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Re-envisioning Tragedy: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and Madness in Three Twentieth-Century Operas

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Re-envisioning Tragedy: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and Madness in Three Twentieth-Century Operas.

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Abstract

This comparative analysis of three twentieth-century operas – Berg's *Wozzeck*, Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* – traces their respective discourses of gender and madness, specifically within the dramatization (musical and otherwise) of their title characters. Of the three, *Wozzeck*, because it adheres to strict gender roles, has been received most uniformly as a tragedy; by contrast, *Lady Macbeth* is traditionally viewed in terms of satire. I argue that feminist musicological analysis allows for a re-envisioning of all three operas, in which the characters are received as tragic regardless of subverting societally enforced gender categories.

Introduction

> If we believe that an opera cannot threaten life and morals, then we are perhaps more vulnerable than we imagined. If it is because we believe that ethics can have no bearing on aesthetics, then our own dehumanization is already far advanced.
> —Richard Taruskin

> Fairly they bought, they said, and fairly they sold, and yet they dealt in darkness
> — From *Peter Grimes*

I have always found opera fascinating as a genre that can connect multiple worlds of art (theatrical, musical, visual) into a sum infinitely greater than its parts. If great storylines combining love, murder, conspiracy, and mistaken identity are not sufficient, surely the power of the musical ideas is enough to win over anyone. With its beautiful sets and ornate costumes, opera is truly a genre in which one can lose oneself in the magic of it all. Besides the outwards glitz, operas, much like any artistic genre, engage with many societal discourses. While the escape is welcome, I found myself most drawn to opera when asked several years ago to explore the connections between opera and "real life." In my research that followed I discovered various representations of women in opera, characters such as Violetta the unapologetic courtesan, Carmen the brazen and unbridled heroin, or Isolde the Irish princess. As a Women's, Gender, and Sexualities Studies major I remained interested in the representation of women in operas and as I have grown as a performer, this interest has only increased. As a performer, I find myself mediating the intent of the composer and my own interpretation of the character as a performer. Contemplating and expanding on this mediation of intent in operatic works began my interest in this interdisciplinary honors thesis.

Within the field of musicology, scholars have explored the ways in which music is created around, in response to, or through, various societal constructs. The field of

feminist musicology is one subset that explores these connections. Within these interdisciplinary fields, "musicology resembles the humanistic disciplines, especially literature, and may borrow from literary or cultural theory. This interest has provoked debate over whether music has its own meaning, independent of the context in which it is created, performed and heard, or whether it is inevitably socially embedded and cannot be fully understood outside these contexts." [1] Since the seventies, feminist scholars such as Susan McClary, Catherine Clement, Mary Ann Smart, and Heather Hadlock have all explored the relationship of gender and operatic works. Smart discusses "works of art as mediated by culture—indeed as representations—designed to 'do cultural work,' to perpetuate agendas, or at least reflect the broad preoccupations of a culture."[2] Exploring music and the genre of opera as constructed by and against societies in order to "do cultural work," the emotions and trials of such "stock" characters becomes deeper and inscribed with meaning that is often lost.

One important early study of women in opera can be traced to Catherine Clement's 1988 *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Clement discusses the role of women in various operas, generally focusing on the construction and representation of women in such works as Puccini's *Madam Butterfly,* Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde,* and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. What makes Clement's argument intriguing is her focus on personal experience—how she has interpreted women through the genre of opera. In a chapter entitled "Dead Women," Clement laments the imminent death of so many nineteenth-century female opera characters and posits that the spectacle of their death is oftentimes what brings people to the opera at all. These women are much like the characters of Wozzeck, Peter Grimes, and Katerina, whose downfalls are also fairly

evident from the opening scenes of their respective works. Clement's argument relies on female characters in operas being labeled as foreigners: "that is what catches them in a social system that is unable to tolerate their presence for fear of repudiating itself. [T]heir foreignness is not always geographical…[b]ut always, by some means or another, they cross over a rigorous, invisible line, the line that makes them unbearable; so they will have to be punished."[3] I argue that the characters of Wozzeck, Peter Grimes, and Katerina are constructed as foreigners by their respective societies.

While Clement refers to the society within the operas, the audience constitutes the more dangerous society. While the societies within these operas doom their main characters to death, these deaths are imagined and, with the closing of each curtain, Wozzeck, Peter Grimes, and Katerina are able to rise and perform all over again. However, audience members use societal constructions of "appropriate behavior" to pass judgment on these characters, often altering the intended message of the composer. Clement's text provides a solid basis for understanding the broad strokes of feminist musicology. Later scholars, such as Susan McClary, would take Clement's foundation and build upon it, using close musical analysis to drive home varying critical arguments.

McClary has examined music's role in the creation of female characters in opera. Perhaps her most famous illustration of musical representation is her critique of Bizet's *Carmen*. In her analysis, McClary posits that Carmen is musically coded as exotic, as an "other" or "foreigner" in comparison to both the characters in the opera and the Western bourgeois audience. Specifically, in Carmen's first-act Habanera, her triplet patterns and chromaticism are in strict defiance of society's tonality. This musical number alienates the audience members, as they do not know if this is the "real" Carmen, or if she is

strategically concealing herself behind her public façade.[4] Much like Katerina, Carmen is a female character rooted in the rejection of gender norms. Her suggestive Habanera illuminates her "as an expert in seductive rhetoric. In her musical discourse, she is slippery, unpredictable, maddening, irresistible."[5] As the first scholar to delve into such research, McClary has blazed a new path of feminist analysis and demonstrated the ways in which operatic works can be re-envisioned, even after many years of musicological analysis.

As a Music and Women's, Gender, Sexualities Studies major, I have found myself drawn to the intersection of musicology and feminist cultural studies as a way to explore the ways in which societal norms influence music, how representations of gender have been created for the operatic medium, and how these gender identities are complicated when confronted with the theme of madness. I realized that madness is a pervasive in many operatic works and I began to wonder why this theme was so prevalent. Through my research I discovered that many composers use themes of madness to connote tragedy and that oftentimes, themes of madness are tied directly to social critiques.

I have encountered three 20th-century operas that I believe are critical to discussing the connections between a composer's portrayal of gender and madness and his social commentary on discourses including class, government, and sexuality. *Wozzeck* (1925) by Alban Berg, *Peter Grimes* (1945) by Benjamin Britten, and *Lady Macbeth of the Mstensk District* (1934) by Dmitri Shostakovich are three operas that engage with these different themes and intentions. The title characters of Wozzeck, Peter Grimes, and Katerina Izmailova represent varying stock characters around which deep moral conflicts

swirl. Representing the common-man, the homosexual, and the conniving woman respectively, all three are driven to madness and suicide at the end of their operas. By exploring representations of gender in connection with the theme of madness in these 20th-century operas, one can see that the way in which a composer fashions a character (in his treatment of arias, libretto, background music, etc.) is often an attempt at a societal critique.

Reception history also plays an important role in this analysis of cultures, as the discourse of reception shapes the ways in which operatic works are remembered throughout history. No matter what a composer's intention, an audience can misinterpret an opera and effectively change its intended message. I believe that such misinterpretation has occurred with *Peter Grimes* and *Lady Macbeth.* Using *Wozzeck* as a foundational example of 20th-century opera as a successful social critique allows for a re-envisioning of *Peter* Grimes and *Lady Macbeth.* Often branded as social misfits, I argue that these two characters must be examined in light of feminist criticism to fully appreciate the ways in which their respective operas critically engage in social commentary and paint them as tragic characters amongst a backdrop of satiric circumstances.

