

## Book Reviews

**Megan Steigerwald Ille. *Opera for Everyone: The Industry's Experiments with American Opera in the Digital Age*. University of Michigan Press, 2024. 308 pp. ISBN 9780472904303.**

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Megan Steigerwald Ille's *Opera for Everyone* is a novel contribution to opera scholarship. In keeping with the so-called Performative Turn in music studies,<sup>1</sup> Ille focuses on the experiences of performers and audiences, creative and collaborative processes such as rehearsals and performances, and opera's ethical and political dimensions, including economics and the legacy of colonialism. She employs an ethnographic approach to explore these aspects.<sup>2</sup> Her main case study is the Los Angeles-based experimental opera company The Industry. She analyzes four of their innovative productions—*Invisible Cities* (2013), *Hopscotch* (2015), *Galileo* (2017), and *Sweet Land* (2020). These productions allow her to reflect on the implications of new models of operatic production for both performers and audiences. The Industry challenges traditional opera by taking performances out of the opera house, blending contemporary listening practices with operatic spectatorship, and confronting the genre's ties to colonialism. This approach highlights the tensions embedded in opera between historical and experimental practices,

<sup>1</sup> The Performative Turn involved a shift from positivist epistemology toward meaning-making processes, from structure to culture, and from texts to performances and experiences.

<sup>2</sup> According to Steigerwald Ille, “while contemporary and historical operatic performance have long been an object of musicological study, ethnographic methodologies respond to increased critical interest in opera scholarship informed by practitioners. Moreover, this methodological orientation allows me to move away from the primacy of an operatic text that still dominates a significant portion of scholarship focused on performance” (6).

live and mediated performances, closed and open production systems, and colonial and anticolonial operatic models.

Steigerwald Ille draws on her background as both a vocal performer and an opera scholar to explore experimental operas and reflect on her shifting perspectives: she feels intimidated as a performer yet fascinated as an audience member.<sup>3</sup> Through her ethnographic work, she became a participant-observer during rehearsals and productions, crafting a polyphonic text that gives voice to the multiple participants involved in these works. This collaborative form of scholarship, for her, is the ideal lens through which to view opera, a fundamentally collaborative art form. Collaborative scholarship is especially revealing when it comes to The Industry, a company that reimagines spectatorship to “eliminate that gap between everyday life and art making” (1). The Industry’s “site-responsive” productions, as defined by artistic director Yuval Sharon, blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, engaging with the locations as if they were active participants in the performance.<sup>4</sup> By taking opera out of the opera house, Sharon’s productions alter expectations, question deep-seated conventions, and raise compelling questions about space, mediation, artistic representation, and reality.

“Opera for everyone” is an expression that encapsulates the main vision of The Industry. As Steigerwald Ille notes in her book’s introduction, the phrase originated from a 2014 audio interview with Sharon and later became the company’s slogan. It reflects their commitment to challenge opera’s historical elitism and the exclusivity often associated with its performance spaces. While seemingly simple, the expression is fraught with complexities. The slogan raises questions about why everyone should be interested in opera and highlights issues related to opera’s accessibility—or lack thereof—due to economic, spatial, social, personal, historical, and even musical constraints. Steigerwald Ille confronts these challenges head-on, opening her book with the following questions (5–6):

<sup>3</sup> See Kristen Turner, “Megan Steigerwald Ille, *Opera for Everyone: The Industry’s Experiments with American Opera in the Digital Age* (U Michigan Press, 2024),” October 25, 2024, in *New Books in Music*, podcast hosted by Kristen Turner, episode 254, <https://podcasts.apple.com/in/podcast/megan-steigerwald-ille-opera-for-everyone-the-id425448670?i=1000674415821>.

<sup>4</sup> According to Sharon, “rather than a background, the location is a character itself, and the productions search for connection and dialogue with the found environment. This process brings immediacy and history to the surface—since, unlike the ‘invisible’ space of the theater, the site is an inextricable partner in the performance.” Yuval Sharon, *A New Philosophy of Opera* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2024), 204.

