

Opera, Audio Technologies, and Audience Practices in the Late Nineteenth Century: The Case of Jules Verne*

Nicolò Palazzetti

Introduction

The French writer Jules Verne (1828–1905) is the second most-translated author in the world after Agatha Christie and before William Shakespeare.¹ Many of his novels and characters have shaped our modern imagination. Verne’s legacy, nevertheless, has often been downplayed due to rigid genre classifications: his *Voyages extraordinaires* have been frequently interpreted as adventure novels, science fiction precursors, serialized fiction, or children’s literature. In fact, less than a quarter of Verne’s sixty-four novels could be counted as “genuine” or prototypical science fiction.² Since the launch of his *Voyages extraordinaires* in the 1860s, Verne’s rising popularity undermined his literary reputation. In the last few decades, however, new studies have fostered a more complex image of the French writer, playwright, and intellectual. This new wave of interest was prompted by the posthumous publication of Verne’s dystopian novel *Paris au xx^e siècle* in 1994. Several scholars have stressed “the importance of Verne as a key commentator on the anguishes of modernity, rather than as the over-enthusiastic promoter of the value of science and technology.”³ The accuracy

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1 “Top 50 Authors,” *Index Translationum*, UNESCO, website, accessed July 15, 2022, <https://www.unesco.org/xtrans/bsstatexp.aspx?critL=5&nTyp=min&topN=50>.

2 See Edmund J. Smyth, “Verne, SF and Modernity: An Introduction,” in *Jules Verne: Narratives of Modernity*, ed. Edmund J. Smyth (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 1.

3 Smyth, 2.

of Verne's technical descriptions was functional to the investigation of the impact of emergent technologies on our social life. Following Michel Serres, we can say that there is no scientific anticipation in Verne:

He reuses a fairly old scientific knowledge, from astronomy to earth science. ... He is on time only for communication, and the artificial objects he stages are always means of communication, never production, from vehicles to the telegraph.⁴

In Verne's thought, communication technologies challenge our understanding of culture and society, while also making available (and portable) specific technologies of production, such as the phonograph. It is perhaps no coincidence that Verne's most famous novel is *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*, 1872)—i.e., a celebration of the large-scale diffusion of steamships, rail networks, and the global circulation of people and ideas.

This article focuses on Verne's literary production about opera, audio technologies, and audience practices—a relatively less known portion of his output which proves to be particularly thought-provoking for scholars interested in the cultural history of recording and communication technologies, technologically-situated listening practices, wider questions of audience behavior, and music-related fandom. In Verne's writing, the exploration of art worlds—e.g., music, opera, and performing arts—goes hand in hand with the exploration of technological devices such as recording and data transmission technologies. Opera and music are often present in Verne's stories, most famously in the novel *Le Château des Carpathes* (*The Carpathian Castle*, 1892) where a famous diva dies on stage as the memory of her music lives on record.⁵

In fact, there are other works by Verne that deal with operatic music, media, and technology. These include the short stories *Une fantaisie du docteur Ox* (*Dr. Ox's Experiment*, 1872), *M. Ré-Dièze et M^{lle} Mi-Bémol* (*Mister Ray Sharp and Miss Me Flat*, 1893), and the novels *Paris au xx^e siècle*,

4 Michel Serres, "Le savoir, la guerre et le sacrifice," *Critique* 33, no. 367 (1977): 1072. My translation.

5 "By a trick of technology (a combination of mirrors and a phonograph), the singer gives a performance from beyond the grave, watched by the solitary grievers who cannot live without her memory. She will remain forever in their minds as a stage figure, caught and frozen in that final, fatal performance." Timothy Unwin, *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 129.

L'Île à hélice (*The Self-Propelled Island*, 1895) and, to some extent, *La Jangada* (*Eight Hundred Leagues on the Amazon*, 1881). This specific corpus of works has not been investigated from the perspective of sound, audience, and technology. As a matter of fact, the most thought-provoking scenarios about the relationship between sound, music, and technology are not to be found in Verne's musical tastes (which were somewhat unadventurous), but rather in his descriptions of the wider impacts of recently implemented systems for imparting, storing, or exchanging information on a large scale and over a distance (e.g., the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the théâtrophone, among others). Innovations in the field of audio and communication technologies are scrutinized by Verne against the backdrop of the era's theatrical and musical realms, as well as the evolution of steam-powered transport systems, social infrastructures, daily life of audiences, and urban entertainment.

This essay is based on a literary, conceptual, and contextual analysis of a selection of Verne's novels, with a privileged focus on *L'Île à hélice*, set in a huge floating city inhabited by melomaniac billionaires, and *Le Château des Carpathes*, set in an eerie castle haunted by an opera fan. All the examples and excerpts here analyzed are connected to their wider cultural, social, and technological contexts as well as to more recent theoretical frameworks developed in the field of opera studies, sound studies, media studies, fan studies, and the cultural history of technology. The main point is to understand, through the analysis of Verne's creative imagination, the role new recording technologies have in shaping new forms of audience behavior. *L'Île à hélice*, for instance, provides vivid descriptions of technologically-mediated audience practices largely unknown outside Vernian circles, such as collective acousmatic listening of live opera performances via the théâtrophone and distracted listening of ambient or therapeutical music via in-home loudspeaker systems. I draw on these examples to understand, through a critical analysis of Verne's viewpoints, the social and cultural impact of the mediatization of listening experience and the parallel commodification of performing arts as a form of entertainment. I then expand these reflections through an original inquiry into Baron Rodolphe de Gortz's peculiar listening practices in *Le Château des Carpathes*. This novel and its memorable character—who recreates the figure and voice of a dead diva via phonograph recordings and projected photographs in a mysterious castle—are certainly more familiar to music scholars. However, I review the results and limits of previous analyses devoted to the novel to suggest a new, more cogent, interpretation for the character of de Gortz

based on fan studies literature. Interpreting de Gortz as a modern fan, rather than a mere obsessional character, changes our perspective on his role in the novel, while also shedding light on the technological history of opera fandom.

