



## Love and Death in Modern Opera

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**Abstract:** I have two interrelated aims in my paper. First, I argue that love and death, in their very relationship, stand at the heart of the values that constitute modernity. I follow Karl Jaspers in holding that our modern values have their origin, historically and ontologically, in Christianity, what I call the Bible. Second, I support this thesis by way of examining four operas, two tragic and two comedic, to show that they embody values that are central to modernity in their profound engagement with the themes of love and death. But, strangely, opera, unlike other modern art forms, has a double history. For the values that are central to the operas on which I concentrate here are altogether opposed to the values that are found in the operas of Richard Wagner (together with some of the operas of Giuseppe Verdi). Wagner, with his false conception of Christianity, rejects the values that are true to modernity in viewing love as the servant of death, not death as the servant of love. In studying the role of love and death in opera, we deepen, consequently, our understanding of the values that are central to modernity.

**Keywords:** Donizetti, Gaetano; Puccini, Giacomo; Wagner, Richard; love; death; opera; modernity; history; Bible; Christianity; values; self; community; covenant.

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### Hermeneutical Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This essay shows, by way of opera, that love and death—and how we look upon love and death in their very relationship—are central to the values that constitute modernity. This is surely evident when we think of the plays of William Shakespeare, both his comedies and his tragedies (together with his history plays and late romances), and of the novel from its emergence in the eighteenth century with Samuel Richardson (in *Clarissa*), together with Henry Fielding, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*) down to

the present. But opera, strangely, has a double story, one that I do not find in the other arts. For the relationship of love and death that Richard Wagner makes central to his operas, to the librettos (the stories, the dramas) of his operas, represents a complete rejection of the relationship of love and death that, I argue, constitutes the very modernity of art. This is the story of love and death that we find in the written arts from Shakespeare on, we could say; and it is the story to be told about the visual arts from the Renaissance, indeed, from the Middle Ages, down to the present age; and it is the like story that we tell about music, more generally, from the creation, in the Camerata of Florence in the later sixteenth century, of what comes to be the Baroque style down to the present day. The invention of the tempered scale in the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries is, in its own way, just as significant for modernity as the

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a greatly expanded version of the introduction to Chapter 3 of my book, *Modernity Between Wagner and Nietzsche*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015.

scientific revolution. The purpose, then, of this present paper is to show how fundamentally different from the values that Wagner makes central to his operas are the values of the operas, consistent with the modern history of the arts, including music, more generally, that I discuss here. This double history only properly comes to light when we comprehend, by truly accounting for, both historically and ontologically, the values that constitute modernity.

I have written extensively on Wagner in previous publications and I can here only summarize, in schematic fashion, my concept of modernity in indicating how and why, in my judgment, Wagner in his operas violates, by contradicting, our modern values. First, I hold—by way of my engaging with Shakespeare as well as with our great philosophers of modernity: Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, G. F. W. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche—that our values are truly modern insofar as they are truly biblical. I hold, then, second, that the Bible is modern unto the end and that modernity is biblical from the beginning. In response, consequently, to the famous question posed by the Latin theologian Tertullian c. 200 CE—What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?—the answer is, "nothing." For the values that are central to our thinking (to our *philosophia*) and to our ethical and political lives (to our *democratia*) are biblical, not ancient Greek, both historically and ontologically. This is already shown to us by Hegel, who follows Kant, by stating that history without ontology is empty, and ontology without history is blind. The values, then, that are truly modern are those constituted by the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, the idea that human life is created, in the beginning, from nothing, from nothing that is natural. For human beings are made in the image of God. Indeed, what Adam and Eve learn, in having fallen from paradisiacal ignorance into the covenantal life of doing unto others what they want others to do unto them, is that they are like God in knowing good and evil. I hold, then, that the three critical principles of biblical existence, at once Jewish and Christian (and, I would add, Muslim), are creation from nothing, the Fall of Adam and Eve into being like God in knowing good and evil, and the story of the covenant as love of neighbor, both personal and social and so at once ethical and political.

By arguing that the values that constitute modernity are biblical, not Greek, at once historically and ontologically, I do follow Karl Jaspers, who writes that

Greek science was radically different from modern Western science. Peculiar to the Christian world, and

developed nowhere else in history, is the scope of the will to know, the relentlessness of the search for truth which manifests itself in Western science.<sup>2</sup>

He notes that, because for "the Greeks the cosmos was perfect, orderly, rational, and lawful [and, I would add, finite]... the rest was of no concern; it was matter, *μη ον* [non-being] unknowable and not worth knowing" (NC 70). When, however, "the world is God's creation, all existence is worth knowing on that account... This tends to steer cognition toward the very realities which do not tally with known orders and laws" (NC 70-1). "This cognition," Jaspers continues, "seeks both the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad." It is true that

*omne ens est bonum*, all that exists is good – namely, as God's creation. But this goodness is no longer seen as the visible and self-contained beauty known to the Greeks. It is present only in the love of all existence as being created by God, and consequently in trust in the meaning of science [i.e., knowledge]. [NC 71]

Jaspers observes additionally that, because, in modernity, man must enter into the infinity of being, he always risks losing himself. Still, if he is to find himself, it will be

only in his present life before Transcendence... [in living] from the depth of his true essence. Man must risk exposure to the boundless range of possibilities; what counts is whether he loses himself before a nothingness which drives him to despair... or whether he finds himself before Transcendence which receives him and sets him free. [NC 61-2]

Consequently, I make the distinction that Kierkegaard draws between Christianity and Christendom central to my hermeneutics. Christianity (which, for me, stands for the Bible, at once Jewish and Christian) is what Kierkegaard calls the coming into existence of the single individual. To come into existence historically and so to be responsible to the other (God and neighbor) for your existence is to acknowledge that, if God has always existed eternally, then God has never existed eternally. For God comes into existence only with and through the single individual—in the covenantal relationship of being responsible for doing the good and accounting for the evil that you do. Christendom, then, for Kierkegaard,

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, trans. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: H. Regnery Co. 1961, p. 67. [Henceforth cited as NC]

represents what he calls baptized paganism, i.e., the rationalization of Christian (biblical) values in pagan terms. Apt examples of such rationalized paganism are the ideas that God is supernatural and that the human soul is immortal. For, while neither of these concepts is found in the Bible, they form the core of neoplatonized Christendom.

