

Blindness and visual impairment in opera

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The performing arts mirror the human condition. This study sought to analyze the reasons for inclusion of visually impaired characters in opera, the cause of the blindness or near blindness, and the dramatic purpose of the blindness in the storyline.

Methods: We reviewed operas from the 18th century to 2010 and included all characters with ocular problems. We classified the cause of each character's ocular problem (organic, nonorganic, and other) in relation to the thematic setting of the opera: biblical and mythical, blind beggars or blind musicians, historical (real or fictional characters), and contemporary or futuristic.

Results: Cases of blindness in 55 characters (2 as a choir) from 38 operas were detected over 3 centuries of repertoire: 11 had trauma-related visual impairment, 5 had congenital blindness, 18 had visual impairment of unknown cause, 9 had psychogenic or malingering blindness, and 12 were symbolic or miracle-related. One opera featured an ophthalmologist curing a patient.

Conclusions: The research illustrates that visual impairment was frequently used as an artistic device to enhance the intent and situate an opera in its time.

Keywords: Blindness, Cataract, Congenital eye disease, Opera, Psychogenic blindness, Visual impairment

Introduction

Art depicts life through the language of its chosen medium. It may speak to aesthetic sensibilities, to intellectual curiosity, to a search for deeper understanding, or it may simply reflect the realities of the human condition mirrored in daily lives (1).

From early 17th century Italy to present-day popularity, works of opera have graced the performing arts with a combination of music, song, and drama. One human condition that has attracted the attention of novelists, playwrights, and opera librettists is blindness. This aroused our professional interest and curiosity regarding these characters.

In this article, we categorize the operas in which visually impaired or blind characters appear so as to evaluate the possible cause of their blindness or near blindness, the role their blindness played in the libretto (storyline and lyrics), and any symbolic meaning or dramatic purpose attached to the visual loss.

Methods

We carried out a literature search for operas that had a visually impaired character. We included unilaterally or bilaterally, totally or nearly blind characters.

Once the target characters had been identified, a synopsis of each opera was investigated. The etiologies of those cases with visual impairment were grouped under 3 headings: organic (trauma, congenital, unknown etiology); nonorganic (psychogenic, malingering); and other (miracle and symbolic). The impact of visual impairment within the storyline was assessed, and the composition date was noted for potential causes of blindness in that era.

We then sought general defining characteristics of the stories in which these characters were found and distinguished 4 groups centered on commonalities in time, context, or theme: biblical and mythical; blind beggars or blind musicians; historical (real or fictional characters); and contemporary or futuristic.

We also identified the roles of the visually impaired characters and allocated them to either a main or a side role. The former was defined as a central character with a direct impact on the denouement of the storyline, the latter as a minor character with no direct impact on the storyline. Voice types were also noted: soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, or bass.

Results

Available sources revealed 38 operas that matched our criteria, with 55 different characters, either as main (n = 45, 1 as

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TABLE I - Visual impairment in opera characters

Theme	Operas	Main characters	Side characters	Totally blind	Nearly blind	Unilateral	Total characters
Biblical and mythical	15	11	5	13	2	1	16
Blind beggars or blind musicians	6	7	1	8	0	0	8
Historical	9	8	2 (1 as a choir)	8	1	1	10 (1 as a choir)
Contemporary or futuristic	8	19 (1 as a choir)	2	21 (1 as a choir)	0	0	21 (1 as a choir)
Total	38	45 (1 as a choir)	10 (1 as a choir)	50 (2 as a choir)	3	2	55 (2 as a choir)

a choir) or side ($n = 10$, 1 as a choir) roles (Tab. I). The earliest opera was composed in 1741, the latest in 2006: 2 operas in the 18th century, 11 in the 19th, 23 in the 20th, and 2 in the 21st with no specific orientation of causes of blindness across the centuries. Twenty-four characters appear to be young, while the remaining are described as old. Thirteen were female, the rest were male. Female voice types were 12 sopranos or mezzo-sopranos and 1 contralto. Male voice types were 21 baritone or bass, 7 tenor; 10 were nonsinging roles, with mixed voices in the choirs. No information could be obtained for 2 male characters in old operas. The ophthalmologist was a baritone (Tabs. II-V).

Fifty characters (2 as a choir) were totally blind, 3 nearly blind bilaterally, and 2 had unilateral visual loss. More than one character with visual impairment was found in 17 of the operas. Five characters became blind during the action: 4 remained blind, while 1 regained their sight, 1 of whom became blind again. In 1 opera, an ophthalmologist cured the blind character (Tabs. II-V).

