The Siren's Song; or, When an Amazonian Iara Sang Opera (in Italian) on a Belle Époque Stage

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She dwells in the depths of rivers and lakes, though she is said to emerge on occasion to lure young men down to her watery realm with the promise of eternal love and endless wealth. According to nineteenth-century explorers and poets who claimed to have heard the myth from indigenous Amazonians, she is either a snake or (more frequently) a giant fish, yet she appears before her objects of desire in the phantasmal form of a beautiful woman with green or blue eyes and hair the color of gold. The elders issue warnings, but to little avail; the men who encounter her are seldom able to resist her enticing voice and almost invariably disappear beneath the surface of the water, never to be seen again.

On May 4, 1895, the Iara (also written as Yara or Uiara) made an unusual appearance at the Theatro da Paz in Belém, one hundred kilometers up the Amazon River from the coast of Brazil. As the protagonist of a new opera by the local composer José Cândido da Gama Malcher, she set her sights higher than the body and soul of a single young swain. Instead, she sought to seduce the elite of this bustling port city, grown rich from the rubber boom, with the promise to transform an Amazonian myth into an art that represented the height of cultural legitimacy on the international stage.[1] The elaborate sets depicting lush jungle foliage and dreamlike underwater scenes cut a stark contrast with the neoclassical restraint of the Theatro da Paz; the arias and recitatives of the indigenous characters were interwoven with words from the native Nheengatu language and the mass choirs and dances typical of grand opera were staged as a celebration of the sun and moon deities, Guaraci and Jaci. Yet the singers and most of the musicians had been contracted in Milan, and although the vocalist who performed the role of the Iara seems to have been Russian, her siren song—like her paramour's song of surrender—was delivered in Italian.

Opera casts a long shadow over historical accounts of Brazil's Belle Époque, when the flush coffers of municipal and state governments funded the construction of lavish theatres and subsidized impresarios who transported entire companies of singers and musicians all the way from Italy (and, less often, France). Nowhere does opera loom larger than in the cities of Belém and Manaus, where its pomp and circumstance contrasted dramatically with the Amazonian environs and the crudities and cruelties of the rubber boom. Despite its historic importance, however, opera fits uneasily into narratives of Brazilian theatre. Part of the problem is the operatic voice—the very essence of the art (or so it is said) and a force that constantly threatens to upstage its theatrical dimension. Michal Grover-Friedlander, for instance, echoes a common view when she argues that "what accounts, in the deepest sense, for the specificity of opera is singing that is unlike any other" (14). In Brazil, this problem is compounded by the fact that the voices in question have so often sung with a "foreign" inflection and only very rarely in Portuguese. Indeed, much of their prestige and power has historically hinged on their association with Europe. Could there be a starker contrast than the voice of the Iara, which appears to arise out of nature itself and embodies the allure of a region whose myths and mystique are central to the national imaginary? Yet her song, too, is riddled with tensions. Known as the "Mother of the Waters" (*mãe das águas*), she is the scourge of all mortal mothers, who live in fear of her power to rob them of their sons. An intermediary between the natural and human worlds, she is both a monstrous animal and an elegant woman whose fair features mark her difference from the indigenous inhabitants of the jungle. Her embrace seems to symbolize a primal communion with nature, but the underwater riches with which she beckons men recall the ornate interior of a European palace—or perhaps an opera house.

This essay approaches the opera *Jara* (as her name is written in the libretto) and its original staging at the Theatro da Paz as emblematic of the Amazon's integration into international commodity circuits during the rubber boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] After all, it seems difficult *not* to interpret the act of seduction at the heart of its plot as an allegory of this process. What is the Iara if not the phantasmagoria, the theatre of optical illusions that Marx invoked in explaining how commodity fetishism occludes the conditions of production—a dynamic that Theodor Adorno in turn saw as exemplified in the operas of Richard Wagner?[3] The opera house in Belém only existed and singers only sailed across an ocean to perform on its stage because rubber trees were being bled dry by workers (many of them

indigenous) trapped in a system of debt-peonage and violence. Despite this, the Iara sings of her riches as if they were the fruit of nature rather than the product of primitive accumulation and human labor. As I show in the first part of what follows, where I outline the origins of the Iara story and the literary precursors to Gama Malcher's opera, her own status as a national myth and embodiment of the Amazonian aura hinges on a similar kind of auditory illusion that makes her voice appear to sing out of a timeless indigenous past. The ingenuity of *Jara*, as the second part of the essay details, is to transform the myth into a dramatization of the power of the operatic voice. But opera is not only a matter of unusual singing. In my discussion of the performance, I show how an attention to its theatrical elements—starting with its reliance on a physical stage—can allow us to hear the historical and material mediations of the Iara's voice. In doing so, this curious work gives the lie to the idea that opera is an entirely European art, revealing that like the Iara—and like the Amazon itself—it too is tied to the very mechanisms of international capital from which it promises an escape.

