How Prevalent is Opera

In Modern Society?

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Abstract

Opera is a unique and wonderful art form that has intricately weaved its way into popular-culture. Unfortunately many people are not aware of opera’s influence because, when directly referenced in pop-culture, opera is often caricatured beyond definition and thereby distorting the public’s understanding of opera’s true nature. Opera, like film, is an art form that is nearly impossible to understand without having experienced it for one’s self. The difficulty in writing a scholarly research paper, then, is not fighting against a lack of words or facts, but rather finding the best way to say them. To put forth a good and solid base of credibility sources were pulled from testimonials from professionals who have had major success in opera, documentaries, Opera News magazine articles, history books and personal experience.

When full understanding is reached it becomes nearly impossible to not see opera’s involvement in popular-culture. It is present in films and television; it is the predecessor of musical theater. Opera has influenced U.S. foreign policy and even lent a hand in ending racial segregation. Through this all-encompassing art form one can also make connections to other cultural aspects thereby enhancing one’s understanding of the succession of global culture. As popular-culture continues to progress so ,too, does opera’s influence.

Introduction

Ed Gardner, Music Director for the English National Opera, once said “Opera is when a man is stabbed in the back and, instead of bleeding, he sings.” Admittedly, opera is one of the most underrated art forms in existence, a sad fact that is perpetuated by hoards of stereotypes. Frequently surrounding the culture of opera is an aura of pretentiousness, elitism and foreignness; yet within the United States the annual number of people who attend operas is equal to the annual number of those who attend NFL games.[[1]](#endnote-1) What is it, then, that makes opera such a fearsome art form to behold? Ask an innocent bystander about opera and one might hear of large Viking ladies who cannot find the right pitch, or any pitch for that matter. Or perhaps one might hear of the legendary “park-‘n’-barks” who can manage to stand as stiff as a board while singing passionate love songs. The fact of the matter is that, just like any other art form, there is more to opera than one might observe on a television commercial.

The term “opera” carries with it a broad spectrum of styles, forms, and creativity in the same respect that “film” defines any production caught on tape. As a form of theater, opera has many different categories: tragedy, comedy, romance, adventure, fantasy, the list goes on. It is entirely possible to attend a performance of one opera and hate it, then go to see another opera and love it; in fact, there are operas that are recommended for first time attendees like *Carmen, The Magic Flute, The Barber of Seville*, and there are operas that should be actively avoided, *Elektra, Wozzeck, Alice in Wonderland*, until sufficient experience is acquired.

The most defining element of opera is the style in which the performers sing. Years of training and study are almost always required of those who wish to fill an opera house with music without the aid of artificial amplification. Producing such enormous amounts of sound requires a mountain of energy; and on top of that are the expectations for singers to appear “normal” by today’s standards. The age of the “park-‘n’-bark” is as far past as performing in black-face. Audiences today expect a certain level of verisimilitude in an actor’s presentation; opera producers are not blind to this fact ergo the casting of singers with dramaturgical finesse has become a growing trend. Even so, the unease that trails opera seems to show no sign of dissipation.

Few people even realize that opera has a profound presence in everyday life. Opera appears in all manners of entertainment and is referenced quite frequently in pop-culture. The hazy assumption that all opera is foreign often prevents the recognition of opera where ever it is and in whatever form it takes. Yet this “foreign” art form has an astounding impact on popular culture and is a far greater influence on society than anyone might dare to guess. Because opera has existed for over 400 years it is sometimes hard to see how it might still be relevant in the 21st Century. Opera is often written off as being unapproachable due to its track record for being an elitist art form, and yet this has not been the case for quite some time.[[2]](#endnote-2) There are many reasons and excuses for not seeing the history and culture of the great inheritance that is opera; discovering the significance of opera in this modern world is truly a worth-while endeavor.