What follows, then, from Kierkegaard's distinction between Christianity and Christendom, between true and idolatrous concepts of modernity, is that Wagner, true to Schopenhauer, his philosophical and, indeed, theological mentor, represents Christendom, not Christianity. For what Wagner portrays in his operas regarding the relationship of love and death is that love serves death, that we are born in order to die. Indeed, death represents for Wagner the liberation from life as the sin of existing. Because, he holds, Jesus as the Christ is born with his will to live broken, he shows his followers that the will to live is sinful and that the only liberation from the sinful life of willing is to will not to will, to will to annihilate the will. Indeed, Jesus is sinless precisely because he is born, not with the will to live but solely with the will to die. But let me add that the music dramas of Wagner, in representing ideas that contradict the values of modern life, also contradict their music. Wagner is a great and innovative composer. While he writes inspired and inspiring music — think of the transcendent music that brings *Götterdämmerung*, the last of his four *Ring* operas, and *Tristan und Isolde* to a close — this music is in absolute contradiction with the stories of these operas. Brünnhilde liberates the world from the sinful existence of life, as represented by possession of the ring of gold, in showing that love serves not life but death. Isolde wills to die, she tells us in the *Liebestod* (the death of love) that she sings in bringing *Tristan und Isolde* to an end, since she and Tristan find love only in eternal death.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, I hold that how we view the Bible — again, both Jewish and Christian, both Hebrew Scripture and what Christians call the Old and the New Testaments — is how we view life, modernity, the values that constitute modernity. But let me add that I also insist upon the importance of acknowledging that, just as the Bible is no less secular than it is religious, so the values that are truly constitutive of modernity are at once secular

and religious. In fact, it is also no less secular than religious, since the concept of God is not supernatural, but covenantal. Thus, we understand that love — as the holy command of the covenant to look upon all human beings as your neighbor, as the categorical imperative to treat all human beings as ends in themselves and never merely as means — is in the world but not of the world. Love represents what Kant calls the kingdom of ends, the kingdom of free subjects (persons) and not the natural world of objects (things). Love as the kingdom of freedom is the creation of will (desire), not the product of nature. Love represents the *civitas Dei* of St. Augustine, as lived in the earthly city. For, while we are of infinite spirit (in bearing the image of God), we are mortal beings. We are all sinners. We all die. So, the question is, always, how we love and how we die.

### On Love and Death

Love and death are the great subjects of modern opera. Indeed, it is the relationship between love and death that is in many ways the defining issue of modernity. How our conceptions of love and death interact with and so shape each other is fundamental to our self-understanding as human beings. Love and death are each so evident in our lives yet, at the same time, they are so profoundly mysterious, so truly awful, in filling us with awe, with fear and trembling, indeed, often with dread and despair. There are no greater powers in our lives than love and death. Those who possess these powers hold in their hands all that is good, all that is gracious, and all that is evil, all that is malignant, in our lives. We are all mortal, we all die. Every human being born of woman is subject to death. But why, then, are we born if our only sure destiny is to die? Still, the puzzling thing about death is that no human beings know their own death. I know that I shall die. But I do not know, and I shall never know, what death is. Indeed, I shall never know that I am dead. I shall never know myself as dead. For from that mysterious region other than or beyond life, that of death, no traveler, as Hamlet informs us in his "to be or not be" soliloquy, has ever returned. Death, paradoxically, is a social experience. So Isolde, in beholding the body of the dead Tristan, concludes Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* in (ironically) asking those around her: do you not see in it, friends, the throbbing life, the infinite all, in which I now drown myself in the highest, unconscious delight? Death is a relationship. We say that each person faces death alone. It is my death, and not yours. True, but each of

<sup>3</sup> See Brayton Polka, "Liebestod: On Love and Death in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 44/2 (December 2013) 239-52.

us also faces life alone. It is my life and not yours. Still, just as I shall never know my death, so equally is my life meaningless—in other words, self-contradictory—except in the context of the lives of others. I shall never know my life except in and through my relationship with others.

The same is true of love. Love is relationship, an infinite series of relationships, really, involving our self in relationships that we call personal (including sexual intimacy); familial; comradely (among friends), to recall Walt Whitman; and socio-political. Self-love is, in itself, meaningless and self-contradictory. For, just as love is relational, so is the self. My self is never my own, except insofar as I am subject to the self-delusion of self-contradiction, which is precisely what our social contract theorists of democracy—for example, Baruch Spinoza or Jean-Jacques Rousseau—call the state of nature, the war of all against all, where all human beings are the enemy not only of others but also of themselves. Indeed, the ultimate paradox of love, as of death, is that, just as the self is itself relationship—Buber's I-thou—so love and death are each, as I have been indicating, relationship. Thus, we may say with Kierkegaard that love, consistent with the biblical concept of creation, comes into existence, historically, from nothing, from nothing that is prior to love. For love is its own priority, the *causa sui*, the cause of itself. Death no less comes into existence historically, for how we love, how we live, is how we die (and vice versa). Death is, we may say, the very creation of life; for life is created from nothing, from nothing other than death. If we were immortal—with the distinction between life and death eliminated—then the significance of both life and death would vanish. Or, as Kierkegaard aptly tells us, if the individual always existed eternally (whether naturally or supernaturally), then he would never exist, then she would never come into historical existence as the single individual. If we believe that death is the end of life, its goal, its justification, then we shall find ourselves once again in the world of Wagner, together with Schopenhauer, in the world that Kierkegaard calls Christendom. It is Christianity rationalized in the terms of pagan values.

But how, then, are we to conduct our lives lovingly, with death always present and yet not as a source of despair, the despair that Kierkegaard calls, in *The Sickness unto Death*, the despair in not willing to be the self that one is and the despair, most terribly, in willing to be the self that one is? Kierkegaard also recognizes the contradictory despair of paganism. He calls it the

despair of not knowing that you are in despair, the despair of not possessing a self, a will, a oneness, a historical continuity. To love not with the despair that love can be realized solely in and through death but to love with faith in life, with the faith that love conquers all and so in defiance of death, i.e., with the faith that love is the end of death and not with the despair that death is the end of love, that is, to live in fear and trembling, is to embrace the biblical story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from immortal paradise as the Fall into the knowledge of being like God in knowing good and evil. Such is the story of love and death within the covenantal history of doing unto others what you want others to do unto you.

I want to emphasize, yet again, that the concepts of love and death that truly constitute our lives as moderns are not universal in the sense of what Schopenhauer calls natural. They are not given in nature. They are historical. They involve a concept of temporality that is not as such either natural or supernatural, mortal or immortal, linear or circular, finite or infinite. They do not adhere to the ancients' laws of contradiction and identity. Rather, our concepts of love and death belong to the world of historical paradox in which temporality represents the time of our lives as promise, as fulfillment, as realization, in which all human beings have the responsibility, the challenge, of making the individual moment count eternally in and as their own history. But this can only be true when it is understood, with Kierkegaard, that every individual, every generation begins in life with nothing but love, and ends in death with nothing but love. For the supreme self-consciousness that we die, which, Pascal tells us, distinguishes human beings from and gives them infinite power over the universe, is the knowledge that we love and are loved. While the finite universe swallows us up as a mere drop of water, we swallow up, we encompass the universe in and through our infinite self-consciousness. Thus, we see that history is the very relationship connecting individuals and generations in the temporal continuity of love and death. The continuity that is history and the history that is continuity are neither natural nor supernatural, for they come into existence as the eternal story of love and death, as the story that every individual and every generation must continuously renew in making it their own, in being true, historically, at once to the past and to the future. The chain of human history is unbreakable, yet its continuity is only as strong as its individual links.

