

Opera as we know it has been around for centuries. In the last several decades, we have seen an integration of experimental opera in musical theatre. The experiment, in question, usually involves using contemporary or classical genres of music to use in the opera. These experimental shows have been noticed by Broadway, and some shows utilizing the opera framework with different genres of music have been very successful, including musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* utilizing the Rock and Roll genre and *Hamilton* utilizing the rap, hip-hop, and R&B genres. In this paper, I want to focus on two sung-through musicals that utilize the experimental opera in its own unique ways and use the opera framework to drive forward the story and the character development: *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812* and *Hadestown*. Through analysis and comparing/contrasting, I will explain how *Hadestown* relies on song reprises to convey character development throughout the show, while *Great Comet* uses emotional climax songs to plot motivation and character development.

As I already mentioned before, both these musicals are sung-through and are experimental operas. While the execution of the music is different in the song styles for both shows, the music is grounded in the action that takes place in the shows, which in turn gives characters the motivation for the plot to advance. Music in opera is not only a performative art, but also a socially grounded action that motivates our plot forward.¹ These already existing stories are successfully

¹ Heile, Björn. "Recent Approaches to Experimental Music Theatre and Contemporary Opera." *Music & Letters* 87, no. 1 (2006): p. 81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3526415>.

integrated with music by the writers into a format that allows the music of the shows to move the story along in its own unique ways.

***Great Comet* and the use of epic ballads to bring the source material to life.**

Great Comet author Dave Malloy writes about his vision for his musical in the book *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812: A Journey of a New Musical to Broadway* and writes about how the source text of *War & Peace* inspired the way he wrote the music:

“I knew that I didn’t want to lose [Tolstoy’s] voice; the experiment was to put a *novel* onstage, melodicizing Tolstoy’s incredible narrative style. To that end, the rhymes were few and far between, and I often had the characters narrate their actions, sometimes speaking about themselves in the third person. So much of the brilliance of Tolstoy comes from his vivid detailing of his characters’ rich inner lives: every small interaction is microprocessed, so that every stare, kiss, blush, and whisper can encompass an entire world of human experience.”²

In this text, Malloy is talking about the uniqueness of creating lyrics out of book passages. He notes that because most lyrics are word for word, rhymes are rare in the songwriting process. What Malloy especially makes a point on is using the music to allow the audience a window into how the characters process their emotions. This responsibility the music has in this show results in epic ballads and raw emotions displayed through the actor’s singing and the orchestration used for the show. These elements contribute to the amount of emotional climax songs we hear in this show, and from its titular characters: Pierre and Natasha.

² Dave Malloy and Steven Suskin, *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812: The Journey of a New Musical to Broadway* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2016): p. 123.

Both Pierre and Natasha have an emotional climax song together (“Pierre & Natasha”). For Natasha, the song comes just after her attempted suicide and her former fiancé refusing to speak with her. For Pierre, he is initially angry and disgusted by Natasha for nearly running away with Anatole and breaking the engagement off with Andrey. However, he shows pity for her when he sees how broken she is after realizing what she had done. Pierre doesn’t display emotion much throughout the show. He is stuck in a period of restlessness and not feeling useful since he’s not fighting in the war. Up until this song and this point, he didn’t know what to do with his life anymore. But when he shows kindness towards Natasha and confesses his love for her, he becomes motivated and hopeful for his future. This confession prompts the only spoken line in the entire show, and also serves as the climax. This song is accompanied by a single piano, meaning it’s motivation almost entirely is driven from the heightened emotion and the words said in the song, ultimately leading us to the climax.

In addition to this main climax of the story, both Pierre and Natasha have their own emotional climaxes throughout the show. Pierre spends the first act in a state of depression and no purpose in his life. The tune changes after a near death experience, and he gains a burst of motivation when he realizes he isn’t ready to die yet (“Dust and Ashes”). This emotional climax sets him up for the events in Act 2 and develops his character through the end of the story.

