

Reading Opera Between the Lines: Orchestral Interludes and Cultural Meaning from Wagner to Berg. By Christopher Morris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 219 + xi pp.

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“Pentimento” (literally “remorse” or “repentance”) is the partial reappearance on a canvas of an underlying image that has been painted over. The recent book *Reading Opera between the Lines: Orchestral Interludes and Cultural Meaning from Wagner to Berg* gives the impression of a pentimento-like double image, that of its surface—the next volume in the poststructuralist take on opera—and that of an underlying “Urbuch” in which the same issues are discussed without the patina of gender studies. The author’s 1998 dissertation might indeed be such an earlier endeavor, but even if the original, fact-based discussion had never been written and existed only in Morris’s mind at some point, it has become revealed through lapses, contradictions and equivocations on the book’s surface. *Reading Opera between the Lines* is best read between the lines.

Not much scholarly attention has been focused on the instrumental interludes found in opera, and so Morris’s book seemed to promise a detailed investigation into not only what these orchestral patches import musically, but also how they could be reconciled with the larger issues of the role of music in opera, its hermeneutic narrative structures, and the intellectual climate in which the composers thrived. That information is embedded within *Reading Opera*, but it is hard to ferret out.

One can, however, unearth here several fascinating narrative functions of the interludes. In the first chapter, Morris

claims that Delius’s “Walk to the Paradise Garden,” from his *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, uses music as the voice of nature, remote from worldly meaning. (His assertion that Delius avoids simple pictorialism would carry more weight if Delius had not included a cuckoo’s call at rehearsal number 47.) Presumably Delius banished the visual and vocal elements from this scene so that we could imagine a perfect paradise. (In the filmed version I saw, however, the “Walk” was accompanied by explicit sexual scenes;¹ Delius would have been horrified.) Chapter Two treats orchestrally-depicted love scenes from Massenet’s *Esclarmonde* and Strauss’s *Feuersnot*, which Morris compares to the outmoded film technique of panning away during explicit sexual encounters, a form of discreet censorship and a bow to the authorities. Apparently, the opera audiences “got it,” as one 1889 witness to *Esclarmonde* testified: “all the spectators became aroused to paroxym. The men’s eyes narrow in rapture, the ladies hide behind their fans. They should bis, yes, an erotic frenzy” (41). Collette felt the heat as well, writing in 1903 about *Feuersnot*: “That a love scene? My God, if I went into such tumultuous ecstasies I’d be afraid of what my neighbors downstairs might say. . . . one would have thought there were fifteen of them, not just two” (50). It must have been quite a thrill for composers of that period to discover a means of depicting sex while avoiding the censor’s disapproval—perhaps as thrilling as it was for latter-day academics to find they could write about sex in scholarly journals.

Debussy’s *Pelléas and Mélisande* is the subject of the third chapter, in which Morris explores the idea of the interlude as dream. In this discussion he invokes Freud and earlier French explorers of the Unconscious and posits that the interludes, in their narrative function, work like Freudian “secondary revision,” that is, the consciously remembered, more coherent version of a dream that fills in

¹ *A Village Romeo and Juliet: Lyric Drama in Six Scenes after Gottfried Keller.* 1992/2003. Videodisc. Music by Frederick Delius, Directed by Petr Weigl. London: Decca.

narrative gaps. Yet later, Morris avers that the dreams are derived from *unconscious* primary process thinking. Still, because Symbolists like *Pelléas's* librettist Maeterlinck saw links between poetry and the Unconscious, this discussion is germane. Chapter Four deals with the interlude as eulogy in *Götterdämmerung*, Pfitzner's *Die Rose vom Liebesgarten*, and *Wozzeck*. Because the characters have died, this is when one most strongly feels the opera orchestra's narrative function as clearly separate from the action, creating a context or frame for the observer.

