

OPERA IN THE  
MEDIA AGE

*Essays on Art, Technology  
and Popular Culture*

*Edited by Paul Fryer*



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To those who ask the questions...

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On the cover: Tod Machover's modern opera *Death and the Powers*  
© Jonathan Williams

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## Opera Criticism: State of the Art and Beyond

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe

### *Formats of Criticism*

Opera criticism is published across a range of media and formats. There are the reviews in the daily or weekly newspapers, both in print and online, reviews in specialist opera magazines, reviews in academic journals and blogs by individuals on the internet. In 2011, David Gillard retired from his role as opera critic of the popular British newspaper *The Daily Mail* after forty years in office. Online, his reviews come with snappy headlines, such as "A Tawdry Travesty of a Carmen from the Tarantino of Opera"<sup>1</sup> on a production of *Carmen*, or "Lady of the Lake Makes a Big Splash"<sup>2</sup> on a production of *Rusalka*. Below the heading follows a verdict, such as "A load of bull" (Gillard, 2012), or "One enchanted evening" (Gillard, 2011) on those productions of *Carmen* and *Rusalka*, respectively. Then there is a star-rating from one to five (one for *Carmen*, four for *Rusalka* in the above examples). The reviews that follow the pithy heading, poignant verdict and star rating are concise, to the point, assured, at times witty, and leave the reader in no doubt about Gillard's position. He provides some information about the essence, not details, of the plot, and about what he perceives to be strengths and weaknesses of the production and the achievements of singers, orchestra and conductor; in usually no more than one sentence each. Thus, on the production of *Rusalka*, he wrote: "Glyndebourne has imported two National Theatre stalwarts to ensure this production looks as good as it sounds. Director Melly Still (*Coram Boy*) and her designer Rae Smith (*War Horse*) bring Dvořák's spooky world to vibrant, quirky life" (Gillard, 2011). He then summed up the musical aspect of *Carmen* with the comments that "Bizet's score gets a decent playing under conductor Ryan Wigglesworth, but the singing is average, with the biggest cheer rightly reserved for Elizabeth Llewellyn's Micaela" (Gillard, 2012).

The scope of the reviews by Rupert Christiansen, who has been writing for *The Daily Telegraph* in the United Kingdom since 1996, is broader, in line with the extra space available for reviews, and with the assumed readership expectations. Online, the heading is a matter of fact information of genre: review, opera title and performing company, in case of touring productions the venue of the performance. This is followed by a sentence providing some essential excerpt from the review in the "says Rupert Christiansen" format, such as "Only a first rate production can release the full power of Massenet's *Werther*; luckily, Scottish Opera's new production is just that, says Rupert Christiansen."<sup>5</sup> As Gillard, Christiansen does not hold back his own views, but in addition to their statement, Christiansen addresses them from a critical distance. For example, here are his opening remarks in a review of *Medea* at the English National Opera:

A small miracle has occurred at the London Coliseum. I was frankly dreading ENO's new production of Charpentier's *Medea*. French baroque opera is something I have never understood, let alone enjoyed, and after the last one I endured—Rameau's *Castor and Pollux*, also at ENO—I found myself in an embarrassing minority: all the top brass proclaimed it marvellous, while I slunk off bored silly.  
So here we go again. A deep breath, a stiffening slug of alcohol, and—well, it really wasn't as bad as all that. In fact, I largely enjoyed it.<sup>6</sup>

He then proceeds to elaborate on why he liked the production in contrast to prior expectations. Comments on the singers tend to be of similar length to those on production, which, as I argue later, is rare. For example, Christiansen comments on the tenor singing Werther:

Jonathan Boyd is a young American tenor, with a light, sweet and heady voice that can't quite scale the climaxes or the broad phrases of *Pourquoi me réveiller*? But he looks the part, enunciates the text in excellent French, and seems to inhabit the music with genuine feeling [Christiansen, 2013a].

Gillard has around 270 words available for his online reviews in *The Daily Mail* (Gillard, 2012), Christiansen up to 400 (Christiansen, 2013b) in *The Telegraph*, Manuel Brug in the German national newspaper *Die Welt* has between 700 to 1,250 words available,<sup>7</sup> Bünning in German national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* around 1,000 words.<sup>8</sup> This broader space allows their reviews to develop more depth, to compare with other productions, and to bring in the history of the opera.

The national newspapers in the United Kingdom will cover predominantly work in London, mainly from the Royal Opera House Covent Garden and the English National Opera, with less space available for some, not all,

productions elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The national daily newspapers in Germany cover productions in the major opera houses across Germany, such as those in Munich, Berlin, Hamburg and Frankfurt, or those close to their location, while regional and local newspapers will cover productions in their areas. With more than half the number of all opera houses in the world to be found in Germany, there is a considerable demand on reviewing.

The German magazine *Opernwelt*, which appears monthly both in print and online with some eighty pages per issue in a slightly larger than A4/letter formats, runs around four major articles per issue, ranging from extensive discussions of one production, to comparisons of two relevant productions. Thus the January 2013 issue, for example, compares productions of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Essen and Frankfurt, discusses the production by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito in Stuttgart of Edison Denisov's *L'Écume des jours*, and reviews a Handel-project by Christoph Marthaler in Zurich, and compares two approaches to Mozart by contemporary directors renowned for their *Regietheater* approach: Hans Neuenfels and *La finta giardiniera* and Barrie Kosky. *Die Zauberflöte*. The magazine features a major interview in each issue—for example one with Wolfgang Sawallisch in the January 2013 issue—provides a section of reviews of CDs and DVDs, a section of reviews of productions from across the country, indeed from across the world (fifteen in the January 2013 issue), a range of information services, such as brief news about singers, companies and productions, forthcoming events, and performance schedules of those opera houses across the world that choose to provide their information to the magazine. Altogether, at least three quarters of the material in the magazine is thus some form of review.

