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Operatic Encounters in a Time of War

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Absolute war, total war, world revolution: the nature and scale of the global conflicts that took place around 1800 have been explored (and contested) both at the time and ever since, and recent scholarship has begun to resituate the literary, visual, and theatrical art of the period within this landscape of perpetual conflict. Opera historians, though, have until recently largely steered clear of the operatic mediation of war beyond its most local manifestations. My article returns to the subject of opera and war, to reflect on how an expanded understanding of wartime, in reaching beyond the actual war event (Favret, 2010. *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*. Princeton: Princeton University Press), can provide new insights into the recent scholarly work on opera’s transnational mobility (and malleability), its articulation of modernity and its framing of cross-cultural encounters.

Keywords: Rossini, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Stendhal, wartime, Cimarosa, South America, opera

Introduction

Theatrical encounters in the battle-scarred twenty-first century: in the summer of 2015, at the height of the Greek credit crisis, the Dalai Lama travelled from Dharmsala to the Glastonbury Festival to call for love, tolerance, and forgiveness in the face of recent violence in the Middle East and Africa, and for an end to killing people in the name of religious faith. He later appeared on the Pyramid Stage with Patti Smith, where the crowd sang him ‘Happy Birthday’, before Smith and the spiritual leader of Tibet gave way to Lionel Richie.

The following day, a new production of Gioachino Rossini’s (1792–1868) *Guillaume Tell* (1829) opened at the Royal Opera House, directed by Damiano Michieletto, triggering the sort of scandal that many opera fans imagine directors live for. Musically, the performance was deemed a success, but critics and audiences alike vented their fury over Michieletto’s updating from medieval Switzerland to the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, the replacement of the opera’s alpine scenery with a soil-
covered floor and some white boxes (see Figure 1), and the adoption of a narrative framing device involving a boy reading a William Tell comic. ‘What tosh!’ wrote a choleric Rupert Christiansen in the Daily Telegraph; ‘if this sort of interpretation represents the future of opera, then God help us all’ (Christiansen, 2015). Calls for an end to war at Glastonbury were welcomed, but rethinking an opera about war through reference to the horrors of recent conflict within the Royal Opera House was not.

The moment that lifted the Tell premiere out of the arts pages and into the ‘real’ news alongside the Dalai Lama, however, focused not on the updating itself, but on Michieletto’s staging of a scene depicting the sexual assault of a Swiss peasant woman by Austrian soldiers as part of the ballet in Act 3. Not for its staging (at least initially), but rather because of the chorus of audience booing that greeted it, signalling an audible breach of opera house etiquette sufficiently unusual in a British context to draw the attention of the media. As members of the first-night audience piled onto the Covent Garden website later that night and in the days to come to register their distaste – either for the depiction of sexual violence, or for the unseemly booing in the middle of an act, or both – Sarah Hibberd, employed as the opera house’s writer in residence for the duration of the production, found herself accused of being ‘enlisted’ by the male production team (an interestingly military term) to defend the indefensible (ROH, 2015a).

Hibberd argued that the scene was shocking but not gratuitous, being dramatically motivated, and in the context of a notably violent plot set in a time of war.
A joint article by music director Antonio Pappano, house director Kaspar Holten, and chief executive Alex Beard reiterated the point, observing that ‘the production tries to convey the horrible reality of warfare’, but also announcing that they would write to all ticket holders for later performances to warn them about this particular scene (ROH, 2015b). A further press release from Holten (ROH, 2015c) informed audiences that alterations had been made by Michieletto to the staging, while emphasizing that ‘the scene that caused some concern at the opening night has not changed in its essence. It is the same duration and makes the same point that we find valid for the theatrical context.’ The boooing was not repeated after the premiere, and by the time the production was broadcast in cinemas on 5 July, numerous tweets wondered what all the fuss had been about (ROH, 2015d). Both outrage and interpretation were successfully contained, and any definitive conclusions about the relationship between opera and war could be postponed for another occasion.

This article is not that occasion; but in the interests of broadening the scope of the topic, and in the context of this special issue, I want to suggest that the arguments that briefly swirled round the 2015 Tell – about depicting sexual violence, about attempting to bring the realities of combat to the operatic stage – might lead us not just back towards a familiar set of debates about updating, relevance, voyeurism, directorial intervention, and so on, but to the much less explored connection between opera and war. Recent work, such as Gavin William’s edited volume Hearing the Crimean War (2019), begins to address this from the broader perspective of sound studies, but the specific connection between war and opera invites closer attention. Specifically, I want to begin with a blunt hypothesis: that the world of opera in the decades around Rossini’s composition of Tell in 1829 (and perhaps to this day) might best be understood through the prism of wartime.

