

OBERTO
OXFORD BROOKES: EXPLORING RESEARCH TRENDS IN
OPERA

Fifth annual OBERTO Conference

Tuesday 8 September 2015

'Opera and Celebrity'

#ObertoCeleb



Joyce DiDonato. Stella di Napoli. Photo: Pari Dukovic

OBERTO holds an annual conference every September. For details and reports of previous conferences, please see <http://obertobrookes.com/events-past/>.

09:15 Registration

09:45 Welcome (Willow Building Room 1)

10:00 SESSION 1: Historical overviews

David Kennerley (University of Oxford) – 'The emergence of a musical celebrity culture: The professional female singer and her public image, c.1760-1830'

Anna Maria Barry (Oxford Brookes University) – 'Male Opera Singers and Nineteenth-Century Celebrity Culture'

Joanne Cormac (University of Nottingham) Chair

11:00 Coffee (Willow Building Room 4)

11.30 SESSION 2 Case studies (parallel sessions)

SESSION 2a (Willow Building Room 1)

Ingeborg Zechner (University of Salzburg) – 'Jenny Lind and the construction of celebrity'

Clair Rowden (Cardiff University) – 'The Second Swedish Nightingale: Christine Nilsson, a very Nordic talent'

Annabelle Lee (Royal Holloway, University of London) – 'Branding Opera Singers on Social Media: The Case of Joyce DiDonato'

Cormac Newark (Guildhall School of Music and Drama) - Chair

SESSION 2b (Willow Building Room 2)

Margaret Butler (University of Florida) – 'The Uses of a Celebrity: Caterina Gabrielli in Parma'

Christina Paine (Royal Holloway, University of London) – 'Angelica Catalani in 1809: Crises of Celebrity'

Andrew Holden (Oxford Brookes University) - Chair

13:00 LUNCH

14:00 SESSION 3 Round table: The contemporary 'star system'

Michael Volpe (Opera Holland Park)
Rupert Christensen (Daily Telegraph)
Hugo Shirley (Gramophone Magazine)

Barbara Eichner (Oxford Brookes University) - Chair

14:45 SESSION 4: Mechanics of celebrity

Colleen Renihan (Mount Allison University) – "A voice and messenger": Child stars and the democratization of opera'

Derek Scott (University of Leeds) and Anastasia Belina-Johnson (Royal College of Music) – 'Celebrities of the Operetta'

Harry Hickmore (University of Cambridge) – 'From Billboard to (Behind the) Screen: "Celebrity", Mediatized Culture, and the Operatic Preview in the Twenty-First Century'

Rachel Cowgill (Huddersfield University) - Chair

16:15 TEA (Willow Building Room 4)

16:45 Transfer to Headington Hill Hall

17:00 SESSION 5: Lecture recital

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University) – 'Opera, cultural categorisation and the problematic 'celebrity singer' in 1920s Britain'

Incorporating a recreation of part of a 1920s concert programme sung by soprano Samantha Hay, with pianist Luke Green

18:00 Conference Close

Session 1 – Historical Overviews

David Kennerley (University of Oxford)

The emergence of a musical celebrity culture? The professional female singer and her public image, c.1760-1840

In recent years, attention has been drawn by Tom Mole and others to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the era that saw the birth of celebrity culture in Britain. This paper takes an in-depth look at this process by examining the expansion and diversification of the methods of image projection available to professional female singers. It will compare the public images of singers from the 1760s and '70s with those from a half century or so later (c.1820-40). It argues that, partly as a result of developments in the press and print culture, but equally because of changing patterns of musical consumption, the range of techniques by which singers could project a public impression of their private personality expanded and diversified significantly.

Candid biographies, scandalous gossip columns, racy visual images, hit songs, and even faked bomb plots all emerge by the early nineteenth century as an important part of a professional female singer's widening repertoire of tools for publicity generation. Singers spent increasing amounts of time and energy creating and maintaining their public images, because the public's impression of a singer's personality was becoming just as important as the quality of their musical performances in determining their popular appeal and commercial success. Since the persona of the singer was playing an ever greater part in shaping audiences' reactions to performance and to musical works, this paper argues for the need to incorporate celebrity more fully in historical analyses of the development of the musical world and into the study of the reception of operatic and musical works.