In the United Kingdom, the magazine *Opera*, published monthly with around 144 pages per issue in A5/half of letter size formats, has around fifty pages worth of reviews from across the world, and twenty pages of reviews from across Britain, in addition to ten pages of reviews of books, CDs and DVDs and Blu-ray (for the January 2013 issue). There are some major features on opera, such as profiles of artists and interviews, and service sections with information about performance schedules and industry news. *Opera Now*, also published monthly, in A4/letter format, sells at a similar retail price as *Opera*, but in comparison with both *Opernwelt* and *Opera*, it carries much less text and many more adverts for productions across the world.

Opera blogs are typically the work of individuals who go to the opera a lot and want to share their experience with others, inviting their readers to comment on their blogs. Examples are *oper aktuell!*<sup>9</sup> by Kaspas Sannemann, who writes in German predominantly about opera in Switzerland and Germany, *weltung*, with contributions from alex and jonathan,<sup>8</sup> and *Intermezzo*.<sup>9</sup> Some bloggers do not reveal their personal identity.

### Comments on the Composer, Score and Libretto

For well-established opera of the canon, critics do not mention the composer at all, taking the knowledge of their readers for granted. For reviews of less well-known composers, or operas, and world premieres, critics provide context and description. Badelt, for example, provides the context for a (rare) production of Marschner's *Der Vampyr* with reference to Weber's *Freischütz* and Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*, concerning the plot elements of a damned man who has to carry out a horrible deed before a deadline, of a father who barbers his daughter away, and the hero who has to see how his beloved falls for the villain.<sup>10</sup> Badelt provides information about the date of origin, 1828, and the place, Leipzig, and places the libretto in the context of gothic horror, more specifically the circle around Lord Byron. The critic provides further context by quoting Richard Wagner's pejorative comments on Marschner's opera, "gelehr-impotente, deutsch-versohlte und verlederte italienische Musik" (Badelt, 2013, 40) [academic-impotent Italian music that has been given a German sole and German leather], but points out that Wagner nevertheless learnt much from Marschner's *Der Vampyr* and developed it further for his own opera *Der Fliegende Holländer*. In these few words, Badelt creates a framework in which to consider Marschner's opera, with an accomplished achievement of putting the libretto to music, and a work of art that Wagner criticized perhaps more from envy, but used to develop his own (implicitly superior) work. The critic proceeds by referring to further common assumptions of *Der Vampyr* as the missing link between Weber and Wagner, adding that this evaluation does not do the music justice—an assessment that is in line with the evaluation that Wagner had much to learn from Marschner. About the music, Badelt writes:

Die Partitur peitscht die Handlung in langen Bögen voran, die Streichertremoli der Gruselzenen kontrastieren mit den lieblichen Bläsermelodien des Liebespaars und derben, ausgelassenen Volkstümlichkeiten, wie sie Wagner später der norwegischen Besatzung von Dalands Schiff zuschreibt [Badelt, 2013, 40].

[The score whips the narrative forward in long arcs, the string tremolos of the creepy scenes contrast with the sweet melodies of the couple and with rough, boisterous popularities in the ways that Wagner later attributes to the Norwegian crew of Daland's ship.]

Writing about a production of the opera *Le Bal* by Argentinian composer Oscar Strausnoy (b. 1970), Markus Thiel provides similar context. He tells his readers that the opera was premiered in 2010 at the State Opera in Hamburg, one of the leading opera houses in Germany: this gives weight to the revival under review, in 2012, of the opera by one of the leading German training institutions, Bayerische Theaterakademie. The critic provides further context

with reference to the librettist's name, Matthew Jocelyn, and the source for the plot, a novella by Irène Némirovsky. Thiel describes the music as a bouquet, ranging from folk song via Charleston, the sound of sewing machines, small open loops, sheet lightning from sound in neon light all the way to quotes from Mahler.<sup>11</sup>

*Kopernikus* by Claude Vivier, composed in 1978/79, was presented by the Young Opera Company in Freiburg, Germany, in 2012. Georg Rudiger describes Vivier's music as "vertraut und fremd, beruhigend und verstörend"<sup>12</sup> [familiar and unfamiliar, comforting and unsettling]. He describes the composer's experiences with music on a long journey through East Asia as influential for the rhythms and instruments of his opera, and gives this example:

Der geschärfte Ton von Trompete, Posaune, Oboe und Violine wird von den drei Klarinetten gebunden, Röhrenglocken, Tam Tam und ein balinesischer Gong schaffen eine spirituelle Atmosphäre [Rudiger, 2013, 39].

[The sharpened tone of trumpet, trombone, oboe and violin is bound by the three clarinets. Tubular bells, Tam Tam and a Balinese gong create a spiritual atmosphere.]

