

Dana Gioia on the Opera, From Tosca to Sweeney Todd

By Bruce Bawer

[Weep, Shudder, Die: On Opera and Poetry](#)

By Dana Gioia

(Paul Dry Books, 198 pages, \$20)

“People’s reaction to opera the first time they see it is very dramatic. They either love it or they hate it. If they love it, they will always love it. If they don’t, they may learn to appreciate it, but it will never become a part of their soul.”

If you’re a fan of 1990s rom-coms, you’ll recognize this line of dialogue. The film, of course, is *Pretty Woman* (1990), and the speaker is Edward Lewis (Richard Gere), who’s flown Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts), a Hollywood Boulevard hooker, to San Francisco to attend an opening-night performance of *La Traviata*.

Vivian loves it.

When I lived in Manhattan in the 1980s and 90s, I had my own Edward Lewis. A friend of mine – who was then a promising young poet and who would later become the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts under George W. Bush – was a subscriber to the New York City Ballet and Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center. Now and then, when he was attending a performance but his wife wasn’t free to join him, he’d call me at the last minute – I lived on the Upper East Side, a quick cab ride across the park – and invite me to come along. **(READ MORE from Bruce Bawer: [Revolution at the LA Times](#))**

I loved the ballet, especially the modern works choreographed by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. As for the operas, I enjoyed the arias in the standard repertoire. But some of the

contemporary ones – as well as contemporary stagings of classics – left me cold.

From time to time I read up on opera, but a surprising amount of what I read was over-the-top gush by fans with whose drooling zeal I couldn't remotely identify. Most alienating of all was a book called *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* by Wayne Koestenbaum, a poet who'd attended Harvard and Princeton and who, at the time his book came out in 1993, was teaching at Yale (trifecta!).

The Queen's Throat was a staggeringly ridiculous piece of narcissistic nonsense that came adorned with blurbs by the then ubiquitous pseudo-intellectual Susan Sontag ("brilliant") and by Queer Studies doyenne Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ("brilliant").

Koestenbaum himself describes *The Queen's Throat* as "my scrapbook," and in it he seems to view opera as a means of bringing out – or legitimizing, or affirming – the hyperemotiveness of a certain type of effeminate, self-dramatizing male homosexual who's in the habit of venerating opera divas. ("I worship her," he writes about Maria Callas.) Since I'm not that type of gay guy, *The Queen's Throat* entirely failed me as a point of entry into a love of opera.



Author Dana Gioia speaking with the Antiquarian Booksellers Association 2021 (Antiquarian Booksellers Association)

The new book *Weep Shudder Die: On Opera and Poetry* is an

entirely different kettle of fish. Like *The Queen's Throat*, it's written by a poet and opera lover – namely, Dana Gioia. But whereas Koestenbaum's garish scrapbook keeps dragging us back, tiresomely and mindlessly, to the supremely uninteresting fact of the author's sexuality, Gioia's book is a lucid, succinct, and serious contemplation of the opera, and especially the opera libretto (the text, of which Gioia has written five), as art.

"No poetic genre," Gioia writes early on, "ranks lower in literary esteem than the opera libretto. It occupies an inglorious position roughly equal to defunct genres such as the pastoral eclogue or verse sermon." (Note: I love pastoral eclogues, but have not encountered enough verse sermons to render an opinion about them.) He goes on: "In the English-speaking world, the verbal component of opera is considered sub-literary. A libretto is a hodgepodge of implausible plotting, hyperbolic characterization, and incompetent versification."

Gioia starts with some history: opera began in 1598 when "a group of artists and intellectuals" in Florence sought "to recreate the performance practices of classical Greek drama." Text mattered more than music; hence, "the earliest operas sound less like singing than intoned declamation." Over time, however, opera developed into "a primarily musical medium in which the composer exercises controlling interest."

