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Cover: Julia Bullock and Roderick Williams in Michel van der Aa's opera *Upload* (Dutch National Opera, 2021). © Marco Borggreve

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"That's How You Know He's Your Love": The Male Singing Voice and Disney's (Re)interpretation of the Male Romantic Lead

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In the 2007 Disney movie *Enchanted*, soon-to-be princess Giselle is expelled from the magical (and animated) kingdom of Andalasia and separated from her betrothed prince Edward who, just like her, is known to burst into song on romantic occasions, dazzling everyone with his operatic timbre. Giselle eventually finds herself lost in New York City, where she meets divorce lawyer Robert. She is puzzled by his matter-of-fact behavior towards his fiancée Nancy and asks him (in song, of course): "How does she know you love her?" She suggests that he should sing to her, to reassure her of his affection, but he quickly states: "I really don't sing." Naturally, in time, they fall in love and Robert starts to sing to Giselle, even if only with a quiet, breathy voice. *Enchanted* presents Edward as the classic Disney prince and Robert as his realistic counterpart, creating a clash of two different ways of expressing love: while Edward is happy to share his feelings by singing about them, Robert is bewildered by Giselle's suggestion that he address Nancy in song. This is unsurprising when considering that many boys and young men seem to view singing as a gender-inadequate activity—and associate it with femininity or homosexuality.[1]

Enchanted thus suggests a juxtaposition of the "Disney way" of expressing love, which is mostly done in song, and the "real world way," where such

1 For statistics and possible reasons see Scott D. Harrison, Graham F. Welch, and Adam Adler, "Men, Boys and Singing," in *Perspectives on Males and Singing*, ed. Scott D. Harrison, Graham F. Welch, and Adam Adler (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 3–12. This issue exists in many genres, as previous research has shown. For example, early 2000s R&B songs often pit female singing against male rapping. This reinscribes a longstanding "stereotyping of music as feminine, concerned with senses, and of language as masculine, a rational structure." Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction: Oh Boy! Making Masculinity in Popular Music," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 10.

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behavior conflicts with traditional gender roles. The term "Disney" refers here to the studio as a supra-agent, which, through its franchise, aesthetics, and marketing "set the standard for gendered representation in children's motion picture production."[2] This juxtaposition is also visible in the overall habitus of Edward and Robert, who stand for two different models of masculinity. Edward is a typical example of the "boy" as a cultural icon. According to Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens, the "boy" is "man enough to be desired and desiring, and yet boy enough to be unthreatening."[3] His androgyny, however ("the hairlessness, his 'pretty' face"[4]) comes with the danger of disrupting the binaries of sex and gender, thus upsetting the structures of desire that are based on such binaries.[5] This is precisely what motivates Robert's more masculine habitus: by refusing to sing, Robert makes sure not to appear too feminine. In the same way, his outer appearance shows no sign of androgyny: he appears more mature, is not as clean-shaven and—as an amazed Giselle finds out—even has chest hair.

My evaluation of the soundtracks to sixty feature-length Disney animated movies (excluding PIXAR-productions and direct-to-DVD-sequels) reveals that the musical display of romantic masculinity is less coherent than the juxtaposition in *Enchanted* suggests. The results do not align with the "Disney way" of expressing love through song. Instead, genuine love duets are relatively rare. I have only detected five examples: "Once Upon a Dream" from *Sleeping Beauty*, "So This Is Love" from *Cinderella*, "A Whole New World" from *Aladdin*, "If I Never Knew You" from *Pocahontas* (featured only in the extended version), and "I See the Light" from *Tangled*.[6] Solo love songs sung by the male protagonist are even rarer—I found only three titles: "One Song" from *Snow White*, "Heaven's Light" from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* and "Lost in the Woods" from *Frozen II.*[7] In many iconic romantic scenes, a third party performs the song, for example the teapot in

2 Katia Perea, "Touching Queerness in Disney Films *Dumbo* and *Lilo & Stitch*," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018): 225, 2.

3 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction," 6.

4 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, 6.

5 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, 6.

6 There are a few others, which for various reasons I do not consider genuine love duets: in "Love Is an Open Door" from *Frozen,* Hans only pretends to love Anna. The exchange between Simba and Nala in "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" and between Duchess and Thomas O' Malley in *The Aristocats'* "Everybody Wants to Be a Cat" are too short to be considered true love duets. The same applies to "Something There" from *Beauty and the Beast*.

7 "Hellfire" from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is in my opinion not a love song, as it only speaks of desire (and hatred) and not of love.

Beauty and the Beast, Sebastian the crab in *The Little Mermaid*, the Italian cook in *The Lady and the Tramp*. This frequent use of the observer love song can be understood as a storytelling mode—the cinematic adaptation of the "once upon a time" in a fairy tale. Ray's love song to Evangeline in *The Princess and the Frog* is a hybrid form: he sings about his own feelings and uses this song at the same time to comment on the emerging love between the leading couple Tiana and Naveen.

Despite *Enchanted* claiming otherwise, the combination of masculinity and the musical expression of romantic feelings seems thus to pose a challenge, even in the Disney universe. In this essay, I will conduct a comparative analysis of the love duets "A Whole New World" from *Aladdin* (1992) and "I See the Light" from *Tangled* (2010), as well as the solo love songs "Lost in the Woods" from *Frozen II* (2019) and "Heaven's Light" from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). By choosing songs from the "Renaissance Era" as well as from the era of the "Deconstructed Diva"[8] it becomes possible to link the analyses to a historical timeline of vocal masculinities, in order to discuss if and how male singing contributed to and coincided with Disney's changing approach towards masculinity. To this date, this development has only been analyzed with regard to the princesses. Liske and Zelda Potgieter observe that "over the span of the 76 years of her existence we see Disney's princess transformed from one who is always virtuous and never evil, and who has no other desire or purpose but to be a wife and mother, to one who knows her own strengths and weaknesses, her good side and her bad, and who no longer needs a man in order to feel fulfilled."[9] Jennifer Fleeger observes a similar development and links it to changing vocal styles:

> The first wave of princesses, the eponymous hand-drawn characters in *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) sing operatically. The second and largest group, which begins thirty years later with the computer-aided color of *The Little Mermaid* and then goes on to *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), performs as if they were on a Broadway stage. The final category is characterized by 3D computer animation and pop vocalizations. In that vein, *Tangled* (2010), its first entry, stars Mandy Moore.[10]

8 These categories follow Potgieter's analyses of the Singing Princess in Liske Potgieter and Zelda Potgieter, "Deconstructing Disney's Divas: A Critique of the Singing Princess as Filmic Trope," *Acta Academica* 48, no. 2 (2016): 49.

9 Potgieter and Potgieter, 55.

10 Jennifer Fleeger, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine* (New

Building on these findings, I will focus on three central questions: (1) whether various models of romantic masculinity are mirrored in specific stylistic musical or vocal devices; (2) how these connections relate to the longstanding tradition of voice categories (*Stimmfach*) in opera; and (3) in which ways the music, and especially the singing, comment on or even contradict the portrayed masculinity.

Of Boys, Beasts, and Postfeminist Heroes

Romantic love is a key topic in most Disney films. According to a 2003 study of twenty-six Disney films, falling in love is an almost inevitable and immediate consequence of a meeting between a man and a woman:[11] "In *The Fox and the Hound*, after Big Mama realized Vixey and Todd [*sic*] were about the same age, she got a big smile on her face and began to tell Vixey about how handsome Todd was. As soon as Vixey and Todd met, they fell in love."[12] The indispensability of this narrative becomes evident in sequels to films such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*: while Quasimodo's love for Esmeralda is unrequited in the first film, he successfully wins the heart of the girl Madellaine in the direct-to-video sequel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame II*. By giving in to this narrative, the sequel "both addresses and cheapens the previous movie's notes of melancholy."[13] According to Amy M. Davis, this concentration on romantic love is due to its low-risk potential. She argues that Disney shies away from being too experimental and progressive in its depictions of gender due to the risk of losing audiences and thus losing money.[14] In contrast, the "tried and true plotlines found

York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 108. For the third group, Fleeger also mentions *Frozen* (2013) and *Brave* (2012).

11 In 18 films, falling in love only takes minutes (*Dwarfs, Bambi, Cinderella, Lady, Sleeping, Dalmatians, Stone, Jungle, Aristocats, Robin, Fox, Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, Lion, Pocahontas, Hunchback, Hercules*). In *The Aristocats* and *The Lion King* it takes a little longer—about a day. Litsa R. Tanner et al., "Images of Couples and Families in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films," *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 31, no. 5 (2003): 364.

12 Tanner et al., "Images of Couples and Families in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films," 365.

13 Jesse Hassenger, "*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Mulan* Are From Disney's Artistically Vital Years," *PopMatters*, March 14, 2013, https://www.popmatters.com/169163-the-hunchback-of-notre-damemulan-2495772610.html.

14 Amy M. Davis, *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 251.

in traditional tales," mostly based on romance, have proven to appeal to a mass audience.[15] Of course, they pose the constant conflict of deciding how to navigate the space between the values transported in traditional folklore and contemporary ideas of relationships and gender.[16] For example, the aforementioned 2003 study found that many Disney movies feature relationships with unequal divisions of power.[17] In the same way, Laura Béres claims that there is a tendency to romanticize men's control over and abuse of women.[18]

While the portrayal of the feminine is well researched, to some extent (e.g., by Potgieter, Fleeger) even with regard to changing vocal aesthetics, the vocal aesthetics of its male counterpart have widely been left undiscussed. Despite a significant increase in gender-focused research, including studies analyzing the evolution and categorization of "Disney men," the singing voice and its role in the process of characterization remains undiscussed. Amy Davis's monograph *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation* (2013), which twins with her earlier study on femininity *Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (2007),[19] identifies three broad depictions of Disney men: boys, heroes (both princes and non-aristocratic), and villains.[20] Many of the following studies have made Davis's categorization their starting point, such as Benjamin Hine et al.'s article, which examines representations of gender in prince and princess characters in Disney movies released between 2009 and 2016.[21] In an extensive statistical overview, they compare actions such as "fighting" and "crying" in order to shed light on the portrayal and evolution of gender-specific behavior. The category "shows emotion" is of particular interest in this paper, as it is a key aspect of the male romantic leads' singing. While no Disney prince has been caught crying so far,[22]

15 Davis, 251.

16 Davis, 251.

17 Tanner et al., "Images of Couples and Families," 365.

18 Laura Béres, "Beauty and the Beast: The Romanticization of Abuse in Popular Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999): 191–207.

19 Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2007).

20 Davis, *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains*.

21 Benjamin Hine et al., "The Rise of the Androgynous Princess: Examining Representations of Gender in Prince and Princess Characters of Disney Movies Released 2009–2016," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 12 (2018): 245.

22 This makes the crying king in *Tangled*, whom his tearlessly grieving wife consoles, even more striking.

Hine detects that Disney princes show more emotions in films from 2000 on. His statistics reveal that "shows emotion" accounted for almost 25% of the princes' behavior between 2000 and 2010, which is striking given that stoicism is regarded as an important masculine characteristic.[23] He concludes that "the largely absent, passive princes of the 1930s and 1950s, and the muscular, brave heroes of the 1980s and 1990s appear to have been succeeded by a troop of sensitive, fearful, but dashing men in the 21st century, thus supporting the argument that the men of Disney are complicated, to say the least."[24]

Michael Macaluso, who also observed this shift in the princes' behavior, links it to the phenomenon of postfeminist masculinity.[25] He identifies a number of Disney men "who [experience] some type of crisis or vulnerability, usually in relation to [their] understanding or performance of masculinity connected to work, family, partner, expectation, etc."[26] To illustrate this finding, he offers two models of Disney masculinity: the first is based on the categories established by Davis, the second includes his newly formed category of postfeminist Disney men. This category encompasses amongst others the romantic male leads Flynn Rider, Kristoff, and Prince Naveen, who all struggle with finding their identity and place in a romantic relationship.

BOY		HERO/PRINCE	VILLAIN
Pinocchio Miguel			
	Aladdin Peter Pan John Smith Quasimodo	Prince Charming Prince Phillip Prince Eric Tarzan Hercules	Gaston Ratcliffe Judge Frollo Shan Yu Jafar Dr. Facilier

Table 1. Models of Disney Masculinity (Michael Macaluso)

23 Hine et al., 11.

24 Hine et al., 10.

25 Michael Macaluso, "Postfeminist Masculinity: The New Disney Norm?," *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018): 221.

26 Macaluso, 221.

BOY	HERO/PRINCE	POST-FEMINIST HERO	VILLAIN
Pinocchio Miguel	Prince Charming Prince Phillip Prince Eric Tarzan Hercules	Mr. Incredible Kristoff Héctor Prince Naveen Flynn Rider	Gaston Ratcliffe Judge Frollo Shan Yu Jafar Dr. Facilier
Aladdin Peter Pan John Smith Quasimodo			Prince Hans
	Ralph Kuzco Maui		
	The Beast		

Table 2. Revised Models of Disney Masculinity (Michael Macaluso)

The phenomenon of postfeminist masculinity has been widely discussed within Media Studies. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker understand postfeminist masculinity as a discourse that "celebrates women's strength while lightly critiquing or gently ridiculing straight masculinity."[27] Valerie Palmer-Mehta speaks of "mediocre masculinity."[28] In contrast, Melissa Zimdar understands postfeminist masculinity as a new version of hegemonic masculinity that includes both the alpha male and the new male, who stands for a kinder and gentler masculinity.[29] This is closely linked to the concept of "hybrid masculinity", which Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe define as "the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men's gender

27 Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

28 Valerie Palmer-Mehta, "Men Behaving Badly: Mediocre Masculinity and *The Man Show*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 6 (2009): 1053–72.

29 Melissa Zimdars, "Having It Both Ways: *Two and a Half Men*, *Entourage*, and Televising Post-Feminist Masculinity," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 278–93.

performances and identities."[30] With this, new tropes of masculinity in the media are introduced. For example, Negra and Diane identify a regular use of "gay male identities," especially in wedding films.[31] John Alberti understands the "bromance" as a "splintering of the idea(l) of a unified construction of masculinity itself."[32] With the example of animated films, Berit Åström demonstrates how the depiction of postfeminist fathers is strengthened at the expense of mothers, who "may be allowed, if they remain in the background, supporting their husbands. But it is best for everyone if they are removed, leaving father and son to create their own family."[33]

Hine offers two contrasting explanations for the emergence of hybrid and postfeminist masculinity. On the one hand, the showing of emotions characteristic of these types of masculinity could serve as a means to discourage feminine behavior, as these traits are often portrayed in a negative way—the fearful and tentative Naveen and the affectionate and sensitive Kristoff being prominent examples. However, it is also possible that filmmakers want to act as a "catalyst for a dissection and re-evaluation of masculinity,"[34] and, in doing so, to present their younger audience with alternative role models, offering "important models of feminine behavior for boys amongst a plethora of hyper-masculine messages present in child and adult media."[35]

From Cock-Rockers to Crooners: The Changing Voice of Masculinity

Previous non-Disney related research shows that many of these questions attached to masculine emotionality, and especially romantic masculinity,

30 Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities," *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 3 (2014): 246.

31 Tasker and Negra, "Introduction," 21.

32 John Alberti, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy*: *Gender as Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 37.

33 Berit Åström, *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*: *Missing, Presumed Dead* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 254.

34 Hine et al., "The Rise of the Androgynous Princess," 11. With this, Hine is especially referring to the research by Sarah Coyne et al., "Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement with Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children," *Child Development* 87, no. 6 (2016): 1909–25, and Davis, *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains*.

35 Hine et al., "The Rise of the Androgynous Princess," 11.

are mirrored in discussions about male singing. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie identify two main types of pop music which they label "cock rock" and "teenybop": Cock rock is "music making in which performance is an explicit, crude and often aggressive expression of male sexuality."[36] In contrast, teenybop, which is mostly consumed by girls, transforms "male sexuality… into a spiritual yearning carrying only hints of sexual interaction. What is needed is not so much someone to screw as a sensitive and sympathetic soulmate, someone to support and nourish the incompetent male adolescent as he grows up."[37] Closely related to this is the genre "Bubblegum Music," meaning pop music in a catchy and upbeat style. It was strongly marked by the teen idols of the 1970s, with figures like Shaun Cassidy and Donny Osmond,[38] developing into the boy band style of the 1990s, where harmonies, tenor voices, and outbursts of falsetto were frequently used to create a more juvenile male presence.[39]

This categorization of linking music styles in general and singing styles in particular to masculinity is of course far more complex, and there are overlaps and contradictions. For example, Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens argue that in popular music, "vulnerability, multi-vocality, and falsetto are seen to be the stuff of 'anti-masculine' musics, situated in a dialogic relationship with the traditional 'cock-rock' canon and thereby exposing something of what we perceive to be 'masculinity' in musical expression."[40] In a similar way, Georgina Gregory observes that "boys are often reluctant to sing high notes when they approach their teen years."[41] However, there are at least two different varieties of voices belonging to the "cock-rock" genre, that do not exclude falsetto and vulnerability: the "power ballads" of the 1980s, with Robert Plant and Freddie Mercury's *heldentenor*, and the bluesier, huskier sound of singers like Paul Rodgers.[42] Another example for the complexity of this topic is the technique of crooning, the singing of "popular sentimental songs in a low, smooth voice, especially into

36 Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 374.

37 Frith and McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," 375.

38 Kim Cooper and David Smay, eds., *Bubblegum Music is the Naked Truth* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2001).

39 Georgina Gregory, *Boy Bands and the Performance of Pop Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 95–96.

40 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction," 7–8.

41 Gregory, *Boy Bands*, 96.

42 Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*: *Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 318–19.

a closelyheld microphone."[43] According to Biddle und Jarman-Ivens, intimate and soft crooning performs "a gendered work very different from an imprecisely pitched, half-shouted voice that seems to come from a large space, such as is favored in various rock musics."[44] This style of singing has often been criticized for being too feminine; Allison McCracken links this to historical and contemporary tendencies of *effemiphobia*.[45] At the same time, it seems to be powerfully attractive to many women, as McCracken demonstrates with singers such as Justin Bieber, for example,[46] and *Glee*'s Darren Criss, who portrays a gay character and is "more than happy to be an erotic object for both sexes."[47] Thus, "the pop crooner has been operating both in the commercial mainstream and on the fringes of gender normativity for decades and has been culturally stigmatized because of both associations."[48]

Of course, these questions are not exclusive to popular singing styles of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but have a longstanding tradition dating back to the operatic *Stimmfach*. The term *Stimmfach* emerged in nineteenth-century Germany when composers such as Carl Maria von Weber aimed to transfer the role categories of traditional drama to opera. While role categories had been present in opera since its beginnings (e.g., "prima soprano" and "buffo" in 17th Century opera), it was only in the nineteenth century that the description of voice types became more differentiated.[49] With the changing musical aesthetics and especially the growing orchestra, a need for heavier and more dramatic voices arose. This led to new categories such as the "tenore di forza" in contrast to the "tenore leggero."[50] In the twentieth century, the German conductor and musicologist Rudolf Kloiber made the first systematic approach to define voice types based on traditional role categories stemming from traditional drama. His *Handbuch der Oper* (1951) led to a normative understanding of the *Stimmfach*,

43 *Oxford English Dictionary*, OED Online, s.v. "croon, v.", accessed July 18, 2022, www.oed.com.

44 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, 10.

45 McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 34.

46 McCracken, 319.

47 McCracken, 327.

48 McCracken, 327.

49 Thomas Seedorf, "Stimmfach / Stimmfächer," in *Lexikon der Gesangsstimme: Geschichte, wissenschaftliche Grundlagen, Gesangstechniken, Interpreten*, ed. Ann-Christine Mecke et al., 2nd revised edition, Instrumenten-Lexika (Laaber: Laaber, 2018), 587–88.

50 Seedorf, 588.

which is influential to this day.[51] In contrast to the overall term "voice type," *Stimmfach* refers specifically to the operatic tradition and its subcategories are much richer with semantic connotations. The *Fachsystem* also plays a vital part in musicals. There, new categories like "pop soprano" or "Broadway soprano"—and the attribution of voices to specific styles such as blues, gospel, and rock, or techniques such as belting—amend the traditional categories.[52] And, as will be demonstrated, it is also vital for voice casting in Disney films, especially the princes from the early era—i.e., Snow White's, Aurora's, and Cinderella's love interests, who are classical tenors and sing with a classical operatic technique.

As the aforementioned literature makes clear, the reception of the portrayal of masculinity in Disney films is just as ambiguous and complicated as the portrayal itself. Indeed, there seems to be a thin line between the exact amount of emotionality men tend to display: on the one hand, making men emotionally available; and on the other, overriding their masculinity. This balancing act is also crucial for the male protagonists of the love songs analyzed in this chapter: as my analyses will show, they each struggle with specific aspects of what is considered "masculine," especially when it comes to negotiating this masculinity within the context of a romantic relationship. With Aladdin from the 1992 movie of the same name, Eugene from *Tangled* (2010), and Kristoff from *Frozen* (2013, as well as its sequel *Frozen II* in 2019), we meet three characters who have a lot in common. All three stories feature couples with different social backgrounds, with the men being poor orphans and the women princesses. Moreover, all three men are more experienced in the ways of the world than their respective princesses and they introduce the female characters to "real life." Aladdin and Eugene sing a love duet with their princesses, making these duets a part of the very small number of genuine Disney love duets. Kristoff sings a solo love song, just like Quasimodo, the protagonist from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). While Kristoff, Aladdin, and Eugene are the male romantic leads in love stories with happy endings, Quasimodo is less fortunate: the beautiful Romani girl Esmeralda only cares for him as a friend and falls instead for the dashing soldier Phoebus.

51 Seedorf, 587, 589. The reference is to Rudolf Kloiber, *Handbuch der Oper* (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse, 1951).

52 Seedorf, 589–90.

"A Whole New World"

In his revised model of Disney masculinity, Macaluso places Aladdin between the categories "boy" and "hero/prince" and this categorization is visible in the production process:[53] in the Oriental-Chinese fairy tale *Aladin,* which served as inspiration to the film, Aladdin is a young boy from China. While the studio decided to reset the tale in Arabia, they originally intended to keep Aladdin as a 13-year-old boy. [54] After looking at the original sketches, which made Aladdin look boyish (some filmmakers even noted a resemblance to Michael J. Fox), Walt Disney Studios' chairman Jeffrey Katzenberg began to worry that Aladdin might not seem masculine enough. Thus, he asked the animators to watch Tom Cruise movies as a reference point and redesign the character,[55] and it was ultimately decided that he needed to be older, more independent, and rougher—a "kind of Indiana Jones character."[56] Aladdin is thus a good example for the "boy" as a cultural icon: he is "man enough to be desired and desiring, and yet boy enough to be unthreatening."[57] This negotiation of masculinity is also mirrored in Aladdin's voice acting, which is done by two different actors: 17-year-old Scott Weinger (speaking voice) and 19-year-old Brad Kane (singing voice). There are contradictory information on this casting process. In interviews, Kane and Weinger make it sound as if Weinger had already been casted as speaking voice but had then experienced problems with the singing part.[58] Hischak however states that originally Kane was meant to do the speaking and singing voice, but at the last minute it was decided that Weinger should do the speaking, who succeeded in making Aladdin "young and appealing even as he was a bit of a playful ruffian." [59] In any case, Weinger's speak-

53 Macaluso, "Postfeminist Masculinity," 3.

54 Thomas S. Hischak, *Disney Voice Actors*: *A Biographical Dictionary* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), 220.

55 Steve Daly, "Disney's Got a Brand-New Baghdad," *Ew.com Entertainment Weekly*, De-cember 4, 1992, retrieved on December 1, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20121025122146/http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,312562_2,00.html.

56 Hischak, *Disney Voice Actors*, 220.

57 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction," 6.

58 "Brad Kane Recording Session - One Jump Ahead from Disney's Aladdin (Behind the Scenes)," Disney's Behind the Scene interview, uploaded on February 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuc6jyuzbRs; "A Disastrous Audition (Alan Menken & Scott Weinger Featurette)," Disney Music VEVO, uploaded on September 12, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALBpLac043M.

59 Hischak, *Disney Voice Actors*, 220.

ing voice sounds somewhat rougher than Kane's, which corresponds to the producers' wish to make Aladdin less boyish.

In the duet "A Whole New World" (music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Tim Rice), Aladdin, disguised as Prince Ali, invites Jasmine onto his magic carpet and starts to sing: "I can show you the world | shining, shimmering, splendid." Throughout the song, Aladdin underlines his ability to introduce Jasmine to a "new world," to "open [her] eyes" and to "take [her] wonder by wonder." She confirms this by singing lines such as "a dazzling place I never knew," and "now I'm in a whole new world with you." In terms of the lyrics, Aladdin thus asserts his masculinity by presenting himself as the more dominant, mature, and active party in the relationship. The music adds a different notion, however: Aladdin's boyish singing has the charm of an untrained voice. This becomes mostly noticeable in the lower register where his vocal cords do not always properly close and air leaks through, resulting in an altogether breathier voice with rather unbalanced registers (especially when singing "now when did you last let your heart decide?") In addition, his pitch is not always fully accurate. This vocal roughness represents vulnerability and youth—a girl of the same age would probably have more control of her voice. This becomes especially audible when Jasmine sings, voiced by 21-year-old Lea Salonga who moves elegantly through the registers and whose voice is equipped with a subtle and well-balanced vibrato. But there is more to the use of the lower register than just youth: when Kane's voice rises in pitch it becomes apparent that he is more at home in a slightly elevated tessitura, as the higher pitches are more resonant and colorful than the lower ones. His youthful voice and the higher register fit well into the dawning era of the boy bands of the 1990s, which the film just predates. Moreover, all singing characters listed by Macaluso as "hero/prince" (Prince Charming, Prince Philipp, Hercules) or between the categories "boy" and "hero/prince" (Aladdin, John Smith, Quasimodo) are tenors, which matches the tradition of romantic opera.[60] Aladdin, despite having an untrained voice, thus fits vocally into the Disney-prince tradition. He does, however, not yet trust in his inner prince and tries to conceal his insecurity by giving his voice a low, husky sexiness, in order to charm Jasmine. Especially in the beginning of the song, he acts like a lyrical tenor trying to play a "cavalier baritone"—a *Stimmfach*, that is used to portray a gallant gentleman irresistible to women. Prominent examples

60 Macaluso, "Postfeminist Masculinity," 3.

are Don Giovanni, who "has his way with every woman he sees"[61] or Eugen Onegin, who is responsible for Tatjana's romantic awakening. Cavalier baritones often have an easy tenor top, as does Aladdin, but also a recognizable baritone vocal color, which is what Aladdin tries to obtain. It is noteworthy that the voice actors in the German and French version of the film—Peter Fessler and Paolo Domingo—face similar challenges, due to the overall vocal range of Aladdin's part in this song. This reveals that the vocal negotiation of masculinity in *Aladdin* is not so much the result of an individual casting choice, but rather of a compositional decision by Alan Menken, whose choice of vocal range makes Aladdin's struggle with his romantic masculinity inevitable.

Halfway through the ballad, the balance of power shifts: when Jasmine sings "Now I'm in a whole new world with you," Aladdin repeats it, acknowledging for the first time that he is experiencing something new as well. Jasmine then takes the musical lead by starting the second verse, with Lea Salonga singing even the highest notes with confidence and clarity (e.g., "I'm like a shooting star"). Earlier in the song, the lovers had sung alternately, imitating and finishing each other's verses. But in the final lines, they start to sing simultaneously ("Let me share this whole new world with you"). As the song ends, Jasmine realizes that Aladdin is not a prince after all but the boy she met at the market earlier in the film. These developments shed light on the changing of Aladdin's masculinity in this romantic context: in the beginning, he presents himself as the more experienced and mature partner. At the same time, his uneasiness with the low register reveals the gap between self-understanding and actual abilities—he is still a boy, not yet a man, and most importantly not yet a prince. Yet, when Jasmine takes the lead, assuring him of her consent and accepting his boyishness and unrefined mannerisms, they start to act as equals, allowing Jasmine to eventually recognize Aladdin's true self. Aladdin's vocals here already imply the eventual happy ending, as his voice clearly has potential: his voice comes across as that of an untrained tenor, a "diamond in the rough," as the cave of wonders calls him at the beginning of the movie. Given that most Disney princes are tenors, his singing implies that it is indeed possible for him to win Jasmine's heart and to earn the status of a prince—which is precisely what happens next.

61 Paul Yeadon McGinnis, *The Opera Singer's Career Guide: Understanding the European Fach System* (London: Scarecrow Pres, 2010), 38.

"I See the Light"

While Aladdin represents the shift between boyhood and manhood, *Tangled*'s Eugene is considerably more masculine. The character design of Eugene came from a process called the "Hot Man Meeting," a one-time event held for *Tangled*. The producers set up a meeting with all the studio's female employees, and asked them what made a man good-looking regarding eye color, hair color and style, and body type—all in order to create Eugene's character design:

> All the ladies of the studio came into the "Hot Man Meeting," where we gathered pictures of their favorite handsome men [e.g., Johnny Depp, Hugh Jackman, Brad Pitt, David Beckham, and Gene Kelly]—we collected pictures from the Internet and from books and from women's wallets. They were very specific about what they liked and what they didn't like."[62]

Thus, to quote the producers, they "created the ultimate man."[63] It is noteworthy that several of these men are not only song- or dance-men, but tend to have a vulnerable quality; while Jackman and Kelly appear more mature in a physical way than Pitt, Beckham and Depp, they nevertheless strongly portray interiority and sensitivity.

Given the characters he was based on, it is therefore no surprise that Macaluso categorizes Eugene as a postfeminist hero, despite this physical hypermasculinity. The crisis, which defines the postfeminist hero, is here caused by his emerging love for Rapunzel, which puts in question his former self-understanding and goals. By this, he differs from Aladdin: Aladdin falls in love with Jasmine at first sight and bases all his actions on the aim of winning her. Eugene first agrees to accompany Rapunzel with the hope of winning back the tiara she took from him. It is only during their shared adventures that he falls in love with her. While the attraction between the two soon becomes clear, it is only in the duet "I See the Light" (music by Alan Menken, again; lyrics by Glenn Slater) that they realize and express their feelings for each other.

