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REVIEW ARTICLE

La vie de Bohème, la vie Quotidienne…

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Lydia Goehr, *Red Sea, Red Square, Red Thread: A Philosophical Detective Story*. Oxford University Press, 2022. 677 pp.

Alexandra Wilson, editor, *Puccini in Context*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. 292 pp.

Nina Penner, *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theater*. Indiana University Press, 2020. 281 pp.

In a well-known scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), the audience discovers that one of the main characters, Madeleine, closely resembles an imaginary character in a painting, allegedly portraying her maternal great-grandmother, Carlotta. Madeleine believes she is possessed by Carlotta, a conviction that arouses the curiosity of John – a former lawyer and police officer – hired by Madeleine's husband to secretly follow her. Other than the portrait, Carlotta never appears physically on screen; her spectral presence is conveyed solely through composer Bernard Herrmann's haunting musical theme. In other words, a non-diegetic element – the musical score – assumes an indirect diegetic function, as it emerges whenever Carlotta's 'presence' is suggested in the scene. Herrmann's music cannot be heard by the characters within the filmic world, but it exists in a liminal space: it translates into audible music for the audience the inevitable spectral energy felt by Madeleine and John. The painting of Carlotta functions as a gravitational centre around which multiple storylines unfold. It also offers the music an opportunity to play an active narrative role. Something similar happens in Lydia Goehr's *Red Sea, Red Square, Red Thread*, which likewise takes a story about a painting as a starting point for intermedial narrative interplay. In the books under discussion here, the visual returns time and again as an anchor for the relationship between operatic fantasy and quotidian life.

Three cardinal themes, assuming different forms and configurations, cut across *Red Sea, Red Square, Red Thread*, Nina Penner's *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theatre* and Alexandra Wilson's edited volume, *Puccini in Context.* First, the theme of *translation* is the force that initially sets Goehr's text in motion. The author introduces her book by asking in what ways different translations of Kierkegaard's red square painting anecdote return a slightly different story. Goehr herself narrates Kierkegaard's anecdote as follows: 'Commissioned to depict the biblical passage through the Red Sea, a painter covered a surface with red paint, explaining thereafter that the Israelites had already crossed over and that the Egyptians were drowned.'[1] In Wilson's and Penner's books, translation also serves as a recurring topic,

[1] Lydia Goehr, *Red Sea, Red Square, Red Thread* (Oxford, 2022), dedication in memoriam.

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here moving beyond the simple question of language, to evoke issues ranging from practical editorial concerns to contemporary performance choices.

The second common theme concerns the relevance of *anecdotes* which, according to Goehr, 'have always been told simultaneously to give out one meaning while withholding another. They give something to plain sight and something different to insight, and the wit lies in the movement between the two' (xvii). Anecdotes occupy a significant place in Alexandra Wilson's *Puccini in Context*, not merely as decorative miniatures but as key aspects of Puccini's life that humanise the composer and illuminate the cultural milieu in which he worked and lived. The rich collection of short essays curated by Wilson shows how anecdotes can anchor scholarly discussion in vivid moments, thus revealing the interplay between historical reality, reception and myth. In *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theatre*, Nina Penner utilises anecdotal evidence from specific productions and performances as analytical touchstones through which she investigates broader questions of narrative agency, interpretation and reception.

Third, the theme of *passage* shapes each text in unique ways. Passage, here, evokes several associations, often intertwined. The Biblical crossing of the Red Sea provides the clearest manifestation of this motif. This theme is the subject of the artist Marcel's painting in Puccini's *La bohème.* In the opening scene of the opera, Marcel is faithfully working on his creation. However, as Goehr shows, the painting undergoes a radical transformation – from masterpiece to mere commodity – between the beginning and the end of the opera, when it reappears used as a tavern signboard. The transformation of Marcel's painting is representative of a passage characteristic of bohemian life more generally, Goehr argues. The very idea of bohemian life captures a transitional existence, suspended between an idealised – at times metaphysical – eternal youth and the reality of social marginalisation and poverty. In Wilson's book, Alessandra Palidda traces a reverse passage when she shows an interesting shift in Puccini's clothing choices, from a 'bohemian look' to a 'successful Italian composer' look.[2] And in Penner's work, the critical passage of authorship in the duel between *Werktreue* and *Regieoper* approaches to opera production forms a central theme.

