

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

DIDASKALIA

Volume 8 (2011)

<http://didaskalia.net>

ISSN 1321-4853

About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλία. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

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Didaskalia is published at Randolph College.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

The Women of Troy: Barrie Kosky's 'operatic' version of Euripides

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Once again ... Myth and History stand before me with opposing claims ... forcing me to decide whether it was a musical drama, or a spoken play, that I had to write. —Richard Wagner¹

Music's function in opera is fundamentally escalatory—it should transport one from the quotidian to the transcendental. Music enlarges character, expands and transcends situation, and engages the audience on a non-verbal, emotional level. The use of music in dramatic representation is multi-faceted and complex. At its most elaborate as manifested in opera, it frequently functions in a narrative fashion—the role of the orchestra being analogous to a narrator. The orchestra can 'describe' and 'comment' on events as they occur, it can also recall events from the past as well as foretell the future—as Wagner's operas so eloquently demonstrate. Music in opera also suggests interiority and depth in regard to character depiction. By means of the music which surrounds the characters and establishes a unique sonic world, it provides access to the thoughts and emotions of the characters and adds a sense of depth and complexity to two-dimensional characters. Through the more than four centuries of operatic development, composers have devised certain musical tropes which have come to represent a wide variety of emotional states ranging from ecstatic joy to insanity. Central to the understanding of the 'meaning' of music in opera is the vocal performance itself with the human voice being the most individual, expressive and even 'vulnerable' instrument of all. The opera aria is the main revelatory form in which characters reveal themselves to the audience, but also through that unique operatic form, the multi-layered ensemble, we simultaneously learn much about characters.

The level of the sophistication and complexity in the way music is used varies considerably throughout the wide variety of music theatre works. Music is used with a different level of complexity and intention in film, and a film without a musical score would be a rarity. Music has been used extensively in western spoken drama from the time of the Greeks, and opera's *raison d'être* was the belief by a group of Florentine noblemen in the late sixteenth century that they were revivifying ancient Greek and Roman drama in this new dramatic form. Opera's founding figure is Orpheus, and the first surviving opera that is still performed regularly today is Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* from 1607. Thus opera has been inextricably bound up with Greek and Roman myth and drama from its inception to the present day.² It is with this in mind that I would like to approach the use of music in Barrie Kosky's adaptation/appropriation of *The Trojan Women*—that is, to look at the role of the music in the play from this quasi operatic perspective.

Kosky's reputation in opera is as an innovative yet frequently controversial director, who has always attempted to stretch the boundaries of the art form in his productions, often infuriating and scandalizing many of the opera's sometimes conservative audiences. It is apparent that opera's stylization and essentially non-realistic mode has influenced much of Kosky's overall theatrical output. Many have argued that Kosky's undoubted musical knowledge and skills have not always been apparent in his approach to opera; there has never been, however, any question regarding his appreciation and deep understanding of the power and effect of music on the stage. What struck me in his adaptation of the Euripides play is the complex role that the music performs and the weight that it is expected to carry in the dramatic thrust of the production. Music forms the backbone of the production, and it certainly does much to propel the emotional narrative of the play. The question is: does it turn Greek tragedy into opera?

Kosky himself describes his use of the songs in the adaptation as the means by which the women characters “hang onto their sanity,” commenting that music is their “last stop before madness, exile or death.”³ Operatic characters are defined, expanded, and frequently ‘redeemed’ through their music. One can think of many characters in opera, from the protagonists of Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1642) to the title figure in Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes* (1945), who apparently possess few redeeming features, yet their musical characterization is ultimately redemptive in overall effect. Can one view Kosky’s choice of and use of music in this light? It is obvious from its pervasive prominence that music is intended in the performance of *The Women of Troy* to carry more weight than mere ‘incidental’ music. Viewed from this perspective it could be argued that the music drives the action just as it does in opera, and I would estimate that in terms of running time the actual performance of the musical numbers has almost as long a duration as the spoken text. Kosky’s deliberate jettisoning of much of Euripides’ text and his replacing it with music perhaps gives us a clue to his overall intentions in this production. But it is how the music is used that is crucial.

