

Culture and the Arts: Opera in Crisis, Can It be Made Relevant Again?

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Theme: [History](#)

Introduction

Opera productions depend on much state support, which is in decline, as states themselves go further and further into debt. To try and overcome these problems there have been many attempts at changes in form and content and even transmission in recent years. But these changes do not solve cost or accessibility issues especially in an era where it is difficult to get people to go out to the much cheaper cinema house, let alone a phenomenally expensive opera production. Although nowadays one is more likely to experience opera as cinema than theatre. Can such an expensive medium become popular again? What makes an opera popular? Can opera be relevant to people's struggles today?

Here I will look at the origins and history of opera from the late 1590s until today. Like other forms of culture, opera was initially influenced by Enlightenment ideas in its Baroque (1590-1750) and Classical periods (1750-1820), while the Romantic (1800-1914) reaction predominated in the early nineteenth century up to the early twentieth century. Enlightenment and Romantic influences could still be seen throughout the twentieth century with Verismo (c1890-1920) and Modernism respectively. The twenty-first century has brought interesting changes in form and content and a global appreciation of opera but it remains an essentially elite form of entertainment in terms of cost and audiences.

Early opera – ‘did not normally furnish half the expense’

Jacopo Peri is credited with developing the first operas. His earliest surviving opera *Dafne* exists mainly as a libretto and fragments of music. The earliest surviving full opera is Peri's *Euridice* which was first performed in 1600. Peri worked with Jacopo Corsi, also a composer of the time, both of whom were influenced by classical Greek and Roman works. They worked with the poet Ottavio Rinuccini, a member of the Florentine Camerata, who wrote the texts. The Camerata were a group of humanists, poets and musicians in late Renaissance Florence who sought to produce new works more in keeping with the spirit of humanism in the form and style of the ancient Greeks.

Renaissance humanism was a revival in the study of classical antiquity, at first in Italy and then spreading across Western Europe from the 14th to the 16th centuries. Their aim was educate people and create a participatory citizenry through the study of the *studia humanitatis*, today known as the humanities: grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. The Renaissance contributed heavily to the spread of Enlightenment ideas which was a much broader movement.

In France, the Enlightenment is traditionally dated from 1715 to 1789, i.e., from the beginning of the reign of Louis XV until the French Revolution. Enlightenment ideas focused

on reason as the main source of knowledge and propagated ideals of liberty, progress, toleration, constitutional government, and separation of church and state in opposition to absolute monarchy and the dogmas of the Catholic church.

The intellectuals of the Enlightenment [believed](#) that “humanity progressed through the rational acquisition and organization of knowledge, and that real knowledge resulted from observation and logic rather than tradition, speculation, or divine inspiration.”

Enlightenment ideas also had a profound affect on different forms of culture, particularly in the creation of opera.

The Florentine Camerata were influenced by the historian and humanist Girolamo Mei who believed that ancient Greek drama was mainly sung rather than spoken as the Greek Aristoxenus had written that speech should set the pattern for song. The Camerata were also critical of contemporary polyphony which was felt to be overused and obscured the words and their meanings. [Therefore](#):

“Intrigued by ancient descriptions of the emotional and moral effect of ancient Greek tragedy and comedy, which they presumed to be sung as a single line to a simple instrumental accompaniment, the Camerata proposed creating a new kind of music. Instead of trying to make the clearest polyphony they could, the Camerata voiced an opinion recorded by a contemporary Florentine, ‘means must be found in the attempt to bring music closer to that of classical times.’”

These musical experiments were called monody and Peri’s operas had the entire drama sung in monodic style with gambas, lutes, and harpsichord or organ for continuo as the main instruments. Thus we see a radical development in musical form along with content coming from Greek mythology. This new ‘music drama’ was called ‘opera’ (work). Over time other composers took up these new ideas and eventually synthesised monody and polyphony.

Peri’s opera *Euridice* tells the story of Orpheus (Orfeo), a great musician, who journeyed to the underworld to plead with the gods to revive his wife Euridice after she had been fatally injured. Orpheus uses his legendary voice to convince Pluto the god of the underworld to return Euridice to life. He is successful and they return from the underworld and rejoice.

The use of this particular story from Greek mythology in 1600 showed the growing divide between the humanist intellectuals and the church. This was at a time when “the persecution of witches was the official policy of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches.” According to Helen Ellerbe in *The Dark Side of Christian History*:

“Around 1600 a man wrote: Germany is almost entirely occupied with building fires for the witches... Switzerland has been compelled to wipe out many of her villages on their account. Travelers in Lorraine may see thousands and thousands of the stakes to which witches are bound.” [1]

The fear of the devil and hell had reached terrible proportions and any reasonable call for mercy or reconsideration, like the theme of *Euridice*, most likely would have been dangerous at that time, except in allegorical forms.