Taken together, the three books successfully suggest a reconfiguration of the way we look at the operatic canon – whether interpretative, historiographical or artistic. As Goehr notes in her introduction, 'Telling tales was always an improvised way of liberation' (xxx). Goehr draws genealogical and liberating force from a seemingly secondary detail in Puccini's opera, namely Marcel's decision to paint the Red Sea Passage. *Puccini in Context*, in turn, represents a reconfiguration through its contribution to the effort of disentangling Puccini from an otherwise stagnant debate around the historical and aesthetic relevance of the composer's music, placing him into a much more nuanced, human dimension. Meanwhile, Penner, through a plethora of analyses and examples, advances the conversation around how opera today can operate and move towards responsible liberation from dusty authorial cages, keeping itself relevant for modern audiences without corrupting its content into an unrecognisable shape.

In addition to the shared aims and themes outlined above, the three works share another overarching feature, succinctly described by Goehr as a '*micrology of telling details.* [...] In the details lie the idiosyncrasies of the liberty at stake for those excluded or denied a place in the main picture or on the page' (xli). Through attentive and critical analysis of translation choices, of otherwise overlooked anecdotes or stories, or details that reveal profound narrative implications in opera scores and performances, each book considered in this review delivers a significant contribution to opera studies, especially through the questions they ask rather than the issues they answer.

[2] Alessandra Palidda, 'Puccini in Pictures', in *Puccini in Context*, ed. Alexandra Wilson (Cambridge, 2023), 155–61.

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Lydia Goehr's latest philosophical enterprise is a gargantuan, over-decade-long effort that brings its reader into a complex, tortuous but methodical descent into the philosophical opportunities offered by a single anecdote (as the subtitle, *A Philosophical Detective Story*, suggests). This over 600-page-long tome meticulously explores the impact and role of the Biblical story of the Red Sea Passage over the centuries, with a focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, opera, philosophy and art. Goehr builds upon the work of Arthur Danto (to whom a *dedication in memoriam* appears at the very beginning of the book), who borrowed Soren Kierkegaard's Red Sea anecdote to present the main argument behind his idea of the Artworld and the End of Art. In Goehr's words, 'Danto used the anecdote to devise a thought experiment, a lineup of red squares, from which then he produced an analytical philosophy of art.'[3]

Goehr explores the archival potential of anecdotes, and opens the door to a genealogical, archaeological excavation that digs deeper and deeper into histor(ies), gifting with renewed depth details that until now had been overlooked by other scholars and historians. The book is organised into five main parts, each divided into sub-chapters (twenty-one in total). Each chapter is further divided into enigmatically titled paragraphs, usually no longer than a page and a half – enigmatic because they do not offer a pragmatic overview of the content, but rather provide a poetic glance into the topic that follows. This ramified structure is not necessarily hierarchical: each part has an overarching theme which is constantly re-threaded into the Red Sea Passage *fil rouge*, but the book has no teleological tension. The different topics and chapters recall each other, but despite the concluding chapter's return to the book's opening material (figuratively 'tying the knot'), Goehr does not satisfy the reader with a cyclical and explanatory ending. The book keeps digging, pushing the investigation to its extremities: Goehr never surrenders to the tempting sensuality of final answers; her book takes the form of a literary fractal, generated by a single initial anecdote. The theme of escape (the escape of the Jewish from Egyptian rule, the escape of the *Bohémiens* from bourgeois expectations) governs the structure of the book from the preface to the last chapter, evoking Fred Moten's words: 'constant escape is an ode to impurity, an obliteration of the last word.'[4]

Part I is mainly centred around Danto's work, Kierkegaard and Hegel. It explores the transformation of commodities into artworks, and delves into the impossible task of defining a realm in which instances of *real* art are separated from common objects. Danto's *freed artworld* represents liberation from art's aim to a superior and universal ideal of beauty. Goehr here denies the mythological existence of a 'pure state' of Art, prior to the liberal market: 'There was never a pure state', she writes. 'This was an idealized construction of a past serving contemporary critique' (76).