Etiologies

Group I: Organic ($n = 34$)

Trauma was the cause of blindness in 11 characters (Tab. VI). Traumas were war-related (gas poisoning or explosion) or fight-related in 3, accidental in 2 (eyes were blinded during a fight), and punishment-related (putting out of eyes) in 6. Five further characters were described as having congenital blindness, and the remaining had blindness of unknown origin, with 1 presumably alcohol-related toxic optic neuropathy (Tabs. II-VI).

Group II: Nonorganic ($n = 9$)

Nine characters presented psychogenic or malingering blindness: 3 self-enucleation (1 unilateral, 2 bilateral), 3 psychogenic, and 3 malingering (Tabs. II-VI).

Group III: Other (symbolic or miracle) ($n = 12$)

Out of 2 who had miracle-related blindness, one was cured and became blind again due to a miracle (Tabs. II, IV, VI).

Storyline

The operas were categorized into 4 groups according to the libretto.

Biblical or mythical

These operas are set in a biblical context, either the Old or New Testament, or based on legends or myths. The earliest was composed in 1836 and the latest in 1966 (Tab. II).

Blind beggars and blind musicians

These operas revolve around blind beggars or blind musicians as main characters. The earliest was composed in 1741 and the latest in 1975 (Tab. III).

Historical (real or fictional characters)

These operas are centered on historical figures who existed, mainly royals, with stories of intrigue and succession to kingly thrones, or on stories set in historical contexts depicting action and characters that are fictional. The earliest was composed in 1784 and the latest in 1928 (Tab. IV).

Contemporary or futuristic

These operas contain contemporary stories in recognizably present-day settings, or operas that treat futuristic themes. The earliest opera in this group was composed in 1958 and the latest in 2006 (Tab. V).

Discussion

The performing arts, such as opera, are a rich mirror of the human condition, in which certain pathologies may form an integral part of a story and its denouement. Despite its prevalence, no study exists that reviews blind characters in opera. We sought to investigate the reasons behind the inclusion of blind characters in operas.

The use of blind characters is not attributable to any particular composer, era, or librettist. Blindness as an operatic device was spread over 38 composers and across the 3 centuries of the existence of the art form. However, most cases of blindness were detected in operas of the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly fertile times for opera.

Characters with visual impairment are representative of causes of visual impairment in the era when those operas were composed, adding veracity and pathos for the onlooker. The audience would have been familiar with age-related blindness, the prevalence of nontreatable eye-related illnesses, the ravages of war and violence, and punishment by blindness echoed in the Bible and mythology.

