

Enjoying the operatic voice

A neuropsychanalytic exploration of the operatic
reception experience

By

Carlo Zuccarini

Cognitive Science and Psychology



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In memory of my parents,
who instilled in me a passion for words and music.

Dedicated to my wife, Michelle,
for her patience during my quest to find my own voice.

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Foreword

I am very pleased to offer this short introduction to Carlo Zuccarini's book, *Enjoying the Operatic Voice*. His work, which I have been following for some time, is both stimulating and intellectually substantial, and in my estimation makes real progress in exploring the meaningful interdisciplinary interactions and possibilities between music, psychoanalysis and, uniquely, neuroscience. Academia has been and in some ways still is resistant to the insights that psychoanalytic theory can bring to the critical analysis of the arts—in this case, to the understanding of the affective experience of music—so a contribution like Dr. Zuccarini's is both timely and most welcome.

In *Enjoying the Operatic Voice*, Zuccarini asks “Has music ‘fallen on deaf ears’ among psychoanalysts?” This question is both clever and cogent. It hints at Freud's indifference—or perhaps resistance—to music, and also at the tantalizing possibility that Freud was effectively tone deaf, and thereby immune to music's emotional and psychological potency.¹ But this question also points a finger at the discipline of psychoanalysis more broadly, and—I think—tacitly critiques the efficacy of applied psychoanalysis, which has made some compelling interpretive forays into the realms of art, literature and film, but has almost nothing to say about music. In this very monograph, Zuccarini cites François Régault's provocative claim that the avoidance of music—for both Freud and for his most famous acolyte, Jacques Lacan—was a “symptom...of a non-relation.”

This symptomatic avoidance is something of a two-way street: musical scholarship has had relatively little to do with psychoanalysis as well. This is counterintuitive, in light of the precocious—if not promiscuous—and progressive leaps of the so-called New Musicology in the 1990s, a movement in which a sometimes-bewildering array of perspectives and approaches derived from literary, feminist, queer and critical theory were brought to bear on musical works, the reception and experience of music, and upon the discipline itself. That tempestuous decade, however, yielded relatively little significant musicological interaction with psychoanalysis.

My own experiences as a musicologist interested in exploring the connections between music and psychoanalysis certainly reflect the long history of musicology's neglect—or avoidance—of psychoanalysis. I occasionally find

¹ See N. M. Cheshire, “The Empire of the Ear: Freud's Problem with Music” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 77/6 (1996):1127-68.

myself being challenged at academic conferences for talking about Freud in my work, even when the context is largely historical (i.e. not theoretical or clinical); moreover, I can recall giving speculative talks on the application of Lacanian theory to music during which audience members sat deliberately shaking their heads in silent disapproval. As recently as the spring of 2018, at an interdisciplinary psychoanalysis and music conference held at the University of London, I met with colleagues who told me they still sometimes struggle to legitimize their interest in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory, more than a century after the publication of psychoanalysis' seminal and now widely-read texts, and nearly eight decades since the death of Freud.

Freud himself, of course, frequently and defensively wrote of the broad resistance to psychoanalysis. The journalist Janet Malcolm, in her book *In the Freud Archives*, which addresses the internecine squabbles within the world of psychoanalysis in the 1970s and early 1980s, notes that Freud struggled against the view of psychoanalysis as “a secret society...practicing a mystical science.”² The problem with psychoanalysis, as Malcolm observes, is that to some extent it is gnostic, and that it seems to require that one has had a personal experience with psychoanalysis before deploying its theories and insights in the service of, say, the interpretation of literary or artistic works. As she cogently and pithily puts it

Writings on psychoanalytic theory or history who come from other fields are regarded with suspicion and skepticism by those within the field. The worst is expected from them—and the worst very often comes. Writings about psychoanalysis from outside the field...are, as a rule, uncomprehending, naïve, off the point, and biased...people who have had personal experience of psychoanalysis are in a better position to grasp psychoanalytic theory than those who have not.³

Music compounds the problem of applied psychoanalysis: if psychoanalysis is a field that requires personal investment, knowledge and experience in order for scholarly investigations and interventions to be fruitful, then so is music—perhaps more so. Malcolm argues that, just as some people who have been psychoanalyzed themselves become “believers” in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory, so “the same could be said of people who have come to a sympathetic understanding of Beethoven's genius through learning to

² Quoted in Janet Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1997), 30.

³ Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives*, 30.

play his piano sonatas.”⁴ In other words, it helps to do it, in order to know it—although having experience, as Malcolm acknowledges, does not guarantee sympathy, or even affinity.

