

Representing a Christian Nation: Sacred and Providential Discourses in Opera in the United States, 1911–1917

AARON ZIEGEL

Abstract

As the genre of American opera was coming of age during the 1910s, composers and librettists began to incorporate the materials of sacred music into the operatic context with surprising frequency. This often took the form of prayer arias, sacred choruses, hymnody, or choral apotheoses, examples of which appear in Frederick Converse's *The Sacrifice* (1911), Victor Herbert's *Natoma* (1911), Mary Carr Moore's *Narcissa* (1912), and Henry Hadley's *Azora* (1917). These composers modeled their efforts after familiar European precedents, including Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Gounod's *Faust*, and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, among other works. Close examination of the music, however, reveals a distinctively American approach in which sacred materials function to reinforce statements of patriotic nationalism. By situating these long-overlooked American operas alongside contemporaneous commentary on the United States' sense of its sacred purpose, this article illustrates how the composers and librettists sought to participate in the discourses of providentialism, the "Christian nation" concept, manifest destiny, and "True Americanism" in order to craft a characteristically national style. The inclusion of sacred musical ingredients thus helped redefine the genre for US listeners, as the operas' characters give voice to their Americanness through the sacred music they sing.

A woman prays to God seeking strength and perseverance through troubled times. A recent convert narrates a dream-vision in which the coming of Christ is revealed. A congregation sings hymns of praise. A choir performs an anthem based upon a liturgical text. Although these statements could describe any number of church services held across the country and throughout the nation's history, they are all in fact plot occurrences from American operas premiered during the 1910s. This tendency is both striking and unusual. The curious explorer of this period's long-overlooked and well-nigh forgotten scores will encounter a considerable amount of sacred music placed within what are otherwise secular stage dramas. At this time, opera in the United States was at last starting to reveal its own distinctive identity. Earlier scores were often singularities with limited exposure, heard only by local audiences, and leaving little lasting impact. By the 1910s, however, new operas are being produced in great enough frequency, are receiving thorough press coverage, and are easily acquirable in published piano-vocal scores, such that the

cycle of influence and inspiration necessary for the development of a national genre is finally underway.¹

The simple presence of sacred music in opera is not, by itself, enough to distinguish the US iteration of the genre. This ingredient is often encountered within the European-composed operas most frequently performed by American companies during the early years of the century too. These natural models (for aspiring composers) and familiar favorites (from the audience point of view) remain equally well-known today: Gounod's *Faust*, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, Puccini's *Tosca*, Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and *Otello*, and Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, among other possible influences and points of comparison.² Prayer arias, sacred ceremonies, religious rituals, hymnody, choruses of praise, and Latin-texted liturgical music occur regularly within this collection of works, just as they do in the American scores seeking to find a place alongside them on the stage. Yet in contrast to European-composed expressions of an often generically "spiritual" religiosity, American works from the period convey an explicitly Christian outlook, repurposing their sacred music to undergird and reinforce nationalistic, patriotic, or other pro-US plot outcomes, while reflecting the nation's contemporaneous politics of religion, race, and assimilation.

G. K. Chesterton's famous observation that the United States is "a nation with the soul of a church" finds its operatic manifestation in four works premiered during the 1910s.³ Although neither Frederick Converse's *The Sacrifice* (Boston, 1911), Victor Herbert's *Natoma* (Philadelphia, 1911), Mary Carr Moore's *Narcissa* (Seattle, 1912), nor Henry Hadley's *Azora* (Chicago, 1917) have earned a place in today's repertory, those attentive to developments in the musical scene in the United States at the time would have been well aware of each of these prominent operatic milestones. Today, of course, their reputation often merits little more than passing mention. This fate was quick in coming. Of this group of works, only *Natoma* held the stage well into the 1920s. The lone productions of both *The Sacrifice* and *Azora* ran for only four repetitions each. Moore, in contrast, oversaw and conducted two subsequent revivals of *Narcissa* in San Francisco, 1925, and Los Angeles, 1945. At the time, however, all four works received fully staged premieres with orchestra and celebrity casts, publishers issued piano-vocal scores, the cultural press covered every phase of the production process, and the nation's music critics eagerly appraised the results. These four operas were consequently "accessible" even to those who did not witness them in live performance, thereby helping to redefine the genre of national opera for a US audience. The inclusion of sacred musical materials is a key facet of this nationalization project, as the operas' characters give voice to

¹ The most recent comprehensive survey of the genre is Elise K. Kirk's *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). The seminal work in the field is Edward Ellsworth Hipsher's *American Opera and Its Composers* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1927), the thoroughness of which demonstrates just how rich and sizable a repertoire was already in existence by the first quarter of the twentieth century. John Dizikes's *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993) primarily explores how the European repertoire took hold in the United States and gives only passing attention to the contributions of American composers. For an in-depth look at the processes of style consolidation during the 1910s specifically, see Aaron Ziegel, "Enacting the Nation on Stage: Style, Subjects, and Themes in American Opera Librettos of the 1910s," *The Opera Journal* 42, nos. 1–2 (2009): 3–21; and "Crafting the Soundworld of American Opera, 1910–1912," in *In Search of the 'Great American Opera': Tendenzen des amerikanischen Musiktheaters*, ed. Frédéric Döhl and Gregor Herzfeld (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2016), 19–44.

² Compiled performance data from the nation's top-tier opera companies during the early decades of the twentieth century yields a US-specific canon of the most frequently performed works. Since opera in the United States was a commercial enterprise driven by market forces, one can assume that the most frequently performed works are also the period's most popular works, and hence relevant sources of modelling and inspiration. It is worth noting that the most frequently performed operas from a century ago remain among the most frequently performed today. For further discussion of the data that justify the canonic comparisons selected for this article, see Aaron Ziegel, "Making America Operatic: Six Composers' Attempts at an American Opera, 1910–1918" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011), 345–51.

³ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1923), 11–12.

their Americanness through the sacred music they sing. (Given the relative unfamiliarity of this repertoire, please see the appendix for premiere production information, cast lists, and plot synopses.)

The increasing frequency in the production of newly composed operas in the United States during the 1910s was largely a result of economic opportunities—rising competition among opera companies to make a cultural impact, audience interest in seeing “novelties” on the stage, a desire among producers to support “native” talent, and encouragement from the critical press to achieve these goals—yet the recurring linkage of Christian themes and operatic sacred music to nationalist plot outcomes is a reflection of larger cultural and political trends. In the years leading up to the 1910s, the nation had undergone a period of unprecedented demographic change. From 1880 to 1910, the population of the United States tripled in size. This increase was even more pronounced in metropolitan centers (i.e., where opera companies are located), which grew at a rate around ten times faster than the nation as a whole. Former farm laborers, both black and white, sought better paying urban employment. Hundreds of thousands of southern black Americans moved North seeking a respite from bigotry and racism. Immigration was likewise on the rise. The 1890s saw an influx of more than 3.6 million new residents, a figure that rose to nearly 8.8 million during the following decade. From 1900 to 1915, a total of 15 million immigrants arrived, bringing the nation’s population past the 100 million mark for the first time in its history.⁴ Growing racial diversity added further tensions, even as the definition of who could count among the nation’s white majority (the Irish? Italians? other South-Eastern Europeans?) continued to shift.⁵ Issues of religious diversity likewise became newly relevant. Events such as the World’s Parliament of Religion, the nation’s first formal interfaith conference, organized to coincide with the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, gave many visitors their “first real exposure to any religion besides Judaism or Christianity” and challenged deeply held assumptions by arguing that “other religions offer their own perfectly respectable paths to God,” as Grant Wacker has explained.⁶

Amidst these dramatic demographic changes, many were seeking clarity on what made an American “American.” The goals of assimilation and “Americanization” rose to the fore. As Julia Richman, the New York City district superintendent of schools, argued in 1905:

[The parents of immigrant schoolchildren] must be made to realize that in forsaking the land of their birth, they were also forsaking the customs and the traditions of that land; they must be made to realize an obligation, in adopting a new country, to adopt the language and customs of that country. They must be made to understand that the welfare of American demands the proper assimilation of all these conflicting foreign elements.⁷

Yet wherein might the key to assimilation reside? One possible answer could be found in the long-

⁴ Figures from Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 295 and 314; Leonard Dinnerstein, Roger L. Nichols, and David M. Reimers, *Natives and Strangers: A Multicultural History of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 123; and Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1915* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916), 38.

⁵ For a detailed discussion, see the chapter “A Nation Stays White: How Race Survived Mass Immigration” in David R. Roediger, *How Race Survived US History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon* (London: Verso, 2008), 136–68.

⁶ Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Religion in American Life*, 267–8.

⁷ Julia Richman, “The Immigrant Child,” *National Education Association Journal of Proceedings and Addresses* 44: (1905): 120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002205740506200408>; see also Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers, *Natives and Strangers*, 182–5.

standing self-perception of the United States as a “Christian nation.”⁸ From philosophers and theologians to politicians and demagogues, innumerable and often contradictory formulations of the concept have been articulated across many disciplines throughout the nation’s history. The Rev. Jasper Adams, for instance, in a widely read 1833 sermon, offered this formulation of the principle: “THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES HAVE RETAINED THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION AS THE FOUNDATION OF THEIR CIVIL, LEGAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS.”⁹ (He must have been shouting, for the published sermon prints the statement in all caps.) US Supreme Court Justice David Josiah Brewer revisited similar issues in a 1902 lecture. His remarks were widely quoted before being published in book form in 1914. Justice Brewer proclaimed, “One thing is undisputed and indisputable—that Christian nations manifest the highest forms of civilized life, and that among professedly Christian nations those in which the principles of Christianity have the utmost freedom and power occupy the first place.”¹⁰ In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, the concept developed along contrasting progressive and conservative pathways. From the progressive standpoint, as Kenneth Wald and David Leege explain, the Christian nation took the form of a “civil religion” that recognized the United States as “a force sanctioned by the divine and serving a larger purpose than mere security or collective self-interest.” This force worked to assimilate a diverse population “by selecting common elements of various creeds to unite people around a shared identity” that valued the ideals of “sacrifice, loyalty, brotherhood, sisterhood, and freedom.”¹¹ The conservative viewpoint, on the other hand, placed the emphasis more specifically on the *Christian* nation, hoping, as Jon Meacham has characterized it, “to turn the American republic into their port in the storm of modernity.”¹² Christianity, despite its many denominational and sectarian variations, thus acted as something of a common denominator for mainstream culture in the United States.

Opera composition in the US provides a heretofore unexplored facet of these issues, one that reveals composers and librettists during the 1910s enacting a series of closely related iterations of the Christian nation ideal, reaching back earlier in the nation’s history for their plots, and co-opting the concept in order to reinforce the dramatic impact of their scores. By considering the selected operas of Herbert, Moore, Converse, and Hadley alongside contemporaneous discourse about the United States’ sense of its sacred purpose, it becomes clear that these opera creators were seeking to establish a national form of the genre by engaging with many of the same questions that the nation at large was struggling to answer. The use of sacred music in the opera context thus allows composers and librettists to dramatically embody the abstract concepts of manifest destiny and providentialism that lie at the heart of what it means for the United States to be a Christian nation, while the characters appearing on stage can serve as examples of how a citizen of this Christian nation should live. Gilbert Chase once offered this rather unkind observation about the operatic output of the period: “A number of American operas have been considered worthy of

⁸ For a thorough study of the “Christian nation” concept and its many societal and legal ramifications, see Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195399677.001.0001>.

⁹ Quoted in Green, *Second Disestablishment*, 99.

¹⁰ David J. Brewer, *American Citizenship*, Yale Lectures on the Responsibilities of Citizenship (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1914), 23.

¹¹ Kenneth D. Wald and David C. Leege, “Culture, Religion, and American Political Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics*, eds. Corwin E. Smidt, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and James L. Guth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 141–2.

¹² Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 143–4. For more on the widening liberal/conservative religious divide during the early twentieth century, see Butler, Wacker, and Balmer, *Religion in American Life*, 323–38.

preservation for posterity. There is, however, no consensus as to whether they should be embalmed, congealed, or mummified.”¹³ The exploration offered here suggests that blowing the dust off the “mummified” remains of this long-dormant music can provide valuable insight into core issues that reside at the heart of the nation’s self-conception.



Our exploration will begin with a pair of operas premiered in 1911 and 1912 respectively: Victor Herbert’s *Natoma* and Mary Carr Moore’s *Narcissa*. These scores form an opportune pairing, as they offer a study in contrasts along a number of parameters. The Irish-born Herbert (1859–1924) was a Stuttgart-trained composer, conductor, and cellist, having held prestigious positions playing cello in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, teaching at the National Conservatory of Music, and conducting the Pittsburgh Orchestra, in addition to earning fame as a writer of comic operas and hit songs.¹⁴ Moore (1873–1957) began her stage career singing the title role in an operetta of her own composition, *The Oracle* (1894), before turning her focus to teaching, composing, and conducting her own works.¹⁵ These two scores are the composers’ first attempts at through-composed, serious opera, or “grand opera” in the parlance of the time. *Natoma* was initially intended for Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera Company, but when that venture folded, the work was picked up by the newly formed Chicago Opera Company, who premiered the score in Philadelphia and New York while on tour before introducing it back home in Chicago. *Narcissa*, on the other hand, reached the stage in Seattle through the composer’s persistence and sheer force of will; she directed the score from the podium, with the lead roles hired in from New York.