At first the songs occur in the ensemble or small chorus of three women, then solo lines emerge from the choral texture, and finally Hecuba has her own solos, joining Andromache and the chorus at one point. In this sense the dividing line between the chorus and the soloist becomes blurred and the three women begin to acquire individuality, particularly in vocal terms, but never in a true operatic fashion where they might simultaneously be expressing different thoughts and emotions in ensemble. The spoken text of this adaptation has been pared back severely from the original play so that the music can play a central role, almost through-composed in operatic terms as some numbers move without pause into the next.

There are several ways of considering the way music is used in the production. On one level the songs provide moments of beauty and repose in what is an extremely bleak play and an even bleaker adaptation. Frequently the performance of the songs is accompanied by acts of immense violence and cruelty counterpointed with a constant background of very loud gunshots as well as screams from the women. In this way the songs are used as a contrast to this violence, both physical and verbal, and they often become moments of what appears to be hope and perhaps even redemption. The songs function in a similar way to the text of the adaptation which juxtaposes language of rhetorical expansion and lyrical beauty with coarse and brutal utterance describing acts of almost unimaginable cruelty and horror. As Peter Craven has observed, “Kosky is keen to avoid anything that might seem to prettify the brutality of Euripides’ play. This is the text stripped bare and rendered bloody... .”⁴ On another level, the songs sometimes provide a commentary on the action, reflecting both emotionally and in a broad narrative sense what is happening on stage. Although they do not advance the action as such, they supplement the action on an emotional rather than a narrative level, functioning as a form of emotional subtext rather than narrative propulsion. In opera, the music, including the arias, ensembles, and choruses, as well as the orchestral accompaniment, is the narrative force, and therefore it is misleading to assume that one can comprehend the narrative purely from the libretto. On perhaps a more superficial level, the songs in Kosky’s production provide a linking mechanism between scenes, analogous with much film music, which is used to underscore the emotional contours of the action and provide a bridge between scenes occurring at disparate emotional levels. I would, however, question whether they have the same kind of narrative function that operatic music exhibits, despite this perhaps being Kosky’s underlying intention.

For Euripides’ chorus, Kosky substitutes a trio of three women who sing, as Craven observes, “as a comfort that is clutched at like a dream, in the manner of Girl Guides in a concentration camp.” They sing madrigals, “the formalized poignancies of the Renaissance that rediscovered the ancient world as a glamour and a humanistic ideal. They sing in the teeth of violation and sadistic revenge.”⁵ Hecuba and Andromache sing two Dowland songs in a curious form—tuneless and off-pitch “Sprechgesang”⁶—also joining the other three voices at times. The tonal and expressive potentialities of the piano are used in a limited way: the most frequent form of accompaniment is chordal, often in the form of spiky staccato

chords which introduce and accompany the songs. This use of the piano seems intended as a musical counterpart to the frequent use of offstage gunshots, and the piano sound is often aggressive and harsh, providing a musical counterpoint to the gunshots. Occasionally there are virtuosic flourishes from the piano, but for the most part the accompaniment is extremely minimalistic and discreet, often only providing tonal orientation for the singers rather than any real accompanimental support or direction for the voice.

The songs in the adaptation are presented in several ways. The audience enters to the sound of rather somewhat fuzzy recorded 'musak' which disappears as the action begins. In front of the stage is a piano and this provides the accompaniment to the performed songs in the play, almost in a cabaret-like setting. Recorded music is used occasionally and in a limited way during the play. The voices of the three female performers are a soprano and two voices lying more in the mezzo soprano range. All three singers are also called on to use a 'belt' voice in addition to the more 'legit' or 'pure' voice that they more frequently employ.⁷ Thus, there is a combination of vocal styles ranging from cabaret or pop to a more 'pure' classical style in some of the pieces.

The first of the three John Dowland songs is "Now, O now I needs must part", a part-song which is sung by the chorus of three voices. Why Dowland? His music has a grace and elegance, and the way the music is structured offers the potential for flexibility in the vocal delivery. These songs, as well as the other music, present a strong contrast when juxtaposed with the brutality and frequent verbal and physical crudity of the production. In addition, the Dowland songs can be regarded as laments or songs expressing deep pain and sorrow; in this they are representative of the melancholy which characterizes much of his music. The songs can be performed unaccompanied, or with a simple accompaniment, which historically would have been a solo lute or a small consort of instruments.