Part II (Chapters 4–8) contains the most useful material for the musicologist interested in what Goehr herself describes as an 'unfamiliar reading of Puccini's *La Bohème*' (160). Chapter 4 starts by outlining the genesis of *La bohème*'s literary material, Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851). By introducing the reader to Murger's work, Goehr encapsulates in her prose the fundamental themes of bohemian life. The true bohemian dwells in an ineffable past – a condition that creates both geographical and temporal distance. The world seen from the perspective of a constant, withered yesterday produces fertile soil for nostalgia; it creates the condition for the tragic existence of the bohemian artist, incapable of completing their *magnum opus.* The eternal youth of the uncompleted work of art mirrors the eternal youth of the bohemian themselves, doomed to die at a young

[3] Goehr, dedication in memoriam. For the work of Danto, see Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1981); Arthur Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy* 61/19 (1964), 571–84.

[4] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC, 2017), vii.

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age, uncorrupted by time and romantically framed by a tragic end. Goehr shows us that a true bohemian is not interested in the idea of completeness, but rather in giving meaning to the struggle of non-completion. As Goehr observes, 'we may ask whether the non-completion of the masterpiece signified a failure or a refusal to finish. If a failure, of what sort; if a refusal, to what end?' (93).

The eternal process of un-doings and re-doings of artworks is a constant presence in Murger's play and in Puccini's opera. As Goehr writes, 'Rodolphe's would-be masterpiece of drama was titled *le Vengeur*. Would-be it remained – made, unmade, and remade so often that stacked up on the floor were as many drafts as attempts by Marcel to repaint, over-paint, and un-paint his *Passage of the Red Sea*' (110). This purposeless busy-ness reveals an existential terror of the void, a fear of idleness that Goehr analyses both in Part I and Part II. According to Goehr, '[Kierkegaard] rescue[d] idleness from its common sickness, to give it back to a nobility of thinking freed from anxieties about quotidian labor' (143). In the case of the bourgeoisie, busy-ness becomes *business*, constantly supplied by daily tasks, work for the sake of accumulation, a fetish for furniture. For the bohemian, the never-ending work of art becomes food for the flames (like Rodolphe's manuscript) or piles of canvases (like Marcel's paintings), until the day that the illusion of freedom is no longer sustainable, and selling a coat won't save the blooming youth of Mimi from a tragic death. In Puccini's opera and Murger's play, these two worlds finally and indelibly collide when Marcel's painting appears again as an anonymous tavern signboard titled *At the Port of Marseille.* In the end, the never-ending struggle for a pure work of art has produced no more than a mere commodity.

In Chapter 6, before delving into Puccini's *La bohème*, Goehr provides a preparatory list of examples from other operas, from *L'Orontea* (1656) by Antonio Cesti and Giacinto Andrea Cicognini, to Alban Berg's *Lulu* (1935), that 'contain *ekphrastic moments* of biblical, prophetic, or promissory significance' (160). Just as Carlotta's pictorial–musical existence in *Vertigo* served as an introduction for this review, here Goehr shows how '*Ekphrastic moments* ... may serve implicitly or explicitly to join works to other works of the same or different genres' (160). Chapter 7, 'Sea Scenes', analyses in depth *La bohème*'s often overlooked first line ('Questo Mar Rosso ...'). The quote can be found in Murger's *Scenes*, but not in the play, 'So why include it at all [in the opera]?', Goehr asks (182). Throughout the chapter, the author offers a vast array of instances, from Puccini's contemporaries to Sally Potter's 1979 film-noir *Thriller*, to show 'agonistic *leitmotifs and life-motifs* that thread the concept of bohème back to the Red Sea' (181). Such a micro-dimensional investigation prompts Goehr to remind the reader of the focus of her book: 'Am I making a mountain out of a molehill by focusing on the painting? Yes and no. My entire book depends on taking opening lines and passing allusions more seriously than their form might suggest we should' (183).

