

Bellini's *Norma* and the Challenge of *Regieoper*

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Despite the universal messages of Bellini's *Norma*, the attempts at translating and adapting it to a modern context in the revisionist spirit of *Regieoper* (the director's opera) encounter serious difficulties, as indicated by recent productions. The present paper focuses on these difficulties by examining in detail what appear to be the most challenging, innovative and thought-provoking among those productions which, despite remarkable merits, suffer from acute shortcomings: *inter alia* certain incompatibilities with the libretto, cultural dissonances, and problems of inner-coherence and verisimilitude. The detailed analysis of specific productions is followed by a general discussion (through a comparative approach) of *Norma*'s adaptability to *Regieoper*, which is shown to be extremely difficult, among other reasons because the terms of reference to the dimensions of the historical context (and the inherent mores) in its libretto are by far less flexible than those of other operas. *Norma*'s universal messages and its dualities of "foreign" versus "familiar," with their vast semantic ambit, would seem to be better understood by meticulously delving into the subtleties of the text (and subtext) of Romani's sophisticated libretto. Inner-coherence and compatibility with the libretto are essential for any attempt at creating an appropriate analogy running parallel to the original narrative. A fully convincing production of *Norma* in a modernizing spirit, if at all possible, remains an artistic challenge.

Keywords: Director's opera, faithfulness to the original, adaptability, inner coherence

Introduction

Although first produced in 1831 (under the inspiration of Alexandre Soumet's poetical drama *Norma, ou L'infanticide*)¹ (David, 2021; Kimbell, 1998, pp. 16-28; Colas, 2015; Isaacson, 2012), many topics of Bellini's *Norma* are of particular relevance today. These topics include *inter alia* a clash of civilizations, the balance of power between men and women, the tension between holding a position of supreme power and femininity, the conflict between different loyalties, and the fluidity of nationalist, religious and cultural identities. In a recent paper on a multidisciplinary approach to *Norma*² (David, 2021, pp. 1-26), I have discussed these topics, with special emphasis on the opera's dialectic profile, and argued that in many respects its world, strikingly similar to that of Greek tragedy, is intensely foreign (e.g., by its pagan polytheism as well as the practice of human sacrifices), and yet profoundly familiar to us. It is no surprise, then, that this work, traditionally performed in its ancient setting, has recently inspired several attempts at moving the plot from ancient to modern times, in the spirit of the contemporary artistic and cultural trend called in German *Regieoper* "direction opera", or "director's

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¹ The librettist, Felice Romani, who worked in close collaboration with Bellini, used many other sources, such as Euripides' *Medea*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Chateaubriand's *Les martyres*. For a detailed analysis of the sources, see David (2021); cf. Kimbell (1998): 16-28 and Colas (2015). For *Norma*'s multi-faceted character see, e.g., Isaacson (2012).

² David (2021): 1-26. The discussion there, however, does not refer to the problems of dramaturgy and performance studies on which the present paper is focused.

opera" (similarly to *Regietheater*)³ (Calico, 2011, pp. 131-154; Müller, 2014, pp. 583-605)—i.e., in general terms productions of canonical works dominated by the concept of the stage director. This dramaturgic practice is usually (if often too simplistically) perceived as standing in contrast to "*Werktreue*"—alleged faithfulness to the original work, the libretto (or play text), and its historical context⁴ (Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2015, pp. 8-27; Vellutini, 2016; Levin, 2007; Xu, 2012; Champion, 2016; M. Hutcheon & L. Hutcheon, 2018; Heisler, 2019; Risi, 2019). Recently it has sophistically been argued that the diametric opposition between these two concepts is rather artificial, a by-product of thought-habits grounded on artificial binaries and generalizations⁵ (Ganzevoort, 2021; Kreuzer, 2006, p. 174). In fact, the practitioners of *Regieoper* and *Regietheater* (like other opera or theatre directors) have vastly different aims, different styles, different methodologies and views of the dramatic or operatic art. However, what they *do* have in common is the habit of taking the artistic license to deviate from the original work and its historical context, i.e. to change the original dimensions of the time-period and place (with their corresponding mores). The revisionist stage directors usually claim to be *faithful* in their own ways to the essence of the original work and even to do it more justice by revealing, through their intuition and idiosyncratic interpretations, new perspectives, frequently held to be *relevant* in terms of contemporary mentalities and cultural trends. After all, metaphorically speaking, to a considerable extent the task of a stage director is similar to that of a translator, and fidelity to the original is widely held to go hand in hand with a measure of freedom in order to produce a worthy and viable translation⁶ (Cachopo, 2014; Said, 1993, pp. 11-12).

