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Female Voice in Dacia Maraini's *Norma '44*

Monica Streifer

The play *Norma '44* by Dacia Maraini (1986) seeks to convey to the audience the experience of two Jewish Italian women—Sara Di Nola, an actress and Lidia Cantù, a singer—imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War Two.¹ Starting with the title itself, the play incorporates multiple references to the famous bel canto opera *Norma* by composer Vincenzo Bellini and librettist Felice Romani (1831). The plot of *Norma '44* clearly parallels the plot of the opera, but Maraini's play additionally engages with the predecessor text through a layering that is meta- and inter-textual, historical, and mythical, the myth of Medea being its ultimate referent.² Indeed, while the opera can be seen as a frame that informs the tragic action of the play, it serves as much more than just a plot device.³ The opera functions in the play as a musical and cultural subtext that evokes the distinct power of the female voice and the strength of female solidarity and friendship through the ages. Although the principal events of Maraini's drama echo to some extent those of Bellini's tragic opera, *Norma '44* is not so much a modern adaptation of the opera as a feminist take on some of its key themes. With its powerful female protagonist and matriarchal

¹ Born in Fiesole in 1936, Dacia Maraini currently lives in Rome. She spent part of her childhood with her family in Japan, where she experienced life in a prison camp for two years (1943-1945) during World War Two. She is the author of more than twenty-three novels as well as poetry and essays, and more than sixty plays. In the 1960s she and other writers founded the *Teatro del Porcospino*, and in 1973 Maraini, along with Lù Leone, Francesca Pansa, Maricla Boggio and others, founded the *Teatro della Maddalena*, a theater company organized and directed entirely by women. Since the mid-1970s, Maraini has written many plays in addition to her prose and poetry and continues to dedicate herself to the theater, which she considers to be the ideal medium for informing the public about specific social and political problems. Her most famous theatrical works include *Maria Stuarda*, *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente*, and *I sogni di Clitennestra*. *Norma '44* was first published in the volume *Erzabeth Bathory: Il Geco; Norma '44* (Editori & Associati, 1991) and then in *Fare Teatro: 1966-2000* (Rizzoli, 2000). *Norma '44* was first performed by the La Maddalena company in Rome, at the Parco del Turismo in EUR on September 2, 1986 as part of the series "L'altra metà della scena" (The Other Half of the Stage). The director was Vera Bertinetti; scenes and costumes by Antonio Valenti and Enrico Coveri, additional music by Mario Nascimbene. Cast: Remo Girone, Vittoria Zinni, Monica Ferri. The play was subsequently repeatedly staged in theaters and schools throughout Italy as part of Holocaust remembrance events, for example in 2005 for Holocaust Remembrance Day in Florence, and in 2009 at the Teatro Blu in Milan as part of the series "Shoah! Per non dimenticare." Maraini stated about the play: "Per anni ho letto e raccolto libri su libri che riguardano i campi di concentramento nazisti. Sono andata ad Auschwitz per capire meglio e vedere da vicino quello che è stato. La mia sensibilità deriva probabilmente anche dal fatto che io stessa ho fatto due anni di campo di concentramento in Giappone (dal '43 al '45) e ho un nervo scoperto sull'argomento. Sui nazisti che forzavano i prigionieri musicisti a suonare ci sono molti racconti e testimonianze. Tenendo conto di quelli, ho scritto *Norma '44* che nasce anche dal mio amore per l'opera e specialmente per la musica di Bellini" (cited in "Festival nazionale sulla drammaturgia contemporanea delle donne, 29 ottobre -18 dicembre 2004," *Nove da Firenze: Eventi, Fatti, Opinioni*, <http://www.nove.firenze.it/vediarticolo.asp?id=a4.10.25.20.15>)

² The opera was itself an adaptation of a work for the theater based on the myth of Medea. Alexandre Soumet's five-act tragedy entitled *Norma* premiered at the Théâtre de l'Odéon on April 16, 1831. Soon thereafter, Bellini and Romani agreed to base their next commission for La Scala on Soumet's play.

³ Maraini is not the only playwright of her time to use opera as a thematic backdrop to a theatrical text. Another compelling and concurrent example is David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), published only two years after Maraini's *Norma '44*. Hwang similarly stages an Italian opera within his theatrical text in order to question the function of aesthetics both within the text and by historical agents. He uses Giacomo Puccini's opera, *Madama Butterfly* (1904) to deconstruct race, gender, heteronormativity, and representations of the "East" in colonial discourse.

milieu, the opera by Bellini and Romani arguably has a proto-feminist orientation rare for its time, providing a compelling foundation for Maraini's contemporary work. Throughout the play she uses the familiar music, plot, and themes of the opera in order to speak from a female perspective about a reality—that of the Nazi concentration camp—that has traditionally been seen by critics as an unprecedented challenge to the “language of art.”⁴

For Maraini, art, and especially dramatic art, must be committed to addressing the real and the historical. It cannot simply leave them behind or shut them out, as much of Italy's own idealist critical tradition recommended, Croce *in primis*, in a misleading attempt to de-politicize and anesthetize art. In *Norma '44* Maraini provocatively juxtaposes classical bel canto opera—one of the most revered art forms in Italian culture, based in large part on the pure beauty of bravura singing—with the horrors of the Holocaust. She does this not in order to melodramatically heroize or spectacularize the characters of the female deportees, but rather, on the contrary, to underscore the women's attempt to recover a basic sense of female identity and a voice. Until the 1980s, research on the several thousands of Italian women deported to Nazi camps was scarce, and male perspectives were dominant. As Anna Bravo has outlined in her pioneering work, starting in the early 1980s on the memory of Italian women in Nazi camps, deportation up to that point had largely been a history of and about men.⁵ Through a cast of three characters (two women and a man), Maraini poses thought-provoking questions about the ability of human beings to perform and justify actions that are in radical discord with their own personal ethics and aesthetics. Karl Hoffmann, the SS officer who plans to co-opt the two women into playing the protagonists in a production of Bellini's *Norma* inside the camp, wishes to obfuscate his complicity in the slaughter of Jews by evoking the realm of pure beauty and claiming to be a classical aesthete (*Norma* had long been admired in Germany, starting with Wagner himself).⁶ As an artist, Maraini is certainly intrigued by the notion of art, and especially music, as a form of transcendence, yet she cannot accept or condone it. Karl thus embodies the temptation (and the seduction) of pure art, of “the purely aesthetic” as something that is ultimately life-denying and inhuman.

