Offred Reframed: The Adaptation from Novel to Opera

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Offred Reframed: The Adaptation from Novel to Opera

> How often do you enter your neighbourhood bookstore ... and find a woman excitedly telling the cashier about the dress rehearsal for an opera she'd just attended, and buying the novel that inspired the work? T. Bernstein

INTRODUCTION

Imagine this task: you want to adapt a three-hundred-page novel into a music drama of no more than two and a half hours! Statistically speaking, you'll have to cover almost two pages of the novel for every minute of music drama. Indeed the majority of opera libretti rely on the adaptation of an existing literary source, such as spoken drama, novels, novellas, chronicles, and fairy tales and are therefore dependent on the librettist's skill to cut and summarize. However, you not only want an opera to contain the major plot elements of the book, you want it to shift between action and contemplation in order to create a gripping experience for the audience in the theatre.[1] Given these challenges to creating a successful libretto, never mind composing the music or designing and mounting the production, Margaret Atwood might be forgiven for harbouring some trepidation about seeing her novel adapted to the operatic stage: 'I had a brief, nightmarish vision of a line of high-kicking handmaids revealing their beige, utilitarian undergarments while singing some variation of *The Anvil Chorus*' ('For God').

However, Danish composer Poul Ruders pursued his vision. During their first encounter, Atwood remembers him saying: 'As soon as I read this book, I saw it as an opera!' Atwood recalls that 'he wanted to do *The Handmaid's Tale* and nothing but *The Handmaid's Tale*, and if he couldn't do *The Handmaid's Tale*, he wouldn't do any opera at all' ('For God'). The composer's single-mindedness may sound surprising, but Ruders himself explains why he thought the novel 'the perfect operatic subject': 'It has everything. Suppressed emotion, illicit sex, violence and, most of all, incredible tenderness. Plus all those ostentatious things like processions, ceremonial impregnations, public hangings' (Morrison, 17).

1 In his description of the libretto as a literary genre, Albert Gier names these two activities as key aspects of the process of adaptation: the need for cuts and summaries of the source text as well as finding the right mix in the dichotomy of introspection and stage activity ('Dialektik von Ruhe und Bewegung') (9).

Once the composer's determination secured copyright for using the novel, it was Elaine Padmore, then opera director of the Royal Danish Theatre, who realized that for the opera to succeed, 'it will need one hell of a librettist' (Morrison, 17). Thanks to Padmore, the experienced writer and West End performer Paul Bentley became involved: '"He is a real theatre animal," says Ruders. "Because he performs so much himself, he knows, for instance, how long a character might take to walk upstage. His libretto is jammed with stage directions"' (Morrison, 17). As well 'he knows how to communicate sung text across an orchestra' (Christiansen).

Composer Poul Ruders and librettist Paul Bentley achieved the feat of reducing the complex novel to a manageable piece of music drama. The opera's world premiere on 6 March 2000 and consecutive performances at the Royal Danish Theatre, Copenhagen, were 'an enormous success ... no less a personage than Queen Margarethe went to see it four times in as many months' (Christiansen). The CD of the premiere released on the Dacapo label was nominated for two Grammy Awards and in 2002 received the Cannes Classical Award for the best work by a living composer.[2] From having attended a performance by the Minnesota Opera in Minneapolis as well as the dress rehearsal and two performances of the Toronto production of the Canadian Opera Company, I can only conclude that the realization of the work as devised by the director and dramaturge Phyllida Lloyd, the production designer Peter McKintosh, and the artistic team led by conductor Richard Bradshaw makes for a thrilling night out in the theatre.

After the world premiere production in Denmark, the opera has seen three more productions internationally. The English National Opera created the first English-language production with seven performances at London's Colliseum between 3 April and 2 May 2003. Phyllida Lloyd, director of the world premiere, led a new group of singers performing in the costumes and set of the original production, this time without surtitles. Many of the British critics met the ENO's performances with hostility: 'leave this truly dreadful work in the bargain basement, where it belongs' (Holden for the *Observer*). The *Sunday Telegraph* called the score 'an eclectic ragbag, not to say a dustbin.' However, Anna Picard of the *Independent on Sunday* also referred to the gender split in critical opinion:

> *The Handmaid's Tale* has attracted unprecedented levels of blokey scorn from most of my fellow critics ... with the clear inference that [the opera] is playing to a left-leaning gallery of ball-breaking, anti-war wimin [sic] and their all-cooking, all-cleaning, all-wimp home-husbands. ... I was, for the most part, hooked.