Chapter Five treats gender issues in Franz Schreker's *Der Schatzgräber*, focusing on the orchestrally depicted night of passion in the third act, and the final chapter discusses the contradictions inherent in Wagnerian music drama, the visceral versus the metaphysical: that is, the Wagnerian dream of an all-encompassing stage picture seems to knock up against his investment in the omnisciently narrative devices of the orchestra sans visuals.

There were, of course, practical reasons for writing orchestral interludes—namely, to mask the noise of scene changes—but by the nineteenth century, these interludes were integrated with the drama (thanks to Gluck's reforms) and laden with reminiscence motives or leitmotifs having direct textual correspondences. Morris notes this dual role of the instrumental interlude in his introduction: “ostensibly the role of the orchestral interludes in music drama is to maintain musical continuity during scene changes, to mobilise the art of transition by dovetailing one scene into the next. But in so doing they take on a narrative-interpretive function” (8).

The scope of *Reading Opera's* repertoire is defined thus:

‘Post-Wagnerian’ opera is defined here in terms not so much of a crude musical and dramatic influence (although there is enough evidence of that) as of a debate on the nature of opera that positions music drama as its point of reference. Wagner's achievement may be characterised as something to live up to, to extend, to redefine, to circumnavigate, but it remains *the* question, and the terms of the debate, even when they seem to

present the “Wagner question” as the “Wagner problem,” tend to remain within the Wagnerian orbit (11).

According to these criteria, I can find no reason that there are no Italian post-Wagnerian operatic interludes included in this volume. Mascagni, internationally known specifically for his *intermezzi mascagnani* (which Puccini invented—but that is another topic) was highly influenced by Wagner, as were all of the *scapigliati*—and yet there is no mention of him, or any other Italian composer, in Morris's book. Witness this Mascagni quote from a letter to a friend: “you know how much I admire Wagner as the father of all maestros past and future.”² Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Puccini are hardly more accepted into the canon of “great” composers than Schreker and Delius, so, even accepting the author's implicit desire to widen the field of inquiry beyond the standard repertoire, I question whether the latter pair are really more deserving of so much attention, especially to the exclusion of *any* Italian operatic composer. Could the lopping off of the lower peninsula of Europe somehow be an act of self-censorship or, at worst, self-castration? No, I believe rather that this book in its present form is less concerned with the ‘what-ness’ of the analytic inquiry than with its ‘how-ness.’

The title's afterphrase, “from Wagner to Berg,” could be a trace of what might have once been a chronologically oriented text discussing the orchestral interludes in Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian operatic repertoire; the published book, however, is organized in nearly reverse historical

- 2 Letter from Pietro Mascagni to Vittorio Gianfranceschi, dated April 8, 1887, housed at the Biblioteca della Scala, Milan. The full text reads, “*Otello* [è] del *Papà dei Maestri*. Parlo sempre dei Maestri Italiani, poichè tu sai quanto stimo il *Vagner*, come *Papà* di tutti i *maestri* presenti e futuri.” [“*Otello* [is] by the *Father of the Maestros*. I speak of Italian maestros, since you know how much I esteem *Vagner* [sic], as *Father* of all the present and future *maestros*.”]

order, beginning with Delius and ending with Wagner. (Morris refers to a non-existent chronological framework in his conclusion as well, when he writes that “we have analyzed . . . the interludes from the *Ring* to *Wozzeck*” (205).) The series to which the book belongs, *New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism* from Cambridge, from which several fine books have emerged, has a stated goal of exploring “conceptual frameworks that shape or have shaped the ways in which we understand music and its history”;³ so it is conceivable that a linear historical approach was overwhelmed by an ahistorical one more compatible with this search for “conceptual frameworks” or the “investigation of the critical discourse surrounding the operas” mentioned in the publisher’s description of the series. The discussion of these orchestral interludes was, quite possibly then, redacted into a search for something like Kramerian “hermeneutic windows,” entry points for postmodern diegeses (Kramer 1990, 6) to which Morris occasionally refers.

