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

Edited by Steven H. Goldberg and Lee Rather

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double entendres. However, I found the change in focus from the experience of listening to music to focusing on the composer to be jarring, notwithstanding the author's attempts to tie them together. By focusing on the psychology of the artists' creative process he moves away from the theme of the experience of listening to music. Much of the chapter on Wagner focused on details of the plot of his operas and less about his music. It would have been helpful to know Lachman's perspective on why opera holds such a grip on its enthusiasts.

It was notable that Lachman did not explore how music works on a larger human scale, for example as an important part of communal religious experiences and rituals. Music facilitates a loosening of boundaries and promotes a sense of belonging to a group, whether it is thousands gathering for a concert of popular music or an army going into battle. Music is frequently at the core of social trends and movements. Music integrates body and mind and is forever linked to dance and sexuality. These topics would fit well within the scope of this book.

In summary, I would recommend this book as a spirited introduction to the study of the psychology of music and a highly personal exploration, but less so a systematic exposition. Easily read in a couple of afternoons, Lachman's wide-ranging observations are thought-provoking and his ample musical YouTube links bring reading and listening together in a most satisfying way.

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**OPERA ON THE COUCH: MUSIC, EMOTIONAL LIFE, AND
UNCONSCIOUS ASPECTS OF MIND.** Edited by Steven H.
Goldberg and Lee Rather.

Opera on the Couch delivers more than one might suspect from this title, which at first seems to suggest that opera might be subject to the paradigms of psychoanalysis. The subtitle, *Music, Emotional Life, and Unconscious Aspects of Mind* suggests a much more complex bidirectional undertaking. Not only does psychoanalysis offer insight into the operas, but opera offers ways of understanding the analytic process and human development.

In the introductory chapter, "Psychoanalysis and Opera: A Felicitous Match," Goldberg and Rather state that 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, the authors attempt to demonstrate that opera can open new areas of understanding for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis.

This anthology consists of an introductory chapter by the editors, Steven H. Goldberg and Lee Rather, and an additional fourteen engaging chapters, each addressing a particular opera. These chapters offer resonant insights into operas that may already be familiar but also enticing introductions to operas that may be unfamiliar. Additionally, at the end of the book there is an appendix with plot summaries of all the operas discussed. Plot synopses are useful when watching and listening to operas, as opera plots are often complex, confusing, or improbable. But the music and the drama add dimensions that the stories by themselves don't always tell. Similarly, in psychoanalysis the story tells much but not everything. And in psychoanalysis, like operas that are seen and heard over and over, detail and nuance emerge with repetition. This is also the case in listening during psychoanalysis where a patient will tell a story over and over again as patient and analyst become more comfortable with the associated affect. Often these repetitions reveal more detail, more nuance, and more mastery over the conflict. As Goldberg and Rather suggest, appreciating opera can "correct the historical tilt towards the verbal text" (p. 6) that often simplifies analytic listening. In other words, opera attunes us to listen to the musicality of the spoken word in the analytic situation; and of course, opera attunes us to pay attention to our own emotional and cognitive reactions to what is going on.

The anthology leads with two of the Mozart operas, which are particularly illustrative of the bidirectional approach of this volume. Lee Rather's chapter, "Across the Great Divide: Reflections on the Moral Reversal in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*," addresses a perplexity many people experience with this opera. *The Magic Flute* is delightful. For many people it is their first opera, one that parents take children to. It has fantastic elements, a

damsel in distress, a dragon, children romping through the forest, a castle, beautiful music, rich texture, symbolism, and many surprises.

The Queen of the Night asks our boy-hero, Tamino, to rescue her daughter from the evil Sarastro, but near the end of the first act, the Queen turns menacing when her order to kill Sarastro is rebuffed. Sarastro turns out to be the father of the princess and his castle is a temple of wisdom. Okay, life is often confusing for kids growing up; how do they/we make sense of what is happening? Opera plots are often confusing. Psychoanalysis to the rescue!