For the songs in *Tangled*, Alan Menken took inspiration from 1960s folk

62 Roth Cornet, "Zach Levi on Being a Disney Hunk in *Tangled*, A Singer, A Superhero & *Chuck*," *Screen Rant*, November 18, 2010, https://screenrant.com/disney-tangled-zach-levi-interview-chuck. The names of the men discussed in this meeting are listed on "Flynn Rider," Disney Wiki, *Fandom*, https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Flynn_Rider.

63 Cornet, "Zach Levi on Being a Disney Hunk."

rock, especially Joni Mitchell's songs.[64] "I See the Light" is much simpler and more folk-like than "A Whole New World," and prominently features the sound of an acoustic guitar adding to the folk-like tone. The first two verses are sung in the characters' heads as an introspective comment on their respective situations. Rapunzel, voiced by 26-year-old Mandy Moore, is singing about the overwhelming feeling of at last seeing the floating lanterns which are lit each year in memory of the lost princess. It is only in the last line that she makes the connection between these feelings and her love for Eugene ("all at once everything is different | now that I see you"). But Eugene, voiced by 30-year-old Zachary Levi, makes this connection much quicker. Halfway through his first solo verse, he sings: "Now she's here, suddenly I know | If she's here it's crystal clear | I'm where I'm meant to go" and gently takes her hand. This action—taking her hand—makes Rapunzel realize that Eugene returns her affection. The beginning of the second chorus finds them finally singing together, and openly professing their love. While Mandy Moore's Broadway-like singing resembles Jasmine's style in "A Whole New World," Zachary Levi sings completely differently than Brad Kane; the song is vocally less demanding than "A Whole New World" and voice actor Zachary Levi is able to sing comfortably within his range. In contrast to Brad Kane's Aladdin, Levi's Eugene is more of a baritone, both in terms of the tessitura of the song as well as in terms of a warm, lush, and more "manly" color. Combined with the overall sexualization and cockiness of the character, this places him near the operatic category of "cavalier baritone". His voice is well-balanced with rich low notes (e.g., "shining in the star light") and an effortless middle register ("never truly seeing"). He sings with a rather straight-toned, breathy voice and is almost crooning ("all those years living in a blur," "all that time," "and it's warm and clear and bright"). With this, he takes on the typical qualities of the pop crooner, with his "alignment with the cultural feminine through his preference for romantic songs and commercial pop… his beauty and sensitivity, his emotional openness and transparency."[65] However, in some moments, a slight vibration of the voice shines through ("it's crystal clear," his last "see you"). This vocal ability reveals that the use of breathy moments is a conscious

64 Todd Martens, "Unwrapping the Music in *Tangled*: It All Begins with Joni Mitchell, Says Alan Menken," *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2010, https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2010/11/unwrapping-the-music-in-tangled-it-all-begins-with-joni-mitchell-says-alan-menken.html.

65 McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 327.

choice to create an impression of vulnerability and emotionality, unlike with Brad Kane's singing.

The way romance develops throughout the song is thus profoundly different from "A Whole New World": Aladdin takes action from the very beginning. He courts and eventually wins Jasmine by singing to her and inviting her to fly—and sing—with him. While Eugene eventually also takes action (by taking Rapunzel's hand), he never intended to court her and was actually caught by surprise by his feelings for her, making him much more passive and undetermined in his courtship. For the "boy" Aladdin, romantic enthusiasm seems fitting, and he makes no secret of his infatuation. For Eugene, in contrast, allowing himself to fall for Rapunzel demands courage. For the boy Aladdin, falling in love is a sign of growth and masculinity. For Eugene, it is a crisis of vulnerability. In both duets, however, the male lead's singing voice does somewhat contrast this confidence or, in Eugene's case, lack of confidence. Aladdin, although being confident and active, sings with a boyish voice and almost oversteps his vocal limits. Eugene's crooning voice sounds much deeper and more mature; it is not only reminiscent of the "cavalier baritone," but also corresponds to current popular aesthetics: in 2013, a British study found that women tend to find tender, deep, and breathy voices most attractive in men—all qualities that are inherent to "crooning." While the deep pitch suggests strength and a large body size, the breathiness could be a way of neutralizing the aggressiveness associated with these features.[66] Moreover, huskiness sometimes has a hormonal cause, and can be a cause of sexual desire. As Mary Talbot bluntly argues in her book *Language and Gender*, if a woman is aroused by a man's breathy voice, "this just means she is turned on by the fact that she turns *him* on."[67] Thus, the vocal timbre serves as a counterbalance to the character's overall coping with romance: the boyish timbre hinders the boy Aladdin from appearing too masculine, whereas postfeminist Eugene reasserts his masculinity through his mature and breathy voice. The same applies to Chayanne, who voices Eugene in the Latin Spanish version of the film.

However, in the Italian (Massimiliano Alto) and French (Emmanuel Dahl) version, this is less clear: while Alto's voice has breathy moments, his timbre is not as low as Levi's, and Dahl's singing sounds much more boyish

66 Yi Xu et al., "Human Vocal Attractiveness as Signaled by Body Size Projection," *Plos One* 8, no. 4 (2013): e62397.

67 Mary Talbot, *Language and Gender*: *An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 32. Italics in original.

than Levi's. Thus, unlike with "A Whole New World," the negotiation of romantic masculinity is not so much integral to the composition, but rather to the respective singer's interpretation. While Levi's Eugene definitely does not sing like a traditional prince, he seems to have wonderful control of his vocal mechanism, contrasting his lack of emotional control whilst falling in love. Thus, despite his postfeminist insecurities, Eugene appears a more mature Aladdin, with the same rough background but a much better command of his voice and body.

"*Lost in the Woods*"

As the analyses of the two duets have shown, romantic masculinity oscillates between dominance and vulnerability. The expressed feelings are consensual in the duets and the man is rewarded for taking the risk to navigate between these poles. This is different when the man sings a solo love song, as I will show through the example of *Frozen*'s Kristoff (who, like Eugene, is a "postfeminist hero") and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*'s Quasimodo (who, like Aladdin, is placed between "boy" and "hero/prince"). Similar to Aladdin and Eugene, Kristoff is an orphan, too, and stems from a different social background than his love interest, Princess Anna. And just like Aladdin and Eugene, he has more life experience than the princess, who seems much more innocent, almost childlike. In his outer appearance and overall behavior, he does however differ from Aladdin and Eugene—i.e., he is of the "loner" archetype, yet bashful and quirky at the same time. This becomes especially apparent in his friendship with the reindeer Sven, with whom he shares food, sings duets, and talks—all while ventriloquizing the reindeer, which, unlike many other Disney animal sidekicks, cannot talk. Kristoff's outer appearance—the bulkiness, the working-class vibe—responds to newly-arising masculine ideas such as the "lumbersexual." This traditional masculinity is however paired with an emotional sensitivity which Heike Steinhoff understands as a sign of postfeminist masculinity: "Like the Beast representing the New Man, Kristoff is also kind, gentle, and caring. Thus, Kristoff's portrayal aligns with contemporary hybrid ideals of heterosexual masculinity."[68]

68 Heike Steinhoff, "'Let It Go'? Re-Inventing the Disney Fairy Tale in *Frozen*," in *Heroes, Heroines, and Everything in Between: Challenging Gender and Sexuality Stereotypes in Children's Entertainment Media*, ed. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson (Lan-

The song "Lost in the Woods" (music and lyrics by Kristen Anderson-Lopez & Robert Lopez) appears in the sequel *Frozen II* and marks an emotional turning point in Kristoff's relationship with Princess Anna: when Anna, once again, seemingly puts her sister first and embarks on an adventurous quest with her, he starts to doubt her love and sings the power ballad "Lost in the Woods." With this, Kristoff is one of the very few male romantic leads in Disney films who sings a genuine solo love song, and the only one who sings about the fear of losing love, rather than pining over a secret affection. This is even more remarkable when one considers that the producers had had difficulties in picturing Kristoff as a singing character: in the first *Frozen* movie, Kristoff did not sing, apart from the short ditty "Reindeer(s) Are Better Than People." Instead, Princess Anna sang a love duet "Love Is an Open Door" with Prince Hans, who turned out to be the villain of the story. One reason for this lack of song was apparently Kristoff's gruff and solitary character, which did not make it very likely for him to break out in song. In an interview, voice actor Jonathan Groff stated: "I couldn't personally imagine how they were going to get a mountain man to sing. The first one, okay, he's got a lute, he's singing a ditty with his reindeer, I buy that. … But how are they going to get Kristoff to sing? I couldn't even imagine it."[69] Groff here touches on the problem of singing as a gender-inadequate way of expression, which had already kept Robert from singing in *Enchanted*. Besides the overall roughness of Kristoff's character, there is also a narrative reason for this lack of singing which has its roots in the first film. Kristoff is presented as a counterpart to the false prince Hans, who—unlike Kristoff—looks and sounds like a Disney Prince, especially in his duet "Love Is an Open Door" with Anna. Denying Kristoff a classical Disney song underlines the juxtaposition of these two characters, who are also rivals in love.

Yet, before shooting the first *Frozen* film, Groff had already established himself as a successful musical theater actor, starring for example in the TV musical series *Glee*. This led to many viewers being disappointed by Kristoff's lack of song—and demanded that he get a solo in the sequel.[70] To solve this dilemma, the composers Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez

ham: Lexington Books, 2017), 169. For Bridges and Pascoe's definition of "hybrid masculinities," see note 30.

69 Joanna Robinson, "*Frozen II*: The Story Behind Jonathan Groff's Surprising '80s Ballad," *Vanity Fair*, website, November 15, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/11/jonathan-groff-song-frozen-2-lost-in-the-woods-making-of.

70 See Robinson, "*Frozen II*."

drew inspiration from both karaoke and 1980s bands such as Journey and Queen: "There's nothing better than a man feeling his feelings in a real way at a karaoke bar," according to Anderson-Lopez herself.[71] Groff states that he has "seen a lot of drunk dudes singing Journey at karaoke. … And it's 'funny'?… There's also a level of necessity for expression. And Queen is a part of that. Queen was so theatrical and big and when you do something that's theatrical and big like that and it's sung by a man, it gives boys the opportunity to really be theatrical and express themselves."[72] Lopez's and Groff's statements imply that, in order to allow themselves to express their emotions, men need a catalyst, such as alcohol, or an explicitly dramatic or theatrical setting, allowing them to construct an ironic distance to their emotions. This is also visible in Kristoff's singing scene: in the beginning, it seems like he is only reprising the ditty from the first movie. He sings, unaccompanied, to Sven: "Reindeers are better than people | Sven, why is love so hard?" Suddenly, the light changes and Sven answers: "You feel what you feel | And those feelings are real | Come on, Kristoff, let down your guard." With a nod, Sven invites Kristoff onto an imaginary stage; a piano starts to play, distorted guitars join in, and Kristoff begins to sing "Lost in the Woods." Interestingly, it is only after his best friend has assured him that his emotions are valid (and after the changing light and talking reindeer make clear that this is a dream-sequence, an introspective musical moment and not a public display of emotion) that Kristoff starts singing the actual ballad ("Again, you're gone…"), thus letting out feelings he cannot express otherwise. The song is filled with visual and musical references to 1980s ballads: the solo piano, the background chorus, the singing into a pinecone, the hair flip, and the diva pose ("I probably could catch up with you tomorrow") are all reminiscent of mid-1980s MTV music videos. The extreme close-up on the face resembles videos by Journey, and the montage where Kristoff sings with a visually multiplied Sven ("Wondering if you still care") alludes to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." All these features create an almost ironic distance to Kristoff's showing of emotions. Groff suspects that the "element of comedy might make the flood of Kristoff's emotions go down easier, especially with young boys."[73] This aligns with Konrad Paul Liessmann's idea that it is possible to take the pleasures of kitsch with a grain of salt—one can keep an ironic distance to the conveyed message and

71 Robinson.
72 Robinson.
73 Robinson.

at the same time indulge in the transported emotions.[74] Thus, the cheesy visual references and the music both ridicule and enable Kristoff's postfeminist showing of emotion.

While the music and the visual effects evoke comedy, the voice, however, does not, or at least not to the same degree: Groff, in fact, does not only voice Kristoff, but also Sven, as well as the complete reindeer background chorus and a multiplied version of himself, resulting in 18 different vocal tracks. For this, he uses a variety of vocal timbres and colors, all of which correspond to different types of masculinity. As Kristoff also dubs Sven—and the reindeer almost seems to serve as his alter ego—it is worthwhile to examine Sven's voice, too, in order to shed light on Kristoff's masculinity. In the opening bars that he sings to Sven, Groff uses a raw and breathy voice, combined with a heavy sigh, reminiscent of a recitativo. For Sven's answer, he employs a slightly comical puffed-up voice, which underlines the scene's surreal tone. When the actual song starts, Kristoff's voice changes once again into a typical Broadway sound, with a soft and tasteful belting and numerous affective voice breaks ("When did I become the one who's always chasing your heart?", "When you're not there"). The fact that he sings with a belt voice, rather than with a vibrato, matches his overall character: he is more of a down-to-earth nature boy, not a fairy tale-like prince charming.

Despite his roughness and the comic elements, the high level of training in Kristoff's tenor voice proves that he is the rightful hero of the love story. Just as with Aladdin, being a tenor makes Kristoff a worthy candidate for the male lead. The song repeatedly features rather high pitches that he hits with comfort and ease. His registers are well-balanced and his voice has the same color from top to bottom. He mixes in head voice ("forever!"), as is typical of a 1980's power ballad,[75] but never goes into full falsetto. It is likely that the use of this high range, combined with a belt voice, is meant to appeal to young girls—not too blatantly masculine, yet also definitely not feminine. In the choruses, Sven joins it, but not with the reindeer voice he used in his short reply to Kristoff. Instead, the reindeer chorus is dubbed with the Broadway-voice Kristoff uses throughout the ballad. Especially in the visual references to "Bohemian Rhapsody", the background chorus sings much higher, but still within a range which seems fitting and not exaggerated for a 1980s power ballad. This giving up of irony in the vocals,

74 Konrad Paul Liessmann, *Kitsch oder warum der schlechte Geschmack der eigentlich gute ist* (Wien: Brandstätter, 2002), 74.

75 McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 318–19.

combined with the strong emphasis on his professional tenor voice, assure a balance between the ridiculing and the acknowledging of Kristoff's heartache.

This balance does however not necessarily translate to other languages. In the German version, for instance, Leonhard Mahlich does not sing with a belt voice and uses considerably less head voice and voice breaks. This makes his singing somewhat more natural and less theatrical. Also, there is less struggling with showing emotions in the lyrics: unlike the English version, where Sven encourages Kristoff to show his feelings ("let down your guard"), German Sven says: "Sorg' dich nicht mehr" ("Do not worry any more"), thus omitting Kristoff's negotiating of masculinity and emotionality. While the references to the 1980s ballad and the connotations linked to this are thus still present in the music, Groff's interpretation as a Broadway singer is much more subversive.

"Heaven's Light"

Just as he does with Aladdin, Macaluso places Quasimodo between the categories "boy" and "hero/prince."[76] Quasimodo shows several character traits typical of the boy—innocence, youth, sweetness, and an enthusiastic infatuation for Esmeralda, with whom he falls in love at first sight. Moreover, as his love song "Heaven's Light" shows, he is "man enough to desire,"[77] although his love for Esmeralda is depicted as a gentle and romantic feeling, in contrast to the lust Frollo displays in the corresponding song "Hellfire." While Quasimodo is "man enough to desire," he is not portrayed as desirable himself: he has a large hump, a squashed face, a lump above his left eye, a receding chin, and a central incisor—all reasons why his master Frollo decided to keep him hidden in the cathedral where he leads a lonely life.

After having experienced Esmeralda's kindness, Quasimodo dares to hope that she returns his affection (a hope encouraged by his friends, the stone gargoyles) and sings the song "Heaven's Light" (music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Stephen Schwartz). It is a short song, much less dramatic than his opening song "Out There." Despite its shortness, it serves as an important dramatic device to underline Quasimodo's changing angle towards romantic masculinity. Lyricist Stephen Schwartz states: "We thought Quasimodo

76 Macaluso, "Postfeminist Masculinity," 3.
77 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction," 6.

needed a moment to express his delusion or hope that Esmeralda might actually think of him in a romantic way."[78] The song is reprised when Quasimodo realizes that Esmeralda prefers Phoebus. The producers considered placing a song there for the lovers, but ultimately decided that the focus should remain on Quasimodo, who once again realizes his exclusion from romantic love.[79] As the song also serves as a contrasting element to the following "Hellfire," it underlines once more Quasimodo's moral superiority to Frollo. Quasimodo looks down on the city and reflects on both his own loneliness as well as the lovers he sometimes observes below, who "had a kind of glow around them | it almost looked like heaven's light." Despite being already forty-three years old and thus twenty-three years older than his character, voice actor Tom Hulce sounds very bright, young, tender, and at ease in every register. For most of the tune he lets a lot of air leak through the folds and is much closer to a spoken voice than an operatic singing voice. This evokes an atmosphere of intimacy and honesty. The person whose voice we are hearing in this scene is apparently an honest, sensitive introvert and no pseudo-masculine show-off. When Quasimodo concludes that his own hideous face "was [never] meant for heaven's light," he even briefly touches on the falsetto register with a high F, evoking an angelic, very innocent feeling, and indicating a vulnerable and rather soft personality. The accompaniment is discrete, featuring a soft string ensemble, solo harp, recorders, and solo strings. But in the second part, when he mentions Esmeralda ("But suddenly an angel has smiled at me"), the string accompaniment suddenly swells, touching on common romantic Hollywood aesthetics. The melody rises and changes again into falsetto ("I swear it must be heaven's light"), followed by the bright and happy sound of the bells which sound much less tremendous and solemn than before. This falsetto is also audible in all other dubbings of the song, as it results from the composer's choice of range, making it an integral part of the song's aesthetics.

Falsetto holds a special place within the discourse of musical gender. It is much more associated with male singing than female singing. The castrati of the eighteenth century were considered desirable partners, and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in some styles such as gospel, such high voice can stand for a certain kind of masculine bravado, notably in

78 Carol de Giere, *Defying Gravity*: *The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz from "Godspell" to "Wicked"* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre Books, 2008), 245.

79 Paul R. Laird, *The Musical Theater of Stephen Schwartz*: *From "Godspell" to "Wicked" and Beyond* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 243.

the "power ballads" of the 1980s.[80] At the same time, falsetto is often understood as "anti-masculine."[81] Given this ambiguity, it is worth taking a closer look at its dramatic function. Quasimodo repeatedly remarks that, due to his appearance, he feels excluded from society in general and specifically from romance—and thus also from traditional discourses of masculinity. This exclusion also means that he is not familiar with the conventions of masculine behavior and, even if he were, they would not apply to him. Thus, unlike Kristoff, he does not need to distance himself ironically from his feelings and is free to sing with whatever voice he likes.

This is different when the song is reprised: when Esmeralda tends to the wounded Phoebus, Quasimodo witnesses them kissing and is utterly shocked and saddened. He starts to sing "Heaven's Light," but unlike the first time, only in his head. Here, sound design plays an important part in altering the meaning of the song: Quasimodo's voice is blurred and the overtones are reduced, thus making his voice sound less bright. With the beginning of the second part he stops singing and lets go of the card with the ace of hearts, which the gargoyles had given him as a symbol of Esmeralda's love for him. As the strings swell, he starts to cry. The concluding confident falsetto disappears along with his self-understanding as a romantically desirable man. Humiliated, he does not dare to express his feelings openly. However, unlike Kristoff, society does not force him to musically comply with contemporary conventions of masculinity and seek shelter in ironic theatricality: Quasimodo has always been at ease with his own emotionality, and this ultimately helps him overcome his heartache.

Conclusion

As my analyses have shown, the music is more than a mere mirror of the various categories of Disney masculinity: it is only in the music, and especially in the use of the male singing voice, that the contradictions inherent to these categories become apparent. This is especially true for characters who find themselves in transition between two categories, like Aladdin and Quasimodo who are placed between the categories "boy" and "hero/prince." In Aladdin's case, the transition between the stages of his character devel-

80 McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 318–19.
81 Biddle and Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction," 7–8

opment becomes audible in his vocals. He is a "diamond in the rough" with an untrained voice. At the same time, his tenor and hence prince-qualities are clearly audible, especially when he stops pretending to be more than he actually is by disguising himself vocally as a baritone in order to win Jasmine's heart. Quasimodo in contrast has never had the chance to approach Esmeralda in a romantic way or to approach anyone at all in song. He is unburdened by traditional gender expectations, and this is audible in his voice which remains pure, soft, boyish, and, due to the falsetto and the overall airiness, lacking body and being almost androgynous. This creates a strong contrast to Phoebus, whose muscles, beard, and low voice (he does not sing) correspond to contemporary concepts of masculinity. However, unlike with the "boy" as a "cultural icon," the androgyny of Quasimodo's voice does not threaten to disrupt the binaries of sex and gender, as he is presented as non-desirable, at least in the first film. Future research may further investigate to what extent these observations apply to the dubbed version of the films as produced by Disney Character Voices International. Especially since the 2000, voice actors are not only chosen for their resemblance to the English original, but also for their appeal to the local market. Also, as has been demonstrated with the reprise of "Heaven's Light", sound design and post production can add additional levels of meaning to the singing which are worth examining.

Besides the transition between various categories of masculinity, music is an important factor within the balancing act that is the display of emotions with male characters, especially when expressed through song. Eugene counters the vulnerability his character experiences by falling for Rapunzel with a deliberately manly and alluring voice. Despite his alleged weakness, his baritone voice proves that he is still desirable. Kristoff takes a different approach: he counters his vulnerability with irony, allowing the spectator to choose how deeply to engage with this pain. While the music creates a comic relief, his tenor voice hinders the musical irony from covering the emotional sincerity necessary to touch the audience and vice versa. By combining the double-edged concept of postfeminist masculinity, the music, and particularly the vocal timbre, it is possible to determine how the hybridity of the male characters' emotional displays is both allotted and received.

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Abstract

While romantic love is a central topic in most Disney films, love duets sung by the featured couple are relatively rare and solo songs sung by the male protagonist even rarer. The combination of masculinity and the musical expression of romantic feelings seems thus to pose a challenge. In order to understand the complexity of romantic masculinity in Disney movies it makes sense to consider an aspect that has so far been left unconsidered: the male singing voice. This article conducts a comparative analysis of the love duets "A Whole New World" from *Aladdin* (1992) and "I See the Light" from *Tangled* (2010), as well as the solo love songs "Lost in the Woods" from *Frozen II* (2019) and "Heaven's Light" from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). It focuses on three central questions: (1) whether various models of romantic masculinity are mirrored in specific stylistic musical or vocal devices; (2) how these connections relate to the longstanding tradition of voice categories (*Stimmfach*) in opera; and (3) in which ways the music and especially the singing comment on or even contradict the portrayed masculinity. By discussing the male lead as a musical character, the article offers a new perspective on Disney's (re)interpretation of romantic masculinity.

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ARTICLES

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

Nicolò Palazzetti

Introduction

The French writer Jules Verne (1825–1905) 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?crit1L=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.

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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 potpourri 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 1850s[10]—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 Fragoso, a homage to Beaumarchais's Figaro and his operatic progeny.[13] Like other extrovert eccentrics populating Verne's novels, Fragoso 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'Amazone*, 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 Milles 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 a 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 a 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"" 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 "théâtrophonic" 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 Télek. 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 Télek. … 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 Télek) 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 aesthetical 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 aesthetical, philosophical, and even anthropological implications of recording technologies. As a writer and an artist, argues Shah, Verne perceived that recording technologies were able to severe ties between author and creation. By dislocating the aesthetical 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, 2016), 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 loudspeaker 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.

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ARTICLES

Rehearsing Upload*

Lea Luka Sikau

I enter the rehearsal studio of the new opera Upload *by Michel van der Aa at the Dutch National Opera in February 2021. Lights are low. Projectors hum. The set consists of seven giant screens. Two singers stand on the stage: the baritone Roderick Williams gazes into a motion tracking camera while the soprano Julia Bullock watches his oversized avatar, brightly projected on the screens. Van der Aa faces a multiple-screen setup, focusing on how to transform Williams's body into a virtual gestalt. The stage projections show the avatar's face repeatedly disintegrating into thousands of particles, every time with different granular structures and contrasts. After some discussion, van der Aa walks back to his desk and announces that he would like to run through the scene again. The stage manager queues the projections, the stage lights, and the click track. Bullock starts singing, addressing the screens.*[1]

In this ethnographic vignette, all eyes are on the avatar. Humans and nonhuman matter center around the virtual protagonist as *Upload* stages a posthuman. The narrative tells a typical science-fiction tale, dealing with uploading the human mind to a server, developing into an avatar, and losing the physical body in the process. In the opera's plot, the figure of the avatar is founded on the withdrawal of a foundation in the form of a con-

* I wish to thank the anonymous readers and editors of *Sound Stage Screen* for their invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this article. Beyond the scope of *Sound Stage Screen*, other scholars have offered precious recommendations, amongst others Peter McMurray, Susan Rutherford, Annouchka Bayley, Elisabeth van Treeck, and Shadi Seifouri. Moreover, I am grateful for the rehearsal insights facilitated by Djoere de Jong and the numerous exchanges with *Upload*'s production team on site and on Zoom.

1 Excerpt of my fieldnote journal formulated after a day at the rehearsal studio.

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genital body.[2] A "father" (Williams) uploads himself at a futurist laboratory and continues to exist as a virtual being: he thinks without having access to the tactility of a lived experience. Surprising his "daughter" (Bullock) with this transformation, a paternal dispute begins which questions life without a congenital body. In multiple ways, *Upload* is reminiscent of the fiction presented in Hans Moravec's *Mind Children* (1988) as well as Tod Machover's and Robert Pinsky's robot opera *Death and the Powers* (2010) developed at the MIT Media Lab.[3] *Upload*, too, explores state-of-the-art technology on stage.[4] Composer, librettist, and director van der Aa conceptualized this posthuman opera for two voices, a chamber ensemble of eleven players, an electronic soundtrack, film, and motion capture. The story is driven by films projected on gigantic screens, stage action, and the singing avatar of the father, rendered in real time. To portray him as a virtual body, the opera recalibrates canonical operatic practices.

This article examines the process of rehearsing a posthuman opera from the perspective of a self-reflective ethnography. Proposing a rehearsal-oriented ontology of opera, I avoid discussions of the performance and even

2 See Bernhard Siegert, *Passage des Digitalen: Zeichenpraktiken der neuzeitlichen Wissenschaften 1500–1900* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 2003), 17.

3 In Machover's opera, a man uploads his mind to gain eternal life and is confronted by the women of the family who question a life without a body. The divide between the "female-body versus male-brain" remains similar in *Upload*. Promoting problematic gender dynamics, the daughter argues: "I believe in my body more than in my soul," while the father claims: "The world isn't reduced to the surface of my skin … I can still think my own thoughts." The rational of the Vitruvian man is contrasted with the impulsive, subordinated woman. Beyond the father-daughter hierarchy, binary gendered dynamics pervade the entire story line. One example off the main story being that *Upload* tells side plots of other men who are uploaded to save their scientific knowledge while the respective women turn into avatars to spend more time with their children. For more on the gender divide in Machover's opera, see David Trippett, "Digital Voices: Posthumanism and the Generation of Empathy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Monique M. Ingalls, and David Trippett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 244–48. For parallels in futuristic narratives about mind uploading, see Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

4 The robotic opera *Death and the Powers* was developed at the MIT as a research project within the *Opera of the Future* Media Lab Group. As such, it circumvented canonical production practices. For more see Peter Torpey, "Media Scores: A Framework for Composing the Modern-Day Gesamtkunstwerk" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/91887, and Benjamin Bloomberg, "Making Musical Magic Live: Inventing Modern Production Technology for Human-Centric Music Performance" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020), https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/129893.

the music itself. Whereas ethnographic investigations of the performing arts have greatly added to other disciplines such as performance, theater studies, and anthropology in the last decades, I strive to make the case for including the rehearsal more substantially in discussions that bridge contemporary opera and media studies.[5] Tying into transdisciplinary dis-

5 For more literature on rehearsal processes from anthropologists, sociologists, and theater scholars, see amongst others Susan Letzler Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Paul Atkinson, "Performance and Rehearsal: The Ethnographer at the Opera," in *Qualitative Research Practice*, ed. Clive Seale et al. (London: Sage, 2004), 94–106; Atkinson, *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006); Josette Féral, "Introduction: Towards a Genetic Study of Performance—Take 2," *Theatre Research International* 33, no. 3 (2008): 223–33; Jens Roselt, *Phänomenologie des Theaters* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2008); Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender, *Making Contemporary Theatre: International Rehearsal Processes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Jens Roselt and Melanie Hinz, eds., *Chaos + Konzept: Proben und Probieren im Theater* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2011); Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner, eds., *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012); Gay McAuley, *Not Magic but Work: An Ethnographic Account of a Rehearsal Process* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Vlado Kotnik, *Opera as Anthropology: Anthropologists in Lyrical Settings* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016); Tamara Yasmin Quick, "Methodologische Diskurse der aktuellen Probenforschung," *Forum Modernes Theater* 31, no. 1/2 (2020): 39–63.

For an examination of historical rehearsal processes in opera, see amongst others Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the "Ring": An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); James Deaville, ed., with Evan Baker, *Wagner in Rehearsal 1875–1876: The Diaries of Richard Fricke*, trans. George R. Fricke (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1998); Mark Everist, "Rehearsal Practices," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen M. Greenwald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 419–41.

For rehearsal ethnographies of western new music rehearsals, see Amanda Bayley and Michael Clarke, "Analytical Representations of Creative Processes in Michael Finnissy's Second String Quartet," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (2009): 139–57; Bayley, "Ethnographic Research into Contemporary String Quartet Rehearsal," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 3 (2011): 385–411; Bayley and Nicole Lizée, "Creative Layers and Continuities: A Case Study of Nicole Lizée and the Kronos Quartet," *Musicae Scientiae* 20, no. 3 (2016): 392–412; Bayley, "Cross-Cultural Collaborations with the Kronos Quartet," in *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music,* ed. Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 93–113; Nicolas Donin, "Domesticating Gesture: The Collaborative Creative Process of Florence Baschet's *StreicherKreis* for 'Augmented' String Quartet (2006–08)," in Clarke and Doffman, *Distributed Creativity*, 70–87.

