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Sounding the Seas: Modern Opera and Oceanic Romanticism

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> Britten has written salt-water music of unequaled intensity … The sting and the crash and the scream of great waters have never before been caught and translated into music with such fidelity. This is not an onomatopoeic imitation but a universalized image of the sea itself in tempest. This storm music punctuates the human music of the inn every time the door opens. And then … Grimes bursts in, like the Flying Dutchman himself, and in an aria, sets out the better side of his nature …[1]

In his second lecture about opera's relationship with international law, David Armitage recalls Wagner's quasi-origin story for *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843): the composer's own stormy sea voyage from East Prussia to Paris via London and Norway in the summer of 1939. Although Wagner had already planned to transform the legend of the eternally doomed ghost ship into an opera, he insisted that his journey gave his ideas a characteristic musical-poetic coloring. For Armitage, this coloring had less to do with the *Schauer* (dark)-romanticism of the craggy Norwegian fjords than with Wagner's experience of the sea as a space of legal exceptionalism and the ship as a vector of law in an ocean of lawlessness. On the run from his Baltic creditors, Wagner had crossed the East Prussian border illegally. According to Armitage, the journey lent both documentary and autobiographical significance to the action, redirecting emphasis from romantic and gothic visions of the sea towards its legal significance.

Indeed, the opera is apparently set in motion by an extension of maritime hospitality from Daland to the Dutchman, in ways that—Armitage argues—mirrored contemporaneous legal debates about contested maritime sovereignty. If legal theorists agreed that the sea could not be held as anyone's property and came to disagree over whether and to what extent rulers could exercise their sovereignty over it, so apparently too did a series of "oceanic"

[1]Anon., "Entertainments: 'Peter Grimes': Second Thoughts," *The Times*, June 15, 1945.

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operas—from *Der fliegende Holländer*, through *Peter Grimes* (1945), to *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991). Wagner, Armitage insists, was the first in a series of composers to represent the ocean as a space of legal pluralism and even legal exception.

While Armitage usefully lays bare the legal conditions of possibility for some of our best-known operatic plots and trajectories, he acknowledges that legal understandings of the sea were often superseded by more romantic visions: "The Dutchman and Senta," he concedes, "rise above earthly duty and mundane law to a higher plane of transcendence, but they could not have done so, had not those other legal frameworks shaped their short-lived relationship." In this response, I excavate these more transcendent, romantic visions: of the sea as a symbol of resistance not just to nation-bound sovereignty but also to human control more generally; and, of nature as a law unto itself—a channel for supernatural, eternal, and even non-human agencies. By exploring oceanic romanticism in two of Armitage's five case studies, I offer an alternative reading of the operatic sea while capturing the relationship between these legalistic and romantic domains. I hope not just to add another layer of contestation or multiplicity to our already-fluid, "liquid modernity" but also—and, more importantly—to capture opera's distinctive contribution to oceanic politics.

Senta's Ballad

Although *Holländer* is a coastal opera, the sea and ships are a consistent presence. The outer acts feature both prominently on stage, and even the supposedly domestic second act is awash with nautical imagery. Yet Wagner's stage directions betray an ambivalence about the sea's significance. On the one hand, he notes that the "representation of the ship cannot be too naturalistic."[2] On the other, he reveled in naturalism. "The sea between the headlands must be seen to rage and foam as much as possible," he explained: "little touches, such as the heaving of the ship when struck by an exceptionally strong wave … must be very clearly portrayed."[3] In musical terms, the first act's opening seems to side with naturalism, deploying chromatic swells, diminished sevenths, and uncontrollable breakneck speeds to depict the crashing waves. This is bolstered by the onomatopoeic sailors' songs ("Hohoje! … Halloho! Ho!"), which Wagner reportedly modeled on his Norwegian experience.[4] At the same time, even before the curtain rises, the

[2]"Richard Wagner, "Remarks on Performing the Opera 'The Flying Dutchman,'" trans. Melanie Karpinski, in *Der fliegende Holländer: English National Opera Guide* (London: Calder, 1982), 37.