The US premiere at the Minnesota Opera in Minneapolis with five performances between 10 and 18 May 2003 was a great success:

2 See the label's website at http://www.dacapo-records.dk

> High praise for Ruders' score has been a feature of all US reviews to date. Anthony Tommasini in the *New York Times* wrote that too many operas in recent years had been well conceived but musically negligible. '*The Handmaid's Tale* is dramatically convoluted, no argument there. But it is so musically inventive that you get pulled in anyway.' He concluded, 'Add *The Handmaid's Tale* to the list of recent works that the Metropolitan Opera should feel obliged to present.' (Bentley)

The music critics met the Canadian Opera Company's six performances in Toronto (between 23 September and 9 October 2004) with considerable acclaim. The *Globe and Mail*'s Robert Everett-Green called the opera 'sensational as a three-alarm fire, Tamara Bernstein of the *National Post* felt that 'all the elements [of the opera] come together in a crackling synergy that holds you in a vice-grip from beginning to end,' and the *Toronto Star*'s William Littler joined the chorus of praise: '[Ruders's score] sounds true to the character of the story, with Richard Bradshaw, his orchestra and his cast serving it at an even higher artistic level than the one I experienced at the widely heralded premiere in Copenhagen.'

My particular focus in discussing this transition from novel to opera will be the two works' central character, who is known to us as Offred. This article explores two specific elements in the transition from novel to opera. First, how does the audience gain access to Offred's story and what role does the framing device play in the audience's perception of the protagonist? And second, how does the centrepiece in the opera – the duet in act 2 between Offred in the Time Now and her alter ego from the Time Before – advance Offred's character development?

BEGINNING THE STORY

As every good storyteller knows – be it in film, theatre, or writing – the *how* of storytelling contributes as much to the success as the story itself. What interests me most in the comparison of formal aspects of storytelling in novel and opera therefore is the audience's experience in approaching Offred's story: first impressions count.

A typical experience for approaching the novel would look something like this: a single reader picks up the novel. For brevity's sake – and at some considerable peril – we'll skip a series of unnumbered pages in the book, such as the title page, a dedicatory page, the table of content, and a page with three quotations.[3] After the part title '1./Night,' the novel itself begins with the following text: 'We slept in what had once been the gymnasium' (11, 13).

3 For the significance of Atwood's dedicating the novel to her ancestor Mary Webster, hanged as a witch in seventeenth-century, Puritan New England, and to Perry Miller, Atwood's teacher at Harvard, see Howells (130f), Davidson (26), and Turner.

What can we learn from this first encounter with the novel's heroine? First, this sentence identifies the ensuing story as a first-person narration: we are witnessing an intimate, personal account of the heroine's own experience. Owing to this particular perspective, the reader knows that the account will be subjective, for the story is limited to this one person's point of view as opposed to an omniscient narrator, who has direct insight into other characters' thought and motivations.

Another aspect of the novel's opening sentence is that it points towards the progress of history and the changed nature of times. A space that had '*once* been the gymnasium' is *now* serving an entirely different function, namely that of dormitory for fertile handmaidens in training. Physical realities which seem ordinary enough have lost what most present-day readers would consider their normal function. This first sentence is just the beginning of Atwood's toying with reader expectations.

