

SAARTJIE

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Two centuries after her death Saartjie¹ Baartman, a South African Khoikhoi woman, has come to be regarded as a female icon and a symbol of the struggle for human rights in debates on race, gender and otherness. In 2010 the Tisch School of the Arts in New York presented “an interdisciplinary symposium on Sarah Baartman” entitled “Venus 2010”; one of the topics dealt with was iconic women in the twentieth century (Tisch 2010). Saartjie Baartman has been depicted as a mythical figure, a national grandmother, martyr and heroine, and the return of her remains to South African soil in 2002 is regarded as a symbolic ending to colonialism, slavery and racism. Some two centuries after Saartjie’s departure from the country her identity is used as a symbol for nation-building in the new South Africa (Kerseboom 2011:64, 75). She was originally displayed as a freak because of her unusual physique, but her life story is now used as an example of colonial exploitation and degradation.²

In the England of the early nineteenth century Saartjie became known as “The Hottentot Venus,” a stereotype and caricature of the “Hottentot”³ female, and in 1816 scientists in Paris came to the conclusion that she is “the living missing link separating beast from man” (Crais and Scully 2009:6). Her “bottom became one of the famous objects of the nineteenth century” (Holmes 2007:166) and after her death her remains were preserved in a French museum. A large illustration of the Hottentot Venus was exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1889) and a plaster cast of her body was displayed at the International Exhibition in Paris (1937) (Crais and Scully 2009:2).

Scholars, scientists, artists and authors have paid homage to Saartjie Baartman as “The Hottentot Venus” in various ways and in various disciplines. Percival R. Kirby, a Scottish musicologist, wrote articles about her based on research done in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s.⁴ In 1979 South African writer and poet Stephen Gray published *Hottentot Venus and Other Poems* and in 1981 Harvard palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould included her in his critique of racialised science in his *Mismeasure of Man*. The African American poet Elizabeth Alexander published

a collection entitled *The Venus Hottentot* in 1990. Six years later Susan-Lori Parks produced the play *Venus* in New York City and Zola Maseko produced the documentary film *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* in 1998 (Crais and Scully 2009:148-149). Diana Ferrus wrote the poem “I Have Come to Take You Home – A Tribute to Sarah Baartman”, which was to play such an important role in returning Saartjie’s remains to South African soil. The South African composer Philip Miller wrote a contemporary “video diary” of Saartjie’s journey told through song, set, and video projection (Miller 2009) and *Venus Noire*, a 166-minute film directed by Abdellatif_Kechiche, was released in 2010 (Kechiche 2010).

These various ways of demonstrating interest in Saartjie Baartman stem from the original fascination with her extraordinary physical appearance, her body. Initially people were not really interested in her thoughts, her feelings or her identity as a human being. We have no evidence of her personal views or feelings, because the only occasion when her opinions were recorded was during an interview in London, the purpose of which was to determine whether she was forced to exhibit her body.⁵ In the absence of recorded statements made by Saartjie herself, one can only speculate about her sense of her own experiences. But it is fairly safe to assume that she must have been emotionally affected by her experiences in England and France.

In this article I shall use Hendrik Hofmeyr’s opera *Saartjie* (2009) to demonstrate the potential of music to act as a language of the emotions, more specifically by showing how her feelings and her inner world are reflected through musical images. Emotions are universal, but in this opera they are portrayed in a Western musical idiom, just as scholars and other authors also discuss African issues in non-African languages. The composer wrote the libretto in collaboration with writer and editor Fiona Zerbst. English is the main language, but three other South African languages are also used, namely Khoi, Afrikaans and Xhosa.

Because of the lack of recorded evidence from Saartjie herself, it is impossible to determine her views and feelings. Her voice is more or less silenced, if one decides not to rely on the many speculations about her emotions, her intentions and her opinions. In this article I shall show how changing melodic gestures in the course of the opera could symbolise Saartjie’s troubled psyche and her various moods.

Although a melody or melodic figure may signify a certain mood, in this opera they are not regarded as static structures.

This short opera with its one-word title deals with the night that Saartjie died as a lonely, solitary figure in Paris at the end of 1815. She is not only a solitary character in this opera, but was also alone in life, surrounded by people who pretended to promote her interests, but who were actually driven by their own agendas. In order to convey the message that the musical narrative in the opera communicates, I must first give some background on how it came about that Saartjie found herself in Paris at the end of her life. Within the limited scope of an article one can attend only to a few issues in using the story of her life as an introduction. The sources I list provide more information on, and interpretations of, the events in her life. These sources also deal with exploitation, the slave trade and its abolition, gender, race, comparative anatomy, scientific racism, inequalities and so on. This overview of Saartjie's life is presented under three headings, namely her years in South Africa, the launching of her career as "The Hottentot Venus" in London and finally the last 16 months of her life in Paris.

1. An overview of Saartjie's life

1.1 From the Eastern Cape to Cape Town

Saartjie was born in the 1770s⁶ about fifty miles to the north of the Gamtoos Valley in the Eastern Cape and not in the Gamtoos Valley as was generally believed (Crais and Scully 2009:7). She became a domestic worker on the farm of Cornelius Muller and learned Dutch as it was spoken at the time in South Africa. As a member of the Khoikhoi, who are regarded as among the original inhabitants of this country,⁷ she played the *ramkie*,⁸ a forerunner of the tin-can guitar (see Fig. 1), and the single-stringed *mamokhorong*.