[3]Wagner, "Remarks," 37.

[4]Richard Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 162.

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overture offers a more transcendental spin with its epic motifs, and this symbolism is heightened as the first scene draws on. Captain Daland, for example, invests nature with metaphysical agency: "[T]his devilish gale blew up," he complains, "[i]f one trusts the wind, trust Satan's mercy!"[5] And the Steersman likewise imagines nature as a metaphysical agent, worthy of supplication and veneration, if not fear: "My maiden, were there no south-wind, I could never have sailed here! Ah, dear south-wind, blow stronger."[6] When the Steersman falls asleep, the Dutchman docks his ship to the *Schauer*-romantic sounds of "Die Frist ist um," his signature aria that foregrounds even darker symbolism: "The weary sea casts me upon land… Ha! Proud ocean … Your spite is fitful, but my torment is eternal."[7]

This shared experience of being at the mercy of an all-powerful, inscrutable sea primes us for Daland's maritime hospitality. The ships are, after all, both merchant vessels, whose trade depended upon international cooperation and mutuality. But the power of hospitality pales in significance with that of the sea, and this hospitality is never self-evident, in ways that bolster and complicate Armitage's observations about contested sovereignty. Daland's declaration is born of a tense moment when the crew discover the "foreign" ship on Norwegian territory. Perhaps nervous about the "Pirates" that the Dutchman mentions in "Die Frist ist um," both Steersman and Captain demand to know the ship's name and nationality. The foreigner indignantly sidesteps the question by asking, expectantly, for hospitality: "Would you deny me anchorage in this storm?"[8] Although this helps to diffuse the surface tension, it marks Daland's hospitality as performative: "God forbid! A sailor is always hospitable!"[9] Wagner's music intensifies this tension. When the Dutchman sings, his music is marked by metaphysical gravitas: his characteristically slow, deliberate utterances are preceded by and filled with long pauses and accompanied by a crawling phrase on the low strings. Daland's response, by contrast, accompanied by prancing cellos in the high register and frantic recitative, sounds altogether more comical, as if to undermine his dignified professions of hospitality.

This differentiation is understandable because, for all their shared occupations, the Norwegian and Dutch sailors relate differently to the sea. In "Die Frist is um," the Dutchman pits his maritime allegiance against earthly infidelity: "I shall never find the grace I seek on land! To you, ocean-tides, I shall be true …There is no eternal fidelity on earth!"[10] Although he longs for divine redemption, most of his sea references are steeped in *Schauer*-romantic

[5]Richard Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide and Libretto*, ed. Burton D. Fisher (Boca Raton, LA: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2017), 33.
[6]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 34.
[7]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 35.
[8]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 37.
[9]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 37.
[10]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 35.

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imagery: "How often have I longingly hurled myself / into the sea's deepest jaws … There, in the awful tomb of ships / I drove mine on to the rocks / but alas no tomb closed over me."[11] His music amplifies this, beginning with slow, recitative built around the "demonic" tritone on the low strings; and when he prays to the angel for release, his floating lyricism conjures up metaphysical music of a more heavenly quality. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that while treasure buys him hospitality and a bride, he declares himself indifferent to such worldly concerns: "nothing chains me to this Earth! … wealth has no value for me."[12] For the Norwegians, by contrast, the sea is an agent of commerce, whose power is compatible with their materialism. Indeed, even Daland's hospitality quickly becomes colored by the treasure he stands to gain. This difference manifests itself as xenophobia in the drinking chorus in Act III, scene 1: after the maidens decide to leave the party, the Norwegian sailors denounce their retired and abstemious portside "neighbors" as "old and pale, not red-blooded."[13]