TABLE II - Biblical and mythical operas

Opera/composition or first performance/ composer/librettist	Character (main or side), voice type	Cause of visual impairment	Significance in the synopsis
Belisario/1836/Geatano Donizetti/Salvadore Cammarano	Belisarius (main), baritone	Trauma: Eyes were put out as a punishment	6 th century; Byzantium. A hero, unjustly betrayed by wife and blinded. Leads an army to defend Byzantium, mortally wounded in battle.
The Ring of Nibelung/1848-1874/Richard Wagner/Richard Wagner	Wotan (main), bass-baritone	One-eyed, psychogenic: Self-enucleation	Wotan, the Nordic god of light, air, and wind, noted for his cruelty. Gave his eye in exchange for knowledge.
Samson and Delilah/1877/Camille Saint-Saëns/Ferdinand Lemaire	Samson (main), tenor	Trauma: Eyes were put out	Delilah cuts Samson's hair to deprive him of his strength. Blinded and imprisoned, kills himself and his captors.
Iris/1898/Pietro Mascagni/Luigi Illica	The father (main), bass	Unknown	Legendary times; Japan. Iris, living an idyll with a blind father, is kidnapped. The father mistakenly believes that she left to be a prostitute of her own will.
Pelléas and Mélisande/1902/Claude Debussy/Maurice Maeterlinck	King Arkel (main), bass	Nearly blind: Unknown	Legend in the mythical land of Allemonde. King Arkel is wise and recognizes the tension between two lovers.
The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya/1907/Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov/Vladimir Belsky	The huntsman (side), baritone	Trauma: Eyes were put out	6,751 years after creation. The prince's huntsman, blinded by Tatars, tells of the atrocities committed at Little Kitezh.
Die Toten Aug'en (The Dead Eyes)/1916/Eugene d'Albert/Hans Heinz Ewers and Marc Henry	Myrtle (the wife) (main), soprano	Miracle	Jesus performs a miracle on a beautiful blind wife who then mistakenly believes another handsome man is her husband. She curses Jesus, stares into the sun, and becomes blind again.
Oedipus Rex/1927 (opera-oratorio)/Igor Stravinsky/Jean Cocteau (based on Sophocles' tragedy)	Oedipus (main), tenor	Psychogenic: Self-enucleation of both eyes	Oedipus had killed his father and married his mother. He put out his own eyes to punish himself.
Oedipe/1936/George Enescu/Edmond Fleg (based on Sophocles' tragedy)	Oedipus (main), bass-baritone	Psychogenic: Self-enucleation of both eyes	Same as above.
Koroghlu (Son of a Blind Man)/1936/Uzeir Hajibeyov/M.S. Ordubadi	Ali (side), bass	Trauma: Eyes were put out	End of 16 th century; Azerbaijan. Ali's eyes were put out by the khan for seeming disobedience; revenged by his son Koroghlu.
The Other Wise Man/1959/Isaac Van Grove/V. Grove and Henry Dyke	Blind man (side), baritone	Nearly blind: Unknown	Artaban at the end of a 33-year search for Jesus arrives nearly blind at the crucifixion.
Don Rodrigo/1964/Alberto Ginastera/Alejandro Casona	Blind hermit (side), baritone	Unknown	8 th century; Toledo. Rodrigo becomes a penniless vagrant, and finds shelter with a blind hermit.
The Bassarids/1966/Hans Werner Henze/Wystan Hugh Auden and Chester Kallman	Tiresias (an old prophet of the Apollo temple in Thebes) (main), tenor	Unknown	1000 BC; Greece. A blind prophet of the temple of Apollo, famous for his prophecies, falls into a trance.
The Growing Castle/1968/M. Williamson/Strinberg	A blind man on Earth and in Heaven (side), baritone	Unknown	The blind character has a nonsignificant role.
Yusuf and Züleyha (Joseph and Zuleika)/1990/Okan Demiriş/Nezihe Araz	Zuleika (wife of the Egyptian Emir) (main), soprano Jacob (father of Joseph) (main), bass	Psychogenic Psychogenic	She becomes blind as a result of her love for Joseph. He becomes blind from excessive crying, but sees again when he recognizes the son he thought he had lost.

TABLE III - Operas with blind beggars or blind musicians

Opera/composition or first performance/composer/librettist	Character (main or side), voice type	Cause of visual impairment	Significance in the synopsis
The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green/1741/Thomas Arne/R. Dodsley	The beggar (main), no information on voice character	Unknown	18 th century; London. The life of a blind beggar and his daughter in Bethnal Green, London.
Les Deux Aveugles de Tolède (The Two Blind Men of Toledo)/1806/Étienne-Nicolas Méhul/Benoit-Joseph Marsollier	Nuguez (a blind musician) (main), bass-baritone Don Brusco (another blind musician) (main), baritone	Unknown Unknown	18 th century; Baghdad. Nuguez, a blind musician, uncle of Flora, who is engaged to another blind musician, Don Brusco. The real lover of Flora tries to fool the blind musicians.
Les Deux Aveugles (The Two Blind Men)/1855/Jacques Offenbach/Jules Moinaux	Giraffier (beggar) (main), tenor Patachon (beggar) (main), tenor	Feigned blindness, malingering Feigned blindness, malingering	19 th century; Paris. Two blind beggars compete for the best spot on a bridge, one playing the trombone, the other the mandolin.
The Devil Take Her/1931/Arthur Benjamin/Alan Collard and John B. Gordon	Beggar (side), baritone	Unknown	15 th century; London. A poet's wife is dumb from birth. A magic surgeon restores her speech, but she is a virago. She attacks everyone, even the maid for feeding a blind beggar.
The Blind Beggar's Daughter/1952/Geoffrey Bush/Sheila Bathurst and Geoffrey Bush	Beggar (main), no information on voice character	Unknown	18 th century; London. Bess, the daughter of the blind beggar, takes to the road to seek her fortune. (The story is identical to that of The Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green.)
The Death of Cuchulain/1975/Jolyon Brettingham Smith/after WB Yeats	Beggar (main), tenor	Unknown	A wooded place, the cliffs at the edge of the world. The blind beggar, witness to Cuchulain killing his son, is paid blood money by Cuchulain's enemies and kills him.

