

COLLEGE OF MUSIC Volume 19 • 2021–2022

# HARMONIA

The Journal of the Graduate Association of  
Musicologists und Theorists (GAMuT)

# HARMONIA

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Volume 19 • 2021–2022

The Journal of the Graduate Association of  
Musicologists *und* Theorists at the  
University of North Texas

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*Harmonia* is the in-house journal of the Graduate Association of Musicologists und Theorists (GAMuT) at the University of North Texas. The objective of GAMuT is to provide a forum for the professional development of the graduate student community, and the annual publication of *Harmonia* functions in support of this goal.

The membership of GAMuT would like to extend its sincere appreciation to Dr. Hendrik Schulze, Dr. Vivek Virani, Dr. Justin Lavacek, and Dr. Peter Mondelli for their service as faculty reviewers for this volume of *Harmonia*.

Congratulations to Garrison Gerard, whose paper “The Human and Nature Balance in Electronic Soundscape Music: An Examination of the Diverging Paths of Soundscape Ecology and Soundscape Music” was the winner of the 2021–2022 Graham H. Phipps Paper Award.

For information about submitting an article to *Harmonia*, please contact [music.gamut@unt.edu](mailto:music.gamut@unt.edu).

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# The Human and Nature Balance in Electronic Soundscape Music: An Examination of the Diverging Paths of Soundscape Ecology and Soundscape Music

GARRISON GERARD

*The final question will be: is the soundscape  
of the world an indeterminate composition  
over which we have no control,  
or are we its composers and performers,  
responsible for giving it form and beauty?*  
—Murray Schafer<sup>1</sup>

In this quote the Canadian composer and naturalist Murray Schafer takes as a given that the world is a musical composition and presents humanity as one group capable of giving shape and form to this cosmic composition as both composers and performers. This is problematic as it places the human at the center of the natural world. In this conception of the world the perspective is fixed. The offshoots of Schafer's theory and the music stemming from it, particularly electronic soundscape music, use the centrality of humanity as a license to subsume all nature in service of the composer lending the world "form and beauty." Using natural sounds as a musical material erases the agency of nature and elevates humanity to the role of creative interpreter for nature, mirroring the ways that we have abused our natural resources for our own material gain.

What is a soundscape? The term, related to words such as landscape or seascape, refers to all the sounds in a given area. It is usually attributed to Schafer in his 1977 book *Tuning of the World*, but Schafer himself attributes its inception to Michael Southworth who used it more than a decade before.<sup>2</sup> Schafer's interests were tangential to Southworth's, as the latter was primarily concerned with soundscapes from the perspective of urban planning.<sup>3</sup> Schafer was primarily focused on composing music based on natural sounds, but he presents

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<sup>1</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1977), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Megan E. Hill, "Soundscape." *Grove Music Online*, edited by Deane Root, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2258182>, and Bryan C. Pijanowski, Luis J. Villanueva-Rivera, Sarah L. Dumyahn, Almo Farina, Bernie L. Krause, Brian M. Napoletano, Stuart H. Gage, and Nadia Pieretti, "Soundscape Ecology: The Science of Sound in the Landscape," *BioScience* 61, no. 3 (2011): 203.

<sup>3</sup> Pijanowski et al., "Soundscape Ecology," 203; Michael Southworth, "The Sonic Environment of Cities," *Environment and Behavior* 1, no. 1 (June 1969): 49–70; and Carlotta Darò, *Avant-gardes sonores en architecture* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2013).

his arguments in *Tuning of the World* as if they are objective, scientific conclusions, rather than as creative, subjective discussions. Schafer defines the soundscape as “the sonic environment.”<sup>4</sup> He further refines this definition, writing that a soundscape can be comprised of multiple other soundscapes, and within any soundscape there are smaller soundscapes made up of fewer sounds.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the soundscape is not scale dependent: the entire universe is a soundscape, as well as the interior of an ant hill. But Schafer specifically designates musical compositions that imitate or include natural sounds as unique soundscapes, distinct from all other natural soundscapes.

This separation of the musical as a distinct category of soundscape highlights an element of bias present in the discussion around soundscapes. There are at least two interweaving elements here: on the one hand, there is the field of soundscape ecology that is focused on using technology and a perspective of listening to examine the natural world and our impact on it. On the other hand, there are composers like Barry Truax who capture these sounds and package them to create a work of music. Using natural sounds as the fundamental musical material for a piece raises complex questions about the role of the author in framing the sound and whose voice is truly being represented. For instance, is it always acceptable to use natural sounds in a work of music, or are there decisions in the composition process that conflate the role of the composer with that of an advocate for nature? These two sides of soundscape studies, the scientific and the creative, are not mutually exclusive; they both have contributed to the growth of the other, but in different ways. Working with natural recordings in a musical setting requires recognizing the voice of nature itself. Composers should consider the colonial and appropriatory capabilities of field recording practices in their compositional process. Above all, the soundscape compositional process must begin from a mindset of listening. Listening has become central to the compositional act with artists such as Pauline Oliveros focusing on listening as the initiating act of any creative venture. In her book *Deep Listening*, she includes exercises that bring one closer to the sounds around them, helping to allow them to hear beyond the surface level.<sup>6</sup> The approach of Oliveros and the scientific field of soundscape ecology both provide some tools for guiding the creative practice of soundscape music.

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<sup>4</sup> Schafer, “Tuning of the World,” 274.

<sup>5</sup> Schafer, 274.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* (New York: IUUniverse, 2005).

## A Branching Tree—Soundscape Ecology

The influence of soundscape ecology on the compositional process and the tools it provides can be traced to its inception; a division of the expanding area of landscape ecology and related to acoustic ecology, it grew out of the ideas proposed by Southworth and Schafer.<sup>7</sup> It was built on a mindset of listening to our environment and propelled by the growing affordability of recording equipment. In addition to enhancing the way we listen to our environment, this relatively new field has provided valuable insights in economic, political, scientific, and environmental discussions since its inception in the 1960's.<sup>8</sup>

Bernie Krause is a major voice in the discipline of soundscape ecology. The author of multiple books on the topic of soundscapes and humanity's impact on the sonic terrain of our world, Krause argues convincingly for incorporating soundscape studies into our discussion of climate change.<sup>9</sup> Krause is also a musician (a composer and guitarist), but identifies foremost as an ecologist—in this way, he is the opposite of Schafer: Schafer allows his musical compulsions to drive his scientific hypotheses, whereas Krause allows his compositions to grow organically out of honest reflection about his work in natural soundscapes.

Krause divides all sounds in the universe into three distinct categories: geophony, biophony, and anthrophony. Geophony includes those sounds made by “non-living” entities: wind in the trees or an earthquake, for example.<sup>10</sup> Biophony are those sounds made by living creatures besides humans: birdsong and whale calls are both examples of biophony.<sup>11</sup> Anthrophony are the sounds that remain: those that are made by humans or our creations. For example, the incessant hum of electric transistor stations or the reverberant peal of a nuclear explosion are both instances of anthrophony.<sup>12</sup>

Soundscape ecology is a crucial voice in the fight against climate change as it can help reveal some of our natural impact in the aural domain that is obscured in the visual domain. Researchers operating in this vein are particularly concerned with examining frequency spectrums in the natural world and their transformation over time.<sup>13</sup> Recording equipment and spectrogram technology renders apparent sounds and patterns in the soundscapes, revealing the

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<sup>7</sup> Pijanowski et al., “Soundscape Ecology,” 203.

<sup>8</sup> Pijanowski et al., 203–04.

<sup>9</sup> Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (New York: Little, Brown, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, 39; and Michael B. Silvers, “Birdsong and a Song about a Bird: Popular Music and the Mediation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Northeastern Brazil,” *Ethnomusicology* 59, no. 3 (2015): 380–97.

<sup>11</sup> Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Krause, 157–258.

<sup>13</sup> Pijanowski et al., “Soundscape Ecology,” 211–15.



impact and interaction between different acoustic bodies. Spectrograms present sound as a visual picture, this allows researchers to determine the frequency and amplitude of sounds, and it reveals interactions in frequency space that would not be apparent to the human ear.<sup>14</sup> Scholars in soundscape studies have focused on the impact of humanity on natural soundscapes.<sup>15</sup> This emphasis means that researchers are looking at all sounds (i.e., not just biophony and geophony, but also the level and kind of anthrophony present). For instance, Krause gives the example of frogs in California who rely on acoustic coordination to protect themselves from predation; when this predation is disturbed by low-flying aircrafts, it takes almost an hour for the frogs to recover their synchronization.<sup>16</sup> Research also revolves around human sounds, examining how humans have carved out vast stretches of the audible frequency spectrum for themselves.<sup>17</sup> This focus on the aural interaction of all bodies and the use of technology to enhance our capability to listen are two elements that can inform a compositional approach to soundscape music.<sup>18</sup>

Since soundscape ecology provides unique insights on the relationship of elements that might not otherwise be apparent, it seemed poised for a swift and all-encompassing acceptance, but as with any field so defined by its need to highlight the effects of climate change and provide tools to reverse it, there was considerable political and corporate backlash. Krause recounts in his book *Voices of the Wild* that when the National Park Service set out to create a “Natural Soundscapes Program,” there was considerable political resistance that stifled the department and eventually led to its name being changed to the more politically palatable “Natural Sounds Program,” removing any reference to soundscapes.<sup>19</sup> He also includes multiple stories from his own experience of research into soundscapes being stifled by government officials and corporate interests.<sup>20</sup> This resistance to even discussing soundscapes elucidates the level of economic force and greed driving the suppression of these concepts.

