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# Anthony's Death: Opera under the Condition of Žižek

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## Abstract

The paper attempts to trace the relevance of the work of Slavoj Žižek in the field of practical opera composition, taking as example the Greek contemporary opera *Anthony's Death*, which dramatizes a multitude of Žižekian topics and concludes with a sung Žižek text. The paper argues that the tension between the dimensions of Meaning and Voice is constitutive of the genre of opera itself, and exhibits the strategies used by *Anthony's Death* to thematize this disjunction. The work's structure is then examined (a) as an attempt to artistically render several Žižekian *topoi* (especially the opposition of the Symbolic/Imaginary and the Real) and (b) from the point of view of the different uses it subjects Žižek's text to. The vicissitudes of thought submitted to musical treatment are considered next, and it is argued that a "fall" from Meaning into Sound is inevitable when abstract thought is sung. Finally, the importance of Žižek's work for contemporary opera is located on the level of operatic *form*, for which it is asserted that it has the ability to act as a potentially vivifying catalyst.

**Key Words:** Opera; Contemporary Music; Candy Candy; Voice; Thanatophilia

Kant is the most preeminent (of the new philosophers), without any doubt. He is also the one whose theory has proved itself to have a continuing effect, and which has penetrated our German culture the most deeply. He has also had an effect upon you, without your having read him. Now you do not need him any more, for you already possess what he could give you.

Goethe to Eckermann (cited in Goetschel 1994: 221)

[T]he philosophy of this century [...] is not — at least not yet — under the condition of Pessoa. Its thought is not yet *worthy of Pessoa*.

Badiou 2005: 36, emphases in original

I am not alone in regarding Slavoj Žižek as the defining thinker of our age. I first encountered his thought via one of his most sustained treatments of art, his Kieślowski monograph *The Fright of Real Tears* (Žižek 2001), which I read during the summer of 2004, at a time of cows fat enough to allow an aspiring 27-year old Greek composer to flee to Paris on a whim as an “Olympic refugee”, determined to avoid the hollow national(ist) euphoria spread as the plague over his hometown, Athens, during the (now infamous as an orgy of spending and corruption) 2004 Olympic Games. I was finishing my operatic adaptation of Josephine Hart’s novel *Damage* at the time<sup>1</sup>, a work I now consider as mostly self-defeatingly neo-Romantic and expressionistic. Informed by my reading of an extensive amount of Žižek’s output over the next few years, my position *vis-à-vis* music theatre underwent a radical transformation, and a new question started forming in my mind regarding my approach to the genre: what does it mean to write opera as a contemporary of Žižek, or, rather (as Alain Badiou puts it *à propos* of philosophy and Fernando Pessoa), *under the condition of Žižek*? Let it be said that, although Žižek has treated extensively (and, to the genre devotee, encouragingly) the subject of opera itself, it was not his dedicated operatic analyses, illuminating though

they might be, that spurred my own creative thought; it was, rather, the whole tenor of his argument regarding contemporary life and culture.

My first concerted attempt to answer the aforementioned question is the opera *Anthony's Death*, the libretto for which Yannis Filias and I wrote in 2005 and 2006, and which serves as the subject of the present article. Interestingly, the music of *Anthony's Death*, a work defined in large part by the notion of symptom, became my own, unshakeable symptom over the succeeding decade; as of 2016, only a small portion of the work has been performed<sup>2</sup> and the composition is still in progress.<sup>3</sup>

### **“As I was watching him fall...”**

There follows an attempt at a brief plot outline of *Anthony's Death*: Sergius and Paulus, two shotgun-carrying men, find themselves in a forest clearing during a foxhunt, having separated themselves from the main hunting party. Hunting horns can occasionally be heard in the woods, just out of reach. It is clear that the men are staking a lot on the outcome of the hunt; they nevertheless spend most of their time talking. Sergius is writing a play, in which Paulus expects to play the lead; the play's title is “Anthony's Death” and it relates the tale of Anthony Brown's (the heroine Candy White's iconic blond boyfriend from the late '70s Japanese *anime* TV series *Candy Candy*) fatal fall from his horse during a foxhunt.<sup>4</sup> The two men ambitiously look forward to finding the fox (gendered as female in Greek), which takes more and more fantastical forms in their overactive imaginations; they start referring to her as “the Red One” (*I Kokkini*) and imagine plentiful rewards for catching their projected booty: fox skin boots, a trip to Ukraine, membership in exclusive clubs...

