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Opera on the Couch
Music, Emotional Life, and Unconscious Aspects of Mind

Chapter 1
Psychoanalysis and Opera: A Felicitous Match

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Opera as an Art Form

As an art form, opera is particularly well-suited as subject matter for psychoanalytic investigation. The great operas tell stories, in words and in music, that unfold timeless and universal themes of love, death, war, power, rivalry, class, and religious faith. With opera's unique integration of music, lyrics, stagecraft, and acting, these themes are brought to life in drama and in character. A particular strength of opera is its potential to convey emotional complexity and conflict on multiple levels and in multiple registers simultaneously. The music may support, reflect, and add nuance to the emotions and lyrics evident on stage, or may suggest unconscious emotions underlying, and even contrasting with, what the audience witnesses. The synergistic power of opera affords a penetrating and complex view of character and motivation, emotion and meaning, to which both opera and psychoanalysis aspire.

It is a premise of this collection that psychoanalysis and opera have much to offer each other. While the same could be said about psychoanalysis and music in general, opera's unique synthesis of music, text, dramatic realization, and the communication of meanings at multiple levels offers particular opportunities for the psychoanalytic understanding and deepening

appreciation of the art form. Conversely, we attempt to demonstrate that opera can open new areas of understanding for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis and opera both explore the depths of human emotional and psychological experience at conscious and unconscious levels, enlarging our awareness and setting change in motion. Both seek to uncover realms of human experience that are difficult, if not impossible, to access, either because they are experiences not yet formulated and represented in words, or because they are emotionally intolerable and rendered inaccessible by defensive operations. Both involve moments of heightened emotional intensity that we sometimes seek to experience, and at other times seek to avoid. Both have prominent corporeal aspects – opera through the intimate bodily expression of emotion in the acts of singing and acting, and psychoanalysis in its emphasis on embodied aspects of emotion and psychosexuality. And both call for complex and expanded forms of attentiveness, in which one listens, observes, and resonates at multiple levels to the words, the music of the words, the unique quality of the voice, and bodily presence and movement. While such multifaceted attentiveness occurs to some degree in response to all forms of art and even normal conversational speech, it is especially heightened in opera and psychoanalysis.

As different approaches to understanding the meanings and challenges of being alive, opera and psychoanalysis each expand and enhance the potential of the other. While on one side of the curtain operatic artists look to psychology to render their performances as powerful and transformative as possible, on the other side of the curtain, psychoanalysis gives opera aficionados the opportunity to deepen their experience and understanding not only of opera but also of themselves.

Applied Psychoanalysis

It is not surprising that the application of psychoanalytic thinking to the arts and music begins with Freud and his early circle of adherents. Freud arrived at his intellectual maturity in *fin de siècle* Vienna, a city of two million people characterized by a surge of creative activity in the arts, music, sciences, and humanities. The cultural milieu of museums, concert halls, and myriad salons and coffee houses set the stage for an unusual cross-fertilization among disciplines (Gay, 1988; Kandel, 2012; Schorske, 1980). For Freud and his early followers, clinical discoveries illuminated artistic and cultural realms, while the artistic and cultural realms contributed invaluably to clinical thinking. Topics such as group phenomena, culture, and the arts were considered to be integral aspects of psychoanalytic study. Prominent within the 24 volume Standard Edition of Freud's work are a number of essential papers and monographs on topics that would only later be labeled "applied psychoanalysis" (e.g. Freud, 1910, 1911, 1914, 1928). While the term may have had the effect of marginalizing this area of psychoanalytic research, it is clear that psychoanalysis from Freud to the present time offers not only a comprehensive basis for the exploration and treatment of mental life in the clinic, but also a body of hypotheses and observations that can be used to investigate a variety of non-clinical fields of inquiry.

