A Florentine Tragedy, or woman as mirror

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Abstract: Alexander Zemlinsky's one-act opera *A Florentine Tragedy* (1917), based on Oscar Wilde's play of the same title, features an erotic triangle – a woman, her husband and her lover – that erupts into violence, murder and a shocking dramatic reversal at the end. Throughout the drama, the character of the woman is a passive mirror in whose eyes the male characters see their own idealised images. The marginalised subject-position of the woman, however, reveals the pivotal role of the feminine in the narcissistic constructions of male desire and the male self. At the same time, however, this reading enables an interpretation of the drama as a project for conceptualising another marginal subjectivity: that of the homosexual male. Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s and Kaja Silverman’s theories, the article explores first the complex dynamics of the triangle at the centre of the drama, and then the implications of a Freudian triangular model of male homosexual subjectivity as constituted through narcissistic object-choice. The homoerotic subtext of Wilde’s play is revealed partly through the ambiguities of the woman’s position in her connections with each of the men, a role that is seen more clearly in terms of their bonds with each other. This subtext is also implicit in the typically Wildean eroticisation of commerce and commercialisation of eros, through which the men engage in relations highly nuanced by erotically inflected language. Most intriguing is the way the male homosocial reading of the drama is supported by the motivic-dramatic structure of Zemlinsky’s opera, as suggested by a new interpretation of the ambiguous musical motifs of ‘love’ and ‘death’ that permeate the opera’s most crucial scenes.

‘The eyes of a woman should not mirror her thoughts, but on the contrary, mine.’

In 1959 Theodor Adorno described Alexander Zemlinsky’s one-act opera *Eine florentinische Tragödie* as ‘hardly performable any more, despite . . . undoubted musical qualities’. The problem lay with what Adorno called ‘one of those crass neo-Romantic libretti which . . . deserve only to be consigned to the flames’. Blame thus falls mainly on Oscar Wilde, whose eponymous play Zemlinsky had set almost in its entirety, in a rather literal German translation. As an active conductor of opera, Zemlinsky knew and admired Strauss’s Wildean opera *Salome*, and Adorno remarks that *A Florentine Tragedy* recalls *Salome*. Both plays take place in a nocturnal, moonlit setting of this article, which draws on material explored in my dissertation, ‘Opera, Narrative, and the Modernist Crisis of Historical Subjectivity’ (Ph.D. diss., The University of British Columbia, 2003), were read at the 2003 meeting of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the American Musicological Society in Seattle, WA, and the 2004 joint annual meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory, also in Seattle. I am grateful to Vera Micznik, David Merzer, Richard Kurth, William Benjamin and the reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. Universal Edition of Vienna generously granted permission for the reproduction of musical examples from Alexander Zemlinsky, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, © 1916 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien, copyright renewed 1944/UE 5662. Thanks to Ms Aygün Lausch at Universal Edition for arranging for this permission.

3 Anthony Beaumont suggests that this was Zemlinsky’s intention: ‘With a setting of Oscar Wilde, Strauss had caused a furore; why should he not follow suit, with *A Florentine Tragedy*?’, Beaumont, *Zemlinsky* (London, 2000), 242.
atmosphere, the moon at times attaining a symbolic prominence which almost makes it a character itself. Also common to both works is a heightened sense of aestheticism as conveyed in lush poetic descriptions of sensual decorative detail and scenic surroundings. They are steeped in the Wildean ethos of symbolism and nihilism, intermingling eroticism and death, love and murder, in a manner redolent of fin-de-siècle decadence. In their disturbing psychological complexities, glazed over but never concealed by rich aesthetic surfaces, they are anxious portraits of the tormented and divided modern subject. The dramatic text so disparaged by Adorno in fact confronts subjectivity in crisis, an issue at the heart of Adorno’s own aesthetic philosophy.

Adorno’s dismissal of the opera implies an artificial separation between libretto and music. While he concedes ‘undoubted musical qualities’, he finds that the libretto renders the opera obsolete, no longer acceptable. His conviction that the opera is ‘hardly performable any more’ points to the potential problems of appreciating a work outside its original context. As he states in the same essay, ‘once works of art have lost the tension of their immediate here and now in their relationship with their observer or audience, they reveal quite different dimensions from those visible in the material at the time’. My reading engages with the opera in both its original and present contexts, examining it especially in relation to ideas of gender contemporary with its creation, but also bringing a newer theoretical apparatus to bear on its interpretation.

Despite Adorno’s opinion of its ‘performability’, A Florentine Tragedy has re-entered the repertory, if somewhat tentatively. It is still far from being as well known to us as Salome, however, enough so that the unfamiliar narrative requires some expository discussion. The drama, set in sixteenth-century Italy, involves only three characters: Simone, a cloth merchant and cuckolded husband; his younger wife Bianca; and her lover Guido Bardi, a young Florentine nobleman. The curtain rises on the two lovers, who are interrupted by Simone’s unexpected return home. From the moment of his entrance he commands the stage. The drama revolves around him, and the two other characters’ contributions are virtually always in direct response to him. Simone is a clever, manipulative man with a sadistic streak that reveals itself in the cruel cat-and-mouse game he plays with the lovers throughout the drama, fooling them with a pretence of ignorance into further betraying their guilt. When he discovers the lovers, he pretends not to realise the import of the situation that greets him, professing to think Guido is a visiting relative or a customer. Accordingly, Simone opens his pack and begins to display his costly wares, rhapsodising in sensuous poetic detail over their beauty and workmanship. The arrogant young nobleman agrees to buy everything at an exorbitant price, allowing himself to be drawn into a game of sexual blackmail, wherein the real object of exchange is Bianca. Tension grows beneath the surface of the beautiful yet

5 Zemlinsky’s opera takes part in something of a contemporary vogue for Renaissance opera subjects, joining other works such as Franz Schreker’s Die Gezeichneten (1915), Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s Violanta (1916) and Max von Schillings’s Mona Lisa (1915); Zemlinsky conducted the Prague première of Mona Lisa during the 1915–16 season, and Schillings conducted the world première of Eine florentinische Tragödie in Stuttgart on 30 January 1917.
seemingly meaningless dialogue, finally erupting when Simone, apparently in jest,
challenges Guido to a duel. In a surprise ending, Simone kills his young rival, then
turns towards his wife to murder her as well. More surprising still, however, is the
disturbing denouement, in which Simone and Bianca reunite in a passionate
embrace over her lover's dead body. 'Why did you not tell me you were so strong?'
she asks, to which he responds, 'Why did you not tell me you were so beautiful?'

