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THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF ZEMLINSKY'S *EINE FLORENTINISCHE TRAGÖDIE*

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Synopsis and Argument

Eine florentinische Tragödie is a one-act opera, Zemlinsky's op. 16 (1916). He adapted the libretto by making some cuts to Max Meyerfeld's 1906 German translation of the unfinished play by Oscar Wilde. The scene is the house of a well-to-do bourgeois cloth merchant in sixteenth-century Florence. Returning from an unsuccessful day's work trying to sell fabrics, Simone (baritone) is surprised to find his wife Bianca (soprano) entertaining the Prince of Florence, Guido Bardi (tenor). Through a series of eight verbal challenges Simone becomes more and more certain that they are having an affair and, when he is convinced of Guido's guilt, he challenges him to a duel. Simone prevails with sword then knife, and finally strangles Guido to death. In an unexpected ending, Bianca now appreciates Simone's strength and he appreciates her beauty. Husband and wife are reconciled.

The aim of the following analysis is to show how the text, stage directions and music illuminate Simone's developing suspicions during the first eight challenges, culminating in the duel. It will then be argued that the ending is implausible and that two alternatives, both suggested by a contemporary critic and both employed in twenty-first century productions, have much to recommend them.

Introduction

When he wanted to, Oscar Wilde could write a well-made play, conforming to widespread nineteenth-century practice: 'a dramatic structure [designed] to provide a constantly entertaining, exciting narrative which satisfyingly resolved the many complications and intrigues that drove the story' (Rebellato 2004). He had four great London successes with this kind of comedy (*Lady Windemere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*). But in *A Florentine Tragedy*, *Salomé* and *La Sainte Courtesane*, three plays which he described as 'beautiful, musical things'[1], he broke all the traditional rules and wrote a new kind of experimental drama. There is no action in *A Florentine Tragedy* before the duel just before the end and no plot in any conventional sense of the word: the originating and driving force behind almost everything that takes place is inside Simone's mind. This makes the play perfect material for an opera libretto, as music can explore the conscious and subconscious thoughts and feelings of the characters and create an inner action. This perspective will be explored in the analysis of the opera which

follows[2]. Zemlinsky accompanied the play text with passionate music which gives deep insight into Simone's thoughts and feelings and those of the other two characters as well, though Simone dominates for almost all of the action. As will be seen, he added detailed stage directions for Simone which complement the music. Together with that music, these indicate Simone's emotions (Wilde left his text with virtually no stage directions). It only remains for a gifted singing actor and director to respond to the text, stage directions and music so as to create a credible character and journey for Simone. This is achieved in the California production by Livermore Opera in which Robert Mellon portrays Simone as a middle-aged balding businessman with shaking hands, who nonetheless goes from strength to strength[3].

That is one of two twenty-first century productions of the opera that have been preserved on DVD and YouTube. It is excellent in every way. The modern-dress setting (the 1910s to judge from Guido's uniform, matching the period to which the second half of the double bill, Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, was updated) works perfectly: all three singing actors handle the musical and dramatic challenges of the opera with authority and Lanya Chianakas' direction is sure-footed and attentive to detail.

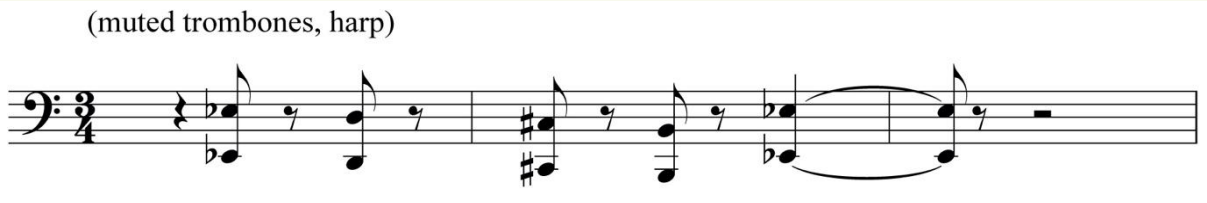
The Opéra de Lyon period costume production directed by Georges Lavaudant[4] is not so successful. It is considerably stylised in what should on stage be a very realistic opera, with a dominating set and use of shadow play and of anti-naturalistic devices, such as Bianca miming spinning when Simone is ordering her to spin and dancing while Simone describes Innocence becoming a wanton at the sound of erotic music. More importantly, though Gun-Brit Barlmin as Bianca creates sensual gestures and postures, she does not present the complete sexuality and erotic commitment to Guido that was later portrayed by Anush Avetisyan at Livermore. Partly because of this, there is far less chemistry between the three singing actors. Another major problem is casting. The singers playing Guido and Simone do not look very different: both are youngish, both have long hair and they are similarly dressed. It is crucial to the opera that Simone should look much older and be costumed as a bourgeois, in contrast to the young aristocrat who is enjoying his wife's favours. This was emphatically achieved at Livermore and, although no production of this powerful opera can fail to make an impression, Lavaudant's is inferior to the enthralling production by Lanya Chianakas.

The play is incomplete: it lacks an opening scene between Guido and Bianca before Simone returns from his day out at work. Zemlinsky asked Meyerfeld to create such a scene but, when he declined to do so, the composer poured all that was necessary to precede the action into a powerful passionate overture. This clearly depicts lovemaking between Guido and Bianca: 'the orchestral *furioso* [Ex. 2] may be understood as conveying the ecstasy of coitus' (Beaumont 2000: 247). In the twenty-first century, it is possible to show this on stage. So, in the Livermore production, the curtain goes up early in the overture. Bianca takes off her dress, lies on the bed with her legs parted and her shift drawn up, and Guido mounts her. They are, however, not caught *in flagrante*. Bianca is dressed and they are apart when Simone enters, in accordance with Zemlinsky's stage direction. The Opéra de Lyon 2012 production is tamer: there is lovemaking during the overture (only in the recorded version: in the opera house the curtain does not rise until just before Simone's arrival), but the production is rather stylised (and fully clothed): much clasping of hands, seductive smiles from Bianca and caresses. There is none of the exuberant sensuality between Bianca and Guido, which is exhibited in the Livermore production both here in the overture and in the love scene later in the opera. But the Lyon production, at least on the DVD, also establishes unequivocally that Bianca and Guido are in an adulterous relationship.