In her review of David T. Little's opera *Dog Days*, which premiered at Montclair State University in New Jersey in 2012, Heidi Waleson provides the context with brief reference to the plot—a post-World-War III scenario in which the main character, a thirteen-year-old girl, befriends a man disguised as a dog—her family initially tolerate his presence, but "when hunger wins out, they kill and eat him."<sup>13</sup> She describes the music as follows: "Composer David T. Little deftly incorporates music theatre as well as traditional operatic writing, and the score has an underlying rhythmic pulse that reflects his background as a rock drummer" (Waleson, 2013, 59). Waleson writes about the music of other recent opera premieres in North America with comments on the "banally tonal piano accompaniment," on the "exercise in musical obviousness, including some hackneyed 'Middle Eastern' melismas," and on the piece being "by turns wry and heartfelt, shifting in tone from the comic, swing-accompanied courtship, the jazz-inflected birth scene," and refers to a character's (!) vocal techniques and Lieder-inspired arias, to "rock'n'roll rebellion and romantic yearning" (Waleson, 2013, 59).

### Comments on the Production

The debate regarding the role of the director in the context of an opera production has focused on the alleged binary opposite of *Werkreue* and *Regieoper* (applied to opera from the term coined in conjunction with theatre as *Regietheater*). *Werkreue* can be understood as the director's commitment

to do as much justice as possible to the perceived intentions of the composer and librettist in the process of translating the libretto from page to stage in conjunction with the conductor who is in charge of the score. The director becomes the servant of the art form, in the service of the librettist, as much as the conductor is in the service of the composer. Related terms are *traditional*, *conventional* and *orthodox*. *Regietheater*, in contrast, places emphasis on the ideas that the director develops inspired by, and in relation to the combination of libretto and score. The director is no longer anyone's servant and develops an idea, often referred to as a concept, for the production and puts that idea or concept into practice over the rehearsal period. The historical development in opera is one from *Werkreue* to *Regietheater*, in parallel to the development within theatre: initially, the role of the director was to ensure singers or actors knew when to enter and exit the stage, leaving the activity of actors in theatre predominantly to improvisation, and not expecting from singers more than predominantly stationary delivery as close as possible to the ramp.

The opposition between the two comes into play if we consider results of the *Werkreue* approach as old-fashioned, lifeless, boring, and "fundamentalist in nature even if necessary for the discussion of opera and theatre"<sup>14</sup> and *Regietheater* as dynamic, associated with ideas, provocation and confrontation (Balme, 43). The opposition can be found equally between the view of *Regietheater* as the apparent disregard for the original work, with traditionalists unable to see directorial decisions as resulting from, or as intrinsic to the work, but as superimposed arbitrarily on the work and thus artificial, an expression of decadence. In contrast to that view of *Regietheater*, *Werkreue* represents the view that the director's role is to express for the audience the composer and librettist's perceived intentions without any conceptual superimposition of their own. As Heather MacDonald put it, productions following the *Werkreue* approach "allow the beauty of some of the most powerful music ever written to shine forth." MacDonald, writing in 2007, associates many European, in particular German, directors with *Regietheater* and sets up the Metropolitan Opera House in New York as a bastion of the *Werkreue* approach.<sup>15</sup>

According to Klonovsky, *Regietheater* is characterized by an egalitarian view of history and people, epitomized by the word "downwards": nothing is great, nothing is beautiful, nothing has turned out well, in particular no human being. The only acceptable perspective on important people is that of the valet (who does not understand or accept anything beyond his sphere), and great deeds are the results of addictions, vanity and inhibitions. The lowest common denominator is that all people have sex, and that needs to be presented on stage as a result. The existence of high culture is considered by leftist intellectuals, among whom Klonovsky counts representatives of *Regietheater*, as suspect and scandalous.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than remaining general, some critics provide details as to where libretto and score do not match directors' choices: MacDonald, for example, writes about the 2011 Salzburg Festival production of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* by Claus Guth:

Lost, too, is the humor. The recognition scene, in which Figaro and Marcellina improbably discover their mother-son relationship, embodied Guth's cluelessness about comic tradition. The repeated "Sua madre!" and "Tuo padre!" of the startled participants should be a moment of ebullient silliness, as indicated by the music's mounting pitches, unbroken major harmonies, and accelerating tempo; instead, the characters stood around woodenly, looking uncomfortable, alienated, and glum. Figaro nervously cleaned his glasses rather than joyfully embrace his long-lost mother. The delightful fillip dissing the Count which ends the episode fell hollowly among this unhappy new family. Not surprisingly, the scene elicited not a chuckle from the audience on the night I saw it, nor was it apparently meant to—contrary to the patent intentions of Mozart and Da Ponte.<sup>17</sup>

*Regietheater* finds many voices in its defense, which tend to be as sophisticated as those defending violence on screen or extreme body art among performance installations. A closer look at alleged analysis in favor, or even in defense of *Regietheater* tends to reveal much detailed description of offending productions, which is equally present in texts against *Regietheater*, in addition to phrases that reveal hermetically sealed jargon: Steier's comment on Bieito's 2003 production of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* is a suitable example.