Still, Gioia argues, the libretto doesn't deserve its current obloquy. While "every operagoer knows" that "half of the top one hundred works produced internationally generally come from only seven composers – Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Richard Wagner, Gaetano Donizetti, Richard Strauss, and Gioachino Rossini," with Verdi, Puccini, and Mozart far out ahead of the others – the librettists of the most popular operas are also a select group. Just under half of the operas in the standard repertory "are the work of only eight poets – Lorenzo Da Ponte, Felice Romani, Francesco

Maria Piave, Salvatore Cammarano, Arrigo Boito, Luigi Illica, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Richard Wagner.”

There follow several chapters, each of which explores a different question in what turns out to be fascinating detail. Why is it that W.H. Auden’s libretto for Britten’s *Paul Bunyan* (1941) “reads better than it performs?” Why is Mozart’s penultimate opera, *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), always rated higher than his last, *La Clemenza di Tito* (*The Clemency of Titus*), even though the latter’s libretto is “indisputably finer” than that of the former? What’s the secret behind the success of the partnership between librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal and composer Richard Strauss?

Then there’s this: “Is poetry still the right medium for opera? Wouldn’t prose be a more direct and natural medium? What sort of writer brings more to the project – the poet or the playwright?” I wouldn’t have imagined that I could find a discussion of such questions absorbing. But I did, big time.

One chapter compares opera, perceptively and engagingly, to other narrative forms. “Opera demands extreme narrative compression. It cannot present complex plotting as easily as film or fiction. If the structure of opera is narrative, its driving energy is lyric; it lacks the novel’s ability to communicate the duration of time. Opera excels at portraying peak moments of human emotion.”

Boy, do I wish I’d read this chapter long ago, before I even saw my first opera: it would’ve helped me, a person who from childhood had been a lover of movies, novels, and popular songs, to adjust my expectations and expand my comprehension in such a way as to enable me to respond properly to opera.

Then there’s this question: would I have become a lover of opera if I’d grown up in Europe instead of America? Gioia notes that while opera is an integral “part of the national identity” in countries like Germany, Italy, and Russia, it’s

never played a major role in “shaping cultural consciousness” in America.

“It is no coincidence,” Gioia points out, “that the most successful American opera, *Porgy and Bess*, premiered on Broadway and unfolds mostly by the theatrical conventions of the popular musical.” Indeed, opera “remains a foreign art form in the United States,” with American opera houses mostly staging “classics written by foreigners performed in foreign languages, often with the leading roles sung by foreigners.” (READ MORE: [Remembering Greer Garson](#))

Yes, there are significant American operas – Gioia discusses a number of them at illuminating length – but they’re “rarely performed... Most new operas are premiered and never produced again.” For example, the Metropolitan Opera, albeit “a magnificent institution,” rarely commissions new works. “Of the three dozen operas premiered by the Met,” writes Gioia, “only one American work has survived, just barely, at the low end of the repertory – Barber’s *Vanessa*.”

Indeed, although there’s now “a great wave of new opera in America,” opera remains “nearly invisible” – unless, that is, one counts as opera at least some of the works of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, to each of whom Gioia devotes an entertaining chapter. Both men, he maintains, embody “the quest to create a new American opera from popular musical theater.”

If I found this book engrossing, it’s because – despite being something less than a full-throated opera lover – I found the insights thought-provoking and was delighted by the beautiful writing. I don’t remember the last time I read a book so full of sentences that read like apothegms.

Sometimes Gioia bangs out several in a row: “Song is a universal human art. No one has found a culture which does not have song... Opera abandons song at great risk... Opera will

never be so sophisticated that it does not need song.” Great stuff.

Weep Shudder Die also contains far more than its share of observations that compel you to pause and ponder before you move on: “A libretto can be too richly written. It can’t be coincidental that nearly all of the enduring operas based on Shakespeare have been done in [foreign languages](#).”

Once again, in short, this is the book that I should have read before I ever set foot in an opera house. I suspect that it would have made all the difference when it came to the question of whether I would become a lover of opera, like Vivian in *Pretty Woman*, or just someone who appreciated and respected it.

What’s especially frustrating about this state of affairs is that the book’s author, Dana Gioia, is also the friend who, a million years ago, when we both lived in New York, invited me so often to be his guest at the [Metropolitan Opera](#). If only he’d penned this marvelous book before I joined him inside that hollowed space!

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