The aim of the present paper is to explore the difficulties encountered by *Regieoper* when applied to *Norma*, with a special focus on the analysis of what appear to be the two most thought-provoking, innovative, and challenging among the relatively recent productions of Bellini's masterpiece that are based on this creative practice. The paper will attempt to assess the measure of their respective success *on their own merits*, not on any *a priori* theoretical grounds in favor of a dramaturgic ideology. Both productions feature, each in its own way, radical interpretations that try to highlight the opera's relevance by staging it in a modern context. One of these productions premiered in October 2016 at the Royal Opera House (ROH) in Covent Garden, London,⁷ under the stage direction of Àlex Ollé (from the Catalan troupe *La Fura dels Baus*) and his Argentinian assistant Valentina Carrasco, with highly impressive sets by Alfons Flores. This production has been frequently broadcasted worldwide on the Mezzo TV channel and was presented on stage last year (July 2022) at the Liceu Opera in

³ The German terminology is widespread since this artistic trend evolved and developed in the avant-garde dramaturgy of post-war East and West Germany (within a broader cultural reaction against bourgeois aesthetic canons). Its roots in the German speaking realm are even earlier, in the "inter-war" period; see Calico (2011): 131-154; Müller (2014): 583-605.

⁴ The *Werktreue* orientation is frequently labeled in the professional jargon by the acronym HIP (standing for a "historically informed production"). For a balanced and insightful summary of this debate (and its theoretical aspects), free of the passion and invective typical of much of its discourse, particularly in journalism (as reflected by terms such as "scandal", "horror", "betrayal", "perversion", "absurdity", "shock value", "Eurotrash" on the one hand, and "atavism", "narrowmindedness", "antiquarianism", "fossilization", "fundamentalism", and "backwardness" on the other hand), see Meyer-Dinkgräfe (2015): 8-27, with bibliography (especially of German literature); see also Vellutini (2016), focused on recent productions of Verdi's operas that are based on Shakespeare's plays (*Macbeth*, *Otello*, and *Falstaff*); cf. Levin (2007); Xu (2012); Champion (2016); M. Hutcheon and L. Hutcheon (2018); Heisler (2019); Risi (2019).

⁵ See Ganzevoort (2021), with a fresh theoretical approach; cf. Kreuzer (2006): 174: "What we need, then, is a wider vision of modernity on the operatic stage, as well as subtler critical instruments with which to approach *Regieoper*."

⁶ For this analogy with respect to another context, the encounter between opera and cinema, see Cachopo (2014), who draws heavily on Walter Benjamin's theory of translation. For an eccentric approach to faithfulness, see Said (1993): 11-12, who supports in principle a revisionist staging which deliberately diverges from the composer's (and librettist's) intentions.

⁷ This is the first *Norma* production at the ROH in thirty years.

Barcelona. The other production made its debut three years earlier at the Salzburg Festival (famous for its innovative approach to opera staging), and was presented on several stages in Western Europe, including the Théâtre des Champs Élysées in Paris (2016), the Monte Carlo opera in Monaco (2016), and the Edinburgh International Festival (2016). The analysis of these productions will be followed by a general discussion, through a comparative approach, of the problematics involved in *Norma*'s adaptability to the *Regieoper* praxis—with, *inter alia*, some additional examples of recent productions of *Norma* as well as other operas of the “classical” repertoire. Beyond the specific case of *Norma*, the present paper is also meant to illuminate certain challenges of contemporary trends of dramaturgy and stage directing, which are on the verge of becoming a new orthodoxy⁸ (Bleeker, 2023, pp. 21-77).

***Norma* at the ROH: A Manifesto Against Militarism and Religious Fundamentalism**

To use the staging of an opera in order to communicate a vision, to convey a message against militarism and religious fundamentalism, may be an attractive idea, but in the case of the London production, as in some other cases of *Regieoper*, it comes at the expense of a frequent incompatibility between the libretto, its historical context, and the staging. In this production, the Druids have metamorphosed into a clerical and military sect, which, on the religious level, bears unmistakably Spanish-Catholic traits associated with the Eastern processions or, *mutatis mutandis*, the Inquisition. Their children wear red and black ritual uniforms and high triangular hats reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. On the political level, the Druids are presented as a fascist military junta, with Oroveso, *Norma*'s father and the Druids' leader, appearing as a generalissimo. The pagan divinities mentioned in the text are incompatible with the Christian context (obviously suggested by the visual set of references) and with a modern background, thereby affecting their plausibility in the production and creating an effect of anachronism and cultural dissonance.⁹ It is true that *Norma*'s dialectics include the tension between the pagan background of the plot and a significant Christian layer in the subtext. However, that Christian subtext of the libretto has nothing to do with oppression or fanaticism. On the contrary, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, within the framework of a detailed discussion of *Norma*'s sources and genesis, that layer is allegorically associated, most probably under the influence of Chateaubriand, the so-called “father of French Romanticism”, with unconditional love, self-sacrifice, altruism, and forgiveness¹⁰ (David, 2021, pp. 4-7, 20-23).

