

Images of War in Opera

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to raise questions with wars seen as part of cultural history attempting, thus, to provide a cultural reading. As such, I attempt to show operatic responses to war, to the meaning of violence, and to the ways they illustrate emotions that are at the core of such destructive activities (that is, patriotism, heroism and so forth) and depict wartime ideologies, practices, values and symbols. This paper is a critical and selective overview of images of war in opera mainly up to the twentieth century. There is no aspect in human activities which is not related, more or less, with the issue of war. War has been part of the total human experience. Subsequently, my paper is about the various ways of projecting images of war in opera. In more detail, it is about the ways that opera, since the era of its birth, responds to human conflicts, named wars, and bring on stage an interpretation: an illustration of a hero, a context of values related to the necessity or the avoidance of war, a message to humanity to make us look at our civilization in either positive or negative ways. A cultural contemplation is not about “truths” of the war but raises the question as to how different “truths” inhabit the political and cultural Western European world by means of the total work of art of opera. Opera has had a fundamental role in privileging some ideals of “truths” from others. The main aim is to raise questions with wars seen as part of cultural history attempting, thus, to provide a cultural reading. As such, I attempt to show operatic responses to war, to the meaning of violence, and to the ways they illustrate emotions that are at the core of such destructive activities (that is, patriotism, heroism and so forth) and depict wartime ideologies, practices, values and symbols.

Keywords: opera, war, culture, heroism, patriotism.

1. Introduction

There is no aspect in human activities which is not related, more or less, with the issue of war. War has been part of the total human experience.

Subsequently, this paper is about the various ways of projecting images of war in opera. In more detail, it is about the ways that opera, since the era of its birth, responds to human conflicts, named wars, and bring on stage an interpretation: an illustration of a hero, a context of values related to the necessity or the avoidance of war, a message to humanity to make us look at our civilization in either positive or negative ways. A cultural contemplation is not about “truths” of the war but raises the question as to how different “truths” inhabit the political and cultural Western European world by means of the total work of art of opera. Opera has had a fundamental role in privileging some ideals of “truths” from others.

Thus, my paper is not just an overview of operas related to war since it raises questions with wars seen as part of cultural history attempting, thus, to provide a cultural reading. As such, I attempt to show operatic responses to war, to the meaning of violence, and to the ways they illustrate emotions that are at the core of such destructive activities (that is, patriotism, heroism and so forth) and depict wartime ideologies, practices, values and symbols. This is a very broad issue to be dealt with in detail within the limited extent of an article. So, I choose to present a critical and selective overview of images of war in opera mainly up to the twentieth century.

2. Baroque era

During the baroque era, royal authority is more than evidently established. There are dominant rulers who rule regardless any other authority, for example, Louis the fourteenth (XIV) in France, known as Louis the Great (Louis le Grand) or the Sun King (Roi Soleil). So, Machiavelli's famous phrase "war is fair when is necessary" meant that necessity is decided by the ruler, that is, the King: "Salvation of the princes is the supreme law" ("Salus principis suprema lex"), as he says.

At this era, the images of war itself in opera are rare. Claudio Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1624)¹ is one of them. The *Combattimento* sets an extended passage from Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata*. Tasso's text, set in the time of the first crusade, is about the combat between the Christian knight Tancredi and the Saracen maiden Clorinda. They are lovers, but their faces are hidden by armour when they meet in battle. Tancredi deals Clorinda a mortal blow and recognizes her after removing her helmet. In Clorinda's dying moments Tancredi baptizes her. The finale of this opera has an expressive passage in which she sees heaven opening to receive her.² Religious faith here is the most important value to be supported since it justifies the crusade.

It is worth mentioning that in order to convey the sounds of battle, Monteverdi includes other musical gestures—the trotting of a horse (motto del cavallo), trumpet fanfares, instrumental passages representing the two warriors circling each other and the sounds of their swords clashing, and the first ever example of written-out pizzicato to illustrate Tancredi and Clorinda hitting each other with the pommels of their swords.³

The second example that projects an image of war at the baroque era is Henry Purcell's *King Arthur* (1692) which is an original semi-opera. It was written in collaboration with John Dryden who wrote the libretto. Dryden was forced to make several changes to his initial conception⁴ because courtly allegory had to fit the monarchy of the moment. Purcell was limited

