

FROM CENTRALIZED TO DE-CENTRALIZED: THE ONGOING STORY OF OPERA'S  
ADAPTATION TO THE CHANGING AMERICAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

By

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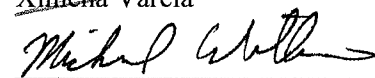
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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the creators of American opera, who, in the face of insurmountable obstacles throughout American history, both financially and culturally, have continually striven to create, and contribute to the establishment of an American opera tradition.

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks the question, what is opera's place in 21<sup>st</sup> century American society? Through an examination of opera's cultural history in America since the Colonial Era, the author examines numerous key points in the history of opera in America and examines how the society and culture of the time influenced and shaped the opera experience. The later part of the paper examines modern audiences, technology, globalized and democratized culture, and how elements of such phenomenon influence audiences' perceptions and opera companies' programming and marketing strategies. Finally, the author discusses the choice of "opera for all" versus "opera as niche", and examines the ways in which opera companies can reconcile the two positions.



## PREFACE

When I first began this research endeavor, I sought to understand how the innovation of The Metropolitan Opera's *The Met: Live in HD* series, and other programs like it, are changing opera. As my research progressed, however, I discovered that not only is there little scholarly writing about the Met's latest undertaking in general, but that the scope in which it fits into the over all breadth of opera's cultural history in America is astounding.

I have always liked opera, but never understood why most of my peers did not. The following questions have remained at the back of my mind for a number of years: "Why does opera have the current social stigma that it does?" "What is it that accounts for opera's public perception as an elite art?" "Why does our society generally have a heightened interest in and added value for all things new, except for opera and classical music?" "Why does opera sound so different than popular music?" These are just some of the questions I have asked myself, sometimes in the midst of sitting through a live performance. My desire to understand the historical and socio-cultural reasons surrounding why opera is perceived the way it is are the main motivating elements behind this work.

This thesis begins with more than just a cultural and sociological historical account of opera in America and how it both evolved and devolved within the larger culture paradigm. It reflects on how this history might be applied to what opera

companies are doing today, and how (and if) the robust cultural history of opera in America plays into the various administrative decisions at play within an opera company. I approach this sociological account of opera first seeking to understand why opera, and its sister art of symphonic music, have continually throughout history and even more so within the last fifty years, faced challenges of popularity and relevance within the American culture at large. This factors into the deeper analysis and strategy for how opera companies operate today. It is essential to examine what place opera has found itself culturally over the past two hundred years in this country, to understand some of the many challenges opera faces today.

Ultimately, this paper is more than anything a reflection on our current cultural climate, how this climate not only affects opera artistically, but also as an institution steeped in tradition and often long-held, and held on to, identities of what it is and the role it plays as a societal institution.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“The past may not predict the future, but it exerts a shaping influence.”*

- Joseph Horowitz, author

This paper argues that unless opera and opera companies are able to adapt and evolve into an art that is recognizable both as a relevant form of creation, and relate to the multiple modern desires for both the traditional and innovative, delivered conveniently and without pretense, it will prove ever more challenging to attract audiences, many of whom continually expect a higher level of costumer service, convenience and ‘total experience’ added value than ever before. However, while that may be the reality facing opera, it will simultaneously be argued herein that this may or may not be a desired goal for opera as an art form. The various pros and cons to the question, “Should opera be for everyone?” are explored in relation to how that outcome would effect opera’s ability to remain true to itself as an art form.

How to keep opera fresh and relevant is often discussed today among opera administrators and those who are concerned about the continued progression of the art form. It is no secret that opera, like every other type of performing art, is facing ever increasing costs and ever more scrutinizing audiences, many of whom have ever shorter attention spans or patience when it comes to their entertainment. However, opera still

struggles not only with an identity problem, but also with the idea that what is often produced on opera house stages relates to a very small audience relative to other forms of entertainment. This would not necessarily be a problem if not for the enormous cost associated with producing traditional opera.

How does this current audience phenomenon compare with U.S. publics of the past? Has opera always been a primarily exclusive art form that reluctantly admitted the riff-raff of common society, or was it at one point in this country's history a viable, relevant, dare say "popular" form of entertainment? This paper examines the American audiences of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and now 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to look for similarities, differences, and answers for how opera companies today may learn and adapt to meet the current demands for entertainment. At the same time, the paper discusses how by adapting to these expectations for entertainment, opera companies risk turning away other groups of people.

Opera has a vast history spanning over four hundred years, and encompasses elements of art, social custom, religion and politics. However, the purpose of this paper is not to provide a complete historical account of opera in the United States; to do this would require a separate paper. For this reason, the author takes a narrower approach, and focuses on the areas and topics of opera's history in the United States that shed light on how opera was experienced by different publics, both as a form of art, entertainment, and cultural institution.

What does opera mean to the American public? It depends on what one means by "American public". American opera publics, in general, can be broken down into three general categories: those who are die-hard fans, those who enjoy it as another form of

live entertainment, and those who simply do not even consider it part of their world.

Comprising of this last public, there is a large segment that, as the opera director Chas-Rader Schieber opines, "...hangs on to this, at best, cartoon image and at worst a kind of antagonism towards [opera] and its audiences"(Rader-Schieber, 2011).

In trying to simultaneously appeal to all three of these publics, are some opera companies presenting a confusing and sometimes contradictory message about what opera "is"? To what extent do opera companies attempt to reach this latter half? And, at what point does outreach become a waste of resources that could otherwise be spent on developing the artistic product for which the first two publics would pay big bucks to see? Some companies present the message that opera is for everyone, and yet at the same time act in ways that give the impression opera is only for those who can afford it and who agree to meet opera where it already is, on its terms; in the opera house. Too many opera companies seemingly approach the idea of audience development, whether knowingly or not, from the pre-supposed notion that opera holds a particular set of values that should be equally recognized by people; that 'opera is something one should like, and here is why.' Yet, at the same time these companies are asking people to take a chance on something new, and on something they claim is valuable and exciting. They are also giving the message that it is really not worth that much. For example, overly discounted tickets and the idea that 'one can get three operas for the price of one', sends a mixed message about quality and value to someone trying to decide if opera is something they want to spend money. On the one hand, opera companies are saying it's the most passionate, invigorating art form there is, and at the same time they are touting the cheapness of it.



This idea of selling opera, that people simply need a little guidance to make the right buying decision, that people actually like opera but just do not realize it, is known in marketing theory as “the sales orientation”(Scheff, Kotler, & Americans for the, 1997). According to this theory drumming up marketing and “hard selling” efforts around one particular performer or event will likely generate higher sales in the short run, but there is nothing to suggest this approach will help build audiences in the long run (1997). This orientation is exhibited by many companies in the form of “star power marketing.” In those instances, an increase number of people will buy into a performance, depending on the popularity of the names associated with it.

It would seem that opera has a self-identity problem. It is trying to be many things to different people, and in the process is confusing people by sending mixed messages about what it is. These messages are not intentionally trying to confuse. However, when there are two types of companies, those that are forward thinking and innovative and supportive of new ideas, and those that continue to hang onto particular traditions and stereotypes of the past, no matter how dated it makes them look, then one begins to wonder, “Will the *real* “opera” please stand-up?” Should opera act as a mausoleum art form, presenting the valued works of the past, or is it a living, breathing art form that should value and support modern creation? Many would argue it is more of a balancing act between the two. There is both a need to present and maintain certain traditions of opera’s past that are integral to the rudimentary fabric of opera, while at the same time continuing to foster itself as a living, breathing form of modern artistic expression.

The research in this paper is divided into two main sections. The first section examines the supply and demand side of opera as it entered and developed in the United States. This includes the history of how opera, as an experience, has progressed (supply side), and an analysis of how this dynamic relationship between society and this unique form of artistic expression has developed together over time (demand). It also examines the history behind the terms “high culture” and “popular culture”, and what they mean to audiences in a modern cultural context. It also examines the various theories surrounding opera and classical music’s cultural influence and value in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and how these instances may or may have not contributed to its separation from the overall culture at large.

The second section talks about opera and culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It argues that because of opera’s unique history in this country, and with the current cultural associations of high and popular culture, entertainment and consumer climate, opera is at a point in its history in the United States where its future role as a form of art and entertainment is quite unclear. Will it again return to a more widely appreciated art form, or will it revel in its niche status as a specialized art form? The paper also attempts to make sense of a variety of cultural conditions and how they affect opera, including the effects of the classical recording industry on the “culture of personality”, and American perceptions of elitism and how they contribute to opera’s popular image.

Opera as a concept has various meanings associated with it. Therefore, basic definitions are needed for how the word and its related configurations are used before developing this thesis. The author Ruth Bereson developed three definitional concepts of opera, two of which are incorporated herein (Bereson, 2002, pp. 14-15). When referring

to “an opera”, it is meant to refer to the performed composite musical work”. It is further noted that while it could be argued otherwise, the author of this thesis will apply this definition for both an opera experienced live and an opera experienced via electronic media.

When the phrase “the opera” is used, it is meant to mean “the social connotations of the venue, the people who frequent it, their modes of dress and behavior; in short the many events external to the work itself and yet so intrinsic to the notion of going to ‘the opera’”(2002, p. 14). This paper talks about many instances where opera does not occur inside a traditional opera house. The author merely highlights the many different ways opera is now being experienced, and does not explore whether or not these experiences should or should not be considered going to “the opera”. It is argued, however, that these new experiences and alternative venues are vital to opera’s continued relevance and development.

The need for research in this area is twofold. First, most of the literature concerning the main questions of this paper was completed in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s. However, there have been a few recent notable additions to the literature concerning opera’s place as an art form in society, including *American Opera* by E.K. Kirk, *The Gilded Stage: A Social History of Opera* by Daniel Snowman, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* by Joseph Horowitz, and *Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception* by Herbert Lindenberger. Author Greg Sandow is also in the process of writing a new book titled, *Rebirth: The Future of Classical Music*, and this paper consults his unfinished manuscript as part of the analysis. This paper will build off of some of the latest points made in these newest works, applying even more current

examples and developing further some of Snowman's ideas about opera's future.

Secondly, most of the writing concerning opera in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is often written from a primarily aesthetic perspective. For example, there is much written on the aesthetic affect modern staging techniques have on the original intent of older operas, but very little if anything is written concerning whether or not audiences prefer a modern staging of a Mozart opera to one set in the period it was written.

There are numerous sources that touch on different aspects of opera as an artistic and cultural phenomenon (Ahlquist, 1997; Bereson, 2002; Dimaggio, 1982a; Dizikes, 1993; Fiedler, 2001; Gans, 1999; Homberger, 2002; Horowitz, 2005; Levine, 1988; Lindenberg, 2010; McConachie, 1988; Ross, 2008; Sandow, 2010; Snowman, 2009; Storey, 2002, 2003; Zelechow, 1991). However, the primary focus of most of the scholarly literature is surrounding the various aesthetic aspects of opera and its modern situation. Some of these areas include the problem of a lack of representation of American operatic works in the modern operatic canon, as well as the lack of treatment of opera as a living art form (Commanday, 1987; Edelson, 2005; Evans, 1999; Martin, 2002). Other commonly reflected areas include concerns surrounding the tremendous cost associated with producing and staging opera (Baumol & Bowen, 1966; Eaton, 1961; Pierce, 2000; Pleasants, 1989; Volbach, 1967; Weisberg, 1998), the influence of modern artistic, musical and literary elements on American opera (Honig, 2001; Pleasants, 1989) the contemporary staging of older works and the effect this has on an opera's original meaning or intent (Hood, 1990; Levin, 2004; Turrini, Borgonovi, & O'Hare, 2008), and the use of digital projections as part of a staging concept (Bonniol, 2003; Rourke, 2010). The primary focus of most of these areas is how it all affects the final outcome on stage.

While all of this past research is still relevant to the modern problems opera faces, it is almost always the underlying assumption that whatever changes occur to opera, they will occur within the confines and parameters of performance taking place in opera houses. Thus, while there is a plethora of recent newspaper and magazine articles on the subject, there is a lack of aggregate scholarly research exploring the other ways in which opera is, and could be experienced. Furthermore, there is an apparent lack of will among many opera companies to truly examine and reevaluate their missions and overall reason for existence. On the surface, their reason for existence is preservation of an art form and the education of the public about it. However, when the art one is preserving is increasingly less and less relevant to the new publics one is trying to serve, one must eventually ask, “For whom are we preserving this?”

This paper does not focus on the aesthetic debates over what should and should not be considered opera. For example, it does not look at questions of aesthetics such as whether or not *Porgy and Bess* or *Candide* are considered works of opera or musical theatre. It also does not address particular operas and stylistic elements except in relation to how they affect and change the audience experience. Also, as the author focuses primarily on opera’s development in New York and Boston, there are numerous stories with regards to the opera histories in the cities of Chicago and San Francisco, and how they contribute to the story, that are not addressed. It is also important to note that while this paper focuses primarily on opera, discussion of classical music, that is to say symphonic music, is also necessary because the two share an interrelated cultural history.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

This research approaches the topic from an inductive logic and “pattern theory” perspectives (Neuman, 2000). W.L. Neuman (2000) elaborates on the idea of pattern theory:

Pattern theory does not emphasize logical deductive reasoning. Like causal theory, it contains an interconnected set of concepts and relationships, but it does not require causal statements. Instead, pattern theory uses metaphor or analogies so that relationship “makes sense.” Pattern theories are systems of ideas that inform. The concepts and relations within them form a mutually reinforcing, closed system. They specify a sequence of phases or link parts to a whole (p.38).

Following with this pattern theory approach, this research analyzed a variety of unrelated, secondary sources concerning the areas of opera’s artistic and cultural history both in the United States and Europe, research on participation with the performing arts, sources discussing the breakdown of a centralized cultural authority, multiple newspaper and magazine articles that in some way or another related to these over-arching areas of research, and a series of interviews with various leaders in the field of opera administration and it’s related disciplines.

The idea behind collecting all of these directly unrelated sources was to test the paper’s thesis that opera in America must adapt to meet present cultural demands. Furthermore, because the causality of the arguments presented in this paper are a matter of a few scholar’s theories and pairing them with editorial patterns found in newspapers

and other articles, using a pattern theory approach to analyze the material made even more sense. Paired with the secondary sources, the author conducted a series of interviews with various people related to the opera industry. The general categories of those interviewed included: opera administrators, opera directors, opera singers, composers and arts journalists/critics. Of the twenty-one people approached for interviews, thirteen participated. The interview questions were formed in an open-ended way, thus allowing the respondent to answer in as much or little detail as they deemed appropriate. The option was given to either interview over the phone or by responding to questions via email. Most interviewees elected to participate over the phone and have the conversation recorded, while only a few participants elected to write their responses via email. The author then paired the transcripts from the phone interviews with the emailed responses, and analyzed the answers for patterns. The author then incorporated these answers into the analysis of the research.

## CHAPTER 3

### OPERA IN THE UNITED STATES

*“Riding beside Barnum in a decorated carriage, Jenny passed under two triumphal arches of evergreen reading “Welcome Jenny Lind” and “Welcome to America.” A throng of ten thousand was waiting at the Irving Hotel. Two hundred musicians, escorted by twenty brigades of fireman, serenaded her with “Yankee Doodle” and “Hail, Columbia.” – Joseph Horowitz, author*

This section focuses primarily on the mid and latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the cities of Boston and New York. The primary reason for this is that it was during this period that significant societal changes occurred in these places; changes that affected how opera and classical music were viewed both as art, entertainment, and markers of class. As the author Joseph Horowitz explains, “The two cities were also physically and demographically distinct...In the history of American classical music, Boston and New York are twin points of origin” (Horowitz, 2005, pp. 10-11).

Furthermore, it is from this period of opera’s history in the United States that the modern ideas for what opera and classical music are and “should be” find their roots, and greatly affect the tradition of how opera and classical music are viewed today by the public at large. Also presented in this section is a counter theory that says it was not so much societal changes that affected opera’s popularity and rules of performance, but changes and developments in the art form itself which contributed to this shift in performance standards and audience expectations.



### Introduction of Opera to the United States

American culture, like many other elements of life in the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was heavily influenced by European traditions. Naturally, the people from various immigrant cultures who crossed the Atlantic Ocean seeking to build a new life in the Americas also brought with them their customs, traditions, and for the purposes of this inquiry, their art and music. Opera, while having always been a part of the American culture from the beginning, was primarily an English operatic tradition (Dizikes, 1993; Kirk, 2001; Snowman, 2009). The earliest form of opera that quickly found popularity in the American colony was that of the ballad opera.

The main reason ballad opera was popular to early Americans was because it was able to relate to the public at large. According to Kirk, “By using well-known airs, everyday characters, and spoken dialogue, it poked fun at the contemporaneous Italian opera seria, which employed long, elaborate arias and complex plots” (Kirk, 2001, p. 34). The element of parody inherent to ballad opera also contributed to its popular appeal. Also, the act of borrowing from other artistic sources, such as folk and popular song, helped contribute to its popularity.

This style of opera was popular in America for nearly a century more, giving away eventually to more melodramatic subjects and styles. The use of popular song parodies eventually gave way to more of a focus on the work of individual composers, as well as more attention to music’s characterization and imagery (Kirk, 2001). Although opera performance in America during the Revolutionary War virtually disappeared, this being heavily influenced by a Congressional ban on theatrical performances at the time, the post-war years saw a huge influx of foreign opera (Snowman, 2009). Also, the terms

used to describe what we now call “opera”, and how this affected the marketing of it, varied widely.

Regarding the Italian operatic tradition, there was one man in particular who is known for bringing it to the United States. In 1825, a famed opera singer named Manuel García brought his family, many of whom were also musicians and singers, to New York in the hopes of revitalizing his career and making money (Dizikes, 1993; Snowman, 2009). Their arrival was highly publicized, and the excitement mounted as they prepared a performance of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* to be performed at The Park Theatre, an occasion that would mark the first time a foreign language opera was performed in New York (McConachie, 1988). Many native New Yorkers were so unfamiliar with this new experience of Italian opera that they wrote newspapers to inquire how they should behave. It was an entirely novel event for all, and as opera historian John Dizikes notes, “...that night began a new chapter in American social history; a chapter sometimes amusing, often dismaying, frequently crass” (Dizikes, 1993, p. 8).

As the months progressed, García’s popularity increased, so much so that people came from other cities to hear his productions, and there was even talk of touring the shows to Boston and Philadelphia. Some early opera admirers also proposed building an opera house in New York City if the Garcías agreed to make New York their home (Dizikes, 1993). When the García season ended some nine months after it started, however, there was disagreement over its success in bringing Italian opera to America.

This new foreign form of entertainment thrilled American audiences so much that they were not certain early on exactly how they should critically approach it (Dizikes, 1993). One reviewer at the time wrote, “Until [opera] is seen it will never be believed

that a play can be conducted in recitative or singing and yet appear nearly as natural as the ordinary drama” (Dizikes, 1993, p. 8). American writer Walt Whitman also struggled to comprehend what he experienced saying, “It [opera] is novel, of course, being far, very far different from what you were used to, the church choir, or the songs and playing on the piano, or the songs, or any performance of the Ethiopian minstrels” (Dizikes, 1993, p. 9).

Some thought the mere enthusiasm and excitement shown by patrons was enough to warrant success, while others felt that since García’s tour had failed to immediately culminate in a permanent New York opera company, it should be considered a failure. Still others believed that since the northern cities, especially New York, valued commercialism and not tradition, and had no real measure of aristocratic society, that opera would fail (Dizikes, 1993). American opera would require a corresponding American aristocracy, and as one southern writer noted, this would require “the lapse of centuries.” Snowman explains this sentiment saying,

In this new American world of free enterprise and market-led economics, there were no bountiful monarchs or dukes keen to use opera as a way of impressing their rivals, no wealthy aristocrats happy to rent expensive opera boxes as a display of social extravagance. Indeed, it was precisely to eliminate such Old World anomalies that the new nation had been wrested from its former European masters in the first place (Snowman, 2009, p. 139).

It is no wonder then that many at the time were doubtful of opera’s appeal in the New World, especially that of foreign language opera. The counter and more optimistic view was that opera was simply there to stay. And, because of America’s unique democratic-commercial nature, opera would be able to free itself from its aristocratic history and traditions and become a unique form of American entertainment (Dizikes, 1993).

However, this democratic-commercial nature would only take opera so far, as will be seen later.

The past thirty years have seen an ever-increasing number of new opera companies and festivals springing up around the United States. However, this is not indicative of opera's prevalence throughout the United States prior to The Italian Opera House, Astor Place or The Academy of Music. Opera existed in many places throughout the United States, but the key distinction was that the numerous places where opera was performed in this country were often makeshift venues and theatres that no one today would recognize as a place "suitable" for the performance of opera. Indeed by 1861, as Snowman indicates, "Italian opera, or at least excerpts from Italian operas, could be heard on every continent" (Snowman, 2009, p. 140). He goes on to say that, "The remnants of nineteenth-century 'opera houses' are to this day scattered across the old mining states of Colorado, Nevada and California..." (2009, p. 140). The primary contributing factor being the onset of the western gold rush in America.

What Manuel García did for Italian opera in New York, John Davis did for French, German and Italian opera in Louisiana. Davis, a Parisian, came to the United States in the latter half of the eighteenth century, eventually ending up in New Orleans (Dizikes, 1993). He experimented with not only French opera, but Italian and German as well. In fact, Davis premiered *Il barbiere di Siviglia* two years prior to the Garcías presenting it New York. Faced with the financial burden of maintaining a standing opera company in New Orleans, Davis decided to take his company on tour (Dizikes, 1993). His group toured New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore, and between 1827 and

1833 “...provided northern cities with almost the only European opera they were to hear” (Dizikes, 1993, p. 29).

A friend and colleague of Davis', James Caldwell, strove to expand English opera in New Orleans and to bring the operatic art to an American public not familiar with it, while at the same time trying to attract the more operatically inclined French speakers (Dizikes, 1993). This balance often proved challenging, as the rough frontiersmen demeanor often clashed with that of the Creole. However, Caldwell worked throughout the 1820s to create a healthy balance between the two groups.

As there were no established rules governing opera performance at the time, Caldwell often brought together “discordant elements” in attempts to build new audiences (Dizikes, 1993). For example, to attract more frontiersmen, he programmed well-known English opera and other musical acts, and even “...altered well-known operas to suit unsophisticated tastes” (Dizikes, 1993, p. 30). “Flexibility”, as Levine indicates, “seems to have been one of the few laws governing the production of opera for most of the nineteenth century” (1988, p. 91). A common example of this was to mix popular English ballads in with foreign operas which singer Madame Feron, a member of Caldwell's company, did in her performance of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Dizikes, 1993). Another example would be to simply arrange varying acts from different operas so as to allow for the most appealing program. In one instance at the Richmond Hill Theatre in 1855, “...the fourth act of Verdi's *Rigoletto* was followed by the final act of Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo*, which in turn was followed by the second and fourth acts of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*” (Levine, 1988, p. 91). As anyone who attends the opera should know, this type of programming does not occur in today's opera houses. This is due to the generally

strict, modern view of opera's performance rules, and the desire to adhere as accurately as possible to the composer's original "intent". This will be examined in a later section.

Another operatic style that grew in popularity during the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the comic opera, or closely related styles: operetta and opéra bouffe (Kirk, 2001). These styles, popular primarily with French composers, made inroads in America with pieces like Offenbach's *Le Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein*, *La Belle Hélène* and *La Périhole*. Shortly after the Offenbach craze, American versions of this light-hearted style soon took their place. William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, colloquially known as "Gilbert and Sullivan", found great popularity with their works the *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Mikado*. While this style of opera was a successful form of entertainment, it also served to enhance education and contribute to community enrichment (Kirk, 2001). The light-natured style and relative simplicity of the operetta allowed for their performance by amateurs, churches, community groups, and young singers. Furthermore, these works became important to music education, and opera work shop programs as numerous schools of music and universities popped up around the country at the turn of the century (Kirk, 2001). Finally, the historical importance of operetta is also felt in the ways it influenced and later gave way to American musical theater.

Even Richard Wagner's operas, with all their melodrama, heightened emotion, reverence and profundity, still managed to appeal to the base elements of American society. His opera *Lohengrin* became so popular that a few years after its premiere the Marine Band performed selections of it for President and Mrs. Grover Cleveland (Kirk, 2001). Wagner's monumental work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, found popular appeal even before it premiered. As Kirk notes, "Favorite scenes from *Die Walküre* reached

both home and bandstand in transcriptions ranging from concert band to harmonica, melodeon, and banjo” (Kirk, 2001, p. 123).

When the Ring Cycle eventually made its westward tour after premiering at The Metropolitan Opera, its publicity followed it in an almost circus-like fashion. Its performance in St. Louis, for example, was billed as “the greatest Operatic Attraction in the World” (Kirk, 2001, p. 123). This trend of framing opera in terms of ‘attraction’ and as a cultural commodity to be marketed and sold in as many ways as possible is evident in the somewhat controversial premiere of *Parsifal*.

Richard Wagner’s widow, Cosima Wagner, opposed the U.S. premiere of the work, and filed a lawsuit against The Metropolitan Opera on the grounds that it was intended by her husband only to be performed at Bayreuth, and that it was a sacrilege against her husband’s intentions for the work to do otherwise (Kirk, 2001). Her concerns were not unfounded. In New York, the craze surrounding *Parsifal* became such that marketers created “Parsifal hats, Parsifal cigars, and Parsifal cocktails” (Kirk, 2001, p. 124).

This kind of marketing still occurs in opera today. The constant challenge facing opera companies today is around how to make opera relevant, cool and sexy. Opera is trying to compete with the rest of entertainment, and it is reflected in various marketing and outreach strategies that Cosima Wagner would have certainly scoffed. The most recent production of Wagner’s Ring Cycle by LA Opera featured a 10-week festival of Ring-related activities, some of which included a hip-hop concert based on Ring themes called “Gangsta Wagner”, a country-and-western parody, and a planetarium show to “Ring” music (Wakin, 2010). Recently, the Washington National Opera featured on its

blog a post about a “Salome cocktail” as a way to promote a socializing event following a performance of their production of *Salome* (Blaustein, 2010). These are just two of many such examples. This approach by Americans to opera and classical music, as something to be consumed and experienced rather than as art to be appreciated, revered, and respected would soon find itself up against a cultural element bent on changing this perspective.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century Audience Perceptions of Opera

The idea of Italian grand opera became wildly popular as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed. Establishments like the Italian Opera House in New York, and later the Astor Place Opera House, provided a place where people could experience the Italian operatic art (Dizikes, 1993; Kirk, 2001; Snowman, 2009). These places provided not only a place for cultivating a taste for music, but also created an element of fashion, social custom and power base around opera that attracted wealthy upper class Americans. This new way of experiencing opera in America, in buildings specifically designed for its performance and corresponding social habits, would continue to shape America’s operatic institutions like the Metropolitan Opera for many years to come (Kirk, 2001).

Even so, there were some who resented this foreign art. The main complaint was that it was not enjoyable to sit hours through an Italian opera and not understand the plot. The term grand opera in the 1830s and 1840s referred mainly to “...long, elaborately staged operas that had large casts and serious dramatic content...”(Kirk, 2001, p. 80). Snowman says, “...grand opera in foreign languages had limited appeal – even in New York, by far the most cosmopolitan city in America” (Snowman, 2009, p. 210). The



solution presented by some American composers was to write new “Italian style” grand operas, but in English (Kirk, 2001).

Still for others, the notion of grand opera, in general, was fundamentally un-American. Snowman asks, “What could be more foreign – in all senses of the word – to the self-consciously democratic spirit of the New World than opera?” (Snowman, 2009, p. 211). He goes on to add, “In all ways...-socially, economically and politically as well as artistically – opera was widely regarded as exclusive in a society proud of its inclusiveness. Opera, in a word, was unpatriotic” (Snowman, 2009, p. 211). This was evident even in cities as multicultural and diverse as New York. Ironically, in a country that originally sought to escape the aristocratic traditions of Europe, it was with opera that the elite societies of New York mimicked the behaviors and customs of their European counterparts.

