

Review

Peering into *The Queen's Throat*

Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*. New York, Poseidon Press: 1993. Hardback, 271 pp.

The outing of opera

Two years ago I went to the Met with a man who jokingly muttered all the way up the stairs to Family Circle Standing Room, 'Why am I here? I'm a man. A real man! I don't like opera! What am I doing here?' He was an instrumentalist who had recently conceived an innocent admiration for Verdi, but he felt compelled to defend himself against the stigma, the institution, the sounds of opera.

We have so many caricatures of gay men loving opera: collecting Callas recordings; dishing dirt about the scandalous backstage manners of prima donnas; donning feathered head-dresses to lip-synch songs of love and death. But is there an essentially gay way of *listening*? Do the queen's ears hear opera differently? Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat*, part autobiography, part poetic meditation, part history, tries to convince us; but, paradoxically, he is so successful in his evocation of 'queer sensibility' that I have my doubts. His category of the 'queer listener' should be more inclusive than any notion of essentially gay opera experience: if, as he argues, opera constructs a perverse listening, then anyone who responds to opera is somehow perverse. But this anti-essentialist stance is clouded by contradictions. At times, he makes room for all in the opera-lovers' closet; at other times he wants fans to show their gay credentials at the door before they can participate in his rapturously queer hearing.

The problem is that 'queer' is not synonymous with 'gay'. Koestenbaum is careful to reserve 'gay' as a modern label for sexual orientation, and very careful not to presume to speak for gay people other than himself. But 'queer' is something else. It's an old label of suspicion, less specific than 'gay', less clinical than 'homosexual'. Koestenbaum's use of the term may make his work more acceptable to the younger gay generation, who have reclaimed 'queer' in order to assert and celebrate deviation from cultural norms. The term has become a trans-historical category that doesn't necessarily correlate with sexual behaviour. The great value of loosening the connection between homosexuality and queerness is that it lets him avoid the twin pitfalls of essentialism and anachronism: he can take historical subjects at their own word when they call themselves 'odd', or 'flaming', without making assumptions about their unknowable sexual lives. For his discussion, the common elements of queer lives are loneliness and inarticulateness, the search for affirmation and voice that leads to opera. People on the margins are queer, and the queerness of opera is its power to give voice to their experiences, both wounding and ecstatic. Homosexual queer people are only a subset of opera's queer devotees.

Admittedly, this creates a certain amount of confusion. Who is this book about? Is the eponymous Queen a gay man, as in standard usage, or is s/he any queer listener? Koestenbaum's discussion of male opera queens wanders from personal memories to anecdotes, his own and those heard second- or third-hand on the grapevine. But for the sake of his argument, all the male fans he writes about are queens, regardless of their sexual

preference or sexual orientation – evasive categories! The old stereotype that being queer makes men love opera becomes a new discursive assumption that loving opera makes people queer.

In discussions of female fans, he equivocates; and here the essentialist cracks in his argument begin to show. Examining documents of opera fan behaviour – *Opera News* from the 1940s and 50s, diva biographies and autobiographies, fiction, poetry, memoirs and histories of fandom – he finds vast numbers of passionate female fans from the distant and recent past. He freely includes these women and their obsessions, their crushes and fan letters, under the rubric of queer opera lovers; they become honorary queens. In fiction and history, he shows us, women crave the power of diva voices and diva personalities as much as, if not more than, men. ‘Girl Kills Self over Mary Garden’, a newspaper headline announced in 1912. As with the men, it is their susceptibility to opera more than their unspecified sexual or romantic inclinations that makes these girls eligible for inclusion in a rich tapestry of dandies and odd girls and divas (and even the occasional tenor).

However, one group is omitted from his ‘gay, queer, and flaming’ fans of the past and present: he refrains, in this book on Homosexuality and Desire, from conclusions about the meaning of opera for modern women, straight or gay. Perhaps he’s too well trained in political correctness to speak for any identity group other than his own. ‘How can I read a lesbian body if I am male?’ he wonders, refusing to speculate about a gaggle of women waiting excitedly for Kathleen Battle at the stage door. He can only exchange blank looks with a female fan of Fiorenza Cossotto, unable to share and unwilling to explore ‘the lesbian regard for the mezzo voice’. Perhaps he’s baiting lesbian voice fetishists to come out of their closet, to write their own memoirs and meditations . . . though those are more likely to be about pop-music diva k.d. lang than Cossotto. Or maybe he’s being careful because live women, unlike dead ones from *Opera News* magazine, could publish rebuttals to his interpretation of their experience. While I appreciate his scruples about putting words in women’s mouths, the exclusion of women from Koestenbaum’s vision of opera-loving queerness betrays a fissure in the broader anti-essentialist argument of his book.

