

Opera and its Discontents: Reflections of/on the Canon

Let me first thank the Graduate Theory and Musicology Associations for this opportunity to speak with you tonight, and to interact with you in yesterday's workshop. And special thanks to Mitia and Miguel for helping with all the details of my visit, as well as to the Faculty of the Jacobs School for their gracious welcome.

Story is at the heart of opera and its discontents, and with a story I will begin. In a Manhattan café a few months ago, I inquired about the price of Michel Cluizel chocolate, which was of course expensive. I saw on the wall a well-known saying of Mother Teresa's: "Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin." I shrugged, "well, according to your sign, I should live for today, so I'll take the chocolate." Another customer chimed in, "I think that quote is from *Gone with the Wind*," and sarcastically added, "but you're not supposed to talk about that movie anymore." His contempt for judgements of the story grabbed my attention and I said, "well, we can certainly keep talking about it, right, maybe try to address the problems"; he cut that off, "no, you can't redo, that would just ruin it. Look what they did to *West Side Story*, they ruined it." "Oh," I said, "I've been reading about that remake. Have you seen it?" Not missing a beat, he said, "No, but I know they ruined it."

Like that customer, opera lovers and commentators often view the canon as sacrosanct, disdaining any interpretive change. At the other extreme are those whose disdain for the works themselves prompts the impulse to ban them from performance and curricula. As voiced by a doctoral student at one of my talks on *The Magic Flute*: "are you defending the canon to keep your job?" A more explicitly generational jab came from a practitioner who stereotyped older audience members as "the bluehairs" who want to see *Butterfly* commit suicide.

I share these stories because musicology needs to be better than this—to rise above the level of national discourse that thrives on extremes. **PP2** Last Fall, at Yale's virtual conference on Opera and Representation, the eminent soprano Latonia Moore offered a feast of food for

thought, some of which I will return to, but first, she said: “Art should never be too quick to judge or too quick to take offense.” I don’t think I exaggerate to say that those on the Zoom stopped short for a moment at Moore’s admonition. This kind of exchange with practitioners is key to achieving goals that the discipline has newly articulated, notably in Naomi André’s 2018 book, *Black Opera*, where she set out her much-referenced notion of an engaged musicology as “an approach that brings together opera in a historical context and focuses on how it resonates in the present day.”

But we are not a house divided; there is a through line to earlier goals. **PP3** Twenty-three years ago, in their preface to *Rethinking Music*, Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist wrote, “It is not just the disciplinary integrity of musicology that has become problematic; it is, to put it bluntly, the relationship between musicology and the rest of the universe.” In the same volume, Ralph Locke’s essay, “Musicology and/as Social Concern: Imagining the Relevant Musicologist,” encouraged us to be honest about our agendas and values, and to show our students how to examine the questions we raise without necessarily promoting our own solutions. Such calls for relevance were prescient, as there is now far greater consensus that we must engage in a big way.

One form of engagement is the position of scholar-in-residence with opera companies that have the appetite to get things right. **PP4** In 2018, the groundbreaking André became the first Scholar in Residence for Seattle Opera, for which “her most visible role involves...free, public community conversations that invite audiences to question problematic social themes and portrayals of marginalized communities in opera, while appreciating the artistic elements that continue to hold up.” **PP5** Last year, Lily Kass was named the first Scholar in Residence for Philadelphia Opera, in order to “help our audiences deepen their relationship with opera while gaining a greater appreciation for the relevance of opera to today’s world.”

That goal draws me back to the student who saw my work as self-interest—might one see such residencies as shameless efforts by opera companies to defend their bottom line? As another sign of a generational divide in academia and classical music? I hope not. Naomi André has fought hard for the platform she now enjoys, and Lily Kass is a young scholar doing fascinating work without institutional support. To make this effort generational feeds a false narrative.

In her 2019 New York Times editorial, *Classical Opera Has a Racism Problem*, Katherine Hu, then a junior at Yale, made a compelling argument from her vantage point as the daughter of Taiwanese-American tenor Joseph Hu, known for his portrayal of Goro in *Butterfly*, and both Pang and Pong in *Turandot*. **PP6** Responding to a Canadian Opera Company production, Katherine condemned the name change from Ping, Pang, and Pong, to Jim, Bob, and Bill, and the move from their Chinese costumes into suits, both of which she saw as a way in which “opera clumsily reckons with its racist and sexist past.” More to generational issues, she added, “But if it hopes to win favor with younger listeners like me, opera needs to realize that shallow changes can’t erase the problematic foundations of season fixtures like ‘*Turandot*,’ ‘*Butterfly*,’ ‘*The Magic Flute*’ and ‘*Carmen*.’ ” She voiced the real question: “How do we preserve the beauty of Puccini’s music, the likes of which will never be composed again, while also recognizing that it taints how we perceive Chinese women like me?” She suggests that directors “approach ...classics as curators and professors — educating audiences about historical context and making stereotypes visible.” This is exactly what *Scholars in Residence* do.

