Dissertation Abstract: Theodore L. Gentry

Emblems of Love and Death in Italian Realist Opera, 1890-1914

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Composers rely upon a body of musical topoi and conventions in order to transmit emotions, moods, and ideas. In opera, these musical devices communicate important dramatic elements to the audience. Used judiciously, topoi and conventions provide an efficient avenue toward comprehension of the drama. In a spoken drama, language normally projects much of the dramatic interpretation. In a musical drama, similar reliance upon text would unduly lengthen the opera, a process that would sacrifice conciseness as well as test endurance limitations of performers and theatre patrons. Some devices are passed from generation to generation; others are limited to a given era or composer. Without them, an opera would be incomprehensible to most people. Listeners expect particular musical elements in certain dramatic contexts, and they are understandably confused when composers ignore the semiotic element of music or incorporate inappropriate topoi.

In analyzing opera, most scholars have overlooked the significance of topoi in operatic interpretation and comprehension. Traditional analysis has emphasized harmonic and formal structures, work that is vital, but which often omits the relevance of such elements to dramatic communication. Wye Jamison Allanbrook, Marco Beghelli, and Frits Noske are three of several recent scholars who have contributed important work in topological investigation.

In this dissertation, I have examined the use of a few topoi and conventions that figure prominently in Italian operas composed between 1890 and 1914. The scope of the study was limited to musical emblems of love and death found in this era. Twenty-five operas form the core of the study, works that represent a highly productive period in Italian opera. Composers include Catalani, Cilèa, Giordano, Leoncavallo, Mascagni, Puccini, Verdi, and Zandonai, as well as several less significant composers including Alfano, Franchetti, Mascheroni, Platania, Smareglia, Spinelli, and Wolf-Ferrari.

In this study, I have examined musical elements in love and death scenes that elicit images and emotive responses related to romance and mortality. Every composer within the confines of this investigation utilizes a common body of musical devices that transmit nearly universal meanings to western audiences. A number of harmonic and rhythmic formulas form the basis of semiotics in operatic literature. Examination of this material reveals a part of the methodology used by composers to interpret drama.