"She is not a woman, but the ghost of a woman... She is a shadow, not a thing"

The story of the Iara is commonly said to have origins in the Tupi and Guaraní cultures, and her name is derived from the Tupi words *ig* (water) and *iára* (lord or lady). Nevertheless, as early as the 1940s, the folklorist Luís da Câmara Cascudo claimed to have found no evidence of the myth during colonial times and argued that the Iara was in fact descended from the seductive sirens who haunted the dreams of the Old World and had become mingled in the imagination of the seafaring Portuguese with the Mouras Encantadas, the shapeshifting souls of young maidens whom the departed Moors left behind to guard their hidden treasures. Transported to Brazil by the Portuguese colonists, this creature (already a cultural hybrid) had become confused with the indigenous *ipupiara*, a fearsome marine monster, half man and half aquatic beast, who according to the natives was responsible for disappearances and drownings. Not until the nineteenth century, said Cascudo, did the Iara take on the title "Mother of the Waters," an obvious accretion of the Amazonian indigenous belief that all things in nature are governed by a maternal figure, or "Ci" ("Ipupiaras").[4] In 1881, João Barbosa Rodrigues (who two years later would found the Museu Botânico in Manaus) published a study of Amazonian legends in which he acknowledged the Iara's kinship with the ancient sirens but claimed that the climate had modified her features, giving her dark skin

(*tez morena*) and black hair and eyes (cited in Casemiro 19). In contrast, the Indianist poems of Romantic writers such as Antônio Gonçalves Dias ("A mãe d'água") and Alexandre José de Melo Morais Filho ("As Uiaras") depict her as having golden hair and light eyes, whereas José de Alencar, in his novel *O tronco do Ipé* (1875), portrays her with long tresses the same color as her leafy surroundings. Other sites in Brazil serve as the setting for some of these works, but by the century's end—as the natural riches of the region drew an influx of outsiders—the Amazon came to be identified as her true home. Such is the case in *Folklore Brésilien* (1889), published in Paris by Federico José de Santana Néri (a native of Belém), who includes two accounts of the Iara. In one, her victim is a Portuguese immigrant set to wed a daughter of Belém's elite and, in the other (said to have been recorded near Manaus), he is an indigenous man. In both she is depicted with blonde hair reminiscent of gold, eyes the color of emeralds, and a (nude) body boasting *des trésors inimitables*, or "inimitable treasures" (144).[5]

The Iara's charms, in other words, had already started to gain fame far beyond the jungle by the time José Cândido da Gama Malcher (1853-1921) chose to make her an opera star. Unlike Manaus, which owed its rise almost entirely to rubber, Belém had been an important regional capital since its founding in the early seventeenth century, and intermittent performances referred to as "opera" had taken place for a century prior to the completion of the Theatro da Paz in 1878.[6] Gama Malcher was the son of a prominent physician and Liberal politician who served for several decades as vice-president of the provincial and (after its redesignation) state government of Pará. Dispatched to Rio de Janeiro to complete his secondary education and studies in piano, the future composer then pursued a degree in engineering at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania before his passion for music led him to Italy, where he would spend most of his adult life. In Milan, he studied at the famed conservatory and made the acquaintance of his compatriot Carlos Gomes, who had shot to international stardom in 1870 following the debut of his Indianist opera *Il Guarany.* Gama Malcher made his own first foray into opera with *Bug Jargal*, a five-act "melodrama" based on a novel by Victor Hugo set at the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. In 1890, when the government of Pará and the Associação Lírica Paraense invited him to assemble an opera company in Italy and manage the annual opera season at the Theatro da Paz, he seized on the opportunity to include *Bug Jargal* in the line-up. Following the run in Belém, he took the company on the road to São

Paulo and Rio, where it met with moderate success before a dispute with a theatre manager bankrupted the enterprise.[7]

Belém had received its prodigal son with a mix of accolades and jeers, and his opera's sympathetic portrayal of the Haitian revolutionaries (staged just two years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil) seems to have raised a few hackles. Even so, he was invited to reprise his role as impresario for the 1895 season. From late February to the end of May, a company he contracted in Italy, Alzatti & Villa, staged fourteen operas, including a heavy dose of Verdi (*Aida, Un ballo in maschera, Ernani, Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*), as well as works by Donizetti (*Lucia di Lamermoor, La favorite*), Ponchielli (*La Gioconda*), Mascagni (*Cavalleria rusticana*), Leoncavallo (*Pagliacci*), Ambroise Thomas (*Mignon*), Gounod (*Faust*), and Carlos Gomes (*Fosca*). Critics heaped praise on the tenor Antonio Ceppi for his performance in *Il trovatore* and indulged in paroxysms of applause for the sopranos Maria di Nunzio and Raimunda da Costa, the latter of whom was a veteran of La Scala and other first-tier theatres in Italy. Yet responses were either ambivalent or simply scathing when it came to *Faust,* which one critic deemed "mais um naufragio... ouvido por uma casa insignificante" ("A temporada lírica"). And as for Gomes's *Fosca*? Far more interesting to everyone than the singing or stagecraft was the composer himself, who had recently arrived from Italy after accepting an invitation brokered by Gama Malcher to lead the new music conservatory in Belém.[8] To the city's chagrin, the ailing hero would expire before he could assume his duties, though he was still living and most likely even witnessed the debut of Gama Malcher's new opera *Jara*, which was sung to a libretto penned by the composer and adapted from a poem by the Italian explorer and amateur ethnographer Ermanno Stradelli.

