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Research article

The Piano as Therapeutic Participant in the Drama of *Pink Mouse*

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Abstract

Out of the multitude of imagery in *Pink Mouse*, both visual and aural, one feature is picked out for close examination: the piano. This instrument is seen at the very opening and it reappears at significant moments as the piece progresses. In an opera notable for its colourful animations, most of the appearances of the piano are presented in black and white and are filmed from the life. In this essay, encounters with the instrument are traced in the order in which they occur, and the suggestion is made that the pianist seen in the opening shot is in fact Maroussia as a slightly older woman, composing the opera and reliving the events from childhood within it. Following a hint offered in the opening placard, where she vows “if a miracle occurs and I have a lucky escape,” the suggestion is made that composition has something of the therapeutic quality of an ex-voto. Maroussia is seen putting together the musical imagery at her piano, attempting to make it her own, still suffering horribly from the memories of her traumatic ugliness, struggling also with *Pink Mouse* in the form of the dancer, who is her collaborator, fellow-rememberer and often awkward muse.

Keywords: *Pink Mouse*; Piano; Composer; Imagery; Memory

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Научная статья

Фортепиано как терапевтический участник драмы “Розовая мышь”

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Аннотация

Из множества образов в “Розовой мыши”, как зрительных, так и слуховых, для пристального изучения выбран один – фортепиано. Этот инструмент появляется в самом начале и виден вновь в значимые моменты по мере развития пьесы. В опере, известной своими красочной анимацией, большинство появлений фортепиано представлены в черно-белом цвете и сняты с натуры. В этом эссе встречи с инструментом прослеживаются в том порядке, в котором они происходят, и высказывается предположение, что пианистка, показанная в начальном кадре, на самом деле главная героиня Маруся, немного повзрослевшая, сочиняющая оперу и заново переживающая в ней события детства. Следуя намеку, данному во вступительной надписи, где она клянется “если произойдет чудо и мне повезет спастись”, высказывается предположение, что композиция имеет что-то вроде терапевтического качества ex-voto. Видно, как Маруся собирает воедино музыкальные образы за своим пианино, пытаясь сделать их своими, все еще ужасно страдая от воспоминаний о своем травматическом уродстве, борясь также с Розовой Мышкой в образе танцовщицы, которая является ее соратницей, единомышленницей по воспоминаниям и часто неловкой музой.

Ключевые слова: “Розовая мышь”; Фортепиано; Композитор; Образы; Память

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INTRODUCTION

One of the tasks of an opera composer is to come up with musical imagery capable of expressing the chosen subject matter. In the traditional form, music evokes scene, setting, character, emotion, balances of power, familiarity and strangeness – everything in the world, in fact (Conrad, 1977). At the conference about *Pink Mouse* in Lüneburg in 2024, I mentioned that when considering the nature of the different types of imagery in the opera, I had been particularly struck by the role of the piano. The opening scene, showing a female pianist, presents an image which recurs in varied form many times throughout the work (fig. 1). Sometimes the pianist is alone; sometimes she is accompanied by a dancer. In contrast to the rest of the opera, put together from a multitude of highly coloured animations, these moments are filmed from the life, in black and white. In subsequent discussion, it became clear that the instrument had a particular significance for the composer and so in what follows I offer some ideas on this topic. In essence, I interpret the woman encountered at the beginning of the work as the older Maroussia in the throes of composing the opera which we are about to hear, reliving her experiences in memory, in order to write them out and find some kind of repose. The autobiographical mode is found to involve re-encountering the traumatic and, as we discover, the process of composition is not easy. Frequently throughout the opera we return to the opening black-and white Maroussia at her piano, as if witnessing her struggles with the material she tries to rework.



Figure 1. The piano in *Pink mouse* (used with permission by the composer.
© Iraida Yusupova)



TIMING: 0.00

From the middle distance, we see a young woman sitting at the piano. It is a fine, modern grand, glistening, coffin black; its lid is fully open. Behind her are the trappings of decoration familiar from Hollywood films such as Charles Vidor's (1945) Chopin biopic *A song to Remember*: a candelabra on a console, a bunch of flowers in a glass vase, cut across and half hidden by the straight edge of the piano lid. This straight edge forms a strong accent, mirrored both by the stick supporting the lid, and by the straight edges of the body of the instrument. All these are at an oblique angle to the picture plane; they contrast with the vertical division of the wall behind, with its contrast of light and dark. The piano provides curves, too: the grand curves of its box are mirrored above in the curve of the lid. This play of shapes also has its Hollywood precursors, in such films as Lothar Mendes' (1937) *Moonlight Sonata*, starring Paderewski (Huckvale, 2022).