Figure 1: Saartjie (Siyasanga Mbuyazwe) and her *ramkie*



In the middle of the 1790s, when Saartjie was about twenty years of age, the farmer for whom she worked sold her to a passing traveller, Pieter Cesars, who was in the service of a wealthy German merchant in Cape Town (Crais and Scully 2009:24). She worked as a domestic servant in the household of the merchant Jan Michiel Elzer until his death in 1799, after which she moved to the house of Pieter Cesars and around 1803 to Hendrik and Anna Cesars, the illiterate Hendrik being the brother of Pieter. The 1807 census registered Hendrik and Anna Cesars as free blacks (Holmes 2007:28).

Cape Town was a typical harbour town, with transient sailors visiting the taverns and inns, where there were ample opportunities for singing, dancing and prostitution. This was the world into which the first of Saartjie's three babies was born (Crais and Scully 2009:37). After the death of this baby she moved in with a new lover, Hendrik van Jong, a drummer in the Batavian infantry, but she still worked for Hendrik Cesars.⁹ A second child born in 1804 also died and after the British Navy moved into Table Bay in 1806, the drummer boy left Cape Town at the end of that year. Back in the household of Hendrik Cesars, Saartjie lost a third baby, born of a relationship with a Mozambican slave (Crais and Scully 2009:46-47).

Hendrik Cesars, the person who later helped to take Saartjie to London, was then in the service of a British Army surgeon named Alexander Dunlop, who arrived with the British Navy in 1806. As she had already put herself on display in Cape Town (Crais and Scully 2009:50), Dunlop saw the attention that Saartjie attracted by her extraordinary physique, her singing and dancing had the potential to make money, specifically in the big city of London. Here the prevalent interest in scientific curiosities and exoticism would guarantee Saartjie's success, but "[i]t does not appear that anyone consulted Sara about these plans" (Crais and Scully 2009:54). The contract mentions that Dunlop would then become Cesars's employer and that Saartjie would be exhibited to the public. Any remuneration, however, either for Saartjie or Cesars, did not figure in the contract (Crais and Scully 2009:56).

The year before Saartjie left Cape Town in 1810 the new British rulers implemented the Caledon code, which specified that free blacks may leave Cape Town, but not the Khoikhoi.¹⁰ In his application to get permission for Hendrik and Saartjie to leave Cape Town, Dunlop wrote to the government on 7 March 1810 that Hendrik would be travelling with "a friend" and on 20 March 1810 Hendrik received his passport, which gave him permission to take with him the "Free Black Saar", a misrepresentation of Saartjie's true identity as a Khoikhoi (Crais and Scully 2009:56, 197). To leave the life of a domestic servant, hoping for fame and fortune and returning home rich, was an obvious reason for her decision to leave, especially with Hendrik Cesars at her side and employed by a British medical doctor (Crais and Scully 2009:136).

Alexander Dunlop, Saartjie Baartman, Hendrik Cesars and one or two young servants left Cape Town at the end of March 1810. With her she took her musical instruments, tortoiseshell pendant, ostrich feathers, an assortment of pipes and other accessories for the exhibition, such as a bushbuck apron that was worn by rural women to cover their genitals (Holmes 2007:53-54). They landed in Plymouth in May 1810 and Dunlop soon found permanent lodgings in Duke Street, St. James's in London's fashionable West End.

1.2 London

Dunlop advertised Saartjie's exhibition with Hendrik Cesars as the showman under the title "Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus". The exhibition "combined science and the freak show, and alluded to the public interest in the figure of the prostitute" (Crais and Scully 2009:71). The poster of September 1810 showed Saartjie from the side, semi-nude, with her extraordinary buttocks at the centre of the picture. This aquatint as well as a second one produced in March 1811 gave the name of "S. Baartman" as the publisher, a fact that demonstrated her talent for business which was exceptional for a woman of the time. Her regular Sunday carriage rides around Piccadilly further promoted Dunlop's campaign (Crais and Scully 2009:75, 81).

The exhibition combined traditional Khoikhoi dancing and her playing her musical instruments with singing of folk songs in Dutch, Khoi and English. With her "African guitar" (*ramkie*) "Sartjee" became the topic of ballads, caricatures, articles and satires (Holmes 2007: 60, 66).

Saartjie became the most famous theatrical attraction in Piccadilly in the transition between two distinct historical moments in English racial attitudes. She arrived towards the end of the era when sentimental primitivism held sway and at the beginning of the rise of the new pseudo-science of ethnology, in which human beings became living specimens (Holmes 2007:70; see also Crais and Scully 2009:80).

It became fashionable to exhibit Saartjie in the homes of the wealthy and aristocratic, and Dunlop arranged private showings at 225 Piccadilly (Crais and Scully 2009:78). However, the African Institution, a formal organisation that campaigned for the abolition of slavery, took up the issue of Cesars's role in Saartjie's exploitation after an anonymous letter in the *Morning Chronicle* (12 October 1810) had mentioned that "[t]his poor female is made to walk, to dance, to shew herself, not for her own advantage but for the profit of her master" (Crais and Scully 2009:89, 90). The next day Hendrik Cesars (or rather Dunlop, because Cesars was illiterate) wrote that "[t]his woman was my servant at the Cape, and not my slave ... she is brought here with her own free will and consent, to be exhibited for the joint benefit of both our families". More letters followed and on 22 October Cesars (or rather Dunlop?) wrote

that he gave “the sole direction of it [the public exhibition] to an Englishman” because his own “mode of proceeding at the place of exhibition” had given offence to the public. To avoid further public complaints Dunlop tried to make the exhibition more acceptable. He got rid of Saartjie’s tight brown body stocking “that suggested a nude Hottentot Venus” and had her dressed in tribal costume (Crais and Scully 2009:91-92). Cesars left the show and Dunlop drew up a contract employing Saartjie as a domestic servant. According to the new contract, Dunlop would pay Saartjie twelve guineas as well as providing financially for the voyage to Cape Town should she wish to return before the five-year contract expired (Crais and Scully 2009:98).

