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SEMIOSIS OF THE OPERA *THE KNOCK* BY ALEKSANDRA VREBALOV¹

Abstract: The opera *The Knock* was commissioned by the *Glimmerglass Festival* and was planned to be performed in 2021. Due to the pandemic the premiere was postponed, but *Glimmerglass* decided to film the opera and stream it on YouTube. The screened version of *The Knock* is the subject of this paper. Despite the setback, the opera had its live premiere on June 23, 2023 at the Cincinnati Opera House.

The libretto of *The Knock* was inspired by the autobiographical testimonies of military wives which Deborah Brevoort, the librettist, relied upon. Inspired by the strong emotions of the story along with the inner monologue of the characters, Aleksandra Vrebalov created music which not only reflects these inner states, but together with the text and image creates an inextricable semantic network, or in other words, a *semiosis* of the artwork.

Keywords: *The Knock*, military wives, *semiosis*, sign, symbol, icon, index

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The opera *The Knock* by composer Aleksandra Vrebalov² and librettist Deborah Brevoort³ was commissioned by The Glimmerglass Festival.⁴ The work was originally supposed to be premiered at the festival in 2021, but due to the conditions of the pandemic, the live performance was postponed. In the meantime, the opera was filmed and streamed on YouTube.⁵ The work had its live premiere on June 23, 2023 at the Cincinnati Opera House. The director of both the filmed and stage versions was Alison Moritz and the conductor for the film version was Lidiya Yankovskaya. The filmed version is 67'48" long and all references in this article are made upon that version of the opera. However, measures from the full score⁶ of the opera are also added for reference.

The term "The Knock" refers to the description of a death notice which is used within the military community. "The Knock" became a symbol of death in that specific community, or as linguists would call it, a "dead metaphor", since the term has lost its original (denotative) meaning and has been frequently used by community members in its metaphorical (connotative) meaning. In other words "a 'dead metaphor,' [is] one that has become conventionalized and has its own literal meaning".⁷ For this reason, "The Knock", or more specifically the "knocking sound" can be perceived as the main (musical) signifier around which the *semiosis*, the process of creating signs and meanings, is possible. According to Charles S. Peirce, semiosis is "an action, or influence, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as sign, its object, and its interpretant,"⁸ it is a process of signs working together to pro-

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⁴ The Glimmerglass Festival is an American opera company founded in 1975. The Glimmerglass Festival presents an annual season of operas at the Alice Busch Opera Theater on Otsego Lake which is eight miles north of Cooperstown, New York, United States. See: <https://glimmerglass.org/>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE1zZDD2_2s

⁶ The full score is provided thanks to the composer.

⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003, 211–212.

⁸ Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, Justus Buchler (Ed.), New York, Dover Publications, 1955, 282. Unlike Saussure, where the sign consists of the signifier and the signified, according to Peirce, the whole sign consists of three elements: the sign, the object and the interpretant.

duce a meaning in which one sign relates to another sign leading to an endless chain of signs.

The libretto of the opera was inspired by the autobiographical testimonies of military wives which Deborah Brevoort, the librettist, relied upon.⁹ She confirmed that the military community was a difficult community to access, but she managed to create relationships with military spouses during a three year period in which she interviewed 43 women from different geographical regions. "During that time I was told many stories about 'the knock', so the story for our opera really comes out of those stories, the people and the wives that I met during that three year period... that project enabled me to write the story with a great deal of specificity, because of the generosity of the people who I met there and who shared much of their lives with me."¹⁰ The story Brevoort wrote is brief and takes place in the space of one night. There is a clear "border" between day and night, good and evil, which according to semiotician Yuri Lotman, is the most important typological characteristic of space. The concept of a border in a literary work is very important, like in a fairy tale. There is a space in the forest where the events take place as well as the space of the house; characters from the forest never enter the house.¹¹ Here, night time is not chosen by chance, since it is dominantly related to evil and death. This specific time/space serves as the index which indicates something terrible is going to happen. Besides the short time frame of the story, the opera has many other minimalistic features, such as the small orchestra ensemble (violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello, bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, vibraphone, bass drum, snare drum, typewriter, cymbal, piano, electric/bass guitar). Furthermore, throughout the entire opera there are only 3 solo female voices and a couple of female choruses, while the only male character is Army Lt. Gonzalez. He was entrusted with the special task of delivering the death notification. For the entirety of the opera he is struggling between feelings of worthlessness, empathy and fear. This small range of material allows the writer and composer to focus on the psychological profiles of these characters, mainly Jo Jenner, the wife who eventually receives "the knock" and Lt. Gonzales, who delivers it. The inner

⁹ In 2023, Deborah Brevoort was awarded the prestigious Campbell Opera Librettist Prize by Opera America.