The woman herself sits upright at the instrument; her shape, with its combination of straight lines and curves, almost mirrors in inversion that of the candelabra behind. Her posture is significant: she does not slouch over the keyboard as some very great pianists do, nor does she gesticulate wildly as You Tube amateurs are inclined to do. She is poised at the instrument like a well-brought-up young lady of early 19th century novels, those amateur salon pianists, so derided at the time by E.T.A. Hoffmann, keen to exhibit their figures and show off to their admirers (Hoffmann & Charlton, 1989). Such young ladies are a staple of costume dramas of the Jane Austen type, but our woman is dressed in modern garb and, rather than playing for us, the viewers, seems to be lost in her own world.

Significant is the fact that at no point do we see her hands. Whereas videos of, for example, Yuja Wang or Peter Bence focus closely on their extraordinary finger dexterity (for Yuja Wang, see for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32OHSsk-BfE> in which the fingers are observed from multiple angles during a live concert; for Peter Bence, see for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS3LVVkJMms> in which the pianist plays for the camera, in an empty hall), here we are left to imagine the tactile relationship our pianist might be having with the keys, the ways in which she presses down on each note. This is presumably because – in Hollywood fashion – the actress herself is not playing the instrument. (I understand that the composer herself is the performer.) The room itself is rather resonant, with a “bathroom” acoustic, the sound captured most likely with a single microphone, in the way typical of amateur recordings.

The effect of this posture is to distance the woman from the actual music – there is a tentative quality to her playing, as if she was exploring the possibilities of the instrument and, perhaps, also testing her own powers of music-making.

But this is counteracted by her facial gestures, which register every inflection of the music, as if she was noting its expressive potential and personal significance. As she reaches the last chord, she registers her satisfaction with a smile and a frown. Has she been improvising, seemingly “plucking music from the air” (Kildea, 2018, p. 44)? Does she recognise *something of herself* in this theme (cf. Kramer, 2021, p. 124).



Then she turns away from the instrument. Why does she turn like this, away from both the instrument and the viewer? What does the music mean to her? Why should these phrases have special meaning, and what might that meaning be?

The music she plays has a melancholy, plangent quality. It has an improvisatory feel, dwelling on the same phrase before ending on a half-close. Her music at this point does not terminate, but leads into an orchestral version of the same material. The little scene has a prefatory quality, akin to a prelude. But the intimacy of the solo instrument contrasts with the fuller, richer sound of the orchestra; the contrast between the two takes us from the personal world of private memory and sensibility into a public, more fully worked-out world, even though the notes are the same.

As the film begins, we are carried into a world of nostalgia, but without being able to pinpoint exactly what the coordinates of that nostalgia are. Why should this kind of music appeal to the woman so much that she wishes to give herself up to it in the way she seems to?

TIMING: 0.22

With the arrival of the words, we are given hints. These come up on a placard; they are not sung or spoken. They suggest a very rich array of concepts: death, accident, escape, innocence, family, the possibility of redemption through creative activity. It is notable, though perhaps coincidental, that these are the themes of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, which also begins with a prologue featuring the piano. Britten's Prologue features an older man introducing and placing the "curious story" he has discovered in a faded manuscript, written by a young, unnamed governess "long ago." Whereas both operas share a theme – the corruption by adults of childish innocence – the use of the piano in their respective openings is quite different. In Britten's work, the piano's sonority separates it from the action which follows, as a frame separates a picture from the wall (Howard, 1969). The man does not play the instrument, which functions like a supporting harpsichord in a classical recitative, invisible in the pit. In *Pink Mouse*, by contrast, the woman expresses herself by playing the piano; we never see her away from it. (Indeed (to anticipate) the instrument itself will be found to be an active participant in the drama.) She, as the first character we see, is our story-teller, our narrator, the "I" of the placard. She is the mature Maroussia, looking back on events, hoping to salvage what she can from the experience of the child Maroussia.

The words on the placard set the origins of the opera in the past, and suggest the possibility of redemption from trauma through an act of creation.

Once upon a time, a cat's whisker from death,
I said to myself: If a miracle happens and I have a lucky escape
Pink Mouse and I shall...write and opera!

If this suggests that the opera to follow will be a kind of votive offering, it also has echoes of the Proustian notion of a work of art as a "means of discovering Lost Time" the materials for which are "stored up" inside the author (Proust, 1981, p. 935-936). There are memories, painful memories which the girl attempts to assuage with her therapeutic



piano playing, as Orpheus attempted to assuage the misery of loss with his lyre. As a gesture of containment, the motifs of her music contain the motifs of the traumatic music accompanying the scenes with her family that follow.