History is the great discovery, the true creation, of the nineteenth century as it infinitely amplifies

and deepens the Kantian revolution in metaphysics whereby, true to the biblical concept of creation *ex nihilo*, the objects of nature depend on the mind of the subject, what Hegel calls infinite self-consciousness, and not the mind of the subject on objects. Because the human subject, our human subjectivity, is nothing but the story of love and death, in the beginning, as in the end—for in the beginning there is nothing but love, and in the end there is nothing but death—how we live and how we depict, how we tell the story, above all, in works of art, of the love that is everything but death and of the death that is everything but love is the eternal task of the faithful individual, Kierkegaard's knight of faith. Since, however, truth is subjectivity, since the subject is, in truth, all there is—in love as in death—the possibilities, within Christendom, of hypocrisy, dishonesty, self-deception, self-delusion, bad faith, of, in short, evil regarding how we understand the relationship of love and death are endless. So, Hans Sachs in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, observes: "Wahn! Wahn! Überall Wahn!" "Deceit (Delusion, Illusion)! Deceit! Everywhere deceit."<sup>4</sup> While Sachs (with Wagner behind him) does not evince a sophisticated grasp of the paradox that, in order for the claim that deceit is everywhere to be true, that claim cannot itself be deceitful (otherwise, it would simply be in bad faith), he does proceed to see to it that in the comedy of life good (art) is brought out of (evil) *Wahn*. Still, precisely because the judgment of love, as of death—before the other—shows all of us to be sinners in our never certain (finite) grasp of the (infinite) relationship of love and death, *Wahn* is, indeed, to be found everywhere, in life as in art.

I arrive, then, at opera as the story of love and death from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. But this history is a double one. I understand this story, the history that I tell here, to be the true story of modernity as set in critical opposition to the celebration of love as death that Wagner, following Schopenhauer, presents in his major operas from *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) to *Parsifal* (1882), with the comedic *Meistersinger* (1868) excepted.

### Love and Death in Modern Opera

My history begins with Gaetano Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830) and concludes with Giacomo Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* (1910). (*The Girl of the Golden West* is

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, trans. John Gutman, New York: G. Schirmer 1963, Act 3.

the title of the American play from which the libretto of Puccini's opera was taken.) Its prelude is *opera seria* in the eighteenth century, together with Mozart, and its postlude is Richard Strauss' opera *Capriccio* (1942). It passes over French opera in these centuries as involving a related but independent story. It is striking to see how our theme of love and death is treated in *opera seria*, as distinct from the improvised genre of *commedia dell'arte* and its successor *opera buffa*, not to mention *Singspiel*, whose outstanding masterpiece is Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The works of the great masters of the Italian genre of *opera seria*, George Frederick Handel and Christoph Willibald Gluck, both hailing from Germanic states (with Handel mounting his operas in London and Gluck his in both Vienna and Paris) are characterized by two elements, above all others. First, the stories on which *opera seria* is based are typically taken from Greek and Roman history and myth, e.g., *Giulio Cesare* (Handel) and *Orfeo ed Euridice*, *Alceste*, and *Iphigénie en Tauride* (Gluck).<sup>5</sup> Second, ancient histories and legends, which show their heroes to be fatally destroyed, are transformed into comedic stories with happy endings in which love, forgiveness, and reconciliation are central. Only in this way, it is evident, can "serious" but secular, as distinct from sacred, subjects such as human love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and happiness, be treated. The sacred remains the domain of the mass and the oratorio, including Johann Sebastian Bach's great settings of the passion story of Christ. In this sense, Mozart adheres to tradition. He wrote his brilliant operas in the three genres of *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, and *Singspiel*. But he wrote no tragedies. Within large-scale works for the voice his serious work is sacred, e.g., his *Requiem Mass* (in addition to his earlier masses). There is no tragedy in eighteenth century opera. Composers, along with their librettists, reject the ancient concept of fate as condemning life to death—count no man happy until he is one with his end, i.e., until he is dead, sings the chorus at the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. They do not yet see that the biblical (Christian) story is, as sacred, absolutely secular, that it involves the *saecula*

<sup>5</sup> It is true that a number of Handel's operas treat subjects from very early medieval history, e.g., *Rodelinda* and *Orlando*. Handel's story is yet more complex in that two of his late works, *Hercules* and *Semele*, are not operas (for they were not intended to be staged and were written, not in Italian but in English). Yet they are not oratorios (which, while written in English, always have sacred subjects). Handel called *Hercules* "a musical drama."

*saeculorum*, i.e., eternity as the moment in which all human beings have to confront, in fear and trembling, the historical reality of their lives in love as in death.

Indeed, we may ask: is the story of Christ a comedy or a tragedy—when it is not turned into the farce of Christendom that Ludwig Feuerbach, together with other left-wing followers of Hegel, including the early Wagner, appositely ridicule and yet from which the mature Wagner, once he is in the grips of Schopenhauer, does not and cannot free himself? We may say, in light of Dante Alighieri, that the Christian story is a *divina commedia* (a divine comedy). We may also say, in light of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that it involves the human tragedy of sin, that you have to lose your life, to sacrifice your life, in order to regain it, in order to be reborn into the life of the spirit in being like the God of history in knowing good and evil as the covenant of loving your neighbor as yourself. The story of the fall of Adam and Eve is the eternal mythos of man, the story of human beings as historical, as Kant and Hegel show us in their profound commentaries on the Genesis story.<sup>6</sup> This story is at once comedic and tragic, funny and heartrending, endearing and appalling, but always, when thoughtfully and engagingly presented, inspiring, revelatory, and moving. Life is at once comic and tragic. Love has its comedy and its tragedy. Death is macabre (in its gallows humor) and ennobling. Life is complete as the story of the fall into the covenant of knowing good and evil. Life is always already to be completed historically by the single individual, by each of us as the single individual, as the funniest story of all time and as the saddest story of all time. The biblical (Christian) story is, finally, the one true comedy and the one true tragedy. For it tells, uniquely and universally, the story of love and death. Where there is love there is comedy. Where there is death there is tragedy. Not only, however, are there profound exempla of each. But also there are countless examples of each that are superficial, sentimental, and schmaltzy when they are not simply demeaning, debasing, and degrading.

Still, the comedy of love and the tragedy of death are, when artfully rendered, for the living; and in that sense they end happily. Yet, all of us who, in the presence of a work of art, contemplate it know in all seriousness that, in finding that it reflects back to us our own historical self-consciousness, we come in death to

our end as, indeed, does the work of art. We repeat: *ars longa, vita brevis*. But we mean: art is for the living, yet all of us living human beings die. Indeed, if we did not die, then we would not live, and then we would have no art. Great art captures the paradoxical relationship of love and death by showing that death belongs to love, that love embraces death, that love is the end of death. It is no easy or common achievement. Failed art confuses the relationship of love and death either by cheapening death and so by sentimentalizing love (as in simplistic Christian art) or by making love serve death in a grotesque parody of the loving sacrifice of Jesus, the terrible contradiction that Feuerbach tried but failed to overcome and that Schopenhauer, followed by Wagner, eagerly embraced.

