

without losing too much. I would go as far as to say that Phillips, or his publisher, should have waited and weaved them together into a single volume. But perhaps I am guilty of wanting him to be better, to have more when I should just do as he suggests and be satisfied with the progress until now and move from this point.

Ben Scanlan

Opera on the Couch: Music, emotional life and unconscious aspects of mind

Steven H. Goldberg & Lee Rather (eds). 2022. London: Routledge.

For several years the San Francisco Centre for Psychoanalysis and the San Francisco Opera have held post-performance psychoanalytically oriented talks which form the basis of this collection of essays. There are fourteen chapters, each about a different opera and by a different author, twelve of whom are American and two from the UK. The authors are mostly psychoanalysts. Several of them also hold music qualifications, and lecture and write about aspects of music and psychoanalysis. One contributor is a music professor at the Juilliard School.

Goldberg identifies some different approaches to putting opera on the couch, exemplified in the four chapters reviewed here. One is to view the opera as an expression of the composer's inner-life, where traces of unconscious wishes, conflicts and traumas may be identified. Another is to regard characters as if they were real people, leading to questions about why they behave as they do. Or they can be viewed as a myth that represents universal unconscious themes. These are often intertwined in the individual chapters reflecting the diverse backgrounds, different styles of doing therapy and interests of the contributors.

Madame Butterfly is a story of wilful refusal to face reality, complicated by cultural and language misunderstandings. It premiered in 1904 and was Puccini's own favourite among his operas. Goldberg labels his chapter 'Sliding walls and glimpses of the Other' where traditional Japanese sliding walls on stage are interpreted as internal defensive barriers and psychic blindness. Japan's borders were forcibly opened by the West in 1853 and the opera opens with Pinkerton, a handsome young naval officer confident in himself and his culture, arriving in Nagasaki. He rents a house with a beautiful fifteen-year-old Geisha, Cio Cio San, known as Butterfly. They have a marriage which he considers is for convenience while planning to eventually marry a suitable American woman. Butterfly, however, believes this is love and marriage for life. She converts to his religion and her family disown her. This sets the scene for tragedy. The American consul Sharpless raises questions about how differently they may view this marriage

and warns Pinkerton of the harm he is causing. He tries to confront Butterfly with truths she does not want to face. Pinkerton leaves Japan and Butterfly waits faithfully for his return. The humming chorus is a moment of calm while Butterfly waits for Pinkerton and when the audience sees her optimism for the last time before it is utterly shattered by the arrival of Pinkerton and his new wife. Finally, facing reality she gives up their son for a better life in America and commits suicide. Now, Pinkerton also sees reality and witnessing her death he cries out her name repeatedly. The opera asks questions such as: How much do we want to know about ourselves and others when it risks shattering our illusions and projections? Is our understanding like the Japanese walls that we open and close to allow or prevent psychological growth? Goldberg suggests that giving up her son at the end is a symbolic maturation and release of Butterfly's childish self. Pinkerton is set to live out his life sorrowful and wiser, his son a permanent reminder. There are no villains in this opera which as Goldberg says:

...holds up a mirror to our own capacities for misunderstanding, abuse of power, and self-serving constructions (and constrictions) of ourselves and others.

(p109)

In many ways, *Butterfly* is an everyday tale of relationship misery writ large, although it could also be understood as an allegory of (American) imperialism.

Billy Budd is based on a novella by Herman Melville. It premiered in 1951 and was a collaboration between the composer Benjamin Britten with E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier. Milton Schaefer summarises it as study of envy and repression. The historical context is late 1790s when two real mutinies occurred while Britain was at war with France. It is based on the ideas about freedom for all men that were taking hold with Thomas Paine's writing and the French revolution. *Billy Budd* is both extraordinarily handsome and innocent. He was press-ganged to join the HMS *Indomitable* where he is hated at first sight by the master-at-arms, Claggart, who sings about how he cannot bear this beautiful young man and will destroy him.

O beauty, o handsomeness, goodness! Would that I never encountered you!

Would that I lived in my own world always, in that depravity to which I was born...

I'm doomed to annihilate you...with hate and envy I'm stronger than love...

It is sung in a minor key that reinforces the dark destructive qualities of Claggart. He frames Billy for organising a mutiny, but Captain Vere

does not believe it, so Claggart is obliged to put his accusation to Billy. Unfortunately, Billy has a stammer which gets worse under pressure. Unable to articulate a defence, he strikes Claggart inadvertently and kills him. Vere orders an immediate trial and Billy is executed, saying at the end 'God Bless Captain Vere' thus forestalling a mutiny by the crew. In an epilogue we learn that Vere spent the rest of his life tormented for executing an innocent man to maintain order on the ship. His reflections were added to the original story to explore the depths of Vere's conflict between law and fear vs. justice and love.