Even though Puccini's opera retains all the elements that characterise the Bohemian myth – 'Can opera survive if the heroine of youthful beauty does not die a premature death?', Goehr asks (91) – it also stages the inherent contradiction of a work labelled as bohemian that nonetheless attained global success. Goehr takes into account the criticism around the over-sentimental nature of Puccini's music for *La bohème*, and asks whether such an approach served 'Ricordi's [Puccini's publisher] *commercial* demand that, at Mimi's death, the audience should be moved as though the orchestral sound were a *sea of tears.* The opera had to overwhelm to sell' (190). In other words, even as the work performed the struggles of the bohemian class, it aligned itself with the aesthetic and economic priorities of the bourgeoisie. After all, as Goehr reminds the reader, Murger and Puccini's works are not bohemian plays or operas, but rather plays and operas '*about* bohème' (190).

Part III shifts to a more biblical and historical perspective. Here, Goehr stresses the 'remaindering of sacred thoughts in secular and profane images of art' (236). She investigates the idea of *Exodus*, and the repeated shifts in perspective between the escape of the Jewish people, and the wandering of the bohemians, weaving the two together. The

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condition of the bohemian resembles the racialised stereotype of the noble savage, or as Goehr quotes from Walter Scott's novel *Quentin Durward*, '*I am a Zingaro, a Bohemian, an Egyptian, or whatever the Europeans, in their different languages, may choose to call our people, but I have no country*' (321, original italics). The bohemian is the individual whose life is irrevocably bound to existential escape. Goehr explores the role of suffering in art, encapsulated in Laocoönian 'perfectly stilled moments', which both support and contrast the motion towards constant escape: 'The aesthetic *movement* made into a *moment* carried the theological transition toward the divine' (251, original emphasis).[5]

With Part IV, Lydia Goehr starts tying a few of the previously loosened knots, by 'linking the Red Sea Passage to the Red Square [of Kierkegaard's anecdote] via the Red Thread' (340). Here she follows 'the oceanic allegory over embattled fields and city streets into red rooms to ask when and why red appears everywhere before one's eyes' (340). She reminds us of Homer's wine-dark sea (341), of Dickens's red-hued embattled streets in *A Tale of Two Cities* (344), of the false news according to which Napoleon drowned in the Red Sea, close to Suez, in 1798 (346). Hugo, Goethe, Hogarth, Poe, Herder, Marx, Nietzsche, Scott, Liszt, Berg – the list of authors, artists and philosophers she engages with keeps growing, as she continues to add new names and forge new connections until the very last page of Part V.

The book's greatest strength is also a reflection of its weakness. This monumental work, despite dedicating great effort to keeping the main thread clear and alive, tends to assume the semblance (especially in the two central parts, III and IV) of an encyclopaedic collection of connections around the Red Sea Passage. Every chapter starts with a clear statement of intent, but Goehr's loyalty to a pure investigative approach quickly submerges the reader in an ocean of quotes and references, leading to a 'sweet foundering' that can be either harsh or pleasant, according to the level of eruditeness of the reader.[6] The end of a part or a chapter returns a feeling of satiety, of controlled completeness, but it never feels final, never reaches a teleological denouement. Each phrase and each reference open further questions; some of them find a continuation in the next paragraph, while others are left unanswered.

