

8 The dramaturgy of opera

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Opera is a multivalent art form: it combines dramatic and literary traditions with vocal and instrumental music and the visual and plastic arts to tell a story. One recurring question in opera studies is exactly how do these diverse modes of expression interact with one another? In an art work that brings together multiple, and possibly competing, expressive 'systems' what creates structure and makes an opera cohere? Is the poetry the primary purveyor of narrative and form? Is the music the chief dramatic and structural agent? If so, do recurring melodies or tonalities take primacy in determining form? Or should we be concerned with formal coherence at all?

How critics and musicologists have answered the above questions – in fact, even the questions raised – depends upon which of opera's domains has been given precedence and what analytical approach has been taken. At various points in opera studies' history, incongruencies and frictions between expressive systems have been smoothed over in favour of demonstrating synthesis, tonal progressions have received more attention than texts, thematic relations across a work more priority than individual numbers. Which parameter has been used as a starting point has resulted in a number of seemingly conflicting, yet overlapping, findings to questions of form. In short, opera's musico-dramatic structures stand in counterpoint to one another, a counterpoint that the field of opera studies itself reflects.

Dramatic and literary structures

Because opera is a drama enacted on a stage, it shares some structural devices with spoken plays. Operas, like plays, frequently are divided into separate acts and scenes, divisions that can be emphasized by pauses or intervals, set changes, musical interludes and the like.

Yet 'opera', as composer Virgil Thomson rightly claims, is more than 'a play with music laid on'.¹ Its multifaceted nature prompts, demands even, structures that differ from both instrumental music and spoken drama. Firstly, the sustained tones of singing take more time than regular speech. Therefore, as poet-librettist Dana Gioia notes, 'opera demands immense narrative compression';² and, as Verdi advised his librettist Francesco Maria

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Piave, ‘the poetry can and must say all that the prose does, and in half the words.’³ Secondly, the sounds of the words matter. Admittedly, sonic qualities play a role in dramatic poetry as well, but in opera sounds have a practical component because they impact performability. It is difficult to sing high pitches, for example, on certain vowels. Additionally, in many styles of opera, unlike in a play, characters ‘speak’ simultaneously, sometimes at great length. Lastly, operatic conventions, particularly musical ones, also shape the work. Lorenzo da Ponte, Mozart’s collaborator, addresses some of the above challenges in the preface to *Le nozze di Figaro*, which he adapted from *Le Marriage de Figaro* a controversial French play by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. Da Ponte remarks:

I did not make a translation of this excellent comedy, but rather an adaptation or, let us say, an extract. To this end, I was obliged to reduce the sixteen characters of which it consists to eleven, two of which may be performed by a single person and I had to omit, apart from an entire act, many a very charming scene and a number of good jests and sallies with which it is strewn, in place of which I had to substitute canzonettas, arias, choruses, and other forms and words susceptible to music.⁴

So how does a librettist make an opera’s words ‘susceptible to music’? By employing many of the same literary devices that poets use – rhyme and metre, assonance, alliteration and anaphora (beginning verses with the same word or phrase).

A number of scholars, such as Tim Carter and John Platoff, have insisted on the importance of understanding dramatic and poetic structures as starting points for the consideration of operas. Indeed, Carter writes that ‘One might plausibly write a history of opera on the basis not of its composers but, instead, of its librettists. Arguably, they were the driving force behind many of the genre’s developments in subject matter, plot and even structure.’⁵ As a result, the work of such scholars questions many long-held assumptions about operatic forms. Their analyses of *opera buffa* reveal that many structures, particularly musical contrasts that were previously attributed to the composer, actually stem from the libretto.⁶ Platoff’s study of *buffa* arias, for instance, touches on all the elements mentioned in Da Ponte’s preface and demonstrates how poetic devices shape these numbers. Many contain a list or a ‘catalogue’ of some kind, which is emphasized through anaphora and rhyme. The texts usually progress through regularly metred stanzas to more rambling, free constructions, and from longer line lengths to shorter ones. As Platoff notes, ‘sentences give way to phrases, then to one- or two-word groups.’⁷ The poetry, then, helps create a sense of acceleration to a climactic epigram. Musical devices, such as shorter and shorter phrases based on repetitive rhythms, follow suit. Leporello’s ‘Catalogue’ aria in Mozart’s *Don*

Giovanni, and Don Giovanni's own 'Fin ch'han dal vino' both exemplify this form.

Poetic structures therefore guide dramatic and musical ones. Thus the poet may alter the rhyme scheme or line lengths to signal a changed dramatic situation or the entrance of a new character, especially in lengthier ensembles. Metre and prosody – the number of syllables per line and where the accentuated syllables fall within the line, especially the location of the final accented syllable – may also determine the rhythmic and harmonic structures of the music. In Italian libretti, for instance, the penultimate syllable is customarily accented (*verso piano*). Poets interweave *versi piani* with lines that conclude with an accented syllable (*verso tronco*) to create variety and delineate poetic structures. This fosters two- or four-bar units, with cadences occurring on accented syllables.

Many opera libretti alternate between stanzas with metre and rhyme and less structured verse. Throughout much of opera's history, metred and rhymed poetry was customarily rendered as melodic arias and ensembles. In some eras, certain verse forms were allied with specific musical forms. Two short stanzas customarily signalled a *da capo* aria, three contrasting stanzas a two-tempo form, interlocking couplets a duet, and so on. Blank verse and prose, on the other hand, prompted more speech-like, declamatory music and consequently different types of musical structures. Arguably the irregular line lengths and accentuations in Wagner's libretti allowed him to move from separate numbers to more motivically driven through-composition (see page 191), what he called 'endless melody'.⁸ Thus the words provide the basic framework for the narrative and the music, on both the macro- and micro-levels.

