

Review: Nicholas Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions & Puccini: Compositional Theory and Practice in Nineteenth-Century Opera*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, and Andrew Davis, *Il Trittico, Turandot and Puccini's Late Style*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010.

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Abstract:

Keywords: Puccini, opera, Nicholas Baragwanath, Andrew Davis, Schenker, Rothstein

### **DRINKING THE KOOL-AID**

In an informal address on opera analysis to the 2011 New England Conference for Music Theorists, William Rothstein said, “I’m going to assume that there are two kinds of people in this room: those who have drunk the operatic Kool-Aid and those who have not.”<sup>1</sup> Now, metaphoric Kool-Aid comes in two flavors: the euphoric, hallucinogen-laced type of the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,<sup>2</sup> and the lethal drink of blind obedience to power that resulted in the mass suicides at Jonestown.<sup>3</sup> Although operatic stages are often littered with empty potion vials and corpses, I am hoping that Professor Rothstein—whose stated goal was to encourage more theorists to analyze opera—intended the former.

The entrance of theorists into the field of opera analysis, which has long been dominated by musicologists, could not occur at a better time. Capping a burgeoning trend in their field that marginalizes much structural inquiry, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker have of late banished any score-based analysis from their recent opera history<sup>4</sup> in favor of a phenomenological approach based on memory and listening experience.

Although their book is intended for a broad readership who might not easily accept musical examples, they claim a mission beyond simple pragmatism, writing that “abstract structural analyses of music, or extended descriptions of notes interacting with each other [...] [are] virtually impossible to extract from listening to or attending an opera.”<sup>5</sup> In effect, they dismiss the value of a great deal of music analysis, while confusing

structure with perception. That is, successful perception of musical organization depends very much upon who is doing the perceiving: Mozart certainly would have grasped many more structural aspects of an opera at first hearing than would an average audience member today. But even that audience member, given enough hearings and perhaps some music appreciation classes, might be able to hear quite a bit. So, despite this and other discouragements from our musicological colleagues, I add my voice to Rothstein's and encourage theorists to take advantage of this moment. The two authors whose recent works are reviewed here have already taken up the challenge to enter the underpopulated operatic analysis stage.

Until recently, of the relatively slim number of book-length works on opera analysis, most have dealt with Mozart, Wagner and, lately, Verdi. It is only within the last few years that theorists have tackled the works of Puccini. Two important and most welcome recent contributions to the field (both from Robert Hatten's series *Musical Meaning and Interpretation*) are the subject of this review. Nicholas Baragwanath's *The Italian Traditions & Puccini* discusses more than Puccini's operas: in his words, the book "sets out to explore some of the Italian traditions of compositional theory and practice in more detail [...] through a survey of contemporary and historical sources that underpinned the training received by composers throughout the nineteenth century. It aims to distil from the extant documentary evidence a coherent theory that reconstructs the once commonplace fundamentals, methods, and formulas that were taught at the Italian conservatories and to explore their significance to composition through a variety of case studies from Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti to Verdi, Boito and Puccini." [Baragwanath, xiii-xiv].

While this book is an invaluable contribution to the history of Italian music theory—another field that warrants more attention<sup>6</sup>—it applies less directly to Puccini than to the earlier composers he lists. As Baragwanath occasionally admits, by the time of Puccini's maturity the old traditions that Puccini had studied in his youth had been replaced. The true protagonist of his book is the craft-like training that earlier composers, and finally Puccini, received. The original title of the book was *Puccini and the Italian Traditions*, but was undoubtedly changed to reflect the emphasis on those methods. Puccini never forsook that education, of course, but as the youthful composer embraced the irresistible pull of Wagnerism and later Modernism, the relationship of those skills to what he was composing became much more complex.