TIMING: 0.40

The girl listens attentively to the orchestral version of her music. The quizzical expressions on her face indicate uncertainty as she attempts to join in. But she fails to recapture it: her attempts are cut short; she does not manage to take control again. Instead, the motifs of her music are purloined by the music belonging to her father, which follows.

TIMING: 0.50

Before the father begins his habitual ranting, however, there is a very brief moment featuring a cartoon of the piano wriggling its feet – a little dance of frustration, perhaps, as painful memories take over. This is an extraordinary moment, despite its extreme brevity. For the legs of the piano, fixed firmly into its body, cannot move very far. They cannot dance, they can only wriggle in away simultaneously comic and absurd, like a child's tantrum. This is an image of multiple frustrations: the child's frustration at the behaviour of her parents, the adult's frustration when attempts to take control of memories are thwarted. Frustration has coordinates in all the dimensions of time. So, this one image contains the past and the present; it implies also the future, unless some way is found to break through or achieve closure. There is perhaps a hint of hope: the piano legs are at least moving; they might one day break free and dance freely. But at this moment in the opera, they wriggle furiously, punctuating an opening episode that is fraught with memory.

TIMING: 1.57

The pianist-girl appears again, framing the father's rant. (His hands, as he thrashes at the computer keyboard, are like a grotesque version of the woman's at the piano. (*Pink Mouse* is full of such ironic references.) She is seen as before from the side, but this time she is not actually playing the instrument, and the music is different – a rapid, repetitive, quasi-minimalist figuration. It is as if some other force has taken over, pounding out the notes. Then we see her from behind, as she appears to be exploring the low notes of the piano, banging them out loudly, just as low notes had been used in the guitar-saturated music in the father's rant. Whereas her opening music was expressive and melodic, here, taking over her father's musical imagery, she uses repeated notes and clusters in the low register, which instantly become subsumed and overwhelmed by the colossal, oceanic sound of the organ. As choir and electronics are superimposed, a crashing sound, sounding like the piano clusters electronically manipulated, bangs repeatedly. This is the imagery of drowning and of the girl's underwater travel. Like the piano music, but in a totally different realm of expression, this imagery is hers in the sense that she has taken



it over as part of her narrative, her operatic enactment. It represents the world seen through her experience and memory.

TIMING: 2.50

The woman defends herself from it all by putting her face in her hands: the keyboard has failed her. But the piano plays on, repeating her threatening bass notes, accompanying her as she sings “in short, that girl was me”.

TIMING: 3.01

In the scene immediately following, the repeated notes, taken up into a higher register, are taken up as the opening notes of the child’s naming song. The young Maroussia sits at the grand piano, but in a cartoon form, tapping out the tune with one finger and looking for approval to her mother. Getting no immediate response, she repeats the melody. Her legs, which cannot reach the ground, do a wriggle dance like that of the piano legs, noted above. Her naming song is played on a vibraphone-like instrument, imitating a toy piano, even though she seems to sit at a full-size domestic instrument. The voice of the grand piano is heard again as her father explains the name. The arpeggiated chords recall the recitative of operatic tradition. The girl repeats her song in a high voice and with a high accompaniment, only to find that it is taken over by the father in a low register, with a deep, resonant accompaniment. The weaker figure’s music is co-opted by the more powerful figure – a symbol of the intertwined forces characterising this relationship between the generations.

Naming is a gesture of assertion on the part of the child, of control on the part of the father. They duet on the name, their intertwining of the same motif being an image of the power struggle.

TIMING: 3.48

The mature Maroussia returns at her piano, though this time we do not see the instrument, as she recalls the bell-like nature of her name. The screen is divided into two: she is on the right, while on the left is imagery of doves ascending – imaginative liberation. But it quickly turns to falling or drowning as the doll-like child floats through the air, ever sinking. A hand tries to catch the child as she tumbles. It looks as if it could be our pianist stretching out, though we have not seen her hands thus far in the opera: their existence has been implied rather than glimpsed. In this interpretation, the mature Maroussia is hoping to catch – and save – the child Maroussia. Alternatively, the hands, which come from right and left, could be those of the parents.

This vignette ends with the child sitting on the father’s hand, before it slides out of sight at the bottom of the screen, leaving the woman singing at her piano (*Timing: 4.32*). She does not immediately play it, however – her narration (“My parents did not want to see New Year in Moscow”) is sung to a notably expressive line (notably expressive,



perhaps, as this is the cause of subsequent catastrophe), against the background of the repeated notes of the naming motif.