Opera (a noun)

One of the greatest obstacles to identifying opera in popular culture is the inability to understand what opera is in the first place. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines opera as “a drama set to music”iii; this vague interpretation, however, is also applicable to Musical Theater, and therefore undermines true understanding. Directly translated from Italian, opera means “a work.” These dry and impassionate “definitions” make it difficult to understand opera the way it is meant to be understood; to truly learn what opera is one must look to its origins.

One of the first operas, *L’Orfeo*, was written in 1607 by the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi. Monteverdi worked under the influence of a group of musical intellectuals known as the Camerata.[[3]](#endnote-3) These musicians longed to find a way to restore the Greek methodology of entertainment, an art form that included theater, music, dance, and singing. What they created they called “il dramma per musica,” or “a drama with music”. Years later in 1637, the first public opera house was opened in Venice with the premiere of Monteverdi’s final opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. It was at this time that the term “opera” came into the connotation that we know today. [[4]](#endnote-4)

This term, “opera,” was established due to the fact that its production requires a colossal amount of work created by a myriad of artisans: singers, dancers, musicians, costume makers, set builders, directors, technicians, etc**.** Richard Wagner, the famed German composer who put Vikings on stage, later coined the term “gesamtkunstwerk” in light of that fact that opera utilizes all the basic forms of artistry. Naturally, venturing to produce such an event is fairly expensive; the only people who could afford such a production were wealthy merchants and the royalty. It is largely from this fact that opera has received its “high-brow” stamp, an unfortunate trait that still resonates even to this day.

Opera was not, however, strictly the “stuffy-elitist” art form that it is viewed as today; in fact, opera’s meager beginnings reveal it to be an entertainment of the masses. Lawrence W. Levine explains “By the nineteenth century, then, opera was established as a widely available form of popular entertainment consumed by people of all social classes.” This applied not only to Europe but also to the U.S. where opera had become “an integral part of a shared public culture”.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The Evolution of Opera

Like most art forms opera evolved into varying styles to accommodate audience taste. The first changes that opera underwent were early in its history; it was split into two main categories: opera *seria* and opera *buffa*. Opera seria (or serious opera) was commissioned by and performed for the nobility; their dramas included stories of gods and heroes of whom the nobility frequently compared themselves to. Opera buffa (or comic opera) was the entertainment of the masses, often produced by wealthy businessmen. Such operas were about any and every subject under the sun. David McVicar, one of many directors to have work at the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, explains: “In an opera buffa you get away from the conventions of opera seria. You can put servants on stage, you can make the stories about the servants, you can give them the best music to sing.” Covent Garden Conductor Antonio Pappano further purports this by saying “Opera buffa appealed to the middle-classes; it was much cheaper to stage and now the public could actually afford to go.” iv

Opera quickly spread throughout Europe and took many forms and names: the German “Singspiel”, the French “Grand Opera” and “Opera Comique”, and “Operetta”. Eventually the expansion of opera split once again into an art form that most Americans recognize as Musical Theater. The unfortunate tag of “elitism” was not solidified until opera had fully taken root in America. In his novel *Expecting Rain: Opera as Popular Culture?* John Storey reveals a startling truth about opera in America: “New York’s Metropolitan had been built by and for its stockholders. The interior reflected that fact, with its famous horseshoe auditorium affording box holders an excellent view of each other. For nearly sixty years, the Met was run on a very un-European basis: the building was owned and maintained by the box holders, who leased it, rent free, to a separate company which was responsible for staging the operas.”Such an arrangement made it difficult for the “masses” to enjoy opera, which had, by then, already become a very popular form of entertainment. Luckily this “high-brow” regulation has been quickly disappearing since the mid-20th Century.

Since the invention of film, opera has expanded its horizons enormously. Opera made its way into cinemas and eventually onto domestic television. In his book *The Story of Opera* Richard Somerset-Ward explains: “It pioneered the use of subtitles on the screen, so that the viewers could follow the text in their own language. Televisions example, however imperfect, encouraged opera houses first to experiment with supertitles on the stage, and eventually install them.” v For the first time in nearly a century audiences could follow along the plot and enjoy the stories that were being presented. World renowned American Soprano Renee Fleming gives her impression of technology in the opera house: “Supertitles were the greatest thing to happen to opera…it was the first time the audience could read the text. I got so many letters from people saying that they were crying, they were so moved, what a beautiful character.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The next, and most innovative step, was taken by the Metropolitan Opera in 2006 when they began a new practice of broadcasting their performances, live, in High Definition, to movie theaters across the world. Opera lovers in 53 countries now can go to a movie theater to see an opera broadcasted live from the Met at the fraction of the cost of a normal ticket. [[7]](#endnote-7)

Opera in Real Life

While new and innovative technology might be attractive to the 21st century audience there is yet another aspect of opera that creates timidity amongst would-be opera-goers: relate-ability. A great number of people claim that they do not like opera with the excuse that they “know” what it is: they may claim that the stories are boring, that the singers do not act as a matter of purpose, or that all operas are in foreign languages and therefore do not concern them. Take a closer look at opera and one will find more familiarities than one might expect.

People who go to operas all too often have misconceived ideas about what they are seeing. While full and lush singing is the front-runner of the attraction to opera the aspect of theater is often lost in the reception of the entertainment. The Camerata stumbled upon opera in their attempt to enhance theater; it is curious then how people feel that they are not witnessing a theatrical story. Opera is just the same as any other art form in that the presentation is a reflection of the composer’s emotional response to a humanistic experience. For example, 1899 Antonin Dvorak premiered his opera *Rusalka*. Now for those who are not of Czeck descent this occurance bears no great meaning; however the story of *Rusalka* is a classic folk tale about a water nymph who longs to have a human soul so that she can love and be loved by the Prince**.** If this sounds at all familiar than it is probably because, nearly a century after Dvorak, Walt Disney re-invented this tale in a film called “The Little Mermaid”. Many of the greatest operas, indeed, tell stories that the average person is already familiar with: *La Cenetrentola* (Cinderella), *Romeo et Juliette* (and many other Shakespeare plays), The *Grapes of Wrath*, etc.In enlightening the fact that so many operas already contain familiar stories it should come as no surprise that they also are the source of familiar music and cultural nuances.

Chances are that if Sesame Street or the Muppets at any time were watched at home, then so was opera. Should someone hum a tune from Disney’s Fantasia films or the Bugs Bunny Cartoons (pictured below)[[8]](#endnote-8), chances are it will be a tune that came from an opera.i 

A great deal of American entertainment includes opera in some way. Commercials are notorious for featuring opera melodies to make products like chocolate, wall-hooks, and even insurance more enticing. The ties, however, do not stop short at cartoons and commercials, many films utilize opera to enhance the drama of a scene. Many films contain snippets of opera in them, movies such as “The Fifth Element” in which the Diva sings a techno version of an aria from Donizetti’s opera *Lucia di Lamermoor*; “Life is Beautiful” features a scene in which the characters attend a performance of Offenbach’s opera *Les Contes D’Hoffman*. [[9]](#endnote-9) In the latest installment of the James Bond franchise one of the crucial climactic scenes takes place at the Bregenz theater during a performance of *Tosca.* Opera has not only made appearances in film but it has also influenced the original compositions of film scores and television shows.

A common feature in opera is a system of using thematic musical elements known as leitmotifs. Howard Shore stated that his approach to composing music for the Lord of The Rings Films was, by necessity, operatic in nature. Venturing to tackle such a musical mountain required the intricate development of lietmotifs. Many simply melodies that are heard in the first film become full blown themes in the later films; themes that are easily recognizable as being related to certain characters (Gollum, Sauron, Hobbits), dramatic situations, including a victory in battle or death of a character, and even Gondor, Rohan and the Elven realms have their own tailored themes.[[10]](#endnote-10) Lietmotifs, however, are not restricted to big-budget films, in fact leitmotifs can be found almost anywhere.