TABLE IV - Historical operas

Opera/composition or first performance/composer/librettist	Character (main or side), voice type	Cause of visual impairment	Significance in the synopsis
Richard Cœur de Lion/1784/André Grétry/Michel Jean Sedaine	Blondel (the troubadour) (main), baritone	Feigned blindness, malingering	12 th century. To save his master, Blondel, Richard's minstrel disguises himself as a blind beggar.
Don Carlos/1866/Giuseppe Verdi/Camille du Locle and Joseph Méry	Grand Inquisitor (main), bass Princess Eboli (main), mezzo-soprano	Unknown Fencing trauma, one-eyed	1560; Spain. Although blind, the Grand Inquisitor senses Don Carlos' adultery. She wears a patch on the affected eye. She informs the king of Don Carlos' adultery.
Boris Godunov/1874/Modest Mussorgsky/Modest Mussorgsky (based on the play by Aleksandr Pushkin and Nicolai Karamzin)	Blind pilgrims choir (side)	Miracle	Turn of the 17 th century; Moscow. Pimen the monk and the blind pilgrims tell of a dream in which a blind man miraculously regains his sight.
La Gioconda/1876/Amilcare Ponchielli/Arrigo Boito	La Cieca (the old mother) (main), contralto	Unknown	17 th century; Venice. Gioconda puts aside her own love of Enzo to repay Laura for saving her mother's life.
Iolanthe/1891/Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky/Modest Tchaikovsky	Iolanthe (main), soprano	Congenital cataract?	5 th century; France. Blind from birth, hidden from her by her father. Falls in love with a count who reveals her blindness. The doctor cures her.
Andrea Chénier/1896/Umberto Giordano/Luigi Illica	Dr. Ibn-Hakia, baritone	Eye doctor	Gérard calls upon the people to give what they can; Madelon gives him her grandson, the only family member she has left in the world, to be a soldier of the revolution.

To be continued

TABLE IV - Continued

Opera/composition or first performance/composer/librettist	Character (main or side), voice type	Cause of visual impairment	Significance in the synopsis
L'Amore dei Tre Rei (The Love of Three Kings)/1913/Italo Montemezzi/Sem Benelli	Madelon (the old woman) (side), mezzo-soprano Archibaldo (the king) (main), bass	Unknown Nearly blind: Unknown	10 th century; Italy. Old, almost blind king suspects his daughter-in-law of a secret affair, although he cannot prove it.
Turandot/1926/Giacomo Puccini and F. Alfano/G. Adami and R. Simoni	King Timur (father of Prince Calaf) (main), bass	Unknown	14 th century; China. Timur, the king of Tartary, is old and blind. He can only recognize his son by his voice.
Der Diktator (The Dictator)/1928/Ernest Krenek/Ernest Krenek	The blind officer (main), tenor	Trauma: Gas poisoning	20 th century; Italy. The Dictator is held responsible for blinding the officer with poison gas.

TABLE V - Contemporary or futuristic operas

Opera/composition or first performance/composer/librettist	Character (main or side), voice type	Cause of visual impairment	Significance in the synopsis
Maria Golovin/1958/Gian-Carlo Menotti/Gian-Carlo Menotti	Donato (a young man) (main), bass-baritone	Congenital	Present-day; Europe. Donato, a blind recluse, possessive lover of Maria, tries to kill her out of jealousy.
Aniara/1959/Karl-Birger Blomdahl/Erik Lindegren	The poetess (main), soprano	Symbolic	In the future, when the world exploded; in a spaceship. The blind poetess speaks of her cult of Light, gives hope to those in the spaceship, but is taken away.
Opéra d'Aran/1962/Gilbert Bécaud/Jacques Emmanuel, Louis Amade, and Pierre Delanoë	Mara Mac Einin (Sean's mother) (main), mezzo-soprano	Psychogenic: Blinded by sorrow at the loss of son	20 th century; Ireland. The mother was blinded by sorrow for the loss of her son. She dies before she sees him again.
	Maureen (Sean's wife) (main), soprano	Trauma: Eyes blinded by accidental blow from steel cable	Maureen intervenes in a fight between two men who love her, but is seriously injured and loses her sight.
Der Besuch der Alten Dame (Visit of the Old Lady)/1971/Gottfried von Einum/Friedrich Dürrenmatt	Koby (eunuch) (side), nonsinging role Loby (eunuch) (side), nonsinging role	Trauma: Eyes put out Trauma: Eyes put out	Present day; Middle European town of Gullen. Claire, the old lady, had Koby and Loby castrated and blinded.
The Picnic/1975/Richard Cumming/Henry Butler	Rebecca (the wife) (main), soprano	Trauma: An accident after a fight	20 th century; Ireland. Rebecca was believed blinded in a horse accident, but in fact she lost her balance and fell down stairs after she hit her husband.
Die Blinden (The Blind)/1989/Beat Furrer/M. Maeterlinck	11 soloists (3 mezzo-sopranos, 8 nonsinging) and a choir (main)	Symbolic	Future. All characters are blind, they do not know precisely where they are, and await the return of their priestly leader.
Ignorant i Szaleniec (The Ignoramus and the Madman)/2001/Mykietyn Pawel/Krzysztof Warlikowski (based on the play by Thomas Bernhard)	A blind alcoholic father (main), bass	Unknown (toxic optic neuropathy?)	While an opera diva performs on the stage, the father and a doctor are waiting for her in her dressing room discussing autopsy methods. At the end of the show, she decides to devote herself to her father.
Adriana Mater/2006/Kaaija Saariaho/Amin Maalouf	Tsargo (the father) (main), bass-baritone	War trauma	Present day, war time in Balkans. The son of the rape victim, Adriana, is unable to avenge his mother by killing his father who was blinded in the war.

