



OBERTO Inaugural Conference

‘Beyond Press Cuttings: New Approaches to Reception in Opera Studies’

Oxford Brookes University, Tuesday 13 September 2011

Far from being a mere historical ‘footnote’, reception has come to be seen as central to the study of opera in recent decades. The purpose of this conference is to consider the ways in which the parameters of operatic reception studies are shifting to include new sources, new media and new audiences, and in the process shedding new light on how societies have received and made use of opera, from the nineteenth century to the present day.

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**OXFORD
BROOKES
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RMA
ROYAL MUSICAL ASSOCIATION

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME: Morning

9-9.30am: Registration

9.30-9.45am: Introduction and Welcome (Alexandra Wilson and Barbara Eichner)

Session 1: 9.45-11.15am: Literary Responses to Opera

Chair: Rosamund Bartlett (Oxford)

Cormac Newark (University of Ulster): '*À la recherche du temps tordu...*'

Charlotte Purkis (University of Winchester): 'The Immortality of the Hour: Creative Engagements and Mythic Construction in the Critical Reception of Rutland Boughton's Music-Drama'

Jessica Collins (Royal Holloway, University of London): 'Reception as Analysis: Readings of Mythology in Michael Tippett's *King Priam*'

11.15-11.45am: Coffee

Session 2: 11.45am-1.15pm: The Audience as Critic

Chair: Mark Berry (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Hugo Shirley (King's College London): 'Criticism under Fire: The Comment's Challenge to Authority'

Simon Evans-White (Oxford Brookes University): 'The Online Customer Review as Valid Opera Criticism?'

John Snelson (Royal Opera House): 'From Wagner's *Ring* to *Anna Nicole*: Critics Versus Audiences at the Royal Opera'

Olga Panteleeva (University of California Berkeley): 'Insult to Injury, or Why the Audience Failed to Read the New *Onegin*'

1.15-2.15pm: Lunch

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME: Afternoon

Session 3: 2.15-3.45pm: Visual Responses to Opera

Chair: Roger Parker (King's College London)

Clair Rowden (Cardiff University): "'Caricature" in 1890s Paris'

Carlo Cenciarelli (King's College London): 'Shades of Verdi: Visual Codes and Musical Meanings in Four Videos of *Don Carlos*'

Estelle Joubert (Dalhousie University): 'Opera in the Age of Digital Culture: Sound and Cinematic Technique in Kenneth Branagh's *The Magic Flute* (2006)'

3.45-4.15pm: Coffee

Session 4: 4.15-5.15pm: Reading Events as Reception History

Chair: Sarah Hibberd (Nottingham University)

Chloe Valenti (Murray Edwards College, Cambridge): 'Adulation and Appropriation: Verdi's Political Image in 1860s England'

Flora Willson (King's College London): 'Listening to the Dead: Opera Criticism at the Funerals of Meyerbeer and Rossini'

5.15-6.15pm: Response from Katharine Ellis (Royal Holloway, University of London) and open discussion

Carlo Cenciarelli, King's College London

'Shades of Verdi: Visual Codes and Musical Meanings in Four Videos of *Don Carlos*'

Filming opera brings into play a new layer of aesthetic considerations, ranging from camera movement to framing, cutting and lighting, focus and colour grading. To date, little attention has been paid to the way in which these choices contribute to shaping musical meaning.

Partly, this might be due to the fact that the genre of filmed opera has grown to be characterised by a deliberately 'impassive' style. Whereas narrative cinema typically uses the length, motion and size of shots to assist the drama, in filmed opera visual parameters often seem to be set *a priori*, based primarily on traditional formal patterns rather than specific narrative considerations. This is the result of pragmatic limitations (concerning the presence of a live audience) and is in keeping with the promise of providing a valid surrogate of the live experience (always a strong selling point of filmed opera).

