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# Bohemian rhapsodies: operatic influences on rock music

KEN McLEOD

## Introduction

Opera and operatic images have invaded nearly all aspects of popular culture. Films (even silent films), radio, television, literature and numerous other media have all, to one degree or another, appropriated either actual opera or operatic devices and conventions. One important realm of popular culture that has appeared relatively immune to operatic influence, however, is rock music. Though several studies have illustrated the impact of 'classical' instrumental music on heavy metal and pop music, no serious scholarship has as yet explored the considerable influence exerted by opera, and its conventions, on various forms of rock music (Aledort 1985; McClary and Walser 1990; Walser 1992; Covach 1997). This essay examines the various manifestations of opera in rock music with particular concentration on works by Queen, Nina Hagen, Klaus Nomi and Malcolm McLaren that employ specific instances of operatic vocality or borrowing. Such opera-rock fusions are often predicated upon the transgression of conventional musical boundaries and often reflect an analogous rejection of traditional cultural boundaries surrounding sexual orientation, gender and class. Long overlooked, recognising opera's cross-relations with rock offers new insights into the postmodern blurring of traditional distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art and broadens our understanding of both genres.

## Opera/rock crossover

Rock music has traditionally resisted opera, a genre seemingly steeped in the hierarchical divisions of class and high culture which rock music, ostensibly, rejects. Aside from calculated attempts to appropriate the cultural prestige of opera, there is little, it would seem, to be gained by the association of rock with opera. The audience and fans of each genre are often highly immobile in their tastes and often deeply suspicious – even resentful – of the opposing form. In broadly general terms, fans of rock music typically find opera to be highly contrived, confusing and convoluted, boring, elitist and arcane, while opera fans typically resent the perceived musical simplicity, loudness, commerciality and banality of rock music. Though such apparently polarised genres often appeal to markedly different tastes and aesthetic ideologies, they nonetheless share a number of similar conventions.

Extreme vocal virtuosity, expression, and attention to nuances of vocal timbre, for example, are traits prized by both operatic and rock singers. The vocal gymnastics of pop singers such as Mariah Carey or the impassioned growls and screams of almost every heavy metal singer display vocal expression in much the same

manner that an opera singer might deliver an ornamental aria or impassioned recitative. Similarly, in both genres there is a distinct aesthetic preference for artists who exhibit ability in upper registers. Opera has traditionally manifest a preference for star tenors, counter-tenors or sopranos (a fact compounded and perpetuated by the vast majority of starring operatic roles that are traditionally written for these voice types). Rock music, however, has witnessed an equal fascination with high-register male vocalists such as Michael Jackson (whose star status, effeminate appearance and falsetto voice appear to mimic conventions previously only observed in baroque castrati such as Farinelli),<sup>1</sup> Michael Bolton or Paul McCartney (not to mention the plethora of heavy metal vocalists who specialise in singing or screaming in extreme upper registers), and female pop divas such as Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey or Celine Dion.<sup>2</sup> Such similarities of expression rest largely on a sense of transgression either of the bondage of social norms and conventions in the case of rock singers, or of the bondage of unrequited love or other dramatic tragedy in the case of the opera singer. In both cases it is the transgressive voice which is able to transcend bodily or emotional constraints.<sup>3</sup>

Both opera and rock also share a common emphasis on extravagant excess and decadent display and spectacle. In her writing on opera in eighteenth-century England, Suzanne Aspden has recently observed that:

Luxury was the vice that defined operatic deviance. In modern discussions of the significance of luxury in opera, the vast amount of money spent on opulent sets, and on fees and gifts for singers, along with the sexual perversions that were imagined to spread from singers to audience, define luxury as the wasteful extravagance of a commercial society fascinated with the foreign. (Aspden 1997, p. 13)

Such an account would seem equally applicable to the excesses, both in lifestyle and performance, of modern rock music. Thus in both genres we witness a literal 'spending' of wealth such that they may both be characterised in the larger sense as adjuncts to cultures of economic success.

An interesting fallout from such preoccupation with excess in rock was the advent of an increasingly elitist rock-star image that was often alienated from his or her audience. Such an image, ironically, ran parallel to the sophisticated and elitist tastes of serious high-art music lovers and eventually resulted in a form of grand 'diva' or prima donna mentality among rock stars who lived analogously extravagant, even decadent, lifestyles. Slowly such performers became disengaged from their public, becoming self-centred egoists just like, according to their critics, many modern opera stars.<sup>4</sup> Cultural critic Dick Hebdige describes the fallout of this trend, particularly as it related to the rise of glam rock:

... more self-conscious teenagers, [were] fastidiously devoted to more esoteric artists (Bowie, Lou Reed, Roxy Music) whose extreme foppishness, incipient élitism, and morbid pretensions to art and intellect effectively precluded the growth of a larger mass audience. (Hebdige 1979, p. 62)

To some extent such theatrical glam rockers mimicked the pretensions and affectations of their operatic high-art cousins. Of course such a parallel draws on a larger paradigm – that of the demented, transcendent or other-worldly artist. Consider Edward Rothstein's description of the operatic diva. She 'leaves behind rationality, emulating madness'; her voice 'is always on the edge, touching on the forbidden, breaking the boundaries of earthly melody' (Leonardi and Pope 1996, p. 229). Obsession with extremes and forbidden modes of artistic expression or lifestyle

seems a shared interest of many rock and opera artists. In spite of seemingly diametrically opposing positions on the spectrum of musical style, the aesthetic ideologies and lifestyles of both audiences and performers in opera and rock are often strikingly similar.