The article is organized in three sections. The first explores Verne's work as a writer in the context of nineteenth-century performing arts, in particular with regards to his fascination for comic operas, French contemporary theater, and Offenbach. It also considers Verne's dystopian novel *Paris au xx^e siècle* from a musical and theatrical perspective. The second segment delves into the impact of new recording technologies on audience behavior. The novel *L'Île à hélice* serves as the case study here. The third and last section focuses on *Le Château des Carpathes*. The overall aim of the article is to shed light on the genesis and evolution of the relation between operatic audiences and audio technologies via the analysis of a set of fertile and imaginative narratives. Verne's literary and scientific imagination constitutes a valuable repository—not fully explored—for the re-examination of a few aspects of the cultural history of sound reproduction and communication, and to better understand how such technologies have contributed to reshaping our daily life as listeners and music fans.

From the Stage to the Future

In the evening at 37° 2' 7" W the coast of Greenland put in a brief appearance through a clearing in the fog; through his telescope the doctor glimpsed a succession of peaks furrowed by broad glaciers; but the fog quickly closed again on this vision, like a theatre curtain that falls at the most interesting moment in the play.⁶

Recent scholarship has reappraised Verne's achievements in the field of drama as well as the theatrical references and techniques informing his work. As affirmed by Timothy Unwin:

The theatre remains a constant presence throughout Verne's writing: not just in its gusto and pacy crescendos, its dramatic confrontations, its reversals and surprises, its complicated but neat solutions and its happy *dénouements*; but

⁶ Jules Verne, *The Extraordinary Journeys: The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, trans. William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36.

also in its contrived virtuosity and stagey artificiality, its humour and word-play, its colourful dialogues and eccentric characters, its ludic convolutions, and its rhythms of disguise, revelation and reconciliation.⁷

Verne's early plays failed to receive substantial success in Parisian theaters, and this lack of success contributed to his decision to embark on a career as a novelist in the 1860s. However, later stage adaptations by Verne for some of his most famous novels, often conceived in collaboration with the playwright Adolphe d'Ennery (1811–99), are considered by scholars among the greatest achievements of nineteenth-century theater. The dramatic version of *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours*, for instance, was a sensational success for the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin since its debut in 1874. It was regularly performed in Paris up to the Second World War, totalizing more than three thousand performances over the course of six decades. The incidental music for the play was composed by Jean-Jacques-Joseph Debillemont (1824–79), who also collaborated to the 1878 stage adaptation of *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant (In Search of the Castaways, 1867–68)*. Another box-office success was the 1882 play *Voyage à travers l'impossible (Journey Through the Impossible)*. This *féerie* is a pot-pourri of various novels from the *Voyages extraordinaires*, such as *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers (Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas, 1869–70)*, *Voyage au centre de la Terre (Journey to the Center of the Earth, 1864)*, *De la Terre à la Lune (From the Earth to the Moon, 1865)*. Such extravagant spectacles led a few scholars to use the notion of *theatrum mundi* to describe Verne's dramatic work.⁸ In Verne's theater, colossal machines, large companies of actors, oversized sets, wild or trained animals stand side by side on stage. It would be reductive, however, to consider Verne's theatrical production from this perspective only. Throughout his *Voyages extraordinaires*, there can be found sophisticated references to the realm of performing arts, including opera, music, and even the circus (as in the 1885 novel *Mathias Sandorf*).

During a late interview with the journalist Robert Sherard, Verne recalled his passion for the stage, mentioning his collaborations with the Théâtre Lyrique and its director Émile Perrin throughout the 1850s,⁹ thus

7 Unwin, *Jules Verne*, 96.

8 Sylvie Roques, *Jules Verne et l'invention d'un théâtre-monde* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018), 7.

9 Robert Harborough Sherard, "Jules Verne at Home: His Own Account of His Life and Work," *McClure's Magazine* 2, no. 2 (January 1894): 120.

confirming the important role played by opera in his aesthetic views and biographical experiences. The Théâtre Lyrique was a leading opera company in Paris, active during the middle of the nineteenth century and located at that time on the boulevard du Temple; Perrin directed the company between 1854 and 1855, but during his career he also directed the Opéra-Comique and the Paris Opera. More generally, Verne's theatrical works—most of them written during the 1850s¹⁰—show the extent of his collaborations with fellow playwrights and musicians, as well as his inclination to engage with various genres (comedies, dramas, vaudevilles, operatic libretti, and so on); in particular, Verne was intrigued by *opéras comiques*, *opéras bouffes*, and *opérettes*. In collaboration with Michel Carré, Verne wrote several libretti for the composer Aristide Hignard, including the one-act *opérette Monsieur de Chimpanzé* (1858) and the one-act *opéra-comique L'Auberge des Ardennes* (1860). Hignard also set to music a collection of seven *Rimes et mélodies* written by Verne in 1857. It is also worth mentioning two operas by Jacques Offenbach adapted from Verne's literary works: the *opéra-féerie Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1875) and the *opéra bouffe Le docteur Ox* (1876). According to Laurence Senelick, Verne and Offenbach shared “a basic belief in the ultimate futility of human endeavour.”¹¹

Several novels by Verne also feature characters who are inspired by the world of theater and music,¹² such as the operatic diva Stilla in *Le Château des Carpathes* or the members of a string quartet in *L'Île à hélice*. Another important musical character is the one featured in the novel *La Jangada* (1881), who recounts the travel of a family down the Amazon River on a large timber raft. A memorable personage in this adventure novel is the barber Frago, a homage to Beaumarchais's Figaro and his operatic progeny.¹³ Like other extrovert eccentrics populating Verne's novels, Frago is a focus of entertainment for both the other characters and the reader. He acts as a symbol of the wondrous world of theater much loved by Verne.

To complete this brief examination of Verne's passion for theater and stage music, it is worth looking at the musical and theatrical futures de-

10 See Alexandre Tarrieu, “Voyage au centre du théâtre,” *Revue Jules Verne*, no. 11 (2001): 11–24.

11 Laurence Senelick, “Outer Space, Inner Rhythms: The Concurrences of Jules Verne and Jacques Offenbach,” *Nineteenth-Century Theatre & Film* 30, no. 1 (2003): 2.