Art, and singing in particular, functions as an essential formal and thematic element of Maraini's feminist play. The two female protagonists, Sara and Lidia, are not only Jewish prisoners in the camp, but also professional artists who are unsure of how their musical background may affect their chances of survival. When Sara and Lidia discover that they have been summoned by Karl in order to fulfill Colonel Saidler's desire to have a production of *Norma* staged in the camp, they realize that their chances of survival are directly linked to opera, and that their struggle will thus be acted out on the stage. Karl also identifies as a musician, and his ability to recognize Sara and Lidia's talents sets in motion the tragic action of the play. He reveals this meaningful aspect of his past to Sara: “di tutte queste attività musicali mi incarico io, umile musicista fallito di Brema,

⁴ Theodor Adorno famously wrote: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.” Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 34. For a thoughtful overview of the question of the literary representation of the Shoah and especially of Adorno's controversial dictum, see Elaine Martin, “Re-reading Adorno: The ‘after-Auschwitz’ Aporia,” *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Language and Arts* 2 (2006): <http://www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/02/elaine-martin>

⁵ Anna Bravo, “Italian Women in the Nazi Concentration Camps: Aspects of Identity in their Accounts,” *Oral History Journal* 13, no. 1 (1985): 20-27. Bravo along with her research partners has since published extensively on the subject. See preface by Anna Bravo in Lucio Monaco and Lidia Beccaria Rolfi, *La deportazione femminile nei lager nazisti* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1995).

⁶ In the play, Karl explicitly refers to Wagner's fondness for Bellini: Dacia Maraini, *Fare teatro 1966-2000* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000), 139.

oggi indegno ufficiale delle SS” (“I am in charge of all these musical activities; I a humble, failed musician from Bremen, today a worthless SS officer”).⁷ Karl’s self-deprecation humanizes him to some extent, even as it bares (both to his female “cast” and to the audience) his cowardly attempt to minimize his complicity in the Shoah.⁸

Although the specific events of the play are fictional, historical records show that several concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Buchenwald, had prisoner orchestras that were forced to give performances for SS officers and visiting dignitaries. For these performers, music became a form of “useful work” that could help guarantee survival.⁹ When Karl first implores Sara to sing the opening lines of *Norma*, she objects, stating “cantavo in teatro. Sono un’attrice di teatro” (“I used to sing in the theatre. But I am really just an actress”).¹⁰ Likewise, when Lidia comprehends the grandiosity of Karl’s operatic project, she responds incredulously, “Io...nella *Norma*?” (“Me... in *Norma*?”),¹¹ stating that she is only a cabaret singer. Nowhere does Maraini suggest that the pure beauty of bel canto opera may even momentarily relieve or dissemble the horror of the camp. Karl’s plan to fulfill Saidler’s desire in fact comes off as grotesque and deluded; its only positive outcome is the opportunity the two women have to preserve a fragment of their life as performers and a minimal contact with their pasts. It is in this process that a bond emerges and develops between them, allowing them to recover a voice and a sense of female identity. For, as observed by Anna Bravo, women deportees in the camps were consistently reduced to non-women, used as sexual slaves or deprived of all femininity and sense of sexual difference, to the point of seeing men as if they were the same sex.¹²

Maraini’s two-act play is set in an unnamed concentration camp toward the end of the Second World War.¹³ The action’s duration is approximately twelve months. Woven throughout

⁷ Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 135 (3). All English translations of Maraini’s *Norma ’44* come from the translation by Lucia Re and Monica Streifer in this same volume. References to the translation will henceforth follow the original page reference in parentheses.

⁸ It is not a coincidence that Karl hails from the city of Bremen. The northwestern German city directly recalls the tale by the Brothers Grimm, *The Town Musicians of Bremen* (*Die Bremen Stadtmusikanten*). In the tale, a donkey, a dog, a cat, and a rooster, all considered past their prime, leave their farms for the city of Bremen, where they envision liberated lives as musicians. The animals never actually reach their destination, however, happening instead upon a cottage in the woods and preventing a robbery through a musical performance. Maraini’s intertextual reference is particularly significant insofar as Karl specifically identifies as a *failed* musician, much like the animals in the tale who have been deemed no longer valuable to their owners. Unlike the animals, however, for whom music is a transcendent experience, Karl’s attempt to use music as a refuge comes off as misguided at best and grotesque and macabre at worst, considering the historical context. It reads as a pathetic attempt to mitigate his involvement in the violent system of the camp through the immunity of art.

⁹ Emilio Jani was an Italian opera singer (tenor) who performed with the prisoner orchestra at Auschwitz. See his book, *Mi ha salvato la voce: Auschwitz 180046* (Milan: Centauro editore, 1960).

¹⁰ Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 135 (4).

¹¹ Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 137 (6).

¹² Bravo, “Italian Women in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” 23. Head shaving, gynecological surgery, and sterilization were some of the practices used to control women and erase their femininity.