Anna Maria Barry (Oxford Brookes University)

Male Opera Singers and Nineteenth-Century Celebrity Culture

Opera singers were amongst the major celebrities of the nineteenth century. While scholarship has so far tended to focus on female singers, male singers also interacted heavily with the burgeoning mechanics of celebrity culture in this period.

This paper will focus specifically on three celebrity singers of the nineteenth century who were British: John Braham (1777 – 1856), Sims Reeves (1821 – 1900) and Charles Santley (1834 – 1922). It will examine how these three singers became household names in nineteenth-century Britain, explaining that press, portraiture and autobiography all played a role in making these men famous.

The paper will argue that these remarkably media-savvy men were skilled manipulators of the press who played a very active role in cultivating their fame. By exploring the celebrity of singers whose careers spanned the long nineteenth century, this paper will also sketch out the evolution of celebrity culture across this period, whilst considering what is unique about *operatic* celebrity.

Session 2a – Case Studies

Ingeborg Zechner (University of Salzburg)

Jenny Lind and the construction of celebrity

Jenny Lind, “the Swedish Nightingale”, (1820-1867) was one of the most prominent opera singers in the Nineteenth Century and widely known for the uniqueness and the purity of her voice. After a highly successful series of performances in 1846 e.g. in Hamburg, Stockholm, Frankfurt and Vienna, her breakthrough as a singer-celebrity was closely linked to her English debut in 1847 at Her Majesty’s Theatre, at this point in time under the management of Benjamin Lumley. Unfortunately Lind’s London debut and the fast disseminating “Lind mania” was clouded by intense lawsuits between Jenny Lind and Alfred Bunn, manager of Theatre Royal Drury Lane, who wanted to engage the singer for his business, but was outpaced by Benjamin Lumley, who finally succeeded in the engagement of the singer. Jenny Lind’s celebrity remained not without influence for the processes verdict. After two successful opera seasons at London’s Her Majesty’s Theatre, Lind decided to terminate her operatic career in 1849 and was thereafter engaged by the sensation seeking manager Phineas Barnum for a highly profitable concert tour in America. Regarding the composition of the music markets mentioned, the German, the English and the American, slightly different images of Lind’s celebrity were built. This paper aims to show how media and managerial marketing strategies strongly contributed to the construction of celebrity in the world of opera and to illustrate the crucial role of London’s opera market in Jenny Lind’s career as well as in the development of international opera business. Furthermore Jenny Lind’s ambivalent functions for society as role and fashion model shall also be considered.

Clair Rowden (Cardiff University)

The Second Swedish Nightingale: Christine Nilsson, a very Nordic talent

Christine Nilsson shot to fame in October 1864 at the age of 21 in her Parisian début at the Théâtre Lyrique as Violetta. As she established her reputation over the next two seasons, news travelled fast and she was snapped up Mapleson for the summer season at Her Majesty’s Theatre London in 1867. After three more seasons consolidating her career in Europe, making roles such as Thomas’s Ophélie and Gounod’s Marguerite her own, Nilsson embarked from Liverpool upon her first American concert tour in September 1870 under the management of Maurice Strakosch, famous impresario and manager/brother-in-law of Adelina Patti.

Thus Nilsson's career took on a decidedly international colour during the great expansion of the star system in the last 30 years of the nineteenth century, made possible by growing press networks and easier foreign travel. Unlike certain house principals of an earlier cast, she toured extensively, carving out a stellar but rather niche career during which she sang a relatively small number of roles. Indeed, it was Ophélie and Marguerite (with which she inaugurated the Metropolitan Opera in 1883), heroines of Germanic and Nordic tales which stuck to her and corresponded to her blond, blue-eyed beauty. By trotting out her regular party pieces, the Swedish folksongs of her rural peasant youth, Nilsson assured for herself a rather pure and even Protestant image, reinforced by a poetic press who wallowed in Nordic geographical and mythological images to describe her talent. This paper examines the career and life choices made by Nilsson in pursuit of wealth, celebrity and artistic integrity.

Annabelle Lee (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Branding Opera Singers on Social Media: The Case of Joyce DiDonato

Given that many social media have been established for over a decade, the process of building a strong personal brand online cannot be ignored in the world of opera marketing. Increasingly, opera singers are using social media not just for 'corporate' advertising of their latest projects, performances and media appearances. Rather, marketing messages often reflect what the branding discourse terms core 'brand values': the singer's own authentic voice, personal attributes and characteristics. This personal contact, which lies at the heart of social media marketing, enables a parasocial or perceived interpersonal social interaction over time. As a result, fans not only follow their favourite singers' activities but also try to relate to their personalities and life stories. Such interactions feed the artist's personal brand and the fan's brand loyalty, both of which can contribute to more engagements and enhance the artist's public profile.

