

# The Phenomenon of Intertextuality in 19th Century Italian Opera Libretti: The Example of G. Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor"

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Each text is an intersection of other text where at least one other text can be read.

—Julia Kristeva, *World, Dialogue and Novel*

The purpose of this study is to identify the specifics of opera libretto in the context of intertextual relationships. The implementation of this goal involves the following tasks:

- Determining the intertextual nature of the opera libretto;
  - Analyzing the structural laws of the text of the literary source and how they are transformed in the opera libretto.
- Libretto as the phenomenon of musical culture requires a multidimensional knowledge of the modern humanities. This requires overcoming a highly specialized approach, be it musicological or literary, and a transition to a comprehensive cultural analysis. To solve the problems posed in the work, this study employs the following methods:
- Integrative, enabling application of the knowledge gained through various sciences to the solution of the tasks posed in this study;
  - Comparative-historical, considering the development of libretto and nineteenth-century Italian opera libretti;
  - Analytic-interpretative, used in the analysis of the interpretations of the phenomenon of the intertextuality of the opera libretto;
  - Typological analysis, which enables identification of the inherent features of the opera libretto.

The synthetic structure of the operatic text has been studied in the framework of various branches of the humanities—musicology, literary criticism, theatrical studies. The issue of intertextuality of the opera libretto has not been considered until recently, as evidenced by the lack of special studies of this phenomenon of musical culture. The scientific novelty of the study is determined by its text-centric orientation. The experience of a comprehensive examination of previously separate texts (the original source and the opera libretto) leads to the discovery of a holistic phenomenon: a multi-level model of interpretation which indicates intertextuality as the main property of the libretto.

*Keywords:* libretto, intertextuality, text, opera

## Introduction

The approach regarding operatic libretto in Italian opera has changed throughout history. In 19th century Italian opera, libretto was denied an independent literary value and was considered to be applied literature

(Kerman, 1989). It acted as an intermediate link associated with both drama and opera, but did not belong entirely to either one or the other. The librettist, on the other hand, was not only dependent on the drama of the original source, but also on the principles of the established operatic standards.

Libretto, as a metamorphosis of drama, is an integral part of the opera, the personification of musical culture, which includes various aspects. As a result of this, libretto requires study and deep comprehension. The libretto, as a mediator between a literary source, musical text, and stage action, is a product and object of artistic and stylistic interpretation. Therefore, to study it and analyze the links that arise between the texts of the literary source and the libretto, it is necessary to use complex and cultural analysis.

The operatic genre belongs to special musical genres, the nature of which is twofold. The synthetic structure of the opera text was studied within the framework of various branches of humanitarian science (Jeuland-Meynaud, 1977; Reibel, 2011).

The study of the phenomenon of the operatic libretto contributes to the deepening of ideas about the development of operatic art, and also correlates with the general trend of modern science—the integration of various fields of knowledge.

Attempts to understand the uniqueness of artistic text can be seen in the work of philosophers of ancient times. Much research on this topic was also implemented in the middle ages and continues until our times in various scientific areas like esthetics, linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and cultural studies. The problem of understanding written text is researched in work by post-modern philosophers such as Baudrillard (1988), Barthes (1967), and Rorty (1967).

In a broader aspect, text generated from the Latin textus, is a texture, a mixture, a combination of rows of signage that are united by the meaning that together create the entirety.

A literary text is a literal creation written by the author, playwright, or poet in a romantic genre, novel, story, and so on.

The study related to text as artistic text that forms a new form of art that is created from the interpretation—translation to other arts. Artistic text forms an artistic version that has been written by a librettist, a composer, and director based on a literary creation and that has been processed into another artistic genre like opera, ballet, a movie and more.

In this scenario artistic text becomes a new creative version with a new meaning that is expressed by the librettist, composer, and director.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, together with the tendency towards spiritual integration, the aim to unify present and past intertextual paradigms in an approach that is based on the assumption that the entire human culture is built on a system of different signs, has become very relevant. This being so, all text must necessarily have an intertextual relationship between them and these signage systems.