While according to his biographer, Peter Gay (1988, pp. 316-317), Freud's relationship to artists was complex and ambivalent, his famous remark to the Minister of Culture of pre-Nazi Germany in 1928 is nonetheless emblematic: when the Minister said, "I have come to greet the great discoverer of the unconscious," Freud replied, "The poets

and the philosophers discovered the unconscious long before I did; I merely discovered its laws and the method to study it scientifically" (quoted from Lehrman, 1954, p. 264).

Freud had recognized early on that an investigation of dreams was a "royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (1900, p. 608). From there, it was a natural step to consider the possibility that the unconscious might also be revealed in more intentional creative acts and cultural practices. In the fertile ground of *fin de siècle* Vienna, Freud's exceptionally broad vision detected reflections of his clinical discoveries in the great myths and other artistic creations, and Freud even noted the similarity of his case studies to the development of character by novelists. Respect for this vein of inquiry sent many subsequent analysts and psychoanalytically informed academics on a journey of applied analysis.

Freud's oft-noted aversion to music (1914, p. 211) will be discussed in a later section; in fact, he made little mention of any form of music anywhere in his voluminous writings. Yet despite this conspicuous absence, many analysts and musicologists since Freud have turned their attention to the psychoanalytic themes embedded in music in general, and in opera specifically.Taking the connection between music and psychoanalysis even further, a burgeoning emphasis in more recent psychoanalytic contributions concerns the role and therapeutic potential of "communicative musicality" (Mallock & Trevarthen, 2009) in the consulting room, as embodied and musical forms of communication are increasingly understood to have essential mutative effects.

Origins of the Collection

The collection of essays in the present volume emerged from more than a decade of collaboration between the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis and the San Francisco Opera in a program known as "Opera on the Couch." Following Sunday matinee performances of selected operas, two psychoanalysts present psychoanalytic discussions of the opera just performed to a group of audience members. The presentations, open to the public at no charge, allow for a substantial period of dialogue with the audience, which typically includes not only psychoanalysts but also individuals from a diverse range of intellectual backgrounds and professions. Over time, the enthusiastic response to our discussions and the interplay between responses from those immersed in psychological theories and those coming from other disciplines became an impetus for this volume. A generative experience for all, a number of participating psychoanalysts were inspired to expand their informal talks into more fully developed papers for publication. This synergy carries over into this book, especially in the final chapter, written by a noted musicologist and distinguished discussant at many national psychoanalytic meetings.

A second inspiration for this collection was the increasing number of compelling psychoanalytic studies of opera published in the psychoanalytic literature, both by authors within our group, and by other psychoanalysts nationally and internationally. Although limited to those published in English language journals, we sought to gather some of the best of these published papers, along with newer unpublished papers by colleagues whose work we knew and admired. The latter, along with the former, constitute the chapters of this book.

Opera on the Couch

Psychoanalytic theories and concepts develop and expand the meanings of an opera at multiple levels that include the creative process of the composer, the nature of the dramatic action, the music and the ways in which music and words interrelate, and the ways in which particular productions emphasize and interpret psychological themes. For example, a psychoanalytic approach can render intelligible the unconscious motivations of central characters, as well as the determinative traumas and other life events that contribute to character formation and interpersonal relationships. A further expansion of meaning might involve illumination of the ways in which the instrumental music constitutes an "orchestral" (S. Goldberg, 2011, p. 58) register of experience that tells a story richer than, and sometimes at variance with, the sung words alone. This musical dimension may amplify, specify, or carry more than the characters consciously know. The psychoanalytic awareness of multiple voices speaking in multiple registers of consciousness and unconsciousness offers the opera audience a deeper understanding of motivation, character, and conflict—in the drama, and in ourselves.

The breadth of psychoanalytic approaches to putting opera "on the couch" is one of the strengths of this volume. Each of its chapters makes use of one, or more often several, of these psychoanalytic approaches. The following summary will orient the reader to the range of approaches represented here, as well as the specific ones emphasized in each chapter.

