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Reading with Your Ears: The Uses of Opera in Literature

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Reading with Your Ears: The Uses of Opera in Literature


James E. Ford

In both the East and the West the relationship between opera and literature is ancient and profound. As the Disciples of the Pear Garden would know, many of the most popular works of the Beijing Opera are based on famous Chinese historical novels. And when a group of late Sixteenth-Century Italians created Western opera they were trying to revive Greek tragedy. (They knew that Greek tragedy was sung in some fashion and the speaking-to-music we know as recitative was their attempt to reproduce that ancient practice.) Of course, many, many Western operas have been based on plays, novels, and short stories.

But my focus today is not the uses of literature in opera. Rather, it is the way authors have used opera in their literary works, and the implications of such usage for readers.

Suppose a writer needs to cause a character to fall down. He or she will have choices. A merely good writer will put any old object in the path of the character to trip him up. A better writer will select a stumbling block very carefully, one that will not only perform the required function—to trip up the character—but an object that will also convey some significant meaning. For instance, the object might be something that was given to the character by another character that he had wronged. Then the object adds an element of irony to the incident—perhaps making the “fall” both literal and figurative. The same thing is true of all elements in a work of literature: they can be functional but empty of significance or they can function and be inherently meaningful. Music is one such element that can be used differentially by good and great writers.

Intermezzo from Cavalleria

[Performed by the Fulda Symphonic Orchestra conducted by Simon Schindler; online at www.mascagni.org]
<http://www.mascagni.org> or this link 

<http://www.mascagni.org/sounds/intermezzo/Cavalleria%20Rusticana%20-%20Intermezzo%20%5BFulda%20Symphonic%20Orchestra,%20Simon%20Schindler,%20-%2020020310%5D.mp3>

A piece of music may be referred to in a literary work merely to provide sound—for instance, in a novel there might be a radio in a room playing music that may add verisimilitude to the scene. Or, at the next, relatively low, level, the music may create a particular atmosphere, like the soundtrack of a movie that adds to the energy of a scary scene. Or, at a more significant level, the particular piece of music may be chosen to reveal something important about a character's nature or state of mind, or it may develop a theme, or even advance the plot.

For example, that music providing beautiful atmosphere for my introductory remarks is the Intermezzo from the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, by Mascagni. It was used by the American writer Willa Cather, not just for atmosphere, but as a plot device in a short story called "Eric Hermansson's Soul." Eric, who had been a violinist, was converted to a "Fundamentalist" sect of Christianity that banned the playing of all musical instruments. But Eric is summoned back to a life of music when he hears this beautiful music wafting through an open window. Although, as I will demonstrate, Cather can be a great writer in her use of music, in this instance, she was only a good writer, for any piece of beautiful music would have functioned equally well to advance her plot. There is no reason to choose this particular beautiful piece over any other beautiful piece; it adds no particular meaning to the story because of its own unique characteristics.

My two-part thesis today is, first, great writers choose music to perform various functions in their writings that is also inherently significant and, second, a reader cannot tell the difference between a merely good or a great writer's use of music if the reader is not fa-

miliar with, or does not go to the effort to become familiar with, the music being used. To really appreciate the great writer's use of music, readers must be able not only to see with their eyes the words on the page naming or describing the music, but also hear with their internal ears the lyrics and melodies of that music. Of course, the great challenge is that, unlike the case of a movie, the reader cannot *literally* hear the music referred to on the page. Often the music isn't even described; it is merely named. That is, it is what is technically called an allusion: a reference inside a work of literature to something outside of the work.

Readers who want fully to appreciate literature that contains music must cooperate with the author, must read actively by engaging their internal ears in a way that requires more effort than passive movie goers expend. These active readers must be able to play the music in their heads as they read. To fail to do so is to read a pale, weak version of the work—like watching an exciting movie without its emotionally moving soundtrack.

Scholars who study the writings of Willa Cather travel all over the world to *see* with their own eyes the places Cather describes in her works. Very few of them go to the trouble to *hear* with their own ears the music that is all over her novels and short stories.