¹ In the *Combattimento* Monteverdi claimed to have recreated the 'agitated' (concitato) genus "described by Plato in the third book of his Rhetoric [Republic] in these words: 'Take that harmony that would fittingly imitate the utterances of a brave man who is engaged in warfare'." In its purest form, Monteverdi's genere concitato involves dividing a semibreve into sixteen semiquavers repeated rapidly one after the other, a technique that can be heard most clearly in the passage where the narrator begins 'L'onta irrita lo sdegno a la vendetta'. (14. John Whenham, "Introduction", *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, SV153, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W633_GBAJY1401905. "Introduction", *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, SV153, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W633_GBAJY1401905 (14/5/2019)).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ As we are informed, it was conceived as a libretto by John Dryden as early as 1684 but since it conveyed extreme partiality to Charles II, the King's death a year later determined its quick demise, if indeed the text ever saw the light of day. Seven years later it re-emerged when Purcell collaborated with Dryden in an original semi-opera. (See "Purcell King Arthur" (Gramophone, the world's best classical music reviews), <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/purcell-king-arthur> (14/5/2019))

to a historical patriotic fantasy and was left with little space for the expression of magic and pathos. Yet, in this opera Purcell's music shines through strongly.⁵

So, these are the two most known baroque operas which articulate images of war. However, the values related to war, for example heroism and honor, are represented in a number of operas during this period.

It makes sense that at the era of monarchy in most European countries, with opera mainly addressed to the ruling class, concepts related to war were transformed and personified in heroes who were idealized. This is particularly evident in the lyric tragedies of Jean-Baptiste Lully in which music plays an equal role with the text and very often includes positive references to royal authority. Operas were often dealing with allegorical and mythical subjects, in which heroism and the sense of duty towards one's country supersedes any sentiment of love. Of course, country is meant to be the monarch. Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Armide* (1786) is a characteristic example towards that end. Similarly, to the previously mentioned opera of Monteverdi, it is based on Torquato Tasso's poem *Gerusalemme liberata*. Much of the libretto of *Armide* is taken right out of the Tasso's original, but Philippe Quinault, the librettist, supplied Lully with a happy resolution of classical demands and baroque lavishness.

The values which are brought forth from the very beginning, that is, the prologue of the opera, are Wisdom and Glory. I should mention that the prologues, in Lully's operas, not only introduce the courtly entertainment to the audience, they also pay homage to the King. So, the opening is usually an allegorical prologue praising a "hero", while the referenced "hero" suggests Lully's patron, Louis the fourteenth.

In the plot of this opera, *Armide* is a seductive sorceress who falls in love with the irresistible and infallible Christian knight Renaud the moment she tries to murder him after capturing the rest of the Crusaders in her homeland. At a deeper level, as Kylie Harwell-Sturgill rightly observes, "the opera depicts an allegory which meets the taste of late-seventeenth century Parisians by means of an exoticized woman's internal struggle with love and war".⁶

3. The era of Enlightenment

The era of Enlightenment brings forth universal values and faith in progress of humanity. Conflict in action might point to the new social order with the bourgeois class as the ruler. As musicologist David Charlton observes, "a general impulse was felt towards portrayal of the whole of society in a sympathetic and unifying light".⁷

At this era triumphs in France the so-called "rescue opera", which according to Charlton is "an inauthentic term of convenience applied to those French operas of the Revolution period (and before) in which, as a climax, a leading character is delivered by another, or by several others, from moral and/or physical danger"⁸. The rescue opera comes out in response to the French Revolution and a new genre that grows out of the *opéra comique*, or comedy opera. Rescue

It is worth mentioning that the final scene brings on a tableau of Britannia and various celebrations of Britain, ending with a hymn to St George and the British state (See *Ibid.*).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See Kylie Harwell-Sturgill, The Momentum of Lully's "Armide" and Opera Columbus, <https://radio.wosu.org/post/momentum-lullys-armide-and-opera-columbus#stream/0> (14/5/2019).

⁷ David Charlton, *Music and the French Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 173.

⁸ David Charlton, Rescue opera. In *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000023227> (14/5/2019).

opera has a certain relationship to reality through its portrayal of actual events. Combination of realism with happy endings is, more or less, in line with the acceptance of current social change and the idea of progress. Heroic spirit is dignified. André Grétry's *Richard the Lionheart* (1784) – the story based on King Richard I and the time he was held captive in Austria – is one of the most known examples of this kind.

