistake; the narrative makes possible what the libretto could not. “You don’t marry the man you love,” states Minnie after she confides in Maryna and explains her life story to the actress (Sontag: 286); and this remark may be treated as a matter-of-fact expression of disillusionment with life, but it also leads us to the question of the very nature of the operatic genre itself.

⁵ Dick’s reaction to Minnie’s emotional outburst is characteristic, too: “Johnson was greatly moved. It was some time before he found his voice.” Like Orpheus, he must find his voice again to lead his Eurydice from paradise back to earth.

disillusionment with the idea of unstoppable expansion. Living in paradise proves impossible, nor is it easy to descend from it.

The paradox inherent in the presentation of the Golden West (first you cannot reach it, then you cannot leave it) brings us back to the orphic myth as the founding myth of opera as a genre: “The [Orphic] myth is not only about the success of song but just as much about the inability to sustain this success” (Grover-Friedlander: 30). Orpheus brings Eurydice back to life but must lose her again.

Marriage is an apt metaphor for opera. Dolar discusses the beginnings of opera, stressing “the link between myth and music” to conclude, “the opera, as the marriage between the two, [is] indeed a marriage made in heaven” (7). Whether we see opera as a union between myth and music or between music and words (cf. Parker’s comment above), the union is as volatile as it is alluring. Two opposing elements, the sum of which is more than its parts: it seems like a state of equilibrium necessary for the curious phenomenon of opera to come into being is again a condition nearly impossible to attain.

This tenuous state of equilibrium between words and music is especially pronounced in the case of *La Fanciulla del West*. Even the title itself – half Italian, half English – testifies to the hybrid nature of the work. The opera, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where it had its world premiere in 1910 (John Dizikes *Opera in America: A Cultural History*: 340), was supposed to be an expression of “American-ness.” But the opera’s hybrid heritage inevitably sterilizes the expression. In one notorious example, we find its California miners shouting “whiskey per tutti.” While justly ridiculed, such a glaring incongruity underscores the helplessness we sometimes face when trying to grasp the American character. As Baudrillard understands it, “America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyper-reality. ... Americans ... are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model” (28–29). In other words, it is impossible to describe America in the American idiom, and any attempt to fix its character in European terms is just as futile, for “they” have no language and “we” cannot describe them.

Yet, even while expressing a particularly European vision of the American West, *La Fanciulla* was at the same time conforming to a particularly American vision of Europe – or, more precisely, of Italian opera. As Dizikes puts it, “Despite all the publicity and the money being spent on [*La Fanciulla*], and whatever its musical strengths, the opera would have to satisfy audiences’ expectations and assumptions about just what, after all, the phrase ‘American opera’ meant” (341).⁶

In this sense *La Fanciulla* reflects a tide of cross-continental expectations. From Columbus on, says Bradbury, “‘America’ was to become a constant testing-place for the myths Europeans already had of it” (18). These clashing expectations

⁶ Those expectations remained to a large degree unfulfilled. Puccini did not compose any remarkable aria for Minnie, which resulted in the audiences’ sense of disappointment: as Dizikes puts it, “those who live by the aria die by it” (343).

surface repeatedly, especially during the opera's more ardent attempts to re-appropriate the American myth, and they account for much of its structural and tonal moodiness. Despite having a third act that revolves entirely around a lynching, *La Fanciulla* still manages to disperse a pervasive atmosphere of death – and a fear of death – with a towering illustration of the redemptive power of love. It remains a Pyrrhic victory, though, showing just how insecure and unsound their success is. Like the Orphic myth, *La Fanciulla* illustrates a triumph over death but a failure to sustain the victory (cf. Grover-Friedlander, mentioned above).⁷

Bradbury emphasizes the two-way traffic of mythopoeic narrations: “It took the Old World to construct the New, narrate it into existence, name its places, shape its geography, find its discourse. And it took those who settled in the New World then to look back on, rediscover, narrate and name the Old” (82). Like Eurydice, settlers in the New World look back, and are possibly punished in the same way – with reification, with an inability to reach beyond the realm they are stuck in.

