

# Operatic Narratives: Textual Transformations in Gwen Harwood's and Larry Sitsky's *Golem* and *Lenz*

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by themselves my words would have no particular power,  
but wedded to the music they become part of the magic  
that, in opera, is quite beyond the sum of the parts.

Gwen Harwood, "Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist" (7-8)

Opera is a special kind of text, characterised by complexity, hybridity and spectacle. Poet Gwen Harwood and composer Larry Sitsky are celebrated artists in their own fields but what is perhaps less known is that they also co-authored six operas: *Fall of the House of Usher* (1965), a one-act opera based on Poe's short story; *Lenz: an Opera in One Act after Büchner's Story* (1970); *Voices in Limbo* (1977); *Fiery Tales* (1975), based on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and excerpts from Boccaccio's *Decameron*; *Golem: A Grand Opera in Three Acts* (1980), first performed in 1993, and *De Profundis* (1982), a setting of Oscar Wilde's letters.

Drawn from a diverse set of sources (from sixteenth-century Italian stories to a nineteenth-century German novella) the operas are sites of immense textual invention: through the dramatic possibilities that the operatic genre offers particular narratives are relocated, translated and transformed. Harwood once referred to her libretti as some of her most important work: "If I could keep one Selected Poem it would be the libretto of *Lenz* but it is indissolubly wedded to the music, and rightly belongs to Larry" ("Lamplit

Presences” 251). Following Harwood’s comment, Jennifer Strauss and Gregory Kratzmann, amongst others, have recognised the importance of the works both within Harwood’s oeuvre and in Australian writing more broadly.<sup>1</sup> But the operas themselves and the actual processes of collaboration have received very little critical attention, due in part to the difficult indissolubility Harwood mentions.

Opera might be understood as a textual hybrid where each of its elements are fundamentally interwoven but nevertheless distinct. This complex set of intersections works to produce a heady, formal exaggeration where the normally regulated modes of language are reframed by their interrelationships with music and space. Susan Stewart suggests that “exaggeration—that is the exaggeration of significance—is an eruption in the economy of consciousness” (173). In this context, the elements of opera collide to produce a formal exaggeration that amplifies available expressive tools. This in turn does not simply translate a given narrative but transforms its expressive capacity via the blurring of categories, the spectacle of performance and the effect that collaborative authorship brings to a work.

How precisely does this transformative effect work? In the following discussion I want to map textual transformation in Harwood’s and Sitsky’s operas, examining the hybrid elements that give rise to formal exaggeration. I will explore the interrelationship of three critical elements: words/music, the visibility of performance and collaborative practice. This mapping aims to illuminate how such interrelationships produce formal exaggeration and, ultimately, the textual transformations observed. I begin with a brief outline of the theoretical terrain.

Analysis of opera is complicated by the continual intersection and blurring of categories. Words and music, as Harwood rightly noted, are indissolubly wedded in both performance and on the page. For, if words are mechanisms for evoking meaning, then words and music interwoven are not two opposing systems periodically co-mingling, but are truly multi-modal. Johan Fornas suggests that “the dichotomy of words and music is no true dichotomy at all, but a fragile construction resulting from intersubjective discourses, where each term is constituted more like a genre than a physical objective fact” (48). He goes on to say that words and music are “intersubjective conventions,” that is, the product of both rhetoric and of contextualisations dependant on specific understandings of operatic genres (48). Composer Pierre Boulez insists that “non-language and meta-language play an important part in

the music-voice amalgam” (188). From a compositional perspective such potentially blurred distinctions between words and music imply a new age of music making; as composers and librettists work with new compositional techniques and looser linguistic expectations, the divide between the two conventional “sacred monsters” of words and music is reduced.

In this context words may even be pure music, particularly for high Modernist composers such as Pierre Boulez or Sitsky. To compose against the words and to consider verbalisations as part of the sound texture, rather than as independent sign systems in co-habitation, allows for sound to be words (and words to be simply sounds). The act (and sound) of utterance takes precedence over consonant/vowel relationships and hence governs the capacity for comprehension. Such blurring of categories where music informs the comprehension of words, or words alter musical interpretation, demands an interdisciplinary kind of (re)reading.

