Sudden Death in Opera
The co-authors of this book draw on a wealth of experience, knowledge, understanding and, not least, love of opera, aptly defining this our most plural and complete form of artistic creation and expression, to explain the romantic themes of love and death, recurring throughout the operatic canon, and to provide brilliant insights and fascinating forays into the overlapping fields of culture, neuroscience, medicine, philosophy, history and religion. The authors’ multidisciplinary research and scholarship have resulted in a work which is both accessible and enlightening for any opera lover, and a particularly valuable source of background information and interpretative inspiration for those making opera, be they working on the stage, in the pit or behind the scenes.

—Ian Ritchie (Artistic Director, The Musical Brain, and freelance curator)
Sudden Death in Opera:

Love, Mortality
and Transcendence
on the Lyric Stage

By

Michael Trimble,
Robert Ignatius Letellier
and Dale Hesdorffer
DUCA
Ma dee luminoso
in corte tal astro qual sole brillare.
Per voi qui ciascuno dovrà palpitare.
Per voi già possente la fiamma d’amore
inebria, conquide, distrugge il mio core.

DUKE
So bright a star
should be shedding its brilliance on my court.
You would make every heart beat faster here.
The fires of passion already flare
headily, conquering, consuming my heart.

(Francesco Maria Piave, Rigoletto, Act 1)

STIMMEN
Selig sind die Liebenden
Die der Liebe sind nicht des Todes,
Und auferstehn werden,
Die dahingesunkenen sind
um Liebe, um Liebe, um Liebe,

VOICES
Blessed are they that love.
Those who have loved shall not die.
And those who have died for love
shall rise again.

(Erich Korngold, Das Wunder der Heliane, Act 3)
# CONTENTS

List of Figures......................................................................................................................... x

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. xvi

Prolegomenon............................................................................................................................ xvii
Nigel Osborn

Prologue.................................................................................................................................... xix

**Part 1: Origins**

Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................... 2
Introduction to Death and Opera

Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................... 19
The Emergence of Romantic Thought: France, Italy and Germany

Chapter 3 ................................................................................................................................... 29
Transcendental Experiences

Chapter 4 ................................................................................................................................... 42
Goethe, the Gothic and Medical Minds

Chapter 5 ................................................................................................................................... 55
Out of Body into Mind

**Part 2: Operatic and Love-Death**

Chapter 6 ................................................................................................................................... 64
The Occurrence of Death in Romantic Opera

Chapter 7 ................................................................................................................................... 74
Sudden Death: Causes, Situations and *Liebestod*
Chapter 19 ..................................................................................................................................... 354
The Operas of Richard Wagner
1. Die Feen, Das Liebesverbot, Rienzi
2. Holländer, Tannhäuser, Tristan, Lohengrin, Meistersinger, Parsifal
   Part 2:
3. Der Ring des Nibelungen

Part 6: Analysis and Explanations

Chapter 20 ..................................................................................................................................... 420
Lessons from the Libretti: Why When and Where? An Analysis
   of Unexpected Deaths: Results and 19th Century Culture, Science
   and Medicine

Chapter 21 ..................................................................................................................................... 448
Love, Other Worlds and the Nature of Redemption

Chapter 22 ..................................................................................................................................... 461
Redemptive Love: Wagner, and the Issues of Gender and Sexuality

Chapter 23 ..................................................................................................................................... 470
Redemption and the Nature of Love
   List 2: Operas with a Liebestod from List 1 ................................................................. 478

Chapter 24 ..................................................................................................................................... 481
Reflections
   List 3: Operas from List 1 with no Liebestod ................................................................. 497

Chapter 25 ..................................................................................................................................... 502
Coda

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................. 511

Index ............................................................................................................................................... 529
LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1
1.1 Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), Salome the Head Hunter, even while dancing
1.2 Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872-1898), Salome
1.3 Orpheus, Roman mosaic
1.4 Orpheus, Roman mosaic
1.5 François Perrier (1590-1650), Orpheus before Hades and Persphone
1.6 Federigo Cervelli (1625-1700), Orfeo ed Euridice
1.7 Jacopo Vignale (1592-1654), Orfeo
1.8 Émile Lévy (1826-1890), The Death of Orpheus surrounded by Bacchantes
1.9 Jean Delville (1867-1953), The Death of Orpheus
1.10 Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) Orpheus on the tomb of Eurydice
1.11 Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)
1.12 Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)
1.13 Sappho, Archaeological Museum, Pompei
1.14 Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice (1871-81). Love leads him to her bier, leaning over to kiss Beatrice
1.15 Joseph Noel Paton (1828-1901), Dante Meditating on the Episode of Francesca and Paolo Malatesta, 1871
1.16 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Beata Beatrice. Dante is behind her, as light forms a halo around her, her transcendent state suggested by her eyes, in a rapture of impending death
1.17 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Story of Paolo and Francesca
1.18 William Blake (1757-37), The Lovers' Whirlwind, Paolo and Beatrice
1.19 Raphael (1483-1520), The School of Athens
1.20 Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), The Ecstasy of St Teresa

