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“I’m sorry my story is in fragments”: Offred’s Operatic Counter-Memory¹

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THE CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY opened its 2004–2005 season to great critical and cultural acclaim with the Canadian premiere of Poul Ruders and Paul Bentley’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (*Tjenerindens Fortælling*), an operatic adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s 1985 dystopic novel of the same title. Opening an opera season with a contemporary work is a box-office gamble; indeed, this risky decision marked a first for the Canadian Opera Company. And, as Atwood admits, when Ruders first approached her and proposed adapting her novel into opera, she thought, “This person is mad” (“God and Gilead”). But the final product, which received its world premiere on 6 March 2000 with the company that commissioned the work (Royal Danish Opera), demonstrates the fortuitous truth that first thoughts are often wrong. In his 2003 review of the British premiere, Martin Anderson aptly sums up the general enthusiasm for the work, “what a superior piece of theatre it is: music, libretto, direction, stage design, costumes and lighting all coalesce to thrilling effect ... it has been

¹ This paper developed out of a conference paper delivered at ACCUTE Congress 2005, entitled “The ‘Eyes’ Have It: Counter-Memory in the Opera House.” I would like to thank Linda Hutcheon for her careful reading and helpful suggestions at every stage of this article.

years since I've seen something this good" (39). A reception so positive is rare for contemporary music of any kind, never mind contemporary opera, which has the misfortune of competing for airtime in perhaps the most inflexible canon in classical music.²

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It is also rare for an adaptation of a literary work as famous as *The Handmaid's Tale* to be lauded so wholeheartedly. As Herbert Lindenberger notes, "[W]henever a canonized literary work—be it a drama, novel, or verse narrative—has been turned into an opera, its admirers note and often deplore what has been 'lost' from the original in the course of transformation" (41).³ Though the action of a novel must be compressed in order to produce an adaptation of this kind, Bentley's libretto, which deftly contains the action in forty short scenes organized into a prologue, prelude, two acts, and an epilogue, is actually fairly faithful to the source text. Ruders and Bentley's work preserves the "frighteningly prophetic" spirit and the "real and human story" of the novel, which is essential to the opera's success, for as Ruders remarks in an interview, "without a great story-line opera, at least modern opera, is useless" (*Sequenza* 21). Ruders and Bentley's adaptation, however, does deviate from the original in one important way. Only after we finish Atwood's novel and read the epilogue do we learn that Offred's story is a reconstruction from the fragments of a lost personal history that exists within a historical narrative that, like all historical narratives, is itself a reconstruction from fragments. In the opera, on the other hand, the story begins with Professor Pieixoto and the

2 Indeed, I could find only one negative assessment. Regarding the British premiere at the English National Opera (3 April 2003), Andrew Clements of *The Guardian* writes, "ENO has done Ruders proud; what Ruders has done for Atwood, however, is far less certain." More in line with the bulk of good reviews that the opera received, John Fleming of the *St. Petersburg Times* calls the opera "not only one of the musical events of the year but also a telling piece of political theatre" in his review of the North American premiere by the Minnesota Opera (May 2003; "Opera's Brave New World"), and Anthony Tommasini, writing for the *New York Times*, calls it a work that the Metropolitan Opera "should feel obliged to present."

3 In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon examines in detail the problems and paradoxes inherent in the "morally loaded discourse of fidelity" that accompanies most discussions of adaptations. Reminding us that adaptations need to be treated *as adaptations*, not as reproductions of the adapted text, her work nullifies the force of the "constant debate over degrees of proximity to the 'original'" that structures many analyses of adapted works (7). While comparisons to the novel are inevitable, the focus of my discussion is the way in which the *opera* navigates the complex, multi-layered, alternative realm to which counter-memory belongs, *not* the ways in which the opera diverges from the novel.

symposium at which he is speaking and at which opera-goers are default attendees. It then moves to the Red Centre, where opera-goers and handmaids alike are indoctrinated, before acts 1 and 2 begin, and opera-goers simultaneously become voyeurs, “Eyes,”⁴ and critics, without relinquishing their former roles as conference participants and ersatz handmaids. I have focused on opera-goers here because the audience’s fragmentation into these various and disparate roles mirrors the ways in which the opera, its main character, Offred, and her narrative are literally and figuratively fragmented, even as it also underscores the way in which in an operatic adaptation of a novel, the libretto itself fragments the novel. Focusing on opera-goers, moreover, demonstrates the most significant alteration that occurs when the story moves from the page to the stage, namely, that readers become viewers and therefore become implicated in the story, rather than passive critics of it.