Music and text combined: arias, ensembles and recitative

While some operatic criticism focuses on libretti,⁹ the music in an opera obviously plays a central expressive and structural role. Indeed, the belief that music serves as the *primary* dramatic and formal agent pervades opera studies. Many commentators assert, as Joseph Kerman does, that an opera's music 'determine[s] the dramatic form' and provides the principal 'articulation[s] . . . from point to point and in the whole'.¹⁰

One common dramatic 'articulation' that the music enhances is the alternation between reflection and action via the juxtaposition of more musically stable passages with those that are less so. Moments of reflection and intense emotional reactions often have been (and still are) configured as arias, the musical equivalent of a monologue. Depending on the style of opera, action and dialogue can be musically rendered as ensembles, as

recitatives, or by withdrawing music altogether and shifting to ordinary speech.

Monologues: arias

Certain styles of opera depend extensively upon arias. Dramatically, these sections reveal the subjective perspective of a single character. Arias often depict a character's internal reactions to external events. In fact, in the 1700s *dramma per musica*, what we now call *opera seria*, featured one extended soliloquy after another. In this way, opera resembles a novel with a third-person narrator more than a play; the audience is privy to the characters' private thoughts, thoughts which might not be spoken aloud in real life but that are musically voiced. Particularly in serious works, arias foster the audience's identification with the characters' dilemmas and/or suffering.

Musically, these extended passages for solo singer feature more sustained, lyrical vocal lines accompanied by the orchestra and often have a clearly audible pulse. Particularly during the late 1600s through the 1800s, arias also were more harmonically stable than the surrounding music because they started and concluded in the same key. Musical coherence was and is created via tonal structure, repetition of melodic and rhythmic material, or other means. Internal conflicts or debates (often a feature of operatic plots) are delineated via contrast – departures from the aria's home key, new melodic material, even a new tempo or metre.

One strand of opera studies has focused on the structures of arias, some writers extending structural analysis to consider how individual numbers follow or depart from conventional musical forms. A chain of analysts has investigated the phrase structures or 'lyric prototypes' in Rossini's and Verdi's arias, for example.¹¹ Another thread is how musical structures intersect with verbal content and dramaturgical functions. Mary Hunter's study of *opera buffa* arias considers formal patterns, but also how these connect to representations of class and gender; James Hepokoski addresses similar questions in his examination of the generic and musical references in the dying Violetta's 'Addio del passato' in Verdi's *La traviata*, suggesting, for instance, that its faltering waltz rhythm refers back to Violetta's heyday as a society courtesan.¹² Both Gilles de Van and Carolyn Abbate have addressed how narrative arias that present a 'story' within the opera (such as Senta's Ballad in Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*), employ strophic forms, with the same tune for each verse, to convey a sense of the primal and inevitable.¹³

Arias may have other musical and dramatic functions, in addition to those already mentioned. If a composer employs a lot of textual repetition in an aria, its dramatic purpose shifts from conveying the content of the text to portraying the depth of the overriding emotion perhaps, and/or to demonstrating the skill of the singer. In other words, instead of highlighting

the semantic content, what is being said, attention turns to *how* the aria is saying it and/or how deftly it is being performed. The multiple soliloquies of *opera seria* have dual purposes. It was customary for each of the main characters to have five to seven arias. These numbers can reveal different facets of the character or, depending on the plot, a character's persistent rage or grief. At the same time, they also showcase different aspects of the singer who sings them – the compass of the performer's voice and performative skills. In other words, music, particularly the power of the voice, trumps the words and narrative function.

Dialogues: ensembles, recitative and speech

Opera, obviously, does not rely on monologues alone. Drama requires conflict, usually conflict *between* characters not just within them. Several genres of music regularly depict interactions between characters.

Ensembles

Unlike in a play or a movie, in an opera more than one character can 'speak' intelligibly at the same time. These passages, known as ensembles, range from two or three to even eight or nine characters singing simultaneously. Ensembles typically convey conflict between characters and/or its resolution. However, external dialogues may alternate with internal reactions or simultaneous monologues. While Eboli, Filippo and Rodrigo may sing together in Verdi's *Don Carlos*, they are not 'speaking' to each other: Eboli expresses remorse for betraying the queen, Filippo the king curses his mistake, and Rodrigo decides the time has come for overt political action. Similarly, when Prince Ramiro and Cenerentola first encounter each other in Rossini and Ferretti's version of the Cinderella tale, the two characters express their inner rapture before conversing briefly. The duet returns to internal reflections during its final section. This duet exemplifies another frequent dramatic and musical process in presenting alternating individual statements that then are layered or combined in some fashion. Contrasting melodic and rhythmic material underscores characters who hold conflicting perspectives. Shared material, particularly when sung in parallel thirds and sixths, evokes agreement or a shared goal. As Ferrando attempts to seduce Fiordiligi during the duet 'Fra gli amplessi' in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, for example, each character challenges the other's tonality, tempo and metre. When Fiordiligi finally succumbs, however, divergent material and musical tension give way to homogeneity and tonal stability.

Ensembles may also depict characters brought together by a shared circumstance or entangled in the same catastrophe. *Dead Man Walking* (Jake Heggie, 2000), an opera about a man on death row and those affected by his actions, contains a sextet near the end of the first act between various

characters who are about to appear before the pardon board. The families of the victims' parents want the prisoner to be executed, the inmate's mother wants his life to be spared, and the nun who has been visiting the prisoner tries to comfort them all. Different musical ideas, underpinned by repetitive rhythms in the orchestra, converge but do not clash. The music underscores that while the murderer's and the victims' families hold opposite positions, all face loss and grief.¹⁴