For ethnographies from practitioners and opera scholars, see Daniel Helfgot and William O. Beeman, *The Third Line: The Opera Performer as Interpreter* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993); Denis Laborde, "L'Opéra et son régisseur. Notes sur la création d'une œuvre de Steve Reich," *Ethnologie française* 38, no. 1 (2008): 119–28; Megan Steigerwald Ille, "Bringing Down the House: Situating and Mediating Opera in the Twenty-First Century" (PhD diss.,

courses within opera, media, and critical posthuman studies, rehearsal ethnography showcases moments in the process and elements of productions mediated by technologies that remain difficult to trace in retrospect.[6] In the midst of opera's production process—after the composition phase and before the premiere—I situate myself in the rehearsal studio and observe the development of an opera over the course of two months.[7] Within this case, I enter the field as a writer for the Dutch National Opera and a participant-observer with a background as mezzo-soprano, dramaturg, and director of new opera.[8] By looking *into* the rehearsal instead of *at* the performance, I shift my focus from the written score to verbal interactions and nonhuman sounds in the rehearsal studio. I comprehend opera's contemporary practices as a continuation of a genre that has historically driven scientific experimentation and technological innovation.[9] Operatic technol-

University of Rochester, 2018); Steigerwald Ille, "Live in the Limo: Remediating Voice and Performing Spectatorship in Twenty-First-Century Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 36, no. 1/2 (2020): 1–26; Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Staging Voice* (London: Routledge, 2021); Lea Luka Sikau, "'I see Marina, but feel Maria': Marina Abramović's Mediation of Callas' Voice," in *Singing Out: The Musical Voice in Audiovisual Media*, ed. Catherine Haworth and Beth Carroll (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming); Sikau, "Rehearsing Callas," *The Opera Quarterly* (forthcoming).

6 From the relations of cinema with opera to emerging technologies in new music theater, operatic performance and its mediation in the digital era take center stage in the current discourse, highlighted amongst others by the recent foundation of this journal. See also Marcia Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Melina Esse, ed., "Mediating Opera," special issue, *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2010); James Steichen, "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story," *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2011): 443–59; Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Karen Henson, ed., *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Milla Tiainen, "Sonic Technoecology: Voice and Non-anthropocentric Survival in *The Algae Opera*," *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 94 (2017): 359–76; Gundula Kreuzer, "Operatic Configurations in the Digital Age," *The Opera Quarterly*, 35, no. 1/2 (2019): 130–34; Tereza Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

7 *Upload* was produced during a national lockdown in spring 2021 at the Dutch National Opera. The restrictions caused by the Covid pandemic made it impossible to premiere the work in March 2021, as originally planned. However, the last rehearsal days on the main stage were used to shoot a film version of the production that was streamed via medici.tv even before its world premiere in July at the Bregenzer Festspiele.

8 Lea Luka Sikau, "*Upload* en de stem zonder lichaam," in "OFF 2021," special edition, *Odeon Magazine* 30, no. 121 (2021): 56–57.

9 David Trippett and Benjamin Walton, "Introduction: The Laboratory and the Stage," in *Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Scientific Imagination*, ed. David Trippett and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2.

ogies both constitute the art form and interact with its agents. Intertwining sounds, stages, and screens, the rehearsal detangles how opera can be understood as an interface which interacts vibrantly through nonhuman technologies and human bodies.[10]

Rehearsal ethnography offers the opportunity to examine the agential relations of material and bodies that sustain opera at large. Rather than merely singling out one technology of wonder, such as the motion capture system, the rehearsal also highlights its embeddedness with material and bodies that have belonged to the operatic vocabulary for centuries.[11] The interface highlights opera's technogenesis, the dynamic co-evolution of humans with "old" and "new" technologies.[12] Beyond acknowledging the co-evolution within the rehearsal, I also draw on Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" to conceptualize the rehearsal itself not only as an environment facilitating technogenesis, but as an immersive, co-evolving technology itself. Le Guin theorizes the first technologies in the Paleolithic age as containers which carry their interiors, explicitly opposing the narrative of sharp tools sticking out and producing hero stories.[13] The rehearsal carries the ensemble of technogenesis over the course of several months.[14] Its space contains physical connections between its agents, and its time carries electromagnetic signals and sound waves.[15] With the

10 Hereby, I draw on Daniel Chua and Alexander Rehding, who elaborate on the interface of music at large as something that "interacts dynamically with a network of discourses and objects." Daniel K. L. Chua and Alexander Rehding, *Alien Listening: Voyager's Golden Record and Music from Earth* (New York: Zone Books, 2021), 200.

11 Walton points towards the materials of operatic productions that remain invisible because of their long-lasting history within the genre. He proposes to include the multiplicity of material rather than merely zooming on the technologies of spectacle. See Walton, "Technological Phantoms of the Opéra," in *Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Scientific Imagination*, 226.

12 Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 10.

13 Le Guin lists some exemplary devices for containing goods: "A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container." Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," in *Women of Vision: Essays by Women Writing Science Fiction*, ed. Denise Du Pont (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 3.

14 "Contemporary technogenesis is about adaptation, the fit between organisms and their environments, recognizing that both sides of the engagement (humans and technologies) are undergoing coordinated transformations." Hayles, *How We Think*, 81.

15 Music and computation scholar Shintaro Miyazaki expands on wireless spaces with regards to the notion of containing and carrying: "A space is not a network, but a channel and container for an infinite number of physical connections and the carrier of an infinite

recognition of the rehearsal as immersive technology, I highlight its genesis in co-evolution with the matter and bodies inside, preventing to isolate singular operatic technologies in the discussion. Transforming along with its production processes, an ethnography of the immersive technology not only sketches out *Upload's* production processes, but simultaneously reflects back on how the *carrier bag of opera* interfaces within the genre's environment.

In the process of this posthuman opera in particular, I interrogate how the immersive technology co-evolves in its production dynamics by transforming into a laboratory-like space. I dissect the composite of the avatar as an assemblage of (non)human agents that recalibrates processes of repetition and connection. Ultimately, this leads me to trace how van der Aa himself co-evolves into the posthuman form of an opera production.

Rehearsing Laboratory

The virtual body recalibrates the architecture of opera's immersive technology and imposes a prioritization of the digital scenography over the live mise-en-scène. As the opera is dependent on rehearsing with an avatar, the technologically ambitious project results in a significant transformation of the space. For *Upload*, the immersive technology evolves into a laboratory-like space. A technical crew sets up an interior architecture saturated with new technologies two days in advance of rehearsal. From the start, the rehearsals are embedded in a technological corset instead of a system of substitutes being simultaneously created around the performers.[16] Whereas most opera productions nowadays work with set and prop substitutes while the final set is manufactured in operas' workshops, *Upload* exclusively employs parts of the original stage technology. From the first day of rehearsals, the score is set in stone as the sets and the elec-

number of signals." Miyazaki, "Algorhythmics: Understanding Micro-Temporality in Computational Cultures," *Computational Culture*, no. 2 (2012), http://computationalculture.net/algorhythmics-understanding-micro-temporality-in-computational-cultures.

16 This is different from previous ethnographic fieldwork I have conducted within other new operas, for example within Marina Abramović's opera production *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) or Sivan Eldar's *Like Flesh* (2022). In these cases, the set on the rehearsal stage is constantly adapting, for example when new props are being added. Contrastingly, *Upload* does not employ props, other than a blanket and a pillow in the last scene.

troacoustic soundtrack are preprogrammed.[17] When looking at other opera productions that are comparable in terms of their screen usage, they differ in that they only install the original projectors, full-size screens, and spotlights in the auditorium, not in the rehearsal studio already.[18] To incubate the virtual in an environment not originally designed for testing technology, *Upload* becomes dependent on the material's yet unknown affordances.

The technological infrastructure erects a laboratory-like structure which is best described through the notion of the "experimental system" as theorized by the Science and Technology Studies scholar Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. This system is made up of two entities: technical objects and epistemic things.[19] Technical objects repeat processes, transmitting knowledge that is common sense in the field, such as the opera's schedule and technologies that have been part of the operatic vocabulary for centuries. These objects appear in the rehearsal as always already repeated. Through repetition, they enable epistemic things—chimeras which embody what the field does not know yet—to occur and co-evolve.[20] Generating difference within repetition, the epistemic thing is reworked with and against the repeated. This "thing" in flux magnifies the difference within repetitive structures and raises new questions, receiving the effort of knowledge.[21] In *Upload*'s rehearsal, the chimera is literally the avatar which cannot be delineated by screen projections. Its agency expands as a compound of relations: it spans from Williams' appearance, his amplified voice and the avatar designer's code over van der Aa's vision, to the recalibration of the studio into a laboratory. The avatar introduces difference to the production practices of

17 Whereas in world premiere productions it is usual to change parts of the score quite flexibly or even to finish writing the music during the rehearsal phase, van der Aa merely changed one note in the daughter's part. The composer elaborated on this during a panel discussion at the symposium *Musiktheater der Zeitgenossenschaft: Michel van der Aas Schaffen an den Schnittstellen der Künste* (Ruhr University Bochum, 16 September 2022).

18 Two examples for productions that work with elaborate live-cued screens, and from which I can recount the rehearsal processes, are the aforementioned *Like Flesh* and the 2012 collaboration between Barrie Kosky and the theater collective 1927 on Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791).

19 Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 28.

20 Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things*, chap. 5 "Reproduction and Difference."

21 Rheinberger, 29.

opera by experimenting with more responsive ways of interaction between performer and digital technologies.

By being explored in the rehearsal studio, the motion capture system contributes to reproduce *Upload* out of canonical practices, while it simultaneously reproduces itself out of the scientific context. According to avatar designer Darien Brito, the rehearsal forms an uncontrolled environment with significantly more unknown variables to navigate:

> We [the *Upload* production team] are using tools that are not originally designed to behave in a way that is useful for opera productions. For these devices, the things that we are doing are a bit weird. They are not meant to be used in this setup. Normally, you would have a studio with proper lighting and the actors would not move much.[22]

Brito describes the technological challenges in this production by taking on the perspective of the devices themselves. Even if the rehearsal studio recalibrated itself to accommodate the epistemic thing, the opera affords new capacities, culminating in a performance that has to render the protagonist in real time without recalibration and delay (but with costumes and changing lighting) for ninety minutes consecutively. Whereas performers can act as if a prop would be the original one—creating a culture of substitutes—the avatar only works with the original stage technology in place. The immersive technology of rehearsal modifies to co-evolve with the motion capture system at the same time as the computational system learns to adapt to the uncontrolled environment.

What drives the rehearsal to produce an avatar (and repeat itself) out of canonical practices? Van der Aa seeks for an avatar look which is dynamic and at the same time abstract enough, and which does not resemble the imagery of a live projection. I extract the artistic research question of how the avatar can embody the congenital body of the father in the virtual space, displaying credibility towards both its existence as a virtual being and its human "nature." During the coding sessions, the team intends to create an avatar that retains the attention of the audience, even in moments when it competes with Williams' physical body on the side stage. The avatar seeks to draw the audience's gaze towards his virtual projection to make his congenital body appear as a substitute, proving liveness and serving the trend

22 Darien Brito, in interview with the author, February 25, 2021.

in contemporary music theater to reveal its own technical materiality.[23] For this effect to work, the avatar has to be projected in real time with minimal latency. Robert Wechsler argues that highly accurate motion capture systems mostly remain unused in realtime performances.[24] Against the grain of industry practices, *Upload* experiments with a real time motion capture system. As the look of the avatar changes in every scene, the rendering process is quite complex. The team tries to decrease the delay of the projected image so that the lip movement of the avatar is in sync with Williams's singing voice. Van der Aa is in close contact with Brito about changing the look. A few times, the avatar designer replies that the composer's requests are not feasible to translate into this virtual environment. Van der Aa counters half-jokingly: "I don't like to hear no." This back and forth between Brito, van der Aa, and the material capacities is characteristic for the research on the avatar's properties. In these moments, the avatar receives the effort of knowledge as hypotheses are falsified. The immersive technology of rehearsal carries a laboratory for the process of technogenesis to evolve through testing and falsification. The director tests his theories while the technology fails to meet his expectations. But instead of compromising his aesthetic ideas to technological feasibility within the framework of opera's schedule, he prioritizes the avatar imagery over rehearsal time with the cast.

Rehearsing Connection

Beyond testing the technical affordances, the virtual body reverses how other bodies in the studio comprehend interaction. Van der Aa, Brito, and the performers all interact distinctively with the avatar. The composer and the coder approximate the avatar while the performers are disconnected from their

23 Ulrike Hartung, *Postdramatisches Musiktheater* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2019), 75.

24 As exceptions to contemporary theatrical production processes, Wechsler points out two projects conducted in collaboration with universities: *motion*^{e} by Trisha Brown, Bill T. Jones et al. (Arizona State University, 2005) as well as Luc Vanier's *Bob's Palace* created at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2003). See Robert Wechsler, "Artistic Considerations in the Use of Motion Tracking with Live Performers: A Practical Guide," in *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity*, ed. Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon (Basingstoke: Palgrove Macmillian, 2006), 60–77.

virtual interlocutor. Despite its virtual character, the composer and the avatar designer see it evolving from an imaginary vision into a more tangible image. While van der Aa steers the avatar artistically, Brito is the expert who understands how to accommodate for the avatar's affordances. In *TouchDesigner* (a software to simulate virtual objects) Brito creates a virtual environment that embeds the uploaded father and translates him into a cloud of particles in real time. The data tracked by the motion capture system is modified with different sets of filters that lend the avatar a different look in every sequence. The avatar designer is the only person interviewed who notices the avatar as "real and tangible," as he can "touch, move, and transform [it] in a literal sense."[25] For the other team members, the avatar seems to be an untouchable body. They perceive the avatar projections more as a cinematic screening merging with the films and less as an interactive body within the mise-en-scène. This notion is intensified as the conversations at the avatar designer's desk are so quiet that they remain incomprehensible for most of the production team. The knowledge generated about the epistemic thing in the studio is inaccessible and creates a distance between the virtual being and the team. The process relating to the avatar creation becomes opaque.

The performers, usually the most connected with fellow performers, are removed from tangible connection as their interactions are always mediated via screens and loudspeakers. Even for the baritone Williams, who lends the virtual chimera his bodily appearance, the avatar is out of his reach of control. Except when stepping out of the motion capture space and, thus, erasing the virtual body, Williams is not involved in how his bodily input is processed. To learn his part, he is dependent on technical instructions by Brito and conceptual guidance by Van der Aa. Restricted to a tiny square captured by the motion tracking system, he carries out his gestures, displaced in a ninety degrees angle from his performing counterpart. In conversations, he mentions that he does not know how his facial expressions are mediated—eliciting estrangement and disconnect—but that he fully trusts van der Aa in directing him.[26] The avatar projections require a counterintuitive acting style from Williams and a real-time modification from Brito that multiplies the performer, disseminates him all over the stage, and fragments his agency.

In the meantime, Bullock plays a daughter who is deprived of physical touch with her father, but still feels an emotional connection with him.

25 Brito, interview.

26 Roderick Williams in interview with the author, January 12, 2021.

In the rehearsal weeks, the soprano seeks to create this connection by acknowledging the virtual body as a sovereign stage persona:

> I need to connect emotionally and start establishing a relationship with [his] avatar. It is such a bizarre thought, but I have to build a connective tissue with the avatar separated from [Williams] and [his] stage presence.[27]

By splitting Williams in two, she defines the projections as her counterpart, as if the avatar itself was an autonomous body. She intends to match Brito's viewpoint—i.e., seeing the avatar as an entity she can affect and which, in turn, can also affect her actions. However, the avatar's constant fragmentation, the surround sound of its voice, and the several different filters make it difficult to locate and address her interlocutor. In the rehearsal process, the virtual body becomes a compound protagonist. Visually and sonically fragmented, Bullock seeks to find virtual touch points to connect with. Dramaturg Madelon Kooijman facilitates this process by tying each scene to an emotional expression of the daughter's character. Bullock projects her emotions onto the screens even if she does not receive a human performer's immediate response.

Zooming out from the individual interactions, the recalibration of connection culminates in the substitution of singers. Whereas most opera productions work with fake sets and props in the rehearsals, which replace the original performance objects, *Upload* uses the official sets from the first rehearsal day onwards. More specifically, it not only uses the same sets, but it replaces the performers to incubate the virtual, too. This process reverses canonical production logistics in modern opera houses. Williams is replaced by an intern who stands in front of the motion capture camera to experiment with the technology. While one human turns into a substitute for another human, matter is explored in its vast affordances. In conversation, the intern said that she "started to do extensive yoga and stretching sessions every morning before the rehearsals as the hours of standing and little movement in front of the camera were physically quite exhausting."[28] In addition to the intern who facilitates the repetitive testing process, the performing covers for Bullock and Williams are frequently present in the studio. Compared to other new opera productions, in which covers attend the last rehearsals only and practice the mise-en-scène separately (for in-

27 Julia Bullock, in interview with the author, March 10, 2021.
28 Anne van Brunschot, in interview with the author, February 17, 2021.

stance, with the stage director's assistant), this production includes them to a significant extent during the rehearsal period.[29] On one rehearsal day, van der Aa starts staging the ninth scene of the opera, the daughter's solo aria, even though Bullock is not present. Her cover, Verity Wingate, has to jump in so that van der Aa can begin to stage the scene. In *Upload*'s rehearsals, humans function as substitutes. By demanding qualities from humans that one might attribute to matter, and exploring the vibrant capacities of material, *Upload*'s rehearsal practices propose a reversed understanding of nonhuman and human bodies in interaction, subverting canonical production practices.

Rehearsing van der Aa

Who exactly is this virtual body that recalibrates connections by erecting a laboratory? Up until this point, I focused on the avatar projection as a compound existence of Williams' appearance, his amplified voice, Brito's code, projectors, screens, and van der Aa's vision. The multiple agents are confounded by Williams' appearance, pretending to display his agency in the virtual realm. When he upsets himself, the particles of his face suddenly bluster around, seemingly elicited by his emotional reaction. However, Williams has nothing to do with the fragmentation and does not even know how exactly his look changes, as it is engineered from the avatar designer's desk. When seeing the avatar coming into being, his compound existence comes to the fore, made of the fusion of different data sets. Does the inquiry about virtual bodies in rehearsal culminate in the avatar, or does it rather lead to a broader examination of how humans, through opera rehearsals, store data in (non)human forms as data carriers?

Brito argues that "the idea of the avatar itself is in a way quite romanticized in the human form."[30] Staging a "romanticized" form, the avatar significantly impacts the immersive technology, the temporalities, and the interaction between (non)human bodies in the studio. However, when looking beyond the avatar projections, *Upload*'s rehearsals function as the generation of data storage in less romanticized forms and with a broad-

29 As both covers Verity Wingate and Michael Wilmering are members of the Opera Studio of the Dutch National Opera, they are asked to join *Upload*'s rehearsals whenever they do not have rehearsals for other productions running at the same time.

30 Brito, interview.

er scope. The avatar is always already in the studio, even before Williams' virtual body gets rendered smoothly. The baritone, for instance, recounts feeling like being a bodily extension of the composer, seeing himself as "an avatar for his artistic vision."[31] For van der Aa, the rehearsal at large becomes his posthuman form. He stores his vision in the bodies and matter in the studio. He uploads his thoughts and corrections onto the rehearsal space, timing it precisely so that there is no overload. Williams reports to get as much information the performer needs at a time.[32] In the following, I examine the ways in which van der Aa sets up his data storage system, uploads his vision, and updates it during the evolving technogenesis. His Wagnerian strive to create *Upload* according to his artistic vision not only enables him to decide which bodies and matter are in the studio, but also how they, as well as the rehearsal space and time at large, co-evolve into the composer's posthuman form.[33]

In informal conversation during *Upload*'s rehearsals, several production members mention the uniqueness of van der Aa's position. Seldom does an opera house commission one person for the libretto, the film script, the film staging, the mise-en-scène, and the cast; as well as for deciding over large parts of the creative team and the technological crew. In opera productions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, multiple authorship is the default mode.[34] Van der Aa constitutes an exception, as he launched an organ-

31 Williams, interview.

32 Williams, interview.

33 The director of the Dutch National Opera, Sophie de Lint, introduces the composer as today's Wagner within the interviews for the documentary on *Upload*. Curiously, the first significant account of verbal interactions in operatic rehearsals at large focuses on Wagner's *Ring* (1875–76). The choreographer Richard Fricke was asked by Wagner to document everything he said during the rehearsals of the Bayreuth world premiere. Whereas this account could be considered as one of the first rehearsal ethnographies, it is almost entirely centered on the composer. In the diaries, it becomes apparent that Wagner was an unpredictable director, who drastically changed his ideas on the mise-en-scène from one to another: "In this condition, it is a necessity for him to block everything one way today, and then change it tomorrow." See Deaville and Baker, *Wagner in Rehearsal*, 80. While *Upload* may be considered a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in scope, van der Aa's direction is quite distinct from Wagner's rehearsal practices. Whereas Wagner constantly changed his mind during the final stages of production, van der Aa arrives at the rehearsals with precise, uncompromising ideas. Relating thereto, he might be considered to be more of a Verdian type, who rehearsed to approximate his ultimate vision of the opera. For Giuseppe Verdi's rehearsal practices, see Clemens Risi, "Encore! Oper wiederholen," in *Chaos + Konzept*, 97-109.

34 Nicholas Till argues that "the multiple authorship of opera has remained common throughout the twentieth century." "The Operatic Work: Texts, Performances, Receptions

izational structure for independently producing his works, called doubleA Foundation. He co-produces the opera with the Dutch National Opera as one commissioning partner out of six, enabling him to expand his agency and "own [his] own works."[35]

Before *Upload*, van der Aa has been successful in setting up this system, particularly in conceptualizing highly ambitious technological projects that augment realities, such as the 3D film operas *Sunken Garden* (2013) and *Blank Out* (2016), and the virtual reality installation *Eight* (2019). His foundation focuses on technological experimentation and the possibility of showcasing early stages of creation for interested theaters and festivals.[36] For artistic directors of opera houses and performing arts institutions, this offer is especially promising as it minimizes risks inherent to technologically ambitious productions. By establishing partnerships that finance specific stages of development more so than commissioning an overall opera, the doubleA Foundation can make use of an independent budget to introduce technological experimentation early in the process. The emphasis on the technological and artistic development, realized by multiple, week-long sprints for testing the technology, points to an alternative approach to operatic creation that rethinks opera by modifying its process.[37] By combining self-producing and commissioning, van der Aa's strategy is reminiscent of the operatic entrepreneurship demonstrated, amongst others, in the realm of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) or Beryl Korot and Steve Reich's *The Cave* (1993). Seen as a precondition to experiment within opera in the late twentieth-century

and Repertories," in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 245.

35 The opera *Upload* was financed by the following commissioning partners: Dutch National Opera, Opera Cologne, Bregenzer Festspiele, Ensemble MusikFabrik, Park Avenue Armory, and the doubleA Foundation itself. During a panel discussion at the symposium *Musiktheater der Zeitgenossenschaft* (see note 17), the composer claimed that he seeks to own his works.

36 See "doubleA Lab," doubleA Foundation website, accessed January 8, 2023, https://doublea.net/doublea-lab/.

37 This is not to say that opera theaters are not themselves already working on rethinking production processes. Operas such as Eldar's *Like Flesh* demonstrate that there are alternative forms of collaboration with institutions such as the IRCAM within the framework of more traditional operatic production to enable research, experimentation, and testing phases. Such development is further reinforced by European initiatives such as FEDORA (European Circle of Philanthropists of Opera and Ballet, www.fedora-platform.com) and ENOA (European Network of Opera Academies, www.enoa-community.com), which establish partnerships between opera houses and other cultural institutions.

United States, Korot and Reich decided to self-produce *The Cave* with multiple commissioning partners and, thus, were able to steer all aspects of the artistic process.[38] In a similar fashion, van der Aa intends not to produce his operas under the umbrella of a single theater that chooses the production team. The doubleA Foundation enables him to surpass the role of the composer and oversee the entire chain of creation. Within *Upload*, he functions in multiple roles. Moreover, he chooses the set designer, the singers, external dramaturgs, and the technological experts. This leads to a collective dominion of men in the rehearsal studio. Beyond the gender-biased narrative told in the opera's plot, the role division, too, reflects a gender divide with regards to responsibility. The leading roles in the production besides van der Aa, such as the set designer, the conductor, and cinematographer, are occupied by men, whereas the assistants and the dramaturg, who are responsible for organizational tasks and the "emotional journey" of the daughter, are women. The biases are carried over to the bodies and matter that store data in the rehearsal—the printed libretto, the video servers preserving the film, and the people co-evolving with such data.

Similarly, the music is carried not only by the score, but also the spatial allocation of roles, van der Aa's tempi dictated by a click track, amplification mechanisms, and the singer's position. The spatial organization of the studio gives indications of how van der Aa turns the space into his avatar. In the rehearsal studios of most contemporary opera productions, there is a fixed spatial relationship: the musical side of the production situates itself on the right side and the singers on stage. Both of these subspaces are expected to sound and have the main agency over the audible space of a rehearsal studio. The spatial relationship between the mise-en-scène and the music is clearly separated. The music comes from the right and the front while stage direction comments are uttered from the left. Within *Upload*, this idea of rehearsal soundscape is modified: the separation of sound and space is deconstructed, as *Upload*'s sound spatialities are more enmeshed. As the stage director is also the composer, the lines between the mise-en-scène and the music are blurred. Sound no longer comes from the right and the front, but from everywhere as the sources are separated from their origin and distributed via surround speakers. This detachment of singers from

38 See Ryan Ebright, "'My Answer to What Music Theatre Can Be': Iconoclasm and Entrepreneurship in Steve Reich and Beryl Korot's *The Cave*," *American Music* 35, no. 1 (2017): 30.

their vocal output ties into larger debates on the ineffability of the voice in opera and sound cinema. Carolyn Abbate argues that such simultaneity of disembodiment and omnipresence "sets up a situation of mastery and submissiveness."[39] In this case, the "mastery" over the sounds is animated by van der Aa, as there is no piano and no accompanist.[40] The accompanist is swapped for van der Aa's electroacoustic tracks that are disseminated through surround speakers together with the singers' amplified voices. The double-digit number of speakers is distributed along the walls of the studio and emits acousmatic sounds—an utterance that one hears without seeing the cause behind the sound.[41] The elaborated MIDI files mimic the orchestral sounds, making an accompanist redundant. While offering more diversification in sound than a piano accompaniment, they also disseminate the composed electronic track.

In addition to restructuring the audible space, van der Aa controls the musical time by storing his desired tempi in external matter. He works with click tracks—cues that give the exact beat to facilitate synchronization with the films projected. The performers learned their parts with the click track prior to arriving at the Dutch National Opera. Having memorized the meter, they now experience more freedom in the studio as they sing on top of an electroacoustic track which does not feature any click. By following the conductor's lead, they can increasingly focus on their musical interpretation without having to listen to every beat. In rehearsal, the metronome function is transferred to the conductor. The conductor's desk is equipped with visual and audible signals. The beats dictate van der Aa's time. The conductor follows the pulse van der Aa imagined for the music at a time when he composed the piece. Via the click track, the composer inscribes a musical meter from the past and conducts invisibly. Attached to the conductor's desk I find a small click track box with a red and a green light. For the first beat in a bar, it shows the red light and for the other ones the green. Additionally, there lies an mp3 player with earphones that sends cues, which are exclusively audible for the conductor. The assistant conductor Fergus McAlpine comments on the shift in the conductor's agency as manifested by the click tracks:

39 Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 148.

40 The piano is replaced by a keyboard which is only used to give single notes to the singers.

41 To expand on the notion of acousmatic sounds, see Pierre Schaeffer, *Treatise on Musical Objects: An Essay across Disciplines*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 64–69 ("Acousmatics").

> The audio click isn't simply like conducting to a metronome, it sends a pulse through your system that cannot not be followed; but it's so rigid that it can take away from the music. The light, on the other hand, when on its own acts more like a guideline of the beat. This is nice, as my ears can completely open up to what's going on around me—I can feel more musical. The downside is that if I'm not careful, it's easy to lose the pulse. Additionally, the beat in the music comes at the start of the light, and not when it's at its brightest. So, one has to conduct even more ahead of the beat.[42]

The rigidity of the click tracks and the MIDI files as well as the presence of the composer modify operatic sound spatialities—and thus also the conductor's role. In addition, their agency is decreased because of van der Aa's time management to hand the score and the MIDI files to the singers in time to rehearse properly.[43] For the majority of blocking rehearsals, the conductor Otto Tausk is substituted by his assistant. In conversations, McAlpine compares his work for *Upload* to conducting film music concerts, or ballets in which the choreographer's steps are set in stone.[44] Whereas typically the stage director and the conductor dominate the sound spatialities of opera rehearsals, here the relationship is shifted. While conforming to a sound source that nobody else in the studio can hear, the conductor translates the click tracks and musical dynamics into gesture. Within *Upload*'s rehearsals, the film cues, musical tempi, and dynamics are extremely precise, almost set in stone. The composer becomes a choreographer of time, while the conductor co-evolves into a translator rather than a musical interpreter—the composer diminishes the conductor's area of responsibility. As the conductor's agency gets significantly reduced to following instead of directing the music, van der Aa's agency, in return, expands. Van der Aa decenters the conductor, decreases the singers' flexibility, and transfers agency to the acousmatic sounds and their dissemination technology.

Apart from the click track, the composer steers the vocal quality and the loudness of the singers in the rehearsal studio. He asks the singers for little vibrato while controlling their amplification via a mixing console. The

42 Fergus McAlpine, in interview with the author, March 8, 2021.

43 From my previous experience in new opera productions, it is quite rare for opera creations to have such a fixed score this early in the process. During the musical rehearsals for *Upload* with the Ensemble Musikfabrik, the conductor Otto Tausk stated that he only found two errors in the entire score, something he claimed to be extremely impressive.