Postmodernism teaches that “the true human subject is fragmentary, incoherent, overdetermined, forever under construction in the process of signification” (Kramer 9); theorists of what George Lipsitz calls “counter-memory” help to explain why this “true human subject” is fragmentary:

Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality ... counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience. (213)

Following this definition, Offred’s story, in both the operatic adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the novel upon which it is based, clearly belongs to the realm of counter-memory. Counter-memory narratives are necessitated by a kind of Catch-22. In order to participate in the dominant discourse—in order to be heard—oppressed and subjugated groups must speak in the language of that discourse. But in so doing, they risk eliding the very counter-memory that their efforts are attempting to legitimize, or at least reinforcing the dominant narrative. The people for whom counter-memory becomes a tool of reconstruction are the people who, like Offred, “have had to develop dual and triple consciousness, who have had to live

4 The “Eyes” are the secret police force in Gilead. The name, of course, symbolizes the “Big Brother” element in Atwood’s dystopic novel (published, notably, one year after the title of George Orwell’s 1984). The image is also reminiscent of the “Eye of Providence” that graces the American dollar bill and forms a part of Masonic iconography.

with the consequences of history, and who have had to find their identities in stories that never mentioned them” (Lipsitz 228). Professor Pieixoto will mention Offred in his story but only insofar as her story—the oral history recorded on cassette tapes—will help him to order the historical narrative it has been his life’s work to construct. He is not content with Offred’s counter-memory unless and until he can fit it into the known canon, as the title of his work, which recalls Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, suggests. In his keynote address to the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadian Studies, which is “held as part of the International Historical Association Convention,” Pieixoto quips, “the superscription ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ was appended to [the transcribed tapes] by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally ... will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particular that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*” (Atwood 373). Once Pieixoto can place Offred’s counter-memory within Father Chaucer’s canon, he can then invalidate the importance of her story through lame sexist jokes but, at the same time, use her story to glean lurid details about the Gilead regime and its leaders, which, for Pieixoto, is where the real interest in Offred’s story lies. “If we could identify the elusive ‘Commander,’” he remarks, “at least some progress would [be] made” (Atwood 381). The efficacy of Offred’s counter-memory is thus always limited by Pieixoto’s intrusions into her text. Her story is undoubtedly a counter-memory, but her story as it is related in history—as we have it in the novel—will always be a mediated memory, a reconstruction from fragments (so it no longer seems to be a fragment), and first-time readers will always be duped by it.

But in the opera the conventions and practices of the counter-memory’s new genre step in to limit Pieixoto’s story, thus allowing the counter-memory to retain more of its fragmented autonomy. Unlike the teleologically driven feminist *Bildungsroman*, the genre to which at least one critic argues Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* belongs (Hogsette 275), opera is always a hybridized genre. In spite of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* dream, “the propensity of opera to assimilate a variety of discourses is ... a sign of its desire to achieve an *illusion* of inclusiveness” (Lindenberger 95, *italics added*). Not quite drama, not quite music, and not quite literature, opera is often characterized by what it lacks—what it takes away from the various art forms when they are pillaged in the service of what Rosalie Colie calls “*the mixed genre in the arts*” (quoted in Lindenberger 95, *italics original*). But this “fault” can also be seen as the major strength of the genre when opera does counter-memory because part of what is lost in the move from

novel to opera is the false sense of teleological unification that the novel form always implies and for which Atwood's novel is sometimes criticized. The novel has been called too neat, "a touch self-satisfied, rather too much conscious of its high moral ground" (Anderson 39), and its narrator, in her recurring use of paralipsis, too "skilled" a "rhetorician and ... fabulator" to actually be the powerless figure that she represents herself to be (Deer 217, 219). By further compressing the action and losing much of the ironic first-person narration, by opening the opera with Pieixoto and his Symposium, and by underscoring these somewhat necessary changes with the hybridization inherent to the genre, the opera better mimics the fragmented nature of counter-memory; in short, because it refuses the false totalizing impulse of the novel, Offred's narrative in *Ruders and Bentley's The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's patronymic naming scheme is immediately rendered obvious.

In *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History*, Lawrence Kramer rather flippantly remarks, "To make anything more itself, or more anything, just add music" (4). While in some cases it could be argued that the addition of music does seem to merely make Atwood's novel "more itself," in most cases operatically voicing Atwood's text—even and sometimes *especially* at the expense of literary text—further fragments the narrative in ways that only an operatic rendering could, thus creating a counter-memory that is potentially more potent, more counter-discursive. For example, in *Ruders and Bentley's The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's patronymic naming scheme is immediately rendered obvious, for instead of silently reading "Offred" as a proper noun, pronounced with an accent on the first syllable, we hear it sung as the fragmented compound word, "Of Fred." A native English speaker naturally registers the name as a single word, Offred, even though, if a reader were to think about it, he or she would realize that the name should be pronounced "Of Fred." As Joseph Adriano remarks, "in order to pronounce the word the way the Gileadites would, we must work at it" (90). But in vocalizing Atwood's tale, we are denied the readerly privilege that allows us to misread, or to mispronounce. While a reader has