It is important to stress that this is not just a matter of plots (or staging of those plots), though there are enough of those, explicitly or implicitly evoking war, to sit alongside a war-saturated work like Tell. Instead, I am interested in the links between operatic culture and war more generally: through discourses, through aesthetics, and through the transformation of operas as they circulated – and still circulate – around the towns and cities of Europe and beyond. With this in mind, in this article I juxtapose three different types of wartime operatic encounter from the decades around Tell; three fragments, that is, of a larger story. First, the reunion of two fictional friends in a war-torn German city in 1813; second, the recollection from later life of a youthful encounter with a gap-toothed opera singer, while travelling with the Napoleonic army on its way into Italy; and finally, an encounter between Rossinian opera, as both performance and idea, and the operatic audiences of republican and imperial South America during the 1820s and 1830s. The first two of these are reasonably familiar in music historical terms, the third much less so. All, though, involve war to an extent skirted round in subsequent literature. All, too, shed light on the fluidity of the operatic encounter itself: with opera, around opera, about opera, moving in their course from the
life of the imagination to something more direct; as direct, at least, as the medieval Switzerland of the 1820s seen through the civil wars in the late twentieth-century Balkans from war-weary twenty-first-century London.

Wartime

Some years ago, in an article about the original Paris premiere of *Guillaume Tell*, on 3 August 1829, I similarly juxtaposed the opera’s original opening night with events going on the same week, such as Victor Hugo’s (1802–1885) attempt to overturn a ban on performances of his new play *Marion de Lorme* (eventually performed in 1831), and the appointment of a new ultra-royalist ministry by the king, Charles X (1757–1836) (Walton, 2007: 257–92). The three stories were chosen for the way that they would all later come to seem prescient of the revolution that would break out exactly a year later. But they additionally sought to underline a wider historiographical point, about the challenges of simultaneity, whether for the later historian looking to draw connections between disparate events, or for those at the time seeking to make sense of the world in which they lived. What was and is the relationship between the theatrical event, and all the other stuff going on, whether that stuff is packaged up under the heading of ‘Politics’, or ‘Society’, or ‘Revolution’, or ‘War’, and what should we make of attempts at the time or later to bring them together, or hold them apart?

In terms of the 1829 premiere, I suggested that in contrast to later interpretations of *Tell* as a straightforward call to arms, one reason for the opera’s success was that politically as well as musically the new opera was open to whatever interpretation different members of the audience wanted to find in it, and could be experienced as espousing revolutionary conflict, rejecting it, or sidestepping it altogether, as desired. I also argued, though, that in any of these readings the performance of *Tell* in Paris nevertheless seemed inescapably trapped in the long shadow of the French Revolution, whether viewed positively or negatively. Not that this made the work particularly exceptional for its time, since there was no way to do or think much about anything in 1829 without finding oneself inescapably trapped in that same long shadow.

Outside the world of opera studies, such a conclusion may seem unremarkable. Inside, though, the fantasy of revolution on stage leading straight to revolution in the streets retained a hold, despite the suspicion of many twenty-first-century critics and operagoers for productions, like Michieletto’s 2015 *Tell*, that updated in pursuit of the elusive but compelling quality of ‘relevance’. Yet for all the controversy, the responses to the Covent Garden production echo the continued capacity of the piece to remain open to interpretation. Some, of course, joined Hibberd in praising the production for its evocation of war; Christiansen, by contrast, searched in vain for the combination of ‘romantic nationalism and bucolic charm’ that he treasured in the piece (without pausing to consider whether Michieletto might not be exploiting the tension inherent between the two) (Christiansen, 2015).
Meanwhile, the opposite extreme might perhaps best be epitomized by a commentator on Hibberd’s blog who lamented the fact that the controversial staging of the Act 3 ballet interfered with the Royal Opera House’s status as the last place left remaining on earth where you can see years of fabulously crafted visual metaphor chiming in exquisite concert with the score. All just for you, to flood your senses for mere moments and leave you dreaming for days as if you were still cradled by those comfy red seats. (ROH, 2015c)

A fantasy of well-cushioned theatrical escapism, in other words, in an uncomfortable world.

The discourse surrounding the 2015 Tell therefore transports us back to 1829 quite as surely as the musical score. Yet at the same time, in place of Tell one could substitute any number of other productions that spark equivalent momentary controversy in any given opera season; or else just succumb to the same world-weariness expressed by some of the other respondents to Michieletto’s production, as critical battle lines are redrawn and the war of words recommenced.

But as such easy slippage into the language of war suggests – and specifically slippage into the language of a type of textbook warfare far distant from the skirmishing, indiscriminate violence, and vast civilian death toll of wars fought over the past 250 years – it seems worth asking whether the war ever really ended in the first place? Not just the eternal metaphorical war of attrition over the purpose or the potential of opera, now well into its fifth century, but the actual set of interlinked conflicts during the period surrounding not only Tell but much of the rest of the operatic canon as it exists today.

The answer, I suggest, is that it never did: the mediated experience of living in a time of war that came into being in the decades around 1800 remains with us all every day, whether configured as potential nuclear war, culture wars, environmental devastation leading to the threat of wars over dwindling resources, acts of terrorism, or any one of the many bloody conflicts that continue around the world, and that take their place in the unforgiving hierarchy of 24-hour newsworthiness.