General parallels in staging and performance are perhaps evidence of some influence of opera on rock; however, the influence of rock music, its glamour and marketing techniques, is becoming increasingly more common in opera.<sup>5</sup> A number of recent opera crossover projects, including Monserrat Caballé and Freddie Mercury's *Barcelona*, Barbara Hendrick's Disney theme songs, among many others, have attempted to reach into the rich pop music market. Indeed, Pavarotti's *Pavarotti and Friends* albums involve rock artists such as Sting, The Cranberries and Meatloaf, and feature songs such as the Pavarotti/U2 collaboration, 'Miss Sarejevo', which have made an impact on the international rock singles charts. The Three Tenors similarly perform in football stadiums to thousands of adoring fans. A press release from a recent Three Tenors world tour proudly announced that 'their new production will be the most visually stunning and technologically advanced to date . . . with dazzling lighting providing a visual feast for every member of the audience'. This type of pre-concert hype would not be out of place in advertising any rock concert. Such 'crossover' opera stars have not only affected the marketing strategies, production values, venues, fees and trappings of rock stars but they also feed into the 3'20" rock music attention span. Instead of presenting the full psychology of an opera they sing only the operatic 'hits' interspersed with a mixture of pop tunes. Whatever one may think of such a trend, it is clear that the sheer public popularity of these crossover projects directly calls into question the traditional division between high and popular culture. Opera, for better or worse, is actively reclaiming its status as 'popular' music.

Despite the commonalities of reception, staging and star culture shared by opera and rock, the actual music of the rock artists owes little, if anything, to direct operatic musical influence. Grand operatic scale and sung dramatic narrative are employed in so-called 'rock operas', rock and Broadway musicals, and even Hollywood movie musicals. However, notwithstanding such relatively superficial resemblance to opera, these genres typically rely on rock or popular song for their musical stylistic inspiration and manifest little, if any, operatic vocality or musical imitation. Conversely, many artists who are usually associated with rock or pop music have crossed over to experimenting with conventional operatic and vocal art-music styles. David Byrne's *The Forest* (1991), Stewart Copeland's minimalist opera *Holy Blood and Crescent Moon* (1989), and Paul McCartney's *Liverpool Oratorio* (1991) and *Standing Stone* (1997) are examples of serious operatic art pieces which, at best, exhibit only residual rock influences.<sup>6</sup>

Outside of the attempts by rock artists to write serious vocal art music, none of the works yet discussed employs any use of traditional operatic vocality, quotation or borrowing, and the manifestations of operatic style in pop/rock music are often only superficial. Instances of the integration of opera and classical or operatic vocality, within the context of a rock or pop song format, are much harder to find. Though rare and often less well known and commercially successful than the examples described above, songs and artists which mix actual musical elements of opera and rock provide insightful and interesting glimpses into the transgression of musical, social and sexual boundaries which such fusions engender.

## Opera in rock

A single rock song can never approach the scale or dramatic evolution of character and plot which traditional opera employs. They have, nonetheless, occasionally provided the locus for operatic quotation, parody and vocality. The most famous example is Queen's 1974 hit single 'Bohemian Rhapsody', from the album *A Night at the Opera*. This ground-breaking work, which spent nearly nine weeks at number one on the British charts, was described by lyricist/vocalist Freddie Mercury as a 'tongue in cheek . . . mock opera' (Hodkinson 1995, p. 200). The song parodies various elements of opera in its use of bombastic choruses, sarcastic recitative and distorted Italian operatic phraseology.

None of the band members received any extensive classical music training; however, in a recent interview guitarist Brian May remarked that all of the band members were influenced by opera in their youth:

Freddie [Mercury] was into really different areas, particularly the operatic thing. Strangely enough, we [Queen] all have a bit of that in us, because it was all around us when we grew up. It's part of our English upbringing; we absorbed a lot of classical music subliminally from our parents. (May 1993, p. 43)

The traditional English predilection for choral music appears to have proven especially influential as, taking an unprecedented four weeks to record, 'Bohemian Rhapsody' featured over 180 vocal overdubs to achieve the sonic choral effects described in the liner notes as 'operatic vocals' (Hodkinson 1995, p. 202).<sup>7</sup>

The work begins with a *cappella* group vocals introducing the story and setting the mood. Though in a true opera this function would typically be performed by an overture, the immediate evocation of a classical vocal idiom, such as found in a madrigal or chorale, is apparent. Next comes the equivalent of an aria or lied with piano accompaniment. Freddie Mercury sings the following enigmatic lyrics:

Mama, just killed a man,  
Put a gun against his head,  
Pulled my trigger, now he's dead,  
Mama, life had just begun,  
But now I've gone and thrown it all away –  
Mama, ooo,  
Didn't mean to make you cry,  
If I'm not back again this time tomorrow,  
Carry on, carry on, as if nothing really matters, *etc.*

The lament-like ballad, accompanied by limping broken arpeggios on the piano, depicts a suicidal young man, played by Mercury, confessing to a murder (or possibly describing his own suicide – the terms are unclear), bemoaning his short life and imploring his mother 'to carry on as if nothing really matters'.

