

## Preface

Arriving at the dungeon for his two o’clock appointment, the dismayed Client (bass-baritone) learns that Mistress Tosca is out with a cold and that his Domme today will be Mistress Salome (mezzo-soprano). Nevertheless, he launches into the scene according to their prearranged script, donning a pink dress and pigtails. The substitute mistress, whose role is that of an opera diva, catches him spying on her as she is getting changed after a performance. While twisting his arm, she sings in a deep, menacing forte: “What are you doing in my dressing room, Polly Puddlepants?” (She forgets to call him a “naughty little bitch,” though, and has to be reminded.) This scene is from *Safe Word*, a 2017 one-act opera by composer Robert Paterson and librettist David Cote, which premiered at Nashville Opera in January 2017.<sup>1</sup> During the half-hour performance, directed by John Hoomes, the Client and his Domme engage in spanking, flogging, and verbal abuse, while numerous layers of role-play develop and intermingle in self-consciously surprising ways.

A year later, in January of 2018, Seattle saw the premiere of a brand-new adaptation of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari’s 1909 intermezzo *Il segreto di Susanna*, with the revamped title *Susanna’s Secret: A BDSM Opera*. Here, Susanna (soprano) hides from her husband (baritone) a penchant for

erotic power exchanges, which she explores instead with a submissive friend (mute). The driving force behind this project was soprano and stage director Sammie Gorham, founder of the Seattle Modern Opera Company, who is also an outspoken practitioner of SM—or BDSM, the now widespread acronym subsuming bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism.<sup>2</sup> In addition to directing and singing the lead role, Gorham herself adapted the libretto to a present-day setting, adding the BDSM theme in the process.

I ask Gorham what the two practices, each of which plays an important part in her life, have to do with each other. Is there any common ground? “They both evoke a lot of emotion and for me, specifically, both things make me cry, both things make me laugh hysterically, both things make me sob and weep, you know?”<sup>3</sup> Gorham goes on to explain: “I’m a switch”—that is, a BDSM practitioner who alternates between being top or bottom—“but typically I’m a submissive. And I definitely have the big emotional reactions a lot. But I’ve always been a crier. Music, or anything, moves me and I just weep.” In marked contrast to psychoanalytic theories of sadomasochism, which tend to conceptualize it as emotional disconnection, a present-day practitioner like Gorham sees BDSM as a source of the powerful emotional experience that is also the hallmark of opera. But there is also an affinity to be found in the tension between fantasy and reality, between artifice and authenticity: “There are a lot of ridiculous scenarios that people really like. Depending on the kind of scenario that you want,” Gorham says about BDSM, “it can be very far-fetched, or it can be very real.” Of course, no operagoer is unaware of the genre’s predilection for far-fetched stories. Like BDSM, it involves actual human bodies in fantasy scenarios, which can be as mesmerizingly intense for those who are into them as they can be embarrassing or ludicrous if the spell misfires. “I think both of them are ‘ok, let’s go play in this fantasy world for a little while,’ you know.” The make-believe that is a basic condition of theater is heightened or exaggerated by music and stories alike: “Opera is like the highest form of fantasy theater,” Gorham remarks; “it’s this crazy music that doesn’t happen in real life—ever—and these crazy situations. And then with a lot of BDSM and kink stuff, it’s definitely the same thing. It’s this highly fantasized realm,” she concludes, “so I just think they’re pretty similar.”

*Deviant Opera* is a book about such similarities. *Safe Word* and *Susanna's Secret* are by no means alone in displaying them on stage. As the Domme in the former piece puts it in one of her arias, “Ritual humiliation / is sweeping the nation.”<sup>4</sup> And not just the nation: in opera houses all over the world the imagery of BDSM and fetishism—whips, chains, leather, handcuffs, and riding crops, but also the physical enactment of eroticized power and violence—has become a recurrent element in contemporary mise-en-scène. As a result, canonical operas are regularly being reenvisioned on stage as erotic games of dominance and submission. *Deviant Opera* seeks to understand this cultural phenomenon by interpreting it in relation both to specific operatic works and to operatic performance in general. It treats the contemporary imagery of BDSM as an optics through which opera’s past configurations of sex, gender, power, and violence, as well as the physical interaction between singing bodies and listening audiences in the present, can be perceived.