Gender has long been a popular and promising discourse through which to analyze the genre of opera and the ability to interweave feminist theory into musicology only broadens fields of research and interpretations of musical works. I find it valuable to juxtapose music, which is often considered a very personal outlet, to gender, which, as Judith Butler so eloquently put it, is a "socially constructed binary that is dependent on *public*, repetitious acts constituted within a specific historical moment that become

inscribed onto the body." [6] Utilizing this notion of performance and inscription of meaning, the lens of gender helps simultaneously illuminate the political goals of the composer as well as trace a continuum of the construction and reception of these stock characters as tragic.

In addition to gender, madness is used strategically in all three of these operas as a theme that complicates traditional representations of gender identity and tragedy. Work in this vein of feminist musicology began with Mary Ann Smart whose PhD dissertation examined the construction of madness and gender categories in opera. Smart posits that all forms of music are mediated by culture and although her focus resides in the discourse of gender in 19th-century opera, her analytical tools remain valuable for 20th-century works as well. Although Smart focuses on the construction of the traditional 19th-century mad scene, as opposed to my tracing of the socio/cultural ramifications of such scenes, both rely on the discourse of reception and intent of the composer.

I find it valuable to connect the theme of madness with the identity category of gender as this relationship is fundamental in situating the title characters within these operas as tragic. The relationship between madness and gender categories is complex and deeply rooted in societal discourse. For women, madness is connoted closely to hysteria, a word that has often been linked to the "otherness" of women's bodies and thus as a way to further exclude women from society. Following this logic, a man proclaimed as mad is viewed by society as emasculated and becomes effeminate. Within the reception histories of these operas, the relationship of gender and madness is used to vilify characters, writing off societal ills as personal, individual moral shortcomings. In response, I

illustrate the ways in which these characters, despite carrying society's label of "mad," are depicted as tragic by their respective composers.

While many notions of madness suggest social ostracization, the composers of these three 20th-century operas have employed this theme as a means of garnering a tragic response. By using madness as a means of social commentary, these composers are able to highlight the various faults of society. This paper traces these three operas as works of the twentieth century that, while created by the composers as social commentaries, are complicated by the societally constructed discourses of gender and madness and therefore are often viewed as less tragic than intended. I argue that dominant, hegemonic gender categories affect the reception histories of operas. The more aligned a character is with these dominant categories, the more likely they are to be forgiven of their moral short fallings and hailed as victims by a sympathetic audience. The composers complicate the idea of complacent art, by using tropes of tragedy and satire, and by interweaving scored music with careful libretto and stage direction. Unfortunately, because each of these main characters has varying audience receptions, at times their tragedies are interpreted more as "serves-them-right" vindications than stories of bitterness and sorrow. Beginning the work of untangling these complicated relationships between composer, society, politics, and reception proves important in progressing the field of feminist musicology if not to provide groundbreaking research, to at least offer new insight into the interpretation and creation of fairly recent, operatic works.

Relating the origins of these operas to the political critiques of the respective composers, I attempt to analyze social norms and the various receptions of these characters by audiences. Themes of moral ambiguity heavily guide the plots, through

which gender and madness are key elements in defining both the expected and actual actions of the characters. Tragedy and satire as artistic tropes become folded into the argument when considering the disparities between the composer's intension and the reception of the characters by the audience. Throughout the paper, I discuss the ways in which conforming to gender-normative behavior, despite a decent into madness, allows for a tragic reception while subverting gender roles garners a more sympathetic response. These connections and overlaps are complex, but I believe that wrestling with the ways in which societal norms effect operatic reception can open up operas for reinterpretations and allow the characters to be understood on a deeper level.

First, I explore *Wozzeck* as the foundational example through which *Peter Grimes* and *Lady Macbeth* can be re-envisioned. *Wozzeck* serves as a successful marriage between composer's intention/political agenda and the opera historical reception. Using Wozzeck as an example of a successfully received tragedy, I analyze the ways in which this is in large part due to Wozzeck's gender and social class. In *Peter Grimes*, the tragic element of the opera becomes muddled by the borough's suspicions of homosexuality in Peter. The case of *Peter Grimes* is important in identifying the ways in which social nonconformism, in this respect in the form of sexual preference, negatively effects critical reception. Lastly, the paper will trace the turbulent creation and reception history of *Lady Macbeth.* Through a careful discussion and analysis of Shostakovich's musical text, I argue that the generally accepted reception of Katerina as morally bankrupt is false and that the character of Katerina provides the audience with a social commentary of the role of women in Soviet Russia as well as a tragic ending.

While this comparative analysis cannot trace all the arguments that one could make about these operas, I attempt to begin these discussions with the hope of illustrating the myriad connections between feminism and musicology. The topic of interdisciplinary studies became important to me in my sophomore year when a peer mentioned that none of my three majors (music, women/gender/sexuality studies, and education) related in any way. I have always disagreed and feel that a liberal arts education challenges me to make these connections across disciplines. This project is an attempt to illustrate just a few of the ways in which a feminist analysis can illuminate the genre of opera and open up discussions about the relationships between art and society. As Richard Taruskin states, if "we believe that an opera cannot threaten life and morals, then we are perhaps more vulnerable than we imagined. If it is because we believe that ethics can have no bearing on aesthetics, then our own dehumanization is already far advanced." [7]

Chapter One: *Wozzeck*

Premiering on November 8, 1925 Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* was based on Georg Büchner's (1813-1837) play *Woyzeck*. Berg attended the first production of *Woyzeck* in 1914 and compiled the opera's scenes from fragmented, unordered scenes that Büchner had created. A pillar of the 20th-century operatic canon, *Wozzeck* tells the story of a poor soldier who is driven to madness by the society around him. Throughout the course of the story Wozzeck's Captain and the Doctor torture him by mocking his social class, his person, and his family. When Marie, the mother of Wozzeck's child, is unfaithful to him with the Drum-Major, Wozzeck is driven over the edge. Taunted by the Drum-Major, Wozzeck raises his suspicions to Marie, who neither assuages nor affirms his fears. However, when Wozzeck sees Marie and the Drum-Major dancing in a bar, he is driven to stabbing her in the stomach as a blood-red moon rises in the distance. Distraught over having killed his Marie and afraid to be caught, Wozzeck throws the knife into a pond and, as the blood-red moon rises again, wades into the pond and drowns.

If Wozzeck appears to be a life-like character, it is because many aspects of his character are taken from real-life scenarios. Büchner's original idea from the storyline originated from real events in which a soldier named Woyzeck was hanged for killing his wife after she had an affair with another soldier. Büchner took this real man's story and wrote his own play expanding on the storyline. Taking these real-life connections a step further for his operatic prouction, Berg incorporated aspects of is own military service into the character of Wozzeck. There is little doubt that the difficult nine years that Berg spent in the military helped shape the way in which Berg was able to portray Wozzeck as

a helpless, impressionable man. Berg's time in the military greatly affected him and he even re-wrote portions of the libretto to reflect some of the lived experiences he had as a soldier, most famously Wozzeck's line about what the military served for dinner. In addition, Wozzeck and Berg shared the experience of having an illegitimate child.[8] These connections, although not always known to the general audience member, help legitimate Wozzeck as a common-man in society. His struggle for survival and the support of his family situates him as a character that who suffering, to which many audience members can relate.

