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Suicide in Opera

By GRAEME FEGGETTER

Atkinson (1971), in his chapter studying the role which coroners and research workers play in defining suicide, noted that by 1927 Hans Rost's bibliography of suicide cited nearly 4,000 works on the subject, while 2,000 further publications were listed by Schneidmann and Farberow between 1927 and 1961. He had personally traced another 300 studies subsequently. In the face of this vast output one hesitates to add yet another paper. However, historical surveys of popular views on suicide have received relatively scant attention, much of the most valuable work being carried out by historians.

Stengel's (1973) survey of suicide and attempted suicide contained a chapter on the attitudes of society to suicide, but it is necessarily brief and rather lacks the clarity of the rest of the book. One of the most detailed historical surveys is MacDonald (1977), which clearly illustrates the way in which society's attitudes towards suicidal behaviour altered between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the twentieth century.

It is worth exploring popular attitudes to suicide, not in this case by using the historical record, but by studying the way in which suicide has been portrayed in a particular art form, since there is a lack of such studies. Alvarez (1971) did briefly mention suicide in literature but reserved most of his book to the discussion of authors who committed suicide themselves. Opera, which, like any other art form, reflects contemporary beliefs about interpersonal relationships and society, has been almost entirely neglected within this context. There is a difficulty in using fictionalized characters since there is no objective, independent evidence available to confirm the hypotheses put forward, merely the internal evidence of the works themselves. However, it is the pattern of changing social attitudes towards suicide which is of interest and merits study.

Since the first opera, Peri's *Dafne*, was mounted at Florence in 1597, it is estimated that some 42,000 operas (von Westerman, 1964) have been composed There is insufficient information in Loewenberg (1978) to enable one to carry out a full statistical analysis on the cause of death in opera, but it is a common impression that suicide is a remarkably frequent operatic cause of death, particularly in the nineteenth century when it vied with tuberculosis as a method of bringing an opera to a suitably dramatic conclusion. Harewood (1976) is generally considered to be a guide to the current European operatic repertory. In his book, he describes the plots of 306 operas; in these there are 77 completed suicides, 32 men and 45 women, of which 7 are cases of murder followed by suicide, and 12 attempted suicides, 7 men and 5 women. There are some difficulties in arriving at a satisfactory definition of suicide and obvious problems arise when, as in Berlioz' *Les Troyens* and Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina* the chorus also commit suicide. In considering these operas only the deaths of principals have been included within the figures given.

In clinical practice the rate for attempted suicide is estimated to be at least 12 times that for completed suicide. As can be seen, in opera this striking finding is not replicated. Stengel (1973) and Kessel (1966) both agreed that the risk of a subsequent successful suicide is about two per cent in the year following the first attempt but equally concluded that two largely distinct populations can be defined—those who successfully kill themselves and those who attempt suicide. It is the latter population of attempted suicides that are missing from the operatic stage. One possible explanation for this is given by Kessel (1965) when he noted in the introduction to his paper that previous gener-

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ations expected people to die if they took poison. This argument could be extended by suggesting that in the minds of operatic librettists other attempts at self-harm were equally likely to prove fatal.

It is worth noting that an operatic study has one distinct advantage over clinical studies of successful suicides. As Stengel (1973) has found, the principal subject of the research, the suicide himself, is no longer available as an informant, only 15 to 20 per cent leaving notes behind. There is considerable controversy about the value and reliability of these notes (Atkinson, 1971). Operatic characters usually give their reasons for their suicidal behaviour in considerable detail and at great length during the interval between the fatal act and their ensuing death.

Three distinct views of suicide can be distinguished in opera. The first view, which held the stage during the seventeenth and for most of the eighteenth century, was suicide as a rational, heroic concept. The second view was the idea of suicide which grew from Goethe's novella *The Sufferings of Young Werther* to influence the whole romantic movement and is best described as the romantic concept. The third view, which emerged in the later nineteenth century and is to be found particularly in twentieth century operas by Berg and Britten, is perhaps best described as the realistic concept of suicide where the description and action of the characters conform surprisingly well to the descriptions to be found in Barraclough (1974). There are two distinct groups within this last concept of suicide which need to be described separately—suicide, and murder followed by suicide. There is also an overlap between the romantic and realistic concepts. The death of *Tosca* (1900) and of Liu in Puccini's *Turandot* (1926) can both be categorized as belonging to the romantic concept but are considerably later in date than several of the examples which are used to illustrate the realistic concept.