Korean-born tenor Julius Ahn, who played Pang in the production with Katherine’s father, pushed a parallel remedy, that is, diverse casting. In response to the tired assumption that most good singers are white, he says simply: “I’ll call BS on that.” And he set the changes in

perspective: “I was kind of jarred by it, to be honest, because I feel that Turandot is a work that needs no apologies.”

PP7 What does opera reflect to us? How much of that reflection comes from itself and how much from what we see in the mirror? Both may make us uncomfortable, but maybe a level of discomfort can be a good thing. We tend to respond to it in extreme ways: avoid the problems and focus on the beautiful music, or ban the originals. The latter produces two levels of loss, and my concern extends beyond the obvious—an incredibly rich body of music—to the more subtle: by targeting earlier works for offensive content we imply that morality is a recent discovery. Yet the discomfort of problematic stories was at the heart of Beaumarchais’ response to the hypocrisy of censorship in 1778: **PP8** “*because the characters in a play show themselves to be morally vicious, are they to be banished from the stage? Vices and abuses--...never change, but disguise themselves in a thousand different ways under the mask of the prevailing morality: to snatch this mask...*, to show them for what they are--this is the...task...of theatre.”

PP9 It might be useful to relate Beaumarchais’ ‘vices and abuses’ to what Imani Mosley, as respondent to my panel on Magic Flute last year, intriguingly called ‘good or neutral disturbance’ in opera, a place where we can sit with problems, and be ‘tested or moved about.’ Director David Pountney has put it another way: “One seeks the truth of a piece by acknowledging what it was written for, and what it has achieved as a work, which is not to be something decorative on somebody’s mantelpiece, but to be a disturbing truth expressed through the power of music and drama, narration and storytelling.”

Let’s turn to a few disturbing truths in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, *Così*, and *Flute*; and then connect to a couple of 19th-century staples, *Aida* and *Butterfly*.

My work on Don Giovanni questions the fallacies I see as a weak basis to either excuse or attack 18th-century opera: a fallacy of context—oh that’s just how people thought back then, ignoring progressive ideas in Mozart’s time and much earlier; and a fallacy of change—that our time has progressed enough to be shocked. Really? When in 2016 a powerful man in the US ridiculed accusers as too unattractive to be victimized, and his supporters laughed? **PP10** They’re no better than Enlightenment men who mocked survivors, verified in court commentary: “...all the *merry* Trials, particularly for Rapes...such as made the Judges forget their Gravity; and caused Scenes of Mirth unusual in Courts of Justice.” **PP11** Rather than feed the fallacy of context, let’s set that alongside progressive views, like the British proto-feminism that Mozart knew of when he chose an English spokeswoman for it in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, perhaps modelled on people like Mary Astell, who in 1694 promoted a university for women, and whose work against the restrictions of marriage gained steam during Mozart’s lifetime.

PP12 Don Giovanni is not a feminist manifesto; but when it gives us a *defense* of Zerlina and Anna *alongside* their *mockery* and assault, the contradiction fits what Barbara Taylor calls “the noisily argumentative world of the Enlightenment, where the simultaneous degradation and exaltation of women was not new” yet there were newly “sophisticated [ways] to elaborate those extremes.”

PP13 I *wish* those extremes were no longer relevant, but on a single day this past month, the New York Times reported sexual harassment and violence claims that were long ignored in three disparate seats of power: the Australian Parliament, the US National Football League, and Harvard University. Twenty years ago, Mary Ann Smart’s essay “Staging Mozart’s Women”, considered “the responsibility of those who put on Mozart's operas to take and ‘perform’ a

position on their values.” I’ve been asking how we distinguish *their* values, and I try to show that they align too well with our messy mix of progress and backlash.

The Finale to Act 1 has been something of a lightning rod for that mixture, and I’ll build toward it here with a translation issue for Zerlina, who rejects Giovanni and barely escapes an attempted rape. She appears conflicted in her first scene with him, the light and musically appealing duet, ‘la ci darem la mano.’ But he has just used class privilege over her fiancé to isolate her, and then falsely promised a socially uplifting marriage—just like the star researcher at Yale who was protected by the administration after he sexually harassed a student, and suggested he was better positioned to advance her career than was her boyfriend.