4. Nineteenth century: The age of nationalism and romanticism

This era, since the end of eighteenth century, also brings forth the emotion of patriotism since state is not perceived as a “property” of the dynastic rulers; it becomes a tool of powerful groups of people who are devoted to the abstract notions of freedom, or nation, or revolution. Nineteenth century becomes the age of nationalism and romanticism. The spirit of romantic heroism inspires a lot the art of this period.

The most important changes, concerning the notions and values related to human conflict, can be named as (1) the shift of focus from “oneness” to “collectiveness”, (2) the reconstruction of the notion of “heroism” through adoption of a more supporting, or sympathizing, view of the ones that are treated with injustice and the ones that are not the winners, AND (3) the projection of the emotion of patriotism, or loving one's country, which corresponds to the creation of nations at that century.

(1) The notion of “community”, or “the collective being”, is evident in Meyerbeer's grand operas. His opera entitled *Les Huguenots* (1836), where a love story takes place during a religious war, is such a characteristic example. Historical “reading” is in harmony with history's philosophy of that time, according to which it is not the person that matters in a historical process but the social forces. Correspondingly, historic opera at that era demands a new dramatic style capable of expressing the autonomous forces of the social movements, abandoning thus the practice of presenting a plot centered upon the fate of persons/soloists. Such a shift towards ‘collectiveness’ is reflected upon this opera.

Examples of other significant operas of this era, in which the community spirit replaces, or becomes equal in importance with, the separate heroes are the operas *Die Meistersinger* (1867) by Richard Wagner, *Aida* (1871) by Giuseppe Verdi, and *Boris Godunov* (1873) by Modest Mussorgsky.

(2) In nineteenth century cultural values express a more supporting, or sympathizing view of the ones that are treated with injustice and the ones that are not the winners. In other words, at the romantic nineteenth century, the approach to the victims in art is not always negative. A good early and well-known example in art, in this respect, is Francisco Goya's painting *The third of May 1808* (1814).

In contrast to most war paintings which serve commemorative purposes, Goya's portrait of war is a blunter, contemporary take on war. The work illustrates the martyrdom that occurred in 1808 when 21,000 Spanish troops attempted to protect the city of Medina del Rio Seco from Napoleon's invasion. In this painting, for the first time, victims are illustrated as the ‘good’ ones, and the conquerors (the army of Napoleon) as cold and emotionless warriors. As it is characteristically written, “there are no heroes in the painting, only victims; there are no brave deeds to marvel at, only bloody executions; and there is no noble cause being commemorated, only revolt and suppression”.⁹

⁹ Analysis of The Third of May, 1808, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/paintings-analysis/third-of-may-goya.htm>, 14/5/2019.



Picture 1. Francisco Jose de Goya, *The Third of May 1808* (1814)

So, opposition to the heroic tradition of the winners is growing. French revolution, embodying the idea of freedom of the nations is reflected in nineteenth-century opera where sympathy for the occupied nations is articulated. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that there is also a growing sympathy and support of the cause for Greek independence. Gioachino Antonio Rossini's opera *The Siege of Corinth* (*Le Siege de Corinthe*, 1826) is such an example. It is important to mention that for the French revision, Rossini hired two literati, Balocchi and Soumet, who rewrote the libretto. They kept the original story line but changed the setting: it is not Venice anymore but the Greek city of Corinth to which the Turks are laying siege. The Greeks are fighting for their survival. The ending is tragic: Corinth is dramatically razed to the ground and Pamira kills herself instead of marrying the Turkish sultan. As Rita Laurence observes, feelings in France ran high for the cause of Greek independence at the time, and the librettists were able to capitalize on those emotions. Rossini additionally conducted a benefit concert for the Greek cause and raised quite a sum.¹⁰

(3) Nations in conflict bring forth the idea of patriotism, of loving one's country, as I mentioned before. Verdi's *Aida* is such an example and one of the most popular works in the operatic repertoire. *Aida* combines the heroic quality and spectacle of grand opera with the composer's preference for vivid character portrayal and rich harmonic and orchestral color. At the core of this opera there is a tragic love story, as individuals try to balance their love and duty for their nation with their wish for personal happiness. As Harley Schlanger observes, the conflicting emotions of patriotism and betrayal, love and rejection, family loyalty versus national duty, give Verdi a rich field from which to produce a variety of recognizable human strengths and weaknesses.¹¹

Verdi lived at the era of Italy's Austrian occupation which caused political resistance all over the country. French revolution influenced the Italians who fought for a united Italy against the might of Austria in the name of the ideas of patriotism and independence. The composer was himself an impassioned patriot and backer of unification, and one can see and hear, in the appeals

¹⁰ See Rita Laurance, Gioachino Rossini "Le siège de Corinthe" (The Siege of Corinth) opera, <https://www.allmusic.com/composition/le-si%C3%A8ge-de-corinthe-the-siege-of-corinth-opera-mc0002377532>, 14/5/2019.