Tensions between the disciplines notwithstanding, there is a modest extant corpus of scholarly literature relating to music and psychoanalysis—which Zuccarini surveys—but it is something of a dog’s breakfast, to my mind. Most of the early Freudians, like Freud himself, did not address music directly via psychoanalytic theory, though many were very musical, most notably Alfred Adler—who was musical enough to have considered a career as a singer—and Theodor Reik, one of Freud’s first students in Vienna, who published a quasi-autobiographical monograph on music and psychoanalysis—*The Haunting Melody*—but not until some 15 years after Freud’s death.

A notable exception among the early Freudians was, of course, Max Graf, who wrote extensively on music from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, with a particular focus on opera—and on Wagner specifically, concluding that the composer’s work reflected the troubled and dis-unified creative centre of the artist, in contradistinction with the more firmly rooted Beethoven. Graf, whose work touched upon the reception and interpretation of Wagner and the post-Wagnerians, is surely an important forerunner of Zuccarini’s work: no study of pleasure and desire in opera can neglect Wagner.

Many of the subsequent forays in the field of psychoanalysis and music have been, to my mind, rather hit-and-miss. There is some valuable literature available in French, including the work of André Michel and, somewhat more recently, Michel Poizat’s *The Angel’s Cry*, which brings to bear post-Lacanian theory on opera and the singing voice—again, presaging and informing Zuccarini’s scholarship, specifically with respect to operaphilia, the fetishizing of the voice, and the Lacanian *objet a*. Among the key English literature on music and psychoanalysis is the seminal two-volume collection *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Music*, edited by Stuart Feder, George Pollock and Richard Karmel. Although these two volumes are methodologically erratic, and the quality of the contributions is variable, it is nonetheless an important foray in the field of music and psychoanalysis, and portends future interdisciplinary approaches.

The recent work of music theorist David Schwarz—notably, the books *Listening Subjects* and *Listening Awry*—represents some of the most fruitful work in bringing together music theory and analysis, psychoanalysis, and musical and cultural history. Schwarz’s multi-layered approach to diverse repertoire—from Schubert Lieder to contemporary opera to The Beatles—and to broader intellectual and aesthetic paradigms, such as German modernism,

⁴ Malcolm, In the Freud Archives, 30.

comprises some of the most compelling music scholarship to emerge from the New Musicology, thanks in no small part to his virtuosic application of post-Lacanian theory to music and the experience of listening and interpretation. Schwarz's approach, too, echoes in Zuccarini's study.

Having said all of this, I think that Carlo Zuccarini's *Enjoying the Operatic Voice* ultimately does something quite different: namely, through what one might consider a kind of Hegelian dialectical synthesis, he introduces a new interdisciplinary subfield, what I would want to call neuropsychanalytic musicology (I do not believe Zuccarini uses this phrase, but given the extent to which he draws upon musicological literature and lens of reception history, I think it is reasonable). His work takes features from psychoanalysis, cognition and neuroscience and blends them in the service of understanding the pleasure we derive from music, which is, of course, a multipartite and multivalent—intellectual, physiological, neurological, psychological and emotional—experience. This synthesized approach, moreover, tackles head-on the problem Malcolm identifies, namely the gnosticism of psychoanalysis: Zuccarini's work retains the creative-intuitive hermeneutics of Freud's invention—bringing something of the mysticism of psychoanalysis to the mystical experience of music—but grounds it scientifically, combining it with the rigour of neuroscience.

Enjoying the Operatic Voice is divided into three lucid parts: "Music and Psychoanalysis," "Music and Neuroscience," and "Neuropsychanalysis." Broadly speaking, Zuccarini is concerned with how the voice in opera is experienced and enjoyed. This concern implicates a very wide range of elements and topics, confirming the interdisciplinarity of his study: for instance, he considers the importance of gender and the experience of opera, viewing the genre through the lens of feminism, gender and queer theory; he examines the relationship between music and words in opera; he contemplates the emergence of singing in relation to human history and the natural world; he brings together gender, emotion and language as he explores how music is processed in the brain; and finally, he provides a theoretical framework for a novel approach—a neuropsychanalytic approach—to opera that seeks to synthesize the subjective experience of opera and the operatic voice with concomitant neuro-physiological processes.