Natoma develops a fictional plot while *Narcissa* is based upon historical events, yet both scores retrospectively examine the legacy of missionary work in the American West. Much of *Natoma*’s plot is set at the Santa Barbara Mission in California. (This still-standing structure was founded in 1820, the year of the opera’s setting.) The opera’s title character ultimately converts to Christianity under the guidance of the Mission priest. The historical figures Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, on the other hand, relocated to the Oregon Territory in 1836 and founded a mission along the western end of the Oregon Trail in order to introduce Christianity to the native population. Although the plots are situated in the past, US missionary activity across the globe was at its peak at the time of these operas’ premieres. By depicting this historical legacy, the opera creators could count on their audience’s present-day associations that linked missionary activity with perceived national and economic strength on the world stage.¹⁶ These are precisely the kinds of associations one might hope to project when seeking to establish a national form of the opera genre.

Natoma incorporates Catholic choral singing while *Narcissa* builds upon Protestant traditions, as required by each opera’s historical setting, yet both composers link these sacred musical materials to dramatizations of the nation’s providential destiny to expand its territory “from sea to shining sea,” as the familiar song lyrics have it. Although already an established geographic reality by the early 1910s, the

¹³ Gilbert Chase, *America’s Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 545.

¹⁴ The principal biographical source is Neil Gould, *Victor Herbert: A Theatrical Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823228713.001.0001>.

¹⁵ The principal biographical source is Catherine Parsons Smith and Cynthia S. Richardson, *Mary Carr Moore, American Composer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

¹⁶ See Mark A. Noll, *The Work We Have to Do: A History of Protestants in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107–9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195154979.001.0001>.

concept remained a potent enough source of national pride that composers and librettists found much dramatic potential in the historical struggles to achieve this goal. In their shared focus on issues of territorial expansion, the project of nation building is accompanied by, and in Herbert's *Natoma* even accomplished through, sacred music. Such sacred passages supply a "divine endorsement" for the nationalist outcomes enacted on stage, and in the process, these operas offer exemplars of Americanness in the Christian nation.

By deploying sacred music as a justification for US territorial expansion, Herbert and Moore—along with their respective librettist-collaborators, Joseph Redding and Sarah Pratt Carr¹⁷—are engaging with one of this nation's fundamental self-concepts: providentialism. As defined by Nicholas Guyatt, *national providentialism* is "the idea that God has directed the history of the United States." He notes that the belief has "played a leading role in the invention of an American national identity" and that it remains "commonplace in American life."¹⁸ One can identify countless articulations of this sentiment throughout the nation's history; two shall suffice to illustrate the longevity of this point of view. John Adams, writing in 1765 for example, reflected, "I always considered the settlement of America with Reverence and Wonder, as the Opening of a grand scene and design of Providence."¹⁹ More recently, the Universalist theologian Forrest Church likewise acknowledged a characteristically American system of beliefs that "invests our nation with a spiritual purpose and ... a moral destiny."²⁰ This pair of operas' engagement with providential outcomes thus springs from a long and continuing pedigree.

Patriotism as enacted on the dramatic stage has an equally rich US legacy, tracing its roots all the way back to stage plays of the colonial and revolutionary eras, as the research of Jason Shaffer has chronicled.²¹ In the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War, patriotic content regularly enlivened musical comedies and other theater productions, with George M. Cohan's "The Yankee Doodle Boy" (*Little Johnny Jones*, 1904), "You're a Grand Old Flag" (*George Washington, Jr.*, 1906), and "Over There" (1917) among the most popular hits.²² Additionally, theater historian John Bush Jones has described what he terms "gunboat musicals," a diverse assortment of Broadway shows produced between 1902 and 1907, which deployed the all-powerful US Navy as a sort of *deus ex machina* that steamed in to rescue imperiled protagonists at the last minute. Jones explains that such musicals conveyed how "the United States is a power to be reckoned with, and [that] American political values and institutions are superior to everyone else's."²³ Given the audience enthusiasm for "gunboat musicals" and production numbers such "The Greatest Navy in the World" from the 1909 installment of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, in which the chorus girls wore headgear in the shape of navy vessels, it comes as no surprise that American naval officers might find their way on to the operatic stage as well. As we shall see, both Paul from Herbert's *Natoma* and Burton from Converse's *The Sacrifice* are close relations to their military officer counterparts from the popular

¹⁷ Redding was a lawyer by profession in addition to his efforts as an amateur composer. Sarah Pratt Carr, the mother of the composer of *Narcissa*, was a popular author of juvenile literature.

¹⁸ Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511619137>.

¹⁹ Quoted in James H. Hutson, ed., *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15.

²⁰ Forrest Church, *The American Creed: A Spiritual and Patriotic Primer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), xii.

²¹ See Jason Shaffer, *Performing Patriotism: National Identity in the Colonial and Revolutionary American Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

²² For further discussion of the patriotism of Cohan's work, see John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theater* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 18-23.

²³ Jones concludes that after 1907 "the gunboat genre finally, utterly, and perhaps mercifully, sank" (Jones, *Our Musicals*, 25-7).

stage. Christian sacred musical elements, however, are notably absent from any of these Broadway expressions of theatrical patriotism. The combination of the sacred and the patriotic is distinctive to opera among theatrical genres of the time.

Mary Carr Moore's *Narcissa* makes the most pervasive use of sacred music in any opera from the period. Indeed, music that articulates the protagonists' Protestant Christianity occupies a central position in the score. The plot's focus on westward expansion and providential guidance highlights the intertwined ideals of personal spirituality and service to the nation. The opera dramatizes the life and death of Narcissa and Marcus Whitman, who were killed by members of a native tribe opposed to their missionary efforts.²⁴ Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* provided Moore with a relevant model—as critics at the time recognized—and thus offers an instructive comparison. Both works dramatize the deaths of individuals who are killed because of their religious beliefs. (*Les Huguenots* depicts the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572.) While Moore infuses her score with Protestant hymnody, Meyerbeer likewise quotes the Martin Luther chorale “Ein feste Burg” at key dramatic points. In *Huguenots*, however, the chorale melody primarily functions as an “artifact” that demarcates the Protestant victims from their Catholic aggressors. Despite this *grand opéra*'s backdrop of religious history, personal spirituality and faith is minimized. In the score's lone prayer aria at the start of Act IV (“Je suis seule chez moi ... De mon amour faut-il”), for instance, the Catholic noblewoman Valentine is primarily concerned for her troubled romantic situation—she is trapped in a loveless marriage and separated from her true beloved, the Protestant Raoul—rather than the sectarian religious strife that surrounds her.

With Moore's *Narcissa*, in contrast, hymn singing and musical prayers appear throughout the work, often when the characters are facing momentous decisions or times of great conflict. Sacred music forms an integral part of their daily lives. Except for a brief, passing quotation of the tune OLD HUNDRED, Moore opted to compose original hymns for her opera. These hymns successively accompany the Whitman's wedding and departure on their westward journey (Act I), their thankfulness for a safe arrival in the West (Act II), and their daily routine as missionaries (Act III). The closing scene of Act I, which depicts the wedding of Marcus and Narcissa and their decision to embark upon a missionary expedition to the Oregon Territory, is the most hymn-centered portion of the score. Here, Moore presents a sequence of three hymns in quick succession. The chorus, representing Narcissa's hometown congregation, sings several hymns of benediction that honors the Whitmans' sacred calling. The first of these, a statement of the most familiar of all tunes, OLD HUNDRED, seems to invite a more broadly ecumenical body of believers (i.e., the opera's audience) into what might otherwise be a story of merely regional appeal. The subsequent pair of original hymn tunes, with lyrics by the composer's mother Sarah Pratt Carr, align duty to the nation with faith in God. The first of the pair acknowledges how faith preserves believers through hardships: “Lord bless us now, and hear our prayer / Constrain our hearts to praise. / Our faith in Thee, we all declare, / Tho' dark or bright the days. / Our faith in Thee, Thy work our joy, / Tho' danger pave the way” (p. 52–3).²⁵ When later scenes in the opera further elaborate upon the motivations behind the Whitman's desire to become missionaries, it becomes clear that national service is their foremost goal. The dangers the Whitmans will face consequently arise because they chose to answer a patriotic calling. The singing congregation here recognizes that their faith is a necessary bulwark against those challenges.

²⁴ Key studies of the life of the historical Narcissa Whitman are Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Converting the West: A Biography of Narcissa Whitman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); and Clifford Merrill Drury, *Where Wagons Could Go: Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

²⁵ All page numbers refer to the published piano-vocal scores; see bibliography for publication details.

In the scene's final hymn, Narcissa herself eventually joins in the singing (example 1).

Scenes of sac-red peace and pleas-ure, Ho-ly days and Sab-bath bell, Rich-est, bright-est,

NARCISSA (gazing upward with lofty courage and faith)

Yes, my nat-ive land, I love thee, All thy scenes, I
sweet-est, treas-ure, Can I say a last fare-well? Yes, my nat-ive land, I love thee, All thy scenes, I

love them well. Friends, con-nec-tions, hap-py coun-try, Can I bid a last fare-well?
love them well. Friends, con-nec-tions, last fare-well?
[members of the chorus gradually drop out, sobbing]
[orch. cues]

Can I bid a last fare-well?
Can I bid a last
Can I bid a last fare-well?

Example 1: Concluding ymn from Act I of Moore: *Narcissa*, vocal parts only, p. 58–60.

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

The lyrics sung by the congregation acknowledge Narcissa's sadness upon departing from "Scenes of sacred peace and pleasure," the "Richest, brightest, sweetest treasure" of the life she is leaving behind. Narcissa then adds her voice to the choir with the text, "Yes, my native land, I love thee." The stage directions, prompting Narcissa to sing "with lofty courage and faith," further emphasize the role of her belief in sustaining her sense of conviction in the work of building the nation. Although the melodies of these hymns are Moore's own, an audience of the time would surely have recognized this decidedly non-operatic idiom's kinship with the communal singing that many experienced in their own church pews. Moore's hymnody consequently engenders a sense of recognition between her audience and the historical events they are witnessing on stage.

Just as Moore's hymnody reflects the present needs and concerns of her characters, prayer scenes likewise play a significant role in revealing more inward emotions, especially those of Narcissa, as she struggles to meet the challenges of missionary life and the rigors of the frontier. Narcissa spends much of the third act praying as she goes about her daily routine. A prominent contingent of the Cayuse tribe, to whom the Whitmans sought to minister, remains suspicious of their activities and keeps them under constant watch, however. Narcissa complains, "Eyes! Eyes! Ev'rywhere they are! No hour of day or night may we escape them, save in darkness [or] sleep" (p. 142). She then seeks comfort in prayer (example 2). Her entreaty concludes, "Oh prosper us in work, in work for Thee. Bless us, nerve our hearts, our hands, in thine employ" (p. 144). It is striking that she asks not for personal attention but rather for the strength to continue God's work. The idiom here is a close relation to mid-nineteenth-century parlor song, with its arpeggiated accompaniment, tonal stability, and diatonic tunefulness evoking a sense of homespun familiarity. While the style is an appropriate contextual reference—with Narcissa singing this passage at her home—when considered alongside the earlier hymnody, Moore once again incorporates a familiar idiom in order to heighten audience sympathy and understanding.

NARCISSA

Oh God a-bove, we thankThee, For the night's sweet rest, the dawn so fair

Example 2: Narcissa's Prayer from Act III of Moore: *Narcissa*, p. 143.

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

Later in the same act, in response to a disruption sparked by that faction of Cayuse opposed to the Whitmans' mission, Narcissa responds with a portion of Psalm 23. The passage freely sets a text drawn from the Psalm's first five verses. As in her earlier hymn, she is again instructed to sing "with lofty faith

and courage” (example 3). Her show of spirituality calms the unruly crowd and is reinforced by a dramatic lighting effect. According to the stage directions, “The sun, now shining brightly over the mountains, shines in through the door and windows, illuminating Narcissa’s face and hair. The Indians accept it as an omen, and are deeply impressed” (p. 171). The harp-like, rolled-chord accompaniment reinforces the heavenly aspects of this on-stage imagery, while Narcissa’s voice rises to an impassioned climax. Here again sacred music enables Narcissa to overcome difficult situations.

NARCISSA

The Lord my Shep-herd is, I shall not want. He mak - eth

me to lie in pas-tures green, My soul He re - stor - eth, My

soul He re - stor - eth. A ta - ble, Thou pre-par-est, in the pres-ence of mine en - e - mies, Mine

Example 3: Psalm 23 from Act III of Moore: *Narcissa* (crowd exclamations omitted), p. 171–2.

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

credits: Megan Woller, soprano; Aaron Ziegel, piano.

en - e - mies. Yea, tho' I walk thro' the val - ley of the shad - ow, Of death, of death, No

ev - il shall I fear, For Thou, for Thou are with me.