¹³ Maraini does not specify the camp’s name, but her mention in the play of Dr. Carl Clauberg, who was notorious for conducting fertility experiments on women (Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 151), as well as the indication that the camp is mainly for women, implies that she is referring to the women’s concentration camp Ravensbrück. While most of Clauberg’s experiments were conducted at Block 10 of Auschwitz, he was moved to Ravensbrück in 1945. Among the few works about women in the camps available in Italian at the time Maraini published the play were Anna Maria Bruzzone’s and Lidia Beccaria Rolfi’s book *Le donne di Ravensbrück* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978) and Maria Massariello Arata’s *Il ponte dei corvi: diario di una deportata a Ravensbrück* (Milan: Mursia, 1979). The details of camp life described in the play, including forced prostitution, match the recollections of detainees. Lidia Beccaria Rolfi herself was a survivor of Ravensbrück and could perhaps be the namesake of Maraini’s protagonist, Lidia Cantù. The majority

the play are excerpts from Bellini's *Norma*, in the form of both music and text. A phonograph and a record are used to play the excerpts, and the women literally sing along—with their own cracked and tentative voices—with the voices from the phonograph.¹⁴ The phonograph's uncanny mechanical sound enables each time a tenuous link with Italian voices, Italian memories, and the art of bel canto. The characters of the play (Karl, Sara, and Lidia) mirror and echo the protagonists of the opera (Pollione, Norma, and Adalgisa). Not only do they interact in the present time of the play in ways that unconsciously imitate the plot of the opera, they also concurrently rehearse and stage scenes from the opera that correspond to their evolving relations. This produces an uncanny mirror and echo-like effect of which Maraini's protagonists become conscious only once it is too late to change the course of the dramatic action. By recycling, recalling, and adapting the plot, themes, and music of Bellini's *Norma* to new ends, Maraini exemplifies the concept of theatrical ghosting, by which the reproduction of a representational phenomenon in a new context generates new meaning.¹⁵ Sara, Lidia, and Karl sing something that the audience is familiar with, something they have heard before, but this something is transported into a new context: that of the twentieth century, the Second World War, and the Holocaust. To this end, Maraini renders Bellini's *Norma* a "twice behaving behavior,"¹⁶ the echo (or ghost) of the original opera literally present, through recording on the phonograph, in the contemporary reproduction. The fact that Sara, Lidia, and Karl, however, are initially unconscious of their ghosting fosters the dramatic irony that fuels the first three-quarters of the play.

It is not by chance that Maraini chose Bellini's *Norma* as the predecessor text for her play. It is an opera with a proto-feminist orientation that renders it propitious for Maraini's continued discussion of the language of art, the power of voice, and the importance of female solidarity. While the misogynist "undoing of women," as Catherine Clément has termed it, still functions as

of women and children detained at Ravensbrück, where 117,000 perished, were Polish and Roma. The direct transports of hundreds of women from Italy to Ravensbrück were organized in June 1944 and continued through January 1945. Towards the end of the war, women were also transferred there from Auschwitz and other camps. The camp at Ravensbrück included political prisoners and Jews, as well as *Mischlinge*, women who were half-Jewish. In the play, Sara is both Jewish and, implicitly, a partisan, for she was caught "in montagna," or "up in the mountains" (Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 134 [1]), while Lidia is half-Jewish. Since *Norma '44* was written and first produced, several other works and memoirs by Italian survivors of Ravensbrück have been published. See, for example, Fausta Finzi, *A riveder le stelle. La lunga marcia di un gruppo di donne dal lager di Ravensbrück, a Lubeca* (Udine: Gaspari Editore, 2006) and the 2006 documentary by Ambra Laurenzi, *Le rose di Ravensbrück, storie di deportate italiane* (ANED e Fondazione per la Memoria della Deportazione).

¹⁴ Although *Norma* was Maria Callas's signature role, her recordings became available only in the early 1950s. Famous Normas include the sopranos Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran, Giulia Grisi (all three of whom Bellini heard before he died at age thirty-three), Lilli Lehmann, and Rosa Ponselle. One recording available during World War Two would have been the 1937 disc of the opera with Gina Cigna as Norma, Ebe Stignani as Adalgisa, Giovanni Breviario as Pollione, and with Vittorio Gui conducting (Orchestra e Coro EIAR, Torino, Cetra label). This is in fact the recording mentioned and used in Maraini's play. In 1984, two years before Maraini's play was first staged, Joan Sutherland and Monserrat Caballé (both sopranos) recorded the opera with Luciano Pavarotti, conducted by Richard Bonynge (Welsh National Opera and Choir, Decca label).

¹⁵ See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001). A salient synopsis of ghosting is given in the introduction: "[T]his process of using the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat different but apparently similar phenomena is fundamental to human cognition in general, and it plays a major role in the theater, as it does in all the arts. Within the theater, however, a related but somewhat different aspect of memory operates in a manner distinct from, or at least in a more central way than in, the other arts, so much so that I would argue that it is one of the characteristic features of the theater. To this phenomenon I have given the name ghosting" (6).

¹⁶ Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36-37.

a traditional and essential aspect of melodrama, Bellini and Romani seem to challenge some of the dominant operatic tropes that reduce female characters to jealous fits of rage and untimely deaths mounted for the voyeuristic pleasure of the (male) audience. Instead of furthering the tradition of operatic works rooted in the inevitable death of women who disturb the symbolic patriarchal order, Bellini and Romani showcase in *Norma* women who pick one another over an untrustworthy lover, and who are willing to sacrifice themselves not for the sake of their male co-protagonist, but rather for the sake of their sisters-in-arms.

