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## Narrativity in Operatic Music: an Author Comparison and Case Study

### I. From A to Z: Comparing the Ideas of Carolyn Abbate and Luca Zoppelli

What constitutes narrativity in operatic music? This is a primary question addressed by the research of musicologists Carolyn Abbate and Luca Zoppelli. Although their views on how narrativity manifests in opera differ significantly at times, they also cohere in fundamental ways made all the more noteworthy by the degree of dissimilarity between the scholars' methods. Indeed, the common ground between the two may usefully direct subsequent inquiry regarding the narrativity of operatic music.

Before delving into the two scholars' ideas, some historical information on narrative theory will help contextualize the discussion. The study of narrative, or narratology, was initially developed with respect to literature and is associated with 20<sup>th</sup> century formalism and structuralism.<sup>1</sup> Early narratologists, including Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes, Vladimir Propp, and Tzvetan Todorov, saw in literature and folklore recurring plot patterns, character archetypes, and storytelling devices that they attempted to describe and categorize. Fred Maus, another prominent writer on music and narrative, identifies several implications for academic discourse beyond pure literary study that arose from this "awareness of story-telling as a patterned activity," including ways that narratology has influenced 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century music academia.<sup>2</sup>

Maus makes a distinction between the application of narratology to text about music and texted music on one hand, and the application of narratology to absolute music on the other. In

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Everett Maus, "Narratology, narrativity," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/40607>.

<sup>2</sup> Maus.

one paragraph he groups examinations of the meta-narratives of music history, comparisons between text genres and their musical counterparts, and studies of operatic story-telling scenes – all subjects that include text. Narrativity in absolute music is introduced as a separate study in a subsequent paragraph. The intrinsic separation implied by this distinction both assumes that music can be easily categorized as either absolute or non-absolute – a problematic assumption to make in the face of studies of musical semiotics, rhetoric, and the like – and makes it difficult to place the study of narrativity in operatic music into Maus’ account of musical narratology at large. Most operas from the Common Practice Era contain some non-texted music that is not overtly programmatic, but instead exists in some less obvious relation to the opera’s literary story and to other, texted music in the same opera. Additionally, a study of narrativity in operatic music will by necessity address some of the concerns Maus ascribes to narratological studies of absolute music – for example, “the identification of agents and actors.”<sup>3</sup> Ascribing agency to elements of absolute music as a way of understanding its structure may be an alluring analytical method, but it is no less applicable to operatic music. As we will see, Luca Zoppelli identifies a narrating composer-voice in operatic music, while Carolyn Abbate’s understanding of “voice” in opera challenges positivistic assignations of musical agency to composer, character, or any other single subject and is pivotal to her reading of opera and musical narrative.

Why then does Maus make the distinction so clear between absolute music and anything else involving text and music? While the answer may lie partially in the focus of his work (absolute music), or the long shadow of 19<sup>th</sup>-century debates between proponents of absolute and programmatic music, it may also be found in the fact that it is inevitably messy to apply

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<sup>3</sup> Maus.

theoretical models from one artistic discipline to another.<sup>4</sup> It may seem useful to separate narratological study of absolute music from that of texted music or text about music because the line between these categories represents a division between the degrees to which literary narrative theory can be directly applied. In the case of absolute music, it is clear that, for example, specific plot models formulated by literary narrative theorists will not apply; at the least a metaphoric re-working of a literary model or at most a specifically musical model will be necessary for analysis. But in the case of texted music and opera in particular, the degree of theoretical transference is less clear: to what extent can a study of operatic music draw directly upon literary narratology?

It is to Carolyn Abbate's credit that she addresses this problem head on throughout *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, beginning in chapter one, where she argues that a central conflict between structuralist and post-structuralist ideas about "voice" in literary narratology cannot be directly applied to music.<sup>5</sup> Put bluntly, structuralism posits that authorial intention creates a meaningful combination of signs in a text, and thus attributes narrative function to an authorial voice; post-structuralism views the authorial voice (or that of any other perceivable subject) as a construction of the text itself, mediated and interpreted by the reader's subjectivity. Negating this dichotomy is central to Abbate's understanding of "voice" in music: due to the corporeal, audibly physical nature of musical performance, a musical subject seems to have more reality for her than a literary subject when