Is there any interest in this book for music theorists, given that there is very little hard-core analysis in it? I think so, because it raises a number of larger issues—beyond the scope of this particular volume—that affect us quite directly. Even though recent academic trends indicate that the postmodern stance is increasingly irrelevant (for example, Knapp and Michaels 1982), and even though Kofi Agawu’s controversial decade-old article (1997), “Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime,” long ago challenged postmodern attitudes toward music theory, the enormous influence that postmodernism continues to exert over the communicative tools of the academy (books, papers, syllabi) is effecting a sort of censorship of certain kinds of theoretical work. Analysts’ voices are becoming more and more unsung, even given the various attempts to incorporate postmodern perspectives into our work (as Agawu noted in his article).

The focus and style of Morris’s book are symptomatic of a more generalized, institutional reaction to the presumed

privileging of absolute music by music theorists, who, for most of the twentieth century, rejected hermeneutic approaches and relied, perhaps overmuch, on quasi-scientific epistemologies and language. The charge of overvaluing “absolute music” is directly relevant to this book, since Morris writes of an interlude that “as ‘pure’ instrumental music untouched by word or scene it can be read as an island of absolute music within the merely theatrical” (18). There are many understandings of the term “absolute music,” but they tend to fall into three general types. There is the term’s quotidian signification as instrumental music unlinked to a text or program. Next is a derogatory one, as used by its inventor Wagner, to signal a music that is alienated from the total artwork and not grounded in sentiment. (Rossini’s operatic music was “absolute” for Wagner because it was shaped by “non-poetic” forces.) Lastly, there is the Hanslickian stance that absolute music embodies a self-referential, ideal state: “What is to be expressed with [music]? Musical ideas. Now a musical idea reproduced in its entirety is not only an object of intrinsic beauty but also an end in itself and not a means for representing feelings and thoughts” (Hanslick 1854/1957, 48).⁴ Most of the ammunition coming from postmodernist gender studies is directed at this final type, as representative of a repressive formalism that denies connection to physical and emotional sensation—the body. Even if that were what Hanslick intended, the evidence that common-practice era composers and their contemporary analysts thought in this manner is scarce; one need only read Koch, as even Dahlhaus has noted (1989, 11), to be impressed by how closely he ties form to emotional content (Koch, 1782–93/1983).⁵ And it is hard to imagine experiencing *any* of the elements of opera—aural, visual or textual—without one’s body’s taking part.

3 This clause comes from the editors’ preface.

4 See also Neubauer 1986 and Treitler 1989. Hanslick felt that programs were irrelevant and texts interchangeable.

5 Koch writes on pages 129–130, for instance, “a melodic section worthy of repetition either already contains much of the feeling to be expressed

The double nature of Morris's book betrays an ambivalence towards these issues. He comes close to admitting that these operatic interludes could never be considered "absolute" at all, in any of its senses: "perhaps in the context of opera, with its powerful intertextuality, any music will always be representational of the drama" (90). There is little chance that the interludes, heard amidst an operatic experience, could be regarded as either independent of a text, as having no connection to sentiment, or as being exclusively self-referential. Some interludes even carry titles (*The Walk to the Paradise Garden*, the *Liebesszene*). Therefore, when the claim is considered that these interludes are "island[s] of absolute music within the merely theatrical," a straw man has been set up.

The charge that theorists are over-reliant on quasi-scientific modes of thought and language rings true, however: even our translations of Schenker have had the excitable bits banished to appendices; and, as Robert Snarrenberg has pointed out, Schenker never intended to exclude hermeneutics from musical analysis, but rather he wished to have those interpretations grounded in the score itself (Snarrenberg, 1997, 5ff).⁶ But following the lead of his post-structuralist forerunners, and in reaction to 'science-speak,'

or new material must be given for expression in the repetition." The identification of musical forms as representations of feeling was so ubiquitous in the common-practice period that Hanslick (1854/1957) felt that he had to argue, against the tide, for a more intellectual appreciation of music: "the mere fact that this particular art is so closely bound up with our feelings by no means justifies the assumption that its aesthetic principles depend on this union . . . [N]o canon peculiar to musical aesthetics only can be deduced from the fact that there is a certain connection between music and the emotions. We might as well study the properties of wine by getting drunk" (10–13).

