Re-visioning a Biblical Story through Libretto and Music: Debora e Jaele by Ildebrando Pizzetti

Helen Leneman

Rome, Italy

Abstract

Both music and librettos are a form of midrash (creative re-telling), because they re-tell all or part of a story by creating a particular mood or feeling musically. The re-telling is in both the altered text and in the language of music. Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1968) wrote both the libretto and music of Debora e Jaele from 1917-1921. In this libretto, motivations are completely reversed. Characters perceived in the biblical account as “good” and “bad” seem to be switched. Our previous presumptions about the story and its characters are challenged: the belief that Sisera is evil and powerful, and has no positive qualities; that Deborah and Jael never met; and that Jael and Sisera had had no prior encounters. The libretto and the music succeed in depicting three-dimensional characters with conflicting motives and feelings. The addition of dimensions to the characters amplifies the moral ambiguities found in the original narrative. Sisera becomes a dominant and central character of this opera. Pizzetti is offering a counter-reading, in which the “villain” becomes a kind of hero and the listener can understand why Jael succumbs to his charms. A recurrent theme in this work is the testing of and by God. The viewpoints of Jael and Deborah depict what Pizzetti described as “human” justice (Jael) and “divine” justice (Deborah). An encounter with this opera will alter forever our reading of this biblical story.

Keywords

Deborah, Jael, Sisera, judges, libretto, opera, Kenite, midrash

In this article, I will discuss an interesting and little-known twentieth century Italian opera, Debora e Jaele by Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880–1968).¹ The discussion will focus on gap-filling in both the libretto and

¹ Many operas and oratorios based on this story have been written since the seventeenth century. The largest number, including the oratorio Deborah by Georg Frederic
music and will follow a brief literary analysis of Judges 4-5. I selected this particular opera for analysis because of the provocative nature of the drama and its unique musical values.

I treat both music and librettos (the script based on the original story, to which the music is set) as midrash—creative re-telling—because they re-tell all or part of the story by creating a particular mood or feeling musically. The re-telling is in both the altered text and in the language of music. The musical techniques that are used to breathe life into the text may be understood on a different level by the musician than the biblical scholar, but our emotional response to the music will help us to read between the lines and find new and interesting possibilities there. (Unfortunately, the readers of this article can only imagine what this music sounds like based on my technical analyses and a few reproduced measures of the score.)

Pizzetti wrote both the libretto and music from 1917–1921. It is not very common for composers to write their own librettos, but because Pizzetti had started his career as a dramatist, before studying music, it was natural for him. In this libretto, motivations are completely reversed. Characters perceived in the biblical account as “good” and “bad” seem to be switched.

**The Biblical Account**

The most striking element in this biblical story is the reversal of expectation. A warrior approaches a woman’s tent; the reader response is fear and dread that a woman is about to be violated. But in this instance, the woman is not the victim. Later writers and librettists were not comfortable with this reversal, on some level. They also felt a need to fill the gap in terms of any previous relationship between Jael and Deborah and Sisera.

The story is under-narrated, for surprise effect. The reader is never given Jael’s point of view. The numerous narrative gaps relate mostly to

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Handel, date to the eighteenth century. Giocondo Fino’s *Debora* (1913) pre-dated the Pizzetti by about 10 years. Fino’s libretto alters the original narrative more than Pizzetti’s does. Interesting similarities between the two librettos are Jael acting as Deborah’s spy, and a Jael–Sisera love interest.