12 On this topic, see “Jules Verne et la musique,” special issue, *Revue Jules Verne*, no. 24 (2007).

13 Jules Verne, “En suivant une liane,” chap. 7 in *La Jangada: 800 lieues sur l'Amazonne*, vol. 1 (Paris: Hetzel, 1881), 103–4.

picted in his “lost novel” *Paris au xx^e siècle*. Written in the early 1860s, the novel portrays a dystopian Parisian society completely dominated by the cult of industrial and technological progress and efficiency. Pierre-Jules Hetzel, the publisher who would shape Verne’s fortunes, rejected the work as overambitious and Verne locked it away for the rest of his life.¹⁴ The posthumous publication of the novel in 1994 became a literary event. The futuristic dystopia portrayed in *Paris au xx^e siècle* was a perfect way to resurrect the myth of Verne as the father of modern science fiction.¹⁵ At various times in his novel, Verne denounces the total equivalence between art and entertainment, and the spread of state-owned entertainment industries. Let us consider the description of “Le Grand Entrepôt Dramatique” in chapter 14—i.e., the large “theatrical depository.”¹⁶ The Entrepôt is a proper industry for playwriting and staging organized according to a rigid assembly line and division of labor: some writers are specialized in writing denouements, some other in writing bravura pieces for divas, others in writing historical descriptions, and so on. The Entrepôt is a state-owned institution and provides different genres of conventional yet effective plays to all French theaters.

Verne was first and foremost interested in denouncing the conventionalism of the Parisian theatrical system of his time. The genres performed in the futuristic Paris are identical to those appreciated by the Parisian audience in the 1860s. Verne’s Entrepôt consists of five divisions, each devoted to a specific genre: comedies, vaudevilles, historical and modern dramas, opera, and light theatrical entertainments. Actors are respected in the French society of the 1960s as “specialized employees”:¹⁷ theater’s complete platitude and industrialization, implies Verne, is a high price to pay for the social ennoblement of actors. In the 1960s, moreover, every aspect of theatrical production is now carefully organized, including the audience: legions of claqueurs are distributed by the Entrepôt to different theaters to ensure the success of the performances. The claqueurs are paid for their work by

14 See Piero Gondolo della Riva, “Préface,” in Jules Verne, *Paris au xx^e siècle* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1996), 11–21.

15 See David Platten, “A Hitchhiker’s Guide to Paris: *Paris au xx^e siècle*,” in Smyth, *Jules Verne*, 78–93.

16 Jules Verne, *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1996), ch. 14 “Le Grand Entrepôt Dramatique,” 203.

17 Verne, *Paris*, 209.

the state and are trained in specific schools by renowned professors to learn “the delicate art of applause, and ... the entire range of its nuances”.¹⁸

Paris au xx^e siècle includes a chapter on the music of the future. The futuristic metaphor is an expedient used by Verne to provide a satirical description of the music of his time. Here the target of Verne’s disdain is Richard Wagner and, indirectly, the Wagnerians’ craze. In his study about the emergence of modern music lovers in the United States, Daniel Cavicchi describes the denigration of Wagner fandom:

The growing presence of Wagnerians in the late nineteenth century ... finally presented critics of music loving with a uniform symbol for derision and ridicule. Wagnerians were known for their devotion to operatic music that was text-heavy and which by all accounts was atonal and difficult.¹⁹

The early 1860s marked a turning point in the history of Wagner’s reception in France. The 1860 concerts at the Salle Ventadour, conducted by Wagner himself, marked “the birth of French Wagnerism.”²⁰ A year later, the revised and translated version of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra famously resulted in a major scandal. Verne was on the side of Wagner’s detractors: “in the last century,” says the character Quinsonnas, “a certain Richard Wagner, a sort of messiah who has been insufficiently crucified, invented the Music of the Future.”²¹ In 1960, under the influence of Wagner, operas now last at least four hours without any entr’acte and they are based on a single, endless phrase. The audience simply swallows the music, talking business, while singers do not sing anymore and instead they neigh, bark, cry, bray as in a menagerie. The repertory of the Paris Opéra, practically “a branch of the Bourse,”²² is divided between a few, isolated revivals of classic masterpieces, such as Offenbach’s *Orphée aux Enfers*, and the mass production of post-Wagnerian operas curated by the Grand Entrepôt.

18 Verne, *Paris*, 207.

19 Daniel Cavicchi, *Listening and Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 153–54.

20 “La naissance du wagnérisme français” (Yannick Simon, “Les trois concerts Wagner au Théâtre-Italien en 1860,” *Dezède* online, posted on January 21, 2018, <https://dezede.org/dossiers/id/263/>). See also Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), esp. ch. 5–6.

21 Verne, *Paris*, 116.

22 Verne, *Paris*, 119.

L'Île à hélice, or *The Social Role of Sound in the Metropolis*

Verne's literary beginnings and early career in Parisian theaters illustrate his interest in the impact of communication technologies on opera and performing arts. Yet, the analysis of dystopian worlds, like the one in *Paris au xx^e siècle*, was soon abandoned in favor of more tangible surveys of imminent technological futures, as with *Cinq Semaines en ballon* (*Five Weeks in a Balloon*, 1863), a novel celebrating the role of hot air balloons in fostering the exploration of large portions of uncharted African land. And with respect to his later, most celebrated works, "the generally happy juxtaposition of the fantastic with the post-scriptum verifiable . . . has its source in careful planning rather than clairvoyance."²³ For instance, the design and description of the submarine Nautilus, one of his most famous machines, were based on advice given by expert engineers.

Verne's writings on sound technologies confirm his ambivalent approach to technological change. One of his favorite musical instruments was the pipe organ; in *Vingt Mille Lieues*, Verne places a large pipe organ in the center of the Nautilus's main hall. The brand-new modernity of the submarine is offset by the cumbersome presence of an old-fashioned, venerable musical instrument of the Western tradition. This coexistence gives to the character of Nemo a romantic and nostalgic dimension, as recalled by the narrator: "Sometimes I heard the melancholy sounds of his organ, which [Nemo] played with much expression, but only at night, in the midst of the most secret darkness, when the Nautilus was sleeping in the ocean wilderness."²⁴ Another less famous short story entitled *M. Ré-dièze et M^{lle} Mi-bémol* shows Verne's fascination for the complex mechanisms of pipe organs. In this grotesque fairy tale, set in a remote Swiss village, Verne explores the continuities between the organ pipe and the human voice, the climax of the story being the dream-like imprisonment of the children of the church choir within the pipes of the organ. The imprisoned children create a new, perfect organ registration centered on the "children's voices."²⁵ This Vernian interest in the continuities between the human being

23 Platten, "A Hitchhiker's Guide to Paris," 80.

24 Jules Verne, *The Extraordinary Journeys: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, trans. William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 275.