In that summer of 2015, for instance, there were over fifty ongoing conflicts around the world, including the civil wars in Syria and Iraq; the precipitous decline into war in Yemen; the US shift from ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ to ‘Operation Freedom’s Sentinel’ in Afghanistan; car bombs, shootings, and suicide attacks claimed by the Islamic State group in widespread locations, including the mass shooting of tourists and locals at the beach resort of Sousse in Tunisia; the spread of the Boko Haram insurgency from Nigeria to Cameroon, Chad, and Niger; the Drug War in Mexico that in the course of 2015 saw more than 8,000 deaths, and so on and on, including multiple conflicts whose origins go back fifty years or more; sometimes much more, into the histories of colonialism that underlie them. Indeed, as Mary Favret has pointed out in her rich study, War at a Distance (2010), it is often hard to say when wars begin and end anyway, given the tendency
of wars themselves to summon up memories of earlier wars, whether for comparison, as sources of glorious or ignominious or fictitious collective memorialization, or simply as inspirations for popular culture.

To try to understand the ways that war seeps into everyday life, Favret shifts attention from the traditional idea of warfare, hived off in bookshops and publishers’ catalogues as a sub-discipline all of its own, and stuffed full of strategy, battles, uniforms, and masculine derring-do, towards the concept of wartime. Wartime, she suggests, ‘translates war from the realm of sublime event to an underlying situation or condition of modernity’ (2010: 38). As a result, the impact of war in its mediated ubiquity can be traced in new ways, and in new locations, often far away from the battlefield, both temporally and geographically. Favret draws here on the work of recent philosophers but also of historians like Paul Fussell, who in his work on the Second World War called attention to the damage war does not just to bodies and buildings, but to other less obvious assets: ‘intellect, discrimination, honesty, individuality, complexity, ambiguity, and irony, not to mention privacy and wit’ (Fussell, 1989: 1, cited in Favret, 2010: 18). Her work ties in with other recent attempts to rethink the study of war in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether by turning to the idea of the postwar and to demobilization (Forrest et al., 2016), to war as encounter (Clarke & Horne, 2018), to memories and traumas of war (Forrest et al., 2012), to the intersections between war and globalization (Planert, 2015), or – most pertinently perhaps – to the sounds of war (Kaltenecker, 2000; Smith, 2001; Herbert & Barlow, 2013; Williams 2019). Much of this scholarship, in what one might broadly term ‘wartime studies’ has its origins in research into twentieth-century conflicts, and particularly the world wars, but in recent years has been increasingly redirected to earlier times, and to the decades around 1800.

In returning to that earlier period, however, various writers have sought to challenge the longstanding historiographical obsession with the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars to the exclusion of all else, in order to situate these events within wider frames of reference (Planert, 2015). In part this involves understanding both Revolution and Empire as themselves transnational and even global in their reach, whether in their intersections with revolutions in the Americas, or in their repercussions beyond Europe. And in part, too, they invoke the venerable historiographical idea of the long eighteenth century, with Napoleon (1769–1821) at its end, as a ‘second hundred-years war’ (Scott, 1992; Crouzet, 1996). Just as important for Favret, though, is a conception of war as a form of what she terms ‘state-sponsored violence against bodies’ (2010: 37), of a kind that invites continuities to be drawn between war and other perpetrations of mass violence from the time, most notably in the form of the transatlantic slave trade; both underpinned by new systems and new forms of financial speculation.

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1 Williams, in particular, draws on Favret extensively in his own introduction (xxx–xxxii).
Once placed at the centre of historical experience in this way, wartime for Favret becomes inescapable, woven into the fabric of early nineteenth-century life in a way that challenges Virginia Woolf’s (1882–1941) observation, writing during the early wartime of 1940, that Jane Austen and Walter Scott lived through the Napoleonic wars without being affected by them. Woolf’s comment that ‘Scott never saw sailors drowning at Trafalgar; Jane Austen never heard the cannon roar at Waterloo’ (1948: 131), fails in Favret’s terms to acknowledge that it can be precisely in what she terms ‘the registers of the mundane and unspectacular’ (2010: 47) that the deep-seated effects of war beyond the Channel can be traced throughout the novels and poems of British Romanticism.

In pursuit of such effects, Favret turns to William Hazlitt’s (1778–1830) final essay, ‘The Letter-Bell’ (1831), written shortly before his death, and just after the 1830 Revolution in France. Its title refers to the bell rung by ambulant postal workers to announce the last post of the day, whose ‘lively, pleasant sound’ for Hazlitt opens up a path back through memory, to his arrival in London many decades before, and to the way that the sound of the bell could cut through the ‘hubbub of confused noises’ that surrounded him in the metropolis, and bring him hope to persevere. The bell as a result becomes a sonic symbol of mediation, of the possibility of communication from and to distant locations through the medium of the post, and from and to distant times through its evocative power. A meditation on the mail becomes a reflection on the possibilities of the mail to bring good or bad news, to join the world without to the world within; and also to bring news of war of the kind that Hazlitt describes in his conclusion, in marveling at the rapid communication to London of the Revolution in Paris in July 1830 by telegraph, and in comparing such new modes of communication with the hilltop fires that announced the fall of Troy. By showing the changing history of the news of war being communicated, Favret suggests, Hazlitt hints at the presence of war woven into daily life as surely as the scraps of cloth collected from the Napoleonic battlefields ended up woven into the paper used to print the literature (and indeed the music) of the early nineteenth century (2010: 48–49).