The assessment of ensembles has been a contested subject in opera studies, in part because they reflect how opera's various domains may not align cleanly. Often these passages end with stable music that returns to the initial tonality or arrives clearly on a new one. Moreover, characters may sing similar music even if they are in disagreement with each other or are experiencing contrasting emotional reactions. Why does this happen? The music requires resolution and stability even if the dramatic situation does not. Harmonic instability, at least before the late 1800s, was expected to resolve. Yet, as Roger Parker and Carolyn Abbate point out, harmonic resolutions do not always coincide with dramatic ones. The much-lauded Act II finale of *Le nozze di Figaro*, for instance, returns to the 'home' tonality of E flat major for a considerable stretch of time and at a considerable volume, even though the action depicts two opposing groups.¹⁵ Additionally, the various musical domains within an ensemble also can seem out of sync. In his assessment of the same finale, James Webster concedes that the passage's tonal stability appears to be at odds with the dramatic situation, but adds that its constancy seems contradicted by other musical gestures such as repeated dissonances over a tonic pedal, syncopations, and abrupt changes in textures, dynamics and rhythms. He asks whether, 'in fact, one might well feel that there are too many strong cadences at the end of Act II, too hectically cascading over each other for effective closure'.¹⁶

While analysts may differ on how opera's systems interact within ensembles, one school of critics advocates doing away with ensembles altogether. Richard Wagner and, consequently, many later composers and aestheticians have eschewed simultaneous utterances in favour of dialogic or monologic forms, arguing that ensembles impede dramatic progress and verisimilitude.¹⁷ Scholars also have tended to view ensembles that highlight musical heterogeneity, such as the Quartet in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, as more 'dramatic', and ones that are more homogeneous in character, such as the Sextet in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* or the Quartet in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, as less so. Melodic and rhythmic heterogeneity, the argument goes, constitutes a closer union between words, action and music. Carl Dahlhaus, however, asserts that ensembles in which characters sing the same or similar melodies are just as dramatic, since they 'accentuate the astonishment common to all' or, like the *Dead Man Walking* sextet described above, they

foreground a ‘common feeling of being trapped in a situation they cannot unravel’.¹⁸ To him, they represent one of opera’s advantages. Such moments in a spoken play would be fleeting. Music, he argues, can extend ‘a fraught silence . . . [and] highly charged feelings . . . long enough for the emotional confusion to sink in fully’ and grant these moments their proper emotional and narrative weight.¹⁹ While Wagner implies that music’s ability to create ‘resounding silence’ applies only to orchestral sounds, Dahlhaus extends this capability to ensembles.²⁰

Recitative

Recitative also reflects opera’s multivalent nature. If music sometimes overshadows the words in ensembles and arias, in recitatives the opposite can seem true: words, action and convention trump music. The syllabic text-setting, melodic contours and brief, irregular rhythms imitate those of speech. Because recitative has been perceived as undramatic, ‘half-music’, it largely has been ignored by analysts.

When taken into consideration, though, recitative can add fresh perspectives on a work’s structure and its dramaturgy. Both Wendy Heller and Beth Glixon argue, for example, that Monteverdi’s confinement of Nero’s abandoned empress Ottavia to recitative in *L’incoronazione di Poppea* serves a crucial dramatic purpose. To Heller, the genre serves to highlight Ottavia’s ‘lack of desirability’, especially in comparison to the ‘languid chromaticism’ and the ‘florid melodiousness’ displayed by the opera’s other female characters, Poppea and Drusilla.²¹ While Heller suggests that recitative renders Ottavia unsympathetic and unattractive, Glixon takes a different point of view. She asserts that the contrast between the austerity of Ottavia’s music and the easy beauty of Poppea’s portrays Poppea’s tuneful rhetoric as being “‘full of air’ . . . persuasive only in a fleeting evanescent way’.²² Although they arrive at different conclusions, both writers acknowledge recitative’s central role in conveying the conflict between fidelity and pleasure that courses through the opera.

Even though recitative may sound improvised or as lacking melody and structure, it frequently contains motivic repetitions and an overall tonal or modal trajectory. Recitatives, particularly orchestrally accompanied ones, also may quote material from a previous number or foreshadow a section to come. As Heller has demonstrated, motifs from Ottavia’s Act I lament resurface in her later farewell to Rome, ‘Addio Roma’.²³ To give another example, the *accompagnato* that precedes Elettra’s aria Act I ‘Tutte nel cor’ in Mozart’s *Idomeneo* lays the groundwork for one of the aria’s distinctive features – a reprise that begins, by eighteenth-century standards, in the ‘wrong’ key. The return of the A section commences in C minor, a step

below the tonic D. Practically every phrase of the prior recitative reiterates material a major second below or above its original statement.²⁴

Another recurring debate in opera criticism is why have recitative at all? Why not incorporate speech? Recitative provides contrast, yet helps maintain the illusion that characters are ‘speaking’ in song. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s explanation reflects this aesthetic:

An opera which would be only an unbroken sequence of airs would tire almost as much as a whole single air of the same length. We must divide and separate the airs by words; but these words should be modified by music. The ideas should change, but the language must continue the same. This language being once given, to change it in the course of a piece would be to speak half French, half German. The passage from speech to song, and reciprocally, is too unequal; it shocks the ear and verisimilitude at the same time . . . Now the recitative is the means of uniting song and words; it is that which separates and distinguishes the airs, which rests the ear, astonished by what preceded, and disposes it to taste what follows: in sum, ’tis by the assistance of the recitative that what is only dialogue, recital, narration in the drama may be rendered without going out of the given language, and without displacing the eloquence of the airs.²⁵

Even so, some genres of opera, such as *opéra comique*, operetta and *Singspiel*, incorporate speech rather than recitative. In certain eras and national traditions, the use of spoken dialogue differentiates lighter works from grander serious ones. In some cases, composers and critics consider a particular language too unwieldy for recitative. Many German writers from the 1700s, for instance, assert that their mother tongue lacks the ‘good accents’ and ‘singing quality’ needed to make recitative intelligible.²⁶ Other writers, like John Gay in his preface to *The Beggar’s Opera*, suggest that whilst it is perfectly normal for people to sing songs in real life, speech is more natural for representing conversational exchanges or conducting business.²⁷

Speech and mélodrame

One of the advantages of speech is that it takes less time than singing, so more information can be conveyed in a shorter amount of time. The original version of the opera *Carmen*, for instance, employs spoken dialogue and, as Susan McClary points out, these spoken exchanges reveal more about Don José’s background, including a propensity for violence.²⁸

