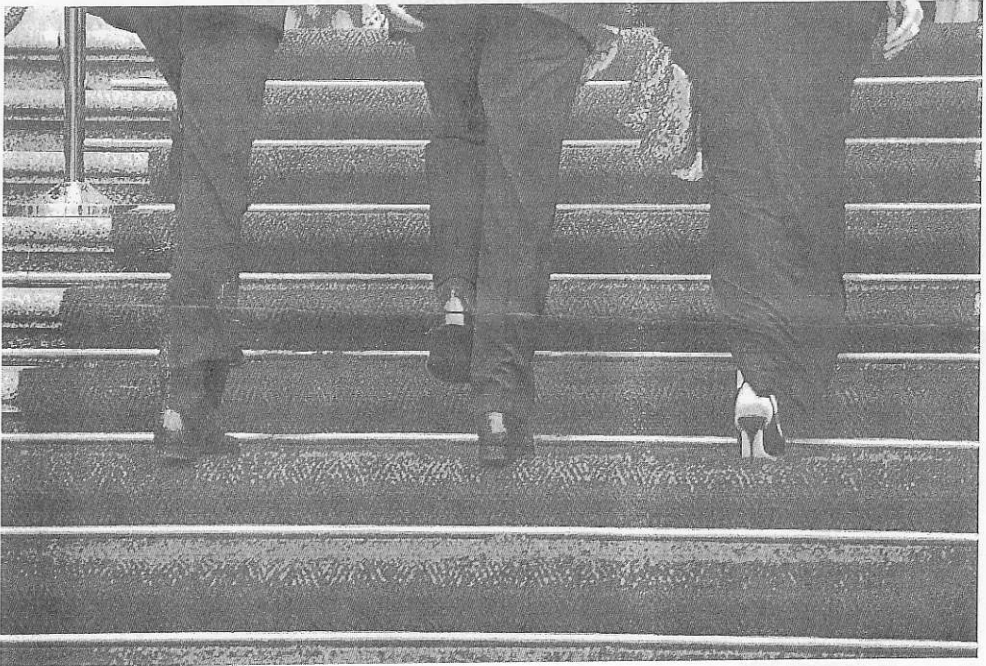


# BEYOND BLACK TIE AND BUBBLY: RESCUING OPERA FROM STEREOTYPES

OBERTO 2014 Conference



Tuesday 9th September 2014

Willow Building, W.01

Headington Campus

Oxford Brookes University

# SCHEDULE

## **9-9.30 Registration**

## **9.30-9.45 Welcome and Introduction (Alexandra Wilson)**

## **9.45-10.45 Opera & Class (Chair: Rachel Cowgill, University of Huddersfield)**

David Kennerley (University of Oxford): 'Opera, The Working Classes and Radical Chartist Culture in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Britain'

Paul Rodmell (University of Birmingham): 'Never 'Tails and Tiaras': The Myth of Opera Elitism in the United Kingdom'

## **10.45-11.15 Coffee**

## **11.15-12.45: Marketing and Writing about Opera (Chair: Mark Berry, RHUL)**

Aoife Ni Drisceoil (NUI Maynooth): '@Opera: Social Media and Mediatization at the Royal Opera'

Michela Ronzani (Brown University): 'Commercial Strategies for an Elitist Product: Advertising Opera in fin-de-siècle Italy'

John Snelson (Royal Opera House, Covent Garden): 'Miscommunicating Opera: Reading the Lines or Reading Between Them?'

## **12.45-1.45 Lunch**

## **1.45-2.45 Crossover and Popular Culture (Chair: Katherine Williams, Plymouth University)**

Hayley Fenn (Harvard University): 'Britain's Got Opera?'

Rupert Christiansen (The Telegraph): 'Crossover: Has it Corrupted, Enlarged or Elevated Public Taste?'

## **2.45-3.45 International Perspectives (Chair: Marianne Betz, Hochschule für Musik und Theater Leipzig)**

Tash Siddiqui (The Wagner Journal): 'Experiment Krolloper: A Failed Synthesis of Operatic Modernism and the Masses'

Laurel E. Zeiss (Baylor University): 'The Death Penalty and the Atomic Bomb: How to Be Accessible?'

