



## Applied Psychoanalysis

OPERA ON THE COUCH: MUSIC, EMOTIONAL LIFE, AND UNCONSCIOUS ASPECTS OF MIND. Edited by *Steven H. Goldberg and Lee Rather*. New York: Routledge, 2022, 240 pp., \$42.95 paperback.

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A memorable Victoria Roberts cartoon from the *New Yorker* depicts a smiling couple walking out of the Metropolitan Opera, one observing to the other, “Most opera plots could be averted by some decent therapy.”

What makes this so funny? At one level, it speaks to the art form’s heightened affective tenor. Operatic characters seem to fall in love, reverse their affections, plot murderous revenge, pledge undying fidelity, die by their own hands, and generally act out to a far greater extent than the general population, to say nothing of their propensity for singing as they do so. They all but cry out for psychological treatment, yet we also laugh at Roberts’s cartoon because that very prospect is absurd. If Floria Tosca were the kind of person inclined to call an analyst rather than leap to her death off the Castel Sant’Angelo, she would no longer be the indelible opera character she is, but someone else entirely. As the cartoon suggests, there simply wouldn’t *be* opera if its characters sought help. Even given this, as analysts it can be hard to resist pondering how we might understand someone like Tosca should she spend some time on one of our couches, and such curiosity is given free rein—in more and less convincing manners—in Steven H. Goldberg and Lee Rather’s edited volume *Opera on the Couch: Music, Emotional Life, and Unconscious Aspects of Mind*.

The book is the product of a long-standing collaboration between the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis and the San Francisco Opera, in which pairs of analysts offer a series of post-matinee lectures with psychoanalytic reflections on a given afternoon’s performance. Many of the book’s collected essays grew out of these apparently generative discussions, and taken as a whole demonstrate both the great potential and the unavoidable difficulties of so-called applied psychoanalysis.

As the editors mention in their thoughtful introduction, “applied psychoanalysis” is an unfortunate phrase, in that it fails to convey the fecund cross-pollination between psychoanalytic concepts and cultural achievement that has been active since at least the turn of the last century. The term in fact captures a particularly unconvincing version of that dialogue, where psychoanalytic concepts are truly “applied”—like a crude coat of paint—to the manifest surface of cultural products. There are isolated examples of this in *Opera on the Couch*, though what to call a psychoanalytic engagement with opera is not the only difficulty. When thinking psychoanalytically about any artform, one must apply psychoanalytic concepts in the absence of an ongoing clinical process, the traditional court of appeal for psychoanalytic interpretations. Psychoanalytic theories themselves are largely accounts of development and mental functioning retroactively derived from analytic work with clinical populations, meaning they are informed speculations, which must be deployed in a particularly circumspect fashion in the absence of a confirmatory clinical process. Ultimately, in trying to employ this body of knowledge to understand works of art, one can find oneself tentatively applying speculative theories absent any means for verification, and given this, it can be a challenge to strike a suitably provisional tone while still making claims that register as meaningful.

The contributors to *Opera on the Couch* approach these challenges in four primary ways, as the editors outline: (a) treating opera characters as real people and elucidating their psychology with psychoanalytic concepts, (b) treating a given opera as akin to a composer’s dream and psychobiographically analyzing both composer and work in these terms, (c) analyzing operas in terms of the universal psychological themes they express, and (d) treating opera as a vehicle for engaging latent sociocultural issues. (The latter approach tends to be enfolded into one or more of the preceding three.) Also, the book’s most powerful essays engage in sophisticated musical analysis that enhances these approaches.

With one exception, the book’s essays employ these investigate modes without engaging questions of methodology. The majority adopt one of the first two approaches just listed, but John Gedo (1997) offers reasoned misgivings about both of these stances. He observes that psychoanalysis has much to contribute to discerning the underlying motivations of characters in narratives that approximate reality, as Frattaroli (1987) also argues in a detailed contribution on “character analysis” in

Shakespeare's plays. But the extent to which opera itself attempts to depict real people is more debatable. Opera's musical context and dramatically heightened affective world seem to set it apart from creative forums that more closely depict reality, like the realist novel, in which characters behave and develop in a more credible fashion. Rather, Gedo argues, opera characters are best understood as embodying archetypes in the tradition of Greek drama, rather than as realistic representations of actual people.

Whether Don Giovanni is treated as a real person, as by Richard Rusbridger in his *Opera on the Couch* essay, or whether the Don is a Dionysian archetype, as Gedo would have it, informs how one understands his psychology. For instance, Rusbridger insightfully demonstrates how Mozart portrays the Don's swaggering emotional vacuity in the opera: Giovanni has no aria of his own, and his melodic lines are often imitative. However, it strikes me as more grounded to understand this as an evocative artistic rendering of the emotional emptiness of all Lotharios, rather than specifically the result of Giovanni's evacuating himself of intolerable affects via projective mechanisms and psychotic denial, as Rusbridger goes on to claim. While these accounts are not necessarily incompatible, the latter is merely a speculative description of some dynamics that may lead to the former, and does not necessarily add anything beyond a psychoanalytic terminology.

