

AXEL ENGLUND

Of Great Pitch and Moment

Some Reflections on Operatic Performance, Interpretation,
and Hermeneutics

Opera is a matter of life and death, nothing less. Should this claim be in need of support, one might, for instance, take the historical route and start with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice through which the genre's foundations were laid around the year 1600 in the first operas of Peri and Monteverdi. Here operatic singing itself is the *laissez-passer* that grants passage between the world of the living and that of the dead. One could equally well cite the extremes of opera fandom, where opera is something one lives *and* dies for. Few writers have rendered this devotion with as much candor and precision as Wayne Koestenbaum in *The Queen's Throat*. "If I die a peaceful death, I want to have an opera record playing in the room," writes Koestenbaum, "because of its scenes of dying and departure, and because singing uses the body so exorbitantly and ultimately that I want to be reminded, when I leave my body, that even when I lived inside it I never completely used it."¹ Yet another option would be to remind oneself of the operatic undertows of misogynist violence traced in Catherine Clément's classic essay *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, which reveals the startling consistency with which opera's core repertoire conflates its aesthetic climaxes with the death of the female leads.²

A slightly less expected configuration of life, death, and opera, however, can be found in Carolyn Abbate's intense and influential polemic "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" published in 2004.³ Here interpretation is posited as the destructive force that threatens to kill opera. Abbate argues that musicology has consistently held on to a gnostic bent, taking as its object the musical text and work, but has shunned "real" music (that is, music in live performance), the experience of which is drastic in character. Musical hermeneutics gets to bear the brunt of her criticism. Searching for a way to decipher an immanent content (which is how Abbate understands hermeneutics) is what makes us erroneously think of music as fixed works rather than as events. Abbate's concluding statement reads: "A performance does not conceal a cryptic truth to be laid bare. But accepting its mortality, refusing to look away, may nevertheless be some form of wisdom."⁴ The notion of unearthing a cryptic truth comes with a disturbing

1 Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 192.

2 Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: Tauris, 1997).

3 Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004).

4 Abbate, "Drastic or Gnostic?," 536.

whiff of disinterment, and the polarized figure of life and death is a recurrent feature in Abbate's argument. She suggests that it can be useful to think of musical works as "living things towards which we must develop an ethical position," and adds, with distinct overtones of the erotic, that "material presence and carnality" is what produces "our love for music to begin with."⁵ Musical hermeneutics, by contrast, not only puts these living beings "in a cage [...] continuously and without regrets"; it also displays a "morbid grandiloquence," which has to do with the fact that it is a "byproduct of classical music's slow-motion death in the twentieth century."⁶ The recordings and scores, with which musical hermeneutics typically deals, she subsumes under the name of "music's necropolis."⁷ This phrase was used for the same purpose in her book *In Search of Opera* from 2001: "To write about opera, to represent it in fiction, or as a metaphor in poetry, or as a figure in philosophy, is to add to the architecture of its necropolis."⁸

Taking Abbate's drastic imagery as my point of departure, I aim to review and evaluate some recurrent tropes, patterns, and arguments in contemporary criticism, and to elaborate on what I take to be their implications for the field of opera studies. Before I do so, however, a brief recapitulation of the developments in the field over the last decades is in order.

Opera, of course, is an art that takes place not on the printed page of a score, but in a concrete staged performance. It is a fundamentally temporal experience, equally defined by visual and aural impressions. Self-evident as this fact may seem, scholarly writing on opera, for a long time, paid little attention to it. In terms of academic territory, opera was chiefly the province of musicology, and musicology in a very limited sense, which took the study of musical structure as its primary purpose. Around 1990 a number of studies began to emerge which challenged this view. Since then scholars associated with the school of New Musicology—Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, and others—have addressed music as cultural practice, deeply involved in the production of social and ideological meaning, and developed methodologies based on critical hermeneutic attitudes to musical scores.⁹ During the 1990s, moreover, proponents of literary studies, psychoanalysis, film studies, and philosophy also raised the critical attention to the opera libretto to new levels of sophistication.¹⁰

Although this body of work did much to wring the field of opera studies out of the stiffening hands of structuralist musicology, it continued to focus on the written work rather than the theatrical event: Opera remained a textual object. Roughly since the year 2000, however, the much-noted "performative turn" within the humani-

5 Ibid., 517 and 529.

6 Ibid., 517, 535, and 151, respectively.

7 Ibid., 510.

8 Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), ix.