This said, one must admit that Ollé and Carasco have succeeded in conveying some of the basic messages of *Norma*, such as the tension between holding a supreme position of power and femininity, as well as the balance of power between men and women. There are also some convincing scenes in this production, as the one of Adalgisa's confessions to *Norma* of her passionate love for Pollione, and *Norma*'s nostalgic recognition of herself and her own romantic experience throughout her acolyte's confession (I.8).¹¹ This scene is coherently perceived, in line with the general concept of the staging, as a religious act reminiscent of a Catholic confession. In this case

⁸ For an excellent discussion of this subject see most recently Bleeker (2023): 21-77.

⁹ This specific disparity between what is shown on stage and the libretto holds true with respect to some *Regie* productions of Verdi's *Aida*, such as that of the Paris opera, Bastille (2013), under the direction of Olivier Py, who (unconvincingly) relocates the opera to the nineteenth century and, in order to convey his central message—denunciation of militarism, nationalism, colonialism, and clerical interference—uses *inter alia* Christian images incompatible with the polytheistic world of ancient Egypt. Incidentally, Hans Neuenfels' highly controversial staging of *Aida* (1981) at the Frankfurt Opera is considered a landmark in the history of *Regieoper*.

¹⁰ On the psychological level, in *Norma*, the fury and vindictiveness typical of the classical (and pagan) tradition of abandoned women—as exemplified by the reactions of Euripides' Medea and Virgil's Dido (in the *Aeneid*)—are counterbalanced by compassion and forgiveness in the spirit of Christianity. See David (2021): 4-7; 20-23.

¹¹ The opera libretto is quoted by the number of the act, followed by that of the scene.

the *mise-en-scène* does not contrast the text or spirit of the libretto. Likewise, the *Casta diva* scene (I.4), in which Norma prays to the moon-goddess to spread peace on earth (with a giant censer concomitantly swinging back and forth in harmony with the music), is not only aesthetically impressive but also convincingly interpreted as a liturgical prayer and, as such, it is to a considerable extent effective as a synthesis of pagan and Christian elements, since in this scene the latter are totally free of the oppressive concept otherwise dominating the production. After all, regardless of its historical context, *Casta diva* (as both text and music) is a universal ode to peace. To conflate for a moment the production with its performance, despite those problematic uniforms of the Druids, the spectators are carried away by the magic of Bellini's music (as performed by Sonya Yoncheva, the orchestra, and choir of the ROH under the baton of Antonio Pappano) as well as by the spectacular sight of the praying ensemble. In this case, the textual, the aural, and the visual elements are in almost complete harmony.

Another powerful and convincing scene in the ROH production (and its performance) is the central confrontation (*agon*, in the terminology of Greek tragedy) between the protagonists, Norma and Pollione (II.10), starting with the heroine's words "in mia man alfin tu sei" ("finally you are in my hands"). The stage directors and the singers (Yoncheva and Joseph Calleja) have succeeded in interpreting the nuances of this complex scene not only vocally but also from the perspective of body-language (gestures, facial expression, and movement)¹² (Smart, 2004; Esse, 2009), starting with the intended dichotomy between words and music, typical of Norma's dialectics¹³ (David, 2021, pp. 12-13), and finishing with Norma's outburst of rage and Pollione's failed attempt to bring her back to her senses by his readiness to sacrifice his own life. The scene manages to express the climax of dramatic tension and the inversion of roles from the perspective of gender (male-female power dynamics).

However, the basic problem with the interpretation of the ROH production is that those "neo-Druids" in their spectacular forest of crucifixes (otherwise an impressive work of plastic art, creating a claustrophobic effect of a closed and fanatic society) do not appear to be oppressed by anybody other than themselves and their own religious zealotry. Indeed, some oppressed groups of people may become fanatics. But who are the equivalent of the Roman oppressor here? What is the coherent analogy of the political dichotomy between conquerors and subjugated, if any? Unlike the "neo-Druid" clerical and military uniforms, the modern and elegant suits of Pollione, the Roman proconsul,¹⁴ and Flavio, his adjunct, while consistent with the dialectic concept of the opera through the implied contrast with the Druids' dress, do not provide any specific clues as to the transformed hegemonic identity of their wearers except their civil and secular status¹⁵ (Risi, 2002; 2019; Fabbri, 2007). Indeed, anachronism and pastiche have been utilized by modern theatre as common strategies in innovation, but their use should be meaningful and coherent in order to promote a new idea and a message, not only a gimmick.

