

Reality Versus Virtual Experience Of War: Lecture Recital Of The Opera War Without End

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Abstract

When the U.S. goes to war, the perspectives of soldier, family and civilian must all be included and not minimized; war affects everyone, just in different ways. Given the realities of multiple deployments and their effects on individual soldiers and family members, the soldier has to make decisions about what to and not to tell family members about war. Family members face similar dilemmas about what to and not to tell deployed soldiers, because soldiers often will be powerless to help their families at home. Civilians may watch news clips or documentaries about the wars but rarely understand the emotional impact of deployment. In searching for a way to investigate the complex lines of communication at work for the soldier, family and civilian, music – specifically a multimedia opera – has been used. *War Without End* is a 1-act opera with 5 scenes; the music and libretto were composed by Jason T. Hoffmann (with the assistance of David M. Bock for the libretto). The narrative of the opera is fiction so that it might not tell one specific story but tell a story that could be applied to all soldiers. One of the main themes used throughout the opera is the myth of Sisyphus. Modern asymmetrical warfare in the current theater of operations is often compared to the task of continuously pushing a boulder up a hill every day for the length of a deployment. The ending of the fictional story is specifically a non-ending because the cycle of deployments has been continuous for over 13 years. Yet the fictional profile of the opera is purposefully obfuscated by the inclusion of video interviews (nonfiction) with my fellow combat veterans who answer general questions that introduce the themes of each scene. The video quality of the interviews is ugly, grainy and uncomfortable to watch because they are recorded Skype chat sessions of soldiers from all over the world. Skype is the primary means that soldiers and families have to communicate. Although they are clearly nonfiction, the videos act as a kind of Greek Chorus. The juxtaposition of nonfiction and fiction acts to tell a bigger story that further engages the audience. The musical setting of this fictional narrative has a way of bringing the experience to the audience in a visceral, emotional way. Music can express much more than the visual realm because this music lacks the gratuitous use of photographic and videoed violence associated with war. So often in our culture, we focus on the visual elements (of a documentary) as the best way of understanding the “truth” or “reality” of an experience. But music expresses another level of “reality”: the shifting lines of communication as they impact the emotional level.

Keywords: War, Reality, Virtual

1. Synopsis of *War Without End*

Middle East & The U.S.A., early 21st Century

Each of the 5 scenes is introduced by a *non-fictional* video posing a question to combat veterans and their family members that is dealt with in the *fictional* narrative of the opera.

Scene 1

“What was it like to deploy?”

Scene 1 acts as the introduction to the non-fictional documentary style video interviews for how each of the following 5 scenes will be presented to the audience. This scene establishes the grainy Skype video interviews, the imperfect audio of the video interviews, and the desert colored photographs used through the non-fictional and fictional videos of the opera. The fictional narrative does not start until scene 2.

Scene 2

“What is a typical day like?”

Soldiers Sarah and Anna wake up to another typical day deployed to the Middle East in their trailer. Martin, Sarah’s husband, and David, Sarah’s father, are both at home in the U.S.A., and are contemplating Sarah being away. Sarah and Anna soon learn how their mission has changed. They will be going outside the wire on a convoy.

Sarah, seeking comfort and support, Skypes with her father about the upcoming mission, careful not to give away any sensitive details. The retired Command Sergeant Major, a senior Noncommissioned Officer, has already heard. Sarah asks her father not to tell Martin about the convoy because she doesn’t want to worry her husband.

Scene 3

“What was convoying like?”

Anna questions Sarah about if she told her husband, Martin, about going outside the wire. Martin and David are at the park with Isa, Martin and Sarah’s daughter. David goes against Sarah’s wishes and tells Martin that she will be going outside the wire.

While going through a mountain pass, Sarah and Anna’s convoy is hit by multiple I.E.D.s. An insurgent mortar team is waiting to start mortaring the convoy as soon as the MEDEVAC arrives. Sarah sees the insurgents and calls in an artillery strike on their position so that the MEDEVAC can safely land.

Back at the forward operating base Sarah is broken and angry; she prays to God and asks, why?

Sarah Skypes home to her father and recounts the events of the convoy within the confines of operational security. She is hurt and broken and just wants a sympathetic ear. Her father is furious at Sarah for stating that “she can’t keep pushing,” and he tells her that soldiers never quit.

Scene 4

“What was it like to lose a soldier?”

Psalm 91 is what many soldiers and their families hold dear as their prayer for strength and safety.

Scene 5

“Why do you continue to serve?”

Sarah comes to terms with who she is... Sarah and Anna are finally home in the U.S.A. but the perfect story ending remains elusive.