How opera was described in words also influenced how people viewed it. In the period after the Revolutionary War, to speak of “an opera”, was meant to include everything from pantomime mixed with ballet, to musical plays combined with melodrama (Kirk, 2001). Often the terms opera and melodrama were used interchangeably. This practice was also seen in certain works of European composers like Donizetti, Rossini, and Verdi. The works *Rigoletto*, *Un ballo in maschera*, and *Luisa Miller*, which we now consider simply under the term opera, were at the time of their European premieres considered melodramas (Kirk, 2001). This multitude of terms used to describe the variety of musical and theatrical works at the time reflects the variety in creation, as well as the desire from theater managers, publishers and composers to utilize terms that would prove most lucrative in the marketing of their works.

The combination of mixing musical and artistic styles, as well as the terms used to describe them was common at the time, and therefore, American's perceptions of opera were multi-faceted. The term "opera" simply had many different meanings at that time in America. According to Kirk (2001) "...the word opera bore a mantle of many hues" (p.12). As she indicates further, what was most important about early operatic works was, "...not what they were called but what they expressed and not what music was used but how it was used" (p.12). This sentiment is reflected in the popularity of one singer in particular.

One of the most recognized and well known examples of popular entertainment, as well as the mixing of musical styles, was the phenomenon of singer Jenny Lind (Dizikes, 1993). A Swedish soprano, wildly popular in Europe, she made her way to the United States in 1850 for a tour organized by none other than the notorious entertainer, Phineas Taylor Barnum. Likely, the craze and publicity surrounding Ms. Lind's U.S. concert tour was at least in part a direct result of P.T. Barnum's ability to create buzz around his events. As Dizikes notes, however,

...it was difficult to explain why thirty thousand people, few of whom had ever heard the name Jenny Lind six months – or six weeks – before, would turn out to look at a singer. Was it that new democratic disease, publicity (Dizikes, 1993, p. 134)?

Ironically, as Dizikes points out, "Jenny Lind's visit to America remains – a century and a half later – one of the best-known events in the nation's entire operatic history, even though she never sang a single opera" (Dizikes, 1993, p. 136). Furthermore, the tour established the importance of publicity as a means of success in the arts in America. This importance is explained in its modern context in a later chapter.

Americans have always been, for the most part, attracted to large personalities and all things hype. The unusual success of Jenny Lind as a touring singer/entertainer reflects more upon the power and influence a well-run publicity campaign can have on the success of opera performance rather than it does about any intrinsic artistic hunger Americans at the time may or may not have had to see Jenny Lind. This idea of opera as spectacle, as an oddity, as a unique foreign event to experience, and the power of personality on American audiences, is discussed later in the paper.

### Is it Opera or Musical Theater?

Should modern opera pursue a re-branding campaign for what it is called? Could the negative connotations some have of the word “opera” actually be preventing these same people from giving it, opera, a chance at all? After all, what is it, precisely, that defines “opera” as “opera”, as opposed to say, “musical theatre”? Stephen Sondheim, arguably one of the most respected and revered people in musical theatre, said in a fairly recent interview with the Evening Standard, “I believe an opera is something that is shown in an opera house in front of an opera audience. The same work in the West End...is a West End show. It’s a question of expectation.” (Sondheim as cited in Snowman, 2009, p. 8) In other words, what makes *Sweeney Todd* musical theatre, or sometimes opera, depends on where it is being presented.

For example, in Spring 2010, the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia produced a production of *Sweeney Todd*. In the summer of 2011, Wolf Trap Opera Company will stage a new production of *Sweeney Todd*. According to Sondheim’s view, the instance at Signature Theatre would be considered a piece of musical theatre for their

audiences. At *Wolf Trap*, it would be considered opera because of the different audience expectations. If *Sweeney Todd* was originally produced in an opera house and called an opera rather than a piece of musical theatre, would it still have made it's way into becoming a popular movie starring Johnny Depp? Furthermore, how many modern movies about opera with star casts have been produced? Drawing parallels between how musicals are reflected in popular movies while opera's are noticeably absent, makes one contemplate the powerful connotations mere words can have towards the popularity of particular art forms, or lack thereof.

Along these same lines of audience expectation, Jorge Martin says in his essay, "Wanted: Opera, dead or alive", "Opera and Broadway musicals...are distinguished from each other by their respective traditions, the expectations of the audience...to some extent musical style, and the degree of commercialism" (2002). Herbert Lindenberger takes the point of audience expectation a bit further saying,

Comparisons among musical genres have tended to stress formal attributes rather than different audience experiences...Once we make the social experience of opera central to an investigation, opera's role among the arts looks different from what a more formal analysis would reveal (Lindenberger, 2010).

Indeed, the notion that there is a distinct aesthetic and experiential difference between musicals and opera is consistently argued. However, the similarities between the two are greater than differences, and it is a matter of marketing, organization structure, and societal perceptions which most greatly distinguish the two.

For almost the first 200 years in America, a concept of opera as something other than just another form of musical entertainment simply did not exist. Opera in the United States was both a novel form of entertainment to the common man, as well as a

fashionable activity for many rich people. It was, as some have said, a simultaneously popular and elite art form. According to Kirk, “During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, audiences of all classes patronized plays, operas, musical shows, and other forms of culture” (Kirk, 2001, p. 160). Furthermore, Levine notes, “Opera in America...was not presented as a sacred text; it was performed by artists who felt free to embellish and alter, add and subtract” (Levine, 1988, p. 95). As a result of this, as Snowman writes,

To our ears and eyes, the operatic entertainment on offer...would often have seemed a curious hybrid, the ‘original’ work severely edited, cut and simplified for popular consumption, but with the addition of new dialogue and additional songs and dance routines (Snowman, 2009, p. 148).

This idea that opera was amenable and living, that it could be arbitrarily adapted to fit the wishes and desire of an audience, would soon change.

Towards the end of the 19th century, culture became “sacralized and segregated” in terms of taste groups and the gap widened between the fine and the popular arts. Operas were performed in “opera houses” and popular shows in “theaters” (Kirk, 2001, p. 160). An aversion to opera performed in the American vernacular became more instilled, and there lacked public support for the development of an uniquely American opera tradition. Soon, a piece was only seriously considered opera if performed in a foreign language and created by foreign talent, the result being, as Horowitz notes, that “American operatic creativity would necessarily be pushed to the fringes of classical music: toward Broadway” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 147). By the end of the 19th century,

...opera in America meant foreign-language opera performed in opera houses like the Academy of Music and the Metropolitan Opera House, which were deeply influenced if not controlled by wealthy patrons whose impresarios and conductors

strove to keep the opera they presented free from the influences of other genres and groups (Levine, 1988, p. 102).

Furthermore, as Levine notes, referring to a shared American culture in the first half of the nineteenth century,

...Americans, in addition to whatever specific cultures they were a part of, shared a public culture less hierarchically organized, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendents were to experience a century later (Levine, 1988, p. 9).

To a certain degree today, although by no means as rigid as the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, opera in America still holds this connotation for many people.

Regardless of specific type, opera had for the first two centuries of American cultural history found a way to appeal to the public at large. Opera was allowed to be whatever it needed to be to please the audience for the longest time. Frankly, it had no other choice except to try and remain popular. It could not afford to be something separate and enshrined from public taste. Opera was, in essence, a market driven form of entertainment for a large part of the first 150 years it existed in this country. This populist attitude, coupled with a philosophy of programming void of tradition or rules, allowed for operatic repertoire to be enjoyed merely as another form of popular entertainment. The following section, however, will illustrate how certain societal forces in the mid and late 19th century would forever change how the art form was experienced in America.

## CHAPTER 4

### OPERA AS ELITE ART

*"The words highbrow and lowbrow are American inventions, devised for a specifically American purpose: to render culture into class."* – John Seabrook

This section examines three key areas in the history of opera in America. First, it addresses the sociological and cultural reasons why opera and classical music shifted away from popular appeal and influence, moving instead into a realm separate from and uninfluenced by popular culture. Second, the section addresses the circumstances and rationales under which classical music organizations, and ultimately opera companies, chose to adopt a non-profit business structure. Third, the section examines the aesthetic arguments for opera's loss of general popular appeal due to the influences of atonal music and avant-garde composers in the early twentieth century. The author argues that these circumstances, in sum, are responsible for the undermining of opera's popularity and ability to adapt to modern culture thereby keeping it relevant.

On the surface, it would appear that opera and classical music have simply fallen out of popular taste and demand as cultural offerings have changed and become more diverse. While this certainly factors into the analysis of opera's popular demise, it is not the complete story. As one recent scholar has written of opera's modern cultural relevance, "The first step in combating the problems that face opera is therefore combating the myth that opera became unpopular as tastes changed. Opera was made

un-popular” (Edelson, 2005). It is the purpose of this section to illustrate how this depopularization occurred, first with classical music, and then ultimately with opera.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, a largely mixed crowd of varying social classes and backgrounds attended the opera. A well known lawyer at the time, George Templeton Strong, illustrates this sentiment in his diary after attending a performance of *La Sonnambula* in 1851 saying, “Everybody goes, and nob and snob, Fifth Avenue and Chatham Street, sit side by side fraternally on the hard benches” (Levine, 1988, p. 85). The important thing to note, and the over all argument for this section is that at a certain point in America’s history, “...opera was an art form that was simultaneously popular and elite” (Levine, 1988, p. 86). Opera in America was not, as in Europe, a “...fundamentally aristocratic diversion. But it was not fundamentally egalitarian either. It was exclusive and it was democratic” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 121). Indeed, Bruce McConachie supports this notion as well when he says, “In 1825 theatre audiences from all classes enjoyed opera as a part of the social conventions of traditional playgoing” (McConachie, 1988, p. 182). Bernard Zelechow (1991) agrees, saying:

[In the early nineteenth century] The opera was enjoyed and understood by a broad cross section of urban Europeans and Americans. The opera house became the meeting place of all classes in society...The absence of the concept of a classical repertoire is an index of the popularity and vigor of opera as a mode of communication and entertainment (p.92).

This sentiment is reflected by numerous additional authors who have written on the subject of opera’s audiences, cultural history and transformation in the United States (Butsch, 2000; Dimaggio, 1982a, 1982b, 1986; Dizikes, 1993; Edelson, 2005; Horowitz, 2005; Jensen, 2002; Kirk, 2001; Levine, 1988; McConachie, 1988; Sandow, 2010;



Snowman, 2009; Storey, 2002, 2003; Zelechow, 1991). While the exact dates of and rationales behind this cultural shift vary slightly with each author, the consensus is that it occurred in various ways between the 1820s and the 1920s. While these changes happened simultaneously and among many different groups in the large northeastern cities, the social conditions of New York and Boston are examined for the purposes of this research.

### Popular Culture vs High Culture

The cultural scholar, Paul DiMaggio examines the emergence of high culture in nineteenth century Boston. According to DiMaggio,

The distinction between high culture and popular culture, in its American version, emerged in the period between 1850 and 1900 out of the efforts of urban elites to build organizational forms that, first, isolated high culture and, second, differentiated it from popular culture (DiMaggio, 1982b, p. 33).

By “high culture”, DiMaggio means “...a strongly classified, consensually defined body of art distinct from ‘popular’ fare” (1982b, p. 36). In other words, it was not the art itself, necessarily, that differentiated high culture from popular in America at the time, but rather the intentional separation and differentiation of particular works of art by a certain class of people as a means to define social boundaries between classes.

The rationale behind the high culture/popular culture distinction, according to DiMaggio, lies in the distinction between the two organizational forms that each type of culture adopted. He says

Not until two distinct organizational forms – the private or semi-private, non-profit cultural institution and the commercial popular-culture industry – took

shape did the high/popular-culture dichotomy emerge in its modern form (DiMaggio, 1982b, p. 33).

Additionally, DiMaggio argues there were three projects that the Boston upper class of the time had to accomplish simultaneously to create an institutional high culture all their own. These were entrepreneurship, classification and framing (1982b).

Entrepreneurship would be used to create an organizational form controlled entirely by members of the elite. Classification would be used to establish strict and clearly defined boundaries between art and entertainment, a definition that elites could claim as their own, and which promoted these high art form's specific recognition and acknowledgement from other classes and the state. Lastly, framing would be used to develop and establish a new form of etiquette and a new relationship between audience and art. This chapter examines these three projects, and how they came to ultimately influence opera.

DiMaggio argues that prior to the 1870s, high culture did not develop in Boston in the non-profit organizational model as we understand it today. The organizational models available and known for the organization and distribution of aesthetic experiences at the time, primarily the for-profit firm, co-operative enterprise and communal association, were in some way flawed and unable to adequately sustain and define particular art forms as high culture (DiMaggio, 1982b). The inherent problem with the for-profit model was that it automatically declassified culture, thus allowing anyone access who could pay for it (Dimaggio, 1982a).

By having profit as the driving force behind cultural artistic endeavors, maintaining a secondary goal of social segmentation and exclusiveness was virtually

impossible. Examples of this at the time included The Boston Museum, which mixed all forms of art as well as the random showing of oddities to attract the largest audience possible. In the performing arts, the numerous orchestras in Boston consistently mixed fine-arts with “light music” without any regard for aesthetic compatibility (DiMaggio, 1982b). One example of the extent to which concert promoters would go was the Peace Jubilee celebrating the end of the Civil War. The event involved an orchestra of over 1,000 and a chorus of 10,000 to perform the Anvil Chorus from Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*. The occasion was accompanied by firemen beating anvils, and live canon fire. A spectacle, if ever there was one.

The worker’s co-operative and communal associations were two other models of organization. In these models adopted by many music societies, “...each member had a vote, shared in the profits of the enterprise and elected a conductor from among their number” (DiMaggio, 1982b, p. 37). These models too, however, were vulnerable to the influences of the market, as well as a general lack of allegiance from its members, many of whom supported themselves by playing numerous other events and would only rehearse as it suited them individually.

The lines at the time differentiating non-profit, co-operative, for-profit and public enterprise were not nearly as defined as they are now in the twenty-first century. A charitable corporation, for example, usually had defined goals within its charter detailing the charitable reason for its existence, but it otherwise legally resembled its for-profit counterpart (1982b). All of these organizational forms, however, were ill suited at serving as an organizational basis for high culture. According to DiMaggio, “None of them...could...claim to speak for the community as a whole, even if they chose to”

(1982b, p. 38). All of the various art and music societies, even though some of them were quite large, only represented a tiny portion of the actual elite, not to mention that the clubs allowed the involvement of middle class and artistic professionals. To counter this, says DiMaggio, “The culture of an elite status group must be monopolized, it must be legitimate and it must be sacralized” (1982b, p. 38). This could only be successfully accomplished through a particular organizational structure and led by a certain group of elites – the non-profit corporation and the cultural capitalists.

According to DiMaggio, cultural capitalists were responsible for the partitioning and defining of high culture and popular culture. By cultural capitalists he is referring both to the individuals who made money from capitalist industries and invested portions of their wealth into cultural enterprises, as well as being collectors of what Bourdieu has called ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). In this second sense cultural capitalists means those who had “...knowledge and familiarity with styles and genres that are socially valued and that confer prestige upon those who have mastered them” (DiMaggio, 1982b, p. 35). Snowman supports this notion by saying one of the ways in which the nouveaux rich differentiated themselves from the lower classes was to, “buy culture”, and this meant strictly, “European culture” (Snowman, 2009, p. 205).

The most famous group of elite cultural capitalists in Boston were known as The Brahmins. Because of their support, and their support alone, institutions like The Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony were able to survive and thrive (1982b). In order for the elite groups, like The Brahmins, to maintain their cultural distinction as a status group, control would need to rest in the hands of the cultural capitalists in a new and unique form of organization. DiMaggio says,

Boston's cultural capitalists would have to find a form [of organization] able to achieve all these aims: a single organizational base for each art form; institutions that could claim to serve the community, even as they defined the community to include only the elite and the upper-middle classes; and enough social distance between artist and audience, between performer and public, to permit the mystification necessary to define a body of artistic work as sacred (1982b, p. 38).

They achieved this end between 1870 and 1900 with the adoption of the non-profit corporation.

Although not perfectly designed to allow elites exclusivity or the ability to monopolize high culture, non-profit corporations nonetheless had five particular virtues that were conducive to supporting these goals (DiMaggio, 1982b). First, the corporation form was familiar to elites as a way to organize their affairs. Whether in the business world with such capital ventures as railroad and telephone companies, or the non-profit world with the governance of places like Harvard, it proved a successful means to conduct business of all kinds. Second, because the governance was made up of people who either personally financially supported the endeavor or encouraged their friends to support it, the non-profit form effectively insulated arts organizations from the pressures of the market. Third, by having control of the organization rest within a well-integrated network of the financial and social elite, charitable corporations could govern themselves without the pressure from the state or other social classes. Fourth, by enlisting a large part of the elite, those organizations could then work towards stabilizing, defining and insulating art as high-culture, thus separating it from popular cultural work. Lastly, the goals of the charitable corporation were more ambiguous than for-profit firms, thus allowing for seemingly conflicting goals. For example, many major cultural

organization's in Boston at the time claimed to pursue communitarian goals even while they simultaneously took actions that made elite culture less and less accessible (1982b).

Yet, while elite groups sought exclusiveness, they still wanted their status as elites to be recognized and to be made legitimate by the rest of American society. After all, "to be seen" and "to be heard" is better than "seeing" and "hearing," as an earlier report indicated. Complete isolation from society, therefore, would not help achieve this end. DiMaggio says, "...in the case of a dominant status group, it is important that their culture be recognized as legitimate by, yet be only partially available to, groups that are subordinate to them" (Dimaggio, 1982a, p. 303). Thus, a concern for public education through art, whether sincere or not, was a fundamental driving force in maintaining a connection with the general public (1982b). As DiMaggio explains, "The tension between monopolization and hegemony, between exclusivity and legitimization[sic], was a constant counterpoint to the efforts at classification of American urban elites" (1982b, p. 48). To educate meant to distinguish between "true art" and "vulgar art". For orchestras, and to the same degree opera houses, this meant continually classifying, framing and refining the programming content. In short, the standard repertoire of most American orchestras and opera companies today reflects the influences of this period in time. Thus, to understand the high culture/popular culture distinction, one must simultaneously understand the organizational form it evolved from. According to DiMaggio,

The alliance between class and culture that emerged was defined by, and thus inseparable from, its organizational mediation. As a consequence, the classification 'high culture/popular culture' is comprehensible only in its dual sense as characterizing both a ritual classification and the organizational systems that give classification meaning (1982b, p. 48).

Once the organizational structure to support high culture was in place, the next step was the process of classifying and framing what would be considered “high culture” (Dimaggio, 1982a). Organizations like the Boston Symphony Orchestra experienced two stages of classification. First, they purified their programming by eliminating residual elements of popular music. Second, they created further sub-classifications of specific genres of high art. They also strengthened the boundaries between professional and amateur art, between artist and audience, and specific rules of etiquette.

According to DiMaggio, “...one way to create distance between the profane audience and sacred art would be to avoid the work of living American artists, particularly those of a commercial stamp” (1982a, p. 305). Another way to increase distance was through the darkening of the lights during performance, a practice that was initiated in 1908 (1982a). Still another way was through hiring only foreign conductors and artists to perform. The rationale for this was that only foreigners, untouched by the popular influences of modern Boston society, could present the art in its purest form.

The repertoire of today’s orchestras and opera companies reflects this attitude. Even though thousands of American operatic and symphonic works have been produced within the last one hundred and ten years, only a select handful have found their way into consistent reproduction. As Joseph Horowitz writes, “Preponderantly, peculiarly, it [the American musical high culture] is a culture of performance...twentieth century opera in the United States [is] a curatorial enterprise, incurably Eurocentric” (Horowitz, 2005, pp. 25, 146). One only need browse the current season offerings of most American opera companies and symphonies to see that indeed a large majority of the repertoire is pre-20<sup>th</sup> century and not of American creation.

Thirty years after its founding, the Boston Symphony began to more fully see the result of its efforts. Programs were more highly classified, boundaries between high art and popular and audience and artist were more firmly established, and an ethic and ideology of connoisseurship framed the musical experience (1982a). Edward Dwight, editor of Boston's *Journal of Music* and highly respected in the community of musical society elites, stressed two features of the Boston Symphony that he believed would help maintain its prestige and excellence in the year's to come. They were to first ensure that the core audience was "fit". By this he meant people who were of stature and class, and who would ensure the financial soundness of the organization by purchasing subscriptions in advance. Second, the presentation of "pure programs" must be upheld. By this he meant, "...concerts in which one might hear only composers of excellence, and into which should enter nothing vulgar, coarse, 'sensational', but only such as outlives fashion (Dwight as cited in DiMaggio, 1982b, p. 309). Not surprisingly, all of these efforts resulted in these artistic institutions being identified with the social classes that patronized them. This common association with opera and classical music to "elite" and "rich" only contributed to a further narrowing of their audience base (1982a).

It is important to note that even given all of these actions toward the creation of a new organizational basis for operation, classification and framing of art, DiMaggio clearly points out that this was not the culmination of some grand conspiracy. Rather, it was a process that naturally evolved out of the sociological principles concerning the need for specific groups of people to classify and differentiate themselves from others in order to create identity. As DiMaggio says, "[This process] was one that the Brahmins and elite status groups in other American cities had to undertake if they were to become a



true upper class” (1982a, p. 317). Maintaining an ideology of connoisseurship was also essential to maintaining ambiguity within the high art forms, and thus a form of control by mere association. As DiMaggio explains,

To see art as expressing the ineffable, as beyond words, to define the relationship of the viewer or listener to the work of art as a transcendent one, sullied by description or interpretation, is to make art ultimately the property of those with the status to claim that their experience is the purest, the most authentic (1982a, p. 317).

Similar to classical music organizations and museums in Boston, opera in New York and the elites who wanted to separate it from popular theatre went through a similar process of classification as the Brahmins had in Boston. Bruce McConachie (1988), asserts that “...ritual mystification served the social function of helping to unify a New York patriciate badly divided in Jacksonian times along professional, ethnic and religious lines” (p.181). McConachie explains that there were “three overlapping social conventions” which allowed New York elite to create mysticism around opera and theatre (p.182). Those three conventions were, in short, to separate opera from other theater by creating special places for its performance, i.e. opera houses, to create and adhere to a strict code of behavior, including dress code, and to insist on foreign language opera as the measure of excellence while simultaneously deeming all other opera in English, inferior. In the end, “[these] standards upheld by behavior and criticism employing foreign words and specialized language [were] impenetrable to all but the cognoscenti” (McConachie, 1988, p. 182). This idea of establishing conditions by which only those properly educated could understand is a recurrent theme seen in both DiMaggio’s and McConachie’s analyses.

One of the earliest such occasions of these conventions finding root occurred during the tour of Manuel Garcia's opera company in 1825. McConachie quotes one early historian of opera in New York as saying: "Garcia created an air of ultra-exclusiveness in advertising and taking subscriptions for the entire, or a part of the performance series..."(McConachie, 1988, p. 183). New Yorkers were eager for more of the type of opera Garcia offered, but it would be almost ten years before the Italian opera would return. The Italian Opera House, which opened in 1833, satisfied this hunger. There were, however, those that protested the adoption of foreign language opera and the new social conventions and expectations that came along with it. Ex-mayor of New York, Philip Hone, disliked the idea of private boxes, calling them "a sort of aristocratical [sic] distinction". He was also dismayed by the idea of foreign language opera (McConachie, 1988).

### The Spectacle of Opera as Social Function

The appeal of opera to many New Yorkers was not always driven by artistic or aesthetic inclinations, at least not of the musical kind. A big part of the draw and intrigue offered by opera was the ability to see and be seen by one's peers in the context of something that was perceived luxurious and special. One of the earliest successful attempts to create a place with such conditions was Palmo's Opera House, which opened in 1844 (McConachie, 1988). It was successful not only with the elite but also with general population as well because its owner, Ferdinando Palmo kept prices low and incorporated dining in his neighboring restaurant as part of the evening. However, complaints began to arise from the high society crowd over the concern that the opera

house's décor and layout were less than acceptable. One New York Mirror reporter at the time noted that, "For the upper gallery is so constructed that though you can see the stage from every part of it, you can only see the dress circle from the front row; and people go to a play little to see and hear, and a great deal to be seen and heard of" (McConachie, 1988, p. 184). It seems that this sentiment did in fact carry some weight with New York society, because Palmo's Opera House closed one year later in 1845.

Two years later, with the building of The Astor Place Opera House in 1847, New York society would never again lack a venue to present grand opera separate from regular theatre (McConachie, 1988). Completely funded by 150 wealthy New Yorkers, and located in a fashionable part of uptown Manhattan, it was the ideal environment for the wealthy to mingle amongst their own. Purchasing individual seats was possible, however, the initial fee of \$1.00 for what would now be considered an orchestra seat, was quickly doubled to \$2, plus an additional \$.50 if one wanted a reserved seat. To put this in context, the average daily wage for a laborer in 1900 was, depending on what state one lived in, between \$1.29 and \$2.24 (Holt, 1902). Therefore, to obtain a seat, the average attendee had to forgo nearly two days worth of wages. There were cheaper seats available in the upper balconies, away from the rich box holders, but the view was partially blocked by a gigantic ornate chandelier. These prices and poor seating conditions kept out most of the "undesirables".

If price didn't keep out those the owners did not want, then dress code and performance time would. A strict dress code for Astor Place was implemented in the hopes of keeping out the middle and lower classes. As quoted in McConachie, patrons of Astor Place were required to have "freshly shaven faces, evening dress, fresh waistcoats,

and kid gloves for gentlemen”(McConachie, 1988, p. 184). Adding to the list of tactics used to keep out lower classes, start times for the opera’s were moved later from 6:30pm or 7pm to 8pm, the rationale being that working class people had to get up early for work so they would be less inclined to stay out late at the opera (McConachie, 1988).

Snowman supports this saying, “...few people were prepared to spend something like a full day’s wages for the privilege of sitting in the further reaches of this vast house and struggling to get home just a few hours before they were due back at work” (Snowman, 2009, p. 221).

Another way the New York elite tried to segregate the grand opera audiences from the regular theatergoing crowd was through strict codes of behavior during performances. By having a code of conduct privy only to those “in the know”, embarrassment was assured for anyone not belonging to the “in crowd”. This combination of various behavioral rules, foreign and unusual to any other form of theater at the time, allowed the fashionable elite to act as gatekeepers to the art form of grand opera. As McConachie explains,

Not only did this [behavior] promise to reduce the unwitting canaille in attendance to dumb embarrassment, it would also allow the truly fashionable to act as high priests in the initiation of all upper-class New Yorkers to the mysteries of opera going. Evidently the patriciate sensed that self-mystification through opera going would help the entire class convince itself of the legitimacy of its power. Anyone who could get through an Italian opera without a social gaffe, in other words, must surely be worthy of wealth and influence (McConachie, 1988, p. 186).

Contrary to what DiMaggio claims, this combination of strict dress code, conversation etiquette, seating rules, proper conversation and behavior during performances was clearly an intentional and well thought out system specifically to keep out those who

would have a difficult time conforming. In addition it served a social function of allowing the elite classes a pseudo form of aristocracy and court life and a way to codify their behavior, something their European counterparts did not have to imitate.

Since this was all very new to the elite classes, there lacked a cohesive understanding at first about all the details of these new behavioral rules. To help clarify and codify these new behavioral expectations for the American aristocracy, sanctioned “arbiters of taste” such as the *New York Mirror* provided accounts of improper behavior in other cities so as to contrast the “proper” from the “improper”. This newspaper, and others like it, allowed readers to refine their own behavior without learning the hard way of self-embarrassment. According to McConachie, “By 1850 advice from etiquette books, opera critics, and elite visitors from abroad, coupled with self-education and “policing”...had transformed a previously untutored audience into a group that fancied itself the cognoscenti” (McConachie, 1988, p. 186). A “mystique of excellence”, then, to operatic enjoyment had all the elements necessary for completion – a specialized location for performance separate from all other forms of entertainment, conventions of dress, behavior, and audience response.