¹² For the importance of these aspects in general, see Smart (2004); Esse (2009).

¹³ At its face value, Norma's statement "At last you are in my hand" expresses vindictive fury, but the caressing melody dialectically reveals profound affection. For a full analysis of this scene, see David (2021): 12-13. For one of its significant dimensions getting lost in the ROH production, see below and next note.

¹⁴ By the way, what meaning does this title have in the new historical context?! This question is important particularly since Pollione's status as proconsul points out that in the recent past, before being appointed as governor of a province, he had been a consul, i.e., one of the two heads of State of the Roman Republic. It is imperative to bear this in mind in order to understand the full dramatic intensity and roles reversal in his central confrontation with Norma (II.10).

¹⁵ The idea of giving a palpably modern and secular outlook to Norma's apartment, presumably meant to stress her split personality and secret integration (or acculturation) into Pollione's world, is pushed to inadequate extremes through eccentric gimmicks that are likely to create a ludicrous effect, totally foreign to the spirit of this lyric tragedy (e.g., at the sight of the children watching television). Indeed, I remember the contagious laughter in the ROH audience at that specific scene and its blatant incongruity. For a theoretical study of the audience reactions (e.g. surprise, shock, outrage, or enthusiasm) to *Regie* productions and their propensity for "de-familiarizing the familiar" by means of provocative innovations, see Risi (2002); Risi (2019); cf. Fabbri (2007).

In this production one is left to wonder what may be the meaning of the role inversion presenting the Roman commanders in civil dress and the Druids in military uniforms. Who are these “neo-Romans”? Asking these questions is hopefully not a symptom of an “intellectual lethargy” frequently ascribed to critics of *Regieoper* (or *Regietheater*) productions by staunch defenders of those enthusiastically committed to the innovations of this dramaturgic praxis¹⁶ (Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2015, p. 10).

Be that as it may, without any clear oppressive agent, rebellion and fight for freedom make no sense (unless the freedom-fighters are lunatics, in this case appropriately presented as praying to a moon goddess...). The modernized narrative not only suffers from a dramatic lacuna and lack of coherency in its new, independent, and elliptical version, but also loses the opera's political message referring to the emergence of nineteenth-century national movements, especially the Italian *Risorgimento* (as well as its association with possible present-day or recent analogies, such as the process of decolonization through fight against imperial oppressors)¹⁷ (Erasmi, 1988/1989; Arblaster, 1992; David, 2021, pp. 17-19). In this sense the *Regie* methodology here is counter-productive since it operates against one of its most significant aims—encouraging a vivid dialogue between past and present in an understandable “language”. There is a problem of faithful “translation”, to put it in metaphorical terms.

The stage directors have taken the liberty of making a surprising and provocative change in the *finale* of this production. In an invented *coup de théâtre*, Oroveso embraces his daughter on her way to the pyre and shoots her in the head—a contrivance incompatible not only with the facts of the libretto, but also with its words and spirit.¹⁸ This is a typical (if minor) example of the arbitrariness and shocking eccentricity that at times accompany the creative work of *Regieoper* practitioners (of various kinds and methodologies) in their otherwise legitimate search for originality and insightful innovations.

Norma at the Salzburg Festival: Nazi Occupation and “la Résistance”

The other production, which made its debut at the Salzburg Festival in 2013 under the stage direction of Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier, is completely different, both conceptually and visually, from that of the ROH. Unlike Ollé and Carasco, who give the audience no clue to a specific historical context replacing the original, Leiser and Caurier have opted for a specific time and place: they leave the setting of the plot in France but ingeniously move the time period forward by about two thousand years, from Roman Gaul to World War II and the Vichy regime. In this version, the Druids have become resistance fighters against the Nazi occupation. Norma, a schoolteacher and major figure in the resistance movement, falls in love with a German officer. Instead of a forest, the plot takes place in a school, where the resistance fighters secretly meet. There is an attempt to adhere to details associated with the new historical context, and not only in the costumes. For example, before the school goes up in flames, with the two protagonists tied to chairs, Norma's head is shaved, in line with the French practice of humiliating women who collaborated with the Nazis. Unlike Ollé and Carasco in London, Leiser and Caurier at least pay due attention to *Norma*'s political motif of conquest, oppression, and insurrection. In this respect the production is inner-coherent and in line with a central motif of the libretto. However, the incongruity

¹⁶ See, e.g., Meyer-Dinkgräfe (2015): 10, with references to further literature.