Heroic suicide

During the seventeenth century and for much of the eighteenth century, the principal subjects of opera and, in particular, opera seria, were the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome, contemporary subjects only appearing in opera buffa or the English ballad opera. As Stengel (1973) and MacDonald (1977) found, the Church's attitude towards suicide was uncompromisingly harsh, treating it as a sin and as a form of murder. The legal penalties in Stuart England were equally harsh, "suicides being denied funerals and burial in the churchyard . . . his movable goods being forfeited to the King's Almoner" (MacDonald, 1977). MacDonald also noted in relation to Jacobean drama that "stage suicides were routine, in fact, and every playgoer had plenty of opportunities to learn that the ancients, whom the learned venerated, thought that suicide was permissible and that the Romans even believed it could be admirable. Most dramatists, however, were careful to point out that what might have been permissible to the ancients was abhorrent to the Christian conscience, and often their eagerness to make this point clear resulted in anachronisms".

The same point can be made in relation to seventeenth and eighteenth century opera. Two examples serve to illustrate this point. In Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1642) Nero's tutor, Seneca, counselled him against the step of discarding his wife Octavia in favour of the noted whore Poppea. Nero's response was to send the captain of the Praetorian guard with the command that Seneca should commit suicide. Seneca gathered his friends about him and in the incomparably grave and dignified aria "Amici, e giunta l'ora", quietly asked them to prepare his bath, accepting suicide as a natural, inevitable end. The other example is Dido in Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689). Dido herself dismissed Aeneas when he revealed Jove's command that he must set sail from Carthage, and in her final noble, sorrowful lament "When I am laid in earth" prepared for her suicide. This same scene was later treated within the romantic concept by Berlioz in *Les Troyens*, but from listening to Purcell's music there is little doubt about the rational, heroic feeling behind Dido's actions. In both these cases suicide is seen as a logical way of balancing life's books which, as Stengel (1973) noted, is a view particularly popular on the Continent. In Durkheim's (1897) classification both these suicides would have been considered altruistic.

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Romantic suicide

In 1774, Goethe published a novella, *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, which had an enormous impact on literary Europe. Stadlen (1979) in discussing the book's impact stated that it was "the obsession with suicide which accounts for the uncanny effect of the novel. An unfounded, rapturous yearning for life is reversed into a longing for death, where the erosion of the will to live is experienced as exuberant strength and his self destruction as an inevitable necessity, which exerts that fatal hypnotic effect". The novel stands at the beginning of the European romantic movement and is said to have led to a suicide epidemic which re-echoed throughout all forms of romantic art.

In opera examples are numerous and it is worth citing two or three of them. In Wagner's opera *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843), the heroine Senta had long been pre-occupied with the legend of the Flying Dutchman and recognized him at the moment when he entered her house. The central theme of the legend was that if a woman could be faithful to the Dutchman until death, he would be redeemed. Despite his later attempts to reject her, she was indeed faithful and willingly flung herself from a cliff at the close of the opera to ensure their joint redemption. In Wagner's later opera, *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), perhaps the apotheosis of the romantic movement in opera, Tristan in the third Act quite deliberately tore the bandages from his wounds to ensure his death at the arrival of Isolde because theirs was a love which could only be conceived of in eternal terms, beyond the grave. A final, more fantastical example is the deaf-mute, Fenella's suicide at the close of Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* (1828), when her final leap achieved the remarkable double feat of covering a distance of nine miles and a high jump of some 4,000 feet from a balcony in Naples to the crater of Mount Vesuvius! Her act of suicide was in response to the news that her brother, Masaniello, who promised to avenge her lost honour, had been poisoned as a traitor.

Realistic suicide

Starting in the nineteenth century, some operatic composers began to achieve a greater degree of naturalism in their work. The sweeping high romantic gestures of Tristan, Senta or Fenella were no longer adequate as a mirror for society. In their depiction of characters, composers as various as Verdi, Puccini, Britten and Berg portrayed acts of suicide and murder followed by suicide which would not be out of place as psychiatric case studies. Popular imagination had begun to accept the idea that suicide was a product of mental illness or a response to a series of intolerable stresses, just as society, particularly in Europe, had begun to take suicide out of the ambit of criminal law. Stengel (1973) stated that the laws governing suicide were repealed in France in 1790, in Prussia in 1796 and in Austria in 1850. In the operatic examples which follow, two distinct groups can be defined. These are the episodes of murder followed by suicide and the successful suicide.

