OPERA IN THE MEDIA AGE
Essays on Arts, Technology and Popular Culture
Edited by Paul Fryer

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To those who ask the questions...
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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 Travey of a Carmen from the Tarantino of Opera" on a production of *Carmen*, or "Lady of the Lake Makes a Big Splash!" 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 (*Carmen* Roy) 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 1995, is broader in line with the extra space available for reviews, and with the assumed readership.

It’s a matter of fact that the reviews of opera, operetta and performing companies are expressed in a more concise and focused style. This is followed by a sentence providing some essential excerpts from the review in the "Opera Reviews" format, such as "Only a first-rate production can release the full power of Mozart’s Werther; luckily, Scottish Opera’s new production is just that, says Rupert Christiansen."

As Gillard, Christiansen does not hold back his own views, but in addition to his statement, Christiansen addresses them from a critical distance. For example, he goes on to discuss his own arguments.

A small miracle has occurred at the London Coliseum. I was freshly declaiming ENO’s new production of Donizetti’s Lucia. French baroque opera is something I have never understood, yet 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 drank off bored silly.

Incongruously, we go again. A deep breath, a stiffening slug of alcohol, and—well, it’s not as bad as all that. In fact, I largely enjoyed it."

He then proceeds to elaborate on why he liked the production in contrast to some other productions, which, as he argues 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 seal the climax of any of the broad sheets of Purcell’s operasures. But he looks the part, emulates the text in excellent French, and seems to inhabit the music with genuine feeling. (Christiansen, 2012)

Gillard has around 270 words available for his online reviews in The Daily Mail (Gillard, 2012). Christiansen is up to 400 (Christiansen, 2013) to The Telegraph. Manuel Braga in the German national newspaper Die Welt has between 700 to 1,280 words available, but in The German national newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung around 1,000 words. 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 focus primarily on productions 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 in both print and online with some eighty pages per issue in a slightly larger than A4 letter format, 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 Pelleas et Melisande in Essen and Frankfurt, discusses the production by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito in Stuttgart of Edison Denisov’s L’Étoile des jous, reviews a Handel project by Christoph Marthaler in Zurich, and compares two approaches to Mozart by contemporary directors renowned for their regie- the Theater approach: Hans Neuenfels and La festa giardiniere and Barrie Kosky. Die Zaubert checking. 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 164 pages per issue, in A3 half a letter size format, 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 bluray (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 News, 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.
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 wants his daughter away, and the hero who has to see how his beloved falls for the villain.6 Badelt provides information about the date of origin, 1828, and the places, 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, "gekünstelter romantik, deutlich verderbter und verleideter italienische Musik" (Badelt, 2013, 41) [academic-imitation Italian music that has been given a German soul and German feather], 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 präsentiert die Handlung in langen Bögen vorne, die Schlusszentrstein der Grandesuxenkonzertet mit den lebhohen Blasenmoten des Liebespaares und deren, ausgelassenen Volktümlichkeiten, wie sie Wagner später der norwegischen Beurteilung von Dalands Schiffsschreit zuschreibt (Badelt, 2013, 46).

[The score whips the narrative forward in long arcs, the string tremolos of the crowd scene 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 Dalands ship.]

Writing about a production of the opera Le Bal by Argentinian composer Oscar Strauss (b. 1978), 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 Désiré Démosthène. Thiel describes the music as a bouquet, ranging from folk song via Charleston, the sound of sewing machines, small open loops, sheet lighting from sound in neon light all the way to quotes from Mahler.8

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 "vertrauter und fremder, herzgerüttelter und versteinert" [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 geschäftige Tanz von Trompete, Pauken, Oboe und Violone wird von den drei Klavieren gebunden. Raunungskreisen, Ton 'Tum und ein halbasiatischer Geist schaffen eine spirituelle Atmosphäre" (Rudiger, 2013, 39).

[The spirited tune of trumpet, drum, oboe and violin is bound by the three pianos. Tubular bells, 'Tum' and a halbasiatischer Geist 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 Wallen provides the context with brief reference to the plot—a post–World War II 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."9 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" (Wallen, 2013, 59). Wallen writes about the music of other recent opera premieres in North America with comments on the "barnyard rural piano accompaniment," on the "exercise in musical obfuscation, including some hackneyed 'Middle Eastern' melismas," and on the piece being "by turns very and heartfelt, shifting in tone from the comic, swing-accompanied courtship, the jazz-inflected birth scene," and refers to a character's (1) vocal techniques and Lieder-inspired arias, to "rock 'n' roll rebellion and romantic yearning" (Wallen, 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 Werkstätte and Regiegruppe (applied to opera from the term coined in conjunction with theatre as Regietheater). Werkstätte 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. Regieoper, 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 pursues that idea or concept into practice over the rehearsal period. The historical development in opera is one from Werkeinspiel to Regieoper, 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 tropes.

