A PERFORMER’S ANALYSIS OF DOMINICK ARGENTO’S

MISS HAYISHAM’S WEDDING NIGHT

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Dominick Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is the least explored of his artistic output. A monodrama in one act for soprano, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* contains some of Argento’s most beautiful and challenging music of his compositional output. The purpose of a detailed analysis of the structure and content of Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is to facilitate the solo vocal performer’s interpretation. Argento’s setting of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is unique in that he musically translates the manic psychological state of the literary character. Argento structured the one act opera in such a manner that the music would illuminate the text and the audience might connect with the unstable psychological episodes and outbursts demonstrated by Miss Havisham. To that end, each section and phrase has its own psychological motivation, which in turn demands a varied musical and dramatic interpretation.

Utilizing selected scenes from *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*, the researcher will analyze Argento’s musical manifestation of Dickens’s literary work. This research will include an investigation into the manner in which Argento uses the shape of melody and the musical phrase along with the harmonic materials to enhance the text and dramatic content. The author will explore the musical nuances Argento incorporates in an effort to develop and portray Miss Havisham’s psychological state. Through an analysis of the orchestral writing the author will show how Argento’s aesthetic balance between the music and text represents the emotional and psychological implications of the monodrama.
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*Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* by Dominick Argento
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†The Six Elizabethan Songs by Dominick Argento
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Dominick Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is among the least explored of his artistic output and rarely performed. Primarily a composer for the stage, Argento (b. 1927) was always intrigued with the idea of writing dramatic music. A monodrama in one act for soprano, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* contains some of Argento’s most beautiful and challenging music from the second half of his compositional output (1960s and 1970s). Argento was greatly influenced by his operatic predecessors, including Mozart, Verdi and Puccini. *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* displays various elements reminiscent of traditional classical opera and the conventional bel canto mad scene. *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is a tour de force of tremendous dramatic and vocal complexity for the singer.

According to Argento’s memoir *Catalogue Raisonné*, John Olon-Scrymgeour’s libretto of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* existed before *Miss Havisham’s Fire* was composed and not only did it provide the impetus for the commissioning of the full opera, it also served in a somewhat abbreviated form as its epilogue. Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is inspired by a character in Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations* (1861), Aurelia Havisham, a complex and unusually conflicted personage in literature. *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is an outgrowth of Argento’s operatic work, *Miss Havisham’s Fire* (1979). Inspired by Beverly Sills’s enthusiasm for the character,

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the work was intended for her last operatic performance and Julius Rudel’s final appearance as director of New York City Opera. Initially, Sills’s tentative suggestion for an operatic topic was *Empress Carlotta of Mexico*. Argento located a copy of the literary work *Imperial Madness* and thought the subject had possibilities. The work reminded Argento of his previous successful collaboration with Ms. Sills. He enlisted the aid of Charles Nolte as librettist, and entitled the work *The Phantom Empress*.

That fall I invited Sills to lunch during a visit she paid to Minneapolis. The libretto was not finished nor was any music yet written, so she asked if I had any alternative ideas to the Carlotta opera. I told her about John Olon-Scrymgeour’s libretto *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* but explained that it was only a short monodrama and hardly the right vehicle for her departure from the stage. Sills responded enthusiastically to the idea of an opera based on the character of Miss Havisham—a folle d’amour, she called her, not unlike many of the operatic heroines she had portrayed during her career. She wondered whether a full-length opera could be written about Miss Havisham. I told her I thought it could and she immediately said: ‘Let’s do that instead!’

Although disappointed, Argento dropped the Carlotta idea in favor of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. He had already started to envision several scenes. Nevertheless, he discovered more possibilities in the character of Aurelia Havisham. Since *Miss Havisham* had originally been John Olon-Scrymgeour’s idea, Argento asked him to serve as the librettist.

Even though Argento was convinced that *Miss Havisham’s Fire* displayed some of his finest music, it was not well received by audiences or critics. Maestro Julius Rudel conducted the premier of *Miss Havisham’s Fire* and believed abbreviating the last scene

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would have helped. “The opera was riding high up until that point, and was appreciated by the audience, but [it] was eventually lost,” Rudel said during a recent interview.

At the orchestra dress rehearsal, I pleaded with Argento and Scrymgeour to make the cuts in the final scene. Argento was willing to do so, but Scrymgeour would not. I could feel the audience slipping away in the performance. If only we could have shortened and tightened things to keep the intensity.3

Argento expresses in his memoir that “Miss Havisham’s Fire was the biggest failure of my career, and no other failure before or since has hurt nearly as much.”4 In spite of the negative response to Miss Havisham’s Fire, Argento remained committed to his decision of foregoing the Carlotta idea. “I took Sills to heart when she said she wanted to feel like a ‘wrung out rag.’”5 Although Miss Havisham’s Fire was originally written for Beverly Sills, she had to decline due to reoccurring health issues. Argento’s goal was to make all his works distinct from each other. Furthermore, Argento felt that Miss Havisham’s Fire was an appropriate successor to his preceding opera, The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe, in terms of style and musical setting.

Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night is an extended mad scene for soprano extracted from Act II of Argento’s Miss Havisham’s Fire. Originally programmed as a companion piece for A Water Bird Talk for baritone, they are often performed together. Both works share similar types of orchestras, and the subject matter of each is marriage6. Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night would prove more effective in the theater and provided Argento some consolation for the failure of Miss Havisham’s Fire. The premiere of

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3 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 4.
5 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 13.
Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* took place on May 1, 1981, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with soprano Rita Shane and conductor Philip Brunelle of the Minnesota Opera.
CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF JOHN OLON-SCRYMGEOUR’S LIBRETTO

John Olon-Scrymgeour’s libretto for Argento’s monodrama, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*, is taken from varying portions of Charles Dickens’s literary work *Great Expectations*. Scrymgeour organized the libretto for the monodrama in a fashion similar to the actions Miss Havisham displayed in *Great Expectations*. Albeit an important figure in Dickens’s work, Miss Havisham is not the main character around which the novel is centered. Scrymgeour ultimately drew from two distinct parts of the book for his libretto -- a character description of Miss Havisham presented in Volume I, Chapter VIII; and her betrayal and tragedy that appear in Volume II, Chapter III.

