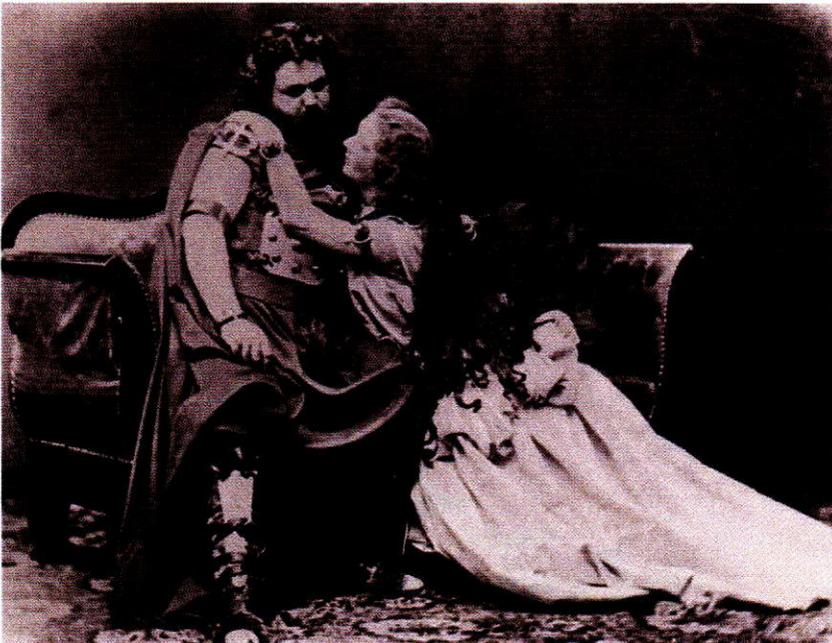


OXFORD
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OBERTO

Oxford Brookes: Exploring Research Trends in Opera

OPERATIC ACTING



Oxford Brookes University, Oxford

Thursday 8 September 2016

Programme of the day

9.15-9.45am Registration

9.45-10 Welcome (Dr Barbara Eichner and Dr Alexandra Wilson)

10-11 SESSION 1: Theories

Benjamin Davis (Cardiff University): 'Lifting Realism off the Floor'

Dr Kara McKechnie (University of Leeds): 'Performing the Self, Performing the Profession, Performing the Part: Dramaturgical Perspectives Backstage'

11-11.30 Coffee

11.30-1: SESSION 2: Case studies (parallel sessions)

SESSION 2a:

Dr Helen Metzelaar (University of Amsterdam): 'The Act of Opera Onstage: the Dutch Devries Dynasty in the Long Nineteenth Century'

Dr Enza De Francisci (University College, London): 'Duse and Calvé in *Cavalleria rusticana* on the London Stage'

Dr Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): 'Film Star Posturing: On "Realistic" Acting in the 1920s'

SESSION 2b:

Prof. Dr. Clemens Risi (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg): 'The Time of the Operatic Gesture'

Dr Mark Berry (Royal Holloway, University of London): 'Wagner, *Regietheater* and the Importance of the Singing Actress'

Dr Laura Moeckli (independent scholar): 'On Conjunction and Disjunction in 19th-Century Operatic Acting'

1-2 Lunch

2-2.30: SESSION 3 Acting workshop with Norman Cooley

2.30-3.30: SESSION 4: Bodies

Professor Heather Hadlock (Stanford University): 'Fat Butch Orfeo'

Dr Hugo Shirley (Reviews Editor, Gramophone): 'Revisiting Dumpygate'

3.30-4 Tea

4-5: SESSION 5: Choruses

Professor Ryan Minor (SUNY Stony Brook): 'Acting, on Behalf of the Chorus'

Katarina Aronsson (Head of Dramaturgy, Royal Swedish Opera): 'Chorus Acting in Opera – How Does it Work?'

5-6: Round table

Professor Karen Henson (Frost School of Music, University of Miami) in conversation with Sally Burgess (mezzo soprano) and Adriana Festeu (mezzo soprano)

Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

Katarina Aronsson (Royal Swedish Opera): 'Chorus Acting in Opera– How Does it Work?'

The role of the opera chorus has changed through history. Composers such as Gluck, Verdi, Wagner and Britten, have used the chorus differently in their works and often as a main character in their operas. But how has the choir appeared and acted on stage? And how have the directors used the choir dramaturgically?