I return to *Anna Bolena*, which Donizetti wrote in 1830 and which was first performed in Milan at the very end of that year. I want to note that nineteenth century romantics discovered Shakespeare as our great modern author of tragedy, in addition to comedy, history, and romance, and it is solely in the nineteenth century that opera composers begin to write genuine tragedies of love and death. *Anna Bolena* is one of the great tragedies, perhaps the greatest, in nineteenth century opera (if, indeed, not in all theater).<sup>7</sup> I shall also consider Verdi's moving tragedy, *Rigoletto*, and two wondrous comedies: Beethoven's *Fidelio* (briefly) and Puccini's *La Fanciulla* (more fully). All four operas, in exploring the relationship between love and death as at once comic and tragic, feature women who, thanks to great personal risk and sacrifice on their part, represent love as the redeeming power through which death is overcome. It is true that, in the two tragedies, Anna and Gilda (the second the daughter of *Rigoletto*) die as the tragic victims of the love in and by which they are deceived (and, in the case of Anna, as we shall see, in and through which she also tragically deceives herself). Still, in going to their death, in accepting their death as love's sacrifice, they bestow the grace of loving forgiveness on the living. Love for them is found in life, not in death. How different they are from Brünnhilde who rides her horse, eagerly neighing, into the conflagration consuming the pyre bearing the body of Siegfried in the name of love as consummated only in and through death.

In focusing on Anna (Boleyn), the second wife of Enrico (Henry) VIII and the mother of the future

<sup>6</sup> See Brayton Polka, *Rethinking Philosophy in Light of the Bible: From Kant to Schopenhauer*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Astonishingly, it was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York only in fall of 2011.

Queen Elizabeth (the last of the five Tudor monarchs), Donizetti<sup>8</sup> is able to use the historical context of royal absolutism in the England of the 1530s to powerful effect, without in this instance his lack of fidelity to the annals of history compromising our response to the opera.<sup>9</sup> The king, consistent with the public record, gets his way, both in bed and politically, as Anna, at the beginning of the opera, has replaced his first wife and, by the end of the opera, has been replaced by his third wife (Giovanna [Jane] Seymour). Who Anna Bolena is personally in royal politics, beyond the public facts, has little historical significance. But Donizetti depicts in the person of Anna, the queen of Enrico, one of the great, tragic figures of the theater. The dramatic intensity of her story is at once moral and musical. From the beginning, when the chorus observes that the queen's fortune is waning as the king's heart is attracted elsewhere, Anna acknowledges to herself that she gave up her true love for the vane splendor of the crown. In the meantime, her lady-in-waiting and intimate friend Giovanna Seymour is deeply anxious that she will inadvertently let on to Anna that it is she (Giovanna) who has replaced the queen in the king's favor (and in his bed). Further, the man whom Anna truly loved and whose love she forsook in marrying the king, Signor Riccardo (Lord Richard) Percy, has been recalled to England from exile by the king. Percy remains deeply in love with Anna, as is clear to all (including both the queen and the king). Add to this the page Smeton who is smitten with the queen. He will lie before the Council of Peers, when it is trying Anna for adultery, that it was he who had an affair with the queen in order to save her from the king's accusation that she had an adulterous affair with Percy and thus

<sup>8</sup> I view Donizetti, in the hermeneutical sense, as the author of the opera and do not here consider composer (music) and librettist (text) separately.

<sup>9</sup> I do not, however, find it acceptable for Donizetti in *Maria Stuarda* (1835) to distort, indeed, to rewrite the history of the relationship between Mary Queen of Scots and Queen Elizabeth (of England), as had Schiller, on whose play the libretto is based (with yet additional historical fabrications). We can have a proper response to, i.e., be in a position properly to evaluate, the fraught relationship, at once personal (psychological) and political, between these two famous queens solely in light of absolute fidelity to the facts of history (insofar as they can be determined), in particular, as they involve the English queen, who is one of our greatest historical figures.

to deprive the king of his justification for annulling his marriage with Anna and making Giovanna Seymour his queen. Smeton provides us with a deeply pathetic image of misguided, adolescent love (a tragic version of Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*). Finally, there is Signor (Lord) Rochefort, Anna's loyal brother and close friend of Percy (who will acknowledge to his friend that he counseled his sister to forgo her love for him and to marry the king).

All of these figures love Anna – the king, Giovanna, Smeton, Percy, and Rochefort; and all of them betray Anna, except Percy (who, without status at court, is politically powerless). Anna loves all of these figures; but, in betraying her love for Percy, she betrays herself and is doomed by *politica reale*. In the rich arias and ensembles sung by these figures Donizetti brilliantly (and profoundly) shows them confronting their mixed motives, their personal conflicts, their moral dilemmas. All of them will the good, with the king, who is not given his own aria, excepted. (But even then Anna and Giovanna each make it clear to us that they have been deeply attracted to the king sexually. There is also no question but that Enrico is in full command of his kingdom: he demands and receives absolute obedience from his subjects, at least politically.) The opera concludes as Anna goes to her execution, accompanied by Smeton, Percy, and Rochefort, with the plea on the part of the chorus for royal clemency – since "merciful kings (*I Re pietosi*) are the image of heaven here below (*quaggiù*)" – having been ignored.<sup>10</sup>

What gives *Anna Bolena* a gravitas, at once moral and political, that we never find, for example, in an opera of Wagner, is that, in the conflict between love and power, the two female figures, Anna and Giovanna, in addition to the chorus, articulate with supreme self-consciousness and with profound self-confidence a concept of love as covenantal that is at one and the same time moral (personal) and political (communal). Theirs is a conception of love that is truly modern precisely because it is truly biblical and so, at the same time, altogether secular (as involving human beings *quaggiù*). What is so moving about both figures is that each of them acknowledges, out of her deepest need, that is, out of her recognition that she is a sinner, like her fellow human beings, that she depends on the mercy, on the love, of others to be saved, to be liberated, that is, to be accepted by her fellow human beings as

<sup>10</sup> Gaetano Donizetti, *Anna Bolena*, trans. William Ashbrook, New York: Souvenir Book 1973, Act 2.

possessing the dignity of doing unto others what they want others to do unto them. Anna and Giovanna are each mortified by their own, individual hypocrisy and self-deception—Anna by betraying the love of Percy for the glory of the crown (and the king's bed) and Giovanna for betraying the trust that Anna has in her by displacing her in the king's bed. Giovanna comes to Anna to tell her that it is only in agreeing to confess to adultery that the subsequent annulment of her royal marriage will allow her to escape execution. Anna, staggered by the proposal, absolutely refuses. When she proceeds to question her devoted friend how she, of all persons, could ask her "to buy her life with infamy," Giovanna tells her that, in addition to the king, it is her rival, the woman whom "Enrico's love has destined for the throne," who so advises her. It then becomes apparent to Anna that her rival for the king's affections is nobody other than her devoted friend, Giovanna Seymour. At first, Anna is outraged and beside herself. But, after regaining her self-poise, she kisses her *infelice* (unhappy friend) and sends her away with her *perdono*:

Now I ask God for your grace,  
And it will be granted to me,  
I beg God for your grace,  
And it will be granted to me.  
May there abide with you in this farewell (*addio*)  
My love, my mercy (*pietà*). [Act 2]

No citation of the simple words of the libretto can do justice to the moving power with which Anna repeats multiple times the final line—*l'amor mio, la mia pietà*—and then, after Giovanna tells her that her forgiveness only intensifies the guilt that torments her, the partial line: *a me sarà* (to me it will be granted).

