



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Opera on the couch: music, emotional life, and unconscious aspects of music**, edited by Steven H. Goldberg and Lee Rather, Abingdon & New York, Routledge, 2022, 224pp., \$39.95, ISBN: 9781032210773

It is not surprising to find frequent references in the literature to the relationship between music and psychoanalysis, given that our emotional life is so closely associated from our earliest days with musical experiences, Freud's self-confessed indifference to music notwithstanding. Numerous articles are published about it, although books are sparse and are mostly edited collections of papers (e.g. Feder, Karmel and Pollock 1991 & 1993), with only a handful of exceptions (e.g. Nagel 2013; Kennedy 2020).

The multiple ways in which psychoanalysis intersects and interacts with music are undoubtedly fascinating, but they also remain difficult to grasp. These texts either suggest a reading of specific compositions from a psychoanalytic perspective by identifying a parallel between their formal structure and psychodynamic models of mental functioning; or they explore more generic theoretical aspects, such as the neuropsychological impact of music on its listeners; or attempt to attribute the significance of certain musical works to the personality or psychopathology of their composers. Classical compositions that contain a verbal text (such as operas, lieder or choral oratorios) are less abstract than purely musical works (such as symphonies, concertos or string quartets) and are the most common subjects of these psychoanalytic studies. Yet, as far as I know, there has never been a psychoanalytic book published in English that is exclusively focused on opera. The volume under review here, *Opera on the Couch: Music, Emotional Life, and Unconscious Aspects of Mind*, is then a welcome first of its kind. It originated from, and was inspired by, a programme of events at the San Francisco Opera where Sunday matinée performances were followed by presentations and discussions with the audience – a programme (also named *Opera on the Couch*) in which psychoanalysts Steven H. Goldberg and Lee Rather, the two book editors, were actively involved.

In their comprehensive introductory chapter on the “felicitous match” between psychoanalysis and opera, Goldberg and Rather suggest that the synergistic form of melodrama is well suited to psychoanalytic investigations because of its “potential to convey emotional complexity and conflict on multiple levels and in multiple registers simultaneously” (1) and because opera displays in words and music such universal themes as love, death, power and faith, which are also frequently heard from the couch. These authors' conclusion is that opera is a privileged art form for interdisciplinary studies. The exploration of the relationship between psychoanalysis and opera then allows us to gain a fresh understanding of those artistic works under scrutiny and, given the richness and complexities of the operatic universe (its stories, characters and music), may also provide us with new perspectives on our analysts' unconscious desires, conflicts and motivations.

The book's fourteen chapters (each written by a different author and some of them rewritten from published articles) cover an opera each and are presented in chronological order – starting with Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787) and ending with Knussen's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1984). Inevitably, the book could not cover the history of opera in a systematic way, with the result that large gaps – the most notable being the absence of papers on compositions by Rossini and Verdi – are left to be filled. An Appendix of Synopses of the operas

discussed in the book seems redundant insofar as such synopses are to a large extent already contained in the relevant chapters.

Some of the operas presented here are considered as “a psychological expression of the composer’s inner life” (4); some authors focus on the music itself and how it conveys the characters’ personalities and their vicissitudes; others treat the opera’s dramatis personae as if they were actual people – in this case, unlike in our psychoanalytic work, interpretations could not be confirmed or disconfirmed by those to whom they are addressed and, therefore, remain speculative.

Because of the contributors’ individual choices, and because of their different orientations and expertise (some of them combining a psychoanalytic career with a background as a musician or musicologist), their chapters display a multitude of theoretical approaches and are written in a variety of styles. This may be unavoidable when discussing a genre that comprises such a range of artistic media, including instrumental music, solo and choral singing, poetry, acting, set design, staging and costumes. However, the wealth of perspectives found in the book may leave those choosing to read the whole volume (as opposed to those who select only the essays on the operas they are interested in) with the impression that they were offered a somewhat fragmented experience. Given the book’s heterogeneity, it may be difficult to provide here a comprehensive overview of it, but through a brief presentation of some of its chapters I can at least offer a general flavour of the variety of psychoanalytic approaches to operas from the book’s contributors.