Escape from earthly paradise means escape from death. Ordinarily such an escape would be impossible, yet the libretto, with its blatant disregard for the plausible, proffers just such an escape for its two lovers. The opera is preoccupied with death and deals with that preoccupation by belittling the importance of death. “[B]ut what is death?” asks the Sheriff, “A swift kick into nothingness, goodnight.” Impossibility or perhaps reluctance to define the meaning of death is significant, as it matches the description of the physical location as undetermined.

Neither the libretto nor the novel specify what the nature of this indeterminate terrain is. Belasco's play, which provided material for the libretto, is more useful here: it places the protagonists upon leaving California, “at the edge of the merciless desert.” They follow the course of action prescribed by Baudrillard: “We should always appeal to the deserts against the excess of signification, of intention and pretention in culture. They are our mythic operator” (63–64). Deserts are the remedy for the excess of signification; whenever meanings pile up and multiply incessantly, there is always the emptiness of the desert. It seems, however, that the instruction is directed towards Americans, despite the misleading “we.” Baudrillard diagnoses the national idiosyncrasy, interestingly enough, drawing a distinction between Italian and American variations: “The Italian miracle: that

⁷ Granted a second chance to explain herself in Sontag's novel, Minnie, the protagonist of *La Fanciulla*, is bewildered: “And guess who I hitched myself to? ... The sheriff. ... But why did I settle for him, that's what I ask myself, when I was so in love with Dick and had gotten up my courage and did go off with him, my head all full of dreams” (288). The emotional attachment proves insufficient; just like Eurydice, she looks back in fear and fails. The transitory stage of her wandering takes place in the intermediary space (“we came into Nevada, which wasn't a state then or even a territory, as long as nobody knew what lay under this mountain the whole place was just a county in Utah” (288), and the indeterminacy of the space necessitates movement towards a more stable terrain (“I left him and went crawlin' back to California, and Jack, he forgave me” (288)). Despite the fact that the very ending of the opera has Minnie and Johnson walk away singing farewell to California, Minnie must return to it just as Eurydice is destined to remain in the netherworld.

of stage and scene. The American miracle: that of the obscene. The profusion of sense, as against the deserts of “meaninglessness” (8) and he specifies what he means by obscenity here: it is “total availability” (9). By drawing this distinction here between Italian and American miracles, he simultaneously points to the fact, that is of interest to us when we discuss the libretto of *La Fanciulla*, that is, the fact that the representation of American immigrants in an opera, that is by definition “American,” is conveyed in Italian. Again, then, the question of hybridity arises: the protagonists of *La Fanciulla* must be imagined as conversing in English, yet what we, the audience, hear is another language.

On the level of language, then, they are prototypical immigrants, seduced by the ideology of total availability: what prompts them is the hope of escaping death, the promise of absolute freedom. Freedom in American dimension is an obvious goal, a founding myth. Intoxication with freedom, and oblivion resulting from it: the perspective is appealing. The myth of freedom, as available to all, and desirable by all, is a preliminary premise of emigration. Julia Kristeva poses a question pertaining to this initial presumption: “to be deprived of parents – is that where freedom starts? Certainly foreigners become intoxicated with that independence, and undoubtedly their very exile is at first no more than a challenge to parental overbearance” (21).

Kristeva suggests that emigration may produce a sense of guilt precisely because it means escaping parental authority, yet the sense of failing in filial responsibilities generated by emigration also reflects on the very relationship between operatic music and libretto. Catherine Clement comments on this correlation in the following words: “Opera music makes its empire and steals the glory, dispossesses half the authors, permanently strips them of their work – without which opera’s song would have no place. And the libretti are orphans” (18). Clement remarks here on the curious status of operatic works which are ascribed to one “parent” only, that is, the composer, whereas the librettist’s role is diminished to such an extent that we hardly ever know who composed the “other” half of the work. Hence we talk of Puccini’s opera, not Guelfo Civinini and Carlo Zangarini’s, and to an extent it is understandable as it reflects the approach to libretti as below the standards of serious literature and merely illustrating the power of music. The operatic orphans, libretti, are deprived of legitimate status, yet this is where freedom rests.

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