Not long after, the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi (with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio) brought out an opera based on the same story in 1607 entitled *L’Orfeo*, an opera which is still regularly performed.

Monteverdi constructed the opera score out of a daring use of many different existing forms – the aria, the strophic song, recitative, choruses, dances, dramatic musical interludes. While there was an actual written score, instrumentalists were allowed freedom to elaborate musically and singers to embellish their arias. While the work was admired up to the 1650s it was soon forgotten until the 19th century due to changing styles and tastes. When first performed it was in front of a courtly audience of nobility and intellectual aristocrats. However, with the spread of interest in opera throughout Europe, public opera houses were built to hold larger and larger audiences by the end of the seventeenth century. Yet the expense of producing opera was becoming apparent as a French commentator noted in 1683:

“the nobility of Venice patronized the great opera theatres more for their divertissement particular that for any financial profit that might accrue, since income from opera did not normally furnish half of the expense’.” [2]

Thus we can see that opera was born in a time of church hierarchy and power, determined to wipe out dissent resulting in widespread fear and danger while Renaissance humanists were focusing on ancient Greek ideas of democratic society, and values like mercy.

Classical – ‘divesting the music entirely of abuses’

It was the German classical composer, Christoph Willibald Gluck who reformed opera in the 1700s as the freedom allowed to musicians and singers to extrapolate was seen to have gotten out of hand. His first reform opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, was premiered in Venice in 1762 and then in Paris, in a revised French-version, in 1774. In his own words, [Gluck](#) sets out his reasons:

“When I undertook to set this poem, it was my design to divest the music entirely of all those abuses with which the vanity of singers, or the too great complacency of composers, has so long disfigured the Italian opera, and rendered the most beautiful and magnificent of all public exhibitions, the most tiresome and ridiculous. It was my intention to confine music to its true dramatic province, of assisting poetical expression, and of augmenting the interest of the fable; without interrupting the action, or chilling it with useless and superfluous ornaments; for the office of music, when joined to poetry, seemed to me, to resemble that of colouring in a correct and well disposed design, where the lights and shades only seem to animate the figures, without altering the out-line.”

Gluck, like other classical period composers sought to simplify music [emphasizing](#) “light elegance in place of the Baroque’s dignified seriousness and impressive grandeur. [...] Composers from this period sought dramatic effects, striking melodies, and clearer textures. One of the big textural changes was a shift away from the complex, dense polyphonic style of the Baroque, in which multiple interweaving melodic lines were played simultaneously, and towards homophony, a lighter texture which uses a clear single melody line accompanied by chords.”

Gluck, Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart were all major composers of the classical style. These composers were on the cusp of a major change in society with burgeoning capitalism changing the balance of power in the feudal aristocratic societies of Europe.

In the past the role of music was to entertain the wealthy and powerful in their mansions and castles while praising the glory of God in the churches. Composers, if they were lucky,

had the job of Kapellmeister, or church composer who worked as artisans producing mainly hymns and oratorios or in-house for a noble patron.

Mozart sought to move away from this life to compose for a more bourgeois audience and become an independent contributor to intellectual life. This was a developing attitude of the intellectuals of Enlightenment Europe who believed in the improvement of humanity and civil society through increased secular knowledge.



[Portrait](#) of Francisco D'Andrade in the title role of *Don Giovanni* by Max Slevogt, 1912

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was written in 1787, two years before the French Revolution, when there was an antipathy to the aristocracy and a growing perception of them as a parasitic class. *Don Giovanni*, as James Donelan notes, gives audiences an exaggerated version of 'an aristocrat who does nothing but consume, and does so almost joylessly'. He [writes](#):

"As the curtain opens, we see Figaro and Susanna; Figaro is counting off the measurements necessary for fitting a bed in his new room, and Susanna is admiring how she looks in the new hat she made for herself. You can already notice several things that indicate that something different from standard opera buffa is going on: this scene of domestic tranquility emphasizes Figaro's and Susanna's capabilities as the makers and doers of this world. You can assume he will build his own bed; Susanna has made her own hat, and this opera, based, as you know, on a subversive play, appeared at precisely the time in history when a new bourgeois class of traders, bankers, craftsmen, and merchants were gaining power and significance in European society, and the necessity of having a noble class was being questioned very seriously for the first time. The workers of the world and the bourgeois created wealth, and got

things done; the sovereign provided them with a stable government, but what did the aristocracy do any more except hoard valuable resources and put on airs?"