Although responsible for killing Marie and ultimately committing suicide, Wozzeck is often viewed as a modern-day tragic character. Wozzeck "repudiates the idea that 'tragic suffering is the somber privilege of those in high places.'" [9] The lower class status of Wozzeck makes him a relatable character and audiences feel his plight as he is accosted by the Captain, Doctor, Drum-major, and even is fellow soldiers; this constant emotional beating makes Wozzeck anxiety-ridden, but not fundamentally insane.[10]

While the tragedy of the story lies completely within the destruction of one man by forces greater than himself, it is interesting that Berg chooses to "depict mental instability through a musical structure that could hardly be more rational."[11] The harmonic structure of the work is atonal, meaning that the music lacks a tonal center or specific key. Despite the fluidity of the harmonies, the rigid structure of Berg's opera score involves meticulous, repetitive meter changes and dozens of recurring melodic-rhythmic motives that symbolize various characters and emotions. Berg appears to compensate for the harmonic looseness by creating rigidity through rhythmic structure. The atonal nature of the piece, with its multiple shifting tonal centers, allows the audience

to become lost in the music. For much of the opera, the music becomes incidental to the action on stage. It is only in the interludes that the audience is directed to the music as a focal point as "the score is in a constant state of tension between the unconscious" and the conscious.[12] By examining several key moments within the opera more closely through a feminist musicological lens, one can see the ways in which Berg effectively capture Wozzeck as a tragic character. Additionally apparent are the myriad ways that social constructs such as gender help articulate this tragic message successfully within the opera's reception history.

Before exploring the ways in which Wozzeck's madness and tragic ending are understood, one must have a closer understanding of the various other constructions of masculinity that swirl about Wozzeck during the opera. Wozzeck's downfall is greatly dependent upon his surroundings and the way in which masculinity is tragically de/re/constructed within various satirical characters of the opera. The opera opens with Wozzeck's masculinity being compromised as Wozzeck shaves the Captain while receiving instructions on how to become a successful. The Captian speaks to Wozzeck about time, and how a secure man does not rush about, but rather takes his time and allows others to wait for him. The Captain exemplifies the status of a "successful man," one that can use others as he pleases and welds power over his soldiers.

The Doctor welds a similar power, although his representation of masculinity revolves more around science, knowledge, and reason. The Doctor becomes masculine through his ability to impart knowledge, using this ability not to help others, but to control them. The scene that most exemplifies the Doctor's true masculinity is where he

is discussing the impending sickness and death of the Captain and then revel's in his apparent worry.

The Drum Major represents the third, and perhaps most important, construction of masculinity as he belittles Wozzeck's manhood two-fold—through his status as Drum Major and through his affair with Marie. The Drum Major is a rather self-important character who has no qualms about boasting his higher military rank in relation to Wozzeck. By claiming Marie and having an affair, the Drum Major is able to re-inscribe his military rank and masculine status through a more sexual means, thus situating his masculine sexuality as more virile and dominant than Wozzeck. The boisterous, obnoxious nature of each of these three other characters helps construct the ways in which Wozzeck must battle to hold onto his construction of masculinity, which from the start of the opera is rather frail. Although the previous accounts of various masculinities within *Wozzeck* may begin to shad some light on the difficulties that Wozzeck faces within the opera, one must also examine how the characters of the Captain, Doctor, or Drum Major situate Wozzeck as tragic in comparison. For this discussion, one must examine the musical component of the work, for it is through musical representation that Berg is able to situate Wozzeck as a heartrending character.

While these various constructions of masculinity seem to draw the audience to Wozzeck in a sympathetic way, it is the music that most propels viewers to view *Wozzeck* as a tragedy. In exploring the score in relation to various characters, it becomes evident that the characters that represent masculinity and society in its various forms are painted in a rather sarcastic, satiric tone. From the bumbling accompaniment in the Captain's opening scene, to the leitmotivs that introduce the Drum Major and twist into odd

variations during the progression of his affair with Marie, it is apparent to the average viewer that these characters are not to be held in the highest esteem. Their outward, physical portrayals of masculinity and society do not mesh with the underlying score that serves to express deeper emotions and this disconnect resonates, however unconsciously, with the audience. Douglas Jarman posits that Berg constructed the opera in such as way that no one listens to the music, just the social implications of the opera." [13] While at times the musical's atonal dissonance can be jarring, the overall integration of emotive music into the operatic work puts the audience at ease and allows them to focus on the critical, social commentary that Berg was attempting to convey. The audience is not torn between focusing on the musical elements of the opera or the staged activity. Instead, the music serves to guide the staged action and convey meaning. For Berg, I believe that the social message was the most vital aspect of the opera, and the music serves to underscore the message that audience members retain throughout the work.

Berg most vividly reveals the inner workings of Wozzeck's character in the instrumental interlude in act III, which takes place solely in the orchestra after Wozzeck has murdered Marie. Other operatic works have used musical motives to express meaning, such as descending, chromatic figures to depict madness, but until *Wozzeck* a purely musical interlude had not been used in quite the same fashion. Separated from the havoc and mockery of society, the satiric elements of previous scenes are washed away and total focus is placed on the musical expression.

Immediately following Marie's death, the interlude begins with a sustained tremolo that crescendos into an overpowering wave of sound that culminates in a complex chord that strikes, triple forte. This crescendo of sound seems to illustrate

Wozzeck's realization of his terrible deed. The pounding, percussive syncopation that follows is a stark contrast to the previous tremolos and the grand pause mirrors the silence and panic that is rising in Wozzeck. Another rising tremolo follows, but while the audience is expecting another percussive breakthrough, or perhaps a sorrowful, virtuosic line of strings, the scene changes to a 2/4 polka-like meter with a piano accompaniment of eighth-notes that is disjointed and frantic. Wozzeck begins to sing a fairly legato, descending libretto over the frenetic piano and his decent in to madness begins. This interlude provides a rare moment when Wozzeck is not surrounded by other characters and other representations of masculinity. Berg expertly utilizes musical ideas during the interludes to portray the inner emotions of characters, emotions that during the action of the opera are obscured.

In addition to the satirical element of the music, I posit that gender and self-identification play a crucial role in situating the work's reception as a universal example of 20th-century tragic opera. Throughout the opera, Wozzeck is positioned as a character struggling to survive amongst his surroundings. While he does have faults, such as his outbursts at Marie, the audience comes to understand these outbursts as reactionary to his unfair surroundings. Wozzeck is a character who, following his own moral compass, does nothing wrong. He takes care of his family as much as possible and works hard at his job, doing everything that the average, middle to low income man does on a daily basis. Audiences are thus able to forgive him for his decent into madness and sympathize with his struggle against a society that seems insistent on keeping him in his socially constructed class position.

