

Prayer is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a “supplication or expression addressed to God or a god; an earnest request or wish. Prayer is most often someone asking for something but prayer can be in the form of a blessing, praise or an intercession.

In life, man follows the natural law, which inclines him to believe in a higher power. It is to this higher power, whether it is God, a god, nature or some other form of power that man turns, especially in times of conflict and prays. Opera is drama, a story of human conflict expressed through song and acting.

Just as prayers are a common part of everyday life, so is art. Art and life are so connected that it is no coincidence that they imitate each other. It is not surprising therefore, to find prayer in one of the greatest of the musical arts, opera. Six operas where prayer is expressed are : Parsifal, Tannhäuser, The Magic Flute, Xerxes, Boris Godunov, and La Juive.

In Parsifal, by Richard Wagner the character of Amfortas, a young king, is suffering. In the beginning of the opera, the audience learns that Amfortas was put in charge of guarding the Holy Grail and the Spear of Destiny (lance that pierced Christ) by his father Titurel. When attempting to defeat a renegade knight named Klingsor, Amfortas was seduced by his toady Kundry and as a result dropped the spear. The Spear of Destiny was then taken by Klingsor, who then stabbed Amfortas in his side. Amfortas suffered a wound that perpetually bled and caused great pain. The pain increased whenever Amfortas was in the presence of the uncovered Holy Grail- which occurred frequently. As king, he would officiate at holy ceremonies which involved direct contact with the relic.

Moving forward in the opera to Act III, we find that Titurel is dead and the knights of the Grail have all but fallen to pieces and lost hope of ever retrieving the Spear of Destiny. Amfortas, despite receiving balsam from Kundry, who is revealed to be a Mary Magdalene of sorts, is in such great pain, that his only wish is to die. His desire to do so is only amplified by the sight of his noble earthly father, lying before him in a casket and the pains of his wound, which remind him of the ones received by Jesus on the cross. He expresses his wishes in the aria “Mein Vater”.

Amfortas, against the wishes of his fellow knights, cries for his poisoned wound to seize his heart and invoke death. As his direct prayers are not immediately heard, he then implores his birth father- Titurel- to intercede on his behalf.

When even this prayer goes unanswered, Amfortas descends into madness and asks that the fellow knights stab him so that he may bleed to death.

In one of the more startling passages in a Wagnerian opera, a bass-baritone implores by singing a high-G. The mere effect on register and sound produced by the bass-baritone causes the listener to understand that Amfortas has truly reached the breaking point, in terms of vocal range and in mental character. The effect is further enhanced by the chromaticism being played by the orchestra beneath him.

In true operatic spirit, when all seems lost, a resolution is found. Parsifal, the hero of the opera and a knight of the Grail, who in Act I had been entrusted to return the spear, returns with the lance in hand and touches it to Amfortas’ side, freeing the king of his pain and resulting in a spiritual conversion among the surrounding knights who have become hungry for the Eucharist. In the end, Amfortas’ prayers were answered by God, in the form of a young knight that heeded God’s call.

With the amount of spirituality in his last opera, it is not surprising that prayer plays a part in one of Wagner's earlier operas, *Tannhäuser*. The story of *Tannhäuser* centers on a song contest in the Kingdom of Wartburg. *Tannhäuser*, the protagonist of the opera has spent much of his time in the Venusberg in the arms of Venus herself. Yet, despite the charms of the goddess, *Tannhäuser* yearns to return to the real world and to the girl he once loved, Elizabeth, who lives in Wartburg. On his way to the castle he stops to kneel down and pray before a crucifix, whereupon he is recognized by a passer-by, Wolfram von Essenbach, who also happens to be an old friend. Wolfram, who is also going to Wartburg, invites *Tannhäuser* to join him. There they may both partake in the song competition.

In Wartburg, the song competition begins. The topic of song: love. Everyone sings of love in noble terms. This begins to eat away at *Tannhäuser*, who suddenly begins to remember his lustful days in the Venusberg. He soon boasts of them aloud and is exiled from the kingdom for his foul mouth. He may only return if he receives reconciliation from the pope in Rome. Elizabeth, in spite of being offended, still loves *Tannhäuser* and prays earnestly for him. Wolfram is uneasy with this, because he too loves Elizabeth but resolves that he will never have her so he too prays for *Tannhäuser* with her. This culminates in Act III's "O du mein holder Abendstern".