This lament is interrupted by a transition to the middle part of the work which presents an Orpheus-like descent into the insanity of the underworld complete with 'Thunderbolts and lightning, very very fright'ning...' The transition is accomplished by way of Brian May's guitar solo which culminates in a chromatic bass line plunge from F to B flat, firmly depicting the descent into chaos (see Example 1, mm. 41–3). The 'opera section', as Mercury called this middle segment, shifts in both musical style and perspective as the tempo doubles (from roughly 72 beats per minute to 144 beats per minute) and the dynamic level softens as piano and solo voice replace the amplified guitars, bass and drums (Sky 1991, p. 29). This

section is also marked by an increase in chromatic complexity as several diminished and flat chords add transgressive colour to the eerily cheerful major tonic–dominant alternations which underpin much of the section.

Complementing the descent to the operatic otherworld, Freddie Mercury takes on a devilish persona, singing 'I see a little silhouetto of a man' in parody of a comic opera recitative. His vocal melody breaks from the rhapsodic lyricism of the

40

Vocals

Guitars

Bass

(Piano)

45

I see a lit - tle sil - hou - et - to of a man, Scar - a - mouche, Scar - a - mouche, will you do the Fan - dan - go.

49

Thun - der - bolt and light - ning, ver - y, ver - y fright - 'ning me. Gal - li - le - o

(With Chorus) (Low Voice)

Gal - li -

52

Gal - li - le - o Gal - li - le - o Fig - a - ro. Mag - ni - fi - co. O

- le - o Gal - li - le - o Gal - li - le - o Fig - a - ro. O o -

(Piano)

*rit.*

Example 1. 'Bohemian Rhapsody', mm. 40–55.

aria-like opening to a more fragmented recitative-style with static word and note repetitions. Evoking a popular eighteenth-century Italian *commedia dell'arte* character, a fantastical dialogue then ensues with the solo line, 'Scaramouche, Scaramouche, will you do the fandango', answered by a demonic chorus, 'Thunderbolts and lightning, very, very fright'ning' (see Example 1, mm. 46–50). This in turn is followed by a ludicrous falsetto solo, engaged in a farcical debate, 'Gallileo, Gallileo, Gallileo, Gallileo, Gallileo, Figaro, Magnifico'. The word repetitions of this line are set as alternating imitative entries at the fifth, and with a short five-note arpeggiated minor-seventh melisma painting the last syllable of 'Magnifico' (see Example 1, mm. 51–5). Operatic techniques such as a homophonic grand chorus, falsetto singing and distorted operatic phraseology further evoke the exotic insanity of this underworld trial.

Following a short dialogue between soloist and chorus, the choral jury interjects with their judgement of guilt: 'We will not let you go'. The antiphonal chorus and the dramatic way the chorus repeats lines sung by the protagonist is highly reminiscent of the light-hearted operetta style of Gilbert and Sullivan, lending another element of satire to the 'mock opera'.<sup>8</sup> The operatic section ends with the chorus, 'Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me', before another abrupt transition into a stereotypical heavy rock mode, with the words, 'So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye'. Made even more famous as the 'head-banging' car scene in the 1992 movie *Wayne's World*, opera and hard rock are here directly juxtaposed. The acoustic texture and fragmentary melodies of the operatic chorus and recitative are, with the entrance of the bass, guitar and drums, replaced by a typical hard driving rock combo completed by Mercury reverting to a hard rock vocal delivery. The chaos of the operatic nightmare is over, replaced by the head-banging order and aggression of a contemporary hard rock band.

In 'Bohemian Rhapsody', operatic recitative, aria/lieu, and chorus are juxtaposed with hard rock in order to represent the world turned upside down, the Bohemian underworld of 'Beelzebub' where it is certain that 'nothing really matters'. Queen's underworld motif mimics a common topos in opera, one found in works such as Monteverdi's *Orpheo*, Purcell's *King Arthur*, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Weber's *Der Freischütz* and Wagner's Ring cycle to name but a few of the more famous examples. Thus the work mocks the fascination with moral transgression shared by both opera and rock. To some extent traditional operatic virtuosity and bombast are also maintained by the complexity of the 180 choral overdubs; however, operatic techniques are here used not to lend musical cachet but rather to mock the musical conventions of both opera and rock. Indeed the song breaks several rock clichés, not only by including operatic vocals and choruses but also by its six-minute length – nearly twice the length of conventional pop singles of the time. The 'opera section' also highlights a nonsensical mix of Italian and French terms, such as 'Silhouette', 'Scaramouche', 'Mama mia' and 'Fandango'. The confused context of these terms serves both to highlight the foreign intrusion of opera in a rock anthem and parody the lack of understanding of foreign language opera common to most rock fans. Through the use of such terminology, opera is clearly marked as rock's 'other' or, to quote Samuel Johnson's description of eighteenth-century opera, an 'irrational and exotic entertainment' (Johnson 1835, p. 148).