To illustrate what I am talking about, let's compare the work of a generally good writer, Ann Patchett, to the work of a great writer, Willa Cather.

Bel Canto, Patchett's recent best selling novel, is full of opera music. That is not surprising because its central character, Roxane Cross, is supposed to be America's foremost operatic soprano. As Roxane is performing a concert at the home of the vice president of a fictional South American country, the house is invaded by a group of rebels who make hostages of Roxane and all the guests at the concert. During the ensuing several months of captivity, Roxane sings many operatic arias as she practices or sings for her fellow captives.

Now, of course, Patchett had to choose the music that Roxane would sing. But Patchett, who has acknowledged that she knew very

little about opera at the time she wrote *Bel Canto*, chose primarily music that she happened to be familiar with and that she happened to like. At one point, she even gives her soprano character an aria to sing that is more suited to a mezzo soprano. With one exception, to be noted, inherent significance is not an issue in Patchett's choice of arias.

In the case of this novel *Bel Canto*, we actually know which real-life soprano Patchett modeled her fictional diva after: "I gave [Roxane Cross] Renee Fleming's voice," Patchett has stated. As you may know, Renee Fleming's is in fact America's current reigning operatic soprano; and her signature aria, the one with which she is most identified, is "Rusalka's Song to the Moon," from Dvorak's opera *Rusalka*. We are not surprised to read in the novel, therefore, that this was the fictional Roxane's favorite encore number. In fact, it was "Rusalka's Song to the Moon" that Roxane was singing when the lights suddenly went out and the rebel soldiers stormed the house. Readers will be able to enjoy this scene much more if they are able hear *this* sublime music in their heads:

Rusalka's Song to the Moon

[Performed by B. J. Ward; online at www.standupopera.com]

<http://www.standupopera.com/audio/rusalka-64.mp3>

[Performed by Robin Rubindunst; online at www.novoartists.com]

http://www.novoartists.com/audio_samples/rubendunst/invocation_to_the_moon.mp3

The only one time in the novel when an aria is chosen because of its specific inherent significance involves both the structure and the atmosphere of the novel. "What I was trying to do [in *Bel Canto*]," Patchett reveals, "was to establish the cessation of time." This is important because, as the months pass, the hostages and the hostage takers become united in a love for their isolation. One way the author achieves her goal is through music's almost magical ability to make us oblivious to the passage of time. But there are good and great ways to use music's timeless qualities. Most often, Patchett just chooses any music beautiful enough to distract the characters—and the reader.

But once, Patchett makes a great choice of a song beautiful enough to perform its entrancing function but which also has inherent relevant significance. In her only meaningful use of music, Patchett employs a song that is about someone who wants to escape both time and locality; and she highlights the song's significance by using one of its stanzas as the epigraph of her novel. The music is "Melanconia, ninfa gentile," by Bellini; and the quoted stanza ends with, "I shall never desire to go beyond that spring and that mountain."

"Malinconia, ninfa gentile"

[Performed by Brigitte Alexandre (sample); online at perso.orange.fr]

<http://perso.orange.fr/soprano/son/MP3nevers/Piste%2010ex.mp3>

[Performed by Antonio Giuliano; online at www.antoniogiuliano.com]

http://www.antoniogiuliano.com/assets/5_Malinconia.mp3

Three months have passed and a fog of isolation has settled over the Vice President's house. Though the characters have become mesmerized, we readers know this unreal state cannot last forever. The function Patchett needs Roxane's final aria to perform is to distract the characters' and the readers' attention while the rescuing soldiers sneak up on the house, so that what follows will be even more shocking. The aria has to have ridiculously high notes and breathtaking passages of mellismas and coloratura singing. It has to be great bel canto music. The very appropriate aria Patchett chooses for Roxane to sing is "Una voce poco fa," from *Il Barbieri di Seville*, by Rossini.

"Una voce poco fa"

[Performed by Maria Callas; online at [youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AThDejzVRvo&search=voce>

Boom! Grenades explode, automatic gun fire breaks out all over the house, and many people we have come to care about die.