Sweden has a long tradition of choral singing with professional choirs of international reputation, the best known being the Swedish Radio Choir, working with conductors such as Riccardo Muti and Daniel Harding. The high musical level of Swedish choral singers is also evident in the opera houses. Many of these singers are today not only of high musical standard, but also educated as opera soloists with knowledge of dramatic action on stage.

I would like to present three examples from the Swedish opera stage and three directors working differently with the chorus. All productions have been produced at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm.

First the Swedish choreographer Mats Ek, who directed a production of Gluck's opera *Orphée* in 2007 (Berlioz's version) involving the chorus in a new way, choreographed together with soloists and professional dancers. Then Johanna Garpe's production of Poulenc's opera *Dialogues de Carmelites* (2011), where individual instructions to every member of the chorus were in focus. Finally, Tobias Theorell's 2011 production of Verdi's *Stiffelio*, where the chorus represented a religious sect, playing the role of an oppressive mass.

The Swedish examples will hopefully open for a discussion about different approaches to directing the chorus today, pointing at a special Swedish tradition.

Mark Berry (Royal Holloway, University of London): 'Wagner, Regietheater, and the Importance of the 'Singing Actress': From Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient to Waltraud Meier'

Richard Wagner might be considered the first modern 'opera director'; indeed, some of his own productions of other composer's works might make all but his most 'radical' successors blush. He nevertheless insisted, again in a recognisably modern sense, on the integrity of the operatic work (distinguishing him starkly from, say, the Paris stagings about which he, Berlioz, and many others so bitterly complained). Wagner's 1847 Dresden production of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*, 'wherein I had to prove myself as a stage director as well; indeed, I was even obliged to lend the most urgent aid to the scene-painters and the machinists,' revealed Wagner not only as conductor but as imaginative editor and composer, a musicologist of sorts. From such direct experience sprang theoretical writings such as *Opera and Drama*, in which the importance of an actor's *Gebärde* (gesture) features strongly.

That had been demonstrated to him still earlier by the legendary soprano, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient: not only his inspiration as Beethoven's Leonore (and Bellini's Romeo), but also the creator of his own Adriano, Senta, and Venus. Wagner's 1872 essay, *On Actors and Singers*, was dedicated to her. I shall consider Schröder-Devrient and a modern present-day successor as 'singing actress', Waltraud Meier, in the light of Wagner's aesthetics, Wagner's own work as director, and the *Regietheater* which not only has featured so strongly in more recent Wagner stagings in particular, but which also finds, in complicated fashion, some of its origins in his own theory and practice.

Norman Cooley (Acting for Opera): Workshop

I believe the fundamental reason people go to the opera is to escape their workaday world and enter a musical world of mystery, drama, passion and enchantment far from their ordinary lives. Transfixed and captivated in this magic world, they experience the human condition at its most extraordinary and arresting. To draw the audience into this magic realm, excellent storytelling is paramount. Alas in Opera, these skills are far too often neglected, much to the detriment of the audience's enjoyment and to the medium itself. I believe acting in opera should be taught very much in the way acting is taught to classical actors with Storytelling at its centre integrated visually with the music.

What is a story and what are the components of a story? – Storytelling exercises

- Introduction- Conflict - Resolution

Who are the Characters? – Character exercises

- Character Research
- Character Relationships
- Character Development within the story

Essential Stage Skills

- Basics skills of stage deportment

When all is sung and done, who is the most important constituent of the medium of opera?

Benjamin Davis (Prifysgol Cardiff University): 'Lifting Realism off the Floor'

What is realistic about acting in opera? How can such a heightened form of performance be relevant to our experience of the real world in theory and in practice?

This paper will draw on current experiments in critical theory around a performative repositioning of realism (Den Tandt, *On Virtual Grounds*, 2016) and will focus on recent examples from my own collaborative work as a stage director on George Benjamin's opera *Written On Skin*, from its world première at the Aix-en-Provence Festival (2012) to a semi-staged concert version for a European tour with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra (2016). I argue that imaginative truth and agency, in navigating the contemporary performance of opera, benefit from a series of dialogically drawn maps that chart the thoughts, intentions and chronotopic (time-space) relationships of performing bodies. With reference to Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, I will suggest that acting in opera benefits not only from a mastery of technique and rehearsal but also an act of faith and communion. My findings are

framed within the concept of 'performing realism' and form part of a practice-based research project which looks into the potential personal and societal value of 'performing realism' in opera.