Setting the piece in a glittery, violent, vaguely eastern European whorehouse, peppered with guns, drugs, and all varieties of bodily fluid and physical assault, Bieito cut through any sentimental/contextual membrane protecting the opera from the stomach-churning brutality of such modern phenomena as human trafficking and snuff-films. In addition to the unsparingly committed cast, the Komische Oper hired 15 professional adult entertainers to fill out the sordid aesthetic texture of Bieito's vision.<sup>18</sup>

What precisely is a membrane of any further description (here: "sentimental/contextual") in relation to an opera? What does the specific descriptor "sentimental/contextual" mean, precisely? What is the relationship between this particular opera and modern phenomena such as "human trafficking and snuff films," precisely? What is the purpose of the employment of "professional adult entertainers," precisely? In each case, the argument lacks precision and does not hold up to scrutiny.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss a specific production of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, and critical response to it, which was explicitly in the *Werkreue* tradition. There is a Richard Wagner Association in Minden, Germany, a town of 83,000 inhabitants on the river Weser in North-Rhine West-



phalia. There is also a municipal theatre in the town, built in 1908 and refurbished in 2012. The theatre does not have its own company; it is a receiving house only. In 2002, Jutta Hering-Winckler, a solicitor in Minden and chair of the Richard Wagner Association, arranged a professional production of *Der Fliegende Holländer* to be produced in Minden and performed at the municipal theatre. In 2005, a production of *Tannhäuser* followed, in 2009 came *Lohengrin*, and *Tristan und Isolde* in 2012. The music for all four productions was provided by the *Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie*, conducted by Frank Beermann. The production had been publicized, in the local newspaper, with special reference to Matthias von Stegmann as the director as a guarantor of the *Werktreue* approach. Von Stegmann had worked for many years as an assistant director at the Bayreuth Festival, including work with Wolfgang Wagner on numerous productions. He had assisted Wagner also for the 1997 production of *Lohengrin* at the New National Theatre in Tokyo, where he returned to direct his own productions of *Der Fliegende Holländer* (2009) and *Lohengrin* (2012). Von Stegmann has been known, in Germany, as an actor in dubbing; he has written German dubbing scripts, and directed dubbing; in particular, he has been in charge of the German dubbing of *The Simpsons* (translation and direction) for a number of years now.

In one of the numerous articles in the local newspaper, *Mindener Tageblatt*, prior to the opening night on 8 September 2012, von Stegmann pointed out that he does not always consider the intellectualizing of certain contents as healthy. For *Tristan und Isolde*, the spectator must take part in the life and the suffering.<sup>19</sup> The set for the production supports this directorial approach, designed by Frank Phillip Schloßmann, who created the set design for the 2006 production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle for the Bayreuth Festival. The orchestra pit in the Minden municipal theatre is too small to accommodate an 80 musician Wagner orchestra. Thus the pit was covered and the opera's action took place on top of it. In this constellation of the theatre space, the singers were literally within reach of spectators in the front row. Von Stegmann considered this proximity as a danger, but also an exciting challenge to develop the level of authenticity needed for spectators so close to the singers to believe their emotions fully and at every moment (Koch, 2012a). Some of von Stegmann's explanations to the singers at the first rehearsal were documented in the *Mindener Tageblatt*: "I want pure emotion up there. That will be demanding. At every second you need to know what you are doing and why you are doing it." With regard to the proximity of stage and spectators, he pointed out that "large gesture of opera will not work," and advised the singers to "think in filmic terms: the end result should look like Chekhov or Strindberg." Von Stegmann emphasized again that he does not want to hide behind a concept that he superimposes on the opera from the outside. He told his singers that

they would all get to their emotional limits in working with this opera, but assured them that he was on their side.<sup>20</sup>

The orchestra was further back on the stage, and separated from the stage space allocated to the action by a gauze. The orchestra was thus in full view of the audience. The stage floor was built as a slope, rising towards the back of the stage. The front part, up onto the gauze, was made from wooden floor boards painted in a light lilac color. At the very back of the stage, behind the orchestra, was a screen on to which different shades and colors of light were projected, in line with the music and the plot. Overall, the set created the image of a ship, with the screen shaped as the bow, and the auditorium as the stern, with the stage up to the gauze as the main back part of the ship and the conductor as the helmsman. Within this image of a stylized ship, the breath of the audience could be considered almost as the wind in the ship's sails.

When the audience entered the auditorium, the stage was open to view fully, lit by the lights in the auditorium. The orchestra musicians were at their desks behind the gauze, which was lit blue. When the house lights went down, the lights on stage came on, Isolde took her place in one of the boats, Brangäne sat near another boat, and Kurwenal was in the background. The conductor arrived, the overture started. Isolde was reading a book, not quite able to concentrate, a number of books were piled on the floor next to the boat she was in, she flipped the pages, read here and there, nervous, agitated, possibly bored. Real life took place in front of our eyes: music, set, changing light, singers, singing, libretto, facial expressions, gestures and glances, all became one, illustrating in surprising detail what is likely the genuine meaning of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, total work of art.

Repeated viewing could possibly allow spectators to pick up on, and remember, all of the minute detail of what happened on stage. Most striking moments included the way Tristan and Isolde behaved when they had drunk the love potion instead of the death drink. Both became love-struck teenagers, in very different, but clearly masculine and feminine ways, respectively, very moving and only slightly comical, so as not to distract from the serious nature of the situation as highly problematic within the opera's overall plot. Neither could help the power of the potion, neither was able to "think straight" any more, all they knew was the attraction to each other, which is love in both a spiritual sense, as eros, and a physical sense as sexuality. The production managed to make this holistic level of their experience clear, for example when Tristan and Isolde moved closer to each other as if to kiss, only for Isolde to break away from the kiss when their lips were almost touching, to place her face on Tristan's chest in a loving embrace.

