

Beyond the Trigger Warning: Teaching Operas that Depict Sexual Violence

KASSANDRA L. HARTFORD

In November of 2014, in the midst of continuing debates about trigger warnings on syllabi in a series of articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and just ahead of the now-retracted *Rolling Stone* article on a violent rape at the University of Virginia, I went to the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.¹ I sat in my usual seats—row G of the balcony—and found myself seated in the middle of a class visit from what I later learned was a local college. Judging from students' reactions, I expect most of them were unfamiliar with the plot of *Lady Macbeth*. A lively performance featuring the gifted Eva Westbroek elicited more gasps of horror and surprise, more sudden movements in seats, and more wide-eyed exclamations beginning with "Holy," than I had yet encountered at the Met. These were particularly pronounced in the infamous finale to Act I, staged in this version as a literal deflowering: a red rose rising over Katerina and Sergei marked the scene as one of passion. From conversations at intermission, it was clear that students were stunned not by the scene's sexual violence but rather by its—to them titillating—sexual content. As we left the opera, I turned to the person next to me to ask if she found this reading strange: after all, in this scene, Katerina exclaims "Let go!" again and again over a frenetic, violent orchestral gallop. "Well," she said, "it seemed like Katerina wanted it, so it didn't really bother me."

1. Laurie Essig, "Trigger Warnings Trigger Me," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 10, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2014/03/10/trigger-warnings-trigger-me/>; Sarah Roff, "Treatment, Not Trigger Warnings," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 23, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2014/05/23/treatment-not-trigger-warnings/>; Mason Stokes, "In Defense of Trigger Warnings," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 29, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2014/05/29/in-defense-of-trigger-warnings/>; Sabrina Rubin Erdely, "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA," *Rolling Stone* 1223 (2014). The article has been retracted, but can still be accessed online at the following archive link: <http://web.archive.org/web/20141119200349/http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-20141119?page=7>.

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By contemporary legal definitions, the actions of the last scene in the first act of *Lady Macbeth* constitute rape.² Katerina does not consent: she repeatedly asks Sergey to leave. She informs him that he is frightening her. When he grabs her, she repeatedly tells him to let her go. Yet I had just sat through a performance in which the audience—including a group of college students present with an instructor—failed to recognize this as a rape scene. Perhaps even more concerning, I actually *heard* an audience member articulate one of the most damaging myths about rape in response to the production: that women secretly want it.

As an opera goer and an opera lover, I have no wish to discourage students from going to an opera or from having the kind of deep emotional engagement with it that the students attending this performance had. Yet the extraordinary sensory power of opera—the power of an art enacted in time, live, before us—gives it a unique power to affect us. It is designed to do so: that is precisely what Schiller points to in his essay “The Stage as a Moral Institution.” For Schiller, the stage is not just, as his title suggests, a moral institution—one that “pronounces a terrible verdict on vice”—but also “a guide for civil life,” one that teaches us by example about socially appropriate behaviors.³ Few of us in the world of the twenty-first century expect the theatrical or operatic stage to serve as the kind of moral compass Schiller imagined more than two hundred years ago. And yet because of its power, opera *can* shape the way students think about, respond to, and feel about contemporary issues. The reactions that I saw demonstrated that, for at least some audience members, the Met’s production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* perpetuated rape culture. What is “rape culture”? Bonnie Gordon describes it as an ideology that “normalizes rape as part of a larger system of attitudes and understandings of gender and sexuality.”⁴ It does so in part by fostering a body of myths about rape that encourage victim blaming and shaming and that tacitly sanction perpetrators. Common rape myths include the assertions that a woman’s manner of dress may suggest that she is “asking for it”; that most women are raped by strangers; that women cannot be raped by their husbands

2. Although states do report the crime somewhat differently, the Uniform Crime Report’s statistics—those used to measure crimes across states by institutions such as the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation use the following definition: “The penetration, no matter how light, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.” Office of the Attorney General, “Attorney General Eric Holder Announces Revisions to the Uniform Crime Report’s Definition of Rape,” Jan. 6, 2012, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-eric-holder-announces-revisions-uniform-crime-report-s-definition-rape>.

3. Friedrich Schiller, “The Stage as a Moral Institution,” in *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 441, 442. The text is reprinted from Schiller, *Complete Works*, vol. III (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1902). The translator is anonymous.