A curiously neglected figure, Stradelli (1852-1926) was from a well-to-do family in the Italian province of Piacenza. In 1879, after abandoning plans for Africa, he set sail for the Amazon with the assistance of the Società Geografica Italiana, establishing his home base in Manaus and working initially as a photographer while exploring the rivers of the region and developing a passion for Nheengatu (a variant of Tupi spoken on the Upper Rio Negro). After tagging along with the Brazilian commission in charge of demarcating the border with Venezuela and joining an expedition to "pacify" the Crichaná (Waimiri-Atroari) people, he returned to Italy for two years to complete his studies in law. In 1882, however, he headed back to Manaus via Venezuela and would remain in the Amazon for nearly all of the next four-and-a-half decades before meeting his end in a leper colony. Stradelli was far from the only

one of his compatriots traipsing through the jungle; although their numbers paled in comparison to those who settled in and around São Paulo and Rio, several thousand immigrants from Italy made their way to the north of Brazil, and Italian architects, artisans, and artists were recruited in droves to design, erect, and adorn the scores of new structures in Belém and Manaus.[9] In 1884, Stradelli laid the first stone of the Teatro Amazonas (Manaus's famed opera house) in his capacity as legal representative for the Italian design firm Rossi & Irmãos, and in 1897, he led a failed attempt to form an Italian-Brazilian rubber corporation. His main legacy, however, was his ethnographic work. In addition to notes from his travels on the Amazonian tributaries and the Vaupés and Orinoco rivers, he published studies and poetic interpretations of indigenous myths and also compiled the first Nheengatu-Portuguese dictionary.[10]

In 1885, while in Italy, Stradelli published a narrative poem called *Eiara* as a short book. In the preface, the author stresses the aural quality of his text and refers to it as a "version" of the "living word" (*parola viva*) that he had "heard and gathered on site... from the very mouths of the indigenous people" (*dalla boca stessa degli indigeni*) (5). Written in octosyllabic verses, the poem is indeed euphonic, but its stylized language and the far-flung locales where Stradelli claims to have heard variations of the tale leave little doubt as to his own role in mediating the myth, even as the accompanying glossary of twenty-four indigenous words and local references in the text simultaneously attests to its ethnographic value.

The opening lines evoke a lush, sylvan scene: as the dying light of the sun sets the waters of the river aflame, the forest casts long, ghostly shadows across an *igara*, or type of canoe, that bears a young indigenous man. The soft rhymes and alliterations—"lunghe lunghe l'ombre nere della foresta" (9)—prepare the reader's ear for the appearance of the Iara, whose presence is first perceived as an illusory, indefinable sound:

> ……. What noise,
> what sound is that which on wings the wind
> carries, indistinct and similar to a moan?
> Is it the trembling of fronds or a human voice
> that modulates in song to the drone of
> breaking waves? Is it the specter of an ill
> mind, is it reality, is it an illusion?[11]
>
> ……. Che rumore,
> che suone è questo che sull'ali il vento

reca indistinto a gemito simìle?
È fremito di frondi o umana voce
in canto modulata cui fan l'onde
frangendosi bordone? È di malata
mente fantasma, è realtà, è illusione? (12)

Gradually the sound becomes clearer and it becomes evident that it is a woman singing. In her initial song, the Iara pleads with the young man (named Begiuchira) to take pity on her; only when a man grants her his love will she be able to leave the rocks where she is bound and cease her weeping. In return, she pledges that "in my arms you will forget life, / there will be no more pain / in my blue eyes you will drink of oblivion"—"nelle mie braccia scorderai la vita, / non avrai più dolore / negli occhi azzurri miei berrai l'oblio" (13).—While Begiuchira remains transfixed in a reverie, the sky grows darker until the memory of his mother finally calls him home. Noting his melancholic demeanor, his mother realizes what has occurred and warns him that the Iara "is death, / she is desperation. She is not a woman, / but the ghost of a woman... She is a shadow, not a thing"—"Ella è la morte, / è la disperazione. Non è donna, / ma di donna fantasma... È un'ombra, non è cosa" (24).— Her faithful son vows to shun the beautiful temptress, but one day while out in his canoe he gets caught up in a storm, and when it clears he finds himself near her lair. She greets him singing, a struggle in his heart ensues, and the poem ends with the water closing over his head, the silence broken only by the sound of a waterfall.

In his preface, Stradelli acknowledges the Iara's similarity to the sirens, undines, and Naiads of European tradition, yet he also associates her with the Amazon's own shape-shifting water snake Boiassu, or Cobra Grande. The Iara, he says, is a serpent who emerges to deliver a warning whenever severe droughts endanger the fish in her realm, and on the occasions when she lures young fishermen to their death, it is to punish individuals or communities for contributing to their depletion. Nothing in the poem suggests that the hapless Begiuchira has committed a crime against nature, though there is an intriguing albeit indirect allusion to the abusive extraction of a different resource. When Begiuchira returns home after encountering the Iara, his mother urges him to divulge the cause of his melancholy, telling him, "The rubber tree does not weep, if its bark / has not been cut"—"La *siringa* non piange, se la scorza / non gl'incidi" (19).— A number inserted after the word *siringa* (rubber tree) directs readers to an extensive glossary entry (the longest of the twenty-four), which describes the appearance and consistency of natural rubber, explains

the process of tapping a tree, and notes that whereas twenty years ago it had little economic importance, rubber was now the largest source of income for the region.