25 Jules Verne, "Mr. Ray Sharp and Miss Me Flat," in Jules Verne, *Yesterday and Tomorrow*, trans. I. O. Evans (London: Arco, 1905), 125–53: 149.

and the automaton recalls E. T. A. Hoffmann's short stories, later adapted into world-famous ballets.²⁶

Verne's most daring views about the relation between sound, music, and technology can be found, however, in his descriptions of the social and cultural impact of recently implemented systems for imparting or exchanging information. Verne is interested in showing how these new technologies fit within the late nineteenth-century transport infrastructure (e.g., steam-powered ocean liners and railroads), making mass communication a concrete reality. Like a modern cultural historian focusing on recording technologies or like a sociologist dealing with new music-related practices, Verne is concerned with the cultural and social forces that are at stake during the implementation of new technological devices and their impact on everyday life.

L'Île à hélice is a thought-provoking example of such preoccupations. In this novel, the future is meant to be "a concentration on the magnificent, cornucopian present which promises so many possibilities."²⁷ Published in 1895, *L'Île à hélice* depicts the adventures of the members of a famous French string quartet during a visit to Milliard City, a garden city inhabited only by billionaires and built on a massive oval boat roaming the Pacific. Likely set in the early twentieth century, the novel combines the topos of the floating city already explored in *Une Ville flottante* (*A Floating City*, 1870) with the one of the ideal city-state from *Les Cinq Cent Million de la Bégum* (*The Begum's Fortune*, 1879). In *L'Île à hélice*, the members of the quartet, called the Quatuor Concertant, are guided through the wonders and idiosyncrasies of Milliard City by the cicerone Calistus Munbar. To the modern reader, the shining perfection, modernity, and inaccessibility of the floating city recalls a mammoth cruise liner.

All the inhabitants of Milliard City are art and music lovers. The city boasts a remarkable collection of paintings and sculptures. However, given the inaccessibility of the moving island and the subsequent lack of touring companies (the Quatuor Concertant would become the first permanent music ensemble of the city), music is commonly experienced via technological means. First, the billionaires listen to music with the aid of an advanced version of Edison's phonograph. As Pinchinnat, the violist of the group, says to Munbar:

²⁶ On Verne and Hoffmann, see Cormac Newark, *Opera in the Novel from Balzac to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 123–25.

²⁷ Unwin, *Jules Verne*, 39–40.

As I see it, your Milliard City never heard anything but canned music and preserved melodies sent to you just like sardines and salt beef. ... Your phonographs carry only the past.²⁸

Verne's "musique en boîte" and "conserves mélodiques"²⁹ closely recall John Philip Sousa's critique of sound recordings as "canned music."²⁹ In Sousa's 1906 assertion, as discussed by Jonathan Sterne, "the possibility of recording sound is just one more form of preservation,"³⁰ since chemical preservation for mass production and distribution was a major innovation in nineteenth-century North American food culture. While recognizing the potential of the phonograph as a "photograph" of a performance, Verne denounces the commodification of sound provoked by recording technologies, as well as the privatization of listening and the celebration of the recorded past: the phonograph provides a "faithful echo" of a dead, disembodied performance. To the modern reader, Verne may sound conservative in his moral judgments, but he points out various cultural and economic shifts prompted by the technological innovations of the late nineteenth century. These shifts are at the core of Sterne's analysis in *The Audible Past*: i.e., how sound started to be "commodified... something that can be bought and sold," losing "its ephemeral character" and its anchorage to the body. "People's ears could take them into the past or across vast distances,"³¹ claims Sterne, and this also changed their experience of death. With regards to art music, and especially to opera, these considerations entail the question of liveness. As Karen Henson has noted, following Philip Auslander, the basic notion of opera's essence "being live and technologically unmediated singing" is a historical by-product of the mediatization of performance events and the advent of recordings, "for one cannot have an ideal of unmediated singing unless one is in a profoundly technological environment."³²

28 Jules Verne, *The Self-Propelled Island*, trans. Marie-Thérèse Noiset (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 65.

29 John Philip Sousa, "The Menace of Mechanical Music," *Appleton's Magazine* 8, no. 3 (September 1906): 281.

30 Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 292.

31 Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 3 and 1.

32 Karen Henson, "Introduction: Of Modern Operatic Mythologies and Technologies," in *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 22. See also Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

The listening practices of Milliard-City's music lovers, however, are many and varied. While sailing the Pacific Ocean, the billionaires regularly attend the concert hall of the boat, listening to operas that are being performed live in European and American opera houses via a cutting edge *théâtrophone*. Here's an extract of the dialogue between the members of the Quatuor and Munbar:

"Since our city is wealthy enough to satisfy all its whims, all its musical yearnings [for opera], it has already been done" [says Munbar].

"How...?"

"With our *théâtrophones*, installed in the concert room of this casino. As you know, our company [i.e., the society which manages Milliard City] owns, submerged in the waters of the Pacific Ocean, many cables attached to Madeleine Bay [Mexico] on one end and tied to powerful buoys on the other. So, when one of our citizens wants to hear a singer of the Old or the New World, we pick up one of the cables and send a telephone order to our agents at Madeleine Bay. These agents establish communication with America or Europe. The cables are then connected with the theater or the concert hall requested by our music lovers, who, seated in the casino, actually attend the distant performances and shower them with applause..."

"But over there, the musicians cannot hear the applause..." cried Yvernès.

"I beg your pardon, my dear Mr. Yvernès, they hear it by the return cable."³³

The *théâtrophone*—which would appear in the 1888 utopian bestseller by Matthew Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*—was a telephonic distribution system active in several European cities from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, allowing its subscribers to listen to opera and theater performances in stereo over the telephone lines. This system was the evolution of an apparatus presented by Clément Ader at the 1881 Exposition internationale de l'électricité in Paris, allowing remote listening to concerts taking place at the Opéra. The *théâtrophone* was commercialized in France around 1890 and later in other countries. The Hungarian Telefon Hírmondó, set up by Tivadar Puskás in the early 1890s, lasted until the Second World War: a radio service ahead of its time, it provided to its subscribers not only music and opera, but also news broadcast, lectures, and even linguistic classes. Verne was enthralled by the *théâtrophone*. In 1889, a few years before the publication of *L'Île à hélice*, a short

33 Verne, *The Self-Propelled Island*, 65–66.

story entitled *In the Year 2889* appeared in English in the North American magazine *The Forum*. Possibly written by Michel Verne by drawing on his father's ideas, *In the Year 2889* describes a world heavily influenced by media in which journalists communicate the news to their "readers" viva voce using a system similar to the théâtrophone.³⁴