4. Bonnie Gordon, “Why We Matter,” *Women in Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19 (2015): 119.

or boyfriends; and that women say no when they mean yes. If we understand that *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*—at least in some stagings and without prior critical commentary—can perpetuate rape culture, what does that mean for the opera’s place in our classrooms? Must Katerina Ismailova—one of the most compellingly written female characters in twentieth-century opera—necessarily be cast aside? And how are we to deal with *other* canonical works in which sexual violence figures? It is hard to imagine even an introductory class in music in which operas appear and in which sexual violence, or the threat of it, is entirely absent. For example, one popular textbook, Thomas Forrest Kelly’s *Music Then and Now*, features three such works, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, Berg’s *Wozzeck*, and Bernstein’s *West Side Story*; another well-respected introductory text, Joseph Kerman and Gary Tomlinson’s *Listen*, features all three and *Rigoletto*.⁵

In this article, I suggest that we need not abandon these operas. Rather, I want to argue that it is possible to teach these works in such a way that we not only avoid perpetuating rape culture, but also work to transform it—an idea borrowed from the influential edited collection *Transforming Rape Culture*.⁶ The conversation about trigger warnings in higher education circles in recent years has focused on the needs of trauma survivors. The purpose of a trigger warning is to alert those who have experienced trauma to discussions, texts, and media that may cause them to re-experience trauma, in order that they may better prepare emotionally for the experience or, if necessary, absent themselves from the discussion. Yet by their very nature, trigger warnings are issued for those who have experienced trauma. In confining the way we speak about sexual violence in classrooms to survivors, we can easily overlook the ways that such scenes affect the remainder of our students. In essence, that is, we risk failing to reckon with the broader problem of rape culture when we simply issue a trigger warning—which is why I propose here that we must think beyond the trigger warning.

I outline here four strategies for approaching sexual violence in opera. First—and most importantly—sexual violence must be named as such. As I show, this suggestion is well-supported in both feminist theory and research in the social sciences. Second, instructors can prepare students for such discussions and allot classroom time for the reaction to and processing of these issues. Third, instructors can be cognizant of the ways that particular productions shape students’ understanding of an opera’s meaning; they must choose productions carefully and discuss these productions with students. Finally, I suggest that it is important to identify campus partners among the staff and faculty and to create dialogues about the best practices in conjunction with

5. Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Music Then and Now* (New York: Norton, 2013); Joseph Kerman and Gary Tomlinson with Vivian Kerman, *Listen*, 7th ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012).

6. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth, eds., *Transforming a Rape Culture: Revised Edition* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2005).

those campus partners. By thinking more holistically about the ways that we respond to operatic depictions of rape, I assert that we can retain important and powerful works in the courses that we teach, stimulate students to engage critically with operatic texts and relevant contemporary issues, and work to change rape culture on campus.

Naming Sexual Violence: Theory and Practice

In *Transforming a Rape Culture*, feminist advocate Carol J. Adams notes that “in the absence of naming violence and understanding the dynamics of sexual victimization, it is difficult to believe victims, even though they usually understate the abuse.”⁷ For Adams, the goal of naming sexual violence is to draw the issue out of the shadows in which it hides, and to make it easier both for survivors to come forward and for them to find advocates who will believe them rather than dismissing their experiences. Yet naming sexual violence in the classroom has a secondary purpose: it can clarify what the term *means* for students. As psychology professor Renae Franiuk notes, “Consent is the key issue in cases of sexual assault, and research shows that many people do not fully understand this term in the context of sexual situations.”⁸ Franiuk’s claims are supported by a wealth of new research that locates particular obstacles in gender differences in students’ understanding of consent and in the fact that even victims tend not to recognize experiences of sexual assault as such when they do not adhere to “rape scripts”—that is, a relatively narrow conception of rape that aligns with predominant rape myths (i.e., rapes happen outside, rapists are strangers).⁹

7. Carol J. Adams, “‘I Just Raped My Wife! What are you Going to Do about It, Pastor?’: The Church and Sexual Violence,” in *Transforming a Rape Culture*, ed. Buchwald et al., 80.

8. Renae Franiuk, “Discussing and Defining Sexual Assault: A Classroom Activity,” *College Teaching* 55, no. 3 (2007): 105.

9. For example, Jozkowski et al.’s recent research study notes gender differences in heterosexual college students’ understandings of consent: while women indicate that they tend to *grant* consent verbally, men tend to *interpret* consent through body language, a communication gap that opens the possibility of sexual assault, “as nonconsent that is not recognized and honored by a partner could lead to sexual assault.” This work echoes the findings of earlier research by Terry Humphreys regarding gender differences in the negotiation of sexual consent. Cleere and Lynn have examined the ways in which internalized “rape scripts” have led many unacknowledged victims of sexual assault to characterize experiences that met the definition of sexual assault as “a serious miscommunication.” These results are particularly concerning given that Cleere and Lynn’s research indicated that acknowledged and unacknowledged victims held similar levels of psychological distress in response to these events on all measures except PTSD. Jozkowski et al, “Gender Differences in Heterosexual College Students’ Conceptualizations and Indicators of Sexual Consent: Implications for Contemporary Sexual Assault Prevention Education,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 51, no. 8 (2014): 909–10, 913; Terry Humphreys, “Perceptions of Sexual Consent: The Impact of Relationship History and Gender,” *Journal of Sex Research* 44, no. 4 (2007): 313; Colleen Cleere and Steven Jay Lynn, “Acknowledged Versus