The first approach assumes that an opera may be examined in order to discover traces of unconscious wishes, conflicts, and traumas manifest in the creative process of the composer (and/or librettist, director, stage designer), whether consciously intended or not. In this modality, the opera is approached as a psychological expression of the

composer's inner life, akin to his/her artistic "dream," and "analyzed" with the aim of understanding the creator's innermost psychic life. In this volume, such an approach is most evident in the chapters concerning Berg's *Wozzeck* (Beaumont), Janacek's *The Makropulos Case* (Tutter), and Bartok's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (Balas).

A second approach is to regard fictional operatic characters as if they were actual people, and to view their roles from the vantage points of their unconscious conflicts, motivations, and developmental histories. Questions related to why they feel and behave as they do are particularly amenable to such psychoanalytic inquiry. Why is Don Giovanni manically driven to seduce every woman he encounters? Why is Elektra unable to mourn, and is instead consumed by her passion for revenge? Why is Madame Butterfly so unwilling to face the reality of her fate, and why is her only recourse suicide? Why is Senta devoted to the Dutchman to the point of her death? Why is Tristan's sense of self such a tragic one, even though those around him see him as very much the hero? Each chapter explores such questions with the tools of psychoanalytic insight. Attending to affects, dreams, psychological defenses and inhibitions, creative processes, identifications, and developmental crises portrayed on stage sheds light on the mysteries of how the mind functions and gives rise to the deeper understanding of various motivations, characters, and self-experiences dramatized in the opera. This approach is most emphasized in the chapters on Puccini's *Tosca* (Tyson), *Madama Butterfly* (Goldberg), Strauss' *Elektra* (Mallouh), Britten's *Billy Budd* (Schaefer), Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (Harasemovich), *The Flying Dutchman* (Keller), *Tristan und Isolde* (Muller), Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (Rusbridger), and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Nagel)

It is, of course, worth noting that both the first and second approaches deal with people, real and fictional, that are not in an analytic relationship, and the interpretations offered by the analytic writer must remain speculative since there is no actual analysand to react to interpretations in confirmatory manner, as is essential in clinical psychoanalysis (see Frattaroli, 1987 for an in-depth discussion of this theme).

A third approach assumes that successful operas that endure with the public do so because they transcend the particulars of character, setting, and plot to arrive at universal unconscious themes. From this perspective, opera may be approached as a genre of myth or psychodrama in which the characters symbolically elaborate aspects of ourselves within a dramatic and musical narrative. In this sense, regardless of the particulars of character or setting, the opera is a crystallized condensation of complex, over-determined, and enduring emotional themes with which we resonate deeply because it presents an externalized psychodrama of our own internal life. This approach is particularly evident in discussions of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (Rather), and in Sendak and Knussen's *Where the Wild Things Are* (Hindle).

Finally, a fourth approach examines how opera examines what is now beginning to be thought of as the social unconscious, focusing on ways in which cultural and linguistic givens, reflected in power relationships and differences in race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are internalized and importantly shape the individual unconscious. This approach also explores the inevitable tensions between the individual and the collective, the fundamental challenges of negotiating what Freud referred to as 'civilization and its discontents' (Freud, 1930). While this is a theme embedded in each chapter, it is particularly central in those on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (Rusbridger), Puccini's *Tosca*

(Tyson), *Madama Butterfly* (Goldberg), Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (Harasemovitch) and *The Flying Dutchman* (Keller). Given the growing psychoanalytic attention to the impact of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors on the formation of the dynamics of defense, symptom, and character, (e.g. Ahktar, 2018; Cushman, 2019; Dajani, 2017; Gonzalez, 2020; Layton, 2020), we anticipate seeing more of this approach in the future.