Comments Zemlinsky made about the drama actually suggest his intent to make
a moral statement in favour of marriage with this opera, in contrast to both the
more 'romantic' view of love as essentially outside the constraints of morality, and
the rather nihilistic view Wilde seems to have held. Recent commentaries have
pointed out similarities between the opera's scenario of infidelity and incidents in
Zemlinsky's biography: he was close to the persons involved in two real-life tragic
triangles. One involved an affair between his sister, Mathilde Schoenberg, and
Richard Gerstl, who committed suicide after the relationship failed and Mathilde
returned to her husband. The other was Alma Mahler's affair with Walter Gropius,
not long before Mahler's death. Indeed, Zemlinsky's statement of his understanding
of the plot was made in a letter to Alma, in which the composer, according to
Anthony Beaumont, 'without mentioning names, pointed an accusing finger'.
Beaumont quotes from the unpublished letter, which describes a married couple's
alienation arising from the husband’s preoccupation with his career:
The husband's passion for his work leads him to overlook his wife's beauty, while the
woman at his side, finding herself cheated of her youth and physical appeal, becomes a slave
to apathy, dejection and open hatred. To bring the two back to reality, a terrible catastrophe
is called for. This is a real tragedy, because one life has to be sacrificed to save two others.
And you, of all people, have failed to understand that?

The attention given to the 'biographical angle' and to the composer's expressed
meaning for the work have been decisive in shaping interpretations of the opera.
Yet the drama's shocking ending surely belies Zemlinsky's apparently disingenuous
remark that a terrible catastrophe was necessary to bring back to reality a husband
whose 'passion for his work' led him to neglect his wife.

Reflecting the male image: Weininger and women

Although Bianca hardly speaks at all, she is the centre around which the two men
dialogue and spar, the residue of subjectivity in a drama of male narcissism. Their

6 All quotations from the play/opera are taken from Oscar Wilde, ‘A Florentine Tragedy’, in
The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, with an introduction by George Bernard Shaw (New York,
1994), 689–700.
notion of romantic love as amoral, an impersonal force controlling human relationships, fits
with the title of ‘Tragedy’, a destruction of the characters that is somehow inevitable.
Adorno may have had this notion in mind when condemning the libretto as outdated,
though this reveals a misunderstanding of Wilde. I owe this insight to William Benjamin.
8 Zemlinsky concludes his commentary with the following barb: ‘Why did you not tell me you
were so – weak?’ Unpublished letter quoted in Beaumont, Zemlinsky, 245.
attitudes towards her reveal their weaknesses of character. Simone treats her unkindly and even cruelly, from the moment of his entrance. Few if any of his words can be taken at face value, in light of the ruse he is perpetrating, but even if insincere they are cutting. He disparages Bianca along with all her sex, saying apologetically to Guido, ‘I trust my honest wife, most honest if uncomely to the eye, hath not with foolish chatterings wearied you, as is the wont of women’. He orders her to kneel on the floor to undo his pack of merchandise, saying, ‘you are better thus’. Though he constantly refers to her (albeit sarcastically) as a ‘good’ or ‘honest wife’, perhaps wishing her to be so, other thinly veiled comments reveal that he sees her as a faithless whore. When he commands her to sit down at her distaff and spin, he explicitly links the place of domestic duty with the site of sexual transgression, saying, ‘So Lucretia was found by Tarquin. So, perchance, Lucretia waited for Tarquin’, transforming the mythical woman from rape victim to treacherous seductress. ‘Who knows?’ Simone continues, ‘I have heard strange things about men’s wives’. Guido Bardi, in contrast, is courtly, yet his flowery poetic praise of her charms distances Bianca as an admired object. But this objectification of her ‘pure’ beauty is false, in that he simultaneously possesses her sexually; she is at once an abstraction and a physical body, an ideal and a whore. The two men, scornful husband and ardent lover, view Bianca differently; yet for both she is object rather than subject.

The ideas behind this portrayal of Bianca were notoriously mapped out in the virulently misogynist and anti-Semitic writings of Zemlinsky’s contemporary Otto Weininger, whose monograph *Sex and Character* was first published in Vienna in 1903. Using a shaky scientific and psychoanalytical apparatus, Weininger ‘proved’ that woman does not possess a truly autonomous self and therefore does not deserve basic freedoms, let alone equality with man, who represents reason, morality and the transcendent self.9 While man’s true nature is intellectual and spiritual, woman’s is purely sexual; she endlessly strives to seduce man. Following current theories of psychology and sexual pathology, Weininger postulated that each individual is bisexual, possessing traits of both man and woman in varying degrees.10 The concept of woman, therefore, as the opposite of man, represents the weakness of humanity, and – here Weininger makes the dangerous leap from the general concept of femininity to the ‘feminine’ person – woman is the embodiment of this sin of man. In fact, it is man’s fall into the weaker, sexual side of his nature that creates woman – she does not really exist, but her ontological status is that of a symptom of man – and his guilt in creating her causes him to attempt to rescue her by loving her. In so doing, he projects onto her his own ideal qualities, and this projection is the source of her beauty. Woman’s beauty is therefore performative: she is beautiful because man regards her so. Loving woman is thus an act of egoism and cruelty which, in idealising her, fails to recognise her true nature. Weininger can conclude, within the space of a few pages, that ‘woman’s beauty is the love of man’, and that ‘love is Murder’.11

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10 See Sengoopta, 47–8, 51.

Zemlinsky very likely read *Sex and Character* – it would seem that nearly everyone else in Austria and Germany did. Arnold Schoenberg described Weininger in the preface to the first edition of his *Harmonielehre* as an ‘earnest thinker’. Georg Klaren, librettist for Zemlinsky’s next opera *Der Zwerg* (1921, also based on Wilde), eagerly espoused Weininger’s ideology: having completed a biography of Weininger in 1919, for Zemlinsky’s libretto he freely overlaid Wilde’s text with a veneer of sexual pathology. He volunteered his services as librettist to Zemlinsky not long after the Viennese première of *A Florentine Tragedy*. Klaren later published an article about Zemlinsky written ‘from a psychological standpoint’, which connects his assessment of the composer’s personality with the many psychologically revealing elements he detected in the drama. In particular, Klaren viewed the scene in which Bianca holds the torch while her husband and lover fight the duel as exemplifying Weininger’s theories of the domination of the feminine as the downfall of man.