Kurwenal was very surprised at what he observed, helpless, confused, and the realization of what she had caused hit Brangäne quite visibly. Both had to

use the maximum physical strength they had available to literally tear Tristan and Isolde apart so as to keep up appearances when King Marke arrived. When Marke discovered Tristan and Isolde at the end of Act II, the color of Isolde's dress matched that of Marke's coat and suit. While Marke lamented Tristan's betrayal, sitting on the sea trunk, Isolde came over to him and sat next to him, sad at his suffering, sad that it was caused by her, but at the same time not showing any signs of feeling guilty; she was under the influence of the love potion, and was thus not responsible for Marke's misery, and neither was Tristan. There was no conflict here for her, or for Tristan.

At the beginning of Act III, we saw Tristan resting in a derelict boat; Kurwenal was busy washing out bloodied bandages from Tristan's wounds. There were many of them, and they were quite bloody, and Kurwenal cried his best with them, without achieving much. It was an image for the moving care that Kurwenal took of Tristan, but it showed also the helplessness of the rather rough man in carrying out this work that he probably never thought he would be doing; his movements were awkward, clumsy, quite inefficient, without any idea of hygiene, as one would expect from a man like him, but the fact that he still tried, and tried so obviously hard to do something almost against his very nature was genuinely moving. Contrary to the ending of the opera as suggested in the libretto, according to which Isolde sinks, in Bran-gane's arms, on top of Tristan's corpse, in the Minden production Isolde left the stage in very bright white light.

It is revealing to analyze the way critics wrote about this production. Some noticed and conveyed a brief impression of the detail of the characters' actions and motivations. Critics described some of the nuances of the production with regard to the singers, generally pointing to their intensity and authenticity,<sup>21</sup> and describing Andreas Schager's Tristan as a boisterous, passionate firebrand and dare-devil, whose ego does not have space for self-doubt (Helming, 2012), and noting the tear that Dara Hobbs sheds as Isolde during her *Liebestod* at the end of the opera.<sup>22</sup> Other details noted by the critics included the splinter from Morold's sword that Isolde wore as a memento on a necklace, with Tristan entering with the rest of the sword.<sup>23</sup> In a long review in *Der Neue Merker*, Pfabigan commented very favorably on the director's highly sophisticated attention to detail that renders every breath, every glance, every step and every phrase into a spectator's very personal experience.<sup>24</sup>

Critics also noted the imaginative, detailed use of light throughout the production, such as velvety blue for the love scene in Act II, complete with starry sky that changes its light constellation in line with music and libretto. The skeleton of a boat that hung high from the ceiling over the orchestra in Act III, was lit red during Tristan's long monologue of suffering (Groenewold, 2012). Groenewold referred to the production as a concentrated psychodrama,

in which the effort to choreograph movements, gestures and glances as naturally and precisely as possible is evident, so as not to allow pathos to seep in. She attests a fine sense of stage dynamics, and awareness of the power of calmness to von Stegmann (Groenewold, 2012). In her review in the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Eleonore Büning concluded that it has been a long time since audiences were able to see emotion on stage and not only in the music (Büning, 2012). Brockmann combined observation of detail with more general writing, emphasizing what the director did not do rather than what he did, or what the effect may have been of what he did: von Stegmann told the story *without* inappropriate additions, interpretations, or references to Wagner's biography (Brockmann, 2012). Helming described the production in general terms as "directorial chamber theatre" and adds that it "abstains from updating and re-interpretations characteristic of *Regietheater*" (Helming, 2012). Similarly, Manuel Brug in the national newspaper *Die Welt* called von Stegmann's production simple but moving, with nothing negative distracting from the music (Brug, 2012).

Thus, the reviews of the Minden *Tristan und Isolde* praise the production; some critics described some instances of detail, others combined general comments with indications that the high quality of the production was achieved because of various things the director could have done but did not do, fortunately. Altogether, however, it is fair to say that directors of the *Regietheater* category can expect to get many more words for their concept and its details, even if that does not entail praise. Such an imbalance of direct critical attention to the director's work raises the question to what extent sparse comments on a director's high level of praiseworthiness, but (?) uncontroversial achievement, in comparison to more detailed and precise comments on controversial *Regietheater* directors, do in fact tempt or seduce particularly younger directors to abandon any attempt at *Werkreue* in favor of *Regietheater*.

Von Stegmann emphasized in interviews that several aspects of his production were based on gut feeling and intuition rather than intellectually conceived in terms of a concept. The violet color of the wooden floor boards is an example, as is Isolde's exit at the end of the opera. In the latter von Stegmann was inspired by the music, which does not suggest sadness any longer, but calm departure and closure: she is liberated, it is almost a kind of apotheosis, a dissolving. It may be that she dies, or that she moves into a different dimension,

### Comments on the Orchestra and the Conductor

When it comes to the assessment of the achievements of orchestra and conductor, space typically given to that assessment is much shorter than for

the production, which cannot achieve much depth. Here are some examples of this: "Patrick Fournillier conducted with energy and vitality, drawing some beautiful sounds from the orchestra."<sup>25</sup> "The Slovenian conductor Marko Leontja gave a sharply focused, balanced reading of this richly descriptive, colourful score that deserves to be heard more widely."<sup>26</sup> "Will Humborg proved once again that he is an explosively dramatic conductor, but he also granted the melodious highlights some intensity."<sup>27</sup> A few more words are given to more famous conductors, for example: "Daniel Barenboim, La Scala music director, shaped the preludes [of *Lohengrin*] as if they were velvet—shimmering and lustrous. The mellifluous strings in the orchestra were colourful but not oversaturated, and created an otherworldly vibe."<sup>28</sup>

