

Opera and Performance: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

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ABSTRACTS

Suzanne Aspden (Oxford University), “Opera-going as performance”

This paper proposes to consider some of the ways in which opera-goers have been enfolded into the performance economy of the operatic event, with a particular focus on opera in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It will explore the reciprocal relationship between what seems to be an increasing desire on the part of audience members to have 'behind the scenes' access or to involve themselves in a production, on the one hand, and opera companies' attempts to expand their audiences through novel approaches to staging opera (whether in cinemas, or in non-standard venues for live performance), both being situated within a culture of theatrical immersion. The British phenomenon of country-house opera will be a particular focus of the paper, but will not be the sole area for exploration.

Alessandra Campana (Tufts University), “2057: A utopian turning back”

This paper is an attempt at articulating a discourse of opera studies' futurity: its "performativity" in relation to a broader critical field. Crucial still is the encounter of presence and ephemerality with an (academic) practice firmly founded on textuality (writing, reading, interpretation). This encounter can be described as a "turning back": a trope that has informed a wealth of reflections of performance, from Orpheus to Louis Althusser, Lawrence Kramer and others.

Axel Englund (Stockholm University), “Benjamin’s Angels: Reaching for opera through *Written on Skin*”

This paper takes a look at opera through the lens of one of the genre's most successful contemporary instantiations: George Benjamin and Martin Crimp's *Written on Skin*, which was premiered in Aix-en-Provence in 2012, in a production directed by Katie Mitchell. Critics hailed the opera as a masterpiece, and in its first five years it has been regularly performed all over the world, in new productions as well as in Mitchell's original one. Although it shares its intensely self-reflexive constitution with many other post-canonical operas, it arguably takes this tendency farther than any of its forebears. The aim of this paper is to listen closely to what *Written on Skin* has to say about opera as an art form in the early 21st century: about its habit of staging history as a series of clashes between the past and the present, about its dependence on the unique of brand of sensual pleasure that emanates from the human voice, and about its various ways of dealing with the technological mediation through which that voice is so often filtered today.

Johanna Ethnersson Pontara and Joakim Tillman (Stockholm University): “Puccini’s *Tosca* and the narrative and performative aspects of music in opera”

Research on opera was for a long time focused on either structural or symbolic aspects of the music. The purpose of this investigation is to broaden opera analysis by paying attention to the double role played by music in opera, the narrative and the performative. Drawing on theoretical approaches of film music analysis and performance theory it attempts to develop a method of analysis that takes both of these aspects into consideration. With Puccini’s *Tosca* as a point of departure, the paper demonstrates how this double role of the music plays a significant role for the construction of meaning in relation to verbal and visual media.

Lydia Goehr (Columbia University), “Picture this: Or how to think through the arts of opera”

The theme is ekphrasis. The issue: to assess the impact of beginning operas with distinctive images via the libretti or scene descriptions. The problem: what happens to those images when productions engage radical refigurations?

David J. Levin (University of Chicago), “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön“? “Opera in the Age of its Digital Reproducibility“

In important ways, opera production and consumption have become (statistically speaking, but also, medially speaking) a matter of pixelated images originating from an opera house stage and destined for a screen, be it in a multiplex, on a handheld device, or a laptop. This paper seeks to explore the scene of medial transfer in opera in two distinct but interrelated senses: as a recurring diegetic fact (since operas are replete with dramatizations of medial transfer) and, in turn, as an increasingly important institutional phenomenon (since such transfers have become so important to the business of opera, to opera’s place in the medial economy). In order to sketch out the relationship between these two scenes, I propose to explore a characteristic instance of diegetic mediation (in this case, Tamino’s aria “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön” from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*) in order to explore its mediation in and by a host of productions.

Christopher Morris (Maynooth University), “Opera studies after humanism”

A meaningful engagement with opera in a posthuman(ist) context no doubt demands consideration of newly created work, from the technologically enabled extension and re-imagination of the medium in what Jelena Novak dubs “postopera” to the creative and performative possibilities raised by the virtual, prosthetic, and cybernetic. But I want to suggest that the issues raised by the performance and circulation of the established repertoire are no less important to this conversation. Two concern me here: first, the implications for scholarship of opera’s improbable survival and growth in the new media and performance economy (streaming, cinecasts, site-specific performance); and second, the question of how these developments might overlap with the posthumanist invitation to reconsider more widely the role of human agency in creative practice. I want, in other words, to consider an opera studies attuned to opera’s new life outside the opera house and alive to the possibilities of thinking through opera—that unruly child of humanism—after humanism.

