
Erin Taylor
Second-year undergraduate (Bachelor of Music (Voice))
Mount Allison University, Sackville, NB

Michal Grover-Friedlander’s, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (2005), is a creative masterpiece that examines films that thematize “their own ‘pull’ towards opera” and are at risk of losing their cinematic qualities in becoming more operatic (1). Throughout the 186 pages (notes and index included), Grover-Friedlander relies upon four “premises” of opera — conditions concerning opera’s reception and its aesthetic elements—to delineate opera’s relationship to film. These four premises are: that film treats the operatic voice as the aesthetic foundation of opera; that death is immanent in the operatic voice; that visuals have the power to undo the aural; and that the fragile, finite nature of the operatic voice is its own undoing (3-8). After establishing these premises, Grover-Friedlander spends the remainder of her book evaluating the notion of voice in film, primarily the representation of voice in silent film and the benefits of collaboration between the two art forms.

*Vocal Apparitions* is organized in a fairly logical fashion. Grover-Friedlander separates the book into three sections: “Part 1: Silent Voices,” “Part 2: Visions of Voices” and “Part 3: Remains of the Voice.” The three sections proceed in a rational order—from silent to modern film —and along a spectrum of philosophical thinking; essentially, the farther into the book the reader progresses, the more s/he is forced to adopt an abstract and philosophical line of thought. “Part 1: Silent Voices” interprets the use of opera in two silent films: *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and *A Night at the Opera* (1935). Neither of these is a cinematic reproduction of opera but instead they both deal with opera as their main subject matter. Grover-Friedlander notes that both films seek to portray an operatic level of drama, particularly in their fixation with death.
“Part 2: Visions of Voices” discusses cinematic versions of Giuseppe Verdi’s operas *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893), and suggests cinematic success for the voice requires it transcend audible art to become visual art. Examining the tension created in this transition is one subject in which Grover-Friedlander is interested. On a broader level, “Part 3: Remains of the Voice” investigates the relationship and differences between film and opera and the benefits of collaboration between the two. Through a comparison of Francis Poulenc’s opera, *La voix humaine* (1958), and Roberto Rossellini’s film, *Una voce umane* (1948), based on the same play by Jean Cocteau, Grover-Friedlander discusses how different mediums give precedence to different aspects of the play. Finally, the book closes with a focus on Fellini’s *E la nave va* (1983) and how it not only combines all points of the previous chapters, but also showcases both the physical and philosophical afterlife of an operatic voice—the physical afterlife existing on recordings and the philosophical residing in memories of such voices.

The premises the author lists in the work’s introduction form the crucial basis for the rest of the work. Grover-Friedlander essentially tells her readers that for the rest of text to be understandable, they must be willing to accept her four theoretical assertions. Indeed, if a reader were to jump ahead to the first chapter without having read the opening, for example, they would be at a loss to discern what the author means when she connects the silence of the cries found in *The Phantom of the Opera* with the death of the operatic voice (25-8).

The first premise posed by Grover-Friedlander suggests that the aesthetic foundation of opera is the aforementioned operatic voice (3-4). The operatic voice sings in what Grover-Friedlander calls the “Italian notion of song,” which causes the audience to anticipate moments of beautiful singing that can be classified in myriad ways, such as passages of florid coloratura, improvisation, legato sustained passages and so on (4). The author suggests that these moments of beautiful singing are brief. The audience is aware of this and they are henceforth ever-conscious of the mortality of these moments.

The author’s premise perhaps assumes too much of the operatic audience. It implies that audiences listen to opera with ears and minds attuned to these moments, which may be true in some cases but certainly is not in all cases. The plethora of reasons people venture to the opera—its social implications, the publicity surrounding the production, the singers performing, to name but a few—are simply too numerous to be ignored. Even if it were true for all cases, no possible way exists for Grover-Friedlander to prove it definitively.

Grover-Friedlander’s second premise — one that is related to the first — is that death is immanent in the operatic voice (4-5). Grover-Friedlander adopts the viewpoints
of four different authors to define death in the operatic voice (4). First, she extends Catherine Clément, who claims that singing itself kills the heroines in opera (4). Second she builds on Michel Poizat’s claim that voice and death are connected, as the voice operates within a spectrum. The highest extreme of this spectrum is the “melos” — and includes cries, shrieks and other shrill sounds often associated with distress or perishing. Poizat claims that since opera singing lies near the melos end of the spectrum, it demands death by its very nature (5). Slavoj Žižek, who derives his theory of operatic death from Wagner’s operas, identifies the focus of operatic death as subjects who are unable to die and yet long to, caught between eternal longing and unfulfilled desire (4). Carolyn Abbate is the last scholar called upon by Grover-Friedlander. Abbate also uses Wagner as the basis for her position, claiming operatic death is a utopian moment where “the authorial voice is replaced by a voice that has no source within the plot,” almost as if the composer invokes the voice of a higher being (4). The way in which Grover-Friedlander uses these perspectives is innovative, but at times it makes the text quite metaphysical and often abstract.

The third premise considers operatic deaths as a replay of “Orphic death,” wherein the visual constantly interrupts the death-to-life motion that song constantly tries to realize (7). Grover-Friedlander turns to Orpheus to explain the power the visual has to undo the musical; it was Orpheus looking back that “cancelled out” the power his song had to revive the dead.