¹⁷ For this political aspect, see Erasmi (1988/1989); Arblaster (1992); David (2021): 17-19.

¹⁸ In the libretto (II.11), Oroveso, now a broken man in tears, maintains that a father is allowed to weep (“O, *pianto, sei permesso a un genitor!*”). Note also his declaration, in Christian terms, “Love has triumphed” (“*Ha vinto amor*”), and Pollione's words “Let us die together” (“*Moriamo insieme*”). Additional examples of deviations from *Norma*'s original *finale* in *Regie* productions will be mentioned below.

between the pagan divinities frequently mentioned in the text (e.g., the moon goddess, Irminsul, the Druid god of war, Venus/Venere) and the modern setting becomes even more jarring than on the stage of the ROH given the otherwise clearly realistic character of this production and its (re)invented specific historical context. This also holds true *a fortiori* with respect to the Druids' ritual practice of human sacrifices.

Some additional elements of major significance are severely affected by the dramaturgic concept of Leiser and Caurier. The clash of civilizations, for example, and the related meaning of the absolute "otherness": Why should a German officer regard the French as "barbarians" ("barbari"), as Pollione repeatedly labels the Druids (I.2)? In terms of a modernist adaptation this deprecatory and derisive label would rather fit a colonial (or post-colonial) mentality in the attitude of the hegemonic elite toward the subjugated (or the formerly subordinate) and, in their masters' perspective, the culturally inferior, uncivilized or savage "natives". *Mutatis mutandis*, the dichotomy between the open, hedonistic world of Rome and the claustrophobic, austere society of the Druids, as reflected, for instance, in Pollione's premonitory dream (I.2) as well as in his exhortation of Adalgisa to leave with him for Rome (I.6) is devoid of meaning in this production since, in strict consistency with the directors' analogy, here ancient Rome turns out to be Nazi Berlin (!), which epitomizes the dangers of de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing in the spirit of the new dramaturgic method. This also holds true as far as the fluidity of nationalist identities is concerned, that, for obvious reasons, is hardly imaginable in the new, modernized context. Thus, regardless of fidelity to the "original", this ingenious adaptation encounters a problem of verisimilitude and inner coherence that severely impairs its efficacy in communicating the parallel narrative imagined by the *régisseurs*.

Another shortcoming of this production can be seen in its way of coping with the tension between femininity and holding a supreme position of power. This aspect, which in the London production, for all its pitfalls, works remarkably well, loses much of its potency in the case of a school teacher, however dominant. Norma is deprived not only of her exotic and magic "alterity", but also of her sacral authority and majestic demeanor as a sort of "national" leader, a transformative diminution that inevitably affects the very essence of this drama and its affinity to Greek tragedy.

For all their modernizing tendencies, none of the above productions pays attention to a motive mentioned in the research literature—a hint of lesbian attraction between the two heroines, Norma and Adalgisa, which is discernible in the duet opening with the latter's mellifluously tender "*Mira, o Norma*" ("Look, O Norma" [at your dear children]—II.3). Patricia Smith, for instance, applies terms such as "romantic friendship", "passionate declamations of feeling between women", and "homoeeroticism" to their relationship¹⁹ (Smith, 1997, pp. 94-100). Worthy of note from a gender-studies (and reception-studies) perspective is that Bellini's opera inspired the Italian feminist writer Dacia Maraini's play *Norma '44* (1986)²⁰ (Sreifer, 2013; Wohl, 2005, pp. 145-160). The action of this adaptation takes place in a concentration camp and revolves around a love triangle: the relationship between two Italian-Jewish women (an actress and a singer) and a German officer, who is a passionate admirer of Bellini's *Norma*. Maraini's plot is inspired by that of the opera, which also provides the musical and cultural subtext throughout. Though in line with the intention of the *Regieoper* trend to modernize *Norma*, this is a completely *different* experiment of dramatic *mimesis*, which offers a new, original, and coherent text, and therefore does not encounter a basic problem of many (perhaps most) *Regie* productions, regardless of their

¹⁹ See Smith (1997): 94-100, with references to gender studies, especially the semiotic impact of McClary (1991).