Parts I, II and III can exist as standalone readings, while Parts IV and V rely too heavily on previously encountered material to stand on their own. The book as a whole should be approached as a brilliantly written experimental encyclopaedia, governed by fluent prose and a never neglected overarching theme. By doing so, Goehr produces a unique picture of a substantial part of European and Mediterranean history. It is an intellectual and literary experiment as captivating as it is utopian: it places the reader before the paradoxes of knowledge, it opens up new archival possibilities, and it shows how the *monument* of knowledge can easily transform into a *moment*, if only we dare to dig a little deeper.

In Chapter 7, Goehr briefly mentions the relationship between Puccini and his publisher Ricordi, more specifically in the figure of Giulio Ricordi (1840–1912). This relationship played a key role in Puccini's extraordinarily successful career, and it is a prominent theme brought up by many of the authors who contributed to Alexandra Wilson's *Puccini in Context.* Wilson's edited book assembles a mosaic of perspectives on Puccini's professional and private life. The thirty-two chapters are divided into seven parts, each of which explores

[5] See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (Boston, MA, 1887). In his 1766 treatise, Lessing illustrated how visual art captures single, suspended moments, while poetry unfolds in time: 'Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow. Poetry, in its progressive imitations, can use but a single attribute of bodies, and must choose that one which gives the most vivid picture of the body as exercised in this particular action' (92).

[6] See the poem *The Infinite* (1819) by Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837). The *dolce naufragar* (a 'sweet foundering') refers to the dissolution of the individual when beholding the vastness of space and time as a pleasant sense of getting lost in a momentary experience of the absolute.

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a different aspect of Puccini's career, from his relationships with family, colleagues and partners, to his sense of geographical belonging. The essays offer an intriguing glance into the composer's turbulent professional relationships with singers, conductors, librettists and critics. The last three sections delve into issues of religion, politics, gender and race in his music, as well as his legacy and influence in new media, popular culture and repertoire.

The preface and first chapter, both written by Alexandra Wilson, underline Puccini's double nature, as someone who 'flirted both with the most advanced intellectual currents of his time and with popular culture, embracing the high and the low', in a way mirroring the high road and low road of bohemian life described by Goehr.[7] In a broader sense, it also reflects the dichotomy between a romanticised *soft* and a harsher *hard* concept of pastoral, bucolic life that emerged especially at the *fin de siècle.* Wilson observes that Puccini cultivated an idealised notion of bohemian life, exemplified by the founding of a bohemian club near Lake Massaciuccoli and, particularly in the early stages of his career, by adopting a bohemian appearance (see the previously mentioned chapter by Alessandra Palidda). As Richard Erkens explains, Puccini's attitude toward his competitors reveals a man who prioritised his career above all else, willing to betray even his closest friends and colleagues to pursue his artistic goals – an approach to life which, more than anything else, brings to light the contradiction between his bohemian-themed operas, and his bourgeois existence and values.[8] Such a singular coexistence of the bohemian and the bourgeois in Puccini's biography can be traced back to his youthful years. As noted by Ditlev Rindom, Puccini experienced some financial stress during his student years in Milan, a fact that brings Rindom to the conclusion that those experiences 'were part of the inspiration (or at least appeal) for his later adapting Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohéme*'.[9]

As his career took him farther from his homeland, Puccini's nostalgic idealisation of Italy intensified. As Flora Willson notes, Puccini did not like Manchester – at that time a bustling industrial city and an emblem of the Industrial Revolution.[10] At the same time, homesickness provoked in the composer's psyche a sense of nostalgia for Torre del Lago, the lakeside village near Viareggio where he composed many of his major operas. Even when Puccini was writing about Paris, Willson reports, his attitude remained ambivalent. She cites 'one well-known letter to Caselli [in which] he offered a litany of his Parisian dislikes, from the urban wildlife, to "the steam engine, the top hat, the tailcoat"'.[11]