While Ann Patchett is a great user of opera in her literature only once, Willa Cather is a often a great writer, to an important degree precisely because she uses music meaningfully about as often and

about as well as any writer who has ever lived. She is especially effective in her use of operatic music. With rare exceptions, she chooses not just any music that will perform a needed function, but the exact right music with precisely the right inherent significance, in the words, in the melody, even in the musical structure. Cather uses music with exquisite sophistication—and thereby makes great demands on her readers, if they are to appreciate her writing fully. As she created the novel *The Professor's House*, Cather wrote, “the experiment that interested me . . . was very much akin to the arrangement in sonatas in which the academic sonata form was handled somewhat freely.” Cather’s friend Edith Head has recorded Cather’s tempo markings for parts one and two of her novel: *molto moderato* and *molta appassionata*. The plot of the late novel *Lucy Gayheart* is structured as a *Winterreise*, a winter’s journey, even as it makes effective meaningful use of several of the songs from Schubert’s song cycle. In the novel, Lucy is the piano accompanist for the tenor Clement Sebastien. Of course, Lucy falls in love with Sebastien; and in her romantic euphoria she hears the music he sings—but misses the words. The narrator says that for Lucy, “life was resolved into something simple and noble—yes and joyous: a joyousness which seemed safe from time and change, like that in Schubert’s *Dir Forelle*, which Sebastien often sang.” The nimble trout of the song does indeed seem joyous and safe, but Lucy overlooks the ending, in which the fisherman hooks the playful fish. Readers familiar with this song know that it does not promise permanent joy: Lucy soon learns that Sebastien has drowned during a concert tour in Europe.

“*Die forelle*”

[Performed by Monsegur Vaillant; online at www.adg-paris.org]

<http://www.adg-paris.org/video.asp?dvdId=1&titleId=1>

Let’s look at several other examples from Cather’s fictional writings in order to learn more about how a great writer can use operatic music. The short story “Nanette: An Aside” is about an aging opera singer named Traduttori. Cather has this character perform the role

of Santuzza in the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana* and sing a soulful aria that, Cather writes, “explains a secret in her heart.” This is Cather using parallelism to guide the reader’s knowledge about and response to her character. Just as Santuzza, in the aria “Voi lo sapete” has been forsaken by her lover in the opera, so Traduttori has an unfaithful husband and, as we read, “faces a life without love.”

“*Voi lo sapete*”

[Performed by Alan Mallach and Cheri Rose Katz;
online at www.mascagni.org]

<http://www.mascagni.org/sounds/unknown-mascagni/14%20Voi%20lo%20sapete.%20o%20mamma.m3u>

Throughout much of the novel *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra Henshaw is a mystery to her narrator friend, until a performance of the “Casta diva” aria from Bellini’s opera *Norma* provides the key to understanding.

“*Casta diva*”

[Performed by Maria Callas; online at [youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB2VP7R02lo>

Cather sometimes uses music to reveal the true desires of her characters, sometimes when even the characters themselves are unaware of their own subconscious thoughts. In the novel *O Pioneer!* Emil Bergson has returned to town to claim Marie, the wife of Frank Shabata. Emil hears the “Ave Maria” and thinks his love is as pure as the Gounod anthem. But, later, as he cuts the tall grass with his scythe, Emil whistles “The Jewel Song” from Gounod’s opera *Faust*. The music he unconsciously chooses reflects his real intentions. Cather expects her audience to know the aria as a hymn to beauty and desire, sung by a woman who is prepared by the attractions of costly jewels to succumb to the temptations of physical lust. If we know the opera, we are prepared not to be surprised when Frank Shabata kills the young lovers as they lie together under the mulberry trees.

“*The Jewell Song*”

[Performed by Anna Moffo; online at youtube.com]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAOIVrYL66Y&search=gounod>

The Song of the Lark is considered the greatest novel about a singer. As is the case with *Bel Canto*, Cather’s fictional opera singer, Thea Kronborg, is patterned after a famous real-life opera singer, Olive Fremstad. Like Fremstad, Kronborg finds her greatest success in Wagnerian roles, which is not surprising since Cather claimed that *The Song of the Lark* was her attempt “to reproduce the emotional effects of the Wagner operas upon the printed page.” And we who would like to have in our heads as we read the novel the voice Cather gave to her character are fortunate to have available a scratchy old recording of Fremstad singing “Milt und leise,” an arias from *Tristan und Isolde* Cather gives to Thea Kronborg to sing.

