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For any budding musicologist, the twenty first century offers a plethora of fascinating and captivating areas of music to research and discuss. The intersection between opera and film is a perfect example of such an area. Though musicological studies of both genres have existed in their own right for some time now, the intersection between the two is a relatively new field of study. Marcia J Citron is one of the pioneers at the forefront of this field, arguing in her book, When Opera Meets Film, that opera and film influence each other in more ways than seems apparent. She even goes so far as to argue that “opera can reveal something fundamental about a film, and film can do the same for an opera.” Citron divides her book into three principle sections, with the discussion ranging from operatic elements in popular films such as the Godfather Trilogy, to the role played by opera when included in a given film (as in the movie Moonstruck). Though not without its flaws, Citron’s book is an overall detailed and exemplary first attempt to tackle the intersection and “intermediality” between opera and film. Perhaps her greatest achievement here is that she has crafted the book in such a way that it is accessible to the general public as well as the academic world.

As Citron argues, this book is about getting a closer look at the surprisingly complex relationship between the differing genres of opera and film. The literature regarding this intersection is surprisingly thin. As Citron states, the earliest study of film and opera together started with Tambling’s Opera, Ideology and Film, which
“stressed opera’s political role when it appeared in filmic form.”¹ Since then, the body of musicological literature concerning this crossover has grown, with Citron at the forefront of the movement. Her main motivation behind the book in question is to "refine and expand" our approach to opera and film, and to “advance our understanding of the aesthetics of the opera/film encounter.” She argues that there is indeed a “symbiotic relationship” between the two mediums that seems to have evaded the attention of the wider scholarly community. Citron organises her argument into three principle parts, each covering different areas of this intermedial genre.

In the first section, titled “Style,” Citron draws upon a work she previously completed for *The Musical Quarterly* that focuses on the relationship between the “workings of opera and film as genres.”² She analyses the popular and well known *Godfather Trilogy* and suggests that the series is highly “operatic” in its nature. In terms of style, Citron notes that the Godfather Trilogy shares many of the common thematic ideas of old Italian operas—themes such as honour, loyalty, betrayal, and revenge. She also makes the point that the trilogy is structurally similar to that of opera. Each film averages around three hours, for a total running time of 540 minutes, demonstrating how Francis Ford Coppola's trilogy is closer in length to an opera than that of a typical film, which on average lasts only 1.5 to 2 hours. She notes also that the “pace of the events” within the three films is inherently slow, much akin to the pacing of an opera. This contrasts with many modern movies which are typically quite fast paced. Finally, Citron argues that there is a functional connection between Wagnerian leitmotifs and recurring objects within the *Godfather* films, showing the influence of opera techniques on contemporary motion pictures. This is, however, where certain issues start appearing in Citron’s argument.

The problem lies in Citron’s inevitable encounter with the same hurdle that she has noticed in other people’s work. Towards the beginning of the “Style” section she writes: “the problem is that ‘operatic’ is capable of many meanings.” Reading through this first section, one cannot help but feel that Citron’s use of the term ‘operatic’ becomes problematic in the sense that the connections made between opera and film are quite abstract in nature. Indeed, I am not the first to acknowledge the need for more concrete definitions in Citron’s work. Jeongwon Joe notes in her review of one of Citron’s journal papers that her work “could benefit from a more sophisticated theoretical framework” and that clearer use of terms like ‘diegetic music’ “might have resulted in a sharper appreciation of what the filmic medium can do for opera.”³ Thus, it becomes difficult to compare and contrast elements between two mediums when there are no concrete definitions with which to form the foundations. With regards to

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the term “operatic,” a quick search through the Oxford English Dictionary returns the definition: “relating to or characteristic of opera.” This being the case, perhaps it would have been beneficial for Citron to provide a brief overview of the typical features which make an opera characteristically an opera, so that one could more easily draw clear connections between the elements within a film and a given musico-dramatic work.

Despite this minor issue, Citron does a solid job of supporting why she believes certain elements in the Coppola trilogy are “operatic.” She clearly states the elements which she believes the analysed films and operas have in common, and describes how characteristics of each can fundamentally reveal something about the nature of the other medium. Whilst the end result is not without its flaws, it does convince the reader that there is definitely much in common between opera and film.

Citron analyses certain sections of Don Boyd’s opera-film, *Aria*, and suggests that music in some opera-films is not the only point of interest—sometimes its use is somewhat diegetic in nature. Typically, when attending an opera, the main focus of the audience tends to be on the music rather than the visual elements onstage. Citron argues that in Boyd’s film, which is a collection of various operas, the main focus is shifted from the music to the visual elements—thus behaving more like a traditional film. She also observes the consequences of merging the two mediums. Citron discusses how the experimentation within *Aria*, especially in Russell’s *Nessun Dorma*, acts as a catalyst for the reinvention of opera into a new hybrid medium: opera-film.