Clemens Risi (Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg), “Opera in performance – ‘Regietheater’ and the performative turn”

In this paper, I will present my approach to analyzing opera productions of the so called “Regietheater” style. “Regietheater” as performance practice retains the musical dramaturgy of the work while at the same time radically questioning, re-examining and re-contextualising the layers of meaning of an opera. It is this essentially intellectual engagement with new meanings that has increasingly brought to light as its counterpart the “other” way of perceiving opera performances: the experience of moments that cannot be described as a representation (or embodiment) of something but which first and foremost trigger intense experiences and physical reactions to what has been experienced. It is this constant interplay of representation and presence that makes opera performances in general but especially those of the so called “Regietheater” so fascinating and provocative. Starting from the observation of the “much-noted performative turn in the humanities”, I would like to suggest an approach that focuses on the performative dimension of opera productions. I will concentrate on the relation between the visible (bodies, gestures, images) and the audible – how these two modalities interact with each other in our perception – as well as upon the relation between representation and presence in live performances of “Regietheater” opera productions.

Arman Schwartz (University of Birmingham), “Is minimalist opera theatrical?”

This presentation has two aims. First, to suggest a narrative of sedimentation that runs counter to accounts of opera’s (inevitable, desirable) “unsettling” via practices of radical staging, medial dissemination, and post-dramatic theater. Second, to suggest that American minimalist opera of the 1970s and 80s was one important site for thinking through the aesthetics of resettlement. What has often seemed like a celebration of postmodern openness and liberated spectatorship may in fact be a late manifestation of modernist anti-theatricalism and, as such, a reflection on the increasingly reified character of the operatic work. If, to put this differently, Michael Fried found minimalist sculpture dangerously theatrical, then you would expect minimalist *opera* to be doubly, triply theatrical. It would seem noteworthy if the opposite were true.

Mary Ann Smart (University of California Berkeley), “Radical staging and the habitus of the singer”

This paper will examine the unspoken tension between two approaches to contemporary staging of opera, the revisionist, often Brechtian mentality that underpins the work of many stage directors and the more practical, more realist, and more psychologizing principles that typically inform singers’ interpretations of scenes and characters. My contention is that both of these currents of thought are present in almost every production, but that scholars and critics tend to see (and have a vocabulary for discussing) the director’s work, while the emotional and physical labor is mostly invisible. This paper attempts to redress that omission, taking seriously the pedagogical, vocal, and spatial considerations that shape the interpretative work of the singer. My discussion will draw on material from published pedagogical material, analysis of filmed productions and stills, ethnographic observation of rehearsals, and interviews with singers and production staff.

Magnus Tessing Schneider (Stockholm University), “Whatever happened in Donna Anna’s bedroom? A study in vocal theatricality”

Tracing the early history of the scenic-vocal portrayal of Donna Anna in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, the paper examines the complex interplay of German singing translations, critical commentaries and performance traditions at the turn of the nineteenth century, and its impact on the opera’s later reception and performance history. Whereas an Italian tradition, which went back to the premiere production in Prague in 1787, tended to emphasize Donna Anna’s wounded honour, filial loyalty and hatred of Don Giovanni, the German tradition emphasized her overpowering passion and secret love for him. These conflicting conceptions of the character epitomize the opera’s problematic position in the clash between the Late Enlightenment and German Romanticism, but the paper also explores, more generally, the challenges and perspectives of using singers’ portrayals as an approach to studying operatic works.

Laura Tunbridge (Oxford University), “Exterminating the recording angel”

The trend in recent years for operas to take film as their source – what Yuell Chandler calls ‘cinemopera’ – provides a route into thinking, once again, about the relationship between performance on stage and screen. Early, silent film seemed to have been attracted to showing opera singers. Now, an opera such as Thomas Adès’s *The Exterminating Angel* (premiered Salzburg, 2016) adapts a film that includes a conductor and singer among its cast. What does such an adaptation do to the concept of operatic performance? How might we hear the conversion of Luis Buñuel’s 1962 film *El ángel exterminador*, which itself plays with ideas of repetition and stasis in the structure of its narrative, into music? Does a live, sung rendition of a spoken recorded medium serve to animate or, rather, does it introduce an extra element of artificiality? Is that the result of singing in English rather than keeping the film’s original language?