Complicating this further are both the overt requirements for a declamatory singing style within operatic form (sometimes blurring dramatic speech and sung vocalisations) and the dual systems of musical and spoken rhythm. When approached carefully, musical rhythm, as Robert Fink suggests, “can do more than interact with the innate rhythm of speech; sensitively used, it can change the way we comprehend words—actually adding new elements of meaning to a phrase as it is sung” (38). Referring to Martin Lange’s term *Aussagespannung* (speech tension), Fink argues that, as we decipher the order of words and their meaning in a sentence, or paragraph, or song, a form of tension builds, ultimately released when a syntactical structure is revealed. In this framework, a composer setting words to music must take this tension into account, either reflecting it or working against it to produce heightened conflict: “the propulsive force of his music will interact with the syntactic drive of speech, producing patterns of reinforcement and interference” (37).

Along with transformations rendered by the intersection of composition, declamation and musical rhythm are the obvious issues of staging and dramatic effect. Both composer and librettist work to produce the line of the opera, crafting its narrative scope through decisions about characterisation, layout and scene structure. From this perspective a good librettist “cannot be considered merely a wordsmith stringing out lines of mellifluous verse: [s]he is at once a dramatist, a creator of word, verse, situation, scene, and character” (Smith xix). In other words, she must be

a skilled dramaturge, not only cognisant that boundaries between words and music function very differently in an operatic space, but also fluent in all the arts of operatic production, including spectacular presentation, technical effects and staging.

Of course, the process is helped substantially if both composer and librettist understand that their various roles will often be fuzzy at the edges. Sitsky commented that this authorial “meshing” is vital for an opera’s dramatic and aesthetic success:

I remember a disastrous association between a writer and a composer. . . . It didn’t work, needless to say, because they were both highly protective of their own roles and there wasn’t going to be any meshing of any kind. Very strict boundaries were drawn. You can’t work that way. . . . It worked with Gwen Harwood for the simple reason that she always regarded the libretto as subservient to the music and if I said, “Can I have another few lines here?” or “This is too long,” or “Do you mind if I change this word?” there was never any trouble. (Cotter 82)

Such aesthetic trust is crucial in cultivating an amiable, productive collaboration: as all aspects of an opera intersect to produce the whole, so too must the writing partnership function coherently.

I have outlined this theoretical framework (the hybrid of words/music, performance and collaboration) to set up a map for reading Harwood’s and Sitsky’s operas in the context of textual transformation, in particular *Golem* (the largest opera work and certainly the most ambitious) and *Lenz* (a smaller, simpler work on Büchner’s short story). Both works are drawn from middle-European traditions (Czech/Jewish and German) and both are centred on rather metaphysical concerns offering suitable narrative commonality. There is also strong archival evidence that documents aspects of the crafting process; a sizeable collection of Sitsky’s and Harwood’s correspondence (Harwood, *A Steady Storm*), including many references to the operas, has been published, and libretto drafts, scores, comments and scrapbooks are held in the National Library of Australia’s Manuscript Collection.<sup>2</sup> Alongside these artefacts are other materials relevant to Harwood’s and Sitsky’s collaborative writing. Both have published various reflections on opera-crafting — Harwood in her essays “Words and Music” (published in *Southerly*) and “Memoirs of a Dutiful Librettist” (cited at the beginning of this paper), and Sitsky in a series of interviews and press articles.