9 For early and influential examples, see Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Susan McClary *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

10 A collection of seminal essays—by, among others, Friedrich Kittler, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean Starobinski, Samuel Weber, and Slavoj Žižek—can be found in David J. Levin, ed., *Opera Through Other Eyes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

ties has led to a growing interest in thinking about opera in and as performance, and several interesting attempts have been made to reframe the methodology of opera studies. David Levin's *Unsettling Opera* from 2007 remains, a decade after its publication, the most ambitious attempt at expanding the vocabulary and methodology of opera-staging criticism.¹¹ While Levin still values the project of interpretation, others have been less inclined to do so: Not only Carolyn Abbate, but also Michelle Duncan, Clemens Risi, Mary Ann Smart, and many others have made thought-provoking interventions into this debate.¹² Typically, this work revolves around notions of liveness, presence, and corporeality, on the one hand, and notions of interpretation, meaning, and hermeneutics on the other—often with strongly agonistic positions pitting those conceptual clusters against each other.

On the anti-hermeneutic side, few writers have been as influential as Abbate or as uncompromising in their polarization. In her above-mentioned article, interpretation and writing, with their concomitant focus on meaning, come across as morbid, murderous, even necrophilic: In so far as our original, carnal love for opera is redirected towards representations of it in media other than the live performance—scores, texts, recordings—we actually desire dead objects. The live event of music is mortal, and hermeneutics constructs a suffocating crypt to put it in, only to triumphantly desecrate it. But what, precisely, does life mean here? To be alive is to be subject to change, because living beings react to and interact with their surroundings. To be dead, by contrast, is to be mute and unchangeable (which, notably, also goes for the state of immortality, although not for survival).¹³ Life is above all fleeting, ephemeral—in short, it is temporal. Its epitome, therefore, is the *moment*, which is always constituted by its own passing.¹⁴ When Faust (who is just as sick of the gnostic work as Abbate) decides to postpone his suicide, what he hopes for is an *Augenblick* that inspires him to say: "Verweile doch, du bist so schön" [Stay a while, you are so beautiful]. It seems natural enough, then, that those who privilege liveness and absorption over interpretation take recourse to the concept of the moment.

11 David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

12 See Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004); and Clemens Risi, "Opera in Performance—In Search of New Analytical Approaches," *The Opera Quarterly* 27 (2011). The 2011 conference of the American Musicological Society in San Francisco featured a panel under the heading "Thinking Through Performance: Operatic Production since 1960" with contributions by, among others, Mary Ann Smart, David Levin, and Ryan Minor. Also, a relevant volume of essays that arose from the Music Theatre working group of the International Federation for Theatre Research is Dominic Symonds and Pamela Karantonis, eds., *The Legacy of Opera: Reading Music Theatre as Experience and Performance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013).

13 For an incisive account of the difference between survival in life and immortality beyond it, see Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); especially the introductory chapter entitled "Of Chronolibido," 1–19.

14 In Hägglund's words: "The passage of time requires not only that every moment be superseded by another moment, but also that this alteration be at work from the beginning. Every moment must negate itself and pass away *in its very event*. If the moment did not negate itself there would be no time, only a presence forever remaining the same." Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 3 (italics in original).

What primarily interests Abbate, who is drawing here on the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, is “the relationship between real music and its action upon performers and listeners at a nonrepeatable moment and place, in a context that will exist only once and not again.”¹⁵ The relationship thus established at this moment becomes “so fundamental, so viscerally powerful and ephemeral, so personal, contingent, fugitive to understanding, that it elicits the unfashionable.”¹⁶ For something that is supposedly unfashionable, however, this kind of moment appears with a remarkable frequency in contemporary opera studies.