Near the end of the book, the reader is subjected to a significant twist in the narrative's development, a shift which significantly reshapes the reader's perspective on the story's subjectivity and its multiple time levels. After three hundred pages of direct access to the handmaid's tale, this story is ironically distanced by a section, entitled 'Historical Notes.'[4] The reader discovers that his or her seemingly unmediated, direct access to Offred's first-person narration was in fact a transcript compiled by textual scholars from several audiocassettes. The heroine's story turns out to have been an object presented at an academic conference set in the distant future long after Gilead's demise, but at the same time ironically reflecting academic realities to which Atwood's novels are currently subjected. While the reader has followed the heroine's life with direct access to her innermost thoughts, fears, and hopes, to the point where she is facing the uncertainty of her fate, in the last thirteen pages of the novel the narrative suddenly jumps the tracks. This discovery that Offred's tale is actually a mediated story yanks the reader away from the privilege of immediate access to the protagonist to the more distant, analytic viewpoint of an outsider. From the world of Gilead, the reader is catapulted into a different fictional universe. Far from receiving answers about the outcome of the heroine's story, the reader is left to speculate about the situation in which the heroine recorded her experiences.

4 The 'Historical Notes' section of the novel has been described as 'a pseudo-documentary framing enfolding the Handmaid's story' (Murphy), 'serving as a meta-commentary on our own position as readers' (Cavalcanti, 170), and as 'appropriation of feminist discourse in a sexist 1990 environment.' Two building blocks create a third: narrative plus frame equal novel (Cavalcanti, 171), an 'ironic repetition of Gileadean discourse' (Stael, 158), and 'a final ironic example of dehumanization through faulty remembering; its satire on the academic rhetorical habit of "distancing" (and thus "objectifying") its subject shows Offred's story ... as fodder for pedantic discussions of the tale's historicity' (Feuer, 85).

Implied in this sudden jump to a closing frame is a third space, in which the heroine recorded her narration. However, this realm of perhaps only temporary safety remains elusive. Neither the reader nor the academic researchers populating the distant future of the symposium gain access to this third space. To the reader, this experience is unsettling. Within reading a few lines of this closing frame of 'The Historical Notes,' the heroine begins to recede into the distance and becomes increasingly unknowable and remote.

How do you translate such a narrative sleight of hand – a sudden violation of the boundaries between different fictional spheres that is so fundamental to the reception of the novel – in an opera? Ruders and Bentley came up with a comparably ingenious method of unsettling their audience. Suddenly pulling the rug out from under their audience's feet, they choose to translate the novel's formal aspect of the first-person subjective narration in a rather different way. By its very nature, opera (like all theatre) involves a direct, objective kind of storytelling. The members of the audience are immediate eyewitnesses to the unfolding events on stage. No matter how important, the central character of a theatrical event is no longer the filter through which the audience perceives the events.

As devised by the librettist Paul Bentley, the production cleverly moves the boundaries between reality and fiction.[5] The audience at the Toronto performance venue, the Hummingbird Centre, expects to enter an operatic auditorium safely separated in time and space from the performance to begin on a cue – usually by the conductor's lifting the baton – framed by the stage's proscenium arch. However, the librettist ingeniously moved the temporal and spatial demarcation line between reality and performance. Immediately upon crossing the threshold into the hall, the audience steps into the first frame of a fictionalized space – the setting of an academic conference: the Twelfth Symposium of Gileadean Studies, as indicated by a number of alternating projections onto the closed curtain. It's a surprise, perhaps not unlike the violation of boundaries in the novel's closing frame.

The manipulation of audience expectations continues. The opera begins not with the conventional conductor's signal to the orchestra, but rather in a decidedly non-operatic medium – a newsreel-like collage: the audience witnesses, in rapid sequence, chemical spills, nuclear disaster, and terrorist attacks, situating the narrative in a constructed 'historical' context. The spectator witnesses ostensibly real events as the participant in the symposium of Gileadean Studies.[6]

5 Describing the frame as a line of demarcation between art and reality is a common trope in frame analysis theory. See Stratmann 11.