Natasha has two notable emotional climaxes aside from “Pierre & Natasha.” The first one we will examine is at the end of Act 1. In the beginning of Act 1, we see Natasha as the poster child for a perfect life: she will be married rich and has an easy, care-free life. This is suddenly uprooted with the arrival of Anatole, who not only changes the tone of the show but the music itself. The show features classical sounds of Broadway until Anatole disrupts Natasha’s life, which is reflected with the use of electro-pop sounds and music stylings. The music especially shines in

driving the plot forward with this change of genre while Anatole is in the show. The tension in the music and between Natasha and Anatole brings us to the final song in Act 1, “The Ball,” where Natasha’s first emotional climax happens: She is kissed by Anatole, and she realizes she loves him. When we move into the second act, we see her struggling to decide if she should refuse her engagement with Andrey now.

Her second emotional climax takes place over the course of two songs: “In My House” and “Pierre & Anatole.” Taking place toward the middle of Act 2, Natasha and Anatole’s plans are thwarted at the beginning of “In My House,” causing Natasha to be in a state of ruin and despair. This song is filled with tension from the strings in the orchestra to the yelling matches between Natsha and Marya, her guardian who caught and thwarted her plans. The tension in Natasha rises into the song “Pierre & Anatole,” where all that is heard is electric sounds and synthesizers as Natasha dramatically takes center stage and poisons herself with arsenic. (Her life is saved in the next song.) The extreme electric sound at this point depicts just how much Anatole truly affected and intoxicated Natasha, putting her in a position where she’d rather kill herself than not be with Anatole. After being saved in the following song, she is completely broken emotionally. She feels there is no one she can turn to other than Pierre, setting her up for the final climax in the show in “Pierre & Natasha.”

This show is unique in the way it integrates the source material and translates it into a musical. Because most of the words are already written, Malloy relies on the use of music styling to motivate the words and develop the characters on the stage. The music styles build on each other over the course of the show, and as a result, there are no reprises of songs. Instead, the show implements one idea or event and uses it to build on the next one, rather than completely revisiting

an idea in the form of a reprisal song. In *Hadestown*, we will look at how it specifically utilizes reprisal songs and repeats distinct song stylings to show character development.

***Hadestown* and the use of reprises in a musical that, in itself, is a reprise.**

Hadestown has its share of emotional climax songs for the main characters. What I want to focus on is how the show utilizes all the reprises in the show – 9 out of 34 songs are reprises, in fact. What kind of story is being told with music when it consistently repeats itself throughout the show?

Hadestown is inspired by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, placed in a Great Depression-era folk tune setting. The folk tune stylings of these songs suggest that these songs have been sung before – and they have. In the first song, “Road to Hell,” the narrator, Hermes, makes the following remarks at the end of the song:

“It’s an old song, It’s an old tale from way back when. And we’re gonna sing it again!”³

Hermes sings these lyrics in an upbeat manner, as if the story is going to be happy. We learn that it isn’t, and the last song (“Road to Hell (Reprise)”) is much slower than the original, yet Hermes says the same line to end the show. This cycle of songs brings up an interesting theory: the entire musical is a reprisal. Since it is designed to cycle over and over again, the use of reprises for the last song compared to the first tells us that ultimately, the characters in this story don’t see development outside of the show. They mostly remain in the same old ways, otherwise the story couldn’t be told again. The use of reprisals within the show are used to depict what character

³ Mitchell, Anaïs. *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of HADESTOWN*. (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2020): p. 15.

development that is seen, and we can analyze what the purpose of these reprisals are doing for the characters.

Our main characters, Orpheus and Eurydice, share a number of songs and reprisals together. When Orpheus first meets Eurydice in “Come Home with Me,” he is literally telling her to come marry him on the spot. The reprise in the second act begins with Orpheus saying the same thing, except it’s saving Eurydice from Hadestown. Another important pair of songs between the two is “All I’ve Ever Known” in Act 1 and “Promises” in Act 2. In Act 1, Eurydice makes Orpheus promise to take care of her through any obstacles that may come into their life. In “Promises,” Orpheus acknowledges that he didn’t follow up on the promises he made in “All I’ve Ever Known,” but vows that he will from then on out. The couple sharing reprisal songs regarding intimate moments of their relationship might show a flaw through love: They are unable to truly build a life together. They are so far stuck in their own ways; they are unable to adapt to their needs and ability to accommodate a partner.