Dresden(?), 1813

One of the clearest risks of such a reading as Favret’s, however persuasive, is that war become the answer to every question, with the result that even its absence only goes to prove its underlying ubiquity. At the same time, the spillage of the sounds of war into the aesthetic sphere brings with it the problems identified by Nicholas Mathew in relation to Beethoven: that the very saturation of early nineteenth-century music with the sonic signifiers of their period serves after Waterloo to empty out that same music’s claims to social relevance, as the grand gestures of a work such as the ‘Eroica’ Symphony (composed 1802–1803, premiered 1804) float free from their original conditions, ready to be repurposed for any later narrative that comes their way (Mathew, 2012: 187–95). Yet the power of Favret’s
model is to remind us that while the emotional and discursive effects of wartime might not always be easy to quantify, a sensitivity to their presence allows us to move beyond a single-minded focus on only the most direct connections between war and cultural production in pursuit of an understanding of wartime that acknowledges the variety of its possible traces.

Not that such traces have to be as subtle and hidden as in some of Favret’s examples, nor that they all have to concern war at a distance. Instead, her framework might also encourage us to return to familiar texts, musical scores, and performances with a renewed sensitivity to how we might interpret the signs of wartime that surround and saturate them. Take, for instance, the well-known dialogue on romantic opera by E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), ‘Der Dichter und der Komponist’ [‘The Poet and the Composer’], first published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* [General Musical Newspaper] in December 1813 (Hoffmann [1813] in Charlton, 1989). The dialogue was written a matter of months after Hoffmann’s first-hand experience of the Battle of Dresden between the Sixth Coalition and Napoleonic forces in late August 1813. During this time, Hoffmann saw many civilians killed by bombs, heard the sounds of warfare during the performance of an opera, and subsequently visited the battlefield, as recorded in his grotesquely vivid polemic entitled ‘Vision auf dem Schlachtfeld bei Dresden’ [‘Vision on the Battlefield of Dresden’], which opens with a soundscape of war: ‘the dull thud of death agony, the whine of pain, the terrible howl of angry despair [...] and the thunder of cannons roared like a distant hurricane’ (Hoffmann, 1814: 3; on this account see in particular Beßlich, 2003).

This context lends a startling immediacy to the operatic dialogue’s introduction, with its equally vivid depiction of the soundscape of invasion of an unnamed town, with guns grumbling, grenades sizzling, horses galloping and soldiers cursing. Meanwhile, the transparently Beethovenian cipher of Ludwig the composer sits at his piano, putting the final touches to his symphony and deaf to the world outside, until a shell blows off some of the roof and shatters the windows of his garret. The stage thus seems set for a straight romantic opposition between life and art that the subsequent dialogue between Ludwig and his old university friend-turned-soldier Ferdinand at first glance only confirms. Soon enough, Ludwig is calling for the creation of a ‘genuine opera [...] in which the music springs directly from the poetry as a necessary product of it’ (Hoffmann [1813] in Charlton, 1989: 196), before expounding on music’s role as ‘the mysterious language of a distant spirit-realm, its wonderful accents resounding in our souls and awakening a higher, intenser awareness’ (196) and much more in the same vein. So it is that proper opera – which is to say romantic opera – for Ludwig cannot express anything from daily life, but must instead inhabit the same magical realm of music itself. At this point, Ludwig introduces his ideal opera plot, based on one of the fairy tales of Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806), *Il corvo* [The

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2All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
Raven] (1761); a tale as magical as it is far-fetched, but seized on by both Ludwig and Ferdinand as a fine example of exactly the sort of story so lacking from opera as it currently exists, which Ludwig describes as ‘merely inane plays with singing added’ (Charlton, 1989: 200).

The desired future path is clear, and it is hard to avoid the sense that as readers we are meant to be siding with Ludwig’s vision, with the result that the opening wartime scene setting quickly fades from memory, lingering only as an example of the chaotic world from which Ludwig wishes to escape. With rare exceptions, meanwhile, this is the way that the dialogue has usually been treated in the critical literature. Yet returning to the dialogue in the light of Favret’s description of wartime, it begins to be possible to see something much more fractured and troubled here, not just in the implicit parallel highlighted by Charlton between the capacity of both war and art to penetrate and transform the lives of the city’s inhabitants, but also in the description of the nature of romantic opera itself (Charlton, 1989: 169–87). Opera buffa, for example, in Ludwig’s vision relies on a warlike experience of ‘bizarre fluctuations of fortune boldly invading everyday life and turning everything topsy-turvy’, giving ‘the curious feeling that a mad demon is abroad’ (Charlton, 1989: 202–03). And even the plot of Il corvo, for all its overt separation from reality, and notwithstanding its improbable happy ending, at the same time reads like a sort of Freudian (or Goya-esque) nightmare depicting the horrors of war, filled with abductions, monsters that can tear characters to pieces in the night, falcons that peck out human eyes, disfigured and wounded horses, and hideous fratricide.