Senta's "xenophilia," as Armitage aptly describes it, offers a marked contrast. As she sits entranced by the foreigner's portrait and lineup of maritime imagery at the beginning of Act II, her famous "ballad" declares allegiance to the Dutchman's (*Schauer*-)romanticism. If the opening onomatopoeia ("Johohohe! Johohohohe!") seems to gesture to the naturalistic Sailor's Chorus, the contours of her aria evoke a more symbolic, romantic sea. While the sailors impose musical order on the chaos, turning the otherwise minor music toward the major key, Senta's ballad initiates the opposite trajectory: a turn from the A major of the spinning chorus to a dark G minor tonality. The introduction delivers high strings shimmering on open fifths, providing a transcendental accompaniment to the Dutchman's epic and sinister motif. Senta picks this motif up and sings it eerily at her own leisure, as if to wrest it from earthly temporality. When the accompaniment re-enters at the beginning of each verse, the iambic rhythms and meter evoke an eternal drudgery appropriate to her gothic imagery ("blood-red sails and black masts," and so on).[14] And at the end of each verse, when Senta sings of redemption through love, the music evokes a more heavenly romanticism: the tempo slows to an adagio, we transition into an unadorned Bb major, complete with chorale-like woodwind accompaniment, underpinning the soaring lyricism of Senta's redemptive themes.

This ballad appears to encapsulate the opera's trajectory. Indeed, as Armitage concedes, the progress from naturalism, maritime custom, to oceanic romanticism culminates in the final scene. If the Dutchman's transcendence of earthly duty, mundane law, or human morality stimulates Senta's imagination

[11]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 25.
[12]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 39.
[13]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 61.
[14]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 46.

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and sympathy, the sea becomes a visual and musical symbol of this romantic infinity. "Senta leaps into the sea," we read in the final stage directions: "suddenly the sea heaves and whirlpools, drowning The Flying Dutchman and its crew. In the glow of the rising sun, the transfigured forms of the Holländer and Senta, are seen embraced in each other's arms, rising over the ship in the sea, and soaring to the heavens."[15] As Senta acts out her vision of romantic redemption, Wagner bolsters it by recapitulating the ballad's musical themes. We hear the naturalistic crashing of waves give way to a triumphant rapprochement between the Dutchman's motif and Senta's two redemption themes: first, accompanied by brass fanfares and swirling strings; and, subsequently, with ethereal harp arpeggios and soaring oboe melodies, as if to foreshadow the epic transcendence at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

Grimes' Melodies

If Wagner ultimately abjured realism for romanticism, human law and custom for "natural supernaturalism,"[16] Britten's vision for *Peter Grimes* might appear to be the opposite. The composer and his collaborators had worked on socialist documentaries in the 1930s and often framed their opera in similar terms: "I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends on the sea."[17] While Wagner's stage was full of painted gauzes, as if to undermine the maritime setting's solidity, Kenneth Green's set designs evinced a detailed realism. And if *Holländer* begins with a grand romantic fashion overture, full of epic and transcendent musical themes, *Grimes* begins in *media res*, without ceremony but instead with dry, woodwind-accompanied recitative: "Peter Grimes, we are here to investigate the cause of death of your apprentice … Do you wish to give evidence?"[18] In pairing this unusually realistic opening with court proceedings, *Grimes* appears to turn from oceanic romanticism to Armitage's documentary legalism.

For all this, however, romantic visions remain. Like Dutchman, Grimes is a morally ambivalent, outsider figure, more at home at sea than on land. His oceanic imagery serves as a lightning rod for his poetic sensibility, sensitivity to nature, and metaphysical visions, all of which coalesce to overshadow his

[15]Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer: Opera Study Guide*, 68.

[16]For a now-classic discussion of romanticism in terms of "natural supernaturalism," see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

[17]Benjamin Britten, "*Peter Grimes*" (1945), in *Britten on Music*, ed. Paul Kildea (New York: OUP, 2003), 50.