The question of whether Saartjie Baartman was treated as a slave was taken to England’s highest court. The investigation included an interview with her on 27 October 1810 conducted by the coroner of the court and a notary accompanied by two merchants who spoke Dutch. Saartjie stated that she came to England of her own free will, that she was paid, that Mr Dunlop would pay for her return and that she was happy in England. At the end of October 1810 the King’s Bench decided that Saartjie Baartman was a free woman who displayed herself willingly and that she shared in the profits (Crais and Scully 2009:93-101; Holmes 2007:91-109).

Although Saartjie’s fame was then at its peak, public interest in London eventually waned, because “[t]he display no longer suggested an explicit spectacle of flesh and touch. ... One viewer expressed disappointment at the show’s respectability” (Crais and Scully 2009:104). Apparently the public was more interested in the pornographic aspect of Saartjie’s exhibitions than the new “spectacle of ethnography”. There is not sufficient information about her whereabouts during her last three years in England to form a coherent picture of her life at the time.

1.3 Paris

When Saartjie arrived in Paris in early September 1814, she was accompanied by Henry Taylor, about whom the records have left no trace (Crais and Scully 2009:117, 113). Leaving behind her the debate and court case on slavery, in France Saartjie was drawn into the discourse on race, comparative anatomy and the human species.

About six months before Saartjie entered Paris, “[n]early one hundred thousand Prussians, Russian Cossacks, and other allied troops defeated Napoleon’s soldiers on the hills of Montmartre”. The result was that when Saartjie arrived “[t]ens of thousands of soldiers, especially Prussians and Russians” were loitering in the city. On 18 September 1814 the first advertisements for the exhibition appeared in the *Journal de Paris* (Crais and Scully 2009:118, 123). The *Journal général de France* reported that Saartjie, wearing her tortoiseshell necklace, the kaross and other ethnic artefacts, charmed the Parisians by dancing, singing in her native language and playing her *ramkie* and *mamokhorong* (Crais and Scully 2009:125; Holmes 2007:124).

In order to raise profits her exhibition eventually stayed open for ten hours a day, while Saartjie had to endure “the gaze and the prodding of strangers” (Crais and Scully 2009:122). At the end of the year she was tired; she had recurrent bouts of flu and the amount of alcohol she consumed to keep her going also took its toll. It was an extremely cold winter. After the New Year of 1815 Saartjie was unable to perform and Henry Taylor became a worried man. During this time a showman of animals by the name of S. Réaux saw an opportunity and took over Taylor’s deal with *La Vénus Hottentote* (Crais and Scully 2009:127).

An ambitious Réaux arranged performances exclusively for Parisian high society and in March 1815 he offered a leading scientist, Georges Cuvier, the opportunity to study the extraordinary body of *La Vénus Hottentote*. Cuvier, then professor of comparative anatomy at the Museum of Natural History, “made Paris the world centre of comparative anatomy, biology and zoology” (Crais and Scully 2009:131). The interest in Saartjie’s extraordinary physique was justified by another scientist, Henri de Blainville, who explained that he wanted to do a “detailed comparison of this woman with the lowest race of humans, the Negro race, and with the highest race of monkeys, the orangutan”. In 1817 Cuvier came to the conclusion that “the Hottentot was a closer relative of the great apes than of humans” (Crais and Scully 2009:136, 140).

It has been speculated that, in order to survive, “she was forced into prostitution in the Parisian underworld” (Kechiche 2010). The date of Saartjie’s death is uncertain.

According to Georges Cuvier, she died on 29 December 1815; the *Annales, Politiques, Morales et Littéraires* recorded 30 December as the date of death and the *Journal général de France* gave the date as 31 December. Various causes of her death were mentioned: fever, smallpox, a respiratory ailment and pneumonia (Crais and Scully 2009:138). Holmes (2007:160), Kechiche (2010) and Kerseboom (2011:68) also mention syphilis as a cause of death. After her death the unburied relics became the property of Georges Cuvier, stored in his *Cabinet d'Anatomie Comparée* for the study of human racial differences (Holmes 2007:162).

2. Hendrik Hofmeyr's *Saartjie* as a musical narrative

Music has the potential to signify that which cannot always be expressed in words, that is human feelings. In the absence of a constative dimension, that is, not being able to make true or false statements, melodic structures do something else – they create effects and therefore they have a performative function. As melody and melodic motives unfold in the course of the opera, they represent a musical narrative that could be interpreted as signifying Saartjie's emotional condition in the various stages of her short life. According to semiotician Eero Tarasti, musical logic cannot be based on static concepts, but on a "logic that depicts the constant changes of phenomena from one state to another. Consequently, musical signification should be based on the continuous becoming and changing of musical figures" (1994:18).