How might this change pedagogy in music history classrooms? First, we as instructors must question received wisdom and take a critical look at the synopses of the operas we teach. The current Grove Music Online summarizes the last scene in the first act of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* by noting that Katerina “succumbs to [Sergei’s] seduction.”¹⁰ Yet Katerina’s text in the libretto simply does not support that reading: she asks Sergei to leave, she tells him he is frightening her, and she repeatedly asks him to let go. Musicologists often refer to the scene as a seduction or as an “ambiguous” scene, but it is a textbook example of express verbal nonconsent. My use of the phrase “textbook example” here is advised: Franiuk describes a strategy for helping undergraduate students understand the meaning of consent by asking students to rate whether or not a given situation constitutes a sexual assault. One of her situations—a date rape in which a woman tells a man she does not wish to have sex, and he continues despite her protestations—mirrors the scene in *Lady Macbeth*.¹¹ Franiuk’s undergraduates all correctly identified her date rape example as a rape, a first-to-fourth degree sexual assault in the state of Wisconsin, where the study was conducted.¹² Confronted with the same interactions in opera, musicologists do not do the same.¹³ And yet the arguments for reading the scene as anything *but* a rape rely upon the myths of rape culture: that women, and particularly Katerina, secretly want to be raped; that women, and particularly Katerina, cannot be raped by a man they have been attracted to, and Katerina has been attracted to Sergei in Act I, scene ii; that women’s—and particularly Katerina’s—sexual fantasies center around rape; and that Katerina’s desire for “passionate embraces” should thus be read as a desire to be raped—in short, that Katerina says no when she means yes.

One might suggest that the simplest solution to this problem is to avoid *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which has generated a host of controversies in different eras. The damning *Pravda* review that sidelined the work for decades “Unacknowledged Sexual Assault Among College Women,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 28, no. 12 (2013): 2594, 2604–05.

10. Laurel Fay, “Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District” *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane Root, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O002507>.

11. Franiuk, “Discussing and Defining Sexual Assault,” 105

12. Franiuk, “Discussing and Defining Sexual Assault,” 106.

13. In a review of a 2007 Canadian Opera company production, for example, Herman Trotter notes that “the handsome hired hand Sergei . . . with only perfunctory resistance beds the wild Katerina” (24). Arthur Jacobs and Stanley Sadie note that Sergei seduces Katerina “without much effort,” which one might attribute to the dated nature of the text if it were not consistently reproduced in more contemporary writings: Charles Osbourne’s *The Opera Lover’s Companion*, for example, describes the scene as a “passionate embrace” and notes that the men in an earlier scene are “playfully molesting Aksinya.” Herman Trotter, “Shostakovich: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*,” *American Record Guide* 70, no. 3 (2007): 24–25; Arthur Jacobs and Stanley Sadie, *The Limelight Book of Opera* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996 [1984]), 510; Charles Osbourne, *The Opera Lover’s Companion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 404, 403.

responded not to concerns about the sexual violence depicted at the end of Act I, but rather to the obscenity of the explicitly sexual music that accompanied the scene.¹⁴ While Richard Taruskin has described the anonymous reviewer as “puritanical,” he elsewhere voices his own very different set of concerns about the opera, pointing to the fact that Katerina and Sergei’s ruthlessness in pursuit of their own happiness is disturbingly reminiscent of the broader approach of Stalin’s Soviet state.¹⁵ The sexual violence in *Lady Macbeth*—not only in Katerina’s rape but also in Aksinya’s sexual assault—might seem like the straw that breaks the camel’s back, a final fatal flaw that dooms the work to obscurity (at least within the confines of the music history curriculum).

As I suggested above, however, these issues arise in *many* of the operas that we teach in introductory and survey classes. Ironically, these operas become most problematic when well-meaning authors and editors use euphemisms that obscure the opera’s content. The well-respected Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca text provides one such example. It summarizes the opening of *Don Giovanni* thusly:

Leporello, Don Giovanni’s servant, laments his sufferings in an opera-buffa style aria, with a touch of aristocratic horn calls when he declares his wish to live like a gentleman rather than a servant. He is interrupted by a clamor as Don Giovanni emerges from [Donna Anna’s] house, where he has tried to have his way with her.¹⁶

By Donna Anna’s own account of that incident, in “Or sai chi l’onore,” she finds a cloaked intruder in her bedroom at night. She briefly takes him to be a known suitor, Don Ottavio, but soon realizes her mistake. He makes advances, and she resists, physically and violently—first by screaming and calling for help, and then by “struggling, twisting, and turning” against Giovanni’s embrace until she frees herself of the intruder and pursues him into the night.¹⁷ What Donna

14. “Chaos Instead of Music,” in *Strunk’s Source Readings in Music History, Vol. 7: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert P. Morgan (New York: Norton, 1998), 1397–99.