Guido’s words to Bianca during their love duet read almost like Weininger on stage. As the duet intensifies, he sings to her, ‘loose the falling midnight of your hair and in those stars, your eyes, let me behold mine image, as in mirrors’. He rhapsodises now not of her beauty, but of his own reflected image which he sees when he looks at her, and with which he is clearly enamoured. The notion that desire is really about and for the self, far from unique to Weininger, is of course a commonplace of Freudian and post-Freudian theory; as Jacques Lacan says in *Seminar I*, it is ‘one’s own ego that one loves in love’. However, it is the Weiningerian formulation, dramatised so explicitly here by Wilde and Zemlinsky, that specifies the way the love of woman objectifies the ideal qualities of the male self.

According to Slavoj Žižek, Weininger ‘hauled into the light of day the “sexist” fantasmatic support of the dominant ideology’. Žižek recognises that in Weininger ‘the male dread of woman which so deeply branded the *Zeitgeist* of the turn of the century’ emerges as linked with the traditional ideological ambivalence towards, on the one hand, Woman as wife and Mother, and on the other, Woman as Whore. This ambivalence runs like a thread throughout the narrative of *A Florentine Tragedy*. In Weininger’s denial of woman’s ontological status, Žižek sees a precursor to Lacan’s ‘La femme n’existe pas’, which replaces the ‘eternal feminine’ enigma once neatly opposed to the masculine with one subject torn by internal antagonisms in fundamentally different ways. But Žižek also hears an echo of Hegel’s characterisation of the self from the *Jenaer Realphilosophie* manuscript, as ‘abstract negativity . . . the night of the world’:

16 Žižek, 106.
The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful.\textendash

Here Žižek discovers the true failure of Weininger's argument in conceiving of woman as the \textit{object} of man: ‘What Weininger fails to accomplish is a Hegelian reflective reversal of recognising in this “nothing” the very negativity that defines the notion of the subject’. In ascribing to woman an infinite striving, ‘Weininger attributes to her a constitutive negativity, and thereby fails to see in his characterisation of “the infinite craving of Nothing for Something” the ontological predicament of all subjects’.\textsuperscript{18} Every subject suffers from the unbridgeable gap between its being and its definition within the symbolic order.\textsuperscript{19} Weininger’s woman, then, is not the object, but the Hegelian subject \textit{par excellence}. The import of Weininger’s entire sexist theory is reversed, like a reflection in a mirror.

Žižek’s essay suggests a dramatic reversal for Bianca, whose role as silent centre of \textit{A Florentine Tragedy} becomes the empty night of the subject. That Simone and Guido continue to see Bianca as object indicates that they look at her without really seeing her; she serves as the object that enables the reflection of desire towards the male self. Yet the very lack of female subjectivity here, when understood as the subject’s ‘defining negativity’, reveals Bianca as the remnant of subjectivity in a drama where the male self is so clearly its own object of desire. In this respect, Guido’s words of love during his duet with Bianca clearly expose the egotistical nature of his affection for her. He is in love with an idealised image of himself, and this is all he sees when he gazes at her. Love is revealed as narcissistic self-love, and as uniquely focused on self-image rather than self-knowledge or knowledge of another. Playing on the Classical myth of Narcissus, Wilde explored a similar formulation of love as self-love in a parable he related to a group of friends:

When Narcissus died, the flowers of the field were desolate and asked the river for some drops of water to weep for him. ‘Oh!’ answered the river, ‘if all my drops of water were tears, I should not have enough to weep for Narcissus myself. I love him’. ‘Oh!’ replied the flowers of the field, ‘how could you not have loved Narcissus? He was beautiful’. ‘Was he beautiful?’ said the river. ‘And who should know better than you? Each day, leaning over your bank, he beheld his beauty in your waters’. ‘If I loved him’, replied the river, ‘it was because, when he leaned over my waters, I saw the reflection of my waters in his eyes’\textsuperscript{20}

As we have seen, both male characters relate to Bianca and to the feminine principle through a fundamental narcissism. Guido’s ardent flattery, distancing Bianca as a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[19] There is no subject, male or female, whose subjectivity is not defined by that order, and who is not also irrevocably severed from its objective dimensions: this is the fundamental subject–object paradigm, as defined by Hegel and linguistically configured by Lacan.
\end{footnotes}
passive ideal even while he possesses her, is merely the flip side of Simone’s
denigration.

Simone links sexual transgression not only with the home as the site of wifely
domesticity, but also with music. Like his feminised description of the moon, which
‘hides her face behind a muslin mask as harlots do when they go forth to snare some
wretched soul in sin’, music wears a guise, and can betray the listener into
corruption. Simone alludes to this power when, seeing Guido’s lute nearby, he asks
the prince to play:

I have heard that by the simple fingering of a string, or delicate breath breathed along
hollowed reeds, or blown into cold mouths of cunning bronze, those who are curious in this
art can draw poor souls from prison-houses. I have heard also how such strange magic lurks
within these shells and innocence puts vine-leaves in her hair, and wantons like a maenad.
Let that pass. Your lute I know is chaste. And therefore play: ravish my ears with some
sweet melody...  

Zemlinsky’s musical setting of this text begins mimetically, with mandolin chords
imitating the strumming of the lute which, on stage, remains silent – it mimics,
perhaps, the music Simone imagines might be played (see Ex. 1). This would
explain why, as he continues his description of music’s power, the orchestra
gradually whips up into a frenzied waltz, calling up all the complex cultural and
social associations of the ‘dangerous’ dance of the nineteenth century with sexual
corruption and excess. Guido actually confirms Simone’s insidious hints by
whispering to Bianca that he will reserve his music for when they are alone together.
He refuses to play for Simone, however, saying, ‘I am content with the low music
of Bianca’s voice, who, when she speaks, charms the too amorous air, and makes
the reeling earth stand still, or fix his cycle round her beauty’. Another link is made
here between the woman and sexual corruption, this time through the musical
sound of her voice.

Wilde’s play had sketched only a very minimal role for Bianca, and Zemlinsky cut
it even further. Not only are her lines few and far between, but many are set in a
most unmelodic fashion. To Simone’s loquacious arioso, flexible, lyrical and highly
expressive, she responds sullenly, with short phrases, flat in pitch profile, rhythmically
impoverished, and low in her range. Lacanian theories of opera have taught us
to hear in the woman’s operatic voice the cry of the subject, which resounds above
the rest of the texture and refuses to be silenced by the pessimistic plotted fate of
female operatic characters. Yet attempts at perceiving a musical reversal for Bianca
are severely limited by Zemlinsky’s persistent unvoicing of her character. Only
briefly, in the love duet with Guido, is her voice unfettered.  