¹⁰ Deborah Brevoort interviewed for The Glimmerglass podcast, November 2021. <https://glimmerglass.org/podcast/the-glimmercast-the-knock/>

¹¹ Jurij Lotman [Yuri Lotman], *Struktura umetničkog teksta* [The structure of artistic text], Beograd, Nolit, 1976.

monologues and psychological nuances of the characters are the elements with which the music is connected extrinsically by external semiosis – by signifying sound with lyrics and extra-musical meaning, and also intrinsically – by connecting musical motifs into a syntagmatic sequence and relating them through various processes of motivic work. Regarding the musical language which she used for depicting the emotions of the characters, Aleksandra Vrebalov says:

The part of work that I needed to do is to really delve into the depth of emotion that each character carried a different set of very deep emotional states that ranged from guilt to the sweetness of memories, that are past and captured to the most dramatic moment of the delivery of the notice and facing the [...] death of the loved one. So, in terms of research it really means delving into the depth of the human soul and trying to find the truest sound, the truest language in music for that.¹²

The story follows the lives of several military wives while their husbands are deployed to Fallujah, Iraq. The wives are in empty houses, surrounded by loneliness and filled with nostalgia and fear. The same setting brings forth the portrait of Lt. Gonzales who watches war movies on TV and would prefer to be in battle in Fallujah. Such a beginning creates a special atmosphere in which an event, a turn, is expected. Then Lt. Gonzalez receives a phone call from his commanding officer who gives him an assignment in Ft. Carson, Colorado. He only has two hours to get there to complete it. At the same time, the Commanding Officer's Wife (COW) calls one of the wives, Aishah, to tell her that the base in Iraq is on "black out" again. She is gathering the wives together at her home, which is Army protocol whenever communications are cut off from the war front. While Lt. Gonzalez is driving in his car, the military wives are gathering at the home of the COW. Jo, who is new to Army life, becomes increasingly anxious as the evening progresses. Lt. Gonzalez is anxious too, since he is not prepared for this new assignment. The synchronicity of these two characters is to be of great importance in relation to the musical material used to describe it. Lt. Gonzalez arrives at the COW's house and reviews the Army protocol for how to deliver a death notification. It is his first "knock" and he struggles emotionally with what he has to do. He decides to wait until the very last minute. When his time is up, he slowly marches up to the door and knocks. When Lt. Gonzalez steps into the house,

¹² Aleksandra Vrebalov interviewed for The Glimmerglass podcast, November 2021. <https://glimmerglass.org/podcast/the-glimmercast-the-knock/>

the women immediately know why he is there, but they don't know which one will receive the knock. Lt. Gonzalez slowly marches up to Aishah and gives her the ritual salute, indicating that she is the one receiving the knock. But soon they realize that Jo, the young Army wife with a newborn child, is the one who has lost her husband. In grief she runs out of the house with her baby. Lt. Gonzales realizes that delivering the knock is the hardest job of all. Surrounded by the chorus of military wives, Jo watches the stars fall as the sun rises and morning comes.¹³

In relation to music, it is important to emphasize that the elimination of a large performing apparatus, along with the suppression of "superfluous" movement, score choreography and visual effects all enable a revelation of purity and beauty of the sound-image-text relationship in the film. We could say that the instrumentation is typical of Vrebalov's style. The sound of loneliness which represents the wives is the sound of the string ensemble. The lines of voices and instruments intersect in unison with the text "Early evening is the hardest", indexing that all the women are feeling the same way. With the words "But our houses are empty; our husbands, far away" the military drum (snare drum) sounds discreetly (1: 48; m. 19). It is the musical symbol of the Army and battle, and at the same time represents the index of a distant space, the *heterotopos*, since the war is far away. The long distance is also confirmed by the melodic line – the word "away" is followed by a minor sixth ascending melodic leap (1:54; m. 20). The opening shows three wives spending an early evening at home thinking about their absent husbands, doing the usual things (writing a diary, preparing dinner...) and discovering little agreements between spouses to think of each other while looking at the moon ("Wait to look at the moon with you"). This discrepancy of characters and space, here and there, *topos* and *heterotopos*, is presented through a combination of woodwinds and military drums.

The sound becomes anxious with the introduction of the image of Jo, a young Army wife, who is nervously waiting for a call from her husband ("There is nothing to do, but to wait to hear from you", 3:12, m. 54). That sound also represents Lt. Gonzalez (4:36; m. 121) who dreams to be a soldier in battle in Fallujah, but was assigned to stay at home ("Stuck with the job no one wants to do!", 5:05; mm. 137–138). The text delivered by the characters, along with their actions, both give the impression that the same thing is repeated every night, almost depicting boredom, with the redundant repetition of fast rhythmic patterns in the strings reinforcing this impression (Women:

¹³ More on <https://www.cincinnatiopera.org/the-knock>

“Doin’ nothing, ’cause there’s nothing to do”; Lt. Gonzalez: “Waiting for something to happen”). The atmosphere of deep sadness is equally presented at all three levels: music, text and image. The text “All this waiting makes us blue”, “Blue is the color of waiting” (5:54; mm. 158–167) is symbolically connected with the blues style in music which emotes melancholy and sadness.¹⁴ In that sense, Vrebalov deploys atypical opera instruments. The piano creates an almost lullaby-like atmosphere (7:40; m. 197) along with flute, clarinet and vibraphone. A strong blues inflection is created by the timbre of the electric guitar (8: 11; m. 205) and especially later at the moment when the women are comforting each other before they get together (12:30; m. 322). The electric guitar receives its full meaning when the phrases “Turning everything blue” (13:03; m. 334) and “Everywhere blue” (14:03; mm. 348–354) appear, iconically referring to blues, but symbolically referring to deep sadness (Fig. 1). It is also a perfect counterpoint to the ensemble of wives at a gathering (21:03; m. 515) with clarinet and bass.