In its original 1813 incarnation, Hoffmann’s dialogue comes to an abrupt end, interrupted by the call to arms spurring Ferdinand’s departure. Before he leaves, Ludwig conveys to his friend his fears for the death of art ‘in our harsh and turbulent times’, and describes the sense of drowning in a tide of horror, in which ‘bloody corpses stare forth from its black waves’. Ferdinand, though, chastises Ludwig for his negativity, and taking up his sabre and helmet declaims the glory of war as a way to purge the earth of wanton stupidity. At the last moment, then, war is held up as offering a gateway to the sublimity otherwise reserved for romantic art, and Ludwig unexpectedly seems won round, joining in a final toast to eternal unity ‘in a higher cause through life and death’ (Charlton, 1989: 208).

One later commentator expressed his dissatisfaction with such a swift close, suggesting that ‘No one but a Romantic could begin an important treatise in such a casual fashion and end so suddenly’ (Garlington, 1979: 40). Yet the opening is anything but casual, while the suddenness of the ending perhaps foregrounds less romantic impetuosity than an uncertainty on Hoffmann’s part about how to bring together the two versions of war set side by side here: the war in its destructive reality on the one hand and the mediated rhetoric of war as glorious and worthy of artistic attention on the other, with Hoffmann’s ideal libretto closer to the former than the latter. And if even Hoffmann’s fairy-tale world of
romantic opera turns out to be infected by the violence of war, then what is to become of the sublimity of war for a higher cause?

When the dialogue was reprinted six years later in the post-Napoleonic world of 1819, as part of the first volume of the *Serapionsbrüder* collection, Hoffmann made a move to neutralize the question. At the start and the end Hoffmann added yet another framing device, as the literary circle of the ‘Serapion Brethren’ talk among themselves, carrying on the aesthetic discussion after the original ending by focusing on whether an opera’s librettist and composer should be one and the same person, as proposed by Ludwig (Hoffmann, 1819). They then conclude their evening by singing a newly composed ‘Night Hymn’, written in the old-fashioned (for 1819) style of ‘Alessandro Scarlatti or the more modern Benedetto Marcello’ (1819: 218). Such an oddly equivocal return to an imagined pre-war musical golden age, for a text about being admitted by the angels into heaven – the ultimate act of sublimity, but one that only occurs after death – may attempt to distract from the unanswered questions of the dialogue proper, yet in practice only compounds them. As a result, Hoffmann’s dialogue in both its versions reveals itself as another example of what Favret in relation to Hazlitt’s essay describes as ‘a history of war mediated […] in the guise of an essay on aesthetics’ (2010: 20). Hoffmann’s manifesto in favour of a sublime and unearthly romantic opera becomes instead an unsettled and haunted disquisition on the relationship between art and war as a non-sublime and violent experience.

Ivrea/Novara, 1800

Hoffmann’s dialogue indicates that the challenge for the later reader is often not only to spot the presence of war – here very much hiding in plain sight, as a disruptive background to a much-discussed aesthetic foreground – but also to work out what to do with it. Take another canonical example of an early nineteenth-century operatic encounter: the seventeen-year-old Stendhal (1783–1842) in May 1800, tagging along over the Alps to Italy with the 40,000-strong Napoleonic army, filled with an unaccustomed happiness, and – as recalled in the memoirs he wrote some three and a half decades later, under the title *Vie de Henry Brulard* [The Life of Henry Brulard] (1835–1836, published 1890) – perceiving armed service as a perfect way to see the wider world (Stendhal, 1982). Stendhal therefore enacts what Joseph Clarke and John Horne (2018) have recently described as the ‘militarized cultural encounter’, as one of a generation of soldiers in the Napoleonic Wars whose life experiences were expanded by their time served in uniform.

Stendhal himself would eventually travel all the way to Moscow as part of the Grande Armée, but in 1800 seems by his own later account to have been at best an incompetent soldier, with a sword too heavy to lift and unsteady enough on his horse for the main challenge of crossing the Alps being not to fall off and down the mountainside. Yet his account of his arrival in Italy bears witness both to the peculiarities and possibilities of army tourism. Often, of course, the
opportunities for travel on offer from the army went hand in hand with extreme hardship and danger, and the restrictions and abnormalities of military life shaped the soldiers’ encounters in ways that set them apart from the experiences of the aristocratic grand tourists of earlier times, or from the travelling middle classes who would follow in later decades. Nevertheless, Clarke and Horne point out that the soldiers who took part in the Napoleonic campaigns were Europe’s ‘most numerous, and most intrepid, travellers’ of the time (2018: 5), and that their experiences therefore deserve closer attention for the insights in their surviving commentaries they give into what it meant to be modern, or European, or ‘civilized’, at the time. Dina Gusejnova (2019), meanwhile, argues that wartime encounters, for all their potential violence, nevertheless held the potential to build on eighteenth-century ideas of cosmopolitanism to foster a sense of greater understanding between peoples. This new sympathy is often clearest when the experience of war was mediated through art, including in Stendhal’s own novels, but for Stendhal in 1800 it could also come through an experience of art mediated through war.

