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Opera at the forefront of the arts scene.

A plea for an informed look at innovative practices inside and outside opera

Although Opera sometimes seems to cherish its reputation of the ultimate 'art of the bourgeoisie', it actually is - and always has been - at the forefront of technological and artistic innovations within the live performance arts.

Why? 'It's the economy, stupid...' to quote Bill Clinton (who was quoting his campaign strategist James Carville)...

The huge production costs associated with an opera production, both enable and stimulate the use of new technologies that could broaden its public appeal. Emerging technologies which are out reach for experimental small scale theatre performances, become available for big opera productions first (think about wireless, spatialised sound reinforcement, subtitling, video projection etc...)

To some opera aficionado's horror, wireless mikes have infiltrated the top of the opera's houses, if only to enable live (or not so live) broadcastings: 'go to the Metropolitan at the cinema' is an international succes. New opera creations sometimes embrace electric and/or electronic instruments, sometimes necessitating the use of amplified voices in the slipstream. This amplification in return enables new ways of using the live voice in opera... This drive for innovation is also present at a 'pure' artistic level. Opera wants to profile itself at the forefront of the Arts. Against all odds, these innovations imply artistic changes in how to deal with them: they will slowly become part of the 'repertoire'.

At the same time, opera cherishes its repertoire. The bulk of what is performed today are creations from dead composers, re-enacted by very living singers, musicians, conductors, stage designers and directors. All of them mirror themselves into an overwhelming tradition. As such opera today combines an extremely conservationist approach with extreme innovation, often in the same house - even within the same production. An extremely innovative approach to the mise-en-scene can be happily married to a very conservationist approach of the music in repertoire pieces.

This makes Opera a very political art form. It is one of these rare 'high-brow' art forms where approval and disapproval is vocalised very explicitly. A challenging staging at Bayreuth guarantees a stampede of reactions at the applause (and Booring), rivalling a football game. I vividly remember the applause of a regular performance of C(H)OEURS, an operatic performance directed by Alain Platel at Teatro Real de Madrid. Animated (and quite heated) discussions erupted at the third balcony¹ between fan's and foes of the piece, continuing onto the streets long after the presentation. Controversy between the new and the old is at the heart of the opera practice. One shouldn't take these musical revolutions lightly - after all Belgium was founded on an opera presentation².

^{2 2}The presentation of 'La muette de Portici', an opera by Daniel Auber on August 25, 1830 allegedly triggered the Belgian Revolution. It hasn't been performed a lot since then.

This vivid opposition between the old and the new is reflected in music education. When I ask conservatory students for their favourite contemporary opera composer, 'Béla Bartók' is always a solid contestant. Unfortunately, he died in 1945. The living repertoire somehow seems to die in an ever shifting past. This reluctance to embrace the real, living, contemporary art practice of music theatre, feels very strange, especially in an educational context, aiming at creating the future. As if Aperghis would somehow be infectious for Mozart (I guess it was the other way round). In this weird embrace of the past, one seems to forget that radical new staging of the repertoire are at the centre of opera practice of today. Musicians, conductors and directors re-invent this repertoire on a daily basis, often nourished by the avant garde of contemporary arts (both fine arts and theatre).

Opera is inherently an intermediate art form: it combines the artistic practice of theatrical story telling with classical singing techniques. Intermediality is defined as the art practice of incorporating the creative strategies of one medium, into another medium. That's exactly what opera has done from its existence. It uses theatrical (and nowadays even filmic) strategies of storytelling in classical music.³ As such, opera has always embraced the best of these (and other) art worlds. Top designers (often from fine arts), top directors (from theatre, cinema or fine arts in general) are flown in for top productions, alongside top singers and conductors. It is the noble art to impress and surprise on every level... Even on a technological one...

Most technological revolutions tend to disguise themselves under the radar: the birth of the copy machine, the mobile phone, the networked society, the birth and death of the fax machine... all had a huge influence on the organisation of our society, and happened without too much fuss at birth...