5 Shirley Neuman is correct when she asserts that "The opera's effect is to increase the emphasis on the personal trauma suffered by Offred and her family." I would have to disagree, however, that the effect of this emphasis is "to diminish the novel's emphasis on its social and political roots." As I argue, though it "cannot recapture the level of analysis" in the novel, the opera retains the work's social and political roots precisely by insisting on the importance of the personal narrative in history—on the importance of counter-memory (862). Furthermore, as Anthony Arblaster's work has shown, opera has and continues to be a powerful political instrument because it merges the private with the public: "[O]pera is ... a public, large-scale form dealing with public events in public places, rather than merely private and domestic dramas" (315).

to “work at” correctly reading the name, the opera-goer is bombarded by the repetitions of the correct pronunciation. This one example—the way in which the significance of the fragmentation of Offred’s name affects the operatic audience whether they “work at it” or not—is but a microcosm of the more general way in which operatic adaptations always irrevocably alter the texts on which they are based.

Before we become aurally aware that Offred’s name is fragmented, we learn from Offred herself that her story is incomplete and non-linear: it is in fragments. The first words sung in the opera are a confession: “I’m sorry my story is in fragments. I’m sorry I can’t change it” (1).⁶ Tellingly, Offred does not merely note that her story is in fragments; she apologizes for its fragmentation, which indicates the degree to which she is captivated by a dominant discourse in which fragmented narratives are deemed second-rate, unworthy. Her assertion is mimetically seconded by the rhythmically fragmented, a-melodic line to which she sings these words and the minimalist, expressionist orchestra that accompanies her, including a descending arpeggio on the harp, which, leitmotif-like, is repeated each time she sings such introspective statements (1). But unlike a true expressionist opera, such as Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck*, in which the music for the entire opera is composed of short, fragmented lines, here Ruders uses the technique as an effect to underscore certain passages. Paradoxically, an opera that consists of fragmented lines throughout would, at some point, cease to be fragmented, just as completely atonal music ceases, at some point, to be dissonant. Because Ruders’s music for *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a mélange of short leitmotifs, historical musical quotations, and melodic and amelodic lines, it depicts the “dual and triple consciousness” of counter-memory more forcefully than would a singularly expressionist opera.

For Ruders, who has been called the “Richard Strauss of the computer-age orchestra” (Stephen Johnson, quoted in “‘Handmaid’ Finds Her Voice”), Berg’s expressionism is but one of several influences—musical and otherwise—apparent in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In addition to its incorporation of musical, literary, and dramatic art forms, this opera also adds technology to the mix: throughout the opera, Ruders uses electronic sound bites (such as the ripple of bullets of a firing machine gun), a loudspeaker, a digital piano, and television programming fragments. Before the opera begins, opera-goers are treated to four moving video conference PowerPoint slide shows, and the Symposium Prologue opens with “a fast moving Surreal

6 All references to the opera, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the vocal score.

Montage of images (still and moving) and headlines from the period which led up to the establishment of the Republic of Gilead, accompanied by a soundtrack of sound-effects (e. g. jet engines, gun shots, explosions) and music,” before a reconstructed cassette player “plays” Offred’s narrative (xix). This jumble of sounds, images, and ideas prepares us for a fragmented narrative and, at the same time, self-reflexively calls attention to the work’s theatricality. The subversion of opera’s theatrical conventions in this meta-theatrical move immediately breaks down our suspension of disbelief, which, in a genre defined by its theatricality, is akin to questioning the value of dominant discourses while at the same time attempting to speak to that discourse—perhaps the most difficult task demanded of counter-memories.

Under Phillida Lloyd’s direction, the Canadian Opera Company’s production of *The Handmaid’s Tale* further emphasized the sense of fragmentation inherent to counter-memory with a set that literally fragmented the stage.⁷ The set, by Peter McKintosh, consisted of a revolving square box divided into four “rooms,” each space distinct in its characterization and visible to both Offred and the audience. Offred’s mental fragmentation into a handmaid, a woman, a mother, a daughter, a friend, and a lover is figuratively re-enacted in the revolving set design. As a performer, the singer who plays Offred is always in danger of falling off the revolving set;⁸ as a character, Offred is always in danger of falling off the precipice that separates sanity from insanity. The set design did not in any way attempt to re-create the palimpsest that is Gilead in Atwood’s novel—the effect is more “space age” than Puritan monotheocratic, and the clothing that Offred’s double of “in the Time Before” wears is more mid-1980s than now (which is when the Time Before should always be set).⁹ However, unlike Pieixoto, who is only concerned with objectivity and facts, the opera does not attempt to accurately reconstruct *history*—or to present

7 The set, costume, and lighting designs for the COC production were replicated from the world premiere in Copenhagen, where Phillida Lloyd also directed (Program).

8 The peril is not only imagined. Remembering the days following up to the world premiere, Atwood writes, “[T]he revolving set had been a challenge: singers had got dizzy and had fallen off” (“For God and Gilead”).

