KATE SOPER

Here Be Sirens

Opera in One Act

Things themselves become so burdened with attributes, signs, allu-
sions, that they finally lose their own form. Meaning is no longer
read in an immediate perception, the figure no longer speaks for itself;
between the knowledge which animates it and the form into which
it is transposed, a gap widens. It is free for the dream.

—Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the im-
pression we exist?

—Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot

ROLES

PEITHO Soprano. A Pre-Raphaelite, early Romantic-era-type Siren. Actually in love
with every sailor who washes up. Peitho is the least evolved of the three Sirens and is
initially innocent of the fact that being a mythological figure is incompatible with being
alive. Her transformation over the course of the play leads her to adopt Polyxo’s quest.

PHAINO Soprano. Phaino embodies both the earliest recorded version of the Siren arche-
type (the deadly birdwoman) and the final stage in Siren evolution: complete sublimation
into mythological identity, past which there is no personal desire or possibility of change.
If she has inner thoughts or feelings, they are totally impenetrable.

POLYXO Soprano. Polyxo doesn’t represent an existing Siren archetype but is in a
nightmarishly self-aware stage between Peitho and Phaino. Trying to get off the god-
damned island; trying not to understand how impossible this is. By the end of the play
she has completed her evolution to join Phaino in apotheosization.

INSTRUMENTATION

Three sopranos and grand piano (three performers total). The following additional items
are required for the piano part: six rocks (two per performer); glass slides (one per per-
former; rocks may be substituted); a thin piece of sheet metal; one large timpani mallet;
four heavily rosined long pieces of fishing wire. See Appendix A: Performance Notes for specific instructions on piano techniques by number.

N.B.: Twenty-two times during the opera, an air horn is played to signal the approach and arrival of a ship. A different “signaling” instrument may be substituted if an air horn small enough to be played indoors cannot be found (or if so desired, for staging reasons), for example: a cast iron dinner bell; a police whistle; a prerecorded sound effect; etc.

**SETTING**

An island somewhere around the Mediterranean. A washed-out, bright gray day.

**TIME**

The past and future.
The prearchaic Greek past and the postapocalyptic U.S. future.

**SCENE 2: POLYXO EXPLAINS IT ALL/SECOND SHIP**

In a blackout, we hear the SIRENS before we see them: PHAINO playing sparse, abstract sounds on the piano; PEITHO singing or humming, lazily and prettily; POLYXO scribbling furiously on a chalkboard.

Sounds continue as lights come back up to gray-white, revealing: PHAINO at piano, PEITHO singing to an invisible sailor corpse, POLYXO at the chalkboard.

Some time passes this way.

Eventually, POLYXO stops and turns to the audience, to whom she delivers all dialogue in this scene.

POLYXO
This is how it happens.

End noises from PHAINO and PEITHO.

POLYXO
First, we feel it coming.

PHAINO begins to rhythmically stomp on the piano pedal.
POLYXO

Oars beating the water, a throbbing in the sand . . .

*PHAINO rhythmically strums highest piano strings with her fingers, pedal depressed*

POLYXO

. . . and the sails fluttering, right before the wind gets sucked out of them. And then—

*PHAINO strums the lowest strings with damper down, then lifts damper extremely slowly to produce high partials.*

POLYXO

— it heaves into view. You can see the white water melting away around it like fog on a mirror: that means they’ve stopped rowing. Because they can sense us too: all of a sudden the sea is glass, and the sky is glass, and the light is a prism whose every ray is focused exactly *(her hands close in to make a bullhorn around her mouth)*—here!

*Simultaneous with “here,” PHAINO plucks Eb5 on the piano and PEITHO begins to quietly sustain this pitch on “Ah.”*

POLYXO

And they don’t know it— but it’s already over. Because they’re in earshot. And that’s when we start in with the singing.

*PEITHO begins Troubadour Song, singing simultaneously with POLYXO’s speech.*

POLYXO

*(Grandly)* What do we sing? *(Less grandly)* Well, whatever you want to hear, generally: to be honest the content is fairly irrelevant.

*POLYXO goes to the chalkboard and picks up a book and the chalk. Over the course of POLYXO’s speech, PEITHO’s singing gains prominence and becomes more audience-directed.*

POLYXO

There are two basic components to the voice. “Logos” *(writes “logos” on board)* is the meaning, is what you’re actually saying—the production of logos being,
according to Aristotle, the mark of reason, the essential feature of intelligence. Whereas “phonos” (writes “phonos” on the board) is the sound of the voice.

There is a particularly striking vocal flourish from PEITHO, to POLYXO’s visible irritation.

POLYXO

The mere sound. The medium through which logos travels. That blankness which awaits imprintation, which resounds without signification.