Let me give a few examples, which are rather bluntly aimed at drawing the reader’s attention to the use of the word *moment*. Clemens Risi, searching for a new analytical approach to opera in performance in a 2012 article, suggests it should start “from the observation that in operatic performances moments can be experienced that cannot be explained as mere translation of a prewritten text or score.”¹⁷ He goes on to specify the kinds of moments he is talking about:

moments to which I cannot immediately assign any significance or meaning, moments when nothing other than the actual configuration of the employed materials (bodies, voices, rhythms, sounds, and tones) and their effect on the spectator is relevant, and where this material comes into existence only in the *moment* of performance.¹⁸

Risi, then, repeats the word with remarkable frequency and finishes by italicizing it. The same goes for Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who in *The Production of Presence* argues for a culture of presence, as opposed to the reigning culture of meaning. He talks of a class in which he wanted to “evoke for my students and to make them feel specific *moments of intensity* that I remember with fondness.”¹⁹ The first example in his list of moments comes from opera: “I wanted my students to know, for example, the almost excessive, exuberant sweetness that sometimes overcomes me when a Mozart aria grows into polyphonic complexity and when I indeed believe I can hear the tones of the oboe on my skin.”²⁰

Of some importance here is the implied association of aesthetics with erotics, which has been struggling against interpretation at least since Susan Sontag launched a heavy punchline at it fifty years ago, claiming that: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”²¹ Perhaps this notion still echoes as a moralist overtone in Abbate’s life and death imagery: Sound eroticism (pun intended) is a life-giving activity,

15 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?” 529.

16 Ibid.

17 Risi, “Opera in Performance,” 283.

18 Ibid. (italics in original).

19 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 97 (italics in original).

20 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 97. This passage is also quoted in Smart, Mary Ann, “An Operatic Alphabet,” paper presented at the AMS panel “Thinking Through Performance: Operatic Production since 1960” (2011), 2.

21 Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), 14.

while the necrophilic inclination of hermeneutics is a non-reproductive perversion. Such moralism is emphatically absent, by contrast, in Samuel Abel's book *Opera in the Flesh*, although Abel is equally interested in sensual immersion. Like Koestenbaum, he writes with intense personal investment from the perspective of gay male subjectivity and wholeheartedly embraces the experience of live opera as a sexual act by repeatedly stressing the importance of singular moments:

Opera's music penetrates my ear, works around my body as the opera progresses, and climaxes at regular intervals, usually at the ends of arias. The orgasm inhabits the music itself, and it also enters my body, sending me into sexual ecstasy at the same moment the music enacts its climax.²²

With this shop-soiled, but still apposite metaphor we may ask whether it is reasonable that the experience of an absorbing orgasm should prevent us from discussing what sex means to us, its personal, social, and political significance. I do not think so. I call Gumbrecht as my witness to illustrate this point, as he does not think it problematic to continue his above-quoted list of enjoyable moments in the following manner:

I want my students to live or at least to imagine that moment of admiration (and perhaps also of despair of an aging man) that gets hold of me when I see a beautiful body of a young woman standing next to me in front of one of the computers that give access to our library catalogue.²³

The culture of presence does not care that erotic absorption in the moment is conditioned by power structures. As much as we love the ecstasy of *jouissance*, it has a flip side that we need to acknowledge. It is our responsibility to counterbalance it with critical attention to its ideological substrates—which those privileged by age, gender, ethnicity, and academic stature are liable to forget when caught up in the erotics of the present moment. Presence, if it is polemically propagated as the *only* way of honoring the experience of opera, comfortably liberates us from any ideological considerations of class, race, ethnicity, or gender.

In its most polemical form, found in Abbate's article, the glorification of absorption amounts to a willful short-circuiting of critical readings, allowing the many ideological problems of, say, Wagnerian music drama—to pick a not so random example—to be swept under the sumptuous rug of romantic orchestral texture with a vibrant voice object on top. Needless to say, the caveat about unacknowledged perpetuation of ideological power structures has been and should be issued at philosophical hermeneutics too: Hans-Georg Gadamer's emphasis on preliminary understanding, for instance, obviously runs the risk of promoting the hermeneutic circulation of received wisdom. But if the obsession with presence makes us dismiss interpretative dialogue about meaning as irrelevant per se, it forecloses the opening toward immanent criticism that Gadamer's perspective actually does

22 Samuel D. Abel, *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 88.

23 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 97.