Should, or can opera be for everyone, and do operas outside the opera house function differently for “everyone” than those within? Do experimental practices explored by companies like The Industry coexist with notions of accessibility? What structural inequalities in the US operatic ecosystem, including the conditions of performers laboring in traditional and experimental spaces, must change for this statement to be true?

The book is organized into four chapters, framed by an introduction and an epilogue. Each chapter examines a core dimension of The Industry’s work—mobile music, operatic economics, experiments with institutionality, and anticolonial opera—through detailed analyses of specific productions in chronological order: *Invisible Cities* (Chapter 1), *Hopscotch* (Chapter 2), *Galileo, War of the Worlds*, and *ATLAS* (Chapter 3), and *Sweet Land* (Chapter 4). The book foregrounds often-overlooked dimensions of opera, such as experiential spectatorship, performer/audience interactions, and the creative and collaborative processes that occur during rehearsals. The result is both refreshing and insightful, emphasizing the “genre’s multiplicity” and opera’s “polyphonic performances” (7). Yet a latent dimension in the book—complexity—is not fully embraced. Complexity refers to phenomena that emerge from a collection of *interacting* objects or entities.<sup>5</sup> The emergent properties of a complex system cannot be observed in its individual components separately, as these properties result from their interconnections. Steigerwald Ille’s focus on dynamic relationships and complex systems calls for a more holistic approach.

The book opens with a quote from a radio interview with Sharon, in which he poses the following question: “What if opera is actually an *emerging* art form?” (1).<sup>6</sup> That is, what if we focus on performances rather than canonical texts? Instead of fixed, individual products, we have organic, collaborative processes that unfold in the here and now. He goes even further: what if, instead of re-creation, each performance becomes an opportunity for novelty and imagination? “Opera’s inherent complexity and layers of signification give the art form a singular and vital fascination: as a space for a multiplicity of meaning, for indeterminacy and ultimately enchantment.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Paul Atkinson, “Making Opera Work: Bricolage and the Management of Dramaturgy,” *Music & Arts in Action* 3, no. 1 (2010): 3–19, and Giorgio Biancorosso and Roberto Calabretto (eds.), *Scoring Italian Cinema: Patterns of Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 2025, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> Italics added.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon, *A New Philosophy of Opera*, 88.

According to Sharon, opera is closer to poetry than to narrative. Ambiguity is a core dimension of his productions because, as he rightly observes, live arts require interdependence, and in the theater, “the spectator is our final and most important collaborator.”<sup>8</sup> By foregrounding relationality and ambiguity, Sharon focuses on the emergent properties that the complex system of each performance brings to life.

While Steigerwald Ille is clearly aware of the complexity of operatic performance, her analyses occasionally break down the event into discrete components rather than exploring their interconnected dynamics. This mirrors the tension between traditional and innovative perspectives on opera she herself identifies in *The Industry*’s productions.

In Chapter 1, “Opera as Mobile Music: *Invisible Cities*,” she examines how the opera draws on contemporary listening modes and digital technologies (specifically, the audience’s use of wireless headphones) to reformulate operatic listening and foreground individuated spectatorship. *Invisible Cities* was produced in collaboration with the L.A. Dance Project and took place in Los Angeles Union Station. Both the opera and Italo Calvino’s source novel portray Kublai Khan as a skeptical listener and Marco Polo as an unreliable narrator. This premise of distrust, which enhances the ambiguity of communication and the need for interpretation, aligns with the performance setup itself. On one hand, performers in plain clothes and audience members wearing headphones found themselves immersed in the uninterrupted flow of everyday life at the station. On the other hand, commuters and passersby unexpectedly bumped into “invisible” performances by a cappella singers and seemingly spontaneous dance sequences. According to Steigerwald Ille, “the opera was designed around an assumed fluency with mobile modes of musical consumption” (48). She refers in this context to Jonathan Sterne’s concept of *audible technique*, defined as “the ways in which listeners assimilate new ways of understanding and interacting with sound in tandem with these same technologies of mechanical reproduction” (49). Sterne explains how new technologies at the end of the nineteenth century detached sound from its source, thereby separating the sense of hearing from the other senses. Referring specifically to headphones, Sterne argues that they “allowed for the isolation of listeners in a ‘world of sounds’ where they could focus on the various characteristics of the sounds to which they attended.”<sup>9</sup> This type of