Through *Wozzeck*, Berg constructs tragedy as a realm of emotion that is accessible to everyone, although significant credit must also be given to Büchner.[14] In the theatrical version of *Woyzeck*, Büchner's intent was to include social commentary on the lack of injustice for the mentally unstable. Berg was then able to take this social commentary imbedded in the original production and expand on its emotive elements, highlighting the tragedy inherent in the plot. Through Wozzeck's breakdown, the audience is able to see the negative affect of societal expectations on the common man and the ways in which persons afflicted by madness are more "profoundly human" than the rest of society.[15] By situating Wozzeck as victim, as a common man who is easily relatable to the audience, as well as focusing on Wozzeck's breakdown as a societal and not moral disintegration, *Wozzeck* grounds its critical reception history as a prime example of 20th-century tragedy in the Western canon of operatic works.

Chapter Two: *Peter Grimes*

Composed in 1945, Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* blurs the categories of tragedy and satire, leaving audience members conflicted as to how to categorize the main character, Peter—as a demonic homosexual, or as a misunderstood, poor fisherman. The part of Peter Grimes was written for Britten's long-time partner Peter Pears, apparently the only man to be able to sing the score as originally written.[16] Like *Wozzeck*, *Peter Grimes* is based upon a 19th-century text, *The Borough*, by George Crabbe (1754-1832). Heavily influenced by Berg's work, Britten's opera also deals with the struggle of the individual against society. Much like Berg did with *Wozzeck*, Britten took several liberties when crafting the main character as well as the surrounding borough for his operatic adaptation.

In Crabbe's poem, Peter Grimes is a man of numerous ills. A smoker, heavy drinker, and gambler, Grimes is depicted as a lowly fisherman whose homosexual tendencies and violent behavior get him into trouble. The poem's depiction of the apprentice death scene makes it very obvious that Grimes pushes him, while Britten's version explicitly states that Grimes is not to touch the boy as he slips off the cliff. Britten's choice to downplay the vices and sexual orientation of Grimes clouds the "appropriate" understanding of the opera and thus complicates its tragic reception history.

The opera opens with a trial where Grimes is being investigated for the death at sea of his first apprentice. Cleared of charges, Grimes is released, but advised to not hire a new apprentice. Grimes's is furious at the borough's refusal to give him a fair second chance and is calmed by Ellen, the school teacher whom Grimes appears to fancy. Grimes hopes to win the approval of the borough by working hard and earning money

that he hopes will get him equal respect in the community. Additionally, he hopes to win the heart of Ellen, who Grimes calls his "safe harbour." [17] His desire of Ellen is apparent and as I will demonstrate later, this attraction complicates the theme of homosexuality that haunts the storyline. Due to the amount of work Grimes must do each day, he is found another apprentice, but when Ellen discovers a bruise on the young boy's neck, she expects that Grimes's is to blame. Angry, Grimes takes the boy and runs off. A mob hunts for Grimes and the boy, who are forced to go into hiding. During the escape, Grimes tells the apprentice to carefully climb down to the boat, instead, the boy slips off the cliff to his death. Grimes's escapes, but returns to the borough several days later as the apprentice's jersey washes up on shore. Another mob starts after Grimes, who is told by the old sea captain that he best take his boat out to sea and sink it. The next morning, as the borough is waking, a report comes in that a boat is sinking. The report is ignored and the opera draws to a close as another day begins in the borough.

Much like Berg, Britten's own personal life is reflected in his opera, although Britten's characterization of Grimes as a reflection of himself is perhaps more complex than the relationship between Wozzeck and Berg. Britten took a much subtler approach in connecting himself to the operatic work. While Berg used very specific connections to incorporate himself into the character (such as the shared connection of military food) Britten uses much more restrained associations. Britten's experiences as a homosexual are illustrated in *Peter Grimes* through the theme of foreignness, but in drawing connections between Britten and Peter Grimes, it is important not to read too much of the composer into the Grimes character. As Philiip Brett states, "the furthest we might go is to see Grimes as symbolic of something the composer recognized in himself.'" [18] While

the deeply ominous thread of homosexuality is implied, it is never spoken in the opera, which is indicative of the repressive shame that Britten felt as an adolescent and child. Indeed, the borough simply remarks, "Grimes is at his exercise" to hint of homosexuality, which parallels Britten's own disavowal of the term "gay" or "the gay life." [19] While the theme of homosexuality is not explicit, it serves as a force that makes Peter Grimes feel like an outsider and ultimately pushes him to taking his own life.

In attempting a social commentary, both Crabbe and Britten wanted to stress the general concept of foreignness rather than focusing exclusively on one aspect of otherness. Within *Peter Grimes* discourses of class, religion, and morality are as relevant to the discussion as the theme of homosexuality. Any of these themes can be addressed and indeed are present in the social commentary imbedded within the opera. Religious and moral discourses are explored in the borough as the townspeople seek to remedy Grimes's heinous behavior by riding the community of him and through their obvious judgments they place on his integrity and character based on rumors and gossip. Class issues are very directly addressed as Grimes is seen as an outsider for his dreamy, free-spirited nature and disinterest in making money and raising his stature. Indeed, this issue of class is a driving force in the opera as it is through the hunt for a large school of fish—guaranteed to amount to a small fortune—that Grimes feels he can win the respect and admiration of the borough.

While Grimes is an outsider in the borough, his undeniable desire to become respected and understood within the community is one of the primary tragic elements of the opera. In Act I Scene I, Grimes sings an aria in which the audience sees his true emotions as an individual and as an outsider. Grimes recounts how he is scoffed at for

being a dreamer. He claims that the borough gossips and "listens only to money" and so through being successful, he will win over the townspeople and marry Ellen. [20] Grimes' announcement of his interest in Ellen early on in the opera also serves to complicate the underlying idea, perpetuated by the borough, that Grimes is a homosexual. This aria most clearly illustrates the myriad ways in which Grimes is perceived as an outsider. The sole purpose is not to examine Grimes' homosexuality. Instead, the focus lies in being an outsider for more general reasons and the inability to fit into socially constructed gender roles, whatever those may be.

I believe that although it is not a blatant theme in the opera, Britten's own sexuality had a lot to do with his softer reinterpretation of Crabbe's Grimes character and the undercurrent of homosexuality that serves Britten's social commentary about acceptance and rejection. Similarly, this undercurrent of homosexuality has created a mixed reception history as to whether or not *Peter Grimes* should be categorized a tragic. Much like Wozzeck, Grimes is depicted as a victim of his surroundings. However, due to the homosexual undercurrent, while praised it as a fine work of modern opera, it is less often classified as decidedly tragic in its ending. I believe it is this fear of homosexuality in mainstream society that clouds Peter Grimes's story and makes it appear as though his fall to madness and suicide are warranted. Through the borough, Britten clearly illustrates the ways in which hegemonic society attempts to seek out and destroy difference. I believe that further exploration of the borough as a satiric element of the opera as well as further discussion of Grimes's sexual orientation situates *Peter Grimes* as a tragedy.

Even if the theme of homosexuality is downplayed in the opera, the theme of dominant, hegemonic society is not; Britten's particular setting of the borough and its

townspeople creates a satirical social commentary on society, most strongly represented by the chorus of borough townspeople. The chorus often serves as the driving force for the moral ambiguity surrounding Peter Grimes. I would like to explore two particular scenes in which satire is depicted through the townspeople of the borough. Both these scenes involve the repetition of words and phrases, a compositional element that I argue paints the borough as farcical and illuminates the gossipy, bitter undercurrents of society that so often attempt to tear down people such as Peter Grimes.