In both the novel and the monodrama, years have passed since Miss Aurelia Havisham’s ill-fated wedding day. Although she had resolved to live in seclusion, she nonetheless adopted a young girl named Estella in an effort to teach her how to betray, manipulate and deceive men without any remorse. Upon meeting the two, Pip immediately feels uncomfortable around Miss Havisham. Over the course of their relationship, he is determined to discover the source of such anger and emptiness in a woman, who seemingly once had the perfect life.

Scrymgeour condensed the action associated with Dickens’s book in an effort to focus solely on the tragedy and demise of Aurelia Havisham. Just as Dickens opted to provide a character description of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, so does Scrymgeour in Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. In both works, when the
obstinate and imperious Aurelia Havisham is introduced, she is portrayed as a picture of emotional instability. We later learn in both works this instability is due to her having been jilted on her wedding day. The Dickens work focuses on the demise of Miss Havisham in two sections of the book. However, Scrymgeour’s libretto is divided into three sections dramatically and emotionally. Each section represents various chapters of her life, which have occurred since she the fateful event.

The first section of the work introduces Aurelia Havisham 50 years after the ill-fated day she thought would have been her wedding day. We meet a subdued Aurelia Havisham. Although she seems to display some characteristics of madness, her mania has yet to fully surface. The second section represents the arrival and subsequent reading of the letter, which arrives on the wedding day to inform her of the tragic jilting. It is in this section that Aurelia Havisham’s madness is manifested and affirmed; her behavior is more agitated and belligerent. The third section represents Aurelia Havisham’s acceptance of her own lot. After receiving the letter and displaying a turbulent tantrum, she returns to her reserved and unflustered disposition, as demonstrated in the first section of the monodrama. As a result, both the libretto and musical score display a cyclic form, which effectively serves the drama and acts as the perfect vehicle for Argento to tell Aurelia Havisham’s tragic story.

“Songs represent the composer’s purest utterance, his most private being, unadorned, uncluttered, devoid of posturing, spontaneous, distilled,” Argento stated in a keynote address at the NATS national convention in 1976. According to Argento, the

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form of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is, “basically rhapsodic and it doesn’t ‘inform’ the work, it *is* the work.” It is fitting that the form of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is classified as rhapsodic, because of the element of madness. Argento stated that, “I’ve almost given up setting poetry, just prose allows me more freedom musically to make lines longer, to make them go in interesting directions. Poetry in a sense dictates the highs and lows, the duration, the rhythm. I find it liberating to work with prose.”

Although there are reoccurring themes, the piece is free flowing in structure and features a range of highly contrasted moods, colors and tonality. Similar in form to Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Argento’s *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is rhapsodic. The combination of a rhapsodic form with cyclic elements allows the return of various melodic and orchestral motives, and creates an arch shape dramatically and emotionally. The recurring thematic material serves to delineate the dramatic sections. Because the structure and form are freely written, the character is portrayed as more spontaneous and believable.

*Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* presents a number of fantasies that the manic character has created nightly since the day she was jilted. Scrymgeour’s libretto displays each emotion that resulted from Miss Havisham’s fantasies and true experiences. And, as such, he supplies Argento with numerous opportunities to express her madness in musical terms.

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8 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 4.
CHAPTER III
THEMATIC MATERIAL AND MOTIVIC STRUCTURE

Argento avoids setting the text in a strophic manner and instead uses repeating musical motives in the orchestra and vocal line -- providing the listener with a sense of dramatic and musical continuity in this through-composed work. Argento’s flexible style in setting *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* blends passages of lyrical melodies with sections of recitative that follow as closely as possible the rhythm of ordinary speech. Argento’s primary focuses are the setting of texts, the weight of words and syllables, and the use of subtext. He also implements recurrent motivic and thematic devices, as a means of framing each section.

Recurrent motivic devices are prevalent throughout the piece. They serve to establish the form of the work, to strengthen the dramatic integration, and to unify the piece musically. We are introduced to Aurelia through a thematic lament in which she refers to herself as the “Queen” who demands diversion. The figure of a double-dotted eighth note followed by 64th notes indicates emotional agitation and instability (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 34-35.
Argento creates a majestic imagery through the text and orchestra. The presence of recitative, pedal points and woodwinds allows the singer to communicate the drama of the scene effectively. Through repetition of phrases, articulation, dynamics and rhythm, a vocal fanfare is displayed. Argento creates seamless transitions between recitative and aria, or arioso, a characteristic similar to the vocal writing of late romantic opera. Argento accomplishes this effect through the use of an E pedal point and a repeated, triplet note pattern voiced in the brass (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Dominick Argento, Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. mm. 18-23.
Elements of the “Queen demands diversion” motive appear in the orchestral writing of the arioso. The shifting tonality, dynamics, meter and articulation suggest Aurelia Havisham’s imbalanced, manic behavior. The first example of polytonal texture is displayed during the arioso at Rehearsal 4. The recitative at Rehearsal 3 provides a musical foundation, dramatically and harmonically, for Argento to expound upon during the arioso section. Argento seems to create a celestial (reflecting the words “nebulae” and “galaxies”) and grand fanfare effect (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 24-33.
The “Queen demands diversion” motive returns a final time at Rehearsal 38, introducing a new cadenza section. Musical elements including rhythmic and melodic structure associated with the section at Rehearsal 6 return at measure 360 (Figure 4). This time the vocal line is accompanied by an E flat pedal point at measures 360-361 (Figure 5).