The importance of keeping out “the people”, while one of the motivating factors in the establishment of these various behavioral conventions was not the primary reason for their creation. Maintaining solidarity among the various elite groups was most important. The reason being that there were many different types of elite in New York in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to McConachie,

Unlike upper-class culture in Boston and Philadelphia, most patrician families in Jacksonian New York had arrived at their status relatively recently and remained uneasy about their place in society (McConachie, 1988, p. 189).

Various economic factors, including the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, contributed to this mixing of elite groups. Grand opera offered a way for these groups to recognize one another socially and reinforce their power and cohesiveness as a class. “Grand Opera”, as McConachie concludes, “helped to homogenize the elite by minimizing the differences among subgroups through the elaboration and celebration of a common mystique” (McConachie, 1988, p. 190).

Contrary to DiMaggio’s view that elite isolation was not a diabolical plot, but rather a natural social progression, McConachie claims grand opera served the elite classes because it allowed them a new way to exert elite domination over other classes. With the historical tides changing, and social power transferring away from individual public figureheads and more and more to political parties, grand opera offered the elite a different yet satisfying means of social control. McConachie explains, “With real power passing from those in public view into the hands of men sitting behind closed doors, public rituals involving all classes were becoming less necessary” (McConachie, 1988, p. 190).

The success of these efforts, along with the high society’s sometimes patronizing arrogance, is reflected in the tone of one New York Herald critic,

The fashionable world is now completely organized – the opera is successful – white kid gloves are all the go – and the canaille must keep themselves a respectable distance from Astor Place hereafter. Read and obey (McConachie, 1988, p. 184).

McConachie summarizes the culmination of these actions saying, “...the elite’s attempt to dazzle and mystify the classes below them through the establishment of a sacred temple for their opera going ritual surfaced into aggressive snobbery” (1988, p. 184).

The canaille, also known colloquially as proletariat or “riff-raff”, perceived the opera house and the related “aggressive snobbery” as a symbolic desire for the rich to display aristocratic distinctiveness.

When the Astor Place opera company toured other northern cities, the impresario of the company, Max Maretzek, employed other star performers and local entertainment to keep the house open and money coming in. However, a physical clash resulted on May 10, 1849 between fans of the aristocratic entertainer William Macready and the more proletariat Edwin Forrest. Macready was booked to perform at Astor Place, and the fans of Edwin Forrest were determined to stop the performance. The two factions collided, resulting in twenty-two deaths. As a newspaper account reported,

Macready was a subordinate personage, and he was to be put down less on his own account than to spite his aristocratic supporters. The question became not only a national, but a social one. It was the rich against the poor – the aristocracy against the people. Forrest’s advocates looked upon it as a piece of retributive justice (McConachie, 1988, p. 185).

As McConachie summarizes, “Elite opera-going had successfully excluded the people, but clearly it failed to mystify them” (1988, p. 185). This clash between the classes stuck with the reputation of Astor Place thereafter, and Maretzek was forced to close the theater in 1852.

In 1854, many of the same elite who helped fund Astor Place opened the Academy of Music and appointed Maretzek its impresario. Keeping in mind the class resentments created by Astor Place, Maretzek and a few of the Academy stockholders attempted to open up the Academy to larger audiences encompassing varying classes and ethnicities. Although Maretzek had some success with his efforts, the elite audiences

continued to dominate control and established even stricter conventions of dress and behavior for the next three decades. When the Metropolitan Opera House was finished in 1883, they reestablished their traditions there as well (McConachie, 1988).

Interestingly enough, stockholders of the original Metropolitan Opera knew very well that their preferred style of grand opera could never pay for itself. In fact, they seemingly took pride that it couldn't, and preferred it that way. A couple days after the Met opened, a person dubbed a 'Young Society Man' published a satirical conversation between himself and a 'Met matron', the young man saying, "Do they suppose that when we build an Opera-house we want to make a shop of it?" The matron responding, "Opera is the only place left where we can sanctify our lives by losing money. Let us keep it pure and undefiled!" (Snowman, 2009, pp. 220-221). Clearly, at the outset of the Met's existence, openness, accessibility and diversity of audience was only not a priority, it was adamantly opposed. This example also shows the contrast between the attitudes of those who believe in "pure art", or art for art's sake, and commercialized art.

The famed sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, theorized that there is a radical contrast between the pure art and commercial art sectors (Morato, 2003). In Bourdieu's theory, "Once the new artistic order was established in opposition to economic interest and power, the resulting tension became the constituting power of the new, autonomous artistic sphere" (2003, p. 247). In other words, once the elite of Boston and New York successfully separated classical music and opera away from the economic and cultural influences of popular culture, maintaining an autonomy and pure separation from the two cultures became this power group's goal. As Morato summarizes further:



Pure art values restricted production and the act of creation, whereas commercial art emphasizes extensive production and dissemination. In the pure art sector, the cycle of production is long because the initial demand is in principle nonexistent, and the potential for economic valorization by gradual dissemination is always uncertain, at least at the beginning of the process...In the case of commercial art, the production cycle is short, and works are adapted to demand beforehand (2003, p. 247).

Lawrence W. Levine approaches opera, now regularly considered a form of “high culture”, from the historical perspective of how Americans came to categorize different types of culture in the first place. He argues that,

...because the primary categories of culture have been the products of ideologies which were always subject to modifications and transformations, the perimeters of our cultural divisions have been permeable and shifting rather than fixed and immutable (Levine, 1988, p. 8).

John Storey (2006) summarizes the sentiment of all of these arguments, saying:

Opera as “high culture” is therefore not a universal given, unfolding from its moment of intellectual birth; it is an historically specific category institutionalized (depending on which cultural historian you find most convincing) by the 1860s, 1900s, or 1930s (p.34).

In New York society, it is argued by some that opera as an exclusively elite art form began to occur earlier than the latter half of the nineteenth century. As indicated earlier, Bruce A. McConachie claims that between 1825 and 1850 elite social groups in New York developed three overlapping social strategies to effectively separate opera from the everyday world of the popular entertainment house. As McConachie explains,

In 1825 theater audiences from all classes enjoyed opera as a part of the social conventions of traditional playgoing behavior. By the Civil War [1861-5] the elite had excluded all but themselves and spectators from other classes willing to behave in ways deemed “proper” according to upper-class norms (Storey, 2002, p. 34).

As Storey explains, “Opera was no longer a form of living entertainment; it was increasingly a source of “Culture” with a capital C – a resource of both aesthetic enlightenment and social validation” (Storey, 2002, p. 34). However, DiMaggio differs from Levine and McConachie in his belief that although there was a “shift in opera’s social constituency during the nineteenth century...issues of opera’s definition, sponsorship, merit, and legitimacy were [not] resolved by the turn of the century” (DiMaggio, 1992, p. 40). He argues that it is only in the 1930s, when opera adopts “the non-profit educational form” (“trustee-governed non profit organizations”), that opera’s “legitimacy” as high culture is finally secured (1992, p. 37). This institutionalization of opera under centralized control, and its distinct cultural boundaries, allowed opera to remove itself from the marketplace and thus help to solidify social boundaries. As DiMaggio explains:

As long as cultural boundaries were indistinct, “fashionable taste,” far from embodying cultural authority, was suspect as snobbish, trivial, and undemocratic. Only when elite taste was harnessed to a clearly articulated ideology embodied in the exhibitions and performances of organizations that selected and presented art in a manner distinct from that of commercial entrepreneurs...did an understanding of culture as hierarchical become both legitimate and widespread (1992, p. 22).

A reflection of opera’s still popular sentiment in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century society can be seen in an 1853 Putnam’s Magazine article that proposed that P.T. Barnum be named manager of New York’s Opera. The article said of P.T. Barnum, “He understands what our public wants, and how to gratify that want. He has no foreign antecedents...He comprehends that, with us, the opera need not necessarily be the luxury of the few, but the recreation of the many” (Levine, 1988, pp. 100-101). Just as this article reflected the popular sentiments surrounding opera in the mid-19th century, so a quote from Thomas

Whitney Surette reflects the growing popular disdain surrounding opera in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He says,

Opera is controlled by a few rich men who think it a part of the life of a great city that there should be an opera house...It does not exist for the good of the whole city, but rather for those of plethoric purses.” Opera houses, he adds, “...are too little related to the community (Surette as cited in Levine, 1988, p. 101).

In the span of just a few short decades the vast majority of public sentiment towards opera had shifted from one of mainstream popularity to one of populist contempt. The distinction evident here is that it was not so much opera as art that was the cause of so much populace disdain, but the opera house itself and those that controlled it. There was, however, one notable exception. Not far across town on 34<sup>th</sup> street, however, another opera house was forming, and it would offer something the Met did not.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, The Metropolitan Opera was the quintessential evening retreat for New York high society. And, while it was not entirely exclusive, the house was clearly designed for the enhancement of high society life and all its trappings, leaving those who scrambled to hear the world’s best singers from the galleries above to contend with poor sight lines and less than spectacular acoustics. But, as mentioned before, opera in America was never merely an art form for the rich. There were just as many people, many of whom were basic working-class, who enjoyed opera for purely aesthetic and spiritual reasons. And, as in a capitalist society, where there is a demand there is usually a corresponding service to fill it. Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera was that company for New Yorkers.

Hammerstein had a great love of grand opera, and erected over thirteen theatres specifically for its performance (Horowitz, 2005). In 1906, his endeavors culminated

with the creation of the Manhattan Opera. It was in many ways the “counter argument” to what the Metropolitan offered. As Horowitz explains,

With its excellent acoustics and sight lines, the thirty-one-hundred-seat house itself surpassed the Metropolitan Opera House in every respect save fashion: the forty-two boxes faced the stage, rather than one another, and there were no grand entrances (2005, p. 200).

In many ways, it was the opera counter-culture of its day, catering to mankind instead of “The Man”. Hammerstein himself sums it up best, saying, “It is society in the broad sense that I hope to attract and to please” (Hammerstein as cited in Horowitz, 2005, p. 200). Unlike the majority of the audience at the Metropolitan Opera, Hammerstein’s audiences attended the Manhattan Opera not for social reasons, but because they, like Hammerstein, had a purely aesthetic love for the art form.

Even still, Hammerstein’s idealistic vision of opera as a purely aesthetic retreat for all men could not last long in society that thrived on being fashionable and lacking in government support for the arts. As Horowitz explains,

His [Hammerstein’s] aversion to persons of wealth and status, amounting to a phobia, proved suicidal: the American system, with its absence of state support, linked opera inextricably to fashionable society (2005, p. 204).

Consequentially, the Manhattan Opera did not last past its fourth season. Hammerstein, lacking support from the wealthy community and other opera leaders associated with the Met, signed a conditional deal with Met leader Otto Kahn that afforded him \$1,250,000, but under the condition that he not produce opera in New York, Boston, Philadelphia or Chicago for ten years. He died nine years later (2005). The struggles Hammerstein encountered in trying to support challenging new work persist still today.

Contrary to DiMaggio, Levine and McConachie, there are those who make an aesthetic argument for opera's cultural shift in America. Bernard Zelechow argues that a particular type of opera and a particular group of artists are to blame for opera's elitist image. He rejects the arguments put forward by DiMaggio, Levine and McConachie that there were "an elite canon of masterpieces" which led to the disjunction, and therefore the notion of an "...accepted elite legitimizing canon of great works of art in contrast to the "trash" of popular culture" (Zelechow, 1991, p. 91). In his view,

The radical disjunction between high art and popular culture is rooted in the self-proclamation and self-fulfilling prophecies of the value of avant-garde art by avant-garde artists mostly in the twentieth century (Zelechow, 1991, p. 91).

He goes on to argue that the categorization of opera as a rich, elitist form of entertainment stems from the origins of only one branch of opera, that of the *opera seria* genre.

Joseph Horowitz also goes against the arguments put forward by the likes of DiMaggio, Levine and McConachie; that high society stratified and segregated artistic experience as a form of social control. Instead, Horowitz argues,

...the argument for social control is not supported by close acquaintance with the musical high culture of the period. Though genteel habits of thought and feeling could act as a suppressant, though "civilization" could tame rowdy dissidence, it does not follow that America's pioneer institutions of classical music can be summarized as fundamentally patronizing and antidemocratic (2005, p. 244).

Horowitz instead argues for a more nuanced version of the social control storyline. He argues that social story behind the opera houses of the northeast, especially the Metropolitan Opera, is a more complex than simply the rich trying to control the poor,

and actually was also influenced by artistic reasons. Referring to the amalgamation of all different types of German immigrants, both rich and poor, who attended the Met and Carnegie Hall amidst the other social elites at the turn of the century, Horowitz says, “In a concert milieu so cosmopolitan and dynamic, social rites served no predominant purpose” (2005, p. 248). In other words, to claim that societal shifts forced the change is too simplistic an answer, and not reflective of the complete demographic picture at the time.

Horowitz also makes arguments against Lawrence Levine who tracked the movement towards sacralization of art in America and the creation of highbrow/lowbrow culture. He summarizes his contention with Levine’s theory behind sacralization, saying, “Levine’s heartfelt populism...misleads him into overly equating the “highbrow” mentality of his own times, and its antidemocratic disparagement of the popular arts, with the practices and pronouncements of Thomas and Higginson in another era” (2005, p. 252). Specifically, Horowitz argues against the notion that cultural capitalists controlled and set artistic standards at places like the Metropolitan Opera, and that the pervading view in the literature that claims opera houses and orchestras were controlled by social elites is, “...an extrapolation, a cultural metaphor for the social inequities and corporate dominion of the period” (2005, p. 253). Contrary to this, Horowitz takes the position that artistic direction and control were created not by the “cultural capitalists” or “the city’s economic elite”, but by the artists themselves, saying:

Only writers innocent of the history of music could make such assertions. A defining vignette for musical sacralization in this period would be the reverent silence imposed by Parsifal or Tristan. Composers, not monied elites, were here the prime agents. Secondly, sacralization was instigated by priestly and hypnotic performers like Seidl or Arthur Nikisch, or by performers less “religious” who nonetheless served a holy repertoire distinct from “entertainment” (2005, p. 253).

According to Horowitz, the shift in opera’s popularity was based more in its changing aesthetics. This aesthetic shift and influence on opera performance practice and behavior expectations occurred prior to the influence of the atonal modernists. Wagner – his music and the cult-like mentality of many its most diehard fans – is what Horowitz argues as one of the primary causes for opera adopting strict performance and behavioral standards for audiences, and the shifting away from a popular culture influence. Spurred on by the large German immigrant population that lived in New York at the time, the Met audiences were dominated by “Wagnerites” who, “...militantly silenced every disturbance from the boxes; implausibly, they took control of the house”(Horowitz, 2005, p. 140).

Ultimately, Horowitz does not completely abandon the notion that classical music did in fact become “elitist”, “antidemocratic”; that musical reverence did in fact eventually devolve into “a species of snobbery.” However, unlike the majority of authors on this subject who claim these changes occurred during the Gilded Age or the turn of the century, Horowitz claims these changes happened in the interwar decades between World War I and II. He says,

It was...after World War I – that sacralization turned into a popular movement, a midculture, rejecting contemporary culture, enshrining dead European dead masters and celebrity performers...Compared to New York's late nineteenth-century audiences, or Boston's...the Toscanini audience of the thirties and forties was intellectually stunted (2005, p. 252).

More recently William Mason, General Director of Lyric Opera of Chicago, said in an interview that, "...American composers, especially in the last half of the twentieth century, were not writing music that Americans wanted to listen to...I think opera over the last fifty years or so has been hijacked to some extent by composers who did not write in a musical idiom that people liked" (Mason as cited in Cropsey, 2002). Andrew Clark writes in the Financial Times of London, "Esoteric trends in music – initiated by Schoenberg and his 12-tone system, and hastened by the post second world war avant-garde – widened the division between what was considered "serious" and "popular"(Clark, 2001).

Barry Singer has a similar argument. The lack of melody composers adopted after the "golden age" of opera is, in his mind, the simple culprit of opera's popular demise in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Puccini as cited in Singer, 2008). He points out that Puccini was witness to this new trend, and highly fearful of its consequences. In speaking of the dissonant direction contemporary opera was taking, Puccini lamented in 1922 while fighting cancer to finish his last opera *Turandot*, "I believe that is the end of opera in theater" (2008). As opera and classical music went atonal, the tonal moved into the creations of popular American song. As Singer explains,

By the time of *Turandot*'s posthumous 1926 premiere...the primacy of popular melody had begun to migrate from opera to the realm of American popular song, where Puccini's true heirs would prove to be Kern, Berlin, Gershwin and Rodgers, among many others. In its wake, the twelve-tone rows of Berg and



Schoenberg were waylaying opera, rerouting its melodic past toward an atonal future. Down this path, too, loomed operas populist fall (2008).

Indeed Will Crutchfield, a conductor and author, said “The cessation of melody pretty much finished opera off as far as any chance of appealing to a broad public was concerned, and the extreme dissonance of the advanced modernists sealed the file” (Crutchfield as cited in Evans, 1999, pp. 178-179). It is at this time in this history of music in America that one begins to see the aesthetic rift between what was considered serious and what was considered popular. That rift only widened as the years and decades progressed into ever more atonal experimentation.

Because of this experimentation with contemporary composers, opera audiences reverted back to the past where melody in opera still existed. As Singer explains, “...there was only one path of escape – backward, in time and tone, to the reassuring changelessness of the expired grand-opera tradition embodied by Puccini [and his contemporaries]...” (Singer, 2008). He adds sadly, “Opera – that overwhelmingly warm-blooded art – became, with every passing year, a more and more bloodless neurological[sic] worship service” (2008). As will be argued in the next few chapters, this “neurological worship service” would only be further perpetuated by advances in entertainment technology.

## CHAPTER 5

### MODERN OPERA AUDIENCES

Understanding American audiences, what motivates, attracts, and discourages them from attending live performing arts, has been a question of study for many decades. Ultimately, as author Christopher Hoile explains, the product that every opera company is trying to sell "...is an artistic experience, the transformative power of which they [the companies] firmly believe in, but about which the uninitiated have doubts and misconceptions" (2005). According to a 2002 poll, non-opera goers listed a number of reasons why they did not attend. Among a number of things, these included 'not understanding the art form', a feeling of 'intimidation' from the art form and being 'uncomfortable' at the opera, and a feeling that they would not understand the story. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said that foreign language was a major barrier to attendance. The high price of tickets and general lack of interest were also listed as reasons for not attending. Many added simply that they thought opera was 'upper-crusty' or 'elitist' (Snowman, 2009). As is indicated in this poll, the notion of many in the general public that opera is for 'someone else', still strongly persists.

The latest National Endowment for the Arts report, the *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (SPPA), indicates that opera attendance totals have dropped to 4.8 million, or 2.1 percent of the adult population, an over all 30 percent decrease since 1982. Attendance is measured by those who attended an opera at least once in a previous

twelve-month period prior to being surveyed (Iyengar, Bradshaw, & Nichols, November 2009). This is a significant drop of 34 percent from the last survey in 2002, and a significant change from the last three times this study was conducted, 1982, 1992 and 2002 when attendance levels remained virtually level at 3.0, 3.3, and 3.2 percent, respectively. While the SPPA shows that in fact all arts disciplines are losing attendance numbers, opera's rate of decline over the twenty-six year period is the highest among all the disciplines, according to SPPA data.

A common claim often heard when speaking of opera and classical music audiences is that they are getting older. This is understandable considering the data seems to point to the fact that audiences are, in fact, aging. The *2008 SPPA*, states emphatically that the average age of all attendees for all benchmark arts activities has consistently risen since the study began in 1982 (Iyengar et al., November 2009). However, the statistics on this ageing phenomenon are potentially misleading when, in fact, the average age of the general population as a whole is also getting older due to the Baby-Boom generation.

A 2011 supplemental report to the 2008 SPPA agrees with this claim, concluding that, "While the aging of the arts audience was real, it was less a product of changes in people's tastes and behavior, than of the aging of the overall population" (Stern, 2011). Additionally, the study concluded that one's age and birth cohort (the generation in which one is born), is a statistically significant but weak determinant of one's future arts engagement. According to the study, "Knowing someone's age or year of birth provides very little power in explaining his or her level of arts participation" (2011). Therefore, while the fact remains that audiences are or appear to be aging, it does not directly

correlate with the idea that they are aging merely because newer, younger people are not going.

Some leaders in the field also feel the statistics on ageing audiences are misleading. Joseph Volpe says,

There are two photographs of Met audiences in my office – one taken in the old house in the 1890s, the other of the first-nighters who opened the new house in 1966. As I scan their faces and figures, the average age seems to be the *equivalent* of what it is today (Michener & Volpe, 2006).

Christina Scheppelmann, Director of Artistic Operations at Washington National Opera, also disagrees with the notion of an ageing audience. When asked what she thought of the statistics saying so, she said, “First of all, I don’t think that is accurate” (Scheppelmann, 2011). She goes on to say, “...when you look at photos from the 50s and 60s, you see just as many grey hairs in the audience as you do today... I think we’ve always had an audience that was a little more mature” (2011). While relying on photographs of specific audiences from a given period in time might not be the most scientific way of measuring the rates at which audiences have aged, it certainly acts as a valid example and counter argument to the ever present doom and gloom that pervades performing arts audience statistics.

While the picture presented for opera by the SPPA appears dire, there are a few specific aspects for how the data is collected that are subject to inherent participant bias as well as some conflicting numbers (Opera America, 2010a). First, the SPPA survey, which is administered by telephone, asks adults 18 and older about their patterns of arts participation over a twelve-month period. The inherent bias in this method is that the

survey is depending on immediate recollections of the participants, as well as their own personal definition of what constitutes opera.

It is also important to note that National Arts Index (NAI), a report produced by Americans for the Arts, reflected a discrepancy in the severity of decline in attendance numbers for over the last decade from what the 2008 SPPA reported. While both reports showed a decline in attendance, the decline is much smaller in the NAI than in the SPPA (Opera America, 2010a). The NAI report also shows an increase in main season opera attendance since 2002, this being contrary to what the SPPA reported. Separated out from the over all NAI index, opera as an individual art form has outperformed the overall arts index in every year of the survey (2010a).

While the SPPA and NAI reports likely reflect the general sentiment towards opera from the general U.S. population, the Opera America data on actual attendance is likely more accurate because it relies on audited reports submitted by over 90 percent of the professional member opera companies. The Opera America data also confirms that audiences have declined over the last decade, but only by 7 percent. This is in stark contrast to the dire 34 percent rate of decline reported by the SPPA over the last decade. In fact, over a 20 year period from 1988 to 2008, Opera America reports an overall 18 percent increase in attendance, and an increase in main season ticket revenue of over 200 percent (2010a). The simple reality is that the studies do not measure the same thing in the same way, and are thus representative of two different things.

There is an interesting silver lining to this, however, when looking at the data produced by Opera America. In their 2008 Annual Field Report, a self-reporting survey of audited financial statements of all Opera America member companies, the financial

picture for opera remains generally positive. Of the 74 member companies, including 11 Canadian companies, who consistently reported over the period from 2004-2008, contributed income rose almost 26 percent, while earned revenue remained relatively flat (Opera America, 2009). Also, average total contributed income rose 12.8 percent from 2007 to 2008, the most of any other year-over-year period surveyed (2009). Furthermore, while revenue generated from the box office remained flat from 2007-2008, it grew nearly 11 percent from 2004. This recent leveling off of earned box office revenue is likely due to the effects of the recent economic recession.

Another promising statistic is that individual giving continues to represent the largest source of contributed income in 2008, having increased by more than 15 percent over the prior season (2009). Also, opera companies seem to be responding to the modern audience's desire to experience opera via other electronic means. On average over the past five seasons, companies have tripled their allocations to broadcasting and recording expenses (2009). All in all, the report states that opera audiences remain committed to supporting the art form with more than 70 percent of companies reporting 70 percent or greater paid capacity during the 2007-2008 season (2009). The report concludes, "...in this time of hardship, the field showed resilience: The entire sample group invested more in opera production than in any other season surveyed and staged more opera than ever before" (2009).

It is important to point out the differences in these studies, both in terms of methodology and in data collected. In essence, the SPPA and NAI studies measure people's perceptions and recollections of attending live opera, the weakness of the study being that it never clearly defines opera, and relies merely on people's memories of their

attendance over a one-year period. Additionally, the Opera America study, while likely giving a more accurate picture of what real attendance numbers are, only reflects upon attendance reported by those companies that are members of Opera America. Also, it does not account for whether or not these are the same people attending more often, or whether they are new attendees that are contributing to the increases. In essence, the SPPA and NAI reports could be said to measure more of a general sentiment held towards opera in terms of people may feel about attending it, while the Opera America data portrays what the actual attendance is, albeit an incomplete picture.

According to a supplemental report to the 2008 SPPA titled *Audience 2.0: How Technology Influences Arts Participation*, more than twice as many Americans participated in opera through electronic media than through live attendance (Iyengar, Bradshaw, & Nichols, 2010). As stated earlier, the percentage of adults as reported by the NEA who attended live opera performance at least once in a twelve-month period is 2.1 percent. However, this number is 4.9 percent for electronic media. These increases in participation are also reflected in most other areas of the arts, including classical music where the increase went from 9.3 percent who participated in live performances, and 17.8 percent that participated via electronic media. Another interesting data point was that electronic media participation in the other “benchmark activities” of musical plays and non-musical plays was actually less than participation in attending a live performance. Why might these two benchmark activities have seen higher live attendance than electronic media participation like all the other benchmark activities have seen? More importantly, how can opera re-strategize to achieve the same type of results? Is it a matter of cost, subject matter relevance, perceptions of accessibility?

The SPPA data also shows that the amount of U.S. adults participating in the arts by performing or creating it themselves has increased in many benchmark areas (Iyengar et al., November 2009). However, while creation and performance participation have increased in the areas of classical music, choir/chorale singing, and painting/drawing/sculpture, they have decreased in the areas of music plays, non-musical plays, and opera. This is perhaps a reflection of the costs and logistical constraints associated with these art forms. For example, singing in a choir and playing an instrument in a classical music group can occur in many different settings, including religious settings that utilize music performance in their worship practices. However, theater, musical theater and opera are not traditionally activities one can do in a variety of ways and places, nor are they typically inexpensive activities.

Research indicates that the “audience experience” is an important measuring quality for value in the performing arts (Radbourne, Johanson, Glow, & White, 2009). According to Radbourne (2007) “audiences...will be fiercely loyal if they can experience fulfillment and realization in the arts experience” (2007, p. 3), and that “the new arts consumer is on a quest for self-actualization where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfill a spiritual need that has very little to do with the traditional marketing plan of an arts...organization”(2007, p. 1). Additionally, audiences increasingly seek to shape their own experience, and marketing strategies should be refocused on empowering audiences, not targeting them (Scheff Bernstein, 2007).

Another factor that affects audiences, and that is particularly related to a lack of knowledge, is that of risk. Risk refers to the possibility of loss or gain (Radbourne, 2007). According to Colbert et al (2001) there are four kinds of risk that determine the



likelihood of re-consumption by theatergoers: functional risk; economic risk; psychological risk; and social risk. In short, the greater the perception of negative risk, the greater the likelihood that participation will not occur. Ways to maximize positive risk and minimize negative risk are offered by Crealey (Crealey, 2003). These include involving consumers in the creation process leading up to the performance, what Crealey calls “product testing”. “Cross-pollination”, or testing segments of the audience with products designed for another segment. “Selling risk”, or selling the idea of shock and amazement, hence risk. “Reducing social risk” by creating comfortable environments for audiences, and finally increasing an audience’s knowledge of the product in order to enhance understanding and minimize anxiety (2003).

While it may not be realistic or feasible for opera companies to employ direct means of public participation into their productions, there are ways opera companies can tap into this creative desire in other areas, such as the opera production and marketing mix. For example, the Savonlinna Opera Festival in Finland is currently holding a collaborative project entirely online to create a brand new opera. The name of the project is called “Opera by You 2012”, and it utilizes an online platform called “Wreckamovie” allowing participants to interact and create the synopsis, libretto and music, all via an online collaborative process (Savonlinna Opera Festival, 2010). Another great example of tapping into the creativity found in their communities is Vancouver Opera. Its marketing department recently held a competition whereby they tapped into the large predominance of graphic designers and anime buffs in their community to design a short anime version of each of their operas (Chan, 2010; Northrup, 2011). This not only

involved members of their community in a creative way, but also engaged an audience in opera that might not otherwise have participated in opera at all.

