

2015

Voice Types of Opera Villains: Collaborative Study of Vocal Tessituras of Villains and Heroes in Opera

Michael Cantrell

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal>



Part of the [Music Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cantrell, Michael (2015) "Voice Types of Opera Villains: Collaborative Study of Vocal Tessituras of Villains and Heroes in Opera," *Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 19 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal/vol19/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity at OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. For more information, please contact weissell@unk.edu.

Voice Types of Opera Villains: Collaborative Study of Vocal Tessituras of Villains and Heroes in Opera

Michael Cantrell

Opera has long withstood the test of time, the thrill and magic entertaining vast audiences. Much like any other aged method of entertainment, it includes one unfailing element: a favored protagonist trying to overcome an obstacle or goal whilst experiencing conflict with the antagonist (Krulik, 2014). In opera, this key component is accompanied with music, creating a perfect setting for more drama. Although the music may seem to have an obvious, stereotypical effect on the characters, most operas do not have a specified method of typecasting. Clichés are sometimes followed, such as a light, innocent voice portraying a damsel in distress, but most of the time in opera, these clichés are ignored.

However, when music is added to the characters, composers usually follow a universal rule of generalized voice-categorizing. According to Knapp (1972), there are six different types of voices in opera: *soprano*, *mezzo-soprano*, *contralto*, *tenor*, *baritone*, and *bass*. From those categories come sub-categories determined by vocal timbre and quality, such as *dramatic*, *lyric*, *coloratura*, and *spinto*. For example, a female singer with a powerful medium-range voice would be classified as a *dramatic mezzo-soprano*, while a male singer with a smooth low-range voice would be classified as a *lyric bass*. There are inevitable clichés that composers follow when assigning character voice types, namely the young heroine played by a light soprano and the evil villain played by a powerful bass.

What makes specific operas great is the amount of diversity in the voices. Each distinct voice representing a different character creates a believable platform for the audience to appreciate. The different voices also greatly add to the storyline and plot by recognizing different characteristics and behaviors of the actors by their voice type. Although our basic human instinct wishes to continually categorize, specific voice types in opera do not imply a character. For example, the brave heroine Aida is a dramatic soprano but the evil Lady Macbeth is also of the same voice-type. Although one composer may only want the protagonists in his operas to be tenors, other composers may want their protagonists to be baritones. Therefore, general labels of voice type are often ignored in opera.

Since these stereotypes are ignored in opera, a large bounty of characters can come from a single voice type. A coloratura soprano can be a villainess such as the Queen of the Night from *Die Zauberflöte*, or a damsel-in-distress like Gilda in *Rigoletto*. Although this disambiguation occurs between voice types, it rarely occurs within a single opera. In any entertainment setting, the relationship between protagonists and antagonists is the strongest piece of the story, and also the most polar. Contrasting themes of “light vs. dark” and “good vs. evil” accompany entire premises of the stories. In opera, these famous themes never fail in the storyline or in the music. Although generalized voice typing of characters is not practiced, opposition of voice type is. What makes the difference between the hero and the villain is not in terms of voice type but in terms of the relationship between the hero or heroine and the villain or villainess. Depending on

where the tessitura sits for the hero or heroine, the villain or villainess will usually musically oppose the hero. And in certain cases of operas, when the villain and hero share the same tessitura, the villain will either have the highest or the lowest note compared to the hero.

Based on examination of famous roles played by sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, tenors, and basses, it will be proved that opposing voice types, whether high or low compared to the hero or heroine, denote the villains and villainesses in opera.

SOPRANOS

The opposing relationship between the Queen of the Night and Sarastro from *Die Zauberflöte* is perhaps one of the most well-known conflicts in opera repertoire. The constant and blatant themes of opposition are magnificent not only in terms of visual imagery, but in musicality. The Queen of the Night, the evil coloratura soprano, dramatically clashes with Sarastro, the heroic dramatic bass, in both presence and sound. These two different tessituras create a setting both magical and frightening.