### 1980s – opera and the post-punk avant garde

'Bohemian Rhapsody' is a relatively isolated instance of a hard rock appropriation of operatic techniques.<sup>9</sup> More frequent and direct cross-pollinations of opera and

rock music occurred in the early 1980s, which saw several post-punk avant-garde artists mixing the two idioms. Reacting to the aggressive social realism of punk rock, artists such as Nina Hagen and Klaus Nomi experimented with a number of different genres and vocal techniques. Hagen and Nomi (both of whom received classical voice training in their youth) chose to adopt a variety of operatic or classical vocal techniques, including recitative-like dialogue and coloratura which they fused with futuristic tech-pop-oriented dance music. Following their lead, Malcolm McLaren would later expand upon this collage technique by appropriating entire opera arias in his hip-hop dance rock mixes, thus anticipating the cut and paste approach of many current new age and world music bands. Though Hagen, Nomi and McLaren each took differing approaches to fusing opera and rock, they shared a similar desire to avoid typical rock/pop stylistic stereotypes and simultaneously transgress not only the traditional boundaries of opera and rock but also traditional gender and sexual boundaries.

Nina Hagen was born in East Berlin in 1955 and from an early age studied opera at the theatre in Dessau, receiving her first national East German exposure in a televised opera version of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. She later became interested in rock music and honed her vocal talents singing with various Berlin rock bands, supplemented by a one-year course of vocal studies at the Central Studio for Light Music. In 1967 the revolutionary people's singer-songwriter Wolf Bierman became her unofficial stepfather, and thus from an early age Hagen was exposed to strong political influences. She subsequently joined Bierman's protest against the participation of East German troops in the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In 1976 Bierman, after crossing the West Berlin border, was refused re-entry and expatriated from East Germany. Hagen, whose lyrics and music were also under intense government scrutiny, seized this opportunity to cross over to the West herself. Renouncing her citizenship in 1976, she successfully petitioned the Exit Application Board to leave the country by threatening to continue Bierman's 'crusade' if she wasn't let go (Goldstein 1981, p. 40).

In 1977, Hagen took up residence in London during the height of the punk explosion and befriended such influential bands as the Slits and the Sex Pistols. Johnny Rotten, evidently, was especially taken with her classical vocal technique. As Hagen recalled, 'he always wanted me to sing [Schubert's] "*Sah ein Knab ein Roslen Stehn*"' (Levy 1996). Hagen formed her own band in 1978, beginning an extremely successful career which included such worldwide dance hits as her classic cover version of The Tubes' 'White Punks on Dope' (1978), 'Smack Jack' (1982) and 'New York, New York' (1983), in addition to a plethora of other hit singles. Hagen has remained extremely popular in Europe and continues to record, releasing *Beehappy* in 1996.

Hagen is one of the most innovative artists to emerge from the punk scene. Her music is an unpredictable mix of aggressive punk, lyrical pop and futuristic techno-disco. Her transgressive music and vocal style are matched by her outrageous appearance and eccentric and overtly sexual antics. Her stage act is legendary for its unconventional theatrical approach, which at times included performances dressed as a man and masturbation – years before Madonna or Michael Jackson. Critics have generally been at a loss to categorise her musical style and image. Arthur Levy perhaps comes close to the mark when he characterises her as 'Marlene Dietrich meets Emma Goldman on stage at the Ritz' (Levy 1996).

Her vocal style is an even more schizophrenic mix of guttural snarls, ear-piercing screams, saccharin pop-chanteuse styling, all mixed with prolonged pass-



ages of florid coloratura. To a certain extent, Hagen's style appears to owe much to the expressionist operatic style of *sprechstimme* as used in Arnold Schoenberg's song cycle, *Pierrot Lunaire*, and, to a lesser extent, in Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, among other works. The often guttural approximation of pitches serves to aid her central message of alienation from society.<sup>10</sup>

Hagen abrasively mixes operatic vocality with spoken word, lyrical pop-rock melodies and futuristic techno-disco. In so doing, Hagen is one of the premiere exponents of the post-punk trend to avoid vocal conformity. While punk rock popularised an aggressive rejection of the gentle vocal delivery of white women rock singers (often carrying the connotations of submissiveness), the post-punk alternative offered room for Hagen to incorporate cries, screams, laughter and operatic vocality into the discourse of popular dance music (Laing 1985, p. 115). Long popular in the gay community, Hagen's mixing of opera and rock-disco, combined with her cross-dressing and overtly sexual image, reflected her desire to transgress musical as well as sexual boundaries in her work.