Frequently, the shift from spoken dialogue to full-fledged music signals a heightened emotional response. To continue with *Carmen*, Don José, unlike the other characters, speaks rather than sings throughout much of the first act; it is not until Micaëla brings him a letter from his mother that he is moved to song. This sudden outburst, combined with the earlier disclosures

about his past, reveals a gap between his public and his private personae and suggests that he has been holding his emotions in check. It also foreshadows impetuous decisions to come.²⁹

Recitativo obbligato, parlante, arioso and other shades of grey

Depending on the prevailing aesthetic of the time, an opera may or may not feature strongly contrasting musical styles and the dramaturgical functions of various types of music may or may not be sharply delineated. Friedrich Neumann's study of eighteenth-century theoretical treatises shows that while early in the century an aesthetic of contrast (as much difference as possible between recitative and aria) prevailed, by the end of the century theorists advocated less stark transitions between arias, ensembles and the surrounding music.³⁰ The music of composers such as Gluck, Traetta, Jomelli, Mozart and Salieri reflects this shift. *Recitativo obbligato* (orchestrally accompanied recitative) and *parlante* (declamatory vocal lines underscored by melodic orchestral music) became much more common. Gluck, Mozart and Rossini, for instance, incorporate various 'shades' of orchestrally accompanied recitative. At times, the strings merely sustain *sostenuto* chords underneath the voice, a texture that has been called a 'numinous *accompagnato*'.³¹ The orchestra also can alternate with the vocal line, its brief interjections acting as audible punctuation marks to the voice's statements. The instruments may also have longer phrases that can return in varied form over the course of a scene.³² *Accompagnato* also reveals how perceptions of musical textures can shift over time. Modern critics tend to view recitative as a single category and associate it almost exclusively with dialogue and narrative, while eighteenth-century theorists emphasized the expressive function of orchestrally accompanied recitative over its narrative role. Almost uniformly, writers of the 1700s describe *accompagnato* as a genre whose primary purpose is not to give plot information but to depict characters in volatile emotional states.³³

Shifting musical aesthetics meshed with or were perhaps prompted by changes in narrative structures. As Scott Balthazar has shown, the self-examination and internal moral dilemmas that dominate Metastasio's libretti were gradually replaced by plots driven by 'extended sequences of consequential events'.³⁴ Characters began to be developed via onstage actions (rather than reflective soliloquies or second-hand accounts of events), including planning future actions that come to fruition later in the story, making cause and effect more readily apparent.³⁵ This change in how narratives were constructed inevitably led to changes in musical structures. *Semplice*, recitative sparsely accompanied by the basso continuo, gradually faded from the scene. Decreased reliance on recitative coincided

with increased reliance on orchestral music as a structural and narrative tool.

Atmosphere, continuity, interiority and narration: the role of the orchestra

Perhaps more than any other domain in an opera the orchestral music can take on a wide range of structural and dramaturgical roles. Its main purpose may be to provide harmonic and rhythmic support for the vocal lines, as in *bel canto* arias whose melodies require intense listening. Even in this, though, the orchestral material can vary a great deal; it can double the voice, present rhythmically independent material that interlocks with the vocal line, or offer its own countermelodies. Because the orchestra itself combines different timbres, its music may encompass all three of these functions by parcelling them out to different instrument groups. In addition to interacting with the vocal line, the orchestral music may also interact directly with the words, 'illustrating' the text by 'painting' the semantic content of specific words or phrases.

Even when not tied to specific words, the orchestral music often establishes atmosphere and mood, or occasionally geographical context. Contrasting tone colours in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* differentiate the underworld from the upper one, for instance. Preludes and interludes in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century operas frequently set the scene. The action of Puccini's *Il tabarro*, for example, takes place primarily on a barge on the river Seine. The rocking prelude in $\frac{12}{8}$ features a rising and falling melody that mimics the ebb and flow of the water's currents. Similarly, the sweeping gestures and wide tonal space that open *La fanciulla del West* are intended to portray the breadth of the California forests; the prelude also contains a cake-walk, a dance associated with America at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century. The latter becomes associated with bandit-in-disguise Dick Johnson. Thus, the overture may foreshadow future events by presenting themes that become significant later in the drama, either literal melodies and/or other musical and dramatic conflicts. The overture to *Don Giovanni* does both. In addition to literally introducing music that will be heard during the opera's denouement, its juxtaposition of minor and major, and serious and comic styles permeates the rest of the work. Similarly, *Carmen*'s prelude aurally enacts the conflicts between carefully prescribed order and its transgression, the societal majority and the Other that figure so strongly in the work.³⁶

In addition to preludes and interludes, orchestral music may come to the forefront to depict external action, especially music that the characters

themselves hear as music, such as marches or dances, or it may be deployed to create ‘sound effects’ (the sounds of ‘cannons’ in *Tosca*, for example). Orchestral material can have practical functions as well; a postlude gives a character time to exit, for instance, or to accomplish some other stage action.

From the Romantic age onward, however, instrumental music in an opera frequently denotes interiority. This practice reflects a larger trend during the 1800s of viewing instrumental music in general as capable of conveying the ineffable – spiritual or emotional states that lie beyond words. Wagner’s claim in his treatise *Oper und Drama* outlines this perspective, one that has greatly influenced operatic analysis:

The orchestra has its own peculiar, its endlessly expressive faculty of speech which it indisputably possesses . . . the faculty of uttering the unspeakable. That which poetry could not speak out is imparted to the ear precisely by the language of the orchestra.³⁷

Indeed, in some cases, the orchestral music seems to represent the character’s subconscious – what the character is truly thinking and/or what the character cannot yet verbalize. Puccini uses this technique prominently several times in *Tosca*. Two syncopated and chromatic motifs underscore Angelotti’s frantic search for a hiding place. After the painter Cavaradossi offers to help the escaped prisoner, Cavaradossi’s lover Tosca enters to set up an assignation. While the two converse, the orchestra sounds motifs associated with Angelotti, indicating that the painter has more pressing concerns. When Tosca is questioned concerning the whereabouts of the fugitive later in the opera, the motif associated with his hiding place emerges in the orchestral music before she finally reveals his whereabouts. The orchestra then acts as an omniscient narrator – one who knows all, sees all, and can express it. In fact, Wagner likened the orchestra to the oracle at Delphi.³⁸

