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0521834376 - Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini

Emanuele Senici

Excerpt

[More information](#)1 | **Virgins, mountains, opera**

The English county of Devon and the French province of Brittany are not renowned for their mountains, and for a perfectly good reason: there are none in either place. Except, that is, on the operatic stage. The stage direction at the beginning of Carlo Pepoli's libretto for Bellini's *I Puritani* (1835), set near Plymouth, calls for 'very picturesque mountains in the background, forming a beautiful and majestic sight: the rising sun gradually illuminates them'.¹ Strictly speaking, the stage directions in Michel Carré's and Jules Barbier's libretto for Meyerbeer's *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* (1859), set in Brittany, never mention mountains – although Dinorah, the heroine, does so in her *romance* 'Le vieux sorcier de la montagne'. But the rocky, picturesque site of Act 1 and the ravine over which a bridge is suspended in Act 3 point to a mountain setting, forcefully evoked by Meyerbeer's recurring echo effects, most explicitly at the beginning of Act 3. The original Parisian audience of *I Puritani* (premiered at the Théâtre-Italien) would not have objected to a mountainous Devonshire, since no one would have had an idea of what the region looked like. Mountains in Brittany could potentially be harder to accept for the audience at the Opéra-Comique, the theatre where *Le Pardon de Ploërmel* was premiered (hence, perhaps, the absence of the word 'mountains' in the libretto's stage directions), and yet the authors were evidently not deterred by geographical correctness.

Why the need to invent mountains where in reality there are none? In short, because the female protagonists of *I Puritani* and *Le Pardon de Ploërmel*, Elvira and Dinorah, are virgins. To be sure, the nineteenth-century lyric stage was densely populated by virgins who live happily in flat or modestly undulated lands, from Rosina in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Seville) to Amelia in Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* (Genoa), from Fenella in Auber's *La Muette de Portici*

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(Naples) to Charlotte in Massenet's *Werther* (a German town), from Marzelline in Beethoven's *Fidelio* (a castle near Seville) to Eva in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (Nuremberg). These characters' virginity is not one of their defining traits, however, nor does it constitute a central theme of the operas to which they belong – it is not the object of elaborate choral praise, for example. In the cases of Bellini's *Elvira* and Meyerbeer's *Dinorah*, though, bodily purity and what the nineteenth century considered its emotional and psychological manifestations, such as innocence and modesty, are emphatically thematised. In nineteenth-century opera the portrayal of an emphatically virginal heroine is often associated with a mountain setting, most frequently the Alps, where the clarity of the sky, the whiteness of the snow, the purity of the air function as symbols for the innocence of the female protagonist. The ideal playground for two virgins with a capital V, then, is the mountains, and amidst mountains they were duly placed, notwithstanding geographical reality.

This conventional association between a vividly depicted mountain landscape and emphatically virginal female characters is present in all the main national traditions of nineteenth-century opera. Beside *I Puritani*, an Italian serious opera, and *Le Pardon de Ploërmel*, a French *opéra comique*, Wagner's *Ring* immediately comes to mind, with its fiercely (rather than modestly) virginal Valkyries roaming freely 'on the summit of a rocky mountain' ('auf dem Gipfel eines Felsenberges') at the beginning of Act 3 of *Die Walküre*. When, at the end of *Siegfried*, Brünnhilde gives herself to Siegfried with wild laughter (after having initially pleaded with him not to touch her virginal body), her act appears all the more portentous for taking place in the same location. When Henry Meilhac, Ludovic Halévy and Bizet decided that *Carmen* needed a character to embody an ideally pure femininity against which Carmen's dangerous seductiveness would emerge more prominently, they invented Micaëla, a seventeen-year-old orphan girl who has followed Don José's mother to a village not far from Seville. Like José and his mother, she comes from the mountains of Navarre and wears the region's typical costume: blue skirt and hair in braids falling on her shoulders – 'it

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reminds me of home' ('ça me rappelle le pays'), José comments.² And it is amidst the mountains of Act 3 that she will accomplish her good deed, convincing José to leave Carmen and go back to his dying mother. As H. Marshall Leicester has suggested, Micaëla's symbolic investment in the mountainous landscape as an emblem of her virtuous self-sacrifice is underlined by director Francesco Rosi in his film version of *Carmen* (1984) with visual references to the sequence in Robert Wise's film *The Sound of Music* (1965) when Maria bursts into song in the middle of a spectacular mountain landscape ('The hills are alive').³ Singing mountain virgins will survive well into the twentieth century, then, on stage and on screen.