Verne's description of "acousmatic" concerts taking place in Milliard City raises further observations. It may be useful to consider the concept of "acousmatic listening" (i.e., the occultation of the cause and the source of a sonic event) as reformulated by Brian Kane in his critical reappraisal of Pierre Schaeffer's thought. Kane defines the aesthetical and detached listening promoted by Schaeffer in relation to acousmatic sounds as "a position of Husserlian detachment and eidetic perfection."³⁵ Kane maintains, instead, that "acousmatic listening is a shared, intersubjective practice ... of listening to the soundscape that is cultivated when the source of sounds is beyond the horizon of visibility, uncertain, underdetermined, bracketed, or wilfully and imaginatively suspended."³⁶ In other words, acousmatic listening does not provoke a more intense concentration on an abstract sonic object, as Schaeffer claimed. On the contrary, Kane affirms that the separation of the source, cause, and effect of the sound provokes a feeling of stupefaction or anxiety that could open up the supermundane and transcendent universe of phantasmagorias.³⁷ In the case of Verne, moreover, the use of the théâtrophone for live acousmatic listening supports the act of listening as a collective practice in which the audience has an active role, as attested by the final applause. More concretely, the visual absence of the performers is also a way

34 Andrea Sangiovanni, *Le parole e le figure. Storia dei media in Italia dall'età liberale alla seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome: Donzelli, 2013), 58.

35 Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147. The reference is to Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), ch. 4 "Acousmatics."

36 Kane, *Sound Unseen*, 7.

37 See Violeta Nigro Giunta and Nicolò Palazzetti, "'New Avenues for Listening.' Sensory Culture in the Digital Age and the Persistence of Utopia. An Interview with Michael Bull," *Transposition* 6 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.1580>. It is also worth mentioning the dramaturgical role of the "acousmatic voice" in the French melodrama *Les frères corses* (1850): see Emilio Sala, "The 'Ghost Melody' as Acousmatic Voice. Music and Effect from Melodrama to Cinema," *TRANS. Revista Transcultural de Música/Transcultural Music Review* 18 (2014),

<https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/article/473/the-ghost-melody-as-acousmatic-voice-music-and-effect-from-melodrama-to-cinema>.

to stress the emergence of the audience as an independent community and the act of listening as a practice which is perceived as separated and autonomous from music composition and production. The inhabitants of Milliard City do not play music, they just listen to it; and the sudden arrival of the Quatuor magnifies this absence. Verne is thus particularly attentive to the rise of music reception as a self-standing habit, a transformative process fostered firstly by the commodification of urban entertainment around the mid-nineteenth century and later the widespread diffusion of media technology in the forms of recording and broadcasting.³⁸

Moreover, according to Verne's writings, the increasing availability of recorded music fosters new forms of distracted listening, a notion similar to what Walter Benjamin would later argue over the last pages of his popular essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."³⁹ As stated by David Goodman, "distracted listening" is a constant occurrence in our mass-mediated world: "We are accustomed to having broadcast or recorded sound all around us, whenever we want, and to listening distractedly or closely at different times and places."⁴⁰ The inhabitants of Milliard City are familiar with this kind of listening thanks to the installation of loudspeakers in their private homes. They use these loudspeakers for listening to pre-recorded music broadcast by the Company, as explained by Munbar to the Quatuor soon after the description of the "théâtrophonie" concerts. In *L'Île à hélice*, these private audio apparatuses are mainly intended for therapeutic purposes, following the theories of Frederick Kill Harford, a pioneer in music therapy in late Victorian England. As Yvernès affirms: "You just have to select the music that fits the diagnosis! Wagner or Berlioz for a weak constitution...", to which Munbar adds "And for fiery dispositions, Mendelssohn or Mozart."⁴¹

The use of classical music as ambient or therapeutic music represents for Verne a *reductio ad absurdum* to denounce the commodification effects of recording technologies. The same vision is put forward by Verne in the 1872 humorous short story *Une fantaisie du Docteur Ox*. In this work, the le-

38 Cavicchi, *Listening and Longing*.

39 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–51.

40 David Goodman, "Distracted Listening: On Not Making Sound Choices in the 1930s," in *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. David Suisman and Susan Strasser (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 15.

41 Verne, *The Self-Propelled Island*, 66.

thargic inhabitants of Quiquendone, a fictional Flemish city, are metamorphosed by the excess of oxygen in the atmosphere of the town and its surroundings due to the side effects of a new system of gas lighting. The transformation affects their performing and listening practices, too. Before the beginning of gas experiments, given the phlegmatic nature of the orchestras, singers, and conductors of Quiquendone, grand operas such as *Robert le Diable* and *Les Huguenots* took several evenings to be fully performed at the local opera house. However, such productions are now astoundingly fast due to the effects of the gas: the fourth act of *Les Huguenots*, which used to last six and a half hours at Quiquendone's opera house, now takes eighteen minutes to be fully played.⁴² This idea of a “fast-forward” listening has been thoroughly analyzed by Cormac Newark: Doctor Ox's experiment ridicules the old-fashioned length and tediousness of grand operas, but also the uncritical faith in technological advances.⁴³

Opera Fandom, Music Recording and the Gothic Supernatural:
Le Château des Carpathes

Audience behavior, theatrical conventions, communication technologies, and literary imagination: all these topics seem to converge on the novel *Le Château des Carpathes*. Published in 1892, this work occupies a prominent position in Verne's late period and pivots entirely on the relationship between opera, fandom, and technology. The beginning is a magnificent literary exercise around the core features of the most blatant, even stereotypical, Gothic fiction: a haunted and abandoned castle in the middle of Transylvania; an environment of fear menaced by frightening rumors and supernatural events; the intrusion of the past upon the present.⁴⁴ Even if the castle, which belongs to the Baron Rodolphe de Gortz, is supposed to be uninhabited, several unexplainable phenomena horrify the residents of a nearby village—i.e., disembodied voices, a persistent smoke, and odd shapes of light above the donjon at night. After many vicissitudes, flashbacks, and plot twists, the reader discovers that the castle is haunted by a nostalgic opera lover.

42 Jules Verne, *Dr. Ox's Experiment, and Other Stories* (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1875), 52.

43 Newark, *Opera in the Novel*, 116–23.

44 For a general overview of Gothic literature's main themes, see Jerrold E. Hogle, “Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–20.