21 Apparently, ‘innocence’ as ‘wanton’ could be male as well as female. A letter of 1897 from
Wilde to the poet Ernest Dowson reads ‘Do I see you tomorrow? ... Come with vine
leaves in your hair’. Quoted in Ellmann, Oscar Wilde, 506–7.
22 See especially Michel Poizat, The Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera, trans.
Arthur Denner (Ithaca, 1992), which responds to Catherine Clément, Opera, or the Undoing of
23 Five bars before rehearsal number 121. All musical citations refer to the Universal Edition
score of Die florentinische Tragodie.
Ex. 1: Zemlinsky, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, opening of Simone’s ‘lute song’ (Reh. 75).
At the same time, however, meaning in the love duet is conveyed at least as forcefully by Zemlinsky’s complex fabric of leitmotifs as by any vocal release for Bianca. Christopher Hailey has argued that in A Florentine Tragedy Zemlinsky makes ‘no effort to develop a network of associative leitmotifs’, employing recurring themes only for ‘such abstractions as love and death’. And yet several motifs other than the ‘abstract’ ones for love and death recur with dramatic significance throughout the work, and the score is virtually littered with motivic references (see Ex. 2). In the love duet, the connection between motifs tends to complicate their dramatic significance (see Ex. 3). The ‘love’ motif in triplet rhythm, heard in the orchestra during Guido’s response to Bianca, continues to accompany her closing words – words that, like so many others in this drama, are laden with double meaning: ‘You know that I am yours for love or death’. The orchestra also foreshadows a four-note descending motif, which dominates as the motif of ‘death’ in the murder scene. When this music reappears in the orchestra during the opera’s critical closing scene, the quieter undertones of its significance become audible.

This closing scene is a strange moment for several reasons. The husband-and-wife embrace over the murdered body of the lover is perverse to say the least, and the sound of the ‘love’ motif from the earlier duet ringing out in the orchestra is unsettling in its new context (see Ex. 4). Furthermore, if the moment seems less than appropriate for renewed marital romance, their words – ‘why did you not tell me . . .’ – seem stranger still, especially as they are sung to the descending ‘death’ motif, which had resounded relentlessly in the orchestra and vocal line as Simone strangled Guido moments before. Bianca’s wonder at her husband’s strength is understandable. She is used to seeing him as he has described himself: an old, tired man from whose body youth has fled. But Simone’s surprise at his wife’s beauty is more cryptic, for surely her appearance is self-evident. Bianca might almost have answered him with Salome’s question to Jokanaan: ‘Ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me . . .? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me’. Simone has, of course, looked before. Yet it is only in this extreme moment that his attention is drawn to her image, and it is what he sees when he looks at her that stays his hand and saves her life.

As Mikuláš Bek has observed, contemporary critics did not like the abrupt reversal at the end of the play, and some attempted to explain it away by saying that Simone had actually loved his wife all along. Other commentators have confronted the interpretation of the reversal more successfully. According to Bek, the dramatic

24 Christopher Hailey, ‘Zemlinsky’s Mirror’ (online article), <http://www.americansymphony.org/dialoguesextensions/200102season/200269/zemlinsky.cfm>, 2002. Hailey’s reference to these two principal motifs of the opera as ‘love’ and ‘death’ is a commonplace in the literature on this work, adopted also for the present article. The motifs are labelled as such also in Beaumont, Zemlinsky; Alfred Clayton, ‘Florentinische Tragödie, Eine’, Grove Music Online, ed. Laura Macy (accessed 12 May 2005), <http://www.grovemusic.com>; and Peter Dannenberg, essay in the booklet accompanying Zemlinsky: Eine florentinische Tragödie, Radio-Symphony-Orchester Berlin conducted by Gerd Albrecht, CD Koch Schwann 314012, 1992.

25 On one level, the reversal plays into the conventional paradigm of the fickle female – Weininger again.
Ex. 2: Selected motifs in Zemlinsky, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*.
Ex. 3: Zemlinsky, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, end of love duet (7 bars after Reh. 124).
reversal becomes more convincing as opera than as stage play, because Zemlinsky’s combination of musical ‘love’ and ‘death’ motifs was virtually an operatic commonplace, suggesting a constellation of opposites familiar and acceptable to an
audience steeped in the Wagnerian ethos of love and death.26 In his notes for the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra recording, Peter Dannenberg accounts for the ending by speculating that ‘Bianca has only become interesting to her husband through her infidelity; Simone only attracts his wife’s attention by becoming a murderer’.27 Yet is it really Bianca’s transgressive sexuality that attracts Simone? I doubt it. His words to Guido during their fight – ‘Now to the death of one, or both of us, or all the three it may be’ – make it clear that he plans to kill Bianca too, if he can. When he rises from Guido’s dead body and turns to her with the words ‘and now for you!’, it is obvious that his intent is still murderous rather than amorous. Yet Dannenberg comes closer to the mark in stating that the characters suddenly see in each other what they had not noticed before.

Regenia Gagnier reads the parallel moment in Wilde’s drama in terms of commercial materialism and commodified human relationships: ‘Simone can only love what he sees, and what he sees is made visible not by its value, but by its price: the logical conclusion of the play is that the husband and wife see each other for the first time, value each other for the first time, because the strength of one has been activated, and the beauty of the other has been objectified, by a competitor’.

Gagnier’s economic model is apt for a drama in which trade of goods between characters is so central to the plot, and her insight that Simone loves only what he sees seems particularly acute. The opera’s preoccupation with visual detail and verbal imagery of the visual, the love dialogue between Guido and Bianca, and at last the final reconciliatory moment between Bianca and Simone, all confirm the play’s theme of tragic misunderstanding between individuals, who relate to each other in only the most superficial manner. As Wilde said, it is about ‘love’s cross-purposes’, through which love somehow becomes the competition of individual purposes.

