# *Rescuing opera from stereotypes*

## **Dr Alexandra Wilson**, Reader in Musicology, explores the misconceptions surrounding opera.

I am firmly of the belief that stereotypes are unhelpful and often harmful. This is as much the case in the field of culture as in any other area of life.

Over the last few decades the media have repeatedly perpetuated the idea that opera is 'elitist'. This cliché, often uttered by journalists who know little about opera, actually does great harm to the cause of artistic accessibility. Told that opera is 'not for them', potential new audiences are likely to be inhibited from giving it a try.

Opera is sometimes, although by no means always, performed in glamorous surroundings, but it is important to distinguish 'the trappings of opera' from the art form itself. (Try to argue that opera itself is elitist and you will not get very far, as my students find when we debate this issue in seminars.)

If we look at the history of opera we can see that it has meant different things to different people at different times. Opera was and still is accepted as very much a part of everyday life in Italy or Germany for example.

Some of the negative perceptions of opera, then, are peculiarly British, and closely tied up with questions of national identity. Opera has been greeted with hostility and suspicion ever since it first arrived in London in the early eighteenth century.

Although the current media obsession with 'elitism' is a product of our particular time, it is in some respects merely a new twist on an old tale.

In order to challenge stereotypes and prejudices about opera that act as barriers to new audience engagement, therefore, we need to understand their historical roots. This is what I am seeking to do in my current research project, which is supported by the British Academy.

I am looking in detail at one particularly significant moment in the history of opera in Britain: the 1920s. Cultural categories were established during this decade that are still powerful today. As mass culture expanded, the intellectual elite tried to defend its authority by pigeon holing artworks, whether novels, plays or pieces of music, as 'highbrow', 'lowbrow' or 'middlebrow', the latter a newly coined buzzword.

A lot of scholarly work has been undertaken on literature and the 'brows', but so far nobody has investigated where opera fitted into the debate. Opera's relationship to the new categories is particularly intriguing because it was so complicated. It was far from clear that opera was 'highbrow', while 'middlebrow' also seemed an inadequate term.

The 1920s was also a decade when opera's cultural status was changing. In the late Victorian era, opera had been a form of genuine popular entertainment, performed by touring opera companies to socially mixed audiences up and down the country. Operatic music was also heard in music halls and brass band concerts. These outlets for opera were declining by the 1920s, yet at the same time it was reaching new audiences through broadcasting and interacting with popular culture in new ways.

In addition to my historical work on this topic, I have an interest in the contemporary politics of opera. Last September, with my colleagues from the OBERTO opera research unit at Oxford Brookes, I organised an international conference entitled '*Beyond Black Tie and Bubbly: Rescuing Opera from Stereotypes*'.

Our aim was to examine critically the idea of opera as a socially exclusive genre, and to consider how it might be presented to prospective audiences in more positive and imaginative ways.

One of the most exciting things about the conference was the way in which it brought academics, students and members of the public together with opera singers and other industry experts. Among the speakers were the Commissioning Editor for Publications at the Royal Opera House, the General Manager of Opera Holland Park and the opera critic for *The Telegraph*. We discussed a wide range of topics, including the marketing of opera, its relationship with 'crossover', and the role of education in creating new audiences.

Finally, changing perceptions of opera and expanding the audience for it also underpins my broader knowledge transfer work. I enjoy sharing my research findings with a wide public, via broadcasts for BBC Radio 3 and programme essays and pre-performance talks for the country's leading opera companies. I have also argued the case against operatic 'elitism' in *The Guardian* and written a book for the general public called *Opera: A Beginner's Guide*, which seeks to demystify opera and demonstrate its relevance for contemporary life.

My ongoing research, and work with colleagues from OBERTO, will continue to challenge stereotypes and prejudices and help to encourage new audiences to explore opera and develop what may become a source of life-long enjoyment.

For more information on OBERTO, please visit **http://obertobrookes.com**

Read an article on Dr Alexandra Wilson's research on the reception of Puccini's operas at **www.brookes.ac.uk/research/ref-2014/**



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