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<sup>14</sup> Pijanowski et al., “Soundscape Ecology,” 209–10.

<sup>15</sup> Pijanowski et al., 207–08.

<sup>16</sup> Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra*, 176–81.

<sup>17</sup> Krause, 97–99.

<sup>18</sup> Soundscape ecology has the capacity to fall into the traps presented in the audio-visual litany by Jonathan Sterne (Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2003], 15). Sterne lists ways that we have privileged the aural over the visual. This tendency of prioritizing one to detriment of another demonstrates in part an overcorrection from the primacy of the visual that was a hallmark of the Enlightenment period. It is crucial that soundscape ecology be incorporated into a larger discussion and not used to discredit the contribution of other senses.

<sup>19</sup> Bernie Krause, *Voices of the Wild: Animal Songs, Human Din, and the Call to Save Natural Soundscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 47–50.

<sup>20</sup> Krause, 50–56.

Despite efforts to disregard its research, soundscape ecology has developed into a full-fledged field with a polished method and focus. But even within the realm of the scientific, the division between music and science dissolves at times. Some of the discussions of soundscape ecology focus on music as intimately related to the soundscape, for instance, as a musician and scientist, Krause often walks a line between the two and combines insight from both freely.<sup>21</sup> This blurring of the lines between the scientific and the creative creates some potential issues. It is not always clear when a statement carries the weight of scientific objectivity and when these observations are driven by a personal, artistic choice. Neither is inherently better than the other, but by eliding their boundaries, it becomes difficult for a reader to disentangle the two.

### **The Other Branch—Soundscape Music**

What is soundscape music? It is difficult (or perhaps inadvisable) to cordon off genres within contemporary music, but there are some common features among those pieces that self-describe as some form of soundscape or electronic natural music.<sup>22</sup> The main recorded sounds used are natural (e.g., bird song, water falling onto a rocky surface, wind perturbing a grove of trees), which are then combined to create a sense of place. These sounds can be electronically manipulated to some degree, but they often retain their connection to the initial sound source in the listener's mind. Although form can be created in multiple ways in these works, it is usually accomplished through motion to different soundscapes. The composer is then able to create separate scenes and interpolate between them to create a coherent composition.<sup>23</sup> Hildegard Westerkamp, a soundscape composer and colleague of Schafer, discusses her initial hesitancy to place boundaries around the genre at all, only partially relenting when it

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<sup>21</sup> Krause, 80–87.

<sup>22</sup> Even in some of the pieces here where I may highlight certain choices that are less than ideal, the composer makes positive choices in other sections. Not all soundscape music has a negative impact, but there are certain maneuvers that serve to obscure the natural soundscape.

<sup>23</sup> My focus in this article is on electronic soundscape works, but it is worth remembering that in acoustic works based on nature there are tropes employed in order to represent emptiness, serenity, or the majesty of nature—e.g., quartal and quintal harmonies, reflective slow moments, or raucous, eruptive musical features. Hester Bell Jordan points out how these representations are problematic, especially the portrayal of wilderness as empty—particularly the interior United States, as indigenous peoples have occupied this land for centuries. These musical representations serve to erase Native Americans from their narratives. This is not dissimilar to the effect of soundscape music erasing the impact of the human on nature. See Hester Bell Jordan, “Landscape Music through a Settler-Colonial Lens,” Paper Presented at *American Musicological Society Annual Meeting* (Boston MA, November 2, 2019).

became clear to her that other artists did not understand what she meant by soundscape music.<sup>24</sup> This tension between definition and freedom may seem trivial, but it highlights a divide at the center of soundscape music: this kind of music purports to be open to all things, but in actuality it is a closely delineated genre with a concise (if unstated) goal. This contradiction is highlighted in Westerkamp's writing, where later in the same article in which she has eschewed any responsibility to define soundscape music, she declares that "[soundscape music] is never abstract."<sup>25</sup> There are clearly borders to soundscape music, and while they may be permeable and inadvisable, their existence is evident in the commonalities of soundscape composers' works.

Soundscape music composed through electronic means has become increasingly common since the 1960's.<sup>26</sup> As recording equipment and digital audio editing software became more widely available, composers have been able to record, manipulate, and incorporate natural sounds in their work more easily. As soundscape composition became more common, composers and theorists such as Barry Truax defined terms for the elements that comprise this soundscape music. One term crucial to this study is the "keystone sound:" the main sound of any soundscape that allows a listener to tie the sound to a particular location; other sounds may be defined as a "background sound," if they are designed to sit behind the normal perceptual awareness of the listener and serve as a piece of a larger whole.<sup>27</sup> Truax, himself a composer who, in a similar vein to Schafer, sees natural sound as an abundant resource to compose with, goes further and lays out four specific qualities and aspects of soundscape music:<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hildegard Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition and Acoustic Ecology," *Organised Sound* 7, no. 1 (2002), 51–52. Of particular interest is Westerkamp's desire to distinguish soundscape music from *musique concrète*; a connection that many composers, theorists, and researchers have drawn.

<sup>25</sup> Westerkamp, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Q. Guyette, and Jennifer C. Post, "Ecomusicology, Ethnomusicology, and Soundscape Ecology: Scientific and Musical Responses to Sound Study," in *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature*, ed. Aaron S. Allen, and Kevin Dawe (New York: Routledge, 2016), 40–41.

<sup>27</sup> Barry Truax, "Soundscape Composition as Global Music: Electroacoustic Music as Soundscape," *Organised Sound* 13, no. 2 (2008): 107.

<sup>28</sup> Truax was particularly interested in the use of granular synthesis, often combining it with his soundscape pieces. This inclination to mix electronic processes with natural sounds, while not inherently negative per se, mirrors the general inclination to use natural sounds as musical material.

- (a) listener recognizability of the source material is maintained, even if it subsequently undergoes transformation;
- (b) the listener's knowledge of the environmental and psychological context of the soundscape material is invoked and encouraged to complete the network of meanings ascribed to the music;
- (c) the composer's knowledge of the environmental and psychological context of the soundscape material is allowed to influence the shape of the composition at every level, and ultimately the composition is inseparable from some or all of those aspects of reality; and ideally,
- (d) the work enhances our understanding of the world, and its influence carries over into everyday perceptual habits.<sup>29</sup>

Each of these points illustrates one way composers were thinking about soundscapes at this time, but the third point is particularly relevant as it highlights the primacy of the composer in Truax's vision of soundscape music. It is the "composer's knowledge" of the environment that is shaping these pieces—not the environment itself. Soundscape music has as its stated goal to enhance the listener's understanding of the world and promote a mindset of listening, using natural sounds (i.e., the voice of nature) to achieve this. And yet, each of these works is written by a single composer who is using the natural sounds as metaphorical paints on a canvas. This tension between the fantasy that these works are natural soundscapes, on the one hand, and the reality that these pieces are creative works of a single composer who is using natural sounds to amplify their own creative voice, on the other hand, is a central issue I raise with regards soundscape music.

Soundscape pieces may be titled as bio music, nature music, eco-acoustic music, or a similar term, but they all use actual recorded sounds of nature as their fundamental material.<sup>30</sup> Some pieces are performed outdoors, thereby blurring the line between the real and the representation of the soundscape, but the vast majority are designed to be reproduced in an indoor space. All these pieces must be played through a loudspeaker system, and the number of speakers and their arrangement controls the degree of spatialization a composer can employ. The most common is a stereo set up using two

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<sup>29</sup> On the first point [a]), this is particularly significant as much acousmatic music has focused on obscuring that very same relationship. These four specific qualities and aspects of soundscape music are displayed in Truax, "Soundscape Composition as Global Music," 103–09.

<sup>30</sup> This includes both processed and unprocessed sounds, and sounds combined with instruments or other sounds and presented on their own.

channels of audio sent to at least two speakers, but domes of speakers and other layouts can be used to introduce additional three-dimensional fidelity to the soundscape. Since soundscape performance uses spatialization as a fundamental musical parameter, the mode and performance location are crucial elements of a soundscape composition. And yet, the goal of the speaker system is for it to fade into the background—just as the hand of the composers shaping the sounds into their own soundscape are invisible to the audience.

Examining specific composer's works illustrates some general tendencies of the genre. David Monacchi is one such composer of complex soundscapes; his music is especially focused on the soundscapes of the equatorial rainforests.<sup>31</sup> He combines recorded sounds by weaving them together in much the same way an acoustic composer might orchestrate a chamber work. *Integrated Ecosystem* by Monacchi is an example of his approach to soundscape composition.<sup>32</sup> It is a patchwork of interwoven recordings that layers the background sounds of the evening chorus of birds and bugs with foregrounded roars and echoing calls such as those of chimpanzees. The sounds are also filtered—both literally and metaphorically. In the literal sense they are processed to remove extra noise and at times, the piece is consumed in large frequency sweeps that slowly remove all the low frequencies, leaving behind a barely perceptible high-frequency ringing. In the now vacated frequency space, another sound can rush in to fill the void. This is not dissimilar from the practice of orchestrating a symphony, where every instrument and their myriad interactions with the other orchestra members are intricately designed to focus the listener's attention on certain foreground elements such as a melody. The sounds are also metaphorically filtered through the mind of the composer. Those sounds the composer hears as more important are represented more prominently in the piece. But then, is this piece the sound of the rainforest? The sounds are from the rainforest, but the organization of the piece is quintessentially human-driven, and even more importantly, driven by a single human, increasing the likelihood for natural sounds to be subsumed in service of the composer's voice.