Now, O now, I needs must part,
Parting, though I absent mourn.
Absence can no joy impart:
Joy once fled cannot return

Refrain:

Sad despair doth drive me hence;
This despair unkindness sends.
If that parting be offence,
It is she that then offends.
While I live, I needs must love.
Love lives not when hope is gone.
Now, at last, Despair doth prove
Love divided lovest none
Sad despair doth drive me hence.⁸

This first song occurs after an exchange between Hecuba and a disembodied male voice (which it later transpires is that of Menelaus), presented as if it were a public announcement which reappears throughout the proceedings. The song is introduced by slowly-spaced chords in the piano with the off-stage gunshot 'accompaniment'. The song is originally written for four vocal parts but is reduced to the three voices. It begins with a solo voice singing the melody line, and then the other voices join. It gradually gains in volume and assurance, but as a new verse starts, it is silenced by a gunshot. This is followed by Cassandra's outburst in which there is extreme distortion of the language—she is so distraught and traumatised that her text is distorted semantically as well as aurally. Her raving is in vivid contrast with the grace and beauty of the song with its high-lying descant, which, it appears, cannot be

sustained in this brutal environment. This silencing suggests that music is unequal to the challenge, a common operatic trope where the singing voice is silenced and replaced by the speaking voice or complete vocal and orchestral silence.

Cassandra's 'aria' is interrupted by single chords and then a solo voice singing the opening lines of the tenor aria of Nadir from Bizet's opera, *The Pearl Fishers*:

Je crois entendre encore,	I still believe I hear
Caché sous les palmiers,	hidden beneath the palm trees
Sa voix tendre et sonore	your voice tender and deep
Comme un chant de ramier!	like the song of a dove
O nuit enchanteresse!	oh night enchantress
Divin ravissement!	divine rapture
O souvenir charmant!	delightful thought
Folle ivresse! doux rêve!	mad intoxication, sweet dream
Aux clartés des étoiles,	in the clear starlight
Je crois encore la voir,	I still believe I see
Entr'ouvrir ses longs voiles	in between the long sails
Aux vents tièdes du soir!	of the warm night breeze
O nuit enchanteresse! etc	oh night...etc.
Charmant souvenir!	Delightful thought! ⁹

In terms of familiarity, this well-known aria is probably second only to the celebrated tenor/baritone duet from the opera. It has a sweetly lilting melody with a transparent, graceful accompaniment. The words express a sense of wonder and longing for the voice of the beloved, Leila. In the opera it takes the form of a serenade, but in this adaptation of the play the effect is more of a lament. The first verse has a simple chordal accompaniment and, as in the preceding Dowland song, there is excessive bending and even distortion of the rhythm of the vocal line. This reaches an extreme where there is an extended pause on a high note at the end of the verse. In a sense this is almost a parody of an operatic tenor or soprano clinging on to high notes to show off. The effect, however, is deliberately unpleasant as the voice loses its vibrato and takes on a hard edge.

The second verse has all three voices, again with extreme rhythmic distortions punctuated by gunshots. This is almost a jazz-like approach with a similar rhythmic freedom, and the piano part becomes more expansive, underscoring the barcarolle rhythm with the occasional flourish in the right hand. However, the voices are deliberately unsteady and tentative with very uncertain pitch, and again the sustained high note at the end is estranged and, it must be said, deliberately out of tune as well. With this song we see the first incongruity between the words of the song and the context in which it is sung, which, although it expresses a sense of longing, could not be said to convey a similar level of pain and melancholy as several of the other songs. One could argue, however, that Kosky uses this excerpt precisely for the fact that it fetishises voice as a disembodied element, something pure and outside the world of the play. This alerts us to the fact that the songs in the production are used frequently more for their aural qualities than for any intrinsic meaning inherent in their texts. One could also rather unkindly note that there is the expectation that the audience would not understand the French text as it might the songs sung in English. There is a sense that Kosky wishes the music to carry a significant weight, but for which both the choice of music and its performance is somewhat inadequate.