2. Conceptual Framework

In searching for a way to investigate the complex lines of communication at work for the soldier, family and civilian, music – specifically a multimedia opera – has been used. *War Without End* is a 1-act opera with 5 scenes for which Jason T. Hoffmann composed the music and wrote the libretto (with the assistance of David M. Bock). Each of the 5 scenes starts with a non-fictional Skype interview of U.S. Army combat veterans and civilian family members. The interview consists of a single question that the veteran and family member are free to answer however

they feel appropriate, without direction or interference from the interviewer. Once the question has been discussed in the interview, it is then further explored in the fictional narrative of the libretto. The fictional narrative is not designed to tell the story of the librettist(s), composer or the specific interviewees; it is a story that could be applied to any soldier, civilian or family member. The characters in the fictional narrative are meant to be an everywoman or everyman.

The fictional narrative centers on four characters: SSG Sarah Knight, a deployed soldier who is a military police officer; SGT Anna Hunter, Sarah's battle buddy; Martin Thomas, Sarah's husband; and CSM(R) David Knight, Sarah's father. The story is focused on the lead character, Sarah, and how the deployment affects her, her family and friend. The purpose of using a female lead in this opera about war was twofold: first, the writer of the libretto wanted a strong female character who did not need to be saved by a male character, which is unusual in opera as a genre, and secondly to show that modern warfare is asymmetrical, with no distinction between forward and rear deployed.

The multimedia aspects at first are used to specifically delineate between the reality of the interviews and unreality of the opera. In the video interviews, still photographs are included of the soldier and family members at home and deployed to develop the audience's interest in the reality of the situation that soldiers and family members find themselves in. This delineation subtly breaks down in scene 3 of the opera; when the characters of David and Martin are at a park discussing Sarah going on a combat patrol outside the wire, or perimeter fence, of her Forward Operating Base (F.O.B.), a video of Sarah and David's daughter is shown swinging on a swing set. The complete break down between reality and unreality occurs shortly after this, with the next video. This video is not an interview but is an action video constructed of still photographs of deployed soldiers and videos of a Field Artillery training exercise assembled to make the viewer believe that what they are watching is an actual attack on a convoy and the response to that. To further reinforce this obfuscation, another video in scene 4 of a memorial/funeral service, with taps playing, is shown while Sarah and Anna render honors to their comrades.

The end of the fictional narrative is specifically meant to be a non-ending. No emotional release or relief is attained even with Sarah finally going home and being with her family again. The cycle of deployments has been unending for over 13 years of constant war, and it has had a profound impact on all parts of society; the purpose of *War Without End* is to show this.

War Without End uses the myth of Sisyphus directly and indirectly in scenes 1, 2 & 3 in both the non-fictional interviews and the fictional narrative of the libretto. Modern asymmetrical warfare in the current theater of operations has been compared to the myth of Sisyphus. As MG(R) John R.S. Batiste stated at the Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing "An Oversight Hearing on the Planning and Conduct of the War in Iraq" on September 25, 2006:

"shifting of forces is generally successful in the short term, but the minute a mission is complete and troops are redeployed back to the region where they came from, insurgents reoccupy the vacuum and the cycle repeats itself. Troops returning to familiar territory find themselves fighting to reoccupy ground which was once secure. We are all witnessing this in Baghdad and the Al Anbar Province today. I am reminded of the myth of Sisyphus. This is no way to fight a counter-insurgency."¹

Obviously, this is on the macro level of war-planning and execution that faces U.S. Army Division level commanding generals and their superiors, but the very idea of the myth of Sisyphus is applicable on the micro level of the individual soldiers and their family members, because they are often living the same day repeatedly for a year or more. The myth of Sisyphus becomes even clearer once the same soldiers have been repeatedly deployed to the same country or countries.

In the first scene of the opera, the question is posed to the veterans, "What was it like to deploy?" and the response from SSG Owen is, "Which time? I've deployed 3 times."² The response from SGT Chad McRoberts is similar, "Which deployment for me? Because I had 2."³ In the second scene of the opera, the veterans and family members are asked, "What was a typical day like?" CPT Scott responds with:

"It was tiring, it was exhausting because my mind was never at rest. Either I'm worried about my guys and the next mission, who's going out with me the next time... Well he went out last time and he needs a break and this guy has been on duty, you know, working all those typical Army leadership issues. And the same time as soon as we are back and I know everyone is safe and we get some down time, well ok what did I miss, how are the girls doing? There is never a time I'm not worried about something."⁴

These explanations of daily soldier life supports and makes clear the myth of Sisyphus. The libretto takes the idea of the interview and expands upon it in the first piece, *Another Day*, with Sarah singing:

“Every day is the same
In this Godforsaken place
We push the boulder to the hilltop
Only to have it roll back down each night
We live the myth of Sisyphus
Over and over, over and over.”⁵

By responding to the same theme, the non-fictional interviews and the fictional narrative of the libretto are brought together into one, whole story.