The opposition between the two comes into play if we consider results of the Werkeinspiel approach as old-fashioned, lifeless, boring, and "fundamental in nature even if necessary for the discussion of opera and theatre" and Regieoper as dynamic, associated with ideas, provocation and confrontation (Balme, 43). The opposition can be found equally between the view of Rectooper 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 Regieoper, Werkeinspiel 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 puts it, productions following the Werkeinspiel 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 Regieoper and sets up the Metropolitan Opera House in New York as a bastion of the Werkeinspiel approach.

According to Klonsky, Regieoper 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 vulgar (who does not understand or accept anything beyond his sphere), and great deeds are the results of addictions, vanity and blindness. The lowest common denominator is that all people have set, and that needs to be presented on stage as a result. The existence of high culture is considered by leftist intellectuals, among whom Klonsky counts representatives of Regieoper, as suspect and scandalous.

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 discard their mother-and-son relationship, embarrassed Gardoni’s closeness about comic tradition. The repeated "Sua madre?" and "Teo padre?" of the startled participants should be a moment of effulgent silliness, as indicated by the music’s mounting pitches, unbroken major harmonies, and accelerating tempo; instead, the characters stand around woefully, looking uncomfortable, alienated, and glum. Figaro nervously clears his glasses rather than joyfully embrace his long-lost mother. The delightful slap-dash of the Court 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.

Regieoper 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 Regieoper tends to reveal much smaller descriptions of offending productions, which is equally pertinent in texts against Regieoper, in addition to phrases that reveal hermeneutically sealed jargon: Stein’s comment on Bieto’s 2003 production of Mozart’s "Die Entführung aus dem Serail" is a suitable example:

"Setting the piece in a glittery, violent, raggily Eastern European whorehouse, peppered with guns, drugs, and all varieties of bawdy fluid and physical assault, Bieto cuts through a sentimentally/ sentimentally insensitive membrane protecting the opera from the stomach-churning brutality of such modern phenomena as human trafficking and soul-selling. In addition to the unswervingly committed cast, the Komische Oper hired 15 professional adult entertainers to fill out the world-synthetic texture of Bieto’s vision.

What precisely is a membrane of any further description (here: sentimentally/contextually) 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 soul-selling," 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 Werkeinspiel tradition. There is a Richard Wagner Association in Minden, Germany, a town of 85,000 inhabitants on the river Weser in North-Rhine West-
they would all get to their emotional limits in working with this opera, but assured them that he was on their side.  

The orchestra was further back on the stage, and separated from the stage space allotted 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 to 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 on 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, sex, changing lights, 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 him to 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. said at his suffering, said 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 tried his best with them, without achieving much. It was an image for the moving core 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 sails, in Brangäne'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 marvelous of the production with regard to the singers, generally pointing to their intensity and authenticity, and describing Andreas Schager's Tristan as a boisterous, passionate firebrand and daredevil, whose ego does not have space for self-doubt (Helming, 2012), and noting the tear that Dana Kobis sheds as Isolde during her Liebestod at the end of the opera. Other details noted by the critics included the splinters from Morold's sword that Isolde wore as a necklace, with Tristan entering with the rest of the sword. In a long review in Der Neue Merker, Pfaffgen 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.

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 bear that hung high from the ceiling over the orchestra in Act II, was lit red during Tristan's long monologue of suffering (Greene, 2012). Groenewold referred to the production as a concentrated psychedrama.

in which the effort to choreograph movements, gestures and glances as naturally and precisely as possible is evident, so as not to allow paths to seep in. She attains a fine sense of stage dynamics, and awareness of the power of culminate to von Stegmann (Greene, 2012). In her review in the national newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Eleonore Rining concluded that it has been a long time since audiences were able to see emotion on stage and not only in the music (Rining, 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 "directional chamber theatre" and adds that it "stands out 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 and 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 praiseworthy, but (1) 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 Werktheater in favor of Regietheater. Von Stegmann emphasized in interviews that several aspects of his productions 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 Fourniller conducted with energy and vitality, drawing some beautiful sounds from the orchestra." 20 "The Slovenian conductor Marko Leonja gave a sharply focused, balanced reading of his richly descriptive, colourful score that deserves to be heard more widely." 21 Will Humann proved once again that he is an expansively dramatic conductor, but he also granted the melodious highlights some intensity. 22 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." 22

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. 1959) 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, energy flows 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 these energies.

Wenn sich etwa im Orchester während eines Figaro-Drängens mehr und mehr feurige Leichtigkeit unternah, die Musiker mit einem Lachen auf den Lippenspielen, ein dran, ein Sog entsteht—sehr zusammenhängende Ergreifungen haben die Interviehwirten immer wieder erlebt, wenn Peter Schneider am Pult saß. 23

[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, Wär

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 "Leuchttende Liebe, lachender Tod," because of the way Schneider conducted the music. When he conducts, Der Rosenkavalier by Strauss turns into [zu einer einzigartigen, bewegten Traumsequenz wird, als werde im Geiste ständig von Verliebten gekannt. Das Orchester trifft unter seiner Leitung oft den richtigen "Tonzügel" und führt Publikum und Sänger geradezu hinein in die musikalische Schönheit (vor allem im Terzett) und alle lassen sich tragen von diesen berührenden Klangen und ihrem Kraftstrom der Gefühle] [Voigt et al. 2012].

a single, life-enchanting sequence, as if, in its thought, lovers were dancing the waltz calmly. 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 whose 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: Sigi Anderson’s singing has been described as effortless and lisomme. 24 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 "beery" or "thready" on the negative end of the spectrum, implying a certain unwieldy quality of the voice that lacks elegance, while others are thin, lisomme or elegant.
In the Italian repertory, Jose Carreras might be considered on the beefy side, while Alfredo Kraus's voice is definitively one of the most elegant in recorded history. The repertoire, of course, is a factor in this but only to some extent. While Carras 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 atroched the characterization of "beefy."

Further categories emerge in the critical assessment of Johan Botha, who gave Siegmund a bright glance, singing him almost like Lobengrin; he sings with vocal shading, nuances and elegant phrasing, and effortlessly. He sings with lyrical expression, excellent diction, and much vocal beauty—and his voice is quite smooth... He sings... with melting tones. Critics thus employ the category of effort, and add the category of comparing the singing of one role (Siegmund) with that of another role (Lobengrin). This approach implies assumptions about roles, canonized ideas of how a certain role should be sung (in this case, the specific expectations regarding the way Lobengrin 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 Lobengrin, so that a singer who does sing Siegmund in a Lobengrin 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 is intensity of light emanating from a voice: "bright" the quality 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 Tucker performed "rather woodenly" as Parsifal. His Tannhäuser was praised as full of flexibility, richness of color and nuance, and a balance of lyric and dramatic sound. 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 relevance in the context of a Wagner tenor. Botha sings with a voice that he guides, or controls, well, leading to a floating sound. He commands a mature, metallic gift, "sounding as fresh and unrestored at the end of the evening as he did at the beginning." 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 he applies pressure, however, his not-so-heroic tenor trembles mightily. As Tristan, critics commented on a "solid, shiny assumption, facing all the difficulties... with genuine accomplishment," describing his voice as "youthful and baritonal." 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." "Sweetness" is a further example of a term related to the sense of ease, "shiny" fits into the visual sense, light sub-category of kinds of sound. "Baritonal" 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 "beautifule timbre, based in baritone color and full compa-thy, warm lyric, and clear diction." 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 fashioned in terms of the sense that is in charge of perceiving sounds, hearing. "Baritonal" 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. This account brings us back to the sense of "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-baritonal timbre that took one by surprise when he skillfully flipped into a breathtakingly delicate, floated top." Others varieties of comment include "Dark yet shining sound," "baritonal based tenor that can rise into gold-dipped high notes with a visceral thrust," and "His vocal palette ranging from lyric to dramatic, his top notes thrilling, his youthful enthusiasm ever-present, his communicative talent spellbinding." and "His singing was supple and resonant, his tone velvety on the edges but seely at its core." 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” in part of the visual category of color, and “circle” 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” bright, slim, full of radiant energy, silvery trumpet sounds, contained, streaming voice.69 “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 Orpheus extended this 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 “Escentra” was as rock-solidly focused, powerfully projected as I’ve ever heard, not the usual hoak- hoak bronze (if you’re lucky) but somehow more like silvery-blue tempered steel, and yet the pristine tone required by the love duet, including an exquisitely framed, plum-in-cure “Voulez-vous” at the very end was effortlessly, most beautifully forthcoming.

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 “hoak- hoak.” Rock-sold 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, “metal,” and reference to effort.

Critic comments on Ryan’s “nicely voice” (reference here to the inanimate object), with a secure and fanfarish upper radius.62 Security may be related to control, or represents a separate category. “Fanfarish” adds an adjective to the sound context. Peter Sellriff’s singing has been described as open-throated, clearly projected and accurate,63 “smooth, attractive but sometimes reedy-sounding.”64 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, powerfully, sweeping, and even, with beautifully benefit 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.65

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 employs find a wide range of depictions, with comparisons or metaphors related to the music theory, to the sense, and to inanimate or animate 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 baritonal), 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, blurry, 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 warm or cool. 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 focused on Regie versus Werkmein. I noted that most space of most reviews 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) are 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 theater: 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.