Murder followed by suicide

West (1965) made the valuable point that one in three murders in England and Wales is followed by suicide, while a further 15–20 per cent of murderers attempt suicide. He further found that almost all the suicides occurred within hours or days of the murder, the aggression which had been turned outwards towards the victim being internalized and leading to suicide. It was unlikely that such suicides were the result of detection and fear of punishment and public disgrace. He also found that the characteristics of these murderers differed quite considerably from the control group of simple murderers, being older, usually married and living within a conventional family setting free from criminal association. Surprisingly, he found that only one half of the offenders were considered sufficiently abnormal to be regarded as insane or fulfilling the legal standards of diminished responsibility, the same proportion that he found in a comparable sample of simple murderers brought to trial and not acquitted. However, he suggested that his own criteria for the diagnosis of mental illness might be more restricted than a jury's. He went on to state: "There was a sizeable group of persons, free from previous mental disturbance, who committed murder and suicide under pressure of collapsing

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physical health or impending disease. Conscious motives of jealousy, vindictiveness and resentment were much more frequently displayed by the male offenders, among whom the rejected lovers, jealous husbands and violent tempered men formed a sizeable group".

Otello (1887), Verdi's penultimate opera, is the most famous operatic example of murder followed by suicide. He was undoubtedly a violent tempered jealous husband who showed signs of aggression in Act 2, attacking Iago physically when Iago first began to feed the seeds of suspicion in his mind. At the close of Act 3 he had some sort of fit which was probably epileptic. He had developed a well established paranoid delusion about his wife's infidelity, based upon the handkerchief and Cassio's reported words uttered in sleep, and murdered Desdemona in the grip of what is classically described as the Othello syndrome (Enoch *et al*, 1979) whose eponymous title is drawn from Shakespeare's original play.

The second example of madness leading to murder followed by suicide is to be found in Berg's opera *Wozzeck* (1925), based on Büchner's play. The character of Wozzeck was seen by George Steiner (1961) as the first real tragedy of low life, repudiating the implicit suggestion of Greek, Elizabethan and neoclassical tragedy that "tragic suffering is the sombre privilege of those who are in high places". Steiner saw Buchner's use of language as dramatic striving to achieve the effect of a nightmare. However, there seems little doubt that Wozzeck was actually psychotic. He was a private soldier who had been treated as an object by the Captain whose servant he was and the Doctor who performed dietetic experiments on him. The Doctor noticed his insanity in the first Act, but did nothing about it. Wozzeck had a girlfriend Marie, who had borne him a child but was unfaithful during the opera with the glamorous figure of the Drum Major. Wozzeck threatened suicide as a response to the taunts of the Doctor, Captain and Drum Major, murdered Marie and then returned to the scene of the crime, looking for the murder weapon, a knife. He stumbled over Marie's body, called out "Murder", found the knife, threw it into the pool and then waded into the water in order to throw it further in, and drowned himself. He was agitated, suffered from early morning waking and was clearly depressed before he committed murder. His final actions as he saw the blood-red moon rising above the wood have all the characteristics of a depressive fugue state.

West (1965) found a history of previous violence which Otello displayed, and previous suicidal threats or attempts, which Wozzeck displayed, to be significant. In his insane group, depression was the predominant illness and Wozzeck was almost certainly suffering from a psychotic depression. Otello's illness was probably a paranoid state, though the syndrome named after him can equally be found in the setting of a depressive illness. In the third example, from one of Verdi's less familiar operas *Luisa Miller* (1849), Rodolfo, the murderer, was completely sane, but believed his lover, Luisa, to have been unfaithful, which was a pattern found by West in his series. Luisa revealed the truth after they had both drunk poison and they died reconciled.

Successful suicide

To illustrate the way in which operatic characters conform to clinical stereotypes, it is possible to present the next suicidal operatic heroine as a case study.

Miss C.C.S., aged 14, married a foreigner. Her father died from suicide when she was a child. At the wedding ceremony, she was denounced by one of her uncles, who was a priest, for giving up her native religion, and her whole family promptly deserted her. Shortly after her marriage her husband left her, but she bore him a son, called Trouble, whom she brought up by herself for three years, never doubting that one day her husband would return. He did return, with a new wife, and made the extraordinary proposal that he should adopt the boy and take him back to his own country. She told his new wife to wait for half an hour when the boy would be theirs, and committed suicide.

The girl is Cio Cio San, the heroine of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Her age and sex make it more likely that she would attempt suicide rather than successfully complete the act, but her death neatly confirms Stengel's

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point that there is a distinct overlap between the two populations. Her act could be seen as an act of internalized aggression, and no matter how altruistic her action appears, it is certain that Lieutenant Pinkerton, a singularly insensitive hero, would feel considerable guilt for the rest of his life. It has been suggested that since she was Japanese there were cultural factors which made her suicide an inevitable ritual, belonging to the earlier heroic concept. However, Puccini's music, centrally based in the Western European operatic tradition, leaves no doubt that feelings of internalized aggression were present and that he saw her death through European rather than Japanese eyes. A comparison of Purcell's music for Dido's suicide strongly reinforces this point.