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<sup>4</sup> While it may seem that I have made Maus and his Grove entry into a bit of a straw man just for the sake of saying that interdisciplinary theory is hard, I believe the distinction he makes represents a larger problem in the study of musical narratology, wherein the relationship between text and music is seen as existing in only a few ossified categories rather than on a fluid, intertextual, interdisciplinary spectrum. The study of narrativity in opera particularly forces this issue.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12-13.

viewed through a post-structuralist lens.<sup>6</sup> But she also does not believe that a musical “voice” not belonging to a character is simply that of a mediating authorial presence, or the composer – rather, she imagines “an aural vision of music animated by multiple, decentered voices localized in several invisible bodies.”<sup>7</sup> This conception of voice does seem to occupy a position outside of the binary argument between an intentional, authorial voice and subjectivity as mere textual construction. It allows Abbate to posit the presence of voices in her analyses unapologetically – without engaging in lengthy deconstruction of their existence – but also to apply hermeneutic windows that would stretch credulity if she were purporting to uncover authorial intention, such as her feminist revival of Brunnhilde in chapter six.

The presence of Abbatian (to borrow Taruskin’s adjective)<sup>8</sup> voices in opera does not require the presence of a sung text, or even a vocal line at all. Abbate argues that sung, text-less music allows the voice to become a “voice-object” whose subjectivity may be less secure than that of a character’s voice or performer’s voice, but is perceivable nonetheless.<sup>9</sup> She also claims that this same effect can arise from a “singing” instrumental line, which by definition will be untexted.<sup>10</sup> Thus a voice might theoretically be present at any point in an opera, regardless of instrumentation or the presence of text in that moment. However, the existence of a musical voice is not Abbate’s only prerequisite for musical narration.

A narrating voice, in Abbate’s view, is not simply a singing voice or an instrument imitating singing; rather, it is marked by disjunctions with the music around it.<sup>11</sup> These disjunctions are what make clear to her that a narrative *act* is occurring and not simply the

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<sup>6</sup> Abbate, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Abbate, 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Taruskin, “She Do the Ring in Different Voices,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4:2 (1992), 193.

<sup>9</sup> Abbate, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Abbate, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Abbate, 19.

unfolding of a series of plot events. Distinguishing between narrative as drama, or a plot with a series of events, and narrative as “narration,” or the act and methods of storytelling, is very important to Abbate. She supports Genette’s view that while a voice is a prerequisite for narrative, the nature of the discourse particular to that voice is what actually constitutes narrativity.<sup>12</sup> A film metaphor drives this home: the discourse of a narrating subject is to literature and music what editing techniques are to film – that is, what distances the telling from the told.<sup>13</sup>

Abbate argues that operatic music (perhaps unlike literature) contains only rare moments of discursive distance and thus only rare moments of narration.<sup>14</sup> Most music, especially in an opera with a literary plot, can be described instead as mimetic – enacting non-musical events, or being “isomorphous” with non-musical events. Abbate cautions that much “narrative” analytical description of music necessarily reduces music to this state alone, negating the possibility of finding discursive distance within the music itself by turning over discursive function exclusively to the analytical text.<sup>15</sup> She seeks to avoid this pitfall in her own analytical writing by looking for those places in which music is “non-congruent” with the dramatic world it mimes most of the time. In her words: “the fact that music lends itself to description as...a narrative *does not actually constitute immanent narrativity*” [emphasis hers].<sup>16</sup> Instead, the points at which true narrativity can be found are rare, disjunct, marked by the presence of a voice as she defines it, and contingent upon the musical and dramatic terms of the individual work.

The ideas described above are laid out in the first chapter of *Unsung Voices* and elaborated upon in case studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century operatic and

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<sup>12</sup> Abbate, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Abbate, 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Abbate, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Abbate, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Abbate, 28.