Chapter 2
2.1 Johann Heinrich Tischbein (1751-1829), Goethe in the Roman Campania
2.2a Novalis (Friedrich Leopold von Hardenberg) (1772-1801)
2.2b Novalis, Sophie and her gravestone
2.3 Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840), The Cross in the Mountains
2.4 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Chapter 3
3.1 Théâtrephone

Chapter 4
4.1 Alexander von Humbolt (1769-1859), Naturgemälde
4.2 William Blake, Newton, a rationalist preoccupied with calculations
4.3 Goethe’s *Urpflanze*, two-leaved, joined

4.4 Goethe identified the *gingo biloba* or *ginko biloba*, associated with the *Urpflanze*

4.5 André Brouillet (1857-1914), *Les fascines de la Charité, service du Dr Luys*, 1880

**Chapter 5**

5.1 Jules-Bastin Lepage (1848-1889), *Joan of Arc* (1884). Her out of body image is in the background

**Chapter 6**

6.1 Francisco Goya (1746-1828), *Love and Death* in the collection *Los Caprichos*, 1799

6.2 Henri Matisse (1859-1954), *Joie de vivre*; Renaissance print, *Erotic Love*

6.3 Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898), *Laus Veneris* (In Praise of Venus) (1873-75), reflecting the hopeless Venus oblique

6.4 Edvard Munch (1863-1944), *Madonna*, 1895

**Chapter 7**

7.1 John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), *Undine*, 1872

7.2 Thomas Cooper Gotch (1854-1931), *The Bride Death raising her hand in a gesture of welcome*

**Chapter 9**

9.1 German Romantics Friedrich de la Motte-Fouqué in Husarenuniform

9.2 Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837)

9.3 Heinrich Heine (1797-1856)

9.4 Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), *In the Waves*, 1889

9.5 Thomas Mille Dow (1848-1895), *The Kelpie* (1895), a watersprite with vipers dripping from her hair

9.6 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea*

9.7 William Blake, *Oh Flames and Furious Desires*, from *Urizen* plate 3, 1794-96

9.8 William Reynolds-Stephens (1862-1943), *Summer—Women and Waves*, 1891

**Chapter 10**

10.1 Auber, *La Muette de Portici*, Adolphe Nourrit as Masaniello

10.2 Rossini, *Guillaume Tell*, trio (Act 3)

10.3 Bizet, *Les Pecheurs des Perles*, duet (Act 1)

**Chapter 11**

11.1 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stars*

11.2 Beethoven, *Fidelio*, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient as Leonore

11.3 Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte*, stage design by Kark Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841)

11.4 Weber, *Der Freischütz*, stage design for the Wolf’s Glen

11.5 Halévy, *La Juive*, stage design for Act 1 (1835)
11.6 Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Fanny Persiani as Lucy
11.7 Meyerbeer, *Les Huguenots*, Enrico Caruso as Raoul
11.8 Verdi, *La Traviata*, Maria Callas as Violetta

Chapter 12
12.1 Bellini, *Norma*, Giuditta Pasta in the title role

Chapter 13
13.1 Frau Minna
13.2 Louis-Leopold Boilly (1761-1845), melodrama seen in an opera house
13.4 Stendhal (Henri Beyle) (1788-1842)

Chapter 14
14.1 Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1835)
14.2 Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848)
14.3 John Everett Millais, *The Bride of Lammermoor*
14.4 Daniel Auber (1782-1871) by Hortense Haudecourt-Lescot (1784-1845)
14.5 Jules Massenet (1842-1912)
14.6 Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924)
14.7 Massenet, *Manon*, playbill, 1884
14.8 Sibyl Sanderson as Manon
14.9 Manon at the Inn
14.10 Offenbach, *Orphée aux enfers*, playbill, 1874
14.11 *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* a. Antonia
14.14 Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1987-1957), photo

Chapter 15
15.1 Tchaikovsky with Medeya Mei and Nikolai Figner, the creators of Lisa and Herman
15.2 *The Queen of Spades*, Herman and the Countess
15.3 *The Queen of Spades*, The Gambling Scene
15.4 Leos Janáček (1854-1928), relief sculpture
15.5 *The Makropulos Case*, BBC Proms
15.6 *The Makropulos Case*, Vienna

Chapter 16
16.1 Modeste Mussorgsky (1839-1881) by Ilya Repin (1844-1930)
16.2 *Boris Godunov*, Boris’s death
16.3 Benjamin Britten (1913-1976), photo
16.4 *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach on the train
16.5 *Death in Venice*, Aschenbach and Tadzio
16.6 Franz Schreker (1878-1934)
Chapter 17

17.1 *La Muette de Portici*, Masaniello and Fenella
17.2 Arthur Hughes (1832-1915) *Ophelia* 1852. Her impending doom referenced by the bat approaching in the gloom. When down the weedy trophies and herself fell in the weeping brook.
17.3 *Hamlet* John Everett Millais (1829-1896), *Ophelia, with poppies, violets and forget-me-nots*, 1852
17.4 Pietro del Pollaiolo (1443-1496) attrib., *Apollo and Daphne*

Chapter 18

18.1 Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), *Undine*, 1909
18.2 E.T.A. Hoffman (1776-1822) by Johann Passini, after Wilhelm Hensel, 1822
18.3 *Undine*, stage design by Schinkel: The Castle
18.4 *Undine*, stage design by Schinkel: The Liebestod
18.5 Albert Lortzing (1801-1851)
18.6 Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813-1869)
18.7 Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904), photo
18.8 *Rusalka*, Ruzena Maturova, premiere (Prague, 1901)
18.9 *Undine*, German postcard
18.10 Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)
18.11 Charles Gounod (1818-1893)
18.12 Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), photo
18.13 *Mephistopheles* by Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), *Illustrations from Faust*
18.14 *Faust* Vision of Marguerite, Scene from the Prologue in Gounod’s opera
18.15 *Faust meets Marguerite* from Delacroix, *Illustrations*
18.16 Marguerite at the Spinning Wheel, from Delacroix, *Illustrations*
18.17 *Faust and Marguerite in the Garden*, Kupferstich by Moritz von Schwind (1804-1871)
18.18 Ary Scheffer (1795-1858), Marguerite and Mephistopheles in Church
18.19 Ludwig Ferdinand Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794-1872), *Faust and Marguerite in Prison*
18.20 *The Prison Scene*, from Delacroix, *Illustrations*
18.21 Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924)
18.22 Pelléas and Mélisande at the Well Edmund Blair Leighton (1852-1922)
18.23 Pelléas and Mélisande at the Tower
18.24 The Death of Mélisande
Chapter 19
19.1 Wagner by Franz von Lenbach, 1871
19.2 Rienzi, Victorious entry into Rome, Dresden 1842
19.3 Der fliegende Holländer, Senta’s sacrifice, Dresden 1843
19.4 Tannhäuser in the Venusberg, Dresden 1845
19.5 Laurence Koe (active 1888-1904), Venus and Tannhäuser, 1896
19.6 Tannhäuser, St Elisabeth
19.7 Robinet Testard (1470-1523), The Allegory of Music
19.8 Lohengrin, Elsa von Brabant
19.9 Lohengrin, Elsa and Lohengrin parting
19.10 Lohengrin and the Swan, Neuschwanstein
19.11 The Swan Grotto at Linderhof
19.12 Miniature from the MS of Tristan et Iseult
19.13 Stained glass window of Tristan and Isolde
19.14 Tristan und Isolde, the creators Ludwig and Malwine Schnorr von Carolsfeld
19.15 John William Waterhouse, Tristan and Isolde
19.16 Herbert Draper (1863-1920), Tristan und Isolde
19.17 Ignatius Tascher (1871-1913), Parsifal, 1901
19.18 William Morris (1834-1896), Vision of the Holy Grail
19.19 The Last Supper, Holy Chalice, Valencia Cathedral, carved from deep red agate
19.20 Parsifal, The Good Friday Spell, Bayreuth 1882
19.21 Parsifal clutches his heart at seeing the agony of Amfortas. Fidus from Jugend, 1900-09
19.22 Ferdinand Leeke (1839-1923), Kundry dies with Parsifal blessing the Knights with the Grail
19.23 Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904), Das Rheingold
19.24 Arthur Rackham, Die Walküre, Brünhilde’s Pleading, 1910
19.25 Franz von Metzner (1870-1919), Siegfried
19.26 Ludwig Habig (1872-1949), Siegfried with the Forest Bird, 1905
19.27 Hendrich Hermann (1854-1931), Götterdämmerung, Siegfried’s Death, 1906
19.28 Arthur Rackham, Götterdämmerung, Brünhilde’s Immolation, 1911

Chapter 20
20.1 Der Freischütz, the Wolfs Glen, design Simon Quaglio (1795-1878), Munich 1822
20.2 The Snake-Goddess, Palace of Knossis (1600 BC)
20.3 Rusalka, Song to the Moon, the Metropolitan Opera
20.4 Edward Burne-Jones. Mirror of Venus from The Flower Book, 1905
20.5 Hecate. William Blake, The Triple Hecate, 1795
20.6 Die Zauberflöte, stage design with Sphinx and moon by Schinkel
20.7 Ernest Rodin (1840-1917), The Kiss
20.8 Giotto (1276-1337), Two Kisses from the Scrovegni Chapel, 1305
   a. The Legend of Joachim at the Golden Gate
   b. The Kiss of Judas
20.9 Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys (1829-1904), Helen of Troy, 1867
20.10 Mélisande hangs her hair from the Tower
20.11 Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), *The Birth of Venus*
   a. The pagan image of Venus
   b. Venus reflected in the portrait of the Virgin
20.12 Donatello (1386-1466), *Saint Mary Magdalene*

**Chapter 21**

21.1 *Tannhäuser*, The Hall of Song
21.2 *Tannhäuser*, The Song Contest
21.3 Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The Glorification of the Virgin* (c. 1490–1495)
21.4 John Collier (1850-1934), *Tannhäuser in the Venusberg*
21.5 Andrea Mantegna (1456–1459), *St. Sebastian*

**Chapter 23**

23.1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
23.2 *Laocoön* (1st c. BC)
23.3 The Fall of Man, *Adam and Eve* by Giuseppe Cades, after Raphael (1483-1520)
23.4 John Collier, *Lilith*
23.5 Masaccio (1401-1428), *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*. They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, Through Eden took their solitary way…
23.6 Giovanni Bellini, *The Blood of the Redeemer*

**Chapter 25/Coda**

25.1. Villa Wahnfried, Wagner’s House in Bayreuth: *Wahn* (delusion, madness) and *Friede* (peace, freedom)
25.2 Palazzo Vendramin Calergi, Venice
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The colloquialism “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings” sums up a popular view of opera: that operas are full of buxom singers and extreme emotions, and tend to end when women die. In fact, the saying has been attributed historically to baseball games, church services as well as to the final Acts of Wagner’s operas *Götterdämmerung* and *Tristan and Isolde*.

As it happens, the nature of and reasons for Isolde’s collapse and subsequent demise at the end of *Tristan* go to the heart of this extraordinary book on love and unexplained death in opera, elegantly penned by musician and cultural historian, Robert Letellier, epidemiologist Dale Hesdorffer and distinguished neurologist Michael Trimble. It is a wonderful journey through the emotional landscapes of our cultural history, as expressed in the most empathetically communicative of our art forms - opera. The authors trace the operatic and medical history of *Liebestod* (love-death) from Fouqué’s novella *Undine*, much influenced by Paracelsus in a combination of the new scientific medical spirit and Neo-Platonism, through E.T.A. Hoffmann’s opera/melodrama, to Lortzing’s *Undine* and Wagner’s own *Tannhäuser*. Both Tristan and Isolde die of a “love potion” But whereas Tristan kills himself by ecstatically removing the dressings from his wounds, Isolde collapses in a way reminiscent of disorders of the autonomic nervous system. In fact, as Michael Trimble has pointed out in his excellent writings on music, the experience of music is in itself closely related to autonomic activity.

The authors also explore the philosophical and literary highways and byways of this colourful journey. The theme of love and unexplained death is traced from the Bible, through the stories of Ananias and Sapphira, Enoch and Moses to *Pyramus and Thisbe, Romeo and Juliet*, Goethe, Scottish ballads, Emily Brontë and Tennyson. As the authors point out, Wagner’s own death was intimately intertwined with the loves of his life and his planned article “The Eternal in the Feminine” - the diagnosis of heart disease was kept from him. And as they conclude:
“Humans are distinguished from other animals by several fundamental behaviours, especially the six L’s of life: Language, Lying, Laughter, Lacrymation, Lyric and Love. For 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”.
PROLOGUE

Opera is a song of love and death, of conditions which bypass rational understanding. This linked it to those ancient mysteries which the Renaissance revived; its practitioners remain devotees of the mysterious transformations probed by religion.¹

The association of love with death is a universal phenomenon in art and in the world’s religions. And since art has emerged as a way of seeking to articulate or express the universal truths enshrined in faith and mythology, it is hardly surprising that it is central to that most complex fusion of drama and song, the lyric genre of opera. Peter Conrad’s book *A Song of Love and Death: A Meaning of Opera* is one of the only comprehensive texts to explore the unbelievably believable world of one of the greatest art forms of human creation. This seems somewhat surprising, in the sense that so many famous operas involve death at some point, even in apparently comic circumstances. In this book, we have attempted to closely examine what we have termed *Unexpected Death*, those that seem to occur without perhaps an obvious cause, so-called *Unexplained Death*.

All who write about the history of opera start with the Orpheus myth. One of the very first operas, Claudio Monteverdi’s (1567-1643) *Orfeo* (1607), tells of the origins and mysteries of music and the importance of Apollo (the father of Orfeo), bringer of light and order. The story is well-known. Orfeo is to marry Euridice, and when she dies from a snake bite, he resolves to rescue her from Hades. Pluto hears Orfeo’s beautiful music and grants him permission to take Euridice back to the world on the condition that he does not look at her as they ascend. He looks, she disappears, Apollo appears, and Orfeo ascends with him to heaven, where he will see Euridice in the stars.

As we follow opera’s development, Orphic laments are renewed on the stage until today, yet from early times the energies of Dionysus, with the charge of Eros, complemented by Thanatos, galvanized and emboldened the myths and music. For about the last 250 years a relatively stable ‘canon’ of ‘classical’ music which ‘harnesses’ human nature has developed, notably in the Western world: a tradition, upheld by our responses to music, so often intense and emotional.² Opera charts the latter. The 19th century saw a rise in the number of deaths with transcendental dimensions
and themes of redemption. It is widely accepted that such developments
caracterised the operas of Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who wanted to
‘redeem’ not only his protagonists but opera itself. Music needed drama
and vice-versa, delivered with mighty sounds and glorious visions exulting
final moments of epiphany.³