That's also the case with innovations in the staging of opera's (both contemporary and repertoire). The invention of the live-filmed-conductor on a closed TV circuit, had quite some impact on the dramatic possibilities of staging an opera, but nobody even bothered to invent a name for it. Subtitling (or rather 'sur-titling') opera's created an important (but almost unnoticed) shift in the perception of opera as a dramatic medium. Suddenly every sentence sung - in any language - became immediately understandable for the general public. Staging and singing an opera had to cope with this new perspective of the public on its drama.

In this paper we argue that these 'quiet revolutions' have quite some dramatic - in every sense of the word - repercussions on how we should train our future (and present) singers. We also will argue that these changes are not only relevant for experimental, contemporary or new small scale operatic practices: they influence almost every opera performance, both repertoire and contemporary alike.

This practice of importing 'the newest and the best' from neighbouring art forms, is at the heart of today's mainstream opera practice. Newly emerging and sometimes highly experimental composers are asked by big opera houses to write innovative new opera productions. Top directors from theatre and cinema are imported by the biggest houses to stage both new and old repertoire classical opera productions. Top fine arts artists are engaged for the set design of these productions. These huge productions are often (but not always) more innovative than the small scale productions from newly formed opera companies.

One could even argue that opera renews itself from the centre of its core business, and not only from the emerging margins. In theatre, small experimental outsider companies tend to feed the innovation of the bigger, established houses. In opera, it's almost the other way round. Why? Here again, it's economics: as these emerging companies in the margin are financially less established they are more dependent on the immediate acceptance of their creations by their audience. Opera is an inherently expensive art form. Taking a big, experimental risk can be fatal.

Big opera houses have a well established practice of importing their innovation from their neighbouring art forms. The list of radically experimental theatre directors (and stage designers - often from fine arts with no staging experience whatsoever) involved in the staging of big (both repertoire and new) opera productions is quite endless. These are often the 'prestige' productions of these houses. They are their prime showcases. As the saying goes: if you want to see what the top of contemporary theatre has to offer, go to the opera.

³ We will not dwell on the semiotic differences between opera and musical, as this seems to be a very fruitless endeavour. Let's be satisfied with the (very un-satisfying) definition that everything that defines itself as an opera within an operatic context is an opera. Period.

In practice, these boundaries between the centre and the margin of opera art practice, are becoming highly permeable for singers, Great singers are traveling from one production to the next, from repertoire to new creations, regardless the size or age or style of the opera house involved. That makes the need for an open view of a wide variety of art practices even more important, not just for the 'experimental opera singers' (which is in my experience an almost non-existing category). Opera is a living and evolving art at the centre of the arts. Century old classical opera pieces are often staged in very innovative ways, and sometimes world creations are staged in very traditional ways. The innovation in the art practice of bringing an opera to the stage, is not linked to the size of the opera house or the novelty of the music. It is at the heart of the opera practice. So it should be at the heart of opera education.

For singers, working in established classical houses as well as in newly formed companies, this implies that some knowledge of what's happening in these neighbouring art forms, is vital for their career. Acting isn't a fixed skill: it is an ever evolving art that embraces all kinds of different approaches, from a realistic, cinematic approach to an abstractly choreographed ritual and everything in between. It evolves with the evolutions in the neighbouring arts such as cinema, fine arts performances, dance and theatre... An acquaintance with these art forms is vital for a future opera singer.

The numbers of singers with fixed, long term contracts in established opera houses are still quite substantial, but in a decline. Lots of new singers travel from production to production, from more traditional to more innovative ones. It has to be remarked that the bulk of these opportunities - both in the context of traditionalist as contemporary stagings - still come from more established classical houses. But this doesn't imply that these houses only produce traditionalists (whatever that may be) interpretations of repertoire. The opposition between an old fashioned, fixed, conservative art practice in the established opera houses and a vibrant alternative market with an innovative, collaborative and flexible art practice, is a false one. The art practices at both ends of the scale (from big established houses to small emerging companies) are incorporating a mix of traditionalist approaches, as well as innovative practices.