6 The opening frame's collage of news-reel screenings was acknowledged as an effective *coup de théâtre* even by some of the critical reviews of the London production: 'you couldn't ask for a more vivid start to this work' (Robert Thicknesse in the *Times*) or Anthony Holden's view in the *Observer* that 'After a promising start, with dramatic (and

This film footage is then followed by the keynote speaker's introduction of the subject matter. Still in full symposium mode, Professor Pieixoto appears in a video-conferencing projection to introduce the tale as a faithful representation of audiocassette tapes found in an attic. Here we witness another essential difference between novel and opera. Apart from the opera's unveiling this framing device from the very beginning, the transition from frame to story in the opera is gradual. We witness the transition from Professor Pieixoto's appearance on a video screen to a gradual dissolve to the core story's protagonist. The fictional character pushes the cassette player's start button – ostensibly from the handmaid's original cassette tape. The amplified, recorded sounds gradually fade into the natural sound emanating from Stephanie Marshall, the physical body on stage, who performed the role of Offred in London and Toronto. The crossing of demarcation lines from opera auditorium to fictionalized space as conference hall to newsreel to the beginning of the music engages the audience in the self-conscious, self-referential questions of dramatic genres as well as the relationship between fiction and reality.

What then does this front-end representation of the framing device in the opera achieve? It presents the audience with multiple layers of partially overlapping realities which place the core story into a much more delicate position, a position indicating the story's subjective angle and underlining the problematic relationship between reality and fiction.

The subjectivity of the story is further enhanced by the heroine's opening monologue, which directly addresses the audience. Rather than immediately beginning her story, the heroine creates another miniature frame before the beginning of the tale about her own experiences. This frame provides an urgent appeal; it wills an audience into existence through the act of storytelling. She rephrases Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* into a self-conscious focus on the act of storytelling: 'I want you to hear it because I want to believe that you are there. I tell therefore you are' (Ruders, bars 18–26; CD 1, track 1 at 1:03ff).[7] Breaking through the theatre's fourth wall of the proscenium arch, the monologue both addresses the potential audience and provides a self-conscious awareness of audience expectation as well as the conventions of storytelling.[8]

Again the two levels of existence – Offred's reflection on the need to tell her story and the story itself – are not neatly separated. Instead, her

timely) newsreel of the White House being blown up by dissidents, this overlong saga soon sags into the monotonous story of one woman's nightmare,' or as one enthusiastic British critic said: 'Here was a new opera that felt more like going to the cinema—a thriller, pulsing with nervous energy' (Fairman).

7 Staels describes Offred's act of storytelling as 'a therapeutic process' (168).

References by bar numbers are to the original piano vocal score (Ruders). CD track numbers are quoted from the Dacapo recording.

8 Feuer claims that 'through telling her story, Offred survives by making herself real, speaking her way out of invisibility into her humanity' (91).

experience in trying to flee the totalitarian regime intrudes on her reflections in a fashion that recalls the psychological phenomenon of involuntarily remembered traumatic events.

How does the musical setting in Offred's self-reflective, opening monologue enhance this setting of multiple frames and subjective experience? First, the music remains transparent so that Offred's voice is clearly in the foreground and her speech intelligibly projected. At the same time, the orchestral writing creates an atmosphere of suspense and anxiety. Drawn-out, dissonant chords in the strings set the emotional scene, punctuated by isolated interjections by the trumpet and a descending line in the harp providing little dots of colour within an otherwise eerie and stark, almost stagnant soundscape. Emerging from this soft carpet of sound is the singing voice of Offred apologizing for the fractured nature of her narrative: 'I'm sorry my story is in fragments.' The vocal style is appropriately one of hesitation, recitative-like declamation, initially within a confined speaking range of a fifth, consisting of small intervallic steps. In the opening scene, Offred's status appears to be in suspense until the nightmare of her failed flight into safety intrudes as the 'Worst Dream' sequence (bars 52–63; CD 1, track 1 at 2:50). The sudden intrusion alludes to the events destroyed her life in the Time Before, and is based on psychological realism: in that the traumatic experience continues to haunt the protagonist, who repeatedly relives the experience of the failed escape. The orchestra whips into Offred's speech with sudden vehemence while gunshots are heard off-stage. The increasing instrumental forces achieve a crescendo from single to triple forte within five bars with conflicting rhythms that sound four and five notes to a single beat simultaneously underlining the confusion. The musical texture creates a kind of psychological realism which represents the traumatic experience that keeps insistently haunting the protagonist.