Figure 1. Blues intonation (mm. 346–354, $\text{♩}=78$) embodied by a minor third interval and the timbre of the electric guitar

The image displays a musical score for a scene from an opera. The score is written for a large ensemble, including strings (Violins 1 & 2, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabass), woodwinds (Flute, Clarinet, Bassoon), brass (Trumpets, Trombones, Tuba, Euphonium), and a vocal soloist (Soprano 1). The music is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 78 beats per minute. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The score features a prominent blues-influenced melody in the vocal line and electric guitar. The lyrics are: "night air night air eve - ry - where blue eve - ry - where blue". The electric guitar part is characterized by a minor third interval and a bluesy timbre. The vocal line is marked with a *mf* dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

¹⁴ The term Blues may have originated from “blue devils”, meaning melancholy and sadness.

Another important sign of sadness in the opera is the descending *glissando*, or more generally the descending melodic line which usually appears in a chromatic passage. When it comes to the *glissando*, it is mostly in the interval of a minor third. Interestingly, blue notes (or "worried notes") in blues are usually thirds as an essential part of the sound. In this blues scene (mm. 315–354) the sounds of minor descending seconds prevail (Fig. 1). The importance and ubiquitousness of the minor third in relation to the semantics of the opera is shown by the fact that, in relation to the original score, instead of a major ascending second, a descending minor third as a *glissando* is performed. (6: 32; m. 169).¹⁵

This musical sign of sadness could be seen as a more elaborate version of what music historiography knows as the rhetorical figure *pianto / sigh gesture*¹⁶ which contains catabasic movement. It is conventional sign denoting the topic of sadness and grief with a signifier of a descending minor second (Fig. 1, word: "blue"). This interval is used redundantly in the melodic lines of all voices and instruments throughout the entire opera and refers to a deep sadness which cannot be avoided. This musical sign is so powerful that it was used by Renaissance composers in madrigals as well as by Baroque composers to indicate the presence of lamentation and death, and their meaning still has not changed to this day.¹⁷ Interestingly, the descending path of the melody as a representation of sadness in music has its foundation in embodi-

¹⁵ Other small changes in comparison to the original score were noticed in the film version, such as the expulsion of section C (mm. 43–53).

¹⁶ In the list of 27 topics by Leonard Ratner, who is the founder of the topical theory in music, this sign is called the *Sigh Motif, Seufzer*, and is numbered 24. Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, New York, Schirmer Books, 1980.

¹⁷ For more on the *pianto/sigh gesture* see: Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays*, Princeton University Press, 2000, 17, 31, 66–73; Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military, and Pastoral*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006; Joan Grimalt, "Poučavanje glazbenoga značenja", *Theoria*, XXI/20, 2019, 11–28; Joan Grimalt, *Mapping Musical Signification*, Cham, Springer International Publishing, 2020; Vladimir Karbusicky, *Grundriss der musikalischen Semantik*, Darmstadt, Wiss. Buchges, 1986; Robert Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics and Tropes*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004; Robert Hatten, "Four Semiotic Approaches to Musical Meaning: Markedness, Topics, Tropes, and Gesture", *Musicological Annual*, 41/1, 2005, 5–30; Robert Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018; Nataša Crnjanski, "Sigh Gesture in Mokranjac's Garlands", *Mokranjac*, 22, 2020, 2–16.

ment theory¹⁸ i.e. the idea of embodied cognition,¹⁹ according to which man conceptualizes the world on the basis of one's own bodily experience and the space in which it operates.²⁰ According to this theory, "sadness in human perception generally has a downward trajectory, which is reflected in language (e.g. "He fell into despair"), but also in other areas".²¹ The conceptual metaphor which enables cross-domain mapping between the physical domain and language is: "Happy is up; Sad is down". This is the reason why, in language, we use expressions like "I am feeling up" or "I am feeling down". The application of this metaphor in non-verbal domains such as music is fascinating because it holds the same meaning, but delivers an even stronger effect. The *pianto / sigh gesture* is an exact example of such mapping in music. Its persistence as a topic testifies to a concept which is deeply embedded in our cognitive processes, making it a universal phenomenon in different historical-cultural contexts. In this regard, the fact that many phrases and words delivered by the female characters end with a descending minor second as a signifier of the *pianto / sigh gesture* confirms its importance for the semantics of the opera (Fig. 2–4). From that point of view, certain moments of tonal painting of the text are also significant, which brings the text-music relationship into the most direct connection. In other words, they are motivated

¹⁸ Embodiment theory is based on the idea that our mental processes depend on bodily experience, that is "the physical makeup of our bodies in many ways defines the way we think". Mihailo Antović, "The Role of Movement in Musical Signification: From Cognitive to Conceptual Semantics of Music", in: Milena Medić, Miloš Zatkalik, Denis Collins (Eds), *Musica Movet: Affectus, Ludus, Corpus*, Belgrade, University of Arts, Faculty of Music, 2019. Some of the most significant studies in the field of cognitive linguistics that talk more about the so called cross domain mapping are: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press (reprinted original 1980), 2003; George Lakoff, "The neuroscience of metaphoric gestures: Why they exist", in: Alan Cienki, Cornelia Müller (Eds), *Music and Gesture*, Berkeley, University of California, 2008, 283–289; Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987; Mihailo Antović, op. cit.