Example 3 (cont'd): Psalm 23 from Act III of Moore: *Narcissa* (crowd exclamations omitted), p. 172–3.

The racial distinction between the Anglo *Narcissa* and the American Indians, already highlighted by the scene's lighting effect that "lightens" *Narcissa* and "darkens" the Indians, is reinforced by the fluency with which her character engages in Christian expressiveness. Through its use of sacred music, this opera re-envisioned *Narcissa* as a citizen of the Christian nation, worthy of the audience's admiration, divinely called to serve, and empowered by her faith. The tragedy of her subsequent death at the hands of the Cayuse thus becomes all the more potent in the eyes of an early twentieth-century audience. Her religiosity is inherently bound up with her whiteness, as missionaries like the Whitmans, with the cooperation of the federal government's Bureau of Indian Affairs, often sought to "eradicate all signs of Indianness" in their efforts to force assimilation.²⁶ In historical fact—the full details of which were not available when Moore and Carr created their opera—*Narcissa* was neither a compassionate nor an effective missionary for the Cayuse tribe, a people whom she neither liked nor respected. *Narcissa* herself described them as "insolent, proud, domineering, arrogant, and ferocious." She was the only woman killed in the so-called Whitman Massacre; her body was also mutilated, suggesting that the tribe's anger toward the white settlers was particularly directed at *Narcissa*. The other white women at the mission remained unharmed.²⁷ For the opera's creators, however, their view of *Narcissa* as a role model of service and sacrifice outweighed any desire for historical accuracy. It is thus significant that *Narcissa* and not her husband Marcus was made the opera's title character.

The sheer variety of types of sacred music found in *Narcissa* is one of the work's most distinctive hallmarks. The composer herself recognized that "It was a difficult task to preserve the religious

²⁶ Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers, *Natives and Strangers*, 226.

²⁷ For more on *Narcissa*'s view of Indians, see Jeffrey, *Converting the West*, 101–7, 148–9, and 164 (source of quote above). For a detailed narrative of the Cayuse response to the ever-expanding population of white settlers and of the massacre itself, see 210–22.

atmosphere without becoming monotonous, and allowing the interest to flag.”²⁸ In order to achieve the necessary dramatic contrast, Carr and Moore present Marcus Whitman as a complementary kind of Christian-nation citizen, even as the approach of these two women creators reinforces typical operatic gender stereotypes. Since Narcissa embodies a (more passive) spiritual citizenship, Marcus articulates a more overt (and active) nationalism. His Act III monologue is a case in point. Here, the libretto advances its patriotic agenda by mythologizing Marcus’s role in securing the Northwest Territory as a US possession. Librettist Carr’s intended title for the opera, *The Cost of Empire*, provides a key to understanding this passage. Marcus sings:

Those that inherit land all worn and spoiled, know naught of this great world, new-made from the hand of God, this vast, unowned, uncomprehended West, where mount and sky are mirrored in a thousand lakes and streams; where forests crown the hills, and buried treasures wait the blast; where many a riven rock, remembering still its fiery birth, presents its harsh, defying face to man; where sleeps the soul or myriad harvests with no plough to wake, no hand to plant. And England this vast empire wins if I falter now.²⁹

This expansionist rhetoric echoes what one could have heard in a mid-nineteenth-century campaign speech. England, which at the time of the opera’s events controlled the Oregon Territory as an extension of Canada, was seen as a threat to US dominion over the West. The historical Marcus Whitman did in fact travel from his mission in the Oregon Territory to Washington, D.C., to lobby for expanded federal assistance in aid of the many newly arriving settlers. The operatic Marcus, in this monologue, argues that the nation’s providential destiny makes the United States the rightful controller of the region’s vast resources. Carr even grants Marcus the clairvoyance of predicting the gold rush to come, noting the “buried treasures [that] wait the blast.” Narcissa immediately recognizes, “It is the voice of God that calls you to this enterprise. I must not stay your zeal, but urge you on to win this prize” (p. 197). Ultimately, the deaths of the Whitmans become part of “the cost” of the expanding US empire. When the actions of Narcissa and Marcus are understood collectively, there can be no doubt about Moore and Carr’s intentions to operatically enact the commingling of nation building, Christian duty, and faithfulness.



Victor Herbert’s *Natoma* offers an even more fascinating demonstration of how sacred music can “providentially” endorse an imperialist plot outcome. The opera unfolds in Spanish-controlled California in 1820 and brings together a diverse menagerie—Americans, Spaniards, and indigenous natives. Librettist Joseph Redding describes the title character Natoma (dramatic soprano) as “the last of her race ... [who] bears upon her face the mystery and sadness of her vanishing” people.³⁰ Throughout the opera she wears an abalone shell amulet that is meant to designate her rightful claim to the California territory as sole surviving heir of her tribe. Natoma was a childhood playmate and so-called “handmaiden” to Barbara (lyric soprano), the beautiful daughter of a rich, land-owning Spanish nobleman, and thus she is entitled to an inheritance from those who currently control the region. Lastly, Paul (*Heldentenor*) is a lieutenant in the US Navy, a figure to whom both female characters find themselves romantically attracted. Natoma

²⁸ Mary Carr Moore, “Writing and Producing an Opera,” *Pacific Coast Musician* 4 (July 1915): 51.

²⁹ Sarah Pratt Carr, *The Cost of Empire: Libretto for the Opera Narcissa* (Seattle: The Stuff Printing Concern, 1912), 19; see p. 194–6 in the piano-vocal score.

³⁰ Victor Herbert and Joseph D. Redding, *Natoma: An Opera in Three Acts* [vocal score] (New York: Schirmer, 1911), v.

meets him first, and the attraction is mutual, but she acknowledges that he will prefer Barbara as soon as he meets her. Paul is the opera's primary dramatic agent—predestined, as it were, in both the librettist's conception and in demographic reality, to fulfill the nation's providential claim to control California. Much of the music for these characters aligns with their stock dramatic types. Natoma recounts the hardship and suffering of her tribe in a lengthy and emotional narrative ("Would you ask me of my people" in Act I, p. 34–43). Barbara fulfills the role of ingénue with a monologue addressed to the "silver moon" in which she declares her immediate yet profound love upon meeting Paul ("Oh, wondrous night!" in Act I, p. 142–6). She later entertains her friends with a strophic song that metaphorically links the awakening of new love with the welcome return of spring ("I list the trill in golden throat" in Act II, p. 246–52). Paul, meanwhile, proves his patriotic credentials with a heroic aria in praise of both *Columbus*, the "Spanish" "discoverer" of the New World, and *Columbia*, a symbolic representation of his nation's greatness ("No country can my own outvie" in Act II, p. 262–8).³¹ Mitzi Kolisch, writing in 1925, articulated an all too common criticism of the work, rightly noting the opera's over-dependence upon inherited grand opera ingredients: "Herbert flung into his effort all the best traditions of arias, choruses, and incidental dances, and to furnish the much-demanded 'native' quality he turned his hero full face to the audience so that they might benefit fully by his ordered ode to Columbus."³²

Audio: <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/6289>

John McCormack, tenor, singing Paul's "Ode to Columbus," rec. April 1919

In brief, *Natoma's* plot hinges upon a consequential decision made by the title role at the end of the second act. A young Spaniard named Alvarado, believing that he was previously promised Barbara's hand in marriage, attempts to abduct her amidst the busy confusion of a village festival in order to thwart her burgeoning romance with Paul. Natoma, while trying to prevent the abduction, stabs Alvarado to death in sight of the gathered townsfolk. Fearing justice for her guilt in Alvarado's murder, Natoma has no choice but to seek sanctuary in the mission church. With this shift of setting to inside the Santa Barbara Mission for the opera's final act, sacred music ultimately facilitates the resolution of these dramatic entanglements.

By the midpoint of Act III, with Natoma sunk to the depths of despair, the mission priest convinces her to abandon her beliefs in her god Manitou and to instead commit herself to Christianity. The priest Father Peralta appeals to her memories of childhood, when she and Barbara were friends and playmates: "Two children wandered hand in hand, / And played amid the golden sand; / The one was dark and sad of face, / The other fair and full of grace. / The light of love shone in their eyes; / O childhood days, O Paradise!" (p. 312–3). This effort at evangelism draws a stark racial distinction between Natoma's "dark" otherness and Barbara's "fair" whiteness. The priest implies that Natoma's childhood friendship has given her an early glimpse into living a life of Christian piety: "My child of the lonely heart, the same love that was yours in the golden sands awaits you here" (p. 315). Father Peralta then extends this promise of forgiveness to Natoma: "The eyes of the Madonna are looking into thine / She holds out her arms to thee / She will take thee unto Her great heart / She will lift thy soul until it joins the spirit of thy Father in the clouds above the mountain." (p. 315–7).

Here, the libretto advances a seemingly inclusive vision of citizenship in the Christian nation—Natoma is invited to receive God's forgiveness should she so choose. As the references to the Madonna

³¹ The role's creator, John McCormack, recorded this aria in April 1912 on a 12-inch 78-rpm disc, Victor 74295, matrix C-11822; digital audio is available in the Library of Congress's "National Jukebox" at <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/6289>.

³² Mitzi Kolisch, "Why Not an American Opera?" *The Independent* 115 (August 15, 1925): 189.

make clear, this particular conversion is a Catholic one. Yet given the setting, Herbert and Redding are not so much making a choice about religious representation as they are simply acknowledging historical fact. The period's denominational polarization, especially widespread anti-Catholicism, has little discernable impact here, while the absence of mention in the surrounding press commentary likewise suggests that these divisions were a non-issue in the operatic context.³³ As ecumenical as this operatic form of Christianity may be, in order to accept this new faith, Natoma must abandon the ways and beliefs of her past in order to assimilate. The opera presents this choice not as a loss of self, but rather as an opportunity to live out her newfound ideals. In fact, Natoma (singing "in quiet ecstasy" according to the stage directions) immediately acknowledges that "Love shall be repaid by love. There is one I wish to make happy; my love is my faith!" (p. 317–18).

This takes us to the opera's final scene. In an ambitious compositional choice, from this moment on, Herbert's lead characters sing no more; instead, they play the role of silent stage actors. Following Natoma's conversion, the mission nuns welcome her into their community. Paul and Barbara have also come to the mission church; they join hands and kneel before the altar. Natoma removes her abalone amulet (the removal of which signifies her assimilation) and places it around Barbara's neck. Through this act she blesses their union and fulfills her "wish to make [Barbara] happy." Father Peralta raises his hands in benediction, Natoma departs to the convent, and the curtain falls to a final statement of the *leitmotiv* that represents Natoma's fate. The vocal music that accompanies this stage action is of exclusively sacred origin, with a text in church Latin sung by the opera's chorus. The opera thus ends with a true choral apotheosis. By excluding the trio of principals from the singing, the audience focuses not on the individual spirituality of these characters, as was the goal of Moore's *Narcissa*, but rather on the politically symbolic implications of their actions.

The passage begins with an organ prelude that prepares for the entrance of an antiphonal chorus of monks and friars. They sing the first stanza of the Compline hymn "Te lucis ante terminum" along with one of the hymn's Proper doxologies (example 4a):

Te lucis ante terminum, rerum Creator, poscimus,
[Before the end of the day, we ask Thee, creator of all,]
ut pro tua clementia sis præsul et custodia.
[to be in Thy mercy our protector and guardian.]
Deo Patri sit gloria et filio, qui a mortuis
[Now to the Father and the Son, who rose from death, be glory given,]
surrexit et paraclito, in sempiterna sæcula.
[with Thou, O Holy Comforter, henceforth by all in earth and heaven.]³⁴

The nuns of the convent next make their entrance, while softly singing the "Sanctus" from the Mass to a simple accompaniment of muted violins. While the nuns' "Sanctus" continues into the "Hosanna," the monks and friars add a recitation-like counterpoint using a slightly modified first verse of Psalm 117 (example 4b).³⁵ Once the full mission choir is assembled on stage, the orchestra joins the chorus for a climactic, *grandioso* reprise of the "Sanctus" theme (example 4c). This climax coincides with that fateful moment when Natoma relinquishes her abalone amulet into Barbara's care.

³³ For a succinct overview of anti-Catholicism throughout American history, see Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23–46.

³⁴ The Latin text is given here as it appears in the published piano-vocal score, p. 320–4.

³⁵ Along with much text repetition, "in æternum" is added to Psalm 117:1—*Laudate Dominum in æternum; omnes gentes laudate eum, omnes populi laudate Dominum, omnes populi laudate Dominum, laudate Dominum, laudate Dominum* (p. 326–9).

1st CHORUS

Do - o Pa - tri sit glo - ri - a, et Fi - li - o, qui a mor - tu - is sur - re - xit,

2nd CHORUS

De - o Pa - tri sit glo - ri - a, et Fi - li - o

Organ

p *p*

ac pa - ra - cli - to, in sem - pi - ter - na sae - cu - la.

ac pa - ra - cli - to, in sem - pi - ter - na sae - cu - la.

rit. *f* *ff*

Example 4a: Double chorus of monks and friars from Act III of Herbert: *Natoma*, p. 321–3.

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

CHORUS of NUNS
p *sempre cresc.*

San - ctus, San - ctus, Do - mi-nus De - us Sa - ba-oth!