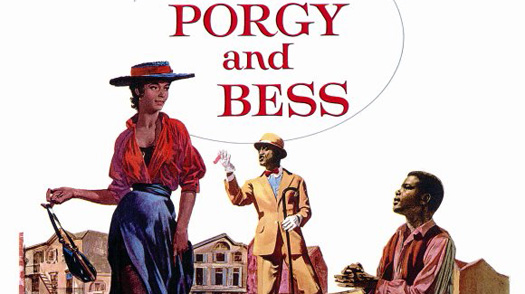
In opera, leitmotifs serve a purpose similar to theme songs for cartoon characters: a few simple chords harken to the arrival or mere mention of the bad guy, the hero or that horrible curse that was cast at the beginning of the show. Even “SpongeBob Squarepants” contains many well-known “leitmotifs”: one for the Flying Dutchman, one for those times when SpongeBob is being mischievous, one for Squidwards relaxed moments, and one for Mr. Krabs. Pick any regular cartoon show, pay close attention to the musical intonation underneath and guaranteed there will be themes for almost every character, place and situation.

An American Inheritance

Before opera made its way into the American psyche it had to make its way into America. Opera has shared a rather interesting past with the Uniterd States. The first American opera houses appeared in New Orleans in the 1700’s and it was not long before the rest of the country had seized this highly popular art form. For America, however, opera became more closely intertwined with the actual establishment of U.S. sovereignty. *Figaro*, a well-known character in unto himself and brain child of a French nobleman Beaumarchais, is a direct result of the American Revolution.

Pierre de Beaumarchais, watchmaker, play-write, advisor to King Louis XIV, and great supporter of the American Revolution, is the source of two of the greatest and most memorable operas in performance: *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*. Beaumarchais greatly admired the Americans in their pursuit of liberty to the extent that he had bankrupted himself from having donated the majority of his income to the American effort. Shortly after the Revolution’s success Beaumarchais was inspired to continue the *Figaro* saga with his new play, *Le mariage du Figaro,* in which Figaro, servant to Count Almaviva, was proved to be of greater intellect and moral standing than his noble master. Naturally this did not sit too well with the King and its premiere was delayed until 1783 (ironically under the insistence of Queen Marie Antoinette who had read and adored the play). In 1786 musical prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart discovered and fell in love with *Figaro* and fitted his tale for the opera with *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Mozart’s opera, in turn, was a major catalyst in the events that led to the French Revolution. Many intellects of the day, who could afford to see *Figaro*, were inspired by its promotion of equality and justice.[[11]](#endnote-11)

After two-hundred years of success for the *Figaro* saga, a third installment premiered at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1991. For its 100th anniversary the Met commissioned John Corigliano to compose a brand new opera. Inspired by Beaumarchais’ third *Figaro* play, *La Mere Couplable*, Corigliano set about composing *The Ghosts of Versailles*; a production which he considers to be a “grand opera buffa”. Every performance was sold out to ecstatic audiences.[[12]](#endnote-12) Needless to say *Figaro* is one of the most iconic operatic characters in existence; mention that name only once and the rhythmic pattern of his signature aria “Largo al factotum” is sure to be on the lips of anyone nearby. Were it not for the American Revolution the invaluable personification of liberty that is *Figaro* would not exist. *Figaro*, then, paved the way to “realistic” opera plots which make up the greater portion of American operatic compositions.

American composers have indeed been hard at work since the mid-1800’s; however the true success of American opera arrived in the mid-1900’s with *The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess* (pictured below[[13]](#endnote-13)). In 1930 the Met commissioned George Gershwin to write a “distinctly American grand opera.”xiii Gershwin, fusing classical and jazz elements, had adapted *Porgy* from DuBois Hayward’s novel of the same title; a story about African-Americans living in the South and all the tribulations that accompany such a scenario. 