More detailed, critical portraits of conductors can yield more meaningful information and both descriptive and evaluative vocabulary. In summer 2012, three critics writing for *Der Neue Merker* spent three hours with conductor Peter Schneider (b. 1939) in Bayreuth, where he has been the longest-serving conductor at the Wagner Festival to date (twenty seasons up to 2012). In what is part interview, part essay, they develop as close a portrait of his abilities as a conductor as possible. First of all, they consider him a conductor who is always and exclusively in the service of the composer, captures the composer's feelings and relates them to the audience. His intuition for the architecture and proportions of the music comes into play in this process, as does his hard work on the scores he conducts, allowing him to come to his conducting fresh, and frequently with new insights often confirmed by reference to the composer's letters. Beyond intuition and work, with a hot heart and a cool head, energies flow between him and his orchestra, and between the orchestra under his baton and the audience. It may be difficult to describe the energies themselves in more depth, but it is possible, the critics argue on the basis of having followed Schneider's work for years, to gauge the impact of those energies:

Wenn sich etwa im Orchester während eines "Figaro" Dirigates mehr und mehr fröhliche Leichtigkeit ausbreitet, die Musiker mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen spielen, ein drive, ein Sog entsteht—solche Kommunikation, solch gegenseitiges Espüren haben die Interviewenden immer wieder erlebt, wenn Peter Schneider am Pult steht.<sup>29</sup>

[If, for example, more and more cheerful lightness spreads within the orchestra during a conducting engagement of *Figaro* and the musicians play with a smile on their lips and a drive and pull are created—again and again the interviewers have experienced such communication, such mutual sensing, when Peter Schneider is on the rostrum.]

In the production of Wagner's *Siegfried* in Vienna, John Treleaven as Siegfried and Linda Watson as Brünnhilde had rehearsed the opera's finale in such a way that they were meant to roll around on the ground. However, Wat-

son and Treleaven could not help but stand on the top of the rock that was part of the set, hand in hand, and joyously celebrate their "Leuchtende Liebe, lachender Tod," because of the way Schneider conducted the music. When he conducts, *Der Rosenkavalier* by Strauss turns into

[zu einer einzigen, beschwingten Traumsequenz wird, als werde im Geiste ständig von Verliebten Walzer getanzt. Das Orchester trifft unter seiner Leitung sofort den richtigen, "Tonfall" und führt Publikum und Sänger geradewegs hinein in die musikalische Seligkeit (vor allem im Terzett) und alle lassen sich tragen von diesen betörenden Klängen und ihrem Kraftstrom der Gefühle] [Voigt et al. 2012].

a single, lilting dream sequence, as if, in thought, lovers were dancing the waltz constantly. Under his direction, the orchestra immediately hits the right "tone" and leads the audience and singers straight into the musical bliss (especially in the trio) and all can be carried by these enchanting sounds and its forceful current of emotions.

### Comments on the Singers

Singing is a major component of opera: together with the music created by the orchestra under the leadership of their conductor, and the production created by director and designer(s), it constitutes practice—the creative interpretation of the texts of score and libretto. As with the theatre and its actors, opera singers are in fact the artists whom audiences will be most immediately aware of in any operatic performance, because it is the singers that are in front of them on the stage throughout the performance. However, most critical reviews of opera might suggest otherwise: typically, two thirds of the review of a well-known opera from the canon will be taken up with comments on the production, the director's concept, and the related design, with one third dedicated to the singers and the conductor with his/her orchestra.

When it comes to describing the singer's achievements, and even their shortcomings, critical vocabulary can be limited in scope and imagination, vague, repetitive, and clichéd. Here is a selection of the more imaginative range of language found in reviews of recent and current Wagner tenors: Stig Anderson's singing has been described as effortless and lissome.<sup>30</sup> Two categories emerge from this account. On the one hand, while singing naturally requires an effort on the part of the singer, such effort shows with some singers, and does not show with others—the ability of singing that comes across as effortless is the ideal. The other category is the kind of sound the singer produces, here specifically its width. Some sounds come across as full, or ample, with "beefy" or "throaty" on the negative end of the spectrum, implying a certain unwieldy quality of the voice that lacks elegance, while others are slim, lissome or elegant.

In the Italian repertory, Jose Cura might be considered on the beefy side, while Alfredo Kraus's voice is definitely one of the most elegant in recorded history. The repertoire, of course is a factor in this but only to some extent. While Cura sings the part of Verdi's Otello, for which a heavier voice like his is required, Kraus never sang that part because his voice was not suited to it. However, in further comparison, Domingo's rendering of Otello never attracted the characterization of "beefy."