Soon, thereafter, Giovanna and the king meet. Enrico is irritated to find that the woman who is shortly to become his queen is filled with remorse as the cause of Anna's disgrace and imminent execution. Yet, at the same time, Giovanna acknowledges that her love for the king continues to consume her heart. She begs him to allow her to escape to a remote refuge. But then the news arrives that the Council of Peers has dissolved the royal marriage and condemned to death "the unfaithful wife," together with her accomplices and instigators. Following upon the choral pronouncement that "merciful kings are the image of Heaven here below," Giovanna proceeds to address the king with perhaps the most profound lines in all opera:

Ah! Think that earth and Heaven  
Have turned their eyes upon you;

That every heart has its failings  
In order to owe mercy to others (*per dovere altrui  
mercè*).<sup>11</sup> (Act 2)

Only the sinner, only the one who acknowledges that he is a sinner, recognizes that others, like herself, depend upon the mercy and the forgiveness of others. The dignity of the self depends on sin, on accepting oneself as a sinner, in acknowledging the sin that one has done. There is no mercy, no forgiveness, no love outside of the knowledge of good and evil, outside of undertaking to will the good in full knowledge that only then and thereby does one take responsibility for overcoming the evil that one has done in the world. I shall simply note here without further comment that the theology implicit in Giovanna's statement is truly radical: that Jesus as the Christ, that God himself—in knowing good and evil—cannot be without sin. For it is only then that Jesus can be the one who shows by his life, it is only then that God can be the one who demands that each person show in his life, mercy and forgiveness to others in loving them as himself. Jesus, we remember from the Gospels, came to save sinners, not the righteous (Matt. 9.13, Mark 2.17). Or as the sinner tells Jesus in the *Recordare* of the Requiem Mass: "Remember, gentle Jesus, that I am the reason for your time on earth."<sup>12</sup>

Anna, too, in recognition that it is her betrayal of her love for Percy that has brought upon her, together with those who love her and whom she loves, the death penalty, articulates with dignity and sure confidence the moral and political consequences of sin. At the end of Act 1, when horror-struck to learn that she is to be judged by the Council of Peers, she acknowledges that there is no hope for her when the accuser (the king) is at the same time the one who condemns (judges) her. In the last great scene of the opera at the end of Act 2, Anna, overwhelmed by her impending execution, together with that of Percy, Rocheford, and Smeton, fades in and out of delirium as she recalls, plaintively, her early love for Percy that she gave up. She then addresses Heaven: "grant [me] release at last from my long sufferings and may these [my] last heart-beats at least be of hope." Finally, after being informed that the festive sounds coming from outside are of the people celebrating their new queen, she addresses the "wicked couple" (Enrico and Giovanna) with complete consciousness of self:

<sup>11</sup> Ashbrook's translation: "that mercy toward others is a duty."

<sup>12</sup> Requiem Mass (Roman Catholic), [www.requiemsurvey.org/latintext.php](http://www.requiemsurvey.org/latintext.php), last accessed November 18, 2014.

"Final vengeance I do not invoke, no, in this dreadful hour: into the open tomb, which awaits me, may I descend with pardon on my lips and may it acquire for me forgiveness and favor (*clemenza e favor*) in the presence of a God of mercy (*pietà*)." Again, the mere text does not do justice to the passion and intensity with which Anna, in singing this final, coloratura aria, with multiple repetitions of its key phrases, expresses the dignity and determination, the final lucidity, with which she goes to her execution (in bringing the opera to a close).

The final scene of *Anna Bolena* is at once dazzling and heartbreaking precisely because its vocal brilliance (the technical demands on the coloratura soprano) effectively serves and expresses a profound text. Anna is a deeply moving, tragic figure because she is no mere sentimental heroine who serves as the victim of others. For it is she herself, as she fully acknowledges, who is the agent of her own downfall. Caught up in royal politics, she is unable to escape the consequences of her original sin, her rejection of Percy's love for the love of the king and crown. She can hope, then, that, as she pardons Giovanna, her friend and rival, and so also the "wicked couple," she, too, will be forgiven by God as the sinner who, in acknowledging her own fallibility, forgives others theirs. It is significant that, in appealing to heaven for release from her sufferings and in expressing the hope that God will forgive her, Anna does not indulge in the dualism (the idolatry!), characteristic of Christendom, between *quaggiù* (down here on earth) as a veil of tears devoid of human happiness and *lassù* (up there in heaven) as the sole domain of human love and peace. She does not tell us that earthly love is doomed to failure and that true love is to be found only in heaven, in marked contrast with the principal characters of both *Don Carlo* and *Aida* whose avowals at the end of each of these operas by Verdi that true love and peace are to be found solely in heaven contradict and so falsify the splendor of the (earthly!) music with which they end.

Donizetti's opera is true to the tragedy of Shakespeare in confronting us with, as it reveals to us, the significance of earthly life. Indeed, there is no figure like Anna Bolena in Shakespeare's five tragedies<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Because Shakespeare is faithful in depicting the values of the ancients in what I call his "Roman and Greek" plays, e.g., *Julius Caesar* and *Troilus and Cressida*, these plays are not tragedies in the modern (biblical) sense. See Brayton Polka, *Shakespeare and Interpretation, or What*

where the characters embodying human good (Hamlet, Desdemona [*Othello*], Malcolm and Macduff [*Macbeth*], Cordelia and Edgar [*King Lear*], and Romeo and Juliet), while at times perhaps rash, do not sin and are sharply contrasted with the characters embodying human evil (Claudius [*Hamlet*], Iago and Othello, Lord and Lady Macbeth, Lear's two eldest daughters together with Edmund and Cornwall plus the other weaker characters in the play including Lear himself, and members of the quarrelling families of Verona [*Romeo and Juliet*]). Anna has a tragic flaw, we may say. But, in the biblical world of modernity, as distinct from the pagan world of antiquity, sin (the originality of one's sin) is remediable—in and through the recognition that mercy, that love, that forgiveness is the duty that we owe to others. Anna, however, finds herself swept up in the glory of court life whose earthly values are dictated by authoritarian self-interest and revenge (the state of nature) and not by the heavenly values of mercy, love, and forgiveness (the civil state as founded on the social contract). Consequently, it is evident that the *Ciel* (heaven) to which Anna, together with Giovanna and the chorus, appeals is the city of God in and by whose light life in the earthly city is and must be lived. Through Anna, Donizetti makes his (nineteenth century) audience vividly aware that the principles of mercy, love, and forgiveness are no less social (political) than they are personal (which is also no less true of Shakespeare's tragedies). Only within democracy, only when we can declare, in good faith, *Sempre libera* in the recognition of the other as the truth of ourselves, can Anna's sin, her fatal flaw, her original mistake be remediable on earth, which is not to say that tragedy, as the consequence of human sin, does not continue to be central to our human lives.