Before tracing the shapes and contours of melodic structures in the work as a whole, I must first mention the circumstances leading to the composition of the opera. In celebrating the centenary of the South African College of Music in 2010, the University of Cape Town requested five South African composers to write a short opera of 20 minutes each. Consequently *Saartjie* (Hendrik Hofmeyr), *Words From a Broken String* (Peter Klatzow), *Hani* (Bongani Ndodana-Breen), *Out of Time* (Péter Louis van Dijk) and *Tronkvoël* (Martin Watt) were performed by the Cape Town Opera in November 2010 (Spies 2010). In this performance of *Saartjie* Siyasanga Mbuyazwe and Siphamandla Yakupa sang the role of Saartjie on alternate evenings.

Hofmeyr's monodrama (as he describes it on the title page) deals with the night that Saartjie died in Paris at the end of 1815. As Saartjie is the only character in the

opera, the drama is situated in her psyche. The composer chose New Year's Eve as the date of death, as this enabled him to use the music, noise and lights of the celebrations in various ways to affect Saartjie's state of mind, as will be shown below. The opera is sung in English, but it incorporates two French songs, a Nguni lullaby, an Afrikaans folk song and a Khoi prayer. One of the French songs is *La Marseillaise*, included for dramatic reasons "despite the fact that it was banned in France at the time" (Hofmeyr 2009).

In the opening scene (starting in measure 66) an exhausted and ill Saartjie has just returned from one of her shows, trapped in a kind of life that she could not have foreseen when she left Cape Town in 1810. She vows that she will not be forced by her manager, Réaux, to continue exhibiting herself. This scene is preceded by an orchestral overture that starts with a dissonant, loud clash in the lowest register, separated from an agitated, ascending four-note figure followed by trills on a dissonant chord. When the main melodic material, played by the woodwind and stringed instruments, is introduced in measure 5, the effect of anxiety is enhanced by the isolated first note of the opening motive (Ex. 1). This effect of isolation, accented in both cases, may well signify an ambiguity, that is, representing Saartjie's singleness of purpose, on the one hand, and her loneliness, on the other.¹¹ (Listen to the orchestral introduction on YouTube 1 at 25". The link appears in the list of references. Siphamandla Yakupa is Saartjie in this performance.)

Example 1: Saartjie, measures 5-14 (orchestral introduction)

Agitato e veemente

Fl. Cl. Vn. I Vn. II

Ob. Fg. Vl. Vc.

The bracketed motive in the first measure of Example 1 appears transposed (that is, on other levels) in every measure until measure 19 with the exception of measures 9 and 14. It is difficult for the listener to make sense of these jagged melodic gestures,

the dissonant chords and the dense, active textures later on (see Fig. 2). How does one link this kind of music with a seemingly simple woman from the Eastern Cape in South Africa? Hofmeyr sees this tension between simplicity and sophistication as an essential component of both Saartjie's personality and the opera as a whole (Hofmeyr 2012).¹²

Saartjie at the time of her fame was no longer the simple country girl of popular legend; she was a fairly sophisticated urban woman with considerable business acumen, who made a career out of playing the "noble savage" for the benefit of European consumers. Perhaps, as the opera suggests, some part of her yearned for the lost innocence of her youth; the citation of folk music represents that longing. The dramatic use of the contrast between simple folk music and a more complex operatic style is a time-honoured operatic tradition, but here also serves to underline the tension between Saartjie's nostalgia for her own mythologised youth and her actual situation. The citations remain deliberately detached from the general musical discourse in order to underline their function as symbols of other states of being, on one hand, the alien world of the French, and on the other, her own youth. It is only in the final moments, when she believes that she is returning to the world of her youth, that the two languages move towards integration in the "folk-like" inflections of the Chorus of Ancestors and the "sophisticated" contours of the Khoi prayer (Hofmeyr 2012).¹³

Figure 2: "The sky is suddenly lit up with fireworks. She stretches out her arms to the light" (p. 74 of the score, near the end of the opera, on the next page).

As Saartjie's mind travels back in time in the course of the opera, the initial agitated motive (marked in Ex. 1) retains its basic shape. This constant element may justify a comparison with the stable identity of her as a person. Therefore this figure is labelled here as the Saartjie motive. The composer intended it to represent her

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frullato
mp *f* *sempre sin.*

f *f espressivo*
frullato (facoltativo [optional])
mp *f* *sempre sin.*

f mp *f mp*

pp *sempre sin.*
pp *sempre sin.*
pp *sempre sin.*
pp *sempre sin.*

Triangolo
p *f* *p* *mf* *p* *mf*

Glu. choro.
P.S.
T.T.
G.C.
mf *mp* *mp* *f* *mf*

Mar.
f *p* *gliss.* *f* *p* *gliss.* *f* *p*

Vib.
(ostaccolati) f

Sax.
The Ob. what

Lo solo
f espressivo

fp *fp* *sempre sin.*
fp *fp* *sempre sin.*
fp *fp* *sempre sin.*

fp *gliss. tremoloso (non misurato)* *sempre sin.*

fp *il più forte possibile* *gliss. tremoloso (non misurato)* *sempre sin.*

fp *il più forte possibile*

f mp *f mp*

agitated and constrained state of being. “The agitated figure vehemently struggles upwards, but is halted by its own limitations” (Hofmeyr 2012). The rules that apply to traditional melodic structures are used by the composer to symbolise the constraints experienced by Saartjie, as will be shown below. The changes in the dynamic level, tempo, rhythm and the inner structure of the motive represent her changing mood and psychological condition. Considering these changes in the Saartjie motive, the overall effect is one of lyricism towards the end of the opera, signifying resignation and a peaceful return “home”, that is her spiritual home, a return to her Ancestors.

To facilitate the description of the Saartjie motive as it changes in the course of the opera I shall label the various forms according to the distances (known as “intervals”) between the adjacent pitches that constitute the three-note motive. The size of each interval is expressed as a multiple of the smallest possible interval, the semitone (abbreviated as “s”). Saartjie’s jagged motive, which is introduced in measure 5, is therefore labelled as s(1+8).

In the first waltz (the orchestra beginning in measure 89) she is unhappy about “another dreary evening”. An ambiguous effect is created when the Saartjie motive, now rhythmically embedded in a waltz-style, is accompanied by dissonant chords on the second and third beat. At the end of the first phrase a mirrored variant of the Saartjie motive, here s(1+10), balances the ascending contour at the beginning of the phrase (broken square bracket in Ex. 2a). Example 2b shows the last motive of the phrase as a mirror image of the opening motive. (Listen on YouTube 1 at 3’40’.)

Example 2: Saartjie, measures 92³-99 (First waltz)

When Saartjie expresses her determination that she will not be forced to carry on exhibiting herself (beginning of Ex. 3), her tone is firm and the large segment shrinks

to a traditional perfect fifth¹⁴ interval (s7). However, she sinks into bitterness when she realises that she is a better financial proposition in death than in life – “[T]hose frigid men of science among their skeletons and their heads in jars, those men, who made me strip so they could probe me top to toe, those men will pay most handsomely for my body when I’m dead” (mm. 129-141). Her musical oration ends with two ascending Saartjie motives, signifying an anguished mind. The large segment first expands to form s(1+11) (“will pay most”) and then shrinks to form s(1+6) (“body when I’m”). In traditional tonal music, the dissonant s6 interval, or tritone (three whole tones), is often associated with death or evil. (Listen on YouTube 1 at 4’10”.)

Example 3: Saartjie, measures 118-141

Reaux can - not force me to con - ti - nue; toe, those
men will pay most hand-some-ly for my bo - dy when I'm dead.

In the second waltz Saartjie is “mockingly bombastic” (according to the score) in ridiculing “those frigid men of science”. The first phrase of the second waltz begins and ends with an enlarged variant of the Saartjie motive, that is, s(1+10). The mirror form that rounds off the phrase (marked by the broken square bracket) is broken up by a rest, as if to suggest doubt about the concept of “hope” (Ex. 4). When she refers to the “famous Saar(tjie)” her original motive, s(1+8), returns and “known as the Ve(nus Hottentot!)”¹⁵ is linked with an expanded large segment, that is s(1+9). (Listen on YouTube 1 at 5’04”.)

Example 4: Saartjie, measures 143³-158 (Second waltz)

"As rare and fine a spe-ci-men, dear sirs, as one could hope to find:
the fa - mous Saar - tjie Baart - man known as the Ve - nus Hot - ten - tot!"

The cheering and laughing crowd of revellers that passes under her window is interested only in her extraordinary physical appearance. When she discards her cloak, calling out “to you I am no more than this” (Ex. 5), the first melodic figure is a descending tritone (s6) with its negative association followed by two ascending Saartjie motives, namely s(1+7) and s(6+1), the latter with the segments in reversed order (marked with a broken square bracket). When she refers to her reputation as “The Venus Hottentot” in a grandiose or sarcastic way, the original motive returns but now in enlarged note values. (Listen on YouTube 1 at 6’39”.)

Example 5: Saartjie, measures 222²-253

Bitterness in the tone of her monologue is musically reflected by a motive in which the order of the segments as well as the direction of one segment change (“Voluptuous monster” marked with a broken slur). Figure 3 captures this moment in the performance of the opera.

Figure 3: “Voluptuous monster”



When her musical oration reaches its lowest point (“Beast from darkest Africa” in Ex. 5), the mirror form of $s(1+10)$ is marked with a broken square bracket. Her growing distress is symbolised by the increase in size of the large segment to form $s(1+11)$ at “of your wil(dest)” followed by the mirror form of $s(1+10)$ marked with a broken square bracket. The mirror form ends with a return to the opening note of the preceding Saartjie motive. After this outburst she asks: “Is this all that remains of me?”

Saartjie’s thoughts go back to her childhood and her youth: “*Where is the Saartjie who dreamed by the Gamtoos and mingled her song with the song of the birds? Where are those other New Year’s Eves, those nights of song and dance and laughter with my Daniel at the Tavern of the Seas?*” The italicised sections in this quotation are musically represented by two leaps of a perfect fifth ($s7$) interval in the same direction (e.g. C-G-D). (Listen on YouTube 1 at 7.27.) The style of this expressive aria, which serves as a preparation for the Afrikaans folk song, is more lyrical because of the absence of the Saartjie motive. *Al lê die berge nog so blou* (Even though the mountains are so blue) reminds her of her Cape lover, Daniel, with whom she had a child, Elsie.¹⁶ The song represents a link with her childhood in the

Eastern Cape and her stay in Cape Town, because the language of the song developed from Dutch which she had spoken at the time.¹⁷ (Listen on YouTube 2 at 2'.)