SERGIUS                             But when we get to catch the Red One,  
   all Rome will be at our feet!

PAULUS                             Just think of the applause!

SERGIUS                             We'll be showing off the award from club to club.

PAULUS                             But we don't belong to any clubs.

SERGIUS                             But when we get to catch the Red One...

   All clubs will want us as their members!

PAULUS                             My cousin got accepted to a patenting club

*Post presentationem* of his Bullrifle.

SERGIUS They'll be asking us to chair meetings!

I'll be wearing my fox skin boots!

PAULUS Ha! That will finish them off!

SERGIUS A Bullrifle?

PAULUS It was a regular two-barreled shotgun  
with two small ivory horns at the front.

My cousin fitted a black pea between them.

And, on the top, two tiny eyes. Made of polyester.

And the barrels looked like nostrils.

So, when the gun went off – listen! – it looked

As if the bull was sneezing! (*Laughs uncontrollably*)

SERGIUS We may even get to open our own club.

PAULUS OK, it wasn't any special novelty...

SERGIUS And then we'll also make that trip to Ukraine.

PAULUS ... but he was accepted

owing to his incomparable contribution to aesthetics.

SERGIUS And later, we may get into politics.

PAULUS I then presented the Horsegun,  
something similar, but with a horse's head.

SERGIUS Do you know who else  
is a fanatic of the foxhunt?

PAULUS I was rejected due to lack of originality.

SERGIUS Jeremy Irons.

PAULUS And yet, I keep thinking  
that, had Anthony ridden a Horsegun,  
he might never have fallen.

SERGIUS (*horrified*) What!?

PAULUS I said...

SERGIUS

Better say nothing. Unnatural stuff. (Filiás & Goyós 2006: un-paginated)

Their idealized talk of “the Red One” swiftly leads to an equally unenlightening discussion of standard-issue Lacanian topics, such as the nonexistence of Woman and the definition of the *objet petit a* (the men taking their cue from the Greek word for “fox”, *alepou*, which is written with a lowercase “a”, unlike “Woman” or the German *Fuchs*). They later have a picnic, take a nap and carry on with the banalities.

SERGIUS

Here you are.

PAULUS

Thank you. Here you are.

SERGIUS

Thank you. Just a little.

PAULUS

Here you are.

SERGIUS

Thank you. Here you are.

PAULUS

No, thank you. Here you are.

SERGIUS

No.

PAULUS

Fine. (*They eat. Silence*)

SERGIUS

I'm dying for the foxhunt. It's a very social sport with great intensity, because you spend most of your time waiting to discover the smell of the fox. It requires courage and strong nerves, which is a feature of all excellent sports. (Filiás & Goyós 2006: un-paginated)

Progressively, in a series of sudden, shocking parapraxes, Sergius and Paulus start shooting at and wounding each other. The inadvertency and traumatic nature of their actions leads the men to a consideration of St. Paul's concept of sin as “doing what [they] hate to do”,<sup>5</sup> and their bloody wounds suggest to them the notion that the true location of the Red One is not somewhere in the outer world, but *within themselves*; therefore, they infer, taking shots at each other is an apposite behaviour towards their goal, that of externalizing the fox/Woman “hiding within”. Finally, the discussion comes to the traumatic dimension of Anthony's fall and death for male subjects of their generation. They talk about how VCR technology allowed them to relive the trauma in a continuous circle of *jouissance*, as they watched and re-watched the scene on video during the '80s.

PAULUS                    In those days  
                               I played and replayed him on the VCR.  
                               I cried. Every time.  
                               I then went through a phase of growing roses.<sup>6</sup>

SERGIUS                    Because they keep getting reborn.

PAULUS                    Like our loved ones.

