

# Some medical matters in operatic literature

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This special interest article describes medical material in operatic literature by providing various examples and historical background that focuses on the diverse interpretations of the role of the medical practitioner throughout the history of opera, and highlights the changes in concepts in the practice of medicine from medieval to modern times. Orchestral techniques that mimic some physiological functions are also discussed.

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The literature of opera contains numerous references to medical matters. There are operatic medical men who are cast in a variety of roles—good, bad, and indifferent; there are musical descriptions of illness and physiological functions; and there is even a good deal of psychiatric therapy and psychological manipulation. Most operas were composed when medical science was still groping in its Dark Age, and psychiatry (in the modern sense) was unheard of. A medical practitioner in an opera could be a barber with some nursing skills (e.g., Figaro, in *The Barber of Seville*), a doctor who made house calls to the sick and dying (e.g., in *La Traviata* and *Pelléas and Mélisande*), a crazed experimenter (e.g., the doctor in *Wozzeck*), or, very occasionally, a skilled expert who cured people (e.g., the surgeon in *La Forza del Destino*). There are also some very good amateur nurses (the best: Isolde, who could apparently cure almost anybody) and at least one fine “psychologist” (Dr. Malatesta in *Don Pasquale*).

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Composers also loved to express physiological functions of all kinds through their music, from the mundane to the life-threatening. Mozart, Richard Strauss, and Puccini were past masters at everything from fatal injury (the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*) to hysterical hypochondria (Herod in *Salome*) or terminal tuberculosis (Mimi in *La Bohème*). Mussorgsky succeeded in making Boris Godunov's fatal heart attack so vivid as to cause nervous members of the audience to clutch their chests!

Our first example of a medical practitioner, albeit a very dubious one, is that of Despina in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, a clever minx who masquerades as a very special kind of medical practitioner. The opera is supposed to deal with congenital faithlessness of women, although I believe, rather, that it demonstrates the wickedness of men who are all too willing to deceive, badger, and tempt women. One of these deceits is the fake suicide attempt by their phony Albanian lovers, which brings the maid, Despina, to the rescue in the guise of Dr. Mesmer, who succeeds in "magnetizing" and "curing" the two men. The medical background for this scene is based on the work of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), the famous German physician from whose name the word "mesmerism" was coined. He wrote his graduate thesis in 1771 on planetary influence on man. After experimenting with medical therapy, he developed the theory of "animal magnetism" in treating nervous disorders. The medical fraternity in Vienna found his theories a bit far-fetched, forcing Mesmer to move to Paris in 1778. His treatment there soon became the height of fashion—until the long arm of Hippocrates once more reached out and dealt him a blow! Even though the combined artillery of the French Academy of Medicine and the Academy of Sciences denounced him as a charlatan, there was an element of truth in his ideas. The power of suggestion was soon recognized to be a potent healing force, leading to the development of hypnosis by his pupil, Count Maxime de Puységur, and also to many techniques of modern psychotherapy.

The Mozart family had been friendly with Mesmer in Vienna (the boy Mozart's youthful operetta, *Bastien and Bastienne*, had its première in 1768 in Mesmer's garden theater), and the Viennese patrons who attended *Così fan tutte* on the first night in 1790 were quite familiar with Mesmer's medical procedures. Hence Despina's state-

ment that mesmeric stone originated in Germany and was now successful in France did not tell them anything they did not know.

Modern productions of *Così fan tutte* usually have Despina brandish a horseshoe-shaped magnet, but according to the original stage directions, Despina applies a lodestone to the heads of the "poisoned" men and then moves this "pezzo di calamita" gently along their bodies. The invisible force is meant to draw out the arsenic supposedly ingested by Ferrando and Guglielmo—a rather spectacular anticipation of modern stomach-pumping procedures.

Mozart's orchestration for woodwinds in this scene provides an almost clinical description of the magnetism that makes bodies quiver as it draws out the arsenic. This is an example of a favorite technique used by operatic composers in portraying physiological functions through instrumental imitation. The beating of the heart is ideally suited to this kind of orchestral device, and many different versions, all of which are illustrated with great precision and imagination, can be found. Some of these passages have amorous connotations, as when Masetto presses his ear to Zerlina's bosom in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. In *Così fan tutte*, Guglielmo and Dorabella indulge in a similar, erotically motivated action. In another completely different situation in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Florestan, confined to a silent prison cell, becomes aware of the beating of his own heart. And, in Strauss's *Salome*, the pulsations of the depraved girl's heart become audible as she listens intently for the head of John the Baptist to roll on the floor.