By orchestrating natural sounds as instruments, the composer is practicing their craft, but presenting their voice as embodied through nature raises questions of authorship and authenticity. Although natural sounds are plentiful in these works, nature loses its

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<sup>31</sup> Monacchi is another musician attempting to stray into the realm of science. In an article cowritten with Bernie Krause (David Monacchi, and Bernie Krause, "Ecoacoustics and its Expression through the Voice of the Arts: An Essay," in *Eco Acoustics: The Ecological Role of Sounds*, ed. A. Farina, S. Gage [Hoboken: John Wiley & Son, 2017], 297–311), Monacchi bemoans the derision they both received for combining art and science. While there is not sufficient space here to fully explore this topic, and there are certainly positive combinations of the two disciplines, it suffices to say that using the cachet of a "hard" science to justify the means of an art can generate issues.

<sup>32</sup> See David Monacchi, *Integrated Ecosystem*, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://vimeo.com/74699260>.

voice in giving the composer theirs; the field recordist can take sounds out of context, using them as another color on an acoustic palette. There is a way to include natural sounds in compositions; the composer must consider why they are using such sonic materials. In taking these sounds without regard for their origin or meaning, the composer walks a dangerous line that could indulge the larger pattern composers to appropriating any sound source available to them. I argue that some of them have taken from nature freely, where they must consider the voice of the subjects they are recording.<sup>33</sup> The composer must approach natural sounds thoughtfully and consider the risks of appropriation. If one approaches nature from the perspective of the singular artist, gathering tools to deploy at their will, that approach shapes the final product. John Drever observes similarities between the ideal process of soundscape composition and ethnography, stating that to compose a soundscape, one must immerse oneself in the sounds of nature.<sup>34</sup> Continuing by saying that in this manner, one can represent nature's voice through music.<sup>35</sup> Drever's argument presents this as a positive aspect of soundscape composition; however, it illustrates one of the fundamental problems of soundscape composition. If soundscapes are ethnographic, should they not inherently be about the nature they are exploring? A work of soundscape music is no more an ethnography than a travel photo slideshow is a documentary.

As soundscape music has developed, it has found a home in the concert hall and is often found alongside fixed media works. Drever provides some insight into the role of the electronic soundscape in his article, "Soundscape Composition," highlighting the conflation of acousmatic music with soundscape music.<sup>36</sup> Truax points out that soundscape composers are increasingly using speaker rings and domes to diffuse their works, a common technique of acousmatic music.<sup>37</sup>

The elision of acousmatic and soundscape music points to how the soundscape composer perceives themselves: an acousmatic composer is usually working with synthesized or found sounds which are assembled like notes in a symphony—the material of a soundscape composer is fundamentally different. Drever advocates for questioning the position of the soundscape composer through his argument that soundscape music is essentially ethnography. Soundscape music is usually presented as an advocate for nature. By immersing themselves in nature, composers are supposedly imbued

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<sup>33</sup> With this statement, I am not advocating for a new materialist worldview where every sound is equal or every living thing is exactly the same. Rather, I am defending that there is the possibility for natural sounds and natural things to have their own voice, and that composers must tread carefully so as not to strip that voice away.

<sup>34</sup> John L Drever, "Soundscape Composition: The Convergence of Ethnography and Acousmatic Music," *Organised Sound* 7, no. 1 (2002): 24–25.

<sup>35</sup> Drever, 24–25.

<sup>36</sup> Drever, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Truax, "Soundscape Composition as Global Music," 105.

with the ability to speak for nature and to present a representation of that nature to an audience—thereby hopefully lending the audience an understanding of nature and increased encouragement to act in its favor. However, if soundscape music is to speak for nature, why the predominance of natural sounds in these works? Surely nature hears not only its own voice, but the voice of humans as well. Krause speaks at length about the desire for soundscape music to be “clean;” for it to represent what we imagine nature to be.<sup>38</sup> This is somewhat understandable within the commercial context that Krause was working in. Even so, the focus in soundscape music is clearly on natural sounds—that is, geophony and biophony. Birds, waterfalls, wind in the trees, for instance, are all common staples of natural soundscape composition, with sounds of traffic or human speech rarely appearing.<sup>39</sup> Why is this, and where are the human voices? These soundscapes are meticulously orchestrated; they are works of art, not works of nature.

The inclination to limit the amount of anthrophony in electronic soundscapes is both natural and problematic. Artistic motivations account for a portion of this reluctance: composers often strive for coherence within a work, and any moment of anthrophony could disrupt an intricately designed natural tapestry composed of biophony and geophony. Further, many composers working in this medium are environmentally conscious and may be attempting to represent the soundscape of these natural places as they wish them to be. That desire to create a pristine soundscape, however, furthers the insidious devouring of natural resources, creating something akin to an aural colonialism. By silencing the human and presenting a delicately balanced musical composition as a representation of the natural, the impact of humans is cleaned away. The selective recording of the field worker and painstaking editing of the audio engineer is invisible. It is next to impossible to stand for any length of time in nature and not hear the impact of humans—the dull roar of a nearby highway, the incessant buzzing of an overpassing aircraft, or the music blasting from a hiker’s pack.<sup>40</sup> By removing these aspects of our current world and selectively choosing those that represent the artist’s vision of “perfect nature,” the result is a nostalgic and tortured portrait of a fantasy world. An imperfect analogy would be a picture taken of a striking mountain with rolling fields of green and a scarlet sunset in the background, but behind the camera, not visible to the viewer of the photograph, are piles of litter and debris. The picture (or

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<sup>38</sup> Krause, “The Great Animal Orchestra,” 175–78.

<sup>39</sup> Some pieces certainly defy this and venture into the less common domain of cityscapes and combine the sounds of traffic with the peal of sirens and traffic horns, but these works more often reside within the space of *musique concrète*.

<sup>40</sup> Here I am writing from my own personal experience; there certainly are still places in this world where the aural impact is next to non-existent, but these bastions are quickly shrinking. Everywhere, the impact of humanity is becoming more audible, or in some ways—as in the destruction of species and forests—the silence humanity has wrought is becoming increasingly deafening.

the soundscape) still has value for its aesthetic beauty, but it has the capacity to be used to cover the effects humans have on nature and has the potential for dishonesty.<sup>41</sup>

I approach this topic as someone who has taken freely from the natural acoustic palette and presented the results as my own. For my work *EverWind*, I embarked on a journey throughout the American Southwest to carry out field recordings to provide the foundational material for an orchestral work I was composing. I lugged recording equipment across more than a dozen national parks;<sup>42</sup> I made hundreds of field recordings, and as I recorded, I was careful to avoid other humans as much as possible. I tried to capture nature in its “purest.” This struggle in and of itself points out the omnipresence of humanity. Even on the most remote mountaintops without a highway or fast-food restaurant for fifty miles in any direction, a half-hour could not elapse without the roar of a jet engine above inserting itself into the recording. Then I meticulously combed through these files searching for anything of interest to me. I combined the files, processed them, and produced an 8-minute manicured piece. Nature was not speaking through me; I was using the resources of nature to amplify my own voice.<sup>43</sup>

Why did I embark on this journey? I was certainly interested in the interplay between nature and music, and I was drawn to these natural locations as *loci* of reflection and inspiration. Perhaps above those personal considerations, however, were economic and practical reasons: I was in an academic environment that placed value on music that could justify itself. I was in a place with grant opportunities that I was encouraged to apply for; recording nature sounds and using them in a work was a project that was likely to be funded. The reason I include this story is to illustrate that natural sound, even when deployed with the best intentions and harvested with the greatest care, can cause damage. In addition, this account depicts an underlying problem in the current academic approach to soundscape music which prioritizes any venture which is perceived as innovative, without necessarily examining the implications of that work.

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<sup>41</sup> I want to be clear that I am very much in favor of environmental activism. Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our current society, it is caused by the actions of humans, and we must make sweeping, intentional change to avoid catastrophe. I also do not think that activism is impossible through music. In fact, many composers and musicians have raised awareness about a variety of issues and affected real change in the world through their actions and their art. My point is that the methods by which soundscape composers produce their music reflects a larger colonial tendency and can create a situation where nature is unable to speak for itself.

<sup>42</sup> This is an aside to the problematic practice of annexing native land and then “preserving” it so as to gain political clout while converting sacred lands to tourist attractions in the form of national parks.

<sup>43</sup> Garrison Gerard and Joseph Klein, *EverWind: Original Composition and Analytical Essay on the Role of Inspiration and Nature in Music*, 2019, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1538726/>.



My own work emphasizes the tendencies and capabilities of soundscape music to obfuscate the human impact. These tendencies are apparent from the very hierarchies imposed in Schafer's categorizations of sounds. Schafer's tripartite division of all sounds in the world into discrete categories—those of geophony, biophony, and anthrophony—shows a preference for the natural.<sup>44</sup> Schafer's categories anticipate Krause's eventual sonic division into six categories, being the first one the most important category: natural sounds.<sup>45</sup> The way these groups are presented implies that natural sounds are fundamentally different and that should be privileged above human sounds. While it has a seemingly innocuous conclusion, this leads to the separation and exclusion of human sounds from soundscapes. Such exclusion has the exact opposite effect as the entire enterprise purports to be striving toward.