9 “Time Before” and “Time Now” refer to the two different “times” in which the opera plays. Time Before is actually our time present: the year of Time Before is the year of the given production. The Gilead revolution takes place two years after Time Before, so two years after the year of the given production. Time

realist drama; instead, its main focus is on the self-conscious construction of a counter-memory. Paradoxically, in so doing—in keeping the puzzle pieces (the fragments) from fitting together—the opera actually offers a more “accurate” version of history than Pieixoto does.

Even in the opera, it is Pieixoto who re-orders the “period audio cassettes” that we are supposedly hearing: he turns the cassette player on in the prologue and he switches it off in the epilogue. But Pieixoto does not write or order the music to which Offred’s story is sung—the music we hear is free of Pieixoto’s scholarly intrusions. To grasp this concept, two important operatic conventions must be understood. First, in opera the characters are not singing to each other and they do not view themselves as singing, unless they consciously choose to sing a song, in which case the occurrence is called phenomenal song. An example of phenomenal song in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is when Serena Joy sings “Amazing Grace” or, rather, when she listens to herself singing it on an old television broadcast (100), for not every appearance of “Amazing Grace” is an instance of phenomenal song. Only when the characters on stage are conscious of their own singing and hearing does the incident register as an example of phenomenal song. Second, the orchestra (which the characters also do not hear) traditionally speaks the hearts of the characters; it expresses their “true” feelings, or unconscious impulses. For this reason, “In opera, music is arguably as important a narrating component as are the words” (Hutcheon 41). The orchestra thus has the ability to accomplish what one critic of the novel notes is “crucial to Offred’s shifting sense of position within Gilead”: her “ironic double talk, [her] ability to communicate in a way that apparently toes the party line while allowing for secondary meanings to resonate,” without making her too strong a narrator to make her helplessness believable (Wagner-Lawlor 84–85).

Just as Ruders takes fragments of expressionist music and sound bites of electronic sound effects, he also draws on opera’s rich storehouse of traditional compositional techniques in order to represent Offred’s story, the most obvious being leitmotifs. Perhaps Wagner’s most important musical contributions to the world of opera, the leitmotif system is a part of opera’s “dominant discourse,” which, like the Gilead regime, is

Now begins with Offred’s third posting with the Commander and ends with her escape. The prologue and epilogue are set many years after Time Now; in the Copenhagen premiere, the year was 2195. See Ruders and Bentley, *The Handmaid’s Tale/Tjenerindens Fortælling: Opera Urtext* (X).

still, to a large extent, a man's world.¹⁰ In a way, Ruders could not escape leitmotifs any more than counter-memory can escape the phallogocentric language in which it must speak. His uses of them, however, differ from the Wagnerian tradition in that here leitmotifs do not systematically and overtly structure the opera; rather, they are employed in select instances to highlight key moments. Leitmotifs are musical clues of remembrance that signal to our ears the presence of a particular character, a place, a time, a thought, or a concept. They are literally musical fragments, which, like symbols, stand for more than the lexical meaning attached to them. Here, the musical fragments, or leitmotifs, mimic the intellectually and emotionally fragmented consciousness out of which Offred's counter-memory emerges. When Offred is repeating Red Centre rhetoric, such as "May the Lord open," "Behold my handmaid. Go in unto her," or "I pray for emptiness / that I may be filled" (76–77, 74, 81–82), it is to a melody that consists of ascending or descending perfect fourth or perfect fifth intervals and of music that responds with tympani accompaniment that echoes the vocal line. Ruders is playing with the use of perfect fourth intervals (that inverted, become perfect fifth intervals) and perfect fifth intervals (that inverted, become perfect fourth intervals), which are both typically considered hollow, empty, and "open" (think of the strings on a violin or guitar). It is an easy, almost primal interval to sing and very quickly assimilates into one's ears. So while Offred is being psychologically indoctrinated at the Red Centre, we are being musically indoctrinated by the calming chant of the Red Centre. Brilliantly, Ruders also chooses the same interval, a descending perfect fifth, for the beginning of Offred's line, "What I feel is emptiness" (86), which musically sends us back to the Red Centre, with the dual images of opening the womb and entering the birth canal, while also meaning, on another level, emotional emptiness. At the same time, we hear the minimalist harp leitmotif in the orchestra, which accompanies Offred's introspective statements, like the one that opened the opera, "I'm sorry my story is in fragments."

Ruders's adaptation also uses the leitmotif operatic convention to effectively dramatize the significance of Atwood's "schoolboy" Latin phrase, "*nolite te bastardes carborundorum*," or "Don't let the bastards grind you down." The phrase symbolizes the "Offred" personality; that is, it symbolizes not only "our" Offred who finds the phrase but also the

10 By opera's "dominant discourse" I am not referring to the singers of opera but to the creators of opera: the composers, librettists, conductors, and directors (see Arblaster 225). And, of course, with the notable exception of Phillida Lloyd, the creators of the operatic version of *The Handmaid's Tale* are also men.