The two operas are also, however, sufficiently different in scope, style and structure to offer substantial contrasts. *Golem* was commissioned in 1979 by Opera Australia and is an enormous work requiring nineteen character soloists (including nine tenors), a double chorus to sing the twenty demanding choral episodes, an augmented orchestra, double percussion and grand piano. Performed in 1993 at the Sydney Opera House, the opera was produced by Barrie Kosky and later released on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Classics label in 2003. The opera draws on a modern version of the ancient Jewish cabbalistic animation narrative. Broadly, the golem is a clay creature crafted and brought to life by an esteemed Rabbi who uses divine language to create, control and ultimately destroy his monstrous creature. The legend apparently first appeared in fourth century BCE Hebrew and Aramaic texts (most famously referred to in Psalm 139) and later in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, or the Jewish Book of Formation (Krause 113). Other golem variants (lovers, servants, warriors) merged with Christian-mystic models of animation to produce various versions of the narrative: as Lewis Glinert humorously notes, by the sixteenth century "recipes for golem making were already being collected in Northern Italy and rendered into Latin" (Johannes Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabbalistica* written in 1517, for example) (82).

More recent versions of the golem story are based on the nineteenth-century "Prague" golem narrative (set in the sixteenth-century Jewish ghettos and centred on the life of Rabbi Judah Loew), including George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* and German director Paul Wegener's *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt Kam* (The Golem: How He Came to be on the Earth). In this version the golem, created for service and as a security measure, happens to fall in love with the Rabbi's daughter Rachel. She is killed in an anti-Jewish pogrom and the golem, distraught in his grief and fierce in his anger, must be destroyed by his creator. Other twentieth-century versions include: Albert Kovessy's Yiddish musical *Goylem*; operas by Abraham Ellstein and John Cracken (both produced in the United States of America); and several novels, including Gustav Meyrink's *Der Golem* and Abraham Rothberg's *The Sword of the Golem*. It was a copy of this last novel that sparked first Sitsky's and then Harwood's interest in the golem tale.<sup>3</sup>

While based on Rothberg's modern novel, Harwood's and Sitsky's *Golem* also includes references to ancient and Biblical texts, sixteenth-century anti-Semitism, and cycles of Jewish prayer. There are allusions to saints and prominent political figures of the period and even visual direction for film images of refugees, gas chambers or characters portrayed in SS uniforms

to be projected onto a backdrop at certain points (not all of which made it into the final production). The result is a densely intertextual and evocatively imagined opera: anchored by character and dramatic outline, this golem tale is rich with references to its own literary history and links to contemporary ideas about Judaism and conflict.

*Lenz*, on the other hand, is comparatively uncomplicated. Commissioned by the Australian Opera Company in 1970, it is based on Georg Büchner's short, semi-biographical story published in 1836 about the life of writer Jakob Lenz. Written for just a few solo parts and chorus, the opera explores Lenz's progressive madness and his visit to the small German village of Steinhal, where Oberlin, a Lutheran pastor, attempts to cure Lenz's mental illness. The work also traces the development of Lenz's madness that eventually alienates him from his friends, community and self. There are several English translations of Büchner's story, a couple of film versions made in the 1960s and several spin-off theatre productions loosely based on the tale.

*Golem* and *Lenz* are both operas written in an avant-garde style, conventional in their actual mechanics but experimental in tonality and scope. As such, they are ideal works to explore the intersections of words and music in contemporary writing. Consider, for example, the compositional process for *Golem*. Musically based on one of Sitsky's earlier works, *The Ten Sepirot of the Cabbala* (1974), for solo choir and percussion, the opera's harmonic structure relies on a complicated mapping derived from the Jewish mystical system of Gematria, where Hebrew letters are linked to particular numbers used to decipher hidden esoteric meanings within language.<sup>4</sup> In this case the Gematrian numbers are assigned to certain notes, note series or rhythmic patterns and then mapped onto the words. "Earth," for instance, is always accompanied by a string figure; "seal" a woodwind motif; "Israel" a quadruple patten; and "naked," "monster" and "hell" are always sung high-pitched.<sup>5</sup> The result is a musically encoded relationship between the esoteric concerns of the opera, the harmonic language Sitsky employs and Harwood's thoughtful libretti. In this instance words do not behave precisely as expected, reworked as they are to destabilise conventional points of emphasis. So, when the tenor voice of golem sings "hell" at an impossibly high pitch against a counter-pointed rhythm, at a moment of intense grief and horror following the death of Rachel, the possible literary interpretations and experience of dramatic *affect* are simultaneously both cerebral (because, after all, the music is composed along strict mystico-theoretical lines) and poignant.