In the summer of 2010, Wolf Trap Opera Company staged an unfinished opera by Mozart called *Zaide*. Since there is no third act to this opera, and thus no ending, the creative team at Wolf Trap devised three possible outcomes and at each performance allowed the audience to vote during intermission for which outcome they would like to see (Wolf Trap Opera, 2010). While additional possibilities such as this are limited, it was nonetheless a creative and innovative move on the part of Wolf Trap Opera, and one that reflected the alignment of creative production with the desire of modern audiences to participate in their entertainment.

While there are more people participating in opera and classical music via electronic media, they are generally the same demographic of people who participate in live performances (Iyengar et al., 2010). According to the *Audiences 2.0* report, “Individuals who were most likely to report participating in benchmark activities through both live attendance and electronic media were similar to those who reported arts participation through live attendance alone” (2010). These general demographics include people who are residents of a metropolitan area, non-Hispanic white and other-race adults, adults who are under age 65, and who have generally higher education and income levels.

In contrast, those individuals who participated in the arts only through electronic media were more demographically similar to those people who reported no participation in the arts, either through live performance or electronic media. This demographic

profile includes those individuals who are from a rural area, are older, of a racial or ethnic minority, and have relatively low levels of income and education (Iyengar et al., 2010).

Another distinct shift in audience behavior is their increased unwillingness to commit to attendance far in advance of a performance date. While this phenomenon is experienced by all performing arts disciplines, it is opera that feels the effects most keenly. Opera is arguably one of, if not the most expensive of the performing arts to produce. Part of being able to plan an opera season years in advance depends upon knowing, or at least having confidence, that the funds will be there to cover the costs when the time comes. With fewer and fewer people willing to purchase season subscriptions, the risk of not being able to pay bills increases, and the reliance on fundraising to make up the difference exponentially increases.

As Joseph Volpe points out, during Rudolph Bing's time at the Met, 75 percent of patrons were subscribers (Michener & Volpe, 2006). Yet today, the majority of tickets go to single-ticket buyers who make their purchases no more than a few weeks in advance. Volpe also points out that the ticket buying habits are also less predictable. What used to consistently sell out; works like *Aida*, *La Bohème* and *Carmen*, the blockbusters as they are known, are now seen to compete in popularity with less-familiar works (2006). Steven Blier, artistic director of the New York Festival of Song and artistic consultant for the New York City Opera, agrees saying, "It used to be that *Aida*, *La Bohème*, and *Carmen* was the way you sold the house, and if you wanted to do something like *Satyagraha* it would be empty. Now it's sort of the other way around" (Blier, 2011). While this is potentially a promising sign that opera audiences are opening up to the idea of more challenging, new and unique works, it still presents opera

companies with the uncomfortable position of navigating uncharted waters in terms of predicting audiences likes and dislikes with regards to programming.

The *National Arts Index 2010* reports three key trends in audience engagement. First, audiences are not walking away from the arts, but they are no longer as interested in engaging with traditional modes of delivery. Second, Americans are seeking more personal engagement in their arts participation. Third, technology is having a dramatic effect on traditional forms of engagement (R. Cohen & Kushner, 2011). One other note worthy development in the study reveals that although showing a decrease of 5 percent from 2008-2009, the rate of new works of opera is still 14 percent higher in 2009 than in 2005. In 2009, audiences saw the premiere of 24 new operatic works premiered at American opera companies, the highest number since first being measured by this study in 2003 (2011, p. 62).

Regarding technology, the findings suggest that arts participation for many U.S. adults would simply not occur if not for their ability to participate via electronic media. It is suggested in the report that the implications of these findings on electronic media participation in the arts suggest that there is a greater interest in the benchmark arts activities beyond those who actually attend the events in person, and that further research into the barriers preventing these groups of people from attending live events is needed. It is evident given this most recent data that live performance attendance, especially for opera and classical music, is secondary to participation via electronic media.

A recent study (Tajtakova & Arias-Aranda, 2008) looked at the audience development strategies in opera and ballet that targeted university students in Slovakia. The section of the study on motivations and barriers to attendance was most interesting

for the purposes of this thesis. The study found that the largest motivator for university students to attend a live opera or ballet performance was a desire to experience a live performance, and the second largest motivator was a desire to see a particular piece. The two largest barriers to attendance were fear of boredom and a fear of a lack of knowledge about the genre (2008). In other words, barriers to attendance force one to leave one's comfort zone, something that most people do not do voluntarily. In the case of these students, being bored and having a lack of knowledge about a given situation was seen as an uncomfortable situation, and thus acted as a barrier to participation. Another interesting finding of the study was that the biggest sub-segment of the student market identified in the survey was a mixed category characterized by no attendance at opera and ballet performance, albeit, with an interest in participating.

A modern definition of audience development can be defined as a pro-active process of cultivation and growth of long-term relationships through engaging, educating and motivating diverse communities to participate in a creative, entertaining experience (Walker-Kuhne, 2005). The Houston Grand Opera has a program that falls very closely along the lines of this definition. Their program, succinctly titled "HGOco", is the new face of opera and classical music outreach/education programs. Ironically, the terms "outreach" and "education" are not used as descriptors for this program, and are actually frowned upon. Laura Canning, Director of HGO Studio, said in an interview, "We don't believe that it is relevant or appropriate, or indeed polite, to presume that if we could just get them [those in the community who do not normally come to opera] in the house that then they would understand" (Canning, 2011). She goes on to add,

The aim is not to make them buy a ticket. The aim is to make them realize that HGO is a company that can be relevant to them. That Houston is a better place to live because HGO is here, even if they never set foot inside the opera house (2011).

Houston Grand Opera prefers to view their community programs as a way to engage their communities, meeting them where they are, and around topics that relate to them. As the program is succinctly described on its website, “Opera tells stories through words and music. Every culture has a musical storytelling tradition, providing the common ground on which HGOco builds new and lasting relationships with the communities we serve” (Houston Grand Opera, 2011). There is no pretention; no ‘divulging opera to the masses from an ivory tower’ tone to their writing, or to their actions for that matter. There is no ulterior motive to get them to come to the opera house. In fact, none of the performances related to this program even occur in the opera house (Dobrzynski, 2011; Houston Grand Opera, 2011). As General Director Anthony Freud points out, there is no one-size-fits-all program, “I don't believe in a generic approach to a generic opera company,” he says, “but what we're doing here should have relevance in every U.S. city” (Freud as cited in Dobrzynski, 2011). This view is certainly a departure from the old idea of “outreach” that approached the situation from the perspective of “us” and “them”, and that “we” have something to share with them “them”. The latest philosophy in audience engagement, as exhibited by HGOco, takes the position that an opera company can and should learn equally as much from their community. Engagement should be a conversation, not a lecture.

While there are many aspects of HGOco, including teacher workshops, Storybook Opera (an opera series designed especially for K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade), and opera camps, there is a

program called Song of Houston that is especially unique. This program seeks to utilize the talent, creativity and stories that already exist amongst the people of Houston, and that make the community the unique place that it is. As described on the HGOco website, Song of Houston is

...an ongoing series of new works that share the stories of Houstonians who define the unique character of our city...These stories...push the limits of the traditional arts and incorporate music-making, photography, creative writing and visual art (Houston Grand Opera, 2011).

Another factor in the development of the modern audience mindset stems from the decline experienced in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in personal music making. Sinclair Lewis caricatured the “consumerist society” of the 1920s as one that “...set America above the ‘decayed nations of Europe’ yet reveres phonographic Verdi...” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 396). Another less literary and more concrete example of the decline of music-making in America was evidenced in a sociological study conducted in 1929 called *Middletown*. This study, actually a study of families in Muncie, Indiana, documented that, “music for adults...almost ceased to be a matter of spontaneous, active participation...The American citizen’s first duty to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer. Consumption is a new necessity” (as cited in Horowitz, 2005, p. 396). One sees this idea of “consumption as necessity” equally applied to art and music as well. Music has more and more become a passive, consumer experience, as opposed to a personal, creative experience.

The tradition of music-making in the home died in the twentieth century, giving way instead to the passive music experience afforded by the phonograph and radio, and a consumerist-oriented cultural mindset obsessed with celebrity and novelty allowed for the

then young recording industry to survive The Great Depression and give birth to an era where, "...destitute families valued their radios over refrigerators, furniture, and bedding" (2005, p. 398). The early foundations were thus laid for an American culture that would, over the next one hundred years, become less and less interested in private music making in the home – *Hausmusik* as it is called in German – and more and more fascinated and drawn to the numerous ways in which to experience music via electronic, superficial means.



## CHAPTER 6

### OPERA IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Opera and classical music are always seemingly on the verge of a crisis, yet simultaneously hopeful of an impending return to prominence (Horowitz, 2005; Lebrecht, 2007; Pleasants, 1989; Sandow, 2010). Whether it is due to the constant struggle of locating funding, the fear of declining attendance, the lack of arts education, the lack of well supported American opera tradition, or the alleged debilitating influence popular culture and technology have on the ability for opera to attract new audiences, opera always seems to be up against some sort of challenge. One of the earliest instances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of an expressed crisis due to technology came in 1955 at the annual symphony convention in Cincinnati where orchestra managers expressed their concern that the growing popularity of television would prove severely detrimental to concert attendance (Scheff et al., 1997). Interestingly enough, as Scheff points out, the three decades that followed this initial scare proved to be one of the largest growth periods in performing arts history in the United States (1997). Ardis Krainik, former head of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, said in 1991:

We are not yet out of the woods. The true effects of the recession and its aftermath have not been fully felt. The next few years will be particularly crucial. And so, I believe the challenges before us are clear: to weather the fiscal storm, to adopt a positive attitude that tells the world that what we do and what we offer is unique, exciting and indispensable, and to prepare for the future by creating an environment that is reflective of our times and of our changing society (Krainik as cited in Rourke, 2011).

This statement, if not for the year it was made in, would be no different from what is often heard today about opera.

Opera seems to live in a world of perpetual destruction, only to be saved again and again by generous patrons and more effective marketing. Can opera always expect to exist in an unending state of crisis? Will it always find itself in an unending struggle with finances, increasingly changing trends in the expectations and demands of audiences and developments in technology? It may not all be as bad as it appears. Scheff and Kotler point out that while there may be individual opera companies in crisis, this does not reflect a crisis for the entire field, saying,

...the struggle of one organization or even a group of organizations does not sound a death knell for the industry as a whole, any more than the troubles faced by such companies as IBM and Chrysler in the early 1990s meant that the entire computer and automobile industries were at risk (Scheff et al., 1997).

Be that as it may, these questions have been asked and continually solved throughout the entire history of opera. Is opera at yet another turning point in its historical development? This is still uncertain. This section examines the various trends and developments both to opera, as well as various elements of our consumer and entertainment culture that will or are currently contributing to a shift in what opera is, how it is experienced, and by whom.

A more intriguing question to ask is, if opera is supposedly a dying art form, then why do so many new opera companies keep appearing? Could the problem be oversaturation of the market, rather than a decline of the art form? Since the year 2000 the number of professional opera companies in North America and Canada has exceeded 100. More importantly, 70 percent of these companies formed since 1960, and over half have formed since 1970 (Opera America, 2010b). The reason for this time frame is

because this is also the point in history when the Met stopped its national tours. Having helped grow an audience in mid-size cities throughout the country for many decades, the disappearance of the Met tours created a vacuum in which regional opera companies filled. This number only includes the professional member companies who belong to Opera America, and does not include the numerous smaller organizations that offer their own niche opera experience, and are not organization members of Opera America. Opera America defines ‘professional’ opera companies in the USA or Canada as one that regularly produces at least two performances of at least two operatic works per annum and pays its performers and its administrative staff. Additionally, the number of professional opera performances in North America rose from just over 1300 in the year 1980 to 2100 in the year 2000 (Snowman, 2009).

Sociologist David Evans makes a distinction between what he calls, “opera” (commodified cultural artifact in performance) and ‘opera’ (commodified entertainment fragments outside the opera house) (Evans, 1999). In his view, there is a social difference between opera in the opera house, and opera as experienced in television, film soundtracks, CD compilations, etc. Storey has a similar but slightly different take on the same idea. He does not think it is so easy simply to separate art and entertainment as simply commodities. He says:

Perhaps a more productive way to understand what is happening to opera is not to see it in terms of commodities but in terms of social practices of consumption. In other words, it is how and by whom opera is consumed which determines whether it is art or entertainment. This is because the difference between what counts as elite and popular culture is never simply a question of the material qualities of particular commodities (Storey, 2002, p. 44).

As Storey points out, "...what counts as popular culture in one historical period can become elite culture in another (and vice versa)"(2002, p. 44). Storey goes on to quote Hall, who says what really matters are "the forces and relations which sustain the distinction, the difference...the relations of power which are constantly punctuating and dividing the domain of culture into...dominant and subordinate formations" (2002, p. 44).

To use a non-opera related example of how this theory works, take the idea of how certain elements of high fashion are adopted as byproducts for mass consumption. Louis Vuitton, for example, has been synonymous with quality and a status symbol for wealth for a very long time. Today, however, the various types of accessories, all bearing a similar distinctive design, can be found hanging off the shoulders of many a pedestrian in any modern city. The important distinction to make, however, is that the majority of these people are owners of Louis Vuitton fakes – products made to look like the real thing, but that can be purchased from a street vendor for a fraction of the cost in any major metropolis. Therefore, Louis Vuitton's impact as a status symbol has been greatly reduced because of its increased availability, regardless of the fact that the majority of bags owned are counterfeit. Those who can actually afford the real thing, and who genuinely care about using accessories as status symbols, simply move on to find something even more exclusive and unattainable to the masses.

This same mindset of attributing a certain object or activity to status applies equally as much to some who attend opera. The people who view opera in this way, will, for the same reasons as those who switch from Louis Vuitton to something else, fight against the idea that opera should, or is even able to relate to a wide range of people.

Whenever something from the opera world somehow manages to successfully break-out into popular culture, it will somehow always be discounted by some in the opera world as being a less than acceptable representation of opera for a variety of reasons. The legendary tenor, John Vickers was adamantly opposed to the idea saying, "...We mustn't smear the line between art and entertainment... You cannot bring art to the masses... You never will" (Vickers as cited in Levine, 1988, p. 255).

No recount of opera's evolution in America would be complete without accounting for the recent historical trend of performing operas in their original language, and the implementation of supertitles (Snowman, 2009). As was recounted earlier, opera began in America as primarily a foreign art form performed in English. As aesthetic and sociological elements shifted, however, disdain formed around performing foreign language operas in English, as well as disregard for any semblance of a homegrown American opera tradition. Interestingly, as little as 50 or 60 years ago, there was somewhat of a resurgence of performing opera in English, many American opera houses performed operas either in English, or in Italian, since that was the accepted 'language of opera'. However, by end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost all major opera houses reverted again to performing works in their original language. This move towards adopting the original language is seemingly counter-productive, for, as Snowman indicates, "Why would potential audiences in the twenty-first century be any more receptive than those of earlier times to opera performed in a language they did not understand?"(2009, p. 407). One invention, in particular, changed everything.

Supertitles, or "surtitles" as they are sometimes called, were developed in the early 1980s by the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. Opinion was divided from the

beginning. For many tried and true traditional opera-goers, there was the aesthetic argument that titles were a distraction and diverted attention away from the art on stage and thus the art. Former head of production at the English National Opera, David Pountney, colorfully expressed his disdain for the new technology being implemented at his company, saying a supertitle was analogous to a “celluloid condom inserted between the audience and the immediate gratification of understanding” (2009, p. 409). Another argument against supertitles stated that they would “effectively kill the opera-in-English movement” (Horowitz, 2005). However, as with most things, there was a trade-off. Audiences could now understand in real-time the precise comedic moments in a Rossini opera, but there would also be a loss in immediacy between the audience and the singer. Now, audiences would have to divide their attention between looking up at a screen and watching for emotional cues from the actors on stage. On the positive side, as Horowitz explains, it opened up the willingness of companies to experiment with lesser-known as well as new American operas (2005).

There was also the elitist exclusionist argument made by some, including some on the Met’s board that since they had gone through the trouble of learning the librettos inside and out, why shouldn’t everyone else have to do the same (Michener & Volpe, 2006)? As evidenced by this last example, the backlash from some was in part motivated by a desire not to allow more accessibility to the art form, thus denying an even wider audience access to what some saw as their own exclusive club. Contrary opinion felt that supertitles allowed an audience to better understand the action on stage. Storey claims there were three main rationales for supporting the addition of surtitles: they would accommodate tourists, help justify higher-government subsidies, and attract corporate

sponsorship (Storey, 2002). Despite the backlash from many traditionalists in the opera community, the use of supertitles prevailed as is evidenced by their incorporation into virtually every opera house in the United States, including the illustrious Metropolitan Opera in the form of their own unique version known as “Met Titles”(Michener & Volpe, 2006).

Another important occurrence of opera in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the increased focus placed on opera as performance over opera as a creative art. As Horowitz recounts, “Supplanting the creative act, the act of performance became the defining focus of American classical music: the great orchestra, the great opera house, the great conductor, violinist, pianist, or singer” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 384). He goes on to say that, “The most obvious shortcoming of the culture of performance was its tendency to treat performance as an end in itself” (2005, p. 384). Whether the influence of star singers, star conductors, or star pianists during the cultural diplomacy battles of the Cold War, the focus of importance has continually bolstered around the spectacle of performing, and the big personalities that went with it. Because of this, an American creative tradition within the classical arts, has never taken off the way it did with the commercialized performing arts; there was simply not the cultural support needed.

Henry Krehbiel prophesized in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that until America fully supports opera in “the vernacular”, created and performed by “native talent”, opera will continue to be viewed as an “experimental”, “exotic”, “expensive thrill” that merely perpetuates an audience that values sensation over domestic creativity (Krehbiel as cited in Horowitz, 2005). The Met perpetuated this thinking, relying on familiar operatic works merely as vehicles for celebrity performers. As Horowitz laments, “We have

witnessed in its [the Met] manifestations the culture of performance, supplanting the creative act as the locus of American classical music” (2005, p. 360). Adding that the Met, self-proclaimed as “the world’s greatest opera house”, became known for its “collection of great names” rather than its support of creative endeavors in American opera. However, to be fair, the Met has in recent decades supported the staging of new American works, and has taken a position of leadership in supporting American singers with its yearly search for American talent through its National Council Auditions, Lindemann Young Artist Development Program partnership, as well as a partnership with The Juilliard School.

In 1944, the opera culture that was obsessed with performance received a breath of fresh, creative air with the establishment of the New York City Opera (NYCO) (Horowitz, 2005). Reminiscent of the motivations surrounding the support of Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera five decades prior, NYCO was founded by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia on the still popular wave of the Federal Works Progress Administration and its support of American creative efforts. With support of such American composers as Jerome Kern, Carlo Menotti, William Grant Still, Aaron Copland and Marc Blitzstein, “City Opera” provided the antidote, or at least a reprieve, from the predictable, albeit grand vision of the Met. As Horowitz concludes, “...City Opera overthrew the culture of performance: as surely as the opera madness of the nineteenth century, it demonstrated that opera in the United States need not be “an exotic” (2005, p. 383).

Just like the Manhattan Opera provided an alternative to the grand opera of the Met in the early 1900s, and the The New York City Opera did and still does today, so too



does a relatively young organization known as the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). It's original impresario, Harvey Lichtenstein realized that if BAM was to amount to anything it would have to draw patrons from Manhattan and thus offer something that Manhattan did not have. As such it was one of the first established companies to embrace the minimalist music movement, with works like *Einstein on the Beach* and other minimalists such as Adams and Reich, but also staged rare French Baroque works (Horowitz, 2005). BAM was doing something different, and because of this, other companies wanted to copy it. BAM exhibited yet again the lesson that NYCO and Manhattan Opera taught at different times in the history of American opera companies; just because the Met isn't doing it doesn't mean it cannot be successful.

An interesting shift in the mid-twentieth century, as pointed out by Daniel Snowman, was not only the increased importance placed on performance practices, but on authentic performance practices (Snowman, 2009). Also known as the "historical performance" movement (Horowitz, 2005), this went simply beyond the idea of playing on authentic instruments, but extended also to exacting appropriate pitch frequencies that instruments should be tuned at, and comparing original manuscripts to reprinted versions to try and determine the composers original intent. The days of editing out parts of a piece, or allowing large amounts of artistic interpretation, were frowned upon as not being true to the creator's intention. A by product of this new obsession with historical musical correctness was that many major opera houses began to widen their repertoire, thus being open to the idea of staging lesser known works. Ironically, as Horowitz points out, "...the post-Baroque historical performance movement failed to discover fresh

repertoire; rather, it became a fresh branch of the culture of performance” (Horowitz, 2005, p. 510).

However, while the canon of works performed throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been primarily rooted in the distant past, the opposite is true for the productions they have received in recent decades. While modern musicians have grown increasingly interested in the authenticity of the music, the opposite can be said of operatic producers and directors (Snowman, 2009). If the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were the time of “the singers opera”, then the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries can easily be called “the director’s opera” or the German term “regie opera”, if only for the simple fact that the focus in opera has noticeably shifted from the power of the star singer, to the power of the star director/producer. Greg Sandow says, “...in the old days, opera was about singers. Stage directors, for the most part, got very little publicity or attention, and often conductors didn’t. You went to hear the singers” (Sandow, 2011a).

According to Snowman, by the turn of the 21st century, “Musical values...were fastidiously conservative, dramatic ones sometimes provocatively avant-garde” (Snowman, 2009, p. 410). This new style of direction has been met with continuing backlash from those who adopt a more conservative view of the art form. Former Met general manager Joseph Volpe says in his memoir:

...I had developed a real distaste for what the Europeans call “regie opera” – productions in which a director transforms a work into something unrecognizable, according to some personal “vision.”...Forget about opera as spectacle, as entertainment, as enjoyment. These pedants, who were pretending to be innovators, were really doing commentaries about opera (Michener & Volpe, 2006, p. 123).

While one side of this resentment, as expressed by Volpe, is due to the valid idea that

some regie-theater productions transformed the piece into something unrecognizable and hence not enjoyable, another part of this backlash is based around the expectations many traditional audience members have of what opera should “look like”. Ian Campbell, general manager of the San Diego Opera says, "We've locked audiences into a kind of canon, because we keep repeating productions — they're just too expensive to use and then just throw away." The consequence being that, "...now many people still go to the opera to hear with their eyes" (Campbell as cited in Taylor, 2011).

Consequentially, it can be argued that an entire generation of American opera audiences have been trained through performance traditions to expect opera to look a certain way. In going to “hear with their eyes”, many traditional audience members will dismiss from the beginning any attempts at minimalism or modernizing of operas that in their view belong to a certain era, and thus should remain within the confines of that era’s aesthetic framework. It could also be argued that the very expectation of opera for many Americans is that it will be a spectacular foreign experience, albeit one they enjoy.

This common notion of opera for many Americans, as a grand and elegant spectacle in period costume, is not one that is generally supported by the varying artistic visions of modern directors. Modern directors want to create, reinvent and renew opera. They see opera not as an art from the past to be re-staged and re-created with the utmost historical accuracy, but as a living art form that should be reflective of the norms of values of modern society. As the late director John Dexter wrote in his diary in response from the Metropolitan Opera board asking him to keep costs low for his productions:

Economy is not a policy, it is a fact. Imagination/Simplicity is a policy...Opera and drama are not a drug for the feeble-minded, they are an essential enhancement of our lives from which we can enrich ourselves and from which we can learn.

Only when the operatic stage can share the freedom of the dramatic stage can the medium exist in the twentieth century and maybe help us understand the world and ourselves, instead of remaining the morphine of the over-privileged (Dexter as cited in Michener & Volpe, 2006, pp. 71-72).

While not entirely representative of all audiences, there is still a significant portion of the modern audience who refuses to recognize anything post-Puccini as being opera, either musically or aesthetically. This idea ties into the history of opera in America has having always been seen as a form of foreign entertainment, and is likely perpetuated by this notion and the fact that the American operatic tradition, while expanding and improving in recent decades, is still not widely recognized as a viable and living American tradition the same way Broadway musicals are. According to Evans,

Defense of the 'pure', 'original' work as written, directed and performed, is frequently used to signal an attack on producers who impose their radical 'idée' employed as attempts to make works meaningful to modern audiences, to liberate them from culinary practice and museum dust (Evans, 1999, p. 294).

Evans warns that exotic productions are all well and good, but they do not exist in a vacuum. He says of operas that have an established performance tradition but are done in a radically new way, "...what is usually forgotten is that opera is an institution, theatres and companies have traditions, audiences who pay and who must be retained, indeed opera's audiences are in several senses retainers of a certain age and outlook" (1999, pp. 325-326). Therefore, in the end, there will always seemingly be a consistent tug of war between the audience that wants something they can immediately recognize, and the directors that want to challenge and push their audiences to new places aesthetically.

Ultimately, says Snowman, the idea that we can exactly replicate how operas written in the past were intended to be experienced is an impossible feat (Snowman,

2009). Simply put, audiences today do not, and cannot, approach a piece written by Mozart for example, the same way the audience did during Mozart's time. Paul Hindemith commented on this subject, saying, "Our spirit of life is not identical with that of our ancestors, and therefore their music, even if restored with utter technical perfection, can never have to us precisely the same meaning it had for them" (Hindemith as cited in Horowitz, 2005, p. 510). The simple notion of what theatre and opera meant to people in past centuries is not the same as what it means to people now, especially in America. The live performing arts in general, not just opera, are further separated from our daily lives now more than ever, a reality that didn't apply to an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century people who viewed the arts and theatre as a primary source of entertainment. As Snowman says,

In many ways, the cinema and stadium became the latter-day counterparts to the opera house of an earlier age, twentieth century temples offering the exhilaration of being present at a communally shared, somewhat ritualized socio-artistic experience (Snowman, 2009, p. 417).

How can opera still adequately compete with these modern equivalents? Perhaps the answer lies in not trying to compete with them directly, but by highlighting the ways in which opera is a different experience than television or movies. Explaining how opera, like anything live, is unpredictable and more visceral than a taped movie or television show, simply because it is live, and anything can happen.

Today, our cultural perspective and filter is not the same as Mozart's original audience. We simply hear things through a different lens. As Snowman opines, "Today's opera goers have heard Bartók and Stravinsky, know about Auschwitz and Hiroshima and are at home in a world of film, jet planes, computers and global terrorism"

(2009, p. 396). Also, period productions, whether set in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, will likely reflect that period more than the period in which the piece was written. As Ian Campbell adds, “Even a detailed period set of the Elizabethan era that was designed in the 1960s will ultimately say more about the ‘60s than the late 16<sup>th</sup> century” (Campbell as cited in Taylor, 2011). Herbert Lindenberger also points out that we must keep in mind the context under which certain operas and styles of opera were created, as well as the emotional experiences and audiences for which they were intended (Lindenberger, 2010). These original emotional intentions might not resonate with modern audiences the same way they did for audiences that the time of their creation. For example, the *opera seria* genre catered to an audience that “...allowed its social activities in the boxes to be interrupted only for momentary thrills...”(2010, p. 67). Thus, the genre is structured with little musical continuity, allowing for multiple interruptions in the music. Sharply contrasting this style are the operas by Wagner which seamlessly stream music and drama together into one continuous, enveloping experience, intended to emotionally transport the audience for hours on end without any interruption (2010). These elements of operas’ creative history must take into account the influences of the speed and ease of Web 2.0, the ubiquity of media and music, the heightened competition for people’s attention, and the increased personalization of all things related to consumerism and entertainment on the modern audiences’ perspective.