### **Intertwining the Branches, or: One Idea for How to Build on Soundscape Ecology to Create a Music Based on Mutual Understanding and Acceptance of Nature**

Using natural sounds in a composition is not inherently damaging; my goal is neither to chastise composers for their use nor to urge composers to retreat to the safe realm of sine-tones and synthesizers. To the contrary: the impact of listening to natural sounds can inform multiple facets of the compositional process. I am arguing for something more fundamental—that nature should inform composition and not the other way around.

Soundscape ecology gives a valuable insight into the process of composition—the technological tools such as microphones and spectral analysis, as well as the scientific approach to understanding our aural world, can inform the compositional process by enhancing the way we listen. Microphones allow the listener to hear in a fundamentally different way. Our ears are constantly filtering noise considered unimportant; the microphone is a non-selective instrument that captures all sounds by virtue of their amplitude rather than their perceived importance.<sup>46</sup> Microphones also function as a kind of microscope for the ears: by raising the volume of quiet sounds, previously unheard worlds come into focus. Invisible realities come into view through the analysis of recorded sound. Krause recounts how recordings of the same forests before and after selective logging paint drastically different pictures.<sup>47</sup> Old-growth forests are filled with multiple interlocking sound signatures, but the same forest, after being selectively logged, lacks almost all its previous aural richness—even once the impact of the logging is no longer visible. Technology and the practices of acoustic ecology can allow composers to hear in a new way.

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<sup>44</sup> The inclination to categorize is in and of itself both telling and problematic.

<sup>45</sup> Schafer, "Tuning of the World," 139–44.

<sup>46</sup> Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition," 53.

<sup>47</sup> Krause, *Voices of the Wild*, 29–34.

This new mindset encourages a reciprocal process of allowing nature's voice to be present in a work of soundscape art.

Excluding humanity from soundscape works is an optional maneuver by composers, and there are ways to develop a musical language that is less based on assimilation of nature into an established creative framework. Soundscapes must begin from an acknowledgment that recorded natural sounds do not belong to the composer, and further that the land on which the sounds are recorded do not truly belong to a particular set of humans or portion of society. Often the "empty" wilderness is only so because of the forced removal and manipulation of indigenous peoples. By acknowledging that sounds are given and not taken and that they have their own lives, the composer is able to engage in a more open dialogue with the issues around sound, which often leads to including human sounds in a richer soundscape.

Building from the basis of those acknowledgements, I posit that soundscapes require a new mindset, or rather a return to a previous mindset with a renewed focus: that of listening to our surroundings. Not listening with the intention of representing that experience of listening, but to go deeper—to hear what nature is truly *saying* and to *speak* that through music. I envision a natural soundscape that does not include a single sound of nature. And even if natural sounds are included, these should be allotted room to speak for themselves. For these reasons, one must encourage a dialogue about the realities of soundscape composition.

In the process of composing these works, it is important to consider the way in which sounds are used. Electronic manipulation is not in and of itself a negative aspect. In fact, there is enormous creative potential in using electronic manipulation to mirror natural processes or to represent the impact of humanity on a soundscape. If electronic processing is the central element, however, the composer should consider what the meaning the processing of a natural sound conveys, and whether the natural sound is the proper vehicle for the composer's expression.

A return to a mindset of listening, a willingness to acknowledge our impact on nature, and a commitment to engage in dialogue about these issues all lead to soundscapes that encourage the voice of nature, rather than creating flat oil paintings of an imagined natural world. If soundscape music is to accomplish its mission of contributing to a deeper understanding of nature, one must first approach nature from a position of reverence and acknowledge how little one might understand about it.<sup>48</sup> The tools of soundscape ecology provide one avenue to begin walking along this path; however, they must be employed to listen more closely to the sounds and especially to the human impact in the aural world, rather than to justify the creative practices as scientific endeavors.

There are many composers, sound artists, and musicians who are operating in this field and doing so in a positive way. As I have

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<sup>48</sup> Westerkamp, "Linking Soundscape Composition," 54.

stated previously, Luc Ferrari uses natural sounds, but does not consider these sonic elements as building blocks to be combined in service of an artistic vision. Ferrari's compositions are highly personal, as he composes soundscapes of his life. While there are natural sounds in his works, the composer never gives the impression that he is trying to represent an entire natural entity. There are natural sounds in his work because there are natural sounds in his life. A second example is Westerkamp and her compositions, who attempts to walk this fine line as well. She combines natural sounds together with recorded human voices to create enveloping sound worlds, some of which fall into the trap of appropriating nature. Other sounds in her works create elaborate inconceivable worlds, prompting one to think differently about their own.<sup>49</sup> There is no right way to use nature. In fact, nature must not be used; it must be listened to.

The central key is that nature *asks* us to listen. If contemporary music is meant to contribute to a better, more inclusive, and more positive world, it must examine the tendencies within its own practice and consider its approach to natural sound. These suggestions and reflections on the impact of soundscape composition are intentionally non-specific. I do not intend to have the answer to the proper way that humanity should interface with nature. My goal is to shed light on some potential issues and to create a dialogue on best practices for composition and creation of music involving the natural world. In order for soundscape composition to flourish, however, one must allow for nature to be in dialogue with us; it has so much to say, if we but listen.

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<sup>49</sup> Hildegard Westerkamp, *Into India: A Composer's Journey*, recorded 2002 (New Westminster BC: Earsay Productions, 2002).

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# The Vilification of Poppea

## *L'incoronazione di Poppea's* Leading Ladies

ELISABETH WILLIAMS

### Introduction

Poppaea Sabina lies on the ground in excruciating pain as life drains from her body.<sup>1</sup> Nero has taken out his anger by kicking her in the abdomen, even though she was pregnant with their second child.<sup>2</sup> Almost 1600 years later after Poppaea's death, audiences would watch Giovanni Francesco Busenello (1598–1659) and Claudio Monteverdi's (1567–1643) *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in the Venetian *carnevale* of 1643 and see her characterized as the villain, despite her tragic fate.

*Poppea* is considered the first historical opera, and the audience already knows the outcome of the events.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the opera must be presented in an intriguing manner that draws a crowd. *Poppea*, in a sense, becomes a work of historical fiction, playing upon the librettist and composer's viewpoints of the characters. The vilification of Poppea stems from Busenello's characterization of Poppea and Monteverdi's musical setting, exemplified by her foils of Drusilla and Ottavia who personify ideal Venetian women.<sup>4</sup>

The opera offers an unsympathetic portrayal of Poppea, one which implicitly justifies her gruesome death. Building on the existing literature of Wendy Heller, Bonnie Gordon, Ellen Rosand, and Edward B. Savage, this article provides the first case study contextualizing Poppea by comparing the opera's other two main women, Ottavia and Drusilla.<sup>5</sup> I will analyze musical examples ascribed to Drusilla and

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will make the spelling distinctions between the historical Poppaea and the character Poppea, as well as Nero and Nerone.

<sup>2</sup> This cause of death is indicated by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (69–122 AD). See Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, "Life of Nero," in *Lives of the Caesars*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1. 35. 3. However, Tacitus (56–120 AD) also defends that Poppaea's death is related to Nero's physical aggression. For the latter, see Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, ed. and trans. Michael Grant, (United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Gesine Manuwald, *Nero in Opera: Librettos as Transformations of Ancient Sources* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2013), 37.

<sup>4</sup> The aim of this article is to look at how to interpret this opera as a whole without question of authorship of sections, as there is no conclusive evidence that Busenello and Monteverdi were not the creators. Busenello and Monteverdi are accepted as the librettist and composer, respectively, of *Poppea*, as of today.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Heller argues about the negative portrayal of females in her article "Tacitus Incognito: Opera as History in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 1 (1999): 39–96, but she does so



Ottavia and compare them to Poppea's pieces. To establish the comparison between these female characters, I consider the societal implications of females and power in Italy in the first half of the seventeenth century. To illustrate such perceptions at the time, I will engage in a dialogue with the studies of the aforementioned authors, with Busenello's libretto, and with Hendrik Schulze et al.'s edition of Monteverdi's score.<sup>6</sup> All translations will come from Schulze's work, edited by Nicola Badolato. The characterization of Poppea will, therefore, be understood through the context of the other female characters in the opera. This article serves to examine the three main female characters and their characterization against the ideals of the seventeenth-century Italian woman. Finally, I will discuss what opera companies today can do to incorporate a modern-day storytelling for *Poppea*.

### Women in Venice in the Seventeenth Century

To understand why *Poppea* is written as such an unsympathetic character, one must first consider the public opinion of women in seventeenth-century Venice. This opinion of women certainly influenced the composer Monteverdi and librettist Busenello in creating the characters of *Poppea*. In the sixteenth century, femininity was associated with keeping a home.<sup>7</sup> As for rights, "late sixteenth-century Italy ... was conspicuous for its persistent denial to women of any kind to share in professional public life."<sup>8</sup> Instead, women were advised to speak very little, as Francesco Barbaro (1390–1454) reports in a 1415 treatise that was reprinted until the 1700s: "Loquacity cannot be sufficiently reproached in women, as many very learned and wise men have stated, nor can silence be sufficiently applauded."<sup>9</sup> The view of an early Venetian 'ideal' woman is quiet, docile, and unopinionated.