As Nigel Simeone observes, Puccini's nostalgic attachment to Torre del Lago and the recreational activities it evoked found further manifestation in *La bohème*: 'The Marchese Carlo Ginori Lisci owned the hunting rights around lake Massaciuccoli, next to Torre del Lago, and it was from him that Puccini obtained a licence to indulge his passion for blood sports. They became friends, and the Marchese was the dedicatee of *La bohème.*'[12] If the dedication of *La bohème* to a nobleman who had granted Puccini his hunting licence were not enough to betray the opera's bohemian façade, Christy Thomas Adams recalls in her chapter that the marketing campaign for *La bohème* 'effectively revolutionized Italian marketing'.[13] The advertising package included 'new print-based marketing tools, such as posters, playbills, postcards, and reproductions of costumes and set designs in periodicals, as well

[7] Alexandra Wilson, 'Preface', in *Puccini in Context*, xv–xviii, at xv; Wilson, 'Forefathers and Teachers', in *Puccini in Context*, 3–9.

[8] Richard Erkens, 'Contemporaries and Competitors', in *Puccini in Context*, 10–18.

[9] Ditlev Rindom, 'Puccini in Milan', in *Puccini in Context*, 37–44, at 39.

[10] Flora Willson, 'Puccini's Travels: Western Europe', in *Puccini in Context*, 45–52.

[11] Willson, 'Puccini's Travels', 51.

[12] Nigel Simeone, 'Puccini and Technology', in *Puccini in Context*, 105–12, at 106.

[13] Christy Thomas Adams, 'Music Publishing in Puccini's Italy', in *Puccini in Context*, 122–9, at 127.

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as envelope seals and porcelain plates'.[14] *La bohème* was conceived, both by Puccini and Giulio Ricordi, as a memorable event, 'in its capacity to catalyse emotional outpourings on stage and pathos in an auditorium, to leave an audience both appalled and enchanted by short-lived beauty'.[15] As Goehr noticed, everything in the opera's finale was designed to create the most intense emotional response.[16] In keeping with Ricordi's request for a *sea of tears*, Flora Willson observes that 'Even the death of Mimi ... was described by Puccini in a letter to Giulio Ricordi as "the whole point of Act IV"'.[17]

Here, I have focused especially on *Puccini in Context*'s treatment of *La bohème*, and how this interrelates with Goehr's work. However, Wilson's volume is by no means limited to this single opera; on the contrary, it proves highly effective in portraying the Tuscan composer in a manner that encompasses his entire œuvre, from his early works in the 1880s to *Turandot* (performed posthumously in 1926). The variety of perspectives offered in the edited book makes it an excellent research tool for those scholars seeking a concise yet comprehensive and well-organised volume on Puccini's life and works. Perhaps, considering this potential use, a list of references at the end of each of the seven sections – rather than a general bibliography at the end of the volume – would have been more helpful in identifying the sources most directly relevant to the overarching theme of each part.

Finally, Nina Penner's *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theater* is the book in this trio that might, at first glance, appear less related to the other two. Puccini is mentioned only a few times, and he is never the subject of one of the in-depth analyses offered by the author. However, as mentioned in the introduction to this review, Penner explores some of the same overarching themes that the other two books address. First, she points out the fundamental shift of attention in musicological studies 'from composers and their works to performers and performances. Most prior studies [...] confine their inquiry to the contents of the score and libretto, overlooking the realities of what happens to these texts in the rehearsal room.'[18] Such a welcome shift can be also observed in the field of music theory, where the work of theorists such as Janet Schmalfeldt recently demonstrated the relevance and importance of keeping in mind technical performance challenges when looking at texts from an analytical point of view, far from the instrument itself.[19] Schmalfeldt, in her 2011 book *In the Process of Becoming*, references Lydia Goehr's 1992 *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, showing how 'the concept of *musical work*' contributed to the establishment of 'music as an emancipated fine art', but also helped to create a commodified idea of music, where the musical work was immediately – and exclusively – identifiable with the composer's creation, the score.[20]

