

UP IN ARMS: CONDUCTING ...(IPHIGENIA)

Lionel Popkin and Alex Purves

arma uirumque cano
Of arms and the man I sing

Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.1

παῖδα σὴν πατὴρ ὁ φύσας αὐτόχειρ μέλλει κτανεῖν
The father who raised your daughter intends to kill her by his own hand
Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis* 873

There was something about being a writer collaborating with a very important figure, where I was feeling this kind of creepy power of telling this story and getting to put my spin on it. That's not inherently bad, but I just thought, *wow, wouldn't it be fun, when you finally have the baton, to be like, forget batons, you know?*

esperanza spalding, interview with N.K. Walecki (2021)

The opera begins with a burst of applause as the conductor enters the pit. He bends, bowing to the audience, then turns, lifts his arms, and the music begins. From here, for the remainder of the performance, we can barely see him (although one of us will turn around in the third act to watch him on the video screens that hang behind us). Or, the opera begins before that with an usher in the audience, asking people what they know of the myth, and warning them that this story will not end well.

According to most versions of the myth, Artemis demanded the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis because she was sickened by the violence that the Greeks were bringing to Troy. In this essay, we play on the English association between arms as limbs (Latin *braccia*) and arms as weapons (Latin *arma*) because these two meanings are often intertwined within the stage-action of the men in Shorter and spalding's ...(Iphigenia). We offer a reading that coordinates the arms of the opera's male characters (Agamemnon, Menelaus, Calchas, and the Greek army) with the arms of conductor Clark Rundell, suggesting that the performance transfers control from the army to the various Iphigenias (including spalding) through a marked shift in choreography. In Act I the arms are purposeful, at times carrying the Iphigenias, dramatically slicing their throats, and generally imposing themselves into the space, but things change decisively by the third act with Rundell's gesture of lowering and folding his arms, ceding musical control to the players on the stage.

...(Iphigenia) retells the story of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, in which Agamemnon struggles with the decision of whether to kill his daughter, whom he has

summoned to Aulis on the pretext of her marriage to Achilles. The play ends with Iphigenia making the decision to go willingly to be sacrificed on the altar in order to ‘save Hellas’, depicted in the tragedy as a matter of ‘opportune timing’ (*kairos*, 1109) that Iphigenia concludes she is powerless to avoid. Shorter and Spalding immediately disrupt this sequence by presenting multiple Iphigenias in the first act, who are killed one by one. By obsessively re-enacting the iconography and gestures of the virgin’s sacrifice, ...(*Iphigenia*) does away with what is *kairos* or singular within the timing of the tragedy, not only by playing the final act of Euripides’ *Iphigenia* first, but also by replaying it to the point of mundanity at the very beginning of the performance. The opening act stages the Achaean soldiers marching heavily across the shallow stage, single file, from wing to wing, and repeatedly raising their arms in stylized movements. Sometimes they raise their upper arms at right angles to the floor, elbows bent and with hands perpendicular, in a show of force and choreographic agreement. At other times they beat their hearts, hold outstretched hands before their faces, or—most theatrically—lift the Iphigenias over the altar before cutting their throats, all to the accompaniment of Shorter’s adrenaline-filled score played by Rundell’s 28-piece chamber ensemble (Fig. 5).

Arms are especially important to the performance of opera. Singing requires a certain stability from the torso so that the breath and vocal apparatus can be adequately engaged. As a result, the movement vocabulary available to the performer is—as here—most often centered on the upper limbs. Dramatically purposeful and realistic, the men in the performance use their arms as decisive but serial markers of punctuation,¹ imposing them on the space in a manner



Figure 5. Still from ...(*Iphigenia*). Soldiers in the fray, with conductor Clark Rundell in the foreground (Act I). © Jon Fine.

1. See Telò, Best, Porter, this issue.

that is overly stylized and hyperfunctional. As others in this issue have suggested, they gesture towards an act that should be horrifyingly consequential but instead reads as parodic and even perplexing, especially as it is driven ever-forward by the musical tempo.²

With the shift to Act II, a backdrop lifts to add depth to the stage and reveal Shorter's jazz trio at stage right. Here begins a new role for the women who step up from their dead selves and receive names ('Iphigenia Unbound', 'Iphigenia of the Sea', 'Iphigenia the Elder', 'Iphigenia the Younger', 'Iphigenia of the Light') to form a chorus around 'Iphigenia of the Open Tense' (spalding). As Walecki writes, 'In Act II, the myth pauses for a moment and the previously sacrificed Iphigenias share their story with not-yet-sacrificed sixth Iphigenia...in the hopes that she can write a new ending.'³ At this point the choreography and the music noticeably change—the women move together in a circular group rather than marching or standing in a line, their bodies are fluid, and their arms reach toward and support each other. The score changes too,⁴ with windows written in by Shorter to allow for the band onstage to improvise, and with spalding's scat singing which, as Kheshti puts it in this issue, 'eschews the linguistic dictates of opera...[in its] sensual-yet-non-sense improvisational performance of the voice as instrument.' The chorus of Iphigenias use their arms very differently than the men—their bodies move forward and down, with arms out but lowered as they sing. In fact, their arms seem to balance them as they find their pitch, and as they sway together as if in water or wind.⁵

Act III returns to the scene of Act I, taking us back to the time of the tragedy's unfolding and to the moment of Iphigenia of the Open Tense's upcoming sacrifice, with altar and army filling the stage and with the set further opened up into Gehry's design of metal clouds. spalding's Iphigenia, 'forced back into the story',⁶ has forgotten what she learned in Act II and struggles to reconcile herself with the plot's ending. Yet the improvisational score of the music