¹¹ See Harley Schlanger, Houston Grand Opera presents a spectacular "AIDA" (April-May 2007). *The Schiller Institute*, https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/educ/reviews/aida_hou.html (14/5/2019).

to patriotism in the opera, his personal commitment to the ideal of a united nation. We could even say that his music provided the soundtrack to the Italians' desire for independence.

Thus Verdi reflected, and even shaped, the struggle for Italian unification; in 1848, after revolution broke out in Milan, he wrote from Paris to his librettist Francesco Piave: "Honour to these heroes! Honour to all Italy, which in this moment is truly great! The hour of her liberation has sounded." He also added: "You speak to me of music! What's got into you?... Do you believe I want to concern myself now with notes, with sounds?... There must be only one music welcome to the ears of Italians in 1848. The music of the cannon!"¹²

Quite a few of Verdi's early operas (for example, *Nabucco* (1842), *Ermani* (1846) and *Attila* (1846)), became powerful vehicles for his political beliefs and the nationalist cause in Italy.

Richard Wagner's nationalism, on the other hand, is expressed in a quite complex and philosophical manner, not always the same throughout his creativity, by using archetypes taken from mythology and mainly illustrating German spirit by means of music. I will need at least one more paper to explain briefly how the notion of "Germaness" can be interpreted in his music dramas and the possible answers will lead us away from the main purpose of this study which is to critically present images of war in opera. However, Wagner's ideas and works are at the heart of romanticism and romanticism is at the heart of nineteenth-century music and, of course, opera.¹³

5. Realism in nineteenth century

Romanticism, at least the part of romantic ideas referring to society, includes some of the earliest ideas to criticize our cultural values and the growth of industrialization in society which started at the closing of eighteenth century; the same cultural values which appeared almost perfect through the looking glass of Enlightenment. Romanticism is against modernity. But the belief in goodness of humankind brings forth emotion. Art has to articulate emotion, the triumph of love, the ideal human state of compassion, all of them clearly reflected on nineteenth-century opera. Art is still, as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it, 'the means to escape from the sufferings of life'. Thus, most images of war on stage do not suggest any critiques or protests of the act of war; they rather stretch ideas of heroism, of loving one's nation, or they refer to historical moments of conflict where a fateful love story might develop.

On the other hand, realistic movements (realism, naturalism and verismo) which appear from mid-nineteenth century, influence operatic writing (starting with the libretto of Verdi's *La Traviata*), attempting to construct a critique to society and the established order.

¹² See Verdi's quotations in "How Giuseppe Verdi's music helped bring Italy together" (BBC-culture) <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20131002-verdi-when-music-meets-politics>, (14/5/2019).

¹³ Starting with my PhD thesis entitled "Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibemungen*: The reforging of the sword, or, towards a reconstruction of the people's consciousness", UK, 1996, I have dealt quite extensively with the issue of how 'Germaness' could be interpreted as expressed in Wagner's theory and praxis in my book *On the 200th year of Richard Wagner's anniversary (1813-1883): Essays on the aesthetics of his theory and work* [Greek], Athens, Greek Musicological Publications, Music Publishing House Papagrigoriou-Nakas, 2013; also in several chapters, essays, papers. A few of them related to this issue, in English, are as follows: (1) "Theorizing 'Death': The Meaning of Negation as a Hegelian Inheritance in Richard Wagner's Musik als Idee", international musicological journal *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 4, 1, July 2007, 31-52, (2) "On the notion of Community: A comparative study between the early romantics and Wagner", international musicological journal *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 42/2, December 2011, 285-315, (3) "Spirit' as 'flames': visualizing the end of Richard Wagner's 'Der Ring'", 17th International Conference of Association RIDIM (Research Centre for Music Iconography), entitled *Music and Dance in Visual Culture*, 5-7 October 2017, Music Library of Greece of the Friends of Music Society, Athens (has been selected to be included in a collective volume, forthcoming publication).

Realism in the Russian national school of music is expressed mainly by the ideas and work of Mussorgsky. In his masterpiece, *Boris Godunov* (1873), the composer, with the help of Alexander Pushkin's reading of seventeenth-century Russian history, attempts to create a critique of the established order of the Tsar.