Gedo also notes complications with analyzing composers on the basis of parallels between their biographies and operatic works. Unlike the literary and visual arts, where the audience more or less directly interacts with the artistic product—reading a book or viewing a painting—the performing arts are realized via the particular interpretations of performers. While many composers (notably Wagner) have been closely involved with the initial productions of their operas, and the score and libretto are invariable, the intermediary interpretive activity between a composer and an audience places opera at a further remove from the composer's immediate intentions—conscious or unconscious—than other art forms. Something has to be *done* to bring an operatic score to life that is more drastic than with a novel or even a dramatic script, and while this allows the generative creative license seen in many modern opera productions, it also raises a question of the extent to which an opera, particularly in performance, should be considered a manifestation of its composer's depth psychology. It would have been welcome for the psychobiographical

essays of *Opera in the Couch* to engage such questions more fully, beyond psychologically speculating on common themes in composers' lives and works. (Paul Robinson's [1985] *Opera and Ideas: From Mozart to Strauss* exemplifies a nuanced historical approach that can make such inquiry more convincing.)

Two of the most compelling essays in the volume tend toward the third approach mentioned earlier: analyzing operas as depictions of universal myths and psychological themes. In his contribution on *The Magic Flute*, Lee Rather (one of the two editors) observes that the opera represents a story of psychological maturation, writing, "The deep structure of *The Magic Flute* is essentially a developmental story of boys and girls needing to situate themselves in relation to mothers and fathers, or more specifically to maternal and paternal function" (p. 29), which he elaborates in admirable detail. He also emphasizes the absence of a third act, both literally in the two-act score, and figuratively in the lack of integration of the maternal and paternal. Like generations of others, I grew up enchanted with *The Magic Flute*, particularly via Ingmar Bergman's 1975 film version (on VHS). Deeply familiar though the opera is, Rather's essay led me to consider it anew. It's true: Tamino and Pamina don't exactly figure anything out, they simply move from the Queen of the Night's darkness to Sarastro's light, and a bit too smoothly at that. The conspicuous lack of mature integration predicated on ambivalence and mourning had never struck me before, as the emotional depth of Mozart's music easily covers over this want of psychological complexity.

John J. H. Muller's essay on *Tristan und Isolde* similarly offered a fresh perspective on an old friend. Muller offers a reading of the opera focused on Tristan's mourning parental loss, and while he passingly connects this with Wagner's biography, it is his granular orchestral and thematic analysis illustrating *how* the composer musically depicts the evolution of Tristan's grief-stricken psychological state that feels like a revelation. He writes how the "Old Tune" leitmotif as it returns in Tristan's second monologue becomes "not merely an expression of Tristan's current state and separation from Isolde, but rather . . . the leitmotif of his entire life, his inheritance of grief" (p. 69), showing how Tristan's life has come to revolve around familiar emotional themes much in the manner we hope to understand with our analytic patients. While Muller's analysis focuses on the character of Tristan, it elucidates the seemingly inexorable, cosmic repetition of traumatic experience—"the same old song"—a

touchstone of psychoanalysis also embodied in the Oedipus myth itself. The essay also demonstrated how an operatic process can mirror the unfolding of an analytic one, the two speaking to each other as different forms of emotionally “thematic” development, so vividly captured in Wagner’s use and manipulation of leitmotifs.

Only one essay in *Opera on the Couch* (aside from the editors’ introduction) directly engages with the methodological questions of psychoanalysis and opera: Ralph Beaumont’s on Berg’s *Wozzeck*. Beaumont opens with a reflection on applied analysis, which he argues is a vital transitional space, one in which we “engage in representing our notions about unconscious activities within others” in an exercise of “symbolization, and the elaboration of mental representations” (pp. 152–153). He goes on to argue that applied analytic efforts like those of *Opera on the Couch* are an opportunity for analysts to experiment with their own thinking in a sort of theoretical playground. This feels like the right chord to strike, framing the book in a spirit of productively playful, if provisional, food for thought, which casts a softer light on some of its more outlandish claims.

For instance, it seemed a bridge too far for Julie Jaffee Nagel to assert that “Lucia’s terror reflects pre-Oedipal shame and its underlying affects” (p. 43), as she does in her essay on Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Lucia may be shame-ridden, but to call this shame “pre-Oedipal” is to force psychoanalytic description where it is not needed and is difficult to justify. Nagel also suggests listeners can “hear Lucia’s defenses and compromise formations increasingly shattered through high notes” (p. 41), which is too mixed a metaphor. While psychological processes might be *reflected* in musical language, as authors in the collection like Muller demonstrate, they themselves make no more sound than they do in a consulting room. What you hear from Lucia is the musical realization of her distress at having her defenses shattered, not the shattering itself. Beaumont’s suggestion, however, is that whatever the credibility of such accounts, *the activity of arriving at and expressing them* can itself be salutary for analytic thinking as a form of theoretical experimentation and mental play, a perspective that helped me to appreciate even the more extravagant passages of *Opera on the Couch* as possessing their own imaginative worth.

Taken as a whole, *Opera on the Couch* demonstrates that psychoanalysis has much to bring to a conversation with opera, and also the complications that arise in maintaining such a dialogue. Having read it, one trusts

that analytic inquiry from a variety of perspectives will continue to elucidate evenings at the opera for analysts and audiences alike, particularly insofar as it grapples with difficult questions of the complex ways psychoanalytic ideas speak to art. In addition to traditional analytic theories, neuroscience and neuropsychanalysis are beginning to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of how music registers in the feeling brain (see Vuust et al. 2022; Zuccarini 2018), and it will be exciting to see how the conversation among these disciplines develops in the years to come.

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Applied psychoanalysis has had a rocky history, not unlike psychoanalysis itself. Vilified over the years by such distinguished and not necessarily anti-Freudian scholars as Meyer Schapiro and Leo Steinberg, it has often