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Ghosts of Madwomen Past: Historical and Psychiatric Madness on the Late Twentieth-Century Operatic Stage

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Inspiring Minds

**Ghosts of Madwomen Past: Historical and Psychiatric Madness on the Late
Twentieth-Century Operatic Stage**

Insanity has been important to opera since the beginning of opera. For four hundred years, operas have featured characters driven mad by love, jealousy, and shame. Some of these characters are among opera's most famous, and are still performed today. Over the past four centuries, though, cultural understandings of what it means to be insane have changed many times. My research explores twentieth-century operas with mad characters. In these operas, modern understandings of insanity and mental illness contend with a centuries-old heritage of operatic and theatrical madness. These characters still sing long, dramatic arias like their predecessors, but also show symptoms of twentieth-century diagnoses, such as schizophrenia, agoraphobia, and alcoholism. Opera composers are not doctors, so these medicalized portrayals of madness demonstrate the growing centrality of medical perspectives to insanity as a concept, and provide insight into how people outside the medical field understand madness in the twentieth century.