Her most well-known song, 'New York, New York' (1983), is a searing critique of the trendy New York club scene set to a constant 4/4 bass-heavy dance beat which includes a periodic quote of David Bowie's song 'Fashion'. Hagen affects several vocal styles, from a sleazy masculine growl to the innocent tone of a young girl. This schizophrenic dialogue, recitative-like in that it is more spoken than sung, is interrupted by the chorus of 'New York, New York' which is fully sung using a bombastic coloratura. Complete with the addition of a backing chorus, the melody, just about the only vocal melody in the piece, consists of an ascending series of C minor arpeggios punctuated by the last repetition of 'New York', which Hagen delivers with an excruciating double octave leap shriek (see Example 2). The affectation of this transgressive coloratura insinuates a common superficiality linking the traditionally alien genres of opera and techno-disco. The lyrics also evoke the more famous 'New York, New York' movie theme popularised by Liza Minnelli and also by Frank Sinatra, a song which sings the praises of the city. In Hagen's ode, however, the bombastic operatic vocal delivery sarcastically undercuts both the platitudes of the original song and highlights the pretensions of New York's infamous nightclub life. In 'New York, New York', Hagen uses operatic vocality to satirise the pretensions of the New York club scene.

His career peaking in the early 1980s, roughly simultaneous with that of Hagen, Klaus Nomi represents another instance of a futuristic mingling of techno pop and opera. Nomi was a counter-tenor who sang both opera and rock 'n' roll. His act was built around the idea that he was a space alien dropped down from a more glamorous galaxy to sing earth-pop, an image constructed with the help of a space suit, heavy make-up, trademark three-pointed hairdo and his other-worldly falsetto.<sup>11</sup> His real-life story was only slightly less peculiar than his space-alien stage



Example 2. Chorus, 'New York, New York' (Nina Hagen).

persona. Nomi, whose real name was Klaus Sperber, was born in West Germany in 1944. In his youth he worked as an usher at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin and would entertain colleagues with his renditions of the great arias and with imitations of Elvis Presley and Maria Callas. He later changed his name to Nomi, an anagram of OMNI, and moved to New York where, after a short stint as a pastry chef, he began studying with the vocal coach Ira Siff, known mostly for his work with the drag divas of La Gran Scena Opera Company. Nomi quickly landed a role in a comic reworking of Wagner's Ring cycle, developed his space-alien persona and, with regular appearances at Max's Kansas City and The Mudd Club, soon became a leading star of New York's burgeoning new-wave performance scene. Receiving national exposure after several performances with David Bowie, Nomi recorded his first album for RCA in 1981. The self-titled work included the futuristic hit 'Total Eclipse', but also his renditions of 'The Cold' song from Purcell's *King Arthur* and 'Mon coeur s'owre a ta voix' from Saint-Saen's *Samson and Delilah*. Nomi's expanding popularity engendered considerable financial backing from RCA, and after a world-wide tour and several videos he recorded his second album *Simple Man* in 1982. This album also saw an eclectic mix of opera and pop-rock tunes, including songs by John Dowland, several excerpts from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* humorously juxtaposed with 'Ding Dong the Witch is Dead', and 'Falling in Love Again'. Unfortunately, Nomi's fame was tragically short lived as early in 1983 his health seriously began to decline. After an agonising few months he died later that year, becoming one of the first celebrities of note to succumb to AIDS.

Nomi's work contains an eclectic mix of 1960s pop-rock, opera and ethereal space music. In the words of Ira Siff, 'He's the only person who ever made sense out of crossing opera with pop, who understood both [musical and vocal] styles and made them work together.' (Smith 1994, p. 3) Like Hagen, Nomi uses operatic vocal techniques in his pop-rock arrangements, but relies far more heavily on appropriating and adapting entire opera arias. His shows and albums alternated opera arias, rock 'n' roll classics, show tunes, and his own futuristic operatically inflected originals, all with pop-rock synthesizer accompaniments.

'Total Eclipse' is an example of this latter style. The title alludes to the aria of the same name from the first act of Handel's oratorio *Samson*. In Handel's work, Samson is a blind captive of the 'Philistines' and sings of his degradation and imminent demise in their hands (see Example 3). Nomi's version quotes the melody of only the opening two words but, even through this minor allusion, he clearly substitutes his own fate for that of Samson. Both are, in essence, held hostage by philistines. For Nomi, of course, the philistines represented conventional straight society and those critics who refused to accept his gay lifestyle and non-traditional fusion of opera and pop. Nomi thus provides an ironic camp twist on the story by substituting his gay alien persona for the traditionally masculine image of Samson. In a similarly humorous reinterpretation, the 'total eclipse' now refers not only to the blindness and imminent death of the captive but, in Nomi's update, becomes a happy-go-lucky look at nuclear destruction. The song, for example, features a bouncy synthesizer dance track with Nomi in a pop tenor range singing, 'blow up, everything's going to go up / even if you don't go out in your chemise Lacoste', before abruptly breaking into his falsetto for a repeated chorus based on the words and melody 'Total Eclipse' as appropriated from Handel. Nomi was, however, also more than capable of serious and moving operatic singing. It must be recognised that the camp humour of 'Total Eclipse' is in marked contrast to his version of

