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“A flower which blossoms and fades”: Depictions of Tuberculosis in 19th-century Opera

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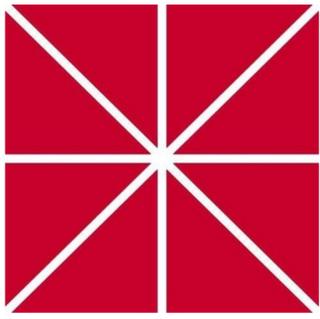
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“A flower which blossoms and fades”

Depictions of Tuberculosis in 19th-century Opera

Goldberg, Daniel



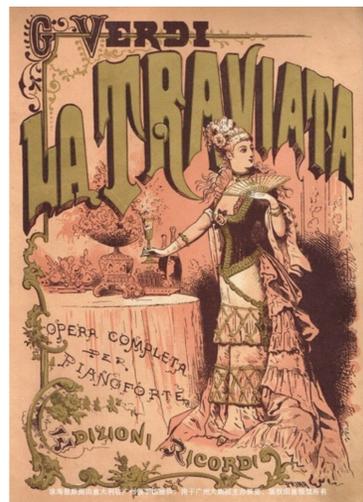
In *La Traviata* we are made aware of Violetta’s impending doom from the very opening musical line of the opera when we hear Violetta’s death motive. This is a very light and beautiful motive, much like Violetta herself, and because it is descending it is meant to portray death.



Elena Razgulyaeva as Mimì



Gimadieva as Violetta

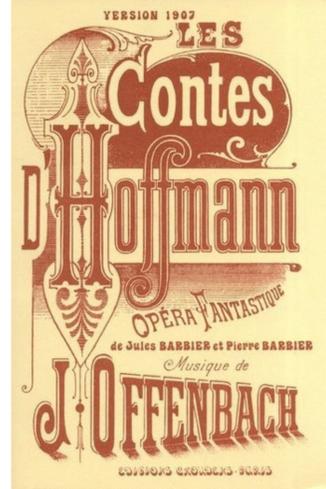


The Romantic period in art and music was a time that focused on the regular person (as opposed to the lofty or religious topics of earlier eras) and had a fascination with nature, emotion, and death. One of the most common themes used to explore the theme of death was disease. Tuberculosis was especially common at the time and therefore found its way into many works of art. In opera repeatedly, the same type of person is the victim of tuberculosis; the disease is always demonstrated by the character, but is also explored through a series of metaphors. This character is always a woman and these “tubercular heroines” always are young, beautiful, frail people who need to be protected. This is the case in *La Bohème* by Puccini, *La Traviata* by Verdi, and *Les Contes D’Hoffmann* by Offenbach. Because the victim is always a frail, fragile girl, tuberculosis can be read through a feminist lens as being an anti-female theme. Why is this the case? What are some of the ways tuberculosis is shown to us in the text and in the music and what metaphors convey the romantic understanding of tuberculosis? In Verdi we see the common metaphors of flowers and farewells; similarly in Puccini the metaphor of flowers is used but there is also the metaphor of light, temperature, and color used to show the symptoms shown with tuberculosis. In Offenbach the use of flowers as a metaphor appears, but this opera points in an even greater anti-feminist and anti-disabled way by always putting the woman under the control of a man and by constantly making fun of the disabled. In all of these stories the heroine is a young beautiful woman who falls in love but eventually faces her demise at the hands of disease.

Olympia is constantly under the control of her creator; she is a wind-up toy that can only move when he activates her. Antonia is always under the control of her father which, as discussed before, eventually leads to her downfall. Giulietta is the only one that does not have another man besides the nemesis always controlling her but, seeing as she is a courtesan, she is still controlled by men on a day to day basis. Even Hoffmann’s assistant Nicklausse, who is a man, is a pants role which means that he is played by a woman.



Adèle Isaac as Antonia (front)



Advisor

Dr. Jessica Sternfeld
Mus 496

Selected Bibliography

- Hutcheon, Linda, and Michael. *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996
- Howe, Blake, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil William Lerner, and Joseph Nathan. *Straus. The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.