While the perspectives outlined above are conceptually separate, the reader will find that they are often intertwined in individual chapters according to the inclination of each contributor. In addition, there is considerable variation within each approach in the extent to which contributors uses not only the libretto but also the musical score to study the ways in which character and motivation are conveyed. Special attention to the musical score is particularly central in the chapters on Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (Goldberg), Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Nagel), Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (Harasemovitch), and *Tristan und Isolde* (Muller).

The Synergy of Psychoanalysis and Opera

As will become clear to the reader, psychoanalytic explorations of opera offer a great deal not only to the opera's audience, but also to those involved in the performance, production, and creation of opera. For opera directors and performers, as well as 20th century composers and librettists, psychoanalytic understandings of an opera have opened-up many possibilities in the areas of drama, stage production, and the interaction of word, gesture, and music. But this is by no means a one-way street. An immersion in opera may offer a great deal to the theory and practice of the psychoanalyst as well.

Freud realized that many of his ideas were anticipated by the great creative artists of the past. As one prominent example, the psychology of the protagonists in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* inspired Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex. Since Freud, many psychoanalytic writers have traversed a similar path, drawing upon art, literature, and drama to expand psychological understanding. An excellent modern musical example of this trend would be Feder's (1982) deepening psychological understanding of nostalgia in his penetrating study of the music of Charles Ives.

However, of all the arts, Freud was least at home with music. In fact, he considered himself tone deaf, and described feeling suspicious of the ways in which music could evoke emotions in himself that he could not understand (Freud, 1985). Recent scholarship has suggested that Freud's aversion to musical experience stemmed from a defensive need to avoid painful feelings and pre-verbal experiences associated with his earliest childhood, possibly related to preverbal trauma in connection with a problematic relationship with his musically inclined mother (Whitebook, 2017). And yet the picture is somewhat more complex and Freud could be moved by music as long as he could relate it to discrete ideas (Barale & Minazzi, 2008; Nagel, 2013). This is illustrated in his 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess in which Freud writes: "The *Meistersinger* recently gave me extraordinary pleasure….the *Morgentraumduetweise* [Morning Dream Song Duet] moved me considerably….Real ideas are put into music as in no other opera through association of feeling tones to meaning." (Freud, 1985, p. 238). From this perspective, perhaps Freud's aversion to music stemmed from the fact that he was moved

by it deeply but only comfortable if the feelings that were stirred could be easily represented by him with words.

In any case, following in Freud's footsteps, classical psychoanalysts have tended to prioritize the patient's verbal 'text' and associations, to the relative neglect of the more embodied and musical qualities of spoken language in its rhythm, pitch, timbre, and tone color. Fortunately, contemporary analysts have benefitted immensely from research into the subtle pre-verbal, essentially musical, "sing-song" exchanges between infant and caretaker that have been so well-studied in modern infant observational research (e.g., Stern, 1985). Such work has catalyzed a correction of the historical tilt toward the verbal text and a move toward attention to the non-verbal.

This dimension of early non-verbal communication is now understood to enhance emotional communication throughout the lifespan, and to play a significant therapeutic role within the clinical psychoanalytic relationship. More speculatively, since each of us went through a developmental period during which sounds and music heard in utero and in the early neo-natal period dominated our proto-consciousness, there exists the potential for both analyst and analysand, in their reveries, to experience sounds and music as emanating unbidden from their unconscious (Grier, 2019 pp. 838-839). Such cutting-edge psychoanalytic thinking has provided a gateway to responding therapeutically to aspects of experience that lie beyond verbally articulated mental content. This exploration of "communicative musicality" (Mallock & Trevarthen, 2009) arose initially in work with infants and children, then became important in work with adult patients unable to make use of verbal interpretation. Gradually it spread as it became clear from clinical practice that such registers of experience are present in all human communication (e.g. P.

Goldberg, 2021; Grier, 2019; Grossmark, 2012, 2016; Knoblauch, 2000; Markman, 2020; Pickering, J., 2020; Purcell, 2019).