Rather than an omniscient narrator, some ‘read’ the orchestral material as an independent persona, who perhaps acts as a sympathetic listener or interrogator to the character and his or her vocal line. Edward Cone and James Webster argue that the vocal line and orchestral music together constitute the authorial voice of the composer.³⁹ The characters, perhaps, see and hear ‘as in a glass darkly’: the composer, the analyst and the audience ‘face to face’. Carolyn Abbate, on the other hand, takes a more post-modern, less author-centred approach. Drawing on the literary theories of M. M. Bakhtin, she suggests that operatic music ‘speaks’ polyphonically, in the sense of presenting many different voices, including a purely musical one.⁴⁰

According to Wagner, the orchestral material is what makes his operas cohere: ‘The orchestra thus takes an unbroken share, supporting and elucidating by every hand: it is the moving matrix of the music, from whence there thrives the uniting bonds of expression.’⁴¹ The orchestral music can take on a structural role within an opera, by presenting recurring material that acts as a frame for the voice and a signpost or, more aptly, an ‘ear-post’ for listeners. Recurring material can be either local or global; thus, as with the libretto, the orchestral material shapes a work’s structure on both the micro- and macro-levels. The ritornello in a baroque *da capo* aria, for instance, initiates and closes the aria thereby separating it from the surrounding recitative; segments of it may also alternate with vocal statements during the aria’s course. Orchestral material can also provide continuity over a wider span of music, particularly if the vocal line is more declamatory in nature. In Janáček’s operas, for example, where the syllabic setting of the vocal lines conforms closely to the rhythms and inflections of Czech speech, the orchestra frequently repeats one or two motifs across a scene, continuity in the orchestral fabric balancing irregularities in the vocal line. Motifs may be confined to a single scene or they may reappear later. In operas by Wagner, Puccini, Britten and others, motifs may recur throughout an opera (or operas in the case of the *Ring* cycle). Wagner’s cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and his other late works derive much of their music from reiterating a complementary collection of motifs in various dramatic contexts. Short melodies or melodic fragments, dubbed leitmotifs, or guiding motifs, by Wagner’s defenders, serve as unifying structural devices, but also accrue symbolic meanings as they become associated with a specific person, place, object or idea.

Leitmotifs acquire their associations in a variety of manners. They may accompany the entry of a character or the description of an object in the vocal line, or they may underscore stage action. Sometimes the melodies are heard in the orchestra first and gain a more precise meaning much later. In *Die Walküre*, for instance, the leitmotif known as the ‘love theme’ is reiterated in the orchestra throughout the first act whenever Sieglinde and Siegmund look at each other, yet its meaning is not verbally articulated until the two reveal their attraction to each other at the act’s close. Leitmotifs are rhythmically and melodically distinctive enough to be recognizable, even when layered with other motifs, but also adaptable enough to transform. In many cases, composers do not simply restate the leitmotifs in their original form; they vary them orchestrally, harmonically and rhythmically. As mentioned above, leitmotifs can serve to ‘elucidate’ a character’s internal thoughts, but also help depict a person’s maturation and/or the long-term consequences of prior events. The opposite can also be true. In *Pelléas et Mélisande* Debussy deliberately chose to retain Mélisande’s motif in its original form for dramaturgical purposes: ‘Notice that the main motif

which accompanies Mélisande is never altered. It comes back in the fifth act unchanged in every respect because in fact Mélisande always remains the same and dies without anyone . . . having understood her.⁴² Recurring motifs may also have broader, less concrete associations, such as recalling an earlier moment in the drama. In addition, their referential nature may also shift or even fade over the course of the work.

Wagner's statement, 'the orchestra thus takes an unbroken share, supporting and elucidating by every hand' and creates 'a moving matrix', also alludes to an opera's overall structure: is it primarily, as he would have it, 'unbroken' and through-composed or separated into a series of 'numbers'? Both approaches have implications for how the audience perceives time moving within a work.

Numbers, through-composition and temporality

Operas can be an assembly of musical units referred to as 'numbers', usually arias and ensembles that have clear beginnings and endings and often contain some kind of internal musical repetition. Like building blocks in different colours and shapes that can be stacked or glued together to create a tower or another object, these musical sections when presented sequentially with transitions create the opera as a whole. Yet because numbers sound musically complete, they also can be extracted from broader dramatic context and performed as concert pieces, or another aria can be substituted, a common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴³ One debate in opera studies is how interdependent and interrelated these 'building blocks' are. A number of studies examine how conventional musical forms, as well as the strengths and preferences of the singers who premiered the roles, influence 'numbers' just as much as if not more than dramaturgical concerns.⁴⁴

Through-composed operas reside on the other end of the structural spectrum. Through-composition, as the term suggests, stresses musical and dramatic continuity. Rather than sharply contrasting lyrical units linked via recitative or speech common in 'numbers' operas, through-composed works attempt to keep the action and music pressing forward without pauses. Vocal lines tend to be more declamatory. Cadences are downplayed; musical textures are more homogeneous and offer few or no applause points. Between these two extremes lies much middle ground. Even Wagner's works arguably contain numbers (e.g. the Liebestod in *Tristan und Isolde*, or 'Der Augen leuchtendes Paar' in *Die Walküre*).