Figure 4

![Figure 4](image)

Figure 5
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. m. 361.

![Figure 5](image)

The dramatic content is opposite of that at Rehearsals 3 and 4. Aurelia has received and read the letter, and becomes more introspective than initially presented during the beginning of the monodrama. Each section employs elements reminiscent of the recitative/arioso section. Argento uses similar and recurring musical ideas to express dissimilar sentiments.
The “Queen demands diversion” orchestral material remains constant throughout the work, whether its role is as accompaniment or orchestral interlude. Beginning at Rehearsal 6, the same rhythmic pattern is displayed, as related to the musical material of Rehearsal 4. In contrast to the previous section, the tonality is D flat Major coupled with G flat Major, creating polytonality and contrary motion (Figure 6).

Figure 6
Dominick Argento, Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. mm. 43-49.
There is a clear tonal center when Aurelia Havisham is lucid and in control of her thoughts and feelings. She views her nightly drink as her anesthesia ("liqueur motive"), her friend and her salvation. This nightly ritual soothes and comforts her. To portray this notion, a tonal center of C Major is employed at measures 37-40 (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Immediately after a robust and hysterical orchestral interlude, during which time Aurelia reads the letter and realizes what has happened to her, the “liqueur motive” returned solely in the orchestral accompaniment in measures 346-349 (Figure 8).
Other important motives which serve to organize the work and integrate the
dramatic and musical content of the opera are associated with the words: “I have done
with all mankind,” “It is Miss Havisham’s Wedding Day,” and “I am the mad Miss
Havisham.” Each has a specific role to help establish continuity and points of reference
in the drama. When we first encounter Aurelia Havisham, her initial phrase is, “I have
done with all mankind . . . and want diversion” (Figure 9).
Aurelia Havisham’s lament is simple, yet as it is presented in an exposed fashion over a pedal chord, it is also very powerful. It is significant that the word “mankind” is chosen as opposed to “humankind.” In this case, “mankind” refers to her view of men in particular. Also worthy of note is how Argento stresses the first syllable of the word in an effort to inform the musical phrase and emotional thought. At this point in the opera, the imperious Aurelia Havisham is introduced. However, when the theme returns later in the work, the intervallic and rhythmic structure are the same, but the text differs [“I have done with all mankind . . . I am tired.” (Figure 10)].

She has received and read the letter, and has released an abundance of rage and hysteria. She has chosen to summon Matthew Compeyson in her own mind. The use of the alla cadenza prepares the audience for yet another emotional side of Aurelia Havisham. The alla cadenza serves as a moment of introspective thought. Finally,
Aurelia Havisham’s resolve is, “I have done with all mankind . . . I have done.” (Figure 11). It is almost as if she has resolved to accept life’s fate and dismiss the ongoing nightly fantasies re-enacted over the years.

“It is Miss Havisham’s Wedding Day,” is Aurelia’s grand fanfare-filled wedding day announcement. Each time it is referenced, the rhythmic structure is the same, with some amendments, but the emotion that follows is different. For example, at Rehearsal 13, the theme foreshadows Aurelia’s transition to a turbulent emotional tantrum with an E Major tonal center, where she gains control again and describes individuals in a violent, obstinate and haughty manner. But at measure 105, “It is Miss,” is musically conveyed by an accompanied descending eighth note pattern with sostenuto articulation, suggesting an emotional change to a more exultant state (Figure 12).
When the thematic material returns at Rehearsal 15, D flat Major is the tonality, leading to B flat Major to introduce her grand pronouncement, “Miss Havisham’s Wedding Day will be remembered for generations.” Argento stresses the importance of “It is Miss,” at Rehearsal 15, by rhythmically notating an unaccompanied identical triplet pattern with sostenuto articulation for each word (Figure 13).

Figure 13
Dominick Argento, Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. mm. 128-130.
Another recurring motive is, “I am the mad Miss Havisham.” Rhythmically, it is reminiscent of the “It is Miss Havisham’s Wedding Day” theme, but it is intervalically different. It appears twice in the opera and on each occasion, the rhythmic and vocal writing is identical. The first occurrence of the lament is immediately after she has received and read the letter at Rehearsal 39, which results in an enormous eruption of emotion (Figure 14).

Figure 14
Dominick Argento, Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. mm. 367-371.
The final example occurs at Rehearsal 48, after she regains her composure and speaks to Matthew, only to erupt into another violent outburst. What is noticeable is how this lament in particular has a calming effect on Aurelia. Each time it is sung, she becomes more vulnerable and reflective (Figure 15).

Figure 15

Argento also uses a “wedding motive” as an orchestral interlude to frame different sections. Seen first in the harmonium, it consists of homophonic, chordal passages, juxtaposed with other motivic material, sometimes metered, sometimes more freely structured (Figures 16 and 17).
At other times, as when this thematic material returns a final time at measure 441, it appears without other motives. Here it is played by the strings, brass and organ, rather than the harmonium (Figure 18).
These are but a few examples of the way in which Argento uses motivic structure to delineate sections, integrate the dramatic elements of the scene, and provide musical continuity in an extended through-composed monodrama.
Aurelia Havisham is a broken woman – mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Yet, she also displays moments of lucidity. The melodic and harmonic structures of this work reflect the dramatic content at its core. When she is passionate and lucid, a strong tonal center is present. This observation is demonstrated beginning at Rehearsal 4 (Figure 19).