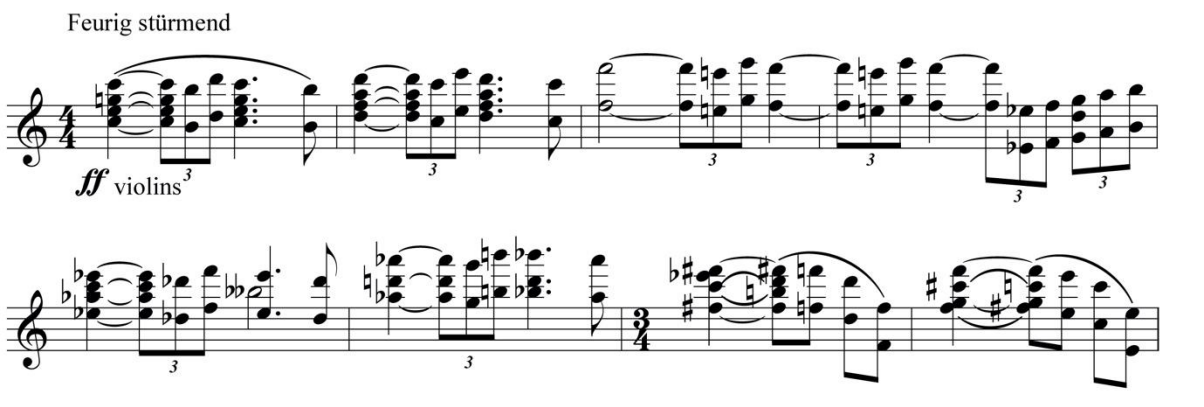
Angelika Wildner-Partsch claims that Simone: 'has seen everything and knows everything when he enters' (Wildner-Partsch 1982: 85). But this is not so. Simone is, in fact, at first merely suspicious and he lays down nine successive challenges to Guido, which we will analyse. But he does not decide on revenge until after the eighth challenge and the love duet. There (125)[5], after Guido has kissed Bianca, she is *looking at him tenderly* when Simone returns from the garden, and he *stays for a moment on the threshold of the door and looks at the couple gravely and sadly*[6], while the ominous figure in Ex. 1 undermines the last notes of the melody portraying their passion for each other. 'More and more the superficial inconsequential dialogue is counterpointed by an "inward dialogue"', which shows the awakening of Simone's decision to kill his adversary' (Fuß 1994: 15).

Guido's behaviour is puzzling. He is reckless in a way which is bound to arouse Simone's suspicions: in his very first utterance after declaring who he is, he describes Bianca's beauty as 'a lamp that pales the stars'[7], and offers to spend frequent days sitting with Simone's wife 'to charm her loneliness' while he is out at work (11–14). Later on, told by Simone that for the hundred thousand crowns which he offers he can have anything in the house, he replies: 'What if I demanded white Bianca?'[8] (44.6–44.8). It is hard to tell, and difficult for the singer and director to interpret, whether Guido really thinks Simone is naïve, if he is incautious because of his infatuation with Bianca, or

Example 1. (66.2–66.4)



Example 2. (bars 4–8)



perhaps he simply believes that as a prince he can do anything he likes in a bourgeois house. Whichever is the case, he pays with his life for his folly.

Leitmotifs

Lee (2006: 42) has a table of seven motifs from the score, to which she attaches names: 'Guido', 'Simone', 'Love', 'Lucca Damask', 'Death', 'Bianca's Love' and 'Simone's melancholy'[9]. The attaching of names to *leitmotifs* has a history going back to an influential book on *The Nibelung's Ring* by Hans von Wolzogen (Von Wolzogen 1896) but it is a regrettable procedure, despite its frequency[10]. Musical themes cannot represent or signify people, ideas, concepts or (normally) objects[11]. They do not have verbal meaning but they do express recurrent emotions and feelings, and they are not static but dynamic: they are processes unfolding through time. This is the case with the two main recurrent motifs in *Eine florentinische Tragödie.* The figure in Ex. 1 is first clearly heard when Simone sings, 'What should Death do in such a merry house, with but a wife, a husband and a friend to give it greeting?', but this does not signify that the motif means death. It is certainly an ominous phrase and it becomes even more so when it accompanies the duel towards the end of the opera. But what it expresses is not an abstract concept (death) but an ominous progression in Simone's thoughts on his journey from this point in Challenge Six through to an obsessive desire to take revenge, and its accomplishment.

Similarly, Ex. 2 is not simply a love theme. When first heard (in the overture from bar 4), it communicates an unfolding emotional process, since it conveys a sense of gradually increasing ecstasy as it surges ever higher in the violins. This process is repeated when it recurs in the love scene between Guido and Bianca (from 116.10; fully displayed at 121.9 ff.), and again at the very end of the opera when it is used to convey the sudden flowering of love between Bianca and Simone (150.8–151.7).

The Nine Challenges

Guido's fate takes shape as the opera unfolds. Simone sets him nine challenges and the result of each of the first eight makes his suspicions grow, depressing him as he realises more and more that Bianca and Guido are lovers, until he acts and fights a duel with the man who has cuckolded him.

One: The assumption that Guido is a kinsman (2.3–17.6)

SIMONE But who is this?
Why you have here some friend. Some kinsman doubtless,
Newly returned from foreign lands and fallen
Upon a house without a host to greet him.
I crave your pardon, kinsman. *(forcefully)* For a house
Lacking a host is but an empty thing
And void of honour … (2.3 ff.).

Simone starts graciously enough but his stress on honour will become a major theme very soon, and it embraces, for Simone, the integrity of his property, which includes his wife. When Bianca tartly states that the stranger is no kinsman and no cousin, Simone's text and vocal line express his amazement. But, as he welcomes Guido, he is careful to sing that he hopes his 'honest wife' (9.9–10) has not wearied the prince with her chatter.