(programmatic) orchestral repertoire throughout the remainder of the book. It is not possible to address all of Abbate's theoretical nuances in a paper of this scope, but some of the ways she expands upon her initial ideas, particularly in chapters three and four, are relevant for comparison with the writings of Luca Zoppelli.<sup>17</sup>

Chapters three and four deal largely with the subject of operatic narration – moments when a character narrates aloud onstage. For Abbate, operatic narration is often a site of the disjunction that for her marks musical narration in general. There is at the very least a textual switch from the present tense of the stage action to the past tense of narration, and the contraction of time that occurs when past events are narrated. As will be discussed below, in some cases operatic narration marks a switch from the characters' "deafness" to the music around them into hearing or vice versa – "defining," as she says, "a move across discursive space."<sup>18</sup>

In chapter three, Abbate also introduces the idea of "reflexivity" in operatic narration, or the ability to comment on the larger performance at hand through a microcosmic moment of narrative performance. Using the moment of Cherubino's "uncovering" from *The Marriage of Figaro* as example, she shows how the Count's narration is reflexive in that "two times are brought together": his narration of his prior discovery of Cherubino's identity serves as a real-time reveal of Cherubino for those listening.<sup>19</sup> Musical as well as textual reflexivity are at work here, as the Count's recitative (the traditional vehicle of operatic narration) interrupts the

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<sup>17</sup> Chapter two of *Unsung Voices*, while less relevant to the comparison with Zoppelli, takes up the question of the applicability of literary narratology to music in more detail; it assures the reader that Abbate has thought through these issues quite thoroughly and makes the valuable case that interpretation of narrative in opera requires equally sophisticated narratological understanding of both music and text.

<sup>18</sup> Abbate, 123.

<sup>19</sup> Abbate, 64.

preceding music, then progressively acquires characteristics of that music as it moves toward the joining of the two times and the “big reveal.”<sup>20</sup>

Abbate also deals with the 19th-century operatic convention of narrative song in some detail.<sup>21</sup> Before Wagner, she argues, opera oscillates between two modes: the mimetic, in which music isomorphously apes plot events, and operatic narration, marked in operatic history first by recitative and then by narrative song.<sup>22</sup> It is in this oscillation – which she describes as intrusive or disruptive – that she finds the discursive distance that proves musical narrativity. Her conviction that narrativity can be marked by intrusion upon a seemingly self-contained musical world leads her to denounce what she perceives to be the typical scholarly project of seeking coherence, and value on the basis of coherence, in music when performing analysis.<sup>23</sup>

Abbate identifies in the music of Wagner (and others succeeding him) more complex traversals between mimetic and narrative modes, in which discontinuities in the traditional structure of narrative song advance meaningful transitions of musical agency between voices. The “Rome Narrative,” a narrative song delivered by the title character in Act III of Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* that is audible within the opera’s fictional world. She identifies a key moment at which, she claims, the act of narration is “uncovered,” and the voice of the character moves from being simply presented (by some other agency) as audible within the fictional world as a singer to actually becoming the voice whose agency governs the totality of the music within the “opera-body,” thus momentarily erasing the “deafness” characters typically have to the larger musical world around them. In this moment, the recurrence of a previously introduced, halting,

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<sup>20</sup> Abbate, 64-65.

<sup>21</sup> The paradox inherent in narrative song and its traditional ballad form, i.e. telling progressive plot events via a repetitive verse structure, has musical implications that Abbate finds useful to her readings of narrativity. I will deal with these ideas in more detail in the speculative third section of this essay.

<sup>22</sup> Abbate, 122.

<sup>23</sup> Abbate, 76.

instrumental ostinato figure is imbued with symbolic meaning by its proximity to – and thus presentation as musical metaphor for – Tannhauser’s description of apprehensively walking toward the Pope.<sup>24</sup> According to Abbate, the formal structure of traditional narrative song begins to break down at this moment, and Tannhauser’s singing voice – through its seeming *composition* and creation of meaning in the formal and instrumental as well as purely vocal spheres – “is altered to *become* the discursive...voice that otherwise speaks through the remainder of Act III.”<sup>25</sup> Although she does not make clear what voice(s) Tannhauser’s supplants as discursive agent, her description of a change of narrative voice – and musical moment whose meaning relies on rupture, rather than coherence – is clear.

While the issue of musical coherence or continuity will return shortly, in the meantime we direct our attention to two articles by Italian musicologist Luca Zoppelli that describe his theories of narrative in 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera: “Narrative Elements in Donizetti’s Operas” and “‘Stage Music’ in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera.”<sup>26, 27</sup> Zoppelli’s ideas diverge significantly from Abbate’s regarding the fundamental questions of *who*, or *whose voice* narrates in opera and *when* and *how* narration occurs.