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Offred who came before her and hanged herself and carved the phrase as well as the Offred who will succeed “our” Offred and re-read the motto. In the opera, every time that phrase is sung, it is sung to the same vocal line (172, 384–85, 541).¹¹ Therefore, when it crops up for the third time in the quartet at the end of the opera, which involves the Commander, Serena Joy, Rita, and Offred, it stands out even against the poly/cacophonic barrage of sound. Because the phrase signals resistance—“our” Offred’s resistance; the violent, self-destructive resistance of the former Offred, who hanged herself; the resistance that will be the “new” Offred’s, when “our” Offred is replaced—its aural resilience further emphasizes the resistance inherent in the act of narrating counter-memories.

As we shall see, in perhaps the most memorable cacophonic scene in the opera, the hymn “Amazing Grace” is imbued with multiple meanings in order to reflect Offred’s condition as the victim/hero of her own counter-memory. Atwood’s novel consists of a series of flashbacks: the narrator moves between and among tenses at will. Making such a technique work on the operatic stage is particularly troublesome, not only because of the difficulty of staging flashbacks but also because music, as a rule, always exists in the present tense. For this reason, Carolyn Abbate questions the very possibility of musical narration. She asks, “Can music, though it exists always in the present moment, create the sound of pastness?” (54). This opera navigates the problem not only by creating and staging an Offred double but also through the use of historical musical quotations and poly/cacophonic scoring. As one of several of these historical musical quotations, “Amazing Grace” stands in for a musical past tense. The result is a truly hybrid narrative that uses counter-memory, in Lipsitz’s words, to “understand both the linear history of contract histories and the oral traditions of aggrieved populations” (229), and the effect on the audience is one of absolute bombardment. Because we watch and hear parallel situations from the past and the present happening *at the same time*, we do not merely understand Offred’s complex fragmented psychological state, we *feel* it ourselves.

Within the opera, “Amazing Grace” becomes a leitmotif for both sexual intercourse and the character, Serena Joy, which is itself ironic, for Serena Joy, next to the “Aunt,” Lydia, is probably the most sexually frustrated woman in the opera. The use of the quotation, however, also ironically comments on both the ideology inscribed in the lyrics to the hymn and the

11 At Jezebel’s, Moira sings, “Don’t let the bastards grind you down” to a different melody, but not in “schoolboy Latin” (462): the phrase, sung in “Latin,” is reserved for the “Of Freds” of Gilead.

cultural associations with such hymns. “Amazing Grace” links both Offred and Serena Joy’s presents to their respective pasts. Serena Joy sings the hymn on a television broadcast from the Time Before, but she also plays the broadcast in the Time Now. At the same time that Offred is hearing the broadcast from her room in Serena Joy’s home, the Offred Double in the Time Before is watching the broadcast as she awaits her married lover’s arrival in a hotel room (100–23). Superimposed on the situation is our historical knowledge that “Amazing Grace” is an old hymn that has retained its currency in Christian circles even in our day. The lyrics in the hymn speak about a divine grace that saves “wretches” and makes those see who are spiritually blind, recalling the New Testament conversion of St Paul. It speaks of “battles, toils, and snares” that will be overcome on account of the central Christian tenet: grace. Of course, it is ironic that a Wife of Gilead should be singing about grace, when, whether she accepts it or not, the entire regime is devoid of grace. But there is yet another irony, for hymns such as “Amazing Grace” are also more generally associated with slavery—they form the root of the African-American gospel practice. The parallel between the underground railway operating during the American Civil War and the “Underground Femaleroad” (Atwood 374, 386) is made explicit in Atwood’s novel; here, the use of the music invites the same comparison. The tune, literally fragmented and distorted by Offred’s counter-memory, is one more puzzle piece whose jagged edges preclude a structured, ordered narrative.

There is an irony, too, in any couple making adulterous love to the tune of a Christian hymn, which does not escape Offred’s lover, Luke. He sarcastically remarks, “Highly appropriate—Serena Joy sings and we make love” (115–16). Indeed, how much more “highly appropriate” it is when Serena Joy’s husband and Offred copulate in the name of the fundamentalist Christian regime to this same tune, with the singer of the tune, Serena Joy, present and involved in what is undoubtedly the strangest *ménage à trois* ever to be staged in opera (247–49). “Amazing Grace” is not the only music we hear; in a manner similar to Charles Ives’s compositional technique, it descants over the dissonant music that precedes it. But unlike Ives’s method, the technique here is meant to reflect the cacophony of the situation, which is why I use the term poly/cacophonic. The music is both polyphonic, in the sense that several independent voice lines are integrated into a whole, but with the addition of the isolated hymn of a different time, in a different musical time, and in a clashing tonality, it also becomes intentionally cacophonic. Ruders has irrevocably altered how we can hear “Amazing Grace,” a seemingly innocuous hymn that