The Baron was an opera fan obsessed with a young diva, Stilla, and used to attend all her performances. But one day the diva suddenly died onstage at the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples while singing the death scene from the opera *Orlando* (composed by some Arconati): “Innamorata, mio cuore tremante, voglio morire...” This was supposed to be her farewell performance, since she had recently decided to retire from the stage to marry Count Franz de Télék. The Baron was devastated by Stilla’s death. With the help of his assistant and scientist Orfanik, the Baron thus decided to bring Stilla back to life in his gloomy castle in Transylvania through projected images and listening to high-quality phonograph recordings from her last performances. The whole mystery of the haunted castle is revealed only in the final pages of the novel.

It will be remembered how deep was the Baron’s despair when the rumour spread that La Stilla had resolved to retire from the stage and become Countess of Télék. ... Orfanik suggested that by means of the phonograph he should collect the principal airs from the operas she would appear in during her farewell performances at San Carlo. This instrument had reached a high state of perfection at this period, and Orfanik had so improved it that the human voice underwent no change, and lost none of its charm or purity.

The baron accepted Orfanik’s offer. Phonographs were successively and secretly introduced into the private box at the theatre during the last weeks of the season; and in this way their cylinders recorded the cavatinas and romances from the operas and concerts, including ... the final air from *Orlando*, which was interrupted by La Stilla’s death.

These were the circumstances under which the baron had shut himself up in the castle of the Carpathians, and there, each night, he listened to the music given out by the phonograph. And not only did he hear La Stilla as if he were in his box, but ... he saw her as if she were alive, before his eyes.

It was a simple optical illusion. It will be remembered that Baron de Gortz had obtained a magnificent portrait of the singer. This portrait represented her in the white costume of Angelica in *Orlando*. ... By means of glasses inclined at a certain angle calculated by Orfanik, when a light was thrown on the portrait placed in front of a glass, La Stilla appeared by reflection as real as if she were alive, and in all the splendour of her beauty.⁴⁵

45 Jules Verne, *The Castle of the Carpathians*, trans. anon. (Akron, Ohio: Saalfield, 1900), 208–209.

Verne's novel *Le Château* has received substantial attention by musicologists. Its wider reception was also relatively successful, giving rise to several movies and even an opera by the composer Philippe Hersant in 1992. The love triangle informing the novel is quintessential operatic: the pure and tragic love between a soprano and a young tenor (in this case, the Count de Télék) is impeded by a dark, monomaniacal baritone (i.e., the Baron de Gortz).

Newark has analyzed the resonances of the story of the Carpathian castle in the context of nineteenth-century music and literature. One reference is certainly Hoffmann (via Offenbach). The name Stilla echoes both the German *stille* (silent) and the Italian *stella* (star), but it is also a reference to the character Stella in Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.⁴⁶ Newark rightly observes that Verne's novel also relies on a set of previous fictional works "featuring the erotic fascination of the tragic female singer":

The real-life sopranos who lost their voices or retired or died suddenly (Falcon, Malibran, and so on) were a staple of Romantic writer-lore, and the fictional genre-pool from which Stilla draws her inheritance includes numerous cases of the loss of voice, life, or both, from Nodier's *Inès de las Sierras* (1837) to various stories by Méry.⁴⁷

The fascination for the technological afterlife of the singing body features in other contemporary science-fiction novels. Henson has analyzed *L'Ève future* (1886) by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a novel in which a female robot, an android, is able to sing with a beautiful voice.⁴⁸ This reference is placed within the larger historical and theoretical framework of the 1820s and 1830s, a chronological turning point which Henson also considers as a conceptual watershed. The Italian word *diva* has already been associated with opera since the Baroque era. However, as Henson suggests, it was only during the golden age of European romanticism that *diva* became a synonym for an exceptional opera singer, one endowed with supernatural singing qualities and the ability to excite obsessive devotion in his listeners. The new operatic diva, exemplified by famous singers such as Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran, was praised by contemporary music critics especially in Paris and Italy. At the same time, the 1820s and 1830s were a turning

⁴⁶ Newark, *Opera in the Novel*, 125.

⁴⁷ Newark, 127.

⁴⁸ Henson, "Introduction."

point in the history of recording technologies, with the creation of the first mechanical devices to store and reproduce information and data, such as the photographic camera—a trend which would later lead to the invention of the phonograph. According to Henson, the soprano in its mythologized form (i.e., the diva) may therefore be understood as a fantasy of technological modernization.

When Verne was writing his later novels, sound recording and data communication technologies were already a solid reality, in tandem with the emergence of the moving images industry.⁴⁹ In this context, *Le Château* can hardly be interpreted as futuristic science: at stake were the aesthetic and social practices favored by new technologies. In his comparative analysis of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Verne's *Le Château*, Raj Shah offers valuable insights on Verne's "fin-de-siècle anxiety" towards the aesthetic, philosophical, and even anthropological implications of recording technologies. As a writer and an artist, argues Shah, Verne perceived that recording technologies were able to sever ties between author and creation. By dislocating the aesthetic experience "from one of physical immediacy to one of alienation and distance," the disembodied voice challenges "the phonocentric privileging of speech over writing," thus "exposing the implicit metaphysical assumption of a speaking presence as illusory."⁵⁰ The acousmatic separation between the sound and its source (*L'Île à hélice*) becomes in the case of the recorded voice of a dead singer (*Le Château*) a tormenting and phantasmagorical separation between the presence of the singing voice and its transcendental existence. Verne understood that the acute sense of nostalgia opened up by this technologically-mediated separation could generate new forms of cultural fetishism. Sound and image recording technologies offered "new modes of perversion and fetishism in their transmogrification of the cult of relics through increasingly and uncannily accurate mechanical reproductions."⁵¹

This idea of cultural fetishism and its implications for the use of recording technologies has not been explored enough in musicological studies devoted to *Le Château*. In his detailed analysis of the novel, Newark has

49 As noted by Unwin, "it was by no means unthinkable in such a climate to conclude that real-time sound-and-image communication was not far off, and there was feverish speculation about the possibilities it opened up" (*Jules Verne*, 45).

50 Raj Shah, "Counterfeit Castles: The Age of Mechanical Reproduction in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Jules Verne's *Le Château des Carpathes*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 56, no. 4 (2014): 429.