The first illustration of the satirical Borough is the round that is sung by the chorus in Act 1 Scene 2. Before this scene, Britten has already established the way in which the chorus is depicted as the gossip-driven force in the opera. The chorus often whispers secretive comments back and forth between sections while the drama unfolds between the main characters. First evident in the courtroom scene, these whispers and rebuttals are continued throughout. Before the round, Peter Grimes has just entered the pub where the townspeople were discussing his relationship with his apprentices. Balstrode begins to pressure Grimes about his previous behavior and the chorus continues their whispered comments such as "he is mad," "chuck him out," and "speak of the devil and he appears." [21] The anxiety rises in the pub as Balstrode defiantly shouts that Grimes kills small boys. Trying to keep the peace, Auntie, owner of the pub, demands a song to break the tension. What follows is a strange, three minute round about a fisherman named Joe.

This scene, marked by the abrupt change in mood situates the chorus as townspeople who are not to be taken seriously. The ability of the chorus to erupt into this complex cannon during the middle of the storyline illustrates the absurdity of society and

illuminates the constant struggle Peter Grimes must undertake to relate to, and fit in with, this community. Although prior to this scene the borough has been portrayed as gossip-driven and suspicious, this is the first (but certainly not last) time that the townspeople are painted as satirically so.

This satiric element returns in the hunting down of Grimes by the mob in Act 3, Scene 2.In this scene, where the mob begins the final search for Grimes, the audience hears the intermeshing of the hatred of the borough and the sardonic way in which Britten paints the scene. The borough has begun their hunt and their collective hatred for Grimes is illustrated in the text, which is sung by various sections at different times creating a wash of detestation over the audience. The lines of text converge, overlap, and repeat in a similar pattern of the courtroom scene or the pub cannon. The text reads: "Who hold himself apart, lets his pride rise—him who despises us we'll destroy. And cruelty becomes his enterprise. Our curse shall fall on his evil day; we shall tame his arrogance! We'll make the murderer pay! We'll make him pay, make him pay for his crime." [22] Clearly, Britten is using the borough to depict modern society—a society that often attempts to stamp out difference and individuality, especially in small communities such as the borough.

The satirical element is the way in which the music carries this text. The music swells as the chanting becomes more furious and deliberate, but the stumbling and overlap of the various chorus sections seems to illustrate the borough's passion to hunt out the delinquent individual. The painting of this dark text reaches is pinnacle when, after several minutes of mounting, the townspeople erupt in jarring, sporadic peels of laughter, apparently overjoyed at the possibility of capturing Grimes. The scene closes

with another strange moment where the townspeople begin chanting Peter's name. Just as before, the chanting overlaps and builds to a crescendo uniting in an exclamation of "Peter Grimes!" The audience assumes that this is the end of the scene, however, after a few measures of music the chant of "Peter Grimes" returns. This booming chord is followed by a grand pause suggesting the piece might be finished, but this chant returns two more times, between each is an extraordinarily pregnant pause of complete silence. This incessant chanting and howling of Grimes's name illustrates the obsession of the borough with the eradication of the individual. The last measures of this scene, which border on parody in their endless repetition, are particularly illustrative of the inability of the townspeople to ignore Peter Grimes.

In response to the incessant chatter of the townspeople throughout the opera, Peter Grimes is slowly worn-down and driven into compliancy; the repetitious whispers and accusations of the townspeople eventually drive Peter crazy; this breakdown is illustrated in Grimes's mad scene at the end of the opera. Britten's use of repetition serves as a musical illustration of the ways in which dominant society, through endless repetition of norms and values, is able to tear the individual down. Grimes's final scene is a sorrowful account of his attempts to have fit in with the borough. Grimes sings, "To hell with all your mercy! To hell with your revenge, and God have mercy on upon you!" During this scene, the townspeople are heard in the distance chanting "Peter Grimes!" Grimes responds "Did you hear them all shouting my name? D'you hear them? Old Davy Jones shall answer: Come home!" [23] Grimes' mad scene ends in a furious repetition of his own name, illustrating that the borough has defeated him and driven him to the point of madness. Grimes can no longer sing, rather he can only relentlessly cry out his name.

Grimes breaks down as the townspeople's malicious gossiping becoming internalized in his mind and his spirit is finally broken. Grimes's scene ends with his lyric line over the chanting of the chorus. He finishes "What harbour shelters peace, away from tidal waves, away from storms! What harbour can embrace terrors and tragedies? Her breast is a harbour too, where night is turned to day." [24] This final line is a remembrance of a past aria of Grimes where he sings of Ellen and the redemption her love would bring for him. The scene closes with Balstrode helping Peter push his boat into the water, where, as the townspeople discover in the morning, Grimes has sunk and drowned.

After Grimes's death, the closing of the opera with the chanting borough again illustrates the way in which dominant society continues on, with no regard to those individuals who stand out from the crowd. This attack on Peter Grimes by a force greater than himself and Grimes's struggle to overcome the borough is what makes this work such a great tragedy. While Grimes does demonstrate moral ambiguity and a quick temper throughout the opera, once again, like Wozzeck, he is intended to be read as a victim by the composer. The gossiping and chanting of the townspeople throughout the opera critiques and mirrors the ways in which dominant society represses the individual. Grimes attempts to fit into the culture of the borough by working hard and earning respect, but the borough is not interested and eventually Grimes is overtaken by their rejection.

The story of Peter Grimes is tragic in that he wants so desperately to be a part of the community. In Act 2 when Ballstrode inquires why Grimes had not left long ago, Grimes replies "I am native, rooted here by familiar fields, marshes and sands, ordinary streets, prevailing wind…and by the kindness of an occasional glance." [25] Despite his

attempt, the borough refuses to accept him. Grimes seems to become a scapegoat of sorts to the townspeople, who are quite willing to charge him with "faults" they are not even certain he possesses. Through a re-envisioning of the text and musical setting of the score, *Peter Grimes* can be reconstructed as a tragic operatic work, despite the flaws in Grimes's character—the real, more destructive flaws are imbedded within society.

Chapter Three: *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsenk District*

Much like *Wozzeck* and *Peter Grimes*, Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* serves as a social commentary that challenges the relationship between gender and madness and the ways in which these discourses are interpreted through the tropes of tragedy and satire. However, separating *Lady Macbeth* from the previous works are two main concerns. First, this opera deals with a *female* who does not comply with gender norms, a discourse that is generally harder to accept that men acting against societal norms. Additionally, Shostakovich's opera also became caught-up in the cultural and political battles within Stalin's Soviet Union, adding an entirely new level of problematics to its analysis and reception.

Premiering at the Little State Opera Theater of Leningrad on Jan 22, 1934, *Lady Macbeth*, an operatic work focusing on the murders of an illiterate woman caught in a web of love and the trap of societal expectations, was a huge success. Following Shostakovich's first opera, *The Nose*, a satirical opera based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol (1835) that was reviewed rather poorly and closed after only sixteen performances, *Lady Macbeth* captured audiences from the beginning. However, the tense political mood in Russia during this time perpetuated by Stalin's control over every aspect of society complicated the critical reception of the opera and placed Shostakovich in possible danger for the rest of his life due to his disregard for patriotic music and social critiques about class and gender categories. *Lady Macbeth* was intended to be the first opera in a set of twelve by Shostakovich that focused on the role of women in various classes of society; unfortunately, *Lady Macbeth* would be the only one of this set and his last opera ever completed.