And by treating Puccini *only* as the inheritor of the older operatic tradition—indeed claiming he is “by common consent, [its] last great representative” [Baragwanath ix] and that his study is “deliberately one-sided” [Baragwanath xiv]—the author skips over a long-standing debate that is central to Alexandra Wilson’s prize-winning book, and many other publications.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most valuable contributions of this volume comes right at the start. In his opening “Note on Translation and Terminology,” Baragwanath supplies nineteenth-century definitions of terms that have long since altered or lost their significance. For instance, he writes that *ritmo* (literally, “rhythm”) has multiple meanings: it can either simply indicate rhythm as we intend the term, or it can refer to a repetitive rhythmic pattern that runs beyond bar lines and has both a melodic design (*ritmo melodico*) and a harmonic impulse (*ritmo armonico*), or the patterns in time of a line of verse. *Disegno* (“design”), he states, is near to our concept of a musical motive or cell, but could also be synonymous with *ritmo*. *Movimento* (“movement”) could indicate either the prevailing tempo, a part of a larger work (our “movement”), or a regular pattern of intervals, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

Baragwanath’s first of six chapters describes the Italian regional music-theoretical traditions, which fall into two main groups: the Neapolitan *partimento* school, and the more progressive northern Italian one that accepted French and German influences, especially after the mid-nineteenth century. The information the author gleans from his sources (treatises, dictionaries, encyclopedias, historical surveys, biographies, monographs, and journal articles) gives a long-needed look at a method of musical education mostly unknown to us now. For example, Baragwanath reveals that the study of *armonia* entailed realizing individual lines of music in several parts at the keyboard, while *contrappunto* involved improvisation with the voice as well as on instruments.

Chapter 2 surveys Puccini’s youthful studies in Lucca and later in Milan. Naturally, Puccini (and all other music students in Lucca) had used Puccini’s father’s counterpoint treatise, as he had been director of the Institute.<sup>9</sup> The work is largely a collection of standard exercises and tried-and-true fugue subjects. So it seems strange that Baragwanath would imply that Puccini’s later fugal compositions in Milan—because of

similarities with exercises in his father's text—had been written previously and passed off as new [Baragwanath 63]. Moreover, the extant fugues of the young composer were mostly composed on subjects given during exams in which the examinees were locked away in isolated rooms. In this chapter as well, alongside fascinating descriptions of what was common-practice education in those music schools, are misleading asides such as: “Puccini, in common with other composers of the Italian opera traditions, was content to remain within time-honored conventions, or at least not to stray too far from them, in order to please his audience and to assist in its appreciation.” [Baragwanath 45] In truth, opera was a popular medium whose adherents called for constant innovation. As Puccini wrote to a friend on 28 June 1904: “One must surprise this blessed public presenting it with a prey more modernly original and with new developments.”<sup>10</sup> Predictable or derivative operas were regularly ridiculed. If Puccini aspired to adhere to any one tradition it was, as Taruskin has called it, the iconoclastic Tradition of the New.<sup>11</sup>

The third chapter focuses on that ambiguous term *ritmo*, and how it relates to expression, versification and accent; here, Baragwanath's poetic analysis of a slice of the libretto for *Edgar*, and how it is set, is quite fascinating. Chapter 4 discusses the eighteenth-century *partimento* tradition, as set out by Gjerdingen and Sanguinetti,<sup>12</sup> as it was interpreted in the nineteenth century. Exercises, such as the rule of the octave or bass-line *movimenti*, were transformed by later writers. Most striking is Bonifazio Asioli's progressive interpretations of these standard patterns, which, as early as 1832, included “additions” to triads that resulted in seventh, ninth, eleventh and thirteen chords. [Baragwanath 154, 179].<sup>13</sup>

In Chapter 5, Baragwanath describes how standardized affects, held over from Baroque practices, provided instant formulas for set pieces. As he writes, “Busy maestros would have had neither the time nor the inclination to indulge in individual, original interpretations of each text. It was far simpler and more professionally astute to make use of a variety of prefabricated materials and formulas, adapting and refashioning them as their abilities allowed and in response to immediate demands.” [Baragwanath 188-9] While this is no doubt true for many Italian opera composers, it simply does not hold for Puccini who took his time composing and who so thwarted these very expectations that Heinrich Schenker (of all people) complained about the changeable, fragmentary nature of the emotions depicted in *La bohème*'s score:

“Everything is broken up into the smallest bits and pieces [...] The count in Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* or Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, despite their less than honorable intentions, are at least men of more steady sentiments, and more steady desires than Marcellos, Rodolfos, etc.”<sup>14</sup>

The final chapter treats the practice of learning counterpoint through singing. As Baragwanath writes, the exercises “normally progressed from formulaic realizations of cadences, scales, and bass motions, in two to eight parts, to more fluent “dispositions” (*disposizioni*), *divertimenti*, *solfeggi*, fugues, canons, and short liturgical pieces. They could be sung to a vowel (usually an Italian *a*), as vocalizations (*vocalizzi*), or to solfa, as *solfeggi*.” [Baragwanath 258] Sprinkled throughout the book are helpful musical examples that span from Rossini to middle Puccini. While the overall organization of the book makes sense, perhaps a more chronological, rather than topical, approach would have clarified the appropriateness of the theoretical concepts explored to composers of different eras.

Focusing on the four last operas of Puccini, Andrew Davis’s volume provides an opening chapter laying out his methodology, followed by a second exploring Puccini’s conventional lyric style (melody, harmony, orchestration, large-scale metric structures). Chapters 3–6 discuss *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi* (i.e., *Il trittico* from 1918) and *Turandot* (op. post. 1926) individually, through the prism of the nineteenth-century concept of “la solita forma,” first put forward by Abramo Basevi.<sup>15</sup> And in an epilogue, Davis relates aspects of Puccini’s “late style”—a concept that, I believe, is not without controversy in Puccini’s case—to the composer’s depressive state. Throughout the book, Davis draws on a wide array of analytical approaches, from Hatten to Hepokoski, from Abbate to Ashbrook, informing his unique vision.

One of Davis’s most important contributions to Puccini studies, I believe, is his identification of the composer’s abrupt mixing of styles as *stylistic plurality*: this trait is, Davis writes, “heterogeneous music in which diverse styles are exploited to such a degree that the contrasts among them—rather than the styles themselves—become the focal point for the listening audience.” [Davis 4] Each *style type* (a category, such as Romantic, Exotic or Dissonant) has its own *style tokens*: particular motives, harmonies, metric features, rhythms, etc. Davis’s thesis is that Puccini reserves the more familiar Romantic *style type* for key dramatic

moments, which thus, paradoxically, allows it to stand out as non-normative. Occasionally, a *style type* can be visited by *style tokens* from another category, leading to *stylistic integration* (a variation on Hatten's *thematic integration*.) This approach could be applied fruitfully to Puccini's earlier operas as well; in fact, the fragmentary shifting and mixing of styles was part of Schenker's complaint against *La bohème* (1896).

Davis is not the first writer to explore the *solita forma dei duetti* [usual style of duets] in Puccini's works: he builds on prior discussions by Ashbrook and Powers,<sup>16</sup> Michele Girardi<sup>17</sup> and David Rosen,<sup>18</sup> among others. Davis, following Gossett,<sup>19</sup> considers the four traditional movements of the *solita forma*—*tempo d'attacco*, *adagio*, *tempo di mezzo*, *cabaletta*— as either *kinetic* or *static*, [Davis 17] and thus more easily subsumed into a texture based on contrast. The rub here is that this formal patterning had long been out of style by Puccini's time. One of his librettists, Luigi Illica, wrote in 1899 about the diminishing importance of poetic verse forms, placing the cabaletta, et. al, firmly in the past: "The verse was fine in the era of the cabalettas."<sup>20</sup> Davis reconciles his exploration along these lines by identifying a "background" use of the form, characterizing the music as in Hepo-Darcian dialogue with the *solita forma*, but he never truly resolves the question. As he writes, "I view the discussion as ongoing and the issue as far from settled: clearly the *solita forma* conventions remain distantly removed from Puccini's formal strategies in large portions of his works, but just as clearly, it seems, Puccini's scores and librettos [...] provide compelling evidence that on some occasions the conventions are not entirely irrelevant. More to the point, *hearing* Puccini's music *with this question in mind*—with the conventions in the cognitive background, as a framework within which the music moves and against which we measure its temporal unfolding—provides fascinating opportunities to interpret its theatrical effect and expressive meaning." [Davis 6] In general, Davis's writing is thoughtful and carefully phrased; his formal charts, as well, are a great help to the reader and the listener in sorting through the many kaleidoscopic shifts of these operatic scores.