By means of focusing on four recent DVD productions of Verdi's *Don Carlos*, I will argue that these limitations make the visual codes of filmed opera all the more significant. First, I will discuss how, despite these attempts to be unobtrusive, or rather precisely *because* of these attempts, the filming of opera invokes an aesthetic of neutrality and clarity that inevitably inflects the drama of Verdi's operas. Secondly, I will show how, across examples which share a restrained and relatively streamlined visual grammar, minimal differences in the length, framing, and editing of shots have potentially far reaching implications on the meaning of operatic gestures.

Jessica Collins, Royal Holloway, University of London

'Reception as Analysis: Readings of Mythology in Michael Tippett's *King Priam*'

Reception has traditionally been construed as the manner in which a musical work is received and responded to by its audience. This paper seeks to deconstruct this formulation, suggesting a revised conception of reception which includes a work's treatment in academic literature both from within and beyond the disciplinary confines of musicology.

Michael Tippett's second opera *King Priam* (1959-62) demarcates a new period in the composer's output; its innovative musical language reflects a striking change of direction in Tippett's ideological and aesthetic temperament. The opera is broadly based on the story of the Trojan War as related by Homer, but from the perspective of the eponymous protagonist. The main focal points of this opera are constructed around instances in the narrative where main characters are faced with a moral choice, and thus the work offers the possibility to consider a musically-catalysed condensation of a multi-perspective broad-scale narrative into an intimate, localised view of events. The work was premiered at an arts festival held during May 1962 for the consecration of the newly rebuilt cathedral in Coventry, a city almost obliterated during the Blitz, and was succeeded the following evening by the first performance of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*.

This paper will consider the initial reception of the opera at its premiere, with particular focus on its performative proximity to Britten's *War Requiem*, before looking at its subsequent treatment in scholarship and finally suggesting that in order to analyse the work to the depth deserved by its complexities, an holistic interdisciplinary approach is required, taking account of readings of both the music and the work's foundational mythology from a variety of different fields to inform a nuanced and more profound interpretation of *King Priam* which is relevant to contemporary society.

Estelle Joubert, Dalhousie University

'Opera in the Age of Digital Culture: Sound and Cinematic Technique in Kenneth Branagh's *The Magic Flute* (2006)'

This paper situates Kenneth Branagh's *The Magic Flute* as one of the first digital cinematic productions of an opera. By 'digital', I do not simply mean digitally captured, screened or distributed. Rather, I am referring to the use of digital technology – CGI (Computer Generated Imagery), digital image manipulation, digital manipulations of time and space, and digital sound effects – as a constitutive component of the creative process. Throughout the opera, the viewer marvels at partially or entirely fantastical *mise-en-scène*, rapid, seemingly magical transformations of landscapes and seamless aerial pans characterized by the illusion of continuous controlled motion within an apparent three-dimensional space, all of which are only possible with the assistance of digital technology. Additionally, there is also an aesthetic style associated with digital culture – quick cuts, rapid-fire editing, looping and interactivity – features associated with new media, which continue to converge with cinema. Using two paradigmatic examples, I shall explore some of the ways in which film-opera has changed with the advent of digital cinema. First, with reference to the opening overture, I argue that digital cinema provides new modes of surveying operatic landscapes. Second, using the Queen of the Night's famous Act II aria, 'Der Hölle Rache', I examine what Andrew Darley refers to as a 'distinctive mode of spectacle' in representing malevolent characters in recent fantasy films, and I investigate the possibility of a 'close-up' of the Queen's voice as an object of fascination and desire.

Cormac Newark, University of Ulster

'À la recherche du temps perdu...'

From before Stendhal until after Proust, a familiar scene in the French novel was that of the *soirée à l'Opéra*, whether tableau of social hierarchy, setting for extravagant goings-on, prompt for emotional epiphany, or a combination of all three. By virtue of its longevity if nothing else, the tradition amounts to a literary sub-genre in its own right.