The edges of words and music are also blurred at a meta-level in this work; the dramatic structure of the opera, for example, is built around the Ten Sepiroth (a prayer of progression from the world we live in, “Malkuth,” to the unknowable light, “Kether Elyon”). A chorus sings one of each of these ten phrases at transition points throughout the opera, generally at the beginning of an act, providing a wash of sound that both underlies the developing action and suggests something of the character of the scene. Each phase of prayer also gestures towards aspects of the narrative (for example, “Gevurah,” or power, is sung when the Golem states at his most self-righteous, “I am the watchman of Israel”). In this case the libretto functions as sound rather than poetry; the sounds are structurally significant but murky in their moment-by-moment significations.

Here, then, are moments of textual transformation. From Harwood’s initial translation of the folktale (evident in her research and diverse references) we then see a libretto set to music that is adjusted by the complexities of Sitsky’s word setting; his “words as sounds strategy,” composing not only against the words but beyond them, works to reposition the evoked and literal interpretations of the dramatic action. Structuring the opera around the Ten Sepiroth adds further texture to the golem story, referring to a particular religious and social history; in this instance the golem text is transformed on expressive and interpretive levels.

Perhaps more than in any other poetic form, the constraints of opera work to shape the possibilities of the text, dictating the kind of poetry employed by the librettist and framing the techniques of narrative crafting that underpin dramatic affect; here, the words/music amalgam meets the demands of dramaturgy. As a poet and musician Harwood was deeply aware of the complexities of the rhythm of language and the difficult problem of writing words that make sense poetically, dramatically and aurally once set to music. She once said that, compared with poetry, libretti must be “looser in texture, because if you leave no room for the music, you get very unsingable stuff. The best songs, as lyrics, are shot through with holes which the music fills up” (Beston 86). Harwood’s *Lenz* libretto, for example, (her “selected poem” referred to above) uses vivid imagery and repetition to evoke the extreme sensations of suffering, damnation and dream-like notions of love central to the narrative. While structurally simpler than the *Golem* it is nevertheless a linguistically exaggerated drama compared to Büchner’s tale. Consider the following lines from Michael Hamburger’s translation of the story. Lenz, now hopelessly lost in bipolar episodes of mad confidence and remorse, reflects on his failed attempt to resurrect a dead child:

Thus he arrived at the highest point of the mountains, and the uncertain light stretched down towards the white masses of stone, and the heavens were a stupid blue eye, and the moon, quite ludicrous, idiotic, stood in the midst. Lenz had to laugh loudly, and as he laughed atheism took root in him and possessed him utterly, steadily, calmly, relentlessly. He no longer knew what it was that had moved him so much before, he felt cold; he thought he would like to go to bed now, and went his way through the uncanny darkness, cold, unshakeable—all was empty and hollow to him. (Büchner 81-82)

The moment of his disillusionment is clear; the narrative voice quietly distant, observational, discreet; and the images of the moon, mountain and light politely framing the language.

Harwood's lines from the *Lenz* libretto concerning the same scene are, in contrast, confrontational, immediate and overwhelming:

Monster, monster, you live in the filth of sores,  
 in scabs, in holes, in the slime of black ravines.  
 The graves praise you, earth sings with your hate,  
 You swell with venom, madness is your joy...  
 When the innocent child is ravished you are there,  
 in the death rattle, the death of putrefaction,  
 in pain, loss, torture, ruin, you are there.  
 I curse you as your bleak wings hunt me down.  
 You shall not have me, ghostly Spirit brooding on the rotting face  
 of the deep.  
 You shall not have me, trinity of nothing, nothing, nothing.  
 (*A Steady Storm* 302)