While indigenous people had used rubber for a variety of purposes long before it was discovered by Europeans, the rise of industrialization created new needs for its singularly elastic, waterproof qualities. But Stradelli's emphasis on its recent commodification, along with his metaphorical depiction of tapping as an injury that generates tears, gestures (if unintentionally) toward the social and environmental costs of the rubber boom—not least among them the physical violence and captivity indigenous people suffered as their lands and labor came under the purview of rubber barons. Yet if this is the case, who is the Iara, the golden-haired mirage that promises pleasure and wealth but also provokes pain and ultimately death? In his discussion of Gama Malcher's opera, the musicologist Márcio Páscoa underscores the Iara's kinship with another Amazonian myth, that of the river dolphins, or *botos*, who assume the guise of gallant white men (or, less often, women) in order to seduce humans and carry them off to an enchanted underwater city (*Ópera em Belém* 267-268). As Candace Slater has argued at length, these oral tales of supernatural beings who represent danger while also offering an escape to an enchanted world should be seen as a creative response to the social dislocations, fantasies, and fears experienced by people in the region since at least the rubber boom. Perhaps something similar can be said of the Iara, who still circulates among indigenous storytellers today and in popular culture has come to be imagined as indigenous rather than white.[12] Unlike the *boto*, however, the Iara ventured into the rarefied realm of art and sang her sweet song on a Belle Époque stage.

A Voice and Nothing More?

It is possible that Gama Malcher drew on an operatic inspiration in turning to the Iara myth. Wagner's music and characteristic style had already begun to sweep Italy when the young musician from Belém arrived in Milan, though it would be decades before the German composer's works were performed in Brazil. Gama Malcher declared himself a devotee of both Verdi and Wagner, and in several chronicles that he wrote for newspapers in Belém (some on performances at the Theatro da Paz and others sent as dispatches from his adopted home), he refers admiringly to the German composer's revolutionary use of chromatic dissonance and his insistence on the essential unity of music and drama. In a commentary on the belated premiere of *Das Rheingold* (the

prologue of the four-opera *Ring* cycle) at La Scala, Gama Malcher dwells on the Rhinemaidens, who are charged with guarding the Rhine River's gold but find themselves foiled when the dwarf Alberich renounces love and in so doing gains the ability to steal their treasure; with the gold he fashions a ring that gives its wearer the power to achieve world domination, setting off the epic struggle that unfolds over the rest of the cycle. "Sonhos poéticos, infinitas delícias, sensações e formas etéreas..." According to Gama Malcher, such was the stuff of Wagner's "novo teatro" (cited in Salles 246).[13]

Yet if the Rhinemaidens represent a natural order prior to the predations of capitalist greed (Wagner's allegories are none too subtle), the title character of Gama Malcher's own opera plays a more ambiguous role. Although she claims to sing nature's song, her promises of love go hand in hand with the lure of lucre and are what disrupt the native man's natural bonds of family and community. In contrast to Wagner's notoriously long mega-productions, *Jara* is a relatively short three-act opera (divided into a prologue and two acts in the score) with an approximate run time of an hour and a half.[14] The plot has little action, after all, and despite the largesse associated with the rubber boom, the volatility of the export economy and the fact that a large share of the profits ended up overseas meant that the financial resources available to Gama Malcher were a far cry from the funding Wagner received from his patron Ludwig II. The libretto, published in Milan prior to the opera's debut in Belém, was written by Gama Malcher, though in a brief note he acknowledges the assistance of the "melodramatic poet" Fulvio Fulgonio in adapting Stradelli's text.[15] In fact, the basic plot closely follows the poem and some of the verses are repeated verbatim, but the differences are significant, not only because of the need to make the words accord with the music but also because Gama Malcher gives a nod to the conventions of Italian opera by introducing dance scenes and choruses. As was customary, the libretto was available for purchase prior to the performance, and in acknowledgment of the event's importance—only once before had an opera by a local composer been performed at the Theatro da Paz, and never had audiences seen an opera about the Amazon—one of the newspapers published a partial translation in Portuguese.[16] Meanwhile, advertisements for the four performances boasted of grandiose, custom-designed stage sets representing "panoramas do nosso sertão."[17]

The role of Begiuchira was assigned to Antonio Ceppi, a tenor from Turin who was on the cusp of stardom. The following season he won praise for his performance in *Aida* at New York's Metropolitan Opera and in subse-

quent years his engagements included Covent Garden in London, the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, the Politeama in Buenos Aires, the Teatro Lírico in Rio de Janeiro, the São Carlos in Lisbon, and the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, where he collapsed from fever while onstage and died a few days later—a delayed response, perhaps, to the Iara's cold embrace? Begiuchira's mother, Sachena, was played by the mezzo soprano Clotilde Sartori, who must have taken a shine to Brazil; she first sang in Rio in 1888 and, after her time in Belém, spent the next three years performing in other opera houses throughout the country, with a brief foray into Argentina to sing in the city of Rosario. In need of a baritone role to round out the distribution of voices, Gama Malcher also introduced a new character not present in Sardelli's poem: Ubira, another indigenous man who encounters the Iara but resists her song, was sung by Alessandro Arcangeli, who would go on to tour Brazil and Argentina for the next two years and later performed several times at La Scala under the renowned conductor Arturo Toscanini.[18]