In the next section, entitled “Subjectivity,” Citron analyses the artistic opera films by opera director Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, discussing the fascinating way in which Ponnelle brought his extraordinary directing talent from the stage to the realm of film and the effect his opera based artistic talents had on the visual style of his opera-films. This section tends to focus exclusively on the opera-film genre itself, a genre which is not without its teething pains. As Michael Grover-Friedlander notes in his book, certain opera-films such as *Otello* and *Friedrich’s Falstaff* have encountered transference problems from the stage to celluloid because of the nature of each medium and the ways an audience views each.4 Citron is no stranger, either, to this genre. One of her previous books, *Opera on Screen*, discusses the various implications for opera that is re-imagined on screen, such as whether a film-opera can convey the same message as its staged counterpart.5 In “Subjectivity,” rather than talking about the influence of opera on film and vice versa, Citron focuses on the nature of subjectivity and the control of images within the opera-film hybrid. As a result, this section of the book feels more like a commentary on the artistic technique and development of cinematography in the opera-film genre rather than offering any sort of correlation. Despite this, the section makes for an interesting segue into the question of film’s affect on opera. Citron heavily analyses the elements of Ponnelle’s cinematography that make his films more engaging.

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and personal, such as Ponnelle’s “camera techniques that highlight the individual.” Convincingly, Citron suggests that Ponnelle is perhaps an ‘auteur’ of the genre, that an opera-film’s approach should be “independen[t] from stage opera,” and that there should be “a recognition that music and the original opera are major sources for filmic interpretation.”

Unfortunately, the second half of “Subjectivity” lacks the same conviction and organisation of the previous section. In this half, Citron veers away from her opera/film intersection argument and drifts into the realm of abstract notions. Here, she argues that the use of *Don Giovanni* in Chabrol’s film *La Cérémonie* is an example of how opera-films can act as a conduit for political discourse as well as the subjective viewpoints of the director. Upon reading the entirety of this section, there is a noticeable shift in the consistency of Citron’s writing style. Whilst the previous section was able to talk about subjectivity and successfully relate it to the manner in which opera can influence film stylistically, Citron does not make it clear why the usage of *Don Giovanni* in *La Cérémonie* is important. I found myself asking at the end of this section, so what? Is Citron implying that opera can be used to make a political point through its insertion within a film? Though in itself she makes an interesting point, one can question whether it necessarily qualifies as a specific way in which opera can influence film and vice versa. Upon re-reading Werner Wolf’s definition of “intermediality,” however, a term to which Citron refers in the introduction, it becomes clear she is referring to the manner in which opera and film can combine symbiotically to convey a specific message that can then be interpreted on multiple levels. Overall, one might argue that Citron was merely trying to point out how opera, like film, can be used in a certain way as a means of projecting a political message. I would say, however, that the overall message in this section, particularly with relation to the broader theme of the intersection between opera and film, was less clear.

I found the final section of Citron’s book to be the most thought-provoking, and arguably the most enjoyable to read. Her analysis in terms of tone and technique in this section was spot on, and much more focused than that of section two. Citron entitles this final section “Desire,” and she argues that the use of opera such as *La Bohème* in the film *Moonstruck* can influence a film’s given impact on an audience and “provides access to the very meaning of the film” itself. I believe that the most important point Citron makes in relation to *Moonstruck* is that the integration of *La Bohème* into the film’s plot and its ability to “shape our perception of the characters” displays opera’s greatest potential to influence a film’s audience. The question then becomes: why is opera such a powerful tool when used like this? Citron persuasively argues that this is because of the inherent popularity of *La Bohème*.

Citron argues that Puccini’s *La Bohème* is one of the most “popular and lush operas.” As such, the opera has historically held the potential to draw emotion from an audience both musically and through its plot and characters. It seems like a fairly logical move for a film’s director and writing team to integrate the best elements of this particular opera into their script when they have worked so effectively in the past in
another medium. Thus, Citron implies that by including an opera in a film, the film is acknowledging and integrating elements that make the opera successful.