²⁰ See Sreifer (2013). For tragedy and feminism in general, see Wohl (2005): 145-160.

specific goals and methodologies: rendering a part of the libretto (in the case of *Norma*, regrettably, a considerable part) anachronistic and preposterous because of the blatant incompatibility between the original text and the new context superimposed by the stage directors in line with their systematic deconstruction and idiosyncratic reconstruction. To cope with this problem staunch defenders of *Regieoper* (or *Regietheater*) usually invoke the postmodernist (or meta-modernist) approach to textuality, i.e., an attitude of extreme *relativism* in the interpretation and adaptation (or appropriation) of literary texts²¹ (Yoskevitch, 2020; Evans, 2000; Slethaug, 2014).

***Regieoper* and the Problematics of *Norma*'s Adaptability**

As stated from the outset, my criticism does not stem from an *a priori* dogmatic or “orthodox” position in the bitter debate between the two conflicting schools of dramaturgy—the “revisionist” and the traditionalist. The dichotomy between them should not be over-simplified, certainly as far as success or failure is concerned. Both orientations may lead to excellent results and generate fascinating cultural events, as they may also lead to dubious or disastrous results—modern absurdities or period-drama kitsch. Many productions happen to be situated somewhere in the middle of this evaluative spectrum, for better or for worse.

The original context is not sacrosanct, and changing it is certainly not tantamount to an act of blasphemy. In some cases, such as the English National Opera (ENO) production of *Rigoletto* (1982) under Jonathan Miller's stage direction (which has become a “classic” and a model of inspiration),²² the creative practice of *Regieoper* has achieved strikingly coherent results. Another example, more recent, of what I consider to be on the whole a success of this *modus operandi* in interpreting an iconic work which, like *Norma*, belongs to the *bel-canto* category, is Katie Mitchell's feminist (and highly controversial) staging of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the ROH (2016, revived in 2018 and 2020).²³ Both of these *Regieoper* interpretations are not only insightful, innovative, and sophisticated, but also cogent, inner-coherent, and compatible with the text and spirit of the libretto, which makes the new context a convincing alternative of the original version. This also holds true with respect to Willy Decker's modernized and vibrant version of *La Traviata*, that originated at the Salzburg Festival (2005) and had many revivals, including one at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (2011). Such productions contribute to enlightening and enriching the original work by subtly adding new layers of reference and fresh insights, without affecting the intrinsic concepts and values of text and music. However, *Norma* provides an example of an opera that, paradoxically, despite its universal messages, is not easily translatable and adaptable to a modernized context—nor to any other historical context or frame of reference different from the original. The difficulty of its adaptability is further illuminated by the deficiencies and pitfalls of additional recent adaptations to which I will refer here only briefly.

²¹ For the link between postmodernism and *Regieoper*, see Yoskevitch (2020). For relativism in the postmodernist approach to historical texts in general and a so-called “defense of history”, see Evans (2000). For a theoretical approach to adaptation, see Slethaug (2014), with bibliography.

²² Jonathan Miller successfully transfers *Rigoletto*'s plot from sixteenth-century Mantua to the Mafia world of Little Italy in the New York City of the 1950s.

²³ Katie Mitchell moves the historical context from the late seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, and the emergence of proto-feminism at the time. In collaboration with Vicky Mortimer as designer, she presents on stage (based on the technical concept of the split-screen synchronism) some shocking episodes that are conventionally left outside, such as the (premeditated) murder of Arturo by Lucia, in this case in collaboration with her maid. Many years earlier, Andrei Șerban had succeeded in staging a coherently revisionist, though by far less colorful, *Lucia di Lammermoor* for the Paris Opera, Bastille (1995, with many revivals). That production was focused on the social idea of a military depressive universe under male domination. A similar, if more radically modernized and iconoclastic interpretation, one that adds to the feminist element an anti-establishment and anti-clerical dimension, is the recent production of the Hamburg State Opera (2021), staged by Amélie Niermeyer.