And as for the supernatural soprano? Given that the company had what by the accounts of all critics were two gifted candidates for the role—Maria de Nunzio and Raimunda da Costa—it is uncertain why Gama Malcher chose neither. Quite possibly, their star power gave them more control over the terms of their employment and they were reluctant to invest the time and labor necessary to master a new part in a work that was highly unlikely to enter the standard operatic repertoire. It is also possible the composer himself believed that an Italian singer, no matter how beguiling her voice, would be insufficiently exotic and otherworldly. Whatever the reason, the role of Iara was given to Anna Politoff, who was already familiar to the local public for her lead roles in *Aida*, *La Gioconda*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, and *Fosca*. Although her name suggests she was Russian and an homage published in a local newspaper appears to confirm this fact, it is difficult to know for certain, because among all of the company's principal singers, she alone seems to have left no other trace in the historical annals of opera.[19] Presumably, she was contracted in Italy along with the others, but what other roles she sang and where is a mystery—and for all anyone knows she did in fact take refuge in a castle at the bottom of the Amazon River after completing her run at the Theatro da Paz.

On May 4, 1895, at around 8:30 p.m. (presuming the performance started on time), a full house of nearly eight hundred spectators at the Theatro da Paz heard the first strains of *Jara*: a solo flute plays a soft, meandering melody, other flutes and woodwinds gradually enter in, and then strings, starting with

the violins before moving to the lower-pitched violas and cellos. Following the overture, the curtain opened onto a scene that publicity had prepared the audience to see as both wondrous and familiar. According to the libretto, the stage set depicts a dense forest, and in the background audiences can glimpse deer and other Amazonian animals—agouti, tapirs, and peccaries—as well as multicolored birds perched in the giant trees. A note below the text defines the unfamiliar animals as quadrupeds and indicates that they should be seen as fleeing from some undefined threat, though there are no clues as to whether they were painted onto a backdrop or whether taxidermy was involved. This abundance of wildlife underscores the plight of Begiuchira, whose first words are an appeal to Tupã, the creator of the universe in the Guaraní cosmology. Here it appears that the Iara has sapped her love interest's virility even before their encounter, forcing his hand to remain idle as he watches prey pass right in front of him. The opera also exaggerates the emotional drama by almost immediately divulging his filial devotion ("Oh! mia dolce Sachena") as he finds himself strangely overcome with weeping and unable to return home. Directing his pleas now to the god Guaraci, he asks, "Is it an illusion? Do I perhaps dream of baseless / Terrible phantasms? Or is it a cruel / Unknown power that drew me here?" ("È illusion? Io sogno forse vani, / Terribili fantasmi? O una crudele / Potenza ignota qui mi trascinò?" (Malcher, *Jara, Leggenda Amazonica* 7).

As Begiuchira bemoans his unmanly stasis, a quick set change swaps in a set of dark rocks out of which a waterfall tumbles. A parenthetical reference to "black-violet" seems to be a cue for the special lighting used to illuminate the Iara's lair. In a letter sent to Gama Malcher prior to his arrival in Belém, the manager of the *Theatro da Paz* reported on having purchased two powerful mobile spotlights but asked the composer-cum-opera impresario to bring colored glass filters from Europe and suggested that in order to achieve his desired effects he should also purchase colored footlights and lamps for the rigging, along with a hexagonal box covered with different colored laminae, which would allow for rapid lighting changes and a multiplicity of tones (cited in Salles 89). When Anna Politoff made her entrance, then, it was almost certainly grand. According to the libretto, the rocks part to allow the mythic singer and her train of Nymphs to pass through. Yet before she is seen, she is heard in the distance, pleading with Begiuchira to release her from the rock with his love. Whereas in the poem her voice is initially perceived as an inarticulate sound, this operatic mirage interpellates Begiuchira with words—though it seems safe to assume that few people in the audience caught everything she

said, since even when opera is sung in the native language of its audience, its peculiar style of singing acts as an obstacle to linguistic comprehension. In this act, too, as at other points in the opera, the text Gama Malcher set to music differs in a number of details from the published libretto, so that even those who had read the latter arrived with their ears not fully primed. To wit, those who were expecting to hear Begiuchira describe the "sweet charm" of the Iara's "celestial song" and declare his heart inundated with an "unearthly joy"—"Oh! Quale dolce incanto / Ha il celestial suo canto!... / Sento inondarmi il sen / Da gaudio non terren!..." (8)—might have been confused when he sang instead of a more ambivalent sensation of inebriation. Still, even those with no knowledge of Italian surely caught his drift when he lustily proclaimed his *grande passione* for the mysterious protagonist.[20]

Begiuchira gives no hint of having comprehended the semantic meaning of the Iara's words. Nor is there any sign that he grasps her subsequent lines, such as her promise that "Over a silent flock I will give you reign"—"Sul muto gregge ti darò l'impero" (9).— In fact, the only time he responds to something specific she says is when her verses are echoed by her chorus of nymphs. This fascination with her voice as a force that exceeds any actual words she says, coupled with her listener's rapturous response, calls to mind Michel Poizat's contention that opera is driven by the desire for an experience of ecstasy—a *jouissance* that accompanies the destruction of signification, the dissolution of the listening and singing subject, and the perpetually incomplete quest for a "sheer voice, sheer vocal object" (4). In the psychoanalytic (and more specifically Lacanian) paradigm on which he draws, this lost object is an illusion of primordial unity that arises as an after-effect of the subject's formation and separation from the Mother (or the Mother of the Waters?). Poizat stresses the religious origins of opera by associating it with the figure of the angel, the archetype (as he has it) of the castrato and the diva. The operatic obsession with high voices, he argues, results from the fact that, in the upper registers, words reach the limit of intelligibility—indeed, the entire history of opera is an evolution from the song toward the pure cry, where "the shiver of pleasure becomes the shiver of horror" (40) and "the distinction between humanity and animality collapses" (44). Poizat concedes that the visual aspect of opera has been central since the art form arose in the seventeenth century amidst the Baroque fascination with theatrics and visual illusions. Yet he concludes that "There is something inescapably paradoxical about opera: producers spend enormous sums to produce such effects and to create sumptuous sets and costumes, only to have the spectators, in those great

