

Havlíčková Kysová, Šárka

'Death is always the present-future' : on Sudden Death in Opera

Theatralia. 2025, vol. 28, iss. 2, pp. 105-108

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2025-2-7>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.83103>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Access Date: 05. 12. 2025

Version: 20251204

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

'Death is always the present-future': On Sudden Death in Opera

Šárka Havlíčková Kysová

Michael Trimble, Robert Ignatius Letellier, Dale Hesdorffer. 2021. *Sudden Death in Opera: Love, Mortality and Transcendence on the Lyric Stage*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021. 641 pp. ISBN: 1-5275-9795-4.

The book, written by behavioural neurologist Michael Tribble, cultural historian Robert Letellier, and an epidemiologist and specialist in epilepsy and brain injuries Dale Hesdorffer, focuses on the topic that every operagoer is very well acquainted with: the operatic obsession with death. The topic of death in opera already has quite a long history of scholarly reflection. For instance, Catherine Clément's *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (1988; French original 1979) focused on the recurrent deaths of female protagonists and their symbolic 'removal' in opera. Peter Conrad's *A Song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera* (1987) touched upon the operatic genre as fundamentally shaped by themes of transcendence and finality. Literary and cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon and medical doctor Michael Hutcheon analysed death playing a crucial role in opera in several of their works, most notably in *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (1996) and *Opera: The Art of Dying* (2004). In their approach, the scholars focus on how opera offers its perceiver the opportunity to contemplate death and the meaning of life, and to prepare for the inevitable end. They examine how narratives of mortality, illness, and the limits of the human body are staged and aestheticised in opera. Their work has been influential in in-

roducing anthropological, philosophical, and some medical questions into opera studies. The book *Sudden Death in Opera* follows some of these paths and focuses mainly on analysing characters' lives and deaths, rather than on the spectators' perception.

The book enriches existing reflections on the study of death in opera by introducing a medical explanation for operatic characters' death and of the death-as-topic in operatic history. The methodology is valuable in bridging literary and cultural-historical perspectives with medical insights. By integrating a medical perspective into the analysis, it expands musicological, theatre studies, and cultural-anthropological approaches, offering a new interpretation of historical dramaturgical contexts through this perspective. The book presents sudden death in opera as a central dramatic and dramaturgical concept. It shows that such deaths are not mere narrative devices but moments of 'epiphany' and transcendence, through which opera stages mortality and confronts the audience with the limits of life.

The authors of the *Sudden Death in Opera* deal with sudden, unexplained deaths of characters, and the presuppositions (and consequences) these kinds of death create in the plots. The scholars offer

a thorough analysis of textual material (librettos) by focusing on *the sudden or unexpected death* of the canonical characters in opera, such as – in different operatic versions – Euridice or human protagonist/Prince in *Undine/Rusalka*, Verdi's Violetta, Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor, or Bizet's Carmen. As could be expected, the authors also pay special attention to Wagner's protagonists/characters (Senta, Elsa, Tristan, Isolde, Siegfried). They analyse nearly fifty unexpected deaths in opera works, mainly of the 19th century opera, and try to explain them, based on a search for references to ANS (*Autonomic Nervous System*) dysfunction. Given that the material core of the book lies in the opera and 19th century librettos, a noteworthy thematic thread is its analysis related to the medical context of the period, including developments in psychiatry. Thus, the authors also focus on the neurological and psychiatric conditions of the characters and find the inspiration for creating opera characters and stories also in the psychiatric discourse of the time.

The book is divided into six parts. The first one outlines the topic's broad historical, cultural, and anthropological contexts, including topic-related mostly qualitative analysis of pivotal literary works (Shakespeare, Goethe, Scott). In the second part, the authors dive into crucial death-love thematic connections in the opera, analysing artistic/dramatic conditions and consequences (such as dying without an evident physical cause, etc.) of so-called Love-Death, or the *Liebested*. They approach this romantic concept – fundamentally elaborated in most of Richard Wagner's works – as an operatic device or motif in which the consummation of true love becomes possible only through death,

representing the ideal that love attains its ultimate, transcendent form beyond the boundaries of earthly existence. *Liebested* serves as a scaffolding for many operatic works and is central to the thematic structure of this book. The third part focuses on the theme of sudden death from the point of view of the history of opera via the history of music. The next section offers a more detailed articulation of the central theoretical questions and conceptual frameworks related to the topic. The fifth part provides a deep textual analysis of selected librettos, including a considerable number of quotations from these texts. In this section, special attention is given to Wagner's music drama. Part six connects the threads from previous parts, providing the analysis results (see below).