Citron’s analysis then moves from a broad observation of the film to specifically looking at the integration and influence of the opera on the film’s main characters. Because this section of the book is entitled “Desire,” the analysis centres mostly on the character Ronny in the film Moonstruck and his love and passion for opera. Citron is no stranger to this film. She previously wrote an article on it examining how opera can “circulate through many layers of mainstream film” and how the music and story of Puccini’s opera La Bohème play a “major role” in the movie.6 In “Desire,” Citron furthers her analysis and shows that the opera seems to not only affect the character Ronny on an emotional level, but also, possibly, on a sexual level. Citron manages to extract meaning from the fact that the character is a single, heterosexual, middle-class, working American who has an obsession with an art form that would be considered abnormal amongst others of his class and description. She questions whether Ronny’s need for a date in order to see La Bohème at the Metropolitan Opera House is a “heterosexual marker”; that is, she is asking whether the date is needed to ensure that a man’s heterosexual image is preserved and that he doesn’t become emasculated. I believe that Citron has tapped into a broader issue here that is quite intriguing. After reading this section, I found myself questioning the broader role of opera in modern society and its relation to class and gender stereotypes. I also found Citron’s suggestion that, because of these stereotypes, it is particularly hard to enter the opera culture today if you are “an outsider to the music culture” fascinating. In all, this section of the book was an engrossing read, and demonstrates well Citron’s ability to go beyond the obvious connections found between opera and film.

Citron’s analysis then changes pace again, as she moves to an analysis of the music cues that Moonstruck derives from La Bohème. She uses detailed tables, musical examples, and a thorough written analysis. Citron is concerned about the movie’s use of these cues, and the difference between the terms “overt intermediality” and “covert intermediality.” These two terms are drawn from Wolf’s book, The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality. It is clear that Citron uses these detailed terms as a baseline for comparison (the definitions of each term can be found in Citron’s introduction). For example she examines how the first cue is inherently an example of overt intermediality, because it goes “beyond diegetic and nondiegetic functions” and operates more on an operatic level because of the combination of musical, emotional, and gestural elements that occur on screen. She contrasts this with the second cue, which she believes is more film-like in nature as the “filmic signifiers are clearly dominant.” She argues that this occurs because of the “instrumental nature of the opera cue” which “functions mainly as film music and signifies film more than it does opera.” Overall, the section is an intriguing analysis of how music can function in

two distinct manners, and how it can still retain and convey the elements that made it operatic.

The second half of “Desire” rehashes more or less the same ideas as the previous section. Here, Citron uses the trio “Soave sia il vento” from Mozart’s opera Così fan tutte and the films Sunday Bloody Sunday and Closer. The principle difference in this section, however, is that Citron analyses two films that use the same opera to discuss “the ways in which opera can function as soundtrack music.” Again, the analysis is comprised of musical score examples on top of a detailed written analysis, covering the overt and covert intermediality of the music in each movie.

Within her examination of Sunday Bloody Sunday, Citron mentions that the theme to “Soave” is repeated many times throughout the movie and is especially prominent at “key emotional moments.” She questions whether the use of “Soave’s” repetitions flatten out the ‘operaticness’ of the music as the film progresses” and whether this would have any effect on the nature of the music itself which was a part of a “distinct medium.” Thus the question arises, does placing opera music within film, particularly in circumstances where it is repeated or over-used, make it “naturalized” or ease the music’s transition into the “movie’s medial realm as film music?” I believe Citron is also hinting at the bigger question: does opera lose its meaning when it is used as a soundtrack in a given film? Citron offers her opinion in the case of this movie and states that “even though ‘Soave’ starts to approach film-music status as the film progresses, it remains a signifier of opera and represents one of the two media of overt intermediality, each with its dominant signifiers.” Upon reading her written and score analysis, one tends to agree with her. It remains, however, stimulating to consider the influence the film genre can have on opera when treated in this manner.

In relation to Closer, Citron’s analysis is a little more abstract in its overall meaning. She discusses the single musical cue of “Soave” in Closer, and states that it “emerges as an independent agent” which “has to be stopped,” suggesting that it is the music’s operatic nature which is “sentimental” and full of “explicit emotion.” She also suggests that this is the reason it is symbolically shut off at the end of the scene. Citron’s overall implication is unclear, and I found myself wondering whether she is making a broader point regarding the general desire within modern society to not accept opera, or whether it was just a general message about the role of “Soave” and the director’s intent for it in this particular scene.

Despite its flaws, it is clear that When Opera Meets Film provides an intriguing analysis of how opera can function within film, and the fundamental ways in which both mediums have diversely influenced each other. I found the wider implications that Citron arrived at the most memorable and interesting moments of the book: opera’s relationship with gender and class in modern society. Though the analysis was at times a little underwhelming, the overall standard of the writing was compelling and excellent. It is particularly hard to draw connections between two diverse mediums such as opera and film, particularly when they have large fields of study in their own right. Citron’s book not only sets the standard for other scholars wishing to tackle this
complex field of study, it also caters to members of the general public who might have an interest in film but who are not particularly musically oriented.

Bibliography:


