

KATE SOPER

Here Be Sirens

Opera in One Act

Things themselves become so burdened with attributes, signs, allusions, 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 impression 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 archetype (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 performer; 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,

Troubadour Song (Part I)

Raimbaut de Vaquires

Sing underneath POLYXO's speech: ornament ad lib.

Peitho

Et Oy _____ Deu, Oy Deu, d'a - - mor! Ad hor - a - m don - a
And. oh. _____ god, oh god, love! _____ Sometimes _____ grows.

Peitho

joi _____ et ad ho - ra do - lor. Al - tas un - das
joy, _____ and _____ sometimes. sorrow. _____ Tall _____ waves _____

Peitho

que ve - nez. suz la mar que fay lo vent cay e lay de - me
that _____ come _____ over the sea, that make the winds _____ here and _____ there. blow, _____

Peitho

nar, De mun a - mic sa - bez no - vas com - tar,
_____ of _____ my _____ love _____ have _____ you _____ news? _____

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 Roscelinus 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:

Troubadour Song: Part II

Raimbaut de Vaquires/Tibullus

Peitho
Qui lay pas set no lo vie re tor nar!
He who sailed o'er you, I don't see his returning!

Phaino
Ne sci o quid fur ti vus a mor par
Something unknown that furtive love prepares

Peitho
Et Oy Deu, Oy Deu, d'a mor!

Phaino
- at. Ut er re que so dum li cit, in li qui
you. Enjoy it if you can, in calm water

Peitho
Ad hor a m don a joi et ad ho ra do lor.

Phaino
- da nat ti bi - - ter a - qua.
the boat sails towards you!

the melody which carries the words is that which paralyzes the mind with sensuousness, “*sed delectatio 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.

Phonebook Aria

♩=58 *mp*

Peitho
A - chi - lles three four five Mount Pe - li - on, Thess - a - ly,

Phaino
mp
A - chi - lles three four five Mount Pe - li - on, Thess - a - ly,

Piano
♩=58 *mp*
Loungy, freely: arpeggiate chords ad lib.

Despite herself, POLYXO begins to become absorbed in the singing.

mp *Gradually increasing in intensity*

Peitho
nine nine four one two four eight; A - do - nis, seven oh two Mount O -

Phaino
mp *Gradually increasing in intensity*
nine nine four one two four eight; A - don - is, sev-en oh two Mount O -

Pno.
mp
Continue to arpeggiate chords at will

mf *mp* *mp*

Peitho
lym - - pus, num - ber twelve, five five five oh seven oh six, ex - ten - sion

Phaino
mf *mp*
lym - pus num - ber twelve, five five five oh seven oh six, ex - ten - sion

Pno.
mp

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! (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.

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 60$ **Accel. al fine**

Hands over ears non vib. hands off vib. hands on non vib. off vib. on non vib. off vib. on non vib. off vib. *sfz*

Polyxo
Ah

Peitho
vib. sempre *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

Phaino
vib. sempre *f* *p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

Ah ah ah ah

POLYXO

(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.

mf

Peitho
Et Oy Deu, Oy Deu,

Mouth words: do not sing

Polyxo
Et Oy Deu, Oy Deu, *mf* Sing d'a - - - mor! Mime inhale

Phaino
Et Oy Deu, Oy Deu, Mouth words: do not sing Audible inhale d'a - - - mor!

Musical score for three parts: Peitho, Polyxo, and Phaino. The score is in a single system with three staves. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "Ad hor - a - m don - a joi et ad ho - ra do - - lor." Above the Peitho staff, it says "Mouth words: do not sing". Above the Polyxo staff, it says "Ad". Above the Phaino staff, it says "Sing mf".

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: ♩ = 108

Vamp while SIRENS move to position around pno.

Peitho

Polyxo

Phaino

Piano

ff
Ped. sempre (pedal played by any performer)

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)

POLYXO

(Conspiratorially) Resist! RELEASE ME!!

Pei.

Pol.

Pha.

Pno.

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

Shouting into strings: ...et quisque se paret ad extrema!
(...and to prepare for the end!)

Player 2: play treble chords

f sempre

"tongue trill" (rapidly flutter tongue at front of mouth)

Pei. *f* Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah

Pol. *f* Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah

Pha. *f* Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah

Pno. *f*

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

Pei. *fp* *ff* (O merciful sea!) (O generous sea!)

Ah O clem - en - ti - si - mum Ma - re, O gen - er - o - si - si - mum Ma - re,

Pol. *fp* *ff* (O merciful sea!) (O generous sea!)

Ah O cle - men - ti - si - mum Ma - re, O gen - er - o - si - si - mum Ma - re,

Pha. *fp* *ff* (O merciful sea!) (O generous sea!)

Ah O clem - en - ti - ssi - mum Ma - re, gen er - o - si - si - mum

Pno. *f* sempre

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

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW

(O beautiful sea!) Sing directly into piano, mouth <1 inch away from strings

Pei. O for-mos - si - si-mum Ma - re, O

(O beautiful sea!) Sing directly into piano, mouth <1 inch away from strings

Pol. O for-mos - si - si-mum Ma - re, O

(O beautiful sea!) Sing directly into piano, mouth <1 inch away from strings

Pha. Ma-re for - mo - si - si - mum O

Pno. l.v. Ped

Pedalling player: clear ped., then immediately redamp to capture vocal resonance in strings

*Drowning sailors reach shore.
Chaos and violence.*

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)