Ruders can assume will be received with indifferent approval in the West, because in the opera, “Amazing Grace” works as a leitmotif for both illicit and/or depraved sexual relations and Serena Joy. When Ruders changes the singer from Serena Joy of “The Growing Souls Gospel Hour” to a chorus in the second appearance of “Amazing Grace,” however, the problem with the seemingly innocuous doctrine that underlies the hymn is even more disturbing, for its reoccurrence in the voice of the people not only demonstrates the degree to which what was once in this opera only associated with Serena Joy has now become hegemonic but also the degree to which that doctrine is hegemonic in our present society. Against so much dissonance, the known “Amazing Grace” is a welcome relief. But in humming along—in even knowing the words and music to “Amazing Grace”—we become a part of that chorus, thus a part of Serena Joy, of “The Ceremony,” of Gilead.¹²

Ruders’s use of musical quotation does not only target those who know the words to “Amazing Grace”; should that hymn not resonate with an audience member, it is likely that one of the several other religious musical quotations that he inserts for a similar effect will. The opera opens with Pieixoto quoting Genesis 30:1–3, which is the epigram that begins Atwood’s novel and the verse upon which the Gileadites derive the concept of handmaids. Though responsorial music resounds throughout the opera, the call/answer reading that precedes the Ceremony in particular sounds suspiciously like a mass, with Nick, Rita, and Offred repeating the short phrases that Serena Joy chants (235–39). This ceremony is then ironically juxtaposed against a television news headline that reports, “Six former Roman Catholic nuns have publicly confessed that the Pope of Rome is the Whore of Babylon” (237). When Ofglen, under the guise of contemplating bodies on the Wall, initiates Offred into the Mayday resistance, the guards chant Joshua 1:5 from the Latin Vulgate, which they had also previously chanted during the Birthing at the Red Centre Hall (367–72, 270–89).¹³ When we return to the Red Centre Hall in act 2, the Handmaids enter, chanting Psalm 101, and during the Particicution that follows, the Handmaids beat a man to death to a *bocca chiusa* (“closed

12 As Anthony Arblaster notes, in serious operas, “The collective voice of the chorus takes us at once into the political realm” and invites the audience “to construct more complex and even ambivalent responses to what they see or hear” (4).

13 In preparation for the conquest of Canaan, God tells Joshua, “There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of your life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Joshua 5:1).

mouth”) male chorus humming the melody of a Lutheran chorale from J.S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, “O Lord, Who Dares to Smite Thee” (506–12). Ruders’s use of musico-cultural fragments like these encapsulates Offred’s fragmented psychology while also asking us to re-evaluate our investments in the cultural practices that the quotations represent.

Offred is in the perilous position of having to live at least two lives at once. Outwardly, she must pretend that she is not just pretending to subscribe to the handmaid’s abhorrent lifestyle; inwardly, she struggles to claim an identity from her past, an identity that includes the family that was literally torn from her arms. As Lipsitz would say, “Out of necessity [she has] learned about both the pain and pleasure of division” (228). The opera magnificently represents this dual consciousness by having two sopranos play the role of Offred. This device makes literal the division between the past and the present, between the personal but unsanctioned narrative and the historical, sanctioned narrative, while at the same time demonstrating how these divisive elements occur simultaneously. For, when the Offreds come together and sing in unison, or when they finish each other’s words and sentences, we are reminded that this split yet represents *one* human subject. In this way, indeed, by virtue alone of the fact that they sing a song that is both an aria and a duet at the same time, the synthesized aria/duet is synecdochical of the very notion of counter-memory. In their incredibly poignant aria/duet, the Offreds draw their battle lines according to the dual histories that they tell. Here, where the past must literally account for its actions to the present, Offred asks, “How could you so betray her? The fruit of your womb. Moon made flesh,” for which her double (Offred from the Time Before) gives a historical explanation: “Hope made me make her a target for the guns of Gilead” (420–21). Then, reverting to the “open” perfect-interval leitmotif that we heard before, and alternating syllables, the Offreds sing, “And what I feel is emptiness” (422), which brings together the many aspects of the psychological torture that Offred endures and perfectly captures her fragmented self. The duet alternates between the responsorial accusations, musically fragmented vocal lines, and unison.¹⁴ In each case, the music responds to the sentiments inscribed in the text. For instance, when in unison the Offreds sing, “I close my eyes and suddenly she is there” to an ascending major scale culminating in a high G, the music is tonal and the vocal line

14 For an astute analysis of this moment, see Helmut Reichenbächer’s article, “Offred Reframed: The Adaptation from Novel to Opera” (843–47).

soars. Sung in a bel canto style, it is the most conventionally beautiful music in the opera (424).

