

# Re/Presenting Orpheus: African Presence, the Operatic Voice, and the Western Musical Canon

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In recent decades, scholars from Gary Tomlinson and Carolyn Abbate to Michel Poizat and Michal Grover-Friedlander have focused on the ways in which operatic works narratively and performatively position the voice as an entity that reveals the metaphysical concerns of each composer's social context, constructing ontologies of the human being that parallel each respective context's views of the musical work.<sup>1</sup> Thus, like the musical work, which may be identified as an abstract archetype, a written score, or the sum of its performances, the human is defined in various operatic periods and national schools as a pastoral being with a spiritually manipulative voice; as an enlightened, objective being with a mechanically reproduced voice; or as a primal, reptilian being with an uncanny voice.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing the operatic voice from this perspective shifts the ontological question away from the search for musical objects and toward the representation of meaning, in which both the operatic voice and the definition of the work serve to signify the anxieties of their context. Because the perspectives expressed by composers are dependent on the cultural contexts from which they emerge, the migration of operatic works to new temporal and sociogeographic spaces necessitates consideration of the stability or instability of musical meaning in these works, particularly those included within an already-established canon.

Accounting for the migration of eighteenth-century European opera to the stages of twenty-first-century Sub-Saharan Africa, the present study highlights a 2011 production of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* at the National Theatre in Kampala, Uganda, and *Impempe Yomlingo*, a 2007 adaptation of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* in Cape Town, South Africa. I discuss the presence of African voices in performances of the Western operatic canon; in these instances, operatic works and voices serve as signifiers of contextualized anxieties and cultural politics. I focus specifically on the ways in which these performers rhetorically position a contemporary African subjectivity over and against their conception of a Western objectivity. Drawing from the assertion that the operatic voice epistemologically reveals the metaphysical concerns of its socio-historical context, I argue that the performance of these works in new contexts reveals the metaphysical concerns of the new context; consequently, the operatic work is treated as an "instrument" that is "played" in order to narrate those concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Kania, "New Waves in Musical Ontology," in *New Waves in Aesthetics*, ed. by Kathleen Stock and Katherine Thomson Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 20; Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*, 26, 35, 73.

## Metaphysics of Voice

What the engagement of opera by African artists reveals about artistic and cultural discourses is particularly noteworthy; the re-contextualization of the genre positions Africans as creative contributors to a historically Western-dominated medium and situates opera as an expressive tool for use within African contexts. The placement of operatic singing in this environment highlights the impact of musical voices and the metaphysics of musical expression that have long been fundamental themes for opera librettists, composers, and critics. In looking at the ways in which operatic meaning is or is not retained as its presentation serves new functions, one must first look at what it may be expressing within its original context.

Discussing the Western world's attraction to the operatic voice, Gary Tomlinson categorizes operatic singing as a type of heightened utterance in which voice reveals normally metaphysical realms to physical perception.<sup>3</sup> As such, elite Western culture has exploited opera to mediate the experiences of two worlds, one esoteric and one sensually accessible, and each era of opera has used the voice to project its own subjective categories of being that are also reflected in other contemporaneous art forms.<sup>4</sup> The “differing hidden realms” made accessible by the operatic voice are “cultural constructions” that reveal the ways in which the members of elite culture fashion their position in the world.<sup>5</sup> According to Vlado Kotnik, the social cache active within operatic hierarchies is variously distributed according to initiation or non-initiation into operatic society, seating arrangements in the opera house, the feats or reputation of one singer over another, and the emergence and evaluation of national schools of operatic composition and vocal technique.<sup>6</sup> As such, the protection and maintenance of sophistication and merit requires the performance of social ritual that marks difference from the operatic non-initiate.<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, the discovery of gold in Southern Africa in the mid-nineteenth century was quickly followed by the erection of opera houses in several cities throughout the region.<sup>8</sup> Because of opera's associations with social distinction and the voice's function in operatic narratives as an agent of influence beyond its source of origin, Nicholas Till implicates opera with the impulses of imperialism, citing the tendency for seventeenth century authors to equate European scientists and explorers with the same mythological figures—particularly Orpheus—that served as the focal point of early opera libretti.<sup>9</sup> Framing Orpheus as the “founder of civilization,” Francis Bacon similarly equated the ability of music to tame beasts and nature with the potential of law and civilization to tame primitive peoples, and Grant Olwage argues that