After a brief, frenzied outburst from Cassandra, the three voices commence the Dowland song once more, this time—in contrast to *The Pearl Fishers*—with much more vocal assurance and confidence. This is a sustained musical sequence with a great deal of aural contrast. The music is finally silenced with a gunshot after the word 'despair' has been sung. However, the Bizet soon starts up again; this time,

however, it is sung much more aggressively and angrily, with a more substantial piano presence. At first it is a solo voice with chordal accompaniment, but the second verse suddenly has the piano in a more virtuosic vein with glissandos and wild flourishes of broken chords and arpeggios—almost as a parody of pianistic virtuosity.

The song comes to a deliberately ‘big’ ending with a sustained high note. Both voice and piano exhibit parodic elements in strong contrast to the way the music has been used up to this point, where the suggestion of sadness, melancholy, and pain have been the main features in terms of performance style. Again there is a certain amount of incongruity with this sudden burst of musical virtuosity, which self-consciously draws attention to its status as a musical performance. In a sense the music ‘intrudes’ on the pain being expressed by characters on stage—the performance of the music is foregrounded at this point: we are alerted to the fact that we are watching a performance. This is almost a moment of Brechtian “*Verfremdung*” where empathy for the characters on stage recedes. Several reviews of the production made the point that Kosky, through some extreme elements in the production, alienates the audience from any sense of empathy for the characters. Perhaps here in a subtle way a similar strategy is being pursued through the mode of musical performance? While opera frequently embodies moments of extreme virtuosity, the intention is almost always character- and situation-driven, as virtuosity is a powerful means of character revelation. One need only think of the series of cascading notes that Lucia sings in Donizetti’s opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* as she sinks into madness: virtuosity in this form is the trope of madness. One must question whether this is Kosky’s intention.

Finally, the music is interrupted by the disembodied voice over the speakers informing Cassandra that she will be ‘shipped away’. This is accompanied, *sotto voce*, by the voices and piano intoning the Bizet melody wordlessly to a strongly rhythmic accompaniment as background to Cassandra’s almost feral declamation. There is a brief moment of silence from the chorus as she continues, then discrete chords start the next song, the Schumann part-song, “*In meinem Garten die Nelken*”:

In meinem Garten die Nelken
mit ihrem Purpurstern
müssen nun alle verwelken,
denn du bist fern.

The carnations in my garden
with their crimson center-star
they all must wilt away now,
because you are afar.

Auf meinem Herde die Flammen
die ich bewacht so gern,
sanken in Asche zusammen,
denn du bist fern.

The flames in my hearth
I so loved to watch,
they crumbled to ashes,
because you are afar.

Die Welt ist mir verdorben,
mich grüßt nicht Blume Stern,
mein Herz ist lange gestorben,
denn du bist fern.

The world went sour,
with neither flower greeting me nor star—
my heart died away long ago,
because you are afar.¹⁰

This is the only song which is performed much as intended: in the original composition it is written for three female voices with piano accompaniment (here the German text does express a sense of pain, but certainly not to the extreme that is portrayed on stage). It is sung without any distortion, although the piano accompaniment is much simplified from the original. Several times during the song the disembodied voice is heard instructing the women to ‘move to the wall’. A strong sense of incongruity is present in the opening words of the song with its depiction of a pastoral scene with the purple carnations, but the vision turns to ashes with the realization that the beloved is distant and the implication that he/she will return no more. There is a protracted pause on the word “*gestorben*” (“died”), and a silence

after it. Finally, the announcement halts the song and the last five bars are omitted, thus creating the impression of incompleteness. There is a long, silent pause, and then chords from the piano start the next piece, the farewell trio from Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte*.

Soave sia il vento,	Gentle be the breeze,
Tranquilla sia l'onda,	Calm be the waves,
Ed ogni elemento	And every element
Benigno risponda	Smile in favour
Ai nostri/vostri desir.	On their wish. ¹¹

Again this is sung in a mode close to the original version (accompanied by muffled screams). Of course, in the opera, this is sung by the young girls Dorabella, Fiordiligi, and the older Don Alfonso as they wave goodbye to their young friends Ferrando and Guglielmo, who appear to be leaving for the war. Not having the male voice providing a counterpoint to the two female voices somewhat distorts the piece, and the words are in starkest contrast to what is actually occurring on stage. The song ends suddenly, on a rather out-of-tune chord, without the final bars as in the score, which again creates a sense of incompleteness and distortion.