Of course, the tonality is not unadulterated in this scene; accompanying the Offreds is a menacing solo violin playing open intervals in its highest register. Moreover, the tonal line is derived from an earlier moment in the Red Centre Prelude, when the Handmaids are being indoctrinated. To the same five ascending notes that Offred later sings “I close my eyes,” and with the same menacing solo violin also in the background, the Handmaids sing, “Blessed are the meek” (25). Furthermore, the tonal vocal line is confined to a couple of phrases; Ruders barely allows us to enjoy the beauty of the line and the operatic voices before he reintroduces the atonal, expressionist music that opens the opera, ending the flashback with the dissonance par excellence of Western music, the semitone, or minor second interval, which erases the possibility of resolution and denotes an incredibly frightening tension in the score (430). In *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, Adorno argues, “The dissonances which horrify [the general public] testify to their own conditions; for that reason alone do they find them unbearable” (9). So, of course, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* the music, at times, *must* be dissonant. We are not intended to find these dissonances “bearable,” any more than we are intended to find Offred’s condition bearable, for Offred’s tale is a counter-memory. By definition, counter-memories originate among people whose conditions are unbearable.

If the dissonances speak for Offred, then the conventional tonal music speaks for the regime; when dissonance and tonality are layered on top of one another, the resulting cacophony is the musical rendering of Offred’s counter-memory. Therefore, it is often the tonal quotations that are really troubling, partially because it is the music that we want to enjoy.¹⁵ The experience is akin to the horror an audience feels in the last scene of Richard Strauss’s *Salome*, when Salome sings a gorgeous aria to John the Baptist’s disembodied head: the music asks us to emote, the action asks us to revolt. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this wrenching juxtaposition is perhaps best depicted with Ruders’s quotation of Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel’s “Bist du bei mir” (“Be Thou With Me,” 507–12). As Ruders says, “This moment is

15 Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon make a similar observation in their discussion of the effect of the “accessible and conventional music” in Harry Somers and Mavor Moore’s abstract, atonal opera, *Louis Riel*: “[I]f our own experience is any indication, [the] theater audience—rather relieved to hear melodic music—ends up being implicated by this very reaction in the politics represented on stage” (239–40).

one of the most tortured in the whole opera; the tune itself is the greatest little song ever written; it's autonomous music; it's bound to convey this terrible eternal message to prepare for Offred's incredible cry of anguish" (quoted in Loader). But given the way in which the palimpsest that is Gilead continually re-appropriates Christian doctrine for its own power-driven agenda, and because the quotation immediately follows a liturgical-sounding exchange between Lydia and Offred, the song also conveys aspects of Gileadite theology, which makes the experience of listening to the extraordinarily poignant quotation extraordinarily painful.

When the Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's, the unofficially sanctioned underground brothel for the elite leaders in the regime, the music plays with our expectations in a similarly complex manner. After the Commander informs Offred of the proposed outing and Offred changes into her humiliating "disguise," the orchestra responds with quasi-jazz accompaniment (437). Once in the club, the jazz fragments in the orchestra are further complemented by cocktail piano music, which, like "Amazing Grace," plays out of time both musically, as it is superimposed on the orchestra, and narratologically, as it plays music of the Time Before (443). The music forces us to ask hard questions. Jezebel's is a brothel—a remnant of the Time Before (which is also our present time)—and brothels are at least officially frowned upon in our culture. But the infectious music, marked "*Alla breve giocoso*," that Ruders chooses to represent Jezebel's comes as welcome relief from the dissonance that precedes it (443). Are we then supposed to endorse this hypocritical club? If the answer is no, then we are faced with the disconcerting thought that we agree at least in part with Gilead's official party line.

When, because of necessary plot compression and reduction in the adaptation process, past and present become simultaneous, symmetries existing in the Time Before (our time) and the Time Now (the Gilead regime) are revealed. As we become aware of the extent to which the extreme, fundamentalist ideology of Gilead was already inscribed in the society of the Time Before, we are also reminded of the less desirable aspects of the Time Before, for which Gilead is a disastrously misguided solution. As Stephanie Barbé Hammer notes, Offred's position in Gilead is "a horrible but nightmarishly appropriate extension of her former life" (43), for in Gilead, she is again adulterous, as she was in the Time Before, participating in unlawful relations with both Fred and Nick. In act 1.4a, Moira, in the Time Before, admonishes the Offred Double for her adulterous conduct, saying, "Kiddo, you are poaching on another woman's ground" (129–30). In the parallel scene in act 2, we once more see Moira and Offred

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talking in the kitchen. Though talking about a different subject, Moira, using the same pet name, says, “Kiddo, I saw it coming and now it’s happened” (335). This scene directly follows two other scenes, in which Offred and the Commander are engaging in what passes for adulterous conduct in Gilead, and the Commander, sounding suspiciously like Luke in the Time Before, offers the cliché, “She would not understand. She and I don’t have much in common any more,” to excuse his adulterous conduct (320). Both scenes are musically parallel, too, characterized by a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the winds and short, almost recitative-like vocal exchanges when the music moves from the present to the Time Before. We are thus confronted with the uncomfortable and disturbing fact that the Commander is not that much off the mark when he calls himself “just an ordinary guy” (383).