6 "In Schenker's view, the verbal or literary meaning ascribed to music by hermeneutic critics failed to meet the standards of 'signification' or 'representation.' His view, however, did not rule out everything but so-called technical language. Schenker allowed himself to use images and programmatic ideas in representing or communicating the effects of

Morris uses alluring subheadings in the text, such as "a walk on the wild side" (if only it were!), "moving, throbbing, swelling," "light from self-love," etc.—even if these are not closely tied to the information in the paragraphs below them. If the primary purpose of these subheadings is not to inform but rather to *arouse*, then might we not consider the practice to be a form of academic pornography? But the use of this scriptorial gesture is quite appealing, even seductively attractive to authors, so one might never guess where it will turn up.

Show us your sexts!⁷ The legible layer of Morris's book follows the gender agenda—"agendera"?—not only by using its normative linguistic cadences and anti-chronological (hence less traditional) orderings, but also by utilizing binary oppositions (male/female, strong/weak) to explore issues of sexuality and power possibly immanent in the text. The logical flaw in this procedure is that using terms and concepts to argue against themselves has the effect of reinforcing them instead.⁸ A typical instance of this is Carolyn Abbate's (1993) statement: ". . . Salome masculinizes *herself*. . . [S]he aligns herself with heroic male resistance by comparing Jochanaan's passive (female) acceptance of violence with her own hypothetical valor" (237, emphasis Abbate's). This gendered turn of phrase implies that valor is not a feminine trait, while passivity is. Morris, too, errs along the same lines, in trying to show inappropriate gender stereotyping in Schreker's male

tones . . . 'What good is a 'guide' if it offers the readers nothing more than what he himself already perceives and knows. . . ?' 'Long and measured the way' is undoubtedly the impression that everyone receives from the principal idea; wasn't Kretschmar's task rather at least to indicate correctly the technical means that led to such an effect. . . ?" (Snarrenberg 1997, 5–7).

7 I take this phrase from Helene Cixous (1976): the concept is of female sexuality as a new kind of writing.

8 This phenomenon has been discussed brilliantly by George Lakoff (2004) and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980).

character Elis and the female one, Els: “Elis’s distant sounds, for example, have a delicate, shimmering quality that invites traditional associations with femininity, and the immediate sensuality of the Els music is climax-oriented in a way that fits a common view of the masculine in music” (158). Even with his modifiers of “traditional” and “common,” there is an undeniably sexist slant to the association of a “delicate, shimmering quality” with the feminine and the “climax-oriented” with the masculine. Worse, this practice permits the author to quote from truly misogynist sources, such as Otto Weininger, whose once-popular ideas are presented by Morris, without much criticism, in order to give a historical context for Schreker’s operas:

[S]ince the absolute female has no trace of individuality and will, no sense of worth or of love, she can have no part in the higher transcendental life. Some sort of relation to the idea of supreme value, to the idea of the absolute, that perfect freedom which he has not yet attained, because he is bound by necessity, but which he can attain because man is superior to matter; such a relation to the purpose of things generally, or to the divine, every man has. . . . A woman’s thought is superficial, and touch is the most highly developed of the female senses. . . . Touch necessitates a limiting of the interest to superficialities; it is a vague effect of the whole and does not depend on definite details (144–45).⁹

Morris, Abbate, Cixous and others (including Weininger) argue that the concepts of male/female at work here do not apply to real men and women, but rather simply represent conceptual poles of significance. But they are not suasive, for if that were true, then any pair of labels would do as well. Would the passage above be more appealing if male/female were substituted by black/white, rich/poor, good/evil or Jew/Gentile? No, it is the underlying binary opposition itself that is problematic.

And although theorists of many stripes have long been tackling the issues raised by postmodernist approaches, the

tendency for the new musicologists to lump all analysts together as upholders of the old conservative order is still active—which effectively creates an artificial binary opposition of us/them. The real situation is far more nuanced than that.