15. Taruskin describes the opera as “a profoundly inhumane work of art.” He continues on to note: “Its technique of dehumanizing victims is the perennial method of those who would perpetrate and justify genocide, whether of kulaks in the Ukraine, Jews in Greater Germany, or aborigines in Tasmania. So, one must admit, if ever an opera deserved to be banned it was this one, and matters are not changed by the fact that its actual ban was for wrong and hateful reasons.” Richard Taruskin and Christopher H. Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music: College Edition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 961; Taruskin, “Shostakovich and the Inhuman,” in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 509.

16. J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 9th ed. (New York: Norton, 2014), 554.

17. The translation is from Burton D. Fisher, ed. and trans., *Mozart’s Don Giovanni* (Coral Gables, FL: Opera Journeys, 2002), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10075776>. The original Italian is

Anna describes is *not* a callous lover who seduces women and leaves them: she describes an attempted rape, from which she escapes only with considerable physical struggle. While the first half of Donna Anna's exchange with Don Giovanni happens offstage, there is little reason to doubt her account, which is entirely consistent with the rage she shows in the opening scene.¹⁸ *A History of Western Music* is hardly alone in its description of the scene, however. Kerman and Tomlinson note that Don Giovanni "commits crimes and moral sins—and not just against the woman he seduces," a phrasing that draws attention to Don Giovanni's flawed moral compass but that covers over his attempts to rape both Donna Anna and Zerlina.¹⁹

With a summary that acknowledges the possibility of seduction or rape, Taruskin and Gibbs's account in *The Oxford History of Western Music: College Edition* is the most straightforward about the events that transpire on stage.²⁰ And yet even that description, which opens with the possibility of seduction, is not likely to resonate with students' understandings of rape in the twenty-first century, precisely because the opening scene in *Don Giovanni* resonates so deeply with the "rape scripts" that students know.²¹ To the virtuous noblewoman Donna Anna, Don Giovanni is a masked stranger and an intruder in her home; she only later realizes that he is an acquaintance. She struggles with him violently, even pursuing him into the street once she has broken free of his grip in an attempt to ascertain his identity. Rather than allowing his identity to be revealed and facing punishment, Don Giovanni murders her father in front of her. A summary of these events as a frustrated seduction is at odds with the campus messaging that students are likely to learn elsewhere in their college education, feminist writing on rape culture that has made its way into the mainstream media, and in recent and well-publicized changes in the legal definitions of rape and sexual assault. Liane Curtis has suggested studying the opera in its entirety in order to work through these issues in conventional summaries—an approach that is rewarding but time-intensive, particularly in survey and introductory-level courses, where there is much material to cover.²² Yet even the simple and practical measure of filling out our summaries of the opera and acknowledging sexual violence more explicitly can have a measurable impact.

"svincolarmi, torcermi, e piegarmi."

18. Further, as Julian Rushton notes, there is little *musical* evidence to cause us to doubt Donna Anna's account. Julian Rushton, *Don Giovanni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 102.

19. Kerman and Tomlinson, *Listen*, 196.

20. Taruskin and Gibbs, *Oxford History of Western Music*, 446.

21. Cleere and Lynn, "Acknowledged Versus Unacknowledged," 2603.

22. Liane Curtis, "The Sexual Politics of Teaching *Don Giovanni*," *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 1 (2000): 121.

The power of naming rape and sexual violence in such scenes, and drawing attention to the myths about sexual assault that underpin readings of these encounters as seduction, is supported not only by feminist thought but also by research in the social sciences. One research study indicated that while students exposed to a story depicting rape as an erotic experience had a greater acceptance of rape myths, including even a paragraph-long textual debriefing had a statistically significant effect in lowering their acceptance of these myths.²³ This research suggests that taking the classroom time to acknowledge that a scene enacts rape, and to point out that the real-life consequences are different from those portrayed in the opera, may have a measurable effect on students' perception of the myths of rape culture.

To those who might fear that we are judging the past by present standards, I should note that my suggestions do not preclude a historically informed approach to understanding the opera's depiction of sexual violence. A number of scholars working in Classics have successfully designed projects that asked students to think critically about the depiction of rape in ancient texts. By asking students to compare modern and ancient definitions of rape, encouraging them to think about the etymology and translatability of the term rape, and focusing attention on commonalities and differences in ancient and modern understandings of gender and power, instructors in Classics are tackling texts rife with sexual violence in ways that offer opportunities for deeper intellectual engagement and greater contemporary relevance in the eyes of students.²⁴