Comedy, in the biblical (modern) sense, is no less the consequence of human sin. In Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the final, revised version of which was first performed in 1814, we find that love, in its encounter with death, is also viewed as at once personal and political. Leonora, disguised as Fidelio, is able to rescue her husband Florestan from the dungeon in which he has been unjustly and cruelly imprisoned by his political enemy, the tyrannical Don Pizarro. But conjugal fidelity and devotion, the abiding love between wife and husband, are not sufficient in themselves to effect Florestan's liberation from prison and so to make freedom on earth a reality. Leonora and Florestan depend on the arrival

*You Will*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011.

at the prison of Don Fernando, the friend of Florestan and an enlightened minister of the crown, to provide the condition in which fidelity to love and freedom can be realized. Still, the revolutionary truth of the opera is evident: true love is selfless in demanding freedom and justice – for all – on earth.

In turning, now, to our second tragedy to be considered here, *Rigoletto*, first performed in 1851, we find Verdi exploring yet another dimension of the interplay between love and politics. While the setting of the opera is political – Rigoletto is the jester in the court of the dissolute Duke of Mantua – the tragedy of the opera centers on his delusion that paternal love for his daughter Gilda – the tender love that father and daughter have for each other – will suffice for her. Yes, Rigoletto wants to protect Gilda from the ugly immorality of predatory court life. Still, he participates in it (even if only as the court fool who acts as a mirror in reflecting back on the Duke and the lords and ladies surrounding him the debauched life that they live). Rigoletto refuses to tell Gilda anything about his own life or, indeed, about her mother (who is dead) or any other family members. But love is primarily social (political), not familial (as Wagner himself acknowledges when, in *Opera and Drama*, which he wrote in 1851, he views music as embodying the romance of life in which youth and maiden depart from their respective families to renew life, to begin life anew in and through a new love relationship, in imitation of the love of their own parents, ultimately, Adam and Eve<sup>14</sup>). Despite the fact that Rigoletto tries to shield his daughter from the wider world, Gilda is very much in love with life and so, while she appears to be innocent of it, is looking for her love in life to be fulfilled (as it is not and cannot be in and through her father). Rigoletto will not allow the lady-in-waiting attending upon Gilda to take this beautiful and blooming girl anywhere outside the house except to church. But, when at church, Gilda does not lose the opportunity of seeing what is about her and of seeing, thrillingly, that she has been seen seeing about her – by a student, the young man (who is the Duke in disguise) will subsequently inform her. She instantly falls in love with him.

Gilda is thus awakened to the power of love. She discovers that she has the capacity to love another. She wants to love another and wants the love of another.

<sup>14</sup> This is the sole instance where Wagner, either in his writings or in his operas, evinces a truly biblical and so a modern conception of love.

She sings, enchanted and enchantingly (just prior to her abduction and subsequent rape), *Caro nome*:

Dear name, that first  
Made my heart throb,  
It will always give me  
To remember the delights of love!  
In thought my desire  
Will always fly to you,  
And my last breath, too,  
Will be yours, dear name.<sup>15</sup>

But the tragedy of Gilda is that she loves sincerely – a man whose only interest is in demonstrating his power, at once private (erotic) and public (political), over her (and who will subsequently rape her in the bedroom of his palace). At the end of the opera Rigoletto makes sure that Gilda learns how untrue a lover the Duke is by having her observe his attempt to seduce the sister of the man whom we know to be the assassin whom Rigoletto has hired to kill the Duke in revenge for his assault on his daughter. Gilda, however, forgives the Duke and offers up her life to save his. In the meantime, the Duke continues to be heard singing *La donna è mobile* (woman is fickle, changeable, movable...) with noble nonchalance. Rigoletto brings the opera to a close in opening the sack that the assassin has delivered to him as containing the body of the Duke only to discover within it his dying daughter. The tragedy that Gilda suffers is that she is the victim both of deluded, paternal (familial) love and of deceptive, sexual (adult) love. But in the end, in sacrificing her life for, as she forgives, the Duke, she abandons, once and for all, the familial love of her father. While love, she consequently shows us, can be and often is the terrible source of self-deception whose end is, tragically, death, still, she leaves behind her the principle of love whose forgiveness of others provides the sole justification of life on earth. We leave behind the Duke self-contentedly singing *La donna è mobile*, insensible to what has occurred, and Rigoletto disconsolately weeping over the body of his daughter, no less insensible to what has occurred, each bearing terrible witness to the power of love in redeeming life through death's sacrifice.

We come, now, to Minnie, the girl of the golden West, owner of the Polka saloon at the time of the gold rush in California (1849-50), a world of rough lives and rough justice, yet a world of tender and

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto*, trans. Ruth and Thomas Martin, New York: G. Schirmer, 1957.

vulnerable individuals whose love is tried and tested by death. In *La Fanciulla del West*, first performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1910, Puccini reveals, by exploring in depth, the character and the values that the figures in the opera, as individuals and in groups, express (or hide) by way of their continuous interaction with each other. The music of the opera, like that of *Anna Bolena*, does not draw attention to itself. It has no parts, whether vocal or orchestral, that invite separate concert performance or even more popular repetition. Yet, it serves, effectively, indeed, profoundly, the *verismo*<sup>16</sup> world of Minnie and her miners who, while they are self-made and self-reliant individuals without worldly standing or pretension, are also, in their lonely thirst for love and truth, deeply vulnerable individuals emotionally. The miners—Sonora, Bello (Handsome), Joe, and the rest—together with Nick, the bartender, all love Minnie, as their sister and teacher. They are desperately sacrificing their lives to get rich quick by working the earth for gold in order to provide support for their loved ones back home: sweethearts, wives, children, and old folks, separation from whom tears at their hearts. Their sole community is the Polka whose center is its mistress, Minnie, with the heart of gold. Indeed, the miners entrust to her safekeeping the gold that they amass.

Into the Polka saloon, one fine day, walks, without apparent purpose, the stranger Dick Johnson, whom Minnie has, however, seen before and who has, it is apparent, caught her attention. There also arrive at the Polka the sheriff, who intends to make Minnie his lover, and a Wells Fargo agent who together are searching for the Mexican bandit Ramerrez whose gang of outlaws has been terrorizing the neighborhood. Indeed, the stash of gold that Minnie holds in trust for the miners could well be the bandit's target.

Puccini explores the character of Minnie through, then, two relationships—with the miners and with

Dick. While he depicts the relations that Minnie has with both the miners and Dick in the Polka in Act 1, it is not evident that they share a significant connection with each other, except that Minnie is central to both. With the relationship between Minnie and Dick having become tender (if not overtly a love affair) by the end Act 1, Dick visits Minnie in her mountain cabin where she lives alone (except for her Indian servants) in Act 2; and they become lovers (while chastely sleeping apart). The miners are absent until they appear in hot pursuit of Ramerrez the bandit, who also makes his sudden appearance. In Act 3, the miners play the central role in determining the *destino* of Minnie in her relationship with both her lover and the bandit.