Voice beyond sex?

The queerness of opera, its connection with sexuality and mystery, is the operatic *voice*, which is neither male nor female but carries an erotic charge beyond binary biological categories. Reading treatises on voice culture and how to sing, Koestenbaum discovers, ‘the wily larynx can embody male and female characteristics, or neither. Some voice manuals make the larynx seem a vestige of an extinct, genderless species.’ Indeed, everything about that voice emanating from the singer’s ‘mask’ is queerly ambiguous. ‘Voice silently avoids the categories we bring to it. Voice is willing to be thrown, to disguise its source, to hurl itself out of sex-and-gender and onto the sands of a neutral, signless shore.’ It is a ‘third sex’, and love for this sex-beyond-gender is by definition queer in our dualistic culture. The female bodies that both contain and project this voice become fantasy surrogates for listeners who lack the courage or opportunity to sing out their own queerness; the fan comes out vicariously through the diva. Opera is a place where mute or silenced people can breathe, can imagine themselves louder and larger than life.

Opera singers, walking the thin line between beautiful song and noise, exemplify the price of discipline and repression that every[sic]body pays. Koestenbaum, writing as a

gay man, makes clear how he identifies with the singer's efforts to school her sound: 'The body that sings and the body that calls itself homosexual are not as sealed as we think. Nor are they as free.' But then, what body is? Performative homosexuality, the careful deployment of gesture and sign to reveal and conceal information about the self, is analogous to 'femininity' or 'masculinity' or 'straightness'. Operatic voices sing the gap between our turbulent, contradictory inner selves and the coherent masks that culture demands. Desires repressed in every fan's throat come pouring back as singers on stage or record sing our muteness.

It is a paradox of this book that all its poetic evocations and its whimsical style are employed to describe its author's inarticulateness. Koestenbaum can persuade us of opera's sublime queerness only by voicing his own, which in turn raises the question of why he needs opera to do it for him. Why must he give Anna Moffo credit for his own idiosyncratic song?¹ Some would say this is merely postmodern affectation. But maybe (more kindly) it is the operatic way to freedom: the diva's song frees the fan to sing for himself, to sing himself in hymning her.

Hymning her... him-ing her... perhaps both: Koestenbaum's contribution to recent discussions of voice undercuts our assumptions about voice and gender. He can identify across gender and that old ambiguity, sexual orientation, because the operatic voice is a radically destabilising force in our binary world of male and female, straight and gay. And the history of opera reveals that the genre has defied binary oppositions since its inception: every era and every operatic reform returns to the buried bisexuality of Orpheus. The original Lost Voice of opera is the anti-essential, surgically constructed voice of the castrato. The biologically male body of the castrato, a deviant, stigmatised body producing a soprano voice of magical potency, has become the body of the diva, now biologically female but still singing deviance and stigma. 'Voice has been described as feminine, but it is equally true that voice evades categorization.' The operatic voice announces a queer subjectivity that overrides gender and takes us...

Beyond the homoerotic pleasure principle in opera

Koestenbaum is working at the boundaries of operatic meaning: the ecstatic, evanescent moment that brings the listener back again and again. He seems strangely unaware that he has fellow travellers in search of that meaning; there is no evidence that he has read the work of French voice-theorists Michel Poizat and Marie-France Castarède, although his approach has important similarities to theirs.² Like them, he links the opera-goer's enjoyment to a psychological-developmental crisis. But where they focus on the infantile, Oedipal crisis of language acquisition, Koestenbaum makes puberty, the acquisition of adult sexual awareness, the critical moment. Psychoanalysis posits that in order to enter into symbolic structure (the Lacanian Law-of-the-Father) and language, the infant must recognise himself (*sic*) as a Subject separate from the surrounding universe and particularly from the mother. The achievement of this separation permanently alienates the child from presence and plenitude (both personified by the mother) and creates a desiring Subject who will spend the rest of his life in a quest for infantile wholeness. The cry, which Poizat identifies as the goal and culmination of opera, is supposed to strike a chord with

¹ Wayne Koestenbaum, *'Ode to Anna Moffo' and Other Poems* (New York, 1990).

² Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1992); Marie-France Castarède, *La Voix et ses sortilèges* (Paris, 1987).

the adult listener's pre-Oedipal inner child, reminding him of the despairing wail that ushered him into subjectivity.

Koestenbaum does not justify his focus on puberty but, given the exclusion of gay sensibilities from the heterosexist canons of 'normal' developmental psychology, it may well be that he feels more secure talking about the parts of his life that he can remember. He therefore chooses a moment subtly analogous to the Oedipal crisis. Like the acquisition of language, the acquisition of sexual identity is marked by a loss of ease (familiar plenitude, the self unaware of its alienation) and the entrance into and negotiation within patriarchal structure: this time the confines of hetero-/homosexuality rather than of signifiers and syntax. Puberty, in his rather loose usage, is a psychological rather than biological event, when the subject recognises difference from prescribed psycho-sexual norms. It is a trauma, but one that the subject consciously experiences and remembers. The Lost Voice of the opera queen is not his mother's or his inner child's, but his own, queer voice, wanting to declare itself but choking on cultural repression.

Koestenbaum's account of a conscious adult experiencing opera, rather than an imaginary infantile self, opens up a broader range of meaning. After all, it seems inadequate to locate all the sources of our *jouissance* in infancy, as if layers of consciousness acquired since then didn't count. Few of us really regress to our pre-lingual origins at the opera (how embarrassing that would be!), at least not reliably and not for more than a moment at a time. In Koestenbaum's terminology, adults go to the opera to experience both 'being sung' and 'singing': both letting the luxurious sound sweep us away, and actively making meaning out of it. When he evokes the mother-and-child fantasy, his imaginary subject occupies both sides of it, because listening constantly circulates: 'Listening, we are the ideal mother ... attending to the baby's cries, alert to its puling inscriptions, and we are the baby listening to the mother for signs of affection and attention, for reciprocity, for world.' Mother and child share responsibility for sound and its meaning, which cannot be fixed in the mother's voice or the infant's ears.

This reciprocal relationship is the key to Koestenbaum's transcendent operatic moments, when the diva's voice announces itself as a Subject, breaking out of its frames of Objectification: character, plot, proscenium, score. He feels the voice as a physical energy that leaps from the singer's throat into the listener's, and lives for the moments when the singing of a woman on stage seems to be peeling forth his own stifled truth. Quoting that 'Ancient-of-days Opera Queen', Walt Whitman, he exults, 'O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me, / O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you'. The Queen's Throat belongs both to the diva singing and to the fan, opening to voice, drinking the sound. The queerness of opera resides in moments of identification and desire, when the voice floats free and it is no longer clear who has produced it.

Queer theory, musicologists and music

'What happens', Koestenbaum wonders, 'when Adelina Patti's voice emerges from the furniture?' The freely circulating, unlocatable voice, equally the product of the singer, the listener and the stereo speaker, remains problematic even in non-standard musicological practice. Edward T. Cone's vision of the Composer as 'that man behind the curtain' continues to dominate academic discourse.³ The notion of an unseen yet transcendent intelligence that speaks (sings) through the bodies of visible music-makers posits a distinct-

³ This vision governs Cone's *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley, 1974); and, more subtly, 'Three Ways of Reading a Detective Story' (1977), in *Music: A View from Delft* (Chicago, 1989).

ion between two sources of music, and gives authority to the disembodied one. Koestenbaum is one of Cone's 'wilful' listeners, who recklessly imposes any meaning he pleases on music, and this sets him apart from the 'attentive' academic listeners who follow Cone's prescription and devoutly submit themselves to the search for a composer's intended meaning.⁴

The musicological morality of submission and self-effacement is so powerful that even self-proclaimed renegades and mavericks do rhetorical gymnastics to prove that the meaning they hear in music doesn't come merely from them, but has the moral force of the composer's intent. This is a particular problem for gay studies and the more neutral 'sexuality studies', both because facts about composers' homosexuality often depend so heavily on imaginative reconstruction and interpretation, and because even when we have 'proof' we can never be sure of what homosexuality meant in a century other than our own – or means in our own time, for that matter. Sexuality is as elusive as artistic intentions, a double burden for the critic who wants to make assertions about the link between them.