What might that mean for teaching an opera like *Lady Macbeth*? Musicologist Elizabeth Wells's article "The New Woman: *Lady Macbeth* and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era" offers this kind of historical grounding, contextualizing the depictions of the sex and violence in this opera in Soviet discourses of its era.²⁵ Wells's analysis positions *Lady Macbeth* in the context both of high rates of sexual violence and debates about what the "New Woman" might mean in the early Soviet era, demonstrating the resonance between Shostakovich's own ideas and that of the Soviet feminist Alexandra Kollontai.²⁶ Wells points to historical details, noting that Aksinya's assault in Act I, scene ii, was widely understood as

23. Neil M. Malamuth and James V.P. Check, "Debriefing Effectiveness Following Exposure to Pornographic Rape Depictions," *The Journal of Sex Research* 20, no. 1 (1984): 8. While this is an older study, Malamuth and Check's research continues to be cited in the social sciences. See, for example, Lee Ann Kahlor and Dan Morrison, "Television Viewing and Rape Myth Acceptance Among College Women," *Sex Roles* 56 (2007): 729–39.

24. See Rosanna Lauriola "Teaching About the Rape of Lucretia: A Student Project," *Classical World* 106, no. 4 (2013): 686; Yurie Hong, "Teaching Rape Texts in Classical Literature," *Classical World* 106, no. 4 (2013): 671–73; Elizabeth Gloyn, "Reading Rape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: A Test-Case Lesson," *Classical World* 106, no. 4 (2013): 678–79.

25. Elizabeth Wells, "'The New Woman': *Lady Macbeth* and Sexual Politics in the Stalinist Era," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13, no. 2 (2001): 163–89.

26. Wells, "Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics," 179.

a rape at the time of the production's premiere.²⁷ It is thus striking that Aksinya and Katerina sing the same motive on the same pitch in their interactions with Sergei during Aksinya's assault and Katerina's so-called seduction.²⁸ Wells's work thus suggests that critically interrogating the sexual violence in an opera may, in some cases, help us better understand the opera's musical and dramatic text and context.

One common objection to describing or staging the scene as a rape is that it defies Shostakovich's intention. In a recent review of both Martin Kušej's and Robert Jones's productions of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, with De Nederlandse Opera and the Royal Opera respectively, Marina Frolova-Walker notes that Jones's staging of the Act I Finale —as a “side-splittingly funny caper of mutual consent”—is “in keeping with Shostakovich's original version, whose obscene trombone glissandos had to be removed from the score before its initial publication.”²⁹ Frolova-Walker's review thus suggests that Jones's reading of the scene is more in keeping with compositional intent. Yet here there is scant evidence for reading *Katerina's* consent, or lack thereof, precisely because the argument centers on the trombone's phallic gesture, which tells us much about Sergei's response but little about Katerina's. The parallels in Aksinya's and Katerina's musical and textual language in their refusal of Sergei's advances suggest that these kinds of claims may overstate our knowledge of Shostakovich's intent. Shostakovich juxtaposes a dirty joke in the trombone and a calculated repetition of one vocal line and the broader musical style of what Rena Moisenko deemed “perhaps the most revolting scene in the entire opera,” in which “shrieks of pain of the raped girl intermingle with coarse and cynical comments from the crowd of onlookers.”³⁰ The frenetic orchestral gallop, which has often been read simply as lusty, can equally be read through its musical correspondence both

27. Wells, “Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics,” 168.

28. Wells, “Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics,” 181.

29. Marina Frolova-Walker, “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk: Bleak Tragedy or Black Comedy? (review).” *The Opera Quarterly* 25, no. 1–2 (2009): 152. Frolova-Walker's reading suggests—throughout—that she accepts the myths of rape culture, and that these myths influence her appraisals of the operas at hand: she notes that “Paradoxically, it is the stronger and more knowing woman of the Amsterdam production who is raped . . . while the awkward girl of the ROH production is ready and willing” (155). Frolova-Walker fails to acknowledge that this is “paradoxical” only if one assumes that a “stronger and more knowing woman” is less likely to be raped than one who more closely matches an “ideal” rape victim, who “wears the unsexy, girlish clothes of a virgin” (155). Further, Frolova-Walker's account of Act I, scene iii as “side-splittingly funny” reads somewhat differently when one juxtaposes it with the earlier scene with Aksinya, during which the crowd laughs uproariously as she cries “Oh, you swine, my breast's covered in bruises! The shameless brute, he's pinched my breast all over.” The crowd declares this so funny that they may “split [their] sides.”

30. Rena Moisenko, *Realist Music: 25 Soviet Composers* (London: Meridian Books Ltd., 1949), 203–04.

to Aksinya's rape and Sergei's flogging, underscoring the violence of the act.³¹ If, rather than instructing students in a received interpretation that attempts to smooth over these complexities, we encourage them to seek evidence from the score (and here, the libretto, which is co-authored by Shostakovich), we are able to avoid projecting a set of troubling ideas that may or may not reflect the composer's own concerns into the work.