There are many well-explained causes of death in opera (for example, by
murder, poison, illness etc., but it is the Unexpected Deaths which
intrigued the authors. It seemed to be one of the topoi linked with the rise
of Romanticism, and we wanted to explore how they may intertwine with
such concepts as Redemption, transcendentalism, states of consciousness
and religion. We set about this task by reading many librettos, examining
the associated musical styles, and looking at the socio-historico-cultural
circumstances of the plots. Between us we have seen and written about
many operas, explored such themes in discussions with friends and
colleagues, and asked ourselves, as others we later note have implied, are
those Unexpected Deaths unexplained? Indeed, sudden death is a
commonly reported experience, but even today, with our advanced
medical knowledge, sometimes causes cannot be found. Watching
characters suddenly expiring on stage, so often females and at the end of
the drama, asked for a resolution.

In this book, to we have tried to examine that challenge by combining our
understanding and intimate knowledge of music (Robert Letellier) with
our studies of medicine (Michael Trimble), and epidemiological expertise
on causes of death in various circumstances (Dale Hesdorffer). To
complement our disquisition, we explore some philosophical perspectives
of those who have ventured to step into the murky waters of music, look at
the meanings of transcendentalism, tried to navigate from the erotic
mysteries of Tristan und Isolde to the spiritual transcendence of Parsifal,
and constructively deconstruct the metaphysical dialectic between love
and death. The latter brings us to the famous Liebestod (Love-Death), the
long history of which we uncover: it was not simply a Liszt-Wagner
neologism. We consider in some detail the compositions and writings of
Wagner. The raison d’être of our work should not be perceived as yet
another study of Wagner, but he is germane to many of our ideas, and the
principal articulator of the issues involved. His ideas were kindled early.
At the age of 19 he sketched out the libretto of his first opera, Die
Hochzeit (The Wedding), inspired by an E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822)
tale. A bride (Ada) is attracted to a stranger (a magnetism referred to by
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749–1832, as elective affinities) whom
she sees at her wedding procession. She shudders at his sight. Later, he
climbs to her bedroom, where she awaits her bridegroom (Arindal). She fights with him and hurls him into the courtyard below, where he dies. The bride’s father wants the murdered man to be buried in front of the whole clan because a divine sign will reveal who is guilty of the murder. The bride shows signs of madness, locks herself in her room, but appears at the funeral and, as the body is carried past, sinks lifeless, falling onto his dead body.

Even before *Die Hochzeit*, as a teenager Wagner had written sketches for stories with gruesome endings; such metaphysical paradigms that came to dominate his later works clearly had early beginnings. The opera was never performed in Wagner’s lifetime, and he immediately went on to compose *Die Feen* (1833). Unlike *Die Hochzeit*, the latter (which we discuss in Chapter 19), has many of the themes and tropes that can be found in one form or another in all Wagner’s later operas, especially the idea that the power of love can overcome death. *Die Feen* moreover has an Orpheus and Euridice-inspired ending in which unreconcilable worlds are reconciled with redemptive poignancy. In later chapters, we discuss Wagner’s obsession with death, and his views on the feminine—*Die Ewig-Weibliche*, the eternal feminine.

The first Part of this book deals with the origins of opera and the emergence of Romantic ideology (Chapters 1 and 2), transcendentalism and phenomenology (Chapters 3 and 4), and out-of-body experiences (Chapter 5). We open several lines of enquiry which lay out the foundations of our journey to explore the Unexpected, introducing some philosophical ideas that are emergent and necessary to penetrate into cultural and musical developments of the 19th century. It is difficult to explore themes of death in opera from the specific perspective we have chosen without noting well-reported experiences in contemporary literature and medical circles of alteration of mind and body, such as twilight states, trances, dreams and bodily transmigrations. At the same time we need to emphasise matters of the heart, metaphorical and literal which are embedded in literature from very early days.

After that lead-in, Part 2 reviews some Romantic *topoi*. We briefly meet Orpheus again, but then note the dramas of several operas with death as a prominent theme (Chapter 6). This is followed by biblical, poetic and dramatic accounts of sudden death, introducing Love-Death, the *Liebestod* itself (Chapter 7). These themes echo from ancient sources, but we follow their representation in opera as a prelude to various forms of Love-Death
(Chapter 8). In these, the apparent cause of death derives from the drama (such as by illness, poisoning or execution) and may be referred to as explained. The chapter ends with a comment on the following two chapters which expand on important concepts which reverberate in later sections of our book. These concern the Elemental Being (from early origins to her resurrection, especially with Hoffmann’s Undine) and the transcendental symbolism of water and flames (Chapter 9). In chapter 10 we draw attention to a variant of love-death which is rarely discussed, the masculine Liebestod.

Before embarking on our analysis of the operas that we identify with Unexpected Death, we first return (in Part 3) to the development of music and opera from the late 18th to the late 19th century, picking up from our introduction in Chapter 2. We have split the dramatic progression of operatic exposition into two sections to better enable the co-occurrence of musical themes, especially following the French revolution(s), with singing (as the castrati lost favour), scenery and lighting (Chapter 11). Chapter 12 looks at the fate of the unbroken musical line, the development of the aria, the growing influence of the librettist and the rise of French Grand Opera.