When Grover-Friedlander moves onto the “Visions of Voices” section of the book — which deals with opera in a visual sense — she evokes this particular premise and explores the continual struggle between the audio and the visual found in opera (53-4). She makes the claim that when opera is transferred from the stage to the screen, it is also changed from an audio art to a visual one (54). This, however, is yet another highly subjective claim. True, a main vehicle of story-telling in opera is the voice, but without the elaborate splendour of costumes and sets, opera simply would not be opera. Visual majesty is part of what makes it such a coveted and sought after art-form; were opera a purely audio art, why would cinema, which Grover-Friedlander claims to be a “visual art,” be attracted to it at all?

The final premise Grover-Friedlander employs argues that song’s frailty is part of its own un-doing. She claims the nature of the operatic voice — especially when it is considered to exist within the previously mentioned spectrum — is just as detrimental

---

to its ability to sustain life as the visual (7-8). Most learn that the voice has its limitations: there are some things it just physically cannot do and it will deteriorate if too much is demanded of it. Thus, operatic song — performed by vocal daredevils who stretch the voice to its most extreme thresholds — can never “give life,” because the song itself can never be sustained(7). This premise is based in physiological fact; no singer can sustain a note forever or sing beyond the capabilities of her/his vocal chords.

Had Grover-Friedlander made her other premises as objective as this one, the entire work would have benefited. As it stands this final premise stands in sharp contrast to the other, far more subjective ones. Though this fourth premise is quite philosophically rooted, it is also grounded in the physiological — as previously stated, operatic vocal production and singing in general lie in the extreme end of the vocal-activity spectrum. Grover-Friedlander’s use of relatable knowledge and physiological facts make this her strongest and most original premise. It truly shows her depth of thought and expertise on the subject matter.

The only unwanted dissonance within Vocal Apparitions is the subjective and abstract nature of these so-called premises. Laura Basini raises this issue in her own review of Vocal Apparitions. The premises rely far too heavily on the willingness of the reader to accept what the author is saying as authoritative without ever receiving very compelling supporting evidence. Albeit infrequently, there are times when Grover-Friedlander speaks in such philosophical terms that her claims would be rendered useless should the reader disagree with her reasoning, such as in the excerpt where she claims “silence, muteness and disintegration of language are at the core of the operatic voice” (9). Claims such as these are full of metaphysical merit, but she presents little empirical evidence to back them up, and readers might be inclined to disagree.

The notion of operatic death itself is so intriguing and indiscriminate that it is its own area of study—that much is apparent from the sheer volume of authors Grover-Friedlander chooses to rely upon for the basis of her premise. Yet, as the book progresses, her second premise of the “death of the operatic voice” is so closely linked with the first that the lines between them seem to blur together. These two premises may have operated more strongly if unified.

Any academically-minded reader who has previous knowledge of opera and is also familiar with the films discussed in this intricately crafted book will enjoy it immensely. That said, it should also be noted this text is not for the faint of heart. Grover-Friedlander has the ability to write with a finesse that encompasses her topics in a way that is truly admirable, but it could make it a potentially difficult read for those who are unaccustomed to philosophical discussion.

---

Anyone wishing to tackle this text should first familiarize her/himself with some literature on opera, ideally sources employed by Grover-Friedlander. Most pertinent of these are Marcia Citron’s *When Opera Meets Film* and Jeremy Tambling’s *Opera, Ideology and Film.* Grover-Friedlander references both of these works frequently, and they offer readers more background information on the relationship between opera and film as well as on other conceptual theories about how opera and film fit together. Secondly, potential readers would be remiss not to consult the films examined in each chapter. Having a basic knowledge of their story lines and being able to visualize them during Grover-Friedlander’s discussion will allow the reader to more easily discern the meaning of her text.

Grover-Friedlander never states that her book examines the relationship between opera and film in a particular era; it transcends many decades. However, recent innovations in the opera-cinema world—for example, the highly successful “Met in HD” broadcasts made by the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York—make it possible for audiences around the world to see live opera performances in their local movie theatres. The topics of silent films and early 1980s movies covered in *Vocal Apparitions* look a bit dated in comparison. Yet despite this the themes, perspectives, and philosophies Grover-Friedlander raises are valuable and applicable to any era in which opera and film have been combined. *Vocal Apparitions* makes readers look twice at the relationship between opera and cinema — or even more specifically, the relationship between the voice and death — and helps them to think critically about the continued life and success of opera-cinema compilations, including the “Met in HD” broadcasts.

Operating under the principle that “first impressions are everything,” it is undeniable Grover-Friedlander has made a remarkably successful impression with this monograph. Its fresh, philosophically-based discussions and flowing, intellectual prose provide an entirely new perspective through which to study opera’s relationship with film that will inspire and engage readers. *Vocal Apparitions* is a highly specialized tour de force that has garnered praise from some of the most recognized musicologists and opera specialists. Just as Mary Ann Smart, for example, praises the book for being “enormously engaging…several steps ahead of any existing book on the subject,” it is

---


Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
apparent this book has made a significant contribution to the literature on opera and cinema. Carolyn Abbate goes so far as to say, “No précis is adequate to the range and perceptiveness of *Vocal Apparitions.*” I wholly agree with such praise with as much conviction and admiration.

**For Further Reading**


*A Night at the Opera*. Directed by Sam Wood. Los Angeles, United States of America: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1935. DVD.

*Phantom of the Opera*. Directed by Rupert Julian. United States of America: Universal Pictures, 1925. DVD.


---

Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.