¹⁹ Cf. Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson, op. cit.; George Lakoff, op. cit.; Mark Johnson, op. cit.; Nataša Crnjanski, *The Glossary of Music Semiotics*, op. cit., Mihailo Antović, op. cit.

²⁰ Nataša Crnjanski, "Passus balcanicus or the Sad Music Has a Downward Trajectory: Contribution to the Study of Mokranjac's Garlands", *Časopis za muzičku kulturu Muzika*, XXVII/1, 2023, 7–45.

²¹ Nataša Crnjanski, "Sigh Gesture in Mokranjac's Garlands", op. cit., 7.

signs or those which contain the characteristics of the text (icons). Some examples are already mentioned: when wives are singing “our husbands far away” (1:52; mm. 20–21) with a leap of a minor sixth and an ascending glissando which refers to a distant space; when Jo sings “drives me up the wall” (3:14; m. 75) with an ascending scale-like melodic line; when Lt. Gonzales sings “It looks like every star in the sky has fallen to the ground” (29:29; mm. 706–707), where the words “fallen” and “ground” are presented with a descending glissando, etc.

Figure 2. Aishah’s singing with descending minor seconds (words: “curtains”, “then wait”, “the moon”, “with you”), $J=76$.

The figure displays two systems of a musical score. The first system, starting at measure 29, features Aishah's vocal line with lyrics: "pull out the left - a - ven", "chuck - en, sa - lad, here...", "O - pen the cur - tains, then wait". The second system, starting at measure 34, features Aishah's vocal line with lyrics: "wait to look at the moon", "with you", "with you", "with you". The score includes staves for Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabasso. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 76 ($J=76$).

Figure 3. Aishah's phrase ending with a descending minor second, Jo's singing beginning with a minor third, ♩=68.

Musical score for Figure 3. The score includes parts for S. D., Jo, Aishah, Vibraphone, Pno., Vc., and Cb. The Vibraphone part is marked *p* and features a descending line with the instruction "tender, like a lullaby". Aishah's part has the lyrics "Jer - rett are you there?". Jo's part begins with the lyrics "wait - ing for". The tempo is marked ♩=68.

Figure 4. The descending chromatic line ("She'll need help through the night") indicates Jo's destiny of receiving "the knock", ♩=90

Musical score for Figure 4. The score includes parts for Cl., E. Gtr., Jo, S. 1, S. 2, Alto, Pno., Vc., and Cb. The vocal parts (S. 1, S. 2, Alto) have the lyrics "sink - hole of sor - row. She'll need help to get through the night". The piano part has a descending chromatic line. The tempo is marked ♩=90.

The twist in the plot is the moment when Lt. Gonzales receives a call (8:32, m. 213) that he needs to travel “up country” and deliver a notice “in two hours”. This is accompanied by strings in a faster version, this time in an “angular rhythm.”²² For this purpose, Vrebalov uses horizontal polymetry switching 7/8 meter (2+2+3) with 9/8 (2+2+2+3, 3+3+3), which perfectly depicts the excitement of Lt. Gonzales. At one moment a typewriter in the background is heard as the iconic sound of the writing of a “death notice” (10:08; m. 254) and the names of the women who call each other “Hello Sally? Kelly? Jennifer? Joan?” appear (mm. 257–262). The viewer knows one of them is getting a message tonight, but not which one. The women are concerned for Jo since “she is new to Army life.” As the night progresses, Jo becomes more and more nervous, while the other wives assure her that it’s all just protocol, or even “Mandatory Fun” (?!). The irony of the expression “Mandatory Fun” is musically illustrated by a dialectical opposition between the strict movement in the strings and the bassoon (depicting the word “mandatory”) on one side, and trills in the flute, along with downward melodic passages in the clarinet, piano and vibraphone on the other side (depicting the word “fun”) which refers to the presence of falsehood and lies (20:08; mm. 493–505). In the traditional sense, irony is contrasting, because it says one thing and means another. The literal translation is a complete negation of the conveyed meaning. Irony – saying one thing, thinking another – is essential for subversion, because it demarcates the work into at least two layers of meaning, into two voices that do not have the same force, while the external form contains what is not true.²³ This is exactly what is present here. Furthermore, there are important signs – indices pointing at Jo, hinting that she is the one who should receive the message. She feels a “funny taste in [...] mouth, like acid” (16:21; mm. 418–421).

²² In comparison to the first appearance of Lt. Gonzales in the binary meter 4/4 (m. 123).

²³ Dimitri Shapovalov, “Speaking in Two Voices: Irony and Lyricism in early Prokofiev“, *Slavonica*, 10, 2004, 21.

Figure 5. The irony of the expression “Mandatory fun” is expressed by a specific timbre and by the movement of the melodic lines (mm. 492–496, $\text{♩} = 120$)

The image displays a musical score for a scene in an opera, specifically measures 492 to 496. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with multiple staves. The instruments listed on the left are Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Violin 1 (Vln. 1), Violin 2 (Vln. 2), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcl.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The Alto part includes the following lyrics: "com - mu - ni - ca - tions or just for 'man - da - to - ry' fun." and "very articulate, as to make it official and clear. We pro-". The music features complex melodic lines and rhythmic patterns, with a tempo of 120 beats per minute.