SERGIUS                    They live inside us.  
                               (*They look at each other, perplexed.*)

PAULUS                    Maybe we are thanatophiles, after all?...  
                               As I was watching him fall...

SERGIUS                    You got off! (Filias & Goyós 2006: un-paginated)

What the men now realize is that *they wanted Anthony dead all along*, identifying with him in an endless loop of feminized thanatophilia. The realization leads them to a frenzied, orgasmic reenactment of the traumatic “primal scene” from *Candy Candy*; the two men ride their shotguns as if they were horses and take turns pretending to be Candy and Anthony, respectively screaming in horror and falling to their “death” from their imaginary horses.

At this precise point there is an abrupt change of scene: we see the bloody, dismembered corpses of Sergius and Paulus lying on the ground; above them, the Red One herself (a clichéd, monstrous, faintly ridiculous, hydra-like apparition, loosely modeled on the image of the Ukrainian pop star Ruslana<sup>7</sup>) sings a delirious monologue in awkward Ukrainian, adapted from a passage of Žižek’s *Looking Awry*:

THE RED ONE    The sky is beautiful in Chernobyl Mother and Father Stop In that unrepresentable point where the very foundation of our world seems to dissolve itself Stop There the subject has to recognize the kernel of its most intimate being Stop The sky is beautiful in Chernobyl Stop What is this open wound of the world if not in the last resort man himself Stop Man insofar as he is dominated by the death drive Stop Insofar as his fixation on the empty place of the Thing derails him Stop

Deprives him of support in the regularity of life processes Stop  
Possible definition of man Stop Nature sick unto death Stop The sky is  
beautiful in Chernobyl Stop Red and blue at the same time Stop You  
must renounce Stop Mother and Father Stop The very idea of a  
natural balance supposedly upset by the intervention of man as nature  
sick unto death Stop Homologous to the proposition Woman does not  
exist Stop You should perhaps assert that Nature does not exist Stop  
It does not exist as a periodic balanced circuit thrown off its track by  
man's inadvertence Stop The very notion of man as an excess with  
respect to nature's balanced circuit Stop Is nothing but a retroactive  
projection of man<sup>8</sup> (Filiás & Goyós 2006: un-paginated)

Even from this, necessarily constipated, synopsis, it is plain that *Anthony's Death* is attempting to tackle a cornucopia of ponderous, Lacan- and Žižek-inflected topics. This begs the obvious question: is it even *possible* to deal with this kind of thing in the notoriously anti-intellectual medium of opera, which, moreover, has been repeatedly pronounced dead since, at least, the beginning of the last century? Can, in fact, thoughts and concepts be *sung*?

### **Meaning vs. Voice**

Despite philosophy's strong original oral tradition and its continued links to academic forms of voice-based discourse (predominantly, in our age, the public or university lecture), the production and consumption of ideas is nowadays mostly considered as a silent, intracranial activity, associated more often with the modern practice of silent reading<sup>9</sup> and writing than with the classical, oral routes of thought processing and dissemination. This is obviously not the place (nor am I the person) to pursue a rigorous examination of the multifarious relationships of thought to sound. My understanding is, however, that, when thought is spoken aloud, its impact is radically *demystified*, losing as it does, in principle, the seductive, ideologically charged depersonalization and authoritative facelessness(what one might be tempted to call the "Sinai tablets" effect) that grant printed media their (still current) authority. This loss is obviously compensated by the addition of a performative dimension to the process and presentation of thought — to the pure dimension of meaning is added the "unclean" dimension of voice and its "grain", mark of a desiring, embodied subjectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere, evidently, is this dimension more obvious than in the case of the operatic voice, the sonic “sublime object” *par excellence*.<sup>11</sup>