As opera became increasingly global, the new buzz word among opera administrators became ‘Opera for All’(Snowman, 2009). The idea that ‘opera was for all’ pervaded the marketing and outreach messages put out by opera companies in an effort to attract vast new audiences. As Snowman says, “...old and young, black and

white, gay and straight, rich and poor were all invited to climb onto the operatic omnibus” (2009, p. 398). Kennicott concurs, but is doubtful of this phenomenon’s positive side, saying one of the biggest mistakes of the opera industry was,

...the idea that opera could be enjoyed without any particular understanding of the art form...the message went out: opera is a transparent medium, no different in the challenges it poses from the cinema or television. This was absurd, of course, but it seemed to offer promise for bringing in the uninitiated. Fear not the arcana[sic] of the art form – just listen (Kennicott, 2006).

Kennicott explains why he thinks this striving for mass appeal in opera is for naught:

Without an understanding of the mechanics and history of the art form, it becomes very difficult to fix any particular performance in the memory. Baseball fans can spend hours citing statistics and debating the fine points of a big game. For the casual operagoer, there is no context. If the basic structure of a piece of music isn’t known, you can’t point to a musical event. You can’t say where the pitch went astray, or an ornament was inserted or a money-note interpolated. You can’t make comparisons, or sustain much of a conversation about the evening. Opera becomes a generalized, generic experience. And people aren’t necessarily willing to invest hours at a time in something that can’t be effectively retained, analyzed, compared and argued about (2006).

Greg Sandow, author and Juilliard professor, would likely disagree with this notion of the need to prepare musically before listening to opera. In a recent newsletter he sent out to subscribers, he posted a song called “An Echo, A Stain” by the artist Björk from her 2001 album *Vespertine*, an album that has sold two million copies worldwide, and asked the simple question, “...how many people who bought the album needed special education – a pre-album lecture? – before they could like this song. It’s complicated music!”(Sandow, 2011b). He goes on to argue that likely nobody needed musical education and preparation to relate to or understand the Björk piece. The reason

for this is that although her music is complex, it speaks to our culture in a familiar way that pieces by Haydn or Tchaikovsky do not.

The question of the need for familiarity with opera and/or music in general in order to like and appreciate is divided—those who think familiarity is necessary for enjoyment, and those who do not. There are also those who will argue that opera is and always has been a niche interest, and that the notion of opera being widely popular is unrealistic. This is an interesting notion considering that at the dawn of the age of music recording, the highest selling record was a series of opera arias sung by the tenor Enrico Caruso (Lebrecht, 2007). Granted, there was not much else being recorded at the time, and the sheer novelty of recording certainly contributed to some of this success, but it is apparent that this music spoke to a lot of people.

Coupled with the importance placed on performance culture was corresponding influence it played in the classical music recording industry and the related celebrity culture that was born from it. According to Horowitz, the performance culture spurred on a recording culture obsessed with perfection and of getting a unique yet different sound for each performer (Horowitz, 2005). At first feared to act as the demise of live attendance, recording of classical music actually proved to be an effective tool in creating demand for live performance, even while it simultaneously perpetuated the expectation of certain performance standards and the culture of performance and celebrity.

The downside of this expansion is explained by Horowitz in terms of “the circle of readers” becoming too wide (2005). He says that unlike the increases in access that occurred at various other points in history, the difference now is not only that the varying means of exposure have increased considerably, but also that the “circle of readers” are



no longer “doers” as well. They are increasingly an audience that expects to hear specific things in live performance, but who also are so divorced from the act of personal music-making that their musical understanding is rooted almost entirely in films like *Fantasia* and music appreciation albums like “The Only Classical CD You’ll Ever Need!”, both of which enforce nothing more than a superficial sampling of the repertoire and reinforce the expectation that opera and classical music are artistically no different than a pop song, can and should be condensed into easily digestible tidbits. The culture of “Be Your Own Music Critic”, an early precursor to the now unquestioned ubiquity of personalized playlists, has empowered the average listener to feel confident in their own musical choices, absent any real knowledge of what they chose.

The consequence of this, as described by Horowitz, was that they, “...segregated and mystified the learned practitioner who could read notes and purvey them for a paying audience...newly professionalized, the [professional] performer was also newly rarified” (2005, p. 409). This mystified view of the professional musician, a new concept in the 20th century where the lines between “amateur” and “professional” were more clearly drawn, added to the ingredients of a perfect storm that would ultimately further devalue amateur music making in favor of professional performance. Now, in the 21st century, we have seen a move in the opposite direction. Now, ideas around “the amateur” are valued, sometimes more than the professional. With the online platforms like YouTube and MySpace, and countless reality shows that feature the amateur in numerous different artistic and creative forms, artists and other creative types now live in a culture that values the amateur story over the professional one.

Interestingly enough, the notion of a best selling classical recording is more and more becoming an exercise in comparing current sales against past, and noting the ever-increasing decrease. According to Norman Lebrecht, since Caruso's recording of arias in 1903, there have only been 25 classical albums to sell over a million copies, and 19 individual artists who have sold in excess of 7 million copies of their various albums (Lebrecht, 2007). Lebrecht makes a point to note however that the chart is deceptive, as there are hundreds of classical records that have sold in excess of half a million records, and that thousands more have made profits from their recordings.

He points out that classical music recording was at one time a profitable enterprise. Even the Great Depression did not have a lasting impact on sales. According to Horowitz, "RCA Victor sales increased sixfold between 1933 and 1938, with symphonic releases leading the way" (Lebrecht as cited in Horowitz, 2005, p. 398). Lebrecht estimates total classical sales of all time, including all top selling albums and artists, to be between 1 and 1.3 billion records (Lebrecht, 2007). Pop music sales, in comparison, has fifteen pop artists topping 200 million sales, and fifty-eight making it too 100 million (2007). These numbers have likely increased since Lebrecht listed these figures in 2007. The trend is clear. The vast majority of recordings sold since the beginning of recording music have been accomplished by what we consider popular artists.

Another societal event that occurred towards the latter half of the 20th century was the decline of opera singer celebrity. Since the tours of Jenny Lind, Americans fawned over the celebrity of such personalities as Rosa Ponselle, Roberta Peters, Enrico Caruso, Maria Callas, Birgit Nilsson, Joan Sutherland, to name just a few. This presents

a challenge for a business that for the longest time has relied on the celebrity of its star singers to bring in the audiences. As Joseph Volpe says,

Let's face it: opera stars don't enjoy the popular esteem they used to. For the Met, which has been a house of stars from the beginning, the decline of opera celebrity has presented a real challenge (Michener & Volpe, 2006).

Volpe's point is a valid one. In a culture that thrives on celebrity, and where celebrity is often achieved simply for being controversial (see Anna Nicole Smith or Paris Hilton), it is a serious problem when one's form of entertainment, opera in this instance, lacks the backing of corporate media conglomerates willing to put up the millions of marketing and research and development dollars needed to produce, market and sell the ideal American celebrity experience. This was not always the case for opera in America.

The decline in celebrity is also due in part to the media's decreasing coverage over the decades of all things related to opera. Roberta Peters appeared sixty-five times on *The Ed Sullivan Show* – more than any other performer, classical or popular (2006). Darren K. Woods, general director of The Fort Worth Opera, said in an interview,

Back in the days, not even as long ago as Johnny Carson and *The Tonight Show*, opera singers were regularly featured... You could also regularly count on people like [Maria] Callas... showing up on the front page of The New York Times... that press doesn't really exist anymore (Woods, 2011).

Today, mainstream media has decided, for the most part, that opera is no longer worthy of coverage other than on the pages of the arts section, and even that is declining (Heilbrun, 1997). The stratification of media and the decline of mass produced classical music recording have taken their toll on opera celebrity and consequentially opera's

ability to appeal to a wider audience and to a culture obsessed by celebrity and scandal.

As Joseph Volpe says,

Opera, the most worldly of entertainments, has become an otherworldly activity to people obsessed with the “news” and blips of pop culture at the expense of knowing anything about their roots in an older, deeper culture (Michener & Volpe, 2006, p. 264).

People today, especially in wealthy western countries like the United States, have access to opera in more ways than ever before. John Storey argues that the modern idea that opera can again be just another form of entertainment, so long as one does the proper “opera as homework”, is reflective of “...the success of the project to invent opera as high culture” (Storey, 2002, p. 37). By “opera homework” he is referring to the influx of modern books designed for the lay reader on how to understand opera. One example of books like this is produced by the infamous “for Dummies” books one can find on almost any subject. There has been much resistance over time, however, to the incorporation of opera into popular culture.

This idea of elitism in opera culture is acknowledged in the books designed for newcomers to opera. *Opera: The Rough Guide* maintains that “opera remains off-putting for too many people. Partly this is due to the social exclusivity cultivated by many opera houses” (Storey, 2002, p. 39). *Opera: A Crash Course* promises “to help you penetrate the miasma of social snobbery that envelops opera everywhere except Italy” (2002, p. 39). The opening blurb of *Opera for Dummies* says: “Attend a live opera in style with tips for sitting in the right place, wearing the right clothes, and more!” (2002, p. 39). In all these introductory texts, the prevailing notion is clearly, ‘opera is foreign, exclusive, snobbish, but we’ll show you how to act so as not to stick out.’ If this is how mass-

produced access to opera looks, then is it any wonder why the idea of opera as elitist, snobbish, etc., prevails?

Record companies continued to focus on celebrity and the idea of “crossover” as their marketing strategy of choice for many classical artists in the 1980s and 1990s, and to some extent still do today. A historical example of opera’s celebrity-crossover success was in 1990 when Luciano Pavarotti sang the aria “Nessun Dorma” from Puccini’s opera *Turandot* as the theme song for the 1990 FIFA World Cup games. Sporting this sponsorship and exposure due to FIFA, “Nessun Dorma” reached the top of the ratings charts (Lebrecht, 2007). It is also because of this aria’s popularity that many opera purists at the time dismissed its legitimacy and relegated it to the realm of “lower” culture. As a reporter for the Sunday Times noted at the time,

The explosion of popular interest in opera in the 1980s worried people who were attracted by its elitist aura. These are the types who threw away their CDs of *Turandot* and complain when they heard the plumber whistling “Nessun Dorma” (Storey, 2002, p. 42).

A criticism of this type of mass-public opera performance, as also exhibited by the popular success of The Three Tenors concerts, is presented by Evans:

All their individual ‘miked’, mass audience ‘aircraft hangar’ affairs with the technical paraphernalia of the sporting events which they simulate-...-popularize ‘opera’ as general entertainment, promote singers as personalities, cash in on their ‘equity’ more than that of their arias, but by all criteria...do not seem to create greater popularity for the original source of this equity (Evans, 1999, p. 353).

A more modern example of an opera singer’s crossover into popular culture is that of the star American soprano Renée Fleming. Described by some as “the people’s diva” (Conrad, 2010), she has created numerous crossover albums with what society

considers “popular artists”. Joseph Volpe says why he thinks Fleming has had such success not only in opera, but also outside of opera circles. He says,

She wants it all. She’s the girl next door; she’s the diva who’s dressed to kill; she’s classical; she’s pop; she’s a serious musician; she’s a celebrity; she’s the mother of two daughters; she’s a career woman. And she never gives up (Michener & Volpe, 2006).

Fleming’s latest album, released in 2010 and titled *Dark Hope*, features her covering songs by the highly popular indie rock group Death Cab for Cutie, and the 2011 Grammy winner for Album of the Year, Arcade Fire (Conrad, 2010). Peter Conrad describes her version of the Death Cab for Cutie track, “When Soul Meets Body”, saying, “Operatic heroines are exalted, transcendent beings but here the soaring angel, who leaves a vapour[sic] trail of beatific tone behind her when she sings Desdemona’s “Ave Maria” from Verdi’s *Otello*, has come down to ground” (2010).

However, Fleming’s album and other artistic crossovers like it, beg the question, “Who cares?” What is the point? Are Death Cab for Cutie and Arcade Fire fans in New York now going to flock to the Metropolitan Opera to see Ms. Fleming sing in *Capriccio*, *Armida*, or *Der Rosenkavalier*? Conversely, are people who typically buy Fleming’s opera albums going to go to see Arcade Fire? Perhaps, but then again, those that would probably would have anyway. There are naturally people who like all kinds of music; people who like both Fleming and Death Cab for Cutie in their own realms. However, it is seriously doubtful this album and others like it will draw new audiences to either side. That being said, Fleming’s rationale for making the album is as good as any, and deserves respect. She says, “We love it when people fail, of course. But if I don’t stretch the limits and break the rules, I’ll

bore people – I'll even bore myself! So I just have to continue pushing the boulder uphill” (Flemming as cited in Conrad, 2010).

Regardless of ideology and gumption, however, there will always remain those who dismiss classical crossover albums as a waste of artistic resource. As a Daily Telegraph reporter in 1995 wrote critically of the crossovers at the time, “If Dinah Sheridan and Frank Sinatra had announced that they were doing *Tristan und Isolde*, we’d pelt them with rotten fruit. Yet when the opera cats do show toons[sic], it’s somehow seen as ennobling the material” (Evans, 1999, p. 360). In answering the question many opera crossover artists ask, that of ‘Why should my voice be exclusive to opera?’ the same author responds, “Well, because that’s what it’s good at”(p.360). Evidently, the advice has not stuck.

At the end of the 20th century, however, some in the opera field were still optimistic about opera’s future in North America. Paul Baker wrote in the journal *Opera Canada* in 1999 that, “As the end of the millennium approaches...most would agree that, as an art form and a business opera stands proudly in the full flush of excellent health” (Baker, 1999). However, as the millennium came and went, opera companies were suddenly faced with a multitude of new challenges never before encountered. The extreme influx of new media technology into the realm of entertainment, an increasingly stratified media culture, a cultural environment increasingly wary of traditional authority, not to mention the stringent economic conditions plaguing all arts organization’s budgets, would pose a threat to the cheery outlook some had for opera in decades prior. Plus, the horrific events of September 11, 2001, aside from forever changing the course of

America's presence in the world, also reminded us that the American culture and way of life is not exempt from the rogue, disestablishment forces of our world.

The dawn of globalized culture had reached the shores of America, and opera was not immune to its influence. The days of status quo operations had come to an end, at least for those companies who recognized the need for change. Many who did not are no longer around to talk about it. Opera companies now face an entirely different world in which to operate, both culturally and technologically, and the path is unclear. As one of the prime bastions of establishment culture, opera enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century with more questions than answers about how to proceed.



## CHAPTER 7

### OPERA IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

*"We need to take nostalgia seriously as an energizing impulse, maybe even a form of knowledge. The effort to revalue what has been lost can motivate serious historical inquiry; it can also cast a powerful light on the present."*

- Jackson Lears, historian

#### Problem of Opera Today

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century closed and the 21<sup>st</sup> century began, opera in America was available to more people than ever before. It could be found in every major city, and most mid-size cities as well. There were, however, some unintended consequences of this expansion, and the desire for opera to appeal to as many people as possible. Since 1965, the number of opera companies in the United States has nearly tripled from 46 to 129 full-time groups (Goodale, 2008). Snowman talks about these affects, or what he calls, the "globalization of opera". This section considers how opera's history has affected modern opera companies' ability to keep refreshing their audience pool. These challenges are examined in terms of how opera is marketed, the experience of opera in an opera house as opposed to other ways, the role of technology in opera and opera/popular culture crossovers. Also considered are the other challenges to opera's appeal as a desired form of leisure activity to modern audiences, and the highly democratized and consumer driven culture we all live in.

In 2005 the New York City Opera executed what the New York Times called a “relatively mild” public relations stunt in order to attract newer and younger audiences (Wakin, 2005). The day after their opening night, the company produced an 80-minute concert version of snippets from all the operas of the season. The pop singer Rufus Wainwright performed as part of the event, as did the group notoriously known for creating rock versions of popular opera arias, the East Village Opera Company. Better yet, all tickets for the event only cost \$25. The NYCO called the festival “Opera for All”. Paul Kellogg, former general and artistic director, said “For a lot of people, price and length of performances are obstacles to coming into an opera house” (Kellogg as cited in Wakin, 2005). He went on to say, “Also there is a sense of elitism that keeps people from coming into the doors” (Kellogg as cited in Wakin, 2005). Was this the new face of 21<sup>st</sup> century opera? Open to all? Hip? Anti-elitist? Cool?

Around the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century, and ever more increasingly due to the continual cultural upheaval caused by the high-tech revolution of communication and entertainment technologies, opera companies have continually strived to remain relevant. Experiencing opera has only become more varied and available as media technologies expand and improve, and more and more people are electing to experience opera and other classical art forms via non-traditional means. The data is not entirely clear regarding whether or not audiences are deciding to move away from live attendance at traditional art forms, or are moving more towards an artistic culture that supports and promotes self-creation, openness, and convenience. Also, the perception that audiences are now older, and that age is a reliable determinant of opera attendance, may be a misperception when taking into account certain societal factors like the rise of the Baby-Boom generation. Finding

ways to adapt opera to this cultural mindset; a cultural mindset that is becoming increasingly disconnected from the influences of traditional models of entertainment and cultural authority, will continue to be the challenge faced by opera companies for years to come. Interestingly, some argue the notion that opera is again gaining popularity, albeit in different ways than before, is an example of history repeating itself.

John Storey posits that, in a way, opera in America has come full circle. Is this an accurate statement? It depends on how one defines interaction with the art form, and what one calls “opera”, that makes all the difference. Storey’s main argument is that while opera is making a return to popularity similar to that seen in the mid and early 19th century as a form of both art and entertainment that simultaneously served both elite and main culture, the key distinctions between then and now are twofold.

First, there is a difference in what is experienced; the main distinguishing factor being the difference between opera that is experienced in an opera house, and opera that is experienced in other ways (Storey, 2002). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, one either experienced opera live, in an opera house or some other theatre, or they didn’t experience it at all. Today, an opera house experience is one among many ways Americans can experience opera. Secondly, there is different expectation for what art should be. As Joseph Volpe describes the social climate for opera towards the end of his tenure at the Met, “Art – along with language, food, fashion, and sex – had become political. Sincerity was out; irony was in. It wasn’t enough for opera to thrill; it had to provoke, explain, comment” (Michener & Volpe, 2006, p. 158).

Thirdly, the variety and amount of leisure activities and time to do them has significantly increased. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, one had relatively few choices for

entertainment and leisure outside of a good book and perhaps some music made at home. The amount of time required for a majority of working-class people to earn a living and survive was significantly higher than today. Therefore, if they were lucky, most people could only attend live entertainment like opera on occasion. Today, the options for entertainment and leisure are so boundless that any attempt to compile a summary would be pointless. As such, opera must now compete, as it did not before, with a slew of new entertainment and leisure options many of which are incredibly more convenient and affordable.

### Impact of Modern Technology and Direction on Opera

Today, opera's are produced using a variety of technologies unthinkable to the creators of the original works. Even something as simple as electric lighting, a technology we would not consider being without on today's opera stage, was not even a reality during the creation of the vast majority of operas now performed. Add to that list the use of digital lighting technology, projections, and TV monitors, and one can easily see how opera has adapted to its stagecraft to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Additionally, technology has affected the course of opera's aural history and traditions as well with the advent of recorded sound.

Ever since audio technology was first invented, people have tried to figure out ways to listen to music. For example, Alexander Graham Bell first created the telephone in order to hear opera performances from a distance (Evrard, 1997). Since the earliest days of live opera transmissions via closed telephone circuits to a select few (Snowman, 2009), early record playing devices such as the Vitrola, live transmission via radio and

later record mediums such as video-tape, compact disc and DVD, opera, like every other musical genre, has adapted to the increasingly rapid changes in musical entertainment consumption.

The ways in which modern audiences can now experience opera has grown by leaps and bounds. A few modern examples of how opera is utilizing new recording and entertainment technology include: live simulcasting in theatres and sports stadiums, recorded operas streamed over the internet on demand, operas downloadable as MP3s, and specialized television channels devoted to arts programming. As some would argue, this is only a natural and logical progression. John Seabrook notes,

As the web and related technology and media continued to shrink the distance between artists and potential audiences, the once-valid rationale for protecting the arts from the ravages of the mainstream marketplace lost ever more logic (Seabrook, 2000, p. 71).

Within the past ten years, the classical music and opera world have exhibited significant shifts in-line with this reasoning. The most famous of all these new adaptations is without a doubt *The Met: Live in HD* series.

According to the recently released National Arts Index 2010 report by Americans for the Arts, the Metropolitan Opera's *The Met: Live in HD* simulcasts twelve operas to 1,500 theatres in 46 countries, selling 2.4 million tickets (R. Cohen & Kushner, 2011), and the over all success of the broadcasts as well as the corresponding hype and auxiliary effects have been well documented (Brooks, 2008; Heyer, 2008; Isherwood, 2007; Midgette, 2008, 2010a, 2010c; Opera America, 2008; Schubin, 2007; Wakin, 2009). However, a study conducted by Opera America in 2008 showed that "the core audience for HD transmissions is moderate and frequent opera goers" (Opera America, 2008).

There is some promising data, however, that suggests that the perception of price for HD tickets is reasonable, thus allowing for a potential increase in ticket prices. Also, the majority of people surveyed indicated that they enjoy attending live opera and the Met HD programming equally, thus suggesting that the audience does not assume the HD transmissions replace live opera (2008). However, the demographics of the general audience surveyed were generally older and not a demographic that would typically substitute a live, more traditional experience with a new alternative form of technology. According to the survey, only 6% of attendees surveyed were younger than age 25 (2008).

Interestingly, younger HD attendees are more likely to say they prefer to attend live opera over HD transmissions than older people. In the section of the study looking at reasons for why people attended, the most common reason was that people wanted to see the particular opera being shown. The highest rated secondary factor was simply the fact that people wanted to see as much opera as possible (73 percent). The least rated secondary factor was from people who wanted to see if they like opera (12 percent). However, among non-traditional attendee groups, 25 percent said a very important reason for attending was to see if they like opera. While not overwhelming, this data suggests that HD transmissions are playing a role in attracting new audiences to opera (2008). However there are some, like Daniel Wakin of *The New York Times*, who states the study actually suggests the Met's claims about democratizing opera may be "exaggerated" (Wakin, 2009).

Other examples abound showing how opera companies are using modern communications technology in opera abound. A Swiss national television network has

taken to producing live prime-time opera programming (Gurewitsch, 2010). Audiences in New York City recently braved the elements to sit outside in the noisy center of Time Square to watch a live simulcast from the Met of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, begging the question, "are expectations for the opera experience changing and adapting to meet our modern electronic mediums?"(Nestruck, 2010). The San Francisco Opera and Washington National Opera have started a tradition of showing live simulcasts of opera in sports stadiums. Recent attendance numbers for 2010 of 32,000 for San Francisco's *Aida* and 11,000 for Washington National's Opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*, reflect the fact that if given the opportunity, and in a space and time that is convenient and comfortable, many people are open to experiencing opera.

Some of the more recent developments in the incorporation of new digital technology include the involvement of 3D technology. Either in the theater, as the English National Opera is doing with a production of *The Elixir of Love* (Hemley, 2011), or as part of the actual in house experience, as the Met recently announced it will do next season for *Siegfried*, the third installment of Robert Lepage's Ring Cycle (Wakin & Lohr, 2011). Even robots are part of the picture now, as American Repertory Theater staged the American premiere of *Death and the Powers*, an opera about how humans relate to technology told through the eyes of the main character who gives up on life "in the flesh" and downloads himself into "The System"(Lamb, 2011).

The composer Arnold Schoenberg wrote passionately towards the end of his life about the threats presented about the ever increasing audio/visual technologies being incorporated into entertainment, many of which he could never have foreseen:

We live in a visually oriented world. At a basic level we watch television and movies, much more often than we listen actively to music or even play it...our ears moreover have become lazy through disuse and through being pampered (or punished) by high decibel concerts or listening to music through earphones...we no longer...have the aural sensitivity our parents had...opera audiences greater emphasis (by being decreasingly musically sophisticated) is on the visual (Schoenberg as cited in Evans, 1999, p. 74).

Speaking to this sentiment, Seabrook says, “Pop songs did capture the zeitgeist in a way that longer, more complicated works like novels or plays or symphonies could not” (Seabrook, 2000). Adorno speaks of this same notion in terms of what he calls a “regression in listening” by modern listeners of music. As he explains, “...individual listeners lose ‘the capacity for conscious perception of music...they listen atomistically[sic] and dissociate what they hear...they are not childlike...but childish” (Adorno as cited in Evans, 1999, p. 77).

The use of new digital technologies to further modernize a 400 year-old art form can often be a double-edged sword. A long time patron of The Metropolitan Opera bitterly told *Vanity Fair* magazine in an in depth article about The Met and Peter Gelb that, “In trying to make the Met cool and downtown-y and glitzy, Gelb is pushing away the old audience” (Munk, 2010). Thus opera administrators across the country are, like Gelb, faced with a balancing act between pleasing the more traditional, often older audiences, while simultaneously trying new and innovative ideas to bring in the newer, younger ones.

The important thing many of the interviewees who participated in this thesis wanted to convey, was that it is not simply the incorporation of new technology into opera that threatens it, but how and for what purpose, that makes all the difference.



The American composer Jake Heggie said technology becomes a problem,

...when it becomes a showcase for technology rather than story-telling. Everything must be in service to the drama, and if one aspect of the production draws attention to itself, then suddenly it's not about the drama (Heggie, 2011).

Another downside to experiencing opera via some other medium other than the live experience is that it removes all concept of scale and individual perspective. As the opera director Chas Rader-Schieber said, "Point of view is removed when you don't see it [opera] in the theatre because you're giving that control over to the camera-operator, and the director of the broadcast" (Rader-Schieber, 2011). With regards to the lack of scale, he says,

Opera has a lot to do with scale... The scale of the house to the production, the scale of the audience to the stage, all of that is incredibly important...a broadcast does not retain a lot of that...you're this giant creature sitting in front of a tiny image (2011).

All uses of technology should not be done for the sake of simply using something new. In all those interviewed for this thesis, the sentiment was the same: technology must be used only if it makes artistic sense for the piece to incorporate it, and in terms of marketing, only if its use ultimately promotes the actual, live theatre experience.

The challenge is, in a world of computer screens and disjointed fast paced entertainment, to refocus opera as a relevant choice for shared experience (Baker, 1999). But what if the idea for what it means to have a "shared experience" has been redefined in the minds of a new generation of potential audiences? How can opera realign itself as a viable option for shared experience in a culture where "sharing an experience" with someone often means clicking a mouse? Naturally, there will always be those who prefer

live experiences as opposed to artificial, no matter how high the production value or how star-studded the cast. Laura Canning sums up this sentiment, saying,

...I would rather watch less than good singers and players on my local stage than watching the best of the best on a film. Because for me the power of the human voice and being there in the live performance and potential danger that brings, is what turns me on about the whole thing (Canning, 2011).

People who feel the way Canning feels about live performance are not the issue for opera. The issue is that opera, and increasingly other types of live performing arts, are not the preferred source of shared experience for a majority of people.

### Emerging Trends and Changes

The effects of a globalized world have certainly affected not only how opera is produced, but also who has access to opera and how. Daniel Snowman details some of the effects globalization have had on opera. One of the trends he points out is the increasing number of specific operatic productions being shown in many different cultures (Snowman, 2009). He points out that many of these popular productions are often driven by the popularity of particular singers. One recent example he gives is of the part played by soprano Natalie Dessay and tenor Juan Diego Flórez part in reviving the popularity of Donizetti's *La Fille du regiment*. Another example of the effect of globalization is how, like the spread of T-shirts and fast food, opera has become increasingly homogenized (2009).

The increased amounts of recordings created between the 1970s and 1990s contributed to this homogenization of the art form, and set certain expectations of performance which many listeners began to demand live. Just as some feared opera

recordings would deter audiences from attending live performance, a similar argument was put forward years later with regard to opera on television and in movie form (Rockwell, 1981). Although as we now know, these advancements in technology actually had the opposite affect on opera's demand. Today in regards to live opera in movie theatres, recordings actually helped to increase the appetite for live performance, and people, "...craved to see and hear the stars in the roles they had committed to disc" (Snowman, 2009, p. 393). While it may be too early to study the same phenomenon for the various live HD series, an interesting further study would be to see if, similar to with opera audio recordings, people who attend live opera in movie theatres also increase their desire to see it live in the opera house.