In his chapter, Rather observes that there are several ways psychoanalytic understanding might offer insights into opera: (1) it might offer insights into unconscious concerns that have influenced the creative process; (2) another approach might be to treat the characters as real people with inner motivations that could be analyzed as if they were on the couch; (3) or, Rather suggests that the opera functions as a myth or psychodrama in which the characters symbolize aspects of ourselves, consciously and unconsciously expressed through the dramatic and musical narrative.

In this mythic understanding, *The Magic Flute* maps the developmental pathway children traverse from the dependency and identification with the mother to the world beyond, the father's world. The moral reversal, mother good/father bad to father good/mother bad suggests the challenge and confusion inherent in the developmental pathway.

This chapter implies that there is a part of development that is missing, the resolution of the either/or dichotomy and the integration of the feminine and masculine. *The Magic Flute* is two acts, not three. The third act, which might have provided some resolution, is missing. *The Magic Flute* was first performed two months before Mozart died. In his final weeks, Mozart was preoccupied with his haunting *Requiem*. A third act, had Mozart and librettist Schikaneder been able to complete it, might have provided a less confusing dramatic and developmental resolution.

In an engaging podcast, *Psychoanalysis on and off the Couch*,¹ Goldberg and Rather discuss *The Magic Flute* with Harvey Schwartz. They tell an interesting story about a psychoanalytic candidate who was

¹ Psychoanalysis on and off the couch podcast (January 8, 2023). Episode 125: Psychoanalysis and Opera - rejoining the verbal and nonverbal. IPAoffthecouch.org. Harvey Schwartz. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RE4D69jGuopTdn8PKvioY-elJHrEWcYXYsQjHf7GcJQ/edit>

confused by the different approaches her supervisors suggested for dealing with analytic patients. Some favored taking a more involved approach; others recommend standing back and letting the analyses unfold. One might suggest (they don't) that involvement is a more maternal approach, while letting the patient come to terms with their conflicts is more paternal. Instead, they suggest that in this time of gender fluidity, those might be unnecessary stereotypes.

In their bidirectional approach, they offer insights both from psychoanalysis and musicology that deepen the understanding of the operas. As a personal example that was familiar to me (but I had not previously known why) was Mozart's use of the key of D minor for the Queen's revenge aria, a key often associated with tragedy. Rather notes, and this resonated with my memory, that this key is prevalent in the later *Requiem*. I went to the piano to convince myself that the emotion I remembered so well was indeed associated with this key signature.

Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, at one level a moral fable, also begins ominously with the D minor chord, which tragically echoes through the opera. Giovanni is a seductive rogue who gets his comeuppance in the end, but not before he takes us with him, not before he and Mozart's music seduce us as complicit participants. Women (some women) admit to admiring him, fantasizing about him. Men (some men) secretly envy his conquests. Or psychoanalytically speaking, he appeals to parts of the feminine and parts of the masculine, which we might recognize consciously or unconsciously but do not necessarily acknowledge.

As the drama unfolds, we do recognize unsettling aspects of masculine entitlement and class privilege. It all seems quite natural, even delightful as Leparello cheerfully recounts Giovanni's *mille et tre* conquests. As chapter author Richard Rusbridger notes, Kierkegaard sees Giovanni as a figure of "transcendent vitality" (p. 13). Kierkegaard probes the moral dimensions of Mozart's masterpiece in Volume I of his two-volume book *Either/Or*.² He anticipates Freud's developmental stages with stages he called *metamorphoses*. The first stage is desire in the abstract, the idea of desire; the second stage is the desire of a particular object (or person); and the third stage is a synthesis of the two. Kierkegaard incidentally

² Kierkegaard, S. (1944). *Either/Or*, trans. D. F. Swenson & L. M. Swenson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959.

suggests, anticipating Rather's formulation, that the *Magic Flute* is representative of stage two. Kierkegaard distinguishes the aesthetic perfection of the musical-erotic—which is pre-reflective and lacks self awareness—from the ethical dimension, which Don Giovanni never reaches but which Mozarts' opera forces upon us, leveraging our emotional awareness of the sensual pleasures and our disquiet at awareness of their consequences.