Richard Rusbridger’s article on *Don Giovanni* stresses the precision with which Mozart’s score, with its frequent key changes and the careful use of other musical devices, parallels the action and the psychological condition of its protagonist. Giovanni is seen as a rather blank character, mostly functioning by means of mania. He is “stuck in a world of phallic narcissism” (17), unable to bear guilt for his cruel treatment of women, and is punished for it in a dramatic finale dominated by Oedipal connotations as the Commendatore, the Don’s nemesis, literally (and musically) sends him to hell.

Music historian John Muller IV considers *Tristan und Isolde* as “the greatest operatic testament to love” and “an intra-psycho music drama [in which] almost nothing happens on the stage in terms of traditional action” (61). The author offers us relevant biographical information on Wagner’s life, as well as understanding Tristan’s inner world, and in particular his overwhelming “heroic” grief, as the result of being an orphan from birth: “He has been born into death,” Muller tells us, “and sees death as his true ancestral home” (67).

In Jeanne Harasemovitch’s beautifully written chapter, Wagner’s music in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is considered dreamlike and, as such, “a vital bridge between our conscious and unconscious worlds” (77). She analyses the opera and its characters in much detail and concludes that, for Wagner, the madness that drives human passion (Wahn) is also what contributes to the formation of dreams and to the creations of art.

The chapter on *Tosca* by Amy Tyson does not deal with the opera as a whole but focuses instead on the pathological personality of its villain, Scarpia, as the ultimate case of psychopathy and sadism. Evil, Tyson claims, “stems from a personal deep internal experience of dreading an existential threat to the self” (96). Interestingly, the masochistic side of the perversion is located in Scarpia himself rather than in Tosca, his victim.

Steven Goldberg offers an original and convincing analysis of the second Puccini opera included in the book, *Madama Butterfly*, in terms of boundaries: both physical ones (the sliding walls in the protagonist’s home) and the “barriers of culture, gender, wealth, and social status” (109) leading to the tragic conclusion of the love story between Butterfly and Pinkerton. Both the young Japanese geisha and the American naval officer, Goldberg argues, “are lost in [their] own subjectivity, unaware of and misunderstanding the subjectivity of the other” (110).

Adele Tutter refers to Janáček's *The Makropulos Affair* in terms of its composer's personal biography and makes no explicit attempt to provide a psychoanalytic interpretation of it; instead she attributes the opera's narrative to Janáček's late-life platonic and repeatedly frustrating love-affair with a much younger woman, his muse and embodiment of the "eternal feminine", a powerful archetypal ideal in nineteenth-century Europe.

Finally, Milton Schaefer interprets *Billy Budd* in terms of the envy that afflicts the eponymous protagonist. Through a detailed reading of Benjamin Britten's music and of E.M. Foster's libretto, Schaefer argues that Claggart's hate of young Billy is the result of his out-of-control, destructive envy, as well as of his repressed homosexual desires. This opera, Schaefer tells us, "is most prominently a portrayal of the struggle between good and evil" (183).


An opera, it could be argued, may at first only exist "on paper" as a score and a libretto, and only come to life when it is performed in front of an audience. These live performances, like those of a play in a theatre (but unlike those of a film in a cinema), are all different from one another; to complicate things, dissimilarities become especially noticeable in different productions, when stage directors and music conductors (among many others) offer their own subjective interpretations of the original text. Critics, including those with a psychoanalytic orientation, must therefore choose whether to write about an opera as originally conceived by its composer and librettist (insofar as this is something that can be ascertained) or about a specific performance of it, or oscillate in their comments between the two. In the same way, the contributors of this book were faced with deciding how to deal with this issue and often left it unclear whether they were writing about an opera as conceived by its composer and librettist, or about a particular performance seen, say, at the San Francisco Opera House – a performance likely to be very different from the one that the book's reader may have seen.

In spite of the limitations that I have outlined here as well as the more general questions implicit in the application of psychoanalysis to non-clinical disciplines, I would recommend this volume to anyone interested in how psychoanalytic theories can enrich our understanding of opera. In their introduction, Goldberg and Rather suggest that "the affinity between psychoanalysis and opera creates many opportunities for cross-fertilization and collaboration" (8). Their book represents one such an opportunity and I hope that this first brave, if somewhat disjointed, volume will encourage further publications on such a thought-provoking subject.

## References

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