Norma debuted at Milan's La Scala opera house on December 26, 1831 to mixed reviews. While the initial performance was criticized, it quickly became an enormous success and was produced thirty-nine times during the 1831-1832 season alone.¹⁷ Based closely on Alexandre Soumet's play by the same name, *Norma* is set in Roman-occupied Gaul in 50 BCE. Romani makes clear, however, that Gaul and Rome are antithetical societies: Roman imperialism and misogyny are directly contrasted with the lunar, matriarchal world of ancient Gaul and of the Druids over whom the priestess Norma rules. Symbolically, the Roman eagle and its solar pedigree stand in opposition to the lunar, forested landscape that Romani describes in the opening scene: "Foresta sacra de' Druidi; in mezzo, la quercia d'Irminsul, al piè della quale vedesi la pietra druidica che serve d'altare. Colli in distanza sparsi di selve" ("Sacred forest of the Druids; in the center, the oak of Irminsul, at the foot of which we see the druidic stone that serves as an altar. Hills, scattered with woods, in the distance").¹⁸ This contrast is rendered in the plot through the antagonistic relationship between Norma, who alone can divine the correct moment for Gaul to rise in rebellion, and Pollione, the Roman proconsul who oscillates between his love for Norma and his new passion for the young priestess Adalgisa. The opera opens with a prophetic declaration by Norma that predicts the inevitable fall of Rome and celebrates the Goddess of the moon. This declaration takes the form of the opera's most famous aria, "Casta Diva," delivered to the audience through the powerhouse voice of Norma herself:

Io ne' volume arcani leggo del cielo:
in pagine di morte
della superba Roma è scritto il nome...
ella un giorno morrà;
ma non per voi.
Morrà per vizi suoi;
qual consunta morrà.
L'ora aspettate, l'ora fatal
Che compia il gran decreto.
Pace v'intimo...
e il sacro vischio io mieto.

Casta Diva, casta Diva, che inargenti
queste sacre, queste sacre antiche piante,
a noi volgi il ben sembiante...
senza nube e senza vel!

¹⁷ Herbert Weinstock, *Vincenzo Bellini: His Life and His Operas* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1971), 107.

¹⁸ Vincenzo Bellini and Felice Romani, *Norma (Lyric Tragedy in Three Acts)*, trans. William Weaver (New York: G. Schirmer, 1969), 1. All passages from the libretto, both Italian and English, are taken from this edition.

(I read in the secret books of heaven:
in the pages of death
is written the name of haughty Rome...
it will come one day,
but not through you.
she will die of her vices;
she will die, as if wasted away.
Wait for the hour, the fatal hour
that fulfills the great decree.
Peace I enjoin upon you...
and I cull the sacred mistletoe.

Chaste goddess, chaste goddess who
dost silver
these sacred, these sacred, ancient trees,
turn toward us thy lovely face...
without cloud and without veil!)¹⁹

According to Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, “Casta Diva” is a demonstration of Bellini’s trademark expressive, declamatory musical lingering: “[I]t has often been celebrated as a classic example of what Verdi, much later would praise as Bellini’s ‘long, long, long melodies such as no one had done before him’; but the peculiar qualities of the aria, its sense of slow development, are dictated by the dramatic situation, as a priestly incantation.”²⁰ “Casta Diva” is heard for the first time at the beginning of Maraini’s play and is the first aria that Karl forces Sara to sing. Its lyrics, which foreshadow the fall of Rome, thematically haunt her lines in their subsequent conversation and cast an aura of fate over the impending Allied defeat of the Nazis:

KARL: Lei è la persona giusta per incarnare questo personaggio da gran scena: occhi di fuoco, gesti maestosi, bocca dura, sprezzo e orgoglio [...] Lei sarà Norma. Per il colonnello Saidler. Per me. Per il campo [...] Il bisogno di bellezza ci uccide. E lei può darcela questa bellezza, Sara.

SARA: Anche voi cadrete. E non saremo noi a farvi cadere. Ma altre aquile venute dall’altra parte dell’oceano.

(KARL: You are the perfect person to play this grand character on stage: eyes like fire, noble gestures, hard mouth, contempt and pride [...] Yes, you will be Norma. For Colonel Saidler. For me. For the camp [...] The need for beauty is killing us and you can give us this beauty, Sara.

SARA: You too will fall. And it will not be us who will make you fall. Other powers will, other eagles will come flying from the other side of the ocean.²¹

¹⁹ Bellini and Romani, *Norma*, 3.

²⁰ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 235.

²¹ Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 136 (4).

Maraini purposefully uses “Casta Diva” at the start of her play in order to frame Sara in the role of Norma, thus aiding her transformation from prisoner to a more powerful character whose actions have consequences within the world of the camp.

“Casta Diva” and *Norma* are outstanding examples of the power of the female voice, a theme that is very important to Dacia Maraini and to Italian feminism. The role of Norma is among the most vocally exacting and physically strenuous parts for a singer-actress in Italian opera. It has in fact been described as a

demanding mixture of vocal and emotional textures, its Cs above (some go for Ds) and B-flats below the staff, its long-breathed lines and octave drops and showpiece trills. One must be able to sing a strong, natural-sounding contralto and some of the highest coloratura ever written. The role of Norma calls for an authentic bel canto soprano voice, one that can be both mercurial-birdlike and witchy-dramatic, which drastically reduces the field of available singers at any time. Moreover, the dramatic challenge of this deep and complex part is at least as great as the musical.²²

As David Littlejohn observes, the role of Norma in many ways epitomizes bel canto and has been recognized as the most compelling example of an art form where the female voice is neither peripheral nor secondary, but rather essential and triumphant.²³