Enza De Francisci (University College London): 'The Two Santuzzas: Duse and Calvé in *Cavalleria rusticana* on the London Stage. A Transnational Perspective'

This paper seeks to examine critically the early relationship between opera and spoken theatre through a close analysis of the initial critical reception of both theatrical and operatic versions of *Cavalleria rusticana* at the time of their debuts. The original play by Giovanni Verga, based on his homonymous *novella* (1880), premièred at the Teatro Carignano in Turin in 1884. Following the phenomenal success, Mascagni later adapted the play into an opera which opened at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome in 1890 and has since become an internationally renowned work. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how the lead role of Santuzza was first performed in the original play and subsequent opera. Special attention is paid to the reception of this central role on the London stage. Indeed, what is particularly fascinating is how Italy's star actress Eleonora Duse and France's operatic soprano Emma Calvé were *both* interpreting Santuzza in late nineteenth-century London at the same time. How did London audiences react to the leading ladies' interpretations? Duse's theatrical performances relied on Verga's words while Calvé's operatic performances relied predominantly on Mascagni's music: were London audiences therefore able to follow the music in the opera more closely than the foreign words in Verga's script? Close analysis of the critical reception and early circulation of both play and opera will thus enable new light to be shed on the intriguing point of contact between the theatre and the opera — particularly where acting is concerned — through a transnational perspective.

Heather Hadlock (Stanford University): 'Fat Butch Orfeo'

Opera is stereotyped in the popular imagination, and frequently theorized in scholarly literature, as a counter-cultural space where mainstream body norms and beauty standards do not apply, or are mitigated by counter-norms from opera's iconography, history, and staging traditions. Since the 1990s, two frameworks have emerged to analyze queer female embodiments in opera: cross-dressing and androgyny, as manifest in trouser roles, and fat femme divas, celebrated as figures of feminist resistance and queer identification.

These frameworks are both debatable. While opera remains more accepting of fat performers than other performing arts, contemporary and avant-garde productions prefer slender bodies for modern, couture, and fetish costume. The importance of film and video in the circulation of opera and building of singers' careers also pressures singers to conform to the slender norms of mass media. As for such queer/butch sub-types as the tomboy, the 'lipstick lesbian' in menswear, and the glam androgyne, these have been assimilated into opera (as into the rest of popular culture) in ways that tacitly affirm the heteronormative paradigm in which slender, able-bodied young women are universal objects of desire. Pseudo- or crypto-lesbian spectacle in opera seems most acceptable when the butch body conforms to a slender-androgynous image. (Most recently we saw this in the 'fat-shaming' of Tara Erraught as Octavian at Glyndebourne in 2014.)

My paper will elaborate on the claims and contradictions of these frameworks, in order to argue that the rare fat butch in opera retains a genuinely subversive, anti-normative energy which fat femme and slender butch-androgynous images are losing. I will do this with a close reading of Stephanie Blythe's performance as Gluck's *Orfeo* in Mark Morris' 2009 production at the Metropolitan Opera, arguing that Blythe's fat body, gaze-deflecting costume, and restrained gestures made Orfeo and Euridice (played by Danielle de Niese) legible as a butch-femme couple in a way that made this opera unexpectedly relevant to the contemporary gay marriage debate.

Kara McKechnie (University of Leeds): 'Performing the Self, Performing the Profession, Performing the Part: Dramaturgical Perspectives Backstage'

In this paper, I will consider social and theatrical articulations of performance in an operatic backstage environment. A rehearsal will contain modes on a continuum which can be pitched from the presentation of self in a professional environment (normally considered to be 'not acting') all the way to operatic acting with what Atkinson (2006) calls 'dramaturgical commitment' by singers and Michael Kirby (1990) would call 'fully matrixed acting'. Only the latter mode has generally been accessible to audiences. This, however, has changed considerably through the rise of social media and digitisation and their adoption by opera companies, mainly for marketing purposes. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram now offer 'glimpses' of 'behind the scenes' areas, selling exclusivity and at times educating audiences, too. Consequently, singers are seen (in rehearsal, in interview etc) as acting 'themselves' as well as performing their characters. Mediatization adds further interpretative layers to the material.

I am interested in comparing different articulations of 'backstage' narratives through a dramaturgical lens which allows for both sociological and theatrical considerations.