For example, in order to escape accusations of wilfulness, Susan McClary must insist that Schubert and Tchaikovsky, not she, enjoyed telling stories about homosexuality.⁵ Often this is provocative, sometimes persuasive, but it's a project that, on musicology's terms, cannot succeed. McClary can try to convince us that Schubert's Unfinished Symphony is actually a 'Letter to My Friends', but hard-core, fact-finding types will not believe her gay-narrative hypothesis until she unearths documentary evidence that this symphony really, intentionally, contained a coded meaning for the initiates of Vienna. Still, she is compelled to give Schubert credit for her own musical analysis, because if she moves too far from the shelter of a composer's authority, she risks being accused of making things up, of imposing meaning, of making the music say things it didn't mean to say. The discipline's requirement is that one find external authority for what one hears. That, I suppose, is one of the reasons it's called a discipline.

Yet here is Koestenbaum, an exuberantly wilful listener, reading all of opera as a Letter to Himself, replete with queer meanings, personal messages and exhortations. He never stops to wonder whether Verdi, Puccini and all the composers of the standard repertoire were secretly gay activists with gay agendas. He doesn't care who *they* thought they were addressing. In his anarchically personal vision of opera, the work is free to proliferate, to accumulate meanings, and to have meanings projected on to it by every listening intelligence. Musicologists, struggling to be good, can take courage from his implicit argument against creative essentialism: an artist need not be gay to produce works with the possibility of queer meaning. He insists that every marginal, unacknowledged audience speaks itself

⁴ Cone set forth his taxonomy of listeners in 'The Silent Partner', an informal lecture at Princeton University, April 1993.

⁵ I regret that I cannot quote from McClary's unpublished analysis of Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony as a homosexual narrative, which she presented under the title 'Making a Difference', at the 1990 conference of the American Musicological Society. However, she makes a similar argument about Tchaikovsky in her *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis, 1991): 'What we have [in the Fourth Symphony] is a narrative in which the protagonist seems victimized both by patriarchal expectations and by sensual feminine entrapment . . . Such a narrative resonates strongly with Tchaikovsky's biography' (p. 77).

McClary's justification of *her* musical analysis as *Tchaikovsky's* autobiographical statement seems to me somewhat forced, and there are broader problems with any reading of musical structures as 'narratives'. However, those problems are beyond the scope of this essay, and Carolyn Abbate has already outlined them in *Unsung Voices* (Princeton, 1991), 19–29.

in mainstream artistic discourse, and that meaning, like the voice, can never be stabilised or confined to a composer's intention or a correct way of hearing.

Alas, there are limits even to Koestenbaum's wilfulness. His 'queer moments in opera' are drawn almost entirely from the nineteenth-century Italian and French repertoire (although he makes room for Mozart), suggesting that these works are open to queer appropriation more than the hermeneutically sealed German canon. His first loves were *Carmen* and *Aida*; in his 'Ode to Anna Moffo' he apostrophises the diva's Butterfly and her Thaïs; and he seems to prefer music that has audible cracks and fissures, that invites the listener to introject alternate meanings like private cadenzas. There is a discreet silence on the subject of German opera until the penultimate chapter, when we learn that he does not 'appreciate Wagner's quest for masculinity', meaning his ironing out of ambiguity, his insistence on simple truths. But here perhaps Koestenbaum has fallen into the musicologically correct trap of taking the composer at his word, letting Wagner's manifestos and leitmotivic exegeses drown the proliferation of meaning within the operas themselves. Freud insisted that the repressed returns. Koestenbaum hears the repression that produces operatic voices, hears the yell behind the song; but he doesn't listen behind Wagner's obsessive grasp for control, or hear the contradictions (the 'unsung voices') in the works. The messiness that Wagner tried to repress came back to him ten-fold, no matter how he tried to fix meaning and purify the genre.⁶ But Koestenbaum, intimidated or perhaps simply turned off by all those hectoring male voices, takes Wagner's polemical writings at face value and peevishly turns away.

The preponderance of male voices may be the key. 'Dreamer, [Wagner] believed that opera was the land of manhood!' Wagner wanted to discipline opera, straighten it out, purge its decadence, but instead his operas inspired a whole decadent subculture. Koestenbaum passes over the cult of Wagnerism, a crucial era of opera-queen history realised on stage in the homosocial vision of *Parsifal*, and this makes it clear that opera for him is not about male bonding. (This may also account for his lack of interest in Benjamin Britten.)⁷ He describes a solitary opera-queen existence, where encounters with other fans inevitably disappoint. He had once hoped to meet soulmates, a brotherhood devoted to the Grail of opera, but instead found a community of solitary souls and private enjoyment. In Wayne's World, the Grail brothers sit around making disparaging remarks about each others' record collections; and they all want to sing like Kundry.