allow for, namely his explicit emphasis on the open-endedness and mobility of our interpretative horizons.²⁴

Abbate notes that “saying what [the work] represents reflects the wish *not* to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us.”²⁵ The example she gives in the subsequent paragraph is *Die Meistersinger*. Of course, Abbate stresses later on, she knows the critical literature on that opera as well as Wagner’s political essays, the opera’s reception history, and the “unspoken anti-Semitic underside to the comedy.”²⁶ Without musical hermeneutics, however, she would not have known, because if we had not let critical interpretation accompany our musical transport once the moment had passed, that literature would not have existed.²⁷

We may also observe that the very concept of climactic moments presupposes that they are always preceded and followed by non-climactic ones. However much I admire *Parsifal*, I venture to suggest that there is no such thing as a five-hour moment of sensual absorption. Furthermore, there are other significant moments than the climactic ones (which goes for sex as well as for opera). Shifting the outlook to the writers dealing hermeneutically with live performances of opera and music, one may note a similar tendency to focus on the moment that distinguishes itself from the others. For instance, consider how the following example from David Levin’s reading of Peter Sellars’ *Le Nozze di Figaro* illustrates this. Levin writes:

the shift between the andantino and the allegro of the finale is registered on-stage: the characters are temporarily suspended in mid-action in a moment of musical self-reflexiveness [...] the characters [...] take a sudden, unexplained, and otherwise uncharacteristic turn toward the introspective, turning slowly, quizzically, as if asking: Where are we? What is going on?²⁸

This is not really a musically absorbing passage, as Levin stresses: “The moment does not call attention to itself as especially important.”²⁹ It is not a drastic, climactic moment, yet it is a moment that poses a question, and thus sets an interpretation in motion. Similarly, a passage that occurs a few pages later zeroes in on an instant that suggests a question: “In the final moments, amid the raucousness, the principals pair off and exit the stage. And as the final accord resounds, we are afforded a fleeting glimpse of a single figure, Cherubino, left behind. What are we to make of this?”³⁰ The moment where something odd happens, something that catches our attention not by

24 See for instance Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2010), 309.

25 Abbate, “Drastic or Gnostic?” 505–6 (italics in original).

26 *Ibid.*, 535.

27 The discussion about the anti-Semitic strata in *Die Meistersinger* is too extensive to review here, but prominent examples can be found in, for instance, in Barry Millington, “Nuremberg Trial: Is There Anti-Semitism in ‘Die Meistersinger?’” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3, no. 3. Abbate refers to Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and The Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 117–35.

28 Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 85.

29 *Ibid.*, 81.

30 *Ibid.*, 89.

being a musical orgasm, but by inciting questions about how to make sense of, how to understand the meaning of what is going on—this is the moment when hermeneutic attention is born, and it happens (or may happen) during the performance.

While Levin's hermeneutic moment occurs in an actual, singular performance, Lawrence Kramer has suggested the recurrence of such moments as indispensable to opera in general. In his 2014 essay on opera and meaning in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* Kramer takes as his point of departure the notion of a "reflective moment," which typically involves what he calls a "song act"—that is, an instance of operatic singing that is heard as singing not only by the audience, but also by the fictional characters.³¹ Kramer understands this type of vocal utterance as a specifically operatic counterpart to the speech acts theorized by J. L. Austin:

Like its verbal analogue, the song act does what it does, or not, by channeling a certain force through its utterance—in opera through the sensory weight of the song act's performance as song. A regular effect of that force is to broach the possibility that the song act may be taken as an instance of generic self-staging. It may, not must: the reflective moment becomes what it is by inviting or demanding interpretation, with all the uncertainties that this entails.³²

The reflexivity of this moment, to Kramer, is a generic imperative of opera: Through the song act opera is continuously staging its own genre (the examples on which Kramer elaborates include the second-act canzonetta in *Don Giovanni* as well as the pastoral air, the protagonist's entry in the song contest, and Wolfram's hymn to the evening star in *Tannhäuser*). The central role of this characteristic, in turn, makes opera essentially dependent on meaning, because it is the reflective moment that is chiefly responsible for creating the critical distance that is a call to interpretation.