Although they are clearly nonfiction, the videos act as a kind of Greek Chorus. The soldiers and family members in the videos (up until this point) answer general questions about deployed life. They represent the truth and knowledge of what life was like for them in that moment. They are informing the community of these harsh realities. The music I use in the videos takes motifs from the opera and reimagines them with synths and effects so that they become only recognizable on a subconscious level when heard again. The music is also intended to be uncomfortable, much like the topics that are being discussed. In these instances, the music is specifically set to represent the emotions present in the nonfiction/reality of the story.

Familiarity is another theme in *War Without End*. The audience is familiar with seeing soldiers and family members being interviewed. The audience is familiar with seeing photographs of the current theaters of combat operations. The grainy, ugly videos (see Figure 1) are what an audience member would expect to see from soldiers deployed; however, the difference here is that the audience also is seeing family members the same way they have come to see soldiers. Skype is the main means of communication for both soldiers and family members while deployed.



Figure 1. Screenshot from *War Without End* DVD interview.

When the U.S. goes to war, the perspectives of soldier, family and civilian must all be included and not minimized; war affects everyone, just in different ways. Given the realities of multiple deployments and their effects on individual soldiers and family members, the soldier has to make decisions about what to and not to tell family members about war. Family members face similar dilemmas about what to and not to tell deployed soldiers, because soldiers often will be powerless to help their families at home. Civilians may watch news clips or documentaries about the wars but rarely understand the emotional impact of deployment.

Self-censorship affects the language that everyone can use, but there in the opera, when language breaks down, it is the music that allows for an emotional release in the course of the narrative. Naturally, one could say that this

music is not a “real” part of the soldier’s experience – these soldiers were not actually singing to each other. But this very “unreality” or “imaginative” expressive tool is what makes it possible to express or feel the very real emotions that soldiers might experience. Likewise, the narrative of the opera is fiction so that it might not tell one specific story but tell a story that could be applied to all soldiers.

3. Analysis of Psalm 91

For many soldiers and family members, Psalm 91 has been adopted as “The Soldier’s Prayer” because of the uplifting meaning of the Psalm. Leroy Esco, an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, told a reporter that, “he had the book Psalm 91: God’s Shield of Protection under his chestplate” when his Bradley fighting vehicle was attacked.⁶ Psalm 91 is not just meant for soldiers but is applicable to all believers; as noted by Patricia Hardee, “Praying this psalm of protection uplifts us from human sense and locates us at home in spiritual sense.”⁷ This prayer of protection provides a unifying link between soldier, family member, civilian and audience member in the opera because it shows that although they all may be different, they pray in the same way.

Even though the text to Psalm 91 is uplifting, the music is directly tied to the extra-musical narrative of the fictional story of the opera. At this point in the story, all of the characters are dealing with the deaths of their fellow soldiers or friends. The music portrays the sorrow that the characters are feeling at this point. While it would have been natural to make Psalm 91 a grand chorus of praise, doing so would have taken away the human dimension of the story. Humans are complex creatures, capable of feeling more than one emotion at a time. In this case, the text expresses praise and the music expresses sorrow.

Some commentators, such as William Bright, argue that music does not have extra-musical associations:

“a musical performance does not necessarily have any reference to specific non-musical phenomena. Some pieces of music within a given culture have, to be sure, extra-musical associations for the members of that culture; thus for us a military march may have a content related to the emotion of patriotism. But such content is not inherent in the nature of music...”⁸

However, this judgment ignores the entire history of the lament in literature and music. Specifically in music, Kyoung-Young Chung notes:

“Composers of Italian chamber recitative laments attempted to express more subtle, refined and sometimes complicated emotions in their music. For that purpose, they intentionally created discrepancies between text and music. Sometimes they even destroyed the original structure of the text in order to clearly deliver the composer’s own voice.”⁹

In *War Without End*, the original text of Psalm 91 is left intact, but the emotional impact goes beyond the text by using the extra-musical device of the lament figure.

The lament figure constructed for Psalm 91 is influenced by the idea of the lament bass or ground bass. One of the most famous examples of a lament bass occurs in *Dido and Aeneas* (“When I am laid in earth”), by Henry Purcell.