On January 29, 1936 after hearing many positive reviews about the opera, Stalin attended a showing in Moscow. Unfortunately, Stalin left the theater before the performance was finished. The next morning Shostakovich was horrified to discover that *Pravda*, a state newspaper, had published an article entitled "Muddle instead of Music" which, amongst other things, regarded *Lady Macbeth* as coarse, primitive and vulgar. The article states:

> This is music constructed as a denial of opera. While our critics—including our music critics—swear by socialist realism, the scene created by Shostakovich presents us with the crudest naturalism. As a result, Leskov's moral tale has a significance imposed upon it that it does not possess. With all the means of musical as well as of dramatic expression at his disposal, the author has tried to elicit the sympathy of the audience for the coarse and vulgar Katerina Izmailova.[26]

The article was un-authored, but was long considered to have been written, or at least dictated, by Stalin, and the warning inherent in this message was thus not taken lightly by Shostakovich. The opera would be pulled from the stage and it would be many years after Stalin's death before *Lady Macbeth*, with revisions by the composer, would be performed again. This drastic, sudden political backlash to an otherwise popular opera illustrates the sex panic that fueled much of the Soviet Union at that time. The brand of womanhood portrayed by Katerina was beyond acceptable for Stalin, whom "the sound of a kiss frighten[ed] more than an exploding shell." [27] Stalin's political agenda focused on "simplicity and nationality," certainly not leaving any room for drastic social commentaries on gender that could challenge Russian citizens to dispute the status quo. Indeed, in the eyes of Stalin, Shostakovich's opera embodied everything he was attempting to banish from the country.

Stalin's swift dismissal of *Lady Macbeth* forever changed the ways in which the opera is received. In fact, even after the fall of Stalin, Shostakovich firmly asserted that the revisions he had made to *Lady Macbeth* were necessary and done wholly of free will. Although the true motives of Shotakovich's *Lady Macbeth* will never be entirely known, I believe that by examining the original opera score and libretto we can see the ways in which Shostakovich makes bold political statements concerning the treatment of women, mainstream society, and, in turn, the role that tragedy plays within this opera. Too long has the character of Katerina been interpreted as malicious and vengeful simply in response to her refusal to comply with dominant gendered expectations. Harsh critiques of the opera such as Richard Taruskin who posit that *Lady Macbeth* is "a profoundly inhumane work of art" belittle Shostakovich's treatment of Katerina and his social commentary of Russian society.[28] The time has come to re-envision Katerina as a victim of her surroundings and of love.

Based on Nikolay Leskov's Russian tale, written in 1865, the opera tells the story of Katerina Izmailova, the wife of a merchant who is often left alone with only the company of her father in law Boris. During one long absence of her husband, Katerina meets Sergei, hired help who works for her husband. In perhaps the most notorious scene of the opera, Sergei comes to Katerina's door the night of their first meeting and asks for a book to read. Eventually, Sergei is able to coerce his way in Katerina's room, despite her wishing him away, and the share a kiss that turns into a pseudo-rape scene. This scene was the tipping point for Stalin who disliked sex depicted in art. [29]The same night, Boris decides to go to Katerina's room and rape her (thinking that she must be missing a man's

presence by now), but instead discovers the affair. The next day, Katerina poisons Boris's food. Sergei helps her hide the body, and they continue their affair.

Time passes and Katerina's husband returns one night when Sergei and Katerina are together in her room. Zinoviy storms in and accuses Katerina of being unfaithful. When Zinoviy strikes Katerina, she calls for Sergei who helps hold Zinoviy down as Katerina smothers her husband. With her husband gone, Katerina and Sergei wed. At the wedding, another hired help goes to the stable to find more wine and instead finds the body of Katerina's late husband and calls the police. Katerina and Sergei try to run, but are captured before even leaving the house and are taken into custody. The two travel in a prison line headed for Siberia and Sergei begins to become distant towards Katerina. He blames her for their predicament and when she bribes a guard to let her see Sergei, he refuses to talk to her. Sergei has begun a new relationship with another prisoner, Sonyetka, and to prove his love for her, promises her new stockings to keep her feet warm. To get the stockings, Sergei apologizes to Katerina for acting so mean and begs for her stockings, which are thick and warm. Katerina, wanting to please Sergei, gives him her stocks freely. The affair does not last long though, as Katerina discovers the two new lovers and becomes enraged. The next day while walking past a river, Katerina tackles Sonyetka into the river and the two are drowned in the waves.

In Leskov's original, Katerina is depicted as an undeniably vile woman who is solely concerned about her own wishes and desires; this is not the same Katerina as depicted by Shostakovich. A scholar on Leskov, K.A. Lantz states, "although Leskov writes with obvious sympathy for the peasants, his image of their character is one of a core of violence covered in layers of ignorance." [30] Katerina's reception as violent and

ignorant of her deeds oversimplifies the work that Shostakovich did to create an opera that critiques the social issues of gender and "class warfare." [31] I believe that this raw reading of Katerina carried over into the reception history of Shostakovich's operatic adaptation. From a feminist critique, I argue that Shostakovich attempts to reinterpret the character of Katerina as tragic, but is hindered by society's refusal to sympathize with characters who disregard normative gender roles. Primarily, my discussion centers on in the ways in which Shostakovich attempts to make Katerina a more humane figure in contrast to her surroundings and fellow characters through both basic changes to the storyline and treatment of characters through musical representation.

To begin to understand Katerina as a tragic character, it is helpful to know about one slight deviation from the original story and how this situates Shostakovich's attitude toward Katerina. In Leskov's tale, once Katerina and Sergei have killed her husband, a distant child relative comes to visit her land because he may have part ownership rights. Furious that a child might spoil their plans, Katerina smothers the small boy under the urging of Sergei. Shostakovich deemed this murder too malicious to be taken sympathetically by any audience and omitted it from his adaptation.[32] Shostakovich left this murder out of his opera because he wanted audiences to sympathize with Katerina. Shostakovich was attempting to illustrate the ways in which Katerina was responding to her surroundings and, as I will argue, the urges and desires of Sergei.[33] Through this re-interpretation, Katerina is not simply a malicious, conniving woman who refused to conform to proper gender roles, but rather a character that is driven to madness and murder for one tragic flaw—desire.

Throughout the opera, it is apparent that Katerina does many things that she does not want to do only under due to the urging of, and her love for, Sergei. Katerina is a lonely woman, but she never instigates any meetings with Sergei; it is only after his request to wrestle in the barn and his brash venture to her room that she gives in. Although she tries to keep away from him out of respect for her husband, Sergei's presence infuses her with life and because she believes that he truly desires her, she submits to love. The murder of Boris is due to the fact that he is going to split the new couple up. Therefore, Katerina poisons him before he can banish Sergei and ruin her name. While it can be argued that this murder was out of pure rage, it is important to remember that Katerina had been in a loveless marriage and hardly saw her husband. As Shostakovich himself remarked in the program notes of *Lady Macbeth*, "her crimes are a protest against the tenor of life she if forced to live, against the dark and suffocating atmosphere of the merchant class.[34] Katerina's murder of Boris was out of a necessity to keep a hold of the first thing to make her happy in a very long time. The killing of her husband is also out of necessity and is actually carried out more by Sergei than Katerina. When Zinoviy enters Katerina's bedroom and accuses her of an affair, he begins beating her and she calls out to Sergei. It is Sergei who holds down Zinoviy and strangles him. Once again, the killing and covering up of the death was due to love—Katerina could not bear to be apart from Sergei.