“*Milt und liese*”

[Performed by Olive Fremstad; online at www.metoperafamily.org]

<http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/sounds/player.aspx?t=16>

But other music besides Wagner’s figures prominently in the novel. Thea Kronborg’s first music teacher had been Professor Wunch, an alcoholic failed musician who nevertheless had managed to light the spark of Thea’s inherent musical talent. As Wunch gives Thea music lessons, he shares with her his favorite piece of music, Orpheus lament, “*Che faro senza Euridice*,” from Gluck’s *Orfeo e Euridice*. Orpheus must use his music to charm his beloved wife out of the underworld. But more is required than artistic ability and desire—Orpheus must also keep his personal feelings under control and have the self discipline not to look back at Euridice along the way. But self control is something neither Orpheus nor Professor Wunch possesses.

“*Che faro senza Euridice*”

[Performed by Lisa Houston; online at www.classicalsinger.com]

http://www.classicalsinger.com/sites/index.php?pt=5&user_id=4888

Cather’s last significant use of opera is in the novel *The Professor’s House*. Professor Geoffrey St. George has lost his passion for living. On a trip to Chicago with his wife, the professor attends the Lyric opera, where he hears Thomas’ *Mignon*. The famous first act aria is the heroine’s longing for a lost place and time. As Mignon asks, “*Connais-tu le pays*” —do you know the land?—Professor St. Peter is transported back to his student days in Paris, a time and place in which he burned with scholarly interests and new love.

“*Connais-tu le pays?*”

[Performed by Marie Morrisey (two 1914 recordings);

online at cylinders.library.ucsb.edu]

<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/mp3s/0000/0227/cusb-cyl0227d.mp3>

<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/mp3s/0000/0228/cusb-cyl0228d.mp3>

No work illustrates Cather’s great use of opera more thoroughly than her short story “The Bohemian Girl,” written several decades before *The Professor’s House*. The very title of the story is borrowed from an opera of the same name, by the Irishman Michael William Balfe. In addition to its title, this opera provides the short story with its overall structure, as well as many useful and meaningful musical elements that function allusively to signal something important to the readers. Cather properly assumed that her contemporary readers were quite generally familiar with the opera, since it had been the most popular opera in English for more than fifty years before her story was published. Cather could rely on her readers knowing the opera’s story, its characters, and both the words and the melodies of the major arias. Today, almost no one knows the opera: you will see what a handicap, both to understanding and appreciating the story, this ignorance entails.

Here is a synopsis of the opera: Arline, the six-year-old daughter of an Austrian count, is stolen by and raised among a band of Gypsies, “Bohemians,” as they were then called by some in Europe. Arline learns to love the Gypsies’ care-free life-style. She also falls in love with Thaddeus, a Polish exile who has attached himself to the Gypsy band. After 12 years, Arline is restored to her father’s castle, but continues to long for the “Bohemian” freedom she enjoyed with the Gypsies. Thaddeus braves great danger to bid Arline a last farewell. He is captured by the guards, but when the Count, Arline’s father, learns of Thaddeus’ devotion—as well as his noble lineage—he blesses his daughter’s union with the penniless vagabond.

In Cather’s “The Bohemian Girl,” Clara is the child of emigrants to the United States from the actual country of Bohemia—whose people, though they were not Gypsies, were known for their freedom-loving, Gypsy-like ways. However, Clara has traded her independence for the security of a marriage to the stodgy—but rich—Olaf Ericson. After a 12-year absence, Olaf’s younger brother Nils has returned to carry Clara off with him. You see, Clara and Nils had been sweethearts during their school days. Nils enters the neighborhood secretly and announces his presence to Clara by whistling a tune he knows Clara will recognize outside her window. This particular tune would have been as familiar—and therefore as significant—to Cather’s readers as it was to Clara. Nils whistles “I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls,” also known as “The Gypsy Girl’s Dream” aria, from the opera *The Bohemian Girl*. Knowing the story and the theme of the opera the music came from, as well as knowing the lyrics of the melody Nils was whistling, Clara and Cather’s readers would all have known exactly what was on Nils’ mind: he wants to call Clara back into the Bohemian/Gypsy life.