Having reached this operatic moment, which is far removed indeed from the moments of physical presence evoked by Abel, Gumbrecht, and Risi, I would like to stress two points. The first is simple, namely that the moments evoked above are typically understood in terms of resistance to that by which they are surrounded. Even though not all of these critics indulge in unnecessary extremes of polarization, the definition of a given moment demands that it is understood in contrast to the stretches of time that surround it. In other words, it is the nature of the moment to be singular—to be singled out, detached from a temporal continuum.

The second point is even simpler: Presence comes to us in moments, and so does meaning. As every operagoer has experienced, opera is long (sometimes too long). But during the hours we are seated in the opera house we may now and then experience a moment striking enough to present itself to us as a vantage point from which the performance as a whole—and, by extension, even operatic performance in general—can be made out. This gesture appears over and over in all of the texts from which I have quoted here; Abel, Levin, Abbate, Gumbrecht, and Risi are all fond of it, as are Kramer

31 Lawrence Kramer, "Meaning," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 356.

32 Kramer, "Meaning," 356.

and McClary. The prominent rhetorical position thus granted by opera studies to the concept of the moment is, I believe, worth dwelling on.

Perhaps one may object that this recurrence of the singular moment is accidental—an insignificant turn of phrase—or a mere matter of convenience: When one wants to connect a theoretical argument to an actual operatic performance—or, indeed, any aesthetic product or practice—exemplification is necessary, and the isolated, captivating occurrence is a handy means of making one's point. There is, however, something more to the idea of the moment when it comes to opera, which has to do not only with the aforementioned emblematic function of the moment vis-à-vis life and liveness (although that remains important), but also with the specific overabundance of the genre.

Opera's hallmark is the surplus of diverse elements and impressions, of semiotic systems and artistic temperaments, of parts that do not add up. The perennial debate about the ascendancy of words or music indicates that the genre has always been conceived as a sum of parts that struggle simultaneously with each other and with the impossible task of forming a whole. Whether in the speculations of the Florentine Camerata or those of Richard Wagner, the seamlessly harmonious coexistence of words and music is only ever located either in a prelapsarian state or a projected future. But words and music are not the only combatants: The dominant role of the singers in the early 18th century, when the virtuoso voice and its elaborate ornamentation were elevated over libretto and score alike, emphasized the performer as another combatant, and with the role of emancipated *mise-en-scène* and radical stagings in the 20th century, the directors and their visions have come to constitute yet another. The same goes for sensory impressions, of course: In opera the visual and aural registers have as a rule competed for the audience's attention with frantically hyperbolic aesthetics. I would not hesitate to say that this conflicted overabundance in different registers lies at the very core of opera's particularity (the obvious contender being the operatic voice itself, which always remains the genre's most distinctive feature). If it is a center, however, it is one that cannot hold. And although postmodern thought has taught us to see how everywhere discourses are falling apart, to no genre or medium is that falling apart as defining as it is to opera.³³

Precisely because the experience of opera is not just multifaceted, but superabundant to the point of disintegration it resists treatment as an organic whole. When that superabundance is distributed on a temporal axis—that is, when it becomes opera's characteristic excess of duration—the parts that refuse to form a whole become moments that stand in relief against an unfolding process. The significant moments of opera, as I suggested above, can be understood less as points in time than as points that *resist* being subsumed into a temporal continuum. To speak about the moment in opera, then, is not only to acknowledge the essential temporality that is specific to live

33 This affinity between opera and postmodern thought has been noted in numerous places. See, for instance, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, introduction to *Analyzing Opera*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 23–24. Abel, on his part, suggests that a “postmodern elusiveness stands at the core of opera's endless fascination and fuels its powerfully ambiguous eroticism.” Abel, *Opera in the Flesh*, 83.

performance, and most rigorously so to music, but also to emphasize the difficulties of incorporating each individual part into a continuous temporal whole, which are specific to opera. To attend to a specific moment is to detach a slice of time from the temporal stretch of an opera and let it stand as *pars pro toto* for the performance itself, or even for the genre as a whole. This rhetorical device becomes so appealing precisely because in opera the parts—whether moments, media, or sensory channels—do not add up to a whole.