Così is all about deception and things not being what they seem, although this is a moment of genuine emotion in the opera as the two women really believe what appears to be happening. Alfonso is the deceiving puppet master, however, and there is great irony in his vocal line which moves in counterpoint to that of the women. But in the use of this excerpt in *The Women of Troy*, the subtlety of Mozart's music does not appear to be highlighted. There is probably an added irony in the fact that this trio is so well-known out of context, primarily in advertising as well as its use in film music, and is a self-consciously 'beautiful' piece of music. Both operatic excerpts, in terms of their words as well as the context in which they occur, have little to do with the events being portrayed on stage, whereas the other songs, particularly the three Dowland songs, express grief at parting and loss and thus more strongly reflect the emotions of the play at the point at which they occur.

There is a brief silent pause, and then with a broken chord introduction, the Dowland song, "Sorrow stay" begins:

Sorrow stay, lend true repentant tears,
 To a woeful wretched wight,
 Hence, despair with thy tormenting fears:
 O do not my poor heart affright.
 Pity, pity, pity, help now or never,
 Mark me not to endless pain,
 Alas I am condemned ever,
 No hope, no help, there doth remain,
 But down, down, down, down I fall,
 And arise I never shall.¹²

This is sung by Hecuba in a quasi "Sprechgesang" style with a minimalist accompaniment, which, in a sense, approximates the freedom and flexibility of the lute, and here the words certainly do reflect the context in which it is sung. Her vocal style seems to suggest that the sweep of the melody has been silenced by the horror on stage allowing only occasional short bursts of melody; it is as if the sweetness of tone which would sustain the melody has become impossible in this context. Hecuba distorts the rhythm as well as the melody of the song. The question arises whether this is a conscious musical choice in terms of the style of the performance, or whether this has been done to accommodate the abilities of an obviously untrained singer. It is certainly a powerful moment where the distortion of the expected mode

of performance conveys great depth of emotion. It is a moment of stasis where it is as if time has been suspended—musical time subverts chronological or even stage time. This song ends a long and almost continuous sequence of music which is followed by Scene 6: Hecuba's long speech 'aria'. This part of the production certainly uses music in a way which approaches the operatic.

At the end of this there is a brief snatch of recorded music followed by the voice instructing the women to 'take their boxes, quickly'. There is the sound of a ringing telephone which continues as the music stops. Immediately Hecuba starts the third Dowland song, "In darkness let me dwell", one of his most acclaimed songs:

In darkness let me dwell, the ground shall sorrow be,
The roof despair to bar all cheerful light from me,
The walls of marble black that moisten'd still shall weep,
My music hellish jarring sounds, to banish friendly sleep.
Thus wedded to my woes, and bedded to my tomb,
O, let me, living, living, die, till death do come.¹³

This is sung as a solo by Hecuba, again with minimal piano accompaniment, in a similar vocal style to her previous song. Again, the words strongly reflect the dramatic context. The vocal delivery is probably even more extreme than the previous Dowland song; at times the vocal timbre is made to be as ugly as possible with a hard, vibrato-less delivery that deliberately distorts the beauty of the song.

Scene 8 is an extended exchange between Hecuba and Andromache culminating in the dragging away of Andromache's son and is followed by the song, "The lament of the blind", by the Croatian composer Josip Slavenski, sung by Hecuba, Andromache, and the chorus of three voices. This is a choral arrangement from "Six Serbian Folksongs" for mixed voices. The words of the song describe the pain and tribulations endured by the blind speaker who calls on God to bless those who still are able to enjoy the fruits of their sight. The song as published is for four voices and the text is usually sung by three voice parts while the fourth part sustains a singing note on the wordless syllable "Oj!"

What Kosky has done is to ignore the text and have all the voices declaim this wordless syllable, sometimes following the melody which is passed from part to part, while also at times sustaining a single note. Again, there are just a few chords in the piano. The declaimed syllables are 'aie', which suggests Jewish liturgical laments and it builds in intensity through the plangency of the female voices. The vocal presentation is free and rhapsodic, with a strong improvisatory sense, and the higher voices frequently float freely above the sustained harmony in the lower voices. This piece of music most closely reflects and captures the emotion and mood of the women in the play, and it is a moment where an operatic intensity is achieved. The women attempt to protect Andromache's son, but they are left huddled against the wall and lit starkly from the side. This is a powerful moment both musically and visually. Again there is a sense of the collective with occasional voices emerging out of the choral texture—there are moments when the singing becomes closer to screams rather than tonal effects.