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mainly in context of the male characters. This article purely considers the female perspective and the implications for *Poppea*. See also Wendy Beth Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Bonnie Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women: The Power of Song in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Ellen Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas: A Venetian Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Edward B. Savage, "Love and Infamy: The Paradox of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*," *Comparative Drama* 4, no. 3 (1970): 197–207.

<sup>6</sup> Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, trans. Hendrik Schulze and Nicola Badolato, ed. Hendrik Schulze, Nicola Badolato, Robert Michael Anderson, José Barnett Jr., Holly K. Cassell, Emily Hagen, Joy S. Hague, Kája Lill, Kenneth R. Lovern, Brandon K. McDannald, Sean Morrison, Emily M. Smith, Joseph A. Turner, and Andrew Vagts (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Els Kloek, Nicole Teeuwen, and Marijke Huisman, *Women of the Golden Age: An International Debate on Women in Seventeenth-century Holland, England and Italy* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Kloek et al., 72.

<sup>9</sup> Francesco Barbaro, *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 204.

The ideals of a domestic silent woman who does not interfere in public life continued into the seventeenth century, when women in Venice were pigeonholed between the limitations of the church, marriage, or the burgeoning red-light district.<sup>10</sup> Venice was a playground for the men, but a cage for the women. Men were free to see obscene productions or call upon a courtesan in a private box, while women were defined solely on their connections to men.<sup>11</sup> Women with well-established fathers or with tremendous talent, such as Barbara Strozzi or Francesca Caccini, could afford some agency, so long as it served the interests of the male sex.<sup>12</sup>

Anti-female sentiment ran rampant in the exclusively male societies of upper-class Venice. Busenello was an active member of one such group, the *Accademia degli Incogniti*. This Accademia was a group of men who met often to discuss philosophical questions and had members reaching through all levels of Venetian influence. The *Accademia degli Incogniti* started in 1630 and reached its peak in the 1640s, right when *Poppea* premiered, and had several opera librettists and impresarios as its members.<sup>13</sup> These were active members of the *Incogniti* who helped bringing the genre to its height. The *Incogniti* were to thank for the creation of the Teatro Novissimo, which produced operas that became a Venetian standard, including *La finta Pazza* in 1641.<sup>14</sup> This also meant that the political views of the *Incogniti* permeated several Venetian operas at the time. Members of the *Incogniti* subscribed to Aristotelian philosopher Cesare Cremonini's dogma to seek physical pleasure, and women were a natural means of achieving that.<sup>15</sup> In *Emblems of Eloquence*, Heller suggests that these organizations acted as a microcosm for Venice itself; the dangers of women were a frequent topic of discussion.<sup>16</sup> Women were alluring but not to be trusted, for they could turn a man's attention away from the betterment of the republic. Instead, the *Incogniti* was a place where anti-female sentiment built, seeing women as corruptive influences, and questioning every motive. The public perceived men as superior to women in seventeenth-century Venice, and the male population feared the prospect of women gaining power.<sup>17</sup>

Busenello's writing about women in *Poppea* betray his ideals, in line with the *Incogniti*'s points of view. Busenello reveals that he is aware of the confines placed on women in Ottavia's recitative "O delle donne miserabil sesso," (Oh wretched female sex), yet he does not see a way of breaking women free:

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<sup>10</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Muir, "Why Venice? Venetian Society and the Success of Early Opera," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 3 (2006): 335.

<sup>12</sup> Virginia Cox, "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1995): 556.

<sup>13</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Muir, "Why Venice?," 346.

<sup>15</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Heller, 52.

<sup>17</sup> Androniki Dialeti, "Defending Women, Negotiating Masculinity in Early Modern Italy," *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 1 (2011): 7.

Ottavia:  
*O delle donne miserabil sesso,  
 se la natura e 'l cielo  
 libere ci produce,  
 il matrimonio c'incatena serve.  
 Se concepiamo l'uomo,  
 O delle donne miserabil sesso,  
 al nostr'empio tiran formiam  
 le membra,  
 allattiamo il carnefice crudele,  
 che ci scarna e ci svena,  
 e siam costrette per indegna  
 sorte  
 a noi medesme fabricar la morte.*

Ottavia:  
 Oh wretched female sex!  
 Even if nature and Heaven  
 made us free,  
 matrimony enslaves us.  
 If we give birth to a man,  
 oh wretched female sex!  
 We produce the limbs of our  
 own evil tyrant,  
 we create the cruel executioner  
 who dismembers us and kills us,  
 and we are forced by unrelenting  
 fate  
 to give birth to our own death.<sup>18</sup>

In these lines, Ottavia is aware of the double standard women face. This does not mean, however, that Busenello is sympathetic to the female sex. Instead, he gives Ottavia the feminist ideals of Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), a nun and writer admired but constantly mocked by the *Incogniti*.<sup>19</sup> This characterization of Ottavia is contradictory to ancient historical sources, which state that Ottavia was silent and reserved.<sup>20</sup> As such, Busenello adds Ottavia's reference to Tarabotti as a possible view of the female sex while at the same time mocking the fight for equality. As Ellen Rosand points out in *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, Busenello shaped his characters according to his wants, unconcerned about their relationships being realistic.<sup>21</sup> Historic sources are, by nature, grounded in the view of the speaker. Busenello may have been faithful to select sources, but a comprehensive review of the works available to him demonstrates that he chose to create his libretto with his own creativity and extra characters, rather than a faithful retelling of the historic tale.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Busenello's libretto inherently adds his commentary and opinion.

One such addition that reveals Busenello's creative license and opinion is the male character Ottone. There is no trail of historical evidence behind the creation of his characterization besides Busenello's own personal inclinations. The traditional male feelings about

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<sup>18</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 219.

<sup>19</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 157.

<sup>20</sup> Heller, 141. It is important to note that historical sources were written originally by men as well. From Ottavia's birth until the 1700s, the portion of primary literature considered by this article and the sources, Ottavia was reported with a male gaze. According to Heller, "Tacitus's construction of Octavia emphasizes a kind of colorlessness: she suffers in silence, expressing little outward emotion, having learned to 'hide sorrow, affection, every feeling.'" See Heller, 141, quoting Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.16.

<sup>21</sup> Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre*. (Oxford: University of California Press, 2011), 156.

<sup>22</sup> Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas*, 133.

women are betrayed by Ottone's outburst after Poppea spurns his advances:

Ottone: <i>Ottone, torna in te stesso. Il più imperfetto sesso non ha, per sua natura, altro d'uman in sé che la figura.</i>	Ottone: Otho, come to your senses. The most imperfect sex has by its nature nothing human in itself but the shape. <sup>23</sup>
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In reality, Ottone went to Lusitania (modern Portugal), to allow this affair to take place.<sup>24</sup> This addition of Ottone to the storyline is a means for Busenello to add a commentary about the dominant view on women. Ottavia describes the limits placed on women, while Ottone blatantly states the misogynistic view of male superiority in seventeenth-century Venice. Venetian women were limited in marriage and seen as secondary citizens like the creation of Ottavia and Ottone demonstrate. The contrast between the words of Ottavia and Ottone conveys the traditional Venetian belief that women are negative influences.

### The Creation of Poppea

Busenello's criticism of Poppea begins from the choice and adaption of ancient historical texts. It is clear even from the final title of the opera that Poppea occupies the limelight, as an earlier version of the libretto was titled *Il Nerone overo L'incoronazione di Poppea*.<sup>25</sup> Poppea usurps the spotlight, with all attention now given to the opera's greatest villain: herself. Busenello's depiction of Poppea is heavily based on the writings of Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56–120 AD), specifically his *Annals*, in which he wrote about the Julio-Claudian dynasty, to which the emperor Nero and Poppaea belonged.<sup>26</sup> According to Heller, the *Incogniti* frequently found inspiration in Tacitus and manipulated his rhetoric for their own uses.<sup>27</sup> Seventeenth-century writer Ferrante Pallavicino (1615–1644) explains that even Poppaea's modesty, described by Tacitus, made men desire her: she could manipulate with her body and words, like a courtesan. However, Poppaea would only love someone if she gained something from the relationship as well.<sup>28</sup> Tacitus had a rather negative view of the Julio-Claudians, specifically of Agrippina, Nero's power-hungry mother. Agrippina symbolized the Julio-Claudian dynasty for Tacitus, a great evil

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<sup>23</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 229.

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Heller, "Poppea's Legacy: The Julio-Claudians on the Venetian Stage," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 3 (2006): 384.

<sup>25</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., XVI.

<sup>26</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*.

<sup>27</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 42.

<sup>28</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 148.

that needed to be extinguished.<sup>29</sup> With no Agrippina in the opera, the character Poppea fills the gap as an insatiable female figure.<sup>30</sup> Poppea therefore symbolizes the destructive female power the Julio-Claudians carried as a dynasty. Busenello's choice to leave Agrippina out of the opera shifts the blame to the closest female in power, that is, Poppea. Busenello's use of Tacitus's *Annals* illustrates his stance against the Julio-Claudian dynasty, specifically Poppea.

The music and libretto assigned to Poppea exhibit her as a corruptive influence on Nerone. The first example where this occurs is in Poppea's first scene, Act I Scene 3, "Signor, deh! non partire," (Sire, please do not leave) where Nerone and Poppea share their love for each other and Poppea begs Nerone not to leave the room. Her words, telling him that he is her sun and light, flatter Nerone. The latter's interjections do nothing but spur on sweeter sentiments from Poppea, stating that she will perish if he leaves. Nerone then begins to talk of the issue Ottavia poses, and Poppea pushes him to the next logical conclusion, insisting that he finishes his thoughts at the words 'In sin che? In sin che?' (As long as? As long as?) and then 'Non rimane? Non rimane?' ([She] does not remain? Does not remain?).<sup>31</sup> This repetition is noted both in the libretto and in the score, demonstrating Poppea's lust for a change of events and her insistence that Nerone take her as a wife and leave Ottavia. Once he finally mentions divorce in that same scene, Poppea's demeanor changes completely, switching to aria-like style and imploring him to leave. This switch in tactic changes Nerone's intentions, ending with him calling Poppea his light in turn. Musicologist Savage explains the duality of the music and its subtext in the following words:

Despite the extreme beauty of the music, underneath all its seductive charm lies the evil of corruption which, eventually, undoes everyone and everything. Poppea, acting the playful siren, casts a skein of sensuous enchantment around Nerone, knowing full well how besotted he is with erotic feelings for her.<sup>32</sup>

Poppea's newly achieved complete power over Nerone is clear in their parting words, where he copies not only her words, but her exact melodic statements (ex. 1). This is seen in the example below, with Poppea on the top line and Nerone on the bottom:<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*.

<sup>30</sup> Heller, "Poppea's Legacy," 387.

<sup>31</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 162–64.

<sup>32</sup> Savage, "Love and Infamy," 199.

<sup>33</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 28.

**Example 1: Poppea and Nerone's First Duet, Act I Scene 3, mm. 198–215.**

198 POPPEA X  
A di - o, Ne-ro-ne, Ne-ro-ne, a di -

NERONE X  
A di - o,

207 Z  
- o. A dio, Ne-ro-ne, a di - o

Y X Z <Parte.>  
Pop-pe-a, Pop-pe-a, a di - o. A dio, Pop - pe - a, a di - o.

Nerone copies Poppea's X, Y, and Z melodic statements exactly after she sings them. This demonstrates that Poppea can control Nerone and make him follow her, as he is listening intently to her every word. Nerone is the emperor, yet Poppea is the one in power, making statements first and hearing them sweetly repeated back to her by Nerone. The fact that Poppea can produce exact melodic statements and words back from Nerone conveys her manipulation abilities, as she is free to express her desires, but Nerone cannot help but repeat them. Monteverdi makes Poppea's influence clear with her ability to have Nerone follow her precise phrases.

Not only is Poppea's control evident in the first duet with Nerone, but Poppea also manipulates Nerone into murder. This addition to the storyline is not historically based, as Seneca's murder is put in a different order by Busenello than it historically played out.<sup>34</sup> Seneca's death in Busenello's rendition is entirely built from Poppea's lie about the philosopher speaking of himself as superior to Nerone. The *Incogniti* and Venetians at the time may have seen this power over Nerone as a negative element of Poppea's character. She is accurately described by scholar Lewis as Circe-like in her ability to charm, perceived as a negative attribute, because music evoked the feminine side in listeners.<sup>35</sup> Monteverdi's setting of the music and Busenello's libretto characterize Poppea's power over Nerone as a poisonous woman to a man's right to autonomy.

<sup>34</sup> The whole timeline of events is displayed in Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 140. Historically, Seneca's death is written in great detail by Tacitus in his *Annals*.

<sup>35</sup> Circe is a Greek god best known for her intoxicating sway over the male population, eventually turning them to animals. In this context, she represents the extreme of evils that women with power hold. See Rachel A. Lewis,

Monteverdi's music for Poppea, particularly her melismas, embodies the very characteristics that Venetian men feared in women, setting her as a loud, sexually charged woman.<sup>36</sup> Referencing again Act I Scene 3, Monteverdi gives Poppea ornamentation at a time when she and Nerone are in the middle of a passionate exchange. In modern renditions of the opera, this scene is often treated as a romantic encounter between Nerone and Poppea. The versions of Glyndebourne (2009) and Opus Arte (2005) chose to use this scene, with its melismatic phrases, to demonstrate Poppea's sexual agency.<sup>37</sup> An example of this melismatic hypotyposis is depicted below in Example 2, indicated in brackets:<sup>38</sup>

**Example 2: Poppea and Nerone's First Duet, Act I Scene 3, mm. 101-14.**

101 POPPEA  
- gnor, sem - pre mi ve - di, sem - pre, sem - - - pre, sem - pre mi ve - di, an - zi mai non mi ve -

106  
- di. Si - gnor, sem - pre mi ve - di, sem - pre, sem - - - pre, sem - pre mi ve - di, an - zi

111  
mai non mi ve - di per - ché, s'è ver che nel tuo cor io

Gordon explains in her book *Monteverdi's Unruly Women* that “ornamentation reflected the empty beauty that had long been associated with women sirens and Circes.”<sup>39</sup> This paints Poppea as a courtesan, using sexual favors to climb the social ladder and get what she desires. Other courtesans in Venice at the time, such as Veronica Franco, used music to demonstrate their power in a similar manner.<sup>40</sup> The scene renders Poppea in an unfavorable light for Venetian standards when

“Love as Persuasion in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*: New Thoughts on the Authorship Question,” *Music & Letters* 86, no. 1 (2005): 25–29.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women*, 201.

<sup>37</sup> See the staged productions of Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Busenello, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, dir. Robert Carsen (Glyndebourne, 2009), and Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Busenello, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, dir. Pierre Audi (Opus Arte, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 25.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women*, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon, 116.

considering the implied sexual connotations of the scene with Poppea's singing. As Gordon states regarding women singing, "when these women took control of their bodies and enacted movements and sensations that paralleled sexual activity, they mimicked a non-procreative sexuality that went against sexual and moral codes."<sup>41</sup> This standard was generally not applied to men, who were not at a danger, as Gordon explains that men's bodies were 'heated' by such works.<sup>42</sup> The fact that Nerone is a male character justifies his many exclamations of sexual joy with melismatic phrasing. Poppea's fault lies in that she is a woman, who should not take such sexual agency. One sees Poppea use her sexual prowess to seduce Nerone to her will and keep her in his favor. Monteverdi employs Poppea's manipulative qualities by using her voice to mimic sexual sensations, setting Poppea farther away from the ideal Venetian woman.<sup>43</sup>

The final scene in *Poppea* establishes a change in dynamic between Nerone and Poppea after she is crowned, depicted in the words and the music.<sup>44</sup> Power reverts to the Venetian standard of male dominance and feminine subordination.<sup>45</sup> Monteverdi has Poppea thank Nerone with long melismas on 'ringraziarti' (thank you). Poppea is no longer wooing Nerone to get something that she wants; she has achieved the wish of becoming an empress. Her poetic thanks and humbling, for the first time, are without a clear ulterior motive in the text. Busenello has Poppea state that a woman should be humbled by her spouse, demonstrating a change from when Poppea eagerly held the power: 'Dà licenza al mio spirito / ... che s'umilii a te come conviene' (Grant license to my spirit / ... that it humbles itself to you, as it should).<sup>46</sup> Nerone has now returned to be the one in charge, while Poppea is subservient to him in terms of social standing. Busenello has made clear that such obedience permeates into the personal relationship in Poppea's words to Nerone. Before this moment, as Gordon explains, Poppea has been

the epitome of the manipulative woman, she represents everything against which conduct books cautioned and embraces all of the negative attributes usually associated with female singers [open mouths, melismatic phrases, loud lives].<sup>47</sup>

At this point of the opera, one observes a switch from the loud and loquacious to the more modest, gracious female that viewers would expect as the normal behavior from a woman. This power dynamic of

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<sup>41</sup> Gordon, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, "Love as Persuasion," 29.

<sup>44</sup> The authorship of the music behind the final scene is highly debated. However, no evidence conclusively shows that Monteverdi is not the author. For the purposes of this paper, the opera is examined as it is presented today.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, "Love as Persuasion," 30.

<sup>46</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 255.

<sup>47</sup> Gordon, *Monteverdi's Unruly Women*, 203.



male dominance *versus* female submission is the dogma the *Incogniti* enjoyed upholding. Attractive women with sexual agency were feared, so the existence of a docile Poppea in the final scene shows a stark change in the power dynamic for the couple. This obedient Poppea allows Monteverdi and Busenello to appease the audience with a restored patriarchal power structure. The final scene acts as a cautionary tale that the norms of a man in power must always return.

When staged, this duet allows for performers to foreshadow Poppea's future. The BBC, Glyndebourne, and Opus Arte versions of *Poppea* all stage the final duet without excessive affectionate displays that have been present in other scenes, opting for a more docile final depiction of Poppea.<sup>48</sup> In the end of the opera, her death was justified for Venetian viewers due to her lust for power, stated by Susan McClary:

as a case in point, Nino Pirrotta argues that Monteverdi's audience would have known about Poppea's ultimate fate ... and could thus have supplied for themselves the missing patriarchal retribution for her apparent triumph at the conclusion of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.<sup>49</sup>

Poppea has been cast by Busenello and Monteverdi as the embodiment of evil femininity throughout the opera, with her sexual agency, brazen voice and free flowing melismatic phrases, and control over Nerone. The last scene's reinstatement of Venetian power dynamics prepares the audience for Poppea's consequential death.