VIOLINS con sordini
pp

p

Ple - ni sunt coe - li et ter - ra glo-ri - a tu - a.

CHORUS of NUNS
Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis.

MONKS and FRIARS
Lau - da - te Do - mi-num in ae - ter - num

ORCHESTRA

Example 4b: “Sanctus” sung by chorus of off-stage nuns, continuing with “Hosanna” and Psalm 117 combined, from Act III of Herbert: *Natoma*, p. 325–6.

Audio: <https://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

Più lento, molto maestoso
 (Natoma lifts the amulet from off her neck, and places it over Barbara's shoulders)

San - ctus, San - ctus,

Do - mi - nus De - us Sa - ba - oth.

ff grandioso

8va

Example 4c: Climactic, full-chorus “Sanctus” from Act III of Herbert: *Natoma*, p. 330–1.

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

In evaluating the meaning of this distinctive scene, Herbert’s audiences would have found comparisons from the standard repertoire near at hand. The most widely familiar model of an opera that concludes with a choral apotheosis comes from Gounod’s *Faust*. That 1859 work was among the most frequently performed scores in the repertoires of New York’s Metropolitan and Manhattan companies and the Chicago Opera Company, thus Herbert’s first audiences would have recently seen or would likely see *Faust* on stage again soon.³⁶ As in *Natoma*, Gounod’s score also concludes with a chorus singing a sacred text. In *Faust*, Marguerite prays for the Lord’s forgiveness as she is dying, while Mephistopheles battles to condemn both her and Faust to damnation. Faust perishes, but Marguerite receives a vision of heaven: accompanied by organ and orchestra, a chorus of angels sings in affirmation of Christ’s resurrection and

³⁶ New York’s Metropolitan Opera House was dubbed the *Faustspielhaus* due to the great frequency with which the company performed the work; see Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 288.

Marguerite's salvation.³⁷ The parallels with *Natoma* in terms of compositional style and content are unmissable. In both scores the chorus rather than the principals have the last word, and with *Faust* holding such a prominent place in the repertory, Herbert could count on the availability of an organ in the opera pit for his closing scene too. Wagner's *Parsifal* might also come to mind, with its elaborate enactment of sacred grail rituals in acts I and III and their intersection with themes of redemption. Herbert's idiom, however, avoids the static monumentality that characterizes Wagner's writing in that score. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is another possible influence. Although less widely familiar to US audiences at the time, Herbert knew the score well from his years as principal cellist in the Metropolitan Opera's orchestra. Like both *Natoma* and *Faust*, *Meistersinger* again features a choral apotheosis, yet here the text remains decidedly non-religious, with the chorus celebrating "holy German Art" (*die heil'ge deutsche Kunst*).³⁸

Natoma offers a unique synthesis of elements from these models. Personal fates are resolved (as in *Faust*), while the choral voices offer a ringing endorsement of the plot's outcome (as in Wagner's models). Yet only in *Natoma* does the final scene offer a larger message about the nation's belief in its providential exceptionalism. Here, the action that unfolds onstage is nothing short of witnessing the fulfillment of manifest destiny itself.³⁹ Through the words of the *Te lucis ante terminum*, the monks ask God to be "our protector and guardian" as California faces a time of changing national affiliation. They assign all glory to be had in the land's future "to the Father and the Son, who rose from death." The words of the Psalm likewise entreat "all the people" (*omnes populi*) to "praise the Lord," as the ramifications of the dénouement impact each of the demographic groups that inhabit the opera. The principals' individuality is thus subsumed by their symbolic significance. The Indian, Natoma, relinquishes her remaining claim to the land by passing on her abalone amulet. The Spaniard, Barbara, looks ahead to California's predestined future as a part of the United States by choosing a marriage partner from outside of her own privileged class. The American, Paul, through his union to Barbara becomes the rightful male inheritor of this formerly Spanish-controlled territory, thus completing his providential purpose. The characters of white European descent can look forward to a limitless future, while Natoma, on the other hand, is safely assimilated into the convent community. Herbert and Redding conceived a conclusion that is simultaneously patriotic, racially "appropriate," and divinely endorsed through the sacred Latin texts. Throughout it all, sacred music validates this operatic realization of national progress.



A counterexample is found in *The Sacrifice* by Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940). Whereas *Narcissa* and *Natoma* both focused on the fate of the nation and its providential destiny, Converse's work instead explores individual strength of character as models for Americanness. Converse's initial composition training was under the tutelage of John Knowles Paine and George Whitefield Chadwick in

³⁷ *Faust*'s choral apotheosis is one of the rarest of exceptions: operatic sacred music that originates in an actual sacred (liturgical) composition. The scene borrows material from an unpublished Requiem composed and performed under Gounod's baton when the composer was only 24 years old. See James Harding, *Gounod* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 48 and 112.

³⁸ According to Thomas Grey, the chorus is "assembled as a microcosm of the nation, their massed choral voice becoming the massed voice of the *Volk*." Thomas S. Grey, "Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* as National Opera, 1868–1945," in *Music and German National Identity*, eds. Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 81.

³⁹ On the emergence of the term "manifest destiny" in American usage and its surrounding discourse, see Guyatt, *Providence and Invention*, 216–30.

Boston, after which he completed his studies with Josef Rheinberger in Munich. Although primarily known for his orchestral music, Converse wrote four operas in total, including *The Pipe of Desire*, which in March 1910 became the Metropolitan Opera Company's first production by an American composer. Converse also served as vice president of the Boston Opera Company board of directors, and from this position of influence he was able to secure both a revival of *The Pipe of Desire* and the premiere of his follow-up score, *The Sacrifice*, during the 1910–1911 season. The new work of the hometown composer debuted to much civic fanfare on March 3, 1911, as the two-year-old Boston Opera Company continued to stake its claim as a significant contributor to the nation's contemporary opera scene in a city that historically had proved less than welcoming to the art form.⁴⁰

The Sacrifice, to the composer's own libretto with additional poeticized lyrics by John Macy, is set during the Mexican-American War and traces the unrequited love of Burton, an American army captain, for the Mexican maiden Chonita. As a *Boston Globe* article published in anticipation of the opera's premiere succinctly summarized:

Chonita is a Mexican girl of rank. She is beloved by two young officers of the contending forces: Bernal, a Mexican, whom she loves, and Burton, an American. Chonita intervenes in an encounter between them and is wounded. Her lover is taken prisoner. Burton spares to her the life of his rival and is himself killed. Hence the name, "The Sacrifice."⁴¹

Converse discovered the kernel for this plot idea in a part-memoir, part-travelogue written by Henry Augustus Wise, a lieutenant in the US Navy who served during the Mexican-American war. Wise modestly claims that his goal in publishing his first-person account was "merely to compose a pleasant narrative, such as may perchance please or interest the generality of readers."⁴² In his chapter XXVI, "Dolores and Her Lover," Wise presents himself as a caring and dependable US military officer who concerns himself with the welfare of a beautiful Mexican woman named Dolores, or Lola. Her lover is an officer in the Mexican army. Wise observes how she fears for her lover's safety in battle, is depressed while he is away, and seeks information on his whereabouts from Wise after a skirmish. Eventually the lover returns to Lola, and Wise describes the tragic aftermath:

[W]hether from idle jealousy, or natural brutality of disposition, [her lover] had the dastardly cruelty to beat the poor unresisting girl, with the hilt of a pistol, until she fell lifeless from heavy blows showered upon her breast and shoulders. ... The miscreant fled, and many an hour of sound sleep he cost me, in hopes of getting a glimpse of him along the tube of a rifle.⁴³

Wise recounts that he visited the dying Lola regularly during her final days after the attack. He was present at her burial and kept a lock of her hair in token of her memory. Converse, in adapting this narrative for the opera stage, maintains Wise's framework of the white American outsider who is attracted to and cares about the wellbeing of a beautifully exotic Mexican woman. Yet as a composer with noted progressive sensibilities, the stereotypically brutal role of Wise's (unnamed) savage Mexican lover would instead be re-envisioned (and named) as Bernal—Burton's equal on the opposing side of the conflict, a worthy romantic

⁴⁰ The principal biographical source is Robert J. Garofalo, *Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871–1940): His Life and Music* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994). For more on the history of the Boston Opera Company, see Quaintance Eaton, *The Boston Opera Company* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1965).

⁴¹ "Boston Man Has Written a New Opera," *Boston Globe*, November 27, 1910.

⁴² Henry A. Wise, *Los Gringos, or an Inside View of Mexico and California* (London: Richard Bentley, 1849), vi.

⁴³ Wise, *Los Gringos*, 160–1.

partner for Chonita, and the key to her future happiness and security.⁴⁴

On the superficial level, this opera seems to resemble any number of familiar scores in which a white male protagonist courts danger or causes harm by loving an exotic “other”—Bizet’s *Carmen* and Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* are two points of comparison with which Converse’s Boston audience would have been well acquainted.⁴⁵ Burton, much like Don José or Pinkerton, is an outsider encountering a culture that is brought to life through all of the stock operatic tropes for achieving “local color.” Folk-like melodies and Latin American dance rhythms abound, particularly in the music Converse writes for the Mexican natives, echoing the procedures found in Puccini’s “Japanese” and Bizet’s “Gypsy” soundworlds. The love triangle at the center of Converse’s plot, however, inverts the more common trope of one male and two female protagonists. Herbert’s *Natoma*, as we have seen, followed the more standard configuration. The Boston Opera Company presented Verdi’s *Aida* more frequently than any opera except *La Bohème*, thus giving audiences another ready parallel. In both *Aida* and *Natoma*, the risks of partnering outside of one’s group are made apparent. For Paul and Barbara, the “safe” outcome is achieved when they are united and Natoma enters the convent. For Radames and Aida, on the other hand, their choice of a cross-cultural coupling “seals” their fate, quite literally, as they are entombed together. In *The Sacrifice*, however, Burton acts as the disruptor of the true romance at the plot’s core.

Although Burton may initially seem like yet another iteration of the “American patriot” archetype, already represented by *Narcissa*’s Marcus and *Natoma*’s Paul, the outcome for Burton is quite unlike what typically unfolds on the operatic stage. In “happy” endings, both Paul and Pinkerton end up “correctly” paired. In tragedies, Marcus Whitman is the victim of his efforts to serve his country, while Radames refuses to accept the safety that a union with Amneris would provide, is condemned for treason, but nonetheless finds himself united with his beloved Aida. Burton, on the other hand, *makes the choice* to sacrifice his own life for the benefit of the maiden whom he loves. For this plot resolution to land convincingly, the audience for *The Sacrifice* needs to achieve a heightened degree of sympathy for both Burton and Chonita. Burton’s actions must seem patriotically justified, and Chonita must possess the model moral character of a citizen of the Christian nation for her to be worthy of Burton’s sacrifice. Sacred music is the medium through which Converse begins to accomplish this goal.

During the opera’s second act, Chonita fears that Bernal has been killed in the previous night’s skirmish. She is exhausted from resisting Burton’s persistent romantic advances, and despite the violence of warfare that surrounds her, she continues to refuse his offer of protection. Instead she turns to prayer, kneeling before the cross in the sanctuary of a mission church, and seeking the strength to persevere through this time of distress (example 5). In full, her prayer reads as follows:

Almighty Father, look down on me, and grant me Thy protection.
Comfort my sorrow.
Teach me Thy mercy, and show Thine infinite compassion and love,
the peace which Thou didst promise
through our Lord Thy Son and our Redeemer.

⁴⁴ Converse’s political views are articulated more explicitly in his later opera *The Immigrants* (unperformed and unpublished during the composer’s lifetime); see Charles Freeman, “Progressive Ideals for the Opera Stage? George W. Chadwick’s *The Padrone* and Frederick S. Converse’s *The Immigrants*,” in *Music and History: Bridging the Disciplines*, eds. Jeffrey H. Jackson and Stanley C. Pelkey (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 115–39.

⁴⁵ See Ziegel, “Making America Operatic,” 350.

Saviour hear me.
 Break the power of them that compass me round.
 For all who trust in Thy defence shall fear no enemy.
 Lord Thou art my shield and my salvation. (p. 165–7)

CHONITA *p*

Al-migh-ty Fa - ther, look down on me, and grant me Thy pro-tec-tion.

Andante sostenuto e cantabile

pp

Com - fort my sor - row. Teach me Thy mer - cy,

mf

and show Thine in - fi - nite com - pas - sion and love,

f *pp*

f *mf* *pp* *ritard.*

Example 5: “Chonita’s Prayer,” Converse: *The Sacrifice*, Act II, p. 165–6.

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

Alice Nielsen, soprano, singing “Chonita’s Prayer,” rec. 1911

Converse's composition shapes Chonita into a wholly sympathetic figure. Although she is nominally a Mexican Catholic, the composer chooses to avoid any trace of both "local color" and denominational specificity in this passage. Working against stereotypical expectations, he refuses to present her as an "exotic" object of Burton's desire. Chonita's admission into the realm of sacred music argues for her honorary "Americanness," aligning her with Narcissa and the post-conversion Natoma as models of piety. The musical setting is carefully calibrated to achieve these goals. The natural rhythms of the text declamation, the chromatic inner voices, subtle harmonic flow, and the richly expressive melodic line capture the supplicatory devotion of Chonita's attitude.