In Part 4 we get to the heart of the matter, the kernel of our exposition to try to understand the so-called Unexpected Deaths. As an introduction to our methods we return to important medical themes which were progressing in the 19th century, and include a brief excursion into what is referred to as the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). We introduce physiology, and aspects that we consider have been seriously neglected in discussions of these deaths, pivoting on the heart as the ‘seat’ of the emotions, and the widespread somatic effects of autonomic disturbance. We thought that these might play a role in explaining those Unexpected Deaths, and one way to find out was to read the relevant librettos. To identify the latter, we inductively used our knowledge of many operas, and singled out as many as we could find with such deaths and noted references to signs and symptoms of ANS dysfunction (Chapter 13).

There is a brief intermission, and the operas that are our primary database are shown in List 1. Part 5 is our summary of 50 operas, in which one or more of the protagonists suddenly die. We briefly describe the story, quote sections of the libretti which hint at autonomic instability, set the deaths in contexts of the social/political circumstances of composition, and review the music.
To help our venture, we have divided the libretti into six chapters. Chapters 14, 15 and 16 deal with females and males separately in whom the ANS could be implicated in the sudden death.

We singled out some operas for special consideration, analysed in Chapters 17, 18 and 19. They do not all reference to autonomic events, but we selected them because their special themes are relevant to ideas fostering Romantic opera (such as La Muette di Portici), because they adopt specific settings (such as the Undine and Faust operas, or Pélèas et Mélisande), or because they were composed by Wagner. The reason to look in detail at the latter is their special relevance to our concerns: List 1 reveals that he was the composer whose operas most involved \textit{Unexpected Death}, especially in females.

In Chapter 20 we analyse specific aspects of the operas from List 1, with a further brief medical interpolation before we document important themes and variations that infuse Romantic operas with meaning, so often elided in productions or discussions of the genre.

In Chapters 21, 22 and 23 we delve into associations intertwining transcendence, Redemption, Love and the \textit{Liebestod}, and in Chapter 24 we offer reflections on our quest into the unexplained: we finish with a coda.

We cite the titles of all works, especially operas, in the original language with English translation. We use English-language versions of the libretti for immediacy of access for readers. Some terms are traditionally known in their original medium: \textit{Liebestod}, \textit{Ewig-Weibliche}, but are used interchangeably with their English translations: ‘Love-Death’, ‘the Eternal Feminine’. \textit{Liebestod} is often, but not always, associated with the musical form of this \textit{topos} because of its occurrence in \textit{Tristan und Isolde}. Our book is devoted to exploring the meaning of these terms.

A key understanding of the love-death, a recurrent \textit{Liebestod} motif, is the death of a protagonist (usually female) through illness in a situation which highlights the fragility of the human condition and underscores the tragedy of a doomed love that can find fulfilment only in death.

In all these matters the questions of song (as Apollonian) and inebriation/madness (as Dionysian) are operatic phenomena intimately associated with the core issues of transcendence, Redemption and their relation to the key concepts/metonym of \textit{Unexpected Death}. In this respect the Mad Scene from Donizetti’s \textit{Lucia di Lammermoor} (1835) and Isolde’s \textit{Liebestod} in
Tristan und Isolde (1865) attain iconic status where music, love and transcendent death coalesce perfectly.

We have surveyed a small collection of operas from the vast corpus that has been composed over time, and it must be the case that we have missed many which may have ANS references in the libretti to explain an Unexpected Death. We have tried to be inclusive but have been somewhat limited by the ‘canon’ of works that have held critics and audiences’ attention over time. We assume that this is so because these operas, their themes and music, and the effects they have on us, contain and retain special features and emotional resonances which resound within the human spirit.

Whether we succeed in explaining the Unexpected Deaths, only further examination of this theme by others will tell. In any case, we hope that our embrace of the theme of Unexpected Death within cultural, scientific and political events related to the composers and their compositions will help those who want to explore further some of the greatest works of music ever composed. Opera, bringing life even to death, renders comprehension about what it means to be a human being, offering an unfolding of self-knowledge and feelings perhaps greater than any other art form.

Notes

3 An excellent text, with special emphasis on German music and opera is: Eichner, B. History in Mighty Sounds: Musical Constructions of German National Identity, 1848-1914 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012).
4 Die Sarazenin (Saracen Girl) and Die Bergwerke zu Falun (The Mines of Falun, from a Hoffmann story.)
5 See for example: Glasenapp, C. F., Das Leben Richard Wagners, trans. Ashton Ellis, W.M. (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, Ltd 1900), 142-3. The links from Die Hochzeit to Die Feen include old Germanic and Norse names, end-rhyme and alliteration, and an early example of a Leitmotiv. Not much music was written, but his sister Rosalie thought it was terrible, and told Wagner to destroy it.
PART 1: ORIGINS
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO DEATH AND OPERA

THROUGH the soft evening air enwinding all,
Rocks, woods, fort, cannon, pacing sentries, endless wilds,
In dulcet streams, in flutes’ and cornets’ notes,
Electric, pensive, turbulent artificial,
(Yet strangely fitting even here, meanings unknown before,
Subliter than ever, more harmony, as if born here, related here,
Not to the city’s fresco’d rooms, not to the audience of the opera house,
Sounds, echoes, wandering strains, as really here at home,
Sonnambula’s innocent love, trios with Norma’s anguish,
And thy ecstatic chorus Poliuto;)
Ray’d in the limpid yellow slanting sundown,
Music, Italian music in Dakota.