The affection and the tender respect that Minnie and the miners have for each other, indeed, their mutual dependence on each other, is revealed in a scene in Act 1 that is surely unique in the history of opera. After a near-brawl in the Polka has been quelled by the arrival of Minnie, she opens up a Bible, and the miners gather around her for what is evidently their daily lesson. She finds her place, Psalm 51, and reads: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean."<sup>17</sup> In telling one miner, who asks what this hyssop is, that it is an herb that grows in the East, she tells another, who asks if it does not grow here: "Yes, Joe, in the heart of everyone of us is preserved a small bush of it." Joe, laughing: "In the heart?" Minnie, serious: "In the heart." She continues to read from the Psalm: "Wash me, and I shall be white as snow. Put inside my breast a pure heart, and renew in me a chosen spirit (*uno spirito eletto*)...." Minnie breaks off her reading to comment:

This means, boys, that there is not  
In the world a sinner  
To whom a way of redemption (*una via di redenzione*) is  
not open –  
Know that everyone of you encloses within yourself  
(*chiudere in sè*)  
This supreme truth of love.

The reading session breaks up; and, later, after everyone else clears out, Dick remains at the Polka. He and Minnie tentatively and then more openly begin to speak about themselves to each other, especially Minnie (although he remains Mister Johnson to her and they address each other with the politely plural "you"). While Minnie first informs Dick that she is happy to live alone and is without fear (*timore*), she

<sup>16</sup> *Verismo* (from *vero*: true to life—real/realistic) is a term used broadly (and with little agreement among scholars) to describe the style developed by Italian writers and composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to portray a lower-class world, so very different from the exalted world of romantic myth and historical romance of earlier writers and composers. *Carmen* (1875), with its factory workers, prostitutes, soldiers, bull fighters, etc., represents the world of *verismo*, not to mention Tennyson's long narrative poem *Enoch Arden* (1864), which Richard Strauss set as a melodrama (for narrator and piano) in 1897.

<sup>17</sup> Giacomo Puccini, *La Fanciulla del West* (*The Girl of the Golden West*), trans. R.H. Elkin, Milan: Ricordi, 2010.

subsequently tells him that she is "nothing but a poor girl, obscure and good for nothing" who "in her heart is discontented in being so small" when she finds within herself a desire to elevate herself up "to you, up, up, like the stars, in order to be near you, in order to be able to speak with you." Dick reminds her that, when earlier in the day they were dancing together, what she says now she cannot speak she then revealed in pressing up against his breast, "and," he adds, "I experienced a strange joy, a new peace that I do not know how to speak." Minnie acknowledges that she, too, is "full of so much happiness (*allegrezza*), of so much fear (*paura*)." After Nick comes in to warn them about "another Mexican snout" (*ceffo*) who has been seen lurking in the neighborhood, presumably a member of Ramerrez' gang, she tells Dick that if anyone tried to steal the miners' cache of gold in her care he would have to kill her first. Dick asks her: "Minnie! And you are able to run such a risk for that which is not yours"? She responds that he would do the same thing if he knew the "proud struggle" (*lotta superba*) in which the miners engage in breaking their bones and hearts in forcing the gold out of the rocks and clay. "And they have come to die like dogs in the midst of the mire in order to send a bit of gold to dear old ones and children far away." Dick tells Minnie that, having earlier heard a whistle from outside, he now has to leave immediately but not before he agrees to visit her in her cabin and, in asking her not to cry, tells her: "You do not know yourself. You are a creature of good and pure spirit – And you have a face of an angel (*angiolo*)!"

While Dick Johnson remains a mystery in Act 1—where he comes from, why he departs with such haste, having heard a whistle (which he acknowledges, in an aside, to be an anticipated signal)—still, in his attraction to Minnie, he draws her out of herself. It is not that Minnie does not know herself. She knows, as a reader of the Bible, that the way of redemption is open to all—sinners—who house within themselves this supreme truth of love. She is fearlessly selfless in accepting the trust of her miners to protect their hard-won gold. But Dick is right. Minnie has not yet been tested by the love of a man (she gaily told him that, while she has kissed many men, she has not bestowed her first kiss on any man). That test comes in Act 2, when her lover Dick is revealed to be Ramerrez, the feared and hated bandit (who is known to have another lover). Minnie is staggered and feels betrayed by the man to whom she gave her first kiss. Now it is time for Dick to reveal himself to her. I know that I am

damned, he tells Minnie, but I would not have robbed you. I was born a vagabond: my name was thief from the time I came into the world, but I did not know it while my father lived. But, when he died six months ago, I learned that "my sole wealth, my sole bread for my mother and siblings, in the future, was the paternal inheritance: a gang of road bandits! I accepted it. That was my *destino*." But then one day he met Minnie and "dreamed of going with her so far away in order to redeem myself totally (*per redimermi tutto*) in a life of work and of love. And my lip murmured an ardent prayer: O God! May she never know of my shame. The dream has been in vain. Now I have finished." It takes Minnie some while before she finds herself able to meet the test of love (that the way of redemption is open to every sinner). She wins Dick's freedom by cheating at cards (as a true Machiavellian) in a high stakes gamble with the self-serving, self-deceiving, and self-loving sheriff (who could not imagine that a loving woman like Minnie would make use of deception in serving the love of another).

Dick goes free but is now on the lam. He is captured in Act 3, as the sheriff, the Wells Fargo agent, and the miners demand that he be instantly hanged. But he is allowed, first, to make a final statement. Having earlier made clear that, while he is a thief, he has never killed anyone, Dick (Ramerrez) now asks that she, who is loved by all, not learn how he died. "May she believe me to be free and far away, upon a new way of redemption.... Minnie, unique flower of my life, Minnie, who has willed me so much good!" But now Minnie, yelling at the top of her voice, gallops in on her horse, her hair flying in the wind and a pistol between her teeth. Steadily and confidently she reminds the miners, individually and collectively, of all that she has done for them. Slowly, they begin to consent to her demand that Dick be freed, as they remove their hats and bow their heads in recognition of all that they owe her. Calling them "brothers of my heart, rough and good souls," she recalls "that one day I taught you a supreme truth of love: brothers, there is no sinner in the world to whom a way of redemption is not open!" A miner responds: "Your words are God's (*di Dio*). You love him like no one in the world." He raises Dick from the ground and cuts the rope binding his hands: "In the name of all I give him to you." Weeping, the miner adds: "Go, Minnie, addio." As Minnie and Dick vanish into the distance, the opera ends with the miners sobbing: "Never again will you return...never again...never again!"

The miners owe their life to Minnie, their teacher, their sister, their sweetheart. They will miss her terribly. They send her and Dick off to begin their new life together in full recognition that their own lives will never be the same—because they have learned from *la fanciulla del west* the supreme truth of love, that the way of loving redemption every human being encloses within his own heart. But, sobbing, they also know, surely, that they have put her lesson to the test. They have learned their lesson, which is that Minnie, together with Dick, is no less dependent on the miners, on their love and good faith in overcoming the anger and bitterness that they had righteously directed against the Mexican bandit who had been robbing the upstanding, hard-working souls of the neighborhood in coming to see that he is the one whom Minnie loves above all others. With and through Minnie they established a community of loving solidarity that in the end saves Dick, and so also Minnie, from arbitrary justice and so supports their freedom to seek *una via di redenzione* together elsewhere. Love is truly tested in and through death. Minnie risks all for love in saving Dick from death (for only if she wins, cheating, at cards, does the Sheriff not gain possession of her and does Dick the bandit go free). The miners risk all for love, since, in saving Dick from death, they lose their Minnie to him.