The final murder, that of Sonyetka, is the tragic ending where Katerina realizes that she has been used and that Sergei never really loved her. This scene can be interpreted simply as a raving lunatic woman who kills herself and another. Katerina is indeed mad by this point, but it is because of Sergei that she is in her predicament.

Because of his manipulations, she killed two members of her family and now, on the way to Siberia, she has given him her warm stockings, thinking that they would help him. When she discovers his ulterior motives, she breaks, having lost the only thing in the world she was holding onto—her desire for Sergei.

In addition to highlighting the malicious treatment of Katerina by Sergei, Shostakovich also composes with an element of satire when addressing various characters which, in contrast, illuminates Katerina as a tragic character. Shostakovich actually subtitled his work "a tragedy-satire," further stressing his attempt at creating a social commentary focusing on the tragic life of women in Russia.[35] The first musical treatment of satire is the use of a bassoon for the character of Boris during his first entrance in the opera. The bumbling bassoon ostinato inscribes the same meaning onto Boris, making him appear as only a parody of a true father-in-law. This characterization of the Bassoon continues in rising glissandos during the humiliating goodbye scene in Act I where Boris forces Katerina to lay on the ground and swear to honor Zinoviy in his absence in front of all the staff and workers. This scene portrays Boris as a farce who uses excessive power to humiliate Katerina and "intensifies [the] portrayal of her oppression." [36]

Two other moments of satire are particularly important to the opera and although these scenes do not involve Katerina, they do help ultimately set the stage for Shostakovich's social commentary on her treatment and characterization. During the opening scene with the peasant workers, we hear them singing a labor song where they are repeating the words "lonesome, sad, joyless." However, underneath their singing, the accompaniment is playing a series of banal accompaniment figures that certainly do not

fit with the mood of the libretto. Perhaps this musical disconnect depicts the conditions of Soviet Russian peasants as lonesome, sad, and joyless, with the relative disregard to those feelings by Stalin and others within systems of government. Similarly, in the rape scene of Aksinya in Act I Scene II, which is visually and musically depicted as quite graphic, the male characters treat it like a joke, even when they are caught. I believe this scene represents the ways in which women were used in Soviet Russia, and provides an illustration of their basic worthlessness to men and people in position of power. While these two musical representations do not deal directly with Katerina, they still play a strong role in illustrating the roles of women within this society as well as the role that peasants and lower class citizens fulfill.

In Act I Scene III we have the scene that appeared to have upset Stalin the most (as illustrated in the Pravda article) and caused *Lady Macbeth* to end its successful performance run. The scene opens with a beautiful aria from Katerina in which she sings about her longing for love. She remarks "the foal runs after the filly, the tomcat seeks the female, the dove hastens to his mate, but no one hurries to me." [37] Much like the interlude in *Wozzeck*, this scene illustrates Katerina's true emotions, her sadness, depression, and longing for love, especially in the long interlude after Katrina's first verse. The violins seem to illustrate her pain and loneliness while the cellos and basses underscore the turmoil to come and allow Boris to interject into the scene. The chimes heard after Katerina's response to Boris seem to mirror her apparent submissiveness to his orders, but the timpani and solo bass clarinet that follow and introduce her aria depict her true inner feelings. The music for this aria is stunningly beautiful, with no hint of the satiric elements of previous scenes. Without the burden of other characters, the audience is

finally able to hear Katerina's side of the story, much like Peter Grimes's first aria where he sings of acceptance and redemption. The soaring vocal lines depict Katerina's beauty; never again in the opera is the music as touching and personal as in this scene. The fact that this emotive music is reserved for the character traditionally received as evil is significant in the re-envisioning of Katerina as a tragic, misunderstood character.

Katerina's aria is followed by Sergei's arrival at Katerina's bedroom in search of a book to cease his boredom. Smooth-talking his way into his room, Sergei begins forcing himself on Katerina. What follows is a pseudo-rape scene in which the music swells with the emotion of the scene. A far cry from the beautiful aria of moments ago, the pounding instrumentation and all too obvious trombone glissandos illustrate musically the passionate and furious love scene on stage. First, the trombones illustrate Sergei's impending erection. The music reaches is penultimate moment a minute and ten seconds into the scene with the sharp staccatos and ever present upward glissandos signifying the approaching climax of their sex act. Finally the pornophony ends, rather uninspiringly, as Sergei's climax is reached and his "deflation" is illustrated with four long descending trombone glissandos. This type of music setting does not support the accessible, nationalistic music Stalin was anticipating for Russia, but it also illustrates the moral panic surrounding female sexuality.

In addition to Katerina's aria, Shostakovich draws upon Berg's use of orchestral interludes in *Wozzeck* and employs an instrumental passacaglia to further express Katerina's inner turmoil after the poisoning of Boris. Besides her aria, this is the truest glimpse into her emotions that the audience receives. Much of Shostakovich's composition style was heavily influenced by Berg's *Wozzeck* and Katerina's interlude is

the most obvious facsimile. The passacaglia follows right after Katerina's farcical bereavement of Boris where she expresses "grief" through wailing, shrieking passages that stumble along until she is interrupted by the priest, a character portrayed by Shostakovich as more absurd than Boris. After this howling scene, the audience might be feeling as though Katerina is truly nothing more than a vile, pitiless woman; however, the following instrumental interlude, opening with a sforzando chord from the brass section, illustrates to the audience the pounding anxiety that Katerina has internalized. These pounding chords give way to virtuosic cellos and basses that hauntingly represent the settling in of Katerina's actions. These strings give way to wild violin and flute melodies highlighting her mounting emotions, but are all the while grounded by the booming bassline of basses and low brass. Gradually, the tumescent wave of emotion begins to recede as the instruments gradually fade out. Finally, the only instrument left is the bassoon, the same instrument used to introduce Boris in the first act. The passacaglia would become vital in Shostakovich's work, becoming prominent in may other orchestral and piano works, but never again, I believe, is it used as passionately or as effectively as in capturing the true feelings of Katerina in *Lady Macbeth.*

These scenes are pivotal in situating Katerina as a character who has emotional needs, but because of those needs is very impressionable. A seeming white knight, Sergei is able to sweep Katerina off her feet, providing her with the love and adoration that she so desperately needs. Her desire to keep him near is the driving force for her regrettable murders, not her status as a wild, uncontrollable woman. Katerina is only viewed as wild character in comparison to the societal expectations and gender categories of dominant society. While subtle aspects of gender expectations have changed since the debut of this

opera in 1934, the overall generalizations, especially in operatic works, are that women should be generally complacent to men and should put the good of others (in this case the land and extended family) in front of personal needs. Katerina's refusal to do both situates her as non-gender conforming, but this does not imply that she is an evil character. Rather, Katerina finds her gender constraints limiting, especially in her quest to be with Sergei. Much like *Peter Grimes*, the subversion of gender categories are not initially the most visible reason to dismiss these characters as tragic; however, re-considering the gendered-traits of these characters while examining their treatment by their respective composers illuminates new ways to envision tragic operatic works and perhaps extend the very definition of accepted gender behavior.