Figure 19
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 24-33.
Here, Argento employs A Major as the tonal center. There is an E Major pedal point against A Major, along with the woodwinds and violins moving in contrary motion. Both musical elements are used to demonstrate Miss Havisham’s struggle between lucidity and emotional imbalance.

As Mary Ann Smart has best expressed, “There seems to be an intuitive connection between madness and coloratura: trills, melismas and high notes suggest hysteria, an unbearable pitch of emotion; they liberate music from text, allow it to escape from the rational, connect it with pre-symbolic modes of communication. In a sense, coloratura is free from the confinement of music and of language: a syllable stretched beyond recognition is an escape from significance, the emergence of irrationality and madness.”10

As such, when Aurelia experiences emotional conflict, the dynamics change and disjunctive rhythmic patterns emerge. There is also a wide variety of articulatory figures and fioratura, as well as more chromaticism and dissonance. An example of Argento’s use of agitated articulation, fragmentation of phrases, and chromatic vocal writing can be heard in measure 421-429 after Aurelia realizes the turmoil and humiliation inflicted upon her (Figure 20).

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Because of the various levels of instability of Miss Havisham, Argento stretches her emotional and vocal capacity through wide, intervallic leaps. When Aurelia is overwhelmed with emotion, the extremes of the voice are exploited. In most cases, they are actually more lyrical and robust, with denser orchestral texture. Such is the case in measures 212-213 [“He loves me Nanny, he loves me!” (Figure 21)].
When Aurelia is more conversational, the vocal part lies in the middle of the voice in a recitative style. However, it is through the use of specific articulation and dynamic shifts that Argento facilitates the singer’s ability to embrace Aurelia Havisham’s emotional state of mind (Figure 22).
The delivery of natural speech-like patterns and inflections coupled with lyrical and melodious phrases occur frequently in Argento’s style of vocal writing. Argento uses this style of writing not only as a means of enhancing the dramatic content, but also as a way of unifying the text as a whole. He achieves this by using perfect fourths, falling fourths, and minor sevenths, especially in the recitative sections. As a result, the melody reflects the shape and inflections of natural speech patterns (Figure 23).

Argento is meticulous when it involves the setting of text- his attention to detail in the weight of words and syllables mirrors a declamatory style. One example of how Argento conveys the importance of the text is by emphasizing an asymmetric subdivision of the beat set against rhythmic patterns such as 2, 3, 4, or 6. He employs quintuplets and quadruplets rhythmically to emphasize the natural stress of the words. As a result, the recitative displays a more natural shape and conversational effect. For example, Argento groups two groups of quintuplets on the phrase, “As good a way to begin as any” (Figure 23).
Another example of Argento’s rhythmic technique for the treatment of words is demonstrated at measure 206. Again, Argento uses quintuplets to convey the natural delivery of speech. As in the case of most twentieth century composers, Argento’s markings in the score are very specific. He notates parlando, for instance, to suggest the vocal manner in which the phrase should be delivered. Variation in the rhythmic structure of the phrases serves to effectively communicate natural speech patterns in the melody (Figure 24).

Figure 24  
Dominick Argento, Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. m. 206.

Argento employs text painting to depict Aurelia Havisham’s manic instability. During the arioso in the second section of the monodrama, Argento displays the linguistic technique of onomatopoeia\textsuperscript{11} in an effort to depict and enhance Aurelia’s madness. As she begins to imitate the sounds of nature, she references the presence of the wind, a bird, a brook, and girlish laughter. For example, Argento uses “whoosh” to describe the action

\textsuperscript{11} The naming of a thing or action by the vocal imitation of the sound associated with it; the use of words whose sound suggests the sense. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/onomatopoeia.
of the wind and “peep” along with a fioratura pattern trilled on [a], to display a birdlike timbre at measures 271-275 (Figure 25).

Figure 25  

An ascending arpeggiated orchestral line, played by the harp, echoes and supports the vocal line as the word “whoosh” is sung (Figure 26).
This style of writing is found quite often in the vocal works of Argento. For example, in the song “Spring,” from *Six Elizabethan Songs*, Argento uses the words “cuckoo,” “jug-jug,” “puwe,” “towitta woo,” to describe the sounds of a bird singing (Figure 27).

Figure 27
Text painting throughout this section is displayed in both the vocal and orchestral writing in Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. Orchestral text painting is displayed when, in the work, “a brook flowing” and “girlish laughter” are also referenced (Figure 28).

Figure 28
Dominick Argento, Miss Havisham's Wedding Night. mm. 277-283.
The orchestral writing is effective in its imitation of nature. Both the vocal and orchestral lines mirror each other in terms of articulation and dynamics, each playing a vital role in strengthening the musical character of the passage. Maestro Rudel contends that the “vocal writing was exemplary,” concluding that “this is where Argento’s mastery comes in – a very skillful and varied orchestration.”

They infuse the work with the required sense of reality that makes Miss Havisham a believable character and the monodrama an applauded operatic work.

In contrast to the declamatory passages, lyrical sections are richly melodic, employing conjunct linear movement. At times these passages exhibit a strong tonal center juxtaposed with diatonic harmonies; at others, great dissonance and polytonality. During the lyrical sections of Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night, Aurelia is either lucid or triumphant. This style of linear writing is generally set in a straightforward and traditional meter thus musically establishing her mental state at the time.

Aurelia’s final aria is the best example of the heiress’s lucidity and perceived triumph over the painful situation. It is during this section that she gains emotional control. The vocal writing of the aria is relatively straightforward. Although it is not at the peak of the melodic sequence, her sense of clarity begins the instant she sings, “others had.” From that point onward, she generalizes her understanding of the situation (Figure 29).