The art aims for an intertextual interpretation that develops a framework of intertextual poetry.

The study will be discussing libretto in 19th century Italian opera as an intertextual phenomenon. This applies also to the broader aspect where intertextuality uncovers an affinity for cultural memory, a semiotic memory of culture in the semantic understanding. How does intertextuality uncover an affinity for linkage that points to the ability of text to create new meanings using the links to other texts?

The terms intertextuality and intertext are identified by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, the great post-modern French philosophers.

Roland Barthes (1967) wrote about the text:

All text is intermediate text of the original text. However, there is no need to understand its intertextuality, whereby the text has some sort of source. Each search for the source or similar influence is similar to the myth about the filiation of creation, text created from anonymous but familiar quotes that we once read, from quotes without quotation marks. (Barthes, 1967, p. 9)

From this it seems that everything has already been said and that new things are created on a kaleidoscope principle: the mixture of new elements that create new combinations. “That is, intertextuality is a never-ending game of signs, the text is the absorption and transformation of other text” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 69).

Opera that incorporates music, song, and theater in it becomes a textual artistic force that uncovers an affinity for other texts. It can be said that opera created according to Kristeva is an act of “flowing productivity”, an act that creates a delight of meanings, one inside another and those against each other, that are not necessarily a closed construction of any kind.

Libretto has become a central part of opera, the part where synthesis exists which is so needed in the operatic genre.

It can be observed that the number of operas written according to the literary source is greater when compared to the number of operas written according to an original plot.

In light of this, the interpretation of the literary source has become extremely important.

A libretto that has been written according to the literary source acts as another step within the hermeneutic circle, a draft of new content. As a result of this, a literary source is not a database but rather a place that produces information. A composer when working on their text does not decipher it but rather interprets it. They use the previous texts (proto-texts) in all their cultural and social experiences.

In other words, interpretation is an explicit or encapsulated affinity for an ideological and sociohistorical system that is realized with the help of the literary object’s source and with the help of the subject that is interpreting.

The meaning of the text varies according to the historical reality and as a result, an infinite amount of the meaning of the text can be examined.

The text is not a static, finished, and fixed product. According to Yuriy Lotman, “a text which lends itself to only a limited number of interpretations comes close to being a non-artistic text and loses its specific artistic longevity” (Lotman, 1977, p. 68).

### **Libretto in the 17th Century Opera**

During the first part of the 17th century the libretto was of paramount importance. According to the aesthetics of the Florentine Camerata with Giovanni Bardi, the principle of writing the opera was expressed in the definition of *Dramma Per Musica* (Lutsker & Susidko, 2019).

At that time, music only acquires its own importance and approaches the importance of other arts.

Libretto opera defines the style, structure, and emotional content of the opera. However, the means for the creation of the libretto were typical and standard. Most of the plots were an interpretation of ancient myths and legends.

The approach of libretto being an independent work occurred at the Arcadia Academy founded in Rome in 1690 (Burt, 1955). The founders of the academy chose a pastoral genre and attempted to combine it with an operatic genre. They attempted to expand their creative circle and invited more and more libretto writers, some

of whom were unprofessional writers who wrote in their free time and some, famous playwrights.

As a result of this, libretto entered the literary genre arena. At the same time, in Venice another style of libretto was developing that was given the name Venetian libretto. Among the great Venetian librettists, it is worth mentioning Giovanni Francesco Businello who wrote the libretto for the coronation of the Montordì Pope, Nicolo Minato who wrote 14 Aurelio Aureli plots.

The things that characterized the Venetian libretto are:

1. Operatic activity develops very quickly.
2. Some of the heroes are portrayed as true historical heroes, some imagined, but all act according to *comedia dell'arte* rules.
3. The main goal is to impress the audience.
4. When writing libretto, the librettist referred to the technical possibilities of the theater in which there was to be a production and built the plot by replacing the scenes with scenery.

### **Libretto in the 17th and 18th Century Opera**

In the 18th century the approach to libretto changed. It was no longer a theatrical action but rather the music writing and defining the rules for writing the libretto.