### **Foil 1: Drusilla**

One of Poppea's foils in the opera is Drusilla, the perfect devoted partner Poppea never was. Drusilla was Busenello's own addition to the story, making her another tool for Busenello to contrast Poppea. Drusilla is the embodiment of selfless love. At the beginning of the opera, Drusilla is infatuated with Ottone but is upset that he still has feelings for Poppea. As the opera progresses, Drusilla becomes excited that Poppea will die and will no longer be a barrier. But rather than depict her wish as a negative trait, Monteverdi's musical setting turns this into a positive aspect. Wanting to get rid of Poppea is portrayed as something positive by Monteverdi, as Drusilla is playing into the *Incogniti* ideals of wising to dampen dangerous female power. Act III Scene 1, "O felice Drusilla" (Oh happy Drusilla), shows Drusilla's

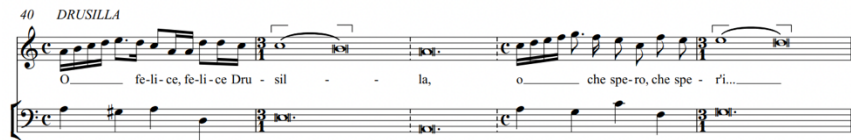
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<sup>48</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. David Alden, prod. David Jackson (BBC Worldwide, 2000); Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Carsen; and Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Audi.

<sup>49</sup> Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 221.

growing hope that Ottone will love her back. One can see her expectation getting stronger on her expressive and reiterated ‘oh’ exclamations in the aria as the melodic line rises, representing both her increasing hope, and her growing happiness. The ‘oh’ exclamations come before the words ‘felice’ (happiness), ‘che spero’ (I hope), and ‘dei’ (gods) in measures 40–44, showing that words cannot express her utter joy and hope (see Example 3).<sup>50</sup>

**Example 3: Melismatic ‘oh’ in “O felice Drusilla,” Act III Scene 1, mm. 40–44.**



Drusilla resorts to simple exclamations to express the emotion she feels, for her love, joy, and hope are overwhelming. On the second ‘oh,’ the key changes from A minor to C major, indicating another increase of her hopes. It is the growth in this aria that allows Drusilla to act against her own interests and assume responsibility for Ottone in the fourth scene of Act III, falsely testifying that she attempted to kill Poppea. By the end of the aria, her joy has encompassed all her thoughts and she does not care that Ottone might not reciprocate her feelings, for she had received a lukewarm reception to her asking if Ottone loved her in Act I scene 13:

Ottone: <i>Ottone, torna in te stesso.</i>	Ottone: Otho, come to your senses.
Drusilla: <i>Sì subite dolcezze gode lieto il mio cor, ma non l'intende. M'ami, m'ami?</i>	Drusilla: Such sudden sweetness my heart enjoys, but it does not understand. You do love me then?
Ottone: <i>Ti bramo, e dican l'amor mio le tue bellezze.</i>	Ottone: I desire you, and your beauty explains my love. <sup>51</sup>

Even though Ottone refuses to state, ‘I love you’ in as many words, Drusilla professes her joy and commitment in Act III scene 1, “Oh, felice Drusilla” (Oh, happy Drusilla). Busenello’s depiction of Drusilla as a happy faithful partner contrasts Poppea as the adulterer.

When Busenello has Drusilla falsely testify that she attempted to murder Poppea, Busenello establishes Drusilla as more worthy and

<sup>50</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 138.

<sup>51</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, 229.

womanly than Poppea. Poppea is unfaithful to her original husband, Ottone, which is how she became Nerone's mistress. This infidelity is contrasted harshly with Drusilla's undying loyalty, to the point that Drusilla would even give up her life for the man whom she loves and ends up going into exile with him. Poppea, instead, rebuffs Ottone when he comes back to her. Faithfulness in female individuals is a quality not only revered by the Venetian public, but also expected, as wives were expected to keep to the house.<sup>52</sup> Infidelity would leave a woman at the mercy of her husband's wrath, as Ottavia adeptly acknowledges when talking to her nurse. Similar to Ottavia, Drusilla proves that faithfulness is one of her best virtues. Drusilla is hailed by Nerone after her sacrifice:

Nerone:  
*E tu ch'ardisti tanto,*  
*o nobile matrona,*  
*per ricoprir costui*  
*... e sia del sesso tuo nel secol*  
*nostro*  
*la tua costanza un adorabil*  
*mostro.*

Nerone:  
 And you, who dared so much,  
 o noble lady,  
 in order to cover up for him  
 ... and be in our times to your  
 sex  
 an admirable example of your  
 constancy.<sup>53</sup>

Drusilla is, by Venetian standards, the perfect woman: she does not desire power, only love. She is simple and she is heroic.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, Poppea unashamedly sleeps with the emperor and considers her ties with her husband severed. Drusilla's existence in this opera serves as a stark counterpoint for Poppea's brash seduction and manipulation.<sup>55</sup> Poppea is unafraid to pursue the emperor and manipulate him for her needs. This is not the expected route for a seventeenth-century Venetian woman; during that time, one would prefer instead Drusilla's path of faithful obedience, following along with the man's wishes. Drusilla's fidelity is rewarded by her banishment with Ottone, preferable as the two are united, and she makes another huge sacrifice by leaving behind her livelihood.<sup>56</sup> As the embodiment of an ideal wife, Busenello's addition of Drusilla's character casts aspersions on Poppea.

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<sup>52</sup> Heller, "Tacitus Incognito," 39–96.

<sup>53</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 251.

<sup>54</sup> Magnus Tessing Schneider, "Seeing the Empress Again on Doubling in *L'incoronazione di Poppea*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 24, no. 3 (2012): 271.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, "Love as Persuasion," 29.

<sup>56</sup> While banishment might not be the ideal happy ending to audiences today, it is one of the best options for a Venetian faithful wife, who should be joyous at the opportunity to spend eternity with her love.

## Foil 2: Ottavia

Poppea usurps Ottavia's rightful and accepted place as a ruler, and Busenello's depiction of Ottavia perpetuates this dichotomy. Ottavia represents the honor, decency, and stability Poppea's intoxication seeks to destroy.<sup>57</sup> Historical accounts, such as those of Tacitus and Suetonius, cast Ottavia as an ideal Venetian woman: she was well liked as a ruler and known for being silent and unemotional.<sup>58</sup> She also remained faithful to Nerone despite him leaving her for Poppea. When suggested to find solace in another, she declines. Through these juxtapositions, Poppea is shown in a negative light.

Ottavia's first recitative, "Disprezzata Regina," (Despised Queen) makes a clear contrast between Ottavia's steadfast loyalty and Poppea's sensuality, experienced just a scene before. The switch to Ottavia's perspective is meant to move the audience: "In this first appearance, her character is musically established as not merely unhappy or distraught, but heartbroken and emotionally disoriented by her husband's cruelty."<sup>59</sup> Her melody in "Disprezzata Regina" is void of the exotic runs or unrestrained madrigalisms that populated Poppea's music, demonstrating Monteverdi's switch in character choices.<sup>60</sup> Instead, the recitative begins with languishing held notes and a continual return to A in the continuo, demonstrating her stasis.<sup>61</sup> The melody then becomes disjointed, towards spoken-like lines, falling apart—in parallel with what is happening with Ottavia's life, as seen in Example 4, mm. 11 and 19:<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Savage, "Love and Infamy," 202.

<sup>58</sup> Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 142–44. The writings about Ottavia also betray a bias towards the silent woman of the ancient male historians, as indicated by Heller, 141, quoting Tacitus, *Annals*, 13.16.

<sup>59</sup> Emily Hagen, Introduction to Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., XIII.

<sup>60</sup> Wendy Heller, "'O delle donne miserabil sesso': Tarabotti, Ottavia, and *L'incoronazione di Poppea*." *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 7, no. 1 (2000): 33.

<sup>61</sup> Emily Hagen, "Depicting Affect through Text, Music, and Gesture in Venetian Opera, c. 1640–1658" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Texas, May 2018), 291.

<sup>62</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., VIII. See translation of this excerpt on page 22 of this article.

**Example 4: Ottavia falling apart in “Disprezzata Regina,” Act I Scene V, mm. 11–26.**

The image shows a musical score for Ottavia in Act I, Scene V, measures 11-26. It consists of three systems of music, each with a vocal line and a basso continuo line. The first system (measures 11-16) is labeled 'Spoken, separated, no longer sustained' and 'Descending line, resigned'. The second system (measures 17-21) is labeled 'Large jump up to "incatena serve"'. The third system (measures 22-26) is labeled 'Descending line, resigned'. The lyrics are in Italian and describe Ottavia's emotional state as she reacts to the betrayal of her husband, Nerone.

11 OTTAVIA Spoken, separated, no longer sustained Descending line, resigned  
 che fo, o-ve son, che pen-so, che pen-so? O del-le don - ne mi-se-ra - bil

17 Large jump up to "incatena serve"  
 ses - so, se la na-tu-ra e' cie - lo li - be-re ci pro - du - ce, il ma-tri - mo - nio, il ma-tri - mo - nio c'in-ca-te - na

22 Descending line, resigned  
 ser - ve. Se con-ce-pia - mo l'uo - mo, o del-le don - ne mi-se - ra - bil ses - so, al no-str'em-pio ti -

Monteverdi keeps closely to the libretto in this recitative, using repetitions only on words such as ‘disprezzata’ (despised) or ‘che penso’ (what should I think) for dramatic effect, as demonstrated in the example above.<sup>63</sup> When Ottavia references Nerone, she switches tactics: she begins asking where Nerone might be, before moving into the first arioso-style section, used exclusively to demonstrate the love between Poppea and Nerone that Ottavia lacks. The audience watches Ottavia struggle with accepting this betrayal in real time as she turns quickly to anger, with her first runs on ‘fulmini’ (lightning), demonstrating the lightning she wishes would strike Nerone down.<sup>64</sup> However, she quickly repents, which would be the adequate response to cursing God or your husband. Poppea seems to not be controlled in her affect when she uses madrigalisms, whereas Ottavia at least tries to control her concern. This repentance is signified by the downward melodic line in Example 5, ending on a sustained lamento, as if she languishes for eternity:<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas*, 236.