In this orchestral sequence interrupting Offred's speech, the audience encounters the opera's 'Heart of Darkness,' the narrator's traumatic reliving of past events: a failed escape from the strictures of the regime that led to her separation from husband and daughter. While this passage is placed near the beginning of the opera, the audience has already traversed several thresholds of narrative frames. Creating such multiple layers of framing for the opera's opening removes the audience from direct access to Offred's story, thereby creating an atmosphere similar to the subjective style of storytelling in the novel.

A KEY MOMENT OF INTROSPECTION

In adapting the heroine as an operatic figure, some key aspects of the novel have to be neglected. For example, the heroine's preoccupation with language and storytelling, such as her exploration of the meaning of

specific words, often leading to a chain of associations, is integral to the introspective nature of the novel. Seven out of fifteen chapters are labelled 'Night,' episodes in which the reader witnesses the heroine's innermost thought. These and similar stylistic markers lead Coral Anne Howells to call Atwood's novel 'inner space fiction' (132).[9]

The opera, in contrast, appears action-packed in its focus squarely on the dramatic. It stages most of the plot's major events in rapid scenic representations, such as hangings, birthings, the Ceremony, and other extroverted and eminently theatrical events. However, even some of the most overtly dramatic (and violent) scenes, such as the Particicution, when the handmaids are prompted into ripping apart an alleged rapist, are musically tempered, here by the soothing Bach chorale 'Bist Du bei mir [Be thou with me]' that accompanies this segment (act 2, bars 3664ff; CD 2, track 18 at 4:00). The Guards are simply humming the chorale, but the underlying text of the first verse reads:

Bist du bei mir, geh' ich mit Freuden	Be thou with me, and I'll gladly go
zum Sterben und zu meiner Ruh'.	To death and to my repose.
Ach, wie vergnügt wär' so mein Ende,	Ah, how my end would bring contentment,
es drückten deine lieben [schönen] Hände	If, pressing with thy hands so lovely,
mir die getreuen Augen zu!	Thou wouldst my faithful eyes then close.[10]

The chorale's text stands in stark contrast with the last act of kindness before the victim's death: Ofglen, a member of the underground resistance, quickly kicks him unconscious. As Ruders describes his stylistic choices: 'I shamelessly go the whole hog. When I want to paint a special emotion, I know which button to push. But if something really heart-rending is going on, quite often I tone the whole thing down. Really hairy bits have quiet, transparent music' (Hoyle, 18).

The emotional impact of horrific scenes may overshadow the more introspective moments, typically given over to that most introspective of operatic genres, the set aria. There is Offred's act 1 monologue about her failure to conceive a child: 'Ev'ry moon I watch for blood / fearfully / and ev'ry moon / blood appears, / dark tears of failure' (bars 1438ff; CD 1, track 13 at 2:40). The despairing monologue laments her emptiness, betrayed by her own body which is no longer entirely her own. Another instance of introspection, which I chose to discuss here, is a particularly unusual – and

9 See also Michael Greene's remark: 'One of the most striking facets of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is how *interior* a book it is throughout' (101).

10 Translation and additional background on the chorale in Wasserman.

important – duet. The duet involves two singers representing respectively the narrator in the Time of the Regime and her alter ego from the Time Before.