It was in Italian opera, however, that the convention of setting an opera with an emphatically virginal heroine in the mountains emerged with particular frequency from the 1820s until the beginning of the twentieth century. In this book I discuss a number of works particularly relevant to the origins, transformations and meanings of such a convention: Bellini's *La sonnambula* (1831), Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* (1842), Verdi's *Luisa Miller* (1849), various operas based on Alessandro Manzoni's novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1827, rev. 1840), a few titles from the 1880s and 1890s, most prominent among them Catalani's *La Wally* (1892), and, finally, Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* (1910). Although the chapters are arranged roughly according to dates of first performance, mine is not an attempt to narrate the birth, life and death of a convention. For one thing, such a narrative would require considering many more operas than are treated here. Rather, the convention functions as an unusual point of view – a theme rather than a composer, a librettist, a singer or a genre – from which to observe Italian opera 'at work' over a century.

In chapter 2 I place Bellini's *La sonnambula* in the Alpine landscape, real and imagined, of early-nineteenth-century Europe. The discourse about the Alps was shaped, on the one hand, on Rousseau's influential conceptualisation of them as a present-day Arcadia (especially in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*), and, on the other, on their recent discovery as a tourist site. The cultural construction of the Alps as a modern Arcadia built on the much older topos of the sentimentalised

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countryside. This topos had had a significant influence on Paisiello's *La Nina ossia La pazza per amore* (1789), one of the foremost examples of late-eighteenth-century sentimental opera and a strong intertextual presence in *La sonnambula*. What interests me are the differences between the two operas, especially the reasons why Bellini and his librettist Felice Romani chose an Alpine setting for a subject that would previously have been set in the countryside – the action of the pantomimic ballet which is the main source of the opera takes place in the Camargue region of southern France. Analysis of the textual, visual and musical topoi employed to create a mountain setting leads to a discussion of the relationship between *La sonnambula* and previous Alpine operas, from Cherubini's *Elisa ou Le Voyage aux glaciers du Mont St. Bernard* (1794) to Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829). The refusal on the part of Bellini, Romani and Alessandro Sanquirico, the stage designer for the opera's première, to take full advantage of the devices traditionally used to create an Alpine ambience opens up space for an interpretation of the relationship between the two main characters, Amina and Elvino, as less idyllic and idealised than critics have suggested. This interpretation is finally tested against the reception of the opera, focusing both on the evolution of stage designs and on the numerous cuts and transpositions to which the roles of Elvino and especially Amina have been subjected over the decades.

Virginité is the most important 'quality' of these heroines, nowhere more explicitly than in Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix*. In chapter 3 I approach this work through discourses about virginité and female sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe. These discourses are exemplified by both contemporary psychiatry and canonical psychoanalytic investigations such as Freud's, which mark the point of arrival of a century-long preoccupation with the preservation of female purity. I then turn to Lacan's conceptualisation of voice as a love object, especially as expanded and developed by post-Lacanian critics such as Kaja Silverman, Julia Kristeva and Michel Poizat, in order to foreground the mechanisms of power and desire at work in the opera, observed in particular through the lens of its handling of

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recurring themes. Throughout the chapter I emphasise the differences between the workings of these mechanisms in the opera and in its source, a French play entitled *La Grâce de Dieu*, focusing especially on the fundamental ways in which music contributes to their articulation and, ultimately, meaning.

My point of departure for chapter 4 is the hypothesis that the transfer of location in Verdi's *Luisa Miller* from the *Residenzstadt* of Schiller's play *Kabale und Liebe* to librettist Salvatore Cammarano's Tyrolean village, usually considered an attempt to draw Schiller's political sting for the censors' sake, can be interpreted as a way of placing *Luisa* in the context of Alpine operas such as *La sonnambula* and *Linda*. The dramaturgy and worldview of these two works are much indebted to those of their sources, which belong to the sphere of French *mélodrame* widely intended. I investigate the ways in which *mélodrame*'s peculiar reliance on visual devices and its concern with familial as well as social issues are translated into a different theatrical genre and socio-cultural milieu, while preserving both their innovative dramaturgy and their conservative social and political stance. I then interpret *Luisa Miller*'s trajectory from Alpine idyll to full-blown tragedy as a kind of fusion of genres different from the oft-invoked Shakespearean or Hugolean mixture of comic and tragic. This interpretation suggests a reconsideration of the traditional account of Verdi's middle period: supported by the early reception of the opera, I argue for *Luisa Miller*'s role in Verdi's multi-faceted exploration of dramaturgies and styles between the mid 1840s and the late 1850s. This opera's play with genres had wider resonances, however, ideological and political as well as dramaturgical. The final section of the chapter explores the political reception of *Luisa Miller* in the wake of the 1848 revolutions and their violent repression, which cast a long shadow on the Italian cultural and political climate of the 1850s.