51 Shah, "Counterfeit Castles", 429.

insisted on the psychological, philosophical, and musical meanings of the novel. The core of his interpretation is the sense of duplication, distance, simultaneity, and eventually crisis provoked by the double existence of a real voice and its recording.⁵² Through the notion of re-enactment, Newark links the tradition of the Gothic novel as a genre (the return of the past haunting Gothic narratives) to the new possibilities of listening offered by the recording—i.e., playback, pause, and re-play. And re-enacting seems to affect the overall structure of the novel.⁵³

The Gothic quality of the recording—i.e., its being haunted by the past—is central in Verne’s novel. De Gortz, however, is not merely a dark, Gothic character; he is also a pioneer in listening practices. The words used by Newark and Shah to describe de Gortz’s behavior—e.g., “compulsively/compulsive,” “desperate,” “fetishism,” “fatalism,” “cult of relics,” etc.—tend to magnify his bizarreness and eccentricity, especially with regards to the use of Stilla’s recording: “the vitality of opera reception in the theatre is replaced by, and contrasted with, the sterility of compulsive private listening.”⁵⁴ This is certainly true. Yet, the use of the term “sterility” belies a potential misunderstanding. It seems to me that De Gortz behaves as a *fan* towards Stilla, as “a fanatic admirer.”⁵⁵ The use of recording technologies only reinforces his peculiar attachment to the diva.

Interpreting de Gortz not as a “maniac” or a “psychopath,” but rather as a fan, changes our perspective of his role in the novel, while also shedding light onto the cultural history of opera fandom in relation to recording technologies. This perspective parallels Verne’s ambivalent fascination with his character, as well as his general approach towards science fiction, where mystery and supernatural events—in this case the haunted castle and de Gortz’s inscrutable behavior—are eventually explained through concrete scientific understanding and technological developments. Even today, both mainstream and journalistic discourses tend to overemphasize unusual be-

52 “For Verne, rather than Stilla’s ceasing to exist when no longer allowed to sing, or when her song is stolen, it is the simultaneous existence of voice-object and its simulacrum that causes the crisis—a crisis that is as much narrative as emotional. ... Going round and round, like the wax cylinder secretly at its centre, the remainder of *Le Château des Carpathes* is nothing less than a study of the compulsive aspect of various kinds of repetition: traumatic re-enactment, Lacanian search for the lost comforting voice, desperate attempt to supply the lack of musical closure, gratification of the recurring need for operatic jouissance, and so on” (Newark, *Opera in the Novel*, 132).

53 Newark, 130.

54 Newark, 131.

55 Verne, *The Castle of the Carpathians*, 209.

havior, reducing fandom to a site of curiosity and stereotypes. The theories developed within the context of fan studies—a field emerged as an extension of media and cultural studies—can provide a better frame to understand de Gortz’s practices. The transformative impact of mass media culture and the interplay between media, institutions, and highly engaged audiences are at the core of fan studies. In his seminal *Textual Poachers* (1992), Henry Jenkins offers an ethnographic account of particular niches among media fans—i.e., television fans (such as the fandom for Star Trek). Through the analysis of their social institutions, cultural practices, and complex relationship to capitalism, Jenkins posits the key notion of participatory culture: “rejecting media-fostered stereotypes of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers” to understand them “as active producers and manipulators of meanings.”⁵⁶

What links de Gortz and a Trekkie (a fan of Star Trek)? As a matter of fact, nineteenth-century music lovers have played an important role in the cultural historiography of fandom. Over several important publications, Cavicchi has studied the emergence of the music audience as a distinct community throughout the nineteenth century in the United States and has analyzed the development of the modern music lover in large urban areas. The word *fan* is an abbreviation of *fanatic*, meaning a religious maniac and a political zealot:

Even though there were no *fans* before 1880, there were *amateurs*, *beggars*, *boomers*, *buffs*, *bugs*, *connoisseurs*, *devotees*, *dilettantes*, *enthusiasts*, *fanatics*, *the fancy*, *fiends*, *gluttons*, *habitués*, *heads*, *hounds*, *kranks*, *lions*, *longhairs*, *lovers*, *maniacs*, *matinee girls*, *nuts*, *rooters*, *Lisztians*, *Wagnerians*, and more. In thinking about the history of fandom, then, rather than starting with use of the term *fan*, we might do better to consider the patterns of behavior the term was meant to describe.⁵⁷

From a sociological perspective, opera fans seem to practice their obsession via an ethic of self-sacrifice based on intense attendance. This “heavily personalized investment,” as explained by Claudio Benzecry in his ethnography of the Teatro Colón’s *aficionados*, tends to be “dismissed with suffixes

⁵⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.

⁵⁷ Daniel Cavicchi, “Fandom Before ‘Fan’: Shaping the History of Enthusiastic Audiences,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 6, no. 1 (2014): 54.

like *-mania*, *-philia*, and *-pathia*” and clearly shows “the impossibility of finding an explanation among the usual sociological suspects (status, networks, class reproduction).”⁵⁸ According to Antoine Hennion, the opera fan “is more prone to thinking about music in terms of attaining intense states of emotion,” possibly “because of the singing, the body, the divas, the tendency to eroticize the voice.” The vocabulary of drug addiction or of sexuality is often mentioned, “as much by observers as by participants.”⁵⁹ However, the abrupt musical enjoyment and even the sense of spiritual elevation experienced by opera fans are the consequence of a set of practices, institutions, devices, and technologies.

De Gortz’s operatic passion for Stilla can be interpreted as the mediated behavior of a fan. His sense of “longing,” to paraphrase Cavicchi, is carried out not only through compulsive and private listening. Rather, De Gortz’s fandom involves a whole array of activities, such as: traveling around European theaters; collecting memorabilia about Stilla; buying and organizing accommodation, tickets, and meals; and finally producing bootlegs, and even creating a quasi-hologram of his favorite singer, duplicating her voice in a rather peculiar setting—De Gortz and Orfanik thus create a site-specific audiovisual installation *avant la lettre*. The immediacy of the musical enjoyment felt by de Gortz in experiencing Stilla’s simulacrum is the result of several mediations, mediators, and actions. As Benzecry observes, musical taste is driven “by the many devices and practices implied in liking something.”⁶⁰ The relationship between the music lover and the object of their passion is influenced by institutional contexts, the authority of other fans, relatives, and friends, and the social play of identification and differentiation; furthermore, musical passion is a reflective practice, fans being aware of their gestures and rites. As Hennion notes, listening is a highly organized activity aimed at achieving a loss of control: it is not a matter of doing something, but of making something happen.⁶¹ As Cavicchi affirms in his study of nineteenth-century music fans, music lovers were those who wanted to perpetuate and support feelings of connection with music, performers and concert venues beyond the limited and ephemeral musical participation afforded by the purchase of a concert ticket.