## **DRINKING THE MUSICOLOGICAL KOOL-AID**

Both of these fine volumes have been shaped to some degree by the hegemony of musicologists in the field of opera analysis. Davis successfully integrates musicologically-based concepts with some traditionally

theoretical ones, but the balance is tilted toward the former. And Baragwanath, as will be elaborated below, seems to echo some of the anti-organicist stance of many recent musicologists. Perhaps this is a coincidence or a pragmatic pre-emptive bow to those who will constitute much of the books' readership. Or perhaps the paucity of analytic tools developed specifically for opera played a role.

But the situation need not be so. In Rothstein's recent article on Bellini,<sup>21</sup> for example, four types of analytic approaches (traditionally theoretical and not) are seamlessly combined: Italianized *Formenlehre* (i.e., the *solita forma*), Schenkerian analysis, the Petrobellian *sonorità*,<sup>22</sup> and neo-Riemannian theory. And, in response to the musicologists' call for only "multivalent analyses" of opera (that is, examinations of the interaction of the sometimes conflicting domains of music, verse, and drama), Rothstein argues that "multivalence is a worthy goal, but it should not preclude in-depth study of individual aspects of any complex work. Interrelating and (perhaps) integrating the various facets of an opera [...] is likely to yield richer fruit once intensive analysis of individual domains has been carried out."<sup>23</sup>

And why stop there? For example, James Webster has warned that, "to invoke instrumental formal types as the primary basis for understanding arias may be irrelevant, if not positively misleading."<sup>24</sup> Yet, many of Mozart's arias (especially in *Idomeneo*, as Rothstein has noted) are indeed in sonata form. Shall we ignore that information? As analysts, we can certainly utilize the musicological concepts of *tinta*,<sup>25</sup> as Davis does, or *sonorità* without setting aside the sets of tools we already possess.

I am not advocating ignoring historical context—just the opposite. The more that analysts understand a composer's era, the more likely it is that they will choose appropriate analytic tools. For example, there is an elephant in the room that neither of the books under consideration here truly acknowledges: Wagner.<sup>26</sup> The enormous influence of this composer and his writings captured Puccini's imagination from the start.<sup>27</sup> Even the composer's deathbed sketches for the unfinished *Turandot* show the annotation "poi Tristano,"

indicating that a theme borrowed from *Tristan* should appear next. It was the Wagnerian liberation from composing in small forms and setting strictly metered poetic verse that intoxicated Puccini and his fellow *scapigliati*. The fragmentary nature of Leitmotifs, the powerful orchestral score resistant to improvised vocal ornamentation, and continuous act-long music are all features of Puccini's music that do not derive from the Italian traditions, and should not be overlooked.

Baragwanath, feels that "Puccini's connections to the Italian musical tradition have been played down or confined to casual asides" by other scholars. [Baragwanath 335] This is a welcome striving toward balance, because Puccini's music, while exhibiting many Wagnerian and Modernist traits, *also* contains traditional tonal structures. Some are quite buried, but recoverable. For instance, in one of Puccini's sketches for *Turandot's* finale, he wrote the following: "Nel villaggio but with chords and harmonized differently and modern movements and reprises and surprises, etc."<sup>28</sup> Here, "Nel villaggio" refers to a very diatonic aria from an earlier opera, *Edgar*. In other words, Puccini was planning to adorn a simple diatonic melody from the earlier work with new harmonies, rhythms, returns—and surprises. Similarly, one can find, hidden beneath many of his dissonant—even polytonal—passages, those simple patterns Puccini practiced in his youth.