Then we have a return of the opening music – this time set to words. A lament, it becomes something akin to a song of protest: “My Dad was Mr Particular Opinion”. He is the embarrassing father who always has the last say – something excruciating for the child, hence the passion of this fragment of song. Hence also the richness of the piano accompaniment: gone are the bell-like sounds of infancy. Here instead is the full passionate utterance of the grand piano against the human voice.

TIMING: 5.15

It is interrupted by an all-seeing eye, haunting the woman, cutting across her song, threatening.

TV...radio...magazines... these splatter around the screen and the sound picture, to relentless, fragmentary, electronic music, before the piano returns, accompanying with rich, melodic figures, the father’s complaints about the loss of freedom.

This might imply that piano music is not the exclusive property, as it were, of the girl and of her search for liberation, and that it can be transferred to other characters when their emotional needs are similar. In general, however, this does not happen, so here it might be interpreted as part of Maroussia’s narrative technique. She projects the piano onto her father and his world. Meanwhile, the electronic onslaught continues, cascading around the words “out of Moscow – what a great idea”, negating the meaning of those words. A similar disjunction occurs at when the girl’s naming music, which earlier had suggested some kind of innocence, returns to the words “filled with resentment, we boarded the plane”. There is a surprising inappropriateness at such a moment, a jarring of music and text which demands interpretation, in the way of Brecht’s alienation technique.

A further juxtaposition occurs at 7.18, when the wriggling pianos – four of them this time – jive and shake, tormented by the electronic hubbub going on around them. These four multiply into eight at 7.25, as a background to the mental turmoil of the girl, as she covers her ears in an attempt to block out the uproar. This uproar, it immediately (7.35) becomes clear, is the sound of her parents’ party. For a moment, she wonders if it has stopped reverberating in her head, but she is disappointed. The sounds haunt her. Against them, the infant naming music returns (7.38), as a gesture of self-assertion through narration, of a child’s delight in Christmas: “instead of a Christmas tree, we decorated a young, slender cypress in our living room”.

If we can assume, from the beginning of the opera, that Marussia as a young woman is the overall narrator of the opera, in moments like these, she deputises, as it were, the role to her infant self. If this is the case, she sees herself in memory as a child, and allows the child to narrate in her own infantile voice, with the simple, unvarying melodic fragment against the rhythm of the chimes.

It is at this point that Pink Mouse appears in the opera, talking to the child. Immediately after, at 8.05, the mouse appears in a fully-grown, lithely balletic form, swirling around the Marussia at the piano. The talking mouse must be a projection of the child: it is a projection which haunts the adult in memory. So, there is at this moment a



polyphony of four characters, Maroussia as a child and as an adult, and Pink Mouse as a toy and as an adult. This quartet are our ostensible narrators, as they talk us through the events of the opera. But they do not form a unified group, they are projecting onto and questioning each other – setting up a dynamic in which the viewer is compelled to do the same to make sense of the multitude of events being presented.

There is a parallel here with another work treating the relationship between a child and the adults who surround her, Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*. Like Pink Mouse, this novella portrays a child grappling, armed with only infantile resources of understanding and language, the adult world into which she has been thrown. Readers seem to discover the world as the little girl does, through her consciousness, following the growth of her interpretation with all its byways and entanglements. But, as James himself notes in his 1909 preface to the work, "small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary." He therefore introduces a narratorial "commentary" to articulate what Maisie herself cannot. He continues:

Amusing therefore as it might at the first blush have seemed to restrict myself in this case to the terms as well as to the experience [of Maisie's], it became at once plain that such an attempt would fail. Maisie's terms accordingly play their part – since her simpler conclusions quite depend on them; but our own commentary constantly attends and amplifies. This it is that on occasion, doubtless, seems to represent us as going so "behind" the facts of her spectacle as to exaggerate the activity of her relation to them. The difference here is but of a shade: it is her relation, her activity of spirit, that determines all our own concern – we simply take advantage of these things better than she herself. Only, even though it is her interest that mainly makes matters interesting for us, we inevitably note this in figures that are not yet at her command and that are nevertheless required whenever those aspects about her and those parts of her experience that she understands darken off into others that she rather tormentedly misses (James, 1897/1966, p. 6).

This authorial voice hints at things, rather than explaining them; additionally, each of the adults is involved in a vortex of misunderstandings and misinformation. Nothing is stable. Nothing is straight-forwardly grasped.