Whose voice do we hear in opera’s narrative music? For Zoppelli, the answer is unitary and clear: the composer’s. In the opening paragraph of “Narrative Elements,” he writes:

This article arises from an attempt to arrive at a theoretical definition of nineteenth-century opera as a spectacle in which we may find, besides the traditional dramatic structure, certain narrative elements. In an unusual manner, they betray the mediating and controlling presence of an *author who narrates* – in this case, the presence of the composer who by musical means goes beyond the basic level of the representation to communicate directly with the spectator, guiding awareness and point of view.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Abbate, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Abbate, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Luca Zoppelli, “Narrative Elements in Donizetti’s Operas,” Trans. William Ashbrook, *Opera Quarterly* 10:1 (1993), 23-32.

<sup>27</sup> Luca Zoppelli, “‘Stage Music’ in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera,” Trans. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2:1 (1990), 29-39.

<sup>28</sup> Zoppelli, “Narrative Elements,” 23.



Such confident assertion of the composer's voice in operatic music may seem shockingly direct in comparison with Abbate's nuanced approach to voice, and reflective of the structuralist view that she dissects and ultimately rejects. Zoppelli's understanding of the composer as narrator may in fact be more complex than this. He is clearly familiar with the work of Edward T. Cone (quoting his analysis of *Simon Boccanegra* later in "Narrative Elements"), who asserts a more subtle mediating projection of the composer's subjectivity as the narrative voice in music.<sup>29</sup> The specific nature of Cone's composer-projection derives from his belief that drama is a more effective metaphor for music than literature, which one can also infer from Zoppelli's writings.

In fact, Zoppelli's answers to the questions of where and how narration occurs begin with applying the traditional dramatic concepts of mimesis and diegesis to opera. He argues that while opera might initially seem mimetic due to being a dramatic medium, it is in fact largely diegetic because of the "mediating barrier" of music, which conveys the composer's commentary on the dramatic representation.<sup>30</sup> By comparison, Abbate avoids the terms mimesis and diegesis in favor of substitutes like "miming" and "discursive distance," but despite these verbal evasions she places much of the music she discusses within the same two basic dramatic categories. However, her application of them is different from Zoppelli's: she sees mimesis, or "isomorphous" unfolding of musical and extra-musical events, as the primary dramatic mode of opera; "discursive distance," or the quality that intimates narrativity and thus diegesis, she considers rare. Given that Zoppelli identifies opera as primarily diegetic, it is not surprising that he identifies more instances of and methods for musical narration in opera than Abbate.

In fact, Zoppelli provides a list of ways that music can function diegetically in "Narrative Elements." The first of these is what he calls stage music – "excerpts that are sung, not according

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<sup>29</sup> Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> Zoppelli, "Stage Music," 33.

to operatic convention, but as songs being performed.”<sup>31</sup> He includes in this category both on- and off-stage music, citing off-stage funeral dirges in *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia* as examples.<sup>32</sup> While the vocabulary Zoppelli uses to define stage music suggests a narrow focus on sung – to the exclusion of solely instrumental – music, there is nothing in his subsequent arguments to suggest that he intends this rigid distinction, and we can safely assume that stage music as he defines it might not necessarily include a human voice. Zoppelli’s interest in stage music seems to overlap closely, then, with Abbate’s interest in both narrative song and music that operatic characters can hear. But the exact function and significance each scholar ascribes to such music – the mechanisms by which it narrates – are different. Both identify a “change in narrative voice” (Zoppelli)<sup>33</sup> in the transition to such musical numbers, but for Abbate that change of voice *itself* is what signals a narrating presence, a rhetorical “and then she began to sing” at the onset of a narrative. Abbate also cares about how the narrative song may be reflexive, or carry implications for the larger work and performance at hand, while Zoppelli seems more concerned with the effect the change of narrative voice has on the point of view perceived by the audience. He sees the change in narrative voice as being from that of composer to character, initiating a pure mimesis: the music we hear becomes identical to the dramatic representation of a musical performance that is occurring.<sup>34</sup> He describes the ensuing effect as “focalization:” lacking the composer’s mediating presence – which the composer has *chosen* to withdraw for narrative reasons – the audience must identify solely and closely with the emotional state of the character who sings.<sup>35</sup> Abbate (betraying her post-structuralist leanings despite disavowing some details of post-structuralist literary narratology) is generally reluctant to ascribe

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<sup>31</sup> Zoppelli, “Narrative Elements,” 24.

<sup>32</sup> Zoppelli, “Narrative Elements,” 24.

<sup>33</sup> Zoppelli, “Stage Music,” 33.