Guido's reply is astonishing. He praises Bianca's beauty and expresses the hope that he can come often to their house to keep her company when Simone is away on business. Given their difference in rank, Simone has little choice but to accept this offer (15), but he takes pains to emphasise that 'Such things as these knit a state together, when a prince so nobly born and of such fair address comes to an honest burgher's honest home as a most honest friend' (15.9–17.5). The words, with the triple repetition of *bieder* [honest] are spelt out in a firm and emphatic vocal line. Their seriousness is masked by the skittish syncopated accompaniment, which alternates between 2/4 and 3/4, but there is no denying their import. This is a warning that any relationship between Guido and Bianca would offend deeply against Simone's fundamental bourgeois code of honesty.

Two: Simone compels Guido to buy fabrics (17.7–42.5)

Some other night
We trust that you will come here as a friend;
Tonight you come to buy my merchandise.
Is it not so? (18).

Simone turns the tables on Guido. Guido's rank may have forced Simone to agree to allow unwelcome visits to Bianca when he is absent, but Simone now makes him buy some material to justify his visit today. Rich music flows from the orchestra as Simone displays first a Lucca damask and then a Venetian robe of state, describing in full the exquisite and expensive decorations of both garments[12]. He shows, at the end, that he already suspects Guido's attraction to Bianca, asking her to entreat him: 'He will refuse you nothing, though the price be as a prince's ransom' (35.9 ff.). It will be just that. Guido recognises this when he sings that he will buy whatever the honest merchant (that theme again) has: 'Princes must be ransomed; and fortunate are all who fall into the white hands of so fair a foe' (37.4 ff.). He realizes that he must pay a price to cover up his sexual relationship with Bianca (whose name of course means 'white').

Simone now goes too far and says that he has heard about Guido: 'there are husbands who wear horns, and wear them bravely' (40.5–40.7). He knows that Guido is a womaniser but, when rebuked, he swiftly apologises and presses Guido to buy the robe of state. The prince foolishly offers the vast sum of a hundred thousand crowns for both garments and so falls into Simone's next trap.

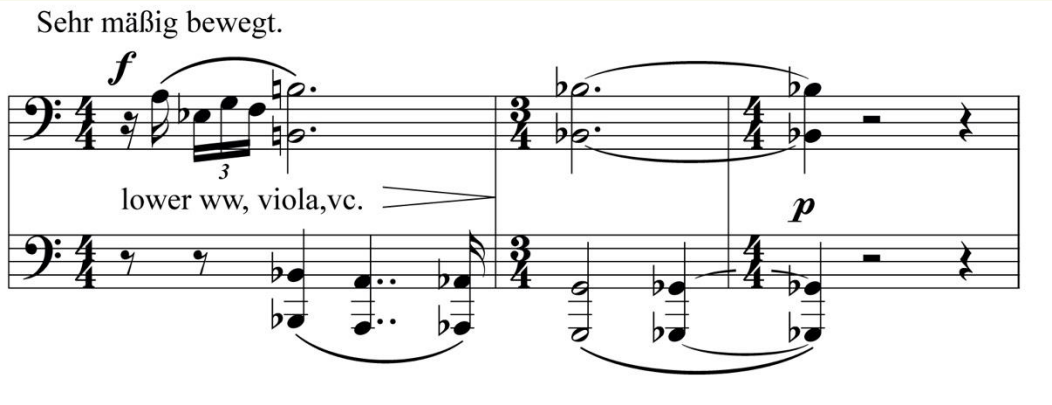
Three: Everything is for sale (42.6–56.10)

The vocal line and orchestral accompaniment express the merchant's overwhelming joy at being offered a hundred thousand crowns for his fabrics, and he declares:

From today my house, with everything that it contains, is yours, all yours (42.9 ff.)[13].

Guido cannot resist the temptation to inquire whether he could demand 'white Bianca' (44.4–44.8). The music comes to an abrupt halt as Simone considers his response to this further revelation that Guido desires Bianca, and then decides to dismiss it: *Simone starts, but pulls himself together and laughs as if at a joke*. However, the orchestra reveals his sudden burst of anger (Ex. 3).

Example 3. (44.9–44.11)



'She is not worthy of so great a Prince; she is but made to keep the house and spin' (45.5–45.7). And Simone, *calm but intense, with muted voice,* orders Bianca to spin:

> Some robe which, dyed in purple, Sorrow might wear
> For her own comforting[14]; or a dainty sheet
> Which, delicately perfumed with sweet herbs,
> Might serve to wrap a dead man. Spin what you will;
> I care not (47.2 ff.).

These grim words are set with an obsessive *ostinato* in the bass: it sounds again in Ex. 4.

Bianca refuses to spin that evening and Simone (*imperious, but calm*) orders her to spin tomorrow and every day thereafter. Then he *goes, visibly agitated, to the window and stays there for a little while sunk in his thoughts.* A powerfully expressive melody illustrates Simone's brooding (Ex. 4).

When he comes back, he *looks at Bianca with a sad expression* before suddenly approaching Guido and changing his tone completely.