In *Don Giovanni*, which has a longer and richer interpretive tradition, these questions become more pressing. Recent scholarship has suggested that some of the gendered readings of *Don Giovanni* in the past represent a tendency that, at best, engaged insufficiently with Mozart's own contexts and at worst, slipped into outright misogyny, as in the claim that "it would be beneficial to [Donna Anna's] personal growing-up if she had been pleasantly raped by Don Juan."³² Kristi Brown-Montesano argues persuasively that much of the interpretive tradition surrounding *Don Giovanni*, in which Don Giovanni is a heroic figure and Donna Anna is secretly in love with him, is as deeply rooted in E. T. A. Hoffman's nineteenth-century reimagining of the work as it is to Mozart and DaPonte's opera.³³ Yet such challenges do not come exclusively from explicitly feminist scholars like Brown-Montesano. Mary Hunter has similarly shown that a tendency to read Don Ottavio "essentially as a wimp" emerged out of Hoffman's reading, which contrasts "the forceful manliness of Don Giovanni" with a "feminized Ottavio."³⁴ Hunter's own analysis suggests that Don Ottavio is better read through the discourse of "noble simplicity," which turned in part on "extraordinary restraint in a situation where extravagant expression . . . would be ordinary."³⁵ From this perspective, Don Ottavio is not gendered as a weak or effeminate man, but rather, marked as an ideal nobleman in the expectations of his class and time precisely through the sharp contrast to Don Giovanni's excesses. In very different ways, Hunter's, Brown-Montesano's, and Wells's arguments point to the fact that ideas about gender performance and conventions for sexual roles are shaped by particular historical and social contexts and, in many cases, closely tied to class or social status. This example illustrates the danger in speaking for composer intention in broad strokes in our discussions of these operas: without sustained study of the gender dynamics and roles of the *opera's* time, we risk projecting the gendered conventions of our time onto the opera—and identifying them, once thus projected, as the composer's intent.

31. Wells, "Lady Macbeth and Sexual Politics," 168, 180–81.

32. William Mann, quoted in Kristi Brown-Montesano, *Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12.

33. Brown-Montesano, *Understanding*, 11.

34. Mary Hunter, "Nobility in Mozart's Operas," *Art and Ideology in European Opera: Essays in Honor of Julian Rushton*, ed. Rachel Cowgill, David Cooper, and Clive Brown (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 190.

35. Hunter, "Nobility," 186.

Because these operas deal with a theme of contemporary relevance for our students, acknowledging the issues at work may in fact spur students to a deeper critical engagement with these operas than they might otherwise have. In my most recent introductory course in Western concert music, I required students to select one of the four operas that we had studied in class, to listen and watch a production of the opera in its entirety, and to write a short response. Taken collectively, the papers on *Don Giovanni* were the strongest that I received: students engaged more deeply both with the libretto's text and the music than they did with other operas. In class, we had studied the opening scene, "Or sai chi l'onore," and the finales to Acts I and II. In class discussion, we had examined the theme of sexual violence both in the opening to Act I and in its finale. For students, this opened questions about the contrast between Don Giovanni's superficial charm and the violence of his actions throughout the opera, and this made them more attentive to *other* issues of power throughout. More than one student, for example, had rich interpretations of Don Giovanni's interactions with Leporello, turning attention to the ways in which Don Giovanni's relationships with social inferiors were plagued by some of the same issues as his interactions with women. Further, students clearly realized the relevance of the issues examined in opera to their lives on campus: one theater major, for example, critiqued a number of elements in the staging she had seen and proposed an effective contemporary staging of *Don Giovanni* on a college campus.

Planning, Preparation, and Reaction

The second intervention that I suggest unfolds in two stages: preparing students for difficult materials and allowing them classroom time and space for reactions. I do not use trigger warnings marked as such on my syllabi, in part because that is not part of institutional culture at my current college or the university where I previously taught. I do, however, prepare students for potentially disturbing materials ahead of time, through a combination of annotations in the syllabus and short verbal commentaries both at the course's beginning and in the class session that precedes our discussion of a work. Unlike a traditional trigger warning, my explanations and annotations acknowledge both the opera's difficult themes and its importance. I also leave room for students to enjoy opera. For example, when I teach *Don Giovanni*, I often note that one of my former students, a jazz performer who was a fan neither of opera nor of classical music, studied *Don Giovanni* and became a convert: she asked for tickets to a live performance at the Metropolitan Opera for her next birthday and joined the college's symphony orchestra the following year. This warning allows students to prepare themselves for the experience of responding to an opera that treats themes of sexual violence, and, if necessary, to request an alternate

assignment ahead of time—although I have never had a student ask for one. It also prepares students for difficult material in a way that addresses one of the primary criticisms of trigger warnings: namely, that they prepare students to understand the material they are about to study as in some way harmful.³⁶ This strategy opens a window of opportunity to discuss opera's emotional complexity and the intensity of our engagement with it. Further, it leaves students room to engage with difficult operas—even to love them—without becoming apologists for their treatment of sexual violence and gender roles (and, by extension, issues of race, colonialism, or class).