The first question might be: is this dancer a friend or foe? She hems Marrisa in from both sides, almost trapping her. Her words "You are so beautiful, Maroussia Mendeleyeva" might be complimentary, but they are not necessarily those a young girl is comfortable with. If the dancer is a projection of Maroussia's, as I suggest, then Marrisa herself might be experiencing the discomfort of a voice-hearer (Parker & Schnackenberg, 2021). Like a voice-hearer, she sits rigid, at first closing her eyes defensively, but subsequently following the dancer with a sideways glance – an eerie movement, reminiscent of the threatening eye seen earlier at 5.15.

The electronic sounds take over once again at this point, leading into the parents' party and the eventual appearance of the Guitarist, with his set-piece song. Maroussia leaves the safety of the piano; her rigid pose at the keyboard is abandoned for a flexible, undulating motion of the whole body in her *pas-de deux* with the dancer. Once again,



there is a degree of discomfort here. Pink Mouse's voice is not concordant with the guitar; there is a collage of disparate elements which hint at the various conflicting energies and emotions at work. This aural impression is reinforced by the visual aspect – black and white, half in shadow, the dancers' forms with their digital haloes disappear into and emerge from the indistinct background.

Colour returns at 9.29 as a memory of a family discussion about crabs cuts in, before (9.55) the dancers return once again. Even while dancing, the adult Maroussia is haunted by the dooms of childhood. The subsequent section features the Guitarist's set piece song. The way for it is prepared, both musically, and emotionally. At 10.10 he is seen sitting by the grand piano – surely an invasion of the girl's territory. At 10.18, Pink Mouse, now sitting protectively in front of the child at the piano, articulates her own fear of the guitarist: "I don't like the hairy one". This is not accompanied by piano music, but by the generalised electronica of the threatening world.

The guitarist's song, salacious and predatory, is danced to in the opera by the adult Maroussia. She appears throughout, whereas the guitarist himself only appears occasionally in his cartoon form. Just before it started, the little girl was put to bed, so she cannot have danced to it as a child. But her mother did – and this is the essence of the threat. The adult Maroussia moves lasciviously to the music, pretending to sing it herself. She adopts the song and makes it hers, as it were, presumably as a gesture of containment, as a way of controlling the memory. Things that horrify one can easily become part of one. One takes possession as an act of control. But Maroussia is posturing as a rock-star: her gestures are out of character and do not carry conviction.

She dances against the background of a cubist picture featuring a guitar in fragments; later these fragments are let loose in a vortex of bits and pieces of the instrument swirling around like the sea in which the boats have sunk, or the coffee cup with the crab in it, both of which have featured already in the visual imagery of the opera.

At 13.51 there is a return to the adult Maroussia and the dancer at the piano. Maroussia is her previous semi-rigid self, watching anxiously the lascivious gestures of the dancer as she wafts her hands over shoulders, breasts and face, saying "Can't you see what the guitarist is doing? He wants to break up your family". This conjures up a memory of the guitarist visiting the little girl in her bed, music decorating the protective blanket, with Pink Mouse as sentinel. Momentarily, there is an image of the girl happy in bed, but this is straightway replaced – as if a slide were being changed – into a scene of horror, transgression, nightmare. This is an invasion of privacy which perhaps never happened in fact. Why should a musician enter a child's bedroom, even in this dysfunctional family? Is this perhaps an instance of the adult Maroussia reinterpreting or reinventing reality, of a mix-up of memory and truth? Or maybe he did visit her bedroom. Certainly, the guitarist's ugly twanging sends electric currents through Pink Mouse, who changes colour, and it also triggers the image of the wriggling pianos at 14.18. The guitarist's static is shown jarring against the noble shapes of three grand pianos, making them wriggle in dismay. As their forms are superimposed, it seems as if they are kicking one another.

There is a change of scene, to the parents' villa, the next morning. The sound of smashing plates sets the emotional temperature. At 18.08, we see the adult Maroussia at



the piano again, this time with her head cradled in her arms on the keyboard. She still looks out towards us, but is defending herself within her body and within the piano. She rouses herself, to plaintively narrate “I woke up early...” to the sound of cellos. But the sound of the smashing continues and the wriggling pianos return, turned upside down and on their sides.