Enjoying the Operatic Voice clearly draws upon earlier studies of the voice that are based upon Lacanian or post-Lacanian theory: this includes notions of the voice as a fetish object, or *objet a* (the object-cause of desire), implicating the voice in the theorizing of "the gaze"; Lacan's tripartite concept of the orders of the human psyche, the "Symbolic-Imaginary-Real" schema; and the concept of *jouissance*, or the excess of enjoyment, in the experience of the operatic voice. The listening subject's experience of *jouissance*, and its recurring encounters with the voice as a partial object—as *objet a*—are *Leitmotifs* in this study, culmi-

nating in Zuccarini's own tripartite theoretical model, which combines neurological science and psychoanalytic theory and culminates with a bimodal account of vocal *jouissance*. In this account, the "operatic orgasm" is linked to psychical elements (such as the activation of unconscious material related to the mother-infant bond, and the subject's transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic) at the same time as it emerges from physiological processes (auditory and visual simulation, and the release of hormones), such that the affective response of the audiophile—shivers, goosebumps, a feeling of ecstasy—is both subjective-psychical and simultaneously underwritten by "endogenous opioids" from the neurological dimension.

Enjoying the Operatic Voice offers a thought-provoking new way to approach the meaning and experience of the human singing voice in opera. Zuccarini's study resides, as he describes it, at "the nexus of psychoanalysis and neuroscience"—I have suggested that this nexus includes musicology as well. But, in answering the question "How and why is the operatic voice enjoyed?", the author arrives at a more apposite term that emerges for his approach: neuropsychanalysis is characterized as a "duet" between disciplines. The concept of a duet, to my mind, is a much more elegant way to think about the possibilities for dynamic interactions between disciplines—certainly more elegant than the clunky "interdisciplinarity," which I have overused in this introduction. And while Régnauld, again, theorizes about the "non-relation" or impossibility of the relations between music and psychoanalysis, it is also precisely there—at the point of the impossible—that psychoanalysis begins to approach music. Contemplating Lacan and music, Régnauld observes—and this nicely applies to *Enjoying the Operatic Voice*, too—"that, in reality, once we are at the heart of the reflection between psychoanalysis and another art, it is hard to tell which one 'advances' the other, because bringing them together gives rise to a sort of intersection."⁵ This intersection is Zuccarini's "nexus," and I certainly look forward to revisiting this intersection, and to following his future departures into the realm of music and mind from there.

Alexander Carpenter

⁵ François Régnauld, "Psychoanalysis and Music." *Lacan.com*, 2002. Retrieved from <http://www.lacan.com/symptom11/psychoanalysis-and.html>.

Overture

“So she poured out the liquid music of her voice to quench the thirst of
his spirit”.

(Hawthorne 1987 [1843]: 272)

The research that underpins this book was motivated by a lifelong passion for opera, as well as the consequent desire to understand why and how this genre of vocal music is capable of evoking an intense yet seemingly inexplicable emotional response. At the peak of its intensity, the ineffable *qualia* of this emotional response features what can only be described as a bittersweet transcendent experience that combines at once extreme bliss and sorrow. After the tension has developed surreptitiously, to a point at which it is no longer bearable, the intensity of the resulting emotional response may suddenly erupt, without notice, in the form of physical manifestations that can range from *frissons* and piloerection to a sense of anxiety, feeling ‘choked up’ and tearful. Although this type of emotional response is not wholly restricted to the reception of opera, the *qualia* of the operatic reception experience is nonetheless unique because of the underlying subjective dynamics, as proposed and discussed in this book. The reason for this may lie in the equally unique features of the operatic voice, particularly in the higher vocal registers. These concepts have been covered by Michel Poizat (1992 [1986]) in his psychoanalytically-informed book *An Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, which ultimately inspired the research for this book. Poizat’s thoughtful and thought-provoking application of psychoanalytic theory to opera stands somewhat (although not entirely) alone in terms of the depth and breadth of material that is covered. Perhaps less broad in its coverage, a comparably detailed contribution can be found in *Opera’s Second Death* by Žižek and Dolar (2002). The book *A nuda voce: vocalità, inconscio, sessualità* by the Italian psychoanalyst and voice coach Laura Pigozzi (2008) provides a broadly-based psychoanalytic exploration of the singing voice, though primarily in terms of its production. The literature in applied psychoanalysis (i.e. non-clinical) has never been replete with material dealing with music, and even less in the case of opera. Possible reasons for this will be discussed later on.