On Stendhal’s descent from the St Bernard pass he was bitten so badly by insects that he could no longer see out of one eye while bivouacking near the Fort of Bard in the Aosta Valley, where he also came under fire for the first time. His first encounter with a local involved speaking Latin to a priest who taught him his first words of Italian: ‘wicked’, and ‘woman’ (Stendhal, 1982: 950). He then recalled arriving at the town of Ivrea (in fact Novara, some fifty miles to the east), and against the advice of his captain went to the local opera house. Here, on hearing Domenico Cimarosa’s Il matrimonio segreto [The Secret Marriage] (1793), he had an epiphany so extreme that looking back on the event in later life he claimed that his experience of crossing the pass and being fired on disappeared in an instant faced with the divinity of Cimarosa: ‘To live in Italy and hear such music became the basis of all my reasoning’ (1982: 952). Stendhal is characteristically candid about the vagaries of memory involved in recollecting at such a distance, however, and restricts himself to a single detail about the performance, namely that the singer playing the part of Carolina was missing a front tooth. ‘I should be telling lies and writing fiction’, he adds, ‘were I to undertake to give details’ (1982: 951).

As with Hoffmann’s dialogue, then, for the later reader the war fades quickly and easily into the background, made farcical in Stendhal’s case by his later relish in his own youthful incompetence and pomposity, in contrast with the much superior values embodied in Italian music, language, and landscape. Yet his forgetting of details from the opera, including its real location, sits alongside an equally telling memory lapse just beforehand, as Stendhal encounters the vast numbers of dead horses and other military debris between Bard and Ivrea, but in doing so loses all recollection of anything else; as if his mind had been wiped ‘by the very violence of their impact’, in the words of W.G. Sebald, honorary godfather of wartime studies (Sebald, 2000: 6). On his arrival in Ivrea, meanwhile, Stendhal prefaces his description of the opera by mentioning the ‘terrified inhabitants’ of the town, and the need to defend his billet against bands of marauding soldiers in search of
loot, and comments that his captain feared he would get killed on his way to the opera house (1982: 951). Stendhal’s encounter with Italian music is entirely shaped, then, by the imperatives and the traumas of wartime, and to focus only on the discovery of Italy and Italian culture is as partial as to see nothing but a debate over operatic aesthetics in Hoffmann’s dialogue.

Yet the two are not quite equivalent: where the mediated war in Hoffmann ends up reverberating through the description of the ideal opera plot, inextricably linking the two, Stendhal’s wartime discovery of Cimarosa is hedged round by violence but the opera itself remains by contrast an empty sonic space, as if drowned out by the ‘terrifying din’ of the cannonade at the fort of Bard that Stendhal describes shortly before (1982: 949). Elsewhere in Stendhal’s work, too, this contrast is reiterated. In the Life of Rossini, for instance, written in 1823, Cimarosa as a living composer appears first in wartime guise as a martyr to the Napoleonic cause, whose sympathies for the Parthenopian Republic in Naples in 1799 led to imprisonment on the return of the Bourbons, together with a commuted death sentence and exile to Venice, where he died in 1801. Cimarosa’s music in the Vie de Rossini [Life of Rossini], however, serves primarily as a calm contrast to the noisy vivacity of the eponymous new musical Napoleon, Gioachino Rossini. When Stendhal records attending a revival of Il matrimonio segreto in Paris in August 1823, for instance, at the height of Rossini’s fame, he finds Cimarosa’s music insipid in its lack of dissonance. ‘We have made progress with unhappiness since 1793’, Stendhal suggests, referring ostensibly to the year of the opera’s premiere, but inevitably recalling by association other events of that fateful Revolutionary year, as well as everything else that had happened since (1824: 230).

Rossini, by contrast, is depicted as at times lively, witty, and vivacious, but also noisy, percussive, and overwhelming: a sonic equivalent to Stendhal’s original wartime world of 1800; the same world from which Cimarosa provided an escape. Rossini’s music, that is to say, offers nothing less than a sonic embodiment of wartime, only slightly mediated, thereby bringing the echoes of Napoleonic conflicts to listeners across Europe and beyond.

Such a reading may seem far-fetched, but was made explicit by various writers of the time, in addition to Stendhal. The French critic Ludovic Vitet (1802–1873), for instance, in an 1828 essay on ‘Rossini and the Future of Music’ described the place of Rossini in the following terms: ‘ten years of war, the roll of the drum, the roar of the cannon had prepared Italian ears for harmonic jolts; it was therefore only a matter of daring to finish a revolution which had already been released’. Rossini, Vitet suggests, proceeded with this task ‘à la Napoléon; with him, all available instruments rise up together, even those that until that time had appeared only in regiments; and, at the head of the greatest battlefront ever assembled, he flew from victory to victory’ (1846: 86).

It is a powerfully direct image, and one that offers suggestive intersections with recent scholarly interventions on the cultural impact of early nineteenth-century war. One could, for instance, link Vitet’s suggestion of Italian musical education
by means of cannon fire to Clarke and Horne’s work (2018) on the civilizing impulse that lay behind the militarized cultural encounter; or map Stendhal’s account of insipid Cimarosa giving way to the thrill of Rossini onto Peter Fritzsche’s exploration (2004) of the widespread contemporary sense of a caesura between pre-revolutionary past and the post-revolutionary accelerating present. Or else one might take Vitet’s bewilderment in his essay on trying to match the image of the published full score of Rossini’s 1826 work Le Siège de Corinthe [The Siege of Corinth] with its cataclysmic effect in performance with Anders Engberg-Pedersen’s study of Napoleonic cartography, and the role of the map as, in Engberg-Pedersen’s words, ‘a media a priori for the planning and execution of large-scale military operations’ (2015: 8). To contemplate Rossini’s music on paper, Vitet observes, feels like being an officer faced with one of Napoleon’s campaign plans. Or again, one could join Emily Dolan’s recent analysis of the musical chaos and confused meanings of one of Rossini’s whipped up frenetic finales, such as the frenzied finale of Act 1 of L’italiana in Algeri [The Italian Girl in Algiers] (1813) (2012: 233–53), with the anxiety and sense of being overwhelmed that Favret describes in thinking about the experience of daily life in early nineteenth-century Britain.