The word “protocol” becomes a comfort word for wives and Lt. Gonzales. Testifying about her experiences with the military community, Brevoort explains the importance of the protocol: “Military culture, I quickly discovered, has a dizzying set of protocols and customs that are strictly observed. These protocols form the substance of military life and govern its rituals. It was important to honor them while writing *The Knock*; they form the structure for the libretto and score, and composer Aleksandra Vrebalov and I made every effort to ensure they were represented as accurately as possible.”²⁴ In the opera, the wives console themselves by saying “it’s just protocol” and that they’ve been through it before, while the Lt. comforts himself by remembering “he has a protocol” and that he has to stick to it. For that reason, a very significant moment in the opera is precisely when, beyond any protocol, a beautiful prayer appears. Lt. Gonzales prays (17:19; m. 438) to Querida Vir-

²⁴ <https://www.cincinnatiopera.org/blog-database/2023/5/9/song-for-the-soldiers-wife>

gen de Guadalupe, asking her to teach him gentleness and strength, and to give him courage. The melody of the prayer is semantically related with sadness, which is again embodied by descending minor seconds and the sound of strings in a choral-like texture (Fig. 6). He is praying in Spanish, a factor which entices the viewer/listener to instantly become intimate with him. The viewer/listener is witnessing Lt. Gonzales's psychological struggle with his difficult task and at the same time is following the psychological struggle of Jo who goes through the "protocol" with other wives for the first time. The introduction of prayer is extremely important for the dramatic narrative because it intensifies the dialectical opposition between "protocol" and "emotion", "order" and "chaos". This opposition is equally important for the musical narrative since it not only introduces two different musical atmospheres, but also differs in tempo, treatment of the text (syllabic-melismatic), instrumentation and other elements.²⁵

Figure 6. The prayer of Lt. Gonzales (mm. 436–446, ♩=72) accompanied by strings in a choral-like texture, the melody is filled with descending minor seconds ("protocols", "como", "amable", "Querida Virgen")

The image shows a musical score for the prayer of Lt. Gonzales, measures 436-446. The score is in 2/4 time with a tempo of ♩ = 72. It features a vocal line for Lt. Gonzales and a string ensemble accompaniment. The lyrics are in Spanish and English. The Spanish lyrics are: "Allí vive gente que no sabe", "Querida Virgen de Guadalupe", "en-re-na me tu ma-re tu de co-mo ser a-ma-ble a-ma-ble y de-ta-le-za Quer-ri-da Vir-gen". The English lyrics are: "up, alone as if breathless building up her intimate". The score includes parts for Clarinet (Cl), Lt. Gonzales (bass), Piano (Pno), Violin 1 (Vln. 1), Violin 2 (Vln. 2), Viola (Vla), Violoncello (Vcl), and Contrabass (Cb). The tempo is marked "riten." and the beat is ♩ = 72.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that after "the knock" Lt. Gonzales concludes that "There is no protocol for this" (53:26), thinking of the woman struck by the terrible news.

There are several exceptional songs in the arias which describe exactly what the composer testified about depicting the deep emotions of the characters. It is important to note that there is no romanticization of these events. Everything is real and therefore cruelly painful. A wonderful moment transpires with the duet of Jo and Aishah (23:46; m. 564) in which Jo reveals that she had a fight with Kelsey on the day he left for Iraq. Again, the melodic line is filled with the *pianto/sigh gesture* and bluesy minor thirds (Fig. 7). Aishah

Figure 7. Jo's Aria (mm. 564–575, ♩=78) with minor thirds and *pianto/sigh* gestures

2321.5" $\text{♩} = 78$

564

Ob.

Vib.

Jo

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

mp pedal, let it blur

p

introspective

The day Kel-sey left I picked a fight dropped him off at the bus left him on the

2343.0" **FF**

571

Vib.

Jo

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

curb drove a-way did-n't e-ven say good bye I watched him in the rear view

p. sul pont.

gliss. between the notes

p. sul pont.

gliss. between the notes

p. sul pont.

tries to comfort Jo. She didn't even say goodbye and his hurt look is "burned in her mind and makes her feel like dirt". This duet is intersected with the

singing of Lt. Gonzales who is questioning himself why he was chosen for this assignment (m. 587). It is a marvelous portrayal of their emotions with a tutti ensemble, including piano, bassoon and electric bass, doubled by a string ensemble in a lively, bluesy counterpoint with voices, flute and clarinet (Fig. 8, m. 619). The local culmination of this part appears with Jo singing "I didn't say goodbye" and Aishah answering "I never say goodbye" – "Because goodbyes are forever". A love song sung by Aishah (35:28; m. 826) is touching as well, accompanied by piano, electric guitar and flute. Lt. Gonzales conjoins accompanied gradually by strings, flute, clarinet, electric guitar and piano. They both sing about soldier's faces – she thinks about her husband whose face she can't remember, and Lt. Gonzales wonders what the soldier who died looked like. Again, the *pianto/sigh* gesture is redundant. The final aria of Lt. Gonzales (52:56; m. 1122) which happens after he delivered the message is also very poignant, bringing back the blues atmosphere: "What do I do"; "She has fallen like a soldier, Shot by my words"; "I would rather stare into the

Figure 8. Tutti ensemble in bluesy counterpoint (mm. 621–630, ♩=110)

25/46 4/4

62/

Fl.