A common character trait in Orpheus is whenever he talks about Eurydice, there is an immediate sense of ownership, or she is “owed” to him. This morally questionable motive is first noted when he first sings to her in “Come Home with Me,” when he makes bold claims that she’ll be his wife and will give her happiness and protection, when they barely even met. Once Eurydice gives in, his promises fade and he hyper fixates on his song, completely ignoring her. He is ultimately unable to learn from his flaws, as his final action of turning back to Eurydice at the end of the show seals her fate in Hadestown, and there’s nothing else he can do.

Eurydice starts at the beginning of the show completely independent, but tired of doing so for a long time. When she gives in to Orpheus’ marriage proposal, she brings down all her walls and becomes dependent on him. This backfires when he ignores her, causing her to strike up a deal

with Hades and goes to Hadestown. Eurydice ultimately has a problem with identity. She gets swept up with identifying as herself, then as a wife to Orpheus, a worker in Hadestown, and so on. She is never her own person in the show, and her reprises are never just her, but as a duet with Orpheus or Hades. This is a callback to the original myth, where Eurydice is simply used as motivation for Orpheus to venture into the underworld. Her purpose in this show, despite her efforts, is just the same. I want to take this viewpoint on Eurydice and put it in context with a review from *The New York Times* regarding the plot development of Orpheus and Eurydice:

“The main story suffers most from this problem: Outside of their arias, Orpheus and Eurydice are blandly written and thus performed. What starts off as a smart riff on “Rent” — poor bohemian girl falls for musician who can’t finish his song — soon becomes vague and merely pretty. Attempts to complicate the characters’ psychology backfire, and their climactic ascent from the underworld, the one thing that worked perfectly downtown, now doesn’t. They merely walk in circles.”⁴

Where I think this review hits the mark on the story development of Orpheus and Eurydice, I think it fails on understanding why Anais Mitchell, the writer of Hadestown chose to keep the story bland and circular. This interpretation brings us back to our theory of Hadestown being a reprise. There are attempts at character development, but ultimately it has to fail otherwise the story couldn’t start over again. We have also demonstrated that the music stylings of folk music and reprises support the circular story, and effectively demonstrates how reprises and recurring song styles can help drive a story forward.

⁴ Jesse Green, “The Metamorphosis of ‘Hadestown,’ From Cool to Gorgeous”, *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/theater/hadestown-review-broadway-anais-mitchell.html>.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined and analyzed how two different styles of songs are used to drive storytelling and character development. *Great Comet* utilizes character development in its songs by building off of one another in tension, creating emotional climaxes for the characters throughout the show. This ends the show with a sense of hope for our characters, that their character development we see in the show will stay with them and they might lead on to make better choices and have a happier life than when we first see them in the show. *Hadestown* utilizes reprises and recurring themes of music to remind the audience no matter what character development we see in this show, our main characters will fall back on their own ways, prompting them to start the story over and over again. The show ends in a tragedy, leaving the audience wishful. “If only Orpheus wasn’t so shallow,” or “If only Eurydice was strong enough to not go to Hadestown in the first place.” The reprisals tell us that ultimately, they will never learn from their flaws.

Great Comet and *Hadestown* have similarities in the way their opera framework is set up, but where the shows are unique is their takes on emotional climaxes and reprises, which gives us fresh experimentation for the opera genre. The framework of the opera is integral to the way these stories are told, and the usage of source material for both shows are utilized in a way that pays proper homage to them, as well as effectively translates them to the stage for audiences to enjoy. As we look to the future of opera and its experimental form, I am interested in what new ways songwriters will utilize other types of songs, such as “I want” or “I am songs” to drive character development and plot in the way that emotional climax and reprise songs did for *Great Comet* and *Hadestown*. We already see a diverse comparison of opera between these two shows, and with

operas not falling out of style, it's only a matter of time before we see the next big experimental opera to hit Broadway.

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