44 McAlpine, interview.

singers are equipped with microphones in most rehearsals. Whereas usually they would be able to quietly check in with their fellow singer, they suddenly cannot steer their voices like they are used. The control over the sound spatialities, musical dynamics, and adjusting to an acoustic situation—techniques perfected by the operatic performer—are lost once the amplification is outsourced beyond the performer's body.[45] The composer seeks for an amplification, a "cinema-sizing" of voices.[46] This "cinema-sizing" changes the rehearsal at large: In the studio, the singers practice their parts with the amplification mechanism in place; They adjust their physical technique to the technological device; The amplification capacity of the operatic voice itself is no longer needed to the same degree and yields to another vocal quality.[47] Associated with a more natural singing style, van der Aa prefers a non-vibrato voice with clear text comprehensibility over the operatic voice.[48] Maintaining the acoustic environment of the original stage in the rehearsal studio allows the singers to minimize insecurity factors and find the right technique early in the process. Rehearsing at the opera house for a period of eight weeks, they take on another acoustic body, a body which is constantly "cinema-sized," even in the production studio.

This is an unusual practice for opera rehearsals. From my experience with various canonical and new operas, productions usually work with some form of acoustic balance in the rehearsal studio before introducing amplification in the auditorium. When singers are exclusively amplified in the final rehearsals and performances, the sound engineers turn their microphones on when they are on stage and off when side stage. However, for the setting of *Upload*'s rehearsals, the microphones remain turned on throughout. Sonically, the singers are in "performance mode" even when waiting side stage for the avatar projections to be tested. Amplification makes each conversation audible in the studio, just like Williams's close-

45 Having worked with van der Aa before, Williams states that he learned to trust both van der Aa's idea of the voice as well as the expertise of the sound engineers. During the interview, he elaborates further on Van der Aa disliking the canonical operatic voice and aiming for a non-vibrato one with crisp and clear diction. For Williams, this vocal technique is quite effortless and gentle to produce. Moreover, these features are reminiscent of vocal styles associated with other music theater works from the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century by Steve Reich, Beryl Korot, Philip Glass, and Louis Andriessen.

46 Jonathan Burston, "Theatre Space as Virtual Place: Audio Technology, the Reconfigured Singing Body, and the Megamusical," *Popular Music* 17, no. 2 (1998): 207.

47 See Paul Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22.

48 Williams, interview.

up projections are visible for everyone. Detached from the privacy of personal interaction, and with their voices streamed with a surround sound setup, the singers reduce their utterances to whispering when they don't sing. Through amplification technology, the singers' spoken voices ultimately get silenced. Considering how much time the singers spend merely waiting for the avatar to be optimized, there are significantly few casual exchanges. The private speech yields to van der Aa's idea of singing. In the score for *Upload*, vocal lines are written without any instruction for speech. Thus, conversations disseminated over speakers seem alienating. Within a rehearsal that is sonically set up to be a performance, the private speaking voice seems to dissociate from the singers' bodies. Even if the whispers are produced by the singer's larynx, they mark estranged sounds. The amplification produces a different order in the sonic spatialities of the studio. The occasional whisper—albeit elicited by the singer's body—is an utterance that distorts van der Aa's desired sound quality. The microphone hosts the voice, and the composer hosts the sonic space. Following the wires of the microphone, I am again directed to the composer who feeds the connection between the amplification system, the singers' bodies, their voices, and the laboratory space.

The entire development process of van der Aa's opera can be read as a technogenesis of uploading that renders all involved (non)humans along with the immersive technology of rehearsal into van der Aa's data outlets. The "epistemic thing" is essentially the avatar behind the avatar—i.e., van der Aa in his fragmentation of the rehearsals' spaces and times. Through the commissioning structure and the doubleA Foundation, he builds the *carrier bag of opera* according to his preferences of people and matter as well as his reimaginings of sonic and spatial setups. He outsources himself in bits of data that get continuously updated until the rehearsal phase ends. The opera is not premiered in a physical space at first but, instead, shot as a film and uploaded online on the medici.tv platform.[49] The posthuman technogenesis of van der Aa's rehearsal is ultimately compressed into one medium, reducing the space to one single screen, and condensing the years of development into ninety minutes.

49 https://www.medici.tv/en/operas/upload-michel-van-der-aa-julia-bullock-roderick-williams-dno, accessed January 8, 2023.

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Abstract

This article examines the process of developing a posthuman opera, Michel van der Aa's *Upload* (2021), from the perspective of a rehearsal ethnography. Proposing a rehearsal-oriented ontology of opera, this article avoids discussions of the performance and even the music itself to focus on stages of rehearsing with a virtual body. As a participant-observer, I examine how the rehearsal space of *Upload* evolves into a laboratory that negotiates receptacles of digital data with congenital bodies. Dissecting the avatar as a compound of (non)human agents, I interrogate how rehearsing a virtual body reconfigures operatic production dynamics. The operatic rehearsal processes repetition and connection, and co-evolves together with the technologies of production. With the example of various agents' interactions during the rehearsal, I illustrate how the figure of the avatar reproduces *Upload* out of canonical rehearsal practices by recalibrating the connections between opera's agents. These elaborations lead to an understanding of van der Aa as a composer who recalibrates himself into the posthuman form of an opera production.

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FORUM

Web Opera and Opera on the Web

edited by Sofija Perović

As an aspiring opera stage director with experience in music and theater, I started my research on opera stage direction more than a decade ago. At that point, I had not fully realized the potential and the importance of the Internet as a tool in contemporary opera productions, and yet all my work was somewhat conditioned and certainly influenced by it. My first experience with opera was, of course, in person. Nevertheless, around the same time I also started watching the VHS tapes of operas lent by my music teachers. I still vividly remember Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's production of *Rigoletto* and Ingmar Bergman's *The Magic Flute*. Those VHS tapes were soon replaced by DVDs and followed by live streaming in cinemas, on television, and finally on the Internet. Since I was living in Belgrade, Serbia, it was thanks to those privileges of modern technology that I had the opportunity to keep up to date with what was going on in the opera world.

To me personally, the Internet represents a window to the world. It brought me to La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House, the Opéra de Paris, and many other places, but it also gave me access to learning and research, and it allowed me to be in touch with colleagues all over the world, to connect with professionals with whom, otherwise, I would not have had the opportunity to get in touch and work with. Now, I use the Internet in my professional engagements as opera stage director every day—be it to do the research, to connect with collaborators, or as a tool in the process of making a new opera. For all the productions I worked with, most of the marketing and publicity was made over the web, on social media, and online

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magazines. It was partly a strategic decision, but it also came naturally since everyone involved in the process used social media on a daily basis.

Besides the use of the Internet as a tool of communication and promotion, the most exciting experience I had with it was when I staged Francis Poulenc's opera *La Voix humaine* at the Bitef theater in Belgrade in 2016. In this production, I made use of the web camera with a specific aim—I wanted to bring closer the story of Elle to a contemporary audience who could no longer relate to the troubles of the first telephones and interruptions made by party lines.[1] By showing their proper reflection on the stage, I wanted the people in the audience to get involved in the story, but also to raise awareness on the privacy issues related to online communications and the sharing of personal data over the Internet—and that is why I opted for a web camera.

This is just one of many examples of taking advantage of the Internet and its products and services on the operatic stage. As we keep using it more and more in our daily lives, its use is expanding and becoming a standard in opera as well. However, even though its presence is constantly challenged and reexamined, after its COVID-19-related explosion in relevance new tendencies (such as web operas) are now seen in a different light.

The year 2020 has changed the world as we know it. The global pandemic has affected artistic and cultural scenes more than any obstacle over the past century, including wars and socio-economic crises. In a recent article, Anna Schürmer identifies social distancing as "a central (un)word of the pandemic year 2020"[2] and examines the transformations the opera world went through during the COVID crisis by identifying this historical moment as one of the main reasons for the "acceleration of digitisation and the appearance of non-human presences on virtual stages."[3] The global impact of the pandemic to the (mostly performing) arts scene reminds us of its interrelation with the general health of our planet, giving another tragic topicality to a relatively new operatic genre called "eco-opera." This worldwide emergency has also highlighted the role of technology not only in our daily lives, but also as an essential part and tool for the performing arts and opera.

1 A party line was a multiparty line or a shared service line used to provide telephone service. These lines were often the only available ones and they had a discount over an individual service. Since lines were shared, when one user was on the phone, other(s) couldn't make a connection, but they could hear the conversation of the other user(s).

2 Anna Schürmer, "The Extensions of Opera: Radio, Internet, and Immersion," *Contemporary Music Review* 41, no. 4 (2022): 401.

3 Schürmer, 402.

This journey began with the first live broadcasts of opera on television and in cinemas, soon followed by online streaming. It was in 2006 that the New York Metropolitan Opera started its successful series of live streamings "Met Live in HD." Other important venues, such as The National Theatre in London, followed the Met's example and started providing live streamings of its productions, first in movie theaters all around the world, but soon increasingly online as well.

Even though no one was prepared for such a drastic change in people's habits and artistic creation, the (not so) recent liaisons that opera entertained with technology and media came as practical, to say the least, during this period. The new subgenres such as web opera, however, came into being long before the coronavirus. Modern technologies were used on operatic stages on a regular basis—e.g., the common use of videos in opera stagings that even resulted in the creation of new software. Some of the most representative examples of such practices can be found already at the end of the twentieth and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, and they include works by composer and innovator Tod Machover, namely his interactive *Brain Opera* from 1996 which "invites the audience to collaborate live and online," and the "robotic" opera *Death and the Powers* from 2010 which tells the story of the inventor Simon Powers conducting his final experiment and trying to project himself into the future.[4] A couple of years earlier, for the revival of his staging of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* at the Met in 2008, director Robert Lepage and his artistic team "Ex Machina" recreated the video projections using an infrared camera that detects movement to make the projection interactive, which at the time was a novelty in the practice of video art for opera. The interactive images responded to the movements of the performers on stage, but they were also modified by the singers' voices. The audience had the opportunity to see something close to the experience of hallucinating. The specificity of this type of video projections lies in its sharing the same quality of live performances, as each performance is different.

Experimentations in the field of video art for the opera stage have been replaced by developments in the field of broadcasting and filming. The absence of the audience in theaters opened new possibilities for the filming of the shows. For instance, it was possible to install the cameras directly on stage, which would be problematic during a live performance (except

4 "Tod Machover—Opera of the Future," People, Mit Media Lab website, accessed February 23, 2023, https://www.media.mit.edu/people/tod/overview/.

for when cameras on stage are used for specific purposes—e.g., in many productions by Frank Castorf or, amongst others, in the staging of *No Exit* by Andy Vores at the Florida Grand Opera in 2013). Since its early era, postdramatic theater has always made use of video on stage, highlighting the poetic dimension of a production more than its content, as it can be seen in the works of Jan Fabre, Romeo Castellucci, or Robert Lepage. Castellucci and Lepage have used their experience with technology and media in spoken theater and have transposed it to the opera.

A new operatic genre has recently emerged from this marriage between opera and new technologies and from the desire to make opera more accessible to young audiences—web operas, in fact, broadcast only on the Internet and not in front of a live audience. The question that has emerged since is whether the very essence of opera as a genre has changed in the age of the Internet or is it only our view of opera (and more generally of art) that has been altered?

Operas for television have been around since the 1950s; yet, with new digital technologies the expectations of global audiences have started to change. Audiences, too, have changed. Today, with Internet at the opera becoming everyday reality, who are the spectators who go to the opera house and those who prefer to stay home and watch it as a TV/computer/mobile phone broadcast? Opera stage director Dmitri Tcherniakov sums the issue up: "The opera on video, at the movies, on Youtube? I don't pay much attention to it, it seems quite natural to me, like mobile phones, computers, and foreign languages."[5] From a different perspective, Romeo Castellucci finds opera on screen to be "an inherent contradiction" as "one has the impression of what it might look like in reality, but it is not 'the thing.' The thing is an encounter, the thing is an act of presence, which is increasingly rare today."[6] In her book *Opera as Hypermedium,* Tereza Havelková notices how liveness today "maintains a high degree of cultural prestige."[7] New generations of opera creators are, however, less interested in keeping that allure of cultural prestige and are aiming more and more to bring opera to wider audiences (be it in more approachable public venues or virtual spaces).

5 Béatrice Picon-Vallin, "Ne pas faire semblant d'oublier momentanément la souffrance, la perte, le sentiment de l'imperfection, toutes nos peurs…," interview with Dmitri Tcherniakov in Isabelle Moindrot and Alain Perroux, ed., *Le théâtre à l'opéra, la voix au théâtre*, special issue of *Alternatives théâtrales* 113/114 (July 2012), 40. My translation.

6 Interview with Romeo Castellucci, this Forum, 116.

7 Tereza Havelková, *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 99.

The connection and interdependence between opera and media began already in the nineteenth century with the first broadcasts of opera through telephones. There have even been examples of inventors who thought of opera for their creations. We already know that the tendency and desire to broadcast opera to remote audiences was already in place during the nineteenth century, and that the idea of making opera accessible to a wider audience isn't a recent phenomenon. Thomas Edison was somewhat prophetic in providing for this, now customary, practice—i.e., watching operas on screen performed by singers who are no longer with us—when he collaborated on the creation of William Dickson's kinetograph: "I believe that in coming years … grand opera can be given at the Metropolitan Opera House at New York without any material change from the original, and with artists and musicians long since dead."[8]

Given the abundance of scholarly literature on the phenomenon, with writings appearing already in the 1980s, video and new technologies, as well as new filming techniques, have remained closely linked to opera since then. During this period of the pandemic, the bond between opera and the Internet grew stronger. We have already mentioned the new genre of web opera and the examples dating from the last few years before the COVID-19 pandemic, but during this period without live performance activities, another new genre (or subgenre) has emerged: Zoom operas (i.e., operas created exclusively for being broadcast over online peer-to-peer software platforms for video communications such as, among others, Zoom). It will be interesting to observe the future of this phenomenon, as Zoom is a digital platform which invites users to actively participate (with the likes, the applauses, and other possible"reactions"); this would create an atmosphere quite different from asynchronous performances one can experience on YouTube or Vimeo, for example, where the audience is invisible and have no direct relationship with the artists (of course, people can leave comments, likes, or dislikes, but this is not available to the artists in real time). How will this relationship between new technologies and opera develop in the future remains to be seen.

Yet, the subjects developed in the libretti for web operas are quite diverse and not necessarily focused on contemporary world issues. For example, the first web opera created in France, *Ursule 1.1*, directed by Benjamin Lazar for the Théâtre de Cornouailles in 2010, recounts the story of Saint Ursula,

8 Thomas Edison, preface to William Kennedy Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Kinetophonograph* (1895; repr., New York: Arno, 1970), [4].

Princess of Brittany, who allegedly succumbed to the arrows of the Huns on her pilgrimage route to Rome, along with 11000 other virgins. As part of the research initiative "Opera and the Media of the Future—OMF," the Center for Research in Opera and Music Theater (CROMT) commissioned two "mini operas for the web" to be hosted on their website and presented at a two-day forum held in October 2014. The first of the two winning projects was presented at Glyndebourne as candidates were invited to reimagine opera on the web and ask themselves the following questions: "What does opera 'mean' on this scale and through this medium? How can the composer/media artist engage an operatic audience? What is the work's relation to the 'live'?"[9] Of the seventeen submitted proposals, the jury nominated two winners: *You Are Here* (Jaakko Nousiainen, director; Miika Hyytiäinen, composer) and *RUR-Rossums Universal Replicants* (Martin Rieser, digital, visual, electronic, and interactive artist; Andrew Hugill, composer). The concept of *You Are Here* is based on the idea of connecting interior spaces of Glyndebourne Opera to exterior spaces of three opera houses in Berlin (Staatsoper, Deutsche Oper, and Komische Oper). *You Are Here* is organized around six short visual artworks, each containing a QR code that can be activated with a smartphone camera. The codes connect to short opera videos, forming, as described by its makers, "a virtual peephole between Glyndebourne and Berlin."[10] Nousiainen and Hyytiäinen have previously collaborated on a similar innovative project called *Omnivore*, originally conceived as an opera "for mobile delivery."[11] The idea for this project was born in 2007 when the devices weren't up to the creator's idea, so it was filmed only a few years later in 2011, and in 2012 it got its online incarnation. This opera is considered to be the first opera written to be distributed as a mobile application and its making took effort and much enthusiasm and creativity from a large group of musicians, technicians, mobile media experts, video makers, and interface designers, among others. The work is also in the "mini format" since it lasts about twenty minutes, and another curiosity and specificity is the fact that there are several variations of the opera, as the system randomly chooses certain parts and the order of presentation. When compared to live performance, always different (even with

9 "Web Opera," OMF website, *Reframe*, https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/omf/web-opera/, accessed February 1, 2023.

10 "*You Are Here*," online presentation, *Reframe*, https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/youarehere/, accessed February 1, 2023.

11 "Omnivore," official website, http://www.omnivoretheopera.net/index.html, accessed February 1, 2023.

the same cast) and unrepeatable, this could be considered as a digital match to the "uncertainty" which accompanies every live event.

As explained in the online proposal, the *RUR* "mini-web opera provides an explosive encounter between new technologies and the long-established tradition of opera."[12] By asking the audiences to actively participate through social media, "*RUR* transforms the way in which operatic works are produced and consumed" by making the online experience intermedial and immersive.

Two years later, in 2016, during the eighteen months when major renovations prevented access to the building, the Opéra Comique in Paris presented *The Mystery of the Blue Squirrel*, an opera designed exclusively for the Internet, conceived as "a veritable operatic thriller, [which compiles] veiled references to the Opéra Comique and allusions to the trades and places of the theater. There [are] investigations and thrills but in a zany vein accessible to children aged 8 and up."[13] This opera in seven scenes (Marc-Olivier Dupin, composer; Ivan Grinberg, librettist and stage director) was born out of the need for the artistic direction at the Opéra Comique to find new places to present its productions during the reconstruction of the Salle Favart. The opera's director for the live broadcast was François Roussillon, already well-known in operatic and dance circles for his recordings, documentaries, and live filming. This full length web opera was advertised to be watched "on the web and with the family." On the Facebook event "Webopéra à partir de 8 ans" (Web opera for those aged eight and older) it was advertised as: "Take note of the event for the family to attend the live creation." Another advertising slogan was: "The room will be virtual; it will be accessed free of charge from the comfort of your personal computer at home."[14] We can see that the Opéra Comique proposed this work as a family event and insisted on the collective and shared experience, to be consumed in the comfort of your sofa, while also insisting on the (clearly attractive) gratuity of the event. The Opéra Comique published the results and figures regarding the number of spectators for the Facebook event: 2,800 unique visitors for the live broadcast, then 4,226 the days after. On the last evening, the platform recorded 7,362 requests. On social networks, the web opera was

12 "Mini-Web Opera: *RUR*," OMF, *Reframe*, https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/omf/web-opera/rur/, accessed February 1, 2023.

13 "*The Mystery of the Blue Squirrel*," Opéra Comique website, https://www.opera-comique.com/en/shows/mystery-blue-squirrel, accessed February 1, 2023.

14 Opéra Comique—Page officielle, "Webopéra à partir de 8 ans," Facebook, February 21, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/events/547184538779857/. My translation.

Fig. 1 – Nico Muhly, *Two Boys*, Metropolitan Opera. Photo credit: Richard Hubert Smith.

a success. Live tweeting amounted to 496 tweets by 112 participants, with 362,654 people being reached globally. On Facebook, 45,292 people were reached, with 725 likes.[15] In any case, these numbers reveal the presence of a strong community, albeit virtual. Through likes and comments on social networks, automatic sharing with friends or followers, the Internet community publicized this web opera created and produced by the Opéra Comique. All in all, a good marketing result, especially as the goal was not only the creation of a new work and genre, but also the presentation and promotion of an opera house which had been closed to the audience for a year and a half. The popularity of the Internet was used also for the educational mission that the management of the Opéra Comique had set for themselves.

The link and interdependence between opera and the Internet was already noted in the early 2000s. In February 2007, Opera Europa organized a conference in Paris during which the question of how to rekindle the interest of younger generations in opera emerged. The conference ("European Opera Days") focused on the possibility of using the Internet for opera as a genre, either for its promotion or for the creation of new types. In his

15 See Opéra Comique, "Webopéra à partir de 8 ans."

opening speech, Jacques Attali spoke of "the web revolution" and its potential for the realm of opera. According to Attali, the Web 2.0 and initiatives like MySpace and YouTube could succeed in transforming spectators into active protagonists.[16] During the conference, the example of the English National Opera (ENO) and its "Inside Out" project was brought up, which aimed to attract young audiences by using the Internet as well as a familiar language. The ENO website offered the opportunity to attend rehearsals in real time and comment on the latest performances on blogs.

Internet as the main subject of an opera was introduced for the first time ten years ago in Nico Muhly's opera *Two Boys* (figure 1), jointly commissioned the by Metropolitan Opera House and ENO, and based on a true story from the early 2000s—a tragic tale of two boys who met in one of the early chatrooms and ended their online "friendship" with one stabbing and fatally wounding the other. Although this is a traditional operatic form, the libretto written by Craig Lucas depicts in an almost naturalistic manner the Internet language, practices, and most importantly problems and perils of the Internet realm which are, unfortunately, still very relevant in today's society. The core topic of the opera is cyberbullying and its consequences, and the same subject also inspires a three-episode web opera composed by Michael Roth on a libretto by Kate Gale, called *The Web Opera* (figure 2).[17] Another similarity with Nico Muhly's production is the fact that this web opera (or web opera series) is also based on true events. This work in progress (there are five episodes planned in total) aims to raise awareness over cyber abuse through the operatic medium.

The website Operavision.eu is one of the newest and brightest examples of Internet use for bringing opera to its younger audiences, but also for bringing together its creators or students from around the world without forcing them to change location. "OperaVision is an invitation to travel online to discover the diversity of musical theatre from wherever you want, whenever you want… Convinced that opera can be accessible to everyone, OperaVision also believes in its role as a digital stage for emerging artists… OperaVision seeks to celebrate the positive impact and value of opera to society…"[18] With such practices, the Internet community is offered a new

16 Martin Schneidel, "Verdi on the web, " trans. Claire Mcbride, *Cafébabel*, February 7, 2007, https://cafebabel.com/en/article/verdi-on-the-web-5ae004e4f723b35a145dc273/.

17 *The Web Opera*, official website, https://www.thewebopera.com, accessed February 1, 2023.

18 "About OperaVision," OperaVision website, https://operavision.eu/about, accessed February 1, 2023.

Fig. 2 – Michael Roth, *The Web Opera*, still photo from episode 2.

space for exchange, learning, and creation, which is essentially a new experience in operatic practice.

As Michael Earley noticed: "The laptop is the new keyboard, sound maker, orchestra, canvas and film studio—often in the hands of and under the direct musical-authorial-directorial control of a single artist."[19] *Upload*, an opera created by Michel van der Aa (composer and multimedia artist) for the 2021 Bregenz Festival (with its film version being screened by medici.tv and streamed by the Dutch National Opera), demonstrates this in the most obvious way. As a talking head reminds the audience during the play, "the human mind is the last analog device in the digital world."[20] Social dementia combined with the desire to live forever are questioned in this innovative work. Our "analog devices" seem to have insufficient memory to keep alive memories of our ancestors, and Michel van der Aa examines other options we may have. This opera explores the possibility of "uploading" thoughts and memories in order to achieve an eternal digital consciousness after death. Aside from the libretto's original topic, the opera is innovative in its technical aspects, too. The video projections used on stage are diverse:

19 Michael Earley, "After *The Twilight of the Gods*: Opera Experiments, New Media and the Opera of the Future," in *Opera in the Media Age: Essays on Art, Technology and Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Fryer (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 237.

20 Kurt Gottschalk, "Michel van der Aa's *Upload* Questions the Meaning of Life… and of Opera," *Bachtrack*, March 24, 2022, https://bachtrack.com/review-van-der-aa-upload-bullock-williams-park-avenue-armory-new-york-march-2022.

one screen shows to the audience the practical side and the process of "uploading," while the other live motion-captured projection represents the digital avatar of the character who "uploaded" his thoughts and memories. Mixed reality was also used by van der Aa in his VR installation *Eight*. Even though *Eight* is more of a unique mixture of musical theater, visual art, and virtual reality than strictly opera, nevertheless it deserves to be mentioned here since such experiments putting together operatic style of music with new technologies paved the way for their usage on the opera stages. Today, even the term "opera" is constantly reexamined, sometimes denied, and reappropriated by artists for other purposes.

In 2015, the Opéra national de Paris developed a third, virtual/digital stage in addition to its two existing ones at the Palais Garnier and the Opéra Bastille. This free platform, called 3e Scène, was launched with the idea of attracting new audiences, especially young people, and getting them interested in opera and ballet.

> Internet is a public place, a collective meeting place, a place for expression and creation. … In this new space, the Paris Opera intends to continue its dialogue with the public and also to make new friends. 3e Scène opens wide its doors to visual artists, filmmakers, composers, photographers, choreographers, writers, and invites them to come and create original works relating to the Paris Opera. The relationship between the Opera and the works created may be forthright, robust, subliminal, drawn-out, extended or even distended. But above all we want the artists to make the Opera their own, to draw on its resources, roam within its walls and meet its talents in order to reveal places, colours, history, questions and people through creation. This 3e Scène has neither equal nor model. Open to the world, it invents a space where tradition, creation and new technology unite as symbols of modernity.[21]

Although the works presented were not full operas and could not be defined as web operas, 3e Scène represented a new interpretation of opera on the Internet. In 2017, 3e Scène organized its first festival at the Gaîté Lyrique,[22] and for the 2019–2020 season the famous French YouTuber Jhon

21 "Manifesto," 3e Scène, Opéra de Paris website, discontinued, accessed February 1, 2023, through Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20201208101638/http://www.operadeparis.fr/en/3e-scene/manifesto.

22 "La Gaîté Lyrique, a cultural establishment of the Ville de Paris, is both a space and a medium that puts the spotlight on post-Internet cultures. It's the place where these artistic practices, born on or transformed by the Internet, are showcased but also imagined, created,

Rachid was invited to perform on the digital platform Yet, not every story has a happy ending: as of 2022, the website for 3e Scène has vanished from the Opéra de Paris online presence and has since been replaced by a far more traditional pay-on-demand platform called "L'Opéra chez soi."

The interest in attracting new audiences to opera (and who hopefully will keep coming back to it), and the desire to find and create new forms within the operatic genre have given rise to many novelties by changing our perception of opera and by making it closer to modern, "digital" sensibilities. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements in connecting the Internet and opera has been the foundation of web opera as a new genre with a great potential, even though it remains to be seen which direction it will take and how it will evolve. Time will show whether the creation of web operas was simply a marketing strategy to attract new audiences or whether it will give birth to artworks that will change the operatic genre and its stakes for generations to come.

As Vlado Kotnik affirms, "the production of opera has never been about performing a musical work on stage only, but also about performing a highly contested social arena."[23] The social arena has drastically changed during the last decade, especially during and after the pandemic, and has been mostly transferred to the realm of social media. How did this shift influence the operatic world? What are the advantages and disadvantages of social media? and, Can they be treated as tools on the operatic stage? I talked about this and many other topics with American soprano Julia Bullock, whose voice is being heard and spread actively on social media; with one of the greatest stage directors of our time Romeo Castellucci, whose views on Internet and the relocation of live shows to the digital screen are much less optimistic or positive; and with the French dramaturg Simon Hatab, who collaborated to the very special production of Jean-Philippe Rameau's opéra-ballet *Les Indes galantes* directed by Clément Cogitore at the Opéra de Paris in 2019.

experimented and transmitted. A space of discovery, La Gaîté Lyrique aims to understand our era and its relationship to virtuality, while also being a place of creativity, sharing and celebration." We are La Gaîté—The Project," La Gaîté Lyrique official website, accessed February 1, 2023, https://gaite-lyrique.net/en/us-la-gaite/the-project.

23 Vlado Kotnik, "The Adaptability of Opera: When Different Social Agents Come to Common Ground," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 44, no. 2 (2013): 303.

Creating Opera for the Web: *Au web ce soir – Ursule 1.1* and *Actéon*[*]

Caroline Mounier-Vehier

"Half play, half musical performance,"[24] "cyber-theater,"[25] "cyber-show for web-spectators,"[26] "webcam show … mini-opera,"[27] or simply "opera for the Internet."[28] The expressions used by journalists to describe *Au web ce soir – Ursule 1.1*, a show conceived and staged by Benjamin Lazar in collaboration with composer Morgan Jourdain and musical director Geoffroy Jourdain, are varied. The stage director speaks of "live theater on the Internet"[29] and evokes "a new theatrical object, which will be a kind of small opera."[30] Performed only once on April 29, 2010, at 9pm live on the website of the Théâtre de Cornouaille (www.theatre-cornouaille.fr), *Ursule 1.1* was an early example of a performance created for an online audience. Ten years later, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Lazar and Jourdain joined forces with director Corentin Leconte for a new video project, at the crossroads of theater, music, and cinema: Charpentier's *Actéon*, this time more soberly described as a "film in sequence shot,"[31] "film,"[32] or "filmop-

* English translations from French quotes are by the translator of the article, Sofija Perović.

24 Julie Koch, "*Au web ce soir*, le théâtre des planches à la Toile," *La Croix*, April 23, 2010, http://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Actualite/Au-web-ce-soir-le-theatre-des-planches-a-la-Toile-_NG_-2010-04-23-550383.

25 Marie-Laure Combes, "Le théâtre en live depuis votre canapé," *Europe 1*, April 28, 2010, http://www.europe1.fr/culture/le-theatre-en-live-depuis-votre-canape-184160.

26 "*Au web ce soir – Ursule 1.1*, un cyber-spectacle pour web-spectateurs," *RTL info*, April 27, 2010, https://www.rtl.be/art/info/magazine/culture/-au-web-ce-soir-ursule-1-1-un-cyber-spectacle-pour-web-spectateurs-164348.aspx.