“I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls”

[Performed by Edith Chapman (Edith Mae Gordon),

1909 recording; online at cylinders.library.ucsb.edu]

<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/mp3s/1000/1626/cusb-cyl1626d.mp3>

Whereas, in the opera, Arline goes from a castle to the Bohemian/Gypsy life and back to the castle, Clara goes from Bohemian freedom to luxurious respectability and back to Bohemian freedom. Therefore, the structure of the short story is the mirror image of the structure of the opera.

Before moving on from our look at the uses of the opera *The Bohemian Girl* in literature, I want to emphasize how import that readers of literature make the effort to get to know a work that was well known throughout the English-speaking world. For, of course, many authors besides Cather use opera in their writings. The great Irish author James Joyce relies on his audience’s familiarity with *The Bohemian Girl* in a number of allusions to it in several of his novels and short stories. Just how familiar he expected his readers to be with “I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls” is shown in his use of the aria to reveal the internal state of mind of Maria, the main character in “Clay,” one of Joyce’s most highly regarded short stories. Maria is a spinster of about 45 years of age. One question the story raises for the reader to answer is, Does this lonely and shy little woman still harbor desires for a man in her life? The answer comes through the manner in which Maria sings “I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls.” At one point, she is asked to sing a song at a small gathering of friends, including some men her own age. She hesitates but finally agrees to sing “Marble Halls.” She makes it through the first stanza, which is about many things she does not have: a noble house, servants, hope, pride. But then, rather than going on to sing the second stanza, as we might expect her to do, she repeats the first one again. The stanza omits is about an man adoring a woman. Readers who do not know the lyrics of this second stanza of the aria will not understand that Maria is suppressing her deepest wish, perhaps even from her own consciousness.

“I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls,”

[MIDI instrumental with printed lyrics]

<http://www.contemplator.com/ireland/marble.html>

If I may be permitted to cite one more instance of the use in literature of music from *The Bohemian Girl*, I'd like to mention a play written just last year and starring Ariel Bybee. *A Singer's Romance* is a play that I wrote for Ariel based on a Willa Cather short story of the same name. An opera singer "of a certain age," as we say, is locked in a loveless marriage and laments that she has never had a real "romance." But, lately, she has noticed a handsome young man loitering at the stage door and around her hotel. This is my last chance for love, she thinks to herself, and begins to plan how she might make contact with the young man. Finally, just as she decides to approach the mysterious stranger, she discovers him in the arms of her maid. In the last scene of the play, Schumann must go to a rehearsal of *The Bohemian Girl*, in which she is to play the part of the older Gypsy Queen who also loves young Thaddeus (do you remember Thaddeus, the Polish nobleman who loved Arline?). The Gypsy Queen is crushed when she discovers that Thaddeus loves Arline and sings that "love smiles but to deceive." As Madame Schumann sings the same words, she—and the audience—realizes that her situation parallels that of the Gypsy Queen; she also has harbored unrealistic expectations of love from a much younger man.

"Gypsy Queen's aria"

[Text online at www.aria-database.com]

[http://www.aria-database.com/libretti/bohemian I _love.txt](http://www.aria-database.com/libretti/bohemian%20I%20love.txt)

One of the most important reasons for reading literature is that it is a source of great pleasure. We readers want to get all the pleasure possible out of the novels, poems, plays, and short stories we read. One, often ignored, source of pleasure in literature is the many, many ways authors use music in their works. As someone interested in both music and literature, one of my goals is to encourage to go to the very rewarding effort to hear the music in literature—to read not only with their eyes, but also with their ears.

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