Opera, as an art in between, has always been swift in incorporating both talents and art practices from new, emerging media and art forms. It has been the first in embracing sub-titling in their live performances (a practice borrowed from cinema and television), long before theatre started doing the same. This practice has quietly revolutionised opera as a medium, as the dialogues (and frankly the story itself) became immediately understandable for all spectators. Up to that moment, opera was an art form for well prepared specialist spectators who knew (and even memorised) the story, way in advance of the live event. As such, subtitling will undoubtedly have a profound effect on the democratisation of this art form. If one takes a photograph from the third balcony audience (which I tend to do), the myth of a dying, over-wealthy audience falls into shambles. It is simply not true⁴.

This innovation challenges the dramatic qualities of the singers: more and more stage directors ask (sometimes quite unknowingly) a 'natural feeling' and 'honest' acting style which can be extremely challenging while singing at full strength. The exaggerating acting style of the past is less in demand. So at least, young singers should be acquainted with very different acting styles and strategies. Ranging from film style natural acting (Peter Sellars, Romeo Castellucci), over dramatic and larger than life acting, till more coded and abstract forms of acting (Robert Wilson). In all these different styles, singers should realise that the public is understanding every sentence of the plot. More than ever, one can't get away with playing the general idea of the scene. As a singer, one has to engage dramatically with the subtext of every sentence, every word.

As a pedagogical methodology, we propose that young singers should be trained in at least some of these different acting styles. They should have some knowledge of the top of the international staging practice (ranging from traditionalist till experimental stagings). An intimate knowledge of (also contemporary) fine art will help to build a common frame of references which can be shared with the stage director (and conductor, for that matter).

The use of 'new' media such as video projections and (live or recorded) generated computer imagery in the set designs, first emerged in big and expensive opera productions, quite long before they did hit the stage in theatre. The reason is economic again: opera as a very expensive art form, is used by artists from neighbouring art forms, to try out new art practices which are financially impossible in their own, 'native' art form. How to deal with live camera's on stage as a singer, isn't an exotic skill to train nowadays.

⁴ Always choose the second or third balcony at opera performances: first balcony is way too expensive, parterre is for the horses and their drivers.

The 'conductor-on-the-screen' is another well established staging practice that aspiring opera singers should learn at school to use in their singing practice. A more natural feeling style of acting is rather hard to achieve when both protagonists look straight at the conductor in the pit, instead of engaging with each other. This requires a built-in 'trust' with the 'conductor-on-the-screen' which can only be learned by practice, from the early days at the opera school on. Organising an acting strategy by a singer involves plotting a visual line-of-sight from one 'Conductor-on-the-screen' to the next. How can I act this scene without losing track of the conductor? Somehow we too easily consider this as a small detail which should be learned on the spot, during the rehearsal of a production, while it's something which can be quite easily simulated in a school situation. A closed circuit consisting of a fixed camera and 3 screens, will do the trick and provide a vital learning experience for the young singer.

Without trying to be overly provocative, one could argue the same for 'amplified singing'. Although 'non-amplified' singing stays at the heart of opera, more and more staging practices require amplification. Even more so for televised opera's (live or not) which are a growing market. Especially since Covid19 forced the public into finding their way to the 'opera-on-the-screen'. These practices have quite some implications on the singing and acting techniques required, again regardlessly whether it concerns a staging of a repertoire opera, or a contemporary world première.

For young singers, this is an amazing challenge and opportunity alike. If they want to prepare for a career at the top, they should know and somehow critically embrace the newest art practices both from new technologies as from neighbouring art forms (theatre, cinema and fine arts). This goes for careers both at the established opera houses, as in the emerging opera companies. And as all techniques: these require knowledge building and training, from early on. It's no longer the icing on the cake: it's part to the cake itself. As opera educators, it's becoming part of our core business.

Peter Missotten (B) °1963 worked as a media artist and scenographer for theatre and opera. He directed a few opera creations, notably 'Kepler' by Philip Glass for Linz 2009 (Austria) and 'Der Golem' by Bernhard Lang for Nationaltheater Mannheim (Germany). He teaches performance art at Toneelacademie Maastricht and is head of the Zuyd research group Technologydrivenart.org.