If, in the domain of philosophical discourse, meaning and voice can thus sometimes appear as antagonistic agents, this is obviously not the case in the domain of psychoanalysis, with its rich tradition of assigning meaning *to the voice act itself*. From my (musician’s) point of view, I see the psychoanalytic process as providing a distinct analogy to the art of operatic composition, as well as to the manner that, in my opinion at least, successful operas articulate the relationship of meaning to sound through their respective agents, namely words and music, *as expounded* (and this is the main point that distinguishes an operatic aria from, e.g., a *Lied* or a pop song; a point, unfortunately, lost when opera, as often happens, is approached as if it were a *musical style* rather than a *theatrical form*) *through the embodied subjectivity* of an abstract, “transcendent” character incarnated in the concrete, contingent performer. To put it somewhat naively, I feel that, in those operas worthy of the name, the main interest lies precisely in the *gap* between what a character *intends* to sing and what s/he *actually* sings, or, in other words, in the particular way the music tends to *distort* the intended meaning of the words of the libretto through the disturbance caused by *its very presence* in the musico-theatrical argument.<sup>12</sup> From the technical point of view, it is my belief that this effect is due primarily to the friction that exists between whatever systems of *notional* meaning regulate an opera libretto (given that the latter is, necessarily, a linguistic construct) and the much more abstract, *non-notional* organizing principles that govern musical sense-making, be it, e.g., the classical, asymmetrical tonal system of Mozart or the modernist, symmetrical twelve-tone method of Berg. Thus, in an operatic piece, both concrete and abstract types of meaning-making may coexist, mirror, complement, contradict or, in the best cases, asymptotically illuminate each other *through the very tension that exists between them*.

Although the notion of an “opera of ideas” is not new, going back at least to Verdi and his famous 1869 letter to De Sanctis, where he explains the difference between typical, run-of-the-mill operas and what he calls “*opere a intenzioni*” (Verdi & Luzio 1935: 111), what we undertook with *Anthony’s Death* was a radically self-aware, reflexive construction that set out not just to illustrate intellectual concepts but rather to dramatize the Meaning/Voice disjunction constitutive of opera *itself*. One of the first formal decisions we took in this direction was, of course, the bipartite structure of the work (see Fig. 1), with the men’s quest (for meaning?) occupying the first part and the

woman's ecstatic vocal performance making up the second part. Whereas the first part is linear, dialogic, narrative and historical, the second part is concise, monologic, non-narrative and ahistorical. Whereas the musical setting of the first part is mostly syllabic, plain and recitative-like, that of the second part is melismatic, a kind of apotheosis of the aria. Whereas the first part is defined precisely by its setting, namely the Heideggerian "clearing" in the forest (the opening of the place of meaning), in the second part all spatial distinctions are obliterated owing to the sublime presence of the Red One. Finally, the opposed "masculine" and "feminine" kinds of discourse are formally presented as completely disjunctive, without the least transition, communication or connection between them.

Up to this point, one could very well think of *Anthony's Death* as a more or less facile, "Yin/Yang"-style construct, its "feminine" ending mistaken for a kind of moralistic revenge of the pre-modern, maternal Thing, wreaking havoc on a "phallogocentric" civilization gone astray. Or, in a more generous reading, it could be seen as a simplified illustration of Lacanian concepts (a kind of naive, Lacanian paint-by-numbers), with the first part standing in for the struggle between the Symbolic and Imaginary modes within the reality of the characters, and the second part for the violent irruption of the Real (prefigured by the gradual opening of the men's bloody wounds during the first part). What, however, allows us to try and disrupt these obvious symmetries, destabilize the opera's form and attempt to radically open up its horizons of meaning is the position given to the figure (and text) of Žižek *himself*, a position that is, in addition, decisively modified in the transition between the first and second parts of *Anthony's Death*.

PART ONE		PART TWO
Dynamic	DISJUNCTION // BREAK	Static
Linear		Non-linear
Dialogue		Monologue
Narrative		Non-narrative
Historical		Ahistorical
Syllabic		Melismatic
Recitative		Aria
Masculine		Feminine
Dual		Unitary
Green (woods)		Red (blood)
Meaning		Sound
Place		Non-place
Comprehensible		Incomprehensible

*Fig. 1: Bipartite construction in Anthony's Death*

### The Žižekian subject

To come back to the opening question, what does it actually *mean* to write opera under the condition of Žižek? It obviously cannot mean to simplistically illustrate

Lacanian (Hegelian, Marxist...) concepts in the plot, in the manner of Zhdanovian socialist realism. Rather, I would suggest that it basically entails the acceptance of and identification with a specific position of enunciation, which I will call *the Žižekian subject*. By this, I do not mean Žižek's own account of the Subject (as elaborated, say, in *The Ticklish Subject* [Žižek 2000] or *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* [Žižek 2002]), but, rather, the exhausting (post)modern condition of *hermeneutic overdrive* that defines the Žižek-aware (or not; cf. the Goethe quotation at the beginning of this article) contemporary Western subject, trying his/her darest to keep up with the, almost impossible, task of intellectual mastery over a multiform, contingent world that attacks him/her mercilessly from all directions. More specifically, for the Žižekian artist-subject, contaminated as s/he is by the Slovenian master's viral hermeneutic hypereloquence and tireless cultural vigilance, "ivory tower" isolationism, artistic "autonomy" or any notion of exceptionalism whatsoever simply will not do; not only is s/he (like Borges' Funes) condemned to take in and obsessively remember every potentially meaningful manifestation in art, culture ("high" and "low"), politics and all other innumerable aspects of contemporary life, but, in addition, to consistently, compulsively attempt to *make sense of it all*, a victim of the condition eloquently described by Tim Dean as "Žižek's hermeneutic voracity" (Dean 2002: 23). To state my case simply, in personal terms: after reading Žižek, it was impossible for me, when making art, to consciously ignore the effect of *anything that exists*; such is the unbearable burden of the epistemically fallen-from-grace Žižekian subject.<sup>13</sup>

In the first part of *Anthony's Death*, my librettist and I tried aggressively to dramatize the hyper-saturation of contemporary life and culture by omnipresent *symptoms*, rife for interpretation. Our characters spout Lacanian/Žižekian chestnuts ("Woman does not exist", the *objet petit a*, sexuation, repetition and the death drive, St. Paul, nature and ecology, sin, the relationship of inside and outside, depth and surface etc.), treating them at the same level as stupid, regular small talk (preparing and eating their picnic), musings on Japanese TV (the hidden meaning of *Candy Candy*), New Age-y clichés (Paulus: "All of us hide a Woman inside." Sergius: "Naturally." Paulus: "Nature is life." Sergius: "Life is a Woman." [Filias & Goyós 2006: unpaginated]), bad jokes (Paulus's narrative of the Bullrifle patent), horseplay (literally, in the end) and Greek popular songs (most notably Eleni Dimou's "Life is a Woman" [/zoieinaigynaika]<sup>14</sup>). In other words, and in a decisive gesture of *mise-en-abyme*, hermeneutic overdrive is treated by the opera as one more symptom of the contemporary world (one actually *aggravated* by Žižekian consciousness) and further

pointed up as compulsive and unproductive by being, in our case, *sung* rather than read or spoken, and thus subjected to the consequent shifting of emphasis further away from the fullness of meaning and closer to the notional void of cadence, intonation and pure sound.

Finally, a word about the compositional techniques mobilized in order to render in music the first, talky part of *Anthony's Death*. In my setting, I tried to bring together the following three compositional principles:

(a) *Contingency*, as reflected in vocal lines that expressly respect the natural contours of Greek speech; that is, the melodic shapes of the men's song are freely derived from those of natural parlance, rather than from arbitrary, purely musical decisions

(b) *Abstract symmetry*, expressed mainly in the harmonic accompaniment entrusted to the electric guitar-led string ensemble, whose harmonic language derives from a principle of musical mirroring (also expressed dramaturgically, as is obvious, in the relationship of the protagonists' duo). Simultaneously sounding intervals are rigorously organized around a central point of symmetry, itself systematically derived from the contours of the (contingently produced)vocal lines. However, the abstract harmonic effect thus achieved is severely compromised by the musical material played *at the same time* by a Baroque-style, harpsichord-led *basso continuo* complement (see Fig. 2), which follows a third principle, that of

(c) *Historicized asymmetry*. In short, the *continuo* harpsichord attempts to follow and harmonically interpret the vocal lines *in the traditional manner*, improvising their accompaniment according to the historical rules of tonal music (whose scale organization is asymmetrical by definition, having reached us through a bumpy, contingent historical path).

