

# From Page to Stage: Opera Librettos

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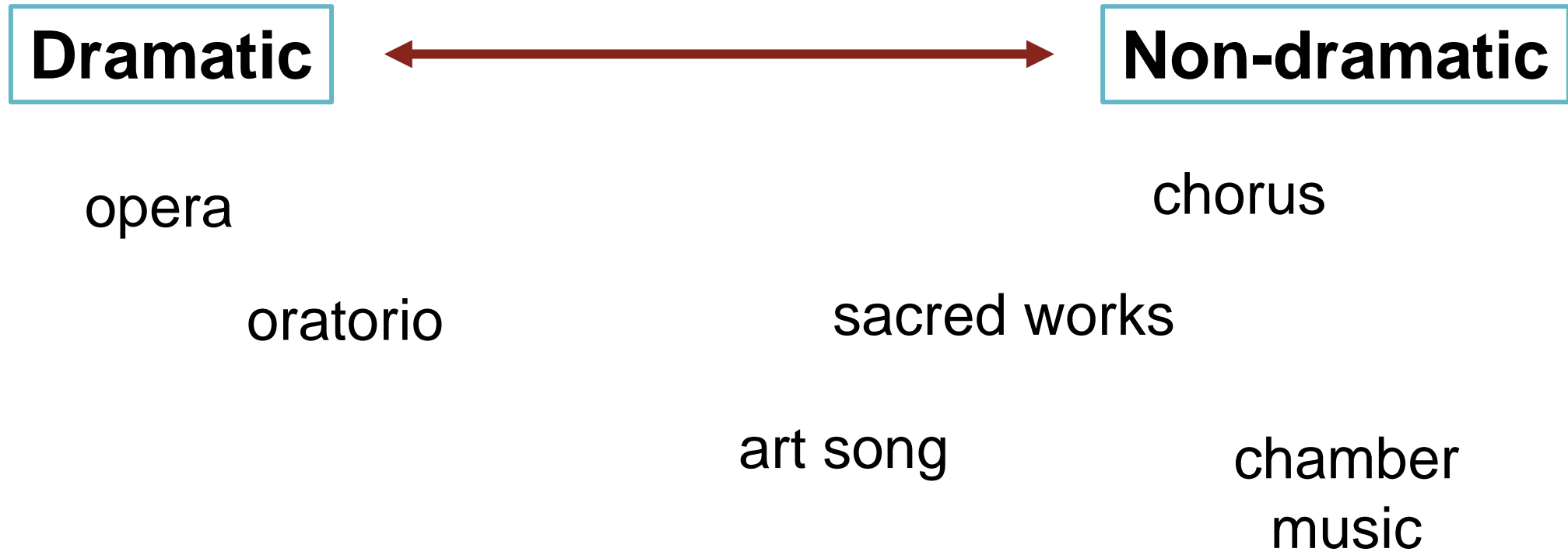


# About Me

- Adult Services Specialist, Gardner Library
- Composer and music theorist
- Taught at KU, UMKC, Missouri Western
- Opera *The Murderess* with librettist Trip Venturella



# Classical Music and Words?



# Opera Libretto

- Libretto = all the text for an extended musical work (like opera)
- Often not written by the composer
  - Not always!
- Often written before the music
  - Not always!
- Not just in Italian :)