PP 14 The model for Zerlina in Moliere’s *Don Juan* is Charlotte, whose initial openness to Don Juan provokes the nongendered word “villaine,” nasty or bad, from her peasant fiancé. I’m grateful to Anne Stone for pointing out that in medieval French, the word ‘villaine’ means ‘townsperson’, further supporting my nongendered reading. In DaPonte’s libretto Masetto calls Zerlina, “Bricconaccia! Malandrina!”, still with nongendered meanings, from the criminal to ‘likeable rogue.’ Yet Bermel’s 1987 translation of the play used ‘slut’, and the Met subtitles use ‘minx’, an archaic word for “a sexually attractive woman who causes trouble.” Disparaging words with no male analogue, these choices both reflect and perpetuate the idea that Zerlina is complicit.

PP 15 In his essay “Don Giovanni and the Resilience of Rape Culture,” Richard Will noted a recent return to dated views: “in [many] versions of Zerlina’s first encounter with Giovanni...what may look elsewhere like a ruthless betrayal of innocence becomes instead a mutual, consensual expression of desire.” While some might claim such direction as a way to grant agency to Zerlina, I think it’s as misguided as renaming Ping, Pang and Pong. What

Zerlina actually shows is *hesitation* borne of class pressure; and her *initial* uncertainty does not prove anything consensual about the *end* of Act I. In fact, both the manuscript score and the printed libretto of 1787 show that she resists the assault, in stage directions that tell us she is first, “trying to hide herself.” Next, Giovanni “takes her”; she sings “Please let me go”; he replies “No”. She asks, ‘do you have any pity in your heart?’ The consensual idea took hold to the point where the 1961 English edition by Auden added the direction—“smiling shyly.” There’s *no* such stage direction in the manuscript or printed libretto. Adding the smile supports what we now call rape culture—initial ambivalence opens the door to presumed consent.

To Zerlina’s plea for mercy, Giovanni says: ‘Yes, I am all love’, distorting her fear into the narcissistic idea that his ‘love’ solves her problem. The idea that sex appeal could absolve him is still with us in distorted notions of consent that depend on who plays the role of Don Giovanni, that is, if it is someone who looks like Harvey Weinstein we would believe it was rape, but not if he is attractive. That myth fed the 19th-century reception by Hoffmann and Kierkegaard, and continued in Abert’s 1976 claim that “Zerlina is already trembling with secret desire.” **PP16** As seen at the bottom right of the page in the libretto, the next direction in the Act I finale is: “while Dancing, [he] leads Zerlina to a door and makes her enter almost by force.”

The music leaves no doubt. Zerlina sings, “I am betrayed” on a tritone. Her call for help comes with a stage direction of struggle (“loudly offstage, sound of footsteps to the right”), and she sings a rising half step that stops on an unresolved seventh. Her resistance is confirmed by the sudden change in the music: the famously conflicting dance rhythms become unified meter; the G-major center jumps to an unprepared E-flat; and the key signature is dropped to allow an unpredictable harmonic path and raise the stakes with her successive cries. Her allies lend support in dramatic unisons that reach the symbol of threat in the diminished seventh for

Zerlina’s accusatory “Scellerato!” (“Wicked”), which still avoids resolution. When she repeats the word, the melody resolves, but the harmony becomes more dissonant, and her final, longer wail leads to the more jarring second-inversion dominant seventh. She sings the phrase a step higher, and her last cry is emphasized by repeated notes. Let’s listen. **PP17** The music passes a test still demanded of women to prove assault: did you object, and loudly enough?

Yet the image of a seductive suitor lingers, as in a *New York Times* critique of the 2016 Michael Grandage staging: the director was “trying to explore the...lecherous Don, but the production seems hyperactive and sleazy — hardly the thing to make aristocratic ladies swoon.” **PP 18** The aristocratic Anna never ‘swooned’ in the text; she fainted at the sight of her murdered father. Then Leporello confronted his boss: “Bravo,... Force yourself on the daughter and kill the father.” Giovanni sneered: “He asked for it.” Leporello pressed: “And Anna, what did she ask for?”—he called out victim blaming and entitlement.

Changed context? A few months ago, a judge gave Christopher Belter no consequences even though he pled guilty to the rape and sexual assault of four teenaged girls at his wealthy parents’ home. If we see complicity rather than class domination of Zerlina, that’s on us, not on the opera.