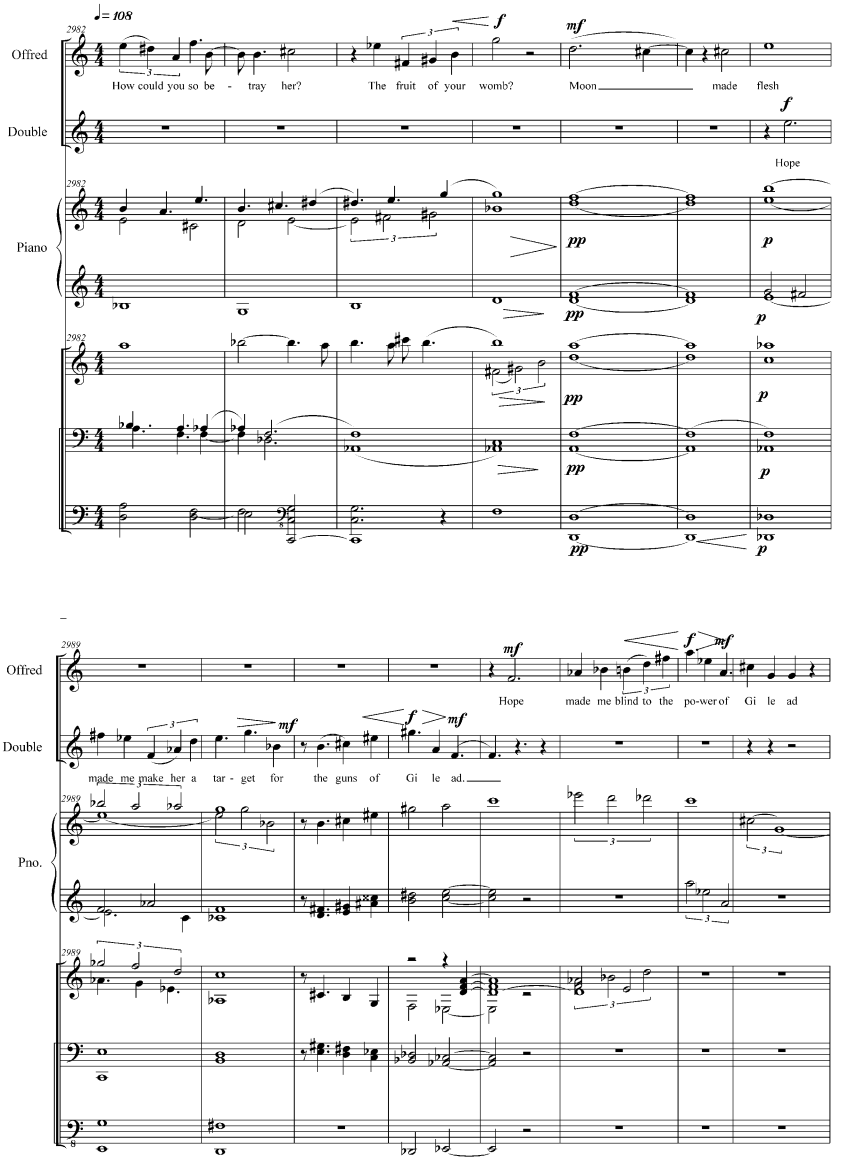
This most idiosyncratic representation cleverly externalizes the innermost private thoughts by dividing the inner battle between Offred and her Double. This trick is yet another theatrical sleight of hand used to adapt a characteristic element of the novel into an effective stage equivalent.

A closer look at the progression of this duet also reveals significant elements of the heroine's psychological and emotional frame of mind. The duet consists of four distinct elements, each characterized by an appropriate means of musical representation:

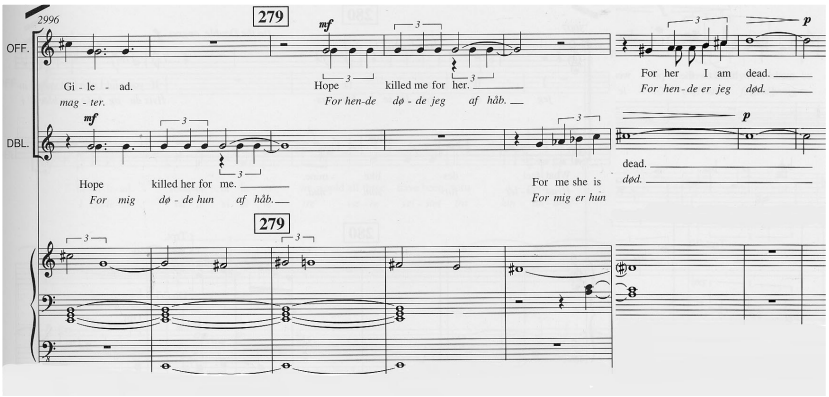
Relationship between Offred and Double	Text	Compositional technique	Passage in score and on CD
(a) confrontational accusations	'How could you so betray her?'	antiphonal (question and answer)	bars 2982ff CD 2, track 10 at 1:07
(b) psychological rapprochement	'And what I feel is emptiness.'	stichomythia	bars 3003ff CD 2, track 10 at 2:11
(c) reconciliation	'I close my eyes and suddenly she is there.'	unison	bars 3023ff CD 2, track 10 at 3:07
(d) existential question	'How can I keep on living'	a capella	bars 3088ff CD 2, track 10 at 6:23