[18]Montagu Slater, "Peter Grimes: An Opera in Three Acts and a Prologue," in *Peter Grimes, Gloriana: English National Opera Guide* (London: John Calder, 1983), 35.

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moral and legal ambiguity. "He is not presented as a worthy character" one early critic explained, "but as an outcast: romantic, Byronic, and misunderstood. There is supposed to be something poetic and elemental about him that sets him apart from the bickering and petty gossip of the township."[19] Even amidst the prologue's legal proceedings, Grimes's romanticism is pitted against the comic fastidiousness of lawyer, Swallow, and the petty gossip and prejudice of the Borough community. At the end of the prologue, the protagonist's ghostly visions of a fateful sea conjure up echoes of Dutchman's "Die Frist ist Um."[20] *Grimes*'s musical romanticism is more obvious still. If Swallow's awkward, woodwind-backed, legalistic patter rivals Daland's satirical quality, *Grimes*'s slow, sustained string accompaniment and seemingly timeless recitation conjures up Dutchman-esque, otherworldly melodies. Meanwhile, the noisy counterpoint of the Borough chorus intensifies the sounds of human intolerance heard in *Holländer*'s Act III drinking scene.

As my response's epigraph makes clear, this opposition between *Grimes*'s oceanic romanticism, and a materialistic, depraved humanity is starkest in the "Boar" scene. It takes place in the wake of the "storm" interlude, which—according to the epigraph's anonymous author—captured the stormy sea with both naturalistic fidelity and universal symbolism. Britten pits these transcendent sounds of nature against the mundane, human soundscape: the storm music fades in and out, cinematically, every time the pub door opens and closes respectively. In The Boar's stoutly human space, we encounter a Dickensian cast of characters to frantic patter, melodramatic declamation, and diegetic drinking songs. When the protagonist bursts through the door, his "Now the Great Bear and Pleiades" aria effects an abrupt transition to a more poetic, redemptive vision of the sea. As Grimes looks up to the stars, singing alternately of "clouds of human grief" and "storm and starlight," we hear an intensified version of the prologue's shimmering string halo and timeless, floating melody.[21]

This tortured romanticism endears Grimes to Ellen Orford, the Borough's very own Senta, who defends the protagonist and offers the prospect of redemptive love. After she informs him that "we've come to take you home," moments before his tragic demise, he recapitulates a fragment of his "What harbour shelters peace?" aria to his characteristically romantic lyricism: "Her breast is harbour too—Where night is turned to day."[22] Instead of emulating Senta and sacrificing herself, however, Ellen reluctantly helps Balstrode to push a solitary Grimes out into the sea. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Armitage reads the ending as offering a "lonelier form of

[19]Desmond Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes—I," *The New Statesman and Nation*, June 9, 1945.
[20]Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes—I," 37.
[21]Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes—I," 45.
[22]Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes—I," 58.

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transcendence on the ocean than that afforded by *Dutchman*. Indeed, on the textual level, we might read the ending as not just a rejection of redemptive love, but also of romantic transcendence itself. After all, when the chorus re-enters, their first words seem to signal a naturalistic indifference to the tragic death: "To those who pass, the Boro' sounds betray. The cold beginning of another day.'[23]

Yet even in the midst of this seemingly objective, documentary ending, a strong dose of oceanic romanticism remains.[24] Tucked away amidst the chorus's imagery of an unpitying nature, the distant toll of mourning resounds: "Or hollow sound from the passing bell / To some departing spirit bids farewell."[25] The violin's grace notes evoke a sobbing lament, which quickly develops into a pathos-laden flute melody. Even when the words suggest naturalistic indifference, the music seems to tell a different story: the chorus's hymn-like textures combine with the warm A major brass chorale and harp arpeggios to evoke music worthy of Senta's divine, redemptive themes. By the time the final stanza turns away from cold naturalism to a more abstract, transcendent vision of the sea, the subtle romanticism of Britten's music seems appropriate: "In ceaseless motion comes and goes the tide / Flowing it fills the channel broad and wide / Then back to sea with strong majestic sweep / It rolls in ebb yet terrible and deep."[26]