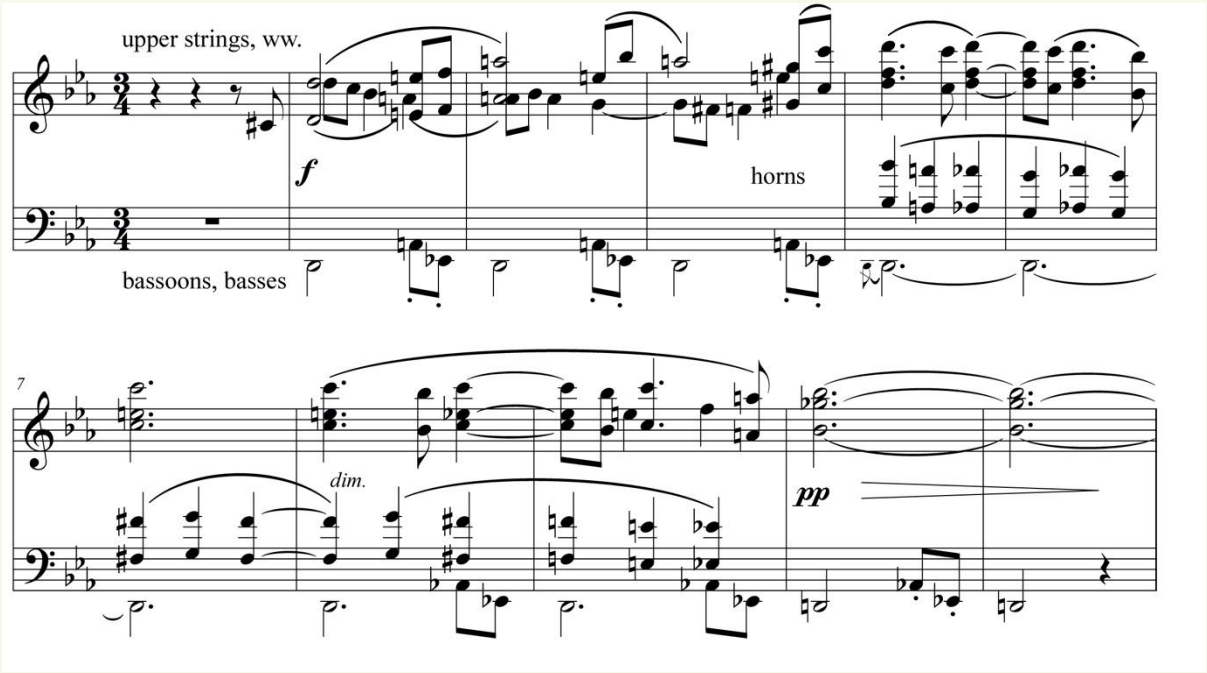
Four: Simone makes conversation (57.1–59.2)

Simone now resolves to draw Guido out, and converses first about English merchants, who are taking profits away from native Italian merchants, and then about the political manoeuvrings of the Pope and the King of France. Neither subject interests Guido: he sings that he has other things, nearer to him and of more importance, on his mind (he is focused on his affair with Bianca). This prompts Challenge Five.

Five: Simone broods on the triangle (59.3–63.9)

> *(serious and thoughtful)*
> Is it then so? Is all this mighty world
> Narrowed into the confines of this room
> With but three souls for poor inhabitants?
> Let this mean room be as that world-stage[15]
> Whereon kings die, and our ignoble lives
> Become the stakes God plays for (59.3 ff.).
> (*he gets up, heavy and tired, from his seat*)

Example 4. (51.2–51.11)



Once again, the orchestra follows this with a passionate short interlude, marked *highly expressive* (61.8 ff.), but the full outburst is reserved for after Simone's next words in which he reveals that today his horse stumbled three times: 'an omen, that bodes not good to any' (62.8–62.10). After this, *he gathers his bundle together and drags it into the next room*. Simone's exit is marked by a tumultuous climax (Ex. 5).

This is a turning point. Simone has reached a high point of passion, expressed here by the orchestra, as he broods on the narrow triangle in his house, to which the mighty world has shrunk this evening, and the last words of his reflection indicate that this mean room could become the stage for a royal death.

Six: Simone openly sings about adultery (63.10–71.3)

In Simone's temporary absence, Bianca tells Guido how she hates him and wishes he was dead. Simone overhears her last words as he returns, and comments:

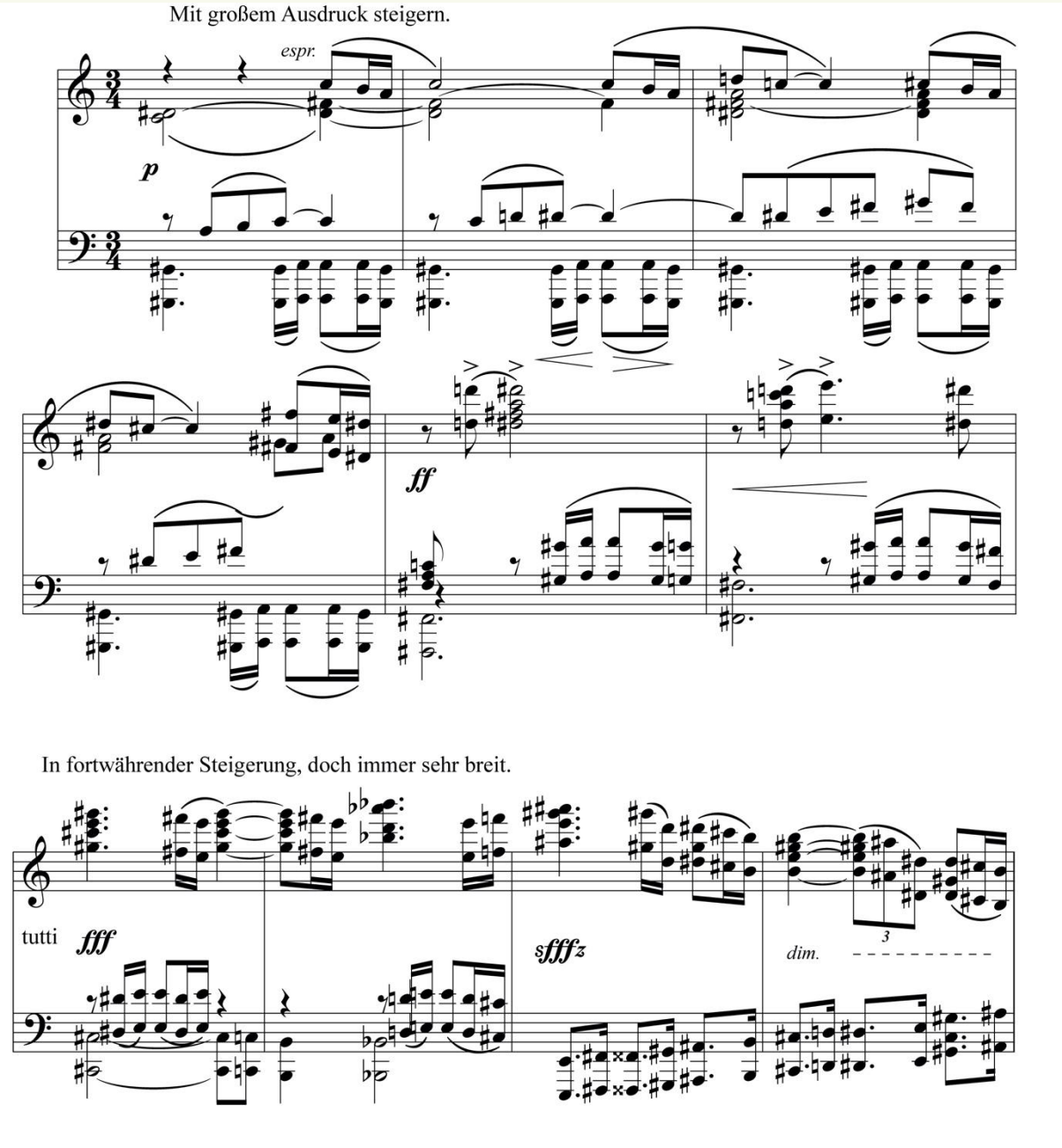
> Who spake of Death? Let no one speak of Death.
> What should Death do in such a merry house,
> With but a wife, a husband and a friend to give it greeting? (65.10–66.6).