Without a break, four spread chords in the piano, Gesualdo's "Mercè!, grido piangendo" from the Fifth Book of Madrigals of 1611 is introduced:

Mercè!, grido piangendo,	"Mercy!" I cry, weeping.
ma chi m'ascolta?	But who hears me?
Ahi lasso, io vengo meno.	Alas, I faint.
Morrò dunque tacendo.	I shall die, therefore, in silence.
Deh, per pietade! Almeno,	Ah, for pity! At least,
o del mio cor tesoro,	oh treasure of my heart,

potessi dirti pria
ch'io mora: "Io moro."

let me tell you before
I die, "I die!"¹⁴

This is a sudden musical change as the musical formality of the madrigal is strongly contrasted with the freedom of the previous folk song. The choice of Gesualdo is interesting, since, apart from his great musical reputation, particularly as a composer of madrigals, he is notorious for an incident of great violence during which he murdered his wife and her lover and left their mutilated bodies outside the wall of his palace for all to see. It has often been suggested that his complex music is inflected by a sense of guilt resulting from this event. The performance of this madrigal, which in its original form is for five solo voices, follows immediately from the preceding piece and retains much of the sense of freedom and anguish conveyed in that, although in broad terms it remains musically reasonably close to the original score. There is an aggressive quality, however, at the beginning of the piece, which becomes more subdued at the words, "alas, I faint". The piano is discreet, providing orientational chords rather than accompaniment. The original madrigal was intended to be performed unaccompanied. Here the words are frequently broken in the middle, thus distorting the semantic sense of the text.

The next music that occurs is a snatch of recorded music from the speakers—a typical 'Motown' sound which again 'accompanies' the horror on stage and the incessant gunshots off stage. This presages the entrance of Menelaus in a wheelchair, followed by the scene with Menelaus, Helen, and Hecuba. As Menelaus finally confirms that he will "sacrifice her on the floor of the family home" the chords of the song, "When you're smiling", start:

When you're smilin', keep on smilin'
The whole world smiles with you
And when you're laughin', keep on laughin'
The sun comes shinin' through

But when you're cryin', you bring on the rain
So stop your frownin', be happy again
Cause when you're smilin', keep on smilin'
The whole world smiles with you.¹⁵

At this moment the incongruity of the music and the context in which it occurs is most deliberately acute. It is reminiscent of the use of songs in Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange* and its many subsequent imitations, and is a self-consciously estranging moment emphasizing the trope which runs through the production: the absolute banality of evil. If what we have witnessed is a form of Holocaust then perhaps taking one's cue from Adorno, the only kind of music that is appropriate to the horror is the empty words and trite melody of this song.

Only the chorus of the song is sung by the three women. Once more the song is accompanied by staccato chords in the piano. However, the piano gradually becomes more frenzied and discordant as the women of the chorus are threatened; finally the music disintegrates under the pressure of constant horror. More and more gunshots ring out as the music grows wilder, and there is the sense of an approaching climax being signaled in the music. The music is finally silenced by the killing of the three women, and their bodies are loaded onto the trolley. The human voice, that most poignant, fragile yet powerfully expressive of all musical instruments has finally been silenced. This act is a metaphor for the destruction of all humanity; it is the final music in the play as the final scene with Hecuba and the body of Andromache's son is played out in 'silence'—the more effective after the musical frenzy of the preceding scene.

The range of music used in the production is varied and offers stark contrasts. John McCallum posed the

question in his review: “So what is uplifting about all this horror? What makes it a great tragedy, rather than just a nightmare?” His answer: “It is, as you’d expect with Kosky, the music [...] Relentless tales of disaster and suffering have to have some point in their telling, and here it is that, in the face of all this, people still sing.”¹⁶ The women of the play use music as a form of resistance to the violence to which they are subjected. Kosky remarked that “I always use music because it liberates theatre and takes you into the poetic ... I have a rule that if I can find a song or piece of music to convey what it takes to say in a great many words, then I will.”¹⁷

Several reviews commented on the unrelenting portrayal of the violence and degradation which results in a lack of audience empathy for the characters. Craven argues that the production “works as a series of shocks that afflict, then numb, the audience.”¹⁸ But it is through the music that Kosky wishes his audience to ‘connect’ with these characters. His choice of music and the performance skills of his women do evoke empathy from a frequently horrified audience. Is it opera? I’m not sure. However, I would argue that the nature of the performance of the final song in the play—not so much the banality of the song but the violence to which it is subjected—suggests that even music is not enough. It is the culmination of a consistent musical strategy throughout the production which, it seems to me, leaves the audience with a sense that even music cannot transcend the despair and darkness at the heart of this production. Somewhat crudely expressed, Kosky finally ‘kills’ even the music, leaving the horror intact.