One of them is the socially oriented and phallogentric production at the ENO (2016),²⁴ in which Christopher Alden moves the plot to a nineteenth-century peasant community in crisis; he transforms the Romans into British landowners, the Druids into oppressed and extremely violent farmers worshipping a phallus image (ensuing almost in what appears to be almost a parody of the opera). In a Bavarian State Opera production (Munich 2006, revived in 2019), Jürgen Rose apparently moves the plot to the modern Middle East (as indicated by the Muslim-style clothes) without any coherent analogy in the overall interpretation, presumably to infuse the sense of a clash of civilizations. However, the idea of a huge white triangle dominating the dark-costumed figures below is an appropriate visual symbol of the love triangle as well as the dialectic spirit of this opera. By far less apposite is the surprising change in the *finale*: contrary to the libretto, Norma is made to step alone to her immolation, presumably in order to emphasize her prominence as the tragic heroine. This revisionist scenario of the *finale* recurs in the “abstractionist” production at the Zurich Opera House (2011, revived in 2019), where Robert Wilson adapts *Norma* to the concept of the Japanese Kabuki theatre, with special emphasis on light effects, body language, imagery, geometric shapes, and a wide palette of colors. This aesthetically commendable “Japanese” version, free of any artificially modernizing elements, presents an impressionistic and *sui generis* vision, one of the more stimulating experiments in the non-traditionalist history of *Norma* productions. However, its extremely slow-motion development and the absence of any physical contact between the characters on stage, which are embedded in Wilson’s methodology, seriously undermine the dynamic flow and the intensity of the drama.

Nowadays many, perhaps most, of the so-called traditionalist opera productions are no longer fully realistic and naturalist (with the exception of period costumes which, at times, are also substituted by eclectic and somewhat timeless codes of dress), but display an increasingly impressionistic and abstractionist approach to staging, frequently based on minimalist sets and on a plethora of symbols, images, light effects, collage or film editing techniques, video projections, and other innovations. There appears to be a middle way, a compromise between the strictly traditionalist and the radically revisionist methods of staging—a balanced and nuanced approach, based on an evocative meta-theatrical strategy, that does not artificially modernize or drastically change the historical context, but only hints at the work’s universal messages through a fresh, updated approach to opera as a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*).

Norma’s adaptability to *Regioper* (in its radically revisionist sense of historic deconstruction and meaningful reconstruction) encounters severe difficulties among other reasons because the terms of reference to the dimensions of time-period and place in its libretto are less flexible than those of many other operas²⁵ (David, 2021, p. 2). *Rigoletto*, for instance, is much more easily adaptable to a context different from its original one. After all, it was initially moved (out of fear of censorship) by Verdi himself and his librettist Francesco Maria Piave, from the court of Francois I—in Victor Hugo’s *Le roi s’amuse* (*The King Has Fun*), the play on which it is based—to late-medieval or early-modern Mantua; the French monarch is metamorphosed into an Italian duke, while Mantua as a location has no specific meaning for the plot; nor has the specific time-period.²⁶ In this case, as in that of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and many other operas, the mutability of the historical context is much more

²⁴ This is the ENO company’s first staging of *Norma*. The policy of having all operas there sung in English translation could have inspired Alden’s idea of relocating the plot to Britain.

²⁵ On the specific clues of the libretto for the dating of *Norma*’s plot, see David (2021): 2 and note 2.

²⁶ Mantua was ruled by a duke between 1328 and 1708, but the libretto does not give any clues to a specific period. A parallel example of considerable flexibility concerning the place and time of an operatic narrative is provided by Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* (*A masked ball*), based on a real event in late eighteenth-century Sweden, but relocated by Verdi and his librettist, under the pressure of censorship, from Stockholm to early eighteenth-century Boston.

feasible than in the case of *Norma*. On the religious and anthropological levels, the centrality of polytheism and the practice of human sacrifices *as a ritual* are not easily translatable to a modern audience. To a certain extent, a similar example of difficulties in the adaptation of an opera to a modernized context is provided by Verdi's *Aida* and the frequent references in its libretto to the ancient Egyptian background²⁷. However, in *Norma* the associations between the personal, the familial, the sacral-religious, the cultural, the military, and the political spheres, with all the dichotomies and binaries involved, are much more complex than in *Aida* (or any other opera set in antiquity). On account of this special complexity, essential aspects of the drama are sacrificed (as argued above) for the sake of adapting *Norma* to a *Regie* production. One may think of many parallels or significant analogies of political and social situations involving the conflict between an oppressed group and its oppressors, but it is extremely difficult to find an adequate parallel of Norma's authority and special position of power, her relationship with the arch-enemy of her people (whose rank as former head of State is also difficult to replicate), her unique status *vis-à-vis* her father on a basis of dual leadership (a special type of familial and sacral diarchy), and other essential ingredients associated with the protagonists and the historical context of this lyric tragedy. Its universal messages can be found in Romani's sophisticated text, which presents a rare blend of erudition and virtuosity, as well as in Bellini's music, which is extremely sensitive to the subtleties of that text²⁸ (David, 2021, pp. 6-9).