The world of the aristocracy was in decline and a new world led by the bourgeoisie was in the ascent with its emphasis on emotion and individualism. The Romantic reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the scientific rationalization of nature produced a new culture that opposed the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment.

Romanticism – ‘mysticism and turbid emotionalism’

This change in attitude was noted by Arnold Hauser in *The Social History of Art*. He writes:

“since the advent of romanticism all cheerfulness seems to have a superficial, frivolous character. The combination of carefree light-heartedness with the most profound seriousness, of playful exuberance with the highest, purest ethos transfiguring the whole of life, which was still present in Mozart, breaks up; from now on everything serious and sublime takes on a gloomy and careworn look. It is sufficient to compare the serene, clear and calm humanity of Mozart, its freedom from all mysticism and turbid emotionalism, with the violence of romantic music, to realize what had been lost with the eighteenth century.” [3]

The Romantics’ attitude to modernity was one of outright rejection. They were radical and individualistic enough to lead bourgeois revolutions but soon saw the abyss and the potential for their own loss of power and dissolution as a class. So, the Romantics looked backwards to medievalism instead of forward to proletarian revolution. Rather than questioning the organisation of society and who should own and control the new means of production in the ‘dark, satanic mills’ they chose to revere an ideal that society could return to peasant culture.

In Germany, Carl Maria von Weber’s *Der Freischütz* (1821) started the style which became known as *Romantische Oper* along with other composers like Albert Lortzing (e.g. *Undine*, described as a *romantische Zauberoper* ‘romantic magic opera’), Heinrich Marschner (e.g. *Der Vampyr* and *Hans Heiling*) and Louis Spohr (e.g. *Faust*). These composers based their operas on typical Romantic themes such as nature, the supernatural, the Middle Ages and popular culture, specifically folklore, culminating in Wagner’s ‘romantic operas’, *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*, 1843), followed by *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850).

Wagner’s operas grew in scale with more nationalist overtones but focused on myths, legends and nature, such as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (the *Ring* or “*Ring cycle*”), a set of four operas based loosely on figures and elements from Germanic mythology. As his fame and influence spread throughout Europe other composers took on board some elements of his style and rejected others.

As nationalists moved away from universalist enlightenment ideas such as equality of all before the law, opera became a powerful tool to promote the idea of ethnic groups as the true basis of the nation state. Folk songs and folk dances as well as nationalist subjects formed the new content of the new operas. In Italy, Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *Nabucco* contains the lyrics, “Oh mia Patria sì bella e perduta (Oh my Fatherland so beautiful and lost!)! In Russia Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) tells the story of the Russian peasant and patriotic hero Ivan Susanin who sacrifices his life for the Tsar by

leading astray a group of marauding Poles who were hunting him. In Brazil, Carlos Gomes' (1836–1896) opera *Il Guarany* (1870) used references from the country's folk music and traditional themes while the Czech composer Antonín Leopold Dvorák used the Czech language for his librettos to convey the Czech national spirit.

Verismo – 'focusing on the hard-knock lives'

Image on the right: Giacomo Puccini, one of the [composers](#) most closely associated with verismo.



In Italy, the growth of Realism in art and literature was making itself felt among opera composers such as Pietro Mascagni (*Cavalleria Rusticana*, 1890), Ruggero Leoncavallo (*Pagliacci*, 1892), Umberto Giordano (*Mala vita*, 1892), Francesco Cilea (*L'arlesiana*, 1897) and Giacomo Puccini (*La bohème*, 1896) and they developed their own style called verismo (Italian for "realism", from *vero*, meaning "true"). Realism opposed Romantic idealisation or dramatisation and focused more on working class people instead. The popularity of Wagner's work with its social and political mythologising had had its effects. As Adam Parker [notes](#):

"The Italians took notice and, coping with their own political, economic and social upheavals, began to embrace a more realistic operatic style that strived to show aspects of everyday life and convey basic truths about human struggles. The music, too, changed. Standard arias — pauses in the action that showcased the talents of singers — gave way to a more unified structure and constant musical flow. Italian composers cast aside romantic fairy tales and stopped short of embracing Wagner's mythical realms, preferring to focus on the hard-knock lives of characters who often were simple village-dwellers, impoverished, lovelorn and prone to make mistakes."