27 "Opéra. *Ursule*, un spectacle webcam décalé," *Le Télégramme*, May 3, 2010, http://www.letelegramme.fr/local/finistere-sud/quimper/ville/opera-ursule-un-spectacle-webcam-decale-03-05-2010-896666.php.

28 "Théâtre de Cornouaille. Rendez-vous avec Ursule sur le web ce soir," *Le Télégramme*, April 29, 2010, http://www.letelegramme.fr/ig/generales/regions/bretagne/theatre-de-cornouaille-rendez-vous-avec-ursule-sur-le-web-ce-soir-29-04-2010-892458.php.

29 Koch, "*Au web ce soir*."

30 Benjamin Lazar, Marion Boudier, and Florent Siaud, "Dramaturgie et mise en scène des classiques," *Agôn*, Dramaturgie des arts de la scene (2009), https://doi.org/10.4000/agon.1181.

31 "*Actéon*," Les Cris de Paris official website, accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.lescrisdeparis.fr/productions/acteon-marc-antoine-charpentier/.

32 Renaud Machart, "*Actéon*, sur Arte.tv: un petit opéra de Charpentier repensé au long d'un plan-séquence," *Le Monde*, February 22, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2021/02/22/acteon-sur-arte-tv-un-petit-opera-de-charpentier-repense-au-long-d-un-plan-sequence_6070823_3246.html.

era."[33] Filmed on December 6, 2020, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, the film was broadcasted on Arte.tv from the 16th of February, 2021.

As film-spectacles, conceived for online broadcasting, rather than filmed spectacles, *Ursule 1.1* and *Actéon* possess several common points which tend to make them similar and at the same time invite to try to define a new spectacular genre of which they would be the first examples. Their respective characteristics will be studied here in this sense. In a broader sense, both these works demonstrate Benjamin Lazar's reflections on the reciprocal relations and influences between stage and video mediums. Whether it be performances that include video art, recordings of performances, filmed shows, or video shows such as *Ursule 1.1.* and *Actéon*, the stage director questions the possible interactions between film and live performance. He explores, with his collaborators, the capacity of video to appropriate the intensity of the stage and its relationship to the present.[34] It will thus also be a question of asking to what extent these two performances studied are representative of this approach and can contribute to a redefinition of the contemporary scene by means of the media available on Internet.

In 2010, for his arrival as associate artist at the Théâtre de Cornouaille, Lazar proposed a show conceived for the web: *Ursule 1.1*, performed live on the Internet by a soprano, Claire Lefilliâtre, a bass-baritone, Lisandro Abadie, a pianist, Aurélien Richard, and a women's choir, mixing professional choristers from the Opus 104 choir, and amateur choristers from the Pôle Voix choir of the Maison pour tous Ergué-Armel. We meet Ursula, a young Breton woman of our time, who takes advantage of the communication space offered by the Internet to tell us her story. Dismayed by the mockery of her name, Ursula takes refuge in a library, where she discovers by chance the story of another Ursula, more precisely Saint Ursula, in the *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine. This is the beginning of the show as a *mise en abyme*, the story of Saint Ursula: the departure from Cornouailles and the pilgrimage to Rome, in company of eleven thousand virgins, the confrontation with the Huns on the way back, the refusal to renounce the Catholic faith, and the death as a martyr. Ursula's project is to gather

33 "*Actéon*," Théâtre du Châtelet official website, accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.chatelet.com/programmation/saison-2020-2021/acteon-live/. This is also the expression used by Sofija Perović in her article "Métamorphoses du chasseur chassé—*Actéon*, filmopéra," *Alternatives théâtrales*, online blog, September 23, 2021, https://blog.alternativestheatrales.be/metamorphoses-du-chasseur-chasse-acteon-filmopera/.

34 See the next section of this Forum "Transposing the Necessity of the Present," an interview with Benjamin Lazar conducted by Caroline Mounier-Vehier.

around her as many young girls as her patron saint: the Internet could thus become the equivalent of Saint Ursula's cloak, a magical garment under which her companions could shelter and protect themselves. Three narratives are thus interwoven: first, a presentation of Ursula the narrator and of her own project; then, the story of Ursula the character (as told by Ursula the narrator); finally, the story of Saint Ursula (recounted, or dreamt of, by Ursula the character). The three stories together conclude at the end of the show: while Saint Ursula falls under the arrows of the king of the Huns, Ursula (character, but also narrator) herself faints and technicians appear in the camera field to help her. After a blackout, Ursula (narrator), alone on stage, gets up and walks towards the camera to introduce the credits.

At the beginning of the video of *Ursule 1.1*, five slides follow one another to introduce the show and present the rules of a game that the director and his team have adopted. These rules contribute in defining the characteristics of the new spectacular object proposed: they indicate the chosen media, its specifications, and the constraints imposed to adapt to it. Broadcasted only on the Internet and filmed with a fixed camera, the performance takes the form of an amateur video filmed by Ursula with her webcam. The form coincides with the content, it corresponds to the announced situation: Ursula is an Internet user addressing other Internet users. The choice of the fixed camera is also thought to be in reference to the films by Georges Méliès and to the early days of cinema, as Benjamin Lazar points out: "The difference with another online performance, such as may be practiced for opera or theater, is that the stage frame will also be the camera frame, according to a device that may evoke Méliès's camera, namely a fixed frame without zoom, posed as a spectator's eye."[35]

The camera frame functions as a stage frame. The point of view is not constructed thanks to the movement of the camera around the filmed object, but rather it is necessary to bring in or out of the camera field what should or should not be filmed. Entering the camera field becomes the equivalent of entering the stage, while the off-screen becomes the equivalent of the backstage. The camera itself occupies a place as static as that of a spectator sitting in a theater. For the director, this characteristic makes it possible to distinguish *Ursule 1.1* from other forms of online performances. Indeed, in the case of a re-run on the Internet, on television, or at a movie theater of a show conceived for and represented in an opera house, the spectators are offered the broadcast of a show performed in another place,

35 Lazar, Boudier, and Siaud, "Dramaturgie et mise en scène des classiques."

in the presence of other spectators. Even if these initiatives tend to give them the impression that they are attending the performance, they are only external witnesses. What they see is not the performance itself, but a trace of the performance, which also carries a point of view—that which is imposed by the camera. In the case of *Ursule 1.1*, the performance is available exclusively online. All the spectators of *Ursule 1.1* see and hear the same thing, at the same time, no matter where they are.

Moreover, the choice of a fixed camera offers a point of view which corresponds to the so-called "eye of the prince," the place in a typical Italian opera house from which the optical effect of the decor in perspective is best appreciated. The modernity of the use of the Internet is thus part of a tradition—i.e., that of the characteristic conception of the stage as a "tableau."[36] As with Italian theaters before the introduction of darkening the auditorium,[37] the question of the attention of the spectators nevertheless arises—another constraint associated with performances on Internet is indeed the ease by which spectators can be distracted, or even abandon the proposed experience. It contributes in justifying the choice of a short format (forty-eight minutes)—i.e., between "the web format" (videos of a few minutes) and "the theater format" (performances of about an hour and a half to two hours), in order to be "in a good in-between time to invite an Internet user to follow the proposal from one end to the other," explains Lazar.[38] But the work must also be interesting, even fascinating, as the show humorously suggests during a hypnosis scene: Ursula presents the camera with a spiral printed in black on a white wheel, which rotates while she waves her hands in the direction of the spectators, in order to hypnotize them and keep them on the web at her side, as she introduces the story of Saint Ursula. Music can be an asset in this process. Thus, the composer Morgan Jourdain wished to contribute, with the music, to awaken and keep the attention of the audience: "It is necessary to find … in my music … something which allows the spectator, the listener, to capture the attention, so we will be clos-

36 See Emmanuelle Hénin, *Ut pictura theatrum. Théâtre et peinture de la Renaissance italienne au classicism français* (Geneva: Droz, 2003); Jean-Louis Haquette and Emmanuelle Hénin, eds., *La scène comme tableau* (Poitiers: La Licorne, 2004).

37 See Anne Surgers, *L'Automne de l'imagination. Splendeurs et misères de la représentation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), in particular "Le divorce entre scène et salle: un modèle qui sépare," 256–71.

38 Benjamin Lazar, "Entre le théâtre et le cinema," presentation of *Au web ce soir* for Europe1.fr, Dailymotion, posted April 28, 2010, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xd43mq.

er to a music one could say charming, charmer."[39] We find here a founding principle of opera: the enchantment of music is associated with the wonder of images. Jourdain adds: "We will try to use the singing in its simplest relationship, in its Orpheus way, … to tell a story and attract the spectators and the spectator's attention during the time of the performance."[40] This reference to Orpheus is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, Orpheus is a poet capable, through his musical talent, of obtaining from the God of the Underworld the resurrection of his beloved Eurydice. On the other hand, he is an emblematic character for opera since the beginning of the genre, at the dawn of the seventeenth century. This reference thus contributes to the inscription of web opera into the tradition of Western opera. However, in the case of an Internet performance, the music must enchant through the mediation of the screen and despite the physical absence of the performers. Jourdain has therefore composed a music that mixes elements of scholarly and popular music, with particular tunes reminiscent of nursery rhymes, which are at the same time catchy, playful, and easy to memorize. The music creates a link with the spectators, beyond the screen.

Like *Ursule 1.1*, *Actéon* is a short opera, lasting about forty minutes, with solo and choral parts performed by the singers of Les Cris de Paris, directed by Geoffroy Jourdain. The notable difference is that this is not a contemporary creation composed for the project, but rather an old work: a pastoral by Marc-Antoine Charpentier which premiered in 1684. The story is inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the hunter Actaeon sees Diana bathing with her nymphs, but the goddess discovers him and, irritated, turns him into a stag, so that her own dogs chase and kill him. For this new filmed work, the rules of the game are no longer the same as for *Ursule 1.1*. This time, the film is not broadcast live, but deferred after post-production work. However, the director did not give up the idea of finding, within the framework of the shooting, a form of urgency specific to live performance. After several work sessions hosted by different festivals, a few days of rehearsals took place at the Théâtre du Châtelet, where the film was shot in one day. Another complementary process is the use of the sequence shot. The film is in fact composed of two long sequence shots, between which the passage is constituted by Actaeon's gaze: the camera embodies a gaze—form and content, once

39 "*Au web ce soir*," video interview conducted by Emmanuelle Giuliani and Julie Koch with Morgan Jourdain and Benjamin Lazar for *La Croix*, Dailymotion, posted April 22, 2010, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xd1hrx.

40 "*Au web ce soir*," video interview.

Fig. 3 – Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *Actéon*, directed by Benjamin Lazar, still photo. © Camera Lucida productions.

again, coincide. The sequence shot consists of a single shot covering several locations in the same place, in this case the Théâtre du Châtelet. It implies a precise preparation and a strong concentration on behalf of the performers; any error can lead to having to start the whole shot again. Indeed, if it is possible to work on sound in post-production, the images will not be able to give rise to the same editing work as a scene filmed in several sequences. Filming in sequence thus makes it possible to create a tension that reminds the performers of a public, live performance.

One of the challenges of the work carried out on both *Ursule 1.1* and *Actéon* is to rediscover certain characteristics of the live performance through the filmed object; in particular, a relationship to the present that gives the interpretation a different intensity from that of a film shoot. It is not a question of trying to reproduce through film a situation and effects identical to those of a theatrical or operatic performance, but of taking into account the specificities of each mode of representation, whether staged or cinematographic, in order to propose a work of transposition—what Benjamin Lazar calls "transpos[ing] the necessity of the present, which is specific to live performance."[41] The stage director and his team thought about how to arouse a different quality of emotion in the performers than in the movies, one that could evoke that of the stage

41 See the next section of this Forum "Transposing the Necessity of the Present."

performance and touch, even surprise, the audience. The shooting conditions are particularly important from this point of view. Shooting live or in conditions close to live due to time constraints or technical challenges, favors awareness of the present and intense concentration, as the director explains:

> The technical challenge of the sequence shot is also close to the live performance: it is now or never, as much for the performers as for the technicians. The balance is perilous, the concentration must be at its highest. It's a challenge that federates a great deal of common energy.[42]

The goal is to put together working conditions that allow performers to bring out a kind of energy close to the one implicit in a stage performance.

However, in contrast to a live performance, the film-spectacle does not bring practitioners and spectators to the same place at the same time. Even in the case of a live broadcast, as with *Ursule 1.1*, the latter are brought together by being online and sharing the same experience which may or may not be simultaneous, but which allows them to be together virtually. There is therefore no more interaction between them during the performance than in the case of a digital rerun. Paradoxically, the same digital screen that should bring artists and audiences together creates a medial screen and, in so doing, separates them. The question of the relationship between practitioners and spectators is crucial to understand the experience of those who perform and those who attend the performance. In fact, in order to find conditions of play close to that of a live performance, Lazar has reflected on how to integrate spectators. For *Ursule 1.1*, different possibilities were considered before the performance to find, through the Internet, a substitute for physical interaction, whether it was a button to applaud by "accumulating claps,"[43] a forum-like platform for written comments, or an online chat. As none of these possibilities could replace the presence of spectators in the theater, a compromise solution was chosen, with a few spectators physically present in the theater, on the shooting site.

But if performers benefit from the gaze and presence of spectators, only a few of the latter are allowed near the stage. Certainly, the digital broad-

42 "Transposing the Necessity of the Present," interview.

43 Expression used by Benjamin Lazar in the video interview conducted by Emmanuelle Giuliani and Julie Koch with Morgan Jourdain and Benjamin Lazar, presented in Koch, "*Au web ce soir*."

Fig. 4 – Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *Actéon*, directed by Benjamin Lazar, still photo. © Camera Lucida productions.

cast, live or deferred, allows to reach a number of spectators much more significant than the number possible during a live performance. For example, the Théâtre de Cornouaille, where *Ursule 1.1* was filmed, can accommodate 697 spectators in its main auditorium and 145 in the Atelier. With 5,773 live spectators, *Ursule 1.1* has gathered in one go the equivalent of more than eight performances at full capacity. Such an approach also allows for a wider distribution of the show, which can be accessed worldwide, regardless of location (as long as its inhabitants have Internet access) and sanitary restrictions, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, for most of the attendees, the distance imposed by the screen is irreducible. Interpretation undoubtedly benefits from the presence of the audience closer to the performers, but audiences who discover the performance on a screen have a very different experience from that of a live performance. Their absence from the auditorium does not only result in their physical separation from the practitioners—their place within a community of spectators becomes virtual, too. Attending a performance is a social activity and the interaction specific to the performance includes the interaction between different spectators of the same performance. Is knowing or assuming that other spectators are attending the same performance at the same time, but in other places, enough to give the feeling of being part of a community of spectators? Does it allow for the sharing that is part of the common experience that a live performance represents?

In other words, is attending a performance on a screen, via Internet, still a collective experience?

Here again, suggestions were made for *Ursule 1.1*—e.g., the possibility of sitting together in the foyer of the theater or recreating a small community of spectators at home by inviting friends and relatives.[44] An alternative solution was proposed for *Actéon*, shot and broadcast during a period of restricted contacts and many cancelled performances due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Like *Ursule 1.1*, *Actéon* was shot in a theater. However, the theater, in this case the Théâtre du Châtelet, was featured in the film itself, and a member of the audience in the theater was played by the actress Judith Chemla. The *mise en abyme* of the filmed performance favors identification in those attending remotely, who are invited to recognize the elements of an opera performance in the object offered to them. We also find in the two films the technique of direct address to the camera, but in two different ways: whereas Ursula (narrator, then character) addresses the viewers to invite them to discover her story, like an Internet user calling out other Internet users within the same community, the spectator embodied by Judith Chemla initially addresses Actaeon himself. The film viewers are thus invited to a particular empathy towards a character to whom they can relate by the look. At the same time, they can recognize themselves in the character of the spectator, who is a figure of spectator within the work itself: her listening, her attention, her reactions are all clues that guide the listening, the attention, and the reactions of the audience behind the screen. Failing to recreate through the screen a community and, more broadly, an encounter in the present between artists and spectators, the film plays with the codes of live performance to accompany the audience in its discovery of the work and invite it to join the (virtual) space of the performance.

Despite their numerous points in common, *Ursule 1.1* and *Actéon* do not correspond to one and the same proposition of a new genre, be it web opera or filmopera. Their peculiar modes of transmission—the first live, the second pre-recorded—change the conditions of reception and thus contribute to their differentiation. They are also different from other proposals that have emerged in recent years, such as *Le Mystère de l'écureuil bleu*, a comic opera by Marc-Olivier Dupin and Ivan Grinberg created for the web in 2016 at the initiative of the Opéra Comique, which was at the time under reno-

44 Combes, "Le théâtre en live depuis votre canapé." In particular, the journalist reports the following remarks by Benjamin Lazar: "We suggest inviting friends to your home to create a true moment of conviviality."

vation. Albeit initially conceived as a "web-opéra," *Le Mystère de l'écureuil bleu* was eventually staged at the Salle Favart in February 2018.[45] *Ursule 1.1* and *Actéon*, on the other hand, are not meant to be performed on stage. These two film-spectacles remain hybrid objects, experiments that use the Internet to think differently about the relationship between video and live performance. Without denying the fundamental difference between a work created and presented at a distance, on a screen, and a performance that implies a simultaneous presence of the performers and the audience, these works nevertheless attempt to transpose into film a relationship with the present that only a stage performance allows. In doing so, they invite us to rethink video art practices and perhaps even to renew them.

(translated by Sofija Perović)

45 See Cathy Dogon, "Web-opéra: *Le Mystère de l'écureuil bleu*," *France 3* online, February 19, 2016, updated June 11, 2020, https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/paris-ile-de-france/web-opera-le-mystere-de-l-ecureuil-bleu-931545.html; Benoît Fauchet, "*Le Mystère de l'écureuil bleu*: baptême public d'un web opéra," *Diapason*, February 24, 2018, https://www.diapasonmag.fr/a-la-une/le-mystere-de-lecureuil-bleu-bapteme-public-dun-web-opera-8459.html#item=1.

"Transposing the Necessity of the Present."
An interview with Benjamin Lazar, conducted by Caroline Mounier-Vehier on September 23, 2022.

After discovering baroque declamation and gestures with Eugène Green, in addition to training at the École Claude Mathieu, French actor and director Benjamin Lazar became known to the public with the resounding success of his staging of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* by Molière and Jean-Baptiste Lully (which has been on tour from 2004 to 2012). A sought-after performer for the baroque stage, he is also interested in a variety of repertoires, from Stefano Landi to Karlheinz Stockhausen, and has collaborated to a variety of contemporary creations (Oscar Strasnoy's *Cachafaz*, 2010; *Ma Mère musicienne* with Vincent Manac'h in 2012, among others). In 2010, he joined forces with composer Morgan Jourdain and conductor Geoffroy Jourdain for an original production: *Au web ce soir – Ursule 1.1*, a web opera filmed and broadcast live from the Théâtre de Cornouaille. Ten years later, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Lazar and Jourdain planned another show for the web: Charpentier's *Actéon*, a film-opera recorded on December 6, 2020, at the Théâtre du Châtelet and broadcast on Arte Concert in 2021 (see the previous section of this Forum).The interview presented here is based on this new spectacular object to reflect more broadly on the relationship between video and live performance in the work of Benjamin Lazar.

CAROLINE MOUNIER-VEHIER: *For several years now, you have been working with video: video recordings or films of shows, but also videos that become material for the stage work or even videos that are themselves performances. What is the difference between preparing a recording of a performance, the transmission of a work, and conceiving a video that is the work itself?*

BENJAMIN LAZAR: The filming of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* was directed by Martin Fraudreau,[1] who also made a beautiful "behind the scenes" documentary.[2] I then began a collaboration over several years with Corentin

1 Molière and Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, musical direction Vincent Dumestre (Le Poème Harmonique), staging Benjamin Lazar, Paris, Théâtre du Trianon, 2004. Videorecording directed by Martin Fraudreau, France, Alpha Classics ALPHA700, 2005, DVD.

2 Martin Fraudreau, dir., *Les Enfants de Molière et Lully*, France, Alpha Productions and Amiral LDA, 2005, video.

Leconte for *Pantagruel*,[3] *Pelléas et Mélisande*,[4] *Phaëton*,[5] among others. The progress of the cameras and the care of the director Sylvain Séchet allowed us to capture *L'Autre Monde ou Les États et Empires de la Lune*,[6] a show entirely by candlelight, without any electrical reinforcement. We wanted to go further and make the recording of a second work. We had the time and the means for *Traviata – Vous méritez un avenir meilleur.*[7] The show premiered at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in 2016. We wanted to impart the feeling of intimacy offered by the configuration of the Bouffes du Nord: the absence of the orchestra seats allows the actors to come forward and enter the great cauldron of the hall, to be with the spectators. In this intimacy, the spectators create their own film, they are their own camera, they choose details, move from one to another and write their own show. In order to create this feeling of intimacy in the film, Corentin Leconte felt that it was necessary to transpose it and impart a personal gesture on the work. In this case, we chose a completely scripted sequence shot, with a few technical interruptions, while leaving the possibility for chance to create happy additions to the shot. This onboard camera also allowed us to give a documentary quality to the images, reinforcing the impression of recounting the story of *La Traviata* as well as the relationship that the singers and instrumentalists have with the music.

We organized a performance with invited spectators who knew they were going to attend a shooting. Their presence was important because it contributed to the energy of a performance. We were thus in a kind of in-between world between the shooting and the performance, with a very particular atmosphere, which also creates a particular emotion. I think that

3 *Pantagruel*, concept Benjamin Lazar and Olivier Martin-Salvan based on the novel by François Rabelais, Quimper, Théâtre de Cornouaille – Scène nationale de Quimper, 2013.

4 Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, musical direction Maxime Pascal (Malmö Opera Choir and Orchestra), staging Benjamin Lazar, Malmö (Sweden), Malmö Opera, 2016. Videorecording directed by Corentin Leconte, Bel Air Classics BAC144, 2017, DVD.

5 Jean-Baptiste Lully, *Phaëton*, musical direction Vincent Dumestre (musicÆterna and Le Poème Harmonique), staging Benjamin Lazar, Perm (Russia), 2018. Videorecording directed by Corentin Leconte, Château de Versailles Spectacles CVS015, 2019, DVD.

6 *L'Autre Monde ou Les Estats et Empires de la Lune*, based on the novel by Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, staging Benjamin Lazar, musical concept by Florence Bolton and Benjamin Perrot (La Rêveuse), Arques-la-Bataille, Académie Bach, 2005. Videorecording directed by Corentin Leconte, Paris, L'Autre Monde, 2013, DVD.

7 *Traviata – Vous méritez un avenir meilleur*, concept Benjamin Lazar, Florent Hubert and Judith Chemla after *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi and *La Dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils, staging Benjamin Lazar, arrangement and musical direction Florent Hubert and Paul Escobar, Paris, Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, 2016. Videorecording directed by Corentin Leconte, Bel Air Classics BAC156, 2019, DVD.

the presence of the public contributed to the emotion that we feel in the actors to which the film testifies. We then completed the film with more traditional shots, again during a public performance. The cameras were unified, creating a slight instability on the fixed cameras that can be typical of a documentary *in situ*. This effect of reality also seemed interesting to us in relation to the history of this opera, which is the first to have been inspired by a recent news item, for six years separate the death of Marie Duplessis from Verdi's opera.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of many shows. It was at this time that you directed the film Actéon*, which had the peculiarity of not being a classic recording, but rather a video object in its own right, this time dissociated from any public performance. Was the process similar to imagining a film for a show based on a live performance project?*

A creation is always the result of a desire and circumstances. This time, the proposal came from Geoffroy Jourdain, who directs the ensemble Les Cris de Paris. Geoffroy was the musical director of *Au web ce soir – Ursule 1.1*,[8] the first video object created for the Internet that I had proposed when I first arrived as associate artist at the Théâtre de Cornouailles. We were eager to do it again for a long time, but it's not easy to find the finance for this type of project that doesn't fit into any box. In 2020, when all the theaters were closed because of the pandemic, Jean-Stéphane Michaud, producer at Camera Lucida Productions, received many requests for filming. He was looking for a different format and Geoffroy Jourdain told him about our desire to do a live filmed work again. We proposed to replace the cancelled performances of Les Cris de Paris with a film project associated with the Théâtre du Châtelet. We were able to work in different places, each time proposing a session open to the public, which allowed us to arrive with many working hypotheses at the Châtelet, where we rehearsed for a few days before filming the sequence shot in one day.

In 2010, Ursule 1.1 *was an original work, with music composed by Morgan Jourdain. In 2020, you filmed an old play:* Actéon,[9] *a pastoral by Marc-Antoine Charpentier created in 1684. Why this choice?*

It is a work that suited Les Cris de Paris very well, with both magnificent choral parts and the possibility for the choristers to become soloists at cer-

8 See the previous section of this Forum, "Creating Opera for the Web."
9 See the previous section of this Forum, "Creating Opera for the Web.".

tain moments. It is also a short work, whose form corresponds well to the sequence shot since everything happens without interruption, from the arrival of the troop of hunters in the forest to the death of Actaeon. We have the impression of following a cinematic sequence with simultaneous events: the hunters who leave with Actaeon on one side, Diana at the bath on the other side, and then the two spaces that come together with the meeting between Diana and Actaeon. It was therefore ideal for this type of shooting. The project evolved again afterwards. While for *Ursule 1.1* we had given a live online meeting, for *Actéon* we shot in sequence and did a post-production work before the broadcast on Arte.

In both cases, it is not a question of an adapted stage project, but of an object designed specifically for the camera. For *Actéon*, Adeline Caron conceived a scenography that was not made to be seen by an audience, but to be filmed by the camera, which gave us the possibility to work in a more metonymic way. For example, the scene of the nymphs bathing with Diana is represented with three aquariums in which the singers plunge their hands. With Sylvain Séchet's lights, the crane camera coming closer to the faces filmed behind the aquarium, the spectator is in the water, a process that joins the way the imagination works in the theater. It's a place where you can make people dream with little: aquariums, a painting that travels, things that we don't allow ourselves as much in the cinema where there is often a demand for reality.

Even if your Actéon *is conceived as a video object, certain elements of your staging remind us that it is a work written for the stage, such as the presence of a spectator played by Judith Chemla.*

During the open rehearsals, we realized that telling the story of this metamorphosis the first time would relieve the audience of the effort of recalling a myth that they would only vaguely know. The difficulty of seventeenth-century language and the spread of the story required a concentration that could have weakened the emotions. What is interesting is to see how the composer revisits a common place, but for that to happen, the place must first be common. In open rehearsals, I told the story beforehand. For the film, I wanted to write a prologue and we added a spectator, but a very involved spectator since she addresses the camera as if the spectator were Actaeon.

The prologue has a preparatory narrative function and establishes a certain relationship with the camera from the beginning of the film. The idea is to create an equivalence between the hunter Actaeon, condemned to

death for what he has seen, and the camera, also a hunter of images, showing that there can be a danger in wanting to look, both for Actaeon and for the viewer. I also wanted the film to end as it had begun, with a camera perspective. We can thus say that the spectator, played by Judith Chemla, has forcefully projected herself into the story, so much so that she has metamorphosed herself into a new Diana.

The character of the spectator is even more interesting because she has a relay function for the spectators who watch the film: she accompanies them in the work and thus allows to reduce the distance that the screen implies.

That is why this address was important. Judith Chemla has such grace and emotional involvement that her character goes beyond the mere convention of the story. This is also what allows us to transpose the necessity of the present, which is specific to live performance.

As in Traviata – Vous méritez un avenir meilleur*, would one of the important aspects of the film for you to be to find a form of intensity proper to the scenic, public representation?*

The situation is not exactly that of a public performance, but it is not only a shooting either, due to the presence of an audience or a single spectator. The technical challenge of the sequence shot is also close to the live performance: it is now or never, as much for the performers as for the technicians. The balance is perilous, the concentration must be at its highest. It's a challenge that federates a great deal of common energy.

To what extent are Ursule 1.1 *and* Actéon *related?*

Ursule 1.1 is a bit like *Actéon*'s big sister. It is almost the same object, but with different productions. We drew a certain number of ideas from *Ursule 1.1*, which was already a work combining music and theater. We also find the same need for concentration. The big difference is that for *Ursule 1.1* we chose a fixed camera, like Georges Méliès's. The camera does not move, it is the objects that move relative to it, with rolling sets, scale effects, objects of different sizes. For example, to represent a sea voyage, a small boat was placed in the foreground, in front of the camera, and the actors in the background on rolling platforms pulled by technicians. For *Actéon*, on the other hand, we used two types of cameras. The first was an on-board camera with an operator who first followed the spectator, then became the eye of Actaeon, and then followed Actaeon transformed into a stag as he made his

way around the stage of the Théâtre du Châtelet. The second camera was a telescopic crane operated by three technicians. It was like a Bunraku puppet, with the main cameraman, who focuses, and two assistants.

At the moment, the term "in-between world" is dear to me because it is the title of a project I am working on—these films are proposals that float between several genres, between several worlds. It is always interesting when a work is not completely assignable to one genre or another.

Have these experiences with video changed your stage work and more generally your relationship to the stage?

It's quite different to think for the camera or for the stage. The image filmed on stage should not be a validation of reality. When it intervenes in a performance, it must be necessary. For *Phaéton* by Lully, for example, I worked with Yann Chapotel. We wanted to tell the power of the show and the show of power in *Phaéton* thanks to the video. To show how Phaeton's race and the great chaconne of Act III testify to the characters' desire to make a spectacle of their power, Yann produced a sequence of military parades that he set to the rhythm of Lully's chaconne in such a way as to gradually create an abstract kaleidoscope. At the end of the show, Phaeton's race was also associated with filmed images, but with reading keys: Phaeton was compared to a pyromaniac child, who plays with matches.