Trauma or presumed trauma was revealed as a major category of blindness in the operas, most frequently a result of war and fights. War-related blindness evidenced the

cruelty of war (2, 3). Blindness caused by accidents created dramatic effect, heightening tension for events to follow (4, 5).

TABLE VI - Causes of visual impairment in operas

Thematic setting	Organic			Nonorganic: Psychogenic or malingering	Other		Total
	Trauma	Congenital	Unknown		Miracle	Symbolic	
Biblical and mythical	4		6	5	1		16
Blind beggars or blind musicians			6	2			8
Historical	2	1	5	1	1 (a choir)		10 (1 as a choir)
Contemporary or futuristic	5	4	1	1		10 (1 as a choir)	21 (1 as a choir)
Total	11	5	18	9	2	10 (1 as a choir)	55 (2 as a choir)

Putting out eyes was a punishment in which the eyes were scooped out, or pierced, or in which a source of intense heat, such as a hot poker, seared the eyes (6, 7). It was used as a means of incapacitating a person. Generally, retribution was enacted, directly or vicariously, showcasing the power of will in overcoming adversity, thus serving an allegorical purpose.

Interestingly, an ophthalmologist appears as a character in one of the operas. He cures a young patient, presumably by performing a congenital cataract operation (Tab. IV) (8). At the end of the opera, the patient can see but is bothered by extreme light and seems unable to make sense of her surroundings as she had never beheld them before. Modern medicine allows the librettist to establish equality between 2 betrothed: seer and nonseer. Tchaikovsky composed the opera while traveling in the United States and would have known of modern cataract treatment (9).

The majority of blind or nearly blind characters portray elderly people. The exact etiology of the condition is not discernable from the librettos, but presumably is congenital, due to age, or infection-related. Age-related eye disease signified wisdom for some, while for others it symbolized weakness and disability (Tabs. II and IV). The etiology of blindness in younger characters was not clear, but could have been either congenital or the aftermath of infection. No ophthalmic antibiotics existed in the times when many of these operas were composed (10).

Blindness may be unwittingly self-inflicted, as in psychogenic cases, i.e., nonorganic visual loss caused by strong emotions, such as deep sorrow and excessive crying due to unrequited love or the loss of a favorite person (5, 11). Psychogenic blindness is used as a device to emphasize the depth of emotion experienced by characters (Tabs. II and V). Some characters blinded themselves to gain strength or to punish themselves (Tab. II) (12-14). In these cases, self-mutilation is used to accentuate the sense of sacrifice made wittingly by characters in the pursuit of wisdom or the feeling of remorse. Functional blindness, on the other hand, was used as a dramatic device to create a humorous atmosphere (Tabs. III and IV) (15, 16).

Blindness in certain characters is associated with wisdom and sometimes with abilities that are atypical, conferring a mystical aura to the person. Similarly, group blindness is used as a metaphorical reflection on the demise of leadership and the groping for knowledge in a changing world; knowledge

requires strength of character, not the fearful reactions of the blind (Tab. V) (17, 18).

Vision loss was central to many of the operatic themes. Hearing loss and other sensory or physical limitations have not had such a distinctive place in opera throughout the centuries. Blindness would have been a common factor in the lives of all social classes. Its finality as a punishment justified retribution, and, in being cured, it was easily associated with the miraculous. It enhanced emotional conflict, served as a priceless gift in exchange for wisdom, drove humor, and assuaged remorse. The nature of vision made it an allegorical device to promote atypical gifts, instilling an alternative understanding of sight.

Appreciation of the perspectives on blindness offered by the performing arts, in this case opera, can awaken us to the social factors that prevailed prior to the modern era, and point to the discoveries still to come in cognitive interpretations of vision.

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