2. The men have a 'Monty Python' effect that can be painful to watch. See Butler, this issue, who summarizes them thus 'I am I am I am. I march I march I march. I grunt I grunt I grunt'—'a drumbeat of masculinity' that Butler rightly criticizes for being too monolithic. As Chinen (2021) writes in a review, 'The chest-thumping machismo of the Grecian soldiers in ...(*Iphigenia*), while overplayed for satirical effect, was also something that took spalding aback. "I didn't realize that men took up so much space in this opera", she says. "And that's so crazy; I wrote it like that! But I didn't know this until I was sitting in the audience watching the parts of the show that I'm not in. And I was like, "Oh my god. What is this?"' She laughs. "But actually, the music has this virility and relentlessness that feels closer to how I perceived these myths when I was first reading them.'" See further Stovall (2022). Kheshti (this issue) discusses these bodies as 'hyperbolic displays of white masculinity that can only be interpreted as parody, further drawing attention to the uncomfortable presence of Blackness, relegated as it is to the subterranean orchestra pit in Act I and to the signifier of spalding's body in Act III.'

3. Walecki (2021).

4. See esp. Stephenson, Griffith, this issue.

5. Their arms sometimes resemble the branches of trees. Examples can be found in BroadStage (2022), starting at 45s.

6. Walecki (2021).

continues, to the extent that partway through this act the conductor stops conducting, folds his arms, and leans against the back wall of the pit. His disembodied torso floats on the monitor screens strategically placed throughout the theater for the singers to see him, but when they no longer need his cues, a quick glance at the cove-mounted monitors reveals a static man, arms clasping his body, waiting as others take over the leadership of the performance.

What is traditional to opera—the controlling baton of the maestro and his marking of time for both musicians and singers—thus falls away within the improvisational aspirations of the performance's end. Spalding has spoken of how, towards the opera's close, she decided to 'let go of the reins of the tyrannical storyteller', and allow the ending to be 'co-devised by the people who are actually in the room bringing the story through their bodies' in real time instead.⁷ The 'real time' here is key because it speaks not just to the unscripted nature of the final act but also to the unscheduled, undirected nature of the myth's unfolding within a conductor-less opera. The baton, like the force of tradition, fate, gods, myth, opera, tragedy, or plot over Iphigenia's story, directs and controls. For Rundell to let it fall—to let his arms fall and, even more than that, to cross them—is to reinvent the 'open tense' of Spalding's Act II Iphigenia into the performance, to give her space and time to imagine other possibilities for her ending.

Like Rundell at the opera's beginning, Spalding turns her back to the audience in Act III, when she vomits and retches over her upcoming death. In doing so, as Sanyal argues in this issue, 'the language of opera and the grammar of myth are viscerally expelled'. At the same time, her gesture of turning her back replaces the conductor's posture with a new form of musicality that moves, spontaneously, up through her body. Already anticipated by the undulating forward-pitched movements of the Iphigenia chorus from Act II, Spalding's retching Iphigenia follows the rhythm of her own body without consenting to watch or wait for an external cue.

Several of the discussions of Shorter and Spalding's ... (*Iphigenia*) mention the Usher—a performer dressed in blue who begins the play in the audience and who both warns the audience to brace themselves for the plot as they are taking their seats and interrupts the first act as it goes along.⁸ By the second act she has joined the stage as an Artemis/Clytemnestra figure who urges Iphigenia of the Open Tense to remember and to say no. This figure's placement in the audience in the first act reminds us that the performance extends from the stage through the orchestra pit to the Usher in the seats, and that the actions in the theater as a whole are part of the world Shorter and Spalding are creating. The Usher's own (failed) attempts to control the plot in Act I stage a resistance to the over-determined role of the conductor; the Greek soldiers onstage often look confused and act obsequiously in response to the 'virility and relentlessness' of the

7. Walecki (2021).

8. See especially Stovall (2022); Griffith, Stephenson, Flynn, Teldò, this issue.

music he conducts.⁹ Rundell's baton compels and controls the soldiers: their raised arms acquiesce to his, with an effect that is at times hyperbolic.¹⁰ If all of these upraised arms represent the force of tradition and myth in its most violent form, then it is appropriate that they should be woven as a theme through the structure of the opera's music, alongside its looping reenactment of Agamemnon's single 'tragic act' of killing his daughter 'by his own hand' (*autocheir*, Eur. *IA* 873).

We began this essay with the first line of Vergil's *Aeneid*, 'of arms and the man I sing', as a play on the use of arms as controlling forces—of violence, timing, or tradition—in the musicality of ...(*Iphigenia*). We end on a different note, with the lyrics of spalding's 'All Limbs Are' from her 2018 album *12 Little Spells*, in which each track corresponds to a single body part (in this case, arms):¹¹

Do your shoulders long
 To fold into the arms of your papa
 Close, strong
 The missing figure is somewhere within they say
 But how do we get there?
 And who's gonna raise us till we find it?
 If our hearts beat cold, will they skip there?
 I'll draw the family tree
 Right side up so ancestors rise with me
 Holding, this new growth lineage carrying
 The scars of our fathers
 By branching upon them growth beyond them
 In the masculine sacred unfurling

The song picks up on still different threads from the many myths of Iphigenia, from the longing of one set of arms for another to the missing figure that exists somewhere in the gap left open by that imagined embrace. The possibility of how and whether spalding can ever 'get there', past her ancestors and the 'scars of our fathers', is one that the opera leaves deliberately up in the air.

9. See n.2, above.

10. For examples see BroadStage (2022) at 1m 43s.

11. spalding (2018), track 9.