Norma is constructed around a love triangle, yet the wartime-imperial subtext and Romani’s focus on Norma and Adalgisa’s sisterly relationship renders it different from the classic *ménage à trois* in which two women battle for the affection of one man. When Adalgisa confesses to Norma that she has a lover, Norma—seeing herself reflected in the tale of the younger woman—empathizes with her, determined to absolve her from her vows and let her go free. When Norma learns that Pollione is Adalgisa’s suitor, she feels betrayed and filled with rage, but Adalgisa instantly forsakes Pollione and vows to die rather than sacrifice their friendship. Like the mythical Medea, Norma is tempted to kill her own children in revenge, but her maternal love and her friendship for Adalgisa prevail, and she charges Adalgisa with taking the children with her to Pollione and then to Rome. Adalgisa, however, cannot accept Norma’s self-sacrifice, and, embracing her older friend, decides instead to attempt to persuade Pollione to go back to Norma. The women’s reciprocal actions and self-narration call to mind the structure of female friendship discussed by Adriana Cavarero in *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* (*Relating Narratives*:

²² David Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art: Essays Around and About the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 156.

²³ See *ibid.*, 67: “Since the disappearance of castrati, the female dramatic soprano has been the single most impressive and compelling vocal range in opera: the highest, the most potentially moving, the most astonishing; the farthest, in effect, from the way we talk. Opera, as several commentators (among them Hélène Seydoux) have remarked, depends absolutely for its historic, enduring, and immediate power on the female soprano range, which is at once ethereally high (like E-string notes above the fingerboard on a violin) and, by the standards of most human beings, “superhumanly” powerful. An all-male opera—Britten’s *Billy Budd* for example—can, like an all-male chorus, be tremendously powerful; but it will always be the odd, one-in-a-hundred exception. When you add to the potential range and power of a dramatic soprano the (literally) breathtaking agility of a coloratura—as any acceptable Norma must do—you have the makings of the sublime operatic, perhaps even musical experience, in purely auditory terms.”

Storytelling and Selfhood), as a “reciprocal narrative exchange.”²⁴ Norma’s strong female identity is rooted both in the female friendship that has led to her self-understanding and in her feminine, maternal power. Norma was tempted to kill her children as a way to take revenge on their father, but she finally sees them as essentially hers, not his: “Ah! no!...son miei figli!” (“Ah, no! They are my children!”).²⁵

It is indeed with regard to Norma’s children that the allusion to the myth of Medea ends. Otherworldly and at times sorceress-like, Norma certainly recalls Medea, yet she chooses to spare her children, and this decision is made in large part due to her friendship with Adalgisa and the support that Adalgisa provides. Instead of encouraging Norma’s suicidal martyrdom, Adalgisa concocts a plan to drive Pollione back into his former lover’s arms. While the plan ultimately fails, it does succeed in highlighting the loyalty of the young novice toward her superior. At the conclusion of their discussion, the two women sing together, declaring their eternal mutual affection in the duet “Mira, o Norma”:

Sì, fino all’ore, all’ore estreme
compagna tua, compagna m’avrai;
per ricovrarci, per ricovrarci insieme
ampia è la terra, è la terra assai.
Teco del fato all’onte
ferma opporrò la fronte
finché il tuo cuore a battere
io senta sul mio cor, sì.
Ah! Sì, fino all’ore.

(Yes, until our last hours,
you will have me as your companion.
to shelter us, to shelter us together
the earth is wide, the earth is wide enough.
With you the affronts of destiny
I will firmly face,
as long as I feel your heart. Yes.
Ah, yes! Until our last hours.)²⁶

It is with this declaration of everlasting love that Adalgisa permanently exits the opera. It is only through her plan to rejuvenate Pollione’s passion for Norma, which sets in motion the action of the last two scenes, that Adalgisa’s presence is felt thereafter. As Patricia Smith notes, “her ‘love duet’ with Norma stands as her final word.”²⁷ In the play, on the other hand, Karl repeatedly questions this aspect of the opera, which is not to his liking. He insists that the two women must

²⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 58.

²⁵ Bellini and Romani, *Norma*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ Patricia Smith, “O Patria Mia: Female Homosexuality and the Gendered Nation in Bellini’s *Norma* and Verdi’s *Aïda*,” in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, and Sexual Difference*, eds. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 98.

be *rivali*, that Bellini was naïve, and Romani perhaps mad when he endowed them with reciprocal tenderness and altruism.²⁸

Maraini uses this duet strategically within her own play as the operatic text that instigates the action of the denouement. It is at the rehearsal for “Mira, o Norma” that Lidia admits she has fallen in love with Karl and in turn Karl realizes that they are re-living the plot of the opera: “C’è del grottesco in tutto questo [...] non vi accorgete che stiamo ripetendo la situazione della *Norma*, pari pari?”; (“There is something grotesque in all of this [...] do you not realize that we are imitating the story of *Norma*?”).²⁹ Karl’s self-referential statement is the precise moment in which the dramatic irony that fuels the play finally breaks down. The audience has been aware of the interplay between Maraini’s text and Bellini’s opera from the beginning, yet it is only in the second half of the second act that the characters realize that their actions are circumscribed within a greater metatheatrical context. It is from this point forward that the play hastens to its tragic ending. Sara reveals that she and Karl have had a son together and Karl, aiming to drive a wedge between the two women in order to control them better, states his love for both Sara and Lidia. Maraini, however, follows Bellini’s example, and uses Romani’s words to highlight the bond between Sara and Lidia, who ultimately choose one another over Karl. This rapid conversation culminates in Sara and Lidia’s singing the famous last lines of the duet “sì, fino all’ore, all’ore estreme / compagna tua, compagna m’avrai” and Sara imploring Lidia to take care of her child should the need arise. In a departure from the operatic text, Maraini’s “Adalgisa” accepts this task, which demonstrates Lidia’s sisterly devotion to her friend and represents an almost literal rendering of the Italian feminist practice of *affidamento*, which has been translated as “entrustment.”³⁰ The women’s reciprocal entrustment is embodied in the child. In the opera’s conclusion, the theme of male redemption and purification through female self-sacrifice overshadows the feminist theme of female friendship and entrustment. When Norma learns that Pollione plans to take Adalgisa with him to Rome, with or without her consent, she summons her army and tells them the time to attack the Romans is near. Once Pollione is her prisoner, Norma offers to spare his life if he will give up Adalgisa and love her once again. He refuses, so Norma tells the Druids to prepare a pyre for a human sacrifice: one of the priestesses, she explains, has broken her vows and must die. Pollione expects her to name Adalgisa, but Norma, now that Pollione is on his knees before her, willingly denounces herself as the guilty one. Inspired by her bravery, Pollione chooses to die with the woman he loved, then wronged, and now loves again. Together they ascend the funeral pyre.