The Queen of the Night is perhaps one of the most iconic villainess roles in not only opera history but cultural history. The height and complexity of the role is very memorable amongst many coloratura sopranos. As the opera progresses, it is apparent that as the Queen becomes more and more infuriated, she sings noticeably higher (Goldovsky, 1968). In her famous act two aria, "Der Hölle Rache," the Queen wickedly orders her daughter, Pamina, to kill Sarastro. The coloratura melodies reach as high as an F6:



Fig. 1. "Der Hölle Rache," (Library Music Source, 2014).

Sarastro's aria, "Isis and Osiris," completely opposes the Queen's high agility by using a slow, descending line all the way down to an F2:

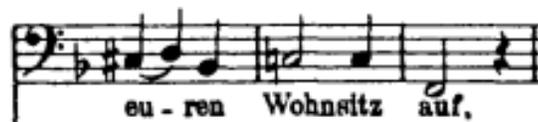


Fig. 2. "Isis and Osiris," (Library Music Source, 2014).

These musical examples show obvious differences between the hero and the villain. In the case of Sarastro and the Queen, not only is gender an evident distinction between the two roles but also the completely different voice-types.

Lady Macbeth, from *Macbeth*, is another iconic villainess. The highest singer in the opera, she is not challenged in terms of musicality or evil deeds. Since she is the source of most of the plot's mischief, Verdi gives her wonderful music to create a dramatic setting for the libretto. Lady Macbeth, a soprano, greatly contrasts her baritone husband, Macbeth, and gives her character a sense of dominance over her feeble husband. In her third act aria, where she is at the peak of her despair and hatred, she sings a Db6:



Fig. 3. “Una macchia è qui tuttora!” (Library Music Source, 2014).

There is not an obvious hero in the opera, *Macbeth*, yet the most evil of all characters is agreeably Lady Macbeth. Since she is the source of all evil, she has the most extreme note values out of anyone in the show.

Although some argue that the title role from *Turandot*, Princess Turandot, is not truly the villainess in the opera, she is undoubtedly evil for the majority of the opera. The princess spitefully enlists her suitors into a series of trials which they must correctly pursue or else be put to death, while she watches with glee. Turandot, a dramatic soprano, is the vocally highest-reaching female in the opera, even compared with the heroine slave, Liu, a lyric soprano. Liu is a very noble character and is a symbol of all things good, yet she does not claim the highest note of the opera; the villainess Turandot sustains a C6, while Liu barely holds a Bb6 (Clark, 2007). Although Turandot and Liu are relatively of the same voice type, Turandot consistently holds high notes and her tessitura is constantly high, whereas Liu's tessitura sits in a medium range with sudden bursts of high notes, creating a dramatic difference between the villainess and heroine.

MEZZO-SOPRANOS

The common adage, “Witches, bitches, and britches,” is often used to stereotypically associate mezzo-sopranos’ roles in opera. Many of these roles are notably lower than the other female roles, making them the ideal villainess; the lower register of females results in chesty, sultry, and darker color. “Pants roles,” as they are called, are often tied with mezzos, in which the female performer portrays a male character. These pants roles are sometimes villains, but most are simply supporting roles. For the sake of this paper, mezzo male roles will not be mentioned.

Dalila from *Samson et Dalila*, based on the biblical story, is the only female in the production, making her the highest singer although she is only a mezzo. She doesn’t need to extend her range due to her sole presence as a female. It is clever that she is placed in the role of a mezzo to make her sound more seductive due to the darker color the lower register requires. Also, the vocal range of a mezzo sits well with the dueling role of Samson, a tenor. In her famous act two aria, “Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix,” where she seduces Samson, she sings a Bb4, which emphasizes her lower, seductive register.



Fig. 4. “Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix,” (Library Music Source, 2014).

Dalila eventually succeeds in destroying Samson with her beauty; it is a very dark, yet simple act. She is arguably one of the most cunning females in classic opera due to her passive evilness (Knapp, 1972).