# Different Types of Opera Texts

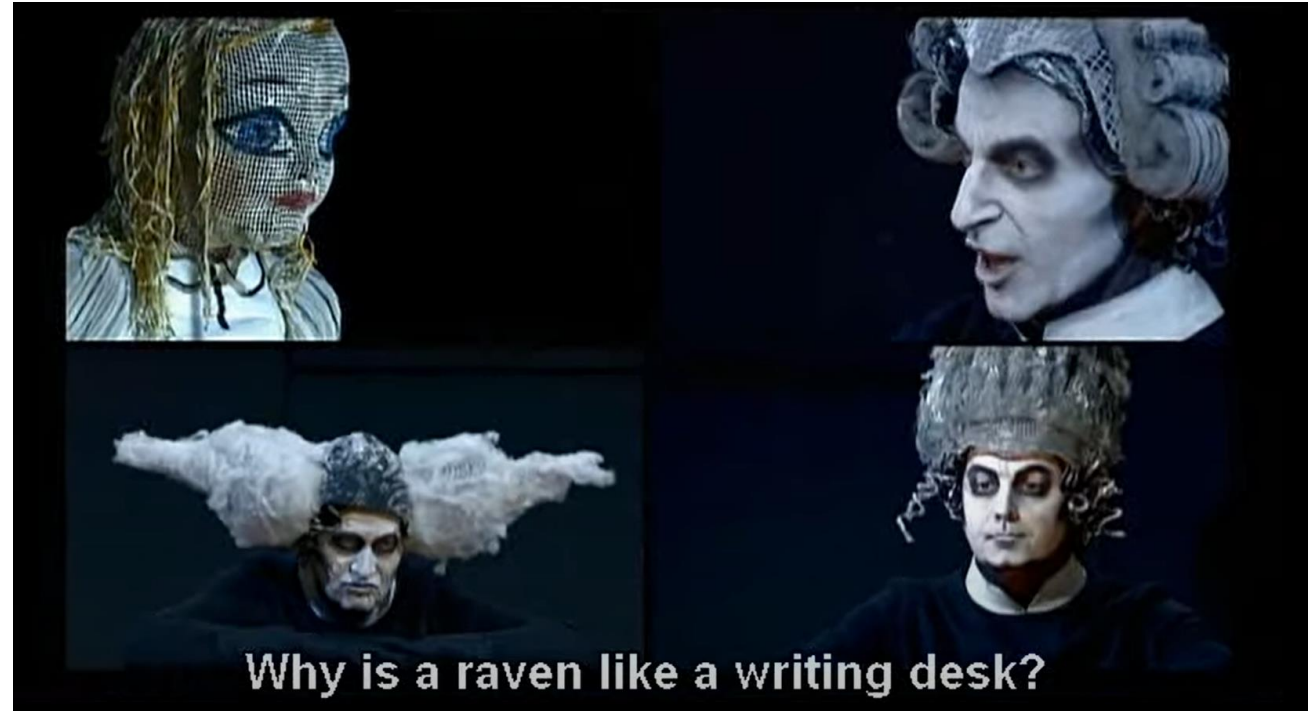
- Pre 19<sup>th</sup> Century = in verse
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century to present = not (always) in verse
- Adaptations of myths, plays, and books





*The Marriage of Figaro*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,  
libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, 1786

Based on a stage comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais



*Alice in Wonderland*, Unsuk Chin, libretto by David Henry  
Hwang and Unsuk Chin, 2007

Based on the book by Lewis Carroll



# Different Types of Opera Texts

- Pre 19<sup>th</sup> Century = in verse
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century to present = not (usually) in verse
- Adaptations of myths, plays, and books
- Assembled texts
  - Using poetry or other source material



*Doctor Atomic*, John Adams, libretto by Peter Sellars, 2005

-declassified government and science documents

-pre-existing poems

## **Holy Sonnets: Batter my heart, three-person'd God**

BY JOHN DONNE

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.





# Different Types of Opera Texts

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- Adaptations of myths, plays, and books
- Assembled texts
  - Using poetry or other source material
- New, original stories



# Particularities of Libretto

- Everything is sung!
- Significantly fewer words than a stage play
  - Multiply the time it takes to read something aloud x7 to get length of piece
- Dramatic time is stretched
- Make room for arias
- Music vs. words – which is more important?



## ***The Crucible* by Arthur Miller**

PARRIS: Betty. Child. Dear child. Will you wake, will you open up your eyes? Betty, little one...

ABIGAIL: Uncle? Susanna Walcott's here from Dr. Griggs.

PARRIS: Oh? Let her come, let her come.

ABIGAIL: Come in, Susanna.

SUSANNA: Reverend, sir?

PARRIS: What does the doctor say, child?

SUSANNA: Dr. Griggs he bid me come and tell you, Reverend sir, that he cannot discover no medicine for it in his books.

PARRIS: Then he must search on.

SUSANNA: Aye, sir, he have been searchin' his books since he left you, sir, but he bid me tell you, that you might look to unnatural things for the cause of it.

## ***The Crucible* by Robert Ward, libretto adapted by Bernard Stambler**

PARRIS: Oh my God, help me! Child! Betty child, will you wake? Will you open your eyes?