Finally, returning for a while to the Laiser/Courier production (debuted at the Salzburg festival), besides its ingenious, if problematic, staging, it contains significant musicological innovations. They are largely due to Cecilia Bartoli's efforts to reproduce Bellini's original intentions as faithfully as possible through close collaboration with the conductor and musicologist Giovanni Antonini and the *La Scintilla* Orchestra of Zurich, which nostalgically plays only on musical instruments belonging to Bellini's period, with a magic musical effect. Antonini attempts to resuscitate the ultimate original version of Bellini, including the many revisions the composer made to the manuscript after the hasty premiere.²⁹ These include the pastoral coda of the Druids's savage call for war (II.7) in their choir *Guerra, guerra!* (in *allegro feroce*), a coda which, by the way, is regrettably omitted by Antonio Pappano in the ROH performance. The contrast between that coda, ending with "a ray of sunshine" ("un raggio di sol"), and the previous savagely warmongering part of the choir is a central example of *Norma*'s dialectics from the perspective of both text and music.

However, as far as the musical interpretation is concerned, the most radical change of Antonini and Bartoli, purportedly in keeping with Bellini's original intention, is the reversal of vocal roles: contrary to the performance tradition of *Norma*, Bartoli, a mezzo-soprano, undertakes the title role, usually sung by a soprano, while Adalgisa's role, normally performed by a mezzo-soprano, is performed by a lyric soprano (Sumi Jo in the premiere), an inversion which, one may contend, would be more appropriate for the respective ages and roles of the two priestesses in the sacral-political hierarchy. Further elaborating on the rationale behind this interpretation (first advanced by the musicologist Rodolfo Celletti)³⁰ and its vocal viability would be beyond the scope of the

²⁷ See above, note 9.

²⁸ For the sophistication of the text and the composer's deep sensitivity and meticulous attention to the words, see David (2021): 6-9.

²⁹ The conductor used a new critical edition by Maurizio Biondi and Riccardo Minasi (2013), based on Bellini's autograph score—Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag. A complete studio recording is available on CD, Decca—4786018 (2013).

³⁰ Celletti (1974). As an artistic director, Celletti put into practice his ideas on "*la vocalità di Norma*" at the Festival della Valle in Martina Franca in 1977.

present paper³¹ (Riggs, 2003; Rutherford, 2007; Toft, 2013; Qin, 2015, pp. 26-84). Whatever the opinion on the results, Antonini and Bartoli deserve warm praise on their research efforts and on their extremely interesting experiment. However, one cannot escape noticing the fundamental gap, not to say discordance, between the claim of trying on the musical level (both orchestral and vocal) to restore *Norma* to its roots, i.e., the original method of performance, and the dramaturgic interpretation of the stage directors, which so drastically distances itself from the original concept. Ironically, this *Regie* production provides an additional dimension—from the field of performing arts and reception studies—to the complex dialectics of *Norma* and to the potential clash between the verbal, the musical, and the visual realms.

Conclusion

Despite their remarkable merits, the two outstanding adaptations of *Norma* to modern contexts (and other minor exemplars) discussed above appear to suffer from acute shortcomings, some of which frequently affect *Regie* productions: *inter alia* certain discrepancies or incompatibilities with the libretto, cultural dissonances, and occasional problems of coherence and verisimilitude.

Norma's adaptability to *Regieoper* is extremely difficult, among other reasons because the terms of reference to the dimensions of the time-period, place, and mores in its libretto are by far less flexible than those of other operas. *Norma*'s universal messages and its dualities of "foreign" versus "familiar", with their vast semantic ambit, would seem to be better understood and conveyed by meticulously delving into the subtleties of the text (and subtext) of the libretto as well as by taking into account the significance and implications of its historical context. Inner-coherence and compatibility with the libretto are essential for any attempt at creating an appropriate and relevant analogy running *parallel* (not contradictory) to the original narrative. A fully *convincing* production of *Norma* in the modernizing spirit of *Regieoper*, if at all possible, still remains an artistic challenge.

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³¹ It is, however, in place to maintain that Giuditta Pasta, the first performer of *Norma*, was not a regular mezzo-soprano or soprano. She had an "absolute voice" (*voce assoluta*)—a term that in the operatic lexicon refers to a rare ability of singing with equal flexibility, self-control, and ornamentation both lyrical and dramatic roles within the range of those vocal specializations (a similar term is *soprano sfogato*); see, e.g., Riggs (2003); Rutherford (2007); Toft (2013). Pasta's contemporary and great rival, Maria Malibran, and later, Maria Callas, too, shared this rare quality, as they also possessed the royal demeanor and charisma that are essential for performing *Norma*'s role; cf. Qin (2015): 26-84.

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