Further categories emerge in the critical assessment of Johan Botha, who gave Siegmund a bright glaze, singing him almost like Lohengrin<sup>31</sup>; he sings with vocal shading, nuances and elegant phrasing, and effortlessly.<sup>32</sup> He sings with lyrical expression, excellent diction, and much tonal beauty—and his voice is quite smooth.... He sings... with melting tones.<sup>33</sup> Critics thus employ the category of effort, and add the category of comparing the singing of one role (Siegmund) with that of another role (Lohengrin). This approach implies assumptions about roles, canonized ideas of how a certain role should be sung (in this case, the specific expectations regarding the ways Lohengrin should be sung, or is commonly sung). In comparison, the role of Siegmund, which, this comment suggests, has often been sung in a way quite different from Lohengrin, so that a singer who does sing Siegmund in a Lohengrin fashion attracts (potentially favorable) attention. Further categories that can be isolated in comments about Botha are diction and phrasing, the ways in which the singer pronounces the words of the libretto. The descriptions above also add to the sub-categories of the kind of sound a singer produces: in addition to width, there are intensity of light emanating from a voice: "bright," the question of whether the voice produces uniform tone or "vocal shading," the quality of the voice in terms of whether it sounds rough or smooth ("quite smooth" for Botha), taken from the sense of touch, and "melting" as an example of the sub-category of relating the sound of the voice to qualities and characteristics of inanimate or even animate objects.

Another example of this particular sub-category is a critic's assertion that Richard Decker performed "rather woodenly" as Parsifal.<sup>34</sup> His Tannhäuser was praised as full of flexibility, richness of color and nuances, and a balance of lyric and dramatic sound.<sup>35</sup> Here, we can see the addition of the sub-category of color, and reference to the "Fach," that is the system of classifying the voices of operatic singers, with lyric and dramatic relevant in the context of a Wagner tenor. Burkhard Fritz sings with a voice that he guides, or controls, well, leading to a floating sound. He commands a mature, metallic vigor, "sounding as fresh and untroubled at the end of the evening as he did at the beginning."<sup>36</sup> Voice control emerges here as a further category. An adjective to add to the list of those in the sub-category of comparison with animate and inanimate objects is "metallic." A singer's ability to sustain his singing at an even level of achieve-

ment across the course of a long performance constitutes the category of energy and persistence. This characteristic is closely related to effort.

Robert Gambill gained both praise and criticism as Siegmund: he sings his "introspective passages with remarkable sweetness and sensitivity; as soon as the applause pressure, however, his not-so-heroic tenor trembles mightily."<sup>37</sup> As Tristan, critics commented on a "solid, shiny assumption, facing all the difficulties... with genuine accomplishment,"<sup>38</sup> describing his voice as "youthful and baritoneal."<sup>39</sup> As Tannhäuser, Gambill "delivers a thrilling performance. It cannot be said that the peaks are scaled without effort, but the account of the music is scrupulous down to the grace notes in the hymn to Venus, the articulation of the text incisive rather than rhetorical."<sup>40</sup> "Sweetness" is a further example of a term related to the sense of taste; "shiny" fits into the visual sense, light sub-category of kinds of sound. "Baritoneal" adds a sub-category, closely linked to Fach, of the range of the voice. Other comments on Gambill address some of the categories defined above, such as effort, articulation, Fach, energy and persistence.

To Louis Gentile, critics have attested "A warm voice with baritone quality and ringing high notes." As for others, critics also note his "unmeasurable reserves for the third act" (here, for the part of Tristan in *Tristan und Isolde*). They comment on his "beautiful timbre, based in baritone color and full empathy, warm lyric, and clear diction."<sup>41</sup> Reference to the warmth of his voice suggests the new category of temperature within the context of the sense of touch; The description of the high notes as "ringing" is a rare instance of a sound being fathomed in terms of the sense that is in charge of perceiving sounds, hearing. "Baritoneal" fits into the category of range of voice, "immeasurable reserves" into that of energy and persistence; diction is there, too. Ben Heppner has been praised for blend of bel canto smoothness and emotional subtlety.<sup>42</sup> This account brings us back to the sense of touch with "smoothness," technical terminology in "bel canto" akin to references to Fach and vocal range, and a new category can be isolated: the emotional dimension of singing, here captured as "emotional subtlety."

Jonas Kaufmann has a "lovely tenor voice, graced by a virile, burnished-baritone timbre that took one by surprise when he skillfully flipped into a breathtakingly delicate, floated top."<sup>43</sup> Other varieties of comment include "Dark yet shining sound"<sup>44</sup> "baritoneally based tenor that can rise into gold-tipped high notes with a visceral thrust,"<sup>45</sup> and "his vocal palette ranging from lyric to dramatic, his top notes thrilling, his youthful enthusiasm ever-present, his communicative talent spellbinding."<sup>46</sup> and "His singing was supple and resonant, his tone velvety on the edges but steady at its core."<sup>47</sup> Adjectives used in these impressions of Kaufmann's voice add to the list of existing categories: "burnished," "dark" and "shining" are part of the visual light category, there

is the reference to the singer's range of voice, "gold" is part of the visual category of color, and "virile" and "visceral" suggest energy. "Resonant" is another rare contribution to describing a sound through a term specifically related to the sense of hearing; "velvety" comes under the sense of touch, and "steely" is a further example of the category of characteristics of animate/inanimate objects. An interesting spatial dimension of the voice is identified with reference to different characteristics at the voice's edges and its core.

Translated from German reviews, Scott MacAllister's tenor is praised for being "stay-the-course"<sup>48</sup> bright, slim, full of radiant energy, silvery trumpet sounds, cantilevered streaming voice.<sup>49</sup> "Stay-the course" refers to energy and persistence, "bright" is in the visual sense light category, "slim" in the visual sense width category, "silvery" in the visual sense color category, while "trumpet sounds" is a further example of a comparison from the auditory sense itself.