Koestenbaum's dislike of the German tradition seems so firmly rooted in Wagner's biography and theoretical writings that I wondered if he'd actually listened to the operas. But in his final chapter, the 'Pocket Guide to Queer Moments in Opera', there nests yet another paradox: Wagner, that masculinist homophobe, contributes the moment that sums up all queerness. Only five of the twenty-eight Moments are from the German repertoire, and two are perhaps inevitable: what self-proclaimed pervert would omit Salome's final monologue, and what gay fan's catalogue could miss the two-soprano bliss of the Presentation of the Rose? But the archetypal Moment is Sieglinde's exit in Act III of *Die Walküre*. Listening to Sieglinde, he says, 'I fall to my knees':

Suddenly she cries out, 'Save my child! Shield me, ye maidens!' In these exclamations Sieglinde advances Wagner's cycle and embodies his vision of woman, but she also represents a joy separate from his plan – a pleasure that I can loosely wear, like a cape. She subscribes to her body: she

⁶ This is one strain of Abbate's discussion of Wagner in *Unsung Voices*, 156–249.

⁷ Alex Ross's review, 'Grand Seductions', *The New Yorker* (12 April 1993), 115–20, considers Koestenbaum's neglect of King Ludwig, *Parsifal* and Britten at some length. However, he does not pursue the implications of Koestenbaum's obvious lack of interest in opera without girls, graciously leaving those questions for me to take up.

votes for thrill over theory ... 'O hehrstes Wunder! Herrlichste Maid!' Speaking about Brünnhilde, she also praises herself – her function as womb, as mouthpiece ... I value Sieglinde's ability to waylay Wagner's tetralogy in a gushy eddy he can't afford or explain. To a certain listener, the woman's exhalations surpass the political ingot called Siegfried.

Sieglinde ... stops the opera to stare into her solitude and exclaim, 'O holy wonder!' She loves what her body can do. She doesn't care what Wotan thinks ... Envy her confident ecstasy: Sieglinde who grabs rapture like a lost twin, who sleeps with her brother, who retreats from the world, who believes her body's evidence, ... who opens my throat.

Here are all the elements of a Queer Moment: a moment of resistance, of subversion, when a voice (often but not always a woman's) sings against, outside or beyond the confines of the plot. Koestenbaum loves Butterfly's and Tosca's off-stage entrances, when they are voice announcing Voice, not yet entrapped in narrative. Just as Sieglinde serenades her body's creative power, so Elisabeth greets not the Hall of Song but *her* song, the opportunity for her own voice to ring out. He treasures the voice's ability to cut across narrative, to subvert forward motion, to transform abasement (Elvira's betrayal, Aida's despair) into thrilling glory. Far from opera being the undoing of women, Koestenbaum proposes that women's voices are the undoing of opera and opera audiences, the undoing of plot and objectivity that we come back for again and again.⁸

Having invoked that verb 'undoing', it's time to look at Koestenbaum versus Catherine Clément, whose *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* has become a *locus classicus* (albeit a much-disparaged one) for discussions of opera, sexuality and mysterious desire. Clément was interested in gynocidal plots, and she tried to strip away the music, a meretricious mask of beauty over brutal patriarchal spectacle: 'This is not to be about the music ... I am determined to pay attention to the language, the forgotten part of opera ... And always those waltzes sweeping my heart away with them ... so I forget the wicked plot.'⁹ Koestenbaum offers an alternative vision, and the singing voice is the key. Clément laments, 'Oh voices, sublime voices, high, clear voices, how you make one forget the words you sing!'¹⁰ But in Koestenbaum's ears, the sublime voices make those words available to anyone who hears them. Voice undoes presumably gendered lines of sympathy and subverts the heterosexist/patriarchal spectacle ostensibly presented. Here is a man in the audience announcing that he identifies fantastically with 'Aida the abased, the exhausted, the enslaved, the ignored'.¹¹ Aida's outpourings of impossible love and abjection are his own, not a titillating spectacle to be consumed at a distance.

Where does the listener insert himself in opera? Koestenbaum warns us against obvious conclusions. He offers a welcome antidote to Lawrence Kramer's pornographic vision of Salome immobilised and powerless in the orchestral spotlight, displayed in vocal bondage by the composer for the delectation of a leering, drooling audience.¹² Voice reaches into

⁸ Again, Koestenbaum seems unaware that this territory has been explored before. Paul Robinson has argued a similar position in 'A Deconstructive Postscript: Reading Libretti and Misreading Opera', *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton, 1988), 328–46.