Usually, when I feel the need, I introduce filmed images or video art into my shows, always remaining attentive to the ways in which the technology is used: what interests me is to find a form and a content that make this use necessary, so that it does not extinguish the subject. Perhaps the fact that I have shot recordings or filmed objects such as *Ursule 1.1* and *Actéon* makes me want to continue the experience. I have worked on several occasions with the filmmaker Joseph Paris, a true poet of the image and of editing, who manages to create an extremely strong dreamlike impression in his films. These images have a life of their own, you feel their materiality and their presence assert themselves at the same time as the things filmed—exactly as actors are, in the same presence, themselves and the character. We recently created a new show, *La Chambre de Maldoror*, at the Théâtre des 13 vents in Montpellier.[10]

10 *La Chambre de Maldoror*, based on *Les Chants de Maldoror* by the Count of Lautréamont, directed and performed by Benjamin Lazar, Montpellier, Théâtre des 13 vents - Centre dramatique national, January 24–27, 2023.

When you stage filmed objects, a director accompanies you. Do you plan to make films yourself or is it the work in pairs that interests you the most?

Everything is open. I like collaborations, but maybe at some point I'll move on to co-directing or directing. When I work with directors, they make a lot of suggestions. We talk about shot values and intentions, we look at the cut together, but they have a fundamental creative part because they know the necessities and the placement of the cameras, technical aspects for which I have intuitions but do not control. In the creative process of *Actéon*, another important stakeholder was the draughtsman Benoît Guillaume, who made sketches and helped make a storyboard from photos that I took to prepare the shots.

I am interested in cinema, but more recently I wanted to share with the public the particular concentration that filming creates and the reflections that filmed projects engender. In my project *L'Entremonde* – including the associated workshops conducted with, among others, the composer Pedro Garcia-Velasquez and the directors and actresses Jessica Dalle and Alix Mercier[11] – I experiment with a public of all ages and backgrounds a creative process based on a three-dimensional recording technique, binaural recording. This allows me to explore the notions of image and inner cinema, through the accumulation and solicitation of images in contact with other images, of works of art. If I say the word *forest* to you, for example, you will search your memory for a certain number of images with which to compose a chimerical forest. In the workshop, we share what this word evokes in us: for some it will be the smell of wet leaves in autumn, others will have more sonic references, others still will think of light. Soliciting inner images is universal, but each person does it in a different way according to his or her background. Today there are new tools to produce fiction and images, but it is crucial to maintain our ability to create and share inner images. This is even more important at a time when, with the development of the so-called metaverse, they would like to make us to believe that we are only waiting to escape into ready-made inner films, a ready-made clothing for imagination. It is not a question of rejecting these technologies in a backward-looking way, but of being attentive to protect our inner images in front of what looks like an attempt at annexation.

What we put into shape in the workshops is in line with what I think in general of the image in theater—a thought that I share, I believe, with set

11 A video presentation of the *L'Entremonde* project is available online on the official website of the Théâtre de l'Incrédule, Benjamin Lazar's company, www.lincredule.com.

designer Adeline Caron, with whom I have been working for twenty years: the image must always contain enough gaps and absences to arouse a desire for completeness in the spectators, so that they can project their memories and desires onto it. There are quite concrete procedures to achieve this, formal and structural answers that are diverse and always to be sought, to be renewed. There is no single recipe. For a long time, I used darkness to leave space in the image—and I still use it, because we imagine what we don't see. But I also know that sometimes a full fire can be full of mystery.

Romeo Castellucci in conversation with Sofija Perović[1]

Romeo Castellucci is an Italian stage director, a lighting and costume designer, and a visual artist known all over the world for his theatrical language based on the totality of the arts. Besides being one of the most sought after and esteemed directors of our time, Castellucci is also a published author of more than dozen books and theoretical essays on stage directing. Castellucci's work is characterized by strong images created of the primacy traditionally afforded to the dramaturgy and the text, exploring instead other means of stage expression such as music, painting, architecture, among others. He is regularly invited to work in the most prestigious international theaters, opera houses, and festivals on all the continents.

SOFIJA PEROVIĆ: *At the heart of your productions, regardless of genre or venue, whether it is opera or spoken theater, baroque, romantic or contemporary music, we can always recognize the human being, its condition, humanity, and humanness. From your point of view, as an artist who actively questions the human condition in his works, what role do you see for the Internet in its future? Is the Internet a tool which could contribute to cutting back alienation among people, or is it putting in danger the very essence of human beings by changing and challenging the codes of communication?*

ROMEO CASTELLUCCI: I'm not so confident in such a way of communicating because I think that mostly it is a matter of social control, and not only social control, but much more. In my opinion, it is the control that goes into the intimacy of people. I have to say that it is useless to fight against the Internet. It exists, but I try to keep myself apart from this kind of illness, because the Internet is a way to communicate with other people through an architecture built by somebody else. The idea of Internet communication is such that communication is under control in the architecture. We have the impression of being free, but it is a cage, and we like this cage. In my opinion, it is a form of slavery—a soft slavery, an invisible slavery, but still a slavery. Especially since it concerns the intimacy of each of us. There is a metaphysical side in communication. On the other hand, art should be a switch of this forced communication. We are obliged to communicate in this architecture, and I believe that art is first of all an experience. In my opinion, art should be an experience, and in the communication which passes through the Internet there is no experience. We only exchange the

1 The conversation transcribed here took place via Zoom on September 9, 2022.

same words. The word on the Internet is a circular word that has nothing to do with me, it is totally detached from experience. However, I am not the right person to talk about that, as it would be more suitable for a sociologist—and I am not a sociologist, I am not a professor, nor a specialist of these things. On the other hand, I fight communication. Art is a fight against communication, in my opinion—it is always personal. On a stage there is nothing to communicate; it is rather a revelation that we receive on a stage, a revelation that is also outside language and that is also why our body, the body of the spectator, is present. Without me (spectator), the show does not exist, because it comes from me, I am half of what I'm seeing. It is an encounter. Theater is the art of contact, it is based on the reciprocal presence between what happens on stage and me sitting in the theater, of my body meeting another unknown body. Obviously the Internet is not like that, it is a fiction that is atrocious. I don't want to be the enemy of the Internet; if it exists, it means that there are reasons for its existence. I don't want to make a criticism of the Internet as such, but as a way of communicating it is disturbing.

How do you feel about the online broadcasting of your work? And what future do you predict for newly emerged genres such as web opera or Zoom opera?

No, that doesn't make any sense. Sometimes I do the work at the opera and there is a video documentary that is programmed by channels like Arte, for example, but that's not theater, it's a documentary, so to say. It's a totally distant experience. One has the impression of what it might look like in reality, but it is not the thing. The thing is an encounter, the thing is an act of presence, which is increasingly rare today. I can accept it as a documentary, but that's not what theater is. During the pandemic, we did theater broadcasts, but it's a stupidity, it's an inherent contradiction. When we enter a theater, we are in danger. When we watch something at home, we are protected and that prevents the theater experience, in my opinion. It's just my opinion.

We've already had the opportunity to see the use of artificial intelligence in opera, the posthuman condition of the likes of avatars replacing singers or dancers. How do you feel about that? Is it something we might expect to see in your future work?

In my opinion, if there is no original idea behind the use of new technologies, it is nothing more than a gimmick—and there are a lot of gimmicks

out there. There is nothing extraordinary about it, it is a normality, it is not surprising. I am surprised by original ideas. Here, everything is predictable and that disappoints me. I don't believe in these new forms; I don't have that kind of optimism when it comes to new technologies. New technology is, by definition, always boring because it is predictable, at least to me. In theater, the most impressive is the anthropological discovery of the individual as an abyss. Most of the time, when you don't know what to do, you fill the space up with new technology which is like a gadget, in my opinion—again, it's very personal. I've never been surprised by new technologies in theater, with robots, etc.—it's always, "So what?" To me, the idea is fundamental. If someone has an idea with technology, then it works—but it is rare.

Your latest production at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, a staging of Gustav Mahler's Resurrection *symphony, is advertised as a "striking meditation on the exhaustion and disappearance of all things—and takes up in a spectacular way the question of the aftermath: the question of a hypothetical renewal." Unfortunately, I didn't have the chance to see it live, I only saw it on the Internet.*

Ah, that is not the same thing. I admit it, it was a totally anti-television piece. It was important for the festival to have a document, but it was totally another experience because the hard core of the show was the voids. There was no one there for twenty minutes, and on TV such voids are not possible. When there were holes in the ground, that was the show and there was nobody. And on television that is not possible. On the other hand, I consider it as a documentary—it is not at all the experience that one can have in real time and place.

Yes, there was this screen between me as a spectator and the real experience. However, watching it on the screen I was impressed, if that is the word that can be used here, by stunning similarities between the images that I saw there and those that we see in the media today [i.e., the war in Ukraine]. And I read that you mentioned on more occasions that you conceived those images more than a year ago, so they were purely coincidental.

Yes, that was an awful coincidence, it wasn't wanted, and it was too late to change the show. Show…it's not even a show. I was disturbed by this coincidence. I had a doubt whether it was legitimate to show images like that in a moment when there was the same thing going on in real life. I

trembled. In the end, we decided with the festival to keep the project as it is, but with a note from me saying that I was sorry by the coincidence that was beyond me.

In a symbolic way, even the place in which this production was presented got its "resurrection," from being a vandalized and abandoned building to the place that gave birth to an artistic spectacle of the highest quality. Can that coincidence bring any hope for our world today, knowing that everything has its end and a new beginning, or is it just illustrating the tragic circle of never-ending violence and destruction?

Hm… Both. When they offered me to work on Mahler's *Resurrection*, they thought of hope. The hope after COVID-19. We were going out again, etc., but I didn't believe in this kind of optimism. I did not feel that there was a resurrection happening. On the other hand, the word *resurrection* was the most difficult to interpret. It is literally a resurrection, but a completely human one, so it was necessary to take the anonymous bodies, probably assassinated, out of the ground in order to restore their dignity. So, it was a totally human *pietas* with bodies coming out of the ground not for a metaphysical resurrection but for a human resurrection. It was not optimistic, but there was a confidence in humanity. However, it is true that it all goes through the image of violence, because violence caused the existence of this mass grave. That was my interpretation of the word *resurrection*. But it's true that there was also a resurrection of the place, of the stadium, because it was a dead place. So, there was this double aspect of the word *resurrection*, a word which is very powerful and very loaded with meaning in our Christian tradition, which is obvious in Mahler's music; so, it was also a question of giving space to Mahler's music, and that's why there was almost nothing to see. After the first chord, it was a question of getting a lot of bodies out of the ground, but there were no particular events, it was not a show, it was not a ballet, it was a moment of contemplation and of listening, deep listening to the music. We don't see it in the ARTE documentary, but it was important to have half an hour where there was the earth with the emptied holes, *e basta (and nothing else)*. The idea was for the holes in the ground to be like the sepulcher of Christ; there was also a reference to the Christian resurrection, but through these gestures with the bodies, with the corpses, it became not a spiritual thing, but rather a heavy thing and at the same time very much human.

Figg. 5 and 6 – Romeo Castellucci, *Resurrection*, Aix-en-Provence Festival. Photo credit: Monika Rittershaus.

Since this production was really anchored in the space where it was presented, would you consider producing it in another place?

Yes, there are plans to do it again in another place. I think it's hard to find a place like this one, but there are possibilities to do it again.

During an interview from ten years ago,[2] you said that in the theater we are hostages or prisoners of the author. Do you still feel that way? And since you are also active on operatic stages lately, where the author of the text is but one of the many personalities involved, does the presence of more than one author make you feel as a double prisoner, or is it liberating in some way?

In the theater that depends on the attitude that one has as a stage director. When we work in a repertory theater, we fall into a faithful attitude, an attitude of respect towards the text, and it is that illustrative, respectful attitude which prevents the imagination and constitutes a cage. In any case, there must be a limit: freedom does not exist in the creation. We need limits. In my opinion, it is a fight that we have with the limits. In combat, it's good to have boundaries, but outside of an illustrative attitude that's flat and superficial. It's about working with the author, but it's also about a fight to give life back (through our body) to this piece, to this music. Obviously, in opera the already given structure is even stronger, in particular the structure of the tone, because everything is given—music is a temporal meter one cannot escape, not even from rhythm. Personally, there are authors, composers, with whom I cannot work. We resonate aesthetically with certain things and certain names, but it is really a question of entering, imagining, and seeing the same object from our own point of view. The view goes beyond that of repertoire, of habit. We must seek to change the angle of view of the same object. It's true that the music is a very strong constraint—a very, very strong one.

As a spectator, I found the video in your production of Orfeo ed Euridice *most striking,[3] and since there was a direct communication between the stage*

2 Borka G. Trebješanin, «Volim da gledaocu serviram probleme», interview with Romeo Castellucci, *Politika*, September 10, 2012, https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/232842/Volim-da-gledaocu-serviram-probleme.

3 Romeo Castellucci has staged Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* for the 2013/2014 season at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, a season devoted to the theme of "Rebellion." The rebellion is one of the most important aspects of the myth of Orpheus—rebellion against the death and against athe cruel destiny. For this most original production, Castellucci took the ancient myth and interpolated it with the real-life story of a young woman, identified

and the hospital I perceived the video on stage as a usage of the Internet in the sense of an online communication between the singers in the opera house and a participant in the hospital who played the role of Euridice, rather than cinematic use of the video on stage. What was your intention behind it?

It's true that there was a real-time connection. It was like a ring. Els was in contact with us in the opera house through headphones. She was listening to the music in real time, and we were watching her listening to us, so it was really a kind of ring. But it wasn't through the Internet, it was broadcast live by a camera connected to an antenna, a signal in the opera house. Every evening, there was the same course in time. The cameraman was in contact with us in the opera house, listening to the music to respect the musical time, to speed up, or to slow down when necessary. The gaze was Orfeo's gaze. The camera was Orfeo's eye. It wasn't really the Internet, it was more of a cinematic language, but it wasn't even cinema because we used sequence shooting—there was no editing. The shooting was done without any interruption and it was also dangerous if there was, for example, an accident on the road—everything was really fragile and I think that fragility was a strong element in this project.

If I may say you used technology in this production in an absolutely unpredictable way and you've created something really revolutionary.

Well, I don't know about that, but there was a subject in there much stronger than the technology we used. In my opinion, technology must be a tool that needs to become transparent. I'm disturbed when I watch technology-heavy shows, it's not interesting in my opinion. In this case, it's true that we used very sophisticated technology, but that was not our focus. The presence of Els was the real thing.

Media often describes your work as shocking. Personally, I haven't found any of your works shocking nor do I believe that it was your goal or intention, I find it each time deeply moving and truthful, but it is possible that the truth

only as Els, who lives in Brussels' hospital in a coma—her body completely paralyzed except for her eyes and eyelids—and who played the role of Euridice. Els is in a type of coma in which the patient is aware of the surroundings, but is unable to react—a state that is still poorly understood and is the subject of research in neurology. The idea of featuring a real person in a coma is daring, especially since it is not a video, but a live projection from the hospital, where Els is listening to the performance of the opera from La Monnaie, while an on-site film crew transmits the images of the hospital room, filmed live to the audience in the opera house.

nowadays comes as or seems shocking and that we got very much accustomed to the untruth. Do you believe that it is still possible to shock today's theater audiences by means of stage imagery?

I don't know if the word *shock* is the right word, but I understand what you mean, and I think so. I think we have to… we have to shake the spectator's body, yes. It becomes more and more difficult, but I think it's necessary and it's the right place to do it. We can even use the word *scandal,* which is a marvelous word, a Greek word. It is necessary to be disturbed in a certain way, but apart from provocation. Provocation belongs to advertising and the media, which must be provocative all the time—so, that's not a provocation at all because it is still predictable. The shock is to be surprised, to be touched in the intimacy. That is the shock in my opinion. Shock is something that forces you to change your point of view, to reconfigure your view of things—I find that interesting and almost essential.

We are living in an era of fake news when all sorts of information are one click away, but we are doubting everything, maybe even more than ever. We doubt even what we see with our own eyes. How do you inform yourself and what are your points of reference?

Precisely, it is difficult because most of the time the news is biased. The source of information is always one sided. It is a power. Information is a power, but also a disease. I seek to interpret with my conscience. I distrust all the information. I think there is always something that is twisted. I try to find a balance between several sources. When it comes to something important—like war, for example—you have to be wary of the source. You always have to look and try to have a context for the important things. You also need to see what is important in your life. Normally, information is not necessary, but there are things which are necessary in order to have a conscience. One has to be intelligent, sensitive, and attentive, and even cautious about conformism and homogenization. But I say this as a citizen and not as an artist.

Simon Hatab in conversation with Sofija Perović

Simon Hatab is a dramaturg for theater and opera. He works with directors Clément Cogitore and Bintou Dembélé (*Les Indes galantes* at the Opéra national de Paris), Silvia Costa (*Julie* at the Opéra national de Lorraine, *L'Arche de Noé* at the Opéra national de Lyon), Maëlle Dequiedt (*Trust—Karaoké Panoramique* and *I Wish I Was* at the Théâtre de la Cité internationale, *Stabat Mater* at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord), Lisaboa Houbrechts (*Médée* at the Comédie-Française), Tiago Rodrigues (*Tristan und Isolde* at the Opéra national de Lorraine), Émilie Rousset (*Playlist Politique* at the Théâtre de La Bastille), Marie-Eve Signeyrole (*Nabucco* at the Opéra de Lille, *La Damnation de Faust* at the Staatsoper Hannover, *Don Giovanni* at the Opéra national du Rhin). He collaborates with the Opéra national de Lorraine (Matthieu Dussouillez) and Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris (Émilie Delorme). He co-directed with Maëlle Dequiedt the short films *I'm off to Work I have Posted on the Fridge all the Instructions on How to Make a Revolution* and *Histoire du bouc*. With photographer Elisa Haberer, he wrote *La Quadrature d'une ville* (Les Cahiers de Corée, 2017). He contributes to the magazines *Europe* (issue" L'Opéra aujourd'hui"), *Alternatives théâtrales* (issue "Opera and Ecologies"), and *Bande à Part*; he also contributed to the *Dictionnaire Roland Barthes* (Honoré Champion) and to the magazine *Fumigène – Littérature de rue*. With Judith le Blanc, he coordinated an issue of the magazine *Théâtre/Public* devoted to musical theater. He is a member of the research group "Histoire des Arts et des Représentations" at the Université Paris Nanterre, where he has given a series of courses dedicated to dramaturgy. He is also an associate artist of the program Performing Utopia at King's College London.

SOFIJA PEROVIĆ: *Being a dramaturg in opera is a relatively new position. You have worked both as an independent dramaturg and as part of the artistic direction team in an opera house. Based on your experience, how would you define the work of a dramaturg?*

SIMON HATAB: I don't believe that dramaturgy in theater and opera is such a new function, but I have noticed that in recent years it has developed in France, particularly under the impetus of dramaturgy courses set up by institutions such as the École du Théâtre National de Strasbourg or the Université Paris Nanterre. Dramaturgy is divided into two complementary fields: production dramaturgy, where we work on the shows, and publishing dram-

aturgy, where we are focused on theater programs, the editorial policy of an institution, meeting with the public, and everything that promotes a link between the stage and the audience. Of course, there is a link between the two since the dramaturg of a show is well placed to contribute to the theater program or to make introductions to the audience before a performance.

What does your work on the shows consist of? Are you a dramatic advisor to the directors?

I do not consider myself as the dramatic advisor of the artists with whom I work because that would imply that I have an ascendancy over them, which is not the case. I see myself more as a craftsman who (re)searches with the director and the artistic team, at the table and on the stage. I don't think that the dramaturg is a scholar with knowledge that gives him or her an expertise. Certainly, there is a part of research which aims at making links, creating connections, working on the resonance of the spectacle. But it seems to me that dramaturgy is also based on forgetting. For example, if I am a dramaturg of *Don Giovanni*, perhaps I have a certain version of the character, but it is likely that the director has a completely different one. I must hear and follow them in this vision. That's why forgetting is important. When I start working on a project or when I arrive at a rehearsal, I must try to forget, to unlearn everything I believe I know to listen to what this strange creature that is forming on the stage—which is the show in the making—has to say to me.

You say you are (re)searching with the stage director, but also with the rest of the artistic team. Who are the persons you are collaborating with?

My privileged interlocutor is the stage director, but the collective dimension is very important. If the role of the dramaturgy is to conceive the show, that is not the prerogative of the dramaturg alone. The director, of course, but also the other members of the artistic team (scenographer, costume designer, lighting designer, among others) make the dramaturgy in the sense that they all participate in thinking the show. On the stage, there is as much meaning in a costume or in a lighting variation as there is in a monologue. The fact that the dramaturgy belongs to everyone makes Christoph Marthaler say that the dramaturg is "a king without a kingdom." I think this is a beautiful idea and perhaps I can propose another one: I believe that dramaturgy is a kingdom, but an invisible one. And in Greek mythology the invisible is the other name for the kingdom of the dead. So, it makes me

think of Heiner Müller, who says that theater is a dialogue with the dead. I imagine that there is also some of that in the dramaturgy…

Since the purpose of this Forum is to examine the use of the Internet in all its forms in opera productions today, and to try to understand the new ways of using it on stage and also behind it, could you tell us what is the role that Internet plays in the day-to-day work of a dramaturg in a theater or opera production?

The aforementioned dialogue with the artistic team is established from the first intuitions of the show and continues until the final stages of the production, lasting from several months to several years. This dialogue needs a support, a place to develop. There are of course workshops that bring together the entire artistic team in the same room, around a table or in a rehearsal room. But between these workshops, the dialogue continues by email or telephone. These times of remote discussions are part of a different temporality because these are the ideas that we can think about for a long time, that we can let settle. Settling seems to me very important in an original production. In addition to these exchanges, we work a lot with shared files. Each of us can put down inspirations and materials for the show, for the scenography, the costumes, the lights… When we form an artistic team for a show, we all start with different languages, imaginations, backgrounds that are our own. Each of us keeps his or her singularity but we also must build a common territory to find each other, to get along, to understand each other and to create the project. These shared files are a way to give substance to this attempt to build a common space.

In what measure are you using Internet in your research?

We use Internet to do the research and to share it with others. I think that this common space that we build should not only be intellectual but rather sensitive: it can be a text but also music, a painting, an installation, an extract from movies or tv shows…

Has the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced us to discover the advantages of working remotely, influenced the way you interact with members of the team for the piece you are working on, and how important it is for you to have a direct contact with your colleagues in the preparatory phases of a show?

I don't really know how to answer that question. In the professional world, I see that Zoom has made it possible to handle certain meetings remotely

that used to take place in person, and that's a good thing for the planet… At the same time, we don't dialogue in quite the same way remotely as around a table. I also have the impression that projects start existing once we meet.

Could you tell us about your experience working as a dramaturg for Les Indes galantes *at the Opéra Bastille? This production was somewhat revolutionary in the sense that it brought hip-hop and krumping dance to the stage of the Opéra national de Paris, an institution that has played such an important role in the history of dance and is still a stronghold of the tradition of classical ballet.*

Having worked on this project for almost three years, I can't judge whether it was a revolutionary production. I would not be very objective. Moreover, in one of her interviews, Bintou Dembélé recalls that hip-hop had already been represented on the Bastille stage, notably during a show where her brother performed. What seemed new to me in *Les Indes galantes* was the part that these dances took in the dramaturgy, their capacity to carry stories, to dialogue, to interact with the vision of the world created in the libretto. My job, together with Katherina Lindekens who was the other dramaturg of the production, was to accompany the project from the very beginning to its creation. This meant having many coffees with Clément and Bintou, participating in workshops, following rehearsals, having coffees again… maintaining this continuous dialogue from the beginning to the end. One of the original features of the production was, of course, the importance of dance, and Bintou and Clément made sure that the dance rehearsals didn't just start at the time of the production rehearsals (i.e., six weeks before the premiere) but more than a year and a half before it. The dance was a truly important component of the show, it carried a lot of the dramaturgy. I could compare this to another show that was created in 2016 at the Paris Opera: *Così fan tutte*, directed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. There too, the dance was so important that rehearsals with the dancers had to start very early. These are two cases in which the Opéra's production machine has managed to adapt in order to create such unusual shows.

This project started well before the premiere at the Opéra Bastille: the short film to the tune of "Forêts paisibles" was presented on 3e Scène and went viral on the Internet, attracting the attention of a much wider audience than the usual one of the Opéra de Paris…

It is true that the origins of this show are to be found in the short film that Clément made on an excerpt from *Les Indes galantes*, choreographed

by Bintou, Grichka, and Brahim Rachiki for 3e Scène, the now-dismantled digital stage of the Paris Opera. The director of the Opéra at that time, Stéphane Lissner, saw it and, I imagine, found that there was a powerful relationship between the music, the images, and the dance, which encouraged him to entrust Clément and Bintou with the entire work. We are thus in an original case where it is a film which generated an opera rather than vice versa… A few in the audience had already seen the short film before attending the show, as the video had become viral. It is said that it inspired other dancers to choreograph and dance to excerpts from baroque music. It has almost become a pop culture object.

What do you think was the impact of this popularization of an eighteenth-century piece of music to the younger generations who had the opportunity to discover it in a space and culture they understood and knew (Internet and hip-hop)? Did this contribute to the democratization of the operatic genre in Paris/France or were there still limitations that could not be overcome? And what was the role of Internet in all this?

Has the show contributed to the democratization of opera? It is difficult for me to answer this question. We work on shows but, in the end, we don't own the effects they produce. Some time ago, I read a book by the musicologist Sylvie Pébrier, *Reinventing Music*.[1] In this book, she defends the idea that the crisis affecting culture today is first and foremost a crisis of narratives. I imagine that everything that can contribute to putting the narratives on stage a little more in phase with the narratives of those who have not had a voice until now is good to take. In a way, this is what *Les Indes galantes* does: through the vision of Clément and Bintou, the dancers' bodies carry the krumping, voguing, electro… political stories that have often been erased or hidden. But democratizing opera is not just an aesthetic question. There are other issues in opera's accessibility, such as the price of seats in certain institutions, or the symbolic capital it represents, which can be intimidating for certain audiences. When we work in dramaturgy, we work in the field of representations, on the symbolic significance of works and performances. But to make things evolve, these symbolic acts must be articulated with political acts for which they cannot substitute.

1 Sylvie Pébrier, *Réinventer la musique dans ses institutions, ses politiques, ses récits* (Château-Gontier: Aedam Musicae, 2021).

France has a highly developed dance tradition to which Les Indes galantes *belongs. What I found particularly innovative in this production was the introduction of another dance tradition that comes from a different country and continent—hip-hop. To your knowledge, how important was the role of the Internet in the introduction and development of the hip-hop scene in France?*

I am not a dance specialist; all I know about the subject comes from my exchanges with the dancers and conversations that I had with the choreographer Bintou Dembélé during rehearsals, and which continued afterwards. Hip-hop culture arrived in France at the end of the 1970s and first spread through television and VHS imported from the United States. As for the role of Internet, which has now taken over from VHS in the dissemination of these dances, it has allowed dancers to train by freely viewing videos. It has made the boundaries between styles much more porous. This was evident when talking to the dancers: some claimed to be of several styles, others did not want to label their dance. In *Les Indes galantes*, the dances that we gather under the label "hip-hop" are in reality multiple: there is the K.R.U.M.P., the Electro, the Vogue, the popping, the gliding, the waacking, the b-boying… Each one carries a political history. For example, the K.R.U.M.P. was born in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, following the beating of Rodney King by police officers. That's why, in the production, these dances show political stories through gesture. For me it is at this level, in this taking of space, that the dramaturgy of the show was played out, more than in the fiction—in the very movements of the bodies. I believe that it was a radically different project from the role assigned to dance in the opera-ballet you mentioned, since the aim of this dance was originally to entertain—i.e., to divert attention in order to establish the authority of the king. Here, conversely, what the dance carries is essential: it carries stories and lives. It opens a space of protest and resistance.

The fact that this production of an opera-ballet was directed by Clément Cogitore—known to the public as a film director, even if he did not necessarily want to include video in his staging—made it possible to bring together cinema and its aesthetic with opera, ballet, and classical/baroque music.

Today, opera faces a strong challenge to reinvent itself by inviting new directors from prose theater, cinema, or the visual arts… This was the case for Clément, for whom *Les Indes galantes* was a first attempt at staging an

opera. When directors start working in opera productions, it happens that they are overwhelmed by the production machine which does not allow them the freedom they have, for example, in theater. Opera is sometimes a bit like Cronus devouring his children. I believe that Clément was very conscious of these risks and that he arrived very prepared. Throughout the creative process, he attended many performances to understand the possibilities of this strange art form that is opera. Before we met, he had conducted an in-depth study of the work. He would come up with very strong intuitions, often visual, such as: "In this scene there will be a merry-go-round." As a dramaturg, our job is to think about the meaning, or meanings. So, when a director comes up with strong images that you can tell are deep insights, it is a gift: it's thrilling to have to think, to decipher strong images step by step, especially when they resist. I think that Clément gave himself to this project. We were also supported by the Opéra's various teams, who were committed to the success of this unusual project: we found solutions together to every technical problem, as if this project had to be done at all costs.

You are right to say that, from the start, it was clear to Clément that he would not use video. This may seem paradoxical knowing his artistic background, but I think it was a very accurate intuition: when artists from another field come to opera, something breaks down, decomposes, and it has to be recomposed in another way; they have to try to find their aesthetics again, but with other means, the scenic means that are specific to theater and that are not those of video-making. For Clément, I imagine that this radical choice was a way of not cheating, of taking this question head on.

In short, there was a lot of preparation for this project, regular workshops punctuated the preparation phase. I remember my girlfriend telling me: "You're still in a workshop on *Les Indes galantes*? But what do you still have to prepare? Are you writing the reviews of the show?"

How did the aftermath of Les Indes galantes *go?*

I think that after the show we wanted to move on, to turn a page. Perhaps it was also a way of letting the public take possession of this object that we had created, of letting other people than ourselves think about it. A show does not stop at the curtain call. If it has marked us, then a few hours, a few minutes, a few seconds can continue to play again within us long afterwards.

Did the documentary released two years later in theaters—directed by Philippe Béziat, who followed the creation process—allow you to dive back into it?

I didn't go see it. Philippe spent a lot of time with us, so I imagine he had a lot of material… But putting on a show is a very intense collective adventure: it's like a few weeks of our lives that go up in flames. So, it's hard to get back into it two years later.