<sup>8</sup> Sharon, 255.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 24.

detached listening experience can be likened to the white cube paradigm that dominated the display of art during Modernism. Traditionally understood as the erasure of context in the contemplation of art, the white cube in fact created a specific context for art: one in which time and sociality were excluded from the experience of artworks, and viewers became self-conscious of their own role as contemplators.<sup>10</sup> This dimension is central to Steigerwald Ille's reconstruction of The Industry's creative trajectory.

Listening to music through headphones gives the listener the impression of a private auditory space. Some audience members quoted in the book also mentioned that headphones created an immersive, filmic experience, as mobile music aestheticized the surrounding environment. While privacy relates to intimacy, both immersion and cinematic references open up a more complex spatial and audiovisual experience. The use of headphones thus triggered an experience that cannot be reduced to a purely auditory one. To be sure, through the use of headphones, the audience was immersed in a context shaped by the music. However, cinema has also played a key role in the development of new—or evolving—listening practices. Steigerwald Ille acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the resulting experience, but her focus on headphones brings her closer to Sterne's notion of *detached listening* when she argues (60) that

Sharon's production decision creates a hierarchy in which the shared aural experience is prioritized as the core of the production rather than a consistent visual experience. The performer's voice is separated from her body, and the audience, the staging seems to suggest, does not necessarily need the latter at all times.

Yet by merging a staged sonic dimension with a fluid dramatic setting, Sharon's goal was to break traditional hierarchies rather than create new ones. Moreover, as audience members themselves reported, listening through headphones did not produce a detached listening experience—quite the opposite. The unexpected and suspenseful mingling of staged and non-staged realities in Los Angeles Union Station pushed each listener/commuter to engage in a constant process of meaning-making specific to their spatial, temporal, and existential situation.<sup>11</sup> Listening is a matter of perspective

<sup>10</sup> See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> See Giorgio Biancorosso, *Situated Listening: The Sound of Absorption in Classical*

and a condition shaped by unique personal circumstances. I agree with Steigerwald Ille that in *Invisible Cities*, “headphones initiate a process of spectatorship.” However, I don’t believe that “audience members give interpretive meaning to the opera’s staging, *regardless* of what visual action is taking place based on where they are in the station at a specific time” (59).<sup>12</sup> Both the action and the ever-shifting locales play key roles in the synchresis that is at the core of *Invisible Cities*’ spectatorial experience.

Chapter 2, “Operatic Economics: Liveness and Labor in *Hopscotch*,” focuses on an opera that takes issues of mediation, liveness, participatory spectatorship, and performers’ experiences one step further. *Hopscotch* is based on a non-linear narrative divided into 24 chapters distributed across three different color-coded routes. The opera incorporated a hybrid set of viewing interfaces for spectators. Some audience members attended and simultaneously recorded/broadcasted live performances from limousines around Los Angeles, while others watched the livestream performance in a space called the Central Hub. The audience also included onlookers scattered throughout different locations in Los Angeles. The performance fostered a dynamic mode of viewership by repeatedly altering the “frames” through which the audience experienced the performance. *Hopscotch* completely broke the fourth wall and fostered an unprecedented level of intimacy—borne out of sheer physical proximity—between performers and audience members. In a reversal of Brecht’s alienation effect, it was not the audience who felt alienated by a highly constructed operatic representation, but rather the performers. While the audience seemed comfortable participating in such an unconventional operatic production, “the conflation of proximity with intimacy led to fraught experiences for performers on the other side of the livestream” (74). Steigerwald Ille refers to Edward Soja’s work on the role of spatiality in constructing networks of power to “provide a gloss on relationships between performers, audience members, bystanders, and the performative space of LA in *Hopscotch*” (74). She explains the difference between Soja’s Firstspace (the built, material environment), Secondspace (imagined or conceptual notions of that environment), and Thirdspace (lived space, merging the former two along with the dimensions of spatiality, historicality, and sociality). I found this reference quite illuminating, as it reintroduced the perspective of complexity in opera. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places*,

*Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Italics added.