The play, on the other hand, ends with Sara-Norma stabbing Karl-Pollione to death at the moment in which she and Pollione would have ascended the funeral pyre. Honoring their agreement and bond, Lidia absconds with the child while Sara waits in the rehearsal barrack, holding Karl’s dead body like a baby. Sound effects convey that she is quickly discovered by the camp guards and summarily executed, thus joining her deceitful lover in a twentieth-century version of a sacrificial ritual. Unlike Norma, however, Sara does not walk knowingly to her death side-by-side with the man who betrayed her. Instead, she takes the initiative to kill Karl first, unafraid of the predictable consequence. Considering this significant change in events, Maraini upends the tradition of self-sacrifice on the part of the tragic heroine. Instead, she shows a modern woman who bravely meets her death not *for* the sake of another, but rather *in spite* of another.

²⁸ Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 160 (25);166 (30).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 168 (31).

³⁰ On *affidamento*, the feminist practice theorized in the early 1980s by the Milan Women’s Bookstore collective, see Graziella Parati and Rebecca J. West, *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 59-60.

Unlike the opera, the play effectively ends on a note of survival, even hope, for after embracing her friend Sara one last time, Lidia fulfills her life-affirming task of rescuing the child and presumably fleeing the camp together.

One of the ways in which Maraini links the opera to the play despite their vast temporal and contextual differences is by focusing on the power of voice in each work. It may at first appear reductive to consider Sara and Lidia's singing as a form of resistance and survival in the concentration camp, yet it becomes clear that singing in fact plays a large role in their ability to retain both a sense of female self and human-ness in a world filled with daily horrors. Their voices are discrete, physical identifiers, and as such are potent reminders of their humanity and individuality in a system whose explicit goals are dehumanization, abjection, and animalization.³¹ Maraini touches on a key theme that Adriana Cavarero discusses in her philosophical text *A più voci* (*For More Than One Voice*), that of the voice as a unique identifier. Commenting on a story by Italo Calvino, "Un re in ascolto" (A King Listens), in which a bored king enslaved to his own abstract power and perennially sitting as if lifeless on his throne, is awakened back to life, pleasure, and the imagination of the body by the sound of a woman's voice singing, floating in through an open window, Cavarero observes:

The voice, however, is always different from all other voices, even if the words are the same [...] This difference, as Calvino underlines, has to do with the body. 'A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voice [...] A voice involves the throat, saliva.' When the human voice vibrates, there is someone in flesh and bone who emits it."³²

The king is enthralled by the beauty of this female voice. Cavarero chooses to include Calvino's words in her introduction for their obvious yet oft-overlooked insight: the fact that voice and physicality are necessarily connected, and that the voice denotes the physical and gendered presence of a specific individual. According to Cavarero, the Western philosophical tradition has unduly ignored the voice as expression of a unique, gendered, and embodied individuality, basing ontology on the abstract concept of "universal Man," and obfuscating the sexual difference between human beings while reducing the female and the feminine to a mere subcategory of this putatively universal Man.³³ The use of voice, which implies flesh and bone, mouth and throat, should thus be seen as a mechanism of survival within the context of Maraini's concentration camp setting. There are many references in the play to hunger, and to the voracious eating of the little extra food that Karl dispenses to Lidia and Sara now and then in order to make them more obediently follow his orders. But while using mouth, tongue, and throat ravenously to devour food does not mark their difference from animals, the use of the same organs to speak, and especially,

³¹ Karl observes in fact twice in the second act that Lidia has finally become nothing but a hyena.

³² Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3-4.

³³ On *A più voci* and Cavarero's "philosophy of voice" see Ryan Dohoney, "An Antidote to Metaphysics: Adriana Cavarero's Vocal Philosophy," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 15 (2011): 70-85; Annamaria Cecconi, "Theorizing Gender, Culture and Music," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 9 (2005): 99-105; and the review essay by Mary Ann Smart, "Theorizing Gender, Culture and Music [review of Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci: filosofia dell'espressione vocale*]," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 6 (2005): 106-10.

to sing, restores their humanity and femininity, however momentarily.