With no break in PEITHO’s song, PHAINO joins her in counterpoint without looking up or moving from the piano. They sing underneath POLYXO’s speech, which grows louder and more defensive as she tries to hang on to the audience’s attention over the increasingly foregrounded singing.

POLYXO

(Speaking over PHAINO and PEITHO’s singing) Phonos is hot air through the windpipes, mucous membranes flapping around . . . an insignificant remnant, an obscene excess. (Gets another book and reads) “Flatus vocis,” as described by Roscellinus of Compiègne, meaning: the sound of the word is not the thing that the word refers to. (Another book) A treacherous distraction, according to Augustine:
the melody which carries the words is that which paralyzes the mind with sensuousness, “sed delecatio carnis meae, cui mentem enervandam non oportet dari, saepe me fallit...”

Really irritated, POLYXO comes forward, definitively interrupting the music.

POLYXO

I mean, we could sing from the goddamn phonebook and you’d doggy paddle through a flaming oil slick to get a better listen!

Beat. PHAINO begins Phonebook Aria. Visible exasperation from POLYXO once she realizes what is happening: her sisters are indeed singing from the phonebook.
Despite herself, POLYXO begins to become absorbed in the singing.
POLYXO moves toward her sisters, irresistibly compelled to join in.

POLYXO snaps out of it and lurches towards the audience.

POLYXO

DON’T LISTEN!! It’s a trap!

She clamps her hands over her ears and squeezes her eyes shut, singing in a childish off-key voice.

POLYXO (singing)

La la la la la la la! (etc.)

After a few seconds of this, she trails off.

POLYXO

(Opens eyes: hands still over ears.) I can’t block out my own voice.

POLYXO holds her hands over her ears and begins to sing.
(With intensity) Do you know how it feels to be the insensate apparatus of a homicidal mythological order? This sound crawls up from the depths of you, aims itself at the bones inside your skull, oozes out through the pores of your face and the sockets of your eyes and gushes from your mouth like a jet, this sound that doesn’t come from you and doesn’t belong to you but is taking you, as a surrogate for a ritual whose only purpose is to...

POLYXO trails off as PEITHO begins a reprise of Troubadour Song.

POLYXO’s affect changes from vexed to seductive as she lip-synchs to PEITHO’s voice. This ventriloquism is seamlessly passed on to PHAINO, who lip-synchs as POLYXO sings, and then to PEITHO, who lip-synchs as PHAINO sings. In each instance, singer and syncher should preserve the illusion that the lip-syncher is singing.
POLYXO

(Wistful) God, I used to love that feeling . . .

PHAINO sounds air horn once. This is the signal that a ship is approaching. The SIRENS snap into business mode, readying themselves, perhaps with calisthenics or snatches of vocal warm-up.

POLYXO

There’s not much time. They’re almost here now. So we dig something out of our virtually inexhaustible repertoire . . . (to SIRENS: cueing an upbeat) “And . . .”

On cue, the SIRENS each burst into a snatch of song (three different songs, performer’s choice). After a brief moment, POLYXO cuts them off abruptly.

POLYXO

. . . and you know what happens next, right? They crash on the rocks and they all die. Eight out of eight sailors, bewitched by the Siren voices, drown before reaching shore.

PHAINO sounds air horn twice. This is the signal that a ship has arrived.
Naufragium

Text by Erasmus

**Brutal and terrifying:** $f = 108$

Vamp while SIRENS move to position around pno.

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**Polyxo**

*Shouting into strings:* Desii esse dominus navis meae; vicere venti!
(*I am no longer ruler of my ship; the winds are victorious!*)

Player 1: Hit thin metal square on low strings with timpani mallet for a clanging thud (place metal sheet before first downbeat)

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**Piano**

$ff$

$\text{Ped. sempre}$ (pedal played by any performer)

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**Polyxo**

*(Conspiratorially)* Resist! RELEASE ME!!

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**Pno.**

*Shouting into strings:* Reliquum est, ut spern nostram collocemus in Deo!
(*All that remains is to put our hopes in God!*)

Player 2: play treble chords

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**Ps.**

*Shouting into strings:* …et quisque se paret ad extremam!
(*...and to prepare for the end!*)
"tongue trill" (rapidly flutter tongue at front of mouth)

Player 1: Remove metal square and use to scrape low strings (x noteheads)
Continue to beat low strings with timpani mallet (square noteheads)

Players 2 & 3: Scrape glass slides or rocks across metal piano bolts

Player 1: Tremolo timp. mallet on low strings
Scrape metal on strings as indicated
Drowning sailors reach shore.

Chaos and violence.

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)