Yet when it comes to the assessment of musico-dramatic structures by critics, middle ground can be difficult to locate. As previous sections in this essay have touched upon, Wagner's operas, his critical writings and

his aesthetics have cast a long shadow over the field of opera studies. Wagner's advocacy of through-composition, recurring themes, continuous orchestral accompaniment and declamatory vocal lines has coloured perceptions of operas from all eras and all types of repertoires. Wagnerian ideals have dominated what domains have been examined and which musico-dramatic structures have been privileged. As Roger Parker and Carl Dahlhaus note, Wagnerian through-composition has been treated as a 'logical' and 'inevitabl[e]' historical development. 'Numbers' operas, therefore, have been treated as 'precursor[s]' to supposedly more 'naturalistic' forms, despite the fact that for over two hundred years clearly delineated musical numbers served (and arguably still serve) as the genre's structural paradigm.⁴⁵

The transition from 'numbers' to more 'through-composed' works demonstrates how cultural values beyond the musical sphere also influence operatic structures and dramaturgies. Gary Tomlinson and Sandra Corse have examined how works from various time periods intersect with changing perceptions of subjectivity – the individual's relationship to the physical and the metaphysical worlds.⁴⁶ And operas and their structures also reflect various eras' conceptions of temporality. During the 1600s and 1700s time was understood to be cyclical – naturally recurring cycles such as the phases of the moon and the seasons of the year governed human life. During the mid-1700s a more linear view of time emerged. Each irreplaceable moment progressed toward a future goal.⁴⁷ The musical structures of Handel's and Mozart's operas mirror this cultural shift. Handel's *da capo* form, which requires the first section of an aria be repeated after a short contrasting paragraph, conveys belief in the eternal nature of certain human emotions, as the music literally circles back on itself. In Mozart's works, characters begin to be developed via action-oriented arias and ensembles rather than reflective soliloquies, a process which continues in Rossini and early Verdi.

Wagner's works handle time in a different manner, reflecting perhaps nascent theories of the unconscious, and the Romantic era's emphasis on interiority and cultural memory. Leitmotifs not only connect to or 'speak' about the present (the current events depicted on stage), but also in some contexts anticipate coming events. Perhaps more importantly, leitmotifs recall past actions and states. Thomas Grey asserts that their most potent function

is the evocation of things past, [their] ability to infuse the dramatic present with an epic history . . . [a] leitmotif, then, is not just the musical labeling of people and things (or the verbal labeling of motives); it is also a matter of musical memory, of recalling things dimly remembered and seeing what sense we can make of them in a new context.⁴⁸

They help weave past and present together, and present time as an unfolding continuum.

In some more recent works, time does not unfold, but is instead bent, layered and folded. Operas by composers such as John Adams, Philip Glass and Daron Hagen present different layers of time simultaneously via musical contrast and the action on stage. Arguably these composers draw on Einstein's theories of time, which state that the past, present and future reside in the same continuum and are in constant interplay. Act I, Scene i of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, for instance, layers sung 'present action' (the takeover of the ship) with sung recollections of the same events, while the next scene uses *Sprechstimme* and singing to portray the intersection of past and present, the mundane and the more abstract.

How rapidly and how remotely the harmony changes also influences an audience member's perception of how time unfolds in a work. No matter what structure an opera employs, for many analysts, harmonic motion and tension constitute a primary way operatic music becomes 'dramatic', a concept that again reflects the influence of Wagner and his defenders. According to Wagner, how a composer deploys tonalities is partly what makes the action intelligible to the audiences.⁴⁹ The writings of some critics suggest that the music itself has a narrative.

Musical plots? Tonal plans, sonata forms and other trajectories

Does the music in an opera have its own plot and trajectory? Exactly how autonomous is it? If the music is indeed the primary dramatic carrier, what it says and exactly how it says it are a matter of debate.

Even though Wagner argued for *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a unified, collective art work), Wagner's formulation that the action on stage and the words represented 'deeds of music made visible' and his remarks concerning musical coherence (quoted in part above) arguably give music, the orchestral material in particular, pride of place. His writings imply that the music alone could convey an opera's plot, that it could be as self-sufficient as a symphony.⁵⁰ This perspective has greatly influenced operatic analysis, as critics sought to show that an opera's music has a unified 'plot' or at least a musical trajectory that underpins the verbal and visual one.

Critics seeking to demonstrate coherence often focus on the tonalities an opera employs. Many argue that harmonic relationships within a lengthy ensemble or over the span of an act can foster a sense of forward momentum. Almost all commentators remark on Mozart's use of keys during the Act II finale of *Le nozze di Figaro*, for instance. Tim Carter calls it 'a masterpiece of

tonal planning that creates a firm structure through no less than 940 bars of music and despite all the twists and turns of the action.⁵¹ This passage, which encompasses about 25 minutes of music, incorporates multiple metre and tempo changes, allusions to dances, entrances and exits of characters, much stage action and various dramatic complications. The finale begins in E flat major, moves to the dominant, B flat, then to the more remote G major to emphasize Figaro's surprise entrance. Next it travels through a circle of fifths to return to its original starting point, E flat major. According to Carter, this progression of keys not only provides 'tonal coherence', but also serves a dramatic purpose. To him the tonal return, 'suggests that by the end of the finale things are more or less back where they were at the beginning, with Figaro and Susanna's wedding no nearer fruition'.⁵²

Many extend the concept of 'tonal planning' to an opera as a whole. A number of musicologists have posited that operatic music encompasses overarching tonal progressions or large-scale tonal dissonances that need to be resolved. Siegmund Levarie asserts that the four acts of *Figaro* constitute a gigantic I–bII–V–I tonal sequence, and that Verdi's *Il trovatore* progresses from E major to E flat minor, for example.⁵³ Charles Rosen notes that Mozart's later operas begin and end in the same key, yet the lengthy ensembles that close acts preceding the final one close in contrasting keys. He argues that Mozart's tonal choices create tensions comparable to those generated by the modulatory development sections of sonata forms. The return to the key of the overture at an opera's close resolves 'all the preceding dissonance like a recapitulation of a sonata . . . [and] serves as a cadence to the entire opera'.⁵⁴ Rosen is not alone in applying standard musical forms to operatic music. Alfred Lorenz, seeking to demonstrate that Wagner's works have more depth of form than the audible interplay of referential motifs, argues that the music incorporates large-scale musical structures, such as bar (AAB) or arch form. Lorenz derives his analyses in part from Wagner's somewhat cryptic comments about poetic-musical periods in *Oper und Drama*.⁵⁵