This prayer aria seems to echo both Desdemona's "Ave Maria" from Act IV of *Otello* and Elisabeth's *Gebet* ("Allmächt'ge Jungfrau!") in Act III of *Tannhäuser*. In all three scores, the act of prayer conveys the purity and devotion of their respective female protagonists. Like Chonita, Desdemona too prays in private for herself and her beloved, yet Wagner's example seems to have been Converse's direct model. Both Chonita's and Elisabeth's prayers share a similar tempo, rate of harmonic motion, and plangent woodwind accompaniment. The identical starting word ("Almighty" and "Allmächt'ge") is surely no accident. A critic writing about the work's premiere for the *Boston Globe* recognized this kinship, noting that both passages "are hallowed by a sublimated, spiritualized beauty, which consorts with the purity, the tender sympathy and the moral fineness of soul which eternally characterize exalted womanhood."⁴⁶ American soprano Alice Nielsen, creator of the role, felt a special kinship with the character. She explained to an interviewer before the premiere, "For my own part, if it had been written especially for me it could not have suited me better."⁴⁷ Nielsen thus seems willing to accept Chonita, as must the opera's audience too, as a representative of herself (white / American / Christian) rather than as an "exotic other."

Converse's refusal to exoticize Chonita is related to a broader trend in these operas (one aligned with Wagner's approach) that refuses to exoticize the sacred. Italian operas familiar to the audience of the Boston Opera Company, on the other hand, often employ operatic sacred music to contribute an exotic dash of local color. The faux-Egyptian rituals from *Aida* are one obvious example of the contrasting Italian approach. The "Te Deum" which concludes Act I of Puccini's *Tosca*, with its slow processional tread, liturgical chanting, church bells, and solemn drumbeats, is designed to highlight the startling juxtaposition of sacred music against Scarpia's lustful evilness rather than to convey any genuinely religious convictions. Likewise, the "Miserere" scene from Act IV of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* incorporates the sacred choral text primarily to impart an ominous and lugubrious mood. In contrast to the faithful Christianity of Chonita (or Wagner's Elisabeth), *Il Trovatore*'s Leonora calls not upon God in her preceding prayer aria ("Timor di me? ... D'amor sull'ali rosee"), but rather she merely implores *the wind* to carry her sighs to her beloved Manrico.

If Chonita's act of prayer thus reshapes the audience's perception of her character, then the actions of Burton likewise require careful explanation. As the opera's representative model of American patriotism, his sacrificial death must surely be more than a doomed effort to convince his beloved of his devotion to her, even if the typically melodramatic plot conclusion may at first seem to present precisely that. In the final act, Chonita's lover Bernal (who had previously been captured) is freed by Burton so that

⁴⁶ "Critical Review of the Opera's Music and Story," *Boston Globe*, March 4, 1911.

⁴⁷ "Boston Tomorrow Hears New Opera," *Boston Globe*, March 2, 1911. Nielsen also recorded this number, the only such portion of the work available on record. The Columbia 12-inch 78-rpm disc, A5298, matrix 30724-1, can be heard on the CD album *Souvenirs from American Opera*, International Record Collectors' Club IRCC-CD 818, [1998].

he may reunite one last time with the apparently dying Chonita (who had been previously been wounded). Chonita recognizes that she will only survive if she is together with Bernal. As the synopsis given in the published libretto explains, Burton “believes the word of Chonita, but how to make his men think that Bernal does not merit the end of a spy. Duty! Honor! Would that he might die with honor; he would give his life for Chonita.” Before he can think of a plan, several American soldiers suddenly rush in to inform their captain that they are trapped by a force of enemy Mexicans. “Sudden decision shows on Burton’s face. He sends the other two soldiers back to their posts. He turns to Chonita. He gladly offers his life that she may have freedom, love, and joy.” Rather than escaping himself, he is killed in the ambush. Chonita, “overwhelmed with the greatness of Burton’s deed,” solemnly departs with Bernal; they are together and free.⁴⁸

In building the case for Burton as a model of individual strength of character, Converse first seeks to establish Burton’s patriotic credentials. As James Parakilas has observed, it is no accident that “the heyday of the Soldier and the Exotic in opera, coincided exactly with the heyday of European [and American] imperialism.”⁴⁹ Burton, much like Paul and Marcus before him, thus becomes a representative of the US imperialist aspirations to defend, influence, and improve otherwise vulnerable parts of the world. He expresses precisely that intention while seeking to secure Chonita’s romantic affections: “Ah! Señorita! If you but knew your fair land’s peril, you who have lived in dreams of beauty, peace and pleasure always round you” (p. 47–8). Burton proceeds to articulate the belief that only he and his American compatriots can secure Chonita’s (and by extension Mexico’s) future: “Stronger natures must protect you, / Surer hands must guide the helm. / You must trust in us to guard you, / We who come with honest purpose / Here, to bring out of this turmoil / Lasting peace and nobler justice, / Better planned for mightier progress” (p. 51–2). This insistence on the comparative superiority of the United States—stronger, surer, nobler, better, mightier—coupled with a perceived duty to serve and protect the less fortunate around the world, reflects yet another point of view on patriotism in wide circulation at the time. Author and Princeton professor Henry Van Dyke, Jr., in an oft-reprinted 1906 essay, laid out a list of beliefs that he deems necessary for “True Americanism” and that significantly overlap with the positive virtues of citizens of the Christian nation. Several of these beliefs are manifest in the choices and actions of the fictional Burton. According to Van Dyke:

True Americanism is this: To believe that the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are given by God. To believe that any form of power that tramples on these rights is unjust. ... To believe that for the existence and perpetuity of such a state a man should be willing to give his whole service, in property, in labor, and in life.⁵⁰

The war that impedes Chonita’s “pursuit of happiness” is an “unjust” trampling of “inalienable rights ... given by God.” Burton’s sacrifice, likewise, reveals someone “willing to give his whole service ... in life.” Thus Converse created a noble, if tragic, patriot—one who rose above cross-border and cross-cultural

⁴⁸ Olin Downes, “Synopsis,” in Frederick S. Converse and John Macy, *The Sacrifice: An Opera in Three Acts* (New York: H.W. Gray Company, 1911), 16–17.

⁴⁹ James Parakilas, “The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter, Part I,” *Opera Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1994): 34.

⁵⁰ Henry Van Dyke, “True Americanism,” quoted in J. Madison Gathany, ed., *American Patriotism in Prose and Verse, 1775–1918* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 87–8.

animosities, whose death was the ultimate expression of these distinctively American ideals.⁵¹ Because of Chonita's ability to enter into the realm of sacred music and to express her innermost spirituality, the audience perceives that she is worthy of Burton's sacrificial love. The sublime music of Chonita's prayer aria helps to justify Burton's efforts to protect Chonita and to secure her future happiness as the honorable actions of a true patriot.



The operatic impact of Christianity is felt yet again in the 1917 opera *Azora* by Henry Kimball Hadley (1871–1937).⁵² Like Converse, Hadley too studied composition with Chadwick before further training in Munich with Ludwig Thuille. In addition to composing, Hadley achieved international fame as arguably the greatest American-born conductor of his generation. His long list of stage works includes five operas, including a 1920 Metropolitan Opera commission, *Cleopatra's Night*. When he wrote his second opera, *Azora*, the composer surely had the choral-finale precedents of Gounod's *Faust*, Wagner's *Meistersinger*, and Herbert's *Natoma* in mind. Premiered by the Chicago Opera Company the day after Christmas, this work ends with yet another a choral apotheosis, but it offers a striking variant to the approaches encountered thus far. Rather than presenting a *tutti* acclamation of a unified point of view, Hadley constructs a static tableau that pits several simultaneous vocal contingents against each other. The title character Azora is the daughter of Montezuma, the "Emperor of Mexico" according to the score.⁵³ The opera's typically complicated plot involves a romance between Azora and Xalca (a prince from an enemy tribe), a prophetic vision of the coming of Christianity to the Aztec lands received by Papantzin (the sister of Montezuma), and the jealous desire of Ramatzin (the general of Montezuma's army) for Azora.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Papantzin, Azora, and Xalca choose to accept the faith revealed to Papantzin in her dream-vision, a crime for which the penalty is death. At the moment that they are to be killed, Spanish priests and the conquistadors of Cortés arrive in Mexico, thus fulfilling Papantzin's prophecy. The Spaniards, who make their first and only appearance on stage in this final scene, sing lyrics that herald Christ's salvation; Azora, Xalca, and Papantzin join this chorus of Christian praise. Montezuma's priests and people make up another contingent, vainly imploring their sun god, Totec, to show his power and to preserve the practice of human sacrifice. The Spanish priests add a third strand of counterpoint to the already over-complicated texture, singing "Gloria in excelsis," "Alleluia," and "Hodie Christus natus est" in Latin. It is the grandest of grand opera ensembles—all of the principals appear simultaneously onstage along with multiple subdivisions of the chorus—and with this climactic yet static tableau, the opera comes

⁵¹ In James Parakilas's reading of the opera's ending, "it is the soldier rather than the exotic woman who dies, but this time the soldier is giving up a fantasy of cultural arrogance—the fantasy that in escaping into the arms of an exotic woman he is bestowing the blessings of his culture on her—and his death serves to expiate the guilt that the American audience has been asked to feel for this arrogance" (Parakilas, "Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter, Part II," *Opera Quarterly* 10, no. 3 [1994]: 61). In the context of citizenship in a "Christian nation," I would argue that Burton's actions were intended to be received in a much more positive light than Parakilas implies.

⁵² The principal biographical sources are John C. Canfield, "Henry Kimball Hadley: His Life and Works (1871–1937)" (EdD diss., Florida State University, 1960), and Nicholas Tawa, *Mainstream Music of Early Twentieth Century America: The Composers, Their Times, and Their Works* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992).

⁵³ Montezuma makes regular appearances in opera plots dating back to the Baroque era; see Malena Kuss, "Contributions of the New World to the Music of the Old World," *Acta Musicologica* 63 (1991): 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.2307/932877>.

⁵⁴ Many contemporary observers noted *Azora*'s unmistakable similarities to Verdi's *Aida*. Writing in Italian for a New York-based publication read by the nation's large Italian-American population, Pasquale de Biasi observed, "Si afferma che si tratti dell'*Aida* americana. Vedremo." [It is said that this is an American *Aida*. We shall see. (Or, We'll see about that!)] Pasquale de Biasi, "Cronache d'arte," *Il Carroccio: The Italian Review* 3, no. 9 (September 1917): 270.

to an end. (Example 6 presents a brief sample of this lengthy passage.) The simultaneous presentation of both sacred Christian and pagan Aztec lyrics risks undercutting the impact of the former, particularly since Hadley does not differentiate the groups musically. Text intelligibility is certainly compromised, as in any grand opera tutti.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the message of Hadley's opera closely echoes that of *Natoma*: acceptance of Christianity is the sole path forward into modernity. Other beliefs must be left behind, be they the Aztec practice of human sacrifice or Natoma's former faith in Manitou. Sacred music within the operatic context is again the conduit for a providential message.

The musical score is for a grand opera tutti, featuring six vocal parts and an orchestra. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 3/2. The score is written for the following parts:

- AZORA & XALCA**: Soprano part, starting with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. Lyrics: "God is King! God is King of".
- PAPANTZIN**: Soprano part, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Lyrics: "There is no oth-er God save Him on high, and".
- MONTEZUMA & HIS PEOPLE**: Soprano and Bass parts, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Lyrics: "Lord, of ev-er-liv-ing fire, pro-tect and save thy peo-ple! Re-".
- SPANISH SOLDIERS**: Soprano and Bass parts, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Lyrics: "There is no oth-er God save Him on high, and save".
- SPANISH PRIESTS**: Bass part, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. Lyrics: "Glo-ria in ex-cel-sis De-o!".
- Orch.**: Orchestra part, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic.

The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and triplets, indicating a complex and expressive performance.

Example 6: Final tableau from Act III of Hadley: *Azora*, p. 222–3.

Audio: <https://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

⁵⁵ For further discussion about the function of the chorus in grand opera, see James Parakilas, "The Chorus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. David Charlton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521641180.006>.

all! —

mf *cresc. e accel.*
Christ, the on - ly Sac - - - - - ri - fice!

mf *cresc. e accel.*
store, — great Chief, our Sac - ri - fice, — our Sac - ri - fice! —

mf *cresc. e accel.*
Christ, the on - ly Sac - - - - - ri - fice!

mf *cresc. e accel.*
Him on high — and Christ, — the on - ly Sac - ri - fice! —

mf *cresc. e accel.*
Glo - ria in ex - cel - sis! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le...

Example 6 (cont'd): Final tableau from Act III of Hadley: *Azora*, p. 223–5.