## **3.45-4.15 Tea**

## **4.15-5.15 Education, Outreach and Rethinking Audiences (Chair: Nicholas Till, University of Sussex)**

Andy Doe (King's College, Cambridge): 'The Upside of Ignorance: No Prior Knowledge required'

Michael Volpe (Opera Holland Park): 'Reassessing Audiences and the 'Not for Us' Debate'

## **5.15-6 General Discussion (Chair: Barbara Eichner)**

# ABSTRACTS

Rupert Christiansen (*The Telegraph*)

## **Crossover: Has it Corrupted, Enlarged or Elevated Public Taste?**

Until the mid-twentieth century, it was accepted and uncontroversial practice for classical and popular singers to perform each other's musical material in concert. Since the 1980s, however, this 'crossover' practice has become a cultural battleground as the ethics of dumbing down are furiously contested, 'karaoke' amplification technologies are introduced and marketing tactics become ever more aggressive.

Has opera been opened up to new audiences by this phenomenon, or has its integrity been debased by the likes of Russell Watson and Katherine Jenkins?

Andy Doe (King's College Cambridge)

## **The Upside of Ignorance: No Prior Knowledge Required**

We frequently behave as if a love of opera grows out of a knowledge of opera. Countless accessibility initiatives throughout the classical music world are founded on the premise that to get people to enjoy an art form, we must first teach them about it. What if this simply isn't true?

Experiments have shown that being told about a piece of music can diminish a listener's enjoyment of it, and few would expect to read the plot of a non-operatic work before watching it for the first time.

In the sphere of recorded music, one of the most obvious distinctions between 'core' and 'crossover' is the level of knowledge assumed on the part of the listener. Commentators blame an absence of music education for an imaginary (and seemingly never-ending) decline in the popularity of opera and classical music, while fondly remembering the time when opera topped the charts - a time when the maximum playing time for a recording was eight minutes and sleeve notes had yet to be invented.

In the twenty-first century, when information about repertoire, performances and recordings is only ever a Google search away, it may be time to rethink the way we communicate with our audience.

If, as the evidence would suggest, it is positive experiences of opera that lead people to learn about opera, then a totally different approach is called for, focussing on customer experience above education.

Aoife Ni Drisceoil (NUI Maynooth)

### **@Opera: Social Media and Mediatization at the Royal Opera**

In this paper I investigate the online presence of the Royal Opera House, focusing on the company's utilization of social media to communicate with audiences. Drawing on Christian Fuchs' critical account of social media, I consider the cultural and social impact of this virtual presence (particularly in and around mediatized performances), the motivations underpinning this form of communication and its implications for access and creativity in cultural institutions. Critical to the ROH's establishment and development of an online presence (including social media platforms YouTube, Twitter and Facebook) has been the policy issued by the Arts Council of England. How, I wish to ask, has this strategy shaped the ROH's communication and interaction with patrons and audience members? And what might these developments reveal about the relationship between live performance, online presence and the virtual identities formed by social media?

Hayley Fenn (Harvard University)

### **Britain's Got Opera?**

Britain's Got Talent is part of the Got Talent franchise, the brainchild of the entertainment industry mogul Simon Cowell, which now reaches 58 countries worldwide. Since the first UK series aired in 2007, of the possible 22 podium positions on the show, ten have been won by singers. Seven of these singers might be considered 'operatic'.

There are some obvious reasons for their success, including those that focus on the clash between opera and popular culture. At the heart of this clash is the notion of artifice, a theme throughout opera's own history. Yet the allusions to artifice – for example, the perception of manufactured technical skill through training, associations with fantasy, and elitism – also seem to be at odds with the consistently positive reaction of the crowd and judges to operatic voices. In other words, the perceived clash results in an embrace.

In this paper, I will argue that the success of the operatic singers on Britain's Got Talent is the continuation of an historical fascination with the operatic voice. The reality show format and the technological interventions of television play crucial roles in ensuring their success and ultimately contribute towards an alignment of this highly commercialized, artificial arena with the opera house itself. With something of a leap of faith, I wish to consider the possibility that Britain's Got Talent is the opera house of the twenty-first century.

David Kennerley (University of Oxford)

## **Opera, the Working Classes and Radical Chartist Culture in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain**

Scholars generally view opera in mid-nineteenth century Britain as firmly embedded within elite, aristocratic culture. From one angle, this is entirely correct. Yet opera, albeit in rather different forms, turns up in surprising places in mid-nineteenth century Britain, including, for instance, the speaker's platform at a mass rally of working-class Chartists in Bradford in 1841. At this demonstration for radical, democratic constitutional reforms, a scene from an English-language opera, *Hofier, the Tell of the Tyrol*, was performed. Using music from Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (most likely played by one of the many Chartist bands), this performance of *Hofier*, a far cry from its original staging at Drury Lane theatre in 1830, turned the work into an inspirational rallying cry for the people to overthrow monarchical oppression and establish popular sovereignty.