Perhaps the most compelling interpretation of this discourse, though, comes from Emanuele Senici, in his recent book on Rossini’s Italian operas, Music in the Present Tense (2019). Here Senici argues that the near-erasure of mediation between the sounds of war and the sounds of music perceived by commentators on Rossini also erases the process of musical mimesis, with the result that Rossini’s music does not appear to recreate the sounds of war on stage so much as to stage equally noisy parallel alternative. To underline the point, Senici cites a description from an imagined meeting between Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Rossini that surfaced in journals in France and Italy in the second half of 1826 and that deserves to be quoted at length, with the fictional Rossini here speaking in the first person:

I introduce in my music too many French horns, too many trumpets, drums, and so on; but they don’t know that, had war continued in Europe, I would have put a cannon in each finale, and assigned music to gunshots. What other means are there to make an impact these days? How otherwise to move people who over the years have been spectators to so many massacres, so many arbitrary acts, so many magnificent deeds? People who have been actors in great political convulsions and, tossed around amid great calamities, great fortunes, and great events, have almost no feeling for simple pleasures. I admire and venerate more than anybody a beautiful opera by one of last century’s great masters. For a while I observed and studied the audiences in several cities whenever one of them was performed. Well, I saw that all listeners were snoozing. I therefore deduced that simple and natural melodies were not suited to distract those who were sad because they had to go to war; or whose mind was occupied by dreams of glory; or who were afraid of persecutions; or who were threatened with exile; or a certain number who were probably absorbed
by great ideas of change and reform. Thus I convinced myself that it was impossible to compose in the same way as when people in public cultivated only calm and quiet thoughts, looked only for peaceful recreation, and discussed only love and pleasure. Consequently, I decided to master the roar of the various instruments, and have put them to use to make my music more dramatic. The public has led me to believe that I have succeeded. (Senici, 2019: 119–20)

Rio de Janeiro/Buenos Aires, 1820s

In Senici’s view, the alternative world that Rossini offers formed part of a larger Italian retreat into theatricalization that comes as a wounded response to the trauma of wartime modernity; a denial of real life, and its replacement for the duration of an opera with an alternative existence, that delivers the thrill of war without its unspeakable – and unsingable – reality. Senici, though, is keen to stress that this is an interpretation focused specifically on Italian society and Italian trauma, which then can take its place alongside the German context of Hoffmann, or the French (however self-consciously Italianized) of Stendhal. But to conclude I want to turn back to Favret’s desire to broaden the focus of our attention beyond the most immediately familiar European contours of early nineteenth-century conflict, and to explore how the discourse about the relationships between Rossini’s operas and the sounds of war mutated as his music travelled further afield. By doing so, I want to suggest that the fictional or discursive reframing of operatic encounters within a wartime context can productively be brought into contact with the actual history of encounters with opera beyond Europe at this time; a history most evident in the arrival of Italian opera in South America in the 1820s and 1830s, of a kind inextricably bound up with conflict.

At the broadest level, this move was again driven by Napoleon, since it was his invasion of Portugal in 1807 that led to the Portuguese court’s decision to relocate wholesale over the Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro, and to build an opera house there suitable for the new capital of the Portuguese empire. And it was Napoleon, too, whose invasion of Spain in 1808 set in chain a series of events which contributed to the independence wars across Spanish South America, leading to the establishment of republics eager to burnish their cultural credentials by tempting opera singers from Rio to visit and perform the repertoire most successful in the cultural capitals of Europe at the time, namely the music of Rossini.

Rossini’s music travelled hand in hand not just with Rossinian singers, but also with Rossinian discourses, promulgated in part by emigrant critics, many of whom had their own wartime histories in Italy or Spain. True to the precepts of cultural mobility, though, translocation inevitably led to transformation. And so just as the link between Rossini’s music and the sounds of war would have signified differently from one audience to another and from one place to another within
Europe, so it became transfigured again in a South American context in multiple ways. In Rio, for instance, the new opera house inaugurated in 1813 became an important location for a court whose authority in its new home relied in large part on ceremonal theatricalization (see Figure 2). Into this context, Rossini’s operas became royal favourites, staged as part of wider celebrations of significant events, including the moment in 1821 when the king, João VI (1767–1826), swore allegiance to the new liberal Constitution of Portugal on the external balcony of the opera house prior to attending a performance of La Cenerentola [Cinderella] (1817).