When she hears the sound of a drum, she thinks that Daniel, her drummer boy in Cape Town, has come back to her. But instead it is the introduction to *La Marseillaise*. “Just more Frenchmen singing hollow hymns to freedom and fraternity ... ‘To arms!’ indeed! And who is the oppressed?” And bitterly she continues: “Ah, Daniel, save me! Save me from these people. ... I want no more of their freedoms.” Two original Saartjie motives, both with the original ascending contours and the second one repeated on a higher level, emphasise her determination. The direction of the small segment of the mirror form changes when, introducing the third waltz, she asks “Hendrik, did you foresee all this when you brought me here?” (marked with a broken square bracket). (Listen on YouTube 2 at 5'44".)

Example 6: Saartjie, measures 375²-389²

The third waltz starts with a descending s10 interval that links with an ascending s(1+10) motive when she refers to Hendrik’s promises of fame. Two other square brackets highlight the Saartjie motive with the same large leaps on “I left all” and “on a London stage”, the ascending contours of the large leaps signifying anxiety. (Listen on YouTube 2 at 6'10".)

Example 7: Saartjie, measures 389³-405 (Third waltz)

Alternating with the s(1+10) motive is a new idea which shows a version of the Saartjie motive in which the large segment has shrunk significantly, forming s(1+3), marked with small pointed brackets in Example 7. The jagged motive has now changed to create a softer, more lyrical effect. The second and third pointed brackets show the mirror variant with its descending contour, as if to signify despondency. Previously the Saartjie motive was separated from the mirror form (see Examples 2, 4, 5 and 6), but in Example 7 the two types are directly linked to form a circular pattern, marked with a large pointed bracket (“all-too-eager ears”), beginning and ending on the same note.

This circular effect could signify ambiguity. Although the circle is traditionally regarded as symbolising perfection,¹⁸ I have shown elsewhere how a circular figure could also represent entrapment.¹⁹ When I showed this article to Hendrik Hofmeyr, he mentioned that he had specifically used a certain kind of interval, that is a diminished interval, to portray entrapment in the opera. According to convention, a diminished interval in a melody “requires a reversion within the melodic contour and therefore precludes the idea of ‘escape’” (Hofmeyr 2012). Saartjie’s melodic line is saturated with diminished intervals that are formed, on the one hand, by consecutive pitches and, on the other, by melodic contours.²⁰ (All the examples with the exception of the Nguni lullaby in Ex. 8 contain diminished intervals in Saartjie’s line.)

In this article I rely in the first place on musical gestures that are immediately perceptible, that is motives that appear on the surface of the music. At the end of Example 5 the direct link of the motive’s original format with its mirror image is not as audible as the circular effect in Example 7, because of the extreme size of the large segment and the extended climactic note (on “wildest”) in the earlier example. This circular image embedded in the extroverted mode of Saartjie’s monologue (Ex. 5) reflects the harsh outer world, whereas the intimate, smaller circle in Example 7 could represent a soft inner world, especially if one considers the significance the composer attaches to the use of diminished intervals. The second phrase of Example 7 portrays the same kind of contrast between the outer and inner landscape: the harsh s(1+10) motive (“I left all”) is directly followed by the lyrical s(1+3) motive with its descending contour (“that was dear”). The accented tritone (s6), also with a descending contour (at “savage”), immediately revives the negative

emotions when linking this psychological drama with its fluctuating emotions to the harsh reality of playing “the savage on a London stage” (Ex. 7).

When the orchestral introduction returns in measure 408, it takes on the form of a dialogue between Saartjie and the orchestra, both parts featuring the original jagged motive. “Oh, what a fool I’ve been! What made me stay in Paris when I could have gone home with you!”, addressing Hendrik. The expressive melody associated with her birthplace returns when she sings: “The waters of the Gamtoos will nevermore cool this brow, I’ll nevermore hear the *loerie*’s call, nor see the *aalwyn*’s flame. Now only death can reunite me with my loved ones in the Great Beyond.” Saartjie’s original motive becomes more lyrical when she dreams of seeing her baby, Elsie, again: “Will I cradle you again within these arms ...”. The semitone is replaced by a whole tone to form s(2+8) accompanied by a gentle rocking movement of chords that consist of open fourths, anticipating the accompaniment for the ensuing Nguni lullaby, *Thula, thu*. (Listen on YouTube 3 at 1’26”.)

Example 8: Saartjie, measures 488³-500

The musical score for Example 8, measures 488-500, is presented in a multi-staff format. The instruments and parts included are:

- Flute, Clarinet, Bassoon:** Flute and Clarinet parts are mostly rests. Bassoon has a solo starting in measure 495, marked *mp* and *espressivo*.
- French horns:** Play chords in measures 488-494, marked *ppp*. In measures 495-500, they play a rocking motion of chords, marked *pp*.
- Marimba:** Remains silent throughout.
- Vibraphone:** Plays chords in measures 488-494, marked *pp*.
- Saartjie:** Sings a melodic line in measures 488-500, marked *mp*. The lyrics are: "Thu-la, thu, thu-la, ba-ba, thu-la sa-na. thul' u-mam 'u-zo-bu-ya e-ku-se-ni, thu-la, thu, thu-la, ba - ba."
- Violas and Cellos:** Play chords in measures 495-500, marked *ppp*.

The image shows a musical score for a scene. The instruments listed are Clarinet, Bassoon solo, Marimba, Vibraphone, Saartjie (vocals), Viola, and Cello. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics for Saartjie are: "thu - la, thu, thu-la, sa - na, thu - la, thu - la, ba-ba-na, thu - la, thu - la, thu ...". There are also markings for "French horns" in the Marimba part.