The second example of suicide is an egotistical one in Durkheim's classification. In Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), the hero fits neatly into Barraclough's (1974) observation in his series of 100 suicides that 93 per cent suffered from a recognizable psychiatric illness. Grimes was an isolated character, no longer young and completely at odds with the community in which he lived. He was a clumsy, inarticulate man, whose lyrical outbursts depicted his own sense of isolation and love of the sea. He had great difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships, his sole relationship in the opera being with Ellen Orford, the local schoolmistress. He acquired a new apprentice, having lost the last one at sea in mysterious circumstances. Ellen noticed bruises on the apprentice and was overheard by Mrs Sedley, the local busybody, who promptly raised a posse. Grimes panicked and put to sea but his apprentice fell from the cliff and died. His next scene in the opera was described by Harewood (1976) "Grimes has a long mad scene to himself, babbling of home and singing snatches that remind him of the various stages of his tragic journey". He called for Ellen but did not recognize her, experienced hallucinations and was either suffering from a psychotic illness or an acute delirious state. He responded to Captain Balstrode's command to sail out to sea and sink his boat. Atypically Grimes had given no previous hints of suicide, nor apparently attempted it before. Nevertheless, he remains the ideal modern successful suicide—male, middle-aged, single and totally isolated from the community, as well as being probably psychotic and beyond reach by his friends.

Attempted suicide

If both these facets of realistic operatic suicide, murder followed by suicide and successful suicide, are well described in the psychiatric literature, there remains the striking finding that attempted suicide is scarcely to be found in opera at all. This may partly be explained by the fact that attempted suicide is largely a twentieth century phenomenon and successful twentieth century operas which enter the regular repertoire are few and far between. Unlike nineteenth century audiences who were eager to see the latest work of Meyerbeer, Halévy or Verdi, the twentieth century audience responds to modern opera by staying away from the theatre.

In describing attempted suicide, Kessel (1966) perceptively remarked that "what 80 per cent of the patients were attempting was not suicide. Moreover what they were attempting, they commonly achieved. To that end the simulation of death, consciously enough, the hint of suicide, heightened its effectiveness. But the act was not attempted suicide. Doctors do not have to be deceived by their simulation, the drama was enacted for their own circle only". Mozart replayed this drama described by Kessel quite brilliantly in both *Così fan tutte* and *Die Zauberflöte*. In *Così fan tutte*, the two young men who were attempting to seduce each other's fiancées apparently took poison and then acted out the drama of their death in the most histrionic fashion. In Bancroft's (1979) analysis of suicidal motivation, their motives were clearly instrumental in order to make people understand how desperate they were and change their minds. Their drama did work and the girls fell in love with the wrong men.

In *Die Zauberflöte*, Papageno's final aria, when he attempted to hang himself because he despaired of ever seeing his promised wife Papagena, brilliantly exploited the pantomime device of a direct appeal to the audience. He asked one of the pretty maidens in the audience to embrace him and then counted up to three. In the

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absence of any response he bid goodbye to the wicked world and made to hang himself. He was rescued by the Three Boys but nevertheless this aria convincingly portrays the appeal motive of suicidal behaviour which was brought out most strongly by Stengel (1973). In Bancroft's (1979) terms this was an expressive gesture, since it was a response to circumstances in which he had found himself and he had no real wish to die. He was also making an instrumental gesture because he was attempting to frighten and influence the audience, though he did not admit this in his aria, a characteristic response which was commonly found in Bancroft's paper.

It is clear from these examples that the changing popular view of suicide from the heroic rational gesture through the great romantic expression of frustrated love to modern clinical descriptions of murder followed by suicide and successful suicide is reflected in the plot and music of these operas. The examples are necessarily selected to illustrate the hypothesis put forward and could not be described as a random sample. Nevertheless, it is suggested that this is a true pattern, which gains further support from MacDonald (1977) and Alvarez (1971) and that, if this hypothesis is correct, then a review of other art forms such as drama or the novel would yield a similar changing attitude towards successful suicide and suicidal behaviour.

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(The date given after each opera is the year of its first performance).

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G. S. Feggetter, M.A., M.B., B.Chir., M.R.C.P. (UK), M.R.C.Psych., *Senior Registrar in Psychiatry, The Warneford Hospital, Oxford*

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