Could you tell us about your future projects and your current collaborations with Clément Cogitore and Bintou Dembélé after Les Indes galantes*?*

After *Les Indes galantes*, I continued to work together with Clément and the rest of the team. We are currently preparing two operas: one for Paris and the other for Antwerp/Ghent, but I believe these are projects that have not yet been announced, so, unfortunately, I can't say more about them in order not to spoil. After *Les Indes* I also continued to dialog with Bintou, notably when she was in residence at Villa Medici and then in Chicago. I wrote her portrait for *Théâtre/Public* and took part in an extensive interview she gave for the same magazine, with Christian Biet and Marine Roussillon.[2] This long-term dialog brought me a lot: in addition to her political questions, I was trying to understand how one could conceive a dramaturgy that would not pass through words but through body, movement, and gesture. She sometimes contacts me to write her biography. I'm not talking about writing her life in 500 pages… I'm talking about the little biographies that are inserted in the press kits. It seems anecdotal, but I think it's very important: for years, the story of these dances has been told by others, and there's something very important at stake in having it told by those who carry them. So, reading her bio again is the most useful and concrete thing I do for her. There is also the conductor—Leonardo García Alarcón—with whom I currently have the pleasure of working on an opera with the choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui for the Grand Théâtre de Genève. Leonardo has been very important in *Les Indes galantes*: he is a conductor who is able to put himself entirely at the service of projects in which he believes. He has been a great supporter of *Les Indes galantes*, which would not have been possible without him. He is a precious partner in dialog.

2 Christian Biet, Simon Hatab, and Marine Roussillon, "Extension du domaine de la danse: entretien avec Bintou Dembélé," *Théâtre/Public*, no. 236 (July-September 2020).

Three years later, what do you take from Les Indes galantes*?*

Many of the questions that continue to accompany me in dramaturgy were already there at the time of *Les Indes galantes*: what does it mean to flabbergast the audience? By representing violence, do we perpetuate it? To what extent do the stories we tell belong to us? Can we tell a story? *Les Indes galantes* was also a symbolic production for me because, right after, I left the Paris Opera where I had worked for more than ten years. I had been lucky enough to grow up in this opera house, to learn my craft from incredible artists and people. So now I wanted to accompany a new generation of artists, in theater and opera, to take care of the future.

Fig. 7 – *Les Indes galantes* by Clément Cogitore, Opéra national de Paris YouTube channel, still photo from video.

Julia Bullock in conversation with Sofija Perović

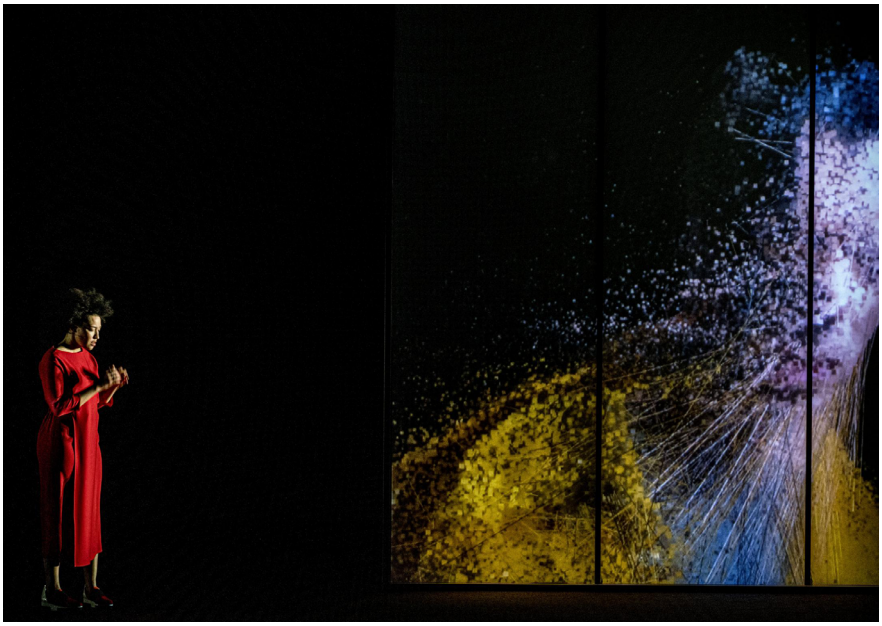

Fig. 8 – Julia Bullock and Roderick Williams in Michel van der Aa's *Upload*, Dutch National Opera. Photo credit: Marco Borggreve.

Despite her young age, the acclaimed American soprano Julia Bullock has already worked on many groundbreaking and innovative projects, but probably the most striking one was sharing the stage with an actual avatar in Michel van der Aa's opera *Upload*. Bullock belongs to the generation of new operatic stars reachable on social media, where it is possible to follow their activities and "stay in touch" over the Internet. We met—quite symbolically, but also practically, being on different continents at the time—on Zoom on August 12, 2022, to talk about Internet and its application on contemporary operatic stages and beyond.

SOFIJA PEROVIĆ: *You are quite active on social media and generally on Internet. I have reached you through Facebook for this interview and you have kindly replied to me. I also noticed that you are engaged and very generous with sharing the work of your colleagues, supporting and praising them on social media. You are not only using Internet as a platform for your personal work and art, but you are also socially engaged and responsive to your fans*

and followers. How do you see the role of Internet in the creation of the image of a new operatic star, someone who is not entirely distant anymore and not a "mythical," unreachable creature, but rather someone who has a closer personal relationship with her audience?

JULIA BULLOCK: Yes, well, part of it is just because I enjoy interacting with individuals who come to performances or who are interested in the arts and it's just a way to stay engaged. It's also a way, as you mentioned, for me to share what some of my colleagues are working on and things that are really exciting to me. I think the Internet, like any form of technology, is just an additional tool that can be used to connect people. So, I'm thinking of radio broadcasts, or when television became really popular and people had these amazing variety shows… This is just another platform which is more direct and allows people to connect on either a very intimate level or just with the fun casual exchange. So, I really value social media platforms, especially more recently when COVID-19 and the struggles with the pandemic hit, when people were feeling very much separated from each other—it's been such a tremendous tool. But I kind of go in and out of phases of utilizing social media. Just think of YouTube—I've been grateful that I've had access to so many different performances and so many different people across the globe because of the Internet, and for a variety of reasons.

Since you mentioned YouTube, I had the opportunity to watch there a recording of the masterclass you previously held on Zoom, and I must say that I was amazed to see how it worked so well for the participants who were in another city or in another state, and also for the singers all over the world who could rewatch it later on. I know it was organized under the particular circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, but do you see this as a possibility in the future as well? Or was it just a one time for you? How do you feel about those online masterclasses?

I've taught a fair amount online over Zoom or Skype. Skype actually seems to work really well, at least for me, as a teaching platform because I'm able to look at the singer and also to look at their scores while they're working. And yes, I'm totally open to continuing working in a virtual space. I have also taken lessons virtually, so I think a lot can be transmitted even over an iPhone. I've only conducted these masterclasses, I haven't sung in them, but it is just a way for people who otherwise would not be able to gather together; and also, I do think that even just a sound or, you know, talking through ideas, all of that is still really valid in a virtual session. So, those have been valuable tools.

From your point of view, is the Internet a place to redefine operatic codes and create a new atmosphere, to change the way things work or used to work in opera for its creators, interpreters, and audiences?

I don't know if it can be used to redefine—maybe with intimacy and direct exchange… I mean, the internet was there for us, or I think developed for us, to help us connecting with each other. Ideally, right? So, maybe the formality of codes of operatic spaces is starting to shift a bit, but only because I honestly don't really know how much that kind of formality was sustainable anyway, as people everywhere are looking for legitimate connections with each other, connections that are not postured nor protected by any kind of artifice. We are seeking out ways, various ways to communicate and this kind of immediacy of seeing somebody on a live screen that's not prerecorded is amazing—truly like a very intimate thing. And I can just think about it, even when I'm recording a song. I did a few recordings with my husband early on during the pandemic, just him and I and the piano, but I just imagined somebody's face, a loved one or a friend or somebody in the audience directly on the other side of the screen, just sitting, you know, two feet from me. That kind of intimate exchange is not something that we get very often in the concert hall, even though the intensity of it can be very vivid in a live performance where there's a big stage and more separation. So, I don't know if it is changing codes, I think it's just allowing people to open up the landscape for however people want to make and share music, or art in general.

You had the opportunity to perform in Michel van der Aa's opera Upload, *which deals with a truly innovative subject for an opera. At the same time, though, the subject of accumulated online experience and its possible preservation for future generations is no longer fiction or a distant idea; with the development of AI, virtual reality, the Metaverse, and so on, this subject is becoming very reachable in the near future. Would you like to tell us a little bit about how it felt being on stage with the avatar of your colleague?*

Honestly, a little frustrating at the start of rehearsing when we were putting the show together, because it was during the height of the pandemic and Roderick [Williams] and I were not able to be close to each other because this was before vaccinations or anything, so the reality of being separated and isolated was palpable and I think it did influence our creative process. It was also a little bit overwhelming because the avatar was so large and it was constantly shape-shifting, and sometimes was at a height

of 5, 10 meters above me. Usually, when you are on stage, you're interacting with other people and maybe there is someone moving set pieces, there are some props, etc., but in this instance there was nothing other than myself and moving of a few screens. There was no tactile interaction between anybody on stage, there was nobody performing, which again was very much a reflection of art at the time, a reflection of what was going on in the world.

And getting all the technology together was a slow process as well. Michel, the composer and director and writer and visionary for the piece, together with his team were still figuring out what the avatar was going to look like at different points over the course of the opera. So, it was also very time consuming, there was a lot of waiting around and watching them fiddle with, pushing various buttons and things. But those were also the moments when Roderick and I were able to talk and just connect as people. So, just looking back on it now, I really valued that time. It's been a couple years now and it was a unique process, and, as with every new opera or every new piece that I perform, there's something to be learned. I think I learned to be much more patient and then also just to find, again, this kind of legitimate ways to connect because the usual ways through which you would learn to come to a relationship with somebody you were working with weren't possible—so, it was cool. And when we got into the groove of the performances, I was so happy with how streamlined the entire piece was; and I think the filming is kind of one experience, but the live performance was really stunning. It was one of the most spectacular, extraordinary visual experiences that I have seen on an opera stage, and even just as a performer, I know that the impact of it is amazing and sleek. Yes, I think *sleek* is the word I would use to describe it: stimulating and sleek.

It sounds very exciting from what you've just described, and I must say that it seems a little like a movie filming, with all the waiting in between takes…

Yes, it definitely was like that.

When you were approached for the first time to work on this new work, did you have any reservations, or did you accept the challenge right away?

I did accept it. Part of it was because Michel and I had a really nice conversation a few years before he began, and he told me about the idea of the project and that it was about human relationship; he said that, obviously, the

technical side of it is increasingly incorporated into the piece, but that what he was really looking to highlight were the complexities between such relationships, so I didn't hesitate for one second. Also, I had looked at a couple of other works by Michel, just on video, and his aesthetic was so stunning that I didn't hesitate to take on the piece.

Caroline Mounier-Vehier received her Ph.D. in Theatre Studies from the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3 in 2020. Since her dissertation, entitled *La scène lyrique baroque au XXIe siècle: pratiques d'atelier et (re)création contemporaine* [*Baroque Musical Theatre in the 21st Century: Workshop Practices and Contemporary (Re)creation*], she has been studying the conditions of production, interpretation, and reception of early music performances on the contemporary stage. She has published several papers and given numerous talks on the subject. Caroline is also active as an orchestra manager and concert organizer.

Sofija Perović holds three doctorate degrees: a Doctor of Musical Arts (from University of Arts in Belgrade, dissertation title "The Influence of Andalusian music on the interpretation of compositions for solo harpsichord by Domenico Scarlatti and Antonio Soler"), a PhD in Literature (from University of Belgrade, dissertation title "The evolution of anti-hero from the existentialist theatre to the theatre of the absurd") and a PhD in Theatre (from University Paris 8, dissertation title "Space and time displacements in contemporary opera productions").
She debuted with the first ever Monteverdi's production in Serbia – *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (elected as the best opera production of the season 2013/2014 in Belgrade) receiving only positive reviews which highlighted "the modern and innovative approach to opera stage directing unknown to Serbian audience before." Since then, she staged Francis Poulenc's one-act opera *La Voix humaine* in Bitef theatre in Belgrade and was invited to present this production at Kotor Art Festival in Montenegro in August 2015. In 2016 she staged and produced the Serbian and Balkans premiere of *Die Weisse Rose* by Udo Zimmermann.
Since 2013 she is a member of the Association of Musical Artists of Serbia and in 2017 was elected associate professor at the Faculty of Contemporary Arts in Belgrade.

REVIEW-ESSAY

Identity, Loss, and Singing Transcendence after the End of the World

Jelena Novak

Review-essay of the film opera *Upload* and the chamber music theater piece *The Book of Water* by Michel van der Aa*

Upload (2019–20), film opera, 85'. Stopera (Dutch National Opera, Opera Forward Festival), October 1, 2021, Amsterdam.

Cast, stage
Julia Bullock—daughter
Roderick Williams—father
Ensemble MusikFabrik,
cond. Otto Tausk

Cast, film
Katja Herbers
Ashley Zukerman
Esther Mugambi
Samuel West
Claron McFadden
David Eeles
Tessa Stephenson

Team
Michel van der Aa—Composer, director, librettist
Otto Tausk—Musical director
Theun Mosk—Scenography & lighting
Elske van Buuren—Costume design
Madelon Kooijman, Niels Nuijten—Dramaturgs

* The short review "Humor, apsurd i melanholija" that I wrote after the Dutch premiere of *Upload* for the Belgrade weekly *Vreme*, October 7, 2021, https://www.vreme.com/kultura/humor-apsurd-i-melanholija/, served as a departure point for the present article. This article was made possible through the support of CESEM—Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical da NOVA FCSH, UIDB/00693/2020, and LA/P/0132/2020, and the financial support of FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., through National funds. Norma Transitória—DL 57/2016/CP1453/CT0054.

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The Book of Water (2021–22), chamber music theater piece for actor, string quartet, and film, 60'. Dutch premiere: Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, November 11, 2022, Amsterdam. Rotterdam performance: De Doelen, November 14, 2022. Video recording: live performance, November 16, 2022, Tivoli Vredenburg, Utrecht.

Cast and team
Samuel West—Narrator/Geiser (live)
Timothy West—Geiser (film)
Mary Bevan—Corinne (soprano, film)
Amsterdam Sinfonietta Kamermuziek
Michel van der Aa—Composition, director, script
Madelon Kooijman—Dramaturgy
Fergus McAllpine—Play out operator
Bart van den Heuvel—Light design
Judith de Zwart—Costume design
Joost Rietdijk nsc—Director of Photography
Film producer—Arjen Oosterbaan | Eastbound Films

I dedicate this text to the memory of my father Tomislav Novak (1951–2022)

The father, without his daughter's knowledge, and unable to bear the emptiness caused by the loss of his wife, decided to end his biological life and continue his existence in digital form. In a special clinic, he scheduled the process of uploading, which meant transferring his entire physical and mental being into a computer file. He then underwent a brief training designed to prepare him for the (im)possibilities of a potentially infinite digital existence. After the data transfer command was given, the father became an intangible being in perpetuity. He turned into a kind of avatar, a peculiar video entity that continues to live (so-to-speak) in a transparent screen two-dimensionality. The cognitive functions and emotional make-up of the father are preserved in this new variant, which continues to develop and "live." In the father's understanding of the world, everything remains the same even though his body no longer exists. However, his rejection of the body still led to some fractures, especially in his relationship with his daughter. She did not know about her father's intention to move permanently to the digital sphere and resents him for not consulting her on such an important decision. She suffers greatly and is confused by her relationship with a father she will never be able to hug again.

This is a brief plot summary of the film opera *Upload*, composed and directed by Michel van der Aa. Due to COVID-19, the performance of the

opera was postponed several times. However, after the abolition of almost all social distancing measures in the Netherlands, it was finally possible to once again present concerts, as well as theater and opera performances; and on Friday, October 1, 2021, the performance of *Upload* took place at the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam. It was a full house with an electric atmosphere, since we were all deeply moved and excited to be able to return to attending live performances. At a reception following the première of *Upload*, the director of the Dutch Opera Sophie de Lint spoke in a trembling voice about the damage done to the performing arts world during the period of pandemic isolation. It turned out to be the first reception held in this opera house in six hundred and thirteen days. The turbulent emotions in the air felt like a kind of epilogue to the performance itself: a feverish proof of the necessity of physical communication and togetherness.

During the period when the performance was postponed, a film version of the opera was made, available on medici.tv. It serves a useful documentary purpose, but it is no substitute for a live performance, given that the work rests on a questioning of different media, and explores peculiar perspectives on, and relations between, these media on stage. All this is largely lost in the medium of film.

Van der Aa is one of the most prominent European creators of opera and music theater. He is a composer and director, and often also the librettist for his works. For *Upload* he wrote the libretto, composed the music, and directed the piece. He assumed the same responsibilities for *The Book of Water*, though in this case he wrote the script, not the libretto, since most of this music theater piece is not sung, though it involves music throughout. Van der Aa is interested in topics related to identity and technology. Thus, for example, in his opera *One* (2003), he explored the boundaries between a human performer and a vocal/visual cyborg to the point where it became impossible to distinguish who was actually singing on stage and where the boundaries of that person were drawn. Likewise, in the opera *After Life* (2005–06) the protagonists are deceased people situated in a kind of purgatory. They stay there for a short period as they search for their most decisive memory, since they have the right to take only one memory with them into eternity. The drama of this work is rooted in the difficulties of choice that the characters face, and in defining their new identity in relation to a single event/person/relationship. In the opera *Eight* (2019), which only one audience member at a time could experience in any one session, the boundaries between performers, audience, and technology are

porous. With full VR gaming gear on, I experienced *Eight* guided by different female characters. Journeying from inaccessible mountain peaks and precipices, through caves and encounters with ghostly voices, I eventually found myself under the table with a virtual girl who sang while blinking with transparent, scary eyes. At some point, I realized that it was the decision of the artist that I should become myself one of the opera's protagonists.[1] *Upload* arises from a science fiction world similar to the ones that informed these pieces.

In *The book of Water*, however, there is no science fiction context, only "rain … pouring down."[2] What happens on the level of the intimate human drama associated with the main character is superimposed, and with growing tension, on what happens outside, in nature, as the flood caused by extended periods of heavy rain creates the framework and the atmosphere within which the seven chapters/scenes of this piece unfold. *The book of Water* is based on the novel *Man in the Holocene* (1979) by Max Frisch. The erosion of the mind (dementia) in the case of *The Book of Water* takes place in parallel with the erosion of the planet and the climate, a topic that resonates with contemporary environmental debates. In both operas there is a precondition of sorrow, depression, loss, and melancholy. Dementia, which eventually overwhelms any sense of identity, is often preceded by depression. And maybe the fiction of *Upload* is a kind of future dementia, a dementia of the body, where it is the body itself rather than memory and cognitive functions that destroys a sense of individual identity.

The main character of *The Book of Water* is an elderly widower called Geiser. He appears as an old man, played by Timothy West in the film, whose image is projected on various screens on stage. The character of Geiser as a younger (middle-aged) man, played by West's son Samuel, is also featured in the live performance. An intriguing dialogue is established between past and present, old age and middle age. Since the actors are father and son, the physical resemblance between them is considerable, and this adds a particular piquancy to the basic concept, in which we observe them on film and on stage at the same time.

Like the father from *Upload*, Geiser has lost his wife. He slowly sinks into the chasm created by grief, dementia, and a stroke, while the water lev-

1 For more details about *Eight*, see Jelena Novak, "*Eight, aus Licht*, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being Immersed in Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2019), 358–71, https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbaa003.

2 Quote from the unpublished libretto of *The Book of Water* by Michel van der Aa.

els at his house and everywhere else steadily rise. Conscious of his memory loss, the main character tries to keep an encyclopedic record of the ideas, images, and situations that are of special importance for him. As the water level rises, he slowly moves his important belongings from the ground floor to the attic. He is alone, although we see his daughter visiting him at the end of the piece. It appears that his only company at the time of the flood is a salamander that has sneaked into his bathroom. Symbolically, it suggests that the relationship with nature is fundamental—a given—on this planet. It is impossible to escape from it. We are never alone. Nature, the planet, climate change, and other global phenomena (hyperobjects) are always with us.[3]

In the film we see an old Geiser, engaged in domestic activities, in his detached house, cutting up parts of the books, remembering his wife, watching TV, putting out the water, making pagodas of crisp bread in the kitchen, gardening, moving stuff upstairs, going out for a walk, and so on. It is only towards the end of the film that his daughter arrives, concerned that she had not been able to make contact with her father. The younger version of Geiser talks about his older self, comments on his behavior, complains about the weather, thinks about the golden section, amongst other things. At the beginning he shares with the audience a poetic typology of thunder:

The twelve-volume encyclopedia explains what causes lightning, but there is little to be learned about thunder; yet in the course of a single night, unable to sleep, one can distinguish at least sixteen types of thunder:

1. The simple thunder crack.
2. Stuttering or tottering thunder: this usually comes after a lengthy silence, spreads across the whole countryside, and can go on for minutes on end.
3. Echo thunder: shrill as a hammer striking on loose metal and setting up a whirring, fluttering echo which is louder than the peal itself.
4. Roll or bump thunder: relatively unfrightening, for it is reminiscent of rolling barrels bumping against one another.
5. Drum thunder.

3 Hyperobjects, according to Timothy Morton, are "entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place." Some of them are global warming, climate, evolution, planets, capital, nuclear radiation. See *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), summary.

6. Hissing or gravel thunder: this begins with a hiss, like a truck tipping a load of wet gravel, and ends with a thud.
7. Bowling-pin thunder: like a bowling pin that, struck by the rolling ball, cannons into the other pins and knocks them all down; this causes a confused echo.
8. Hesitant or tittering thunder (no flash of lightning through the windows): this indicates that the storm is retreating.
9. Blast thunder (immediately following a flash of lightning through the windows (…)
10. Groaning or lath thunder: a short, high-pitched crack, as if one were snapping a lath, then a groan, short or prolonged (…)
11. Chatter thunder.
12. Cushion thunder: this sounds exactly like beating a cushion with flat hands.
13. Skid thunder: this leads one to expect either bump or drum thunder, but before the windows begin to rattle, the noise slips over to the other side of the countryside (…)
14. Crackle thunder.
15. Screech or bottle thunder, often more frightening than blast thunder, though it does not make the windows rattle (…)
16. Whispering thunder.[4]

The text of the script is rambling and prolix, and it sometimes approaches the absurd, as in this example. Its length and density also carry meaning, arguably expressing the trauma of memory loss, of the loss of the house, and indeed the loss of the whole planet/world as we know it. The text intersects with various situations in the film and on the stage itself, and it is that intertwining of different realities, quite different from a conventional narrative, that actually tells the story. Just as in our daily lives, we jump from analogous (we might say old-fashioned) activities such as cooking to all kinds of screens, mediated meetings, typed talks, delegated tasks, projected gatherings, transmitted performances, postponed presences, delayed intimacies, resulting in a radical reinvention of what used to be called "togetherness." And this fractalization of life, its transmission to all kinds of screens acting together and performing togetherness on our behalf, is actually the central theme of both pieces.

4 Michel van der Aa, *The Book of Water*, libretto, unpublished document.

On Transcendence

Upload begins in a darkened hall. Only the voices of a daughter and her father are heard, almost whispering (in English) the names of body parts and the stereotypes associated with them:

(…)
Daughter
Expand - lungs
Support - bones
(…)
Taste - tongue
Sprain - ankle
Grab - wrist
Shake - heart
Bash - fist
Carry - weight
Reach - arm
Father
Spread - fingers
Blink - eyes
Light - smile
Daughter
Sweat - fever
Father
Race - thoughts
Aim - view
Pick up - scent
(…)
Daughter
Tingle - cheek
(…)
Father
See - crimson
Hear - chirping
Relish - memory
Daughter
Hug - shoulders
(…)[5]

Physical and emotional intimacy and tenderness are displayed in this remembrance of body parts and of the memories associated with them. The scene gradually lights up and we see the daughter and the silhouette of the father. She remembers growing up with her father and the closeness they built. That closeness is deeply grounded in bodily reciprocity. She remembers her father's shoulders carrying her when she was tired, his hands holding her as she learned to walk, the prickle of his unshaven beard when he kissed her. We also see the father-avatar on stage. Although it exists as a projection on the screen, this projection is larger than the natural size of the human body and is prone to "wasting," a pixelation of the image, and some other distortions that make it dynamic and create the illusion of some special "living" entity (see figure 1). Physically, the projected father looks like, and does not look like, himself, but his voice remains un-

5 Michel van der Aa, *Upload*, libretto, unpublished document.

Fig. 1 – Roderick Williams and Julia Bullock as father and daughter. Michel van der Aa, *Upload*, still frame.

changed and his thoughts and feelings are intended to remain true to the "original." During the opera, we sometimes see the singing father (Roderick Williams, baritone) only as a projection, but at other times we see Williams on stage, albeit with his singing voice synchronized with a projection of the digital father.

In this multi-layered performance—shifting between the performer singing live, interacting directly with the character of his daughter (Julia Bullock, soprano), and their more complicated interaction through the introduction of screen projections—van der Aa literally performs the drama of postponed and displaced realities on stage, while at the same time "talking" about them in connection to the father's and daughter's new virtual relationality. The drama between father and daughter is punctuated by parts of the story that unfold in the upload clinic. Through these encounters, the audience is confronted with the true implications of the father's decision—legal, moral, and other. These scenes, unlike the family dialogue, are cinematic, and are spoken rather than sung. They convey a Lynchian aesthetic marked by both absurdity and humor. One candidate for upload, for example, is a researcher who has received a grant to digitize himself because it is allegedly in the interest of the status quo to preserve his invaluable knowledge of the Holocene in this way. Here, and elsewhere, van der Aa represents humor as one means of refuting the absurdity caused by the

Fig. 2 – Roderick Williams and Julia Bullock as father and daughter. Michel van der Aa, *Upload*, still frame.

tendency of Homo sapiens to complicate both its individual existence and life on the planet in general.

In the key scene of the opera, the final one, all the vertical screens and splintered perspectives are turned off and suddenly, in a darkened hall, a huge, partly stretched canvas is lifted like a sail over the audience. On it, we see the original, pre-digitized father and daughter in close-up, lying facing each other, singing again those words depicting parts of the body, as at the beginning of the opera (see figure 2). The size and intimacy of the image and the abrupt shift of perspective come as a sobering blow. Stripped down in form, and conveying an almost painful melancholy, this scene conveyed to me a sense of the characters as almost palpable in their intimacy. It was as if members of the audience had sneaked in like voyeurs. Many questions related to the new relationships and new circumstances caused by physical distancing are raised by this move, not least those relating to the warmest moments of *The Book of Water*, when Corrine, the daughter of Geiser, finally finds him, towards the end of the opera.

The interrogation of identity, fear, memory, loss, nature, knowledge, erosion, and singing all takes place in *The Book of Water* in dialogue with an unexpected extension of the performance into a fluent 3D illusion created on stage. On the right side of the stage, we see the string quartet and the sound technician, while on the left we see an angular structure with

Fig. 3 – Timothy West and Samuel West, as old and young Geiser. Michel van der Aa, *The Book of Water*, still frame.

translucent glass forming a kind of cabin. That structure provides tridimensionality with the film projection. It gives the projected image profundity, drawing the spectator and the live protagonist on stage, into the reality of the film. This intriguing game between different spaces and realities is seductive, and in many ways it is the motor of this piece. The game of involvement and in/dependency between all of them becomes palpable while making us part of the simulacra.

Among the impressive, hyper-realistic moments is the one when Samuel West as young Geiser enters the angular glass structure and initiates the projection of the rain storm. At that moment, he starts talking about various types of thunder (as in the text quoted earlier). This illusion of a storm appears to be so accurate in its faithfulness to the original natural spectacle of the rainstorm that it conveys a sense of Kantian sublime. It is not the audiovisual theme, the rain storm itself, but the way it is performed—its efficiency, sharpness, elegance, velocity—that produces this effect of transcendence.

The forcefields in *Upload*—between simultaneous screens, projected and living entities, father and daughter, technology and art, speech and singing—are resolved through music. The ensemble Musikfabrik, placed on stage and led by the conductor Otto Tausk, presented a convincing and finessed reading of a musical score that oscillates between electronic and symphonic

sound. In recent works, the musical language of van der Aa have slipped into various non-classical environments. Here he makes reference to techno music, which, by sharpening the edges and the volume of the sound, excitingly conveys the psychological state of the characters. The daughter's slow aria is touching and reminiscent of Henryk Górecki's melancholic gestures, notably in his *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (1977). It is as though all the sorrow and loneliness that the protagonists might feel is somehow absorbed by the music, in gestures of melancholy but not of pathos.

In recalling those performances—trying not to be influenced by the recordings of *Upload* and *The Book of Water* that have since become available—I clearly remember that actual singing appeared only twice in *The Book of Water*. And I remember, too, the special atmosphere of those arias—typical of Van der Aa's vocal writing—with their combination of sustained notes sung non-vibrato, their sometimes considerable leaps in melodic line, and their quasi-improvised, non-directional rhythms, all informing and seemingly hovering over the ever-present feeling of melancholy. However, and not to my surprise, I did not immediately remember if both arias were sung from the screen or if it was just one of them. Actually, in my memory I had started to doubt whether there was any live singing in the piece at all.

In fact, we hear both arias coming from the screen. In the first, we do not see who is singing. The singing comes from the film, and the song appears as a memory, as it occurs in Geiser's head while he comes across the photo of his deceased wife (Scene 3). In the second, the singer is Geiser's daughter Corrine. We see her in the house in the film, while at the same time we hear her voice (Scene 7). She is sometimes synchronized with her voice, so that she appears to be singing in the house of her father. At other times we hear her singing, but we only see her silent image, with closed mouth, going around the house. The figure of the daughter was incorporated so smoothly into the whole experience that I became indifferent to whether she was projected on screen or performing live on stage. In my memory *she was there*, although I was not sure how exactly. Her presence and the aria she sang constituted the most tender moment of the performance and embodied the warm hug she gave to her father when she finally found him.