⁹ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988), 12, 62.

¹⁰ Clément, 28.

¹¹ Casting, he implies, can make the identification more intense: 'who dares to have a crush on Carlo Bergonzi, even though in an ad for *Aida* he is young and dark-eyebrowed, a masculine goody-goody with a vein visible on his broad-palmed hand?' Evidently, Koestenbaum dares.

¹² Lawrence Kramer, 'Culture and Musical Hermeneutics: The Salome Complex', this journal, 2 (1990), 269–94.

the listener and closes the distance that makes objectification possible. Instead, 'Listening to Salome's final scene, I indulge in lush, irresponsible fantasy: ... I become a Princess of Judea in the sheath of a prom queen'. 'Tasting [Salome's] tones', Koestenbaum relishes her not as a degraded object but as a surrogate self trumpeting forth perverted ecstasies. The lines of emotional investment between opera and its audiences are blurry and constantly shifting; like the voice, they escape straight/forward assumptions about gender and the location of the subject.

On the differences between queens, divas and women

In spite of all this polymorphous play, the all-inclusive opera-loving fantasy breaks down, because a feminist agenda and Koestenbaum's gay agenda have not been reconciled. Koestenbaum's tense exchange with Clément crystallises the problem. To Clément's, 'Leave this woman [Maria Callas] alone, whose job it was to wear gracefully your repressed homosexual fantasies', he declares, 'my love can't harm dead Callas. And yet homophobic society wants me to abandon my fantasies. To demand that I renounce my veneration is to suggest the desirability of erasing what makes me gay.' To let the debate proceed on these terms promises a tedious bout of name-calling: 'Misogynist!' 'Homophobe!' Perhaps a closer look at Koestenbaum's fantasies, and the terms of his veneration, will move the debate to more interesting ground.

Are Callas and all the idolised divas just honorary drag queens, their true selves buried under layers of make-up, sequins and mannerism? Queenly adulation certainly doesn't focus on these women for their professionalism, their ability to make a place for themselves in a cut-throat business world. Larger-than-life smiles, and even melodramatic bitchiness mask the unglamorous truths about singers' careers, the blackened toenails and twisted bones inside the ballerina's satin slipper. At one point, Koestenbaum praises female opera singers for their subversion of conventional values: 'she presents the uncomfortable and antipatriarchal spectacle of a woman taking her body seriously – channeling, enjoying, and nourishing it'. This is the portrait Willa Cather paints of her protagonist Thea Kronborg, the aspiring diva in *The Song of the Lark*, and although Koestenbaum cites the novel twice, he does not acknowledge the gap between Cather's vision and his own, a gap that casts light on the sinister, impersonal aspects of queenly adulation.

A passage from the last portion of the novel crystallises the difference between Cather's portrait of the artist and Koestenbaum's publicity photos. Her pragmatic Thea (modelled on American diva Olive Fremstad) wrestles with characterisation more than costume choice. In contrast to the stylised gush of 'divaspeak', Thea is inarticulate, unable to deploy spoken language in the repartee or devastating ripostes that opera queens treasure. In the novel's final section, Thea's childhood friend and mentor has come unannounced to New York to hear her in *Lohengrin*. He is enraptured by her singing, but cannot reconcile the magical, larger-than-life diva on stage with the human woman he remembers. Contrary to opera queen fantasy, diva and woman are not the same. Dr Archie goes back to Thea's apartment building and waits for her to come home:

He confronted her just as she reached the elevator ... She gave him a piercing, defiant glance through the white scarf that covered her face. Then she lifted her hand and brushed the scarf back from her head. There was still black on her eyebrows and lashes. She was very pale and her face was drawn and deeply lined. She looked, the doctor told himself with a sinking heart, forty years old ... Her hair was parted in the middle and done very close to her head, as she had worn it under the wig. She looked like a fugitive, who had escaped from something in clothes

caught up at hazard. It flashed across Dr Archie that she was running away from that other woman down at the opera house, who had used her hardly.¹³

'That other woman' is Thea's diva-self, a persona that for this evening has worn Wagner's Elsa as her second mask. In this scene of double unmasking, the scene that Koestenbaum's queens do not witness and would not derive pleasure from witnessing, Thea *lifts her veil*, the veil of glamour that stands for both her on-stage performance and her off-stage celebrity persona. Behind the performance and the persona is an exhausted, aging human woman whom Cather's other characters (and her readers) love and cherish. By contrast, the queen's adulation as described by Koestenbaum is detached, impersonal, a love of mannerism and accoutrement, a love for an artifact rather than an artist.