On one level, then, *Deviant Opera* is about a current tendency in opera staging. It builds on scholarship from the last two decades that has treated opera as a mutable onstage phenomenon, affording primacy to the way it is seen and heard in concrete productions—whether live or mediated—over its codification in scores. By studying operatic staging via a particular element of its contemporary visual code and analyzing a cross-section of its concrete onstage manifestations, the book furnishes opera studies with a fresh perspective that could also be applied to other habits of contemporary stage direction. On another level, however, this particular imagery evokes concerns that resonate deeply with both historical and contemporary discourse on opera: the affinity with supposedly deviant sexuality that has insistently adhered to opera; the obsession of operatic plots with the intersection of power, violence, and desire; opera’s normative reproduction or performative subversion of misogynist assumptions; the hyperbolic theatricality of opera’s musical and textual representation of sexual desire; and the discourse of sensual enjoyment associated with the experience of operatic song.

Therefore, *Deviant Opera* is also a book about what opera *is* to the twenty-first century. It describes a historical trajectory from the operas of Handel and Mozart via Wagner and Puccini to Berg and beyond, but the works and their contexts are always approached from the perspective of their theatrical instantiations today. These productions are arenas where

past and present notions of sexuality and power clash. Taken together, however, they can also be understood as a performative interpretation of the art of opera itself and its role in contemporary culture. This book argues for the necessity of connecting sensual enjoyment with critical engagement. The intense pleasure of the music—and the operatic voice in particular—remains key to the art form, cherished for its own sake by singers and audiences alike, whichever production frames it. The insistent intertwinement of that sensuality with disconcerting notes of power and violence is what necessitates reflective criticism. In the end the productions discussed here point to the uncomfortable fact that opera habitually eroticizes pain and humiliation, that the audience is expected to come to the opera house to take sensual pleasure in hearing and seeing the intense suffering of others. Hence, their offering of operatic *jouissance* is of a piece with their appeal for critical engagement with sex, power, and gender; without the former there would be no incentive for the latter. Together, these two aspects of opera form a vital basis for the genre's continuing relevance to the new millennium.

Since stagings like the ones I write about are bound to puzzle, infuriate, or intrigue almost any regular operagoer today, I have strived to write accessibly enough to reach readers outside the narrow straits of opera scholarship. I also set out to do justice to the strange combination of the sensual, the silly, and the sinister inherent to my topic (an ambition that remained my objective long after I had realized its fundamental impossibility). The book is neither an attack on or a celebration of either contemporary opera staging, SM, or their combination. It argues that the onstage foregrounding of sex, power, and desire should compel us—as audience members, as opera fans, as cultural critics—to think about these issues through and with the enjoyment of operatic performance. My objective has thus not been to reach a conclusive ethical assessment but to encourage and stimulate such thinking. Neither practice can be stowed away securely in compartments labeled “misogyny,” “subversion,” “liberation,” or “oppression.” They are not reliable molds that produce the same result over and over but continuous performative games with high stakes. They must be addressed by the individual listener and spectator in a process of interpretative thought that can never be disentangled from the *jouissance* that is the promise of opera, whether it is fulfilled or not.

*Deviant Opera* represents my own attempt to engage with these productions, informed by the historical and theoretical contexts that I have found the most rewarding and revealing in each individual case. At any given moment I invite my readers to creative disagreement: if there is one point I am inclined to repeat over and over, it is that opera's undercurrents of power, violence, and eroticism require an open and continuous critical dialogue. While active querying of the ethics and politics of a staging does not obstruct the particular pleasure that we seek when attending the opera, that pleasure can never be entirely isolated from the political. The opera stage is an arena where the problem of sex, power, and violence is made manifest and played out in physical form. Once it is granted its own agency, operatic mise-en-scène intervenes in the absorption, much to the dismay of those who would prefer to be swept away by the waves of musical beauty and turn a deaf ear to opera's more discordant notes. A staging can illuminate, interrogate, and question—or endorse and capitalize on—the brutality of the plot and the sensuous force of the music, without eradicating either. The productions addressed in *Deviant Opera* highlight, in various ways, the interplay of eroticism and violence, desire and power. Other flaws and merits aside, they do not allow us to forget the fact that canonic opera is a form of culture that thrives on our capacity to derive pleasure from the suffering and humiliation of others—seeing it, hearing it, relishing it.