<sup>34</sup> Zoppelli, “Stage Music,” 33.

<sup>35</sup> Zoppelli, “Stage Music,” 33.

agency to or indeed even mention the audience at all, but she does so in a passage that makes clear her opposing view of the effect stage music has on listeners:

The [narrative] song, foregrounding the process of performance, also makes musical improvisation and composition palpable; it forces us to deal explicitly with ourselves as listening subjects, for we – the audience – are mirrored by the rapt listeners on stage.<sup>36</sup>

While the two scholars both identify stage music as a site of operatic narrativity, the mechanisms of narrativity and subsequent effects on audience perception that they attribute to stage music are quite different.

Zoppelli's inclusion of offstage music under the narrative heading brings physical space into play as an element of narrative discourse. He discusses the ability of literary narrative description to call unseen places, spaces, and distances to the imagination, and posits that the placement of operatic music offstage combined with its setting in a key distantly related to the previous one lends the music a discursive function – an ability to describe or imply physical distance.<sup>37</sup> While I am not sure this is so much an instance of *narration* as it is of *metaphor* – distance around the circle of fifths as physical distance – the possibility of physical space interacting with operatic music in a narrative way is fascinating, deserves more detailed study, and does not figure significantly in Abbate's work to my knowledge.

Zoppelli also argues that distantly related tonalities can discursively mark a temporal distance in an operatic plot, pointing out that the key relationships between different acts of *Lucrezia Borgia* are more closely related when the action they contain occurs in temporal succession, but less closely related when time has passed between the action in one act and the next.<sup>38</sup> This observation is predicated on an understanding of historical musical convention – that is, it is conventional for closely related keys to follow one another, and distantly related keys

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<sup>36</sup> Abbate, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Zoppelli, "Narrative Elements," 25.

<sup>38</sup> Zoppelli, "Narrative Elements," 26.

placed in succession are a rupture of this conventional relationship. While his claim begs the question of whether the audience actually perceives the degree of key relatedness between acts – which may in practice be separated by an intermission – it leads Zoppelli to make a crucial distinction between literary narrative and dramatic mimesis. He notes that “temporal cues such as ‘shortly thereafter’ or ‘many years have passed’” are the province of literary narrative, while traditional drama preserved the Aristotelian precept of unity of time.<sup>39</sup> This distinction between temporal rupture as an explicitly narrative function and temporal unity as a traditional function of mimesis strengthens his argument – supporting a temporal rupture in plot with a musical cue rather than a verbal cue does not undermine the narrativity that is immanent in the rupture. A similar argument could be made to support Zoppelli’s prior point about physical distance – that the breaking of Aristotelian unity of place is traditionally the province of narrative rather than mimesis, and thus underscoring its appearance musically is part of the composer’s specifically musical narrative arsenal.

These explanations would probably be insufficient for Abbate. I expect she would argue that in these anti-Aristotelian moments, the tonal changes are isomorphous with narrative elements of the plot, and consequently that although the literary element of the opera may display narrativity, the musical element itself does not. Where Abbate searches with rigor for exclusively *musical* narrativity, Zoppelli seems more inclined to locate authorial narrative function in passages whose narrativity is supported by the intersection of multiple elements of opera – plot, physical space, etc. – and not by the operation of music alone. Zoppelli’s project is thus more practical – at what moments in the totality of an opera does the audience perceive the narrating agency of the composer, and why? – while Abbate’s is more philosophical: is music, as an ontological category, capable of narration, and if so, how?

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<sup>39</sup> Zoppelli, “Narrative Elements,” 26.

So Zoppelli and Abbate may indeed be asking slightly different questions in their research, and a final point of comparison will also help elucidate differences in the methods they use to answer their respective questions. Abbate sees moments of operatic narration as inherently creating musical discontinuity, while Zoppelli sees stage music in general as part of a historical move in the early nineteenth century toward greater musical continuity. The musical numbers, or portions of numbers, that he identifies as stage music in 19th-century opera tend to transmit information that would have been conveyed in prior centuries through recitative, which generally produces a striking shift in rhythmic language, texture, instrumentation, etc. from the music it follows.<sup>40</sup> Both scholars are aware of the criteria the other uses to define stage music as creating continuity or rupture: Abbate mentions the same historical shift in the style of operatic narration in her book, and Zoppelli clearly acknowledges that at the very least, a shift into stage music means a discontinuity in narrative voice. Despite awareness of these ideas on the part of both scholars, the degree of continuity each attributes to stage music remains quite different.