Simon O'Neill's debut as Othello drew this extended description:

the voice, though absolutely not Italian-sounding, has a clean, clear, clarion ring to it—think maybe King, or Wunderlich—that struck me as plain thrilling. The opening "Esultate" was as rock-solidly focused, powerfully projected as I've ever heard, not the usual honking bronze (if you're lucky) but somehow more like silvery-blue tempered steel; and yet the plaintive tone required by the love duet, including an exquisitely floated, plumb-in-tune "Venere splende" at the very end was effortlessly, most beautifully forthcoming.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the category of comparison with other roles, on the basis of references here to King or Wunderlich we can add the category of comparison with other singers. "Clarion ring" is appropriately from the context of sound, as is "honking." "Rock-solid" falls into the category of comparison with inanimate objects; "bronze" alludes to visual sense color, as does "silvery-blue," combined with a further inanimate object, "steel," and reference to effort.

Critics commend Lance Ryan's steely voice<sup>51</sup> (reference here to the inanimate object), with a secure and fanfarish upper radiance.<sup>52</sup> Security may be related to control, or represents a separate category. "Fanfarish" adds an adjective to the sound context. Peter Seiffert's singing has been described as open-throated, clearly projected and accurate,<sup>53</sup> smooth, attractive but sometimes reedy-sounding.<sup>54</sup> "Open-throated" is an example of a separate category, relating to the singer's body. "Accurate" and "clearly projected" relate to control and security, together forming a category of singing technique. Klaus Florian Vogt's voice has been described as weightlessly high, bright, solid, gleaming, effortless, powerful, sweeping, and even, with beautifully heartfelt piano passages, which nevertheless reach all remote corners of the opera house; critics also commended his clear diction, which allows audiences to hear and understand every word.<sup>55</sup>

We have discovered a range of suitable categories in which to place

descriptions of singing in opera. Critics can relate the singing they write about to singing that they consider well-known to their readers or listeners, in comparison with other roles or other singers. Technique comprises diction and phrasing, as well as accuracy of hitting the right notes, control of the singing, and that implies control of breathing, security and projection. Energy and persistence are related to this. With all of these, the singer has to make an effort, but the better the singer, the less of that effort will be obvious to the audience. Singers will be judged by the way they are able to convey the character's emotions not only in their acting on stage, but through their voices. Sometimes critics will relate singer's physical qualities to their singing. The kinds of sound the singer emits find a wide range of depictions, with comparisons or metaphors related to the music theory, to the senses, and to animate or inanimate objects. In the context of music theory, the sounds of voices are related to the Fach (such as lyric or dramatic), to the voice range (for example, a tenor who sounds baritone), or epoch or style in the history of music (such as *bel canto*). In the context of inanimate objects, singing can be described as wooden, melting, or metallic. In the context of the senses, the visual sense dominates with terms from color, light and width (golden, silver, dark, bright, shiny, lissome, slim). The sense of touch appears in the context of singing described as smooth or rough, or velvety, or the metaphorical use of temperature, such as warmth. The sense of taste comes in through references to flavor, such as "sweet." The sense of hearing is represented by terms such as "resonant" and "ringing," or references to "clarion," or musical instruments such as trumpet, and fanfare.

In this essay I have considered opera criticism of live performance from a range of perspectives: the format or medium in which reviews are published, and the ways in which critics tend to comment on the composer, score and libretto (predominantly for new work). In terms of production, the essay is dedicated to a discussion of the production, with much less space given to the orchestra, the conductor and in fact, and perhaps surprisingly, the singers, who are, after all, those whom the spectators (including the critics) see and hear on stage throughout a performance. Close analysis of the vocabulary used to describe and evaluate singers' achievements does reveal, however, the considerable range of categories of vocabulary available for that description and evaluation. The availability of, and ease of access to, recordings of the singers' voices through CD and DVD, TV and HD cinema broadcasts offers reviewers a considerable pool not only for comparison of live and recorded material, but also for the purpose of expanding and honing their own abilities of hearing in relation to the singers' voices, and their ability to describe critically the experience of what they have heard.

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## Gods and Heroes or Monsters of the Media?

Trevor Siemens

In a book that focuses on opera's place in a contemporary media culture, this essay provides a survey of the place of media culture in contemporary opera. Beginning with myth as a basic paradigm for operatic storytelling, this essay explores the relationship between myth and media in the narratives of operas composed over the past thirty years. To place these works in context, examples of operas that herald a changing approach to subject matter are drawn from earlier in the twentieth century; works that bridge the gap between the elevated characters, Gods and Heroes of myth, and a stage populated with the "ordinary" of contemporary life, works that mark a shift from magic to technology.

Whatever the subject matter, there is an important question to be answered when setting out to compose opera. For a composer in search of the sublime, wanting to avoid the ridiculous, the choice of subject and story was and is crucial in determining success. And the question that lies at the heart of this decision, the answer to which will make a piece work as music theatre: what makes the story sing?

For the Florentine Camerata, that select gathering of Renaissance intellectuals, artists and musicians who acted as opera's midwives, the answer flowed directly out of the very principles that informed the development of the first operas. In a desire to re-create an ancient and lost theatre out of the theories of Aristotle, the descriptions of Plato and the works of Euripides, these thinkers and composers naturally turned to the extant plays and literature of ancient Greece and Rome for their subject matter. The stories of Gods and Heroes provided an obvious, tangible and direct link to the past. More importantly for the development of the form however, was a cast of super-human characters in extraordinary circumstances that provided a rationale for the use of an elevated manner of communication; creating a drama in song instead of speech.