The revolutionary libretto operatic measures introduced Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio. Zeno does not dictate the laws that the Arcadia founders attempted to introduce but did try to find the means that were more in line with the operatic genre.

Zeno tried to maintain the sequence in libretto and to remove the meaningless jumps in the meaning of the text. He also tried to free it from an enormous amount of arias and to follow classical tradition. For him, the educational aspect was more important than the theatrical aspect.

In the 18th century, the substantial number of arias was a serious problem for librettists.

Composers chose the words that would be easier in poetry and put them into the text several times in a row, as a result damaging the poetic text which was to become simpler and banal on the one hand but on the other hand became more musical.

The composers attempted to insert words with more "Ah" movement to enable the singer to display their virtuosity and full control of their voice (Marino, 1987). The singer became the main character.

The music defined the rules for the text which should be light and easy to sing.

Libretto poetic text received operatic characteristics. In other words, the music with a prose structure defined the structure of the text.

The poetic text of the plot could change the rhythm of the original text to match the requirements of the musical text.

In his article on Aristotle's poetry, Pietro Metastasio divides the musical poetics of the plot into two types: musicality of recitatives that are supposed to express the essence of musical harmony and the musicality of arias that express the musical essence of the melody (Goldin, 1986).

He compares the recitatives with the confrontations and clashes that can be seen in Greek tragedy and that are based on rhythm and harmony and the arias with strophes or anti-strophes leaning on the melody.

The musical structures of these two formats are very different: recitative imitates day to day speech and aria incorporates within it poetic and musical characteristics.

Metastasio put the arias in the text and in the role of the hero according to the principle of contrast that

were to become one of the basic principles of dramatics—the principle of light and shadow (*Chiaroscuro*) (Beniscelli, 2000).

According to the rules of *Chiaroscuro*, arias adjacent to each other should have different content and format. In his work on artistic poetry, Metastasio claims that the main Aristotelian idea of imitation is expressed in the actor's victory over the temptation to deceive the viewer (Brizi, 1973).

A word that resists the pressure coming from composers and singers, a word is independent. Metastasio tries to find equilibrium between drama and music and attempts to incorporate the arias into poetic text so that they become an integral part of the dramatic activities. Metastasio returns the importance of the text to opera.

The structure of the libretto suggested by Zeno and Metastasio remains in Italian opera throughout the entire 18th century.

### **Italian Opera Libretto in the 19 Century**

In Italian opera in the 19th century there are extremely close connections between the original text and the literary text and composers were beginning to act as one artistic team.

As an example, one can cite the successful partnership between Cammarano and Donizetti, Cammarano and Verdi and others.

This answered the new social needs of the Italian audience who on one hand wished to enjoy the show but on the other hand anticipated to see the provocation that creates anticipation and uncertainty in relation to the natural world that is described.

In order to create uniform intertext a libretto undergoes a number of stages:

1. The first stage is the translation and processing of the literary source and an understanding of its intertextuality.
2. In the second stage a combination is made between the musical dramaturgy and the literary dramaturgy.
3. The third stage is a staged interpretation that includes many aspects and at the same time addresses the audience-interpreter.

This gradual process has major intertextual potential and widens the boundaries of libretto activities. The libretto is a skeleton for building musical creation—staging, it defines its dramatic musical realization.

The study discussed the following stages:

1. During the first stage the original literary text is translated and processed in its intertext understanding.

The librettist creates their libretto according to their own point of view, according to their knowledge and moral values. As a result the libretto itself is the intertext that has many interpretations. The text of the literary source is primary. Text of the libretto is secondary in comparison to the original text and primary regarding stage interpretation.

The composer and the librettist are the implementers—interpreters of the literary text and they are not regarded as the creators by the directors.

That is, the relationship to the literary source becomes an intertext action and the libretto becomes the product of the interpretation.

These differences are created during the production of the creation. They become an interpretation of the implementors but are not based only on their subjective opinion rather derived from characteristics that are part of the creation from the beginning and point to different interpretations that become apparent in different aspects.