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<sup>3</sup> Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 6ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Vlado Kotnik, *Opera, Power and Ideology: Anthropological Study of a National Art in Slovenia* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 157.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Malan, “Opera Houses in South Africa,” in *The World of South African Music*, ed. by Christine Lucia (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 126.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Till, “Orpheus Conquistador,” in *Opera Indigene: Re/presenting First Nations and Indigenous Cultures*, ed. Pamela Karantonis and Dylan Robinson (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 20.

nineteenth-century vocal pedagogy was used in South Africa as a means of colonizing the body of the Other.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Tomlinson maintains that each culture creates their own purposes for modes of mediating the self through the voice.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is within the context of the dominant dualist, empirical constructions of modernity in eighteenth-century Europe—with an emphasis on the division between mind and body as represented by the philosophy of René Descartes—that we often read the genesis of many of the canonic works of that century.<sup>12</sup> With the increased prioritization of literacy in Enlightenment thought, the mind is able to read aesthetic objects from the position of an outside, disinterested observer; because of the potential for separating mind and body, the Cartesian model identifies the body as a kind of machine, which, as we will see, has implications for the ways in which native Africans interpret both of the operas studied here. According to Veit Erlmann, however, there was a contemporaneous alternative to this ontology—represented by the writings of Claude Perreault—that positioned the human self as an animal body, a “self-generating organism,” in which the self is always and organically present.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, these distinctions between the Cartesian mind-body objectivity and Perraultian subjectivity seem to parallel the traditional discursive distinctions between Europe and Africa. Paulla Ebron points out that musicological methodology has historically constructed European music as literate, aesthetically autonomous, and transcendent and African music as emotionally embodied, autobiographical, and experiential.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the analysis of the European canon has tended to focus on written works and that of African music has focused on performative presence. While these regional distinctions have been negotiated through gross power imbalances and have been contested within both regions, they are, nonetheless, always figured in dialogue.<sup>15</sup> Following in the line of these expectations, then, a number of African philosophers—ranging from eighteenth-century Ghanaian professor Anton Amo to twentieth-century Kenyan scholar John Murungi—have argued that the African is a unitary, non-Cartesian being and that African music embodies what it means to be human.<sup>16</sup>

Carolyn Abbate argues that fervor for the Cartesian mind-body dualism and aesthetically autonomous musical objects was reflected in contemporaneous attempts to objectively capture voices in automated singing machines. Therefore, she interprets Orpheus’ lament in Gluck’s opera—which features a major key and crank organ-style melody—as imitative of domestic music boxes; similarly, Mozart gives Orphic power not to Tamino’s voice, but to his flute—a reification of Orphic power that has been removed from the body and codified through the instrument.<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that all Western performers conceive of their own approaches in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 21; Grant Olwage, “The Class and Colour of Tone: An Essay on the Social History of Vocal Timbre,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004), 208.

<sup>11</sup> Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>13</sup> Veit Erlmann, “Refiguring the Early Modern Voice,” *Qui Parle* 21, no. 1 (2012), 87.

<sup>14</sup> Paulla A. Ebron, *Performing Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 34, 38-39, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Ebron, *Performing Africa*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, “Amo’s Critique of Descartes’ Philosophy of the Mind,” in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. by Kwasi Wiredu (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 200; John Murungi, *African Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), Dedication, 67, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 18, 54.

these terms; rather, I cite these examples to highlight the positions of African participants in this investigation, who emphasize a present African agency in performance that contrasts with what they believe to be a Western model of operatic performance. The political ramifications of these constructions parallel those of the contemporary African philosophers mentioned above. Attempting to construct an Afrocentric approach to the ontology of man, P. Kaboha has referred to empiricism as the cause of the great crisis of the West, and Murungi has gone as far as to blame the objective distance of empirical method for what he calls “the emptiness of the European.”<sup>18</sup> While the performers in the following examples do not state their cases in an explicitly political terms as these final statements, we will see the ways in which they conceive of their participation in operatic activity as a kind of subjective presence in the performance.