Purcell's aria for the Cold Genius from *King Arthur* which, barring the synthesizer accompaniment and counter-tenor transposition, is a faithful and poignant rendition of the original.<sup>12</sup>

Though his approach was pure camp, Nomi's use of opera is, unlike Hagen or Queen, not intended to parody or negate either opera or rock conventions. Nomi was an avowed opera queen, a true opera fan from his youth but with a concomitant love of the ridiculous. His space-alien persona, alien-sounding counter-tenor, and alien taste for combining opera and rock was symbolic of his sexual alienation from the conventions of traditional 'straight' society. His futuristic image combined with his penchant for the seemingly arcane form of opera presented a camp discourse that subverts any claim to privilege. Rather than negating the songs and music that he loved, Nomi employed a camp aesthetic in order to, in effect, refuse the burden of artistic autonomy. Though Nomi's music was just beginning to gain a worldwide audience at the time of his death, he paved the way for a plethora of made-up gender-bending acts (Culture Club, Marilyn, The Cure) which followed in his wake.

Only one year after Nomi's death, Malcolm McLaren achieved even greater international fame and commercial success with dance-rock versions of grand opera arias from his 1984 album *Fans*. Perhaps best known as the manager of the Sex Pistols and a notorious rock 'n' roll provocateur, McLaren mixes R & B and hip-hop beats with appropriated arias from opera classics such as *Madame Butterfly* and *Carmen*. More marketing innovator than composer or performer, McLaren saw immense creative possibilities in the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary idioms and, in his cut-and-paste operatic appropriations, anticipated a host of other such artists like Enigma, Dead Can Dance, Deep Forest, and even the 'Pavarotti and Friends' collaborations.

Earlier in his career, McLaren was actively associated with the Situationist movement, a small coterie of art students and intellectuals which aimed to use disruptive artistic events in order to expose the oppressive nature of capitalism (Laing 1985, p. 126). In keeping with these ideals by combining opera and rock, McLaren claimed to be 'stealing from the rich and giving to the poor' (Aletti 1984, p. 98). In the guise of a postmodern Robin Hood, McLaren, if he is to be believed, attempted to strip opera of its bourgeois trappings and deliver it to the street for all to appreciate.<sup>13</sup> Whatever his motivations, McLaren, like Nomi and Hagen before him, is a master of the postmodern art of taking culture, operatic culture in particular, out of context in order to see it more clearly or just to watch it squirm.

The hit single from *Fans* was the aria '*Una bel di'*', retitled '*Madame Butterfly*' for McLaren's purposes. Unlike Nomi's camp approach to mixing opera and rock, McLaren, with his situationist roots, saw a commercial potential in mixing the two idioms to appeal to a mass audience, and thus his work perhaps favours a 'kitsch'

Samson

To - tal elipse! no sun, no moon! All dark, - All

dark - amidst - the blaze - of moon!

Example 3. 'Total Eclipse' (G.F. Handel).

aesthetic (Dorfles 1969; Goodwin 1991; Le Tourneau 1994). The entire opera plot is comically compressed into this one number as McLaren himself speaks or raps the role of Pinkerton, who narrates the plot. Butterfly is also transformed into the contemporary persona of a black R & B singer as she sings, 'My white honky I do miss him / Someday soon he'll come around / Just to stop my nervous breakdown'. All the while an unadulterated version of '*Una bel di*' soars over a techno dance track complete with drum machine whip cracks. The result is at once trashy, humorous low camp, yet unexpectedly touching and, perhaps above all, slickly produced and commercially viable. Interestingly enough, no credit on the album is given to any of the operatic vocalists, thus further subverting the performances to the perceived importance of McLaren's ideas. The album is, in essence, a commercial promoting both opera and McLaren himself.

To some degree, McLaren merely updated and expanded upon Puccini's original vision of the work. Given the well-known cultural melange of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, an Italian grand opera set in Japan based upon notions of American imperialism, McLaren confuses the issue even more by updating the racial divisions and adding yet another clash of historical musical genres into the mix. The appropriation of Puccini's aria was an idea directly borrowed from black music culture itself, which regularly tropes and recontextualises the work of other artists.<sup>14</sup> In true postmodern fashion, we find Puccini borrowing Japanese and American melodies and McLaren, in turn, borrowing both from Puccini and black street music. Indeed, McLaren can be easily, perhaps intentionally, read as the thoughtless imperialist Pinkerton, come to unrepentantly pollute and commercialise the world's culture. Indeed, McLaren furthered this analogy when he followed the dance mix opera style of *Fans* with the well-known television advertising campaign for British Airways, which featured a similar cut-and-paste appropriation of 'The Flower Duet' from Délibé's *Lakmé*.