The Italian Verismo composers were highly influenced by the realistic literary works of Émile Zola, Honoré de Balzac and Henrik Ibsen and sought to bring opera down to earth by examining the lives of ordinary people, the lives of the poor, with themes such as infidelity, revenge, and violence.

The Verismo singing style brought in big changes from the elegant *bel canto* style of the 19th century. Verismo singers adopted a more declamatory singing style with a vociferous, passionate element to increase the emotional content of the opera.

20th Century – ‘losing much of its narrative power’

The twentieth century led to many changes as Modernism and Postmodernism, descendants of Romanticism, settled in to Western culture while Realism and Social Realism, descendants of the universalist ideas of the Enlightenment, became state styles in the East. The Modernist composers rejected traditions such as classical ideas of form in art (harmony, symmetry, and order). As in literature and art, Modernist emphasis on new forms had their effect on opera as atonal, and then twelve-tone techniques were developed by Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, while later in the century Philip Glass and John Adams became known for a pared-down style of composing called Minimalism.

Atonality, which describes music that lacks a key, became used from the early twentieth-century onwards and began a breakdown of the forms of classical European music which had existed from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

The knock-on effects were profound, as Andrew Clements [writes](#):

“With the collapse of tonality, music had lost much of its narrative power, they reasoned, and so storytelling need no longer be a prerequisite of opera either. The music would still contain, support and reinforce the onstage drama, but that drama didn’t need to be linear: scenes could proceed simultaneously (as in Bernd Alois Zimmermann’s *Die Soldaten*, 1965), present different versions of the same story (Harrison Birtwistle’s *The Mask of Orpheus*), tell no story at all (Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*) or dispense with a text altogether (Wolfgang Rihm’s *Séraphin*, 1995).”

Meanwhile, in Russia there were many successful composers. Mikhail Glinka’s (1804–1857) *A Life for the Tsar* was followed by Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813–1869) and his opera *Rusalka* (1856) and revolutionary *The Stone Guest* (1872), Modest Mussorgsky’s (1839–1881) *Boris Godunov*, Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s (1840–1893) *Eugene Onegin* (Yevgeny Onegin), (1877–1878) and *The Queen of Spades* (*Pikovaya dama*) (1890) and the prolific Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) who completed fifteen operas.

The Soviet state encouraged opera and many new operas were produced by a new generation of composers. While the early operas were influenced by Modernism, things started to change as the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress instigated a policy of Socialist Realism and by 1946 the Zhdanov Doctrine was proposed which opposed “cosmopolitanism” (which meant native Russian accomplishments were to be emphasised more than foreign models) and the “anti-formalism campaign” (which saw “formalism” as art for art’s sake and did not serve a larger social purpose).

Most famously Dmitri Shostakovich’s (1906–1975) *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (performed in 1934) was criticised by *Pravda* in an article entitled *Chaos Instead of Music* in 1936. The story centres around a lonely woman in 19th-century Russia who falls in love with one of her husband’s workers and is driven to murder. While there doesn’t seem to have been any problem with the content, however, one can see the reaction to Western Modernism playing out in the [description](#) of the opera:

“From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing roar. To follow this “music” is most difficult; to remember it, impossible. Thus it goes, practically throughout the entire opera. The singing on the stage is replaced by shrieks. If the composer chances to come upon the path of a clear

and simple melody, he throws himself back into a wilderness of musical chaos – in places becoming cacophony. The expression which the listener expects is supplanted by wild rhythm. Passion is here supposed to be expressed by noise. All this is not due to lack of talent, or lack of ability to depict strong and simple emotions in music. Here is music turned deliberately inside out in order that nothing will be reminiscent of classical opera, or have anything in common with symphonic music or with simple and popular musical language accessible to all.”

When an editor of Pravda was asked why Shostakovich was targeted, he replied: “We had to begin with somebody. Shostakovich was the most famous, and a blow against him would created immediate repercussions and would make his imitators in music and elsewhere sit up and take notice. Furthermore, Shostakovich is a real artist, there is a touch of genius in him. A man like that is worth fighting for, is worth saving ... We had faith in his essential wholesomeness. We knew that he could stand the shock ... Shostakovich knows and everyone else knows that there is no malice in our attack. He knows and everyone else knows that there is no desire to destroy him.” [4]

Indeed, Shostakovich was awarded the USSR State Prize in 1941 (*Piano Quintet*), 1942 (*Symphony No. 7*), 1950 (*Song of the Forests – The Fall of Berlin* for chorus) and 1952 (*Ten Poems for Chorus* opus 88).