A further motivation in exploring the reception of the operatic voice has been the steadily growing interest over the years, on the part of neuroscientists, in research related to music and emotion. However, despite the increasing number and the impressive scope of empirical studies in this area, using a

wide variety of methods and technologies ranging from psychological scales to neurophysiological measures, comparatively little attention has been paid to the reception of opera, or indeed to vocal music in general. This may be due to the scientific requirement of eliminating confounding issues, as will be discussed elsewhere. Even though the results of these studies provide much insight into the neurofunctional and neurochemical processes involved in the reception and enjoyment of music, the origins and *qualia* of the resulting affective response are still for the most part elusive. Neuroscientific knowledge of this type has mutually informed, complemented and advanced other areas, such as the broader field of emotion, neuropathology and music therapy. In a similar way, a mutual reciprocity has developed over the years between neuroscience and psychoanalysis, mainly in a clinical context, giving birth to the relatively new but established inter-discipline of neuropsychanalysis. The power of this approach lies in its ability to deal both separately and jointly with the subjective mind and the objective brain. Given the versatility of this approach, it has been adopted as a framework for this book. In doing so, an attempt has been made to reconcile neuroscientific knowledge and psychoanalytic theory, providing a parallel account that focuses on interdisciplinary meshing points, in order to explore a genre of vocal music that has been largely overlooked by both fields.

The aim of this book is to try to understand not only *how* operatic vocal music is processed and enjoyed, but also *why* it is enjoyed, in particular as regards the subjective experience of the intense affective response that it is capable of evoking in the operaphile. Specifically, the following three areas are explored: 1) the origin and nature of the intense affective response that is evoked in some listeners by the operatic voice; 2) how and why the operatic voice is enjoyed; and 3) the notion that the enjoyment of the operatic voice has something erotic about it. By adopting this dual-pronged approach, the separate strengths of both fields in combination may provide a tool that is at least somewhat better equipped to tackle the complex, multi-dimensional aspects of the operatic reception experience as a whole, while focusing on the operatic voice. This is a long-standing methodological problem that was highlighted in Carolyn Abbate's (1992: 118) "Analysis" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*:

The central problem remains the necessity to cope with an art that mixes various languages (visual, verbal, musical); this problem has affected every writer on opera, and can be said to twist his or her own interpretative language. While opera combines three basic systems, an analytical methodology has yet to be developed that is capable of discussing these as they exist in an ideal experiential reality, as aspects of

a single and simultaneously perceived entity. Virtually all operatic interpretation has been forced to dissect the operatic experience, focus separately upon the music, the text and the visual form of any operatic passage (i.e. 'while the text spoken is this, we see that on stage, and the music does this'). Opera analysis deals monophonically with what in performance is a visual-textual-musical polyphony. To be sure, analysis often seeks for a relationship between these systems, yet such a search is itself born of interpretation's inability directly to reflect or translate the complex simultaneities of opera. Analysing opera thus inevitably creates a fundamental schism, and its quest for relationships is perhaps driven by longing for a whole object that the act of analysis has itself unfused.

On a related but separate note, it may be worth mentioning an observation that emerged from time to time in the early stages of the research for this book. A potential flaw was perceived in successfully reconciling, or perhaps making a more evident and palpable connection between two disciplines that are sometimes considered to be quite separate and therefore essentially irreconcilable. The task bears a resemblance to that of the operatic singer, who must "reconcile the irreconcilable" (Scotto Di Carlo 2007b: 564), that is attempt to achieve intelligibility without compromising the production of beautiful sound. In the case of this book, the criteria relate to ensuring uniformity and coherence by adhering to a rigorous approach. It is hoped that these criteria have been largely met by adopting an intermediate 'complementarist' approach, that is dealing initially with the subject matter through the separate lenses of psychoanalysis and neuroscience, and then bringing both into focus through the unifying inter-discipline of neuropsychology. The analogy of a coin may be useful to clarify this approach. Whilst the two sides of a coin are perceived as forming part of a whole, they are essentially different, especially when viewed separately, in isolation. The unity of the coin is only recognisable when both of its sides are presented at once, as a whole object that can be handled at will. Therefore, dealing separately at first with psychoanalysis and neuroscience allows a closer look at each side – the other side – of the same multi-dimensional coin. This provides a clearer understanding of the distinctive features of the same coin, or what it is that constitutes the wholeness of the coin.

This book is articulated in three parts, preceded by introductory chapters. The first part focuses on psychoanalysis, whilst the second part focuses on neuroscience. This allows clarity in the exposition of technical material and concepts that are specific to each field. In addition, it allows this material to be developed within its own epistemological context, before relevant strands are woven to-

gether in the third part. This initially 'complementarist' approach has the advantage of bringing transparency to the neuropsychanalytic discussion in the third part, avoiding the need to intersperse lengthy background explanations and justifications that would inevitably interrupt the flow of the discussion.