The opera's concluding scene functions as both the practical and the musical fulfillment of Papantzin's vision. Earlier in Act I, she relays the prophecy to her brother Montezuma in a lengthy narrative. This passage includes material—both text and melody—that is subsequently recapitulated in the concluding tableau. This recurring material is found in Papantzin's vocal part above and in the final two lines of text below. Librettist David Stevens' lyrics for her dream narrative is one of the most striking examples of the interplay of history, religion, providentialism, and the Christian nation in these operas. The entire passage reads as follows:

I dreamed that Death had claimed this mortal frame,
 And forth, along a dim, mysterious road,
 My spirit fared;
 In time a spacious valley met my sight,
 Which no beginning had, nor end,
 With hills on ev'ry side.
 And through this fair and verdant space,
 A mighty river ran athwart my path—
 And still I knew no fear,
 But ere I plunged into the flood,
 I closed my eyes to gather strength;
 And when I opened them again,
 Behold! there stood upon the brink
 A glorious Youth in garments white,
 Whose visage like the heavens shone,
 His lustrous wings repeating all the splendent hues
 The sun has e're evoked
 From all the precious gems of earth!
 And on his gracious brow there stood the figure of a Cross.
 And as I gazed, he spake:
 "Not yet! It is not time," he cried;
 "For thou hast yet to learn the love of God,
 Ere thou shalt cross the River!"
 And speaking thus, he turned me toward the east;
 And there upon the waters I beheld
 Great ships that bore a host of men.
 Aloft they held bright banners,
 And lo! on ev'ry ensign shone
 The figure of a Cross! Then spake the Youth:
 "Behold! the Warriors of God are they,
 The One Great God of all,
 And bring His Word unto thy race.
 Therefore, return; relate what thou hast heard,
 And behold! this is the message thou shalt bear:
 'All gods but One forsake,
 And cease thy rites unhallowed.
 There is no other God save Him on High,
 And Christ the only Sacrifice!'"⁵⁶

Audio: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0013.106>

Papantzin's "Dream Narrative," Hadley: *Azora*, Act I, p. 55–61
 credits: Meghan McGinty, alto; Aaron Ziegel, piano.

Papantzin, a member of the Aztec royal family, is the chosen recipient of a divine revelation that is brought to fruition with the arrival in the opera's finale of Cortés's fleet, emblazoned with "bright banners" bearing "the figure of the cross." The angel in Papantzin's vision makes it clear that the acceptance of Christianity

⁵⁶ David Stevens, *Azora: The Daughter of Montezuma* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1917), 15; see p. 55–61 in the piano-vocal score.

is a prerequisite of progress towards modernity. *Azora* thus extends the concept of providentialism to encompass the larger New World.⁵⁷

Yet the symbolic ramifications of the opera's plot and context were not lost upon the opera's early auditors. With the nation's recent entry into the "Great War" and the accompanying outpouring of patriotism, *Azora* proved to be a well-timed vehicle for nationalist enthusiasm. A columnist in the illustrated news weekly *Current Opinion* beat the patriotic drum with particular fervor. The writer welcomed the score as "the first genuinely all-American operatic production" on account of its "American subject, the text and the music written by Americans, performed by Americans, with scenery designed by an American." The opera's premiere was a momentous occasion because it "signalizes an epoch in American musical annals, for it is the first time ... that an all-American product has 'gone across' an American grand-opera stage." Previous operas failed to measure up, in the writer's opinion, through their use of singers or conductors of foreign birth. *Natoma*, by the Irish-born Herbert, was even called out by name on account of that perceived flaw, while a photo of Hadley appeared above the caption, "A MUSICAL PATRIOT."⁵⁸ Reviews in the *Chicago Post*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post* echoed similar sentiments. The awarding of this "all-American" accolade to an opera about pre-colonial Mexican history was aided by the plot's resonance with notions of providentialism and its depiction of assimilation into the Christian nation. *Azora*, *Xalca*, and *Papantzin* could thus be seen as prototypical "True Americans."



As conspicuous as these operatic displays of religious faith might seem from our point of view a century later, audiences of the time apparently found such plot devices to be entirely unsurprising. While commentators frequently complained about those aspects of plot and libretto that seemed ridiculous or absurd, the period's critical commentary was nonetheless likely to offer praise for the nationalist orientation of operatic sacred music. Indeed, critics identified these scenes as some of the strongest in each opera. The *Boston Globe*'s review of *The Sacrifice* singled out "Chonita's Prayer" for being among "the pages which one will probably remember," praising the music's "simplicity and repose."⁵⁹ Paul Hedrick, reviewing the premiere of *Narcissa* for the *Seattle Daily Times*, felt that the "church music in the ... first act went straight into the hearts of the audience. Its appeal was such that none could resist."⁶⁰ After a later Los Angeles revival, one critic went so far as to compare Moore's opera to the famed "Passion Play at Oberammergau. ... *Narcissa* approaches nearer to that than anything else I have ever witnessed."⁶¹ In response to *Natoma*, a *New York Times* commentator praised Herbert's "use of churchly effects in the last act" noting that they were "carried out with skill, and the result is truly impressive."⁶² The music critic

⁵⁷ The point of view advanced in this opera, celebrating Cortés's triumph over the Aztecs, is far removed from today's understanding. For more contemporary readings of this history, see Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); and Al Sandine, *Deadly Baggage: What Cortés Brought to Mexico and How It Destroyed the Aztec Civilization* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015).

⁵⁸ "Patriotism and Music: The First Genuinely All-American Operatic Production," *Current Opinion* 64, no. 2 (February 1918): 103.

⁵⁹ "Critical Review of the Opera's Music and Story," *Boston Globe*, March 4, 1911. A subsequent report on the opera's third performance listed Chonita's Prayer among "a number of songs which may be sung at home" (*The Sacrifice Again*, *Boston Globe*, March 14, 1911).

⁶⁰ Paul Hedrick, "Narcissa Approved," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 23, 1912.

⁶¹ "Mary Carr Moore," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 1926.

⁶² "Natoma Greeted By Great Audience," *New York Times*, March 1, 1911.

of *The Independent* likewise congratulated Herbert for crafting a finale that “produces an atmosphere of religious exaltation of which any European opera composer might be proud.”⁶³ Finally, Hadley’s early biographer Herbert Boardman, writing about *Azora*, described the opera’s third act as “a gradual crescendo from the darkened abodes of paganism to the illumined heights of Christianity.” He sensed that “whenever the Christian element is in the foreground, a sense of spirituality seems to be reflected in the music.”⁶⁴

These operas use their period settings to articulate sacro-political perspectives on the Christian nation concept that arose contemporaneously in US discourse. *Natoma* and *Narcissa* engage in a conversation that is historically relevant to their early nineteenth century settings (1820 and the 1830s/1840s respectively), roughly coinciding with the 1833 sermon of Rev. Jasper Adams quoted at the start of this article. An earlier 1803 New Hampshire Supreme Court decision suggested that “the principles of the Gospel will give the best and greatest security to government, and ... the knowledge of these [principles] is most likely to be propagated ... by public instruction in morality and religion.”⁶⁵ It would seem as if these compositions have co-opted the opera house as an alternative venue for such “public instruction.” Moore’s *Narcissa* in particular stands out for its intentional stance of moral and religious edification. The 1902 words of US Supreme Court Justice Brewer bear quoting again, as each of the composers and librettists discussed here might have been familiar with them. Brewer’s belief that “Christian nations manifest the highest forms of civilized life” and that “professedly Christian nations ... occupy the first place” is operatically enacted in both *Natoma* and *Azora*, while *The Sacrifice* and *Narcissa* each present Christianity as an essential marker of “civilized life.”⁶⁶

Historian Steven K. Green notes that by the early decades of the twentieth century, the construct of the United States as a Christian nation had been reduced to “a historical or aspirational concept” that “retained only symbolic significance as a cultural paradigm.”⁶⁷ Although Green observes a sort of winding down of these ideas around the time of these operas’ premieres, it should come as no surprise that providentialism, manifest destiny, “True Americanism,” and Christian national identity would recur with such regularity in opera in the United States. Composers and librettists were then in search of just such an “aspirational concept” upon which to construct a distinctively American approach to opera, as they sought to adopt and adapt the European-made art form for their country. The genre of opera was seen as uniquely well suited to this pursuit. As early as 1849 in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, Wagner had already “invested [his work] with a quasi-religious function and significance,” in Roger Hollinrake’s apt phrase.⁶⁸ Wagner likewise sought to cultivate in his compositions the potential for “regeneration,” in terms of the social reform his works might accomplish.⁶⁹ The ideals of this Wagnerian project were transmitted to the United States most prominently via Anton Seidl, who offered this imperative in 1894: “The field of grand opera is open to [American composers]; it offers them the best opportunities for achievement. It is only in this field that they can work out their greatest conceptions. Wagner must be their pattern, for, as I have already

⁶³ “Victor Herbert’s *Natoma*,” *The Independent* 70 (1911): 660.

⁶⁴ Herbert R. Boardman, *Henry Hadley: Ambassador of Harmony* (Atlanta, GA: Banner Press, 1932), 128 and 131.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Green, *Second Disestablishment*, 121.

⁶⁶ Brewer, *American Citizenship*, 23.

⁶⁷ Green, *Second Disestablishment*, 389–9.

⁶⁸ Roger Hollinrake, “Opinions and Outlook: Religious Beliefs,” in *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner’s Life and Music*, ed. Barry Millington (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 146.

⁶⁹ See William Weber, “Opinions and Outlook: Opera and Social Reform,” in *Wagner Compendium*, 153–8.

said, he represents the complete development of grand opera.”⁷⁰ More than any other genre of composition, opera was the medium that could best illuminate such lofty concepts as providentialism and the Christian nation. Collectively, Moore, Herbert, Converse, and Hadley offer one set of answers to this call, even as they draw upon a more inclusive range of models than Wagner alone.

Whether communal as in *Narcissa’s* hymnody, universally catholic in *Natoma’s* choral apotheosis, inwardly personal in Chonita’s Prayer, or prophetic in Papantzin’s dream narrative, the persistence of Christian sacred music became a quintessential style trait that is crucial to an understanding of this phase in the development of American national opera. Later commentators, unfortunately, have generally overlooked this point of stylistic consistency. The always opinionated Ethan Mordden, for instance, writing in his 1978 book *Opera in the Twentieth Century*, is dismissive of the entire repertoire: “Those American operas of the early twentieth century that have survived for scrutiny do not survive the scrutiny; they warble, squeal, and pine away in a variety of late-romantic imitations.” He goes on to ask rhetorically, but apparently anticipating a response to the negative, “Is some pattern or characteristic showing itself yet? Is a tradition evident? What’s American in opera?”⁷¹ The evidence explored in this article, on the other hand, suggests that there is indeed much that must be considered distinctively, uniquely, and characteristically American in opera of this time. While the compositional idiom may not significantly depart from a mainstream late-Romanticism, the composers’ and librettists’ nationalistic treatment of sacred music departs dramatically from the works of both their European forebears and contemporaries. In contrast to Mordden’s hasty dismissal, William Saunders, for whom memory of these works was still fresh, noted in 1932, “It was clearly obvious to all who had taken the least trouble to study the scores and tendencies of these works, that there was, from beginning to end, a distinct and conscious urge towards the formation and evolution of a pronounced and distinctive American idiom.”⁷² Although these four works remain largely forgotten, this pioneering generation of composers helped to establish a precedent that came to full fruition in the operas of the 1930s, scores that still hold a place in today’s performance repertoire. The impenetrably simple spirituality of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), the Puritanical piety and hypocrisy of Howard Hanson and Richard Stokes’s *Merry Mount* (1934), and the alternately ecstatic and sorrowful sacred choruses in the Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935) become all the more impactful when one recognizes the operatic lineage that they continue. The dramatic portrayal of citizens of the Christian nation was the seed that helped opera to take root on US soil.

Appendix

The following synopses are reprinted from a variety of period sources, including newspapers and the published scores or libretti, thus readers can acquaint themselves with the stories of these operas in the same manner as their first listeners did over a century ago. The four works appear here in the order of their presentation in the article. (N.B. Some paragraph breaks, punctuation, and other formatting issues have been standardized without comment.)

⁷⁰ Anton Seidl, “Wagner’s Influence on Present-Day Composers,” *North American Review* 158, no. 446 (January 1894): 91.

⁷¹ Ethan Mordden, *Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 300 and 306.

⁷² William Saunders, “The American Opera: Has It Arrived?” *Music and Letters* 13 (1932): 150.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/13.2.147>.

Mary Carr Moore: *Narcissa*

DATE OF PREMIERE: April 22, 1912

VENUE: Moore Theater, Seattle, Washington [the theater's common name is coincidental]

CONDUCTOR: Mary Carr Moore

PRINCIPAL ROLES⁷³

Narcissa Whitman (soprano)	Luella Chilson Ohrman
Marcus Whitman (tenor)	Charles Hargreaves
Delaware Tom (baritone)	Charles Derbyshire
Waskema (mezzo-soprano)	Mme. Hesse-Sprotte [Anna Ruzena Sprotte]
Elijah (tenor)	Alfred A. Owens
Siskadee (contralto)	Romeyn Jansen
Chief Yellow Serpent (baritone)	Frederick Graham

SYNOPSIS⁷⁴

ACT I. Marcus Whitman, after a long absence in the Northwest, returns to his native village accompanied by two Indians, arriving during the Sabbath morning service. He comes to plead for help that he may carry the gospel to the Indians of that far West. Narcissa Prentice, his betrothed, begs to go with him, and Marcus, though fearing for her safety, finally yields, his own desire supplementing hers. They are united and sped on their westward journey amid tears and prayers of the congregation.