He continues with the wish that Death should go to houses where there are adulterous wives, who grow weary of their noble husbands, 'and in polluted and dishonoured sheets (*with the utmost strength*) feed some unlawful lust' (68.4–69.2). Through all of this, the new theme (Ex. 1) underlies Simone's at first ironic and then passionate outburst. It signifies that Simone's thoughts have now developed to an obsessive concern with adultery and his following words to Guido (*calm and friendly*, 69.6 ff.) are filled with irony: he tells the young lord that he is unspoilt and honourable and knows nothing of such things, while he himself, being older, is all too aware of them. The audience should not have forgotten that earlier in the opera Simone had accused Guido of cuckolding husbands and Guido did not deny it.

Seven: The lute (71.4–95.10)

Guido has brought with him a lute (in the Livermore Opera modern dress production, a guitar) with which to serenade Bianca. Simone, with a sudden change of mood, abandons his brooding. He calls for them to make merry and then he sees the lute. He challenges Guido to play and the prince, doubtless thoroughly unsettled by having to listen to Simone's recent condemnation of adultery, declines. Simone

Example 5. (62.10–63.9)



entreats him again, singing about the power of music, but once again he returns to his obsession:

> I have heard also
> That such strange magic lurks within these shells
> That at their bidding casements open wide
> And Innocence puts vine-leaves in her hair
> And wantons like a maenad. (85.1–87.1).

At this point the music becomes *very fast, wild*: a mad waltz and, in the Livermore production, Robert Mellon (as Simone) performs a wild dance, waving the guitar in the air as an illustration of the maenadic sexual ecstasy to which Innocence has reduced herself. Then he continues, ironically, 'but your lute, I know, is chaste' (88.3–88.6), and he begs Guido to play because 'my soul is in a

prison-house, and needs music to cure its madness' (90.3–91.3). This succeeds in provoking another admission from the prince. As Guido refuses, he sings that:

> Tonight I am content
> With the low music of Bianca's voice,
> Who, when she speaks, charms the too amorous air,
> And makes the reeling earth stand still, or fix
> His cycle around her beauty. (91.10–94.6).

This absurd exaggeration leads Simone to tell Guido that Bianca is not beautiful and that 'it is better so' (95.6–95.11). He will only appreciate his wife's beauty at the very end of the opera, when Guido is dead.

Eight: The toast (96.1–125.9)

Disappointed that Guido will not play for him, Simone embarks on a new attack: he invites the prince to drink with him. He starts momentarily when he sees wine spilt on the table (in the Livermore production, Simone is actually seen to have the shaking hand which Bianca told Guido at 64.4–64.5 she detests, and he has spilt the wine himself) and, for a moment, he takes it as another bad omen: 'I have heard it said when wine is spilt blood is spilt also; but that's a foolish tale' (101.7 ff.). The figure in Ex. 1 sounds repeatedly as he makes this discovery and broods on bloodshed.

Guido accepts, with a recklessness which is truly astonishing at this stage of the action, the idea of a toast, proposes that it should be to Bianca's health and asks Bianca herself to taste his wine: *Bianca sips from the glass, looking at Guido. Then Guido takes the glass from her hand and drinks a deep draught.* At this point (109.5–110.3), the figure in Ex. 1 sounds again, increasing the ominous atmosphere, as Guido proceeds to exaggerated praise of the wine which Bianca's lips have blessed.

Not surprisingly, this has put Simone off the idea of feasting with the prince. He is intensely depressed, and the repetitions of the figure in Ex. 1 show, once again, that he is brooding on Guido's now almost confirmed adultery as he declares:

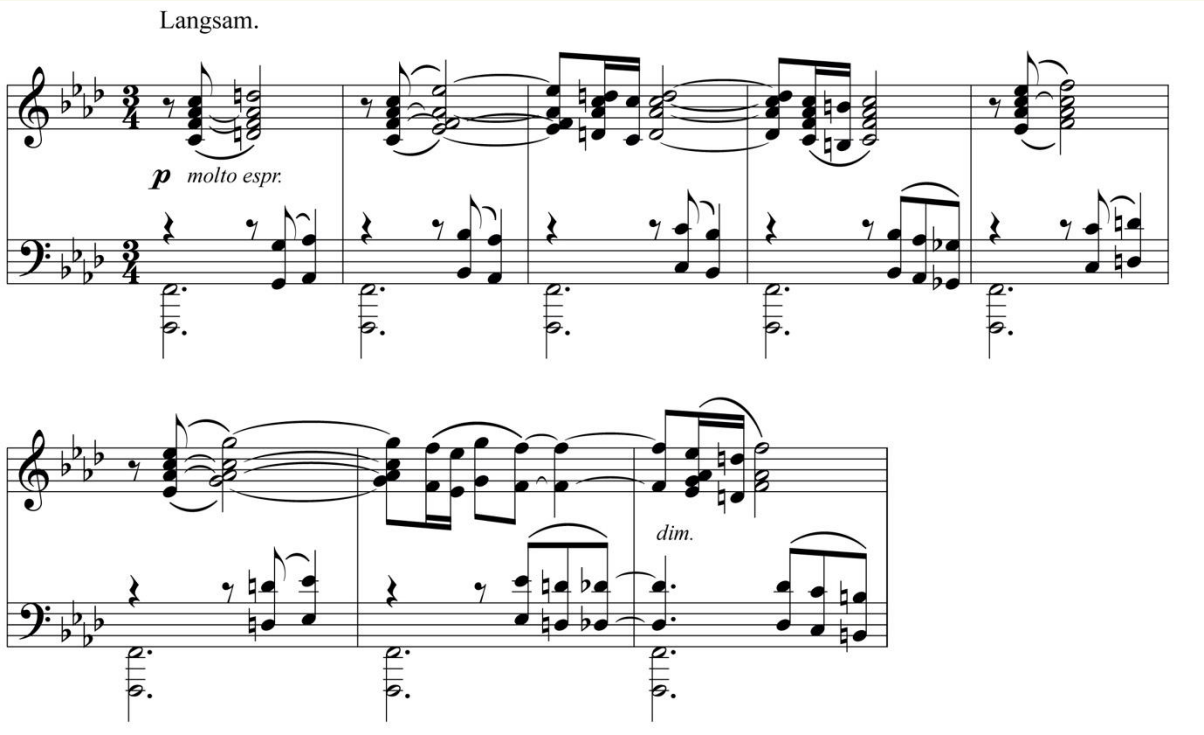
> It is strange, my lord,
> I cannot eat or drink with you tonight.
> Some humour, or some poison in my blood…
> Poisons my palate and makes appetite
> A loathing, not a longing (113.5–115.5).

There is, once again, a powerful orchestral interlude expressing Simone's feelings, however this time a *piano, molto espr.* one. In Zemlinsky's stage direction, *He opens the door to the garden as if to be able to breathe better, then goes out into the garden, which we see in full moonlight. Guido and Bianca remain for a little time in depressed silence* (Ex. 6, 115.6).

The three quoted orchestral interludes (Exx. 4, 5 and 6) and the very short interlude at 61.8 ff. are all related in their thematic material. At these moments of vocal silence, the development in Simone's thoughts and feelings wells up between the sung scenes in which they are concealed under what Fuß (1994: 15) calls the 'superficial, inconsequential dialogue'. In fact, however, as we have seen earlier in this analysis, much of that dialogue has a pointed subtext. These orchestral passages together form a psychological narrative of Simone's move towards the certainty that he has been betrayed.

Now follows the love scene in which we realise how tenderly Bianca and Guido care for each other. After a passionate exchange of words, he kisses her on the mouth, and she ends by singing, 'you know that I am yours in love or death' (124.8–125.3). The melody depicting how growing passion draws them to each other (Ex. 2) then gradually fades (125.3–125.10), since the figure in Ex. 1 sounds out twice, now harmonized in full 1–3–5–8 chords, as: *She extends her hands to him and looks long and tenderly at him. Simone comes from the garden, stays a moment on the threshold of the door, and looks at the couple gravely and sadly.* The end is near: Simone is now convinced that Guido and Bianca are lovers, and will attempt to take his revenge.

Example 6. (115.6–115.13)



Nine: The duel (125.10–149.7)

Guido decides to leave and Simone insists on fetching his coat and sword for him. He sings that he himself has a sword. It may be rusted now, but still:

> …I remember
> How once upon the road to Padua
> A robber sought to take my pack-horse from me;
> I slit his throat and rode on.
> (*with an ever more threatening expression*) I can bear
> Dishonour, public insult, any shames,
> Shrill scorn and open contumely, (*forcefully*) but he
> Who filches from me something that is mine,
> Though it be the meanest trencher-plate
> From which I feed my appetite,
> Perils his soul and body
> And dies for his sin (131.4–134.6).

This is all set high in the baritone register with menacing *sforzandi* from the orchestra and, from the marking *forcefully* onwards, a passionate melody in the woodwind instruments, which is accompanied by the figure in Ex. 1 as an *ostinato* until the last two lines, where a stroke on the gong introduces an *ff* declamation of the figure in Ex. 1 by the full orchestra. This sequence is the climax to which all the previous eight verbal challenges have led: Simone's almost open declaration that he intends to take physical revenge by killing the man who has cuckolded him.

Guido's response, 'What am I to make of that?' (134.7–134.8)[16], is marked *suddenly completely serious*. The young man has, at last, recognised that he faces the possibility of death for the theft of Simone's wife and his honour. Simone now challenges Guido to a duel and he accepts this lethal challenge, doubtless confident that, being a young aristocrat, he can overcome a middle-aged bourgeois.

However, Simone defeats Guido by disarming him of his sword. He throws both swords away and the pair fight again with daggers. The stage has now grown very dark, lit only by nearly burnt-out candles after Simone orders Bianca to extinguish the torch with which she was lighting the sword combat. As he sings 'Now to the death of one, or both, perhaps all three' (144.1–144.4), the darkened mise-en-scène with the flickering lights literally illuminates how the world has indeed narrowed to this one room. The older merchant, animated by his passion for revenge, once again proves stronger than the young prince: Simone deprives Guido of his dagger and strangles him. Throughout the duel, the figure in Ex. 1 dominates in the orchestra, presented in numerous different ways, and it sounds with extreme force (*fff*) when Simone orders Bianca to put out the torch (143.6–143.8). It now portrays how Simone's mounting obsession has exploded into physical violence.

When Simone has his hands on Guido's throat, the prince begs uselessly for his life: Simone is particularly incensed when Guido claims to be innocent (147.4–147.5). As he finishes Guido off, Simone himself sings the figure in Ex. 1 as a melody, *powerfully* and slowly, with extended notes (minims climaxing in a semibreve) high in the baritone's range: 'The dumb river shall receive your corse, and wash it all unheeded to the sea.' (148.3–148.9). With the taking over of this motif into Simone's voice, in this powerful declamation, the revenge is complete.