Chapter 1 lays the foundations by stating the aims and scope of this book, as well as the limitations of its conceptual approach. A brief history of opera is provided in Chapter 2, followed by a discussion in Chapter 3 of the tension between words and music that has characterised opera since its beginnings. The relevance of this discussion lies in the significant role of language in psychoanalysis and the overlap identified by neuroscience between the processing of language and music, as covered in Chapter 17. On a related theme, considerations about the multi-layered nature of this art form and its constituent elements in Chapter 4 serve as a basis for the psychoanalytic notions that are developed in Part I and amplified in Part III. An overview of some elements of feminist and queer theory related to music and opera in Chapter 5 contributes to 'rounding out' the background information, as well as informing some of the discussions in subsequent chapters. Chapter 6 deals with the inter-disciplinary connection between psychoanalysis and neuroscience. This aims to explain the conceptual framework of the neuropsychanalytic approach adopted in this book, thus serving as a preamble to the subsequent chapters.

The various dynamics at work within opera and in the reception experience are considered exclusively through the lens of psychoanalysis in Chapters 7-13, which comprise Part I of this book. The ultimate aim of these chapters is that of attempting to establish *why* the operatic voice is enjoyed by the operaphile, as well as identifying possible factors that may contribute to the intense affective response that it can evoke. In order to do so, various theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Donald Winnicott, amongst others, are introduced, applied and discussed. The introductory overview in Chapter 7 is followed in Chapter 8 by a discussion of applied psychoanalysis, the various approaches that can be used, their advantages and limitations, and the particular approach that has been adopted here. As a logical progression, the issues of validity and validation of applied psychoanalysis are examined, with considerations as to why psychoanalysis has never paid a great deal of attention to music in general, and opera in particular, compared to literary and figurative arts. Freud's (1961 [1936]: 430) self-proclaimed ignorance of and outward aversion to music is analysed as a possible factor. The subsequent exploration in Chapter 9 of the significance of the voice and the gaze, as lost or partial objects, in the operatic reception experience leads into a discussion of the synaesthetic-like effect that can result when the voice and the gaze overlap, especially although not exclusively, in the primary or privileged context of the opera house. The focus then shifts from the sensory to the sensual aspects of the reception experience in Chapter 10, namely the

function of desire and its circuitous path that drives the operaphile's quest to (re-)encounter the lost vocal object, fuelling an inherent eroticism that manifests as enjoyment in the form of the 'operatic orgasm', or vocal *jouissance*. The role of gender is also taken into account. Resuming and amplifying the discussion that began earlier in the book, in Chapter 11 the various 'layers' of opera are considered in greater detail, in relation to the Lacanian orders of Symbolic, Imaginary and Real, including the nested, triadic nature of each order. Given the operaphile's ultimate focus on the singing voice, an attempt is made in Chapter 12 to identify the position of the operatic voice in relation to the fetish and *objet petit a*. Chapter 13 considers the intermediate space of illusion in opera and how this can function as a transitional experience for the operaphile, based on Winnicott's (1953) theories about transitional objects and phenomena. Consequently, the notion is proposed that opera can provide a solacing experience for the operaphile because of an enduring link with the mother.

In Chapters 14-20, which comprise Part II of this book, the focus shifts from psychoanalytic theory to the wide-ranging neuroscientific research on music, its reception, neural processing and enjoyment. Due to the requirement of eliminating confounding factors in empirical studies, opera and vocal music, in general, are largely absent from the material presented in these chapters. The research findings are nonetheless relevant to vocal music when one considers that the voice is looked upon by singers as an instrument. In other words, the voice can be said to function both *in* music and *as* music. Both of these functions are addressed in Chapter 17 by examining the overlap in the neural processing of language and music, as well as the progressively differential processing of lyrics and music in songs. The origins of music and singing are explored in Chapter 15 by drawing on various material, including theories of evolutionary psychology and biology relating to animals and human beings. Hypothesised purposes and functions of music and singing are considered, such as the selection of mates, the regulation of affect and behaviour, cohesion in collaborative work, and bonding between mother and infant. The related themes of the role of culture, society, memory and language in the reception of music are examined in Chapter 16. Moving on from this background material, the overlap between the neural processing of language and music is addressed in Chapter 17, as well as the innate capacities of human beings for both language and music and the processing of syntactical rules. In addition, this discussion covers the role of Broca's area in the processing of music and language, including historical considerations relating to this area of the brain and its ongoing importance in neural research. Continuing to delve deeper into the brain, a description is provided in Chapter 18 of the neural underpinnings of the music reception experience and its enjoyment, with a subsequent detailed examination of the constituent elements of music,

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