In another instance of this sort (act 1.6), Nick casually comments to Offred, as she returns from her shopping expedition, “Nice walk?” (151). Immediately, we literally see and hear the propaganda that has indoctrinated Offred. On a screen appears Aunt Lydia, singing in her appropriately grating coloratura, “Thou shalt not talk to men. Some men will try and speak to you. They cannot help it. God made them that way” (152–54). Simultaneously, the characters of the Time Before appear on stage. Offred’s mother, reiterating the stereotypical militant feminist rhetoric of the 1980s, tauntingly comments, “What use is a man? Take it from mother. Ten seconds of half babies. That is all a man is good for” (155–57). In the classroom, Lydia, who is memorably described by one critic as “a sci-fi cousin of Mozart’s avenging Queen of the Night” (Tommasini), is responsible for showing the Handmaids why the Red Centre “is not a prison but a privilege” (52–53). Her lesson about “freedom to and freedom from” is illustrated with slides, “all of women, starting with glossy glamour shots, then soft porn, hard porn, women kneeling, sucking guns, tied up, hung [sic.], beaten, tortured, killed” (Bentley 85), after which she begins a tirade that climaxes in an orgasmic-like repetition of the word “Gilead” (57–58). Later, we hear Offred’s mother deliver a similar invective against men, in which she reminds Luke and the Offred Double that she participated in “anti-porno demos” (160). Like Lydia’s lesson, it too comes to a frenzied climax, this time on the repeated syllables “far” and “queer” (162, 164). The likeness is later made explicit when Offred remembers her mother’s initial reaction to the first actions taken by the Gileadites: “They’re closing down the Pornomarts! All the porn shops, all over town! That’s great! It’s one of the things we fought for!” (283–84). The merging of past and present not only allows us to feel what it is to be in Offred’s mind, attempting to

reconstruct a narrative but caught between the past and the present, it also makes us aware of the similarity of the positions held by both matriarchs. Both are extreme, both wish to indoctrinate Offred, and both demonstrate a complete lack of confidence in men.

As we have seen, unlike Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ruders and Bentley's operatic adaptation is framed from the outset. Not only is the audience watching an opera, a mythic representation of one woman's struggle, they are also participants in an academic conference, attempting (however imperfectly) to historicize that struggle. As Karen Stein notes, that puts the audience in a rather precarious position. She writes, "Although privileged in his society, the scholar may be viewed as a voyeur, a parasite" (276). So in addition to being extended chorus members, indoctrinated handmaids, and virtual conference participants, we are also voyeurs (replete, in some cases, with opera glasses)—yet another set of Eyes surveying Offred. We become the shadow in Offred's statement, "Behold my shadow in the sun. I spy a handmaid, and I spy on her. And my shadow spies on me" (138–39). Witness to all aspects of Offred's counter-memory, our capital is unsurpassed in this society where to see is to have power. When Offred visits the doctor, he lasciviously comments on her body, remarking, "They are beautiful, your breasts. And I'm the only man who ever sees them" (185–86). The supreme irony of his comment was brilliantly revealed in the Canadian Opera Company Production when Offred and Nick make love and Offred bares her breasts to all seventeen thousand people who saw the production during its two-week run ("Handmaid's Tale in Toronto"). As Pamela Cooper, writing on the 1990 movie adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Volker Schlöndorff, observes, "To film *The Handmaid's Tale* ... is to force the audience's complicity by identifying the inherent voyeurism of movie-watching with the invasive examining of the disenfranchised by the dictatorial which the novel portrays" (57). The difference between film and opera is primarily the addition of live music, which works on our conscious as well as our subconscious, so that to watch the opera is to understand and *feel* the complexities surrounding Offred's counter-memory, while at the same time recognizing that the opera is marking us as "Eyes" that are complicit with the oppressive ideology that bolsters the brutal regime of Offred's counter-memory.

I have focused on the many ways in which opera adds to and subtracts from Atwood's novel in order to demonstrate how Ruders and Bentley's fragmented version of *The Handmaid's Tale* creates a stunning and compelling counter-memory. But counter-memories are only efficacious to the extent to which they provoke a reaction, and their audience determines

that reaction. So what characterizes a typical operatic audience? As Ruders notes, an operatic audience is certainly “much larger and more broadly constituted” than the usual “contemporary music ghetto” (Hurwitz). It is also often a fairly conservative, moneyed, and, in North America, an elite crowd, which is likely why the Minnesota Opera “was unable to line up a corporate sponsor for *The Handmaid’s Tale*” (“Opera’s Brave New World”). Surely, however, presenting a counter-memory to a more conservative crowd is more politically efficacious than merely preaching to the converted. During the Minnesota premiere, there were a few walkouts, but as Fleming writes, “that seemed only right. If you can’t get a few people scandalized by such a lurid episode, then you probably haven’t done your job in staging a daring new work” (“Opera’s Brave New World”). The last two words vocalized in the opera are “interact now.” Spoken in the imperative, this command demands a reaction far stronger than the polite applause typical of North American audiences. Indeed, it demands of its audience the most difficult role yet: to write themselves out of Offred’s reality by writing themselves into her opera. Potent, indeed.

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