## Conclusion

In the early 1980s, punk rock, with its obsession with shock and aggressive social realism, gave way to 'post-punk' and 'new wave', which allowed space for more diverse and individual forms of musical expression. Nomi and Hagen are largely concerned with negating traditional musical practices (including those of rock music itself) by abrasively clashing operatic vocality with rock music conventions and futuristic imagery and technology. For Nomi and Hagen, opera and the opera house represent a fantasy world which separated them from the social realism of the outside, straight, rock community. Queen also evoke the idea of the escapist world of opera as indicated in the opening text to 'Bohemian Rhapsody': 'Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality'.

Another theme common to Hagen, Nomi, McLaren and, to a lesser extent, Queen, is the blurring of temporal existence – the sense that linear history and time is somehow out of joint. As such their mixing of arcane opera and futuristic techno pop/rock echoes the postmodern condition as described by Lawrence Grossberg:

We have been thrown into a maelstrom of constant change, apparently under no-one's control and without direction. Both the past and future have collapsed into the present, and our lives are organized without any appeal to the place of the present within a historical continuum. (Grossberg 1984, p. 107)

In addition to this postmodern temporal displacement of these rock–opera juxtapositions, there also exists a shared sense of general emotional detachment, somewhat reminiscent of Brecht–Weill songs (perhaps not surprising given Nomi and Hagen’s Berlin roots). Nomi’s alien, Hagen’s anarchic dominatrix, and even McLaren’s rap–Pinkerton all serve as theatrical props by which to distance any sense of immediate personal involvement in their music. As in the work of Brecht and Weill, such detachment underscores a certain political stance of alienation from, or rejection of, the traditional values of mainstream society.

All of the works and artists that I have discussed blur the boundaries of rock and opera idioms and, in so doing, simultaneously blur traditional constructions of gender and sexuality. Not coincidentally, Queen (Mercury in particular), Hagen, Nomi and McLaren are all gay icons.<sup>15</sup> Glam rock often intersected with the gay community and Queen was well known for its great appeal to transvestites and even performed the video for ‘I Want to Break Free’ in drag. Guitarist Brian May pointedly claimed, ‘we’ve always felt close to people who didn’t feel comfortable with the normal [sexual] conventions’ (May 1993, p. 44). Indeed, ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ narrates in part Freddie Mercury’s own bohemian lifestyle where ‘nothing really matters’, including sexual or musical orientations – gay or straight, opera or rock. The story is much the same for Nomi and Hagen. Opera serves as an a-historical camp reference for Nomi’s asexual alien counter-tenor, and as one of many tools that Hagen uses to transgress traditional sexual roles and taboos. Malcolm McLaren has also long been associated with the gay club and fashion scene. His use of hip-hop R & B opera, though no doubt motivated by his basic interest in the commercial potential of all genres, seems to desexualise the original music in favour of a popularly acceptable product.

As manifest in conventions such as ‘pants’ roles, castratos, and mistaken identity cross-dressing, opera is commonly associated with issues of gender crossing and sexual identity. Opera is also associated with vocality which, through either virtuosity of range or timbre, also evokes and often transgresses traditional gender boundaries. The often outlandish and unreal nature of opera in a world that conventionalises emotions and forbids homosexuality has also come to stand as a common marker of gay identity.<sup>16</sup> For many in the gay community, opera represents the triumph and transcendence of emotion and physical vocality over repressive social and moral conventions. The appropriation of opera or operatic vocality by Mercury, Hagen, Nomi and McLaren calls on this transgressive tradition to symbolise the presence of both a musical and sexual Other. Opera, more than other non-rock or classical appropriations, would thus seem to offer the most practical forum with which to assail the traditionally heterosexual world of rock and pop music.

This essay has attempted to delineate some of the more overt instances of the use of opera in rock/pop music and to suggest some of the underlying discourses of such fusions. Queen, Hagen, Nomi and McLaren succeeded in anticipating and, to some extent, helping to establish the resurgent popularity of opera, and opera–rock artist crossovers (such as The Three Tenors and the Luciano Pavarotti ‘and Friends’ collaborations), and the plethora of new-age and world-music bands appropriating historical vocal music. Whether negating rock traditions, attempting to popularise opera, promoting female or homosexual voices, or merely creating a postmodern reaction to punk’s social realism, these artists force a valuable reinterpretation of both opera and popular music. In so doing, they bridge one of the widest and seemingly most unassailable gulfs in music.