At 19.20, the adult Maroussia witnesses the conversation between her infant self and the father. She sits there, in the middle, in black and white, her eyes twitching eerily, following the increasingly awkward interaction between her parents. At 20.06, we see her momentarily, as a now unattractive child, standing by her piano. The music increases in ugliness. At 20.32, her parents are fighting on the floor by the piano, as she looks on, half hidden behind the instrument. At 20.40, the adult Maroussia is seen clambering onto the music stand at the front of the instrument, as if hoping to enter into its protective space. She is no longer playing – the piano has become a defensive den or nest. Finally, after recognising that “this looks like the end of the family”, she does manage to squeeze herself in. As she does so, we are vouchsafed a glimpse of the music stacked on the piano, which includes manuscript paper. She is a composer; what we are viewing is the opera she is writing. At 21.11, we are briefly back in the cartoon world of the child standing solidly by her piano, threatened by the heads of her parents. Then, at 21.19, the adult Maroussia sits in the piano with her feet over the keyboard, hearing the adults ask what has happened to her face. At 21.48, we see her looking into the mirror, reenacting the trauma of childhood. She confronts a mask. Her music is fast and electronic at this moment; she has turned away from the piano, as – overcome – she sings of her dismay. Only at 24.35 does the piano return, as the child tells her mother of the guitarist’s visit to her bedroom, calling her to the seabed. Its role is now slightly different – it is in duet with the cello: other music is influencing it.

At 28.57, after the rap between the adult Maroussia and the dancer, which leads her away into more worldly ranges of expression, the timid Maroussia is seen once more at her piano, defensively clutching a rodent. The music is predominantly on the strings – an *obligato* melody that carries through this section of the opera. Maroussia herself is typing the narrative of her early life on a laptop keyboard, not on the keys of the piano itself, all the while fending off the dancer.

The interlude which follows points up the poignancy of the situation, featuring an expressive melody on the cello, with a distant piano accompaniment. The start of Act 1, on the yacht, does not feature the piano until 33.32, when full chords accompany in a recitative-like manner the Uncle introducing himself. As he comments on the attractiveness of the young girl, her earlier naming music is picked out on the piano in a varied form. He in some way takes hold of her music, and when the adult Maroussia is again seen with her head in her arms at the grand piano (34.38), it is with the oceanic gurgling sounds of the sea and the subsequent shipwreck overwhelming her. Increasingly also, the visual imagery is of the piano being overwhelmed by the waters (imagery reminiscent of that in the early part of Jane Campion’s film *The Piano* (1993), explored in Campion & Pullinger (1994). Clusters in the bass register of the piano are heard – not played by her, but illustrative of the crashing of wreckage into the deep (35.11): “For many of us there would never be a tomorrow night”.



At 38.30 the adult Maroussia is at her piano, her score laid out in front of her, apparently singing off it. She doesn't play the instrument – the music behind her is of a general, oceanic type, but she moves her arms from side to side in a flowing, wave-like motion, akin to that often used by singers when they engage physically with the lines they are singing. This image superimposes upon itself twice, and then three-times, forming abstract patterns, illustrative of the feeling of sailing in different directions all at once. (This use of multiple imagery and reflections also has precedents in Hollywood film, such as *Rhapsody in Blue* (Rapper, 1945)).

At 41.32, after the dialogue between the child and the boy on board the yacht, the adult Maroussia returns at the piano in black and white, alongside the cartoon image of her younger self on board the boat. This time she strokes the strings inside the piano, creating a metallic *glissando* effect which adds to the oceanic boom of the music. This is not the quasi art-music of the opening: this is the generalised sonic image of chaos. As before, images from various angles are superimposed upon each other, creating a vortex-like flux of straight lines and sharp accents illustrative of fear (“I’m scared when my parents quarrel!”) and also of sex (“They sleep naked! I saw it myself.”) These cluster sounds fade into the next section, aboard the yacht, which returns to the repetitive rap-like music. (This has a function akin to recitative in classical opera – large tracts of informative text are got through quickly, with the minimum of musical material.)

When the adult Maroussia at the piano returns at 42.46, it is to punctuate these memories with a cluster spread on the piano wires, as described above. This is clearly a comment on what has just been portrayed in the rap and the cartoon – and it is a comment of dismay. At 47.35, in the lull before the storm the adult Maroussia strokes the wires more gently, the sounds so produced combining with the sounds of underwater as the sea rises and the storm interlude begins. At 51.30, the low clusters in the piano are combined with vast chords in the organ, submerging all around them. We see the adult Maroussia again, clearly at her piano (though the instrument itself is not visible). Whereas before we saw her from the side, now we see her straight on, from a camera position within the piano, as it were, looking downwards in dismay at the keyboard, as she relives the experience of being on the sinking boat. Our narrator is vividly bound up with the action she remembers. Later the chorus adds a further sonority to the overwhelming oceanic soundscape, as the adult Maroussia, our narrator, sings in an ever more angular and emotional style. At 53.30, the top of her head is seemingly submerged by the tsunami, as if it is she, rather than the boat, that is floundering. Her voice changes (54.06), and the accompaniment is momentarily reduced to the crashing clusters on the piano, before the music and the visual imagery take over and portray the development of the storm.