13 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Questions 5 & 6.
Every time she voices, “I could have got over you,” the tonality resolves back to B flat Major in measure 405. Argento remains committed to the importance of the role of the text. Aurelia is most emotional and bitter regarding the word “slut” in measure 401, which Argento notates in a descriptive manner synonymous to “others” in measure 404. To stress the gravity of the text and subtext, Argento sustains the note on an A5 in an effort to strengthen her claim, wanting Matthew to be clear about what she really thinks of him and his actions (Figure 30).
The harmonic syntax of the piece plays a vital role in bringing Aurelia Havisham’s story to life. Argento creates an unstable emotional atmosphere by fusing tonal and polytonal writings. His varied and rich harmonic palette portrays the complexity of the fallen heiress. In addition, continuity, which Argento achieves through the use of pedal points, is an important element in the harmonic organization of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. The insertion of pedal points serves two roles -- musically, to delineate sections while establishing and stabilizing tonality, and dramatically, to set a mood of foreboding, isolation and eeriness.
CHAPTER V
TREATMENT OF THE ORCHESTRA

It has been said that, “madness has been one of the most provocative subjects for opera ever since the days of Strozzi’s La finta pazza, which introduced into the then relatively-new era of the opera stage a theme inherited from commedia dell’arte.”¹⁴ Thus, it is worth noting that women had been going mad in opera long before Aurelia Havisham. Although subjects in opera may vary, the girl driven mad by love - la pazza per amore - remains constant. An argument presented in 1806 by Charles Bell in The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts, pointed out that when “one portrayed the insane, it is with a moral aim to show the consequence of vice and the indulgence of passion.”¹⁵ Argento captured this tragedy of the drama when creating Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night by thoroughly integrating orchestral elements with the vocal writing through effective instrumentation, text painting, articulation and dynamics. Articulation devices in the orchestral writing, such as accents, staccatos, and martellatos, inform and enhance the dramatic content of the work.

Scored for a small chamber orchestra, the orchestral accompaniment for this monodrama is vital to the successful portrayal of its complex lead character. To Argento, “the orchestra is part of the atmosphere and color, [but] using piano is unchanging, it doesn’t transport color. It’s like a painting, to take a Picasso and make it black and

¹⁵ Charles Bell, The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts, (London: C. Bell, 1883).
The orchestra maintains a supportive role throughout the opera. Just as the vocal line exhibits musical motives and themes, those same elements are heard in the orchestra. In most cases, especially as the emotions intensify, the orchestra foreshadows the actions -- whether it is through orchestral interludes, pedal points, or elements associated with the wedding ceremony. In a sense, the orchestra functions as a distinct character which comments, questions, and engages in dialogue with Aurelia Havisham.

Time is a recurrent dramatic theme of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. Argento creates a plaintive and eerie atmosphere through the use of the harmonium and chimes. The piece begins with the chimes representing the striking of the clock. Argento uses repeated B flats to symbolize the constant rhythmic pattern of time as well as a sense of urgency. Subsequent occurrences of the clock theme in the chimes represent anger in some instances, while expressing despair in others. Initially, there is no clear tonal center. This is significant in that it suggests her mental instability (Figure 31).

Figure 31

This same series of clock motives returns later in the work (Figure 32).

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16 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 14.
There also appears a clearly defined tonal center of F Major at measures 173-175, while measures 417-419 maintain a tonal center of E Major. At each instance, the motivic structure is rhythmically and harmonically similar (Figure 33).

Figure 33
The harmonium, provides an effective representation of Miss Havisham’s wedding theme. Evocative of the organ in a church wedding, it also portrays a mood of eeriness, in much the same way that the organ is used in horror films (Figure 34).

Figure 34
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 5-7.
As Aurelia’s emotional turbulent behavior erupts, the orchestral writing displays denser texture through clusters of chords reminiscent of the late romantic era. The range and variety of articulation, dynamics and tessitura increase in an effort to create musical tension similar to that of Aurelia’s psychological state (Figures 35, 36 and 37).

Figure 35
Figure 36
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 116-121.
Figure 37
This type of orchestral writing remains constant throughout the work. Further, when Aurelia’s emotional state is severely challenged, the orchestral writing mirrors the vocal line and the dramatic content (Figure 38). Argento is unafraid to push the envelope orchestrally and vocally in order to convey the message of one woman’s tragedy and sorrow.

**Figure 38**
The orchestral interludes in *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* are essential to the integration of the drama and musical thought. Just as the motivic structure frames individual sections and episodic outbursts, so do the orchestral interludes. The orchestral interludes are active participants that foreshadow and enhance the drama. For example, at Rehearsal 31, the repetition of the F# in measures 296-298 establishes the moment in which Aurelia begins to read the letter (Figure 39). At this point in the work, an aura of suspense and urgency is exhibited through the use of strongly accented eighth-, sixteenth- and triplet-note patterns in all voices. Argento creates the effect of emotional imbalance at measures 298-303 by notating disjunctive descending tremolo patterns by the strings, resolving to a cluster chord, signifying the dropping of the letter (Figure 39).

Figure 39
Argento continues the same musical pattern at Rehearsal 33, as Aurelia’s mind continues to race and she relives the reading of the letter. Although the repeated section at Rehearsal 33 is similar in structure, F natural is employed and the appearance of the strings is longer and more pronounced (Figure 40).