ACT II. Opens at the historic old Fort Vancouver, stronghold of the Hudson's Bay Company, where Dr. McLaughlin commands in baronial splendor. He is expected home from his historic trip to England, and arrives laden with gifts. Amid the general rejoicing, the signal gun is heard, and all is commotion and terror. The song of the approaching missionaries reassures the Fort people, and the missionaries are royally welcomed. Yellow Serpent, Chief of the Allied Tribes, invites Marcus to install his mission at Wailatpu, promising him support and the friendship of the tribes.

ACT III. Autumn, several years later. The orphaned child of a settler lies in the cradle of Narcissa's dead baby. The coming of many immigrants, destroying pasture and driving away game, has made the Indians sullen and resentful. Delaware Tom incites them to open rebellion. The Whitmans are upheld by Yellow Serpent, Elijah, his young son, and Siskadee. An outbreak is impending, but Narcissa with her beautiful voice weaves a spell about the superstitious Indians, subduing them temporarily. Dr. McLaughlin comes and new promises are made, but the arrival of immigrants rekindles the anger of the Indians. Elijah, to avert open rupture, plans an expedition to California, and promises Siskadee to return in the spring and make her his bride. Marcus discovers that Congress proposes to let England have the Northwest, and starts upon his terrible and historic midwinter overland journey to save the Northwest to the United States.

ACT IV. The next spring. Marcus has returned successful. Indian maidens in gala attire go out to meet the returning braves from California. Waskema, the Indian prophetess, foretells impending catastrophe. Narcissa is apprehensive. Indian discontent grows. Soon the death wail is heard. The braves return, many horses riderless. Yellow Serpent, stricken with grief, relates the

⁷³ Information from "Mrs. Moore's Opera to Be Given This Evening," *Seattle Daily Times*, April 22, 1912.

⁷⁴ The librettist's own plot summary, reproduced here, appears in the published libretto and in slightly modified form in the piano-vocal score; see Sarah Pratt Carr, *The Cost of Empire: Libretto for the Opera Narcissa* (Seattle: The Stuff Printing Concern, 1912), 5. A comment included in the libretto but excluded from the score claims, "The story follows history almost exactly, departing from it only in trifles and in compressing events, to fit the necessities of stage portrayal."

cowardly murder, by a white man, of young Elijah while on his knees in prayer at Sutter's Fort. The Indians are enraged. While Yellow Serpent goes to his lodge, Delaware Tom incites the friendly Indians, the Cayuses, to massacre the immigrants. In their absence the stranger tribes, hostiles, guided by Tom, batter down the Mission House door, and kill the inmates, including Marcus and Narcissa, their "golden singing bird."

Dr. McLaughlin arrives but too late. Yellow Serpent is summoned and he swears vengeance on all who participated in the massacre. On the hillside, Siskadee mourns her lover, and through all wails the death chant of the Indian women.

Victor Herbert: *Natoma*

DATE OF PREMIERE: February 25, 1911

VENUE: Metropolitan Opera House, Philadelphia

CONDUCTOR: Cleofante Campanini

PRINCIPAL ROLES⁷⁵

Natoma (soprano)	Mary Garden
Barbara de la Guerra (soprano)	Lillian Grenville
Lt. Paul Merrill (tenor)	John McCormack
Don Francisco de la Guerra (bass)	Gustave Huberdeau
Juan Bautista Alvarado (baritone)	Mario Sammarco
José Castro (baritone)	Frank Preisch
Father Peralta (bass)	Hector Dufranne

SYNOPSIS⁷⁶

The first act takes place on the Island of Santa Cruz, off the coast of California. The time is 1820, when California was under the dominion of Spain. Barbara, the daughter of Don Francisco, a Spaniard of the old regime, Natoma, an Indian girl, and Lieut. Paul Merrill of the United States Navy are the central characters in the story. The rising curtain shows the hacienda of Don Francisco, who awaits the coming of his daughter from the convent across the water. His song of praise is interrupted by the arrival of Alvarado, Barbara's cousin, and his companions, Jose Castro, a half-breed, and Pico and Kagama. As Barbara has not arrived, the four go off in search of game.

Then over the hilltop come Natoma and Lieut. Merrill. From the neck of the Indian maiden hangs an amulet—the shell of abalone. Paul persuades her to tell him the secret of the charm. The first father of her people, Natoma says, stepped from the clouds in the dawn of some far-off morning. Then a terrible famine came and the father of the tribe prayed to the spirit of the mountain and the water. In answer to the prayer, the ocean tossed up in untold numbers the

⁷⁵ Information from Hipsher, *American Opera*, 261. Note that the published vocal score incorrectly gives the premiere date as February 23, 1911, which was in fact only a public dress rehearsal. This world-premiere production was presented by the Chicago Opera Company on tour in Philadelphia and New York. For the subsequent Chicago premiere, cast changes included Caroline White as Barbara, George Hamlin as Paul, and Henri Scott as Don Francisco. See Glenn Dillard Gunn, "Natoma's Initial Chicago Production Scheduled Event of Opera Week," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, December 10, 1911.

⁷⁶ The summary presented here, in Redding's own words, was included in Glenn Dillard Gunn, "Natoma's Initial Chicago Production Scheduled Event of Opera Week," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, December 10, 1911. An extensively detailed synopsis also accompanied the published piano-vocal score; see "Story of the Opera," in Victor Herbert, *Natoma* (New York: Schirmer, 1911), v–x.

abalone that contained meat for all the people. When the first father died, he told his sons the story of the wonderful shell, which should go through the generations as a deed of gift and plenty. The last of her race, the shell now rests on the breast of Natoma—princess of her scattered tribe.

Paul is touched by this story, but he questions Natoma about her companion, Barbara. Feeling that Paul will love Barbara, Natoma begs the lieutenant to beat her, kill her even, but let her be his slave. At the end of her piteous plea, Barbara, Father Peralta and the convent girls arrive and are joyously greeted. Barbara meets Paul and both know that they will love each other. All enter the hacienda except Natoma. She is stopped by the half-breed, Jose Castro, who wants her to go with him to the mountains and make war on both Americans and Spaniards. She rebukes him for his proposal. Soon Alvarado and his companions return and the former serenades Barbara. She appears in answer to his song, but she rejects his love. Maddened by the rebuff, Alvarado plans to kill Lieut. Paul. But Castro suggests a better way. Tomorrow a fiesta will be given on the mainland in Barbara's honor. Then they can carry the girl off to the mountains on swift horses. The others come out of the hacienda, and with the coming of night, Father Peralta and the convent girls depart. Paul now declares his love for Barbara. But as Paul leaves and Barbara retires into the hacienda a light appears at one of the windows. The face of Natoma, the look of fate upon it, is seen behind the light.

Act two takes place in front of the mission church on the mainland. In the dawn Natoma appears, sad and forlorn, her heart torn by doubts and fears. She prays [to] the Great Manitou, Spirit of the Hills, as the church bell calls to morning worship. Soon the plaza is full of people and Spanish soldiers come on the scene. The national salute, the flag of Spain, is raised to the breeze. The vaqueros and rancheros arrive and sing to the maidens their stirring song of life on the plains. Alvarado and Castro, Pico and Kagama are warmly greeted. The girls dance, and soon Barbara and her father and the others arrive, Barbara on horseback. After the Castilian custom, Don Francisco places a woof of royal lace on Barbara's head, signifying that she inherits his estate. Barbara now sings a beautiful ode to spring, and Alvarado invites her to join in the dance. But the minuet is interrupted by a cannon shot. Lieut. Paul arrives, and in ardent voice sings a tribute to Columbus.

Now the minuet begins again and soon breaks into the "dance of declaration" [i.e., a Pañuelo], each man at the climax placing his hat on the head of the girl he loves. Barbara gaily tosses Alvarado's hat into the crowd. The Spaniard is in a rage, but all of a sudden, Castro steps forward. He dares anyone to dance with him the dagger dance of the ancient Californians. The onlookers are stunned by the challenge, but Natoma steps forth and sticks her dagger into the ground beside that of Castro. To a wild, barbaric rhythm, the dance begins. Meanwhile Alvarado throws his serape over Barbara and is about to carry her off. Natoma, seeing him, jerks up her dagger, and rushing past Castro, sinks the knife into the back of the Spaniard. Alvarado falls dead. In an instant, all rush on Natoma to kill her. But Lieut. Paul takes command and holds back the crowd. Then the church doors open and Father Peralta appears holding the cross. Instantly the tumult dies. Natoma, penitent, walks over to the church steps and falls at the padre's feet.

The third act takes place inside the Mission church. Natoma is huddled before the altar—a heartbroken princess of a vanishing tribe. Father Peralta tells her there is but one God and that she is in his house. But Natoma will not hear him and wants to return to her people. The padre is more tender now as he tells her of the love of the Madonna. But still Natoma is deaf to his plea. Then the priest touches her heart by speaking of her beloved Barbara. Natoma now realizes that her own hope of happiness has vanished but that she must make Barbara happy. Father Peralta now orders the candles lit; the doors open and the chorale beings. The church fills rapidly, and in the throng are Paul and Barbara, who sit with eyes fixed on Natoma. Father Peralta proclaims the divine word. Soon the convent doors open and in a flood of light the Ursuline nuns are kneeling in the convent garden. Natoma walks down to where Paul and Barbara kneel before her. She lifts the amulet from her breast and bestows it on the Spanish girl. Then she turns and walks into the light and the garden beyond. An instant she pauses: then the doors close behind her as the orchestra cries out in double forte the Indian theme of Fate.

Frederick S. Converse: *The Sacrifice*, Op. 27

DATE OF PREMIERE: March 3, 1911

VENUE: Boston Opera House

CONDUCTOR: Wallace Goodrich

PRINCIPAL ROLES⁷⁷

Chonita (soprano)	Alice Nielsen
Captain Burton (baritone)	Roman Blanchart
Bernal (tenor)	Florencio Constantino
Tomasa (contralto)	Maria Claessens
Magdalena (soprano)	Bernice Fisher
Corporal Tom Flynn (bass)	Howard White

SYNOPSIS⁷⁸

Chonita is a Mexican girl of rank. She is beloved by two young officers of the contending forces: Bernal, a Mexican, whom she loves, and Burton, an American. Chonita intervenes in an encounter between them and is wounded. Her lover is taken prisoner. Burton spares to her the life of his rival and is himself killed. Hence the name, "The Sacrifice." [...]

In the hills overlooking a mission, is the house of Senora Anaya, Chonita's aunt. In the old garden are the young girl and the old Indian servant [Tomasa] who sits upon the ground combing her mistress' long, black hair. It is afternoon. Chonita is half reclining upon a divan, singing and accompanying her song upon the guitar. Chonita is singing of Bernal, her lover, who is hiding in the hills from the Americans at the mission. The mention of the hated race of "gringos" incites Tomasa to a long and impassioned scene, in which she relates the old Indian prophecy of the Hiahi that her people would succumb to the march of the white man in his insatiable thirst for gold. She sings with deep pathos a farewell to her Westland.

Pablo, the son of Tomasa, brings Chonita a note from Bernal, telling of his arrival within the hour. Chonita urges Pablo to warn her lover that Capt. Burton is accustomed to call at dusk and to therefore use caution. Tomasa pleads with the girl not to see Burton and insists that he loves her. Chonita reminds her that for the present they must have his friendship and protection.

Burton arrives. Chonita receives him with courtesy, but coldly. At his request, she takes the guitar and sings for him. In the conversation, she finds occasion to speak bitterly of the oppression and cruelty of his soldiers. Burton, in a long *romanza*, protests the charge, assuring her that the riches of her country demand strong protectors, which his people would be, even by rigorous means. He grows more impassioned and declares his love for her. At his utterance of her name Bernal, who had been secreting himself in the border of the wood, starts, and is seen by Chonita. She tells the American that her love is given and leaves him bewildered.

When Burton has gone, Chonita calls softly to Bernal in the olive grove. He answers and appears. They embrace, but he recoils and upbraids her with anger for the scene with Burton. Chonita avows her hatred for the American, but urges her need for his protection for herself and her aged aunt. Bernal tells of his anticipated attack upon the mission and the Americans that night.

⁷⁷ Information compiled from Edward Ellsworth Hipsher, *American Opera and Its Composers* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1934), 135; and "Critical Review of the Opera's Music and Story," *Boston Globe*, March 4, 1911.

⁷⁸ "Boston Man Has Written a New Opera," *Boston Globe*, November 27, 1910.

The two sing rapturously of their love. Pablo's signal song of warning is heard [offstage] in the grove. Tomasa appears at the door. There are a few measures of quartet before Bernal departs and the act ends.