Chapter 5 examines the evolution of the association between mountains and virginity in Italian opera of the second half of the century. The works range from adaptations of Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* to mid-century operas by Pedrotti and Mercadante, and from Puccini's early *Le Villi* and *Edgar* to Catalani's *La Wally* and

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Giordano's *Fedora*. The perception and construction of the Alps was affected, on the one hand, by an emerging aesthetic of literary and musical realism, and, on the other, by the direct experience of this landscape on the part of audiences made possible by the continuous increase of tourism. Both factors were potentially at odds with the traditional operatic representation of Alpine landscape. Librettists and composers responded to these evolving contexts in widely different ways. Their responses led to new ways of representing not only landscape, however, but also the characters' interaction with reality, especially in its sonic manifestations, *La Wally* proving the most interesting and complex work in this respect. Its text as well as the scenes painted by Adolf Hohenstein for its first production reveal startling similarities to poems by Giosuè Carducci and paintings by Giovanni Segantini from the same period. The common goal of these diverse artistic products was re-consecrating a landscape whose idealisation was under serious threat. The third act of *Fedora*, on the other hand, stages the failure of such an attempt in terms of the failure on the part of Alpine landscape to redeem a character who does not belong in it.

The loss of symbolic potential of the old convention is observed in the final chapter from the vantage point of Puccini's radical gesture of replacing the Alps with the Californian Sierra Nevada in *La fanciulla del West*. Puccini's gesture is placed in the larger context of the culture of modernity, which brought about a shift in the construction and perception not only of landscape, but also of femininity and masculinity. I return to the gender-sensitive perspective of chapter 3, therefore, discussing how the fin-de-siècle concern with new conceptions of femininity influenced the depiction of the protagonist Minnie, of her relationship with the almost exclusively male community in which she lives, and of her link with the 'virgin' landscape surrounding her. In turn-of-the-century Italy the discourse on femininity overlapped significantly with that on the United States of America, locating there its newest and most modern manifestations. I explore the Italian image of the United States, and especially California, through two figures particularly influential on

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the formation of this image, Buffalo Bill and Bret Harte. The landscape of the Californian Sierra Nevada was the ideal setting not only for a new kind of virgin, but also for a new construction of sonic space and of ways of hearing it on Puccini's part. I suggest that *Fanciulla's* modernity is located more profitably in these dramaturgical and representational strategies, rather than in its up-to-date harmonic, melodic and timbral language – where past and present commentators have usually placed it. I conclude with a reflection on the role of landscape as an instrument of cultural force.

It should be clear from the preceding summary that the immediate scholarly context of this book is the exploration of the many kinds of conventions fundamental to the production and consumption of opera in general, and nineteenth-century Italian opera in particular. This exploration has in the past concentrated mostly on formal and structural matters, at least for nineteenth-century Italian opera. I focus on a different kind of convention, one whose investigation involves a broader spectrum of issues; in this sense the book belongs to a larger scholarly context. Recent years have witnessed an impressive broadening of the scope of opera studies, with writers from disciplines such as literary criticism, cultural history, philosophy and feminist/gender/queer studies contributing new and important perspectives. These writers exhibit an ongoing concern with the cultural, social, ideological and political meanings of opera, whose cultural work they investigate in broadly interdisciplinary terms. Following their lead, my approach, interdisciplinary in argument and method, places the operas under scrutiny in a series of inter-related contexts, in turn musical, literary, theatrical, visual, social and ideological. At the same time, I insist on the particular qualities of opera as a theatrical and musical genre, and on the crucial importance of the kinds of musical dramaturgy peculiar to nineteenth-century Italian opera. Close readings of librettos and scores thus constitute a fundamental aspect of my work.