We see that in the comedy of *La Fanciulla* it is community solidarity that supports, by blessing, the love of Minnie and Dick. Because this community of love and good faith is absent from the tragedies of Anna Bolena and Gilda, their lives are lost. Yet, it is in the name of these values that they go to their death. The community in and by which Leonora's husband Florestan is liberated is present only in the person of the royal minister. Again, however, it is in the name of faithful love that he acts to free Florestan. But what the comedic *La Fanciulla* also shows us is that, while love between individuals both creates and is sustained by community values, the love that is romance, in modernity, is at the same time deeply personal as enjoyed and lived by two adults (man and woman in this case) in an intimate relationship with each other. The love, then, that is not only communal but also and, in the fundamental sense, personal (between two persons), is not primarily familial. Still the irony—*Die List der Vernunft in der Geschichte!*—is that, typically, two loving individuals want and have a family, for it is their children who will go forth to recreate yet again the personal romance of love—with the support of and in the support of the democratic community.

Richard Strauss' *Capriccio, A Conversation Piece for Music*, which was first performed in Munich in 1942 (*sic!*), is a fitting postlude to our short history of opera. It is set in 1775, at the time of Gluck's reform of *opera seria*, in an aristocratic chateau near Paris, which was then becoming the center of the European opera world (although the premiers of the major operas that Mozart wrote ending in 1791 were all given in or near Vienna, except for two in Prague). It is the birthday of the countess Madeleine, a widow, and among her guests are a musician and a poet, both of whom are in love with her and both of whom have written pieces in her honor. The salon conversation, which also draws in her brother the Count, an actress to whom the count is attracted, and a theater director, is whether in opera poetry (text) or music is more important, whether the words are to serve the music or whether the music is to serve the words, a topic much discussed in the eighteenth century and to which Wagner, in his earlier writings, gives his definitive answer: music is to serve the words (as he harshly rejects what he viewed as the sacrifice of the text to dazzling coloratura display on the part of brilliant castrati whose singing in show-stopping arias was wildly popular with eighteenth century audiences). As the conversation regarding the relevant merits of poetry and music gains in complexity and drama, it begins to become evident to the hosts and their guests that they are interacting with each other like characters in an opera, indeed, that they are creating an opera, the very opera that is being performed before us.

With the coming of evening everyone goes off except for the countess, who will dine alone at home tonight. She concludes the opera, which has taken shape before us, in singing what is, in effect, an extended aria of some twenty minutes or so, in parody, we can say, of Wagner and in homage to the tradition of the brilliant, coloratura aria in Italian opera in and through which individual characters reveal to us their deepest feelings and concerns. Words or music? The poet or the musician? The countess has invited each of her suitors, unbeknownst to the other, to be in her library at 11 o'clock in the morning to learn who is to be the object of her choice. Addressing herself in a mirror, she remarks: "A little ironically you glance back at me? I want an answer, not your testing glance! You are silent? O, Madeleine! Madeleine! Will you be consumed between two fires? You mirror-image of the lovesick (*verliebten*) Madeleine, can you advise me, can you help me find the conclusion for your opera? Is there one that is not

trivial?"<sup>18</sup> The butler enters to announce dinner. The countess goes out humming the melody to which the musician set the sonnet of the poet (to his annoyance). The curtain falls.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

The caprice that is Strauss' opera ironically resolves the question of whether the poet or the composer, the libretto or the music is more important in opera by showing them to be charmingly integrated in and through the conversation that takes place among the

principal characters and that then becomes the opera that unfolds before us. To find the conclusion for your opera that is not trivial is, we have learned from *Anna Bolena* and *La Fauciulla del West*, together with *Fidelio* and *Rigoletto*, to confront the issue of love and death, whether in tragedy or in comedy, with an articulation of the values, at once personal and social – and so always involving the subject – that constitute our modern lives. We all love and we all die. Love is the comedy of life. Death is the tragedy of life. How we love and how we die is the question, then. We love sincerely, and we love insincerely. We die in good faith, and we die in bad faith. Love and death are the most profound of issues. They are also the most trivial of issues. Does love serve death, or does death serve love?

We have learned from our tragic heroine Anna and from our comedic heroine Minnie that the way of redemption is open to the sinner as the supreme truth of love that all human beings lodge within their heart. To do unto others what you want others to do unto you is to recognize that to the sinner alone is offered the salvation of owing mercy to others. We have also learned from our two heroines that love and forgiveness are at once personal and social, both individual and communal, in that they involve, always, subjects in relationship. In creating their intensely personal relationships individuals bring into existence and nourish the very community values that at once sustain them and give meaning to their lives. Thus, do we have that continuity in life, both personal and social, that is historical. Every individual begins anew at the beginning. There is no beginning anew that is not historical, and there is no history that is not new in the beginning. The paradox that is the relationship between love and death is that, if we did not die, then love would vanish into the contradictory opposition between the contingent many and the eternal one. The great challenge of love, then, is how to confront death, how to face death such that it serves the life of love, the love of life. The great challenge of death is how, in facing it, to confirm our commitment to love and life. Few works of art meet this challenge as convincingly as do the two operas of Donizetti and Puccini that I have examined here.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Strauss, *Capriccio*, trans. Maria Massey, London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1963. German text online *Opernführer: The online Virtual Opera House*, [www.opera-guide.ch/opera.php?id=363&uilang=de](http://www.opera-guide.ch/opera.php?id=363&uilang=de), last accessed November 18, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> In his earlier opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912, revised 1916) Strauss also turns opera into the history of opera with the events, as they unfold on stage, becoming the very opera that we are beholding. An *opera seria* is to be presented in the palace of a rich and "great lord" in Vienna in the eighteenth century. It concerns the tragic story of Ariadne who, having been abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos, mourns her lost love, laments her fate, and longs for death. But another troupe has also arrived to provide entertainment for the evening – in the improvisational style of *commedia dell'arte*. The opera and the improvisation are performed at the same time, with the result that, as the tragic and the comedic modes of acting and singing parody one another, hilariously, yet also seriously, Ariadne learns from the performers in the *commedia dell'arte* troupe that the solution to a broken heart is love, not death. Indeed, Bacchus, who is not the messenger of death whom Ariadne has been expecting, arrives; and he instantly falls in love with her. The opera ends with a duet in which "Bacchus completely transfigures her with his love, and Ariadne embraces life instead of death." See Richard Strauss, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, trans. Alfred Kalisch, no place, Boosey & Hawkes, no date, p. 2. True to *opera seria*, as we have seen, we are well on our way, as it were, to the opera buffa of Mozart and, ultimately, to the great comedies and tragedies of nineteenth and twentieth century opera.