The first time the USSR State Prize was awarded for opera was to Uzeyir Hajibeyov for the opera *Keroghlu* in 1941. It was the first opera in the Muslim East. *Keroghlu* was based on a regional legend about a young man who organized a rebellion against the khan (king), who had blinded his father out of spite. [Hajibayov](#) uses the rhythms of Azerbaijan’s Yalli dance in the choir’s singing to reflect the strength of the people and their yearning for freedom. The large choir [conveys](#) the unity of the people and glorifies their rebellion.



[Koroglu](#) is a “classical opera complete with arias, choruses and ballet, but like so much of Hajibayov’s work it also includes traditional rhythms and melodies. [...] Hajibayov included folk instruments such as the tar, zurna (pipe) and nagara (drum) in the orchestra to heighten the sense of place. [...] The opera quickly gained popular acclaim and was performed widely.”

Thus we can see the huge gap that opened up between modernist opera in the West, its influence in the East, and the kind of opera that was promoted in the Soviet Union.

Twenty-First Century – ‘no use pretending something’s not broken’

A couple of years ago Classical-Music.com asked leading opera singers to list their top operas. Five were composed in this century: Jake Heggie, *Dead Man Walking* (2000), Mark-Anthony Turnage, *The Silver Tassie* (2002), George Benjamin, *Written on Skin* (2012), Thomas Adès, *The Exterminating Angel* (2016). Despite the variety of themes and historical periods – showing that opera composition and production is alive and well, in the [words](#) of Graham Vick (thestage.co.uk): “we need to bend – there’s no use pretending something’s not broken.”

Recent writers on opera are well aware of the issues involved and have come at the problem from differing perspectives. For Vick, issues of form were uppermost in his thoughts. In an [article](#) entitled *Opera needs radical overhaul to survive*, he writes:

“We must stop believing that, if we work really hard, we might be almost as good as the legitimate theatre. Our agonising nostalgia for class (Downton Abbey only the most recent example) perpetuates philistine values. Crippled with self-doubt and privilege, the art form can hardly be heard in the wider society. A charge often levelled against it is that it is ‘owned by the few’. It is this sense of possession and superiority that is its greatest enemy.”

He suggests different ways that opera companies can overcome these problems such as having touring versions and lowering seat prices by lowering performance costs.

For writers like Richard Morrison (chief music critic of the Times) content is a determining factor for future survival. In a recent article he discusses Anthony Bolton’s *The Life and Death of Alexander Litvinenko* (spy killed by polonium), John Adams’s *Death of Klinghoffer* (hijacking of a cruise ship), and Tansy Davies’s *Between Worlds* (about five people trapped in the World Trade Centre on 9/11). He [questions](#) the subject matter of recent operas which seems to be almost a strategy of using shock tactics to get punters back into the opera house:

“Can anything and everything be turned into art? Is the entire human condition fair game for a writer, painter or composer? Or are some real-life subjects so horrific or still so fresh that they should be off limits, at least until those caught up in them are no longer around to be offended?”

Both of these are valid and important perspectives on the ongoing problems of the opera business. However, like cinema, the more expensive a cultural medium is, the more its ideology is tightly controlled by those who hold the purse strings. The mass media corporations control how everything is seen and understood, saturating the media with ideologies that favour the world outlook of the neoliberal elites. This allows them to promote conflicts that suit their agenda (e.g. the bombing of Libya) and neutralise the ones that are not going their way (e.g. the attacks on Syria).

Conclusion

For culture in general to inspire future interest and support it must move away from the narratives and objectives of the elites. Working class struggles have shaped the world and any improvements in living conditions have been won after years of often violent conflict and sacrifice. These stories, histories and even allegories of these stories have formed the basis of culture in the past. Ordinary people do not own their own mass communications media or opera houses but know art made in solidarity with their plight (whether it be local or abroad) when they see it. Therefore, yes, anything and everything be turned into art, that is, if it is made in such a way that empathy, solidarity and progress is the result of the work and not just a distant spectacle as a vehicle for shock-horror or laughs. For opera to have distinctive, compelling, and meaningful engagements with people in the future it must first invest in its most important component: its audiences.

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Notes

[1] Helen Ellerbe, *The Dark Side of Christian History* (Morningstar and Lark, 1995), p.136/7

[2] Daniel Snowman, *The Gilded Stage: A Social History of Opera* (Atlantic Books, London, 2010), p.36

[3] Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 3 (Vintage Books: New York, 1958), p.225

[4] Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (Harper Perennial: London, 2009), p.249

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