One of the most controversial interpretations of *Lady Macbeth* is Richard Taruskin's "*Entr'Acte*: The Lessons of Lady Macbeth" where Taruskin posits that Shostakovch's treatment of Katerina as a tragic character is "heavy handed." [38] Taruskin's article clearly outlines Shostakovich's attempt to "justify Katerina so that she would impress the audience as a positive character;" however, Taruskin challenges audience members to receive this opera with "hearts on guard." [39] In his argument, Taruskin unabashedly claims that Shostakovich's treatment of Katerina is uncalled for and claims that "its technique of dehumanizing victims is the perennial method of those who would perpetrate and justify genocide" by planting "a sweet innocent amid injustice and corruption and condem[ing] the environment by contrast." [40] Taruskin's argument is reminiscent of Stalin's renouncement of the work as anti-nationalist and realist and it is precisely these types of critiques that feminist musicology attempts to destabilize.

Essays on *Lady Macbeth* such as this are the type of receptions that downplay the critical, social commentaries that composers such as Shostakovich were attempting to make. While informative and well written, his argument comes across as mean-spirited and uninformed when making such blanket statements as "if ever there was an opera to be banned it was this one." [41] I cannot challenge Taruskin for boldly stating opinion, but I do take issue with his refusal to even begin to see Katerina as a tragic character. I believe that Taruskin's argument is indicative of the way in which many people (scholars and non-academics) approach the reception of this work. Unexamined internalization of gender norms and societal expectations has conditioned many, if not most of us, to write off Shostakovich's social commentary and the character of Katerina as too far fetched to be taken seriously, let alone tragically.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Throughout the analysis of these three twentieth century operas, we have seen the ways in which composers have used the medium of music to provide social commentaries on various cultural discourses such as government, sexual orientation, gender, and class; additionally, I have discussed the ways in which gender and madness can negatively or positively effect the reception history of these operas and their political messages. Beginning with *Wozzeck* and analyzing the role that morals and gender play in its reception history as a tragic opera we can begin to see how operas such as *Peter Grimes* and *Lady Macbeth* can, while complicating notions of dominant gender norms, be re-envisioned as tragedies as well. I argue that whether or not these operatic works are received as successful political critiques or tragedies has everything to do with the gender of the characters and how easily they fit into dominant, hegemonic, prescribed notions of gender performativity as decided by dominant society. Within this identity category of gender, madness also emerges as a theme in each opera, often as the means through which each composer makes their political statement by employing tropes of tragedy. Additionally highlighting the stoic tragedy of the characters are the satiric backdrops of government, power, and society that serve to, once again, employ a political message.

I have attempted, by using Wozzeck as a foundational example, to depict the ways in which Peter Grimes and Katerina can be re-interpreted as tragic characters who, much like Wozzeck, are victims of their societal surroundings. While the satiric elements present in *Peter Grimes* and *Lady Macbeth* do not go entirely unnoticed, they are often trumped by the ways in which Peter and Katerina are subversive—through sexuality and gender, respectively. This paper has attempted to point out these elements of gender,

madness, tragedy, and satire in the hopes that these twentieth century works can be re-interpreted as the socially conscious, tragic operas that they were intended to be.

The implications for continuing feminist musicological research such as this are numerous. Examining a canonized genre such as opera through a feminist lens allows the historical field of musicology to interact with interdisciplinary fields. Investigating opera interdisiplinarily allows researchers to draw upon a plethora of scholarship applicable to the genre, but often overlooked as it is not directly related to musicology. Fields of study such as media and film studies, gender studies, and even queer scholarship have all began to creep into discussion of opera in such books as Wayne Kosterbaum's *The Queen's Throat*. In the pursuit of new, innovative scholarship, interdisciplinary studies should continue not only for the sake of scholarship, but for the advancement and enrichment of scholars.

I myself as a scholar have been affected through the research and writing of this project. Academically, I have been stretched to draw connections across disciplines and research far outside the realms of musicology to find supporting materials. I also wrestled internally with integrating musical and feminist analysis within this paper as one interdisciplinary endeavor. I believe this exercise above all else has been the most rewarding throughout the course of this project as it provided me the opportunity to integrate four years of learning within the fields of Women's/Gender/Sexuality Studies and Music into one interdisciplinary argument and critique.

While this paper does not encapsulate all the intricacies of each opera, it does serve to explore the field of feminist musicology by offering a re-examination of the relationships between gender and madness and the ways in which these discourses affect

the reception history of these three socially critical operas. It is my hope that this critical feminist analysis has situated the characters of Wozzeck, Peter Grimes, and Katerina Izmailova securely within the realm of tragedy and has illuminated the social critiques of three extraordinary 20th-century composers.

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[2] Mary Ann Smart, "Dalla Tomba Uscita: Representations of Gender and Madness in Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera," (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1994), 9.
[3] Catherine Clement, *Opera or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 59
[4] Susan McClary, *George Bizet: Carmen* (New York: Cambridge University press, 1992), 75.
[5] Ibid., 77.
[6] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 91.
[7] Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 510.
[8] Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (New York: Cambridge University press, 1898), 67.
[9] George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg* (London: University of California Press, 1980), 37.
[10] Ibid., 117.
[11] Jarman, *Alban Berg*, 59
[12] Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Characteristics of 'Wozzeck,'" in *Wozzeck*, ed. Nicholas John (New York: Riverrun Press, 1990), 37.
[13] Jarman, *Alban Berg*, 59.
[14] Mark DeVoto, "'Wozzeck' in Context," in *Wozzeck*, ed. Nicholas John (New York: Riverrun Press, 1990), 8.
[15] Kenneth Segar, "Georg Büchner's 'Woyzeck': an Interpretation," in *Wozzeck*, ed. Nicholas John (New York: Riverrun Press, 1990), 17.
[16] Phillip Brett, *Music and Sexuality in Britten* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 16.
[17] Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1945), 371.
[18] Brett, *Music and Sexuality*, 192.
[19] Ibid., 192.
[20] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, 97.
[21] Ibid., 137.
[22] Ibid., 336.
[23] Ibid., 366.
[24] Ibid., 371.
[25] Ibid., 88.
[26] Francis Maes, *A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar*, trans., Arnold J. Pomerans and Erica Pomerans (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 299.
[27] Solomon Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin: The Extraordinary Relationship Between the Great Composer and the Brutal Dictator*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (London: Little, Brown: 2004), 115.
[28] Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 509.
[29] Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin*, 95.

[30] K.A. Lantz., *Nikolay Leskov* (USA: Twayne Publications, 1979), 39.
[31] Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically*, 505.
[32] Ibid., 501.
[33] Ibid., 500.
[34] Ibid., 501.
[35] Volvok. *Shostakovich and Stalin*, 94.
[36] Taruskin. *Defining Russia Musically*, 501.
[37] Ibid., 506.
[38] Ibid., 502.
[39] Ibid., 510.
[40] Ibid., 501, 509.
[41] Ibid., 509.

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