These fundamentally different readings can be attributed in part to the differing research interests between the pair. Zoppelli is more involved with historical musicology – he has published a critical edition of a Donizetti score and cites primary source documents to support his arguments about operatic narrativity as frequently as he cites contemporary scholars. Abbate, in turn, seems more heavily engaged with interdisciplinary critical theory, evidenced in her lengthy and detailed discussions of exactly how various types of literary narratology can be applied to music. Thus Abbate reads the onset of stage music as a rupture signifying discursive distance, while Zoppelli reads it as a development toward musical continuity in a particular historical context. I do not doubt that either scholar is fluent in the other's seeming area of

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<sup>40</sup> Zoppelli, "Stage Music," 35.

specialty, but the differences in academic orientation made clear in their writing are almost impossible to ignore.

It is remarkable, then, that though these two scholars have such different approaches, there is any common ground at all between their views on narrative music in opera – and indeed, what common ground there is gains strength because of it, like an experimental result successfully replicated by a different research team. Stage music seems critical for understanding operatic narrativity, regardless of how one explains the basis for its narrativity. Similarly, the idea of *distance* as a key component of musical narrativity is held in common – whether in the discursive distance Abbate seeks to identify moments of narration or in Zoppelli's implication that disunity of time and place are fundamentally narrative, and thus that musical support for these discontinuities can constitute musical narrativity. One could pursue a study that examines these commonalities further, combining Abbate's careful examination of meta-analytical language and transference between literary and musical narratology with Zoppelli's willingness to afford the composer some agency and the historical context of a work some value. Perhaps the removal of some ideological noise would render possible a more stable understanding of operatic narrativity than that found in the quantum space between the work of Abbate and Zoppelli.

## II. Case Study: A Narrative Moment in *La Traviata*

In the second number of Verdi's *La Traviata*<sup>41</sup> Alfredo fatefully reveals his love for Violetta; a portion of the melody he sings in his confession recurs several times throughout the remainder of Act I. Figure 1 shows the first occurrence of this melody in vocal score, beginning in the second bar of the excerpt and ending in the bar before Violetta's entrance. We'll call it "Alfredo's love theme:"

The musical score is for a vocal duet from Act I, No. 2 of *La Traviata*. It is written for Alfredo (soprano) and Violetta (soprano). The tempo is marked "con espansione" and the dynamics are "p" (piano) and "pp" (pianissimo). The score is in 3/4 time. The lyrics are in Italian and English. The melody begins in the second bar and ends in the bar before Violetta's entrance.

Alfredo's lyrics: mor. birth. Di quel-la-mor, quel-la-mor ch'è pal-pi-to del-l'u-ni-ver-so, del-l'u-ni-ver-so in-te-ro, mi-ste-ri-o-so, mi-ste-ri-o-so, al-te-ro, croce, cro-ce de-life, the life u-ni-ver-sal, my-sterious pow-er, guiding the fate of mor-tals, Sor-row, sor-row and li-zia, cro-ce de-li-zia, de-li-zia al cor. Ah se ciò è ver, fug-gi-te-mi! If this is true, ah fly from me!

Violetta's lyrics: Ah se ciò è ver, fug-gi-te-mi! If this is true, ah fly from me!

Fig. 1 – Alfredo's love theme: *La Traviata*, Act I, No. 2 "Valzer-Duetto," bars 195-213<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La Traviata* (New York: Dover, 1990)

<sup>42</sup> Giuseppe Verdi, *La Traviata* (in vocal score) (New York: Schirmer, 1899)

Violetta reprises this theme twice in the cantabile portion of her aria that ends Act I. We hear it again in the cabaletta, “Sempre libera,” traditionally sung from offstage by the person playing Alfredo. It is this occurrence that interests me for its apparent narrativity, and to understand how and why it functions narratively, I will analyze it using ideas about operatic narrativity proposed by both Abbate and Zoppelli in turn.