Drawing on the above observations, this presentation focuses on social media branding of one opera singer, Joyce DiDonato, whom *Opera News* describe as 'opera's most connected singer.' It emphasises strategies concerning fans' brand loyalty online, then offline and back online, notably, the influence of her nurturing brand values arising from her blog and the effect of her self-dubbed 'Yankee Diva' pseudonym on the fan-led #letJoycesing campaign. Managing all her social content herself, DiDonato's approach towards online branding necessitates as artist management and PR run social media instead of the singer and as social media becomes a company.

Session 2b – Case Studies

Margaret Butler (University of Florida)

The Uses of a Celebrity: Caterina Gabrielli in Parma

Eighteenth-century opera scholars have long appreciated star singers' influence over factors such as their arias' musical content, their high salaries, and even the repertory they were to perform: singers acting as free agents on an open market acquired a high degree of autonomy. But what might a celebrity do for an operatic institution, beyond merely raising its visibility, and how might an institution's promotion of a particular celebrity advance a broader agenda? Furthermore, how might responses to such questions affect our view of the star singer's power?

Soprano Caterina Gabrielli (1730–96) eclipsed most other *prime donne* in the views of mid-century critics. One lauded her as “perhaps the greatest musician Italy has ever had”; Metastasio proclaimed her the “new star in the musical heavens.” Her engagement in Parma (1759–61) brought international visitors to the city, not only enhancing its prestige but raising its revenue. My study of Parma's theatrical account books shows that the court spent more on its costly French troupe engaged in the years preceding Gabrielli's arrival than for all the operas in which she sang combined, and that her engagement seems calculated to help pay off the staggering debt. Moreover, her continued association with Vienna during her Parma engagement reinforced the growing alliance between the Bourbon and Hapsburg dynasties, one consolidated soon after her appointment as “prima virtuosa da camera” in Parma. In this paper I explore intersections among celebrity, institutional character, and political hegemony within an increasingly cosmopolitan Europe.

Christina Paine (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Angelica Catalani in 1809: Crises of Celebrity

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Angelica Catalani's international celebrity in the operatic and concert circles of Europe was unprecedented: her voice regarded as a phenomenon; her performances as magical and supernatural. In Britain (1806-1813) her domination of the Italian opera in London was almost complete; but through her celebrity she was also an episymbol for other important cultural, social and political forces. Close examination of press representation and archival documents reveals her as a symbol of aristocratic French power in war-torn Britain; as a symbol, through demands for unprecedentedly high salaries (a measure of absolute worth for singers), of foreign greed; as a hard-working businesswoman, overcoming discrimination and a lack of legal identity; and as a contaminating threat to English music, morals, and society.

She was represented in distinct gendered paradigms: decorum and femininity; and domination and masculinity. In 1809 Catalani served as a figurehead in the Covent Garden Old Price Riots and in the Middlesex Hospital Affair, both of which scandals gained a huge amount of negative press attention, even, briefly in June 1809, overtaking the War with France. Here her female image and cultural value in the theatrical world intersected with a wider political assertion of British nationalism and national identity. Press criticism of her supposed wrongdoing served as a tool through which the national effort against France in was publicly voiced. Catalani's celebrity serves as a lens through which the liberations achieved by, and the pitfalls awaiting, a talented, successful, ambitious and exceptionally famous woman – one married to a French army officer in Napoleonic London – can be understood.

Session 4 – Mechanics of Celebrity

Colleen Renihan (Mount Allison University)

“A voice and messenger”: Child stars and the democratization of opera

The commercial empire surrounding children marketed as opera stars propagates a narrative that begins on a televised talent show, where young fresh-faced children deliver operatic arias in an elevated style. They are then discovered by a producer, and are launched on successful recording and performing careers. Child stars like Charlotte Church, Jackie Evancho and Amelia Willighagen have certainly followed this path. The phenomenon nevertheless raises questions about the role of these children in the contemporary democratization of opera—also an integral part of the narrative. In this paper, I explore the phenomenon of the child opera star with an interest in untangling the curious relationship between the aesthetic symbols of opera and childhood. Curiously, while the operatic performances of child opera stars do reimagine the genre in radical ways, they also nevertheless uphold nineteenth-century notions of music's transcendent qualities in a formulation of the operatic art that locates its power in the music and not the text. By focusing on music's sanctity and on the element of childhood innocence, these performances reinforce the commonly held misconception of music's universality and opera's elitism, and thus, work against the project of opera's democratization. Through a consideration of the identities at stake in discussions in the media surrounding this phenomenon, I consider the myriad ways that the notion of transcendence is configured in the marketing and consumption of these child stars, and the potential repercussions for the repositioning—and possible democratization—of opera in the twenty-first century.