This paper locates this remarkable performance within a wider Chartist culture in which opera played an important role. Appropriating 'elite' opera was one method by which Chartists sought to prove to their political opponents the cultural and intellectual sophistication of the working class and hence their entitlement to the vote. Moreover, re-interpreting these operas as revolutionary calls-to-arms was a highly political act and one which foregrounded the *needs, aspirations and desires of the working man, rather than the elite*. While this was a very different type of operatic culture to that performed on London's opera stages, this paper nevertheless demonstrates that mid-nineteenth century opera had both a much wider public, and a far greater range of uses and meanings than has hitherto been appreciated.

Paul Rodmell (University of Birmingham)

## **Never 'Tails and Tiaras' – The Myth of Opera Elitism in the United Kingdom**

The popular image of opera in the United Kingdom in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century seems to be bedevilled by perceptions of social and cultural elitism and exclusivity, neatly encapsulated by visions of audience members in full evening dress, a glass of champagne readily to hand. The efforts of the country's opera companies over many years to rid themselves of this cliché, by offering tickets at competitive prices, playing in varied and unconventional venues and, more recently, through live cinema broadcasts, seems to have had only a limited success in altering this image. But was it always so? Performances of opera in Great Britain have a history stretching back some three hundred years and, while there has always been – as with many forms of entertainment – a proportion which was dominated by a fashionable elite as interested in seeing and been seen as it was in the art form itself, there is another story, of a popular musical genre accessible and affordable to most people.

This paper briefly considers reasons for this country's continuing narrative of opera as an elite entertainment and also exposes the 'alternative history' of performances for mass audiences provided by touring companies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – a time when opera probably came closest to being a popular form of entertainment easily accessible to the man (and woman) 'on the street' or 'on the Clapham omnibus' – to show that it was never always tails and tiaras.

Michela Ronzani (Brown University)

### **Commercial Strategies for an Elitist Product: Advertising Opera in fin-de-siècle Italy**

My paper explores the first encounter between the world of opera and that of advertisement in turn-of-the-century Italy through the commercial communication of the music publisher Ricordi & Co. Socioeconomic changes that characterized fin-de-siècle Italy (industrialization, literacy levels, distribution of wealth, socialism, etc.) brought about a widening of potential opera audiences and a diversification, as well as hierarchical distinction, of cultural and entertainment products offered in urban settings. For the first time, the Italian opera industry had both the opportunity to attract new audiences, and access to a set of advertisement tools to make it possible. For the opera industry the new marketing possibility also meant to redefine and negotiate the cultural status of opera, its destination and its aesthetic value.

In my paper I analyze a selection of Ricordi's innovative advertisement tools such as posters, postcards and gadgets, and the company's retail and printing politics. Ricordi's ads are attempts to reach middle-class audiences and instances of popularization and democratization of opera. However, the ads communicate an elitist idea of opera and indicate a struggle in positioning the cultural product opera within the new implicit categories of 'high' and 'low'. In broader terms, my paper addresses how the process of commercialization and hierarchical differentiation of culture that characterized Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, affected the world of opera causing on the one hand an opening to new markets, on the other hand a redefinition of opera's traditional elitist role. My paper therefore aims to contribute to the conference as an attempt to explain the historical origins of operatic 'elitism.'

Tash Siddiqui (*The Wagner Journal*)

### **Experiment Krolloper: A Failed Synthesis of Operatic Modernism and the Masses**

I would like to cast a fascinating historical sidelight on the idea of opera as a socially exclusive and intellectually forbidding genre, in the shape of the Berlin Krolloper, the republican and avant-garde opera house which flourished controversially in Weimar Germany between 1927 and 1931 under Otto Klemperer.

Officially called the Staatsoper am Platz der Republik, this opera house served a working-class audience, the membership of the Berlin Volksbühne. The Volksbühne was founded to provide theatre performances for Berlin's urban proletariat at prices it could afford. In the immediate post-war period, after the birth of the Weimar Republic, its membership grew considerably, and so did its ambitions, which included an opera house of its own.

This agenda was shared by the social democrats at the Prussian Ministry of Culture, whose mission was *soziale Kunstpflege* – the cultivation of social art. Opera was to be reinvented as an agent of social rebirth. To this end, the new Prussian government and the Volksbühne collaborated to rebuild the Krolloper.

Yet the opera company in residence at the Kroll, led by Otto Klemperer, also became a flagship for the brave new world of the operatic avant garde in Berlin, heavily subsidised by the Prussian state. The Kroll in the late 1920s was thus an unprecedented attempt to engage

an audience other than the bourgeoisie with modernist repertory and with innovative productions of the older repertory.