Soja refers to Jorge Luis Borges's story *The Aleph* as both an inspiration and an apt metaphor to grasp what he means by "Thirdspace." *The Aleph* is an allegory on the infinite complexities of space and time—a place "where all places are." In Borges's story, the narrator feels frustrated because he cannot explain this place using language, as language has a linear dimension, while the Aleph is characterized by simultaneity. According to Soja,

*everything* comes together in Thridspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the trans-disciplinary, everyday life and unending history.<sup>13</sup>

The paragraph perfectly encapsulates what *Hopscotch* and many of The Industry's productions are about. Steigerwald Ille argues that "*Hopscotch* overlayed Secondspace (imagined) on top of Firstspace (built) to blur the boundaries between when the operatic performance began and reality ended" (83). I, too, see moments of blurred boundaries as good examples of Thridspace in this production, but I don't think the layering metaphor is apt here. Instead of the imagined being layered on top of the physical, what this production prompted was a merging of realities through lived experiences that dissolved any prior distinctions. The spectators shaped the performance by broadcasting what they were watching and listening to via their smartphones. They also felt like actors in a film while riding in the limousines alongside the performers. For Steigerwald Ille, the audience's sense of control and participation is "an illusion of agency rather than agential power itself" (86). She explains that to ensure consistency across performances, the company had prerecorded videos of each scene during preview week, in case the live feed failed or audience members chose not to record and broadcast the performances they were witnessing to the Central Hub. According to her, this invisible backup plan "invalidates the efforts of the audience members as mediators" (87). However, based on the spectatorial experience and the author's insightful description and analysis of the mediated dimension of this production, I don't see how having these prerecorded videos could invalidate the audience members' gestures. By blurring the boundaries between mediation and

<sup>13</sup> Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 56–57.

liveness, Sharon simply—yet decisively—deepened the complexity of the operatic experience. I concur with Steigerwald Ille that the presence of a backup—and backhanded—plan “illustrates the ways in which mediation as *belief* rather than reality played a role in spectator experiences in the production” (87). Yet, to me, this reinforces the conflation of reality and fiction that *Hopscotch* performed, Soja theorized, and Borges articulated in *The Aleph*.

In Chapter 3, “Experiments with Institutionality: *Galileo*, *War of the Worlds*, and *ATLAS*,” Steigerwald Ille analyses three productions by The Industry during its three-year collaboration with the LA Philharmonic and explores the tension between the company’s innovative aesthetics and the traditional economic systems within which it operated. She distinguishes two types of institutional structures: the LA Phil’s closed network, based on replicability and circulation, and The Industry’s open assemblage, which fosters experimentation and flexibility. The choice of the terms *network* and *assemblage* in relation to institutional entities—repositories of established orders with existing norms—is productive. In complex systems theory, these terms describe different types of behaviors within any given system. Both a network and an assemblage consist of interconnected components that interact with one another. However, while networks tend toward stability, assemblages are characterized by dynamism. Steigerwald Ille aptly describes the U.S. opera industry “as an ecosystem in which aesthetic, institutional, and economic principles are intertwined” (116). She uses actor-network theory (ANT) to analyze institutional culture, contrasting ANT’s bounded networks with Gavin Steingo’s fluid assemblages in his model of broken networks.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the LA Phil aligns with the former, The Industry exemplifies the latter. Her analysis reveals the strengths and weaknesses of each model, sheds light on the compromises necessary in co-productions, and hints at how independent companies may also adopt closed models (e.g., Beth Morrison Projects). Open models “prevent the sorts of standardized processes of generic repetition key to closed systems... They have been heavily critiqued, however, for the way they institutionalize forms of economic instability” (132).