moments of success, close their eyes to the display the better to be ravished by the diva's singing" (33).

But is this what most opera-goers actually do, and is it even an apt description of their ideal operatic experience? Isn't opera also theatre and aren't all the material trappings part of what opera-goers desire? In fact, it seems unlikely that anyone attending the debut of *Jara* was expecting to be ravished by Anna Politoff's voice. Reviews of her prior performances suggest that while she was appreciated for her acting ability and charm, her voice was acknowledged to be weak and underwhelming.[21] As for her performance as the sonic seductress, one critic deemed it satisfactory, though when she was singing offstage her "veiled" voice ("a sua voz sempre tão velada") was difficult to hear clearly—an inadvertent approximation, perhaps, to the effect evoked in Stradelli's poem. And then there was Antonio Ceppi, whose voice was to be admired but who had obviously failed to memorize the part of Begiuchira and on several occasions sang random words entirely unrelated to the subject of the opera (see Binóculo). Then again, how many people in the audience noticed, and would it have ruined the effect even if they had? Opinions of *Jara* varied widely and were undoubtedly influenced by critics' political persuasions given Gama Malcher's close association with the Liberal Party and his father's prominence in the state government. Still, there was one thing on which all agreed: the stage sets, lighting, costumes—all of the material aspects of the opera—were beyond reproach. One critic went so far as to state that the opera's "apparato scenico" was of "uma riqueza tal, que eclypsa os mais ricos scenarios que conhecemos no Theatro da Paz" ("Theatro da Paz"). In his lengthy review, he says not a single word about the music—or the singing. Rather, he gives a detailed description of each of the scenes of the Amazon, assuring readers that those who have traveled in the region will immediately recognize their correspondence with reality.

Despite its own discrepancy with reality, however, something rings true in Poizat's account of the operatic voice. The story of the Iara as told in the literary texts of this period figures the assimilation of the indigenous (or immigrant) subject into the circuits of capital and the symbolic order of the nation as an experience of *jouissance* in which the self and all prior social bonds are destroyed through a sexual union with a maternal she-beast who possesses a beautiful voice. In staging the myth, however, Gama Malcher gives it a metatheatrical twist (and in doing so dramatizes Poizat's argument) by turning the scenario of seduction into an allegory for the power of opera itself. What, after all, is the strange sense of paralysis Begiuchira suffers in

the first scene but a metaphor for the experience of the audience, held captive in the theatre as he is in the forest and subject to the whims of an actress who has yet to appear? The connection comes into focus as the plot advances and Begiuchira takes to calling the Iara the "diva." This first occurs in the second act, which is set in his village and begins with his duet with Sachena, whose tears lead him to promise he will turn a deaf ear to the Iara. As their conversation ends, however, another offstage voice is heard, this time singing words that even fewer (if any) in the audience could have understood. Ubira, the baritone foil to Begiuchira's tenor, is out on a hunt and is heard singing in what was almost certainly the first ever utterance of Nheengatu in an opera, his lines accompanied by brass instruments and echoed by a chorus of his fellow hunters: "Eià, Canindè, Cuirè, Cuirè!! / Epatù, paturepè, paturepè!!" (15). Unlike the other Amazonian references in the libretto that were unfamiliar to Italian audiences, these words (most of which refer to animals) have no explanatory notes; their value is purely sonic and symbolic of an indigenous authenticity. When Ubira returns to the village, he tells of his escape from a "woman seductress" ("donna sedutrice") who is also a songstress. Begiuchira cries to himself in recognition: "it was her, the Iara, the diva!"—"era dessa, sì Jara, la diva!" (20). Ubira describes her beguiling voice for the villagers and warns, "I see danger in her, / In all of her splendor!" ("Vedo perigli in essa, / In tutto il suo splendor!"), but Begiuchira responds, "For me her promise / Is a beautiful dream of love..."—"Per me la sua promessa / È un bel sogno d'amor..." (21).