Examples will centre around modes of acting encountered in

- a) ethnographic field work in opera rehearsals
- b) an opera documentary (e.g. *Die singende Stadt* (documentary on Calixto Bieito's production of *Parsifal*, Stuttgart 2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKMeZR22JEg>)
- c) a web-based multi-camera experience (*The Opera Machine* (Royal Opera House) – to which ends are they created by opera companies? <http://www.roh.org.uk/interactives/opera-machine>)

Helen H. Metzelaar (University of Amsterdam): 'The Act of Opera Onstage: the Dutch Devries Dynasty in the Long Nineteenth Century'

Research into the Devries dynasty, a little known three-generation Dutch operatic family, has disclosed a wealth of press reviews that present conflicting opinions on their operatic acting. These reviews can help us gain a better understanding of what actually happened onstage and how the press reacted to it. All members of this dynasty were trained in the French tradition, where opera long emphasized words (Henson 2015, 11). Throughout her career Rosa Devries was acclaimed as an actress, a *tragédienne* comparable to the French tragic actress Rachel Félix. When Devries knelt to ask her father for forgiveness in the title

role of *Norma*, her facial expression was so striking that Dutch audiences could not hold back their tears. In the 1850s, however, critical attention in France, Spain and Britain turned to her body image, deriding her for being overweight. As Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, she was 'a stout matronly lady, as unlike the heroine as can be imagined' (*Spectator*, 21-6-1856). In 1885 a Dutch review commented on the performance style of Rosa's son, Maurice Devries, advising him to be more sparing in his gestures and movements onstage because these were not 'distinguished' enough. A decade later, when he sang the title role in Rossini's *William Tell*, again his 'unconventional' gestures were observed. Yet in another review he was praised for his acting, which was in the manner of the 'old French opera school'. This paper hopes to contribute to the relatively new field of operatic acting.

Ryan Minor (SUNY Stony Brook): 'Acting, on Behalf of the Chorus'

Narratives of the opera chorus tend to diagnose a lingering discomfort underlying coordinated group reactions to, and participation in, dramatic action. Thus from the early eighteenth century through the present day, dramaturgical criticism of the opera chorus has frequently focused on questions of believability: from French debates over *vraisemblance* through Gluck's reforms, Wagner's famous depiction of the chorus in grand opera as screaming scenery, Brecht's prescription of non-realist group gestures, and, most recently, *Regietheater's* insistent use of the chorus to unmask the genre's ideological investments in collective identities. So conceived, the history of operatic composition, dramaturgy, and reception seems to have found in the chorus an embodiment of the opera's own bad faith in itself: a metonym for the inherent unbelievability of the entire genre.

But what histories such as this tend to downplay – and here I also indict my own previous scholarship – is that complaints about the opera chorus were as much focused on *bad* acting as they were the premise of choral acting itself: an under-rehearsed afterthought at best, choral acting was an indictment both of the genre's slapdash tendencies and its theoretical underpinnings.

My talk revisits some of the seminal documents outlining opera's embarrassed relationship to its chorus, focusing less on the theoretical implausibility of the convention than on matters of intentionality and – for lack of a better word – quality. And while I argue that criteria of plausibility and 'good' acting are historical constructs, I also suggest that the more recent success of Patrice Chéreau's opera stagings relies in part on his investment in choral acting as a fundamental linchpin in the genre's fragile claims to dramatic cohesion.

Laura Moeckli (Basel): 'On Conjunction and Disjunction in Nineteenth-Century Operatic Acting'

For nineteenth-century composers, singers, actors, musicians and theorists, the conjunction of expressive means was perceived as an ideal to be achieved in operatic performance rather than a redundant aesthetic, as it is often considered today. For example, in his acting treatise *Physiologie du théâtre* (1840), the French theorist Hippolyte Auger extolls the conjunction of expressive means as 'simultaneous manifestations of the soul'. The singing pedagogue Enrico Delle Sedie in turn describes how the lyric artist must additionally

'combine his inflexions with those given to the music, seeking inspiration from the composer as well as the poet' (1874). Thus music and drama, sound and movement, voice and body, singing and acting, constituted complementary means of conveying dramatic expression. Against this backdrop of concurrence, disjunction offers an exceptional yet powerful means of highlighting contradictory passions and tensions by subtly confounding contemporary expectations.