Clb.

Cl

Bsn.

Bass

Jo

Aishah

Pno.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Ve

Cb.

should-a said good-bye. But what if some-thing hap-pens?

for-get the should-as

2597.3²
626

Fl.
Ob.
Cl.
Bsn.
Bass
Alto Sax.
Pno.
Vin. 1
Vin. 2
Vla.
Vcl.
Cb.

for - get the what ifs too There's no - thing you can do On nights like

barrel of a gun, than into the eyes of this fatherless child”; “This is the hardest job of all, watching wives and children fall. This is the cost of war.” The aria comes after the plot denouement, the general climax, in which the characters from both sides of the communication chain finally meet. The solo lines of those songs are often doubled by violins or woodwinds, but since the emphasis is on the text, its syllabic treatment is more pronounced, along with the natural accentuation of the words from which the melodic line arises.

As mentioned earlier, “the knocking sound” is the main musical sign of the opera. It appears as two signifiers, so the importance of it lies within its polysemy and at all levels of meaning which are interconnected on an iconic and symbolic level, or in Peirce’s terms, levels of Firstness and Thirdness.²⁶

²⁶ C.S. Peirce, “On a New List of Categories”, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 7, (1868), 1867, 287–298. According to Charles Peirce, there are the following sign categories: signs in themselves (legisign, sinsign, qualisign), signs in relation to an object (symbol, index, icon) and signs in relation to their interpretants (rheme, dicent, argument). When a sign is perceived in relation to the object, there is an icon based on similarity (Peirce’s Firstness), then an index based on the reference of the sign

The first signifier appears as the sound of a heartbeat in an almost surgically precise portrayal of the psychological state of Lt. Gonzalez (Fig. 9). His character is always introduced by an anxious rhythm in the string instruments (14:21). Lt. Gonzalez wonders “What’s that knocking sound?” during his trip. The sound frustrates him as his trip continues. It becomes louder and louder, and when he finally realizes that it’s his own heart, he exclaims: “I am like a ticking bomb, about to explode” (30:00).

Figure 9. The “knocking sound” embodied by the sound of the bass drum (mm. 454–459, ♩=72)

The musical score for Figure 9 consists of several staves. At the top, there is a tempo marking of 182.4° and a rehearsal mark 'AA'. The first staff is for the Bass Drum (B. D.), showing a steady, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with the dynamic marking 'mf, dry'. Below this is the vocal line for Gonzales, which is mostly silent, with the lyrics 'SPOKEN. DAMN, THERE'S THAT KNOCKING SOUND AGAIN!' appearing in the middle of the score. The next staff is for the Piano (Pno.), featuring a complex, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with the dynamic marking 'mf'. Below the piano part are five staves for string instruments: Violin 1 (Vin. 1), Violin 2 (Vin. 2), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Cb.). Each of these string parts is marked with the instruction 'scratchy and dry, close to the bridge' and features a steady, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

to something with which it is in a causal physical relationship (Peirce’s Secondness) and a symbol with a conventional and arbitrary relationship between the sign and object (Peirce’s Thirdness). Since Saussure’s symbol is an arbitrary sign, some theorists avoid the term symbol and prefer to use an arbitrary sign or a conventional sign. Cf. Philip Tagg, “Introductory notes to the Semiotics of Music”, <https://www.tagg.org/xpdfs/semio-tug.pdf>, 1999, 4. Saussure, on the other hand, established that the character of a symbol is never completely arbitrary, meaning there must be some trace of a natural relationship between the signifier and the signified. Cf. Ferdinand Sisir [Ferdinand de Saussure], *Opšta lingvistika [General Linguistics]*, Beograd, Nolit, 1977 [1916], 136. See more: Nataša Crnjanski, “Sigh Gesture in Mokranjac’s Garlands”, op. cit., 202–207.

While Lt. Gonzalez is changing clothes, the music takes over the role of the text, the beating of his heart is heard along with wonderful and elusive motifs in the solo violin which are carried on by the piano and various wind instruments. Those motifs, like thoughts, come and go with a very determined rhythm, gradually becoming angular in melodic lines and symbolically ending in a minor second. The director, Alison Moritz, made an analogy of this scene with preparing for battle, since both tasks require uniform and protocol.²⁷ This analogy will be obvious to viewers at the very end of the opera or the moment when Jo Jenner finally receives the message and Lt. Gonzalez perceives her as a soldier falling from a bullet, hit by his words. Finally, Lt. Gonzalez thinks he received the answer to his question, why he was assigned this task (“I come from strong people. We do jobs no one else can do. My Mother cleans toilets, my father digs ditches!” m. 797). The first “knocking sound” iconically represents the heartbeat and symbolically the psychological distress of Lt. Gonzalez.

A new “knocking sound” appears when Lt. Gonzales finally arrives in front of the house. He waits until the end of time, since “the longer life will remain the same for the woman inside”. The motif is in a higher register (40:54, m. 914; 41:32, m. 927), this time orchestrated by an interesting timbral play of vibraphone, violin, double bass and piano (Fig. 10). The “knocking motif” is transformed in Morse code, a sign Vrebalov has used in her work before.²⁸ Here, it triggers several interpretants²⁹ around which a *semiosis* is created. It conveys the message (of death) and since it is mainly used in the military, it again indicates a strict protocol which cannot be avoided. A

²⁷ Signs of war are everywhere. While traveling, Lt. Gonzalez comes across a Target store (15:06) and wonders how he didn't see the red circle and dot “marking the spot where the bullet should hit” before.