At 52.50, the wriggling pianos return briefly, before giving way to Pink Mouse in both her cartoon and dancer incarnations. The music here is the *Lacrymosa* from the Requiem mass: the traditional musical imagery of death. There is no piano sound, nor piano playing, as the adult Maroussia relives her impressions of the agony of that day, and of her guilt at surviving (“How shall I go on living?”). As a suffering composer, she has delegated expression of that guilt to tradition:



*Lacrimosa dies illa
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus.
Huic ergo parce, Deus:
Pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem. Amen.*

Full of tears will be that day
When from the ashes shall arise
The guilty man to be judged;
Therefore spare him, O God,
Merciful Lord Jesus,
Grant them eternal rest. Amen.

(Text from Latin Mass Funeral, n. d. <https://www.latinmassfuneral.com/requiem-mass/>).

At the opening of Act 2, *The Sea Bottom*, at 1.00.48, our narrator is revealed as the composer, studying her score, hearing the music and conducting the choir. At the sound of the organ, she cues the chorus, then joining in with her song while playing harp-like glissandi on the strings of the piano as if she were spinning. This is a significant moment in the opera. At the very beginning, she said “I shall write... What has come of this? An opera!” But this is the first time that we have seen her studying her score and conducting it. The implication – hinted at throughout – is that all the music in the opera is hers, not just the piano music.

It was suggested above that the piano was a refuge for the girl, having a therapeutic function (cf. Monaco, 2009, p.35). Composers often work out their ideas at the piano; their scores are notated on manuscript paper which comes in ring binders. But if she wishes to cure herself of the terrors of memory by writing them out, they need to be confronted and made apparent both to her and to the audience who she wishes to share and understand her experiences. This involves the invention of imagery suitable for each and every moment, each and every character, each and every action of the work. Much of this imagery is shared. Every work assumes an array of culture, and the sounds and sights of *Pink Mouse* are easily accessible to a contemporary audience, ranging from the lyrical piano music for inward thoughts, through the offensiveness of the guitarist’s pop, to the overwhelming vastness of the choral music superimposed over the organ. But at this moment in the piece we understand that all this imagery comes out of the composer’s mind – that means out of the mind of the adult Maroussia. She spins the eave and weft of the music. At 1.0.25 the piano, seen from above, looks like a harp; she strokes the strings accompanying the choir till it reaches a cadence, which she conducts. Then there is a superimposition in which she both stands up to sing, gesturing like an opera singer, whilst in another embodiment, her arms and hands are seen stroking the strings. The dancer meanwhile is present.

This is one of the most splendid moments in the opera. “We can understand the language of the bottom. We are at the Bottom. I can see nothing terrible in that.” The girl gives full voice to the splendid melody she has found to express these words, and the harmony has a richness which supports the melody in an opulent fashion. This is not the music of reticence or of fear: she lets go, and the music soars.

Naturally, in this opera of juxtaposition and irony, this moment is brutally interrupted by the non- music of the Guardian of the Bottom, with its speeded-up discourse. Functionaries do not get fine music in most operas, and when at 1.05.15 the Director’s aria is salon music with a honky-tonk piano, one is not surprised. The adult



Maroussia is absent from the scene with the Holy Goose, but returns at 1.09.35 along with the dancer. They interrupt the cartoon pageant, questioning the narrative “Why the young prince? Where is the senior one? He’s in disgrace...”

Maroussia asks the questions; Pink Mouse, in the guise of the dancer, offers the explanations – they are, after all writing the opera together, as we were told at the very beginning. Why this dance at this moment? Perhaps just two collaborators letting off steam and having a bit of fun? Their dance lasts till 1.11.08: not much more than a minute and a half, but such is the speed of events in this opera, that it seems much longer. The following section evokes the musical world of Monteverdi (composer of *Orfeo*), folk song and religious song, until 1.16.23, when the adult Maroussia, her image superimposed four times, interrupts with low clusters and a spread glissando across her piano strings. These crash back and forth as the Queen announces that she has failed to give the girl back her beautiful face. At 1.17.04, we have to imagine the adult Maroussia at her piano, because although we hear her voice, we do not see her. She sings an operatic scena, accompanying herself on the piano with reassuring arpeggios: “Am I really going to remain ugly?...Not to worry...It will all be fine.” This is another of the great lyrical moments of the opera, a moment of hope, as she rises to a top Ab over a climactic Db major chord, before continuing further though ever further keys. Such a moment cannot last long: a tam-tam stroke at 1.18.35 puts a stop to it.