Puccini's opera *Tosca* presents another kind of sexual abuser who is completely reflective, self-aware, determined, and who draws pleasure as well as excitement from the pain he afflicts on others. *Tosca*'s villain, Scarpia, makes no attempt at seduction or pretense thereof. For him, it is naked power and the excitement of inflicting pain on others: "For myself the violent conquest. Has stronger relish than the soft surrender."

Amy Tyson, the author of the chapter, "Evil as Sadistic Perversion in *Tosca*," raises the important question, "What is evil? Is it the farthest point on a behavioral continuum of cruel behavior? Or is it uniquely different from the wide range of self-serving unkindnesses humans impose on one another?" (p. 91).

For her, the answer is that Scarpia is both evil and mentally disordered. Here psychoanalytic vocabulary and insight inform the emotional tensions, which might otherwise be almost unbearable. Modern diagnostic categories, such as psychopathy or sociopathy and sadistic perversion, did not exist in 1800, but stories of the sexual opportunist, narcissistic rapists are as old as time and as familiar as today. Unlike Giovanni—or the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto*—who imagine that they will be admired, Scarpia, Tyson notes, makes no attempt to seduce but rather enjoys being hated by his victims.

Tyson's chapter reviews a number of philosophical, theological, and psychological studies that attempt to understand the relationship between perversion and evil. Common to these is that the perpetrator is incapable of empathy with the feelings of the victim, but also needs to compensate for a feeling of inadequacy or deficiency in himself. For example, she notes psychoanalyst Fred Alford (1997) concludes, based on extensive interviews with violent inmates, that evil is related to a sense of dread.

Doing evil is an attempt to evacuate this experience by inflicting it on others, making them feel dreadful by hurting them. Doing evil is an attempt to transform the terrible

passivity and helplessness of suffering into activity...The dread is rooted in a menacing sense of internal lifelessness and a fear of death. [p. 96]

In the opera, Scarpia fears losing power (potency) as the invading army is about to take over his city, where he had suppressed all dissent. He tortures Tosca's true love, Mario, forcing her to hear his screams then promises to free him if she will submit to him sexually. It turns out that Scarpia's promise was a lie. Tosca is tricked into witnessing Mario's execution by a firing squad, which she was told would be a mock execution using blanks instead of real bullets.

Like other autocrats whose tactics are becoming so familiar to us, Scarpia starts his conquest of Tosca with a disinformation campaign. He plays on her insecurities to cast doubt on her grip on reality. He suggests that a fan he found is evidence of Mario's infidelity and relishes evidence of Tosca's gullibility, her suggestibility. We now recognize this strategy and call it gaslighting.

Scarpia is an imagined character, but not unfamiliar. Tyson notes the emergence of the Me Too movement and the open acknowledgment of previously unacknowledged transgressions. We even witness on the national stage the drama of former president Donald J. Trump—a defeated politician watching his power slip away, resorting to lies, inciting violence, ordering executions,³ and promising mass executions and firing squads if he could regain power. His sexual transgressions are legion, and even a librettist couldn't come up with lines on pussy groping, "And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. You can do anything."⁴

While many people find this appalling, many also find it appealing. This moral inversion is what we need to understand, and a

³ "The Trump administration restored federal executions, executed more people than any administration in 120 years, oversaw a federal government that executed more Americans in a one-year period than every state combined, and was the first administration since the 1880s to put people to death during a lame-duck period." Bess Levin, "Trump's Record-Setting Executions were even more Appalling than Previously Thought," *Vanity Fair*, January 27, 2023. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/12/brandon-bernard-executed-doj-trump>

⁴ "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women," *The New York Times*, October 8, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>.

psychoanalytic approach to a character like Scarpia helps us appreciate the defensive function of such cruel behavior.

Seeing such behavior as perversion, sexual perversion, is to recognize the distortion in the imagined reality. The excitement is the antithesis of the dreaded emptiness, a way of avoiding the reality that one is not in fact admired. Perversion is a distortion of reality, not a creation of an alternate reality. It is madness, madness as a metaphor⁵ that straddles moral evil and mental aberration.⁶

In the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Lucia goes mad when she realizes that there is no realistic solution to the situation that has been forced upon her. She descends into madness when heaven and earth fail her: “‘Twas my hope that death would hide me from a doom of shame and anguish. Comfort is denied me. In despair I must languish. None will counsel me. None will aid me. Heaven and earth have both betrayed me.”