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## Endnotes

1. In publicising the movie *Farinelli* (1994), Sony Pictures directly compared the castrato to 'today's androgynous rock stars such as Michael Jackson, David Bowie, or Prince who, two centuries later, have the same international notoriety . . .' (quoted in Harris 1997). Of course, castrati did not sing using a falsetto (head voice), such as used by Michael Jackson and others, but rather their phenomenal pitch range, sheer power and unearthly timbre were produced using a chest voice. Thus Jackson's vocal style is not directly derived from operatic tradition; its reception and modern-day effect, however, bear a marked similarity to those of the castrati.
2. Of course, a significant number of male pop singers, outside of those mentioned here, use a middle-range mezzo/baritone voice, and many female pop singers, such as Gladys Knight or Tina Turner, sing in mezzo soprano or alto registers. The prevalence of 'high' voices in rock music, at least in part, can be seen to stand as an associative marker of 'youth' – the literal evocation of a prepubescent or pubescent voice. Lower voices, however, can be interpreted as, in some cases, standing for markers of a more 'authentic' (perhaps more mature?) sound. Roland Barthes (1977) explores this notion with regard to timbral 'grain' of the voice in his essay, 'The grain of the voice'.
3. Though rock and operatic singers display similar virtuosity, there are also important differences. An opera singer is typically more concerned with technically hitting the correct notes at the correct time in a composition. They train to be consciously aware of, and able to control, various expressive aspects of their voice, be it range, timbre or dynamic levels. A rock singer is perhaps typically more concerned with direct visceral expression of the body. It is an expression that, unlike opera, transcends standard notation or formalisation. They are often self taught and less conscious of, or concerned with, their vocal technique.
4. The term 'prima donna' conjures up a stereotype of the jealous, neurotic and self-centred leading soprano. Such a typical representation is often concerned with the sometimes mystical, often obsessive, relationship of opera stars to their voice. Recently, Susan Leonard and Rebecca Pope have argued that Madonna, Annie Lennox and Diamanda Galas are 'contemporary singers outside the operatic tradition who consciously construct themselves, and are constructed by others, in the tradition of the operatic diva' (Leonard and Pope 1996, p. 19). Such constructions are, however, based largely on the similar costumes, rejection of conventional gender behaviours, desire for artistic control, and ability to generate or attract attention which these women share with archetypal operatic divas, such as Maria Callas, than with any similarities of voice or musical influence. Indeed, to some extent the construction of the 'operatic diva' can be extended to the whole notion of the cult of celebrity as it arose in Hollywood in the early part of the twentieth century.
5. Even similarities of reception can be observed. Like opera audiences, for example, rock audiences often resort to consulting the libretto, in the form of liner notes, when they want to fully comprehend the lyrics.
6. For a more detailed account of these works, see Polkow (1992). Many crossovers have emerged from the tremendous influence of minimalism on rock and vice versa. Minimalist composers such as Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass commonly play venues previously only frequented by rock stars. The fascination with minimalism has even spawned crossover collaborations, such as Philip Glass's *Songs from Liquid Days*, in which he joins forces with David Byrne, Paul Simon, Suzanne Vega and Linda Ronstadt, among several other rock/pop personalities.
7. The English predilection for choral music can be traced to the anthems, masques and operas of John Blow, Henry Purcell and, of course, Handel's oratorios. Though the term 'operatic vocals' appears in the liner notes, it is unclear from May's comments whether or not the influences to which he alludes were truly 'operatic' in nature or derived more from classical church choral genres.
8. To some extent the deliberate blurring of classical genres and style, evident in the mix

- of a cappella chorus, ballad/ lied and operetta, serves to heighten the notion of the work being a 'mock opera' and thereby deflecting any unacknowledged operatic interpretation.
9. Mercury would return to the notion of mixing pop and rock in his 1992 collaboration with Montserrat Caballé on the album *Barcelona*.
  10. A direct link to this tradition cannot be absolutely proven at this time; however, given Hagen's operatic training, it seems reasonable that she would likely have been familiar with this technique.
  11. Nina Hagen has also described herself and her daughter, Cosma, as descending from another world and has discussed her religious experiences in terms of UFO encounters. The space-alien identity of Hagen and Nomi resonates with both their musical and sexual alienation from conventional practices.
  12. This song has subsequently become something of an anthem in support of European AIDS research.
  13. Such a desire for cultural redistribution also apparently lay at the heart of the rock opera *Tommy*. Pete Townsend claims his objective with the work was 'to turn on the spiritually hip . . . the street fighters . . . [and] the opera lovers' (Cott 1973, p. 45).
  14. For a discussion of troping and signification in traditional and popular African-American music, see Gates Jr (1988) and Brackett (1995).
  15. It is interesting to note the considerable impact of gay culture on pop music that took place in the early 1980s and the concomitant ties with operatic vocal techniques. Indeed, in addition to Hagen, Nomi and McLaren, many other gay artists, or artists with particular appeal in the gay community, such as Jimmy Sommerville, Annie Lennox, Alison Moyet and Dollie De Luxe, all used elements of operatic vocal styles in their work to greater or lesser degrees.
  16. Even in the early eighteenth century, critics such as John Dennis commonly associated Italian opera with 'effeminacy' and as an art which 'emasculated and dissolved the Mind' (see Thomas 1994, pp. 185-6). For discussions of the relationship of opera to gay identity, see Bronski (1984); Sedgwick (1990, pp. 167-9, 175-6); and Koestenbaum (1993).

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