<sup>64</sup> Júlia Coelho, “A Study of Monteverdi’s ‘Three Genera’ from the Preface to Book VIII of Madrigals in Relation to Operatic Characters in *Il Ritorno D’Ulisse in Patria* and *L’incoronazione Di Poppea*” (Master’s Thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2018), pp. 322–39.

<sup>65</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, ed. Schulze et al., 38.

**Example 5: Descending lament in “Disprezzata Regina,” Act I Scene V, mm. 77–88.**

77 OTTAVIA  
- col - po. Ahi, trap - pas - so trop - p'ol - tre, e me ne pen - to. Sop - pri - mo g sep - pel

82  
li - sco in ta - ci - tur - ne an - go - sce il mi - o la - men - to. O Ciel, o  
NUTRICE  
Ot - ta - via, Ot - ta - via.

Even when she has been wronged, Ottavia is repentant in Busenello’s libretto and vows to “suppress and bury / [her] lament in silent anxieties,” (*sopprimo e seppellisco / in taciturne angosce il mio lamento*).<sup>66</sup> Busenello puts emotional burden on Ottavia for her to grieve her situation in solemnity. Contrary to *Poppea*, Ottavia is not using her emotions to manipulate Nerone or a threat to the patriarchal structure. Instead, when Ottavia does use emotions to call for help, she retracts her statement, as she is not only aware of her status as a wife but remains in controlled affect.<sup>67</sup> *Opus Arte* and *BBC* productions show this subservient and resigned Ottavia by choosing to end Ottavia’s lament on the ground, Glyndeborne bent over in a sitting position.<sup>68</sup> Monteverdi’s descending lament enhances the submissive Ottavia that Monteverdi and Busenello have created, an ideal feature for a seventeenth-century wife.

While Busenello’s version of Ottavia plots to murder *Poppea*, Ottavia still betrays the *Incogniti* ideals. Ottavia asking Ottone to murder *Poppea* means one less influence over Nerone, and silent Ottavia is the lesser of two evils for the spot of empress. As previously mentioned in this article, a silent wife is preferred over a loquacious one during this time. Therefore, Ottavia’s plot in *Poppea* helps to restore the order to the silent wife. Ottavia is the rightful ruler: her music, meant to move the audience, and her attempt to keep herself in submissive power portray her as the ideal empress. Ottavia’s position as the rightfully submissive wife contrasts *Poppea* as the adulterer and malevolent woman, exemplified by Busenello’s retelling and Monteverdi’s music.

<sup>66</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, 220.

<sup>67</sup> Hagen, “Depicting Affect,” 326.

<sup>68</sup> See Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Audi; Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Alden; and Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Carsen.

## Conclusion

Poppea's portrayal as a manipulative female seductress by Busenello and Monteverdi placates the Venetian viewers for Poppea's future, especially when contrasted against the characters of Drusilla and Ottavia. Busenello and the *Incogniti* viewed female power as hostile to the Venetian Republic, which comes through in the female characters of *Poppea*. I have analyzed the three main female characters in this article and their depiction against the ideals of the seventeenth-century Italian women. Drusilla's creation by Busenello contrasts with Poppea as the ideal Venetian wife, willing to be subordinate and give up her livelihood for her significant other. Busenello illustrates Ottavia as the juxtaposition of Poppea, the rightful ruler who is righteous enough to remain faithful despite her husband's infidelity. Poppea, unlike the other two characters, is portrayed by composer and librettist as the villain from the very inception of the opera. As previously stated, Poppea holds power over Nerone, which is too dangerous: in the patriarchal society of Venice, the rightful status of a man is being in charge—in this case Nerone. The need for a man in control would have been considered by the Venetian public, rendering Poppea's fate seem rightfully consequential.

When one interprets *L'incoronazione di Poppea* for modern audiences, the questions posed are: is there room to increase Poppea's agency? Can there be a take that makes unsympathetic Poppea the victim of domestic abuse, as attested to by historical sources that address her death? There is no doubt that women are provided more agency in current times than in 1600s Venice, and the misogynous take of Poppea being the villain and the antithesis of the perfect woman needs to be addressed. After all, according to Roman historians, Nero is the one who reportedly kicked Poppaea to death, killed his own mother, had Ottavia and Seneca executed, and had Ottone exiled until the rest of his days. The historical villain is Nero, not Poppaea. The opera leaves no character morally pure, but a directorial take that portrays Poppea as less of the evil femininity and more of a complex woman, or that makes note of the inherent biases against seventeenth century women should be in order for future productions.

Of the three recent adaptations of *Poppea* considered in this article, the Glyndebourne rendition attempted to convey partly the above-mentioned ideas, leaving the audience focused on Poppea's future. The empress ended the opera looking uncertainly into the distance after Nerone exited the stage, whereas most productions end with the portrayal of a happy couple.<sup>69</sup> Another instance was BBC's television production of *Poppea*, which told unknowing viewers about Poppea's future with a short summary of Ottavia and Poppea's murders once the opera finished.<sup>70</sup> Taking a step to hint at and acknowl-

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<sup>69</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Carsen.

<sup>70</sup> Monteverdi and Busenello, *Poppea*, dir. Alden.

edge Poppea's tragic demise is a measure all productions need to take from now on.

As discussed in this article, Poppea functions as a high-class courtesan. In modern Western society recently, there is momentum for the reduction of stigma around sex work. For instance, the "sugar daddy / mama" dynamic and escort arrangement is not uncommon today among U.S. students to pay off their student debts.<sup>71</sup> Is Poppea not in a similar situation, a woman making the best out of her situation to rise above her station with a partner who has more means? A pro-sex work version of *Poppea* that takes a positive spin on Poppea's social climbing is possible. This can be done in many ways, starting by giving the audience the research behind Poppea's sexual agency, providing explanations in the program on the history behind the sexualization of the female singing voice, and how Poppea's sexualization played in the dynamic behind Poppea and Nerone. Another step towards this direction would be to have the actors portraying the historical characters in a faithful yet innovative way: in a new version, the director could call upon an intimacy coach to help with the structuring of a real power dynamic between Poppea and Nerone. However, Nerone turns abusive and kills her in real life. Therefore, why not also incorporate some toxic behaviors of his in the final scene, such as staging that allows Nerone to look physically and dramatically superior to Poppea, giving it a threatening, yet historically more accurate final look?

Poppea, regardless of her position as a courtesan turned into an empress, did not deserve to be kicked to death. Busenello used Poppea's abusive death as a pretext for creating an unsympathetic character that reflects the gender roles of his day. Monteverdi continued the dialogue of Poppea as the antithesis of the ideal seventeenth-century Venetian woman via his musical adaptation. *Poppea* is a harrowing story for future audiences to reflect upon and to consider gender roles, as well as offer the opportunity to talk about sex work and domestic abuse. Poppea might not have been the ideal Venetian woman of the seventeenth century, but she was still a human being with desires, hopes, and expectations, whose life was unjustly cut short.

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<sup>71</sup> Peter Fleming, *Sugar Daddy Capitalism: The Dark Side of the New Economy* (United Kingdom: Wiley, 2018).



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## About the Contributors

**GERARD GARRISON** is an American composer of electroacoustic and concert music. Characterized by dramatic gestures and moments of arresting luminosity, his music is an exploration through intimate sound worlds. His work builds on multiple traditions spanning from modern to classical.

His music has been presented internationally with performances by groups such as [Mod]ular Ensemble, Fort Worth Symphony, and Nu Atmospheres Ensemble. An ardent collaborator, he has been commissioned by ensembles and soloists such as Andrew Cook, Spencer Byrd, the Avenue C Project, Atelier Piano Quartet, and Amorsima String Trio. In 2020 Gerard served as Artist-in-Residence of Padre Island National Seashore.

In addition to composition, Gerard is a conductor, pianist, trumpeter, improviser, and avid advocate for new music. He is a founding member of the Nu Atmospheres Ensemble and conducts the NOVA New Music Ensemble at the University of North Texas.

Gerard completed his master's degree in Music Composition from the University of North Texas and received a Bachelors in Piano from Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Texas in Denton, where he serves as a Composition Teaching Fellow.

**ELISABETH WILLIAMS** (she/her) graduated in the spring of 2022 from the University of North Texas with a Master of Music in Vocal Performance and a related field of Pedagogy. In the Fall of 2022, Elisabeth is headed to William Jewell College to pursue an Artist Diploma in voice. She graduated in the spring of 2020 Summa Cum Laude with her Bachelor of Music from Illinois Wesleyan University and a minor in Italian Studies.

Elisabeth's research interests include the history of Opera, the depiction of women in operas, and women musicians. She has had the privilege of performing in multiple countries, including four continents. As a continual performer, Elisabeth is passionate about research that allows performers to better know the intentions behind the creation of their characters. Informed and learned performers produce more authentic and driven performances. She hopes that with knowledge behind the original intentions, artists can make the informed choice to stay true to tradition or adapt for current audiences.