Our next practitioner, Dr. Malatesta, is more a psychotherapist than a medical man. He is a descendant of the theatrical tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, in which the role of the "confidant" was often assigned to the "doctor." It is not likely that Donizetti gave much thought to the medical or psychoanalytical propensities of his character when he wrote *Don Pasquale*. I see Dr. Malatesta as a charismatic, youngish medical practitioner who uses an innovative method of treatment for obsessive disorders. His inventiveness becomes evident when his *modus operandi* is analyzed. He urges a stubborn patient to become involved in a potentially very dangerous relationship and, by making his "treatment" very painful, but ultimately harmless, cures him.

Dr. Malatesta realizes that his aged friend and patient, Don Pasquale, is on a disastrous course

in his desire to marry at such an advanced age. Malatesta is on friendly terms with Pasquale's nephew, Ernesto, and the young widow, Norina, whom Ernesto loves. The adroit Malatesta manipulates Pasquale by disguising Norina as an innocent girl, and allowing Pasquale to "marry" her in a mock ceremony. The "treatment" continues as Pasquale's new "wife" spends his money, fights with him, humiliates him by slapping his face and—to speed up matters—makes it appear that she has an appointment with a lover. It is not surprising that Pasquale will go to any lengths to get rid of his new "wife." In fact, he is delighted that his nephew, Ernesto, is willing to take the woman off his hands! As the opera ends, it is quite clear that Don Pasquale has been effectively dissuaded from ever marrying a young girl.

Malatesta might represent a disciple of Dr. Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843), the founder of homeopathy. This treatment was based on the so-called "law of similarities," the notion that very small doses of dangerous drugs could provide permanent immunity to various ailments. Homeopathy enjoyed widespread popularity during the early 19th century. It was considered an innocuous substitute for bloodletting, purging, and the wholesale administration of toxic drugs. Malatesta obviously believed that giving Don Pasquale a potent, but very small dose of "marriage" would cure him forever of any desire for the real thing.

Our next operatic doctor, Dr. Miracle, is a very strange personage. He appears in the "Antonia act" of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, based on the stories of the celebrated German writer and musician, E. T. A. Hoffmann. This act is taken from the story, *Counsellor Crespel*—probably the most specifically "musical" of all of Hoffmann's tales. Crespel collects valuable Italian violins. Anxious to discover the secret of their superior tone quality, he "dissects" and reassembles them. Both he and his daughter, Antonia (in the story), are convinced that there is a mystical kinship between the human voice and the tone of a fiddle. After promising never to sing again, Antonia listens to her father's playing and declares that it is her own voice that emerges from the body of the violin. The central premise of the story, that singing can cause an overwhelming degree of feverish excitement and lead to the singer's death, is a notion that is not only highly romantic, but also extremely suggestive from a composer's point of view. Offenbach takes full advantage of

the opportunity to combine ardent vocalization with "feverish" violin passages.

Dr. Miracle is the most obviously evil of the four enemies of the hero of Offenbach's opera who function as emissaries of Satan and who are responsible for Hoffmann's undoing. Dr. Miracle performs a variety of startling, supernatural tricks. He uses his extrasensory hypnotic arts to examine and question Antonia, his patient, and he is able to disappear and reappear at will, having no difficulty in passing through solid walls. Later on, when he is left alone with Antonia, he brings to life the portrait of her mother, adds to the girl's feverish excitement by accompanying her on one of Crespel's violins, and drives her to exhaustion and death. To understand all this, we must keep in mind that Antonia is suffering from an unusual condition that makes the act of singing highly injurious to her health. Her mother, a famous opera star, succumbed to the same affliction, so one might say that Antonia has an inherited genetic weakness of the lungs!