²⁸ For example, in the work *Antennae*, Morse code plays an important role since the composer examines its acoustic quality and communicational potential. See more in: Nataša Crnjanski, “Play of signs in the work *Antennae* by Aleksandra Vrebalov”, op. cit.

²⁹ Interpretant is Peirce's term which enters into the triadic structure of the sign: sign-object-interpretant. According to Peirce, the interpretant is a mental tool which arises through the connection between the sign and the object in the mind of the one who interprets the sign. Cf. Nataša Crnjanski, *Pojmovnik muzičke semiotike [The Glossary of Music Semiotics]*, Novi Sad, Academy of Arts, 2019, 73). An interpretant is a new sign which creates another interpretant, leading to an infinite series of *unlimited semiosis*. Cf. Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work”, in: T. A. Sebeok (Ed.), *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979, 193.

descending *glissandi* in the strings and descending melodic lines work together as musical signs of deep sadness (mm. 921–927).

Figure 10. The “knocking sound” as Morse code, descending melodic lines and *glissandi* as musical signs of sadness (mm. 914–927, ♩=72)

SCENE 7
 385 3/4
 914 (remains @ ♩ = 72)

Fl. *dry, with a metal stick, keep the pulse at all times mentally*

Vib. *mp*

Gonzales SPOKEN: Here we are. Home of the Comman - der.

Vln. I *dry, percussive*

Ch.

918 2/4

927 **BBB**

Gonzales There's a wound on the door that's your last get - out - line. The

Vln. 1 no vib. detached

Vln. 2 no vib. detached

Vla. slow gliss., creep. soft

Vc. slow gliss., creep. soft

Ch. slow gliss., creep. soft

914,9^o
921

Vib. *Vibraphone*

Gonzales *(Checks his watch)*
line of de-par-ture the point of no re-tur-n.

Pno. *mp*

Vln. 1 *mp*

Vln. 2 *mp*

Vla. *gliss.*

Vc. *p slow gliss., creepy, soft*

Cb. *p slow gliss., creepy, soft*

CCC

The same *glissandi* return when the message is delivered to Jo Jenner. The melody of prayer (43:19; m. 960) is echoed, beautifully arranged with bass guitar, clarinet, strings and piano. The choral-like texture of the clarinet and bassoon evokes a funeral-esque sound (m. 974) and the prayer gradually becomes the plaint. When Lt. Gonzales finally goes to knock at the door, he doesn't know the proper way to knock since the protocol doesn't advise him how to do so (45:29; m. 998). He then prays again and asks the Querida Virgen de Guadalupe how he should knock. When he finally does the "knock" (46: 53; m. 1017) and enters, the music depicts his anxious state by referring to the "knocking sound" in his head (bass drum) and something creeping down his neck (*tremolo* in strings and squeaky sound produced from inside the piano). Both he and Jo Jenner are overwhelmed with emotion. Her exclamation "Nooooooo" (m. 1106) with an upward glissando is accompanied by a tutti ensemble depicting her emotional chaos. The second signifier of the "knocking sound" iconically represents "the knock" at the door, but symbolically – the death itself.

Figure 11. The moment of delivering "the knock" (m. 1092, ♩=54)

QQQ

Gonzalez doesn't know what to do.
He pulls a script from his pocket and reads.

40:28.2"
1092

S. D. Snare Drum *mp*

Jo SPOKEN: No. (Trying to wind the charger cord.) SPOKEN: No. (Trying to wind the charger cord.)

Gonzales SPOKEN: *like a recit., do not vocalize too much, rhythm close to natural speech*
Mes. Jen-ner I have a spe-cial mes-sage for you from the Se-cre-ta-ry of the Ar-my.

Pno.

Vln. 1 **QQQ** *gliss.* *gliss.* *gliss.*

Vln. 2 *gliss.* *gliss.* *gliss.* *gliss.*

Vla. *gliss.* *gliss.*

Vc.

40:51.5"
1099

S. D.

Jo SPOKEN: No. (Trying to wind the charger cord.)

Gonzales He en-trus-ted to me to ex-press to you his deep re-gret that your hus-band Kel-sey Jen-ner died in Ful

Pno.

Vln. 1 *gliss.*

Vln. 2 *gliss.*

Vla. *gliss.*

Vc.

By using sound rather exclusively, Vrebalov succeeds in creating a musical analogy of the “dead” metaphor which exists in language. In Fig. 10, we observe descending *glissandi* as signs of sadness, the military drum as a sign of Army and protocol, clusters and note heads as arrows that visually evoke “bullets and arrows” which hit the heart of the person receiving “the knock”. Because the listeners/spectators do not have an insight into the opera score, we should mention here the suggestive notation of the composer, where the semiographic representation of the sound essentially depicts the textual action in a visual manner.³⁰ This is another feature of her music which can also be seen throughout the composer’s entire musical oeuvre. It may not be sufficient to mention that this semantic relationship between the visual representation of sound and the program it describes stems from the composer’s deep inclination towards visual art. Namely, Vrebalov often “paints” using an ink drawing technique, and her individual musical and artistic works are in a unique relationship on the verge of synergy.