Figure 40

The picturesque and atmospheric orchestral writing of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* serves the imagery of the text. At Rehearsal 8, Argento creates a celestial effect of “silent galaxies,” through the use of the instrumentation which consists of the harp, oboe, violin and flute. The use of triplets against duplets, evokes the movement of the stars and galaxies. Argento concludes the G flat Major section with an ascending scale employing a raised 4th and raised 5th as the word “up” is sung and a seated Aurelia turns her eyes upward (Figure 41).
Another example of orchestral imagery is displayed at measure 92. Argento introduces the “limp down the aisle” motive in the vocal line (Figure 42).

Figure 42
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 92-93.
The identical passage, repeated in the orchestra line by the string basses and followed by the addition of cellos and violas, exhibits the effect of clumsiness as seen throughout the section (Figures 43 and 44).

Figure 43
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 94-100.
When Aurelia is comical or filled with dismay, the instrumentation involves the strings. When she is ostentatious or coherent, there is a pronounced presence of the brass and woodwinds. The addition of the woodwinds and brass intensifies and reinforces the emotional grandeur of Aurelia Havisham. Beginning at measure 136, the tonal center is B flat Major. Argento begins the section with the orchestral voicing in the strings. As Miss Havisham’s emotions become gradually more pronounced, Argento infuses the phrase with woodwinds, horns, and organ. The texture becomes denser, and supported by the harmonic transition to D flat Major, C Major and a resolution to B flat Major, the result is a fanfare appropriate for the end of her grandiose pronouncement (Figures 45 and 46).
Figure 45
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 136-142.

Figure 46
Dominick Argento, *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. mm. 143-151.
At Rehearsal 25, Aurelia is imitating Orlick. Argento brings this section to life by using the lower stringed instruments. The vocal and orchestral lines are sung in unison, creating a moment of sarcastic musical laughter (Figure 47).

Figure 47

These selected examples represent the richness of Argento’s orchestral writing and how it serves the dramatic integration of the piece.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Argento demonstrates his profound understanding of the human voice in *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. His attention to detail in the vocal writing suggests one who is sensitive to, and knowledgeable about, the needs and desires of the singer. His intrigue with the human voice should come as no surprise, considering his response when asked the question, “You seem to like to write for the extremity of the soprano voice. Why? And who are your influences?” Argento readily admitted that his influence is his late wife, Carolyn Bailey, who was a coloratura soprano.

In ideal complement to the orchestration, the text for *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is equally infused with a natural heaviness of passion and expectation. Aurelia Havisham displays most, if not all the characteristics of mad women and how they are portrayed in music, as researched by Mary Ann Smart.

She sees him everywhere, and addresses him in passionate songs. He is the handsomest, the greatest, the most humorous, amiable and perfect of men. She never had any other husband. It is him who lives in her heart, controls its pulsations, governs her thoughts and actions, animates and adorns her existence. She is sometimes motionless: her look is fixed, and a smile is upon her lips.

Important compositional features in Agento’s musical setting of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* include: rhythmic and melodic motives used to unify movements; an

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17 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 10.
illustrative orchestra accompaniment used to portray visual images and belligerent manic outbursts, harmonic shifts; and variance of tempos to define sections and to depict the emotionally erratic and imbalanced psychological states of Aurelia Havisham. The principal feature in *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is Argento’s treatment of the vocal writing. Miss Havisham’s frequently exploited high and difficult tessitura contrasts in vocal timbre, dynamics, articulation, mood and passages of both lyrical and dramatic singing are demanding for the most accomplished singer. Clear and precise declamation of the dramatic expression and text are the major considerations for the performer.

Legato singing style in *Miss Havisham's Wedding Night* is easier to produce in the lyrical passages. However, the dramatic declamatory singing often with disjunctive vocal phrases also requires a legato approach. “I feel strongly about words,” Argento expressed. “I like to believe that I pay more attention to the text and the setting of text than most of my colleagues.” The delivery of Argento’s setting of Dickens text with its speech-like characteristics can be difficult to articulate, as many of the words are delivered rapidly and often contain clusters of consonants. In studying the role of Aurelia Havisham, the singer should avoid articulation through the jaw and tongue, thus creating tension and an interference with the vocal apparatus.

Because of this and other intricacies, Shane has expressed that she does not “think the young singer can sing *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. The tessitura is difficult. It takes a real strong artist - one whose technique is solid.” The singer must be technically sound because of the enormous dramatic content of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*.

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19 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 5.
20 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 5.
Also, vocal, emotional and physical stamina play a tremendous role. Considering the variance of emotional shifts, the singer must be well prepared musically since it is easy to allow the energy of the drama to compromise the integrity of the vocal technique. According to Erie Mills, because *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is intensely demanding both vocally and emotionally, performance practice issues such as vocal timbre changes, stamina, dynamics and text must be addressed. “I benefited by a long rehearsal period and a wonderful stage director and conductor,” Mills disclosed. “I’ve always been one to sing out in rehearsals, especially in an opera that I’ve never performed. This role was much more demanding mentally than it was vocally.”

Although *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* is set as a monodrama, it still requires proper staging, costuming, props and lighting similar to a larger work – all of which inform the performance. While Aurelia Havisham is a complex woman, the staging does not require an elaborate effort. Argento suggests that the work be “simply staged,” adding that “it doesn’t need elaborate staging.” However, the visual image of Aurelia Havisham is important. An awareness of the exterior of the manic is an added necessity, given in an effort to bring the character to life with credibility. For years, Aurelia has relived the devastating moment of being jilted on her wedding day. Because she has always been a woman in control who has a grand and imperious persona, Argento allows the music to be reflective of the text and character. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the performer to embrace Aurelia Havisham in every capacity while working to become one with the tragedy, drama and music.

