Operatic Arias Involving Ethical Dilemmas

By Mervin H. Needell, M.D., M.A.

Merv Needell loved ethics and he loved the opera. At my encouragement, in 2002, he began this list of ethical issues arising in the great operas. They are notes for a larger project, never realized. It is reproduced here, very lightly edited, as a tribute.

– Ken Goodman

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Don Giovanni

A fine exemplar of ethics in the opera, with many juicy issues, but Elvira’s aria in the 3rd act, just before the banquet scene, where she recites the Don’s many transgressions, gets my vote.

Elektra

Mother, Klytemnestra, had murdered her husband and married another man. Daughter Elektra swears murderous revenge on both. Sister Crysothemus declines to help her sister out of cowardice or unwillingness to conspire to kill. Exiled brother arrives unannounced and does the job with Elektra’s help. Lots of rich ethical and moral judgments.

Ernani

In return for amnesty, Ernani swears to kill himself any time Silva, his vanquisher, demands. He goes free, and later plans to marry a woman loved by his debtor. On the wedding day, the debtor demands his debt. In making good his promise, and against the entreaties of his bride-to-be, Ernani stabs himself.

Eugene Onegin

In the 3rd act, would-be lover, Onegin, offers a married woman, Tatyana, the love she doesn’t have in marriage if she would run away with him.

Faust

Old Professor Dr. Faustus wants his youth back again. Mephistopheles offers his services to restore the doctor’s youth during his remaining life in this finite world, but of course wants Dr. Faustus’ soul in return, to enslave him in the eternal world. One of the consequences of dealing with the devil is the doing of vile harm to others, such as ruining the life of the innocent virgin Marguerite and killing her heroic brother, Valentine. Dr. Faustus has to choose.

Die Frau ohne Schatten

Empress desperately wants to bear a child, but, being a deity, she has no shadow and thus cannot conceive. She persuades a poverty-stricken common woman, Dyer’s wife, who also wants to bear children, to trade her shadow for riches.
Rigoletto

In the 3rd act, the assassin, Sparafucile, agonizes over the prospect of betraying a client’s trust by taking his fee but killing the wrong man.

Der Rosenkavalier

The Marschallin, in her late 30’s, locked into a convenient but loveless marriage to the aged Field Marshal, has a young lover, Octavian. Eventually, Octavian becomes attracted to a maiden, Sophie, his own age. But he is loyal to the Marschallin, and will not pursue Sophie without leave from the Marschallin. She agonizes over the prospect of losing Octavian, even though she knows she should give him up.

Tosca

In the 2nd act, Tosca deals with the brutal police chief, Scarpia, to release her lover from prison in exchange for her sexual favors, and then she murders Scarpia and escapes with the writ of release that Scarpia had drawn up in good faith.

Il Trovatore

First act: The witch, Azucena, entrusted to babysit a prince, throws him in the fire and represents her own child as prince.

Die Walküre

Act 2: Goddess Brunnhilde wants to carry out the wishes of her father, god Wotan, by sparing Siegmund (a favored but illegitimate son) in a duel with the rapist, Hunding. But Wotan’s wife, Fricka, objects because Siegmund has stolen away and mated with Hunding’s wife, Sieglinde, who also happens to be Siegmund’s twin sister. Wotan tells Brunnhilde to desist and let Siegmund die. Justifying her behavior by believing she is fulfilling Wotan’s true will, not his ostensible will (which is Fricka’s will), she disobeys her father’s order and tries to save Siegmund. Wotan goes ballistic.

Werther

In the 1st act, eligible young lady, Charlotte, wants to marry an attractive suitor, Werther, but gave a deathbed promise to her mother that she would marry her mother’s choice, Albert, whom she doesn’t love. (Elaine [Dr. Elaine Needell, Merv’s wife] talking now – Mother’s choice was far better for her.)