Although invented as a necessity of operatic convention, the character of Ubira posits the possibility of fidelity to indigenous lifeways and resistance to the diva's call. In a similar sense, the extended dance that takes place in the second act is a nod to the predilection for such scenes in Italian opera and introduces a note of the *verismo* style, which had been popularized by the debut of *Cavalleriana rusticana* just a few years earlier in 1890 and claimed to offer more "realistic" portrayals of everyday people rather than royalty or mythological figures. At the same time, despite the jocose banter between choruses of men and women who compare the Iara myth to their own views on the sexes, the dance scene is at least nominally a festival honoring the Guaraní deity Guaraci. Ultimately, however, the opera's plot is mirrored in its form. *Jara*'s incorporation of elements of indigenous culture is simultaneously a staging of their disarticulation, dissolution, and subjection to the value system of art. After Ubira informs them of the danger lurking in the forest, Begiuchira and the other villagers perform a *preghiera*, or prayer, to

Guaraci and their other gods, asking for assistance in warding off the Iara, but both their gods and their performative rituals are proven powerless in the next and final act. It opens onto a panorama of the Amazon River at sunset with a view of the village and its *malocas*, the collective dwellings characteristic of indigenous communities in the region. Begiuchira sings to the Iara—"oh diva of my deep love" ("o diva del mio amor profondo")—and begs her to release her hold on him (25). The Iara emerges out of the water and deploys all her vocal wiles, a lengthy duet ensues, and the scene dramatically ends with her lover bellowing, "If you are death / Death is beautiful!" ("Se sei la morte / La morte è bella!") before diving into the water (28).

This is where most versions of the Iara story, at least in the literature of the Belle Époque, end. To recall, Stradelli's poem leaves readers with the sound of silence and the image of the water closing in over Begiuchira's head. If this were the final scene of *Jara*, it might be more convincing as an illustration of the power of the operatic voice, or perhaps it would have come across instead as parody, given the less than otherworldly qualities of the Russian singer who incarnated the myth. In any case, Gama Malcher's opera proves itself unable to disavow the temptations of the theatre. The final, short scene takes place underwater in a "silvery and golden grotto" with "segments of coral, mother-of-pearl shells, large rocks of diamond, rubies, emeralds, and other precious stones, etc." ("Grotte argentate e dorate, tronchi di corallo, conchiglie di madreperla, grossi massi di brillanti, rubini, smeraldi, ed altre pietre preziose, ecc."). To the side, bathed in blue light, is a rock with a door leading to the Iara's nuptial chamber, where she will invite her new husband to enter and experience the "promised delights" ("gaudi promesi"), while dancing (swimming?) all around them are her nymphs, each dressed to represent one of the aforementioned precious stones (28). The two lovers sing of their mutual devotion, with the culmination coming in the final lines of the opera as the Iara declares: "In the azure kingdom—oh my Lord / We will dream—among lights and flowers!"—"Nel regno azzurro—o mio Signor / Noi sogneremo—tra luci e fior!..." (30). According to the libretto, the last image the audience sees as the curtain falls is that of the newlyweds floating in the direction of the blue light on a giant mother-of-pearl shell, escorted by the chorus of nymphs.

Underwater Opera

Theodor Adorno defined opera as "the specifically bourgeois genre which, in the midst and with the means of a world bereft of magic, paradoxically

endeavors to preserve the magical element of art" (29). Indeed, the conclusion of *Jara* appears to confirm the reality of its mythic protagonist's promises. Whereas other versions leave lingering the question of what happens beneath the water's surface, Gama Malcher assuages all doubts and rewards the indigenous man for succumbing to subjection by granting him riches and eternal love. This aqueous realm is the reified world of the commodity, where even dancing bodies are equivalent to petrified stones, yet it is also an image of the aesthetic—a second nature, or an underwater opera. But in putting paradise before opera-goers' eyes and enacting it with flesh and blood bodies on a physical stage with actual commodities, *Jara* also gives a glimpse of the contradictions at the heart of the fantasy. Reviewers' rapturous descriptions of the lavish scenery suggest that for those spectators watching a Russian representing an Amazonian myth and singing (too faintly) in Italian while an Italian who was very likely wearing brownface completely bungled his lines, the allure of the operatic voice was inseparable from the novel lighting technologies, imported stage sets, and circulating singers that contributed to the Amazon's integration into international circuits of capital. Not everyone, however, was beguiled by the opera's ostentation; on the night of its debut, flyers were distributed at the theater lampooning the composer and accusing him of draining the state's coffers to fund his own expensive pet project and reap huge profits. A politician took up the issue in the state legislature, leading Gama Malcher to defend himself in the local press and offer to provide receipts for all of the expenses incurred, but the insinuations of financial malfeasance were a likely factor in his subsequent exclusion from the professoriate of the Conservatório de Música and fall from the state governor's favor (Salles 101-103).

Meanwhile, although the voice of the Iara was imagined as ushering in a glorious era of opera by Amazonian composers, *Jara* itself failed to enter the magical underwater world of art it evokes. No attempts were made to re-stage this or any of Gama Malcher's scenic works, and over the following years, middle-brow operettas began to outnumber operas at the Theatro da Paz. Within two decades, both the rubber boom and the era of grand opera were a thing of the past, and not until the twenty-first century would the Amazon's own "indigenous" diva sing opera (in Italian) again.[22]

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Notes

[1] For an account of the rubber boom that emphasizes the international political and economic issues at stake, see Hecht. On the growth of Belém in this era, see Sarges.

[2] The decision to use the spelling "Jara" in the libretto is somewhat perplexing given that the letter "j" does not exist in Italian, nor is this one of the spelling variants used in Brazil. Newspapers in Belém invariably referred to the opera as *Yara*, and performances were advertised in the local press under this title, but I prefer to use the title as written in the libretto to register the oddity and unplaceability of this operatic figure.

[3] Marx describes the commodity fetish as "a definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things" (165). For Adorno, Wagner's operas mirrored the commodity form, in part because of his moves to conceal the orchestra and other evidence of the human labor on which their mythic illusions depended. See his *In Search of Wagner*.