Anastasia Belina-Johnson (Royal College of Music), Derek Scott (University of Leeds)

Celebrities of the Operetta

This joint paper examines the careers of a handful of operetta performers from the early twentieth-century who were not only famous for their technical skill, but were celebrities in the wider sense with which we now understand that term. This is not surprising, given that operetta in the early twentieth century became one of the first examples of a global theatrical entertainment. The personal characters and day-to-day activities of operetta stars became of interest to the public, and the stars themselves might gain or suffer because of the attention of the press and film media.

Harry Hickmore (Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge)

From Billboard to (Behind the) Screen: “Celebrity”, Mediatized Culture, and the Operatic Preview in the Twenty-First Century

Bryn Terfel’s Dutchman stands tall before a formidable vessel upon a stormy Norwegian sea, his wintry stare penetrates the gaze of the onlooker who looks up at the Royal Opera House’s latest poster for *Der fliegende Holländer* (2015). Such a scene is strikingly familiar. Indeed, the practice of the operatic celebrity fronting the marketing campaign of an upcoming production goes almost as far back as the operatic poster itself. In recent decades advertising techniques have moved beyond the poster and now propel the operatic celebrity further into the limelight via the glossy programmes, YouTube trailers and social media campaigns that complement productions.

This paper will focus on one particularly extraordinary operatic “preview”, Susan Froemke’s documentary-film, *Wagner’s Dream*, which was commissioned as a preview to Robert Lepage’s much-hyped production of the *Ring* cycle at the Met in 2013. Featuring extensive “behind-the-scenes” footage of Deborah Voigt (Brünnhilde), Jay Hunter Morris (Siegfried), Lepage and also the Met’s General Manager, Peter Gelb, when it was released, *Wagner’s Dream* was curiously packaged as much a part of Wagner’s *Ring* as each of the four operas themselves. This paper argues that, in doing so, a hyper-*Ring* was conceived – one in which real life characters became conflated with those on stage. Drawing on Lydia Goehr’s “work concept”, this paper will investigate the extent to which these stars’ celebrity statuses, illuminated by *Wagner’s Dream*, affected the “work” their characters later inhabited (*Wagner’s Ring*). This will allow the paper to then consider the repercussions of celebrity, technology and media on the “works” mounted in opera houses today.

Session 5 – Lecture-Recital

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University)

'Opera, cultural categorisation and the problematic 'celebrity singer' in 1920s Britain'

As mass culture expanded in 1920s Britain, cultural elites strove to defend their authority by developing a stricter codification of 'high' and 'low' culture. Opera's place in the 'battle of the brows' was far from straightforward and this paper considers how the figure of the operatic celebrity further complicated opera's already vexed cultural status. The 1920s was a decade in which the operatic star system was much debated, as singers began to be overshadowed in the public imagination by the new stars of film and sport. The star system was regarded as an impediment to improving musical taste and many commentators from the period welcomed its supposedly imminent demise. But opera stars still appeared on the front pages of the tabloids and had the clout to dictate repertory.

In this paper, I shall examine a number of different categories of 'problematic' celebrity singer, the way in which singers exploited modern publicity methods, and the reasons why they seemed to jeopardise opera's acceptance as 'high art'. The serious opera critics welcomed the arrival of a new generation of world-class singers at Covent Garden but abhorred the 'celebrity singers' who toured the regions with pick and mix concerts, promoted themselves as commodities and allowed their personalities to impinge upon their performances. Although middlebrow commentators had fewer problems with the star singers' blurring of formal boundaries, those who sought to promote the cause of English opera resented the media attention paid to a few celebrated foreign singers.

In the second half of this lecture-recital, soprano Samantha Hay and pianist Luke Green will recreate part of the programme of a typical 1920s celebrity concert.