Unlike the ending in the libretto, where Lt. Gonzalez is supposed to hold the baby, in the film version Moritz decides that Aishah and COW will hold the baby. Then Jo runs off with the baby as the stars disappear from the sky. After the women’s chorus composed in a choral-like, funeral-esque texture, Moritz also added a funeral scene in which Jo is handed a flag wrapped in a triangle, and the opera ends with the lines “Blue and stars are all that will remain of her husband, the soldier.” The polysemy of the concept of “the stars” is present, since the stars appear on all three levels of meaning, as symbol, index, and icon. The stars represent the states on the flag (a symbol of loyalty), (disappearing) stars are indicators that morning is about to come (indices for a new day), and the stars in the sky represent the souls of the dead (icons of risen souls).

The Knock centers upon the lives of those who mostly have peripheral roles in the stories about soldiers – those who are left behind, those who lose, those who wait. By coincidence, in this opera they are embodied in the characters of women. It should be remembered that in American culture, as well as in some other cultures, women are also part of the military system, so it is possible to talk about the global message of this opera out of gender and particular context. A great effect in the opera was achieved by the characters

³⁰ One such example is the moment when the women sing “fighting a war in Fallujah” in a canonic imitation, with musical notation resembling a soldier’s battlefield (1:58; mm. 22–24).

in the film sometimes being silent, but the viewer/listener still hears their inner monologues. This has a much stronger impact and would not be possible on stage in a live performance. To some extent we see this as an advantage of the filmed opera, including the ability to see the story through the details (the director's eye), closely acting through mimicry and the ability to listen/watch again, among other things. In this regard, we have to mention the cast, whose exceptional acting and singing contributed to the quality of the film, even more intensely and noticeably than when it comes to a live performance.³¹

We observed several important signs used in the opera. The most important are the "knocking" sound and the catabasic musical signs which indicate the presence of deep sadness and grief: the descending minor second (*sigh gesture / pianto*), the minor third and the downward *glissandi*. The significance of the "knocking sound" with two signifiers, a heartbeat and the door knock, and two signified, anxiety and death, can almost be compared to Beethoven's fate motif. Indeed, the semantics of these signs are reinforced by interesting and atypical opera instrumentation, such as the electric guitar and electric bass with particular reference to the blues. The composer Aleksandra Vrebalov thoroughly examines the communication potential of those conventional signs and uses them in an unconventional manner to fulfill the music-text-image as a whole. Together with the director and librettist she created a global message which transcends borders, spaces and nations. It all confirms that the signs should not be studied in isolation, but as we concluded, in the process of *semiosis*, with the various relationships which make up that process, as Charles Morris stated (1975). To summarize, these sign relations are the real source of (musical) semantics, where music speaks more than we think.

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³¹ The cast, in order of appearance: Commanding Officer's Wife: Stephanie Sanchez; Lisa: Lisa Marie Rogali; Victoria: Victoria Lawal; Aishah McNair: Mia Athey; Joella "Jo" Jenner: Mary-Hollis Hundley; Lt. Roberto Gonzalez: Armando Contreras; Jarrett McNair: Roy Allen; Funeral Guest: Abby Rodd; Funeral Guest: James F. Rotondo III.

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Summary

The opera *The Knock* was commissioned by the *Glimerglass Festival* and was planned to be performed in 2021. Due to the pandemic the premiere was postponed, but *Glimerglass* decided to film the opera and stream it on YouTube. The screened version of *The Knock* is the subject of this paper. Despite the setback, the opera had its live premiere on June 23, 2023 at the Cincinnati Opera House.

The libretto of *The Knock* was inspired by the autobiographical testimonies of military wives on which Deborah Brevoort, the librettist, relied upon. Inspired by the strong emotions of the story along with the inner monologue of the characters, Aleksandra Vrebalov created music which not only reflects these inner states, but together with the text and image creates an inextricable semantic network, or in other words, a *semiosis* of the artwork. The term "The Knock" refers to the description of a death notice which is used within the military community. "The Knock" became a symbol of death in that specific community, or as linguists would call it, a "dead metaphor", since the term has lost its original (denotative) meaning and has been frequently used by community members in its metaphorical (connotative) meaning. Besides the short time frame of the story (one night), the opera has many other minimalistic features, such as the small orchestra ensemble, 3 solo female voices and a couple of female choruses, while the only male character is Army Lt. Gonzalez. This small range of material allows the writer and composer to focus on the psychological profiles of these characters, mainly Jo Jenner, the wife who eventually receives "the knock" and Lt. Gonzales, who delivers it.

In the article, several important signs used in the opera are observed. The most important are the "knocking" sound and the catabasic musical signs which indicate the presence of deep sadness and grief: the descending minor second (*sigh gesture / pianto*), the minor third and the downward *glissandi*. The "knocking sound" appears as two signifiers, a heartbeat and the door knock, and two signified, anxiety and death. The semantics of these signs is reinforced by interesting and atypical opera instrumentation, such as the electric guitar and electric bass with particular reference to the blues. The composer Aleksandra Vrebalov thoroughly examines the communication potential of those conventional signs and uses them in an unconventional manner to fulfill the music-text-image as a whole.