PP 19 While difficulties with the story are fairly recent for Don Giovanni, complaints about the story have long shadowed *The Magic Flute*. In early reviews, the dialogue was especially disparaged: **PP20** “the content and the dialogue of the work were just too terrible,” and “the music and the decorations are pretty; the rest an unbelievable farce.” By 1913, Edward Dent could conclude, “The libretto of *Die Zauberflöte* has been considered one of the most absurd specimens of that form of literature in which absurdity is regarded as a matter of course.”

While this view still informs broad cuts, the dialogue does have supporters. For conductor Rene Jacobs, “No opera loses so much as *Die Zauberflöte* if one strips it of its drama, and that means also and *above all* the spoken dialogue.” Recent criticism of the text has intensified around gender and racial issues, but interestingly, it is the sung portions that contain much of what is offensive, and they are often cleaned up with sanitized translations for non-German speakers, as Lily Kass has shown. Yet the dialogue remains a target, despite the fact that the genre of Singspiel is identified with dialogue and comedy, both slapstick and sophisticated.

At the end of Scene 1, for example, when Tamino “wakens and looks fearfully around,” the audience has already watched the Three Ladies kill the serpent. Tamino unwittingly feeds Papageno the language with which he can comically take credit for the women’s action: “So you strangled [erdrosselt] it?” Papageno confirms, “Strangled! [Erdrosselt!]” and in a comic aside: “I’ve never been as strong...as I am today.” But both men failed: Tamino arrived with a bow and no arrows (stated in stage directions), and Papageno immediately lied. So maybe we are meant to question male superiority before we even meet the Queen, reframing the view of a completely misogynist text. In fact, comedy may have served to soften its more progressive aspects.

The power of humorous dialogue to engage serious issues is seen just after we, along with Papageno, first meet Monostatos. Preparing the appearance-based judgements there, I see a comedic analogue in the spoken exchange of Scene 2 when Tamino asks Papageno’s identity and he replies: “A man, like you! Now what if I asked who you are?”—to which Tamino identifies by rank: “Then I would answer that I am of princely lineage.” Papageno mocks class difference: “That’s too high-flown for me.” Tamino counters, “I’m not sure whether *you* are human.” Papageno’s original feathered costume gave reason for doubt, but at the same time, Tamino’s reaction may signal the folly of judging humans by class and appearance.

That folly is first made explicit in song (Sc12), when Papageno and Monostatos are equally startled by each other's difference, and they sing the same words in short comic bursts: "That is the devil for sure." **PP 21****video** The presumption of danger in the other is treated as ridiculous. **PP22** If the next spoken words are cut to avoid offense, we lose Papageno's critique of his own actions, "Am I not a fool to let myself be frightened? There are black birds in the world, why not also black people?" The problem is in the perceiver. Yet this perceiver admits *ignorance* (confirmed in Scene 2, he said he did not know *any* other lands and people), and *realizes* that a human can have black skin. Censorship seems hypocritical compared to the revolting label used by Los Angeles officials, NHI—no humans involved—in cases with Black men of low economic status.

Placing racism and misogyny in an uncomfortable past ignores both how they continue and how they were resisted in Mozart's time. In that context, I see a structural parallel in the dialogues around the two well-known light-hearted songs. Tamino had questioned whether Papageno was human after his identifying song, "I am the birdcatcher"; and then, Monostatos, before singing his, "everyone feels the joys of love," examines his own humanity, though tainted with sexism. **PP23** When he asks, "What was my crime, what man could remain cold at such a sight?" he wants the same entitlement as white men. **PP24** Blaming the victim, the Black overseer is a convenient stand-in for White Europeans given voice in the 1739 pamphlet by George Booth, stating that men cannot control their physical response to women. Not a vestige of an immoral past, that idea reappears in Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's 'stop telling women to smile' campaign of 2013. As she describes, "things can jump from a seemingly nice comment to ...an insult and... an assault if the woman doesn't respond the way the man wants her to." We hear

that escalation in Monostatos' speech: "That girl will make me lose my senses yet! The fire that smolders within me can still consume me."

To cut his *spoken* words then privileges the ensuing racialized aria—"White is beautiful, I must kiss her." *Distorted beyond what the dialogue* says, the image of the leering Black male was later embellished, as Gunter Meinhold noted, with Monostatos "*transformed* into the evil principle, a real monster with splendid white teeth." Grotesque exaggeration created a deplorable performance tradition. **PP25** But I suggest that the persistence of a racially charged danger narrative may prompt decisions to whitewash the character, as in Paul Peers' tattooed white Monostatos. In 2019 for Berlin Opera's first new production of *Flute* in 25 years, Yuval Sharon *added* dialogue that, while well-meaning, can signal present-day virtue around a supposedly post-racial world. The three boys interject, "This doesn't seem right, this must be a very old text." We could see it as a trope on the moralistic statements that are sprinkled throughout the original; but Sharon contorts that tradition to distance the present. A present when Sudanese refugees from Russia's ongoing war are beaten and turned away while Ukrainians are welcomed into neighboring countries.