In addition to its function as an indelible reminder of physical and gendered presence, singing (or vocal emission) is also the instrument with which Maraini highlights the importance of female solidarity and friendship within the play. Sara and Lidia are forced to rehearse Bellini's opera and to sing on command, yet it is through this experience that they are joined together and form the bond that will ultimately provide for the only form of salvation in the play. While Maraini features many excerpts from the opera, the pieces she chooses to reproduce in their entirety are Adalgisa and Norma's love duets "Oh, Rimembranza!" and "Mira, o Norma." In fact, it is noteworthy that Norma does not sing any love duets with Pollione, but rather only with Adalgisa, reversing the traditional heterosexual operatic structure. This change has the effect of creating a homosocial vocal event that takes as its primary focus the individual experiences of the two female protagonists and the mutual emotionality they engender.³⁴

In the duet "Oh, Rimembranza!" Adalgisa confides in Norma, sharing her first experiences of love, which bring about nostalgia in the older Druid priestess, who fondly remembers her happy, early times spent with Pollione. Norma, however, is unaware of the object of the young novice's affection until he interrupts their reminiscing, revealing his offenses. Yet Romani does not capitulate to insidious female stereotypes or pit the two women against one another. Instead, he uses the revelation as an impetus to bring Norma and Adalgisa closer together through their disgust for Pollione and subsequent declaration of mutual faith. Specifically, Norma blames Pollione for the transgression, thus rendering Adalgisa the victim:

Oh non tremare, oh non tremare,
o perfido,
ah non tremare per le...
Essa non è colpevole,
il malfattor tu sei...
trema per te, fellow...

(Oh, do not tremble, do not tremble,
O treacherous man,
ah, do not tremble for her...
She is not guilty,
you are the evil-doer...
tremble for yourself, villain...³⁵

³⁴ Using a rather emphatic style, Clément describes the duet in Act 1 in these terms: "An astonishing duet; an astonishing rapport. One sings—and the other sings too. A cello accompanies the deeper voice, another cello accompanies the younger. And Norma replies; Norma admits; Norma remembers. Nothing can stop Adalgisa now: she is transported by the cries of love at its most irrational. And Norma? Norma relives it all as if in an echo. Hallucinated, she discovers herself once more in the 'other woman': an essential substructure for the 'hysterical,' womb-to-womb identification by which every female relationship takes place. We swim with them in a fluid love that pours itself out in all directions: a love in which Pollione (the still-unmentioned object of the same love that these two women bear for him) serves as the conduit between one and the other. Adalgisa is captivated by the marvelous way in which love begins, and Norma is captivated by Adalgisa in love. The two women are in love with the same love: 'he,' the man who, in the pre-dawn light, whispers to one the same tender words he once whispered to the other, 'he' is never named. 'He' does not exist, beyond the united beating of two women's hearts" See Littlejohn, 169.

³⁵ Bellini and Romani, 8.

Likewise, Adalgisa responds in solidarity with Norma, denying Pollione's advances and calling him a traitor ("Va, traditor"): "her response, tellingly, is one informed by neither fury nor sensibility but rather by a stunningly pragmatic sense of honor and gynocentric alliance with Norma in the face of their now mutual enemy."³⁶ Thus, in the example of "Oh, Rimembranza," the voice functions as a specific and tangible medium through which to connect the two female characters and aids in the development of their relationship.

The text of *Norma '44* is thick with allusions to other voices and echoes from the dramatic, cinematic and literary tradition.³⁷ While Maraini uses Bellini's *Norma* as her principal structural and thematic foundation, she also references other literary figures and works over the course of the play, including Shakespeare and Goethe. These references, often found in Karl's philosophizing lines, are significant considering Maraini's focus on the limits of art and artistic discourse in the context of war and the Holocaust.

Karl's pastiche recitations of Goethe's poems, his evocation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and his repeated allusions to the plot of Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*) elucidate fundamental aspects of his personality. Karl craves beauty and detests the horrors of the camp, and yet he continues to participate in its cruel and dehumanizing "experimental" system. Most importantly, he consistently seeks refuge in the world of art. Within the first pages of the play, he invokes a sort of magical escapism by citing lines from Goethe, in an effort to explain to Sara the need for music, and thus beauty, in their horrifying camp:

La bellezza, Sara, è questo: dimenticare che il mondo anche qui / tiene nei suoi lacci
di terra tante creature. / La bellezza mi è propizia [...] mi concede questi sogni [...]
così dice Goethe.

(Beauty, Sara, is this: to forget that here too the world / holds many creatures in its
earthly snares. / Beauty is propitious to me [...] it allows me to dream [...] Or so
says Goethe.)³⁸

³⁶ Smith, "O Patria Mia," 97.

³⁷ Maraini makes implicit references to previous twentieth-century literary and cinematic works that similarly combine the use of opera, mythology, and aestheticism within a wartime context. These texts include the play *Il dio Kurt* (1968) by Alberto Moravia and the film *The Night Porter* (1974) by Liliana Cavani. Both works are set in concentration camps and include sexual transgression, oscillating power structures between prisoner and guard, and a fundamental subtext of mythology and opera: the Oedipus myth informs Moravia's play, while Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (1791) serves as *The Night Porter's* heteronormative backdrop to Maximilian Aldorfer and Lucia Atherton's sadomasochistic and ultimately fatal relationship. In *Norma '44*, female friendships prevail and the masculine orientation of the Oedipus myth is largely reversed through a textual focus on female camaraderie instead of male genealogy. Maraini's play could thus be considered a feminist response to Moravia's *Il dio Kurt*, which instead focuses on the sufferings of Kurt, an SS guard who believes that the Jewish family unit is the modern reoccurrence of the tragic family drama of Oedipus. Maraini's play also echoes *The Night Porter's* portrayal of the perverse and decadent Nazi officer who relies on the pretense of a highly developed aesthetic taste (as seen in his obsession with opera and ballet) as a justification for his violent actions. While Maraini's depiction of Karl's relationships with Sara and Lidia is less explicitly portrayed than Maximilian and Lucia's in Cavani's film, the shared thematic subtext of iconic operas such as *The Magic Flute* and *Norma* links the two works.