The ending (149.8–151.11)

The reversal of expectation at the end of Wilde's play is, to say the least, abrupt:

> SIMONE Now for the other.
>
> *GUIDO dies. SIMONE rises and looks at BIANCA. She comes towards him as one dazed with wonder and with outstretched arms.*
>
> BIANCA Why did you not tell me you were so strong?
>
> SIMONE Why did you not tell me you were beautiful?
>
> *He kisses her on the mouth.*
>
> CURTAIN

Zemlinsky tried to make it more plausible by adding detailed stage directions:

> SIMONE And now for you!
>
> *He gets up slowly, without looking around. Bianca, who since the start of the knife duel has stood there and watched Guido full of expectation, has during its course unwillingly retreated back to the door. She has opened the curtain and the door, so that full moonlight illuminates the scene. She is on the threshold, in growing excitement, looking at Simone, remaining standing. Now she comes to him, as if dazzled by a miracle.*
>
> BIANCA *(in tender ardour)* Why did you not tell me you were so strong?
>
> SIMONE *(as his boundless astonishment turns into marvelling at her beauty)*
>
> Why did you not tell me you were so beautiful?
>
> *(He extends his arms towards her. Bianca sinks on her knees before him. He kisses her on the mouth.)*
>
> CURTAIN

Zemlinsky commented on the opera in a letter to Alma Mahler:

> The treachery of fate drives two people apart. The husband's passion for his work leads him to overlook his wife's beauty, while the woman at his side, finding herself cheated of her youth and physical appeal, becomes a slave to apathy, depression and open hatred. To bring the two back together, a terrible catastrophe is called for … This is a real tragedy, because one life has to be sacrificed to save two others (Zemlinsky in Beaumont 2000: 245).

Overall, the opera was well received by the critics but several early reviewers rightly criticised the ending, despite the sublime music which Zemlinsky composed to follow Simone's last words and express the emotions of the reconciled husband and wife. The point was best made by Heinrich Stümcke:

> The moment surprises and irritates the spectator when it strikes his ear. He expects something different, something monstrous; that the woman might avenge her dead lover, that she might throw herself out of the window in despair, or collapse over the dead body and even be killed by her husband (Stümcke in Bek 1995: 170)[17].

As this quotation suggests, there are three alternative endings for the opera which are arguably at least as credible as Wilde's and Zemlinsky's, and the two of them which are stageable, given the text and the music, have been used in twenty-first century productions.

1. Simone kills Bianca. He now knows that she has committed adultery. In the moments before the duel, he sang that it means death 'for one, for two, maybe even for all three' (144). and, when he is satisfied that he has killed Guido, his next words are 'And now for you!' (149.9), a clear indication that he intends to murder Bianca. Accordingly, in the 2012 Opéra de Lyon production, the curtain falls as Simone approaches Bianca from behind and begins to wrap the cloth with which he strangled Guido around her neck.

2. Bianca murders Simone. Her husband has just killed the lover to whom she is passionately attached. She has told Guido how she hates Simone (64) and that she wishes he was dead (65.7–65.9); and, during the duel, she twice urged Guido to kill him ('Töt ihn!', 138.9 and 143.8). Accordingly, in the 2020 Livermore Opera production, Simone has been menacing Bianca with his dagger singing 'And now for you!', but she saves her own life by singing 'Why did you not tell me you were so strong?' Simone lets the dagger fall as she rises to her feet on these words. Then Bianca manoeuvres so as to be behind and above Simone and the curtain falls as she raises the dagger high and plunges it down towards his throat.

Admittedly these interpretations play against the overall thrust of the closing bars of orchestral music but it cannot be denied that both of them are more plausible than the Wilde ending in light of the events earlier in the opera. The second version is particularly appropriate and makes a savage feminist statement: not only has Simone murdered Bianca's lover, but he has treated her patriarchally as his chattel throughout the opera, frequently demeaning her. For example, Simone addresses Bianca curtly as 'Wife' and 'Woman' and makes her kneel on the floor to get fabrics out of his suitcase: 'It is better so' (21.9–21.10)[18]. (In the Livermore production, he pats her patronisingly on the head as he sings this line). And he is very impatient when she does not find the right material at once ('Quick! Quick!', 22.3–22.4)[19], Later Simone orders her to spin, though she is not in the mood (46 ff.), and, when Guido praises Bianca's beauty, he sings, 'You flatter her. She has her virtues as most women have, but beauty is denied her [Wilde: 'Beauty is a gem she may not wear']. It is better so'. (94.11–95.1) At Livermore under Lanya Chianakas' direction Robert Mellon gives a commanding performance, establishing that the cuckolded Simone is in fact the dominant male. He is imperious from the very first moment when he complains that Bianca is slow to greet him, he pushes her around physically and he clicks his fingers to get her to do his will. She has long wished that Simone was dead. Now she takes revenge for her maltreatment and the death of her lover.

Zemlinsky did all he could to make Wilde's ending credible, in both his added stage directions and his music, but he did not succeed. And there is one very curious feature of that music: on each of the two 'Why did you not tell me…?' lines, the ominous, now death-laden figure in Ex. 1 sounds in the orchestral accompaniment. This, together with the adoption here (between and after the sung lines) of the love music shown in Ex. 2, which accompanied much of the earlier love scene between Guido and Bianca, serves to undermine the picture of a happily reunited husband and wife. Beaumont claims that as the love motif (my Ex. 2) returns here, 'All that had been stolen, the smallest motif, the subtlest harmonic inflection, everything formerly associated with Guido, is now again in possession of Simone' (Beaumont 2000: 247). But this is simply not achieved in the short coda. And, in any case, Beaumont has to add a caveat to his interpretation: 'Only as the bass line passes through A minor, the key of death, does the radiant A flat major of his victory suffer a momentary discolouration.' (Beaumont 2000: 247). Indeed, it does, and that descending bass line is highly ominous, since it is close to the figure in Ex. 1 and therefore plays well with either of the imminent murder scenarios adopted in the Lyon and Livermore productions at the moment when it sounds, just before the curtain falls.