PAULUS

String ensemble

*Harmonic point(s)  
of symmetry*

Continuo

Fig. 2: Simultaneous harmonic languages in Anthony's Death (reduction)

The effect sought by the superimposition of what amounts to *two* harmonic languages, one instrumentalized and symmetrical, the other “organic” and asymmetrical, is to render musically the *insistence* of traditional, humanistic attempts at meaning-making (represented by the anachronistic baroque complement), despite the obvious unruliness of the material presented to our senses and intellect by the contemporary world and the temptations of instrumental systematization.<sup>15</sup>

### Real-izing Žižek

Let us now turn our attention to the second part of the opera, where the approach delineated above is turned on its head and Žižek’s position in the system of *Anthony’s Death* is radically challenged. At this point, the work suddenly stops treating him as inspiration for the compulsive meaning-making machine that is part one; instead, it puts Žižek’s words *directly into the mouth of the phallic, sublime Woman* that dominates part two. Despite the material still being Žižek’s own, in an even more literal way than before, its function is now totally different: meaning yields its place to sound, sense to voice, the symbolic recedes before the colonizing invasion of the Real.

How to make sense of this reversal? In order to illustrate the position that Žižek’s text occupies in the second part of *Anthony’s Death*, I would like to refer to an amusing

story told to me by Lacanian political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis. As Stavrakakis recounts<sup>16</sup>, more than two decades ago, upon leaving Greece to study discourse analysis at Essex University, he was urged by his Greek teacher, political psychology professor Thanos Lipowatz, to contact one of Lipowatz's old acquaintances in the UK, one of whom Stavrakakis had not heard of until then, and whose name Lipowatz wrote on a piece of paper that he handed to Stavrakakis; the name was, of course, "ŽIŽEK". Stavrakakis describes eloquently the fleeting feeling he experienced when he looked at the handwritten name, with its square shape, alliteration and exotic diacritics (written, furthermore, in an alphabet that, in block capitals, could equally well be Greek as Latin): Stavrakakis felt as if it that inscrutable word/shape was a kind of runic talisman, a totemic object of indeterminate meaning, still liable, however, to somehow influence the course of his future life...

This, then, is the ambition of the second part of *Anthony's Death*: to treat Žižek himself as a totem, as *dues absconditus* of the narration, his words as semi-incomprehensible holy writ, to be rendered not as meaning but as Voice, specifically *the voice of the Real itself*. Part two will mobilize a series of technical strategies that include, but are not limited to:

- (a) setting to music an automatic translation of the Žižek text to Ukrainian, produced through Google Translate
- (b) jumbling Žižek's lines with Oedipal nonsense, telegraphic jargon and an obscure, though resonant (in the context of the opera's subjacent concern with the notion of "ecology without nature"<sup>17</sup>), reference to a further '80s landmark, the Chernobyl disaster
- (c) electronically filtering and auto-tuning the singer's voice for an uncanny, robotized effect familiar from contemporary pop songs,<sup>18</sup> and, last but not least
- (d) explicitly enunciating Žižek's text *from the Woman's position in the diegesis*.

Through these techniques, the Slovenian philosopher's highly sophisticated argument reaches its end point: pulverized, purged of sense, ultimately reduced to incomprehensible gab and noise whose impact becomes almost exclusively *affective and somatic*. Thus, reaching its endpoint after all the talk, *Anthony's Death* culminates

ina senseless, stupid conflagration, a holocaust of meaning, kind of an operatic “revenge of the (Žižekian) nerds”.

### **Epilogue: Salvaging meaning**

I am a practicing musician, not a dedicated thinker. Rigorous intellectual analysis is not my field; therefore, this article should be approached solely as an artist's inevitably flawed attempt to put his largely intuitive artistic approach into comprehensible words. I commenced this text with a question: can thoughts and concepts be sung? Now, after a long discussion, I still feel as if I have dodged it. In a way, the literal answer should be obvious: most certainly, concepts *can* be sung, anything can, even a cookbook or the yellow pages – why not Žižek, too? Maybe, then, the original question should have been phrased in this way: *what befalls* thoughts and concepts when they are sung? To this question, my opera *Anthony's Death* attempts to explore, exploit and provide several answers: treated as surface-level material, abstract thought can be cheapened, stultified, trivialized, schematized, neutered, become cliché, lose itself in vocal grain and intonation, used as raw material for banal performance mixed with saliva, sweat and phlegm, ultimately turned into senseless refuse, garbage, sonic waste, thus completing its downward trajectory from the domain of the Symbolic to that of the Real and from intellectual mastery to corporeal abjection; a fall as resounding (and potentially fatal) as that of Anthony from his horse.