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21 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 4.
22 Appendix A, Q & A: Interviews with Living Sources, (Dallas: Jammieca Mott) Question 12.
Dr. Dominick Argento  (November 14, 2008)

1. How and why did you choose this particular subject matter?

Answer: The idea came from my librettist Scrymgeour. We had it in mind as a 30 minute monodrama. I had a commission from City Opera, Beverly Sills and Julius Rudel. She was getting ready to retire in the next couple of years and wanted to commission a work for her retirement.

2. You mention in your memoir that Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night posed more possibilities than the Carlotta idea. What were those possibilities?

Answer: It was going to be an epic work. Sills was very excited. A lot of her frustrations with opera were that she felt that they were too short for her or she was too long for them. By the time the final curtain call arrived she was just getting relaxed and could sing for two more hours. Unfortunately, Sills developed a recurrence of cancer. Due to the treatment, she simply didn’t have the strength.

3. What do you recall were your greatest challenges in writing the Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night?

Answer: I had rarely written for the coloratura soprano. My wife was a soprano and started out as a coloratura soprano. I studied a lot of the roles of Bellini and Donizetti that Sills had done and figured out how I could make it my own stylistically.

4. What is the form of Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night, and how did you establish it?

Answer: It is rhapsodic in form. It is the work.

5. In regards to the treatment of words, what did you include or exclude?

Answer: I feel very strongly about words. I like to believe that I pay more attention to the text and the setting of text than most of my colleagues. The weight of words and syllables/subtext is important. One must explore those things and reflect it in the music.
6. On the Librettist, John Olon-Scrymgeour, please tell me a little about him and his work, your relationship with him, and how he impacted Miss Havisham's Wedding Night?

Answer: There isn’t very much. I don’t think he even had a website. He was the librettist for 5 or 6 of my works. He wrote a lot of short stories and poetry, but never had much published. He moved to San Francisco and he died about 2 years ago. Apart from that there isn’t much. We met when we were both in school.

7. Regarding the treatment of the mute characters, are they on stage or simply figures of her imagination?

Answer: They are figures of her imagination.

8. Who is Nanny? In fact, is she the chambermaid?

Answer: She is a figure of Miss Havisham’s imagination.

9. Of the world’s opera composers to date, who were or are some of your major influences?

Answer: Monteverdi, Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, Strauss, Britten and Walton.

10. You seem to like to write for the extremity of the soprano voice, why? Are there any influences for this preference, if so who?

Answer: My wife. She used to sing [Mozart’s arias for] the Queen of the Night and the repertoire of Bellini - a favorite of Sills. Most singers’ spouse or partner is their muse. For example: Mozart, Strauss, Verdi and Britten - all married or were involved with singers and it makes a difference in their compositions.

11. What inspired you to write for Rita Shane?

Answer: Julius Rudel suggested Rita Shane for the second act. She premiered the work and was triumphant.

12. How much of the Shane work needs to be staged?

Answer: Simply staged. It doesn’t need elaborate staging.
13. Why do you feel that the first version for Shane was a failure?

   Answer: It was too big - too many scenes. I took Sills to heart when she said she wanted to feel like a “rung out rag.” If Sills would have done it, it would have been well customed designed for her voice.

14. In the 21st century, what would you like for people to take away from a performance of *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*? What would you like for them to recall or think 27 years later?

   Answer: Think about the character. The tragedy-peculiar and how they hurt. I like to write about people you can imagine their life’s troubles. The music is there to pump life into the character - it is the life blood of the characters. The orchestra is part of the atmosphere and color, [but] using piano is unchanging, it doesn’t transport color. It’s like a painting, to take a Picasso and make it black and white.
Erie Mills (May 19, 2009)

1. What was your approach to portraying Aurelia Havisham?

   Answer: I read Great Expectations first. Even though Miss Havisham doesn’t have much dialogue in the novel, she is referenced many times. Because I had to play the character at several different ages, I used many real life people as models. The very infirmed Miss Havisham was my mother who died of Parkinson’s.

2. What steps did you take in an effort to embody Aurelia mentally? What was your motivation?

   Answer: I like adjectives: proud, wealthy, privileged, spiteful, inflexible, etc.

3. Considering the enormous failure of the work, what drew you to the character?

   Answer: She is so famous in literature, and I knew of the NY City Opera production. Plus one gets to portray a character that ages over 60 years in the course of the opera. That’s a great thing. And when Opera Theatre of St. Louis asks you, you know it will be beautifully produced.

4. How did you go about preparing yourself vocally and physically, stamina wise, considering it is such a tour de force?

   Answer: I benefited by a long rehearsal period and a wonderful stage director and conductor. I’ve always been one to sing out in rehearsals, especially in an opera that I’ve never performed. This role was much more demanding mentally than it was vocally.

5. What advice would you give to the young singer studying the role?

   Answer: To be honest, I’m not sure a “young” singer should sing the entire role. It takes more life experience, and the ability to use one’s voice in a non-bel canto way at certain moments. A singer needs to know that she can make sounds that would really upset her voice teacher, but also sing beautifully! That takes time and a very good sense of one’s singing ability.
6. In preparing and performing the role, did you face any obstacles? If so, what were they?

Answer: The preparation time was difficult, because I didn’t have a coach who knew the opera. I was fortunate that a coaching friend had worked on the City Opera production, so I flew her to California and we worked for a week because rehearsals began in St. Louis. As I said above, I really became a recluse during the rehearsal period. I had some trouble with allergies, so I didn’t socialize much. Actually I guess it was good for the character.

7. How did you embrace this tragic character?

Answer: I think Aurelia Havisham thought she knew what she was doing. The tragedy was she didn’t want to accept the consequences.

8. At each performance, with what did you want to leave the audience?

Answer: I wanted the audience to realize the greatness of the opera and its composer. Argento is brilliant and such a wonderful composer for the voice.