Although now largely discredited, the structuralist writings of both Lorenz and Levarie stem from a time when Wagner's essays and operas strongly influenced opera studies. More recently, musicologists have turned away from searching for tonal plans and motivic correspondences in pre-Wagner repertoire to consider how the immediate dramatic situation and practical matters such as orchestration and the range and tessitura of the singers involved govern the tonal progressions an opera contains. On the one hand, claims for tonal plans have been supported in part by primary sources. Bryan Gilliam's study of Strauss's sketches for *Elektra* shows that harmonic ideas (a progression from D minor to C major/C minor) preceded thematic ones.⁵⁶ Antonio Salieri recounts how he planned out the keys for

all the numbers before he actually began to compose. On the other hand, the reminiscences of Salieri and other composers also suggest that singers' ranges played a crucial role in harmonic choices.⁵⁷ Precisely what conditions determine an opera's 'tonality' is also debated: must it begin and end in that key? Must the tonality recur prominently and in similar dramatic circumstances? What roles do closely related tonalities play? Should the key in which numbers start be given precedence, or the key in which they end? Martin Chusid argues, for instance, that D flat should be considered the 'principal tonality' of *Rigoletto*, because certain crucial numbers conclude rather than begin in that key; D flat also serves as the tonality in which Monterone utters the all-important curse.⁵⁸

Whether or not certain operas are 'in' a particular key, some composers do deploy tonal 'conflicts' for dramaturgical purposes. Strauss's choice of keys with no common tones (except enharmonically) for the leading characters in *Salome* creates musical tension and highly chromatic tonal space. The title character is associated with C sharp major, while John the Baptist's anchor is C major. As the infatuated young woman tries to wrest control, the prophet rejects her physical and tonal advances and strives to return 'home'.

Some analysts argue for 'associative tonalities', keys that, as the term suggests, are connected with specific characters or concepts. In the highly symbolic *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy uses keys a tritone apart, C major and F sharp major, to portray darkness and light, respectively. The opera closes in C sharp major; several analysts argue that the score gradually modulates sharpward towards this tonal goal.⁵⁹ Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Britten's *Billy Budd* incorporate similar clashes of tonalities: sensuality and spirituality and their tonal corollaries conflict – E major and E flat major in the former; B flat major and B minor in the latter. Analyses of *Billy Budd* exemplify how considerations of a single domain by different writers can result in contrapuntal views. Although most scholars argue that tonalities carry symbolic import in *Billy Budd*, they disagree about what certain keys represent. To Mervyn Cooke, B flat major represents 'salvation and reconciliation'; B minor symbolizes oppression, instability and the threat of mutiny; and A major connotes unadulterated goodness and beauty. Philip Brett associates the B flat major–B minor opposition with Vere's confusion, and suggests that the return of B flat at the opera's conclusion represents forgiveness. Arnold Whittall argues that the score's tonal ambiguities embody doubt and the corrupting effects of war, from which no one and, by extension, no key is exempt. Cooke, Brett and Whittall also differ on what evidence should be considered when assessing keys. What weight should the librettist's and composer's personal lives receive? Should how the composer uses the same tonalities in other works be factored in?⁶⁰

While some works rely on specific keys as structural and/or symbolic devices, atonality, tone rows and rhythms can be deployed in a similar fashion. In John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles* atonality defines the realm of the ghosts, tonality the world of the play within the opera. Mark Adamo juxtaposes twelve-tone and tonal music in *Little Women* in order to contrast what he calls 'narrative music' and 'character music', textures comparable to recitative and aria. Mikel Rouse employs percussion ostinati, rhythmic canons and large-scale cross-rhythms as structural devices in his opera *Dennis Cleveland*. These rhythmic layers, which go in and out of phase, underpin a largely consonant surface.⁶¹ Again, the question remains – do these intricate rhythmic devices make the work cohere, add complexity, or both?

Other contrasts and repetitions

The same facets that give any type of music structure or form can be found in an opera: repetition, variety and contrast. Aspects such as melody, harmony and texture create both unity and variety. Although the preceding discussion has reflected opera studies' fascination with orchestral motifs and tonalities, these are not the only parameters that can develop and transform or play a dramaturgical and/or structural role. So can rhythms, orchestral colours and vocal lines. In *La traviata*, Violetta's vocal line alters in character and range as her disease progresses, for example. A composer may also exploit vocal contrasts in service of characterization. Oscar the flighty page in *Un ballo in maschera* sings coloratura, a choice that sets him apart from the more down-to-earth characters.

The multiplicity of domains and the diverse ways these art forms can be deployed give operas a complexity and 'density' that spoken dramas lack.⁶² Just the music alone encompasses an array of colours, textures and structures. As David J. Levin argues, opera as a genre benefits from an 'excess of expressive means', any of which can create meaning and form.⁶³ Although opera studies have traditionally focused primarily on music–text relationships, writers such as Levin have started examining scenic elements and staging in more detail, particularly how they do and do not intersect with an opera's other domains.

Friction or cooperation? How do these 'systems' or 'texts' align?