The corrosive potency of abstract thought *can*, however, be salvaged through its subterranean effect on the *form* of a piece, on the expressive strategies that inform the deeper substratum of an operatic work. As eloquently put in a note by one of the greatest of all cinema directors, Robert Bresson:

On two deaths and three births.

My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, *placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen*, come to life again like flowers in water. (Bresson 1977: 7, emphasis mine)

It is, then, on *this* level where, as my experience with *Anthony's Death* has been proving to me, Žižek's thought may indeed be galvanizing, even revivifying, for modern opera; through its urgent and exacting demand on the contemporary subject to *keep on trying to integrate the entire field, at any* (personal or artistic) *cost*, Žižek may still

hopefully inspire the contemporary operatic creator with the courage to struggle for the continuous potency and relevance of an art that should *still* try to swallow the world and digest it whole, rather than retreat to the safety and deadening embrace of the twin goddesses of Expertise and Good Taste, the voracious Scylla and Charybdis of our operatic "last men".

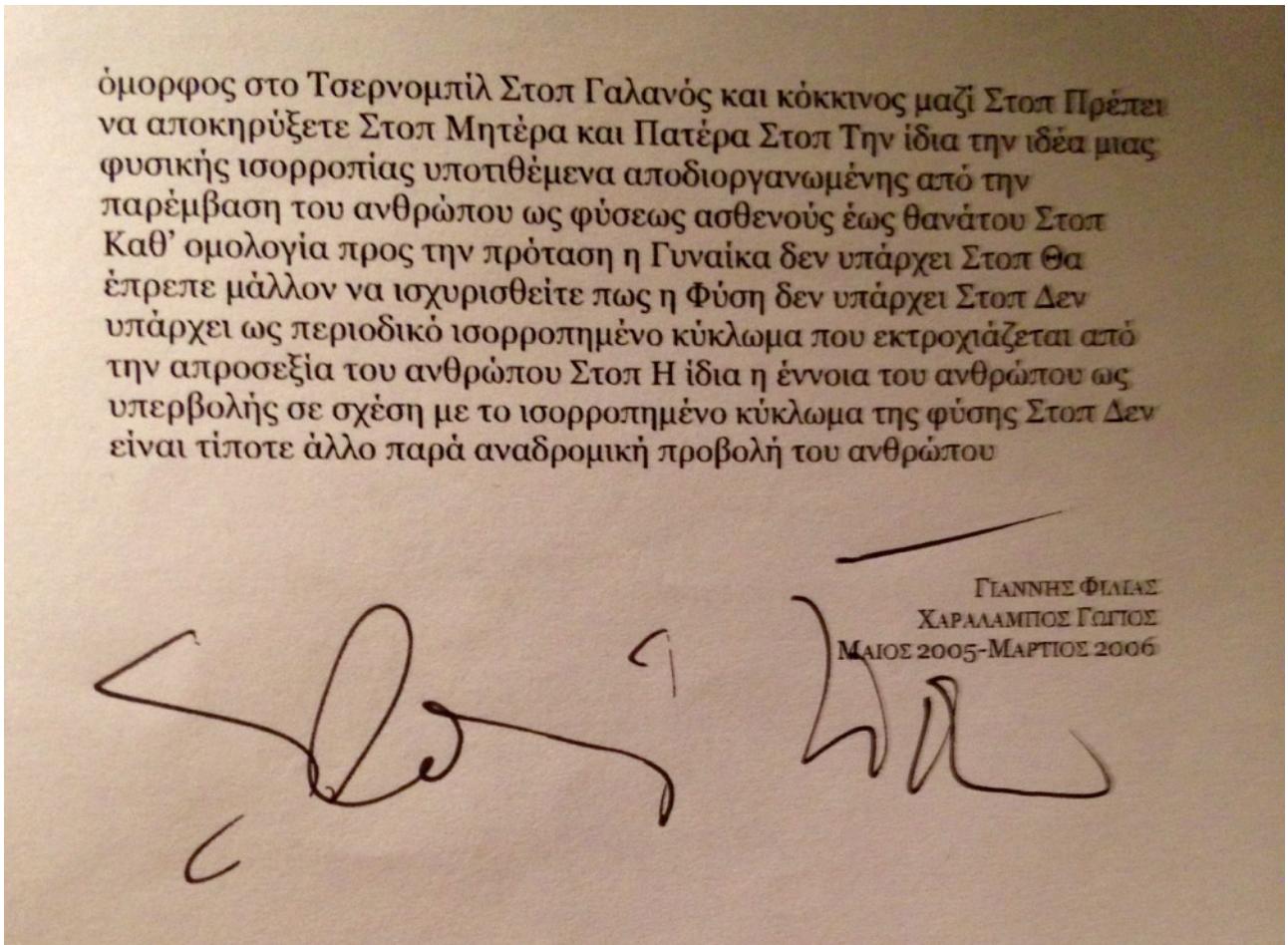


Fig. 3: Žižek's autograph on the libretto of Anthony's Death

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A novel which, interestingly, has since had a compelling Lacanian reading in Mellard 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The first public performance of part of *Anthony's Death* took place on ^ May 2016 under the title *Anthony's Death Abstrect*, as part of the Sound Acts festival at the Polychoros KET, Athens, Greece. A video of the performance is available online (Goyós 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Despite this (or even because of this), I somehow believe the argument delineated here would still hold even if I never managed to finish the work.

<sup>4</sup> The relevant clip can easily be seen online (e.g. Imazawa 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, in *Candy Candy*, the boarding school the heroine is sent off to after Anthony's death is Saint Paul's Academy in London. It is notable that Yannis Filias and I were not conscious of this detail when working the St. Paul references into the libretto.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony is associated with the image of the rose throughout *Candy Candy*. Candy first meets Anthony at the gates of his late mother's rose garden, and he later grows her a special rose called "Sweet Candy".