It is interesting to compare this opera, in this respect, with Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka's opera *A life for the Tsar* (1836). Glinka's opera, which is based on a historical episode that gave it a natural, patriotic appeal in Tsarist Russia, is about a courageous peasant, Ivan Susanin, who gave his life to protect the Tsar in the early seventeenth century. However, the nationalistic theme of loyalty to the tsar is challenged in *Boris Godunov* where the Russian people appear to be in conflict with the Tsar due to their poverty. The most important idea of this opera is the expression of the tragedy of the Russian people who were doomed to be ruled by cruel tyrants.

Finally, Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* (1900), a representative opera of the Italian movement of "verismo", is about political intrigue and romance in the days of the Napoleonic wars. Here one of the conquerors, Baron Scarpia, Chief of Police, appears hateful and sadist as he does everything in order to sustain his power, and satisfy his desires. At the end, when he attempts to rape Tosca she murders him and then kills herself.

6. Twentieth century

Realistic movements in art, as we have seen, produce a more objective approach to war. They make sure we understand that the tragedy war produces is ugly; it reduces life's value to zero and spreads death creating fear, panic, even hysteria; also, war makes us reflect at, and reconsider, our cultural values. It is not a coincidence that this approach to war is at the core of important movements of twentieth-century art (for example, Expressionism and Dadaism), since this is a century of two World Wars and, therefore, of continuous apocalypse of the faults of our civilization and continuous reflection upon all these in art. Respectively, there is a complexity of articulating contemporary images of war in opera since they go far beyond merely witnessing conflict or representing it: they also judge it, expressing 'truths' against reality, against war. The tragic experience of the two World Wars, and not only, is transferred mainly as images of fear, terror and alienation in the work of art.

Composers at the first decades of the twentieth century might have experienced war themselves. This is the case of the composer Alban Berg. The most characteristic opera which reflects the ultimate fear of the 1st World War, or the war in general, is his opera *Wozzeck* (1922), a work which is considered to be the most representative example of expressionism. *Wozzeck* was composed at the period 1914-1922 and performed in 1925.

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is the story of a lowly conscript so abused and degraded that he is alienated from almost everyone and murders the mother of his child. This opera can be seen as evocative of all war even though it is based on an 1837 play by Georg Büchner. The plot depicts the everyday life of soldiers and the townspeople of a rural German-speaking town. Prominent themes of militarism, callousness, social exploitation, and casual sadism are presented in a brutal and uncompromised way. In this opera there are quite a few autobiographical references due to the challenges Berg faced from his induction as a soldier in World War I. For example, the scene of snoring soldiers in the barracks during Act 2, Scene 5, was influenced by Berg's similar such experience. Berg employed, although not only, atonality and "Sprechgesang" to express intense emotions and even the thought processes of the characters on stage. The expression of madness and alienation was amplified with atonal music.¹⁴

¹⁴ See, for more detail on the aesthetics of expressionism in music and painting and their reflection of World War I, Anastasia Siopsi, The alienated individual unable to connect with the world: On the paradox of

Another important opera related to war is Prokofiev's *War and Peace* (1941-43), based on Leo Tolstoy's nineteenth-century novel, a response to the sufferings of the Soviet Union. The libretto was written by Sergei Prokofiev and Myra Mendelson.

It has to be mentioned that scenes in Act II, where armies are marching, were composed by Prokofiev after he scored films for Eisenstein. Not coincidentally, while he composed, the Germans had Moscow under siege, so, the intended audience knew the experience of war.

According to John Yohalem,

...the battle scenes and the terrible scenes of what goes on around the battle reach fever pitch – the terrorism, the looting, the ravaging, the brutalization, the untold petty heroisms of ordinary people – we reach the grandeur of the burning of Moscow...¹⁵

7. Craving for peace

In fact, operas have long expressed criticism of war and conflict. The hero of Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* (1791) is determined to avoid tyranny at all cost. Verdi gives the title character in *Simon Boccanegra* (1857, rev. 1881) an ardent plea for peace, while in *Aida* (1871) Verdi portrays the Egyptians as brutal warmongers in contrast to the peaceful Ethiopians. Richard Strauss's *Friedenstag* (1938), also, had such a clear anti-war message that the Nazis banned it.¹⁶

A very important case of a pacifist composer is Benjamin Britten, whose musical works, especially his *War Requiem* (1961), are powerful means of communicating to his fellow men the great wound of war. Britten's statement to the War Board gives us a picture of his convictions at twenty-nine years old; for example, we read: "The whole of my life has been devoted to acts of creation (being by profession a composer) and I cannot take part in acts of destruction".¹⁷

His most characteristic "pacifist" opera, *Owen Wingrave* was written in late 1960s, while war was at the forefront of people's minds, mainly due to the Vietnam War.