Another crucial dramaturgical question is how do opera's expressive 'systems' or 'texts' align? Are they cooperating with one another or creating

friction? And if the latter is it deflating or invigorating? As noted earlier, opera studies has been heavily influenced by Wagner's ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which states that the art forms in an opera should be both self-sufficient yet inextricably linked. Yet even Wagner concedes this fusion is difficult to achieve. Increasingly critics have taken a step back from Wagner's ideals and have explored the disjunctions between opera's various signifiers, especially divergences between staging and the other art forms. Rather than trying to minimize or resolve these frictions, postmodern critics such as Abbate and Levin argue that opera's 'unruliness' and multiplicity should be celebrated.⁶⁴

Certainly there are times when the words, music and action seem out of sync with one another. Musicologists debate about the messages (and the merits) of works such as *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Così fan tutte* in part because the great beauties of the music seem at odds with the deceptive actions portrayed.⁶⁵ Franco Zeffirelli admits in his autobiography that his grandiose Hollywood-style staging of *Antony and Cleopatra* for its premiere overwhelmed Samuel Barber's intimate music.⁶⁶ Joseph Kerman finds the music that accompanies the defeat of the Queen of the Night in *Die Zauberflöte* and the ending of *Il trovatore* too short and too perfunctory.⁶⁷ At times, Alice Goodman's elegant poetry for *Nixon in China* seems designed to be read rather than sung. And, as discussed elsewhere in this volume, non-literal stagings frequently create a sense of estrangement and distance from (rather than absorption in and identification with) plot events and characters. As Carolyn Abbate and Joy Calico have recently argued, opera is a temporal art form that entails the physical and the metaphysical, the noumenal and the sensuous, individual moments and the whole. In a live performance, audience members experience it from transient moment to moment.⁶⁸ In the moment it does not seem to matter that Figaro's assumption of Susanna's melody occurs on the dominant rather than the tonic or that musical beauty overrides verisimilitude in *Lucia's* Sextet. If all domains aligned precisely would the experience be as satisfying?

Therefore counterpoint and complementarity might be a better model for operatic dramaturgies and structures, rather than the unity and coherence Wagner purports. Some works and productions point up the frictions between the domains, while others damp them down. Each of an opera's 'texts' plays a role in its musico-dramatic construction and its dramaturgy; it operates within its own conditions and exigencies, but it also intersects with or impinges on the others – creating a counterpoint that varies within a single work as well as from work to work, genre to genre, and performance to performance.

This counterpoint extends to the field of opera studies itself. Opera's multivalent nature accommodates, perhaps even necessitates, a multiplicity of analytical approaches.

Notes

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- 3 As translated by Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 332.
- 4 As translated in Tim Carter, *W. A. Mozart: 'Le nozze di Figaro'*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 96.
- 5 Tim Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 47.
- 6 Carter, Chapter 5 of *Figaro*; John Platoff, 'Musical and Dramatic Structure in the Opera Buffa Finale', *Journal of Musicology*, 7 (1989), pp. 191–230.
- 7 John Platoff, 'Catalogue Arias and the "Catalogue Aria"', in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart: Essays on his Life and his Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 296–311; 300–2 in particular. See also Platoff's 'The Buffa Aria in Mozart's Vienna', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2 (1990), pp. 99–120.
- 8 Richard Wagner, 'Zukunftsmusik' (1860), trans. Robert L. Jacobs, in *Three Wagner Essays* (London: Eulenberg Books, 1979), pp. 40–1.
- 9 Some other representative examples: Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); Daniela Goldin, *La vera fenice: librettisti e libretti tra Sette e Ottocento* (Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 1985); Jens Malte Fischer (ed.), *Oper und Operntext* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1985); Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (eds.), *Reading Opera* (Princeton University Press, 1988).
- 10 Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, rev. edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 9–10. See also pp. 7 and 214–15.
- 11 For example, Friedrich Lippmann, 'Verdi e Bellini', in *Atti del 1° congresso internazionale di studi Verdiani 1966* (Parma: Istituto de Studi Verdiani, 1969), pp. 184–96; Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, rev. edn, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Joseph Kerman, 'Lyric Form and Flexibility in "Simon Boccanegra"', *Studi Verdiani*, 1 (1982), pp. 47–62; Harold S. Powers "'La solita forma" and "The Uses of Convention"', *Acta Musicologica* 59 (1987), pp. 65–90; Scott Balthazar, 'Rossini and the Development of the Mid-Century Lyric Form', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 41 (1988), pp. 102–25; Steven Huebner, 'Lyric Form in *Ottocento* Opera', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 117 (1992), pp. 123–47.
- 12 Mary Hunter, Chapters 4 and 5 of *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (Princeton University Press, 1999); James A. Hepokoski, 'Genre and Content in Mid-Century Verdi: "Addio, del passato" (*La traviata*, Act III)', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1 (1989), pp. 249–76.
- 13 Gilles de Van, 'Musique et Narration dans les Opéras de Verdi', *Studi Verdiani*, 6 (1990), pp. 18–54; Carolyn Abbate, Chapters 1 and 3 of *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1991).
- 14 This sentence draws on the composer Jake Heggie's comments about this scene. *And Then One Night: The Making of 'Dead Man Walking'*, (documentary film), produced and directed by Linda Schaller (KQED and the San Francisco Opera Association, 2001).
- 15 Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, 'Dismembering Mozart', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2 (1990), pp. 187–95; 188–90 and 194–5.
- 16 James Webster, 'Mozart's Operas and the Myth of Musical Unity', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2 (1990), pp. 205–7.
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- 22 Beth Glixon, review of *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women’s Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* by Wendy Heller, *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music*, 12 (2006), 5.2.
- 23 Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, pp. 154–6.
- 24 For more on relations between *accompagnati* and set pieces, see Laurel E. Zeiss, ‘Permeable Boundaries in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 13 (July 2001), pp. 115–39.
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- 29 For more in-depth discussion of these issues, see McClary, *Carmen*, pp. 45–6, 71–2 and 77–80.
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- 31 For example, Reinhard Strohm, ‘Rezitativ’, in Ludwig Finscher (ed.), *Die Musik Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1998).
- 32 Laurel E. Zeiss, ‘Accompanied Recitative in Mozart’s Operas: “The *chef d’oeuvre* of the Composer’s Art”’, PhD dissertation (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), pp. 72–118. See also Zeiss, ‘Permeable Boundaries’, p. 121.
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- 37 Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, pp. 315–16 (translation altered).
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- 39 Edward T. Cone, *The Composer’s Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 1–56; and James Webster, ‘The Analysis of Mozart’s Arias’, in Cliff Eisen (ed.), *Mozart Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 124. Webster expresses a more nuanced view in his article ‘Cone’s “Personae” and the Analysis of Opera’, *College Music Symposium*, 29 (1989), pp. 44–65.
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