The connection between landscape and gender offers an unusual and stimulating point of view from which to consider a number of related issues central to the interpretation not only of single works

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and the conventions they display, but also of opera in general. Each chapter thus broadens out from a consideration of musical and dramatic detail to an exploration of theoretical and historiographical issues. The chapter on *La sonnambula* suggests ways in which human geography might be incorporated into readings of single works as well as operatic traditions and genres. The discussion of the sexual and vocal relationships linking the main characters of *Linda di Chamounix* invites exploration of ways in which psychoanalytic theories can be imported into and adapted to operatic criticism. A politicised reading of generic subversion in *Luisa Miller* becomes the starting point for a reconsideration of the complex relationships it establishes among opera, history and politics. And the discussion of fin-de-siècle works and of *La fanciulla del West* leads to an investigation of the ways in which the conventions explored in the previous chapters extend into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and adapt to a new operatic, cultural and ideological context.

A further context to which this book belongs is, then, the theoretical exploration of the nature of opera as a genre and its methodological and historiographical implications. Indeed, studying the evolution of the particular convention at the centre of this book offers a valuable perspective on the nature of change and evolution in opera as a genre. Especially in the last two hundred years, the increasing presence on the lyric stage of 'old' works has meant a progressively longer survival of themes and conventions, ones that each generation has absorbed and modified in different ways. An investigation of these ever-changing processes affords a vantage point from which to decode the ever-changing relationship between opera and culture.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY VIRGINITY AND THE DE-EROTICISATION OF CULTURE

In chapters 2 and 3 I discuss in some detail the nineteenth-century discourses on mountains and on female virginity respectively, suggesting why they were often linked in various cultural and artistic

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manifestations, and specifically in Italian opera. Here I want to reflect on the particular historical locatedness of this connection. To put it bluntly, both mountains and virginity became what they were for nineteenth-century culture only in the nineteenth century. It was only then that, after centuries of progressive emergence, mountain landscape eventually reached a truly prominent position in European imagination, acquiring the panoply of meanings that it still displays to this day. And it was only in the nineteenth century that the preoccupation with female virginity, notably its preservation, became an obsession, affecting all sorts of cultural and artistic manifestations.

To be sure, mountains are promoted as a space linked to female virginity as early as in the Book of Judges: Jephthah's daughter retires to the mountains to lament her fate of dying a childless virgin before being sacrificed by her father.

Then she said to her father: 'Let me have this favour. Spare me for two months, that I may go off down the mountains to mourn my virginity with my companions'. 'Go', he replied, and sent her away for two months. So she departed with her companions and mourned her virginity on the mountains. [. . .] It then became a custom in Israel for Israelite women to go yearly to mourn the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite for four days of the year.⁴

In Pseudo-Philo's *Antiquitates biblicae*, which contains an early elaboration of the story, the daughter directly invokes the mountains as witnesses to her grief, and calls for the trees to bend their boughs in sorrow and the wild beasts to trample upon her virginity.⁵

Giacomo Carissimi's oratorio *Jephte* (1649), whose text is based on Pseudo-Philo's dramatisation as well as the Bible, concludes with the daughter's lament, answered by Echo (two sopranos):

FILIA

Plorate, colles; dolete, montes, et in afflictione cordis mei ululate.

ECHO

Ululate.

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FILIA

Ecce moriar virgo, et non potero morte mea meis filiis consolari.

Ingemiscite silvae, fontes et flumina; in interitu virginis lachrimate.

ECHO

Lachrimate.

FILIA

[. . .] Exhorrescite, rupes; obstupescite, colles, valles et cavernae, in sonitu horribili resonate.

ECHO

Resonate.

FILIA

Plorate, filii Israel, plorate virginitatem meam.⁶

DAUGHTER: Bewail, hills; grieve, mountains, and howl for the sorrow of my heart.

ECHO: Howl.

DAUGHTER: Now I will die a virgin, and at the time of my death I will not be consoled by my children. Groan, forests, springs and rivers; shed tears over the death of a virgin.

ECHO: Shed tears.

DAUGHTER: Tremble, rocks; be astonished, hills, valleys and caves: resonate with terrible sounds.

ECHO: Resonate.

DAUGHTER: Lament, children of Israel, lament my virginity.

The daughter repeatedly implores the landscape to produce sound, to vibrate in sympathy with her voice and the profound emotions which compel this voice to pour forth. Echo obeys this request, but in so doing it amplifies the sound to which it responds: while one soprano repeats the last few bars of the daughter's melody exactly, the other harmonises a third above or below (Ex. 1.1). The daughter asks hills to bewail, mountains to howl, valleys and caves to resonate: a two-voiced echo gives the illusion that they have come alive, that they are literally responding to the daughter's call. Landscape has a musical and emotional voice, it can be heard, even if it cannot be