Among the three productions analyzed in this chapter, Steigerwald Ille views *Galileo* as a failure since it never made it into a full production. Sharon, however, “interpreted *Galileo*’s postponement and eventual cancella-

<sup>14</sup> Gavin Steingo, “Actors and Accidents in South African Electronic Music: An Essay on Multiple Ontologies,” *Contemporary Music Review* 37, no. 5–6 (2017): 554–74.

tion as an affirmation of The Industry's flexible processes" (130). *War of the Worlds* is interpreted "as an overt institutional critique of Western art music and the traditional concert hall space" (144). In this case, "a rigid assemblage led to success primarily because Sharon *had* to be in collaboration with the inflexible structure of the LA Phil" (146). Finally, *ATLAS*, an opera composed by Meredith Monk in 1991, moved from being an experimental production that did not fit into a closed institutional system in 1991 to an established one by 2019, due to the influence of Monk's reputation and her rigid creative process.

Chapter 4, "'What You Remember Doesn't Matter': Toward an Anticolonial Opera," examines how *Sweet Land* addresses the entanglement between opera and the legacy of colonialism through a collaborative creative process that deliberately inverted colonial hierarchies. The work tackles not only the historical ties between opera and colonialism but also the violence of settler colonialism and the mechanisms of coloniality. The production process deeply shaped the operatic representation. The creative team consisted of three pairs of multi-racial and multi-ethnic artists (153):

librettists Douglas Kearney (African American, arrivant), Aja Couchois Duncan (Ojibwe, French, and Scottish, Indigenous, settler), composers Raven Chacon (Diné, Indigenous) and Du Yun (Chinese, American immigrant), and directors Yuval Sharon (first-generation Israeli American, settler) and Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota, Indigenous).

According to Steigerwald Ille, *Sweet Land*'s original contribution lies in pioneering a structural change by incorporating a plethora of voices—writers, designers, performers, as well as composers. This truly collaborative production deployed a "strategic reassemblage," following Paperson, of the colonial machine's component parts.<sup>15</sup> Steigerwald Ille provides clear examples of such strategic reassemblage without overlooking the complexity of this process, as "'giving agency' and 'making space,' however, also describe processes within a stable hierarchy in which individuals in power decide to share it" (169). The crucial dimension that allowed this collaborative effort to succeed was trust. As many of the participants stated, after a lifetime of being tokenized and exploited, it took them some time to even accept and embrace the possibility of having their agency acknowledged and valued.

<sup>15</sup> See la paperson, *A Third University is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

In this chapter, Steigerwald Ille's self-reflective voice comes more to the fore. She acknowledges her own assumptions and biases, engaging in a process of (self-)realization that mirrored that of the creators and performers during rehearsals. Each person's lived experiences became fundamental sources in the formulation of an anticolonial critique of opera. Steigerwald Ille does an excellent job guiding the reader through the complex process behind this involved production and revealing the intersectional relationships among standard historical narratives, operatic conventions, and systems of subjugation.

*Sweet Land* is a case in point of a complex adaptive system. First, it is made possible by an ensemble of heterogeneous agents who make individual decisions about how to behave. A highly relevant dimension is that these decisions evolve over time. Second, the agents interact with one another, and their interactions lead to emergent phenomena—new realities that could not have been predicted and cannot be understood by analyzing the individual components. In these types of systems, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. According to Steigerwald Ille, “as a result of this dynamic rehearsal environment, some performers interpreted the rehearsal process itself as a form of social justice. ... performers were given the opportunity to rehearse not only the opera, but also the opportunity of self-assertion and dialogic exchange” (186). *Sweet Land* went beyond a superficial understanding of diversity and inclusion, focusing instead on deeply embracing Sharon's question: “How can the process of creating this work of art reflect the society we actually want to create?” (170).

This question brings us back to Sharon's goal of creating “opera for everyone.” The Industry's productions encourage audience interaction, create spaces for countercultural composers' music to be performed, and give voice to groups that are usually marginalized. As Steigerwald Ille acknowledges in the epilogue, they have also pushed opera scholars to move beyond the conventions of traditional scholarship and develop a new scholarly genre that blends textual analysis with ethnography and first-person reflection.

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