The confrontation between Offred and her Double illustrates the dark moments of the heroine's self-doubt: why did I have to risk my daughter's happiness by attempting to flee the dictatorship? However, such self-doubts – interior thoughts in the novel – are externalized in the opera, as the protagonist hurls this accusatory question at her alter ego, physically present on stage (noted as (a) in table above).

The music too reflects this dual existence in the vocal lines, through an antiphonal question-and-answer pattern in which the last note of the question constitutes at the same time the seed for the first note of the response, thus creating a seamless transition between the two aspects of the same character. This mutual accusation begins with Offred Now: 'How could you so betray her?' and the Double from the Time Before responds with: 'Hope made me make her a target for the guns of Gilead' (see music example 1).



Music example 1: section a (bars 2981–90): antiphonal question and answer

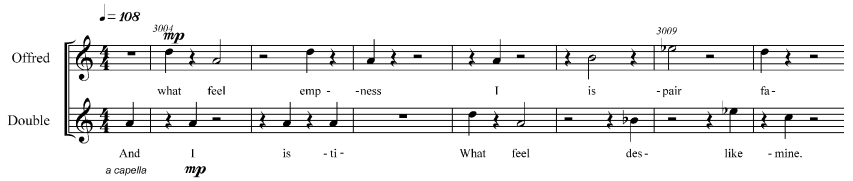


Music example 2: end of section a (3000–4): first overlaying of the two voices

The first overlaying of the two voices arises from the two aspects of the daughter's fate: 'For me she is dead' and 'For her I am dead,' ending on a sustained sharp dissonance between the two characters. While the orchestra has fallen silent, their voices hold a long note at the interval of a small second (C-sharp and D-natural) expressively painting the suffering and pain, the terrible emotion shared by both Offred Now and her Double from the Time Before (bars 3001f). In the next segment of the duet ((b) in table), their sharing receives another poignant form of expression. A single line of text is divided between the two characters so that each supplies a single syllable, with the vocal line alternating between the two. In classical Greek drama, this technique of sharing a line of verse between two characters is called *stichomythia*, a technique particularly well suited for sections of dramatic dialogue when two characters are in violent dispute.[11] Here this technique is taken to an extreme, the *antilabe*. Each character contributes only a single syllable before the other character adds the next. This technique creates a powerful rhythmic intensity. Indeed the dispute continues in such a fashion that the last note of a line clashes with the first note of the response from the other character in sharp dissonance (see music example 3).

A point of redemption is only reached when Offred and the Double create a happy illusion: 'I close my eyes and suddenly she is there' (section c). The two voices temporarily merge in unison, singing near-identical lines. Leaving spheres of atonality behind, moments of surging lines are set to a tonal centre in B-natural. To the words 'Sometimes she's holding her

11 *Stichomythia* refers to a form of dramatic dialogue in which two characters speak a single line each for a considerable stretch or even break a single line between speakers ('antilabe'). The technique originated in the literature of ancient Greece. The term derives from the Greek *stichos* ('rows') and *mythos* ('speech') (Denniston).