In the Verdi opera, *Aida*, the mezzo-soprano Amneris is the villainess of the production. Her dark personality and dark voice completely oppose Aida, the heroine soprano. Aida, Amneris' slave girl, is in love with her mistress's betrothed, much to Amneris's fury. She eventually takes responsibility for the death of the doomed Aida. In her furious act two duet with Aida, Amneris sits around her lower range while she fumes, as seen below:

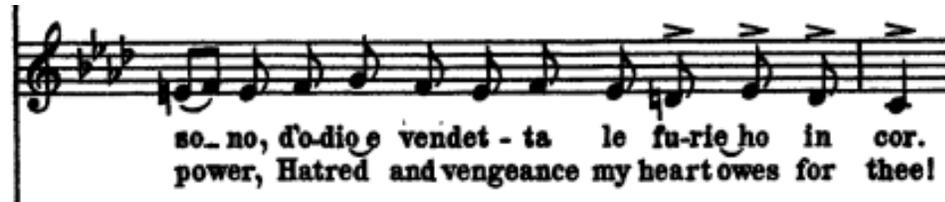


Fig. 5. "Su! del Nilo al sacro lido," (Library Music Source, 2014).

Although Amneris sings higher than most mezzos of her type, she still sings considerably lower than her heroine, Aida. As Aida sings her act one aria, "Ritorna vincitor," the characteristics of a dramatic soprano are observed; most of her lines are declamatory with only notes on the staff sustained (Clark, 2007). However, as Aida keeps singing, she reaches a treble B \flat 6, as seen below:



Fig. 6. "Ritorna vincitor," (Library Music Source, 2014).

The Gingerbread Witch from *Hansel und Gretel* is also an example of an evil dramatic mezzo that counter-mimics her lyric soprano heroine, Gretel, and lyric mezzo hero, Hansel. Because of the innocent quality of the children's voices, the witch's voice is dramatically opposed. The opera version of the classic tale successfully depicts the evil witch as the villainess, bringing out the dark color of her mezzo-soprano range. In one scene, where the witch is gathering ingredients for the brew she is making, she utilizes the prime range of a typical mezzo soprano in treble cleff:

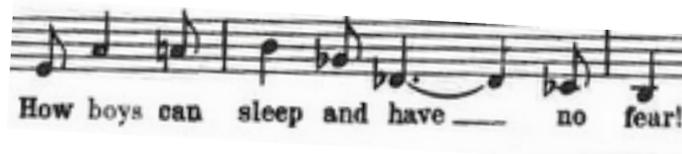


Fig. 7. "Witch's Aria," (Library Music Source, 2014).

Tenors

In much of opera, a common character stereotype has been followed based on vocal range: the tenor. Whether the hero, the love-struck romantic, or the playful sidekick, the tenor is rarely found to be the villain. Few exceptions occur, yet within these exceptions the hero and villain are so alike it is difficult to determine the difference between the two.

One of these exceptions is the villain in the opera *Rigoletto*. The Duke, a tenor who is the enemy of the hero, Rigoletto, a baritone, sings much higher than the hero. Perhaps Verdi's decision to make the Duke into a tenor was based on his flirtatious and tenor-like personality. In his first act seduction aria, "Questo a quella," The Duke ascends as high as an Ab⁴:



Fig. 8. "Questo a quella," (Library Music Source, 2014).

The similarity of the hero and villain in this particular opera is very strong. In one scene, Rigoletto even laments how similar he is to the enemy. The vocal qualities of the Duke and Rigoletto are similar so that the musicality adds greatly to the continuous conflict between the two. The rhythmic coordination of the Duke and Rigoletto are also very similar. Below is an excerpt of Rigoletto's and his daughter, Gilda's duet from Act three that shows the similar rhythms of the hero and villain:



Fig. 9. "Lassú in cielo!," (Library Music Source, 2014).

Another example of a shared villain role in opera is the partnership between Iago and Otello in *Otello*. Although *Otello*'s main villain is the baritone Iago, Otello, a tenor, has much to do with the mischief that unfolds. Iago, Otello's right-hand mate, gossips and commands Otello to commit evil acts. The result is Otello betraying his wife, killing her and much of the cast, much to Iago's approval. Otello is no hero, yet he isn't exactly the villain. Either way, the double role of villain is split between Iago and Otello.