Opera, Politics, and the Sea

Although I have highlighted the ways that oceanic opera shunned legal pluralism or exceptionalism in favor of more transcendent visions of sovereignty, my intention is not to deny Armitage's legal contexts and connections. Indeed, as a product of its time, opera could not help but register contemporary positions regarding international law and sovereignty, especially when representing such a powerful signifier as the sea. But registering such positions need not mean endorsing them, and understanding how opera mediated legal discourse means paying particular attention to how its aesthetic tensions impacted its politics.

On the one hand, the naturalistic details, which began in *Holländer*, expanded in *Peter Grimes*, and developed into outright political topicality in *Klinghoffer*, reflected a pressure that opera felt to speak to the concerns of the modern world. On the other, it was often regarded as temperamentally

[23]Shawe-Taylor, "Peter Grimes—I," 58.

[24]For a more detailed exploration of this tension between realism and romanticism or sentimentality in *Peter Grimes*, see the second chapter of Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

[25]Slater, "Peter Grimes," 59.

[26]Slater, "Peter Grimes," 59.

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and aesthetically ill-suited to this kind of realism, steeped as it was in romanticism. While W. H. Auden described the genre as "the last refuge of the High style … [and] grand manner,"[27] Theodor Adorno elaborated: "it is precisely because opera, as a bourgeois vacation spot, allowed itself so little involvement in the social conflicts of the nineteenth century that it was able to mirror so crassly the developing tendencies of bourgeois society itself."[28] Opera may have had its origins, as Armitage and Polzonetti point out, in courtly diplomacy, but it also had its transcendent, mythical, or anti-political phase. Indeed, at a time when every aspect of human life and nature—including international waters—was becoming administered and politicized, opera often garnered popularity for glancing back nostalgically to more transcendent forms of sovereignty: "to call opera Romantic is to simplify," Adorno explained, "it would be appropriate to think of opera as the specifically bourgeois genre that in the midst of a world bereft of magic, paradoxically endeavors to preserve the magical element of art."[29] According to Adorno, Wagner was the *fons et origo* of this tendency, clothing his reactionary politics with mythic or transcendent imagery.

To judge from our case studies, the sea served as a potent lightning rod for this kind of underlying romanticism. The sea had always been a powerful symbol of transcendent forces, but attempts to extend international law across the otherwise uncontrollable sea likely intensified the symbolism. These legal models have a presence—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—in oceanic operas, but they were in tension with and superseded by more romantic conceptions of sovereignty: the sea as a space of inscrutable, even divine, forces, which rendered human law and custom insignificant. Indeed, it is likely because of the difficulty of legislating that the sea became such a useful symbol of transcending legal, moral, and even human sovereignty.

Opera was well suited to represent this tension, not just because of its divided aesthetic loyalties but also because, as a multi-media artform, it could represent these complex tensions in the relationship between its distinct domains. I have sought to show how these tensions played out not just in the plotlines but the music and staging. In both *Holländer* and *Grimes*, for example, we have seen how the music often worked with and against the plot trajectory to undermine human morals, customs, and laws, in favor of altogether transcendent agencies. But even in works like *Billy Budd* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, where the plots seem to point more clearly the opposite way—where human law seems to triumph over the eternal maritime

[27]W. H. Auden, "The World of Opera," in *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber, 1968), 116.

[28]Theodor W. Adorno, "Bourgeois Opera," in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 23.

[29]Adorno, "Bourgeois Opera," 18.

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ambiguities—the music likewise seems to tell a different story, as if glancing back nostalgically to *Holländer*'s or *Grimes*'s oceanic romanticism. Far from acceding to the genre's apolitical fantasies, exploring opera's contribution to international law means taking seriously the creative friction—both artistic and political—between oceanic romanticism and the legal realities it sought to resist.

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