Dr. Miracle certainly displays true virtuosity in his therapeutic endeavors. Even though Dr. Dulcamara, in Donizetti's opera, *L'Elisir D'amore* (*The Elixir of Love*) referred to himself as an "encyclopedic doctor," it is Dr. Miracle who, in reality, can best make claim to this title. Indeed, he uses the most comprehensive medical techniques of any practitioner in the operatic repertoire. We see him use hypnotism and pulse-taking of an invisible patient; we see a display of dozens of vials, presumably filled with curative prescriptions; we listen to standard bedside-manner questions; and we hear appeals to the patient's hidden desires, her love for music, for vocalizing, and for her mother. When Antonia remains steadfast in her determination to give up singing (at her father's request), Dr. Miracle uses witchcraft, brings to life the picture of Antonia's mother, and uses the mother's voice to foment her vocal ambitions, while adding to her frenzied excitement with inflammatory passages on the violin. Needless to say, all these "encyclopedic" procedures are illustrated and reinforced by appropriate orchestral passages and by the castanetlike clanking of medicine bottles attached to Dr. Miracle's fingers! It seems odd that someone who claims to be a doctor of medicine should be so eager to hasten his own patient's demise; but then, as we have seen, Dr. Miracle is not interested in helping and healing, only in hurting and destroying.

Among other 19th century operas, there are no less than four medical men in the Verdi repertoire. Those who have their origin in Shakespeare's plays—the doctor in *Macbeth* and Dr. Cajus in *Falstaff*—do not indulge in any medical behavior that is of the slightest dramatic or musical significance; in contrast to these, Dr. Grenville, who appears in the final scene of *La Traviata*, and the military surgeon of *La Forza del Destino* (Act III) are real medical practitioners. Dr. Grenville comes at dawn to visit the ailing Violetta. He feels her pulse (the orchestra tells us that it beats at about 144 pulsations per minute) and before leaving, he whispers to Violetta's maid his prognosis that her mistress has only a few hours left to live. He returns later to give Violetta a sedative and remains to witness her death.

The military surgeon in Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* has the unique distinction of saving the life of the opera's principal tenor by removing a bullet from his chest. Don Alvaro is wounded while leading a charge, and he is brought back to the quarters of the commanding officer to await medical attention. Before leaving to prepare for the operation, the surgeon tells Alvaro to remain very quiet. Nevertheless, Alvaro has a conversation with his best friend, Carlo, and then joins him in singing one of the greatest duets in operatic literature! The doctor has converted Carlo's bedroom into a provisional operating room, and at the end of the duet, Carlo is carried in for the removal of the bullet. The surgeon must have been extraordinarily skilled, for by the end of 80 bars of music, he has successfully removed the bullet and returned a dangerously wounded man to health (without benefit of antibiotics!).

Twentieth century opera has more than its share of doctors. To begin with, we have the physician in Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, a compassionate general practitioner (cum obstetrician) who appears in the final scene, paying a house call on the dying Mélisande. He seems to be the one who has recently helped deliver Mélisande's baby daughter. Peculiarly, although at the very end of the previous scene, the audience saw Golaud (her husband) strike and kill Pelléas (her lover) with his sword, the doctor never alludes to this murder and refers only to the wound that Golaud shortly thereafter had inflicted on his wife. In his opening remarks the doctor assures Golaud that he is in no way responsible for his wife's illness and semiconscious condition.

"Please believe me," he says, "That little wound was not the thing that caused it. It would not have injured a bird. So it is not you who are to blame, my gracious lord. Do not distress yourself, I beg you. Besides, one never can tell. We may still be able to save her." The audience is therefore left to think either that Mélisande is dying from the complications of childbirth (e.g., internal bleeding) or that the doctor is so afraid of the warlike Golaud that he is not speaking the truth about the wound. Mélisande's symptoms (extreme weakness; inability to raise her arms; and mention of winter coming and the sun going down, which may indicate chills and encroaching darkness) could indicate a drop in blood pressure due to loss of blood (either from the wound or from childbirth). So, as with so much in this mysterious opera, we are left with yet another mystery: an incomplete diagnosis!

The doctor in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* is, in at least one respect, different from all other operatic physicians mentioned in this essay: he does not sing a single note. In the second act of this delightful "comedy for music," Baron Ochs and Octavian get involved in a sword fight, during which the Baron receives a nick on the upper part of his right arm. Although the wound is hardly more than a scratch, he screams to high heaven: "Murder . . . I am very hot-blooded . . . Bring bandages . . . Call a doctor . . . I can bleed to death in no time . . . Arrest that man . . . I can tolerate the sight of any blood except my own . . . Call the police . . . Call a physician!!!" The doctor arrives shortly and immediately proceeds to bandage the Baron's arm. He remains on stage for quite a while, but has few opportunities to display his acting skill, save to make some negative gesture when the Baron's host offers the wounded man a strong drink. Here is one instance where the most effective therapy does not come from the medical profession, for it is the drink that soon performs the cure, and the doctor is eventually sent off to prepare a comfortable couch with plenty of featherbedding for his rapidly recovering patient. In his autobiography, *Notes from a Low Singer*, the well-known British bass, Michael Langdon (a famous Baron Ochs in his day) relates one occasion when the doctor decided to add something rather extraneous to his role:

After he had finished his examination of me, or so I thought, I sat back in my chair, assuming my look of pain and outrage. To my surprise the



'Doctor' then appeared in front of me again and began to examine my right eye. He tugged at the lower lid, and out popped my contact lens. I cursed him soundly and he disappeared round the back of the chair . . . . I saw that my lens had landed on my knee, but as I bent forward to retrieve it, I felt a sharp tap on my neck. The 'Doctor' was improvising some business with his reflex hammer, which, being unexpected, I did not find at all funny. My lens shot off my knee and into a bowl of water standing just in front of me. That was the last I saw of it . . . .

Dr. Spinelloccio in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* is another physician who does not have much of a chance. His patient, old Buoso Donati, has already died by the time the doctor turns up on his house call! Since Buoso's family is keeping his death a secret, in order to alter his will, they have Gianni Schicchi impersonate the dead man, and they keep Dr. Spinelloccio away from the patient, preventing him from looking too closely. We learn that Spinelloccio is a graduate of the renowned medical school of Bologna, an institution so respected that the doctor tells Buoso's family: "It's certainly a fact my patients never die! I do not claim any personal merit. The success is due entirely to the excellence of the Bolognese school . . ." (In this scene we have yet another physical function set to music: when the doctor asks the family whether his medicine worked on the patient, Puccini has the contrabassoon execute a coarse and realistic imitation of a bowel movement.)

Twentieth century realism has brought a harrowing aspect to some operatic medical scenes. We have the frightening death scene of the old Prioress (presumably from cancer) in the *Dialogues of the Carmelites* by Poulenc in which the doctor can only stand by and let nature take its course.

The most unpleasant of all modern medical sagas in opera is undoubtedly the scene in Berg's *Wozzeck* where the sadistic doctor torments the half-mad Wozzeck, employing him for dietary experiments. "Have you been eating your beans, Wozzeck?" he asks, "Beans in quantity, nothing but beans. And then, next week, we will add a bit of mutton. I am starting a revolution in medicine . . . 10% of ureic acid and salt of ammonia, hyperoxydul . . ." If we accused poor Despina of quackery, we must say that, compared to the crazy health-faddist theories of Berg's physician,

her magnetic procedures seem highly professional! After torturing Wozzeck, the doctor turns his malevolent attentions to the Captain, who is a hypochondriac. The doctor begins by scaring the captain, telling him he is on his way to see a woman dying of cancer of the uterus; then he begins diagnosing the captain's own physical condition: "As for you . . . hmm . . . bloated . . . obese . . . thick neck . . . typical apoplectic symptoms . . . . You might well get an apoplexia cerebri . . . possibly just along one side . . . or, if you are lucky, only below the waist . . . or you might become mentally incompetent, and just vegetate thereafter . . . ."

But to close on a somewhat happier note, there is one operatic success story of which I am sure every physician would be proud! In Janacek's opera, *The Makropoulos Case*, we learn that, around 1600, a medical man at the court of Rudolph II of Bohemia (now Czechoslovakia) had brewed up a chemical formula for longevity and fed it to his daughter, the 16-year-old Elina Makropoulos. Now, 327 years later, she is still going strong! (In fact, this opera, based on the play, *Makropoulos* by the Czech author, Karel Capek, refers to some real medical history: the alchemists of that period who lived in the famous Golden Street near Prague Castle were renowned for their chemical potions, though none quite achieved the degree of Dr. Makropoulos's success!) However, the opera shows the dark side of longevity. Elina is not content with her eternal youth, and by the end of the opera, she has grown so weary of life that she rejects the chemical formula that has kept her alive all these years. Now, unable to "renew her prescription," she will rapidly age and die, but she does not care. She has grown stale, bored, and blasé, and when asked about her father's great secret formula, she merely says, "It is written here: 'I, Hieronymos Makropoulos, physician to the Emperor Rudolph.' I don't want the stuff anymore! Here take the formula . . ." She tries to give it to a young girl, but Krista, having had a good look at the results of everlasting life, throws the formula into the fire.

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