Although the music blatantly links this scene to the earlier duet between Guido and Bianca, no commentator makes more than a surface connection between the two moments. The musical motif that dominates in both places is assumed to signify a general idea of ‘love’, not specific as to the actual lovers. This so-called ‘love’ motif, at once indeterminate and over-determined, provides a musical answer to the puzzling reversal in the drama’s final moments. This is a drama in which the characters love only what their eyes can see, yet they see without understanding: love is dictated by image. But what Gagnier, Dannenberg and Bek all mistake is precisely what it is that Simone sees at this moment, which apparently reignites his love for his wife. The answer lies in Guido’s words to Bianca, whose import re-echoes in the music of the love duet once again pouring from the orchestra in a lyrical torrent. Like the ill-fated nobleman, Simone looks into Bianca’s eyes and sees only himself. He responds to his idealised image reflected in her, as she now becomes

26 See Mikuláš Bek, ‘On the dramaturgy of Zemlinsky’s Eine florentinishe Tragödie’, this journal (1995), 165–74. Bek’s article provides a useful reception history of the opera, incorporating reviews of its initial performances and relating them to theories of opera and drama of the period.


his mirror, as she was Guido’s. The motif in the orchestra highlights what is common in both these moments: not love, but narcissism, and ultimately the failure of individuals to relate to one another.

Through its relationship to Wilde’s text, Zemlinsky’s music sings another narrative of the tragedy of *A Florentine Tragedy*, which is not, as Zemlinsky stated, that ‘one life has to be sacrificed to save two others’. It is Wilde’s tragedy of ‘love’s cross-purposes’, as so beautifully conveyed in his parable of Narcissus and the river – the tragedy that leaves the individual subject fundamentally alone in the night of the world. The ‘resolution’ Zemlinsky intended for the final moment is musically belied by the motivic significance accrued from one so-called love duet to another. Hearing Zemlinsky’s music through Wilde’s text adds to Adorno’s ‘undoubted musical qualities’ a critical quality of reflection on the way the character of an individual woman mirrors the universal fate of the subject.

Reflecting, reconfiguring: the triangle and male homosocial desire

This woman-as-mirror reading of the opera seeks out a site for feminine subjectivity through a reversal of a traditional concept of masculine subjectivity. That site remains elusive, though; it is glimpsed only as in a glass, darkly. We never really see Bianca as subject. However, the drama may also be read – in a manner perhaps more faithful to its contemporary context – as a project for imagining another marginal subjectivity: that of the homosexual male. Wilde’s play projects multiple conceptions of homoerotic desire, with the role of the feminine construed as pivotal.

Considering that the opera’s libretto derives from Oscar Wilde, an undercurrent of homoeroticism would perhaps be unsurprising. Yet that dimension of the play is hardly mentioned in Wilde scholarship, or in critical discussions of the opera – only Beaumont refers obliquely to it, and then in light of a possible biographical link with Wilde. He supposes that Simone, the older and wiser man with a sharp wit and a tongue given to flights of fluid poetic imagery, may be a type of Wilde himself. Guido, then, he surmises, could represent the young and beautiful Lord Alfred Douglas, third son of a nobly titled and rather dysfunctional family. This parallel is suggested in part by Simone’s description of Guido as ‘the gracious pillar of [your father’s] house, the flower of a garden full of weeds’, a description that might be taken as a slur on Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry. That the two men.

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30 The playwright spoke of plans for further work on the *Florentine Tragedy* after his release from prison, and his friends also seemed to think that it remained unfinished at the time of his death, lacking an opening love scene between Guido and Bianca. The opening dramatic situation is immediately understandable, without any expository preceding scene, and perhaps only further stage directions would have been necessary to finish the existing portion. In spite of this, many – Zemlinsky among them – felt that the drama wanted an additional opening scene. He asked Max Meyerfeld, the German translator of the play, to provide a scene, but Meyerfeld refused. Zemlinsky’s orchestral prelude had to stand in, then, for a missing dramatic introduction. It has long been heard as a musical depiction of the love-making between Bianca and Guido.
in the play might specifically represent Wilde and Douglas themselves is only speculation, but there is indeed some suggestion in the play of an erotic component in the relationship between the merchant and the prince.

The clearest and most subtle manifestation of homosocial interaction between the two men is the way they relate to each other through Bianca, their charged rivalry suggesting the kind of homoerotically inflected love triangle famously analysed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.\(^{31}\) Referring to René Girard’s discussion of the play of desire and power among the members of novelistic love triangles, Sedgwick affirms the intense link between the rivals in any erotic contest: ‘The bonds of “rivalry” and “love”, differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent’.\(^ {32}\) What becomes apparent is how often the choice of a lover is dictated by the fact that she has been chosen by the rival; thus the connection between the male rivals is actually ‘stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved’.\(^ {33}\)

The erotic triangle in *A Florentine Tragedy* is structured so that each man in turn takes an active role. The first action is Guido’s, and takes place outside the scope of the drama *per se*, before its beginning. In choosing Bianca as love object, he chooses Simone as sexual object as well. (That his object-choice of the man who is Bianca’s husband is deliberate – even if he has no prior relationship to Simone himself – is strongly suggested in the play by Simone’s remarks to the effect that Guido has a reputation for conducting affairs with *married* women.) As Sedgwick notes, ‘“To cuckold” is by definition a sexual act, performed on a man, by another man’, and as such it raises the possibility of ‘heterosexual love . . . as a strategy of homosocial desire’.\(^ {34}\) Interestingly, Guido’s seeming position of power is somewhat diminished by the fact that, at this point, Simone’s words suggest that he has already relinquished Bianca as love object. (As mentioned above, he continues throughout the drama to deny her suitability as object for either his own or Guido’s erotic desire; and it is indeed his *lack* of desire for her – and hers for him – which makes the culminating dramatic reversal difficult at first to comprehend. It also suggests, of course, that his desire lies elsewhere.) Equally interesting is the pivoting of the determining role such that, from the opening of the play, Simone becomes the active rival. His engagement with Guido may suggest that he is again choosing Bianca as object, and is therefore willing to compete for her; but in fact, it signals at the same time his choice of Guido as object of homosocial desire.

In a sense, an interpretation drawn from Sedgwick’s theory would reverse Gagnier’s economic interpretation of the drama: while Gagnier suggests that

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\(^{31}\) See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985). Sedgwick uses the term ‘homosocial desire’ to designate what she attempts to theorise as a *structural* continuum of relationships among men, ranging from homosocial to homosexual. ‘Homoerotic’ points towards an eroticised component in homosocial desire, which may not necessarily imply genital homosexual desire or activity.


\(^{33}\) Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 21ff.

\(^{34}\) Sedgwick, 49.
Simone (re)connects with Bianca through Guido – seeing her worth through Guido’s eyes – the love-triangle model rather shows how Simone is connected to Guido through Bianca. While both interpretative schemes address the dynamics of power in erotic relationships, they leave aside the question of subjectivity, so central to the woman-as-mirror aspect of the opera. However, that Weiningerian reading merges the social and subjective aspects of the drama into a dynamic triangular model, one that clarifies both the economics of power and the workings of desire in relation to the other and the self. Significantly, it yields an interpretation that allows for the emergence of a view of same-sex desire operating alongside the more conventional understanding of the heterosexual rivalry evident on the surface, all the while maintaining the centrality of the role of the feminine.