Gershwin did not want his opera to be performed in black-face, as was common at the time, and for that reason *Porgy* was denied its residence at the Met. Instead Gershwin had to radically alter the opera to fit the standards of Broadway which was no stranger to African American performers. Unfortunately George Gershwin would never live to see *Porgy* performed on the American opera stage, at which point *Porgy* became THE American opera, soaring to global success.

Bootleg productions of *Porgy* had made their way to Europe during World War II. The Danes took such an extraordinary liking to *Porgy* that the Nazi occupiers outlawed its performance because of its Jewish-American composer. The Danish Royal Opera Company refused to cancel its performances of *Porgy* (all 21 of which were sold out) and the Nazi’s had to threaten to bomb the opera house at which point the Danes relented and canceled all the remaining performances. Immediately following the war, however, *Porgy and Bess* was re-instituted into the DRO’s repertoire.

In 1952 *Porgy* was fitted with an all-African American cast for a world tour. Cast members included famed performers such as Leontyne Price, Cab Calloway, Maya Angelou, and William Warfield. Angelou said of their performance in Italy “The moment the curtain opened, the singers pulled the elegant first-night audience into the harshness of black Southern life. The love story unfolded with such tenderness that the singers wept visible tears. Time and again, the audience came to their feet, yelling and applauding.” *Porgy* had enormous success wherever it went, including Leningrad. *Porgy* was the first American production to enter Russia since its revolution, but the U.S. State Department refused to pay for the event so the Russians gladly put it on their own bill. *Porgy* was just as successful in Russia as it was in every other country, except America.

Amidst the Civil Rights movements *Porgy* had difficulty gaining favor in the opera house. African-American’s often found the stereotypical content and archaic language to be degrading and felt that such a regression to the days of Jim Crow was an insult. By the 1960’s African-American culture had so drastically changed to the effect that the cultural display in *Porgy* was considered ancient history. Slowly but surely *Porgy* began to creep into the hearts of America when in 1976 it premiered at the Houston Grand Opera. In 1985, relatively fifty years after its premiere, *Porgy and Bess* made it to the stage of the Metropolitan. *Porgy* was performed a total of 52 times in the years that followed. [[14]](#endnote-14)

Opera’s Introduction into Modern Society

Since the inception of *Porgy and Bess* the definitive American Opera had finally begun to take shape. American opera has continuously been pushing past the boundaries of conventional opera. In 1939 Gian Carlo Menotti composed *The Old Maid and the Thief*, the first and only opera written specifically for radio. Menotti also wrote *Amahl and the Night Visitors*; not only a children’s opera but also the first written for television.[[15]](#endnote-15) Carlysle Floyd, in response the growing temperament of McCarthyism composed *Susannah* in 1955: the story is set in Tennessee and tells of a young woman, Susannah, who is falsely accused of adultery based on rumor and suspicion. Since 1955 Susannah has become the second most popular American opera, after *Porgy*.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Composer John Adams brought new depth to the world of opera in 1987 with *Nixon in China* (pictured right[[17]](#endnote-17)). It was the first time in history that an opera composer had chosen to portray recent and dramatic events in the world of politics.iii Adams, again in 2005, created another uniquely American opera with *Doctor Atomic*, the story of which follows the lives of the scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project in the 48 hours preceding the first testing of the atomic bomb. Sources for the libretto include personal accounts from the actual participating scientists. [[18]](#endnote-18)

American opera also took a keen interest in its own patriotic past. In 1956 Douglas Moore premiered his opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, loosely based on the lives of Horace Taylor and Elizabeth “Baby” Doe Tabor.iii In April of 2011 Ricky Ian Gordon premiered his operatic song-cycle *Rappahannock County* at Virginia Opera. Commissioned to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War this piece depicts the lives of Virginians throughout the war. Ian Gordon is also the composer who brought John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* to the opera stage.