Here is a dramatic rendering of Lenz's emotional state, articulated through a rather violent first-person narration that suggests an intensity of feeling not immediately present in Michael Hamburger's translated text. Harwood's poetic brevity shifts the practical elements of mountain tops, tiredness, even surroundings, into the activities of production; the coldness gripping Lenz in Büchner's prose is now communicated via a dense imagery and framed by setting, vocalisation and gesture. Given the nature of opera performance, the emphasis of the narrative is also altered from third-person narration to first person-declamation, from observation to dramatic exposition. Furthermore, Harwood offers image and vocalisation as interrelated elements; that is,



words written for music, designed to be sung and expected to be heard in a performance. The final lines of this excerpt, for example, rely as much on rhythmic repetition (the “You shall not have me” motif) as the play on the verbal trinity (“nothing, nothing, nothing”). The language is rhythmic enough but allows for the composer to play with its texture. Coupled with Sitsky’s setting of an atonal, piercing melodic line and spare instrumentation, the operatic effect is one of sharp separation and of dissonance. Both the nature of opera and the designs of the librettist produce a recognisable Lenz-text that nevertheless is absolutely distinct from the prose form in its dramatic emphasis. Harwood’s and Sitsky’s *Lenz* presents a lurid emotional landscape compared to the gentler, darker designs of Büchner.

Clearly, the words/music amalgam is densely interwoven with both the composer and librettist’s notion of the dramatic. Correspondence between Harwood and Sitsky includes several exchanges regarding atmospheric effect, length, order of acts, stage setting and language. Just after completing the first draft of the *Golem* libretto, Harwood wrote to Sitsky clarifying the incorporation of the Ten Sepiroth into the opera’s structure: “What about the colour symbolism of the Kabbala? Are we going to work with the designer or do we get medieval outdoor dunnies without notice?” (*A Steady Storm* 332). Aside from reflecting their amiable working relationship, her humorous question also suggests that by this, the fifth opera, her capacity to craft narrative effect via context and language was well established. Compare this to an earlier letter to her close friend, stage designer Tony Riddell, regarding the first opera *Usher*:

[Sitsky] asks for my views on settings; I have few, as I have no practical experience with opera at all. I hope you can give me some idea of how this could be set up on a stage—could you give me some hope that it won’t be ludicrous? . . . I feel sure a practical man like you could solve this inoperable problem.

(*A Steady Storm* 199)

Puns aside, Harwood’s letter echoes Smith’s comment that librettists must be skilled dramaturges. It is apparent that by the time they were writing *Golem* both Harwood and Sitsky were confidently working across the visual, linguistic and aural. A combination of attention to detail (the colour symbolism, for instance) and a capacity to envisage the poetic capabilities attached to colour, sound textures and movement suggests that they were acutely aware of the exaggerated effect produced by opera’s hybridity. Here, Harwood’s libretto is not only being crafted in the context of the performance constraints of texture and declamation but also within the frame of a spatial and dimensional context.

Commenting on her *Lenz* libretto Harwood wrote: “Above all my task is to give the composer what he needs while remaining true to the spirit of the work I am transforming from one medium to the other” (“Memoirs” 7). Such an amiable attitude is perhaps only possible if both collaborators recognise the scope of each other’s activities. For one of the significant points of tension between composers and librettists is the issue of ownership—who wrote what and how much gets changed. In an industry characterised by disputes, bickering and fraught collaborations Harwood was happy to give Sitsky the words to the operas; “I’m just glad they [libretti] have given the composers the occasion to write such splendid music. . . . I shouldn’t think they [libretti] could stand apart, they would be of little interest without the music” (qtd. in Beston 87). In her mind they belonged together and, in that state, were capable of producing far more than the sum of their parts. Harwood’s relaxed approach to her libretti (unlike her protective attitudes towards her published poetry) reflects her understanding that opera crafting is a team effort and as such must be concerned with the merits of the piece, not necessarily the authorship of each component. Similarly, Sitsky once confessed to adding words, or entire sections, to Harwood’s libretto, certainly a practical logical response to “running out of Gwen lines.”<sup>6</sup> This artistic compatibility is one of the compelling aspects of Harwood’s and Sitsky’s collaborative relationship: it is clear that their respective artistic practices “meshed” most productively.