In a tumultuous decade, then, as independence and post-independence struggles created instability around the continent, the music of Rossini often came to symbolize participation within a culture of Europeanized civilization, but also to serve as a sort of official soundtrack for republican (and, in Brazil, imperial) aspirations. Yet the intersections of war and opera at this time go much deeper, and manifest themselves in more elusive and more interesting ways. In Buenos Aires, for instance, the embrace of the Parisian model of culture led in the mid-1820s to an explosion of operatic performance, mainly of works by Rossini. But newspapers accounts at the time make clear that the sounds of Italian opera also spilled out into the street, to be played night after night by regiments patrolling the streets. What in Italy had sounded like the sounds of war brought onto stage in Buenos Aires was taken out of the opera house and remilitarized.

Inside the opera house, too, the patriotic resonance of certain pieces, such as Rossini’s Tancredi (1813), set in Syracuse at a time of both civil wars and external wars, was underlined during performances in newly-independent Uruguay in 1830 by

![Figure 2: Jean-Baptiste Debret, Real Teatro de São João, Rio de Janeiro (1820s). Image courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France.](image-url)
granting it the subtitle ‘El Libertador de la patria’ ['The Liberator of the Fatherland']. More strikingly still, a performance of another Rossinian opera, *La gazza ladra* [The Thieving Magpie] (1817), back in Buenos Aires in 1829 turned the trial of the servant girl Ninetta that lies at its heart into a solemn restaging of the assassination the previous year of a Federalist leader as part of the civil war between Federalists and Unitarians. The Federalist President, Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793–1877), attended, along with his ministers and the chief of police, consuls, and vice-consuls, while the takings went to those widowed or orphaned by the war.

So we come full circle, to find ourselves confronted with a performance of an opera by Rossini updated and made ‘relevant’ with added material in reference to a conflict still raw in the minds of those involved. Needless to say, the parallel can only be taken so far, not least given the official sanction (or instruction) provided in Buenos Aires to adapt the work accordingly. Even so, such forgotten productions can remind us that a production such as Michieletto’s Covent Garden *Guillaume Tell* has a genealogy stretching much further back than the history of twentieth-century *Regietheater*. But it can also encourage us once again to attend to the traces of war within and around this repertoire.

That said, questions should remain about how best to exercise such attention. Is there enough continuity between productions of the same opera, for instance, to listen and look forwards and back both temporally and geographically in pursuit of transnational sounds and signs of war? And if such connections do exist, to what extent are they enabled or even produced by the circulation of discourse, driven by the globalization of the press and in certain cases by the migration of music critics from one location to another? Hoffmann’s musical romanticism would in time become a recognizable part of the lingua franca of nineteenth-century criticism, while Stendhal’s celebration of Rossini as a new Napoleon, itself cobbled together from existing Italian debates, would be literally carried around the world, ending up excerpted in local papers and borrowable from lending libraries across Europe, the Americas, and beyond. To what extent, then, is Rossini’s connection to wartime a discursive connection, of a kind whose loss by the twenty-first century made a production like Michieletto’s shockingly unmeaningful to so many of the first night audience? Or have we also lost the ability to react to the mediated sounds of war that saturate Rossini’s scores, and to see his plots, both comic and serious, in Senici’s terms, as an attempt to escape from wartime trauma of a kind that has no easy escape?

Second, if we return to Favret’s idea of wartime translating war ‘from the realm of sublime event to an underlying situation or condition of modernity’ (2010: 38), where do we draw that line between the sublime and the mundane; that is, the unsu-

blime? My readings of Hoffmann’s dialogue and Stendhal’s epiphany both sought to agitate the smooth waters of critical consensus on Hoffmann’s place within the quest for a German Romantic Opera, and Stendhal’s intertwined fascinations with love, music, and Italy, and to dwell instead on the traces of war as a way to
question their pursuit of sublimity. In Hoffmann’s case this aim is complicated by his play with different forms of sublime experience, from the sublime horrors of the battlefield to the sublime feelings of coming together to fight for a higher cause. Nevertheless, the friction between the two creates sparks of uncertainty: about the future of art, for sure, but also about the capacity of even the perfect romantic art to escape reality, and thereby to avoid becoming accidentally and sickeningly relevant. For Stendhal, on the other hand, his search for sublimity in war is undercut in turn by terror and bathos, while the remembered – or rather forgotten – sublimity of Cimarosa later turns insipid. Rossini then steps into the breach, but his attempt at matching the sublime excitement and aural volume of the battle, always resisted by some, quickly becomes so ubiquitous as to lose its effect for all, and – with certain famous exceptions, including Guillaume Tell – falls out of fashion as fast as it fell into fashion around 1815.

Only in war-torn South America, where throughout the 1820s Rossini’s music truly was, to quote Senici’s title once more, music in the present tense, would it stick around longer, quarantined from the challenges of Hoffmannian rhetoric, and embraced as the sound of a new republicanism. Here, though, the continuation of civil and international wars by the 1830s severely curtailed the performance of live opera, with the result that Rossini’s music lived on primarily outside the theatre. In the church and in the salon, for sure; but most of all in the music played by the ever-present military bands, as they paraded through the streets of Buenos Aires or Montevideo each evening, threatening and entertaining in equal measure. And so, as in Europe, Rossini’s music lost any sublimity it once had, and became instead a crucial sonic layer in the history of wartime opera yet to be told; the sound of a distant march through an unending time of war.

Notes on contributor

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