Koestenbaum knows this, but avoids questioning its implications. He comments, in his fragment on *Divas and Dolls*, 'the soprano Olympia, in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, is one operatic image of the soprano as inanimate doll'. Had he pursued this image back to its source, he would have found that in E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' a young man looks through magic spectacles at the musical robot Olympia and falls in love with her, convinced that she is real. Hoffmann shows us Nathanael's delusion, which is also the ironic truth about the opera queen and the prima donna:

'Oh, you wonderful, profound soul', cried Nathanael, back in his room, 'no one but you, you alone, understands me perfectly'. He trembled with heartfelt rapture when he considered how the marvellous harmony between his soul and Olimpia's was becoming more manifest by the day; for he felt as though Olimpia had voiced his own thoughts about his works and about his poetic gift in general; *indeed her voice seemed to come from within himself*. This must indeed have been the case for the only words Olimpia ever spoke were those that had just been mentioned. (emphasis added)¹⁴

Koestenbaum lacks Hoffmann's ironic detachment from this scene of infatuation, and his raptures sometimes sound as naive as Nathanael's. Like Nathanael, he cannot distinguish reliably between adorable singing dolls and real live women. Unlike Hoffmann, he does not acknowledge or explore the implications of his confusion.

I mentioned before that Koestenbaum is not interested in opera without girls, and this makes the alert reader wonder – not about his sexual preference (which we are in no position to discuss), but about the non-sexual uses that he has for operatic women. He revels in diva-personae, singling out the stigmatised divas for worship and adulation, lovingly cataloguing eccentricities, mannerisms and deformities. In his 'Ode to Anna Moffo', he reminded her, 'You had a bruise / on your left calf when you taught a master class / at Merkin Concert Hall – not packed'.¹⁵ The misty evocation of this bruise tells us what we need to know. Koestenbaum addresses Moffo from a distance, ostensibly to protect her privacy, but also to guard his image. He loves a fantasy, frozen on album covers and dispensing trite advice at a master class, peering over the lowered window of her white limousine, even her signature larger than life. Yet this glamorous fantasy figure is marred by something so mundane as a bruise on her leg. The bruise is a sinister metonymy for Moffo's beloved, damaged larynx; her humiliating comeback attempts; her brief career. It is a stigma, not in the figurative but in the religious sense, a mark on the body that declares pain and vulnerability.

Divas' voices, to Koestenbaum's ears, sound like this bruise. 'The operatic voice pretends

¹³ Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915; New York, 1991), 351.

¹⁴ E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'The Sandman', in *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, trans. Ritchie Robertson (Oxford, 1992), 113.

¹⁵ Koestenbaum, *Ode*, 50.

to be polite but is secretly stressed, huge, exorbitant: it sings its training: it exclaims, "A price has been paid". It calls attention to the body's pain, and the queen's affection for the woman's wounded body is disturbing. He has nothing to lose from his emotional investment in a diva's performance. When she breaks, he has the sado-masochistic pleasure of seeing her martyrdom and identifying (painlessly) with her suffering.

Koestenbaum relies on women to act out, to write large the information he keeps closeted, the invisible stigma of his homosexual body. He describes gayness as something which must constantly be policed – a tendency to swish, to lisp, to give oneself away with a look or a word – and the divas who have given themselves away on stage and in life become his fantasy surrogates. He makes an analogy between queer puberty (the discovery that one is homosexual) and 'diva-puberty', the girl's discovery of her voice. Interpreting anecdotes from a number of singers' biographies and autobiographies, he claims that this moment of vocal discovery is a developmental crisis during which the girl claims her voice, commits herself to coming out with something that makes her different, abnormal. She builds her diva persona along with her voice, a protective shell around her difference.