This lullaby was anticipated in measure 484 by the viola, marked *espressivo*. However, Saartjie's version develops in a direction of its own, just as her life had started out from the land of the *loerie* (a bird), the *aalwyn* and *boegoe* (plants), the mountains and the rivers to pursue a life of her own.

Saartjie falls asleep while the bassoon with its mellow timbre repeats the Nguni lullaby and the clock strikes twelve (measure 500⁴). She is woken by the cheering of the crowd and in her confused state mistakes the distant cannon fire and fireworks celebrating the New Year for the thunder and the stars of Africa. She seeks consolation in the words of a Khoi prayer from her childhood.

Figure 4: Saartjie praying



In the notes that accompany the score Hofmeyr (2009) writes that “[t]he Khoi prayer is one of the few extant transcriptions of one of the extinct Khoi languages, but only the words have survived, so that the music had to be invented. Apart from references to the descending phrase format so typical of African song, there is no attempt to make the music sound ‘authentic.’” These descending contours feature more prominently in the middle of the prayer. The English translation provided in the notes runs as follows: “Son of the Thundercloud! Brave, roaring Gurub! Speak softly, for I am without guilt; Forgive me, for I am grown weak. O Gurub! Son of the Thundercloud!”

*!Nanumatse! !Gari-khoi, !Gurutse!, †Ouse gobare, /havië t’am u-hã-tamaö;
/Ubatare †outago Xuige. !Gurutse! /Nanus oatse!*

Example 9 shows the beginning and end of the prayer, with the Saartjie motive anchoring the prayer on both ends. As if asserting herself even at the end of her life, Saartjie’s expressive music is heard at a high dynamic level. The idea of isolation that was already evident in the orchestral opening of the opera and in the initial introduction of the Saartjie motive (Ex.1) is further developed here. The prayer opens with a short, three-measure phrase, isolated by rests on both sides. As in Example 7, two Saartjie motives with a shrunken large segment mirror each other to form another circular image when Saartjie realises that she is crossing into a new world (*!nau*). As the distance between the peripheral notes of this circular figure is a diminished fifth interval, the circularity is here allied to the ‘constraining’ effect of diminished intervals to create a symbol of inescapable doom. (Listen on YouTube 3 at 3’40”.)

Example 9: Saartjie, measures 521-548

At the sound of cannon-fire she starts up,
clutching her throat.

ff Ah, the *!nau* is u - pon me! *liberamente* *!Na* - nu - mat-se!

13 †ou-ta-go Xu - ge. !Gu - ru - tse! /Na - nus oa-tse! /Na - nus oa - tse!

After the descending melodic contours in the prayer, it ends with the original jagged Saartjie motive, but here with an extremely augmented large segment, forming s(1+11). As the fireworks celebrate the new year, “[s]he stretches out her arms to the light” and, while hearing her ancestors calling her to come home, she dies. “A final statement of the Saartjie motive, now in a bright major key, is heard in the orchestra against Saartjies’s last note, signifying the attainment of that for which she had been striving” (Hofmeyr 2012).

Figure 5: As “the stars of Africa” light up the sky, Saartjie hears the ancestors calling her home.



In *Saartjie* Hendrik Hofmeyr created a life through music, a work rich in meanings, many of which are of an ambiguous nature. A convincing musical narrative is the product of the way in which the three-note Saartjie motive is shaped over time to reflect her psychological condition, and her fluctuating mood and feelings in the course of the opera. Moreover, the meaning of the words and their musical signification are so tightly integrated that the perceiver is drawn into the act of interpretation, becoming involved in Saartjie’s dilemma. On a macro-structural level the effective positioning of three waltzes also contributes towards the experience of a coherent whole. In the first waltz (Ex. 2) Saartjie’s account of the “dreary evening” ends with the decision “[i]t must be the last time!” In the second waltz she mocks the scientists (Ex. 4), realising that her body is worth more in death than in life. After

listening to the crowd singing *La Marseillaise*, she acknowledges “what a fool I’ve been” in the third waltz (Ex. 7).

On another level the three songs in different South African languages also facilitates understanding. They represent three different times and places in her short life. The order in which these songs appear in the opera also shows a kind of progression into her inner world. First, the Afrikaans folk song, the most recent of the three, is associated for Saartjie with her life and loves in Cape Town. The Nguni lullaby of earlier origin reflects her short experience of motherhood in Cape Town, but reaches further back to her own childhood in the Eastern Cape. In the opera this elegant lullaby near the end of the opera, accompanied by slowly rocking open chords, symbolises a point of arrival, a point of rest.²¹ Finally, going further back in history, the prayer of the Khoikhoi, who were among the first inhabitants of the country, represents a spiritual home, taking her back to her Ancestors and to peace with herself.

Postlude

President Nelson Mandela raised the issue of the repatriation of Saartjie’s bodily remains with French President François Mitterrand and six years later, on 9 August 2002, she was finally buried on a hillock near Hankey in the Eastern Cape, the province of her birth (Crais and Scully 2009:163, 165). Saartjie’s homecoming and her burial evoked a number of disagreements that were the result of divergent agendas driven by politicians, by scientists and anti-scientists, and by men and women in the Reference Group who steered the project. “Politicians clearly knew that securing the [Western Cape] province for the ANC was impossible without the ‘Coloured’ vote, and in the ensuing years they became acutely sensitive to the demands of Khoisan leaders” (Crais and Scully 2009:153). Even the place and date of burial became a matter of dispute because the women in the Reference Group objected to the choice of Women’s Day (9 August) – they felt Saartjie should have a day for herself.