Perhaps there can be no art post Holocaust? Craven notes that

the choruses in this production provide what may be a nearly intolerable accompaniment to what is essentially a ritual of genocide. But these bits of Dowland and Gesualdo do not individuate the collective experience of grief the way Euripides’ chorus does. They work the other way, as a dreadfully precarious retreat into a world of courtly graces. The stratagem is brilliant, though it ignores the fact that Euripides’ choric music is as wild and many coloured as Mahler’s.¹⁹

I do not see it as a ‘retreat into the world of courtly graces’. Rather, that world is subverted by the mode of performance as well as the situation and events in the production—this world of grace and beauty evoked by the music cannot be sustained in Kosky’s bleak world view. There are few ‘courtly graces’ in this musical performance with its frequent distortions and musical inadequacies, and the songs, finally, cannot provide access to this world. While the intention might have been to provide moments of beauty, these are overwhelmed by the horror. At the end of many operas (not to mention other dramatic representations) we leave the theatre feeling deeply moved and ultimately uplifted despite the subject matter. Does this happen at the end of this production? I am not sure, and I’m not sure it succeeds as opera; Kosky’s production choices have, perhaps, finally destroyed the power of music to transcend the horror.

notes

¹ Wagner, Richard (1851: online), “Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde.” [Projekt Gutenberg-De](#). [12/09/2007.]— (1966). “A Communication to My Friends”. Richard Wagner’s Prose Works. Trans. William Ashton Ellis. New York, NY: Broude Brothers. 269–393.

² The most recent new ‘Greek’ opera performance I have come across is a production at the Globe Theatre in London of an operatic version, directed by Derek Walcott, of Seamus Heaney’s version of Sophocles’ *Antigone: Burial at Thebes* (2004). This new opera, according to many of the critics, suffered the fate that many plays turned into opera endure: a faithfulness to the text that impedes the music.

³ The Women of Troy. Program note.

⁴ Peter Craven, “A nightmare by glaring torturer’s light.” (The Australian Literary Review. November 5,

2008. Vol 3, No 10. 18–27), 19.

⁵ Craven, 18.

⁶ A form of ‘speech-song’ developed in the early twentieth century as an expressionist vocal technique where musical pitches are suggested rather than fully sung.

⁷ The use of the female voice in musicals, where the chest register is predominant, is often described as ‘belt’, while there are times when a more ‘classical’ operatic quality is called for, known colloquially as ‘legit’.

⁸ Lute Songs of John Dowland. Ed. David Nadal. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997. 14.

⁹ George Bizet. Les pêcheurs de perles. Miami: Edwin F. Kalmus, 43–48. Translation: [The Aria Database](#)

¹⁰ Robert Schumann, Opus 29. London: Peters, 1985 (PE.P02393). 102–5. Translation Richard Stokes: www.hyperion-records.co.uk

¹¹ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Cosi fan tutte. London: Novello, 1963. 60–65. Italian with English translation.

¹² Lute Songs of John Dowland. 62.

¹³ Lute Songs of John Dowland. 130.

¹⁴ Carlo Gesualdo. Madrigals. Ed. Dennis Stevens. New York: Gaudia Music, 1992. 64. Translation: [The Lied, Art Song, and Choral Text Page](#).

¹⁵ Larry Shay, Mark Fisher, and Joe Goodwin (1928). First performed in 1929 by Louis Armstrong, who made it famous.

¹⁶ John McCallum. Review of The Women of Troy. The Australian. September 23, 2008.

¹⁷ Barrie Kosky interview by Bryce Hallett. The Sydney Morning Herald. September 6, 2008.

¹⁸ Craven, 27.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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