But Baragwanath, rather than exploring the synthesis of the traditional and (often Germanic) progressive in Puccini, occasionally sounds like a last, hoarse voice in the old Verdi/Wagner debate. Ignoring the strong influence of French skills-based training of the Boulanger tradition (which shares much with the Italian practices), his prose is often stridently critical of the German influence in the music academy: "Music history still belongs to the victors of this century-long struggle for cultural supremacy (To describe it in blander, more objective, and less provocative terms as part of a general process of cultural transformation would be to deny the conscious intent with which it was carried out and to provide alibis for both the historical agents and their commentators.) [...] The ancient Italian traditions [...] undermined, moreover,

from within by a fifth column of Germanophile progressives in Florence and Milan, gradually dwindled to a meager canon of historically second-rate [...] “masterworks.”” [Baragwanath x, xiii]

To place Puccini only on the Italian side of such xenophobic boundaries is to distort history. The composer was caught in the middle, not only in the pro-Verdi or pro-Wagner controversy, but literally during in World War I. Germany and Italy were on opposite sides, and Puccini was an international artist trying to continue his career in more northern countries. His dilemma is epitomized by two quotes from that period: “I am not a Wagnerian; my musical education was in the Italian school”<sup>29</sup> and “Although I may be a Germanophile, I have never wanted to show it publicly.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps Baragwanath has imbibed some more insidious sort of the musicological Kool-Aid and adopted a postmodern, anti-structuralist stance that shuns any Germanic “formalist” theory, especially Schenkerian analysis. For instance, as he and others have noted, many of Puccini’s melodies (such as Butterfly’s “Un bel dì”) are built on an elaborated, descending scale. Baragwanath convincingly relates these scale-based passages to those practiced in upper-voice exercises during Puccini’s early education: “in the final act of *La bohème*, ‘Sono andati’ for instance, owes the touching simplicity of its measured descent to a standard practical counterpoint on the *scala nell’acuto* or soprano scale, as well as borrowing the style of its chordal accompaniment from late nineteenth-century *solfeggio* exercises. [Baragwanath 268–259]

William Drabkin, on the other hand, sees “Sono andati” as a Schenkerian 8-line.<sup>31</sup> But one analytic model need not supersede the other, as they are both (from a Schenkerian point of view) prolongations of the tonic. And one might wonder why Baragwanath prefers to isolate this feature of Puccini’s music from other scale-based melodies. As naturally occurring outgrowths of the tonal system, tunes as diverse as “Somewhere over the Rainbow” and the opening theme of the Bach *Concerto for Two Violins* are built on scalar structures.

Unfortunately, Baragwanath goes out of his way to disqualify any Schenkerian interpretation: “As centuries of Italian theory and practice testify, the scale was a standard compositional tool, far removed from the notion of a profound, composed-out chord of nature or “primeval line” (*Urlinie*). It provided a serviceable formula for many thousands of tunes. What conventional Schenkerian theory would consider the “foreground” or “surface” of this melody was in the Italian traditions regarded as its *essence*.”

[Baragwanath 275] This statement is surprising, given that Baragwanath is familiar with Schenkerian concepts<sup>32</sup> and thus should be aware that Schenker’s 8-line is not a “foreground” concept at all. But, more importantly, there was no way for Italians or anyone else to regard a scale as a composed-out Klang until Schenker came up with the idea many years later.

I hope that these two important contributions to the fields of opera analysis and Puccini studies will encourage others to partake as well. The time is right to do so. Shall we drink to that?

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to William Rothstein, not only for his brilliant analyses of opera, but for providing valuable insights during the writing of this review.