In his funeral speech President Thabo Mbeki criticised “Western science,” which prompted the comment from Crais and Scully that he used the opportunity to

promote his own agenda with regard to HIV/AIDS: “Since coming to power in June 1999, the Mbeki government has regularly issued scathing denunciations of Western science as part of its denying the medical basis of the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa, where infection rates are among the highest anywhere in the world today” (2009:167).

Arriving home in a physical sense, however, did not restore Saartjie’s human dignity: within months the grave was vandalised – “it may have been that the powerful symbolic site offered ritual specialists powerful *muti* (medicine) to cause harm, to ensure benefits, or to ward off witchcraft” (Crais and Scully 2009:167).

Today her grave, surrounded by a high, strong fence, overlooks the Gamtoos river valley with misty mountains that provide the backdrop. The stones around the fence are firmly cemented together, creating a harsh effect in comparison to the lush environment (see Figs. 6 and 7).

Finally, even in death Saartjie is isolated ...

Figure 6: Saartjie’s grave near Hankey in the Eastern Cape



Figure 7: ... overlooking the Kouga mountains



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Endnotes

¹ In South Africa and England she was known as Saartjie or "Sartjee" (Crais and Scully 2009:72). However, in 2002 the South African government strongly advised against the use of the diminutive form of her name, because they deemed it insulting and offensive, and stipulated that the name as it appeared on her baptismal certificate should be used. Crais and Scully give the name on the birth certificate as Sarah Bartmann with the surname spelled incorrectly (2009:107). The diminutive form (pronounced *Sar-key*) is actually an affectionate way of expressing endearment. I know three Saartjies, all intelligent and refined women, two of them with doctor's degrees.

² Pictures of Saartjie Baartman and the way in which she was presented in exhibitions are freely available on the internet. (See, for example, <http://scientificaesthetic.com/2009/03/03/saartjie-baartman-the-hottentot-venus/>.)

³ "Hottentot" is currently regarded as a degrading way of referring to the original Khoekhoe or Khoikhoi, an ethnic group whose ancestors came from north-eastern Africa centuries ago. In language and culture they are probably of Hamitic origin. I would like to thank Prof. OJO Ferreira, Honorary Professor in the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies at the University of Pretoria, for assistance with the historical aspects of this article.

⁴ These articles and other publications dealing with the Hottentot Venus are listed at

<http://carlagirl.net/research/venbib.html>.

⁵ Crais and Scully have their doubts about the validity of two interviews conducted in Paris, because they “seem to have been cobbled together by authors rather than being genuine interviews” (Crais and Scully 2009:197, 128).

⁶ Holmes gives 1789 as the date of birth but without providing verification (2007: xiii). In this article the more probable birth date given by Crais and Scully is used because their book is based on extensive investigation of primary sources.

⁷ About 2 000 years ago Khoikhoi herders reached the southern tip of Africa (Giliomee and Mbanga 2007:6).

⁸ Figure 1 shows Saartjie with her *ramkie* in the performance of the opera. Photos of the performance are used courtesy of Cape Town Opera. The photographer is Stuart Ralph.

⁹ Holmes mentions that the nationality of the drummer boy has been reported as being either Irish, Khoisan, Nguni or West Indian (2007:36).

¹⁰ The Caledon code of 1809 “centred on the pass system, which greatly reduced people’s movements. Without passes, blacks were subject to arrest” (Crais and Scully 2009:174).

¹¹ In the condensed score the parts for flute (Fl.) and oboe (Ob.) are written an octave lower and the parts for bassoon (Fg.) and violoncello (Vc.) an octave higher.

¹² I showed an initial draft of this article to the composer, whose comments I include here with appreciation. I would also like to thank the E-Service unit of the Department of Library Services at the University of Pretoria for assistance to upload Hofmeyr’s opera on YouTube.

¹³ Listen on YouTube to the composer introducing the opera to the public (Hofmeyr 2010a).

¹⁴ The size of the interval is here measured in degrees of the scale.

¹⁵ The text in brackets that follows the Saartjie motive is also quoted here in order to contextualise the motive.

¹⁶ In the opera the composer changed the drummer boy’s name, Hendrik, to Daniel to avoid confusion with Cesars’s first name.

¹⁷ YouTube also provides a video performance of this traditional Afrikaans folk song with the composer at the piano (Hofmeyr 2010b).

¹⁸ Hofmeyr himself uses a circular figure to represent completeness in the motive associated with the female protagonist in his song cycle *Die stil avontuur* (*The Quiet Adventure*) (Hofmeyr 2012).

¹⁹ I illustrated how circular ideas in Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* represent the inescapable plight of the downtrodden (Spies 2004).

²⁰ In Example 3 the second and third note under the last square bracket (“body when I’m [dead]”) is a diminished fifth, and the first and third note that outlines the melodic contour is a diminished sixth.

²¹ “The song and the lullaby are linked by the fact that both use as countermelody a theme first heard in the introduction (mm. 38ff.) and associated throughout the opera with longing and nostalgia. This lyrical theme is also superimposed on the two lively French songs at the moment when Saartjie wakes in a daze (m. 510ff.), signifying the clash between inner and outer worlds” (Hofmeyr 2012).