If the difficulty of melding together disparate elements marks opera in all its registers, theorists have, from the genre's very beginnings, tried to cope with this situation simply by assigning primacy to one of the elements involved: *prima la musica, poi le parole* (or, on occasion, the other way around). To give a contemporary example, Paul Robinson, in a polemical chapter of his book *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters*, exalts an experience of listening to Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* thus: "I found myself listening to the performance over and over. I listened without a libretto; nor did I consult a synopsis of the opera. I simply indulged myself in the thing itself."³⁴ The libretto and the synopsis having been cleaned out, together with scenery, acting, and stage drama (Robinson is listening to a sound recording), the purity of music is the only remaining contender for the prestigious title of the Thing Itself.

The temptation to reduce the excess of opera to a given element, it would seem, is just as strong when it comes to the aesthetic attitudes that have been my focus here: the focus on meaning versus the focus on presence. To postulate, on the basis of the moment that you enjoy most, that *this* is the essence of operatic experience is just as questionable as appointing a winner in the battle between the sensory channels, semiotic systems, and artistic contributors. Letting moments of presence and absorption eclipse moments of critical reflection and meaning is as much of a betrayal to the live experience of opera as the other way around. In fact, the mutual exclusion between the two poles is in itself a distortion of what in actual experience is an on-going dialectic, or perhaps more accurately, an erratic vacillation or vibrant coexistence.³⁵ That exclusion, I submit, appears only if the move from the instantiating striking moment to the theoretical conception is made in a carelessly totalizing frame of mind.³⁶

Adding the audience's aesthetic attitude to the list of opera's internal conflicts, however, does not imply that it is coextensive with the other ones. This insight is important: To simply align words and language with text and interpretation, and music with liveness and immersion, is an out-and-out blunder. These pairs cannot be neatly

34 Paul Robinson, "Reading Libretti and Misreading Opera," in *Opera, Sex, and Other Vital Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 49.

35 David Levin aptly dubs this tendency in Abbate's argumentation "either/or-ification," objecting to the idea that "the eventness of a piece is to be understood in contradistinction to its hermeneutic aspiration." I fully agree with Levin when he concludes: "In short, I want to have it both ways: I want to be transported and to think about where we are going." Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 9–10.

36 Abbate, in her article on music as drastic or gnostic, is ambiguous about this: She does argue for the mutual exclusion, and is adamant in her defense of what she calls drastic moments as the *raison d'être* of music, yet she does concede that relevant gnostic moments can take place in a performance. Abbate, "Drastic or Gnostic?" 512.

mapped over each other, because the “other” term is constantly present in both media. As has been repeatedly made clear in recent literary theory, material embodiment plays a significant part in the way we read and understand texts (and certainly not less so when we hear them pronounced on stage). Likewise, and this claim of musical hermeneutics remains essential, music as a socially and culturally embedded practice takes an active part in the circulation of meaning. Any attempt to purify opera by straightening out the alignment of aesthetic components and critical attitude—to make literature the exclusive realm of hermeneutic *logos* and music that of material *melos*—therefore fails to account for the intermedial cross-contamination that has defined the genre throughout its first four centuries.

This is precisely why increased attention to the staged performance of opera is so vital: Nowhere is the experience of words and music less purified, more enmeshed, and yet more impossible to read into a comprehensive whole than on the operatic stage itself. Likewise, no situation makes it so abundantly clear that the experience of opera can accommodate both moments of interpretative thought and moments of sensual immersion (not to mention moments of boredom and distraction), and that these two states of mind cannot be unambiguously ascribed to words and music, respectively.

Therefore, opera in performance needs to serve as a corrective to old-school hermeneutics and as a model for new interpretative efforts—especially if these are to attend to the performance of opera, as opposed to the hermeneutics of New Musicology, which despite the best of theoretical intentions has remained rather focused on the score as text object. A truly operatic hermeneutics has to take leave of anything that resembles the insistence (central to traditional philosophical hermeneutics) that proper understanding presupposes the parts that add up to a coherent whole.³⁷ It must allow meaning to be momentary. The hermeneutic circle as the emblem of understanding is too complete a shape through which to perceive the unruliness of opera.³⁸ A mode of interpretation geared toward operatic performance needs to place greater emphasis on the open-ended and uncontrollable quality of meaning in opera, *and* resist the temptation to subsume all of opera’s elements under the category of meaning. In other words, it must allow the moments of drastic presence—musical or otherwise—to remain themselves.