### ***Impempe Yomlingo: The Magic Flute***

Moving from the general to the specific, we see how performing canonic works in Africa can both perpetuate and challenge conventional expectations for operatic and African experiences. According to Sheila Boniface Davies and J.Q. Davies the 2007 South African production *The Magic Flute: Impempe Yomlingo*, was “explicitly promoted as a vehicle for political and social change—an instrument for directing processes of national post-apartheid transformation.”<sup>19</sup> The re-contextualization of the opera’s setting to South Africa is assisted through a transcription of the orchestral accompaniment for an ensemble of marimbas, other percussion, and choral voices, which was taught to the musicians not through a printed score, but rather by way of oral demonstration, reinforcing Africa as a space for participatory, phenomenological community engagement.<sup>20</sup>

It is at this point that we encounter a seeming paradox between distance and presence. By framing the performance itself as an agent of transformation, the producers echo the colonial legacy of Orphic rhetoric as a force for civilizing the wild, objectifying nature, and establishing nations, attempting to redeem this legacy for their own purposes. Further, it is likely that the production implicitly makes reference to the global associations of opera with sophistication and social distinction, naming South Africa as an initiate into the operatic community; as is the case in much of the world, then, the cultural cache that opera bestows serves to supplement the community’s level of monetary value. At the same time, however, the presence of an indigenous instrumental ensemble and the utilization of oral, rather than literate, pedagogical tools frames the performance as both autobiographical and experiential. As such, the producers bring to the forefront the idea of an embodied African creative presence in the performance, suggesting that Africans themselves generate transformative power.

The idea of an African metaphysics of presence in the production becomes more obvious when we consider the treatment of the opera’s namesake: in *Impempe Yomlingo*, Tamino mimes

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<sup>18</sup> P. Kaboha, “African Metaphysical Heritage and Contemporary Life: African Contributions to Contemporary Life,” in *The Foundations of Social Life: Ugandan Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. by A.T. Dalfovo (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 74; Murungi, *African Musical Aesthetics*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Sheila Boniface Davies and J.Q. Davies, “So Take this Magic Flute and Blow. It Will Protect Us as We Go’: *Impempe Yomlingo* (2007-11) and South Africa’s Ongoing Transition,” *Opera Quarterly* (Advance Access; DOI: 10.1093/oq/kbs039), 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 9.

playing his flute while a jazz trumpeter improvises behind him in the style of Hugh Masekela, serving, through the power of musical influence, as an agent of transformation.<sup>21</sup> This transcription supports both Tomlinson's and Abbate's positions: just as the flute is Mozart's substitute for the human voice, the trumpet is contemporary South Africa's substitute for the flute. Thus, it is through the corporeally present flute that we "hear" the metaphysical sounds of the trumpet, a voice of the nation. The analogy of Tamino's flute relaying an African song may be extended further: Davies and Davies suggest that *The Magic Flute*, the opera, is itself an instrument "played" by the opera company for the purpose of national transformation, and the nation's minister of finance stated, "Mozart wrote *The Magic Flute* for this!"<sup>22</sup> Mozart's work is recognized as an object, but it is through the active presence of African voices that the work is believed to sing about African experience. In other words, unlike Tamino's flute in Abbate's account, the performing subject takes priority before the instrument. While Mozart is credited as the instrument maker, the opera is utilized by South Africans with South African processes for South African purposes; thus, *Impempe Yomlingo* emphasizes not the objective text, but rather a South African experience of that text.