In addition to stamping its own mark on opera, American companies increasingly have been producing re-modeled stagings of older operas. The operas themselves are not changed, as *Romeo and Juliet* was changed into *West Side Story*, but rather the settings’ place and time are changed to either explore new interpretations of the story or to make a story more relatable to an audience. It is uncertain when directors started displacing the settings of opera, but earliest examples of avant-garde productions can be seen in the early 20th Century.[[19]](#endnote-19) The Virginia Opera’s latest production of Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* is one such example. The setting was removed from 19th Century Germany to late 20th Century West Virginia. Hansel and Gretel became children of impoverished German immigrants and as such they alternate between singing in English and German; and instead of losing themselves in the Black Forest they become lost at an abandoned carnival. Director Kevin Newbury explains: “Our approach feels both contemporary and timeless, reflecting the terror of displacement that many people are feeling right now while also embracing the beauty of the fairy tale.” Modern issues are reflected in the production which would otherwise be lost: issues such as bullying, economic strife, and the longing to hold onto cultural heritage. By transposing the opera into modern times the story is renewed for a younger generation.[[20]](#endnote-20) The country in which you prefer to enjoy an avant-garde opera, however, makes a huge difference in how modern a production might be.

America was founded with a capitalistic economy, and as such any business endeavors, including opera companies, are left to their own devices to raise the funds to support said business. Most American opera companies refer to themselves as non-profit organizations. This is because the majority of their funds and drawn from donations and art foundations. The majority of European companies are another animal altogether. Historically, European opera houses and opera composers were sponsored by the nobility. As history progressed this form of funding transferred onto the governments. The Italian opera houses, for example, receive a large percentage of their funding from the government, so donations and box office sales do not take the brunt of the load. This may not seem like a significant detail in the productions stylistic situation, but it is the defining element that separates U.S. operas from European ones.

American opera companies financially rely on the support of the public. American directors, therefore, are motivated to create a piece of art that the public wants to see; in other words, create a show so irresistible to the audience that they will happily pay to keep it in production. In Europe, however, directors have less fear of being publicly booed for their “overly-creative” ideas because the survival of the production is secured by the government’s paycheck, not the audiences’ demand. Opera, however, is an evolving and in the process of evolution there are going to be stages of development that are less aesthetically pleasing than others.

Conclusion

The temptation to define a piece of art as sedentary and finite is great, especially when it comes to opera. Four-hundred years of existence is an incredibly long time, in terms of changing styles, but sometimes it is hard to see the change in opera because the differing styles over the years have been drastic. There is a tendency for a person to look at an older opera and label the art form to said productions specific parameters; when such mistakes are made one might invariably say that opera no longer exists because it is so far-gone from what it once was. This mistake is excruciatingly obvious, however, when the same principle is applied to another art form. No one would dispute that Michelangelo’s work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is a masterpiece, nor would such a thing be said of the visual elements in the “Lord of the Rings” films. Both are incredible works of art that instill a sense of wonder and imagination in those who see them, yet they were created hundreds of years apart using inherently different tools and methods of creation. If the very first opera ever written sounded exactly the same as the most recent opera then there would be a valid excuse for calling it boring, or too traditional. There are so many different and beautiful forms of opera that can be enjoyed in so many ways just as visual art. With all the publicity that opera gets these days it should be impossible to not have been made aware of its existence. Not only is opera prevalent in the United States, but in the rest of the world as well.

Opera is a universal art form that can be enjoyed in China, South Africa, South America, and even Australia. (Sydney Opera House pictured left[[21]](#endnote-21)). Operas have be written and performed in an innumerable amount of languages and in ever setting imaginable. The basic themes of love, justice, morality, and passion are elemental in the stories of operas. The humanistic qualities of what is told through opera are timeless and boundless as a medium for cultural expression. The very identity of opera is the same as that of the American heritage: it is a point of convergence for all manner of people, a place where history meets the future. In the past opera has worked wonders in the breaking of social barriers in order to find new ways of bringing people together. That essence has not changed, nor will it as opera continues to grow and become an even greater part of modern society.

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