In this paper, I will consider nineteenth-century sources and discourses – including libretti, scores, didactical treatises and 'livrets de mise en scène' – which shed light on the 'conjunction' and 'disjunction' of expression in operatic acting. The application of these theoretical terms – notably proposed by Mary Ann Smart in *Mimomania* (2004) – to the historical sources, helps gain insight into largely forgotten traditions and conventions, revealing unsuspected nuances of expression in situations that might otherwise appear banal or even awkward.

Clemens Risi (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg): 'The Time of the Operatic Gesture'

The following quote from the *Encyclopädie der gesammten musikalischen Wissenschaften* dates from 1835, but it still seems to be valid for so many opera performances today: '[...] usually, the singers' movements are weak and monotonous, often ugly, as for example the raising of the arms which frequently occurs, as well as the alternating stretching out of the hands together with a shallow opening of the hands.' (D. Sch., 'Acteur,' in *Encyclopädie der gesammten musikalischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Gustav Schilling, vol. 2 [Stuttgart, 1835], p. 47) These gestures can, of course, be identified as stereotypical, conventional operatic gestures. And they are most often criticized as symptoms of singers who lack instruction or direction. On the other hand, in defence of these gestures, they can also be seen as traces of a certain kind of baroque deictic gestures or as remnants of ancient rhetorical gestures. But there is also, in my view, a third way to look at these gestures: as gestures of vocal training. In my paper, I would like to discuss this stereotypical gesture practice of opera singers, addressing the questions of where this practice possibly comes from, in how far it is (still) related to signification and emotion, of how we can catch a glimpse of performative processes of the past (as gesture in opera), and what relevance the knowledge of historical performance (gesture) practice can have for today's stagings and performances.

Hugo Shirley (Gramophone): 'Revisiting Dumpygate: Glyndebourne's *Rosenkavalier* and Questions of Operatic Verisimilitude'

This paper looks specifically at the storm that attended the Glyndebourne Festival's production of *Der Rosenkavalier* in 2014. This highly emotive and often rancorous debate revolved around the perceived physical suitability of mezzo soprano Tara Erraught for the role of Octavian, and the reaction of the critics. Much of it was played out on social media, a platform clearly unsuited to discussion of the complex issues about operatic acting and dramatic verisimilitude that lay beneath the tempestuous surface of the debate.

My aim here is less to revisit that stormy surface than to explore some of the underlying arguments heard at the time, not least the reassertion of an operatic aesthetic – apparently turning back the clock several decades – that situates the voice as the principal concern of an audience, with dramatic verisimilitude some way down the list. This process also saw remarkable – and remarkably old-fashioned – appeals to the authority of composer and librettist as representatives of an aesthetic based primarily on musical values, appeals that even the most cursory glance at the correspondence between Hofmannsthal and Strauss, not to mention the score, show to be untenable.

The ideas voiced on social media were endorsed and further validated by being taken up by bloggers and columnists, many of whom happily admitted to not having seen the production in the theatre. I conclude by asking whether this can be seen to have had a lasting effect on the discourse on operatic acting and verisimilitude, or whether it was just a storm in a champagne flute.

Alexandra Wilson (Oxford Brookes University): 'Film Star Posturing: On 'Realistic' Operatic Acting in the 1920s'

Dramatic realism was not a high concern in early 1920s British operatic performances, leading a contemporary critic to write 'Acting in opera! The term is almost a contradiction'. Reports abounded of singers being cast with little concern for age or physical appearance, while formulaic 'park and bark' stagings were a practical necessity at a time when there was little formal direction or rehearsal time. Standards of operatic acting started to improve, however, as film began to change expectations of dramatic realism and as a new generation of high-calibre international singers arrived in Britain later in the decade. Yet the starriest of these attracted criticism because of the way in which their offstage personae seemed to intrude upon their onstage performances.

This paper will examine the reception of two high-profile 'celebrity singers' who performed at Covent Garden in the late 1920s. Maria Jeritza and Rosa Ponselle were initially fêted for their unusually vivid acting and slender figures. With time, however, critics began to complain that their performances were mannered, self-conscious and always the same – the projection of a personality rather than the interpretation of a role – and that they treated the stage like a catwalk. I shall investigate why the incursion of 'film star attitudes' and personal fashion choices into operatic performances was regarded as so problematic at this ostensibly pivotal moment in operatic acting history.