“Purcell followed an Italian tradition of setting laments over a basso ostinato, or ground bass. The bass grows out of the descending fourth common to laments, but changes the usual diatonic pattern (G-F-Eb-D) to the chromatic (G-F#-F-E-Eb-D) and adds a cadential extension (Bb-C-D-G) to create a five-measure pattern that is heard eleven times. Over these inexorable repetitions, symbolizing her inevitable fate, Dido’s melody conveys great tension by following an independent course.”¹⁰

The reason I am calling what I have written a “lament figure” instead of a “lament bass” (even though the bass does lament) is that the listener focuses intently upon the Soprano because the lament figure starts so high on E5 and descends chromatically to A4. See Figure 2.

The lament figure continues to be used throughout Psalm 91. The vocal parts of Psalm 91 consist of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Baritone; each of the voices sings the lament figure when they enter the piece. For nearly two thirds of Psalm 91 each voice sings their part solo. The reason for not singing as a choir is to heighten the drama of the lament figure and to not fulfill the expectation of making Psalm 91 a typical chorale. To extended the dramatic melodic shape of the lament figure in measures 37 to 40, I used the Soprano to start the lament figure on A4 and

descend chromatically to E4 and then the Alto continues the lament figure continuing on E4 and descends chromatically to A3. The lower an instrument sings or plays a note in their specific range changes the timbral quality of the note and in this instance, see Figure 3, the desired goal was sadness.

Figure 2 shows the musical score for Psalm 91, measures 4 to 17. The score is written for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Mezzo (M), and Tenor (D) voices, and Piano (Pno.), Violin (Vln.), Electric Guitar (E.Gtr.), Bass, and M.K. (Music Keyboard). The lyrics are: "He that dwell - th in the se - cret place of the most high shall a - bide un - der the shad - ow of the A - migh - ty." The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano).

Figure 2. Psalm 91 composed by J. Hoffmann © 2014.

Figure 3 shows the musical score for Psalm 91, measures 12 to 39. The score is written for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Mezzo (M), and Tenor (D) voices, and Piano (Pno.), Violin (Vln.), Electric Guitar (E.Gtr.), Bass, and M.K. (Music Keyboard). The lyrics are: "Nor for the pest - i - lence that walk - eth in dark - ness; nor for the des - truction that wast - eth at noon - day." The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *pp* (pianissimo).

Figure 3. Psalm 91 composed by J. Hoffmann © 2014.

I used this type of musical motif throughout the setting of Psalm 91 for the purpose of going beyond our ability to perceive language. As Iain McGilchrist notes:

“We may find it initially hard to accept the primacy of music, since we are trapped inside a culture that is so language-determined and part of communicating that we cannot imagine it being any other way. Because the part of communicating that we are aware of lies in the choice of words, we imagine wrongly that that must be where most, or perhaps even all, communication lies. What we are not conscious of, and need for most purposes to remain unconscious of, is that the majority of the messages we communicate are not in words at all.”¹¹

The understanding that the human condition is not limited to one emotion at a time and that the story as a whole can be best represented by music is key to making a truly believable work. The subtlety of a sung descending chromatic motif joined to the uplifting words of Psalm 91 portrays how people who have lost their fellow soldiers would pray. This is not a contrived nationalistic military march; the descending chromatic motif is the expression of sorrow, and when one prays with the heavy heart of loss, it does not sound joyful.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this artistic creation is to show an audience that normally does not have any association with the military or the family members of military members what the cycle of deployments is actually like from the mundane to the horrifying. The use of a multimedia opera to tell the story is done specifically to bridge the divide between the different worlds of the military society and the civilian society by welcoming the audience to go on this journey of sound, sight and emotions. *War Without End* makes no moral judgments on any segment of American society. *War Without End* is a window into the world of what military life can be for any given soldier by the fictional narrative being vague of year, specific conflict or military occupational specialty. The military has been actively engaged in the war on terror for over 13 years. Many aspects of the war on terror have changed over the 13-year period, such as additional countries being engaged in the war on terror beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, and the increased sophistication of insurgent weapons; improvised explosive devices being converted to vehicle borne improvised explosive devices and explosively formed penetrators. However, what remains the same for the military member and their family members are the raw emotions that they must deal with on a daily basis. No matter what or where the war on terror changes the emotional impact of modern asymmetrical warfare remains the same. *War Without End* does not merely represent the experience of deployment; by activating our imaginations and emotions, it creates, in us, the sense of dislocation and disorientation that every soldier and family member feels.

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