Schaefer says that what sparks Claggart's hatred and envy is that Billy is the object of his repressed homosexual yearnings. Billy is also repressed and naively sees the world as only positive, a denial that may have served him during an impoverished childhood. So as with *Butterfly* and *Pinkerton*, we have two protagonists who have no means of understanding and seeing the other in their own self-hood. Claggart cannot tolerate goodness and Billy cannot imagine badness. Britten and Forster were both homosexual at the time when it was illegal. Schaefer suggests, and I agree, this does not particularly drive the opera. Britten wrote several operas depicting dark figures with homosexual overtones, so I think it is more that they could bring understanding to the original tale and flesh it out in words and wonderful music.

The Makropulos Case was composed by Leoš Janáček and based on a play by Czech writer Karel Čapek. The main theme of the play, and I think the opera too, is immortality. The story goes that in 1565 Makropulos, the court physician to the Habsburg Emperor, claimed to have an elixir of life, but the incredulous emperor made the physician's daughter Elina drink it instead. The opera opens in a court room three-hundred years later when Emilia Marty, as she is now known, is fighting to regain possession of the recipe that will give her another three-hundred years. Her extended life has enabled her to continue developing her talent as a singer but has also led to apathy and a sense of cynical futility; she is uncaring about people but afraid of death. She tells others they are happy because they could die at any moment.

There is an episode in the opera in a tavern where she is recognised by a decrepit old man, a previous lover. In the production I saw they performed a kind of *danse macabre*, arrestingly poignant. Finally, after trying to avoid explaining her claim to the recipe she admits the truth to the lawyer who hands it over, but it ends up thrown on a fire. The potion is wearing off and she lets death come, ageing rapidly before the eyes of the astonished onlookers. At the end she sings "it is miraculous how softly death has touched me" as her appearance softens while she dies. In contrast to my understanding of this opera, Adele Tutter labels her chapter 'Janáček's

eternal feminine' and views the opera as an expression of Janáček's inner life and personal history. She identifies two sources of inspiration: first, his patriotism amid the Czech National Revival which peaked in his lifetime; and, second, his unrequited passion for Kamila Stösslová, forty years his junior whom he viewed as the love of his life and who was the model of many female roles in his later works. She also argues that "for Janáček, Stösslová embodied 'the eternal feminine', an archetypal cultural ideal of considerable fascination in 19th century Europe" (p166). My first surprised reaction to her different interpretation changed on reflection when I realised this is a perfect example of how all art is interpreted by the beholder; no one has control of its meaning, often least of all the artist, and with performance art like opera, dance and theatre much depends on the interpretations of the production team too. So it was a good reminder for me of how widely different perceptions of the same phenomena can occur and both can be true, it does not have to be either/or.

The Magic Flute was composed by Mozart with a libretto by Schikaneder. Lee Rather approaches this opera in his chapter as an example of "collective myth or psychodrama in which the characters symbolise aspects of ourselves" (p25). The plot is a surreal mix of serious, comic, romantic and magical. It has a dream-like quality with a rambling tale about a hero's quest for true love and wisdom in a dangerous world. We first meet Tamino being chased by a (phallic) serpent (he also has a bow with no arrows) from which he is saved by three ladies who are in the service of the Queen of the Night, whose daughter Pamina he immediately falls in love with on seeing her picture. He vows to rescue her from imprisonment by the wicked sorcerer Sarastro. There is also a bird man, Papageno, who is given a set of magic bells by the Queen while Tamino is given a magic flute; both instruments have protective qualities. They set off to find Sarastro, only to be astonished to discover that he is actually the high priest of wisdom while the Queen is a wicked woman. As in other fairy stories, the hero and heroine overcome trials and tribulations and the Queen is cast into darkness forever. So, all ends well? Rather is intrigued by the reversal halfway through the opera, as I have always been, and he makes much of this in his analysis about individuation and the dramas we experience in the process. For him it is essentially a developmental story, but he is dissatisfied with the ending,

a tilted personality development in men and women ... and the tendency toward the devaluation of women cross-culturally

(p34)

He sees a contradiction in marginalisation of the Queen, who is portrayed with greater emotional complexity than the other characters. Certainly,

the Queen has the best aria by miles, like the powerful ‘Der Hölle Rache’ (Hellish revenge) which is available on YouTube. Also, as Rather points out, it is she who enlists other characters to guide Pamina and Tamino to Sarastro’s temple. He concludes that “the Queen’s banishment...destines her to live on in the minds of the audience” (p35) where she may become integrated into what for him is a missing third act. Both Mozart and Schikaneder were involved in Freemasonry. Therefore, it may be best to understand the opera through the concept of music having the power to transcend human fear and hatred and leading to wisdom and enlightenment. This illustrates that “in psychoanalysis and art ... the impossibility of arriving at singular or final meanings” (p35).

This book has been a fascinating and enlightening read. If you are not already an opera lover, I hope this may have piqued your interest. I look forward to the next edition.

Diana Pringle

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