Before looking closely at the recurrence of the theme in “Sempre libera,” it will help to describe the conditions of its prior presentations. When the theme first appears, Alfredo is accompanied by pizzicato strings and intermittent bassoon and horns; later in the number he sings material from the love theme in duet with Violetta and a clarinet is added to double Violetta’s line. The time signature is 3/8 and the tempo ♩ = 96; the key is F major. Violetta’s later cantabile “Ah fors’è lui” presents the theme similarly: the time signature, tempo, and key are all as before, and the instrumentation is nearly identical, although the winds’ role in the accompaniment is expanded. In both of these preliminary occurrences of the theme, its initial note (scale degree 1, tonic function) is preceded melodically by a crescendo on scale degree 7 (dominant function) in the preceding bar, creating a high degree of continuity with the preceding phrase and allowing the beginning of the theme to satisfy conventional harmonic and metric expectations. Because these two occurrences are so similar and because the text of Violetta’s cantabile makes clear she is thinking about Alfredo’s profession of love, the appearance of the love theme in the cantabile seems easily explained as quotation – Violetta recalling Alfredo’s confession aloud as she wonders whether she ought to accept his love.

When the theme occurs again in “Sempre libera,” it is markedly discontinuous with the music preceding it. While it is again presented in 3/8 and at ♩ = 96, these now manifest at the onset of the theme as *changes* of time signature and tempo rather than continuing the conditions



of the preceding music. As the theme begins, the instrumentation shifts from full orchestra to solo harp, a change from the original accompaniment of the theme. Not a note has been played on the harp prior to this point in the opera, making the instrumentation change even more radical. The fulfillment of harmonic and metric expectation previously displayed at the beginning of the theme no longer exists; instead, the theme begins in a phrase elision, interrupting the conclusion of Violetta's vocal line. In yet another change from prior versions of the theme, it is now transposed to A-flat major, the overall key of the cabaletta.

This instance of Alfredo's love theme satisfies two of Abbate's primary conditions for musical narrativity – change of narrative voice and disjunction with preceding music. Assuming that the singer playing Alfredo sings this line from offstage, the voice is disembodied, becoming a “voice-object” without visible physical source. The identity of this voice-object becomes a question: is it literally Alfredo's voice, a memory of his voice within Violetta's consciousness, or an internal voice of hers, repeating his words? However one answers the question, a more abstract Abbatian discursive subject can also be “heard” here. If the voice-object belongs to Alfredo, who is not physically present, the discursive subject acts by allowing us to hear him, wherever he is, and thus telling us of a place beyond the frame of the stage. If the voice-object is internal to Violetta, the discursive subject has made us privy to the thoughts she does not voice aloud.

Whether the voice-object that sings the love theme exists internally or externally to Violetta, she certainly seems to hear and respond to it (“Oh...oh amore!”) Conversely, in the portions of the cabaletta that she sings, she is ostensibly “deaf” (to use Abbate's word) to the fact that she is surrounded by music. One might argue that she does not necessarily hear the music of the love theme as *music*, but that she only hears the *text* that it delivers. However, because

Alfredo is not physically onstage, his voice has become part of the “unseen” musical realm of opera usually occupied by the orchestra, to which characters are generally deaf. Thus while Violetta may not hear this explicitly as music, some sort of breakthrough has occurred from the unseen musical realm into the frame of the stage. And as we already know from Abbate, oscillation between deafness and hearing signals narrativity.

It is worth pointing out here that if the character Alfredo delivers this version of the theme while visible, the narrativity of the moment is lost: if he literally sings outside Violetta’s window (as in the 1982 film of *La Traviata* directed by Franco Zeffirelli),<sup>43</sup> music becomes isomorphous with dramatic representation and the ambiguous subjectivity of the voice-object is erased. This robs the moment of substance, for the ambiguity inherent in the voice-object – is it his voice, or hers? – speaks to the loss of self, and thus of personal liberty, that is a danger inherent in all-consuming love and clearly concerns Violetta.

While I think it is important to retain the ambiguous subjectivity of the voice-object in this particular instance of the love theme, the way the theme is subsequently integrated into the cabaletta seems to support an ultimate reading of this voice-object as an “inner-Violetta” in conversation with an “aloud-Violetta” who is voiced by the soprano onstage. The second time we hear the sound of Alfredo’s voice in “Sempre libera,” it is less of an interruption. The time signature and tempo of the surrounding music are retained and the love theme acquires new rhythms to fit its new metric context, suggesting that what was originally “his” music is adapting itself to hers, becoming part of her musical identity from within. In addition, her responses to the voice-object now engage it in a dialogue with clear harmonic and melodic syntax. A fragment of the love theme and a response from “aloud-Violetta” combine to form a two bar phrase that is

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<sup>43</sup> *La Traviata*, Directed by Franco Zeffirelli, (1982; Universal Studios: Deutsche Grammophon, 2008), DVD.

repeated and followed by a four-bar phrase: a classic sentence structure, articulated both melodically and harmonically (Fig. 2).