In Julie Jaffe Nagel’s chapter, “An Intersection on the Oral and Aural roads,” she notes that Freud prioritized the spoken word and the oral route to the unconscious in psychoanalysis; and that Freud professed not to derive pleasure in music. Listening to Donizetti’s opera, she suggests it provides access to emotions of shame, despair, and helplessness—a bridge as it were between the narrative and the inner experience of her world. Perhaps this chapter best explicates the importance of listening (the aural route) as a way of apprehending the drama in psychoanalysis as well as in opera.

There is a note of poignancy in Benjamin Britten’s *Billy Budd*, based on Herman Melville’s novella. Billy is a handsome young sailor whom most of the crew like, but the malevolent Claggart provokes him to a rage. Because Billy stammers, he cannot respond verbally and strikes Claggart, which is a capital offense in maritime law. Captain Vere (Vere = true) recognizes the injustice but feels torn by his duty to uphold the letter of the law.

As so often in opera and in life, we are stunned by the cruelty. In Milton Schaefer’s chapter on *Billy Budd*—titled “A Study in Envy and Repression”—he points out that Melville intimates that Claggart’s hatred

⁵ Dyer, A. R. (2014). Madness as metaphor: therapeutic implications of post-critical thought. *Tradition & Discovery*, 42:23-33.

⁶ Dyer, A. R. (2021). Evolution of the “Goldwater Rule,” professionalism, politics, and paranoia.” *J. Amer. Psychoanal. Assn.*, 68:709-719

of Billy stems not only from his envy of Billy but also from his own repressed homosexual desires:

Contrasting the seemingly innate evil of Claggart, there is the goodness, and almost the perfection of Billy. Even more in the novella than the opera, we are made aware of the physical beauty of Billy...From the moment Claggart sees Billy, he is out to destroy him. [p. 185]

This story is of particular interest to me in teaching ethics to psychiatry residents because it highlights the tension between rule-based (deontological) ethics and contextual or end-based (teleological) ethics that we often experience in clinical dilemmas.⁷ I had never seen (heard) the opera version of the story, but was able to experience the San Francisco Opera's production on DVD. My observation from the comparison between Melville's novella and Britten's opera (with libretto by EM Forster & Eric Crozier) is that Captain's Vere's agonized decision is expressed poignantly in the music. As Schaefer notes:

While Forster's libretto would point to the power of love to heal wounds, Britten's score suggests a more unstable balance, where harp, woodwind, and brass join forces to weaken the finality of closure. In the end, one must endure rather than undo the past and, as is often the case in opera, the music has the last word. [p. 187]

I have tried to highlight the interactions of music, emotional life, and unconscious aspects of the mind by looking at selected chapters⁸ in this entertaining and edifying anthology, chapters which deepen our understanding of these operas which may be familiar or provide introductions to operas not yet familiar. The English language provides an impoverished vocabulary for emotional experience. Feeling words are

⁷ My wife, who did her PhD thesis on the novels of Herman Melville, identifies this as the tension which Melville identified as between a heavenly "chronometrical" approach and the earthly "horological" world of the man-of-war. Dyer, S. (1977). *Plinlimmon's Theme: The Aspirations and Limitations of Man in the Novels of Herman Melville*. Duke University.

⁸ Other chapters are equally worthy of attention, but for reasons of time and space are not included here: *Madama Butterfly*, *Elektra*, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, *Wozzek*, *The Makropulos Affair*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and three chapters on Wagner operas.

usually abstractions and not a reference to sensations in the body. A wine connoisseur knows the vocabulary of wines, which, poetic as they may be, can convey meaning to others who have tasted the wines and identify the words with the experience. Similarly, opera, like psychoanalysis, provides a reference of shared experience, which can help us all empathize with the experience of others, deepen our own emotional life, and tap unconscious aspects of the human mind.

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