It is a fact that following the horrors of World War II, opera increasingly became a way in which composers – including the dedicated pacifists Michael Kemp Tippett and Benjamin Britten – could explore their political and moral convictions. There is an explanation in this respect. Pre-war nationalistic ideologies were more or less in agreement with the ideals of the French revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. The nations, respectively, demanded dedication of the citizens to a great extent in the name of these ideals. Fascism appeared and grew in a direct confrontation to all these by supporting authority and obedience against liberty, and racial

expressionism in music and painting around the era of the First World War, in International conference entitled *The Birth of Contemporary Europe: World War I, Music and the Arts*, 9-11 November 2018, Athens (Organized by Ministry of Culture and Sports, Directorate of Modern Cultural Heritage, Music Library of Greece of the Friends of Music Society, National Library of Greece, National Historical Museum, Department of Musical Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Megaron- The Athens Concert Hall, forthcoming publication of the annuals in the website of Music Library of Greece of the Friends of Music Society). See also A. Siopsi, Aural and visual manifestations of the scream in art, beginning with Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) "Der Schrei der Natur" (1893), *New Sound International Magazine*, 50, Autumn 2017.

¹⁵ John Yohalem, Prokofiev's War and Peace at the Met, http://www.operatoday.com/content/2007/12/prokofievs_war.php, 13/5/2019.

¹⁶ Kate Hopkins, Operatic pacifism, <https://www.roh.org.uk/news/operatic-pacifism>, 13/5/2019.

¹⁷ Mitchell, D. and Reed, P., (Eds.), *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2, 1991, 1046.

superiority against fraternity. Thus, World War II was a conflict in which humanity felt its whole system of values to be threatened, even its own survival.

To stretch even more this point, it is especially after the experience of World War II, after the experience of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, that revivals of ancient tragedy, some of them in the form of opera, prefer Euripides plots that bring forth lost human values for us to remember our mortality, that we are only humans. Euripides' anti-war and anti-heroic messages prevail in modern times over those of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Marianne McDonald rightly argues as follows:

[Twentieth century is] the century that greatly appreciated the authenticity of the classical works. Ancient myths are vehicles for expressing contemporary problems. We observe a return to tragic issues and texts of the 5th century: they appeal to people who had the experience of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. At this century we become aware of the horror of mass murders and the crowds of people that can die in one moment because of the "advanced" technology.¹⁸

Examples of choices of ancient works for operas in the twentieth century, based on contemporary problems, are as follows: *Lysistrata* (anti-war subject), *Bacchae* (productions that probably reflect the contemporary fear of a charismatic and powerful leader who exceeds the limits or a dictator), *Prometheus* (the other kind of leader, a strong and revolutionary who serves people), *Antigone* (turn to human rights), *Medea* (women's rights) and so forth.¹⁹

8. Epilogue

As an epilogue, since 1945 (the bombing of Hiroshima), nothing happened that could give enough evidence that war, or the threat of war, could not continue being a very effective means of performing foreign policies. Subsequently, images of war as depicted in twentieth century operas matter a lot in the context of our current realities and in the context of who we are as human beings. Images of war not only in opera, but in art as a total, continue to occupy a central position in both shaping and unsettling the shifting parameters of how the truths of a conflict are defined in the twenty-first century. Technology, different aesthetic approaches, might change the means and the way of showing and contemplating upon the same unanswered questions of humanity which always reach a culminating point during wars.

As a final observation, in this article I presented as critically as possible an overview, or, a brief cultural reading of images of war in opera up to the first decades of the twentieth century. As I attempted to demonstrate, opera, as a total work of art, can contextualize questions related to war and thus reflect upon them in a most complex manner by bringing on stage outer and, mainly, inner reflections of war in unique ways which can enrich our understanding of our troubled world and our tragic existence within it.

¹⁸ Marianne McDonald, *Greek Mythology in Classic Opera* [Greek], Greek transl. (original title: SING SORROW: Classics, History and Heroines in Opera), Athens, Periplos Publishing House, 2005 (published in English in 2001), 241.

¹⁹ See, for more detail, *Idid.*, 241-242.

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