A by-product of the digital age in which production values are phenomenally better than decades prior, is that audiences have come to expect singers to more realistically reflect the roles they are portraying, as well as the expectation for an over all more heightened and visceral theatrical experience (Isherwood, 2007). Indeed, Peter Gelb insists that raising theatrical standards will be "the salvation of opera" (Gelb as cited in Isherwood, 2007).

Renée Fleming, one of the world's leading sopranos, says "The quality of acting in opera has improved drastically since I started singing." (Flemming as cited in Isherwood, 2007) She goes on to say, "Now the old arch style of playing the diva, which some performers still indulge in, is considered close to camp" (Flemming as cited in 2007). Indeed, Greg Sandow supports this notion. In referring to the notoriously bad acting styles of a stereotypical opera singer, he says,

...this wouldn't have mattered in 1935 because people were not as immersed in media and scene acting in as many forms as they are now. Also, acting was simpler back then, more flamboyant, and more like a poster than a painting. So opera acting was more in the same vain (Sandow, 2011a).

Clearly, however, trends in opera acting nowadays are moving away from the big gestures, overtly unrealistic acting, and the infamous "park and bark". Not only has the heightened expectation for realistic acting pervaded the industry, but it has also affected the casting process in regards to a singer's physical appearance.

Expectations for a specific physical look, not just acting ability, has also affected opera singers. Spoiled by the increased artistry and accuracy of movie and television production, audiences have a harder time now suspending disbelief whenever they see a two hundred-plus pound woman attempting to portray a petite teenage girl. Because of HD technology, the concept of "public distance" versus "intimate distance" in theater is now being blurred even further beyond the already heightened intimacy offered by television. This new reality has created a newfound weight added to the importance of a singers looks, a consideration that, as some would say, is made at the expense of over all musical talent. Even opera veterans such as Fleming, who established their fame long before the advent of HD technology, are considering changing their stage persona in an effort to accommodate a more global audience (Heyer, 2008).

The new Live in HD opera movement, while innovative and a wonderful experience for many, is continually perpetuating a set of expectations among audiences that some in the opera field see as an increased value placed on style over substance. Darren K. Woods, General Director of the Forth Worth Opera, says that, "...The Met...is teaching us that you have to be famous and beautiful to sing opera, and it would be very

helpful if you were both” (Woods, 2011). In referring to some of the cast in the recent Met simulcast of Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, he says,

...it was clear that they cast them because they were beautiful and they would look pretty on the big screen...and while it would sound beautiful in the theatre, they simply did not have the pipes to sing Wagner in the house. So the Met was more concerned with those of us paying twenty dollars for that ticket in the movie theater than they were for the people who were paying \$400 to sit in those seats at the Met. I find that really personally appalling (Woods, 2011).

Met General Director Peter Gelb recently responded to criticisms like this by writing an op-ed piece in the New York Times saying,

Only after productions have opened do we consider relatively minor adjustments to lighting, makeup and costumes for our Live in HD presentations...the popularity of these programs doesn’t mean we have to hijack the staging or sacrifice our theatrical values in exchange. There is no Faustian bargain involved here (Gelb, 2011).

However, in an in depth Vanity Fair article about the Met and Peter Gelb from late 2010, the director of the Met’s new production of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, is quoted during a rehearsal as saying to a singer, “Stop! It gets too opera’y[sic] here. Keep it real. The gestures get too grand, too big. O.K.?”(as cited in Munk, 2010). It is interesting to point out that although Gelb addresses many of the other criticisms related to stage direction, acting and costuming, he does not directly address the criticism of singers not being vocally adequate for the roles they are cast. To Peter Gelb’s credit, however, his intention is clearly not one of undermining opera, but of attempting to draw a larger audience to it.

Opera experiments like the *The Met: Live in HD* series force one to ask the question, “To what extent should opera go in an effort to make ‘opera for all’?” If ‘opera for all’ means dumbing-down opera and, as Steven Blier says, “making opera more like

the movies” (Blier, 2011), then is it really just selling out, or is it adapting to new audience demands and trying to remain relevant? As media technology becomes more advanced in the years and decades ahead, and technologies like HD expand into broader aesthetic territory, this debate will undoubtedly continue. One thing is certain, technological innovations in the way people experience opera will likely have a residual effect on how operas are produced and cast. Ideally, the ability to experience opera in the cheap comfort of a movie theater will make people more willing to take a chance and experience lesser known, and new opera; a chance the average patron might not necessarily take if required to pay larger amounts of money to see a new or lesser known work live in the house.

Interestingly enough as Snowman points out, with all this striving for new audiences, in new shiny opera houses, one would think that opera was a changed art. However, the repertoire being seen on stage remained a relatively small core set of pieces written by people who were long dead. New opera works are on the rise, but the amount of them that make it past their initial run are few.

According to the latest Opera America statistics, 350 new American operas have premiered since the year 2000 (Opera America, 2011). This number does not take into account that as of this writing, there are still eight months in the year 2011. This makes for an average of about 29 new operas per year. A very insignificant number of those have received subsequent productions. While it is true that not every new work can be the next classic, the fact that so very few new works receive continued support after their initial run is a discouraging figure. Commercial artistic adventures also face these challenges. There are hundreds of albums and movies created every year that never reach

beyond a very limited audience. However, the difference is that commercial artistic ventures, when they do succeed, succeed big. This is do, in part, to the fact that successful commercial ventures are often heavily supported and marketed by powerful corporate media entities. This is not a reality for opera.

Counter to this idea of ‘opera for all’ is the notion that opera should embrace its marginality and harness it as a unique asset rather than a crutch (Kennicott, 2006). As Kennicott explains, “If the larger culture thrives on simple oppositions, on sound bites, not serious discussion – on voices talking over each other at a fevered pitch – then opera, and art, should go elsewhere” (2006). He emphatically declares a phrase that many people in opera may think, but would never admit publicly, saying that “Opera never was central to American society, and it never will be... No matter what happens...opera is marginal in American culture” (2006) He continues, explaining that our culture is increasingly becoming marginal and segmented, but that opera, as one of these segments, has failed to enjoy the fruits of its marginality. This notion of opera embracing its marginality and uniqueness, separate from market-driven influence, is not a new idea. Roger Sessions, a university professor, composer and instructor of Milton Babbitt, maintained in 1938:

Above all American composers will have to abandon resolutely chimerical hopes of success in a world dominated overwhelmingly by “stars”, by mechanized popular music and by the box-office standard, and set themselves to discovering what they truly have to say, and to saying it in the manner of the adult artist delivering his message to those who have the ears to hear it (Sessions as cited in Horowitz, 2005, p. 446).

The National Arts Index Study 2010 reported on the condition of slipping sales in the music recording industry. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA)

tallies units sold and total value of units shipped in various forms including CD, Cassette, LP, DVD, music video, and digital downloads. The RIAA data shows that albums downloaded digitally increased from 4.6 million to 76.4 million between 2004 and 2009, while digital single downloads grew 139 million to 1.14 billion (R. Cohen & Kushner, 2011, p. 29). Paradoxically, there is a decline in overall album sales and a sharp increase in the sale of individual tracks and single digital downloads. Between 2003 and 2009, track sales increased by 225 percent, while album sales declined 43 percent (2011, p. 30). Meanwhile, the popular music concert industry ticket sales have gone up considerably. For the top five touring artists, the average ticket price purchased was \$90, and attracted more than six million concert-goers, while the top 100 concert tours averaged a ticket price of \$63 per ticket. Concert tour sales numbers increased in 2009, distinguishing this industry from some other arts industries, including opera, that suffered sales due to the economic downturn.

The classical music recording industry, and the story of its rise and fall due to the advent of online music downloads, is an example of how people began to steer away from centralized authorities on music in favor of a more customized, personal music experience they could control individually. Also part of this sub-story, is the continuing idea that the classical music industry simply failed to continue to attract new people because its lack of a sense for artistic adventure. David Evans says, “The ‘auratic’ tradition of opera is very much a recorded tradition” (Evans, 1999, p. 74).

Regarding arts engagement and participation, the report interestingly found a discrepancy between arts supply and demand. The 2009 report indicates that, “...the vigor of the arts industries (the supply side) were not matched by a parallel increase in



participation and engagement” (R. Cohen & Kushner, 2011, p. 57). The report is clear to indicate that this lack of demand is in terms of the number of people who are consuming, and not in dollars generated. The report also showed that personal arts creation (making art, playing music) has increased. Since the study’s inception, opera attendance peaked in the year 2000 with 3.9 million attendees, but has been on a pattern of decline ever since. In 2009, the study measured the lowest rate of attendance rate for opera since 1999 at 2.9 million attendees. However, it is important to indicate that the study specifically measures, “...total attendance at main stage season performances by reporting opera companies” (2011, p. 57). Therefore, while there is an over all declining trend, it cannot be said to speak for all opera companies in the United States.

While not intended as the primary focus of this paper, Peter Gelb and what he is doing at The Metropolitan Opera is largely focused on, if only for the immense way in which his leadership at the Met is influencing the rest of the opera culture. Gelb’s leadership has brought a lot of ‘firsts’ to The Met. As reported in *Vanity Fair*, he spent \$500,000 in his first year to promote a new production of *Madama Butterfly* by using outdoor advertisements on telephone booths, lampposts and subway entrances. This may be standard practice for Broadway, but not for the Met. Gelb also hosted the Met’s first ‘open-house’, where thousands of visitors from the general public were allowed to go on the stage, given tickets to a *Madama Butterfly* dress rehearsal, and a bag lunch to top it all off (Munk, 2010). Most recently, the Met hosted some of the best New York City bartenders in a drink-making contest themed around the new production of *La Fanciulla del West* (Simonson, 2010). This is just an example of the many attempts to think ‘outside the box’, the ‘opera box’ if you will, and find crafty and new ways to engage

new audiences and different art forms and talent-pools as part of the over all opera experience. This can sometimes seem to be a stretch, or even gimmicky, but the line between gimmick and creative can sometimes be quite thin.

One thing is clear: employing all of these new, innovative ideas to revamp the art form and attract new audiences is not cheap. It requires money. The organizational structure and over all cost of producing opera does not allow for innovations to be paid for through increases in ticket prices. Doing so would see ticket prices far outside the reach of most buyers. And, because of the extreme cost and non-profit structure associated with opera, most new innovations must be paid for by donors. Interestingly, the donors asked to support these innovative changes are often, but not always, the same people who might not want the art form to change in the first place. Peter Gelb has shown that bridging this generational gap is possible.

One of the Met's current star examples of patrons such as this is Agnes Varis (Munk, 2010). Ms. Varis and her husband fully fund the "Agnes Varis and Karl Leichtman Rush Ticket" program. At a cost of \$2.3 million per year, this program frees-up 200 orchestra seats two hours before most performances, and are sold at \$20 a piece. In addition to this, Ms. Varis has underwritten four new productions and paid for the Met's outdoor advertising campaign, a total contribution since 2006 of \$21 million. Under Gelb's rule, according to Vanity Fair, every new production is meant to inspire donors. Apparently, this philosophy is working for as Gelb claims in the interview, the HD transmissions have garnered, "thousands of new donors" (Munk, 2010).

Gelb is often criticized by many opera purists as too willing to cross the "aesthetic line". Prior to his appointment at the Met, some members were concerned about his

actions running the Sony classical-music label. Particularly, they were concerned about certain 'cross-over projects' he supported such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma's *Appalachian Waltz* album to Michael Bolton's album of opera arias, and the highly successful soundtrack album to the movie *Titanic* (Munk, 2010). How is this different than P.T. Barnum touring Jenny Lind, symphonic bands playing Wagner, or individual acts of different operas paired together as a variety show experience? It is not. It shows an attempt at innovation, an attempt to reconnect the art form to a new generation of listeners through artists and mediums with which they are familiar. While it is understandable that some may have legitimate concerns over particular decisions made by Gelb, it is unfair to completely discount his over all efforts.

Critics of this approach are coming at it from a position of artistic purity, the same type of ideas of purity and sacrilization for classical music and opera that first appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their minds, there are certain aesthetic thresholds that must never be crossed. Unfortunately, when the threshold they favor supports a house that is so out of style very few people want to buy it, there is a problem.

Gelb's critics oppose him not only because he is attempting to re-define the threshold, but also because he is trying to redesign the entire house, and add a few additional rooms in the process. He is trying to reverse the course opera has taken over the last 150 years, and re-assimilate it to the realm of popular culture. Even before Gelb, this sentiment existed in the classical music world. Gerard Mortier, now general director of the Teatro Real in Madrid, said in 1997, "The frontier between classical music and entertainment must be abolished" (Mortier as cited in Evrard, 1997, p. 172). Speaking of the criticism he received early on as being "...a marketer above all else", Gelb responded,

“The idea that artistic success could only be measured in terms of commercial failure somehow was something that I just found ridiculous” (Gelb as cited in Munk, 2010).

Something else that one is starting to see is the attempt to breakdown barriers between performer and audience. In a time where the culture expects ultra-personalization and an “added-value” aspect to everything, some opera singers are finding ways to be more interactive with their audiences. One of the best examples of this is the American mezzo-soprano, Joyce DiDonato. Her video blog (VLOG), creatively titled “TheYankeeDiva”, not only gives viewers a behind the scenes of glimpse of the preparation one goes through to prepare a role, but they get this directly from Ms. DiDonato herself (DiDonato, 2011). There is no lavish camera crew following her around. It is just her and a handheld camera. What makes these videos even more compelling is that Ms. DiDonato speaks through the camera to the viewer. When one watches the videos, one feels they are having a genuine conversation with her and not simply watching a well-crafted PR video. She also has a series of videos where she answers questions posed by viewers about singing. She then will respond with a video with a genuine and uncanned response one can immediately see is truly genuine. The same sentiment of openness and accessibility is consistent throughout Ms. DiDonato’s website, wherein she includes personal blog posts from her recital tours, personal backstage photos, and personal updates to both her Facebook and Twitter pages. Apart from her exquisite instrument, it is this combination of multiple added-value elements and Ms. DiDonato’s magnetic personality that give her that “little extra something”.

Pop stars are also delving into the opera world. While not a novel phenomenon, The Who having done it in 1969 with their rock opera *Tommy*, more recent examples of

crossover have seemingly fallen on deaf ears. Popular musician and lyricist, Rufus Wainwright, recently composed his own opera. It is called *Prima Donna* and it premiered at the Manchester International Festival in 2009 (Christiansen, 2008). Unfortunately, the reviews were not spectacular, and it has since failed to be picked up by another company. Perhaps Wainwright's first mistake was writing the opera in French. A language and culture many Americans are already uneasy with, the Met dropped the commission in part because of the language choice. Another interesting pop artist crossover is Beyonce Knowles' 2001 *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (Wikipedia, 2009). Produced by MTV, it takes the story from George Bizet's opera, and sets it in modern Harlem, although it mainly replaces the original music with an original hip-hop/r&b score. Elton John did something similar with Verdi's opera *Aida*, although his adaptation premiered on Broadway in 2000 and has seen successful subsequent mountings since then. While no one in the opera world would likely even consider this a serious interpretation of this classic work, it shows that the stories told by classic operas are timeless, and can still inspire artistic creation, albeit in an entirely unrelated musical form.

The new Anna Nicole Smith opera, aptly titled *Anna Nicole*, is creating controversy not only in the opera world, but is also causing a stir in tabloid magazines (Hamilton, 2011; Midgette, 2011; Revoir, 2011). The bigger question is, is this just another gimmicky "CNN Opera" full of hype and little substance, or is it legitimate art? According to an opening night review by David Gillard, "...this is not just a clever send-up of superficial values. It's a glittering modern morality tale that condemns a soulless society that worships at the shrine of silicone implants and Jimmy Choo shoes" (Gillard

as cited in Revoir, 2011). In opposite reviews, Andrew Clark in the Financial Times calls it a “waste” and a “tragedy” and basically concludes it a complete waste of an opera houses’ resources (Clark, 2011). In effect, it could be argued that this an operatic criticism of elements of our popular culture. Musically, it’s also being praised. Gillard writes, “Turnage’s eclectic jazz-tinged score – pungently played under conductor Antonio Pappano – splendidly captures the mood of this rasping, grasping American nightmare” (Gillard as cited in Revoir, 2011).

Even with all this artistic crossover, ventures into new media, the use of modern stories as inspiration for librettos and the modern staging of older works, opera companies still face the same pervading problem: getting audiences to attend live opera, in person, as opposed to experiencing them in the privacy of their own homes, or in public, via an electronic medium. Perhaps the answer, then, is to not have opera in traditional opera houses, but to instead bring it to where the potential new audiences would want to see a performance; beyond the opera house so to speak (Dorny, Feenstra, Payne, & Cahn, 2007). Going a step further, perhaps part of the answer is smaller rather than larger opera, and establishing oneself as a niche area among the masses of regional opera companies who predictably go with *La Bohème*, *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* each year. Anne Midgette reports on an idea that small is the way to go for opera companies. She says, “Small is better. That’s the message that’s going around the opera world these days. Grand opera is big and thrilling, but it’s hard to find the money to put it on” (Midgette, 2010b). There are many creative-minded people heeding this call for smaller, more intimate experiences, a few of which are highlighted here.

Urban Arias, based in Arlington, Virginia, is the brainchild of conductor, Robert Wood. Its website explains the philosophy behind the need for its existence, saying “As opera companies across the country look for ways to develop new audiences and fill larger theaters, we offer a lean, contemporary, audience-aware approach” (Urban Arias, 2011). Having had its inaugural festival season in Spring 2011, Urban Arias focuses exclusively on producing “...short, contemporary operas”, and sets a goal for itself of producing one new short opera each year beginning in 2012” (Urban Arias, 2011). The “short” selling point clearly appeals to a younger audience less willing to sit for a three or four hour opera. Apart from directly tackling the traditional opera barriers of length and foreign language, Urban Arias also offers a niche artistic experience in a region heavily saturated by performing arts organizations. Woods, in explaining the rationale behind the mission of Urban Arias, says, “I think fewer people are trying to capture the whole market, but instead are finding some part that they will really appeal to and stick with that” (Wood, 2011). He is certainly living true to his words as is exhibited by his vision for Urban Arias.

Le Poisson Rouge is another example of the new non-traditional venue. The venue is self-described on its website as,

...a multimedia art cabaret founded by musicians on the site of the historic Village Gate. Dedicated to the fusion of popular and art cultures in music, film, theater, dance, and fine art, the venue's mission is to revive the symbiotic relationship between art and revelry; to establish a creative asylum for both artists and audiences (Le Poisson Rouge, 2011a).

This popular New York City venue regularly hosts modern composers and performers like Steve Reich, the Kronos Quartet, pianist Emanuel Ax and the Metropolis Ensemble, and holds regular events supporting works by new composers (Le Poisson Rouge,

2011b). However, what is most interesting about this venue is not so much that it hosts an eclectic mix of modern and classical music, although this is also a rare combination, but that it does it in a venue akin to a nightclub. In fact, they attempt to redefine the concept of “nightlife”, saying, “We invite you to immerse yourself in a nightlife of true substance and vitality. Bring open mind and drinking shoes” (Le Poisson Rouge, 2011a).

Indeed, Le Poisson Rouge and places like it are an interesting turn in the history of classical performance venues. In a sense, they are a return to the ways in which many Americans experienced music as described in the early chapters of this paper; in a social setting which allowed for real interaction and engagement with the performance as opposed to a passive listening experience.

The concept of non-traditional, unique venues is not unique to Le Poisson Rouge, or to America. There is a group in England that is applying this concept to opera as well. Succinctly named OperaUpClose, this new group in England has begun a series of performances in and around English pubs aptly called, “Pub Operas”. The company’s founder, Adam Spreadbury-Maher says, “...the greatest operas, like the greatest plays, cry out to be experienced in a variety of contexts and at different scales” (Spreadbury-Maher, 2010). A new-concept company similar to Urban Arias, OperaUpClose has initially only performed adapted versions of opera classics like *La Bohème* and *The Barber of Seville*, albeit in bars instead of traditional performance venues. However, the innovative creative thinking paid off, even for the staging of a traditional work, when in March 2011 the OperaUpClose production of *La Bohème* was nominated for an Olivier Award for best new opera production against the opulent Royal Opera House production of *Adriana Lecouvreur* (Youde, 2011). On March 14, 2011 the opera world was stunned



as OperaUpClose won best new production up against not only the Royal Opera House, but also four other established opera companies (Masters, 2011).

It's a surreal day in the opera world when the first production ever staged by a company, and one that was intended to be performed in a bar, competes and wins up against the likes of the Royal Opera House; a company that has for centuries built up its reputation and repertoire, and innumerable resources. This "under-dog upset" could partly be explained by referring to a theory put forward by Pierre Bourdieu called "multicultural capital". In referring to this idea, John Seabrook talks about the shift in cultural authorities in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century saying, "Whereas the old system valued unity and orthodoxy, the new system recognized and assigned a value to difference. Marginal groups, who possessed little in the way of cultural capital...could be rich in multicultural capital, as a result of what Pierre Bourdieu had identified as "the hierarchy of oppression""(Bourdieu as cited in Seabrook, 2000, p. 54). Groups like Urban Arias and OperaUpClose exist, in part, because our culture currently supports their visions; a vision of unorthodoxy and unique difference added to the community. In other words, in the new age of democratized communication, entertainment and art, in a time where everyone has an equally valuable opinion and where everyone knows someone who is working on their album or their memoir, organizations that appear or are able to act less like organizations in the traditional sense, and more like a group of unique individuals coming together to create something new in an unconventional way, will have a better chance of being supported by the current culture than an organization that still operates in a top-down, "dial-up" era. In the next chapter, this idea of shifting and changing cultural authorities is examined in greater detail.

## CHAPTER 8

### OPERA, POWER, AND DE-CENTRALIZED CULTURE

*"There can now be no historically mandated form of art."* - Arthur Danto, historian

*"In Nobrow, subculture was the new high culture, and high culture had become just another subculture."* - John Seabrook, author

There is an aspect of this story yet to be addressed which, although not the primary cause of opera's problems, is certainly a factor. This aspect is the world of de-centralized culture and ever distracted, shortened attention spans, and how the traditional bastions of taste and cultural influence are no longer respected and revered as they once were. This is reflected not only in how and where we choose to get our information, but also how we decide what entertainment to consume and how many in society collectively now decide what is popular and what is not.

Every established creative industry has a corresponding creative team that goes along with it, and thus an authority and tradition of what is acceptable practice. The traditional performing arts have directors, producers and agents. The recording, film, and publishing industries have all of the above as well. Newspapers, magazines, and their radio and television counterparts, have journalists, and editors who oversee them. These industries have traditionally been the ones in our culture to determine what is quality,

what is worthy of production, and what is interesting or valuable. As this chapter will now explore, these ideas about centralized authorities of culture and arbiters of taste and class, have been turned on their heads in the past decade.

It used to be that certain cultural entities were held responsible for focusing attention on what mattered in the world. However, as John Seabrook describes this mindset, "...[it] became instead an immoral enterprise: an elitist attempt to ramrod a narrow set of interests onto the masses" (Seabrook, 2000, p. 69). Those that initially felt the effects of this shift in point of view most heavily were those entities that depended the most upon cultural autonomy for their authority and maintenance of a certain standard. Organizations like opera companies, orchestras, news magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Economist*, all of which had managed for decades to maintain a higher standard uninfluenced by the whims of popular culture, suddenly faced a cultural shift in which their standards were no longer respected.

There is also the issue of shifts in cultural power; in what entities and art forms hold the most social influence, and which entities and art forms attract political power. Opera houses have found their place in this hierarchy over time, and have for centuries enjoyed a place generally at the top of this hierarchy. However, those long ago established beliefs about what cultural entities wield the most power have begun to shift in recent decades.

Some argue that opera houses, in general, have always been used as a means to separate and define social standing and class, in addition to acting as a place for its performance. Author Ruth Bereson explains, "...the history of opera, and the grand opera houses, is intermingled with the history of power brokers, most particularly with

the rituals and public displays by which those who hold the reins of power demonstrate and reinforce their authority” (Bereson, 2002, p. 2). It would almost appear from this account that in an opera house the performance of opera was secondary to its functioning as a way to measure social rank and class. According to Bereson this has always been the case. She says, “...opera has performed the function of legitimizing the power of the state through the use of ceremonial ritual since its beginnings as entertainments performed in the ducal palaces of Italy in the sixteenth century” (Bereson, 2002, p. 4).

However, according to Joseph Volpe, former general director of the Metropolitan Opera, one of the earliest pioneers for the Met of battling this image of exclusion and elitism was its first president, Otto Kahn. According to Volpe,

Kahn set about converting what had been a profit-seeking venture into a not-for-profit enterprise – one devoted to the highest international standards of artistic excellence and to dismantling the Met’s image as an exclusive hangout for railroad barons and their bankers...he believed opera belonged to everybody (Michener & Volpe, 2006, pp. 247-248).

While Bereson’s point is not unfounded in history, there were clearly those in the history of American opera, including Kahn and Hammerstein, who believed opera’s reach should extend beyond the wealthy and privileged. Regardless of these efforts by some, however, opera has continually been used as a pawn in the battlefields of class warfare. There have been numerous periods in American history where class tensions reached higher than normal levels. It is during times like these when activities such as opera are more heavily criticized and forced to continually prove their value to the greater society at large.

Just as in Jacksonian times, America is again experiencing a new wave of resistance against all things perceived as elite. While the Jacksonian backlash was more

about class differences, the current backlash seems to be against a more ethereal idea of the elite: one that has no face, but that is represented by things related to higher authorities. Ideas associated with higher education, art, economics, science, almost anything requiring any form of higher-level thinking, are subject to the scrutiny and vitriol of a new class of populism, as currently embodied by the Tea Party.

However, the Tea Party movement may just be an extreme example of an underlying attitude that seems to be creeping through this country at the moment: a general distrust for authority. Not just distrust of the government, but of all types of authority; authority on education, authority on science, authority on economics, authority on culture, are all under attack. The very idea that there are objective facts or quality things versus non-quality things, and that they can be decided by a particular centralized group of individuals, is a highly unpopular concept these days. As Kennicott writes, "...the value placed on objectivity is dwindling, and the pleasure taken in freewheeling, wildly interpretive understandings of the world is growing" (Kennicott, 2006). How does this all relate to opera?

Those people and institutions that have traditionally been seen as the arbiters of taste and authority on most matters related to fact and culture, are now being discounted and distrusted in favor of a more convenient, democratized truth; a truth determined not by a centralized, objective information source shared by all, but by what one personally deems an authority. The current marketplace that caters to and builds up the importance of individual service, "made your way" and "tailored just for you", and even using personal pronouns in the naming of brands (see "I-pod" or "I"-pad), has also seemingly breached the realm of objective fact and allowed for "personalized truths" as well. This

convenient democratized truth applies not only to facts about such things as the sciences or economics, but even to what one might have called in a previous era, a “cultural authority”.

Could it just be, however, that this obsession with the individual is simply ingrained deep within the American cultural heritage? Ever since the earliest days as citizens of a new country, Americans have been pre-occupied with individual identity (Seabrook, 2000). As De Tocqueville observed in his tours of the United States in 1840:

In democratic communities, each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: himself... His ideas are all either extremely minute and clear or extremely general and vague; what lies between is void. When he has been drawn out of his sphere, therefore, he always expects that some amazing object will be offered to his attention; and it is on these terms alone that he consents to tear himself for a moment from the petty, complicated cares that form the charm and the excitement of his life (De Tocqueville as cited in Seabrook, 2000, p. 99).

This quote reflects a perception that generally, most Americans are merely concerned with that which is immediately gratifying and of themselves. Americans are generally unwilling to pull themselves away from the routine of life, unless it is for the chance to encounter a particular “amazing object”. If this premise holds true for modern American society, and not just for what De Tocqueville observed in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, then attempting to widen the audience for opera may be for naught.