... (Walt Whitman, *Italian Music in Dakota*)

The Theme

“And the secret of love is greater than the mystery of death” [Und das Geheimnis der Liebe ist grôsser als das Geheimnis des Todes]. In 1901, the composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949) came across the German translation of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*, and the opera, with the libretto by Hedwig Lachmann (1865-1918), was premiered in Dresden in 1905. The play was a cynosure of the prevailing fin-de-siècle art, closely entwined with late Gothic symbolism, decadence, and aestheticism. Wilde probably was inspired by the novel *À Rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) in which the decadent Des Esseintes slavers over two paintings by Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) depicting Salome. One, *The Apparition* (1876), shows the head of John the Baptist hovering in...
front of her, eyes staring down on the near naked dancer, dripping blood surrounded by a halo.

The story of the opera is well known even if it seems to have no biblical equivalent. The imprisoned Jokanaan (John the Baptist) rails against Salome’s mother and her incestuous marriage to Herod. Salome persuades the captain of the guard, Narraboth, to let her see Jokanaan, and he is brought from prison. She is besotted by him, he refuses to kiss her, she develops a passion which rapidly becomes an obsession. Herod’s own lust for Salome leads him to ask her to dance, for which he will offer her anything she desires. After the seventh veil has fallen, it is the head of Jokanaan on a silver dish. She kisses the lips of the severed head, his lips and blood tasting bitter, the taste of love. [Fig. 1.1 Moreau, *Salome*]

Not to be confused with Mary Salome, present at Christ’s crucifixion (Mark 15:40-41), here Salome is portrayed as “the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust...the accursed beauty...like the Helen of ancient myth”. The music is intoxicating, and in this short story there are three deaths (Narraboth, Jokanaan and Salome). The story also includes a suicide, incest, a curse, religion, a fascination with the East, obsession, madness and altered mental states, eroticism, necrophilia and a *Liebestod*. The encounter between Salome and Jokanaan functions at a deep Biblical level. There are sacred and profane implications, along with Salome’s erotic language and imagery of the Song of Songs. Salome’s obsession with Jokanaan is paralleled by Narraboth’s and Herod’s for her. Her descent into madness activates her already overexcited body. Salome is swiftly executed; there is only the bitter sweet of tragedy to savour, no redemption or salvation—but there is the music.

The closing scene of the opera, with the Dance of the Seven Veils, the fatal request, the execution of Jokanaan, the presentation of his head, and the extended soliloquy as Salome indulges her lust, conjure up a claustrophobic atmosphere, a sultry intensity of torrid heat and moral torpidity. The atmosphere is sustained by the tonal language, with its subdued intensity, its constant background of shimmering violin tremolos and a reiterated three-note motif, quiet but obsessively insistent. It generates unease and fearfulness, representing as it does the nauseous fixation of Salome’s perverted desire.

Salome is one epigone of a *femme fatale*, which fascinated the artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, with a historical resonance going back to Eve, Circe, Cleopatra, and many others, whose existence hovers between reality
and mythology, often with supernatural overtones. In the 12th and 13th centuries, courtly love within the Troubadour tradition vies with eroticism and the fearful embrace. Passion undermining social conventions is a theme well represented in poetry and literature, especially reinvigorated in the Romantic era. John Keats’s (1795-1821) *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia*, Gustave Flaubert’s (1821-1880) *Salammbô*, Anatole France’s (1844-1924) *Thaïs*, compete with Algernon Swinburne’s (1837-1909) *Dolores* and *Faustine*, and images portrayed in the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and Moreau. Such depictions provide dramatic potential and find expression in opera. [Fig. 1.2 Salome]

Wilde’s Salomé is a reflection of the moon, pale and ever-loitering, a daughter of Babylon. Along with others such as Frank Wedekind’s (1864-1918) *Lulu* “…created for every abuse,/To allure and poison and seduce,/To murder without leaving trace”, they portray myths which segue with the more Romantic concerns of the female and powers of love and loss which emerged with opera of the 19th century. This book is concerned with the different physical and psychological congeries which abound in Strauss’s Salomè.