With regard to opera, since the layering of the verbal and prosodic levels is so prominent, careful listening to opera has the potential to widen the analyst's listening frame by encouraging greater attunement to the emotional subtleties conveyed by the patient, who accompanies his or her verbal 'libretto' with musical elements of melody, timbre, pitch, rhythm, and pacing. With its immediacy of emotional experience, opera teaches the psychoanalyst much about feelings that evade verbal description: "[J]ust as words can describe events we have not witnessed, places and things we have not seen, so music can present emotions, moods, and other embodied experiences we have not felt, passions we did not know before" (Langer, 1942, p. 222).

Listening simultaneously to the multiple conscious and unconscious voices that emerge from the interaction of the libretto's text as it is expressed with subtle vocal musical nuance and underpinned by the multiple layers of the orchestral score helps the analyst develop a perceptual mode that has been various described as "binocular" (Bion, 1962), "bi-ocular" (Birksted-Breen, 2016) and "bi-auditory" (Grier, 2019). The essential ingredient is that perceptually triangulating the object of attention from more than one perspective enables the listener to move from a simple two-dimensional frame to a complex three-dimensional frame yielding a depth of field that is essential to grasping deeper, more elusive, untranslatable, and unconscious aspects of the patient's communication. As Grier has pointed out:

> It is often the musical aspects of language—the nature and quality of voice, its variability in representing multiple voices, its volume and intensity, rhythmic patterns, and tone color, that stimulate the analyst's bodily experience as well as

> his visual and/or auditory (and sometimes musical) reveries, which in turn provide access to what is happening unconsciously in the analytic pair at any given moment. At times, the progress of a psychoanalytic treatment can be sensed from shifts in the music of the analysand's utterances" (Grier, 2019, p. 841).

Such insights are part of a contemporary sensibility in psychoanalytic practice that correctively reverses the unfortunate bifurcation of the verbal and non-verbal modes of communication and of listening in classical analysis (Nagel, 2013). The advantages of re-joining these two modes is especially relevant for work with patients for whom verbal interpretations are relatively unhelpful but who respond well to treatment focusing on affective attunement and "duetting" established through modalities of prosody, gesture, and rhythm of speech. But it goes further than that, as Langer has suggested: "Because the forms of human feeling are much more congruent with musical forms than with the forms of language, music can *reveal* the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach" (1942, p. 235). In the opinion of many contemporary analysts, the music-like duets and certain forms of "accompaniment" to the patient's "solo" (Grossmark, 2012, 2016; Markman, 2020; Purcell, 2019) create embodied feelings of deep connection with another that are in and of themselves mutative and healing, whether or not they lead to subsequent verbal symbolization and interpretation.

Conclusion

As we hope this volume will demonstrate, the great opera composers and librettists offer penetrating psychological insights into the depths of human character, emotion, and psychic life. Unique among the arts, in opera all forms of artistic

expression—poetry, text, music, drama, acting, dance, and the visual arts—are brought together. This is what Wagner aimed for in his idealized concept of a *"Gesamtkunstwerk,"* a work of art that synthesizes as many possible forms of art to explore the most profound levels of human experience. Wagner may have carried this further than any other operatic composer (even designing his own opera house), but the potential for a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is present in all opera.

Like all serious art, opera is open to multiple interpretations and many levels of understanding. The chapters that follow attempt to illuminate both what the creators consciously understood and intended, as well as what they may have intuited or captured unconsciously.

While opera composers understand and render desire and emotion in music, drama and words, psychoanalysts create a psychological space in which to discover, formulate, and transform the dynamics of human desire and emotion. This affinity between psychoanalysis and opera creates many opportunities for cross-fertilization and collaboration, enhancing our understanding of the full complexity and dimensionality of human experience. In this way, the chapters that follow represent a collective effort to use psychoanalytic theory and methodology to deepen our understanding of opera and, at the same time, to enlist opera to inspire the continued development of psychoanalytic theory and practice.

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