Numerous aspects of the *soirée à l'Opéra* are of interest to musicologists and scholars of literature alike, but this paper will consider just one: its treatment of time. Examples from Stendhal and Proust, also Verne and others, will chart the relative regularity or, by contrast, awkwardly concertina-like motion of its passing, measured against a flow of musical and dramatic information that is itself by turns frozen, diverted or occasionally even reversed. More generally, the paper will examine the fundamental difficulty of

representing music, let alone musical contemplation, in prose. The private musings of characters while watching the stage necessarily interact with what happens around them in the theatre and with the progress of the plot to produce a complex temporal entity. After all, even the most neutral running commentary on a work is already twisted or warped, not only by the conventional metaphors of technical terminology and aesthetic viewpoint, which tend automatically to parse the work, but also by the impression of halting and stumbling forward produced by the non-proportionate tellings of different musical events. These twists, perennially fascinating to novelists, were also part of the stock-in-trade of professional opera critics – who were sometimes the very same writers.

Olga Panteleeva, UC Berkeley

‘Insult to Injury, or Why the Audience Failed to Read the New *Onegin*’

The new 2006 production of Chaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow – the first to replace the 1944 spectacle – stoked a violent controversy among the audience and critics. The paper focuses on the audience’s reception, analyzing heated discussions at the major Russian online forum for classical music. Professionals and amateurs alike felt strongly about the production and its relationship to the canonical “originals” by Pushkin and Chaikovsky: two cornerstones of contemporary Russian national identity, deeply ingrained in everyday conversation and popular musical consciousness.

Through physical gesture, closely aligned to music, and through verisimilar “things Russian” in the set, imitating a post-Soviet everyday life familiar to the audience, the director Dmitry Chernyakov engages the spectator into a perceptual activity of “reading.” The online reactions vividly reflect that people refuse to “read” the production in the same way they engage in personal, often intimate, interpretations of the two “originals,” and base their judgment on how well the directorial reading fits their own.

The well-documented scandal around Chernyakov’s *Onegin* is an instructive case study for two reasons. First, a wealth of online interpretative accounts illuminates the perception process: what kind of miscommunication is at work when the majority of Russian operatic audiences reject *Regieoper* as nonsensical? More importantly, the strong emotional reaction of spectators who identify with Pushkin’s and Chaikovsky’s characters, or at least claim to understand their personalities, reveals how diverse, contradictory and intimate are the interpretations of Pushkin’s novel and Chaikovsky’s opera today.

Charlotte Purkis, University of Winchester

‘The Immortality of the Hour: Creative Engagements and Mythic Construction in the Critical Reception of Rutland Boughton’s Music-Drama’

What, and when, was, and is, *The Immortal Hour*? Begun in 1910, and premiered at Glastonbury in 1914, Rutland Boughton’s setting of Fiona Macleod/William Sharp’s ‘psychic play’ seems to have achieved permanent fame as the quintessential late Romantic English music-drama, due to its visionary, escapist, spiritualist, Orphic, Celtic, fey and faery character which became hugely appealing to audiences during and after World War One with over a thousand performances in successive London productions in the decade between 1922 and 1932. ‘Immortal Hourites’ were “led by dreams and visions” of ‘The Lordly Ones’ into the ‘Land of the Ever-Young’, into a realm which made them seemingly beyond any capacity or desire for analysis, so enthusiastic were they for repeat experience.

Whereas critics published many reviews discussing perceptions of the vision evoked and encountered in the world of this work, other members of these audiences, who Christopher St. John, for example, referred to as “magnetised pursuers of the shadow of their own aspiration to unearthly things”, turned to creative writing – forms of reverie in literary forms – as well as to diary, letter and memoir, to seek to express their response. Using examples from archival sources and other published evidence through which we can re-encounter this make-believe world of ‘other’ spirits, this paper will ask is creative response more valuable than knowledge-based criticism in capturing and securing the perpetual reputation of this work, in helping us understand how the ‘Immortal Hour’ was felt and lived, even perhaps etched on the souls of many mid twentieth-century listeners?

Clair Rowden, Cardiff University

“‘Caricature” in 1890s Paris’

In the *fin-de-siècle* French press, released from the shackles of censorship by laws passed in 1881, augmented by the increasingly easy and cheap reproduction of images, caricatural representations of the arts, artists and musicians abound. In particular, a fashion for opera in cartoon form was exploited in a number of journals, most frequently appearing in *Le Journal amusant*, *Le Charivari* and *Le Triboulet*.