As a younger composer, Strauss had described himself as a complete Wagnerian. But even if later he made “a detour round him”, the ideas and works of Richard Wagner and the *Liebestod*, quite different from some of the other songs of love and death that we discuss later, will be central to the themes of our work.5

**A Song of Love and Death**

Peter Conrad, in *A Song of Love and Death* (1987), refers to opera as “an art devoted to love and death”.6 From the earliest operas, portraying the plight of Orpheus and his loss of Eurydice, death by one means or another, so often forms part of the drama. Orpheus—the son of Oeagrus the Greek river god (or Apollo) and the muse Calliope—was a singer of holy songs, performed with a lyre or cithara, mastered harmony, charmed the flora and fauna and fell in love with Eurydice. She was bitten on the ankle by a serpent, when alone and possibly running away barefoot from the shepherd Aristaeus, who was chasing her (according to Vergil), perhaps before the marriage to Orpheus was consummated. The virgin could not be revived by the songs of Orpheus, and died.7

The idea of drama being performed with music emerged in Florence in the 1590s and the first opera to survive intact was Jacopo Peri’s (1561-1633)
Introduction to Death and Opera

Euridice (1600, libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini, 1552-1621). The score was probably known to Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) whose opera La favola d’Orfeo (1607) is considered as the first great opera. Here was a statement of the power of music to arouse emotion, reflecting on the glorious past of Classical Antiquity [Fig. 1.3-4, Orpheus, mosaics]

At the end of Peri’s Euridice, Orpheus and Eurydice embrace. Monteverdi has Apollo descending, assuring Orpheus that he will be immortal and see Eurydice again among the stars. Orpheus wants his lamentations to be heard by all.

The music of Christof Willibald Gluck’s (1714-1787) Orfeo ed Euridice (1762) has him mourning by the side of Lake Avernus, a portal to the underworld. As in other versions of the story, he descends to Hades to recover Eurydice (in some to redeem her) and to recover his lost self. After all, he was not the first to go to Hades (the katabasis): Hercules had been there. But Pluto laid down the law and stipulated that Orpheus could take Eurydice with him as long as he did not look back at her until he had returned across the Avernus. Gluck’s Eurydice implored him to turn to her; Monteverdi pitted love against death, but he looked, and she disappeared [Fig. 1.5-10, Orpheus in the Underworld, Orpheus and Eurydice].

Luigi Rossi’s (1597-1653) Orpheus (1647) and Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice gave us happy endings. Orfeo’s lament in Gluck’s music “Che farò senza Euridice” (What will I do without Eurydice) is of such beauty that Amor appears and restores her to life. Orfeo and Eurydice return from the underworld and there is general rejoicing. In Joseph Haydn’s (1732-1809) Orfeo ed Euridice (1791), on the ascent, Eurydice places herself directly in front of Orfeo and removes her veil. He sees her ‘gracious face’, but the Furies seize Eurydice. A bacchante (follower of Dionysus) offers Orfeo a drink—the nectar of love, which is a poison—and he dies. In Ovid’s tale, Orpheus was subject to sparagmos, being torn asunder by the Maenads on account of rejecting women. The happy endings rather give way to a developing Romanticism and the destructive influences of Dionysus. However, whichever version of the myth is adopted, the ability of music to elevate souls and overcome death is poignant. Conrad insists that “Orpheus is opera’s founder, and he presides over it throughout its subsequent history”. [Figs. 1.7-10, The Death of Orpheus]
The Birth of Tragedy

Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, 1872) has been read in many ways. It can be seen as a diatribe against the decline of German culture from the high standards of Classical Greek ideals, within which is an appeal for a regeneration of the former, focussed on works of poet and composer Richard Wagner. It is surely an encomium to Wagner, who at the time of its publication was a confidant as well as a reflective mirror for Nietzsche’s ideas, musical and classical. However, Nietzsche’s book is also a serious attempt to examine the birth and then decline of Tragedy as an art form. It is one opening to examining the question of why Tragedy is somehow pleasing to us as an aesthetic art-form. What is the pleasure we get from seeing Tragedy on the stage, in the opera house, at the cinema or on the television? Just why do we have the response we have to Tragedy, which often involves crying, and a consolation of the falling tears? [Fig. 1.11 Nietzsche]

Three aspects of Nietzsche’s theories are pertinent to the ideas opening up in him and this book. Firstly, the full title—The Birth of Tragedy, out of the Spirit of Music—affirms music as central both to his thesis but also to the questions posed above. Secondly, he introduces the interplay between the two iconic Greek gods, Dionysus and Apollo. These cannot be taken literally, and are used by him as emblems for his theories. We will meet them again later. Thirdly, and much less commented on, is Nietzsche’s use of physiological and psychological ideas that were current at the time of his composition.10

Nietzsche was a scholar of Greek culture, and as a frequent visitor to Wagner’s house at Triebschen he was well acquainted with Wagner’s ideas. The latter was incorporating Greek theatrical concepts and models into the plots of his operas. Music was played and philosophy discussed. The intellectual Zeitgeist had heralded a return to the ideas of Ancient Greece, inspired by despair at the lack of a defined German theatrical and cultural tradition.

The Desires of Eros

Ever since our species began to tell stories, the awareness of, and later the conflict between the world of nature and that of human consciousness became one avenue of exploration. So did the clash between consciousness and social conventions. The enclosed intellectual world of the Middle