This configuration of the erotic triangle echoes the more primary scheme of the Oedipal triangle, which dramatises the role of the feminine as well as the masculine in the formation of the subject and its sexual self. Freud theorised both heterosexual and homosexual subject-formation through an interplay of identification with and desire for each parent. Put simplistically, the young male child (and in Freud’s theories the child is virtually always male) who comes to identify with his father and choose his mother as erotic object-choice – the ‘positive’ version of the Oedipus complex – takes on a heterosexual identity; the opposite pattern, the ‘negative’ version of the complex, results in a homosexual identity. But in Freud’s later writings he came to see that most (if not all) subjects underwent some form of both the positive and negative versions of the complex (i.e., the ‘complete’ complex), and thus that the development of heterosexual identities for both sexes passes through a homosexual stage. The male child, then, initially experiences a homoerotic identification with his father, involving an ‘effeminate’ subordination to the father. Further, while the infant boy’s sense of self initially arises in relation to the feminine, in the context of his original union with his mother, his masculinity is constituted in opposition to the feminine. These observations point to the fundamental role of the feminine in the necessarily triangular development of both heterosexual and homosexual male subject-identities.

Finally, the triangular configuration repeats once again in Freud’s theories of different paradigms for homosexual subject-types, which Kaja Silverman has schematised in her exploration of the role of the feminine in various possible homosexual subject-positions. Most significantly for the present discussion, Silverman describes, in addition to the negative Oedipal schematic, a concept of male homosexuality that hinges on narcissistic object-choice. This configuration places the homosexual subject in an identity relationship to the father (significantly, a masculine identity, rather than a feminine identity with the mother, as in the ‘negative’ Oedipus complex), and a desiring relationship to a phantasmatic of the self. Possibilities for the narcissistic object-choice include self-love, love of what

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the subject once was, love of what the subject desires to become, and ‘love for someone who was once part of [oneself]’.\textsuperscript{36}

All this is by way of showing the multiple significances of the erotic triangular scheme around which \textit{A Florentine Tragedy} is constructed. More to the point is the way the opera dramatises the instability of male subjectivity constituted under the stress of the triangular model, and encourages and enables an interplay of theoretical perspective which is of particular critical interest. The opera simultaneously stages triangular configurations of trade and desire between men. While the trade relationship is enacted through the position of the woman between them, the same feminine position will reveal both the relation of the desiring male subject to its self and the determination of its erotic object-choice through identification.\textsuperscript{37} Where the import of the feminine position in the contemporary Weiningerian context becomes explicit within the drama, Silverman’s Freud-based model situates that position within a triangular configuration that echoes Sedgwick’s model of male political-economic relations. \textit{A Florentine Tragedy} thus provides the key to a dialectical interaction between two models of eros and desire, supplying a new dimension to each of the views of libidinal economy and subjective constitution. Figure 1 demonstrates this multiplying of homosocial relations between the drama’s male characters, as they relate to each other both directly and indirectly in terms of trade, rivalry and homosocial desire.

Homosocial, yes . . . but homosexual? At first glance the homosocial relationship between men here is not obviously sexual, although, as will be discussed below, certain details of the play (and of the opera) designate this desire as erotically inflected on both sides. What is perhaps more obvious on the surface of the drama is the economic interaction between the men. Economically, women’s exchange


\textsuperscript{37} As Silverman has it, ‘“Woman” would thus seem to function at times not only as the locus of gay identification, but as the pivot of gay desire’; \textit{Male Subjectivity at the Margins}, 355.
value has traditionally been linked with their sexuality, as viewed in terms of either
the reproduction of children, or prostitution. A Florentine Tragedy alludes more than
once to prostitution, in Simone’s veiled accusations of his wife’s infidelity and sensualised description of the moon, but not to the economy of family. Significantly,
Bianca does not seem to be a mother. What she does (re)produce is cloth: she spins,
and usually at her husband’s command (though on this occasion her refusal to do
so arouses his anger). This activity highlights her productive value for Simone, as
well as further implicating her in his seeming obsession with his trade, and his open
exchange with Guido: the Lucca Damask and the cut-velvet robe of state for
100,000 crowns.

The latter extravagant offer from Guido draws from Simone great excitement and
effusive exclamations of pleasure and gratitude. ‘A hundred thousand! My brain is
dazed’, he exclaims. Zemlinsky’s setting of this moment marks Simone’s excitement
with a flurry of semiquaver arpeggios, but also inserts a sevenfold repetition of
Simone’s dotted motif, as if asserting that, through this monetary coup, control of
the situation now lies with him. He attempts to kiss the nobleman’s hands, and
declares that ‘this night shall prove the herald of my love, which is so great that
whatsoever you ask it will not be denied you’. In reply, Guido suggests that he might
ask for . . . Bianca. This request entwines her all the more firmly in trade and renders
explicit the sexual aspect of the commodity exchange between the men. But as
Ellmann and Gagnier have observed, such entanglement of sex and commerce is
unsurprising when the author is Oscar Wilde, for it characterised his own
homosexual relationships, both the transient and the more enduring ones. In
particular it summed up the nature of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas.

If Wilde’s play leans towards the commercialisation of eros, it also and equally
eroticises commerce, supplying an erotic subtext for the trade relationship between
merchant and nobleman. This tendency is highlighted in Zemlinsky’s opera by the
nature of the themes for the ‘Lucca Damask’ and the robe of state, whose rich, lush
orchestral textures and surging, ‘rauschend’ qualities give them the character of love
themes. These are some of the opera’s most lyrical passages, the moments wherein
Simone’s loquacious parlando wells up into an impassioned arioso, ebbing and
flowing over the chromatic harmonies and buoyed up by the full orchestral swell.
As Peter Franklin notes, Simone ‘is drawn from the start into the rather high-flown
passionate rhetoric of Guido, the princely young lover; his vocal style does little to
distinguish him socially and psychologically from his rival and ‘as a result,
psychology follows morality out the window at the end of the opera’. But the

38 Ellmann documents Wilde’s well-known repulsion at his wife’s pregnancy (it was while she
was carrying their second and last child that he ceased sexual relations with her altogether,
and began an active pursuit of relationships with various young men). He thus seemed to
exhibit very strongly what Julia Kristeva has analysed as a primary fear of the maternal
power of women, which is likely at work in the notable absence of images of motherhood,
aside from the negatively comic, in his works.