'Experiment Krolloper' failed, and in my paper I will outline the reasons for this failure. In essence, the problem was that Berlin's working-class opera-lovers were uninterested in the avant garde. They wanted nothing more than the chance to dress up and and enjoy *Tosca* or *Madame Butterfly* in opulent surroundings, or to be uplifted by the same great classics that gratified their wealthier counterparts.

John Snelson (Royal Opera House, Covent Garden)

### **Miscommunicating Opera: Reading the Lines or Reading Between Them?**

Opera is marketed to different audience segments in different ways. It is discussed in art and culture forums, and described across all forms of media. The way opera is talked about by those in the business directs how opera is perceived by the wider world. This presentation will consider the language used by such insiders and how it helps or hinders a wider understanding of opera. Reflection on examples from across a range of participants and roles in opera will question how helpful or clear what is presented is to those with whom we wish to engage. Such words as 'relevant' and 'entertainment' may be uttered. If you like this, then you will love other examples from promotional material. Most importantly the concept of opera's relevance to contemporary life will be stunningly highlighted to make this unmissable. Book now!

There is no single formula for communication as there is no single constituency to whom everything is addressed. However, the fault lines between what is said to promote it and the perspective of those it is aimed at reveals a great deal about how honest the world of opera is with itself, how much it understands its audience, how confident it is of its *raison d'être* and how productive it can be in changing the perception of opera – if it needs changing at all.

Michael Volpe (Opera Holland Park)

### **'Reassessing Audiences' and 'Not for Us' Debate**

I have long been incubating a television programme on this very subject. I come from a working class, inner city background but went to an amazing school that opened our eyes to the world of culture in a matter-of-fact way. It just became what we did. Many of my friends who grew up on the same estate never encountered the arts beyond the usual pop music and cinema (and even then in a fairly narrow frame of reference). I encouraged one fifty-year-old man to attend an opera (he had been cleaning our windows) and it pretty much changed his life; he now attends theatre, reads more, explores culture of many kinds. He said to me "I got to the age I am and I NEVER knew this stuff was there and if I did, it was unimaginable that I would consider it 'for me'." He also reports that he would be extremely reticent to be too open in his 'local' about his new hobbies.....

I would like to talk about the issue from primarily an operatic, but generally wider cultural viewpoint; that what prevents the development of audiences is not the art forms themselves



but people's perceptions of them and these perceptions are rarely challenged by the target groups themselves. We can make the arts accessible but what we need is education from very early ages and a real engagement with a great swathe of 'ordinary' people. I would posit the theory that there is an enormous natural capacity for opera among the UK population, that identifiable groups like football fans are immensely capable of enjoying the operatic art form because they are melodramatists and emotional by nature, they make their own videos on youtube of special football moments and then add music for effect; they understand the concepts of drama and how music heightens it.

For opera and the arts in general to flourish as we would like we do need to continue outreach and make seats accessible from a monetary point of view, we should avoid dumbing it down, running scared of our shadow etc. But most of all we need to appeal to a huge portion of our society who are simply ensnared by the old stereotypes or are simply afraid of the art form, even though they may be curious. To change this we need people who come from these communities to evangelise, we need to present the art form in wholly unexpected places and media, we need to make a massive effort to bring opera as a musical form into mainstream life, addressing directly not only people's misconceptions of the art form but their misconceptions of themselves.

Laurel E. Zeiss (Baylor University)

### **The Death Penalty and the Atomic Bomb: How to Be Accessible?**

Are operas by living composers based on actual events good vehicles for reaching beyond the opera house? *Dead Man Walking*, an opera about a prisoner on death row and the nun who ministers to him and his victims' families, suggests that they are. Since its premiere in 2000, *Dead Man Walking* has been produced by thirty-seven companies in the United States and elsewhere, making it one of the most frequently performed operas in English in the twenty-first century. Performances in the U.S. usually are preceded by a number of community events, including debates about the death penalty and conditions in prisons, talks by the nun whose memoir serves as its basis and appearances by the composer. Evidence suggests that this opera attracts younger, first-time operagoers. In other words, companies use it not only as a way to reach out but also to bring people in.

A number of other recent works have similar, beyond the opera house, tie-ins. *Doctor Atomic*, an Opera about the development of the atomic bomb, prompted widespread coverage in the mainstream press and was accompanied discussions by scientists. Kevin Puts' *Silent Night* has been used to reach out to veterans' groups.

This paper will explore how and why these works have been successful, including what publicity and musical strategies they share.