Music example 3: stichomythia 3004–10
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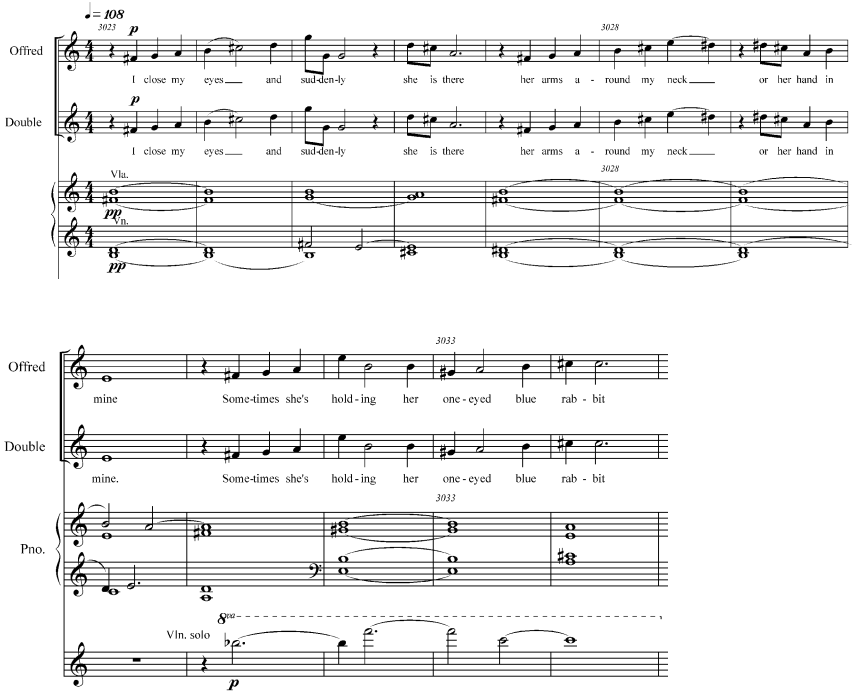

Music example 4: unisono (bars 3023–30)
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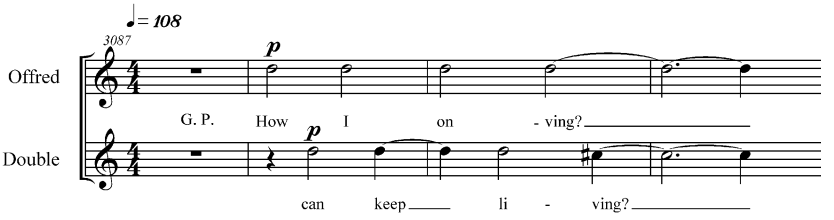
one-eyed blue rabbit,' the composer adds a solo violin that soars to extreme heights. The character's blissful conjuring of her daughter's image is matched with the angelic sound of the violin in the highest register. Alas, the stratospheric playing occurs in a different tonal universe – the key of B-flat – from the tonal existence of the two Offreds (dominated by sharps in B-natural and E major) – resulting in the dissonant coexistence of two tonalities. The two voices' merger continues in a prayer that culminates –

after a dramatic rest of the complete forces for a whole bar – in the existential question: 'How can I keep on living?' again split between Offred and her double, initially on the same note – continuing all *a capella* or without any orchestral accompaniment – but then ending on the long suspended note of a sharp dissonance (again a C-sharp clashing with a D-natural in the interval of a small second), perhaps signifying a long but painful life. The two aspects of the character are united, but in solitude (bars 3087–90; CD 2, track 10 at 6:23). (See music example 5.)

How does this exegesis of one crucial passage in the opera parallel the character development of the novel? Suspense, uncertainty about the final outcome seems already to be foreshadowed at this stage. While the ultimate fate of the character is unknown, this passage anticipates the novel's ending 'And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light' (307).

These two examples – a discussion of the imaginative approach to recreating a framed narrative and a short analysis of the narrator's duet with her alter ego – only scratch the surface of the full scope of creative energy released. The staged performances to date testified to the ingenuity of composer and librettist in manipulating form and content (music and text) in creating a reinterpretation of their literary source: Margaret Atwood's novel. As Tamara Bernstein remarked: 'the opera gives us something no novel can: the force of communal experience. It's one thing to read a novel, quite another to experience Atwood's vision with thousands of others. You could feel that cathartic power in the opening-night ovations for all.' Adaptation is too inadequate a word to describe Paul Ruders's and Paul Bentley's new artefact. This is an opera of significant impact and great creativity.



Music example 5: existential question, unisono diverging into dissonance (bars 3087–90)

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