58 Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 186.

59 Antoine Hennion, *The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation*, trans. Margaret Rigaud and Peter Collier (New York: Routledge, 2015), 275–76.

60 Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic*, 8.

61 Hennion, *The Passion for Music*, 278.

Some [music lovers] maintained an extraordinarily active audience life, attending concerts several nights a week. ... Others pursued artists outside of the concert hall, waiting in front of hotels for a glimpse of their favorite star or going on pilgrimages to the homes of European composers and performers. Many concertgoers, especially after the 1850s, attempted to re-create their favorite concert performances by collecting and playing sheet music for the pieces performed. Others attempted to fix on paper every moment, every feeling during a concert, their diaries acting as stand-ins for the performances themselves.⁶²

Others, one may add, started listening to their favorite operas, divas, and arias via remote live transmissions (i.e., the *théâtrophone*) and recording technologies. In the late 1890s, this practice was already a reality. The activities of the music lover described by Cavicchi were reinforced by the possibilities offered by the fact of recording. De Gortz as a fan repudiates “the primacy of direct experience through persistent mediatization.”⁶³ Verne shows us how fandom and media technologies are strictly correlated: modern opera lovers are typically technophiles, and practices of cultural nostalgia (such as the cult of the voice of dead divas) are constantly shaped by the rise of new technologies.⁶⁴ Verne was not a seer, but rather a sharp observer. De Gortz is an opera fan placed between two eras of audience behavior; the evolution of his character—from the touring opera lover following Stilla to the compulsive listener of her recorded voice—celebrates the coexistence, so to speak, between the typical behavior related to “nineteenth-century urban entertainment (in the form of commodified performance and mass-published texts)” and the new practices fostered by “twentieth-century media technology (in the form of recording and broadcasting).”⁶⁵ Of course, this is not meant as a strict temporal dichotomy:

Even though the advent of the phonograph was a revolutionary moment in music, in which new kinds of repeated listening or mediated intimacy with performers emerged, we can also see how those behaviors might have opened

62 Cavicchi, “Fandom before ‘fan,’” 60.

63 Shah, “Counterfeit Castles,” 454.

64 The burial of the recorded voices at Paris Opera in 1907 is a striking example. See Emmanuel Reibel, “Fantasmagories de l’écoute: autour des urnes de l’Opéra (1907–2007),” in *Écoute multiple. Écoute des multiples*, ed Pierre Fargeton and Béatrice Ramaut-Chevassus (Paris: Hermann, 2019), 71–89.

65 Cavicchi, “Fandom before ‘fan,’” 56.

up a bit earlier, especially in continuities carried over from the culture of nineteenth-century “music lovers.”⁶⁶

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the evolution and development of the long-lasting relationship between opera singers, opera fans, and new recording technologies by drawing on the work of Jules Verne. Based on reliable empirical observations, the literary imagination developed by Verne in the late nineteenth century offers a viewpoint not only on the trends, idiosyncrasies, and fears of his epoch but also on new, emergent listening practices. A witty and knowledgeable observer of the French theatrical and musical world of his time, Verne has offered some sarcastic critiques of this world and its idols, such as the Grand Entrepôt Dramatique and the depiction of the music of the future in *Paris au xx^e siècle*, his satirical description of French grand operas in *Une fantaisie du docteur Ox*, or even his love for Offenbach. But Verne has also explored the impact of recording and communication technologies on the practices of audience and listeners in the late nineteenth century: collective acousmatic listening (the billionaires and their théâtrophone in *L'Île à hélice*), distracted listening (in-home loud-speaker systems in *L'Île à hélice*), “fast-forward” listening (*Une fantaisie du docteur Ox*), the privatization of listening and the wider activities of technologically-informed fandom (de Gortz in *Le Château des Carpathes*). More importantly, Verne has offered some thought-provoking reflections, based on vivid concrete situations, on the long-lasting role of technology and the media in shaping the society and the cultural sphere, from the emergence of modern music fandom and the parallel commodification of performing arts as a form of entertainment and cultural industry to the philosophical implications of the act of recording and the mediatization of artistic experience.

It does not matter today to verify the validity of Verne’s predictions; rather, it is important to point out the concrete value of his preoccupations since they shed light on basic tenets and outcomes of modernization as a cultural force. Verne did not mean to see into the future.⁶⁷ Instead, he commented

⁶⁶ Cavicchi, 56.

⁶⁷ Daniel Compère, “Jules Verne and the Limitations of Literature,” in Smyth, *Jules Verne*, 42.

on the imminence of the present, aware of the entertaining role literature and theater have on our everyday life. Opera, performing arts, and communication technologies were at the core of Verne's thought, and our present is also the result of his wondrously staged futures.

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Abstract

This article analyzes several novels and short stories by Jules Verne devoted to opera, audio technologies, and audience practices. This portion of Verne's output is particularly thought-provoking for the cultural history of recording technologies, technologically-influenced listening practices, audience behavior, and music fandom. As often in Verne, the exploration of art worlds is connected with the exploration of technological inventions, such as recording and broadcast technologies. This article focuses in particular on *L'Île à hélice* (1895) and *Le Château des Carpathes* (1892). These novels are linked to their wider cultural, social, and technological contexts as well as to recent theoretical frameworks developed in the field of opera studies, sound studies, media studies, fan studies, the cultural history of technology, and Verne studies. The aim of the article is to shed light on the genesis of the relation between operatic audiences and audio technologies through a survey of Jules Verne's visionary and imaginative narratives.

Nicolò Palazzetti is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Music and Theatre at La Sapienza University of Rome. He has recently won a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship from the European Commission for researching opera fandom in the digital age. After his studies in Aesthetics at the University of Bologna, he obtained a PhD in Cultural Sociology and Musicology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris (2017). From 2017 to 2018, he worked as a Teaching Fellow at the University of Birmingham and from 2019 to 2021 as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Strasbourg. Nicolò obtained research grants from the Giorgio Cini Foundation, Venice, the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, and the Institute of Musical Research of the University of London. He has presented his research on music, theater, and opera in ten different European countries and has published several essays and articles in international academic journals, including the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* and the *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*. He is the author of the monograph *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making*, published by The Boydell Press, UK in 2021.