Applying De Tocqueville’s line of reasoning to modern society results in a scenario where most Americans would not be willing to try opera as a new experience because it is not expected to live up to their idea of an “amazing object”. Consequentially, the notion that these Americans would be willing to depart from that which is comfortable to them, a notion which the expansion of opera’s social outreach

depends upon, undermines the very premise of attempting to reach the “untapped” audience. For these “uninitiated”, that which forms “the charm and excitement” of their life is not opera. Furthermore, their perception of opera leaves it falling even further outside their purview as something that is only not part of their life, but something that does not even make it into the category of “amazing object”. Therefore, opera is automatically discounted in their minds as a worthy recreational endeavor, and thus never even considered as an option.

A modern distrust for authority also plays a role. In general, there is a pervading distrust of all traditional forms of authority, both culturally and governmentally. While this can be said to have always existed in this country, there seems today to be even more of a division than ever before between those who respect traditional authorities, and those who do not. Part of this inherent distrust stems from the ever increasing belief held by many in the United States that these authorities on culture, science, education, facts in general, are not of the “true” American culture, but are in essence foreign elitist ideas being forced upon the minds of otherwise hard-working, “common sense” Americans. A recent essay written by the editors of N+1 magazine called “Revolt of the Elites” makes the argument that the general American society no longer distinguishes the idea of “the elite” between different areas of society as it once did, but automatically relegates all those associated with culture under said category (Editors of n+1, 2011). The authors give an etymological overview of the term and provide its current context, saying,

The word suggests a group of important individuals who have come by their roles through social position as much as merit; who place their own self-maintenance as an elite and the interests of the social class they represent above the interests and judgments of the population at large; and who look down on ordinary people as inferiors. Today, though, it’s the bearers of culture rather than the wielders of

power who are taxed with elitism. If the term is applied to powerful people, this is strictly for cultural reasons, as the different reputations of the identically powerful Obama and Bush attest...Culture, not power, determines who attracts the epithet (2011).

Americans like a good tale of “rags to riches”. They can better appreciate a story they could realistically see themselves achieving. This is why, as the article quotes Eric Hobsbawn, “It is possible for the poor to identify with multimillionaires...” in the sense that they too could one day be rich if only blessed with the right luck and circumstances, and why it is “...the US armed forces, pop stardom, and professional sports that confer prestige and power in the most egalitarian ways” (Hobsbawn as cited in Editors of *n+1*, 2011). These are experiences and people that most Americans can relate to in some way, as opposed to say, a Nobel Prize Winner, Poet Laureate, or editor of *The Economist*. Similarly, Americans are hard pressed to relate to the careers of such professions as opera singers or artists. The general understanding being that what these careers involve is not only not real work, but that the work being done is of a foreign, abstract, unworthy and elite subject matter.

In most all instances of what separates something from being relegated to the realm of “the elite” to something that is relatable and attainable to society at large is that which requires a high level of education, namely advanced college degrees, and those things which do not. As the article claims, “For a century and more, the university degree has been the vital bourgeois credential...a degree became what a patent of nobility had been for the aristocracy, establishing who was in and who was out” (2011). In recent decades, as the cost of a university education has skyrocketed, the idea of universities became in the minds of many middle/lower class Americans



one less about merit and more about elitism. However, there is a caveat to whether or not one's higher education is deemed elitist, and that is determined by the ability of one to make money from one's degree.

American society has always had a love-affair with the pragmatic philosophy that asks, "what is the practical use of skill x?" Ever since the American philosopher John Dewey solidified the quintessential American pragmatic philosophy, it seems that the only thing which speaks to most Americans and politicians as to the value of a given activity is the consideration of its mercenary or commercial value. Applied to higher education, degrees in areas such as business or marketing are often given a pass from the elitist category as they are undertaking the noble study of "making money". As such, the American populist charges of elitism tend to focus primarily against those individuals and degrees that compel or are compelled to pursue something other than material wealth.

How does society differentiate, then, from the generally educated elite and those who actually get branded with the term? What is the rule? According to the authors of the article,

The main culprits turn out to be people for whom a monied[sic] and therefore educated background lies behind the adoption of aesthetic, intellectual, or political values that demur from the money-making mandate that otherwise dominates society (2011).

Furthermore, the notion that anyone would choose to,

...favor a more challenging type of book, a less strictly tonal sort of music, a less representational kind of painting –or,...a less completely shitty grade of film product – mostly demonstrated that you came from a higher social class. And many Americans have come to agree (2011).

The picture this paints of the modern, conservative American populist is one who discredits education in the true sense of the word, referring to intellectual betterment, and only values the institutional support of those practices and activities that have a direct and immediately measurable commercial value. The article concludes, “The resentful right, under the banner – hoisted alike by Beck, Huckabee, and Palin – of *common sense*, flatters deprivation as wisdom by implying to the uneducated that an education isn’t worth having” (2011). The notion that someone would undertake learning something for the sake of general knowledge or even mere enjoyment of learning is a foreign concept to the nouveaux American populist. Apply this line of reasoning to professions dealing in the liberal arts or humanities, and it is clear why these activities and career paths are so highly *devalued* in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

This American pragmatic view of higher education as only being worthy in terms of its economic impact has also found its way into influencing the policies surrounding the education of our nation’s children. In April 2011, the United States government was on the verge of shutting down due to the Congress’ inability to agree on a budget. One thing that the newly-elected Republican-led House of Representatives, of which a significant portion campaigned on populist Tea Party principles, were able to agree on was the fact that funding should be completely eliminated for the Arts in Education program and a \$43.1 million decrease in NEA funding. This represents the culmination of a consistent pattern in government over the past decade of ever decreasing support, both financially and institutionally, for arts and culture education in public schools (see No Child Left Behind). These

current cuts are guised under the banner of “fiscal responsibility”. However, a proposal is also underway to further lower the corporate and marginal tax rates, a policy that would arguably do nothing to curtail the national debt. Now is it clear what the priorities are?

Why is arts education important to the future success of not only opera, but also arts in general? Studies consistently show that exposure to art and music at an early age is one of the most significant factors in that child’s active participation with art and culture later in life (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). In fact, according to the previous study, more than 50 percent of adults surveyed who indicated they had had childhood arts education also reported having attended a benchmark arts activity within the past year, while fewer than 30 percent who reported having had no childhood arts education attended a benchmark arts event in the year prior to being surveyed (2011).

In accordance with this data, it is also the belief of many in the opera field that the failure of arts education in America is a significant factor for why the arts, including opera, are not more widely attended. American composer Jake Heggie says, “...if you don’t let people know from an early age that this kind of thing matters, then how are they going to find it? Some people do find it themselves later on, but the general populace does not” (Heggie, 2011). Opera administrator Robert Wood also spoke of arts education in terms of how it affects perceptions of opera, saying, “I think that this [image of opera as elitist] is accounted for by the fact that we don’t have much in the way of music education in the public schools so that kids are

not learning what is behind this great art and how it can be relevant to them” (Wood, 2011).

As our culture and information are reduced to easily digestible sound-bites, the possibility of one being open to the idea of not only wanting to experience something new, but even the possibility of taking the chance, greatly decreases. As people don’t just “watch the news” but seek out the news channel that best fits with what they already believe; as people increasingly stratify what they are exposed to, “liking” this “not liking” that, updating their cues, wish-lists and playlists with things only *they* want to experience; as entertainment companies use algorithms to discourage the possibility of anything one might find unappealing from crossing their screen; is it any wonder people are averse to the idea of risk taking with regards to their entertainment choices?

We increasingly live in a society that thinks in terms of “The Band-Aid of the quick fix”(Naisbitt, Naisbitt, & Philips, 1999); a society that expects something to be immediately gratifying, and for answers to problems to be immediately solved, no matter how difficult the situation. This hyper-individualized, risk-averse, immediately gratifying mentality pervades our culture, and yet, the belief remains by many in the opera field that if only people would give opera a chance, they would love it. Frankly, this is not a particularly inviting environment for asking people to take a chance on something new and widely perceived as foreign, and not for them.

Kennicott explains the current state of affairs by saying, “Our culture is experiencing an atomization of authority and meaning, at every level. Newspapers, the nightly news, museums, academia, even science – almost every sector of our intellectual culture is losing mainstream authority” (Kennicott, 2006). Moreover, the “taste makers”

of culture have also become increasingly de-centralized; a reality exhibited by the fact that trends in popular culture are increasingly set by viral videos on Youtube, and news organizations like CNN that now hold daily poles allowing the audience to decide what news stories they will cover. The “taste makers” are simultaneously the creators and the consumers.

This environment is reflective of a change in the way Americans view mainstream sources of information and culture, and how they make a collective sense of the world around them. For these traditional organizations, according to Kennicott “...it’s a matter of finding a new voice in a world without central, or mainstream, authority” (2006). It’s also about the type of cultural environment opera originally developed in, and the type of cultural environment we are in now. As one author in an *Opera News* article explained, “Opera developed in a culture where the development of emotion or mood spun out in real time created tension and deepened feeling. In our media culture time is never real and is always formulated” (as cited in Evans, 1999, pp. 347-348).

Might we one day see a backlash against this constant barrage of fast-paced, technology rich environments? One author seems to think so, and in his mind, the evidence of it is already here. In *High Tech/High Touch: Technology and Our Search for Meaning*, John Naisbitt argues that in a world saturated with technology, an environment in which he calls the “Technologically Intoxicated Zone,” human beings exhibit certain behaviors that act as signposts or warning signs that their lives are overrun with technology (Naisbitt et al., 1999). Naisbitt says,

...Americans are intoxicated by technology... We feel that something is not quite right but we can’t put our finger on it. The Intoxicated Zone is spiritually empty,

dissatisfying and dangerous, and impossible to climb out of unless we recognize that we're in it (1999, p. 3).

This is a problem, he says, exacerbated by a few key situations.

According to Naisbitt, there are certain symptoms to look for in a culture seeped in the Technologically Intoxicated Zone. In summary, they are favoring a quick fix for everything, both fearing and worshipping technology, blurring the distinction between real and fake, accepting violence as normal, loving technology as a toy, and living one's life in a distanced and distracted way (1999). He offers numerous scenarios and examples related to each, and develops whole chapters around each one of these ideas. In short, however, he claims that as these situations become more and more a reality for people, many will seek out ways to cut off technology, and the prevailing need to "get away" will become even stronger. People will seek out more experiences that bring them closer to nature and people. Experiences that force one to slow down, and just take it in. This is the therapy from the Intoxicated Zone.

John Seabrook explains how one such icon of American popular culture allowed for this feeling of nostalgia and escape. He writes how part of the reason why Star Wars was so successful was because it simultaneously banked on our culture's desire to know the future, while at the same time playing upon our desire to return to a more simpler time in the past that,

...has the friendships, the heroism, and other reassuring conventions of the pop-cultural past (outlaw saloons, dashing flyboys, sinister nobles, brave knights, and narrow escapes). It makes you feel a longing for some unnamable thing that is always being lost...but it's a longing sweetened by the promise that in the future we'll figure out a way of getting the unnamable thing back (Seabrook, 2000, p. 136).

How do we get back that feeling which is “unnamable”? How can opera foster a feeling of nostalgia, mystery and longing for a cultural past that is simpler and yet unattainable? Opera has an opportunity to accomplish this better than any other art form. It has all the elements described by Seabrook, but it first must get past its long established public image of something that is not for everyone.

Opera has the possibility of being one of these experiences for people. It already is for many. Like many other performing arts, it has something that is unique and unattainable through technology: the live human experience. According to Naisbitt, this is increasingly important for people. He says, “In a time when technology is obscuring the real while simultaneously exaggerating it, we are reassured by the authentic” (Naisbitt et al., 1999, p. 14). What is more authentic than watching people perform live, in a completely acoustic environment, without assistance of amplification technology, in a room full of people all breathing together with the singer, where anything can happen and each performance is an individually unique experience?

One organization in particular, referred to earlier in the paper, is tackling the question head on. A group at MIT, aptly called “Opera of the Future”, is re-examining the concept of opera, and what it can be (D. S. Cohen, 2011; Lamb, 2011). The leader of the group, Tod Machover, created a futuristic opera called *Death and the Powers* that tests the traditional notions of what opera is. One of the key characteristics of this piece that sets it apart from others is what Machover calls “disembodied performance”. In this method of performance the singer is required, “...to act out almost the entire program out

of sight or earshot of the audience – even while a high-tech translation of his performance appears on the stage” (Machover as cited in D. S. Cohen, 2011).

This notion of opera will certainly prove offensive to some who draw the line at amplification of opera. For others, since it was the intent of the creator of the piece for the voices to be amplified, the use of these technologies is permissible. It appears that, at least as far as amplification is concerned, the opera world is divided three ways: those who never deem it permissible, those who think it is appropriate only if intended by the composer, and those who are open to anything new and have no aesthetic qualms with amplification. This is a new challenge that the opera world must navigate in the years to come. As opera continues to evolve as an art, and audience expectations regarding how things should sound change, opera administrators will continually need to evaluate how operas from vastly different artistic perspectives and concepts are programmed and marketed.

In this new era of ever increasing technological speed and convenience, of slogans like “Change You Can Believe In”, the expectation is high and often impatient for this change to occur. Whether it is something as complex as a change in government policies, or a change in someone’s weight, people are less and less patient and demand immediate results. The evidence is all around us. We are bombarded daily with messages of how to make things in our lives “quicker”, “better,” “easier”. Convenience and technology have convinced audiences that if something can’t be accomplished in the span of a 30-minute television segment or the length of a Tweet, then it is likely more complicated than it needs to be.



This idea that everything is or should be simple pervades every aspect of our culture, from education, to government policy, to weight-loss. During the Health Care reform debate in Washington, D.C. in 2010, many Republican members of Congress used the mere physical page count of President Obama's healthcare bill as a point of argument for why it was not worthy, as if national healthcare reform is "common sense", "simple" and easily understandable enough to be condensed into an easy one page summary.

It is possible that even those in the opera world, accustomed to being patient enough to sit through a four or five hour opera, are falling prey to this pervading cultural expectation when talking about the future of opera: "Today, if art does not appeal instantly or command attention through deliberate provocation, it does not sell. Value is defined by demand, which is dictated by mass taste" (Clark, 2001). Clark takes an oddly cynical yet somewhat optimistic outlook on the future of opera. He says, "Opera may no longer be a living, pulsating entity but its well-preserved corpse will be worthy of inspection for decades to come" (Clark, 2001). Even the idea of their being a desire to inspect the "well-preserved corpse" of opera in the coming decades is uncertain. There are some who write our culture has changed so drastically that the idea of opera being considered a form of entertainment, or even a nostalgic past-time, is increasingly falling by the wayside due to the change in the way our culture now views classical forms of artistic expression. In *Nobrow*, John Seabrook reflects on the notion of what traditionally one might come to expect growing up in American culture. He says,

As a kid I thought that becoming an adult would mean putting away pop music and moving on to classical, or at least intelligent jazz. The taste hierarchy was the ladder you climbed toward a grown-up identity. The day you found yourself putting on black tie and going to enjoy the opening night of *Aïda* as a subscriber

to the Metropolitan Opera was the day you crossed an invisible threshold into adulthood (Seabrook, 2000, p. 10).

As Seabrook goes on to argue, status developed this way in America for more than a century. The unspoken rule was that one works harder, acquires more things, and moves up the social ladder. In doing so, it was expected that while moving up the social class ladder, the entertainment one liked, etc., would naturally change as one's status changed. As Seabrook says, as one moved up the socio/cultural class ladder, one "...cultivated a distaste for the cheap amusements and common spectacles that made up the mass culture" (2000, p. 11). Opera, by the measure of most social ladders, was at the top.

Long before the idea of the "nobrow culture" put forth by Seabrook, was another idea about the blurring between high and popular culture; the idea of what the culture critic Dwight Macdonald deemed in the 1960s the "Midcult" (Horowitz, 2005).

According to this theory, mass culture props up high culture on a pedestal only to devalue it and water it down for mass consumption. Examples given by MacDonald include what he calls "music appreciation bibles", movies like *Amadeus* and celebrity sensations like The Three Tenors. The deeper rational behind all of this being that by doing these things both cultures are threatened with corruption. As Seabrook indicates,

So it became necessary to devise a way to distinguish the real artists from the hacks, and the legitimate art of the old aristocracy from the commercial art that the cultural capitalists produced for the newly urbanized masses. The Romantic notion of "culture" evolved to fill that need (Seabrook, 2000, p. 67).

In other words, in an attempt to open up these forms of art to more people by simplifying them or dumbing-down, they in turn trivialize the very essence of what makes these

works great in the first place and thus create over time a lesser standard to which these should uphold.

If opera is to ever appeal to more than just a microcosm of the potential audience pool, it needs to seriously consider how it, as a cultural product, acts as an identity to those who ascribe to it. One way that opera is becoming an identity is through the notion of “opera tourism.” As Evans says, “Tourism draws together processes of cultural commodification [sic], consumerism, and citizenship ”(Evans, 1999, p. 370). Evans quotes another who says, “Part of what people buy is in effect a particular social composition of other consumers [which]...the providers of the services must ensure” (Urry as cited in Evans, 1999, p. 370). Indeed, opera and opera tourism allow people to assume an identity of “Dress Circle, Grand Tier or Balcony”. This is something that doesn’t happen in movie theaters. Interestingly, this is yet another reason why the Met HD experience is so unlike that of the live experience. Everyone who experiences opera in the theater is essentially experiencing the same “economy class” opera.

Because there is this strong association of culture and art with identity, is it any surprise then that people are not flocking to opera in droves? Yes, opera’s identity is in the process of changing. The Met’s HD series is integral to this shift. However, it has only been under way since 2006, and the marketing behind it is quite minimal and extremely focused and targeted. In other words, if someone is not looking for it, it’s unlikely to come their way. Opera is still a nonexistent thing for most of the general public, and the perceptions this public has of opera are still generally rooted in the identity of opera from 100 years ago. For them, the identity of opera is “old”, “not cool”, “for the rich”, “for old people”, “for white people”, “foreign”, “a dead art form”, “too

long”, “silly”, and on and on. Those who know and identify with opera today understand that, while some of these assumptions have a grain of truth, the current identity of opera is more youthful, vibrant, creative and alive than ever before.

It may well be that this is all a moot point. Perhaps opera companies, and opera, will never appeal to more than just a fragment of society. Perhaps opera should focus more on how it can be creatively unique, smaller, more personal. And maybe, as a result of this refocusing as a niche interest rather than trying to be a slightly higher quality version of a mass-produced cultural commodity, it will rejuvenate and reenergize the people who are inclined to like it in the first place. A new focus on creative quality and uniqueness rather than mass-produced Mozart just might just enliven a new generation of creative talent, and propel opera in a creative direction yet unseen. In other words, opera needs to move from a “big grid” mentality to a “small grid” one.

Seabrook talks about this idea of “the small grid” and “the big grid”. He says it progresses out of the ideas of both De Tocqueville and George Trow, who described commercial culture as existing on two grids. Seabrook says, “As the big grid grew ever more massive, with the merchandising-driven, corporately compromised state of global culture...-the small grid became tighter, more intimate, auguring in on itself” (Seabrook, 2000, p. 100). He goes on to say,

One of the basic truths of the big grid was that a culture project that relied on artistic execution was riskier than a market-tested project that would make money even if it was bad, because it was well-marketed, solidly targeted at the all-important under-twenty-five-year-old-male demo, and because Stallone was huge in India (2000, p. 100).

As a result of this heavily market controlled culture, argues Seabrook, people increasingly revolted against things being mediated in their lives. In turn, the world of “independent artists” and obscure bands saw popularity they likely never dreamed would happen. The more obscure something became, the more and more people wanted it. To be “cool”, suddenly, was to not do what everyone else did; to not like what everyone else liked.

Yet, even with all this segmentation, we still strive for a common unity. This phenomenon is reflected in the classical arts as well. As Kennicott says,

As symphony executives (and often opera executives as well) have pursued the shrinking mainstream audience for their art forms, they find themselves ever more constrained by a mainstream taste that is only narrowing (Kennicott, 2006).

The mainstream is no longer where we go to *find* identity in art, rather, it is where the corporate networks, in their effort to continue to relate to society, reflect the already established identities of those niche groups who have become popular on their own.

An example of this big grid/little grid distinction was seen at this year’s Grammy Awards when the award for Best New Album of the Year went to an underground group called Arcade Fire (Powers, 2011). As the author describes, this year’s Grammy Awards were, “...a generational takeover and an airing of the widening gap between the traditional corporate music industry and the dynamic, diverse culture that’s redefining the very nature of popular music...” (2011). The article goes on to describe this award to Arcade Fire as an example of a backlash against what many think has become the mere spectacle of popular music – a spectacle often lacking in true artistic talent and artistry

and produced with the same tired old formulas. If that is the reality, then possibly more people are beginning to reevaluate their perceptions of what music can be.

This idea that heightened media technology would only contribute to the further stratification of our united culture was predicted well before it really happened. For example, in 1990 the futurist author George Gilder wrote in *Life After Television*: “The medium will change from a mass-produced and mass-consumed commodity to an endless feast of niches and specialties...A new age of individualism is coming, and it will bring an eruption of culture unprecedented in human history” (Gilder as cited in Seabrook, 2000, p. 106). This “eruption of culture” is why opera must now compete with the Nobrow environment in which, “...because more people could make art, more did” (Gilder as cited in Seabrook, 2000, p. 107). In the current Nobrow culture, there are too many artists; too many voices screaming for attention. As a result, “...the real and important artists had to compete for attention with the worthless time-wasting hacks” (Gilder as cited in Seabrook, 2000, p. 107).

Besides the eruption of culture that opera must contend with, there is also the fact that people now have increasingly shorter attention spans. While this could be contributed in part to the fact that there are many more things competing for our attention now than ever before, it may also be argued that the way certain industries construct their cultural products only supports and further perpetuates short attention spans. Take for example the way movie studios approach movie production. Lawrence Kasdan, an established Hollywood screenwriter, says today, the idea of character and narrative is only a passing thought in Hollywood development meetings with producers and executives. He says, “Narrative structure doesn’t exist – all that matters is what’s going

to happen in the next ten minutes to keep the audience interested. There's no faith in the audience. They can't have the story happen fast enough" (Kasdan as cited in Seabrook, 2000, p. 151). This same argument could be made for any type of mass-produced entertainment; music, television or otherwise. We have, as a culture, become accustomed to entertainment constructed not around the act of creation, but of how a particular act of creation can be fit into a 30-minute television timeslot, or a compact disc single. The corresponding effect on more complex art forms like opera being that since they cannot fit into these marketing constraints, are not considered as viable entertainment by media conglomerates.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

*“What you need to know about the past is that no matter what has happened, it has all worked together to bring you to this very moment. And this is the moment you can choose to make everything new. Right now.” - Author Unknown*

To be certain, opera’s relationship to the American audience has, over the course of history, proven as nuanced and varied as America’s cultural fabric. The numerous angles and side-stories one could take on the subject of opera’s cultural history in America, and how they have contributed to opera’s current place in society, could easily fill volumes. As such, it has been the attempt of this work to present this story as concisely as possible, while offering examples and addressing all the requisite areas. The preceding body of work is by no means a comprehensive study of all the varying topics addressed herein, but rather is intended to paint a picture of the author’s interpretation of the literature, and how he relates these many unrelated areas into one cohesive theory.

Opera, both as an art form and institution, is at an interesting crossroads in its history. The culmination of all the arguments herein were to show that opera has been a heavily centralized and controlled cultural form for at least the last 150 years in this country. There have been elements and moments where it waxed and waned in and out of popular demand, but for the most part, it has remained a significantly segregated art form in terms of to whom it appeals.



Faced now with the inevitable realities of the current cultural changes, opera is trying to adopt a more de-centralized cultural mindset. In a way, it is trying to revert to the creative spontaneity allowed many decades ago. Now, however, it is being done in the context of a society that is, for the most part, hard to please, not very patient, and not nearly as musically understanding as it once was. These are uncharted waters not only for opera, but all the classical arts. The formulas used in the past to appeal to audiences no longer work as well, in part, because they were created for a culture that no longer exists; for a society that no longer views music and entertainment the same way.

As discussed herein, opera's cultural history in America, along with the influences of shifting musical tastes, shifting attitudes about "who" and "what" determine culture and relationships with technology, have shaped the general American perception of the art form. Additionally, and to a certain degree consequentially, there are multiple perceived threats to opera's future in this country. Many of these perceived threats are a by-product of the American cultural relationship with art, as well as the previously described changes in society that have affected perceptions of the art form.

In the series of interviews conducted for this thesis, each interviewee was asked the same question at the end of the interview: "What is the biggest threat to opera's survival as an art form in the United States?" The answers were varied and included things like, "Ambivalence", "Remaining relevant", "Complacency", "The Internet", "Short Attention Spans", "Money", "over-corporatization of the art form", "demise of arts education", "trying to capture or affix what opera 'is' or 'should be'", and "poor business model". One person even insisted that the incessant negative focus by many on the idea that opera and classical music have an inherent problem culturally would in fact

eventually lead to such a demise. What is consistent is that everyone agrees opera in America faces many challenges now and in the coming years.

As dire as things may appear, however, there is reason to be hopeful. Opera does not have to end as tragically as most of its stories do. However, changing opera's storyline from a negative one to a positive one will depend on opera companies digging down deep, and analyzing their missions, visions, communities, and programming. For many this will mean drastic change. For some companies this change, if followed through to complete fruition, would transform those companies into something unrecognizable in comparison to what they are now. This fact alone is a primary reason why so many companies are holding onto tried and true programming choices. Immediate survival is the primary concern. While this is an understandable mindset, it is not sustainable. Those companies that do not come to terms with the current cultural reality, and how it affects what they do or do not do, will before long cease to exist.

There are equally as many positions one could take on the condition of opera in America, as well as what the answers are to its continued survival. For some, making the art form as accessible and easy as possible, to as many people as possible, is the answer to opera's future survival. For others, opera will never, nor should it try to pander to the masses. For this latter group, it is opera's ability to remain artistically true to itself, and allowing for the composer to create, free from influence over the concern for marketability of his or her work, that makes opera and to a larger extent art, special.

Regardless of where one comes down on the "opera for all" versus "opera as niche" argument, there are some hard realities about opera in this country that cannot be refuted. First, producing opera is likely to only get more expensive, not less. The rising

cost of everything, not just labor, will inevitably affect artistic decisions. Because of this, opera companies will have to rethink their strategies, not only in terms of how they can produce opera more efficiently, but also in terms of figuring out ways opera can be experienced and thus commoditized through different communication mediums.

Second, while it has improved in recent decades, the lack of support by opera companies and the opera public for homegrown American opera, is a factor in understanding why opera continues to feel foreign for many Americans. Organizations like American Opera Projects continue to work tirelessly towards reversing this course of history (American Opera Projects, 2011). Third, the larger culture in which opera now finds itself is increasingly more and more resistant not only to things perceived as elitist and foreign, but is also averse to activities and forms of entertainment that are both overly complicated and not in alliance with the pervading culture of consumer-oriented marketing and programming.

It is the opinion of this author, supported by numerous leaders in the field, that until opera is valued not merely as a performance spectacle, but also as a respected and valued form of creative expression, it will continue to be viewed in America as nothing more than a social playground for the rich, a “special attraction” for tourists, and a genuine, yet generally misunderstood and disrespected interest of a minority population.

Interestingly, this scenario is acceptable for some people in opera, and actually preferable. These are the people who say, “better niche than mass appeal” and “better purity than pandering.” These people would likely accept the state motto of New Hampshire as the motto for opera – “Live free or die.” They are perfectly content with keeping opera small in the sense of its appeal, and actually revel in the fact they can feel

it is their own niche interest, generally unspoiled by the influences of hype, marketing, and popular culture.

How do opera companies reconcile the two schools of thought – to be niche or to be for all? How does a place like The Metropolitan Opera simultaneously balance being innovative and risky with traditional and safe? The answer is neither easy nor clear. What is clear is that Peter Gelb is trying to do something different. *The Met: Live in HD* series is not only innovative, but is also re-defining, intentionally or not, how opera is perceived, produced, and experienced. It is understandable, however, given that the Met relies a considerable amount financially on the support of opera traditionalists, why many long time audience members at the Met do not approve of Gelb's vision. That being said, Gelb walks a fine line between boring the innovative mind and deterring the traditional one. It is a constant balance between the two. Perhaps, then, the answer is to choose between the two.