Morris also treads well-worn poststructuralist paths when he invokes the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in his interpretations. Although there is much to be gained from insight into the human mind (and neither language nor music—nor any other human endeavor—could exist without mental activity), this admixture of psychoanalytic thought seems a strange choice here, even though it is a commonplace in poststructuralist musings: Freud was as much a structuralist as his contemporary and fellow Viennese (and postmodern target), Heinrich Schenker. Just as Schenker elaborated concepts of background, middle-ground and foreground, so Freud posited a structure of the mind in which the Unconscious was revealed by sifting through telling “foreground” thoughts and actions. And the myths that Freud relied upon, such as the Oedipal one, were not unlike the Fuxian contrapuntal structures Schenker prized, in the sense that they were held to be universally underlying formations.

The choice of Lacan is problematic as well: his capitalized “Other” is not the oft-mentioned dangerous female force that threatens the stable paternal control of society, language, et. al.; but rather it is identified with that paternal center itself, and he refers to it as “Phallus.” The “gaze at the Other,” so familiar from gender essays, where it implies a sexually charged scopophilia, was in fact intended by Lacan to mean an attempt at self-recognition through the images of authority.

Opera is a hybrid, combining the visual, the aural and the dramatic. But although these elements are interdependent, only the operatic music can stand alone, without the visual and dramatic (as in the interludes), not the reverse. As Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (1988) have stated, “Nobody seems to want ‘operas without music’—the mere

9 Morris quotes here from Otto Weininger (1944, 284; 191).

rumor of having to sit through one provokes audience unrest.”¹⁰ One can conclude, therefore, that operatic music is a more fundamental part of the experience than the rest. In fact, it is the filter or frame through which all of the other elements are perceived: the speed of every stage movement, the rhythm of every line of dialogue, the range of every vocal intonation or stress is influenced, if not outright determined, by the musical score. And this is made most clear when the aural is all that remains active, as in the interludes: the overall narrative can still function, though not in the same way.

The fundamental importance of the music in opera and its close study through analysis are implicitly marginalized by the textualist focus on “reading” opera, of which *Reading Opera Between the Lines* is just one example. Recent titles including that code word are *Reading Opera* (Groos and Parker 1988) and *Reading Critics Reading* (Parker and Smart 2001). (Is the next one going to be *Reading about Reading about Opera*?) Opera is not to be read, but to be heard and seen, and I would posit that any attempt only to read it is a misreading. Oddly, some postmodernists would agree, but for very different reasons: “every reading is a misreading, turning the text into what it is not” (Aichele 1993).

But the issues that the textualists bring to the table concerning the nature of language do resonate with the perennial issue of whether music can be considered one. Both Puccini and Berg thought their task in composing opera was a form of translation. Anyone who has ever translated anything from one language into another can attest to the fact that the mental conception is quite distinct from its outer forms in either language. Some poststructuralists note this phenomenon: “You only read words insofar as

¹⁰ “Most listeners appreciate Songs Without Words; many demonstrably prefer ‘operas without words.’ Nobody seems to want ‘operas without music’—the mere rumor of having to sit through one provokes audience unrest in Tieck’s *Der gestiefelte Kater*” (Groos and Parker 1988, 1).

writing itself has become invisible. What you read is the idea within the word, and you don’t like it if the materiality of the word obscures the idea . . . Every reading is a translation, a transfer (or ‘metaphor’) of something which allegedly lies on or in the page” (Aichele 1993). Perhaps then, observing opera is akin to experiencing simultaneous translation—and the interludes are moments when we hear only one of the translator’s voices.¹¹

But if operatic music were to be considered a type of language, what would it express? One might argue, as Peter Westergaard does, that operatic music is not intended to illustrate anything outside of itself, anything in the real world.¹² (Yes, operatic music creates its own world, but what piece of music doesn’t?) Every opera composer begins with a subject in mind, at the very least, and perhaps a plot, or even an entirely prepared text. And yet how does operatic music relate to these? I have posited elsewhere (2004, 369–70) that there are six ways in which music can function to express an operatic text: presentation of atmosphere or mood; presentation of local or historical color; presentation of emotional content and character; presentation of physical stage action; presentation of verbal and textual content (including stage directions¹³), and presentation and/or identification of characters, objects, events or thematic ideas.