Conclusion

Like the opera itself, this analysis has been 'narrowed into the confines of this room' where Wilde's drama of adultery and revenge is played out together, of course, with Zemlinsky's fine, intense musical setting of that drama. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the play is the fact that it is unfinished, leaving not only an absence of earlier action, which Zemlinsky had to fill with an orchestral prelude of

considerable length, but also the possibility that the text which we have does not represent Wilde's final thoughts. Certainly, the finale, even as set by Zemlinsky with very much expanded stage directions, is problematic: it leaves room, as we have seen, for different directorial reimaginings, which go against Wilde's proposed ending in conjugal reconciliation but have some justification in the music, as well as in the action of the opera up to and including the death of Guido. *Eine florentinische Tragödie* is, in consequence, an open-ended work, quite unlike the other Wilde poetic drama that was made into an opera: no one can doubt that everything in *Salome* leads up to Salome's extended monologue to the head of Jokanaan, and even the shock ending (Herod's command that she be killed) responds to a natural revulsion against Salome's perverse sexual satisfaction. But almost everything in *Eine florentinische Tragödie* leads *away* from the closing reconciliation.

Eine florentinische Tragödie achieved considerable success, with productions in its first year at Stuttgart (the premiere), Prague (under Zemlinsky's own baton), Vienna and Graz. There were five further productions in the twenties before it vanished into obscurity until Zemlinsky's music started to be rediscovered in the late 1970s (Beaumont 2000: 248–9). It has been a seriously underestimated work. It will never achieve the popularity of *Salome* but, like Strauss' opera, it takes a Decadent Wilde text and transforms it into a powerful Expressionist opera. The expressionism is, however, all in the music. On stage the drama should be played as realistically as possible.

ENDNOTES

1. Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, quoted in Bek (1995: 174).
2. Cf. Fuß (1994). For an analysis of the psychological insights provided by the music in the operas of Zemlinsky's contemporary Janáček cf. Ewans (1977). For an analysis of the exploration of thoughts and feelings in examples of operatic music 1776–1955 from the performer's and director's perspective cf. Ewans (2016).
3. March 2020, directed by Lanya Chianakas and conducted by Alexander Katsman with Robert Mellon as Simone, Michael Day as Guido and Anush Avetisyan as Bianca. Available on YouTube. DVD published by Premiere Opera, no. 18350.
4. Opéra de Lyon 2012. Directed by Georges Lavaudant and conducted by Bernhard Kontarsky, with Martin Winkler as Simone, Gun-Brit Barlmin as Bianca and Thomas Piffka as Guido Bardi. Premiere Opera DVD 9966. (The last three-quarters of this production can be found in three parts on YouTube).
5. All references to the score are by rehearsal figure and where necessary by bar after that rehearsal figure.
6. All of Wilde's and Zemlinsky's stage directions are here printed in italics.
7. All English quotations from the libretto use Wilde's original words, except where the meaning of the German text deviates from them. Zemlinsky's directions for expression and staging are added.
8. The German *forderte* is more forceful than Wilde's original 'asked for'. And Zemlinsky sets it emphatically: the last word of the sentence in German, after a brief dramatic pause.
9. Wildner-Partsch (1982) also confidently assigns names to several musical themes. Even worse is Perroux's commentary (1998): every motif is assigned a name in capital letters, so for example my Ex. 1 is entitled MORT and Ex. 2 BIANCA. This exhibits a total misunderstanding of the relationship between text, action and musical themes in opera.
10. William Mann set a good example in his text and translation of the Ring (London: Covent Garden, 2 vols., n.d.) by supplying only numbers for the 71 main themes of the cycle, placing these numbers in the text at the points where the motifs occur and supplying music examples for each numbered theme. His practice was more or less followed (numbers, but some occasional labelling) in the English National Opera Guides, published by John Calder and edited by Nicholas John.
11. There are some near-exceptions in this last category. For example, Bartók's evocation of the contents of the first six doors in Duke Bluebeard's Castle is certainly tone-painting – though the music portrays them through Judit's eyes and illuminates her reactions.
12. The music of this scene is reminiscent of that in Strauss' Salome when in a similar manner Wilde's Herod describes the riches of his palace in the fruitless attempt to persuade Salome not to demand the head of Jokanaan. Zemlinsky knew Salome well: he had conducted the Viennese premiere at the Volksoper in 1910–1911, and subsequently included the opera in his repertoire at the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague.
13. This is a slightly simplified version of Wilde's original text.
14. Zemlinsky cuts a third, macabre image from Wilde's text: 'or some long-fringed cloth/ in which a new-born and unwanted babe/ might wail unheeded'.
15. Wilde repeats 'mighty', but the German text has *Weltbühne*, recalling Shakespeare's famous: 'All the world's a stage…' (As you like it II.7.139).

16. Very free: Wilde's original is 'Why do you speak like this?'
17. Written in a review of the premiere.
18. Wilde wrote: 'You are better so.'
19. Wilde wrote: 'Dispatch! Dispatch!'. The German 'Flick! Flick!' is much more peremptory.

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses Zemlinsky's opera *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, based on an unfinished play by Oscar Wilde. After the Introduction and a brief note on *leitmotifs*, the paper analyses the nine challenges that the fabric merchant, Simone, sets to Prince Guido Bardi. The emphasis is on how the text and music show the development of Simone's thoughts and feelings. The cumulative results of the first eight challenges convince Simone that Guido is having an affair with his wife Bianca. He challenges Guido to a duel, wins it and kills him.

Husband and wife are then reconciled. But this conclusion to the opera has been controversial since the first performances. The discussion concludes by evaluating two ways of improving on Wilde and Zemlinsky's ending, both of which have been seen on stage in twenty-first century productions.

Keywords. Oscar Wilde, Alexander Zemlinsky, Max Meyerfeld, A Florentine Tragedy, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*

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