“Her throat, full of aching, grieving beauty”
Reflections on Voice in the Operatic Adaptations
of _The Great Gatsby_ and _Sophie’s Choice_

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F. Scott Fitzgerald’s _The Great Gatsby_ and William Styron’s _Sophie’s Choice_ are novels distinctive for their particular sound worlds: _The Great Gatsby_ is celebrated as brilliantly evoking the Jazz Age, while _Sophie’s Choice_ has a ‘soundtrack’ of classical music running throughout. How does a composer find his own ‘voice’ when faced with adapting these essentially ‘musical’ works into opera? A composer’s voice could be regarded as residing in the musical web in which the operatic characters exist, but the use of phenom-enal music is employed in highly sophisticated ways in both John Harbison’s _The Great Gatsby_, and Nicholas Maw’s _Sophie’s Choice_. The ‘silent’ language of a novel to which as readers we ‘give voice’ in our heads, is accorded materiality in the physical presence and particularly the vocal utterances of characters on stage as well as through the orchestral commentary. On a purely physical level, composers attempting to convey the sound of the voices of the female protagonists of these two novels would at the very least be expected to match the ‘musicality’ of their novelistic counterparts. In Fitzgerald’s novel, Daisy’s voice is fetishized by the narrator, Nick, while the changing register of Sophie’s voice in Styron’s work is described in great detail by the narrator, Stingo. However, the narratorial voice of the fiction is itself problematised in any operatic adaptation. Both these novels have participating, first-person narrators who become flesh-and-blood characters in the operatic versions. Narrators in opera pose particular challenges in their representation, as do the fluctuating modes of narration in both these novels, and both operatic narrators are deployed in significantly different ways. These are some of the issues relating to ‘voice’ in a variety of manifestations addressed in this paper through an examination of both these recent operatic adaptations.

In adapting a literary work for the lyric stage characters are literally given voice, not to mention flesh and blood. The ‘silent’ language of a novel, both in terms of the presentation of the narrative as well as actual dialogue – the black and white marks on a page to which we as readers ‘give voice’ in our heads – is accorded materiality in the physical presence and particularly the vocal utter-
ances of characters on stage as well as through the pervasive orchestral commentary. The concept of voice in opera is multifaceted, but in this chapter I consider it from the perspective of the strategies employed in translating the particular vocal qualities of the central protagonists of the novels, *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald), and *Sophie’s Choice* (William Styron), into their operatic counterparts. The main focus will be on the two principal female characters, Daisy and Sophie respectively, supplemented by consideration of the other major characters.

The novel is not an aural genre and it is obvious that it is only in some form of adaptation that the words on the page are given actual sonorous presence. A novel adapted for the stage will literally be embodied by the actors who bring not only their physical attributes but a distinctive vocal contribution as well. In film adaptation there is the pervasive impression of an immediate and almost visceral physical presence despite the actual ‘absence’ of the sonorous body. However, opera is the genre wherein the adapted novel is perhaps given the most striking physical and, most importantly, aural existence.

Nevertheless, the novel has long attempted to convey the materiality of character and situation, and this is certainly true of the two novels under discussion, where music and sound are omnipresent and serve a wide variety of purposes. In *The Great Gatsby*, music permeates the fabric of the novel which itself has come to symbolize ‘the Jazz Age’, and the sound of Daisy’s voice in particular is a central trope that is interrogated throughout. Similarly, the description of a wide variety of music suffuses *Sophie’s Choice* and provides a constant soundtrack to the novel’s events both tragic and comic. While perhaps not quite as central as Daisy’s voice in Fitzgerald’s novel, Sophie’s voice assumes a wide range of registers throughout Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* and its description is of comparable sig-

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1 The increasing popularity of the audio book is surely changing the way we experience the genre.

2 In addition to the voice of Daisy, which will be discussed in detail, the voice of Nick Carraway as narrator “is so present that one sometimes fails to notice it at all, registering instead a kind of white noise, a background from which the many other sounds in the novel emerge” (Moreland 2002: 29). Ruth Prigozy notes the importance to Fitzgerald of contemporary popular music, which was “not simply part of the contemporary cultural scene; it was symbol, symptom, and sum of an era; it was past, present, and future playing endless, elusive refrains” (1976: 53).

3 Frederik N. Smith argues that the novel “depends heavily on the aural both in calling up a world outside the novel and in bearing much of the weight of its meaning” in which Styron develops an “exceptionally subtle contest between music and noise” (2003: 211).