<sup>2</sup>The eponymous subject of Wolfe (1968). These were parties held by Ken Kesey where the psychedelic drug LSD was used.

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<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/jonestown/> for more information.

<sup>4</sup> Abbate and Parker (2012).

<sup>5</sup>Abbate and Parker, (2012, xv).

<sup>6</sup> A new series entitled *Italian Music Theory Treatises*, edited by Giorgio Sanguinetti and this author, is forthcoming from Pendragon Press.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson (2007). The topic is also treated in Burton (2012).

<sup>8</sup>Another excellent source for ancient and modern Italian musical terms is *Lessico della letteratura musicale italiana 1490 - 1950* (LESMU), available at: <http://www.francoesatieditore.com/testovis-184.html>).

<sup>9</sup>See also Burton (1996).

<sup>10</sup>[Bisogna sorprendere questo benedetto pubblico presentando a lui una preda più modernamente originale e di sviluppo nuovo.] Gara (1958, 277).

<sup>11</sup>Taruskin (1995).

<sup>12</sup> Gjerdingen (2007) and *Sanguinetti* (2012).

<sup>13</sup>Bonifacio Asioli (1769-1832) was the founder of the Milan Conservatory; his best known theoretical works are *Il trattato d'armonia* (Milan, 1813) and *Il maestro di composizione* (op. posth., Milan, 1832), the latter of which will soon be published in annotated English translation in the series *Italian Music Theory Treatises* from Pendragon Press.

<sup>14</sup>Schenker: (1897)

<sup>15</sup> Basevi, whose major work on Verdi is Basevi 1859, mentioned the “solita forma dei duetti” [the usual form of duets] almost in passing, and only to note that Verdi’s Sparafucile-Rigoletto duet did *not* follow the normal pattern. Powers gave weight to the concept in Powers 1987. For an alternative view, see Parker 1997.

<sup>16</sup>Ashbrook and Powers, (1991).

<sup>17</sup>Girardi (1995, 2000).

<sup>18</sup>Rosen (2004).

<sup>19</sup> See Gossett (1971).

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<sup>20</sup>Gara (1958, 186).

<sup>21</sup>Rothstein (2012).

<sup>22</sup>Petrobelli (1982). He defines the term *sonorità* as “a specific pitch prolonged by various means of articulation, and considered independently of any harmonic function.”

<sup>23</sup>Rothstein (2012, 279).

<sup>24</sup>Webster (1990, 204).

<sup>25</sup>“tinta” [“tint”] is a concept resistant to translation. It has been utilized to a large extent to indicate a general coloration (such as “modal” or “chromatic”) rather than a specific musical structure or texture. Basevi describes “tinta” or “colorito” [coloring] in general terms: “a center toward which the different pieces that compose the opera converge.” Basevi, (1859, 114-5).

<sup>26</sup>Baragwanath does write, “Young-German firebrand Richard Wagner [...] advocated a more explicit variety of cultural imperialism for the good of less advanced peoples like the French and Italians. [...] to annex and nationalize foreign traditions was, for *German* artists, to render them *Universal*.” (Baragwanath xi).

<sup>27</sup>This has been well documented in, for example, Budden (1987), Girardi (2000) and Burton (2012).

<sup>28</sup>[Nel villaggio ma ad accordi e armonizzato diverso e movenze moderne e riprese e sorprese etc.] Ms. sketch 91.A.III.35, probably dating from January 1924. Schickling (2003, 377).

<sup>29</sup>*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 79 (1912): 241; cited in Deathridge (2008 234) and Baragwanath, (40).

<sup>30</sup>Benchè io sia un germanofilo non ho voluto mai mostrarmi pubblicamente.] Sartori (1978, 306).

<sup>31</sup>William Drabkin, “The musical language of *La bohème*” in *Giacomo Puccini: La bohème*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 87-88.

<sup>32</sup>See his “Analytical Approaches to Melody in Selected Arias by Puccini” *Music Theory Online*, 14/2, (June 2008).