In the interim between this and the following act, the Mexicans under Bernal make their midnight attack upon the Americans in the mission and are severely repulsed. The curtain rises upon the interior of the building the next morning. Roistering, chaos and sacrilege stamp the scene. There are two groups of soldiers. Those on the right are sitting upon boxes and broken furniture cleaning weapons and accoutrements; those on the left are laughing, jesting and playing cards. On a rough couch against the wall, a soldier lies with bandaged head. Various paraphernalia of war, arms, blankets, etc., are strewn about. Near the altar at the rear a disfigured statue of the Holy Virgin stands upon a pedestal, the broken pieces scattered about its base. The sole relief to this picture of stress and disorder is a view through a passageway to a bright, sunlit garden beyond.

Corp. Tom Flynn ... sings the inevitable bravado air of home, sweetheart and martial glory, to which his fellow-soldier[s] ... assent with much vocal sonority. After bantering Little Jack upon his questionable bravery in the fray of the night just past, Corp. Flynn sings another song full of ghostly mystery and low notes. There are valiant rejoinders from all hands. Magdalena, an Indian girl, arrives, sings, gives the soldiers flowers and receives coins. A gypsy appears singing a lively tune. Spanish girls appear with her. They sing and begin to dance. Ere long, the men have caught them and joined in the dance.

Tomasa appears with anxiety and asks Tom if Capt. Burton is there, and says her mistress has come to see him. Chonita enters. She is appalled at the desecration before her. Both sing a prayer. Burton appears. He tells of one rider who pursued him with peculiar insistence, and it cost him his life. Chonita, shaken with fear, asks the color of his horse. Burton answers "white." She cries out that it was Bernal and swoons. When she revives, Burton attempts to comfort her, and makes new declarations of his love, which she repudiates. He affirms his devotion with greater intensity. She spurns him after a dialogue work[s] up to an exceedingly impassioned climax. Burton leaves the room.

While Chonita prays, a priest enters. It is Bernal in disguise. The lovers greet each other in a delirium of joy. At the return of the soldiers, Chonita secrets her lover in the confessional. Burton reenters, believing that prayer has sobered her judgment. She tries cleverly to disarm [his] suspicion while parleying for time and escape. Burton fancies she is beginning to accede to his love, when Bernal sets upon him with uplifted dagger. Burton draws quickly to defend himself. Chonita rushes between and is wounded by Burton's sword. She falls. Corp. Tom and two soldiers seize and bind Bernal after a struggle.

The third act takes place before the dawn in Senora Anaya's house. Chonita sleeps fitfully. Tomasa watches over her. The light is dim. Chonita dreams she hears a shot. If they shoot Bernal, she will die. Tomasa watches eagerly for Padre Gabriel, the priest, and sings as in the beginning of the story, "Tis true, as ever, love brings life and death." This is the problem of the play.

The dawn is giving place to day. The sunrise hymn is heard without. Chonita sings a prayer for the deliverance of her lover. From the camp at the mission is heard a cannon shot and a trumpet playing reveille. Chonita is frantic with dread. Presently, Burton and the corporal enter with Bernal. They release him and permit him to approach the bedside. Chonita sobs upon his breast. The scene is tense with passion and the portent of death. [...]

[The following text is taken from Olin Downes' synopsis printed in the published libretto, as it gives a more detailed account of the ending of the opera.⁷⁹]

[...] Chonita, for the last time, begs him to spare Bernal, reminds him of his promise to do for her "all that man can do." If Bernal dies, she will die; if he lives, she will live. Burton impresses upon her that it is not his wish, but the dictates of honor which he must follow. He believes the

⁷⁹ Olin Downes, "Synopsis," in Frederick S. Converse and John Macy, *The Sacrifice: An Opera in Three Acts* (New York: H.W. Gray Company, 1911), 16–17.

word of Chonita, but how to make his men think that Bernal does not merit the end of a spy. Duty! Honor! Would that he might die with honor; he would give his life for Chonita. And the priest answers sternly that his prayer is heard, that even now death awaits him. "I, God's messenger, bear you his summons." Shots ring out. The two soldiers stationed outside of the door at the end of the room rush in and commence to barricade the passage. They tell the Captain that a trap has been set. The door on the left flies open, and Tom rushes in wounded and pursued by two Mexicans. As he dies, he calls to his commander to save himself.

Sudden decision shows on Burton's face. He sends the other two soldiers back to their posts. He turns to Chonita. He gladly offers his life that she may have freedom, love, and joy. Drawing his sword, he makes at the nearest Mexican, lowers his guard and is killed. Tomasa, as she covers the body, reflects again on love, and life, and death. ... Chonita, overwhelmed with the greatness of Burton's deed, is supported by Bernal as she advances, and kneels by the body. Pablo and several attendants enter with a litter for Chonita. There is solemn music, as for a processional, while Chonita and Bernal are gently led away.

Henry Kimball Hadley: *Azora: The Daughter of Montezuma*

DATE OF PREMIERE: December 26, 1917

VENUE: Auditorium Theatre, Chicago

CONDUCTOR: Henry Hadley

PRINCIPAL ROLES⁸⁰

Azora (soprano)	Anna Fitziu
Xalca (tenor)	Forrest Lamont
Ramatzin (baritone)	Arthur Middleton
Papantzin (contralto)	Cyrena Van Gordon
Montezuma (bass)	James Goddard
Canek (bass)	Frank Preisch

SYNOPSIS⁸¹

Xalca, a Prince of Tlascala, having been overcome in battle by Montezuma, is now residing in the latter's capital, a nominal prisoner of war. Actually, he stands high in the Emperor's favor as a military leader; having submitted to Montezuma's rule, he has been given an important command. The true reason for Xalca's devotion to Montezuma's interests lies in his love for Azora, the Emperor's daughter, who is destined by her father to be the wife of Ramatzin, titular chief of Montezuma's army. She, however, has given her love unreservedly to Xalca and regards Ramatzin's pretensions with disdain.

Owing to Xalca's anomalous position, his betrothal to Azora has been kept secret in the hope that an impending war with Tarascan will afford him an opportunity to so distinguish himself that his claim to equal standing with all will be recognized. Ramatzin, however, already resentful and angry at Xalca's success and popularity, is further enraged by the suspicion that Azora loves the

⁸⁰ Cast list given in the published vocal score; see Henry Hadley, *Azora: The Daughter of Montezuma* (New York: Schirmer, 1917), 5. Note that this source provides an incorrect premiere date of December 18, 1917—that date was originally planned, before cast illness and other delays pushed this back to the twenty-sixth.

⁸¹ This synopsis is taken from the published libretto; David Stevens, *Azora, the Daughter of Montezuma: An Opera in Three Acts* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1917), 5–6.

Tlascalan, and all the energies of his bitter and unscrupulous nature are employed to defeat the hopes and aspirations of his rival. Such is the situation when the action of the story begins.

It is the morning of the Feast of Totec, a ceremony requiring the sacrifice of many lives to the Sun-god, not only for his nourishment and subsistence, but to secure his favor in the impending war with Tarascan. Before the Feast begins, Ramatzin imparts his suspicions concerning Azora and Xalca to Canek, the fanatical High Priest of the Sun, who, knowing Montezuma's fierce pride in his race, foresees great trouble should Azora disregard her father's wishes with respect to Ramatzin. Accordingly, with the hope of dissuading Xalca from so dangerous a purpose, he charges him with aspiring to win the hand of the Emperor's daughter, an ambition beyond the hope of all save the noblest of her own race. Xalca admits his love for Azora and proudly refuses to surrender her. Canek bids him beware of the consequences of his rashness, and withdraws, declaring that he will beseech the gods to intervene. Azora then appears; in a passionate scene with Xalca their mutual love and devotion are reasserted.

The ceremonies of the Feast now begin with a general assembling of Montezuma's people, together with the Emperor are his sister, Papantzin, Canek, the Fire-Priests, Dancing Girls and Soldiers. The Sacrificial Victims are brought forth and all are about to proceed to the scene of the sacrifice, when Montezuma, observing that his daughter is not present, inquires the reason. Papan declares that she dissuaded Azora from presenting herself at the ceremony, believing the sacrificial rites to be wicked and unhallowed. Though Montezuma rebukes her for her apostasy, she relates a vision in which she beheld and heard a messenger from the true God, who proclaimed the coming of Christ's warriors and the victory of the Cross over blindness and superstition.

Montezuma is momentarily affected by her recital, but at that moment Ramatzin appears with the news that the approach of the Tarascan has been signaled from the mountains, and all is forgotten except the sacrifice to the Sun-god and immediate preparations for battle. Xalca is summoned and Montezuma entrusts him with the campaign against the enemy, promising him whatever he may demand if he return victorious. Xalca eagerly undertakes the task, seeing therein his chance to win Azora unopposed. He departs forthwith, and, despite the earnest protests of Papan, the sacrificial ceremony proceeds.

A month has elapsed without news from Xalca; Azora seeks the Temple of Totec at sunset, and before the Sacred Fire prays for her lover's safe and victorious return. Her devotions are interrupted by Canek, who tries to convince her that Xalca is defeated and dead. He further declares that Montezuma, angry at the apparent failure of Xalca's army, has determined on a second expedition under Ramatzin's command and that a swift runner has been dispatched with a message to Xalca that if he be alive and beaten, he may remain away. Canek, however, interprets Xalca's silence as certain proof of his defeat and death, and leaves Azora all but hopeless.

Ramatzin now presents himself and urges his claim for her hand. He pleads humbly enough until it becomes obvious that Azora holds him in contempt, when his passion and anger lead him to affront her by his brutality. Canek appears in response to her cries and intervenes, although he pleads Ramatzin's cause until she dismisses them both peremptorily.

The hour of prayer having now arrived, Montezuma and his people enter the Temple and appeal to Totec for aid. Ramatzin, being commanded to lead his men to the scene of war, declares his readiness to depart, but demands that Azora be formally betrothed to him before he goes forth. The Emperor accedes without hesitation, and Azora is bidden to take the required vows. She refuses, and Ramatzin is driven by his fury to charge her with loving the Tlascalan. She proudly admits the charge and passionately asserts that she will wed no other. Montezuma sternly commands submission, and refuses to hear her final appeal; she defies him and reasserts her determination to wed Xalca if he be alive. Montezuma, enraged, swears that if Xalca appears before him with such bold pretensions, his fate shall be certain and swift death.

At this instant a distant trumpet is heard; the assembly stands in silent and breathless expectation, and the runner who was sent to seek out Xalca's army staggers up the steps of the Temple to announce the approach of Xalca victorious. The trumpets sound again, and amid the

triumphant songs and acclamations of his soldiers, Xalca appears in the entrance to the Temple. He proclaims victory and gives thanks to Totec, asking that on the morrow a sacrifice be made to the god.

Montezuma, speaking for the first time since Xalca's appearance, grimly assures him that a sacrifice shall be made. Xalca, now observing the ominous silence that pervades the assembly, but ignorant of its meaning, lays his sword at the Emperor's feet and claims his reward—the hand of Azora. Montezuma, in an outburst of fury, denounces him as an alien slave; and when Azora also demands that her father keep his plighted word, he declares that they shall indeed be made one—and by the hand of Death! The lovers are made prisoners and condemned to die at sunrise on the Altar of Sacrifice. The scene closes amid the jubilant shouts of Xalca's soldiers, without the Temple and unaware of their leader's fate.

In the hour preceding dawn on the following morning, Azora and Papantzin are seen in the Cavern of Sacrifice, the latter seeking to administer the consolations of faith in the true religion of Christ as revealed in her vision. Azora is not unresponsive, but is unable wholly to comprehend the significance of Papan's belief. Canek presently appears with news that Montezuma has determined to spare his daughter's life if she will accept Ramatzin. The latter is now admitted, together with Xalca, who, being acquainted with the Emperor's proposal, joins the others in begging her to yield, that he alone may pay the penalty of their ill-starred attachment. Azora refuses her father's clemency and declares her readiness for death with her lover.

Montezuma and his people now appear and Azora's determination is made known to him, whereupon he harshly directs Canek to perform his office. The prisoners are placed upon the Altar of Sacrifice. Canek prepares to dispatch them by his own hand as soon as the shaft of sunlight admitted by a cleft in the wall shall rest upon the victims, this being regarded as a mystic signal from the Sun-god.

The moment is at hand; the High Priest, armed with the keen flint weapon of his office, has raised his arm to strike, when strange voices are heard singing the noble theme that has expressed Papan's faith in the true God. Awe-stricken silence falls upon the assembly; Canek's arm is involuntarily stayed; the voices draw nearer and the music grows more exalted. Suddenly there appears in the entrance the figure of Cortés mounted on a white charger and accompanied by his warriors and a band of Priests bearing white banners emblazoned with the symbol of the Christian religion and led by one holding aloft a great white Cross.

The people of Montezuma are filled with apprehension and dismay while, amid the chanting of the Spanish Priests, the bearer of the Cross makes his way unopposed to the Altar. As he reaches the prisoners, a shaft of sunlight falls directly upon the white Cross; Canek's nerveless hand releases his weapon and he falls senseless before the holy symbol. Montezuma and his people call frantically on their god Totec to protect them, but the overpowering manifestation of Christian faith is invincible and the scene closes with the triumphant strains of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.

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