As a result, it could be said that libretto opera is an intertextual model of the literary source.

Donizetti received an offer to write an opera from the San Carlo Theater in Naples in 1835. The official librettist was Salvatore Cammarano (Maxwell, 2014).

A fruitful collaboration between the two artists began with *Lucia* that led to the writing of six more operas. Donizetti and Cammarano read Walter Scott's text as translated by Gaetano Barbieri which was very common and became the source of inspiration for other Italian composers. In 1829 a production of *Lucia de Lammermoor* written by Michele Carafa was performed.

Donizetti and Cammarano had heard the opera and were well acquainted with its libretto that was based on the translation by Barbieri (Donizetti, 1972). Here there can be seen that another level has been added to intertextuality: The movement of text from its source language to its language of destination. The text of the translation is secondary to the source of the libretto when compared to the translated text and primary to the stage interpretation.

In the comparison between the translated text and the text of Scott there are a number of differences that answer the expectations of the Italian reader and that answer the social progress of the period.

Barbieri opens his book in the second part of the original book written by Walter Scott. Instead of quotes from *Henry IV*, Barbieri (1826) brings quotes from Shakespeare. Barbieri inserts a wider explanation regarding British politics than Giacomo who lived during the same period. He also adds descriptions about nature that in the novel by Scott were more subdued in order to create the ambience of the whereabouts of the dramatic activity.

In this way the translation of the original text adds a new voice which is apparent by filling the expectations of the audience that cannot be questioned.

2. During the second stage a combination is made between the musical dramaturgy and the literary dramaturgy. Carol Money (2016) in her doctoral dissertation introduces a table in which one can see the fundamental differences between Scott's novel, the original legend, and the libretto by Cammarano and Donizetti.

Salvatore Cammarano (1810-1852) wrote the synopsis of *Lucia di Lammermoor* that was entirely different from the final libretto of the opera (Castel, 2000).

In his work on Cammarano, John Black mentions that of the 619 lines that the author wrote in his libretto, 117 were entirely different from those we find in the final version of Donizetti (Black, 1984).

Black claims that some of the changes occurred due to censorship but that a large amount were due to Donizetti's wish to let the music "suit the flow of music".

Donizetti not only destroyed part of the text but also forced Cammarano to remove entire scenes. For example, he removed the presence of Aliza in the scene about Lucia and Edgardo as told by Raymondo Lanriko in the first scene of the first act.

Cammarano in accordance with the operatic rules for writing the plot was forced to shorten the novel, to remove the descriptions about nature, descriptions about the interior, and historical explanations that could not be inserted into the libretto.

In their place he uses a means that can be defined as the use of a sung word and a narrated word. Descriptions about nature and the interior of the house are found in the textual description before the scenes (Black, 1980).

Cammarano chose to concentrate only on the love story between Lucia and Edgardo and the conflict that

developed in its wake. Some of the characters in the novel disappear and in their place new characters appear.

One of the major differences between the novel and the libretto is the removal of the major character in the novel, the persona of Lady Ashton, Lucia's mother.

In the novel by Scott, Lady Ashton is a negative character, destructive, a persona with satanic characteristics.

In the opera during the first scene Normano says that Lady Ashton has been killed by a bull and that she had a gentle and honorable personality. Here an intertextual tendency can also be seen related to the socio historical system of Italian society of the period.

The persona of the mother in Italian culture is an innocent character, kind hearted and pure.

The introduction of the Lady Ashton persona, who has negative characteristics is impossible for an Italian audience and could have caused the performance to fail.

Donizetti also introduced many changes based on his own opinions. Edgardo saves Lucia from attack from Thor.

With Cammarano this is done with Aliza, in Scott's novel Edgardo saves Lucia and her father. Donizetti introduces the character of the brother of Lucia and gives him the persona of Lady Ashton from the novel whereby continuing the tradition of Chiaroscuro of Metastasio and the tradition of new Italian opera where a baritone hero is a negative character.