My pedagogical strategy focuses equally upon discussion in response both to the assigned materials and to in-class listenings and viewings. On days when students have been assigned reading or listening that discuss sexual violence, I begin class by eliciting students' responses to them with an open-ended question such as, "What are your reactions to this opera?" This allows students who have found materials difficult, frustrating, or disturbing to express those concerns immediately, and defuses tensions because students are sure that both their classmates and I have heard their concerns at the outset. When such concerns or responses result from a misunderstanding of the assigned material or a misreading of a text, it allows for discussion that helps to focus students' reading comprehension and textual interpretation. When students disagree, it encourages them to practice the skills that are at the core of music history courses: developing an interpretation of a musical or musical-dramatic text, finding the evidence to support that reading, and framing it as an argument. I continue this exercise with each in-class listening and viewing assignment for the day, which helps to ensure that students who might struggle with the material have ample opportunities to reflect and debrief.

In an interdisciplinary course for non-majors that I taught recently, "Representing the First World War," I asked students to watch the entirety of Berg's *Wozzeck*. I had warned the students (all non-majors) that the opera was violent, but had left alone the question of the ambiguous Act I scene between Marie and the Drum Major. The first student who spoke drew attention to the apparent power differential between Marie and the Drum Major and to the Drum Major's aggressive posturing and language. Drawing upon these elements, she suggested that the scene was best understood as a rape, since Marie's ability to consent was impaired by the class and power differential between the two characters and her consent was not affirmative. The student's observation prompted a lively discussion. Students pointed to Marie's apparent concession—"it's all the same to me," she says, after a lengthy protest—and

36. Ellen Kaplan, "Trigger Warnings Scare Students When They Should Be Gently Guided," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Aug. 11, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/Trigger-Warnings-Scare/148351>.

debated whether that constituted affirmative consent. Ultimately, the majority of my students understood this as a rape, a consensus they reached after drawing attention not only to Marie's text but also to the violent brass outbursts at Marie's "Lass mich!" ("Let me go!") and her ascent into the high register for "Ruh mich nicht an" ("Don't touch me"), which read to them more like a shriek. Responding to a student's concerns about the potential sexual violence in the scene thus led directly to a thoughtful discussion in which students responded directly to both textual and musical elements, drawing evidence from the opera to support their readings. One of the concerns that has been aired about trigger warnings specifically is that they forestall critical thinking and censor curricula.³⁷ As this example demonstrates, however, I have found that a modified trigger warning, and a carefully prepared discussion of difficult materials, has precisely the opposite effect. My students—both male and female—often deeply engage with these works and the themes they present, which resonate with broader campus conversations and concerns.

Preparing students for the conversations that we will have and allowing them time to debrief in class acknowledges the emotional impact of this powerful idiom, even as it encourages them to think critically about works that make audiences uncomfortable—sometimes in productive ways. Indeed, there is much to be gained from teasing out the line *between* objecting to or drawing attention to materials that make one uncomfortable and censoring them. This can be particularly productive in a discussion of *Lady Macbeth*. Students often encounter only a short excerpt from or summary of the debate over *Lady Macbeth*. Yet if one assigns both the review itself and a section of the opera, and allows students to form their own reactions separate from the *Pravda* review and debates about censorship, it opens room for critical thinking about music, drama, and questions about opera's social function. This can lead students to examine why the plot unfolds as it does, to consider what function a scene that makes us uncomfortable might have, and to exploit opportunities to put present-day concerns in dialogue with music history. Thus, it allows students to appreciate *Lady Macbeth*—or similar works—in ways that are much more complex (and here, of course, I echo Liane Curtis's suggestions on teaching *Don Giovanni*).³⁸

37. See, for example, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>; Craig Klugman, "Trigger Warnings on College Campuses Are Nothing But Censorship," *Pacific Standard*, Dec. 22, 2015, <https://psmag.com/trigger-warnings-on-college-campuses-are-nothing-but-censorship-a71cf8de272e#.wy7xe4z2b>.

38. Curtis, "Sexual Politics," 121.

Selecting Productions

One of the challenges in dealing with these operas is deciding whether to show stagings of these operas and, if so, which stagings to show. Opera is a powerful idiom precisely because it encompasses multiple sensory domains. It is also a remarkably *flexible* genre; an innovative staging of an opera, like Chereau's *Ring* production, can rework the most problematic elements in a text; an unsuccessful one can exacerbate them. Yet what kind of staging is successful in this context? It might seem like the best staging for a class is the one in which the presentation is *least* disturbing—one like last fall's Met production of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. Yet the audience reaction I described at the opening of this paper suggests the problem with this kind of staging. If we show a staging in which a scene that meets contemporary legal definitions of rape is presented as titillating or pleasurable, we risk reifying the myths of rape culture. Showing productions that show sexual violence for what it is will make students uncomfortable—but sexual violence *should* make students (and us) uncomfortable. That is to say, this kind of discomfort is productive and thought-provoking. The alternative—productions that stage rape as scenes of passion—encourages audiences to consider the events as not-rape, and thus to accept a broader body of myths about rape that enable rape culture.