While Roberta Montemorra Marvin has demonstrated how the parodic spectacle of operatic burlesque crossed class boundaries, transforming a high art genre and repertoire into one for the lower classes, iconographic parodic treatment works very differently. While the mode of consumption is radically transformed – from the theatre to the home, from the public to the private sphere, from the serious to the comic genre, from the exclusive to the mass produced representation – operatic parody in iconographic form comprises a set of codes which must be shared in order to be comprehended. Thus authors – men of letters and the establishment – continuously solicit the ‘cultural capital’ of their readers, their peers, in order to communicate irony and satire. Moreover, as parodic adaptation of operas, as well as the operatic genre, these cartoons constitute an authorised, temporary subversion of recognizable forms which inscribe the mocked conventions onto

themselves, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence. Thus, in contrast to the pedagogic irony and satire of mid-century moral caricature of the likes of Daumier and Grandville, as well as the political caricature – particularly of Wagner – issuing from the world of the ‘contre-pouvoir’ in an age of relative freedom of expression of the press, operatic parody of the *fin de siècle* provokes no critical reflection on cultural practices, it suggests no renovation or renewal, but reinforces the dominant aesthetic and moral mores.

My paper presents a selection of the iconographic parodies of high profile opera premières which appeared in the Parisian press during the 1890s as an intriguing test case, in order to explore the function of parody in this context. While capable of satirical humour with regard to that which was flawed in society and operatic tradition, operatic parody in the press nevertheless presented a consensual view of the artistic establishment which brought the singers, dancers, musicians, authors, composers and directors, as well as their foibles, trials and tribulations, directly to the heart of the *fin-de-siècle* home.

Hugo Shirley, King’s College London

‘Criticism under Fire: the Comment’s Challenge to Authority’

A standard view in reception studies – reflecting the history, tangibility and relative permanence of printed media – suggests that professional newspaper critics provide reliable (or, at least, less unreliable) accounts of operatic performance. These accounts are the ‘press cuttings’, which, along with other archival sources, have traditionally provided the basic material for writing reception history. This hierarchy, however, is crumbling, and this paper acknowledges the growing importance of internet-based opera writing. Its main focus is on a virtual front line that has developed between newly enfranchised audiences and the on-line newspaper: the ‘comments’ section, in which readers are able to take issue with professional reviews in an unmediated (if not always unmoderated) and unedited way.

I examine some striking ways this debate is carried out: the tendency for a critic’s judgements to be (mis)construed as an affront to anyone who might disagree; how the commenter’s subjective experience is often replaced with claims to objective judgement; the reader’s disappointment at the critic’s inability to provide his or her own watertight, quasi-objective summary of the performance in question. Furthermore, at a time when the work of ‘citizen journalists’ can be presented as legal evidence, this paper wonders whether comments should similarly be admissible in musicological court and if, indeed, there are systems in place for them to be preserved. Finally, I ponder the question of where, between critic and comment, future scholars might be able to locate the authority traditionally seen as necessary for the writing of reception history.

John Snelson, Royal Opera House

'From Wagner's *Ring* to *Anna Nicole*: Critics Versus Audiences at the Royal Opera'

Performances at the Royal Opera House have traditionally been presented in the historical records and performance narratives most consistently through the voices of professional critics. But what happens to the view of operas – both productions and performances – when anecdote, personal observation and audience surveys are taken into account? What did everyone think of a new work such as *Anna Nicole*, does it matter, and can that information be of any practical use in how an international opera house plans what it does? The answer is at best confusing, but the questions raised increasingly loom large and challenge what may remain of the authority of the professional critic as much as they interrogate the purpose of opera performance.