This is the primary concept that Penner challenges and explores in her book. Taking issue with Abbate's 'suggestion that if one entered the world of an opera, one would predominantly hear speech, not song' (xxi), Penner proposes a fresh approach to the study of narration and authorship in opera, and how these two concepts and their interpretations contribute to the creation of an operatic *story*. For Penner, opera characters communicate through singing even within the fictional world; they enact a character by singing. At the same time, meaning does not end there: medium in art does not merely refer 'to the *materials*

[14] Adams, 'Music Publishingin Puccini's Italy', 127.

[15] Flora Willson, 'Gender Politics in Puccini's Operas', in *Puccini in Context*, 197–204, at 199.

[16] Goehr, *Red Sea*, 190.

[17] Willson, 'Gender Politics', 199.

[18] Nina Penner, *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theater* (Bloomington, IN, 2020), xvii.

[19] For further reference, see Janet Schmalfeldt, 'Phrase', in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Concepts in Music Theory*, ed. Alexander Rehding and Steven Rings (Oxford, 2015), 295–345, at 326.

[20] Janet Schmalfeldt, *In the Process of Becoming: Analytic and Philosophical Perspectives on Form in Early Nineteenth-Century Music* (Oxford, 2011), 7.

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(physical or otherwise) with which artists work but also to the *practices* governing how they use these materials' (23, original emphasis). Pointing out the (never too obvious) fact that 'what makes a musical performance with singing an operatic performance, as opposed to a concert, turns on the function of its extramusical components' (28), Penner offers a rich array of examples that show how contributions to the overall operatic narrative – and its reception – may hide anywhere, carrying fundamental tasks. Discussing Dmitri Tcherniakov's mafia-like staging of 'Ah, chi mi dice mai' from *Don Giovanni* (2010), for instance, she points out that the ironic content of that production is mostly conveyed through 'singers' gestures and facial expressions [...] What singers look like and the actions they perform typically generate story content about the characters they play' (29–30). Since for Penner characters do hear and live the musical world they enact, many narrative shifts can be fully understood only if we interpret music from a diegetic (that is, phenomenal) perspective. In Verdi's *La traviata* (1853), 'Radical changes to the characters' beliefs and desires may be unrealistic in our world, but they are not unrealistic for opera [...] because such exchanges are conducted through song' (33). In the same way, Carlotta's influence in *Vertigo*, mentioned at the start of this review, can be fully understood only if we consider Herrmann's theme as a direct translation of an intangible energy that exists in the film's world and is dimly perceived by the characters. Inversely, Penner also notes that the narrative content of a tone poem like Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote* (1897) would not be imaginable without its title and programme (12–13).

Even though the visual element is fundamental to any discussion of opera, other contributors are equally important in shaping its meaning. Borrowing from Gregory Currie's category of *visual fiction* – through which 'content is determined, in part, by what we see' – she proposes, for opera, a category called *audiovisual fiction.*[21] This category works both ways: if meaning in opera cannot ignore the visual element, 'evaluations of the expressivity of instrumental music depend [...] also on visual information' (28–9).[22] By employing the term *agent*, Penner allows for 'storytellers that are nonhuman' to be considered active narrative participants. Building on the writings of Gérard Genette, Wayne C. Booth, Roland Barthes, Edward T. Cone and others, she challenges the notion that the author and the narrator are necessarily the same individual.[23] Presenting a compelling range of examples, she suggests that a different use of the narrator figure can drastically change the way an operatic story is told. For instance, Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods* (1987) features an ostensibly extradiegetic narrator who suddenly becomes ensnared within the very narrative he presumes to control. In Debussy's and Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Le martyre de saint Sébastien* (1911), the complex fabric of orchestral quotations significantly contributes to the overarching narrative.