<sup>7</sup> Ruslana won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2004 with the song "Wild Dances"; several publicity photos from the time show the singer embracing a wolf, her hair wild and unkempt.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Žižek 1991: 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> For an interesting historical purview of the modern style of silent reading, see Saenger 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Let it be said that, in my view, this performative dimension is paramount to the wide popularity of the Žižek persona, with its characteristic timbre, accent, rhythm and assorted vocal idiosyncrasies, in the age of YouTube. For a spectacularly successful *musical* approach to Žižek's performance style, cf. Slakonja 2013.

<sup>11</sup> On this issue, studies I consider significant include Tomlinson 1999 and Dolar 2006.

<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying, of course, that I don't mean this in the banal sense of the music supposedly representing a kind of "deep truth", an *Ersatz*-Jungian unconscious to the libretto or the characters' discourse, but rather, strictly, in the sense of a *surface effect* of meaning-making.

<sup>13</sup> Which, in my opinion, actually raises the interesting possibility of Žižek as a potential modern figure of the *superego*, issuing a new, inescapable command: "Think, don't act!".

<sup>14</sup> The song can be heard on YouTube (e.g. Dimou 2008).

<sup>15</sup> It is also a gentle satire of the contemporary Baroque music renaissance, a phenomenon the ubiquitousness of which I consider as thoroughly reactionary and ideological, although this is not the place to open *that* can of worms.

<sup>16</sup> Stavrakakis 2012, personal communication.

<sup>17</sup> For the concept of "ecology without nature" cf. Morton 2007. Interestingly, during the same year, Žižek also gave a lecture in Athens on the exact same subject (Žižek 2007).

<sup>18</sup> In pop music, the technique is known as "the Cher effect". See Frere-Jones 2008.