39 According to Ellmann (Oscar Wilde, 65), ‘since neither Wilde nor Douglas practiced or
expected sexual fidelity, money was the stamp and seal of their love’.

Steven LaRue (Detroit, 1992), 452.
blurring of vocal styles here seems more than careless or accidental: that Simone becomes most expressive when singing about his wares reinforces the equation between trade and passion hinted at elsewhere in Zemlinsky’s music, while also participating in the Wildean eroticisation of commerce.

This triangular configuration of libidinal economies at the heart of *A Florentine Tragedy* has long historical precedent, stretching back at least to Shakespeare’s sonnets. But Wilde’s play also explores a much more contemporary aspect of homoeROTicism, the stereotype of the effeminate gay ‘dandy’. Simone’s words frequently feminise Guido, through allusions to physical beauty, sensuality and seduction; at the same time he denigrates or denies these ‘feminine’ qualities in Bianca. Even while virtually blackmailling the nobleman caught in a compromising situation into purchasing his wares at an exorbitant price, Simone seems to take pleasure in the idea of dressing Guido in the most beautiful, luxurious, ornamental and costly of the garments in his store. ‘I have the fancy to see you in this wonder of the loom amidst the lovely ladies at court like a flower among flowers’, the merchant says, as he tries to settle a price for the Venetian velvet robe of state. (It is the second time he has compared Guido to a flower.41) ‘The effect of this speech is to frame Guido as feminised object of the male gaze, the position later occupied by Bianca.42 Simone’s lute song, discussed earlier as drawing together music, corruption and femininity, also contains his most blatantly homoerotic words. The fact that he openly asks Guido to ‘ravish’ his soul through musical performance – and this on an instrument traditionally used to accompany love songs and serenades – gives homosexual nuance to the already highly eroticised context.

If Simone’s discourse is homoerotically inflected, so, at times, is Guido’s. When he tells Bianca ‘this common chapman wearies me with words’, Guido links Simone both with the wearisome ‘foolish chatterings’ that the merchant has earlier dismissed as ‘the wont of women’ and with the widespread contemporary stereotype of the overly loquacious Jew. Conflating categories of racial and sexual difference in a pseudo-medical discourse on ‘degeneracy’ which implicated Jews in a perceived decline of German civilisation was well established in fin-de-siècle culture. The effeminate character of the Jew as a mark of a pathologically sex-obsessed and degraded Viennese society appears prominently, for example, in Weininger’s theory. In his words, ‘the Jewish race is pervasively feminine’.43 Sander Gilman has explored the complex cultural linkages between concepts of degeneracy and ‘perversion’, homosexuality and Jewishness that informed the response to Wilde in German-speaking countries, most famously as it surrounded the creation and

41 Flowers often carry homoerotic associations in Wilde, both in the literary (particularly poetic) oeuvre and in his personal life and letters; as well as the famous green carnation, lilies and hyacinths were important metaphors for young men and male beauty.


reception of Strauss’s *Salome*. The same cultural apparatus would have allowed the German (and Austrian) audiences of both Wilde’s play and Zemlinsky’s opera to understand the Jewish features projected onto Simone as signals not only of his materialism, but of sexual abnormality. For German-speaking audiences, these racial markers would have signified sexual otherness at least as clearly as the hints of ‘dandification’ and effeminacy that may have been read by (English) audiences of Wilde at the time.

There is a doubled ambiguity in Guido’s remark that ‘princes must be ransomed, and fortunate are all high lords who fall into the white hands of so fair a foe’. Presumably the white hands and fairness refer here to Bianca, though it is unclear why she might be considered a foe. The latter reference becomes clearer when, a little later in the play, Bianca describes Simone’s hands as white. Is Simone the true foe whom Guido finds fair? It is literally the merchant’s white hands into which Guido has fallen by the time he is strangled to death at the end of the play. This ultimate struggle, culminating in direct physical contact between the men, is precipitated by Guido’s words whose phallic imagery carry what is perhaps the clearest homoerotic innuendo in the whole play: ‘Naught would please me better than to stand fronting you with naked blade’.

The climax of the escalating erotic tensions in *A Florentine Tragedy* is, disturbingly, a collapse of the triangle through violent murder. If the Wildean slippage between eros, commodification and configurations of desire has proven tricky to theorise, analysis of the eruption of violence, which resonates as homophobic within this context, is even more challenging and unstable, especially given a relative lack of theoretical apparatus through which to approach it. Sedgwick discusses some historiographical investigations of homophobic violence, and finds manifestations of (Victorian) ‘homosexual panic’ in novelistic and psychoanalytical literatures. She uncovers tendencies towards violent outcomes in the erotic triangles of the Gothic novel, and discusses two implicitly homoerotic triangles in Dickens, both of which end in homophobic murder with strong suggestions of accompanying male rape. In *Our Mutual Friend*, the character of Bradley Headstone murderously attacks two other male characters, notably from behind; the first of these is his rival for the love of Lizzie Hexam. The language in which these attacks are described is heavily


46 Simone’s proposal of the duel as a test of whether his sword or Guido’s is ‘better tempered’ is an obvious game of ‘who has it (the phallus)’ and ‘whose is better (bigger, stronger)’.
suggestive of male rape in its use of the imagery of an iron ring (Sedgwick reads ‘sphincter’) and gripping embraces from behind, as Sedgwick shows in quoting, for example, the following passage:

Bradley had caught him round the body. He seemed to be girdled with an iron ring . . . Bradley got him round . . . and still worked him backward . . . ‘I'll hold you living, and I'll hold you dead! Come down! . . . When the two were found . . . he was girdled still with Bradley’s iron ring, and the rivets of the iron ring held tight.47

As Sedgwick points out, this ring imagery is recapitulated in Dickens’s last, unfinished novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, and recalls too the iron shackles of the convict Magwitch in Great Expectations, whose murder of Compeyson is also described in terms of a violent deathly grip. Note the similarities to Simone’s words as he wrestles with Guido in the darkness, gripping him with strangling hands: ‘Ah, devil! do I hold thee in my grip? . . . You are caught in such a cunning vice that nothing will avail you, and your life narrowed into a single point of shame ends with that shame and ends most shamefully.’ Here is echoed the imagery of grappling and holding, but it is the invocation of shame which seems to suggest more strongly that rape is implied.48 Like the Dickens characters Sedgwick discusses, Simone ‘is bound, through a woman whom he is incapable of loving, to a far more intense relation with a man toward whom he can express nothing but the most intimate violence’.49