37 “Einstimmung aller Einzelheiten ist das jeweilige Kriterium für die Richtigkeit des Verstehens. Das Ausbleiben solcher Einstimmung bedeutet Scheitern des Verstehens.” Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 296.

38 In a sense, this is what Lawrence Kramer has insisted on for the last twenty-five years with respect to the meaning of music. “Hermeneutics,” he sums up, “needs to be musicalized if it is to work free of the self-imposed restraints that have hobbled its historical development.” *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3. This musicalization implies a lot of things, the most of important of which I take to be that it envisions interpretation as essentially temporal and performative. Much like interpreting a piece of music typically means to perform it, interpretation “neither decodes nor deciphers. It demonstrates”; “it is not reproduction; it is a mode of performance, and more specifically a mode of performance as cognition.” *Ibid.*, 7 and 9. Simply put, to interpret is to present something in a specific way that could also be presented in a different way. Kramer, however, only rarely addresses specific musical performances, but rather seeks to take the place of the performer. Typically, he carries out a hermeneutic performance of musical scores as an alternative to a live performance, rather than as an interpretation of it.

If the idea of a necessary, if hypothetical, totality of meaning is the aspect of Gadamerian hermeneutics that seems to sit least comfortably with operatic performance, the one that is most thoroughly compatible with it is the principle of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. The notion that the interpretative discourse that accompanies a work of art in its progress through decades, centuries, and millennia cannot be considered external to its meaning is one of the primary insights of *Wahrheit und Methode*.³⁹ This fundamental historicity of meaning, which is part and parcel of Gadamer's emphasis on the "classic" work that speaks to different epochs in different ways, opens the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* up toward an alignment with the contemporary practice of operatic *Regietheater*, which lays equally strong emphasis on the interpretative renegotiation of highly canonized operatic scores.⁴⁰ While assigning an important role to the act of interpretation—not only by reinterpreting operatic works, but also by demanding a different level of activity from the interpreting audience—this strand of musical theater typically carries no illusions that such interpretation would be able to domesticate the new layers of meaning added by experimentally inclined stagings. The hermeneutic principle of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, like *Regietheater's* persistent renegotiations of canonical operas, does not confer upon its objects an immortality beyond life, but, quite to the contrary, a historical survival through moment after moment of lived time.

For the same reason, writing texts about opera does not necessarily confirm its status as a dead object. Scholarly writing on live performance inevitably compromises the temporality of live experience by mediating it through printed language. But surely, this is equally true regardless of whether that writing tries to capture and elaborate on a moment of bodily *jouissance* or on a moment of interpretative *reflection* (the former, in fact, is typically the one least likely to survive this transference into a scholarly text). The blame for this problem, therefore, cannot be laid on interpretation as such, but belongs, for better or worse, to all academic writing. Consequently, the problem cannot be solved by discarding hermeneutics. It seems to me that the best response to this predicament is for scholarly writing to part with any remaining aspirations to eternal life—which, in the case of traditional hermeneutics, appeared as the will to affiliate itself with the aspects of canonical immortality that are only the flip side of death—and instead to emphasize its own quality as a momentary performance, part of an on-going dialogue, continuously revised and revisable. If performance itself is thus allowed to serve as the model for interpretative criticism, the hermeneutic circle need not be hung as a noose around opera's neck, and a revitalized hermeneutics, which is able to do justice to the inconsistencies and incongruities of opera, in all its diverse moments of overwrought splendor, can bring new life to the scholarly stage.

39 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 305–12.

40 This potential affinity between *Regieoper* and hermeneutics has been noted by several critics. Mary Ann Smart writes that "a meaning-centered approach meshes neatly with *Regieoper*-style stagings, which themselves tend to act as commentaries, drawing out concealed layers of textual meaning and creating friction with the base text." "Operatic Alphabet," 2. Cf. Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 32–35.