There is such a thing as trying to do too much, and spreading oneself too thin. Opera companies should strategically evaluate what it is they are trying to accomplish artistically, and whether that vision aligns with the interests of their community. They must figure out how they can offer something in their community that is not already offered, and think creatively about what niche they can fill and that will be compatible with their budgets. Americans live in a culture of customized experiences and on-demand entertainment. We more and more rarely experience randomness in our lives. Our lives and our choices increasingly shaped by algorithmic formulas and intelligent databases that gather and categorize our market-profile, in turn allowing companies to market to us with fine-point precision. Opera companies should take a lesson from this.

Instead of everyone trying to live up to the Met's standard of grand opera, companies should figure out what they can do best, within their means and with heightened attention paid to strategic audience engagement, and produce opera that uniquely represents them as a company. The story of Urban Arias is a perfect example of this.

The "opera for all" boat has sailed, and all those it left behind do not seem to care. As such, continuing to waste resources on generic "outreach programs" that "bring opera to the people," will only further prove opera's irrelevance to those the programs are trying to serve. The more opera is seen by the layperson as something from the past, as an act of recreating art from the past, the more irrelevant it will seem to them.

Furthermore, even with new inventions like HD and the various other technological avenues one can choose to experience opera, opera must move beyond simply presenting the classics. Even in these new mediums, opera cannot sustain itself as a presenter of relic performance art, even if it is in high-def or 3D.

Instead the keyword should be about creation and showing how opera is not old, but current, alive and new. Opera must realign itself as a worthy creative endeavor for composers and musicians, while simultaneously present itself in the minds of a new generation as a relevant option for shared artistic experience. Houston Grand Opera's HGOco is one example of an opera company that understands the importance of this mindset. They have realigned their mission so that it truly serves their community. HGO's approach to its community positions it not as an entity that exists in Houston and serves a particular group of wealthy people, but an entity that serves all of Houston both through performances in the opera house and creative projects within the greater community at large.

How will we know when these changes have begun to occur? What will be the cultural signs that the image of opera has begun to change into something more current? One place to look for these changes are in the images and cultural references generally used to refer to opera. If one currently searches the word “opera” on Google, a cartoonish image of Brünhilde from *Die Walküre* is one of the first images to appear. The fact that this image most highly represent’s the word “opera” on the internet, reflects the reality in modern American society that opera is from the past, foreign, and frankly, quite silly. If, however, this same search reveals at a point in the future an image of American opera creation, then one can at least have the assurance that the signpost for opera has changed, and likely found a new connection within our complex and varied culture that is America.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A - Interviewee Biographies

#### **Steven Blier**

New York Festival of Song's artistic director Steven Blier also enjoys an eminent career as an accompanist and vocal coach. Among the many artists he has partnered in recital are Samuel Ramey, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Susan Graham, Frederica von Stade, Jessye Norman, Wolfgang Holzmair, Susanne Mentzer, Sylvia McNair and Arlene Augér. In concert with Renée Fleming, he has performed throughout North America and Europe, including recitals at Carnegie Hall, La Scala, Milan, and a *Live From Lincoln Center* telecast. His collaboration with Cecilia Bartoli began in 1994, and has included an appearance at Carnegie Hall where Mr. Blier played both piano and harpsichord.

Mr. Blier co-founded New York Festival of Song (NYFOS) in 1988 with Michael Barrett. Since the Festival's inception he has programmed, performed, translated and annotated over 125 vocal recitals with repertoire spanning the entire range of American song, art song from Schubert to Szymanowski, and popular song from early vaudeville to Lennon-McCartney. NYFOS has also made in-depth explorations of music from Spain, Latin America, Scandinavia and Russia.

In keeping the traditions of American music alive, Mr. Blier has brought back to the stage many of the rarely heard songs of Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Kurt Weill and Cole Porter. He has also played ragtime, blues, and stride piano evenings with John Musto. A champion of American music, he has premiered works of John Corigliano, Ned Rorem, William Bolcom, John Musto, Richard Danielpour, Tobias Picker, Robert Beaser, and Lee Hoiby, many of which were commissioned by NYFOS.

His discography includes the premiere recording of Leonard Bernstein's *Arias and Barcarolles* (Koch International), which won a Grammy Award; the NYFOS discs of Blitzstein, Gershwin, and German Lieder (*Unquiet Peace*); Gershwin's *Lady Be Good!* (Nonesuch Records); four albums of songs by Charles Ives in partnership with baritone William Sharp (Albany Records); first recordings of music by Busoni and Borodin with cellist Dorothy Lawson (Koch International); and *The Land Where the Good Songs Go* with Sylvia McNair and Hal Cazalet, celebrating P.G. Wodehouse's collaborations with Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Ivor Novello.

In October 1999, New World Records issued the Grammy-nominated premiere recording of Ned Rorem's full-length song cycle *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, commissioned by NYFOS and the Library of Congress. His latest recording is the forthcoming Bridge Records release of NYFOS's *Spanish Love Songs*, with Michael Barrett, the late Lorraine Hunt-Lieberson, and Joseph Kaiser.

Mr. Blier is on the faculty of the Juilliard School, and has been active in encouraging young recitalists at the summer programs including the Wolf Trap Opera Company and the San Francisco Opera Center. As a broadcaster and writer, he has appeared both as an essayist and quizmaster on the Metropolitan Opera broadcast intermissions. His writings on opera have been featured in recent issues of *Opera News Magazine* and the *Yale Review*. A native New Yorker, he received an Honors Degree in English Literature at Yale University, where he studied piano under Alexander Farkas. He completed his musical studies in New York with Martin Isepp and Paul Jacobs

### **Laura Canning**

Laura Canning was born in Portsmouth, England, in 1974. After studying Modern and Mediaeval Languages at the University of Cambridge, she started work in London for the operatic division of Athole Still International Management and later Harold Holt Artist Management. She was soon approached by Glyndebourne Festival to work in their Artistic Administration department where she spent two years before moving to Welsh National Opera in 1998. She rose to Artistic Administrator at WNO, and moved with the company into their new home, Wales Millennium Centre. She was also a Trustee for the nationally renowned arts center Chapter. She moved to Houston Grand Opera in 2008 to take up the position of Studio Director, and serves on the senior management team for the company. She has served as adjudicator for the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, the National Opera Association Competition and for the Richard Tucker Foundation. She is married with two sons.

### **Patrick Carfizi**

Recent notable engagements include Paolo in *Simon Boccanegra* with San Francisco Opera, Brander in Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust* with the Metropolitan Opera, Nourabad in *Les pêcheurs de perles* with Seattle Opera, Taddeo in *L'italiana in Algeri* with Dallas Opera, Dr. Bartolo in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* with Canadian Opera Company and Papageno in *Die Zauberflöte* with Houston Grand Opera. Additionally at the Metropolitan Opera, he has performed such roles as Schaunard in *La bohème*, the Mandarin in *Turandot*, Masetto in *Don Giovanni*, Haly in *L'italiana in Algeri*, and Peter Quince in Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

For the 2009-10 season, Patrick Carfizzi returns to the Canadian Opera Company as Talbot in *Maria Stuarda*, as well as performances at the Metropolitan Opera in *La damnation de Faust*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Turandot*, *Gianni Schicchi*, and *La bohème*. Future engagements include Houston Grand Opera, Dallas Opera and a debut with Opera Cologne. Past engagements include performances of Masetto in *Don Giovanni* for the Tanglewood Music Festival under James Levine, Don Magnifico in *La Cenerentola* with Houston Grand Opera, Handel's *Messiah* with San Francisco Symphony, Janacek's *Glagolitic Mass* with Seattle Symphony, Pandolfe in Massenet's *Cendrillon* with Central City Opera, Frank in *Die Fledermaus* with Seattle Opera, Leporello in *Don Giovanni* with Minnesota Opera, and Dr. Bartolo in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. In addition to his staged opera performances, he has also performed with a



number of concert organizations such as Opera Orchestra of New York, Washington Concert Opera, and Mostly Mozart festival singing Mozart's Mass in C-Minor.

A graduate of the Yale University School of Music School, Mr. Carfizzi has won several prestigious awards: Of note, he has won the Richard Tucker Career Grant Award, the George London Award, the Sullivan Foundation Award, The Richard F. Gold Career Grant from The Shoshana Foundation, and the Sergio Franchi Memorial Scholarship from the National Italian American Foundation. He has also participated in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions where he was the Connecticut District Winner.

### **Jake Heggie**

Jake Heggie is the American composer of the operas *Moby-Dick*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Three Decembers*, *The End of the Affair* and *To Hell and Back*, as well as the stage works *For a Look or a Touch* and *At the Statue of Venus*. He has also composed more than 200 songs, as well as concerti, chamber music, choral and orchestral works. His songs, song cycles and operas are championed internationally by many of the most celebrated singers of our time, including Isabel Bayrakdarian, Joyce Castle, Stephen Costello, Joyce DiDonato, Susan Graham, Ben Heppner, Kristine Jepson, Patti LuPone, Audra McDonald, Robert Orth, Kiri Te Kanawa, Morgan Smith, Frederica von Stade, and Bryn Terfel, to name a few. The operas – most of them created with the distinguished writers Terrence McNally and Gene Scheer – have been produced internationally on five continents. Since its San Francisco premiere in 2000, *Dead Man Walking* has received more than 150 international performances. *Moby-Dick*, which recently received its 2010 world premiere in Dallas, was commissioned by The Dallas Opera with San Francisco Opera, San Diego Opera, State Opera of South Australia and Calgary Opera. Upcoming projects include songs commissioned by Carnegie Hall, The Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, and San Francisco Performances, as well as "Ahab" Symphony, commissioned by University of North Texas at Denton, where Heggie will be guest artist-in-residence during the 2010/11 academic year. His most recent recording of songs and duets, *PASSING BY: Songs by Jake Heggie*, is available on Avie. [www.jakeheggie.com](http://www.jakeheggie.com)

### **Leon Major**

Leon Major hails from Toronto, Canada and currently serves as the Artistic Director at The Maryland Opera Studio at the University of Maryland, College Park. In the 2010-11 season, he directs many productions including *Florencia en el Amazonas* at Maryland Opera Studio, *Intermezzo* at New York City Opera, *Don Pasquale* at Washington National Opera, and *Later the Same Evening* at Glimmerglass Festival. Past productions include *Shadowboxer* and *Eugene Onegin* at Maryland Opera Studio; *Salome*, *Falstaff* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at New York City Opera and Glimmerglass; *L'Italiana in Algeri*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at Washington Opera; *Roméo et Juliette*, *La traviata*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Carmen*, *Don Carlos* and *Don Giovanni* at Boston Lyric Opera; *Peter Grimes* at Vancouver Opera; *Così fan tutte* at Florida Grand Opera, San Diego Opera, and Municipal Opera of Rio de Janeiro;

as well as *Don Pasquale* and *Faust* at Opera Company of Philadelphia. Mr. Major has given master classes in Mexico City (Sociedad Internacional de Valores de Arte Mexican), The Shanghai Conservatory, Tel Aviv (Israeli Vocal Arts institute) and Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music. His book, *The Empty Voice: Acting Opera* will be published this spring by Amadeus Press, New York.

### **Chas Rader-Shieber**

Known both for his bold and inventive productions and for his acute musical instincts, Chas Rader-Shieber has established himself as one of the most innovative opera directors of his generation. Reviewing his staging of Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*, Toronto's Classical 96.3 FM praised Mr. Rader-Shieber's "daring and visionary approach to staging" and declared him "a force to be reckoned with in the opera world." Mr. Rader-Shieber's repertoire encompasses a broad range of works from Mozart to Benjamin Britten, but he has made a particular specialty of Baroque opera. Of his production of Handel's *Orlando* at the New York City Opera in 2004, The New York Times stated that Rader-Shieber had given audiences a production "at once contemporary, fanciful and true to the original." In addition to *Orlando*, Mr. Rader-Shieber's work at the New York City Opera has included a critically acclaimed production of Handel's *Flavio* in 2003.

Mr. Rader-Shieber opened the 2009-2010 season directing his production *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* with San Francisco Opera and then directs a remount of *Tamerlano* for Los Angeles Opera. He concludes the season directing *Antony and Cleopatra* for the Curtis Institute of Music and Handel's *Tolomeo* for Glimmerglass Opera. In the 2008-2009 season, Mr. Rader-Shieber made his debut in Australia presenting Charpentier's *David et Jonathas* for Pinchgut Opera. He presented a new production *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Lyric Opera of Chicago and directed *Il Viaggio a Reims* at Curtis. He finished the season with a new production of *Il re pastore* for Opera Theatre of St. Louis and directed his production of *Don Giovanni* for Santa Fe Opera. During the 2007 -2008 season Mr. Rader-Shieber directed *Una Cosa Rara* for Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Handel's *Tamerlano* at Washington National Opera, Bolcom's *A Wedding* for Music Academy of the West, as well as direction and production of *Aindamar* by Osvaldo Golijov with Curtis Opera Theater.

In 2006-2007, Mr. Rader-Shieber brought his *Don Giovanni* to Opera Pacific and also made his return to New York City Opera directing Rossini's *La Donna del Lago*, which he also directed at Minnesota Opera. Rounding out his season were engagements to direct *L'Ormindo* at Pittsburgh Opera, *The Cunning Little Vixen* at Houston Grand Opera and Bellini's *I Puritani* at Opera Theater of St. Louis.

Among his many other Handel credits, he directed lavish and modern stagings of *Semele* for the Arizona Opera and the Skylight Opera Theatre, *Alcina* at the Curtis Institute of Music, *Giulio Cesare* at the Pittsburgh, Minnesota and Edmonton Operas, and *Tamerlano* at the Spoleto Festival USA. He has also directed other Baroque operas, including Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* for Pittsburgh Opera Center and the Curtis Institute, and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at the Curtis Institute.

Mr. Rader-Shieber has also become well known for his interpretations of Mozart operas.

Among others, he has directed *Die Zauberflöte*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan Tutte* at companies including Opera Pacific, Opera de Montreal, Santa Fe Opera and the Juilliard Opera Center. The Toronto Globe and Mail said of his *La Clemenza di Tito*: “Rader-Shieber is a talent to watch, given his brilliant, economical illumination of Metastasio's text, which focused on character revelation like a psychological thriller.” Mr. Rader-Shieber's work also includes repertoire ranging from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* at the Skylight Opera Theatre, to Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* at Music Academy of the West, and the operas of Britten, Giancarlo Menotti and Ned Rorem at the Curtis Institute of Music. Mr. Rader-Shieber has served as Artistic Director of the Skylight Opera Theatre, and on the faculty of The Juilliard School and the Musical Academy of the West.

### **Kelley Rourke**

Kelley Rourke is the dramaturg at Glimmerglass Opera, where she has been on staff since 1994. Her adaptation of *The Elixir of Love* for Sir Jonathan Miller's recent production at English National Opera was praised for its “cracklingly witty translation” (The Independent) which “communicates vividly without mashing the music” (Financial Times). Other adaptations include *Orpheus in the Underworld* for Glimmerglass Opera, with revivals in Dallas and Washington, DC; as well as *Pagliacci* (2010), *The Magic Flute* (2005) and *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (2004) for the In Series (Washington, DC).

She is the librettist for *Our Basic Nature*, a new chamber opera based on the true story of a man who raised a chimp as his daughter for twelve years, excerpts of which have been presented at Nautilus Music-Theatre and American Opera Projects, as well as featured on Minnesota Public Radio. She has created supertitle translations for more than 50 operas, which have appeared at such companies as the Metropolitan Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and New York City Opera, among others. Rourke has held various positions at OPERA America, the national service organization for opera, since 1998. As the organization's director of research and publications, she edited several collections of essays, and she is founding editor of the organization's magazine. Rourke is a contributor to the New Grove Dictionary of American Music and serves as program annotator for Vocal Arts DC. She has been engaged as rapporteur for convenings of arts leaders by the Salzburg Seminar and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and she is a frequent speaker at conferences and workshops for opera artists and administrators. She contributes regular articles for Sing for Hope, a non-profit organization that mobilizes professional artists in volunteer service programs. Through Bent on Learning, which brings yoga and meditation to NYC public schools, she teaches primary school children. She serves on the board of directors of Cherry Valley Artworks (Otsego County, NY). Rourke holds degrees in piano performance and arts management.

### **Greg Sandow**

Greg Sandow is a composer, a veteran critic, and a writer, teacher, and consultant who works on projects involving the future of classical music. He's writing a book on classical music's future, called *Rebirth*, and he teaches a course on the future of classical music at Juilliard, where he's a member of the Graduate Studies Faculty. As a critic, he's nationally known for his writings about both classical music and pop, and as a consultant, he's worked on projects with a variety of organizations, including the Cleveland Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony. He speaks widely about the future of classical music, both nationally and internationally.

Currently he's finishing a two-year project as artist in residence at the University of Maryland, where he works with students at the School of Music to develop concerts that can attract people their own age. With his wife, Anne Midgette, chief classical music critic for the *Washington Post*, he does joint residencies at music schools, which so far have included Bowling Green State University and at the College of Music at Florida State. As a blogger, he writes "Sandow," an influential blog on the future of classical music, at [www.artsjournal.com/sandow](http://www.artsjournal.com/sandow).

### **Christina Scheppelmann**

Ms. Scheppelmann has nearly two decades of experience as an arts administrator and executive in opera. Since 2002, Christina has served in her current position as Director of Artistic Operations for Washington National Opera. In this role, she is responsible for the guidance and actualization of all aspects of WNO's artistic mission. Under the leadership of General Director Plácido Domingo, she has advanced WNO's reputation as a world-class opera company by presenting the best international talents to enthusiastic audiences, always promoting excellent financial oversight while never compromising an outstanding artistic vision.

A native of Hamburg, Germany, Christina has worked at prestigious opera companies in Europe and the United States. After earning her post-graduate degree in banking and economics in Germany, she began her career in opera administration while working as an artist manager for singers, directors, and designers with Walter Beloch Artist Management in Milan, Italy. After her direct experience managing artists, she took administrative positions as the Assistant to the Artistic Director at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, Spain and then at the Gran Teatro la Fenice in Venice, Italy. After her professional experiences in Europe, Christina was appointed as Artistic Administrator at the San Francisco Opera.

Christina is a regular jury member at national and international vocal competitions. She is frequently interviewed for arts broadcasts and publications, and is also often a speaker and presenter at master classes and panel discussions in the opera community worldwide.

### **Kim Pensinger Witman**

Kim Pensinger Witman assumed directorship of the Wolf Trap Opera Company in 1997, prior to which she worked for Wolf Trap Opera, Washington National Opera,

and Washington Concert Opera as music administrator, coach, assistant conductor, chorusmaster, and chief of music staff. A graduate of The Catholic University of America, Kim has been a visiting faculty member in the opera departments of the Peabody Conservatory of Music and the University of Maryland. She has been active as an opera coach and recitalist in the Washington, D.C. area since 1981 and has performed at the Kennedy Center, the Philips Collection, the White House, and at New York's Merkin Hall.

### **Robert Wood**

Conductor Robert Wood has enjoyed great success since his debut with the San Francisco Opera in 2004. Primarily an opera conductor, he has made a considerable impression with his interpretations of bel canto works, garnering praise for his stylish and elegant conducting.

Mr. Wood was appointed Conductor in Residence at the Minnesota Opera from 2006-2008, leading productions of *L'italiana in Algeri*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *La donna del lago*, *Rusalka*, and, most recently, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Mr. Wood also recently conducted a concert featuring Stephanie Blythe and Lawrence Brownlee for San Francisco Opera, *L'italiana in Algeri* at Vancouver Opera, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* for Hawaii Opera Theater, *The Love for Three Oranges* at Indiana University Opera Theater, *La cenerentola* at New Jersey Opera Theater, *Lakmé* at Minnesota Opera, and *The Nutcracker* for San Francisco Ballet. Mr. Wood's collaborations with the Wolf Trap Opera Company include *Le Comte Ory* and *Die Zauberflöte*. Other recent conducting engagements include *H.M.S. Pinafore* with the Indiana University Opera, and a recording for ODC Dance in San Francisco of Jack Perla's *On a Train Headed South*. Mr. Wood will return to the San Francisco Opera in the summer of 2011 to conduct the Merola Opera Program's concert of extended scenes.

Mr. Wood spent many years on the staff of San Francisco Opera where he led performances of *La traviata* and *L'italiana in Algeri*, and assisted productions of *La bohème*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Don Carlos*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Merry Widow*, and *Tosca*. He has also appeared as conductor for many productions with Opera San José including *Tosca*, *Faust*, *Manon*, *Carmen*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Rigoletto* and *La bohème*, and as guest conductor with the San José Chamber Orchestra. Mr. Wood held the position of Chorus Master at The Santa Fe opera from 2001 to 2004, and acted as cover conductor for *Beatrice and Benedict*, *La belle Hélène*, *L'italiana in Algeri*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. At The Santa Fe Opera, he also received critical acclaim for the choral contribution to the world premiere of Bright Sheng's *Madame Mao*, and the American premiere of Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de loin*. Mr. Wood also served as Chorus Master for Opera Company of Philadelphia's production of *Les Pêcheurs de perles* in 2004, and has appeared at Chicago Opera Theatre and the Florida State Opera, where he conducted Gluck's *Orfeo*. Mr. Wood was a 1998 Merola Opera Program and Western Opera Theater participant, and spent several years in Vienna studying voice and singing in the Arnold Schönberg Chor.

### **Darren K. Woods**

Darren K. Woods was appointed General Director of the Fort Worth Opera in July of 2001. Under his leadership, the Fort Worth Opera has increased subscription and donor bases and has received rave reviews for production quality. In May of 2007 Fort Worth Opera changed its format to a spring festival season and celebrated its first commissioned work: *Frau Margot* by Thomas Pasatieri with a libretto by Frank Corsaro. In four short years, the Fort Worth Opera Festival has been hailed as one of the best in the country (Scott Cantrell, Opera News) and presented its second world premiere in the 2010 season: Jorge Martin's *Before Night Falls*. Expanding on Mr. Woods' dedication to young artists, the Fort Worth Opera Studio launched in 2002 with four members who participate in main stage productions, perform for more than 100,000 children and receive coaching and lessons from visiting guest artists. Prior to his appointment in Fort Worth, he was the General Director of the Shreveport Opera in Louisiana. While in Shreveport, Mr. Woods founded Shreveport Opera Express, or SOX, a touring, arts in education program the involved school children working with professional artists in the schools.

Darren K. Woods was appointed General Director of the Seagle Music Colony in the summer of 1996 and continues as Artistic Director today. Since that time, Seagle Colony has expanded from nineteen young artists, a faculty of seven and two productions to thirty-two artists selected from over 1,000 applicants, six productions and a faculty of seventeen. The Colony recently expanded to include the new Frank and Dorothy Shames rehearsal studio and new construction continues to expand the campus. The caliber of young artists at Seagle Colony continues to rival any other program in the world with recent debuts of past artists at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, Santa Fe Opera and even on Broadway.

Mr. Woods is a frequent vocal competition judge. In recent seasons, he served as a panel judge for the Richard Tucker Foundation, the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, the Lieber Competition, the Denver Opera Guild Competition, the Dallas Opera Guild Competition and the Marguerite McCammon Competition. Prior to becoming an administrator, Mr. Woods performed as a professional operatic tenor for twenty years in such venues as New York City Opera, Carnegie Hall, Washington Opera, L'Opera Madrid, Opera Trieste, Seattle Opera, Dallas Opera, Baltimore Opera, Santa Fe Opera and many others.

### **Francesca Zambello**

An internationally recognized director of opera and theater, Francesca Zambello's American debut took place at the Houston Grand Opera with a production of *Fidelio* in 1984. She debuted in Europe at Teatro la Fenice in Venice with *Beatrice di Tenda* in 1987 and has since staged new productions at major theaters and opera houses in Europe and the USA. Collaborating with outstanding artists and designers and promoting emerging talent, she takes a special interest in new music theater works, innovative productions, and in producing theater and opera for wider audiences.

Francesca Zambello has recently been awarded the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French government for her contribution to French culture and the Russian

Federation's medal for Service to Culture. Other honors for her work include three Olivier Awards from the London Society of Theaters and two Evening Standard Awards for Best Musical and Best Opera. She has also received the award for Best Company Achievement. The French Grand Prix des Critiques was awarded to her twice for her work at the Paris Opera. Other awards include Best Production in Japan, the Palme d'Or in Germany, the Golden Mask in Russia and the Helpmann Award in Australia.

Opera works in recent seasons have included the world premiere of *An American Tragedy*, *Cyrano* and *Les Troyens* for the Metropolitan Opera, *Porgy and Bess* and *Die Walküre* for the Washington Opera, *La Bohème* at the Royal Albert Hall; *Fiery Angel* for the Bolshoi, *Salome* for Chicago Lyric Opera, *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni* at the Royal Opera House and *Boris Godunov*, *War and Peace*, *Billy Budd* and *William Tell* at the Paris Opera, *Carmen* at the National Center for the Performing Arts of China, and *Salome* at the Saito Kinen Festival in Japan and at the Washington National Opera. Recent theater projects have included *Show Boat* in London at the Royal Albert Hall; a new musical, *Rebecca*, for Vienna's Raimund Theater; *Tibet Through the Red Box*, a new play by David Henry Hwang for the Seattle Children's Theatre; *The Little Prince* with Oscar-winning composer Rachel Portman; *Napoleon in the West End*; *The Little Mermaid* for Disney on Broadway; the musical of *The Little House on the Prairie* at the Guthrie Theater, and now on a National Tour; *The Master Butchers* at The Guthrie Theater, and *Aladdin* in Disneyland. Other recent works have included a film of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* for BBC Television, as well as a new film for the BBC, Sony and PBS of *The Little Prince*; and, *West Side Story* for the floating stage in Bregenz.

Further opera works include *The Ring* for the San Francisco Opera, and the Glimmerglass 2011 Summer Festival. She retains her position of Artistic Advisor to the San Francisco Opera. Ms. Zambello has also served as a guest professor at Yale University and The Juilliard School. She recently took over as the Artistic & General Director of Glimmerglass in Cooperstown, NY. An American who grew up in Europe, she speaks French, Italian, German, and Russian. She attended Moscow University in 1976 and graduated cum laude from Colgate University in 1978. She began her career as an Assistant Director to the late Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. From 1984-1991 she was the Artistic Director of the Skylight Music Theater. She has been guest professor at Harvard and Berkeley Universities. Francesca Zambello lives in New York and London.

## APPENDIX B – Interview Questions

1. What is the image of opera today in modern American society? What do you think accounts for this image?
2. The latest National Endowment for the Arts data in performing arts participation indicate that the U.S. opera audience that attends live opera performance is shrinking in size and growing in age. What do you think accounts for this?
3. If the audience numbers for live opera performance are declining, why has there been a significant increase in the amount of opera companies nationwide and worldwide, especially in eastern countries?
4. In your experience, what elements of opera have contributed to its decline in popularity (e.g. aspects of the operatic art form, the institution of opera, etc.)?
5. In your opinion, is there a distinction between experiencing opera in an opera house, and experiencing it via some form of electronic medium, i.e., HD Transmissions, DVD, streaming online video? If so, what is that distinction, specifically?
6. What are the pros and cons of incorporating new technologies in opera?
7. How does the incorporation of modern technology into opera production affect the opera singer's preparation of a role?
8. Can you think of examples of successful marketing or outreach efforts in opera? Why do you think they succeeded? (naming the actual opera company is optional)
9. What are examples of outreach and marketing efforts that have had a negative impact and/or failed? Why do you think this happened? (naming the actual opera company is optional)
10. What are your ideas to help opera/opera companies break down barriers and increase access and participation?
11. Have you seen any of these ideas implemented?
12. What is your opinion of performing foreign language opera in English?
13. How can opera be a participatory art other than through attending a performance?
14. What is the biggest threat to opera's survival as an art form in the United States?



15. How do you think opera, as an entertainment/artistic experience, will adapt/change in the next decade in the United States.

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