Distancing also ignores how the original words at times question racism. After the Queen's climactic revenge aria, the *dialogue* gives Pamina space to reflect: "I am to commit murder? ...that I cannot do!" Monostatos re-appears, saying: "Put your trust in me!" Pressing the challenge expressed in his aria, to be viewed human, he asks, "*why* do you tremble? at my black color or at the murder that [you've] planned?" Unlike the accusers documented by Ava DuVernay in her 2019 film, *When They See Us*, Pamina does not buy into the danger narrative. To his either/or question—is it race or your guilty conscience—she chooses the latter, saying "Then you know?" He will reveal the plan to murder Sarastro unless she consents. Faced with

defiance, he says: “No? why not? Because I am the same color as a black ghost? Is it not so? then die!”

Without this very uncomfortable dialogue, we miss nuance—Monostatos first condemns the link of fear and rejection with blackness, but then resorts to a physical threat that *does* justify fear; and while Sarastro will interrupt the threat, he does so with troubling words: “your soul is as black as your face. And I would have punished you...for this black crime had not a wicked *woman*...forged the dagger for it.” In Sarastro’s hierarchy, he *would have* punished the man he had just insulted, but without witnessing the woman’s order, he *does* judge the Queen harshly enough to absolve Monostatos, who had threatened to kill Pamina before Sarastro’s eyes. The dialogue, then, also lets us see Sarastro, not as a caricature of Enlightenment, but as a flawed human.

In the interest of time here, I’ve not focused on the many gender issues in Flute, but must mention the routinely cut dialogue that precedes the Queen’s iconic aria. Without her spoken explanation, many conclude either that she is evil throughout, or that she suddenly morphs into a caricature of malevolence after intermission. If allowed to speak, she tells us that she was denied a transfer of power from her dying husband, who told her it was beyond any woman’s understanding, so she must “submit to the guidance of wise men.” The full dialogue puts the aria in a new light, as in this response from a student in my Reframing Opera course: “Watching her unleash her wrath, although unjustly on Pamina, is a glorious sight to behold because the only thing [in her way] is her gender.” I will return to this intriguing idea of empowerment by a maligned character later, but to sum up here, despite differences in gender, race, and class, both the Queen and Monostatos use the *spoken* word to be seen beyond stereotype, and Sarastro’s words reveal the hypocrisy of the Enlightened patriarch.

PP 26 As with *The Magic Flute*, the story of *Così fan tutte* has long been thought unworthy of its exquisite music. For some today, it's just too awful to the women, or, it is redeemed by the fallacy of context. An added fallacy of gender equivalence is that *Così* teaches a light-hearted lesson, from which *all* parties learn not to test fidelity. I think the context voids equivalence: all may behave 'like that', but all are not equally deceived, nor do they bear equal consequences. Even though in the well-known sources the men admit *their* tendency to stray, we need to look at what happens to the *women* who are accused of the same thing—then and now.

PP27 In Ovid's *Procris and Cephalus*, the wife is judged though she only *hesitates* in resisting the disguised suitor. Further, her husband reveals: "When I saw her, I almost relinquished testing her loyalty...She was sad (but no one could be more lovely in her sadness)." Conflating attractiveness with sadness, he reduces her emotion to its effect on him. But he *induced* the sadness, and he *continues* to press her in disguise till she finally hesitates, upon which he condemns her. Ashamed and outraged, she still forgives his deceit.

In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the disguise is reversed: the wife reveals herself to confront the deceiver (who was put up to it by the husband) and the deceived (who accepted the lie). But the *reason* for disguise is different: for *Così*'s men it will enable deceit; for Zinerva, disguise saves her life. She's on the run after her husband sent his servant to kill her. Still, she forgives. Likewise, in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, though Posthumous declares "all women are faithless," the falsely accused Imogen manages to save herself. Posthumous admits he'd be dead if his faults were punished as badly, and Imogen forgives him for plotting her murder.

Violent consequences also emerge in Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, a primary source for *Così*. Lurcanio declares that because he witnessed Guinevere's forbidden sexual activity, a man must defeat her accuser in a duel, or she will be burned at the stake. **PP 28** However, Ariosto

offers another view crucial to the fallacy of context, when Rinaldo objects: “If the same urge drives both sexes to love’s fulfilment...why is the woman to be punished for doing with one or several men the very thing a man does with as many women as he will, and receives for it not punishment but praise?” This view only partially makes it into *Così*. Still, writers like Giuseppe Gazzola insist that a feminist critique “misses the cheerful resistance to erotic constraint that Despina’s incitement provides.” Despina may incite; but, for their reluctant attraction to the disguised men, the women are met with mockery and veiled threats.