Chloe Valenti, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge

'Adulation and Appropriation: Verdi's Political Image in 1860s England'

The popular portrayal of Verdi as a political composer has been much debated in Verdi scholarship, yet little work has been focused on the role of critics from outside Italy in the creation and dissemination of Verdi's image as the 'bard of the risorgimento'. This paper seeks to address this by exploring Verdi's image in late 1850s and 1860s England through an unusual lens: the visit of Giuseppe Garibaldi to England in 1864.

A climactic point in England's longstanding fascination and involvement with Italian politics and culture, Garibaldi's visit was a moment when politics and theatre mixed on a level not previously seen in England. Just twenty years earlier, English critics had been deeply sceptical of any association between politics and opera, yet the patriotic displays during Garibaldi's visits to the London opera houses made them increasingly receptive to the idea of a blended theatrical and political stage.

While news of Verdi's election to the Italian senate a few years before had formed the foundations of his new, 'political' image, Garibaldi's visit encouraged critics further in their depiction of Verdi as a risorgimento composer. They referred to the 'Viva V.E.R.D.I.' acrostic repeatedly during the 1860s, augmenting its significance far beyond its original, short-lived appearance in late 1850s Italy. Furthermore, they responded to Verdi's position as the foremost Italian composer of his day by looking back on his early works from the 1840s and re-envisioning his early career from their new political perspective, thus further encouraging the formation and dissemination of Verdi's now-familiar political image.

Simon Evans-White, Oxford Brookes University

‘The Online Customer Review as Valid Opera Criticism?’

Internet sales have taken a growing share of the CD and DVD retail markets over the past 5 years (ONS) and customers are increasingly using websites such as www.amazon.co.uk or www.play.com to purchase CD and DVD recordings of opera performances. Such websites offer the facility to submit customer reviews and ratings of products which are available for potential purchasers to review before committing to a purchase. This paper examines these customer submitted reviews as a growing body of criticism, and the consequent establishment of a ‘new authority’ in opera criticism driven by the consumer as opposed to that of established or salaried music critics who write for professional publications. Questions are raised as to the validity of criticism, which often cannot be attributed and is not subject to established editorial processes, and to the value of the reflections of the non-professional opera consumer when compared to those of the professional music critic. Empirical research and comparison of customer reviews with those of professional reviewers reveals that the potential disparities in quality and efficacy between amateur and professional reviews are less exaggerated than might be supposed. Critically the paper examines whether the differences in genesis and dissemination, and the anonymity afforded by the retail websites, has any impact upon the cultural significance of the user review, and seeks to establish the importance of such reviews to the study of contemporary opera reception.

Flora Willson, King’s College London

‘Listening to the Dead: Opera Criticism at the Funerals of Meyerbeer and Rossini’

During the 1860s, operatic Paris was rocked by the deaths of two of its greatest figures: Meyerbeer on 2 May 1864; Rossini on 13 November 1868. Although almost exact contemporaries, Meyerbeer left his last work, *L’Africaine*, in rehearsal, while Rossini had (famously) not written an opera for almost forty years. Both, though, produced extravagant shows of mourning at a time when the rituals and discourses surrounding death were changing fundamentally. With death becoming ever more private, Parisians nonetheless pored over newspaper reports of detailed instructions left by Meyerbeer to avoid accidental live burial. Rossini’s death could hardly have been made more spectacular, being announced at the Opéra during a performance of *Les Huguenots*, a work that foregrounded precisely the meeting of public and private staged at his funeral one week later.

Reception studies in opera have generally taken as their focus particular works, with reactions to first performances ever at the fore. But contemporary responses to actual composers – their fragile corporeality in stark contrast to the rhetoric of immortality increasingly accorded their works – have much to contribute. This is especially the case with Rossini and Meyerbeer, who by their deaths virtually embodied the operatic genres in which they had composed: Rossini representing an ever more distant Italian tradition; Meyerbeer in the vanguard of *grand opéra* (according to some, even ‘the music of the future’). These Deaths of the Author elicited extraordinarily varied responses, inflecting many aspects of discourse on their newly completed *œuvres*, not least their monumentalisation in an increasingly stable operatic canon.