My difficulty in remembering the media and protocol of singing is telling. The world we live in has changed, it seems to tell us. The notion of *liveness* still keeps evolving, even as the modes of re/mediation changes. We all learn the new rules and adapt as we evolve. Both *Upload* and *The Book of Water* are about loss—loss as a learning process. They are about how we learn to lose (father, memory, home, body, planet) while at the same time

entering new worlds. The final verses sung by Corrine are optimistic, although they introduce the pain of loss. Despite the rays of divergent light (between digital and analog, life and death, memory and loss) the generosity of the sun is sustained:[6]

My father,
smiles at me in an unknown language.
My father smiles at me.
You diverge here,
your intuitive gaze,
imagined, understood, and lost.
You diverge here,
in shifting shadows,
between sleep and dream.
Eternity,
the sea fled away with the sun,
between sleep and dream.[7]

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6 This reading of the generosity of a sun that is always giving, and not asking anything in return, is inspired by Oxana Timofeeva's book *Solar Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

7 Michel van der Aa, *The Book of Water*, script, unpublished document.

Book Reviews

Francesca Vella. *Networking Operatic Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 256 pp. ISBN 9780226815701.

Luca Battioni*

Francesca Vella's groundbreaking debut monograph *Networking Operatic Italy* will certainly not go unnoticed across a wide spectrum of disciplines such as opera studies, reception, and performance studies. The author's refreshing outlook and compelling prose contribute to making the text a must-read for any serious investigation of nineteenth-century Italian culture.

The question of mobility lies at the core of this book, and in particular the question of how movement came to play a role in articulating national discourses in nineteenth-century Italy within the context of opera. On the one hand, Vella's intervention points to the long-standing culture of approaching Italian opera exclusively through the rigid wide-angle lens of national discourses—an approach that ultimately erased identity pluralism and flattened dynamics of urban exchange and mobility. On the other hand, she touches upon the limitations of the "local" approach that looks at localisms as discrete entities completely disconnected from a broader national framework. In response to these restricting routes, Vella proposes an alternative way that focuses on "how key aspects of an Italian macro-identity were articulated through opera, both Italian and foreign, *in between* distinct locations: liminal spaces that in turn transformed operatic ideas and aesthetics" (4). In other terms, by deflecting both a circular determinism—whereby

* This review grew out of the course *Introduction to Italian Studies* taught by Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg at Brown University. I am deeply grateful to her for the careful reading and the great advice, while the views expressed in the article are my own. Thank you also to Anne Kerkian for the invaluable help in the editing process.

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operatic forms and national forces mutually inform each other—and a narrowed focus on cities as "discrete operatic milieus" (2), Vella argues that discourses of identity-making were articulated in the liminal spaces, physical and/or imaginary, that operatic forms generated between locations.

Of note, this newly "liminal space" paradigm, very cogently articulated in the introduction, does not consistently bring the promised results in the body of the text and risks reinforcing the very local-national dualism that it is trying to overcome. For instance, the author argues that operatic relocations between cities are "a type of material interaction that challenges the notion that the peninsula's urban centers altogether resisted the nation's unifying impulses after 1861" (111). Yet, a few pages later she points to the export of "local" products to other cities as battles for cultural supremacy, whose goal was far from any idea of national unity. The relocation of Wagner's *Lohengrin* from Bologna to Florence actually guaranteed a new power position for Bologna, while for Florence "the whole trading operation risked undermining the prestige of a city that had itself once been preeminent in promoting "'modern' music" (114). Perhaps a better way to reconcile the local and national dichotomy might be to rethink how this complex web of power relations informed or resisted nationalist discourses. Furthermore, the presence of non-Italian opera—for instance, Meyerbeer and the Parisian *grand opéra*—significantly complicates the picture. It is important to question what role this presence played for or against the Italian nation-building process, and in what forms was Italian opera resistant to this process.

In the book's introductory lines, the author positions her work within the field both by separating it from a series of methodological frameworks that have crystallized in the study of Italian opera and by setting forth its continuity with the new scholarly trends in opera studies. She then introduces the reader to the themes that will counterpoint the whole text. Unlike traditional introductions, Vella does not unfold the synopsis of each chapter in an orderly and mechanical fashion. Instead, in the introduction, the selected five case studies dialectically interface with the author's narrative, creating an interesting holistic continuum. Furthermore, Vella defines plainly the terms that are key to her study. For instance, in her discourse, she reconfigures "mobility" not only as "vast, fast, and spectacular movements" (3) but as those inconspicuous movements and mechanisms involving both cultural and material artifacts. She clarifies that "media" in her study includes "transportation and communication technologies," as well as "newspapers, wind bands, and the human voice" (6–7). Furthermore,

she posits the terms "Italy" and "Italian" "not as expressions of an existing political reality but as references to shared cultural markers" (5). Ultimately, she situates her work in conversation with a broader framework of studies and against a tendency in Italian studies of considering the Italian case as distinctive and unique.

Although in a footnote Vella mentions the resonance of Bruno Latour's work in her approach to material and human actors, perhaps for the economy of this review it is worthwhile to recall here the relevance of actor-network theory (ANT), as a good deal of this book bears such theoretical framework's watermark. In broad terms, ANT challenges the notion of society as a pre-fixed entity wherein non-social actors are embedded and framed. Rather, in the words of Latour society should be decoded as "one of the many connecting elements circulating inside tiny conduits."[1] Thus, material elements as well as nonhumans agents contribute to the assemblage of any given actuality as much as human factors. Following this reasoning, opera is both diluted in and produced by all the ingredients accounted for by Vella's monograph —from Meyerbeer's operas to marching bands, single operatic numbers, replicas, Adelina Patti's voice, technological devices, and railways. Furthermore, from an ANT point of view, an interesting question here is not so much whether opera in nineteenth-century Italy has to be understood locally, nationally, or globally, but how and the extent to which opera mobilized and was moved from one locale to another locale across shifting networks of human and nonhuman factors. By broadening the framework, ANT theory might help us to better understand the politics of nineteenth-century European culture with its local and national rivalries as well as forms of "transnational cosmopolitanism."[2] In addition to this, Vella's book echoes and elaborates the sonic implications of the spatial turn in musicology and sound studies by leaning toward an understanding of sounds as socio-material assemblages "located simultaneously in the materials and practices of production, transmission and reception (hearing and listening).[3]

1 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4–5.

2 The reference is to Axel Körner, "From Hindustan to Brabant: Meyerbeer's *L'africana* and Municipal Cosmopolitanism in Post-Unification Italy," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017): 74–93.

3 George Revill, "Vocalic Space: Socio-Materiality and Sonic Spatiality," in *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn between Disciplines*, ed. Marijn Nieuwenhuis and David Crouch (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 43–62, at 58.

In Chapter 1, Vella explores a wide range of mobilities intersecting with the city of Florence's urban spaces in the 1850s. The Tuscan capital premiered the first Italian stagings of many of Giacomo Meyerbeer's operas. As the author argues, over the course of an opera's mobile life, the mapping of operatic objects (designed for a specific city or theater) onto the locality of a different place exposed tensions and sites of resistance. Far from being passive reconstitutions of the Parisian model, the Florentine replicas of Meyerbeer's operas set in motion a complex set of technological and cultural negotiations. In other words, in the grand opéra-centric system, operatic mobilities gave agency to peripheral Florence, allowing the Tuscan city to constantly reposition itself into the European framework of urban modernity.

For Vella, Meyerbeer's operas contributed to setting in motion a paradigm shift from "an event-oriented operatic culture … to an understanding of operas as permanent works amenable to endless reproduction" (28). In other terms, operas became mobile objects that, in their journey across the globe, negotiate both their presence and their provenance locally. The complex social, political, and cultural imaginary that the object "opera" carried contributed to an incessant remapping of places within the virtual geography of the time. In light of the plurality of mobilities that revolved around opera productions, Vella reconsiders modern interpretations of Meyerbeer's operatic cosmopolitanism, generally attributed to the composer by European critical discourses from the 1830s onwards. In Vella's argument, this was neither the result of the projection of external values onto his works nor the outcome of the composer's struggle to overcome cultural and aesthetic hierarchies. Rather, his cosmopolitanism was one of the many points of convergence for the various and multifaceted discourses that his operas circulated as commodities in a widespread interconnected global web.

Furthermore, from this very first chapter Vella begins to shake the traditional reception theory's tree. In fact, by departing from a constricted traditional view of newspapers as the site of critical responses by contemporary audiences, she argues that they "were central to the articulation of urban identities" (26), for the material assemblage on the page "encapsulated contemporary urban experience" and reflected "the fragmentation of city life" (26–27). Thus, musical criticism and newspapers not only played a crucial role in the cultural and political mediation process but, by placing opera within a broader web of physical and imaginary relationships, they also contributed to the networking of operatic objects across space and time.

One of the high points of the monograph, Chapter 2 focuses on the circu-

lation of a single operatic object—the marcia funebre from Errico Petrella's opera *Jone* (1858). Although this opera has since disappeared from the operatic repertoire, in the second half of the nineteenth century Petrella's funeral march was a truly popular hit. By retracing the circulation of the march, Vella unveils the intricated matrix of meanings and functions that its movements generated. Vella starts her analysis of the march from the original operatic context—*Jone*'s act 4, scene 1. On the stage, a marching band accompanies Glauco to his death. The ensemble begins its performance offstage, thus producing an aural cue that later gets transformed into a visual cue as the band bursts on the stage, manifesting its diegetic presence. Soon, the orchestra joins in and complicates the diegetic/non-diegetic dynamics at work by introducing "a stereophonic effect that momentarily unsettles the diegetic, monaural world woven by the band" (58). These musical movements in and out of both the narrative and the stage make Petrella's march an operatic object already associated to notions of mobility and mourning from its very initial appearance.

Furthermore, Vella emphasizes that the very structure of the piece and its potential for endless repetition facilitated its migration from the opera house to public spaces and contributed to constructing Petrella's march as a portable mechanical device. What makes Vella's discussion even more compelling in this chapter is the linkage with wind bands outside the theatrical realm. The transposition of operatic music to popular forms of diffusion such as transcriptions, piano fantasias based on celebrated arias, barrel organs, and marching bands, guaranteed its capillary distribution within the social tissue of the nation.[4] Originally designed for a marching band on stage, Petrella's march easily made its way into the repertoire and global circuit of wind band performances. Yet, Vella's argument moves further and links civic wind bands to the military march as a technology of power used for disciplining body and generating "muscular bonding" (9).[5] In this vein, she argues that the spaces created by marching band performances of Petrella's marcia funebre functioned as funeral entrainments—i.e., forms of biopolitical technology instilling a specific attitude in both performers and audiences (69):

4 See for example Antonio Carlini, ed., *Fuori dal teatro. Modi e percorsi della divulgazione di Verdi* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015).

5 Vella's reference is to William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 1.

> Weighty tread, minor mode, dotted rhythms, and other funeral march figures are not intended only, or even mainly, to signify particular situations. Their function is not primarily to evoke death and grief, or to depict the inner landscape of a mourning heart. Rather, it is to instill particular moral attitudes in and through the marching body. Funeral marches, which by the mid-nineteenth century no longer had military purposes alone, were in this sense less music to be "listened to" in a modern, attentive, bourgeois fashion, and more music to be "acted upon" through repeated physical behaviors.

The wealth of the second chapter's content does not end here. Vella positions Petrella's march within the broader context of post-Unification Italy and points to a developing death culture that at the time "was thoroughly transformed under the influence of competing political, social, and religious agendas" (47). Petrella's marcia funebre testifies to a transitional moment in the process of reimagining funeral rites within the framework of the new nation. *Jone*'s march got caught in this restructuring mechanism, repurposed and absorbed into a new "expanded landscape of Italian death culture" where "a funeral march such as *Jone*'s could elicit variegated affective responses, and could even become a trademark of 'exotic' Southern rituals" (72).

In this context, I believe that this chapter could have benefited from a conversation with Antonio Gramsci's idea of national-popular culture. The Italian philosopher argued that, unlike other countries, nineteenth-century Italy failed to produce a national-popular culture and that "in Italian popular culture music has to some extent substituted that artistic expression which in other countries is provided by the popular novel."[6] If music, the universal language par excellence, became the expression of national-popular culture in Italy, for Gramsci this spoke of the failure of a class of organic intellectuals to create a true national-popular literature. However, when Vella argues that "*Jone*'s marcia funebre provided an 'emotional arena' in and through which different social groups could imagine themselves as parts of the same national body, even as they articulated independent responses to human mortality" (9), this does provide, to a certain extent, a counterexample to the Gramscian notion of music as an exclusively cosmopolitan phenomenon. As chapter 2 demonstrates, Petrella's march, aside from its wide mass diffusion, created a national-popular space wherein in-

6 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 378.

dividuals of any class reimagined their place in the newly unified state. In her cogent analysis in this chapter, Vella ultimately shows us that, when well situated, even an old-fashioned march such as Petrella's can become a sophisticated object that reveals the hidden modernity of its time. As Vella puts it, "band performances understood as media for articulating collective grief on an everyday basis were symptoms of a new age" (47).

Chapter 3 investigates the figure of opera soprano Adelina Patti. Born in Spain to Italian parents, Patti grew up in the United States where she debuted in 1859 before embarking on an international career as a global ambassador of bel canto. In this chapter, Vella shows that, because of the singer's polyglot skills, Adelina Patti's voice participated in multiple national communities and mobilized various political and national discourses—indeed, her voice could be localized both anywhere and nowhere. Furthermore, Vella argues that "Patti's vocal organs were imagined as a proto-recording device" (9) that could absorb and impeccably reproduce different languages. The global mobility of such a multilingual speaking and singing machine—and, in general, the broader circulation of voices in the nineteenth century—contributed to raising concerns related to diction and pronunciation as makers and markers of the so-called *italianità*.[7] Like the other chapters concerned with the mobility of operatic objects and the way they both shaped and were shaped locally during their mobile trajectory, this section describes Patti's voice as yet another object. Yet we should not forget that Patti was a subject whose voice was deeply attached to a body. An overly narrow focus on how different critics and listeners perceived Patti's voice and articulated different national discourses, positions Patti exclusively as a singing machine, and from my viewpoint denies her acoustical agency. For example, looking at how she shaped discourses about herself and her transnational background through her multilingual talents might be further investigated.

As briefly addressed at the beginning of this review, in chapter 4 Vella recounts the unprecedented mobilization of Wagner's *Lohengrin* from the

7 Recent opera studies scholarship has scrutinized the notion of *italianità* (Italianness) under transnational and global lenses, revealing how nineteenth-century material culture and technological discourses, as well as transnational consumption and circulation of opera, endlessly reconfigured notions of operatic *italianità* both on the peninsula and abroad. From this new understanding, operatic *italianità* challenges nationally-bound interpretations of opera and becomes an analytical tool for a critical interrogation of opera's fluid transformations across time and space. See Axel Körner and Paulo M. Kühl, *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

city of Bologna to Florence. Drawing on Axel Körner's work on the cultural politics of post-Unification nationalism in Italy,[8] the author points out that such extraordinary operatic transfer from the progressive center of Bologna to the Tuscan city exposed a complex network of power relations between Italian localities. This meant that cultural and political tensions were continuously negotiated and remapped. Furthermore, Vella points to a new conceptualization of opera whereby railways not only guaranteed the mobility of operatic productions but were incorporated into "opera's basic infrastructure" (126). In other words, she argues that operatic discourse expanded to include external technologies. Interestingly, she follows this thread up to the introduction of the Fascist thespian cars, where the mobilization of the spectacle was separated from the operatic performance and became in itself a spectacle that pointed to the modernity and efficiency of the regime. In the last section of this fourth chapter, the author briefly returns to the theme of death culture and public rituals. First, she points out that operatic translocations expose "the paradox that an act aimed at preserving and transplanting authenticity ultimately required 'deadness': a disassembling and recombining of the opera production's various component parts" (129). Second, similar to her analysis of operatic discourse, she emphasizes the late nineteenth-century incorporation of railway stations into the performance of public rituals, including the movement of mortal remains from one city to another. In other words, the author alludes to a clear tension at work in these railway spaces between mobility and immobility—between life and death—that intersects with the mechanized technologies transporting body remains or disassembled operatic objects to be staged either in opera productions or in funerary rituals.

The concluding chapter is arguably the coup de théâtre of the entire monograph. In this section, Vella measures her analysis of operatic objects against the yardstick of one of Giuseppe Verdi's most studied operas: *Aida* (1871). In these pages, the author lays out a groundbreaking methodological framework that is worth emphasizing in this review. Vella opens the final chapter with an analysis of the famous "Guerra! Guerra!" moment in *Aida*'s act 1, scene 5. The author reads this operatic micro-segment as a telegraphic communication event wherein "the repetitions of 'Guerra!' and 'Radamès!' by the chorus in *Aida* are configured as relays, with the two words transmitted like electric signals" (141–42). This wireless telegraphic diffusion of

8 Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy: From Unification to Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

sounds on stage is also linked to the creation of a community—that of the Egyptians sharing their fear about the imminent Ethiopian invasion.

Discussing *Aida* today means coming to grips with Edward Said's famous essay from his seminal book *Culture and Imperialism*,[9] which has indelibly marked the reception of Verdi's opera by orienting its analysis towards imperialist and Orientalist frameworks. To complement this reading, instead of interpreting *Aida* as a "proto-recording device that stored and reproduced its Orientalist 'origin'" (143), in her analysis, Vella situates Verdi's opera "as both a work and an event, against a backdrop of Italian and international experiences of long-distance communication and temporality prompted by contemporary media" (143). In other terms, despite being aware that her interpretative gesture might momentarily divert the object *Aida* from the imperialist/Orientalist logic, the author tries to make space for a repositioning, at the level of both composition and meaning, of Verdi's opera within the technological context of the time.

And here, on the one hand, Vella distances herself from what she terms the "deterministic shadow," (143)—that is, the tendency to revert to technological determinism as the matrix through which artistic developments are understood; on the other hand, she acknowledges a certain degree of historical accuracy to such a technology-driven approach. Thus, she is trying to reconcile these two strains into one methodological outlook/framework. To put it differently, the author is not asserting that *Aida* is determined by the new nineteenth-century technologies, but that the work itself came into being as an object profoundly shaped by discourses that mobilized ideas across a wide range of fields.

For Vella, electric communication in the nineteenth century existed "at the midpoint between an idea and a technology" (144). While in the previous chapters she has focused on the articulation of Italianness in the space produced by movement in between distinct locations, here once again it is in the liminal space between ideas and technology that works of art are articulated and come into being. To the author, this middle space is where scientific and cultural images proliferate, intersect with each other, and finally coalesce into various formats. This space works in such a holistic fashion that it would be "almost inappropriate for the historian to disentangle different domains of contemporary experience, given that the analogical mindset was what defined the age" (144). Although her analysis

9 Edward W. Said, "The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*," in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 111–31.

is restricted to a very short fragment of *Aida*, Vella constructs a compelling methodological scaffolding for investigating musical objects. In her specific case study, she overcomes the traditional view that looks at the object *Aida* exclusively as a reflection of the politics of its time and thinks of *Aida* as a device that responded to the nineteenth-century technological mindset and, when performed, echoed telegraphic communications on and off the stage. Finally, the author brings us back to the idea that technology not only affected how opera circulated and was performed on a global scale but also how this technology was incorporated into the very nature of operatic compositions. As trains and notions around mobility occupied the space of operatic thinking, in this final chapter Vella links Verdi's search for simultaneity to a novel understanding of time in the opera production system, which ultimately led to a "newly networked sense of Italian operatic experience" (166).

To conclude this review, I want to circle back to the book's Introduction, where the author offers a critique of reception studies that provides the broader methodological framework for the five case studies discussed in the text. As Vella recounts, the advent of the telegraph ushered in a new model of communication, whereby the transfer of meaning became independent of physical transportation. Such a schism between producer and receiver reverberates in the way reception theory analyzes opera, that is by separating the text from its context and understanding these two as independent entities. This tendency, coupled with an inherent ineffability of the musical text, has contributed to placing the object "opera" in the background in favor of an emphasis on the receivers—for example, contemporaneous press materials or the personal accounts of people who attended the opera. The author's critical operation for this book is twofold: first, to bring the musical text back to the center of historical investigation and, second, to complicate the notion of media understood as "message-bearing institutions."[10] Thus, reception theory is only one of the tools in the arsenal of a wider methodological system that, by looking at "how opera (was) networked across space and time," (13) opens up a whole range of new perspectives for (re)studying operatic cultures.

10 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

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Performance Reviews

Children, an opera in seventeen songs, with music by Irena Popović, based on the novel by Milena Marković. Belgrade, National Theatre, October 8, 2022.

Sofija Perović

Children is an opera in seventeen songs composed and staged by Irena Popović. The libretto, based on the award-winning novel/poem of the same name by Milena Marković, was written by dramaturg and playwright Dimitrije Kokanov (who ventured for the first time into the world of operatic librettos), while the choreography was created by Igor Koruga, the scenography by Miraš Vuksanović, the costumes by Selena Orb, and the musical dramaturgy by Jelena Novak. The structure of the opera resembles a soundtrack where each song could be listened and performed independently but, when put together, these seventeen "songs" create a coherent theatrical work which made quite an impact on the local audience in Belgrade, Serbia. The work consists of a prologue and three parts: "The Skyscraper Forest," "Sea of Tears, Mother's Milk and Children's Urine," and "The Wind" in which the topics—such as growing up in the blocks of New Belgrade, a complicated relationship with the mother, teenage pregnancy, the search of identity in a no-longer existing country—are brought up.

Children had its world premiere on October 8, 2022, on the main stage of the National Theatre in Belgrade, the institution that hosts opera and ballet productions in the Serbian capital since the nineteenth century, with the opera ensemble being officially formed in 1919.[1] Even though the opening

1 For more information about the history of opera in Belgrade, please see Raško Jovanović, Olga Milanović, Zoran Jovanović, eds., *125 godina Narodnog pozorišta u Beogradu*

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Fig. 1 and 2 – *Children* by Irena Popović, National Theatre in Belgrade, 2022, © National Theatre in Belgrade.

of an independent opera house has been the main focus of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia (and formerly Yugoslavia) for almost half a century, with every other government promising to prioritize the construction of the opera house, Belgrade still does not have one. The fact that this brand new chamber opera, composed and staged by a contemporary Serbian composer such as Irena Popović, opened the National theatre season 2022/2023 brings a ray of light and hope for the future of opera in Serbia. This is also the first time that the National theatre in Belgrade produced a contemporary opera based on a present-day novel. The attention that was accorded to the creation of this opera in the media and the public is without precedent. Probably, the main reason lies in the work of Milena Marković (1974), a dramatic author and poet whose book *Children* won the most prestigious literary award in Serbia (NIN award) for best novel in 2021. This choice made by the jury was, to say the least, surprising, since *Children* is not really a novel – it is a poem – and giving an award for the best novel to a book that doesn't strictly belong to this genre was a very bold and unexpected move. But no matter how controversial and certainly unprecedent this choice might seem, the reactions of the general public and literary circles were unanimously positive.

In *Children*, the voice in all its meanings and forms is predominant. The composer, who is also the stage director, rethinks voice as a tool, in opera and on stage, by juxtaposing operatic and regular singing. By means of the voice (and of being vocal), the very idea and notion of expressing oneself freely, truly, and completely despite the restrictions imposed by internal and external factors—such as a conservative upbringing, social expectations, traditional concepts of gender roles, among others—are also questioned in this operatic piece. In the patriarchal society, such as the Balkan one, the children's voices are united with the female voices which are altogether often neglected, considered as second grade, misunderstood, regarded as not serious enough, not important and, even when expressed, not taken into consideration. In her book, Milena Marković tries to represent all those voices through the prism of autofiction and her own growing up in former Yugoslavia. Although at the first glance it might seem like an inner quest, a search for the lost childhood, the poem is much more than that. As writer

(Belgrade: SANU, 1997); Mirka Pavlović, „75 godina od institucionalizovanja Opere (i Baleta) (1919–1994)," *Pro Musica* 154–55 (1995): 14; Sofija Perović, "L'Opéra de Belgrade (1992–2000)," in Caroline Giron-Panel, Solveig Serre, eds., *Les lieux de l'opéra en Europe (XVII^e–XXI^e siècle)* (Paris: Ecole des chartes, 2017), 43–50.

Miljenko Jergović said: "It is a dangerous novel about history, the most important and traumatic one for us, which starts with the Second World War, continues through the eighties, the decade of our growing up, and overruns us during the nineties."[2] The collective aspect of this poem is emphasized and made obvious in the opera where the author('s voice) is "represented" by fourteen actors, three singers, and the choir. Irena Popović took direct inspiration for this collective aspect of the opera from Marković's novel: "In the music I composed for *Children*, I tried to find the tone of the collective voice, i.e. Milena's being. The complexity of Milena's poetry and its many layers allowed me to make this collective voice both operatic and ordinary, childlike and also perfect in its imperfect tone. The voices in *Children* are a unique combination of things that cannot be combined, and it seems to me that we get an overtone that floats through spaces and simply refuses to be defined and caught in the trap of classical analysis."[3]

Although Marković examines the specific issues related to the generations that grew up in former Yugoslavia (the country that became a sort of Neverland for many) and that, because of the historical events in their country, were not able to become independent adults—they could not find their ways in the war and the transition stricken newly formed countries; they couldn't manage to get the jobs which would enable them to leave their parent's houses and have enough means to create and provide for their own families; and they got stuck in a sort of Peter Pan complex, not being able to accept their own responsibilities—this poem is much more universal. It talks about finding one's voice(s), about accepting the fact that we all have contradictory voices and feelings within us, that it is absolutely fine not knowing what we want or how we feel, that it is alright not to feel as we thought we would or as we were taught we should, that growing up is a hard thing to do and that we are allowed to feel overwhelmed by it.

This is a work whose belonging to the operatic genre is questioned by many professionals from the opera world in Serbia. It was created mostly

2 "To je opasan roman o istoriji, onoj nama najvažnijoj i traumatičnoj, koja poteče sa Drugim svetskim ratom, nastavi se kroz osamdesete, ta decenija našeg odrastanja i pregazi nas tokom devedesetih," quoted in Tanjug, "Premijera kamerne opere *Deca* u Narodnom pozorištu: Spoj muzike, drame i poezije za otvaranje sezone," *Euronews Serbia*, October 8, 2022, https://www.euronews.rs/kultura/aktuelno-iz-kulture/64870/premijera-kamerne-opere-deca-u-narodnom-pozoristu-spoj-muzike-drame-i-poezije-za-otvaranje-sezone/vest.

3 Irena Popović as quoted in "*Children*—Composer's and Director's Note (Extract)," National Theatre, Belgrade, official website, accessed December 18, 2022, https://www.narodnopozoriste.rs/en/performances/children.

by the members of the dramatic ensemble of the National theatre,[4] it was inspired by the novel which is not a novel, and the result was a cathartic theatre piece that brought the audience to tears. This work is not what a regular opera lover in Serbia would expect (or want) to see. In order to understand the importance of this work one should know that the opera scene in Serbia is still very conservative, that opera is often mistaken with *bel canto*, that Serbian audiences have very few opportunities to see new stagings and even fewer new operatic works (and when that happens it goes almost unnoticed, since the media is not paying any interest to such endeavors), that the repertoire of the opera ensemble at the National theatre is very limited (based mostly on Italian romantic works), and almost all the productions were created decades ago and return each season. In such circumstances, the fact that *Children* was given the main stage of the National theatre instead of the smaller one, and the opportunity to open not just the opera but the full 2022/23 theater season, can be considered as an important step forward. However, this work is not only relevant and special for the local scene (despite being sung in Serbian), but it is a powerful and original theatrical piece that is even questioning the status of opera today in the much broader sense.

As a composer, Irena Popović is famous for her applied music and work in theater, and she is consciously and intentionally mixing the voices of the actors with those of the opera singers. She questions the very essence of opera by using "ordinary" voices, children's voices, voices of the orchestra players (who are on stage behind the actors and singers, visible to the audience at all times and actively involved in the staging), and by mixing many musical genres including musical theater, pop music, turbo-folk, and World music.

Popović's musical language, already well known in Serbia, is easily recognizable in this work and, despite being a mixture of many influences and genres,[5] in the end it feels like easy-listening music. The power and force of the human voice on stage, and the importance of internal voices in each human being, are represented in this opera by emphasizing the commu-

4 Despite the fact that it is described as an opera in seventeen songs, on the official website of the National theatre in Belgrade, *Children* is labeled as "drama." See "Performances," National Theatre, Belgrade, official website, accessed December 18, 2022, https://www.narodnopozoriste.rs/en/performances.

5 In the musical style of Irena Popović, Jelena Novak has recognized the influence of Michael Nyman, Philip Glass, Arvo Pärt, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and David Lang (see *Children*, program notes, National Theatre, Belgrade, 2022, 26).

nal aspect of singing—in the primal sense of coming together to sing. The teamwork is one of the most striking elements of this piece—a collaboration between actors, singers, and musicians all involved in each aspect of the work. A very special contribution is made by the children's choir called "Hopes," which brings together children coming from the "margins" of society, thus providing an extra aura of innocence and authenticity to this opera both musically and theatrically.

The opera, as well as Milena Marković's poem, invites us to look deep in ourselves and search for the inner child hidden inside. *Children* is an anti-opera that brings hope for the future of the genre in Belgrade and can be recommended to contemporary opera lovers all over the world.

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She debuted with the first ever Monteverdi's production in Serbia – *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (elected as the best opera production of the season 2013/2014 in Belgrade) receiving only positive reviews which highlighted "the modern and innovative approach to opera stage directing unknown to Serbian audience before." Since then, she staged Francis Poulenc's one-act opera *La Voix humaine* in Bitef theatre in Belgrade and was invited to present this production at Kotor Art Festival in Montenegro in August 2015. In 2016 she staged and produced the Serbian and Balkans premiere of *Die Weisse Rose* by Udo Zimmermann.
Since 2013 she is a member of the Association of Musical Artists of Serbia and in 2017 was elected associate professor at the Faculty of Contemporary Arts in Belgrade.