³⁸ Maraini, *Fare teatro*, 135 (3).

In a perverse way, Karl is a dreamer as well as an aesthete: he uses the music of *Norma* as a means by which to escape the terror of quotidian life in the camp, and to delude himself into love first with Sara, then with Lidia. Specifically, his love for these women is based on their status as living works of art—real actresses and singers who embody the aesthetic realm into which he is desperate to escape. Despite this fundamental artistic attraction, Karl is both insecure and mercurial in his relationships with Sara and Lidia. Perhaps the latent uncertainty expressed in Goethe’s poem “Schlechter Trost” (Small Comfort) reflects the ambiguity of his own situation as a vulnerable SS guard with an insatiable need for beauty, haunted by his past as a failed musician, and trapped by his attraction to a Jewish prisoner.

The context in which Maraini includes Goethe’s poem helps clarify its meaning: the morning after their first rehearsal, Karl makes evident his feelings for Sara by addressing her as “sweet Sara,” to which she replies with derision, denouncing his hypocrisy. Instead of a rebuttal, he quotes from “Schlechter Trost”:

E vennero i fantasmi della notte [...] / I fantasmi della notte con visi lunghi /
passarono oltre / senza preoccuparsi / s’io fossi saggio o folle.

(Then the night ghosts came / The night ghosts with their long faces / passed me
by, / Not worrying if I was wise or foolish.)³⁹

Karl is unmoved by Sara’s insult, unconcerned with the dangerous political ramifications of his love for her. Maraini’s choice to situate the poem within their conversation supports the notion that Karl relies on the poetry and words of others in his attempts at self-expression. When he asks Sara if she recognizes the quote, she replies “Le sue citazione sono fuori luogo” (“your quotations are out of place”).⁴⁰ With this second rebuttal, Karl changes the subject and the situation remains unresolved, much like the end of the poem.

This structure is seen again later in Act 1, when Karl quotes Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* in order to express his experience of love by hearsay upon learning that a singer, Sara, has been brought to barrack 61. Karl claims he knew he would love her without ever having met her. When Sara calls his rhetoric absurd, he replies with the song of the Clown who addresses Sir Andrew and Sir Toby in Act 2, Scene 3 of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*:

Cos’è l’amore? Non ha domani. / La gioia di oggi porta una risata di oggi / ciò che
verrà è ancora incerto / nell’indugio non giace fortuna / vieni a baciarmi, figlia della
luna.

(What is love? ’Tis not hereafter; / Present mirth hath present laughter; / What’s to
come is still unsure: / In delay there lies no plenty; / Then come kiss me, sweet and
twenty, / Youth’s a stuff will not endure.)⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 134 (12).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 134 (12).

⁴¹ Ibid., 146 (13).

Again Karl relies on the poetry of others to express himself, seeking asylum and cover in the worlds of art and literature. He even refers to Shakespeare as his uncle, “mio zio William,” highlighting further the extent to which he has internalized an artistic fantasy world. Furthermore, his choice of quotation reflects the tragic absurdity of his passion: his decision to describe his love for Sara with picturesque Shakespearean lines while completely ignoring their macabre surroundings demonstrates his distorted vision of reality. Sara responds, in fact, by correcting his inaccurate image: “Lei è innamorato di un’idea. Io sono diversa, capitano Hoffmann, molto diversa. Molto più stupida, più tenera, più vulnerabile” (“You are in love with an idea. I am different, Captain Hoffmann, quite different. More stupid, more tender, more vulnerable than you think”).⁴²

Lidia is at first less skeptical than Sara, and lacks her sophistication and understanding of the complexities of the concentration camp. This trait is evidenced by her use of vernacular and idiomatic Italian expressions, which are significantly more colloquial than Sara’s or Karl’s language. Unlike Sara, Lidia is naïve, full of the desire to believe that love can exist even in a concentration camp. This leads to her tragic love for Karl, though Maraini ambiguously weaves the theme of her love for him with that of her hunger. She may love him, the text implies, because he brings her food and a chance to survive. To a certain extent, her love for Karl and his escape into art are similar adaptive mechanisms to a habitat antithetical to life. An example of her naïveté is seen within the first pages of the play, as Karl narrates the plot of *Norma*. Karl explains that Adalgisa falls in love with Pollione, to which Lidia excitedly responds in, as Maraini puts it, a childish manner: “(*infantile, partecipe; veramente interessata*) E Pollione si innamora di Adalgisa?” [“(childlike, taking part; truly interested) And Pollione falls in love with Adalgisa?”].⁴³ Her willingness to believe in the plot of *Norma* foreshadows the tragic ending of the play itself. On the next page, Lidia responds to Sara’s accusation that Karl’s production is a cruel trick with trust, saying that she can tell he is “diverso dalle altre SS” (“different from the other SS”)⁴⁴; that “ci sta male nella sua pelle” (“he is uncomfortable in his own skin”).⁴⁵

Lidia believes that she has nothing left to lose, while Sara holds on stubbornly to the idea that through resistance, she may retain the ability to write her own ending, and thus remain human. Ultimately, their strongest method of resistance takes the form of song. Between the inherent physicality of singing and the thematic resonance of the opera’s lyrics (especially those that focus on the fall of the Roman Empire, or the enduring strength of female friendships in times of adversity) Sara and Lidia are given a chance at survival. Even though the play ends in a similarly tragic fashion to that of the opera’s conclusion, Lidia’s presumed escape with the child her friend has entrusted to her, and the very fact that Maraini chooses bel canto opera to frame her wartime drama, show that the female voice has a particular power to engender perseverance and agency.

⁴² Ibid., 147 (14).

⁴³ Ibid., 139 (7).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 141 (8).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 141 (8).

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