Also questioning gender equivalence is sentimental training, which requires women (and I use present tense on purpose) to accept unwanted attention. **PP29** A year after *Così* premiered, Mary Wollstonecraft would ask: “why do women condescend to receive attention from strangers, *different* from that civility authorized between man and man.” *Così*’s women are told to be “sweet” though they want nothing to do with the strangers. In the fake suicide scene, the men say they’ll die without a kiss, and Despina urges the women to “Agree, as an act of goodness.” Our laughter at comic tropes is uneasy as the women must ignore their own feelings while the men act on theirs. That difference deepens when the men discount Fiordiligi’s show-stopping resistance aria, *Come scoglio—Like a Rock*. Guglielmo responds, “Stay, cruel one,” Alfonso adds, “a little sweetness to my friends”, and Guglielmo negates their agency, saying: “Don’t be shy, cute eyes; Two loving flashes Vibrate a little here.” It’s a thinly veiled No means yes. The women face an untenable situation: expected to be ‘nice’ to any suitor, yet judged if they are unfaithful. Alfonso then patronizingly forgives them since they are not responsible for their own nature. **PP30** To view women ruled by passion conflicts with expectations for them to keep order in society. That contradiction defies logic and justifies repression, as in the second part of

George Booth's 1739 pamphlet, in which women are declared sexual beings who must be guarded from "all objects apt to excite that Flame."

Layers of contradiction make the ending of *Così* so ambiguous that Cleveland Lyric Opera let the *audience* choose which couples would remain together. Ambiguity is supported in the music. When the women join Ferrando to praise the future marriage that only the men know is fake, Guglielmo's syllabic bass line stands outside the beautiful upper-voice canon. In the Metcalf 1992 production, Guglielmo tries to stand with the three but sinks down, and continues in a half-talking buffa style. Yet his comic style is at odds with what Dorothea Link called "rage at the women's betrayal." For the Staatsoper in 2001, Doris Dörrie's Guglielmo turns menacing, and the simmering quality seems to match the *sotto voce* marking.

Consequences escalate when the men reappear as their original selves and sing, "in torrents, in fumes, in seas, then the blood will flow." We might see these words as exaggerated images of sentimental culture at the shock of betrayal. But the men take no responsibility for *inducing* the women's betrayal, and their threat taps into the violent reactions in the sources. The music itself is contradictory: swirling sixteenth-notes paint the sea of blood, yet we're in bright E-flat major. We hear trumpets and drums in martial dotted rhythms that may recall the false military draft that started the deceit, but could also signal the threatened revenge. The only stage direction is for the men to head to the other room while the women stop them. Some productions hint at violence by having the men draw their swords. Dörrie takes it further: **PP 31--video**. It might seem overdone when Guglielmo strikes Dorabella, but I think Dörrie finds balance between overly dark productions and those that ignore the potential for violence.

Faced with anger, Mozart's women admit guilt and welcome punishment. In gorgeous music they sing, "too late I see my error". **PP 32--video**. The men neither admit nor apologize

for the deceit. Instead, according to stage directions, “they mock the women in a ridiculous way.” Alfonso is blamed for the plan, and the comedy is at the women’s expense.

A 2010 study of apology in the journal *Psychological Science* found that women generally admit offensive behavior, while *men* rate their *own* offenses less severely. Lack of responsibility for one’s actions supports overreaction to the apologetic partner. So, Dörrie’s escalation could make sense. But when the women then point swords at the *men*, the director gives them a power they do not possess, then, or now when according to a 2018 UN study, 58% of murders of women are done by intimate partners, whose main reported reasons are “possessiveness, jealousy and fear of abandonment.”

These reasons help us understand why the men don’t take responsibility in this story. When earlier in Act 2 Ferrando had bemoaned Dorabella’s betrayal, Guglielmo mock-consoled him, insisting that Guglielmo is himself such a catch, no woman, not even Ferrando’s girlfriend, could resist him. The outsize role of male dishonor suggests that a woman’s actions—by choice or by force—affect her husband more than herself. Outdated? **PP33** Producer Shelley Ross recently released the email she had received after being sexually harassed by commentator Chris Cuomo; who writes, “as a husband I can empathize with not liking to see my wife patted as such,” and continues in pseudo-Enlightenment language, “so pass along my apology to your good and noble husband.” **PP 34** Such reasoning was called out in 1780, when Diderot connected “false moral standards” and the notion of women as property, to jealousy and its consequences.