ABIGAIL: Uncle... Uncle Parris. Susanna has come from the Doctor. He says he has looked, but cannot find no cure in his books for Betty. He bids you look to unnatural causes.



# *The Murderess*

- “A True Crime Chamber Opera”
- Libretto by Trip Venturella
- Four singers and chamber ensemble: piano, flute, clarinet (and bass clarinet), violin, cello, and percussion
- One act, one hour long



# *The Murderess*

- Inspired by “Jolly” Jane Toppan, a serial killer from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century
  - Nurse who poisoned her patients
- Aimed to center women’s stories
- Also wanted dramatic characters and tense situations



# Characters

- Jane Toppan: mezzo-soprano, dramatic voice. A suspicious nurse.
- Minnie Alden: mezzo-soprano, less dramatic color. A very sick old woman.
- Julianne Agner: soprano, lyric voice. A young, naïve housekeeper.
- Charlie: tenor, light and comedic. A pharmacist.



**Scene 1:** Jane gives Minnie an exam, Julianne expresses her wariness of Jane. Julianne asks for the evening off, Minnie asks Jane to stay and cook dinner.

**Scene 2:** Jane goes to the pharmacy and buys strychnine and laudanum.

**Scene 3:** Julianne is going through Jane's things. They have a confrontation.

**Scene 4:** Jane cooks dinner laced with laudanum and reveals that she'll poison Minnie with the strychnine that evening.

**Scene 5:** Julianne is on a date with Charlie and they realize Jane's plan.

**Scene 6:** Jane's plot is interrupted, she is arrested and taken away. Minnie wakes up and reveals that she hired Jane to end her life. She convinces Julianne to finish the job and the opera ends with a gunshot to Minnie's chest.



# Collaboration Process

- Broad themes of show = both of us
- Outline, libretto drafts, final libretto = Trip
- Edits to libretto, all of the music = me





Initial ideas and outline	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> libretto draft, composing begins	Final libretto	First draft of full opera, begin orchestration	Full opera finished	Piano/vocal score and parts made	Premiere with Landlocked Opera Company in KC
Summer 2020	September 2020	October 2020	April 2021	May 2021	July 2021	July 2023



# Outline

- Determining the scope of the story
  - Which would be narrow in a one-hour opera!
- Creating the characters
  - And who would sing them
- Our outline is mostly accurate to the final show



# Outline

Scene 1 – Jane is the private nurse to Minnie, a rich, very ill woman, serving her along with a young maid named Julianne. Julianne believes that Jane is not to be trusted, and may only be there to take Minnie’s money, but Minnie rejects the idea. She believes Jane is a kind and loving nurse. After Jane enters and gives Minnie her morning check-up, Julianne asks about taking the night off to visit “a friend of her sister’s,” so Minnie asks Jane to cook her dinner.



# Edit Process

- Cutting back the word count
  - Again and again and again
- Fixing some plot holes



## Draft 1

What can I do for her  
when she's sick like this?  
I would do anything  
She's my only family  
Like a mother—more than a  
    mother  
Mothers give you a home  
Because you are theirs  
Minnie gave me a home  
When I was a stranger

## Draft 2

What can I do for her  
when she's sick like this?  
She's my only family  
Like a mother—more than a  
    mother  
Mother and father and home.

## Final Libretto

What can I do for her  
when she's sick like this?  
She's like a mother—more than a  
    mother.  
A home.



# Arias

- A piece for one voice that can be self-contained
- Moment for singer to shine
- Tends to not contain plot
- Crucial for most operas



## Draft 1

No major aria for Minnie.

## Draft 2



## Final Libretto

Nearly the same!

## MINNIE

A strange one  
I was in an open field  
And saw a shadow running in the distance  
Once it got close—it was my horse, Lady Arabella  
From before I married Richard  
When I was still young

I was wearing my riding habit  
Gold buttons and cornflower silk on my wrists  
But it was me, as I am now  
And there was no way  
I would climb into the saddle

Then suddenly, I was on her back  
Like I had been lifted through the air  
Jane, I haven't ridden since before the War of the Rebellion  
It's a good omen, I think.  
It means that tonight is a good night.



# After the Opera is Written...

- Funding/Commission might include performance
- Be practical about production
- Reach out to small companies





# Questions?