The content described here populates the first three chapters of Penner's book. Chapters 4 and 5 dig deeper into the narrative function that real-life authors give to orchestral commentary. Examples range from Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), Sondheim and Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957), Sondheim and Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd*

[21] Quoted from Gregory Currie, 'Visual Fictions', *Philosophical Quarterly* 41/163 (1991), 129–43, at 140.

[22] Other scholars, for instance Tereza Havelková, have examined this same topic through different theoretical frameworks such as hypermedia. See for reference Tereza Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception* (Oxford, 2021).

[23] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY, 1983); Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1983); Roland Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977); Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley, CA, 1974); Cone, 'The World of Opera and its Inhabitants', in *Music, a View from Delft: Selected Essays*, ed. Robert P. Morgan (Chicago, 1989), 125–37. This point has, of course, previously been made in Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1991), but Penner prefers to anchor her arguments in literary theory.

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(1979) and Britten and Plomer's *Gloriana* (1953). Chapters 6 through 8 present different approaches to opera production employed by conductors, directors and singers. Penner divides her discussion primarily into two categories: productions that belong to the *classical paradigm* (or work-performance, *Werktreue*), whose main purpose is to make a modern audience understand a preexisting work the way in which it was originally conceived, and productions aligned with James Hamilton's concept of the *ingredients model* (or performance-work, Regieoper), in which fidelity to the original work becomes less important than the effort to 'retain and even build the audience for these art forms in the twenty-first century' (217).[24] Among the cases examined in this final chapter, one of great significance is Katharina Wagner's 2007 production of *Die Meistersinger*, where she 'ameliorated the anti-Semitism' embedded in the opera by 'flipping Wagner's intended lines of allegiance from Walther and Sachs to Beckmesser' (216–17). Penner notes that Katharina Wagner's production occurred in a twenty-first-century Germany where 'Regieoper is hardly an "endangered cultural asset"' (236), and 'it is hard to see [K. Wagner] as a victim or even as a Beckmesserish underdog', considering 'the many glowing reviews, ample attention in the scholarly press, and the fact that she did get the directorship [of the Bayreuth Festival]' (236–7).

This section of the book, Penner suggests, is also the most autonomous, and can be approached by the reader independently of the information contained in the preceding five chapters. While I agree with this guideline, I would argue that Penner's work functions as a well-balanced whole, in which each chapter contributes to the overarching theme of the book in a tightly interwoven manner, making it difficult to separate the text into smaller parts. Penner's theoretical proposal may have significant repercussions for any field that deals with audio-visual relationships, from sound studies to film music studies. The questions raised in the final three chapters establish direct links with Lydia Goehr's book. When discussing Puccini's adaptation of Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Goehr notes that 'with adaptation comes loss and gain, and for hermeneutical purposes one must attend to both' (91). Implementing the classical paradigm instead of the ingredients model – or vice versa – in a new opera production will cast new light on certain elements while leaving others in shadow. Such a wide array of possibilities unveils the vital force embedded in the operatic repertoire, and if, as Goehr observes, 'strikingly few adaptations have given a significant place to the Red Sea painting' (92) in Puccini's *La bohème*, applying Penner's model to the opera could indeed yield a refreshing interpretation, even for one of the most frequently performed works in the canon. In a certain sense, the constant reworking of Puccini's operas reflects the composer's own tendency to revise his works continually.[25] At the same time, it provides a fertile counterbalance to, in Goehr's words, 'what the bourgeois demanded of art, [namely] that it should hang in the museums for bourgeois citizens to view and preferably also to own' (94). Taken together, these three books invite the reader to challenge and reconsider the various intersections between opera, literature and the myths that not only shape our place in history and culture but through which culture – and, in this case, Puccini's place within modernity – continuously narrates and reimagines itself as monument, movement and moment.

[24] For Hamilton's 'ingredients model', see James R. Hamilton, *The Art of Theater* (Hoboken, NJ, 2007).
[25] See Ditlev Rindom, 'Editing Puccini', in *Puccini in Context*, 217–23.

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