A-----A'

The musical score is divided into two main sections, A and B, separated by a dashed line. Section A consists of two four-bar phrases. The first phrase is marked 'A' and the second 'A''. The lyrics for the first phrase are: 'sier, noy, all an - - noy, all an - -'. The lyrics for the second phrase are: 'A - mor è pal - pi - to del lu - ni - ver - so. Love, thou art life and breath of all cre - a - tion.' The piano part includes a 'FL & CL' marking and a 'p Harp. & Str.' marking. The harmonic analysis below the piano part for section A is: I V I V.

B------(A)

Section B continues the musical score. The lyrics for the first phrase are: 'lar, ah! ah! noy, ah! ah!'. The lyrics for the second phrase are: 'dee - vo - lar il pen - ban - ish all an -'. The piano part continues with the same texture. The harmonic analysis below the piano part for section B is: I V<sup>4</sup>/<sub>2</sub>/IV vi vii<sup>o</sup><sub>3</sub>/ii ii<sup>6</sup> V (7) I.

Fig. 2 – Melodic and harmonic sentence structure integrates fragments of the love theme into the cabaletta

As this dialogue should clearly not be read as a literal conversation between Alfredo and Violetta, it seems more appropriate to interpret it as an exchange between “Inner-Violetta” and “Aloud-Violetta” in which the love theme, taken up by the former, is integrated into the metric,

harmonic, and melodic syntax of the music of the latter. Not only is this just the sort of reflexivity Abbate likes to see extend from a moment of narrativity, but it also suggests that the two Violetta-voices are coming closer together, foreshadowing her eventual acceptance of Alfredo's affection. Indeed, the juxtaposition of text between the two voices in this moment of integration makes it quite unclear whether the "new delights" that occupy Violetta's thoughts ("*a diletta sempre nuovi dee volare il mio pensier*") are those of her uncommitted life of pleasure or those of the "*amor*" he has proposed.

Additional nuances can be added to this reading of the cabaletta by considering its use of the love theme in light of Zoppelli's ideas about offstage "stage music." The theme itself admittedly does not fit neatly into his definition of stage music for two reasons: first, it is not necessarily heard by the characters as song, and second, it does not produce the mimetic fusion he believes is a hallmark of stage music, in which a performance within the drama becomes identical with the performance of the opera. But because it is sung offstage – breaking the spatial frame of traditional drama – it is worthwhile to examine whether the functions Zoppelli ascribes to offstage stage music can apply in this case.

Zoppelli argues that stage music "is particularly appropriate when psychological change forms the center of the drama," and gives several examples in which music heard from offstage provides a catalyst for the psychological transformation of a lone onstage character.<sup>44</sup>

Juxtaposing the character's progressive psychic development against the fixed form of a song or prayer allows the change to appear to occur gradually, in stages, rather than all at once.<sup>45</sup>

However, in the intrusions of Alfredo's love theme into Violetta's cabaletta, the roles of the musical elements are reversed: the offstage music changes to integrate itself with the more

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<sup>44</sup> Zoppelli, "Stage Music," 37.

<sup>45</sup> Zoppelli, "Stage Music," 37.

consistent musical identity of the cabaletta, a conventional form. Rather than being a cause for concern, this discrepancy between Zoppelli's model and the operatic text at hand suggests a reading with some plausibility: that the "inner-Violetta," although voiced by the singer playing Alfredo offstage, is the one undergoing psychological change, moving toward acceptance of Alfredo's love and pushing the unwilling "aloud-Violetta" toward manifesting that acceptance outwardly. The conventional repetitions required by the form of the cabaletta thus acquire meaning – as the integration of the love theme betrays Violetta's inevitable acceptance and return of Alfredo's love, "aloud-Violetta's" recurrent runs of sparkling coloratura ring hollow: they expose the dead-end superficiality inherent in the carefree life she insistently exalts. Through her eventual acceptance of the risks and rewards of loving Alfredo, Violetta acknowledges her own capacity for psychological growth.

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