[4] "Ci" is a word used throughout the Amazon to refer to the origin and maternal force that is believed to inhabit different elements of nature (water, the forest, etc.). Readers may be familiar with her appearance in Mário de Andrade's experimental novel *Macunaíma* (1928), where Ci is the wife of the eponymous protagonist and mother of his ill-fated child. At the end of the novel, Macunaíma is seduced and torn to shreds by a Iara.

[5] The account from Manaus in Santana Néri's book is a translation of Francisco Bernardino de Souza's text "A Yara" from 1873. Santana Néri claims to have heard the first story from friends of the dead man, though he hints that it may have been a ruse to cover up a murder. The fact that in his book, the Iara's two victims are an immigrant and an indigenous man points to the way in which the story allowed local elites to imagine their own centrality in the region.

[6] On the construction and subsequent history of the Theatro da Paz, see the lavishly illustrated volume edited by Silva and Fernandes. In his *Cronologia lírica* (16), Páscoa cites evidence of performances referred to as opera as early as the 1760s, though it is difficult to know to what degree they resembled what we imagine as opera: during this period in Brazil, the term *casa de ópera* was often used as a generic term for a theater, and in some cases "opera" might have simply designated a type of theatrical performance in which music had an important role.

[7] See the biography by Vicente Salles, a local historian who was instrumental in recovering Gama Malcher's legacy and his works.

[8] On Gomes's ill-fated stay in Belém, see Coelho.

[9] Evidence indicates that there were around 1200 Italians in the city of Belém at the turn of the twentieth century (Emmi 157, see also Table 11). However, their public presence was especially visible given their prominence in architecture and the arts. In addition to Emmi, see also Cappelli.

[10] For details on Stradelli, see Cascudo, *Em memória de Stradelli*, and Truffelli, whose edited volume includes a number of Stradelli's texts, including his poem "Eiara."

[11] This and all other translations from Italian in this article are my own.

[12] I have not found any recent studies of the Iara from an ethnographic perspective. However, see the story "Iara, the Mother of Water" by Daniel Munduruku, an indigenous writer originally from Belém who is now the managing director of the Museu do Índio in Rio de Janeiro.

[13] Another possible point of comparison is Alfredo Catalani's opera *Loreley* (1890), based on the German legend of a young woman who throws herself into the Rhine River in despair over a faithless lover and becomes a water spirit who lures men to their death with her song. But the Iara was never a mere mortal—whether part fish or part snake, she is mythic through and through.

[14] The original score is currently on display at the Instituto Carlos Gomes in Belém and is not available for consultation, though a version edited by the musicologist Márcio Páscoa was published in 2009.

[15] Fulvio Fulgonio was the pseudonym of Francesco Pozza (1832-1904), a playwright and librettist who also worked under his real name. The extent of his contribution to the *Jara* libretto is unclear, though he authored the libretto for *Il pazzo d'Evora,* an opera Gama Malcher began to compose in 1895 but never completed (Salles 167).

[16] Henrique Gurjão's *Idália* debuted at the Theatro da Paz in 1881. The translation of the *Jara* libretto appeared in *Província do Pará*, 3 May 1895, p. 2-3; it offers a literal rendering of the words without attempting to replicate the rhyme or meter scheme.

[17] See advertisements published in *Província do Pará*, 4 May 1895, p. 3; 7 May 1895, p. 3. It was common practice to recycle sets used in other productions, and often for different operas, so the fact that the sets were made specifically for this opera was significant. A text by Gama Malcher (cited in Salles 102) cites a "sr. Bovescalle" from Milan as the painter of the sets, but I have been unable to find more details about his identity.

[18] Páscoa provides these details about the artists in the immensely useful "Apêndice biográfico" at the end of his *Cronologia lírica* (pp. 233-292), which provides information on the careers of all the principal singers who performed at the Theatro da Paz between 1890 and 1907.

[19] The homage to Politoff from David Ossipovitch Widhopff, a Russian artist and caricaturist resident in Manaus who was the editor of the journal *O Mosquito*, is reproduced in Salles, 231. Both Salles and Páscoa claim to have been unable to find any other references to Politoff (if that was indeed her real name), and my own internet searches have yet to turn up anything.

[20] My observation of these differences between the published libretto and the opera as it was likely performed are based on Páscoa's commentary on the score, which indicates that Gama Malcher made revisions to the music (and consequently to the sung text) after the libretto appeared in print, and on the video of the 2006 performance, which follows the score used in the original production.

[21] For instance, a review of her performance in *Fosca* a few weeks earlier echoes a common sentiment when it notes that "Anna Politoff, embora pouco ajudada pela voz, não poderia haver reproduzido melhor, dramaticamente falando, a trabalhosa e accidentada parte de Fosca" (Monóculo).

[22] After its original run in May 1895, *Jara* was not performed again until 2006, when it was staged under the direction of Roberto Duarte and Cleber Papa as part of the Theatro da Paz's annual opera festival (a project that began in 2001 and has also involved the recovery and performance of Gama Malcher's *Bug Jargal* as well as other operas by local composers, including Henrique Gurjão's *Idália*). I purchased a DVD of the production at the Theatro da Paz and have referenced it in writing this article. As far as I know, there is no separate audio recording of the music.

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