¹¹ Wagner, it should be noted, compared the relationship of operatic music and text to sex, not translation, and he used purple prose to do it: “Through the redeeming, loving kiss of that melody the poet is now initiated into the deep, endless mysteries of woman’s nature” (Wagner 1900/1995, quoted in Morris 188); so perhaps that gives Morris license to do likewise.

¹² “Instead of experiencing opera as representing reality, try experiencing it as a reality unto itself. To do this, the sensory data must be at least as internally consistent as those you use to construct ordinary reality. You can then relate events in one form of reality to those in the other in either direction (representation is unidirectional) without having to dance around obvious dissimilarities (singing vs. speaking, orchestra vs. no orchestra)” (Private communication with the author).

¹³ Stage directions can include not only physical actions, but also expressive indications for sections of text.

All of these functions can operate with or without immediate visual stimulus (even the aural representation of physical movements potentially being accomplished by musical suggestion), assuming that the references are made comprehensible to the audience at some point, either earlier or later in the operatic experience—and thus they can all function in an instrumental interlude. But the narrative function can also work equally well with the visual and vocal stimuli present; for example, a general mood can be established with characters onstage that can determine, as a narrator's voice would, the emotional context in which we view the action. The opening of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, for instance, is a deathbed scene accompanied by mirthful music. Is that not a comment upon the action by a narrator? Thus, Morris's focus on the interludes, while a valuable inquiry, cannot be isolated artificially from the rest of the discourse on music's role in opera.

In our shared efforts to understand opera, I believe that it is a mistake to banish from our communal discourse *either* the rational constructs of scientific and quasi-scientific language or impressionistic prose. As scientific explorations of the brain bring physiological knowledge ever closer to explorations of the mind and its artistic pursuits, we would do well not to exclude the message because of its delivery system. For instance, the visual element of opera is its unique trait among all text-related musical genres, and the importance of the visual has been reaffirmed by recent scientific reports of what is known as "mirror neurons" (Blakemore and Frith 2005). These brain cells become activated when our bodies make some action, but they are activated equally when we *see* someone else performing that action. Hence the identification an audience member feels with a character in an opera, or in film or the theater, has a physiological, neurological basis. So when the visual element in opera is eliminated during the interludes, a visceral connection is lost between image and onlooker, and the effect is one of stepping back, observing from a greater distance. The parallel to narration fits here, and thus it jibes with Morris's thesis: something is being 'said' differently in

these interludes, but it is still being said. If we were to disregard this information, which could be so relevant to discussions of narratology and identification, simply because the information is derived scientifically, it would diminish our collective knowledge.

Whether the conceptual distance that purely orchestral passages provide in opera is discussed physiologically or hermeneutically, the question remains *why* composers would choose to distance the listener from the story. Because they can. Operatic music can alter its functions as easily as cinematic points of view (POVs), shifting us from cityscapes to closeups. POVs in film can put us in the shoes of heroes, villains or omniscient narrators, and operatic music can do the same, switching easily between illustrative functions. When we hear quickening rhythmic thuds in music, we are suddenly inside a character's body, listening to our/her heartbeats speed up; and when we hear imitation cuckoos chirp, we are taking one of Delius's nature walks.

Morris, in *Reading Opera between the Lines*, has shown us some of the fascinating results that can occur when opera composers choose to unleash the narrative powers of their medium. But I would urge him and other opera analysts to continue that discourse while abandoning the divisiveness, and to try searching for meaning by embracing both the yin and the yang, the exegesis and the eisegesis. Perhaps a "reconstructionist" truce is what is called for, with a dash of true "pentimento" on all sides.

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