BASSES

In much of opera, both comic and dramatic, the villain is usually portrayed as a bass or bass/baritone. The idea is befitting; basses have a deep, dark voice that potentially creates an evil character. In a stereotypical sense, the bass is another voice type that continues the common placement of voices.

In the opera *Faust*, many clichés are used, such as a bass villain, a soprano damsel in distress, a daft tenor, and a baritone hero. Mephistophéles, the bass, is a devil who exchanges an elixir of youth for the soul of Faust, the tenor. Mephistophéles, the anti-hero, and Valentin the hero, are alike in many aspects but yet again the difference relies mainly on the timbre of

Mephistophéles' voice. In his act two drinking song, Mephistophéles sings of deceit and sin, the range similar to Valentin's act four aria, the famous "Soldier's Chorus:"

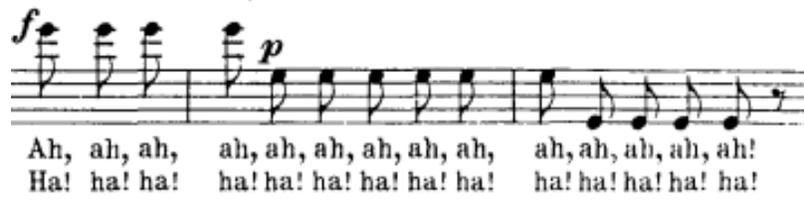


Fig. 10. "Vous qui faites l'endormie," (Library Music Source, 2014).

It should be noted that when the Devil appears in standard opera, he is usually portrayed as a bass, such as the case of *Faust*.

In the tragic opera, *Hamlet*, the baritone hero, Hamlet, greatly contrasts the evil Claudius in vocal texture. Claudius has many low, unmoving vocal passages, where Hamlet contains much more melismatic coloratura and bravado. Although Hamlet is not the highest singer of the men, he dramatically opposes Claudius's low range. An excerpt of Hamlet's famous aria in bass cleff, "O vin dissipe le tristesse," shows his agile leaps as opposed to Claudius' slow-moving texture:



Fig. 11. "O vin dissipe le tristesse," (Library Music Source, 2014).

The opera *Tosca* is a great example of the stereotypical role of the bass. The villain, Scarpia, creates drama through his sneaky seductions. The darkness and richness of Scarpia's voice dramatically highlights the darkness and richness of Tosca's, the heroine's, voice. Just like the Queen of the Night and Sarastro from *Die Zauberflöte*, the gender difference of villain versus heroine is very strong and creates a powerful setting to the music. In the opera's second act, Scarpia and Tosca banter back and forth, creating a frightening duel of stamina and range:

Fig. 12. "Act Two Duet," (Library Music Source, 2014).

In conclusion, opera does not always cling to stereotypes as it usually is thought. Several different roles of villains prove that a character is not necessarily based on voice type but on how the composer wishes to incorporate the rest of the cast based on roles. The musical differences between villainess and heroine, such as Princess Turandot and Liu, and between villain and hero, such as Mephistophéles and Valentin, prove that both antagonist and protagonist must be

observed in order to determine voice-type. Based on the examination of sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, tenors, and basses, it is quite obvious that the villain must be compared to the hero when a composer is scoring an opera.

REFERENCES

- Clark, M. R. (2007) *Aria Repertoire*. Location: Bloomington, IN.
- Goldovsky, B. (1968) *Bringing Opera to Life*. Location: New York, NY.
- Knapp, J. M. (1972) *The Magic of Opera*. Location: New York, NY.
- Krulik, N. (2014) [Graph illustration]. The Five Essential Elements of a Story. Retrieved from http://www.katiekazoo.com/pdf/KK_FiveEssentialElements.pdf
- Library Music Source (2014) *Aida, Die Zauberflöte, Faust, Hamlet, Hansel und Gretel, Macbeth, Rigoletto, Samson et Dalila, Tosca*. Retrieved from UNK Online Library.