This is not to suggest by any means that *Regietheater* is off the table. In upper-level classes, I often discuss operatic stagings with students. When students have had several opportunities to discuss and critique particular productions in class, with an eye to the ways different productions shape meaning, I ask them to imagine a staging of a work that raises thorny issues of contemporary relevance. I have not yet asked students to consider this approach in a work treating sexual violence, although I have asked them to imagine a staging of a work with themes like anti-Semitism, racism, and colonialism. By asking students to consider how *they* might stage a given work, the assignment invites students to develop an investment in the work and its performance, but it requires them to tackle the ethical issues such operas raise. Because even staging a portion of a work requires both score study and careful examination of the themes that might be brought out in staging, the assignment tends to encourage deep critical engagement with operatic works. By way of a caveat, such assignments depend on a continual engagement with opera over the course of a class and a command of score study, and are thus better suited to upper-level courses and assignments that fall later in the semester.

Working With Campus Partners

Much of the concern about trigger warnings has been precisely that trigger warning policies handed down from administration reflect an infringement of faculty's rights to determine the content of their own curricula. I approached this differently: at the time that I began working on this issue, I was working at a large research university that had no administrative or departmental policy on trigger warnings. I was concerned, however, about finding a way to meet the diverse needs of the student population, which—statistically speaking—was likely to include both a number of sexual violence survivors and a number of students who accept a broad body of myths about sexual violence that the operas we study in my classes might either challenge or reinforce. I took my concerns to the experts on the issue. On that campus, the staff from Counseling and Psychological Services ran not only the counseling program, but also workshops on sexual violence in first-year seminars; they were housed partially in the Wo/Men's Center and had offered a SafeSpace workshop I had attended two years previously focused on supporting LGBTQ students. Ultimately, I had three primary questions for them:

1. If we want to be sensitive to the needs of both sexual violence survivors and the general student body at large, should we include trigger warnings on syllabi?
2. Should we show productions of these kinds of operas in class?
3. If we *do* show productions, what kind do we show?

While I had my own ideas about what was appropriate, I felt that referring the question to a campus partner with greater experience with sexual violence survivors and sexual assault prevention could only be productive—and I was prepared to concede I needed a new approach on their recommendation. Rather than a simple answer, however, I found my questions prompted dialogues; I spoke and corresponded with staff members and discovered that in fact sexual assault educators face some of these same challenges. As a musician, I often think of music, theater, and film as the only domains on campus where art happens in time, and therefore with a kind of immediacy and emotional impact that separates them out from other arts and humanities disciplines. Yet precisely *because* of that emotional power, sexual assault educators often use mediums like film or live theater in order to dramatize the importance of these issues. As they explained it, sexual assault educators at that institution made their own informed decisions about whether or not to show potentially disturbing scenes

that illustrated the issues at hand, although they always both prepared students for such materials and allowed time for discussion and debriefing.

When I took on a new teaching position at a small liberal arts college in the fall of 2015, I reached out to the co-director of the Faculty Center for Teaching and chair of the Women and Gender Studies program to ask about the campus climate surrounding trigger warnings at this institution. While there was no existing policy on the issue, she invited me to take part in a Faculty Center for Teaching discussion on the issue. The event drew interest from faculty not only in Women's Studies and the humanities, as might be expected, but from a number of departments—including those where such issues infrequently come into play, such as mathematics. In this context, faculty were able to share ideas and teaching strategies in an environment conducive to frank but collegial conversation.

In both of these cases, perhaps the most important thing for me—particularly as a young faculty member who given my field of study must engage with these complex issues—was the opportunity to work collaboratively alongside other members of the staff and faculty in considering and responding to depictions of sexual violence in the classroom. When it is possible, this approach helps to break down the polarities between campus constituencies, so that faculty, staff, students, and administration are not deadlocked against one another but can instead work collectively to create a better campus environment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have laid out four strategies for negotiating the challenges facing instructors who teach operas that depict sexual violence. These suggestions are grounded in both a healthy realism and a healthy optimism. For if, as instructors, we need to be realistic about the rape cultures on our campuses, the possibility that we can be part of meaningful change by thoughtfully attending to these issues is fundamentally heartening. Further, work in the social sciences suggests that there is an evidentiary basis for this optimism. By working beyond disciplinary, departmental, and administrative boundaries, we can address sexual violence in music history classes in ways that take a proactive stance on one of the most pressing pedagogical challenges in classrooms today—while fully embracing the broader goals of engaging students in critical thinking, historical inquiry, and attentive listening.