### ***Orpheus and Euridice***

While the use of a Western-composed operatic work for the expression of African experience is easily demonstrated through transcriptions or adaptations such as *Impempe Yomlingo*, the establishment of that experience may be more difficult when the performers attempt to follow the score more closely, as is the case in the 2011 production of Gluck's *Orpheus and Euridice* at the Ugandan National Theatre in Kampala. Gluck had himself already provided an adaptation of the original *Orfeo ed Euridice* for French audiences; the text was reset in order to reflect the contours of the French language, and the role of Orpheus was changed from a castrato to a high tenor to satisfy French musical tastes. Thus, producing an English translation of the Italian version without any overt Ugandan symbolism seems to provide fewer problems to discussions of the musical work and the impact of an African presence on performance practice. Indeed, the musical priorities of this performance—which de-emphasize harmonic tension and release, metric accents, and tempo fluctuations—may as easily stem from the performers' notions of classical music as from their sense of African identity.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, the testimonies of musicians connected to operatic performances in Uganda suggest that this activity is, in fact, framed as an expression of African experience. The production's musical director, Francis Mutesasira, said, "I love opera because I can express myself very well," and singer Agatha Aturinda has expressed her suspicion that the most admirable operatic performances are those that are "performed genuinely."<sup>24</sup> These accounts of operatic identity demonstrate the conception of personal investment that contrasts with the Cartesian model of disinterested objectivity. Similarly, William Bulega of the Kampala Music School—the sponsors of the production—argues that most of the classical musicians in Kampala began performing the traditional music repertoires of their ethnic groups first and suggests that

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>23</sup> Kampala Music School, *Euridice Orpheus*, DVD recording (2011).

<sup>24</sup> "Orpheus Vidcast 1," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77jAjR8isTg> (accessed March 25, 2012); "Xpera Uganda Part 1," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHfJmMbVY8A> (accessed March 25, 2012).

they “advance to the classical world” through the “roots” of their “own” music.<sup>25</sup> Like the rhetoric of national transformation surrounding the *Impempe Yomlingo* production, this final statement serves two purposes. First, it perpetuates the social hierarchies of musical identities discussed by Kotnik. Second, it helps to establish a Ugandan presence in the production by suggesting that the participants are able to perform the opera because of their unique status and fundamental experience as Ugandans. In other words, it is the Ugandan experience that prepares them for operatic performance.

Bulega, who has previously worked as a choreographer for composer Pedson Kasume’s now disbanded Xpera Uganda opera ensemble, specifically discusses the concept of presence, experience, and unitariness in African performance:

So this one is...sort of different from the traditional operas whereby tradition is just copy and paste into your bodies, where this one is coming from within the body. So, I train them and their skills of listening to their bodies and improvising by the use of their feelings around...the pressures around them.<sup>26</sup>

As such, Bulega positions the body, rather than the text, as the source from which interpretation is derived—an approach he contrasts with what he calls “traditional opera.” Thus, the phenomenological presence of the unitary African self is placed at the center of the interpretation. The performing subject takes precedence over the observable object, resisting, in a way, the “copy and paste” methods by which colonialism sought to tame the beast. From these perspectives, Murungi continues his own concept of African aesthetic agency:

Unlike Cartesians, we will not make the error of assuming that our starting point is presuppositionless. We admit right at the outset that we cannot completely purge our understanding of all presuppositions, and perhaps, not only will we start with presuppositions; most likely, we will also adopt new ones as we move along.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, each of these testimonies makes use of the Western musicological perspective that Africans immerse themselves into music through experience. It is important to point out, however, that these positions are not exclusive to native Africans, nor may they be generalized across operatic performance, composition, or adaptation by native Africans. Nevertheless, they are the perspectives of specific individuals utilizing an object of Western origin for expression as Africans. Further, this is not to say that performers or critics in the West avoid an autobiographical approach to musical endeavor; rather, the cases covered in this study exemplify the ways in which these participants position their approaches within global operatic practice, seeking to reconcile their own conceptions of *opera* and *Africa*. Likewise, through their interpretation of opera, we are able to better understand their attempts at negotiating definitions not only of Africa and Europe, but of operatic works and operatic voices as they are related to those physical, epistemological, and socio-geographic distinctions.

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<sup>25</sup> “Xpera Uganda Part 3,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbPwTWPjLSw&feature=related> (accessed March 25, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> “Xpera Uganda Part 2,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mn3p4Yo2VvM&feature=related> (accessed March 25, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Murungi, *African Musical Aesthetics*, 67.

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