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Opera and Its Discontents: Reflections of/on the Canon

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The operatic canon is viewed by many as sacrosanct, with even minor interpretive changes disdained. At the other extreme we find those whose disdain for the works themselves prompts the impulse to ban them from performance and curricula. This talk starts from the ways in which we are ill-served by either position, both of which are exacerbated by the presumption of a generational divide around divergent views. Musicology needs to be better than this—better than the general level of national discourse that thrives on extremes and shuns nuance.

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 instead of recognizing the usefulness of discomfort, we tend to respond to it in contradictory ways: avoiding the difficult conversations by focusing only on the beautiful music, or advocating censorship. The latter produces two levels of loss, and a concern of this talk extends beyond the obvious one—squandering an incredibly rich body of music—to another kind of impoverishment that goes unacknowledged: by targeting offensive content in earlier works we give tacit support to the notion that we occupy a morally superior perch from which to view them, as if we have solved the societal challenges made visible in works of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Starting with recent efforts toward practical strategies with which to address such thorny issues, this talk then centers on aspects of three Mozart operas—complicity in *Don Giovanni*, dialogue on race and gender in *The Magic Flute*, and gendered consequences in *Così fan tutte*—to show how a fuller view of the context, then and now, can help us to confront more directly and productively the troubling issues raised in their stories. Lastly, the central topics discussed here are connected to two of the most performed and maligned 19th-century staples, Verdi's *Aida* and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, with emphasis on recent interactions among scholars and practitioners that point to exciting paths forward.