The book is extensive (over 500 pages), and includes over 170, mainly colour illustrations, mostly reproductions of works of art and photographs of personalities or remarkable places.

The analysis focuses mostly, almost exclusively, on the librettos (libretti). The authors pay special attention to the operas 'in which there are suggestions of disturbances of the ANS' (176) and pay 'special attention to examples of heart arrhythmias and references to stress or strain of the heart within the context of the drama' (176). We can therefore derive that death in opera (or perhaps not only in opera?) does not have to be caused by apparent physical injury. Furthermore, for specific creative periods, especially 19th-century opera, it is even more effective for the audience when the injury comes from 'within' (the body, the soul); reflected by suggested ANS dysfunction. The authors also separate male and female instances and provide a reader with a statistical overview

of both sexes' dominance in deaths on the stage throughout opera history. The final analytical part of the book (Part 6) develops several issues previously examined in the above-mentioned works by Catherine Clément (1988), Peter Conrad (1992), and Michel Poizat in his book *The Angel's Cry* (1992). For example, the authors want to fill a gap in Clément's list of explained (female) operatic deaths (by suicide or poison), answering the question about the 'unclassifiable [...] dying without anyone knowing how or why' (422). They search for the clues in the librettos to 'explore the psychological predispositions and vulnerable personalities of the protagonists leading to the unexpected death' (426) and note that 'many of the characters chosen have reasons to experience bodily and psychological distress' (426), offering insights that could inspire further interpretation and allow the authors to reconnect with the broader cultural and historical context.

Part 4 can be seen as the heart of the book. Although it consists of a single chapter (no. 13), it outlines the main concepts that can be used to understand sudden deaths in opera, drawing on physiology, neurology, cognitive science, and more. This line of argumentation leads to an understanding of a specific dramaturgical strategy of opera – the one in which sudden death, particularly within Love-Death, functions as a consciously constructed operatic device designed to heighten emotional intensity through a cognitive-physiological mechanism:

By far the most mysterious of the variants of Love-Death is the sudden and ostensibly inexplicable death ensuing in a situation where excessive emotion leads to some

kind of psychosomatic intensity of unendurable stress, resulting in destabilisation and ultimately cessation of vital autonomic functions (155).

The book provides a dense and comprehensive view of the theme of sudden death in operatic narratives, and various (textual and consequently musical and theatrical) conditions of death in opera. The authors' interpretation of the topic is highly focused. All in all, they show that sudden, unexplained deaths in opera function not merely as dramatic climaxes but as moments of love, mortality, and transcendence that reveal opera's unique capacity to aestheticise and transform the experience of human finitude. In their view, the 'style' of (sudden) death in opera reflects the psychophysical conditions of the historical periods in which these works were created. I also appreciate how the authors meticulously, sensitively, and systematically revisit these topics from interdisciplinary perspective(s).

One might ask whether greater attention could be given, apart from librettos, to the musical dimension of opera and its staging practices. It would also be enriching to provide more examples of how the authors' findings could affect the theatrical practice: acting, directing, and scenography. While directing is mentioned only briefly in Chapter 24, it is not clear why the authors do not talk about scenography; they only focus on the 'scenery'. From the vantage point of theatre studies, the authors' relatively conservative assessment of contemporary staging practices in opera – particularly those emerging from the mid-20th century onwards (141) – invites critique: there is an oversimplification and generalisation of the diverse

approaches within the artistic field. The passages on staging practices appear more like subjective opinions (no references to specific productions are offered) and omit contemporary scholarly discourse on operatic staging approaches (see e.g., RISI 2022).

Despite a few reservations, I regard the book as a compelling and insightful contribution to our understanding of opera via the prism of operatic librettos – not only as a culturally and historically layered art form, but also as a vibrant biocultural phenomenon deeply entwined with essential aspects of human emotional, cognitive, and sensory experience. As the authors write in the introduction, '[f]or Wagner, and the rest of us, death is always the present-future – without death, there is no life; without life there is no love; without love there is no art; without art there is no music, and a world without music would be inhuman' (xviii). The book will be of particular interest to anyone who engages with opera and is not afraid to expand their perspective beyond the cultural-historical horizon.

Bibliography

- CLÉMENT, Catherine. 1988. *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- CONRAD, Peter. 1987. *A Song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1987.
- HUTCHEON, Linda and Michael HUTCHEON. 1996. *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
- HUTCHEON, Linda and Michael HUTCHEON. 2004. *Opera: The Art of Dying*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- POIZAT, Michel. 1992. *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- RISI, Clemens. 2022. *Opera in Performance: Analyzing the Performative Dimension of Opera Productions*. London/New York: Routledge, 2022.



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.