In this song to the evening star, Wolfram sings, accompanied by his harp, of the darkness that now covers the land (presumably, because Elizabeth has given up her life to God, so that *Tannhäuser* may be saved.). there is a light that guides through the darkness- Elizabeth. *Tannhäuser* returns from Rome with dismay- the pope has denied him reconciliation. *Tannhäuser*'s salvation will come "when the Pope's staff grows leaves"... in other words, never. *Tannhäuser* resigns himself to his fate and returns to the Venusberg. In what can be seen as a prayer of intercession- Wolfram's hymn seems to have brought about the guidance of Elizabeth who through her prayerful life and recent death has caused a miracle to happen: the pope's staff has sprouted leaves and *Tannhäuser* is redeemed.

The orchestral accompaniment to "O du mein holder Abendstern" is quite sparse, consisting mainly of harp and light strings. This does not mitigate Wagner's ability to color the text, from darkness decking the land ("Dämmrung deckt die Lande") being evoked in G-minor triplet arpeggios with the harp in the home key, to the shining of the evening star in the relative major evoked with tremolo strings. The overall theme of the piece is not despair but hope when all seems lost. This echoes the biblical phrase "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...". In other words, evil will not touch someone who has the light of God on his side, or at least someone interceding on his behalf in the case of Elizabeth and *Tannhäuser*.

Prayer over others or on their behalf is not merely confined to Christian characters. Sarastro's aria "O Isis und Osiris" from Mozart's *Magic Flute* is a good example of this type of prayer. Occurring at the beginning of the second act, "O Isis und Osiris" is the blessing which the Egyptian priest Sarastro prays over the newly paired couple Tamino and Pamina. The purpose of the prayer is to invoke the wisdom of the gods upon the two before they begin their journey towards enlightenment in the Temple of the Sun. Along this journey, they will face tests.

The aria is a *molto adagio* in the key of F-major and sits low in the bass tessitura. The result of this is a dark, solemn sound intoned by Sarastro on the opening and ending

notes. A Mozartian orchestra consisting of violins, cellos, bassoons, flutes, trombones, and, depending on the conductor's style, a potential assortment of other instruments, supports the soloist. The resulting sound may be why the aria has been described as, "the only one of its kind that could be put into the mouth of God and not be blasphemous." It may be no coincidence then, that this aria is gaining popularity outside its operatic context and has been used in many memorial settings.

Not all pagan prayer arias are quite so serious. In George Frederick Handel's *Xerxes* the character of Elviro, servant of Arsamenes, brother of the king Xerxes, is caught in a love scandal. Arsamenes is in love with Romilda, whom Xerxes eyes as a potential mistress. Adding to the mix is the daughter of a general, Atalanta, who is in love with Arsamenes. As the nobles work at ways to deceive each another, Elviro becomes a tool in the games of royal love. His breaking point is reached when Xerxes' bridge of boats to Europe breaks apart during a storm. The aria, "Del mio caro baco" symbolizes the chaos into which the characters have flung themselves and the toll the situation has taken on one of its victims, Elviro. The aria is significant because it occurs during a storm which foreshadows the emotional troubles which will come to the nobles.

In the aria, Elviro prays not to a noble god such as Zeus for help- as one would expect. Instead, he offers an indirect prayer to Bacchus through whom all things drinkable come.. Elviro thirsts not for water, which turns one into a hypochondriac ("L'aqua rende ipocondriaco") but for the "good wine of the zodiac so that he may drink until he can no longer lift his head. Elviro wants to drink so that he may forget the chaos around him.

Though the aria is addressed to a Roman god, it does exhibit elements of Zoroastrianism both textually- "il bon vin sin nel zodiaco"- and musically; the aria has a similar feel to arias of the character Zoroastro in Handel's earlier opera *Orlando*. The accompaniment of both works consists of light strings and harpsichords playing with a very bouncy feel and in common time. In the context of musical history, this shouldn't be surprising. Musical "recycling" by composers is quite common. A basic analysis of the two operas also reveals a similar storyline: a prince in love with someone other than the person whom he is supposed to be in love with and that person in turn is in love with somebody else. The characters of Elviro and Zoroastro differ however, because in *Orlando*, Zoroastro is directly and knowingly the cause of the love dispute- he directly manipulates, whereas in *Xerxes*, Elviro is unknowing and is directly manipulated. At the aria's end, it is clear that Elviro is quite distraught and sick of being pushed around by the nobles. His complaints are similar to those expressed by someone faced with mounting troubles, who desperately cries out, "There is no God" even when he believes otherwise. Elviro's aria may seem somewhat "blasphemous" when compared in context to "O Isis und Osiris". Historically speaking, however, it is not without precedent. It was St. Augustine after all, who before his conversion to Christianity uttered the prayer, "Oh Lord, make me a Christian...just not right now".

Rejection of an imposed religion is not always such a light issue. In the case in Jaques Haléy's opera *La Juive*, the unwelcome union between a Christian and a Jewess results in the death of the woman at the hands of an angry mob. Before the Jewess Rachel's execution however, a local cardinal, Brogni, tries to intervene with aria "Si La Rigueur". The aria is similar to Sarastro's aria "O Isis un Osiris" in both key (F-Major) and textual purpose. Brogni implores the crowd and God in a prayer, to give clemency to

the Jewess and to a lesser extent, to her Christian lover Léopold. Brogni declares “Rappelons nous son précepte sacré”- recall the sacred precepts and effectively let “he who is without sin, cast the first stone”.

In the hands of any other composer, the opera would probably end with Rachel and her father converting to Christianity and all living happily ever after. This is not so with *La Juive*. The reason lies in the composer’s faith. Halévy was Jewish. Unlike his predecessors, Halévy lived under the tolerant arm of Napoleon’s empire, which had recently relaxed harsh laws against Jews tracing back to medieval times. With his new found political and religious freedom, Halévy was allowed to write an opera in which the lead Jew was not a back-stabbing Juif Süß, but a friendly heroine, who stood up for what she believed against the bigoted anger of Christian townsfolk. Halévy doesn’t criticize the whole church as being anti-Jewish. Brogni and his aria “*Si LaRigueur*” are Halévy’s insurance against that. For a cardinal of *La Juive*’s time period (fifteenth century) to be that outspoken about tolerating the Jews is quite monumental.

It is in his development of this opera and this aria that perhaps Halévy was as much a successor to the legacy of French composers such as Lully as he was a successor to French visionaries like Nostradamus when it came to Judeo-Catholic relations. John Paul II, breaking with an old tradition that held the Jews to blame for many things both factual and fictional, would redefine the relationship of the Jews to the church as the following:

To the Jews belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ... as Christians await the (second) coming of the Messiah, so do the Jews (the first).

In addition to redefining the relationship, the Pope would also issue an apology to the Jews for the actions committed against them in the past by the Church. Perhaps this scene from *La Juive*, written so long ago can help foster today, in an age of continued anti-Semitism, acceptance of religious differences.

About one hundred years after events in *La Juive* transpired, great political strife overtook Russia, in the form of political murders by numerous members of nobility in a contest for the title of Tsar. Mussorgsky used these events as the subject of his opera *Boris Godunov*. Given the background of this opera and the uncertainty at its beginning, it is appropriate that the opera’s opening scene is one of prayer. In front of the Novodievichy monastery in Moscow, it is announced that Boris, the future Tsar, has refused his crown. The crowd, consisting mainly of blind pilgrims is horrified at this news. Surely lawless anarchy would ensue. Fervently, the crowd utters a prayer to heaven that a Tsar be crowned. In addition to the words, the crowd soon produces various holy relics and icons to be venerated in the hopes of further holy intercession. Their prayers will be answered and Boris will be crowned Tsar.

Musically speaking, the prayer is a mixture of Russian Orthodox-like chant and 18th century Russian Choral Liturgy. The piece has a monophonic feel at times, with the men’s low parts figured in parallel fifths, giving the piece a medieval sense. At the same time, however, the piece diverges with upper lines that are quite florid for Russian choral music. For the most part the chorus stays true to a diatonic A flat-Major key but the chromatic stylings of the Big Five do creep in here and there; the occurrence of a Phrygian cadence that is spelled with a 9th added to the IV chord is not considered

uncommon in this repertory. Though certainly not shocking to the modern ear, the harmony was defiantly nouveau in the late 19th century.

True art is universal; it touches on the human condition in all times and places. The operas, Parsifal, Tannhauser, the Magic Flute, Xerxes, Boris Godunov and La Juive, while taking place in different eras and settings, all explore man's mortality and fragility. Faced with this reality, a human turns in prayer to someone or something with superhuman abilities for guidance, protection and a solution to his earthly dilemmas. The scenes in these operas demonstrate that in art, as in life, prayer is a natural expression of man's awareness of his limitations.