Today’s audience knows we’re still far from ideal. They hear the words “blood will flow” while the US Senate refuses to re-authorize the Violence Against Women Act, and while recently in Italy a man who killed his wife was given a reduced term due to what the judge called

“profound disappointment and resentment” at the victim’s *infidelity*. (This judge was female.)
Cosi is relevant, and engagement with it is vital to today’s work on gendered consequences.

I trace my *personal* engagement with all three of these operas to the way I always cringed when teaching the catalog aria in Don Giovanni. Once I opened a space to bring that discomfort into the room, the students engaged more deeply, and I expanded the work to problematic issues in later repertoire. In this final segment tonight, I will briefly connect some of the themes addressed so far to Verdi’s *Aida* and Puccini’s *Butterfly*, at the heart of Katherine Hu’s cautionary tale with which I began.

PP35 Three moments in the afterlife of *Aida* offer windows into its relationship with race: the premieres in Cairo and Milan in the early 1870s; Theodore Drury’s largely African-American productions in the early 1900s; and the experience of one of our stellar Aidas, soprano Latonia Moore.

For nuance around the premieres, I look to Christopher Gauthier and Jennifer McFarlane-Harris’s essay, “Nationalism, Racial Difference, and ‘Egyptian’ Meaning in Verdi’s *Aida*.” They identify Egypt with “the writings of elites...who drew a stark line between cultured, civilized Egypt and the uncivilized black Sudanese.” For the audience at the Cairo premiere: “a darker-skinned Ethiopian heroine and lighter-skinned Egyptian hero may have reminded [them] of Egyptian circumstances... that Verdi almost certainly would not have been aware of, let alone intended.” Cementing racial identification of the characters, Ricordi’s production book for La Scala specified that both *Aida* and *Amonasro* should be darkened to have “olive, reddish skin.”

The link to dark skin has since served other functions. In her article, “Class, Race, and Uplift in the Opera House,” Kristen Turner reports that Theodore Drury produced *Aida* because,

in his words it was “especially adapted to my use as regards the story, as it deals with Ethiopians and Egyptians.” Turner’s excerpt of the 1909 NYT review mentions a ‘color scheme’, which piqued my interest. **PP36** In the full review, we see that the headline is ‘A Study in Color Schemes,’ and it is explained in this way: **PP 37** “It was noticed by one woman in the audience that the maidens selected to represent Ethiopians were light in color, while those representing Egyptians were much darker. This color scheme extended also to the principals.” Another woman says that it must be a mistake, but I find it hard to see the groupings as anything but intentional, since they applied to nearly the entire cast. Could Drury in 1909 have been offering one way to question the role of race in this opera?

PP38 Soprano Latonia Moore has put into personal terms the presumption that was voiced by Drury’s audience: “I can’t deny that me being black as Aida offers a certain level of authenticity that we would not get if we saw someone who was glowing white. But it’s *only because* people have become *so caught up in the colors* of the story.” From an obsession with a racialized performance tradition, Moore turned to the genre itself: “The issue I have always had with that, is that this is opera. The reason I got into opera was because it doesn’t matter what you look like. The point is not for you to look exactly like the character, [but] for you to bring the character to life through song.”

The Yale conference I cited at the outset brought practitioners and scholars into open conversation from which compelling moments emerged. Moore posed a candid question there: “If people see 230-pound me as Butterfly and accept it, why not accept a 6-foot Latvian as Aida without makeup?” Her view stems from her understanding of the character: “Aida is secret royalty—that’s the badass—not color.” She frankly added, “Opera is not naturally a form for a Black person in America...but the more I do, the more I’m comfortable as a Black woman ...

these characters help with a sense of self.” Moore credited three canonic composers: “Thank you, Puccini, Verdi, Mozart.” **PP39** At that point, the esteemed Daphne Brooks had us pause to take in what we just heard: “the historian in me wants to mark the moment in 2021 when a majestic singer can talk about being empowered by those roles rather than being subjugated by them.”

Just as Drury’s ‘color scheme’ may inform how we approach Aida, an early-twentieth century Japanese production of Butterfly informs its ethical performance. In April 2019, the Pacific Opera Project produced what it calls “the first ever true-to-story bilingual Madama Butterfly.” Not mentioned was a precedent described by Mari Yoshihara in her article “The Flight of the Japanese Butterfly.” The 1930 Tokyo staging had Japanese roles played by Japanese singers in their own language, and American roles in English. For further nuance, since Consul Sharpless had lived in Japan, he switched between languages. The translator Horiuchi highlighted the insulting aspects of the original: “Even Westerners must find it absurd that these characters with [top-knot] appear onstage - one cannot tell whether the setting is supposed to look like Japan or China - in shuffling steps, put their hands on the ground, and bow up and down.” He called out what we a century later call ‘yellowface’.