What is the freakish secret that the budding diva must choose not to disavow? Perhaps Marie-France Castarède can help. She proposes that divas are 'phallic women', frightening, fantastical embodiments of Woman before her imagined castration. Equating vocal potency with phallic presence, Castarède postulates that the woman soprano with a big voice seems to be hiding something else big under her skirts, the same big thing that Freud claimed every little boy imagined under his mother's skirts until a fortunate moment of revelation convinced him otherwise. So the diva is, in imagination, a monster simultaneously male and female, like her historical antecedent the castrato, embodying both phallic presence and maternal plenitude.¹⁶ The queer non-singer, coming to terms with his own difference, imagines that he has an alter ego in the woman who discovers her big voice, accepting its queer hermaphroditic power as she builds her defences against the stigma it carries. Divas, like homosexual bodies, destabilise gender binarisms. Listening to their voices, the opera queen fantasises that he's singing into an echo chamber.

The diva, whose on-stage voice and off-stage persona are a fantastic echoing mirror of the fan's life, provokes another desire that Koestenbaum identifies as perverse: homo-desire, desire for a being the same as the self. In a queer Kinder-Szene he tells us, 'I spent much of childhood trying to distinguish identification from desire, asking myself, "Am I in love with Julie Andrews, or do I think I *am* Julie Andrews?"' He defines this desire at its most shameful as an urge to make love to oneself:

The solitary operatic feast, the banquet for one, onanism through the ear: taking an evening out of my life to listen to *Simon Boccanegra*, I feel I am locked in the bathroom eating a quart of ice cream, that I have lost all my friends, that I am committing some violently antisocial act ... The opera queen, listening to Callas, is as removed from actuality and as enamored of 'mere' images as the 'lonely' gay man flipping through *Mandate*.

Indulgence in this desire for the self is the shame of the stereotypical opera queen: the recluse who prefers to live in a closed loop of shared subjectivity with his recorded fantasy double.

'To be a diva's number one fan is ... to be considered sick, lost, lonely, vicarious.' To be *considered* thus: why do outsiders deride the life of imagination and representation? Koestenbaum suggests that only 'homophobic society' constructs the opera queen's satisfactions as pathetic and stunted. I don't presume to condemn these satisfactions but, as a woman, I feel put off by my erasure from the opera queens' system. It is not homophobia

¹⁶ Castarède, 179–84.

to protest that in the queen's imagination women are goddesses and martyrs, but never simply life-sized. The diva, the 'phallic woman', is a chimera whose voice brings ineffable pleasure but whose inevitable and humiliating destruction is a source of pleasure as well. The opera queen craves and fears women's power, and defends himself against it by distancing his human self from the singing, feminine image. Once again I turn to Koestenbaum's *Ode*:

Anna, in New
York, hello; I don't propose to ruin
your retired, bowered peace
with a thousand clues
this crammed account, through a telescope, of a seven-league view:
peer in the wrong end, and the vision shrinks.

The queen's eye is a telescope that reaches across vast distances to capture a star, a distorted vision of a woman. This telescope – like Nathanael's magic spectacles – is an optical trick, an illusion, a manufactured lens for looking at things which the viewer prefers to keep at a 'seven-league' distance. He will not 'peer in the wrong end' because then he will no longer see the diva but only the woman, living her own life rather than some overwrought version of his own. For an alternative, I return to 'Willa Cather, lesbian', of whom Adrienne Rich has written:

And Willa who could not tell
her own story as it was
left us her stern and delicate
respect for the lives she loved –
How are we going to do better?¹⁷

Koestenbaum's treatment of his own story is searching and often profound, but his treatment of women and their lives left me hungry for that 'stern and delicate respect'.

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'If you speak a secret, you lose it; it becomes public.' Throughout his exposé of opera queendom, Koestenbaum seems simultaneously proud and afraid to be its elegist, as if he could destroy the phenomenon by the act of naming it. 'But', he continues, 'if you sing the secret, you magically manage to keep it private, for singing is a barricade of codes'. By this definition, all human utterance is singing; no matter how much we tell or want to tell, we can never be known. Our inner selves are always barricaded behind codes of language. Koestenbaum wants to 'out' opera, to 'out' opera queens, but like all objects of discourse they will escape him. Identity – what something 'is' – is as ephemeral as voice. This book will no more destroy the meaning of opera for its queer and gay fans than the publicity attendant on gays in the AIDS crisis and the military will make homosexuality obsolete. Opera and its fans, the life of imagination and representation, will endure regardless of how many elegies are written, because the 'Mystery of Desire' – like the psyche, like the interior darkness beneath the voice-box – is an infinite space that cannot be turned inside out or made obsolete by one searching spotlight.

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¹⁷ Adrienne Rich, 'For Julia in Nebraska', in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (New York, 1981), 17.