9. Some twenty years later, how would you like to see and hear Aurelia embraced and portrayed by the young singer?

Answer: It’s only been since 2001 for me, so it hasn’t been that long. I liked to know that young singers are doing their homework on not only the character, but the music. I would hope that any singer would work to express the text and be totally committed to the role.
Maestro Julius Rudel (August 22, 2009)

1. Maestro Rudel, you are greatly respected, in addition to everything else, for the fact that you’ve prepared and conducted many premieres of new operas. How did Miss Havisham’s Fire, at the New York City Opera, compare in terms of your ultimate satisfaction experience?

Answer: [It was] lovely, wonderful stuff. It has a life of its own. Developed to be too long, one-third of the last scene of the opera should have been cut. The opera was riding high up until that point, and was appreciated by the audience, but [it] was eventually lost.

2. Do you think Beverly Sills’ inability to assume the leading role, as originally planned, was important in the critical reception of this opera?

Answer: No, it would not have made a difference. [The opera was] simply too long.

3. How closely did you work, interpretively, with the composer? Was he in attendance for most or all of the rehearsal period?

Answer: He was present for a lot of the rehearsals. He would come and share his opinions.

4. Did you feel the libretto was well constructed? Did you feel that cuts might have improved it?

Answer: Yes. At the orchestra dress rehearsal, I pleaded with Argento and Scrymgeour to make the cuts in the final scene. Argento was willing to do so, but Scrymgeour would not. I could feel the audience slipping away in the performance. If only we could have shortened and tightened things to keep the intensity.

5. Did you need to make any “adjustments” for the singers? Did they find the music very difficult?

Answer: No. The vocal writing was exemplary.

6. How do the instruments support the moods of Miss Havisham?

Answer: This is where Argento’s mastery comes in - a very skillful and varied orchestration.
7. In your experience, what did you like or dislike about the piece? How does it compare to others you have conducted?

   Answer: It was very skillfully done - colorful and pleasing. With the exception of the final scene, [it was a] well constructed and paced piece.

8. As you know, *Miss Havisham’s Fire* was revised not long ago by the Opera Company of St. Louis, with revisions from the original. Do you think the opera deserves more performances?

   Answer: Absolutely! Until the final scene, it was a wonderful piece.
Rita Shane (August 28, 2009)

1. What was your approach to portraying Aurelia Havisham?

   Answer: I read the book and watched the film “Great Expectations.” The libretto was different. A lot of the libretto was taken from Dickens’ work. I had a wonderful director Wesley Balk who enabled me to use my imagination.

2. What steps did you take in an effort to embody Aurelia mentally? What was your motivation?

   Answer: After reading the book and watching the movie, I had also done a similar female character driven mad by love - one in particular who was waiting for her lost love in a wedding dress.

3. Considering the enormous failure of Miss Havisham’s Fire, what drew you to the character?

   Answer: The music is brilliant. The libretto was difficult. If the work had been judiciously cut as we were rehearsing it, it would have been successful because the music is great.

4. How did you go about preparing yourself vocally and physically, stamina wise, considering it is such a tour de force?

   Answer: It is a major tour de force. I was a very strong singer technically. Miss Havisham was an enormous success for me. She was very right for me. I was blessed with a great teacher and great technique. I just did what I do - I did it!

5. What advice would you give to the young singer studying the role?

   Answer: I don’t think a young singer can sing Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night. The tessitura is difficult. The many mood changes, I mean she has real psychological problems. I won’t say how old the singer should be, but they must be a mature singer - a real pro, artist. That’s not a role for a young singer. It takes a real strong artist - one whose technique is solid. A lot of people can sing the notes, but that doesn’t mean they can sing the role.
6. In preparing and performing the role, did you face any obstacles? If so, what were they?

Answer: Walking out on stage for a world premier, we only had one orchestra dress rehearsal for *Miss Havisham’s Fire*. I wish we would have had more time to make necessary changes. *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night* can stand by itself.

7. How did you embrace this tragic character?

Answer: I felt it very much to the music. I really understood her. Reading the novel and watching the movie was a tremendous help. I didn’t have to do too much for *Miss Havisham’s Wedding Night*. I had already done the entire role and the epilogue doesn’t come until the end. I had to get used to the TV monitors and being totally alone on stage. Also, I had a great director who allowed me to be organic when it came to the staging. I was very kinesthetic - I never wrote down any staging, it just gelled inside me.

8. At each performance, what did you want to leave the audience with?

Answer: ‘She was really great!’ (laughter) ‘What a great performance!’ (laughter). It was very successful for me. Very right for my voice, my imagination, my heart, my soul, my musicality. It just fit - it all just worked. And, of course, all the hard work I had previously done on *Miss Havisham’s Fire*.

9. Some 20 years later, how would you like to see and hear Aurelia embraced and portrayed by the young singer.

Answer: As she is written by Dickens, that she does her homework and has a solid technique. One can’t worry about technique and be successful, free, in this role. I’d love to direct someone in this role. I’d like to show them how to be focused on something one moment and immediately change to the next, etc. I think I would really like to do that.

**ORCHESTRA**

Flute, Oboe, Clarinet in B♭, Bassoon;
Horn in F, Trumpet in B♭, Tuba;
Percussion (one player): Chimes, Tam-tam, Temple Blocks,
    Tambourine, Snare Drum, Bass Drum, Timpani, Cymbals,
    Suspended Cymbal, Triangle, Glockenspiel, Woodblock,
    Wind Chime;
Harp, Piano (also Celesta), Organ (also Harmonium);
Violins I & II, Viola, Cello, Bass (all soli)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Discography