Harwood, herself a keen musician, was entranced with Sitsky’s music from her first encounter with it (and him) at the Second Australian Composer’s Seminar in Tasmania, 1963: “Who can grasp for the first time / these notes hurled into empty space. / Suddenly a tormenting nerve / affronts the fellowship of cells” (from “New Music” dedicated to Sitsky, *Collected Poems* 194). In this poem words are attempting to cross to music, a neat gesture towards the greater difficulties of writing libretti that requires the capacity for distilling complex plots into a staged structure (such as *Golem*) or providing sufficient narrative interest for a melancholic, introspective character (such as *Lenz*).

The poem also reflects a shared aesthetic passion. Throughout the drafting process of *Golem*, for example, Harwood would insert particular words or phrases guaranteed to attract Sitsky’s musical attention. These would then feature in his encoded system for word setting as recurrent stresses, motifs or accents. As Sitsky notes:

She [Harwood] had the kind of imagery and language I responded to. And after a while she was sneaky—she knew

certain words and certain imagery would trigger music. After a long association she was playing me. She had me on a string and she knew the kind of words I would respond to. But it was great. (Cotter 81-82)

His comment suggests that Harwood was a canny, perhaps even manipulative librettist who was able to pre-empt the kinds of connections her words would have to music. But Harwood also understood the technical strategies required for translating difficult narratives into opera. In her "Memoirs of a Librettist" she notes that

[i]n *Lenz*, where the tension is almost unbearable, I tried to give the composer a series of linked themes and key words that would bind together Lenz's fragmentary experiences and make him a human character with whom the audience could have real sympathy. (7)

Here imagery functions both poetically within the libretto and motivationally in the mechanics of word setting. Again, categories of production collide to produce a greater sense of the narrative than possible in other contexts.

In this context, Harwood's and Sitsky's operas radically reposition narratives, and not only on the more obvious levels of shifting a folklore onto the stage, or extracting two hours of sung text from a short story. The Golem, for example, offers a Jewish folktale embedded within a dense set of social reference and a complicated musical setting, producing a text quite different to its literary counterparts. And *Lenz*, with its crazed, raging libretto, transforms Büchner's tale into the cinematic, working on the dissonance of Sitsky's harmony and Harwood's dense writing. Through the intersections of words and music, the impact of the visual and dramatic, and a collaborative authorial practice, these exaggerated operatic texts function as a collection of parts that works to evoke a sensually complex response.

Furthermore, the intersections of already hybridised categories elevate expressive capacity, offering a dense textuality only possible in a hybrid environment. Within this array of intersections, then, we see the transformative effects of opera at work. And it is these transformative effects that offer a way into the difficult practice of reading opera in a literary context: they allow us to deal with the parts as well as the sum, to examine both the characteristics and intersections of categories, and to consider the processes of operatic construction. In this they highlight both the magic and complexities of the genre, a delight indeed when presented with the fruits of Harwood and Sitsky's artistic dexterity.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See also Holmes, Campbell and Shaw for a discussion of the libretti, outlining the influence of the collaboration on Sitsky's writing.
- <sup>2</sup> Sitsky, Folios 2, 8 and 9; Box 1, Folders 2-4; Box 17, Folder 143; Box 25, Folders 189-99; and Box 34, Folders 260-61.
- <sup>3</sup> See Harwood's letter to Sitsky, 2 October 1974, thanking him for sending her a copy of the novel (*A Steady Storm* 292).
- <sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of Sitsky's harmonic language in *Golem* see Crispin.
- <sup>5</sup> These numerical values are clearly marked on the third version of the libretto draft (Sitsky, Folio 12, Item 1).
- <sup>6</sup> Conversation with Larry Sitsky at the Symposium of the International Musicological Society, Melbourne, July 2004.

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