In the text of Cammarano many quotes from famous Italian authors are intertwined like Mancini, Alfieri, Leopardi and Metastasio (D'Angelo, 2011).

When combined, the text creates intertext. Together with the text of Cammarano and Donizetti they create the new artistic text. As an example the following prose can be used:

Lucia's frase: "di gemiti/mi pasco, e di dolor", which remind "che si pasce di gemiti e d'affanni" (Manzoni, 2012, p. 41) but derived from "di gemiti si pasce e di sospiri" of *Visioni sacre e morali* of Alfonso Varano (1870).

3. The third stage is the stage of interpretation which includes many aspects that at the same time turn to the interpreting audience. According to the culture of romantic Italian opera of the 19th century, low male voices were meant to characterize a negative persona.

The continuation of the tradition can also be seen with Verdi in *Othello* (Yago), especially during the period of writing about Lucia when a new approach to operatic voices is developed.

The bel canto tradition with beautiful, uniform, but distant singing from the deep emotions of the romantic characters gives a place for singing with the emphasis of low and high registers in the voice, a search for different colors (Garcia I(pere), 1824a). This being so, the persona of Lucia in our time is performed by a soprano coloratura whereby many sopranos have to handle the great difficulty of the role especially in the second act. The soprano coloratura voice did not exist in Donizetti's time (Garcia I(pere), 1824b). Giuditta Pasta impressed the audience with a change of colors in the registers. She also greatly influenced the art of Donizetti and Bellini. Her voice was very similar to the descriptions of the contemporary voice of a mezzo soprano.

A composer saw Lucia as an impulsive figure, gushing with emotions, an unbalanced figure and for this purpose the sound of Pasta was very appropriate.

The opera was written for the Naples Theater starring Fanny Tacchinardi Persiani. The composer wrote

the role of Lucia especially for the voice of this singer (Gossett, 2006).

Here we can examine the third stage of creating an intertextual text of the libretto, which is a stage interpretation that appeals to the viewer-listener with the help of the singer's personality.

In the Cavatina of Lucia, it is apparent that the vocal range can be significantly lowered and the central range of the voice can be concentrated. The melody starts from an A note and goes up to F and again gradually goes down to A. This is already implemented in Bellini's arias. Donizetti uses two registers of voice which in our time is uncommon for highlighting and displaying the inner feelings of the heroine.

Later the arias expand to the rhythm in order to on the one hand emphasize the uplifting of Lucia and on the other hand, to expose the mental instability of the heroine.

## Conclusion

In light of the above it can be summarized that:

1. Opera is an intertextual text. The composer and the librettist use intertextuality in the process of writing an operatic libretto. In a broader sense, intertextuality reveals an affinity for cultural memory, the semiotic memory of culture. In a semantic sense, intertextuality reveals an affinity for connectivity, it indicates the ability of a text to create new meaning with the help of links to other texts.

2. Throughout the history of opera there has been a close connection between it and drama which has become more understood and felt where drama and music are combined. Comparison between the structure of the text of the literary source between the structure of the text of the libretto is very important and requires the use of a fusion of different disciplines such as: linguistics, musicology, performing arts, and cultural arts. The literary source contains different aspects that enable different interpretations and approaches.

3. The libretto of the opera by Donizetti—Lucia de Lammermoor—is a transformation of a structure of literary origin made by the librettist and the composer and holds clear intertextual features such as:

- The text of the libretto is a new model of the original. It creates new meaning with the help of links to the original text and other texts.
- The text of the librettist is a combination of Cammarano, Donizetti, and intertext texts—texts by Manzoni, Leopardi, Alfieri, and more.
- The libretto text is made up of three levels:
  - (1) A level of character interviews, imaginary thought that creates meaning.
  - (2) A level of content that reflects the processes of story development.
  - (3) A verbal level with the help of the existing texts.

The importance and understanding the importance of operatic libretto contributes to the understanding of the development of opera art and is appropriate for the tendency of modern science that strives for integration in the different fields of knowledge.

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