In the light of the homosocial reading of the drama, the musical motifs of its operatic setting may be heard as signifying in terms of both identity and desire. The first two bars of the overture directly juxtapose the motifs associated with Guido and Simone, and then follow them immediately with the ‘love’ music. Perhaps unexpectedly, Guido and Simone’s motifs are interrelated by their rhythmic profiles (see Ex. 5). Beaumont has pointed out the similarities between these two motifs, going so far as to suggest that the second motif in the overture, Simone’s, originates in the first, Guido’s.50 Both use dotted rhythms – the most obvious link – and also triplets, and in their various versions throughout the opera they at times share intervallic qualities as well. Although Beaumont notes the association of the stepwise dotted motif with Simone, he does not connect Guido with the more leaping dotted motif, whose upward thrust suggests to him a ‘phallic symbol’; yet it appears clearly and repeatedly in association with the character of the prince.

47 Quoted in Sedgwick, Between Men, 169; her discussion of the ‘ring’ imagery appears on 192.
48 Zemlinsky’s stage directions for his libretto version of Wilde’s play specify that Simone should strangle Guido from the front, throwing him down and placing a knee on his chest. However, Wilde’s stage directions are more ambiguous; they state simply that ‘Simone overpowers Guido and throws him down over [the] table’. They thus leave open the possibility that this attack in the dark, like those in Dickens, is precipitated from behind.
49 Sedgwick, Between Men, 193. Silverman also explores, to a greater extent, non-sexual and sexual violence inflicted on both heterosexual and homosexual male bodies, but does so within the frameworks of crises in historical typings of masculinity in the former, and masochistic subject-positions in the latter. Thus her psychoanalytic interest in subject-positions does not focus on theorising homophobic violence as such. See Male Subjectivity at the Margins, especially chapters 2, ‘Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity’, and 6, ‘Masochistic Ecstasy and the Ruination of Masculinity in Fassbinder’s Cinema’.
Beaumont notes these motivic similarities without speculating about their dramatic significance, but the nuances of Wilde’s drama surely invite interpretation in terms of homosocial object-identification.\textsuperscript{51}

As mentioned above, Zemlinsky’s voluptuous setting of the episodes of both the Lucca Damask and the robe of state give musical currency to Wilde’s sensualisation of commerce, electrifying the commercial exchange between the two men. Franklin’s observation that Guido and Simone share the same ‘high-flown passionate rhetoric’ not only strengthens the sense of musical identity suggested by the commonalities in their motivic materials, but underscores the passionate nature of their intercourse, wherein Simone sings to Guido in the same manner in which Guido sings to Bianca. The Lucca Damask music in particular, which recapitulates almost exactly the second thematic section of the overture, contains the ‘love’ motif embedded in its second phrase (see Ex. 6), suggesting that the damask might also be viewed as a love object exchanged between the men. It continues to be associated with Simone and his obsession with his trade, ultimately having more to do with commerce than with the sensual qualities of the robe itself.

\\textsuperscript{51} I am not suggesting an effort on Zemlinsky’s part to emphasise the drama’s homoerotic subtexts, nor even that he was necessarily aware of them. It seems clear, however, that he recognised the importance of the relationship between the two male characters, as the earlier description of the character of the ‘robe of state’ and ‘Lucca Damask’ themes indicates his sense of the ‘passionate’ nature of Simone’s engagement in the trade relationship.
Perhaps most important, though, is the new significance that can be imputed to the ambivalent love motif, already problematised in terms of its meaning for the two heterosexual duets in the opera. It proves to be even more heavily over-determined when its possible homoerotic connotations are considered. Not only is the ‘death’ motif present with the ‘love’ motif in both love duets, but the ‘love’ motif is also heard during the murder scene (see Ex. 7). Between Guido and Bianca, the Wagnerian conflation of love and death can suggest (as do her ambiguous words) the price he will pay for their forbidden affair. Between Bianca and Simone, the decadent association of love and death echoes the tragedy that enables their reunion, and hints at the darker side of their emotions.

Between Simone and Guido, though, the music of love and death suggests – what? – the motivation, perhaps, behind their encounter, and its truly ambivalent nature. Like the desire that has surfaced, unnamed, in earlier moments of the drama, only to be extinguished finally in violence, the motif of a ‘love that dare not speak its name’ is gradually drowned out by the forceful motif of ‘death’, which saturates the score to a greater degree than any other place in the opera. It seems as though the descending four-note motif takes on a mimetic quality here, not in terms of signifying death, but through the violence with which it dominates the passage. It takes over the direction of virtually the whole texture, which is effectually overwhelmed by the motif’s gravitational pull, and the entire orchestra is caught in its grip, sliding inexorably downward: a musical enactment of the overcoming of
Ex. 7: Zemlinsky, *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, murder scene (3 bars after Reh. 147).
Ex. 7: Continued.
love by violence, as Simone tightens his hold on Guido’s throat. Repeated rushing semiquaver scales in the bass begin by ascending the full octave from $F_1$ to $F_2$, but gradually lose height, reaching only to $E_2$, then $D_2$. High in the orchestra, the love motif recurs in a descending sequence, falling first by semitone and then by whole tone. The death motif itself, sung by Simone with chordal accompaniment, sequences downward by whole tone, then by minor second, as though he is picturing Guido’s body sinking in the water: ‘The dumb river shall receive your corpse and wash it all unheeded to the sea’. Even after death finally occurs, the motif continues, joined again by the ‘love’ motif for the final love scene. In Bianca’s vocal phrase ‘why did you not tell me?’ the eros latent in the ‘death’ motif is made explicit, and Simone echoes her, his phrase a mirror of hers.\footnote{As Richard Kurth commented on an earlier version of this article, the murder of Guido may be understood as Simone’s vehement rejection of the homoerotic tendencies mirrored in Guido’s ‘courtly’ and ‘femised’ qualities, which in turn reflected the feminised characteristics of Simone himself: both his stereotypical Jewish/effeminate features, and his de-masculinised state in the wake of Guido’s usurping of the phallic power he asserts over his wife. In the abrupt reversal at the drama’s end, Simone re-embraces his phallic identity; but his erotic identity, whether homo- or hetero-, remains narcissistic.} The third member of the erotic triangle has finally been eliminated. Or, more accurately, the triangle has been reconfigured again: one woman, one man, and the eroticised image of his idealised self, which he sees reflected in the mirror of her eyes.