The piano is largely silent until the love duet at 1.34.38, when it combines with the cello in a romantic-style set piece, with the boy admiring the girl who is more concerned about her parents than with him. At 1.35.45 we see the black and white adult Maroussia lying flat on the floor, fussed over by the dancer; the piano comes to the fore again as they sing the duet melody as a melisma. The dancer enacts the boy’s desire, pulling up the girl’s skirt, only to be roundly admonished: “hands off!!!”.

Guitars and crude music characterise the next scene with the father and the prankster clown.

But at 1.39.25, we return to the adult Maroussia typing at her laptop on the piano, distracted by the dancer who repeatedly tries to interfere. Collaboration can be frustrating at times. Presumably she is creating the duet of high sopranos Reggy and Gina, which follows. At 1.46.57, she is back playing the piano, laden with jewels, reading the music off the score, singing “I had no idea how hard it is to be a real princess...I was [Dad’s] toy princess: now I’m a real one”. This is the first time in the opera that we find Maroussia actually using a score in this way, performing what she has written. Before long, her song becomes less lyrical – being a princess seems not to be effortless – and she switches to a new kind of music, in which she sings a jagged line, all the while picking out the tune, arms akimbo, with staccato notes in the piano. She does not refer to the sheet music as she spins the narrative of the creatures queuing up to make an appointment with her; it is as if this was a spontaneous improvisation. The music becomes more expressionist as the theme of denunciations is introduced; Maroussia’s gestures become more anguished and her facial expressions decidedly ugly. What she narrates is bad stuff.

At one moment (1.50.12) she picks up the little doll of pink mouse which has been lying on the piano, and then throws it down. This section of her scena ends with a vicious glissando swiping the keyboard from top to bottom, a gesture of finality. But just a



moment later, the music has changed. At 1.50.31, she returns to her sheet music to sing a romantic song. This begins as music which could work for a love song – and yet it refers to the adult world which requires double standards and is generally disgusting. As she gets further into the performance, her need for release breaks open the line of the song: as she rips off her necklaces, the song takes a battering. Twice more she throws off the trapping of a princess; asking “why do anything at all?”. This is a set-piece aria, and it leaves her at 1.53.22 apparently exhausted, contemplating what she has just been through and perhaps listening to the words following: “Eternity has a bad effect on people.”

That’s the last we see of the adult Maroussia for a while. The piano returns at 2.06.15 in the scene between the girl and her father as an *obbligato*, binding the scene together, and the melody is taken up by the guitar at 2.09.06, but we do not see the instrument being performed. Only at 2.20.07, after many other adventures, does the black and white image of Maroussia trying to control the dancer return. The piano reprises the repeated notes originally heard when the child was introduced at the opening of the opera, but quickly reprises the aria with cello *obbligato* heard earlier during the interlude between the Prologue and Act 1.

But it is the guitar that from 2.21.30 onwards that carries this opera towards its end. “You know he is a guitarist?” “What do I care...I love him more than anyone else in the world.” And it is a new sound altogether – organ plus marimba – which accompanies the disembodied childish voice in the work’s lovely coda.

CONCLUSION

This essay has traced each and every one of Maroussia’s black and white appearances, in order. Description of this kind seems necessary when a work is relatively unknown. Maroussia is seen as the composer of the opera, putting together the musical imagery at her piano, attempting to make it her own, still suffering horribly from the memories of her traumatic ugliness, struggling with the Pink Mouse in the form of the dancer, who is her collaborator, fellow-rememberer and often awkward muse.

We have one last sight of the adult Maroussia at 2.21.30, as the credits begin. She is contemplative, as if joining us, the audience, in taking stock of all that she has made to happen during the previous two-and-a-half hours.

If this is so, Maroussia will view herself sitting at the piano. She will consider her relationship with the instrument, noting the visual side of herself at the keyboard, her posture, her hand- and head- gestures and ask, along with us: Why do you want to play it? What’s in it for you as the performer? Will she perhaps see the instrument as an extension of her body and her imagination, a repository of her longings, creative aspirations, her soul? As a performer, one does not always know how one looks while playing one’s instrument. But, having completed the opera, she might be justified in feeling a sense of mastery and a sense of potential. As she said at the beginning: miracles might happen.

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