PP40 That same production’s Butterfly, Matsudaira Satoko, reflected on how, as a Japanese woman, the role impacted her differently than Italian singers: “there is a series of exchanges between [Yamadori] and Cio-Cio-San. In the Italian performance, Butterfly makes fun of [him] and giggles. But I’ve acted that scene to show Cio-Cio-San trying her best to push back her tears of anger. That’s the sentiment that came most naturally to me.” A century ago, Satoko showed us how to take meaningful ownership of Butterfly.

PP41 I began tonight with reference to Yale student Katherine Hu, and I’ll bookend her response with that of Malina Gulino, a multiracial Columbia student who felt extreme harm at

being required to attend a Met Opera performance of *Butterfly*: “The issue is not just that the story itself is racist, it’s also that the Met manages to make the opera even more wildly offensive. I was made to watch white singers in yellowface pace across the stage in garish bastardizations of kimono while gongs sounded from the orchestra.” Adding insult to injury for Gulino, when she “flipped through the program looking for any note about the story’s blatant Orientalism. There was none.” That is a gross institutional failure and must change.

Last month, during the Toronto Symposium called *Grappling with Butterfly Today*, Boston Opera’s Jessica Johnson Brock pinpointed such failure: “Don’t just put it on the stage and walk away.” Ethan Heard, co-founder of Heartbeat Opera, talks about “wrestling with the canon in a joyful and productive way,” which means treating it with both “reverence and irreverence.” Heard is biracial, and his *Butterfly* starts from “the brown son googling yellowface, eventually *Butterfly* comes up, then they start with Act 2, the boy gets to know a woman like his mother, [and we] explore the tension between the glorious beauty of the love duet and the disturbance of Pinkerton buying a teenaged wife.” **PP42** The NY Times review seems to insist on the either/or extreme with which I started tonight: the headline suggests that this re-do may be the *only* way to *save* the work.

For their recognition of the *many* possible ways forward, I’ve been inspired by the two events I cited here, Yale on Representation and Toronto on *Butterfly*. **PP43** A real standout was Teiya Kasahara, a bi-racial Canadian soprano (who uses the pronoun they) and who shared their thoughtful and moving companion piece for *Madame Butterfly*, called *The Ballad of Cho-Cho San*. One of André’s rubrics of engaged musicology is, ‘who is telling the story?’ In Kasahara’s piece, “Chō-Chō san gets to tell her own story.” As Susan McClary described it in the next day’s symposium, “we get to hear our favorite bits of the music, but we are required to think about

them in a different way.” Perhaps not coincidentally, while Kasahara was creating their brave deconstruction, they were also covering the title role in a traditional performance, and they make room for many ways to think about it: **PP44** “As one of the most famous operas ever to have been written with one of the most glorious arias, I have found some peace with singing this role (and other appropriated roles) by creating discourse around the work and being able to use my creativity to live in it and continue to engage with it today.” Kasahara calls it the Butterfly Project, **PP45** “because I don’t think it will ever be finished, nor do I think this type of work should finish: cultivating an intentional awareness concerning where our most prized canonical works come from.”

This ongoing project converges with Boston Lyric Opera’s ‘Butterfly Process’, taking place now. **PP46** After the events of 2020, the company decided that it could not just return to normal. So, despite its planned return after Covid, Butterfly was taken offstage to deal with it. (The yearlong panel discussions are available on Boston Lyric’s website.) As expected, this process angered some of their audience and pleased others. Librettist Eiki Isomura concluded, “There are no complete solutions, just attempts to see through new eyes, to make sure every production has a goal, something to examine, to raise the bar for producers.

As scholars and instructors, I would add, we can raise the bar by digging in to information and context that encourages multiple views, lowers the temperature of the argument, and puts a dent in a pointless divide between canonic and new works, traditional and non-traditional productions. We can do this if we commit to the real work, and relish the physicality with which practitioners speak of it: tackle, grapple, wrestle with it. Avoid the reductive general discourse seeping into academia, where we should be *more* skeptical of simplistic judgements. Let canonic operas speak, but just as important, *speak back*—not to tear

down the past, but to learn from its contradictions as we continue, with humility, to learn from our *own*. Thank you.